

Taming Princess Anna

by

Sue Lyndon

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Chapter 1

“They say you’re the best.” King Mendel bit into an apple and began chewing loudly.

Bronson held the king’s gaze and nodded. “I am the best, your majesty. If you hire me, I guarantee I’ll locate your daughter in no time.” Now wasn’t the time to act humble. He had come to the castle as Bronson the Hunter and he wanted the job. If the king hired another bounty hunter, Bronson still planned to track the princess down on his own, but then he’d have the gruesome task of eliminating the hired bounty hunter first. The princess belonged to him and he didn’t want anyone interfering. He’d also come to speak to the king in hopes of learning more about the princess’s disappearance.

King Mendel took another bite of apple, a pensive look crossing his face. The juice trickled down his chin and into his graying beard. Cold black eyes narrowed and the aging king leaned over the table, his brow creasing as his stare lingered on Bronson. “As I’m sure you’ve surmised, Princess Anna is a bit spoiled and troublesome.” The monarch sat back in his chair and yelled for more wine.

The king truly didn’t recognize Bronson, and that brought him comfort. Bronson’s appearance had changed drastically since he’d been a child serving as a footman in the castle walls. The scar on his left cheek, as well as his huge stature, served him well when he wanted to forget his past as a lowly servant. He cleared his throat. “I’m sure Princess Anna is a fine young woman, your majesty. I hear she’s the most educated of all your children.” Bronson had grown up playing with Princess Anna and learning alongside her when her governess permitted it. However, when King Mendel discovered that a servant had befriended his daughter, the monarch dismissed the governess and threw Bronson and his parents out on the streets, at the height of the harshest winter the Kingdom of Iverson had ever known.

“Princess Anna is simply throwing a tantrum over her impending marriage to Lord Edmund, and she’s sour she won’t be allowed to further her education. I ordered her

to leave her books behind in the castle so she could focus on her wifely duties, as she should, and the next day she disappeared from her room. No one has seen her since.”

At the mention of Lord Edmund, a distant cousin of the princess known for his temper and substantial gambling debts, an icy chill crept up Bronson’s spine. He’d promised her once, years ago before he was kicked out of the castle, that he wouldn’t let her cousin get his slimy hands on her. She’d smiled and kissed his cheek with a faraway look in her blue eyes and said she hoped the awful marriage never came to pass. Though it seemed like a hundred years ago, his cheek burned with the memory of her soft lips whenever he recalled the tender moment.

“Forgive me if I’m being too forward, your majesty, but the longer we sit here, the farther Princess Anna is getting in her travels. I’ve captured many of the most elusive criminals wanted by the crown over the years and turned them over to your soldiers. One runaway girl, a princess unused to life outside the castle walls, will be no trouble for me. Am I hired or not?”

The king chuckled. “You’re quite bold, Bronson. Bronson *the Hunter*. Quite the name you have. ” He laughed again. “I like it. You’re hired. Gods know my soldiers have been useless in tracking Princess Anna down. Bring my daughter back, and soon. She’s going to answer to me for running off before I turn her over to her new husband.”

Though he raged inside at the king’s words, Bronson kept his face impassive, not wanting the king to read through his deception. Princess Anna might be a little spoiled and headstrong, but she didn’t deserve the fate her father had chosen for her. He respected her desire to further her education and hoped one day, after the revolution that was brewing came to pass, she might be able to fulfill her dreams. He only hoped she didn’t hate him for his part in the downfall of her family’s reign.

Though it sickened him, Bronson bowed before the king and thanked him for the job. After the guards returned his sword, he made his way out of the castle as quickly as possible, setting out for the outskirts of the city. As he passed through the streets, people scurried out of his way as if he were carrying a plague. Because of his huge stature and fierce looks, most thought he was a former mercenary from another kingdom. Though there was much unrest in the city and a revolution brewed, the Kingdom of Iverson hadn’t known war for over a decade, and many of the mercenaries that had been hired to

crush the neighboring Rastian Empire, roamed outposts and seedy areas of the city, looking for work and often turning to criminal activity. Though Bronson had never been a mercenary, he was just as deadly, and perhaps a bit deadlier since he knew every inch of the city, including what lay inside the castle walls.

