



Caitlin Crews
SECRETS OF HIS
Forbidden
CINDERELLA

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MODERN

CAITLIN CREWS

Secrets Of His Forbidden Cinderella

Аннотация

Cinderella's scandalous secret Their forbidden passion had consequences! Overwhelming. Irresistible. Off-limits. Teo de Luz was all those things to innocent Amelia. Until she attends his opulent masquerade ball, and they share a deliciously anonymous encounter! Now Amelia must tell this brooding Spaniard he's the father of her unborn child. Teo can't forget his runaway Cinderella, but discovering her true identity stuns him. His loathing of Amelia's family means he cannot dismiss her deception! He will marry her. He will claim his heir. And he'll exact a sensual revenge on Amelia, one pleasurable night at a time...

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USA TODAY bestselling and RITA® Award-nominated author **CAITLIN CREWS** loves writing romance. She teaches her favourite romance novels in creative writing classes at places like UCLA Extension's prestigious Writers' Programme, where she finally gets to utilise the MA and PhD in English Literature she received from the University of York in England. She currently lives in the Pacific Northwest, with her very own hero and too many pets. Visit her at caitlincrews.com.

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CHAPTER ONE

“HIS EXCELLENCY IS not at home, madam.” The butler sniffed, visibly appalled.

He did not so much bar the door to the grand and ancient palatial home as inhabit it, because such a glorious door—crafted by the hands of long-dead masters and gifted to the aristocratic occupants likely on bended knee and with the intercession of a heavenly host, because that was how things happened here in this fairy tale of a place that had claimed this part of Spain for many centuries—could not be blocked by a single person, no matter how officious or aghast.

And the butler was both, in spades. “One does not *drop in* on the Nineteenth Duke of Marinceli, Most Excellent Grandee of Spain.”

Amelia Ransom, considered excellent by her closest friends instead of an entire nation and with decidedly lowbrow peasant blood to prove it, made herself smile. Very much as if she hadn’t, in fact, turned up at the door of a house so imposing that it was unofficially known as *el monstruo*—even by its occupants. “I know for a fact that the Duke is in.”

An old acquaintance of hers still lived in one of the nearby villages—“nearby” meaning miles upon miles away because the Marinceli estate was itself so enormous—and had reported that the Duke’s plane had been seen flying overhead two days ago.

And that the flag with the Marinceli coat of arms had been raised over the house shortly thereafter, meaning the great man was in residence.

“You mistake my meaning,” the butler replied, his deep, cavernous face set in lines of affront and indignation that should have made Amelia slink off in shame. And might have, had she been here for any reason at all but the one she’d come to share with Teo de Luz, her former stepbrother and the grandiose Duke in question. “His Excellency is most certainly not at home to you.”

It was tempting to take that as the final word on the matter. Amelia would have been just as happy not to have to make this trip in the first place. It had been a gruesome red-eye flight out of San Francisco to Paris, particularly in the unappealing seat that had been all she could get on short notice. The much shorter flight to Madrid had been fine, but then there was the drive out of the city and into the rolling hills where the de Luz family had been rooted deep for what might as well have been forever, at this point.

“I think you’ll find he’ll see me,” Amelia said, with tremendous confidence brought on by fatigue. And possibly by fear of her reception—and not from the butler. She stared back at the man with his ruffled feathers and astonished air, who did not look convinced. “Really. Ask him.”

“That is utterly out of the question,” the butler retorted, in freezing tones. “I cannot fathom how you made it onto the

property in the first place. Much less marched up to pound on the door like some... salesman.”

He spat out that last word as if a salesman was akin to syphilis. Only far more unsavory.

If only he knew the sort of news Amelia had come to impart. She imagined he would cross himself. Possibly spit on the ground. And she could sympathize.

She felt much the same way.

“I expect you go to great lengths to keep the Duke’s many would-be suitors from clamoring at the door,” she said brightly, as if the butler had been kind and welcoming or open to conversation in any way. “He must be the most eligible man in the world by now.”

She’d personally witnessed the commotion Teo caused when enterprising women got the scent of him, long before he’d assumed his title. That was why she hadn’t even bothered attempting to get in the main gates, miles away from the front entrance of the stately home that was more properly a palace. The grand entrance and gates were guarded by officious security who could be reliably depended upon to let absolutely no one in. Amelia had therefore driven in on one of the forgotten little medieval lanes that snaked around from the farthest corner of the great estate, there for the use of the gamekeeper and his staff. Then she’d left her hired car near the lake that had been a favorite reading spot of hers back in the day.

That way she could walk to clear her head from the flight and

so little sleep, prepare herself for the scene before her with Teo and best of all, actually make it to the soaring front door that would not have looked out of place on a cathedral. Her car would have been stopped. A woman on foot was less noticeable. That was her thinking.

She hadn't really thought past getting to the door, however, and she should have.

The butler was slipping a sleek smartphone from the pocket of his coat, no doubt to summon the security force to bodily remove her. Which would not suit her at all.

"I'm not another of Teo's many groupies," Amelia said, and something flashed in her at that. Because that wasn't *precisely* true, was it? Not after what she'd done. "I'm his stepsister."

The butler did not do anything so unrefined as *sneer* at her for the unpardonable sin of referring to Teo by not only his Christian name, but a nickname. He managed to look down his nose, however, as if the appendage was the highest summit in the Pyrenees.

"The Duke is not in possession of a stepsister, madam."

"Former stepsister," Amelia amended. "Though some bonds far exceed a single marriage, don't they?"

Her smile faded a bit as the butler stared down at her as if she was a talking rat. Or some other bit of vermin that didn't know its place.

"I doubt very much that His Excellency recognizes *bonds* of any description," the butler clipped out. His expression suggested

Amelia had offended him, personally, by suggesting otherwise. “His familial connections tend toward the aristocratic if not outright royal and are all rather distant. They are recorded in every detail. And no *stepsisters* appear in any of these official records.”

Amelia pressed her advantage, scant though it was. “But you don’t know how Teo feels about members of the various blended families his father made while he was still alive and marrying, do you? Do you really dare send me away without finding out?”

And for a long moment, they only stared at each other. Each waiting to call the other’s bluff.

