



# His Royal Bride Replacement

**Author:** *Lynne Graham*

**Category:** Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

**Description:** His Royal Bride Replacement is a royal, stand-in bride, marriage of convenience romance from the bestselling author Lynne Graham.

A life-changing ring...  
from His Highness!

Crown Prince Alessio drowns out each exploit with outrageous behavior! Even his wedding is hitting the headlines for all the wrong reasons—his reputation-repairing fiancée has pulled out! Leaving him urgently seeking a replacement bride. Enter Rosalia Castelli... Innocent Rosy is merely a palace art restorer. How can she even think of becoming Sedovia's queen? Yet to save her family from financial peril, she must accept Alessio's shock proposal. And as she spends more time with her husband, she begins to catch glimpses of the man beneath the rebellious facade...and to crave his touch!

**Total Pages (Source):** 36

## CHAPTER ONE

Prince Alessio Marchettistode out of his private apartments in the Sedovian palace. Six feet four inches tall, he had a shock of unruly long black hair that brushed his shoulders and bright green eyes set into a lean, sculpted face. A tiny gold hoop gleamed in one ear while the hint of a tattoo showed below the edge of a pristine shirt cuff. Impeccably dressed though he was, in a Brioni suit complete with monogrammed cufflinks, there were hints that he was not as conservative as he might appear at first glance.

Alessio slid fluidly into the luxury car awaiting him in the courtyard. His security team, all of them in a dour mood at the prospect of policing him in a public place, where anything might happen, swung into two far less noticeable vehicles to follow him down the hill into the city of Severino.

It was a sunny, early summer day and the air was crisp and clean. Alessio braked to avoid the morning parade ground activities of the household guard out front before angling the car deftly over the bridge that led down into the town. Picturesque as any postcard with colourful window boxes and quaint, narrow buildings with steep roofs, the streets were busy. Tourist numbers were down though, because many of their country's visitors had picked their holiday dates to coincide with Alessio's wedding and its accompanying festivities, which were due to take place in two weeks' time. The wedding would soon be followed by an equally grand coronation at which Alessio would ascend the throne, alongside his future consort, Princess Graziana of Eboltz, an island nation off the coast of Sedovia.

Alessio, meanwhile, was dreading the wedding with every fibre of his being. He was

almost twenty-eight years old and he had always known he would have to marry young. He could not become king until he was married and in a position to provide an heir. It was just Graziana...a perfectly nice woman, he reminded himself, who he had known since he was ten, although they had not met that often during their childhood and neither of them had sought each other out as adults.

Sadly, Graziana had no sense of humour, he reflected uneasily. She was also short-tempered with the staff and given to childish tantrums if challenged, but he could handle that, he hastily assured himself. It would be a modern-day marriage of convenience. Just like his parents, they would marry, eventually produce a royal heir and then discreetly go their separate ways, duty done. It had worked for his parents, although they had pretty much hated each other and had not been much keener on their single offspring, no matter how hard Alessio had tried to impress and please.

A vague memory of gathering flowers for his mother assailed him. She had thrust them away in absolute horror lest the pollen from the stamens stain her dress. He had been punished for that gift, just as he had been punished for sneaking into his father's study to tell him that he had won a prize in mathematics only to discover that his parent was entertaining a half-naked woman in there.

No, neither of his parents had liked him much. He had been both a necessity and an inconvenience to them. Neither of them had enjoyed the intrusion of a noisy little boy in their sophisticated, separate households. And they hadn't warmed to him any better when he'd tried to be quiet and studious instead. That he had gone off the rails as a teenager had been almost inevitable. Hence the long hair, the tattoos, the earring, the ultra-defiance of the adolescent years. His reputation as an international playboy had, for a handful of years, been equally stellar. His mother had rolled her eyes in bored disgust, his father had laughed and advised him to visit exclusive brothels where the women were rather more discreet.

Alessio had learned the hard way that he wasn't and never would be a loved son. And

that was why he wanted a family of his own—because he had never had a family as such. He would create a family with Graziana and love them and her. He had to learn how to love her to make the family unit secure and happy. It had disappointed him when Graziana had laughed at the idea that love could eventually grow between them.

‘Don’t be naïve,’ she had quipped with sneering amusement. ‘People like us aren’t expected to experience feelings like that.’

He drove down the street and double-parked under the combined gaze of a flock of tourists and the whirring, clicking cameras of the waiting paparazzi. Before he could climb out of the car, his newspaper arrived courtesy of a curvaceous blonde. Accepting it, he thanked her, deftly ignoring the card she gave him with the paper. At his final stop, he just about made it out of the car to collect his coffee from the beautiful brunette already awaiting him on the pavement. He had only once made it into the café to buy his own but that had been embarrassing because in spite of his protests everyone in the queue had been neglected while he’d been served ahead of them.

Unfortunately, Alessio’s PR team ruled his schedule. Despite his regular participation in red-carpet ceremonial and charitable events, the team had decided that he was not being sufficiently visible to the general populace, hence his now well-known coffee and paper trips into town once a week. He hoped that they had already worked out that his future consort would never agree to do something so beneath her dignity. Graziana was very conscious of her lofty royal birthright and status. Even so, she would have to learn to take a genuine interest in their people. Above all, the small country of Sedovia on the edge of the Mediterranean was known as a friendly, relaxed place and Alessio was proud of that reputation.

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‘Catch you later!’ Rosy told her sister, Vittoria, who was freshening up the floral arrangements on the veranda that fronted the hotel. Vittoria’s husband, Patrick, was up a ladder repairing a shutter. With the royal wedding approaching and a bunch of guests due to arrive, it was all hands on deck to ensure that the hotel was spruced up to perfection.

‘Have a good day,’ her sibling shouted cheerfully as Rosy set off on her ancient bike to work.

As Rosy filtered into the busy traffic, she was thinking of how very gutsy Vittoria and Patrick were. They had dealt with their financial problems and now, relieved that their finances appeared to finally be on the road to recovery, they were working round the clock and making the best of every moment of their move to Sedovia. The Cathedral View Hotel—Vista Cattedrale in Italian—was unsurprisingly an eighteenth-century building directly opposite the cathedral where the royal wedding was to take place in a couple of weeks. The previous year, Vittoria and Patrick had bought the aging hotel at a knockdown price online and had spent a small fortune renovating it to a very high level of comfort.

Unfortunately, Vittoria and Patrick had required a big bank loan to finance the improvements and, over the winter, when they had fallen behind on the payments, the bank had threatened to repossess the hotel. Only the truth that the hotel had been fully booked since the spring had staved the bank off and had ensured that the regular repayments continued without any further problems. But it was still a precarious way to live, Rosy reflected ruefully, and wholly dependent on the number of guests keen to have a bird’s-eye view of the stupid royal wedding from the balconies attached to their rooms. Heavens, right now the wedding was all anyone could talk about and it had been like that for months!

Perhaps the problem was that Rosy wasn’t quite as patriotic and royalist about Sedovia as the locals. She had grown up in London with her Sedovian father, Franco

Castelli, and her half-sister, Vittoria. Italian had been her first language and, while she had always hoped to visit Sedovia, she hadn't ever planned to actually make her home there. No, that had long been her sister's dream, not Rosy's.

Even so, there was nothing that Rosy wouldn't do to make Vittoria happy. Over twenty years her senior, Vittoria had virtually raised Rosy from birth. Poor Vittoria hadn't had much choice about that with a workshy drunk of a father and a stepmother, Heather, who, having decided that motherhood and possibly Franco Castelli were not for her, had abandoned Rosy at the hospital.

Vittoria had stepped into the breach like the trooper she was and to all intents and purposes, as she'd taken on the role of a single parent, she had become the only mother that Rosy had ever known. And she was a terrific mum, not just to Rosy but to her own twin teenaged sons, Matteo and Elio. Rosy had been loved and supported through every year of her childhood, by both Vittoria and her brother-in-law, Patrick, who called her the daughter that he would never have, she recalled fondly, for the couple had recently given up hope of ever having another child of their own.

As the traffic ground to a halt, Rosy looked ahead and groaned out loud before uttering a very rude word below her breath. It was that idiot prince snarling up the morning traffic again, utterly ignoring the fact that most people were trying to get to work. Why on earth did His Royal Highness Prince Alessio Marchetti insist on causing a traffic jam at least once a week by fetching himself a coffee and a newspaper from town? As if he couldn't have both brought to him at his palace on the hill by one of his many minions! Good heavens, the guy had a staff of hundreds who would go to any lengths to ensure his comfort. The palace staff adored their prince and the entire palace revolved around him. Rosy knew all about it because she worked at the palace too.

Aware her tetchy boss, Lucy Ragusa, would be hugely irritated if she was late, Rosy broke the Sedovian traffic rules and began to cut through the lanes of cars on her

bike. She did so well that she managed to steer along the back of the locals and tourists vying to get a better view of their prince. Then, out of the crush and free, she stood up on her pedals and began to push up the steep hill to the palace, perspiration beading her brow below her sun hat because it demanded considerable physical effort.

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Alessio swung onto the bridge and sawherand immediately hit the brakes. An irreverent grin slashed his lean, darkly handsome features. The best legs in the kingdom of Sedovia, potentially even the best female rear view in history, he reflected with wry amusement. She was clad in her usual denim shorts and vest top, standing up to steer her bone-rattler of a bike uphill. Sometimes she ducked the challenge and walked up the narrow footway wheeling the bike. He admired her persistence though, even if her efforts and slow progress slowed the Bugatti to a complete crawl. But then she never ever got out of his way and he liked that too; loved that she never looked back, never noticed him.

He had first noticed her about three months earlier and she seemed to arrive at the palace every morning around the same time. Obviously, she was a member of staff but he didn't know who she was or what she did and he wouldn't enquire because it would be inappropriate. She could be a gardener, a kitchen helper or a maid. Or an electrician, a mechanic or a plumber. The palace staff was gargantuan and covered every eventuality. Her job, however, was none of his business. He only knew that she wasn't one of his administrative staff or a member of the PR department.

And then even as he was watching a delivery van rounded the corner too fast and swung out, catching her bike with its bumper, and both bike and woman went flying, before landing in a sudden heap. Alessio swore and braked so hard that only his seat belt saved him from hitting the windscreen. He vaulted out of the car to go to her assistance without even thinking about it. Behind him a police siren went off,

signifying an incident and only because he was present. Ignoring it and the security men hastening to his side, Alessio approached the fallen woman.

She sat up in the roadway, groaning in pain and swearing in English with admirable ferocity. Blood streaked her legs and one arm. Hair like a gorgeous crimson and copper sunset tumbled in pre-Raphaelite curling locks in a mass around her delicate, pointed face. He was staring, he knew he was staring, but he had never seen her face before or her hair and, stooping, he retrieved her sun hat and extended it to her.

‘Let me get you out of here,’ Alessio urged, aware that the paparazzi would be on them within minutes. A television helicopter was already circling noisily overhead. He turned to the security man next to him and said, ‘Retrieve her bike so that the traffic can get moving again.’

A police officer was already interviewing the shaken van driver.

‘Did you hit your head?’



## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:41 am*

‘No,’ she mumbled, scrubbing at the blood on one knee and wincing when it hurt before looking up at him, squinting in the sun.

Alessio saw the sunglasses that had fallen off her nose and lifted them to offer them back to her. Madonnamia, she was gorgeous, he thought abstractedly. Eyes with the depth and colour of amethysts set in a heart-shaped face, a soft pillowy pink mouth and skin as velvety smooth as a creamy lily petal.

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Rosy was staring and she just kept on staring because she couldn’t believe her eyes. She accepted the sunglasses even though one of the lenses had smashed. She could hardly put them on again like that and crammed them into a pocket instead. She breathed in slow and deep, striving to steady herself and accept that Alessio Marchetti, the Crown Prince, well, the only Prince of Sedovia, was crouching down beside her acting like a good Samaritan. The intensity of the emerald-green eyes locked to hers left her feeling oddly dizzy.

‘Can you walk?’ he asked as the hubbub around them grew and cameras began to show in a sea of surrounding obtrusiveness.

‘Of course, I can,’ Rosy told him, grudgingly accepting the hand he extended and beginning to rise with his help, only to stiffen and flinch as her ankle sent a jolt of pain running up her leg. ‘I think I must’ve turned my ankle when I fell.’

Alessio stooped to lift her into his arms and slotted her with care into the passenger seat of his car while phone cameras operated and questions were hurled by breathless

journalists, who had raced up from around the corner. He dropped her sun hat back onto her head and she crammed it low, not wanting to look at anyone, not wanting to be identified in such company. She was too well aware that everything Alessio did and everyone he interacted with was of interest to his loyal public and of even greater interest to the media.

The policeman approached the car and spoke to Alessio, who said that he would give a witness statement to the police later in the day, and at that news the policeman retreated and stopped the traffic, making some vehicles reverse while his companion cleared the road so that Alessio could drive across the bridge into the palace.

‘What on earth are you doing?’ she demanded. ‘Where are you taking me?’

‘Into the palace for treatment.’

‘I use the employees’ entrance.’

‘Right now you can’t walk and my office is within easier reach,’ Alessio countered.

Rosy compressed her lips and gritted her teeth at having to respect that tone of authority. Ultimately, he was her employer, she reminded herself in exasperation. She might never have met him before but arguing wasn’t a good idea.

‘What’s your name?’ he enquired smoothly.

‘Rosy... Rosy Castelli,’ she said. ‘Rosy short for Rosalia.’

He drew the powerful sports car to a halt on the cobbles and left the car as she struggled frantically to get the heavy passenger door open. ‘Chill, Miss Castelli,’ the Prince urged. ‘The only cameras here are of the security variety.’

A little of her panic dissipating, Rosy winced as she clambered out, balancing on one foot and the door.

With a muttered imprecation, her companion swept her off her feet again and she trembled and gasped.

‘Nervous little creature, aren’t you?’ he quipped. ‘What do you think could happen to you here where we are surrounded by so many other people?’

Face as red as a tomato, Rosy glanced at his security team hovering, the faces under the portico of the staff all wide-eyed with wonderment at the scene that met their eyes. ‘I don’t like being the centre of so much attention,’ she said truthfully.

Alessio sighed. ‘Clearly there isn’t much excitement round here if we’re attracting this much interest,’ he muttered, brushing past the bowing minions on the doorstep while ordering an ice pack and requesting that Dr Rossi be called to his office.

‘There’s a doctor on staff?’ Rosy exclaimed in astonishment.

‘Dr Rossi is the head librarian and also a doctor. He prefers books to doctoring but he’s happy to help out in an emergency.’

‘I’m hardly an emergency,’ Rosy quibbled as he elbowed open a door off the giant echoing marble hall while the heat of him scorched the side of her body and the scent of him—ocean-fresh and clean with the merest hint of some woodsy cologne—flared her nostrils. ‘A few bumps and scrapes.’

‘And you’ll be on crutches for at least a few days,’ Alessio interposed drily as he laid her down with care on an opulent leather lounge.

‘Nonsense!’ Rosy protested as he dropped down into an athletic crouch beside her.

He was too close, way too close for comfort, those shimmering green eyes squarely locked onto her. Her breath was trapped in her throat, her heart speeding up and she felt, with a sinking heart, her breasts swell inside her top. 'Your ankle is already puffing up,' he pointed out, standing back as an ice pack complete with protective cloth was laid down beside her and he asked for a first-aid kit.

'I can do all this for myself,' Rosy objected shakily, shattered by the effect his proximity had had on her because she didn't ever react that way to men. Sure, he was good-looking, sure, he was the pin-up of Sedovia, indeed of Europe itself, but she wasn't the sort of woman who reacted physically to such a man...was she?

'Tea or coffee? What's your preference?' Alessio shot at her as she roasted like a pepper on a grill, mortification claiming her entirely. Not such a woman, she reminded herself, not the sort of woman who would compare his luminous eyes to jewels, who would notice the lush black lashes framing that stunning gaze and the warm intelligence etched there.

'Tea...' another voice interposed quietly. 'Sweet. Miss Castelli is in shock.'

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:42 am*

Yes, she was in shock, Rosy conceded ruefully. The boss got too close and she got way too embarrassed. ‘You know her, Aldo?’ the Prince remarked in surprise, standing up with a friendly smile to greet the older man.

‘Dr Rossi,’ Rosy said awkwardly.

‘Yes, she works with Lucy Ragusa.’

‘Lucy’s still around?’ Alessio commented in surprise. ‘I thought she would’ve been retired from the conservation department by now.’

‘Lucy’s job is her life,’ the small, bespectacled doctor responded as he bent down to examine Rosy’s ankle and asked her to perform a series of small movements, some of which caused her considerable pain. ‘Clear the room, Alessio. Our patient doesn’t need an audience.’

Rosy breathed a sigh of relief as some of the faces disappeared. Silence fell as the older man tended to her wounds and she closed her eyes tight against the discomfort of gravel being removed from her legs and arm while the icebag was wrapped round her ankle and the chill soothed some of the hot, throbbing discomfort.

‘A sprain. Get the swelling down, prop it up and rest it for a few days and you’ll be fine. There’s bound to be a pair of crutches somewhere in the household. I’ll take my leave, then,’ the doctor announced and a door closed.

A cup of tea was eased into Rosy’s hand. Involuntarily, her hand trembled and the cup was swiftly withdrawn again. As she opened her eyes, she could feel the hateful

prickle of tears burning behind them and she sucked in a steady breath.

Alessio towered over her, looking anxious, and then he sank down on the lounge beside her but still at least a foot away from her. 'It's normal to be upset. You almost had a very nasty accident and naturally you're in shock.'

Rosy snatched in a shuddering breath. If she cried in front of him, she would die.

'Breathe in, breathe out, slowly,' he advised stiffly.

Gently, carefully, she followed his advice, one breath in, one breath out.

'Shall I fetch Lucy?'

'Oh, heavens, no!' Rosy gasped in dismay, her tension reclaiming her at that prospect. 'She would think I'm making such a fuss and I'm late—'

'I'll ensure that Lucy is informed of the accident,' he hastened to assure her as he tugged a phone from his pocket. 'You are not physically capable of working today.'

'That's not true,' she protested.

'You won't be capable until you are off the crutches and able to walk again,' Alessio pointed out.

Rosy's pink lips down-curved at that reminder. It was horribly true. Her boss depended on her being able-bodied because Lucy Ragusa was not. Lucy got breathless just climbing the stairs and suffered from several health conditions. Unable to stand up easily, her arm bruised from smashing against the road surface and her whole body aching, Rosy knew that she herself would be incapable of even painting. A solitary tear escaped and rolled down her cheek.

‘It’s not the end of the world,’ Alessio chided.

‘Itisto Lucy,’ she contradicted ruefully. ‘We’re trying to finish the restoration of your great-grandfather’s portrait for the tours that have been organised.’

Steeling himself against his innately sensitive nature, Alessio held himself back and pressed a tissue into her hand. ‘Imagine a hug,’ he murmured huskily. ‘If I could give you one, I would. None of these things matter right now. What matters is that you are safe and you need to go home and rest... Where is home?’

Thoroughly disconcerted by the very concept of the future king of Sedovia giving her a hug, Rosy flushed and the desire to cry ebbed. She mentioned the hotel. ‘I live there with my sister and her family,’ she told him.

‘My driver will convey you home.’

‘Oh, but—’

‘No buts. You go home and rest until you can walk again,’ Alessio cut in.

With difficulty, Rosy snatched her gaze from the black-lashed brilliance of his, her complexion warming again. ‘Lucy will beso—’

‘Ticked off but she’ll get over it,’ the Prince interposed as a knock sounded on the door.

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A maid appeared carrying a set of crutches.

Alessio vaulted upright to collect them, relieved that the unchaperoned meeting was

at an end. She was too beautiful. Piccola volpe, he had almost called her when she cried. Little fox, utterly inappropriate. He had wanted to comfort her but that would have been an even more questionable move. He wasn't married as yet but he might as well have been, he reflected wryly. 'My driver will take you home and I don't want to see you back at work until you're fully recovered,' he told her succinctly.



## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:42 am*

With his assistance, Rosy stood upright and anchored the crutches to use as support. The Prince escorted her back out to the echoing foyer of the palace and signalled a young man, who came running, and instructed him to take Rosy back to her home.

Alessio strode back into his office, got on his phone to their resident tech expert and asked for a full background report to be done on Rosalia Castelli. He had no intention of making enquiries through the palace's HR manager because that would ignite speculation. But there was no harm in satisfying his curiosity, he reasoned, and she was a mystery with her perfectly spoken Italian and her unexpectedly rich store of English curses, both accompanied by that edgy English accent catching on certain syllables.

Coffee was brought. He sipped, unwillingly reliving the accident. It had been a dangerous near miss. Rosy could've been badly hurt, could've ended up beneath his wheels. He breathed in deep. She might be supple, slender and strong in appearance, but her actual build was slight, petite and fragile. Luckily, she was bashed and bruised and nothing worse. And why was he still worrying about her? She would be fine. She lived with her family. They would look after her. His family had never looked after him, however...but the staff had. Only she didn't have staff. In a hotel though? Alessio stamped down hard on that inner flood of thoughts. He only knew that he had never wanted to give anyone a hug so badly...

\* \* \*

'Are you sure that you can manage?' Vittoria checked.

'Yes, go away while I check these accounts,' Rosy urged, sitting back behind the

desk, one ankle propped up on a stool. 'I'll be running around again by tomorrow. I'm feeling much better.'

'Don't overdo it,' her sister warned her anxiously.

But Rosy was coping, and she liked to keep a close eye on the account books. Vittoria was an experienced hotel manager, well, she had done two years in a tiny London hotel, and Patrick was a chef. Neither one of them was any good at maths and neither one of them was much good at sticking to a budget. It was Rosy's calculations that kept them on the straight and narrow. And in truth, the deeper she got into the books, the more she realised that those winter debts were still in there merely waiting to catch up with her sister and brother-in-law again. Only a fabulous summer season with a hotel crammed with high-spending guests would correct that before winter arrived along with the natural downturn in tourism.

Would she have agreed to throw her lot in with theirs had she known how challenging it would be? When their father had died and the house was left equally between the two sisters, Rosy had allowed her share to go in with her half-sister's share to enable the purchase of the hotel in Sedovia. Why? Well, she hadn't felt entitled to her share at all because that house had originally belonged to Vittoria's mother, only her sister had insisted. Of course that was pure Vittoria, always generous, but no sense with money whatsoever. And here was Patrick spending on extravagant stuff like truffles and lobster because he was determined to make the restaurant super successful to bring in extra customers.

Rosy sighed and laid down her calculator, her head aching. It had been a tough week but her ankle was almost better. She had helped on Reception and prepared vegetables in the kitchen for Patrick, but she hadn't been able-bodied enough to help with the bed changes or the laundry or the serving of meals and snacks. Vittoria was looking pale and stressed this week and she had been ill as well, even if, for some reason, she was keeping her apparently upset stomach a secret.

‘You didn’t get his autograph!’ Vittoria had exclaimed in disappointment when she’d heard about her sister’s actual face-to-face meeting with Prince Alessio. The Prince who was literally her sister’s idol, the perfect guy. And lifting Rosy off her feet into his sports car when she was injured had only gilded his reputation.

‘I don’t think he gives those.’

‘You don’t seem impressed,’ Vittoria had said in surprise.

‘No, he is gorgeous,’ Rosy had conceded, ‘no doubts about that. His photos don’t lie. And truthfully, he was much nicer and a lot less arrogant than I expected. He was kind and considerate but very polite and royally distant.’

‘Naturally.’ Vittoria had sighed. ‘He’s on the brink of marrying his princess...his childhood sweetheart.’

‘I don’t think I believe in that,’ Rosy had admitted with cynicism. ‘It’s much more likely that their parents looked at them—Eboltz with a daughter and Sedovia with a son—and decided it would be perfect if they married and united the two countries. I mean, Eboltz is the size of a postage stamp, so why not?’

Vittoria had frowned. ‘What about romance?’

Rosy had wrinkled her small, snub nose. ‘It’s my bet they’re making the best of things. Both rich as sin, both very attractive, both royal heirs. And he’s sown all his wild oats and presumably she has too.’

‘There’s never been an ounce of scandal about Princess Graziana. You’re such a sceptic, Rosy,’ her sibling had complained.

Rosy marvelled that she could even be cynical, growing up as she had on a diet of

sweet cartoons and romantic movies and novels. But then, actual romance had never come her way. At school she had stayed flat as a board, skinny and undeveloped and unsought-after by boys. University, when she had been studying for her fine art degree in London, had not been much more promising. She had male friends but more of the ‘good mates’ variety.

She had yet to pin down what it took for a man to attract her. Men who had demonstrated interest in her had withered in receipt of her lack of interest. Yet the Prince had what it took to attract her in spades, which mortified her. She wasn’t about to fangirl over him. That was only a physical thing, she reasoned uncomfortably, based on that long luxuriant hair, those stunning eyes of his and that very hot and seriously great physique he sported. If she hadn’t found him attractive, she wouldn’t be normal.

\* \* \*

Alessio woke up the following morning to an unexpected text from Graziana, who was not in the habit of regular communication with him. Furthermore, the text had been sent in the middle of the night.

I’m sorry. I am so very sorry about this.

Alessio couldn’t even imagine Graziana voicing such an apologetic sentiment. As a rule, she was self-contained and never ever humble. What on earth did she mean?

## CHAPTER TWO

Rosy walked outonto the portrait gallery to double-check the state of the wall to which the now restored portrait of the Prince’s great-grandfather would be returned when Lucy returned to work the next day.

Lucy Ragusa, her immediate boss, was a world-renowned art expert and restorer and, six months earlier, Rosy had been hired as her full-time assistant because the older woman had been unwell. Her failing eyesight was a not-so-secret secret within the small conservation department of the royal household. The job had been a golden opportunity for Rosy with the added benefit of receiving skilled training in her chosen field. She had learned so much in the past six months of working at the palace.

As she moved back towards the office she heard Prince Alessio's distinctive dark, deep drawl carrying up from the museum on the floor below and she came to a sudden halt. Without hesitation, she leant over the gallery balustrade and stole a look. She needed to thank him for having her bike repaired and returned to her, but she didn't want an audience. In truth her bike had had so much replaced and so much added it was like an entirely new bike.

Alessio stood below, black hair tousled, big wide shoulders encased in a khaki tee, faded fitted jeans sheathing his long strong legs. As he lounged back against a display table, soft fabric stretched across his taut abdominal muscles, her mouth ran suddenly dry. He shifted position, his powerful thighs flexing as someone unseen offered to fetch coffee and Rosy discovered that her eyes were locked to the Prince like superglue. With difficulty she shook her head and frowned at her distraction and headed straight for the stairs. He was within reach and alone and, according to his casual clothing, off duty. She would never get a better chance to thank him.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:42 am*

As she reached the museum doorway, she heard a raised voice and stepped back, staying out of sight.

‘But this can’t happen!’ Alessio was ranting. ‘It’s not possible. The wedding has to go ahead. It can’t be postponed or cancelled. Get her back, she’s your daughter—

‘What do you mean she’s already married?’ Alessio growled in audible disbelief.

Eyes wide with astonishment, Rosy grimaced on his behalf.

‘No, there’s nothing more you can do. But she could have told me herself. I apologise for raising my voice.’ Moments afterwards, he tossed something down on the display case surface, probably, she surmised, his phone, the call clearly finished.

Silence fell and Rosy appeared in the doorway. In the act of raking long brown fingers through his black luxuriant hair, Alessio stilled to stare at her.

‘How long have you been standing there?’ he demanded curtly.

‘I heard you on the phone and stepped back out of view,’ Rosy admitted honestly. ‘It didn’t seem like the right moment to interrupt.’

