



# THE PRINCE'S CINDERELLA BRIDE

CHRISTINE  
RIMMER



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**Christine Rimmer**

**The Prince's Cinderella Bride**

Серия «Mills & Boon Cherish»

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## About the Author

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Christine Rimmer

# MILLS & BOON

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About the Publisher

For MSR, always

## Chapter One

Maximilian Bravo-Calabretti, heir to the Montedoran throne, stepped out from behind a low cluster of fan palms and directly into the path of the woman who'd hardly spoken to him since New Year's.

Lani Vasquez let out a small squeak of surprise and jumped back. She almost dropped the book she was carrying. "Your Highness." She shot him a glare. "You scared me."

The high garden path that wove along the cliffside was deserted. It was just the two of them at the moment. But anyone might come wandering toward them—one of the gardeners looking for a hedge to trim, or a palace guest out for a brisk early-morning stroll. Max wanted privacy for this. He grabbed her hand, which caused her to let out another sharp cry.

"Come with me," he commanded and pulled her forward on the path. "This way."

She dug in her heels. "No, Max. Really."

He turned to face her. She flashed him a look of defiance. Still, he refused to let go of her soft little hand. Her sweet face was flushed, her thick midnight hair loose on her shoulders, tangled by the wind off the sea far below. He wanted to haul her close and kiss her. But he needed to get her to talk to him first. "You've been avoiding me."

Her mouth quivered in the most tempting way. "Yes, I have."

Let go of my hand.”

“We have to talk.”

“No, we don’t.”

“We do.”

“It was a mistake,” she insisted in a ragged little whisper.

“Don’t say that.”

“But it’s the truth. It was a mistake and there’s no point in going into it. I don’t want to talk about it.”

And he didn’t want to hear that. “Just come with me, that’s all I’m asking.”

“I’m expected at the villa.” She worked as a nanny for his brother Rule and his wife. They owned a villa in the nearby ward of Fontbleu. “I have to go now.”

“This won’t take long.” He turned and started forward again.

She let out a low, unhappy sound, and for a moment, he was certain she would simply refuse to budge.

But then she gave in and followed. He kept hold of her hand and pulled her along. Not glancing back, he cut off the overlook path and onto the rocky hillside, finding a second path that twisted up and around, through a copse of olive trees and on to where the land flattened out to a more cultivated formal garden.

High, green hedges surrounded them, and they walked on thick grass. The grass gave way to a rose garden. Now, in February, the buds were only just forming on the thorny stems. Beyond the budding roses, he took a curving stone path beneath a series of trellises. Still she followed, saying nothing, occasionally

dragging her feet a little to let him know she was far from willing.

They came to a gate in a stone wall. He pushed through the gate and held it for her, with his free hand, going through after her and then closing it behind them.

Across another swath of lawn, between a pair of silk floss trees, the stone cottage waited. He led her on, across the grass, along the stepping-stones that stopped at the rough wood trellis twined with bare, twisted grapevines. The trellis shaded the rough wood door.

He pushed the door open, let go of her hand and ushered her in first. With a quick, suspicious glance at him, she went.

Two windows let in enough light to see by. Sheets covered the plain furniture. It took him only a moment to whip off the coverings and drop them to the rough wooden floor, revealing a scarred table with four chairs, a sofa, a couple of side tables and two floral-patterned wing chairs. The rudimentary kitchen took up one wall. Stairs climbed another wall to the sleeping area above.

“Have a seat,” he offered.

She pressed her lips together, shook her head and remained standing by the door, clutching her book tightly between her two hands. “What is this place?”

“It’s just a gardener’s cottage. No one’s using it now. Sit down.”

She still refused to budge. “What are you doing, Your High —?”

“Certainly we’re past that.”

For a moment, she said nothing, only stared at him, her dark eyes huge in the soft oval of her face. He wanted to reach out and gather her close and soothe all her troubles away. But everything about her warned, Don’t touch me.

She let out a breath and her slim shoulders drooped. “Max. Really. Can’t you just admit it? We both know it was a mistake.”

“Wrong.” He moved a step closer. She stiffened a little, but she didn’t back away. He whispered, “It was beautiful. Perfect. At the time, you thought so, too—or so you said.”

“Oh, Max. Why can’t I get through to you?” She turned from him and went to one of the windows.

He stared at her back, at her hair curling, black as a crow’s wing, on her shoulders. And he remembered...

It was New Year’s Eve. At the Sovereign’s New Year’s Ball.

He asked her to dance and as soon as he had her in his arms, he only wanted to keep her there. So he did. When the first dance ended, he held her lightly until the music started up again. He kept her with him through five dances. Each dance went by in the blink of an eye. He would have gone on dancing with her, every dance, until the band stopped playing. But people noticed and she didn’t like it.

By the fifth dance she was gazing up at him much too solemnly. And when that dance ended, she said, “I think it’s time for me to say good-night.”

He’d watched her leave the ballroom and couldn’t bear to see

her go. So he followed her. They'd shared their first kiss in the shadows of the long gallery outside the ballroom, beneath the frescoes depicting martyred saints and muscular angels. She'd pulled away sharply, dark fire in her eyes.