Amelia wished that she’d stopped somewhere and freshened up. She’d dressed to impress precisely no one back in San Francisco many, many hours ago, and she was afraid that showed. She didn’t particularly care if Teo saw her looking ruffled, but butlers in places like this tended to be far more snobbish than their exalted employers. Her ratty old peacoat was a good barrier against the blustery cold of the January day. The jeans she’d slept in on the long flight from San Francisco were a touch too faded and shoutily American, now that she considered it in the pale Spanish morning. And the boots that hadn’t seemed to need a polish back home seemed desperately in need of one now, here on the gleaming marble stair that led inside the palatial house she still dreamed about, sometimes.

Because *el monstruo* was truly a fairy-tale castle, and then some. There were turrets and dramatic spires, wings sprouting

off this way and that, with pristine land rolling off on all sides toward the undeveloped horizon. Standing here, it was easy to imagine that the breathlessly blue-blooded family that had lived here for the better part of European history was the only family that had ever existed, anywhere.

The de Luzes would no doubt agree.

Of all her mother's husbands—all the titled gentlemen, the courtiers with hints of royalty, the celebrities and the politicians who had found themselves charmed and captivated and discarded in turn by the notorious Marie French—none had impressed themselves on Amelia as much as Luis Calvo, the Eighteenth Duke of Marinceli. Teo's father, whom Marie had pursued, caught and then inevitably lost over the course of a few whirlwind years when Amelia was still a teenager.

As formative experiences went, finding herself thrust into the middle of a world like the de Luzes', so excruciatingly exclusive, deeply moneyed and aristocratic that they might as well have lived on another planet altogether—and for all intents and purposes, did—had been as ruinous as it had been exhilarating. Marie had always preferred rich men. But add together every conventionally rich man in the world and it would still barely scratch the surface of the de Luz fortune. And the nineteen generations of power and influence that infused it, expanded it and solidified it.

Amelia had not recovered as quickly from this marriage as she had from the others her mother had subjected her to over

the years. Or from this *place*. And most of all, she had never quite gotten over the man who lived here now, his father dead and gone. And when she'd belatedly performed a much-needed exorcism to get rid of the hold those years kept on her, she'd soon discovered that she'd created a far bigger problem.

You've come here to create a solution, she reminded herself primly.

Not that it would matter why she'd come if she couldn't get in the door.

Teo de Luz—once her forbidding, stern and usually outright hostile stepbrother, now the latest Duke in a line so long and storied she'd once heard giddy society types braying to each other that the de Luz family was, in fact, *Spain itself*—wasn't the sort of man who could be waylaid. There were no accidental meetings with him in local coffee shops; he owned half the coffee farms in Kenya. He did not frequent public gyms or lower himself to the questionable hospitality of bars or restaurants accessible to the hoi polloi. He had chauffeurs. Private jets. Shops closed to accommodate him, restaurants offered him their private rooms, and he stayed in secluded villas in the few locations where he did not hold property, never public hotels.

The sorts of places he went for fun didn't bother to put names on the doors. You either knew where they were, or you didn't. You were either in the club, or you were out.

If you had to ask, you didn't belong.

Amelia was sure that if she looked closely at the de Luz coat

of arms, that's what it would read.

As the daughter of Marie French, Amelia had grown up *close to* a lot of money, but never *of* it. Her mother was famous for her many divorces, and she'd certainly gathered herself a tidy sum from various payouts—alimony, divorce settlements, baubles and properties that had been showered upon her by this lover or that—but the kind of wealth and power that the de Luz family had in spades and demonstrated so decidedly here wasn't the sort that could be amassed by one person. Or within one lifetime.

It would take twenty generations to even make a dent.

If Amelia could turn back the clock and make all of this go away, she would. If she could reach back these few, crucial months and slap some sense into herself long before she'd had her brilliant idea at the end of the summer, she'd swing hard. Her palms itched at the notion.

But wishing didn't change the facts.

“Please tell Teo that it's me,” she said sunnily to the dour man towering over her, possibly prepared to stand right where he was for another twenty generations. She smiled as if he'd already agreed. “Amelia. His favorite stepsister.”

She was fairly certain she was not Teo's favorite anything, but that wasn't something she planned to share. And for another long, tense moment, there on the front step where she could feel the winter wind bite at her, Amelia thought that the butler would slam the door in her face and let the estate's security detail sort

her out.

A part of her hoped he would. Because surely, if she'd gone to all the trouble to fly herself to Spain, turn up on his doorstep and *try* to tell him what she needed to tell him, that was enough. Above and beyond the call of duty, really.

She could only do so much, after all. It wasn't *her* fault the man chose to barricade himself away like this.

He wasn't barricaded away last fall, a voice inside her that she was terribly afraid was her conscience chimed in.

It had been late September when she'd found her way here last. She'd come under the cover of darkness, blending in with the extensive crowds who flocked to the estate for the Marinceli Masquerade that took place every fall to commemorate the birthday of the long-dead Tenth Duke. It was a glittering, diamond-edged fantasy that had been going on in one form or another for three hundred years. Amelia had come with such a different purpose then. It had been her one opportunity to enact her exorcism, and she had dedicated herself to the task. She had dressed like a stranger and had even gone so far as to dye her hair and wear colored contacts. Because she had her mother's violet eyes, and people did tend to remember them.

And she'd spent the months since congratulating herself on a job well done. Sometimes immersion therapy was the only way to go. Even when she'd understood what she'd inadvertently done, she hadn't regretted what she'd done—only what the result of it would ask of her.

But today, it was creeping toward midday, and the weather was raw. This part of Spain was covered in a brooding winter storm that had made her drive from Madrid dicey. Particularly when she'd skirted around the mountains—the snow-covered peaks of which she could feel, now, in the frigid wind that gusted at her as she waited for the butler's decision.

She didn't particularly relish repeating that drive, especially without getting what she'd come for here. But she would do it if necessary. And then she would hole up in a hotel somewhere and either try to come up with a new plan to find Teo and speak to him, or she would simply go back home and get on with this new life of hers.

She was giving herself a little pep talk about what that would look like when the butler stepped back, and inclined his head.

