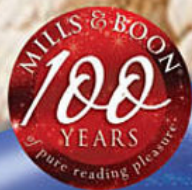


Italian Prince, Wedlocked Wife
Jennie Lucas



MILLS & BOON[®]
MODERN[™]

JENNIE LUCAS

Italian Prince, Wedlocked Wife

Аннотация

Step into a world of sophistication and glamour, where sinfully seductive heroes await you in luxurious international locations. From rags to riches... Single mum Lucy Abbott will do anything to protect her child. She's working all the hours she can, but can still barely afford to feed her baby daughter. An arranged marriage... So when Prince Maximo d'Aquilla offers her millions, and a way out of her desperate life, Lucy grabs the chance. Max whisks her to Italy...and soon she's totally his! ? By royal command! Max has seduced her entirely. But he is driven by revenge, not desire...is he ruthless enough to walk away from his captive bride...?

His blue eyes burned through her. “You are going to come with me to Italy and live in luxury for the rest of your life.”

Prince Maximo d’Aquila. An exotic name. But he was more than a dream. He was a flesh-and-blood man, a Roman gladiator, hard of sinew and bone, with a powerful, dangerous edge. And he was too good to be true.

She shook her head. “I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“I grow weary of this.” His eyes traced over her. “I do not have time. We both know you’re coming with me.”

She almost couldn’t breathe. The man hadn’t been lying—it really was an offer straight out of her wildest dreams. To never have to scrimp again, wake up in a terrified panic in the middle of the night wondering how she’d pay her bills. To know Chloe was safe and warm and secure forever.

Jennie Lucas grew up dreaming about faraway lands. At fifteen, hungry for experience beyond the borders of her small Idaho city, she went to a Connecticut boarding school on scholarship. She took her first solo trip to Europe at sixteen, then put off college and traveled around the US, supporting herself with jobs as diverse as petrol station cashier and newspaper advertising assistant. At twenty-two, she met the man who would be her husband. After their marriage, she graduated from Kent State with a degree in English. Seven years after she started writing, she got the magical call from London that turned her into a published author.

Since then life has been hectic, with a new writing career and a sexy husband and two babies under two, but she's having a wonderful (albeit sleepless) time. She loves immersing herself in dramatic, glamorous, passionate stories. Maybe she can't physically travel to Morocco or Spain right now, but for a few hours a day, while her children are sleeping, she can be there in her books.

Jennie loves to hear from her readers. You can visit her website at www.jennielucas.com, or drop her a note at jennie@jennielucas.com

ITALIAN PRINCE, WEDLOCKED WIFE

BY
JENNIE LUCAS



www.millsandboon.co.uk

ITALIAN PRINCE, WEDLOCKED WIFE

To Anna Marie Allen,
auntie *par excellence*— I couldn't have written this book
without you.

CHAPTER ONE

HE'D found her!

Prince Maximo d'Aquila parked his Mercedes beneath a broken streetlight, staring at the brightly lit gas station. The shining light from the shop's windows illuminated the snowy night like a flame in the darkness, silhouetting the girl working alone inside.

Lucia Ferrazzi.

The granddaughter of his enemy. The ex-lover of his business rival.

Fate, he thought, gripping the steering wheel. *Il destino*. After all these years of looking, how else to explain it?

His phone rang. Ermanno, one of the bodyguards waiting in the car parked behind him, said a single word: “*Signore?*”

“Wait for my signal,” Maximo replied in Italian, and snapped his phone shut.

He watched her for another five minutes. It was ten o’clock on New Year’s Eve, and the store should have been busy selling wine and beer; but the run-down South Chicago neighborhood was eerily dark and deserted beneath the heavily falling snow.

The girl assisted her only customer at the cash register with a shy smile. Her scrubbed, clean face made her seem younger than twenty-one, he thought. Cat’s-eye glasses framed her wide-set brown eyes, giving her plain features a dowdy, bookish look.

She would fall to him easily, he thought.

The solitary customer left, and a gray sedan skidded to a stop near the gas pumps. A thin man stepped out of the car. He stared at the girl, spraying breath freshener into his mouth, then started toward the store.

Maximo saw the alarm in the girl’s eyes, the way she bit her tender pink lip as she watched the slender man come toward the door. She was afraid of him.

Maximo allowed himself a single, grim smile. She didn’t realize how much her world had changed.

As of now, she was under Maximo's protection.

Before the clock struck midnight, she would be his bride.

His revenge would be complete. And as for that other matter...

He pushed the thought firmly from his mind. It would all be over. He would take her, and in three months, he'd be free. Free—of everything.

“Oh, no,” Lucy Abbott whispered aloud. The sound of her voice echoed in the empty store.

She leaned her head against the glass, watching as her smarmy manager came toward the door. She'd prayed she wouldn't see him tonight. That he would have a date, a party, *anything* to keep him from stopping by to “check on the store.”

Just one more week, she reminded herself with a deep breath. One more week to put up with Darryl's crude jokes, the way he stared at her breasts beneath her cashier's smock, the way he would “accidentally” brush his groin against her hip amid the narrow aisles of chips and candy.

She'd applied to be an assistant manager at a nearby store, and she needed his good reference until her position was finalized next week. Then Lucy could say goodbye to him forever. And even better, she would get a raise. For the first time since her baby had been born, she would be able to have just one job instead of three—she could work just forty hours a week instead of sixty. She'd be able to spend a few precious hours with her baby every single day.

Baby? Chloe wouldn't be a baby much longer. Tomorrow was her first birthday. She could hardly believe it. In Lucy's constant struggle to pay rent and medical bills and child care, she'd missed much of her daughter's first year. She'd missed the first time her baby had rolled over, the first time she'd sat up by herself, the first time she'd crawled. She'd missed countless smiles and crying and happy jabbering...

Stop it, she ordered herself, angry at how close she was to tears. *Stop it right now.*

Darryl burst through the door with a hard ring of the bell, bringing a blast of wind and snow behind him.

"Hey, Luce," Darryl said with a leer on his pink, rubbery lips. "Happy New Year."

"Happy New Year," she mumbled, hating that he called her *Luce*. It reminded her of the last man who'd called her that.

"Busy tonight?"

"Yes, very," she lied over the lump in her throat.

