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USA TODAY  
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CATHERINE  
MANN

ESCAPING WITH THE BILLIONAIRE

USA TODAY  
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OLIVIA  
GATES

TWO CLASSIC ROMANCE STORIES

Catherine Mann

**Escaping with the Billionaire: The  
Maverick Prince / Billionaire, M.D.**

«HarperCollins»

## **Mann C.**

Escaping with the Billionaire: The Maverick Prince / Billionaire, M.D.  
/ C. Mann — «HarperCollins»,

Two fan-favorite romance stories from USA Today bestselling author Catherine Mann and Olivia Gates. *The Maverick Prince* He's known as Tony Medina, Texas shipping magnate. But then his royal heritage is splashed across the tabloids, and his lover, Shannon Crawford, is furious! Tony whisks her away to his secret island retreat, claiming he's guarding her from the paparazzi. But his true goal is to win Shannon back...by any means necessary. *Billionaire, M.D.* Vowing to care for and protect Cybele, a pregnant widow, following an accident, Dr. Rodrigo Valderrama takes her to his palatial seafront estate. He also vows to never let her know his true feelings. But even with all his brilliant skills, he fears he won't be able to keep Cybele if she discovers his role in her pregnancy.

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**The Maverick Prince**  
**Catherine Mann**  
**Billionaire, M.D.**  
**Olivia Gates**



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### **The Maverick Prince**

USA TODAY bestselling author Catherine Mann has books in print in more than twenty countries with titles from Harlequin Desire, Harlequin Romantic Suspense and HQN Books, among others. A five-time RITA® Award finalist, she has won both the RITA® Award and the Booksellers' Best Award. Catherine resides in Florida with her aviator husband, their four children and a menagerie of pets. For more information, visit [catherinemann.com](http://catherinemann.com).

Look for more books from Catherine Mann in Harlequin Desire—the ultimate destination for powerful, passionate romance! There are six new Harlequin Desire titles available every month. Check one out today!

To my favorite little princesses and princes—Megan, Frances, James and Zach. Thank you for inviting Aunt Cathy to your prince and princess tea parties. The snack cakes and Sprite were absolutely magical!

## Prologue

GlobalIntruder.com

Exclusive: For Immediate Release

Royalty Revealed!

Do you have a prince living next door? Quite possibly!

Courtesy of a positive identification made by one of the GlobalIntruder.com's very own photo-journalists, we've successfully landed the scoop of the year. The deposed Medina monarchy has not, as was rumored, set up shop in a highly secured fortress in Argentina. The three Medina heirs—with their billions—have been living under assumed names and rubbing elbows with everyday Americans for decades.

We hear the sexy baby of the family, Antonio, is already taken in Texas by his waitress girlfriend Shannon Crawford. She'd better watch her back now that word is out about her secret shipping magnate!

Meanwhile, never fear, ladies. There are still two single and studly Medina men left. Our sources reveal that Duarte dwells in his plush resort in Martha's Vineyard. Carlos—a surgeon, no less—resides in Tacoma. Wonder if he makes house calls?

No word yet on their father, King Enrique Medina, former ruler of San Rinaldo, an island off the coast of Spain. But our best reporters are hot on the trail.

For the latest update on how to nab a prince, check back in with the GlobalIntruder.com. And remember, you heard it here first!

## Chapter 1

Galveston Bay, Texas

“King takes the queen.” Antonio Medina declared his victory and raked in the chips, having bluffed with a simple high-card hand in Texas Hold’Em.

Ignoring an incoming call on his iPhone, he stacked his winnings. He didn’t often have time for poker since his fishing charter company went global, but joining backroom games at his pal Vernon’s Galveston Bay Grille had become a more frequent occurrence of late. Since Shannon. His gaze snapped to the long skinny windows on either side of the door leading out to the main dining area where she worked.

No sign of Shannon’s slim body, winding her way through the brass, crystal and white linen of the five-star restaurant. Disappointment chewed at him in spite of his win.

A cell phone chime cut the air, then a second right afterward. Not his either time, although the noise still forced his focus back to the private table while two of Vernon Wolfe’s cronies pressed the ignore button, cutting the ringing short. Vernon’s poker pals were all about forty years senior to Antonio. But the old shrimp-boat captain turned restaurateur had saved Antonio’s bacon back when he’d been a teen. So if Vernon beckoned, Antonio did his damndest to show. The fact that Shannon also worked here provided extra oomph to the request.

Vernon creaked back in the leather chair, also disregarding his cell phone currently crooning “Son of a Sailor” from his belt. “Ballsy move holding with just a king, Tony,” he said, his voice perpetually raspy from years of shouting on deck. His face still sported a year-round tan, eyes raccoon ringed from sunglasses. “I thought Glenn had a royal flush with his queen and jack showing.”

“I was taught to bluff by the best.” Antonio—or Tony Castillo as he was known these days—grinned.

A smile was more disarming than a scowl. He always smiled so nobody knew what he was thinking. Not that even his best grin had gained him forgiveness from Shannon after their fight last weekend.

Resisting the urge to frown, Tony stacked his chips on the scarred wooden table Vernon had pried from his boat before docking himself permanently at the restaurant. “Your pal Glenn needs to bluff better.”

Glenn—a coffee addict—chugged his java faster when bluffing. For some reason no one else seemed to notice as the high-priced attorney banged back his third brew laced with Irish whiskey. He then simply shrugged, loosened his silk tie and hooked it on the back of the chair, settling in for the next round.

Vernon swept up the played cards, flipping the king of hearts between his fingers until the cell stopped singing vintage Jimmy Buffett. “Keep winning and they’re not going to let me deal you in anymore.”

Tony went through the motions of laughing along, but he knew he wasn’t going anywhere. This was his world now. He’d built a life of his own and wanted nothing to do with the Medina name. He was Tony Castillo now. His father had honored that. Until recently.

For the past six months, his deposed king of a dad had sent message after message demanding his presence at the secluded island compound off the coast of Florida. Tony had left that gilded prison the second he’d turned eighteen and never looked back. If Enrique was as sick as he claimed, then their problems would have to be sorted out in heaven...or more likely in somewhere hotter even than Texas.

While October meant autumn chills for folks like his two brothers, he preferred the lengthened summers in Galveston Bay. The air conditioner still cranked in the redbrick waterside restaurant in the historic district.

Muffled live music from a flamenco guitarist drifted through the wall along with the drone of dining clientele. Business was booming for Vernon. Tony made sure of that. Vernon had given Antonio a job at eighteen when no one else would trust a kid with sketchy ID. Fourteen years and many millions of dollars later, Tony figured it was only fair some of the proceeds from the shipping business he'd built should buy the aging shrimp-boat captain a retirement plan.

Vernon nudged the deck toward Glenn to cut, then dealt the next hand. Glenn shoved his buzzing BlackBerry beside his spiked coffee and thumbed his cards up for a peek.

Tony reached for his...and stopped...tipping his ear toward the sound from outside the door. A light laugh cut through the clanging dishes and fluttering strum of the Spanish guitar. Her laugh. Finally. The simple sound made him ache after a week without her.

His gaze shot straight to the door again, bracketed by two windows showcasing the dining area. Shannon stepped in view of the left lengthy pane, pausing to punch in an order at the servers' station. She squinted behind her cat-eye glasses, the retros giving her a naughty schoolmarm look that never failed to send his libido surging.

Light from the globed sconces glinted on her pale blond hair. She wore her long locks in a messy updo, as much a part of her work uniform as the knee-length black skirt and form-fitting tuxedo vest. She looked sexy as hell—and exhausted.

Damn it all, he would help her without hesitation. Just last weekend he'd suggested as much when she'd pulled on her clothes after they'd made love at his Bay Shore mansion. She'd shut him down faster than the next heartbeat. In fact, she hadn't spoken to him or returned his calls since.

Stubborn, sexy woman. It wasn't like he'd offered to set her up as his mistress, for crying out loud. He was only trying to help her and her three-year-old son. She always vowed she would do anything for Kolby.

Mentioning that part hadn't gone well for him, either.

Her lips had pursed tight, but her eyes behind those sexy black glasses had told him she wanted to throw his offer back in his face. His ears still rang from the slamming door when she'd walked out. Most women he knew would have jumped at the prospect of money or expensive gifts. Not Shannon. If anything, she seemed put off by his wealth. It had taken him two months to persuade her just to have coffee with him. Then two more months to work his way into bed with her. And after nearly four weeks of mind-bending sex, he was still no closer to understanding her.

Okay, so he'd built a fortune from Galveston Bay being one of the largest importers of seafood. Luck had played a part by landing him here in the first place. He'd simply been looking for a coastal community that reminded him of home.

His real home, off the coast of Spain. Not the island fortress his father had built off the U.S. The one he'd escaped the day he'd turned eighteen and swapped his last name from Medina to Castillo. The new surname had been plucked from one of the many branches twiggling off his regal family tree. Tony Castillo had vowed never to return, a vow he'd kept.

And he didn't even want to think about how spooked Shannon would be if she knew the well-kept secret of his royal heritage. Not that the secret was his to share.

Vernon tapped the scarred wooden table in front of him. "Your phone's buzzing again. We can hold off on this hand while you take the call."

Tony thumbed the ignore button on his iPhone without looking. He only disregarded the outside world for two people, Shannon and Vernon. "It's about the Salinas Shrimp deal. They need to sweat for another hour before we settle on the bottom line."

Glenn rolled his coffee mug between his palms. "So when we don't hear back from you, we'll all know you hit the ignore button."

"Never," Tony responded absently, tucking the device back inside his suit coat. More and more he looked forward to Shannon's steady calm at the end of a hectic day.

Vernon's phone chimed again—Good God, what was up with all the interruptions?—this time rumbling with Marvin Gaye's "Let's Get It On."

The grizzled captain slapped down his cards. "That's my wife. Gotta take this one." Bluetooth glowing in his ear, he shot to his feet and tucked into a corner for semi-privacy. "Yeah, sugar?"

Since Vernon had just tied the knot for the first time seven months ago, the guy acted like a twenty-year-old newlywed. Tony walled off flickering thoughts of his own parents' marriage, not too hard since there weren't that many to remember. His mother had died when he was five.

Vernon inhaled sharply. Tony looked up. His old mentor's face paled under a tan so deep it almost seemed tattooed. What the hell?

"Tony." Vernon's voice went beyond raspy, like the guy had swallowed ground glass. "I think you'd better check those missed messages."

"Is something wrong?" he asked, already reaching for his iPhone.

"You'll have to tell us that," Vernon answered without once taking his raccoonlike eyes off Tony. "Actually, you can skip the messages and just head straight for the internet."

"Where?" He tapped through the menu.

"Anywhere." Vernon sank back into his chair like an anchor thudding to the bottom of the ocean floor. "It's headlining everywhere. You won't miss it."

His iPhone connected to the internet and displayed the top stories—

Royalty Revealed!

Medina Monarchy Exposed!

Blinking fast, he stared in shock at the last thing he expected, but the outcome his father had always feared most. One heading at a time, his family's cover was peeled away until he settled on the last in the list.

Meet the Medina Mistress!

The insane speed of viral news...His gaze shot straight to the windows separating him from the waiters' station, where seconds ago he'd seen Shannon.

Sure enough, she still stood with her back to him. He wouldn't have much time. He had to talk to her before she finished tapping in her order or tabulating a bill.

Tony shot to his feet, his chair scraping loudly in the silence as Vernon's friends all checked their messages. Reaching for the brass handle, he kept his eyes locked on the woman who turned him inside out with one touch of her hand on his bare flesh, the simple brush of her hair across his chest until he forgot about staying on guard. Foreboding crept up his spine. His instincts had served him well over the years—steering him through multimillion-dollar business decisions, even warning him of a frayed shrimp net inching closer to snag his feet.

And before all that? The extra sense had powered his stride as he'd raced through the woods, running from rebels overthrowing San Rinaldo's government. Rebels who hadn't thought twice about shooting at kids, even a five-year-old.

Or murdering their mother.

The Medina cover was about more than privacy. It was about safety. While his family had relocated to a U.S. island after the coup, they could never let down their guard. And damn it all, he'd selfishly put Shannon in the crosshairs simply because he had to have her in his bed.

Tony clasped her shoulders and turned her around. Only to stop short.

Her beautiful blue eyes wide with horror said it all. And if he'd been in doubt? The cell phone clutched in Shannon's hand told him the rest.

She already knew.

\* \* \*

She didn't want to know.

The internet rumor her son's babysitter had read over the phone had to be a media mistake. As did the five follow-up articles she'd found in her own ten-second search with her cell's internet service.

The blogosphere could bloom toxic fiction in minutes, right? People could say whatever they wanted, make a fortune off click-throughs and then retract the erroneous story the next day. Tony's touch on her shoulders was so familiar and stirring he simply couldn't be a stranger. Even now her body warmed at the feel of his hands until she swayed.

But then hadn't she made the very same mistake with her dead husband, buying into his facade because she wanted it to be true?

Damn it, Tony wasn't Nolan. All of this would be explained away and she could go back to her toe-curling affair with Tony. Except they were already in the middle of a fight over trying to give her money—an offer that made her skin crawl. And if he was actually a prince?

She swallowed hysterical laughter. Well, he'd told her that he had money to burn and it could very well be he'd meant that on a scale far grander than she could have ever imagined.

“Breathe,” her ex-lover commanded.

“Okay, okay, okay,” she chanted on each gasp of air, tapping her glasses more firmly in place in hopes the dots in front of her eyes would fade. “I'm okay.”