So he kissed her again.

And a third time, as well. By some heady miracle, with those kisses, he'd secured her surrender. Lani led him up to her small room in the deserted apartment of his brother Rule's family. When he left her hours later, she was smiling and tender and she'd kissed him good-night.

But ever since then, for five endless weeks, she'd barely spoken to him.

"Lani. Look at me...."

She whirled and faced him again. Her mouth had softened and so had her eyes. Had she been remembering that night, too? For a moment, he almost dared to hope she would melt into his arms.

But then she drew herself up again. "It was a mistake," she insisted for the fourth time. "And this is impossible. I have to go." She headed for the door.

He accused, "Coward."

The single word seemed to hit her between the shoulder blades. She let go of the doorknob, dropped her book to the rough entry table and turned once more to meet his waiting eyes. "Please. It was just one of those things that happen even though it shouldn't have. We got carried away...."

Carried away? Maybe. "I have no regrets. Not a one." He was

glad it had happened, and on New Year's Eve, too. To him it had seemed the ideal way to ring in a whole new year—and right then, a dangerous thought occurred to him. God. Was there a baby? If so, he needed to know. “We should have been more careful, though. You're right. Is that why you keep running away from me? Are you—?”

“No,” she cut in before he could even get the question out. “We were lucky. You can stop worrying.”

“I miss you,” he said, before she could start in again about how she had to go. “I miss our discussions, our talks in the library. Lani, we have so much in common. We've been good friends.”

“Oh, please,” she scoffed. But there was real pain in her eyes, in the tightness of her mouth. “You and I were never friends.” All at once, her eyes were too bright. She blinked away tears.

He wanted only to comfort her. “Lani...” He took a step toward her.

But she put up a hand and he stopped in midstride. “We've been friendly,” she corrected. “But to be more is beyond inappropriate. I work for your brother and sister-in-law. I'm the nanny. I'm supposed to set an example and show good judgment.” She swallowed. Hard. “I never should have let it happen.”

“Will you stop saying that it shouldn't have happened?”

“But it shouldn't have.”

“Excuse me. We are two single adults and we have every right to—”

“Stop.” She backed a step toward the door. “I want you to listen, Max. It can’t happen again. I won’t let it.” Her eyes were dry now. And way too determined.

He opened his mouth to insist that it most certainly would happen again. But where would such insistence get him? Except to send her whirling, flinging the door wide, racing off down the walk and out the gate.

He didn’t want that. And arguing with her over whether that unforgettable night should or should not have happened was getting him nowhere, anyway. They didn’t need arguing. They needed to reestablish their earlier ease with each other.

So in the end he answered mildly, “Of course you’re right. It won’t happen again.”

She blinked in surprise. “I don’t... What are you saying?”

“I’ll make an agreement with you.”

She narrowed her eyes and peered at him sideways. “I don’t want to bargain about this.”

“How can you know that? You haven’t heard my offer yet.”

“Offer?” She sneered the word. He held his silence as she nibbled her lower lip in indecision. Finally, she threw up both hands. “Oh, all right. What, then? What is your offer?”

“I’ll promise not to try to seduce you,” he suggested with what he hoped was just the right touch of wry humor, “and you’ll stop avoiding me. We can be...” He hesitated, remembering how she’d scoffed when he’d called them friends. “...what we used to be.”

She aimed a put-upon look at the single beam in the rough-textured ceiling. “Oh, come on. Seriously? That never works.”

“I disagree.” Light. Reasonable. Yes, just the right tone. “And it’s unfair to generalize. I think it can work. We can make it work.” Until she admitted that being what they used to be wasn’t nearly enough. Then they could make it work in much more satisfying ways.

She hovered there in front of the door, staring at him, unblinking. He stared right back, trying to look calm and reasonable and completely relaxed when in reality his gut was clenched tight and he’d begun to lose hope he would ever get through to her.

But then, at last, she dropped her gaze. She went to the rustic dinner table, where she ran her finger along the back of one of the plain straight chairs. He watched her, remembering the cool, thrilling wonder of her fingers on his naked skin.

Finally, she slanted him a look. “I love Montedoro. I came here with Sydney thinking I would stay for six months or a year, just for the life experience.” Sydney was his brother Rule’s wife and Lani’s closest friend. “Two years later, I’m still here. I have this feeling, and it’s such a powerful feeling, that Montedoro is my real home and I was only waiting to come here, to find the place I was meant to be. I want to write a hundred novels, all of them set right here. I never want to leave.”

“I know. And no one wants you to leave.”

“Oh, Max. What I’m trying to say is, as much as I love it here,

as much as I want to stay forever, if you or any of your family wanted me gone, my visa would be revoked in a heartbeat.”

“How many times do I have to tell you? No one wants you to go.”

“Don’t pretend you don’t get it. Love affairs end. And when they end, things can get awkward. You’re a good man, a kind man. But you’re also the heir to the throne. I’m the help. It’s... well, it’s hardly a relationship of equals.”

