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By Michelle Smart

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An exclusive source has revealed that Amy has ended their affair—leaving Helios furious. And we all know he's not a man to be denied! Legally, Helios must wed someone of pure royal blood. So the question remains: Will he do as duty commands, or will he risk his crown to marry his mistress?

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### Editorial Review

#### About the Author

Michelle Smart's love of romance began at the age of twelve when she came across her first Mills & Boon® book and discovered that a book had the capacity to make her heart beat as if she were falling in love. When not reading, or pretending to do the housework, Michelle loves creating worlds of her own, with handsome brooding heroes and the sparkly, feisty women who can melt their frozen hearts. She hopes her books can make her readers' hearts beat a little faster too.

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'Do you really have to shave it off?' Amy Green, busy admiring Helios's rear view, slipped a cajoling tone into her plea.

Helios met her eye in the reflection of the bathroom mirror and winked. 'It will grow back.'

She pouted. Carefully. The clay mask she'd applied to her face had dried, making it hard for her to move her features without cracking it. Another ten minutes and she would be able to rinse it off. 'But you're so sexy with a beard.'

'Are you saying I'm not sexy without it?'

She made a harrumphing sound. 'You're always sexy.'

Too sexy for his own good. Even without a beard. Even his voice was sexy: a rich, low-pitched tone that sang to her ears, with the Agon accent which made it dance.

Impossibly tall and rangy, and incredibly strong, with dark olive colouring and ebony hair, currently tousled after a snatched hour in bed with her, Helios had a piratical appearance. The dangerous look was exaggerated by the slight curve of his strong nose and the faint scar running over its bridge: the mark of a fight with his brother Theseus when they were teenagers. Utterly without vanity, Helios wore the scar with pride. He was the sexiest man she'd ever met.

Soon the hair would be tamed and as smooth as his face would be, yet his innate masculinity would still vibrate through him. His rugged body would be hidden by a formal black evening suit, but his strength and vitality would permeate the expensive fabric. The playful expression emanating from his liquid dark brown eyes would still offer sin.

He would turn into Prince Helios Kalliakis, heir to the throne of Agon. But he would still be a flesh and blood man.

He lifted the cut-throat blade. 'Are you sure you don't want to do it?'

Amy shook her head. 'Can you imagine if I were to cut you? I would be arrested for treason.'

He grinned, then gave the mirror a quick wipe to clear away the condensation produced from the steam of her bath.

Smothering a snigger, she stretched out her right leg until her foot reached the taps, and used her toes to pour a little more hot water in.

'I'm sure deliberately steaming up the bathroom so I can't see properly is also treasonous,' he said with a playful shake of his head, striding lithely to the extractor fan and switching it on.

As with everything in his fabulous palace apartment it worked instantly, clearing the enormous bathroom of steam.

He crouched beside the bath and placed his gorgeous face close to hers. 'Any more treasonous behaviour, *mata-kia mou*, and I will be forced to punish you.'

His breath, hot and laced with a faint trace of their earlier shared pot of coffee, danced against her skin.

'And what form of punishment will you be forced to give me?' she asked, the desire she'd thought spent bubbling back up inside her, her breaths shortening.

Those liquid eyes flashed and a smirk played on the bowed lips that had kissed her everywhere. It was a mouth a woman could happily kiss for ever.

'A punishment you will never forget.' He snapped his teeth together for effect and growled, before throwing her a look full of promise and striding back to the mirror. Half watching her in the reflection, Helios dipped his shaving brush into the pot and began covering his black beard with a rich, foamy lather.

Amy had to admit watching him shave as if he were the leading man in a medieval film fascinated her. It also scared her. The blade he used was sharp enough to slice through flesh. One twitch of the hand...

All the same, she couldn't drag her eyes away as he scraped the cut-throat razor down his cheek. In its own way it had an eroticism to it, transporting her to a bygone time when men had been *men*. And Helios was all man.

If he wanted he could snap his fingers and an army of courtiers would be there to do the job for him. But that wasn't his style. The Kalliakis family were direct descendants of Ares Patakis, the warrior whose uprising had freed Agon from its Venetian invaders over eight hundred years ago. Agon princes were taught how to wield weapons with the same dedication with which they were taught the art of royal protocol. To her lover, a cut-throat razor was but one of many weapons he'd mastered.

She waited until he'd wiped the blade on a towel to clean it before speaking again. 'Do I take it that despite all my little hints you haven't put a space aside for me tonight?'

Her 'little hints' had taken the form of mentioning at every available opportunity how much she would love to attend the Royal Ball that was the talk of the entire island, but she hadn't seriously expected to get an invitation. She was but a mere employee of the palace museum, and a temporary employee at that.