Very, very slightly. Grudgingly, even.

"If madam will wait here," he said, beckoning her inside to what she supposed was the foyer. Though it bore no resemblance to any other foyer Amelia had ever seen.

It always seemed to her like its own ballroom, dizzy with chandeliers, mosaic-worked mirrors and statuary clearly meant to intimidate. This was not a stately home built to offer invitations. Quite the opposite. It had been, variously, a fortress, stronghold, the seat of a revolution, a bolt-hole for a deposed king, the birthplace of a queen and a long list of other dramatic accomplishments that Amelia had spent two very long, very lonely winters studying. Right here in the vast library that

soared up three floors, commanded its own wing and was more extensive than many university collections.

Amelia smiled at the butler, though she could admit it was mostly saccharine, as he shut the heavy door behind her.

He did not return the favor.

He indicated a stone bench against the wall and waited until Amelia sat.

“This is a private home, madam, not a museum,” he intoned. At her. “It is certainly not open to spontaneous visits from the public. Please respect the Duke’s wishes and stay right here. Do not move. Do not explore. Do you understand?”

“Of course,” Amelia said, frowning slightly, as if wandering off into the house where she’d once lived had never occurred to her.

Then again, the last time she’d actually lived here had been ten years ago and she hadn’t felt free to wander gaily about the place then, either. That she was unwelcome here had been made very clear. From Teo, certainly, if not from his distant father, who had been interested only in his scandalous new wife. And certainly from the legion of staff who were possessed of their own opinions about the notorious Marie French as their new mistress. Her teenage daughter had been, at best, a casualty of that war.

Or anyway, that was how Amelia had always felt.

And always stern, usually visibly horrified Teo, with those simmering black eyes, that blade of an aristocratic nose and that

cruelly sensual mouth that haunted her dreams in ways that only made sense later—

Well. That had never helped.

The Amelia who had been so bent on exorcism would have launched herself into action even as the butler's footsteps faded away, echoing off into the maw of the great house that stood proud around her. That version of herself had been deeply committed to reclaiming her life. To making something she wanted out of the things she'd been given and the things that had been pressed upon her, one way or another.

She really had made huge changes in her life last summer. She had settled in San Francisco, for one thing. No longer did she travel about with her mother, forced to act in all kinds of roles that only put strain on their already unconventional relationship.

Her first attempt at setting healthy boundaries with Marie had come when Amelia had insisted on going to college, an enterprise that her mother had found amusing at best and actively baffling at worst.

“There's only one school that matters, silly girl,” Marie had said, laughing wildly in that sultry way of hers that Amelia had watched pull men to her from across vast ballrooms. “We call it Hard Knocks University and guess what? Tuition's free.”

Unlike many women who, like Marie, married and divorced with the pinpoint accuracy of an expert marksman, Marie had always delighted in the fact that she'd produced a child. But then, that was the thing the dismissive, disparaging tabloids had never

understood about her. Was she a gold digger? Almost certainly. But she was also earthy, charming and frequently delightful. She collected husbands because she fell for them, spent their money because she only fell for wealthy ones and moved on when she was bored. She'd made it her life's work. And yet many of her discarded ex-lovers still chased after her, desperate for another taste.

Amelia never knew if she admired her mother or despaired of her.

"I don't think a life of ease, cushioned by alimony payments from some of the richest men alive, constitutes the school of hard knocks," Amelia had replied drily.

Marie had thrown up her hands. Literally. And Amelia had gotten her first taste of victory.

She had loved college. She had hidden away in Boston for four wonderful years. She'd walked along the Charles. She'd spent lazy, pretty afternoons on the Common. She'd taken trips on the weekend down to the Cape or explored the out-of-the-way harbors that dotted the rocky Maine coast. She'd camped in the Berkshires. She'd hiked through the turning leaves in the New England fall, gotten maple syrup straight from the tap in Vermont and had stayed in stark farmhouses that reminded her of Edith Wharton novels.

She had studied anthropology. Sociology. Poetry. Whatever took her fancy as well as the finance and business courses that gave her a solid foundation to best serve her mother's needs. And

for four glorious years, she'd been nothing more and nothing less than another college student in one of the best college towns in existence.

After graduation, she'd gone straight back to the job she'd been preparing for all her life. Her mother's personal assistant, financial manager, moving specialist and far-too-often on-call therapist.

It was that last part that got old, and fast. Last June, Amelia had decided that she was never going to live her own life if she was too busy parsing every detail of Marie's. That was when she'd decided that of all the places she'd been, she could most see herself living in beautiful San Francisco.

"But I almost never go to San Francisco," Marie had protested. And she'd laughed when Amelia only stared back at her blandly. "Fair enough."

Her summer in San Francisco had felt like the life Amelia had always wanted. She was twenty-six years old. The perfect age, or so it seemed to her, to be on her own in a marvelous, magical city. She could handle her mother's affairs from afar, and did, and only rarely had to fly off to sort out whatever disaster her mother had created across the world somewhere.

Amelia had even decided that she might as well start dating. Because that was what normal people did, according to her friends. They did something other than marry in haste, then repent in the presence of swathes of legal teams, the better to iron out advantageous financial settlements.

But a funny thing happened every time Amelia had tried to lose herself in the moment and let passion—or a third glass of wine—sweep her away. Not that there was much *sweeping*. If she let a date kiss her, and even if she enjoyed it, the same thing happened every time.

Sooner or later, instead of getting excited about her date, she would find herself imagining simmering black eyes. That impossible blade of a nose that gave him the haughty look of an ancient coin—ones that were likely made from the piles of gold the de Luz family hoarded.

And that stern, sensual mouth that could only be Teo's.

Damn him.

The terrible truth she'd discovered last summer was that she couldn't seem to get past her once-upon-a-time stepbrother. And she might not have thought of the Masquerade, but she'd been in Europe anyway. Marie had summoned Amelia to attend to her as she'd exited one love affair and started another in Italy. And somehow, while moving Marie's things from one jaw-dropping Amalfi Coast villa to another, Amelia had started thinking about the Marinceli Masquerade at *el monstruo*. Filled with people in the September night, all of them draped in masks and costumes as they danced away the last of summer the way they'd been doing for generations.

