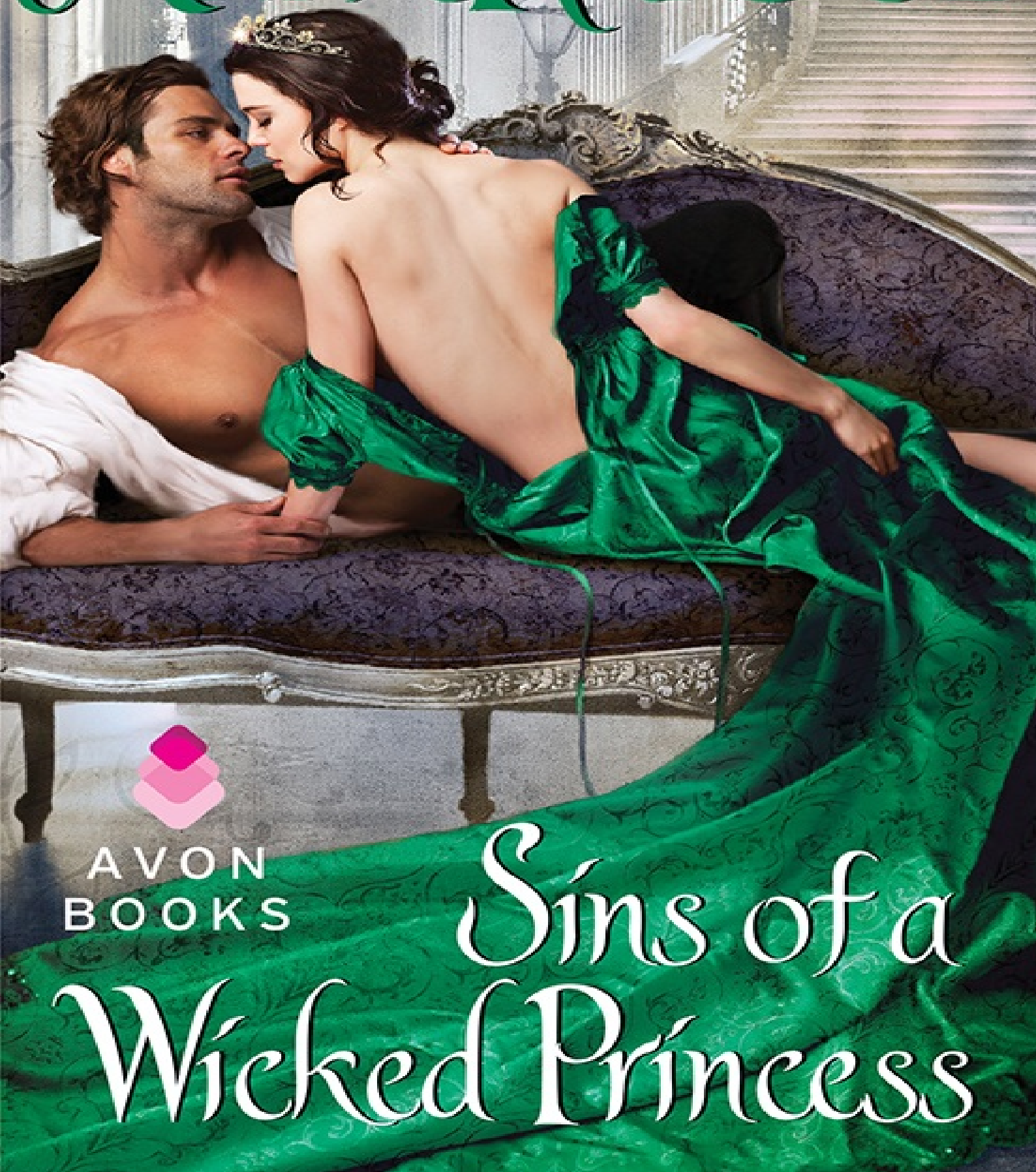


ANNA RANDOL



AVON
BOOKS

Sins of a Wicked Princess

Sins of a Wicked Princess

Anna Randol



AVON

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Dedication

To everyone who couldn't wait for Ian's story

Dedication

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Prologue

Ian Maddox watched the backs of the other two members of the Trio as they strode from Sir James Glavenstroke's office. Their little merry group of spies had been officially disbanded. Now that Napoleon was dead, the Foreign Office wanted nothing to do with three former convicts—no matter how perfectly trained.

Both Clayton and Madeline, the other members of his team, had been shocked by the news. Madeline had even been hurt.

And no one hurt Madeline.

