



THE *Italian's*
PREGNANT VIRGIN

MODERN™
& 

MAISEY YATES

Maisey Yates
The Italian's Pregnant Virgin
Серия «Mills & Boon Modern»
Серия «Heirs Before Vows», книга 3

Аннотация

You will be my wife...Esther Abbott was backpacking across Europe when she was approached about being a surrogate. Desperately in need of the money, Esther agreed. But when the deal falls apart, she's left pregnant and alone, with no one to turn to...except the baby's father! Learning he is to have a child with a woman he's never met is a scandal Italian billionaire Renzo Valenti can't afford. Following his recent bitter divorce and with an impeccable reputation to maintain, Renzo has no choice but to claim the child...and Esther as his wife! Book 3 in the Heirs Before Vows trilogy

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“You will be my wife...”

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Renzo Valenti, heir to the Valenti family real estate fortune, known womanizer and chronic over-indulger, stared down at the stranger standing in his entryway.

He had never seen the woman before in his life. Of that he was one hundred percent certain.

He did not associate with women like this. Women who looked like they had spent an afternoon traipsing through the streets of Rome, rather than an afternoon tangled in silk sheets.

Esther was red-cheeked and disheveled, her face void of make-up, long dark hair half falling out of a bun that looked like an afterthought.

Had she been walking by him outside he would never have paid her any notice. Except she was in his home. And she had just said words to him no woman had spoken to him since he was

sixteen years old.

But they meant nothing. As she meant nothing.

“Congratulations. Or condolences,” he said.

“Depending.”

“You don’t understand—”

“No,” he said, his voice cutting through the relative silence of the grand antechamber. “I don’t. You practically burst into my home, telling my housekeeper you had to see me, and now here you are, having pushed your way in. Regardless, you’re not drawing this out and making a show, and I have no patience for either.”

“It’s your baby.”

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MAISEY YATES is a New York Times bestselling author of more than thirty 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 my parents, who actually are great and have always supported me. In spite of what 90% of my characters' parents might suggest.

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[CHAPTER ONE](#)

“THE THING IS, Mr. Valenti, I’m pregnant.”

Renzo Valenti, heir to the Valenti family real estate fortune, known womanizer and chronic overindulger, stared down at the stranger standing in his entryway.

He had never seen the woman before in his life. Of that he was nearly one hundred percent certain.

He did not associate with women like this. Women who looked like they had spent a hot, sweaty afternoon traipsing through the streets of Rome, rather than a hot, sweaty afternoon tangled in silk sheets.

She was red-cheeked and disheveled, her face void of makeup, long dark hair half falling out of a bun that looked like an afterthought.

She was dressed the same as many American college students who flooded the city in the summer. She was wearing a form-fitting black tank top and a long, ankle-length skirt that nearly covered her dusty feet and flat, unremarkable sandals that appeared to be falling apart.

Had she been walking by him outside, he would never have paid her any notice. Except she was in his home. And she had just said words to him no woman had said to him since he was sixteen years old.

But they meant nothing, as she meant nothing.

“Congratulations. Or condolences,” he said. “Depending.”

“You don’t understand.”

“No,” he said, his voice cutting through the relative silence of the grand antechamber. “I don’t. You practically burst into my home telling my housekeeper you had to see me, and now here you are, having pushed your way in.”

“I didn’t push my way in. Luciana was more than happy to let me in.”

He would never fire his housekeeper. And the unfortunate thing was, the older woman knew it. So when she had let a hysterical girl into his home, he had a feeling she considered it punishment for his notorious behavior with the opposite sex.

Which was not fair. This little creature—who looked as

though she would be most at home sitting on a sidewalk in the vicinity of Haight-Ashbury, playing an acoustic guitar for coins—might well be some man's unholy punishment. But she wasn't his.

“Regardless, you're not drawing this out and making a show, and I have no patience for either.”

“It's your baby.”

He laughed. There was absolutely no other response for such an outrageous statement. And there was no other way to remove the strange weight, the strange tension that gripped him when she spoke the words.

He knew why it affected him. But it should not.

He could imagine no circumstance under which he would touch such a ridiculous little hippie. And even so, he had just spent the past six months devoted to the world's most obscene farce of a marriage.

And though Ashley had been devoted to the pleasure of both herself—and other men—during their union, he had been faithful.

A woman with a small baby bump, barely showing beneath that skin-tight top, claiming to be carrying his child could be absolutely nothing but ridiculous to him.

He'd had nothing at all but six months of fights, dodging vases flung in a rage by his crazy wife—who seemed to do her best to demolish the stereotype that Canadians were a nice and polite people—and then days on end of ridiculous cooing like he was

some kind of pet she was trying to tame again after a sound beating.

Little realizing that he was not a man to be tamed, and never had been. He had married Ashley to make a point to his parents, and for no other reason. As of yesterday, he was divorced and free again.

Free to take this little backpacker in any way he wanted to, if he so chose.

Though, she would find the only place he wanted to take her was out the front door, and back onto the streets she had come from.

“That, you will find, is impossible, cara mia.” Her eyes went round, liquid, shock and pain visible. What had she imagined would happen? That he would fall for this ruse? That she would find her salvation in him? “I can see how you would build some strange fantasy around the idea I might be your best bet for help,” he said, attempting to keep his tone calm. “I have a reputation with women. But I have also been married for the past six months. So whatever man is responsible for knocking you up in a bar crawling with tourists and never calling again? He is not me, nor will you ever con me into believing it is. I am divorced now, but in the time I was married I was faithful to my wife.”

“Ashley,” she said, blinking rapidly. “Ashley Bettencourt.”