Now that her vision cleared she had a better view of her place at the center of the restaurant's attention. And when had Tony started edging her toward the door? Impending doom welled inside her as she realized the local media would soon descend.

“Good, steady now, in and out.” His voice didn't sound any different.

But it also didn't sound Texan. Or southern. Or even northern for that matter, as if he'd worked to stamp out any sense of regionality from himself. She tried to focus on the timbre that so thoroughly strummed her senses when they made love.

“Tony, please say we're going to laugh over this misunderstanding later.”

He didn't answer. His square jaw was set and serious as he looked over her shoulder, scanning. She found no signs of her carefree lover, even though her fingers carried the memory of how his dark hair curled around her fingers. His wealth and power had been undeniable from the start in his clothes and lifestyle, but most of all in his proud carriage. Now she took new note of his aristocratic jaw and cheekbones. Such a damn handsome and charming man. She'd allowed herself to be wowed. Seduced by his smile.

She'd barely come to grips with dating a rich guy, given all the bad baggage that brought up of her dead husband. A crooked sleaze. She'd been dazzled by Nolan's glitzy world, learning too late it was financed by a Ponzi scheme.

The guilt of those destroyed lives squeezed the breath from her lungs all over again. If not for her son, she might very well have curled inside herself and given up after Nolan took his own life. But she would hold strong for Kolby.

“Answer me,” she demanded, hoping.

“This isn't the place to talk.”

Not reassuring and, oh God, why did Tony still have the power to hurt her? Anger punched through the pain. “How long does it take to say damned rumor?”

He slid an arm around her shoulders, tucking her to his side. “Let's find somewhere more private.”

“Tell me now.” She pulled back from the lure of his familiar scent, minty patchouli and sandalwood, the smell of exotic pleasures.

Tony—Antonio—Prince Medina—whoever the hell he was—ducked his head closer to hers. “Shannon, do you really want to talk here where anyone can listen? The world's going to intrude on our town soon enough.”

Tears burned behind her eyes, the room going blurry even with her glasses on. “Okay, we'll find a quiet place to discuss this.”

He backed her toward the kitchen. Her legs and his synched up in step, her hips following his instinctively, as if they'd danced together often...and more. Eyes and whispers followed them the

entire way. Did everyone already know? Cell phones sang from pockets and vibrated on tabletops as if Galveston quivered on the verge of an earthquake.

No one approached them outright, but fragments drifted from their huddled discussions.

“Could Tony Castillo be—”

“—Medina—”

“—With that waitress—”

The buzz increased like a swarm of locusts closing in on the Texas landscape. On her life.

Tony growled lowly, “There’s nowhere here we can speak privately. I need to get you out of Vernon’s.”

His muscled arm locked her tighter, guiding her through a swishing door, past a string of chefs all immobile and gawking. He shouldered out a side door and she had no choice but to follow.

Outside, the late-day sun kissed his bronzed face, bringing his deeply tanned features into sharper focus. She’d always known there was something strikingly foreign about him. But she’d believed his story of dead parents, bookkeepers who’d emigrated from South America. Her own parents had died in a car accident before she’d graduated from college. She’d thought they’d at least shared similar childhoods.

Now? She was sure of nothing except how her body still betrayed her with the urge to lean into his hard-muscled strength, to escape into the pleasure she knew he could bring.

“I need to let management know I’m leaving. I can’t lose this job.” Tips were best in the evening and she needed every penny. She couldn’t afford the time it would take to get her teaching credentials current again—if she could even find a music-teaching position with cutbacks in the arts.

And there weren’t too many people out there in search of private oboe lessons.

“I know the owner, remember?” He unlocked his car, the remote chirp-chirping.

“Of course. What was I thinking? You have connections.” She stifled a fresh bout of hysterical laughter.

Would she even be able to work again if the Medina rumor was true? It had been tough enough finding a job when others associated her with her dead husband. Sure, she’d been cleared of any wrongdoing, but many still believed she must have known about Nolan’s illegal schemes.

There hadn’t even been a trial for her to state her side. Once her husband had made bail, he’d been dead within twenty-four hours.

Tony cursed low and harsh, sailor-style swearing he usually curbed around her and Kolby. She looked around, saw nothing...Then she heard the thundering footsteps a second before the small cluster of people rounded the corner with cameras and microphones.

Swearing again, Tony yanked open the passenger door to his Escalade. He lifted her inside easily, as if she weighed nothing more than the tray of fried gator appetizers she’d carried earlier.

Seconds later he slid behind the wheel and slammed the door a hair’s breadth ahead of the reporters. Fists pounded on the tinted windows. Locks auto-clicked. Shannon sagged in the leather seat with relief.

The hefty SUV rocked from the force of the mob. Her heart rate ramped again. If this was the life of the rich and famous, she wanted no part.

Shifting into Reverse then forward, Tony drove, slow but steady. People peeled away. At least one reporter fell on his butt but everyone appeared unharmed.

So much for playing chicken with Tony. She would be wise to remember that.

He guided the Escalade through the historic district a hint over the speed limit, fast enough to put space between them and the media hounds. Panting in the aftermath, she still braced a hand on the dash, her other gripping the leather seat. Yet Tony hadn’t even broken a sweat.

His hands stayed steady on the wheel, his expensive watch glinting from the French cuffs of his shirt. Restored brick buildings zipped by her window. A young couple dressed for an evening

out stepped off the curb, then back sharply. While the whole idea of being hunted by the paparazzi scared her to her roots, right here in the SUV with Tony, she felt safe.

Safe enough for the anger and betrayal to come bubbling to the surface. She'd been mad at him since their fight last weekend over his continued insistence on giving her money. But those feelings were nothing compared to the rage that coursed through her now. "We're alone. Talk to me."

"It's complicated." He glanced in the rearview mirror. Normal traffic toiled along the narrow street. "What do you want to know?"

She forced herself to say the words that would drive a permanent wedge between her and the one man she'd dared let into her life again.

"Are you a part of that lost royal family, the one everybody thought was hiding in Argentina?"

The Cadillac's finely tuned engine hummed in the silence. Lights clicked on automatically with the setting sun, the dash glowing.

His knuckles went white on the steering wheel, his jaw flexing before he nodded tightly. "The rumors on the internet are correct."

And she'd thought her heart couldn't break again.

Her pride had been stung over Tony's offer to give her money, but she would have gotten over it. She would have stuck to her guns about paying her own way, of course. But this? It was still too huge to wrap her brain around. She'd slept with a prince, let him into her home, her body, and considered letting him into her heart. His deception burned deep.

How could she have missed the truth so completely, buying into his stories about working on a shrimp boat as a teen? She'd assumed his tattoo and the closed over pierced earlobe were parts of an everyman past that seduced her as fully as his caresses.

"Your name isn't even Tony Castillo." Oh God. She pressed the back of her hand against her mouth, suddenly nauseated because she didn't even know the name of the guy she'd been sleeping with.

"Technically, it could be."

Shannon slammed her fists against the leather seat instead of reaching for him as she ached to do. "I'm not interested in technically. Actually, I'm not interested in people who lie to me. Can I even trust that you're really thirty-two years old?"

"It isn't just my decision to share specific details. I have other family members to consider. But if it's any consolation, I really am thirty-two. Are you really twenty-nine?"

"I'm not in a joking mood." Shivering, she thumbed her bare ring finger where once a three-carat diamond had rested. After Nolan's funeral, she'd taken it off and sold it along with everything else to pay off the mountain of debt. "I should have known you were too good to be true."

"Why do you say that?"

"Who makes millions by thirty-two?"

He cocked an arrogant eyebrow. "Did you just call me a moocher?"

"Well, excuse me if that was rude, but I'm not exactly at my best tonight."

His arms bulged beneath his Italian suit—she'd had to look up the exclusive Garaceni label after she'd seen the coat hanging on his bedpost.

Tony looked even more amazing out of the clothes, his tanned and muscled body eclipsing any high-end wardrobe. And the smiles he brought to her life, his uninhibited laughter were just what she needed most.

How quiet her world had been without him this week. "Sorry to have hurt your feelings, pal. Or should I say, Your Majesty? Since according to some of those stories I'm 'His Majesty's mistress.'"

"Actually, it would be 'Your Highness.'" His signature smile tipped his mouth, but with a bitter edge. "Majesty is for the king."

How could he be so flippant? "Actually, you can take your title and stuff it where the sun—"

“I get the picture.” He guided the Escalade over the Galveston Island Causeway, waves moving darkly below. “You’ll need time to calm down so we can discuss how to handle this.”

“You don’t understand. There’s no calming down. You lied to me on a fundamental level. Once we made l—” she stumbled over the next word, images of him moving over her, inside her, stealing her words and breath until her stomach churned as fast as the waters below “—after we went to bed together, you should have told me. Unless the sex didn’t mean anything special to you. I guess if you had to tell every woman you slept with, there would be no secret.”

“Stop!” He sliced the air with his hand. His gleaming Patek Philippe watch contrasted with scarred knuckles, from his sailing days he’d once told her. “That’s not true and not the point here. You were safer not knowing.”

“Oh, it’s for my own good.” She wrapped her arms around herself, a shield from the hurt.

“How much do you know about my family’s history?”

She bit back the urge to snap at him. Curiosity reined in her temper. “Not much. Just that there was a king of some small country near Spain, I think, before he was overthrown in a coup. His family has been hiding out to avoid the paparazzi hoopla.”

“Hoopla? This might suck, but that’s the least of my worries. There are people out there who tried to kill my family and succeeded in murdering my mother. There are people who stand to gain a lot in the way of money and power if the Medinas are wiped off the planet.”

Her heart ached for all he had lost. Even now, she wanted to press her mouth to his and forget this whole insane mess. To grasp that shimmering connection she’d discovered with him the first time they’d made love in a frenzied tangle at his Galveston Bay mansion.

“Well, believe it, Shannon. There’s a big bad world outside your corner of Texas. Right now, some of the worst will start focusing on me, my family and anyone who’s close to us. Whether you like it or not, I’ll do whatever it takes to keep you and Kolby protected.”

Her son’s safety? Perspiration froze on her forehead, chilling her deeper. Why hadn’t she thought of that? Of course she’d barely wrapped her brain around Tony...Antonio. “Drive faster. Get me home now.”

“I completely agree. I’ve already sent bodyguards ahead of us.”

Bodyguards?

“When?” She’d barely been able to think, much less act. What kind of mother was she not to have considered the impact on Kolby? And what kind of man kept bodyguards on speed dial?

“I texted my people while we were leaving through the kitchen.”

Of course he had people. The man was not merely the billionaire shipping magnate she’d assumed, he was also the bearer of a surname generations old and a background of privilege she couldn’t begin to fathom.

“I was so distracted I didn’t even notice,” Shannon whispered, sinking into her seat. She wasn’t even safe in her own neighborhood anymore.

She couldn’t wish this away any longer. “You really are this Medina guy. You’re really from some deposed royal family.”

His chin tipped with unmistakable regality. “My name is Antonio Medina. I was born in San Rinaldo, third son of King Enrique and Queen Beatriz.”

Her heart drumming in her ears, panic squeezed harder at her rib cage. How could she have foreseen this when she met him five months ago at the restaurant, bringing his supper back to the owner’s poker game? Tony had ordered a shrimp po’boy sandwich and a glass of sweet tea.

Poor Boy? How ironic was that?

“This is too weird.” And scary.

The whole surreal mess left her too numb to hurt anymore. That would return later, for sure. Her hands shook as she tapped her glasses straight.

She had to stay focused now. “Stuff like this happens in movies or a hundred years ago.”

“Or in my life. Now in yours, too.”

“Nuh-uh. You and I?” She wagged her hand back and forth between them. “We’re history.”

He paused at a stop sign, turning to face her fully for the first time since he’d gripped her shoulders at the restaurant. His coal-black eyes heated over her, a bold man of uninhibited emotions. “That fast, you’re ready to call an end to what we’ve shared?”

Her heart picked up speed from just the caress of his eyes, the memory of his hands stroking her. She tried to answer but her mouth had gone dry. He skimmed those scarred knuckles down her arm until his hand rested on hers. Such a simple gesture, nothing overtly erotic, but her whole body hummed with awareness and want.

Right here in the middle of the street, in the middle of an upside down situation, her body betrayed her as surely as he had.

Wrong. Wrong. Wrong. She had to be tough. “I already ended things between us last weekend.”

“That was a fight, not a breakup.” His big hand splayed over hers, eclipsing her with heat.

“Semantics. Not that it matters.” She pulled herself away from him until her spine met the door, not nearly far enough. “I can’t be with you anymore.”

“That’s too damn bad, because we’re going to be spending a lot of time together after we pick up your son. There’s no way you can stay in your apartment tonight.”

“There’s no way I can stay with you.”

“You can’t hide from what’s been unleashed. Today should tell you that more than anything. It’ll find you and your son. I’m sorry for not seeing this coming, but it’s here and we have to deal with it.”

Fear for her son warred with her anger at Tony. “You had no right,” she hissed between clenched teeth, “no right at all to play with our lives this way.”

“I agree.” He surprised her with that. However, the reprieve was short. “But I’m the only one who can stand between you both and whatever fallout comes from this revelation.”

## Chapter 2

A bodyguard stood outside the front door of her first-floor apartment. A bodyguard, for heaven's sake, a burly guy in a dark suit who could have passed for a Secret Service employee. She stifled the urge to scream in frustration.

Shannon flung herself out of the Escalade before it came to a complete stop, desperate to see her child, to get inside her tiny apartment in hopes that life would somehow return to normal. Tony couldn't be serious about her packing up to go away with him. He was just using this to try to get back together again.

Although what did a prince want with her?

