



TAMING THE LOST PRINCE

RAYE MORGAN

Cherish

Raye Morgan

Taming the Lost Prince

«HarperCollins»

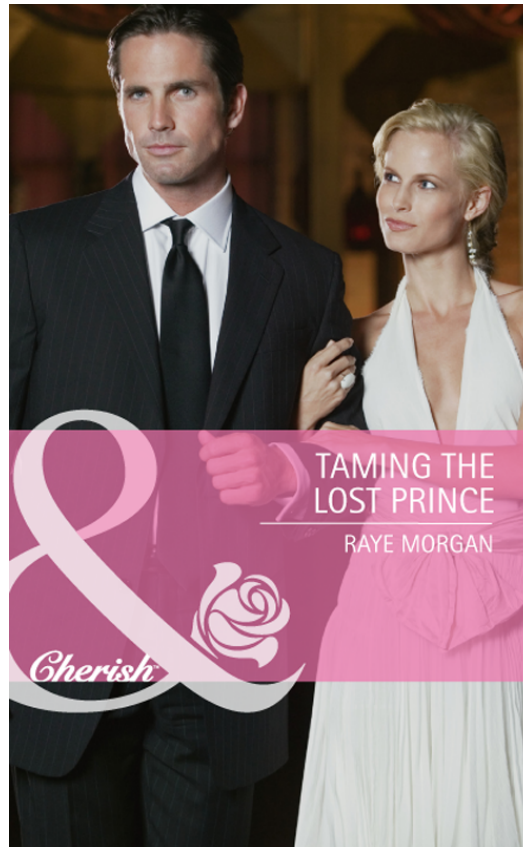
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As a fighter pilot, Max Kanova became a hero – and then a prince. He accepted his royal status...until it was suggested he should marry. Kayla was brought in to “tame” the new prince, but she didn’t expect it to be Max, the man whose baby she had after an unforgettable night of passion. How can she face him again – and tell him the truth about their child?

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“Hey, gorgeous, it’s been almost two years, hasn’t it?”

She nodded, her head swimming. He was still the most beautiful man she’d ever seen, still hard and handsome, still looking like a playful rascal and a bit of a rogue. His thick rust-colored hair seemed to have a constant breeze blowing through it, his mischievous blue eyes were framed by eyelashes so thick, it was almost criminal, and his mouth looked so deliciously sensual, it ought to be censored. That was Max, just as she remembered him. Lord how she’d missed him!

“So what are you doing here?” he asked, looking completely bemused.

“I came to...to sort of arrest you. In a way.” She made a face. What a farce.

“Arrest me?” At last he focused on the security guards behind her. He frowned. “What did I do now?”

“Oh Max,” she sighed. “Why can’t you be good?”

“Kayla, my sweet,” he said grinning at her, “you know that’s not in my nature.”

Dear Reader,

This is the last book of a series of six about the lost princes of Ambria, a lovely, fog-shrouded, fictitious island nation off the coast of Western Europe. All the princes have been found and brought back home again. Their family, which was shattered and torn apart when their parents were killed by the Granvilli rebellion almost thirty years ago, is reconnected and healed about as well as it can be. Goodness and mercy are back in the land.

Too bad all our problems can’t be solved so easily—but then, we’re not royal, are we?

It’s been something of a royal year, what with the Westminster Abbey wedding of Prince William and beautiful Kate Middleton and all the excitement and celebration that surrounded it. This wonderful couple brought back star power to the British monarchy, a sense of special magic that reminds us why fairy tales so often feature princes and princesses. Larger than life, the focus of dreams. No wonder we love it all.

Prince Max and the woman he loves, who is secretly raising his child, need a bit of that magic to find their happy ending. They have to struggle through misunderstandings, a kidnapping and a heavy shared sadness that almost destroys their love. I hope you enjoy being a witness to the way they manage to capture their dream.

Thank you for reading my story.

Regards!

Raye Morgan

About the Author

RAYE MORGAN has been a nursery-school teacher, a travel agent, a clerk and a business editor, but her best job ever has been writing romances—and fostering romance in her own family at the same time. Current score: two boys married, two more to go. Raye has published more than seventy romances, and claims to have many more waiting in the wings. She lives in Southern California, with her husband and whichever son happens to be staying at home at the moment.

Taming the Lost Prince

Raye Morgan



www.millsandboon.co.uk

This book is dedicated to Nick and Jenn, and most of all to CB, the new prince in our family.

CHAPTER ONE

PRINCE MAX leaned out over the edge of the wrought-iron rail on the balcony. A light rain was falling but he hardly noticed. He was at least the equivalent of five floors up. The castle garden below looked farther away than that. A strange, shivering impulse inside made him wonder what would happen if he jumped.

Too late now. A few weeks ago he could have jumped. He could have ended his worthless life with a flourish. No one would have cared.

But now he had a new life—new responsibilities. People were beginning to expect things of him. What the hell made them think he could possibly deliver?

Actually, this might be a better time to jump. Maybe he would find out he could fly. It looked so simple. All he had to do was spread his wings. He knew what it felt like to fly. He'd been flying ancient crates from past wars for years now. Flying planes was the one thing he knew he was good at. But taking that leap on his own would be different.

No, he wasn't going to jump. He wasn't going to mock his fate by trying to fly without a plane. Self-destruction wasn't really his style. But he did have a peacock feather he'd picked up in the castle gardens. He held it out.

"Fly and be free," he muttered to it. And then he let it go. It began its long, meandering flight toward the ground and he leaned out even farther, watching it go. It flashed back colors, blue and green and gold. As it neared the ground, it started to spin crazily. He laughed. "Go, baby," he murmured to it. "Do your thing."

The feather hit the ground and his laughter faded away. Now it was caught, just like he was. A short flight to nowhere.

"Hey," a candy-coated feminine voice said to him. "Don't lean out so far. You'll fall."

He closed his eyes for a moment. Was he ready for this? Did he need it?

"You okay, mister?" she said.

He turned slowly, wondering if she realized who he was. Probably not. He was dressed for hiking, not for the ball. But he thought he'd seen her before, passed her in the halls. He recognized the look. And he knew the drill. Either he gave her a simple friendly nod and went on his way, or he smiled at her suggestively and things went on from there. His choice. He could tell she was ready. Eager even. A part of him groaned.

