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The Royal House of Savoy

A modern royal family in search of old-fashioned love….

The Vittorio family has ruled the Italian principality of Castelmare for generations. But as illness claims the aged King Rudolfo, he must pass the throne on to his eldest son, Lucca.

This month, Crown Princess Regina hopes her gardener will become her groom!

Italian Groom, Princess Bride

"She could never marry you, let alone acknowledge you or your love child in public either! How does that sit with you?"

"I'm going to get word to her I'm here in the greenhouse, waiting to talk to her."

Dizo's father patted his arm."Coraggio, figlio mio."

This went beyond courage. Dizo didn't have a choice but to face the situation head-on. A scandal like this would rock the royal palace. It would undermine the honor of both his family and Gina's.

He thought of other royal families who'd been caught up in similar situations. Once the press got wind of what was going on in Castelmare, their lives would never be the same. They'd all be labeled and the torment would never end.

For himself, it didn't matter. For Gina, he would do whatever it took to protect her.

REBECCAWINTERS

Italian Groom, Princess Bride



Rebecca Winters,whose family of four children has now swelled to include three beautiful grandchildren, lives in Salt Lake City, Utah, in the land of the Rocky Mountains. With canyons and high alpine meadows full of wildflowers, she never runs out of places to explore. They, plus her favorite vacation spots in Europe, often end up as backgrounds for her Harlequin Romance®novels. Writing is Rebecca's passion, along with her family and her church. She loves to hear from her readers. If you wish to e-mail her, please visit her Web site at www.cleanromances.com.

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The Brooding Frenchman's Proposal
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CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

CHAPTER TWO

CHAPTER THREE

CHAPTER FOUR

CHAPTER FIVE

CHAPTER SIX

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHAPTER NINE

CHAPTER TEN

CHAPTER ONE

"GUIDO?"

The wiry head gardener of the palace grounds turned around. He'd just lowered a bag of peat moss onto the pile inside the nursery shed behind the greenhouse. When he saw who it was, he made a slight bow.

"Buona sera, Principessa.I'm very sorry about your father." Though he was civil to her, she'd always felt his reticence around her. Of late she'd sensed his antipathy.

No matter how many times she'd asked him to call her Regina, he'd always called her Princess and insisted his sons did, too. The rigid, class-conscious father of three would maintain his distance to the grave.

"Thank you, Guido. I am, too," Regina murmured.

No one could have had a more wonderful parent than the man who'd reigned over the European Principality of Castelmare since before she'd been born. Lung cancer had finally taken her father and although it had been a blessed release, Rudolfo Vittorio IV had died too young.

Her mother was handling it exceptionally well, probably because his long suffering was over and she had a new three-month-old granddaughter to dote on. Regina's older brother, Lucca, now king, and his wife, Alexandra, had each other and their darling Catarina. Everyone had someone. Now more than ever before Regina needed the one man she'd always loved, the man who'd been her closest friend and confidante from the age of ten.

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"What can I do for you?"

"Is Dinozzo still on the grounds?"

"No," was all he said before he went out of the doors to pull another bag off the bed of his truck. She flinched because Guido's behavior bordered on open hostility.

Her watch said it was after 6:00 p.m. She'd planned to come this late so Dizo, her special nickname for him, would be through with any jobs his father had saved for him after leaving the university's animal hospital. Filled with a fierce disappointment that she'd missed him, she followed Guido.

"If you should talk to him tonight, will you please tell him I'd like a word with him in the morning about some plantings we discussed earlier?"

He went back out to the truck to pick up another bag. "I would, but he left for Sardinia."

She almost doubled over in shock.

Sardinia—

Without any other explanation, Guido returned to the shed to deposit the bag.

"W-when did he leave?" her voice faltered. She'd been counting on him being here so they could talk. In her loneliest hours she could always turn to him. He'd been there for her at every crossroad. When she'd been betrothed to Crown Prince Nicolas of Pedrosa at the age of twenty-one, she'd run to Dizo in turmoil. Somehow he had always made her feel better.

"Early this morning."

Early meant evenbefore the funeral. While Guido sounded exceptionally happy about it, pain seared her so deeply she couldn't breathe.

While she and her family had been burying their father and husband in the plot that held all the past Castelmare rulers of the House of Savoy, Dizo had just left without letting her know why? He hadn't even watched the burial from a distance when he knew how much her father had respected Dizo for putting himself through college and medical school.

"I see." She fought to maintain her composure so Guido couldn't take satisfaction in her devastation. Today was a national day of mourning in honor of her father. Now that Nic had become king and was pushing for her to marry him right away, this had turned out to be the blackest day of her life. "How soon do you expect him back?"

"I don't."

She swallowed hard. "Is someone ill?" The Fornese family had been born in Sardinia. They had extended family in Sassari. Dizo was particularly fond of his aging grandmother who lived with Guido's brother.

Dizo visited them when he could, but between his studies at the University of Castelmare and helping his father in his spare time, there weren't as many visits anymore.

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Even so, Regina hated it whenever he had to be gone for a day or two at a time. She found herself counting the seconds until he returned.