Why did she insist on seeing trouble where there was none? “You’re wrong. We are equals in all the ways that really matter.”

She made a humphing sound. “Thanks for that, Your Highness.”

He wanted to grab her and shake her. But somehow he managed to remain still, to speak with calm reproach. “You know me better than that.”

She shook her head. “Don’t you get it? We went too far. We need to back off and let it go.”

Let it go—let her go? Never. “Listen. I’m going to say it again. This time I’m hopeful you’ll actually hear me. I would never expect you to leave Montedoro, no matter what happened. You have my sworn word on that. The last thing I would ever want is to make things difficult for you.”

Heat flared in her eyes again. “But that’s exactly what you’ve done—what you are doing right now.”

“Forgive me.” He said it evenly, holding her dark gaze.

Another silence ensued. An endless one.

And then, at last, she spoke again, her head drooping, her shining, softly curling hair swinging out to hide her flushed cheeks. "I hate this."

"So do I."

She lifted her head and stared at him, emotions chasing themselves across her sweet face: misery, exasperation, frustration, sorrow. After a moment she confessed, "All right. It's true that I miss...having you to talk to."

Progress. His heart slammed against his rib cage.

She added, "And I adore Nick and Constance." His son, Nicholas, was eight. Connie was six. Lani was good friends with Gerta, Nick and Connie's nanny. Rule's children and his often played together. "I..." She peered at him so closely, her expression disbelieving. "Do you honestly think we could do that, be...friendly again?"

"I know we could."

"Just that and only that." Doubt shadowed her eyes. "Friendly. Nothing more."

"Only that," he vowed, silently adding, Until you realize you want more as much as I do.

She sighed. "I... Well, I would like to be on good terms with you."

Light, he reminded himself as his pulse ratcheted higher. Keep it light. "All right, then. We are...as we were." He dared to hold out his hand to her.

She frowned. He waited, arm outstretched, arching a brow,

trying to appear hopeful and harmless. Her gaze darted from his face to his offered hand, and back to his face again. Just when he was certain he would have to drop his hand, she left the table and came and took it. His fingers closed over hers. He reveled in the thrill that shivered up his arm at her touch.

Too soon, she eased her hand free and snatched up her book. “Now, will you let me go?”

No. He cast about for a way to keep her there. If she wouldn’t let him kiss her or hold her or smooth her shining hair, all right. He accepted that. But couldn’t they at least talk for a while the way they used to do?

“Max?” A slight frown creased her brow.

He was fresh out of new tactics and had no clue how to get her to let down her guard. Plus he had a very strong feeling that he’d pushed her as far as she would go for now. This was looking to be an extended campaign. He didn’t like that, but if it was the only way to finally reach her, so be it. “I’ll be seeing you in the library—where you will no longer scuttle away every time I get near you.”

A hint of the old humor flashed in her eyes. “I never scuttle.”

“Scamper? Dart? Dash?”

“Stop it.” Her mouth twitched. A good sign, he told himself.

“Promise me you won’t run off the next time we meet.”

The spark of humor winked out. “I just don’t like this.”

“You’ve already said that. I’m going to show you there’s nothing to be afraid of. Do we have an understanding?”

“Oh, Max...”

“Say yes.”

And finally, she gave in and said the words he needed to hear.

“Yes. I’ll, um, look forward to seeing you.”

He didn’t believe her. How could he believe her when she sounded so grim, when that mouth he wanted beneath his own was twisted with resignation? He didn’t believe her, and he almost wished he could give her what she said she wanted, let her go, say goodbye. He almost wished he could not care.

But he’d had years of not caring—long, empty years when he’d told himself that not caring was for the best.

And then the small, dark-haired woman in front of him changed everything.

She turned for the door.

He was out of ways to keep her there, and he needed to accept that. “Lani, wait...”

She stopped, shoulders tensing, head slightly bowed. “What now?” But she didn’t turn back to him.

“Let me.” He eased around her and pulled the door wide. She nodded, barely glancing at him, and went through, passing beneath the rough-hewn trellis into the cool winter sunlight. He lingered in the open doorway, watching her as she walked away from him.

## Chapter Two

“What is going on in that head of yours?” Sydney O’Shea Bravo-Calabretti, formerly kick-ass corporate lawyer and currently Princess of Montedoro, demanded. “Something’s bugging you.” The women sat in kid-size chairs at the round table in the playroom of the villa Sydney and Rule had bought and remodeled shortly after their marriage two years before.

Lani, holding Sydney’s one-year-old, Ellie, kissed the little one’s silky strawberry curls and lied without shame. “Nothing’s bugging me. Not a thing.”

“Yes, there is. You’ve got this weird, worried, faraway look in your eye.”

Okay, yeah. Yesterday’s confrontation with Max in the little stone house had seriously unnerved her. She’d thought about little else since then. She’d told no one what had happened on New Year’s, not even Sydney. And she never would. But she had to give Syd something, some reason she might be distracted—anything but the truth that, while Sydney and Rule and the kids were here at the family’s villa, Lani had led His Highness up to her room at the palace and done any number of un-nannylike things to his magnificent body.