"Let me see." She tried to flinch away, but he still managed to brush against her backside as he went behind the counter. He punched a few buttons on the cash register, then seeing the few dollars inside the tray, looked up at her accusingly. "Why, you little tease."

Pretending to laugh, she backed from him. "It's been busy, really! See the floors wet with tracked snow? I'd better get a mop..."

"Always such a busy little bee." He sneered, stopping her with

one bony, sinewy hand. “You really think you’re better than me, don’t you?”

“No, of course not, I—”

Darryl grabbed her blue smock, looking down at her, breathing hard. “I’m tired of being nice to you for nothing.”

She heard the bell jingle above the door. But before she could look, he grabbed the back of her head, coming at her with his pink, rubbery lips.

“What are you doing—let me go!”

“You act so prim,” he panted, “but you sleep around. You had that kid, didn’t you? I know you want me—”

“No,” she whimpered, struggling to turn her face away.

Darryl yelped as a large hand grabbed him by the shoulder, spinning him around, yanking him backward like a dog on a leash.

Lucy gave a little cry as she saw a dark, towering figure pick up her manager by the lapels of his jacket. Darryl struggled futilely while the man, far taller and stronger than him, lifted him off the floor.

The stranger’s eyes were hard and black. In a voice as cold and implacable as death, he growled into his face, “Get. Out.”

“Yes,” Darryl gasped.

The giant tossed him to the floor. Her manager scabbled back like a crab, tripping over his own feet in his eagerness to get away. He paused at the door.

“You’re fired!” he bleated at Lucy, then rushed out into the

snowy night, revving the engine of his old gray sedan down the dark street.

Fired? She was fired? Her heart pounding, Lucy looked at her rescuer beneath the fluorescent overhead light.

The dark stranger looked down at her. His expressive eyes seared hers. He didn't touch her. He didn't have to. Just the heat of his glance made her tremble from deep within, as if he'd just woken something deep inside her...

“Are you hurt, *signorina*?” His voice was accented and deep.

She had to lean back to see his face. She was five-six, not terribly petite, but the man still towered over her. His shoulders were impossibly broad, the lines of his long, black coat elegant and sharp, and his face...his face! Roman nose, high cheekbones. His blue eyes stood out against his olive skin. He had black, wavy hair, a darkly shadowed chin and crinkles at the edge of his eyes. Early thirties?

But he took her breath away. The way he'd saved her—the way he looked at her now. She'd never known a man could be at once so beautiful and so strong. He was like a handsome prince out of a long-forgotten dream.

“*Signorina*?” His eyes were intense, searching as he reached over to touch her cheek. “If he hurt you—”

She felt his brief touch like an explosion up and down her body. Her blood trembled as if she'd just thrown herself naked into a bed of snow. “No. I'm fine...I'm...” She sucked in her breath and repeated numbly, “I'm fired.”

Fired.

No way to pay Mrs. Plotzky.

With no babysitter, she couldn't go to her two part-time jobs. And since Chloe's trip to the E.R. last month for croup, Lucy was already a month behind on her rent. Her landlord had threatened to throw her out on the street if she didn't catch up.

Cold days stretched before her, Chicago's icy wind wailing like a baby's cry, and frigid, desperate nights scavenging beds at homeless shelters. She'd be destitute with her baby in the dead of winter, no job, no money, no home...

Her baby. She'd failed her baby.

Lucy's heart rose up in her throat, nearly choking her. Her lips soundlessly repeated her daughter's name. Her knees trembled, her body shaking with a whole year of repressed grief and exhaustion. And everything started to go black...

The man caught her before she could hit the floor. Lifting her as if she weighed nothing, he held her against his chest.

"You're done here," he growled, and started carrying her toward the door.

Carrying her to the door?

She blinked up at him, feeling dazed and lightheaded—and not just because of nearly fainting. Being close to this stranger, being cradled in his arms, did strange things to her heart rate. He was as darkly handsome as any hero from a novel. As he carried her past the counter, her eyes fell upon her battered paperback copy of *Wuthering Heights* poking out of her bag on the floor.

But this dark, handsome stranger wasn't Heathcliff. And she certainly wasn't pampered, spoiled Cathy. Romantic tales had nothing to do with real life.

She'd learned that the hard way.

Lucy shook herself out of her reverie. "Where—where are you taking me?"

"Out of here."

"Put me down!" Every insane man in Chicago seemed to be stopping by tonight—all of them intent on ruining her life! She kicked and struggled in his arms. "Let me *go!*"

Abruptly he released her, and she slid down his impossibly hard, impeccably dressed body. Her own body broke out in a cold sweat as she stood somewhat shakily on her own two feet.

"I think the phrase you're looking for," the man said, "is *thank you.*"

She'd been grateful to the man for saving her from Darryl's advance, but now... What did Lucy care about some forced kiss, when her baby might soon have no home?

"Thank you?" she demanded furiously. "For what? For getting me *fired?* I could have handled Darryl just fine if you hadn't interfered!"

"*Si.*" His sensual mouth curved upward. "You obviously had the situation well in hand."

She ground her jaw. "You're going to call him right now and tell him you're sorry!"

"I am sorry only that I didn't use his face to mop your dirty

floor.”

If she didn't get her job back, she would be forced to take her baby to a homeless shelter. If all the shelters were full, which was likely during Chicago's cold, hard winter, they'd have to live out of Lucy's decrepit old hatchback, on the street, freezing...

And it was all her fault for not doing a better job at protecting her daughter.

Terror ripped through her. “I need this job!”

“No. You do not.” He looked down at her, so handsome, with the calm arrogance that only came from wealth. “You cannot pretend you took this job out of anything but desperation.”

Lucy felt sick at his accurate appraisal of her situation.

With no savings and few marketable skills, Lucy had worked at low-paying jobs since Chloe's father had deserted them a week before her birth. She'd had to work constantly just to survive, since she'd foolishly given up her hard-won college scholarship to be with him. And he'd left Lucy with nothing but his baby in her belly and the memory of his whispered promises.

For the past year, she'd held their heads above water by such a thin margin. One mistake like this could suck them under. She couldn't let them drown!

“Please,” she whispered, though she knew it was hopeless. “You don't know what will happen if I lose this job.”

He looked down at her. Reaching out a broad, strong-fingered hand, he gently lifted her chin.

“You have nothing to fear ever again. You are mine now,

Lucia. And I protect what is mine.”

