

One Night to Dance

By Christy Newman

Brilliant colors, silk, satin, and velvet gowns, golden lights, soft music—it was all wonderful. Noble men and women waltzed gracefully across the marble floor. The men were enthralled with the beautiful ladies. There was much life, joy, and gaiety. She imagined being led across the beautiful room in a trance, heart in the clouds, dancing with... "Savah, help me fasten my necklace!" a young woman—her mistress—called.

The enchantment shattered, and reality called her back. Savah nodded, smiling to hide the faraway look in her eyes. She dipped her head respectfully and stepped behind Trianne. She snapped the clasp of the pearl necklace around the slender, ivory neck of the young lady. Savah tapped her shoulder as a cue that it was done. "You look beautiful," she said with a smile.

Trianne smiled and turned toward her. "Thank you, Savah." The silver and blue silk gown she wore swayed as she spun and caught the light like the wings of an angel. Her shoulder-length, platinum-blond hair was plaited, and the overall effect was quite elegant. Savah had meant every word she had said when complimenting the woman.

Savah smiled and tilted her head downward. She followed as Trianne moved across the room to speak with several other finely dressed women. She looked down at herself, dressed in a rather plain, floor-length, pale red, corseted dress. Savah wasn't nobility—she was here to serve. But while she wasn't needed she could still dream.

Savah had been in Trianne's service since her parents had been killed by an enraged bear when she was twelve years old. She had no other living relatives. In Tayon Valdar, the best and most loving solution was often apprenticeship. She had been taken into another family's home and raised with their daughter. She had been given many advantages, including education and training that would have been far beyond her family's means. The payment was to be her servitude until she reached the age of twenty-one, which was just a little over two years away.

She stood in the crowd of women, knowing she wasn't like them. They all had brilliant shining jewelry, expensive dresses, and elaborate hair styles. She herself wore only her simple dress, and her light brown hair was pulled to the side in a loose braid. She didn't feel as though she fit in with the company. After all, it was a castle, and the grand party was thrown for nobles, royals, influential acquaintances, and wealthy friends.

She let her mind wander to the next day. It was difficult for her to stay in the present at times. She wondered what chores Trianne would have for her. She knew that she would have to set out a dress and have it ready. She would also need to draw a bath as well as sweep the floor...

Quiet giggling brought her back to the present. Trianne stood beside her, whispering in her ear.

"I'm sorry, what?" Savah asked.

Her mistress rolled her eyes but repeated herself anyway. "Look, there." Trianne pointed across the room to two men walking through the room in their general direction. "Isn't he absolutely amazing?" she sighed.

"Who, King Tollan?" Savah snorted, trying to keep the confused disagreement from her voice.

"No!" Trianne laughed, shaking her head. "If you think so, I pity your eyes! No, *him*..." she pointed to the other man.

Savah looked, expecting it to be Gavin, the king's second. It wasn't. It was one of the men Tollan was training—supposedly the most skilled warrior in the entire land. Savah knew his name—most everyone did—Ryden. He had been Gifted at a young age—before most normally were. Ryden was so powerful that the king himself had decided to train him. At only twenty years of age, nearly every unmarried woman in all of Tayon Valdar fell for him. Even she herself was a bit starry-eyed. She knew better though. She knew her place... and that was not it.

"Don't you agree, Savah?" Trianne asked her yet again.

Savah huffed. She hated to admit it, but yes. "Yes," she answered distantly and looked around her. Several girls lined up, giggling, and blushing. Many of them held fans, lightly waving them and batting their overly-long eyelashes. Savah rolled her eyes. They were all so giddy and stupid sometimes. She loved people—truly she did—but at times it was very difficult, especially with some women.

"Trianne, would you mind terribly if I got a little fresh air? I'll only be gone for a moment."

Trianne shook her head, answering airily, "No, of course not."

Savah noticed that the question had been answered by rote. Trianne was not paying any attention whatsoever. It was a bit comical. The usually poised and reserved ladies all stood there like a bunch of hens, clucking and shoving each other to be first in line. If she were more than a servant, she would have laughed aloud and told them as much—but she wasn't, and so she didn't.

She hurried across the room, skirting around the edges and staying out of the way. She smiled politely at people who gave her any notice and finally reached the open, arched doorway that led to a large balcony. Savah stepped out onto it and walked forward, looking at the slowly setting sun in the distance. She sighed, only halting when she reached the parapet, where she leaned against it, palms down for support. Using one hand, she pulled her shawl farther around herself as it was a bit cool out.

