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By Anne Mcallister

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Demetrios Savas's heart is empty—that's the way he likes it. So how has this delectable stranger left him reeling? And why he is craving to taste such deliciously forbidden fruit once more?

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Editorial Review

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Someday her prince would come.

But apparently not anytime soon, Anny thought as she glanced down to check her watch discreetly once again.

She shifted in the upholstered armchair where she'd been waiting for the past forty minutes, then sat up even straighter, and craned her neck to look down the length of the Ritz-Carlton lobby for any sign of Gerard.

There were hundreds of other people milling about. In fact, the place was a madhouse.

It always was, of course, during Film Festival week in Cannes. The French seacoast town began overflowing with industry moguls, aspiring thespians, and avid filmgoers toward the end of the first week in May.

By now—three days into the festival—the normally serene elegant area near the hotel bar, where small genteel groups usually met for cocktails or apertifs, was now a sea of babbling people. The usual polite hushed voices of guests had been replaced by raucous cracks of masculine laughter and high-pitched flirty feminine giggles.

All around her, Anny heard rapid intense conversations rumbling and spiking as producers talked deals, directors flogged films, and journalists and photographers cornered the world's most sought-after actors and actresses. Everywhere she looked curious fans and onlookers, not to mention the hopeful groupies, milled about trying to look as if they belonged.

A prince would barely have been noticed.

But unless he was masquerading as a movie fan, which of course was ridiculous, there was no sign of tall distinguished Prince Gerard of Val de Comesque anywhere.

Anny was tempted to tap her impatient toes. She didn't. She smiled serenely instead.

"In public, you are serene, you are calm, you are happy," His Royal Highness, King Leopold Olivier Narcisse Bertrand of Mont Chamion—otherwise known as "Papa"—had drummed into her head from the cradle. "Always serene, my dear," he had repeated. "It is your duty."

Of course it was. Princesses were serene. And dutiful. And, of course, they were generally happy, too.

Privately Anny had always thought it would be the worst ingratitude if they weren't.

Being a princess certainly wasn't all fun and games as she knew from twenty-six years of personal experience. But princesses, by their mere birthright, were entitled to so much that none of them had a right to be anything but grateful.

So Her Royal Highness, Princess Adriana Anastasia Maria Christina Sophia of Mont Chamion, aka Anny, was serene, dutiful, determinedly happy. And grateful. Always.

Well, almost always.

At the moment, she was also stressed. She was impatient, annoyed and, if she were honest—with herself at least—a little bit apprehensive.

Not scared exactly. Certainly not panic-stricken.

Just vaguely sick to her stomach. Edgy. Filled with a sort of creeping dread that seemed to sneak up on her when she was least expecting it.

Except she had felt the dread so frequently over the past month that now she *was* expecting it. Regularly.

It was nerves, she told herself. Prewedding jitters. Never mind that the wedding was over a year away. Never mind that the date hadn't even been set yet. Never mind that Prince Gerard, sophisticated, handsome, elegant, and worldly, was everything a woman could ask for.

Except here.

She stood up so that she could scan the busy lobby once more. She'd had to dash to get to the hotel by five. Her father had called her this morning and said that Gerard would be expecting her, that he had something to discuss.

"But it's Thursday. I'll be at the clinic then," she had protested.

The clinic *Alfonse de Jacques* was a private establishment dedicated to children and teens with paralysis and spinal injuries, a place between hospital and home. Anny volunteered there every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon. She had done it since she'd come to Cannes to work on her doctoral dissertation right after Christmas five months ago.

At first she'd gone simply to be useful and to do something besides write about prehistoric cave painting all day. It got her out of the flat. And it was public service—something princesses did.

She loved children, and spending a few hours with ones whose lives were often severely limited seemed like time well-spent. But what had started out as a distraction and a good deed quickly turned into the time she looked forward to most each week.

At the clinic she wasn't a princess. The children had no idea who she was. And when she came to see them it wasn't a duty. It was a joy. She was simply Anny—their friend.

She played catch with Paul and video games with Madeleine and Charles. She watched football with Philippe and Gabriel and sewed tiny dolls' clothes with Marie-Claire. She talked movies and movie stars with eager starry-eyed Elise and argued—about everything—with "cranky Franck," the resident fifteen-year-old cynic who challenged her at every turn. She looked forward to it.