At least there weren't any reporters in the parking lot. The neighbors all seemed to be inside for the evening or out enjoying their own party plans. She'd chosen the large complex for the anonymity it offered. Multiple three-story buildings filled the corner block, making it difficult to tell one apartment from another in the stretches of yellow units with tiny white balconies. At the center of it all, there was a pool and tiny playground, the only luxuries she'd allowed herself. She might not be able to give Kolby a huge yard, but he would have an outdoor place to play.

Now she had to start the search for a haven all over again.

"Here," she said as she thrust her purse toward him, her keys in her hand, "please carry this so I can unlock the door."

He extended his arm, her hobo bag dangling from his big fist. "Uh, sure."

"This is not the time to freak out over holding a woman's purse." She fumbled for the correct key.

"Shannon, I'm here for you. For you and your handbag."

She glanced back sharply. "Don't mock me."

"I thought you enjoyed my sense of humor."

Hadn't she thought just the same thing earlier? How could she say good-bye to Tony—he would never be Antonio to her—forever? Her feet slowed on the walkway between the simple hedges, nowhere near as elaborate as the gardens of her old home with Nolan, but well maintained. The place was clean.

And safe.

Having Tony at her back provided an extra layer of protection, she had to admit. After he'd made his shocking demand that she pack, he'd pulled out his phone and began checking in with his lawyer. From what she could tell hearing one side of the conversation, the news was spreading fast, with no indication of how the Global Intruder's people had cracked his cover. Tony didn't lose his temper or even curse.

But her normally lighthearted lover definitely wasn't smiling.

She ignored the soft note of regret spreading through her for all she would leave behind—this place. Tony. He strode alongside her silently, the outside lights casting his shadow over hers intimately, moving, tangling the two together as they walked.

Stopping at her unit three doors down from the corner, Tony exchanged low words with the guard while she slid the key into the lock with shaking hands. She pushed her way inside and ran smack into the babysitter already trying to open up for her. The college senior was majoring in elementary education and lived in the same complex. There might only be seven years between her and the girl in a concert T-shirt, but Shannon couldn't help but feel her own university days spent studying to be a teacher happened eons ago.

Shannon forced herself to stay calm. "Courtney, thanks for calling me. Where's Kolby?"

The sitter studied her with undisguised curiosity—who could blame her?—and pointed down the narrow hall toward the living room. "He's asleep on the couch. I thought it might be better to

keep him with me in case any reporters started showing up outside or something.” She hitched her bulging backpack onto one shoulder. “I don’t think they would stake out his window, but ya never know. Right?”

“Thank you, Courtney. You did exactly the right thing.” She angled down the hall to peek in on Kolby.

Her three-year-old son slept curled on the imported leather sofa, one of the few pieces that hadn’t been sold to pay off debts. Kolby had poked a hole in the armrest with a fountain pen just before the estate sale. Shannon had strapped duct tape over the tear, grateful for one less piece of furniture to buy to start her new life.

Every penny she earned needed to be tucked away for emergencies. Kolby counted on her, her sweet baby boy in his favorite Thomas the Tank Engine pj’s, matching blanket held up to his nose. His blond hair was tousled and spiking, still damp from his bath. She could almost smell the baby-powder sweetness from across the room.

Sagging against the archway with relief, she turned back to Courtney. “I need to pay you.”

Shannon took back her hobo bag from Tony and tunneled through frantically, dropping her wallet. Change clanked on the tile floor.

What would a three-year-old think if he saw his mother’s face in some news report? Or Tony’s, for that matter? The two had only met briefly a few times, but Kolby knew he was Mama’s friend. She scooped the coins into a pile, picking at quarters and dimes.

Tony cupped her shoulder. “I’ve got it. Go ahead and be with your son.”

She glanced up sharply, her nerves too raw to take the reminder of how he’d offered her financial help mere moments after sex last weekend. “I can pay my own way.”

Holding up his hands, he backed away.

“Fine, Shannon. I’ll sit with Kolby.” He cautioned her with a look not to mention their plans to pack and leave.

Duh. Not that she planned to follow all his dictates, but the fewer who knew their next move the better for avoiding the press and anyone else who might profit from tracking their moves. Even the best of friends could be bought off.

Speaking of payoffs... “Thank you for calling me so quickly.” She peeled off an extra twenty and tried not to wince as she said goodbye to ice cream for the month. She usually traded babysitting with another flat-broke single mom in the building when needed for work and dates. Courtney was only her backup, which she couldn’t—and didn’t—use often. “I appreciate your help.”

Shaking her head, Courtney took the money and passed back the extra twenty. “You don’t need to give me all that, Mrs. Crawford. I was only doing my job. And I’m not gonna talk to the reporters. I’m not the kind of person who would sell your story or something.”

“Really,” Shannon urged as she folded the cash back into her hand, “I want you to have it.”

Tony filled the archway. “The guard outside will walk you home, just to make sure no one bothers you.”

“Thanks, Mr. Castillo. Um, I mean...” Courtney stuffed the folded bills into her back pocket, the college coed eyeing him up and down with a new awareness. “Mr. Medina...Sir? I don’t what to call you.”

“Castillo is fine.”

“Right, uh, bye.” Her face flushed, she spun on her glitter flip-flops and took off.

Shannon pushed the door closed, sliding the bolt and chain. Locking her inside with Tony in a totally quiet apartment. She slumped back and stared down the hallway, the ten feet shrinking even more with the bulk of his shoulders spanning the arch. Light from the cheap brown lamp glinted off the curl in his black hair.

No wonder Courtney had been flustered. He wasn’t just a prince, but a fine-looking, one-hundred-percent man. The kind with strong hands that could finesse their way over a woman’s body

with a sweet tenderness that threatened to buckle her knees from just remembering. Had it only been a week since they'd made love in his mammoth jetted tub? God knows she ached as if she'd been without him for months.

Even acknowledging it was wrong with her mind, her body still wanted him.

\* \* \*

Tony wanted her.

In his arms.

In his bed.

And most of all, he wanted her back in his SUV, heading away from here. He needed to use any methods of persuasion possible and convince her to come to his house. Even if the press located his home address, they wouldn't get past the gates and security. So how to convince Shannon? He stared down the short tiled hallway at her.

Awareness flared in her eyes. The same slam of attraction he felt now and the first time he'd seen her five months ago when he'd stopped by after a call to play cards. Vernon had mentioned hiring a new waitress but Tony hadn't thought much of it—until he met her.

When Tony asked about her, the old guy said he didn't know much about Shannon other than her crook of a husband had committed suicide rather than face a jury. Shannon and her boy had been left behind, flat broke. She'd worked at a small diner for a year and a half before that and Vernon had hired her on a hunch. Vernon and his softie heart.

Tony stared at her now every bit as intently as he had that first time she'd brought him his order. Something about her blue-gray eyes reminded him of the ocean sky just before a storm. Tumultuous. Interesting.

A challenge. He'd been without a challenge for too long. Building a business from nothing had kept him charged up for years. What next?

Then he'd seen her.

He'd spent his life smiling his way through problems and deals, and for the first time he'd found someone who saw past his bull. Was it the puzzle that tugged him? If so, he wasn't any closer to solving the mystery of Shannon. Every day she confused him more, which made him want her more.

Pushing away from the door, she strode toward him, efficiently, no hip swish, just even, efficient steps. Then she walked out of her shoes, swiping one foot behind her to kick them to rest against the wall. No shoes in the house. She'd told him that the two times he'd been allowed over her threshold for no more than fifteen minutes. Any liaisons between them had been at his bayside mansion or a suite near the restaurant. He didn't really expect anything to happen here with her son around, even asleep.

And given the look on her face, she was more likely to pitch him out. Better to circumvent the boot.

"I'll stay with your son while you pack." He removed his shoes and stepped deeper into her place, not fancy, the sparse generic sort of a furnished space in browns and tan—except for the expensive burgundy leather sofa with a duct-taped X on the armrest.

Her lips thinned. "About packing, we need to discuss that further."

"What's to talk about?" He accepted their relationship was still on hold, but the current problems with his identity needed to be addressed. "Your porch will be full by morning."

"I'll check into a hotel."

With the twenty dollars and fifty-two cents she had left in her wallet? He prayed she wasn't foolish enough to use a credit card. Might as well phone in her location to the news stations.

"We can talk about where you'll stay after you pack."

"You sound like a broken record, Tony."

"You're calling me stubborn?"

Their standoff continued, neither of them touching, but he was all too aware of her scrubbed fresh scent. Shannon, the whole place, carried an air of some kind of floral cleaner. The aroma

somehow calmed and stirred at the same time, calling to mind holding her after a mind-bending night of sex. She never stayed over until morning, but for an hour or so after, she would doze against his chest. He would breathe in the scent of her and him and them blended together.

His nose flared.

Her pupils widened.

She stumbled back, her chest rising faster. “I do need to change my clothes. Are you sure you’ll be all right with Kolby?”

It was no secret the couple of times he’d met the boy, Kolby hadn’t warmed up to him. Nothing seemed to work, not ice cream or magic coin tricks. Tony figured maybe the boy was still missing his father.

That jerk had left Shannon bankrupt and vulnerable. “I can handle it. Take all the time you need.”

“Thank you. I’m only going to change clothes, though. No packing yet. We’ll have to talk more first, Tony—um, Antonio.”

“I prefer to be called Tony.” He liked the sound of it on her tongue.

“Okay... Tony.” She spun on her heel and headed toward her bedroom.

Her steps still efficient, albeit faster, were just speedy enough to bring a slight swing to her slim hips in the pencil-straight skirt. Thoughts of peeling it down and off her beautiful body would have to wait until she had the whole Antonio/Tony issue sorted out.

If only she could accept that he’d called himself Tony Castillo almost longer than he’d remembered being Antonio Medina.

He even had the paperwork to back up the Castillo name. Creating another persona hadn’t been that difficult, especially once he’d saved enough to start his first business. From then on, all transactions were shuttled through the company. Umbrella corporations. Living in plain sight. His plan had worked fine until someone, somehow had pierced the new identities he and his brothers had built. In fact, he needed to call his brothers, whom he spoke to at most a couple of times a year. But they might have insights.

They needed a plan.

He reached inside his jacket for his iPhone and ducked into the dining area where he could see the child but wouldn’t wake him. He thumbed the seven key on his speed dial... and Carlos’s voice mail picked up. Tony disconnected without leaving a message and pressed the eight key.

“Speak to me, my brother.” Duarte Medina’s voice came through the phone. They didn’t talk often, but these weren’t normal circumstances.

“I assume you know.” He toyed with one of Shannon’s hair bands on the table.

“Impossible to miss.”

“Where’s Carlos? He’s not picking up.” Tony fell back into their clipped shorthand. They’d only had each other growing up and now circumstances insisted they stay apart. Did his brothers have that same feeling, like they’d lost a limb?

“His secretary said he got paged for an emergency surgery. He’ll be at least another couple of hours. Apparently Carlos found out as he was scrubbing in, but you know our brother.” Duarte, the middle son, tended to play messenger with their father. The three brothers spoke and met when they could, but there were so many crap memories from their childhood, those reunions became further apart.

Tony scooped up the brown band, a lone long strand of her blond hair catching the light. “When a patient calls...”

“Right.”

It could well be hours before they heard from Carlos, given the sort of painstaking reconstructive surgeries he performed on children. “Any idea how this exploded?”

His brother hissed a long angry curse. “The Global Intruder got a side-view picture of me while I was visiting our sister.”

Their half sister Eloisa, their father’s daughter from an affair shortly after they had escaped to the States. Enrique had still been torn up with grief from losing his wife...not to mention the guilt. But apparently not so torn up and remorseful he couldn’t hop into bed with someone else. The woman had gone on to marry another man who’d raised her daughter as his own.

Tony had only met his half sister once as a teen, a few years before he’d left the island compound. She’d only been seven at the time. Now she’d married into a high-profile family jam-packed with political influence and a fat portfolio. Could she be at fault for bringing the media down on their heads for some free PR for her new in-laws? Duarte seemed to think she wanted anonymity as much as the rest of them. But could he have misjudged her?

“Why were you visiting Eloisa?” Tony tucked the band into his pocket.

“Family business. It doesn’t matter now. Her in-laws were there. Eloisa’s sister-in-law—a senator’s wife—slipped on the dock. I kept her from falling into the water. Some damn female reporter in a tree with a telephoto lens caught the mishap. Which shouldn’t have mattered, since Senator Landis and his wife were the focus of the picture. I still don’t know how the photographer pegged me from a side view, but there it is. And I’m sorry for bringing this crap down on you.”

Duarte hadn’t done anything wrong. They couldn’t live in a bubble. In the back of Tony’s mind, he’d always known it was just a matter of time until the cover story blew up in their faces. He’d managed to live away from the island anonymously for fourteen years, his two older brothers even longer.

But there was always the hope that maybe he could stay a step ahead. Be his own man. Succeed on his own merits. “We’ve all been caught in a picture on occasion. We’re not vampires. It’s just insane that she was able to make the connection. Perfect storm of bad luck.”

“What are your plans for dealing with this perfect storm?”

“Lock down tight while I regroup. Let me know when you hear from Carlos.”

Ending the call, Tony strode back into the living room, checked on Kolby—still snoozing hard—and dropped to the end of the sofa to read messages, his in-box already full again. By the time Tony scrolled through emails that told him nothing new, he logged on to the internet for a deeper peek. And winced. Rumors were rampant.

That his father had died of malaria years ago—false.

Supposition that Carlos had plastic surgery—again, false.

Speculation that Duarte had joined a Tibetan monastery—definitely false.

