

BECOMING THE
PRINCE'S WIFE

Rebecca Winters

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Rebecca Winters

Becoming the Prince's Wife

Аннотация

A forbidden love...with a prince! Attorney Carolena Baretti keeps her cards close to her chest. But when a chance encounter with the handsome prince ignites a fiery attraction, Carolena finds that he may just be the one man she can trust....Crown prince Valentino finds himself increasingly distracted from his duty by commoner Carolena. But Valentino is playing with fire. To be with Carolena he would have to sacrifice everything—including his right to the throne....Princes of Europe Torn between love and royal obligation...

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PRINCES OF EUROPE

Torn between love and royal obligation ...

by Rebecca Winters

Vincenzo and Valentino are determined to fulfil their duty to their beloved kingdoms by taking royal wives, but they haven't counted on the revolutions taking place in their hearts caused by two captivating commoners.

When these two charming princes risk everything to win the trust of the women they love, they soon find the true meaning of commitment and honour, proving that sometimes fairytales do come true—and in the most unexpected ways!

EXPECTING THE PRINCE'S BABY Available May 2014

and

BECOMING THE PRINCE'S WIFE Available June 2014

Becoming the

Prince's Wife

Rebecca Winters



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REBECCA WINTERS, whose family of four children has now swelled to include five beautiful grandchildren, lives in Salt Lake City, Utah, in the land of the Rocky Mountains. With canyons and high alpine meadows full of wildflowers, she never runs out of places to explore. They, plus her favourite vacation spots in Europe, often end up as backgrounds for her romance novels, because writing is her passion, along with her family and church.

Rebecca loves to hear from readers. If you wish to e-mail her, please visit her website: www.cleanromances.com.

To my four wonderful, outstanding children: Bill, John, Dominique and Max.

They've had to put up with a mother whose mind is constantly dreaming up new fairytales like the one I've just written.

Their unqualified love and constant support has been the greatest blessing in my life.

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CHAPTER ONE

AS CAROLENA BARETTI stepped out of the limousine, she could see her best friend, Abby, climbing the stairs of the royal jet. At the top she turned. “Oh, good! You’re here!” she called to her, but was struggling to keep her baby from squirming out of her arms.

At eight months of age, little black-haired Prince Maximilliano, the image of his father, Crown Prince Vincenzo Di Laurentis of Arancia, was becoming big Max, fascinated by sights and sounds. Since he was teething, Carolena had brought him various colored toys in the shape of donuts to bite on. She’d give them to him after they’d boarded the jet for the flight to Gemelli.

The steward brought Carolena’s suitcase on board while she entered the creamy interior of the jet. The baby’s carryall was strapped to one of the luxury leather chairs along the side. Max fought at leaving his mother’s arms, but she finally prevailed in

getting him fastened down.

Carolena pulled a blue donut from the sack in her large straw purse. "Maybe this will help." She leaned over the baby and handed it to him. "What do you think, sweetheart?"

Max grabbed for it immediately and put it in his mouth to test it, causing both women to laugh. Abby gave her a hug. "Thank you for the gift. Any distraction is a blessing! The only time he doesn't move is when he's asleep."

Carolena chuckled.

"So you won't get too bored, I brought a movie for you to watch while we fly down. Remember I told you how much I loved the French actor Louis Jourdan when I was growing up?"

"He was in Gigi, right?"

"Yes, well, I found a movie of his in my mother's collection. You know me and my love for old films. This one is called Bird of Paradise. Since we'll be passing Mount Etna, I think you'll love it."

"I've never heard of that movie, but thank you for being so thoughtful. I'm sure I'll enjoy it."

"Carolena—I know this is a hard time for you, but I'm so glad you decided to come. Vincenzo and Valentino need to discuss business on this short trip. It will give you and me some time to do whatever we want while Queen Bianca dotes on her grandson."

"When Max smiles, I see traces of Michelina. That must delight her."

"I know it does. These days it's hard to believe Bianca was

ever upset over the pregnancy. She's much warmer to me now."

"Thank heaven for that, Abby."

"You'll never know."

No, Carolena supposed she wouldn't. Not really. Abby Loretto had offered to be a surrogate mother to carry Their Highnesses' baby, but they'd both been through a trial by fire when Michelina was suddenly killed.

Carolena was thrilled for the two of them who, since that time, had fallen deeply in love and weathered the storm before marrying. Now they had a beautiful baby boy to raise and she was glad to have been invited to join them for their brief holiday.

Today was June fourth, a date she'd dreaded every June for the past seven years. It marked the death of her fiancé, Berto, and brought back horrendous guilt. She and Berto had shared a great love, but it had come to a tragic end too soon. All because of Carolena.

She'd been too adventurous for her own good, as her own wonderful, deceased grandmother had always told her. You go where angels fear to tread without thinking of anyone but yourself. It's probably because you lost your parents too soon and I've failed you. One day there'll be a price to pay for being so headstrong.

Tears stung her eyelids. How true were those words.

Berto's death had brought about a permanent change in Carolena. Outside of her professional work as an attorney, she never wanted to be responsible for another human life again.

Though she'd dated a lot of men, her relationships were of short duration and superficial. After seven years, her pattern of noncommitment had become her way of life. No one depended on her. Her actions could affect no one or hurt anyone. That was the way she liked it.

Dear sweet Abby had known the date was coming up. Out of the goodness of her heart she'd insisted Carolena come with them on this trip so she wouldn't brood. Carolena loved her blonde friend for so many reasons, especially her thoughtfulness because she knew this time was always difficult for her.

As she strapped herself in, several bodyguards entered the body of the jet followed by black-haired Vincenzo. He stopped to give his wife and son a kiss before hugging Carolena. "It's good to see you. Gemelli is a beautiful country. You're going to love it."

"I'm sure I will. Thank you for inviting me, Vincenzo."

"Our pleasure, believe me. If you're ready, then we'll take off. I told Valentino we'd be there midafternoon."

Once he'd fastened himself in and turned to Abby with an eagerness Carolena could see and feel, the jet taxied to the runway. When it took off into a blue sky, it left the Principality of Arancia behind, a country nestled along the Riviera between France and Italy.

Before heading south, she could see the coastal waters of the Mediterranean receding, but it was obvious Abby and Vincenzo only had eyes for each other. Theirs was a true love story.

Watching them was painful. There were moments like now when twenty-seven-year-old Carolena felt old before her time.

Thank goodness she had a movie to watch that she hadn't seen before. The minute it started she blinked at the sight of how young Louis Jourdan was. The story turned out to be about a Frenchman who traveled to Polynesia and fell in love with a native girl.

Carolena found herself riveted when the volcano erupts on the island and the native girl has to be sacrificed to appease the gods by jumping into it. The credits said the film had been made on location in Hawaii and used the Kilauea volcano for the scenes.

As the royal jet started to make its descent to Gemelli, she saw smoke coming out of Mount Etna, one of Italy's volcanoes. After watching this film, the thought of it erupting made her shiver.