But he couldn't give in to that. What the hell? He was young. Life was there to be lived. And who knew how much longer he'd be free to follow where his urges led him?

"I'm fine," he said, and he smiled.

"You're wet," she countered flirtatiously.

He shook his head like a sheepdog. Water flew everywhere. She gave a little shriek and then she laughed.

"You'd better come on to my place and get dry," she offered.

"Your place?" he repeated questioningly.

"Sure. My room is on this floor. I'm only a few doors away. You need to dry off. You wouldn't want to catch a cold, would you?"

His gaze made an exploratory journey down the length of her, from her spiked, fire-engine-red hair, down to her full lips, lingering on her hourglass figure. His look was insolent. He knew it. And he also knew she was the type of woman who liked that sort of thing.

"Sure, why not?" he said. Anything was better than joining the other royals at this ridiculous ball the queen had cooked up. A few hours with this willing playmate might be just the thing to help him get rid of this feeling of doom that was hanging over him. "You're like an angel of mercy, aren't you? Always on the lookout for someone in trouble."

Her smile had a wicked sparkle to it. “Not really,” she said. “I’m kind of picky about who I help.”

He raised an eyebrow. “And I made the grade?”

Her eyes widened appreciatively. “Oh, yeah. You’ll do.”

He pretended to bow. “I’m honored.”

She giggled and led the way.

* * *

Queen Pellea swept into the royal office and glared at Kayla Mandrake. “So where is he?” she demanded.

Kayla jumped up from her desk, shaking her head. That sinking feeling she’d been fighting since she’d found out who the new prince actually was had come back with a vengeance. “I haven’t seen him at all,” she said. “I thought he was supposed to be here....”

Pellea grabbed the back of a chair, her knuckles white. “Of course he was. He was given complete instructions. And he blew them off, as usual. Everyone is waiting in the ballroom.”

“Shall I make an announcement over the speaker system?”

Pellea looked pained. “Oh, Kayla, you’ve been in Paris all this time and you don’t know how things have been. This guy is driving me crazy.”

Kayla held back a grin. That was Max. He drove everyone crazy.

“He’ll settle down,” she told the queen without really believing it herself. “Once he understands the way we do things.”

“The more he understands, the more he flouts the rules. You’re going to have to go out and track him down.”

Pellea made a sound of angry impatience and tossed her head in frustration. She was wearing a spectacular gown—deep blue silk threaded with gold, strapless, form-fitting, with a skirt cut to move sinuously as she danced...or walked. Kayla felt frumpy in her simple skirt and sweater.

“And I hope you’re prepared to kill him when you find him,” Pellea said dramatically.

“Your Majesty,” Kayla began, beginning to give in to a touch of anxiety. She was trying to think of a new excuse for him on the fly—but something that wouldn’t get her fired. The queen did have her emotional moments.

“Don’t.” Pellea held up a hand like a crossing guard. “I don’t want to hear any tales of woe. I don’t want to hear explanations and confessions. All I want is Prince Maximillian here where I can punish him.” She shivered with what looked like anticipation. “Or his head on a platter. That would do.” Her dark eyes flashed. “Do you understand?”

Kayla nodded. Despite everything, she was working hard to suppress a grin. She didn’t dare let it show. Pellea was so angry.

The trouble was, she knew very well that the Max she had known was sure to make Pellea even angrier as time went by. There was nothing she could do to avoid it.

“Yes, Your Majesty. I’ll do my best.”

“Just find him!”

Queen Pellea swept out like the storm she could sometimes resemble. Kayla took a deep breath and steadied herself. What now? How was she supposed to find a rebel prince who obviously didn’t want to be found?

It was always this way with Max. Rules were made for other people, not for him. He was easily the most infuriating—and the most charming—man she’d ever known. Just the thought that she would see him again any moment gave her a thrill that was electric. But it also gave her a dull, pounding headache. How was she going to work this? Heaven only knew.

She started by making a few phone calls. There were guards everywhere and security officers working the monitors at special locations. If he was in the castle, someone must have seen him. And some had. She got a lead here and there, and finally, an actual sighting from a hall guard who’d seen him disappear into the apartment of a local girl who was well-known for partying.

“Of course,” Kayla muttered acidly. “I should have known.”

She started off toward the place like a rocket, but deep in her heart, she dreaded the whole confrontation ahead of her. What was she going to do once she got to the door? Barge in on a seduction? She shuddered as she punched in the floor designation on the elevator panel.

“Darn you, Max,” she whispered. “Do you always have to make life so hard?”

She thought about the last time she’d seen him, almost two years ago, his thick, bronzed hair disheveled, his eyes bleary with pain. Emotional pain. They’d both been in agony that night, both mourning over the same tragedy. The next thing she’d known, he was gone.

The elevator doors slid open silently and she stepped off, heart beating, head aching. It was only a few steps to the doorway. She stood in front of it, wishing she were anywhere else. Her phone buzzed and she pulled it open. It was Pellea, of course.

“Yes?”

“Have you found him yet?”

She sighed. “I’ve got his location. I’m about to go in and see...”

“Watch him,” Pellea warned. “If there’s a balcony, he’ll jump.”

Kayla gasped. “You don’t think he’s suicidal, do you?”

“Oh, heavens no. He defies death for the fun of it. I swear he’s got to be an adrenaline freak.”

Kayla considered that seriously. “You know...” she began.

But Pellea wasn’t waiting to hear other views.

“Last week, we had a gathering of the new princes at the ski chalet, a meeting for them to get to know each other better. We’d barely begun cocktails when Max and the chalet manager’s two beautiful daughters took off on snowmobiles, racing off into the mountains as though it were nothing more than a free snow day. And they didn’t come back.”

“Oh.”

“No excuses the next day, of course. He thinks his smile covers all bases.”

“I see,” she said for lack of anything cogent to add. She felt a little lost with the queen battering her with complaints like this. A part of her wanted to defend him, but how did you defend behavior like this?

