
Chapter 1

c. 1963

"**Y**our Royal Highness."

His eyes, as always, were drawn to her, and he noted that there was no dramatic or overt response at all from her. Instead, there was an almost imperceptible sign that she'd heard him that most would never have noticed. But he would never miss anything about her, so he saw the way her back stiffened just slightly at the sound of his voice, as well as what had probably become a very strange thing to hear herself being called by him after all these years.

Low and deep and full of confidence at all times, that subtly commanding, resonant tone wasn't one that could be forgotten easily, especially not considering the circumstances in which she had frequently—and last—heard it. What was it, eleven years ago? Twelve? Surprisingly, she really hadn't kept track. She'd been much too busy living her life.

Such as it was, she filled in the derogatory comment herself, as if trying to preempt him from doing it. Not that he likely would, at least not out loud, anyway. He was—generally

—too well bred for that. So much so that she had no doubt that he had bowed his head to her, too, as protocol dictated he should, despite her current circumstances and the fact that she couldn't even have seen him do it.

And if it were anyone else—literally anyone on the planet—but him, she wouldn't have cared in the least what he or she thought about the life she was currently leading. But this was him, and although she very much didn't want to, parts of her that she thought she'd killed off reared their ugly little heads again and demanded that she pay attention to what this man thought of her—even now.

After sitting on her heels, frozen in place for a brief moment as she deliberately drew a slow breath to calm a heart that was trying to beat its way out of her chest, she leaned forward again onto one gloved hand and continued weeding her garden as if he wasn't there. And he had no doubt that that was what she heartily wished to be true.

She took so long to respond to him that, as he stood there with his back ramrod straight, he fidgeted—once and only once—immediately regretting the action that betrayed his unease. And thoroughly, once he had given in to it even though there had been no witnesses to it, either. It was bad enough that he'd done it at all, and he could only consider it a blessing that no one had observed that revealing slip up.

"Yes, Lord Rockwell, what have you come all this way to say to me?" *When you undoubtedly hate my guts*, she finished in her head.

But that wasn't at all what he was thinking. Even after all this time, her soft, slightly raspy, innocently bedroom voice brought him to fully, painfully erect faster than anyone or anything else ever had. Douglas clasped his hands in front of himself, hoping to hide his condition, not that he really needed to, since she was still facing away from him. It was force of habit.

As she continued to rip the weeds—quite viciously—from the ground, she heard him come closer to her, even though she made no acknowledgement of that fact until she found herself staring, not at weeds, but rather two undoubtedly very expensive, highly polished black shoes that had insinuated themselves into her field of vision.

Without so much as a thought, she reached up and began smacking away at what she had known to be a significantly muscled calf—and that had not changed in the least—as she yelled at him in a wholly unladylike manner that more closely befitted that of a fishwife rather than someone who bore the exalted title of HRH.

"Get off, you big lug! You're standing on my peas!"

To say that Douglas Ramsay, seventh Lord of Rockwell, Knight Exemplar, Order of the Rose, and recipient of the Star of Valor for bravery in the Third Last War wasn't at all prepared for the way the termagant in front of him attacked him as if he was standing on her child would have been an underestimation bordering on farce. It wasn't as if her blows were hurting him in the least; they were much akin to a mosquito worrying a bull. What irked him was that she obviously had absolutely no regard for the fact that her dirt covered gloves were rapidly making his pants resemble her garden from the knee down. So, rather than try to kick out at her—which could easily hurt her—or even push her away, he simply reached down, grabbed the back of her overalls, which provided a surprisingly convenient handle with which to do so, and lifted her off the ground.

Once he'd taken the three or so steps—for him—needed to get her out of the garden while carefully trying not to land an enormous foot on anything that was likely to be alive and growing, not that he would know a weed from a plant if his life depended on it, he made his way onto the nicely mown

grass, to set her gently—and somewhat regretfully at the same time—down.