‘Then I must ask you not to repeat a word of what you may have overheard. In case you haven’t guessed, the wedding of the century has tanked,’ he murmured with sardonic bite.

‘I couldn’t repeat anything even if I wanted to. I had to sign an NDA my first day

here,' Rosy pointed out. 'And I'm only here now because I wanted to thank you for having my bike picked up and repaired.'

'Your...bike?' Alessio repeated blankly.

'Yes, you had it repaired for me and I am grateful. You were kind to me that day.'

'I'm sorry. I'm not quite with you,' Alessio breathed in a raw undertone. 'I'm in shock.'

'Understandably, if the wedding's not going ahead.'

'It can't. My bride married her bodyguard last night and took off to New York with him,' Alessio spelt out flatly, studying her in the workmanlike overalls that only enhanced her tiny, slender frame, her bubbling vibrant curls restrained in a topknot arrangement. Not a scrap of make-up and still exquisite. Rosy, that was her name and it suited her. He still hadn't checked through that file on her background, had deliberately ignored it after his PA had asked him why he had asked for it in the first place. In fact, he had felt rather guilty and a little embarrassed for requesting that unnecessarily intrusive check.

'It sounds like you dodged a bullet,' Rosy whispered awkwardly.

'No, it's more like Graziana has exploded a bomb in my life...in this country...and in her own.'

'I'm so sorry.' Rosy began to back away as she heard the sound of steps approaching and reckoned his coffee was about to arrive.

Trying not to think about the shock news she had overheard, Rosy went back to work. Lucy was a perfectionist and had left a list of tasks to be accomplished during her

absence, more than could be easily accomplished in the hours available. Of course, Rosy had had a week at home while her ankle recovered and undoubtedly her boss felt that she had to compensate for that time off. After all, everything and everybody within the Sedovian palace was gearing up towards the royal wedding. The wedding that wasn't going to happen now, she reflected, and then quickly suppressed the thought. Would the special tours of the palace, the museum and the art gallery even still go ahead? Right now, it felt as though the whole of Sedovia was preparing for the wedding. And now it wasn't going to happen...

Before she suppressed the feeling, a current of sympathy for the Prince filtered through her. He was being jilted and with minimal warning. He had been very much in shock. Rosy reckoned that the whole populace would go into shock when the news broke, as break it must very soon. Princess Graziana had seemed demure and dignified, not the type to throw her cap over a rainbow and run off with an employee, although Rosy had heard other rumours about Alessio's bride-to-be following her brief stays in the household. That she was very demanding and spoilt, prone to angry outbursts and definitely not a fan of Alessio's more casual approach to formality.

By the time Rosy was riding home on her bike, her mood was sombre. She was thinking of how a wedding cancellation would impact the family hotel and her heart sank. A lot of people had booked on a special royal wedding package that had chosen the Cathedral View Hotel as one of a small, exclusive selection for discerning guests. All those guests might well cancel now and Vittoria and Patrick's finances would sink without trace. There was nothing left in the kitty for rainy days. The rainy days fund had been used up last winter when guests had been few and the final renovation bills had come in even higher than expected. Rosy broke out in perspiration. The truth was that if the wedding failed to happen, her family's business would probably go bankrupt sooner rather than later.

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Alessio didn't pause to speak to anyone on his impatient walk back to his private apartments. As he poured himself a whiskey, he told himself that nobody had foreseen the likelihood of Graziana's defection, he least of all. Graziana had never struck him as the impulsive, passionate type. Indeed, Alessio had found her quite averse to any sort of physical intimacy, which he could now better understand if she had been involved in a secret affair all along. Even so, the wedding arrangements had begun only six months earlier and she had insisted then that a marriage of convenience would be a perfect fit for her. In fact, she had been the one to float the idea of their marrying first.

'I'm not getting any younger,' she had said briskly. 'You need a wife and a child and you're only a couple of years younger than I am. It could work.'

And at the time, if Alessio was honest with himself, it had felt like the end of the world on his terms, because he hadn't felt ready for marriage, but he had also known that Graziana would probably be a very popular candidate. Everyone had been ecstatic when they'd announced their engagement. Graziana had also appeared fully involved in every tiny wedding detail. There had been no hint that there was anything amiss, except perhaps when she'd stepped back from him when he'd attempted once to close his arms round her and said, 'I'd prefer to wait for all that until we're married.' Not a problem, he had decided at the time, concluding that his future bride was just not a very physical person, refusing to allow his reflections to linger on what that disappointing discovery meant for him.

With the few facts he knew chasing revolving circles inside his brain, Alessio groaned out loud. Well, if Graziana had found true love, he wished her well. He felt a little foolish now for having practised celibacy on her behalf for so many months. But had she the smallest idea of what a nightmare she had unleashed on her widowed father and the economy? So very many business ventures were invested in the wedding occurring. But what could he do about any of it without a bride? Find another one? Pull some magical woman out of a hat like a white

rabbit?Impossible!Stop dwelling on it, he urged himself.

In an effort to distract himself, he lifted Rosy Castelli's file off his desk. She had impressed him even before she had overheard that ghastly exchange with Graziana's unfortunate father. She had not made a fuss over her accident either, had been stoic, practical and controlled. And then, after hearing that bombshell phone call, she had not lied and faked ignorance, she had been honest about having overheard and had apologised, even offered a little sympathy. And now that he was single again, he didn't have to feel guilty for thinking that Rosy looked exquisite even clad in paint-stained workmen's overalls. But she was still a member of staff, he reminded himself circumspectly before he travelled further down that dangerous road.

He glanced at the file he had opened, and it was the figures that grabbed his attention first because he had worked as an investment banker for several years. Rosy's family were trying to run a business on a shoestring and sailing very close to the wind in their indebtedness. They would likely be ruined by the collapse of the wedding-based celebrations.

And there his mind was, right back where he didn't want it to be, hammering away at Graziana's betrayal and what a disappointment his supposedly perfect bride had turned out to be.

\* \* \*

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:42 am*

When Rosy got back to the hotel she had to seek out Vittoria and she found her sister in their spacious rear apartment off the courtyard, sitting at the kitchen table with tears streaming down her quivering face.

‘What on earth?’ She gasped, for her sister had never been a crier.

Vittoria nudged a creased letter across the table to her sister. ‘The roofer, Mr Calabrese, who sorted us out after that flood in the winter. He said he was willing to wait for payment but he can’t wait any more...and why should he?’ she cried, stricken. ‘But now he’s taking legal action to get what he’s owed!’

‘Oh, my goodness,’ Rosy framed in dismay as she studied the letter. ‘You didn’t tell me about this bill. It’s not on the books.’

‘No. I didn’t want to worry you and it was an emergency...you know it was.’

‘Yes, but Mr Calabrese needed it paid and there are other things that could have taken a back seat while we worked to meet his bill,’ Rosy reasoned unhappily, thinking of things like the purchase of truffles and the very best linen available.

‘He did a great job. He deserves his money,’ Vittoria agreed. ‘But this is the worst possible time for this to happen with the wedding coming up...and me.’ Her sister grimaced and looked guilty. ‘I’m pregnant again.’

‘I beg your pardon...’ Rosy was shattered by that announcement when the last she had heard, after Vittoria had spent years trying without success to have a third child, was that her sibling was going through an early menopause.

‘Even the doctor thought it was the menopause.’ Vittoria sighed. ‘But he did a test and then an ultrasound. I’m three months along already...and could you think of a worse time for such a development?’

‘It’s wonderful news, news you and Patrick have wanted for a long time,’ Rosy responded tautly. ‘OK, so the timing is not what you would have chosen but you’re better concentrating on the positive right now.’

‘This giant bill we can’t pay,’ Vittoria exclaimed tearfully. ‘And the twins are going to be so embarrassed that I’m pregnant!’

It took time for Rosy to bolster up her sibling’s flagging spirits, sticking to the few positives she could grasp after that conversation. There was no way on earth that they could cover that bill and it looked as if bankruptcy was on the horizon because, without the wedding, there was no promise of future prosperity to take to the bank and persuade them to extend the bank loan.

Her tummy churned sickly at what now lay ahead of her family. They would lose the hotel and she would have to give up her job as presumably they would have to return to the UK. Or would they? That would be such a shame when her nephews had already settled so well into their schools and made friends. Patrick could get work as a chef somewhere else. That would be two wages coming in, hers and Patrick’s, she reasoned in desperation, knowing she was being foolish in trying to second-guess an unknown future. Would the bank repossess and sell the hotel immediately, throwing them out on the street? How long would that procedure take? Months? Weeks?

It was hardly surprising that Rosy got very little sleep that night. The prospect of losing everything, even the roof over their heads, was terrifying, particularly with Vittoria going through what might yet prove to be a difficult pregnancy. Certainly, her sister looked pretty sickly right now. The situation was horrific and she felt guilty that she hadn’t broken that non-disclosure agreement and warned her sister that the

royal wedding had fallen through. In reality, she decided, she hadn't been able to face telling Vittoria what she had accidentally discovered. Presumably, however, that news would soon be on TV and in every newspaper because the Prince could hardly keep that announcement to himself.

\* \* \*

Alessio didn't sleep that night either. He tossed and turned. He hated disappointing people and that, first and foremost, all practicalities aside, was what he was about to do when he announced that the big wedding was off. He hated failure and Graziana was a failure of elephantine proportions. Whose fault was that but this? He should've questioned her more about her values and then possibly he might have suspected that she was utterly ruthless, if not cruel, when it came to putting her wishes above everyone else's. Her country, her father, her own people, not to mention Sedovia and its unlucky prince.

Now if there were a practical solution to his lack of a bride, he could have handled it. It crossed his mind that he handled most problems with the liberal application of business opportunities or cash. And if he took that road with this crisis? Would he choose one of the calculating socialites he had met over the years who would do virtually anything for money or enhanced status? Or a young Sedovian woman who worked for a living and who might just want to save her flesh and blood from the consequences of their financial mistakes? A beauty with sterling qualities he had already noticed. There was nothing spoilt, selfish or snobbish about Rosy and she was a beauty. Not a classic tall, blonde beauty like Graziana. No, much more of a slender, delicately curved and exquisite package of the more unusual and colourful variety. She attracted him.

Madonna mia, he hadn't thought of hugging a woman since his mother's rejection!

\* \* \*

‘I thought I was to help you with the rehanging of the portrait this morning,’ Rosy murmured in surprise when Lucy Ragusa showed her into one of the attic workrooms and indicated a small broken ornament that required fixing.

‘The workmen will do the hanging with my supervision,’ her boss announced. ‘I mustn’t get into the habit of expecting you to always work by my side.’

But that was what I was hired to do! Rosy almost countered because the older woman was looking her over in the strangest way, as if she had never quite seen her before, and then nodding thoughtfully as she departed again. With a suppressed sigh of confusion, Rosy gathered the tools to make the repair, deciding that she didn’t have to don her overalls for such a task. It would be painstaking, fiddly work, rather than messy, although she might well have to touch up the paint after she had it put back together. Carefully gathering the pieces, she studied them one by one below a magnifying device.

A knock sounded on the door and she flinched in surprise just as it opened and the very last person she had expected to see appeared in the doorway for a split second and then strode in, carefully shutting the door behind him.

Rosy stepped back from her worktable, her cheeks warming. ‘Your Highness,’ she said in a slightly strangled undertone, wondering what on earth could bring him to a workroom.

‘I’m sorry to disturb you while you’re working but I needed a discreet place in which to meet with you, and Lucy was kind enough to help me,’ he proffered, bewildering her even more with that mystifying speech.

Frozen to the spot, Rosy simply stared back at him, one hand braced against the table as though to keep her upright. Holy moly, he was so hot he sizzled in her mind’s eye, effortlessly elegant and gorgeous in a designer navy pinstripe suit. He was so tall, so

sophisticated, so everything, from his thick blue-black hair that she wanted to plunge her hands into to his probably handmade shoes and everything that lay in between. Brilliant green eyes held hers and she paled as though she had been cornered by a lion and was too afraid to make a run for it.

‘You needed a discreet place in which to meet me?’ she queried unevenly, gazing back at those extraordinarily intense green eyes of his with difficulty. So intense, so powerful; she felt frozen to the spot.

Prince Alessio swung out a chair by one of the tables and set it beside her. ‘Please sit down and please try to relax because I have an offer...a proposal to make and you must feel able to speak freely to me without fear of causing offence.’

Rosy blinked rapidly, her agile brain skipping over that phrase as she tried to imagine in what possible reality he might have an offer of any kind to make to her. She snatched in a jerky breath to keep her lungs working and dropped down into the chair. Not surely an indecent proposition of any kind? He emanated no sleazy vibes and yet why would he wish to see her alone where they would remain unseen?

‘I have to announce Graziana’s marriage to another man today. I cannot keep such news from all those who need to know, but I have an idea and I urge you not to become angry with me until you have heard me out. I have no wish to insult or offend you.’

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:42 am*

‘Right...’ Rosy nodded very slowly, none the wiser as to what was coming her way.

‘Your family are deep in debt.’

Rosy gritted her teeth on the wish to ask him how he knew that and then she wondered if the court action the roofer was taking against her sister and brother-in-law was already common knowledge within the higher palace echelons. With care, she compressed her lips and slowly nodded again.

‘So deep in debt that the cancellation of the wedding will likely put them out of business,’ Alessio continued as the cheeks that had flushed paled at that forecast.

‘That is true,’ Rosy conceded heavily.

‘What I need at this moment is another bride, a replacement for Graziana so that the wedding can go ahead. That would, at least, alleviate the serious damage that will be done to the Sedovian economy if the wedding were to be cancelled altogether at short notice. Thousands of business people have made expensive plans and hired employees, pledging their fortunes to invest in the boost to the tourist season that the wedding will deliver.’

‘But where the heck are you to find another bride with only nine days to go?’ Rosy asked helplessly.

‘I’m looking at her and hoping she will give me a shot,’ Prince Alessio murmured with the most extravagant smile. ‘I’m willing to settle your family’s debts and ensure that their hotel is a success in any way that I can if you will marry me and try to



pretend that we're in love...that this is some last-minute face-saving move to shield me from the fallout of Graziana's insane flight.'

That smile unleashed butterflies in her tummy. She blinked again.

I'm looking at her and hoping she will give me a shot.

The future King of Sedovia was asking her to become his bride in Graziana's stead.

'This is crazy,' she whispered shakily, plunged deeper still into shock by his words.

'No, it's not. The PR team could spin it. We have photographic evidence of our first meeting on the bridge or we pretend I'd already met you here where you work. You're a Sedovian citizen. There is nothing shady about your past. If I pose as a man in love with another woman rather than a jilted bridegroom it will make the sting of Graziana's betrayal annoy people less. I'm angry with Graziana but I have no desire to punish her and she's in my past now. If she has chosen love over a royal marriage of convenience, who am I to criticise when I would have done the same thing?' he declared, lean brown hands moving in a series of eloquent gestures to express his emotions.

And the fluid hand movements were very expressive of a lot of emotions, many more emotions than she would have believed he possessed. 'Only I was not fortunate enough to meet a woman I could love,' he completed grimly.

'But you can't want to marry me...a complete stranger.'

'I believed that I knew Graziana well enough and where did that get me?' Alessio enquired. 'I would never have dreamt that she would do what she has just done. I thought she was conventional, loyal and dutiful, as we were both raised to be. I assumed I was the more volatile of the two of us and I was wrong because I

would never have done this to her on the brink of our wedding.'

For a dangerous moment, Rosy let herself picture how much happier her family would be if she agreed and how well the hotel would thrive without the burden of that bank loan and without the constant striving to make ends meet and settle bills. Without a doubt it would transform her family's lives in very positive ways, particularly now that Vittoria was pregnant with a much-desired child and needed to be protected from stress. It was a wonderful idea, but she just could not imagine herself marrying Prince Alessio Marchetti... That was where her imagination went flat and utterly refused to co-operate.

'I can't believe you're serious with this...er...suggestion.'

'I never expected to marry for love. No doubt, you do. We have different goals and have probably always had different expectations of life. I don't have the space to give you a decent amount of time in which to consider my proposal either. I need to know right now if you could consider marrying me in nine days' time.'

Rosy sat there in a daze. She was thinking of all the sacrifices her sister had made on her behalf from when she was a baby, Patrick's acceptance of a pseudo-daughter into their newly married world when they had both been only in their twenties. She owed them everything she was and had become and it was a debt she could never repay. If she could finally bring them some good fortune in return for their sacrifices, if she could save them from bankruptcy, homelessness and all the attendant horrors that would assail them, they deserved that she put their needs first just once, rather than her own.

'I can't imagine marrying you... It's not like we're equals,' she said awkwardly. 'You inhabit a world very far removed from mine.'

'It will become your world too,' Alessio asserted. 'I will do everything within my

power to help you to adapt and be happy. I do not want you to feel as though I'm trying to buy you.'

'But whichever way you look at it, you are.'

A wheezy little giggle was wrenched from Rosy and he looked at her with a frown of incomprehension. She crammed her hand guiltily to her mouth.

'I laugh when I'm nervous. Me...a princess? It would be unreal and impossible.'

'It will be possible, Rosy, should you agree.'

Rosy breathed in slow and deep to evade that questioning tone. 'Do you know how much in debt my family is?'

'I do, but I inherited enormous wealth when my parents died and have since made a great deal more on my own behalf. Your family's debts are a drop in the ocean to me. I know you're not a mercenary woman but your life will become much more comfortable if you marry me,' he pointed out.

A tremulous smile formed on Rosy's tense lips. 'I can't picture that either but you're incredibly persuasive.'

To her shock, Alessio dropped down lithely on one knee in front of her and he was so tall they were almost level. 'Will you marry me, *piccola volpe*?'

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:42 am*

Her throat closed over so tightly she couldn't breathe. She wanted to tell him that he couldn't railroad her into marrying a stranger and becoming a princess. She wanted to tell him that he was a shockingly beautiful guy and too much altogether for her to withstand when she had never before been exposed to a man of his calibre. And then he called her little fox and even though she had a million questions, she couldn't concentrate enough to ask them because he was actually taking her hand in his. She swore an electric charge raced right up her arm when skin-to-skin contact was finally made by his light, warm hold.

'Yes, but it's for my family and a little...because I have sympathy for your predicament right now,' she admitted in a rush, determined not to show an ounce of her susceptibility because he was too smooth by half.

'This was my grandmother's ring.' Rosy watched wide-eyed as a glittering oval pink diamond ring was eased onto her ring finger. 'She had tiny hands like you and here...it fits,' he pronounced with satisfaction. 'Do you think that's a good sign?'

'I'm not thinking anything right now,' she lied as she noticed that unexpectedly happy sparkle in his green eyes that suggested that she had just made his day. And she supposed she had because he had found his replacement bride at very short notice and she was conveniently right on his doorstep in the palace. An ordinary young woman, so shocked and impressed by who and what he was that she wasn't demanding answers to any of the questions she still had teeming on her tongue. But, of course, he couldn't mean a real marriage with sex and all that and he couldn't be talking for ever either. Right now Prince Alessio was choosing a temporary bride to take him and Sedovia through the crisis that Graziana had left in her wake. In a year's time or so, or possibly even sooner, he would be urgently requesting a divorce.

He vaulted upright again. 'I'll make my announcement. I will always be grateful for your trust and generosity and you won't have to worry about anything ever again,' he intoned fervently. 'My staff will sweep every obstacle from our path to enable us to marry. You need to give me your phone number. A rather prosaic request, which underlines how little we know each other.'

'Yes.' Rosy dug out her phone and they exchanged numbers. It brought her down to earth but she was still in shock. She had agreed to marry a ruling prince. But it still didn't feel real.

### CHAPTER THREE

'Sit down,' Vittoria urged the bride, because Rosy was white as milk and visibly trembling and, in the background, they could both hear the festive roars of the crowds in the streets below, already gathering for the wedding day celebrations.

The older woman leant down to whisper in her sister's ear, from which a priceless pearl and diamond drop earring was suspended. 'You don't have to do this. I may think Prince Alessio's the most fanciable thing since Patrick first made sour dough but if the prospect of Alessio is truly what is making you look sick, you can still walk away.'

'What, and get murdered by the mobs out there?' Rosy whispered shakily but a loving smile softened her lips at her sister's generosity.

'I'm not saying that escape would be easy but it's possible right up until you say "I do" at the altar,' Vittoria insisted briskly. 'Alessio's not been doing what he should've been doing this past week.'

'He's been working, selling the story, if you want to call it that. He's got the media skills... I haven't. No, it's just the crowds and the excitement getting to me. It freaks

me out a bit.'

'He should've been spending more time with you, helping you shape up, getting to know you,' Vittoria spelt out in a punitive hiss. 'And so I told him at that stupid dinner.'

Rosy nodded, trying not to imagine how Alessio would have responded to such blunt interference, and a flush of mortified colour finally warmed her pallor. The 'stupid' dinner, which they had both attended at the palace a couple of nights earlier, had been a mere photo opportunity to capture the Sedovian prince meeting his lady love's family. Vittoria and Patrick had weathered it well. Patrick had predictably hived off to meet the palace head chef and discuss some new kind of ravioli that had appeared on the dinner menu. Her nephews had disappeared into a games room that was stacked with options to entertain teenagers.

And Vittoria had basked in Alessio's attention, trying to sum him up and get a good read on him because that was what Rosy's sister did with anyone getting close to her family. Only possibly Vittoria was working out what Rosy had already learned about Alessio—he didn't let people in. He was always courteous, charming and a hell of a polished communicator, but he didn't allow people to get close.

Rosy had had a rare glimpse of the real Alessio the day he'd proposed to her when he had told her stuff, more personal stuff because she'd already known about Graziana, and he had seen no need to prevaricate on that topic. She had been shaken when he had said very, very convincingly, 'I was not fortunate enough to meet a woman I could love,' and a little piece of her soft heart had broken off and gone in his direction because he had been sincere. She had truly believed that had he met a woman he loved there would never have been a marriage of convenience with Graziana arranged in the first place.

But Rosy had not seen a glimpse of the real Alessio since then, in spirit or in the

flesh. Once Prince Alessio had made his shocking announcement about the change of brides and Graziana's elopement, the Cathedral View Hotel had been mobbed by the media and Rosy had had to move into a guest room at the palace to give her family the peace to continue running their hotel. She had been handed over bag and baggage to the household staff to be packaged as the bride and that had proved to be serious business.

Little capsule etiquette lessons on how to address the other royals and VIPs attending the wedding. They had discovered that she didn't need coaching on the cutlery or art or in various other fields because she had been educated well and sensibly brought up. Good manners, patience and tolerance were innate in her but Alessio's vanishing act—to work or otherwise—had left her feeling abandoned by the guy who had promised to help her adapt while he still remained, by his own choice, a virtual stranger.

And she now assumed that that was how he expected their supposed marriage to work: as a romantic pretence in public and nothing whatsoever in private. Certainly, the palace had to realise that they were fake because Alessio had kept his distance. And he had not given Rosy any material with which to fashion romantic fibs for her own family's benefit. She had had to tell Vittoria the truth. She was the replacement bride and Alessio would very generously reward them all by taking care of that bank loan and any outstanding debts. What she had not foreseen, however, was that her connection to the hotel would cause business to boom there, with the restaurant packed every night, or that would-be guests for rooms that were already fully booked were still phoning and arriving at all hours pleading for a space.

'Are you sure that you want to do this?' her sister had asked her doubtfully. 'Are you attracted to him? Is that why?'

'Yes, I do find him attractive,' Rosy had admitted ruefully. 'But I'm not going to be doing anything about it. This is a business arrangement and it'll stay that way until

we part. I'm convinced that he's only willing to marry me because he thinks the Sedovian economy will suffer without this wedding. So, think of me like a wedding doll, not a future wife. I'm a symbol, nothing more.'

Vittoria departed to collect her sons downstairs and head to the cathedral while Patrick remained in the palace to escort Rosy on the strictly timed schedule. Only her wedding gown was Rosy's own personal choice. Her magnificent pearl and diamond tiara, earrings and necklace were Maretti heirlooms. Her bouquet had been chosen by the staff. But the dress? That was very much Rosy's dream. She had been shocked by the number of top designers who'd stepped forward when it had become known that a royal wedding gown was required within the space of a week.

It was classic with a slender silhouette, long tight lace sleeves and a sweetheart neckline. The silk bodice was adorned with crystals that glittered and the skirt and the train were exquisitely white, embroidered with Sedovian wildflowers. In her opinion, she looked exactly like a fairy princess from a cartoon, particularly with her mad mop of curls left long and loose...hugely persuaded by the stylist, who had told her that Alessio had verbally admired Rosy's amazing curls. She wrinkled her nose, wondering why he had even noticed her curls.

She wasn't wearing anything borrowed or blue. She might be stepping into Graziana's shoes and have inherited most of her bridesmaids—the Sedovian ones at least—but at no stage had Rosy ever viewed herself as a genuine bride. She was too practical to see herself as anything other than Cinderella, but the Prince wasn't hers and there was no fairy godmother hovering in the wings to make her secret fantasies come true.

Did she have secret fantasies? Yes, of course she did, and Alessio could have played a starring role in them had he not been quite so careful to ensure that she didn't get any ideas above her station or any notion that he had any kind of a personal stake in marrying her. She was the convenient stand-in bride, nothing more important, and she



was way too sensible to base any dreams on Alessio Maretti. He was as gorgeous as a sunset but as unobtainable as the moon. No, Rosy wanted a normal, hard-working guy, who thought she was as special as the stars in the sky.

Abstractedly, she wondered where he was taking her on their two-week honeymoon. He had been planning to take Graziana to Barbados, but a staff member had remarked that it would be bad taste to take Rosy to the same place, so where was she getting to go? Her eyes sparkled with anticipation.

Patrick, closely shaven and unusually immaculate in his fancy wedding apparel, was even more nervous than Rosy was when they climbed into the waiting beribboned limousine.

‘I’ll be glad to get out of this monkey suit,’ he lamented, running an uneasy finger round his silk cravat.

‘I’ll just be grateful when the cathedral and all the fuss is over,’ Rosy confided anxiously.

The car moved at a stately pace through the flag-waving, cheering crowds to the cathedral where a line of attendants and security men awaited the bride’s arrival. Breathing in deep, her train caught up immediately by an attendant to aid her exit, Rosy emerged to a burst of cameras, mercifully kept back by the protective barriers. She kept her back straight and her head high and forced a smile. Bride, wedding day, look happy. It was a pretty simple role, she told herself as she was escorted into the church and the splendid music started up, along with the soaring voices of the choir. There had been no time for a rehearsal but the aisle was a straight passage, if a very long one, and she walked down it, her hand braced on Patrick’s arm, the bridesmaids flocking in behind her.

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Alessio watched his bride and he couldn't take his eyes off her.

'Madonnamia, she's tiny!' his best friend and legal counsel, Eduardo Conti, hissed. 'And beautiful. You're doing better than you deserve with this one.'

Rosy was doing so well, Alessio decided. He knew she was extremely nervous because he could see the tension etched into the delicate lines of her face, but she wasn't showing it otherwise, walking erect and dignified with her head high, the tiara lodged in her magnificent fiery fall of hair. She had worn it down for him. Although he had not asked specifically, only hinting to the stylist, he was pleased.

She looked absolutely spectacular, and the thought shook him because Alessio had never thought of a woman in such exaggerated terms before. He drew in a slow, ragged breath and realised that, while he had dreaded marrying Graziana, there wasn't any dread in him now, only a sort of hopeful expectancy that they would work as a couple. It didn't hurt that she turned him on hard and fast, even with a cardinal standing over him in all his church regalia, and for Alessio, who prided himself on his self-discipline, that was a revelation. Something about Rosy Castelli fired him up like dynamite.

