



THE ITALIAN'S
PREGNANT
Prisoner

MODERN™



MAISEY YATES

Maisey Yates
The Italian's Pregnant Prisoner

Серия «Mills & Boon Modern»

Серия «Once Upon a
Seduction...», книга 3

Аннотация

Pregnant...and at his mercy!Charlotte Adair spent her life locked away in a tower. Her father's death frees her to find the one man she's ever loved...only to discover billionaire Rafe Costa is now blind, believes she betrayed him, and is bent on a vengeful seduction!Rafe is shocked to realise that Charlotte is a virgin, but weeks after their scorching encounter, he learns she's pregnant – with twins! To claim his heirs, Rafe steals Charlotte away to his castle, but she is a far from biddable prisoner. She is irresistible, defiant, and Rafe must seduce her into compliance!Book 3 in the Once Upon A Seduction... trilogy

Содержание

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“What exactly are you proposing?” Charlotte asked, her words cool.

“I'll make it very clear. I don't care what you've been doing for the past five years. I don't care what you do tomorrow, for that matter. I care about tonight. Tonight I want to make sure we finish what is between us. Tonight I want you in my bed.”

Rafe jerked back when trembling fingers touched his lower lip. The shock of it immobilized him. It had been so long since he had been touched. So he stood absolutely still as she traced his lower lip, his upper lip, mimicking what he had just done to her. She traced his jaw and then moved her fingers, featherlight, down the side of his neck, where they came to rest on his pulse.

“Unless you're afraid of me,” she said, “then it appears I still have the same effect on you that I once did.”

He held her chin, keeping her still. “That may be. But one thing has changed. I do not love you, Charlotte. Quite the

opposite. If I take you to my bed you will be giving yourself to a man who hates you. Though I wonder if that matters? Because it certainly doesn't matter to me. I find that I want you regardless."

"One night?" And this time a slight tremble worked its way into her words.

"Just one," he responded.

She let out a long, slow breath that echoed in the corridor around them. "Okay. One night."

Three innocents encounter forbidden temptation in this enticing new fairy-tale trilogy by New York Times bestselling author Maisey Yates...

Once Upon a Seduction...

Belle, Briar and Charlotte have lived sheltered lives, far from temptation—but three billionaires are determined to claim them!

Belle has traded herself for her father's freedom—but the dark-hearted Prince keeping her prisoner threatens to unleash an unknown sensuality...

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And Charlotte is reunited with the billionaire who once climbed a tower to steal her innocence—and Rafe is about to discover the secret consequences!

Find out if these young women can tame their powerful men—and have their happily-ever-after!

The Prince's Captive Virgin

The Prince's Stolen Virgin

The Italian's Pregnant Prisoner
All available now!
The Italian's Pregnant Prisoner
Maisey Yates



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

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To the Presents team.

You believed in me first.

I didn't know when I sent in my chapters eight years ago that this was where it would lead.

I'm so glad it did.

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[CHAPTER ONE](#)

Once upon a time...

LET DOWN YOUR HAIR...

Charlotte Adair's heart was pounding so hard she was sure the person next to her could hear it. And she was shaking. Shaking and fighting against the rising tide of emotions and memories that were threatening to compromise her ability to think straight.

Although, it could easily be argued that her being here at all was proving she lacked any ability to think with clarity.

She had escaped. For five years she had been free.

But there was unfinished business. Rafe.

He would always be unfinished business. There would be no fixing that. But she could see him. She could see him one more time.

And, at least, he wouldn't be able to see her.

Pain burst in her chest, hot and acidic, her stomach tightening. Yes, his abandonment had hurt her. Immeasurably. But that didn't mean the thought of such a powerful man being injured in the way he had been wasn't painful.

Of course, any thoughts of Rafe were painful.

And as she stood in the darkened corner of the antechamber that led into the ballroom, her palms beginning to sweat, the red gown she was wearing started to feel so tight she could scarcely breathe.

She couldn't hold off the memories any longer...

* * *

"Let down your hair."

"You know I'm not allowed to," Charlotte said, moving away from Rafe, every nerve ending in her body tingling. Every part of her demanding that she follow his simply issued command, regardless of the consequences.

Which was basically the same demand she'd been issuing to herself from the moment she'd first seen him.

She wanted him. Whatever that had meant at first, she hadn't fully known. Only that she wanted to be near him. Always.