Limpily, she offered, “Well, the current book is giving me fits.” That should fly. She was in the middle of writing the final book in a trilogy of historical novels set in Montedoro. Syd had been

her best friend for seven years and knew that she could get pretty stressed out while struggling with the middle of a book where the story had a tendency to drag.

Syd was so not buying. “The current book is always giving you fits. There’s something else.”

Crap. Lani frowned and pretended to think it over for a minute. “No, really. It’s the book. That’s all. There’s nothing else.”

“Yolanda Vasquez, you are lying through your teeth.”

So much for the sagging-middle excuse. What to try next?

No way was Lani busting herself. Syd had her back, always. But it was just too tacky to get into, the nanny-slash-wannabe-writer getting naked at New Year’s with the widowed heir to the throne—whom the whole world knew was still hopelessly in love with his lost wife. “Lying through your teeth,” she echoed brightly. “What does that mean, really? Some expressions are not only overused, they make no real sense. I mean, everything we say, we say through our teeth, right? I mean, unless we have no teeth.”

Syd didn’t even crack a smile. “You think you’re distracting me from asking what’s up with you. You’re not.”

“Nani, Nani...” Ellie squirmed around until she was facing Lani. Then she reached up her plump right hand and tried to stick her fingers into Lani’s mouth.

Lani gummed them. “Mmm. Yummy, tasty little fingers...” Ellie giggled and bounced up and down. Lani kissed her again,

that time on her button of a nose, after which she started squirming again and Lani hoisted her high. Ellie laughed in delight as Lani swung her to the floor.

The little sweetheart was only thirteen months and already walking. For a moment, she wobbled, steadying herself on her fat little feet. And then she toddled to her brother's open toy box and started rooting around in it.

Syd's phone chirped. A text. She took it out and read the message. "Rule. He won't be home till after seven." She started composing a reply. Lani breathed a cautious sigh of relief that the subject of what could be bothering her was closed.

Over at the toy box, Ellie pulled out a soft green rubber turtle, which she carried across the playroom to four-year-old Trevor, who sat quietly building a slightly tilted Lego tower.

"Turt," she said, beaming proudly, and held it out to him as Syd chuckled and texted.

Trev gave Ellie his usual so-patient big-brother look, took the toy from her and set it down on his other side. Ellie frowned and toddled carefully around to reach the turtle again. She bent with great concentration and picked it up. "Tev," she said.

Trevor went on building his tower.

Sydney put her phone down. "So you're not going to tell me?"

Resigned to continued denials, Lani dished out yet another lame evasion. "Syd, I promise you, there's nothing to tell." Were her pants on fire? They ought to be.

And right then, before Sydney could say anything else, Ellie

cheerfully bopped Trev on the head with the rubber turtle—not hard enough to hurt, but hard enough to get his full attention.

Trev scowled. “No hitting,” he said, and gave her a light shove.

She let out a cry as her baby legs collapsed and she landed, plop, on her butt. The impact caused Trevor’s shaky tower to collapse to the playroom floor.

Trev protested, “Lani! Mom! Ellie is being rude!”

Ellie promptly burst into tears.

Both women got up and went over to sort out the conflict. There were hugs and kisses for Ellie and a reminder to Trev that his sister was only one year old and he should be gentle with her.

Trev apologized. “I’m sorry, Ellie.”

And Ellie sniffed. “Tev. Sor-sor.” She sighed and laid her bright head on Sydney’s shoulder.

Then Sydney’s phone rang. She passed Ellie to Lani and took the call, after which she had to go and attend a meeting of one of her international legal aid groups. Lani was left to put the kids down for their nap.

She felt guilty and grateful simultaneously. Once again, she’d escaped having to tell Sydney that she’d had sex with Max on New Year’s Eve.



At the muffled creak of one of the tall, carved library doors, Lani glanced up from her laptop.

Max.

He wore a soft white crewneck sweater and gray slacks, and his wonderfully unruly hair shone chestnut brown in the glow from the milk-glass chandeliers above. His iron-blue eyes were on her, and her heart was galloping so fast she could hardly catch her breath.

He'd said he wanted them to be as they used to be.

Impossible. Who did he think he was kidding? There was no going back to the way it had been before. And the more she thought about it—which was all the time since their conversation in the gardener's cottage—the more she was certain he knew that they couldn't go back.

And she would bet that was fine with him. Because he didn't want to go back. He wanted to be her lover, wanted more of the heat and wonder of New Year's Eve.

And okay, she wanted that, too. And she knew it would be fabulous, perfect, beautiful. For as long as it lasted. Until things went wrong.

Because, as she'd tried so very hard to get him to see, love affairs ended. And there were too many ways it all could go bad, too large of a likelihood she'd be put on a plane back to Texas. Yes, all right. It might end amicably. But it also might not. And she wasn't willing to risk finding out which of the two it would be.

She stared in those beautiful eyes of his and thought that she ought to confront him for being a big, fat liar, for saying how he missed her friendship when he really only wanted to get back in bed with her.