Savah took a deep breath and let it out in a long, slow, calming sigh. It was nicer outside. There were fewer distractions. She could focus on what she needed to get done. With that in mind, she brought her thoughts back to her chores. She would get up early tomorrow because she needed to clean the stables. She thanked the Higher Power that Trianne's family owned only five horses. After that, she would need to get cleaned up then ready a bath for Trianne. Savah already knew what dress she would set out—a green velvet one with angel sleeves and gold trim. With that out of the way, she would still have much to do...

"Mind if I join you?"

Savah flinched at the voice. She had heard no one come out. "You scared me," she stated, putting a hand at the base of her neck and turning. She expected it to be one of the other

servants but wasn't exactly right. She froze as she came face-to-face with none other than Ryden Hunter.

"I noticed..." he stated with a half-smile.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"I live here."

Heat rose in Savah's cheeks and she looked down. Her frustration at the embarrassment bubbled just below the surface. "No, I meant... aren't you enjoying the party?"

Ryden glanced back and huffed quietly. "Not with all the man-eating women about."

Savah bit her lip to keep from laughing. "Same..." she stated, waving one hand back toward the people inside. "I love them, but they can be completely unbelievable. Please excuse me for saying so," Savah said quietly.

Ryden nodded, glancing behind him. Several of the women were wandering around, actively looking for him.

Savah sighed. She thought she should probably leave him alone. She should go back and find Trianne. Besides, the longer she stood there across from Ryden, the more it made her remember how much she sometimes wanted to dance like all the other women did. She dreamed of someone falling in love with her, regardless of her low position. She hated that the longer she stood there, the more she wished she could just disappear because that could never be, no matter how badly she wished it would.

Ryden broke into her thoughts as he moved forward and took Savah's hand, pulling her forward. He turned, walking back into the lit room, leading her.

Her mind was racing, and a cool tingling sensation ran up her arm. She followed as he moved back into the ballroom. It wasn't as though she could actually stop him. "What are you doing?"

"Getting us both out alive."

"What?"

"You want to dance, and we might as well. I would rather it be you than them."

She didn't have time to ask what he meant. He led her through the great room. Many people were watching. She knew it. She felt their eyes on her. They kept moving through the elegantly dressed crowd. Savah found she did not hear them anymore. They were invisible to her. She could only hear her pounding heart. Then he was asking her to dance, and her brain shut down. "I can't," she stammered, shaking her head and blushing. She cursed her pale skin for how completely it showed the bright color when she blushed.

"If you say no, then we will both leave alone..." He leaned closer to her and whispered in her ear, "Please?"

She felt her heart leap, and she bit her lip. She didn't want to dance—it would be humiliating. Every woman there would be staring—or rather—glaring at her.

He must have read her mind, because he answered, "Let them watch. Let them whisper. Wouldn't it be nice, this once, to have them envy you?"

Savah smiled and tried to say no. She found herself unable to make the simple two-letter word come because she *did* want to. It *would* be nice. Her gaze met his sapphire eyes. Ryden *was* amazing, and she hated herself for admitting it. He was playing with her. He had not even asked for her name. Tomorrow, she would be forgotten and would never cross his mind again. This was not love. He didn't care about her, and she knew it. She also knew that if she danced with Ryden she would fall... not physically, but emotionally.

He asked again.

Just this once, she let herself go. "Yes," she whispered.

In that moment, her dream—the one that would never be real, was fulfilled. She was not a servant. She was not in the background, quietly standing out of the way. She was not less than anyone else. It was a feeling she knew she could get addicted to. Savah was dancing, and her heart soared. Her dress, though plain, didn't matter. For that moment, she was as important and privileged as all the other ladies.

The song ended too soon, and she knew that the dream was over. Heat crept once again into her cheeks and she tried to move away, but he didn't let her go.

"And you told me you couldn't dance..." he said, teasing lightly.

Savah smiled and politely nodded. "Thank you, I should go..."

He nodded. "If you must, then good night." A smile touched his eyes.

She turned and slowly walked away. She was going to remember that smile forever. It would have her lying awake in bed, grinning at the roof, and reliving every moment. Even if it was just this once, it had happened. Someone had looked at her as more than a servant, more than a wallflower. She was doomed to be single forever now—because who could compare to him? This was going to take her down, but it had been worth it.

Savah stopped and turned, glad to see that Ryden was still looking at her and hadn't just completely blown her off the second she had turned away. "You'll remember me?" she asked with an innocent smile.

He smiled again. "That's all you want?"

"No. That's all I *ask*."

He nodded. "What is your name?"

She smiled. He had asked after all. "Savah..." She turned and walked through the crowd, grinning. She wrapped her arms around herself. She was on top of the world. Everything had gone right for once in her life. Tomorrow, she would come crashing down into reality. But she couldn't think about that now—not now...