"I see. And what exactly are the rules concerning men in your

bedroom?”

She blushed, her skin heating all over. “Well, I would assume that it’s frowned upon. Of course, it is nothing my father ever thought to forbid me expressly from. I suppose I’m meant to take it as read.”

Rafe smiled, and she felt the impact of it all the way down to her toes. He was the most beautiful man she had ever seen. That had been her very first thought about seeing him when he’d come to work for her father two years earlier.

She wasn’t entirely sure of the circumstances, only that he was an apprentice of sorts, which made her stomach tremble in a not-too-pleasant way. Because while the circumstances of her father’s business were kept largely secret to her, she wasn’t stupid. Yes, she lived a secluded life at his villa in Italy, transplanted from their native United States when Charlotte had been just a child, but in that seclusion she had taken the opportunity to learn how to gain information by quiet observation.

Charlotte had become part of the wallpaper in the villa many years ago, and as a result she was often underestimated. She liked it that way.

Being invisible.

But then Rafe had appeared, and he had not allowed her to remain invisible. He had seen her. From the first. She had been sixteen the first time she’d laid eyes on him, when she had been certain that her heart was going to claw its way up her throat and out of her mouth. Not just because he was beautiful

—though, he was certainly beautiful. In his early twenties at the time, with broad shoulders, a jaw so square she thought she might cut her finger on it, and dark, fathomless eyes that she wanted desperately to get lost in.

He was a tall man, well over six feet, and she had the feeling that if she were to walk up to him and stand just in front of him that she would only come up to the middle of his chest. Which, she could not help but think, would be solid, strong, perfect to rest against.

Yes, her obsession had begun that first moment, and it had not abated. Apparently, it had been the same for him. He had tried to warn her away from him. But she'd persisted. She'd made a fool of herself, following him around. But it had worked. Eventually, he had stopped telling her to go away. Eventually, they had begun to form a friendship.

Except, she supposed friends didn't have to sneak around. Friends did not have to wait until the house was dark, and everyone was safely asleep to meet out in the stables, or to catch a moment with one another in the brilliant light of day out in one of the fields well away from the house.

It was chaste. Always.

Until one afternoon when they'd been in the corner of the barn, and he had told her it was time for him to go back to his post—whatever that meant—and she'd been filled with a strange kind of desperation that she could not fathom or fight.

She had reached up, touched his face with her fingertips. And

then she'd had his iron grip wrapped around her wrist, his dark eyes burning hotter than she had ever seen them before.

Before she could protest—before she could question anything—his mouth had been on hers. Claiming. Marking her as his own.

She had never been kissed before that moment. Hadn't even thought much about it. But kissing Rafe was like touching the surface of the sun. She could hardly bear it.

It was too hot. Too bright. Too much.

And far too brief.

But that night, he had climbed the trellis and come into her room. Her tower bedroom, high above the rest of the house, separated from everyone, as she always was. No one came into her bedroom.

But he had. And he had treated her to another kiss. Then another.

He had come to her room every night for the past two weeks. Their kisses had gotten longer, deeper. They'd begun shedding clothes. Lying on the bed together. Trading intimacies she would have found shocking before him. Would have found shocking if it were with anyone but him.

With Rafe, all these things felt right. She'd been asking him for more. Asking him to take her virginity. But so far he'd kept it to pleasuring her, and never taking things to their ultimate conclusion.

She had been okay to wait. But tonight she felt urgency.

Tonight, there was a rock in her stomach, and she knew that she had to tell him about the conversation she'd had with her stepmother earlier that day.

Her father didn't often speak to her, if he did at all. Most of the relevant information was conveyed through Josefina, her stepmother, who was the most hardened, suspicious person Charlotte had ever known.

And given Charlotte lived in a compound with criminals, that was quite a feat.

Earlier today she had informed Charlotte that her father's ultimate purpose for her was about to be fulfilled. He had found another kingpin in a corner of Italy Charlotte had never been to who was looking for a wife. And it was an alliance her father wanted to cement with his own bloodline. A dynastic union. The one use he could think of for a daughter he had never wanted.

Josefina seemed nothing but happy to be rid of the stepdaughter she had always seemed jealous of. A jealousy Charlotte could not understand, given she was a glorified prisoner in her father's home. But Josefina had once been a poor girl from the village her father's estate was built near, and she had clawed her way from poverty to being Michael Adair's mistress, then ultimately his wife. She wasn't quiet about that achievement, and it was Charlotte's belief that her stepmother was secretly afraid she might someday lose her elevated position, which made her a bit vicious.

