



Maisey Yates

The Prince's

**PREGNANT
PRINCESS**

MILLS & BOON

MODERN

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The Prince's Pregnant Mistress

Аннотация

“I. Am. Pregnant.” Three little words are all it takes to threaten Prince Raphael DeSantis’s secret life of pleasurable hedonism, ruin the state of a nation, and find him bound to a waitress. To prevent yet another international incident following on the heels of his of his convenient – and very broken – engagement to a suitable princess, Raphael must now make his mistress his bride! But heart-sore Bailey Harper won’t come willingly. This arrogant Prince will have to use every provocative trick at his disposal to seduce her into submission – and return to his country with Bailey as his wife! Book 2 in the Heirs Before Vows trilogy

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“Of course,” Raphael said, “there will be no discussion of my sending you child support checks, and no discussion of the child being raised here, because you will both be in Santa Firenze.”

“I thought I wasn’t fit to be brought back to your country.”

She wasn’t. Even now, looking at Bailey, he felt that intense possessiveness that had him in a stranglehold. Taking her, claiming her, seemed to be the most obvious choice.

Which was what gave him pause. A ruler was meant to be cool. A ruler was meant to direct his actions with his mind, his sense of honor, not with anything half so fickle as desire or heat.

Raphael wondered what his father might have done in this instance. And then had to concede that his father would never have been so foolish as to get himself in this situation.

He was forced, then, to weigh his options. To bring back a woman such as this...one he had already decided was unsuitable

for his kingdom...was unfathomable.

But honor. Honor and duty were at the center of all of it, regardless of what she made him feel. His duty was to his child.

“That was before I knew you were carrying my heir.” He took a step toward her, the word mine pounding itself through his head in time with the thundering of his heart. “Of course you are coming back to my country with me now. But not as my mistress. Bailey Harper, you are going to be my wife.”

One stolen moment of extraordinary passion leads to dramatic consequences in this stunning new trilogy by New York Times bestselling author Maisey Yates in...

[Heirs Before Vows](#)

Claiming their legacy with a diamond ring!

Three of the world's most impressive and powerful bachelors, connected by fate and friendship, are about to find their lives changed irrevocably!

No one could have expected the shocking consequences that now lead these determined alpha males down the aisle...

...as expectant fathers!

Find out what happens in...

The Spaniard's Pregnant Bride

October 2016

The Prince's Pregnant Mistress

December 2016

This stunning trilogy concludes with...

The Italian's Pregnant Virgin

January 2017

The Prince's Pregnant Mistress

Maisey Yates

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MAISEY YATES is a New York Times bestselling author of more than thirty romance novels. She has a coffee habit she has no interest in kicking, and a slight Pinterest addiction. She lives with her husband and children in the Pacific Northwest. When Maisey isn't writing she can be found singing in the grocery store, shopping for shoes online and probably not doing dishes. Check out her website: maiseyyates.com.

This book is dedicated to the librarians. I spent countless hours at libraries, reading countless books. Thank you for giving the joy of reading to everyone.

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[CHAPTER ONE](#)

IT HAD BEEN a perfect night. So beautiful, the white Christmas lights strung across the facades of the buildings in Vail glittering on the snow all around them. Like the stars had dropped down from the sky to light their way.

Yes, the night had been perfect and Raphael even more so. But then, he always was.

Bailey couldn't quite believe it was real. Even after eight months with him, she couldn't believe it. He was like something out of a fairy tale, and she was a girl who never thought she'd

have a happy ending.

But then she'd met him.

Of course, she only saw him every few months, when he flew into Colorado on business, and never for long enough.

She'd been guarded all of her adult life. So cautious when it came to men and dating. But with Raphael...that caution had never been there. She'd just given herself to him with no thought of self-protection, no thought of anything but how much she wanted him.

She was like a different woman with him. A woman in love.

It was always so frantic when he was there. Tonight was no exception. They'd finished dinner, a walk through the town, then back to the hotel, where he'd consumed her.

There had been an edge to him tonight, an intensity. Not that she was complaining.

She stretched out on the sheets, curling her toes. She was still recovering. She giggled and rolled onto her side, looking toward the bathroom.

The door was closed, a sliver of light visible beneath it. She sighed heavily, waiting for him to come back to bed.

Waiting impatiently.

Tonight felt different. Significant and special.

She loved him so much. She ached with it. She'd never thought she could feel this way about someone. Never thought someone could feel this way about her.

She was ready for more. She was ready for everything.

The bathroom door opened, and her heart skipped a little. That made her smile. It was ridiculous how giddy she was over him. But then, she'd never let a man close enough to her to have this kind of intimacy.

In her waitressing job she got hit on by men all the time. She just wasn't...swayed by it. At all. She had been thoroughly disenchanted with men by the time she'd moved out of her mother's home at sixteen. She'd seen too much. Too much heartbreak. Too much screaming.

Bailey had decided to make her own life, her own future. She'd made it to twenty-one a virgin because she'd been so determined to wait until it was right, until she was ready.

And then she'd met Raphael. Her friends barely believed he existed. She'd stopped talking much about him when all she'd gotten were skeptical eye rolls and Raphael? Bailey, are you dating a Ninja Turtle?

He'd never met them because he was so busy whenever he flew in. And then she wanted him all to herself. So yeah, she was giddy. She had a feeling she always would be.

"Bailey, shouldn't you be getting dressed?"

She frowned. She hadn't expected him to say that. She spent the night with him all the time when he came through town. "I thought...well." She swept a hand over her bare curves. "I'm ready for more if you are."

"I have an early flight out—I thought I told you."

He looked grim suddenly. She hated that grimness. It grabbed

her by the throat and held her tight, filled her lungs with dread, and she couldn't quite pinpoint why. "No. You didn't." She forced a smile because there was no point fighting with him if these were their last few minutes together before he had to leave again. "You have to go back to Italy?"

"Yes," he said, reaching for his pants and tugging them on, covering up his gorgeous body.

She watched him dress the rest of the way, the reverse strip show still arousing even if it had a more depressing ending than the alternative.

His muscles rippled with each movement, his fingers blunt and efficient as he buttoned his shirt. Reminding her of just how efficient they were with her.

"Bailey," he said again, his tone vaguely...irritated. She couldn't recall Raphael ever being irritated with her before.

"I'm comfortable," she said, sighing heavily and rolling out of bed. "There. Now I'm not. I hope you're happy." She purposefully wiggled her hips a little bit as she made her way to where he'd torn her dress off earlier. "I hope this survived," she said, picking it up gingerly.

"I'll replace it if it didn't."