But then, who was she to get all up in anyone's face about lying? She'd yet to tell Syd the truth. And she wanted to be Max's lover as much as he wanted to be hers.

However, she wanted the life she had planned for herself more. Risking all of her dreams on a love affair? She'd tried that once. It hadn't ended well.

He gave her a slow nod. "Lani." A shiver went through her—just from the sound of her name in his mouth.

"Hi, Max," she chirped way too brightly.

"Go on, do your work. I'm not here to distract you."

Liar. "Great." She flashed him a smile as bright and fake as her tone and turned her gaze back to her laptop.

He walked by her table on his way to the stairs that led to the upper level. She stared a hole in her laptop screen and saw him pass as a blur of movement, his footfalls hushed on the inlaid floor. He mounted the stairs, his back to her. The temptation was too great. She watched him go up.

At the top, he disappeared from sight and she heard another door open, no doubt to one of the locked rooms, the vaults where the rarest books and documents were kept. She wasn't allowed into any of those special rooms without the watchful company of the ancient scholar who acted as palace librarian or one of his two dedicated assistants.

In fact, she wouldn't be allowed into the library at all at eight o'clock at night if it wasn't for Max.

A year ago, he'd presented her with her own key to the ornate,

book-lined, two-story main room. To her, it was a gift beyond price. Now, whenever she wanted to go there, anytime of day or night, she could let herself in and be surrounded by beautiful old books, by a stunning array of original materials for her research.

Library hours were limited and pretty much coincided with the hours when she needed to be with Trev and Ellie. However, most days from about 5:00 p.m. on, Rule and Sydney enjoyed time alone with each other and their children—usually at their villa. They welcomed Lani as part of the family if she wanted to stay on in the evening, but they had no problem if she took most nights off to work on her latest book.

With the key, she could spend as many evening hours as she pleased at the library. And later, at bedtime, her room in the family's palace apartment was right there waiting. Then, early in the morning, it was only a brisk walk along landscaped garden paths down Cap Royale, the rocky hill on which the palace stood, to Fontbleu and the villa.

Pure heaven: the laws, culture and history of Montedoro at her fingertips in the lovely, silent library with its enormous mahogany reading tables and carved, velvet-upholstered chairs. Yes, there were some language issues for her. Much of the original material was in French or Spanish. The French, she managed all right with the aid of her rusty college French and a couple of French/English dictionaries. She knew a little Spanish, but not as much as she probably should, given her Latino heritage. Max, however, spoke and read Spanish fluently and was always

happy to translate for her, so the Spanish texts were completely accessible to her, too. Until New Year's, anyway.

It had worked out so perfectly. Lani stayed at the palace several nights a week. She took her laptop and worked for hours. No one disturbed her in the library, not in the evening.

No one but Max—though he didn't really disturb her. He came to the library at night to work, too. An internationally respected scholar and expert on all things Montedoran, he'd written a book about the special, centuries-long relationship between Montedoro and her "big sister," France. He'd also penned any number of articles on various points of Montedoran law and history. And he traveled several times a year to speak at colleges, events and consortia around the world.

Before New Year's, when he would join her in the library, they would sit in companionable silence as she wrote and he checked his sources or typed notes for an upcoming paper or speech. He'd always shown respect for her writing time, and she appreciated his thoughtfulness.

Sometimes, alone together in the quiet, they would put their work aside and talk. And not only in the library. Often when they met in the gardens or at some event or other, they might talk for hours. They had the same interests—writing and history and anything to do with Montedoro.

They'd shared a special kind of friendship.

Until New Year's. Until she finally had to admit that she'd done it again: gotten in too deep with the wrong guy when she

needed to be concentrating on the goals she'd set for herself, the goals that she never quite seemed to reach, no matter how hard she worked.

Right now, she should get up and leave—and she would, if only she hadn't foolishly agreed that they could go back to the way they were before.

Right. As if that was even possible.

But still. She'd said she would try. And the hopeless romantic idiot within her wanted at the very least to remain friendly with him, to be his friend, which she had been before New Year's, in spite of her denials the other day.

So she stayed in her seat, laptop open in front of her.

A full ten minutes passed before he reappeared on the stairs—ten minutes during which she did nothing but stare at the cursor on her screen and listen for the sound of his footsteps above and call herself five thousand kinds of stupid. When he finally did come down, he was carrying a stack of folders and books.

She waited for him to engage her in some way, her teeth hurting she was clenching them so hard. But he only took a chair across and down from her, gave her another perfectly easy, friendly nod and bent his gorgeous head over the old books and papers.

Well, okay. Apparently, he was just there to work.

Which was great. Fabulous. She put her hands on her keyboard and her focus on the screen.

Nothing happened. Her mind was a sloppy soup, a hot mess

of annoyance, frustration and forbidden longing. She yearned to jump up and get out of there.

But something—her pride or her promise to him yesterday, maybe—kept her sitting there, staring blankly at her own words, which right then might have been hieroglyphics for all the sense they made to her.