“Last night it was dinner with the Italian ambassador. We’re about to sign an important treaty with them. He didn’t show. And what was the excuse? He’d stopped in at a pub and got involved in judging a karaoke contest and lost track of time.”

“Oh, Max,” Kayla said in soft despair.

“So I say, watch the balcony. He’ll tie a rope to the edge and pretend he’s Tarzan. Don’t let him get away.”

“I won’t.” She only wished her determination was as stout as it sounded.

Pellea sighed. Maybe her tone hadn’t been convincing. “Give me your exact location. I sent a couple of security officers up to help you. I’ll key in directions for them.”

That startled her. “Help me do what?” she asked after giving the queen her location.

“Make sure he doesn’t escape. We’ll tie him up and drag him in if we have to.”

“We will?” She knew Max and she was pretty sure that wasn’t going to be done easily. This whole thing was beginning to resemble a nightmare. She stared at the door to the target apartment. Max was supposedly in there. They’d told her he’d gone in with a woman. Did the phrase *love nest* come to mind? This wasn’t the way she’d imagined their reunion might pan out.

“Now I want you to be forceful,” Pellea encouraged. “You must take him by surprise.”

Kayla gasped in horror as a picture of what that might mean spun through her head. “You mean ... burst in on him without warning?”

“If you have to. Whatever you do, you’ve got to stop him from disappearing again. Call me when it’s over.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. Of course.” She hung up just as two security guards stepped off the elevator and marched over to join her.

“Sgt. Marander, ma’am, at your service,” the one who seemed to be in charge announced. “Here’s the master key. We’re here to back you up. We’ll be right behind you.”

She chewed on her lower lip. “Can I knock first?” she asked, rather forlorn.

His stare was steely cold. “I’m afraid not. Her Majesty specifically recommended a surprise attack. She’s afraid he’ll ...”

“Escape by jumping off the balcony. Yes, she told me as much.”

He glanced at her and frowned. He probably heard the reluctance in her voice and didn’t approve. “Sorry, miss. Instructions from the queen are not to be taken lightly.”

She took a deep breath. “All right,” she said, straightening her shoulders and heading for the door. “Here I go.”

She closed her eyes and turned the key in the door, letting it swing open. “Max?” she asked breathlessly, not daring to look. “Are you in there?”

There was an ominous moment of startled silence and then a deep voice cried, “Kayla! What are you doing here?”

She forced herself to squint through one slightly opened eye. And there he was, standing before her, completely clothed. Very civilized. Not scary at all. She gasped in relief.

“Oh, Max,” she said, half laughing. And as he threw his arms around her, she sighed and went limp in his embrace. “I can’t believe it’s really you.”

He hugged her, kissed each cheek, dropped a quick one on her lips and, finally, leaned back to take a look.

“Hey, gorgeous, it’s been almost two years, hasn’t it?”

She nodded, her head swimming. He was still the most beautiful man she’d ever seen, still hard and handsome, still looking like a playful rascal and a bit of a rogue. His thick rust-colored hair seemed to have a constant breeze blowing through it, his mischievous blue eyes were framed by eyelashes so thick it was almost criminal, and his mouth looked so deliciously sensual, it ought to be censored. That was Max, just as she remembered him. Lord, how she’d missed him!

“So what are you doing here?” he asked, looking completely bemused.

“I came to ... to sort of arrest you. In a way.” She made a face. What a farce.

“Arrest me?” At last he focused on the security guards behind her. He frowned. “What did I do now?”

“Oh, Max,” she sighed. “Why can’t you be good?”

“Kayla, my sweet,” he said grinning at her, “you know that’s not in my nature.”

But he was genuinely happy to see her. Taking her in was like a good shot of whiskey. One look and he was transported two years back in time, back to those sidewalk cafés with the red umbrellas along the Mediterranean coast, back to the balmy breezes and sunlight filtering through the palms, back to hearing suggestive songs played by small combos while they’d sat sipping chichis, the local drink that tasted a bit like a Mai Tai and packed a punch like an angry kangaroo. The things they’d done, the things that had happened, the choices made, the regrets—it all still churned inside him. He couldn’t let it go.

But he also couldn’t regret knowing Kayla. She’d always been a joy. It was fantastic seeing her again.

“This is Kayla,” he said casually to the redhead who was standing behind him, looking terrified. It appeared she wasn’t used to having castle security barge in through her locked door. “Her husband was my best buddy in the old days when we flew sorties out of Trialta together.”

“Oh,” the redhead said weakly. Her teeth seemed to be chattering. “Nice to meet you, I’m sure.”

“Yes,” Kayla responded and tried to smile at the girl.

Max saw the confusion in her eyes and realized she was still digesting the situation she'd burst in on. It was pretty obvious she thought she'd found him having a "moment" here. That was hardly the case, though the redhead seemed to have thought it might turn into one, too.

But he hadn't been able to conjure up any interest. He'd been polite. He'd chatted. He'd accepted one small drink and the redhead had worked hard at creating a seductive scene. But he'd found himself looking out at the stars in the inky sky and listening to the strains of the orchestra from below in the ballroom, and all desire for that sort of satisfaction had melted away.

But before he found a way to explain all that, the two guards stepped forward and began to slip metal restraints on his wrists.

He looked down, startled. "What the hell is this?"

"Sir," Sgt. Marander said in an unfortunately pompous tone, "consider yourself in the custody of castle security."

Max blinked. He couldn't accept this. Handcuffs? They had to be kidding. He quickly saw two or three ways out of the situation. He could easily handle the guards and ...

But then he looked up and met Kayla's worried gaze. Her pretty face, her dark, clouded eyes and her long, silky blond hair all created in flesh a picture that had haunted him for two years. Adrenaline still sizzled inside him for a few seconds, then began to drain away.

He wasn't going to run from Kayla. Now that he'd found her again, he didn't want to lose her until they'd had a chance to talk. If he could mine her memories and join them with his, maybe he could slay some of the demons that kept him awake at night. Maybe.

"Please, Max," she was saying, reaching out and putting a hand on his arm. "It's really important to Queen Pellea that you make an appearance at the ball."