'You look incredible,' he murmured when she finally looked at him, something she had appeared determined not to do on her passage down that long aisle in the full glare of the television cameras.

Her polite smile barely moved. The cardinal began to speak. Alessio's mind

wandered but Rosy listened. She was more serious in the religious stakes than he was, he decided.

\* \* \*

Holy cow, he was so breathtakingly beautiful, Rosy could barely believe that Alessio was real flesh and blood. The lean angles and hollows of his perfect face, the high cheekbones, the proud jut of his nose, the moulded sensuality of his full mouth but, above all, it was always his eyes that she carefully avoided, lest in some mysterious way he guessed that she found him impossibly attractive. That lustrous vibrant green surrounded by a layer of thick inky lashes? Her heart stuttered to a stop before ramping up in pace. Her muscles all tightened in defence, that ache stirring low in her pelvis again, her breasts swelling and tightening inside her dress; all the embarrassing hallmarks of what was wrong with her, she reflected in pained discomfiture.

Rosy had never been so drawn to anyone in her whole life and when it was Alessio, it embarrassed her to death at the same time as it terrified her because that magnetism of his made her feel out of her depth and out of control. She refused to be silly about him, however, totally refused to be that stupid. She was an adult and she knew they had no relationship and that they were enacting a deception on the real world. She had been in the same room when his PR team had discussed how popular a choice she would be in comparison to someone like Graziana, who had apparently insulted the entire country of Sedovia by letting Alessio down. Rosy might have her role in the Cinderella story but she wasn't in line for Cinderella's happy ending.

Alessio slid the wedding ring onto her finger and she surfaced again to the ceremony, colour burning her cheeks as she realised how she had mentally drifted away. A ring was passed to her and she tried to slot it onto Alessio's finger but by that stage her hand was shaking and he had to take care of it. It was done, it was done, she thought in relief, the main event accomplished and complete: they were married.

‘You were very brave,’ Alessio murmured soothingly as they signed the register. ‘For someone unaccustomed to crowds, you’re managing very well.’

‘Thank you,’ she said stiffly and braced herself to walk back down the aisle.

Alessio banded an arm round her as they reached the cathedral’s main entrance. ‘One kiss for the cameras?’ he whispered.

‘Of course,’ she agreed because it was part and parcel of the whole performance of a couple supposedly in love, she thought ruefully.

His hand eased down her spine to catch her to him, while his other hand tipped up her chin. ‘You’re a very long way down,’ he complained teasingly as he bent his dark, arrogant head.

Rosie braced as though she were in a queue for the guillotine. And then his sensual mouth engulfed hers and not in the fleeting salute she had innocently prepared for. The tip of his tongue parted her lips and he nibbled the lower one as though they had all the time in the world and no audience, and only then did he kiss her. The whole world fell away from her. Her head spun at the intoxicating taste of him and a flush of raw heat flamed through her every nerve ending as he welded her against him with big hands. She felt the unyielding hardness of his broad chest, the solid strength of him, and she was dizzy with the multitude of sensations striking all at once.

The best man gave Alessio a covert nudge. ‘You’re shocking the press...’

Alessio started to free his bride, discovering only then that he had lifted her right off her feet and she had dropped her bouquet. He stooped to retrieve it and returned it to her. ‘I forgot where we were,’ he said apologetically.

On the drive back to the palace, Alessio talked smoothly about some of their most

important guests, educating her for the reception party, Rosy gathered. It was as if the kiss hadn't happened. Although she felt relieved, in the sense that she felt she had responded with too much enthusiasm, she was also tempted to ask him what he thought he had been playing at with such a kiss in a non-existent relationship. It wasn't as if they had even dated. In any case, nobody had ever kissed her so intimately before and she didn't really want to openly complain about that because the fact that she had never had a lover was her business and not his. But he was a guy, an international playboy, and maybe he thought nothing of such a kiss. If she complained, she would come across as ridiculously strait-laced and outdated in her ideas.

Once they arrived at the palace, the regimented reception schedule kicked off. There were greetings and drinks with arriving guests, followed by entertainment by Sedovia's most famous artistes. Rosy spent a little time with her former work colleagues and realised only then that she was out of a job she had loved for good at the palace. Nobody was likely to put Alessio's ex-wife back on the staff. Of course, she would have the divorce settlement mentioned in one of the many documents she had had to sign prior to their wedding, and she wouldn't be poor, so possibly she would look for a conservation job elsewhere in Sedovia.

The reception drifted on, seemingly endless with the speeches, the polite socialising with strangers, the cutting of the cake, even the tossing of the bouquet because it was a very traditional wedding. By the time she had to move out onto the dance floor to do that first couple's dance thing, Rosy had had more than enough of the pomp and ceremony and, even worse, the having to dance in front of the guests when she couldn't dance. Predictably Alessio compensated for that lack by letting her simply shuffle in time with him.

'We can leave now,' he murmured into her hair. 'You've had enough.'

'Thank goodness,' she muttered, letting him tug her through the crush and urge her

across the giant foyer towards the lift in the corner. 'Where are we going?'

'It's a surprise. I think you'll like it. It's private and not too intimidating.'

On the floor above, he ushered her into a bedroom and paused in the doorway of a connecting room. 'This is your room. I'm next door. Your maid will help you change.'

And then he was gone, the stranger she had married. A young woman arrived, dressed in the household uniform, and told Rosy that her name was Maria. Rosy could never have got out of her gown without help and she was relieved to have someone untangle the laces and unhook the hooks and undo the buttons.

'Will I leave you to get dressed? Or should I stay?' Maria asked her uncertainly. 'I'm very good with hair. Your luggage is already packed and ready for your departure.'

'You can leave. Thanks for your help,' Rosy said warmly. 'I'm not going to need anything more done to my hair today.'

An array of unfamiliar clothes was laid across the bed. The new wardrobe that Alessio had briefly mentioned during one of his fleeting phone calls? She had been kitted out like a new army recruit, she thought with amusement, selecting black linen trousers and a shimmering but light silky top for the journey, deeming comfort most important while travelling. She removed the jewellery, glad to see the back of the heavy necklace and tiara, rubbing her sore neck as she removed the earrings. She didn't think she had ever been so tired in her entire life.

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As she was emerging from the bedroom, one of the household stewards was hovering. 'The Prince is waiting downstairs, Your Highness.'

It was the first time she had actually registered being addressed as a princess and she reddened and nodded, too weary to point out that it wouldn't do any harm for Alessio to wait on his bride for a few minutes. Unfortunately, the entire household revolved around him, but the needs of others had to be considered as well, she reasoned ruefully, determined not to become one of the 'adulation of Alessio' clique. He was human and flawed like everybody else, hence that utterly inappropriate kiss at the cathedral. She had let him get away with that but he wasn't getting off with much more around her.

Alessio was already at the wheel of a large SUV. Rosy climbed into the vehicle with difficulty because it was so tall, and she slumped in the front passenger seat while smothering a polite yawn. It wasn't too far to the airport, she reflected sleepily, struggling to stay awake.

A hand shook her shoulder and she moaned and sighed. 'Don't make me get up...'

'I have to. We've arrived,' Alessio informed her gently, all too aware that he had not appreciated how exhausted she was until she fell into a solid five-hour nap beside him. And she'd looked so cute asleep, all ruffled foxy curls and that delicate little upturned nose with its handful of freckles above that pink luscious mouth.

Rosy shook herself like a dog coming out of water and sat up, eyes squinting into the darkness lit only by the glaring headlights. She couldn't see anything but big dark trees and driving rain thumping down on the bonnet. 'Weather's not the best,' she

mumbled helplessly. 'I don't even remember getting on a plane...how is that possible?'

'We drove here. We didn't fly, although if we ever return, we will fly. The time it would take to get here was seriously underestimated and the mountain roads are bad.'

Mountain roads? They had driven here? It didn't sound like any honeymoon Rosy wanted to be on. Alessio virtually bullied her out of the car and, by virtue of a torch, she saw their luggage already stacked on the front porch of a...giant mountain cabin surrounded by overhanging trees. Graziana had been deemed worthy of Barbados and Rosy got...? A mountain cabin. With resolve she lifted her chin, not wanting to be difficult. Maybe Alessio fished or climbed or hiked or some such thing and this was his dream destination. Yes, that made sense.

Although Rosy was determined not to make endless excuses for his omissions, she knew that she had to make allowances for his background, which she had heard all about just working within the palace. Alessio had always been alone, no siblings, not even cousins, and with detached and indifferent parents. He had existed in a cocoon of one from birth. Clearly it didn't come naturally to him to consult others about their preferences, needs or wishes. Nor did it help that he was surrounded by fiercely loyal and sycophantic staff, who believed that he could do no wrong.

The front door was unlocked and they stepped into gloom until she found a light switch that illuminated the huge and very ugly antler chandelier above them.

'I don't understand,' Alessio breathed. 'Where are the staff?'

'How many of them are there?'

'I haven't a clue. This was my grandparents' holiday home and I haven't been here in over twenty years,' Alessio startled her by admitting. 'But the same family have been



paid to maintain and look after the place for generations.'

'It looks like they dropped the maintenance, certainly the cleaning,' Rosy remarked, noting the layer of dust on everything and already moving further to explore, walking through a door to the rear of the hall to find herself in a country-style kitchen that had much more appeal than the dusty hall with its old-fashioned furniture. She investigated the fridge and found it packed with food.

'Somebody tried to prepare for us coming.' She pointed out all the food to Alessio.

'This place is a dump. We can't possibly stay here.'

'It's too late at night to move anywhere else,' Rosy said with common sense. 'The roads are bad, it's dark and it's pouring with rain. I'll check out the rest of this place.'

She went across the hall, illuminated a giant reception room ornamented with horrid hunting trophies and an array of sofas. There was a small library, a formal dining room, a games room and a study with an ancient desk. She padded upstairs and heard a sound that she had unhappily become familiar with during her first months with her family at the hotel: the sound of water dripping in more than one place. She began opening doors, switching on every light she came across and discovered bedrooms too damp to occupy until she reached the double doors at the end of the landing and walked into a large room that was obviously a later addition to the cabin because even the furniture was more modern.

And someone had prepared the final room. The faded rugs and the floor were spotlessly clean and the giant four-poster bed was freshly made up in clean linen. There was even a bunch of wildflowers on a table by the window and she smiled. Someone had done their best with a giant neglected house left to go to rack and ruin and she appreciated it. A relatively modern bathroom with working plumbing also lay through a door, which took care of her last concern.

Alessio was still pacing along the cavernous porch and totally unable to get reception on his phone, rage and frustration emanating from him in perceptible waves.

‘Forget it. We’ve got food and accommodation. We’ll manage. I’m going to make some food. I don’t know if you’re hungry but I’m starving,’ she told him and simply left him to pace.

‘This is not accommodation,’ Alessio objected from the kitchen doorway as she slammed through drawers and cupboards to find pans.

‘It may not be what you’re used to, but it will do.’

‘Not for our wedding night.’

‘Yes, but it’s not a real wedding night. We’re a fake couple, remember?’

Silence fell for a beat and then another. She tensed and turned to look at him. He was frowning at her, perfect ebony brows drawing together in apparent surprise. Vibrant green eyes suddenly struck hers like lasers. ‘Is that your way of saying that you’re not sharing a bed with me?’

## CHAPTER FOUR

It was Rosy’s turn to frown. ‘You mean, you actually assumed that I would?’

‘Of course, I did,’ Alessio proclaimed without a shade of discomfiture.

‘Well, I’m not doing that with you and I can’t think why you’d expect it anyway with us barely knowing each other,’ she began, talking faster and faster as embarrassment threatened to consume her. ‘I couldn’t do that with a stranger!’

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‘I haven’t felt as though you were a stranger from the first moment I met you,’ Alessio told her truthfully. ‘But that’s not a reproach or an argument. We should’ve had this conversation before the wedding but I was in too much of a rush to win your agreement.’

‘To be fair, you didn’t have the luxury of time or space with that announcement about Graziana to make.’ Rosy shook her head and turned away, still scarcely able to credit that he had simply assumed sex would be included in their agreement.

But were his expectations so far removed from reality? a little voice chimed inside her head. In a world where men and women could meet once and have sex and never meet again? Suddenly she was quite sure that she had come across as a terrible prude but she wasn’t about to apologise for it. There were limits to what she was prepared to do on her family’s behalf and casual sex was a hard limit for her.

She had stayed a virgin to the age of twenty-two not because she was a moralist, not by any specific choice but mostly by an awareness of her own nature. She was a romantic, she was cautious, and she was cynical about attachments based on sex because she had seen so many of those fail around her. She didn’t want to risk falling for some loser who wanted her only for the fleeting release her body could give him. She valued herself a little higher than that. Undoubtedly, she had been helped by the simple fact that she had never met anyone she truly craved a closer physical connection with.

And then Alessio had appeared on that bridge and raw, visceral attraction had flared through every inch of her being the instant she’d met his stunning eyes. Ever since then she had been determined to protect herself and not yield to that shocking

physical chemistry. Alessio would forget her existence the day the ink was dry on their divorce papers. He would remarry some lofty, titled lady similar to Graziana, have children and probably never think about the Cinderella who had briefly dug him out of a difficult predicament ever again. That was just a hard fact of life.

‘We’ll discuss it...some other time. Not while I’m wondering where I can sleep tonight,’ Alessio murmured with wry humour.

So, he wasn’t about to dispute her stance. Relief filled Rosy. ‘I’ll look for bed linen and you can pick a sofa in that nightmare-inducing drawing room. When was this house last checked by the palace?’

‘I have no idea.’

‘It must’ve been years ago. The roof is leaking like a sieve upstairs. You can’t leave a property like this untended for so long. Whoever is responsible for property on your staff dropped the ball, and, if I were you, that would make me ask for a check on any other properties you have in your portfolio.’

‘You’re cooking... I am so grateful that you can cook,’ Alessio groaned, appreciating her point. ‘I’ll check out the bed linen, take a look upstairs. I’m no helpless.’

He strode out, leaving her at the stove, engaged in making one of Patrick’s signature quick pasta dishes. She listened to him hefting cases up from the hall and she smiled, deciding that she might even be kind enough to make up the chosen sofa for his benefit.

\* \* \*

Alessio wandered round the upper floor in a daze. It was a dump on the brink of extinction, and he was inclined to let it self-destruct. He walked into the single

habitable bedroom and immediately recognised his mother's signature colour scheme of white with touches of blue. His stomach churned and he no longer wanted to argue about sleeping downstairs on a sofa. But the sharing of the single dry full-functioning bathroom in the house still had to be negotiated. He might be willing to sleep on a sofa but he wasn't willing to do it unwashed.

And what about that? A wife who wasn't a wife? He had made an unbelievably naïve assumption. He had imagined that Rosy understood what he intended with their marriage. He had never, not for one moment, planned on fake. She believed that he had married her to be a figurehead, presumably, a last-minute replacement and no more for Graziana. It hadn't occurred to Rosy that he found her far more attractive and appealing than his former fiancée, that he wasn't a man who had ever expected to have much say in who he married or much genuine liking or desire for his bride. But Rosy had broken the mould of his expectations, giving him a glimpse of brighter possibilities in his future...and he had simply reached for her and grabbed.

Without explanation.

That was where he had gone wrong. He was a man who from adolescence had been surrounded by women who would give him anything he wanted without question. He had never ever had to explain his wants, needs or wishes. Everything had come to him without him even asking for it. All those women had wanted one or more of three things from him. Sex. Luxury. Status. Only it seemed Rosy didn't crave any of those benefits. And yet when he had kissed her, he had fully believed she desired him as much as he desired her. So, what else had he got wrong aside from the horror-movie wedding night in a hopefully un-haunted house?

He located a linen cupboard for the first time in his life, ridiculously relieved that the dripping water hadn't accessed its contents. He yanked out musty sheets and a pillow and returned to the drawing room. It creeped him out too, all those moth-eaten trophies with their glassy eyes staring down. He shook out a sheet and draped it over

a sofa, dropped the pillow into place.

‘Alessio!’ Rosy called.

He appeared in the kitchen doorway. ‘Is there time for me to take a shower before we eat?’

‘If you can accomplish it within twenty minutes,’ she warned him. ‘Is there any wine here that you know of?’

‘I’ll check the drawing room.’

He returned with a dusty bottle and two glasses. ‘There’s a fully stocked wine cellar under the house. I remember that.’

‘You’re not going down into a basement in this place,’ Rosy told him firmly. ‘Not on my watch. There could be rotten wooden steps, rats...who knows?’

Alessio laughed, green eyes glimmering with appreciation. ‘I hear you.’

‘Do you mind if we eat in here? I know it’s a kitchen but it’s clean and the dining room isn’t.’

‘That’s fine with me.’

As he departed, Rosy sighed and set the farmhouse table. He had cooled off quickly, travelling from angry frustration to laid-back acceptance, and that relieved her. Her father had been an angry, offensive drunk whom they had all carefully avoided to the best of their ability when he’d been under the weather.

Alessio returned just as she was putting out the meal. She took a single glance at him,

sheathed in jeans and a white tee, and her tongue cleaved to the roof of her suddenly dry mouth. Black hair still damp from the shower and tousled, falling round his lean, sculpted features, green eyes crystalline with clarity and vigour. She snatched a sudden breath and turned away quickly. He had gone through the same day she had and he had not had the chance to sleep and yet he was still buzzing with energy. How could that be?

‘I laid out fresh towels for you from the linen press.’

‘My goodness, you’re very well house-trained,’ Rosy quipped as she set the plates down on the table and he opened the wine. ‘Where are your security team staying?’

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‘They have a bunkhouse at a local farm and here they work in two teams, four off and resting and then four on for every shift.’ Alessio speared a piece of pasta and savoured it. ‘You’re a hell of a good cook.’

‘Can’t be anything else growing up with a chef in the house. Patrick imbued me with his love of food. I used to cook with him after school when Vittoria was at work. He usually worked evenings and we’d all have dinner together before he left the house.’

‘Sounds very family orientated.’ Alessio paused. ‘I never had that. Where was your father in all of this?’

Rosy stiffened. ‘How detailed was your background check on me? Dad was an alcoholic but he didn’t want to deal with it. Plenty of people tried to help him and failed. Life was better after Patrick moved in because Dad was scared of him, so the shoving me and Vittoria out of his way and the verbal abuse pretty much stopped then. Mostly, Dad spent half the day in bed and the other half out drinking. He was never there for me or my sister and she had a tough time with him after her mother died.’ Rosy grimaced. ‘Just think, she went through all that and still had enough room in her heart for me ten years later. But then that’s Vittoria, she just puts her head down and gets on with it the best she can.’

‘And that’s why you couldn’t stand back and let your sister and her husband lose their dream with the hotel,’ Alessio slotted in. ‘Evidently you have the same big, soft heart.’

‘Except where you’re concerned!’ Rosy flipped back teasingly. ‘Not about to share a bed with you because you put a ring on my finger!’



‘Wait until I ask,’ Alessio advised, having cleared his plate. ‘And please note, I haven’tasked.’

‘Noted,’ she said, a little breathless, rising from the table to deal with their plates, grateful that there appeared to be a working dishwasher because tiredness was beginning to build on her again with an ache in her back and a heaviness in her eyes. She didn’t even know why she had mentioned the ‘sharing a bed’ angle again, most probably because she felt awkward and a little bad at subjecting him to a sofa.

‘Do you mind if I ask you a question?’ she added abruptly.

Sipping his wine, Alessio leant back in his chair and surveyed her. ‘Anything.’

‘Why did you decide to bring me here to the mountains, and not to a more conventional honeymoon getaway?’

Alessio winced. ‘I assumed that you wouldn’t welcome the attention. Graziana revelled in media interest and in one of the more conventional places there would be a great deal of it for the newly-wed Prince and Princess of Sedovia. Our every expression interpreted, our every outing and gesture and choice of clothing commented on. I didn’t want you to feel that you had to tolerate that level of curiosity. I also believed we could get to know each other here without other distractions. I assumed—possibly wrongly—that peace and quiet would be more your style.’

‘Itis,’ she agreed, disconcerted by his explanation because on some level she had assumed the worst about him: that being seen with her ordinary self in public might embarrass him or that someone like her didn’t need or require an opulent break. But all those kinds of feelings only magnified the insecurity that she had struggled to hide from him, and she didn’t want to admit that out loud. That he had been thinking of her needs, that he had been considering what was best for her instead of what he

might want just blew her away. Her conscience twanged and her heart softened.

‘Look, I’m going to head to bed,’ she murmured, having loaded the dishwasher and put it on. ‘I’ll probably be better company in the morning.’

‘Goodnight,’ Alessio said lazily. ‘We’ll find out what happened to this place tomorrow and then head down to the beach for a break.’

Rosy paused and turned her head back with a frown. ‘What beach?’

‘There’s a private cove below the woods. I remember it from childhood. That’s why there’s no pool here and we can probably be grateful for that because that would have been left to go to rack and ruin as well.’

‘I’ll look forward to that,’ Rosy muttered before heading for the stairs while thinking abstractedly of Alessio as a little boy who had once enjoyed bucket and spade holidays at his grandparents’ summer home.

She went for a shower, used the towels he had replaced for her, and avoided washing her hair because she always let it dry naturally. She climbed into the giant bed and felt guilty. It was so big that she could’ve let him share it. It wasn’t as though she were afraid that he might assault her. And there would surely be occasions while they remained married that they would have to share a bedroom, particularly if they were away from the palace, so, really, what had she been whinging about? The fact that he had dared to assume that she might have sex with him? Was she punishing him for that?

Of course, she hadn’t expected to share a bed with him when their marriage wasn’t real. But, at the same time, any sort of intimacy with Alessio would expose her to experiencing the sort of possessive feelings about him that she really couldn’t afford to have in her situation.

Still tired though she was, she shifted, sleepless in the surprisingly comfortable bed. About an hour later, her every joint snapped taut when she heard a soft knock on the door. She sat up and switched on the bedside lamp. ‘Yes?’ she called.

Alessio stepped through the door, bare-chested, a pair of black pyjama pants anchored to his lean hips and a clutch of bedding clamped below one arm. ‘May I sleep on your floor? The sofa is damp and feels like a rock. It’s in here or the kitchen,’ he told her flatly. ‘They’re the only dry places in this house.’

Rosy clutched the sheet to her pink-flamingo-clad breasts, her favourite pyjamas chosen for comfort. She couldn’t take her eyes off him. Stripped, he was pretty intimidating. So tall, so bronzed, so built from his powerful shoulders to the lean, honed musculature of a torso worthy of a centrefold. ‘OK,’ she breathed, and before she could change her mind added jerkily, ‘But I think you’d be more comfortable in the bed. Goodness knows, it’s big enough.’

Green eyes glimmered with surprise. ‘But I thought—’

‘I was being unreasonable,’ Rosy interrupted ruefully and she lay back down again. After all, there was no point in making an enemy of the man she’d married, was there? To a certain extent, their arrangement would be much easier if they fashioned, at the very least, a friendlier bond.

Unfortunately, she had the best view of Alessio climbing into bed and she shut her eyes fast. All those muscles flexing, not to mention the tattoos that she craved a closer look at. A shuddering breath filled her lungs because she was remembering that kiss and those sensations were stealing back into her treacherous body, filling her with a different kind of tension altogether.

‘Mind if I switch off the light?’ he murmured, his dark deep voice sibilant and somehow unbearably sexy that close.

‘No.’

And she should have done it herself because he rolled closer and stretched up over her, enveloping her in a tormentingly intimate scent trail that was purely him: outdoorsy, earthy, clean, warm masculinity. Her nostrils flared and she breathed in deep again as the light went out.

‘Thanks,’ he said wearily in the darkness. ‘I was freezing cold down there. We need wood for the fire in there. I’ll get everything sorted out tomorrow. I appreciate you bearing with me and cooking and dealing with it all without complaint.’

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A sudden giggle escaped Rosy. ‘I’m sorry. I was just trying to imagine what would have happened if you’d brought Graziana here...but, of course, you weren’t bringing her here, you were taking her to Barbados. I think I was a little jealous of that, but I wouldn’t have enjoyed the media fascination or the idea that I was on show all the time.’

‘I’ll make up for my oversights in the future,’ he promised drowsily. ‘Go to sleep—you’ve got breakfast to make in the morning... I hope.’

‘Hmm,’ she mumbled and slid into slumber between one moment and the next.

\* \* \*

Rosy wakened sprawled across a living, breathing furnace. She gazed down at Alessio and slumbrous green eyes assailed hers. ‘You’re a real snuggler,’ he told her. ‘Every time I moved away, you found me again and hooked a leg or an arm around me.’

Rosy leapt off him as though she had been burned. ‘I’m so sorry!’ she framed before scrambling out of the bed and disappearing into the bathroom, where she was relieved to see the sunlight drenching the woods behind the cabin.

But even inside the shower she was reliving the feel of Alessio’s hot, urgent body under hers, the bold press of his arousal, and her face flamed. She wasn’t so naïve that she didn’t know that it was normal for a man to wake up that way but there was nothing normal about the way that intimacy had made her feel. All on edge and jumpy, parts of her heated up in dangerous response. Hair washed and patted dry, she

returned to the empty bedroom to ferret out something suitable to wear. She yanked a blue swimsuit out and donned it, wrinkling her nose at her reflection before tugging out shorts, a loose top and a pair of canvas shoes.

Alessio was already downstairs and opening a cool box in the kitchen. Lightly clad in swim shorts and a tee, he was a vision of lean, powerful masculinity as he bent down, cotton fabric outlining sleek, flexing back muscles and a strip of bronzed flesh and she sucked in a sharp breath.

‘Where did that come from?’ she asked stiffly.

‘At least one maintenance system hasn’t broken down since I was last here. When we’re in residence, fresh baked goods, fruit, eggs, cream et cetera are delivered every day from the farm where my bodyguards are staying.’

‘Convenient,’ Rosy commented as she set about making a lavish breakfast while considering snacks and drinks for the beach, a much easier task with the amount of food that had been delivered.

They were having coffee when a knock sounded on the back door and one of Alessio’s security team stepped in, escorting a teenaged girl who introduced herself with timid hesitance as Bianca Marino, whose family were caretakers for the cabin. Alessio frowned, black brows drawing together, and it was Rosy who stepped in to offer the teenager a cool drink and offer her a seat.

When she admitted under Rosy’s encouragement that she was only sixteen, Rosy gave Alessio a speaking, expectant glance, remarking on how well prepared the kitchen and the main bedroom had been.

As the trembling, anxious girl relaxed a little, Rosy drew out her story. Bianca’s mother had died almost fifteen years earlier, a woman Alessio fondly recalled as

Sofia, who had made cakes for him as a child. Sofia had been responsible for cleaning the cabin, her husband for the maintenance. Bianca's father, however, had suffered a serious back injury the year after he was widowed and her brother, who had initially taken on his father's job, had left home to find a better-paying position.

'I will see your father before we leave,' Alessio pronounced calmly.

'Nobody ever came here. It didn't seem to matter what state it was in when it was never used. We didn't mean any harm,' the girl muttered in awkward completion.

Alessio saw her out again, his firm mouth taut.

'Let's go to the beach,' Rosy urged brightly, keen to take his mind off what they had just learned.

'You think I'm being too judgemental?'

'No, I think first you need to discover how Bianca's father was injured, because he was maintaining this house at the time and he may not have notified the palace because he was afraid of losing his job. I also think there should be an annual check on every property you own. If the supervision has been this lackadaisical, when was the level of pay for the job last updated? Three of the family were working here at one stage.'