Eventually, she managed to type a sentence. And then another. The writing felt stiff and unnatural. But sometimes you had to write through a distraction. Even a really big distraction, like a certain six-foot-plus hunk of regal manliness sitting across and down from you.

For two full hours, she sat there. So did he, tapping away on a tablet computer, poring over the materials he'd brought down from upstairs. She sat there and she wrote. It was all just garbage she'd end up deleting, but so what? They were being as they used to be, sitting in silence, working in the library.

Except that it was nothing like it used to be. Not to her, anyway. To her, the air felt electrically charged. Her tummy was one big knot, and the words she was writing made no sense at all.

At ten after ten, she decided she'd sat there writing meaningless drivel and pretending there was nothing wrong for long enough. She closed her laptop, gathered up her stuff and rose.

He glanced up then. "Leaving?"

She hit him with another big, fake smile. "Yeah." She hooked her purse on her shoulder and picked up her laptop. "Good

night.”

“Good night, Lani.” He bent his head to his notes again.

And somehow, she couldn’t move. She stood there like a complete fool, staring at his shining, thick hair, at his impossibly broad shoulders to which his soft white sweater clung so lovingly. She wanted to drop back into her chair and ask him about his day, to tell him the real truth—that she missed him in the deepest, most elemental part of herself. That she wished things were different, but she was not a good choice for him as a friend or a lover or anything else, and he ought to know that....

He glanced up a second time. “What is it?” he asked. Gently. Coaxingly.

“Nothing,” she lied yet again.

He began closing books and stacking papers. “I need to take everything back upstairs. Only a minute, and I’ll walk you out.”

“No, really. It’s fine, I—”

He stopped and pinned her with a look. “Wait. Please.”

The problem was, in spite of everything—all she could lose, all the ways it wasn’t going to work—she wanted to wait for him. She wanted to be his friend again.

And more. So much more...

“Fine,” she said tightly.

He tipped his head sideways. “You won’t run out on me?”

She pressed her lips together and shook her head while a frantic voice in her mind screamed, You idiot, what’s wrong with you? Get out and get out now. “I’ll be right here.”

He gathered the materials into his big arms and turned for the stairs. She stood rooted to the spot as he went up, knowing she ought to just duck out while he wasn't looking—but somehow unable to budge.

He came back down again and picked up his tablet. "All right. Let's go."



A few minutes later, along a wide, marble-floored corridor on the way to Rule and Sydney's apartment, he stopped at a gilt-trimmed blue door.

She frowned at him. "What's this?"

He clasped the ornate gold latch and pushed the door inward. On the other side, dimly, she saw a sitting room. "An empty suite," he said. "Come inside with me."

She moved back a step. "Bad idea."

He held her gaze, levelly. "A few private minutes together in a neutral setting. We'll talk, that's all."

"Talk." She said the word with complete disbelief.

"And only talk," he insisted. He sounded sincere.

And she was tired of resisting, fighting not only him, but also herself. She wanted to go in that room with him. It was hopeless. Every minute she was near him only made her want to steal one minute more.

She let him usher her in.

He turned on a lamp. She sat on a velvet sofa and he took a

floral-patterned armchair.

“All right,” she said. “Talk about what?”

“Why making love with me on New Year’s Eve has upset you so much. To me, it was exactly right, a natural step. The next step for us. I don’t understand why you can’t see that.”

She stared at him and said nothing. The truth was too dangerous.

He watched her face as though memorizing it. “I miss those black-rimmed glasses you used to wear. They made you look so serious and studious.”

She’d had laser surgery six months before. “Life is easier without them in a whole lot of ways.”

“Still, they were charming.”

She almost messed up and gave him a real smile. But not quite. “You dragged me in here to talk about how you miss my glasses?”

He set his tablet on the low table between them. “Put down your laptop.”

She had it clutched to her chest with both hands. It was comforting, actually. Like a shield against doing what she really wanted and getting too close to him. But fine. She set it down—and felt suddenly naked. “This is ridiculous.”

“I’ve been thinking it over,” he said as though she hadn’t spoken, a thoughtful frown carving twin lines between his straight, thick brows.

“Max. Why are we doing this? There’s just no point.”

He shrugged. “Of course there’s a point. You. Me. That

something special between us.”

“You still love your wife,” she accused. And yeah, it was a cheap shot, the kind of thing a jealous girlfriend looking for promises of forever might be worried about. Lani was not looking for promises of any kind, no way.

He answered without heat. “My wife is gone. It’s almost four years now. This is about you and me.”

“See?” she taunted, childishly. Jealously. “You’re not denying that you’re still in love with her. She’s still the one who’s in your heart.”

Something happened in his wonderful face then. Some kind of withdrawal. But then, in an instant, he was fully engaged again. “This is not about Sophia. And we both know that. You’re just blowing smoke.”

Busted. “Can’t you just...? I mean, there have to be any number of women you could have sex with, be friends with, any number of women who would jump at the chance to get something going with you.”

His mouth twitched. What? He thought this was funny? “Any number of women simply won’t do. I want only one, Lani. I want only you.”