"I'm more worried about what I'll wear home." Another sigh escaped her lips. "When are you coming back?"

"I'm not."

She felt like all the air had been pulled from her body. She just stood there, blinking in the dim light, totally frozen while

her fingers went numb and her insides went cold. “What do you mean, you aren’t coming back?”

“I don’t have any more work here in Vail. We’re finished up with our meetings.”

“Right. So. But... I’m here.”

He laughed, a hard, low sound that wasn’t like Raphael at all. “Sorry, cara, that is not enticement enough.”

She was dumbstruck. Completely. And she hated herself for it. “I don’t understand. We just had the nicest date and the best... I don’t... I don’t understand.”

“It was goodbye. You have been an especially lovely diversion, but that’s all it could ever be. I have a life back in Italy, and it’s time I got back to it in earnest.”

Dumbstruck turned into sucker punched. “A life? Are you... Raphael, are you married?”

“About to be,” he said, his tone hard. “I can’t afford distractions any longer.”

“You’re engaged. Of course you are,” she said, words tumbling out of her mouth without her permission. “I bet you...live with her. Of course you only come and visit me every couple of months. I’m such an idiot.” She covered her mouth and stifled a scream. She was too angry to be humiliated. Too wounded to care if she bled all over him. “I was... I was a virgin, and you knew that,” she threw at him. “I told you it was a big step for me!” Angry tears welled in her eyes, rolling down her cheeks.

“And I appreciated the gift, tesorina,” he said, his tone now

like iron. “We were together for eight months. It was hardly a fling.”

“It’s a fling if one of you isn’t taking it seriously at all!” A sob rose in her throat, shaking her whole body. “If one of you knew it would end and was sleeping with someone else.” She bent down then, picked up her shoe and threw it at his head.

He dodged it neatly, an Italian swear word on his lips.

She bent again, picking up her other shoe and flinging that at him too. This one hit him square in the chest. He closed the distance between them, grabbing hold of her wrist. “Enough.” He released her as quickly as he’d taken hold of her. “Don’t embarrass yourself, Bailey. Not more than you already have.”

“You should be embarrassed,” she said, her voice shaking. She pulled the dress on, then moved to pick her shoes up. She hadn’t put her nylons back on, but who had the time for that ridiculousness when your heart had just been ripped out through your chest? “You are the one who lied to me.” She sniffed much louder than she meant to, pulling her coat on over the dress, trying to ignore the fact that she was shaking so hard now her teeth were chattering.

“I never lied to you,” he said, his dark eyes burning. “You created the story you wanted to believe.”

She let out a feral growl and rushed past him, heading out the door as quickly as she could, feeling like a disgraced hooker walking out of his hotel room in the middle of the night, wearing high heels and a beautiful dress that she was going to have to

burn now.

It wasn't until she was outside, until the cold wrapped itself around her, overtaking her, that she fell apart. Completely, utterly. She sank to her knees in the snow, sobbing until her throat hurt.

It felt like her life was over. And right now, she did not have it in her to put herself back together.

Three months later

I'm sorry, Bailey. But I can't have a waitress falling asleep in the kitchen in the middle of her shift. Especially not a fat waitress.

Her boss's voice played over and over in her head as she trudged back to her apartment. She had been right, that night three months ago when Raphael had broken things off with her. Her life pretty much felt like it was over.

She was so far behind in her classes it didn't look like she had the credits she needed to graduate, she didn't have a job anymore and she was so sick and tired she barely cared about either.

Now she was going to have to tell Samantha that she couldn't make rent. Well, this was the crowning achievement on the past months' humiliations, really. She had become everything she had felt so far above for most of her life.

When she had left home, left town, she had blistered her mother's ears with her rant about how she was off to make a better life for herself. One that wouldn't be all about men and an intense dedication to being a victim.

She'd gotten the hell out of metaphorical Dodge. Leaving behind that life of destitution. Where she'd been nothing but unwanted. Nothing but resented, and she'd vowed to do better.

She'd been wise to men, and what they might say to get into your pants, from the time she was way too young to know any such thing. Because she'd heard her mother rant at length on the subject after whatever boyfriend had broken up with her. As a result she had imagined herself as inoculated against such things. Had imagined that she was immune to that kind of behavior.

The truth of it was, she simply hadn't met a man who made her crazy enough. Then she met Raphael. And now, here she was, single, out of a job and pregnant. And all at the age of twenty-two.

She was the cycle. The cycle that she had so proudly and grandly told herself she wouldn't perpetuate. Now here she was. Perpetuating. She was a statistic. A sad statistic wandering around in the chilly, early spring air with nowhere in particular to go.

She stopped, turning to face the small general store across the street. Candy. She needed candy. Since she couldn't have wine. Damn pregnancy.

She ducked into the store and made her way to the nearest candy aisle, stopping abruptly when her eye caught the tabloid just above the chocolate bar her hand hovered over.

The man on the cover looked...far too familiar.

Prince Raphael DeSantis jilted by Italian heiress Allegra

Valenti just weeks before royal wedding!

“What the actual hell?” The shoppers around her startled when she all but shouted the words, but she didn’t care. She reached out and grabbed the magazine, flipping through it with shaking fingers.

Raphael. Prince Raphael.

She flipped the pages until she saw it. The article about the scandal that was apparently rocking the principality of Santa Firenze, a tiny dot on the map of Europe. One she’d never even heard of.

It was him. There was no mistaking it. With his arresting good looks, more like a god than a man, and his incredible body...a body they had on show in the article, thanks to a few creeper beach pics. Those broad shoulders, washboard abs and lean hips...

She knew that body better than she knew her own.

“Oh, my...” She reached into her purse and pulled out a stack of tip money, throwing a ten down onto the counter. “Keep the change.” She ran out with the candy bar and the magazine, her entire body starting to shake.

What Twilight Zone episode had she stumbled into? What kind of a joke was this?

By the time she got back to her apartment she felt like she was going to be sick all over the floor. And, given the theme of the last couple of months, she wouldn’t be surprised if she did. Attempting to keep food down was sometimes a superhuman

feat. Not that you could tell by her expanding waistline. Which her ex-boss had made clear to point out along with the firing.

She was tragic. So tragic that all she wanted to do was throw herself down on the bed and sleep for the rest of the day.

She made her way into the living room, where Samantha was sitting, looking wide-eyed.

“Are you okay?” Bailey asked, mostly to stave off the question of whether or not she was.

“You have a visitor,” her roommate responded.