And then there were the stories about him and Shannon, which actually happened to be true. The whole “Monarch’s Mistress” was really growing roots out there in cyberspace. Guilt kicked him in the gut that Shannon would suffer this kind of garbage because of him. The media feeding frenzy would only grow, and before long they would stir up all the crap about her thief of a dead husband. He tucked away his phone in disgust.

“That bad?” Shannon asked from the archway.

She’d changed into jeans and a simple blue tank top. Her silky blond hair glided loosely down her shoulders, straight except for a slight crimped ring where she’d bound it up on her head for work. She didn’t look much older than the babysitter, except in her weary—wary—eyes.

Leaning back, he extended his legs, leather creaking as he stayed on the sofa so as not to spook her. “The internet is exploding. My lawyers and my brothers’ lawyers are all looking into it. Hopefully we’ll have the leak plugged soon and start some damage control. But we can’t stuff the genie back into the bottle.”

“I’m not going away with you.” She perched a fist on one shapely hip.

“This isn’t going to die down.” He kept his voice even and low, reasonable. The stakes were too important for all of them. “The reporters will swarm you by morning, if not sooner. Your babysitter

will almost inevitably cave in to one of those gossip-rag offers. Your friends will sell photos of the two of us together. There's a chance people could use Kolby to get to me."

"Then we're through, you and I." She reached for her sleeping son on the sofa, smoothing his hair before sliding a hand under his shoulders as if to scoop him up.

Tony touched her arm lightly, stopping her. "Hold on before you settle him into his room." As far as Tony was concerned, they would be back in his Escalade in less than ten minutes. "Do you honestly think anyone's going to believe the breakup is for real? The timing will seem too convenient."

She sagged onto the arm of the sofa, right over the silver X. "We ended things last weekend."

Like hell. "Tell that to the papers and see if they believe you. The truth doesn't matter to these people. They probably printed photos of an alien baby last week. Pleading a breakup isn't going to buy you any kind of freedom from their interest."

"I know I need to move away from Galveston." She glanced around her sparsely decorated apartment, two pictures of Kolby the only personal items. "I've accepted that."

There wouldn't be much packing to do.

"They'll find you."

She studied him through narrowed eyes. "How do I know you're not just using this as an excuse to get back together?"

Was he? An hour ago, he would have done anything to get into her bed again. While the attraction hadn't diminished, since his cover was blown, he had other concerns that overshadowed everything else. He needed to determine the best way to inoculate her from the toxic fallout that came from associating with Medinas. One thing for certain, he couldn't risk her striking out on her own.

"You made it clear where we stand last weekend. I get that. You want nothing to do with me or my money." He didn't move closer, wasn't going to crowd her. The draw between them filled the space separating them just fine on its own. "We had sex together. Damn good sex. But that's over now. Neither one of us ever asked for or expected more."

Her gaze locked with his, the room silent but for their breathing and the light snore of the sleeping child. Kolby. Another reminder of why they needed to stay in control.

In fact, holding back made the edge sharper. He skimmed his knuckles along her collarbone, barely touching. A week ago, that pale skin had worn the rasp of his beard. She didn't move closer, but she didn't back away, either.

Shannon blinked first, her long lashes sweeping closed while she swallowed hard. "What am I supposed to do?"

More than anything he wanted to gather her up and tell her everything would be okay. He wouldn't allow anything less. But he also wouldn't make shallow promises.

Twenty-seven years ago, when they'd been leaving San Rinaldo on a moonless night, his father had assured them everything would be fine. They would be reunited soon.

His father had been so very wrong.

Tony focused on what he could assure. "A lot has happened in a few hours. We need to take a step back for damage assessment tonight at my home, where there are security gates, alarms, guards watching and surveillance cameras."

"And after tonight?"

"We'll let the press think we are a couple, still deep in that affair." He indulged himself in one lengthy, heated eye-stroke of her slim, supple body. "Then we'll stage a more public breakup later, on our terms, when we've prepared a backup plan."

She exhaled a shaky breath. "That makes sense."

"Meanwhile, my number-one priority is shielding you and Kolby." He sifted through options, eliminating one idea after another until he was left with only a single alternative.

Her hand fell to rest on her sleeping son's head. "How do you intend to do that?"

“By taking you to the safest place I know.” A place he’d vowed never to return. “Tomorrow, we’re going to visit my father.”

## Chapter 3

“Visit your father?” Shannon asked in total shock. Had Tony lost his mind? “The King of San Rinaldo? You’ve got to be kidding.”

“I’m completely serious.” He stared back at her from the far end of the leather sofa, her sleeping son between them.

Resisting Tony had been tough enough this past week just knowing he was in the same town. How much more difficult would it be with him in the same house for one night much less days on end? God, she wanted to run. She bit the inside of her lip to keep from blurting out something she would regret later. Sorting through her options could take more time than they appeared to have.

Kolby wriggled restlessly, hugging his comfort blanket tighter. Needing a moment to collect her thoughts and her resolve, she scooped up her son.

“Tony, we’ll have to put this discussion on hold.” She cradled her child closer and angled down the hall, ever aware of a certain looming prince at her back. “Keep the lights off, please.”

Shadows playing tag on the ceiling, she lowered Kolby into the red caboose bed they’d picked out together when she moved into the apartment. She’d been trying so hard to make up for all her son had lost. As if there was some way to compensate for the loss of his father, the loss of security. Shannon pressed a kiss to his forehead, inhaling his precious baby-shampoo smell.

When she turned back, she found Tony waiting in the doorway, determination stamped on his square jaw. Well, she could be mighty resolute too, especially when it came to her son. Shannon closed the curtains before she left the room and stepped into the narrow hall.

She shut the door quietly behind her. “You have to know your suggestion is outrageous.”

“The whole situation is outrageous, which calls for extraordinary measures.”

“Hiding out with a king? That’s definitely what I would call extraordinary.” She pulled off her glasses and pinched the bridge of her nose.

Before Nolan’s death she’d worn contacts, but couldn’t afford the extra expense now. How much longer until she would grow accustomed to glasses again?

She stared at Tony, his face clear up close, everything in the distance blurred. “Do you honestly think I would want to expose myself, not to mention Kolby, to more scrutiny by going to your father’s? Why not just hide out at your place as we originally discussed?”

God, had she just agreed to stay with him indefinitely?

“My house is secure, up to a point. People will figure out where I live and they’ll deduce that you’re with me. There’s only one place I can think of where no one can get to us.”

Frustration buzzed in her brain. “Seems like their telephoto lenses reach everywhere.”

“The press still hasn’t located my father’s home after years of trying.”

But she thought... “Doesn’t he live in Argentina?”

He studied her silently, the wheels almost visibly turning in his broad forehead. Finally, he shook his head quickly.

“No. We only stopped off there to reorganize after escaping San Rinaldo.” He adjusted his watch, the only nervous habit she’d ever observed in him. “My father did set up a compound there and paid a small, trusted group of individuals to make it look inhabited. Most of them also escaped San Rinaldo with us. People assumed we were there with them.”

What extreme lengths and expense their father had gone to. But then wasn’t she willing to do anything to protect Kolby? She felt a surprise connection to the old king she’d never met. “Why are you telling me this much if it’s such a closely guarded secret?”

He cupped her shoulder, his touch heavy and familiar, stirring. “Because it’s that important I persuade you.”

Resisting the urge to lean into him was tougher with each stroke of his thumb against the sensitive curve of her neck. “Where does he live then?”

“I can’t tell you that much,” he said, still touching and, God, it made her mad that she didn’t pull away.

“Yet you expect me to just pack up my child and follow you there.” She gripped his wrist and moved away from his seductive touch.

“I detect a note of skepticism in your voice.” He shoved his hands in his pockets.

“A note? Try a whole freaking symphony, Tony.” The sense of betrayal swelled inside her again, larger and larger until it pushed bitter words out. “Why should I trust you? Especially now?”

“Because you don’t have anyone else or they would have already been helping you.”

The reality deflated her. She only had a set of in-laws who didn’t want anything to do with her or Kolby since they blamed her for their son’s downfall. She was truly alone.

“How long would we be there?”

“Just until my attorneys can arrange for a restraining order against certain media personnel. I realize that restraining orders don’t always work, but having one will give us a stronger legal case if we need it. It’s one thing to stalk, but it’s another to stalk and violate a restraining order. And I’ll want to make sure you have top-of-the-line security installed at your new home. That should take about a week, two at the most.”

Shannon fidgeted with her glasses. “How would we get there?”

“By plane.” He thumbed the face of his watch clean again.

That meant it must be far away. “Forget it. You are not going to isolate me that way, cut me off from the world. It’s the equivalent of kidnapping me and my son.”

“Not if you agree to go along.” He edged closer, the stretch of his hard muscled shoulders blocking out the light filtering from the living area. “People in the military get on planes all the time without knowing their destination.”

She tipped her chin upward, their faces inches apart. Close enough to feel his heat. Close enough to kiss.

Too close for her own good. “Last time I checked, I wasn’t wearing a uniform.” Her voice cracked ever so slightly. “I didn’t sign on for this.”

“I know, Shanny...” He stroked a lock of her hair intimately. “I am sorry for all this is putting you through, and I will do my best to make the next week as easy for you as possible.”

The sincerity of his apology soothed the ragged edges of her nerves. It had been a long week without him. She’d been surprised by how much she had missed his spontaneous dates and late-night calls. His bold kisses and intimate caresses. She couldn’t lie to herself about how much he affected her on both an emotional and physical level. Otherwise this mess with his revealed past wouldn’t hurt her so deeply.

Her hand clenched around her glasses. He gently slid them from her hand and hooked them on the front of her shirt. The familiarity of the gesture kicked her heart rate up a notch.

Swaying toward him, she flattened her hands to his chest, not sure if she wanted to push him away or pull him nearer. Thick longing filled the sliver of space between them. An answering awareness widened his pupils, pushing and thinning the dark brown of his eyes.

He lowered his head closer, closer still until his mouth hovered over hers. Heated breaths washed over her, stirring even hotter memories and warm languid longing. She’d thought the pain of Nolan’s deceit had left her numb for life...until she saw Tony.

“Mama?”

The sound of her son calling out from his room jolted her back to reality. And not only her. Tony’s face went from seductive to intent in a heartbeat. He pulled the door open just as Kolby ran through and into his mother’s arms.

“Mama, Mama, Mama...” He buried his face in her neck. “Monster in my window!”

\* \* \*

Tony shot through the door and toward the window in the child's room, focused, driven and mentally kicking himself for letting himself be distracted.

He barked over his shoulder, "Stay in the hall while I take a look."

It could be nothing, but he'd been taught at a young age the importance of never letting down his guard. Adrenaline firing, he jerked the window open and scanned the tiny patch of yard.

Nothing. Just a Big Wheel lying on its side and a swing dangling lazily from a lone tree.

Maybe it was only a nightmare. This whole blast from the past had him seeing bogeymen from his own childhood, too. Tony pushed the window down again and pulled the curtains together.

Shannon stood in the door, her son tucked against her. "I could have sworn I closed the curtains."

Kolby peeked up. "I opened 'em when I heard-ed the noise."

And maybe this kid's nightmare was every bit as real as his own had been. On the off chance the boy was right, he had to check. "I'm going outside. The guard will stay here with you."

She cupped the back of her child's head. "I already warned the guard. I wasn't leaving you to take care of the 'monster' by yourself."

Dread kinked cold and tight in his gut. What if something had happened to her when she had stepped outside to speak to the guard? He held in the angry words, not wanting to upset her son.

But he became more determined by the second to persuade her and the child to leave Galveston with him. "Let's hope it was nothing but a tree branch. Right, kiddo?"

Tony started toward the door just as his iPhone rang. He glanced at the ID and saw the guard's number. He thumbed the speaker phone button. "Yes?"

"Got him," the guard said. "A teenager from the next complex over was trying to snap some pictures on his cell phone. I've already called the police."

A sigh shuddered through Shannon, and she hugged her son closer, and God, how Tony wanted to comfort her.

However, the business of taking care of her safety came first. "Keep me posted if there are any red flags when they interview the trespasser. Good work. Thanks."

He tucked his phone back into his jacket, his heart almost hammering out of his chest at the close call. This could have been worse. He knew too well from past experience how bad it could have been.

And apparently so did Shannon. Her wide blue eyes blinked erratically as she looked from corner to corner, searching shadows.

To hell with giving her distance. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders until she leaned on him ever so slightly. The soft press of her against him felt damn right in a day gone wrong.

Then she squeezed her eyes closed and straightened. "Okay, you win."

"Win what?"

"We'll go to your home tonight."

A hollow victory, since fear rather than desire motivated her, but he wasn't going to argue. "And tomorrow?"

"We'll discuss that in morning. Right now, just take us to your house."

\* \* \*

Tony's Galveston house could only be called a mansion.

The imposing size of the three-story structure washed over Shannon every time they drove through the scrolled iron gates. How Kolby could sleep through all of this boggled her mind, but when they'd convinced him the "monster" was gone—thanks to the guard—Kolby had been all yawns again. Once strapped into the car seat in the back of Tony's Escalade, her son had been out like a light in five minutes.

If only her own worries could be as easily shaken off. She had to think logically, but fears for Kolby nagged her. Nolan had stolen so much more than money. He'd robbed her of the ability to feel safe, just before he took the coward's way out.

Two acres of manicured lawn stretched ahead of her in the moonlight. The estate was intimidating during the day, and all the more ominously gothic at night with shadowy edges encroaching. It was one thing to visit the place for a date.

It was another to take shelter here, to pack suitcases and accept his help.