Surely it was the perfect opportunity to get that man, her former stepbrother who took up too much space in her head, out of her system. Once and for all. Because Amelia felt certain that

in order to have that normal life she wanted, she really might like to do more than kiss a man someday.

That meant she was going to have to *contend with* Teo.

And once the notion had taken hold, Amelia couldn't seem to think about anything else.

But then, the funny thing about life was that there were always so many different and unexpected ways to repent a moment of haste. Her childhood had taught her that. Her mother was the poster girl for repenting over the course of years and through lawsuits, some brought against her by the angry heirs of men who had attempted to win her favor via excessive bequests.

In Amelia's case, it wasn't a single moment she needed to repent. More like a stolen, astonishing hour.

As soon as she could breathe again, she'd crept out one of the many side doors in this monstrosity of a private palace. She had fled under cover of darkness and she had never meant to return.

Therefore, naturally, here she was. A little more than three months later, sitting on a hard stone bench surrounded by grimacing old statues that glared down at her in judgment. As if they knew exactly what she'd done and resented her for her temerity.

"You and me both," she muttered at them.

And regretted it when her voice seemed to roll out before her, tumbling deep into the quiet depths of the house.

Of course, the historic seat of the Marinceli empire wasn't simply *quiet*. It was self-consciously, dramatically *hushed*. Not

the sort of sound that came from emptiness or neglect, but was instead one more marker of impossible wealth. Wealth, consequence and a power so deep and so vast it stretched back centuries and more to the point, infused the very stones in the ceilings and the walls.

If a person really listened, they could *hear* all that might and glory in the lush quiet, even sitting still in the foyer, as directed.

Amelia unbuttoned her coat, letting the heavier flaps fall to her sides. She'd learned a long time ago that there was no point competing in places or situations like this. She was always so obviously and irrevocably American, for one thing. That she would therefore be considered gauche and inappropriate by a certain set of Europeans was understood. And no matter what she wore or how she comported herself, or even if she adopted excruciatingly correct manners, she would always be seen through the lens of her mother. So she'd learned long time ago that she might as well stop trying to convince anyone otherwise.

Things that couldn't be changed, Amelia had found, could often be fashioned into weapons.

From far off, she heard the sounds of approaching footsteps, and braced herself. She held her breath—

But it was only the butler again. He appeared before her, gazing at her with suspicion, as if he expected to find her cutting the paintings out of their frames and stuffing them down the back of her jeans. Amelia smiled. Widely.

If anything, that seemed to horrify him more. She could tell by the way his chin seemed to recede into his neck.

“If you will follow me,” he said, every syllable dripping with disapproval. “The Duke is a very important man. He is excessively busy. You will do well to bear in mind the compliment it is that he has chosen to carve out a few moments to entertain this untoward and wholly discourteous appearance of yours.”

“I’ll be sure to thank him,” Amelia said, rising to her feet. The butler only stared back at her. “Profusely.”

But the added word didn’t seem to help. The butler turned on his heel and stalked off. Amelia followed, impressed against her will at the sheer umbrage he managed to carry in his shoulders.

He led her through the great hall, then off into the long gallery that connected the main part of the house to some of its seemingly haphazard wings. It was thick with portraits of black-eyed, haughty-looking men in a variety of historical outfits. She had been in the same gallery before, as an obsessed sixteen-year-old, tracking the evolution of Teo’s features through ages and ancestors.

Today she found it wasn’t Teo’s features she was thinking of, or not entirely. She was trying to imagine all these fierce old aristocrats combined with her, and coming away with nothing much besides a wholly unwelcome stab of guilt. She did her best to swallow that down as they left the gallery and moved farther into the labyrinth of the grand house.

All the rooms they passed were the same. Everything gleamed, a beacon of understated, exceptional taste. There were no knickknacks. No personal items. No shoes kicked beneath a couch or empty mugs on a table. Each room was arranged around a color scheme, or a view, or some other unifying notion. There were no antiques in the general sense. If she recalled correctly, every item in this house was priceless. Literally without price because any value attached would be too exorbitant. The house was filled with hand-selected, finely wrought pieces of art that had been presented to the family at one point or another by grateful, obsequious artisans and vassals and would-be allies.

The butler stopped, eventually, with the click of his heels and tilt of his head—both of which he managed to make an insult—before a door. Calculating quickly, Amelia figured that this must be the Duke's study. Ten years ago, Teo's father had spent his days here, conducting his business when he was at home. She'd had absolutely no occasion to venture to this part of the house, and after an initial introductory tour, hadn't.

It was only now, as the butler opened the door and ushered her inside, that she acknowledged the flutter in her belly. Not only acknowledged it, but accepted that she couldn't quite tell if it was anticipation, fear or a spicy little mix of both.

The door closed behind her with a quiet click that she felt was as passive-aggressive as the rest. But she had other things to think about.

Because this room, like every other room in this palace,

exuded magnificence, wealth and quiet elegance. It was its own little library, and “little” only in comparison with the grand one across the house. There was a fire in the hearth and gleaming bookshelves packed tight with books—and not in matching volumes, with gold-lettered spines, suggesting no one touched them. This was a working library. A personal collection, clearly. There were even photographs in frames on the shelves, almost as if a regular human lived here and collected memories as well as priceless objects. There was a surprising amount of light coming in from the winter day outside, through the glass dome atop the ceiling and more, through the glass doors that opened up over the gardens.

Amelia took all of that in, and then, slowly and carefully—as if it might hurt her, because she was terribly afraid it might—she let her eyes rest on the man who waited there. He leaned against the vast expanse of a very old, very beautiful antique desk that somehow managed to connote brooding masculinity and centuries of power in its lines.

Or maybe that was the man himself.

He was like a song that sang in her, that called the dawn, that changed the world.

Teo de Luz, once upon a time her stepbrother and now a far greater problem in her life, waited there as if he was one of the statues she'd seen in the hallways, crafted by old masters with decidedly famous and inspired hands. And this was not one of the few, very rare photographs of him that a person could find

if they deep-dived online. This was not the man she'd found at the Masquerade last September—masked, hidden and diluted in some way, she'd assured herself, even if his touch had not felt *diluted* in any way. This was not even the stepbrother she remembered from ten years ago.