She was his? What was he talking about?

Then she realized what he'd called her: *Lucia*.

“How—how did you know my name?” Lucy stammered.

“I know more about you than you can imagine.” He watched her beneath heavy-lidded eyes. “And I’m here to make your dreams come true.”

Her dreams.

A snug, warm little house surrounded by sunshine and flowers. Her daughter growing up happy and secure. Having someone to love, instead of always being alone, fighting just to survive—

Pulling away from his touch, she angrily shook the images from her mind.

“My only dream is for you to call Darryl and beg for forgiveness.”

His dark eyebrows rose. “That is indeed a fantasy.”

“What did you think I would say? That my dream was to spend a night in your bed, having you make love to me for hours on end?”

She'd meant to be sarcastic, but he gave her a hot glance that made her shiver, and wonder if her words were truer than she'd thought.

“I offer you revenge,” he said. “Against the man who hurt you.”

“I told you. Darryl didn't do anything. You came before—”

“Alexander Wentworth,” he bit out.

At the name, she felt the blood drain from her face. “What?”

“I will make him regret the day he abandoned you and your child to starve.” His blue eyes burned through her. “You are going to come with me to Italy, and live in luxury for the rest of your life.”

CHAPTER TWO

HE WANTED to take her to Italy?

Italy. The warm, beautiful land Lucy had dreamed of since she was twelve years old, watching *A Room with a View* on TV during her mother’s last night in the hospital. Even her mom’s final words to her had been, “Go to Italy, Lucy... Go...”

But Lucy had never left Illinois. She’d lived in foster homes until she was eighteen, then worked and scrimped her way into college. Her sophomore year, working at a department store, she’d met a handsome, smooth-talking man who spoke Italian—the vice president of a fashion house based out of New York. He delighted her with stories of Rome, promising to someday take her to visit.

Lucy had never met a man like Alex Wentworth. A man so magical...so glamorous...so exotic. She’d dropped out of college, giving up all her hard work, simply because he’d complained that school took too much of her time. She’d fallen like a brick.

She was still falling. The dream had become a nightmare. He’d fled to Rome, beyond the reach of Chicago’s child support laws. For the last year, he’d returned all her letters and photographs

unopened. He'd sent her one curt note, telling her he was in love with someone else. He'd suggested Chloe was not his child and that Lucy was either a delusional stalker or a gold-digging whore.

It had nearly killed her. But she was fine now. Really. She could live with a broken heart.

What she couldn't understand was how he could deny their child. How he could live in luxury, drinking wine, taking lovers, enjoying a warm, beautiful city—when he'd left his innocent baby behind to suffer?

If Lucy went to Italy, she could ask him.

Looking up at the dark stranger, she licked her dry lips. "Let me get this straight. You...you want to take me to Italy?"

He gave her a sensual smile. "Sì. And you will never worry about money again."

She almost couldn't breathe. The man hadn't been lying—it really *was* an offer straight out of her wildest dreams. To never have to scrimp again, wake up in a terrified panic in the middle of the night, wondering how she'd pay her bills. To know Chloe was safe and warm and secure forever.

And she could see Alex. He'd been able to ignore her letters, but he couldn't ignore her if she showed up at his office, could he? Once she showed him a picture of Chloe, he would come to his senses. He would love their beautiful baby. Once he saw their daughter, once she was real to him, how could he do anything but love her?

Lucy accepted that he'd moved on to another woman. But she

couldn't bear for Chloe to grow up without a father, as she herself had. Without a father, Lucy'd had no one to love or protect her when her mother had died...

"So you agree?" the dark stranger said coolly.

Lucy clasped her hands behind her back to hide their trembling. "I don't understand. Why do you want to take me to Italy? How would that hurt Alex?"

The man gave a cold smile. "He will realize how great a fool he was to let you go."

A laugh rose in her throat, so bitter it nearly choked her. "How so?"

"He will lose something he wants. Something that rightfully belongs to me." The man reached forward, touching her shoulder. His latent power and sensuality burned through her blue cashier's smock, sending a current of heat pouring through her veins like lava. "We will make him pay, Lucia." His intense eyes mesmerized her. "All you have to do is say yes."

Yes, she thought, dazed at her own sudden change of fortune. Yes, yes, yes.

But as her lips parted to speak the words, a realization made her freeze.

She'd been through this before.

Attracted to a devastatingly handsome man who made her blood race. Who'd promised her the world. She'd naively given him her heart, her future, her faith.

And it had cost her everything.

She wrenched her shoulder away.

“Sorry,” she forced herself to say. “I’m not interested.”

He blinked.

“You’re—*not interested?*”

She got the impression that no woman had ever turned him down for anything. It would have been amusing, if the whole situation hadn’t infuriated her—and made her hurt all over.

Fighting back tears, she picked up her ratty handbag from the floor. “You walk in here, a total stranger. You get me fired—then expect me to blindly trust you? Are you out of your mind? Who do you think you are?”

He gave her a brief bow, elegant and fluid and ironic. The sharp cut of his coat, his blue eyes against tanned skin, reminded her of Mediterranean sun and olive groves. He was a romantic fantasy, every dream she’d ever had of exotic lands. And then he spoke.

“I am Prince Maximo d’Aquila.”

She stared at him for a shocked moment, thinking she’d heard him wrong, that she was having a flashback to all the historical novels she’d read as a teenager. “You’re a prince?”

“Does my title impress you?” He punched numbers on his cell phone, the expression on his face hard as granite as he snapped it shut. “*Va bene*. Perhaps now you’ll cease your pointless resistance and accept your fate.”

Prince Maximo d’Aquila. An exotic name. But he was more than a dream. He was a flesh-and-blood man, a Roman gladiator

hard of sinew and bone, with a powerful, dangerous edge.

And he was too good to be true.

She shook her head. "I'm not going anywhere with you."

"I grow weary of this." His eyes traced over her. "I do not have time. We both know you're coming with me. Either do it gracefully, or—" he came closer "—I will simply take you."

She could see at once that it was not an idle threat. He could take her—in any way he wished. And on this dark, empty, snowy night, with no cameras or weapons or customers, who would stop him?

She sucked in her breath, gathering her anger like a defensive force. *She* would stop him.

How dare he try to intimidate her this way! Did he think he could boss her around with his gorgeous face, his wealth, his power, his alleged *royalty*?

