

SUSAN
MALLERY

*The Sheik &
the Princess
Bride*

Сьюзен Мэллери

The Sheik & the Princess Bride

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“YOU'D BETTER GET MOVING, BIG GUY.” Prince Jefri of Bahania had just been bested...by a woman! And not just any female, but Billie Van Horn, his gorgeous, take-no-prisoners flight instructor who was more than a match for this ultramasculine male. Well, she might be an ace in the air, but when it came to romance Billie was determined to keep both feet on the ground. So why did the sexy sheik make her feel as if she were soaring high above the clouds? She knew that when royal honor called, her high-born lover would fly from her side forever... unless Jefri defied his destiny and chose love....

Содержание

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| The Sheik & the Princess Bride | 6 |
| Contents | 7 |
| Chapter One | 8 |
| Chapter Two | 15 |
| Chapter Three | 23 |
| Chapter Four | 30 |
| Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. | 31 |

The Sheik & the Princess Bride

Susan Mallery



To Sharon. Because every woman deserves
a little fantasy in her life. This one's for you.

Contents

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen

Chapter One

Prince Jefri of Bahania refused to believe he could be beaten by a woman. It was simply not possible. Yet here he sat in the cockpit of his F15, going over five hundred miles an hour and staring into the sun where he'd last seen the other plane soar out of sight.

"You'd better get moving, big guy."

The amused female voice came through his headset and caused him to grind his teeth.

Where was she? He turned his head, searching for a glimmer of sunlight on metal. Something. Anything that would give him a clue as to her whereabouts. He saw nothing.

Jefri had been flying since he was a teenager and in all that time, he'd never once been anything but confident. For the first time in his life, he felt a cold sweat trickle down his back. Seconds later a high-pitched warning tone sounded in the cockpit. She'd locked on to him. Had this been a real combat situation, he would be dead.

"Bang, bang," the woman said and then chuckled. "You lasted all of two minutes. Not bad for a rookie. Okay. Follow me down."

Suddenly her jet swooped in from his left. The machine turned gracefully, then moved in front of him. Even at this speed, she was close enough for him to read the call sign painted on the fuselage.

Girly Girl.

Jefri groaned. This could not be happening. He was a prince, a sheik, heir to untold wealth and land. He was the youngest son of the king of Bahania. He did not get shot out of the sky by a woman!

"I know what you're thinking," she said. "You're upset and humiliated. You men always are. Console yourself with the fact that no one's beaten me in a dogfight for six or seven years. This is war, not personal. My job is to make you better. Your job is to learn. Nothing more."

"I am aware of my responsibilities," he said curtly.

"You're going to hold a grudge, aren't you? I can already tell." She sighed. "Some guys are like that. Oh, well. It's your ulcer."

With that, her jet rotated as gracefully as a ballerina, then streaked across the sky. Jefri stared at the space where it had been just a heartbeat ago. How the hell had she done that?

He shook his head and keyed in the code for the recently installed military air traffic control tower. After giving his number and approximate position in the desert, he requested permission to return to the base. When it was granted, he turned his plane to the correct coordinates and headed south.

Twenty minutes later, he landed and taxied his jet toward the large, newly constructed hangars. When he'd stopped the plane and opened the hatch, he heard someone call his name.

"Two minutes," Doyle Van Horn yelled from the tarmac. "That's the record so far. Good for you."

Good? Jefri gritted his teeth and climbed down the ladder. "It was a disaster."

When he reached the ground, Doyle slapped him on the shoulder. "You can't take it personally. Nobody beats Billie."

"That's what she said." Jefri stared at the blond man. "How long has she been with your firm?"

Doyle grinned. "Technically, all her life. She's my sister. Dad had her driving tanks by the time she was twelve. She soloed in a jet on her sixteenth birthday. You said you wanted to be trained by the best, and that's what we provided, Your Highness."

"Call me Jefri. I've told you, no formalities. It will be easier that way."

Doyle nodded. "Just checking. I thought you might be touchy after being shot down and all. Some guys are."

Jefri didn't doubt it. He watched as a second aircraft came in for landing. The jet moved lightly, barely raising any dust when the wheels touched down.

“I wish to meet her,” he said firmly.

“I figured you would. They always do.”

Jefri raised his eyebrows. “Do they?”

“Yup. No one can believe it. Things only get worse when they get a look at her.”

“In what way?”

Doyle laughed and held up his hands in a gesture of surrender. “You go find out for yourself. Just one warning. You might be a prince and the guy who hired us, but Billie is off-limits. To everyone. Even you.”

Jefri was not used to being given orders, but he didn’t argue with Doyle. He wasn’t interested in Billie Van Horn as anything but a resource. If she was the best, he wanted to learn from her. Then he would take her on again, and this time he would win.

Billie climbed out of the cockpit and tugged on the zipper of her flight suit. No matter how many times she sent the manufacturer her measurements, they always got the fit wrong. Whoever designed the stupid things seemed to forget women had parts men didn’t.

She jumped the last couple of feet to the ground and removed her helmet. As she did, she saw a tall man striding toward her. She recognized the determined pace, the stubborn set of the shoulders. Oh, yeah, this would be Prince Jefri. No doubt Bahanian royalty weren’t used to losing. Well, he’d better get used to it. She didn’t plan to treat him any differently than any other client, which meant he was going to keep on hearing that tone-lock for the rest of her time here.

Men always hated being beaten by her. They couldn’t seem to accept that a woman could be good in a dogfight. In her experience the men she trained fell into two camps. The first got angry and aggressive, often attempting to take out their frustrations in the air by bullying and intimidating her on the ground. The second kind ignored her. Outside of the classroom or an airplane, she simply didn’t exist.

A few men—a very few—saw her as an actual person and were pleasant.

But no one she’d ever trained had bothered to see her as a woman. She supposed it was asking too much to find a man who could accept that she could whip his butt in the air and still want to go dancing on Saturday night.

Prince Jefri continued to stalk closer and she wondered which camp he would fall in. Was it too much to ask that he be one of the nice guys? Did royal sheiks get trained in manners these days? Were there—

The man in question pulled off his helmet and whipped off his sunglasses as he approached. At that exact second, Billie’s brain shut down.

He was gorgeous.

No, that didn’t describe it. She needed a better word to explain how beautiful he was—but in a totally masculine way. Was it his eyes—deep brown, thickly lashed and sensual? Was it the firm set of his mouth, the perfect cheekbones, the dark hair? Was it the combination of features, the determination in his expression?

Did it matter?

He only got better as he got closer. She’d seen his pictures in magazines, but those glossy images were nothing when compared with the real thing. She did her best to catch her breath and act normal but her heart beat at a speed approaching Mach 3 and showed no signs of slowing.

“Congratulations,” the über-hunk said as he held out his hand. “You maneuver your jet like a pro.”

He sounded gracious and not the least bit put out. Was that possible?

“I am a pro.”

She took the offered hand automatically and nearly swooned at the sparks that arced between them. She could feel them, and yet the man gently squeezing her fingers didn’t seem the least bit

affected. So typical, she thought with wry amusement. Something about being in the cockpit of a jet seemed to render her genderless. Ah, well. In her next life she would be a sex kitten. In this one she was destined to be permanently single.

“How did you disappear into the sun so quickly?” he asked. “I was watching. You were there and then you were gone.”

“Every jet has blind spots. The trick is to know where they are and use them to your advantage.”

“But I could have turned such that the blind spot moved.”

She shook her head as she pulled her hand free. “You were stiff up there. I knew you’d stay on course long enough for me to get lost in the sun. Now, if you’ll excuse me...”