“Who?” she asked, feeling like the only possible option was that it was someone from the IRS telling her she owed back taxes, or maybe a police officer letting her know she had a warrant for a parking ticket she didn’t know she had...something awful. Because that was the theme of the day. The theme of the past few months, really.

“He’s here,” Samantha said, sounding dazed.

There could only be one he. There was only one he that would make a woman’s voice sound like that. Only one man Bailey had ever met who could render a woman completely stunned by his very presence.

And, as Bailey was processing that bit of information, she heard shoes on the hardwood floor and looked up, up into the dark eyes of Prince Raphael DeSantis just as he exited her bedroom.

He was here. In her crappy little apartment. Looking as out of place as a lion among house cats.

She wrapped her coat more tightly around herself, doing her best to conceal her figure. To hide the bump that she knew was pretty plainly visible without her woolen shield.

“What are you doing here?” she asked. She realized she was also still holding the tabloid with his face on it. She looked down at the magazine. Then back up at him. “What are you doing here?” she repeated.

“I came to tell you that I wanted to start seeing you again,” he said.

“Oh, please.” This exclamation came from her roommate, who had watched Bailey weep into her pillow for weeks now.

“What she said,” Bailey affirmed, crossing her arms even more tightly beneath her chest.

“Could we have a moment?” He directed the question at Samantha, then, without waiting for a response, grabbed hold of Bailey’s arm and guided her back into her bedroom. He closed the door, enclosing them both in the space.

And for a moment, she was completely lost in him. In his strength, in his very presence, which reached to every corner of the room, and around her. She wanted to lean into him. To rest her head against the solid wall of his chest and release hold of all of the heartbreak, fear and stress she had been enduring for the past few months.

She just wanted to fall into his arms and lose it all. Lose herself.

But that was impossible. He was...he was a liar. On so many

more levels than she had realized.

“My engagement is off,” he said, as though she were not holding a magazine in her hand proclaiming exactly that. “And, given that, I see no reason why the two of us can’t resume our liaison.”

“Our...liaison. The one where you come and visit me every couple of months for sex?”

“Bailey,” he said, his tone exceedingly hard done by. It made her want to punch him. “I have a certain life, certain expectations, and...”

“These expectations?” She turned the tabloid around, thrusting it toward him. “You’re a prince? What strange fairy tale did I fall into, Raphael? You said you were a pharmaceutical rep.”

“You said I was a pharmaceutical rep, Bailey,” he said. “Don’t you remember?”

“I...” She remembered everything about the night she met him. The way that her world had stopped completely when their eyes had met. How out of place he looked in the sleazy diner that she worked at, Sweater Bunnies, where the waitresses all wore sweaters with plunging necklines and short shorts, with glittering tights and high heels.

His plane was delayed because of the weather. He had come into town on business. They had ended up talking. And then she had done something she had never done before in her life. She went home with him.

They didn’t have sex. Not that first night. But he had kissed

her, and she had...well, she'd learned an entirely new definition for the word want. Her entire body had caught fire with the touch of his lips, the touch of his hands. They had been talking one moment, and then the next, he had her down on the bed.

"I'm a virgin," she said.

"I don't need you to be," he responded, his voice rough, his hands tangled in her hair. "We don't have to play that game. Unless you want to."

"No," she said, "I really am. Like, a really, real virgin. Who has never done anything like this before, ever."

He sat up. "Never?"

"Never. But, I like you. And...maybe if the weather is bad tomorrow..."

"You want to wait, but you might be ready tomorrow?"

"I don't know."

"We'll wait," he said, kissing her cheek.

And he hadn't thrown her out. Instead, he had poured her a glass of soda and then continued to talk to her.

She hadn't made him wait long after that. The next night she'd made him her first, and she'd already been spinning fantasies about him being the only.

Then...well, then he'd turned out to be a frog. Except he was actually a prince. Which was just insane.

"Of course I remember," she snapped.

"Then you remember that you were the one who laughed at me, and said, 'You aren't a pharmaceutical rep or something, are

you?” And I did not correct you. In fact, you will find, Bailey, that a great many of the things you think about me you created.”

“So now you’re gaslighting me? You’re making this whole thing about what I chose to believe? And somehow, you think that will make me want you back. Not as a girlfriend, or anything like that, just as your little Colorado-based... Tell me, Raphael, where do your other women live?”

“I never thought of you that way,” he said, his tone fierce. “Never.”

“Actions speak louder than words and all of that. You treated me like one. You’re still treating me like one. Get out of my apartment, Your Majesty,” she spat.

“I am not in the habit of taking orders, you will find. I was all right playing your game before, but now you know. I am a prince, cara mia. And what I want, I have.”

“Well,” she said, flinging her arms out wide, “you don’t get this.”

He reached out, cupping the back of her head and drawing her forward. “You don’t mean that.”

“Oh, but I do.” She pressed her hands flat against his chest—the better to shove him backward—only then he felt...so much like home. Like everything brilliant and perfect that she’d been missing while her life had been upended.

It was easy to forget he was the one who’d upended it.

He curved one arm around her waist, drawing her body flush against his. And then he frowned.

And she came back to reality, hard.

“Don’t touch me,” she hissed, pulling away and straightening her coat a little bit frantically.

She didn’t want him to see that she was pregnant because...

Because she didn’t know why. She’d resigned herself to her fate as a single mother because he was supposed to be married to someone else. Because the text she’d sent out to him after the fact saying she needed to talk to him had gone unreturned.

But he was here now. And he was a prince, damn it all.

Her own father had never been around, and she and her mother had suffered financially for it. Raphael could support their child. Could make sure they didn’t struggle.

She flicked the top button of her coat open, her heart pounding. “I’m not going to be your lover, Raphael,” she said, her voice trembling as she continued undoing buttons. She let her coat fall free and revealed the bump that was only just now visible beneath her tight-fitting sweater. “But whether you want to be or not, you are the father of my baby.”

CHAPTER TWO

IT WAS RARE that Prince Raphael DeSantis was rendered speechless. But then, it was rare for him to be rejected.

And that had happened twice in the past week.

Were he a man with any insecurity, he might be wounded. However, he was the Crown Prince of Santa Firenze, a man who had been born with the world in hand and every advantage available to him. A man who—upon his birth—had been

worshipped by the palace's many servants, simply because he existed. Reverence was a gift bestowed upon him from his first breath. And he had spent his life ensuring that he maintained the admiration of his people.

And this little waitress had refused him. Then gone on to reveal a surprise he certainly hadn't seen coming.

"You are certain it's mine?" He knew the question would earn him more of Bailey's ire, but he suddenly felt as though everything was hanging in the balance. This woman, who looked at him as though she wanted to do him bodily harm, was carrying the heir to the throne of his country.

