



The Prince's Green Card Scheme

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Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

Description: All he wanted was a way to get home,
In the end, he'll get way more than he bargained for...

HIM

I pushed my luck one too many times, but skipping out on my own wedding was a step too far,
Banished or deported or exiled, whatever you want to call it...
My parents threw me out of the country, and I went from glory and riches to living in disgrace,
The thing is, it might just end up being the best thing that ever happened to me.

A marriage deal seemed like my only option for getting home,
I never expected that my fake bride could be so much more than that...

HER

This isn't what I signed up for.

Marry a guy so he can get a green card and me a huge payout?
Sure.

Marry a playboy prince who just so happened to be banished from his country and now I have to show the entire royal family that he's changed for the better?

That might be asking too much...

Paolo is enigma, but between the lies and the playboy exploits, I sense a better man waiting to be revealed,

And if that wasn't a surprise already, there's an even bigger one on the way...

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Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am

PROLOGUE

PAOLO

I jump to my feet when my parents arrive. Neither of them looks happy to see me, but why would they? I'm behind bars, and they've come to bail me out.

At least, I hope they have.

Usually, they just get me out quietly, not wanting to draw attention to the fact that the king's third grandson has been arrested. Again.

I say again. It's only happened, like, maybe four times. And at least one of those times wasn't my fault.

This time, though, there's no way I can spin it to be better.

"Paolo," my father says darkly. I take a sharp breath.

"Hey, Dad," I mumble. "How are you?"

He shakes his head, his eyes hard. "Explain yourself. You have one chance."

I hesitate. "I... uh...."

All my father does is hang his head in shame. "Yes. That's what I thought."

“No, wait, I can explain,” I try, desperately wanting to summon the words that will make this all better. “It was a mistake, yeah? I panicked. I got scared and I panicked.”

“And ended up in a bar, in the arms of some nobody woman?” says my mother, the words cutting me to shreds.

“That wasn’t... I mean, yeah, I guess, but that wasn’t the plan.”

The looks thrown at me are thunderous and dark. I’ve really screwed up this time.

“Do you know,” says my father slowly, “just how many women in this country would do anything to be with you? The respect you and your name carry? And all you do is flush it away?”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, the lump in my throat making it hard to breathe.

But my father shakes his head again. “No, Paolo. This time you have gone too far. It was bad enough when it was just partying and petty crimes. But this? This cannot be forgiven.”

I stare at him in shock. This is cold even by his standards. Somehow I don’t think the punchline to this is going to be me getting off lightly.

A police officer comes forward and unlocks the holding cell, gesturing for me to leave. I blink, confused. “Wait — you bailed me out?”

“Not exactly,” says my mother, folding her arms. Her face is tight with emotion that she’s repressing, her lips thin to stop them trembling. “Paolo, we have given you so many chances. We have told you a hundred times that this behavior needs to stop. When we asked you about this, you agreed to it. We are not unreasonable people — we asked you if you would accept an arranged marriage and you told us you would.”

“You’ve had hundreds of chances to marry someone you liked,” adds my father. “We’ve never wanted to force anything upon you.”

I groan. “Yeah, yeah, you just thought that marrying me off would calm me down a little. Give me a nice girl and I’d stop letting you down. Well, sorry for being a disappointment again.”

“This isn’t about disappointment,” says my mother, gesturing for me to follow them out of the police station. “This is about shame.”

“How do you think it looks to our people for a prince to not show up to his own wedding? This was televised, for God’s sake! The people were excited for this!”

I open my mouth and close it again. I don’t have a good defense for that. My mother shoots my father the kind of look that says keep cool, don’t get angry, and the guilt in my stomach grows.

My father takes a steadying breath. “Get in the car,” he says quietly.

I hesitate, staring at the car. “Where are we going?” I ask.

“The airport,” says my mother.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am

My face falls in confusion and my father continues. “Don’t make this harder than it has to be, Paolo. We’ve made arrangements for you to be deported.”

“Wait — deported?” I gasp. “You’re exiling me?”

“That’s an old-fashioned word,” says my mother. “We prefer to call it expulsion.”

“Or banishment,” adds my father.

“How is that better?!” I swallow thickly, my eyes pricking with tears. “Will I ever be allowed to come home?”

My father looks at me gravely, his shoulders sagging as though the weight of all this is sinking him. “We are willing to review your citizenship after five years if you are able to prove to us that you’ve changed.”

“I’m being banished,” I whisper.

“You’re being given a chance to start over,” says my mother. “It is for your own good.”

I don’t know what else to say to that, so I say nothing. There are no hugs, no goodbyes. Just my parents staring at me with more disappointment than I’ve ever seen.

Then I get into the car, and the driver starts the engine, and as I’m being escorted to the airport, I stare out the window, watching as my country goes past, thinking about

how I'm never going to set eyes on it again.

CHAPTER 1

PAOLO

ONE YEAR LATER

"Can I get you ladies another drink?" I flash them both one of my most charming smiles.

The girls giggle, and one of them covers her mouth with her hand shyly. I'm sure they told me their names, but that was three or four drinks ago now, so I've privately nicknamed them Blondie and Sparkles due to their respective hair color and style of dress.

Blondie says something in German that I don't quite catch, and Sparkles says, "Would you, Paolo? That would be wonderful."

I grin at them both again. "Your wish is my command."

The best bit about the year I've spent in exile is the way I've used it to tour basically all of Europe. Right now, I'm enjoying the wonderful scenery of Bavaria, as well as enjoying the wonderful company of German girls. Not that I've ever found it that hard to pick up girls.

After all, I am a prince. That does tend to be a draw.

The worst thing about this first year of exile, though, is that it's finally forced me to actually think about stuff like my bank account and my living arrangements and what I'm going to do with the rest of my life.

I suppose you could call me immature. I know many newspapers have. But I like to see myself as a free spirit; the kind of guy who rides life's waves as they come.

Or at least I did — when I had all the money of royalty and the kind of family name that gets you anything you could possibly desire. The disgrace of exile has hit me like a tsunami. And much as I like to pretend that I'm still surfing, there are days when I feel like I'm drowning.

Today is not one of them, though. Today I'm in a lovely Bavarian bar with two beautiful German girls. And I haven't hit my credit limit yet.

I wave to the bartender and gesture for more drinks. She smiles in acknowledgement, and I throw her a wink. She doesn't react, which is pretty much what I'm expecting, but it also has the desired effect of making Blondie and Sparkles prickle with jealousy.

I haven't got intentions towards anyone else tonight, but it's good to keep people on their toes. After all, I am a prince and I do still have a reputation. Well, kind of, anyway. It's in tatters back in Bellamare, and I'm sure everyone is cursing my name to heaven.

The news has spread abroad but I'm far less known out here than I am at home. People mostly only care about Miguel and Luca. The third in line is way less interesting than the other two.

The bartender slides three more cocktails over to us, and I grin at her again.

“So, Paolo,” says Blondie, brushing her golden hair behind her ear. “What are your plans tonight?”

“Easy now,” I say, my eyes darting down to her lips. “This is my plan for the night.

I've got two gorgeous women in this bar, where the drinks and music are good. I wasn't planning on doing anything else."

"Not...anything?" she says, leaning into me, biting her lower lip just a little.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am

“Well, that depends what you’ve got in mind,” I say, my voice low. “I have a double king bed back at my hotel room.”

Blondie tucks her hair behind her ear again and slides the tip of her finger between her teeth. Her brilliant blue eyes glitter, even in the low light. She leans in a little closer to me and I mirror her. When I glance down at her body from this angle, very little is left to the imagination underneath her close-fitting dress.

Sparkles places her hand on my shoulder, and I reach up to place my own over it, brushing my fingers over hers. I look back at her with a smile. “There’s plenty of room for two.”

She grins at me with half-lidded eyes, her plush pink lips pursing with desire. They’re both hot. I have scored so lucky today.

It’s going to be a good night.

My phone buzzes on the bar and I glance down at it. It’s a notification from Bellamare’s national news website. I might not live there anymore, but I still have an interest in what’s going on. Despite what my family might want, I’m never going to cut all ties with my country completely.

Bellamare is still my home.

My eyes dart over the headline: King has Died at Ninety-Two. I blink and read it again to make sure that I’m not seeing things. King has Died at Ninety-Two.

My breath catches in my throat. “Excuse me a second, ladies,” I say, blowing them both a kiss despite the cold shiver spreading down my spine. “I’ll be right back.”

I snatch up my phone and hurry for the bathroom with as much dignity as I can muster. I don’t want the girls to leave me, but I need a moment to myself.

I lock myself into a bathroom stall. The music from the bar is still thumping outside, and with shaking hands I grab my phone from my pocket and unlock it to stare at the article, willing it to be untrue.

An official notice from the palace today came with devastating news for the country — King Francesco III was a beloved ruler to the people of Bellamare for forty-five years, and has seen the country through times of change, turbulence, and great joy. The palace have confirmed that he passed away peacefully, after suffering with illness for several years.

A faint nausea rises in my throat as I read the rest of the article. It’s a clinical report of all the major events of his life. It’s like talking about someone distant, unknown.

I knew my grandfather wasn’t in the best of health, so his death isn’t exactly a surprise to me. It’s just the way I’m learning it that’s caught me off guard.

My grandfather has passed away — and not one single person in my family thought to tell me.

My father is now the king — and not one single member of my family thought to tell me.

The words swim before my eyes, and the punishment of my exile stings all over again. Most days I can hide the ache, but this has brought it back with a vengeance. This feels like being kicked in the chest.

I get that I'm exiled, but to not tell me that my own grandfather is dead...

I haven't wanted to go home this badly since I got kicked out of the country.

I stand in the bathroom for as long as I can before I think it's probably starting to look weird. Suddenly, I don't think I'm really in the mood for anything except going back to my room and sleeping off this revelation, but I don't want to leave the girls hanging.

Maybe if I throw myself into their arms, it might make everything better. At the least, it might help me to forget everything for a while.

I take a few deep breaths, trying to ground myself, and shove my phone back in my pocket. Why did I have to get the news this way? Why couldn't anyone have just called me? I wouldn't have expected Miguel or Luca to do it — I'm not exactly close to my brothers. But my father, my mother, or even Maria, one of my attendants...

Anything except finding out this way.

I give myself another minute in the stall, then shake my head and steel myself to face the world.

Tomorrow. I'll deal with all of this tomorrow. Tonight, I'm going to have fun.

I head back out to the bar where the girls are waiting for me, and I ask them if they want to come back to my room. They both act like they're surprised by the offer, but they both agree. Sparkles wraps her arms around my waist and I lean in to kiss her, but although her body feels incredible and her lips are soft and inviting, it feels hollow.

Even when we get back, I can barely turn off my mind. It's good to feel like they

want me, but I can't lose myself.

All I can think about is home.

CHAPTER 2

PAOLO

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am

I sigh and lean back on the chair, the front two legs swinging up into the air. I always used to get told off for doing this as a kid. They used to try and scare me, telling me that I would lose my balance and crack my head open like an egg. I guess that was a lesson that never stuck.

PI Schultz fixes me with an even stare over the table. He has thick brown hair, a thick beard, and a thick German accent, and he's in the middle of telling me about some options I have for getting back into Bellamare.

"The issue with your country," he's telling me, "is its size. It would be much easier to sneak your way back into a larger country. But Bellamare is very tight about their immigration numbers and keep a close eye on the citizenship register."

"So, it's hopeless then," I sigh.

"We do have a couple of options," says Schultz, "though neither is ideal. I wouldn't recommend trying to become an illegal immigrant — you seem like you're in enough trouble as it is."

"Yeah. Hopeless."

He fixes me with that hard look again, and I get the distinct sense that he was born in the wrong decade for the job that he has. This is a guy who would have been way more suited to the noir twenties than the modern day. It's almost jarring to see him working on a computer. I feel like he should have a typewriter in here.

"Your best option, as far as I can see it, would be to marry a Bellamari citizen under a

pseudonym, and then by extension gain rights to reenter the country.”

“So you want me to commit identity fraud against myself?” I say, frowning. That makes no sense at all.

“Not at all,” he says. “Fraud suggests malicious intent. You’re just trying to get home. You can renounce the marriage and the fake citizenship as soon as everything blows over. Besides, the marriage won’t count once they realize it’s a false identity. It’s not like we’re aiming to make you a full-time resident — we’re just trying to get you access back to your own country.”

“I guess... but I’m not exactly everyone’s favorite person right now, and it’s not like people don’t know who I am. There’s no way one single Bellamare woman is going to want to marry me.” I slump back in the seat, all the hope I’d had that things might be looking up draining away. “It doesn’t matter how nice I can be, or how much money I wave in a woman’s face. Nobody likes me enough to agree to this.”

“I suspected this much,” Schultz says, not missing a beat. “So, I compiled a list for you.”

He drops a file full of printouts on the desk in front of me, and it lands with a dull thump. I flip open the file to see several résumé-style pages of women, with small bios and headshots.

“Here are several eligible women who all have Bellamare citizenship in some way,” Schultz says. “You could talk to any of these women, explain your case, and see if they would be amenable to the idea of an arranged marriage.”

I bark a laugh. “I can’t explain this to anyone,” I say. “I’d seem insane.”

“Then what is your better suggestion?”

I hum thoughtfully. In truth, I really don't have one. "I do like the idea of marrying someone for the citizenship. I think that could work."

"So, what will you do? Follow up with one of these girls?"

"Oh, yes. I'll be my charming self, of course."

Schultz says nothing but his single raised eyebrow gives his true feelings away. I ignore the reaction.

Instead, I pull the folders towards me and start looking through them more closely. All of the women in here are beautiful, young, single. A couple of them seem to have complicated lives, and I turn those pages over quickly. I don't need anything more complicated than my own life right now.

It's amazing to me how many different countries these girls come from and have a dual citizenship with us. There are girls here from England, from Australia, from Morocco. I'd be happy to go to any of those places to seek them out.

I narrow the pile down a little more, dismissing the girls for arbitrary reasons —too blond, not enough of a smile, not enough in the bio, too much in the bio.

The pile doesn't get any less overwhelming, though. I keep flicking through the pages, waiting for inspiration to strike. I was kind of hoping I'd look at one of the photos and find myself looking at the one. But I haven't, so I just pull one out at random and place it down in front of me.

I'm going to let fate decide this one for me.

My random selection pulls out a girl from the US, living in New York, working as a bartender. She has a nice smile. Her name is Chloe.

I look at her photo one more time, then smile. “This one,” I say.

Schultz nods. “All right. I’ll compile some more data for you.”

“Great.” I grin, then a flare of doubt makes me add, “You’re sure this is going to work, right?”

“You signed the waiver, did you not? No guarantee of certainty. All I can do is offer you information towards your goal and give you the best advice I have to offer.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am

“Yeah, I did,” I sigh.

“For what it’s worth,” Schultz says, “I do think this will work. Is this what I would recommend for a life partner? No. But to get home? This should work.”

“Good,” I say quietly, glancing back down at Chloe again. “That’s all I want.”

CHAPTER 3

PAOLO

I got to my hotel late last night and slept most of the day away today. Even though I had had this fantasy that the second I landed, I’d go out and hunt Chloe down, sleeping was actually a really good idea.

Really, the second I checked in and lay down on the bed, it was game over. I woke up three hours later, and by the time I’d done that, I was hungry. So I got room service, and by then it was too late to be going out and chatting anyone up.

But it was a good move, because now it’s early evening and I feel well rested and ready to go for my journey through New York.

I came here once, years ago, as a teenager, and we did all the usual tourist stuff like the Empire State Building and the Statue of Liberty. It was pretty exciting back then, but I don’t think I would want to live in a cramped apartment to be serenaded by the traffic all the time.

Chloe's bar is in some hidden corner of the city, somewhere I've never heard of, let alone ever been. It's on one of the later stops of one of the more obscure subway lines and then down an alley. The whole time I'm on the subway, I stare into my phone, trying not to play with my baseball cap. The more I pull it down over my eyes, the more suspicious I probably look.

Not that I really need to be worried anyway, I think. Bellamare isn't exactly the biggest, most well-known country, and I doubt my shenanigans have crossed the Atlantic. Still, I don't want to be recognized and I don't want to talk to anyone.

And I don't know where I'm going. So I stare at my map, watching as my blue dot creeps along the screen towards my destination.

I only get lost finding my way from the station through the tiny streets like four times.

When I finally get there, I stand outside for a moment, staring up at it. It's an unassuming place, the sign peeling, the windows darkened so I can't see inside. The menu stuck to the wall is faded, but the cocktails look good.

Taking a breath, I steady myself and push open the door.

It's busy inside so I guess enough people must know about it. It's definitely one of those dives where you only go if you know it exists, and you only know it exists if you're a local. Good if you want the culture, I suppose, the real experience, living in places like this. On any other day, that's what I'd be thinking about.

But today, it's seven p.m. and I want a drink. And I want to go home.

I saunter over to the bar. Sure enough, the information Schultz gave me was good. There at the bar is a young woman, her light brown hair tied back, her green eyes

shining. She's chatting to a customer while she puts glasses away, smiling and laughing at whatever he's saying.

An irrational rush of jealousy surges through me. How dare this other man flirt with the woman I'm about to go flirt with? How can she be thinking of anyone else when she's mine? But she doesn't know that yet.

I squash down that feeling of possessiveness, shaking my head at myself. I have to play this cool.

I sidle up to the bar, take a seat, and grin at her she hands me a drinks menu. "Thanks."

"You're welcome," she says, smiling. Her smile is even prettier in reality than any of the photos I saw.

Yes, this plan is looking better by the second.

I watch as she goes back to work, not saying anything. I want to see her in action before I start speaking. You've got to be careful with people when they're at work. Most women don't exactly want random men to be flirting with them when they're on shift. I'm going to have to play my cards right if I want her to speak to me for more than two seconds.

And she is very pleasant to look at. She's in her work shirt, so clearly she isn't trying to look her best right now, but I can still tell she has a great body under there. Her breasts swell under her top, and I get a tantalizing glimpse of her collarbone. It wouldn't really matter what she looked like, but I can't pretend it doesn't help that she's hot.

"So, what can I get you?" she says, sliding back over to me, leaning on the bar to

show me the constellation of freckles scattered across her face.

I purse my lips, not wanting to smile too broadly. “I can’t decide. Give me your favorite.”

“Okay,” she grins, narrowing her eyes like I’ve given her a challenge. I don’t take my eyes off her for a second as she grabs the cocktail shaker, pours from a few different bottles into it, and shakes. Her fingers wrap around the metal and I barely blink, staring at her long, elegant fingers, her neatly manicured nails.

God, she’s perfect.

She slides a glass over to me, sticking an umbrella in it as she does. “House special. The Jet Pilot,” she winks. “We added it to the menu because one of the guys who works here is obsessed with planes. Enjoy.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am

With another grin, she drifts back off to work, and I take a sip of the drink. Immediately, I get hit with the warm taste of rum, and an aftershock of absinthe, and I smile. I'm not sure what it says about her that this was her choice of drink to give me, but clearly she thinks I can handle it.

Next time, Chloe passes back by me, I grin at her to catch her attention. "Everything good?" she asks.

I smile. "It's all perfect with me. How about with you?"

She shrugs. "Oh, just another day at work."

"I feel you," I say, despite the fact that I've never really felt that in my life. The closest I've got to a tedious day at work has been charity balls, and even then I'm allowed to drink the champagne. "When do you get off your shift?"

I'm hoping I've pitched it so it sounds more like genuine concern for her welfare than trying to chat her up to go out afterwards. To my relief, it looks like I got it just right because she shrugs again. "Not much longer now. I was on the day shift today. Honestly, I'm just grateful I've got a job at all."

I force a chuckle at that. We live in such different worlds. "A nightmare, huh?"

She laughs and the sound is like pure honey to me, sweet and smooth and something I feel like I could drown in. I want to make her do it again, a hundred times. "What do you do for work?" she asks.

Aha. I've got her now. I don't bother to hide my smile. "I'm in business," I say, hoping that if I keep the subject broad enough she won't ask me any more questions about it. I have got a backstory, but it's not detailed enough to hold up under any heavy scrutiny.

"Business, huh?" she repeats. "What do you actually do all day, then? Having an office job has always sounded really boring to me."

"I muddle through," I say, and notice how my turn of phrase makes her smile at me. "There's a lot of spreadsheets."

"That makes me wish I paid more attention to math at school," she giggles. Then she leans forward on the bar and fixes me with a look that searches deep into my soul. "If you don't mind me asking, I notice you've got a bit of an accent there. Where are you from?"

"Bellamare," I say confidently, then realize that I have to pretend that she doesn't know what I'm talking about. I shrug bashfully, looking away from her eyes even though I don't want to. I don't want to overdo this. "You've probably never heard of it. It's a tiny island near Italy. Most people don't know where it is."

Her mouth drops open and I make another quip to fill the silence. "If it helps, my geography of the US is terrible too."

"No, no. Sorry," she says, almost stammering out the words. "It's not that at all. It's just... well, you'll never believe this, but my dad came from Bellamare."

"Really?" I say raising both eyebrows. I've been practicing this reaction in the mirror for the last few days, desperately trying to figure out what a realistic expression would be for realizing that you have a connection with a complete stranger to your home country.

My expression needs to convey that it's more than an interesting fact because no one's ever heard of Bellamare, but I can't go making a pantomime of it. That'll just make her think I'm weird.

"Wow," I say, hoping it doesn't sound too forced. "Barely anyone round here has heard of Bellamare, let alone comes from it. We're a pretty tiny country."

"I know," she says. "I hardly ever tell anyone about my dad because I don't usually have the patience for having this conversation. It's no fun when you have to pull out a map to explain your roots."

"I've been there before," I chuckle, and fortunately that's true.

"I can't believe this at all. You're from Bellamare."

"Have you ever been?" I ask.

Her face falls. "No," she says, shaking her head, "But I would love to go. I have the passport and everything. It was one of the few things Dad managed to do for me before..."

"Before...?" I push. I need her to open up to me. I need her to feel like she can trust me.

"He died when I was young," she says, drawing back from me a little. "I've always wanted to go because of him. It would be really easy for me too; I wouldn't even need a visa or anything."

"I hate to sound forward," I say, not feeling bad at all about pushing the conversation on, "but do you want to go for a drink after this? No pressure, no expectations. Just good company. I'll tell you stories of home."

She stares at me for a long moment, and I think for a second that she's going to reject me, but then her face softens and she nods. "Okay," she says, pushing some stray hair back behind her ear. "My shift is nearly over. If you're willing to wait until nine, then yeah. I'll go for a drink. Why not?"

"Sounds perfect," I grin. And it does. "I'm Paul, by the way."

"Chloe," she says with a smile, and I have to stop myself from saying I know.

Without even realizing it, she's stepped straight into my scheme, exactly where I want her.

CHAPTER 4

CHLOE

I have a personal rule that when customers are flirting with me, I'll return the favor if I think they're hot, but I won't let it go any further than that. It feels like a slippery kind of road that I don't want to go down.

Especially with men. You give them an inch and they'll try and take a mile.

And when you work in a bar, nothing is less comfortable than random men trying to get it on with you while you're on shift. But when Paul asks me if I feel like going out for a drink with him, my mouth opens and says yes before my brain really has time to think.

Maybe it's just the Bellamare thing, but he is the perfect vision of a Bellamari man. He has a well-groomed beard and short black hair that, I am sure, if it got a little bit longer, would have a curl to it. His eyes are dark and warm and inviting, his face round but without looking childish, and his skin glows with a summer tan, olive and brown so soft-looking that I almost want to lean over and touch him.

When he reaches out for his glass to take a drink, I can't help but let my eyes linger on his long fingers, on the way his lips wrap around the straw.

I know what I like in a man, and Paul is hitting every target.

Not only does he look beyond gorgeous, but he seems like a nice guy as well. He's

funny. He's charming. He's got a great smile.

From the second he suggests the drink, I'm watching the clock, waiting for the minutes to tick by until we can go somewhere else, together. Finally, it hits nine and I scamper over to where he's sitting at the bar. He hasn't moved since he got here. He's just sat there quietly, waiting for my shift to end.

"Hey," I say, grinning as he grins at me. "Wait here. I'll be back in a second."

I run into the back, take off my apron and change out of my work shirt. I'm glad I've got a spare shirt in here. It's not my cutest ever date outfit but it's a fun blue blouse, perfect for this summer weather.

Trying not to seem too eager, I rush back out into the bar, my heart racing with nervousness as if he might have started chatting someone else up while I've been gone.

But he hasn't.

He smiles when he sees me again.

"Hey," I say as I step out from behind the bar.

"Hey," he says. "Let's get out of here."

We step out onto the street into the hot, sticky New York air. It doesn't seem to faze Paul at all, and I guess he's probably used to hot summers as much as I am, coming from Bellamare. He clearly hasn't spent much time in New York, though, because he keeps looking up at the sky in wonder, staring at all the buildings like they're magical and new.

I lead him through the streets, winding our way through traffic and tourists as we get deeper into the city. He barely says a word, and I wonder if it's occurred to him that he's putting an insane amount of trust in me right now. I could be anyone, taking him anywhere.

In fact, I'm taking him to a nearby favorite bar, somewhere cozy and casual. A good place for a date.

"I suppose we could have just stayed at your bar," Paul says as we get closer.

I shake my head. "I didn't want to run into anyone I know." He raises an eyebrow as if to say oh, I see; worried about people seeing you with a man, but says nothing.

It's not that I think my colleagues would actually say anything. I don't think they care that much. It's more that I've been there for the last seven and a half hours and I want to go somewhere different and more exciting than work.

When we get to the bar, I hold the door open for him. It's dim and subdued in here, the music not too loud, the waiters not too overbearing. I don't feel like anything too intense right now, but the fries they do in here are great, and I'm hungry.

We get settled at a table and he stares at me evenly. "What?" I say.

"Nothing. I just can't believe how lucky I am to be here."

"Paul," I scoff, staring down at the table, "I barely know you."

"Then let me tell you a little more," he says with that easy smile that drew me into this in the first place. "Did you know that Bellamare is the most beautiful country on earth?"

I bite my lip, trying to hold in a giggle. “I hoped it might be. Tell me everything about it. What’s your favorite part?”

He narrows his eyes, thinking. “It’s always gorgeous. But in the summer, when the sky is blue and the sun is bright, going for a walk around Lake Bella is more beautiful than any other place in the world. The trees are such a lush green, and the weather never lets you down. I always wanted to take the person I loved on a picnic there. I’m saving that for someone special.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am

“Why did you come here?” I ask, then take a sip of my cocktail. I hope he doesn’t find it an insensitive question.

He winces, and I grimace, hoping I haven’t blown it completely. This is the hottest guy who’s shown any interest in me in years.