* * *

The helicopter flew away from the new hot fumarole in the western pit of the Bocca Nuova of Mount Etna. The fumarole was a hole that let out gas and steam. After the scientific team had observed an increased bluish degassing from a vent in the saddle, they sent back video and seismic records before heading to the National Center of Geophysics and Volcanology lab in Catania on the eastern coast of Sicily.

En route to the lab the three men heard deep-seated explosions coming from inside the northeast crater, but there was no cause for public alarm in terms of evacuation alerts.

Once the center's helicopter touched ground, Crown Prince

Valentino waved off his two colleagues and hurried to the royal helicopter for the short flight to Gemelli in the Ionian Sea. Their team had gotten back late, but they'd needed to do an in-depth study before transmitting vital data and photos.

Valentino's brother-in-law, Crown Prince Vincenzo Di Laurentis, along with his new wife, Abby, and son, Max, would already have been at the palace several hours. They'd come for a visit from Arancia and would be staying a few days. Valentino was eager to see them.

He and Vincenzo, distant cousins, had done shipping business together for many years but had grown closer with Vincenzo's first marriage to Michelina, who'd been Valentino's only sister. Her death February before last had left a hole in his heart. He'd always been very attached to his sibling and they'd confided in each other.

With his younger brother Vitale, nicknamed Vito, away in the military, Valentino had needed an outlet since her death. Lately, after a long day's work, he'd spent time quietly partying with a few good friends and his most recent girlfriend, while his mother, Bianca, the ruling Queen of Gemelli, occupied herself with their country's business.

As for tonight, he was looking forward to seeing Vincenzo as his helicopter ferried him to the grounds, where it landed at the rear of the sixteenth-century baroque palace. He jumped out and hurried past the gardens and tennis courts, taking a shortcut near the swimming pool to reach his apartment in the east wing.

But suddenly he saw something out of the corner of his eye that stopped him dead in his tracks. Standing on the end of the diving board ready to dive was a gorgeous, voluptuous woman in a knockout, fashionable one-piece purple swimsuit with a plunging neckline.

It was just a moment before she disappeared under the water, but long enough for him to forget the fiery fumarole on Mount Etna and follow those long legs to the end of the pool. When she emerged at the deep end with a sable-colored braid over one shoulder, he hunkered down to meet her. With eyes as sparkling green as lime zest, and a mouth with a passionate flare, she was even more breathtaking up close.

“Oh— Your Highness! I didn’t think anyone was here!”

He couldn’t have met her before or he would have remembered, because she would be impossible to forget. There was no ring on her finger. “You have me at a disadvantage, signorina.”

She hugged her body close to the edge of the tiled pool. He got the impression she was trying to prevent him from getting the full view of her. That small show of modesty intrigued him.

“I’m Carolena Baretti, Abby Loretto’s friend.”

This woman was Abby’s best friend? He’d heard Abby mention her, but Vincenzo had never said anything. Valentino knew his brother-in-law wasn’t blind... Though they hadn’t told him they were bringing someone else with them, he didn’t mind. Not at all.

“How long have you been here?”

“We flew in at two o’clock. Right now the queen is playing with Max while Abby and Valentino take a nap.” A nap, was it? He smiled inwardly. “So I decided to come out here for a swim. The air is like velvet.”

He agreed. “My work took longer than I thought, making it impossible for me to be here when you arrived. I’ve planned a supper for us in the private dining room tonight. Shall we say half an hour? One of the staff will show you the way.”

“That’s very gracious of you, but I don’t want to intrude on your time with them. I had a light meal before I came out to swim and I’ll just go on enjoying myself here.”

He got the sense she meant it. The fact that she wasn’t being coy like so many females he’d met in his life aroused his interest. “You’re their friend, so it goes without saying you’re invited.” His lips broke into a smile. “And even if you weren’t with them, I like an intrusion as pleasant as this one. I insist you join us.”

“Thank you,” she said quietly, but he had an idea she was debating whether or not to accept his invitation, mystifying him further. “Before you go, may I say how sorry I am about the loss of Princess Michelina. I can see the resemblance to your sister in you and the baby. I know it’s been devastating for your family, especially the queen. But if anyone can instill some joy into all of you, it’s your adorable nephew, Max.”

The surprises just kept coming. Valentino was taken aback. The fact that she’d been in Abby’s confidence for a number of

years had lent a sincere ring to this woman's remarks, already putting them on a more intimate footing. "I've been eager to see him again. He's probably grown a foot since last time."

An engaging smile appeared. "Maybe not quite another foot yet, but considering he's Prince Vincenzo's son, I would imagine he'll be tall one day."

"That wouldn't surprise me. A presto, Signorina Baretti."

* * *

Carolena watched his tall physique stride to the patio and disappear inside a set of glass doors. Long after he'd left, she was still trying to catch her breath. When she'd broken the surface of the water at the other end of the rectangular pool, she'd recognized the striking thirty-two-year-old crown prince right away.

Her knowledge of him came from newspapers and television that covered the funeral of his sister, Princess Michelina. He'd ridden in the black-and-gold carriage with his brother and their mother, Queen Bianca, the three of them grave and in deep grief.

In a recent poll he'd been touted the world's most sought-after royal bachelor. Most of the tabloids revealed he went through women like water. She could believe it. Just now his eyes had mirrored his masculine admiration of her. Everywhere they roved, she'd felt heat trail over her skin. By that invisible process called osmosis, his charm and sophistication had managed to seep into her body.

But even up close no camera could catch the startling midnight

blue of his dark-lashed eyes. The dying rays of the evening sun gilded the tips of his medium cut dark blond hair and brought out his hard-boned facial features, reminiscent of his Sicilian ancestry. He was a fabulous-looking man.

Right then he'd been wearing jeans that molded his powerful thighs, and a white shirt with the sleeves shoved up to the elbows to reveal hard-muscled forearms. No sign of a uniform this evening.

Whatever kind of work he did, he'd gotten dirty. She wondered where he'd been. There were black marks on his clothes and arms, even on his face, bronzed from being outdoors. If anything, the signs of the working man intensified his potent male charisma. He wasn't just a handsome prince without substance.

Carolena was stunned by her reaction to him. There'd been many different types of men who'd come into her life because of her work as an attorney; businessmen, manufacturers, technology wizards, mining engineers, entrepreneurs. But she had to admit she'd never had this kind of visceral response to a man on a first meeting, not even with Berto, who'd been her childhood friend before they'd fallen in love.

The prince had said half an hour. Carolena hadn't intended to join the three of them this evening, but since he'd used the word insist, she decided she'd better go so as not to offend him. Unfortunately it was growing late. She needed to hurry inside and get ready, but she wouldn't have time to wash her hair.