Ian waited until his two friends were out of sight before opening the door to old Glaves's office again. Despite everything they'd endured, the other two spies had never been stripped of the nobility that held them together at their very core.

Ian, on the other hand, had never been burdened with it to begin with.

Glavenstroke choked on a mouthful of brandy when he spotted Ian. "What are you doing here? I've said all that needs to be said."

Ian suspected the man liked to think of himself as the father of the Trio. But Ian didn't doubt he'd slit their throats if he deemed it expedient. Or rather, he'd order some poor idiot to forfeit his life attempting it.

Ian lowered himself into the leather chair across from Glavenstroke, propped his boots up on the desk, and picked up a glass of brandy, downing it in one gulp. The aged French liquor was worth more than the entire stipend received by the Trio for their ten years of service.

"What do you want, Wraith?"

Ah, Glavenstroke was nervous, then. He never called Ian by his completely dashing and thorough apt spy name unless he was afraid.

Good. He should be.

"I'm not a fool, correct?" Ian asked.

Glavenstroke's eyes narrowed but he shook his head.

“Lovely. I was hoping you'd concur. That makes this much simpler. Perhaps you could tell me what I'm supposed to believe you'll let the three spies who know England's dirtiest secrets waltz away free.”

Glavenstroke's head jerked like a horse fighting a bit. “You've proven your loyalty. I could do no less.”

“Perhaps *you* could, Glaves. But I suspect some of your friends will soon think better of it.”

The older man's face reddened. “What are you suggesting?”

“When the time comes to tidy up all the loose bits at the Foreign Office, the Trio will never be mentioned.”

“Of course not. Everyone is grateful—”

Ian crossed his ankles, then reached down to flick a spot of mud from his boots. “You see, my dear mentor, I won't tolerate it.”

“Now, listen here! I saved you from Newgate—”

“Truly, Glaves? After all this time it hasn't occurred to you that I was still in that prison cell because I chose to be?”

“You seemed more than eager to grasp my offer when I tendered it.”

“Indeed. It seemed useful. And it *was*. The chance to refine my skills. Refine my mannerisms. My language. And learn all those undetectable ways to kill a man . . .”

Glavenstroke surged to his feet and planted his hands on the desk. “You have the gall to threaten me?”

“No, no. Not at all. This is simply an assurance that anyone sent after me will die bathed in their own blood.” Ian stood and poured himself another glass.

“But surely you're loyal—”

Ian lifted the glass in a toast. “I am loyal to the Trio.” He picked up the decanter. Might as well take the whole thing. “Anyone who threatens us will die. Painfully. Make sure you spread that helpful little morsel of gossip around.”

Chapter One

“We named her Juliana after you, of course, Your Highness.” The apple-cheeked woman peeled the red, angry infant out of a huge cocoon of blankets and thrust her forward.

Princess Juliana Castanova refused to turn her head to see her aunt Constantina make another tick on the back of her fan. That made the third new baby Juliana this week and the tenth this month. If she ever did manage to regain her country and return home with her fellow exiles, there’d be some confused schoolteachers.

Yet Juliana dutifully accepted the crying creature and kissed her on the cheek. When the crying suddenly ceased, all the gathered courtiers gasped and applauded.

Juliana suspected the baby’s reaction had to do with being freed from far too many blankets in the stifling reception room, but as her aunts constantly counseled her—her people had been deprived of their country, she’d be a beast to deprive them of their monarch as well. So she smiled as if her royal blood gave her some sort of divine power over infants.

Then she quickly passed the child back.

The clock in the hall tolled the hour, signaling the end of the public audience. The rest of the hopeful supplicants were herded out the doors until next week. Not that they’d have much more luck then. Smiles, she could give. Money was in much shorter supply.

After the collapse of the monarchy in Lenoria twelve years ago, the Castanovas had been stripped of everything but their personal holdings—which weren’t considerable: a single mountain chateau and a hunting lodge on Lake Tuire. The prince regent had granted Juliana a yearly stipend when she and her younger brother fled to London. Thankfully, he’d also gifted them with this house. Otherwise there’d be no way she could support the fifty loyal Lenorian servants who’d fled with her.

What little extra money she had was used to support Lenorian citizens in London, but there was never enough.

Juliana longed to flop in a chair and bury her head in her hands, but a princess did neither of those

things. So instead she glided over to where her three great-aunts sat to the left of Juliana's oversized and less-than-comfortable throne.

Constantina, the youngest of the three elderly women, pursed her lips as she studied the back of her fan. "Drat! That brings the total to thirty so far this year. I believe I owe you a quid. Although you'll have to wait until next quarter for me to pay. I spent the last of my money on a new collar for Lulu. His old one was becoming terribly tarnished." She stroked the rotund ferret curled in a basket by her chair.