"I'm always at the clinic until five at least," she'd protested to her father this morning. "Gerard can meet me there."

"Gerard will not visit hospitals."

"It's a clinic," Anny protested.

"Even so. He will not," her father said firmly, but there was a sympathetic note in his voice. "You know that. Not since Ofelia..."

He didn't finish. He didn't have to.

Ofelia was Gerard's wife.

Had been Gerard's wife, Anny had corrected herself. Until her death four years ago. Now beautiful, charming, elegant Ofelia was the woman Anny was supposed to replace.

"Of course," she'd said quietly. "I forgot."

"We must understand," her father said gently. "It is hard for him, Adriana."

"I do understand."

She understood that there was every likelihood she'd never replace Ofelia in Gerard's affections. She only knew she was supposed to try. And that was at least part of the reason she was feeling apprehensive.

"He'll meet you in the lobby at five. You will have an early dinner and discuss," her father went on. "Then he must leave for Paris. He has a flight in the morning to Montreal. Business meetings."

Gerard was a prince, yes, but he owned a multinational corporation—several of them, in fact—on the side.

"What does he want to discuss?" Anny asked.

"I'm sure he will tell you tonight," her father said. "You mustn't keep him waiting, my dear."

"No."

She hadn't kept him waiting. It was Gerard who wasn't here.

Now Anny did tap her foot. Just once. Well, maybe twice. And she shot another surreptitious glance at her watch, while in her head her father's voice murmured, "Princesses are not impatient."

Maybe not, but it was already almost quarter til six. She could have stayed at the clinic and finished her argument with Franck about the relative merits of realism in television action hero series after all.

Instead, when she'd had to leave early, he'd accused her of "running away."

"I am not 'running away'!" Anny told him. "I have to meet my fiancé this afternoon."

"Fiancé?" Franck had frowned at her from beneath his mop of untidy brown hair. "You're getting married? When?"

"In a year. Maybe two. I'm not sure." Sometime in the foreseeable future no doubt. Gerard needed an heir and he wasn't prepared to wait forever.

He had agreed to wait until she had finished her dissertation. Barring disaster, that would be sometime next year. Not long.

Not long enough.

She shoved the thought away. It wasn't as if Gerard was some horrible ogre her father was forcing her to marry. Well, yes, he'd arranged it, but there was nothing wrong with Gerard. He was kind, he was thoughtful. He was a prince—in more than one sense of the word.

It was just— Anny shook off her uneasiness and reminded herself that she was simply relieved he understood that finishing her dissertation was important to her and that he hadn't minded waiting until she had finished.

Apparently Franck did mind. He scowled, his dark eyes narrowed on her. "A year? Two? *Years?* What on earth are you waiting for?"

His question jolted her. She stared at him. "What do you mean?"

He flung out a hand, a sweeping gesture that took in the four walls, the clean but spartan clinic room, his own paralyzed legs. He stared at her, then at them, then his gaze lifted again to bore into hers.

"You never know what's going to happen, do you?" he demanded.

He had been playing soccer—going up to head a ball at the same time another boy had done the same. The next day the other boy's head was a little sore. Franck was paralyzed from the waist down. He had a bit of tingling now and then, but he hadn't walked in nearly three years.

"You shouldn't wait," he said firmly. His eyes never left hers.

It was the sort of pronouncement Franck was inclined to make, an edict handed down from on high, one designed to get her to argue with him.

That was what they did: argued. Not just about action heroes. About soccer teams. The immutable laws of science. The best desserts. In short, everything.

It was his recreation, one of the nurses had said to Anny back in January, and she'd only been marginally joking.

"So what are you saying? That you think I should run off and elope?" Anny had challenged him with a smile.

But Franck's eyes didn't light with the challenge of battle the way they usually did. They glittered, but it was a fierce glitter as he shook his head. "I just don't see why you're waiting."

"A year's not long," Anny protested. "Even two. I have to finish my doctorate. And when we do set a date there will be lots to do. Preparations." Protocol. Tradition. She didn't explain about royal weddings. Ordinary everyday weddings were demanding enough.

"Stuff you'd rather do?" Franck asked.

"That's not the point."

"Of course it is. 'Cause if it isn't, you shouldn't waste time. You should do what you want to do!"

"People ca..."

Users Review

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