'Fair point,' Alessio conceded, the squared set of his broad shoulders easing, while he attempted to prevent his gaze from wandering in the direction of his bride's truly spectacular long shapely legs. He was still aching from waking up with her lithe body draped over him earlier. Nothing wrong with that, he told himself. Only, unfortunately, there was no outlet for his very healthy libido, he reflected wryly.

Rosy slung cold drinks and some snacks into a rucksack and Alessio swung open the

back door with alacrity.

‘You know the way?’ she prompted.

‘There should be a path, probably overgrown by now, and a bridge over the stream and then it’s all downhill from there,’ he promised, taking the rucksack from her shoulder to put it on his own.

They headed into the darkness of the woods, towering trees providing a canopy far above them and shading them from the worst of the summer heat but, still, perspiration broke out on Rosy’s skin. ‘It’s hot.’

‘Yes...let me check this first,’ Alessio urged, stepping onto a roughly built concrete bridge spanning a rushing stream and gripping the wooden guard rail, which fell away from his grasp into the water below.

He strode back, clasping her hand. ‘Let me go first. It’s dangerous.’

‘I’m not one of your little ditsy women, Alessio. I’m a good swimmer and that stream doesn’t look deep,’ Rosy argued with spirit.

‘But if you fell, you could hurt yourself and it’s my responsibility to keep you safe.’

Rosy heaved a sigh and grasped his hand, colliding with glimmering crystalline green eyes that sapped her resistance as easily as a vacuum extractor. He guided her over to the opposite bank and moved her on. They were travelling downhill then and the walking, even though it meant threading a passage through light undergrowth on somewhat slippery ground, was less taxing. They were reaching the edge of the woodland when she saw a blue shimmering glimmer below them. ‘The sea,’ she murmured.



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‘The cabin should have been built on this side of the mountain,’ Alessio opined. ‘The views would’ve been spectacular, but my grandmother chose the land side because she was a gardener and the site she chose was more protected from the wind.’

‘There was a garden?’ Rosy asked in surprise.

‘Once upon a time at the front. It’s now run wild.’

As they stepped into full sunshine, Rosy found herself at the edge of a small cliff looking down into a sunlit rocky cove composed of white sand and glimmering blue water.

‘It’s magical,’ she whispered in wonderment.

### CHAPTER FIVE

In advance of her, Alessio moved down the worn, steep, twisting steps to the beach, one hand on hers to guide her every step of the way.

Rosy heaved a sigh but made no complaint. If he wanted to behave as though she would trip over her own feet, she would let him. Even so, it was rather uplifting to be the source of that much care and attention from a guy. Alessio, in fact, bent his entire concentration on her and it was a new and rather intoxicating experience for Rosy, who was much more accustomed to men who elbowed her in the ribs and treated her with hearty sexlessness as though she were a mate. But Alessio, it only slowly dawned on her, was her husband, which presumably explained why he was so over-the-top protective of her.

They arrived on the sand and she immediately kicked off her shoes, letting her toes flex as they walked towards the blankets already spread across the sand in the shelter of the cliff. He took her hand and guided her over to a rocky outcrop that jutted out to point out the shallow cave behind it. 'You can change in there if you need to.'

A heap of towels sat beside the blankets. 'How did these get here?' she asked.

'Security put them down for us and delivered lunch and drinks for us.'

'I brought snacks for lunch.'

'But this is supposed to be a honeymoon and I don't want you feeling that you have to do all the catering,' Alessio responded smoothly, watching as she whipped off her tee shirt and dropped her shorts with a remarkable lack of self-consciousness before racing down to the shoreline, a lithe, slender silhouette captured against the bright sunlight.

He watched her walking through the surf and then dancing into the waves like a water sprite, her glorious hair fanning round her and glinting in every shade from red to copper to gold. Absolutely gorgeous. No supermodel could have held his attention more closely. He breathed in deep and slow and shed his tee, watching her wade deeper into the water with an obvious sense of freedom and assurance. He wanted her, no doubt about that, but he wasn't an idiot with women either. He assumed that they had to learn how to function as a couple before he let his libido control him.

He joined her to wash away the heat of the day and waved her away from the rocks where the currents were strong until she finally turned back towards the shore. Clambering upright, she stumbled as a wave hit her legs and Alessio laughed and closed his hand over hers to raise her up and steady her.

'I forgot how much I loved it here,' he admitted, disconcerting her.

‘Then why did you wait over twenty years to come back?’ she asked, watching water stream down his lean, broad, bronzed chest, trickling through the smattering haze of black hair, noting almost involuntarily the intriguing arrow of dark hair heading down from below his navel to disappear beneath his waistband. Cheeks burning, she raised her gaze guiltily to collide with glittering green eyes.

‘Firstly, my parents only came here to please my grandparents. They didn’t do rustic and the simple pleasures. And secondly...’ Alessio’s expressive mouth tightened as he changed tack on a raw note. ‘Don’t look at me like that if you don’t want me to touch you.’

Flames of mortification and a stricken conscience forced Rosy to drop her gaze again. Inwardly she squirmed because she knew she was sending out confusing signals and naturally he could read her much better than she could read him. Alessio, after all, had the reputation of a heartless womaniser. He had quietened down as he’d moved into his late twenties but he hadn’t acquired his rakish image by accident. Before their wedding, she had done her share of online snooping over that phase of his life and she had seen the pictures of him at parties, on yachts and in exclusive clubs filled with celebrities and socialites. Accompanied by a parade of gorgeous women and often more than one.

‘It’s not that I don’t want you to touch me,’ she said clumsily. ‘It’s just that I wasn’t expecting it at first and I can be a bit awkward with...er...men. Not a lot of experience. So, you were saying about why you haven’t been back here?’ she encouraged, forcing herself to stand her ground in the surf and lift her eyes to his again, pride and determination straightening her spine.

His glorious green eyes glinted in the sunshine and he bent down suddenly to drop a teasing kiss on the tip of her pert nose. ‘You’re not awkward with me, possibly a little shy. Nothing wrong with that except I’m not used to it. But I think I’m beginning to like it,’ he said, directing her back towards their picnic spot and tossing her a towel.

With hands that trembled a little, Rosy towelled herself and gulped down cool water. He liked it? What was she supposed to make of that comment? Deeply self-conscious again, she breathed in deep and slow.

‘I didn’t return because my grandmother had a stroke and passed away here on that last holiday,’ Alessio explained grittily, his lean strong features taut. ‘I was heartbroken. She was the only softness in my life and I still remember my grandfather crying. They were a sincerely happy couple...and then I went upstairs and my parents were having a screaming row.’

‘A...row?’ Rosy queried in surprise.

‘Yes. The Queen’s death put the whole family into official mourning and it meant that my mother couldn’t go to her fashion shows and my father wouldn’t be able to race his yacht that season.’

‘Oh.’ There was a wealth of comprehension in Rosy’s shaken response to those admissions and she reached out and squeezed his hand. ‘That’s very sad.’

Thinking fondly back to his grandparents’ happy marriage, Alessio closed his much larger hand round hers. ‘I think it was the first time I saw my parents as they really were. Two very selfish, shallow people. My father didn’t even attempt to comfort his distraught father. I suspect he saw my grandfather as being in his way by then. He was forty-five and he wanted the throne.’

Rosy winced.

Alessio frowned. ‘But when he took his place a few years later, he was very reluctant to allow his official duties to get in the way of his playboy lifestyle. I don’t intend to follow his example.’

Rosy lay back to enjoy the sunshine, slathered on a little more sunscreen and eventually drifted off into a doze, only to wake up to find Alessio unfurling a parasol over her. 'Are you ready for some lunch?' he asked.

‘Maybe.’

Alessio dropped down beside her. ‘And it’s getting late. You’ve been asleep for a while.’

Rosy blinked, realising that the sun had moved and she checked her watch, startled to appreciate that the afternoon was well advanced. ‘You’re right. It’s past lunchtime. You should’ve woken me up.’

‘It’s not a problem. I want us to spend another couple of hours down here. We have people doing stuff back at the cabin.’

‘Stuff?’ Rosy teased with a frown of incomprehension, half sitting up.

‘So, we’ll have lunch now,’ he announced, dragging forward a cool box.

‘Stuff?’ she questioned with amusement again, blue-amethyst eyes dancing.

‘You deserve a surprise, at least a surprise that doesn’t send you running screaming for the hills like this place did when we arrived.’ Alessio grinned. ‘You should’ve seen your face when you saw the rain and the cabin. You were horrified.’

Rosy reddened. ‘Maybe a little.’

‘A little?’ He laced a hand through the still damp and tangled fall of her hair and cupped her neck. ‘May I kiss you, *piccola volpe*?’

Rosy nodded nervously.

And their mouths collided, one of her hands rising, fingers splayed to spear into his luxuriant black hair as he caught her to him, his hand curving closely to the nape of her neck. She shivered as the tip of his tongue dallied with hers. As his tongue plunged, it was like a ride up to the heights on a roller coaster and then a sudden steep fall into the kind of passion that was new to her. A piercing ache travelled through her lower body and she felt her nipples tightening, a faint gasp escaping low in her throat.

‘We can’t do this here. I need to work at going slow with you,’ Alessio quipped as he freed her and turned back to the cool box to emerge with an array of elaborate light bites, which he set out before her.

‘You’ve been in touch with the palace!’ Rosy accused in astonishment as she studied the sophisticated selection of tapas.

Evidently, the night before and prior to waking her up, Alessio had driven down the mountain until he got reception on his phone and he had put plans in place then and there. She was impressed because he hadn’t mentioned it and had just got on with it, not that she thought even the Sedovian palace staff could do much in a few hours with a cabin left to go to rack and ruin for years. Hopefully they would at least deliver more food of the same calibre.

‘If the place can be made more comfortable, we can stay a few days before we move on. I did think of shifting us onto my yacht but, unless we stayed out at sea, we wouldn’t get much peace from the paps.’

‘I can manage,’ she declared, content to eat and enjoy the view of the sunlight sparkling off the sea and listen to the soft rush of the surf.

‘Wine?’

‘No, thanks. It’s too warm.’ Rosy paused and then pressed on. ‘I gather your parents weren’t a happy couple.’

‘Well, that’s scarcely a secret. My mother had a habit of making very acid comments to my father in public, which enraged him. She married him for wealth and he married her to have a child.’

‘So, you must’ve been a very much wanted baby.’ She sighed enviously as they ate.

‘Diomio, are you kidding? I was wanted in the sense that my father needed an heir, but neither of them had the smallest interest in children. After I was born, they moved into separate wings of the palace and only appeared as a couple after that at official functions and, even then, only when it was necessary. Bearing in mind that they couldn’t stand each other, it was especially ironic that they died together when their plane crashed.’

‘You must’ve been very shocked by that disaster,’ Rosy murmured heavily.

‘I was...but, although they were still officially based at the palace, they hadn’t been part of my life in a long time and I generally only saw them in public. I was given my own household at the age of eight to get me out from under their feet,’ he admitted tautly. ‘We didn’t have close ties.’

‘Eight?’ Rosy stressed. ‘Your own household? What did that mean?’

‘Essentially that I lived apart from my parents with staff who looked after me, and they did. The staff looked after me very well,’ Alessio asserted with appreciation. ‘But, of course, they didn’t act like parents, so I never really knew what that would’ve been like.’



‘You didn’t have a proper family,’ Rosy said wryly. ‘I was much luckier than you with Vittoria and Patrick.’

‘After my parents died, my freedom was at an end. I had to clean my act up because I was under too much scrutiny. I never ever expected to come this close to the throne so young. And it was painfully obvious that everyone was keen for me to find a wife to marry. That’s how I walked blindly into the arrangement with Graziana. It was expected of me, so when she suggested it, I thought, why not? She’s royal, she’s popular, she knows what she’s signing up for.’

‘But there should be much more to a marriage.’

Alessio dealt her an amused glance, sunshine gleaming off the clean lines of his high cheekbones and strong jawline. ‘Do you think I don’t know that? But at the time, she seemed the best option available and I was willing to commit.’

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‘So, there was no romantic connection at all?’

‘Romantic isn’t in Graziana’s toolbox.’

‘But it must be if she ran off with her bodyguard.’

‘I still find that hard to believe. She enjoyed her life the way it was. Something I don’t know about must’ve happened,’ he said grimly. ‘And why are we talking about all this? Graziana is old history now. You’re my wife...’

Rosy winced. ‘Well, more sort of...your wife for now.’

‘Or my wife for as long as you are happy being my wife. Madonnamia, I never looked on you as some temporary solution on my path towards some ideal marital candidate!’

‘You...didn’t?’ Rosy frowned at him, all at sea, unsure how to interpret that statement or its exact meaning, even though everything it covered was fundamental to their marriage. She scrambled upright, suddenly ill at ease beneath that gleaming green intense gaze of his, which made her feel hot all over. ‘I’m going to take a dip and cool off again!’

And she ran down the beach, struggling to work out what he had meant by what he had said.

Following her, Alessio caught her hand to tug her back towards him. ‘Rosy...do you really think I could have you crowned by my side in a couple of weeks and then

dispense with you a few months later without causing a huge scandal?’

Rosy went pink. ‘I hadn’t thought about it quite like that.’

‘It would make both of us look like idiots for getting married in the first place!’

Rosy flinched. ‘Probably...but even so, that’s what I assumed you intended.’

‘Obviously not. I’m a little more practical and realistic than that. I find you attractive. I respect you. I think you can do the job. So, why shouldn’t we give it a go?’ Alessio demanded forcefully.

Rosy wanted to slap him but she resisted that temptation. Instead, she pulled her hand free of his and darted into the water to escape the conversation and snatch a moment alone to think.

Why shouldn’t we give it a go?

As if a marriage, a serious relationship, were just one more novelty to try and she had nothing better to do with her life than try it with him! And possibly, to Prince Alessio Maretti, it was. She was shocked and increasingly angry with him.

Matters she should’ve understood before their wedding were only now falling into place to form a totally different picture of his attitude in comparison to her own. But whose fault was it that she had got totally the wrong idea about their marriage? He hadn’t spent any time with her before the ceremony, hadn’t discussed any important details or his own expectations, never mind hers. No, he had just dumped those on her unforwarned the night before when she had realised that he had simply assumed that she would share a bed with him.

Alessio took a lot for granted with women, she reflected angrily, breaking into a fast

crawl and ploughing back and forth through the water in the mouth of the cove. That wasn't a surprise. How many women had ever said no to Alessio? He rejoiced in a level of male beauty that was surpassingly rare and he was incredibly sexy. He was drop-dead gorgeous, wealthy beyond avarice and charming even with the staff. He was accustomed to being the centre of attention. He was royal, and that explained a lot. A kind of unconscious arrogance and very high expectations. He assumed that people would go out of their way for him. He assumed his attentions would invariably be welcome. He assumed that most women would be attracted to him. He assumed that the ordinary Sedovian citizen he had married at the last minute would naturally go that extra mile for him.

But no blasted way on earth was Alessio Maretti going to give marriage a go with her! He hadn't asked her to marry him and stay married to him. He hadn't tasked her to share a bed with him as his wife. No, he had left her to assume that their marriage would be as fake as plastic flowers and as short as she chose. As for the prenup, there had been more about the terms of them breaking up than staying together. Yes, it had said that for every year she remained married to him her eventual settlement on their separation would increase. Yes, it had said that any children born of the marriage would have to remain in Sedovia with him as royal progeny.

Obviously, none of those terms had surprised her because Rosy had not at any stage expected Alessio to tell his legal eagles that their marriage was a big fat fake in which no marital bed would ever be shared. She had naturally believed that those specifications belonged to his desire to be discreet about their secret arrangement. On the strength of that conviction she had signed the prenup, sincerely crediting that none of those terms would ever come back to haunt her. And now that they were well and truly married, Alessio had not only moved the goalposts, he had blown them sky-high!

Rosy stalked back up the beach in a temper such as she hadn't experienced in years. She snatched up her clothes and a towel and headed for the cave to get changed

without looking at Alessio once. It would be rude and inexcusable to slap him and probably juvenile to scream at him for misleading her, and Rosy did not like to be rude, aggressive or juvenile. Staying out of Alessio's way until she simmered down was definitely a necessity. And then later, she would sit down with him and talk like an adult, she promised herself. She would admit that she felt deceived, insulted and angry.

Give it a go?

He could forget that idea! Her teeth gritted as she stripped off her swimsuit and wrung the sea water out of it.

It was cool in the shade of the cave. She shivered as she dried herself and wriggled back into her shorts and her halter top, wishing she had thought to pack under garments. Her toe nudged something slimy and she fell back with a stifled shriek, looking down to see that she had got her foot entangled with a strand of seaweed. Rolling her eyes at her own foolishness, she kicked it away.

'Rosy? I heard you cry out. Are you all right?' Alessio called urgently from out of view.

'A stupid piece of seaweed gave me a fright. I'm fine,' she said thinly.

'But very angry with me,' Alessio commented, stepping into her line of sight and lounging back against the rocky outcrop that guarded the cave's entrance from sight. 'You don't hide it well.'

'So sorry about that. Does your security team have binoculars on us? I will try to do better in the future,' she said stiltedly, dark blue eyes flaring like flames. 'But maybe you could try not making me angry the next time.'

‘I don’t know what I said or did to make you this angry,’ Alessio informed her without hesitation.

Rosy sent his lean, powerful figure a stabbing glance of resentment. ‘You’re not that stupid. You didn’t spell out what I was getting into before the wedding. Now you’re trying to change our agreement altogether. I didn’t sign my entire life over to you, Alessio! I believed this marriage would last eighteen months or two years at most, now what are you talking about? I also don’t want anyone giving me a go like I’m a new shoe to try on—I deserve better than that!’

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‘Of course you do,’ Alessio agreed. ‘I’m sorry that my words offended you but it was not meant that way. I only meant that this marriage could become a normal marriage if we both wanted it to.’

‘Well, I didn’t sign up for that! Anormalmarriage!’ she gasped accusingly. ‘I was a substitute bride, nothing more. You talked more about the wedding saving the Sedovian economy from a slump than about what being married to you would entail, so if I misunderstood what was intended, it is entirely your fault for not taking the time to spell out your agenda!’

‘I don’t have an agenda, Rosy,’ Alessio breathed curtly, wide sensual mouth compressed, a suspicion of angry pallor beginning to circle his jawline. ‘I concede that we should’ve had this discussion before we married. I will even agree that the fact that we didn’t is my fault because I was too busy trying to make us seem like an acceptable couple for the benefit of the public. But this is not a game for me or for you, Rosy. This is a marriage like any other.’

Rosy threw her hands up in the air in an almost violent gesture. ‘ButIdidn’t know that! You weren’t honest with me. I didn’t even know you found me attractive. I certainly never dreamt that you might believe I would share a bed with you.’

‘I’ve been attracted to you from the first moment I saw you and, unless you’re a liar, you will admit that that attraction is mutual.’

Rosy almost ground her teeth together in rage at that direct attack. ‘Somewhatmutual,’ she qualified stiffly.

‘Want to test it out? Resist a kiss and I’ll back off,’ Alessio traded.

One kiss? Was this a prince who thought he was about to magically awaken Sleeping Beauty? An angry laugh was wrenched from Rosy as she pinned her lips firmly together. ‘Oh, please, test me in the mood I’m in now,’ she encouraged.

‘You look like a very cross, pouting toddler when you do that.’ Alessio sighed heavily.

Rosy relaxed her face in shock at that retaliation, determined to feel absolutely nothing as he backed her up against the wall. But the heat of him at least drove out the chill still clinging to her damp skin below her light garments.

Alessio stalked closer, suddenly immeasurably tall and broad in the confined space. Rosy snatched in a sudden breath and closed her eyes the better to block him from her awareness. It occurred to her that she wanted him to kiss her, that in the act of denying that truth, she was, in fact, playing a game. Her eyes flew open again. ‘Alessio,’ she began as his hands came down on her shoulders and flexed.

‘Rosy...’ he said gruffly, tilting her head to one side to expose her slender neck and burying his mouth there, sending a flash fire of unexpected reactions rippling through her. She squirmed closer to his lean, powerful body, needing, craving more physical contact. Her whole body thrummed with sensitivity, her breasts swelling, her nipples pricking up against the cotton of her top.

Alessio swung her round so that she no longer had her back to the wall and lowered his head to find her parted lips and claim them. Her heart hammered madly inside her. Her hands lifted to lace into his hair. As he traced her mouth with his, plucking at her full lower lip and then exploring, she felt as though the liquid fire of impatience was pulsing through her veins. Heated warmth and dampness were pooling at her feminine core and she strained against him, instinctively seeking greater contact. Just



a kiss, just a kiss, she reasoned with herself, even though just a kiss didn't explain the insane hunger building inside her.

Alessio slid down the wall, carrying her with him and pulling her across his lap. 'Easier,' he muttered as she looked up at him with disconcerted eyes. 'You're way too small.'

'Sizeist comment,' she scoffed shakily. 'Maybe you're too tall.'

'Nothing we can't work around,' Alessio countered with assurance, long fingers smoothing down her bare thigh and making her shiver before his hand travelled back again and his fingertips flirted with the frayed hem of her shorts. 'And what are you worrying about? You have a beautiful face, fantastic hair, fabulous legs and an even more spectacular bottom. Haven't I been admiring them for months every time I saw you on your bike heading into work?'

Rosy looked up at him in astonishment. 'You...have?'

'Yes, I have been...quietly appreciating you from my car whenever I saw you on the road.'

It was odd, she thought later, how much that admission pleased her. That Alessio had noticed her before Graziana ran away and that it wasn't only her accident on the bridge that day that had attracted his attention to her.

'What are we doing?' she mumbled as he kissed her again.

'Well, we're not fighting any longer,' Alessio pointed out with dancing eyes and a wickedly sexy grin, long brown fingers stroking her taut ribcage. 'I think that's a win, don't you?'

His sensual mouth caressed hers open again and he ravished the tender interior, sending a new tension into her splayed limbs and a wild anticipation. His hand eased below her top and rose to cup her breast and a moment later the hot damp heat of his lips closed round the straining peak, alternating between the prominent buds, dallying and teasing until the coil of heat in her belly was at boiling point. And she wanted more, her body twisting and rising over his, she wanted more from him than her next breath. She needed the satisfaction that he had taught her responsive body to crave to an unbearable degree.

With a clumsy hand she reached down to unbutton her shorts and he kissed her again and wrenched them out of his path while he was doing it. And then, at last, he was touching her where she most needed to be touched. He pressed his thumb against her throbbing clit, stroked a finger through her damp folds, toyed with her damp entrance where she was ultra-sensitive. Her heartbeat pounded and her spine arched at the sweet pleasure. And the strengthening band of tension in her pelvis tightened another agonising notch until he delved inside her, easing the terrible hollow ache assailing her, and then brushed her swollen bud. It was as if he had set a chain of fireworks off inside her body. She ignited beneath that blissful surge of release, sensation pounding through her in wave after delightful wave. As she cried out and arched, he caught her mouth under his again to smother the sounds she made.

And when Rosy finally surfaced from that climax, he was already tugging her clothing back into place, tugging her gently to her feet while she struggled, all fingers and thumbs, to do up the button on her waistband. Even as she did so, she was hugely aware that their intimacy had been strictly one-sided and embarrassment claimed her because she hadn't touched him, hadn't even tried to do so. There was some excuse for the fact that she wouldn't really have known what she was doing, but she was painfully aware of his visible arousal.

\* \* \*

‘I’m going for another swim,’ Alessio breathed thickly, not trusting himself to linger when he was so aroused and not really knowing what to say to her at such a moment because he knew that she had to make a decision as well as to what happened next. ‘And then we’ll head back to the cabin. Bearing in mind what you said earlier, you need to decide what you want in this marriage before we go any further, *piccola volpe*.’

He dropped a careless kiss on the top of her bent and swimming head and strode out of the cave. Rosy blinked rapidly, still all shaken up by what had happened between them. How they had travelled from fighting to kissing escaped her just at that moment. But she perfectly understood what he had said. If she wasn’t prepared to stay in their marriage for longer than she had originally expected to stay, intimacy was a bad idea. If she was prepared to stay, for how long would she stay? What was her timeline, not to mention his?

And what would such a relationship do to her? How could what started out as fake ever become real? Alessio, she thought almost vengefully, had made his point. She wanted him. She hoped he didn’t know it but she found him irresistible and that wasn’t a good thing either, was it? What if she fell in love with him? What if she had a child with him? Would she always feel as if he had only married her as Graziana’s conveniently available replacement? As the substitute, there to play a good walk-on part?

## CHAPTER SIX

Rosy walked back through the woods, lost in the turmoil of her whirling thoughts. As the cabin came into view, she saw the workmen scattered across the roof.

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:42 am*

‘Temporary repairs. A proper fix will have to wait until we leave in a few days,’ Alessio explained. ‘I also asked for the damp rooms upstairs and the drawing room to be cleared and the furniture disposed of. The linen should all be replaced as well—’

‘So, does all that mean that you’re planning to keep this place?’ Rosy pressed in surprise.

‘Yes. Coming back here with you has somehow dispersed the unhappy memories,’ Alessio admitted quietly as they walked into the kitchen where she immediately saw the changes. A large fridge freezer had replaced the old fridge, and the freezer compartment was packed with ready-made gourmet meals. A microwave had appeared and a sophisticated coffee machine sat in another corner. The fridge was stuffed with fresh food and a prepared meal for that very evening.

‘I was quite happy cooking for us,’ she said ruefully.

‘But now you won’t have to work so hard at it and we can relax,’ Alessio pointed out as she moved out into the hall and then crossed to the drawing room to stare at the new contemporary sofas and note that the moth-eaten hunting trophies had been removed.

‘Did you have furniture brought all this way from the palace?’ she asked with growing incredulity at the improvements that had been implemented in such a short space of time.

‘No, a store in Rifka was happy to step up and supply us with everything. It’s only twenty miles from here,’ he pointed out, referring to Sedovia’s third largest city.

Rosy could only imagine the alacrity with which a store proprietor would have stepped up to provide Sedovia's reigning prince with such purchases. She glanced upwards and wasn't at all surprised to see that the ugly antler chandelier had been replaced as well.

Alessio noted the direction of her gaze, his emerald-green gaze gleaming with wry comprehension. 'I'm head of the Sedovian conservation society. Such relics from the past are better removed and there will have to be some sort of public consultation about what to do with them because the palace still contains problematic items as well. Destruction—denying our past—may not always be the best remedy. Hunting within accepted guidelines is still a popular rural pursuit.'

'I can't see anyone wanting to go to a museum dedicated to old hunting trophies,' she remarked. 'But you could be surprised, if you included the artworks that devolved from them. Add in an antique gun exhibition and old photos and it could work though, particularly if you added a conservation exhibition, showing how much attitudes have changed over the years.'

'I hadn't even considered that possibility.' Alessio dealt her an appreciative and lingering appraisal. 'That's quite a comprehensive plan to come up with so fast. I can see that your museum training will be an asset.'

Rosy flushed, striving not to show how pleased she was by the compliment. 'Let's go upstairs,' she suggested, because she wanted to shower and change.

'We'll have the Internet back now and a booster has been installed for phone reception,' Alessio proffered as she glanced into the study to see one of the palace technicians still at work.

'You really did think of everything.'

‘Not really. I had to concentrate on what could be done quickly. Even for a few days we don’t want to live inside a building site. The whole place requires extensive work but at least it should be clean and reasonably comfortable now.’

‘It’s certainly clean,’ Rosy conceded as they walked past empty bedrooms now stripped of all evidence of rot and damp and another bathroom that now looked surprisingly functional.

