

USA TODAY Bestselling Author

SARAH MORGAN

More Than She Bargained For



Two classic, powerful romance stories

Sarah Morgan

**More than She Bargained For:
The Prince's Waitress Wife /
Powerful Greek, Unworldly Wife**

«HarperCollins»

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Wealthy men meet their unexpected matches in these two classic stories! **THE PRINCE'S WAITRESS WIFE** When Holly Phillips meets Prince Casper, he lives up to his wicked reputation by bedding her—then casting her aside! Worse, she finds out she's pregnant. Although he's convinced she's a scheming gold digger, royal protocol demands he make her his bride. And her first duty as his convenient wife will be on their wedding night. **POWERFUL GREEK, UNWORLDLY WIFE** Gorgeous billionaire Leandro Zagorakis swept Millie into his glamorous world. Wrapped in his arms and draped in diamonds, she thought nothing could touch their romance. But the deepest, darkest betrayal did, so Millie ran away. Now, though, Leandro's powerful voice is demanding that his wife come home. And, to her shame, she's willing...

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More than She Bargained For

The Prince's Waitress Wife

Powerful Greek, Unworldly Wife

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Chapter 1

'Keep your eyes down, serve the food and then leave. No lingering in the President's Suite. No gazing, no engaging the prince in conversation, and no flirting. *Especially* no flirting—Prince Casper has a shocking reputation when it comes to women. Holly, are you listening to me?'

Holly surfaced from a whirlpool of misery long enough to nod. 'Yes,' she croaked. 'I'm listening, Sylvia.'

'Then what did I just say?'

Holly's brain was foggy from lack of sleep and a constant roundabout of harsh self-analysis. 'You said—you told me—' Her voice tailed off. 'I don't know. I'm sorry.'

Sylvia's mouth tightened with disapproval. 'What is the matter with you? Usually you're extremely efficient and reliable, that's why I picked you for this job!'

Efficient and reliable.

Holly flinched at the description.

Another two flaws to add to the growing list of reasons why Eddie had dumped her.

Apparently oblivious to the effect her words were having, Sylvia ploughed on. 'I shouldn't have to remind you that today is the most important day of my career—catering for royalty at Twickenham Stadium. This is the Six Nations championship! The most important and exciting rugby tournament of the year! The eyes of the world are upon us! If we get this right, we're made. And more work for me means more work for you. *But I need you to concentrate!*'

A tall, slim waitress with a defiant expression on her face stalked over to them, carrying a tray of empty champagne glasses. 'Give her a break, will you? Her fiancé broke off their engagement last night. It's a miracle she's here at all. In her position, I wouldn't even have dragged myself out of bed.'

'He broke off the engagement?' Sylvia glanced from one girl to the other. 'Holly, is Nicky telling the truth? Why did he do that?'

Because she was efficient and reliable. Because her hair was the colour of a sunset rather than a sunflower. Because she was prudish and inhibited. Because her bottom was too big...

Contemplating the length of the list, Holly was swamped by a wave of despair. 'Eddie's been promoted to Marketing Director. I don't fit his new image.' So far she hadn't actually cried and she was quite proud of that—proud and a little puzzled. *Why hadn't she cried? She loved Eddie. They'd planned a future together. 'He's expected to entertain clients and journalists and, well, he's driving a Porsche now, and he needs a woman to match.'* With a wobbly smile and a shrug, she tried to make light of it. 'I'm more of a small family-hatchback.'

'You are much too good for him, that's what you are.' Nicky scowled and the glasses on the tray jangled dangerously. 'He's a b—'

'Nicky!' Sylvia gave a shocked gasp, interrupting Nicky's insult. 'Please remember that you are the face of my company!'

'In that case you'd better pay for botox before I develop permanent frown-lines from serving a bunch of total losers every day.' Nicky's eyes flashed.

'Holly's ex and his trophy-blond slut are knocking back the champagne like Eddie is Marketing Director of some Fortune 100 company, not the local branch of Pet Palace.'

'She's with him?' Holly felt the colour drain from her face. 'Then I can't go up there. Their hospitality box is really close to the President's Suite. It would just be too embarrassing for everyone. All his colleagues staring at me—*her* staring at me—what am I going to do?'

'Replace him with someone else. The great thing about really unsuitable men is that they're not in short supply.' Nicky thrust the tray into the hands of her apoplectic boss and slipped her arm through Holly's. 'Breathe deeply. In and out—that's it—good. Now, here's what you're going to do. You're going to sashay into that royal box and kiss that sexy, wicked prince. If you're going to fall

for an unsuitable man, at least make sure he's a rich, powerful one. The king of them all. Or, in this case, the prince. Apparently he's a world-class kisser. Go for it. Tangling tongues at Twickenham. *That* would shock Eddie.'

'It would shock the prince, too.' Giggling despite her misery, Holly withdrew her arm from her friend's. 'I think one major rejection is enough for one week, thanks. If I'm not thin and blonde enough for the Managing Director of Pet Palace, I'm hardly going to be thin and blonde enough to attract a playboy prince. It's not one of your better ideas.'

'What's wrong with it? Straight from one palace to another.' Nicky gave a saucy wink. 'Undo a few buttons, go into the President's Suite and flirt. It's what I'd do.'

'Fortunately she isn't you!' Sylvia's cheeks flushed with outrage as she glared at Nicky. 'And she'll keep her buttons fastened! Quite apart from the fact I don't pay you girls to flirt, Prince Casper's romantic exploits are getting out of hand, and I've had strict instructions from the Palace—no pretty waitresses. No one likely to distract him. *Especially* no blondes. That's why I picked you in the first place, Holly. Red hair and freckles—you're perfect.'

Holly flinched. Perfect? *Perfect for melting into the background.*

She lifted a hand and touched her unruly red hair, dragged into submission with the liberal use of pins. Then she thought of what lay ahead and her battered confidence took another dive. The thought of walking into the President's Suite made her shrink. 'Sylvia—I really don't want to do this. Not today. I just don't feel—I'm having—' What—a bad hair day? A fat day? Frankly it was a battle to decide which of her many deficiencies was the most pronounced. 'They're all going to be thin, blonde, rich and confident.' *All the things she wasn't.* Her hands shaking, Holly removed the tray of empty glasses from her boss's hands. 'I'll take these back to the kitchens. Nicky can serve the royal party. I don't think I can stand them looking at me as if I'm—'

As if I'm nothing.

'If you're doing your job correctly, they shouldn't be looking at you at all.' Unknowingly echoing Holly's own thoughts, Sylvia removed the tray from her hands so violently that the glasses jangled again. Then she thrust the tray back at Nicky. '*You* take these glasses back to the kitchens. Holly, if you want to keep this job, you'll get up to the President's Suite right now. And no funny business. You wouldn't want to attract his attention anyway—a man in his position is only going to be interested in one thing with a girl like you.' Spotting another of the waitresses craning her neck to get a better view of the rugby players warming up on the pitch, Sylvia gave a horrified gasp. 'No, no. You're here to work, not gape at men's legs—' Abandoning Holly and Nicky, she hurried over to the other girl.

'Of course we're here to gape at men's legs,' Nicky drawled. 'Why does she think we took the job in the first place? I don't know the first thing about scrums and line-outs, but I do know the men are gorgeous. I mean, there are men and there are men. And these are *men*, if you know what I mean.'

Not listening, Holly stared into space, her confidence at an all-time low. 'The wonder is not that Eddie dumped me,' she muttered, 'But that he got involved with me in the first place.'

'Don't talk like that. Don't let him do this to you,' Nicky scolded. 'Please tell me you didn't spend the night crying over him.'

'Funnily enough, I didn't. I've even been wondering about that.' Holly frowned. 'Perhaps I'm too devastated to cry.'

'Did you eat chocolate?'

'Of course. Well—chocolate biscuits. Do they count?'

'Depends on how many. You need a lot of biscuits to get the same chocolate hit.'

'I ate two.'

'*Two biscuits?*'

Holly blushed. 'Two packets.' She muttered the words under her breath and then gave a guilty moan. 'And I *hated* myself even more afterwards. But at the time I was miserable and *starving!* Eddie

took me out to dinner to break off the engagement—I suppose he thought I might not scream at him in a public place. I knew something was wrong when he ordered a starter. He never orders a starter.’

‘Well, isn’t that typical?’ Nicky’s mouth tightened in disapproval. ‘The night he breaks up with you, he finally allows you to eat.’

‘The starter was for him, not me.’ Holly shook her head absently. ‘I can’t eat in front of Eddie anyway. The way he watches me always makes me feel like a pig. He told me it was over in between the grilled fish and dessert. Then he dropped me home, and I kept waiting, but I just couldn’t cry.’

‘I’m not surprised. You were probably too hungry to summon the energy to cry,’ Nicky said dryly. ‘But eating chocolate biscuits is good news.’

‘Tell that to my skirt. Why does Sylvia insist on this style?’ Gloomily, Holly smoothed the tight black skirt over her hips. ‘I feel as though I’m wearing a corset, and it’s *so* short.’

‘You look sexy as sin, as always. And eating chocolate is the first phase in the healing process, so you’ve passed that stage, which is a good sign. The next stage is to sell his ring.’

‘I was going to return it.’

‘Return it? Are you mad?’ The empty glasses rattled again as Nicky’s hands tightened on the tray. ‘Sell it. And buy a pair of gorgeous shoes with the proceeds. Then you’ll spend the rest of your life walking on his memory. And, next time, settle for sex without emotion.’

Holly smiled awkwardly, too self-conscious to confess that she hadn’t actually had sex with Eddie. And that, of course, had been her major drawback as far as he was concerned. He’d accused her of being inhibited.

She bit back a hysterical laugh.

A small family-hatchback with central locking.

Would she be less inhibited if her bottom were smaller?

Possibly, but she wasn’t likely to find out. She was always promising herself that she’d diet, but going without food just made her crabby.

Which was why her clothes always felt too tight.

At this rate she was going to die a virgin.

Depressed by that thought, Holly glanced in the direction of the President’s Suite. ‘I really don’t think I can face this.’

‘It’s worth it just to get a look at the wicked prince in the flesh.’

‘He hasn’t always been wicked. He was in love once,’ Holly murmured, momentarily distracted from her own problems. ‘With that Italian supermodel. I remember reading about them. They were the golden couple. Then she died along with his brother in that avalanche eight years ago. Horribly sad. Apparently he and his brother were really close. He lost the two people he loved most in the world. A family torn apart. I’m not surprised he’s gone a bit wild. He must have been devastated. He probably just needs someone to love him.’

Nicky grinned. ‘So go up there and love him. And don’t forget my favourite saying.’

‘What’s that?’

‘If you can’t stand the heat...’

‘Get out of the kitchen?’ Holly completed the proverb but Nicky gave a saucy wink.

‘Remove a layer of clothing.’

* * *

Casper strolled down the steps into the royal box, his handsome face expressionless as he stared across the impressive stadium. Eighty-two thousand people were gradually pouring into the stands in preparation for the breathlessly awaited match that was part of the prestigious Six Nations championship.

It was a bitterly cold February day, and his entourage was all muttering and complaining about freezing English weather.

Casper didn’t notice.

He was used to being cold.

He'd been cold for eight long years.

Emilio, his Head of Security, leaned forward and offered him a phone. 'Savannah for you, Your Highness.'

Without turning, Casper gave an almost imperceptible shake of his head and Emilio hesitated before switching off the phone.

'Another female heart broken.' The blonde shivering next to him gave a disbelieving laugh. 'You're cold as ice, Cas. Rich and handsome, admittedly, but very inaccessible emotionally. Why are you ending it? She's crazy about you.'

'That's why I'm ending it.' His voice hard, Casper watched the players warming up on the pitch, ignoring the woman gazing longingly at his profile.

'If you're ditching the most beautiful woman in the world, what hope is there for the rest of us?'
No hope.

No hope for them. No hope for him. The whole thing was a game, Casper thought blankly. A game he was sick of playing.

Sport was one of the few things that offered distraction. But, before the rugby started, he had to sit through the hospitality.

Two long hours of hopeful women and polite conversation.

Two long hours of feeling nothing.

His face appeared on the giant screens placed at either end of the pitch, and he watched himself with detached curiosity, surprised by how calm he looked. There was a loud female cheer from those already gathered in the stands, and Casper delivered the expected smile of acknowledgement, wondering idly whether any of them would like to come and distract him for a few hours.

Anyone would do. He really didn't care.

As long as she didn't expect anything from him.

He glanced behind him towards the glass windows of the President's Suite where lunch would be served. An exceptionally pretty waitress was checking the table, her mouth moving as she recited her checklist to herself.

Casper studied her in silence, his eyes narrowing slightly as she paused in her work and lifted a hand to her mouth. He saw the rise and fall of her chest as she took a deep breath—watched as she tilted her head backwards and stared up at the ceiling. It was strange body language for someone about to serve lunch.

And then he realised that she was trying not to cry.

Over the years he'd taught himself to recognise the signs of female distress so that he could time his exit accordingly.

With cold detachment he watched her struggle to hold back the oncoming tide of tears.

She was a fool, he thought grimly, to let herself feel that deeply about anything.

And then he gave a smile of self-mockery. Hadn't he done the same at her age—in his early twenties, when life had seemed like an endless opportunity, hadn't he naively allowed his emotions freedom?

And then he'd learned a lesson that had proved more useful than all the hours spent studying constitutional law or international history.

He'd learned that emotions were man's biggest weakness, and that they could destroy as effectively as the assassin's bullet.

And so he'd ruthlessly buried all trace of his, protecting that unwanted human vulnerability under hard layers of bitter life experience. He'd buried his emotions so deep he could no longer find them.

And that was the way he wanted it.

* * *

Without looking directly at anyone, Holly carefully placed the champagne-and-raspberry torte in front of the prince. Silver cutlery and crystal glass glinted against the finest linen, but she barely noticed. She'd served the entire meal in a daze, her mind on Eddie, who was currently entertaining her replacement in the premium box along the richly carpeted corridor.

Holly hadn't seen her, but she was sure she was pretty. Blonde, obviously. And not the sort of person whose best friend in a crisis was a packet of chocolate biscuits.