Billie turned and headed for the temporary barracks set up at the edge of the airport. If she’d thought she would lose the man of the hour by walking quickly, she was wrong. His long stride easily kept pace with hers, and he continued to pepper her with questions. She answered his queries automatically, all the while doing her best not to notice that he fit the “tall, dark and handsome” cliché perfectly. Pretty and a prince, and about a hundred times more interested in flying than in her.

“This is my stop,” she said brightly, cutting him off in mid-pound-thrust ratio question, as they reached the flap of her semipermanent home. “We’ll have plenty of time to discuss all of this during the lecture time, and in simulation.”

“When will I fly against you again?” he asked.

She tugged the zipper of her flight suit down to her hips and pulled her arms free of the heavy fabric. It might be October in the desert, but it was still warm. She plucked at the T-shirt she wore underneath.

“We’ll have plenty of air time,” she told him. “Don’t worry, I’ll be killing you over and over again.”

“I think not. About that last maneuver...”

The man didn’t even notice she had breasts, Billie thought with a combination of humor and regret. She’d often thought she could step out of her flight suit and walk around stark naked and not one of the pilots would notice. Of course her brothers would see and probably kill her.

“I’m off duty until the morning,” she said politely, wishing she could give him a gentle push back to his palace or wherever it was he lived. “I know you’re anxious, what with getting your new air force up and running, but I don’t work 24/7. Call me crazy.”

With that she disappeared into the tent.

Jefri frowned. Had the female instructor turned her back on him and walked away? He followed her inside. “You don’t understand. I need this information,” he said, barely noticing the Spartan setting.

Billie glanced at him, then smiled. “You don’t give up, do you?”

“No.”

She opened the drawer of a dresser and pulled out several garments, then disappeared behind a screen.

“Okay, fly boy. I’ll give you fifteen minutes, but then you have to let me get some rest. I flew all night to get here and my regular tent isn’t set up yet. I’m stuck in regulation housing until then. No offense, but it’s hot here and I want my air-conditioning. Oh, have a seat.”

He glanced around for a chair and saw one in the corner. There was a small ball in the seat. As he reached for it, the ball moved, uncoiled, growled and snapped at him.

From behind the screen, he heard laughter.

“I see you found Muffin.”

He eyed the ball of fur with distaste. “Muffin?”

“My baby. Be nice to the tall man, sweetie,” Billie said. “He’s paying the bills. Just go ahead and scratch under her chin. Oh, and tell her she’s pretty. Muffin likes that.”

Jefri eyed the tiny dog. All he saw was multicolored strands of hair and two mistrustful eyes. Hardly anything attractive.

“Get down,” he said and pointed to the floor of the tent.

Muffin made a sound very much like a huff, turned her back on him and curled up in a ball. On the chair. He reached for her, but before he could pick her up, she growled.

“I would kill for a bath,” Billie said with a sigh, and Jefri allowed himself to be distracted. “But we don’t actually travel with a tub. Doyle says it’s too inconvenient. Oh, sure, we can move millions of pounds of jets and computer equipment with no problem, but one lousy tub is difficult. What is it with guys? Why don’t you get the whole point of a nice long soak?”

As she spoke she stepped out from behind the screen. Jefri began to answer, when his senses went on alert. For the first time since she’d climbed down from the jet he actually looked at her.

Girly girl didn’t begin to describe things.

She was a centerfold fantasy come to life—big blond hair, big blue eyes and bigger breasts. Her sundress hugged her impressive curves before falling to midthigh. High-heeled sandals gave her a little height, but she still barely cleared his shoulder.

After giving him a smile bright enough to be listed as an energy source, she crossed to the fur ball and gathered it in her arms.

“How’s my pretty girl?” she asked in a baby voice. “Did you say hello to the nice prince?”

Billie held the dog’s paw in her hand and gave it a little wave. “Muffin says hi.”

Prince Jefri of Bahania had never had anyone pretend to speak for an animal before. He glanced from the woman to the dog and back.

Billie grinned. “Okay, so you’re not a ‘talk to the animals’ kind of guy. I can accept that. Doyle swears he hates her but I see him sneaking her treats every now and then.”

She walked toward the tent flap and pushed it open. “I thought it would be cooler here, given the time of year. I guess not, though. It’s the desert and all.” Still cuddling the dog, she walked out into the sunlight. “Not to be too pushy, but your time is ticking away. Didn’t you have more questions to ask me?”

Questions? Jefri followed her out, then saw the rows of fighter jets. Yes, of course. He’d had dozens of things he wanted to know, but he couldn’t think of any of them. Not when the hem of her form-fitting dress drew his gaze to her perfect thighs, and the sway of her hips made his blood boil.

He was unused to such strong physical reactions. Women had always been easy for him. He saw, he wanted, he was offered. But Billie seemed oblivious to her appeal, nor did she see him as more than an eager student.

She spun around and faced him. “What?” she asked, her blue eyes wide with amusement. “I know I haven’t intimidated you, so out with it. What do you want to know?”

He had a thousand requests for information. How soft would her skin feel under his fingers? How would she taste when he kissed her? How low would she moan as he pleased her over and over, because his fantasies about Billie were about making her surrender with desire?

“Why do you do this?” he asked. “Why do you fly?”

“Because I love it. I’ve always loved it.” She grinned. “And I’m damned good at it.”

“Yes, you are.”

Two airplane mechanics walked by. Both of them eyed Billie. They bent their heads together and exchanged words he couldn’t hear. But he could imagine.

Jefri looked at the large tents, the open camp and then back at Billie. This would not do.

“You cannot stay here,” he told her.

Her smile faded. “Excuse me? You’re throwing me out of your country?”

“No. Of course not. I’m saying you can’t stay in this camp. It’s not safe.”

Her good humor returned. “I appreciate the concern, but I’ve been living in camps just like this since I was eleven. They’re a little rough on the outside, but still plenty fun. It’s sweet of you to worry,

but you don't have to. I usually have three brothers and a father hanging around. This time there's only Doyle, but he's plenty burly and he'll make sure I'm well protected." She rubbed her cheek against the dog's shoulder. "Too protected. Isn't that right, little Muffin girl?"

He ignored her conversation with the dog. "You and your brother will be my guests in the palace."

She blinked at him. "Did you say palace?"

"Yes. There are several dozen guest rooms. You would be very comfortable there."

"Do these rooms have bathtubs?" Temptation thickened her voice.

"Large enough to swim in."

She made a low noise in her throat. The sound made his blood surge.

"Gee, a real bed, walls, a roof and a sand-free life," she said. "Color me there. Doyle objects, I'll have to deck him."

"This is a complete waste of time if you ask me," Doyle muttered as the long, black limo drove between large wrought-iron gates. "We've never stayed with a client before."

Billie gazed out at the extensive and well-manicured lawns. "We've never had a royal client before. It's a palace, okay? This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. No one's forcing you to suffer through the indignities of pure luxury. Go back to our tent city by the airport if it makes you happy."

Her brother glared at her. "You know Dad would kill me if I wasn't around to keep an eye on you."

"I'm twenty-seven, Doyle," she said. "At some point you're going to have to acknowledge that I'm all grown-up."

"Ain't gonna happen."

She shook her head at the familiar sentiment. It was hard enough being the baby of the family, but being the only girl made things worse.

Still, she'd gotten used to their high-handed treatment years ago and for the most part was able to ignore it. When she didn't care one way or another, she usually gave in. But not this time. Not when there was a bathtub on the line.

The car rounded a corner and Billie felt her eyes widen. "I can't believe it," she breathed as she took in the multistory pink palace sprawling in front of her.

The main building was huge—the size of a museum or a parliament building. Balconies circled every floor. There were turrets and arched windows and guards on the ground and lush gardens for as far as the eye could see.