"Do you think I'm stupid?" she demanded.

"I'm starting to wonder."

"Your story is ridiculous! You're a prince, and you want me to run away with you to Italy and be rich and happy? What's your scam? I get on your plane, then what—end up sold into a harem in some desert?"

"You think any sheikh would tolerate such insolence?" he said icily.

"I just know that when a handsome man makes an offer that's too good to be true, it means *he's lying*."

His laser-blue eyes narrowed.

“First you insult my honor. Now you call me a liar?”

His voice held a quiet, dangerous edge. She trembled with fear, even as she rebelliously clenched her hands.

“If you think I’m idiotic enough to believe some fantasy about becoming wealthy and getting revenge on Alex, you’re not just a liar, you’re a fool.”

He looked down at her, and she felt scorching heat to her toes. His glance made her feel hot all over, dizzy, pummeled by a whirlwind. “If you were a man, I would make you regret those insults.”

She raised her chin defiantly. “And since I’m a woman?”

His fingers gently traced a tendril of dark hair that had escaped her ponytail. “Your punishment will be entirely different.”

There was a sudden ring at the door. It took a moment for Lucy to even realize what that meant, lost as she was in the sensation tingling up her hair, her scalp, down her spine to her toes. How was it possible that with just a single touch, he could make her whole body shake...?

A hulking man, shorter than Maximo but twice as wide, came to him with a deferential bow. “*Mio principe.*”

“Ermanno.” The two men spoke in Italian, one giving calm commands, the other acquiescing with a nod.

For a moment, she stared at Maximo. A gorgeous, wealthy, arrogant prince. Demanding that she go with him to Italy. *Her*, Lucy Abbott. A nobody.

No! she told herself fiercely. She wasn't a nobody. She was Chloe's mother. And she couldn't succumb to this so-called prince's evil scheme, whatever it might be. She wouldn't obey. And the fact that his slightest caress made her ache to surrender only proved how dangerous he truly was.

Now. While he was distracted—this was her chance to escape. Before he dragged her away to hell under the guise of sweet promises, and she never saw her daughter again.

Quietly she edged back toward the door.

The two men continued to talk.

Lucy took a deep breath. Then turned and ran.

"Ferma!" the dark prince roared. *"Stop, Lucia!"*

Outside, the blast of cold air hit her, swirling snow and making her long dark ponytail twist in the wind. Pushing up her glasses, she sprinted for her old Honda. Parked behind the gas station, it was covered by ice and snow. Her hand shook as she stuck the key in the door.

But the lock was frozen!

Panicking, she glanced over her shoulder.

Prince Maximo was striding toward her like a bull, his dark eyes cold and furious. Desperate, she turned it harder.

The key broke off in her hand.

She had no car. *No escape.*

With a gasp, she turned and stumbled through the snow, crossing the street toward the deserted city park. On the other side of the vast, empty darkness she could see lights and the

twinkle of traffic. But she'd barely reached the edge of the park before he caught up with her.

He knocked her into the soft powder, his large, muscled body pressing her into the snow. Grabbing her wrists, he turned her over beneath him. She struggled, but he used his weight against her.

She looked up at his face, so close to hers. With his body so hard and warm against her own, she could barely feel the cold snow beneath her.

"Basta! I told you to stop!" He tightened his hands, shackling her wrists. "You must learn to obey."

The trees were dark over his head, their snowy branches waving like claws against the gray sky. Scattered moonlight sifted through the clouds, leaving his dark hair in a halo of light.

"I'll never obey you," she cried. "Never!"

"We'll see." His glance touched her lips, and she suddenly knew he was going to kiss her. In the dark winter wonderland of the park, they were utterly alone. Surrounded by snow and cold, she felt fire in her veins at his touch, and she was helpless to move, helpless to fight.

But she had to fight. Without a mother to protect her, her baby would be vulnerable and alone, tossed into foster care as Lucy herself once had been. She couldn't give in.

She would fight to protect Chloe to her last breath...

"Let me go," she whispered. "Please. If you have any decency at all—if you've ever loved anyone and lost them—I'm begging

you. Let me go.”

Her quiet voice reverberated against the snow, muffled in the thick silence of the night.

He stared down at her with sudden pain in his eyes.

Abruptly he released her wrists and rose to his feet.

“As you wish, *cara mia*,” he said, sounding almost bored.

“Stay here if you wish. I am returning to my hotel.”

Thank you, thank you, thank you, she thought fervently. She scrambled to her feet, turning on her heel, ready to run.

“After all,” he mused behind her, “I want to make sure your baby is sleeping comfortably. And she hasn’t lost that little purple hippo she carries everywhere.”

Her heart stopped in her chest.

Wide-eyed with fear, she whirled back to face him. “What?”

He looked at her with cool disdain. “Oh, did I not tell you? My men picked up your daughter an hour ago.”

CHAPTER THREE

“YOU aren’t going to get away with this,” Lucy ground out for the tenth time as he drove them into downtown Chicago.

Unmoved, Maximo parked his sleek black Mercedes beneath the grand marquee of the Drake Hotel. “You have no idea what I can get away with.”

Furious, she ripped off her blue cashier’s smock, balling it up in her hands and tossing it to the floor. “I don’t know what the laws are like in Italy, but in Chicago, you can’t just *kidnap* someone—”

“There are laws against kidnapping in Italy, as well.” He abruptly stopped the car. “They do not apply in this case. I did not kidnap your daughter.”

“What do you call it then?”

“I knew you would accept my offer. I simply expedited our departure.”

Leaving the engine idling, he undid his seat belt and stepped out of the black SUV. Her eyes widened as she saw him carelessly hand a hundred-dollar bill to the waiting valet.

“Thank you, your highness,” the young man breathed, and hurried to open the passenger-side door for Lucy. She nearly tripped over her own feet running after Maximo. With his long stride, he was already to the main door.

“Welcome back, your highness.” The brawny doorman touched his cap with deep respect. “Happy New Year to you, sir.”

“*Grazie*,” Maximo replied with a brief smile. “To you, as well.”

Just inside the revolving door, Lucy caught up with him on the wide flight of stairs leading up to the lobby. She grabbed his arm. “You have them all fooled, don’t you?” she snapped. “Some *prince*. They think you’re respectable—honorable—but I know the truth. You’re nothing but a...”