She recoiled from him. "How dare you ask me that?"

"I would be remiss if I did not."

He tried to ignore the hurt in her blue eyes. This changed things. It changed everything. Bailey had been a diversion he wasn't looking for. And he had allowed himself to get caught up in it. To enjoy the fiction that she had built up around them. That he was a businessman, coming to Vail once every couple of months for meetings and to spend time with her.

Somehow she hadn't seemed to know who he was. But then, part of maintaining the admiration of his people had been keeping himself out of baser things like tabloid news. Which he had clearly failed at recently. He attributed that to his former fiancée, Allegra.

But it had all come to an end three months ago. He had known that he couldn't continue his assignation with Bailey right up

until his marriage. He had never touched Allegra, and he didn't love her, but he had intended to be a good husband to her. A faithful husband. Or at least—depending on the agreement they ultimately reached—a discreet one.

When the engagement had ended, however, he had immediately thought to come back to his mistress.

The world was crumbling as he knew it—a slight exaggeration perhaps, but the cancellation of a royal wedding could hardly be deemed insignificant. It had made him tabloid fodder.

His father, the late ruler of Santa Firenze, had despised all forms of media and had felt it wholly beneath a leader to become a headline when he should be aiming to be part of history.

He had instilled this in Raphael, along with strength and steel. There had been no softness allowed in his childhood, and Raphael could see it for the benefit it was now that he was a man, both of his parents long dead and an entire nation left to him to oversee.

In fact, his marriage to Allegra was a testament to that strength. That he had been more than willing to set aside the desires of his flesh for the betterment of his kingdom.

Bailey, no matter that he desired her, could offer no political advantage to his country. Allegra, on the other hand, would bring an alliance with one of Italy's oldest families and a great deal of influence within the business community thanks to both her father and brother.

Bailey heated his blood. But his time with her was outside

the norm...something separate from Santa Firenze. Something he could not afford to bring back there, he had known with certainty. Not only was she beneath him in status, she was a distraction. The sort his father had always warned against.

The only thing Bailey had...was his heir. And that was something that could not be ignored.

He had not foreseen this complication.

“Yes, Your Royal Jackass, it’s your baby. Since you were the one to take my virginity, I would think you would know that.”

“Nearly a year ago, Bailey. Many things could have happened since that first time we were together. I was not always here. And it has been three months since I left you. For all I know, in your grief, you sought solace with another man.”

“Yeah, it’s been a nonstop orgy since you dumped me. I figured, why not just go for it? After all, your royal scepter paved the way. Might as well allow the common folk a chance.”

“Enough. You are being crude, and it doesn’t suit you.”

“Yes it does. It suits me perfectly. As you well know. I am not the kind of woman that you could ever take back to your country, so you must think that. I’m a waitress. A lowly server that you met in a sleazy restaurant better known for the waitresses breasts than the chicken breasts. I would say this behavior suits me perfectly.”

She was vibrating with rage, angry like she’d been the night he had ended things with her. When she had screamed at him, thrown a shoe at him. Hit him with a shoe. It had been the exact response he’d been looking for. He could not have her coming

after him. Could not have her being tempted in any regard to find him, not when he was ready to get married and begin producing children. He had made their separation as devastating as possible so she would not seek him out.

Better to spoil her memory of him than leave her longing. Of course, he had changed his mind about that. Which he reserved his right to do. He was a prince, after all.

“You are carrying my child,” he said, looking down at her stomach. She wasn’t showing dramatically, just a vague bump beneath her sweater. Her curves looked a bit more abundant. He considered himself an expert on Bailey’s curves, so he was certain his assessment was correct. “How far along are you?”

“Close to four months,” she said. “It happened before we broke up. But I didn’t know until after.”

“Did you try and get in touch with me?”

That question seemed to make her angry, too. “Yes. I did. Though, since I didn’t know your actual identity, it was a little bit tricky. I texted you.”

The only number that Bailey had was to the phone that only she used. He had been careful to keep everything with her separate. Particularly when he had discovered that she truly didn’t know who he was. There had been something so enticing about it. The chance to come here and be with a woman who had no expectations. To be more himself than any other venue allowed.

And when he had ended things with her, he had gotten rid of the phone. Cutting off his temptation. He didn’t need to save

messages from her. Or the occasionally suggestive photographs that she had provided.

“I no longer have that phone,” he said.

“Wow. When you break up with a girl, you really go hardcore.”

He frowned. “You keep using that word, Bailey. As though you were my girlfriend. From my point of view, we never had that kind of relationship.” He realized, even as he spoke the words, that he was being extraordinarily unfair to her.

With most women, he laid out the ground rules from moment one. He had not been seeking Bailey out. Not at all. He had come to Vail to visit a friend’s resort and see about investing in the property and its expansion. And then a blizzard had waylaid his travel.

Not even a man such as himself could control a storm.

He had wandered into a restaurant not far from his hotel, and had nearly walked right back out when he’d seen what sort of establishment it was. But then he had seen her. Somehow, in spite of the tacky surroundings, the horrendous uniform and the dim lighting, she had shone.

He had been able to think of only one thing. One word. Mine.

And there had never been a single thing in his life that he had wanted and had not gotten. He had purposed in that moment that the waitress would be one of them.

When she had made assumptions about who he was, he had allowed her to do so. He had encouraged it. And he had not

done as impeccable a job as he usually did of ensuring that the relationship stayed in the bedroom. But he had reasoned that he only ever saw her for a long weekend every couple of months. And it would be wrong to keep her in a hotel room the entire time.

So he had taken her out. He had no connections to Vail other than that one visit to see about investing. The press never had any reason to take an interest in him being there. Or even think that he would be there.

There were a great many advantages to having a relatively low profile.

“What I mean,” he said, attempting to soften his tone, “is that I have lovers, not girlfriends. Women that I carry out affairs with. I don’t date. That’s the issue with being a prince. You cannot simply go public with women, not without expectation being attached. However, I was hardly going to live my life celibate.”

“You had a fiancée.” The words were low, carrying with them an edge of violence.

“Allegra was nothing more than a convenience. She is from one of Italy’s most revered families. She was a reasonable choice for a man in my position. She was not my lover.”

“Well, I guess that’s something,” she said. “So. I figure we need to come to some kind of child support arrangement? I’m having your baby. If you need me to get a paternity test, fine, whatever. I’ll hate you, but I already do. Whatever you need. A cheek swab, my blood. Though I’d prefer not to give blood. I’ve

already bled for you. I'm not doing it again.”

