
Chapter 1

c. 1976

The first bullet whizzing by her head was startling and alarming.

The second—heard at the same time the electricity failed—was downright sobering.

Even before not-so-intrepid reporter Lettie McBride could really react to what was happening, she felt her arm being grabbed, not her hand but her forearm, just above her wrist, which gave the man who had taken it captive much more control over her movements. She couldn't let go of him and be free of him—he would have to release her from his hold, himself.

And, considering what she knew of the man, as well as the look on his face at the moment, that wasn't much likely to happen at any time in the immediate future.

"Come with me," he commanded abruptly as he began to pull her along—none too gently—behind him down the hallway, keeping her hugging the wall as he did. Then he turned back to give her a stern look. "Be quiet, and do exactly as I say—both of our lives depend on it," adding in a voice that made her heart

and stomach—as well as parts south, she was horrified to realize—clench, "And, if you do not, and we somehow manage to live through this, I will take you over my knee and thrash your bare backside for your disobedience."

And she didn't doubt him in the least about that, either.

He'd never looked—nor acted—more like a king to her than in those moments when he put his big body in front of hers, holding her tight behind him as they moved slowly, quietly through the halls of the palace. The memory of what she had read about his extraordinary acts while in his country's military during their last war with their acrimonious neighbor—when he was still a prince—flitted through her mind, and she knew that, even though he was likely the target of whatever violence was besetting them, there was probably not a safer place for her to be than in his experienced hands.

A gun had already appeared in his hand—from where, she had no idea—but the sight of it only added to the butterflies that were rapidly morphing into bats in her stomach, regardless of the extent of his capabilities. This wasn't a war—not yet, anyway. It was more likely an attempted coup, and that didn't inspire any confidence in her about their possible survival.

She could hear bullets whizzing around, then thumping loudly into plaster walls or causing crystal and glass to shatter disconcertingly close to them, not liking to think about where else they might have landed as a few groans rose from unfortunates she guiltily hoped were on the other side.

With his steel grip on her arm, she was dragged along behind him as he guided them down the next big hallway that already showed signs of the fight.

When they reached a corner, he turned back to look at her briefly, then growl, "Stay here, up against the wall. And *don't move!*"

With that, he went around the corner, and Lettie heard him squeeze off several rounds, followed by the terrifyingly unmistak-

able sound of bodies hitting the floor. From the other end of the hall that crossed the one they'd come down, she heard double doors burst open, and she saw him immediately turn and advance bravely towards whoever it was confronting him, gun up, prepared to fire.

"Bacca!" He lowered his gun upon recognizing the man.

The other man motioned to him urgently. "There's no time, Your Highness. You must come with me to safety."

He was already turning to her, putting his hand out to her imperiously, as if he couldn't imagine she might eschew it.

But she did. She came to stand close by his side, but she did not take his hand. He lowered it slowly, studying her closely as he asked without taking his eyes from hers, "Bacca, do you have a handgun you could spare?"

"Of course, sir." He immediately produced an old revolver, handing it to his king, butt first.

Alek le-Kyenn, in turn, offered it to the woman standing in front of him, who was shaking and obviously terrified, but still, was standing tall and not hysterical in the least as he might have expected.

"Have you ever fired a gun before, Ms. McBride?"

She noted his careful, distinct use of her preferred title rather than the first name she had given him her permission to use earlier, as if it felt distasteful in his mouth to do so. She guessed he was no longer Alek to her, either.

"I have."

He seemed somewhat impressed. "Well, it's loaded and the safety is off. Use it if you feel it's necessary." He couldn't help but grimace at that, thinking not of himself, but of the consequences to her if what he said next came true. "If, for some reason, neither Bacca nor I are around, turn right at the end of the next hallway and go to the end. There will be a staircase. Follow it down until you find the elevator. Hopefully, there'll be someone there to help you further." He wasn't at all sure of that, but at

least being underground, she might fare a bit better for a bit longer, anyway.

Lettie could see the plain concern on his face, and it nearly made her blush.

Then he ruined it entirely by saying disparagingly, "But for Heaven's sake, try not to shoot either one of us!"