As he traversed the streets, his mind wandered to Princess Anna and the last time he'd seen her. They'd been in the west end of the castle in a room near the princess's chambers, practicing reading to one another in the Rastian tongue. The princess had had a fascination for other cultures and languages, and she'd often spoke of growing up to become a teacher, detailing the classroom she'd have in the middle of the city and how any student would be welcome, no matter what kingdom their parents hailed from. Being several years older than Princess Anna, Bronson had known her fate was already sealed and those dreams she had about becoming a teacher were just that—dreams. He'd never had the heart to tell her she'd be expected to marry a noble of her father's choosing, and his heart broke as he remembered the day she'd come to him in tears after learning of her betrothal to Lord Edmund.

The streets became muddier and the houses more debilitated as Bronson continued his trek. He doubted Anna had made it outside the city. Soldiers swarmed the borders, searching all who entered and left, and usually demanding a heavy bag of coins in return for passage in or out. It was just another form of corruption the king allowed.

The worst crime of the king though was letting his people starve. As the years passed, King Mendel lost more and more trading partners and the kingdom grew more and more isolated, and as trading waned, the foods the people had once depended on for survival no longer flowed into the port. And to salt the wounds of the starving masses, the king allowed his soldiers to run roughshod over the city and he raised taxes each year, throwing those who couldn't afford to pay into the dungeons. Most never saw the light of day again.

King Mendel's days were numbered. When Bronson had learned that a revolution was underway, he'd joined the cause without thinking twice. Of course, his first concern had been the princess. Her older sisters had been married off and lived in neighboring kingdoms, but her brother Tamlen still lived in the castle and served as his father's right hand. Tamlen would never be king though, not if Bronson and the rest of the rebels had

their way. Exile was the best outcome any of the nobles could hope for, aside from Princess Anna.

Bronson had made a deal with the highest ranking revolutionaries to keep the princess safe in the Kingdom of Iverson, so long as she married a commoner and lived as one. In return, Bronson had given them detailed descriptions of the layout of the castle, including the soldiers' quarters, secret rooms and passages, and the location of stockpiled weapons.

His heart twisted as he thought of how Princess Anna might view him. She'd think he was a monster for helping to bring about the downfall of her father, and for forcing her into a marriage after all—but not to Lord Edmund. A commoner. She had to wed a commoner and sign a document that stripped her of her title and nobility, and Bronson wasn't sure how she'd react to such news. There wasn't a second to waste, and he'd force her if necessary in order to keep her safe. He had to find her first, of course.

Then he had to make Princess Anna his wife.

* * * * *

A gust of wind pierced through Anna's cloak. She wrapped her arms around herself as she leaned against a building, knowing she would need to seek shelter soon. She had been staying in a different inn each night along the border to the Brichen Forest, hoping the soldiers guarding the perimeter were called away so she could make her escape out of the city. Unfortunately, more guards appeared on the border each day and she feared the reason for their presence. Obviously, her father had noticed her absence.

Thirty days. He'd told her she'd be married to Lord Edmund in thirty days and ordered her to cease her studies immediately, insisting she had no need of foreign languages and mythology—her favorite subjects by far—and to begin preparing herself for life on a grand estate outside the castle walls. While her older sisters had married princes in neighboring kingdoms, there weren't any kingdoms left that her father was friendly with anymore. As a result, years ago he'd betrothed her to a distant cousin, a man she'd only met a few times as a child.

Well, it had been twenty days since she'd left the castle, and she would stay

hidden in the seedy sections of the city until an opportunity to escape presented itself. She gazed at the people moving through the streets, most of them bone-thin and wearing tattered clothing. Many weren't wearing shoes, either. It broke her heart to know the people of the Kingdom of Iverson lived in such deplorable conditions, in shacks that were crumbling. Though it was now early spring and the days were slowly growing warmer, she felt sick to her stomach as she wondered how many of them wouldn't survive the cold snowy months of the next winter.

