

A man and a woman are dancing in a grand, ornate ballroom. The woman is wearing a long, flowing yellow dress and white gloves, and the man is wearing a black tuxedo. They are facing each other, and the woman has her arms around the man's neck. The room features gold-colored walls, columns, and chandeliers. The floor is polished and reflects the lights. The overall atmosphere is elegant and festive.

THE PRINCE'S CHRISTMAS VOW

Jennifer Faye

 *Cherish*™

Jennifer Faye

The Prince's Christmas Vow

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Secretly married...to a prince! Zoe Sarris hasn't seen Crown Prince Demetrius Castanavo since their secret elopement. So she's shocked when he requests her interior design services. She's only just pieced her broken heart back together, and seeing Demetrius—as gorgeous and guarded as ever—threatens to shatter it all over again...However, the shocking news that they are actually still married changes everything... Especially when Demetrius reveals he wants his princess back – preferably in time for Christmas!

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Demetrius crossed his muscular arms. “Perhaps hiring you was a mistake—”

“No—” Zoe bit back her next words, but it was too late. Demetrius’s brows had lifted at her sudden outburst.

“I mean, we have an agreement in writing.”

“And you didn’t think that I would leave myself a loophole—a way out if the need arose?”

Who was this man? And what had happened to the laid-back Demetrius?

Her gut told her to get out now. That she was getting in far too deep with a man who still had a hold on her heart.

To complicate matters further, she had no job to return to. She’d already resigned from her position as interior designer for the island’s most prominent furniture store. And most importantly this job paid well—well enough to pay her mother’s bills.

Zoe was stuck.

“You still haven’t answered my question. Why did you hire me?” She watched him carefully, not sure what sort of reaction to expect.

“I wanted the best for this job. And you are the best on the island.”

Was he serious? He thought she was the best? A warmth swirled in her chest and rose to warm her cheeks. Their gazes connected and held. Her heart thudded harder, faster. She refused to acknowledge that his words meant anything to her. She was over him. Past him.

“So you just expect us to work together like ... like nothing ever happened?”

The Prince’s

Christmas Vow

Jennifer Faye



www.millsandboon.co.uk

Award-winning author **JENNIFER FAYE** pens fun, heartwarming romances. Jennifer has won the RT Reviewers’ Choice Best Book Award, is a Top Pick author and has been nominated for numerous awards. Now living her dream, she resides with her patient husband, one amazing daughter—the other remarkable daughter is off chasing her own dreams—and two spoiled cats. She’d love to hear from you via her website: www.jenniferfaye.com.

To my readers ...

I am so blessed to have the most amazing readers, some who have become dear friends.

I greatly appreciate your friendly notes, unfailing support and daily company on social media.

Thank you.

You all are amazing!

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[CHAPTER ONE](#)

THE PLAN WAS in motion.

Though suddenly, it didn't sound like such a good idea.

Demetrius Castanavo, the Crown Prince of the Mirraccino Islands, shrugged off the worrisome feeling as he stepped out of the air-conditioned black limousine. Nothing was going to go wrong. He glanced at the clear blue sky, appreciating this last bit of good weather before it cooled down in the weeks leading up to Christmas.

Demetrius buttoned his charcoal-gray suit jacket, gave each sleeve a tug and then straightened his shoulders. Today he must look his best. It was imperative.

A bright camera flash momentarily blinded him.

He blinked, regaining his focus. The media coverage had begun. He restrained a sigh. Instead he lifted his chin and forced his lips into a well-practiced smile.

Demetrius, the royal playboy, was no more. His days of nonchalance and bucking the system were over. Now he was intent on becoming a proper and worthy heir to the Mirraccino throne. It was, after all, his birthright—whether he desired it or not.

And now he was about to participate in a very important interview that would help shape his new, improved public image—one he hoped would sway the residents of the Mirraccino nation to support his inevitable rise to the throne.

His gaze settled on an impressive set of steps that led to a historic mansion. At the top was an expansive landing with large, white columns amid the backdrop of blue shuttered windows. The place was a timeless beauty. He was glad they were going to save this building by revitalizing it.

There was just one snag in his well-thought-out plan—Zoe.

His estranged wife.

But that situation would be resolved soon—very soon.

The head of his security detail leaned in close and whispered, “The reporter is waiting for you on the landing, Your Royal Highness.”

Demetrius shoved the disturbing thoughts of his estranged wife to the back of his mind. He’d deal with her tomorrow. “Good. As soon as I meet with him, we have to get moving if we’re going to stay on schedule today.”

“Sir, the reporter, it’s a woman.”

“Si. I remember now.” Demetrius needed to keep his head in this game instead of wondering how Zoe would react when she saw him again.

Demetrius swiftly climbed the steps that fanned out, covering a large area while adding to the building’s charm. He’d definitely made the right decision by insisting the all-access ramp be constructed on the side of the building, readily accessible yet not losing the building’s aesthetic appeal.

His vision was to marry the building’s beauty with functionality. They were doing well with the functionality. The beauty would be Zoe’s area of expertise. And tomorrow would be her first day on the job.

Off to the far side of the landing stood a short, slender brunette. Her makeup was a bit heavy for his tastes, but he reasoned that it must have something to do with spending so much time in front of the television cameras. Interviews were one of his least favorite tasks, but at times they were a necessity—like now.

When his advisors had unanimously agreed this was the best way for him to overhaul his scandalous youthful past, they had also assured him that agreeing to the one-on-one interview would be the best way to give the citizens access to him—to let them know that he was serious about being a caring, involved ruler. Though he’d rather keep his distance from the paparazzi, Demetrius had to admit that in this one particular instance, they may in fact come in handy—quite handy indeed.

He reached the landing and turned to the reporter. Greetings were quick and formal. Demetrius had every intention of keeping things moving along at a brisk pace. He knew the more time he spent with the media, the more they’d learn. And in his experience, that was never a good thing. He wanted to control the flow of information, not the other way around.

Ms. Carla Russo, the face of Mirraccino’s entertainment news, held a microphone. “Before we begin, I wondered if you might have an announcement for our viewers.”

“I do have news—”

“Oh, good. We’ve been hearing all sorts of rumors, and the viewers would really like confirmation that you’ve decided upon a princess.”

What?

The cameraman moved closer. Demetrius’s throat constricted. They knew about Zoe? No. Impossible. The reporter was on a hunting expedition. Pure and simple. Anything for a sensational headline. Well, he wasn’t about to give her anything to chase. Nothing at all.

With practiced skill, Demetrius forced his lips into a smile. “I can assure you there is no princess in my near future.”

“That’s not what we’ve heard. There are rumors floating about that someone special has caught your attention. Could you share her name with us?”

Maybe the reporter did know something about Zoe, after all. Though the palace employees had all signed confidentiality agreements, there could still be a leak. A delivery person? A guest? There was always room for someone who’d slipped through the cracks. But obviously, whatever this woman knew wasn’t much or she’d be throwing out names and facts.

He couldn’t lose control of this interview. It wasn’t just the building that was about to get a fresh lease on life. If his plan succeeded, their futures would both have makeovers. After all, he’d

been putting off getting on with his royal duties long enough now. He'd grown. He'd learned. And now he was becoming the man he should have been all along.