She had certainly seemed vicious when telling Charlotte of

her upcoming marital fate.

Dimly, Charlotte had always thought that her life might come to this. Because her father was nothing if not a medieval lord, the master of his keep and all who depended on him for anything. And of course it was not outside the realm of imagination that he would try to cement his power in the criminal world through marriages. Like a dark king, trading family members to prevent wars. Or to start them. Depending on the present circumstance.

But even though part of her had always known it was a possibility, she had done her very best not to think of it. And now, there was Rafe.

Rafe, who made love and sex something that wasn't theoretical. Rather, something that she wanted. Something that she craved. Not in a general sense. She wanted it with him.

The idea of sharing her body with someone else... It could not be endured. Her need for Rafe, for his touch, his kiss, for everything... It was so intimate. It went deeper than the electric need that sparked over her skin.

It was heart. He was her heart.

"Yes," he said, "I suppose that is the letter of the law, if not the spirit of it." His dark eyes turned intense, a black flame that burned through her. "I would like you to break some rules for me. I know your hair is considered quite the asset. You're not allowed to cut it—is that true?"

Charlotte touched her heavy bun. "Not entirely. I get the ends trimmed. But yes. My father considers my hair to be part of

my beauty.” And the importance of her beauty had become shockingly clear with her marriage deal being brokered.

“Creepy.”

She forced out a laugh. “You work for him. And here you are.”

“I only work for him until my debt is repaid. I have no loyalty to your father. On that you can trust me.”

It was the first time Rafe had said anything like this to her. “I didn’t...I didn’t realize.”

“I am forbidden from speaking of it. But then, I am certain that I am also forbidden from being in here. And I’m also forbidden from touching you like this.” He put his hand on her cheek, and then he kissed her. “Let down your hair,” he whispered against her lips.

This time, she obeyed. For him. Only for him...

* * *

Charlotte was dragged back to the present, and her heart was beating out of control, as it had been in the memory. It had only been a couple of weeks after that when everything had fallen apart. When she had been left devastated, wounded beyond the healing of that devastation.

When Josefina had told her that Rafe had gone, that he didn’t want her. And that she had no choice but to go and marry Stefan. Charlotte had protested. So much so, that she had found herself locked up. So much so that she had seen the true nature of her father. He did not love her. Not at all. He would kill her if she didn’t marry the man of his choosing; that was what he’d told

her. And Charlotte had been ready to believe it.

She had also not been ready to accept her fate. Because if there was one thing that being with Rafe had taught her, it was that there was more to life than the villa. More to life than her tower bedroom. More to intimacy with a man than a simple transaction.

And she had wanted those things. All of them.

So when her father had paid his men to transport her across the country and they had stopped at a petrol station in the middle of nowhere she had taken her chance.

She'd slipped from her restraints and fled, running deep into the woods, certain they wouldn't follow her there. Somehow, she was right. They had searched for her along the highways, perhaps checking in with passing motorists and various business owners.

They certainly hadn't expected her—cosseted princess of the Adair family empire—to take her chances with the wolves and foxes out in the thick forest.

But she had.

Ultimately, had found a certain measure of safety living in rural Germany, moving from cottage to cottage, never settling in one place too long, taking simple positions at shops and farms over the years.

It had been a lonely existence, but in many ways freeing.

It wasn't until years later that she had seen anything of Rafe again. But then, there he was, splashed across the cover of a newspaper. The story of a man who had worked his way up from nothing, from the Italian slums, to become one of the wealthiest

men on earth.

A blind man. Wounded in an accident that he refused to speak of.

After that, she saw him on the covers of papers quite a lot. It never got easier. It never got less painful. She ached for him. For what they might have had, had he truly loved her as she had believed he had. For the accident that had taken his sight.

She thought very little about his billions. If only because she had never truly doubted that Rafe would overcome his circumstances in a spectacular way. He was a singular man. He always had been. No one compared to him. And no one ever would.

It was why, when she had gotten the news of her father's death, when she had found out about the invitation under his name to this event, and the fact that Rafe would also be in attendance, that she had decided to take her chances.

With her father out of the picture, no one was coming for her. And she very much doubted any of his men would recognize her now. She was no longer an eighteen-year-old girl.