She'd lived in a large house with Nolan, four thousand square feet, but she could have fit two of those homes inside Tony's place. In the courtyard, a concrete horse fountain was illuminated, glowing in front of the burgundy stucco house with brown trim so dark it was almost black. His home showcased the Spanish architecture prevalent in Texas. Knowing his true heritage now, she could see why he would have been drawn to this area.

Silently he guided the SUV into the garage, finally safe and secure from the outside world. For how long?

He unstrapped Kolby from the seat and she didn't argue. Her son was still sleeping anyway. The way Tony's big hands managed the small buckles and shuffled the sleeping child onto his shoulder with such competence touched her heart as firmly as any hothouse full of roses.

Trailing him with a backpack of toy trains and trucks, she dimly registered the house that had grown familiar after their dates to restaurants, movies and the most amazing concerts. Her soul, so starved for music, gobbled up every note.

Her first dinner at his home had been a five-course catered meal with a violinist. She could almost hear the echoing strains bouncing lightly off the high-beamed ceiling, down to the marble floor, swirling along the inlay pattern to twine around her.

Binding her closer to him. They hadn't had sex that night, but she'd known then it was inevitable.

That first time, Tony had been thoughtful enough to send out to a different restaurant than his favored Vernon's, guessing accurately that when a person worked eight hours a day in one eating establishment, the food there lost its allure.

He'd opted for Italian cuisine. The meal and music and elegance had been so far removed from paper plate dinners of nuggets and fries. While she adored her son and treasured every second with him, she couldn't help but be wooed by grown-up time to herself.

Limited time as she'd never spent the night here. Until now.

She followed Tony up the circular staircase, hand on the crafted iron banister. The sight of her son sleeping so limp and relaxed against Tony brought a lump to her throat again.

The tenderness she felt seeing him hold her child reminded her how special this new man in her life was. She'd chosen him so carefully after Nolan had died, seeing Tony's innate strength and honor. Was she really ready to throw that away?

He stopped at the first bedroom, a suite decorated in hunter green with vintage maps framed on the walls. Striding through the sitting area to the next door, he flipped back the brocade spread and set her son in the middle of the high bed.

Quietly, she put a chair on either side as a makeshift bed rail, then tucked the covers over his shoulders. She kissed his little forehead and inhaled his baby-fresh scent. Her child.

The enormity of how their lives had changed tonight swelled inside her, pushing stinging tears to the surface. Tony's hand fell to rest on her shoulder and she leaned back....

Holy crap.

She jolted away. How easily she fell into old habits around him. "I didn't mean..."

"I know." His hand fell away and tucked into his pocket. "I'll carry up your bags in a minute. I gave the house staff the night off."

She followed him, just to keep their conversation soft, not because she wasn't ready to say good-night. "I thought you trusted them."

“I do. To a point. It’s also easier for security to protect the house with fewer people inside.” He gestured into the sitting area. “I heard what you said about feeling cut off from the world going to my father’s and I understand.”

His empathy slipped past her defenses when they were already on shaky ground being here in his house again. Remembering all the times they’d made love under this very roof, she could almost smell the bath salts from last weekend. And with him being so understanding on top of everything else...

He’d lied. She needed to remember that.

“I realize I have to do what’s right for Kolby.” She sagged onto the striped sofa, her legs folding from an emotional and exhausting night. “It scares the hell out of me how close a random teenager already got to my child, and we’re only a couple of hours into this mess. It makes me ill to think about what someone with resources could do.”

“My brothers and I have attorneys. They’ll look into pressing charges against the teen.” He sat beside her with a casual familiarity of lovers.

Remember the fight. Not the bath salts. She inched toward the armrest. “Let me know what the attorneys’ fees are, please.”

“They’re on retainer. Those lawyers also help us communicate with each other. My attorney will know we’re going to see my father if you’re worried about making sure someone is aware of your plans.”

Someone under his employ, all of this bought with Tony’s money that she’d rejected a few short days ago. And she couldn’t think of any other way. “You trust this man, your lawyer?”

“I have to.” The surety in his voice left little room for doubt. “There are some transactions that can’t be avoided no matter how much we want to sever ties with the past.”

A darker note in his voice niggled at her. “Are you talking about yourself now?”

He shrugged, broad shoulders rippling the fabric of his fine suit.

Nuh-uh. She wasn’t giving up that easily. She’d trusted so much of her life to this man, only to find he’d misled her.

Now she needed something tangible, something honest from him to hold on to. Something to let her know if that honor and strength she’d perceived in him was real. “You said you didn’t want to break off our relationship. If that’s true, this would be a really good time to open up a little.”

Angling toward her, Tony’s knee pressed against hers, his eyes heating to molten dark. “Are you saying we’re good again?”

“I’m saying...” She cleared her throat that had suddenly gone cottony dry. “Maybe I could see my way clear to forgiving you if I knew more about you.”

He straightened, his eyes sharp. “What do you want to know?”

“Why Galveston?”

“Do you surf?”

What the hell? She watched the walls come up in his eyes. She could almost feel him distancing himself from her. “Tony, I’m not sure how sharing a Surf’s Up moment is going to make things all better here.”

“But have you ever been surfing?” He gestured, his hands riding imaginary waves. “The Atlantic doesn’t offer as wild a ride as the Pacific, but it gets the job done, especially in Spain. Something to do with the atmospheric pressure coming down from the UK. I still remember the swells tubing.” He curled his fingers around into the cresting circle of a wave.

“You’re a surfer?” She tried to merge the image of the sleek business shark with the vision of him carefree on a board. And instead an image emerged of his abandon when making love. Her breasts tingled and tightened, awash in the sensation of sea spray and Tony all over her skin.

“I’ve always been fascinated with waves.”

“Even when you were in San Rinaldo.” The picture of him began to make more sense. “It’s an island country, right?”

She’d always thought the nautical art on his walls was tied into his shipping empire. Now she realized the affinity for such pieces came from living on an island. So much about him made sense.

His surfing hand soared to rest on the gold-flecked globe beside the sofa. Was it her imagination or was the gloss dimmer over the coast of Spain? As if he’d rubbed his finger along that area more often, taking away the sheen over time.

He spun the globe. “I thought you didn’t know much about the Medinas.”

“I researched you on Google on my phone while we were driving over.” Concrete info had been sparse compared to all the crazy gossip floating about, but there were some basics. Three sons. A monarch father. A mother who’d been killed as they were escaping. Her heart squeezed thinking of him losing a parent so young, not much older than Kolby.

She pulled a faltering smile. “There weren’t any surfer pictures among the few images that popped up.”

Only a couple of grainy formal family portraits of three young boys with their parents, everyone happy. Some earlier photos of King Enrique looking infinitely regal.

“We scrubbed most pictures after we escaped and regrouped.” His lighthearted smile contrasted with the darker hue deepening his eyes. “The internet wasn’t active in those days.”

The extent of his rebuilding shook her to her shoes. She’d thought she had it rough leaving Louisiana after her husband’s arrest and death. How tragic to have your past wiped away. The enormity of what had happened to his family, of how he’d lived since then, threatened to overwhelm her.

How could she not ache over all he’d been through? “I saw that your mother died when I read up on your past. I’m so sorry.”

He waved away her sympathy. “When we got to...where my father lives now, things were isolated. But at least we still had the ocean. Out on the waves, I could forget about everything else.”

Plowing a hand through his hair, he stared just past her, obviously locked in some deep memories. She sensed she was close, so close to the something she needed to reassure her that placing herself and her son in his care would be wise, even if there weren’t gossip seekers sifting through her trash.

She rested her hand on his arm. “What are you thinking?”

“I thought you might like to learn next spring. Unless you’re already a pro.”

“Not hardly.” Spring was a long way off, a huge commitment she wasn’t anywhere near ready to make to anyone. The thought of climbing on a wave made her stomach knot almost as much as being together that long. “Thanks for the offer, but I’ll pass.”

“Scared?” He skimmed his knuckles over her collarbone, and just that fast the sea-spray feel tingled through her again.

“Hell, yes. Scared of getting hurt.”

His hand stilled just above her thumping heart. Want crackled in the air. Hers? Or his? She wasn’t sure. Probably equal measures from both of them. That had never been in question. And too easily he could draw her in again. Learning more about him wasn’t wise after all, not tonight.

She pulled away, her arms jerky, her whole body out of whack. She needed Tony’s lightness now. Forget about serious peeks into each other’s vulnerable pasts. “No surfing for me. Ever try taking care of a toddler with a broken leg?”

“When did you break your leg?” His eyes narrowed. “Did he hurt you? Your husband?”

How had Tony made that leap so quickly?

“Nolan was a crook and a jerk, but he never raised a hand to me.” She shivered, not liking the new direction their conversation had taken at all. This was supposed to teach her more about him. Not the other way around. “Do we have to drag more baggage into this?”

“If it’s true.”

“I told you. He didn’t abuse me.” Not physically. “Having a criminal for a husband is no picnic. Knowing I missed the signs... Wondering if I let myself be blind to it because I enjoyed the lifestyle... I don’t even know where to start in answering those questions for myself.”

She slumped, suddenly exhausted, any residual adrenaline fizzling out. Her head fell back.

“Knowing you as I do, I find it difficult to believe you would ever choose the easy path.” Tony thumbed just below her eyes where undoubtedly dark circles were all but tattooed on her face. “It’s been a long day. You should get some rest. If you want, I’ll tuck you in,” he said with a playful wink.

She found the old Tony much easier to deal with than the new. “You’re teasing, of course.”

“Maybe...” And just that fast the light in his eyes flamed hotter, intense. “Shanny, I would hold you all night if you would let me. I would make sure no one dared threaten you or your son again.”

And she wanted to let him do just that. But she’d allowed herself to depend on a man before... “If you hold me, we both know I won’t get any rest, and while I’ll have pleasure tonight, I’ll be sorry tomorrow. Don’t you think we have enough wrong between us right now without adding another regret to the mix?”

“Okay...” Tony gave her shoulder a final squeeze and stood. “I’ll back off.”

Shannon pushed to her feet alongside him, her hands fisted at her sides to keep from reaching for him. “I’m still mad over being kept in the dark, but I appreciate all the damage control.”

“I owe you that much and more.” He kissed her lightly on the lips without touching her anywhere else, lingering long enough to remind her of the reasons they clicked. Her breath hitched and it was all she could do not to haul him in closer for a firmer, deeper connection.

Pulling back, he started toward the door.

“Tony?” Was that husky voice really hers?

He glanced over his shoulder. So easily she could take the physical comfort waiting only a few feet away in his arms. But she had to keep her head clear. She had to hold strong to carve out an independent life for her and her son and that meant drawing clear boundaries.

“Just because I might be able to forgive you doesn’t mean you’re welcome in my bed again.”

## Chapter 4

She wasn't in her own bed.

Shannon wrestled with the tenacious grip of her shadowy nightmare, tough as hell to do when she couldn't figure out where she was. The ticking grandfather clock, the feel of the silky blanket around her, none of it was familiar. And then a hint of sandalwood scent teased her nose a second before...

"Hey." Tony's voice rumbled through the dark. "It's okay. I'm here."

Her heart jumped. She bolted upright, the cashmere afghan twisting around her legs and waist. Blinking fast, she struggled to orient herself to the surroundings so different from her apartment, but the world blurred in front of her from the dark and her own crummy eyesight. Shannon pressed her hands to the cushiony softness of a sofa and everything came rushing back. She was at Tony's, in the sitting room outside where Kolby slept.

"It's okay," Tony continued to chant, squeezing her shoulder in his broad hand as he crouched beside the couch.

Swinging her feet to the ground, she gathered the haunting remnants of her nightmare. Shadows smoked through her mind, blending into a darker mass of memories from the night Nolan died, except Tony's face superimposed itself over that of her dead husband.

Nausea burned her throat. She swallowed back the bite of bile and the horror of her dream. "Sorry, if I woke you." Oh, God, her son. "Is Kolby all right?"

"Sleeping soundly."

"Thank goodness. I wouldn't want to frighten him." She took in Tony's mussed hair and hastily hauled on jeans. The top button was open and his chest was bare. Gulp. "I'm sorry for disturbing you."

"I wasn't asleep." He passed her glasses to her.

As she slid them on, his tattoo came into focus, a nautical compass on his arm. Looking closer she realized his hair was wet. She didn't want to think about him in the shower, a tiled spa cubicle they'd shared more than once. "It's been a tough night all around."

"Want to talk about what woke you up?"

"Not really." Not ever. To anyone. "I think my fear for Kolby ran wild in my sleep. Dreams are supposed to help work out problems, but sometimes, it seems they only make everything scarier."

"Ah, damn, Shanny, I'm sorry for this whole mess." He sat on the sofa and slid an arm around her shoulders.

She stiffened, then decided to hell with it all and leaned back against the hard wall of chest. With the nightmare so fresh in her mind, she couldn't scavenge the will to pull away. His arms banded around her in an instant and her head tucked under his chin. Somehow it was easier to accept this comfort when she didn't have to look in his eyes. She'd been alone with her bad dreams for so long. Was it wrong to take just a second's comfort from his arms roped so thick with muscles nothing could break through to her? She would be strong again in a minute.

The grandfather clock ticked away minutes as she stared at his hands linked over her stomach—at the lighter band of skin where his watch usually rested. "Thanks for coming in to check on us, especially so late."

"It can be disconcerting waking in an unfamiliar place alone." His voice vibrated against her back, only her thin nightshirt between them and his bare chest.

Another whiff of his freshly showered scent teased her nose with memories of steam-slicked bodies.