With his twin brother, Alexandro, now married and spending a lot of time abroad in his wife's homeland, more responsibilities had befallen the king. But the king was not in the best of health. The physicians kept warning him to slow down. And that's why Demetrius's plan just had to work. He didn't want his father to have a heart attack or worse.

The first part of his plan included gaining the public's trust. The second part was a bit more delicate—getting his estranged wife to quietly sign the annulment papers. The question that needed answering was why had she ignored the papers for months now?

By the time the revitalization project had finally gotten off the ground, so had Zoe's career as an interior designer. She'd worked on some of the most notable buildings here in Bellacitta, the capital of Mirraccino. With the public enthralled with her work, he knew he needed to hire her. His advisors, knowing his history with Zoe, said he was foolish. But Demetrius insisted he had reasons for this unorthodox approach.

His first reason was that she had a flare with colors and arrangements—a way to make people sit up and take notice without it being over-the-top. And the second reason was to be able to get close to her without arousing the press's suspicions. With her close at hand, he'd be able to work the answers out of her that he needed to put his short-lived marriage to a very quiet end.

Demetrius struggled to maintain his calm and easy demeanor. “Today, I'd like to focus on Mirraccino and in particular the South Shore redevelopment. It's very important to me and to the king. It promises to bring new homes and businesses to the area as well as create new job opportunities for the local residents.”

“So the rumors of a new princess are false?”

Drawing on a lifetime of experience of dealing with the media, he spoke in a calm, measured tone. “You will be my first call when I have a marriage announcement. But I believe right now the viewers would like to hear more about the project.”

The reporter's brows rose and her eyes filled with unspoken questions, but he met her gaze head-on. If she dared to continue this line of questioning into his personal life, he'd wrap up this interview immediately. It wasn't as if she was the only reporter on the island, though she did host the nation's most popular entertainment show.

Color infused her cheeks as she at last glanced at the camera. “The South Shore project is going to benefit quite a number of people. How exactly did you come up with the idea to revitalize this area?”

“This endeavor is something that has been of interest to the crown for some time now. However, it wasn't until recently that we were able to gain the last of the property deeds in order to push ahead with the plans.”

The loud rumble of an engine caught his attention. He sought out the source of the noise. It was a taxi that had pulled to the curb near his limo. A tall, willowy brunette emerged from the blue-and-white taxi. She turned and leaned in the passenger window as she handed over the cab fare. If Demetrius didn't know better, he'd swear that was his wife. But he refused to let his imagination get the best of him and upend this interview.

He turned back to Ms. Russo. “Residenza del Rosa is our first project. We will have it up and running by the beginning of the new year.”

“So you have plans for more than just the mansion?” Ms. Russo sent him an expectant look.

“Si.” Demetrius swallowed hard and forced his thoughts back to business. “Residenza del Rosa is already well underway. As soon as we have the necessary funding secured, we will start on phase two, which will be to build affordable housing.” The clicking of heels caught his attention. He refused to be distracted. Security would handle it. “We intend to make the South Shore accessible to both the young and the young at heart. This area will once again be a robust community.”

The head of his security detail approached him. Demetrius held up a finger to pause the interview. The bodyguard leaned over and whispered in his ear. “It’s a Ms. Sarris. She has a pass and she says she works here. Should we let her through?”

“Oh, look.” Ms. Russo’s face lit up. Too late. She’d caught sight of Zoe. The reporter’s eyes sparkled as though she’d been given a special treat. “Isn’t that the interior designer, Zoe Sarris?”

Before answering the reporter, Demetrius gave an affirmative yet reluctant nod to his man to allow Zoe to join them. That woman certainly did have bad timing—first when she walked out on him just hours after saying “I do”—and now. How did she do it?

He could feel the reporter’s gaze on him. He cleared his throat. “Yes, it’s Miss Sarris.”

“I wonder what she’s doing here?” The reporter sent him a speculative look. “Did you arrange this?”

He resisted the urge to frown at the reporter’s fishing expedition as well as the fact that his estranged wife was about to crash his very important interview. “No. It appears she’s here to work. We’ve been lucky enough to obtain Ms. Sarris’s exclusive services to create a welcoming yet relaxing environment for the future residents of Residenza del Rosa.”

“And what features will it provide?”

“This long-term care home will be able to accommodate different levels of care from assisted living to skilled nursing.”

“And Ms. Sarris is here to make this mansion into the beauty it once was?”

“We’re hoping she’ll be able to take what is here and give it a fresh feel.”

“I’m sure she will. Is Miss Sarris signed on for the other buildings in the revitalization project?”

“Not at this point. We want to see how this first building goes and then we’ll reevaluate, figuring out what works and what doesn’t.”

Ms. Russo nodded in understanding. “How splendid that she can join us and give our viewers an idea of what she has in mind for the place. I’ve seen her work before and it’s fantastic. In fact, we can do before and after shoots of the mansion, both inside and out, with your permission of course.”

“That sounds like a good idea.”

Demetrius followed Ms. Russo’s gaze to the woman in question. Zoe’s clothing choice was nothing out of the ordinary, a short black skirt and a pink blouse. But on her, it looked fantastic as it nestled her curves perfectly—curves that he still knew by memory. She lifted her black sunglasses and then shook out her long dark curls before resting her shades atop her head like a hairband.

No matter what had gone down between them, there was no denying the obvious—she was a knockout. He should glance away—check his phone—continue the interview—anything but continue to stare at her.

Her legs were long, toned and tan. He couldn’t have turned away even if he’d have tried, which he had no inclination to do. It’d been months since he’d laid eyes on her. Visions of her in his dreams didn’t count—they couldn’t hold a candle to the real thing.

Zoe moved one strappy black high heel in front of the other. The classic ZZ Top song “Legs” started playing in his head. This girl definitely knew her strongest attributes and she worked them—no wonder he’d fallen for her hard and fast. Was it possible that she was even more gorgeous now than she had been when they’d met more than a year ago?

“It’s warm standing here in the sun. Perhaps we should move to the shade.” Ms. Russo signaled to her cameraman to take a break. “Prince Demetrius, are you all right?”

The concern in the reporter’s voice startled him out of the trance he’d fallen under. He drew a breath of air into his straining lungs. With effort, he turned his gaze from Zoe to the reporter who wore an inquisitive expression.

Not good, Demetrius. Not good at all. Stay focused.

He cleared his throat. “Sorry. I just remembered something that needs my attention. Let me just make a note of it.” He pulled out his phone and made the pretense of typing something while he got his brain screwed on straight.

The same question kept playing over and over in his mind. What in the world was Zoe doing here? Surely she hadn’t come to see him. No. That was impossible. His schedule was kept under wraps for security purposes. Even Ms. Russo had not been alerted to the location for this interview until this morning. So that still left the question of why Zoe had crashed this important interview?

Demetrius slipped his phone back in his jacket pocket. “Okay. Where were we?”

“I thought we might want to wait for Ms. Sarris to join us.”

Her comment had him instinctively turning back to the woman who’d gained the reporter’s attention. Zoe climbed the last two steps in those sky-high black heels that made her legs look as though they went on and on forever. His mouth grew dry and his palms became moist.