And though she hated to admit it, she knew her father was responsible. He kept Iverson isolated from the rest of the world. Only a few select ships entered and left the desolate port. Most of the goods that entered the port were taken to the castle, where lavish parties were still held, despite the fact that the people were apparently starving. Guilt flooded her as she thought of her warm bed, the many servants who had waited on her over the years, and the luxury she'd been surrounded with since her birth. She'd heard enough whisperings to know the people weren't happy with her father, but she hadn't realized they'd had so much cause to dislike him until now.

King Mendel was cruel and selfish, there was no denying it. He had always been a distant father, rarely speaking to her, and instead spending all his time with her older brother, Tamlen, who was in line to become the next king. Anna didn't think Tamlen would be a gentler ruler than King Mendel. He'd be far worse. He had a temper worse than the king and despite turning thirty years old recently, he wasn't any wiser than he'd been as a child. The Kingdom of Iverson would fail completely under his rule, and Anna supposed the smartest thing to do was leave the city behind and forget she was a princess.

She had left her fine silk gowns behind and donned a maid's dress, tattered slippers, and a patched up cloak. She'd also snatched a knife from Tamlen's room and strapped it to her thigh, and brought a bag of coins she hoped was enough to sustain her until she figured out what to do after escaping the city. Farms and small villages covered the lands between Iverson and the farthest shore of the island. Perhaps she could book passage to another kingdom far away and secure a position as a teacher or a governess. All the Iverson ports were supposed to be closed, or at least closely regulated by her father's soldiers, but there had to be a way off the island. She couldn't stay here and risk being found.

She shuddered. Her cousin, Lord Edmund, lived in a massive house overlooking the city, and she'd heard plenty of rumors about what happened behind the walls of his estate. When Lord Edmund wasn't busy gambling, drinking, and whoring, he housed state criminals for questioning on behalf of her father. To put it simply, he tortured the king's enemies for information, then had them brutally slaughtered. In exchange for his services, King Mendel paid off Lord Edmund's gambling debts and kept him fat and happy in the ridiculously large house while the rest of the kingdom starved and tried to survive cold winters.

Another gust of wind pierced Anna to the bone. She rounded a corner and spotted an inn she hadn't stayed in yet. Most of the inns in the city were used for whoring, but one could usually rent a room for a small fee and even obtain a hot meal and a bath. Her stomach growled and she shivered, moving toward the inn as a light rain began falling. She'd be lucky if she didn't catch her death on the streets! She hoped she could escape the city soon. She didn't know how long of a journey it was to the other end of the island. At least the city was huge and blending in hadn't been a problem for her—so far.

No one looked up from their cups as she entered. She kept her head down and her cloak covering most of her face. A pockmarked woman gladly accepted the coins she placed on the counter as she requested her room, meal, and bath. The woman's daughter led her to a musty room upstairs, and Anna had never been so happy to see a small, straw mattress in her whole life. Blankets had been draped over it, and there was even a pillow, though she wondered just how many fleas would bite her tonight.

"Here's your room, miss. Your dinner will be up shortly, and a bath soon after." The young girl spoke loudly and smiled, and Anna couldn't help but smile back at the small child. She wondered about the girl's life and hoped it wasn't as hard as most of the children she saw in the streets as she walked through the city each day.

"Thank you, dear." Anna pulled a coin from her bag and handed it to the child.

The girl's eyes lit up and she stared at the silver coin in disbelief. "Thank you, miss." She curtsied and scurried from the room, promising to oversee the preparation of her meal and bath herself.

Anna smiled and closed the door, wishing it had a lock. Glancing around the room, she didn't see a single piece of furniture that would serve to block the door. At least she

was a light sleeper, and the door creaked a bit, so she'd have plenty of time to retrieve her knife if anyone tried to bother her.

Peering out the window, she glanced at the street below. The rain was falling in sheets by now, and figures rushed to and fro through the mud and muck, trying to get home and out of the foul weather.