He was stunned, but only momentarily, by her usage of his wife’s name. It was common knowledge, so of course if she knew about him, she would know about Ashley. But if she knew he

was married, why not choose an easier target?

“Yes. Very good,” he said. “You’re up on your tabloid reading, I see.”

“No, I know Ashley. She’s actually the person I met in a bar crawling with tourists. She’s the one who knocked me up.”

Renzo felt like he’d been punched in the chest. “Excuse me? None of what you’re saying makes sense.”

The little woman growled, lifting her hands and gripping her head for a moment before throwing them back down at her sides, curling her fingers into fists. “I am... I am trying. But I thought you would know who I was!”

“Why would I know who you are?” he asked, feeling at a loss.

“I just... Oh, I should never have listened to her. But I was... I am just as stupid as my dad thinks I am!” She was practically wailing now, and he had to admit, this farce was inventive even if it was damned disruptive to his day.

“Right at this moment I’m on your father’s side, cara, and I will remain so until you have offered me an explanation that falls somewhere short of being as stupid as my ex-wife getting you pregnant.”

“Ashley hired me. I was working at a bar down by the Colosseum, and she and I started talking. She was telling me about the issues in your marriage and the trouble you were having conceiving...”

The words made his gut twist. He and Ashley had never attempted to conceive. By the time they’d gotten to a place where

they might discuss giving him an heir to his empire, he'd already decided that no amount of shock value made her worth it as a wife.

"I thought it was weird, her talking to me like that. But she came back the next night, and the next. We talked about how I ended up in Italy and how I had no money..." She blinked. "And then she asked me if I would consider being her surrogate."

Pressure built in Renzo's chest until it exploded. English deserted him entirely, a string of vulgar Italian flowing from his lips like a foul river. "I don't believe it. This is some trick that bitch has put you up to."

"It's not. I promise you it isn't. I had no idea that you didn't know. No idea at all. It was all very... What she said... It made sense. And...and she said it would be easy. Just a quick trip to Santa Firenze, where the procedure is legal, and then I just have to...be the oven. I was supposed to get paid to make the bread, so to speak, and then...well, give it to the person I...baked it for. Someone who wanted the baby desperately enough to ask for help from a stranger."

Panic tore through Renzo like a wild beast, savaging his chest, his throat. Making it impossible to breathe. What she was saying was impossible. It had to be. Mostly.

Ashley was...unpredictable. And God knew how that might manifest. Especially since she'd been enraged by the divorce—made simple because of their marriage in Canada, which she had felt was calculated on his part. It was, of course.

But she wouldn't have done this. She couldn't have. Still, he pressed.

"It made sense to you that a woman pursued surrogacy, and claimed to have a husband whom you never saw?"

"She said that it would be impossible for you to come to the clinic. She could only do it because she wore large sunglasses and a hat. She said that you were far too recognizable. She said you were very tall." She swept her hand up and down. "You are. Obviously. You don't blend. Not even sunglasses would disguise... You know what I mean."

"I know nothing. It has become apparent to me over the past few minutes that I know less than I thought. That snake talked you into this. How much did she pay you?"

"Well, she hasn't given me everything yet."

He laughed, the sound bitter. "Is that so? I hope that final price is a high one."

"Well, the problem is that Ashley said she doesn't want the baby anymore. Because of the problems that you're having."

"Problems?" The question was incredulous. "Does she mean our divorce?"

"I...I guess."

"So, you did some cursory research on us, and then no more?"

"I don't have internet at the hostel," she said flatly.

"You live in a hostel?"

"Yes," she said, her cheeks turning a darker shade of pink. "I was just passing through. And I ran out of money. Took a job at

a bar, and I've been here longer than I anticipated. Then I met Ashley about three months ago."

"How far along are you?"

"Only about eight weeks. I just... Ashley decided she didn't want the baby anymore. And I don't want to... I don't want to end the pregnancy. And I thought that even though she said you didn't want to handle any of this, because it damaged your view of the whole thing... I wanted to come to you. I needed to make sure."

"Why is that? Because you fancy that you will raise the baby if I don't want it?"

It was her turn to laugh. There was no humor in it, only hysteria. "No! I'm not going to raise a baby. Not now. Not ever. I don't want children. I don't want a husband. But I was involved in this. I agreed to it. And I feel like... I don't know. How can I not feel responsible? She became a friend to me almost. I mean, she was one of the first people in forever who talked to me, told me about her life. She made sure I knew how much she wanted this baby and...now she doesn't. She might have changed her mind, but I can't change my feelings about it."

"What will you do?" he asked. "What will you do if I tell you I don't want the baby?"

"I'll give it up for adoption," she said, as though it were the most obvious thing. "I was going to give birth anyway. That was part of the agreement."

"I see." His thoughts were racing, trying to catch up with everything that the woman in front of him—the woman whose

name he still didn't know—was saying to him. “And was Ashley planning on paying you the rest of the fee if you continued with the pregnancy?”

The woman looked down. “No.”

“So, you had to make sure that you could still collect your fee? Is that why you came to speak to me?”

“No. I came to speak to you because it seemed like the right thing to do. Because I was becoming concerned about your lack of involvement in the whole thing.”