"Not bad," Doyle said.

Billie cuffed him. "You're impressed. It's amazing. Too bad Dad and the guys can't be here to see it."

Her father was in South America attending a multinational conference and her two oldest brothers had special assignments in Iraq. Which left Doyle and her in charge of the Bahanian job. Easy work, Billie thought. She could train an air force pilot in her sleep. Flying was something she loved and one of the few things she did well.

The limo pulled to a stop and a uniformed guard stepped forward to open the rear door. Doyle stepped out first. Billie grabbed Muffin and slid across the slick, leather seat. As she stepped out into the sunlight, her eyes took a second to adjust. During that second or two, her gaze landed on Prince Jefri and she would have sworn she saw him bathed in shimmering gold.

Neat trick, she thought as her mind whirled from the beauty of the palace and her body swooned from the beauty of the man.

"Ms. Van Horn." The prince nodded.

"Billie," she said with a smile. "As I'm going to be shooting you out of the sky on a regular basis, there's no point in being formal."

She thought the prince might have winced at her words. No doubt he thought he would get good enough to win against her. They all thought that, and they were all wrong. Which meant he would get more and more crabby as the training went along. Oh, well. It had happened before and she had survived.

The prince spoke to a uniformed young woman who nodded, then gestured toward Doyle. Her brother gave Billie a quick wink as he followed the maid into the castle. Billie stepped up for her escort and tried not to drool at the thought of the riches within.

“This way,” Prince Jefri said.

She blinked at him. “Excuse me?”

“I will show you to your room.”

Did royalty do that? She figured about the only thing a prince did for himself was breathe. Hadn’t she read somewhere that some royals even had a special servant to put toothpaste on the toothbrush?

“You don’t have to do that yourself,” she said, thinking of her bath and how long she was going to soak. At least an hour. She had a good book she wanted to finish and a...

“Is this your first visit to my country?” he asked.

“Um, yes.” She shifted Muffin to her other arm and trailed along beside the prince. “I wasn’t part of the sales presentation when our firm bid for the training job.”

They entered into a foyer the size of a small arena. The gold inlaid ceilings soared a good fifty feet above them. Mosaics of ancient battles lined the curved walls. Not exactly like the flocked wallpaper in that hotel in Bosnia.

He noticed her interest and paused in front of a mural of several fierce men on horses. “My people have always been fighters. A thousand years ago, we defended our land against the infidels.”

She looked at him out of the corner of her eye. “That would be us, right?”

“Only if you are European.”

“I’m a bit of everything.” She looked at the elaborate chandelier and the stained glass windows. “Beautiful place.”

“Thank you. The Pink Palace is a treasure for the people of Bahania.”

“How many of them get to stay here on a regular basis?”

The prince surprised her by smiling. “We hold it in trust.”

“I’m sure they’re grateful.”

He started down the main hallway. Billie followed, noting they could have easily driven a tank and not come close to bumping into any walls.

“I did some research before I got here,” she said, her high-heeled sandals clicking loudly on the tiled floor. “Your country is not strictly Muslim.”

“No. Our people celebrate many faiths, and respect all.”

That’s what all her reading had told her. While the rest of the Middle East couldn’t seem to get it together, Bahania, and their neighbor El Bahar, offered religious freedom to all. The monarchies had ruled for over a thousand years with no hint of uprising. Ultimate power that didn’t corrupt? Was it possible?

“So why the air force?” she asked.

“To protect our oil fields. With so much unrest around us, we need to be able to secure our resources.”

“The oil won’t last forever.”

“True, which is why even now we are diversifying our exports. Bahania will not be left behind in the world market.”

Pretty and smart, she thought with a little smile. Now if only he could see her as a desirable woman, her life would be complete. Her research had informed her that Prince Jefri was single, but she’d seen pictures of the women in his life. There wasn’t a fighter pilot in the bunch.

They passed room after room. Some were decorated with elegant Western-style furniture while others had low sofas and cushions, more suited to a nomadic tent. There were paintings and frescos and statues and...

Muffin squirmed in her arms.

"What is it sweetie?" she asked.

The dog yipped and squirmed some more. Seconds later a large white cat strolled out of a meeting room large enough to hold the entire Congress.

Billie yelped and clutched her dog more tightly to her chest. "What is that?" she asked as she took a step back.

The prince stared at her. "A cat," he said with the obvious patience of one speaking to a mentally challenged person.

Annoyance overcame hormones and she glared at him. "I know it's a cat. What's it doing here?"

"My father has an affection for cats."

She eyed the fluffy white demon. "I read that but I thought more in the lines of a painting on velvet or some carvings. Are you telling me there are actual cats in the palace?"

"Dozens. Is that a problem?"

She saw the corner of the prince's mouth twitch, as if he was amused by her reaction.

"I'm not a cat person."

"They will not hurt you."

She wasn't all that sure. If there were dozens, they could gang up on her and take her down. "What about Muffin?"

"I'm sure your...dog will be safe."

She didn't like how he said "dog" and she didn't like the cats.

"Do you have an allergy?" he asked.

"Not exactly."

"Then what, exactly?"

"I had a bad experience when I was young."

"With a small lion?"

She narrowed her gaze. Suddenly he wasn't nearly as handsome and not the least bit intelligent. "Would you like to show me to my room?"

"More than life itself."

Chapter Two

Jefri could tell his guest was annoyed and unhappy about the cats. While he didn't appreciate them as his father did, especially when they shed on all the furniture and covered his clothes in cat hair, they were little more than a mild inconvenience. But watching Billie Van Horn skitter around them, jump away and generally act as if she was in mortal danger every time one of them crossed her path, he wondered what possible trauma in her past could have caused such an overreaction.

At least wondering about her cat phobia gave him something to think about other than the perfection of her body. She was all lush curves and earthy appeal. Her scent—soap, something floral and a hint of the woman herself—made his blood heat. He wouldn't have minded his reaction if she'd been trying to get his attention, but she seemed to be far more concerned about protecting herself from marauding felines.

He led the way to an elevator that took them to the third floor. When the doors opened, a tabby sat in the middle of the hallway. Billie jumped which, considering her high-heeled sandals, made him worry for the state of her slender ankles.

"Were you attacked?" he asked as she sidled around the twelve-pound feline.

"What?" She glanced at him, her blue eyes wide with worry. "Not me, but a close friend." She pressed her lips together. "Muffin is only seven pounds. They could slice her to ribbons and serve her for breakfast."

Jefri thought of how much time his father's cats spent sleeping. "I doubt they are that ambitious."

Billie's sniff told him she wasn't impressed by his logic.

As much as he wanted her in the palace, he hadn't intended his invitation to distress her.

"Would you prefer to stay at the barracks?"

She shook her head. "We'll manage."

"The room is just up there."

He motioned to a door, then stepped ahead of her to open it. Billie stepped inside and her breath caught in an audible gasp. Jefri followed her gaze, taking in the large living area, the floor-to-ceiling windows offering a view of the Arabian Sea and the wide double doors that led to the sleeping quarters.

"Will you be comfortable here?" he asked politely.

"Yes. And should I feel the need to take in boarders to supplement my income, there will be plenty of room." She grinned. "This I could get used to."

"You may consider the palace your home while you're in Bahania."

"You might want to be careful with an invitation like that. What if I never want to leave?"

Then she would be available to him whenever he wanted. Jefri turned the thought over in his mind and found it gave him pleasure. Too bad his father had done away with the harem. She would have been a wonderful addition.

"Please let any of the staff know if you have any needs," he said instead of telling her what he was really thinking.

"Sure thing. I can't imagine needing anything else, though. This room is amazing."