He smiled down into her anxious gaze. "There is nothing I'm looking forward to more," he lied smoothly. "Now that you're here, I'll have someone to dance with."

She jerked back, pulling her hand away. "Oh, no. Not me. You're supposed to be meeting eligible ladies of rank. That's not me."

He stared at her. "Kayla, what's the deal? Do you work for the royal family, or what?"

She nodded. "Yes. I've known the queen since we were kids together and my sister's husband is in the guard. Pellea offered me a job and I jumped at it." She shrugged, palms up. "I love it here."

He frowned, not sure what to make of that. When they'd been in Trialta, he'd assumed she was as much of a vagabond as he was. Now to know she had royal ties ...

But what was he thinking? He was the one who was supposed to be a prince.

Still, he didn't like being corralled this way. He could tolerate going to the ball if they let him come on his own terms. This way was just too much. Kayla or no Kayla, he was back to wanting to get the hell out of here. But his hesitation had meant he was locked up.

"Hey, I'll come with you willingly," he noted. "But could we get rid of these handcuffs?"

She hesitated, looking down at them. Then she gazed up into his eyes.

He smiled. She sighed.

"Sure," she said, wondering if she were risking everything but hardly caring. She looked at the security agents. "Let him go."

The sergeant glared at her. "But, Miss ..."

"I'll take the responsibility," she said. "If he bolts, I'll tell the queen it was my fault."

The man shrugged and used the key, but he didn't look happy about it.

Max smiled and flexed his wrists and looked toward the balcony in the redhead's room. He could make it in two bounds and be jumping for freedom in seconds. Everything in him was ready to go. Why the hell should he stick around when he knew he was going to hate the results?

CHAPTER TWO

KAYLA could read Max's mind. She knew him too well. She saw the glance as a way out and she moved in smoothly, taking his hand in hers, lacing their fingers together. If he was going to run for it, he was going to have to drag her with him.

"You're all mine now," she told him archly. "I'm calling the shots."

"Is that right?" he said, looking skeptical, but amused. "I thought I was the one who was supposed to be royal all of a sudden." He raised one quizzical eyebrow. "You've heard, haven't you? Now they've got me pegged as one of the lost princes. Can you believe it?"

She shook her head, smiling at him. "I'm finding it hard. When I realized it was you ..." She shrugged and closed her eyes as she relived those moments, and when she spoke again, her voice was shaky. "Max, I thought you were dead."

He looked at her for a moment, then managed a crooked smile. "Which time?" he asked softly.

Her phone buzzed. She knew it was the queen. Pressing her lips together, she shook her head.

"We'll have to talk later." She reached for her phone but she didn't let go of his hand. She'd learned a lesson or two over the years, and one of them was to look both ways before stepping off the curb.

"Yes, Your Majesty. We're on our way."

Ten minutes later they were in Pellea's public parlor while she flitted about and generally let Max know he was on thin ice with her. Kayla watched, but hardly listened. She knew the queen was crazy about him and was just trying to convince him to behave.

At the same time, she herself was a bit impatient with all this. She felt as though every nerve ending was vibrating right now. There were so many things to take care of, so much to consider. Max was back and she had to figure out how to fit him into her life again. She had a thousand questions for him. There was so much she wanted to know, so much they'd missed. So much they needed to discuss.

For instance, had he come close to marrying anyone in the last two years? Was there someone out there? She was hoping there was, but the signs weren't good. If he had someone serious in his life, she could move on without any lingering doubts. Couldn't she?

The funny thing was, she couldn't imagine him married. He didn't have a married way about him. His beautiful eyes had a look that said he was always searching for something and not very satisfied with what he'd found. You had a sense that there was something missing in his life, but he wasn't sure what it was and he knew he hadn't seen it yet. Just seeing that in him scared her.

But the queen seemed to have no forbearance left for all that. She knew what she wanted from Max and she wanted it now.

"The first thing we're going to do is get you into some decent clothes," she said, rummaging through her closet.

"What? You don't like my style?" He said it in a tone that might have seemed insolent if he hadn't paired his words with a look of pure innocence that caught Pellea by surprise, making her laugh.

"Now I see what the problem is," she told him, shaking her head. "You just don't know any better. You need to learn a thing or two about being a prince, don't you?"

"If you insist." His mouth twisted but he bent forward in a sweeping bow. "Anything for you, my beautiful queen."

Despite everything, Pellea colored slightly, then glanced Kayla's way. "You've got to admit, the boy's a charmer," she said out of the side of her mouth. "I think he's a diamond in the rough, too. We'll see what we can make of him." She smirked. "Heat and pressure. That's how you get perfect diamonds. Are you game?"

He didn't answer but she'd already turned away and was hunting through a closet again, muttering about sizes and ruffled shirts.

He looked at Kayla and shrugged, as though to say, “They’ve got me this time,” and she smiled at him, her heart full of affection for all he’d meant to her in the past. She wasn’t sure what the future would bring. But things were never dull when Max was around.

Her smile faded as she remembered that there was something more lasting than memories between them, something more precious than life itself. And that was when she decided it was time for her to go.

“Your Majesty, if you don’t need of me here ...”

Pellea poked her head back out of the closet. “Go ahead, Kayla,” she said. “I know you’ve got work to do. I won’t keep you.”

“Thank you,” Kayla said, then she turned and gave Max a stern look. “You will be good, won’t you?”

“At what?” he teased with a lopsided smile.

She glared at him. “The guard is outside so don’t think you can get away with anything,” she murmured to him out of Pellea’s hearing.

He gave her a “Who? Me?” look. She shook her head and started for the door. “Have a lovely time at the ball,” she said over her shoulder. “I’m sure you’ll be the star.”

And she was out the door before he had a chance to say or do anything else.

She hurried back to the office, hoping to get some work done that she’d neglected while she was off chasing princes. It had been a hectic week. Pellea had sent her to represent the DeAngelis royal family at a financial conference in Paris. She’d hated leaving for a whole week, but the fact that the queen had that much faith in her had been wonderful. She’d worked herself to the bone trying to live up to expectations and she was exhausted.