Anger built inside him, reaching its boiling point and bubbling over. “Allow me to paint a clear picture for you of what exactly happened. My ex-wife went behind my back to hire you. I still don't understand how this happened. I don't understand how she was able to manipulate both you and the doctor. I don't understand how she was able to accomplish this without my knowing. I don't understand what her endgame was, as she is now clearly backing out. Perhaps now that she has seen she will get no money from me, and I'm not worth the effort anyway, she does not wish to be saddled with my child for the rest of her shallow existence. Or, perhaps it is simply Ashley. Who decided to do something on a whim, thinking that something of this magnitude would be a delightful surprise she would drop in my lap like the purchase of a new handbag. And much like my ex feels about handbags, she has decided she is bored of this one and moved on to the next shiny thing. Regardless of her motivation, the end result is the same. I didn't know. I did not want this baby.”

At that, she seemed to deflate. Her shoulders shrunk inward, some of her defiant posture diminishing. “Okay.” She blinked rapidly, lifting her chin and staring him down. “If you change your mind, I’m at the hostel Americana. You can find me there. Unless I’m working at the bar across the street.” She turned on her heel and began to walk away from him, toward the front door. Then she paused. “You claim you’ve been in the dark this whole time. I just didn’t want you to have that excuse anymore.”

Then she walked out of his house. And just like his ex-wife, he determined that he would think about her no more.

* * *

It nagged at him. There was no escaping it. For three days he’d attempted to ignore and dismiss the events that had occurred earlier. He did not know the woman’s name. He didn’t even really know if she was telling the truth. Or if she was another of his ex-wife’s games.

Knowing Ashley, that was it. Just a game. A weird attempt to try to draw him back into her web. She had been far too content with the dissolution of their union. Particularly after she had been so bitter about it in the first place. She had claimed he had always known it would end this way. Which was why they had sought marriage outside the country. Divorce in Italy was far too complicated. And, he supposed, the fact that he had covered his bases in such a manner was in some ways indicative of his commitment. Or at least, his faith in the mercurial Ashley.

But then, he imagined Ashley had gotten her revenge.

Surrogacy was not legal in Italy. Undoubtedly why she had sought to have the procedure done in neighboring Santa Firenze.

More the pity that his sister, Allegra, had dissolved her agreement with the prince of that country and married Renzo's friend—Spanish duke Cristian Acosta, who would be no help to him in this situation—instead.

He should let it go. Likely the woman was lying. Even if she weren't...what should it matter to him?

A sharp pang in the vicinity of his heart told him he clearly hadn't had enough to drink. So, he set out to remedy that. But for some reason, grabbing a hold of the bottle of Scotch reminded him of what the stranger had said before she'd left.

She worked at a bar. She worked at a bar near the Colosseum, and if he wanted to find her he could look there.

He took the stopper out of the Scotch bottle. That would all be very well and good if he in fact wanted to find her. He did not. There was no point in searching for a woman who was—in point of fact—probably only attempting to scam money out of him.

But the possibility lingered. It lingered inside him like an acrid smell that he couldn't shake. One that remained long after the source of the odor was removed. He couldn't let it go because of Jillian. Because of everything that had happened with her.

He gritted his teeth, setting the bottle back down. Then, he strode toward his closet, grabbing a pair of shoes and putting them on quickly. He would get his car, he would go down to the bar, and he would confront this woman. Then, he would be able

to come back home and go to bed, sleeping well, knowing with full confidence that she was a liar and that there was no baby.

He paused for a moment, taking a deep breath. Perhaps he was being overly cautious. But given his history, he felt he had to be. He had lost one child, and he would not lose another one.

CHAPTER TWO

ESTHER ABBOTT TOOK a deep breath as she cleared off the last table of her shift. Hopefully, she would have a decent amount of money in tips when she counted everything up, then, she would finally be able to rest easy. Her feet hurt. And she imagined that as early on as she was in the pregnancy, she couldn't exactly blame it on that.

It was just the fact that she had been working for ten hours. But what other choice did she have? Renzo Valenti had sent her away. Ashley Bettencourt wanted nothing to do with her or the baby. And if Esther had any sense in her head she would probably have complied with the other woman's wishes and pursued a termination. But she just couldn't do it.

Apparently, she had no sense in her head. She had a lot of feelings inside her chest, though. Feelings that made all of this seem impossible, and painful, and just a bit too much.

She had come to Europe to pursue independence. To see something of the world. To try to gain perspective on life away from the iron fist of her father. That brick wall that she could no more reason with than she could break apart.

In her father's world, a woman didn't need an education that

extended beyond homemaking. In her father's world, a woman didn't need to drive, not when her husband should accompany her everywhere at all times. In her father's world a woman could have no free thought or independence. Esther had always longed for both.

And it was that longing that had gotten her into trouble. That had caused her father to kick her out of the commune. Oh, she'd had options, she supposed. To give up the "sinful" items she'd been collecting. Books, music. But she'd refused.

It had been so hard. To make that choice to leave. In many ways it had been her choice, even if it was an ultimatum. But the commune had been home, even if it had been oppressive.

A place filled with like-minded people who clung to their version of old ways and traditions they had twisted to suit them. If she had stayed any longer, her family would have married her off. Actually, they would have done it a long time ago if she hadn't been such a problem. The kind of daughter nobody wanted their son to marry.

The kind of daughter her father eventually had to excommunicate to set an example to the others. His version of love. Which was really just control.

She huffed out a laugh. If they could see her now. Pregnant, alone, working in a den of sin and wearing a tank top that exposed a slim stretch of midriff whenever she bent over. All of those things would be deeply frowned upon.

She wasn't sure if she approved of her situation either. But it

was what it was.

Why had she ever listened to Ashley? Well, she knew why. Because she had been tempted by the money. Because she wanted to go to college. Because she wanted to extend her time in Europe, and because she found that waiting tables really was kind of awful.

There was nothing all that romantic about backpacking. About staying in grimy hostels.