She climbed out of the pool and retraced her steps to the other wing of the palace. After a quick shower, she unbraided her hair and swept it back with an amber comb. Once she'd applied her makeup, she donned a small leopard-print wrap dress with ruched elbow-length sleeves. The tiny amber stones of her chandelier earrings matched the ones in her small gold chain necklace. On her feet she wore designer wedges in brown and amber.

The law firm in Arancia where she worked demanded their attorneys wear designer clothes since they dealt with an upper-class clientele. Abby had worked there with her until her fifth month of pregnancy when she'd been forced to quit. After being employed there twenty months and paid a generous salary, Carolena had accumulated a wonderful wardrobe and didn't need to worry she wouldn't have something appropriate to wear to this evening's dinner.

A knock at the door meant a maid was ready to take her to the dining room. But when she opened it, she received another shock to discover the prince at the threshold wearing a silky charcoal-brown sport shirt and beige trousers.

He must not have trusted her to come on her own. She didn't know whether to be flattered or worried she'd made some kind of faux pas when she'd declined his invitation at first. Their eyes traveled over each other. A shower had gotten rid of the black marks. He smelled wonderful, no doubt from the soap he used. Her heart did a tiny thump before she got hold of herself.

“Your Highness— This is the second time you’ve surprised me this evening.”

He flashed her a white smile. “Unexpected surprises make life more interesting, don’t you think?”

“I do actually, depending on the kind.”

“This was the kind I couldn’t resist.”

Obviously she had irritated him. Still, she couldn’t believe he’d come to fetch her. “I’m honored to be personally escorted by none other than the prince himself.”

“That wasn’t so hard to say, was it?” His question brought a smile to her lips. “Since I’m hungry, I thought I’d accompany you to the dining room myself to hurry things up, and I must admit I’m glad you’re ready.”

“Then let’s not waste any more time.”

“Vincenzo and Abby are already there, but they didn’t even notice me when I passed by the doors. I’ve heard of a honeymoon lasting a week or two, even longer. But eight months?”

Carolena chuckled. “I know what you mean. While we were flying out, they were so caught up in each other, I don’t think they said more than two words to me.”

“Love should be like that, but it’s rare.”

“I know,” she murmured. Vincenzo and Michelina hadn’t enjoyed a marriage like that. It was no news to Carolena or Valentino, so they left the subject alone.

She followed him down several corridors lined with tapestries and paintings to a set of doors guarded by a staff member. They

opened onto the grounds. “We’ll cut across here past the gardens to the other wing of the palace. It’s faster.”

There was nothing stiff or arrogant about Prince Valentino. He had the rare gift of being able to put her at ease and make her feel comfortable.

She looked around her. “The gardens are glorious. You have grown a fabulous collection of palms and exotic plants. Everything thrives here. And I’ve never seen baroque architecture this flamboyant.”

He nodded. “My brother, Vito, and I have always called it the Putti Palace because of all the winged boy cherubs supporting the dozens of balconies. To my mother’s chagrin, we used to draw mustaches on them. For our penance, we had to wash them off.”

Laughter rippled out of her. “I’m afraid to tell Abby what you said for fear she’ll have nightmares over Max getting into mischief.”

“Except that won’t be for a while yet.” His dark blue eyes danced. No doubt this prince had been a handful to his parents. Somehow the thought made him even more approachable.

“With all these wrought-iron balustrades and rustication, the palace really is beautiful.”

“Along with the two-toned lava masonry, the place is definitely unique,” he commented before ushering her through another pair of doors, where a staff member was on duty. Their arms brushed in the process, sending little trickles of delight through her body. Her reaction was ridiculous. It had to be

because she'd never been this close to a prince before. Except for Vincenzo, of course, but he didn't count. Not in the same way.

They walked down one more hall to the entrance of the dining room where Abby and Vincenzo sat at the candlelit table with their heads together talking quietly and kissing. Gilt-framed rococo mirrors made the room seem larger, projecting their image.

Valentino cleared his throat. "Should we come back?" He'd already helped Carolena to be seated. The teasing sound in his voice amused her, but his question caused the other two to break apart. While Abby's face flushed, Vincenzo got to his feet and came around to give Valentino a hug.

"It's good to see you."

"Likewise. I'm sorry I took so long. It's my fault for leaving work late today, but it couldn't be helped."

"No one understands that better than I do. We took the liberty of bringing Carolena with us. Allow me to introduce you."

Valentino shot her a penetrating glance. "We already met at the swimming pool."

Carolena felt feverish as she and Abby exchanged a silent glance before he walked around to hug her friend. Then he took his place next to Carolena, who still hadn't recovered from her initial reaction to his masculine appeal.

In a moment, dinner was served, starting with deep-fried risotto croquettes stuffed with pistachio pesto called arancini because they were the shape and size of an orange. Pasta with

clams followed called spaghetti alle vongole. Then came the main course of crab and an aubergine side dish. Valentino told them the white wine came from their own palace vineyard.

“The food is out of this world, but I’ll have to pass on the cannoli dessert,” Carolena exclaimed a little while later. “If I lived here very long I’d look like one of those fat Sicilian rock partridges unable to move around.”

Both men burst into laughter before Valentino devoured his dessert.

Carolena looked at Abby. “What did I say?”

Vincenzo grinned. “You and my wife have the same thought processes. She was afraid pregnancy would make her look like a beached whale.”

“We women have our fears,” Abby defended.

“We certainly do!”

Valentino darted Carolena another glance. “In that purple swimsuit you were wearing earlier, I can guarantee you’ll never have that problem.”

She’d walked into that one and felt the blood rush to her cheeks. That suit was a frivolous purchase she wouldn’t have worn around other people, but since she’d been alone... Or so she’d thought. “I hope you’re right, Your Highness.”

His eyes smiled. “Call me Val.”

Val? Who in the world called him that?

He must have been able to read her mind because his next comment answered her question. “My brother and I didn’t like

our long names, so we gave ourselves nicknames. He's Vito and I'm Val."

"V and V," she said playfully. "I'm surprised you didn't have to wash your initials off some of those putti."

Another burst of rich laughter escaped his throat. When it subsided, he explained their little joke to Vincenzo and Abby.

Carolena smiled at Abby. "I'd caution you never to tell that story to Max, or when he's more grown up he might take it into his head to copy his uncles."

"Fortunately we don't have putti," Vincenzo quipped.

"True," Abby chimed in, "but we do have busts that can be knocked over by a soccer ball."

Amidst the laughter, a maid appeared in the doorway. "Forgive the intrusion, Your Highness, but the queen says it seems the young prince has started to cry and is running a temperature."

In an instant both parents jumped to their feet bringing an end to the frivolity.

Wanting to say something to assure them, Carolena said, "He's probably caught a little cold."

Abby nodded. "I'm sure you're right, but he's still not as used to the queen yet and is in a strange place. I'll go to him." She put a hand on Vincenzo's arm. "You stay here and enjoy your visit, darling."