Leucretia tapped a finger to her rouged, bloodred lips. Although she was the eldest sister—she had been the twin of Juliana's grandfather—she still dyed her hair raven black and kept the long plaits wrapped around her head. "Shall we double the wager? I say we won't make it to one hundred Julianas by the end of the year."

"Done! I say our Juliana has great things in store this year and will far exceed everyone's expectations."

If only Juliana could believe that. The Congress of Vienna was over, and her country had been divided between the Spanish and the French. The only thing that kept Lenoria temporarily intact was the lack of Juliana's signature on the treaty.

Which she refused to give.

Yet both countries had vowed to go to war if Juliana tried to reclaim her throne.

So now she sat in London like a ninny while she tried her best to figure out a solution.

Leucretia lifted a sculpted brow. "That is possible. But there are only so many Lenorians of childbearing age in England."

Eustace sighed at her two sisters. "You should not speak of childbearing in front of Juliana. It isn't proper."

Leucretia snorted. "All the babies she kisses must come from somewhere."

Eustace's crinoline gown crinkled as she stiffened. Her nostrils flared but she refused to argue. "You must hurry and change, Juliana. Monsieur Dupre will be here in less than an hour to continue your portrait."

"Am I truly necessary?" Juliana asked. The portrait Dupre painted flowed almost entirely from his own imagination. It looked nothing like her.

But all three of her aunts stared at her with equal expressions of shock.

"Of course you are," Eustace said, her jowls quivering. "Even if Prince Augustus doesn't express interest in you, perhaps one of the other Hapsburgs might. Or if not them, I hear Czar Alexander has a second cousin we haven't approached yet. Of course he is only ten."

Juliana had discussed this topic far too many times to blush at her aunts' frank examination of her lack of marital prospects. It was hardly her fault the options were so few. They needed a prince that wasn't French or Spanish so she could gain his country's support in her effort to regain her throne.

But strangely, she was finding it rather difficult to find someone willing to marry a poor, plain princess without a claim to her country.

“Gregory said Prince Wilhelm will be attending a house party at some duke’s country estate. We should all attend.” Constantina held down a portion of biscuit to her pet, who sniffed at it once before returning to sleep.

“Gregory is back?” Juliana asked.

Leucetia stood. She always managed to look far more regal than Juliana ever could. “And avoiding you, apparently.”

Which meant her brother was most likely in trouble or about to become so. “Which duke is hosting the party?”

Constantina had to think. Dukes were on about the same par as chimney sweeps in her mind. She never bothered to keep track.

“The Duke of Sommet?” Juliana asked.

Constantina nodded happily. “It’s been ages since we went to a grand party.”

Blast Gregory. Why couldn’t this house have a dungeon? She’d told him to stay away from Sommet. Her brother was convinced Lenoria had fallen through the meddling of outside forces. Juliana agreed. But while she’d become rather obsessed with uncovering the conspirators responsible, Gregory was far more eager to band with anyone who promised an immediate restoration to power.

Juliana knew Sommet only slightly from the Congress of Vienna, but he was a man of grandiose promises and velvet threats. He liked to think himself a man of influence. But Juliana had found he abused his influence over those weaker than himself.

Like Gregory.

Juliana had no desire to spend any time at his party. “Isn’t Prince Wilhelm fifty?”

Eustace sniffed. “Forty-five. But my own dear Albert was fifty-three when I married him.” And he’d died three years later, leaving Eustace to mourn him for the past fifty years. Not something Juliana wanted to replicate.

“Let’s try Prince Augustus first.” He, at least, was her age, even if the most flattering reports of him called him a sniveling pudding of a man. “And I’d better change if I’m to meet with Dupre.” Juliana picked up her skirts and hurried as elegantly as she could from the room before her aunts tried to change her mind. If she didn’t adore them so much, she might be able to better resist their advice. But as it was, they were so well-intentioned she had a difficult time denying them anything.

The corridor was only slightly cooler than the air in the reception room, but Juliana would take any reprieve she could get. After glancing around to ensure no one was watching, she tugged at her heavy velvet bodice. London wasn’t the best place to be in July. If the invitation to the house party had been from anyone else, she might have accepted, simply to escape the smell of the city.

Juliana retained only select memories of Lenoria, but she did remember there was always a breeze in the summer. And the air smelled of flowers and rain, not of soot and refuse.

A familiar dark head appeared then disappeared around the corner ahead. “Gregory!”

There was a long enough pause that she was certain her brother had decided to run away—in which case she’d have to give chase, even knowing the scolding her aunts would give her once they heard.