As she opened the door on their bedroom, Alessio was opening the room next door. ‘And this will be my room,’ he advanced calmly, walking into a neatly furnished room, coloured in pale shades of blue and grey. ‘I’ll use the other bathroom as well, so we won’t be getting under each other’s feet...’

Or snuggling or colliding in the same bed, Rosy translated with an inner wince of discomfiture. Without warning the oddest sense of hurt, regret and disappointment was assailing her and, her cheeks burning at that awareness, she hastened on into the bedroom that they had shared the night before. There she stopped dead on the threshold, only to stare at the unexpected new furniture and the fresh contemporary bedding with a green tropical colourway.

‘Why did you change this room?’ she enquired.

‘It was done in my mother’s favourite colours and I dislike being reminded of her,’ Alessio confessed rather stiltedly, faint colour scoring his hard cheekbones as she swivelled to look at him.

Rosy compressed her lips. ‘Oh,’ she said, keeping to herself the reality that she had actually quite liked the previous décor. True, it had been a little shabby, a little dated, but she found feminine florals soothing.

‘And you required more storage for your clothes. You were living out of your

suitcases,' Alessio pointed out, clearly determined to cover his tracks lest she suspect that he was more sensitive to reminders of his mother than was strictly masculine.

'I was living out of my cases because I was too lazy to unpack last night, and now...' she said in open appreciation as she opened a wardrobe door to view hanging garments, neatly folded garments on shelves and filled drawers '...it's all been done for me, which is wonderful!'

'The maids have been very efficient on our behalf but I didn't request any live-in staff because—'

'We don't need them in a place this size when we're not staying long,' Rosy slotted in calmly. 'You thought of everything...thanks. We'll be more comfortable now but you didn't need to have a second bedroom prepared for yourself—'

Alessio gazed down at her with hooded green eyes that smouldered. 'Idid. You need your privacy while you decide where you stand in this marriage of ours. I chose to give it to you for your sake as much as mine. If you want a quick exit from this marriage, I want to know soon so that I can prepare the way,' he murmured tautly.

It was the scorching intensity of his gaze that flushed heat through her entire body. She knew he was thinking about the cave. Did he think she was a bit on the wanton side? After all, in a temper just before that development she had told him she hadn't signed her whole life over to him and had assumed that their marriage would be relatively brief. And that was true, but she had also made it surpassingly obvious that she found him very attractive and in an outrageously short space of time he had charmed her out of most of her clothes. So perhaps, she reflected as she closed the bedroom door, he was right to say that separate bedrooms were a better idea than too much dangerous proximity.

Even if she kind of really, really strongly resented him for enforcing a separation?

After all, she had never known what it was to crave a man the way he had made her crave him. That was utterly new, that was exhilarating, and it was perfectly normal for her to wish that that compelling sexual attraction had been allowed to go to its natural conclusion. After all, she might never again meet a man who attracted her as much as Alessio did. Only, Alessio had put himself off-limits. Alessio, very unexpectedly, was acting like a bit of a prude, wasn't he? In the end, whether they consummated their marriage or not didn't really matter even if they did break up a couple of years down the road, she reasoned unhappily.

Uneasy with the conflicting thoughts whizzing through her head, Rosy went for a shower. Was she trying to argue herself into bed with Alessio again? What else was she doing? So, she was curious about what it would be like to be with him that way. Nothing wrong with that when that curiosity came solely from her inexperience. A recollection of the physical feelings that had engulfed her in the cave shimmied through her body afresh and she shivered, still shaken by how potent and powerful those responses had been.

Towelling herself dry in the bedroom while she perused her new wardrobe and selected a casual long dress in a pretty fabric, she heard a noise and walked over to the window. She was astonished to realise that Alessio was chopping wood. Even as she watched two workmen she recognised from the palace approached him, clearly offering to do the job for him. Alessio, however, was determined to do the job himself and he reached behind his back to peel off his tee shirt in that distinctively masculine way. Rosy's mouth ran bone dry.



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Tearing her attention from all those flexing back and abdominal muscles on the beach had been tough enough and watching him with an axe was an even hotter experience. Perspiration glistened on his bronzed skin as he worked. For goodness' sake, she was practically perving on the guy! Her face burned as she donned her clothing and wondered why he was chopping wood when it was still so warm. As she went back for another look at his truly stunning torso, muscular biceps and lean hips, she smiled. If she chose to perve over her very hot husband, that was her business.

She went downstairs and noted that the dining room table had been laid for their meal, complete with glasses, tablecloth and napkins. She was being shown the correct way and she supposed Alessio wasn't accustomed to casual dining unless he was on the beach. She had worked as a waitress while at university and she would manage.

\* \* \*

Alessio strode through the front door and paused in the entrance to the kitchen. Her hair wildly curly and still rather damp round her incredibly delicate triangular face, Rosy was looking particularly appealing in something summery and soft that clung to the sweet pouting curve of her breasts. As she looked up from her task, the fullness of her lush mouth and the brightness of her blue eyes entrapped him.

In a split second, the nagging pulse at his groin raced from zero to sixty and he shifted his lithe hips as if to ease the pressure of arousal. 'Have I got time for a shower?'

'If you're quick. Dinner will be ready in fifteen minutes,' she told him. 'In the dining room. We're going to be formal tonight in honour of all the work that has been done

here.'

'The roofers finished while you were upstairs,' he told her. 'They did a great job.'

Punctual to the minute, Alessio reappeared in the dining room clad in the perfect mix of formal and casual, tailored trousers smoothly outlining his long strong legs, a shirt rolled back to his elbows and open at his brown throat, his luxuriant black hair still damp from the shower. Rosy was setting out the cold starters and he was in the act of pouring the wine when his phone rang and he dug into his back pocket to answer it.

A frown line divided his brows. 'How may I help you?' he asked, his dark deep drawl unusually cool and clipped in tone. His attention moved to Rosy and he said in aside to her, 'Excuse me... I'll take this outside.'

\* \* \*

Alessio strode out onto the shaded front porch, anger he was striving to contain paling his olive complexion. 'Graziana?' he prompted in an expressionless voice.

'Look, I honestly believed I had no choice,' she declared stridently. 'I know you have to be angry with me but at the time, I thought I was pregnant.'

'Pregnant?' Alessio almost whispered in his astonishment.

'And I knew that I couldn't do that to you.'

'And that, in our circumstances, I couldn't be fooled,' Alessio cut in with lethal bite, wondering if she was also aware that secret DNA tests were now mandatory with royal births.

'That too. But I panicked. I told Marco and the only answer seemed to be for us to

run away and face the music at a later date. I persuaded the palace priest to do the marriage honours and then we rushed to the airport.'

'And at no stage could you find five minutes to phone and warn me?' Alessio interposed with scorn.

'I sent you a text!'

'Saying that you were sorry but not what you were sorry for.'

While Graziana argued weakly that she hadn't known what to say, Alessio thanked her for her explanation, keen to end the exchange.

But his former fiancée was far from finished and continued. 'The important point is that I'm not pregnant! I found that out before we even arrived in New York. It was all a stupid, crazy comedy of errors,' she lamented, her tone sharpening into angry shrillness. 'So, now Marco and I are applying for an annulment, but my father has cut off my access to my trust fund. I didn't even know that he had the power to do that!'

'I don't understand what all this has to do with me,' Alessio admitted flatly.

'Oh, don't act as if you're dim!' Graziana snapped. 'Or superior, just because you contrived to produce a new bride overnight to replace me. What I'm trying to say is that you could go for an annulment or a divorce now too, and we could—'

'No,' Alessio pronounced succinctly. 'There is no "we" now. I'm married. Let's leave this pointless conversation here and agree to continue as former friends for the sake of both our countries.'

He cut off the call against a backdrop of her protests because he had nothing more to say to her. All he knew was that she wasn't the woman he had once believed her to

be. She had no sense of honour or loyalty and now that her father had pushed her into a corner by flexing his financial control, she was trying to turn back the clock in the craziest way possible.

\* \* \*

While he was still outside, Rosy finished pouring the wine and sipped hers. She spread her napkin and toyed with a lettuce leaf on her plate before defiantly taking a first bite. Several minutes passed and just as she was about to commence her own meal, Alessio came back.

‘Sorry about that,’ he breathed, folding down into his seat and reaching for his wine.

‘It was... Graziana and I needed to hear what she had to say.’

‘Graziana?’ Rosy parroted in surprise at the admission.

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‘I had to speak to her. No matter what she’s done, I can’t ignore the fact that we should remain on reasonable terms with so close a neighbour,’ he admitted grimly.

‘What did she want?’ Rosy asked baldly.

‘She ditched me because she believed she’d fallen pregnant by her bodyguard. That’s why she married him and took off. Then she realised she had been too hasty and she’s now pursuing an annulment,’ Alessio advanced.

Rosy had frozen. ‘Might it be your child?’

Alessio groaned. ‘No, there is no baby. It was only a scare and even if it hadn’t been, it couldn’t have been mine because Graziana and I haven’t had sex.’

Rosy’s lips rounded in a silent ‘oh’ because that information took her aback. Like most people, she had assumed that he and Graziana were already lovers, even if they were not ‘in love’.

‘And now she’s chasing an annulment for her marriage to the bodyguard?’

‘On the grounds of non-consummation.’

Rosy nodded and stood up as she prepared to go into the kitchen to fetch their food. ‘Are you thinking of doing the same thing?’ she couldn’t help asking, her heart sinking at the prospect.

Alessio slung her an incredulous look. ‘Why would I want to do that?’

‘Because she was everything you wanted and, by the sounds of it, she’ll soon be available again...and you could be too,’ Rosy pointed out, lifting her chin as she headed back out to the kitchen. ‘It makes me a little superfluous.’

As she set out the main course on the counter, she realised that she felt deeply hurt by the prospect of their unlikely marriage being set aside before it even got a chance to get going. Why did she feel so hurt? She had married him for the money that had settled her family’s debts, hadn’t she? It had been an impersonal arrangement, so how had her feelings got involved? But if she had only married him for the money, shouldn’t she be relieved if their marriage came to a sudden sharp halt? After all, he was unlikely to ask her or her family to return that money and an annulment would leave her free to return to her life.

Only, she registered, she didn’t want to set Alessio free when tantalising possibilities were now hovering on the horizon ahead of them. The chance of them settling into arealmarrriage? The chance of them staying together, eventually raising a family? The concept of such developments between them sent her heart racing and soaring with hope and happiness. And why was that? When had her emotions even got involved? When had she begun caring what Alessio might think and feel? And when had she begun stressing about how he might compare her suitability as a royal wife with Graziana’s? Graziana, who would naturally slide into a royal role with all the ease of a princess born and bred?

OK, she reasoned with herself, she was fiercely attracted to Alessio...and she liked him, probably much more than she should. He was good company, neither vain, nor arrogant, indeed he was none of the things she had once dimly assumed he would be. Here with her, shorn of his usual opulent surroundings and servants, he wasn’t pompous or condescending or selfish or spoilt. When he had opted for a separate bedroom, he’d been thinking of her, hadn’t he? Giving her the opportunity to think about whatshewanted, no matter how little her ultimate decision might match his needs as a public figure.

‘Rosy?’ Alessio demanded from the doorway and she glanced up, noting the angry glitter of his jewelled eyes and the tight set of his sculpted jawline. ‘What on earth makes you think that I would still want to marry a woman who was clearly cheating on me throughout our engagement?’

‘I... I—’ she stammered.

‘I had a lucky escape and I know it,’ he breathed with subdued ferocity. ‘Her affair might well have continued after our marriage! She was obviously very discreet about the relationship because nobody appears to have known about it or suspected anything.’

‘I’m sorry I jumped to conclusions,’ Rosy said ruefully. ‘It’s just Graziana wanting you back and hovering and her being so perfect for the royal role makes me feel insecure.’

‘That’s foolish and your insecurities are without foundation as far as I’m concerned,’ Alessio stated, lifting the plates out of her hands to set them aside and closing his hands round hers instead. ‘I’m the son of parents, who lied to and cheated on each other. I have no desire to be married to a dishonest woman without loyalty. Nor could I ever want such a woman to become the mother of my children.’

‘I see that,’ Rosy conceded, pulling her hands free, her face deeply flushed as she reached for the plates again. ‘Come on, let’s eat.’

\* \* \*

Frustration rippled through Alessio as he searched her shuttered face. Maybe he shouldn’t have told her about Graziana’s phone call or his ex’s current plans. But he preferred honesty and had little tolerance for lies and half-truths. In reality, his parents’ numerous self-indulgences had made him into their very opposite in

character. He had married a sincere, honest woman and he didn't want to risk damaging her faith in him. That was why he was stepping back from the intense sexual chemistry between them, offering her the space to decide what she wanted, because, no matter how much he wanted her, he didn't want to take advantage of her. But first she needed to think through whether or not she was prepared to stay with him and give their marriage a chance.

They were finishing the last course and Rosy had been thinking hard when she said rather abruptly, 'I'm not the only one of us who needs to be considering what he's doing.'

Alessio lifted a satiric ebony brow. 'Meaning?'

'You hand out mixed messages all the time, stop, then start, so that I never really know where I stand with you,' Rosy framed tightly. 'First I think we're in a fake marriage, then I realise I'm in a trial marriage—'

'When did I say that you were on trial?' Alessio demanded, tossing down his dessert fork.

'That's the impression you give me. You want me to decide to be all in or all out before you waste your time on me. You let us get...er...close in the cave, and then I return here and you've moved yourself into a separate bedroom to keep your distance. So, you're not one hundred per cent committed either, are you?' Rosy shot at him before she snatched up the tray she had left nearby and began to clear the table.

'Leave those!' Alessio ordered in exasperation.

'No, I don't fancy coming back to them in the morning,' Rosy told him steadily and walked out to the kitchen to begin filling the dishwasher.



\* \* \*

## Page 21

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‘Rosy...’ Alessio stalked into the kitchen, his lean, strong features taut with annoyance. ‘I said leave them,’ he reminded her.

‘Oh, did you think I didn’t hear you the first time?’

Rosy studied him. He was impossibly good-looking and sometimes, like right at that very minute, it infuriated her because her physical awareness of him put her very much on edge. ‘I heard you fine but I’m not one of your little minions, eager to do as I’m told and please. What I’m telling you—in case you haven’t got the message yet—is not to tell me what to do. I’m neither a member of your staff nor a child. Unless I’m doing something wrong or dangerous or offensive in some way that I don’t understand, don’t shoot orders at me, because I won’t listen!’

Averting her eyes from his taken-aback appraisal, Rosy spread her attention to the kitchen clean-up that was still required and decided that she’d had enough for one day. She would take care of it all in the morning when she was fresh and in a better temper. Slinging down the dishrag she was still holding in one hand, she neatly sidestepped Alessio and headed for the hall.

‘Goodnight. I’m off to bed.’

\* \* \*

Meanwhile, Alessio began to load a dishwasher for the first time in his life. Rosy had made him uncomfortable by showing him the truth of his behaviour. His parents had pretty much ignored him all his life and he had craved a better relationship with them. He had promised himself that when he was married, he would do everything

differently. There was just one small problem, he acknowledged: he didn't know how to have a normal relationship because he had absolutely no experience in that line. Fleeting affairs didn't count, Graziana patently did not count and the one seemingly good relationship he had had with a woman while he was a student had crashed and burned before he'd even told her that he loved her. Possibly that explained why he was handing out mixed messages on his intentions...

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Well, she had told Alessio, Rosy reminded herself drowsily as she collapsed into a bed that felt deflatingly empty all of a sudden. It was not as though she actually wanted him in the bed with her—oh, dear, no—but it was the way he had withdrawn that intimacy with that bred-in-the-bone pride of his that had outraged her. He had had no right. Either he was her husband, or he was not. She wasn't the only one who wouldn't tolerate half-measures or his habit of moving forward two steps and then stepping back again, leaving her alone and uncertain in unknown territory feeling like an idiot, a fool, who should never have allowed such liberties.

The door creaked open, pausing her on the brink of sleep, and she froze, light from the landing highlighting Alessio, clad only in a pair of boxers. Her eyes widened at the large expanse of lean bronzed muscularity on view.

'I am one hundred per cent committed to this marriage,' Alessio gritted.

'Er...right.' Rosy fumbled for something to say because he had taken her by surprise. 'It just seemed rather insulting the way you took yourself off and then oddly coincidental when Graziana phoned and told you that her marriage hadn't been consummated either...not, er, that I'm up for that tonight,' she muttered awkwardly. 'I'm far too tired and cross with you.'

Alessio dealt her a lazily amused grin and vaulted onto the other side of the bed. 'It's

actually not the norm for us to share the same bedroom, interconnecting rooms, yes, but not the same bed, and I assumed that you wouldprefer—’

‘Yes, well, stop assuming stuff, just ask,’ Rosy said with a sniff, still reeling from that heartbreaking smile of his.

‘And I didn’t want to risk getting you pregnant before you’d decided that you were staying.’

Rosy stiffened. ‘You couldn’t get me pregnant. I’ve been on the pill since university.’

‘But accidents still happen and, if I can avoid it, I will not have any child of mine growing up with divided parents.’

Rosy sighed. ‘You’re just a little paranoid because of your background. Nobody knows if they’ve got for ever together. One of us could drop dead next year.’

‘Madonna mia...I seriously hope not,’ Alessio incised with amusement.

‘Or, eventually, one of us could decide they can’t stand the other...who knows? Nobody knows. That’s the point. Thereareno guarantees,’ she countered.

‘Go to sleep,piccola volpe. It will all look much less intimidating in the morning.’

\* \* \*

Rosy wakened at the crack of dawn and for the first time felt rested and more like herself. The royal wedding and all the changes and the surprises dealt by Alessio had taken more out of her than she had realised. She crept out of bed, careful not to wake Alessio. Black hair dark against the pale pillow, ridiculously long lashes lying against his cheekbones, he looked younger, less guarded, relaxed. But still utterly gorgeous

with that classic bone structure and perfect physique.

Freshening up, she put on shorts and a top and left the room, only to find lights still burning everywhere, and she frowned as she went round switching them off. Alessio wasn't used to being without staff and she supposed that that was why the ordinary tasks of life could irritate him when he saw her doing them. But Rosy, cheerfully clearing the dining room and returning the kitchen to its former spick and span status, was in her element. She liked jobs completed, preferred order in her surroundings and could only relax once that order was restored.

She brought in the basket of pastries and other perishables from the porch and packed it away before deciding to enjoy an early morning walk in the sunshine. The sky was a blissful blue without a cloud in sight but the tree canopy kept the temperature cool. She reached the stream, which was still quite flooded from the storm, and that was when she heard a cry. An animal cry? She wasn't sure and she frowned, scanning the banks, and then the island of flotsam that the storm had sent down the mountain. A tangle of broken branches nudged the bank and there was something made of cloth in it, something...moving.

It was the work of a moment to kick off her shoes on the bank and she was about to step into the water when a voice hailed her from the opposite bank.

‘Don't go into the water! It's slippery and dangerous, Your Highness.’

Startled, she glanced up and saw one of the palace protection team and then the little cry came again. ‘There's something in that sack... I think,’ she said, flinching only for a second as the cold water froze her bare toes.

There was a splash and she glanced up in dismay as the security guard jumped down into the water fully clothed to stop her in her headlong flight to take care of the matter. ‘Oh, I'm so sorry...now you've got your shoes wet,’ she groaned, guilty that

she had been stubborn and had not foreseen that he would see it as his job to go into the water for her.

He waded across the stream towards her, holding the dripping sack. As he shook it open on the bank, a snuffly little black and white spotty snout emerged.

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‘My goodness, it’s a puppy...’ Sticking her feet back into her shoes, Rosy knelt down on the bank and carefully lifted the little animal that had crept out of the sack, shivering and dripping.

‘The rest of the litter weren’t so lucky,’ her companion told her with regret. ‘I’ll see that they’re buried.’

Realising that the pups had been tossed in the stream to drown, Rosy flinched, but it was a fact of life that such things still happened to unwanted puppies. She held the quivering puppy against her.

‘This river runs for miles. We’ll never trace where they came from.’

‘I’ll take her back to the house, warm her up,’ Rosy said with determination. ‘And I’m sorry you’ve got all wet just doing your job and looking after me.’

‘I’m off duty now anyway, Your Highness. I’m heading back straight to bed.’

She thanked him again and hurried back to the cabin to grab a towel and strive to warm up the little animal. She was in the midst of that exercise when Alessio joined her.

‘Who’s this?’ he asked, kneeling down beside her.

‘I’m going to call her Clover and we’re keeping her.’ She took a deep breath and rushed into explaining about the stream and the sack, tears stinging her eyes as she mentioned those who had not survived.

‘Why Clover?’

‘Lucky four-leafed clover,’ she said chokily.

‘I’ll call a vet to take a look at her. She’s not a newborn, so it was particularly cruel to try and get rid of them like that,’ he breathed, vaulting back upright as she cuddled the puppy to use his phone. ‘But unfortunately, people either don’t want or can’t afford to pay the vet fees.’

Clover snuffled over to the water in a saucer on the floor and promptly fell in it while Rosy hovered over her.

‘Did you have any pets when you were growing up?’

‘No, my mother wouldn’t have any animals in the palace and my grandmother was allergic to pet fur, so it’s been many years since there’s been a royal pet.’

‘We couldn’t have one because my father didn’t like them and then Vittoria and Patrick were always working, so it would’ve been difficult.’

Alessio was on the phone talking and Rosy coaxed the pup to drink the water, wondering what on earth would be safe to feed it. Deciding to wait for the vet’s advice, because Alessio appeared to be having a great chat with the person, she busied herself instead making breakfast. The coffee from the machine was a delight and she bit into a fresh pastry with pleasure. As soon as Alessio completed the call, he had to answer another and she nudged a coffee mug into his hand and he smiled, taking a seat at the table and stretching out his long denim-clad legs. Then his smile vanished and he frowned darkly.

‘Once the vet has passed the puppy for travel, we’ll be leaving. There are drones flying over the cove and a boat out in the bay so we won’t get any peace. It was too



much to hope that everyone involved in the work yesterday would keep quiet about our location,' Alessio commented. 'On the other hand, the necessary work can be continued as soon as we leave and we can return for a weekend when all this fuss has died down.'

'I'll be sad to leave,' Rosy confided. 'I just hope we can bring Clover with us.'

'If we can't, the vet will look after her until we return,' Alessio pointed out.

'You'll have to replace the shoes the security guy was wearing when he jumped into the stream,' she warned him. 'I was planning to do it myself and he only went in to stop me from doing it. I'll be more careful in future.'

'I'm glad to hear it. You've got a headstrong streak.'

'And you have an extravagant streak,' Rosy was quick to say. 'You left all the lights on when you went to bed!'

His clear green eyes danced with appreciation at the reproof. 'Duly noted, piccola moglie.'

'I do sound like a nag, don't I?' she said in embarrassment.

'No, you don't. You sound like someone who regularly forgets who I am and what that means in this country. It's good for me to have an equal shooting me down. It's a breath of fresh air in my world.'

The vet arrived, a tall, shapely woman in her thirties, utterly charmed by Alessio and fascinated by the sight of Rosy making her coffee. Clover was thoroughly examined and identified as a crossbreed with the long floppy ears and rough speckled coat of a Spinone and, probably, some other hunting breed. However, she wasn't healthy

enough for travel and would have to remain under veterinary supervision. The vet had brought puppy food and a pet carrier box with her and Clover ate like a champion before subsiding into a doze on Rosy's lap.

'She's landed on her feet here,' the vet joked as she gathered her belongings to leave and Alessio followed her with Clover secured in the carrier box.

Sad that she had had to part with her new pet almost as soon as she had found her, Rosy went upstairs to start packing, dragging out cases and sighing as she piled stuff on the bed.

'Dress up for the airport,' Alessio warned her. 'There'll be cameras there to record our first public appearance since the wedding.'

\* \* \*

The crush at the airport and the amount of security, including police, that shepherded them from their car indoors unnerved Rosy. Her spine was rigid while Alessio maintained a light hand at her back to keep her moving. Cameras flashed and the air was thick with shouted questions. She had never in her life felt quite so much on public show and ensuring that nothing other than a polite smile crossed her face was a distinct challenge. Boarding the opulent private jet was a relief and when it shot into the sky, the relief was even stronger.

‘Is it always like that?’ she asked, lying back in her reclining seat with a pile of new magazines beside her and a long, cold drink clasped in her weak hand.

‘Yes, that’s our norm,’ Alessio confirmed. ‘Eventually you just switch off and think nothing of it.’

Rosy was leafing through the magazines only to immediately pause when she saw Graziana’s beautiful face obscuring half the front page. Without hesitation, she went straight to that article, given, she noted, when Graziana was in New York. Reading it made her heart sink and her teeth grind. It was sugary sweet right down to the number of times the Princess of Eboltz had to pause to dry her tears and sip her water. Overwhelmed by the pressure of the royal wedding and insecure about the bridegroom’s commitment to her, Graziana explained, she had simply panicked and run away with a ‘good friend’ on her protection team, who had ‘insisted’ on marrying her before they took that ‘unwise’ step. She made herself sound like a little girl without agency of her own and only discreetly mentioned her hope of being granted an annulment of her marriage.

Drawing in a deep breath, Rosy tossed the magazine into Alessio's lap. 'I've already read it,' he admitted, setting the magazine on the seat next him. 'Our PR team is very efficient.'

'She threw you under the bus!' Rosy proclaimed. 'She's hinting that you and I had something going on before she ran off!'

Alessio shrugged a broad shoulder with a maddening air of nonchalance. 'That was to be expected.'

'Expected?' Rosy erupted angrily.

'She's only inferring what others have been too delicate to comment on,' Alessio reasoned with outrageous cool. 'The suggestion that we were carrying on some illicit affair during my engagement to her—'

Rosy was so vexed by that news that she jerked upright in her recliner and pressed it down, her blue eyes shaded violet with resentment. 'How dare she?' she seethed furiously. 'How dare anyone think that about us?'

Alessio rested glittering green eyes on her, his surprise at her attitude unhidden. 'But surely you realised that people would think that.'

'No, I didn't,' Rosy admitted grittily.

'It makes more sense that prior to the wedding you and I had, at the very least, an attraction to each other and at worst were involved in an affair.'

'But it trashes my reputation!' Rosy interrupted angrily. 'I wouldn't have got involved with a man on the brink of marrying another woman.'

‘What does it matter what other people think, Rosy?’ Alessio parried with rich cynicism. ‘The great majority were simply happy that when Graziana fled, you and I were able to step in and still deliver the wedding and that elusive promise of happy ever after.’

Rosy pursed her lips and said nothing because she was unwilling to say anything more. She had no control over Graziana, any more than he had, and no way of silencing gossiping tongues. So, her reputation had been destroyed, but what was a reputation as such in this day and age, she reasoned with herself, striving to cool down.

‘Let it go,’ Alessio urged with assurance. ‘Graziana will do and say whatever she feels she has to in an effort to redeem her public image and since, mercifully, I am not the guy who had to marry her, I intend to ignore her. Her father has cut her off from her trust fund and she is desperate to reclaim his approval by any means within her power. I would imagine that as soon as that annulment is granted, Graziana will marry some important power broker to please her father.’

Thinking about all that, Rosy relaxed back into her seat and set the magazines aside, lest they contain any further interviews with the Princess of Eboltz, guaranteed to boil her blood through her veins. It was past time she wised up, a little voice warned her at the back of her mind. Possibly, she was getting too big for her boots. She was the wife Alessio had bought with cold, hard cash. What axe did she have to grind with such a background to their royal marriage? The fact that that money had gone to her family, rather than her personally, was not relevant. She needed to remember that she was a humble art restorer and not a genuine wife. She couldn’t do anything about the reality that some would believe that she had been sleeping with Alessio while he was engaged.