At this point, Valentino stood up. "We'll have all day tomorrow. Right now your boy needs both of you."

“Thank you,” they murmured. Abby came around to give Carolena a hug. “See you in the morning.”

“Of course. If you need me for anything, just phone me.”

“I will.”

When they disappeared out the doors, Carolena got to her feet. “I’ll say good-night, too. Thank you for a wonderful dinner, Your Highness.”

He frowned. “The name’s Val. I want to hear you say it.”

She took a deep breath. “Thank you...Val.”

“That’s better.” His gaze swept over her. “Where’s the fire?”

“I’m tired.” Carolena said the first thing that came into her head. “I was up early to finish some work at the firm before the limo arrived to drive me to the airport. Bed sounds good to me.”

“Then I’ll walk you back.”

“That won’t be necessary.”

He cocked his dark blond head. “Do I frighten you?”

Your appeal frightens me. “If anything, I’m afraid of disturbing your routine.”

“I don’t have one tonight. Forget I’m the prince.”

It wasn’t the prince part that worried her. He’d made her aware of him as a man. This hadn’t happened since she’d fallen in love with Berto and it was very disturbing to her.

“To be honest, when you showed up at the swimming pool earlier, you looked tired after a hard day’s work. Since it’s late, I’m sure you’d like a good sleep before you spend the day with Vincenzo tomorrow.”

"I'm not too tired to see you back to your room safely."

"Your Highness?" The same maid came to the entrance once more. "The queen would like to see you in her apartment."

"I'll go to her. Thank you."

He cupped Carolena's elbow to walk her out of the dining room. She didn't want him touching her. The contact made her senses come alive. When they passed the guard and reached the grounds, she eased away from him.

"After getting to know Vincenzo, I realize how busy you are and the huge amount of calls on your time. Your mother is waiting for you."

"I always say good-night to my mother before retiring. If our dinner had lasted a longer time, she would have had a longer wait."

There was no talking him out of letting her get back to her room by herself. "What kind of work were you doing today?" She had to admit to a deep curiosity.

He grinned. "I always come home looking dirty and need to wash off the grime."

She shook her head. "I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to. Volcanoes are a dirty business."

Carolena came to a standstill before lifting her head to look at him. "You were up on Mount Etna?"

"That's right."

His answer perplexed her. "Why?"

"I'm a volcanologist with the National Center of Geophysics

and Volcanology lab in Catania.”

“You’re kidding—” After that movie she’d watched on the plane, she couldn’t believe what he’d just told her.

One corner of his compelling mouth lifted. “Even a prince can’t afford to be an empty suit. Etna has been my backyard since I was born. From the first moment I saw it smoking, I knew I had to go up there and get a good look. Once that happened, I was hooked.”

With his adventurous spirit, she wasn’t surprised but knew there was a lot more to his decision than that. “I confess it would be fantastic to see it up close the way you do. Have you been to other volcanoes?”

“Many of them.”

“You lucky man! On the way down here I watched a Hollywood movie with Louis Jourdan about a volcano erupting in Polynesia.”

“You must mean Bird of Paradise.”

“Yes. It was really something. Your line of work has to be very dangerous.”

For a second she thought she saw a flicker of some emotion in his eyes, but it passed. “Not so much nowadays. The main goal is to learn how to predict trouble so that timely warnings can be issued for cautioning and evacuating people in the area. We’ve devised many safe ways to spy on active volcanoes over the decades.”

“How did your parents feel about you becoming a

volcanologist?”

A smile broke the corner of his mouth, as if her question had amused him. “When I explained the reasons for my interest, they approved.”

That was too pat an answer. He sounded as if he wanted to get off the subject, but she couldn’t let it go. “What argument did you give them?”

His brows lifted. “Did you think I needed one?”

She took a quick breath. “If they were anything like my grandmother, who was the soul of caution, then yes!”

He stopped outside the entrance to her wing of the palace. Moonlight bathed his striking male features, making them stand out like those of the Roman-god statues supporting the fountain in the distance. His sudden serious demeanor gave her more insight into his complex personality.

“A king’s first allegiance is to the welfare of his people. I explained to my parents that when Etna erupts again, and she will, I don’t want to see a repeat of what happened in 1669.”

Carolena was transfixed. “What did happen?”

“That eruption turned into a disaster that killed over twenty-nine thousand people.”

She shuddered, remembering the film. “I can’t even imagine it.”

He wore a grim expression. “Though it couldn’t happen today, considering the sophisticated warning systems in place, people still need to be educated about the necessity of listening and

heeding those warnings of evacuation.”

“In the film, there’d been no warning.”

“Certainly not a hundred years ago. That’s been my greatest concern. Gemelli has a population of two hundred thousand, so it can’t absorb everyone fleeing the mainland around Catania, but I want us to be prepared as much as possible.”

“How do you get your people prepared?”

“I’ve been working with our government to do mock drills to accommodate refugees from the mainland, should a disaster occur. Every ship, boat, barge, fishing boat would have to be available, not to mention housing and food and airlifts to other islands.”

“That would be an enormous undertaking.”

“You’re right. For protection against volcanic ash and toxic gas, I’ve ordered every family outfitted with lightweight, disposable, filtering face-piece mask/respirators. This year’s sightings have convinced me I’ve only scratched the surface of what’s needed to be done to feel at all ready.”

“Your country is very fortunate to have you for the watchman.”

“The watchman? That makes me sound like an old sage.”

“You’re hardly old yet,” she quipped.

“I’m glad you noticed.” His remark caused her heart to thud for no good reason.

“I’m very impressed over what you do.”

“It’s only part of what I do.”

“Oh, I know what a prince does.” She half laughed. “Abby once read me Vincenzo’s itinerary for the day and I almost passed out. But she never told me about your scientific background.”

“It isn’t something I talk about.”

“Well, I think it’s fascinating! You’re like an astronaut or a test pilot, but the general population doesn’t know what you go through or how you put your life on the line.”

“That’s a big exaggeration.”

“Not at all,” she argued. “It’s almost as if you’re leading a double life. What a mystery you are!”

She wouldn’t have put it past Abby to have chosen that particular film because she knew about Valentino’s profession and figured Carolena would get a kick out of it once she learned about his secret profession.

After a low chuckle, he opened the doors so they could walk down the hallway and around the corner to her room. She opened her door. Though she was dying to ask him a lot more questions about his work in volcanology, she didn’t want him to think she expected his company any longer. She was also aware the queen was waiting for him.

“It’s been a lovely evening. Thank you for everything.”

His eyes gleamed in the semidarkness. “What else do you do besides give unsuspecting males a heart attack while you’re diving?”

Heat scorched her cheeks. “I thought I was alone.”

“Because I was late getting back, I cut through that part of the

grounds and happened to see you. It looks like I'm going to have to do it more often."

He was a huge flirt. The tabloids hadn't been wrong about him. "I won't be here long enough to get caught again. I have a law practice waiting for me back in Arancia."