Did she have a degree? Was she clever?

Holly's vision suddenly blurred with tears, and she blinked frantically, moving slowly around the table, barely aware of the conversation going on around her. Oh dear God, she was going to lose it. Here, in the President's Suite, with the prince and his guests as witnesses. It was going to be the most humiliating moment of her life.

Trying to pull herself together, Holly concentrated on the dessert in her hand, but she was teetering on the brink. Nicky was right. She should have stayed in bed and hidden under the duvet until she'd recovered enough to get her emotions back under control. But she needed this job too badly to allow herself the luxury of wallowing.

A burst of laughter from the royal party somehow intensified her feelings of isolation and misery, and she placed the last dessert on the table and backed away, horrified to find that one of the tears had spilled over onto her cheek.

The release of that one tear made all the others rush forward, and suddenly her throat was full and her eyes were stinging.

Oh, please, no. Not here.

Instinct told her to turn around, but protocol forbade her from turning her back on the prince, so she stood helplessly, staring at the dusky pink carpet with its subtly intertwined pattern of roses and rugby balls, comforting herself with the fact that they wouldn't notice her.

People never noticed her, did they? She was the invisible woman. She was the hand that poured the champagne, or the eyes that spotted an empty plate. She was a tidy room or an extra chair. But she wasn't a *person*.

'Here.' A strong, masculine hand passed her a tissue. 'Blow.'

With a gasp of embarrassment, Holly dragged her horrified gaze from those lean bronzed fingers and collided with eyes as dark and brooding as the night sky in the depths of winter.

And something strange happened.

Time froze.

The tears didn't spill and her heart didn't beat.

It was as if her brain and body separated. For a single instant, she forgot that she was about to make a giant fool of herself. She forgot about Eddie and his trophy blonde. She even forgot the royal party.

The only thing in her world was this man.

And then her knees weakened and her mouth dried because he was *insanely* handsome, his lean aristocratic face a breathtaking composition of bold masculine lines and perfect symmetry.

His dark gaze shifted to her mouth, and the impact of that one searing glance scorched her body like the hottest flame. She felt her lips tingle and her heart thumped against her chest.

And that warning beat was the wake-up call she needed.

Oh, God. 'Your Highness.' Was she supposed to curtsy? She'd been so transfixed by how impossibly good-looking he was, she'd forgotten protocol. What was she supposed to do?

The unfairness of it was like a slap across the face. The one time she absolutely did *not* want to be noticed, she'd been noticed.

By Prince Casper of Santallia.

Her horrified gaze slid back to the tissue in his hand. And he *knew* she was upset. There was no hiding.

'Breathe,' he instructed in a soft voice. 'Slowly.'

Only then did she realise that he'd positioned himself right in front of her. His shoulders were wide and powerful, effectively blocking her from view, so that the rest of his party wouldn't see that she was crying.

The problem was, she could no longer remember *why* she'd felt like crying. One sizzling glance from those lazy dark eyes and her mind had been wiped.

Shrinking with embarrassment, but at the same time relieved to have a moment to compose herself, Holly took the tissue and blew her nose. Despair mixed with fatalistic acceptance as she realised that she'd just given herself a whole new problem.

He was going to complain. And who could blame him? She should have smiled more. She should have paid attention when the bored-looking blonde seated to his right had asked her whether the goat's cheese was organic.

He was going to have her fired.

'Thank you, Your Highness,' she mumbled, pushing the tissue into her pocket. 'I'll be fine. Just don't give me sympathy.'

'There's absolutely no chance of that. Sympathy isn't my thing.' His gorgeous eyes shimmered with sardonic humour. 'Unless it's sympathy sex.'

Too busy holding back tears to be shocked, Holly took another deep breath, but her white shirt couldn't stand the pressure and two of her buttons popped open. With a whimper of disbelief, she froze. As if she hadn't already embarrassed herself enough in front of royalty, she was about to spill out of her lacy bra. Now what? Did she draw attention to herself and do up the buttons, or did she just hope he hadn't noticed...?

'I'm going to have to complain about you.' His tone was gently apologetic and she felt her knees weaken.

'Yes, Your Highness.'

'A sexy waitress in sheer black stockings and lacy underwear is extremely distracting.' His bold, confident gaze dropped to her full cleavage and lingered. 'You make it impossible for me to concentrate on the boring blonde next to me.'

Braced for an entirely different accusation, Holly gave a choked laugh. 'You're joking?'

'I never joke about fantasies,' he drawled. 'Especially sexual ones.'

He thought the blonde was boring?

'You're having sexual fantasies?'

'Do you blame me?' The frank appraisal in his eyes was so at odds with her own plummeting opinion of herself, that for a moment Holly just stared up at him. Then she realised that he *had* to be making fun of her because she knew she wasn't remotely sexy.

'It isn't fair to tease me, Your Highness.'

'You only have to call me Your Highness the first time. After that, it's "sir".' Amused dark eyes slid from her breasts to her mouth. 'And I rather think you're the one teasing *me*.' He was looking at her with the type of unapologetic masculine appreciation that men reserved for exceptionally beautiful women.

And that wasn't her. She knew it wasn't. 'You haven't eaten your dessert, sir.'

He gave a slow, dangerous smile. 'I think I'm looking at it.'

Oh God, he was actually flirting with her.

Holly's legs started to shake because he was so, so attractive, and the way he was looking at her made her feel like a supermodel. Her shrivelled self-esteem bloomed like a parched flower given new life by a shower of rain. This stunningly attractive, handsome guy—this gorgeous, mega-wealthy prince who could have had any woman in the world—found her so attractive that he wanted to flirt with her.

'Cas.' A spoiled female voice came from behind them. 'Come and sit down.'

But he didn't turn.

The fact that he didn't appear willing or able to drag his gaze from her raised Holly's confidence another few notches. She felt her colour mount under his intense, speculative gaze, and suddenly there was a dangerous shift in the atmosphere. Trying to work out how she'd progressed from tears to tension in such a short space of time, Holly swallowed.

It was *him*, she thought helplessly.

He was just gorgeous.

And way out of her league.

Flirting was one thing, but he had guests hanging on his every word—glamorous women vying for his attention.

Suddenly remembering where she was and who he was, Holly gave him an embarrassed glance. 'They're waiting for you, sir.'

The smooth lift of one eyebrow suggested that he didn't understand why that was a problem, and Holly gave a weak smile. He was the ruling prince. People stood in line. They waited for his whim and his pleasure.

But surely his pleasure was one of those super-groomed, elegant women glaring impatiently at his broad back?

Her cheeks burning, she cleared her throat. 'They'll be wondering what you're doing.'

'And that matters because...?'

Envious of his indifference, she laughed. 'Well—because generally people care what other people think.'

'Do they?'

She gave an awkward laugh. 'Yes.'

'Do *you* care what other people think?'

'I'm a waitress,' Holly said dryly. 'I have to care. If I don't care, I don't get tips—and then I don't eat.'

The prince lifted one broad shoulder in a careless shrug. 'Fine. So let's get rid of them. What they don't see, they can't judge.' Supremely confident, he cast a single glance towards one of the well-built guys standing by the door and that silent command was apparently sufficient to ensure that he was given instant privacy.

His security team sprang into action, and within minutes the rest of his party was leaving the room, knowing looks from the men and sulky glances from the women.

Ridiculously impressed by this discreet display of authority, Holly wondered how it would feel to be so powerful that you could clear a room with nothing more than a look. *And how must it feel to be so secure about yourself that you didn't care what other people thought about your actions?*

Only when the door of the President's Suite closed behind them did she suddenly realise that she was now alone with the prince.

She gave a choked laugh of disbelief.

He'd just dismissed the most glamorous, gorgeous women she'd ever seen in favour of—*her?*

The Prince turned back to her, his eyes glittering dark and dangerous. 'So.' His voice was soft. 'Now we're alone. How do you suggest we pass the time?'

Chapter 2

Holly's stomach curled with wicked excitement and desperate nerves. 'Thank you for rescuing me from an embarrassing moment,' she mumbled breathlessly, desperately racking her brains for something witty to say and failing. She had no idea how to entertain a prince. 'I can't imagine what you must think of me.'

'I don't understand your obsession with everyone else's opinion,' he drawled. 'And at the moment I'm not capable of thinking. I'm a normal healthy guy, and every one of my brain cells is currently focused on your gorgeous body.'

Holly made a sound somewhere between a gasp and a laugh. Disbelieving, self-conscious, but hopelessly flattered, she stroked her hands over her skirt, looked at him and then looked towards the door. 'Those women are beautiful.'

'Those women spend eight hours a day perfecting their appearance. That's not beauty—it's obsession.' Supremely sure of himself, he took possession of her hand, locking her fingers into his.

Holly's stomach curled with excitement. 'We're not supposed to be doing this. They gave me this job because they thought I wasn't your type.'

'Major error on their part.'

'They told me you preferred blondes.'

'I think I've just had a major shift towards redheads.' With a wicked smile, he lifted his other hand and carelessly fingered a strand of her hair. 'Your hair is the colour of a Middle Eastern bazaar—cinnamon and gold. Tell me why you were crying.'

Caught in a spin of electrifying, exhilarating excitement, Holly's brain was in a whirl. For a moment she'd actually forgotten about Eddie. If she told him that her boyfriend had dumped her, would it make her seem less attractive?

'I was—'

'On second thoughts, don't tell me.' Interrupting her, he lifted her hand, checking for a ring. 'Single?'

Detecting something in his tone but too dazed to identify what, Holly nodded. 'Oh yes, completely single,' she murmured hastily, and then immediately wanted to snatch the words back, because she should have played it cool.

But she didn't feel cool. She felt—*relieved that she'd left the engagement ring at home.*

And he was smiling, clearly aware of the effect he was having on her.

Before she could stop him, he pulled the clip out of her hair and slid his fingers through her tumbling, wayward curls. 'That's better.' Very much the one in control, he closed his fingers around her wrists and hooked her arms round his neck. Then he slid his hands down her back and cupped her bottom.

'Oh.' Appalled that he seemed to be focusing on all her worst features, Holly gave a whimper of embarrassment and fought the impulse to wriggle away from him. But it was too late to take avoiding action. The confident exploration of his hands had ensured he was already well acquainted with the contours of her bottom.

'Dio, you have the most fantastic body,' he groaned, moulding her against the hard muscle of his thighs as if she were made of cling film.

He thought she was fantastic?

Brought into close contact with the physical evidence of his arousal, Holly barely had time to register the exhilarating fact that he really did find her attractive before his mouth came down on hers in a hungry, demanding kiss.

It was like being in the path of a lightning strike. Her body jerked with shock. Her head spun, her knees were shaking, and her attempt to catch her breath simply encouraged a still more intimate

exploration of her mouth. Never in her life had a simple kiss made her feel like this. Her fingers dug into his shoulders for support and she gasped as she felt his hands slide *under* her skirt. She felt the warmth of his hands against her bare flesh above her stockings, and then he was backing her against the table, the slick, erotic invasion of his tongue in her mouth sending flames leaping around her body and a burning concentration of heat low in her pelvis.

He was kissing her as though this was their last moments on Earth—*as if he couldn't help himself*—and Holly was swept away on the pure adrenaline rush that came with suddenly being made to feel irresistible.

Dimly she thought, *This is fast, too fast*. But, even as part of her analysed her actions with a touch of shocked disapproval, another part of her was responding with wild abandon, her normal insecurities and inhibitions dissolved in a rush of raw sexual chemistry.

Control slipped slowly from her grasp.

When Eddie had kissed her she'd often found her mind wandering—on occasions she'd guiltily caught herself planning meals and making mental shopping lists—but with the prince the only coherent thought in her head was *Please don't let him stop*.

But she *had* to stop, didn't she?

She didn't do things like this.

What if someone walked in?

Struggling to regain some control, Holly gave a low moan and dragged her mouth from his, intending to take a step back and think through her actions. But her good intentions vanished as she gazed up at his lean, bronzed features, her resolve evaporating as she took in the thick, dark eyelashes guarding his impossibly sexy eyes. *Oh, dear God*—how could any woman say no to a man like this? And, if sheer masculine impact wasn't enough, the way he was looking at her was the most outrageous compliment she'd ever received.

'You're staring at me,' she breathed, and he gave a lopsided smile.

'If you don't want men to stare, stay indoors.'

Holly giggled, as much from nerves as humour. 'I am indoors.'

'True.' The prince lifted one broad shoulder in an unmistakably Latin gesture. 'In which case, I can't see a solution. You'll just have to put up with me staring, *tesoro*.'

'You speak Italian?'

'I speak whichever language is going to get me the result I want,' he purred, and she gave a choked laugh because he was so outrageously confident and he made her feel beautiful.

Basking in warmth of his bold appreciation, she suddenly felt womanly and infinitely desirable. Blinded by the sheer male beauty of his features, and by the fact that this incredible man was looking at *her*, her crushed heart suddenly lifted as though it had been given wings, and her confidence fluttered back to life.

All right, so she wasn't Eddie's type.

But this man—*this incomparably handsome playboy prince who had his pick of the most beautiful women in the world*—found her irresistible.

'You're staring at me too,' he pointed out, his gaze amused as he slid his fingers into her hair with slow deliberation. 'Perhaps it would be better if we both just close our eyes so that we don't get distracted from what we're doing.'

'What *are* we doing?' Weak with desire, Holly could barely form the words, and his smile widened as he gently cupped her face and lowered his mouth slowly towards hers.

'I think it's called living for the moment. And kissing you is the most fantastic moment I've had in a long time,' he said huskily, his mouth a breath away from hers.

She waited in an agony of anticipation, but he didn't seem in a rush to kiss her again, and Holly parted her lips in expectation, hoping that he'd take the hint.

Why on earth had she stopped him?

With a faint whimper of desperation, she looked into his eyes, saw the laughter there and realised that he was teasing her.

'That isn't very kind, Your Highness.' But she found that she was laughing too and her body was on fire.

'I'm not kind.' He murmured the words against her mouth. 'I'm definitely not kind.'

'I couldn't care less—please...' She was breathless and trembling with anticipation. 'Kiss me again.'