He should have had his men turn her away. How was he supposed to concentrate on the interview when all he wanted to do was confront Zoe?

He only had one question: Why?

Okay. So maybe he did have a couple more questions. Like, when did she start dressing like that? Were her skirts always so short? How was a man to make intelligent conversation when all he could think about was her bare, tanned legs?

Concentrate on the business at hand.

Every muscle in his body tensed. He couldn’t continue to stare at her. He didn’t want anyone to notice that he was affected by Zoe’s presence.

“Excuse me.” Zoe’s gaze didn’t quite meet his. “I didn’t know anyone would be here today. If it’s okay, I’ll just go inside and make some notes.”

“No problem.” Demetrius backed up to let her pass by.

“Wait.” Ms. Russo stepped in Zoe’s way. “Ms. Sarris, would you have a couple of minutes to speak with us?”

Zoe shook her head. “I don’t want to intrude.”

“You aren’t. In fact, I’d like to get a few quotes from you. But first I need to go track down my cameraman. He wanted to film a few frames of the mansion under construction.”

Demetrius waited until the reporter was out of earshot before turning to Zoe. “What are you doing here?”

“I already told you. I came to take notes.” Her steady gaze met his. “What are you doing here?”

Leave it to Zoe to question a prince. She never was one to be awed by someone’s position or power. To her, everyone put on their pants one leg at a time just like everyone else. Then again, that was one of the things he’d always admired about her. But suddenly, it wasn’t so admirable—suddenly she made him uncomfortable having to explain himself.

Though his family thought he’d only known Zoe for a few weeks, the truth was that they’d been involved for six months before taking the plunge. When his family found out about their elopement, chaos had ensued, so he never got a chance to correct them. Besides, what difference would it have made? His family had already determined that he was impulsive and foolish to rush into marriage with someone so unfitting for the role of princess.

But that was then and things had changed a lot since then. Now Demetrius was cautious and he thought out his actions before he acted. In fact, he’d planned out what he would say to Zoe when they first met up again, but he hadn’t expected it to be here on these steps—in public—in front of a television camera.

Not about to get into anything personal right now, he settled on, “I’m the prince and I have every right to be here. After all, this project is under the direct supervision of the Crown.”

“Of course.” Her cheeks took on a pink tinge. “I should have known. I was just caught off guard by your presence.”

“Listen, there’s something you should know—”

“Sorry about that.” Ms. Russo smiled as she rejoined them.

Demetrius cleared his throat. It was time to put this all to an end before it blew up in his face. Instead of gaining the public’s trust, he might just damage his reputation beyond repair if they unearthed the truth about his very brief, very rushed marriage.

Demetrius stepped forward. “Ms. Sarris just informed me that she won’t be able to stay.”

CHAPTER TWO

SO MUCH FOR thinking Christmas had come early.

There appeared to be a lump of coal in her stocking.

Zoe arched a brow at Demetrius. Question after question crowded her mind. Like what exactly was her ex-husband really up to? Then again, their marriage had been annulled so technically he wasn’t her ex. So what did that make him? Her fairy-tale past? Her delicious mistake?

Not that any of it mattered.

They were history. That part was undeniable.

“The prince is correct. I just stopped by to check on something.” Zoe made sure to wear her friendliest smile. “If you’ll excuse me.”

She stepped past Demetrius and kept walking. The murmur of their voices resumed. It wasn’t until she’d reached the other end of the landing that she paused and glanced over her shoulder.

Her gaze scanned over Demetrius’s tailored charcoal-gray suit and polished dress shoes. He looked quite smart in his designer clothes. His hair was a little shorter and styled. So much for the laid-back, not-worried-about-his-looks prince. The tide had most definitely turned. The man standing in front of the camera definitely had a serious persona about him.

What had happened to turn Demetrius into the focused prince standing before her? The question teetered on the tip of her tongue, but she knew that it was no longer any of her business. The thought settled as a lump in her stomach. She’d done what she thought was best at the time by walking away—even if she had loved him.

When his dark gaze met hers, the breath hitched in her throat. It was abundantly clear that she was the very last person he’d expected to see today. And he was none too happy about it. Her fingers fidgeted with the material of her skirt. Would he have her replaced?

Zoe’s stomach dipped. This job was not only impressive but it also paid well—quite well. It’d certainly improve her declining bank account and give her the funds necessary to continue helping her ailing mother. Without it, she didn’t know how she’d make do.

She’d lingered too long. It was time to slip inside the mansion away from the paparazzi, away from the questions—away from Demetrius’s accusing stare. She was just about at the front door of the mansion when a man stepped out from behind one of the columns.

“Smile for the camera, sweetie.” He snapped a picture of her.

The flash momentarily blinded her. She stood rooted in the same spot. What in the world?

The man was short and had a paunch. He hadn’t seen a razor recently and his hair was greasy with a long, stringy comb-over. His eyes narrowed in on her. “They’re going to love you.”

“Who are you? What do you want?”

“I’m the man who’s going to learn your secrets.”

There was no way he was with Ms. Russo. Zoe started to back up. Not realizing there was a step behind her, she tripped and a scream tore from her lungs.

“Zoe?” Demetrius called out.

Her hands flailed about as she struggled to regain her balance. And then suddenly there was a steadying hand clutching her arm, pulling her to safety. Once she was on level footing, her gaze met Demetrius’s concerned look.

“Are you all right?” His voice was gruff with concern.

“I’m fine.” She glanced around but the man who’d startled her was gone.

“Did you see that man?”

Demetrius shook his head. “Was it one of the construction workers?”

“I don’t think so. He had a camera.”

Demetrius called over one of his security detail, and in hushed tones they spoke. Then he turned back to her. “Don’t worry. If he’s still here, they’ll find him. Do you know what he wanted?”

Zoe shook her head.

Ms. Russo rushed over. “Is everything okay?”

“There was a man here,” Demetrius explained. “He startled Miss Sarris.”

The reporter lowered her microphone. “I caught a glimpse of him just as he turned to leave.”

Zoe was so relieved to know that someone had seen him. “Do you know who he is?”

“I don’t know his name.” Ms. Russo’s dark brows drew together. “I’ve seen him before. I think he may be a stringer, selling whatever dirt he digs up on celebrities to the highest paying publication. He doesn’t look it, but he’s very good at sniffing out the scandalous stories.” Ms. Russo’s gaze moved from Zoe to Demetrius. “So Prince Demetrius, do you know why he’s investigating you?”

Demetrius frowned. “I have no idea.”

Wanting to diffuse this line of questioning, Zoe spoke up. “What will happen if they catch him?”

Demetrius’s gaze met hers. “Did he hurt you?” When she shook her head, he continued. “He’ll most likely be questioned and released.”

It wasn’t exactly a comforting thought to know that man would soon be loose. But Demetrius was right. They couldn’t lock him up just because he’d scared her.

“Don’t look so worried.” Demetrius’s voice was low and comforting. “He was interested in me, not you.”

Zoe wasn’t so sure about that. The man’s beady eyes had been staring right at her when he’d spoken. Goose bumps raced down her arms. She’d prefer to never see him again.