He looked at her hand, then back up. His blue eyes were icier than Lake Michigan in winter. “I’m what?”

Fury pounded through her, making her reckless. “A thief. A blackmailer. A kidnapper of children—”

He grabbed her shoulders. She felt the strength of his touch. He looked down, towering over her. His handsome face was as cold and hard as ever; there was something new beneath his eyes—something ferocious and angry, held back by the sheerest force of will.

Looking up into his face, she was suddenly afraid.

His voice was low. “Be careful how you provoke me.”

She swallowed, remembering his earlier promise to punish her like a woman deserved. “I’m not scared of you,” she lied. “And if you think taking me to your hotel room—forcing me into bed—will hurt Alexander, you’re dead wrong.”

He abruptly released her.

“I’ve never forced any woman into my bed,” he said coolly. His eyes traced her face, then up and down the length of her body. “If I ever decide I want you, *cara*, you’ll come to me willingly.”

The colossal arrogance of the man! A hot flush suffused her cheeks. “How dare you—”

“Fortunately you are not my type,” he said. “You are far too plain, too badly dressed, too young—”

“Oh,” she gasped, humiliated to the core.

“You are not a woman to me,” he said coldly. “You are a weapon.”

A weapon? She sucked in her breath. “What do you intend to do to Alex?”

“Why do you care? Unless you’re still in love with him.”

She shook her head. “Of course not! But he’s my baby’s

father!”

“Don’t worry.” His lip curled into a sneer. “He will merely be forced to admit that he has a daughter. Surely you have no objection to that?”

Alex had been keeping Chloe a secret? “No,” she muttered. “I’ve no objection.”

“And he will lose his bid for a company. Someone else—someone you don’t know—will also lose.”

“How many enemies do you have, anyway?” Lucy demanded, then shook her head. “Hundreds. Thousands. Everyone who’s ever met you, I imagine! I don’t care. Just take me to my daughter. If you’ve hurt or frightened her, I swear I’ll—”

“I would never hurt a child, *signorina*. Just as I would never hurt a woman.” His lip curled as he added under his breath, “Although you tempt me.”

She followed him up the steps to the elegant 1920s-style lobby. The soaring ceiling sparkled with enormous chandeliers. Beneath them, wealthy revelers crowded together, some wearing diamonds and fur coats, celebrating the advent of the new year with a half-drunken chorus of “Auld Lang Syne.”

Maximo led her past the well-heeled guests to the golden elevators behind the lobby. When they were alone behind the closed doors, he hit the button for the tenth floor.

Lucy repeated in a low voice, “I don’t even know you. So I don’t understand why you’ve done this. Kidnapped my daughter. Gotten me fired. Turned my life upside down—”

He turned to face her. “Don’t you want to be rich, Lucia?” he demanded. “To buy clothes, cars, jewelry? Don’t you wish to spend time with your daughter and buy her everything her heart desires?”

She stared at him, heart pounding in her chest. “Are you crazy? Of course I do! But strangers don’t just fall out of the sky and offer money. I’m trying to figure out your angle!”

“No angle. I’m offering a lifetime of wealth and luxury for you and your daughter. And the chance to repay the man who abandoned you both.”

“But there’s a catch,” she said.

“What makes you so sure?”

“There’s always a catch.”

“Perhaps.” He looked at her. “Does it matter?”

The elevator doors opened, and he strode out. Feeling as if she were Alice who’d just fallen through the looking glass, Lucy followed him down the maroon carpet of the hallway. The wainscoted walls were yellow-gold, illuminated by glistening chandeliers at every corner. He stopped at a door.

Mrs. Plotzky opened to his knock. Her hair was in curlers and she was wearing a luxurious white robe and cushy hotel slippers. The television was blaring softly behind her in the elegant living room. She beamed at sight of Lucy.

“Oh my dear! Such a wonderful day! I’m so happy for you. When Prince Maximo’s bodyguards explained he was taking you both to Italy, I—”

“Where’s Chloe?” Lucy bit out, angry that her babysitter had been so gullible.

Taken aback, the elderly woman pointed to a door inside the suite. Mrs. Plotzky sat back down on the gold sofa with her knitting while Lucy went to the adjacent door.

She stood in the doorway of the darkened bedroom, listening to her daughter’s deep, even breathing. When Lucy’s eyes had adjusted, she saw a small lump in the center of the enormous bed surrounded by pillows. Her baby. The light from the doorway scattered across Chloe’s plump cheeks. The baby was clutching her tattered purple hippo to her chest.

Lucy crept closer. She stroked Chloe’s hair, tenderly tucking the blankets beneath her chubby legs. The linens made her pause. They were soft against Lucy’s fingers. Luxurious and white, not stained and threadbare from a thousand washings at the quarter Laundromat.

Slowly she looked around the palatial bedroom. From the windows overlooking Lake Michigan, to the plush, pristine carpet, the room had every luxury and comfort.

Not like their tiny apartment, where the windows rattled every time the El train went by. Where Chloe’s crib was crammed against Lucy’s bed, which was jammed up against the kitchen counter. Where it was cold all winter, no matter how high Lucy turned up the thermostat. Where spiders and mice kept turning up, no matter how hard or often Lucy cleaned in the middle of the night.

Chloe turned over in her sleep, stretching in the luxurious bed with a contented sigh. Lucy's heart went to her throat.

Her baby deserved a life like *this*.

Don't you want to be rich? she heard Maximo's voice say. *Don't you wish to spend time with your daughter and buy her everything her heart desires?*

Stroking Chloe's soft downy hair, Lucy saw the worn-out elbows of her baby's pajamas, and her throat started to hurt.

Alex had told her he loved her. He'd proposed marriage. He'd begged Lucy to have his baby. He'd refused to use a condom, laughing at her fears, seducing her, reassuring her. Older than her, with a high-status job, he'd promised to give them both security and comfort and love—forever.

Against her better judgment, she'd let herself love him. Let herself *believe*.

Then she'd come home on Christmas Eve last year. Heavily pregnant, weighed down with grocery bags of fresh cranberries and canned pumpkin, she'd been singing "Deck the Halls" when she pushed open the door with her hip. She'd found her apartment empty and dark. All his clothes were gone. His toothbrush. His briefcase. His computer. Even the three-carat engagement ring she'd left lovingly in the velvet box on her dresser, because it no longer fit her pregnancy-bloated finger.

