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A Throne for the Taking

By Kate Walker



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A kingdom's safety

Betrayed by those she loves, Honoria Escalona must now face the only man capable of bringing stability to the Mediterranean kingdom of Mecjoria. A cold, hard man who once called her his friend... Alexei Sarova—the true King of Mecjoria.

In exchange for her happiness

But Alexei's tortuous past has changed him into someone she hardly knows. He blames Ria's family for his bitterness, and his help—when he offers it—comes with a price: he'll take his rightful place as King with Ria as his wife, until she produces a true-blood heir....



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Editorial Review

About the Author

Kate Walker was always making up stories. She can't remember a time when she wasn't scribbling away at something and wrote her first "book" when she was eleven. She went to Aberystwyth University, met her future husband and after three years of being a full-time housewife and mother she turned to her old love of writing. Mills & Boon accepted a novel after two attempts, and Kate has been writing ever since. Visit Kate at her website at: www.kate-walker.com

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He was coming. The sound of footsteps in the corridor outside told her that. Brisk, heavy footsteps, the sound of expensive leather soles on the marble floor.

A big man, moving fast and impatiently towards the room where she had been told to wait for him. A room that was not as she had expected, but then nothing had been as she had expected since she had started out on this campaign, least of all this man she hadn't seen in so long. It had been more than ten years since she had spoken to him, but they would now be coming face to face in less than thirty seconds.

How was she going to handle this?

Ria adjusted her position in the smart leather chair, crossing one leg over the other then, rethinking, moving it back again so that her feet were neatly on the floor, placed precisely together in their elegant black courts, knees closed tight, her blue and green flowered dress stretched sleekly over them. Lifting her hand, she made to smooth back a non-existent wandering strand of dark auburn hair. Her style would be immaculate, she knew. She'd pulled her hair back tightly from her face so that there was nothing loose to get in a mess or distract her. Nothing to look frivolous or even carefree. That was not the image she'd aimed for.

She'd even fretted at the thought that her dress might be a little too casual and relaxed when she'd put it on, but the below knee length of the swirling skirt covered her almost as much as the tailored trousers she'd considered wearing, and the lightweight black linen jacket she'd pulled on over the top added a needed touch of formality that made her feel better.

The room she sat in was sleek and sophisticated with pale wood furniture. Far sleeker and much more luxurious than she had ever anticipated. One of the soft grey walls displayed a set of dramatic photographs, sharply framed. In black and white only, they were the sort of images that had made Alexei Sarova his reputation and his fortune. They were superb, stunning but—Ria frowned as she looked at them. They were bleak and somehow lonely. Photographs of landscapes, places, no people in them at all. He did sometimes photograph people—she knew that from the magazines she had read and the stunning images that had appeared in the articles—but none of those commissions were displayed here.

Outside the door, those determined, heavy footsteps slowed, then halted and she heard the murmur of voices through the thick wood, the deep, gravelly tones making it plain that the speaker was a man.

The man. The one she had come here to meet, to give him the message that might save her country from all-out civil war, and she had vowed that she was not leaving until she had done so. Even if the nerves in her stomach tied themselves into tight, painful knots at the thought and her restless fingers had started to beat an unsettled tattoo on the wooden arm of the chair.

'No!' Ria reproved herself aloud. 'Stop it! Now!'

She brought her nervous hand together with the other one, to clasp them both demurely in her lap, forcing herself to wait with every semblance of control and composure, even if the churning of her stomach told her that this was very far from the case. Too much rested on this meeting and she wasn't really sure that she could handle it.

Oh, this was ridiculous! Ria drew in a deep, ragged sigh as she put back her head and stared fixedly at the white-painted ceiling, fighting for control of her breathing. She should be well able to cope with this. She'd been trained practically from birth to meet strangers, talk with them, making polite social chit-chat at court events. It was what she could do as naturally as breathing while all the time keeping her head up high, her spine straight so that she looked as good as possible, with first her nanny's then her father's voice in her ear, telling her that the reputation of the Escalona family—an offshoot of the *royal* family—should be the first and foremost thing in her mind.