Of course, she'd objected to his high-handed move from the second he'd lifted her off the ground, but his arms were more than long enough to keep her well out from his side and unable to land any of the wild, arm swinging blows she aimed him during her brief trip. But when her feet hit the ground, she was already running at him, landing a respectable blow to his breadbasket that very nearly set him back a step, before beginning to kick ineffectually at his shins.

"Don't you ever do that again, Lord Rockwell!"

Her voice was unlike he had ever heard it—deeper, huskier, as if she was fighting the need to cry and found it hard to speak—and it put him on alert in a very different way from how he had been when he'd walked into her back yard.

Regardless, she wasn't done taking out her ire on him, having taken a few steps back to look angrily up at him, she spewed, surprisingly ferally, "You are not to touch me again, ever. I believe I've already told you that once, but then, you always did only hear—and do—what you wanted to." Without another word, she gave him her back and headed into the house after shedding her gloves carelessly into the neat wicker basket that sat at the end of the garden.

He wasn't quite fast enough to catch her before she got through the door, but he was able to slip into the house behind her.

She turned to confront him immediately, which was another behavior that would have been unusual for her when he'd known her in the past. "I don't remember inviting you in, Lord Rockwell," she intoned coldly. "In fact, I don't remember inviting you onto my property. This isn't Anterre; this is the United States, and I do own several guns."

Unfortunately—and rightfully, she hated to admit—that unsubtle threat only earned her a slightly raised eyebrow. "So,

you're going to shoot me?" he asked casually, appearing wholly unconcerned about the possibility, which only annoyed her just that much more.

"No, but they are loaded, and they are placed strategically around the house."

"Why? Are you expecting an invasion?" he fired back.

"Well, no, but sometimes the press—and looky-loos—can be persistent, even now."

Douglas looked fiercely angry at that, as if he wished he could have been there to chase off every one of them.

"And I did get invaded—I know your war record and your personality. You are most definitely a one-man invasion of my sovereign territory."

His frown melted into a grin that almost—but not quite—made him look boyish. He was much too masculine to quite make it there. Charlotte seriously doubted that he'd ever looked boyish even when he was one.

"Well, I'm sorry you see my visit that way."

Her eyes narrowed on him. "No, you're not." She turned away from him. "Since you don't seem the least inclined to leave, and I can hardly push you out myself if you don't want to go—"

He grinned unrepentantly at that.

"—then I suppose I have to offer you some kind of refreshment. Would you like some coffee or tea, or something stronger?"

She didn't see him take a step closer to her, but there was no mistaking how close he was. She knew he was scrupulously not touching her, but his warm, coffee-scented breath moved the baby hairs that had fallen out of her hastily messy updo as he spoke in a highly intimate and thus inappropriate way.

"Does this mean there's a truce between us?" he murmured.

Charlotte tried to steel her loins against him, but it didn't

work. It had never worked. She had no defenses against him at all, and that had been at least part of the original problem. But she still had to do her best to try to defend herself against him, didn't she? At the same time, she found it very depressing that her attraction to him was still so potent. As always, she was reduced to a throbbing puddle of goo any time she was within a thousand miles of him.

Trying, with varying degrees of success, to slip back into the habit of not letting on just how disturbing she found his presence, she rapped back at him, "I would call it no more than an uneasy détente."

His hands were halfway up to her shoulders, intending to turn her around and into him as he bent her back over his arm while kissing the breath out of her. But Douglas forced his hands back to his sides with a ruthless will that had served him well in almost every area of his life—save, perhaps, his relationship with her.

Although he knew that they hoped he might be able to reason with her, he also knew that he was the last person they should have sent to do the job he'd been tasked with—which was something that he had emphasized to them, but then, here he was. He should have flatly refused to go but hadn't quite been able to convince himself to do so. The opportunity to see her again was too tantalizing, despite the sobering reason for which he was going in the first place.

Now she was standing in front of him, looking somehow even more delicate and wraithlike than he remembered and activating every protective, dominant nerve in his body. To say nothing of the deep, nearly uncontrolled desire he felt for her, which hadn't abated in the least, despite how many years had passed since he'd last seen her. It might as well have been yesterday, as far as his libido was concerned.