"I've been here at least a dozen times, but never in this room. It's a big house." They'd met five months ago, started dating two months later...had starting sleeping together four weeks ago. "Strange to think we've shared the shower, but I still haven't seen all of your home."

“We tended to get distracted once our feet hit the steps,” he said drily.

True enough. They’d stayed downstairs on early dinner dates here, but once they’d ventured upstairs...they’d always headed straight for his suite.

“That first time together—” Shannon remembered was after an opera when her senses had been on overload and her hormones on hyperdrive from holding back “—I was scared to death.”

The admission tumbled out before she could think, but somehow it seemed easier to share such vulnerabilities in the dark.

His muscles flexed against her, the bristle of hair on his arms teasing goose bumps along her skin. “The last thing I ever want to do is frighten you.”

“It wasn’t your fault. That night was a big leap of faith for me.” The need to make him understand pushed past walls she’d built around herself. “Being with you then, it was my first time since Nolan.”

He went completely still, not even breathing for four ticks of the clock before she felt his neck move with a swallow against her temple. “No one?”

“No one.” Not only had Tony been her sole lover since Nolan, he’d been her second lover ever. Her track record for picking men with secrets sucked.

His gusty sigh ruffled her hair. “I wish you would have told me.”

“What would that have changed?”

“I would have been more...careful.”

The frenzy of their first time stormed her mind with a barrage of images...their clothes fluttering to carpet the stairs on their way up. By the top of the steps they were naked, moonlight bathing his olive skin and casting shadows along the cut of muscles. Kissing against the wall soon had her legs wrapped around his waist and he was inside her. That one thrust had unfurled the tension into shimmering sensations and before the orgasm finished tingling all the way to the roots of her hair, he’d carried her to his room, her legs still around him. Again, she’d found release in bed with him, then a languid, leisurely completion while showering together.

Just remembering, an ache started low, throbbing between her legs. “You were great that night, and you know it.” She swatted his hand lightly. “Now wipe the arrogant grin off your face.”

“You can’t see me.” His voice sounded somber enough.

“Am I right, though?”

“Look at me and see.”

She turned around and dared to peer up at him for the first time since he’d settled on the couch behind her. Her intense memories of that evening found an echo in his serious eyes far more moving than any smile.

Right now, it was hard to remember they weren’t a couple anymore. “Telling you then would have made the event too serious.”

Too important.

His offer to “help” her financially still loomed unresolved between them, stinging her even more than last weekend after the enormous secret he’d kept from her. Why couldn’t they be two ordinary people who met at the park outside her apartment complex? What would it have been like to get to know Tony on neutral, normal ground? Would she have been able to see past the pain of her marriage?

She would never know.

“Shannon.” His voice came out hoarse and hungry. “Are you okay to go back to sleep now? Because I need to leave.”

His words splashed a chill over her heated thoughts. “Of course, you must have a lot to take care of with your family.”

“You misunderstand. I need to leave, because you’re killing me here with how much I’ve hurt you. And as if that wasn’t enough to bring me to my knees, every time you move your head, the feel of your hair against my chest just about sends me over the edge.” His eyes burned with a coal-hot determination. “I’ll be damned before I do anything to break your trust again.”

Before she could unscramble her thoughts, he slid his arms from her and ducked out the door as silently as he'd arrived. Colder than ever without the heat of Tony all around her, she hugged the blanket closer.

No worries about any more nightmares, because she was more than certain she wouldn't be able to go back to sleep.

\* \* \*

By morning, Tony hadn't bothered turning down the covers on his bed. After leaving Shannon's room, he'd spent most of the night conferring with his lawyer and a security firm. Working himself into the ground to distract himself from how much he hurt from wanting her.

With a little luck and maneuvering, he could extend his week with her into two weeks. But bottom line, he would ensure her safety.

At five, he'd caught a catnap on the library sofa, jolting awake when Vernon called him from the front gate. He'd buzzed the retired sea captain through and rounded up breakfast.

His old friend deserved some answers.

Choosing a less formal dining area outside, he sat at the oval table on the veranda shaded by a lemon tree, Vernon beside him with a plate full of churros. Tony thumbed the edge of the hand-painted stoneware plate—a set he'd picked up from a local craftsman to support the dying art of the region.

Today of all days, he didn't want to think overlong on why he still ate his same childhood breakfast—deep-fried strips of potato dough. His mother had always poured a thick rich espresso for herself and mugs of hot chocolate for her three sons, an informal ritual in their centuries-old castle that he now knew was anything but ordinary.

Vernon eyed him over the rim of his coffee cup. “So it's all true, what they're saying in the papers and on the internet?”

Absurd headlines scrolled through his memory, alongside reports that had been right on the money. “My brother's not a Tibetan monk, but the general gist of that first report from the Global Intruder is correct.”

“You're a prince.” He scrubbed a hand over his dropped jaw. “Well, hot damn. Always knew there was something special about you, boy.”

He preferred to think anything “special” about him came from hard work rather than a genetic lottery win. “I hope you understand it wasn't my place to share the details with you.”

“You have brothers and a father.” He stirred a hefty dollop of milk into his coffee, clinking the spoon against the edges of the stoneware mug. “I get that you need to consider their privacy, as well.”

“Thanks, I appreciate that.”

He wished Shannon could see as much. He'd hoped bringing her here would remind her of all that had been good between them. Instead those memories had only come back to bite him on the ass when she'd told him that he was her first since her husband died. The revelation still sucker punched the air from his gut.

Where did they go from there? Hell if he knew, but at least he had more time to find out. Soon enough he would have her in his private jet that waited fueled and ready a mile away.

The older man set down his mug. “I respect that you gotta be your own man.”

“Thank you again.” He'd expected Vernon to be angry over the secrecy, had even been concerned over losing his friendship.

Vernon's respect meant a lot to him, as well as his advice. From day one when Tony had turned in his sparse job application, Vernon had treated him like a son, showing him the ropes. They had a lot of history. And just like fourteen years ago, he offered unconditional acceptance now.

His mentor leaned forward on one elbow. “What does your family have to say about all of this?”

“I’ve only spoken with my middle brother.” He pinched off a piece of a churro drizzled with warm honey. Popping it into his mouth, he chewed and tried not think of how much of his past stayed imprinted on him.

“According to the papers, that would be Duarte. Right?” When Tony nodded, Vernon continued, “Any idea how the story broke after so many years?”

And wasn’t that the million-dollar question? He, his brothers and their lawyers were no closer to the answer on that one today than they’d been last night. “Duarte doesn’t have any answers yet, other than some photo-journalist caught him in a snapshot and managed to track down details. Which is damn strange. None of us look the same since we left San Rinaldo as kids.”

“And there are no other pictures of you in the interim?”

“Only a few stray shots after I became Tony. Carlos’s face has shown up in a couple of professional magazines.” But the image was so posed and sterile, Tony wasn’t sure he would recognize his own sibling on the street. For the best.

His father always insisted photos would provide dangerous links, as if he’d been preparing them from the beginning to split up. Or preparing them for his death.

Not the normal way for a kid to live, but they weren’t a regular family. He’d grown accustomed to it eventually...until it almost seemed normal. Until he was faced with a regular person’s life, like Shannon’s treasured photos of her son.

He broke off another inch of a churro. His hand slowed halfway to his mouth as he got that feeling of “being watched.” He checked right fast—

Kolby stood in the open doorway, blanket trailing from his fist.

Uh, okay. So now what? He’d only met the child a few times before last night and none had gone particularly well. Tony had chalked it up to Kolby being shy around strangers or clingy. Judging by the thrust of his little jaw and frown now, there was no mistaking it. The boy didn’t like him.

That needed to change. “Hey, kiddo. Where’s your mom?”

Kolby didn’t budge. “Still sleepin’.”

Breaking the ice, Vernon tugged out a chair. “Wanna have a seat and join us?”

Never taking his eyes off Tony, Kolby padded across the tile patio and scrambled up to sit on his knees. Silently, he simply blinked and stared with wide blue-gray eyes just like Shannon’s, his blond hair spiking every which way.

Vernon wiped his mouth, tossed his linen napkin on the plate and stood. “Thanks for the chow. I need to check on business. No need to see me out.”

As his old friend deserted ship, unease crawled around inside Tony’s gut. His experience with children was nonexistent, even when he’d been a kid himself. He and his brothers had been tutored on the island. They’d been each other’s only playmates.

The island fortress had been staffed with security guards, not the mall cop sort, but more like a small deployed military unit. Cleaning staff, tutors, the chef and groundskeepers were all from San Rinaldo, older supporters of his father who’d lost their families in the coup. They shared a firm bond of loyalty, and a deep-seated need for a safe haven.

Working on the shrimp boat had felt like a vacation, with the wide open spaces and no boundaries. Most of all he enjoyed the people who didn’t wear the imprint of painful loss in their eyes.

But still, there weren’t any three-year-olds on the shrimp boat.

What did kids need? “Are you hungry?”

“Some of that.” Kolby pointed to Tony’s plate of churros. “With peanut butter.”

Grateful for action instead of awkward silence, he shoved to his feet. “Peanut butter it is then. Follow me.”

Once he figured out where to look. He’d quit cooking for himself about ten years ago and the few years he had, he wasn’t whipping up kiddie cuisine.

About seven minutes later he unearthed a jar from the cavernous pantry and smeared a messy trail down a churro before chunking the spoon in the sink.

Kolby pointed to the lid on the granite countertop. “We don’t waste.”

“Right.” Tony twisted the lid on tight. Thinking of Shannon pinching pennies on peanut butter, for crying out loud, he wanted to buy them a lifetime supply.

As he started to pass the plate to Kolby, a stray thought broadsided him. Hell. Was the kid allergic to peanuts? He hadn’t even thought to ask. Kolby reached. Tony swallowed another curse.

“Let’s wait for your mom.”

“Wait for me why?” Her softly melodic voice drifted over his shoulder from across the kitchen.

He glanced back and his heart kicked against his ribs. They’d slept together over the past month but never actually slept. And never through the night.

Damn, she made jeans look good, the washed pale fabric clinging to her long legs. Her hair flowed over her shoulders and down her back, still damp from a shower. He remembered well the silky glide of it through his fingers...and so not something he should be thinking about with her son watching.

Tony held up the plate of churros. “Can he eat peanut butter?”

“He’s never tried it that way before, but I’m sure he’ll like it.” She slipped the dish from his grip. “Although, I’m not so certain that breakable stoneware is the best choice for a three-year-old.”

“Hey, kiddo, is the plate all right with you?”

“S okay.” Kolby inched toward his mother and wrapped an arm around her leg. “Like trains better. And milk.”

“The milk I can handle.” He yanked open the door on the stainless-steel refrigerator and reached for the jug. “I’ll make sure you have the best train plates next time.”

“Wait!” Shannon stopped him, digging into an oversized bag on her shoulder and pulling out a cup with a vented lid. “Here’s his sippy cup. It’s not Waterford, but it works better.”

Smoothly, she filled it halfway and scooped up the plate. Kolby held on to his mother all the way back to the patio.

For the first time he wondered why he hadn’t spent more time with the boy. Shannon hadn’t offered and he hadn’t pushed. She sat and pulled Kolby onto her lap, plate in front just out of his reach. The whole family breakfast scenario wrapped around him, threatening his focus. He skimmed a finger along his shirt collar—Hell. He stopped short, realizing he wasn’t wearing a tie.

She pinched off a bite and passed it to her son. “I had a lot of time to think last night.”

So she hadn’t slept any better than he had. “What did you think about after I left?”

Her eyes shot up to his, pink flushing her face. “Going to see your father, of course.”

“Of course.” He nodded, smiling.

“Of course,” Kolby echoed.

As the boy licked the peanut butter off the churro, she traced the intricate pattern painted along the edge of the plate, frowning. “I would like to tell Vernon and your lawyer about our plans for the week and then I’ll come with you.”

He’d won. She would be safe, and he would have more time to sway her. Except it really chapped his hide that she trusted him so little she felt the need to log her travel itinerary. “Not meaning to shoot myself in the foot here, but why Vernon instead of my lawyer? Vernon is my friend. I financed his business.”

“You own the restaurant?” Her slim fingers gravitated back to the china. “You are responsible for my paychecks? I thought the Grille belonged to Vernon.”

“You didn’t know?” Probably a good thing or he might well have never talked her into that first date. “Vernon was a friend when I needed one. I’m glad I could return the favor. He’s more than delivered on the investment.”

“He gave you a job when your past must have seemed spotty,” she said intuitively.

“How did you figure that out?”

“He did the same for me when I needed a chance.” A bittersweet smile flickered across her face much like how the sunlight filtered through the lemon tree to play in her hair. “That’s the reason I trust him.”

“You’ve worked hard for every penny you make there.”

“I know, but I appreciate that he was fair. No handouts, and yet he never took advantage of how much I needed that job. He’s a good man. Now back to our travel plans.” She rested her chin on her son’s head. “Just to be sure, I’ll also be informing my in-laws—Kolby’s grandparents.”

His brows slammed upward. She rarely mentioned them, only that they’d cut her out of their lives after their son died. The fact that she would keep such cold fish informed about their grandson spoke of an innate sense of fair play he wasn’t sure he would have given in her position.

“Apparently you trust just about everyone more than me.”

She dabbed at the corners of her mouth, drawing his attention to the plump curve of her bottom lip. “Apparently so.”

Not a ringing endorsement of her faith in him, but he would take the victory and focus forward. Because before sundown, he would return to his father’s island home off the coast of Florida.

\* \* \*

She was actually in a private plane over...

Somewhere.