“What are you talking about? A child support?”

“Presumably you have a castle. I would like to not live in a heap.”

“And so you want money?”

He found her fascinating. This woman who had not known who he was. This woman who was standing there with a tabloid featuring him at her feet, who had been a virgin when he'd first taken her. Who was asking for child support, and not threatening to go to the press. Not demanding a pied-à-terre in various cities or pieces of the crown jewels.

Clearly, she had no understanding of the situation she found herself in, in spite of what she thought.

“I don't think it's unreasonable,” she said. “My own mother was single. And my father didn't give us anything. I'm not going to consign my son or daughter to that life if I can make it better. I have a responsibility. And so do you.”

“Undeniably I have a responsibility to this child, but I do not think you understand exactly what you're dealing with here,” he said, staring at her, mystified.

“I'm dealing with an unexpected pregnancy and the best way that I can think to handle it. I want to make sure that you are not living in the lap of luxury while your son or daughter has nothing.”

“Oh, I have no intention of my son or daughter lacking for anything. But if you think that I'm leaving them here in Colorado

to be raised alone by you, you have failed to understand the man that you are involved with.”

Her entire face turned pink, her rage seemingly silent for the first time since he had aroused it three months ago.

“I am not sending child support checks, cara. There will be no more discussion of it.”

“What do you mean you aren’t allowing me to raise my child in Colorado? Under what authority? This is America! And last I checked, you probably aren’t a citizen.”

“Diplomatic immunity,” he said, waving his hand, “and a desire to preserve relations with my country, will no doubt see any kind of court battle you should wish to wage fall in my favor. Who would give custody to a waitress from Sweater Bunnies when a prince is on hand to raise the child to rule?”

“You’re going to take my baby from me?” Her voice had turned shrill, and he could see that she was looking around the room, her eyes darting back and forth. Probably looking for a weapon.

“It should not come to that.”

“Start speaking slowly, and spelling out what exactly you’re implying. Obviously I’m not picking up on it.”

“Of course,” he said, “there will be no discussion of my sending you child support checks, and no discussion of the child being raised here, because you will both be in Santa Firenze.”

“I thought I wasn’t fit to be brought back to your country.”

She wasn’t. Even now, looking at her, that intense

possessiveness had him in a stranglehold. Taking her, claiming her seemed to be the most obvious choice.

Which was what gave him pause. A ruler was meant to be cool. A ruler was meant to direct his actions with his mind, his sense of honor, not with anything half as fickle as desire or heat.

He wondered what his father might have done in this instance. And then had to concede that his father would never have been so foolish as to get himself in this situation.

He was forced then to weigh his options. To bring back a woman such as this, one he had already decided was unsuitable for his kingdom...it was unfathomable.

But honor. Honor and duty were at the center of all of it, regardless of what she made him feel. His duty was to his child.

“That was before I knew you were carrying my heir.” He took a step toward her, the word mine pounding itself through his head in time with the thundering of his heart. “Of course you are coming back to my country with me now. But not as my mistress. Bailey Harper, you are going to be my wife.”

CHAPTER THREE

“YOU HAVE A private jet.”

“Of course I do,” Raphael said, brushing past her and walking up the stairs into the sleek-looking aircraft.

“Were you in your private jet the night that we met?”

He treated her to a withering look. “I wasn’t flying economy.”

“I just...” She let the words trail off. There wasn’t much to say. Not really. He was not the man she had thought he was. That

had become apparent when he'd broken her heart the way that he had, when it had been revealed that there was another woman in his life. This was just another layer to it. She supposed that some people would view this as good luck. The fact that the man who had gotten her pregnant was wealthy, titled and powerful should be some kind of boon.

She looked up at the plane. She didn't really feel like it was a good thing. Not now.

She just felt small. Small and so desperately out of her depth.

She had argued with him about the marriage thing, and she intended to argue with him even more. But...what could be done? He presented a pretty ironclad case when it came to how he would go about getting custody. And she didn't want to lose her baby.

Are you sure part of you just doesn't want to go off with him because it sounds easy?

She banished that traitorous voice, began to walk up the steps and into the jet. And that feeling of being tiny only increased. She was nothing. No one. Just a girl from Nebraska who had gone to Colorado seeking mountains and a fresh start. A girl raised by a single mother in a drafty house built in the 1920s with a sagging foundation and a crack in the ceiling.

She looked around the cabin, her jaw a little bit slack. It was...she had never seen anything like this on the internet. She had idly scrolled through the odd slideshow on various lifestyle websites showing the ridiculously luxurious way that the rich and famous traveled, but she had never imagined she would be

standing in the middle of it. Much less ready to fly on board.

“There are bedrooms back that way,” he said, gesturing past the plush living area and bar to the back of the plane. “There is also a bathroom and a shower.”

“There’s a shower?”

“Of course there is.” And that was it. No further explanation. As if it really were the most typical thing on the planet for a man to have a shower on his plane, and she was the absurd one for thinking otherwise.

“Okay then. I will keep that in mind in case I feel a little bit travel stale.”

Her heart began to hammer loudly, her hands shaking as the door to the plane closed.

“You know,” she said, “we don’t have to go now. I have... I have school to finish.”

“You mentioned. In your rant as you packed your things.”

She was failing right now, but still. “Well, it was a valid rant. I worked hard to pay my way this far through school, and if I don’t finish this term, I’ll be out the money for the classes.”

He sat down on one of the tan leather couches, spreading his arms wide over the back, his posture laconic. She had to wonder how on earth she hadn’t realized he was royalty. Sure, she had never been in the presence of anyone who could be considered royal, but he exuded it. How had she ever thought he was a normal man?

You never did. You saw him and the world stopped.

“Come now,” he said, “cara mia, the cost of your college tuition will be the least of your concerns. I can arrange to have you complete your courses remotely. Or you may transfer to one of the universities in Santa Firenze. Of course, you will have to take classes at the palace and not on campus should you choose to do that.”

“Why can’t I go to the campus?”

“You would create a circus.” He tapped the back of the couch with his fingertips. “I am not a man accustomed to getting tabloid attention. My family name has always been upheld, whispered reverently, spoken of with great respect. We are not part of the nouveau riche royal set who takes great pride in posting our social engagements on various online accounts. We take pride in the title. My father did before me, and I do it now. That headline you saw today was an aberration. There is a reason that you were not aware of my identity. I simply don’t court publicity. That is the vocation of celebrity, and I am not a celebrity. I am the ruler of my country.” He sighed heavily. “I dislike the position I find myself in. Because you...you will be a problem.”