The urge to shoot him, at least at that moment, was quite strong at that remark, but she refrained as it could probably be considered counter-productive by some, and acknowledging that, as annoying and chauvinistic as he might be, being with him—and his man—was probably her best bet right now.

The men moved quickly, and she found herself wishing she'd spent more time on the tennis courts or in a gym than she had sitting on a nice comfy office chair in front of a typewriter, but she managed to keep up, although the air conditioning—which seemed a downright necessity in summer here—had gone off with the lights, and her asthma was giving her a bit of a problem from the heat.

Luckily, she always carried a rescue inhaler, which she used while the men conversed about the best way to get him to something called a "safe room", which was a term she hadn't heard until now. The sound of the inhaler discharging, though, caused the king to turn back to her suddenly.

Hearing her wheeze as she expelled all her breath before using the medicine prompted him to ask, "Are you all right?" And he even managed to sound as if he was actually concerned.

"I'm fine, thank you," she answered softly, not wanting him to become angry or even impatient with her.

But his next words surprised her, answering the question she'd wisely kept to herself. "If you can't keep up, let me know. I'll carry you."

And he could do it, too, of that she had absolutely no doubt. But she was not about to put him out or hinder their path to safety like that surely would, despite his obvious strength.

And Lettie knew that she was automatically ascribing altruistic motives to him—with his movie star good looks and quietly dominant demeanor, it was hard not to. But the bald truth of the situation was that he had offered to carry her because they all had a better chance of living through this if she wasn't a burden to their advancement. "Thank you, but I would rather pull my own weight. If I need your assistance, be assured that I won't hesitate to ask for it."

His chin raised a notch, as if he was somewhat impressed, then he said, "See that you do, on both counts." Then he turned back to his friend, comrade, servant, and bodyguard, Bacca, and they commenced planning in Kyennese.

She'd learned a few phrases and words in preparation for the trip, but nowhere near enough even to begin to understand what they were saying to each other.

They scuttled down several more corridors—all lavishly decorated, at one time, anyway, now bearing the scars of the fight that was ongoing all around them, it seemed—and down several flights of stairs. Then, finally, they were out, in a much narrower, more office-like hallway. And as they got there, she heard a door close behind them, recognizing someone yelling at them to stop.

All of a sudden, she found herself pulled close behind the king, sandwiched between him and the other man, each brandishing his gun. She could feel that they were tensed and ready for anything.

Within a split second, they turned in unison, leaving her standing still, and she got a face full of his chest as he clamped—surprisingly gently—her head to it, putting his hand over her exposed ear as they crouched down to shoot at whoever it was trying to ambush them from behind.

Unfortunately, that meant neither of them saw the man who was surreptitiously making his way toward them from the other direction, a large, lethal looking gun in his hands. Lettie didn't

see him at first, either, until the king took a knee and began firing, along with Bacca, at the men they could see.

She knew it was up to her to take care of the man who was rapidly coming up on them from behind the two men who were bravely trying to defend themselves and her.

And she did so, without hesitation, raising her gun and firing just above the king's shoulder. The element of surprise was on her side, because the villain obviously couldn't conceive of the idea that she might have a gun, and she aimed—as she imagined she should—for center body mass. Keeping the gun steady when she was terrified out of her wits wasn't easy, but she did well enough, by steadying her hand against one of His Majesty's shoulders, that he fell backward, falling over very much as if he was one of those ducks you hit during that game every fair has on its midway.

Alek's head swiveled almost comically quickly around, and he took in the scene behind him, then he looked down at her in obvious amazement.

But, having done what she thought needed to be done, it seemed that she had expended her meager abilities, and—as the men managed to again get them steadily moving forward, toward something—safety, she assumed—she couldn't seem to think of anything but what she'd done. She couldn't really hear anything that was said to her, and thus, became more of a liability, even more so than she had been before this thing began.

Lettie knew that the king was issuing orders to her and that she ought to do as he said, but she couldn't quite hear him, even though he was right next to her, couldn't process what reached her numbed brain as gibberish, even though she knew he was speaking English.