Since the window shades were closed, she had no idea whether they were close to land or water. So where were they? Once airborne, she’d felt the plane turn, but quickly lost any sense of whether they were going north or south, east or west. Although north was unlikely given he’d told her to pack for warm weather.

How far had they traveled? Tough to tell since she’d napped and she had no idea how fast this aircraft could travel. She’d been swept away into a world beyond anything she’d experienced, from the discreet impeccable service to the sleeping quarters already made up for her and Kolby on arrival. Questions about her food preferences had resulted in a five-star meal.

Shannon pressed a hand to her jittery stomach. God, she hoped she’d made the right decision. At least her son seemed oblivious to all the turmoil around them.

The cabin steward guided Kolby toward the galley kitchen with the promise of a snack and a video. As they walked toward the back, he dragged his tiny fingers along the white leather seats. At least his hands were clean.

But she would have to make a point of keeping sharp objects out of Kolby’s reach. She shuddered at the image of a silver taped X on the luxury upholstery.

Her eyes shifted to the man filling the deep seat across from her couch. Wearing gray pants and a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up, he focused intently on the laptop screen in front of him, seemingly oblivious to anyone around him.

She hated the claustrophobic feeling of needing his help, not to mention all the money hiding out entailed. Dependence made her vulnerable, something she’d sworn would never happen again. Yet here she was, entrusting her whole life to a man, a man who’d lied to her.

However, with her child’s well-being at stake, she couldn’t afford to say no.

More information would help settle the apprehension plucking at her nerves like heart strings. Any information, since apparently everything she knew about him outside of the bedroom was false. She hadn’t even known he owned the restaurant where she worked.

Ugh.

Of course it seemed silly to worry about being branded as the type who sleeps with the boss. Having an affair with a drop-dead sexy prince trumped any other gossip. “How long has it been since you saw your father?”

Tony looked up from his laptop slowly. “I left the island when I was eighteen.”

“Island?” Her hand grazed the covered window as she envisioned water below. “I thought you left San Rinaldo as a young boy.”

“We did.” He closed the computer and pivoted the chair toward her, stretching his legs until his feet stopped intimately close to hers. “I was five at the time. We relocated to another island about a month after we escaped.”

She scrunched her toes in her gym shoes. Her scuffed canvas was worlds away from his polished loafers and a private plane. And regardless of how hot he looked, she wouldn’t be seduced by the trappings of his wealth.

Forcing her mind back on his words rather than his body, she drew her legs away from him. Was the island on the east coast or west coast? Provided Enrique Medina’s compound was even near the U.S. “Your father chose an island so you and your brothers would feel at home in your new place?”

He looked at her over the white tulips centered on the cherry coffee table. “My father chose an island because it was easier to secure.”

Gulp. “Oh. Right.”

That took the temperature down more than a few degrees. She picked at the piping on the sofa.

Music drifted from the back of the plane, the sound of a new cartoon starting. She glanced down the walkway. Kolby was buckled into a seat, munching on some kind of crackers while watching the movie, mesmerized. Most likely by the whopping big flat screen.

Back to her questions. “How much of you is real and what’s a part of the new identity?”

“My age and birthday are real.” He tucked the laptop into an oversized briefcase monogrammed with the Castillo Shipping Corporation logo. “Even my name is technically correct, as I told you before. Castillo comes from my mother’s family tree. I took it as my own when I turned eighteen.”

Resting her elbow on the back of the sofa, she propped her head in her palm, trying her darnedest to act as casual as he appeared. “What does your father think of all you’ve accomplished since leaving?”

“I wouldn’t know.” He reclined, folding his hands over his stomach, drawing her eyes and memories to his rock-hard abs.

Her toes curled again until they cracked inside her canvas sneakers. “What does he think of us coming now?”

“You’ll have to ask him.” His jaw flexed.

“Did you even tell him about the extra guests?” She resisted the urge to smooth the strain away from the bunched tendons in his neck. How odd to think of comforting him when she still had so many reservations about the trip herself.

“I told his lawyer to inform him. His staff will make preparations. Kolby will have whatever he needs.”

Who was this coolly factual man a hand stretch away? She almost wondered if she’d imagined carefree Tony...except he’d told her that he liked to surf. She clung to that everyday image and dug deeper.

“Sounds like you and your father aren’t close. Or is that just the way royalty communicates?” If so, how sad was that?

He didn’t answer, the drone of the engines mingling with the cartoon and the rush of recycled air through the vents. While she wanted her son to grow up independent with a life of his own, she also planned to forge a bond closer than cold communications exchanged between lawyers and assistants.

“Tony?”

His eyes shifted to the shuttered window beside her head. “I didn’t want to live on a secluded island any longer. So I left. He disagreed. We haven’t resolved the issue.”

Such simple words for so deep a breach where attorneys handled all communiqués between them. The lack of communication went beyond distant to estrangement. This wasn’t a family just fractured by location. Something far deeper was wrong.

Tucking back into his line of sight, she pressed ahead. This man had already left such a deep imprint on her life, she knew she wouldn't forget him. "What have your lawyers told your father about Kolby and me? What did they tell your dad about our relationship?"

"Relationship?" He pinned her with his dark eyes, the intensity of his look—of him—reaching past the tulips as tangibly as if he'd taken that broad hand and caressed her. He was such a big man with the gentlest of touches.

And he was thorough. God, how he was thorough.

Her heart pounded in her ear like a tympani solo, hollow and so loud it drowned out the engines.

"Tony?" she asked. She wanted.

"I let him know that we're a couple. And that you're a widow with a son."

It was one thing to carry on a secret affair with him. Another to openly acknowledge to people—to family—that they were a couple.

She pressed hard against her collarbone, her pulse pushing a syncopated beat against her fingertips. "Why not tell your father the truth? That we broke up but the press won't believe it."

"Who says it's not the truth? We slept together just a week ago. Seems like less than that to me, because I swear I can still catch a whiff of your scent on my skin." He leaned closer and thumbed her wrist.

Her fingers curled as the heat of his touch spread farther. "But about last weekend—"

"Shanny." He tapped her lips once, then traced her rounded sigh. "We may have argued, but when I'm in the room with you, my hand still gravitates to your back by instinct."

Her heart drummed faster until she couldn't have responded even if she tried. But she wasn't trying, too caught up in the sound of him, the desire in his every word.

"The pull between us is that strong, Shannon, whether I'm deep inside you or just listening to you across a room." A half smile kicked a dimple into one cheek. "Why do you think I call you late at night?"

She glanced quickly at the video area checking to make sure her son and the steward were still engrossed in Disney, then she whispered, "Because you'd finished work?"

"You know better. Just the sound of you on the other end of the line sends me rock—"

"Stop, please." She pressed her fingers to his mouth. "You're only hurting us both."

Nipping her fingers lightly first, he linked his hand with hers. "We have problems, without a doubt, and you have reason to be mad. But the drive to be together hasn't eased one bit. Can you deny it? Because if you can, then that is it. I'll keep my distance."

Opening her mouth, she formed the words that would slice that last tie to the relationship they'd forged over the past few months. She fully intended to tell him they were through.... But nothing came out. Not one word.

Slowly, he pulled back. "We're almost there."

Almost where? Back together? Her mind scrambled to keep up with him, damn tough when he kept jumbling her brain. She was a flipping magna cum laude graduate. She resented feeling like a bimbo at the mercy of her libido. But how her libido sang arias around this man...

He shoved to his feet and walked away. Just like that, he cut their conversation short as if they both hadn't been sinking deep into a sensual awareness that had brought them both such intense pleasure in the past. She tracked the lines of his broad shoulders, down to his trim waist and taut butt showcased so perfectly in tailored pants.

Her fingers dug deep into the sofa with restraint. He stopped by Kolby and slid up the window covering.

"Take a look, kiddo, we're almost there." Tony pointed at the clear glass toward the pristine sky.

Ah. There. As in they'd arrived there, at his father's island. She'd been so caught up in the sensual draw of undiluted Tony that she'd temporarily forgotten about flying away to a mystery location.

Scrambling down the sofa, she straightened her glasses and stared out the window, hungry for a peek at their future—temporary—home. And yes, curious as hell about the place where Tony had grown up. Sure enough, an island stretched in the distance, nestled in miles and miles of sparkling ocean. Palm trees spiked from the lush landscape. A dozen or so small outbuildings dotted a semicircle around a larger structure.

The white mansion faced the ocean in a U shape, constructed around a large courtyard with a pool. She barely registered Kolby's "oohs" and "aahs" since she was pretty much overwhelmed by the sight herself.

Details were spotty but she would get an up-close view soon enough of the place Tony had called home for most of his youth. Even from a distance she couldn't miss the grand scale of the sprawling estate, the unmistakable sort that housed royalty.

The plane banked, lining up with a thin islet alongside the larger island. A single strip of concrete marked the private runway. As they neared, a ferryboat came into focus. To ride from the airport to the main island? They sure were serious about security.

The intercom system crackled a second before the steward announced, "We're about to begin our descent to our destination. Please return to your seats and secure your lap belts. Thank you, and we hope you had a pleasant flight."

Tony pulled away from the window and smiled at her again. Except now, the grin didn't reach his eyes. Her stomach fluttered, but this time with apprehension rather than arousal.

Would the island hold the answers she needed to put Tony in her past? Or would it only break her heart all over again?

## Chapter 5

Daylight was fading fast and a silence fourteen years old between him and his father was about to be broken.

Feet braced on the ferry deck, Tony stared out over the rail at the island where he'd spent the bulk of his childhood and teenage years. He hated not being in command of the boat almost as much as he hated returning to this place. Only concern for Shannon and her son could have drawn him back where the memories grew and spread as tenaciously as algae webbing around coral.

Just ahead, a black skimmer glided across the water, dipping its bill into the surface. With each lap of the waves against the hull, Tony closed off insidious emotions before they could take root inside him and focused on the shore.

An osprey circled over its nest. Palm trees lined the beach with only a small white stucco building and a two-lane road. Until you looked closer and saw the guard tower.

When he'd come to this island off the coast of St. Augustine at five, there were times he'd believed they were home...that his father had moved them to another part of San Rinaldo. In the darkest nights, he'd woken in a cold sweat, certain the soldiers in camouflage were going to cut through the bars on his windows and take him. Other nights he imagined they'd already taken him and the bars locked him in prison.

On the worst of nights, he'd thought his mother was still alive, only to see her die all over again.

Shannon's hand slid over his elbow, her touch tentative, her eyes wary. "How long did I sleep on the plane?"

"A while." He smiled to reassure her, but the feeling didn't come from his gut. Damn, but he wished the past week had never happened. He would pull her soft body against him and forget about everything else.

Wind streaked her hair across her face. "Oh, right. If you tell me, I might get a sense of how far away we are from Galveston. I might guess where we are. Being cut off from the world is still freaking me out just a little."

"I understand, and I'll do my best to set things right as soon as possible." He wanted nothing more than to get off this island and return to the life he'd built, the life he chose. The only thing that made coming back here palatable was having Shannon by his side. And that rocked the deck under his feet, realizing she held so much influence over his life.

"Although, I have to admit," she conceded as she tucked her son closer, "this place is so much more than I expected."

Her gaze seemed to track the herons picking their way along the shore, sea oats bowing at every gust. Her grayish-blue eyes glinted with the first hints of excitement. She must not have noticed the security cameras tucked in trees and the guard on the dock, a gun strapped within easy reach.

Tony gripped the rail tighter. "There's no way to prepare a person."

Kolby squealed, pitching forward in his mother's arms.

"Whoa..." Tony snagged the kid by the back of his striped overalls. "Steady there."

A hand pressed to her chest, Shannon struggled for breath. "Thank God you moved so fast. I can't believe I looked away. There's just so much to see, so many distractions."

The little guy scowled at Tony. "Down."

"Buddy," Tony stated as he shook his head, "sometime you're going to have to like me."

"Name's not buddy," Kolby insisted, bottom lip out.

"You're right. I'm just trying to make friends here." Because he intended to use this time to persuade Shannon breaking up had been a crappy idea. He wondered how much the child understood. Since he didn't know how else to approach him, he opted for straight up honesty. "I like your mom, so it's important that you like me."

Shannon's gasp teased his ear like a fresh trickle of wind off the water. As much as he wanted to turn toward her, he kept his attention on the boy.

Kolby clenched Tony's shirt. "Does you like me?"

"Uh, sure." The question caught him off guard. He hadn't thought about it other than knowing it was important to win the son over for Shannon's sake. "What do you like?"

"Not you." He popped his bottom lip back in. "Down, pwease."

Shannon caught her son as he leaned toward her. Confusion puckering her brow, her eyes held Tony's for a second before she pointed over the side. "Is that what you wanted to see, sweetie?"

A dolphin zipped alongside the ferry. The fin sliced through the water, then submerged again. Clapping his tiny hands, Kolby chanted, "Yes, yes, yes."

Again, Shannon saw beauty. He saw something entirely different. The dolphins provided port security. His father had gotten the idea from his own military service, cutting-edge stuff back then. The island was a minikingdom and money wasn't an object. Except this kingdom had substantially fewer subjects.

Tony wondered again if the secluded surroundings growing up could have played into his lousy track record with relationships as an adult. There hadn't been any teenage dating rituals for practice. And after he left, he'd been careful with relationships, never letting anything get too complicated. Work and a full social life kept him happy.

But the child in front of him made things problematic in a way he hadn't foreseen.

For years he'd been pissed off at his father for the way they'd had to live. And here he was doing the same to Kolby. The kid was entertained for the moment, but that would end fast for sure.

Protectiveness for both the mother and son seared his veins. He wouldn't let anything from the Medina past mark their future. Even if that meant he had to reclaim the very identity he'd worked his entire adulthood to shed.