I can’t blow it on our first date.

First date? My own thoughts take me by surprise. First date implies that I’m hoping there’ll be more. Am I really so lonely that I would jump into bed with the first guy who smiles at me?

Whoa, I think. Jump into bed? Get ahold of yourself.

I know how to have fun but that seems unrestrained by anyone’s standards.

“A business trip,” he says. “I’ve been away from home for nearly a year now.”

“Wow. You must miss home.”

He shrugs. “Yeah. But I’ve been traveling the world. It’s good. It’s fun but... yeah, I guess I miss home.”

“I can’t imagine being away from my friends and family for a whole year. I would find that really hard.”

“I think I do,” he says quietly.

“We’ll both get there someday. To Bellamare, I mean.”

“How come you’ve never been?” he asks gently.

Now it’s my turn to shrug. “It’s expensive. Plane tickets cost a fortune — and that’s before you even think about hotels or places to eat or things to do. I could never afford it on my salary.”

A strange glint comes into his eyes, a sparkle like I’ve just told him something amazing, and I can’t help but frown in response. All I said is that I haven’t got enough money to travel. I guess it’s not something he would understand, if he’s a businessman who’s been traveling the world for the last year.

Clearly, money isn’t an issue for him.

“Do you have a savings account for it?” he asks, and I shrug again.

“Yeah, but life keeps getting in the way. One day, though. One day I will get there.”

“Well, if you ever do get there, I would love to show you around.”

“Whoa, tiger,” I say. “Why would I run away to a country with a guy I’ve only just met?”

“Who said anything about running away? I was just proposing a trip, but if you’re down for forever...” He flashes his best grin at me, and I let out a laugh.

“You think you’re so charming, don’t you?” I say, narrowing my eyes.

He smirks at me. “I don’t think it. I know it.”

“Confident, huh?”

“I know what I’m doing,” he says, raising both eyebrows

“Oh, yeah? You just think I’m going to fall for you like that, do you?”

“Well, wearealready having a drink, aren’t we?”

“Yes,” I say firmly. “A drink. But I like to know people a little better before I fall in love with them.”

“So love is on the table, then?”

I scoff and try my best to look serious, but his dumb little grin undoes me and I can’t stop myself from smiling. “We’ll see how it goes.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am

He stares at me again, then offers me his hand. “Hello. My name is Paul. I’m twenty-seven years old. I’m from Bellamare. I’ve got two brothers who are older than me and I love to travel. My favorite drink is a tequila shot. My favorite animal is bears.”

“Bears?” I splutter, taking his hand. Damn him! That is stupidly cute. “What kind of bears?”

“Brown bears,” he says without thinking. I had almost been expecting him not to have a real answer, so the fact that he does takes me by surprise.

“Okay... Why?”

“They’re just interesting. Like, did you know, they can run up to thirty miles per hour. And they love eating salmon.”

His whole face lights up as he talks, and it gives me a light, fuzzy feeling in my chest. I bet if I got him going, he could carry on for a while. And I have a feeling it would be cute to watch.

But I’m interested in digging more into his life. “Business, then, huh? What does your company do?”

His expression falls and I feel a little bit bad about ruining his fun. “It’s like wealth management, property investment, that kind of thing. We do accounting for rich people, basically.”

“Sounds interesting,” I say weakly.

Humming in vague agreement, he reaches out for his drink, his slender fingers wrapping around the glass. I swallow some more of my own drink as I try to distract myself from thinking about his fingers somewhere else.

As we've been talking, we've been leaning in closer and closer, our bodies moving like they're magnetically drawn together.

"You don't have to lie to me," he says. "I know it's boring. But it lets me travel and meet people like you, so it's worth it."

I bite my lip again, unable to hold back the giggle. What is wrong with me? "I guess nobody dreams of being an accountant," I say.

"I think my brother did," says Paul thoughtfully, tapping his cheek. "Then again, Luca is really boring."

I laugh aloud at that, deciding there's no point in trying to hold myself back. I'm having a good time. Why should I pretend I'm not?

"All right — what about you?" he asks, and I take a deep breath. My life isn't all that exciting, especially compared to his.

"Okay... My name is Chloe. I'm twenty-five. I work as a bartender because New York's an expensive place to live and I need to pay my bills somehow. What I really want to do is be an artist, but there's not much money in that. I don't have a favorite animal, but my favorite color is red. And I haven't had anyone come back to my place in years because I still live with my mother, and that's not necessarily a hot look."

"What's the shame in that?" he says, genuinely meaning it. "I live with my parents."

“You do?”

A faint blush rises on his cheeks like he said something he wasn't supposed to, but then he nods. “Yeah, I do. I don't think it's weird at all. Sometimes you do what you've got to do.”

I have no reply for that, and I can't help but notice that we're so close together that it would be easy to lean over and kiss him right now.

Is that what I want? Is that what this burning inside my chest is?

“Tell me about your art,” he says, breaking the moment. “What do you like to do?”

“I paint,” I say with a smile, excited to talk about it — much like he was when talking about bears.

I hardly ever confess my passion to anyone. They either don't care or act like it's a cliché. And I can't tell if Paul really does care or not, but it feels easy to tell him anyway. Something about the way he's putting me at ease makes me want to spill my whole life to him.

“In an ideal world, I'd love to have a studio, maybe put up an exhibition of my work in a gallery one day. I really want to make something that connects to at least one person. If just one person really felt something as a result of my work, then it would be worth it to me.”

“Maybe one day you'll show me,” he says, but this time he doesn't grin. Instead, he keeps looking into my eyes, like he's searching for an answer to a question I don't understand.

It's like he's seeing straight into my soul.

And the worst part is, I think I like it.

CHAPTER 5

PAOLO

The last thing I expected from this was to actually really get on with the woman I'm trying to marry. Obviously, I know that it would help matters, but I've never felt this before.

Chloe's funny and gorgeous and smart, and best of all, she talks to me like I'm a human being. She doesn't just like me because of my status. She likes me because of who I am.

Or at least I hope she likes me, anyway.

This plan seemed completely insane when Schultz suggested it. But for the first time since then, I really feel like it could work.

I glance at my watch and realize we've been talking for hours. It barely feels like any time has passed at all. If it wasn't getting late, I could keep going forever.

"I'm really enjoying this," I tell her.

"Are you?" she says. "So am I."

"Good," I grin. "Good. Me too."

There's a beat of silence, and I decide to try my luck. "Chloe," I say. She hums and raises her eyebrows in question. "I think I'd quite like to kiss you now."

She flushes a little, bringing her hand to her mouth in embarrassment.

“Would that be okay?” I ask.

“Yes,” she says quietly, a smile growing on her face. “Yes, I think it would.”

It doesn't take much to lean in and close the distance so I can press my lips against hers. She's soft and warm and pliable, and as soon as our lips touch, she melts into me, letting out a small moan of pleasure.

Suddenly, it's not enough. I need to feel more of her. I get up, round the table, and wrap my arms around her, pulling her in for another kiss, harder this time. Deeper.

Her tongue flicks out to explore my mouth and I let her, our teeth clacking gently against each other, my hands roaming her back as hers do the same for me. My heart is racing, beating like a drum, like she's holding the stick and playing me like a melody. I've had my fill of girls over the last year, but all of them have felt ephemeral, impermanent.

Somewhere inside me, I know Chloe won't last either, but there's a part of me that almost wishes she would.

A rapid vision rushes through my head of a life that I could have with a woman I'd never known before today. One where we have a marriage, a baby, a family. A lifetogether.

I pull back with a jolt, my own mind frightening me. As soon as I do, her hands drop to her sides, leaving behind a cold ache on my body.

“You okay?” she asks.

I shake my head, then nod quickly, realizing I'm giving her a mixed message. "Yes," I say breathlessly. "I'm okay. More than. Chloe, I know this is sudden, but I would just love to go home with you."

Her blush deepens. "I can't. I mean, my mom. Our apartment, it's just not... it doesn't work."

"No, I get it," I say. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. I meant, I'm staying in a hotel for the week and I would absolutely love it if you would come back and share it with me tonight."

Her mouth opens as she draws a breath, looking deeply into my eyes like she's trying to solve a puzzle, and then she nods slowly. "What the hell," she says. "Promise me a good time and I'll say yes."

"I wouldn't promise anything else."

She grabs the front of my shirt and pulls me in for another kiss, hard and passionate, full of a lust that wasn't there before. Every kiss we share seems to be better than the last.

"Come on," I say, offering her my hand. "Let's get out of here. I have access to the private bar at the hotel. Let's get a drink."

But we don't even manage to make it that far.

As soon as we step into the elevator, I lean in close to her. She turns to me with that smile again, and I feel that magnetic compulsion to kiss her.

She melts into my lips and, without thinking, I wrap my hands around her back and pull her close to me. I'm half-expecting her to pull away, but she doesn't. Instead, she

grinds her hips into mine, and I feel a rush of blood flood to my groin.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am

“Want to skip the bar?” I whisper.

She nods hard. “Yes, yes.”

I punch the button for my floor, and the elevator gets us there in no time. I take her hand and, giggling like schoolchildren, we almost skip along to my room. I fumble with the key card, and the second we cross the threshold, Chloe spins me around and pins me against the door, kissing me hard.

I guess she knows what she wants.

Luckily for her, I want her too. I want her more badly than I’ve ever wanted anyone.

My hands come to her hips, feeling her body beneath her clothes. “Chloe, I need you,” I growl.

“Then have me,” she whispers, reaching up to start unbuttoning her blouse. I push her hands away to do it for her.

We stumble back towards the bed, our hands twining as we fumble with each other’s clothes, tearing buttons and zippers, and when we hit the bed, we tumble backwards, half-undressed and giggling.

Chloe rolls on top of me and leans in to kiss my face, my neck, my chest. She undoes the last few buttons on my shirt and throws it to the ground, and all I can do is cling to her as my desire builds. I’m glad the room was cool when we came in because I’m on fire now. My skin is burning with every touch, my blood pulsing through my veins

like my heart is trying to burst out of my chest.

I can only hope she feels the same.

She looks down at me through her long, dark eyelashes, her eyes deep and enticing. “Let me make you feel good,” she says breathlessly.

“Please,” I gasp, my hand coming to her head to stroke her hair and brush it out of her face, then I slide it down to feel the curve of her cheek beneath my palm.

She shuffles down my body, tracing the outlines of my muscles with her mouth, then she settles between my legs, and her lips wrapping around me are so perfect that I could almost black out.

“Chloe... I’m going to...” I manage to get out before my hips buck and I come almost embarrassingly quickly.

She sits up on her heels with a grin. “I’ve still got it, then?”

I grab her wrists and tug her down on top of me. She lets out a little yelp as she loses her balance, but doesn’t complain as we collide in another kiss. Her lips are salty and damp, and my head spins with the lust bubbling inside me. “Yes,” I growl in her ear. “You’re too good at that.”

The second I regain enough control of my limbs to move, I reach out to her wetness and grin as she writhes on top of me. I slip my fingers inside her and hold her tight as I find her clit and start building her own climax. Her fingernails dig into my skin, and I know I’m going to have marks later, but I don’t care.

Only one thing is important right now, and that’s making Chloe see more stars than she ever has before.

When she comes, she cries out, the sound like music to my ears, and her whole body trembles. She shakes through her aftershocks, then starts giggling, which makes me start giggling. Unsteadily, she pushes herself back upright, then flashes me a hungry grin, noticing my length hardening again. “Do you have condoms?”

“Yeah, hang on,” I say, scrambling to the bathroom to grab the box I bought earlier that day. I stumble back to Chloe, and together, like we’re dancing, we arrange ourselves on the bed, Chloe straddling my waist, and my hands reaching out for her like I’m trying to hold on to smoke.

She rolls the condom over my hardness and wastes no more time. She sinks down onto me, and I don’t hold back my moan of bliss. Her hips start to move, and together we cry out, our bodies creating a harmony that sounds like a revelation to me.

This is sex like it’s meant to feel.

This is two people, connecting on the most intimate level, giving themselves to each other, trusting the other to undo them completely and not let go of any of the pieces. This is two people who aren’t afraid to let it be fun.

And it is fun.

By the time we’re finally wrung out, my chest hurts from laughing and my brain is the most contentedly fuzzy it’s been without an excess of drink in a long time. No one has made me laugh like this in years.

“Stay tonight,” I whisper as we lie together in our afterglow.

“Okay,” she whispers back, and the word is like magic to me. There’s nothing I would have liked to hear her say more.

CHAPTER 6

CHLOE

When I open my eyes, Paolo is still there, chest pressed into my back, his strong arms looped around my body. I can barely believe it.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am

My legs and hips have that sweet ache of sex to them, the one that feels kind of like you ran a long way. Except what we did last night was a lot more fun than running.

I'm not usually a one-night stand person. Usually I like to get to know someone before I'll allow myself to get into bed with them, but if this is what one-night stands can be like, then I understand why other people do them. I never imagined I could feel this kind of connection with someone so quickly. I never dreamed that a stranger would be able to find all the right places to touch right away, and then take pleasure in doing it again, and again, and again...

I close my eyes, not wanting to break this bubble. I have to work later, and the thought of having to leave makes me ache, so I push it away. All I care about right now is lying here in the arms of a man so muscular and handsome, it almost shouldn't be possible.

If I didn't know myself better, I'd say I'd fallen head over heels for him.

It's almost a shame that this is going to be the end of it. Unless it doesn't have to be...

No. I can't let myself start thinking like that.

The truth is, I barely know anything about Paul. Sure, we had a good night, but it's way too soon to be thinking about anything more permanent.

"Good morning, you," mumbles a voice in my ear.

I chuckle and lean back into him. “Good morning.”

“I’m surprised you’re still here.”

I let out a huff of surprise. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

He shrugs, his body moving behind me like a comforting wave. “It’s just not that typical for people to stick around after a night like ours.”

“Why are you still here?” I throw back, rolling over so I can face him.

“I’ve got a beautiful woman in my arms. Why would I not still be here?”

“Stop it,” I say, feeling my cheeks heat.

I’m not used to hearing people say stuff like that to me. It still comes as a shock that anyone would find me attractive at all. Not that I think I’m horrible-looking or anything. I’m just not a stunning beauty. I’m not the kind of person you would typically think of as being a beauty.

“No, I won’t,” he says, grinning, and my heart flutters in that same way it did when he first threw that smile at me.

I never thought I believed in love at first sight. I still don’t think I do, but this attraction is no joke — and there doesn’t seem to be anything I can do to stop it.

I giggle as Paul reaches out and kisses me again. Then, like he’s uncertain of himself, he draws back for a second. “Is this okay?” he asks. “I mean, you do want?—”

“God, yes,” I interrupt, reaching forward to wrap my arms around him. I kiss him firmly on the lips. It’s sweet of him to ask, but there’s nothing I want more than this

right now.

And because I didn't exactly think to pack an overnight bag yesterday, I'm still naked, so my bare breasts press against his chest, and the sensation of my sensitive nipples on his skin makes me shiver.

"I won't allow you to think you're not gorgeous, you know," he whispers in my ear.

I bite my lip, my blush increasing. I almost can't believe he's being sincere. A guy like this isn't supposed to like a girl like me. Guys like this are supposed to like models or blondes, not normal people.

Carefully he rolls over so he's on top of me. Already I can feel him hardening against my leg, his own naked skin warm on mine. I guess he didn't think to put on pajamas either.

Our lips meet again, and this time the certainty of our passion isn't just some drunk fling. Whatever is going on between us is deeper than a fleeting affair. It feels like all of this could be something that, if we put some effort in, could really last.

He grinds against me slowly, not making his lust a secret, and heat rises in my stomach with my own desire. There's something burning inside me, and the only thing that can help it is Paul's body against mine.

I push my hips back against him, and he slides his hand down over my thigh, his fingers slipping into my wet folds and making me cry out. It can't be too comfortable for him to be in this position, but he doesn't stop until I'm coming apart in his arms, his lips on my neck, his arms tight around me, holding me safely.

In this moment, I don't think anything could hurt me at all.

“You ready for more?” he whispers.

“Give it to me,” I reply breathily, reaching out to twine my fingers with his.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am

He holds my hand for a second, then kisses my shoulder as if in apology and shuffles away to grab a condom from the box. I smile, watching as he rolls it on. I love that I don't even have to ask him. I guess I must just have bad taste in men because the last few relationships I had, asking them to care about me at all was like trying to teach a horse calculus.

It was worse than useless.

And then he crawls back onto the bed, and his fingers drift back to my sex, and my brain turns offline almost completely.

How many girls has he slept with in the past? Last night he promised me that he was clean, but he gave me some of the best sex I've ever had. I don't doubt that that's how this morning is going to go as well.

But that doesn't come without practice.

I don't exactly care right now, though. Wondering about his past and why the hell he could possibly have any interest in me is a thought for later, when we inevitably part ways and I'm longing for this ridiculous boy who's brought a whirlwind into my life.

When we climax again, it's together, each setting the other off as we tumble over the edge, clinging to each other like we're all we have to tether ourselves to the earth. Without his hands on me, I'm almost scared that I'd float away.

Breathless, we flop down on the bed, our fingers twining together as we lie in the silent bliss of hormones flowing through our bodies.

“You’re too good at that,” I whisper. “You’re magic.”

“No more magic than you,” he says, pressing his lips into my cheek.

I can’t think of anything else to say to that, so I say nothing, relishing the delight of lying next to him.

How did I get this lucky?

Eventually, he rolls onto his side and asks, “Do you want to shower?”

“With you?”

“If you want.”

“Yes, I’d like that. I need to clean up.”

We lie for a little longer, neither one of us really wanting to get up, but eventually my stickiness and sweat are bothering me too much and I force myself out of bed. Paul follows me, and we step into the shower.

It’s a vast space, almost bigger than the entire bathroom in my apartment at home. We barely need to bump against each other as we rotate into the water, but we do anyway, unable to help pressing our wet bodies together.

It’s intimate and silly and we spend far more time in there than we really need to. By the time we get out, we’ve been clean for a long time.

But a shower is a good excuse to keep staring at his naked chest and back, both of which are very delightful sights.

The idea of never seeing this again makes me ache.

But everything ends eventually, and we get out with wrinkled fingers.

“Chloe,” Paul says as we’re drying off. I wrap my hair up in a towel and hum at him to indicate I’m listening. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Shoot.”

He takes a deep breath, and my stomach lurches like I’ve just jumped out of a plane.

And then he says the thing I’m expecting him to say least of all.

“Would you like to marry me?”

CHAPTER 7

PAOLO

“Marry you?!” Chloe half-shrieks.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am

I open my mouth and close it again. I mean, it wasn't as negative a response as I'd been expecting, but it wasn't a resounding yes.

What had I really been expecting her to say to that, anyway? There's no way asking like that was going to work. I hadn't meant to blurt it out, but I guess I was just high on emotion.

Sure, we've known each other for less than twenty-four hours, but I like Chloe. A lot. I know even now that I wouldn't want anything bad to happen to her.

I still should have asked more tactfully.

With a sigh, I say, "Yeah, I know it sounds weird, but... well... will you just hear me out?"

She raises both eyebrows as if to suggest that I've only got a handful of seconds to make this stop sounding totally insane before she's going to walk out of here forever.

I decide not to beat around the bush any more than I already have.

"Okay. I know this looks like I'm just trying to use you or whatever, but I swear I'm not. I mean, how weird would it have been to have deliberately searched someone out just to ask them to marry me?" I let out an awkward laugh as I feel my web of lies start to constrict around my throat.

And she still doesn't look impressed.

“Ha ha,” I chuckle, then continue. “No. The truth is, I’ve actually been looking for a green card for ages because, as I said, I’m a citizen of Bellamare and I work here in the US, and they’ve been really funny about giving me a visa. And the thing, is if you’re a citizen of Bellamare... well, that means that we could just get married under Bellamare terms — and that would make my marriage legal, both there and here, and it will give us both the benefits of dual citizenship.”

She frowns, her lips running into a thin line. I feel like I’m losing her. “I already have dual citizenship.”

It takes all my strength not to slap my hands over my face and groan. “I’m sorry. I should have brought this up in a different way. I promise I’m smoother than this really.”

“Really?” she asks dubiously.

I must look utterly ridiculous right now. Ridiculous and pathetic, here in my towel, my hair wet and all my dignity lying in pieces on the floor.

Without thinking, I reach out for her hands, but she flinches away, so I drop my hands to my side. Time to try something else. “I do think you’re pretty, Chloe,” I say. “I know I don’t know you very well at all, but I do feel an attraction towards you. That, I promise you, is real. If you’d let me, I’ll take you out on as many dates as you want. Hell, I won’t even make you promise forever. I just really need to not get deported in the next few months.”

“You really think you’ve got lucky here, don’t you?” She narrows her eyes, and I bite my tongue to stop myself making a coarse joke. That won’t help at all right now. But for all her suspicions, she’s still not running. “It’s a hell of a coincidence,” she says like she’s mulling it over. Then she adds, “You really think I’m pretty?”

I nod, grinning. Finally, this conversation is turning back into something I'm good at. "Oh, yes. In fact, I would go as far as to say radiant, gorgeous, and wonderful. I've met a lot of women in my life. I've liked quite a lot of women. But with you there's something I just can't explain. Every time I look at you, it's like there's a spark of something inside me. Something that makes me never want to take my eyes off you."

She blushes, dipping her head as she stares down at the floor. Maybe that was a little too strong. But flattery is all I've got left to make her forget how utterly, utterly ridiculous this entire scheme is.

"Plus," I add, stepping forwards. This time she doesn't resist as I take her hand. "There are a hell of a lot of pretty women out there who are really terrible in bed. You're not one of them. Not that that's make-or-break in a relationship of course, but it's definitely a plus."

"You're not so bad yourself," she says, blinking up at me through her eyelashes.

I smile. "So, you'll do it?"

"Marry you?" she says, tensing.

"Yes. Why not?"

"I can think of like three or four hundred reasons why not."

"But none of them are that I'm not hot, right?"

She laughs, pulling her hands away, leaving me cold like I've just lost a vital part of something. "No. None of them are that you're not hot."

"Then what?" I push, stepping towards her. I don't want to force anything — if she

rejects me hard, I'll back off — but while she's wavering, I've got to try. "Would it really be so bad? It's just paperwork. I'm not asking for a white wedding."

"What if that's what I want?"

"Then I'd give it to you."

"Really?" she says, folding her arms defiantly as she stares up at me. "Why? As you say, you barely know me. Why would you do this for a stranger?"

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am

I meet her eyes and stare deep into them. “Tell me you feel nothing between us. Look at me and tell me truthfully if you feel nothing.”

She stares back, her mouth open, but she doesn’t say anything. It’s the closest I’m going to get to a confession.

“Exactly. I’m not asking for love. I’m just asking you to help me out. And maybe we can see what happens from there.”

A long silence passes between us, the air crackling with a tension that I can’t name — half lust, half confusion, and one hundred percent uncertainty.

And her expression isn’t changing. I’m losing her.

Suddenly, I don’t know which idea is worse. Losing my chance to go home, or losing her completely.

“I’ll give you a hundred thousand dollars!” I blurt, then wince. I should have brought that up more smoothly as well.

Chloe’s eyes open wide as she processes what I said. “You’ll dowhat?”

“A hundred thousand. I’ll give you a hundred thousand dollars as compensation for having to put up with me. The marriage, it’ll just be a formality. I’m not asking for a ceremony, none of that pomp and circumstance. I just need the piece of paper. I promise we can take our actual relationship as slowly as you want, and if you don’t want it, we can leave it at that. I’m not trying to force anything weird on you, I

promise. I just need something, and you can help me get it.”

“A hundred thousand dollars...” she echoes. “Seriously?”

“Take it or leave it,” I say, offering my hand to her.

If she says no this time, I’ll drop it.

My heart leaps into my mouth as she looks up at me again.

“This is crazy,” she says quietly. But then she takes my hand. “Okay. What the hell. I’ll marry you.”

CHAPTER 8

CHLOE

The second I get home, I fall into my mother’s arms.

She pulls me in tight and kisses my forehead, holding me without a word.

“Mom, I’ve done something stupid,” I say, my voice shaking with the sobs I want to let out.

“What’s the matter, baby?” she says, stroking my head. “We can fix it, whatever it is. You and me, together, like always.”

I squeeze her, breathing deeply. Already, I’m starting to feel calmer.

It might not be ideal to be living with my mother in my twenties, but renting in New York City is beyond expensive, and me and Mom have always gotten along well. We

don't agree on everything, obviously, and sometimes she's so annoying I want to scream, but she's always there for me.

I know she always will be.

"Oh, God," I say, releasing Mom from the embrace so I can cover my face with my hands. Already this morning is starting to feel like a dream, and last night even more.

Mom looks at me expectantly, and I blurt it out. "I think I might just have agreed to get married to someone to get him a green card."

I don't know why I'm expecting to get told off for it — I'm an adult making my own choices, after all. But this feels like a teenage kind of stupid mistake to make. I squeeze my eyes shut and wait for the lecture to begin.

Instead, there's silence. I crack open my eyes. Mom has covered her mouth with her hand, trying not to laugh. "You've done what?"

She guides me to the sofa, placing a hand on my shoulder. We sit down with a flop and she looks at me firmly. "Tell me what happened. Everything. I won't be upset."

I take a shaky breath, a tear running down my cheek. "I met this guy last night," I start, and Mom raises an eyebrow but says nothing. "He was cute. I thought it might be a bit of fun."

"And was it?"

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am

“Mom!” I scoff, not particularly wanting to discuss my sex life with her. Still, unbidden, the memory of Paul’s body against mine flows through my mind, making me shiver. “Yes. But that’s not the point. This morning, I was getting ready to go, and he told me he had been looking for a green card.”

“So he’s not from the US?”

“No,” I clench my fists at my sides. This isn’t going to be an easy conversation in so many ways. “He’s from Bellamare.”

Mom takes a sudden, sharp breath, recoiling like she’s been slapped. “Bellamare?” she whispers.

I nod. “Yeah. Like Dad.”

“They’re handsome, aren’t they?” Mom jokes weakly, and I look away to try and hide my blush, which is probably answer enough.

All my life, I’ve watched my mother doing her best to raise me, and as I’ve grown older, I’ve just got more grateful for everything. I can’t begin to imagine how hard it is to be left alone as a single parent, while grieving for a partner you had loved and lost.

And Mom did love Dad. I don’t remember him that well, but Mom always talks about him with the kind of affection you dream of someone feeling for you. It was sudden, when he passed away. That’s something Mom doesn’t like to talk about, and I try not to bring it up.

That much I do get.

“And this is why this man wants to marry you, I suppose? Because you’re both Bellamari?”