Finally, he bent down, lifted her into his arms and ran with her, down quite a few flights of dark stairs, yet his steps never once faltered. She was carried into an elevator for a very long ride down, then off it again and through several doors, each one

more formidably armored than the previous as it was slammed ominously shut and locked behind them through various complicated means. Until, at last, Alek set her down in something that resembled a small, well-appointed apartment.

The lights were even on, although they hadn't been in the rest of the building since she'd heard those first shots, although they must've been, at some point, underground for the elevator to have functioned, suggesting that this area had its own source of power, perhaps a very large generator. Even the air conditioning was working, and it was welcoming and cool. She immediately felt calmer than she had, although her heart was still racing as if they were still being hunted, and her usually clear mind was still badly muddled.

Bacca nodded to her, bowed to his king, and took his leave through the door they'd come in mere minutes after they'd gotten there.

"Where's he going? Isn't he safe here now, too?" The question was out of her mouth before she could think whether or not she should ask it, but with the way her mind had deserted her since she'd shot that man, she wasn't surprised.

A dark eyebrow rose, but the king answered while looking down at her with a slightly curious look, speaking slowly and deliberately in a deep, soft tone that actually managed to get through to her. "Having delivered us to relative safety, Bacca, who is my head of security, has gone to rejoin the fight."

"Relative?" Her addled brain had seized on that telling descriptor, and the calm she had been beginning to feel began to desert her again.

As she hadn't moved from the spot where he'd somewhat reluctantly relinquished her, it was easy for him to wrap his arms

around her again, drawing her against his big body as he felt her shiver violently.

He didn't want to lie to her, nor did he want to upset her further, and wishing he'd chosen his words better didn't help. "This is the safest place in the country—that's why it's called a safe room. We are miles underground, surrounded by steel reinforced concrete walls that are five feet thick, behind enormous doors like they have in bank vaults. You saw what it took to get in here. If we had to, we could survive a nuclear blast. There's enough food and water down here to last us several lifetimes."

Not usually an impulsive man, he nonetheless couldn't resist kissing the top of her head as he hugged her tightly. The urge to want to comfort her was irresistible on several levels.

"Are you all right?" he asked, giving her a considering look. "How's your breathing?"

"Better, thank you."

"Good." He took a deep breath. "I imagine this is not quite what you envisioned when you accepted my offer to come interview me, hmm?" he asked, keeping his tone deliberately light as he ran his severely restrained hand over the top of her shoulder length blonde hair, when what he desperately wanted to do was comb his fingers through its wavy softness and delve into it close to the back of her head to use his hold to tip her head back so that he might kiss her.

But he didn't—although he was closer to losing that battle with himself than he was comfortable with.

No, there was something else he needed to do even more urgently that he was pretty sure was going to make it damned near impossible for him to get within ten feet of her again once he was finished.

Not that it was going to deter him from doing it. It still needed to be done, especially since there was every possibility they could end up in much the same situation again at some point while she was here.

But he couldn't ignore how she had behaved after she'd acted so heroically in saving his—their—lives, even though she most definitely had. Although he completely understood her reaction—doubting that she'd ever shot a man before, and the fact that she had proven herself to be much more of an asset than he had anticipated—he still had to impress on her what he'd told her when they'd first been fired upon. He felt he needed to impress on her that she *had* to obey him in a situation like that, without question, if she wanted to remain alive.

The bald truth was that, once she'd discharged her weapon, they had made it here despite her.

Alek frowned deeply at the idea of her leaving, but he wasn't in the habit of fooling himself, either. Considering what they'd just lived through, and what he was going to do to her shortly, she was probably going to ask to leave as soon as it became safely possible to do so.

There was no way he could keep her there against her will, barring out and out kidnapping. The more primitive parts of his brain had already begun to work on justifying that action, but he nixed it immediately. In his grandfather's time, he might have gotten away with it.

And that old man *had* gotten away with it when he was young and brash and charming enough to convince his grandmother to be flattered rather than outraged at his uncivilized behavior.

But it left another bad taste in his mouth. He didn't want her to be with him against her will, but because that was where she wanted to be. What would be demanded of her as his bride nowadays would be entirely too much to expect of someone who didn't really want to be there.