Teo was older now. He was beautiful and he was ferocious, and it was truly awful, how a single man could seem as imposing and great as the ancient house they stood in.

And suddenly, Amelia was all too aware of every choice she'd made that had brought her here to stand before him. She felt as fatigued and threadbare as her jeans.

She ordered herself to speak, but when she lifted her chin to do so, she found herself...caught.

Because even here, in his own private library with the weak winter light pouring in and a fire crackling in a fireplace—all things which should have made this scene domestic and soft—Teo was something *more* than merely a man.

He was always bigger than she remembered. Taller, more solid. His shoulders were wide and the rest of him was long, lean, and she knew, now, that he was made entirely of muscle. Everywhere. His black eyes simmered, like his ancestors' out there in the long gallery, but she had somehow dimmed the effect of them in her mind. In person, he was electric. His hair was still inky black, close cropped, and she saw no hint of gray at his temples. He had those unfair cheekbones that might have seemed pretty were it not for the masculine heft of his nose, and

then, below, that sensuous, impossible mouth that made her feel flushed.

Especially because now she knew what he could do with it.

And she hadn't seen him clearly that night in September. That had been the point. She had been bold and daring, and he had responded with that brooding, overwhelming passion that had literally swept her off her feet. Into his arms, against a wall. And then, in a private salon, still dressed in their finery, with fabric pushed aside in haste and need.

Too much haste and need, it turned out.

Even though she had watched him roll on protection.

But now, he wore nothing to cover his face. And he wasn't smiling slightly, the way he had then. Those dark eyes of his weren't lit up with that particular knowing gleam that had turned her molten and soft.

On the contrary, his look was frigid. Stern and disapproving.

It made her remember—too late, always too late—that he wasn't simply a man. He was all the men who had come before him, too. He was the Duke, and the weight of that made him... colossal.

A decade ago, on the very rare occasions that he had looked at her at all, he had looked at her like this.

But it felt a lot worse now.

"This is a surprise," Teo said, with no preamble. "Not a pleasant one."

One of his inky brows rose, a gesture that he must have

inherited from the royal branch of his family tree, because it made Amelia want to genuflect. She did not.

“Hi, Teo,” she replied.

Foolishly.

“You will have to remind me of your name,” he said, and there was a gleam in his eyes now. It made her feel quivery in a completely different way. And she didn’t believe for a second that he didn’t know who she was. “I’m afraid that I did not retain the particulars of my father’s regrettable romantic choices.”

“I understand. I had to block out a whole lot of my mother’s marriages, too.”

A muscle worked in his lean, perfect jaw. “Allow me to offer a warning now, before this goes any further. If you have come here in some misguided attempt to extort money from me based upon an association I forgot before it ended, you will be disappointed. And as I cannot think of any other reason why you should intrude upon my privacy, I will have to ask you to leave.”

Amelia considered him. “You could have had the butler say that, surely.”

“I will admit to a morbid sense of curiosity.” His gaze swept over her. “And it is satisfied.” He didn’t wave a languid hand like a sulky monarch and still, he dismissed her. “You may go.”

Amelia ordered the part of her that wanted to obey him, automatically, to settle down. “You don’t want to hear why I’ve come?”

“I am certain I do not.”

“That will make it fast, then.”

Amelia could admit she felt...too much. Perhaps a touch of shame for having to come to him like this—especially after the last time she’d shown up here, uninvited. Her pulse kicked at her, making her feel...*fluttery*. And she was, embarrassingly, as molten and soft as if he’d smiled at her the way he had in September.

When he hadn’t ventured anywhere near a smile.

“Never draw out the ugly things,” Marie had always told her. “The quicker you get them over with, the more you can think about the good parts instead.”

Just do it, be done with it and go, she ordered herself.

And who cared if her throat was dry enough to start its own fire?

“I’m pregnant,” she announced into the intimidatingly, exultantly blue-blooded room. To a man who was all of that and more. “You’re the father. And before you tell me that’s impossible, I was at the Masquerade last fall and yes, I dyed my hair red.”

She could only describe the look on his face as a storm, so she hurried on.

“And because you asked, I’m Amelia Ransom. You really were my stepbrother way back when. I hope that doesn’t make this awkward.”

CHAPTER TWO

HIS EXCELLENCY MATEO ENRIQUE ARMANDO DE LUZ, Nineteenth Duke of Marinceli, Grandee of Spain, and a man without peer—by definition and inclination alike—did not care for American women in general or the loathsome, avaricious Marie French in particular. He had viewed her corruption of his once proud father as a personal betrayal, and had celebrated their inevitable divorce as if it were his own narrow escape from the grasping woman's mercenary clutches.

That his father had fallen for such a creature had been a deep humiliation Teo was terribly afraid stained him, too. They were de Luzes. They were not meant to topple before such crassness, much less *marry* it.

His father's subsequent wives had, at the very least, been from a certain swathe of European aristocracy. Only Marie Force had managed to tempt the Eighteenth Duke into breaking from centuries of tradition. Only her, a coarse and common woman whose gold digging had already been a thing of legend.

Teo was the only heir to dukedom that had never been polluted in living memory—until Marie.

By extension, Teo had never cared for Marie's daughter, either, with those same unearthly purple eyes that had always seemed to him a commentary on her character. Or decided lack thereof.

Even though Amelia had been little more than a child—*sixteen is not precisely a toddler*, came a contrary voice inside him that he chose to ignore—Teo had been certain her sins had been stamped upon her then, every new curve a bit of dark foreshadowing. With such a mother, she had only ever been destined to head in one direction.

“Pregnant,” he said, as if tasting the word.

“Coming up on eighteen weeks,” she replied, with rather appalling cheer. When he only gazed at her in disbelief, she continued. “If you count backward, you’ll find that it matches right up with the Masquerade.”

“Thank you, Miss Ransom,” Teo replied after a moment, in the frigid tones that usually made those around him quail, scrape and apologize. The woman standing just inside the door of his study looked notably unaffected. “I am capable of performing simple mathematical equations.”