“It’s just a weird coincidence,” I shrug. “He’s already from Bellamare; it’s not like he’s going to get anything out of marrying me for that. He told me he’s a businessman, and that he needs a green card for work.”

“Doesn’t that sound kind of strange to you, honey? Can’t he get a work visa?”

I slouch back into the sofa. “I don’t know. And I’m not stupid, Mom — I did question that already. It sounds like they’re giving him trouble with it, that’s all.”

Mom takes my hand and covers it with both of hers. “Chloe, you know I support you doing anything you want.”

“I know, Mom.”

“But marriage? Even if it’s not for the ceremony, even if you had fun last night... I just don’t want you to get hurt, that’s all. I don’t want you to get trapped in a situation you can’t get out of.”

I lean forward to rest my head on Mom’s shoulder. “I know. But he really did seem like a reasonable guy, and I can always divorce him later on, once his job works out.”

Mom frowns. “Reasonable, maybe. Desperate, absolutely.”

I scoff at that. “I’m sure he was desperate, but that doesn’t mean I shouldn’t trust him. What kind of person sleeps with someone just to manipulate them into marriage?”

There's a long pause while Mom thinks, and I know that she's thinking, Honey, you're being naïve. There are a lot of people out there who would do that kind of thing, but I don't care. I've chosen this now.

And I can always back out. It's not like he's forcing me into anything. It's not like he held me under threat and forced me to sign my name. He asked. And sure, he offered me money, but nobody trying to trick someone into doing what they want looks at you like you're their world.

Do they?

"Plus," I say, trying to drop the news casually. "He's offered me a lot of money."

Mom's face falls. "How much? Chloe, what are we getting involved in here?"

"A hundred thousand dollars," I say quietly. "We could do so much with that, Mom. All I have to do is marry this guy. It's only temporary. And anyway, I did like him. He seemed great."

"A hundred thousand dollars!"

"Honestly, Mom, you didn't raise me stupid. I know what I'm doing."

I've jumped on the defensive now, but I can't explain to her why this feels like the right thing to do. I can barely explain it to myself.

I just know that this isn't the mistake it looks like.

Mom squeezes my hands again, her concern written all over her face, barely concealed, like the dark circles of stress underneath her eyes. This is why I have to do this. I've been given the chance to change her life. I have to take it.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am

“Promise me you’ll be careful. Don’t do anything without letting me know, okay?”

“Okay, I promise.”

But even as I can see the doubt in her eyes, I grow more and more certain. It’s weird, but this is going to be for the better. I don’t know why, but I know it. Somewhere deep inside, I know that this is right.

CHAPTER 9

PAOLO

Even though Chloe assured me she was going to be here, I still have a moment of fear that she won’t show up.

I arrived at the courthouse thirty minutes early and immediately started freaking out that she wasn’t going to be here. Not that she had any obligation to arrive early.

But I don’t know what I’m going to do if this doesn’t work out. There’s no way I can make myself do this again. Meeting Chloe was fun, but hunting down someone else with Bellamari citizenship just to pay them off seems like far too much work. Plus, my bank account isn’t infinite. It’s not sad, for sure, but it’s not going to be able to handle too many more of these big purchases.

No. It’s either Chloe or I’m just going to have to think of something else.

As the time for our appointment grows closer, I get more and more nervous. The

woman at reception throws me a sympathetic look, and I wonder just how many people like me she's seen.

Just how many people have promised to sign their lives away and never showed up?

This whole thing is making me really reassess how I feel about marriage. Not that I felt particularly favorable towards it before, but this is just the worst. I don't think I could handle the stress of depending on another person, let alone the big fanfare of a real wedding.

At least if I'm by myself, I know I only have to look after me.

What am I going to do if I have to start genuinely worrying about her too?

I guess I had assumed that any girl I tried this on would just agree to the paperwork and then leave immediately, not wanting to be any further part of my life. I would understand that. After all, if someone paid me a fortune just to sign a piece of paper, I wouldn't feel any obligation to them at all. Gratitude, perhaps.

But it doesn't seem like any real basis for a relationship.

And it wouldn't be, except me and Chloe just seemed to click so well. I've spent a long year chatting up girls, going home to their beds, giving them a really good time. It's been fun getting to know them a little. Some of them I've even gone back to a bunch of times.

Plenty of them were very nice. Plenty of them made me laugh. But none of them clicked like me and Chloe did.

I'm not any sort of believer in true love. None of that destiny, or knowing at first sight, or anything like that. But that is almost what this feels like. Like something

real.

It's not real, though, I remind myself. All this is just a way to get home.

I look at my phone again. Maybe she's let me know that she's not going to show up. My heart freezes when I see that I do have a message from her. Stuck in traffic, be there in five.

It's a cold, efficient message. Nothing like the kind of thing you would expect two people about to get married to say to each other.

But it does soothe my nerves. She hasn't forgotten.

I really am going home.

When Chloe walks through the door, I jump to my feet and I can't help but grin at her.

She's wearing white. It's not exactly a bridal gown, but it does make her look absolutely beautiful. The fabric clings to her waist, and the skirt billows around her knees, drawing my attention to her long legs and the plunge of her cleavage.

"Hello," I say.

She smiles back at me. "Hello."

"I'm glad you came."

"Were you starting to worry I wouldn't?"

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am

I don't say anything, letting my silence be answer enough.

"Come on, then," she says, holding out her hand. "Are they ready for us yet?"

I glance up at the receptionist, and she nods with a small smile. "Yeah, I think so."

"Have you been waiting for long?" Chloe asks.

"Yeah," I say sheepishly, rubbing the back of my neck. "I was bored."

She doesn't comment on the fact that I must have gotten here really early, but I can see the thought glistening behind her eyes.

Carefully, and desperately wanting to change the conversation, I take hold of her hand. She nods at me, and together we step up to the reception desk. The receptionist glances down at her computer. "Paul and Chloe, yes?"

"Yes," we say in unison.

The woman clicks a few things on her computer, then nods. "Okay. Thanks for waiting. Mr. Hopkins is nearly ready for you. If you take a seat, he'll get you soon."

"Thank you," I say, but before we can go and sit down, a man in a well-fitting suit comes through the door.

"Paul and Chloe?" he asks with a toothy smile. "Come with me."

We follow him through some corridors into a simple office room. He gestures to us to take a seat. “Welcome,” he says. “I’m glad to have you here.”

“We’re glad to be here,” I say, ignoring the side-eye Chloe gives me.

“All right,” he says, taking his own seat, slapping his hands down on his thighs. “Are you ready?”

“Yes,” I say decisively, then look at Chloe. She nods with slightly less certainty, her smile not quite real.

I hope Mr. Hopkins doesn’t think that we’re being strange or suspicious. I guess he’s probably seen worse than us. At least we have the appearance of liking each other.

“Okay, then. I have some paperwork for you. But before we get to signing, if you want to say anything to each other, now’s a perfect time.”

We turn to each other, staring into each other’s eyes, each waiting for the other to start. I realize that I didn’t prepare one single thing to say about the woman who’s technically about to become my wife. Not that I even know enough about her to start making a speech — but the officiant is looking at us expectantly, so someone has to say something.

I take hold of Chloe’s hands and smile warmly at her. “Chloe, you are one of the kindest, most generous women I’ve ever met,” I say. She blinks in surprise, like she wasn’t expecting me to say anything like this. “You’ve made me feel the happiest I’ve felt in a long while, and I’ve had a lot of fun in the time I’ve known you. I can’t begin to tell you how grateful I am that you’ve agreed to be my wife.”

The officiant purses his lips, then smiles, and I get the sense that he’s holding back a comment. I guess there are one too many men who fail to say anything nice about the

woman they're supposed to love.

It's not like I'm even technically lying or anything, anyway. I am grateful to Chloe. She's giving me everything I want.

Realizing that she should probably say something too, Chloe squeezes my hands. "I'm grateful too," she starts, then bites her lip, stalling as she tries to summon words to match those I've just said to her.

I'm glad I'm not the only one who forgot to write fake vows.

To Mr. Hopkins, I suppose we probably just look like a nervous young couple rather than two people who are doing this for some kind of arrangement. That's good. That's not going to raise any suspicions.

This is all going swimmingly.

"You've given me more of an opportunity than you can ever know," Chloe continues. "And if I had to call anyone my husband, I'm glad that it's someone as caring and giving as you." She smiles, satisfied with her vow.

"Great," says Mr. Hopkins in what might be the most businesslike tone ever. "All right. So, because yours is a bit of a special case, unfortunately that means there's going to be a lot more to sign than is typical. We'll start with the easy one."

He produces several sheets of paper, all written in my native tongue. Chloe squints at the Bellamari, trying to decode it. Does she even speak a word of it at all? It's not a language they teach in schools over here, and it's unlikely that her dad was able to teach her based on how young she was when he died. I wonder what she thinks of it. It's not exactly Italian, but to the unpracticed ear it's close enough.

“Because you are both Bellamari citizens, this is a legal record showing that your marriage will be recognized both here in the US and in Bellamare. It should grant you both all the same legal rights as any citizen would get over there.”

I clench my fist to stop myself grinning too widely. I can't believe this was so easy.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am

“Please,” says Mr. Hopkins, gesturing for us to do what we came here to do.

We both pick up a pen and sign the document. I glance over it, and it says exactly what the man said it does: that our marriage is fully legal and recognized in Bellamare. That, as full citizens, we’re allowed unhindered right of entry. The thought of it makes my head spin.

“Okay, great,” says Mr. Hopkins. His face twists into something approaching regret, and he says, “Now, you’ll be surprised to learn the US makes things a bit trickier for dual citizens.” Chloe snorts a laugh. “Here’s the paperwork to pronounce you both married, and here,” he says, producing some more paperwork from his manilla folder, “is the official start of your process to becoming a citizen.”

He pushes the papers towards me, and I pick them up, the words swimming in front of my eyes. “Unfortunately, it’s a little more complex than simply signing a form, but your chances of getting rejected after this are very slim. When it’s a legitimate marriage between two people who love each other, this country has no problem with welcoming new citizens.”

I start laughing, and Chloe glares at me, making me stop. Maybe he wasn’t making a joke, then. I cough awkwardly to cover my gaffe, then say, “Okay, thank you. Brilliant. Let’s sign, then, shall we?”

He gives us a strange look but says nothing else. I’d love to know where we rank on the personal list of weirdest ceremonies he no doubt has in his head.

I sign it quickly. Mr. Hopkins takes the paperwork back, double-checks it, then gets

to his feet. “Excellent,” he says. “Well, then, it’s my great privilege to announce that, in the eyes of the US Government, I can officially pronounce you husband and wife.”

He looks at us both expectantly. Chloe and I share a look, and almost panic as we realize that this is the part where most people kiss. Chloe glances down at my lips as if to ask me a question, and to save her any more awkwardness, I lean in and press my lips chastely against hers.

“Congratulations,” says Mr. Hopkins. “You are all good to go as far as I’m concerned. Whenever you’re ready, you can head out.”

“Thank you,” we both say, getting up at the same time and almost scrambling out of the office. His words were saying there’s no rush, but I imagine he has a whole lot of these to do today, and I don’t want to hold him up.

The second we hit the street outside, I let out a sigh of relief. “Thank you so much,” I say. “You have no idea what this means to me.”

Chloe gives me a puzzled look, but doesn’t follow up with whatever question is in her mind. “Thank you, too. I really meant it in there. You have no idea what this money is going to do for me.”

“No problem at all. Anything for my wife.” I wink at her and she blushes.

“Well, I suppose that’s it, then,” she says, grimacing.

“It doesn’t have to be.”

“What do you mean?”

“Isn’t it traditional after getting married to go back home and consummate it?”

Her blush deepens, spreading pink right across her nose, and I have to resist commenting on how cute it is. “You mean...” she starts, stumbling as her mind races to catch up. “You actually want me to come home with you?”

I take hold of her hand and squeeze it gently. “As I said, you’re my wife now. And that relationship can mean whatever you want it to mean. If you never want to see me again, I get that. I won’t push for anything. But I do find you very attractive. If you would let me romance you, I would.” She lets out a chuckle of disbelief. “Plus,” I add, “I do have to give you that check.”

“Okay, then,” Chloe says slowly. “I don’t think Mom would be too happy at you coming back to our place, though.”

“I bought an apartment,” I say casually, and when her mouth drops open, I quickly add, “I needed a base here. It’s not a big deal.”

“Sure...” she says. Then, before I can dig myself any deeper, she says, “Let me tell Mom I’m not coming home. Then we can go back to yours, okay?”

I flag down a taxi while Chloe speaks to her mother, and my stomach twinges as she does. In the short time that I’ve known her, she’s spoken to her mom more times than I’ve eventhoughtabout mine.

When we get to my place, I tip the driver well, then take Chloe by the hand and lead her up to my new penthouse.

“Wow,” she says as we step out of the elevator and into the apartment. “This is awesome.”

I close the door behind us and grin at the way she looks around, scanning every inch of the walls as she takes in the sleek grey paint and silver finishes. “It’s all ours.”

“You know, I already had lunch, but...” She bites her lip, her eyes raking over me. “I am hungry for something else...”

With that, she steps forward and kisses me, and I feel myself melting in her hands.

My own hands travel to her breasts without thinking, and I smile into her mouth as our kiss deepens, our lips pressing harder together. She moans as our tongues entwine, and she grinds her hips forwards, pressing against my hardening, aching length.

We push each other back towards the bedroom, shedding our clothes as we go. By the time we fall on the bed, we’re both naked, unable to take our hands off each other.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am

“Here’s to marriage,” I say crawling up over her to kiss her face.

“To marriage,” she grins, kissing me back then flipping me so she’s straddling my waist.

And that’s the last thing we say for a long time — because we’re too busy making each other see stars.

CHAPTER 10

CHLOE

When I wake up, Paul is gone.

I feel a pang inside my chest, wondering if the honeymoon of this strange relationship is over already. If it is, at least I enjoyed it while it lasted.

As far as arranged marriages go, I could definitely have done worse.

I decide I should make the most of sleeping in such a plush and comfortable bed and snuggle back in, closing my eyes and letting sleepiness overcome me. The pillows smell like Paul, and I breathe him in deeply, already missing his musk, the feeling of his firm body against mine.

But three seconds after I decide to drift back to sleep, the bedroom door opens and Paul enters with two mugs.

“Coffee?” he asks. “I’m sorry, I don’t know how you take it, so I just assumed cream and sugar.”

“That’s perfect. I like it sweet.”

“Just like you,” he grins.

I shake my head. “You really don’t have to flirt with me like that, you know.”

“Why?” He rounds the bed to place one mug on my bedside table, then crosses back to place the other on his side, where he crawls into bed, snuggles up beside me, and squeezes me tight. Gently, he nuzzles his nose into the crook of my neck, like he’s trying to breathe me in. “I know this is only going to last for so long. That means I have to make the most of it now.”

“You make me feel something so strange,” I whisper to him, curling into him.

“It had better be a good strange,” he says with a grin.

He leans in to kiss me, and I smile. “Oh, yes,” I say, letting my fingers trace their way down his toned chest, bumping over his defined abs. “It’s a very good strange.”

With that he takes hold of my shoulders and presses me back into the bed, kissing my neck, my shoulder. I let out a yelp of surprise and giggle as I give myself over to his attack.

“Your lips feel so damn good,” I groan.

“I think they’d feel better somewhere else.” He flashes me that wicked look of his, then starts snaking a trail of kisses down my body.

All I can do is moan helplessly, electric current surging through my limbs, making my hips buck at even the lightest touch. And then his mouth hits my wet sex, and my eyes roll back in my head. “Don’t you dare stop,” I hiss, and instead of words he just doubles down.

It feels like we spend hours like that, relishing each other’s pleasure, holding one another, exploring our bodies, seeing what happens if they collide together. I have no idea how many times I come, but eventually my stomach lets me know that all this physical activity is making me hungry.

“Is that your way of telling me you want breakfast?” says Paul, cuddling into me.

“Isn’t it more like lunch now?” I giggle.

“That’s just semantics.”

He starts kissing my neck again, and I let out a happy sigh. “Oh, don’t start that again. If you start kissing me there, we’re never going to get out of this bed.”

“Would that be such a bad thing?”

“No,” I say shuffling to face him. “But I am hungry. And I could do with a shower.”

“Then both of those things you will have,” he grins.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am

He wraps me tightly in his arms once more, then releases me so we can get up. Reluctantly, I peel myself out of bed and pad off to the shower. As I enter, I marvel at the size of the bathroom. It took me aback last night, and it's not losing its impact today.

I'm not surprised at all to find the water pressure in the shower better than perfect. Looking down at my body, I can see the evidence of our lovemaking — red marks from teeth and lips, scattered remains of sublime pleasure.

By the time I emerge again and head into the kitchen, Paul has whipped up a breakfast like I've never seen before. "This isn't exactly traditional Bellamari fare," he says sadly. "It's hard to get all the stuff in the US. But it's the closest I could do."

There are pastries and toast, fruits that I can barely name, all laid out in a huge spread. "Wow. Thank you. You didn't have to do all this for me."

He crosses the room to wrap his arms around my waist, and pulls me into his chest. "How many times do I have to remind you? You're my wife. That means it's my job to do nice things."

"Well, this is a very nice thing." I rest against his chest for a moment, then realize he's wearing a button-up shirt. "Wait a second. You look like you're about to go out."

He looks at me apologetically, his face falling. "Unfortunately, I just got some bad news from home. I have to leave this afternoon. But I've left the spare key for you on the table, so please feel free to stay here as long as you like."

“You’re leaving?” I stammer, taking a step back from him.

“I have to,” he says, then rummages in his pocket and produces a small rectangle of paper. “The check, as promised.”

He presses a hundred thousand dollars into my hands and kisses me on the forehead. “I’m sorry to have to go like this. Call me later if you like.”

“Sure...” I say, dumbfounded.

He kisses me once more, then, without even looking back, he marches away to the door, pulls on his shoes, and leaves.

I stare down at the paper in my hand.

All I can do now is let out a sob.

Then I slump down at the table and bury my face in my hands. I’m not sure how long I sit there for, letting the turbulence of emotions out until I have no tears left to cry.

And then I get up again.

I should probably go home. I collect up as much of the breakfast as I can manage into a bag, then rush down to the first floor, back to the ground, where there are noisy cars and the atmosphere wavers in the heat.

I’m about half a block along the street when I decide to flag down a taxi. It would be good to let someone else drive me home. And it’s not like I can’t afford it now.

Mom’s on the phone when I get back, and I can’t pretend I’m not relieved. Later, no doubt, she’ll ask me about the ceremony. She knew it was today, and it took

absolutely everything in me to stop her from showing up. Eventually she accepted that she really didn't need to come because this wasn't a proper wedding and would hardly count as one, and that Paul was a real, non-murderous guy.

I did have to promise her that I would let her plan my real wedding, but that's not something I can see happening for a long time yet.

As I dump the bag on the floor, I wave at her, gesturing at the breakfast that I'm putting out on the counter.

Then I vanish away to my room so I can lie down on my bed and stare at the ceiling.

I want to cry, but the tears won't come. All that's left is a sense of hollowness. A complete numb emptiness.

Paul is gone.

He's gone. He got what he wanted, and despite all the pretty words, I have the sickening feeling I'm never going to see him again.

How have I gotten so attached in just a few short days?

How could I have let myself believe that this man cared about me?

But that's the thing. I do believe it. Nothing he said to me gave me the impression that he was being insincere. Maybe he's away at home now laughing, thinking about how stupid I was to fall for all his promises, how shallow I was to accept his proposal.

If I'm being realistic, I'm probably never going to hear from him again.

But he gave me what I wanted too. With this, my dream is going to come true.

So why does it feel like it's come at a cost?

CHAPTER 11

PAOLO

"Passport?" the customs officer asks as I step up to the desk.

This seemed like such a good idea yesterday. But today, all I have is questions. What if I get recognized? What if I get thrown out? What if the passport doesn't work?

I'm kind of hoping that people round here have forgotten about me while I've been gone. I doubt I'll have been forgotten completely, but at least I won't be front-page headlines anymore, so I won't be at the front of anyone's mind. People are remarkably good at not paying attention.

"All right, sir, you're good to go. Enjoy your stay in Bellamare," the officer says, pulling me out of my thoughts.

"Thank you," I breathe, hoping my relief isn't too obvious. But if the officer notices it, she doesn't comment.

As I head through the airport, I feel like I could be dancing on clouds. I step out into the daylight and grin. I'm home. I can't believe this is working.

Despite the fact that it's summer, I pull my scarf around my face and push my glasses up my nose. Quickly, I flag down a taxi and jump in the back, keeping my sunglasses

over my eyes for the whole journey. I can't get recognized now. I've come too far for that.

I give the driver directions to the town just outside our stately home. I don't want to direct him straight to the house. That would be suspicious. But if I head to the town, I can at least walk up to the palace without too much hassle.

Fortunately, the driver says nothing to me on the journey, so all I do is stare in silence out of the window for forty minutes, watching the green fields go by, making out the ocean in the distance. I've missed this place so much more than I realized.

When the driver pulls into the town, I thank him and hand him his fare in cash. Then I jump out, shoving my hands in my pockets as he drives away.

Then I start hiking up to my home.

I didn't even bring a bag. After a ten-hour flight, that's starting to look like an oversight now. I guess I was assuming that my parents were just going to let me back in the house so I could pick up all my old stuff again.

That's assuming that they even still have any of my old stuff. What if they threw it all out with me?

As I approach the door, my heart starts pounding in my chest. Maybe this is a really, really bad idea. It's not like anyone's going to want to see me. That's why they got rid of me in the first place.

I pace back and forth for a while at the door, trying to figure out what I'm going to say to whoever opens it. At least it won't be my parents. It's not like the king answers his own front door.

If I'm lucky, it will be one of the staff who used to like me.

If I'm not lucky, it'll be one of my brothers.

At least if it's Miguel or Luca, our screaming match will bring someone running.

Finally, I raise my fist and do it. I hammer on the door seven or eight times, not intending to stop until someone comes for me.

When Maria opens the door, I let out a cry of surprise. Her mouth drops open in shock, her hands falling limp at her side. "Prince Paolo?" she asks, almost whispering. "Can it really be you?"

I nod, releasing the breath I'd been holding. I smile. "Yeah, it's me. I'm home."

Her face quickly changes from delight to a panicked fury. "Come, come," she says, ushering me inside. "What on earth are you doing here? By the saints, have you been seen? You're going to be in such trouble."

"I know," I groan, running my hand through my hair. "But I had to come back. I'm a different person now. I promise. I want to do better. I want to pay my respects to Grandfather. I want to prove myself."

"It's not me that you have to persuade," she says, leading me through the house.

I grimace, knowing that she's right.

"We should hide you," she says as we step into one of the small, unused rooms near the kitchens.

This stately home is one of those built so many years ago, when servitude was still

meant staff running around houses through secret passages so they couldn't be seen by the aristocracy. We still call those staff servants today, but that's mostly a linguistic thing now.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am

In truth, many of these cubbyholes and little passages were just a fun diversion for me and my brothers when we were young. For as long as I've been alive, and even longer than that, nobody in this country has subscribed to the notion that servants should go unheard and unseen.

I am damn grateful for the hiding hole now, though.

Maria and I stand there for a while, trying to devise the best way of breaking this news to my parents. Eventually, we decide that we should just come out with it.

I suggest coming in through the side entrance, the personal one, and Maria tells me it would be best to use the front door. She tells me that she will come and welcome me in, as if she's surprised, and call for my parents.

It's not my favorite plan in the world, but it does seem better than sneaking around. She shows me out back onto the street through the side entrance, and I walk slowly around to the front door. It's a huge, imposing wooden thing, complete with carvings of horrible gargoyles and hinges that, no matter how much they get oiled, always creak.

I knock tentatively on the door, and a few seconds later, true to her word, Maria returns.

"Paolo!" she exclaims, gasping in shock and doing a startlingly good job of acting like she didn't know it was going to be me. "You're back!"

"I'm back."

She rushes over to the intercom by the door and buzzes up to my parents' living quarters. "Your Majesties," she says, "we have a visitor."

There's a faint sound of a reply that I can't quite distinguish, but I can easily imagine my father saying why should we care? "Trust me, Your Majesty. You should come down. It's your son."

We head through to the drawing room that my parents use to entertain guests. It's a grand, stately room with some hideous gold wallpaper and carpet that hasn't been replaced in fifty years. They're very proud of this room. It's got some historical significance or something.

Personally, I think it's ugly. It's a good job I'm never going to be king, because if I were, I would probably redecorate the whole place.

We sit for what feels like forever until my parents enter the room. They push the door open slowly, and when I see them I get to my feet. I grin sheepishly. "Hi, Mom. Dad. How are you?"

"Paolo," says my father, staring harshly at me. "You're not supposed to be here."

"No, I know," I say, clenching my fists as I try to hold my nerve. "I'm sorry for lying, but... well, I've come to pay my respects to Grandfather. I can't believe no one told me that he had passed."

"It seems you're struggling with the concept of being exiled, then," my mother says coldly.

I take a deep breath. I have to not fight with them. The most important thing about this conversation is that I don't fight with them. If they kick me back out now, there's no way I can face them like this again.

I decide not to say anything about the inheritance. “I loved Grandpa. I get that I’m not supposed to be here, but it felt unfair that everyone else should get to say goodbye to him and I didn’t. I don’t care that I wasn’t invited to the funeral. I just want to see his grave. I can go again after that. I won’t complain. But a year in exile has taught me a couple of things. That was the point, wasn’t it? To teach me a lesson?”

“And what lessons have you learned?” asks my father. I don’t think he believes a single word I’ve said. I’m not surprised. I probably wouldn’t either, if I were him.

If they’ve been following my travels — and I don’t doubt that they’ve been keeping an eye on me in one way or another — it doesn’t exactly look like I’ve done a whole lot except party for the last year. To any outside observer, I guess it doesn’t seem like I’m changed at all.

“I found a wife,” I blurt.

“A wife?” says my mother, the faintest expression of surprise peeking through her mask of neutrality. I get the sense that she wants to end that sentence asking why I didn’t tell them, but of course, I had no way of telling them. It’s not like they would have listened to me anyway, and it’s not even like my marriage is real.

“Yes, a wife,” I say, holding my head up high. “Her name is Chloe. She’s just a normal person, and I met her doing normal-person things. She lives in New York, and her dad was from Bellamare. We’ve got a lot in common, actually. It’s been really interesting getting to know her. With her, it’s not about me being a prince at all. She’s taught me how to be a real human.”

“And do you think that is enough to warrant us lifting your exile?”

“No, I guess not,” I sigh. “But surely it means something. I’m responsible now. I’m grown up. A real human woman fell in love with me and married me, of her own free

will. It had nothing to do with my title.”