“Are you all right?” The reporter sent her a worried look.

Zoe nodded. “I should be going.”

“Please don’t rush off.” Ms. Russo gestured to her cameraman to start filming. “Since you’re here, can you give us some idea of what to look forward to with the mansion?”

Zoe wanted to leave—to get as far away as fast as possible. But how would that look? Talk about giving credence to that creep’s allegations that she had secrets. She refused to let him or anyone else run her off.

With every bit of willpower she could muster, Zoe flashed the camera a smile. “Sure. As long as Prince Demetrius doesn’t mind.”

He made a pretense of checking his Rolex watch. “I suppose we have time. But it will have to be quick. I have another meeting shortly.”

“Certainly.” The reporter’s eyes gleamed with victory.

The woman started rambling off questions about the project as the cameraman filmed the whole session. It was bad enough running into her ex, but now to be filmed with him for primetime television made her want to groan. Could this day get any worse?

“Now, how did you two meet?”

“What?” When all three people turned inquisitive eyes Zoe’s way, the heat of embarrassment inched up her neck. “Sorry.” She searched for the easiest way out of this mess. “I got distracted. What did you ask?”

“I was wondering how you and the prince met.”

Zoe waited, hoping Demetrius would speak up and put an end to this interview. But instead he remained silent, letting the awkward silence grow. Zoe improvised. “We don’t really know each other.”

The reporter’s brow arched. “That’s interesting. I’d have sworn you two seemed to know each other. Are you sure there wasn’t another project? Or a social engagement?”

“We don’t move in the same social circles,” Zoe said with utter honesty.

At last, Demetrius found his voice. “This is actually our first project together and Miss Sarris might not remember, but we met ever so briefly at the opening of the DiCapria corporate offices. She’d done such an excellent job with its design that when the Residenza del Rosa project came up, her name immediately came to mind.”

Of course Zoe remembered that moment. It had been the night her whole world changed. So then how could he just stand there and talk about their very first meeting at the DiCapria party as though nothing had come of it? It had been the precipice of her heart tumbling and careening into his.

“The DiCapria office is beautiful.” Ms. Russo turned to her. “That project brought you a lot of public attention. Would you say it was a turning point in your career?”

“Definitely.” Zoe was very proud of that project. They’d given her a lot of freedom with the design and she’d ended up impressing everyone. “It was and still is one of my favorite projects.”

“I’ll make a note to get some photos of the DiCapria offices to include in this exposé.” The woman keyed a note into her phone. “And if we could just have one more photo of you two together for our website, we’ll be done.”

Zoe’s cheeks ached from smiling so much. *Don’t they already have enough footage?* But when she glanced up the cameraman had gone to exchange his filming equipment for a digital camera.

While the reporter spoke to the camera guy, Demetrius leaned close and spoke in her ear. “Hang in there. Doing what she asks will be a lot faster and easier than trying to duck out.”

His crisp, fresh cologne teased her memory. She remembered all too clearly what it was like to lean into him and press her mouth to the smooth skin of his neck. His quickening pulse would thump beneath her lips as she’d leave a trail of kisses from his jaw down to his chest—

She groaned as she drew her thoughts up short.

That was then. This is now.

* * *

Demetrius sent Zoe a warning look as her groan reached his ears.

She had to hang in there just a little longer.

This interview couldn’t fall apart now.

If he failed to gain the nation’s confidence, there was a very good chance that anarchy would ravage this very beautiful island nation his father had spent his whole life protecting. Demetrius would do all he could to keep that from ever happening to his much-loved homeland.

Most of all, he couldn’t let down his father. He knew in the grand scheme of things that it shouldn’t weigh so heavy on him, but his father hadn’t had the easiest life despite his position. When Demetrius was fifteen, his mother had been murdered in an assassination attempt. It’d fractured their family.

His twin, Alexandro, blamed himself for the murder and had assumed the role of protector. Their father had grown quiet and reserved, spending all of his time working. Demetrius had gone a bit wild, living life to its fullest. He never thought any of them would be happy again.

Then last year, his brother had led the paparazzi on a wild chase to the United States to divert attention from Demetrius’s elopement to Zoe. And his brother’s daring plan had worked...sort of. While in the States, Alex had fallen in love and married an American. Somewhere during all of this, they’d started to act like a family again—sharing meals and catching up on each other’s lives. And he couldn’t lose that. Not again.

But now being here with Zoe, he realized he’d made a huge mistake by thinking they could work side by side. His gaze strayed to her. She was answering some more questions about her profession for the reporter.

His gaze skimmed down over her, noticing on closer inspection that her clothes hung a bit loose. Had she lost weight in the time they were apart? She had been slender when he knew her. The fact that she’d lost weight was worrying. He hoped she wasn’t sick. He studied her face. She didn’t look ill.

As he continued to stare at her, he felt the draw of attraction as strong now as it had been back when they were together. Was it possible she was even more beautiful today than she had been when he'd pledged his heart to her? His gaze slipped to her full lips—

Realizing the direction of his straying thoughts, he jerked them to a halt. No matter how tempting he still found her, he refused to fall for her charms again. His foolish behavior had already cost him so much.

“We’re almost done.” The reporter clasped her hands together. “I just need a couple more candid shots for the website. Could you both move to the edge of the steps?”

While they moved into the designated positions on the top step, he chanced another glance Zoe’s way. Her lips lifted at the corners. However, her smile didn’t quite reach her brown eyes. He wasn’t about to complain. At least she was playing along.

“Can you shake hands?”

With anyone else, the request would have been simple, but Zoe was not just anyone. She was most definitely someone—someone he was over. His jaw tightened. So then why was he making such a big deal out of this?

He extended his hand to her.

There was a moment’s hesitation. Her gaze met his, but he couldn’t read what she was thinking. When her hand slipped into his, there was a jolt—no, it was more like a lightning bolt—of awareness that coursed between them.

It means nothing.

She means nothing.

It’s all in my imagination.

“Hold that pose.” The reporter turned and frowned at the camera guy. “What’s the problem? Don’t keep the prince waiting.”

The photographer waved over the reporter. With a flustered look on Ms. Russo’s face, she uttered an apology and rushed down the steps to straighten out the problem.

“Are you really planning to oversee this project personally?” Zoe’s gaze was hard and cold.

He lowered his voice to a whisper. “Why wouldn’t I? This is my project. Surely you know that.”

“I know that they were bandying your name about when I was hired, but I figured they were just trying to impress me. I had no idea you could actually be persuaded to take part in this venture.”

He wanted to take offense. He wanted to assure her that he was always on top of things. But then again, not so long ago, he’d had his priorities all turned around. Back then, he’d only been worried about his personal happiness. Even as a teenager, he’d known that once he stepped up and took his rightful place in the monarchy that his life would not be his own. So he’d put off the inevitable as long as possible.

He kept his voice low. “Things have changed since you knew me.”

“You act like we were just strangers that passed in the night.”