Flashing her a megawatt smile of male satisfaction, the prince finally lowered his head and claimed her mouth with his. He kissed her with consummate skill, his touch confident and possessive as he drew every last drop of response from her parted lips.

Her senses were swamped, her pulse accelerating out of control. Holly was aware of nothing except the overwhelming needs of her own body. Her arms tightened around his neck and she felt the sudden change in him. His kiss changed from playful to purposeful, and she realised with a lurch of exhilarating terror that this wasn't a mild flirtation or a game of 'boy kisses girl'. Prince Casper was a sexually experienced man who knew what he wanted and had the confidence to take it.

'Maybe we should slow this down,' she gasped, sinking her fingers into the hard muscle of his shoulders to give extra support to her shaking knees.

'Slow works for me,' he murmured, sliding his hands over the curve of her bottom. 'I'm more than happy to savour every moment of your utterly delectable body, and the game hasn't started yet. Why rush?'

'I didn't exactly mean—oh—' her head fell back as his mouth trailed a hot, sensuous path down her throat 'I can't concentrate on anything when you do that—'

'Concentrate on *me*,' he advised, and then he lifted his head and his stunning dark eyes narrowed. 'You're shivering. Are you nervous?'

Terrified. Desperate. Weak with longing.

'I—I haven't actually done this before.' Her whispered confession caused him to still.

'Exactly what,' he said carefully, 'Haven't you done before?' He released his hold on her bottom and slid his fingers under her chin, forcing her to look at him, his sharply intelligent eyes suddenly searching.

Holly swallowed.

Oh God, he was going to walk away from her. If she told him the truth, this experienced, sophisticated, gorgeous man would let her go and she'd spend the rest of her life regretting it.

Was she really going to let that happen?

No longer questioning herself, she slid her arms back round his neck. She didn't know what was going on here, she had no idea why she was feeling this way, but she knew she didn't want it to stop. 'I meant that I've never done anything like this in such a public place.'

He lifted an eyebrow. 'We're alone.'

'But anyone could walk in.' She wished he'd kiss her again. Would he think she was forward if *she* kissed him? 'What would happen then?'

'They'd be arrested,' he said dryly, 'And carted off to jail.'

'Oh—' Reminded of exactly with whom she was dealing, Holly felt suddenly intimidated. Please, *please*, let him kiss her again. When he'd kissed her she'd forgotten he was a prince. She'd forgotten *everything*. Feeling as though she were standing on the edge of a life-changing moment, Holly gazed up at him and he gave a low laugh.

'You talk too much, do you know that? So—now what? Yes, or no?' He smoothed a rebellious strand of hair away from her flushed cheeks in a slow, sensual movement, and that meaningful touch was enough to raise her temperature several degrees.

He was giving her the choice.

He was telling her that, if he kissed her again, he was going all the way.

‘Yes,’ she whispered, knowing that there would be a price to pay, but more than willing to pay it. ‘Oh, yes.’

If she’d expected her shaky encouragement to be met with a kiss, she was disappointed.

‘If you want to slow things down,’ he murmured against her throat, ‘I suppose I could always eat the dessert that’s waiting for me on the table.’

Holly gave a faint whimper of frustration, and then he lifted his head and she saw the wicked gleam in his eyes. ‘You’re teasing me again.’

‘You asked me to slow down, *tesoro*.’

She was finding it hard to breathe. ‘I’ve definitely changed my mind about that.’

‘Then why don’t you tell me what you want?’ He gave a sexy, knowing smile that sent her body into meltdown.

‘I want you to kiss me again.’ *And not to stop.*

‘Do you?’ His head lowered to hers, thick lashes partially shielding the mockery in his beautiful eyes. ‘You’re not supposed to give me orders.’

‘Are you going to arrest me?’

‘Now, there’s a thought.’ He breathed the words against her mouth. ‘I could clap you in handcuffs and chain you to my bed until I’m bored.’

Her last coherent thought was *Please don’t let him ever be bored*, and then he lifted her, and the demands of his hands on her thighs made it impossible for her not to wrap her legs around his waist. There was the faint rattle of fine bone-china as he positioned her on the table, and only when she felt the roughness of his zip against the soft flesh of her inner thigh did she realise that he’d somehow manoeuvred her skirt up round her waist.

With a gasp of embarrassment, she grabbed at the skirt, but she felt the hard thrust of his body against hers.

‘I *love* the stockings,’ he groaned, his dark eyes ablaze with sexual heat as he scanned the lacy suspender-belt transecting her milky-white thighs.

Thighs that definitely weren’t skinny.

The fragile shoots of her self-confidence withered and died under his blatant scrutiny, and Holly tugged ineffectually at the hem of her skirt, trying to cover herself. ‘ Sylvia insists on stockings,’ she muttered, and then, ‘Do you think you could stop looking at me?’

‘No, I definitely couldn’t,’ he assured her, a laugh in his voice as he released his hold on her bottom, grasped her hands and anchored them firmly around his neck. ‘Take a deep breath in for me.’

‘Why?’

A wicked smile transformed his face from handsome to devastating. ‘Because I want you to undo a few more buttons without me having to move my hands again. I’m never letting go of your bottom.’

Hyper-sensitive to that particular subject, Holly tensed, only to relax again as she registered the unmistakable relish with which he was exploring her body. ‘You *like* my bottom?’

‘I just want to lose myself in you. What’s your secret—exercise? Plastic surgery?’ He gave another driven groan, captured her hips and drew her hard against his powerful erection. ‘What did you *do* to it?’

‘I ate too many biscuits,’ Holly muttered truthfully, and he gave a laugh.

‘I love your sense of humour. And from now on you can expect to receive a box of your favourite kind of biscuits on a daily basis.’

Slightly stunned that he actually seemed to *love* her worst feature, and trying not to be shocked by his unashamed sexuality, Holly was about to speak when his mouth collided with hers again and sparks exploded inside her head. It was like being the centre piece at a fireworks display, and she gave a disbelieving moan that turned to a gasp as her shirt fell open and her bra slid onto her lap.

‘Are these also the result of the famous biscuit-diet?’ An appreciative gleam in his eyes, he transferred his attention from her bottom to her breasts. ‘*Dio*, you’re so fantastic I’m not even *thinking* about anything else while I’m with you.’

Something about that comment struck a slightly discordant note in her dazzled brain. Before she could dissect his words in more detail, he dragged his fingers across one nipple and shockwaves of pleasure sliced through her body. Then he lowered his dark head and flicked her nipple with his tongue.

Tortured by sensation, Holly’s head fell back. Inhibitions blown to the wind by his expert touch, driven to the point of explosion by his vastly greater experience, she knew she was completely out of control and didn’t even care. She felt like a novice rider clinging to the back of a thoroughbred stallion.

The burning ache in her pelvis grew to unbearable proportions, and she ground herself against him with a whimper of need. Desperate to relieve the almost intolerable heat that threatened to burn her up, she dug her nails into his shoulders.

‘Please—oh—please.’

‘My pleasure.’ His eyes were two narrow slits of fire, his jaw hard, streaks of colour highlighting his cheekbones as he scanned her flushed cheeks and parted lips. Then he flattened her to the table and came down over her, the muscles in his shoulders bunched as he protected her from his weight.

Feeling as though she’d been dropped naked onto a bonfire, Holly gave a low moan that he smothered with a slow, purposefully erotic kiss.

‘You are the most delicious thing that has ever been put on my table, my gorgeous waitress,’ he murmured, his desperately clever fingers reaching lower. The intimacy of his touch brought another gasp to her lips and the gasp turned to a low moan as he explored her with effortless skill and merciless disregard for modesty.

‘Are you protected?’ His husky question didn’t begin to penetrate her dazed brain, and she made an unintelligible sound, her legs tightening around his back, her body arching off the table in an attempt to ease the fearsome ache he’d created.

His mouth came down on hers again and she felt his strong hands close around her hips. He shifted his position, tilted her slightly, and then surged into her with a decisive thrust that drew a disbelieving groan from him and a shocked gasp from Holly.

An explosion of unbelievable pleasure suddenly splintered into pain, and her sharp cry caused him to still instantly.

Pain and embarrassment mingled in equal measure and for a moment Holly dug her nails hard into his shoulders, afraid to move in case moving made it worse. And then suddenly the pain was gone and there was only pleasure—dark, forbidden pleasure that beckoned her forwards into a totally new world. She moved her hips restlessly, not sure what she wanted him to do, but needing him to do *something*.

There was the briefest hesitation on his part while he scanned her flushed cheeks, then he surged into her again, but this time more gently, his eyes holding hers the whole time as he introduced her to an intimacy that was new to her. And it was pleasure such as she’d never imagined. *Pleasure that blew her mind*.

She didn’t know herself—her body at the mercy of sensual pleasure and the undeniable skill of an experienced male.

Controlled by his driving thrusts, she raced towards a peak and then was flung high into space, stars exploding in her head as he swallowed her cries of pleasure with his mouth, and reached his own peak with a triumphant groan.

Gradually Holly floated back down to earth, aware of the harshness of his breathing and the frantic beating of her own heart. He’d buried his face in her neck, and Holly focused on his glossy dark hair with glazed vision and numb disbelief.

Had that really just happened?

Swamped by an emotion that she couldn't define, she lifted her hand and tentatively touched him, checking that he was real.

She felt an immediate surge of tension through his powerful frame and heard his sharp intake of breath. Then he lifted his head, stared down into her eyes.

To Holly it was the single most intimate moment of her life, and when he opened his mouth to speak her heart softened.

'The match has started,' he drawled flatly. 'Thanks to you, I've missed kick-off.'

* * *

Keeping his back to the girl, Casper stared blankly through the glass of the President's Suite down into the stadium, struggling to regain some measure of control after what had undoubtedly been the most exciting sexual encounter of his life.

On the pitch below, England had possession of the ball, but for the first time in his life he wasn't in his seat, watching the game.

Which was something else that he didn't understand.

What the hell was going on?

Why wasn't he rushing to watch the game?

And since when had he been driven to have raw, uncontrolled sex on a table with an innocent woman?

Innocent.

Only now was he realising that all the signs had been there. And he'd missed them. *Or had he ignored them?*

Either way, he was fully aware of the irony of the situation.

He'd had relationships with some of the world's most beautiful, experienced and sophisticated women, but none of them had made him feel the way she had.

This was possibly the first time he'd enjoyed uncomplicated, motiveless sex. Sex driven by sheer, animal lust rather than human ambition.

Yes, the girl had known he was a prince.

But he was experienced enough to know that she'd wanted him as a man.

Hearing the faint brush of clothing against flesh, he knew she was dressing. For once he was grateful for the iron self-control and self-discipline that had been drilled into him in his few years in the army, because that was the only thing currently standing between restraint and a repeat performance.

It must have been novelty value, he reflected grimly, his shoulders tensing as he heard her slide her feet into her shoes. That was the only explanation for the explosive chemistry they shared.

Which left them where, precisely?

He turned to find her watching him, and the confusion in her beautiful green eyes turned to consternation as a discreet tap on the door indicated that his presence was required.

The girl threw an embarrassed glance towards the door and frantically smoothed her skirt over her thighs. It was obvious from the uneven line of buttons on her shirt that she'd dressed in a hurry, with hands that hadn't been quite steady. Her hair was still loose, spilling over her narrow shoulders like a fall of autumn leaves, a beacon of glorious colour that effectively announced their intimacy to everyone who saw her.

Focusing on her soft mouth, Casper felt a sudden urge to power her back against the table and lose himself in her incredible body one more time.

'They'll be waiting for you in the royal box.' Her husky voice cut through his disturbingly explicit thoughts, and she hesitated for a moment and then walked over to him.

'Y-your Highness—are you all right?'

Casper stared down into warm green eyes, saw concern there, and suddenly the urge not to let her go was almost painful. There was something hopeful and optimistic about her, and he sensed she hadn't yet discovered that life was a cold, hard place.

Her smile faltered as she studied the grim set of his features. 'I guess this is what you'd call a bit of an awkward moment. So—well—' she waved a hand '—I have to get back to work and you—well...' Her voice tailed off and her white teeth clamped her lower lip. Then she took a deep breath, closed the gap between them, stood on tiptoe and kissed him on the mouth. 'Thank you,' she whispered. 'Thank you for what you've given me.'

Caught by surprise, Casper stood frozen to the spot, enveloped by a warm, soft woman. She tasted of strawberries and summer and an immediate explosion of lust gripped his body.

So he wasn't dead, then, he thought absently, part of him removed from what was happening. *Some things he could still feel.*

And then he heard a massive cheer from the crowd behind him and knew instantly what had happened.

Not so innocent, he thought grimly. Not so innocent that she didn't know how to work the press to her advantage. She was kissing him in the window, in full view of the cameras covering the game and the crowd.

Cameras that were now focusing on them.

She might have been sexually inexperienced, but clearly that hadn't prevented her from having a plan.

Surprised that he was still capable of feeling disillusioned and furious with himself for making such an elemental mistake, Casper locked his fingers round her wrists and withdrew her arms from his neck.

'You can stop now. If you look behind me, I think you'll find that you've achieved your objective.'

Confusion flickered in her eyes and then her attention fixed on something behind him. 'Oh my God.' Her hand covered her mouth. 'H—how did you know?' Her voice was an appalled whisper and she glanced at him in desperate panic. 'They filmed me kissing you. And it's up on the giant screens.' Her voice rose, her cheeks were scarlet, and her reluctant glance towards the stadium ended in a moan of disbelief. 'They're playing it again and again. Oh God, I can't believe this—it looks as though I'm—and my hair is all over the place and my bottom looks *huge*, and—everyone is looking.'

His eyes on the pitch, Casper watched with cool detachment as his friend, the England captain, hit a post with a drop-goal attempt.

'More importantly, you just cost England three points.'

With cold detachment, he realised that he was now going to have to brief his security team to get her out of here, but before he could speak she gave him a reproachful look and sped to the door.

'Do *not* leave this room,' Casper thundered, but she ignored him, tugged open the door, slipped between two of his security guards and sprinted out of sight.