The innkeeper's daughter returned with venison stew and hard biscuits. Anna ate with gusto, not having eaten since yesterday evening. Unsure of how much an illegal passage off the island would cost, she'd been trying to stretch her money as far as possible. Eating one meal a day seemed like the smart thing to do. She'd contemplated sleeping on the streets to save coin as well, but after trying one night and becoming frightfully cold despite it being early spring, she'd decided it wasn't worth it if she became ill. Leaving on such short notice, she'd only had access to the moderate amount of money she'd had in her chambers. She'd taken a few pieces of jewelry too and hoped they worked as well as money when it came time to board a ship.

Though the tub brought up was so small she couldn't stretch her legs out straight, Anna thought the bath was heavenly. She scrubbed herself vigorously with the rose scented soap provided and sank back in the water with her knees bent, luxuriating in the warmth surrounding her. The sounds in the inn below drifted up as the muscles in her tired, aching body relaxed one by one. Anna closed her eyes and prayed to the gods that tomorrow was the day she breached the city walls.

She considered the possibility of creating a distraction to draw the soldiers away from a section of the border. But what kind of distraction would take them away from their posts? A fire, perhaps. Or an explosion. A riot, maybe. She frowned. All the ideas that came to mind were too destructive for her taste. She didn't want to damage the city or hurt the people in her quest to escape, and she didn't know how to create such a grand distraction anyway.

The air around her shifted, and a hand suddenly clamped over her mouth, jolting her from her thoughts.

Icy panic filled her. Anna thrashed around, fighting the man that held her, but the hand remained firmly over her lips. Water splattered onto the floor as she tried to lurch from the tub, but the intruder's strength surpassed hers.

“Hush, little dove.” A deep voice rumbled next to her ear, setting off a trail of goosebumps from her neck to her toes. She shuddered and quaked, cold with fear.

Only one person had ever called her *little dove*, but he was long gone. Tears blurred her vision. It was only a coincidence, and the man holding her captive meant to do her harm. Drown her. Strangle her. Rape her. Her terror escalated when she reached for the knife on her thigh, only to remember she’d taken it off before crawling into the bathtub.

“Now, I want you to listen very carefully,” the deep voice continued, “I mean you no harm. In fact, it is my intention to keep you safe. I will only remove my hand if you promise not to scream. Do you promise, little dove?”

Little dove. Again. Her throat tightened as memories fell upon her, memories of a time long ago when she’d been a somewhat happy child, long before the responsibilities of adulthood had weighed upon her heart. An older boy in the castle, a servant, had befriended her. They’d been inseparable, although after he’d been banished from the castle, she often wondered if he’d merely tolerated her. She had followed him around during his chores and invited him to attend her private studies, much to her governess’s chagrin. Bronson was his name, and chances were that he and his parents had perished long ago.

“Do you promise not to scream, princess?” The voice sounded more urgent.

What choice did she have? Anna breathed deeply through her nose and then nodded twice. She inhaled several times through her mouth once he removed his hand, covering her breasts and keeping her head low. She knew she wouldn’t like what was about to happen, but maybe if she were docile enough, he’d lead her to the bed. Her dress rested on the edge of the bed with the knife tucked underneath it.

“Here.” The large man, his face obscured by the shadows, stood with a towel spread open. “You must get dressed, and then we must hurry. Please, do not be afraid.”

Easy for him to say. Anger heated her blood, and she glared up at him and his proffered towel. “I rented this room for the night. You, sir, must leave immediately.”

But wait . . . oh, heavens. Realization crashed upon her like an icy wind sweeping down from the mountains. He hadn’t just called her *little dove*. He’d called her *Princess*, too.

He knew!

She bit the inside of her lip, scowling up at him and raging inside. Of course. He must be a soldier of her father's, here to take her home. Drag her was more like it. She had no plans to go willingly.

"My father sent you, didn't he?"

Her question was met with silence, and he continued to hold the towel open. The lantern that rested on the floor next to the bed provided little light for the room, and certainly not enough light to reveal his face. Not that she knew what most of the guards looked like, but she recognized some of them. She would certainly recognize a soldier's uniform, and the black trousers worn by this man confused her. Iverson soldiers traditionally wore blue and red. From what she could tell of this man, he appeared to be a commoner. Except, no. A sword was affixed to his hip. Commoners couldn't afford swords.