It was more than that, though. Ashley had seemed so vulnerable when they'd met. And she had painted a picture of a desperate couple in a rocky place in their marriage, who needed a child to ease the pain that was slowly breaking them apart.

The child would be so loved. Ashley had been adamant about that. She had told Esther about all her plans for the baby. Esther hadn't been loved like that. Not a day in her life.

She had wanted to be part of that. Even in just a small way.

Finding out that was a lie—the happy-family picture Ashley had painted—was the most wrenching part of it all.

She laughed and shook her head. Her father would say this was her punishment for being greedy. For being disobedient and headstrong.

Of course, he would probably also expect this would send her running back home. She wouldn't do that. Not ever.

She looked up, looked at the view in front of her. Looked around her at the incredible clash of chaos that was Rome. How could she be regretful? It might be difficult to carry the baby to

term with no help. But she would. And then after that she would make sure that the child found a suitable home.

Not one with her. But then, it wasn't her baby, after all. It was Renzo's. Renzo and Ashley's. Her responsibilities did not extend beyond gestation. She felt pretty strongly about that.

The hair on the back of her neck seemed to stand on end, a rush of prickles moving down her spine. She straightened, then slowly turned. And through the crowd, across the bar that was teeming with people, tables crammed together, the dark lighting providing a sense of anonymity, he seemed to stand out like a beacon.

Tall, his dark hair combed back off his forehead, custom suit tailored perfectly to his physique. His hands were shoved in his pockets, his dark eyes searching. Renzo Valenti.

The father of this baby. The man who had so callously sent her away three days earlier. She hadn't expected to see him again. Not when he had been so adamant about the fact that he would have nothing to do with the child. That he didn't even believe her story.

But here he was.

A surge of hope went through her. Hope for the child. And—she had to confess internally, with no small amount of guilt—hope for her. Hope that she would be compensated for the surrogacy, as she had been promised.

She wiped her hands on her apron, stuffing a bar towel in the front pocket and striding across the room. She waved a hand, and

the quick movement must have caught his attention, because just then, his gaze locked on to hers.

And everything slowed.

Something happened to her. A rush of heat flowed down through her body, pooling in her stomach, and slightly lower. Suddenly, her breasts felt heavy, her breath coming in short, harsh bursts. She was immobilized by that stare. By the fathomless, black depths that seemed to pin her there, like a butterfly in one of the collections her brothers had had.

She was trembling. And she had no idea why. Very few things intimidated her. Since she had stood there in front of her father—in front of the whole commune, like a bad movie or something—refusing to recant the “evil” things she had brought in from the outside, there wasn’t much that bothered her. She had clung to what she wanted, defying everything she had been taught, defying her father, leading to her expulsion from the only home she’d ever known. That moment made everything else seem mundane in many ways.

Perhaps, she had imagined, the world would turn out to be every bit as scary and dangerous as her mother and father had promised her it would be. But once she had purposed in herself that she was willing to take that chance to discover herself, to discover her freedom, she had made peace with it. With whatever might happen.

But she was shaking now. Was intimidated. Was maybe even a little bit afraid.

And then he began to close the space between them. And it felt as though there was a connection between the two of them. As though there was a string tied around her waist, one he was holding in his hands. And even though he was the one drawing nearer to her, she felt the pull to him.

It was loud in the bar, but when he spoke it cut through like a knife. Effortless, sharp and exceedingly clear. "I think you and I need to have a little chat."

"We tried that," she said, shocked at how foreign her voice sounded. How breathless. "It didn't exactly go like I planned on it going."

"Well, you walked into my home and dropped a bombshell on me. So, I'm not entirely certain how you expected it to go."

"Well, I didn't know it was a bombshell. I thought we were just going to discuss something you already knew. A bombshell you were complicit in."

"Sadly for you, I was not complicit. But if what you're saying is true, we definitely need to come to an agreement of some kind."

"What I'm saying is absolutely true. I have the documentation back at the hostel."

He narrowed his eyes. "And I'm supposed to believe that this documentation is factual?"

She laughed. "I wouldn't know where to begin forging medical paperwork like that."

"That means nothing to me. Your word means nothing to me. I don't know who you are. I don't know anything about you. All

I know is that you showed up at my house earlier and are now asking me to believe the most fantastical of tales. Why should I?"

"Well," she said, looking down at her sandaled feet, "I suppose because you're here." She looked back up at him, her breath catching in her throat when she met with his furious gaze. "That means you must think it could be true. And if it could be true, why wouldn't it be? Why would I target you? Why would I... I don't know. It's just... Trust me. I would never have cooked this up on my own."

"Take me back to your hostel."

"I'm just off shift. I need to go write down my time."

He reached out, grabbing hold of her bare arm. The contact between his fingers and her skin sent an electric crackle down through her body. She had to think. Really think if she had ever been touched like this by a man. Other than a doctor or her family members, she'd had very little physical contact with anyone. And this seemed... It seemed more than significant. It burned her all the way down to the soles of her feet. Made her feel like her shoes might melt.

Like she might melt.

"I will speak to your boss later if need be. But you're coming with me now."

"I shouldn't."

A smile curved his lips. It was not kind. It did nothing to dispel any of the tension in her chest. If anything, it made everything feel heavier. Tighter. "But you will, cara mia. You will."

After that statement of declaration, she found herself being propelled out of the open-air bar and onto the busy street. It was still teeming with people, humidity hanging in the overly warm air. Her hair was sticking to the back of her neck, her tank top sticking to her skin, and his body was like a furnace beside her as they strode purposefully down the street.

“You don’t know where I live.”

“Yes I do. I am fully capable of looking up the name of a hostel and finding the directions. And I know the streets well.”