Unaccustomed to having his orders ignored, Casper stood in stunned silence for a few precious seconds and then delivered a single command to his Head of Security. 'Find her.'

'Can you give me her name, Your Highness?'

Casper stared through the door. 'No,' he said grimly. 'I can't.'

All he knew was that she clearly wasn't as innocent as he'd first thought.

* * *

Feeling nothing except a desperate desire to hide from the world, Holly sprinted out of the room, shrinking as she passed a television screen in time to overhear the commentator say, '*Looks like the opening score goes to Prince Casper.*'

Hurtling down the stairs, she ran straight into her boss, who was marching up the stairs towards the President's Suite like a general leading an invading army onto enemy territory.

'Sylvia.' Her breath coming in pants, Holly stared at the other woman in horrified silence, noticing the blaze of fury in her eyes and the tightness of her lips.

'*How dare you?*' Sylvia's voice shook with anger. 'How dare you humiliate me in this way? I picked you especially because I thought you were sensible and decent. And you have destroyed the reputation of my company!'

'No!' Horribly guilty, overwhelmed by panic and humiliation, Holly shook her head. 'They don't even know who I am, and—'

'The British tabloid press will have your name before you're out of the stadium,' Sylvia spat. 'The entire nation heard the commentator say "That's one girl who isn't lying back thinking of England". If you wanted sleazy notoriety, then you've got it.'

Holly flinched under the verbal blows, feeling as vulnerable as a little rowing boat caught in a heavy storm out at sea. *What had she done?* This wasn't a little transgression that would remain her private secret. This was—this was... 'Prince Casper has kissed lots of women,' she muttered. 'So it won't be much of a story—'

'You're a waitress!' Sylvia was shaking with anger. 'Of course it's a story!'

Holly stared at her in appalled silence, realising that she hadn't once given any thought to the consequences of what they were doing. She hadn't thought at all. It had been impulse, chemistry, intimacy; she bit back a hysterical laugh.

What was intimate about having your love life plastered on sixty-nine-metre screens for the amusement of a crowd of eighty-two thousand people?

She swallowed painfully. 'Sylvia, I—'

'You're fired for misconduct!'

Her world crumbling around her, Holly was about to plead her case when she caught sight of Eddie striding towards them, his face like a storm cloud.

Unable to take any more, Holly gasped another apology and fled towards the kitchens. Heart pounding, cheeks flaming, she grabbed her bag and her coat, changed into her trainers and made for the door.

Nicky intercepted her. 'Where are you going?'

'I don't know.' Feeling dazed, Holly looked at her helplessly. 'Home. Anywhere.'

'You can't go home. It's the first place they'll look.' Brisk and businesslike, Nicky handed her a hat and a set of keys. 'Stick the hat on and hide that gorgeous hair. Then go to my flat.'

'No one knows who I am.'

'By now they'll know more about you than you do. Go to my flat, draw the curtains and don't answer the door to anyone. Have you got the money for a cab?'

'I'll take the bus.' Too shocked to argue, Holly obediently scooped her hair into a bunch and tucked it under the hat.

'No way.' Nicky stuffed a note in her hand. 'Get a taxi—and hope the driver hasn't seen the pictures on the screen. Come to think of it, sit with a hanky over your nose. Pretend you have a cold or something. Go, go, *go!*'

Realising that she'd set into motion a series of events that she couldn't control, Holly started to walk towards the door when Nicky caught her arm.

'Just tell me one thing,' she whispered, a wicked gleam in her eyes. 'The rumours about the prince's talents—are they true?'

Holly blinked. 'I—'

'That good, huh?' Nicky gave a slow, knowing smile. 'I guess that answers my question. Way to go, baby.'

* * *

Ruthlessly focusing his mind on the game, Casper watched as the England winger swerved round his opponent and dived for the corner.

The bored blonde gasped in sympathy. 'Oh no, the poor guy's tripped. Right on the line. Why is everyone cheering? That's *so* mean.'

'He didn't trip, he scored a try,' Casper growled, simmering with masculine frustration at her inappropriate comment. 'And they're cheering because that try puts England level.'

'This game is a total mystery to me,' the girl muttered, her eyes wandering to a group of women at the back of the royal box. 'Nice shoes. I wonder where she got them? Are there any decent shops in this area?'

Casper blocked out her comments, watching as the England fly-half prepared to take the kick.

A hush fell over the stadium and Saskia glanced around her in bemusement. 'I don't understand any of this. Why is everyone so quiet? And why does that gorgeous guy keep staring at the ball and then the post? Can't he make up his mind whether to kick it or not?'

'He's about to take a very difficult conversion kick right from the touchline. He's concentrating.' Casper's gaze didn't shift from the pitch. 'And if you open your mouth again I'll have you removed.'

Saskia snapped her mouth shut, the ball snaked through the posts, the crowd roared its approval, and a satisfied Casper turned wearily to the fidgeting blonde next to him. 'All right. *Now* you can ask me whatever you want to know.'

She gave him a hopeful look. 'Is the game nearly over?'

Casper subdued a flash of irritation and resolved never again to invite anyone who didn't share his passion for rugby. 'It's half time.'

'So we have to sit through the whole thing again? Tell me again how you know the captain.'

'We were in the rugby team at school together.'

Clearly determined to engage him in conversation now that there was a pause in the game, Saskia sidled a little closer. 'It was very bad of you to kiss that waitress. You are a very naughty boy, Cas. She'll go to the newspapers, you know. That sort always do.'

Would she?

Casper stared blankly at the crowd, trying to blot out the scent of her hair and the taste of her mouth—the softness of her deliciously rounded bottom as she'd lifted herself against him.

For a brief moment in time, she'd made him forget. And that was more than anyone else had ever done.

'Why does your popularity never dip?' Clearly determined to ingratiate herself, Saskia kept trying. 'Whatever you do, however scandalous you are, the citizens of Santallia still love you.'

'They love him because he's turned Santallia from a sleepy, crumbling Mediterranean country into a hub of foreign investment and tourism. People are excited about what's happening.' It was one of Casper's friends, Marco, who spoke, a guy in his early thirties who had studied economics with him at university and now ran a successful business. 'Santallia is *the* place to be. The downhill-ski race has brought the tourists to the mountains in the winter, and the yacht race does the same for the coast in the summer. The new rugby stadium is sold out for the entire season, and everyone is talking about the Grand Prix. As a sporting venue, we're second to none.'

Hearing his successes listed should have lifted his mood, but Casper still felt nothing.

He made no effort to take part in the conversation going on around him and was relieved when the second half started because it offered him a brief distraction.

'What Santallia really wants from you is an heir, Cas.' Saskia delivered what she obviously thought was an innocent smile. 'You can't play the field for ever. Sooner or later you're going to have to break your supermodel habit and think about the future of your country. Oh no, fighting has broken out on the pitch. They're all sort of locked together.'

Leaving it to an exasperated Marco to enlighten her, Casper watched as the scrum half put the ball into the scrum. 'That was never straight,' he murmured, a frown on his face as he glanced at the referee, waiting for him to blow the whistle.

‘Did you read that survey that put you top of the list of most eligible single men in the world? You can have any woman you want, Cas.’ Oblivious to the impact of her presence on their enjoyment, Saskia continued to pepper the entire second half with her inane comments, all of which Casper ignored.

‘A minute of play to go,’ Marco murmured, and Casper watched as England kept the ball among the forwards until the final whistle shrilled.

The crowd erupted into ecstatic cheers at the decisive England victory, and he rose to his feet, abruptly terminating Saskia’s attempts to converse with him.

Responsibility pressing in on him, he strolled over to his Head of Security. ‘Anything?’

‘No, sir,’ Emilio admitted reluctantly. ‘She’s vanished.’

‘You found out her name?’

‘Holly, sir. Holly Phillips. She’s a waitress with the contract catering company.’

‘Address?’

‘I already sent a team to her home, sir. She isn’t there.’

‘But I’m sure the photographers are,’ Cas said grimly, and Emilio nodded.

‘Two rows of them, waiting to interview her. Prince and waitress—it’s going to be tomorrow’s headlines. You want her to have protection?’

‘A woman who chooses to kiss me in full view of television cameras and paparazzi doesn’t need my protection.’ Casper spoke in a flat, toneless voice. ‘She knew exactly what she was doing. And now she’s lying low because being unavailable will make it look as though she has something to hide. And having something to hide will make her story more valuable.’

She’d used him.

Casper gave a twisted smile. *And he’d used her, too, hadn’t he?*

Emilio frowned. ‘You think she did it to make money, sir?’

‘Of course.’ She’d actually had the temerity to thank him for what he’d given her! At the time he’d wondered what she meant, but now it was blindingly obvious.

He’d given her media opportunities in abundance.

He searched inside himself for a feeling of disgust or disillusionment. *Surely* he should feel something? Apparently she’d considered the loss of her virginity to be a reasonable price to pay for her moment of fame and fortune and that attitude deserved at least a feeling of mild disappointment on his part.

But disillusionment, disgust and disappointment all required expectations and, when it came to women, he had none.

Emilio was watching him. ‘You don’t want us to find her, Your Highness?’

Ruthlessly pushing aside thoughts of her soft mouth and delicious curves, Casper glanced back towards the pitch where the crowd was going wild. ‘I think we can be sure that when she’s ready she’ll turn up. At this precise moment she’s lying low, laughing to herself and counting her money.’

Chapter 3

'You have *got* to stop crying!' Exasperated and concerned, Nicky put her arms round Holly. 'And—well—it isn't that serious, really.'

'Nicky, *I'm pregnant!* And it's the prince's baby.' Holly turned reddened eyes in her direction. 'How much more serious can it get?'

Nicky winced. 'Isn't it too soon to do a test? It could be wrong.'

'It isn't too soon. It's been over two weeks!' Holly waved a hand towards the bathroom. 'And it isn't wrong. It's probably still on the floor where I dropped it if you want to check, but it doesn't exactly give you a million options. It's either pregnant or not pregnant. And I'm *definitely* pregnant! Oh God, I don't believe it. Once—*once*—I have sex and now I'm pregnant. Some people try for *years*.'

'Yes, well, the prince is obviously super-fertile as well as super-good looking.' Nicky gave a helpless shrug, searching for something to say. 'You always said you couldn't wait to have a baby.'

'But *with* someone! Not on my own. I never, ever, wanted to be a single mother. It was the one thing I promised myself was never going to happen. It *really* matters to me.' Holly pulled another tissue out of the box and blew her nose hard. 'When I dreamed about having a baby, I dreamed about giving it everything I never had.'

'By which I presume you mean a father. God, your dad *really* screwed you up.' With that less than comforting comment, Nicky sank back against the sofa and picked at her nail varnish. 'I mean, how could anyone have a kid like you, so kind and loving, and then basically just, well, walk out? And you were seven—old enough to know you'd been rejected. And not even coming to find you after your mum died. I mean, for goodness' sake!'

Not wanting to be reminded of her barren childhood, Holly burrowed deeper inside the sleeping bag. 'He didn't know she'd died.'

'If he'd stayed in touch he would have known.'

'Do you mind if we don't talk about this?' Her voice high-pitched, Holly rolled onto her back and stared up at the ceiling. 'I have to decide what to do. I've lost my job, and I can't go home because the press are like a pack of wolves outside my flat. And the whole world thinks I'm a giant slut.' Dying of embarrassment, her insides twisting with regret, she buried her face in the pillow.

And she *was* a slut, wasn't she?

She'd had sex with a total stranger.

And not just sex—recklessly abandoned, wild sex. Sex that had taken her breath away and wiped her mind of guilt, worry, *morals*.

Whenever Eddie had touched her, her first thought had always been *I mustn't get pregnant*. When the prince had touched her the only thought in her head had been more, *more*...

What had happened to her?

Yes, she'd been upset and insecure about herself after her break up with Eddie, but that didn't explain or excuse it.

And then she remembered the way the prince had planted himself protectively in front of her, shielding her from the rest of the group. What other man had ever shown that degree of sensitivity? He'd noticed she was upset, shielded her, and then...

Appalled with herself, she gave another moan of regret, and Nicky yanked the sleeping bag away from her.

'Stop torturing yourself. You're going to be a great mother.'

'How can I be a great mother? I'm going to have to give my baby to someone else to look after while I work! Which basically means that someone else will pick my baby up when it cries.'

'Well, if it's a real bawler that might be an advantage.'

Holly wiped the tears from her face with a mangled damp hanky. 'How can it be an advantage? I want to be there for my baby.'

'Well, perhaps you'll win the lottery.'

'I can't afford to play the lottery. I can't even afford to pay you rent.'

'I don't want rent, and you can sleep on my sofa as long as you need to.' Nicky shrugged. 'You can't exactly go home, can you? The entire British public are gagging for pictures of you. "Where's the waitress?" is today's headline. Yesterday it was "royal's rugby romp". Rumour has it that they're offering a reward to anyone who shops you. Everyone wants to know about that kiss.'

'For crying out loud.' Holly blew her nose hard. 'People in the world are starving and they want to write about the fact that I kissed a prince? Doesn't anyone have any sense of perspective? *Thank goodness they didn't know the whole story.*

'Well, we all need a little light relief now and then, and people love it when royalty show they're human.' Nicky sprang to her feet. 'I'm hungry and there's no food in this flat.'

'I don't want anything,' Holly said miserably, too embarrassed to admit to her friend that the real reason she was so upset was because the prince hadn't made any attempt to get in touch.

Even though she knew it was ridiculous to expect him to contact her, a small part of her was still desperately hoping that he would. Yes, she was a waitress and he was a prince, but he'd liked her, hadn't he? He'd thrown all the other people out of the room so that he could be with *her*, and he'd said all those nice things about her, and then...

Holly's body burned in a rush of sexual excitement that shocked her. Surely after sex as mind-blowing as that, he might have been tempted to track her down?

But how could he get in touch when the press was staking out her flat? She had a mental image of the prince hiding behind a bush, waiting for the opportunity to bang on her door. 'Do you think he's really annoyed about the headlines?'

'Don't tell me you're worrying about *him!*' Nicky had her hand in a packet of cereal. 'He just pulls up his bloody drawbridge, leaving the enemy on the outside!'