But then Gregory reappeared. He didn't slump—he'd been raised by the same aunts, after all—but he did avoid her gaze. "Juliana. I was just going out."

"It can wait."

"No, it—"

Juliana lifted a regal eyebrow and her brother silenced. Being the ruler of an almost nonexistent country did have some advantages. "I hear you have been spending time with Sommet."

Gregory flushed and brushed a heavy lock of his chestnut hair from his eyes. "He has plans to help restore Lenoria."

"Plans that involve plotting without the consent of the current ruler of Lenoria?"

Her brother scowled, making him seem far younger than his twenty years. "What choice do I have when the current ruler won't do anything to reclaim the country? It's been almost two years since the war ended. We were supposed to be home by now."

Juliana flinched, but she wouldn't let her brother goad her. "Sommet is a manipulator and a liar."

Gregory's tone turned pleading. "You don't know him like I do. His plan will work. By winter, we could be back in Lenoria. You could finally be taking care of your people. Do you think the Spanish or the French will take care of them?"

"*How dare you.*" Sommet might be able to manipulate Gregory with his lies, but she refused to be manipulated as well. "I give everything to my people. I spend every minute of every day agonizing over each one of them."

"Agonizing isn't the same as acting. And since you aren't the ruler of anything, I don't know why I'm listening to you."

He strode past her down the corridor.

"Gregory."

But he didn't glance back.

Juliana yanked out the pins securing her heavy gold crown in place and tugged it off as she walked the few remaining feet to her room. Not feeling any less suffocated, she tossed it on her bed. "Darna?"

Her maid was nowhere in sight. Juliana knew she should sit quietly and wait for her to return. But she wanted out of the blasted gown. *Curse Gregory anyway.*

She *was* acting. She was just acting cautiously. Acting rashly for the sake of action would be worse than no action at all.

Wouldn't it?

She reached behind her and fumbled with the buttons. Her aunts wouldn't allow her to wear the dress again regardless. Apparently, being seen in the same dress twice would cause her subjects to lose faith in her ability to rule or some such nonsense.

You are Lenoria now, Leucetia would say. Make her glorious.

The buttons refused to come undone. Normally she would have given up and waited for her maid, but instead, she grabbed one corner of the closure on the back of her dress and yanked.

Two pearl buttons popped loose and rolled across the floor. She glared at them, then peeled her

bodice down, tugged out of the sleeves, and wrestled with the rest of the dress. The fabric was so stiff that when she tossed it on the floor, it sat there full and awkward before slowly deflating.

She kicked it once for good measure.

“Perhaps I should announce my presence before you get more naked,” a low, rumbling voice announced. “Or violent.”

She stumbled back with a shriek as a man stepped from beside her wardrobe. He was tall and broad. Handsome. Dark-haired and scarred.

And suddenly at her side with an agility a man his size shouldn't possess.

Before she could take a breath to scream, his hand clamped over her mouth and his other arm wrapped around her waist, sealing her to the hard wall of his chest.

Chapter Two

Ian was slightly frustrated. And not from the surprisingly soft feminine form writhing against him.

No one had told him the princess was insane. Not that it surprised him. Half the royals in Europe were stark raving barmy. A little too much cooing in the same nest.

But the intelligence he gathered was usually flawless. He'd been told that Princess Juliana was formal, cold, and plain.

None of those words applied to this woman.

Her hair was brown. That much, at least, his sources had gotten right. But he'd been told her eyes were brown, not the color of burnished copper. Her face was perhaps a trifle narrow, but the sharp angles of her cheekbones lent it elegance.

And when she'd ripped the dress from her body . . . He smiled at the memory. One of the best things about being a dishonorable scoundrel was that he didn't have to feel guilty about the entertainment.

All of his leads pointed to this woman. Over the past two years, someone had betrayed the true identities of the members of the Trio to their worst enemies. The betrayer had covered her tracks well. But eventually they had all led here.

To the princess in his arms.

He didn't wince at the sharp kick to his shins. It never occurred to women to wear useful shoes. But when she followed that with an attempted bite to his palm, his estimation of her rose a little.

"Who gave you information on the Trio?"

Someone had betrayed Madeline to a vindictive Prussian bastard and Clayton to a group of violent Russian revolutionaries. Their true identities weren't something this princess could have pieced together on her own. Someone from the Foreign Office must have handed her the information. He intended to find out who and for what price.

He had to know how many pounds of flesh to carve, after all.