He *wanted* her; the urge to just lift her onto the kitchen counter and lay her back so that he could feast on the parts of

her that he most wanted to claim was causing his fingers to itch. And all those thoughts and impulses were going to do was complicate matters in what would likely be an irretrievable fashion. He'd rarely had to remind himself to keep his mind on the goal of a mission. The only times he'd had to resort to telling himself that was when she was involved.

"Well, I'm sorry that you feel that way."

"No, you're not," she casually answered again, causing him to issue a quickly squelched chuckle.

"I see your manners haven't improved in the least since the last time I had to correct you for displaying bad ones." His comment was delivered in a sinfully soft, decidedly warning tone.

Was that a gasp he heard at that? The spoon she was using to add a bit of sugar to his tea clattered loudly down onto the saucer in the palpable silence of the room, as if her fingers could no longer manage to hold it. Color seeped boldly into her face, turning it a dusky red that was more telling than he should have wanted it to be. More telling than his pants were made to accommodate, frankly. Yet he couldn't shove aside a feeling of pure joy at her reaction. It seemed she well remembered much more than just how he took his tea.

And he, for one, had committed every second he'd spent with her to memory, dragging them out when he was alone and in bed, or in the shower, or at a boring meeting, and even when he was out to dinner with a woman who was perfectly wonderful and replaying them in excruciating detail—every touch, every kiss, every sigh, every moan that came from either of them.

All the women he'd dated since she'd left—hell, since he'd met her—could have been Joan of Arc, but none of them were her, and she was the only one he'd wanted for as long as he could remember. That remained true, even now—even after what she'd done to him.

Charlotte handed him his cup and saucer, grabbed her own mug of coffee, and went to sit down at her small, barely ever used dining room table. There was no way she was going to let him get any farther into her house, even though its size was going to require a proximity to him that was undoubtedly going to give her problems.

When they'd sat down, she asked matter of factly, while avoiding his gaze, "So you're here because my sister's not well, I'm assuming?"

If he had his druthers, they wouldn't have had this conversation until after he'd had her again—after he'd taken her gently and roughly and every way in between, until that powerful, undeniable need had been sated—if only for a few long moments before he would again begin to experience the overwhelming need to have her beneath him again. He'd become starkly and involuntarily familiar with self-denial over the years, but the longer she sat there, trying to look cold and prim and unaffected—which only succeeded in making her look more sad and forlorn and ethereal to someone who knew her well enough to look past the practiced façade she presented to others—the more his heart ached for her, easily keeping time with the throbbing of the distinctly less altruistic parts of his anatomy.

Douglas leaned forward, folding his hands on the table and wishing he felt that he could at least take her hand in some gesture of comfort, but he knew she wouldn't be able to accept it, and that made him feel even more conflicted about the feelings that were flooding his senses at the mere sight of her.

"I take it that you don't watch the news?"

She wrinkled her nose in a fashion he'd always found charming. "Not if I can avoid it."

He cleared his throat uneasily before saying quietly and in a deeply respectful way, "I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but

it is thought that she..." His eyes darted to hers but only for a second before she looked away. "The doctors don't think she has much more than a month left, if that long."

Charlotte let go of the breath she'd been holding since he'd so unexpectedly arrived on her doorstep—well, in her garden, anyway. She was surprised to find her eyes suddenly wet with a sheen of unshed tears, but she ruthlessly blinked them away. Queen Helena, who was known to her family members—those few with whom she remained on speaking terms—as Sarah, had ruthlessly cut her younger sister out of her life all those years ago, when she refused to comply with the queen's wishes, and then blatantly—and publicly—defied them.

Charlotte had no illusions that if they weren't living in such a civilized century, her head would have been sitting on a spike at the entrance to Bedford Castle—the traditional home of the monarch—for all to see what became of those who thumbed their noses at their sovereign.