“This isn’t the way back,” she said, feeling the need to try to find some power in the situation. She despised feeling helpless. Despised feeling controlled.

“Yes,” he said, “it is.”

Much to her dismay, this alternate route seemed to put them back at the front door of the hostel much more quickly than the one she typically took. She pursed her lips together, frowning deeply.

“You’re welcome,” he said, pushing the door open, his entire posture and tone radiating a kind of arrogance she had never before come into contact with.

“For what?”

“I have just showed you a better route home. Likely I will save you time in the future. You’re welcome.”

She scowled, ducking her head and walking past him into the narrow hallway. She led him down the hall, to the small room that she had in the back. There were four bunk beds in it, with

two other women currently occupying the space. It was fairly private, all things considered. Though, as Esther began to feel more symptomatic of her pregnancy, it began to feel more and more crowded.

She kicked her sandals off, making her way across the pale, uneven stone floor, and headed to the bottom bunk, where all of her things were kept when she wasn't sleeping. Her backpack was shoved into the corner by the wall, and she grabbed hold of it, dragging it toward her.

When she didn't hear footsteps following her, she turned to see Renzo standing in the doorway. His frame filled the space, and when he took that first step inside, he seemed to bring something with him. Tension. A presence that filled not only the room, but any empty space in her chest.

"Welcome," she said, her tone flat.

"Thank you," he responded, his words carrying a level of disdain that was almost comical. Except, it was difficult to find much of anything funny at the moment.

She tugged on the drawstring that kept her backpack cinched shut, then hunted around for the tightly folded papers that were down in the bottom. "This is it." She held it out to him and he took it. His fingertips didn't brush hers, and she found herself preoccupied by the realization that she had almost hoped they would.

"What is all of this?" he asked, unfolding the documents.

"Medical records of everything and the signed agreement.

With both mine and Ashley's signature. I suppose you would know if it looked different from your wife's actual signature. And I think we can both agree that the likelihood of me randomly being able to forge it is slim."

He frowned, deep lines forming between his dark brows. "This seems... It seems like perhaps there could be some truth."

"Call Ashley. Call her. She's mad at me. I'm sure she'll be more than happy to yell at you, too."

"Ashley wants you to end the pregnancy?"

Esther nodded, swallowing hard. "I can't. I agreed to this. And even though the baby isn't mine, without me, maybe it wouldn't exist. And I just... I can't."

"Well, if this is in fact my child, that isn't what I want either."

"You want the baby?"

She tried to read his expression, but she found it impossible. Not that she was exceptionally adept at decoding what people were thinking. She had spent so many years growing up in a closed community. Seeing any faces at all that were unfamiliar was a shock. Going out into the wide world after an entire life being cloistered was... There were so many sights. So many sounds and smells. Different voices, different accents. Different ways of expressing happiness, sadness.

While she often felt at a disadvantage, sometimes she wondered if she actually read people a bit better than those who didn't have to look as closely at the people around them. She always felt that if she released hold on her vigilance—even

for a second—she would find herself lost in this endless sea of humanity.

But there were no clues at all on Renzo's face. It was as though he were carved from granite. His lips pressed into a firm line, his black eyes flat. Endless.

"I will take responsibility for my child," he said, which was not the same as wanting the child. But she supposed, it didn't matter.

"Well...I suppose that's..." She didn't want to ask about payment. Except, she desperately wanted to ask about payment.

"But the first thing we must do is get you out of this..." He looked around the room, his lip curling slightly. "This place. You cannot stay here. Not while you are carrying the heir to the Valenti fortune."

She blinked rapidly. The baby that she was carrying was the heir to a fortune? She knew that Renzo was rich. Of course she did. She had seen the way that Ashley was accustomed to living after their stay at the lavish hotel the other woman had insisted they stay in when they'd gone across the border for the procedure.

Still. This revelation seemed different. "But we've been fine for the past couple of months," she said.

"Perhaps. Though, I imagine our definition of 'fine' may be sharply different from one another's. You are not to work at that bar, not anymore. And you will come with me. Back to my villa."

Esther felt like she had been punched in the chest. She found that she couldn't breathe. She felt immobilized. Utterly and completely weighted down by that dark, uncompromising gaze.

“But what if I... What if I don’t want to?”

“You don’t have a choice,” he returned. “There is a clause in this agreement that says Ashley can choose to terminate it should she decide she no longer wants the pregnancy carried to term. That has happened. That means unless you comply with my demands, with my word, you will get nothing. And you will have no recourse. Not—I assure you—in Italy. I will pay you more than the sum my wife agreed on, but only if you do exactly as I say.”

Her head was spinning. She felt like she needed to sit down or she was going to fall down. She found herself doing exactly that before she even realized it, her weak legs folding, plopping her down roughly onto the edge of the thin mattress, the wood frame digging sharply into her thighs.

The noise from outside filtered through the single-pane windows, joining the thoughts in her head, swirling around, making her feel dizzy. “Okay,” she said, only because she could think of no discernible reason to refuse him.

She knew there were other consequences to consider. Concerns for her safety, perhaps? She didn’t know him. Didn’t know him in any way beyond a brief understanding of his reputation as a businessman.

She also knew that he had been married to Ashley. Ashley, who had proved to be untrustworthy. Manipulative and—if Renzo was to be believed—a liar.

So, she imagined that said something about his character.

But she didn't see another option. Not one beyond putting herself through something that would undoubtedly be both physically and emotionally demanding without any kind of recourse. Not for the first time, she felt a deep sense of guilt and regret.