They don’t have to know that that’s more or less a lie.

Actually, it’s pretty much one hundred percent a lie. Chloe doesn’t know who I am. And the reason she married me couldn’t have had anything less to do with love.

“You do realize,” says my father, “any marriage you’ve had will not be recognized by this country. Any wedding you had away from us will not count, in our eyes.”

“Then we’ll get married again,” I say defiantly. “And this time we’ll do it properly. I’m not embarrassed to have Chloe recognized in front of everyone. I’m not embarrassed to show who I am now.”

They both stare at me, neither one of them convinced. It’s not the first time I’ve had a passionate outburst in front of them.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am

But this is probably the least like a petulant child I've ever sounded.

My mother shoots my father a look, and my father nods grimly. I have no idea what the silent conversation they're having is, but I'm certain that I'm not going to like their response.

"Very well," says my father. "For now, you can stay. But you are not to leave this house. Nobody is to see you. We are willing to accept your story as an honest one for now. But if you're planning to stay in this country long term, it would be best if you and yourwife—" he says the word with such disdain that it makes me recoil, "—had better start making arrangements for her to come here for a formal introduction."

I nod hesitantly. "She'll need to get time off work. That doesn't happen just overnight. You have to give us time to plan."

They share another look, then my father says, "Two months. We'll give you two months for this wife of yours to make an appearance. If she is as good and honest as you say, then we will have no problem with her. And if you're willing to show some respect and responsibility for your duties, then we will graciously put an end to your exile and allow you all the full rights of citizenship again."

I nod, bowing my head as I try to keep my face serious and hide the panic that has started swirling around in my stomach.

Invite Chloe here? What a mess this is becoming.

She has no idea that she married a prince. She has no idea what scheme she's tangled

up in. There's no way I can be certain she'll say yes to the trip, even less that she'll agree to go along with the deception.

"Thank you," I say to my parents instead of voicing any of these fears. "I'll speak to her tonight. We will get something arranged. You're going to like her, I promise."

Neither of them say anything as they leave the room.

That night, I lie in bed and toy with the idea of texting Chloe, but I can't figure out what to say.

So, I leave it.

And then I leave it the next day. And then a week goes by. Then two.

And every night I redraft the message that I'm trying to send.

And every night, I don't send it.

CHAPTER 12

CHLOE

SEVEN WEEKS LATER

"Mom, I'm home!" I shout as I come through the front door.

"I'm in the kitchen," Mom yells.

I take my shoes off in the hall and step through to the smell of my mother cooking.

“I’m making Bolognese,” she says, glancing over her shoulder at me. “Just the way you like it.”

“You’re the best,” I say, scampering up to her and wrapping my arms around her waist.

“No problem,” she says, covering one of my hands with hers. “How was the real estate agent?”

“Fine,” I say, not releasing my mother from my embrace. “We’ve got some options for a new place. They said that with my credit rating and the amount we’ve got to put down, we should have no problem buying an apartment.”

“That’s great,” smiles Mom. “You know, I do understand if you want to move out by yourself. To live your own life a little...”

“No way,” I scoff. “You’ve done so much for me, Mom. Now it’s my turn to look after you.”

She squeezes my hands, then gently pushes me away so she can go back to her pot.

“It smells good,” I say, breathing in the rich tomato smell.

She smiles warmly, but I can’t help but notice how tired she looks. The wrinkles in her face are deeper than ever, the bag under her eyes dark. She’s been through some hard times lately and I want to do everything I can to help her through it.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:40 am

“Did you look into renting that studio space as well?” she asks, stirring the Bolognese. The delicious tomatoey scent rises again and fills my nostrils with a smell that I can only describe as home.

“I did. I called the guy who owns the building earlier. The rent for it is a little more than I would like, but if we get a mortgage and I keep working at the bar, everything should be fine. We can afford it.”

“And of course, once you start selling your art, we’ll be rolling in millions anyway.”

“Hey,” I chuckle, shaking my head. She’s expecting way too much from me.

But I’m glad that she has that kind of faith in my ability. I’m so grateful that I’ve always had someone to believe in me.

The moment is shattered by the sound my phone ringing. Fumbling for it, I groan. “Ugh, sorry. I’m going to get this. It’s probably the real estate agent.”

“I’ll call you when dinner’s ready, love,” she smiles.

I head off to my bedroom and pick up my phone without looking at the number.

When I hear Paul’s voice, I almost drop it again. “Chloe? This is you, right?”

“Paul?” I splutter. “How...? What are you doing calling me? It’s been nearly seven weeks! I thought you never wanted to speak to me again.”

“I just wanted to see how you’re doing,” he says in a tone that suggests he actually wants something else but is trying to ease me into it.

“What do you really want?” I snap, in no mood for games. “And I’m fine, by the way. Me and my mom are moving out soon. We’ve got a new place.”

He doesn’t have to know that that’s not entirely true.

“Good,” he says, and I can almost see his stupid smile as he does. I close my eyes and try to black out that thought. “I’m happy for you.”

“I couldn’t have done any of this without you. So, what do you want?”

There’s a long silence, and for a minute I think he’s completely vanished.

“Paul?” I say uncertainly.

“I’m here,” he says, “I’m here. Okay, I’ll just come out with it. How would you like an all-expenses-paid trip to Bellamare?”

I nearly drop the phone again.

“You— What?”

“Look, I’m kind of in a bit of a situation here. And I’d love to see you again. Honestly. I’ve thought about you every single day, and I’ve wanted to talk to you since I left.”

I bite my tongue from saying so why didn’t you call sooner? “What situation?” I ask instead.

“It’s a long story, but basically my parents are threatening to kick me out if I don’t bring home my new and lovely wife to meet them at once.”

“You told your parents about me?”

“Didn’t you tell your mom about me?”

“Well, yeah,” I say. “But that’s different. I didn’t tell my mother that I married you because you’re the love of my life. I told her the truth.”

I don’t really think I meant to say that, because using the words *love and you* in the same sentence feels dangerously like starting to catch feelings. And I had just about managed to suppress thoughts like that.

“What is the truth?” Paul asks quietly.

I don’t give him an answer.

“Look,” he says, “I know it’s not ideal, but I really did mean it when I said I wanted to see you again. This doesn’t have to be a big deal. They just want to have dinner. I just need to prove that you exist, that’s all.”

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

“Let me get this straight,” I say, starting to feel the anger seep into my tone again. “You’ve ignored me for almost two months, and now you want me to go and play happy families with your parents just make yourself feel better?”

“It’s not like that,” he insists. “They really will kick me out if they think I’m lying about you.”

“They sound pretty intense.”

He never said that much about his parents, but the little he had said didn’t sound too good at all.

“They are. So... will you come?”

“Will I come to Bellamare and have dinner with your parents? Will I lie to everyone and pretend to be your doting wife? No.”

“I’ll give you another hundred thousand,” Paul says, desperate. “I’ll book first-class plane tickets. I’ll give you more money — whatever you want. Just say you’ll come.”

“This really means a lot to you, doesn’t it?”

“You have no idea.”

He lets out a shaky sigh, and that’s when I realize exactly how much he means this. When I first picked up, I easily could have believed that he was playing games with me. But that little sigh he just did...

Either he's an incredible actor or he really is completely out of options.

I only wish those options didn't involve using me.

"All right," I snap. "I will come — on one condition."

"Anything," he says too quickly.

"I want answers for everything."

"Answers," he says, like he doesn't know what I'm talking about. And I can't tell if he's being deliberately ignorant or genuinely stupid.

"Yeah, answers. Why did you leave me in your apartment that morning? Why have you had to lie to your parents about me? Did you even need a green card at all?"

Do you love me?

"Yes, yes, I did. I promise." He sighs again, and I imagine him pinching the bridge of his nose, squeezing his eyes shut as he tries to make everything make sense.

"Okay, fine. Deal," he says, relenting. "If you promise to come and have dinner with my parents, I'll tell you absolutely everything. The unfiltered truth. I can't promise you're going to like it, and I'll get it if you never want to speak to me again. But please, please, please can we just pretend for my parents for one night?"

Maybe the secrets he's been keeping were deeper than I expected. Damn. Now the mystery of it is intriguing me more than it's irritating me.

"Okay," I say finally. "I can probably take a Monday off work and early shift on Friday. Maybe half a week if you give me some time to arrange my schedule."

“You’re still working?” he says, dumbfounded.

“Yes,” I say like he’s stupid. “One hundred thousand dollars is nice, but it’s not enough to live off for the rest of my life.”

“Oh,” he says, his voice small.

And that’s the point when I start doubting that he’s even a businessman at all.

It’s the kind of job I could believe he would have. But the way he acts around money makes me think that he’s never had a life where he’s had to think about how much anything costs. Ever. It sounds nice.

“Thank you,” he breathes. “Text me your email. I’ll send you all the flight information straightaway. Just let me know which weekend, which days you can do. Please make it soon, though.”

When I head out for dinner, I decide not to tell Mom about the call. Not yet, anyway. No doubt she’ll tell me this is a terrible idea, and it probably is. I almost definitely shouldn’t go to a foreign country for a stranger.

But the second I heard his voice, he enchanted me again. I don’t know what power he has over me, but it looks like I can’t escape it.

Page 27

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

That night, I put in a request for time off work, and to my surprise, it gets approved almost immediately.

The next thing to do is tell Paul. But I don't know what to say.

I lie in bed, awake into the early hours of the morning trying to think of anything to say at all. Eventually, I just send a screenshot of the leave approval.

Not too much longer, Paul texts back with a screenshot of flight confirmations. I don't even want to know what time it is in Bellamare right now.

Has he been waiting for me since we spoke?

Is he looking forward to this as much as I am?

CHAPTER 13

CHLOE

It's a seven-hour flight to Amsterdam then another three and a half hours to Bellamare. By the time I finally land in my father's home country, I've been awake for a million hours and all the coffee in the world isn't going to do anything.

I'm already not looking forward to the flight back.

I'd never been in a plane before today, and though it wasn't as bad as I had been expecting, it still wasn't my favorite activity. The airport at JFK was terrifyingly busy

because it's summer, and Amsterdam wasn't much better. I couldn't sleep during the entire overnight flight from New York to Amsterdam either, and I was too wired on European caffeine on the way to Bellamare.

If it were up to me, I think I would have taken the train everywhere. Unfortunately, though, Bellamare is an island, and Paul was insistent that I got there as fast as I possibly could.

So, flights it was.

The immigration line is long at arrivals, but it doesn't take too long to pass through to the front of the line. The customs officer smiles at me, welcomes me into the country and stamps my passport.

And then I step through the arrivals gate, basking in the summer sun of a country that I've always wanted to see.

Paul said that he had arranged transport for me from the airport to his home, but when I stand waiting, I can't see anyone who seems to be waiting for me. People bustle around me, dragging their suitcases behind them, shouting at each other in all sorts of languages. Mothers carry their children, and lovers jump into taxis hand in hand, and all this is set to the loud backdrop of aircraft landing and taking off.

In movies, there's always someone holding a sign with the traveler's name on, but I can't spot my name anywhere. I grip the straps of my backpack tighter, starting to get nervous that this is all a massive practical joke.

Just then, a man in a sharp suit approaches me. In an accent I would call Italian if I didn't know any better, he says to me, "Ma'am. You're Miss Chloe Fontana, yes?"

I grin. "That's me."

“Very good. Follow me, ma’am. I have a car waiting for you.”

I chuckle nervously at the formality but chalk it up to a cultural thing that I don’t understand. Everything here is so new, and I’m so tired. It’s like all my senses are exploding.

He leads me out to a small parking lot that is fenced off from the common rabble of people, and gestures towards a black car with tinted windows. My stomach lurches. “Um... can I have some sort of proof of identity?” I ask, clasping my hands together. “I don’t exactly want to get bundled into a car and kidnapped right now, you know? I’m supposed to be meeting someone.”

When the man frowns, confused, I decided he’s probably not a kidnapper. I think most kidnappers probably just kidnap you without waiting to have a conversation about it first.

“Of course,” he says at last. He reaches into his pocket, and I flinch before I realize that he’s probably not reaching for a gun. Instead, he pulls out his wallet and shows me an ID card identifying him as one of the staff of the royal palace.

Royal? I think. Why the hell have I got a royal escort?

“Is that to your satisfaction, Your Highness?” the driver asks, and that’s when I know something is really weird here.

“Uh... yes. Thank you,” I say, then scramble to get into the car before we can have any more odd conversations.

I buckle up my seatbelt as the driver gets in the front. “It’s about forty minutes to the palace,” he informs me, “so I hope you’re ready for a little drive.”

“Sure,” I say, resigning myself to the fact that we’re going to have to make conversation after all. Usually, I love to talk to people, but this is just getting weirder by the second. I don’t think I like being called Your Highness. There’s nothing high about me.

I’m a normal girl. And I’m getting the horrible feeling that I’m being taken for a fool.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

“If you like, I could tell you some of our history. Your husband informs me that you’ve never been here before. Is that so?”

“Um, yeah,” I say. “That is true. And some history would be great, actually. I’ve always wanted to come here. It’s been a dream of mine ever since I was young.”

“Then we could not be happier to be making that dream come true for you.”

“Sorry, what was your name?” I say, realizing I didn’t catch it on his ID.

“Cristian,” he replies. “It’s good to meet you.”

“And you.”

“If I may speak freely... we’ve been taking bets for many years on when Prince Paolo was going to get married. You are a brave woman to have tied the knot with him.”

“Ah, well, he didn’t tell me he was a prince when we met.”

Cristian chuckles, and I chuckle awkwardly too. I think it’s probably best not to tell him that this is the first time I’m hearing about all of this royal business.

Fortunately, he decides to move the conversation on after that, and we spend the next forty minutes driving through some of the most scenery I’ve ever seen. In the distance, there’s a mountain range. Out of the window, I can see the sea. Cristian informs me that the landscape looks like this because Bellamare is what’s left of

volcanic activity in the sea. That's why they have such rugged mountains while still being an island.

To be polite, I decide not to tell him that I already knew that.

However, he does then tell me a whole bunch of stuff I didn't know about the history. About how Bellamare used to be part of Italy, until their independence in 1672. He tells me about the monarchy, how I've married into a family that can be traced back as residents of the island for nearly six hundred years and how, all being well, they intend to stick around for another six hundred.

"That's a long time," I say. "You never know what's going to change in six months, let alone six hundred years."

"True enough," says Cristian sagely. "But I believe this country is going to last forever."

As we approach the palace, Cristian tells me this isn't actually technically a palace, but one of the many stately homes owned by the royal family. This is their summer residence, he explains. It's further into the mountains so it's cooler, but close enough to a beach that's owned by the family, so they can enjoy it whenever they want.

Whenever we want.

This is going to take a hell of a lot of getting used to.

Paul — Paolo is so in for it when I see him again.

We pull up outside the house, and I try not to gawp. It has grand columns, statues, a fountain — everything you could possibly imagine a stately home having. As we get out of the car, I can't help but stare. Surely this is some kind of joke. If I'm about to

be caught on camera for Bellamare's version of framing stupid tourists for their own amusement, I'm going to burst into tears.

But to my relief and also to my surprise and frustration, Paolo runs out of the front door and sweeps me up in his arms, kissing me on the cheek. "Chloe, you're here."

"Yeah. Would you like to tell me where the hell I am?"

"Oh, did Cristian not tell you? This is our family summer home."

"So it's true," I hiss, not wanting anyone to overhear our argument.

Paolo grins without meaning it, his face glowing red as he scratches his neck. His hair is longer now than it was when we met, and his beard has grown like he's forgotten to go to the barber and get it trimmed.

He puts an arm around my shoulders and says quietly, "I know I owe you a really long apology and a really long explanation. But please can we just get inside first?"

I decide not to argue with him anymore. It's not that I don't want to. It's not even that I'm scared of the public scandal.

But the guy is clearly going through a lot lately and I don't want to embarrass him any more than he already has been.

No matter how much all of this is his own stupid fault.

We head inside, and he drags me upstairs to what I can only presume is his bedroom. I perch on the edge of the bed and then look at him squarely. "Okay, explanation time. Now."

CHAPTER 14

PAOLO

This is not in any way how I was expecting to show Chloe my bedroom, but I need to take her somewhere quickly right now. If she's seen, that's going to raise way too many questions that I do not want to answer before we get our story straight.

Plus, if we're up here, out of the way, she can shout at me and call me stupid. This is somewhere I can grovel for her forgiveness without being observed.

I can't pretend it wasn't good to see her. When she stepped out of the car, it all came flooding back to me. Seeing her face again, even if she looked unhappy — it made my heart flip in my chest. Her brown hair was streaked with gold in the sun; her angry green eyes were just as deep and gorgeous as I remembered.

And now she sits on my bed and fixes me with the most incredulous look I've ever seen.

"Okay," she says, her face unchangingly stern. "Explanation time. Now."

I open my mouth and close it again. There isn't a single word I can say that will make any of this even remotely okay to her.

She stares at me expectantly, and when I say nothing, she bursts. "What the hell is going on? Why am I here? Why in God's name do all these people think that I'm married to a royal?"

"Because you kind of are," I say sheepishly.

The look on her face doesn't improve. I know she's waiting for me to say more, but what more can I say?

I know I owe her the truth. The truth is just hard to swallow.

"Okay," I say, sinking to sit down on the floor, letting her judgment rain down on me from above. "Let me start from the beginning. A little over a year ago, I made some stupid mistakes and got myself banished from the kingdom."

"Banishment?" she interrupts. "I didn't think that was something that still happened."

"Me neither," I sigh. "But believe me, it does. And it was great for a while. I had fun. I just kept doing whatever the hell I'd been doing before — being an idiot, going out and getting drunk, hooking up with all the women I wanted. Those kinds of things. And then my grandfather died."

"Oh, I'm sorry," she says quietly, a flicker of genuine emotion flashing across her face. "That's not easy."

"No," I agree. "It's not. Especially when nobody told me, and I wasn't invited home for the funeral."

Her face finally gives way completely from sternness to pity, but right now I'll take pity over anger. As long as I'm not being yelled at, I have a chance to make things right.

"So, I needed a scheme. A plan. Something that was going to get me back in. I needed some way to get home so I could pay my respects to my grandfather and — hear me out — the best idea I had was to find someone with Bellamari citizenship to marry me so I could sneak back into the country without flagging on any of the immigration computers."

“So you did hunt me down!” Chloe says, her eyebrows knotting together at the betrayal.

I nod slowly. “I did. And I’m sorry. But I didn’t lie about needing a green card.”

“You just lied about which country you needed the green card for. And also, you know, being royal. You made up this whole stupid plan, what, just to sleep with me? To trick me into coming home with you? This was all just some game to you, wasn’t it? Some dumb game where you thought you would play with people’s lives like they don’t matter at all.” Her voice gets louder and louder as she goes on.

She’s really angry now. She spits the words towards me and they hit me like a venomous lash. I sit, head bowed, and take it all. It’s the least I deserve.

“Yes. How I found you... the coincidence of meeting you was a lie. I did construct a scenario. But the way I felt about you that night... that wasn’t a lie. Surely you know that.”

She doesn’t say anything to that. Doesn’t shake her head. Doesn’t move an inch.

I have no idea what she’s thinking now. I couldn’t even begin to guess.

“Say something?” I plead, glancing up at her after enough time has passed for the silence to be awkward.

Chloe sighs hard, her eyes softening when she looks at me. “What do you want me to say?”

“I don’t know. Anything.”

Anything’s better than whatever this is.

She looks into my eyes for another long second, then lets out a harsh, bitter laugh. “I can’t do this,” she says, getting to her feet. “I’m going home. I’ve always wanted to come here, and you’ve gone and made this whole trip a nightmare. Actually, no — worse than that. You’ve ruined this entire country for me forever. I always thought the people here were supposed to be good, kind, honest — so I hope you’re happy that all of this has ruined everything for me.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

She shakes her head, her eyes shining with tears, and starts towards the door. “Goodbye, Paul.”

I jump up and hold out my hands to stop her, half in surrender, half-begging. “Chloe, please wait. Please. I know I’ve hurt you. Maybe I should have told you what was going on all along. But be honest — would you have paid any more attention to me if I had said, Hey, I’m a prince. Let’s get married?”

Her breath catches and she hesitates, freezing in place. This means there’s still a chance. This means I can still get through to her.

If she really could never forgive me, she’d have walked out of here already.

“Look, I know I can’t ever make it up to you. And I get that. But if you just come to dinner with my parents one time, I’ll give you double whatever I already promised you. I’ll give you a guided tour around Bellamare. I’ll give you anything that you ask for. Please just do one more thing for me. One more thing, and then I can be out of your life forever.”

Her mouth opens, her lips quivering, uncertainty plastered all over her face.

“I know I’m not asking something easy,” I say, taking a step towards her. “But I’m on my hands and knees begging.”

“Are you?” she says, raising an eyebrow.

That makes me blink. A joke?

I feel like I've got whiplash.

"Do you want me to?" I say softly. "Because I will. If you want me to get down on my knees and beg you to stay, I will."

As if all this wasn't humiliating enough already. I suppose that's what she wants. My utter humiliation.

And if I want her to stay, I guess I have to submit to it.

With a sigh, I start bending my knees as if to get down on the floor, and Chloe chuckles, waving her hand at me. "No, dummy. I don't literally want you to get on your knees. Why would I want that?"

"Oh," I say.

She stares at me again, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

And then it dawns on me. She's not running. She's not even frowning anymore. All she's doing is standing here, in my bedroom, arms folded, the faintest look of amusement on her face. The kind of look you have when you're desperately trying not to laugh.

"Wait," I blurt. "Does this mean you'll do it?"

She nods slowly, allowing the smile to spread over her face. "It's so completely against my better judgment, but yes. I'll stay. This means a lot to you, doesn't it?"

It's my turn to nod slowly. "More than you could ever imagine."

"And that's why I'm staying," she says. "I haven't forgiven you. I can't promise I

ever will. But I'll do it. I'll stay for dinner. And if you show me around the country, I just might consider that whole forgiveness thing after all."

"It's a deal," I say, letting myself return her smile.

And just like that, for the first time in months, the endless churning inside my chest quietens a little. Almost like everything's going to be okay.

CHAPTER 15

CHLOE

For the next few hours, time flows by as I stay with Paolo in his room. We spend that entire time trying to figure out the best way to get me in the palace without it being too weird, without having a huge fanfare or nightmare.

Eventually, we decide that we'll just skip the formal announcement. We'll let everyone think they missed the memo about my arrival. It's not like me coming was a secret, and if I just appear, hopefully people won't question me, but themselves.

Fortunately, the king and queen aren't home right now. They're away on official duty abroad for a few days. The staff knew I was supposed to be arriving here this weekend, so they'll probably just leave me to my business.

Paolo tells me that his parents weren't happy with him booking the tickets for this weekend, almost like we were waiting for them to be away before I arrived. He tells me it wasn't on purpose, but it definitely was a happy coincidence. If I hadn't suggested this weekend, he would have. He thought it would be more comfortable for me if I wasn't launched immediately into a royal meeting with parents whom I wasn't expecting to see.

I hate him for being that thoughtful.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

When we finally emerge from his room, he calls one of his staff to take me to my own room. He actually calls them servants, and I chalk it up to being a translation error. There's no way a modern royal family actually have servants in the way I would imagine. Surely, in the modern world, servitude is an outdated concept.

The longer I'm here, the more I realize I don't know the first thing about modern royalty. I don't know what they do. I don't know who they are. I don't know what I'm supposed to do. This is a whole world that's always felt magical and alien to me. Like something out of a novel rather than real life.

Under any other circumstance, I might be almost excited that this was my real life now. For all intents and purposes, I'm a princess. Somehow, it's nothing like the movies make it seem.

The woman who takes me to my room is called Maria. She's a short woman on the older side, her hair graying, her smile kind. Her skin is olive, tanned and kissed by the sun, making her seem radiant and alive, and her eyes are a luscious dark brown. They're the kind of eyes that make you trust them immediately.

She doesn't say much as we head down the corridor. I try not to look around too much, not wanting to seem like I'm gawking. But in my head I am.

Everything here is so pristine. So polished. The wallpaper looks expensive. The carpets are thick and ornate. Every single one of the light fittings is the same, each bulb matched to a perfect luminosity, each screw the same perfect shade of bronze.

How much upkeep must go into a house like this? How many staff do they have?

“Here you go,” says Maria, unlocking and opening a door. “All of it is yours.” She gestures for me to step through and, taking small steps, I do.

I have to bite my lip to hold back from gasping when I see it.

It’s a huge room. The ceilings are high and slanted, the curtains a deep eggplant color. The bed is made more crisply than any hotel bed I’ve ever seen. There are trims of gold on the sheets, and the royal crest is embroidered on the pillows. All of the furniture looks like it has been custom-made to match, and the room is nearly as big as the apartment me and my mom share at home.

A sudden stab of guilt hits me right through the heart. I hope Mom’s okay. I haven’t spoken to her in a few hours, not since I landed and texted her to tell her I’m okay. How am I going to explain any of this to her when I get home? Knowing her she’ll probably just laugh.

She’s mother-in-law to royalty now.

“Please, make yourself at home,” says Maria, spreading her arms out wide to emphasize her point. “There is a bathroom and a fridge in here too. If you need anything at all, just call me or one of the other staff members. We’ll bring whatever you need. If you’re hungry, we can find you something in the kitchen. If you’re bored, I’m sure we can find something to entertain you.”

I have no words, so I force out a, “Thank you,” and keep staring.

All of this is way too much for my brain to comprehend.

“It is my pleasure,” she says with a wide grin. “Please let me know if you have any questions or need anything.”

“Honestly, I just don’t want anyone to take any special time out of their day for me,” I say. “This is all... well, it’s great, obviously, I’m grateful for it. It’s just... a little overwhelming.”

“I understand,” says Maria, her grin twisting into a wry smile. “When I first began my work here, in my home there lived my parents, my husband’s parents, my husband, our children. Our home was comfortable, but it wasn’t big. But the royal family pay a very generous wage, and since then, we’ve been able to move our parents out and get the big space for our children that I wish I could have had growing up.

“I couldn’t have asked for more from them in all the time I have been here. But my first day of being here, I had that exact same expression that you have right now on your face. The open eyes and the open mouth. This surprise that anything can be so... so... oh, what’s the word?”

“Opulent?” I suggest. “Fancy? Way too extravagant?”

She chuckles. “All of those things, yes. You’ll forgive me that I haven’t spoken in English in a long while. I don’t get to practice very often.”

“It sounds perfect to me,” I say.

“I always wanted to learn better.”

“It’s way better than my Bellamari. I should have tried harder to learn, but I never found time. I only really know the basics.”