She bent over and set her dog on the floor. The fur ball trotted to the sofa and began sniffing at the furniture.

"Do you always travel with your pet?" Jefri asked.

"Yup. Muffin and I are a package deal. I've even taken her up flying with me."

He couldn't imagine why. "Does she enjoy it?"

"Hard to tell," Billie admitted. "She doesn't throw up, so that's something."

Wanting to talk about something other than the creature touring the room, he crossed to the French doors and pointed toward the sea.

“The balcony circles the entire palace. From the south end you can look toward Lucia-Serrat.”

“I’ve heard of the island. It’s supposed to be very beautiful.”

“Much of this area is.”

She shook her head. “I had a mental picture of sand as far as the eye could see. But the city sprawls over a much bigger area than I would have thought. Of course when it ends, there are miles of sand.”

“You noticed that while you were flying today?”

She nodded. “Not much else to do up there. The first few days of dogfighting are pretty boring what with...”

Her voice trailed off. He saw her swallow, then she glanced at him from under long lashes.

“So that was bad, right?” she asked, sounding more resigned than contrite. “I’ve just insulted a prince. Is there a punishment? Do I get sent to the dungeon?”

“Why the sudden concern?” he asked. “Back at the airport you told me I would never beat you.”

“Oh, you won’t,” she told him. “But I should probably be more subtle about it all.”

“Because of the palace?”

“It does sort of put our lives in perspective. I’m a small-town girl and you’re...not.”

“Indeed. I would not even qualify as a big-city girl.”

Her beautiful mouth twisted. “You know what I mean. Maybe you could get me a brochure or some notes. Something along the lines of twenty ways not to insult royalty.”

“There is a person in charge of etiquette. Perhaps I should have him drop by.”

Billie wrinkled her nose. “You’re making fun of me.”

“Only a little.”

“Wow. You have a sense of humor. What’s next on the surprise parade? Do you do your own laundry?”

“Never.”

“A guy thing. My brothers don’t do theirs either. But then that’s fairly typical of—”

A sharp yowl cut through the conversation. He turned toward the sound but Billie was already moving across the marble flooring. Several sharp barks were followed by a yip.

“Muffin!” she cried as she plunged into a fray of fur, paws, teeth and tails.

While Jefri had no desire to rescue her pet, he felt obligated to offer assistance. He eyed Billie’s bare legs and hands, then moved behind her, wrapped an arm around her waist and lifted her out of the way.

She squealed, adding to the din. He had a brief impression of curves, heat and potential before he set her down behind him.

“I’ll take care of this,” he said as he reached into the swirl of cats and plucked out a small growling, yelping ball of fur.

For his trouble he received several scratches, a bite from the dog and enough hair on his suit to change the color from black to gray.

“I believe this is yours.” He handed the small, shaking dog to her.

She pulled the creature close and brushed her hands over its body. “Muffin! Are you hurt? Did those horrible, mean killers hurt you?”

After reassuring herself that Muffin had indeed survived, she turned her attention to him.

“I don’t know what to say,” she breathed, her blue eyes wide and anguished. “They could have killed her.”

He examined his hand. Muffin’s bite hadn’t broken the skin, but several of the cats had left their mark.

“I think she would have survived the encounter.”

He crossed to the main door and opened it, then shooed the cats out of the suite.

“There may still be one or two left in here,” he said. “Just give them a push out the door.”

She glanced around uneasily, then moved close. “How can I thank you?”

Her voice was low and intense. Had she been someone of his usual social circle, he would have assumed she was offering more than a polite acknowledgment of what he’d done. But with Billie, he wasn’t so sure. Besides, as much as he wanted her in his bed, he intended to seduce her every step of the way. He had a feeling that with her, anticipation would only make the experience sweeter.

“It was no matter.”

She shook her head and set Muffin on the sofa. “It was a huge deal. Those cats were so horrible.” She reached for his hand and took it in hers. “You’re bleeding!”

A few of the scratches seeped blood. Jefri wasn’t the least bit concerned, but he didn’t object when Billie dragged him into the large bathroom and ran water over his hand.

Her skin was smooth and warm against his own. She stood close enough for him to feel the heat of her body and the light brush of her breasts against his arm.

“You were very brave,” she said.

“They were only cats.”

“Killers by nature,” she murmured as she reached for a towel.

He wiped his hands then touched his finger to her chin. “What happened that made you so afraid of cats? While I’ll agree they are hunters, they are small enough that you would never be in danger of them.”

She shrugged. “I don’t like them.”

“I gathered that. The question is why?”

Billie sighed. Her breath teased his skin and he dropped his hand to his side.

“When I was young, I desperately wanted a pet,” she said. “Something of my own. But my mother was concerned about getting me one because my brothers were so wild. She doubted any pet big enough to hold its own with them would be a good animal for me. But on my seventh birthday, my brothers pitched in and got me a white mouse.”

She smiled. “I know they did it because they thought the mouse would scare me, but I wasn’t frightened at all.”

“You have three older brothers?” he asked.

She nodded.

He thought of the size and strength of Doyle Van Horn and knew that Billie would have to have been tough to survive in that household.

“I loved Missy,” Billie said.

He raised his eyebrows. “Missy the Mouse?”

“Uh-huh. She was very sweet and tame. I taught her tricks.”

“Such as?”

“She knew her name and she would stand on her back legs when I offered her food.”

“That’s not a trick. She was simply attempting to reach the food.”

Billie’s eyes narrowed. “She was my mouse. I get to say if it was a trick or not.”

“Fair enough. So you had this mouse. I suspect there was a cat involved.”

Billie nodded. She leaned against the bathroom counter. “We had this playroom. There was a latch up higher than I could reach and sometimes, if I slammed the door, it locked into place. One day Missy got out. I couldn’t find her anywhere. I wanted my brothers to help me find her, but they wouldn’t. I was mad, so I stomped into the playroom and slammed the door. It locked behind me.”

Her voice remained firm, but he heard the edge of emotion. Why? Over the death of a mouse twenty years ago? What possible reason could she have for caring?

Billie folded her arms over her chest. “I walked to the window and looked out and that’s when I saw Missy. Two of the neighbor’s cats had her cornered. They were playing with her. Torturing her. I screamed for my brothers to let me out but they were in the front yard and couldn’t hear me.

My mom was at the grocery store. I was trapped for nearly two hours. That's about how long it took them to kill and eat her."

Jefri winced. "You didn't turn away?"

"How could I? She was my mouse." She sighed. "I remember sobbing and my mom finding me. She tried to convince me it hadn't been Missy, but how many white mice live in the wild?"

"So that is why you dislike cats?"

"Wouldn't you?"

He couldn't imagine having a mouse as a pet in the first place. "They were acting on instinct, not out of malice."

"Oh, and that makes Missy's death acceptable?"

"Of course not." Were they really talking about a mouse?

"It's hard having pets," she said as she straightened her arms and pushed off the counter. "But worth it. Now I have Muffin and I'm going to make sure nothing bad ever happens to her. No palace cat is going to be allowed to have her for dinner."

"The cats here are well fed."

"They'd better be."

Temper flashed in her eyes. Jefri wondered how they'd shifted topics so completely. Given his choice they would be talking about flying or how attractive she found him. So far they had done neither.

"I will tell the staff to keep the cats out of your rooms as much as possible," he said.

"Really? That would be great." She glanced at the tub. "If you hadn't tempted me with such a great bathroom, I probably would have returned to the barracks. But this is pretty irresistible."

Ah, so she could resist him, but not a bathtub. That put things in perspective.

"About your stay here," he said, deciding flying was the safest topic. "You will have to be at the airport each day?"