She tried not to traffic too much in guilt. Mostly because she had spent so much of her life neck deep in it. Every time she found a book at the local book exchange and slipped it into her bag—one she knew she shouldn't have. Every time she figured out a way to smuggle in a CD she shouldn't have had.

When she'd been kicked out after the discovery of her smuggled items, she'd become determined to live life on her own terms. To shamelessly adore pop music, and sugared cereal and movies. To read all the books she wanted, including books with dirty words and dirty scenes. And to feel not even a hint of shame.

But on this score, it was difficult for her to feel anything but a creeping sense of shame. She had seized this opportunity because it had seemed like a chance for her to make her dreams come true. To go to school. To continue to travel. To start a life that would remain completely separate from where she had come from.

She had been so single-minded, so focused, so determined to keep herself from ever returning to her family, to that small, claustrophobic existence, that she had ignored any and all twinges of discomfort over this arrangement.

But now, it was impossible to ignore. Impossible to wave

her hand over the fact that she was carrying a baby. That she had some kind of responsibility in all of this. That it would be incredibly hard on her body. That it would likely wreck her emotionally. And that if she didn't comply with what Renzo was asking her to do...

There was a very good chance she would come out of it diminished. That the strength she had gained, strength enough to strike out on her own, would be gone. And for what? For money she wouldn't even be able to get.

So, she found herself cinching her backpack back up. Slipping her feet into her sandals, and turning to face Renzo.

"Okay," she said, her lips feeling slightly numb. "I'm going with you."

CHAPTER THREE

ADRENALINE AND ANGER coursed through Renzo in equal measure on the car ride back to his villa. It did not escape him that the woman—whose name he had read in the documents, but whom he had yet to be formally introduced to—was looking around the Italian-made vehicle with an expression akin to a country mouse. But he found he could spare little thought to it.

Not when the reality of the situation was so sharp. When his pulse was beating a steady tattoo in his throat, when his blood was running hot and fast beneath his skin. A baby. Esther Abbott, this American backpacker, was pregnant with his baby. Yes, he would have to verify all of this with Ashley, but he was forced to believe Esther. Though he had no real reason to.

Nothing beyond gut instinct. The idea of trusting his gut nearly made him laugh. But then, he rarely trusted his gut. Usually, he trusted in parts lower. And his own quick intellect, which he often allowed himself to imagine was above reproach.

In matters of business, it was. When he was consulted on where a certain business should be built, when he was tasked with seeing to a major bit of real estate development, he never failed. Instincts, inherited from his father, drove him in that arena.

Apparently, in other matters he was not quite so discerning. Or so unerring. His ex-wife was one of the very prominent examples of that truth.

Jillian being another.

Women. It seemed he had a tendency to be a fool for women. No matter that he kept his heart out of any such entanglements, he seemed to have a knack for finding women who got him in other ways.

He looked sideways at Esther, then quickly turned his focus back to the road. He would have no such issues with her. She was plain. Pretty, he supposed. But her wide brown eyes were unlined, unenhanced in any way. Her dark eyebrows a bit heavier than he typically liked on a woman. There were vague bruised-looking circles beneath her eyes, and he couldn't work out if that was because of exhaustion, or if it was simply part of her coloring.

He was so accustomed to seeing women with a full face of makeup that was near enough to airbrushing in real life that he

found it very hard to say.

Her lips were full, dusky, and he thought probably the most attractive thing about her. Though, her body was also nice enough. Her breasts weren't large, but they were beautiful shaped, and it was clear she wasn't wearing a bra beneath that black tank top of hers.

But her breasts were immaterial. The only thing that mattered was her womb. And whether or not his child currently resided inside it.

He turned sharply into his driveway, leaving the gate wide open, and not particularly caring. Then, he got out of the car, rounding it and jerking open the passenger door. "Welcome to your new home," he said, knowing that his tone sounded anything but welcoming.

She bit her bottom lip, gathering her backpack from the floor of the car, and getting out, holding the offensive canvas bag to her chest. She looked around, eyes wide, a sort of sickly pallor appearing beneath her tan skin.

"You were just here a couple of days ago," he said. "You can stop looking so intimidated."

"Well," she said, directing her focus to him, "you're intimidating. A house like this... One that is practically a castle... That's intimidating." She took a deep breath. "And I know I was here earlier. But this is different. I was focused on telling you about the baby. I wasn't thinking I would stay here."

"Are you going to pretend that you would prefer the hostel?"

There is no need to pretend with me. You agreed to carry a child for money. It isn't as though you can suddenly make believe you have no interest in material things."

She shook her head. "I don't. I mean, not the way that you think. I want to go to college."

He frowned. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-three."

He held back a curse. She was the same age as his sister, Allegra. Possibly a bit younger. Had he been the sort of man who possessed the ability to feel sympathy for strangers, he thought he might feel some for her. But those softer feelings had been bled from him long ago, empathy replaced by a vague sense of concern.

"And you couldn't access any scholarships?"

"No. I had to pay to take the SATs. I didn't exactly go to high school. But my scores are good enough to get into a few places. I think. I just need to get my financial ducks in a row."

"You didn't go to high school?"

She pursed her lips together. "I was homeschooled. Kind of. Anyway, it isn't like I was trying to get myself a yacht. And even if I was, nobody does surrogacy for free for a stranger."

He lifted a shoulder. "I suppose not. Come this way."

He led the way into the villa, suddenly completely at a loss. His housekeeper had already retired to her quarters, and here he was with an urchin whom he suddenly had to manage. "I imagine you're tired," he said.

“Hungry,” she replied.

He gritted his teeth. “The kitchen is this way.”