The ferry slid against the dock. They'd arrived at the island.

And Prince Antonio Medina was back.

\* \* \*

What was it like for Tony to come back after so long away? And it wasn't some happy homecoming, given the estrangement and distance in this family that communicated through lawyers.

Shannon wanted to reach across the limousine to him, but Tony had emotionally checked out the moment the ferry docked. Of course he'd been Mr. Manners while leaving the ferry and stepping into the Mercedes limo.

Watch your step...Need help? However, the smiles grew darker by the minute.

Maybe it was her own gloomy thoughts tainting her perceptions. At least Kolby seemed unaffected by their moods, keeping his nose pressed to the window the whole winding way to the pristine mansion.

Who wouldn't stare at the trees and the wildlife and finally, the palatial residence? White stucco with a clay tiled roof, arches and opulence ten times over, the place was the size of some hotels or convention centers. Except no hotel she'd stayed in sported guards armed with machine guns.

What should have made her feel safer only served to remind her money and power didn't come without burdens. To think, Tony had grown up with little or no exposure to the real world. It was a miracle he'd turned out normal.

If you could call a billionaire prince with a penchant for surfing "normal."

The limousine slowed, easing past a towering marble fountain with a "welcome" pineapple on top—and wasn't that ironic in light of all those guards? Once the vehicle stopped, more uniformed security appeared from out of nowhere to open the limo. Some kind of servant—a butler perhaps—stood at the top of the stairs. While Tony had insisted he wanted nothing to do with his birthplace, he seemed completely at ease in this surreal world. For the first time, the truth really sunk in.

The stunningly handsome—stoically silent—man walking beside her had royal blood singing through his veins.

“Tony?” She touched his elbow.

“After you,” he said, simply gesturing ahead to the double doors sweeping open.

Scooping Kolby onto her hip, she took comfort in his sturdy little body and forged ahead. Inside. Whoa.

The cavernous circular hall sported gold-gilded archways leading to open rooms. Two staircases stretched up either side, meeting in the middle. And, uh, stop the world, was that a Picasso on the wall?

Her canvas sneakers squeaked against marble floors as more arches ushered her deeper into the mansion. And while she vowed money didn’t matter, she still wished she’d packed different shoes. Shannon straightened the straps on Kolby’s favorite striped overalls, the ones he swore choo-choo drivers wore. She’d been so frazzled when she’d tossed clothes into a couple of overnight bags, picking things that would make him happy.

Just ahead, French doors opened on to a veranda that overlooked the ocean. Tony turned at the last minute, guiding her toward what appeared to be a library. Books filled three walls, interspersed with windows and a sliding brass ladder. Mosaic tiles swirled outward on the floor, the ceiling filled with frescos of globes and conquistadors. The smell of fresh citrus hung in the air, and not just because of the open windows. A tall potted orange tree nestled in one corner beneath a wide skylight.

An older man slept in a wingback by the dormant fireplace. Two large brown dogs—some kind of Ridgeback breed, perhaps?—lounged to his left and right.

Tony’s father. A no-kidding king.

Either age or illness had taken a toll, dimming the family resemblance. But in spite of his nap, he wasn’t going gently into that good night. No slippers and robe for this meeting. He wore a simple black suit with an ascot rather than a tie, his silver hair slicked back. Frailty and his pasty pallor made her want to comfort him.

Then his eyes snapped open. The sharp gleam in his coal dark eyes stopped her short.

Holy Sean Connery, the guy might be old but he hadn’t lost his edge.

“Welcome home, hijo prodigo.” Prodigal son.

Enrique Medina spoke in English but his accent was still unmistakably Spanish. And perhaps a bit thick with emotion? Or was that just wishful thinking on her part for Tony’s sake?

“Hello, Papa.” Tony palmed her back between her shoulder blades. “This is Shannon and her son Kolby.”

The aging monarch nodded in her direction. “Welcome, to you and to your son.”

“Thank you for your hospitality and your help, sir.” She didn’t dare wade into the whole Your Highness versus Your Majesty waters. Simplicity seemed safest.

Toying with a pocket watch in his hand, Enrique continued, “If not for my family, you would not need my assistance.”

Tony’s fingers twitched against her back. “Hopefully we won’t have to impose upon you for long. Shannon and her son only need a place to lay low until this blows over.”

“It won’t blow over,” Enrique said simply.

Ouch. She winced.

Tony didn’t. “Poor choice of words. Until things calm down.”

“Of course.” He nodded regally before shifting his attention her way. “I am glad to have you here, my dear. You brought Tony home, so you have already won favor with me.” He smiled and for the first time, she saw the family resemblance clearly.

Kolby wriggled, peeking up from her neck. “Whatsa matter with you?”

“Shhh...Kolby.” She pressed a quick silencing kiss to his forehead. “That’s a rude question.”

“It’s an honest question. I do not mind the boy.” The king shifted his attention to her son. “I have been ill. My legs are not strong enough to walk.”

“I’m sorry.” Kolby eyed the wheelchair folded up and tucked discreetly alongside the fireplace. “You musta been bery sick.”

“Thank you. I have good doctors.”

“You got germs?”

A smile tugged at the stern face. “No, child. You and your mother cannot catch my germs.”

“That’s good.” He stuffed his tiny fists into his pockets. “Don’t like washin’ my hands.”

Enrique laughed low before his hand fell to rest on one dog’s head. “Do you like animals?”

“Yep.” Kolby squirmed downward until Shannon had no choice but to release him before he pitched out of her arms. “Want a dog.”

Such a simple, painfully normal wish and she couldn’t afford to supply it. From the pet deposit required at her apartment complex to the vet bills...It was out of her budget. Guilt tweaked again over all she couldn’t give her child.

Yet hadn’t Tony been denied so much even with such wealth? He’d lost his home, his mother and gained a gilded prison. Whispers of sympathy for a motherless boy growing up isolated from the world softened her heart when she most needed to hold strong.

Enrique motioned Kolby closer. “You may pet my dog. Come closer and I will introduce you to Benito and Diablo. They are very well trained and will not hurt you.”

Kolby didn’t even hesitate. Any reservations her son felt about Tony certainly didn’t extend to King Enrique—or his dogs. Diablo sniffed the tiny, extended hand.

A cleared throat startled Shannon from her thoughts. She glanced over her shoulder and found a young woman waiting in the archway. In her late twenties, wearing a Chanel suit, she obviously wasn’t the housekeeper.

But she was stunning with her black hair sleeked back in a simple clasp. She wore strappy heels instead of sneakers. God, it felt silly to be envious of someone she didn’t know, and honestly, she only coveted the pretty red shoes.

“Alys,” the older man commanded, “enter. Come meet my son and his guests. This is my assistant, Alys Reyes de la Cortez. She will show you to your quarters.”

Shannon resisted the urge to jump to conclusions. It wasn’t any of her business who Enrique Medina chose for his staff and she shouldn’t judge a person by their appearance. The woman was probably a rocket scientist, and Shannon wouldn’t trade one single sticky hug from her son for all the high-end clothes on the planet.

Not that she was jealous of the gorgeous female with immaculate clothes, who fit perfectly into Tony’s world. After all, he hadn’t spared more than a passing glance at the woman.

Still, she wished she’d packed a pair of pumps.

\* \* \*

An hour later, Shannon closed her empty suitcases and rocked back on her bare heels in the doorway of her new quarters.

A suite?

More like a luxury condominium within the mansion. She sunk her toes into the Persian rug until her chipped pink polish disappeared in the apricot-and-gray pattern. She and Kolby had separate bedrooms off a sitting area with an eating space stocked more fully than most kitchens. The balcony was as large as some yards.

Had the fresh-cut flowers been placed in here just for her? She dipped her face into the crystal vase of lisianthus with blooms that resembled blue roses and softened the gray tones in the decor.

After Alys had walked them up the lengthy stairs to their suite, Kolby had run from room to room for fifteen minutes before winding down and falling asleep in an exhausted heap under the covers. He hadn’t even noticed the toy box at the end of his sleigh bed yet, he’d been so curious about their new digs. Tony had given them space while she unpacked, leaving for his quarters with a simple goodbye and another of those smiles that didn’t reach his eyes.

The quiet echoed around her, leaving her hyperaware of other sounds...a ticking grandfather clock in the hall...the crashing ocean outside...Trailing her fingers along the camelback sofa, she looked through the double doors, moonlight casting shadows along her balcony. Her feet drew her closer until the shadows took shape into the broad shoulders of a man leaning on the railing.

Tony? He felt like a safe haven in an upside-down day. But how had he gotten there without her noticing his arrival?

Their balconies must connect, which meant someone had planned for them to have access to each other's rooms. Had he been waiting for her? Anticipation hummed through her at the notion of having him all to herself.

Shannon unlocked and pushed open the doors to the patio filled with topiaries, ferns and flowering cacti. A swift ocean breeze rolled over her, lifting her hair and fluttering her shirt along her skin in whispery caresses. God, she was tired and emotional and so not in the right frame of mind to be anywhere near Tony. She should go to bed instead of staring at his sinfully sexy body just calling to her to rest her cheek on his back and wrap her arms around his waist. Her fingers fanned against her legs as she remembered the feel of him, so much more intense with his sandalwood scent riding the wind.

Need pooled warm and languid and low, diluting her already fading resistance.

His shoulders bunched under his starched white shirt a second before he glanced over his shoulder, his eyes haunted. Then they cleared. "Is Kolby asleep?"

"Yes, and thank you for all the preparations. The toys, the food...the flowers."

"All a part of the Medina welcome package."

"Perhaps." But she'd noticed a few too many of their favorites for the choices to have been coincidental. She moved forward hesitantly, the tiles cool against the bottoms of her feet. "This is all...something else."

"Leaving San Rinaldo, we had to downsize." He gave her another of those dry smiles.

More sympathy slid over her frustration at his secrets. "Thank you for bringing us here. I know it wasn't easy for you."

"I'm the reason you have to hide out in the first place until we line up protection for you. Seems only fair I should do everything in my power to make this right."

Her husband had never tried to fix any of his mistakes, hadn't even apologized after his arrest in the face of irrefutable evidence. She couldn't help but appreciate the way Tony took responsibility. And he cared enough to smooth the way for her.

"What about you?" She joined him at the swirled iron railing. "You wouldn't have come here if it weren't for me. What do you hope to accomplish for yourself?"

"Don't worry about me." He leaned back on his elbows, white shirt stretching open at the collar to reveal the strong column of his neck. "I always look out for myself."

"Then what are you gaining?"

"More time with you, at least until the restraining order is in place." The heat of his eyes broadcast his intent just before he reached for her. "I've always been clear about how much I want to be with you, even on that first date when you wouldn't kiss me good-night."

"Is that why you chased me? Because I said no?"

"But you didn't keep saying no and still, here I am turned on as hell by the sound of your voice." He plucked her glasses off, set them aside and cradled her face in his palms. "The feel of your skin."

While he owned an empire with corporate offices that took up a bayside block, his skin still carried the calluses of the dockworker and sailor he'd been during his early adulthood. He was a man who certainly knew how to work with his hands. The rasp as he lightly caressed her cheekbones reminded her of the sweet abrasion when he explored farther.

He combed through along her scalp, strands slithering across his fingers. "The feel of your hair."

A moan slipped past her lips along with his name, "Tony..."

“Antonio,” he reminded her. “I want to hear you say my name, know who’s here with you.”

And in this moment, in his eyes, he was that foreign prince, less accessible than her Tony, but no less exciting and infinitely as irresistible, so she whispered, “Antonio.”

His touch was gentle, his mouth firm against hers. She parted her lips under his and invited in the familiar sweep, taste and pure sensation. Clutching his elbows, she swayed, her breasts tingling, pulling tight. Before she could think or stop herself, she brushed slightly from side to side, increasing the sweet pleasure of his hard chest teasing her. His hard thigh between her legs.

She stepped backward.

And tugged him with her.

Toward the open French doors leading into her bedroom, her body overriding her brain as it always seemed to do around Tony. She squeezed her legs together tighter against the firm pressure of his muscled thigh, so close, too close. She wanted, needed to feel him move inside her first.

Sinking her fingernails deeper, she ached to ask him to stay with her, to help her forget the worries waiting at home. “Antonio—”

“I know.” He eased his mouth from hers, his chin scraping along her jaw as he nuzzled her hair and inhaled. “We need to stop.”

Stop? She almost shrieked in frustration. “But I thought... I mean, you’re here and usually when we let things go this far, we finish.”

“You’re ready to resume our affair?”

Affair. Not just one night, one satisfaction, but a relationship with implications and complications. Her brain raced to catch up after being put on idle while her body took over. God, what had she almost done? A few kisses along with a well-placed thigh, and she was ready to throw herself back in his bed.

Planting her hands on his chest, she stepped away. “I can’t deny that I miss you and I want you, but I have no desire to be labeled a Medina mistress.”

His eyebrows shot up toward his hairline. “Are you saying you want to get married?”

## Chapter 6

“Married?” Shannon choked on the word, her eyes so wide with shock Tony was almost insulted. “No! No, definitely not.”

Her instant and emphatic denial left zero room for doubt. She wasn’t expecting a proposal. Good thing, since that hadn’t crossed his mind. Until now.

Was he willing to go that far to protect her?

She turned away fast, her hands raised as she raced back into the sitting area. “Tony—Antonio—I can’t talk to you, look at you, risk kissing you again. I need to go to bed. To sleep. Alone.”

“Then what do you want from me?”

“To end this craziness. To stop thinking about you all the time.”

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