She could talk to presidents' wives about their trips round the glass-making factories, discuss the agricultural output of the vineyards, the farms. She could even, if she was allowed, converse intelligently on the vital role of exports, or the mining of eruminum, the new miracle mineral that had just been discovered in the Trilesian mountains. Not that she was often asked to do any such thing. Those important details were usually left to her grandfather or, until recently, to her second cousin Felix, the Crown Prince of Mecjoria.

But she had never before had to deal with any mission that meant so much in the way of freedom, both to her country and herself. That restless hand threatened to escape her careful control and start its nervous tattoo all over again at just the thought.

'Do it, then.'

The voice from the corridor sounded sharp and clear this time, bringing her head up in a rush as she straightened once again in her chair. *Shoulders back, head up...* She could almost hear her father's strict commands as she drew in a long, deep breath to calm herself as she had done on so many other previous occasions.

But this wasn't one of those events. This man wasn't exactly a stranger and polite chit-chat was the last thing she expected to be exchanging with him.

The handle turned as someone grasped it from the other side. Ria tensed, shifted in her chair, half-looked over her shoulder then rethought and turned back again. She didn't want him to think that she was nervous. She had to appear calm, collected, in command of the situation.

Command. The word rang hollowly inside her head. Once she had only to command something and it would be hers. In just a few short months her life had been turned upside down, and in ways that made her status in society the least of her concerns, so that now nothing was as it had ever been before, and the future loomed ahead, dark and dangerous.

But perhaps if she could manage this meeting with some degree of success she could claw back something from the disaster that had overtaken her country—and family. She could hope to put right the wrongs of the past and, on a personal level, save her mother's happiness, her sanity, possibly. And for her father... No, she couldn't go there, not yet. Thoughts of her father would weaken her, drain away the strength she needed to see this through.

'I'll expect a report on my desk by the end of the day.'

The door was opening, swinging wide. The man she had come to see was here, and she had no more time to think.

As he entered the doorway her heart jerked sharply under her ribcage, taking her breath with it. For the first time she felt suddenly lost, vulnerable without the ever-present security man at her back. All her life he had been there, just waiting and watching in case he was needed. And she had come to rely on him to deal with any awkward situation.

The *once* ever-present security man, she reminded herself. The protection that was no longer there, no longer part of her life or her status here or in her homeland of Mecjoria. She was no longer entitled to such protection. It was the first thing that had been stripped from her and the rest of her family in the upheaval that had followed Felix's unexpected death, and the shocking discovery of her father's scheming in the past. After that, things had changed so fast that she had never had time even to think about the possible repercussions of the changes and to consider them now, with the possible consequences for her own future, made her stomach twist painfully.

'No delays... Good afternoon.'

The abrupt change of subject caught Ria on the hop. She hadn't quite realised that his companion had been dismissed and that he was now in the room, long strides covering the ground so fast that he was halfway towards her before she realised it.

'Good afternoon.'

It was stronger, harsher, much more pointed, and she almost felt as if the words were hitting her in the small of her back. She should turn round, she knew. She needed to face him. But the enormity of the reason why she was here, and the thought of his reaction when she did, made it difficult to move.

'Miss.'

The warning in his tone now kicked her into action, fast. Her head jerked round, the suddenness and abruptness of the movement jolting her up and out of her seat so that she came to her feet even as she swung round to face him. And was glad that she had done so when she saw the size and the strength of his powerful form. She had seen pictures of him in the papers, knew that he was tall, dark and devastating, but in the 3D reality of living, breathing golden-toned flesh, deep ebony eyes and crisp black hair, he was so much more than she had ever imagined. His steel-grey suit hugged his impressive form lovingly, the broad, straight shoulders needing no extra padding to enhance them. A crisp white shirt, silver and black tie, turned him into the sleek, sophisticated businessman who was light-years away from the Alexei she remembered, the wiry boy with the unkempt mane of hair who had once been her friend buried under the expensive tailoring. Snatching in a deep, shocked breath, she could inhale the tang of some citrus soap or shampoo, the scent of clean male skin.

'Good afternoon,' she managed and was relieved to hear that her control over her voice was as strong as she could have wanted. Perhaps it made it sound a little too tight, too stiff, but that was surely better than letting the tremor she knew was just at the bottom of her thoughts actually affect her tongue. 'Alexei Sarova, I assume.'

He had been moving towards her but her response had a shocking effect on him.

'You!' he said, the single word thick and dark with hostility.