Alek sighed, knowing that his next course of action would most certainly ruin any real, positive feelings she might have been beginning to feel toward him—especially a woman like she was, who wouldn't expect to be treated that way.

Unlike a woman who had been raised in his country, who

expected her disobedience to be corrected as he was going to correct hers.

Perhaps he should just do what his council had been pushing him toward since before he assumed the throne—find a good Kyennese woman from a good family and marry her. Since his grandfather's time, she need not be a royal.

Hell, since his grandfather's time, she need not even be from their side! King D'Lan had seen and fallen in love with a woman while a part of a scouting party, and he had proceeded to kidnap his bride from their sworn enemy—a rival family—with which his family grudgingly shared the country. And since that time, the two sides had grown into one—overall—seamless population.

Minus a few disgruntled types who preferred to cling to the old ways, he mused, thinking of what had just happened.

No, if he pursued the beautiful American journalist, he would be taking a page from his father's book, who had fallen in love with an American woman he'd met in London and decided that he could not do without her, practically on first sight.

There had been some rocky moments—no Kyennese leader had ever married a non-Kyennese, but she had turned out to be the perfect woman for the job, as his canny father must've recognized, and she became very nearly as revered as he was by their people. Indeed, his mother's title—as what loosely translated to the British equivalent of the Queen Mother, technically set her above even him, not that she'd ever pull rank on him.

Alek smiled briefly. Probably not, anyway. He wouldn't really put much past his mother, even at the ripe old age of sixty-eight.

But unlike his predecessors, the king couldn't quite admit to himself that he loved the woman he was holding in his arms, but he was most certainly intrigued by her, more intrigued by far than with any other woman he'd ever met, even before he'd met her, or she wouldn't be here.

He was inherently distrustful of the press, and although his country had a free press—by law—they were still reverential

enough not to criticize him or his policies very much. But the foreign press had absolutely no compunction, he knew, and they spent what he considered to be entirely too much time speculating about when—and definitely whom—he might marry.

Forcing himself back to the present, Alek held Lettie until she was no longer shaking, not that he deluded himself into thinking that meant that she was all right. Perhaps what he had planned wasn't such a bad thing, however, since it would give her something else to worry about entirely.

So, eventually, he withdrew his arms from around her, although not entirely, keeping his hands on her delicate shoulders as he looked down at her sternly.

"Do you remember what I told you when the shooting first began?" He could see the instant recognition in her eyes, which rapidly morphed into a distinct wariness that was reflected in her voice.

"Yesssss," she answered cautiously.

Alek began to slowly maneuver them towards the dining room table, reaching down to pull a chair out of the arrangement to place it well away from everything in the big, open room as she watched him like a hawk. A suspicious hawk.

If he hadn't been schooling his expression to be deadly serious, as the subject dictated, he might have laughed at her owlish expression.

"What did I say, little bird?" he asked, not unkindly, taking a seat on the chair, pulling her down onto his lap and holding her there even when she struggled to get away.

"I think I'll take the fifth on that."

"We don't have a Bill of Rights in my country."

"I would highly recommend you get one. Luckily, mine is portable."

His smile was endearingly crooked, and she heartily wished she hadn't noticed it.

"This isn't a democracy or a republic—yet, although I am

working towards that—well, towards a constitutional monarchy, anyway."

"I know."

He had forgotten how well prepared she was, although he also knew that it was something on which she prided herself. "Good. So, you must've come here thoroughly cognizant of the fact that, as it stands, I am the undisputed ruler of this country," Alek supplied unnecessarily as he deftly tipped her over his lap. "And neither your Bill of Rights nor the entire American army—or even your staunch feminist beliefs—will save you from receiving the spanking I promised you if you disobeyed me."

"When did I disobey you?" she asked defiantly, craning her head around so that she could look at him, all while making futile attempts to slip off his broad thighs, one way or the other.

Lettie was horrified at the position she found herself in, and quite determined to get away from him, even if she had to dive headfirst onto the floor and risk cracking her head open.