Okay. Crap. That sounded good. Really, really good. She made herself glare at him. “You’re working me. I know what you’re doing.”

He sat there so calmly, looking every inch the prince he was, all square-jawed and achingly handsome and good-hearted and

pulled-together. And sincere and fair. And way, way too hot. “If working you is telling you the truth, then yes. I am shamelessly working you. I waited five endless weeks for you to come to me again, to tell me whatever it is that’s keeping you away from me. It was too long. So I took action. I’m not giving up. I’m not. And if you could only be honest, I think you would admit that you don’t want me to give up.”

Why did he have to know that? It wasn’t fair. And she needed, desperately, to get out of there. She grabbed her laptop and popped to her feet. “I need to go.”

He shifted, but he didn’t rise. He stared up the length of her and straight into her eyes. “No, Lani. You need to stay. You need to talk to me.”

Talk to him. Oh, no. Talking to him seemed only to get her in deeper, which was not what she wanted.

Except for when it was exactly what she wanted.

He arched a brow and asked so calmly, “Won’t you please sit back down?”

She shut her eyes tight, drew in a slow, painful breath—and sat. “I’m not...ready for any of this with you, Max.”

He reached out and took her laptop from her and carefully set it back on the low table. “Not ready, how?”

Her arms felt too empty. She wrapped them around herself. “It’s all too much, too...consuming, you know? Too overwhelming. And what about the children?” she demanded.

He only asked, “What about them?”

“They have a right to a nanny who isn’t doing their daddy.”

“And they have just such a nanny. Her name is Gerta—and in any case, you’re not doing me, not anymore.”

She let out a hard, frustrated breath. “I’m just saying it’s impossible. It’s too much.”

He kept right on pushing her. “What you feel for me, you mean?”

She nodded, frantically. “Yes. That. Exactly that.”

“So...I’m too much?” His voice poured through her, deep and sweet and way too tempting. It wasn’t fair, that he should be able to do this to her. It made keeping her distance from him way too hard.

She bobbed her head some more and babbled, “Yes. That’s right. Too much.”

“I’m too much and Michael Cort wasn’t enough?”

Michael. Oh, why had she told him about Michael? She’d dated the software designer until she saw Sydney with Rule and realized that what she had with Michael was...exactly what Max had just said it was: not enough. “You and Michael are two different things,” she insisted, and hated how wimpy and weak she sounded.

“But we’re the same in the sense that Michael Cort and I are both men you decided not to see anymore.”

“Uh-uh. No. I was with Michael for over a year—and yes, I then decided to break it off. But you and me? We’re friends who slept together. Once.”

His eyes gleamed. “So then, we are friends?”

She threw up both hands. “All right. Have it your way. We’re friends.”

“Thank you, I will—and about Michael Cort...”

“There is nothing more to say about Michael.”

“Except that I’m not in the same league with him vis-à-vis you, correct?” He waited for her to answer. When she didn’t, he mildly remarked, “Ouch.”

God. Did he have to be so calm and reasonable on top of all the hotness and being so easy to talk to and having the same interests as she did? He was a quadruple threat. At least. “Can we just not talk about Michael?”

“All right. Tell me why you find this thing between us...how did you put it? ‘Overwhelming’ and ‘consuming’ and ‘too much.’”

“Isn’t that self-evident?”

“Tell me anyway.”

Against her better judgment, she went ahead and tried. “Well, I just...I don’t have time to be consumed with, er, passion, now. There are only so many hours in a day and I...” Dear Lord. Not enough time to be consumed with passion? Had she really said that?

“Tell me the rest,” he prompted evenly.

She groaned. “It’s only that, well, my dad’s a wonderful teacher, the head of the English department at Beaufort State College in Beaufort, Texas, which is west of Fort Worth...” He was frowning, no doubt wondering what any of that had to do

with the subject at hand—and why wouldn't he wonder? For a person who hoped someday to write for a living, she was doing a terrible job of keeping to the point and making herself understood.

“You told me months ago that your father's a teacher,” he reminded her patiently.

“My father is successful. He's head of his department. My mother's a pediatrician. And my big brother, Carlos, owns five restaurants. Carlos got married last year to a gorgeous, brilliant woman who runs her own dancing school. In my family, we figure out what we want to do and we get out there and do it. Okay, we don't rule principalities or anything. But we contribute to our community. We find work we love and we excel at it.”

“You have no problem then. You have work you love and you're very good at it.”

“Yes, I'm good with children, and I love taking care of Trev and Ellie.”

“You're an excellent nanny, I know. But that isn't the work you love, really, is it?”

She folded her hands in her lap and stared down at them—and wandered off topic some more. “My dad wanted me to follow in his footsteps and be a teacher. From the first, I knew I wanted to write. He said I could do both. Of course, he was right. But I didn't want to do it his way, didn't want to teach. We argued a lot. And the truth is I wasn't dedicated to my writing, not at first. I had some...difficulties. And I took my sweet time getting

through college.”

“Difficulties?”