"Yup. There's plenty of butt for me to kick in your nice blue skies."

"I'm sure my men will enjoy learning from you," he told her, ignoring the assumption that she would continue to best him. He was going to make sure that didn't happen.

"Oh, they're going to learn, whether they enjoy the process or not."

"I will put a car and driver at your disposal. Simply tell the driver where you wish to go and he will take you there."

Her mouth parted. "You're kidding? My own driver?"

"You may share him if you would like."

She laughed. "No, that's okay. As I said before, I could really get used to this."

"I hope you'll enjoy your stay in my country."

He nodded at her and left. While there was much more to be said, this wasn't the time. Later, when he'd decided on his strategy he would talk to her about more than her work. He would discover the secrets of the beautiful woman who flew like a falcon and moved with the grace of the cats she found so distasteful. He would learn her strengths, her weaknesses and he would have her in his bed. He would also best her in the air. To be honest, he wasn't sure which he would enjoy more.

Billie finished drying her hair and stepped back to admire the effect. "Not bad," she murmured to her reflection, as she fluffed up a curl. She'd always been a big-hair kind of gal and the complete lack of humidity in Bahania meant no risk of her carefully poofed style going flat.

Nearly an hour in a massive tub had relaxed her. Now rested, redressed in a sundress and still jetlagged from her trip the previous day she felt both tired and antsy.

"We should take a walk," she told Muffin as she moved back into the living room of the suite. "A couple of laps in this room would almost do it, huh?"

She grinned as she spoke, then turned in a circle as she admired the elegant Western-style furnishings and beautiful paintings. There was a thick oriental rug by the sofa and a dining area to the left. The view was as spectacular as any she'd ever seen from the ground. Silent air-conditioning kept the room a comfortable seventy-six degrees.

"The good life," she said as she gathered Muffin in her arms. "Okay, what if we take a quick walk outside, then figure out what we're doing about dinner? I mean does the palace have room service? I should have asked the prince about it."

She would have, too, if he hadn't been so tall and princely while he'd showed her around the suite.

"The man is a hunk," she told her little dog as she carried her out into the corridor. "Wish he were my type."

Not that Billie had an actual type. That would require a level of involvement she'd never had.

"In my next life I'll be a guy magnet," she told herself. "They'll be tripping over each other to get to me."

But until then, it was just her and her dog.

Billie walked to the end of the corridor and took the stairs down. She had a good sense of direction and was able to find her way to the garden in under five minutes.

The lush cultivated space seemed larger at ground level. The various gardens spilled into each other, more formal English garden hedges giving way to serene pools surrounded by tropical disarray. She set Muffin down, careful to keep an eye on her so she wasn't cornered and attacked by marauding cats.

"Not bad," Billie murmured as Muffin began to sniff. "Easy to understand why it's good to be the prince."

Her sandals clicked loudly on the stone path. She wove her way between plants and bushes and trees, stopping to smell a flower or finger a leaf. She didn't know all that much about growing things. Her expertise required an engine and enough thrust and speed to break the sound barrier. Still, if one had to stay earthbound, this was the place.

She rounded a corner and saw a man sitting on a bench. He looked up as she approached, then stood.

"Good afternoon," he said with a smile. "Who might you be?"

The man was tall and handsome, albeit older. Gray spread from his temples and there were lines by his dark, deep-set eyes. His well-tailored suit reminded her of a bank president or senator, not that she'd ever met either.

"Billie Van Horn," she said, holding out her hand.

"Ah, the military expert. I recognize the name." He shook hands with her, then motioned to the bench. "You are a member of the family?"

"The only girl. A giant pain, let me tell you." She settled on one end of the stone bench while he took the other. "The good news is I'm a great pilot and if my brothers ever make me too crazy I challenge them to a dogfight." She grinned. "A fighter jet is a great equalizer."

"I can imagine."

Muffin trotted up and sniffed at the nice man's shoes.

"My dog," Billie said. "Muffin. I'd heard there were cats, but I didn't expect so many. I'm trying to keep Muffin from being the chef's special."

"I doubt you have to worry. She looks capable of taking care of herself."

"Not when she's outnumbered. There was already a fight in my room."

The older man raised his eyebrows. "You are staying at the palace?"

"Yes. Prince Jefri invited me and my brother Doyle." She leaned close. "I confess I was seduced by the thought of a bathtub. Roughing it comes with the job, so how could I resist a few weeks in a palace? The place is amazing."

“I’m glad you think so.”

A cat strolled up. Billie eyed it with distaste but her companion simply stroked its back.

“You fly jets?” he asked. “That is your job?”

“I do most of the in-air training. I also work with the pilots on the simulators. It’s fun.”

“You are good at this?”

She grinned. “The best. This morning I blew Prince Jefri out of the sky in less than two minutes. Not literally, of course.”

“How comforting. I am not yet ready to lose my youngest son.”

As the words sank in, Billie opened her mouth, then closed it. “S-son?” she repeated, hoping she’d misunderstood. “You’re his father?”

“Yes.”

She looked into the dark eyes and realized the resemblance had been staring her in the face.

“But that would make you...”

“The king.”

“Oh, God.”

She half rose, thought about The King and I and wondered if she was allowed to hold her head higher than his. Was that a real law or just humor for a musical?

“I can’t...” She swallowed. “I didn’t...” Giving in to the need to curl up and die, she covered her face with her hands and moaned. “How many laws have I broken?”

“No more than three or four.”

She spread her fingers and peeked at the king. He didn’t look angry. If the smile was anything to go by, he was amused.

She dropped her hands to her lap and straightened. “You could have told me.”

“I did.”

“I mean before. When I said, ‘Hi, I’m Billie.’ You could have said, ‘Hey, I’m the king.’”

“This was more interesting. You would not have spoken so freely with me if you had known who I am.”

“No kidding. So do I bow or something?”

“You do neither. I am King Hassan of Bahania.” He nodded regally. “Welcome to my country.”

“Thank you. It’s great.” She sighed. “I guess I’d better apologize for not liking cats.”

“Caring for them is not required, although you aren’t allowed to injure any.”

“I’m okay with that, but Muffin may be another matter.” She glanced down at her dog and wrinkled her nose. “She’s only seven pounds, so I don’t think she could do much more than cause a lot of noise.”

The king followed her gaze, then smiled. “That is true. I will have to hope my cats are up to the challenge. If there—”

A loud howl interrupted his sentence. Billie sprang to her feet and headed toward the noise just as a black-and-white cat flew in front of her. She sidestepped to avoid stepping on the horrible creature and slid off the stone path. Her momentum didn’t help her regain her balance and she felt herself falling.

Suddenly strong arms grabbed her from behind. Someone hauled her up, rescuing her from what could have been some serious pain. Billie caught her breath as she felt rock-hard muscles, incredible body heat and the thundering beat of her own heart.

Please God let her not have been rescued by the king. He was handsome and all that, but old enough that having a visceral reaction to him bordered on icky.

She turned her head and breathed a sigh of relief when she saw Jefri gazing at her from only a few inches away.

“Your dog seems to be in trouble again,” he said as he righted her. “She has a knack for finding it.”

Billie straightened and brushed off her dress. "I would say with all these cats stalking her, she has little choice except to protect herself."

Remembering the presence of the king a half sentence too late, she swallowed. "Not that the cats aren't lovely," she added in a small voice.

Jefri raised his eyebrows, but didn't speak. The king looked amused. He bent over and scooped up a now calm and silent Muffin.

"So you are a troublemaker," he said, staring into her dog's little face. "Perhaps you need to learn your place in the world."

Billie hoped that place didn't involve a cage. "She travels with me everywhere. She's sort of spoiled."