“Oh, will I? Excellent. One hopes that I will be too much of a problem for you to want to take on.”

He waved a hand. “Not at all. You see, cara, you are carrying my baby. The most important thing on this earth is the birthright of that child. You must be married to me in order to secure that birthright.”

She blinked. “Is this the Middle Ages?”

“No, this is Santa Firenze. And this is the cost of being royal.”

“Good thing you’re rich. It seems damned expensive.”

“You have no idea. But, suffice it to say, your tuition is not my concern. In fact, it isn’t your concern, either. You have no more financial concerns.”

His words were strange. Made her ears feel fuzzy. She could hardly comprehend them. All she had worried about—from the time she had known what it was like to be hungry, from the moment she had experienced her first night in winter with the heat off because the electricity had been interrupted by the power company—was money. To have this man look at her, snap his fingers and say it was no longer a concern was...it was beyond surreal.

“I don’t... I don’t understand...any of this.”

“It is simple,” he said as the engines to the plane fired up and the aircraft began to glide down the runway. “I am a prince, I cannot have a bastard. I would have preferred a more suitable wife, a wife with a title or a pedigree of some kind. However, you are the one carrying my baby. That means I will have to make do with what I have.”

“More flattering words have never been spoken, I’m sure.”

“This is not about flattery. This is about reality.”

The aircraft lifted off, and as it rose higher, Bailey’s stomach sank into her feet. The longest plane ride she had ever been on was the short trip between Nebraska and Colorado. And nothing more. Which brought to mind other concerns. “Wait,” she said,

her heart kicking desperately against her chest, thinking that perhaps she had found a reprieve. “I don’t have a passport.”

He laughed. “That is of no concern to me. I can arrange to have one secured for you.”

“Not by the time we reach your country.”

“That is the thing. It is my country. No one is going to deny you admittance if I say you may have it. And as for coming back to the States, you certainly will eventually. So, we will secure you documentation for that eventuality. However, either way you’ll be fine. You will be traveling with me.”

He was maddening. Nothing fazed him. Nothing even made him pause. He was going about this with all the ruthless efficiency of a commander going into battle. And each and every protest issued from her lips, he struck down like an enemy of war.

“Does none of this bother you?” she asked. “I mean, you say you don’t like being in the tabloids, but you say it with all the fire and passion of an iceberg. Meanwhile, I feel like my life is falling apart. I feel like I’ve been dropped into some third-rate reality show.”

“That’s insulting. This is first-class,” he said, his tone dry, “all the way.”

“Is this a joke to you? Your life has been easy, I get that. It radiates off you in waves. Your privilege. Your wealth. Everything I’ve had I’ve worked for. Every day of my life has been infused with some kind of struggle. Every single thing I own was purchased at great cost. You spend more on bottled water in

a week than I spend on groceries in a month.”

“That is probably true. But now this is your life. Do not worry about your roommate, by the way. I made sure to give her several months of rent so that she would not feel your absence too keenly.”

“Nice of you to consider her feelings,” she said, though she was grateful that Samantha wouldn’t be left high and dry. Suddenly a wave washed over her, leaving her feeling adrift. Weightless. “I think I’m in shock,” she said, sinking further back into the chair across from him, her limbs suddenly feeling very shaky.

“Bailey,” he said, his expression concerned. “Are you able to breathe?”

She laid her head back, feeling dizzy.

“No,” she said.

Suddenly he was next to her, his large hands cupping her face. He was warm, and he was so very Raphael. “Bailey,” he said, his tone stern. “Keep breathing.”

Her vision went fuzzy around the edges for a second, then dark...

It came back, with too much clarity, too much brightness. She felt sick to her stomach, a cold sweat on her forehead, her fingers icy. “What happened?” she asked.

“You passed out,” he responded. He looked...he looked genuinely concerned. Though she wondered if it was for her or for the baby.

“Don’t touch me,” she said, pulling away from him. He complied, removing his hands from her face. She hated it. Hated that when he touched her she still felt something. Hated that he wasn’t touching her anymore. Hated herself for caring.

“Have you been passing out regularly?”

“No,” she said, trying not to watch him as he stood up and crossed to the bar. Trying very, very hard not to pay total and complete attention to his every movement. “I’ve had a little bit of a shocking day. I walked into a grocery store and saw that my ex-lover was a prince. Seeing as I knew I was having his baby, it suddenly occurred to me that I was having a prince’s baby. Then I went home, and said prince was in my bedroom. Then he dragged me onto a private plane, all the while demanding that I marry him or he’ll take my baby away. I think I’m just suffering the aftereffects.”

He opened up a bottle of sparkling water and poured it into a glass, his movements deft and swift. Then he crossed the space to her, handing her the drink. “I found out I was going to be a father today, and I seem to be handling it well.”

“Because you’re a robot,” she replied, taking a sip of the bland, fizzy liquid.

“I think that you can attest to the fact that I’m all man, Bailey. Not a robot.”

“Not all. Parts of you,” she said. “You seem to have Tin Man syndrome. No heart.”

“I love my country,” he responded, his tone cool. “I am

eternally loyal to it. And I will do whatever is necessary to preserve the legacy. There is no reason for me to panic about the situation we find ourselves in. There is no question that I must marry the mother of my child. And while who you are will require a little bit of damage control, I was already set to be married in the next month. And, presumably, sometime after my wife would have given birth to a child. That has always been the course plotted out before me. All in all, only the bride has changed.”

“So...women and the children they bear are interchangeable to you?” she asked.

“A wife and child are necessary components to my life,” he said, his tone hard. “Essential to the continued health of the kingdom and bloodline. The importance cannot be overstated.”

“But who the woman...”

“Matters in terms of bloodline, political affiliation and the ability to have children. You have one out of three—I think you’re smart enough to guess which.”

He said it with such calm. As though the bride were the most incidental part of the marriage. As though he didn’t care at all whether he was married to her or to the shiny brunette she’d seen in the tabloids. “You’re horrible. Just horrible. How did I manage to convince myself for eight months that you were Prince Charming? No reference to your actual royalty intended.”

“We see what we want to see, Bailey. You wanted to see me as something that I wasn’t. It was convenient for you at the time.

I was an easy lover for you to have. Don't pretend that it didn't suit you on some level to be with a man who was only around part of the time."

"Or I was an idiot virgin who had finally found a man that she wanted to sleep with, and had her judgment completely clouded by her orgasms."