All she did was smile. As if she doubted him, but was magnanimously keeping that opinion to herself.

It... irritated him. And Teo was rarely irritated by anything—because his life was arranged to avoid anything and anyone who might dare to annoy him in any way.

Perhaps he should have expected something like this. Pregnancy claims upon him were always and forever naked attempts to grab a chunk of the de Luz fortune and then bask in the glory of the many titles, honors and estates that went along with the name. It wasn’t really a surprise that this impertinent,

insolent creature of questionable parentage had developed ideas above her station when she'd spent those mercifully brief years thrust into the exalted realm of his family.

Teo understood it, on some level. Who wouldn't wish to be a de Luz?

Amelia Ransom, still cursed with those indecorous purple eyes, stood before him on a rug so old that its actual provenance was still hotly contested by the historians who periodically combed through the de Luz house and grounds and wrote operatic scholarly dissertations on the significance of the family collections. That she should be deeply shamed by her presence here—and the fact that the carpet beneath her feet boasted a pedigree while she did not—seemed not to have occurred to her.

Especially while she was issuing preposterous accusations. Involving fancy dress and dyed hair, of all things.

It was all so preposterous, in fact, that Teo could hardly rouse himself to reply further.

Because he was the current head of one of the most ancient houses in the world, and the favor of his time and good temper was not granted to any bedraggled creature who happened along and turned up at his door.

Not that many creatures, bedraggled or otherwise, usually dared “turn up” in his presence. Or managed to “happen along” in the first place even if they did dare, as he employed what he'd believed until now to be an excellent security service. He made a mental note to replace them. Before the next dawn.

And remembered as he did that Amelia's mother had been notable chiefly for the things she'd dared. All of which she'd gone ahead and executed without the faintest notion of her own gaucheness.

Hadn't he always known that her daughter would turn out just like her?

"I've learned many things since September," said the creature before him. He had recognized her on sight, of course, though he had not intended to gift her with that knowledge. Because she should have assumed that she was entirely unworthy of his notice and his memory alike. Instead, she was talking at him in that same offensively *friendly* voice that made him think of overly bright, manic toothpaste commercials. "One of them—which you would think ought to go without saying—is don't disguise yourself and have relations with your former stepbrother and think there won't be repercussions."

"I have yet to accept that any 'relations' occurred," Teo said in what he thought was a mild voice, all things considered.

"Acceptance, or the lack of it, doesn't change the facts," Amelia replied, and Teo saw a glimpse of something steely in those garish eyes of hers. "And the fact is, I'm pregnant with your baby."

"How convenient for you."

He watched her from his position against his desk, where he felt significantly less at his ease than he had moments before. Amelia, meanwhile, did not seem particularly thrown by his

reaction. There were no tears. No wilting or wailing, the way there normally was during outlandish pregnancy claims—if the reports he'd received were to be believed. If anything, she brightened.

“I’m informing you because it’s the right thing to do,” she told him, with a hint of self-righteous piety about her, then. “Not because I need or want you to do anything. Consider yourself informed.”

She turned then, and Teo almost let her go. Purely to see if she would do what he thought she meant to do, which was march straight off—but only so far, as it was difficult to extort money from a man once ejected from his presence. He assumed she knew it.

He decided he wouldn’t play her game. “Surely the point of disguising yourself, as you claim you did, and then deciding to have ‘relations’ with me under false pretenses, would be to stay. Not to flounce off because I’ve failed to respond as you would like.”

It would have been easy enough to find photos of the Masquerade, he told himself. He had danced with a luscious redhead, then disappeared with her for a time. Anyone might have guessed what they’d been up to.

That certainly didn’t mean that *this* woman was that redhead. His mind reeled away from that possibility even as his body readied itself, remembering.

Amelia waved a distinctly impolite hand in the air, and

compounded the disrespect when she didn't turn back to face him. "I don't care what you do with the information, Teo. I think we can all agree that it's appropriate to inform a man of his paternal rights. That's all I wanted to do, it's done, the end."

"Surely a letter would have sufficed."

She did turn then. Not all the way. She looked back over her shoulder, and he was struck against his will.

Hard.

Teo truly hadn't believed that Amelia Ransom, of all possible people, was the mysterious woman he'd enjoyed so thoroughly at the Masquerade last fall. But he remembered...this. Almost exactly. The hair had been a bright red, the eyes a dramatic shade of green that now, in retrospect, he should have known was false, and she'd worn an intricate mask that took over the better part of her face. The mask had been a steam punk design and so intricate, in fact, that she'd claimed she couldn't remove it—and he hadn't cared, because her mouth had been sweet and hot, her hands had been wicked, and he'd had his fingers deep inside her clenching heat mere steps from his own damned party.

"Right," she said. Drawled, really. And "disrespectful" didn't begin to cover the tone she used. Or that direct stare. "Because you would have opened a letter that I sent."

"Someone would have."

"And believed it right away, I'm sure."

"I don't believe it now, Miss Ransom. I'm not certain what you thought a personal visit would accomplish. All you have done is

remind me of the low esteem in which I hold your entire family.”

“I’m going to go out on a limb and guess that you don’t have a lot of feelings about my poor grandma in Nebraska. I doubt you know about her at all, so lowly is her existence next to this whole...display.” And Teo felt the umbrage of nearly twenty generations of de Luzes rise within him as she managed to do something with her face to indicate how little she thought of him, this grand house where history had been made and was still revered, and more or less everything he stood for. “So that low esteem, I’m guessing, is aimed directly at my mother.”

“Your mother is little better than a terrorist,” he retorted. Icily. “She sets herself a target, then destroys it.”

“Yes,” Amelia said drily. “This house is virtually rubble at our feet. It was the first thing I noticed.”

“Once she got her claws in him, my father was never the same.”

Teo discovered, with some consternation, that he was standing straight up from the desk when he hadn’t meant to move. More, he was far too tense, with the temper she did not deserve to see kicking through him.

“My condolences.” Amelia did not sound the least bit apologetic, much less sympathetic. “I must have misunderstood something. I thought he was Luis Calvo, the Eighteenth Duke of Marinceli, a man possessed of the same great wealth and immeasurable power you now wield. While my mother is...a mere divorcee. Who was the victim?”