Demetrius cleared his throat. Using the same voice he used when his advisors didn’t agree with him, he whispered, “This revitalization project is important. There’s a whole lot more at stake than just my reputation—”

“Sorry about that.” Ms. Russo joined them again. “My cameraman had a problem with the equipment. We need to film the part where you shake hands again.” Hesitantly they joined hands while Ms. Russo smiled. “This is great! The viewers will love it. This will definitely add a sense of hands-on attention by the prince.”

Hands-on. The words conjured up the memory of Zoe in his arms. Demetrius schooled his facial features to keep the unintended meaning of the reporter’s words from showing. He didn’t dare look at Zoe. He didn’t want to do anything to bring about a reaction in her. After all, how was he supposed to smile and relax while standing next to the one woman that he thought he could trust above all others?

“Can you look at each other?”

Demetrius reluctantly gazed at Zoe. Her gaze was closed and guarded. She was none too excited about this unexpected reunion, either. Well, good, he was more than willing to share the discomfort, although it didn't come close to the agony he'd experience after she'd run out on him.

“Good. Good.” The reporter's voice held a happy tone. Obviously she was the only one happy about this encounter. “Now could you continue to shake hands while talking about the project? We need a sound bite—one showing you two working together. A team effort.”

Demetrius cleared his throat. “*Grazie*. Your presence is appreciated.”

There was a pause and Demetrius tensed, waiting and wondering what Zoe would say.

“I'm honored to have been chosen for this very special project.”

“We are the lucky ones to have your talent to create a stunning retreat for the residents of this facility to forget about their lives—their problems—and just relax in the common rooms of this historic building.”

There was the slightest flash of emotion in Zoe's eyes, but in a blink it was gone. “I hope to live up to your expectations.”

He'd give her credit. She was keeping this professional. Then again, he could never fault Zoe for acting anything but mature and professional. Otherwise they'd have never been able to maintain a relationship that was out of sight of the paparazzi. Which left him with a question that had been nagging him since she'd left him—why hadn't she sold her story—their story—to the tabloids?

His gaze narrowed in on the woman standing before him. He didn't understand her any more now than he did before. Perhaps he understood her even less. His advisors had insisted she was holding out for a bigger payday—bigger than the check he'd insisted on sending with the annulment papers. Was that why she'd never signed and returned the papers?

He withdrew his hand and turned to the reporter. “Ms. Sarris needs to get on with her work.”

Zoe thanked both of them and turned away. Then instead of leaving, she headed inside the building. The fact she didn't use the opportunity to make a hasty escape surprised him. Then again since the night she'd walked out on him, everything she did surprised him.

CHAPTER THREE

THIS CAN'T BE HAPPENING.

It must be some sort of nightmare.

Zoe seriously considered pinching herself, but before she could put her thought into action, she heard footsteps behind her. Her pencil paused over the rough sketch she'd been making of the ballroom with notes for a tentative design.

She didn't even have to turn around to know who was behind her. It was Demetrius. What did he want now? The sure, steady steps of his dress shoes clicked over the marble floor, growing louder as he grew nearer. The footsteps stopped. He cleared his throat as though to gain her attention. Her entire body tensed.

The truth of the matter was that she owed him an explanation. It was long overdue. But this was not the time nor the place for this reunion. She didn't even know what to say to him. “Sorry” just wasn't enough. Regardless, there was no chance of ignoring him.

She leveled her shoulders and turned. “Did you need something, Your Highness?”

“You can stop with the ‘Highness’ bit, we're alone.”

Zoe's gaze darted around the room, just to be sure. She took a calming breath. “I honestly didn't expect to find you here.”

“Obviously. Your start date isn't until tomorrow. What are you doing here early?”

The easiest solution would be for her to hand in her resignation here and now. The words teetered on the tip of her tongue. But the artistic part of her didn't want to walk away from this amazing opportunity. This mansion was steeped in Old World charm and beauty. However, her feet

were poised to run from the one man in this world who could make her heart flutter with excitement with just one dark, mysterious gaze.

Fight or flight? Fight or flight?

Her spine stiffened and her chin lifted. “I wanted to be prepared for tomorrow when I meet with Mr. Belmonte.”

“Your meeting isn’t with him.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that your meeting is with me. I requested you for this job.”

Zoe’s stomach lurched. None of this made any sense. Why would he hire her with their messy history?

“By the time this job is completed, this mansion is going to be restored to its former glory. It’ll start outside with the sweeping steps and the large, white columns and continue inside with its vintage style. In this section, I want people to forget that it’s a care home and instead feel as though they’ve been transported to a tranquil place. Do you think you can deliver something like that?”

She glanced around at the peeling paint and the chipped plaster. The mansion had been downright neglected. It was hard to imagine the building being transformed into one of beauty. But she knew that it could be done.

“Of course I can do it.” Her unwavering gaze met his. “But you knew that or you wouldn’t have hired me.”

“True enough.”

“What are you really up to? And don’t tell me that you hired me out of the goodness of your heart. I won’t believe you.”

Demetrius’s dark brows rose. “If I didn’t know better, I’d swear you just implied that I’m heartless.”

“I don’t want to play word games with you.” She took a second to pull herself together, because it felt as though her world had just slipped off its axis. “What are you up to?”

“I would think that is obvious. This is a royal project and I am overseeing it from start to finish.”

“Not that. I want to know why you hired me of all people.”

“Does it matter?”

“It does.” There was something more—something he wasn’t saying.

The man standing before her wasn’t the same man she’d married—the man who’d swept her off her feet was sweet and fun. His biggest worry back then had been wondering what he’d do for entertainment the next day. She didn’t understand how someone in his position could have lived his life so carefree, but obviously it’d all caught up with him. Because this man with his lips pressed together into an uncompromising line while staring directly at her meant business—of that she was certain.

He crossed his muscular arms. “Perhaps hiring you was a mistake—”

“No—” She bit back her next words but it was too late. Demetrius’s brows lifted at her sudden outburst. “I mean, we have an agreement. Or at least I do with Mr. Belmonte.”

“Agreements are made to be broken.”

“But it’s in writing.”

“And you didn’t think that I would leave myself a loophole—a way out if the need arose?”

Who is this man? And what had happened to the laid-back Demetrius?

Her gut told her to get out now. That she was getting in far too deep with a man who still had a hold on her heart. But what kind of daughter would that make her? This was her chance to make the remainder of her mother’s life better.

And to complicate matters further, she had no job to return to. She’d already resigned from her position as interior designer for the island’s most prominent and discriminating furniture store. And most important, this job paid well—well enough to pay her mother’s bills.

Zoe was stuck.

“You still haven’t answered my question. Why did you hire me?” She watched him carefully, not sure what sort of reaction to expect.

“I wanted the best for this job. And you are the best on the island.”

Was he serious? He thought she was the best? A warmth swirled in her chest and rose to warm her cheeks. Their gazes connected and held. Her heart thudded harder, faster. She refused to acknowledge that his words meant anything to her. She was over him. Past him.

“So you just expect us to work together like...like nothing ever happened?”

* * *

A loud bang echoed through the expansive ballroom.

Demetrius’s body tensed.

“What was that?” Zoe whispered.

He didn’t know but he certainly intended to find out. He peered around the various drop cloths, plaster buckets and scaffolding. “Who’s there?”