He studied her for a moment. "I heard you're in the same firm with Abby."

"We were until her marriage. Now she's a full-time mother to your nephew."

A heart-stopping smile appeared. "It must be tough on your male colleagues working around so much beauty and brains."

"They're all married."

"That makes it so much worse."

She laughed. "You're outrageous."

"Then we understand each other. Tomorrow we'll be eating breakfast on the terrace off the morning room. I'll send a maid for you at eight-thirty. Buona notte, Carolena."

"Buona notte."

"Val," he said again.

"Val," she whispered before shutting the door. She lay against it, surprised he was so insistent on her using his nickname, surprised he'd made such an impact on her.

After their delicious meal, she wasn't ready for bed yet. Once she'd slipped on her small garden-print capri pajamas, she set up her laptop on the table and started to look up Mount Etna. The amount of information she found staggered her. There were

dozens of videos and video clips she watched until after one in the morning.

But by the time she'd seen a video about six volcanologists killed on the Galeras volcano in the Colombian Andes in 1993, she turned off her computer. The scientists had been standing on the ground when it began to heave and then there was a deafening roar. The volcano exploded, throwing boulders and ash miles high and they'd lost their lives.

The idea of that happening to the prince made her ill. She knew he took precautions, but as he'd pointed out, there was always a certain amount of risk. The desire to see a vent up close would be hard to resist. That's what he did in his work. He crept up close to view the activity and send back information. But there might come a day when he'd be caught. She couldn't bear the thought of it, but she admired him terribly.

The playboy prince who'd had dozens of girlfriends didn't mesh with the volcanologist whose name was Val. She didn't want to care about either image of the sensational-looking flesh-and-blood man. When Carolena finally pulled the covers over her, she fell asleep wishing she'd never met him. He was too intriguing for words.

At seven-thirty the next morning her cell phone rang, causing her to wonder if it was the prince. She got a fluttery feeling in her chest as she raised up on one elbow to reach for it. To her surprise it was Abby and she clicked on. "Abby? Are you all right? How's Max?"

“He’s still running a temperature and fussing. I think he’s cutting another tooth. The reason I’m calling is because I’m going to miss breakfast with you and stay in the apartment with him. It will give Vincenzo and Valentino time to get some work done this morning.”

“Understood. I’m so sorry Max is sick.”

“It’ll pass, but under the circumstances, why don’t you order breakfast in your room or out by the pool. I’ll get in touch with you later in the day. If you want a limo, just dial zero and ask for one to drive you into town, and do a little shopping or something.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll love relaxing by the pool. This is heaven after the hectic schedule at the law firm.”

“Okay, then. Talk to you soon.”

This was a good turn of events. The less she saw of Valentino, the better.

CHAPTER TWO

BY TEN-THIRTY A.M., Valentino could see that Vincenzo wasn’t able to concentrate. “Let’s call it a day. I can see you want to be with Abby and Max. When I’ve finished with some other business, we’ll meet for dinner.”

Vincenzo nodded. “Sorry, Valentino.”

“You can’t help this. Family has to come first.” He walked his brother-in-law out of his suite where they’d had breakfast while they talked. When they’d said goodbye, he closed the door, realizing he had a free day on his hands if he wanted it.

In truth, he’d never wanted anything more and walked over to

the house phone to call Carolena Baretti's room, but there was no answer. He buzzed his assistant. "Paolo? Did Signorina Baretti go into town?"

"No. She had breakfast at the pool and is still there."

"I see. Thank you."

Within minutes he'd changed into trunks and made his way to the pool with a beach towel and his phone. He spotted her sitting alone reading a book under the shade of the table's umbrella. She'd put her hair in a braid and was wearing a lacy cover-up, but he could see a spring-green bikini beneath it.

"I guess it was too much to hope you were wearing that purple swimsuit I found you in last evening."

She looked up. Maybe it was a trick of light, but he thought she looked nervous to see him. Why?

Carolena put her book down. "You've finished your work with Vincenzo already?"

He tossed the towel on one of the other chairs. "Between you and me, I think he wanted to take a nap with his wife."

A smile appeared. "They deserve some vacation time away from deadlines."

"Amen. We'll do more work tomorrow when Max is feeling better. Come swim with me."

She shook her head. "I've already been in."

"There's no law that says you can't swim again, is there?" He put his phone on the table.

"No. Please—just forget I'm here."

"I'm afraid that would be impossible," he said over his shoulder before plunging in at the deep end to do some laps. When he eventually lifted his head, he was shocked to discover she'd left the patio and was walking back to her wing of the palace on those long shapely legs.

Nothing like this had ever happened to him before. Propelled into action, he grabbed his things and caught up to her as she was entering the door of her apartment. Valentino stood in the aperture so she couldn't close it on him.

"Did you go away because I'd disturbed you with my presence? Or was it because you have an aversion to me, signorina?"

Color swept into her cheeks. "Neither one."

His adrenaline surged. "Why didn't you tell me you preferred to be alone?"

"I'm just a guest. You're the prince doing your own thing. This is your home. But I had no intention of offending you by leaving the pool."

He frowned. "Yesterday I asked if you were afraid of me. You said no, but I think you are and I want to know why. It's true that though I've been betrothed to Princess Alexandra for years, I've had a love life of sorts. In that way I'm no different than Vincenzo before he married Michelina. But I've the feeling Abby has painted me as such a bad boy to you, you're half terrified to be alone with me."

"Nothing of the sort, Your Highness!" She'd backed away

from him. "Don't ever blame her for anything. She thinks the world of you!"

That sounded heartfelt. "Then invite me in so we can talk without the staff hearing every word of our conversation."

She bit her lip before standing aside so he could enter. "I'll get you a dry towel so you can sit down." He closed the door and watched her race through the suite. She soon came hurrying back with a towel and folded it on one of the chairs placed around the coffee table.

"Thank you," he said as she took a seat at the end of the couch.

He sat down with his hands clasped between his legs and stared at her. "What's wrong with you? Though I've told you I find you attractive, it doesn't mean I'm ready to pounce on you." She averted her eyes. "Don't tell me you don't know what I'm talking about."

"I wasn't going to, and I didn't mean to be rude. You have to believe me."

She sounded sincere enough, but Valentino wasn't about to let her off the hook. "What else am I to think? Last night I thought we were enjoying each other's company while we talked, but today you act like a frightened schoolgirl. Has some man attacked you before? Is that the reason you like to be alone and ran the minute I dived into the water?"

Her head lifted. "No! You don't understand."

"Since you're a special guest, help me so I don't feel like some pariah."

“Forgive me if I made you feel that way.” Her green orbs pleaded with him. “This has to do with me, not you.”

“Are you this way on principle with every man you meet? Or am I the only one to receive that honor?”

She stood up. “I—I’m going through a difficult time right now.” Her voice faltered. “It’s something I really can’t talk about. Could we start over again, as if this never happened?”