Everything. Gone.

A year later, and Lucy still couldn't hear "Deck the Halls" on the radio without feeling sick.

He'd left her, but that didn't matter. What did matter was that he'd left his own child to starve. He'd even tried to deny Chloe was his.

Lucy would never forgive him for that.

Just as she would never forgive herself for trusting his easy charm. She could still hear his whisper sometimes at night. "I love ya, Luce. I'll always take care of you."

Liar, she thought, then looked down at her daughter. Alex had lost more than he would ever know.

But so had Chloe. She had no father.

Lucy's eyes narrowed. If she could just see Alex, she could break through his selfish stupor and he would realize what he'd done. He would realize that he loved his daughter. He would act like a decent father, and her daughter would be safe and warm, with two parents to protect her.

Lucy could still give her precious baby the life she deserved.

Whatever it took.

Whatever the catch.

To give her baby a good life, Lucy would do anything—work herself to exhaustion. Sell her body. Even risk her soul.

In sudden decision, Lucy softly kissed Chloe good-night. She spoke briefly with Mrs. Plotzky before leaving the elderly babysitter knitting in front of her game show.

Every step Lucy took was deliberate. Determined.

She found Maximo in the gold-and-cream hallway, leaning against the wall.

“Well?” he asked quietly. “What is your decision?”

She raised her chin. “My daughter will never worry about money again? She’ll have food and a warm house and be happy and safe?”

“Correct.”

“And I will be able to speak with Alex in person?”

His blue eyes glittered. “Oh, yes.”

“I accept your offer.”

CHAPTER FOUR

“*VA BENE.*” Maximo looked down at her with a strange light in his eyes. “Come with me.”

He took her hand, and she felt the same electricity, the same high-voltage shock. He pulled her back down the hallway and into the elevator. He was Heathcliff carrying her across the moors. He was Mr. Rochester demanding what he had no right to possess...

He was Prince Maximo d’Aquila, taking her to his hotel room.

He stood behind her in the elevator, his hands possessively on her shoulders. Against her will, she closed her eyes. The weight of his hands felt like gold against her skin. Satiny-smooth, gleaming, heavy—forbidden.

Except Maximo wasn’t Heathcliff. Heathcliff had wanted Cathy so much that he’d been willing to kill for her, die for her. He’d been driven half-mad when he’d lost her.

The Italian prince standing behind her now, so close that she

could feel the warmth emanating from his body, didn't even see her as a woman.

You're not my type. You're too plain. Too badly dressed. Too young.

That's wonderful, she told herself fiercely. She was done with men. Done with love. All she cared about now was Chloe, and giving her a good life at any cost.

The elevator stopped on the fifth floor, and Maximo led her to the end of a hall. She heard laughter, the chiming of crystal glasses, voices speaking in English and Italian over the sounds of violins. He pushed open the door to his suite.

Lucy stopped, her mouth agape.

In the far corner, a string quartet performed Vivaldi's "Winter." She recognized two Hollywood celebrities, a senator. Money and power poured from the suite like music.

She'd expected a hotel suite, but...

"This is a palace!"

"I don't have any palaces in this particular country." Looking utterly at ease, Maximo took off his coat and tossed it on the upholstered settee beneath the mirrored foyer. "This is just the presidential suite."

Just the presidential suite. One night here would probably cost a year of her rent. "You're having a New Year's Eve party?"

He glanced at her, his eyes heavy-lidded, sensual. "I will soon celebrate far more than that. Stay here."

Glamorous people were turning to stare. Two women in

particular, a blonde and a brunette, whispered to each other as they looked Lucy up and down. She licked her lips nervously. “Perhaps I should wait for you outside—”

“You will wait here.” His voice rang with authority, demanding immediate obedience. “If anyone speaks to you, you will not explain your presence.”

“No problem,” she muttered. How could she explain it, when even she didn’t understand?

She watched him make his way toward the bar across the suite, frequently stopped by his guests. Every woman in the suite, young and old, married and single, seemed determined to get his attention.

Except for the two gorgeous, elegant women who’d seen her arrive with Maximo. They sashayed toward Lucy like vultures.

The pretty blonde in a tight red dress looked at her scornfully, and Lucy was suddenly aware of her scuffed tennis shoes, her messy ponytail, her old clothes. The blonde’s lips twisted. “Nice outfit.”

Lucy flushed. She knew her sweatshirt was not fashionable, but it had once been her mother’s. Working the night shift, that made her feel watched over; plus, the kitten on its front always made Chloe laugh.

“I’ve heard of slumming,” the blonde drawled, “but this is ridiculous, isn’t it, Esmé?”

“Now, Arabella. You should be more kind.” The chic brunette gave Lucy a patronizing stare. “She’s probably here to clean the

bathrooms.”

Lucy froze, reminded of the way she'd been teased as a child. Her mom had moved them around so much, Lucy had always been the new kid in school. With her thick glasses and secondhand clothes, she'd been an easy target. And after her mother died, it had been worse. She'd spent countless hours in the school library with books her only real friends....

“Esmé. Arabella.” Maximo suddenly appeared at Lucy's shoulder. He leaned forward to kiss the cheeks of the brunette, then the blonde. At his attention, the women preened and tossed their hair, like flowers reaching for the sun.

He drew back, putting his hand on Lucy's arm. “I see you've met Lucia.”

Esmé tossed Lucy a cold glare, then pretended to give a little laugh. “Oh. Is she your friend? I thought she was the maid. How very eccentric of you, Maximo. Why go out for a common drive-through hamburger when you could enjoy foie gras in the comfort of your suite?”

She obviously wasn't talking about food.

For Lucy, it was the last straw in a stressful night.

“Foie gras is outlawed in Chicago, Esmé,” Lucy replied sweetly. “I can't imagine why anyone would find mashed duck liver appealing, anyway.” She looked the brunette over from her supershort minidress to her platform heels, “It's so greasy and nasty.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Why, you little—”

“Excuse us,” Maximo said, hiding a smile as he pressed Lucy away.

“It’s almost midnight, Maximo,” Esmé called after them as they reached the bedroom doorway. “Don’t forget our New Year’s kiss!”

“No!” the blonde cried. “He’s going to kiss *me!*”

Maximo closed the door solidly behind them, and just like that, all the noise of the party fell away. They were alone in the bedroom.