Life was tough that way, giving with one hand, taking with the other. Would she even want to turn the clock fully back? Return to her old life? Never ever have been a

woman whom Alessio Maretti kissed? A little zing scorched through her pelvis as she looked at her husband, the Prince, rejoiced in that perfect profile of his, the fall of his tousled black hair as he worked at his laptop and chatted in Spanish on the phone. No, she fancied the socks off him, she admitted to herself. No, she didn't wish to go back to her single past.

But was it only that sexual chemistry that drew her to Alessio? She didn't want to fall in love with him. There was no love in a marriage of convenience. This was supposed to be a practical partnership in which both parties benefited from an exchange of mutual needs. Liking, respect and consideration were the foundation of that kind of bond and she believed that they had already achieved that happy balance, so she needed to be less temperamental and more accepting of their differences.

Certainly, she was seeing, if not quite accepting, their differences that afternoon when the SUV that had picked them up in Spain wafted them through a wonderful, tall black wrought-iron gateway and on to a thickly wooded estate. El Palacio, it was called, the former home of Alessio's mother, and it had come to him by inheritance.

'Once, I planned to sell it. My mother had no fondness for it and neglected it and by the time it came to me, it required extensive restoration. I only use it when I'm here on diplomatic visits or in need of a relaxing break, but, as I soon discovered, it has a remarkable charm all of its own,' he advanced as the ancient rambling building came into view above them and the car continued up the steep lane. 'It started out as a convent and changed into being a medieval home, but it was most altered in the eighteenth century when the daughter here married a very rich Portuguese duke. It's a Spanish house but it carries an unmistakeable Portuguese flavour. It's open to the public for most of the year.'

Rosy tried to relax her shoulders as the car came to a halt in a paved courtyard. 'That's good.'

In the fierce heat of the sun, she accompanied him up the steps under the shaded portico and on into a simply vast hall, with lines of marble columns marching ahead of them to frame a twin stone staircase at the rear. Before them stood a uniformed rank of household staff awaiting their arrival.

‘The duke was apparently inspired by a Roman villa that had recently been unearthed in the grounds,’ Alessio quipped as they moved forward into the blessed cool.

Introductions followed but Rosy missed most names after Jorge, the household steward, made himself known. ‘The number of staff tells me that we will be waited on hand and foot while we’re here,’ she murmured half under her breath as they mounted the stairs in Jorge’s stately wake. The inside walls of the staircase were lined with blue and white tiled medieval scenes.

‘This house runs like a top-flight hotel,’ Alessio agreed with amusement. ‘It’s the least you deserve after that experience at the cabin.’

‘No, that ended up being fun. I wouldn’t change that for the world.’

‘And you rescued Clover.’

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‘No, strictly speaking, Giuseppe rescued her.’

‘But he wouldn’t have noticed the sack had it not been for you,’ Alessio corrected as they reached the landing, which was also an upper gallery exposed to the elements on one side. ‘To keep the house cool,’ he added.

Rosy surged over to the gallery wall to look across at the other wing of the house and then down. ‘Is that a medieval cloister?’ she asked in wonderment.

‘Yes, the cloisters and the chapel from the convent were preserved, although the duke’s piety ensured that the chapel was appropriately embellished.’ He walked her on down the gallery where Jorge awaited them, clearly keen to throw open the very large and heavily carved double doors at the foot.

‘We will sleep in splendour tonight,’ Alessio murmured teasingly.

And she discovered that he had not been joking. A giant carved four-poster bed sat on a dais in a chained-off alcove. ‘Gosh, we’re going to have our own state bed,’ Rosy remarked. ‘I hope the mattress has been renewed since the duke’s days here.’

Two maids were already busily occupied unpacking their luggage in a big dressing room furnished with wall-to-wall closets.

‘Have we got a bathroom?’ Rosy whispered anxiously to Alessio.

He laughed, humour dancing in his glorious green eyes. ‘Yes, we have a plethora, installed before architectural heritage prevented such alterations. Some bedrooms



were sacrificed, giving us all the modern necessities, but, as there were so many bedrooms, they aren't missed. Jorge will serve us tea in the cloisters and then we will explore to our hearts' content.'

'Let me change into something more comfortable first,' she urged, nipping into the dressing room to grab shorts and a top and a pair of casual sandals.

'Will you share the bathroom?' Alessio enquired.

Rosy coloured. 'Of course,' she conceded, wondering when the concept of being truly married would sink in so that she was not self-conscious about such unimportant things.

Furthermore, Alessio's was a helpful presence when he unzipped her out of the formal, neat-fitting dress she wore but he was undressing himself as well and that was distracting even in a huge bathroom with both of them stationed at opposite sides.

'You look incredible,' Alessio husked as she stepped free of the dress, clad only in wispy peach-coloured undies, her slim, curvy body stilling beneath his intense scrutiny.

Rosie was convinced that she was reddening like a traffic light from top to toe as he studied her. Her breasts swelled in the cups of her lacy bra and she instinctively pulled her stomach in as a hot liquid feeling pooled at the very centre of her body. Etched in her mind's eye, even as she turned circumspectly away, was a shirtless Alessio, his bronzed torso and tattoos and rippling muscles leading down into long, strong legs. In haste, she dressed, wanting him, not wanting him, still afraid of feeling too much for him while all the time wondering if Alessio had ever been in love.

'I'm serious. You look amazing,' Alessio husked, long fingers touching her shoulder to turn her round again, potent green eyes laser-beam sharp focused on her and

smouldering hot in temperature. 'That shower is big enough for both of us.'

Rosy tensed and reached for her shorts instead, for she wasn't quite up to the stage where she might consider stepping stark naked into a shower with Alessio and she didn't know if she would ever be. That level of intimacy stretched way beyond even her imagination. Flushed and taut, she zipped her shorts and pulled on her top, saying merely, 'Jorge has refreshments waiting for us.'

'This is still our honeymoon,' Alessio chided softly, and his hand slid down to enclose hers, turning her back to him again.

'Alessio...' she began anxiously.

His other hand framed her cheekbone and his erotic mouth claimed hers, teasing and parting and delving with only the tip of his tongue until a shudder ran through her, igniting a burst of heat deep down inside her, ensuring that her legs wobbled. He ran his lips down the slope of her neck, pausing to nip and tease and she shivered again. She fell back from him in a sensual daze of tense anticipation as his dark head lifted. He gave her a slow-burning smile and reminded her that Jorge was waiting for them downstairs.

Suspecting that had been one-upmanship on display by a more skilled player than she was herself, she walked slowly down to the charming sunlit cloister where Jorge awaited with a prettily decorated table and a choice of tea or coffee and a selection of sweet treats. She rested back in her comfortable seat and waited for Alessio to reappear.

She was nervous of having sex for the first time; she knew that that was the real problem. She didn't want to be a disappointment. She didn't want to come over all shy and unsure and embarrass herself. She didn't want to think or behave as though the act of sex would actually be important to him. After all, she assumed it wouldn't

be to a guy who had once figured in the media as an irrepressible Casanova. Consummating their marriage might well be the only way she prevented Graziana from sneaking back in as a marriage candidate again. How was she to know otherwise when Alessio already seemed to have forgiven his ex and hadn't uttered a single critical word about that interview she had given?

Sipping her favourite Earl Grey tea, she pulled out her phone and called her sister. She hadn't spoken to Vittoria since the wedding, had only contrived to send her a couple of texts. Her sister burst straight into excitable speech, complaining bitterly about Graziana's interview and the implied slur laid on Rosy's behaviour. Firming her slight shoulders, Rosy brushed off the sting of her sister's feelings on that topic and brought Vittoria up to date on the cabin, the Spanish house and Clover. But, of course, what her sister really wanted to know was how Alessio was treating her.

'I've got no complaints whatsoever,' Rosy framed stiltedly because Alessio was currently striding down the gallery to join her. 'It's been really good...look, I have to go for now.'

'Vittoria,' she explained. 'She's got herself in a bit of a temper over Graziana's interview.'

'Yes, I've dealt with that,' Alessio startled her by claiming. 'There will be a statement made by the palace that I first met you on the day you were knocked off your bike and that it was only after Graziana's departure that we first got to know each other. I was remiss in not immediately understanding your feelings on the matter. In any case, why should we support Graziana in her attempt to excuse herself by smearing us with a lie?'

Rosy was entirely thrown by that succinct declaration on her behalf. She was finally receiving the support she had unconsciously expected from him and had been disappointed not to receive. Bereft of breath, Rosy stared back at him. His change of

heart came as a huge relief. 'That's what I thought. Thank you for that. I was annoyed by it,' she muttered unsteadily, unprepared to admit as yet that she had been more hurt than angered.

'You don't need to thank me for what I should've seen instantly. You're my wife and you should always be able to rely on me to defend and protect you. I've grown more cynical over the years and I won't always see matters in quite the same light as you do,' Alessio warned her tautly. 'But neither of us deserve the rumours that Graziana is happy to use against us. I, after all, was the fool who has not been with a woman since the week of our engagement last year.'

Rosy was so disconcerted by that unexpected revelation that she said doubtingly, 'Even though you and sheweren't... Are you serious?'

'I believed it would be disrespectful for me to seek solace with anyone else. No matter how discreet I would've tried to be, there was too big a chance of any fling ending up splashed across the tabloids,' he breathed tautly. 'When I realised she'd been involved in an affair throughout, you can imagine how I felt.'

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‘Proud that you had more loyalty and respect for her than she had for you?’ Rosy queried. ‘There really is no excuse for what she did or how she’s behaving now, trying to pose as the innocent party.’

An almost luminescent glow had lit Alessio’s jewelled eyes as he looked at her and listened to her. ‘You’re on my side,’ he said in apparent wonderment.

‘Of course, I am...’ Rosy frowned. ‘You’re my husband and you’ve defended me, so naturally I see the situation from your point of view. Sit down. Do you want tea or coffee?’

‘Not right now.’ Alessio threw back his dark head and suddenly laughed with wicked amusement before his hand closed over hers to almost lift her out of her seat to stand before him. ‘Right now, *piccola volpe*, I want my wife...and I want her more in this moment than I have ever wanted a woman before!’

## CHAPTER EIGHT

‘It’s the middle of the day!’ Rosy gasped as Alessio urged her back upstairs by a narrow staircase she had not even realised acted as a shortcut.

‘No, symbolically speaking, it’s the first day of our marriage...as it should’ve been,’ Alessio countered levelly. ‘We didn’t have this understanding then but now we do.’

‘What understanding?’ she queried as she stumbled in the entrance to their bedroom and he swept her off her feet.

‘You are here for me and I am here for you. Not to put too fine a point on it, I’ve been waiting to hear that all my life,’ Alessio spelt out in a raw undertone as he dropped her down on the bed and then went to work on the zip of her shorts. ‘Someone who is with me and only me, even if she doesn’t always agree with me, even if she has doubts.’

‘That’s a pretty tall order, Alessio.’

‘But one that you’re more than able to meet,’ he told her, discarding her shorts on the floor and embarking on her top.

‘Even if I’m not quite up to burning the sheets off the bed?’ Rosy pressed a little desperately, her voice strangling in her dry throat at his haste.

Alessio looked down at her and laughed. ‘What are you trying to say?’

‘I haven’t had sex before,’ she admitted in a driven undertone. ‘And no, I don’t want to talk about it.’

Alessio dealt her a stunned appraisal that fully conveyed his astonishment and whipped his hands off her. ‘I appreciate you telling me beforehand,’ he breathed tautly. ‘I am so sorry that I didn’t even consider that possibility. I thought you were simply shy.’

Rosy sat up and hugged her knees in the centre of the bed. ‘It’s okay. Don’t make a big deal of it.’

Alessio vaulted off the bed. ‘I need a shower,’ he told her, disconcerting her because she knew he had showered before he even came downstairs.

‘A cold one,’ he specified, interpreting her look of bewilderment.

Rosy sat frozen on the bed and then regained her wits. She slid off the bed, removed her remaining garments and scrambled back in again. Alessio returned to her, hair still damp and tousled and, if anything, even more breathtakingly gorgeous. A line divided his ebony brows as he looked at her. 'I forgot to kiss you,' he husked, mounting the steps to the bed to come down beside her. 'Stupid oversight. Write it off as an excess of enthusiasm.'

'I will,' she said breathlessly, his firm hard mouth ravishing hers with the kind of intensity she had only met before in him. As though nothing mattered but that particular moment, as though he would pour all of himself and everything he was into the endeavour. It unleashed a flock of butterflies in her tummy and made her heart race so fast it pounded at the base of her throat.

'It's like unwrapping a present,' Alessio growled as he wrestled her free of the sheet and curved possessive hands over the pouting thrust of her breasts, his thumbs teasing at her swollen nipples.

Her spine arched, delight and anticipation snapping together in a wondrous connection. Glittering green eyes, luminous as jewels in sunlight, gazed down at her searchingly. 'Are you quite sure about this? I can wait—'

'I wouldn't be in this bed if I wasn't sure,' Rosy declared.

And in the end the truth wasn't what she had once assumed it would be in any way. It wasn't because they were married. It wasn't because she had some silly thought of ensuring that the marriage was fully consummated. No, her motivation was much more basic in nature. She wanted him, she wanted him more than she had ever believed she could want any man and she craved that closer physical bond.

He caught a ripe pink peak in his mouth and laved it with his tongue and her hips squirmed, red-hot reactions snapping through her lower body and bringing it alive.

She felt the surge of damp between her thighs and instinctively rubbed against a hair-roughened thigh to ease the desire he was stoking. He settled her back against the pillows and worked his way down her slender length, kissing, nibbling, touching gently, exploring until all of her skin surface felt as sensitive as if she were perched on a knife edge of expectation. She could already feel the surge of quivering heat building in her pelvis and tightening every muscle.

He slid her thighs apart and concentrated on the most sensitive place of all. Her hips jerked up and her lips parted on a moan, pleasure darting through her in shocking waves. Her fingers speared into his black hair and lodged there, tugging as her hips exercised a rhythm of their own and the growing tightening inside her became almost unbearable. And when that sexual tension broke, her climax roared through her like fireworks shot off inside her. Her whole body jolted and she cried out as the blissful waves of release crashed across her and she slumped.

‘That was even better than the cave,’ she mumbled in a helpless compliment.

And Alessio lifted his head and gazed down at her with unholy amusement. ‘Are you planning to rate me now?’

‘Eleven out of ten. I’m impressed to death. You were worth waiting for,’ she told him shyly. ‘And I only waited because I was convinced that the right guy would eventually show up.’

‘And you think I’m the right guy?’ Alessio asked.



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Her blue eyes shimmered. 'I hope so but you're definitely the hottest contender. I've never wanted anyone as much as I wanted you.'

'Nobody would ever have suspected that on our actual wedding night when you called me a stranger,' he reminded her.

'I've got to know you since then and I've liked what I've learned about you. I've moved on...as have you,' she pointed out as he pulled her close and planted a kiss on her lips that turned into a more explosive kiss than she had expected. She wrapped her arms round him as if he were the only stable place in a shifting world. And now, she finally felt free to touch him, to work her fingers through his luxuriant hair, run her hands across his wide muscular shoulders and his smooth back and feather down his lean sides.

As he quivered, she laughed. 'Gosh, you're ticklish!'

He rolled over, gripping her with a sexy growl that curled her toes, and ravaged her parted lips with a slow, erotic intensity, and that curl in her lower body spread wings and fluttered with renewed arousal. He was a fabulous kisser. But when Alessio pinned her under him and she felt his erection hard as an iron bar against her, it sent wild thrills of excitement through her. With other men that awareness of her partner's arousal had turned her off because she had known that she had no plans to go further. With Alessio, however, it turned her on so hard and fast it made her head spin.

He spread her out like a starfish and teased and toyed with every sensitive inch of her squirming body and when the pleasure began to surge up again, only then did he move over her. As he eased into her with a care she could feel, she gasped, 'I'm not

breakable!’

‘Shush. I’m trying to make this as painless as possible for you,’ Alessio ground out thickly. ‘We can swing from the chandeliers next week.’

Even in the tense grip of more pleasure than she had ever dreamt of experiencing, Rosy grinned up at him, enchanted by that promise. He tipped her back and shifted his lithe hips, guiding himself into her slick opening. She felt him, strong, forceful, alien and the strange satisfaction of it, the feeling of rightness, made her close her eyes and seek to lose herself in that very private moment. He pushed and a sting of discomfort pulled a gasp from her and he stilled.

In frustration, Rosy angled her hips up to him and gravity sank him deeper until the feat of possession had been achieved and she smiled, revelling in that sense of fullness, of friction as he lifted and began to move. And then, the warm nucleus of liquid fire coiled up inside her started to heat up and the excitement grew and finally burst free. All of a sudden she couldn’t stop her own body from rearing up to join with his. The intensity of it all engulfed her and she discovered that it drove her on.

‘I want you so much. I’ve craved this from the moment I met you,’ Alessio groaned, thrusting into her welcoming body with lethal power, igniting little hotspots of response all over her, her body leaping and buzzing with renewed energy.

Response to his intensity bloomed with their every movement. Suddenly she was on a runaway train heading towards the ultimate objective, her body out of her control, flaming and burning with hunger. She was inflamed by the knowledge that Alessio had always hungered for her. That raised her way above the level of being a replacement bride and she loved that idea. He pushed her thighs back even further and rose over her like a conquering god intent on domination, and her excitement rose accordingly, her heart hammering, her pulses racing as she surged to the peak and another orgasm swept her off in its tight grip.

Alessio shuddered and growled his satisfaction above her.

‘You are so hot,’ he breathed jerkily in her ear while he flattened her with his weight.

Rosy was floating, quite unconcerned by such bodily necessities as having to breathe. ‘Only to you.’

‘Absolutely to me,’ Alessio growled, dropping a kiss on her brow, his arms tightening round her as he rolled over to release her from his weight. ‘My bride, my lover...when I first noticed you on your bike months ago and I realised you must work at the palace, I wouldn’t let myself find out who you were and what you did. All I had seen then was your incredible legs and behind and then, because of the accident, I saw your face and your hair and I was transfixed.’

‘But you were engaged,’ she reminded him doggedly. ‘You weren’t about to do anything about it.’

‘Do you judge me for that?’ Angry green eyes assailed her sleepy ones.

‘No, but it’s not something I can forget,’ she muttered drowsily.

Alessio climbed out of the bed once she was asleep. He wondered how he had fared. Rosy had been his first and, if he had anything to do with it, his only virgin. She had enjoyed herself, hadn’t she? But still it worried him that his wife was so inexperienced. At some stage, might she be likely to be curious about what sex would be like with someone else? He would talk to her about that, he decided. But would it be wise to put such an idea in her head? She wasn’t a cheater; she wasn’t disloyal. She had even listened to him partially excusing Graziana’s indefensible behaviour without striking him dead. Fortunately, his intelligence had kicked in. Rather belatedly, he had appreciated that his wife had first call on his allegiance and that Graziana was now pretty much the enemy, particularly if she intended to take any

more shots in the direction of his wife.

As he showered, he couldn't get Rosy out of his thoughts. Her passion, her fearless honesty, her tenderness with that dog, her unquestioning loyalty and support. He had played a blinder exchanging Graziana's cold-fish personality for a woman who burned with moral strength and attraction. And if he had anything to do with it, she would burn exclusively for him.

\* \* \*

Late the following morning, after a lengthy breakfast, Alessio took Rosy outside to show her the extensive grounds. They strolled through shaded walks in the woods behind the ancient house, laid out in the eighteenth century to resemble the then fashionable English country garden. When they reached the waterfall, built to resemble a natural one in a giant stone-edged pond but somewhat undermined by the provision of a shell grotto and shrine nearby, Rosy kicked off her shoes and waded into the crystal-clear basin to cool her hot feet.

'Oh, that's blissful,' she moaned, perching on the edge of a stone outcrop and dipping her toes back into the water.

Alessio copied her because for the first time in recent memory he too had chosen to dress down in shorts. He had become accustomed, he conceded, to the company of constantly groomed and polished women, who would not have yielded an inch in their formal dress code even in a hurricane. Once again, Rosy was a breath of fresh air and, taking in her playful smile, he pulled his phone out and keyed in an agreed code with their protection team. Now they had total privacy.

Shedding his sandals, he joined her in the shallow basin, moving forward to nudge her legs apart and step between them and bend down to claim her ripe, pink lips eagerly with his, prying them apart to delve deep into the moist interior of her mouth.

And that fast, Rosy's bones and muscles liquefied beneath the heated surge of molten honey rising in her pelvis. It was as if he had pushed a button and hunger gripped her instantaneously.

Her brain couldn't quite handle that sudden change in her own behaviour. She panicked and all she could think about as he tugged off her shorts and knickers and tossed them onto the dry ground was that they would be seen and that he couldn't be thinking of what he was doing and where they were. 'Alessio...we could be seen. Gardeners...oh, my word, your protection team!'

'All elsewhere. We are, in a very rare event, alone,totallyalone,' he stressed huskily as he whipped off her top and went for the catch on her bra. 'It is our honeymoon, after all. Let's be young and reckless just this one time.'

'Having sex in daylight was a big enough stretch for me!' Rosy protested but he was smiling that wickedly sexy smile down at her and his glorious green eyes were gleaming and vibrant. Her own body was already humming beneath the exploration of his skilled hands. She fell, abruptly, silent. 'I just can't say no to you right now,' she whispered guiltily.

'And shouldn't we rejoice in that?' Alessio chided as he stripped off in front of her, revealing his lithe, lean, bronzed length already primed for action.

Rosy poked his bare chest with a forefinger. 'And you absolutely swear that nobody's going to see us?' she checked.

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‘I wouldn’t take that risk with you.’ Alessio nibbled at that spot below her ear in that place that drove her temperature high while he employed his palms and his fingertips to stoke her desire until she was wriggling off her rocky perch in her need to get closer. Only then did he hoist her up into his arms and then slowly bring her down, jostling her into place until he stretched her slick sheath with his urgent fullness. The sensation was overwhelming.

Indeed, she was only starting to adjust to his effortlessly arousing movements when he stepped beneath the waterfall and she let out a startled shriek. ‘You—!’

His mouth clamped over hers for a split second, silencing her objections. Water streamed down over them but the sensations at her hot core drove them out of mind. Arms linked round his neck, she transformed into less the seduced and more of a partner, pushing down on him, moaning with raw excitement as the increasing pressure in her pelvis pushed her onward and upward. And then she was flying high and soaring in ecstasy and Alessio was stifling her cries with his lips on hers.

She sagged against him as they stepped out from below the water. ‘I’m never going to move again,’ she swore shakily.

‘You will. Jorge has a splendid lunch awaiting us at our next stop.’

In the act of gathering her clothes, Rosy fixed accusing blue eyes on him. ‘Did you plan this?’

Alessio laughed. ‘If I’d planned it, I would’ve had towels stashed in the grotto!’

And she acknowledged the truth of that admission as she clambered, damp, into her clothing again while also appreciating how much her own world view had changed within the space of twenty-four hours. As they walked on, she remarked on the fact that, on this occasion, Alessio had not employed extra contraception on their behalf.

‘We can afford to take that very slight risk now that I know you’re staying.’

‘I haven’t actually said that yet in a long-term sense,’ Rosy adjusted with care. ‘You take a lot for granted sometimes.’

His big hand tightened its hold on hers. ‘Losers rarely take all. I have confidence in us as a couple. I believe we’ll go the distance.’

‘I hope we do as well,’ she murmured quietly. ‘But I won’t be ready to have a child for a while. I’m only twenty-two.’

‘In comparison, I can’t wait,’ Alessio admitted candidly. ‘I want my own family. I love children. It’s important to me but I can accept that you’re not at that stage yet.’

She wondered if she was being selfish and scolded herself for the thought. They strolled through the peaceful canopied green lanes that criss-crossed the woods. By the time they arrived at a glade containing a very imposing but mossy statue of the Portuguese duke with one hand on a sword and the other on the head of a giant lion, Rosy was ready for a drink and something to eat. Food awaited them there in a cool box.

They settled down and ate at the circular stone table and benches in the shadow of the statue and her hair dried in the sunshine while they talked.

‘Have you ever been in love?’ she asked him.

Alessio looked both amused and thoughtful at that blunt question. 'One and a half times.'

'How can you be half in love?'

'Because I was fifteen and it was a crush. It came to nothing when I realised that she preferred girls to boys,' he told her lightly.

Rosy set down her wine glass. 'And the other time?' she prompted with greater curiosity.

His bright gaze hooded, the memory clearly not a good one. 'I was twenty, still a student. She was the daughter of one of our leading Sedovian families. I brought her back to the palace to a party she was desperate to attend and...' He hesitated, frowning.

'And?' she pressed uncomfortably, somehow feeling as though she was prying.

'She slept with my father,' Alessio told her very quietly. 'And tried to deny it but he boasted about it. He was a vain man, used to choosing whichever woman he wanted, and bedding her reassured him that he was still irresistible.'

Rosy had paled, disgust now clouding her troubled gaze. 'That's horrible. How could she?'

'Oh, that was easy. He was a king and, even though he was a married, much older man, that was all it took. Maybe she had a vision of him divorcing my mother and marrying her...who knows? Stop looking so tragic on my behalf, piccola volpe. It feels now like it happened a lifetime ago.'

'But how could your father betray you like that?' she muttered.



‘He had to share the public stage with his heir and he disliked anyone who took attention away from him. As I grew up, he began to see me as a rival.’

Rosy sighed. ‘And I thought I had it rough because my father barely noticed I was alive and had no interest in me.’

‘But don’t you see that your experience, like mine, will probably make us better parents when the time comes?’ Alessio countered calmly.

‘Perhaps, but this is the very first week of our marriage and we’re not talking about that as yet,’ she reminded him lightly. ‘I do understand though that you probably feel the pressure of having to try and provide an heir for the throne.’

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‘No, it’s not that. I genuinely want a child, a little being to love and cherish and the stability of feeling part of a family. I know it’s not usual for a man to admit that but some of us do feel that way.’

‘And how courageous to admit it,’ she murmured, sidling along the bench to seek his tempting mouth again for herself.

After a couple of glasses of wine, she was getting sleepy when they returned to the house and she decided to take a nap before dinner in the hope that it would waken her up for the evening.

Alessio promised he would wake her later and went off to do some work. She recalled the light in his gaze when he confessed that he simply wanted a child and his unashamed honesty had touched her. He was like water steadily dripping on stone, she warned herself squarely. Except that he had buckets of charisma and was sexy as all get out. If she wasn’t careful, she would find herself agreeing to have a child just to please him. Their relationship needed time and space to develop before they made such a major decision. But her own emotions were getting so tangled up with him and she had been naïve not to realise that that would happen.

The sex was amazing. Foolish of her not to appreciate that she could not get that close to Alessio without feelings becoming involved. Deeply involved, she acknowledged. She was falling head over heels in love with the man she had married. He was everything she had ever wanted in a man. Intelligent, loyal, kind, considerate, surprisingly sensitive. His troubled childhood might have damaged him but he had dealt with it, learned the lessons and moved on. Their marriage was no longer a fake. She was something more than a replacement bride now, she reflected with

satisfaction before she fell asleep.

It wasn't Alessio who wakened her, it was some internal alarm of her own because she opened her eyes, checked the time in dismay and surged straight into the bathroom to freshen up before dinner. They had skipped dinner the night before and rifled the fridges at long after midnight to feed themselves. This evening, she would do the whole formal thing, she decided, yanking out a long blue dress. Act like a princess for once, she thought ruefully, but, with Alessio around and his penchant for al fresco encounters, that was likely to be a challenge.