A movement caught his attention. Across the room, a worker in a yellow hard hat straightened from where he’d dropped a load of lumber. He glanced their way. “Hey, you aren’t supposed to be in here. This is a designated hard hat area.”

Demetrius nodded his understanding. “We were just leaving.”

“See that you do. I don’t want to have to throw you out.” The man turned and walked away.

Obviously the man hadn’t recognized him with the shadows and the distance. That was all right with Demetrius. Sometimes he got tired of being the prince, of posing for pictures and answering questions. Sometimes he just wanted to be plain old Demetrius. He’d been able to pull that off not so long ago when he was partying and showing up in places most inappropriate for royalty. But those times were over and not to be repeated.

Zoe laughed. The sound startled him. It’d been so long since he’d seen her happy. In the beginning, their relationship had been an easy and relaxed one. He missed those times. He hadn’t relaxed like that since—

No. He wasn’t going down memory lane. That was then. This is now.

Everything had changed over the past year. He refused to be swayed by the way the gold specks in her eyes twinkled when she smiled or how her cheeks filled with color when she was paid a compliment. He was immune to it all.

Zoe turned her attention back to him. “I guess he didn’t realize who he was threatening to toss out of here.”

“The man was just doing his job and making sure that no one is injured on his watch.”

“Then I guess we better hurry.” She turned and snapped a couple more pictures of the room with her phone. “I’ve already been given the dimensions of the rooms as well as the architectural drawings.” She glanced around again. “And now with these photos, I should be able to get started. We should get going before that man comes back.”

Demetrius stepped in front of her. “Not so fast. We need to establish guidelines for our working arrangement.”

“That’s easy. When I have some sketches, I’ll contact you.”

When she once again started around him, he reached out and grasped her wrist. “That won’t work. I want a more hands-on approach.”

She yanked her arm away and glared at him. “Surely you aren’t proposing to look over my shoulder?”

“That’s not how I would have worded it, but so be it.”

Zoe planted her hands on her hips. “I don’t work well under close supervision. I need room to do my research and then I start sketching and playing with colors. It isn’t going to be an overnight project. It will take me time.”

“I understand that. As long as you understand that you’ll need to keep your design plans a secret from everyone—even your family and friends. The big reveal will be the week of the Royal Christmas Ball. Large contributors will be invited to wow them into donating more funding for more renovations in the neighborhood. The following day, Ms. Russo will be airing another segment on her television show giving viewers before and after shots of the mansion.”

Zoe nodded her understanding. “Trust me. No one will see my designs. When I have something ready for you to see, we can meet in the village at the *caffè* house.”

“That’s impossible. My daily presence in the village, as well as the security detail, would be far too disruptive to businesses.”

A frown pulled at her beautiful face. “Fine. What do you suggest?”

Demetrius glanced over, noticing the workman had yet to return, but his gut told him the man would be back soon. They had to make this brief. “I think our best solution is to work at the palace.”

“The palace?” Zoe’s face noticeably paled.

“Offices have been set up there for the architect, the PR consultant and others. It will be very handy having all of the key people under one roof.”

“But I don’t have a car.”

He hadn’t thought of that, but if that was her only objection, he’d find a solution. “I’ll send my car for you.”

Her mouth opened, but then she closed it as though she’d run out of protests.

Good. Another problem solved. “Now that we have that straightened out, let’s get out of here before that guy comes back. I don’t relish the idea of facing him down.”

The worry lines smoothed on Zoe’s face. “You don’t have anything to worry about. I remember how you’d visit the gym each morning, not to mention your evening run along the beach. I’m guessing you still do both.”

“I do. When time allows.” Demetrius’s shoulders straightened. Had she just paid him a compliment? “Still, I prefer to keep a low-key presence.”

“Since when? You used to love to be the playboy and you didn’t care who photographed you.”

“Things certainly have changed since those days.”

She glanced away. “I guess they have.”

Everything had changed, apparently for both of them. And the more time he spent with her, the more he wondered about those dark smudges under her eyes that her makeup didn’t quite cover. Something was keeping her up at night. But what?

CHAPTER FOUR

WHAT HAD SHE been thinking?

Agreeing to work side by side with her ex.

And at the royal palace of all places.

The next morning, Zoe muttered to herself as she tried on outfit after outfit. The pile of discarded clothes on her bed was growing. What did one wear to the palace? Business attire? Nah, too stiff. A summer dress? Too casual. Nothing seemed fitting for the occasion.

And then she recalled that she wasn’t an invited guest. She was the help. She’d probably be ushered in the back entrance and kept out of sight. With that in mind, she dressed as she normally would for a consultation—a short purple skirt, a white blouse and a pair of heels.

Up until now, she’d carefully avoided Demetrius. In some ways, it seemed like forever since that horrible day at the palace when her whole house of cards had come tumbling down, and in other ways it seemed like just the other day. Demetrius had no idea how much that decision had cost her—she’d sacrificed her heart that night. And her life had never been the same since then.

Leaving had been the only way she’d known to care for her mother and to protect the prince. With Zoe gone from his life, he could move on. He could find someone else to be his perfect princess

—someone whose DNA didn't have a fifty-fifty chance of inheriting the blueprint for early onset familial Alzheimer's disease.

In the beginning, she'd let herself get so caught up in his attention—in the belief that their love could overcome anything. In the end, she'd learned the harsh reality of life.

Love couldn't fix everything.

If it could, her mother wouldn't be ill. Her mother wouldn't be fading away right before her very eyes.

As it was, her mother had just gone to stay with a family friend who had a house by the sea—the community where her mother had grown up. Her mother insisted that she wanted to go. She'd referred to it as her final vacation as the sea had always brought her mother great peace. The trip couldn't have come at a better time. It provided Zoe with a chance to make the most of this amazing opportunity.

The buzz of her phone drew Zoe out of her thoughts. The number was blocked. She could only figure that it must be the driver sent to pick her up. She stabbed her finger at the keypad and an unfamiliar male voice came over the line. It was indeed the driver. He was waiting for her in the back alley. It was obvious Demetrius didn't want to draw attention to her comings and goings. That was fine with her.

Most people in the building walked to work, making it possible for her to slip down the back stairs unnoticed. She entered the alley to find an unmarked black sedan with heavily tinted windows.

The driver opened the door for her. She climbed inside and leaned back against the cool leather seat. It was hard to believe that once upon a time this lifestyle had been hers. Sure it'd been brief—quite brief. But for a moment, it had been magical.

As the sedan rolled through downtown Bellacitta, she stared out at the colorful city. Though it was only November, the shops were already decked out in festive red and silver decorations. The lampposts were adorned with colorful wreaths. A sense of kindness and compassion was in the air. Zoe and her mother had always enjoyed this time of the year. Any other year, their Christmas tree would already be trimmed, supplies would be on hand for Christmas cookies and carols would fill their home. A deep sadness filled Zoe because the Christmases she once knew were now nothing more than memories, and the future looked bleak.

When the car rolled to a stop at an intersection, Zoe got the strangest feeling that someone was staring at her. She glanced out the window. She didn't see anyone at first. Then at last her gaze rested on a man—the creepy reporter from the mansion. She froze.