"So I see." He set the dog down on the ground and patted her head. "I would like you and your brother to join me for dinner tonight." He straightened. "If you can bear to leave the little one in your room."

Dinner with the king? How many times did that happen to a girl like her?

"Absolutely." She mentally flashed on her wardrobe. "Formal? Informal?"

"It will just be family," he said.

Which didn't answer her question but made her wonder if the ever-hunky Prince Jefri would be there.

"Good. Would you like to inform your brother?"

Billie thought of Doyle's reaction to dinner with royalty. He wouldn't be amused.

"I'll let you tell him," she said, knowing even her brother wouldn't dare lose his temper with a king. "He'll be thrilled."

Jefri's mouth twitched, which made her wonder if he knew what she was thinking.

Not possible, she told herself. Men like him didn't care about brains or thoughts. They wanted... She paused as she realized she didn't know what men like him wanted from women. But as she was neither a supermodel nor the heir to a champagne fortune, she was unlikely to find out anytime soon.

"Seven-thirty then," the king said.

"I'll be there." She bent over and scooped up Muffin, then headed back to her room. If she was going to dine with royalty she needed much bigger hair.

Jefri finished knotting his tie and turned to reach for his jacket. As he picked it up, he checked the fabric for cat hairs.

"Try this," his brother, Murat, said and tossed him a delinting roll.

"Thanks."

Jefri went to work on his jacket while Murat lounged on the recently dehaired sofa.

"She really has a dog?" his brother asked.

"It is more of a rat with fur." Of course Billie seemed to have an affinity for rodents, he thought remembering the tragedy of her mouse.

"And she shot you out of the sky?"

Jefri shrugged into the jacket and turned his attention on his brother. "Not literally."

"I can see that." Murat grinned. "I cannot wait to meet her."

"She is...unexpected."

"Sounds interesting."

Jefri said nothing as he stared at Murat. His brother rose, stretched, then chuckled.

"I am the crown prince," Murat said, as if Jefri needed reminding. "I may claim who I choose."

"You may not claim this one."

One dark eyebrow rose. "Why not?"

Jefri allowed himself a small smile. "She is mine."

"Ah. Does she know?"

“Not yet, but she will. Soon.”

“Then I wish you luck, my brother.”

“I will not need it.”

Jefri was determined. Nothing would stand in the way of his learning all of Billie’s secrets, then having her in his bed.

Chapter Three

Like most women, Billie had loved to play dress-up when she'd been younger, so the chance to actually put on finery for real was too good to pass up. Plus one of her job perks was attending the Paris Air Show every other year. Which meant after she and her brothers oohed and ahed over the latest in aviation technology, she went shopping.

She stood now in one of her impulse purchases—a shimmering floor-length dark purple gown. The halter-style permitted her to show off curves and still wear a bra—always exciting. Combs held her hair off her face and allowed her to tease the curls up about another inch, while long tendrils cascaded down her back. Strappy silver sandals with four-inch heels made her feel like an Amazon goddess...well, a short one anyway.

“What do you think?” she asked, holding out two different earrings for Muffin to inspect. Her dog lay on the high four-poster bed. “These are more dangling, but these have more flash.”

Muffin barked.

“I agree. Flash over dangle,” Billie said and put on the smaller cubic zirconia earrings.

After a light spritzing of perfume, she pronounced herself as ready as she was going to be.

“I promise to bring you back something,” she said. “I’m sure we’ll have some kind of meat dish. I tucked a Baggie in my purse.” She waved her tiny evening bag at Muffin.

The trick would be getting the bit of entrée from her plate to her handbag, but she'd done it countless times before and had almost never been caught.

“Okay. You be good. I’ll see you soon.”

Billie pushed the play button on the DVD player in the bedroom armoire, then headed for the door. As she stepped into the hallway of the amazing pink palace, she had the feeling that for the first time in her life, she was almost a princess.

“Way better than Halloween dress-up,” she murmured as she started down a corridor.

As she paused by the elevator, waiting for it to take her to the second floor because there was no way she could do stairs in these shoes or the long dress, she heard a door close and the sound of footsteps. Seconds later Jefri walked toward her.

“Good evening,” he said, looking more than a little spiffy in a black tux. So she'd guessed right then, “a family dinner” in royal circles meant way dressier than jeans.

The soft wool fabric of Jefri's tux had the faintest shimmer to it, and Billie had an instant urge to touch. That would be bad, she told herself, trying not to swoon as she took in the rest of the package.

Most men cleaned up pretty well and looked good in a tuxedo, but those who had a head start in the looks department came out looking even better. Jefri was no exception. He'd brushed his dark hair away from his face, which emphasized his stern yet handsome features. The white shirt collar and cuffs made his skin seem darker. Billie avoided the sun whenever possible. She burned more than tanned and didn't want to be fighting the leather look when she was fifty.

Knowing how pale she was and how dark he was gave her a little shiver. She had a visual of them entwined in bed, looking like actors for an erotic movie.

“Hi,” she said and waggled her fingers. “You look nice.”

He reached for her free hand and raised it slightly, then kissed her knuckles. “You are enchanting. The glories of my country pale when compared to your beauty.”

Okay, sure. It was a line and little old-fashioned, but it worked. Billie felt her knees get a little wobbly and her heart start to pound.

The elevator doors opened. Jefri put his hand on her back to urge her to enter first. His thumb and forefinger landed on bare skin. Goose bumps erupted, even as warmth poured through her.

“I see you left Muffin in your room,” he said.

"I thought it was best. I always feel badly when I'm going to have fun without her, but she's watching a movie."

He pushed the button for the second floor. "Excuse me? Your dog is watching a movie?"

"Uh-huh. And I have to say that DVD collection in the armoire was fabulous. I had a hard time deciding, but in the end I put on Legally Blonde II because she has a real thing for Bruiser. That's the dog in the movie."

Jefri's gaze never left her face, yet she felt him mentally drifting. He blinked.

"I do not understand," he told her. "You are the same woman who can fly a fighter jet better than anyone I know."

The doors opened and they stepped out.

"Yup. That's me."

"Yet you put on a movie for your dog? "

"I don't really see how the two concepts relate."

"Nor do I. This way."

He escorted her down a long corridor. Soft lighting spilled from the dozens of rooms they passed. Talk about a lot of space. Taking a lap around each floor would pretty much take care of anyone's aerobic needs for the day.

"I heard your brother could not join us tonight," Jefri said.

"The rest of the equipment arrived and he wanted to oversee that. If you ask me, he was in a snit about having to get dressed up for dinner. His loss. I'm sure the food will be amazing."

"I hope you find that everything pleases you."

His low voice scraped along her bare skin like a length of nubby fabric. Billie felt strange, sort of trembling and overheated and spacey. She had to get a grip. In the heels she wore, one wrong step could be fatal.

They turned left at a large pillar and entered what she supposed for them was a small, casual dining room. For her it was like being asked to eat in the roped-off parts of the British Museum.

A long table stood in the center of the room. From the number of chairs pushed up against the walls, she supposed it could be expanded to seat at least thirty, maybe more. Two antique hutches stood flanking a large tapestry depicting a young woman in an open kind of boat. Based on her dress, Billie would guess the scene was from the mid-sixteen hundreds.

Three chandeliers provided light over the table, but instead of using bulbs they twinkled with candlelight. Several sconces lined the walls, also providing illumination. A long buffet held a bucket of champagne on ice and unopened bottles of red and white wine, along with an assortment of liquors. Two men with trays of canapés hovered by the doorway, and there wasn't a cat in sight.

"This works," Billie said as she and Jefri strolled the length of the room.