“You must be joking. Calling Marie French ‘a divorcee’ is like calling a *Tyrannosaurus rex* a salamander.”

Amelia’s gaze flashed a deeper, darker shade of violet.

“There are very few things that I know to be incontrovertible truths,” she said. And though her voice was soft enough, her gaze seemed to slap at him. “But one of them is that wealthy men fend off paternity suits the way a normal person slaps down mosquitoes on a summer night. Since our parents actually were married, no matter what opinions you have about that union, I thought I owed you the courtesy of telling you in person.”

“Such courtesy. I am agog.”

She turned all the way around to face him then, but if he thought she would lower her gaze meekly, it was his turn for disappointment. Amelia held his gaze steadily, and Teo could admit he found it...surprising.

Not discomfiting. He was the Duke. He was not *discomfited*.

But the truth was that most people did not dare hold his gaze. Or not for very long. Most people, as a matter of fact, treated Teo with the deference due his title.

A deference he had come to believe was due to him, personally, as the holder of the title, because of course it was no easy thing to quietly command an empire while pretending he did nothing but waft about to charity balls. Thrones were for the powerless in these supposedly egalitarian times, and the de Luzes had always trafficked in influence and strength.

Teo was somehow unsurprised that it would be this bedraggled

American, daughter to a woman so coldly mercenary that she was her own cottage industry, who not only dared—but kept staring him down.

As if he was a challenge she could win.

But the fact he was not surprised did not mean he liked it.

“What is it you want, Amelia?” he asked, aware that his tone was cool. The word of a de Luz had once been law. These days it merely sounded like the law, which was close enough.

She blinked at him as if he was...obtuse.

It was not a sensation he often had.

“I’ve already told you what I want. What you need to hear, at any rate. That’s all I wanted. To tell you.”

“Out of the goodness of your heart. You wished to inform me of my supposed paternity, and then...what? Blow away like smoke in the wind?”

“Nothing quite so poetic. I thought I’d go back home to San Francisco. Try to enjoy the rest of my pregnancy and prepare for life as a single mother.”

And she smiled sweetly at him, though he would have to truly be obtuse not to hear the decided lack of sweetness in her voice.

“I see. You are keeping this miraculous child, then?”

She tilted her head slightly to one side, her gaze quizzical. “I wouldn’t trouble myself with coming all this way, then storming your very gate—literally—if I wasn’t planning on keeping it. Would I?”

It was Teo’s turn to smile. Like one of the swords that hung

on his walls, relics of the wars his ancestors had won.

“It is with great pleasure, Miss Ransom, that I tell you I have not the slightest idea what you would or would not do in any given circumstance.”

“Now you do.”

“I’m taken aback, you see.”

He had already straightened from his desk, and he suddenly found himself uncertain what to do with his hands. It was such a strange sensation that he frowned, then thrust his hands in the pockets of his trousers, as he would normally. It was almost as if he wanted to do something else with them.

But no. He might have shared a few explosive moments of pleasure with this woman—a circumstance he had yet to fully take on board—but he was a grown man stitched together with duties and responsibilities. He did not have the option to be led around by his urges.

“That must feel like a revolution,” Amelia said. Rather tartly, to his ear. “What’s next? Will the serfs rise up? Will they march on their feudal lord?”

“You seem to have mistaken the century.”

“Right.” Again, that insolent drawl. She made a great show of looking all around her, as if she could cast her glinting eye into every corner of the rambling house that had stood here—in one form or another—for so many centuries. “I’m the one stuck in the wrong century. Got it.”

“What astounds me is the altruism of your claim,” he said,

finding his temper rather thinner than he liked. When normally he prided himself on being the sort of lion who did not concern himself overmuch with the existence of sheep, much less their opinions. “Out of the goodness of your heart, you chose to come here and share this news with me. That would make you the one woman in the world to claim she carries an heir to the Dukedom of Marinceli, yet has no apparent intention of claiming any piece of it.”

“I’m hoping it’s a girl, actually,” the maddening woman responded. In a tone he would have called bland if he couldn’t see her face. And that expression that seemed wired directly to the place where his temper beat at him, there beneath his skin. “If I remember my time here—and in truth, I prefer to block it out—there has never been a Duchess of Marinceli. Only Dukes. One after the next, toppling their way through history like loose cannons while pretending they’re at the center of it.”

His temper kicked harder. And he found he had to unclench his jaw to speak. “If you do not wish to make a bid for the dukedom, and you claim your only motivation is to inform me of this dubious claim of yours, I am again unclear why this required a personal audience.”

“I was under the impression that this was the kind of thing that was best addressed in person,” she said. Very distinctly. As if she thought he was slow. “Forgive me for daring to imagine that you might be an actual, real, live human being instead of this...caricature.”

“I am the Duke of Marinceli. The doings of regular people do not concern me.”

She rolled her eyes. At him.

Teo was so astonished at her temerity that he could only stare back at her.

“Noted,” she said, in that bored, rude way that he remembered distinctly from her teen years. Though it seemed far more pointed now. “You are now informed. When you receive the legal documents, you can sign them happily and in private, and we can pretend this never happened.”

“I beg your pardon? Legal documents?”

Amelia folded her arms, and regarded him steadily, as if he was challenging her in some way. And Teo was beginning to suspect that what beat in him was not strictly temper.

“Of course, legal documents,” she chided him. *She chided him.* “What did you think? That I would trust you to let this go?”

“Let this go?” he repeated. And then he actually laughed. “Miss Ransom. Do you have any idea how many enterprising women, whether they have enjoyed access to my charms or not, take it upon themselves to claim that I have somehow fathered their child?”

“You’re welcome to treat me like one of them. In fact, I’d be perfectly happy if you thought I was lying.”

Teo hadn’t really made a determination, not yet. He hadn’t let himself connect his mysterious redhead to this...disaster. Or he hadn’t wanted to let himself. But there was something about

the way she said that that kicked at him. As if she really, truly wanted him to dismiss her. And that was so different from the other women who had turned up over the course of his life to make their outlandish claims that it made something deep inside him...slide to the left. A simple, subtle shift.