He was standing on the sidewalk not more than a few feet away. He was staring at her. His dark eyes narrowed. Heavy scruff covered his squared jaw as his thin lips pressed into an unyielding line. The little hairs on Zoe's arms lifted. When he raised his camera, Zoe ducked back in her seat before realizing that the dark tint on the windows would shield her. It wasn't until the car was in motion again that she let out a pent-up breath. She rubbed her arms, easing away the goose bumps. At least she was going someplace he wouldn't be able to follow—of that she was certain.

As the car exited the city, she wondered what the reporter was after—something specific or was he just digging for a juicy nugget. She told herself to relax. Sooner or later, the man would give up and move on to another story. She just hoped it was sooner rather than later.

Zoe glanced out the window as they passed by the outskirts of the historic village of Portolino with its stone walkways, quaint shops and renowned craftsmen. It was a much slower pace than the city life of Bellacitta, but it held its own charms. Caught up in the throes of life, she hadn't been there since she was a child. If there was time someday after work, she wanted to visit the village, but the only way to do that was on foot. She'd have to remember to bring more sensible footwear.

The car slowed as it made a right turn. They wound their way along the long palace drive with its colorful foliage and the shadows of the palm trees. The last time she'd been driven up this driveway, it had been under the guise of moonlight. Today the sunshine was bright and cheery. This time it felt

so different. Good in some ways. But then she glanced to her right, noticing the empty seat next to her. And not so good in other ways.

When the enormity of the palace came into view, the breath caught in her throat. Sure, she'd seen pictures of it all her life, but with it being tucked back in away from public view, she'd never had an opportunity to view it in the daylight. It was so impressive—reminding her once again that Demetrius didn't come from the same world as her.

She sat up straighter, taking in the palace's warm tan, coral and turquoise tones. The place was simply stunning. The palace's subtle curves and colorful turrets reflected an island flair that was Mirraccino. Sure the island nation had evolved with technology and such, but they also kept with traditions as much as possible. And she loved that Demetrius wanted that Old World feel for the mansion.

To her utter surprise, the car rolled to a stop at the front entrance. An enormous wooden door with brass fixtures swung open. An older gentleman in a black-and-white tux strode toward the car. She was so struck by this surreal moment as he opened the door for her that she failed to move. She'd never expected to be welcomed back here after things had ended badly between her and Demetrius. And though they weren't rolling out the red carpet for her, this was more than she'd ever imagined.

The butler stood aside. "Welcome, Miss Sarris."

Coming to her senses, she stood. "You were expecting me?"

The man nodded. "Prince Demetrius asked that you be escorted to the suite of offices reserved for the South Shore project. He said to tell you that he has been delayed, but he will catch up with you shortly."

She tried to ignore the disappointment that consumed her. It wasn't like Demetrius had invited her to the palace to relive the good old days. No, this was business, pure and simple. Then again, nothing was simple when it came to her ex—nothing at all.

She was guided inside where her heels clicked on the marble floor of the spacious entryway. The sound reverberated off the ornate walls and high ceiling. There were a couple of ladders and a tall pencil Christmas tree. Boxes of decorations littered the floor. It appeared she and her mother weren't the only ones to decorate early.

Zoe would have loved a bit of time to look around, but she was briskly ushered away—down a long hallway, around a corner and down a flight of steps. They turned another corner where the palace sprang to life in a flurry of activity. There were people holding electronic tablets, *caffè* cups and papers, hustling through the hallway. Everyone smiled and greeted her. They were definitely a very friendly bunch.

A smile tugged at Zoe's lips. Maybe this working arrangement wouldn't be so bad, after all. Especially if Demetrius was off attending to his princely duties. In that moment, she realized she'd been worried about nothing. As busy as this place was, she doubted she'd see Demetrius much at all.

"You'll be working in here." The butler stood aside to let her enter.

"*Grazie.*"

"You are welcome, ma'am. I'm sure someone will be along to answer any questions you might have. Do you need anything before I go?"

She shook her head. "No."

"Very well, ma'am."

Alone in the room, she glanced around impressed by the enormity of it. The walls were painted a warm cream white. Detailed crown molding framed the ornate ceiling with a crystal chandelier. This was all for her?

She'd never been in an office so steeped in history. She glanced at one of the garden paintings on the wall. She'd bet it was older than her and worth far more than she earned in an entire year.

"You must be Zoe," came a young female voice.

Zoe spun around to find a pretty blonde standing in the doorway, wearing a friendly smile. “Hi. That’s me. Did you ever see an office like this? It’s amazing.”

“I guess so if you like old stuff.”

Old stuff? Try antiques. Heirlooms. Rare treasures. “Are you part of the palace staff?”

The young woman shook her head and her bobbed hair swished around her chin. “I was hired to work on the South Shore project.” She stepped farther into the room. “My name’s Annabelle.”

“Nice to meet you. Looks like we’ll be working together.”

“I’m looking forward to it. If you have any questions, feel free to ask. I probably won’t know the answer, but I’ll be able to point you toward the right person to ask.”

“You’re here. Good.” Both women turned at the sound of Demetrius’s voice.

“I’ll let you get to work.” Annabelle made a hasty exit.

Zoe wished she could follow her new friend. Suddenly, this very spacious office seemed to shrink considerably. Thankfully Demetrius appeared to be a very busy man. So once he welcomed her, he’d be off to another meeting, she hoped.

Demetrius cleared his throat. “Sorry I’m late. I didn’t mean to intrude.”

“You didn’t.” She couldn’t help but notice he looked immaculate with his short hair combed into submission and his tailored suit hugging his muscled shoulders and broad chest. Her heart kicked up its pace a notch or two. She assured herself that it was nothing more than nervousness. She swallowed hard. “We were just introducing ourselves. Annabelle seems really nice.”

Demetrius’s brows rose as though her admission caught him by surprise. “Annabelle’s great. She’s the daughter of the Duke of Halencia.”

The news that Annabelle was an aristocrat dampened Zoe’s excitement over having an ally behind the palace walls. For some reason she’d been thinking her newfound friend was just like her—a commoner.

“I’m surprised she’d want to work here.” Zoe uttered her thoughts without realizing how it might sound.

Demetrius cleared his throat. “It’s an arrangement between the duke and my father.”

An arrangement? Could it be a marriage arrangement? Jealousy swift and sharp stabbed at Zoe’s heart making the breath catch in her throat. Not that she had any right to feel anything about Demetrius moving on with his life. Now that their marriage had been annulled—erased—wiped clean—he was free to do as he pleased. This is what she wanted, wasn’t it?

Forcing herself to act as though this bit of news didn’t bother her, Zoe said, “I look forward to working with her.”

“Good.” He walked over to the larger of the two desks. When he noticed that she’d followed him, he stopped and turned. “Um. This is my desk. Yours is over there.”

“You mean we’re sharing an office?”

His dark brows rose. “Is that going to be a problem?”

The professional part of her knew the answer was supposed to be no, but her scarred heart said otherwise. It sounded like she had a frog in her throat when she choked out, “No. No problem at all.”

A puzzled expression came over his face. “We ran out of offices. And with you being the newest member of the team, it was either fit you in here or move you to another wing by yourself.”