"I'm glad you like it. Champagne?"

"Sure. I'm not flying until late tomorrow morning."

Jefri popped the bottle with an ease that made her feel like an extra in an old Audrey Hepburn movie, then accepted the delicate crystal glass.

"To new adventures," he said, touching his glass to hers. "And those we share them with."

She figured this wasn't the time for her usual "Bottoms up" so she smiled before taking a sip. The liquid bubbles tickled the whole way down her throat. Oh, yeah. This was the good life for sure.

A tall man Billie hadn't met entered the dining room. Based on his good looks and regal bearing she was going to take a wild guess and say he was another royal prince.

Bingo, she thought, when Jefri introduced him as "My oldest brother, Crown Prince Murat."

She had her purse in one hand and her champagne in the other. For one horrible second, Billie thought maybe she was expected to curtsy. Why hadn't she asked Jefri on the walk over? Before she could figure out what to do, Murat leaned forward and lightly kissed her cheek.

“Welcome, Ms. Van Horn. My brother complained of your great skill in the sky but he said nothing of your exceptional beauty.”

She would have thought that older handsome prince set to inherit the kingdom would have had some effect on her when he'd kissed her. She'd braced herself for at least a toe curl, but there hadn't been even a flicker. Interesting. So her reaction was specifically to Jefri and not just to the whole good-looking-guy-in-the-palace thing. She would have to take that information out later and figure out what it meant.

“Most men don't enjoy being shot down by a woman,” she said with a smile. “It's an ego thing. I don't take it personally.”

“Billie is convinced I will not ever best her. I am going to have to prove her wrong.”

Murat glanced between the two of them. “She does not look concerned, my brother. Perhaps you will have to content yourself with besting her in other ways.”

The king entered the room, along with an obviously pregnant woman and what Billie took to be yet another of the handsome prince crop.

Jefri leaned close. “Perhaps my brother is right and I should seek other kinds of victories.”

The combination of his words and his warm breath on her neck made her quiver.

“Come, you must meet our newest treasure,” the king said, leading the couple toward them. “Billie, my son Reyhan and his beautiful wife Emma.”

Billie had the whole purse/champagne thing under control this time. She'd tucked her bag under her arm so she was able to hold out her right hand to both of them.

“Welcome,” Reyhan said pleasantly.

“Are you really a fighter pilot?” Emma asked.

“She is brilliant in the sky,” Jefri said, answering for her.

“Amazing,” Emma smiled. “I thought you would be more... masculine. But you're lovely enough to be a pop star or an actress.”

Billie beamed. “Aren't you sweet. I'm just a girl who likes to dress up. I tried being one of the boys for a long time and it never worked.”

“One cannot imagine why,” Jefri murmured in her ear.

Murat returned with a scotch for his brother and a glass of what looked like sparkling water for Emma.

“What do you think of Billie?” he asked. “Is she not most intriguing?”

Jefri stepped between her and Murat. “She is my guest.”

Billie felt a slight thrill. Was Jefri being possessive? Did he actually see her as something other than a means to fly better?

Another couple arrived—one of the princes accompanied by a petite, curvy blonde who squealed when she saw Billie.

“You're American. Yeah. We can hang out and talk while you're here. I'm Cleo. Hi. Do you realize that out of all four of the women who are in this family, I'm the only one who lives in the palace?” She poked Emma's arm. “You're constantly gone, as are Zara and Sabrina. It's really annoying.”

Cleo's escort, Prince Sadik, sighed. “You have confused our guest and possibly frightened her.”

“Are you frightened?” Cleo asked.

Billie laughed. “No, just confused. What women? Who are Zara and Sabrina?”

“Perhaps we should adjourn to the table where we can all straighten this out,” the king said. “Billie, you may sit next to me.”

So she found herself next to the king of Bahania, surrounded by honest to goodness princes and princesses. Billie had the fleeting thought that she wished her mother was still alive to take part in all this.

“All right, let me see if I have this right,” she said over the soup course. “Sabrina and Zara are princesses by birth.”

The king nodded.

“But Zara didn’t know she was your daughter until about a year ago. And Cleo and Emma are Americans married to your sons.”

“That is correct.”

“Very complicated,” she said as she discreetly moved the sliver of prosciutto she’d slipped off her appetizer plate into the Baggie.

“You will learn who belongs with whom,” the king said kindly. “Simply remember my sons favor American women.”

“Interesting point.”

She couldn’t help glancing across the table to where Jefri sat. Did he favor American women as well? He seemed to be watching her, and while she wanted to believe it meant something, she’d been burned enough times to hold back. Ever since turning sixteen and having her first crush, she’d found herself interested in men who wanted nothing to do with her. It was like a curse.

“I have met one of your brothers,” the king said. “How many are there?”

“Three. I’m the only girl and the youngest.”

“Sabrina could relate to that,” Cleo said. “Her brothers made her life miserable. What about yours?”

“My mother always said they were a handful. She did her best to keep them in line.”

“What does she think of your occupation?” Jefri asked.

“She died when I was eleven. I’m not sure she would have been thrilled with my hanging out with my brothers all the time, but she would have wanted me to be happy.”

“Did your father remarry?” the king asked.

Billie shook her head. “We traveled a lot with the company. My mother had kept me home with her, but after she was gone, I went around the world, as well. It made for a very eclectic education.” And nowhere to call home. But Billie had always known she would have to choose between her love of the sky and putting down roots.

Emma leaned toward her. “I would have thought someone raised by her father would have been more of a tomboy.”

Billie laughed. “I tried being one for a while, but then I realized I made a lousy son, so I gave it up and surrendered to my inner girl.”

“Hence the call sign?” Jefri asked.

She nodded.

He raised his glass. “To always surrendering to your inner girl.”

If asked, Billie would have expected to explain that the royal family was stuffy and well, boring. But that wasn’t true at all. After grilling her about her life—in the most pleasant way possible—they’d laughed and talked and teased just like any other family she’d met. Okay, the flatware had been gold, but the rest of the meal had been surprisingly normal.

Whether it was the combination of too much champagne, the strange quarters or an evening spent getting lost in Jefri’s dark gaze, Billie found herself unable to sleep. Giving up, she left Muffin snoring softly and pulled on her robe, then walked into the living room where she opened the French door leading to the balcony and stepped out into the quiet of the night.

A moon hung low in the sky and sent fingers of light across the lapping sea. There were scents in the air, smells she didn’t recognize but knew would forever remind her of Bahania. The air was still, faintly cool, but still pleasant.

“The good life,” she said with a smile. “I doubt anything is ever going to top this.”

She leaned on the balcony and stared down at the dark gardens. Slim shadows darted in and out of bushes. Cats, she thought grimly. No doubt out to kill. Why on earth would anyone think creatures like that were pet-worthy?

“What has you so concerned?” Jefri said as he came out of the darkness and moved next to her at the railing. “You are frowning.”

His unexpected appearance startled her, although not enough to make her duck back inside. She had a brief thought that she was in her nightgown, but then reminded herself that she’d been a lot more uncovered in her evening gown.

“There,” she said pointing toward the garden. “Cats.”

He chuckled. “I will protect you from any who attempt to attack you.” He glanced around. “Where is Muffin?”

“Sleeping. She needs her beauty sleep.”

“Tell me she does not have one of those black sleep masks.”

Billie laughed. “She doesn’t.”

“Good.”

He leaned against the railing, his shoulder close to her own.

“Did you enjoy your evening with us?” he asked.

“Very much so.” She glanced at him, taking in the dark slacks and the formal white shirt he’d unbuttoned. The tie was gone, as was the jacket, and he’d rolled his sleeves up to his elbows.