She gulped and remained in the tub, her hands still shielding her breasts. "I asked you a question," she said, this time more forcefully. "Did my father send you?"

"Yes, little dove, but I have no intention of returning you to the king."

Her stomach nearly revolted. If not her father, then... The possibility was too grim to consider, but she had to know for certain where this man planned to take her. "Lord Edmund, then? Are you taking me to him?"

The man stiffened. "No. You'll never be in same room with Lord Edmund if I have anything to do with it. Now please, stand up, Princess. We have a long journey ahead of us and it's easiest to slip past the soldiers in the dead of night."

Anna's mind whirled, and some of her fear dissipated. An urgency surrounded the stranger, yet he hadn't threatened her. Would he hurt her later? She wondered why he was in such a hurry and what he planned to do with her once they slipped past the guards. She knew she was better off on her own though, and a port on the other side of the island remained her goal.

"Princess, I am losing patience. Stand up and step into the towel or I'll drag you out of the tub myself." His tone was sharper than before, and she shivered in the water, despite how warm it was around her body.

"Fine." She rose up and grabbed the towel. She didn't allow him to drape it

around her, instead snatching it from his hands and wrapping it around her torso in a flash, hating that he'd seen her unclothed, for however brief a moment. Whoever he was, he was certainly no gentleman.

Anna stepped from the tub and headed for the straw bed, rivulets of water cascading down her legs and leaving wet footprints on the dusty floor. She glanced over her shoulder at the stranger and gasped when he stepped into the light.

She'd never seen a man so tall. At least three heads taller than Anna, he had a broad chest and wide shoulders. He wore plain, black clothing that appeared to be draped upon solid muscle. A scar marred his left cheek all the way up to his eye.

He turned around, showing her his back and finally giving her privacy. "Get dressed, and hurry."

Hastily drying off, Anna kept peering over her shoulder at the man, but he didn't attempt to peek at her. She slipped her drawers on and tied them, then felt around underneath her dress for the knife. Her heart pounded. It wasn't there!

"You . . . you," she began in an accusing tone.

"If you're a good girl, I might return your weapon after a few days." He turned slightly, but didn't attempt to look at her just yet.

Anna hurriedly finished dressing, putting on her thickest stockings, worn slippers, her only dress, and her cloak, before grabbing the sack that contained the few treasures she'd brought along, and heaved it over her shoulder. She moved to the center of the room and crossed her arms over her chest.

Finally, the man turned around. She almost flinched at the scar on his cheek. It was deep and she cringed to imagine how badly it had hurt. He was lucky he hadn't lost his eye. Fleeting, she wondered what had happened to the person who'd attacked him. She shuddered to think of it.

"I'm not going anywhere with you." She planted her feet wide on the floor.

The air seemed to leave the room as he approached her and took her by her shoulders, leaning close to peer directly into her face. "Do you not recognize an old friend, little dove?"

"You must be mistaken," she said, wishing to shrink back but remaining in place, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of witnessing her fear. "I don't know you."

He tipped her chin up and stared at her for a long moment, and as she gazed into his dark eyes, a sense of familiarity descended upon her. His scent and mannerisms, always so tense, was reminiscent of someone from long ago. And his dark brown eyes reminded her of the one and only friend she'd had as a child, the friend her father had thrown out of the castle, except these eyes held a hard glint that had her trembling in her slippers.

“Bronson,” she whispered. “Is it really you?”

“Yes, little dove. It is I.”

The urge to both cry and dance collided, but she did neither. Instead, she let her arms fall to her sides, then tentatively reached up to touch his face, but avoided his scar out of fear that it might still cause him pain. “Why are you here? How did you find me?”

“I must get you out of the city as soon as possible. It's not safe for you here.”

“Why? What's happening?”

The lines on his face deepened as his eyes narrowed. “War is coming, Princess, and no noble within the city is safe.”