Still, good manners had been drilled into her from a young age, and the words, "I'm sorry to hear that," tumbled out of her mouth automatically with absolutely no thought or feeling behind them whatsoever.

She could feel him staring at her but kept her face a careful blank, which was depressingly easy, although she supposed she should be happy about that. But Charlotte recognized the bald fact that it was a shame that she and her only sister hadn't been as close as adults as they had been as children. Granted, there were quite a few years between them, but Sarah had always been her confidant and her protector—at least, that was, until their older brother, King Stephan, died unexpectedly when he was thrown from a horse during a polo match.

It may only have been her sensitivity towards things changing between them, but it seemed to her that from the

moment she was informed that she was to be queen, her sister changed. Gone, was her sense of adventure and fun, which she had gladly shared with Charlotte, and in its place, was a more somber demeanor that caused the older girl to criticize her younger sister for being frivolous and immature when she had engaged in the same activities in the years prior to her ascension to the throne.

Charlotte had not only lost her brother that day, but she also lost a sister, and their relationship only deteriorated from there. Charlotte visibly chafed against the restrictions and requirements of being a Princess Royal, especially as she began to grow up, and the more she rebelled, the tighter her sister drew the reins.

And that was when the man whom she had only known peripherally—and who, if she was being honest with herself, had always scared her more than a little, at first—had come in.

Rather than allow herself to indulge in useless reminiscing, she got right to the point, prompting almost rudely, "And you are here because?"

His expression at her question proved to her that the amount of time they were apart had absolutely no effect on her reactions to him. That brows drawn frown caused her butt to tingle, there was no denying it, although she refused to allow those distracting sensations to cause her to shift in her chair. It would be a dead giveaway to him, and she knew from long experience that it was best not to let Douglas know any more about her than she absolutely had to, certainly nothing as revealing as that.

Unfortunately, he could be annoyingly perceptive—not necessarily in general, but especially regarding things that pertained to her.

"You know exactly why I'm here, Your Royal Highness."

The clearly chiding tightness of those words only added to

her urge to fidget as he continued to stare at her boldly, belying the air of formality that they were both fighting themselves to maintain.

Charlotte stood immediately, bottom—her whole lower half—still embarrassingly alert to his every oblique, but never unintentional, inflection or deliberate movement.

"Well then. I'm very sorry that you've wasted your trip, Lord Rockwell. I do hope you have a pleasant flight back, however, and thank you for telling me the news—"

Before she got the rest of her sentence out, she found herself hauled into his arms in a manner that would have been more at home in a lurid women's novel than being the actions of a decorated war hero and a valued member of her sister's court. But then, as much of a staunch monarchist as he was, Douglas had always had a flair for doing the unexpected. He preferred, on occasion, to ask for forgiveness rather than permission, which was, contrarily, a trait that he did his best to discourage in her from the moment they'd met.

He might have tugged her to him quickly, but that was where his hasty movements met an end. Once she was in his arms, he slowed his pace considerably, widening his stance so that he could bring her even more closely against him—intimately so.

There was such a height difference between them that as his arms kept her body molded to his, she recognized exactly what was pressing insistently into her belly. Trying to jerk herself away from him—hoping that the element of surprise would work in her favor—by pressing her hands against his expensively clad biceps, she only succeeded in losing control of both of them, and before she could do anything about it—before she really even knew it was happening—she found them neatly clasped behind her back in one of his.

She should have known that she wasn't going to be able to catch him off guard like that. It had been wishful thinking at

best to hope that he might have gotten a little bit weaker in more than a decade, but, if anything, it seemed that his strength had increased triple-fold. But perhaps that was just in comparison to her husband, although that was hardly a fair observation. Still, he didn't try to swoop down and kiss her immediately. That had never really been his style.

Deliberately addressing his third shirt button, she commanded icily, "Let me go immediately!"

Douglas smiled. "And yet you would undoubtedly claim that you have no queenly attributes. That certainly sounded like a royal command to me."