And as for Rafe... Well, he would never see her. Just as he would never see anything ever again.

But she could see him. She needed to do that. Needed to put that part of her life behind her completely so she could move on. Her time of seclusion was at an end. And he was wrapped all up in it.

She was done hiding. But she had some ghosts to vanquish.

She took a fortifying breath and moved out of the shadows and into the light. She could honestly say it was the first time in five years she had done this. For the first time in five years, she wasn't hiding.

She sensed that heads were turning, following her progress as she made her way through the ballroom. But she didn't care. She wasn't here for generic admiration. Or curiosity. She was here for him.

She had dressed up for him. Even if it was foolish. For one thing, he wouldn't be able to see her. For another, she didn't want him to.

It didn't take her long to see him, though. Her eyes were drawn to him, like a magnet. He was near the center of the ballroom, standing and making conversation with a group of men in suits. He was the tallest. The handsomest. He had always been the singularly most beautiful man she had ever seen. And he still was. Except at thirty he was much more mature than he'd been at twenty-five. He had filled out, his chest thicker, his face more chiseled. Dark stubble sat heavy on his jaw, and she wondered...she wondered what it would be like to touch his face with it there.

She hadn't touched a man since Rafe. She'd had no interest.

She needed to find some interest. Because she was going to have a normal life. After she claimed the inheritance she knew that she still had—untouched—in a trust at the bank in London, she was going to start her life in earnest.

Maybe go to school. Maybe start a shop of her own, since she had always enjoyed working in them over the past few years. Had enjoyed not being lonely.

Whatever she did, it would be her choice. And that was the point.

She didn't know what answers she had expected to find here. Right now, the only clear answer seemed to be that her body, her heart, was still affected by him.

He excused himself from the group, and suddenly, he was walking her way. And she froze. Like a deer caught in the headlights. Or rather, like a woman staring at Rafe Costa.

She certainly wasn't the only woman staring. He moved with fluid grace, and if she didn't know better, she would never have known his sight was impaired at all.

He was coming closer, and as he did her heart tripped over itself, her hands beginning to shake. She wished she could touch him.

Oh, she wanted it more than anything. In that moment, she wanted it more than her next breath. To put her hands on Rafe Costa's face one more time. To kiss those lips again. To place her hand over his chest and see if she could still make his heart race.

It was easy to forget that her stepmother had told her how Rafe had left, taking an incentive offered by her father to end his tenure there earlier. How he had thought nothing of Charlotte when he left. Nothing of all the promises he had made to her.

Yes, it was so easy to forget all of that. It was easy to forget

that and remember instead the way it had felt when he had kissed her. Touched her. The way that she had begged him to use more than his hands between her thighs, more than his mouth. The way she had pleaded with him to take her virginity, to make her his in every way.

But he hadn't.

For honor, he had said. And for her protection.

Except, really, he had never wanted her. At least, not enough to risk anything. So he had simply been toying with her.

She should remember that. Her treacherous, traitorous body should remember that well. But it didn't. Instead, it was fluttering. As if a host of butterflies had been set loose inside her.

He came closer, closer still, passing through the crowd of people, everyone moving out of the way for him, as though he was Moses parting the sea.

Time seemed to slow. Everything around her. Her heartbeat. Her breathing.

Suddenly, he was there. So close that if she wanted to she could reach out and touch the edge of his sleeve with her fingertips.

Could bump into him accidentally, just to make contact. He wouldn't know it was her. He couldn't.

Suddenly, he turned. He was looking past her, his dark eyes unseeing, unfocused. But then, he reached out and unerringly grabbed hold of her wrist, dragging her toward his muscular body.

“Charlotte.”

CHAPTER TWO

IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE.

Charlotte—for all intents and purposes—had disappeared five years ago. She hadn’t simply disappeared; she had gone off to marry another man.

The triumphant smile on her stepmother’s face was the last thing he had seen. The last thing he had ever seen. Beyond gray, amorphous shapes.

He mostly hung close to the walls in situations like this. He had a cane to help him navigate, but in a crowd this thick it was still difficult. Though, in a crowd this thick it was also normal to run into people. So there was that.

He could see sharp contrasts between light and darkness, but he couldn’t make out features or colors. Nothing subtle.