He led her through the expensive house, listening to the sound of her shuffling footsteps behind him as they made their way to the kitchen. The house itself was old. Stonework dating back centuries. But inside, all of the modern conveniences had been supplied. He made his way to the large stainless steel fridge and opened it. “You may have your pick of what’s inside.”

As soon as he said that, he realized that most of the food was still ingredients, and not exactly a meal. But surely, there would be something. Then he remembered that his housekeeper often left portions in the freezer for him just in case.

He didn’t often eat at home, and he would just as soon go out if there was no staff on hand to make him something. But he was not going back out tonight.

He looked until he found what looked to be a container of pasta. “Here you go,” he said, setting it down in front of a wide-eyed Esther.

He didn’t stay to see what she did after that. Instead, he strode from the room, taking the stairs two at a time and heading toward his office. He paced the length of the room for a moment, then turned to his desk, taking hold of his phone and dialing his ex-wife.

It took only two rings for Ashley to answer. That didn’t surprise him. If she was going to answer, of course she would do it quickly. Otherwise, had she intended to ignore him, she would

have done so steadfastly. She was nothing if not extreme.

“Renzo,” she said, sounding bored. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“You may not find it such a pleasure to speak to me, Ashley. Not when you hear what I have to say.”

“I have not actually found it a pleasure to speak to you for quite a few months.”

“We were only married for six months, so I hope that’s an exaggeration.”

“It isn’t. Why do you think I had to find other men to satisfy me?”

“If you are talking about emotional satisfaction, I have several answers for that. However, if you mean to imply that I did not satisfy you physically, then I’m going to have to call you a liar.”

Ashley huffed. “There’s more to life than sex.”

“Yes indeed. There is, in fact, the small matter of the woman who is currently downstairs in my kitchen.”

“We’re divorced now,” Ashley said, her voice so sharp it could cut glass. “Who is or is not in your kitchen—or bed—is none of my concern.”

“It is when it’s Esther Abbott. A woman who claims that she had an agreement with you. For her to carry our child.”

There was a pause. He was almost satisfied that he had clearly succeeded in rendering Ashley speechless. It was such a difficult thing to do. Even when she had been caught in bed with someone else, she had done her best to talk, scream and cry her way out of

it. She was not one to let it rest. She was never one to let someone else have the last word.

Her silence now was telling. Though, of her absolute surprise, or of her chagrin at being found out, he didn't know.

"I thought it might save us. But that was before... Before the divorce was final. Before you found out about the others."

"Right. The five other men that you were with during the course of our marriage?"

Ashley laughed. "Seven, I think."

It didn't matter to him. Five, seven or only the one he had actually witnessed. He had a feeling the truth didn't matter to Ashley either. It was all about scoring points.

"So this is true," he said, his tone harsh.

"Yes," she replied, her voice tight.

"How?" he bit out.

She huffed out an impatient-sounding laugh. "Well, darling, the last time we were intimate you used a condom. I just...made use of it after you discarded it. It was enough for the doctor."

He swore. At her. At himself. At his body. "Is there nothing too low for you?"

"I guess that remains to be seen," she said, her tone brittle like glass. "I have a lot of living left to do, but don't worry, Renzo, you won't be part of it. My depths will not be of any concern to you."

"This woman is pregnant with our child," he said, trying to bring it back around to the topic at hand. To the reason he had some creature-ish backpacker in his home.

“Because she is stubborn. I told her she didn’t have to continue with it. In fact, I told her I refused to pay the remainder of the fee.”

“Yes,” he bit out. “I have had a discussion with her. I was only calling you to confirm.”

“What are you going to do?”

That was a good question. An excellent question. He was going to raise the child, naturally. But how was he going to explain it? To his parents. To the media. These would be headlines his child would read. Either he would have to be honest about Ashley’s deception, or he would have to concoct a story about a mother abandoning her child.

That would not do.

But surrogacy was not legal in Italy. No agreement would be binding within these borders. And he would use that to his advantage.

“There is nothing to be done,” he said, his tone swift, decisive. “Esther Abbott is pregnant with my child. And I will do the responsible thing.”

“Renzo,” she said, her voice fierce, “what do you intend to do?”

He knew. There was no question. He had been in a situation similar to this before. Only then, he had had no power. The woman involved, her husband, his parents, had all made the decisions around him. His ill-advised affair with Jillian costing much more than his virginity.

At sixteen, he had become a father for the first time. But he had been barred from having anything to do with the child. A story carefully constructed to protect her marriage, her family, that child and his reputation had been agreed on by all.

All except for Renzo.

He would not allow such a thing to happen again. He would not allow himself to be sidelined. He would not put him, or his child, in such a precarious position. There was only one thing to do. And he would see it done.

“I shall do what any responsible man would do in this situation. I intend to marry Esther Abbott.”

* * *

Esther had never seen anything quite like Renzo's kitchen. It had taken her more than ten minutes to figure out how to use the microwave. And even then, the pasta had ended up having cold spots and spots that scalded her tongue. Still, it was one of the best things she had ever tasted.

That probably had more to do with exhaustion and how long she'd gone without eating than anything else. Pasta was one of her favorite newly discovered foods, though. Not that she'd never had noodles in some form. It was just that her mother typically made them for soups, and not the way she'd had it served in Italy.

Discovering new foods had been her favorite part of travel so far. Scones in England with clotted cream, macarons in France. She had greatly enjoyed the culinary adventure, nearly as much as the rest of it.

Though, sometimes she missed brown bread and stew. The kinds of simple foods her mother made from scratch at home.