Lucy rubbed her wrist.

“I’m sorry,” she muttered, although she really wasn’t.

“Sorry? For what?”

“For being rude to your mistress.”

He stared at her, then snorted. “Do you mean Lady Arabella? Or the Countess of Bedingford?”

Lady? Countess? Apparently royal titles were as common in Maximo’s world as Mr. or Mrs. “Take your pick.”

He shrugged. “I hardly think a meaningless fling qualifies any woman to claim the title of *mistress.*”

“Meaning you’ve slept with both of them?” Her shocked voice ended with a squeak.

His sensual mouth curved into a smile. “There have been many women in my life. But as for details—a gentleman can hardly be expected to kiss and tell.”

“Some gentleman,” she huffed. “Can’t you tell that they’re in love with you?”

“I doubt that very much.”

“They were ready to scratch my eyes out just for being with you!”

“You exaggerate. And in any case—” his blue eyes caressed hers “—if any woman chooses to love me, she has only herself to blame. I am always very clear. I am not a man to settle down or give my heart to just one woman. I am faithful to only three things.”

“Those are?” she spat out, folding her arms.

“Justice for my family. My own freedom.” He held out a crystal flute of champagne. “And the success of my company.”

She stared at the champagne he was holding out to her. As a college student, she’d been too focused on her studies to bother with alcohol; as a single mother, she hadn’t had the money or inclination. “Look, I know it’s New Year’s and everything, but I’m just not in the mood. If you want to celebrate, why don’t you ask one of the princesses outside?”

His dark eyebrow lifted in amusement. “Surely you’re not jealous?”

She looked away. “I just feel sorry for them, that’s all.”

“Esmé and Arabella have influence in certain circles, and though I’ve lost personal interest I see no reason to cut off ties with them. I trade in luxury. And that is what I celebrate. The takeover of a small leather-goods company for my conglomerate. I have desired this company for many years,” he said softly. “And it will be mine within the hour. Perhaps you’ve heard of

it. Ferrazzi.”

He watched her from beneath heavily-lidded eyes.

Ferrazzi. She'd admired their three-thousand-dollar handbags, even sold a few of them to wealthy customers. They were lovely bags, impossibly stylish, with leather as soft as cashmere and hardy as steel.

But worth that price? The bags weren't big enough to live in, nor did they magically mop her floor, cook her dinner or wash her clothes. Three thousand dollars for a handbag? That was insane!

But Maximo seemed to be waiting for a response, and it seemed rude to criticize the company he would soon own. She cleared her throat, struggling to be polite. “Ferrazzi. Yes.”

His large hand tightened around his delicate champagne flute. “What do you know about it?”

“Um.” She bit her lip—literally—then finally said with a sigh, “I once worked in the accessories department at Neiman Marcus. Of course I know Ferrazzi handbags. That's like asking me if I've ever heard of Chanel or Prada. You're buying the company?”

“Si.”

“But it must cost millions!”

He gave her a cold smile. “Hundreds of millions.”

She gaped at him, then snapped her mouth closed, muttering, “You obviously have more money than sense.”

“And you obviously have greater regard for truth than tact. Here.” At a discreet knock on the door, he pushed the flute into her hand. Swiftly downing his own champagne, Maximo

answered the door. A slender man in a suit handed him a folder.

“What is it?” she asked, taking a tentative sip of champagne. *Not bad*, she thought in surprise. It was a bit sweet and fizzy like soda.

Closing the door behind him, Maximo opened the folder and glanced over the papers. He handed her the folder. “This is for you to sign.”

Setting the champagne flute down on a glass table, she opened it with a puzzled frown. “What is it?”

“A prenuptial agreement.”

“But—who’s getting married?”

“You are. To me.”

CHAPTER FIVE

LUCY looked up from the folder to the handsome prince in front of her. “What are you talking about?” she croaked. “Married? To you?”

“Correct.”

“I don’t even know you!”

His sensual lips curved. “An excellent start for marriage.”

“You said you’d never settle down with one woman—and you want to marry me?”

“Si.”

“But why?”

“Let’s start with why you’d want to marry me,” he said smoothly. “My palatial homes all over the world. My vast fortune. You can buy whatever you want without question. You will never

need to work again. You will travel in the most exclusive circles of society. Your daughter will go to the best schools.” He took a step toward her. “And then there’s the title.”

“The title?” she repeated faintly, aware of how close he was to her.

He stroked a dark tendril of her hair, still wet from when he’d crushed her into the snow. “Wherever you go, for the rest of your life, you will be accepted and admired. As my princess. My bride,” he said. “The Principessa Lucia d’Aquila.”

Lucy—a *princess*?

Suddenly alcohol seemed like a terrific idea. Snatching up her champagne flute, she drank it all down in a gulp. The expensive bubbles might really have been soda for all she noticed. But when she was finished, her mouth was still dry. She licked her lips, then felt his searing blue gaze. She looked up.

His hot glance plundered her mouth. As if he’d seized her, kissed her, possessed her by force of his will. She was suddenly aware of her every breath—and his.

“But people don’t get married for *money*,” she whispered. “They do it because they care about each other...”

“Oh, do they?” He ran his hands on her shoulders, tracing upward with a finger along her neck to her jawline. He gently lifted her chin. He looked at her slowly, as if assessing the shape of her face beneath her glasses and messy hair, analyzing the shape of her body beneath her clothes. Finally he met her eyes.

“Perhaps you are right,” he said abruptly. “Perhaps this will

be for more than money. Perhaps I will take you to my bed.”

“You what?”

He smiled, a cruelly sensual smile. “This will be even more enjoyable than I thought. I will make you feel as you’ve never felt before. Make you moan and gasp with pleasure until you forget your own name.”

She closed her eyes. She knew he could do it. Just hearing him threaten to seduce her, feeling his touch against her skin, was nearly enough to make her forget her name already.

“Would you like that?” His lips brushed against the tender flesh of her ear. “Would you like, at last, to feel the sensations you’ve only read about in books?”

A quiet shiver rocked her from her toes.

Startled, she looked up at him. His expression was arrogant. Knowing. As if he could read into her very soul. As if he somehow knew that her only lover had left her deeply unsatisfied.

“But you said—you said you didn’t want me,” she stammered. “You said I’m not your type.”