But when he had walked by her, he had caught her scent. And in that moment, he had seen so many things. Color and light bursting through his mind, vivid and sharp. Sun-drenched days in Tuscany, that had been hell on earth except for her. Soft, pearlescent skin that was too fine, too exquisite for him to touch. And yet he had. And that beautiful blond hair that her father had had a strange obsession with.

Glossy, impossibly long and always kept wound up in a bun so that no one could truly see it or appreciate it. Memory gripped him tight...

* * *

“Let down your hair,” he rasped against her throat as he kissed her, lying down on her large four-poster bed.

He begged her for that privilege, every night. The privilege of running his hands through her hair. Touching the silken strands, seeing her naked, her hair cascading over her pale body like a waterfall, light pink nipples just barely visible through the golden curtain.

She reached up, taking the pins out, obeying his command. In the past weeks since he had begun coming into her room he had asked her to do this for him every night, and every night she had complied. The fact that she never took it down before he appeared led him to believe that she enjoyed this game. Of his commands, and her acquiescence.

It was fine with him. He liked it too.

It was dangerous. This game. Easy to pretend that it was some sort of harmless assignation. That they might get caught, and might suffer a severe scolding. But Rafe was under no illusions. If he were caught with Charlotte, her father would have him killed. If Charlotte were found not a virgin, after her father had taken great pains to seclude her away from the rest of the world, Rafe would be killed. And possibly Charlotte, as well.

And so, he didn't take her virginity. Rather, he pushed the boundaries every night. And every night she begged him for more. Every night, he declined. But he was becoming weak. He would not be able to hold out for much longer. And in truth, he didn't intend to.

He simply needed to get to a place where he had shored up the assets he needed to be free of her father. He could hardly plunge Charlotte into a life of poverty after she had lived the cosseted existence of a gentleman gangster's daughter. Michael Adair's empire had the semblance of legitimacy, but it was anything but.

To most of the world he appeared to be a businessman. But that was only because the world didn't look too closely. Not at fabulously wealthy, powerful men who could offer a great many favors, and do untold amounts of damage if they were crossed. It benefited no one to examine those things too deeply. And so nobody did.

Rafe knew all too well about the power men like Michael wielded. He knew too what it was to go from a spoiled, cushioned life to one of abject poverty. His father was not unlike Michael Adair. Oh, he might not be a criminal, but he thought nothing of using the people in his life until they were spent.

Until he had no more use for them but to grind them under his boot for fun. That was what Rafe remembered most about the father he hadn't seen since he was five years old. How much he seemed to relish causing pain.

When he had kicked Rafe and his mother out onto the streets, the man had seemed to enjoy their distress. Or, if not that, then the fact he had the power to do so.

Power. Yes, men like that loved power.

And Rafe had spent many years with no power at all. Begging. Stealing. Doing whatever he could to help his mother survive.

He had begun doing odd petty crimes with a group of boys. Delivering packages that he never asked about the contents of. Things like that.

He'd ended up getting caught by the police and charged with running drugs, in spite of the fact that he was only a boy. And a boy who'd had no idea what he was handling at that.

It was through that arrest that he'd met Michael Adair.

It was only much later that Rafe had realized the man must have had a connection to the drugs. To the particular ring of petty criminals Rafe had been working with.

Michael Adair had not only given Rafe his freedom; he had also provided Rafe with an education, paying for him to attend one of the finest private schools in Europe. Rafe had accepted greedily. Uncaring of what it might mean in the future.

Michael had promised him someday he would collect the favor. And indeed, he had made good on that threat.

For years, he had done various errands for Michael in Rome. Until finally, he had been brought to the estate to apprentice under the man himself.

That was when he'd really gotten to know the man he'd aligned himself with. Had seen how hard he was. How entirely without morals.

Rafe had asked him once why he had shown such an interest in a young boy from the streets. Why he'd helped him at all, much less sent him to school and provided for him.

He'd said it was because he didn't have a son. And he had

thought perhaps Rafe was the protégé he needed.

Rafe might have been shocked or upset if he weren't already the son of an amoral bastard. As it was, he just figured he might as well take advantage. At least this particular amoral bastard wanted to give him a hand up, unlike his actual father.

But after school he had started getting a deeper look at Michael Adair's twisted empire. By then he was living at the estate and there was no leaving. Not without being killed.

The entire business made Rafe ill. Michael was ruthless. He didn't care who was hurt by his business practices. And he was not above intimidation, or even murder to get what he wanted. He had a host of enforcers who meted out punishments on those who did not comply with his wishes. And Rafe could only count himself fortunate that he had not been forced to be part of that side of the business.