“That’s better than most foreigners,” Maria says warmly. “But trust me, ma’am, you’ll quickly get used to this feeling of being overwhelmed. And we are not going to treat you like you’re anything other than what you are. Some people might act a little

more respectful than you want, but working here? All it does is show us how normal the royal family are as people. if you ask anyone to just use your name, then they will. You will see it. It is not like all those American movies you have seen, I promise.”

I let out a laugh, relieved and embarrassed all at the same time. How did I get myself mixed up in this?

Suddenly, all the hours of sleep I’ve missed come crashing down onto me, and I stumble over the bed, slumping down on it with a sigh, throwing my backpack on the ground. “Believe me when I say this is beyond my wildest dreams. This isn’t something I ever imagined wanting at all.”

“That’s young Paolo for you,” Maria says. “That boy is always thinking of these big schemes. It is why he got kicked out in the first place.”

“Can I ask more about that? Or is it some sort of, like, state secret?”

Maria throws back her head and laughs heartily “Oh, no. if you go to ask any citizen of Bellamare about Paolo Gallinari, they would say the same thing. Exile was always coming to that boy.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yes,” Maria chuckles. “He used to be so irresponsible and reckless. It was because he felt as if he didn’t have enough attention. With the two brothers older than him, he was never going to be as important as he wanted. That’s just the way it is. But he could never understand that. He didn’t see why he shouldn’t get all the attention his brothers got, so the only way he could shout was with these wild, foolish acts.”

“That explains the marriage plan,” I grimace.

“It does,” she says, nodding. “Oh, the things he has done. But do not get scared by such rumors, though. If you look into the things he’s done, then yes, it may seem like you’ve married someone who’s not good to be a husband at all. Not all of it is true, but...”

“It’s kind of scary.”

She hums in acknowledgement. “It is. But since he has been back...” She shakes her head and shrugs like she can’t quite articulate what she wants to say. “I don’t know. It’s strange, but something has changed about him. Perhaps it’s meeting you. Perhaps you have done some good for him.”

“Oh, I doubt it,” I say, staring down at my hands. “I’ve only known him a few days really. We barely got to know each other at all before he left. All this? It was the very definition of a whirlwind romance.”

“Then maybe you can teach him some more things. Heaven knows he has enough to learn.”

All I can do is nod in response. Maria’s words don’t exactly fill me with confidence, but they make me feel better about being here. About the choices I’m making.

Even as she tells me more about some of the crazy scandals Paolo’s been involved in over the years, I can’t help but feel that the person I met was lightyears away from the wild young prince she’s describing.

Maybe it was all just an act that I fell for. But the Paolo I met was kind and responsible. He wasn’t just out to do something crazy for the sake of it. Well, not totally, anyway. He never made me feel disrespected.

And even though it’s becoming incredibly clear that he wanted something from me more than he cared about whatever relationship it was we had, now I know all the facts, it doesn’t feel like he was being irresponsible. Not desperately. He just wanted to get home.

More than ever, I don’t know what to think at all.

“Will you stay? With me. Please. I could do with the company.” My face flushes at the request. I’m not always great at asking for what I want, but the idea of staring at the wall for the rest of the day makes my stomach turn. “It’s okay if you’re busy. I just don’t think I want to be alone right now.”

“Of course,” says Maria, coming towards me. “It is what I’m here for. Let me tell you a little bit more about the country. About the family that you are all muddled up with.”

“Okay. I’d like that.”

She pulls up and sits on a small armchair next to the bed and lets the stories flow. She moves away from Paolo quickly, and starts telling me more of the sordid secrets of the royal family.

And as she starts narrating tales of history, of kings and queens from long ago and scandals they've endured, I finally start to feel a little more at peace.

Finally, this feels like somewhere I could maybe belong after all.

CHAPTER 16

PAOLO

To nobody's surprise, less than five minutes after Maria has taken Chloe to her room, Miguel and Luca burst into my room without knocking or asking.

"Look who's home," Miguel sneers.

"Hello, Miggi," I say disinterestedly, using the nickname that's wound him up ever since we were young. "Hello, Luca."

"Come downstairs," Luca demands, folding his arms like an old man. "We have things to talk about."

"Okay," I say, rolling my eyes. I know I'm going to get absolutely no choice in this matter, so there's no point in arguing.

Like a prisoner, they march me out of my room and downstairs to one of the drawing rooms at the back of the house. Nobody really uses this room, and my brothers know it. No doubt they've strategically picked this location so we won't be disturbed.

I sit down in one of the seats around the table. Luca sits opposite me, and Miguel — of course — takes the head of the table. My eldest brother is exactly as arrogant as you would expect a crownprince to be. He knows everyone thinks he's the most important person in all the land and acts like he is. He's exactly the kind of person you think of when you think of a prince: snobbish, uptight, and looks at everyone else like they're a peasant.

I might be wild, but I swore to myself a long time ago that I would never be as callous as he is.

Luca is a lot harder to describe. He's one of those people who, if he didn't speak, you would barely know he was in a room. He's got an almost malleable personality, able to adapt to any situation and be the person who looks best in it. If he was evil, he'd be terrifyingly dangerous, but as he is, he's always playing second fiddle to Miguel. I don't think he's ever going to be a threat to anyone.

No one except me, anyway.

“You’ve come back for the inheritance, haven’t you?” spits Miguel.

“No,” I lie. “I came back because this is my home. I wanted to see my family — and nobody told me my grandfather had died.” And, I think, I do want my inheritance.

“Well, unfortunately,” continues Miguel, “despite what we all tried to tell him, Grandfather didn’t write you out of the will. You always were his favorite.”

“Can’t see why,” chips in Luca, examining his manicure like a disinterested villain. “It’s not like you do anything but give us all a bad name.”

“Thanks,” I say, letting their words flow over me. This is mild compared to their usual digs. “Anyway, where the hell have you two been? I’ve been home for two months now. I haven’t seen either of you at all.”

“Some people actually have jobs to do,” says Luca, fixing me with a withering look that, if I were less wise to his tricks, would disintegrate me at once. “We’ve both been in Spain for the last six months. You know — diplomatic relations, keeping alliances, that kind of thing.”

I can’t help myself and say, “Oh, yeah? Trying out every tavern in a twenty-mile radius of the hotel? Having every girl you set your eyes on?”

Miguel slams his fist on the table, his eyes blazing with irritation. “This is why we got rid of you. You’re a good-for-nothing, arrogant little brat. We were better off

without you here.”

I roll my eyes. When I was younger, these sorts of comments used to hurt me, but ever since I realized that Miguel was lashing out at me to cover for his own insecurity, not a single word he has said has bothered me.

“This is boring,” I say, making a point of yawning theatrically. “Can I go now?”

“No,” says Luca. “The thing is, Paolo, we don’t think you have the right to come back here and demand inheritance. We don’t think you should get anything at all.”

“Surely that was Grandpa’s choice to make,” I say. “You can’t exactly stop it if it’s written in law. That’s how these things work.”

Luca scoffs. “How these things work is, if you’re a good little boy who doesn’t go and get himself exiled and acts like a real prince the way he’s meant to, then you can get whatever you want.”

Miguel gives Luca a hard look, presumably to shut him up, then takes over the conversation. “You are the first person to have been banished in over three hundred years. You can’t just saunter back in here full of lies, hauling your fake wife behind you and pretending that everything’s going to be okay. Life just doesn’t work like that.”

I lean back in my seat, shrugging. I think they’re probably bluffing about their ability to cut me out of the family. I have no way of knowing for certain, though, so I probably shouldn’t piss them off, just in case they do have some sorts of power to take Grandfather’s money away from me.

But even if they do, if Mother and Father let me stay, then frankly I don’t need the inheritance anyway. If I’m allowed to stay, there’s nothing Miguel and Luca can do

to stop me being here.

“My wife isn’t fake,” I say, deciding that is the easiest argument to make. “She’s actually very real. She’s upstairs right now.”

The best argument, maybe, but possibly not the best thing to say, because a glint enters both of their eyes. It’s a wicked kind of sparkle I remember well from childhood. That is a look of imminent bullying. That’s something I cannot — I will not — allow to happen to Chloe.

They can say what they like to me, but they will not hurt her.

“We look forward to meeting her,” says Luca with a crude grin. “I bet Mom and Dad are, too.”

“Actually, they told me that, because I’m responsible now, because I have a wife who they are going to meet and like, that means I’m going to be able to stay in this country forever again. Which means I’m just as entitled to the inheritance as you are.”

“So this is about the inheritance!” snaps Miguel like he’s won. Then he launches into a long spiel about how horrible I am and how I don’t deserve any money or the family name or blah-blah-blah.

I’m just relieved that they’re back to attacking me rather than Chloe. They’re both kind of scary when they’re mean, and they’re mean a lot. The last thing I want is for Chloe to get embroiled with them.

I know I shouldn’t tune out from what Miguel is saying, but I can’t help it. He’s boring me to tears, and all I can think about is Chloe upstairs in a room all by herself.

All alone in a foreign country, cursing my name because of all the lies I've told her.

She must be just as crazy as I am to have stayed here.

There's no way she can forgive me after everything I've done. Somehow, the idea of her cutting me out forever freezes my heart like a block of ice.

I guess I was stupid to have thought she would still want me.

I guess I screwed it all up when I never messaged her again after I got home.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

Even if I had wanted to, I was too fixed on my goals. I wanted to get home. I think there was a part of me that thought, after I got home, I could get to know her a little better. I think I was looking forward to it, seeing if our relationship actually could go somewhere. Seeing if, maybe one day, we could make something real out of it.

All of that seems incredibly unlikely now.

We argue for what feels like hours, Miguel and Luca insistent that I shouldn't get anything, me doing my best not to rile them up — and failing. This is the same kind of argument we've been having ever since we were kids. Not over inheritance, but over anything.

It was always those two against me, and I could never win. They would always decide what they want and then decide that I was not allowed to join in, laughing when I got upset.

I used to wish for nicer brothers. For the kinds of brothers you see in movies, who look after you, who care about you as a person. For the longest time, I thought that kind of fraternal relationship was completely fictional — but it turns out my brothers are just horrible.

All of this is such a waste of time. I could be upstairs with Chloe right now. We could go out and explore the world. I could be trying to win her back, or at the very least win her forgiveness.

Even if she doesn't want me romantically, I'd settle for her friendship. Despite everything, she's become way too important to me to lose forever.

“Okay,” says Luca after an eternity of relentless bickering has passed. “It seems that none of us are going to change our minds about this.”

Miguel huffs in begrudging agreement.

“Mother and Father will make their decision soon,” Luca continues. “If they allow him to stay, then I suppose we will have to accept grandfather’s wishes. But if he screws up again?—”

“When,” Miguel interrupts.

“Then we should have no issue with cutting him out altogether.”

Miguel nods in agreement. “He won’t be able to argue against that.”

This is another of their favorite tricks, both talking about me like I’m not in the room while I’m sitting in front of them. It’s designed to make me angry, and it works. Fortunately, I’ve got a lot better at holding my tongue over the years.

“So, I’m free to go now?” I say as calmly as I can, getting to my feet. “You’ve both been such delightful company, but I have a wife upstairs with whom I would much rather spend my time.”

They shoot me a look that I can only describe as utter disdain, then wave me away. I know they’re going to be sitting there bitching about me for the rest of the day, but I don’t care.

It’s not like I was lying. I do have Chloe. I do want to be out of their company.

I’ve done everything I can. I’m home. We just have to get through the dinner now. And if my brothers get me kicked back out? Well, so be it.

At least I've tried. There's not really a whole lot else I can do.

CHAPTER 17

CHLOE

I'm woken at what is deemed an appropriate time and summoned to breakfast. My head is pounding and my stomach churning, and I could have done with sleeping for another seven or eight hours, but it doesn't look like that's an option.

A member of staff knocks on my door and asks me to get dressed. I want to say, No, I need to sleep, but I don't want to be rude. So, I get up, get showered and dressed, and let her lead me down to the dining room.

It's another grand room, though I suspect not the biggest dining room in the house. The table is laid as if we're about to have an extravagant meal, so I'm surprised when a waiter brings out a humble selection of breads and pastries for me.

I was expecting excess, but this doesn't feel too crazy at all.

As I start putting pastries on my plate, Maria appears behind me, startling me when she says hello. I jump, and she apologizes with a laugh. "Nessa didn't wake you up too early, did she? I told her to let you sleep, but she's so used to dealing with other royals who will launch the official complaint if the time and plan is not followed to the letter. Did you sleep well?"

"Yes," I lie. In truth, I tossed and turned all night, but I don't feel like getting into that now. "You don't have any painkillers around, do you? My head's killing me. Is the jet lag going to be this bad on the way back?"

"When are you here until?"

“I’m supposed to leave on Wednesday. That’s — what...? It’s Saturday now...” I count off the days of the week on my hands, my brain nowhere near awake enough to do that kind of math in my head. “Five.”

“That’s a good length of stay,” says Maria. “You should have plenty of time to see all the things you want to see before you leave, and be rested enough for the flight.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

“Paolo has promised me he’ll take me on a private tour of the country. I don’t really know what to expect from that.”

Maria nods. “He certainly knows a lot of good places. I am sure he’ll be able to tell you everything you could ever want to know about Bellamare.”

I hum in agreement, taking a bite of one of the pastries so I don’t have to formulate words.

Another reason I’m tired is that I stayed way too late on my phone last night, searching news reports about Paolo. All of the translations were crude, but it was good enough to give me an idea of the kind of guy he was when he lived here.

It doesn’t fill me with a whole lot of confidence.

The guy I met was smooth, charming, seductive. The guy that the papers are describing is a dumb child who would strip his pants off in a heartbeat just to make someone giggle.

The Paolo in the papers is crude, stupid, always out partying, and never paying a single second of attention to his responsibilities.

Could that still be who he is?

“Can I sit?” Maria asks.

“Yeah, of course. It would be nice to have the company.”

“I did ring for Paolo,” she says as she sits, “but he must still be asleep. That boy always was late to get out of bed.”

“I was reading some stuff, last night,” I say, figuring that Maria is the best person to ask about it. She probably knows the truth better than a journalist. “Why exactly was Paolo exiled? Was it just because of the partying? Was it just because he was stupid and young?”

Maria sucks in a sharp breath. I brace myself for whatever truth is about to come.

“In a small part, yes,” she says. “If you would like to know the full truth, I will tell it to you.”

I’m not sure that I do, but I’ve started this now. I nod.

“It was such a surprise when he came home and told us all that he had found a wife.”

I finish my pastry, not sure where this sentence is going. Maria continues, “You see, the king and the queen have long had the idea in their heads that if we could only get Paolo to marry a nice woman, then perhaps it would distract his attention from making a mockery of the family. That if some woman would agree to be his bride, perhaps it would calm him down enough to make him grow into a real adult.”

“But nobody wants to do it?” I say, and judging by the Paolo in the papers, I can understand why.

“Quite on the contrary,” says Maria. I raise a questioning eyebrow. “There’s a small country in Eastern Europe called Ralfava. And it was arranged that Paolo would marry the first-born princess of that country.”

“He was engaged?” I splutter.

Maria chuckles grimly. “You see, the main reason he was exiled was because on the day of the wedding, he never showed up. He... oh, what is the English word for it? Oh, yes — abandoned the bride in the church.”

“Jilted,” I say, my entire body freezing up.

“Yes. He jilted her. And not only that, but instead of showing up, he went partying and he got himself arrested. And then, when his father went to get him out, Paolo was told that he wouldn’t be allowed to remain in the kingdom. He was driven to the airport and sent away, forbidden from returning.”

“Forbidden until...” I don’t finish the sentence, letting the obvious ending hang in the air. “Am I doing the right thing by staying?” I ask suddenly. “I only promised I would because he seems so desperate to get back in good faith with his parents. But what if he wants more from me after that? Can I really trust the husband who would do something like that? Is our marriage even real at all?”

Maria doesn’t answer. Instead, she breathes out a long, unhappy sigh.

I reach for another pastry. I’m not sure that I have any option except to keep eating. At least that is something I can control.

At last, Maria speaks again, quietly. “He has never really seemed interested in marriage before. In women? Yes, certainly. But the responsibility of a marriage... Well, you can imagine everyone’s surprise when he came home and announced you.”

“Yeah, I can.”

“I couldn’t believe it, for sure. And then you arrived, and I couldn’t believe it even more — that such a lovely, beautiful young woman would have agreed to be wed our Paolo. And then, of course, I discovered it was all just a trick. A scheme in order to

get home to us.”

She reaches out and takes my hand, almost motherly in gentle affection. “I can’t tell you what’s going on in his head,” she says. “But I can tell you that he cares about you. In all the years I’ve known him, which is his whole life, I’ve never seen him show such relentless attention to a girl. I’ve never seen him act like he cares so fiercely. I’ve never seen him defend someone like he has defended you.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

“Defend?” I ask. I haven’t seen anything that looks like defense.

She nods, frowning like she’s confused that I don’t know what she’s talking about.

“Yes. Yesterday. In the evening, he told me all about his brothers. How they had taken him aside and started to say such horrible things about you. I have never seen him so angry about something like this before.”

“He was angry? For me?”

“He chose you, Chloe. I do not pretend I know all of the details, and I am not telling you it should be easy. Of course, this does not mean you should forgive him immediately. But at least give him the chance to work for it.”

“Is it worth it?” I whisper.

All this time, I’ve been so focused on the way Paolo has used me, I had convinced myself that that night we shared together, the way it felt, that it was all inside my head. That I had been the one who had got caught up in it, and Paolo’s shows of emotion were an act. That all of his smiles had been working towards a goal.

Could he actuallyreallyhave fallen for me?

Maria meets my gaze. “I told you last night of the young stupid playboy that he was. If I were you, I would not let him forget it. But he does have a chance to be more than he is. There has always been something buried deep inside his heart that has been screaming to get out. I think perhaps we should let him try to prove who else he can be.”

Long after returning to my room after breakfast, Maria's words run through my head. Who else can Paolo be?

I think I already know the answer to that question.

CHAPTER 18

PAOLO

I stay in my bed until lunchtime, relishing the familiar feel of my own pillows. Even though I've been sleeping in this bed again for two months now, I'm still grateful for the warm embrace of memory foam after a year of horrible hotel pillows.

Has it been a coward move to hide myself away?

Maybe. But I didn't want to bump into anyone who would talk to me, and I definitely didn't want to face my brothers. I had way too much of them yesterday.

It would be so easy to lie here until the sun sets, letting people bring food to me and shutting the world away. But I have things to do, and I shouldn't abandon Chloe all day.

If I'm not careful, Maria will start telling her stories about me, and then Chloe will hate me more than she already does. At least I know Maria will look after her.

It makes me feel better to know that Chloe will be in safe hands.

Eventually, the bell for lunch rings, and I force myself up. I have to face this day eventually.

After all, I only have a few days left to try and convince Chloe not to leave me

forever.

There's a lot of work to do.

I jump quickly in the shower, then trim my beard before I head down to the dining room. There, I find Chloe sitting alone, eating one of the dishes the chef has prepared for us.

"Morning," I say.

She starts and turns to look at me, her face immediately softening into a smile when she realizes who I am, before hardening again into a practiced neutral. I swallow my own smile, not wanting her to think I'm smug about having noticed the cracks in her façade. "It's moreafternoonnow, isn't it?" she says.

"Maybe." I shrug. "Whatever. I'm hungry. What's for lunch?"

"Not sure," she says, her mouth full. "Some sort of chicken salad, I think."

I look at the table and smile. "You know what? That is pretty much how I would translate it. This is one of Bellamare's best dishes."

"It's pretty good," she agrees.

I take a seat next to her and scoop food onto my own plate. The thing about skipping breakfast is I'm absolutely ravenous now.

We sit in silence as we eat, and out of the corner of my eye I keep catching glimpses of her. I'm trying not to appear like I'm looking, but I can't help stealing glances every few seconds.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

More than anything, I can't help but notice how sad she looks.

In the handful of days that I knew her in the US, Chloe always had this glimmer of joy on her face. Now, looking at her, it's like that spark has been extinguished. "Let's go for a walk." I say. "After lunch. Let me show you the palace grounds."

"Okay," she agrees more quickly than I expected. "That sounds nice, actually. It'd be good to get out of the house. Have you got a lot of land here?"

I shrug. "We have a big garden here in the summer palace, but we have a bigger one in the spring palace. But this one's nice because we have our own beach that you can go to."

"I haven't brought any beach clothes," Chloe says, her face falling again.

I wave my hand. "Don't worry about that. If you want to go to the beach, we can get you anything you need."

"I don't want you to buy me a new wardrobe!" she snaps, and I recoil like an elastic band has smacked me in the face. I'm not used to people declining my generosity.

"Okay... well, maybe we can go to the beach another day," I say, backpedaling. "Let's just walk today."

"Okay," she says quietly, not looking at me, as if she feels bad for her outburst. I want to reach out for her hand to tell her that it's okay. She has nothing to apologize for.

I want to tell her how much she has changed my world. How much she means to me. But as I look at her, she looks away from me.

My tongue seizes up in my mouth, and I can't form any words at all.

We eat the rest of our lunch in silence, and when we're done, we both stand at the same time.

"Meet me back here in twenty minutes?" I say. "Wear whatever you like. I'll show you everything you need to see."

She smiles thinly and leaves without another word.

The second she's gone, I slam my hand down on the table.

Am I really getting this all so wrong?

Are my brothers actually right?

Maybe I shouldn't do this. Maybe I'm not cut out for having a wife. Maybe I'm not even cut out for having friends.

Caring only about myself was so much easier than this. But Chloe has done something irreversible to my brain. Because of her, I can barely think straight. Every single day since we've met, she has been making me dizzy.

And the worst part is, I don't want the dizziness to end. I want her to keep making me feel butterflies in my stomach. I want her to keep making me feel like I'm becoming a better man.

I've never felt that before.

It's a change I don't think I'm doing a great job of.

I'm almost surprised when, twenty minutes later exactly, Chloe appears again in the dining room. "Ready to go?" she asks.

I jump to my feet. "Yeah. Follow me."

We head through the house together, weaving through the corridors until we reach the back door. I hold it open for her, then follow her out into the bright sunlight.

The gardeners are out in force, filling the air with a background hum of grass-cutting. They've been out for the last few days, working with the landscapers to prepare for the public opening of the land. All the trees are neatly trimmed, and the flowerbeds are weed-free and color-coordinated.

Chloe blinks as she steps out, taking it all in. She smiles. I guess all this is so normal to me that I barely think about it. But she'll be noticing the perfectly clear waters of the fountain, the mountains in the distance, the cobbled paths that were built with stones designed to complement the grass and flowers perfectly.

"This is gorgeous," she says, eyes wide.

"It's pretty good, isn't it?" I agree. "This house is actually one of the newer ones that my family owns. It was built in 1873, shortly after a period of economic downturn. As the economy started to get better, my family built this place as a way of giving something back to the people. I know what you're thinking — how on earth does building a new house do anything for the people? — but for most of the year, we open it up for the public to come and walk in the grounds. It's a free park for everyone to come into and roam around."

"That's a nice idea," Chloe says, still looking around in awe. "I would like walking

here.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

“You could come anytime you wanted,” I say, and she gives me a weird kind of look.

And then all the tension in her shoulders falls away and I can’t decode what she’s feeling at all.

“Come on. Let’s keep going.”

We wander around the fountain, and I tell her a little more about the house, about how it was built from Bellamari stone and how we had some of the finest architects of the age design it.

“How do you know about all this stuff?” she asks.

Smiling with faint embarrassment, I bring my hand to the back of my neck and rub my shoulders. “Well, you know how I just told you we open this place up for the public?”

She nods, and I sigh, knowing she’s going to judge me for this. “When I was a young teenager, my parents thought it might be nice if I offered some exclusive tours. They made me take members of the public around all day long, answering all their questions. I knew the basics, but I learned most from the history buffs who would try and trick me with questions they knew I wouldn’t know how to answer. I did that for a couple of years and learned a whole lot that I’ve never quite forgotten. It’s pretty useless knowledge really.”

“That’s cute,” she says, looking at me with a smile that seems to be trying to tell me something. I can’t decide what, so I don’t comment on it.

“Yeah, I guess,” I say. “It was definitely one of the better things my parents made me do. You should be glad you’ve never had to do royal duties before. Some of them really suck.”

“Am I going to have to start doing them now?” she asks, “You know, because...” She trails off, but I know the end of that sentence is because we’re married.

“Honestly, I don’t know. I don’t know where all this is going. But if you stick around with me, then yeah, probably you’ll have to. But if none of this is real, then you don’t really have the obligation to.”

We walk around the fountain, looking back at the house. Chloe doesn’t say anything, digesting what I’ve just told her.

This must be so much for her to take in.

Is it good or bad that she isn’t saying anything?

Does she want to stick around or not?

And then the day gets worse. Because Chloe isn’t saying anything, I let my mind and gaze wander. For a while, I linger on her. She’s wearing a light blue sundress, one that shows off her freckled shoulders and swirls around her legs. The breeze catches her hair and sometimes blows it so that it frames her face so perfectly, like something out of a movie.

She takes my breath away with how beautiful she is.

Not wanting to be caught staring at her, I look away, my eyes drifting back to the house. It always looks so lovely in the sun.

And then I spot Luca staring at us from one of the windows. He's peeking out from behind the curtains, and there's a shadow behind him that I can only assume is Miguel.

"Chloe," I hiss, panicking. "Kiss me."

"What?" she splutters, raising both eyebrows as high as they'll go.

"My brothers are watching. Please, just kiss me. It doesn't have to be anything deep. Just pretend. Please. It won't mean anything."

I'm ready to start trying to persuade her more, but before I can say anything else, she steps towards me, grabs the front of my shirt, and pulls me down for a kiss.

I flail for a second, and then my arms wrap around her, holding her as her magical lips press against mine. Inside my chest, my heart bursts like a firework all over again.

In reality, it doesn't last for more than a couple of seconds at most. But in that moment, time seems to freeze altogether, shattering around us as if nothing else in the world matters. Nothing but me and Chloe, there and then.

Nothing else does matter except us.

Right now, I need her more than ever.

Then she lets go, and it's over.

I'm reluctant to move back, but I do. Even though my body is crying out for her, aching, I don't want to seem pushy. I glance back up to the window, and I breathe out when I see Luca and Miguel are gone.

Maybe they weren't spying on us after all. Maybe I was seeing phantoms in my mind. But I doubt it. They have both been trying to catch me off guard for years, and this is a fresh target for them to aim at.

At least we've won this time.

We turn towards the garden again, and I clench my fists to stop myself from reaching for Chloe's hand. "Thank you," I say. "And sorry. But the less suspicious we can make my brothers of us, the less likely they're going to be to pull some prank on you."