Her words hung between them, tense and heavy. She despised herself for bringing that up. For bringing up the pleasure they had found together. She would rather forget it. It kept her up at night. All day, she would drag herself around, feeling exhausted and heartbroken. But night was worse. Because then she would dream. And when she dreamed, it was that Raphael was in bed with her. Touching her, kissing her. And when she woke up, she was alone. Hideously, depressingly alone, and she ached. For a touch she would never have again.

"I am sorry you were hurt," he said, his tone clipped. "That was never my intention. But I have known who I was to be, what sort of woman I was to marry, from the time I was a boy."

"And that woman isn't me."

"No." He pushed his hand through his dark hair. "It is important to make the best choices I can for my country. And someday my child will do the same. It is what was instilled in me from the beginning. My mother reinforced my father. She had been raised to be the wife of a prince, and she knew her place. That is what it takes to raise the heir to a throne, Bailey. You must understand it is not snobbery on my part—at least not entirely—"

when I say you are not suited.”

“I...” She swayed slightly in her seat. “I really don’t even know how to have this conversation.”

“You should get some rest,” he said, stunning her with that declaration. “When we land we will be very close to the palace, and you can get settled in. In the meantime, I am afraid that you are overtaxed.”

“I don’t feel like you’ve earned the right to comment on my level of taxation.”

“As ruling government of an entire nation, taxation falls under my purview.”

“Oh, well, that’s fabulous. I guess we know which things are certain. Death, taxes and Raphael.”

“I’m hardly going to kill you, cara. I’m going to make you a princess.”

Suddenly, she felt so tired she could barely hold her head up. She could not be a princess. She was a waitress. And waitresses didn’t become princesses. “I’m going to have that nap now.”

Bailey wandered to the back of the plane, opening the door to the bedroom, then closing it tightly behind her. It was bigger than her bedroom in her apartment. With a large, ornate bed that looked like it was designed for much more than sleeping. It was ridiculous. He was ridiculous. This whole thing was ridiculous.

She kicked her shoes off, crossing to the bed before throwing herself down on her face like some tragic cartoon princess. She shut her eyes tight, trying not to give in to the tears that were

building behind them.

This had to be a dream. All of it. When she woke up in the morning, her head would be clearer. She would be single, alone and pregnant. Her ex-boyfriend would be nothing more than that jerk pharmaceutical rep from Italy who had left her in the lurch. He would absolutely not be the prince of some obscure country, and she would not be a future princess.

The alternative was unthinkable.

* * *

When they disembarked in Santa Firenze, Raphael had them pull the car right up to the plane. He was feeling more than slightly concerned for Bailey's health. Or, at the very least, the health of their unborn baby.

She had been especially pale ever since he had first seen her in her apartment, and she had gotten only more waxen as the trip had worn on. Though he had only seen her once after she had gone to the bedroom to sleep, and that was only to use the restroom about a half hour before they landed.

He was confused by her. By their every interaction. She was not grateful for the offer of marriage. Not especially pleased that he was giving her the chance to be a princess. His wife. A position of great honor. One that most women would fight over.

And yet the two who'd had it offered to them both seemed to have rejected it.

Allegra was a separate issue.

"The car is waiting," he said through the closed bathroom

door.

Bailey emerged a moment later, wet-haired, gritty-eyed and cranky, wearing a university sweatshirt and a pair of stretch pants.

“I see you availed yourself of the shower,” he said.

“How often do you get a shower at thirty thousand feet? I thought that if I didn’t at least give it a try, I would be seriously failing in the luxury stakes.”

“Well, you will have ample opportunity to use the facilities again. Even if I upgrade jets, it will still have a shower.”

“You’re assuming that I will be making use of your jet in the future.”

“Of course, you’re marrying me. Pretending otherwise is ridiculous.” He grabbed hold of her elbow, leading her from the plane, carefully helping her down the steps. “Now, come get in the car.”

She sputtered, “Just because you say nothing else makes sense does not mean that nothing else makes sense.”

He opened the door to the car, gesturing for her to get in. She shot him a deadly glare, then complied. He got in beside her, slamming the door shut. “You seem to be misunderstanding,” he said, feeling very much like he was speaking a different language. Because Bailey seemed to persist in misunderstanding him. “I am the ruler of Santa Firenze. No one in my family has produced an illegitimate child. Not one. No one in my family has ever been divorced. We are a hallowed and storied lineage. I am offering

you a chance to become part of it. The fact that you have rejected me is outrageous on so many levels I cannot even begin to list them all.”

“By all means,” she said, leaning back in her seat. “List them. If you have time.”

“It isn’t that long of a drive to the castle.”

She blinked. “Castle?”

“What part of prince are you having trouble comprehending? I speak very good English, though Italian is my first language. You, however, are making me question my linguistic skills.”

“I would hate to be the cause of you questioning your linguistics. I’m sure that they’re fantastic.”

“They can’t be overly fantastic, because you do not seem to understand anything of what I am telling you.” There was no point arguing.

She would understand the moment his family home came into view. It was the jewel of Santa Firenze. Settled in the middle of the Alps, overlooking one of the deepest and bluest lakes in Europe, craggy peaks rising up around it. She would understand then. What he was offering. Understand what a gift he was presenting her with.

As the car made its way down the narrow, winding two-lane road, Bailey insisted on shifting constantly in her seat and letting out long, huffy sighs.

“Your distress is noted,” he said.

“Not overly. You keep accusing me of not understanding, and

yet I think you're the one who has not fully taken on board that I am not happy about this."

"I am offering you marriage. Legitimacy for your child, an end to your financial concerns."

"About that," she snapped. "Where was your offer to end my financial concerns when I was working double shifts at that horrible restaurant? As I was killing myself to get through college, and you were presenting yourself as a businessman there on your company's dime?"

"Would you have accepted my offer of financial assistance?"

Her face went blank then, her mouth settling into a stubborn line. "Yes," she said.

"You're a terrible liar. You would not have accepted. Not from Raphael the businessman. And you seem to like Raphael the prince a lot less."

"That's because the first time I met Raphael the prince was when he was breaking up with me at midnight after what I had thought was a very romantic date. Only then you threw me out into the snow."

"I wanted a clean break. I felt it was better for both of us."

"Don't try to convince me that you lost any sleep over any of that."

He had. She had no idea. He had lost countless hours of sleep, lying there hard and aching, wanting something that only she could give to him. She had cast a spell over him from the moment he had first seen her, and he had never been able to explain it. He

only knew that she affected him in a way no other woman ever had. And it had nothing to do with skill.