Holly bit her lip. She was the one who'd kissed him by the window. *She'd had no idea.* 'I feel guilty.'

'Oh, please! This is Prince Casper we're talking about. He doesn't care what the newspapers write about him. *You're* the one who's going to suffer. If you ask me, the least he could have done was give you some security or advice. But he's left you to take the flak!'

Holly's spirits sank further at that depressing analysis. 'He doesn't know where I am.'

'He's a prince,' Nicky said contemptuously, flopping back down on the sofa, her mouth full of cereal. 'He commands a whole army, complete with special forces. He could find you in an instant if he wanted to. MI5, FBI, I don't know—one of that lot. One word from him and there'd be a satellite trained on my flat.'

Shrinking at the thought, Holly slid back into the sleeping bag. 'Close the blinds.' *What had she done?*

'Well, you can go on hiding if that's what you want. Or you could give those sharks outside your flat an interview.'

'Are you mad?'

'No, I'm practical. Thanks to His Royal Highness, you have no job and you're trapped indoors. Sell your story to the highest bidder. "My lunchtime of love" or "sexy Santallian stud"?'

Appalled, Holly shook her head. 'Absolutely not. I couldn't do that.'

'You have a baby to support.'

'And I don't want my child looking back at the year he was conceived and seeing that his life started with me dishing the dirt on his dad in the papers! I just want the whole thing to go away.'

It was ironic, she thought numbly, that she'd fantasised about this exact moment ever since she was a teenager. She'd *longed* to be a mother. Longed to have a child of her own—to be able to create the sort of family she'd always wanted.

She'd even lain awake at night, imagining what it must be like to discover that you were pregnant and to share that excitement with a partner. She'd imagined his delight and his pride. She'd imagined him pulling her into a protective hug and fiercely declaring that he would never leave his family.

Not once, ever, had she imagined that she'd be in this position, doing it on her own.

One rash moment, one transgression—*just one*—and her life had been blown apart. Even though she was in a state of shock, the deeper implications weren't lost on her. Her hopes of eventually being able to melt back into her old life unobserved died. She knew that once someone spotted that she was pregnant it wouldn't take long for them to do the maths.

This was Prince Casper of Santallia's child.

Nicky stood up. 'I need to buy some food. Back in a minute.' The front door slammed behind her, and moments later Holly heard the doorbell. Assuming Nicky had forgotten something, she slid off the sofa and padded over to the door.

'So this is where you've been hiding!' Eddie stood in the doorway, holding a huge, ostentatious bunch of dark-red roses wrapped in cheap cellophane.

Holly simply stared, suddenly realising that she'd barely thought about him over the past two weeks.

'I didn't expect to see you here, Eddie.'

He gave a benign smile. 'I expect it seems like a dream.' Sure of himself, Eddie smiled down at her. 'Aren't you going to invite me in?'

'No. You broke off our engagement, Eddie. I was devastated.' Holly frowned to herself. Her devastation hadn't lasted long, though, had it? It had been supplanted by bigger issues—but should that have been possible? Did broken hearts really mend that quickly?

'I can't talk about this on the doorstep.' He pushed his way into the flat and thrust the flowers into her hands. Past their best, a few curling petals floated onto the floor. 'Here. These are for you. To show that I forgive you.'

'Forgive me?' Holly winced as a thorn buried itself into her hand. Gingerly she put the flowers down on the hall table and sucked the blood from her finger. 'What are you forgiving me for?'

'For kissing the prince.' Eddie's face turned the same shade as the roses. 'For making a fool of me in public.'

'Eddie—you were the one partying in that box with your new girlfriend.'

'She was no one special. We both need to stop hurting each other. I admit that I was furious when I saw you kissing the prince, then I realised that it must have been hard on you, watching me get that promotion and then losing me. But it seems to have loosened up something inside you. A whole new you emerged.' He grinned like a schoolboy who had just discovered girls. 'You've always been quite shy and a bit prim. And suddenly you were, well, wild. When I saw you kissing him, I couldn't help thinking it should have been me.'

Looking at him, Holly realised that not once during her entire passionate episode with the prince had she thought 'this should have been Eddie'.

'I know you only did it to bring me to my senses,' Eddie said. 'And it worked. I see now that you are capable of passion. I just need to be more patient with you.'

The prince hadn't been patient, Holly thought absently. He'd been very *impatient*. Rough, demanding, forceful.

'I didn't kiss the prince to make you jealous.' She'd kissed him because she couldn't help herself.

'Never mind that now. Put my ring back on your finger, and we'll go out there and tell the press we'd had a row and you kissed the prince because you were pining for me.'

Life had a strange sense of humour, Holly reflected numbly. Eddie was offering to get back together. But she was already being propelled down a very different path.

'That isn't possible.'

'We're going to make a great couple.' He was smugly confident. 'We'll have the Porsche and the big house. You don't need to be a waitress any more.'

'I like being a waitress,' Holly said absently. 'I like meeting new people and talking to them. People tell you a lot over a cup of coffee.'

'But who wants to be weighed down with someone else's problems when you can stay at home and look after me?'

'It *can't* happen, Eddie—'

'I know it's like a fairy tale, but it *is* happening. By the way, the flowers cost a fortune, so you'd better put them in water. I need the bathroom.'

'Door on the right,' Holly said automatically, and then gave a gasp. 'No, Eddie, you can't go in there.' Oh, dear God, she'd left everything on the floor—he'd see.

Wanting to drag him back but already too late, she stood there, paralysed into inactivity by the sheer horror of the moment. The inevitability was agonising. It was like witnessing a pile-up—watching, powerless, as a car accelerated towards the back of another.

For a moment there was no sound. No movement.

Then Eddie appeared in the door, his face white. 'Well.' His voice sounded tight and very unlike himself. 'That certainly explains why you don't want to get back together again.'

'Eddie—'

'You're holding out for a higher prize.' Looking slightly dazed, he stumbled into the living room of Nicky's flat. Then he looked at her, his mouth twisted with disgust. 'A year we were together! And we never—you made we wait.'

'Because it didn't feel right,' she muttered, mortified by how it must look, and anxious that she'd damaged his ego. That was the one part of this whole situation that she hadn't even been able to explain to herself. Why had she held Eddie at a distance for so long and yet ended up half-naked on the table with Prince Casper within thirty minutes of meeting him? 'Eddie, I really don't—'

'You really don't *what*?' He was shouting now, his features contorted with rage as he paced across Nicky's wooden floor. 'You really don't know why you slept with him? Well I'll tell you, shall I? *You slept with him because he's a bloody prince!*'

'No—'

'And you've really hit the jackpot, haven't you?' He gave a bitter laugh. 'No wonder you weren't excited about my Porsche. I suppose he drives a bloody Ferrari, does he?'

Holly blinked. 'I have no idea what he drives, Eddie, but—'

'But it's enough to know you're getting a prince and a palace!'

'That isn't true. I haven't even decided what to do yet.'

'You mean you haven't decided how to make the most money out of the opportunity.' Eddie strode towards the door of her flat, scooping up the flowers on the way. 'I'm taking these with me. You don't deserve them. And you don't deserve *me*. Good luck in your new life.'

Holly winced as the flowers bashed against the door frame and flinched as he slammed the door. A horrible silence descended on the flat.

A few forlorn rose petals lingered on the floor like drops of blood, and her finger stung from the sharp thorn.

She felt numb with shock. Awful. And guilty, because it was true that she'd shared something with the prince that she hadn't shared with Eddie.

And she didn't understand that.

She didn't understand any of it.

Two weeks ago she would have relished the idea of getting back together with Eddie.

Now she was just relieved that he'd gone.
Sinking onto Nicky's sofa, she tried to think clearly and logically.
There was no need to panic.
No one would be able to guess she was pregnant for at least four months.
She had time to work out a plan.

* * *

Flanked by four bodyguards, gripping a newspaper like a weapon, Casper hammered on the door of the fourth-floor flat.

'You didn't have to come here in person, Your Highness.' Emilio glanced up and down the street. 'We could have had her brought to you.'

'I didn't want to wait that long,' Casper growled. In the past few hours he'd discovered that he was, after all, still capable of emotion. Boiling, seething anger. Anger towards her, but mostly at himself, for allowing himself to be put in this position. What had happened to his skills of risk assessment? Since when had the sight of a delicious female body caused him to abandon caution and reason? Women had been throwing themselves in his path since he'd started shaving, but never before had he acted with such lamentable lack of restraint.

She'd set a trap and he'd walked right into it.

'I *know* she's in there. Get this door open.'

Before his security team could act, the door opened and she stood there, looking at him.

Prepared to let loose the full force of his anger, Casper stilled, diverted from his mission by her captivating green eyes.

Holly.

He knew her name now.

She was dressed in an oversized, pale pink tee-shirt with a large embroidered polar bear on the front. Her hair tumbled loose over her shoulders and her feet were bare. It was obvious that she'd been in bed, and she looked at him with shining eyes, apparently thrilled to see him. 'Your Highness?'

She looked impossibly young, fresh and naïve and Casper wondered again what had possessed him to get involved with someone like her.

She had trouble written across her forehead.

And then she smiled, and for a few seconds he forgot everything except the warmth of that smile. The anger retreated inside him, and the only thing in his head was a clear memory of her long legs wrapped around his waist. Casper gritted his teeth, rejecting the surge of lust, furious with himself, and at the same time slightly perplexed because he'd never in his life felt sexual desire for a woman dressed in what looked like a child's tee-shirt.

This whole scenario was *not* turning out the way he'd expected.

How could he still feel raw lust for someone who'd capsized his life like a boat in a storm? And why was she staring at him as if they were acting out the final scenes of a romantic movie? After the stunt she'd pulled, he'd expected hard-nosed negotiation.

'I see you didn't bother dressing for my visit.' Ignoring the flash of hurt in her eyes, he strode into the tiny flat without invitation, leaving his security team to ensure their privacy.

'Well, obviously I had no idea that you'd be coming.' She tugged self-consciously at the hem of her tee-shirt. 'It's been well over two weeks.'

Casper assessed the apartment in a single glance, taking in the rumpled sleeping bag on the sofa. *So this was where she'd been hiding.* 'I have a degree in maths. I know exactly how long it's been.'

Her eyes widened in admiration. 'You're good at maths? I always envy people who are good with numbers. Maths was never really my thing.' Colour shaded her cheeks. 'But I always had pretty good marks in English. I think I'm more of a creative person.'

At a loss to understand how the conversation had turned to school reports, Casper refocused his mind, the gravity of the situation bearing down on him. 'Do you have any idea what you've done?'

Biting her lip, she looked away for a few seconds, then met his gaze again. 'You're talking about the fact I kissed you in front of the window, aren't you?' Her glance was apologetic. 'It's probably a waste of time saying this, but I really *am* sorry. I honestly had no idea how much trouble that would cause. You have to remember I'm not used to the press. I don't know how they operate.'

'But you're learning fast.' Her attempt at innocence simply fed his irritation. He would have had more respect for her if she'd simply admitted what she'd done.

But no confession was forthcoming. Instead she gave a tentative smile. 'Well, I've been amazed by how persistent they are, if that's what you're saying. That newspaper you're holding—' she glanced at it warily '—is there another story today? I don't know how you stand it. Do you eventually just get used to it?'

Her friendliness was as unexpected as it was inappropriate, and Casper wondered what on earth she thought she was doing. Did she really think she could act the way she had and still enjoy civilised conversation?

The newspaper still in his hand, he strolled to the window of the flat and looked down into the street. How long did they have? By rights the press should already have found them. 'I've had people looking for you.'

'Really?' Her face brightened slightly, as if he'd just delivered good news. 'I sort of assumed— Well, I thought you'd forgotten about me.'

'It would be hard to forget about you,' he bit out, 'Given that your name has been in the press every day for the past fortnight.'

'Oh.' There was a faint colour in her cheeks, and disappointment flickered in her eyes, as if she'd been hoping for a different reason. 'The publicity is awful, isn't it? That's why I'm not at my flat. I didn't *want* them to find me.'

'Of course you didn't. That would have ruined everything, wouldn't it?' He waited for her to crumble and confess, but instead she looked confused.

'You sound *really* angry. I don't really blame you, although to be honest I thought you'd be used to all the attention by now. D-do you want to sit down or something, sir?' Stammering nervously, she swept the sleeping bag from the sofa, along with a jumper, an empty box of tissues and a pair of sheer black stockings that could have come straight from the pages of an erotic magazine. Bending over revealed another few inches of her impossibly long legs, and Casper's body heated to a level entirely inconsistent with a cold February day in London.

'I don't want to sit down,' he said thickly, appalled to discover that despite her sins all he really wanted to do was spread her flat and re-enact their last encounter.

Her gaze clashed with his and everything she was holding tumbled onto the floor. 'C—can I get you a drink? Coffee? It's just instant—nothing fancy—' Her voice was husky and laced with overtones that suggested coffee was the last thing on her mind. Colour darkened her cheeks and she dragged her gaze from his, clearly attempting to deny the chemistry that had shifted the temperature of the room from Siberian to scorching.

'Nothing.'

'No. I don't suppose there's much here that would interest you.' She tugged at the tee-shirt again. 'Sorry—this whole situation is a bit surreal. To be honest, I can't believe you're here. I mean, you're a prince and I'm—'

'Pinching yourself?'

'It is weird,' she confided nervously. 'And a bit awkward, I suppose.'

'Awkward?' Shocked out of his contemplation of her mouth by her inappropriate choice of adjective, Casper turned on her. 'We've gone way beyond *awkward*.' His tone was savage, and he saw her take several steps backwards. 'What were you thinking? What was going on in that manipulative female brain of yours? Was it all about making a quick profit? Or did you have an even more ambitious objective?'

The sudden loss of colour from her face made the delicate freckles on her nose seem more pronounced. 'Sorry?'

Casper slammed the newspaper front-page up onto the coffee table. 'I hope you don't live to regret what you've done.'

He watched as she scanned the headline, her soft, pink lips moving silently as she read: *Prince's Baby Bliss*. Then her eyes flew to his in startled horror. 'Oh, no.'