No, he was being taught the business. Because Michael had no son. And he wanted Rafe to be able to take control of the business portion, the front of house part of the empire.

But that did not mean that he found Rafe to be good enough for his daughter, and Rafe was under no illusions that it would be the case. Rafe had also decided that while he was content to get any education he could get from Michael, he was certainly never going to overtake the man's evil empire.

No. He was going to escape at his first opportunity. And he was going to do it with Charlotte.

Then. Then he would make her his.

She shook her head, her hair falling around her in a silken wave. His stomach tightened. And he couldn't breathe. He'd had more women than he could count. A side effect of being a young boy unsupervised far too early. One who looked much older than he was the moment adolescence had hit.

But none had ever affected him like this. None had ever made him feel as though his heart were being pulled out of his chest through his mouth. Had ever made him feel like he might die if he didn't touch her. But also made him feel so protective that...he would rather cut off his own hands than do her harm. And it was that need, that need that overrode all else, that gave him the strength to resist her, night after night.

He leaned in, sliding his fingers through her hair, lifting the silken strands to his face, and inhaling deeply.

Roses. Lavender. And something he couldn't name. Something that belonged only to her...

* * *

Rafe dragged himself back to the present. And to the feel of the woman he was currently holding on to. Soft. She was so soft. It had to be Charlotte. It could only be her.

Of course, it had been five years since he had touched a woman, so perhaps, his memory was faulty. Perhaps, they were all this soft. But he didn't think so.

Michael Adair was dead. And he had been on Rafe's mind this morning. Perhaps, that was why his body was playing tricks on him now.

Or perhaps, it was why Charlotte had resurfaced.

“Come with me,” he said, his voice hard.

He held on to her with one arm, casually sweeping the ground in front of them with his cane in his other hand.

She said nothing. Didn’t protest. Didn’t speak at all. Frustration bubbled up inside him. And he wished...oh, how he wished he could see her face. Yes, his other senses had been honed quite a bit since the accident. But in this moment, though, senses could not replace his sight. Not by a long shot.

He took them out of the ballroom, into some kind of alcove. Perhaps no one was around, it didn’t seem as though anyone was. But if they were, he doubted they would have the balls to interrupt them. Something else Rafe had honed over the past five years was a fearsome reputation. He was a man who took no prisoners. He acted ethically. He was bound and determined that he would. That he would never bear any resemblance to Michael Adair, or to any man like him. But he was also determined that he would never go back to the streets he had come from.

It was power that insulated a man. He knew that well. The only reason he had been at Michael’s mercy in the first place was because he had been vulnerable. Because he lacked resources. Because he lacked power.

He had made a vow that he would never return to that place. Never. There was no longer any vulnerability inside of him. And truly, his blindness—nature’s last gasp at ensuring he wasn’t all powerful—had only spurred him on to work harder.

It was an accident he wished hadn't happened. He didn't want to give it too much credit in his life. However, he was also certain enough that it had made him work harder. That it made him yet more determined to appear capable, infallible.

He was also certain that early on it had caused a great many to underestimate him. So when his corporation gobbled up theirs, when his success put them out of business—his electronics manufacturing conglomerate slowly and steadily taking over the world—they simply hadn't seen it coming.

Something he found deliciously ironic.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he asked. "Has your husband set you free? Or has he simply let you out for the night?"

"I...I..."

Was it her? Was that her voice? It had been so long. And memory was not infallible. If this was simply something conjured up out of his darkest desires, out of need he should no longer feel, his rage with himself would know no bounds.

"Charlotte Adair." He said her name like a curse. "Is that your last name anymore? After marrying Stefan did you take his last name?"

"I think you must be mistaken," she said, her voice a low whisper.

He slid his hand up her arm, following the line to her collarbone, up the side of her neck and to her chin, where he gripped her between his thumb and forefinger. "I am never mistaken. You would do well to remember that." He leaned in,

and he could smell her again. Lavender. Roses. Charlotte.

His heart beat her name over and over again.

It had to be her. No woman had affected him like this in the past five years. No woman had affected him at all.

And then he'd walked through that ballroom and caught her scent, touched her skin. It was like being born again.

"If you lie to me, I will make you pay. There will be no end to what it will cost you."

She began to tremble beneath his touch, and he slid his thumb upward, along her lower lip, heat and arousal tightening his gut.