Much as he’d like to explore her problem further, he decided to let it rest for now. “That all depends.” On impulse he said, “Do you like to ride horses?”

“I love it. I used to ride all the time on my grandparents’ farm.”

Good. “Then I’ll have lunch sent to your room, and I’ll collect you in an hour. We’ll ride around the grounds. It’s someplace safe and close to Abby, who’s hoping you’re having a good time. But if you’re afraid of what happened to my sister while she was riding, we could play tennis.”

“I’m not afraid, but to go riding must be a painful reminder to you.”

“I’ve worked my way through it. Accidents can happen anytime. To worry about it unnecessarily takes away from the quality of life. Don’t you think?”

Her eyes suddenly glistened. “Yes,” she whispered with such deep emotion he was more curious than ever to know what was going on inside her, and found himself wanting to comfort her. Instead he had to tear himself away.

“I’ll be back in an hour.” Reaching for his towel and phone,

he left the apartment and hurried through the palace to his suite. Maybe by the end of their ride today, he'd have answers...

* * *

Carolena stood in the living room surprised and touched by his decency. He'd thought she'd been assaulted by a man and wanted to show her she didn't need to be afraid of him while he entertained her. No doubt he felt an obligation to her with Vincenzo and Abby indisposed.

He was sensitive, too. How many men would have worried she might be afraid to ride after what had happened to his sister? She'd gotten killed out riding, but he didn't let that stop him from living his normal life. His concern for Carolena's feelings increased her admiration for him.

So far she'd been a perfectly horrid guest, while he was going out of his way to make this trip eventful for her when he didn't have to. This wasn't the behavior of a playboy. The crown prince was proving to be the perfect host, increasing her guilt for having offended him.

Within the hour he came for her in a limo and they drove to the stables across the vast estate. Once he'd picked the right mare for her, they headed out to enjoy the scenery. In time, he led them through a heavily wooded area to a lake. They dismounted and walked down to the water's edge.

"What a beautiful setting."

"We open it to the public on certain days of the month."

"Abby used to tell me she felt like a princess in a fairy tale

growing up on the palace grounds in Arancia. If I lived here, I'd feel exactly the same way. You and your siblings must have spent hours here when you were young." On impulse she asked, "Were they interested in volcanology, too?"

His eyes swerved to hers. She had the feeling she'd surprised him by her question. "Quite the opposite."

That sounded cryptic. "What's the real reason you developed such a keen interest? It isn't just because Etna is there."

"It's a long story." There was that nuance of sadness in his voice again.

"We've got the rest of the afternoon." She sank onto her knees in the lush grass facing the water where an abundance of waterfowl bobbed around. "Humor me. Last night I was up until one o'clock looking at video clips of Etna and other volcanoes. They were incredible. I really want to know what drove you to become so interested."

He got down on the grass next to her. "My father had a sibling, my uncle Stefano. He was the elder son and the crown prince, but he never wanted to be king. He fought with my grandfather who was then King of Gemelli.

"Uncle Stefano hated the idea of being betrothed and having to marry a woman picked out for him. Our country has never had a sovereign who wasn't married by the time he ascended the throne. It's the law. But Stefano didn't ever want to be king and left home at eighteen to travel the world. I knew he had various girlfriends, so he didn't lead a celibate life, but he never married.

“In time, volcanoes fascinated him and he decided he wanted to study them. To appease my grandparents, he came home occasionally to touch base. I was young and loved him because he was so intelligent and a wonderful teacher. He used to take me up on Etna.

“The day came when I decided I wanted to follow in his footsteps and announced I was going to attend the university to become a geologist. My parents could see my mind was made up.

“While I was at school, the family got word he’d been killed on the Galeras volcano in the Colombian Andes.”

“Valentino—” she gasped. “I read about it on the website last night. One of the people killed was your uncle?”

Pain marred his striking male features. “He got too close. The ash and gas overpowered him and he died.”

She shuddered. “That’s horrible. I should have thought it would have put you off wanting anything more to do with your studies.”

“You might think it, but I loved what I was doing. Statistics prove that on average only one volcanologist dies on the job each year or so.”

“That’s one too many!”

“For our family it was traumatic because of the consequences that followed. His body was shipped home for the funeral. A few weeks later my grandfather suffered a fatal heart attack, no doubt from the shock. His death meant my father took over as king with my mother at his side.

“While we were still grieving, they called me into their bedroom and told me they were all right with my desire to be a volcanologist. But they prayed I wouldn’t disappoint them the way my uncle had disappointed my grandfather. They said my uncle Stefano had disgraced the family by not taking up his royal duties and marrying.

“I was torn apart because I’d loved him and knew he’d suffered because he’d turned his back on his royal heritage. But when I heard my parents’ sorrow, I promised I would fulfill my princely obligation to the crown and marry when the time was right. They wouldn’t have to worry about me. Michelina and I made a pact that we’d always do our duty.”

“You mean that if she’d wanted to marry someone else other than Vincenzo, she would still have done her duty.”

He nodded. “I asked her about that, knowing Vincenzo didn’t love her in the way she loved him. She said it didn’t matter. She was committed and was hoping he’d fall in love with her one day.”

“Did you resent him for not being able to love your sister?”

“How could I do that when I don’t love Alexandra? When I saw how hard he tried to make Michelina happy by agreeing to go through the surrogacy process, my affection for him grew. He was willing to do anything to make their marriage better. Vincenzo is one of the finest men I’ve ever known. When he ended up marrying Abby, I was happy for him.”

“You’re a remarkable person. So was your sister.”

“I loved her. She could have told our parents she refused to

enter into a loveless marriage, but she didn't. Uncle Stefano's death had affected all of us, including our brother, Vito. One day after his military service is over, he, too, will have to marry royalty because he's second in line to the throne."

"The public has no idea of the anguish that goes on behind locked royal doors."

"We're just people who've been born to a strange destiny. I didn't want to disappoint my parents or be haunted with regrets like my uncle. Fortunately, Mother is still capable of ruling, and my time to fulfill my obligation hasn't come yet."

"But it will one day."

"Yes."

"It's hard to comprehend a life like yours. May I be blunt and ask you if you have a girlfriend right now?"

"I've been seeing someone in town."

She had to suppress a moan. Did you hear that, Carolena? "And she's all right with the situation?"

"Probably not, but from the beginning she's known we couldn't possibly have a future. In case you're wondering, I haven't slept with her."

Carolena shook her head. "You don't owe me any explanation."

"Nevertheless, I can see the next question in your eyes and so I'll answer it. Contrary to what the media says about me, there have been only a few women with whom I've had an intimate relationship, but they live outside the country."

“Yet knowing you are betrothed has never stopped any of them from wanting to spend time with you?”

“No. The women I’ve known haven’t been looking for permanency, either.” He smiled. “We’re like those ships passing in the night.”

It sounded awful. Yet, since Berto, she hadn’t been looking for permanency, either, and could relate more than he knew.