"I know. I get it," she says, avoiding my eyes.

I don't know what else to say to her after that.

So, we just keep walking as if nothing happened.

It's awkward for a moment, but then we relax again, exploring and enjoying a nice day, making jokes and laughing like old friends. When we stop thinking, we fall into such an easy friendship that it's hard to believe I haven't known her all my life.

It's doing nothing to help the confusion inside my heart.

CHAPTER 19

CHLOE

Paolo makes us get up way too early, and we hit the road while we're both still bleary-eyed and yawning.

I kind of get the feeling that leaving this early in the morning is a scheme to stop

anybody else from speaking to me, but honestly, I don't really mind.

Last night at dinner, I got my first interaction with Paolo's brothers, and I don't like the thought of being left alone with them all. Talking to them even for that tiny amount of time has really made me understand why Paolo has always been so desperate to leave this house.

They're like vultures, and they spent every second trying to find ways to undermine me or humiliate Paolo.

It was horrible.

We've been on the road for almost an hour when I finally turn to Paolo and ask, "So... where exactly are we going?"

He grins sheepishly at me, and my own face falls. That is a look I've come to know as the one he does when he has a secret he's been keeping and now he feels embarrassed to tell me. I brace myself for the worst.

"Okay, don't get mad with me," he says, and I glare at him. "But we are going to the village of Ricatari."

"Ricatari?" I echo. Why is that name so familiar to me? Then it clicks and I stare at him in horror, stammering, "But that's... that's where my father grew up. How did you know that?"

He scratches his cheek, baring his teeth in an approximation of a smile. "I looked him up on the public register. It's not like it's a secret. I didn't do it to stalk you. I just thought you might like to see where you came from."

Part of me wants to be mad with him, to tell him off for invading my privacy like this.

But against my better judgment, I don't.

Mostly, I just think it's sweet. He didn't have to care this much. He didn't have to figure out my father's name or go to all the effort of looking him up, finding where he was born.

He didn't have to make plans for us to come.

It's not exactly a quick and easy thing to do. Paolo might sit here and claim that it wasn't hard, but it was also no accident. The butterflies in my stomach raise their horrible heads again, and I try to ignore the message they're trying to give me.

"Thank you," is all I say instead. "For thinking of it."

He just smiles in response.

We spend the rest of the journey in silence, staring out of the windows. Occasionally, I look over at Paolo to watch the summer sun brush over his face, lighting him up in gold.

Once, I swear I caught him doing the same back at me.

When we get to the town, it's nothing like I imagined it would be.

It's not big. It's not busy. It barely looks populated at all. Between the houses there are tiny, cobbled streets, and all of the houses I can see have roofs made of thatch, the walls in red brick. There's a tiny church in the town center, and a supermarket that looks more like a convenience store. It's small and looks like it's been owned by the same family for the last hundred and sixty years. The signs in the window are handwritten and faded, and it's closed.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

Paolo parks the car in what I assume is the central lot, even though there are maybe three spots vaguely marked out. We get out of the car, and he smiles. “This is pretty typical for a Bellamare village. It’s not the smallest by any means — they have a grocery store, a post office, and a gas station. In some villages you have to travel for miles to get any of those things.”

“This is where he grew up,” I whisper, breathing in the air deeply like it might have a trace of him somewhere.

“It is. It was probably smaller in the seventies, but a town like this never changes too much. There are probably people here who still know his name.”

The thought of that is unimaginable. I’ve lived in New York City all my life. I barely even know what my neighbors look like, even less their names or anything about them as people. There’s a pleasant anonymity in the city. It’s worlds away from this.

“Do you want to see the house he grew up in?” Paolo asks.

My stomach lurches. “Okay,” I say quietly. “Do any of his family still live here?”

Paolo shakes his head sadly. “No, I couldn’t find much information on them. I’m sorry. I think his parents have passed, and any siblings he had have moved away to bigger cities.”

“I know he has a brother,” I say, “My mom and contacted him a couple of times. But Dad’s side of the family never were that interested in us.”

“That’s a shame,” says Paolo. “Your family mean a lot to you.”

“Yeah,” I say softly. “They do.”

“Come on, then,” he says, holding out his hand to me. “It’s not far.”

I take his hand and squeeze it gratefully. My personal feelings don’t matter right now. Seeing the place my father grew up in is something I need the support for.

We don’t say much as we walk through the village. Occasionally, Paolo points out something of historical or architectural interest, and I just nod in response, absorbing everything.

I’m trying to imagine my father here. I’m trying to think about him as a child, him seeing all these buildings every day; him living his life here the same as anyone would live their life anywhere.

Flashes of memory come back to me, of him taking me to the park when I was young, of him buying me ice cream. Times he swept me up in his arms, spun us around in circles and told me that he loved me.

Every time I’ve ever imagined doing something like this, coming to Bellamare and seeing the place where my father lived, I’ve always imagined it as a sad occasion. I’ve always thought it would be something that would cause me to break down in tears. Something that would squeeze my heart until it burst. I always thought it would make me grieve for a father I never had, until I couldn’t breathe.

And in a way, it is. It is making me ache for all the things he never saw me do. For all the milestones he missed.

But more than anything, I feel a great sense of joy. It makes no sense. It’s the last

thing I would have expected.

Seeing these rickety old houses, the mountains in the background, the people going about their day-to-day lives... it makes me want to cry a little. But not with sorrow or grief. I want to shed tears of relief.

This is who my father was. This is where he lived, what he loved. This is where he went to school. This is who he was before me.

All this time, the memory of him has been secret to me, like something I didn't dare touch in the fear that it would hurt. That, or, if I reached out to it, I'd spoil it somehow. Like he was something I had to think of as distant and untouchable.

But now that I'm here, I just want to celebrate. I want to think about that wonderful man whom I was so lucky to know.

It's like a part of me that has been broken all this time is finally whole.

In my head, I send up a little thank-you to him for leading me here. Things with Paolo might be complicated and they might not make any sense, but thanks to him, I've come to the place I've always wanted to be.

Thanks to my dad, I was led here. It must have been for a reason.

I guess I have a lot to be grateful for.

"Here we are," says Paolo, pulling me down what looks to be an ordinary street.

A couple of young women wander past us. They catch a glimpse of Paolo and bow their heads deeply. One of them whispers something to the other and they both break down in giggles. They say something to him in Bellamari then walk quickly away

after bowing again.

“What was that about?” I ask.

Paolo just shrugs. “It’s no big deal. I’m the prince; they recognized me. People think they have to be nice to me because of my title. It’s stupid, really.”

“They bowed for you.”

He shrugs again. “You get used to it eventually.”

I don’t want to get used to it, I think, but the last thing I want to do right now is have a fight. Being here means too much to me to ruin it by being petty.

“It’s just a normal house,” I say, changing the subject as we stand outside number nineteen, Via Bella.

“What were you expecting?” he asks, glancing at me, his hand tight on mine.

“I don’t know. I guess I wanted it to be something special. But it’s just completely normal.”

“It’s not a bad thing to be normal.”

“No, I guess not.” I take a shaky breath, and Paolo squeezes my hand again.

“We can leave any anytime you want,” he says. “We don’t have to stay if it’s making you uncomfortable.”

“No,” I say quickly. I can’t let him take me away. “It’s just a lot, that’s all.”

We stand there for a long while, just staring at the house. I try to memorize every brick, every chip in the stone, every piece of straw in the roof. I trace the window frames with my eyes, the lace curtains inside, the wreath on the door. In my

imagination, the young boy who would be Antonio Fontana runs past, grinning.

“We can see if the owners are home, if you want. We could ask if we can go in.”

“No!” I snap, too harshly. More gently, I add, “No. No, it’s okay. Seeing it is enough.”

Paolo says nothing. He just holds my hand and lets me have this moment.

But it can’t last forever, even if I want it to. My father is gone. And this house belongs to someone else now.

“Let’s go back to the village,” I say, turning to Paolo.

“You sure?”

I nod, forcing a smile. “Yeah, I’m sure.”

As we head back, a bunch more people recognize him and bow deferentially. Bowing to him is one thing, but then they notice our hands entwined and they bow to me too. I really wish they wouldn’t do that, but I don’t say anything. It’s not like there’s anything I can do to stop it. Plus, if I’m planning to stick around in Paolo’s life, this is probably something I’ve got to get used to.

Am I planning to do that?

We wander along the main street, or what counts as such here, and I look in all the shop windows. They’re all tiny, family-run businesses with no set opening hours. I’m pretty sure if I went inside and started haggling, someone would go along with it.

“Do you think they sell postcards here?” I ask.

“Maybe not in this village,” says Paolo, his face crumpling thoughtfully. “But I can take you to the capital, Bellé. They’ll definitely have some touristy stuff there.”

“I’d like to get a postcard for Mom.”

“So, then, a postcard you shall have.” He smiles at me, that big, warm smile, the one that reaches his eyes and lights up his entire face.

It’s only then that I realize exactly how long we’ve been holding hands for.

And I don’t let go.

The way they’re swinging like a pendulum between us feels like a comfortable weight, an anchoring force that’s stopping me from floating away. I should let go. I know I should. I don’t want him to get any ideas about what this means.

But I really don’t want to.

“Wait, I’ve got an idea,” Paolo says, his eyes brightening in the very definition of a lightbulb moment.

“What?”

“Hang on a second.”

He drops my hand, leaving me with a hollow, cold feeling. I stuff my hands in my pockets to force myself to ignore it.

Paolo doesn't seem to notice my disappointment. He picks up his phone, dials a number, and starts having a very animated conversation in Bellamari. I can't follow it at all, but he's smiling and nodding, which seems to be a good sign.

Then he meets my eye again like he's remembered I exist, and pulls the phone away from his mouth.

“How do you like the idea of going wine tasting?”

CHAPTER 20

PAOLO

“Okay, why not?” says Chloe, giving me a puzzled look. “Does this mean we have to leave?”

Her face falls, and I shake my hands in front of me. “No, I just remembered that there is a really excellent vineyard just outside this village run by this old woman and her husband. My parents used to love their farm. They probably remember your family. Hang on.”

I put the phone back to my mouth, and in Bellamari, say, “Yeah, that would be great, thank you so much for agreeing to open for us. I do hope it’s not too much trouble.”

“Not for the young prince,” says Carina, her voice crackling down the line. “It would be our honor to host you and your wife.”

“Yes, actually, about that. I’ve brought her here because her father grew up in this village. You wouldn’t happen to remember him, would you? Antonio Fontana? It would mean the world to Chloe if you could tell her anything about him.”

Carina hums, and my heart flips in disappointment. Maybe promising Chloe stories was a hope too far. And then Carina says, “The name is very familiar to me. I do remember a young boy by that name.”

“Honestly, even if you make something up, that would still be great.”

“You are still a cheeky young thing, aren’t you? I won’t be telling lies to your wife. I will think of a true story, though she will have to forgive my English — I assume she doesn’t speak Bellamari, if you are speaking so crudely in front of her.”

“No, she doesn’t,” I say, my face heating at the callout. There are very few people I would take that kind of reality check from, but Carina is one of them. I remember being very young, running around the vines with my brothers, free and wild — before I really understood what being a prince meant.

“Thank you so much,” I say again as I hang up, then turn to Chloe. “Come on!”

Chloe chases me back to the car, calling for me to wait. I don’t. I’m too excited. She’s going to love this. It’s only a five-minute drive, and she gives me a look the entire time.

As we head up the path, Carina comes out to greet us. She waves to me, and the second we get out of the car, she launches at us, wrapping her arms around me and squeezing me hard.

Then she turns and looks Chloe up and down. “This must be Chloe,” she says, speaking English with a thick accent. “Welcome, welcome. My name is Carina. It is a great pleasure to have you here. And Prince Paolo...”

She turns back to me and pinches both of my cheeks before ruffling my hair. In Bellamari, she says, “You are always so handsome, young man. It has been too long since you came to see us.”

My face heats in faint embarrassment. But she is right. I haven’t been here in years, and I should have. Carina has always been as kind as a mother to me.

She waves at us to follow. We do, and Chloe leans in to whisper, “What was that about?”

“She’s not usually open for visitors on a Sunday, but for us she’s making an exception. She’s an old family friend.”

“That’s nice of her,” Chloe says. “She didn’t have to.”

We head for the old barn. It’s a big, airy space that’s designed to give tourists a good view of the vines when they sit to drink wine. What Carina doesn’t tell tourists is that she never gives them her best wines — or that she got her certificate for being a master wine taster online for fifteen euros.

She seats us at the big table so we can see the grapes soaking up the warm, golden sunshine, then starts putting together a sampling basket. Chloe stares out at the farm as Carina scurries back and forth, and I stare at her.

Even a few days of being in the sun has given her hair highlights, touched all the freckles on her face and brought them out, framing her dimples when she smiles. She isn't looking at me, and it gives me the perfect chance to commit every curve, every line of her face to my memory.

Even if I have nothing else after this, I'll be able to think of her like this.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

Carina returns with a hamper that she dumps on the table, then sits down across from us. As she starts unpacking wines and glasses, she says to Chloe, “Now, then. Your father? Antonio Fontana?”

Chloe’s breath catches in her throat. “Yes. That’s right.”

“Yes, yes, I remember Antonio. Small boy. Always playing hide and seek with his friends. He...” she lifts her eyes to the sky, almost like she’s praying for the words to come to her.

But they don’t, so she sighs and turns to me. In Bellamari, she says, “Tourists, they’re easy. I know all the right things to say in English to them. But your Chloe deserves more than my broken words.”

“She’s not mine,” I protest.

Carina shakes her head at me. “Try telling her that. See the way she is looking at you, boy?” I glance at Chloe, and my heart leaps to see her eyes fixed on me. “Now, tell her this.”

I listen for a moment, then turn to Chloe and her expectant look and start translating. “She says she remembers one time he and his friends came to the vineyard when they were teenagers. Some of his friends were complete tricksters. And one of them dared your father to steal some grapes off the vines. He went all the way into the vineyard and started to complete the dare— Seriously?” I chuckle, cutting myself off to interrupt Carina, my final word in Bellamari.

Carina grins at me. “By the saints, every word I tell you is the truth.”

Then she continues her tale, and I force myself not to laugh. It’s a funny story, but Chloe is looking at me so reverently that I feel like I have to take this seriously.

“But then,” I resume, “Carina’s husband caught him, and he burst into tears. Taking pity on him, her husband brought him inside and gave him a glass of wine made from the grapes he had been trying to steal and told him to drink it up. And once he was finished, they drove him home because he was more tipsy than a teenager should be. And when they told his parents, they all laughed and laughed.”

“He was good boy,” says Carina in English at the end of the story.

Chloe’s eyes start brimming with tears, and I reach out for her hand. All I want to do is offer her a small comfort. “I’m sure he was,” she says, her voice shaking.

“And he has raised a beautiful daughter,” says Carina. “Here, try this wine. It is the wine of the stolen grapes.”

She pulls a bottle from her basket and pours a small sample into our glasses. “I also have some fresh cheeses and breads from around the area.” The basket seems to be endless as she brings out snacks and grapes and plates. Chloe’s eyes are still shining with tears, but the smile on her face is very real.

“Try! Try it!” Carina urges.

Chloe and I both raise our glasses, tapping them lightly against each other. Then we swirl the sample around, staring at it as if either of us know the first thing about wine. Chloe leans in and sniffs it, then takes a swig. I follow, letting the dark flavor splash over my tongue.

So I don't wince, I purse my lips, forcing myself to swallow. I'm not a big fan of red wine on the best of days, but I don't want to upset Chloe by admitting I don't like the wine that reminds her of her father. This day is already a lot for her without my negativity.

"What do you think?" asks Carina.

"This is great," says Chloe, grinning. Carina fills up her glass without asking, and Chloe takes another sip.

Then Carina raises an eyebrow at me and I stuff some cheese and bread into my mouth so I don't have to say anything.

She chuckles and pours us out some white wine next. She can definitely tell that I didn't enjoy that. But Chloe did.

That's all that matters.

"Tell us another story," I say to Carina, changing the focus away from me and back to the reason why we're here.

Carina hums as she carves up one of the hard cheeses, then launches into another tale of Chloe's father. I help her translate sections, but she manages for the most part. She tells us about the village, as it would have been when he grew up, and the mischief the kids used to get up to.

Chloe listens to every word, enraptured, and I just lean back and watch, letting my eyes drift shut as I bask in the sun, eating bread and drinking wine as the afternoon drifts on towards night. I know Carina will let us stay as long as we want, but I don't want to ever leave.

Because the more I stay here, in Chloe's company, the happier I am.

She makes me feel easy, content. She doesn't treat me like I'm anything but what I am, and it makes me want to be more for her. She can see a different man in me, one who is as generous and thoughtful as I pretend to be when I'm with her.

She makes me believe that it could be true, as well.

The sun glows on her skin and I eat cheese until I think I could burst, while my heart twists inside my chest.

If she would listen, I would tell her I loved her.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

If she wanted me, I'd be all hers. But I know we're not meant to be.

And knowing that makes the ache a thousand times worse.

CHAPTER 21

CHLOE

Paolo allows us to sleep in a little the next day, but I don't feel well rested at all. All night I was tossing and turning, unable to sleep for more than an hour at a time. I don't know why, but I couldn't get comfortable at all, and nothing I could do was helping.

The first person I see when I leave my room is Maria. I smile at her. "Good morning, ma'am," she says.

"Good morning. Is Paolo up yet?"

She shakes her head. "I haven't seen him. But if I were you, I would avoid the dining room for a little while. Miguel is down there demanding breakfast from the chef."

I shudder. "Good idea. Thanks. I'll just go back to my room then, I guess."

Maria says goodbye to me, and I sneak off back to my room, passing Paolo's as I do. I hesitate outside his door and contemplate knocking. It's probably not a good idea.

But that split second of hesitation is all it takes for him to decide it's time to open the

door. When he sees me, he jumps in surprise. “Chloe!” he says, “What are you doing here?”

“I was just going back to my room,” I say, trying to look casual. “Miguel’s in the dining room.”

“Ah, I see. Wise choice.”

“Have your brothers always been this nasty?”

“The same and worse,” he sighs.

“You must have had a fun childhood.”

He doesn’t respond to that. Instead, he says, “Tell you what, let’s get breakfast on the go.”

“Where are we going today?”

“Bellé, the capital city. We’ll definitely find a postcard there. And I want to show you the best gelato you’ll ever have eaten in your life.”

I grin. “That sounds good.”

“Good. But first, come in.” He grabs my wrist and pulls me into the room. I yelp, stumbling forward as he closes the door behind me. “Technically,” he says, “I’m not supposed to leave the palace at all. Yesterday was okay because news isn’t going to spread from a small village. But if I’m seen in the city and someone takes a photo of me, then I’m absolutely screwed.”

“We don’t have to go,” I say. The last thing I want to do is put him at risk. He doesn’t

need to get into any more trouble.

He shakes his head. “No, I want to. But I wasn’t quite sure what to wear. Should I wear this hat?” He puts on a stupid hat with earflaps. “Or this hat?” He puts on a stupid straw hat with a brim so wide I can barely see his face at all.

“Well, both are bad,” I say, pulling no punches, “But the straw hat’s better. Slightly.”

“Okay, and with sunglasses...” He goes and pulls some sunglasses out of his closet. “And maybe this scarf?” He throws a scarf around his neck for the final touch. “How do I look?”

“You were going for inconspicuous?”

“Yes.”

“Yeah — no. You couldn’t stick out more if you tried. Let me look.”

I fling open his closet. Almost everything he has in there is more expensive than anything I’ve ever owned, all suit jackets and button-up shirts and silk ties. I rummage around, flicking between generic, boring-colored shirts. He has to have something interesting in here. He can’t be all work. I know for a fact he’s not all work.

I’m about to lose hope, but then eventually I find the perfect thing.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

I pull it out. “Here we go. This is it.” I give it to him, and he stares down at it in horror, as if he had forgotten that he had ever owned such a hideous Hawaiian shirt at all.

“Really?”

“Yes. And we’ll add in... yeah, here. These shorts, then put on a baseball cap — backwards — sunglasses, and... socks and sandals. Perfect.”

“And you thought the straw hat was ridiculous!” he huffs, arms full of clothes, sticking his nose up at my idea.

“We’re aiming for an American tourist,” I say, “Nobody is going to think twice about a stupid American tourist. Definitely nobody’s going to think that their prince would ever dress like that. It’s the perfect disguise.”

“I take your point.” He frowns, then looks me up and down. “What are you going to wear?”

I shrug. “Let me see if I can get Maria to find me some leggings and a T-shirt, then we’ll both look perfect.” Against my will, Maria did go out and find me an entire new wardrobe. And, worst of all, she got my style spot on, so I love everything in my new closet.

What did I do to deserve this generosity?

“Perfect?” Paolo scoffs. “By whose definition?”

“The perfect disguise,” I say. “That was what you wanted, wasn’t it?”

By the time we meet at the side entrance ready to go, I have to bite my tongue to stop myself from laughing. “Wow,” I say as Paolo approaches me, looking less than pleased. “Don’t you look the part?”

“Do I?” he asks, perking up. His puppy-dog need for approval should be annoying, but I can’t help but find it cute.

“Unfortunately, yes. Everything about this—” I gesture at him “—could not be further away from royalty.”

“Good. I guess,” he says sadly.

“Cheer up,” I grin. “We’re going to have a great day today.”

He cocks his head at me, giving me distinct puppy-dog vibes again, but doesn’t say anything. He just gives me this look of intrigue, like he wants to ask how I can be sure. I guess I can’t.

But I have a good feeling about it.

Together, we drive into the city. He points more stuff out on the way, tells me his ideas for some things we could do. I have no real agenda. Not having to think about it feels kind of nice.

He pulls into a parking lot, then turns to me and says, “You hungry?”

“Yeah, a little.”

“Right, then. Gelato time.”

“You can’t have gelato for breakfast!”

“Maybeyoucan’t, but I definitely can. And anyway, the crepes in this place are to die for. Just trust me, okay? Let’s go.”

I don’t argue with him any more than that — clearly his mind is set on this plan, and I am curious. Everyone likes crepes, after all.

He leads me through the city, taking my hand, a big dopey grin plastered across his face. The way he loves this city fills me with a lightness, a shared joy. It’s infectious.

I can see why he wanted to get home so badly.

And I can’t really argue with him when we get served, because these crepes are damn good.

“Do you come here a lot?” I ask before I eat a strawberry whole.

He shakes his head. “I get them to deliver. I’m not really allowed to come into the city that often. Especially lately.”

“Do you ever just wish you could do what you want?”

Page 46

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

“Doing what I wanted got me into this mess to begin with,” he says ruefully, his face falling under a shadow. “Maybe it’s not such a good idea after all.”

I don’t push it any further. I don’t want to spoil our day.

After we finish our crepes, Paolo drags me back out onto the street to go and see the cathedral. It is a huge, intricate building, very ancient-looking, very impressive. I crane my neck up at it and watch as the light glints off the stained glass.

Tourists buzz around us, and Paolo flinches away from them, turning his face from every camera, every selfie. His parents have got him really scared about this.

How many rules is he breaking again, just for me?

We walk around the cathedral three times, then head to the art museum, where we both do our best impressions of the paintings. He makes me laugh with every dumb expression, every way he shamelessly holds out his arms to make himself look silly.

It’s all to make me laugh. And it does. Spending this time with him here, looking at these beautiful artworks and this ridiculous man... it almost feels like a date. I almost feel like I want it to be.

“Are you sure there’s nowhere you want to go?” Paolo asks as we pass by some statues commissioned by some long-ago royals and rich people to commemorate an event I’ve never heard of.

“No, not really. I’m happy to do whatever you want.”

This isn't the first time today he's asked me that, but I really am happy to defer to his better knowledge. He's already taken me to the one place I wanted to go most of all, and now I'm just enjoying exploring his city with him.

The backwards-baseball-cap look really could not suit him less, but it's doing its job. Nobody recognizes him at all. Just for now, we're two normal people, nothing more than two friends exploring a city together, enjoying each other's company, laughing at each other's dumb jokes.

This is Paolo in his truest form. This is a Paolo who isn't a prince and isn't pretending that he is anything but who he wants to be. This is the kind, funny, ridiculous man that I met months ago. This is the guy I fell for. Not the prince. Not the smooth-talking charmer, but the man who was thoughtful enough to take me to my dad's village.

That's what I fell in love with.

His face shines with excitement as he guides me around the city he knows best in the world. If he could always act like this, how could I do anything but love him?

There's that word again, jumping into my mind against my will. Surely he's broken my heart too many times now for me to still have feelings for him. Hasn't he lied and cheated? Hasn't he made promises? Used me? Isn't our entire relationship built on a foundation of misunderstandings and lies?

But somehow, here in the city, this feels like a reset button. This feels like it could be the start all over again.

This is the closest I think he's going to get to taking me out. To getting to know me the right way, and letting me get to know him. I'm still not sure if I like Prince Paolo, but normal-man Paul...

How can I forget him?

As we walk along the river, Paolo looks out and smiles, waving down at one of the boats filled with tourists. The sun catches his face, framing him in gold. It makes his eyes sparkle and his lips seem more kissable than ever.

Damn. I shouldn't be thinking about kissing. I shouldn't be thinking about anything except going home and forgetting about all of this craziness.

"Do you want to go on a boat tour?" he asks, turning to me.

"Okay," I say. "Why not?"

He offers me a hand and, despite knowing I shouldn't, I take it.

Despite everything, I still want him so badly that when I think about losing him, I forget how to breathe.

CHAPTER 22

PAOLO

By the time we finish up our pizza, the afternoon is drifting on towards the evening. I pay the bill, and as we're walking out, Chloe sighs dreamily. "That was probably the best pizza I've ever eaten in my life."

"We know how to do it around here," I say. "Once you've started enjoying Bellamari food, it might be difficult to go back to American cuisine."

"I'm already dreading it."

“You don’t have to.”

Page 47

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

I want to say, You could stay here with me, but that's a little bit too much like a confession, so I keep it to myself.

"Let's go to the history museum," I say instead. "There are all sorts of interesting artifacts from all over Europe. They close soon, so we should go now."

"Sounds good," she says, grinning. "But only if you promise to try and recreate some of the statues again."

"Deal."

We turn down the main street, and I look at her. "You know, this is the most fun I've had in ages," I say, putting my hands in my pockets to stop myself from taking hers.

"I hate to say it, but me too."

"Why do you hate to say it?"

She shrugs and looks away.

We keep walking, and a few strides later, she adds, "I'm supposed to be angry with you."

"Are you angry with me?"