'Is it true?' The expression on her face killed any hope that the press had been fabricating the story to increase their circulation figures. 'You're pregnant?'

'Oh my God—how can they have found out? How can they possibly know?'

'*Is it true?*' His thunderous demand made her flinch.

'Yes, it's true!' Covering her face with her hands, she plopped onto the sofa. 'But this isn't how—I mean, I haven't even got my head round it myself.' Her hands dropped. 'How did they find out?'

'They rely on greedy people willing to sell sleaze.' The bite in his tone seemed to penetrate her shock, and she wrapped her arms around her waist in a gesture of self-protection.

'I take it from that remark that you think I told them. And I can see this looks bad, but—' She broke off, her voice hoarse. 'It wasn't me. Honestly. I haven't spoken to the press. Not once.'

'Then how do you explain the fact that the story is plastered over the front pages of every European newspaper? The palace press-office was inundated with calls yesterday from journalists wanting a comment on the happy news that I am at last to be a father.' He frowned slightly, disconcerted by her extreme pallor. 'You're very pale.'

'And that's surprising? Have you *read* that thing?' Her voice rose. 'It's all right for you. You're used to this. Your face is always on the front of newspapers, but this is all new to me, and I hate it! My life doesn't feel like my own any more. *Everyone* is talking about me.'

'That's the usual consequence of selling your story to a national newspaper.'

But she didn't appear to have heard him. Her eyes were fixed on the newspaper as though he'd introduced a deadly snake into her flat.

'It must have been Eddie,' she whispered, her lips barely moving. 'He knew about the baby. He's the only one who could have done this.'

'You disgust me.' Casper didn't bother softening his tone, and shock flared in her green eyes.

'*I disgust you?*' She couldn't have looked more devastated if he'd told her that a much-loved pet had died. 'But you—I mean, we—'

'We had sex.' Casper delivered the words with icy cool, devoid of sympathy as yet another layer of colour fled from her cheeks. 'And you used that to your advantage.'

'Wait a minute—just slow down. How can any of this be to my advantage?' Gingerly she reached for the newspaper and scanned the story. Then she dropped it as though she'd been burned. 'This is *awful*. They know *everything*. Really private stuff, like my dad leaving home when I was seven and the fact I was taken into care, stuff I don't talk about.' Her voice broke. 'My whole life is laid out on the front page for everyone to read. And it's just *horrible*.' Her distress appeared to be genuine and Casper felt a flicker of exasperation.

'What exactly did you think would happen? That they'd only print nice stories about you? Nice stories don't sell newspapers.'

'*I didn't tell them!*' She rose to her feet, her tousled hair spilling over her shoulders. 'It *must* have been Eddie.'

'And what was his excuse? He didn't feel ready for fatherhood? Was he only too eager to shift the responsibility onto some other guy?'

Puzzled, she stared at him for a moment, and then her mouth fell open. 'This isn't Eddie's baby, if that's what you're implying!'

'Really?' Casper raised an eyebrow in sardonic appraisal. 'Then you have been busy. Exactly how many men were you sleeping with a few weeks ago? Or can't you remember?'

Hot colour poured into her cheeks, but this time it was anger, not embarrassment. ‘You!’ Her voice shook with emotion and her eyes were fierce. ‘You’re the only man I was sleeping with. The only man I’ve *ever* slept with. And you know it.’

Casper remembered that shockingly intense and intimate moment when he’d been *sure* she was a virgin. Then he reviewed the facts. ‘At the time I really fell for that one. But virgins don’t have hot, frantic sex with a guy within moments of meeting him, *tesoro*. Apart from that major miscalculation on your part, you were pretty convincing.’

She lifted her hands to her burning face. ‘That was the first time I’d ever—’

‘Fleeced a billionaire prince?’ Helpfully, Casper finished her sentence, and her eyes widened.

‘You think I set some sort of trap for you? You think I *faked* being a virgin? For heaven’s sake—what sort of women do you mix with?’

Not wanting to dwell on that subject, Casper watched her with cool disdain. ‘I know this isn’t my baby,’ he said flatly. ‘It isn’t possible.’

‘You mean because it was just the once.’ She sank back onto the sofa, stumbling over the words. ‘I know it’s unlikely, but that’s what’s happened. And you might be a prince, but that doesn’t give you the right to speak to me as though I’m—’ Unsure of herself, her eyes slid to the door, as if she were worried the security guards might arrest her for treason.

‘What are you, Holly? What’s the correct name for a woman who sleeps with a guy for money?’

Her body was trembling. ‘I haven’t asked you for money.’

‘I’m sure what you earned from the newspapers will keep you and *Eddie* going for a while. What did you have planned—monthly bulletins to keep the income going? *Now* I understand why you thanked me.’

‘Th—thanked you?’

‘As you kissed me in the window.’ His mouth curved into a cynical smile. ‘You thanked me for what I’d given you.’

‘But that was—’ She broke off and gave a little shake of her head. ‘I was feeling *really* low that day. The reason you walked over to me in the first place was because I was crying. And I thanked you because you made me feel good about myself. Nothing else. Up to that point in my life, I knew nothing about the way the media worked.’

‘You expect me to believe that it’s coincidence that you’ve been in hiding for over two weeks? You were holding out for the big one. The exclusive to end all exclusives.’ He saw panic in her eyes and felt a flash of satisfaction. ‘I don’t think you have any idea what you’ve done.’

‘What *I’ve* done? You were there, too! You were part of this, and I think you’re being *totally* unfair!’ Her hands were clasped by her sides, her fingers opening and closing nervously. ‘I’m having *your* baby. Frankly, that in itself is enough to make me feel a bit wobbly, without you standing there accusing me of being a—a—’ She choked on the word. ‘And, as if that isn’t bad enough, you’re telling me you don’t believe it’s yours!’

‘You want to know what I think?’ His tone was the same temperature as his heart—icy cold. ‘I think you were already pregnant when you turned on the tears and had sex with me on my table. That’s why you were crying. I think you were panicking about how you’d cope with a baby on a waitress’s salary. And you saw me as a lucrative solution. All you had to do was pretend to be a virgin, and then I wouldn’t argue a paternity claim.’

‘That’s all rubbish! I had sex with you because—’ She broke off and gave a hysterical laugh. ‘I don’t *know* why I had sex with you! Frankly the whole episode was pretty shocking.’

Their eyes collided, and shared memories of that moment passed between them like a shaft of electricity.

His eyes dropped to her wide, lush mouth and he found himself remembering how she’d tasted and felt. Even though he now realised that she couldn’t possibly have been a virgin, he still wanted her with almost indecent desperation.

'*Stop* looking at me like that,' she whispered, and Casper gave a twisted smile, acknowledging the chemistry that held them both fast. Invisible chains, drawing them together like prisoners doomed to the same fate.

'You should be pleased I'm looking at you like that,' he drawled softly, 'Because good sex is probably the only thing we have going for us.'

Even as his mind was withdrawing, his hands wanted to reach out and haul her hard against him. He saw her eyes darken to deep emerald, saw her throat move as she murmured a denial.

'I honestly don't know what's going on here,' she muttered. 'But I think you'd better leave.'

Somehow her continuing claim at innocence made the whole episode all the more distasteful, and the face of another woman flashed into his brain—a woman so captivating that he'd been blind to everything except her extraordinary beauty. 'What sort of heartless bitch would lie about the identity of her baby's father?' Ruthlessly he pushed the memories down, his anger trebling. 'Don't you have a conscience?' His words sucked the last of the colour from her cheeks.

'Get out!' Her voice sounded strange. High pitched. Robotic. 'I don't care if you're a prince, just get out!' Her legs were shaking and her face was as white as an Arctic snowfield. 'I was *so* pleased to see you. That day when you comforted me when I was upset—I thought you were a really nice, decent person. A bit scary, perhaps, but basically nice. When I opened the door and saw you standing there I actually thought you'd come to see if I was OK—can you believe that? And now I feel like a complete fool. Because you weren't thinking about me. You were thinking about yourself. So just go! Go back to your palace, or your castle, or wherever it is you live.' The wave of her hand suggested she didn't care where he lived. 'And do whatever it is you want to do.'

'You've robbed me of that option.'

'Why? Even if the world does think I'm having your baby, *so what?* Don't tell me you're worried about your reputation. You're the *playboy prince*.' There was hurt in her voice, that same voice that only moments earlier had been soft and gentle. 'Since when has reputation mattered to you? When you have sex with a woman, everyone just smiles and says what a stud you are. I'm sure the fact that you've fathered a child will gain you some major testosterone points. Walk away, Your Highness. Isn't that what you usually do?'

'You just don't get it, do you?' His voice was thickened and raw. 'You have no idea what you've done.'

What exactly *had* she done?

Appalled, Holly stared at him.

The anger in his face was real enough. It was clear that he genuinely believed that he couldn't be the father of her baby. And her only proof was the fact that she'd been a virgin.

But he didn't believe her, did he?

And could she blame him for that? It was true that she hadn't behaved like a virgin. The entire encounter had been one long burst of explosive chemistry. It had been the only time in her life that she'd been out of control.

And that chemistry was back in the room, racking up the tension between them to intolerable levels, the electricity sparking between them like a live cable. His gaze dropped to her lips and she saw in his eyes that his mind was in exactly the same place as hers.

It was like a chain reaction. His glance, her heartbeat, harsh breathing—*her or him?*—and tension—tension like she'd never experienced before.

Streaks of colour accentuated his aristocratic cheekbones and he stepped towards her at exactly the same moment she moved towards him. The attraction was so fierce and frantic that when she heard a ringing sound she actually wondered whether an alarm had gone off.

Then she realised that it was the phone.

Hauling his gaze from hers, Casper inhaled sharply. '*Don't* answer that.'

Still reeling from the explosion of sexual excitement, Holly doubted she'd be capable of answering it even if she'd wanted to. Her legs were trembling and the rhythm of her breathing was all wrong.

She watched dizzily as he crossed the room and lifted a bunch of papers from the printer.

Mouth grim, shoulders tense, he leafed through them and then lifted his gaze to hers. 'What were you doing? Profiling your target?'

Having completely forgotten that she'd actually printed out some of the sheets on him, including a particularly flattering picture, Holly suddenly wished she could sink through the floor. 'I—I was looking you up.' What else could she say? She could hardly deny it, given that he was holding the evidence of her transgression in his hands.

'Of course you were.' He gave a derisive smile. 'I'm sure you wanted to know just how well you'd done. So, now we've cleared that up, let's drop the pretence of innocence, shall we?'

'OK, so I'm human!' Her face scarlet, her knees trembling, Holly ran damp palms over her tee-shirt, wishing she could go and change into something else. He looked like something out of a glossy magazine, and she was dressed in her most comfortable tee-shirt that dated back at least six years. 'I admit that I wanted to find out stuff about you. You were my first lover.'

'So you're sticking to that story.' He dropped the papers back onto the desk and Holly lifted her chin.

'It's *not* a story. It's the truth.'

'I just hope you don't regret what you've done when you have two hundred camera lenses trained on your face and the world's press yelling questions at you.'

She shrank at the thought. 'That isn't going to happen.'

'Let me tell you something about the life you've chosen, Holly.' Tall and powerfully built, he looked as out of place in her flat as a thoroughbred racehorse in a donkey derby. From the stylish trousers and long cashmere coat, to the look of cool confidence on his impossibly handsome face, everything about him shrieked of enormous wealth and privilege. 'Everywhere you go there will be a photographer stalking you, and most of the time you won't even know they're there until you see the picture next day. Everyone is going to want a piece of you, and that means you can no longer have friends, because even friends have their price and you'll never know who you can trust.'

'I don't need to hear this—'

'Yes, you do. You won't be able to smile without someone demanding to know why you're happy and you won't be able to frown without someone saying that you're suffering from depression and about to be admitted to a clinic.' He hammered home the facts with lethal precision. 'You'll either be too thin or too fat—'

'Too fat, *obviously*.' Heart pounding, Holly sank down onto the sofa. 'Enough. You can stop now. I get the picture.'

'I'm describing your new life, Holly. The life you've chosen.'

There was a tense, electric silence and she licked her lips nervously. 'What are you saying?'

'You have made sure that the whole world believes that this is my baby. And, as a result, the whole world is now waiting for me to take appropriate action.'

Pacing back over to the window, he stared down into the street.

Holly had a sudden sick feeling in her stomach. 'A—appropriate action? What do you mean?'

There was a deathly silence and then he turned, his eyes empty of emotion. 'You're going to marry me, Holly.' The savage bite in his tone was a perfect match for the chill in his eyes. 'And you may think that I've just made your wildest dreams come true, but I can assure you that you're about to embark on your worst nightmare.'

Chapter 4

‘So when do you think he’ll be back?’ Holly paced across the priceless rug in the Georgian manor house. ‘I mean, he’s been gone for two weeks, Emilio! I haven’t even had a chance to talk to him since that day at the flat.’ *The day he’d announced that she was going to marry him.* ‘Not that this house isn’t fabulous and luxurious and all that—but he virtually kidnapped me!’

‘On the contrary, His Highness was merely concerned for your safety,’ Emilio said gently. ‘The press had discovered where you were and the situation was about to turn extremely ugly. It was imperative that we extracted you from there as fast as possible.’

Remembering the crowd of reporters that had suddenly converged on Nicky’s flat, and the slick security operation that had ensured their escape, Holly rubbed her fingers over her forehead. ‘Yes, all right, I accept that, but that doesn’t explain why he hasn’t been in touch. When is he planning to come back? We need to *talk.*’

There was so much she needed to say to him.

When she’d opened the door to the flat and seen the prince standing there, her first reaction had been one of pure joy. For a crazy moment she’d actually thought that he was there because he’d spent the past two weeks thinking about her and decided that he needed to see her again. Her mind had raced forward, imagining all sorts of unrealistic scenarios that she was now too embarrassed to even recall. Her crazy, stupid brain had actually started to believe that extraordinary things *could* happen to someone ordinary like her.

And then he’d strode into her flat like a Roman conqueror neutralising the enemy.

Remembering everything he’d said to her, she felt a rush of misery.