He pulled his knife and flashed it in front of her face. “I’ll let go of your mouth and you will tell me your answer. Now, before you decide to be annoyingly brave, know that before you can draw in a full breath, I’ll have slit your throat, but not enough to kill you. No, just enough so you can no longer breathe to scream. Then I’ll slice you open, starting at your pretty little toes, up to your belly, where I will play with your entrails while you watch.” As far as threats went, it was one of his better ones. It was a risk. Some people fainted entirely at that point, but he was growing impatient with the endless labyrinth of people and dead ends that had clogged his search.

Juliana nodded against his hand. So he slowly lifted it.

“I have no idea what the Trio is.”

Ian added another tick to his admiration at the cool composure in her voice, but he tightened his hold. Not enough to leave marks, but enough that her breathing came in spurts. “Come now, Juliana. You must know the name of the group of spies who toppled your country. You wanted revenge. I can understand that. Admire that, even. But, you see, our two goals unfortunately conflict at that point. Now, if you value your skin, tell me who gave you the information.”

She’d been shivering, but the motion suddenly stopped. “What did you say?”

“Which part? It was a rather long monologue.”

“A group called the Trio was responsible for the uprising in Lenoria?” The outrage in her voice actually sounded genuine.

“The letter sent to General Einhern came from this house. And one year ago in June, three Russian revolutionaries came to this house, where they were given information on a friend of mine.” Clayton and his new wife had managed to survive the Russians, but it had been a close thing. Ian wouldn’t let them be at risk again.

“The Trio is English, then?”

He barely dodged a foot stomp. And he had to shift quickly to keep from slitting her throat to begin with. Early.

“I thought the French were behind it because we wouldn’t side with Napoleon. Or the Spaniards because—” She growled. “And I’ve been sitting in London all this time. In the very lap of the bastard responsible for my parents’ deaths.” Her sharp elbow hit him with surprising force, but not enough to make him more than wince. “Well, I wish good luck to the people who are hunting the Trio and wish good luck to *you* to the devil.”

This interrogation wasn’t going the way he’d anticipated. He’d interrogated many people over the years. Men. Women. Even children a time or two. He always obtained the information he needed.

He’d also become quite good at knowing the truth when he heard it.

And she was telling the truth.

Damn.

Like a cat drowning in the Thames he floundered one more time. “My information isn’t wrong.”

“I’m afraid it is.” For the first time since he’d entered, she sounded disdainful and condescending. Like a princess.

What the devil had he missed? His information was not wrong, but he wasn't about to bicker with her, wasting time until her maid returned from the little crisis he'd arranged.

"I wasn't even here last June. I'd been invited to Brighton with the regent."

Ah. *Double damn.*

If that was true, then holding her at knifepoint was a rather large waste of time. He sheathed the knife and spun her around so he could study her face. "I can check that claim."

"Go ahead." Her strange amber eyes could have frozen the devil's horns.

"Someone in your household is responsible," he said. One of the letters had been written on parchment from her desk. Ian had verified it personally. And those revolutionaries *had* come here. Somehow he must have put the pieces together wrong.

She inched back. "Unfortunately, you're not going to get the chance to find out who."

"I will."

She grabbed a candlestick from the table and brandished it in front of her. "Not after I scream. My soldiers will gut you."

Ian laughed at her naïveté. With a single grab and twist of her wrist, the candlestick was in his hands. "Your soldiers consist of five lads playing dress-up with rusty swords. They can't stop me from coming back whenever I choose. You won't even be able to prove I was here in the first place."

Her eyes narrowed. "Then *I* will shoot you."

He tucked a finger under her chin. Blimey, but her skin was soft. "Aren't you the most darling thing?" Spunky. That was the word. The princess was spunky.

Juliana slapped his hand away and he returned it to his side. She was not *darling*; she was nearly ruling sovereign. "I'll double the security on the house." Had she just spit as she talked? But she was beyond caring. She'd spit on this man's grave.

"Because your security was so efficient in keeping me out the first time, Jules?"

If he didn't stop grinning, she'd punch him.

"You will address me as Your Highness."

"I make it a rule never to call any undressed person by their title."

That was it. She swung for all she was worth. His grin actually disappeared before her hand hit.

Ouch.

She winced at the impact. She might have broken her wrist.

His strong hand clamped over hers, and she blinked her eyes open. Had she really closed them?

She'd punched his arm. Not even his face.

He tucked her hand behind her back, tight enough that she couldn't move unless she wanted to dislocate something. "Very good, Princess. But don't fear, when I return to your less-than-castle, you won't even know I'm here." His lips lowered until they were inches from hers. "And while you're lying in bed thinking about my hard chest, you might ask yourself why you never did bother to scream."

He spun her away in a quick maneuver that made the world tilt. She had to catch the table to keep
from falling.