She doesn't answer, and I don't push it. It wasn't a no. And right now that's good enough for me. As long as she doesn't hate me outright, I'm happy.

The line for the history museum is long, and as much as I want to use my royal credentials to skip it, I know I can't. Today we're being normal, and one of the worst things about being normal people is the amount of waiting you have to do to get anything.

How do people stand it?

My face is sweating from the heat, but I don't dare take my cap off. For a second, I remove my sunglasses to wipe my eyes. And that's when I hear someone say, "Oh, my God, is that Prince Paolo?"

My blood runs cold. I shove my glasses back on my face, grabbed Chloe's hand without waiting for permission and pull her away. "Come on. We have to go."

"What's happened?" she asks, her mouth wide open in surprise. "Paolo, what is it? Are you okay?"

"Don't call me that," I hiss, too harshly. But she can probably feel my hand sweating in hers, my heart racing. "Just don't say anything. Let's get out of here."

Without any more questions, she lets me pull her away.

I keep checking back over my shoulder to see if we're being followed. Not that I would be able to tell if we are. There are people everywhere, walking in our direction. The paranoia is making everyone a demon. Any person who even glances at us as could be a threat.

And if we get caught...

It's bad enough that I'll have to face the consequences. I can't bear the idea that Chloe will have to suffer for my mistakes too.

I can see the papers now. Paolo's Secret Wife! The media whirlwind she would get swept up into would be no joke, and she's got no training to deal with it, no experience. She doesn't even want any of this.

"Paul, what is it?" Chloe asks.

Despite the fear flowing through me, I feel a rush of affection again as she uses my pseudonym. It's not that different from my name, but it's different enough that it cools my panic. And it's the fact that she thought of it that matters.

"Someone saw me," I breathe. "Someone saw me and knew who I was. And now they're following us."

"Are you sure?" she asks, her fingers tightening around mine.

"Sure enough. We have to get out of here."

"Let's just go back to the car," she says calmly. "We can go home. I've already had a great day. The car's in the central lot; it can't be far."

"There's no easy way back, though. Not one where we can avoid everyone. People are going to see us. We're going to get caught. My parents are going to find out I lied again, and I'm going to get kicked out of the country all over again." I grow more and more frantic as I speak, my throat closing up with panic.

Nothing about this is good.

Page 48

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

Some people pass by and stare closely at us, and I flinch, turning my head away. It's way too hot for me here.

I feel like I'm going to be sick.

"You must know some other way back. Something more hidden," Chloe says, tugging on my hand to try and get me to slow down. "At least let's just go somewhere to lie low for a bit. If people are following us, they'll get bored eventually."

"Okay, okay. Good plan."

Someone points at us, and I pull Chloe down an alleyway, both of us pressing in tightly against each other as the space narrows.

I shift my weight from foot to foot, waiting and waiting until it becomes agonizing.

"Are they gone yet?" I whisper.

She hesitates, and I can tell she's trying to stop herself from saying I don't think they were following us to begin with. I don't care if she thinks I'm being paranoid. She doesn't realize it yet, but she's got married to the most notorious person in all of Bellamare.

Everyone has an opinion about me. There isn't a single person who would be shy to share it if they saw me. Bellamari people don't believe in dishonesty.

She might think I'm this cool guy, but the truth is I'm just the loser prince that

everyone hates.

The last thing I want is for Chloe to get caught up in that mob.

She cranes her head to try and look around the wall, and I pull her back, our bodies bumping against each other in the narrow alleyway. She looks up at me pleadingly. “They’re gone,” she says gently, keeping eye contact. “Let’s head back.”

“Just a few minutes longer,” I whisper, placing my hand on the wall next to her like a barrier.

She stares up at me. We’re so close that the heat of her skin radiates out to me, washing over me like sunlight.

“Paolo, it’s okay,” she says, placing both hands on my shoulders. “We’ll just go back. I’m sure there’s all sorts of rumors on the internet all the time. No one will think you broke any rules. It’s all going to be okay.”

Her hands on me are like comforting anchors, pulling me back down to the ground.

Without thinking it through, I reach out and brush my thumb over her cheekbone. How can I possibly start to tell her what she really means to me?

How can I possibly explain all the ways she’s changed my life?

“You okay?” she asks, staring deep into my eyes.

“Yes,” I say quietly, and mean it.

Then I place my other hand on the other side of her face and lean in to kiss her deeply. And just like in the garden, my heart soars again, racing with the certainty

that this is right. This is good.

She's wrong if she thinks I don't care for her. I do. I care more than I ever cared about anyone before. There's something inside us that matches so perfectly, something that connects us so deeply that letting go of her feels like ripping a part of myself away.

My heart beats in double time as I realize she's pulling me closer, deepening the kiss. Her hands are tight on me, her body pressed up close to mine. Her hips bump against me like she's trying to find something to grind up against. I'm dizzy with the sensation, dizzy with the idea that she wants me.

I feel sick and crazy all at the same time.

I never want to like anybody else. Only her.

In that moment, as the world freezes around us, everything is clear. I need to find some way to win her back. I need to prove to her that this love is real.

I need her to be my wife — for real.

CHAPTER 23

CHLOE

The second we get back in the car, Paolo starts driving, not uttering a word. There are no words to explain what just happened. That was more passionate than any other kiss we've shared. I know it was stress-driven, but I can't help but wonder how real it really was.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

There's no way such desperate passion could have been fake. Could it?

I don't comment on it. Right now I want to be happy in the delusion that this still means something. Right now, I don't have the space in my head to start processing why his first response in a panic was to kiss me like that.

I don't know what to do about any of this.

We head out of the city, weaving through the streets and past the traffic. As the signs start to point towards the highway, suddenly he turns left onto a tiny road.

"Isn't the house in the other direction?" I ask.

"Yeah, but I don't want to go home yet. Do you?"

"I don't know. Not really."

"Okay, then."

He doesn't offer any further explanation, and I don't push him for one. Instead I pull out my phone to text my mother. I send her a couple of photos of the museums, of the landscape, of the pizza. Having a great time, I write. Miss you loads. Wish you could be here too.

Me too, honey, she replies quickly. Looks beautiful. I remember why I fell in love there ha ha! Have fun x

I smile to myself, then look at Paolo. He's staring straight at the road, both hands gripping the wheel tightly. The tension in his body makes him sit up straight; it looks like he's in pain. Every so often he changes gear, and I can't help but look down at his hands.

I have to stop thinking about his fingers. But there's a fire burning inside me that he lit with that kiss, something that's going to be so hard to put out.

"This is the second-oldest cathedral in the country," he says as we turn down a street buried in the city suburbs. "Everyone always goes to visit the big one. But personally I think this one's a lot nicer."

We drive by it and I see what he means. It's built of the same gray stone as the other one, but the stained glass seems more impressive, the turrets cleaner. It stands proudly there, somehow more imposing, set away from the tall buildings and old, cobblestone streets.

"Are we stopping?" I ask.

"We can if you want to," he says, glancing at me, "But I thought we could just do a driving tour."

"Right. No problem."

"It's safer this way. But we can stop if you want."

"No, it's okay. I'm happy just to see it."

I'm happy to see it with you, I think, but keep the thought to myself. Things are already complicated enough right now without talking about our feelings on top of everything else.

He points out a couple more things, statues and streets and historical sites, then finally he says, “Are you ready to go home?”

“I wouldn’t mind. Are you?”

“I think I am. Unless there’s anything else you want to do.”

“No, not really.”

“Okay.”

He turns back onto the main road towards the highway.

And then, without thinking, I say, “Why don’t you do this more often?”

“I can’t,” he says, his face crumpling in confusion. “I have my duties.”

“No, I mean, why don’t you act like this more often?”

“What?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

“Everything I’ve ever heard about you tells me the story of a selfish boy. An idiot. But every time I’m with you like this... I don’t see that at all.”

“Whatdoyou see?” He glances over at me again, his eyes blazing with a self-loathing I’ve never seen before.

I take a breath, then tell him the truth. “I see someone kind. I see someone who cares. I see a guy who’s spent his entire life feeling overshadowed and who never quite figured out how to deal with that.”

He says nothing for a long while, and I don’t think he’s going to reply. Until, so quietly I barely hear it, he says, “You’re right. It’s not exactly that I was neglected as a kid. I had everything I needed. But... well, Miguel’s the oldest. I guess you’ve probably heard the expression, ‘the heir and the spare.’”

I nod when he looks at me expectantly. He sighs deeply and chuckles bitterly. “Well, I’m the spare’s spare. It’s not that I wasn’t loved or looked after. It’s not that I didn’t have everything I ever wanted, could ever even dream of. I guess it’s just... oh, I don’t know.”

My hands act before my brain can tell myself it’s a bad idea, and I reach out for his hand. “You just wanted to be noticed as much as them.”

“I guess, yeah.”

“It makes sense,” I say, “that you rebelled. You just wanted someone to see you for who you were.”

“And that’s the first time that anyone’s ever told me that my actions weren’t just those of some reckless young idiot.”

“You were just a kid. It must be a hell of a lot of pressure to be royal on top of that.”

“Most people would call it cushy,” he says with a chuckle so bitter that I almost feel like he’s about to cry.

I guess all he’s ever needed was for someone to be kind to him, to show him that there can be more to life than just being a disobedient boy. That he can be loved for who he is rather than what he is.

There’s that word again. Love.

He’s way too tender right now for me to start bringing something like that up. So, instead, I say, “You know, I like it when you’re like this.”

“Like what?”

“When you act like a human.”

“I’m always a human!” he says defensively.

“No, you’re not.”

I’m expecting him to argue more, but then he just sighs. “No, I’m not. I don’t think I’ve ever known how to be.”

“There’s still time for you to learn,” I say. He scoffs, and I push. He needs to hear this. “God knows I don’t know you that well, but I’ve seen it. If you could just show everybody else how kind and funny and cool you are, I’m sure they would all quickly

change their minds about you being some stupid little boy.”

“Oh, so you do think I’m a stupid little boy?” he snaps.

I shake my head, my tone calm. “Did I say that?”

“No,” he admits with a frown, and I see him gripping the steering wheel like he’s holding on for dear life.

“I mean it, you know,” I say. “I’ve had a great day today. I’ve had a great day with you.” My heart is racing hard in my chest now, like it wants to burst with words I don’t know how to form. Don’t know how to speak.

There aren’t any words to describe the way he’s changed my life.

Instead of more talking, I squeeze his hand. “We should do this again.”

“What?” he says, glancing over at me like he thinks he misheard.

“We should do this again,” I repeat. “You and me hanging out all day. You should show me some more of the country, or we could just do something fun. As long as I’m getting the real Paolo, I don’t mind. In fact, I’d like it.”

“I’d like that too.” He smiles for the first time since we started talking.

“I do like you, you know,” I confess quietly. “I like spending time with you.”

Page 51

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

He says nothing, his eyes fixed on the road, and because his eyes are fixed on the road, I let myself look at him. I let my eyes wander down to his lips. I let myself remember how good his body felt on mine.

All this time, I've been trying to deny it to myself, but I don't want to deny it any longer.

I want Paolo.

After all this is over, he might not want me anymore, but right now, as long as we're together, here in his home, I want him.

I know this can't last forever. But right now, it's me and him. And I like that.

CHAPTER 24

PAOLO

When I pull up to the palace, I turn off the engine and we sit in silence for a while, trying to figure out what to say.

We didn't speak much after Chloe's confession, and I can't quite figure out how I'm supposed to respond. Am I supposed to tell her that I love her now? Am I supposed to admit that to myself?

That's too much pressure to handle.

So, instead of words, I turn to look at her. Her eyes are swimming with an emotion I can't name, making me feel like I'm drowning in them, like I can't look away.

"Chloe," I say softly, reaching out to push her hair behind her ear, letting my fingers linger on her cheek, "I had a really good day today."

"So did I," she says again, like she really does mean it. "I'm glad we got to spend it together."

"I have a question," I say, ready to hold my breath waiting for her answer. She tilts her head. "Earlier, in the alleyway... I don't regret it, but it was a mistake. I shouldn't have kissed you like that. And you're right. I should allow myself to show who I am more. I should be better. So..."

This is getting out of control. I shake my head, and Chloe narrows her eyes at me, trying to figure out where this is going. "So?" she asks.

"So," I say, "I would like to kiss you again. Would that be okay?"

"I would be furious with you if you didn't," she says, her face splitting into a wide smile. I grin back, then lean over, wrapping my arms around her.

Our lips meet gently and tenderly, pressing against each other, but underneath, I can sense the passion that's still there. I feel her take a deep breath, and her arms come to my waist, like she's trying to pull me in.

I don't want to stop this moment, but kissing in the car like this is too exposed. That and there are other things I would much rather do in more appropriate places. "Chloe," I breathe in her ear, "let me take you back to my room."

Let me show you what you mean to me, I think, but don't dare say it. All of this is

already complicated enough without adding words like love into the mix.

She leans back from me, her eyes dark with lust. "I'm all yours."

We rush out of the car, only to get stopped by Maria in the corridor. "There you both are," she says. "Your dinner will be going cold. You should get yourselves to the dining room straightaway."

Chloe and I share a look, trying to figure out how we can wriggle our way out of this. To me, it's clear as day what Chloe has got on her mind. But we can't exactly say no to Maria. We don't want things to start looking weird.

Not that having sex with your wife is that weird, I guess. I'm pretty sure that's what you're meant to do.

But to keep up appearances, we head dutifully through to the dining room without argument.

I'm not particularly hungry after our lunch, and from the way Chloe picks at her food, I don't think she is either. She keeps throwing me this little look, almost a smirk. It's barely anything, but it's teasing enough to start driving me crazy.

We sit at the table for as long as we can bear to. I get the sense that both of us are counting down the seconds to the moment it's polite for us to leave again. And the second that that moment arrives, I make eye contact with Chloe and say, "Are you done?"

She nods, that lustful spark on her face again. "I'm ready to go upstairs."

"Let's retire for the evening." I get to my feet and offer her my arm. "Shall we?"

We move through the house almost impossibly slowly. We climb the stairs slowly, not to seem like we're rushing, not to seem like we want each other so desperately that I could scream.

Page 52

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

It was bad enough bumping into Maria earlier. I don't think I can bear to see anyone else now. I don't think I can hide the physical reality of me wanting her.

I don't think I can stand the embarrassment of being caught.

The second the bedroom door closes behind us, she pushes me up against it and kisses me, grinding into me, a low noise bubbling in her throat.

"God, Chloe," I growl. "I've missed you."

"Prove it," she says, and I do. I flip her around, pushing her against the door, letting my kisses dip lower and lower, nipping her collarbone and shoulder before sinking to my knees, hooking my fingers into the waistband of her leggings and tugging them down to the floor.

She's already glisteningly wet for me, so I don't waste any time, burying my face straight into her folds. She cries out and claps a hand over her mouth, trying to keep quiet, even though it's too late to take back her moan.

I pull away for a second to tell her, "You really don't need to do that. These walls are pretty soundproof."

She looks down at me and says, "Why have you stopped?"

I don't need any further instruction than that.

I push my tongue back against her clit, flicking it in increasing circles with growing

pressure, burying my entire face in her, eating her as hungrily as a starving man would eat a meal.

I am starving for her.

I've been hungry for her since the day we met, and no amount of kissing her seems to fill me.

When she comes, she shakes around my mouth and fingers, her legs trembling hard, one hand clenching in my hair, the other digging into my shoulder as she tries to stay upright while her wetness is spreading down my face. She tastes divine.

I don't move until she stops trembling.

As she comes down from her climax, she sinks to meet me on the floor, straddling my knees and kissing me, pushing me backwards onto the floor. They nearly slip out then — the words I've been trying to figure out how to say.

In this second, if I told her that I loved her, I would mean every syllable.

And if I told her in the next second, I would mean that too. But my head is spinning with sex, and today's already been weird enough without another added complication. I'd say I'm falling for her, but falling implies I still have further to go.

I don't. I am hers completely, whether she knows it or not. Whether she wants it or not. There will always be a part of me that loves her.

Her fingers wrestle with the button for my shorts and I reach down to help her pull down my fly. She releases the button then slips her hand inside to cup my hardening length with her palm, applying a gentle pressure that makes me feel like I'm about to explode there and then.

“I need you, Chloe. I need to fuck you right now. Please.”

She doesn't answer with words. Instead, she rips off her T-shirt and unclasps her bra so she can throw it to the floor. I take off my own shirt, and we roll around on the floor for a little longer, me rolling on a condom before, finally, I slip inside her and we connect, moving against each other in a perfect rhythm.

This moment will have to end eventually, but I never want it to.

We kiss, we hold each other, we fuck — no, we make love. That expression has never been more true than it is right now.

This is love. She must feel it too. She must.

What other explanation is there for the way her hips move? For the way she throws her head back and moans? For the look of pure ecstasy on her face?

Her mouth opens in silent gasps, and she cries out as she comes, her body shaking out of her control. I reach down between our bodies to her clit, wanting her to come again and again, wanting to make her feel so, so good.

And then I explode.

The world fades around me for a second. All I'm aware of is Chloe's body, the way her breasts press against me, the way her hands cling to my skin, the way her lips feel against my face, and I almost say it again. The thought is so loud in my head, Chloe, I love you. I'm sure she must feel it.

But saying it is too much like a confession. And in this moment, this beautiful moment of peace and passion, I feel like a confession will bring it all shattering down.

CHAPTER 25

CHLOE

Paolo has left me alone in my room for the day while he runs around trying to get everything ready for his parents to come home. He's clearly nervous. He keeps fretting and sticking his head in to check that I'm okay, running up and down the stairs as if there's something he can do to make this go more smoothly. I hope he doesn't blame himself too much if it doesn't.

There's only so much he can do. If his parents don't want this to go well, then it won't.

For his sake, I hope it does.

I slept in his bed all last night, cuddled up close to his body, breathing in his warm scent. I've missed it. Maybe it was a mistake for us to have made love like that, but nothing about it felt like a mistake.

As he's said multiple times, technically I'm his wife. And in actuality, we're adults. We can do whatever we want with our bodies.

And I really liked doing what we did last night. A thrill runs down my spine as I think of it.

A thrill that's quickly followed by a rush of nausea up my throat. I clutch my stomach, trying not to gag. I don't know what's wrong with me. Maybe I'm just nervous. Maybe Paolo's anxiousness is rubbing off on me. It doesn't need to.

The idea of meeting his parents makes me feel sick enough already. Literally, it seems, this morning.

When we woke up, we made an action plan. We're going to face this together. We're going to pretend that we've known each other for months, and we're going to stick to the truth as much as possible. We met in the bar where I worked. We hit it off. We had some fun. We got married. By choice.

That doesn't exactly explain the month and a half where he didn't speak to me, but we've agreed to pass that off as him being confined to his quarters here at home if anyone questions it.

No matter how many times we run through the cover story, though, I'm still terrified that it's going to go wrong. I don't know how they'll see through it, but if they do, I don't think my acting skills are good enough to come back from it.

The thing I'm sure they already know about is Paolo's ridiculous fake passport scheme. They probably know that our marriage is basically a sham, but we're not here to try and prove the legality of our wedding. I'm just here to support Paolo, to help show his parents that he's not the boy he was when he left.

The goal of this dinner isn't to try and show that his idea was good, or that his way back into the country was the proper one. The goal is to prove that I'm someone who chose to marry him of my own free will because I wanted to, and we like each other for reasons other than titles or money.

What can possibly go wrong?

There are only hours to go until the big event. That thought makes my stomach lurch again, and this time the sickness is too much.

Retching, I run to the bathroom, stumbling to the toilet, where I promptly eject the contents of my stomach.

This is so humiliating. In all the times I've been nervous before, I've never actually thrown up from it. I usually get shaky and a little sick, but nothing this bad.

Then again, maybe nothing I've ever been stressed about before has had so much riding on it. I've never had the power to ruin someone else's life before.

Thinking about it, I woke up feeling sick, like my whole body was swollen and lethargic. I put it down to our night of fun, but now a horrible thought is tickling the back of my mind because there's no way I'm old and inflexible enough to feel this achy after a few hours of sex.

So... what if the sickness has another cause?

My hands shaking, I try to think of the last time I had my period. I can't quite place the date... but no matter, we've used protection every time.

And then horror rises in me as it dawns on me. That night, the night we consummated our marriage. We didn't use protection.

I guess we consummated it the good old-fashioned way.

I throw up again.

There's a knock on my door. "Hello?" calls Maria. "Chloe, are you in here?"

My only response is to retch. Maria rushes to the bathroom and stands in the doorway, watching me kneeling by the toilet. "Are you okay?" she asks, frantic. "Are you going to be okay for the dinner?"

Tears streaming down my face, I turn to look at her, shaking my head. With a broken voice, I sob, “I think I might be pregnant.”

Maria rushes over and envelops me in her arms, sitting on the bathroom floor with me, holding me tight. “Oh, sweetheart,” she says, “What happened?”

“Do you really need me to explain?” I scoff, my voice shaking with tears. “It happened the normal way.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

“I am old, not so stupid,” says Maria with a wry smile. “Tell me how it has happened.”

“I guess it must have been the night after we were married. It was a really good night... Oh, God! What am I going to tell Paolo? He won’t want this.”

Maria strokes my hair, gently squeezing my shoulders. “Don’t worry about that now. We’re not even certain that this is true. This could all just be the nerves of having to meet the king and the queen.”

“Please don’t remind me of that,” I whisper. This is all a nightmare enough as it is.

“Do you want the baby?” Maria asks.

“I want to know if it’s real,” I say covering my face with my hands. “And if it is real... I don’t know. Yes, of course, I want it if it’s real.”

“Come and lie down,” says Maria.

She helps me to my feet and guides me slowly to the bed. I close my eyes the second my head hits the pillow.

“I’ll be back soon,” she says. “I’ll bring some medication and a test. Everything’s going to be okay. Please try not to worry too much.”

In that second, I trust her implicitly.

When I open my eyes again, Maria's back, and I realize I must have fallen asleep for a while.

"Are you ready to take the test?" she asks, smiling kindly as I sit up.

"No," I say, holding out my hand for her to give it to me.

She hands the test to me without a word, and I head to the bathroom to pee on the stick. As if this couldn't get more humiliating than it already is.

And then we wait.

Maria sits with me and holds my hand as we wait for the results, trying to distract me from the catastrophes I'm cooking up in my mind.

She sets a five-minute timer, and the second it goes off, she goes to the stick and snatches it up so I can't see it. "Are you ready to know?"

"Just put me out of my misery."

I close my eyes hard, clenching my fists. In my heart, I know the answer already.

Quietly, Maria says, "It's positive."

I can't help but sob again. It's not entirely a surprise, but it's definitely not what I was expecting out of today.

"What am I going to tell Paolo?" I ask again. I can imagine the horror on his face now.

I can also imagine him with a baby in his arms, smiling. Playing with it. Being a good

dad.

“We can worry about that later,” says Maria. “It is definitely his?”

I throw her the kind of look that makes it clear her joke is not funny right now, and she squeezes my shoulder in comfort.

“Let us worry about the king and the queen and the big dinner first. Let us pray to God that that goes smoothly, and once all of that stress is over, then we can tell Paolo.”

“Sounds good,” I say, even though all of this couldn’t sound any further from good.

“Do you want me to stay?” Maria asks. “Or would you prefer to be alone?”

“Please don’t leave me,” I say, too quickly. “I don’t think I can do this on my own.”

“Then I will stay.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

And she does. To my relief, she doesn't talk any more about pregnancy or babies or anything like that. Instead, she tells me more stories about Paolo as a child, about all the stupid antics he got up to. It just about takes my mind off the whole thing.

At least it does so enough that by the time Paolo knocks on the door to tell me it's showtime, I feel a little calmer.

Not completely, but enough to be able to face this.

After all, what choice do I have?

CHAPTER 26

PAOLO

The silence is deafening. I keep glancing between everyone at the table. My mother, my father, Chloe, and Maria stood in the corner.

I don't think I've ever felt more stressed in my life. I can feel myself growing wrinkles in real time from the pressure of it all.

I just need them to believe this one thing. I just need Chloe to play the part of a convincing wife for an hour.

She promised that she would, but she's sitting here looking so miserable I almost want to kick her under the table and beg her to start smiling. She is being polite at least, but her beautifully happy face has been marred by a frown.

I can't understand why. Maybe it's the nerves.

If I wasn't doing my very best acting, I would probably be frowning like that too. God knows I'm nervous enough. But this seems kind of unlike her. I want to ask her what's wrong, but I can't do that now. Not while my mother and my father are holding a magnifying glass to us, scrutinizing our every move.

"So, Chloe," says my father, breaking the silence with the promise of an awkward question. "Paolo here tells us that you are a working woman." I wince. Why did he have to say that like it's a bad thing? "What is it that you do?"

Chloe takes a large sip of her glass of water then forces a smile on her face. It looks fake. "I work in a bar," she says.

"You own it?" asks my father.

"No," she bites out, her entire body tensing like she knows she's being led into a trap.

I wish I could have told my parents not to do this. Not to humiliate her in front of them. Not to make her feel like she's worth so much less than she is.

I know what they're doing. I'm sure Chloe can see it too. They're trying to assess if she has any sort of dowry, if she comes from any sort of important family, any sort of money. I already told them that she doesn't, but asking them to listen to me is like asking a fish to start breathing and walking.

"No, I don't own it," she says quietly, not quite able to look my father in the eye. "I am one of the more senior bartenders, though. The next time there's an opening, I think I'm probably going to be promoted to manager."

"Well, that's good, isn't it?" sneers my father, and I see Chloe wilting like a flower in

the sun.

I clench my fists under the table. Screaming would do no good now, but it would make me feel better. There's too much riding on this, though. We have to keep our composure.

Even if it kills me, we have to keep this together.

"You met while Paolo was on one of his business trips?" says my mother, spitting the words "business trip" to make it really clear to each and every one of us exactly what she's insinuating.

Yeah, yeah, I want to say, we all know you think I'm useless. We all know you think I've never had any sense of responsibility in my life. You all think that I spent my entire year in exile acting like an idiot — and you're probably right. After all, what have I got to show for any of it?

Suddenly Chloe feels so far away. If I could, I'd reach out and take her hand.

"Yes. He was in New York for work and he happened to come into my bar. I can't explain why but we really hit it off. We went out a couple of times, really got along, and then he popped the question. It was sudden, but it felt right."

I release a shaky breath. At least she got that pitch-perfect. She nearly sounded convincing.

"You know," says my father, his face unchanged, "when Luca got married, people were partying in the streets. Everyone in the country was out celebrating. And Miguel?—"

"Yes, Father," I interrupt with a sigh. "Everyone knows about Miguel's wedding."

“Does your wife?” he spits, staring me down.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

I close my eyes tightly. “No,” I say through gritted teeth.