And while she was gone, the search for the last of the lost princes of Ambria had struck gold. First Mykal Marten, whom she’d met before she left for the continent, had been confirmed as the fourth prince. And then the news had come that the fifth and last prince had been discovered. When she saw the name—Max Arragen—in a newspaper account, she hadn’t thought much of it, but then she saw a picture. It was blurry and taken from a distance, but the jaunty set of the shoulders had made her think of Max—her Max. She’d gasped and begun to wonder.

It wasn’t until she’d returned home to Ambria a day ago that she’d seen a good picture and realized that Prince Max really was the man she’d known in Trialta as Max Arragen two years before. And that sent her into a virtual tailspin.

She’d only known him for about six months, but the time they’d spent together had been crazy and intense. He was her husband’s best friend, and they’d both been working as contract pilots, flying reconnaissance missions against the tyrannical regime of the North African nation of Trialta on the Mediterranean. They’d lived like young people involved in war often do, working hard during the day, partying at night like there was no tomorrow. They were fighting for the rebels and thought they were invincible.

She couldn’t believe he was back in her life again—at least in a peripheral way. He always managed to inject excitement and surprise into everything, like no one else she’d ever known. She remembered times in Trialta where it had seemed she and Eddie were in the lead vehicle in a continuous car chase—and Max was at the wheel.

And then came the day when Eddie didn’t return from a mission. The wreckage of his plane was found, and all the parties stopped. Kayla had clung to Max at the time and they’d mourned together, hardly believing that the Eddie they both loved so much could be gone forever. No one else could have understood how deep their grief was.

But that was then. Things had changed, for both of them. Surely he’d had some life-changing experiences since she last knew him. And she’d had a beautiful, wonderful child.

What would it be like to be friends with Max now? She was a little bit afraid to find out. She wasn't the wide-eyed innocent she'd been two years before. She had some secrets of her own. And how would she keep them from him, now that he was going to be living right here in the castle?

She buried her worries in work, staying an hour longer than normal. And then, once she'd put away her papers and shut off her computer, she gave in to temptation and made her way down to the ballroom instead of going straight to her room.

She took a back entrance and climbed the stairs to a seldom-used interior balcony that overlooked the entire floor area. The orchestra was playing a waltz and the couples swept across the floor, around and around, the women like flowers in their beautiful dresses, the men resplendent in gold-edged uniforms of white or blue or crimson. Despite everything, it took her breath away and made her heart beat faster. A scene like this would make anyone want to be noble, especially if they'd been raised on fairy tales.

She watched for a few minutes longer, caught up in the magic. How wonderful to be royal and to live as though you were the star of it all. Just being here in the castle made her feel as though she were blessed. But it also made her feel a new and more intense responsibility to her country and her people. She wondered if Max would start to feel a little of that soon.

She could pick out most of the princes. So handsome, every one of them—so tall and strong. They looked like men who were confident in themselves and ready to take on the world. She could hardly believe Max was about to take his place alongside of them.

There was Prince Mykal, sitting on the sidelines, still recovering from a horrendous motorcycle accident from a few months before. Prince David, one of her favorites, was dancing with beautiful Ayme, who had recently become his bride. Prince Joe, still looking like a California surfer with his sun-streaked hair, was laughing with Kelly, his own new bride. And newly crowned King Monte had Pellea in his arms and was leading her around the floor with such obvious passion, you'd think the honeymoon was starting that night. That made her laugh softly to herself.

She searched the crowd. Where was Max? Her gaze lingered a moment on Princess Kim. She was glad to see her looking happy after all that she'd been through on the enemy side of the island with the Granvilli partisans. It was good to have her safe and sound, back in the castle where she belonged. But where was Max?

At first worried, she began to get angry. If he had slipped away again ...!

And then she saw him.

Max was standing with a group of men she didn't recognize. As she watched, the men moved away and a beautiful dark-haired woman was brought up to be presented to him. Kayla felt a tug on her heartstrings, but she tried desperately to suppress it. She couldn't be jealous. There was no sense behind it. She had to keep it down. Max was not hers and never had been. Never would be, especially now that he was a prince. There was no justification for any jealousy. She couldn't let it happen.

She watched as they danced. He moved so well, as if he were floating on air. He was talking to his partner and she was blossoming in his arms. He could have been born for this—and of course, he really was!

The dance was over. She could breathe again. And now, she really had to go. But she watched for just one minute more, and suddenly his head was tilted up. He was looking right at her. And as she watched, he lifted a glass of champagne and smiled at her, giving her a toast. Her breath caught in her throat and she gasped. He gave her a nod, and then a lascivious wink. Her face felt hot as she pulled back, away from where anyone could see her. She was laughing, though. That wink was guaranteed to keep her warm that night. Trust Max!

But as she turned and left the balcony, her amusement evaporated. She couldn't do this. She couldn't be watching Max from afar and reacting every time he noticed her. Nothing good could come of this. Much better that she should stay as far away from him as she could get. If he really

wasn't attached, it would be his duty to find a bride as soon as possible. Watching him fall in love would be tough to take. And if he ever found out ...

No, keeping in touch with Max was much too dangerous. She had to find a way to avoid it.

She hadn't eaten since breakfast and she was starving. Glancing at her watch, she knew it was too late to pick up Teddy before he went to sleep. Her heart ached as she thought about that. She missed him. Her baby was only a little over a year old and she missed him when she had late days like this. Sighing, she knew she had to speak to Pellea about it. She really didn't want to be away from her child this long. At the same time, she was so lucky to have this job ...

She stopped in at the all-night café and got a salad to eat once she got home.

Then she headed for her sister Caroline's room, just two doors down from hers.

"Hi," she called softly, opening the door with her own key. "How are they?"

"Sleeping like lambs," Caroline said, rising from the couch where she'd been reading and coming to give her sister a hug.

Just two years apart, they looked enough alike that there was always someone who asked if they were twins. Caroline wore her blond hair short, pixie-style, and had a more sleepy, languid look about her, but otherwise, they were practically replicas and had always been especially close.

They stood together looking down at where the two little boys, one dark-haired like his father, the other as blond as his mother, lay side by side, sound asleep.