Why had she even hinted at any of that? “Just difficulties, that’s all.”

“You’re not going to tell me, are you?”

She shook her head tightly and went on with her story. “My parents would have paid for my education, even though they weren’t happy with my choices. But I was proud. I wanted to make it on my own.”

“You were proud?” he teased.

She felt her cheeks grow warm. “Okay, yeah. I am proud. I met Syd and we were like sisters from the first. I went to work for her, became her live-in housekeeper before she had Trev, to help put myself through school. And then once I got my degree, I stayed on with her, working for her, but with plenty of time to write. I worked hard at the writing, but it never took off for me. I lacked focus. Until I came here, until I knew the stories I wanted to write. And now I do know, Max. Now I’ve got the focus and the drive that I need, plus the stories I want to tell.”

Max was sitting forward in the chair, his gray-blue gaze intense. “Have I somehow given you the idea that I think you should stop writing and spend every spare moment in bed with me?”

“Uh, no. No, of course you haven’t. It’s just that I have goals and I need to meet them. I need, you know, to make something of myself. I really do, Max.”

He went on leaning forward in the chair, watching her. And she had that feeling she sometimes got around him, the feeling that used to make her all warm and fuzzy inside, because he knew her, he understood her. Too bad that lately, since New Year's, that feeling made her worry that he knew too much about her, and that he would use what he knew to push her to do things his way. He said, "You want your parents to be proud of you—and you don't feel that they are right now."

Her mouth went dry. She licked her lips. "I didn't say that."

He went further. "You're embarrassed that it bothers you, what your parents think. Because you're twenty-nine years old and you believe you should be beyond trying to live up to their ideals. But you're not beyond it, Lani. You're afraid that it will somehow get out that we've been lovers and that your mother and father will read about it in the tabloids, tacky stories of the nanny shagging the prince. You're afraid they'll judge you in all the ways you're judging yourself. You're afraid they'll think less of you, and you already feel they look down on you as it is."

"No. Really, they're good people. They don't look down on me, and I love them very much."

"Plus, you're clinging to a completely unfounded idea that I'll grow tired of you and have you banished from Montedoro in shame."

She groaned. "Okay, it really sounds silly when you put it that way."

"Good. Because it is silly. I've given you my word that

it's never going to happen. And I never break my word." He was frowning again, holding her gaze as though he could look right through her eyes into her mind. "There's more, isn't there? Something deeper, something you haven't told me yet. Something to do with those 'difficulties' you had that you wouldn't explain to me."

Uh-uh. No. Not going there. Never going there. "It doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does."

It was long in the past. She'd survived and moved on, and she didn't want to get into it with him now—or ever. She lifted her chin to a defiant angle and kept her mouth firmly shut.

Without warning, he stood. She gasped and stared up at him, a breathless weakness stealing through her at the sheer masculine beauty of him. And then he held down his hand to her. "Take it," he said with such command and composure that it never occurred to her to do anything else.

She put her fingers in his. A dart of hungry fire flew up her arm, across her chest and downward, straight into the secret core of her. She should tell him to let go. But she didn't. She only rose on shaky feet to stand with him and then stared up at him dazedly as hot, sweet memories of New Year's Eve flashed through her brain.

He said gruffly, "There's nothing wrong with wanting your mother and father to be proud of you. It gets dangerous only when you let your need for their approval run your life."

She managed to muster a little attitude. “Do you have any idea how patronizing you sound?”

He only smiled. “Hit a nerve, did I? Also, you should know that very few authors can write a decent book before the age of thirty. Good writing requires life experience.”

“Do you think you’re reassuring me? Because you’re not.”

“I’m praising you. You’ve written five books and you’re not thirty yet. One is okay, two are quite good and the most recent two are amazing.”

“Five and a half books.” She was currently stuck in the middle of number six. “And how do you know how good they all are? You’ve only read the last two.” He’d actually offered to read them. And she’d been grateful for his helpful ideas on how to make them better. That was before New Year’s, of course.

He added, “And you’re published.”

Yes, she was. In ebook. Just that past December, as a Christmas present to herself, she’d self-published the three women’s fiction novels she’d written before she moved to Montedoro. So far, unfortunately, her e-book sales gave a whole new meaning to the word unimpressive. She was holding off on self-pubbing the new trilogy, hoping to sell them as a package to a traditional publisher.

And suddenly she got what he was hinting at. “You downloaded the three books I e-pubbed, didn’t you?”

One big shoulder lifted in a half shrug. “Isn’t that what you put them on sale for—so that people will buy them?”

Her heart kind of melted about then. How could she help but melt? He not only made her want to rip off her clothes and climb him like a tree, but he was a very good man. He was constantly finding new ways to show her that he really did care about her and the things that mattered to her. It wasn't his fault that she had trouble trusting her own emotions.

Her throat burned with all the difficult stuff she didn't know how to tell him. "Max, I..." She had no idea where to go from there.

And then it didn't matter what she might have said. He wiped her mind free of all thought by the simple act of lifting her chin lightly with his free hand and lowering his lips to hers.

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