“I’ve never dined with royalty before,” she said. “I thought I’d be more nervous but everyone made me feel very comfortable.”

“I was concerned you thought there were too many questions.”

“Not at all. I thought everyone was interested and genuine rather than grilling me.”

“We are like other families?”

“Except for the prince thing.”

“So you were impressed.”

She smiled. “Not exactly.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Why not?”

“Come on. How impressed could I be by wealth and a title when we both know I could blow you out of the sky in thirty-eight seconds?”

“Good point. However, I could impress you in other ways.”

Oh, yeah, that was a serious possibility.

“I’m just the hired help,” she said instead, and did her best to act casually. “In a few months, I’ll be gone and you’ll rule your own skies.”

“Do you like that aspect of your job? Going from place to place?”

“Sometimes.” She tucked her hair behind her ear. “I enjoy seeing the world, but sometimes I wouldn’t mind having a permanent base of operations. The problem with that is I’ve yet to find a way to combine home and hearth with what I love to do.”

“The flying.”

“Exactly.”

“How did you learn to fly?” he asked.

“My dad had always taken me up with him. I was handling single engine planes by the time I was ten. My mom tried to hold me back, which worked until she died. Then there was no one telling my dad no. I worked my way up to jets pretty quickly.” She turned her head and smiled at him. “Having a mini air force in the family helped. What about you?”

“I have always loved flying. My father indulged me with lessons when I was twelve. I’m sure he thought it was something I would outgrow.”

“But you didn’t.”

“You’re right. The more I flew, the more I loved it. I wanted to join an air force, but we did not have one here in Bahania and no other country would allow me to train. They did not want the responsibility of a king’s son.”

“Huh. I never thought there would be discrimination against royalty.”

“You would be surprised.”

“Maybe, but don’t expect any sympathy.”

“I am not.” He turned so he faced her. “Your life has not been traditional.”

“I know. I’m glad for what I’ve experienced, but it hasn’t come free. I’m going to be thirty in a few years. I’d like to get married and start on the whole baby thing, but I don’t actually meet the kind of guys who would be interested in me.”

He frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“It’s the whole blow up in the sky thing. Most men don’t like it and compensate one of two ways. They get way too aggressive with me on the ground, or they ignore me. No one is ever just a guy.”

Although Jefri was making a good showing, she thought. If only he wasn’t a real prince.

“You are not making any sense,” he told her.

“Sense or not, what’s what is. The men I work with don’t see me as an available female.”

“Perhaps they are not willing to take on your brothers.”

Billie stared at him. “Excuse me?”

“Your brothers. Doyle warned me away from you this afternoon. After our flight.”

She heard the words, but she couldn’t believe them. “He what?”

“The message was extremely clear.”

“I...He...” She pressed her lips together and reached for a rational, coherent thought. “That lying, cheating, scummy pinhead,” she muttered.

Was it possible? Were her brothers the reason no one ever asked her out?

She thought about how possessive they were of her. Of the things they said and how they worried about her.

“This is so like them,” she said, feeling her temper rise. She couldn’t believe it. She’d been date-free for years. How many guys had wanted to take her out only to be headed off by one of her brothers?

“I’m going to make them pay.”

“I would request that you not make them suffer too much.”

“Why?”

“Because they have kept other men away from you.”

“Oh, right and that’s a good thing, how?”

“You are still available to me.”

Billie barely had time to process the sentence, which was probably for the best because the most eloquent thing she would have come up with was “Huh?” As Jefri spoke, he drew her into his arms and pressed his mouth to hers, so whatever else she was going to say faded into a soft, soul-stealing kiss.

He claimed her with a combination of passion and tenderness. Firm lips moved against her own, discovering, heating, delighting. Her temper faded as if it had never been, while liquid desire took its place.

She sighed and melted against him, letting her body lean against his and her arms rest on his strong shoulders. He smelled of cognac and night and mystery. He drew her closer still until they touched as intimately as their mouths. One of his hands tangled in her long hair while the other roamed over her back.

Instinctively she tilted her head, to make the kissing easier. He responded by brushing his tongue against her lower lip. Anticipation raced through her and she parted for him. But instead of deepening the kiss, he moved away. He kissed her cheek, then along her jaw. When he reached the sensitive

skin below her ear, he licked that spot and made her shiver. He took her earlobe in his mouth and gently grated his teeth.

Fire raced through her. Her breasts swelled as her nipples puckered into tight sensitive points of need. She felt overdressed and jumpy, as if her skin was suddenly too tight. Heat settled between her legs. She wanted to rub against him, she wanted to touch and be touched, she wanted to beg.

He returned his mouth to hers. Again she parted for him, but he kept the kiss chaste, barely touching, moving back and forth. Need filled her, unfamiliar yet welcome. The wanting grew.

At last, when she thought she was going to have to scream or maybe throw herself off the balcony, he slipped his tongue inside her mouth and circled it against hers.

Yes, she thought, giving in to the exquisite sensations that filled her. Arousal shook her, making her need so much more than this kiss. Yet she didn't want the kiss to end. She wanted him dancing with her like this for always.

But it was not to be. Eventually he drew back and she knew it was important to act with dignity and not whimper. In the faint light from her room, his eyes glowed with a need that both thrilled and frightened her.

"You are a woman of many surprises," he said as he stroked her cheek.

"The same could be said of you. Not the woman part," she added, feeling more than a little foolish. "You're a man of surprises."

"Thank you."

He brushed his thumb across her mouth. "I look forward to what tomorrow brings," he said. "Sleep well."

"Good night."

She waited until he disappeared into the darkness before stepping into her room. Sleep well? With her body on fire and her mind swirling? Between the kiss and what he'd told her about her brothers, she wasn't sure she was ever going to sleep again. Which was fine. She could spend the night planning her revenge against all the Van Horn men.

Chapter Four

Jefri arrived for his weekly meeting with his father a few minutes early. The king's office was near his own. Several guards stood on duty, while dozens of staff members raced around with folders and stacks of papers.

The king's senior assistant waved Jefri in. One of the wide double doors stood open and several people filed out.

Jefri waited until they'd left before walking inside. He found his father standing behind his desk, flipping through a calendar.

"I'm thinking of visiting Europe," the king said without looking up. "With Murat taking over most of my state duties and the other work divided between you, Sadik and Reyhan, there is little to keep me here."

Jefri grinned. "Are you complaining you do not have enough to do?"

"I suppose I am. It is a sad state of affairs when a king is no longer needed."

Jefri took a seat on the visitor's side of the desk. "I think it is unlikely you will be beheaded anytime soon."

His father sat down and smiled. "How you comfort me." He leaned back in his chair. "So our new air force is off to a positive start?"

"Of course. The Van Horn team is in place. All the instructors have arrived. Billie is in charge of them."

The king nodded. "A most pleasant young woman."

Jefri could think of several words to describe Billie, but pleasant wasn't one of them. It was too bland, too lacking in style. Billie could never be accused of either.

"She assists in the pilot training, both with actual flying and in simulators. The Van Horn people have prepared an intensive eight-week program to forge our pilots into a team. When the initial instruction is finished, they will return to offer refresher courses until we get our own training in place."

"Very impressive," the king said. "I would advise you not to annoy her. I would hate to lose you because, to quote the young woman herself, she blows you out of the sky."

Jefri smiled. "I will not allow that to happen."

"It sounds as if she is unbeatable."

"Perhaps."

But he had a feeling he knew her weaknesses. Last night she had melted in his arms. Whatever her skills in the sky, on ground, she was mere woman. He planned to take advantage of that fact, pleasing them both along the way. He did not believe she could respond to him so easily in the night and then destroy him, however much in theory, during the day.

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