“I’ve warned my latest girlfriend our relationship could end at any time. You’re within your rights to condemn me, Carolena.”

“I could never condemn you,” she whispered, too consumed by guilt over how she’d accidentally brought out Berto’s death to find fault with anyone. “You’ve had every right to live your life like any ordinary man. But like your uncle, it must have been brutal for you to have grown up knowing your bride was already chosen for you.”

“I’ve tried not to think about it.”

Her mind reeled from the revelations. “Does your betrothed know and understand?”

“I’m quite sure Princess Alexandra has had relationships, too. It’s possible she’s involved with someone she cares about right now. Her parents’ expectations for her haven’t spared her anguish, either.”

“No,” she murmured, but it was hard to understand. How could any man measure up to Valentino? If Princess Alexandra was like his sister, she’d been in love with Valentino for years. “Does she support your work as a volcanologist?”

“I haven’t asked her.”

“Why not?”

“Up to now we’ve been living our own lives apart as much as possible.”

“But this is an integral part of your life!”

He sat up, chewing on the end of a blade of grass. “Our two families have spent occasional time together over the years. But the last time my brother was home on leave and went to Cyprus with me and my mother, he told me that Alexandra admitted she never liked the idea that I was a volcanologist.”

“And that doesn’t worry you?”

He studied her for a long moment. “It’s an issue we’ll have to deal with one day after we’re married.”

“By then it will be too late to work things out between you,” she cried. “How often do you fly to Catania?”

“Four times a week.”

“She’s not going to like that, not if she hates the idea of it.”

He gave her a compassionate smile. “Our marriage won’t be taking place for a long time, so I choose not to worry about it.”

“I don’t see how you can stand it.”

“You learn to stand it when you’ve been born into a royal family. Why fate put me in line for the throne instead of you, for example, I don’t know.”

“You mean a woman can rule?”

“If there are no other males. Under those circumstances, she must marry another royal so she can reign. But my grandparents

didn't have a daughter. Uncle Stefano should have been king, but he rebelled, so it fell to my father to rule."

Tears trickled down her cheeks. "How sad for your uncle."

"A double sadness, because though he'd abdicated in order to choose his own life, he was burdened with the pain of disappointing his parents."

"There's been so much pain for all of you. And now your own sister and father have passed on."

He nodded. "It's life."

"But it's so much to handle." Her voice trembled. Carolena wanted to comfort him but realized no one could erase all that sadness. She wiped the moisture off her cheeks. "You didn't have to tell me anything. I feel honored that you did."

His gaze roved over her. "Your flattering interest in what I do prompted me to talk about something I've kept to myself for a long time. It felt good to talk about it. Why don't you try it out on me by telling me what's bothering you."

Her eyes closed tightly for a moment. "Let's just say someone that I loved died and it was my fault. Unlike you, I can't seem to move on from the past."

"Maybe you haven't had enough time to grieve."

Carolena could tell him seven years had been more than enough time to grieve. At this point, grief wasn't her problem. Guilt was the culprit. But all she said to him was, "Maybe."

"It might be therapeutic to confide in someone. Even me."

His sincerity warmed her heart, but confiding in him would

be the worst thing she could do. To remain objective around him, she needed to keep some barriers between them. "You have enough problems."

"None right this minute."

He stared hard at her. "Was his death intentional?"

"No."

"I didn't think it was. Have you gone for counseling?"

"No. It wouldn't help."

"You don't know that."

"Yes, I do." In a panic, she started to get up. He helped her the rest of the way. "Thank you for being willing to listen." It was time to change the subject. "Your uncle would be so happy to see how he guided you on your particular path, and more especially on how you're putting that knowledge to exceptional use. If I'd had such an uncle, I would have made him take me with him, too. What you do can be dangerous, but it is thrilling."

"You're right about that," he said, still eyeing her speculatively. "Shall we head out? By the time we reach the palace, hopefully Vincenzo will have good news for us about Max and we can all eat dinner together."

"I hope so."

They mounted their horses and took a different route to the stable. A limo was waiting to take them back to her wing of the palace. When they arrived, she opened the car door before he could. "You don't need to see me inside. Thank you for a wonderful day."

He studied her through veiled eyes. "It was my pleasure. I'll call you when I've spoken with Vincenzo."

She nodded before getting out of the limo. After hurrying inside, she took a quick shower, applied her makeup and arranged her hair in a loose knot on top of her head. For the first time in years her thoughts hadn't been on Berto. They'd been full of the prince, who'd brought her alive from the moment he'd appeared at the side of the pool.

No matter that he had a girlfriend at the moment, it was hard to breathe every time Carolena thought of the way he'd looked at her. She could understand why any woman lucky enough to catch his eye would be willing to stay in a relationship as long as possible to be with him. There was no one like him.

Needing to do something with all this energy he'd generated through no fault of his own, she got dressed, deciding to wear a short-sleeved crocheted lace top in the same egg shell color as her linen pants. The outfit was light and airy. She toned it with beige ankle-strap crisscross espadrilles.

While she was waiting for a phone call, she heard a knock on the door and wondered if it might be the prince. With a pounding heart she reached for her straw bag and opened it, but it was the maid, and Carolena was furious at herself for being disappointed.

"Signorina? His Highness has asked me to accompany you to dinner. He's waiting on the terrace."

What about Abby and Vincenzo? "Thank you for coming to get me."

No shortcuts through the grounds this time, but it gave Carolena the opportunity to see more of the ornate palace. By the time she arrived at the terrace, Vincenzo had already joined the prince, but there was no sign of Abby or Max. The two men stood together chatting quietly.

She had the impression this terrace was a recent addition. It was a masterpiece of black-and-white marble checkerboard flooring, Moorish elements and cream-colored lattice furniture in Italian provincial. A collection of exotic trees and flowering plants gave the impression they were in a garden.

Valentino's dark blue gaze saw her first. He broke from Vincenzo and moved toward her wearing jeans and a sand-colored polo shirt. "Buonasera, Carolena. You look beautiful."

Don't say that. "Thank you."

His quick smile was a killer. "I hope you're hungry. I told the kitchen to prepare chicken the way Abby tells me you like it."

"You're very kind." Too kind. She flashed him a smile as he helped her get seated. Valentino had no equal as a host. She decided he had no equal, period.

Vincenzo walked over and kissed her cheek before sitting down at the round table opposite her. A sumptuous-looking meal had been laid out for them. A maid came out on the terrace just then and told Valentino his mother wanted to speak to him when he had a minute. He nodded before she left.

"Where's Abby, Vincenzo?"

"Max fussed all day and is still feverish, so we're taking turns."

“The poor little thing. Do you think it’s serious?”

“We don’t know. Our doctor said it could be a virus, but Max isn’t holding down his food. That has me worried.”

“I don’t blame you. Is there something I can do to help?”