He could remember the first time she had knelt down before him and taken him into her mouth. The way that she had tasted him, with shy, timid strokes of her tongue, how she had taken him in as deep as she could, her every movement uncertain. It was not her skill that enticed, but her sincerity. Her intense dedication to him. He was a man who had always felt a certain level of worship was his due, but it meant so much more coming from such a willing supplicant, rather than a trained one.

So yes, he had lost sleep. He'd had no desire to touch another woman, and, in fact, that had worked to his advantage, since he had purposed that he would not until his wedding night with Allegra. In that time he had attempted to drum up some kind of enthusiasm for the woman he was engaged to. But he had found none. Allegra was beautiful, with golden skin and dark, shimmering curls.

But he had craved the pale, flaxen-haired beauty of Bailey.

It was all vaguely ridiculous. He was fantasizing about a university student named Bailey. Princess Bailey.

But that was the thing with honor. It was supposed to matter even if it was hard. A truly strong oak didn't bend in the wind, and neither could the ruler of Santa Firenze.

As a boy, when he'd hurt himself, his father had not allowed his mother or the servants to comfort him. It had been up to him to breathe through the pain and carry on. That, his father had

told him once, was how a man learned to soldier on in all things. If you could do it with a cut, you would do it with an emotional wound, too.

When he was older, his father had told him it applied to other physical aches, as well. A man might want a certain woman, might burn for her, but if there was potential a dalliance would harm the country, that craving—like all other harmful desires—had to be cast aside.

The prince of Santa Firenze could have whatever his heart desired. And that was why his heart, soul and sense of honor had to be made strong.

Raphael knew that he was strong. Had been, utterly and completely all his life.

Until her.

It was truly ridiculous. But here they were. And she, somehow, felt like she was in a position to play hardball.

The limo wound itself around the last curve, and, finally, the stately palace gates came into view. Wrought iron and scrolling, the family crest emblazoned upon them. They parted for the car as if by magic, and the limo rolled through a lane lined with hedges until they reached the magnificent courtyard in front of the palace.

The ground was overlaid with brick. A giant fountain dominated the center. At its top was a golden statue and there were many others fashioned from marble all around, representing the great leaders of his country. His very bloodline carved into

stone in front of this hallowed castle that had housed generations.

He looked over at her and was satisfied to see that, finally, she had the decency to look impressed. She was staring up at the castle, at its turrets, with ivy climbing up the side and the blue-and-white flags of his country waving in the breeze from the very top of the shining palace.

“This is my home,” he said, stating the obvious for dramatic effect. “And when you are my wife, it will be your home. When our child is born, it will be his home. Do you still think you should raise him in an apartment in Colorado with your roommate?”

“I... I had no idea.”

“It is not my fault you don’t pay attention to current affairs. Or perhaps it is my fault, for keeping my country financially sound and free of most of the conflicts that happen in the world. We have very few reasons to be in the news because the citizens are happy, the coffers are full and we have no national security crises or natural disasters to speak of.”

“Is this Narnia?”

“If it were, then a breath would turn all of the statues back to flesh. However, it is the real world. And they are only stone.”

“That’s a shame,” she said. “Then all I would have to do is walk back to the wardrobe and I could be free of you.”

She was mutinous. And he had never dealt with mutiny before. Like his father before him, he’d made Santa Firenze his life. Nothing had ever come before it. And as such, no one in his country had ever had cause for complaint.

“You don’t actually want to be free of me,” he said. How could she? “You’re putting up a fight because you have an idea of what your life should be. I would argue that you are putting up a fight additionally because you have an idea of what consequences you should suffer for your sins.”

“My sins?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said, “your sins. You think you should be punished for this. Because you allowed yourself to get pregnant. And now you must pay penance. The sad, single mother, waiting tables, having been abandoned by her lover. It’s a very nice narrative, but it is not a situation you find yourself in. You have a man willing to step up and take responsibility. More than a man, you have a prince. Saying anything but an emphatic yes is a waste of your resources.”

She looked up at the palace, her eyes wide, her lips parted slightly. He was struck in that moment by the fullness of her beauty. Just as he had been the first time he’d seen her. And now she was carrying his child. She would be his wife.

Mine.

He pushed that word to the back of his mind. This wasn’t about that. It was a necessity. What he must do. It had nothing to do with want. With that thing Bailey made him feel that was so perilously close to weakness.

“Come,” he said, opening the door and extending his hand to her. “We must get you to your room.”

CHAPTER FOUR

BAILEY TRIED NOT to stare too gauchely as she entered the palace, her heart thundering loudly. Loudly enough that she was pretty sure it was echoing off the marble walls of the massive antechamber they were standing in now. She had never seen anything like this in her life. It was like something out of a movie, except in a movie she had a feeling she would be heading toward some sort of fun montage where she would try on lots of dresses and upbeat pop music would play in the background while a sassy stylist told her how amazing she looked.

Instead, she was standing there wearing nothing more than a sweatshirt and pants that had seen better days, feeling like something a very large, overly self-satisfied cat had dragged in.

There were servants wandering around the palace, not making eye contact with Raphael, as though any unsolicited contact would be far too presumptuous on their part.

They did not look at her, either. Not with any kind of curiosity. In fact, she seemed beneath their notice. As though she were merely a package he had brought in after a day of shopping.

“It’s so quiet in here,” she said, her voice reverberating around them even though she was speaking softly.

“There are so many people in the palace at all times, it would be difficult to think if everyone were carrying on a conversation, don’t you agree?”

“So you have a...silence policy?”

“There is no policy. But my father was one to train the servants to ensure they were rarely seen and rarely heard. I have done

nothing to revise that code of conduct, as it suits me.” He, on the other hand, didn’t seem to feel like he was speaking too loudly. His voice echoed across the room, and he was not bothered by it in the least.

“You are definitely an elevated personage,” she said, following him just slightly behind. “Aren’t you?”

“This is my palace,” he said, making a broad, sweeping gesture. “Of course I am elevated.”

“It’s just... I had the feeling royalty was a bit more modern nowadays. Prince Harry is out greeting soldiers and things.”

“And getting caught with his trousers down at hotels in Las Vegas.”

“We both know your trousers have been down, Raphael—it’s just that nobody was there to take pictures. Actually, I could have taken pictures. I should have. I sent you some scandalous shots and sadly, never got a nude pic from you. Think of the leverage that would provide me.”

His eyes sharpened. “I see you’re finally considering the angle of using the press against me.”

“I don’t want to. Not particularly. To what end? So that we’re both embarrassed? So that our child can look at the headlines in the future and see all the ugly things we said about each other? That isn’t what I want. We both know that even if I were able to disgrace you by giving sordid details of your secret affair with a waitress, I would be the one who was called a whore.”

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