She was only wearing sneakers, so it couldn't have hurt much, but she took that moment to inform him of her displeasure by slamming her foot sharply down on his instep.

He did emit a bit of a small grunt at her action, and Charlotte knew that she had better content herself with that, while trying to defend herself from him—and extricate herself from his hold—without the use of her hands. Sometimes she wished she would think things like that through better, but it was unlikely that she would ever learn to do that now. Although she knew that if she let him, he was going to attempt to teach her better habits, as he'd tried to do before.

All he had to do to render her even more helpless than she already was, to carefully contract the arm that was holding her hands against her back to lift her off her feet, forcing her into an even closer proximity to him than she had been. Essentially, she was leaning on him from her shoulder to her knees, and there was precious little she could do to rectify the situation.

Her feet were still free, though, so Charlotte hauled one of them back and let fly against his shin, with more satisfying results than her insult to his instep. Even though she was quite enjoying kicking him, he proceeded to convince her—without trying very hard—that neither of those actions was acceptable to him.

It was near mid-summer, and she was in her gardening togs, which were her oldest, most worn clothes that could still avoid being tossed in the rag bin. As a result, although she was wearing sensible white panties and a pair of worn, faded hog washers, they were both so old and well used that she might as well have been bare bottomed for all the protection they afforded her against the platter-sized hand that was fiercely and determinedly descending on her backside.

As with many other things, Douglas didn't like to rush a spanking. Oh, he would if he had to. Many was the time that he'd caught a woman of his doing something they both knew she oughtn't, and he'd taken that exact moment to deliver a swift, uncompromising chastisement that consisted of an unflinching flurry of crisp, hard swats that barely gave the miscreant the chance to take a breath in protest. And it rapidly became much more likely that she was going to use that open mouth to scream or cry or beg him to stop, instead, as the swats just kept coming, until he felt that he had gotten his point across in one of the most primitive—and satisfying—manners possible. And now, he didn't think he'd ever forget Charlotte's outraged expression when his palm splatted loudly against a rear end that was much less generous than he remembered.

For one of the few times since he'd gotten there, she locked eyes with his, issuing a threatening whisper that held shades of her sister when she'd been healthy, not that he was going to tell her that.

"Don't you dare spank me!" she intoned very slowly and forcefully, knowing even as she said them that she might as well have been issuing warning thunder not to boom or a blizzard not to snow. He was at least as much of a force of nature as either of those things were, and just about as biddable.

Unfortunately, he continued to spank her right through her warning, which dulled its impact considerably, while

nothing was going to do that for the person on the receiving end of one of his spankings.

She could see the smile playing about his lips as he murmured, "Surely, you remember that I dare to do a lot of things, princess, especially when someone in my charge misbehaves."

Charlotte thought about opening her mouth again to correct his fallacious assumption but decided that she preferred not to give him the satisfaction of betraying any feelings whatsoever about what he was doing to her. In fact, she didn't even struggle to get away, preferring not to show him any response at all. But she was ashamed to realize that they were rapidly approaching the point when she simply wouldn't be able manage to do either of those things any longer.

He was too damned good at this, and what was worse was that the bastard knew he was, too!

She had long since given up trying to kick his shins. Not because she didn't want to, but because the painful sting of the spanking he was delivering had scattered her mind to the point that it was hard to think about anything except trying to get him to stop. Besides, she didn't much fancy the idea of breaking her toes, either. The man was made of solid concrete, she'd swear. She was going to have to limp away from him—if he'd ever stop scourging her with the paddle that was merely his hand.

Seconds before she knew she would have lost the battle to keep from debasing herself by begging him to stop, he did, setting her down on her own two feet as if she was made of spun sugar while not allowing her to step so much as an inch away from him as he kept her hands securely behind her.

The part of him that had been such a presence against her belly was now even more of one, and as she pondered the ramifications of that, she found her wrists released and her face cupped by a big hand on either side of her face. Even if

she didn't know that he was right-handed, she would have been able to tell that that was the hand he'd used to punish her simply because it was just about as hot as her bum was at the moment, where it rested against her face.