“Miguel,” says my father as if I hadn’t just spoken, “asked us to declare a national holiday for his joyous day. You see, when things are done properly, we like to celebrate in this country. We like to do good things for our people. And we like to make sure that our family is well looked after.”

My fists are clenched so tight under the table that I’m leaving little crescent marks in my palms. I know he’s just doing all this to get at me, but it is getting to me. He’s making me look bad in front of Chloe. Right now that hurts more than anything in the world

I glance over the table at her, trying to decode the expression on her face. She still looks sad. Is it because she’s falling for my father’s propaganda? Is she believing what he’s saying about Luca and Miguel? I hope not.

I’m not perfect, but surely she knows me better by now. Surely she’s seen enough of me to know that this is just my father’s mind games.

I try to catch her eye, wanting desperately for her to look at me so I can make some expression to say this isn’t true. Not that it’s all untrue — there really was a national holiday when Miguel got married.

But the thing that isn’t true is the way he’s suggesting that, because I didn’t do the same as my brothers, I am a lesser person.

Maybe I am.

It's taken me all this time to see it. But in the last month I've gone through a bigger journey of realization than at any other time of my life.

They wouldn't listen if I did, but for the first time in my adult life, I feel like I could stand up to my parents and say, "No, I'm not a dumb child. I know who I am. I know who I want to be — and the person I want to be is the kind who marries Chloe because she's normal. Because she's kind. Because she makes me into a better person."

But that would only fall on deaf ears, so I keep my mouth shut.

I might be changed — but I'm still a coward. All this conversation is making me want to do is run away and hide in a deep, dark hole.

Maybe exile was better for me. At least when I was in exile, nobody was judging me. Or at least, I couldn't see it. I wasn't living it every day.

Two months I've been back, and I'm trying so hard not to fall into my old ways. But every time my parents speak to me like I'm stupid, it gets so hard not to live up to those old expectations.

I glance at Chloe again, and this time she does catch my eye. She offers me the faintest of smiles. It's enough to give me some hope. It's not much, but I'll take it.

We just have to get through this. Once my parents see that we mean it, they'll back off. Once we make it clear that this is who we are, and we're not going to change it, they'll stop bothering me about it.

This is what they've always wanted, anyway. Me to get married. Me to become a better person.

We just have to show them.

And maybe get married again, properly. But that's a conversation for another time. A time when Chloe doesn't look so scared and close to tears.

Why did I have to get sat so far away from her? Why can't I take her hand and run?

Why can't this just be over?

CHAPTER 27

CHLOE

Every second I spend here makes it more and more obvious why Paolo decided he needed to escape. It's not what I would have done, but every third sentence out of his parents' mouths seems to be some sort of comparison to his brothers. I don't think I agree with Paolo's past ways, but I am definitely coming to understand them.

It can't be easy when nothing you do is seen as being right. If anything, all this conversation is doing is making me long for my mom again. I miss her so much.

I wish Paolo had the kind of support she gave me when he was growing up. Maybe he would have turned out differently.

"So what does your father do?" asks the queen.

I chuckle awkwardly. "My father's dead," I say.

"I'm sorry to hear that," she says with the practiced tone of someone who doesn't really care but has learned how to pretend that she does.

“But he is the reason I always wanted to come here,” I add. “He was from Bellamare. If it wasn’t for him, I would never have met Paolo at all. I wouldn’t have had something to talk to him about, a connection.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

“And you would never have fallen in love,” says his mother like an accusation. I just smile, deciding it’s best not to say anything to that.

We don’t want to get caught out in our web of lies right now. That won’t help anything.

“Your mother, then?” asks the king, clearly not done with this line of interrogation. “She has a job?”

I want to say, Look, I know what you’re doing. You’re trying to figure out if I’m good enough for your family, and I already know the answer’s no. So why don’t we just stop pretending? Why don’t you just tell me that you think I’m worthless?

But again, that’s not going to help us. I have to be a good wife right now, and that means swallowing all my snarky comments. This isn’t about me. It’s about helping Paolo.

“My mother did a great job raising me,” is what I say instead. “She’s always been there for me, always made sure I had everything I needed. I’m repaying the favor now. She lost her job a few months back, and she’s been taking some time out since. It feels good to do what I can for her.”

“So, you are a family-oriented person?” the queen asks, her eyes sharp on me.

This is like the worst job interview ever. At least in an interview, I have a pretty good idea what the right answers are.

“I would say so. My mom’s always been the most important person to me in the world. I think being able to rely on each other as a family, knowing they’re always there for you — well, I think that’s the best thing in the world.”

I hope that I managed to lace my own words with enough of a sting, but if the king and queen feel it, they say nothing. In fact, they don’t even blink.

I like to think that I can hold my own, but I’ve got nowhere near as much experience in this game as they do. I’m sure that they will be able to beat me every single time in the subtext-and-snide-comments arena.

“We’ve been trying to instill the importance of family values into Paolo for years. It seems that perhaps, finally, he’s found someone who could teach him that. It would be good for him.”

“I’d like to think so,” I say, forcing the smile again. I glance over at Paolo, and he grimaces encouragingly. “I hope I’ve already taught him a lot. He’s always been a kind person in the time I’ve known him.”

That, finally, is enough to make his mother crack her façade. She raises her eyebrow a fraction before settling back into the mask, but it’s enough to make me breathe out in relief. That was pure shock, right there.

That, to me, is a sign that I’m doing something right.

I just have to keep holding on now until the dinner is finished.

We’re interrupted by the kitchen staff taking away our plates from our appetizers and bringing out the main course. In the bustle, I catch Paolo’s eye and he grins at me. I smile back, though I wish I could hold his hand.

I wish it could be me and him again, alone in our own little world. Much as I want this to be over, the fact is that after the dinner, he doesn't need me anymore. He'll have what he wants. He'll be home.

That thought makes my stomach turn and I push it away. I can't be dealing with sickness again now. I'm trying to be the perfect wife. The perfect wife doesn't throw up at the dinner table.

The perfect wife doesn't keep her pregnancy a secret — nor is she stupid enough to let it happen without really wanting it.

I have to stop thinking about this. The more I think about it, the worse the nausea gets. There'll be plenty of time to worry about raising a baby on my own when all this is done. Because I'm assuming Paolo won't want anything to do with it.

Think of the scandal!

My head hurts with the pressure of it all.

I force myself to eat as much as I can of the meal. It's good — pasta and fish and a sauce so creamy I'm almost tempted to go to the chef and ask for the recipe. Maybe I will do that before I leave. I bet Mom would love some authentic Bellamari dishes.

It's only a short reprieve, though, because the king and queen launch right back into questioning me about my life. They ask more about my mother, about my school, about my career, such as it is. I confess that I want to be an artist, and I can't tell if the reaction is disappointment or disdain.

The thing I know for sure is that they're not impressed.

What was Paolo thinking bringing me home? I'm nobody. I'm nothing to them.

This was never going to work.

It takes forever, every second feeling like an eternity, but finally we finish dinner. I thank the king and queen for the meal, letting myself relax a little now that the end is in sight.

And then the king asks, “Would you like dessert?” and all I can do I stare as my traitorous stomach turns at the idea of sugar.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

Please, I beg myself, don't do this now. I took a bunch of pills already to try and calm my sickness, and until now it was working.

But it's no use. It lurches and a fresh rush of nausea rises in my throat. I take some deep breaths, trying to will the sickness away again.

Paolo leans across the table, clearly seeing how bad I must look, and says, "Chloe, are you okay?"

"Yeah," I say, and then retch, covering my hand with my mouth. "I'm just feeling kind of queasy, that's all."

"Was it the food?" asks the king, challenging me as he fixes me with another of those intense, horrible stares.

"No," I say. "No, the food was great."

He looks at me, unimpressed, and I can't hold it any longer. "I'm so sorry. I have to go." Jumping up, I shove my chair back hard and lurch forwards before running out of the room.

I hear Paolo call after me as I go, but if I don't make it to the bathroom right now, I'm going to make an embarrassing mistake all over the carpet.

I collapse on the bathroom floor, empty my stomach into the toilet and then let out a sob.

What if this has just ruined everything? What if this has blown Paolo's chances of being allowed to stay in the country? What if this has blown our marriage forever?

CHAPTER 28

PAOLO

Chloe all but sprints out of the room, leaving me and my parents staring after her in surprise. "What's that about?" asks my mother.

"I don't know," I say, frowning hard. Mother frowns back at me, and I say, "Let me go and see if she's okay."

I push my chair back and start heading towards the door. As I do, I notice Chloe's dropped something on the ground. I reach down to pick it up and realize it looks like a blister pack of pills.

I squint at them, not sure what they are, but keep walking, not wanting my parents to think I've picked up anything weird. Their eyes burn into the back of me as I cross through the doorway, but they don't matter right now.

Nothing matters as much as Chloe does.

As she got up, she looked the palest I've ever seen her. Her face turned a ghostly porcelain, like she was about to throw up. Maybe she's sick. She didn't seem sick, but maybe that's what these pills are for.

As I head down the corridor, I read the information on the pill packet more carefully, trying to figure out what's going on. It's got some long medical name that I don't understand, but then I spot the tagline printed so small I can barely make it out. Europe's number-one morning sickness brand.

Morning sickness,I think.But that's...

A sickening realization hits me.

My entire bloodstream freezes me into a block of ice, and I gasp like I've been punched in the chest and forgotten how to breathe.

Chloe's pregnant.

We've been married for nearly two months now. Could it be... Is this child mine?

Somehow, I don't think she would cheat on me. But is it really cheating if a marriage wasn't real to begin with?

My vision blurs as I hurry to the bathroom. I need answers, and if she is pregnant, then it looks like I'm not the only liar here. I need to see her right now.

I hesitate when I finally reach the bathroom. Do I burst in? Do I knock? This isn't exactly a problem I've dealt with before. I need to see her but I don't want to surprise her when she's vulnerable in the bathroom. I don't want to scare her.

But there has already been enough deception between us. I don't want any more secrecy.

Making a decision, I lift my fist and knock on the door.

"Occupied," calls Chloe from within. She doesn't sound good.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

“Chloe it’s me,” I say. “Can I come in?”

“No,” she says shakily.

“I’m worried about you. Please let me help.”

“Okay, fine,” she calls with a shaky sigh. “It’s not locked.”

Carefully, I open the door to find her crouched on the floor next to the toilet, one hand holding back her hair, the other clutching her stomach.

I rush over to her, sinking to my knees next to her. “What’s the matter?” I ask. “What’s happened?”

“Nothing,” she lies, and paranoia creeps around my ribs.

“Are you sure?” I ask. She nods then leans forward to throw up again. Unthinkingly, I reach out to take her hair and pull it out of her face. She doesn’t resist, and I sit there holding her until the vomiting has passed.

Then I sit up on my knees and rummage around in my pocket, looking for the pills. “Are you sure it’s nothing?”

She looks at me with wide, pleading eyes. They’re shining with tears, almost like she’s begging me not to keep asking.

My own hands shaking, I pull the pack of pills out of my pocket and hold them up.

“You dropped these,” I say quietly.

She gasps, her hand coming to her mouth, the tears in her pretty green eyes finally falling. She reaches out to snatch the pack away from me but she doesn’t say anything else. There’s not really anything else to say. Nothing except...

“Is it true?” I whisper. “You’re taking these because... because you’re...”

“Because I’m pregnant,” she splutters. “I’m pregnant with your baby.”

I let out the breath I’ve been holding ever since I left the dining room, the relief and shock of the truth washing through me like a thousand shots of adrenaline.

“My baby,” I echo.

“I’m sorry,” she sobs. “I know this wasn’t what you wanted. It’s probably going to make things so much harder than they already are. I didn’t mean for this to happen. And I’ll understand if you don’t want it. If you never want to see me again, I’ll?”

Not wanting her to spiral any further, I lean in and cut her off with a kiss. As our lips press together, I regret it a little because her lips taste of salty tears and bile, but I can ignore that.

I’m sure I’ll share better-tasting kisses with her in the future. Right now, all that matters is Chloe and me and our unborn baby.

“I want this,” I say as I pull away, wiping my mouth. “I want this more than I can possibly tell you.” I reach out for her hand. “I’m so sorry for all of the lies. Believe me; I’m being honest now. I want you, Chloe Fontana. I love you.”

She stares at me in shock, and I let the rest of my confession tumble out. “I’ve loved

you since the moment I met you. I loved you more every single time I've seen you. I know our relationship is weird. I know it's unorthodox. But if you'll have me, I promise that I'm going to spend every second proving to you that I can be a good husband. More than that, I'll prove to you that I can be a good friend. A good lover. A good person."

This is what I've been trying to say to her for such a long time now. This is the least romantic way I could possibly have done it.

But I don't care. I love her. I mean it so much, my heart could burst. I love her, and I love our baby.

And now it's up to her to decide if she still wants me.

CHAPTER 29

CHLOE

Isniff, scrubbing my eyes with the palm of my hand. But it doesn't stop the tears from flowing. This man... "I already know you can be," I say. "You are ridiculous, Paolo. You and your schemes. You and your life."

He gives me this look as if to ask if that's a good thing or a bad thing, and I realize then that he really means it. Trying not to burst into tears again, I say, "I still haven't a hundred percent forgiven you for all the lies. But we have a baby on the way now. That changes things. I know you have it in you to grow. But I can't pretend I don't feel anything, because I've loved you since we met too. I love you too."

His breath catches in his throat, his eyes shining.

"I can't promise to be what your family want me to be," I add. "All I can do is

promise to be good and faithful to you. To be the kind of wife that will make your parents proud, even if they won't admit it."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

“Who cares about my parents,” he scoffs. “If you’re not good enough for them, I don’t care. They can exile me again for all I care. You’re good enough forme. That’s all that matters.”

“You would renounce your titles for me?” I ask, my lips quivering and tears now falling freely. He must know I wouldn’t ask that of him. And I know he wouldn’t offer unless he meant it.

“You helped me get them back.”

“Kind of.”

“Yeah, kind of. But for you? Yes, I would lose them all over again.”

With that I throw up in the toilet again.

He strokes my head gently, reaching out to hold my hand. I take it and squeeze hard. But in that one gesture, I feel every breath of truth in the words he just said to me. He really did mean it.

He really does love me.

Once the wave passes, I sit back and wipe my mouth with the back of my hand. He leans in to me, and I lean away, grimacing. “Okay. I’m sorry. I don’t want to kiss you again right now. I mean, I do, but...”

“No, I get it,” he says with a grin. “Let’s wait until we’ve had a mint.”

“Deal,” I smile.

“This stuff really doesn’t work that well, does it?” he says, turning the packet over in his hand.

“Maria said it was the best that money could buy,” I frown.

“Well, then, we have to do better. Also — Maria? You told her before you told me?”

“We were going to tell you after the dinner,” I say desperately. “We didn’t feel like it was a good idea to have any more stress before the big event.”

“So, you kept all the stress to yourself.” He shakes his head. “Don’t do that again. I want to know everything about you, Chloe, I want to know all your secrets. I don’t want you to feel like you ever have to hide anything from me again.”

“I won’t. But I need you to promise that you won’t lie to me. Not ever again.”

All of this is wonderfully fairy-tale-like, but there’s still a nagging part of my mind that doesn’t want to believe the transformation. Paolo might have shown me a better side to himself, but complete personality changes don’t happen overnight. I need him to look me in the eye and promise me now that he’s going to change for real, that he is going to be the better person I know he can be.

He takes both of my hands and looks me straight in the eye. “I know I’m not perfect. I can’t ever promise you perfection, but I can promise you I will never lie to you again. I can’t promise anything else but that.”

“No,” I say with a smile, “you can’t. But that’s all I need.”

We sit there for a long moment, holding hands before I collapse forward into his

arms, wrapping mine around his body, holding him tight. I would like nothing more than to kiss him right now, but my throat is scorching and my lips and mouth taste disgusting. I don't want to put him through that again. Besides, I feel like there'll be plenty of time for kissing later.

He wraps his arms around me and squeezes, and I know in that moment that I'm safe and loved.

"We must look ridiculous," I giggle, wiping my eyes again. "I mean, look at us. On the floor."

I feel him laugh deep inside his chest. He doesn't say anything, but I know that I'm right. We're sitting on the floor of the royal bathroom, in one of the most expensive houses in the entire country, in the country that I've always dreamed about visiting.

And I'm throwing up.

It's not exactly the romantic confession a girl dreams of. And somehow that makes it even more special than anything else.

He could have done roses. He could have done fancy dinners and a big party. We could have gone through the motions of all the standard romantic things, but this here, on the golden tiles, sitting by the gilded toilet, it feels special in a way that roses never will.

"Let's get married," Paolo says.

I sit back up, staring at his face, and laugh. "But we're already married."

"I mean properly," he insists. "Let's do it the right way. Let's have your mother there. Let's do it under my real name. Let's mean it."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

“Okay,” I say. “And you’ll buy me an expensive dress?”

“I’ll buy you whatever you want.” He grins, leaning in to kiss me on the forehead.

We sit there for a little longer waiting to see if my stomach will settle. “I think I’m good,” I say eventually. “I think the worst of it has passed.”

“Good. I’ll speak to Maria about getting some different pills for you. But in the meantime...” With a groan, he gets up to his feet and offers me his hand. “There’s one more thing I have to put right.”

I take his hand and let him pull me to my feet. I know exactly what we have to do now, and the idea isn’t filling me with joy. But if his parents hate me after this, so be it.

We can’t force them to accept us.

Now that we’re hand in hand, I feel braver than ever. Now that all of our messy untruths are laid bare, I feel like I can face anything.

He opens the bathroom door and holds out his hand. I take it and follow him back to the dining room.

My heart rate spikes as we approach the door. His hand squeezes mine as if he can tell how nervous I am, then he puts his hand on the golden knob and opens the door. “Mother, Father,” he says, staring his parents straight in the eye. “There’s something we need to tell you.”

CHAPTER 30

PAOLO

My parents stare at me expectantly. My heart leaps into my mouth. I glance back at Chloe, and she nods, encouraging me as always. She gives me the strength I need to do what I have to do.

I take a step forward, completely exposed, like I'm under a spotlight. Like I'm standing in the line of fire, waiting for them to pass judgment.

"We've got some news," I say taking a deep breath. "And I have a confession. Me and Chloe... we're not really married."

My parents' faces don't change, like this was something they expected. I continue. "I mean, the ceremony was real, but, well, it wasn't really under my name. And the thing is, Chloe only agreed to marry me because I offered to pay her. I lied to her about who I was, and she only agreed to do it because I promised her money. And because she's a wonderful, generous, and kind person, she went along with my scheme. She agreed to come here and meet you."

"Why would you do this?" asks my father sternly, his eyebrows knotting together. He looks more like an angry old man than ever.

"I wanted to know if I was in Grandfather's will," I confess, my eyes pricking with tears. I clench my fists and fight them back. "Because nobody told me that he had died, and I wanted to know if any of you remembered me. It all started this plan to get home, to marry a Bellamari citizen. To get a fake passport. It was all working perfectly. And then I went and made the stupidest mistake of all."

"Which was?" asks my mother, raising the most unimpressed eyebrow I've ever seen.

“I fell in love. I fell in love forreal. I found something more important than myself. I realized how much more I should be. I realized that, all this time, I’ve been listening to what you think of me and accepting it as the truth.”

“What we think?” Mother scoffs.

“Yeah. What you’ve thought about me my entire life — that I’m stupid and unworthy. You’ve always favored Miguel and Luca, and I get that. Miguel’s going to get the crown, and Luca’s next after that. But me? I’m nothing. The only way I could ever get anyone to notice me was to make noise in the stupidest way possible.”

“We never thought that,” says my father quietly.

“What?” I blink.

Father slides his chair back and gets to his feet. “Yes, Paolo, you are the youngest. Yes, the crown is unlikely to ever fall to you. But we’ve never thought any less of you because of that. We have loved you as a son, ever since you were born. We have always wanted what was best for you.”

“You did?” I say, my throat closing up with emotion. Chloe reaches to take my hand, giving me an anchor in this stormy sea I’ve been thrown into.

“We did. And I see now, perhaps we were a little harsh on you. But it seems the year of exile has done wonders for you after all.”

“This is the man we always believed you could be,” says my mother, getting to her feet. They both round the table to approach us, and my heart leaps into my mouth.

A million times, I’ve imagined having this conversation with my parents. A million times, I’ve imagined standing up to them, telling them how I’ve always felt. Asking

them why they've never cared about me the same way that they've cared about my brothers. And in all my imaginings, I never thought that the answer would be that they did care about me all this time.

"We're sorry if we've let you down," says my mother. "You are our son, Paolo. You are important."

She glances at my father, and a rare smile splits across his face "Yes. You've learned the lesson that we hoped you would. You've become a man. So, we're ready to welcome you back with open arms."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

My hands fly to my mouth and I let out a choked sob. “Really?”

“Really.”

Suddenly, I’m more vulnerable than ever. Everyone’s eyes are on me, boring deep into my soul, trying to decide what I’m going to do next.

Chloe squeezes my hand, and I turn to her. “I love you. I’m so sorry for all the lies. If you’ll still have me...?” She nods with a teary smile, and I turn back to my parents. “Allow me to marry Chloe. Properly. Allow me to give her the ceremony that she deserves, to express our love in front of everyone. I’m not afraid to shout it from the rooftops.”

I turn back to Chloe and sink to one knee. “Marry me again?” I ask, taking her hand and kissing her knuckles. I wish I had a ring, but for now the promise is enough. “Promise to be mine forever.”

“I promise,” she says, a tear tracing down her face.

I jump back to my feet and wrap my arms around her, kissing her on the cheek. She squeezes me tight, and I smile. This is perfect.

“Oh, and another thing,” I say, letting her go and turning again. “Chloe’s pregnant.”

My mother’s mouth drops open. She looks down at Chloe’s belly, then back at me. “Then we’d best arrange for this marriage to happen as soon as possible.”

“Wait,” says Chloe. “Please. Yes, Paolo, I will marry you. But, Your Majesty...” She hesitates and curtsies to my mother, and I see a flash of amusement behind my mother’s eyes. “Do you mind if we don’t do it straightaway? Unless me having a baby will cause some big scandal. I am happy to stand in front of everyone in the country and tell them that I’ll be faithful to Paolo forever, but we never had a chance to have a real relationship. Let us have that first. Let us fall in love the real way, then get married.”

I look at my parents. They look at each other. My father leans in and whispers something in my mother’s ear, and she nods. An eternity passes as we wait to hear what they’re going to say next.

Then my mother smiles, a real, genuine smile, the kind that she doesn’t give very often. “Yes,” she says. “I think that can be arranged.”

EPILOGUE

TWO YEARS LATER: CHLOE

My mother is pinning the last of my hair in place when there’s a knock on the door. “Come in,” she calls, then immediately stiffens. For a second, I think she’s going to throw a pillow at Paolo to get him to leave the room, but he raises both hands in surrender.

“Hey, Mrs. Fontana,” he says, grinning at her.

I thought he’d looked smart the first time we got married, but that was nothing compared to how he looks now. He’s wearing a perfectly tailored suit, a crisp bow tie, his hair styled so every strand is in the perfect place, his brown eyes sparkling with joy. He couldn’t be more handsome if he tried.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” says Mom. “And how many times have I told you to call me by my name?”

He throws up his hands again. “I’m just trying to be polite.”

“And I’m just trying to get my daughter through this wedding.”

“Mom, it’s okay,” I say, reaching out to put my hand on her arm. “They’re weird in Bellamare. They don’t really believe in the ‘badluck to see the bride before the wedding’ thing. And besides, we’re already married.”

“Sort of,” says Mom.

“And anyway,” interrupts Paolo, “I haven’t come to see either of you two. I missed my baby.”

As if on cue, Antonio blinks his eyes open. He’s been curled up on the huge armchair in the corner, asleep. I tried to get him not to, so he didn’t wrinkle his tiny suit, but he didn’t want to take the suit off, and he didn’t want to stay awake.

In the end, I relented and let him have a little nap.

“Da!” he calls out, opening his arms to make Paolo come to him.

With a grin, Paolo does, rushing towards our baby, sweeping him up in his arms and spinning him round in circles.

“Careful,” I sigh, and Paolo sticks his tongue out at me.

I knew he would be a good dad, and he’s spent the last two years proving that to me. I don’t think his mother has liked that it’s taken two years for us to be ready for the

wedding, but now that I know her a little better, I can tell she likes me really.

Plus, she's really good with Antonio.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

Of course, my mom is an awesome grandmother, but I hadn't expected Paolo's parents to care as much as they do. Ever since that day when he confessed everything to them, I think they've all realized that they've been wrong about a lot of stuff.

And I'm glad they have, because they're a great family. At least, his parents are. His brothers aren't exactly liking the extra attention Paolo has been getting, or the way he's been forgiven, but he's closer than ever with his parents, and I love seeing it.

He loves my mom too. We've flown her over for the wedding, and she's been fussing over me for days trying to get me ready.

"Oh, Chloe!" she says, squinting at her phone. I roll my eyes. Today is not the day for the reading-glasses conversation again. "Another one of your paintings has sold."

"Which one?" asks Paolo, now rolling on the floor with Antonio.

"Get up!" sighs Mom. "You'll ruin your suit!"

He shrugs as best he can from the floor with a baby on top of him. "No one will notice. Which painting?"

"The big blue one," says Mom.

I shake my head in despair. I love them both, and they've been so supportive of my gallery, but neither of them know the first thing about art. But I couldn't have done any of it without either of them. I just ran my first exhibition, and I'm still amazed by how well it went.

People really liked my work. A critic wrote nice things about it online.

And now I'm getting married, for real, to the love of my life.

"Aw, man," says Paolo, finally getting up. "I liked the big blue one."

"Then you should have bought it," I say, sticking up my chin to invite him for a kiss. He doesn't let me down, but our lips barely touch before my mother is shooing him away.

"Please, Paolo. Go and get ready. I swear, I can't take the stress of you two. There'll be plenty of time for all that later."

"Okay, Mrs. Fontana," he grins, winding her up on purpose. "We've got some hard work to do to give Antonio a sister."

"Go!" she demands, shaking her head in fond amusement.

He blows me a kiss, picks Antonio up for one last spin, then waltzes out of the room.

"That boy," sighs Mom, smiling at me. "I don't know what you see in him."

"Yes you do," I say, grinning back.

Antonio waddles over to me and flops on the floor, wrapping himself around my leg. I reach down to ruffle his hair, then take my mother's hand. "I love you guys," I grin. And as I look at myself in the mirror, here in my wedding dress with my mom and my baby and my husband just outside, I know that everything is just the way it's meant to be. Like perfect fate.

The End