She smiled to herself then because his passionate streak of unpredictability thrilled her just as much as his sheer intensity. She reckoned there would be plenty of times they had to act as if they were much older and staid than they were, so it was probably good for both of them to go a little wild occasionally. Although she suspected that making love outdoors in a waterfall did not seem as shocking or daring to Alessio as it had seemed to her.

Dressing, she heard someone giggling and realised that either a member of staff was having fun or Alessio was entertaining, because the room he used as an office was directly below their bedroom. From the landing, she peered down at the gallery below but it was too awkward an angle to show her much. She caught a flash of scarlet just out of view and the sound of Alessio laughing. Returning to the bedroom, she dashed on some lipstick and mascara before cramming her feet into high heels, keen not to look like a wife who might embarrass him. Ready, she started down the staff staircase that acted as a shortcut to the gallery.

Emerging onto the gallery, she caught the merest flash of a gorgeous brunette in a scarlet dress walking into Alessio's office, talking volubly in what sounded like Spanish. A mane of long silky black hair worn loose, a figure-hugging dress with a low neck and towering heels—she was unlikely to be a business connection, she reasoned, stopping in the open doorway to look into the office. Alessio's back was

turned to her as the brunette flipped through images on the laptop in front of him while she talked very fast. She was so close to Alessio that her swishy hair was brushing his shoulders and as she bent over, her hands rested on his shoulders for balance. Annoyance flashed through Rosy like a match thrown on a hay bale and her blue eyes blazed.

‘Sorry if I’m late...you were supposed to wake me,’ she reminded Alessio.

At the sound of her voice, he swung round and stood up, dislodging the brunette, who backed off with a flirtatious smile and purred in Italian, ‘And who is this, Your Highness?’

Her familiarity with Alessio turned Rosy’s tummy over with a sick lurch. His smile in Rosy’s direction was distinctly tense.

‘Rosalia...allow me to introduce you to Lucia Garcia Perez, the tourist board’s manager for this area. El Palacio is to be the focus of a new advertising campaign in the spring. Lucia, allow me to introduce you to my wife, Rosalia.’

‘Yourwife?’ Lucia gasped, all wide dark eyes and parted lips. ‘You’ve got married? I had no idea.’

Tempted to ask what rock she had been hiding beneath to avoid the blanket European media coverage of Graziana’s defection and Rosy’s last-minute substitution as the bride, Rosy forced her lips into a polite smile. ‘Pleased to meet you,’ she said, extending her hand. ‘I’ve fallen in love with this place. Tell me about the campaign.’

‘There’s no reason for you to get involved in this,’ Alessio sliced in, having raised a staying hand as Rosy made to move towards the laptop he had been studying with the brunette. ‘Give me fifteen minutes and I’ll be done.’

‘I’ll ask Jorge to send in some refreshments,’ Rosy murmured coolly, returning to the doorway.

‘Thank you but there’s no need, Your Highness,’ Lucia interposed brightly, her dark eyes snapping with enjoyment as if she could sense Rosy’s concealed vexation. ‘Alessio will look after me. We’re old friends.’

With a non-committal nod of acceptance, Rosy departed, her spine stiffening as she heard the door close in her wake. She didn’t think he should be in that office alone with so forward a woman. Old friends indeed! She’d heard that expression before in an old sitcom and it should’ve been left there. Lucia had been touching him, all over him like a rash, fixing his cufflink, for goodness’ sake!

Quietly seething, Rosy went into the drawing room, where Jorge served her with a drink. It took almost half an hour for Alessio to join her. By then, he had changed into a dinner jacket and classy narrow black trousers to match her appearance and he looked arrestingly handsome. His strong jawline was slightly clenched, however, his lean dark face a little taut.

‘I didn’t hear your visitor leave,’ Rosy heard herself quip, even though she had not intended to make any reference to the gorgeous Spanish lady.

‘She’s always used the side entrance into the library,’ Alessio countered.

‘Old friends indeed.’

‘Don’t be passive aggressive about it. Just say what you’re dying to say.’

Rosy felt the heat of the colour flushing her face at his intonation. ‘I thought that she was far too familiar with you and that you should’ve told her to back off,’ she said quietly.

‘Madonna mia!’ Alessio bit out impatiently. ‘If it only takes the appearance of an old lover to make you throw a jealous fit, how will you ever cope with my misspent past?’

## CHAPTER NINE

The ghastliest silence fell. Into it, Jorge surged to pour Alessio an aperitif and offer her a second, which Rosy refused.

Stiff as a concrete post, Rosy tilted her chin. She hadn’t seen Alessio angry before, so it was a new experience, and he was angry with her, angry, tense and uncomfortable and that bothered her and, she discovered, wounded her. All of a sudden, she felt like the replacement bride again, guilty of crossing boundaries that she had had no right to cross. Jorge, evidently a good reader of the room, was already striving to usher them across the hall into the dining room and their first formal meal in the rambling house.

Rosy almost winced when she saw the polished table scattered with rose petals and crystals. It was the ultimate honeymoon dining experience with tiny heart-shaped savoury tarts on the plates awaiting them and she was quick to compliment Jorge on the beautiful and elegant setting.

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:42 am*

Listening to her gracious comments, Alessio breathed in deep and slow to calm his volatile temper. He was annoyed with himself and with Lucia, not with Rosy.

‘It’s not a matter of petty jealousy,’ Rosy murmured with quiet pride as soon as they were alone. ‘It’s a question of what’s appropriate and Lucia was touching you.’

‘No, she was not,’ Alessio contradicted curtly.

‘She was fiddling with your cufflink, her hands on your arms and your shoulders, her hair tossing round you,’ Rosy specified with pink cheeks. ‘Put yourself in my place. If a man was touching me in the same familiar way, would you ignore it? Would you be quite content to watch that happening in front of you?’

Alessio gritted his even white teeth hard enough to chip them because he knew that he would not be accepting in any way of such a display. He would not stand still for a second to watch another man touching his wife. His possessive streak ran deep and strong and her logical reaction infuriated him. ‘I’m not accustomed to discussing my private life with anyone,’ he admitted in a driven undertone. ‘I have been an independent operator for too long. But now, I have to appreciate that I can no longer have that autonomy when I have a wife.’

‘I understand that,’ Rosy murmured, the tension in her shoulders easing as she recognised that he had mastered his anger. ‘Your past, however—misspent or otherwise—is none of my business.’

‘Up to a point that is true, but not when it intrudes so blatantly into our marriage,’ Alessio retorted without hesitation. ‘I was embarrassed by Lucia’s visit and that made

me angry. I had to tell her that what we had would not be continuing.'

'She knew you were now married and I gather it was a longstanding relationship,' Rosy guessed.

'She was trying to save face when she pretended that she was unaware of your existence. I've not visited Spain since my engagement to Graziana. I didn't have a relationship with Lucia, merely a casual friends-with-benefits arrangement when I was here. She didn't want any publicity either because her family would have disapproved. In recent years I have been much more discreet about such matters than I once was,' Alessio explained tautly. 'Lucia suited me because she had no ambition to be splashed over the tabloids with me beside her.'

Embarrassed? She respected him for admitting that to her but could not help wishing that she had not seen the lovely Spaniard at all. It had only created dissension and left her feeling insecure because Lucia had proved to be one of those supermodel perfect beauties like all the predecessors Rosy had viewed in Alessio's company online. And those comparisons simply made Rosy feel soveryordinary with her red curls and diminutive height.

'So, if she knew you were now married, she was—'

'Fishing? Testing the water to see if I wished to continue...and naturally, I don't,' Alessio asserted. 'There will be no other women in my life while you are with me.' His brilliant crystalline green eyes assailed hers with a ruthless gleam and he toasted her with his wine glass. 'Where do you think I would get the energy from?'

And Rosy almost choked on her wine as she thought of the number of times they had had sex over the past thirty-six hours. 'I suppose we've been busy,' she framed. 'Like rabbits or whatever.'



Alessio flung back his head and laughed with rich amusement. 'I think they are more famous for producing little rabbits and we're trying not to do that!' he contradicted. 'I can talk to you about anything, and I've never had that before with a woman. It's a valuable advantage for both of us.'

And just like that, Rosy reflected in silent wonder, all the tension and the messy emotions drained away and she found herself smiling back at him, entranced by his breathtakingly handsome lean, dark face. Her heartbeat had kicked up pace, her tummy awash with butterflies, and she knew right then in that moment that it was too late to worry about falling in love with a husband who could still decide to eventually dispense with her as a wife. After all, her surge of pleasure and excitement was warning her that she had already fallen victim to his appeal.

\* \* \*

'I'm hardly going to see you after tomorrow.' Rosy sighed, her expression wry because there was no point regretting the reality of Alessio's busy life.

It was the last night of their honeymoon and in the morning, they would be returning to the palace in Severino, the capital of Sedovia. Their little idyll in Spain of total privacy and togetherness would be at an end. They would be plunged straight into the fuss and complexity of the royal coronation, due to be staged in another two weeks' time. There would be multiple meetings with all the many people involved, garment fittings and rehearsals. They would have to fight an often-rigid schedule to find time to be together and she felt guilty because she was already dreading those changes in spite of the fact that she now felt much more secure in her role as Alessio's wife and princess. Two weeks together had changed so much for them as a couple. She was now calmer and more confident in the awareness that Alessio liked her, respected her, understood her and, also...lusted madly after her.

'Why would you think that?' Alessio demanded, breaking off from a lingering and

leisurely exploration of her slender, curvy body to sit up and look at her in apparent disbelief.

‘Because that’s what it was like before the wedding. You didn’t have any time for me.’

‘Everything’s different between us now. Back then, I was still in shock from Graziana’s betrayal and I was also afraid that you might panic and retreat from all the demands and responsibility coming your way as a royal,’ Alessio admitted, thoroughly disconcerting her, for it had not once occurred to her that he might have feared such a development, although admittedly she had found the days running up to their royal wedding hugely stressful. ‘I couldn’t afford to take anything for granted until you actually married me. I worried about making the wrong move, about saying or doing anything that might upset you.’

Rosy nodded, secretly amused by that explanation. ‘So, I should’ve said, “Alessio I want to spend time with you”?’

‘And if I could’ve seduced you into bed, I would have been even keener, piccola volpe. But I know there would have been no chance of that now.’ A wicked glitter made Alessio’s eyes gleam like jewels in the lamplight as he stroked an expert fingertip across a tight, straining nipple with sensual intent. ‘I know for a fact that you’re not the kind of woman who’ll sleep with a stranger on her wedding night!’

‘But it didn’t take you long to change my mind, did it?’ she teased back, covering his wide mouth with her own, tipping him back against the pillows with a sensual assurance she could not have utilised just two short weeks before.

Right from the outset, she had realised that Alessio had set a newly discovered part of her nature free and it had empowered rather than diminished her. She revelled in the fact that Alessio couldn’t keep his hands off her because it was the same for her. On

that level, she conceded, they were equals. It was only when she put in the emotional attachment that she had developed for the man she had married that she felt a little foolish and lacking.

Once the passion had subsided, Alessio rested back with Rosy's limp length still in his arms. He was also in no hurry to return to the palace. He knew that he had allowed too many staff to organise his schedule for too long without question. He had seen it as his duty to the throne and had avoided demanding personal time of his own. There would have to be modifications, he acknowledged grimly, so that he had hours to spend with his very beautiful, very sexy wife.

Rosy made him ridiculously happy in some weird way. Somehow, and he had no idea how, she stopped him worrying, stressing and overworking. He was becoming conscious that he had been too agreeable a royal heir, far too focused on not following in his father's self-indulgent footsteps. Unfortunately, that guiding ambition had merely sent him to the other extreme in which he had allowed too many people to demand his time and his appearances. The result was that in the few years since his father's demise, he no longer had anything that could be described as off-duty time. And how could that truth possibly help to build the family life he had long hoped to achieve?

It certainly would not impress Rosy, who set high standards, refused to be rushed into anything and moved steadily at her own pace. Rosy was strong, but? There was no way that he would allow the royal staff to take over Rosy's schedule and try to guilt her into working endless hours and late nights for the myriad causes that sought palace support. Firmly resolved to immediately begin the changes that he saw were necessary to protect his wife, Alessio was already making plans.

\* \* \*

'Now, this is a question I keep meaning to ask you and forget to,' Alessio admitted

during their flight back to Sedovia. 'Is there any chance in the future that you might want to decide to search for your missing mother?'

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:42 am*

Dumbfounded by that enquiry coming at her out of the blue, Rosy frowned in bewilderment. ‘Definitely not. I spent twenty years living in the same house with the same family she left behind when I was a baby. At any time, she could’ve visited, phoned or written if she had ever been curious about me...and she never did and that tells me all I need to know,’ she confided calmly. ‘Wherever she went, she didn’t look back on abandoning me with regret. I’m just not interested now. Vittoria gave me photos of my mother taken during the eighteen months that she lived with my father and was able to satisfy my curiosity. I look a little like her.’

‘But what if she chooses to get in touch with you?’

‘Why on earth would she do that?’

‘Our marriage has been widely covered in the newspapers and an abandoned child who has become a queen may be a more alluring prospect,’ Alessio remarked with unhidden cynicism.

‘I would still not want any interaction...or the complications that could come with it. Is it awful to admit that I’m more excited by our coming reunion with Clover?’ she muttered uncomfortably. ‘Am I heartless?’

Alessio closed a hand round her clenched fingers. ‘Not at all. I admire your practicality and backbone. You can’t feel an attachment to a stranger who made it obvious that she was not attached to you.’

‘Even though I’m aware that there may have been extenuating circumstances?’ Rosy winced as she made that intervention. ‘I mean, maybe she was suffering postnatal

depression and was simply too ashamed when she recovered to check up on me. Possibly my father was abusive towards her as well. There could be a lot of stuff I don't know about her situation back then, so I've always tried not to be judgemental about it,' she confessed ruefully.

'I feel that in our circumstances,' he stressed, 'it may be wise to look into her disappearance in advance and discover, if we can, what did happen. Did she remarry and have more children? Are there other family members involved? She may not even still be alive...unhappily, that possibility has to be checked out. But it's up to you what you choose you do. May we seek further info...or not?'

Rosy swallowed hard at that fair enquiry. She saw his point, she more than saw his point because, as the Queen of Sedovia, she would be very visible, and it was his job to protect the monarchy. 'You can make enquiries if you think it's necessary, but I would prefer not to know the results...unless she has passed away. That, I would prefer to know,' she specified.

Although that was a partial lie she was giving him, she acknowledged inwardly. Her mind was already roaming through other various possibilities that had not occurred to her before. That she might have half-siblings? A living mother out there? Things she had never allowed herself to wonder about before because they had seemed pointless. Unsettled, she lay back in her leather recliner and closed her eyes, striving not to wonder.

Alessio's gaze rested on her delicate, taut profile and he suppressed a sigh. He had suspected that his question would upset her, and it had. But hopefully, he reasoned, it would be worth it in the end because he was less concerned about some silly scandal that might shadow the throne in the future and rather more concerned with protecting Rosy from the unexpected and the risk of distress. She had dealt bravely and compassionately with her mother's desertion, and he refused to let that issue come back to haunt her.

They had barely arrived at the palace and, indeed, were waiting in the echoing hall for the lift when a small, rather pompous man in a suit marched up to Rosy and planted a file in her hand. 'Your schedule this week, Your Highness. I thought we should take the first possible opportunity to go over it.'

'And this isn't the right opportunity, Antonio,' Alessio sliced in levelly. 'My wife has been travelling and she is now about to move into her new home. She must have time to settle in and choose her own interests from the large number available.'

Disconcerted by that interference, the man went into retreat while Alessio guided Rosy into the waiting lift. 'I could've done it,' she told him anxiously.

'I know you could but there's no necessity for you to leap straight in with both feet into an unfamiliar environment. I want you to take your time and decide which ventures you wish to support. I thought possibly...' he grinned at her as Clover surged out of the sitting room and the puppy hurled herself at Rosy's knees and she knelt down to deal with loads of puppy kisses and licks '...animal rescue. There are several associations to choose from, any of which would be delighted by your support. And possibly...er, children.'

'If that's viable when I've none of my own,' Rosy quibbled. 'Although I'm hopefully going to be an aunt again in a few months.'

Clover bundled in her arms like a wriggling parcel, Alessio proceeded to show her around his wing of the palace. It had everything, absolutely everything, she registered in pleasurable surprise. It was far larger than she had appreciated on her brief visit to change out of her wedding gown in that bedroom two weeks earlier. There was a gym, an entire room to be devoted solely to her wardrobe, their separate offices and Alessio confided that he had had a small kitchen installed while they were in Spain in case she took the notion to cook for him. The smile in his eyes told her that he was very much hoping she succumbed to that temptation.

‘You are a fabulous cook,’ he pointed out as they traipsed on through innumerable bedrooms and reception rooms.

‘So is the palace chef,’ she traded. ‘But I do enjoy cooking sometimes.’

‘And these will be our rooms.’ Alessio thrust wide a door into the vast crown prince’s suite. ‘Not just mine but yours as well. We will rewrite historical precedent and share.’

Rosy nodded, singing in her heart that he had thought that out for himself. She had only the haziest concept of his usual schedule, only a vague recollection that he was always coming back and going somewhere else for the fuss made of his returns was memorable for anyone on the palace staff. He was incredibly popular with employees working for him, which was why she had been startled when he had brushed off Antonio’s request because Antonio was one of his senior advisers and probably quite unaccustomed to such treatment. If Alessio wasn’t careful, he would make her unpopular because without a doubt any changes made would be laid at her door.

Over breakfast the next morning, Rosy listened at length to Alessio’s elaborate plans to divest them of long day schedules crammed with meetings and appearances and on her second cup of tea finally mustered the gumption to venture her own opinion. ‘Yes, but none of that is really practical just at the moment with the coronation so close,’ she remarked apologetically. ‘We’ll have to buckle down and just get on with it for the next couple of weeks and then you can begin making changes.’

Comprehension gripped Alessio like a vice. Possibly two heads being better than one was a more useful cliché than he had previously foreseen, he conceded grimly. He nodded. ‘Obviously. Possibly you could be free for Antonio’s meeting at some time today?’



Rosy read his air of frustration, quite understanding that Alessio had a new broom mentality, full of fire and vigour, but she was a little more realistic than he was because very little could be achieved overnight. 'Of course. We'll get through this stage bit by bit. It's just unlucky that there's only one of you,' she commented. 'When your father was at this stage, he had an adult son to stand in for him.'

Alessio laughed at that 'only one of you' and cracked a joke about the unlikelihood of his parents having ever produced a second child. His less than sunny mood had dissipated as he rose from the table and they parted to go separate ways. 'I'll see you tonight.'

But the heavy list of dinner parties leading up to the coronation meant that they didn't really see each other except in parting or across a room over the following ten days and Rosy was so exhausted when she fell into bed every evening, she didn't even stay awake long enough to notice Alessio's arrival. Most mornings she wakened to a mere dent in the pillow beside hers. She was much too busy to fret about his absence and quite saw why he had hoped to change things, even if he had picked the wrong time to try and do it. He was much more aware of such stuff than she was, she censured herself. This royal life had always been his and she hadn't really known what she had been talking about.

And then in the space of a moment, the day before the coronation, everything changed for Rosy when a member of the PR team brought her a printout from a website, titled Gold-Digger Scams Sedovian Royal Family!

Rosy was horrified as she scanned a disturbingly accurate financial estimate of her family's hotel misfortunes and her family's obvious prosperity since the wedding. White as milk, she read the entire lengthy report, which invited the Sedovian public to make up their own minds about how a 'commoner' like Rosalia had 'forced' herself on Alessio. Had she or her family used some secret blackmail to entrap the Crown Prince over some youthful indiscretion of his? Blatant lies followed in named

quotes of people that Rosy had never heard of, vilifying her reputation with men and money. It was all nasty, sordid stuff.

‘This website has already been taken down, Your Highness. The lawyers were able to enforce that under threat of a libel suit.’

‘But how many people must have seen it?’ Rosy gasped, upset beyond belief as she thought of her family hearing about such accusations, most especially when there was a tiny kernel of truth in the story.

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And that truth was that Alessio had bought his royal bride, like an apple off a supermarket tray. How had she ever contrived to forget that horrendous fact? How on earth had she managed to fall in love with her buyer? Those harsh facts suddenly made her feel cheap and unclean. An hour later, necessity having suffocated any chance of giving way to angry, wounded tears, Rosy emerged from a final fitting of her coronation robes and went straight to Alessio's official office on the ground floor to tell him about the website.

Having neglected to knock, she stopped dead on the threshold when she registered that her husband was in the middle of a meeting and every head turned to see her. 'Oh, I'll see you when you're finished,' she said lightly, forcing an apologetic smile onto her tense face and turning on her heel again.

Being forced to wait even longer to vent her feelings did nothing to cool down Rosy's mood. The more she reread that article, the angrier she became, even though a calming voice at the back of her head warned that it was a very bad idea to keep on heavy-duty dwelling on such a negative item. That was why it was unfortunate that it took Alessio quite a long time to finish his meeting and Rosy had showered and clambered into the casual clothing she always wore after what she deemed to be 'work hours' were over. In fact, clad in her shorts and tee, she was pacing the floor in their bedroom when Alessio finally put in an appearance.

'I need a shave,' he complained, striding through the door, looking darkly handsome but stressed out and rubbing a hand irritably over his shadowed, stubbled jaw line.

'You always need a shave,' Rosy pointed out quite truthfully for he had to shave twice a day.

In silence she watched him strip. There were times when watching that lean, muscular, hair-roughened physique of his emerge from clothing was the highlight of her day, quickening her heartbeat, turning her tummy over with craving. But this wasn't one of those times. Rosy desperately wanted his full attention and it didn't seem the right moment, but frustration was engulfing her at having had to wait so long to speak to him and just as he was about to stride into the en suite for a shower and shave, she crossed the room.

'I have to talk to you,' she told him in a rush as she set down Clover on the rug. 'It's about this website...'

Alessio flipped round and actually smiled at her, she registered in disbelief. 'Oh, that?' he murmured with unbelievable calm and cool. 'That's already been dealt with.'

'I beg your pardon?' she cried with incredulity. 'You already knew about that article?'

Twin ebony brows drew together above his gleaming, assessing gaze. 'Of course. Our IT team are very good. They check out stuff like that every day,' he told her conversationally. 'The government informed the palace about that site as well.'

'So...?' Rosy breathed in deep and fast. 'In other words, just about everybody in Sedovia knew that I and my family had been targeted and maligned...everybody but me!'

'I saw no reason to upset you with such nonsense,' Alessio admitted levelly, not turning a hair in spite of the fact that Rosy had got very flushed and was standing there rigid with clenched fists by her sides. Clover, though, had shot below the bed when she had raised her voice.

'You saw no reason?' she gasped furiously.

Alessio released his breath in a huff. 'Clearly, you believe I should've told you sooner.'

'Yes!' she bawled at him angrily. 'At least I could've warned my family.'

Blind to her temper, it seemed, Alessio skimmed his flashing smile at her. 'You don't need to worry about that either. I took care of that for you and Vittoria and Patrick aren't bothered. In their words, "Sticks and stones don't break bones",' he completed cheerfully and the dog dared to peer out from under the bed.

And that was the last straw for Rosy, the absolute last straw that Alessio could have dared to go over her head to her family and warn them of that article while continuing to keep her in the dark!

'All royally handled, I take it?' Rosy breathed between gritted teeth in a tone of dulcet sweetness.

'Yes. The website was taken down following the threat of legal action. It was only in existence for a couple of hours and the leak at the bank was traced to a junior employee. He has been dismissed for breaking his employment contract and selling confidential information for cash,' Alessio explained with distinct satisfaction. 'Our staff are excellent at dealing with such incidents.'

Rosy wrinkled her nose. 'So, it was just me you left out of all this handling, even though it was me who was most libelled!'

'How did you find out about it anyway?' Alessio enquired, poised there so deadly serious now and clad only in a pair of boxers, acres of bronzed male flesh on show.

'Samantha on the PR team.'

‘She’s new and she wouldn’t have been made aware yet that you are not to be informed of any such personal attacks.’

‘Who said I wasn’t to be informed?’ Rosy very nearly shouted at him and Clover retreated further below the bed.

Alessio elevated an ebony brow. ‘I did, of course. I don’t want you to be upset by something so trivial.’

‘Trivial?’ she screeched back at him, making him frown in apparent surprise. ‘You think it’s trivial when I’m called a scheming, gold-digging shrew? Or when the financial background to our marriage is leaked to the public?’

‘Of course, I don’t think it’s trivial in your estimation,’ Alessio countered more thinly, a faint flush rising along his high cheekbones. ‘But, at present, we have won what redress we can for this distasteful incident. We are still pursuing proof of who put up the site, although we have a suspect. Beyond that, there is nothing more we can do.’

‘I had a right to be told about that article the minute it appeared!’ Rosy launched back at him stridently.

His green eyes glinted like diamonds in sunlight, hard and unyielding. ‘Not if this is how you will react. Being trolled is what happens to public figures, and we are public figures, however, we—as a couple—do not take it personally. That is the bottom line here and I will not move it a centimetre. Now you may understand why I ordered that you be protected from such scurrilous drivel.’

As Alessio went on into the ensuite without another word, Rosy couldn’t bear to let him have the last word and she yelled, ‘I don’t feel like part of a couple!’

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The bathroom door closed and Rosy just covered her tear-wet face with her hands and swallowed back an angry, wounded sob while striving to maintain control.

Clover emerged from under the giant bed and gambolled round her feet, relieved the noisy drama was over, and Rosy got a grip on herself and went out through the balcony doors in the sitting room, down the handsome stone steps and took the dog out to play in the courtyard below. Well, now she knew where she stood with the guy she loved!

### CHAPTER TEN

Alessio and Rosy talked quietly over dinner, excruciatingly polite to each other while the staff were around.

Over coffee, Rosy murmured, 'So, we're not allowed to talk about this.'

Alessio slung a scorching appraisal at her. 'No, we're not. The discussion is closed. I have said all I can say on the subject.'

'We can still exchange views quietly.'

'You can't. You made me angry,' Alessio condemned as though that were an actionable offence. 'And as a rule, I do not get angry.'

'You're not accustomed to anyone arguing with you,' Rosy almost whispered. 'But I'm also sure I'm difficult enough to get you into the habit without it being a total disaster.'

‘Enough!’ Alessio sprang upright and tossed down his napkin. ‘I have work to do.’

Tears stung the backs of Rosy’s eyes because she had never seen Alessio so upset about anything and it was true that he didn’t normally get angry. It disturbed her that she had managed to get him so riled up.

‘Please...’ she murmured as he was striding out of the room.

Alessio froze as if she had paralysed him with that single word and then he slammed the door shut and spun round to lean back against it, looking very much as though she had trapped him. Tall, dark and trapped against his will. He breathed in deep and slow before focusing shimmering, stormy green eyes on her anxious face. ‘This is our world and I can’t change it for you. You will be a target every day of your life if you stay married to me. Someone will always have a rumour to spread through the media and there is absolutely nothing I can do to prevent it happening,’ he framed with savage bitterness, taking a couple of steps away from the door. ‘I can’t fully protect you from it—how do you think that makes me feel?’

And the last piece of the puzzle smoothly fell into place then for Rosy. He blamed himself for that article that had distressed and embarrassed her. He was a future king and people wanted to know everything about him and that truth had made her, as his partner, equally fascinating. When he went to the lengths of warning her that she would be a target every day she stayed married to him, it was an exchange that had gone too far though, she reasoned. Such an extreme sentiment plunged them into an unnecessary drama as helpful as a dark, suffocating cloud.