Caroline's husband, Rik, was a rising star in the Ambrian royal guard. Right now he was on a mission on the Granvilli side of the island and would be gone for a few days. Luckily, whether Rik was home or not, Caroline loved having Teddy in to play with her own boy.

"Why don't you leave him here for the night?" she suggested. "He's used to sleeping here after the last week when you were in Paris. And it was so hard to put them down tonight, I hate to wake them up and have to start all over again."

"Are you sure?" Kayla felt guilty, but she was so tired, it sounded like a good thing to do.

"Absolutely. You're only two doors down. I can get you over here fast if I need you. Just come on over first thing in the morning and it will all be good."

She stayed for half an hour, sharing her salad with her sister while they talked, watching her baby while he slept.

And then she was back in the corridor, on her way home and looking down toward the public area, wondering how the ball was going. It was interesting to live this way, with everything happening so close at hand. The castle lifestyle was growing on her. She had been new to it a year before when she'd come to work here, but she was used to it now and it seemed a comfortable way of life. She compared it to living on a huge cruise ship.

She opened her own door and went in, yawning and kicking off her shoes as she did. A tap on a switch turned on a soft light in the kitchen, which did enough to light the path to her bedroom. She made her way slowly through the apartment, casting off clothes as she went, first her jacket, then her skirt, then her sweater.

She was thinking about crashing straight onto her bed and closing her eyes and not opening them again until morning. Heavenly peace. No dreams, please. Just wonderful sleep. Her eyes began to droop in anticipation.

But it was not to be. Two steps short of her destination, just as she was reaching back to unhook her bra, a dark hulk rose from her overstuffed chair in the corner.

"You know," the hulk said ruefully, "I'd love to let you go on with this, but I have a feeling you'd hate me in the morning. Just a hunch."

She screamed, grabbing her sweater back again and pressing it to her chest. At the same time, Max jumped forward and took her by the shoulders.

"No, don't scream," he said urgently. "I get into so much trouble when women scream."

She glared up at him, quickly pushing him away, startled and exasperated all at once. She could smell alcohol on his breath, but that was hardly surprising. Still, she was wary enough to be careful. Handsome men, liquor and a moonlit night—the recipe for disaster.

“Then don’t jump out at them from dark corners, maybe,” she suggested sharply.

He shrugged as though anxious to make up for scaring her. “Okay, okay. It’s a deal.”

“Oh, Max.” She glared at him as she tried to keep covered in all the most delicate areas. “Why did you let me get this far before you said anything?”

His eyebrows rose. “Are you kidding me?”

“Oh!” She shook her head, but she was calming down. “Look that way,” she insisted, pointing to the wall. “And don’t turn around until I tell you to.”

He turned obediently and she began to search her drawer for fresh clothes to wear. “What are you doing here?” she demanded at the same time.

“I wanted to see you. We need some time to talk. Old times and all that.”

She pulled on a comfortable top.

“Maybe call first next time,” she suggested grumpily as she dug for something to pull over her legs. “How did you get in here anyway?”

He chuckled. “Princes pretty much rule around this castle. You tell people you’re a prince and they want to do things for you. The housekeeper couldn’t wait to do me a favor.”

“That’s a problem.” She sighed. “Okay, you can turn around.”

He turned and looked at her and he was knocked out. Here he’d just come from a royal ball filled with beautiful women who’d all spent half the day in the beauty shop and were dressed to kill and no one he’d seen there turned him on the way Kayla did wearing a simple sweatshirt and black leggings, with her hair looking like a tornado had just come through.

“I think I love you,” he said, taking in all her rumpled glory and smiling. “I know I’ve missed you like crazy. It’s so good to see you again.”

She gazed into his warm blue eyes and melted. She knew he was kidding, that this was his way of joking about emotions instead of dealing with them. But she also knew he was recognizing the ties between them and ready to embrace them, just like it used to be.

Still, she had to wonder if he remembered that last night as clearly as she did. He had done nothing to indicate it. As far as she was concerned, she hoped he had a touch of amnesia. That night had been a crazy rush of pain and grief and anguish and they hadn’t handled it very well. Best to forget it. If they could.

She gave herself a moment to really look at him. Pellea had found him a striking uniform to wear to the ball, but he’d taken off the jacket and pulled open the shirt, displaying some gorgeous skin and manly chest hair. Now he looked less than formal. She shook her head at the sight, but despite everything, she enjoyed seeing him. She always did.

“How did you get away from Pellea?”

He shrugged. “It wasn’t easy. The woman was watching me like a hawk.”

She sighed and sank into a chair, gesturing for him to sit on the couch across from her. “She’ll probably be calling me any minute to organize a search party.”

He moved her discarded jacket and dropped down onto the arm of the couch, then leaned toward her. “You won’t give me up, will you?” he said with a puppy-dog look.

“Are you kidding?” she told him crossly. “Of course I will. I’m not risking my job so that you can play hooky.”

He laughed. “Good point.” Then he frowned. “What is your job exactly?”

“I’m the queen’s personal assistant. I do whatever she needs to get done but doesn’t have time to do herself.”

It was a good job and she was proud of it. As a single mother without anyone to count on but herself, she was lucky to have it. If she ever lost it, for any reason, she would be in real trouble. There

weren't many good jobs for women in Ambria right now and the queen was a wonderful woman to work for. With a two-year-old of her own, Pellea understood the problems Kayla had to face and was ready to give her a lot of leeway.

"Ah," Max said, "impressive. Quite another level from the job you had in Trialta."

She smiled, thinking of it. "Selling T-shirts to tourists from a kiosk on the beach. Yes, I didn't get much chance to show my skills and talents at that one."

But it hadn't mattered then. Her days were spent waiting for Eddie to come back from a flight, and her nights were filled with wine, music and friends. For a few months, life had been carefree and exciting. But you had to pay for everything, one way or another, and she'd been paying the price ever since.

Max was staring at her as though he could see what she was thinking. "And yet, here you are, barely two years later, assistant to the queen."

She gave him a look. "I do have a university education, you know."

He appeared surprised. "No, I didn't know. When did you get that?"

She smiled. "Long before I first met you."

"No kidding." He frowned, thinking that over. "That's more than I've got. And they think they want me to be a prince."