She swallowed hard. “If I’m in your way, I don’t mind working elsewhere.”

He shook his head. “I’m hardly ever in here, so it won’t be a problem.”

She supposed his frequent absence was some small consolation.

Zoe moved to the other side of the room and settled her laptop and day planner on the desk where she noticed a vase of fresh cut flowers. Red, white and purple blossoms beckoned to her. She leaned forward and inhaled their perfumed scent.

All the while she could feel Demetrius's gaze following her every movement. She needed to show him—show herself—that she was over him. She could be just as professional as him—even if his mere presence could still make her stomach shiver.

She stepped around the desk and crossed the great divide. She stopped in front of his massive carved cherry desk and laced her fingers together.

He glanced up from his computer monitor. “Did you need something?”

“I wanted to thank you for this opportunity. I won't let you down.” His eyes reflected a mixed reaction. Perhaps she could have worded it better. “I also wanted to tell you that I won't let the past come between us.”

His dark brows drew together as he shushed her. With long, swift strides, he moved to the door. He noiselessly pushed it closed before turning back to her. “If I didn't think you could be professional, you wouldn't be here.”

She didn't know whether to be complimented or insulted. “*Grazie.*”

“As for the other matter, we do need to talk. We have some unresolved business to address. But I don't want to get into it here. It'd be too easy to be overheard. And I don't want rumors to start.”

“Neither do I.” But obviously for different reasons than him. “You don't have to worry, Annabelle won't hear anything about the past from me.”

“I hope not. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a meeting with the contractor.” And with that he swung open the door and set off down the hallway, leaving her to wonder what his cryptic comment had meant.

What unresolved business?

CHAPTER FIVE

“HOW'S IT COMING?”

Demetrius strolled into the office late the next afternoon. He couldn't help but notice how Zoe jumped. He hadn't meant to startle her.

“Good.” Her voice said otherwise. “Well, as good as can be expected at this stage.”

“I just visited the work site and the construction of the residential rooms on the backside of the mansion is moving ahead of schedule. Soon you'll be able to get in there and do your thing.”

A frown pulled at her full, lush lips, but she didn't say anything. Things definitely weren't going as well as she'd like him to believe. Maybe she wasn't up to the task, after all. There were still those dark smudges beneath her eyes. Something was most definitely keeping her up at night. But what?

His immediate instinct was to go to her—to rectify whatever was troubling her. He took a step forward, then hesitated. What was he thinking? Obviously he wasn't—at least not clearly. Her problems were no longer any of his concern. And that had been her choice. Not his.

She glanced up at him, peering over her laptop. “Did you need something else?”

He cleared his throat. “I'd like to see what direction you're taking the project.”

Her mouth gaped, but nothing came out. He couldn't help but notice the pink gloss shimmering on her lips. His thoughts rolled back in time, remembering how her kisses were always sweeter than berries. His body stiffened. With determined effort he focused his mind back on the only thing that mattered—the only thing he could count on—work.

“Perhaps I could see what you've been able to do so far on the computer.” His words eased the awkward silence.

“I...I don't have anything but some rough outlines.”

“That's okay. It's just with all of my meetings, we haven't been able to talk much.”

There was a rebuttal reflected in her eyes, but in a blink it was gone. With a shrug, she stood up. “Be my guest.”

He wasn't sure by the stilted tone of her voice whether she would be open to his feedback or if she'd just give him lip service and then disregard his input. He wanted to believe they could set

aside their differences in order to make this important project a success. They were, after all, both professionals.

He took a seat, surprised that she was doing all of her work on the small laptop when he'd provided her with a computer and a large-screen monitor, which was much easier on the eyes. Then he noticed that she had specialized software. He should have expected that, but he'd noticed how his thoughts became severely distracted around her.

She stood off to the side. "You have to realize that what you're looking at are some rough sketches. There are no details. I haven't had a chance to refine them."

"I understand."

She showed him how to navigate the software. As she leaned over his shoulder, he caught a whiff of her perfume. The alluring scent was the same as what she wore when they were together.

Concentrate on the pictures.

Minutes passed, and then she asked, "Well, what do you think?"

"I don't know." It was the truth.

"Don't tell me you hate all of the themes."

He flipped back and forth between the three layouts of the mansion's ballroom that she'd done up. The first screen cobbled together garden-themed pictures with lots of greens, pinks and yellows. The second screen contained images more in line with ancient Roman ruins utilizing the idea of the large columns on the front porch as well as adding some Greek and Roman statues. The last screen pulled together various Mediterranean aspects from the blues of the sea to the green of the palms.

"Say something. The suspense is torture."

He'd never seen her so anxious. Under different circumstances, he might have turned this into a bit of fun, but the time for teasing and light banter had long passed them by.

"They all have aspects that I really like." He flipped through the images once again. "Can you combine them?"

"What?" She moved to stand on the other side of the desk in order to face him. "You're not serious, are you? They're too different. It would be a mess."

He raked his fingers through his hair. "I never said that I was any good at decorating. That's what I have you for."

She crossed her arms and leveled a steady stare at him. "And you're the one who insisted that we work on this together. You went on and on about how you had to approve everything."

He got to his feet. "Fine. I pick the garden theme. Wait. No. The sea one."

She waited as though sensing he would change his mind yet again. "You're sure about the sea setting?"

He thought for a moment and then nodded. "I think it's the most relaxing of all them. If the residents aren't capable of making an outing to the seaside, then we can bring it to them."

"Okay. Then we need to pick out a color scheme." She pulled up a few color combinations. "I'd like to get some samples up on the walls as soon as possible to get a real feel for the shades before we commit to a color scheme."

However, as she leaned over his shoulder to type something in the computer, one of her barrel-roll curls landed on his shoulder. A driving need grew in him to wrap her silky strands around his finger. If he were to turn ever so slightly—if he were to reach out to her and draw her closer—she'd land in his lap.

As though in a trance, he reached out. His fingers slid down over the soft, smooth strands. What would it hurt to taste her sweetness again? He started at the end of her curl. His finger and thumb worked together wrapping her hair inch by inch around his digit.

Her surprised gaze met his. His heart pounded in his chest. But there was something more in her gaze. Interest. Excitement. Desire.

The fact that he could still turn her on sent the blood roaring through his veins, drowning out his common sense. Long-denied desire drove him onward. One thing that couldn't be denied was that they had chemistry. They should have a warning sign—combustible when mixed.

With each twist of her hair, her face moved closer. He would show her what she'd given up. He'd remind her that all of this could have been hers if only she'd believed in them—if only she'd loved him.

A noise in the hallway caused her to jump back. He reluctantly relinquished his hold on her hair, allowing her to straighten. He tried to tell himself that it was for the best, but a sense of regret churned in his gut.

He cleared his throat as he tried to remember where they'd left off. “What about this gray-blue color? I like it.”

There was an unmistakable pause before Zoe spoke. “That is a bit dark and you have to realize the darker the shade, the smaller the space will appear. Why don't you see what you like on this page?” She adjusted the computer so that it displayed dozens of much lighter shades of blue. “Trust me. They'll appear darker on the wall.”

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