When she whirled back around, he was gone.

Chapter Three

Ian wanted nothing more than to climb into a bed. Not just any bed like most nights, but a soft bed with blankets that were made from bunnies covered with goose down.

Despite his boasts, the princess's house had been more difficult to get into than he'd anticipated. He'd had to scale to the third floor before he'd found any windows that could be opened from the outside.

He just wasn't as young as he used to be.

His boots left imprints on the soft Turkish rugs in the corridor outside his room at The Albany. He seldom used these rooms. He generally preferred to skulk with his own kind in any of a dozen hovels in the slums of the city. But tonight, his back ached and a night on the floor of some hole would give him nothing but hours spent tossing and ruminating on a nearly naked princess.

Besides, he had to do something with all the money Cipher had invested for him.

He unlocked the door and stepped inside, already planning what he'd order from the kitchen staff. The price of the rooms was more than made up for by the divine creations that came out of the kitchen. Jean Pierre was a master craftsman when it came to flavors.

Ian eased shut the door behind him.

The hairs on the back of his neck suddenly stood at attention.

The fireplace was lit. As was a candle.

Someone had moved his stockings.

He'd left a pair drying in front of the fireplace when he was last here . . . what, two weeks ago?

What the devil? The hotel staff knew not to enter his rooms. And if someone was waiting to kill him, he doubted they'd light a fire and tidy his clothing.

"Good evening, sir. Your dinner will be delivered shortly."

An elderly servant in an impeccable black coat and a lemon yellow hat containing three ostrich feathers stepped into view.

“Canterbury?”

“If I might take your hat and gloves, sir?”

“What in the blazes are you doing in my rooms?”

“Taking your hat and gloves, sir.”

“But how did you find my rooms?” It wasn’t often that Ian was baffled, but this did it.

“Mr. Campbell gave me your location, sir, when I inquired.”

Curse Clayton. “When I asked you to take that position with Madeline in London, it wasn’t because

I wanted you close at hand.” No, he’d known he could trust Canterbury completely with Madeline, but Ian didn’t want him. The old butler dredged up far too many worthless memories.

“I believe you made that quite clear at the time, sir.”

How much more blunt did he need to be? “I do not need you.”

“So you said twenty years ago. And that didn’t work out so well for you, did it? Arrested and sentenced to hang shortly thereafter.”

By then Ian had been firmly entrenched with his merry band of cutpurses and gutter rats. He’d been living with his gang of thieves on the streets for almost ten years. Yet when Canterbury had heard about the trial, he’d come and tried to speak on Ian’s behalf even though it had cost him his position as the Duke of Yuler’s butler.

“I survived.”

There was a knock on the door. Canterbury answered and accepted a silver tray from the footman. He placed it on the small table and uncovered a plate of beef dripping with savory juices and seasoned with rosemary, mushrooms, and a touch of black pepper. In a nearby bowl, strawberries wallowed in clotted cream as white as angel wings.

“I assumed you’d want dinner when you returned, but if I was incorrect . . .” He started to lift the plate.

Ian grabbed it. It would be a crime to let such food go to waste. And he happened to be an expert on crime. “How did you know that I was going to be here tonight?”

“A good butler always anticipates his master’s whims, sir.”

“No. I was the spy. Not you. You do not get to deflect me with non-answers.”

“As you say, sir.”

“No, I want *you* to say. That is the whole point.”

“Shall I have the staff wait on dessert, sir?”

Ian glared. “You fight dirty, old man.”

“A good butler would never dream of fighting, sir. Now would you like wine or brandy with your meal? I was able to obtain a rather fine bottle of French brandy, if I might be so bold.”

“Oh, you might be,” Ian muttered. He plopped down in the chair with a sigh. “The brandy, cur, not you.”

“You may wish to remove your muddy coat before eating.”

“You are an interfering old biddy, Canterbury. Do not push your rather meager amount of luck

And I don't see how you can take issue with my coat when you look like a bloody lemon peacock."

Ian wished he were the type to savor the meal. It was beyond divine. It was as if Canterbury had somehow reached into Ian's very soul and plucked out the perfect symphony of flavors.

Curse him, anyway.

"Where are you staying?" Ian asked.

"Here, sir."

Ian took another mouthful of the beef. Mercy. He needed to fall down and beg for mercy before he died from sheer bliss. "I've never had this here before. What do they call it?"

"You have had it before, sir."

"Going batty in your old age?" Ian wasn't entirely sure how old Canterbury was. Sixty-five? Two hundred? But other than the slight stoop in the man's once straight spine and his thinning gray hair, one would never have known it.