He didn’t believe it was his baby and the injustice of that still stung. True, she wasn’t exactly proud of the way she’d behaved, but it seemed he’d conveniently forgotten his own role in the affair.

And as for his proposal of marriage—well, that unexpected twist had more than kept her mind occupied over the past two weeks.

Had he meant it? *Was he serious?* And, if he was serious, what was her response going to be?

It was the most difficult decision she’d ever had to make, and the arguments for and against had gone round and round in her head like a fairground carousel. Marrying him meant being with a man who didn’t know her or trust her, but *not* marrying him meant denying her baby a father.

And that was the one thing she’d promised herself would never happen to any child of hers.

Reminding herself of that fact, Holly straightened her shoulders and stared across the beautifully landscaped gardens that surrounded the manor.

Their baby was *not* going to grow up thinking that his father had abandoned him. She swallowed down the lump that sprang into her throat. *Their baby was not going to be the only child in school not making a Father’s Day card.*

Which meant that her answer had to be yes, regardless of everything else.

What else mattered? Hopefully over time the prince would realise how wrong he had been about her, and once the baby was born it would be a simple matter to prove paternity. Perhaps, then, their relationship could develop.

Realising that Emilio was still watching her, she felt a squeeze of guilt. ‘I’m sorry. I’m being really selfish. Is there any news about your little boy? Have you phoned the hospital this morning?’

Remembering just how taciturn and uncommunicative the prince’s Head of Security had been when they’d first met, she was relieved that he’d responded to her attempts to be friendly.

‘His temperature is down,’ he told her. ‘And he’s responding to the antibiotics, although they’re still not sure what it was.’

‘Your poor wife must be so tired. And little Tomasso must be missing you. I remember having chicken pox just after—’ *Just after her father had left.* The feelings of abandonment were as fresh as

ever and Holly walked across to him and touched his arm. 'Go home, Emilio,' she urged. 'Your wife would like the support and your little boy would dearly love to see his daddy.'

'That's out of the question, madam.'

'Why? I'm not going anywhere. I feel really guilty that you're stuck here with me. If it weren't for me, you'd be back home in Santallia.'

Emilio cleared his throat. 'If I may say so, your company has been a pleasure, madam. And you've been a great comfort since Tomasso was ill. I'll never forget your kindness that first night when he was first taken into hospital and you stayed up and kept me company.'

'I've never been thrashed so many times at poker in my life. It's a good job I don't have any money to lose,' Holly said lightly. 'The moment the prince turns up, you're going home.'

But what if he didn't turn up?

Perhaps he didn't want to marry her any more.

Perhaps he'd changed his mind.

Or perhaps he'd just imprisoned her here, away from the press, until the story died down? After all, he believed that she'd talked to the press. Was he keeping her here just to ensure her silence?

Her thoughts in turmoil, Holly spent the rest of the morning on the computer in the wood-panelled study that overlooked the ornamental lake. Resisting the temptation to do another trawl of the Internet for mentions of Prince Casper, she concentrated on what she was doing and then wandered down to the kitchen to eat lunch with the head chef and other members of the prince's household staff.

'Something smells delicious, Pietro.' Loving the cosy atmosphere of the kitchen, she warmed her hands on the Aga. Naturally chatty by nature, and delighted to find herself suddenly part of this close community, Holly had lost no time in getting to know everyone living and working in the historic manor house.

'It's a pleasure to cook for someone who enjoys her food, madam,' the chef said, smiling warmly as he gestured towards some pastries cooling on a wire rack. 'Try one and give me your verdict. You're eating for two, remember.'

'Well, I'd rather not be the size of two. I'm not sure I'm meant to be developing cravings this early, but already I don't think I can live without your *pollo alla limone*.' Holly still felt slightly self-conscious that everyone clearly felt so possessive about her baby. She bit into a pastry and moaned with genuine appreciation. 'Oh, please—this is *sublime*. Truly, Pietro. I've never tasted anything this good in my life before. What is it?'

Pietro blossomed. 'Goat's cheese, with a secret combination of herbs—' He broke off as Emilio entered the room and Holly smiled.

'Emilio, thank goodness.' She took another nibble of pastry. 'You're just in time to stop me eating the lot by myself.'

'Miss Phillips.' The bodyguard's eyes were misted, and Holly dropped the pastry, alarmed to see this controlled man so close to the edge.

'What? What? Has something happened? Did the hospital ring?'

'How can I ever thank you? You are—' Emilio's voice was gruff and he cleared his throat. 'A very special person. My wife called—she just received a delivery of beautiful toys. How you managed to arrange that so quickly I have no idea. Tomasso is thrilled.'

'He liked his parcel?' Relieved that nothing awful had happened, Holly retrieved the pastry and threw Pietro an apologetic glance. 'Sorry. Slight overreaction there on my part. Just in case you can't tell, I briefly considered drama as a career. So he liked the toys? I couldn't decide between the fire engine and the police car.'

'So you bought both.' Emilio shook his head. 'It was unbelievably generous of you, madam.'

'It was the least I could do given I'm the reason you're not with him.' Holly frowned and glanced towards the window. 'What's that noise? Are we being invaded?'

Still clutching the spoon, Pietro peered over her shoulder. 'It's a helicopter, madam.' His cheerful smile faded and he straightened his chef's whites and looked nervously at Emilio. 'His Royal Highness has returned.'

* * *

Chilled by the wind, and battling with a simmering frustration that two weeks of self-imposed absence hadn't cured, Casper sprang from the helicopter and strode towards the house.

Although he'd managed to put several countries and a stretch of water between them, he'd failed to wipe Holly from his thoughts. Even the combined demands of complex state business and the successful conclusion to negotiations guaranteeing billions of dollars of foreign investment hadn't succeeded in pressing the Stop button on the non-stop erotic fantasy that had dominated his mind since that day at the rugby.

Even while part of him was angry with her for her ruthless manipulation, another part of his mind was thinking about her incredible legs. He knew she was a liar, but what really stayed in his head was her enticing smile and the taste of her mouth.

And that was fine. Because her manipulation had given him a solution to his problem.

As he approached the house, two uniformed soldiers that he didn't recognise opened the doors for him, backs ramrod straight, eyes forward.

Casper stopped. 'Where is Emilio?'

One of them cleared his throat. 'I believe he is in the kitchen, Your Highness.'

'The kitchen?' Casper approached a nervous footman. 'Since when did my kitchen represent a major security risk?'

'I believe he is with Miss Phillips and the rest of the staff, sir.'

Having personally delivered the order that Emilio should watch her, Casper relaxed a fraction. Contemplating the difficult two weeks Holly must have had with his battle-hardened security chief, he almost smiled. Emilio had been known to drive soldiers to tears, but he felt no sympathy for her. After all, *she* was the one who had decided to name him as the father of her unborn baby. She deserved everything she had coming to her.

Striding towards the kitchen with that thought uppermost in his mind, he pushed open the door, astonished to hear the rare sound of Emilio's laughter, and even more surprised to see his usually reserved Head of Security straighten a clasp in Holly's vibrant curls in an unmistakably affectionate manner.

Holly was smiling gratefully and Casper felt like an interloper, intruding on a private moment. Experiencing a wild surge of quite inexplicable anger, he stood in the doorway.

The rest of the staff were eating and chatting, and Emilio was the first to notice him. 'Your Highness.' Evidently shocked at seeing the prince in the kitchen, he stiffened respectfully. 'I was just about to come upstairs and meet you.'

'But you had other things to distract you,' Casper observed tightly, strolling into the kitchen and taking in the empty plates and the smell of baking in a single, sweeping glance.

Without waiting for him to issue the order, the various members of his household staff rose to their feet and hastily left the room.

Pietro hesitated and then he, too, melted away without being asked.

Only Emilio didn't move.

Casper slowly undid the buttons on his long coat. 'I'm sure you have many demands on your time, Emilio,' he said softly, but the bodyguard stood still.

'My priority is protecting Miss Phillips, sir.'

'That's true.' Casper removed his coat and dropped it over the back of the nearest chair. 'But not,' he said gently, 'from me.'

Emilio hesitated and glanced at Holly. 'You have the alarm I gave you, madam, should you need me for anything.'

There was no missing the affection in Holly's smile. 'I'll be fine, Emilio, but thank you.'

Watching this interchange with speechless incredulity, Casper was engulfed by a wave of anger so violent that it shook him.

Against his will he was transported back eight years, and suddenly he was seeing another woman smiling at another man.

Pain cut through the red mist of his anger, and he glanced down at his hand and realised that he was gripping the back of the chair so tightly his knuckles were white.

'Your Highness?' Holly's voice penetrated his brain. 'Are you all right?'

Locking down his thoughts with ruthless focus, Casper transferred his gaze to Holly, but the bitter taste of betrayal remained. 'Emilio is a married man. *Do you have no sense of decency?*'

'I— I'm sorry?'

'I've no doubt his wife and child will be sorry, too.'

Her expression changed from concern to anger. 'How dare you? How dare you turn everything beautiful into something sordid. Emilio and I are friends—nothing more.' She lifted a hand to her head. 'Oh God, I can't believe you'd even think—*what is the matter with you?* It's almost as if you believe the worst of people so that you can't be disappointed.'

Was that what he did? Stunned by that accusation, Casper felt as cold as marble. 'Despite a short acquaintance, Emilio would clearly die for you.'

'We've been living in each other's pockets for two weeks—what did you expect? On second thoughts, don't answer that.' She took a deep breath. 'Look, maybe you don't know me well enough to know *I* wouldn't do that, but you know Emilio. He was telling me that he's been with you for twenty years! How could you think that of someone so close to you?'

Because he knew only too well that it was the people closest to you who were capable of the greatest betrayal. And causing the greatest pain.

Casper released his grip on the chair and flexed his bloodless fingers.

'Whatever the nature of your relationship, Emilio is in charge of my security. He can't perform his duties effectively if he's flirting in the kitchen.'

'Nor can he perform his duties on an empty stomach. We were eating lunch, not flirting. Or aren't your staff allowed to eat lunch?'

'You're not a member of my staff.' Casper glanced round the homely kitchen. 'And there is a formal dining-room upstairs for your use.'

'It's as big as a barn, and I don't want to eat on my own. Where's the fun in that?' Her expression made it clear that she thought it should have been obvious that eating alone was a stupid idea. 'Sorry, but sitting alone at one end of a vast table is a bit sad. I prefer the company of real people, not paintings.'

'So you've been distracting Emilio.'

'Actually, yes. I've been trying to take his mind off his worries.' Her shoulders stiffened defensively. 'Did *you* know that his little boy has been taken into hospital? And he's been stuck here with me, fretting himself to death while—'

The anger drained from Casper. 'His son is ill?'

'Yes, and he—'

'What is wrong with the child?'

'Well, it started with a very high temperature. I don't think his wife was too worried at that point, so she gave him the usual stuff but nothing seemed to bring his temperature down. Then she was putting him to bed when—'

'*What is wrong with the child?*' Impatient for the facts, Casper sliced through her chatter, and she gave him a hurt look.

'I'm *trying* to tell you! You're the one who keeps interrupting.'

Attempting to control his temper, Casper inhaled deeply. 'Summarise.'

'I *was* summarising.' Affronted, she glared at him. 'So, his temperature went up and up and then he had a fit, which apparently can be normal for a toddler because they're hopeless at controlling their temperature, and so they took him in and did some tests and—'

'That isn't a summary, it's a three-act play!' Exasperated, Casper strode across to her and placed a finger over her mouth. 'Stop talking for one minute and answer my question in no more than three words—*what is wrong with Emilio's son?*'

Her lips were soft against his finger and he felt the warmth of her breath as she parted her lips to respond.

'Virus,' she muttered, and Casper withdrew his hand as if he'd been scalded, taken aback by the rush of sexual heat that engulfed him. The urge to take possession of her luscious mouth was so strong that he took a step backwards.

'And is his condition improving?'

'Yes, but—'

'That's all I need to know.' Needing space, Casper turned and strode purposefully towards the door, but she hurtled after him and caught his arm.

'No! No, it isn't all you need to know! "Virus" and "improving" doesn't give you a clue about what it's been like for poor Emilio! Those are just facts, but it's the feelings that matter.' She waved an arm. 'He was stuck here with me while they were doing all these tests, and he was worried sick

and—' She broke off, clearly unsettled by his silence. 'Don't you *care*? You're *so* cold! Y-you just stand there looking at me, not saying anything. What do you think it's been like for Emilio being stuck here with me while his little boy is ill?'

Casper scanned her flushed cheeks and lifted an eyebrow in sardonic mockery. 'Noisy?'

Her hand fell from his arm. 'I'm only talking too much because you make me nervous.'

Only both of them knew that there was more than nerves shimmering between them.

It was there in her eyes—awareness, excitement, longing.

Distancing himself, Casper yanked open the door. 'Then I'll give you a moment to collect yourself.' He left the room, issued a set of instructions to a waiting security-guard, and then returned to the kitchen to find Holly pacing the room in agitation.

She threw him a reproachful look. 'All right, maybe I do talk a lot, but that's just the way I am, and nobody's perfect. And you're the one who left me here without even telling me when you'd be back!' Her chin lifted. 'Did you think I'd sit in silence for two weeks?'

Casper strode over to the large table and poured himself a glass of water from the jug on the table. 'It was fairly obvious to me from our last meeting that you and silence have never been intimately acquainted.'

'Well, I don't expect you to understand, because you're obviously the strong silent type who uses words like each one costs a fortune, but I like people. I like talking to them.'

And they liked talking to her, if the buzz of conversation around the kitchen table had been anything to go by.

And she knew about Emilio's son.

Casper tried to remember a time when people had been that open with him, and realised that they never had been.

Even before tragedy had befallen the royal family of Santallia, he'd lived a life of privileged isolation. Because of his position, people were rarely open and honest.

And he'd learned the hard way that trust was one gift he couldn't afford to bestow.

Because of his error of judgement, his country had suffered.

And now he had the chance to make amends. *To give the people what they wanted.*

And as for the rest of it—physically the chemistry between them was explosive, and that was all he required.

He drank deeply and then put the glass down, his eyes locking with hers.

Immediately engulfed by a dangerous tension, Casper tried to analyse what it was about her that he found so irresistibly sexy.