But he expertly countered every attempt she made, gently but firmly, and what with the previous exertions, she found herself quickly exhausted.

"You should use your inhaler," he prompted, sounding terribly solicitous, which had her head whipping around again so that she could stare at him questioningly. "Tears are expected during a punishment. You're going to cry and scream and wiggle about, and I don't want you to have problems breathing or to try to use your asthma to stop your chastisement."

She hadn't liked hearing any of what he'd just said, but it was the last bit that annoyed her the most, when it probably should have been the first, but Lettie was quite sure she could stop him from going through with his ridiculous threat. "I would not do that, Your Royal Highness. Not just because you're not going to spank me anyway, but because it wouldn't be right."

He leaned back a bit, perfectly happy to have this casual conversation while she was lying in such a thoroughly titillating

position, although he also had to hope that she wouldn't notice how excited he was because of it.

"And why, pray tell, do you think I'm not going to spank you when I have you right here, conveniently over my lap—" Alek interrupted himself to pull her skirt up rather slowly, as if he was savoring it, then taking her pantyhose and panties down in one quick, more efficient motion.

Her squawk of indignation was too cute and he had to smile down at her, but he was savvy enough to be glad she was too busy trying to reclaim her dignity to see it. She was trying to surreptitiously pull her skirt back down, which was definitely the easiest thing to do to cover herself, but she was also smart enough not to boldly reach her hand back, which would have resulted in it being captured immediately and not returned to her until the spanking was over and done with.

Unfortunately for her, although he admired her technique, he still caught the hand that was doing its level best to thwart his will. She growled in outrage at the loss of it then began to use her free hand—not to continue that goal, surprisingly—but to reach up and smack him, hard, once, twice, three times, being careful to engage in quick, strategic strikes that meant she got away with it. But not a fourth time.

As she brought her hand down again, he caught her wrist before she could come in contact with his side or arm, adding it to the hand that he was keeping on her back, away from his target and hers.

She was already panting at her own efforts, but she managed to sound very businesslike as she threatened him anyway. "You do realize that, if you do this, I will complain to everyone I can once I get back to the States—the State Department, the FBI, the CIA—and I'm a journalist. I'll write an interview with you that tells the whole world that you endorse beating women!"

She was astonished—and crestfallen—when he merely chuckled at her threat. "Although I would have absolutely no

problems with admitting that I had chastised you physically, I highly doubt that you're going to write an article admitting that I spanked your bare bottom—and while we were alone in a room together, far away from everyone else?" His hand laid bold claim to the body part that was at the center of their discussion, and she couldn't help but jump, even though his touch was anything but harsh. "I think not, Ms. McBride. You might be a liberated female, but I can't imagine that you'd be eager to let anyone know what is going to transpire between us. I would be willing to wager that you're not even going to tell your best friend about this. It's much too embarrassing and humiliating to own up to, being a grown woman who was put over the lap of a man you barely know—a king at that, although I know you don't put much stock in the title—on your tummy, with your skirt up and your panties down, to have your beautiful little bottom reddened until you can't help but cry and beg him to stop."

"I will never do either of those things!" she yelled, renewing her efforts to get free and, in doing so, betraying her own doubts in what she'd said.

Alek cleared his throat at that, adjusting her minutely as he leaned forward a bit. "You do realize why I feel you need to be spanked, don't you, Ms. McBride?"

"Yes." Her answer was short and clipped. She deliberately left off the "sir" she supposed she should have said.

He frowned but continued. "By disobeying me in what was a life or death situation, you not only further endangered your own life, but Bacca's, too, as well as my own."

She was reluctantly impressed that he listed himself last. In fact, it sounded as if he was most annoyed that she'd risked her own life, although she couldn't imagine why.

"And because of that—because that is such an important concept that might well come up again before you leave—this is not going to be an easy punishment. And, as to you not crying or

pleading, I'm afraid it's most unfortunate for you that I *do* love a challenge."

And yet she was nearly as good as her word, but Alek wasn't sure whether he was more impressed by that feat or more concerned about it by the time he'd finished punishing her.