And it wasn't as if they would be together for ever, she thought with a strange stab of wistfulness. Their relationship had never been a secret, but it hadn't been flaunted either. She was his lover, not his girlfriend, something she had known from the very start. She had no official place in his life and never would.

He placed the blade back to his cheek and swiped, revealing another line of smooth olive skin. 'However

much I adore your company, it wouldn't be appropriate for you to attend.'

She pulled a face, inadvertently cracking the mask around her mouth. 'Yes, I know. I am a commoner, and those attending your ball are the *crème de la crème* of high society.'

'Nothing would please me more than to see you there, dressed in the finest haute couture money can buy. But it would be inappropriate for my lover to attend the ball where I'm to select my future wife.'

The deliciously warm bath turned cold in the beat of a moment.

She sat up.

'Your future wife? What are you talking about?'

His reflected eyes met hers again. 'The underlying reason for this ball is so that I can choose a wife.'

She paused before asking, 'Like in *Cinderella*?''

'Exactly.' He worked on his chin, then wiped the blade on the towel again. 'You know all of this.'

'No,' she said slowly, her blood freezing to match the chills rippling over her skin. 'I was under the impression this ball was a pre-Gala do.'

In three weeks the eyes of the world would be on Agon as the island celebrated fifty years of King Astraeus's reign. Heads of state and dignitaries from all around the world would be flying in for the occasion.

'And so it is. I think the phrase is "killing two birds with one stone"?''

'Why can't you find a wife in the normal way?' And, speaking of normal, how were her vocal cords performing when the rest of her body had been subsumed in a weird kind of paralysis?

'Because, *matakia mou*, I am heir to the throne. I have to marry someone of royal blood. You know that.'

Yes, that she *did* know. Except she hadn't thought it would be now. It hadn't occurred to her. Not once. Not while they were sharing a bed every night.

'I need to choose wisely,' he continued, speaking in the same tone he might use if he were discussing what to order from the palace kitchen for dinner. 'Obviously I have a shortlist of preferred women—princesses and duchesses I have met through the years who have caught my attention.'

'Obviously...' she echoed. 'Is there any particular woman at the top of your shortlist, or are there a few of them jostling for position?'

'Princess Catalina of Monte Cleure is looking the most likely. I've known her and her family for years—they've attended our Christmas Balls since Catalina was a baby. Her sister and brother-in-law got together at the last one.' He grinned at the scandalous memory. 'Catalina and I dined together a couple of times when I was in Denmark the other week. She has all the makings of an excellent queen.'

An image of the raven-haired Princess, a famed beauty who dealt with incessant press scrutiny on account of

her ethereal royal loveliness, came to Amy's mind. Waves of nausea rolled in her belly.

'You never mentioned it.'

'There was nothing to say.' He didn't look the slightest bit shamefaced.

'Did you sleep with her?'

He met her stare, censure clear in his reflection. 'What kind of a question is *that?*'

'A natural question for a woman to ask her lover.'

Until that moment it hadn't been something that had occurred to her: the idea that he might have strayed. Helios had never promised fidelity, but he hadn't needed to. Since their first night together their lust for each other had been all-consuming.

'The Princess is a virgin and will remain one until her wedding day whether she marries me or some other man. Does that answer your question?'

Not even a little bit. All it did was open up a whole heap of further questions, all of which she didn't have the right to ask and not one of which she wanted to hear the answer to.

The only question she *could* bring herself to ask was 'When are you hoping to marry the lucky lady?'

If he heard the irony in her voice he hid it well. 'It will be a state wedding, but I would hope to be married in a couple of months.'

*A couple of months?* He expected to choose a bride and have a state wedding in a few months? Surely it wasn't possible.?

But this was Helios. If there was one thing she knew about her lover it was that he was not a man to let the grass grow beneath his feet. If he wanted something done he wanted it done now, not tomorrow.

*But a couple of months... ?*

Amy was contracted to stay in Agon until September, which was five whole months away. She'd imagined... Hoped.

She thought of King Astraeus, Helios's grandfather. She had never met the King, but through her work in the palace museum she felt she had come to know him. The King was dying. Helios needed to marry and produce an heir of his own to assure the family line.

She *knew* all this. Yet still she'd shared his bed night after night and allowed herself to believe that Helios would hold off his wedding until her time on Agon was up.

Gripping the sides of the free-standing bath, she got carefully to her feet and stepped out. Hands trembling, she pulled a warm, fluffy towel off the rack and held it to her chest, not wanting to waste a second, not even to wrap it around herself.

Helios pulled his top lip down and brought the blade down in careful but expert fashion. 'I'll call you when the ball is finished.'