Her smile wavered a bit. It was true. From what she knew of his background, he might have a bit of trouble. He'd never been shy about it. While sipping drinks in the sidewalk cafés of Trialta, he'd regaled them with tales of his childhood living on the streets, always making it sound hilarious rather than tragic. But she'd often thought the raw tattered ghost of deprivation lingered in the shadows of his eyes.

He'd had a rough childhood. Any breaks he ever got he'd worked hard to achieve. That was very different from what most royals experienced. The newspaper accounts had filled in some of the parts of his background she hadn't known before, but she didn't know how accurate they were.

"From what I've read in the newspapers and magazines, they seem to think that you were spirited off on the night of the rebellion," she said to him musingly. "When the Granvilli family attacked and burned the castle—when your parents, the king and queen were killed, and all the DeAngelis royal children went into hiding."

She shuddered just thinking of it. Those poor kids!

"Do you know how you escaped? Do you have any idea who it was who saved you by carrying you off that night?"

His shrug was careless, as if he didn't know and didn't really care. "Whoever they were, they didn't take very good care of me. By the time I was seven or eight, I was fending for myself on the streets. Before that, there were various strangers—at one point I think I was staying with a pickpocket who tried to teach me his tricks. But as far as I know, nobody was around for long at anytime. There's no one I can claim."

It broke her heart to think of a child being abandoned like that. She knew from his stories during their Trialta days that he'd been taken in by a fisherman for a while, but the man was cruel and he eventually ran away. It wasn't until his late teens when he was given a corner to sleep in and a job cleaning the chapel that he met a wonderful older man—a pastor—and his kindly wife, who made it their business to see that he was clothed and had a safe place to stay.

The pastor had a hobby of flying ancient aircraft—planes from twentieth century wars. Pretty soon he was teaching Max the ropes, introducing him to aviation, and after that life was much brighter. Max joined the Ambrian Air Force as soon as he was old enough. And that was pretty much all she knew.

"And no one ever guessed you were one of the lost princes," she murmured, looking at him wonderingly.

He laughed shortly. "Did you guess?"

She spread her hands out. “No.”

“Neither did I. That shows you how long the odds were.”

“Yes.” She sighed. “How horrible for you to be treated like that as such a young child. I’m glad the Granvillis are paying the price for their treason now.”

He stirred restlessly. “That’s life. Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose.”

“And sometimes they pull the chair out from under you, just when you think they’ve given you a throne to sit on.”

He grinned at her appreciatively. “A cautionary tale, Kayla? Reminding me not to count on anything?”

She nodded. She couldn’t help it. She’d always been a cautious one. Her only times of going crazy had involved marrying a flyer and then letting grief make her lose all control when he died. “Count no chicks before they hatch.”

He cocked his head to the side. “Wisdom as well as beauty.”

“Nice of you to notice.” She rose, feeling a little too nervous to sit for long. “Would you like a drink? Iced tea? A cup of coffee?”

“A beer?” he suggested, following her to the little kitchenette.

“I think I have one.” And she did, ice cold and ready to drink. She pulled it out of the refrigerator and popped the top for him.

He took a long sip, sighed with satisfaction and leaned against the counter, looking at her. “So what have you been doing all this time?” he asked her. “You didn’t come straight here from Trialta did you?”

“No. I’ve been here for less than a year.”

“And what were you doing before that?”

She hesitated. Her heart was thumping in her chest. It was time to come clean. She had to tell him. He would find out soon enough anyway. And if he thought she were trying to keep it from him, he might think ...

She shivered.

“I ... uh ... I had a baby.” She forced herself to look him in the eye and not waver. “A little boy. I call him Teddy.”

“Teddy?” He blinked at her.

“Yes. He’s at my sister’s right now, down the hall. Maybe you can meet him tomorrow.”

And she stared into his eyes, searching for doubt, searching for memories, searching for anything that would tell her he’d guessed the truth.

CHAPTER THREE

MAX'S reaction came a beat too late. Kayla knew he'd had a quick second to think before he let his natural instincts take over. What was he thinking in that flash of time? What was he feeling? His crystal-blue eyes didn't show a thing. But that tiny hesitation did.

"Teddy," he said, sounding pretty normal. "You named him after Eddie, huh? Great."

He licked his upper lip quickly, then smiled and reached out to give her a one-armed hug. "Kayla, I'm so glad you have a piece of Eddie to hold on to. That is very cool."

He was looking right into her eyes now, seeming completely sincere. "I can hardly wait to meet him."

Glancing down, she realized, to her horror, that her fingers were trembling. Quickly, she shoved them under the hem of her sweatshirt.

"How about you?" she said, a little breathless. "I guess you're not married."

"Married!" His laugh was short and humorless. "You know me better than that."

"If Pellea has her way, you soon will be."

His deep, painful groan made her smile.

"Did you meet anyone interesting at the ball?"

"That wasn't all the ball was about, was it?" His groan was louder this time. "Oh, lord, do you think she's going to have more of them?"

"Of course. You have to marry someone. The others are all paired up already. Pellea wants to get you settled as well."

His sigh was heartfelt as he leaned wearily across the little counter. "Why don't you marry me? Then we can forget all about this nonsense and just be happy."

She looked away. The very suggestion sent something skittering through her like sparks from fireworks and she took a quick, gasping little breath, trying to suppress the feeling.

Marrying Max—what a concept. Luckily, that would never happen, not even for the sake of convenience. There was no way Max could ever take care of her and her baby. It wouldn't work. She'd been out in the world with him and she probably knew him better than she knew any other man, other than her husband. Max was born to be a bachelor.

Even Eddie had said so. "Max will never get married," he'd told her when she tried to have a go at a little matchmaking at one point. "He's like those animals that die in captivity. They can't be tamed. They can't even be gentled. Leave Max alone. He'll just break their hearts. And yours, too."

Eddie was right, as usual. Max was not a man to hang your heart on. She shook her head and got up the nerve to meet his gaze again. "Sorry, Max. You're going to have to walk that lonesome valley on your own."