It wasn't at all what Lettie had expected, having not been spanked since she was about eight-years-old, by her father. It was never over his lap but bent over the back of a chair he kept in the corner of his den for just that purpose, which she was always required to fetch for him, knowing she was going to end up gripping the seat of it until her nails split.

This was definitely not her father's style of spanking.

He was too damned attractive, for one thing, taller and broader than she usually liked, hair black as night and kept neat and short, unlike the fashion back home. His muscular thighs weren't uncomfortable, like the chair back that often cut into her stomach, especially toward the end of a chastisement, when she was more desperate to try to avoid the blows. They might have been a distraction, but there was no getting away from how viciously he was searing her fanny.

It wasn't a furious flurry of swats delivered in a haphazardly aimed, irregularly timed manner. Instead, it was precise and planned and thoroughly breathtaking, each connection of his palm to her bum designed to provide maximum corrective action with a minimum of effort on his part. And considering the upper body strength she'd already seen intimate examples of, she knew that he was holding back quite considerably. For which she was eternally grateful.

Not that it wasn't absolutely and utterly horrid from beginning to end—it was. He had her wishing she was literally

anywhere else—a dentist's chair, a delivery room, a used car salesman's office—within the first several smacks.

But although the wicked thought generator at the back of her mind wanted her to surrender to what was happening, some areas of her mind wanted her to play the penitent female being punished by the stern, autocratic male, all the while hoping that her obvious contrition would cause him to go easier on her. But she couldn't bring herself to do that on several levels, not the least of which was that he was right.

Not that she was going to admit that to him, but he was. Her reaction to having shot that man put them all in mortal danger by clouding her mind and making her a useless burden. She wouldn't have been at all angry at them for leaving her behind when she lost her mind for those few minutes, especially Bacca, whose job it was to get his king—not her—to the safe room.

Her prevailing attitude—the one that kept her mostly silent and stiff, forcing herself to absorb each powerful spank with as little reaction as was humanly possible—was prideful, not self-deprecating. Lettie wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of submitting to him.

She just couldn't bring herself to do it, even though she thought it might go easier on her if she indulged in the histrionics he expected to hear. Lettie simply steeled herself against it—mentally and physically, as well as she could—and waited it out.

Oh, she wasn't completely quiet; there was no way she could have been. The man's hand was inhumanly hard, and she would have been willing to bet that he'd done this before, although she didn't want to consider that any too closely at the moment. There were several groans and the occasional moan, but overall, she kept her mouth firmly clamped shut.

She even did her best not to try to avoid the relentless crack of skin on angry skin, although there was a little of that, too, here and there. But with all her efforts, she still lost to him. She

might not have been loudly crying her eyes out, but she was crying, although not very much. And he checked, too.

He stopped—she wasn't sure if it was going to be in the middle of it or what—to run a finger over her damp but not sopping wet cheek with a sigh.

His perfunctory, "Let's get this over with," was far from comforting.

The last part was easily the worst, but she remained steadfast—maybe moaning a little bit more, or trying to curve her hips out of the way of his hand a bit more often—but that was really nothing.

She didn't know he'd stopped until she found herself in his arms again as he carried her over to a couch that seemed to have been made up entirely of pillows, sinking down into it with her on his lap and continuing to hold her to him, encouraging her to relax against his chest in a way she couldn't—or wouldn't—while she was over his lap.

Alek was a bit concerned about her, he admitted to himself. He'd spanked plenty of women, but he'd never had one react as she had. Granted, he'd never punished a woman he didn't know reasonably well, although he didn't think he'd ever spanked an American woman, or one who was so fervently pro-women's rights, either.

Was that it? he wondered. If so, he was surprised that she'd remained right where he'd put her and not screamed bloody murder at him from across the room.

He rubbed his hand down the line of her back, which only served to remind him of how small she was compared to him, making embarrassing parts of him take note of how good it felt to hold her so closely and touch her. Then he moved it to her hair, bending to press his nose to the crown of her head—

inhaling the lovely floral scent of her shampoo—as he whispered experimentally, "It's okay to cry. I know you did a little, but not much, considering how hard a spanking that was. I don't know if that's because you're not comfortable doing that around me, but I wish you would. You're safer here, with me, than you are pretty much anywhere else on the planet." He squeezed his arms tightly around her, just once, then relaxed them again. "Might help you feel a bit better."