‘The pressure on us will be relentless because we must live in the public eye most of the time. I’ve been aware of the glare of the cameras from early childhood,’ Alessio bit out in raw continuation. ‘Everything is criticised or commented on, every personal choice, every outfit, every tattoo, every piercing, every woman on my arm. It was at its worst in the past until I reached the stage of not caring any more. I didn’t care



what was said about me and still don't, but that's no comfort now because I do care very much about what is said about you.'

'I know and I'm very grateful for that!' Rosy crossed the room and tried to haul him into her arms but he was standing there still, rigid with tension and deep emotion. 'I didn't understand how you felt, not properly, because nobody's ever been interested in me in that line before, because I was so ordinary until I met you.'

Alessio gazed down at her, stormy green eyes glittering. 'Extraordinary,' he corrected thickly. 'You were never ordinary. You've dealt with everything that was thrown at you but this one thing...the adverse publicity is ironically the most dangerous thing in the life we lead. I've known women and men as well who live for the scandalous headlines and the praise. But, if you want to keep your sanity, you have to stay away from it. Sometimes it's nice, just as often it's vicious.'

'I understand better how you feel now.' Rosy ran caressing fingers up below the silk lining of his jacket, smoothing over his taut cotton-clad torso, feeling the slight shudder as he reacted helplessly to her touch. 'And I know what will make you feel even better.'

Alessio bent down and scooped her up in his arms. 'Yes, I hit the perfect word...extraordinary.'

And then he was kissing her with the fierce hunger that made her kick off her shoes as he carted her willy-nilly through a series of interconnecting doors into their bedroom and he launched them both down onto the bed.

'I like being wanted,' she gasped.

'I like being wanted too, *piccola volpe*.'

And the pathos of that admission turned her heart inside out. Alessio, who hadn't been wanted as a child by parents who had needed him only as a means to an end. Alessio, hunted like a big-game trophy by calculating women, who sought his wealth or his title or his body, she thought, reflecting on Lucia, who had simply wanted to enjoy him the way Rosy herself did. Yes, that thought was a true leveller of pretention, reminding her that she was far from unique in Alessio's life, maybe just another woman who wanted him, craved him like an addictive drug because, in reality, he was fantastic in bed. It didn't matter that she loved him, she was probably one of a crowd who had loved him but got no further. In fact, she was simply that one lucky woman who had been in the right place at the right time when he'd needed her to become his bride. It was a humbling reflection, grounding her in the midst of the soaring passion that only he could induce in her.

'What are you thinking so hard about?' he demanded in the blissful aftermath of that fury of desire, long fingers stroking soothingly up and down her spine.

'Nothing,' she fibbed, running her fingers through his silky hair, holding him close, secure in appreciating now that he liked affection, liked being snuggled, liked all sorts of stuff that she had once assumed men didn't like. Alessio Maretti was his own unique self, fashioned by his love-deprived background, and she was his exact opposite because, in spite of her mother's desertion, she had rejoiced in endless love and affection from her sister and her husband. And maybe that was why she understood him better now, what drove him, what troubled him...

And it was a huge plus to learn that Alessio only lost his temper when he saw her as being under threat and at risk of distress. He cared about her. Did he even realise what that little scene had told her? She didn't think so. Alessio didn't spend much time agonising over his reactions, he just seemed to react in the heat of the moment. Volatile and intense. He could be snatched by force from his normal, remote calm control setting to a passionate vehemence of emotion that turned her upside down inside herself. The guy she loved, the guy she had married, and she couldn't believe

how strongly she felt about him after such a short time.

\* \* \*

She was having a cup of tea at some indescribably early hour the next morning when Vittoria phoned. ‘You’ll never guess who was outside our hotel last night with a cameraman waiting to capture pics of our celebrity customers leaving?’ her sister told her in a playful tone.

‘So, tell me—’

‘Blasted Graziana!’ Vittoria gasped, her incredulity now unconcealed. ‘I couldn’t believe my eyes when I saw her. I mean, what’s a princess doing behaving like that?’

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:42 am*

‘Alessio told me that her father cut off her trust fund, so maybe she’s just trying to make a living as a TV presenter or celebrity blogger or something,’ Rosy responded, unable to understand the choices of a woman she had never met but heard all too much about. For her just at that moment, Alessio’s former fiancée simply felt like yesterday’s news.

‘Nobody wants to see Graziana on television or anywhere else. She’s too disliked,’ Vittoria scoffed.

‘I just don’t think about her.’ Rosy hesitated and then pressed on because this was her sister, after all. ‘Alessio wasn’t attached to her.’

‘She strikes me as a bit intense, so maybe he dodged a bullet there,’ Vittoria commented before moving on to address the coronation events that would start at eight that very same morning with a military parade.

And ever afterwards that whole day would be a simple blur for Rosy, kicking off for her with a formal breakfast attended by religious personnel and followed by a private meeting. It progressed on, hour by exhausting hour, with a procession to the cathedral in a carriage, and then there was ceremony after ceremony. In her long tailored white dress, she was horribly conscious of the cameras, not to mention the stunning moment when a crown was set on her head. It was a decided relief once she was walking back down the aisle on Alessio’s arm even though the cameras were going madder than ever.

Only the presence of her own family in the front pew, her sister proudly pregnant now in a smart maternity dress, stabilised Rosy. That was real life, not the massive

pomp and consequence of the coronation, which was intended for Alessio's benefit and only tangentially for her as his consort.

Exhausted by the spectacle, they both crashed into recreation for the weekend afterwards, relieved that the royal household believed everyone had acquitted themselves well in their various duties. And then, Alessio informed her that they were going to dine out as a treat. When she asked him where on earth in Sedovia they could accomplish that without becoming the cynosure of all eyes in the restaurant, he explained that they would have a private room for them and their guests. And as their guests were to be her family and Alessio's friend, Eduardo Conti and his chatty Spanish wife, Catalina, she was delighted because none of their guests were VIPs, whom it was impossible to relax with.

They were ushered in through a rear entrance, which Vittoria thought was wonderfully cloak and dagger, and Catalina giggled at their glimpse of the kitchens with all their rushing, immaculately uniformed chefs. Patrick, meanwhile, being a chef too, was busy eying up the competition, for they were visiting the top restaurant in Severino, which had won multiple foodie awards. Not that her sister and brother-in-law had much to worry about, Rosy reflected fondly. Currently, her family's hotel was fully booked well into the colder months and Patrick's own restaurant, though much smaller than the one they were visiting, was doing a ringing trade and popular with celebrities working at the television studios nearby.

There was much discussion about the food on the plates. Pleased to hear that Eduardo and his wife had already eaten at Patrick's restaurant, Rosy looked up from her plate to find Alessio studying her and she smiled, instantly, gloriously happy when she collided with his smouldering green eyes and felt herself turning hot pink in response.

That was the precise moment that the door burst open and framed the very last person Rosy had expected to see grace their precious, private evening out. It was Graziana, groomed to the nth degree, clad in a very glamorous figure-hugging silver dress.

Rosy blinked and looked instinctively at Alessio for guidance, but he was too engaged in pressing something on his phone. As she turned her head to frown, Graziana came closer, snatched up a glass of water from the table and threw it over her, the tumbler falling down on the carpet.

‘You stole the man I loved!’ she shouted like some ghastly playground bully while Rosy sat there dripping in sincere disbelief at the Princess of Eboltz’s behaviour.

A split second later, the room was full of Alessio’s security men and a bunch of policemen. The most senior policeman lowered his head to hear Alessio’s instructions while everyone else at the table sat dumbfounded by the scene. Ever practical, Vittoria handed Rosy her napkin to help dry her off. Only at that point did she notice the man with the camera on his shoulder and he was being handcuffed. Graziana was screaming and struggling but nobody was paying her the slightest attention and she was getting handcuffed very firmly too. As the senior police officer present told her sharply to stop kicking before she was forcibly restrained, she finally fell silent, staring at Alessio expectantly.

‘You can’t do this to me. I’m royal.’

‘You committed an assault on the Queen,’ Eduardo Conti, ever the lawyer, pointed out.

‘I threw water at her. I didn’t touch her!’ Graziana proclaimed, tossing Rosy a sneering smile of superiority.

‘It’s still an assault. Any infringement of the Queen’s personal space is an assault still on the statute books. You can thank the Middle Ages for that,’ Eduardo completed with a satisfied gleam in his gaze.

Alessio dismissed most of the men hovering in the room, leaving only the senior

policeman and the head of his security with them. The cameraman was removed as well.

‘You can’t do this to me!’ Graziana shrieked at him. ‘I’m the Princess of Eboltz and I hold diplomatic status here.’

Alessio expelled his breath slowly. ‘Well, you did until yesterday when I received the proof that you were behind that obnoxious website that libelled my wife. Your diplomatic status was immediately revoked.’

‘Revoked?’ Graziana exclaimed incredulously. ‘You can’t do that to me!’

‘You are currently under a deportation order to Eboltz, which would’ve been served on you had we had the time to establish where you are staying. As we didn’t have the time, I will now give you a choice.’

‘My father won’t allow me to go home,’ Graziana countered with satisfaction.

‘I spoke to Prince Sebastien yesterday. He’s changed his mind. He prefers you at home rather than here acting like an embarrassment to Eboltz,’ Alessio responded with biting contempt. ‘So are you going home or you going to a jail cell tonight? That is your choice. If you refuse to leave Sedovia, you will be charged with assault and you will remain in a cell until the charge is answered in court. You may well receive a short sentence and after that is served, you will still be deported.’

‘I can’t believe you’re speaking to me like this, treating me like I’m just anybody!’ Graziana screeched in outrage. ‘I’m royal. I’m a princess.’

‘You have to act like a princess to get the royal treatment,’ Rosy surprised herself by slicing into that flood of self-justification, temper stirring now in the aftermath of the shock of the other woman’s behaviour.

Graziana had been responsible for that dreadful article on that website. Only hanging, drawing and quartering as a punishment would have lessened Rosy's anger.

'Charge her and put her in a cell,' Alessio advised the policeman, weary of the exchange.

Graziana gave him a wounded look, tears shimmering in her bright blue eyes. 'Alessio, please...

'All right, I'll go home!' Rosy heard the beautiful blonde shout outside the door as she was bundled out.

'With so many witnesses, this will get out into the media,' Eduardo forecast with a shake of his head. 'And I'm sorry to say it but I've no sympathy.'



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Vittoria hissed a five-letter bad word in Rosy's ear. Catalina said it out loud in Italian and her husband frowned at her in disapproval. Alessio merely smiled with satisfaction. Rosy, who was usually more compassionate, was simply grateful that the spiteful princess would be removed from Sedovia and prevented from making further attacks on either her or her reputation.

'How will she get home?' she asked abstractedly as their servers reappeared with the main course of their meal.

'On the evening ferry. Fortunately for us, she timed her arrival here well.'

Rosy's eyes widened in disconcertion. 'Graziana...on that little ferry? I can't imagine that.'

'I imagine she won't be able to either.' Alessio finally laughed and, as if by silent mutual agreement, nobody even mentioned Graziana's name for the remainder of the excellent meal.

In the limo that was wafting them back to the palace with police outriders, Rosy said, 'When you said there was a suspect for that article online, was it her? And if it was her, why didn't you tell me?'

'To be frank, I couldn't believe it could be her, any more than I could credit what she did tonight to you. How could I have been so blind to the craziness she was hiding behind her bland, formal front?' he demanded.

'I don't think she's crazy, I just think she's been very spoiled,' Rosy contended

thoughtfully. 'I also think she's an attention seeker and all of a sudden nobody is the slightest bit interested in her any more and she can't bear that. Life as she knew it has ended. But only someone pretty stupid would think she could walk in on us with a cameraman, do something like that to me and get away with it.'

'And is that your final word?' Alessio queried with unconcealed amusement.

'Yes, I've no doubt she'll face a reckoning with her father and have to keep her head down for the foreseeable future. And hopefully, she'll stay out of Sedovia.'

'You're so calm,' Alessio noted with appreciation. 'Any other woman would be screaming at me for exposing her to that scene with Graziana.'

'How could I blame you for it?'

'I should have told my head of security that Graziana was under suspicion with that website because when she insisted that she was an expected guest in the restaurant, the security team were too aware of her status to question it,' he explained. 'That's how she got in. I've never wanted to handle a woman roughly in my life before but when she burst in and threw that water at you, I wanted to kill her!'

'My goodness...' Rosy was disconcerted by that roughened admission.

'She could have hurt you when she threw that glass and if she had, I probably would've laid violent hands on her!' he bit out fiercely. 'I will never allow anyone to get that close to you again.'

'Don't be daft,' Rosy soothed. 'Fortunately, there's only one Graziana and she's gone now. She won't be a problem for us again. As for her trying to claim that she ever loved you, even I was tempted to slap her for that.'

‘Really?’ Alessio had elevated an ebony brow in surprise.

‘Of course I was after the way she treated you!’ Rosy responded with defensive heat. ‘Her sleeping with another man while she was engaged to you was the lowest of the low. She cheated on you, deceived you, upset you—’

‘I’m not upset now. In fact, I’m fairly certain that ninety nine out of a hundred men would come through an insane drama like that tonight and thank their good fortune at having been ditched before the wedding,’ Alessio said with unhidden amusement. ‘I can laugh about it now but I did make a very blessed exchange of brides...as your sister was quick to point out.’

‘Did she?’ Rosy winced as they walked back into the palace. ‘Well, that’s Vittoria, speaks as she sees and she’d have no time for Graziana’s dramatics.’

Clover raced across the giant hall as they waited for the lift and Rosy bent down to greet the puppy. ‘What are you doing downstairs?’

Alessio smiled at the apologetic teenager scooping up the puppy. ‘Rosy, this is Antonio’s youngest son, Pietro, and he volunteered to be the official dog-keeper for the summer. He’s keeping Clover for us tonight.’

Rosy’s brows disappeared beneath her fringe and she said all that was proper to the boy before stepping into the lift. As soon as the doors closed on them, she exclaimed, ‘Dog-keeper? Are you serious?’

‘He looks after her when we’re not around and she does need a lot of exercise,’ Alessio pointed out straight-faced. ‘So, the vet-to-be is the dog-keeper.’

‘Fine.’ Rosy resisted the urge to inform him that she had wanted to cuddle her dog and Clover had just been carried off.

‘I wanted you all to myself tonight,’ Alessio announced, gazing down at her in a different way altogether. ‘No dog, no distractions, nothing but us.’

Rosy reddened, perfectly able to interpret that scorching heat in Alessio’s eloquent scrutiny. ‘Right...’ she mumbled, a little quiver of response filtering through her pelvis.

‘I’ve decided that you’re not a very romantic woman, but then I’m not a very romantic guy. You don’t notice the flowers...you don’t—’

‘What flowers?’ she asked him blankly.

‘I’ve been sending you flowers every day for a couple of weeks! How could you not notice? You didn’t even read my cards,’ Alessio complained.

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‘You sent the flowers that keep on changing in our sitting room?’ Rosy paled in dismay. ‘I never looked for a card. I just thought it was the staff ensuring fresh flowers in there for us. I’m really sorry I didn’t notice.’

‘Being calm and practical is fabulous for being a queen,’ Alessio told her as he herded her into their bedroom, where champagne on ice and chocolate-covered treats appeared to be awaiting them, making her brow furrow. ‘But when you’re a wife and you have a husband trying to tell you that he’s hopelessly in love with you, it’s not so good, *piccola volpe*...’

‘Hopelessly in love with me?’ Rosy parroted in sheer shock at that announcement. ‘Since when?’

‘I think it started the day you crashed your bike, because I couldn’t take my eyes off you. I was enthralled the whole time I was with you but trying to keep my distance because I was supposed to be getting married,’ Alessio explained. ‘I accept that I’m not great at the frills when it comes to telling you that I love you, but I’ve never told a woman I love her before and you’re so...silent.’

‘Because I love you too,’ Rosy finally piped up in a belated rush. ‘And I was silent because I was shocked. I honestly didn’t think you had those kinds of feelings for me. I thought I was just the replacement bride, the substitute for Graziana.’

‘In bed as well?’ Alessio quipped. ‘Surely not?’

‘That’s sex, that doesn’t count,’ Rosy argued.

‘Don’t be naïve. Love and sex are an unbeatable combination in a healthy relationship.’ Alessio eased her up against him and kissed her with passionate hunger and she shivered against his lean, muscular body, thought becoming a distant impossibility. ‘And we have both because we attract each other like magnets...and you love me. To paraphrase you, when did that happen?’

‘Oh, just along the way somewhere. I got attached. I tried not to but the more time I spent with you, the more it crept up on me.’

‘You’re making falling in love sound like a distinctly disturbing experience.’ Alessio laughed. ‘But I’m still crazy about you. I got it wrong on our wedding night but I must have got some things right.’

‘You got an awful lot of things right,’ Rosy whispered, her hands reaching up to frame his high cheekbones so that their eyes met, his bright and unusually vulnerable, hers steady and warm with approbation. ‘But I’m not about to tell you them all and swell your ego.’

‘That’s mean,’ Alessio complained, tugging her down on the bed and uncorking the champagne to send it foaming down into the waiting flutes before slotting one into her hand.

Bubbles tickled her nose as she sipped from the glass and reached out to try one of the dainty chocolate-dipped fruit treats on the silver salver in front of her. ‘I don’t think you have a mean bone in your entire body,’ she told him.

Her conscience was twanging because she knew she was holding back on him and that wasn’t fair. He had told her that he loved her and she had been so astonished at that announcement, she had simply stared at him. He had had the courage she lacked. ‘You’re loyal, protective, kind, thoughtful, entertaining, honest...at least, when you’re not keeping quiet about stuff in the unnecessary belief that you’re protecting

me.'

\* \* \*

'It's fundamental to me to protect you any way I can from anything that could harm you,' he objected.

'I'm strong, Alessio. I can handle all kinds of unpleasant truths. I mean, there's really nothing that you don't have going for you in the lovability stakes. How can I possibly be the first woman you've told that you loved her? What about that harpy who slept with your father?'

'I hadn't got around to telling her that I believed that I loved her. I'm not sure now that I ever did. I didn't experience any desire to run around taking care of her as if she were breakable...as I do with you.'

'I bet if she'd known you were thinking it was love, she'd never have got with your father,' Rosy opined with newly learned cynicism.

Alessio swiped her champagne flute from her and the chocolate treats, ignoring her little whimper of disappointment. 'We're not talking about that tonight. Tonight is for us and nothing else. Let's not waste any of it discussing my youthful mistakes.'

'I can't believe you love me,' she admitted unevenly. 'It feels too good to be true.'

Alessio continued to strip off his suit and hauled his shirt over his head, exposing every mouth-watering inch of his muscular torso. Her heartbeat pounded and she wriggled out of her dress, cast it aside, treating her wispy silk underwear with a similar lack of care. He came down over her, all sleek dark predatory male, primed for action, and her mouth ran dry. 'Believe it,' he urged thickly. 'I am never letting you go. I'm not a changeable person, *piccola volpe*. I never wanted to keep one particular

woman before and the emotions involved are much stronger than I realised they'd be.'

'Are they?' As he slowly lowered his big body down on hers, every skin cell in her body was flaring alive with sensual energy and with the connection she had only ever felt with him. He loves me, she thought in awe and intense relief. He had deserved to be loved. Trusting him and giving him that chance to prove himself worthy had been the biggest emotional risk she had ever taken but had also brought her the most magnificent reward.

'Yes, you've noticed that I'm not always reasonable where you're concerned. I'm possessive, territorial. I would be jealous if you so much as looked at another man.'

'No chance of that,' Rosy scoffed tenderly as he looked down at her with burning adoration in his jewelled gaze, her fingers skimming appreciatively across the smooth hot skin of his wide shoulders. 'You're it for me. I'm here for the long haul.'

'I was worried that you would think it would be too soon to tell you how I felt but I didn't want to keep it a secret.'

'And you got a dog-sitter lined up for Clover so that she doesn't come whining and scratching at our bedroom door and you ordered champagne and strawberries.'

'I wanted to make more of an occasion of it but you get embarrassed if I make extravagant gestures.'

'You can't buy a vet a new clinic just because she looked after Clover for a week and a bit—other people just pay the bill,' she pointed out gently.

'It was for you. You were so impressed with all the rescue work she did for free. Some people deserve that you go that extra mile...and I may not have mentioned it,



but she is getting that new clinic. It's not extravagant. She runs a charity and it's a tax write-off,' Alessio informed her with just a hint of one-upmanship.

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‘I love you so much I could burst sometimes!’ she gasped chokily.

He wiped the tears from her cheeks with his thumbs and bent down to kiss her. ‘I love you so much,’ he husked.

‘Me too,’ she said with an inelegant sniff.

And then that seething passion they generated together wholly claimed them, bonding hearts and bodies in a wild scorching rush of emotion, sensual pleasure and satisfaction.

### EPILOGUE

Five years later

‘I miss Daddy!’ wailed Isabella, Crown Princess and future Queen, with a quivering lower lip. ‘He’s s’posed to be here for my tea party!’

Rosy comforted her daughter, explaining as best she could to a four-year-old about a flight being delayed, and quietly reminded her that it was bedtime. Isabella, however, was very much her volatile father’s daughter. With her favourite doll, her favourite teddy, her favourite bunny and even her favourite snake all set up at the little table for the toy tea party, Isabella was inconsolable at her father’s failure to appear. Clover, who often functioned as a large, moving, breathing soft toy for the children, sat calmly nearby, her gentle eyes firmly fixed, not to Isabella, whom she adored, but to the real biscuits on the tea plate.

Rosy hadn't planned to produce an heir to the throne quite as quickly as she had. In fact, she had intended to wait six months before even trying to conceive. Her cautious schedule, however, had failed owing to a forgetful moment in the shower one morning. Alessio had been over the moon while Rosy had been shaken out of her usual composure. There had been parties across Sedovia after Isabella's birth, the heir destined to be the first queen in several generations.

And once they had settled into parenting Isabella, it hadn't seemed a major deal to consider a second pregnancy, only Rosy had unexpectedly conceived twin boys, Enzo and Armando, who were now adventurous two-year-old toddlers, presently fighting over a toy in the far corner of the room. Francesca, the baby currently crawling across the floor and threatening her big sister's tea party, was definitely, Rosy had assured her husband, their fourth and final child.

The respectable size of the royal family had surprised Sedovia, accustomed to previous rulers who had mostly had only one child. Rosy had never expected to find herself the mother of four children under five but with nannies and staff to help out she had seen no good reason to restrict Alessio's deep, driving desire for a proper family of his own.

Rosy had also seen that Alessio was never happier than when he was with them. He spent a lot of time with his children. Indeed, Patrick complained that he was being held to an impossible standard with Alessio by his wife, Vittoria. Their little girl, Ginevra, was only several months older than Isabella and family gatherings were lively now. As for Rosy, she had learned that she received a deep inner contentment from being a mother and she cherished the huge amount of love surrounding her.

Certainly, she was not in a position to be as full-time a parent as she once would have liked. On the other hand, she enjoyed her multi-layered life with all its many shades. She had a royal role as Alessio's consort, which entailed ceremonial appearances, and she attended events for several favourite charities.

Even so, she very much appreciated her freedom to continue working as an art restorer of growing repute. Mostly she restored paintings within their own household in rooms set aside for that purpose. Lucy, now retired while still working as a consultant for the palace restoration team, was a frequent visitor and adviser. Rosy had been suggested as Lucia's replacement, but Rosy hadn't wanted the role, knowing that she wouldn't have sufficient time to devote to the job. It was enough for her to still have the ability to work in the career of her choice.

Alessio's enquiries in respect of her long-lost mother had, following a two-year search, finally given her answers...sad answers. Medical records had revealed that her late mother, Heather, had been a drug addict, a fact that Vittoria, a student at the time, had not been aware of but which they both knew that their father must've known even though he had chosen to keep it a secret. Most probably, Rosy's mother had left her baby immediately after her birth because she was desperate for a fix. Heather's life had gone downhill fast and, within a few years of her daughter's birth, she had died of an overdose. She had had no other relatives alive and no more children. Tragic though that backstory had been to learn, Rosy had adjusted to it, even more grateful now that Vittoria and Patrick had stepped up for her in that vacant parental spot and still continued to fill it.

In fact, just at that moment, even though Alessio was late and the kids were stropky over the fact, Rosy acknowledged that she was remarkably happy in her life. Alessio might be the exciting centre of his children's world but he was at the heart of Rosy's too. They often spent family weekends at El Palacio in Spain and, in the summer, at the much improved and extended cabin in the mountains, where the kids could run a little wild and skip through the surf and where, occasionally, Rosy and Alessio got a little frisky in the cave behind the rocks. They always spent their wedding anniversaries at the cabin and she cooked and often that was where they got together with her sister and husband and kids because it was a perfect place where everyone could be themselves and not worry about prying eyes.

It occurred to her that she was downright grateful that Graziana had run out on that

wedding that should have taken place with Alessio. Having been deported from Sedovia, Graziana had settled back to life on the island of Eboltz and as soon as she had been granted her annulment from the unfortunate bodyguard she had wed in such haste, she had married a wealthy businessman, who had swept her off to live in France. There, from occasional glimpses of her face in glossy magazines, Graziana was living the highly visible, glossy life she had obviously craved. But that kind of life would never have suited Alessio, Rosy reflected fondly.

‘Daddy!’ Isabella shrieked so loudly that Rosy jumped, sprung from her reverie with a vengeance.

A crowd of children engulfed him in the doorway. Clover stole a biscuit and ran off with it. Francesca commenced her very slow crawl in her father’s general direction. Rosy smiled as Alessio succumbed to the challenge of the tea party.

Alessio’s heart lit up in lights the instant Rosy smiled at him, that warm, welcoming smile that enveloped him. She was still *hispiccola volpe*, impossibly pretty and delicate in the snazzy blue cocktail frock she wore. It was her birthday but she still wouldn’t put herself forward and would insist that he took his time with their children.

An hour later, the royal couple dined in private with candles and all the little touches their staff had included to enhance the occasion. Rosy sipped wine, the light reflecting off the stunning diamond crescent necklace she wore, her latest gift. Her attention, though, was all for Alessio, who had been absent for a week. Now he was describing someone he had met while he was overseas, lean, darkly handsome features with those classic cheekbones animated, stunning green eyes alight, shapely sculpted mouth compressed with amusement while his hands sketched vivid word pictures in the air between them. Still drop-dead gorgeous, still hers in every sense of the word and the pleasure induced by that acceptance flamed through her like a wildfire.

Slowly, gracefully, she slid upright and settled entranced blue eyes on him. 'Early night?'

'It's your birthday,' he protested.

Rosy grinned. 'So, it's my choice what we do next...'

'You're a wicked woman but I love you for it,' Alessio groaned, closing his hands over hers to pull her close, tugging her into stirring contact with his lean, hard body. 'It's been a very long week without you, piccola volpe.'

She smiled below the circling caress of his erotic lips, reacting to the physical urgency of his hips rocking against her. 'For me too...'

And they careened into the bedroom, Alessio knocking a shoulder off the door, disconcerting the dog, who looked up and then went back to sleep again, having seen it all before.

A while later, they lay luxuriating in a hot, limp pool of fulfilment.

'I love you so much,' Alessio said huskily, winding one of her curls round a long forefinger as he gazed down at her dreamily. 'And you look absolutely fantastic in diamonds.'

'Clearly, I was tailor-made for you,' Rosy murmured drowsily. 'Yes, I love you too, more than I even did five years ago.'

'Love sort of grows, doesn't it? I've never been this happy in my life...'

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