Douglas tipped her face up to his, being very careful of her, as he always was, but not allowing her to deny him. He could see that her eyes were wet and knew that that could have been for one of two reasons—learning about her sister's illness or the spanking she'd just received. His money was on the spanking, since he knew she hated her sister's guts, and he doubted that even the news of her imminent demise would reduce her to tears. A thorough spanking, though, had been known to do so—although not always. She could be a tough nut to crack when she got stubborn about something, but he could usually get through to her.

"Ah, Charlotte, I have missed you," he confessed huskily, lips descending onto hers playfully at first, trying to coax and tease a reaction from her, then more hungrily as his body's demands made it much harder than he'd remembered to keep himself in check.

While in the grip of a need he was all too familiar with that had come roaring back—as acute as ever—the moment he'd caught sight of her, Douglas's tongue found its way past her teeth—not worrying in the least that she might bite him, since she certainly wouldn't want to endure any more attentions to her already sore, painful behind. She wouldn't want to add to the ones she'd already earned from him with the recalcitrant behavior she'd displayed since he'd arrived.

His kiss was passionate and bold, but the way he held her face was tender and loving. The contrast was quite a potent combination in and of itself, and Charlotte found her resolve not to respond to him in any way seriously undermined—again.

As much as she wished she was on occasion, usually when

she was with him, she wasn't an emotionless robot, and it had been a very long time since anyone had touched her like this. The fact that it was Douglas who was holding her only amplified her responses, making it much easier for him to wrest away the control of them that she was barely managing to maintain. She'd always been much too sensitive to him—to his touch and his voice—and apparently time and distance hadn't affected that in the least. If anything, it was worse now than it had ever been in the past.

Finally, after the air had been filled with the sounds of her soft sighs and his low moans, he came up for a breath of air, wholly unable to let her go. As he watched, her head bowed immediately, hands floating in the air around them as if they weren't at all sure where they should land. Just when he was going to reach down and help her with that—to put them on his chest where they belonged—they found their way on their own, if very tentatively. At first, her fingers barely brushed his shirt, graduating to plucking at it as if she was picking feathers off him, then, with barely disguised reluctance, she laid them flat on his stomach.

"Douglas, please don't do that again. Oh!" The words were no sooner out of her mouth than she found herself lifted against him again as he began to walk down the hallway that was just off the dining room.

Two doors on the right, one on the left, he didn't need any more information than that in order to determine which was the master bedroom. And he was proven right when he opened it and found a good-sized bedroom, with a not good-sized bed—at least, not for a man of his carriage.

But he would make do. If he had to take her on a pile of blankets on the floor, then that was what he intended to do, but it wouldn't come to that. It would be a tight squeeze for him, and his feet would likely hang over the edge of the bed,

but that was his problem, not hers. He would see to her comfort well ahead of his own.

It came to mind that William was a much smaller man than he was. In fact, he wasn't much bigger than Charlotte if he remembered correctly—and he did.

As he bore her down onto the bed, being very careful not to squash her, Douglas made certain that she had more than enough room, but after he curled himself around her as she lay on her back, he looked up at her and froze in the act of leaning down to kiss her.

She looked as if she was about to cry, one hand reaching out to him, not trying to stop him, it didn't seem, but acting as if she thought she needed permission to touch him, and his heart seized painfully, right then and there.

"Charlotte?" he questioned gently, brushing several strands of hair away from her face that had come loose from the messy knot atop her head. "Are you all right?"

She blushed beautifully, and he wanted to take her right then. "I," she stopped, deflating some and keeping her eyes from his, "I—" Her mouth was open, but nothing was coming out.

"What is it?"

Finally, she closed her mouth with a decisive "click". "Nothing. I'm fine."

He gave her a considering look. "Are you sure—"

But she sat up at that moment and kissed him, which he most certainly didn't expect, and it had the intended effect. It distracted him from asking her any further questions as he draped his length over her, dwarfing her in more ways than one.