For a long moment, he held his breath as she sat, stiff and unyielding. Finally, though, she drew a long, ragged breath—she could hear it as well as feel it—and then she just seemed to dissolve into tears and melt into him. Alek gathered her even more closely against him and just held her, not becoming uncomfortable at the storm of emotion as some men would have, and not even attempting to guide her through it, but letting her experience it without his interference, with his undeniable, underlying support.

When she was reduced to hiccupping sobs, he wiped her face and then offered his handkerchief for her to blow her nose into.

"Better?" he murmured, surprised at just how much her unfettered response meant to him.

Lettie nodded, embarrassed now at how she'd let herself go in front of him. This most certainly was nothing like a spanking from her father, who, once he was done, had usually just sent her to bed without any supper after telling her that he hoped she'd learned her lesson. There certainly wasn't any of the delicious holding and hugging this man was doing that seemed to be some kind of magic. She hadn't cried like that since her last pet had died. She didn't cry often, having schooled herself not to in the male dominated world of journalism, but he'd somehow acquired the key to the floodgates, and she couldn't stop herself.

Lettie put her hand up, as if to push against him in order to sit up, but she let her hand drop into her lap as she raised herself

without touching him, as if it wasn't something she trusted herself to do.

Sounds of someone at the door startled them both, and she leapt off his lap to stand well across the room from him as Bacca and several other men she didn't recognize poured into the room, the others finding their knees and lowering their heads in the presence of the king.

"The insurrection has been put down, Your Majesty. It is safe for you to return to your room." He gave Lettie a questioning glance but said nothing, returning his attention to his sovereign.

"Thank you, Bacca and gentlemen." He nodded at the others around him. "Rest assured that your loyalty to me shall not be forgotten."

The men—who seemed in awe of him—all looked up at that, big smiles on their faces.

"I just wanted to give you the all clear, Sire," Bacca said, bowing, himself. "I shall leave several men here to escort you, just in case."

Alek clapped the other man heartily on the shoulder. "I shan't forget your hard work in this, either, my friend."

"It is nothing, my king. I live to serve you," Bacca returned quietly, then he left with all but four of the soldiers.

When they were back in the room where it had all started—which was a beautifully appointed salon with floor to ceiling windows, beautiful brocade curtains, soft Aubusson carpets, and many gorgeously upholstered chairs in shades of azure blue, maroon, cream and gold—rather than reclaiming the seat he'd been in when they had been so rudely interrupted, he instead walked across the room to the ornate, color coordinated princess phone that was perched on a big Italian provincial desk.

To her fanciful brain, the receiver looked absurdly feminine in his big, masculine hand, but he paid it no mind whatsoever.

"Shall I arrange for your flight home?" he asked matter of factly, holding the telephone to his ear, as if it was a foregone conclusion and asking her that question was a mere formality on his part.

She looked startled, and he looked puzzled. "Why? Are you throwing me out of the country, already?"

Alek brought the phone away from his ear, but he still held it to his chest. His words strong and serious, he admitted, "I will probably never be able to assure you that something like that won't happen again. As you might have guessed, not everyone in my country supports my reformist tendencies. Of course, I'm not throwing you out—you saved my life. But considering the fact that I cannot guarantee your safety, and with what has already happened, not to mention your punishment, I assumed—"

"Then I'm not going anywhere! This is a great story," she blushed brightly then quickly amended, "Well, parts of it are, anyway, and unless you're saying that you're deporting me for some reason, I'm staying!"

His expression was perilously close to proud as he nodded and replaced the receiver on the hook. "Very well, then. But you don't think you want some time to recover, perhaps nap in your room?"

"Absolutely not. If I give myself too much time to think about it, I'll drive myself crazier than I already am."

That got her a smile, and he was devilishly handsome when he smiled. "Shall we pick up where we left off, then?" he asked, sitting—not where he had been before the commotion, but much too close to her on the couch, instead.