“I see now that I was wrong.” He gently stroked down her neck with his forefinger and his thumb. “You have your own beauty, different from any I’ve seen before. There is no reason not to enjoy our short marriage. I can show you what love is truly like—show you how passionate love can be.”

Her heart turned over. “Love?”

“Marry me, and your feet will barely touch the ground.”

Oh. That kind of love. Of course, what else could he mean? A

playboy like Prince Maximo d'Aquila would not get emotionally entangled in relationships. He had too many of them.

"But you said you'd never settle down," she whispered. "So why now, Maximo? Why me?"

"You think little of yourself." He ran his hands down her arms, from her neck to her bare wrists. "You do not know your own worth, Lucia."

Lucia. Every time he called her that it was a caress, making her feel exotic, beautiful, desired. She loved the feeling—almost as much as she feared it...

She took a deep breath.

If a handsome man seems too good to be true, she repeated to herself fiercely, he's *lying*.

So why was he trying to make her believe he desired her?

Because he thought she'd refused his proposal.

The realization gave her the strength to pull away. Narrowing her eyes, she raised her chin.

"You're not proposing marriage because you think I'm *beautiful*," she said evenly. She held up the prenup with a loud rattle of paper. "You had your lawyers working on this for hours. Stop trying to seduce me. I'm not one of those simpering women to melt at your command. Tell me *why* you want to marry me. Whom will it hurt? And how?"

"*Cara—*" He moved toward her, palms up in a gesture of supplication.

"No!" She moved backward, unwilling to let him touch her.

“Don’t you *‘cara’* me. I want cold, hard facts!”

His expression changed.

And suddenly, he laughed aloud.

“*Bravo, signorina,*” he said with a satisfied clap of his hands.

“You are the first woman to resist me since I was fifteen years old. Bravo.” He gave her a nod. “I respect your intelligence.”

She flushed, feeling unaccountably pleased by his praise.

“And as you’ve left me no choice...” He took the file from her, opening it on a nearby table. “Here are your *cold, hard facts*. Our marriage will last approximately three months. I will allow you to spend my fortune as if it were your own. In return, I will have complete control and management of all your current and future assets.” He paused, looking up to search her gaze. “Do you find that unfair?”

She said with a bitter laugh, “My only asset is a beat-up old Honda that barely runs. If you want to try to manage that, be my guest.”

“At the end of our marriage, I will be required to pay you full market value for anything I keep.” He quickly turned to another page. “And in addition, I will recompense you with a settlement of ten million dollars for each month of our marriage.”

She stared at him, unable to comprehend the words.

“Thirty...million...dollars?” she choked.

“*Sì.*”

Lucy closed her eyes. She would never have to work again. She could spend her days playing with her baby. Chloe would

have the best of everything. The best schools. Brand-new toys. Brand-new clothes. Ballet lessons. Italian lessons. Tuba lessons. Anything and everything. They could have the snug, warm little house she'd always dreamed of. She could turn the heat up as high as she wished. They could pick the biggest Christmas tree on the lot. Chloe could have pony rides—no, a whole stable of thoroughbreds. World cruises. Tuition to Harvard. *Anything and everything.*

She tried to be calm, but her hands were shaking.

“Wh-what would you expect me to do for that?”

“I would expect you to appear to be my devoted wife in every way. To honor and obey.”

She licked her dry lips. “To do something illegal?”

“No.”

“Immoral?”

“That is in the eye of the beholder. It would be a marriage of convenience. A few moments ago, you found that distasteful. Do you still?”

She was suddenly willing to reconsider. “Just three months?”

“That is my guess.” His blue eyes became grim. “I’m waiting for a man to die—a man you don’t know.”

That brought her up short. “Oh.”

“He is old and ill. Once he is dead, we will divorce. And you will be wealthier than your wildest dreams.”

“Still.” She swallowed. “It’s a bit ghoulish, isn’t it—waiting for someone to die?”

“We all die sometime, *cara*.”

“That’s...true.” Biting her lip, she paced the bedroom, then turned with a sudden intake of breath. “You will do nothing to cause his death?”

His eyes flashed. “You think I’m a murderer?”

She didn’t know what to think. None of this made sense. “I’m just trying to understand.”

“Don’t try.” He pushed the prenup toward her. “Just sign.”

“Wait. Please.” She pressed her fingers against her eyelids. *Think*, she ordered her brain. But everything he’d said, all his seductive evasions and cryptic demands, just jumbled together in her mind. Why would a wealthy, handsome prince want to marry her?

“What about me is so special that it’s worth thirty million dollars?” she asked. “And what does Alex have to do with it?”

He looked away, clenching his jaw. When he turned back to her, his sky-blue gaze was cold.

“I’ve made you a good offer. If you don’t like it, tell me to go to hell. Go back to your old life.”

A sudden rush of fear went through her. Go back to her old life? Wake Chloe up from her soft bed upstairs, and drag her back to their freezing, mouse-infested apartment?

“Or—” he pushed the prenuptial agreement toward her on the table, holding out a pen “—sign this and marry me.”

“But—”

“No more discussion. Make your choice.”

She stared at his outstretched pen.

She'd be a fool to sign this agreement. Without a lawyer to explain the legal jargon, for all she knew she'd be signing her life away. Marry a man she didn't know? Run away with this darkly handsome prince to Italy? Be transformed from a desperate single mother to a powerful princess? Be so wealthy that her daughter, her granddaughter and her great-granddaughter would all be able to devote their lives to their own pursuit of happiness?

Slowly Lucy took the pen.

She'd be a fool *not* to sign it.

Her choice was simple. Either take this risk—or take Chloe back to their old life. One paycheck away from living out of Lucy's car. And she'd just lost her job!

Thirty million dollars. A number beyond comprehension. But still, she hesitated.

“What about your needs?”

“My needs?”

“Your—needs,” she said, flushing. “I won't share your bed.”

“Ah.” His sensual lips slid into a grin. “We'll see.”

“No.” She gripped the pen in her hand. “I'd be a fool to love a man like you.”

“We're not talking of love. I've taken many women to my bed, and never once experienced a broken heart. Just pleasure.”

Which was exactly why she had to make sure he never touched her. A playboy prince like Maximo might be able to seduce someone with just his body, but Lucy didn't think she could keep

her heart out of it. She didn't think she could make love without
falling

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