She strode to the door, uncaring that bathwater was dripping off her and onto the expensive floor tiles. 'No, you won't.'

'Where are you going? You're soaking wet.'

From out of the corner of her eye she saw him pat his towel over his face and follow her through into his bedroom, not bothering to cover himself.

She gathered her clothes into a bundle and held them tightly. A strange burning buzzed in her brain, making coherent thought difficult.

Three months. That was how long she'd shared his bed. In that time they'd slept apart on only a dozen or so occasions, when Helios had been away on official business. Like when he'd gone to Denmark and, unbeknownst to her, dined with Princess Catalina. And now he was throwing a ball to find the woman he would share a bed with for the rest of his life.

She'd known from the start that they had no future, and had been careful to keep her heart and emotions detached. But to hear him being so blasé about it...

She stood by the door that opened into the secret passageway connecting their apartments. There were dozens and dozens of such secret passageways throughout the palace; a fortress built on intrigue and secrets.

'I'm going to my apartment. Enjoy your evening.'

'Have I missed something?'

The fact that he looked genuinely perplexed only made matters worse.

'You say it isn't appropriate for me to come tonight, but I'll tell you what isn't appropriate—talking about the wife you're hours away from selecting with the woman who has shared your bed for three months.'

'I don't know what your problem is,' he said with a shrug, raising his hands in an open-palmed gesture. 'My marriage won't change anything between us.'

'If you believe that then you're as stupid as you are insensitive and misogynistic. You speak as if the women you are selecting from are sweets lined up in a shop rather than flesh and blood people.' She shook her head to emphasise her distaste, watching as her words seeped in and the perplexity on Helios's face darkened into something ugly.

Helios was not a man who received criticism well. On this island and in this palace he was celebrated and feted, a man whose words people hung on to. Affable and charming, his good humour was infectious. Cross him, however, and he would turn with the snap of two fingers.

If she wasn't so furious with him Amy would probably be afraid.

He strode towards her, magnificently naked. He stopped a foot away and folded his arms across his defined

chest. A pulse throbbed at his temple and his jaw clenched tightly.

'Be careful in how you speak to me. I might be your lover, but you do not have a licence to insult me.'

'Why? Because you're a prince?' She hugged the towel and the bundle of clothes even tighter, as if their closeness could stop her erratically thumping heart from jumping out of her chest. 'You're about to make a commitment to another woman and I want no part of it.'

Benedict, Helios's black Labrador, sensed the atmosphere and padded over to her, his tongue lolling out as he sat on his haunches by her side and gave what looked like a disapproving stare at his master.

Helios noticed it too. He rubbed Benedict's head, the darkness disappearing as quickly as it had appeared, an indulgent smile spreading over his face as he looked at Amy. 'Don't be so dramatic. I know you're premenstrual, and that makes you more emotional than you would otherwise be, but you're being irrational.'

'Premenstrual? Did you really just say that? You really are on a different planet. God forbid that I should become "emotional" because my lover has had secret dates with other women and is about to take one of them for his wife and still expects me to warm his bed. But don't worry. Pat me on the head and tell me I'm premenstrual. Pat yourself on the back and tell yourself you've done nothing wrong.'

Too furious to look at him any more, she turned the handle of the door and pushed it open with her hip.

'Are you walking away from me?'

Was that *laughter* in his voice? Did he find this *amusing*?

Ignoring him, Amy raised her head high and walked up the narrow passageway that would take her to her own palace apartment.

A huge hand gripped her biceps, forcing her to twist around. He absolutely dwarfed her.

Regardless of the huge tug in her heart and the rising nausea, her voice was steady as she said, 'Get your hands off me. We're over.'

'No, we're not.' He slid his hand over her shoulder to snake it around her neck. His breath was hot in her ear as he leaned down to whisper, 'While you're sulking tonight I will be thinking of you and imagining all the ways I can take you when the ball's over. Then you will come to me and we will act them all out.'

Despite her praying to all the gods she could think of, her body reacted to his words and to his closeness the way it always did. With Helios she was like a starved child, finally allowed to feast. She craved him. She had desired him from the moment she'd met him all those months ago, with a powerful need that hadn't abated with time.

But now the time had come to conquer the craving.

Pressing a hand to his solid chest, resisting the urge to run her fingers through the fine black hair that covered it, she pushed herself back and forced her eyes to meet his still playful gaze.

'Enjoy your evening. Try not to spill wine down any princess's dress.'



His mocking laughter followed her all the way to the sanctuary of her own apartment.

It wasn't until she arrived in her apartment, which was spacious compared to normal accommodation but tiny when compared to Helios's, and caught a glimpse of her reflection that she saw the clay mask was still on her face.

It had cracked all over.

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

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