He stopped dead, then swung round back towards the door, grabbing at the handle to stop it slotting into the frame. This was worse than she had expected. She had known that she would have to work hard to get him to give her any sort of a hearing, but she hadn't expected this total rejection.

'Oh—please,' Ria managed. 'Please don't walk out.'

That brought his head round, the black, glittering eyes looking straight into hers, not a flicker of emotion in their polished depths.

'Walk out?'

He shook his dark head and there was actually the faintest hint of a smile on those beautifully sensual lips. But a shiver ran down Ria's spine as she saw the way that that smile was not reflected in his eyes at all. They remained as cold and emotionless as black glass.

'I'm not walking out. You are.'

It was far worse than she had expected. She hadn't really believed that he would recognise her that fast and that easily. Ten years was a long time and they had been little more than children when they had last had any close contact. She knew she was no longer the chubby, awkward girl he had once known. She was inches taller, slimmer, and her hair had darkened so that it was now a rich auburn instead of the nondescript brown of her childhood. So she had expected to have to explain herself to him. But she had thought that he would wait to hear that explanation, had hoped, at least, that he would want to know just why she was here.

'No...' She shook her head. 'No, I'm not.'

Dark eyes flashed in sudden anger and she barely controlled her instinctive shrinking away with an effort. Royal duchesses didn't shrink. Not even ex-royal duchesses.

'No?'

How did he manage to put such cynicism, such hostility into one word?

'I should point out to you that I own this building. I am the one who says who can stay and who should go. And you are going.'

'Don't you want to know why I'm here?'

If she had thrown something into the face of a marble statue, it couldn't have had less effect. Perhaps his stunning features became a little more unyielding, those brilliant eyes even colder, but it was hard to say for sure.

'Not really. In fact, not at all. What I want is you out of here and not coming back.'

No, what he really wanted was for her never to have come here at all, Alexei told himself, coming to a halt in

the middle of his office, restless as a caged tiger that had reached the metal bars that held him imprisoned. But the truth was that it wasn't anything physical that kept him captive. It was the memories of the past that now reached out to ensnare him, fastening shackles around his ankles to keep him from getting away.

He had never expected to see her or anyone from Mecjoria ever again. He thought he had moved on; he'd turned his life around, made a new existence for himself and his mother. It had taken years, sadly too many to give his mother the life she deserved as she'd aged, but he'd got there. And now he was wealthier than he'd ever been as a...as a prince, his mind finished for him, even though it was the last thing he wanted. He had no wish to remember anything about his connection to the Mecjorian royal family—or the country itself. He had severed all links with the place—had them severed for him—and he was determined that was the way it was going to stay. He would never have looked back at all if it hadn't been for the sudden and shockingly unexpected appearance of Ria here in this room.

He waited a moment and then pulled the door open again. 'Or do I have to call security?'

Ria's eyebrows rose sharply until they disappeared under her fringe as she turned a cool, green gaze on him.

Suddenly she had become the Grand Duchess she was right before his eyes and he loathed the way that made him feel.

'You'd resort to the heavy gang? That wouldn't look good in the gossip columns. "International playboy needs help to deal with one small female intruder".'

'Small? I would hardly call you small,' he drawled coolly. 'You must have grown—what?—six inches since I saw you last?'

She had grown in other ways too, he acknowledged, admitting to himself the instant and very basic male reaction that had taken him by storm in the first moments he had seen her. Before he had realised just who she was.

He hadn't seen such a stunning woman in years—in his life. Everything that was male in him had responded to the sight of her tall, slender figure, the burnished hair, porcelain skin, long, long legs.

And then he had realised that it was Ria. She had grown up, grown taller, slimmed down. Her face had developed planes and angles where there had once been just firm, round, apple-rosy cheeks. He had loved those cheeks, he admitted to himself. They had been soft and curved, so smooth, that he had loved to pinch them softly, pretending he was teasing but knowing that what he actually wanted was to feel the satin of her skin, stroke it with his fingertips. These days, Ria had cheekbones that looked as if they would slice open any stroking finger, and the rosy cheeks were carefully toned down with skilful make-up. The slant of those cheekbones emphasised the jade green of her eyes, and the soft pink curve of her mouth, but it was obvious that any softness in her appearance was turned into a lie by the way she behaved.

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