"No, sir. It was one of your mother's favorite recipes."

Ian set down his fork and stood. "I'm finished."

"Sir, your mother—"

"You can stay here if you like, Canterbury, but don't expect me back."

Hurt flashed only for an instant before it was gone behind the butler's impassive façade. "Very good, sir."

The July air was too hot and humid to clear his thoughts as Ian strode back onto the street. Damn Canterbury. His mother was dead in an unmarked grave at the crossroads. She should be left in peace. After all, it was what she'd wanted. What she'd wanted more than her own son.

A man crept out of the shadows, the menace on his face melting into a gap-toothed grin when he recognized Ian. "Who's your mark tonight, mate?"

Ian let the gutter flow back into his accent. "Off to see Margie."

"A lovely dove, she is."

Margie was a friend of his from his days in the gutter. She'd risen from a two-bit light skirt to the owner of a bawdy house with sixteen *employees*. She kept a room for Ian in the attic when he wanted it. But as far as everyone else knew, he spent many a night in the redhead's arms.

Ian let himself into the small cramped room by way of the window. This room, at least, was untouched. His stockings hung dry and stiff in front of a cold fireplace.

But he didn't feel any more at peace here than he had at The Albany.

Grunts and drunken laughter filtered through the walls. He'd fallen asleep to the noise without trouble many times, but tonight the moans repulsed him and he found himself back on the street.

Where to now? The flat by the wharf would stink of rotting fish heads in the summer heat. Clayton or Madeline both would happily provide him a room for the night. Or he could spend the night as an uninvited guest in any house in London.

Yet somehow he found himself back at the walled garden of a deposed princess.

As he tucked his fingers in the cool vining plants that scaled the walls, his mind ceased

caterwauling. And his grin slowly returned to his face.

There were more guards posted tonight.

Good for her.

Too bad they didn't know what to look for. Their eyes watched the gates while he'd scale the wall to the garden, climb the oak tree to the balcony on the second floor, and then follow the gutter to the empty bedroom on the next floor.

He could sleep in the blue guest room three doors down from the fair princess with her none the wiser.

She'd be asleep now. For a moment, the urge to stare at her peaceful slumber nearly overwhelmed him. She'd be tucked in by her maid, her hair fanned out over her pillow. The angry flush would be gone from her cheeks. The animation in her face momentarily at rest.

What did a princess dream of at night? Castles and handsome princes, no doubt. The color of her next ball gown. Or perhaps having Ian clapped in manacles and thrown into the dungeon—she did have spirit, after all.

Ian turned away from the wall. He wouldn't go inside tonight. The information he sought would be found in darkened corridors and empty guestrooms. He'd need daylight to question her servants.

He strode away. There was a cot in the kitchen of the Rutting Beaver that would do for the night.

And for the first time in his life, he couldn't wait for the morning to come.

Chapter Four

Juliana wanted nothing but to go to sleep, but first she'd had to spend several hours reviewing the security on the house. And now this.

"Gregory, you'll have to stop pacing and just tell me what is amiss."

Her brother dragged his hand through his hair and groaned again. "I'm as good as dead."

She would kill him herself if he didn't start talking. "What? Do you owe someone money? Is it a gambling debt?"

He stopped long enough to frown at her. "I know better than that."

"What then? A woman? Your mistress?"

Gregory sank into the chair in the corner of Juliana's room. "I hope never to hear you utter that word again."

Juliana snorted, glad none of her aunts was there to hear her. "I see the bills for the jeweler. No one is going to either tell me what is wrong or leave me in peace so I can sleep."

"It is Sommet."

Ice filled Juliana's stomach. "What has he done?"

Gregory buried his face in his hands. "You were right about him. He has—he has found a way to have the crown taken from you." He dug his fingers into his scalp. "And given to me."

"*What?*" She might not particularly want to be a monarch, but she'd die before she allowed anyone to wrest it from her.

"It has to do with you being a woman."

"Women are allowed to rule Lenoria." It was always the eldest child rather than the first male.

He swallowed. "Yes. But if the princess is still unmarried by twenty-two, any male heirs have the right to challenge her for the throne."

In 1345, King Hubart had wanted his son to inherit rather than his daughter. He couldn't change the old law, so he amended it.

“You’re twenty-four,” Gregory reminded her.

“I know how old I am.” Juliana took a calming breath. “I fail to see what the problem is. Don’t challenge me. Sommet cannot force you. Just deny him.”

Gregory actually moaned.

“He *can* force you?” she guessed, dread expanding in her chest.

“He had information on the people who toppled Lenoria.”

The Trio. The man who’d been here earlier had mentioned them. His rough voice and gentle hands. “What did you do?”