A swift kick of loneliness, of homesickness, punched her low in the stomach. It was unusual, but it did happen sometimes. Most of her home life had been difficult. Had been nothing at all like the way she wanted to live. But it had been safe. And for most of her life, it had been the only thing she'd known.

She blinked, taking another bite of her pasta, and allowing the present moment to wash away the slow-burning ache of nostalgia.

She heard footsteps and looked up. Renzo strode into the kitchen, and that dark black gaze burned away the remaining bit of homesickness. There was no room for anything inside her, nothing beyond that sharp, cutting intensity.

"I just spoke to Ashley."

Suddenly, the pasta felt like sawdust in Esther's mouth. "I imagine she told you the thing you didn't want to hear."

"You are correct in your assessment."

"I'm sorry. But it's true. I really didn't come here to take advantage of you, or to lie to you. And I really couldn't have forged any kind of medical documents. I had never even been to a doctor until Ashley took me for the procedure."

He frowned. She could tell that she had said something that had revealed her as being different. She did that a lot. Mostly because she didn't exactly know the line. Cultures were different, after all, and sometimes she thought people might assume she was different only because she was American.

But she was different from typical Americans, too.

“I lived in a small town,” she said, the lie rolling off her tongue easily. She had always been a liar. Because if ever her parents asked her if she was content, if ever her mother had asked her about her plans for the future, she’d had to lie.

And so, covering up the extent of just how strange she was became easier and easier as she talked to more people and picked up more of what was expected.

“A town so small you did not have doctors?”

“He made house calls.” That part was true. There had been a physician in the commune.

“Regardless of your past history, it seems that you were telling the truth.”

“I said I was.”

“Yes, you did. It is an unenviable position you find yourself in—or perhaps it is enviable, depending on your perspective. Tell me, Esther, what are your goals in life?”

It was a strange question. And never once had she been asked. Not really. Her parents had spoken to her about what she would do. About what her duty was, about the purposes of women and what they had to do to be fulfilled. But no one had ever asked her if it would fulfill her. No one had ever asked her anything at all.

But he was asking. And that made something warm glow inside her.

It made her want to tell him.

“I want to travel. And I want to go to school. I want to get an

education.”

“To what end?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“What do you wish to major in? Business? History? Art?”

“Everything.” She shrugged. “I just want to know things.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Everything I didn’t before.”

“That is an incredibly tall order. But one that is certainly possible. Is there a better city in the world to learn about history? Rome.”

“Paris and London might have differing opinions. But I definitely take your point. And yes, I agree I can get quite an education here simply by being here. But I want more.”

He began to pace, and there was something in that stride, attention, a purpose, that made her feel a bit like a small, twitchy little field mouse standing in front of a big cat. “Why shouldn’t you have more? Why shouldn’t you have everything? Look around you,” he said, sweeping his hand in a broad gesture. “I am a man in possession of most everything. For what reason? Simply because I was born into it. And yes, I have done all that I can to ensure I am worthy of the position. I assumed the helm of the family business and have continued to navigate it with proficiency.”

“That’s very nice for you,” she said, mostly because she had no idea what else she was supposed to say.

“It could be very nice for you,” he said, leveling his eyes on

her. Her skin prickled, somewhere beneath the surface, where she couldn't tamp it down, not even by grabbing hold of her elbows and rubbing her forearms vigorously.

"Could it?"

"I am not going to be coy. I am a billionaire, Ms. Abbott. A man with a limitless supply of resources. Ashley was not as generous with you as she might have been. But I intend to give you the world."

She felt her face growing warm. She cleared her throat, reaching up and tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, just so she had something to do with the reckless energy surging through her. "That's very nice. But I only have the one backpack. I'm not sure the world would fit inside it."

"That is the catch," he said.

"What is?"

"You will have to give up the backpack."

She blinked. "I'm not sure I understand."

"I am a man with a great deal of power—that, I should think, is obvious. However, there are a few things I am bound by. Public perception is one of them. The extremely conservative ideals of my parents are another. My parents have gone to great lengths in my life to ensure that I became the man that I am today." His jaw seemed to tighten when he said that, a muscle there twitching slightly. "And while I was certainly pushing the edges of propriety by marrying Ashley, I did marry her. Marriage, children, that is what is expected of me. What is not expected?"

To have a surrogacy scandal. To have it leak out to the public that my wife conspired against me. I will not be made a fool of, Esther,” he said, using her first name for the first time. “I will not have the Valenti name made foolish by my mistake.”

“I don’t understand what that has to do with me. You’re going to have to be very direct, because sometimes I’m a little bit slow with shorthand.”

He frowned. “Just how small is that town you’re from?”

“Very small. Very, very small.”

“Perhaps the size of the town makes no difference. Admittedly, we are in a bit of an unprecedented situation. Still, my course is clear.”

“Please do enlighten me.”

He paused, looking at her. Which shouldn’t have been significant. He had looked at her before. Lots of times. People looked at each other when they talked. Except, this time when he looked at her it felt different.

But this was different. Whether or not that made any sense, it was different. His gaze was assessing now, in a different way from what it had been before. As though he were looking deeper. Beneath her clothes, the thought of which made her feel hot all over, down beneath her skin. As though he were trying to see exactly what her substance was.

He looked over her entire body, and she felt herself begin to burn everywhere his gaze made contact. That strange, restless feeling was back between her thighs, an intense heaviness in her

breasts.

She sucked in a sharp breath, trying to combat the sting of tears that were beginning to burn there. She didn't know why she wanted to cry. Except that this felt big, new and completely unfamiliar. Whatever this was.

“Esther Abbott,” he said, his words sliding over her name like silk, “you are going to be my wife.”

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