But it changed everything.

“We will determine if you are lying the same way we determine any other claim,” he managed to say despite that...shift.

“What does *that* mean? Ritual sacrifices? Forced marches? The dungeons?”

He lifted a brow. “A simple paternity test, Miss Ransom. The dungeons haven’t been functional for at least a hundred years.”

“I can take any test you like,” she said after a moment. “Though that seems like a waste.”

“Funnily enough, to me it doesn’t seem like a waste at all. It seems critical.”

She shrugged. “We can prove that you’re the father if you like, but I’m only going to want you to sign documentation giving up your parental rights.”

And something in him stuttered, then slammed down. Like the weight of the whole of this monstrous house he called his home, loved unreservedly and sometimes thought might well be the death of him.

“Miss Ransom,” he said, making her name yet another icy weapon. “You cannot possibly believe that if you are indeed

carrying my child—the firstborn child of the Nineteenth Duke of Marinceli—that I would abdicate my responsibilities. Perhaps your time here as a child—”

“Hardly a child. I was a teenager.”

But Teo did not want to think about the teenager she’d been, too curvy and unconsciously ripe.

Had he noticed her then? He didn’t think he had, but it was all muddled now. The girl he’d tried to ignore and the redheaded witch who had beguiled him into losing his head were tangled around each other and thrust, somehow, into this pale woman who stood before him with her blond hair flowing about her shoulders, not the faintest trace of makeup on her hauntingly pretty face, and eyes the color of bougainvillea.

He was forced to accept that it was not merely his temper that seethed in him.

But he kept speaking, as if she hadn’t interrupted him. “Whatever age you were, we clearly failed to impress upon you the simple fact that the members of my family take their bloodlines very seriously indeed.”

“I’m well aware.” And there was something in her gaze then, and in the twist of her lips. It dawned on him, though he could hardly credit it, that the august lineage of his family was not, in fact, impressive to her. “But if I recall correctly, you’re the person who, upon the occasion of our parents’ wedding, loudly proclaimed your deep and abiding joy that my mother was too old to—how did you put it?—oh, yes. ‘Pollute the blood with

her spawn.’ I can only assume that any child of mine would be similarly polluted at birth. You should disavow us both now, while you can still remain pristine.”

It took Teo a long moment to identify the hot, distinctly uncomfortable sensation that rolled in him then. At twenty-six he’d had a sense of his own importance, but had imagined his own father would be immortal. His recollection of their parents’ wedding—evidence that his once irreproachable father had lost it completely, a deep betrayal of everything Teo had ever been taught, and a slap against his mother’s memory—was that he had been quietly disapproving. Not that he had actually said the things he’d thought out loud.

“I don’t recall making such a toast,” he said now. Stiffly. “Not because such sentiments are anathema to me, of course. But because it would be impolite.”

“You didn’t make a toast. Heaven forbid. But you did make sure I heard you say it to one of the other guests.” And he might have thought that it hurt her feelings, but she disabused him of that notion in the next moment by aiming that edgy smile of hers at him. “In any case, I thought it would be *impolite* not to tell you about this pregnancy.”

Teo didn’t care for the way she emphasized that word.

“But it can end here,” Amelia said, merrily. “No legal pollutants to the grand Marinceli line. I’m sure that in time, you’ll find an appropriately inbred, blue-blooded heiress to pop out some overly titled and commensurately entitled heirs who will

suit your high opinion of yourself much better.”

Teo had never heard his duties to his title and his family’s history broken down quite so disrespectfully before. It was... bracing, really. Like a blast of cleansing winter air after too long cooped up in an overheated room.

She claimed she was pregnant, and he couldn’t dismiss the claim, because it seemed likely—however *impossible* and no matter how he wished it untrue—that she really had been the redheaded woman he had sampled the night of the Marinceli Masquerade.

More than sampled. He had been deep inside her, sunk to the hilt, and had woken the following morning wanting much, much more—another unusual sensation.

But this was not the time to lapse off into that cloud of lust—a cloud he now knew was deeply inappropriate and, if she was telling the truth about her pregnancy and his paternity, might well have already changed the course of his meticulously plotted life. It didn’t matter why she’d come here or what game she was playing.

Teo wanted answers.

He prowled away from the desk, moving toward the chairs that sat before the fire. “Come in. Remove your coat. Sit, for a moment, as you deliver these little atom bombs of yours.”

He made that sound like an invitation. A request. It was neither.

Amelia did not move. She stood where she was, still just inside

the door, and . . . scowled at him.

Teo was certainly not used to people contorting their face into any but the most obsequious and servile expressions, but that, too, was not the issue here. He reached one of the chairs, and waved his hand at it.

“Sit, please,” he said, and this time, it sounded far more like the order it was.

Amelia continued to scowl at him in obvious suspicion. But despite that, she moved closer. With obvious reluctance. In itself another insult.

“Most people consider it an honor to be in my presence,” he told her drily.

She sniffed. “They must not know you.”

And Teo’s memory was returning to him, slowly but surely. He normally preferred to pretend those years hadn’t happened. Those embarrassing, American years, when Marie French had draped herself over the priceless furniture, and laughed in that common, coarse way of hers. But now he had the faintest inklings of recollection where the daughter was concerned, and not only about those problematic curves.

Amelia had not faded quietly into the background, as would have been expected of any other girl her age. Not Marie French’s daughter. He had the sudden, surprisingly uncomfortable memory of the uppity little chit mouthing off. Not only to him, which was unaccountable, but on occasion to his father, as well.

Which was unacceptable.

He couldn't say he much cared for either the recollection or a repeat of it now.

Amelia took her time moving across the floor, and then even more time shrugging out of her coat. Then, not to be outdone—and not to obey him totally under any circumstances—she then held it to her as if it was a shield as she sat down in the armchair Teo had indicated.

He took his time seating himself opposite her, putting together the pieces. If he squinted, he could see the pieces of the wild redhead who had made the tedious Masquerade that tradition insisted he throw far more entertaining than usual. He wished his body wasn't so delighted at her return. It could only cloud the issue all over again.

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