"You cannot lie to me," he whispered, his mouth now so close to hers he could feel her breath. "You might have a husband, but believe me, there is no man on earth who knows you as well as I do."

She was burned into his memory in a way no one else could be. Because losing his head over Charlotte had nearly cost him everything. Had been a turning point in his life. He could not walk away from it, not really. He bore the mark of it.

Not just his vision, but the ugly scars on his body from where he had fallen off the balcony.

From where he had been pushed.

"My...my father is dead," she said, the words rushed. "I've come to London to sort out some of his business."

He laughed, the sound cold and hard even to his own ears. "Silly girl. Did you think for one moment that I would be unaware of your father's death? I nearly gave my staff a holiday. In

celebration.”

He slid his hand down her throat, holding it gently, feeling the flutter of her pulse beneath his thumb.

“I was under no illusion you would have given them a holiday so that you could wallow in your grief,” she said, her breathing quick and shallow, betraying her fear when her tone of voice did not.

“I opened my best bottle of champagne that night.”

She shifted, and he had a feeling she was looking directly at him now. Looking him full in the face, when before she had not been. “So did I. Do not think you have a monopoly on despising that man.”

“Probably the last remaining thing we have in common, cara mia.” She stiffened beneath his touch.

“It would not surprise me.”

Her pulse was racing beneath his thumb, and he knew that his own heart was pounding just as hard. He was angry with her. So angry. He wanted to destroy her. Destroy her in the way he had been destroyed by the loss of her. By her betrayal.

But he also wanted her. That protection he had extended to her, the virginity he had preserved, simply so that she could throw it away to another man, so that she could marry another, galled him.

It had been his by rights. And out of some misguided sense of chivalry that he no longer possessed he had not laid claim to it.

“Is your husband here?” he asked.

She hesitated. “No.”

“I believe you and I have unfinished business.” He changed the way he held her, yet again moving his thumb up to her mouth, to trace her plush lips. “Do you not agree?”

He heard a faint sniff, and he imagined her tossing her head back, her expression haughty. He had seen her do it many times before. Years ago. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Charming. But I think you do.” He moved his fingertips to the edge of her mouth, then back down the side of her neck, coming to rest on her pulse. “This feels just as I remember it. I make your blood run faster. This makes me wonder if I still make you wet.”

She gasped, and he waited for a slap across the face that didn’t come.

“I’m frightened,” she said, her voice breathy.

“I don’t believe that. A woman who would dare set foot in London, into a place where you had to know I would be, so soon after her father’s death... Well, I don’t believe she’s afraid of anything. No. I do not believe this is fear, Charlotte.”

“What you believe or don’t believe doesn’t automatically become truth.”

He chuckled. “See, that simply isn’t true. I’m richer than your father ever was. People do my bidding, not because they fear me but because of what I can do for them. What I wish often becomes truth easily enough.”

Five years. Five years since he had touched a woman. Longer

since he'd had sex with one. There had been no one else from the moment he'd met her. And he'd held back out of deference to her innocence.

Now it had been five years since he had touched her.

"I can make you want me," he said.

And he hated that, for the first time in years, he doubted himself. Because as certain as he was of a great many things, he could not be certain that she would want a scarred, blind man in her bed.

"What exactly are you proposing?" she asked, her words cool.

"I'll make it very clear. I don't care what you've been doing for the past five years. I don't care that you married Stefan. I don't care what you do tomorrow, for that matter. I care about tonight. Tonight, I want to make sure we finish what is between us. Tonight. I want you in my bed."

He jerked back when trembling fingers touched his lower lip. The shock of it immobilized him. It had been so long since he had been touched. So he stood, absolutely still as she traced his lower lip, his upper lip, mimicking what he had just done for her. She traced his jaw, and then moved her fingers featherlight down the side of his neck, where they came to rest on his pulse.

"Unless you're afraid of me," she said, "then it appears I still have the same effect on you that I once did."

He held her chin, keeping her still. "That may be. But one thing has changed. I do not love you, Charlotte. Quite the opposite. If I take you to my bed, you will be giving yourself to a

man who hates you. Though, I wonder if that matters? Because it certainly doesn't matter to me. I find that I want you regardless."

"One night?" And this time, a slight tremble worked its way into her words.

"Just one," he responded.

She let out a long, slow breath that echoed in the corridor around them. "Okay. One night."

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