Gregory scowled for a moment. “It’s not like it’s any different than what you would have done. If you’d captured them in Lenoria, you would have had them executed.”

Perhaps. Perhaps not. She was eternally grateful that she didn’t have that authority here in England. “That’s Sommet talking, not you. You tried to have people murdered?”

“I didn’t try to kill them. I simply told other people they had wronged where to find them.”

“How did you know who their enemies were?”

“Sommet.” His bravado dissolved. “He kept proof linking me to it. He says he’ll reveal it to the government, if I don’t obey.”

The English would be up in arms at a foreign royal plotting the murder of its citizens.

“They might hang me for attempted murder.”

Even if they didn’t, the scandal would be enormous. The regent would withdraw his support. They’d lose the house and their small stream of income.

“And if you do what Sommet wants?”

Gregory groaned. “I’d become king. Sommet claims he has the support to free Lenoria.”

“Then why won’t he do it with me in control?”

Gregory’s words were muffled by his cravat as he ducked his chin into his chest. “I may have signed away certain rights to him if he could get Lenoria back.”

Juliana gripped her bedpost to keep from strangling him. “What, precisely?”

“The mineral rights in the southern mountains.”

A princess does not raise her voice. A princess does not raise her voice.

“Those rights belong to the crown. You have no right—”

Ah. It suddenly all made sense. “If you were king, then the documents you signed would be binding.” There was gold in those mountains, and more importantly iron, vast amounts of it if the reports were to be believed.

“Perhaps it would be for the best if I did listen to Sommet, then at least we’d have a country, which is more than we have— *Ouch!*” he cried as she gripped his ear.

“You did *not* just threaten to take my country from me.” The mob ten years ago hadn’t managed to do that. She wouldn’t allow her brother to.

Her brother fought to get her to release him. “Ouch. Not really, I swear. That’s why I came to speak to you in the first place. I don’t know what to do.”

The fight went out of Juliana, and suddenly she was a young girl leading her sobbing brother out a castle burning with their parents' bodies still inside.

She placed her hand on his shoulder. "I will take care of it."

Her brother stared up at her. "How?"

"What documents does Sommet have?"

"Letters. Letters to a friend where I explain my plans to reveal the identity of those spies." He fidgeted side to side.

Juliana frowned. "But how can he release those documents without revealing his part in all this?"

"I never mentioned him." He scrubbed his face. "I may have wanted my friend to think it was a my plan."

"Do you have any proof that Sommet was the one who gave you the names?"

Perhaps she could convince Sommet that he was endangering himself with those letters.

"No. He always insisted on meeting in person. Nothing is in writing."

Blast. But perhaps if she went to Prinny on her knees and explained about her imbecilic young brother—

Gregory cleared his throat. "While in my cups, I may have also written a letter demanding we kick the prince regent for sponsoring the Trio."

Juliana sucked in a breath. "That is treason." He truly *would* hang. She collapsed on the edge of her bed.

"Juliana?" Gregory asked.

She had to take three breaths before she could answer. "Where are these letters?"

Gregory shook his head. "At his country estate, or so he claims. I'm supposed to declare the challenge at his house party next week."

"You know the challenge is a formality. If you contest the throne, it will go to you."

Gregory swallowed. "I know."

That explained the rather impressive list of royals and British noblemen that had been invited to the duke's house party. There would be no going back after Gregory acted.

"If I do as he says, he'll give me the papers afterward."

Yes, and she was a dairy maid.

"Surely there's someone we can tell . . ." Her words faded. Who? Sommet was one of the most powerful dukes in the country. And how could she tell anyone without explaining Gregory's part in all this? "We will go to the house party."

Gregory blinked. "You aren't going to cede the crown—"

She cut him off with a glare. "Of course not. I'm going to get the letters back so he can no longer control you."

"How? He won't listen to threats. You aren't— You aren't going to sleep with—"

She smacked him alongside his head. "I'm going to steal the letters back."

Gregory threw back his head and chortled. “You couldn’t even get past Cook to steal a tart—” He quieted. “You’re serious. Juliana, that is insane. You will be caught, and Sommet is not a man to cross.”

“I will get them back. I swear it. And have I ever broken a promise?” She fixed a stare on her brother when he would have spoken. “Ever?”

Slowly, he shook his head.

“You will accept the duke’s invitation on behalf of the royal family of Lenoria and tell him you agree to his plan. You will let him think he has won.”

A crease crossed Gregory’s forehead. “It might be dangerous. How do you intend to—”

But Juliana already had a plan formulating in her mind.

It would either work—or get her killed.

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