“Yes,” Valentino inserted. “If Max is still sick tomorrow, you can keep me company, since Vincenzo will be tied up taking care of his family.”

He actually sounded happy about it, but the news filled Carolena with consternation. She’d been with him too much already and her attraction to him was growing. She flicked him a glance. “You don’t have to worry about entertaining me. I brought my laptop and always have work to do.”

“Not while you’re here.” Valentino’s underlying tone of authority quieted any more of her excuses. “No doubt you and Abby had intended to visit some of the shops and museums in Gemelli while on holiday, but I can think of something more exciting for tomorrow if you’re up to it.”

Vincenzo shot her a glance she couldn’t decipher. “Be careful.”

She chuckled. “Is that a warning?”

After finishing his coffee, a glimmer of a smile appeared. “On my first business visit here years ago, Valentino dangled the same option in front of me.”

“What happened?”

He studied her for a moment. “That’s for you to find out.”

“Now you’ve made me nervous.”

“Maybe you should be.” She couldn’t tell if Vincenzo’s cryptic response was made in jest or not.

“You’ve frightened her,” Valentino muttered. Again, Carolena was confused by the more serious undertone of their conversation.

“Then I’m sorry and I apologize.” Vincenzo put down his napkin and got to his feet. “Enjoy your evening. We’ll talk again in the morning. Please don’t get up.”

“Kiss that baby for me and give Abby my love.”

“I will.”

She’d never seen Vincenzo so preoccupied. Being a new father wasn’t easy, but she sensed something else was on his mind, as well.

“What went on just now?” she asked as soon as he left the terrace.

Valentino had been watching her through narrowed eyes. “I’m afraid he thinks my idea of a good time could backfire.” Carolena believed there was more to it than that, but she let it go for now.

“You mean it might be one of those surprises that’s the wrong kind for me?”

“Possibly.”

“Well, if you don’t tell me pretty soon, I might expire on the spot from curiosity.”

She thought he’d laugh, but for once he didn’t. “I’d like to take you sailing to Taormina. It’s an island Goethe called ‘a part of paradise.’ The medieval streets have tiny passages with secrets I

can guarantee you'll love."

"It sounds wonderful, but that wasn't the place you had in mind when you were talking with Vincenzo."

"I've had time to think the better of it."

A rare flare of temper brought blood to her cheeks. "Vincenzo is Abby's husband, not mine."

"And he enjoys her confidence."

"In other words, he's trying to protect me from something he thinks wouldn't be good for me."

"Maybe."

Carolena's grandmother used to try to protect her the same way. But if she got into it with the prince, she'd be acting like the willful child her grandparent used to accuse her of being. Averting her eyes, she forced herself to calm down and said, "It's possible Max will be better, but in case he isn't, I'd love a chance to go sailing. It's very kind of you."

She heard his sharp intake of breath. "Now you're patronizing me."

"What do you expect me to do? Have a tantrum?" The question was out of her mouth before she could stop it. She was mortified to realize she was out of control. Something had gotten into her. She didn't feel at all herself.

"At least it would be better than your pretense to mollify me," came the benign response.

What? "If you weren't the prince—"

"I asked you to forget my title."

“That’s kind of hard to do.”

“Why don’t you finish what you were about to say. If I weren’t the prince...”

“Bene.” She sucked in her breath. “If neither of you were princes, I’d tell you I’ve been taking care of myself for twenty-seven years and don’t need a couple of guys I hardly know to decide what’s best for me. If that sounds ungracious, I didn’t mean for it to offend you, but you did ask.”

A look of satisfaction entered his eyes. “I was hoping you would say that. How would you like to fly up on Etna with me in a helicopter? We’ll put down in one spot and I’ll show you some sights no visitor gets to see otherwise.”

Gulp. She clung to the edge of the table from sheer unadulterated excitement. Valentino intended to show her that ten-thousand-foot volcano up close? After seeing that movie, what person in the world wouldn’t want the opportunity? She couldn’t understand why Vincenzo thought it might not be a good experience for her.

“You love your work so much you’d go up there on your day off?”

“You can ask that after what I revealed to you today? Didn’t you tell me you thought it sounded thrilling?”

“Yes.” She stood up and gazed into those intelligent, dark blue eyes. Ignoring the warning flags telling her to be prudent, she said, “I’d absolutely love it.”

A stillness surrounded them. “Never let it be said I didn’t give

you an out.”

“I don’t want one, even if Vincenzo thought I did.”

A tiny nerve throbbed at the side of his hard jaw. “If Max is still sick in the morning, we’ll leave around eight-thirty. You’ll need to wear jeans and a T-shirt if you brought one. If not, you can wear one of mine.”

“I have one.”

“Good, but you can’t go in sandals.”

“I brought my walking boots.”

“Perfect.”

“I’ll see you in the morning then.”

As she started to leave, he said, “Don’t go yet.”

Valentino—I can’t spend any more time with you tonight. I just can’t! “Your mother is waiting for you and I have things to do. I know the way back to my room.”

“Carolena?”

With a pounding heart, she paused at the entrance. “Yes?”

“I enjoyed today more than you know.”

Oh, but I do, her heart cried.

“The horseback ride was wonderful. Thank you again.” In the next breath she took off for the other wing of the palace. Her efforts to stay away from him weren’t working. To see where he spent his time and share it with him was too great a temptation to turn down, but she recognized that the thing she’d prayed would never happen was happening!

She was starting to care about him, way too much. Forget the

guilt over Berto's death that had prevented her from getting close to another man. Her feelings were way too strong for Valentino. Already she was terrified at the thought of handling another loss when she had to fly back to Arancia with Abby and Vincenzo.

But if she said she wasn't feeling well now and begged off going with him tomorrow, he'd never believe her. Though she knew she was walking into emotional danger by getting more involved, she didn't have the strength to say no to him. Help.

CHAPTER THREE

LETTING CAROLENA GO when it was the last thing he wanted, Valentino walked through the palace to his mother's suite. The second he entered her sitting room he was met with the news he'd been dreading all his adult life.

While he'd been riding horses with Carolena, his mother had worked out the details of his coming marriage to Princess Alexandra of Cyprus. Both royal families had wanted a June wedding, but he'd asked for more time, hoping for another year of freedom. Unfortunately they'd forced him to settle on August tenth and now there was no possibility of him changing his mind.

Tonight his mother had pinned him down, gaining his promise there'd be no more women. By giving his word, it was as good as writing it in cement.

Ages ago he and Michelina had talked about their arranged marriages. Valentino had intended to be true to Alexandra once their marriage date was set, but he'd told Michelina he planned to live a full life with other women until his time came.

She, on the other hand, never did have the same problem because she'd fallen in love with Vincenzo long before they were married and would never have been unfaithful to him. Vincenzo was a good man who'd kept his marriage vows despite the fact that he didn't feel the same way about her. Valentino admired him more than any man he knew for being the best husband he could under the circumstances.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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