Not her dress sense, that was for sure. Her ancient jeans had a rip in the knees, her pale-pink jumper was obviously an old favourite, and the colour in her cheeks had more to do with the heat coming from the Aga than artful use of make-up.

Accustomed to women who groomed themselves to within an inch of their lives, he found her lack of artifice oddly refreshing.

Her beauty wasn't the result of expensive cosmetics or the hand of a skilled surgeon. Holly was vibrant, passionate and desperately sexy, and all he wanted to do was flatten her to the table and re-enact every sizzling moment of their first meeting.

Exasperated and baffled by the strength of that inappropriate urge, Casper dragged his eyes back to her face. 'Emilio failed to pass on the message that you were to buy a new wardrobe.'

'No. He told me.' She hooked her thumbs into the waistband of her jeans and the movement revealed a tantalising glimpse of smooth, flat stomach. 'I just didn't need anything. What do I need a new wardrobe for? I've spent the mornings helping Ivy and the afternoons helping Jim prune the trees in the orchard.'

'Who is Ivy?'

'Your housekeeper. She lost her husband eight months ago and she's been very down, but she has started joining us for lunch, and she's been talking about— Sorry.' She raised a hand in wary apology. 'I forgot you just want facts. OK, facts. I can do that. Ivy. Housekeeper. Depressed. Improving.' She ticked them off her fingers. 'How's that? You're smiling, so I must have done OK.'

Surprised to discover that he was indeed smiling, Casper shook his head slowly. 'Your gift for conversation has clearly given you a great deal of information about my staff.'

'It's important to understand people you work with.'

'When I left you here, my intention was not for you to work alongside the staff.'

'I had to do something with my day. You gave orders that I couldn't leave the premises. I was trapped here.'

'You were brought here for your own safety.'

'Was I?' Her brilliant green eyes glowed bright with scepticism. 'Or was I brought here for *your* safety, so that I couldn't talk to the press?'

'That particular boat has already sailed,' Casper said tightly, his temper flaring at her untimely reminder of just how effectively she'd manipulated the media. 'You're here for your protection.'

'Do you have any idea how weird that sounds?' Holly glanced pointedly at the rip in her jeans. 'I mean, one minute I'm a waitress who no one notices unless they want to complain about their food, and the next I'm someone who needs twenty-four-hour protection.'

'You're carrying the heir to the throne.'

'And that's all that matters?' She tilted her head to one side, studying his expression. 'You'll put aside your personal feelings for me because of the baby?'

What personal feelings?

Emotion had no place in his life.

On one previous occasion he'd allowed himself to be ruled by emotion and the consequences had been devastating.

As far as he was concerned, his relationship with Holly was a business transaction, nothing more.

Casper stared into her anxious green eyes, wondering why she didn't look more triumphant.

She'd successfully secured a future for herself and her child.

Or was she suddenly realising just how high a price she'd paid for that particular social leap?

'I don't want to discuss this again.' Crushing any future urge on her part to dwell on the unfortunate circumstances of their wedding, Casper strolled forward, realising that he hadn't yet revealed the reason for his return.

'Y-you're a bit crabby. Perhaps you need to eat,' she said helpfully, scooping up a plate from the table. 'Try one of Pietro's pastries. It's a new recipe and they're really delicious.'

'I'm not hungry.' His intention had just been to deliver his orders and then spend the afternoon catching up on official papers. He hadn't expected to be drawn into a discussion.

Nor had he expected an ongoing battle with his libido.

'Just taste them.' Apparently unaware of his reluctance, she broke off a piece of the pastry and lifted it to his lips. 'They're fresh out of the oven. Try.'

Drowning in her subtle floral scent and her smile, Casper's senses reeled and he grasped for control. 'I have things to tell you.'

'Eat first.'

Casper ate the pastry and wished he hadn't, because as his lips touched her fingers again he was immediately plunged into an erotic, sensual world that featured Holly as the leading lady in a scene dominated by scented oils and silk sheets.

She withdrew her hand slowly, her eyes darkening as they both silently acknowledged the dangerous sexual charge that suffused every communication they shared.

'What is it you need to tell me, Your Highness?'

'Casper.'

For the space of a heartbeat, she looked at him and then she gave a twisted smile. 'I don't think so. I'm not comfortable enough with you. Maybe it's just because you've had a long journey, but you're very cold. Intimidating. I feel as though you're going to say "off with her head" any minute.'

'You can't call me Your Highness in the wedding ceremony.'

Shock flared in her eyes. 'I sort of assumed the wedding was off. You haven't *once* phoned me whilst you've been away.'

Casper thought of the number of times he'd reached for the phone before he'd realised what he was doing. 'I had nothing to say.'

Holly lifted her hands and made a sound that was somewhere between a sob and laughter. 'Well, if you had nothing to say to me in two weeks, it doesn't bode well for a lifetime together, does it? But I do have things I want to say to you.' She drew in a breath. 'Starting with your offer of marriage. I've given it a lot of thought.'

'That doesn't surprise me. I expect it's been two weeks of non-stop self-congratulation while you enjoy your new life and reflect on the future.' His cynical observation was met with appalled silence and she stared at him for a moment, her delicate features suddenly pinched and white.

Then the plate slipped from her hands and smashed on the kitchen floor, scattering china and pastry everywhere.

'How *dare* you say that? You have a real gift for saying really horrible things.' Her small hands curled into fists by her sides. '*Have you any idea how hard all of this is for me?* Well, let me tell you what my life has been like since you walked into it!

'First there is that huge picture of me on the screen so the whole world can see the size of my bottom, then the press crawl all over my life, exposing things about me that I haven't even told my closest friends and making me out to be some psycho nutcase. *Then* I discover I'm pregnant, and I was really happy about that until you showed up and told me that you didn't believe it was yours. So basically since I've met you I've been portrayed publicly as a fat, abandoned slut with no morals! How's my new life sounding so far, Your Highness? Not good—so don't *talk* to me about how I must be congratulating myself because, believe me, my confidence is at an all-time low.' Her breathing rapid, she sucked in several breaths and Casper, who detested emotional scenes, erected barriers faster than a bank being robbed.

'I warned you that—'

'I haven't finished!' She glared at him. 'You think this is an easy decision for me, but it isn't! This is our baby's future we're talking about! And, whatever you may think, I didn't plan this. Which is why I've done nothing but agonise over what to do for the past two weeks. *Obviously* I don't want to be married to a man who can't stand the sight of me, but neither do I want my baby to be without a father. It's been a horrible, *horrible* choice, and frankly I wouldn't wish it on anyone! And if you need that summarised in two words I'd pick "scary" and "sacrifice".'

In the process of formulating an exit strategy, Casper looked at her with raw incredulity. '*Sacrifice?*'

'Yes. Because, although I'm sure having a father is right for our baby, I'm *not* sure that being married to you is right for me. And there's no need to use that tone. I don't care about the prince bit, nor do I care about your castle or your bank account.' Her voice was hoarse. 'But I won't have our child growing up thinking that his father abandoned him. And that's why I'll marry you. By the time he's old enough to understand what is going on, you will have realised how wrong you are about me and given me a big, fat apology. But don't think this is easy for me. I have no wish to marry a man who can't talk about his feelings and doesn't show affection.'

Casper responded to this last declaration with genuine astonishment. 'Affection?' How could she possibly think he'd feel affection for a woman who had good as slapped him with a paternity suit?

She rolled her eyes. 'You see? Even the word makes you nervous, and that says everything, doesn't it? You were quite happy to have hot sex with me, but anything else is completely alien to you.' She covered her face with her hands, and her voice choked. 'Oh, what am I doing? How can we even *think* about getting married when there's nothing between us?'

'We share a very powerful sexual chemistry, or we wouldn't be in this position right now,' Casper responded instantly, and her hands dropped and she gave a disbelieving laugh.

'Well, that's romantic. There's no mistaking your priorities. Summarised in three words, it would be sex, sex, sex.'

'Don't underestimate the importance of sex,' Casper breathed, watching as her lips parted slightly. 'If we're going to be sharing a bed night after night, it helps that I find you attractive.' Surprisingly, his statement appeared to finally silence her.

She stared at him, her eyes wide, her lips slightly parted. Then she rubbed her hands over her jeans in a self-conscious gesture. 'You find me—attractive? Really?'

'*Obviously* your dress sense needs considerable work,' he said silkily. 'And generally speaking I'm not wild about jeans, although I have to confess that you manage to look good in them. Apart from that, and as long as you don't *ever* wear anything featuring a cartoon once you're officially sleeping in my bed, yes, I'll find you attractive.'

A laugh burst from her throat. 'I can't believe you're telling me how to dress—or that I'm listening.'

'I'm not telling you how to dress. I'm telling you how to keep me interested. It's up to you whether you follow the advice or not.'

'And that's supposed to be enough? A marriage based on sex?' She shook her head slowly. 'It doesn't make sense. I still don't understand why, if you genuinely don't believe this is your baby, you'd be willing to marry me. Instead of facts, why don't you give me feelings?'

He didn't have feelings.

He hadn't allowed himself feelings for eight years.

'Given all the research you did on the royal house of Santallia, I would think you'd be aware of the reasons. I'm the last of the line. I'm expected to produce an heir. To the outside world, it appears that I've done that.'

'You're giving me facts again,' she said softly. 'How do you *feel*, Your Highness?'

Ignoring her question, Casper paced over to the window, his tension levels soaring. ‘The people of Santallia are currently in a state of celebration. The moment the story broke on the news, they were making plans for the royal wedding. There will be fireworks and state banquets. Apparently my popularity rating has soared. School children have already been queuing outside the palace with home-made cards and teddies for the baby—little girls with stars in their eyes.’ He turned, looking for signs of remorse. ‘Are you feeling guilty yet, Holly? Is your conscience pricking you?’

‘Teddies?’ Instead of retreating in the face of his harsh words, she appeared visibly moved by the picture he’d painted. Her hand slid to her stomach in an instinctively protective gesture, and he saw tears of emotion glisten in her eyes. ‘They’re that pleased? It *is* wonderful that everyone is longing for you to get married and have a baby. You must be very touched that they care so much.’

‘It’s because they care so much that we’re standing here now.’

Her gaze held his. ‘So, if they wanted you to have a baby so badly, and you’re so keen to please them, why haven’t you done it before? Why haven’t you married and given them an heir?’ She broke off abruptly and he knew from the guilty flush on her cheeks that her research had included details about his past relationships.

He could almost see her mind working, thinking that she knew what was going on in his.

Fortunately, she didn’t have a clue.

No one did. He’d made sure of that.

The truth was safely buried where it could do no harm. *And it was going to stay buried.*

Observing his lack of response, she sighed. ‘What’s going on in your head? I don’t understand you!’

‘I don’t require you to understand me,’ Casper said in a cool tone. ‘I just require you to play the part you auditioned for. From now on, you’ll just do as you’re told. You’ll smile when I tell you to smile and you’ll walk where I tell you to walk. In return, you’ll have more money than you know how to spend, and a lifestyle that most of the world will envy.’

She opened her mouth and closed it again, her face a mask of indecision. ‘I don’t know. I really don’t know.’ She stooped and started picking up pieces of broken china, as if she needed to do something with her hands. ‘I thought I’d made up my mind, but now I’m not sure. How can I accept your proposal when you *scare* me? You use three words, I use thirty. I’ve never met anyone so emotionally detached. I—I’m just not comfortable with you.’ She put the china carefully on the table.

‘Comfortable?’

She rubbed her fingers over her forehead, as if her brain was aching and she wanted to soothe it. ‘We’ll hardly be great parents if I’m bracing myself for conflict every time you enter a room. And then there’s the fact that I don’t exactly fit the profile of perfect princess.’

‘The only thing that matters is that the world thinks you’re carrying my child. As far as the people of Santallia are concerned, that makes you the perfect princess.’

‘But not *your* perfect princess. You don’t seem to care who you marry. Did you love her very much?’ She blurted out the question as though she couldn’t stop herself, and then gave an apologetic sigh. ‘I’m sorry. Perhaps I shouldn’t. But you lost your fiancée, Antonia, and it’s stupid to pretend that I don’t know about it, because everyone knew—’

No one knew.

‘Enough!’ Stunned that she would dare tread on such dangerous territory, Casper sent her a warning glance, and in that single unsettling moment he had the feeling that she was looking deep inside him.

‘*I am* sorry,’ she said quietly. ‘Because I certainly don’t want to hurt you. But I don’t see how we’re going to have any sort of marriage when you won’t let another human being get close. You create this barrier around you. Frankly, how I ever felt relaxed enough with you to have sex, I have no idea. At the moment my insides feel as though I swallowed a knotted rope.’ But even as she said the

words the tension in the air crackled and snapped, and he saw her chest rise and fall as her breathing quickened.

The sexual chemistry was more powerful than both of them, and Casper wasn't even aware that he'd moved until his hands slid into her hair and he felt her lips parting in response to the explicit demands of his mouth.

Enforced abstinence and sexual denial had simply increased the feverish craving, and he hauled her hard against him, driven by a sensual urgency previously unknown to him.

Her lips were soft and sweet, and the scent and taste of her closed over him, drowning his senses until every rational thought was blown from his brain by a powerful rush of erotic pleasure.

She moaned with desperation, her arms winding round his neck, her body trembling against his as she arched in sensual invitation, her abandoned response a blatant invitation to further intimacy.

In the grip of an almost agonising arousal, Casper closed possessive hands over her hips and lifted her onto the kitchen table. She was pliant and shivering against him, the sensuous movements of her body shamelessly urging him on.

And then the gentle hiss of water boiling on the Aga penetrated the red fog in his mind and he froze, his seeking hands suddenly still as he realised what he was doing.

And where he was doing it.

Another time, another table.

Deploring the lack of control that gripped him whenever he was with this woman, he dragged his mouth from hers with a huge effort of will, and stared down into her dazed, shocked eyes. Her mouth was damp and swollen from his kiss, and she was shaking with the same wild excitement that was driving him.

His usual self-restraint severely challenged by her addictive sexuality, Casper released his grip on her hips and stepped backwards.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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