His mouth twisted with a bit of pretended chagrin, but he wasn't really thinking about what she'd said. His gaze was skimming over her face, searching in her eyes, looking for something in the set of her lips. She wasn't sure what he expected to see, but it was disturbing, and she turned away, heading back to the living room.

She could feel him watching her, as though his gaze were burning a brand into her back. She forced herself not to look, and finally he came after her and sank onto the couch.

"Come and sit down by me," he said.

His voice was low and there was a new element in it ... something different, something mysterious. She felt wary and her pulse stuttered and then began to move a bit faster. There was a sense of being a bit off-kilter. Somehow, the room seemed warmer. A new tension quivered in the air. Every time her eyes met his, the tension seemed thicker, more insistent, like a drumbeat beginning to make itself heard across a rain-forest jungle.

She took a deep breath and held it for a moment, trying to calm herself. They were just friends, but she worried that he might be edging toward something more. She couldn't let that happen. Not again.

"Come on," he coaxed. He wasn't smiling but his gaze was warm. Almost smoldering.

She shook her head and dropped back into the chair. "No. I think I'll stay here."

"What's the matter?" he asked her.

She licked her dry lips. "I think we need to keep a demilitarized zone between us," she said, trying to sound casual and friendly at the same time.

His eyebrows shot up. "What are you talking about?"

She took a deep breath. How to begin?

"I'm serious, Max. I don't think we ought to be close. You're moving into a whole different sphere of life. I don't belong there. Let's not start anything that will have to be ..." She shrugged, not sure she wanted to put it into words.

His bright gaze clouded and he appeared bewildered by what she'd said. "But you seem a part of this castle stuff and I'm just a beginner," he pointed out. "What are you talking about with this 'different sphere' business?"

She wondered for just a moment if he were really that naive about the class structure in their society. Ambria had always been a remote, self-absorbed little kingdom. Islands tended to breed peculiarities in animals and people if they were cut off from the mainstream for too long. Now that the monarchy had taken back control, after a twenty-five-year exile, and some of the old customs and rituals were being revived.

Royalty was royalty. It was special. That was all part of establishing authority and building back the old foundations. They were meant to be set apart from the common Ambrian. That was just the way it had to be.

"I'm an employee," she told him cheerfully. "You're a prince. Never the twain shall meet."

He made a face as though he thought that was complete tripe, but he would accept her judgment for the moment.

"We can still be friends, can't we? We can still talk."

"Sure."

He frowned. "I'm counting on you for that, you know."

That was just the problem. "Max ..."

He took in a deep breath. "Here's the deal, Kayla. I don't know what I'm doing here." His gaze was hard now, insistent, and yet at the same time, completely vulnerable. "I don't know if I can stand too much of this prince stuff. It's not me."

"Oh." A flash close to pain went through her. He thought he couldn't do this. And yet, how could she be surprised? This was exactly what she would have expected if anyone had asked her. But that didn't mean she could let him go down this road without a struggle. He had to see how important it was.

"I'm willing to give it a go. For now. But I'm not feeling too confident. Most of my life has been lived on the other side of the divide. I don't know if I can adapt."

"Of course you can." She wished she could find the words she needed to get through to him. "Max, you were meant to be a prince from the beginning. Don't you see? The part where you lived on the streets was the mistake."

"I'm not so sure about that." He winced, then went on softly, his eyes looking dark and luminous, his voice barely hiding the years of uncertainty he'd lived through.

"Sometimes I think I never got a family because I didn't deserve one. I was a misfit. A pretty bad misfit. And maybe I didn't ever get that kind of family love because ..." He looked up and met her gaze. "Because I'm just unlovable."

She gasped. He wasn't joking. His expression was serious, questioning. Now she had to stop herself from going to him, from sliding down beside him and pushing away his pain with her arms. And at the same time, everything in her wanted to do it.

"Max! How can you say that? Women adore you!"

He stared at her for a moment, then gave a half laugh, half grunt. "That's not love, Kayla. That's something else."

Her head went back in surprise. Who would have believed Max would be the one to see the difference so clearly? But still, he seemed to be utterly blind to his own strengths. He was always so carefree and debonair. She'd never known he had this insecurity at his core. She had to make him see how wrong it was.

"Oh, come on. What did we used to call you? Mr. Casanova. A new girl on your arm every night."

His sigh was full of regrets. "You see, that's just it." He took a long drink from his beer and stared into space. "Lots of new girls. No true love."

It was hard to believe that a man this appealing, this attractive, thought he couldn't find his soul mate. She looked at him, so handsome, so adorable. Her fingers ached to run through that thick auburn hair. It took all her will to stay where she was.

"Haven't you ever been in love?" she asked him.

"Not really." He squinted at her, thinking it over. "I don't think so. Not like you and Eddie." His smile was crooked. "I used to watch you two together and I think I hated you almost as much as I loved you."

"Oh, Max ..."

"You know what I mean. It was pure jealousy. You two were so good together, so ... so devoted." His voice broke on the word and she had to close her eyes and bite her lip to keep from going to him.

Devoted. Yes, that was exactly the way it had been. When she'd found Eddie, she couldn't believe her luck. They'd met in an elevator in their apartment building in Paris. As they traveled up the floors, people got off, but the two of them remained, until they were alone and looking at each other tentatively across the empty car. Their eyes met. Love at first sight. And when they finally got to her floor, he admitted he had been four stops before. How could she not invite him in for a cup of coffee? Two months later, they were married.

When he'd died, she had thought life was over. She moved in a dark, menacing fog, blindly searching for some way out of the pain, not really believing it was possible. For days, she was obsessed, thinking of ways to join him. And then she realized she had someone else to think about.

"Do you remember ...?" Max's voice choked.

She stiffened. Here it came. She had to keep a cool front. Still, she had to tell the truth, at least as far as it was safe.

"I remember too much," she said softly.

"Me, too." He finished off his beer and looked at her. "I think about Eddie every day."

She nodded, closing her eyes. "Me, too."

She wasn't going to cry. She had to hold it back. For a moment, she let herself recall the way it had been being married to Eddie. Sunshine every day. Champagne for breakfast. Walks on the beach and dancing barefoot to a reggae tune. Driving with the top down. Love in the afternoon. Eddie was the best. The very best.

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