"No. He will be getting married soon."

That was a lie. Though Guido could have wished his eldest son had settled down with a wife years ago, it hadn't happened. What he'd just said were the words of a wishful thinking father. If it were the truth, Dizo would have told her himself. Guido valued family over education, not wanting to admit his hardworking son could have both in time.

Choose the battle you're sure of, Regina's father used to tell her. This was one she would let pass. "I had no idea. Thank you for the information, Guido."

"Prego, Principessa."When he went back for the next bag, she realized she'd been dismissed.

As she walked away in agony, she saw Dizo's younger brothers returning in one of the other trucks. Out of desperation she waved them down.

The vehicle slowed. Fonsi tipped his head out the window. "Princess?Is there something wrong?"

Wrong? her heart cried hysterically. Yes, something was wrong. "I came here to discuss the kind of trees I wanted planted at my father's grave, but I just learned that Dinozzo left for Sardinia."

Fonsi nodded.

"Your father said he's going to be married." They would tell her it wasn't true.

"At the end of the summer," Pasquale informed her from the interior of the cab. "He's found a job there."

Dizo had never breathed a word of it to her. He'd just passed his medical boards. She'd thought of course he planned to be a vet here in Capriccio where he could stay close to his family. She'd planned on it. Regina couldn't live without Dizo.

She patently didn't believe Guido. He'd made it up and his sons were in on the lie.

"Did you ask Papa for help?"

"Not yet, Fonsi," she said out of wooden lips. "Your brother mentioned he had some ideas, so I wanted to talk to him about them first."

"We are all very sorry about your father. Papa revered him and will be happy to plant something special," Pasquale chimed in, but he was a little too eager for them to get off the subject of Dizo. It could only mean their father had coached them in what to say to her. He really disliked the spoiled princess of Castelmare.

Guido Fornese had always been in charge. He saw no reason for his boys to go to college when they all had a fine job on the estate. Fonsi and Pasquale, already married with children, would never usurp his authority by acting on something without his directive first. Dizo was different.

Though he showed his father respect and helped out as much as he could, he'd become a brooding,

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thirty-two-year-old bachelor who'd wanted more from life and had gone after it even knowing it displeased his parent. Unlike his siblings, Dizo had never lived in fear of Guido or anyone else.

Whatever had caused him to leave the country so abruptly, he'd done it of his own volition. That put the terror in her.

"I'll talk to your father later in the week when he's not so busy. Thank you."

They nodded before driving on.

Regina kept walking until she couldn't see them anymore, then she broke into a run across the extensive grounds, her pain too deep for tears. When she reached the rear of the eighteenth century palace, she entered through a private door with one of her bodyguards right behind her and raced up the steps. Her suite on the second floor of the east wing overlooked the Mediterranean. Before she shut the doors, she motioned to the closest bodyguard to come inside.

"Rico, as soon as I pack a bag I'm leaving for Nice in the limo. My family knows nothing about my plans." She didn't dare take the helicopter or Lucca would hear it leaving and ask questions. "If you and Vito like this job, then keep this information to yourselves, please."

"Capisco,your highness."

Once he was out the door she phoned her pilot. "I'm flying to Alghero, Sardinia, tonight." It was less than an hour's flight to the northwest part of the island. "I'll be at the airport in forty minutes. Be ready to take off. I have no idea of my return."

After buzzing her private secretary who would arrange for a rental car to be waiting at Fertilia airport in Sardinia, Regina threw some clothes in a bag and left the palace the same way she'd slipped in.

The thirty-five-mile drive to the Fornese farm on the outskirts of Sassari wouldn't take long. Secretly she'd always wanted to visit there with him, but of course that had been out of the question.

Not any longer…

Though she was betrothed to someone else, Regina needed this one night of freedom to love Dizo and no one was going to stop her…

Dinozzo Romali Fornese stood at the bar with his shirtsleeves pushed up to the elbows. He knew he was getting very, very drunk. That was good. His native Vernaccia d'Oristano always did the job. The pain of imagining Gina as Nic's bride was too staggering to contemplate.

Tonight he needed to be totally blotto if he had a prayer of getting through it. One more drink to make certain, then he tread his way carefully to the entrance of the two hundred year old tavern. "See you later, Dinozzo," the barman called after him in their native Sassarese.

The night air was soft, but it didn't drip with the flower-scented sweetness that surrounded the palace, grazie a dio. No reminders here. Dizo climbed in his uncle's truck and headed through the city's ancient streets for the farm where he'd grown up as a boy.

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Instinct, not faculties, was all he required to get him there. When he flew in for short visits he always slept in the back bedroom of the stone farmhouse, but this time he hadn't come for a visit. If he was still alive tomorrow, he would have to find work and an apartment.

The last thing he remembered was turning onto the gravel track that led around the rear of the old family home.

"Dizo?"

No. No dreams. Not tonight.

"Dizo,caro— "

That voice. No one called him that except one person. "Leave me alone, Giannina," he muttered in agony.

"You know you don't want me to."

He felt her arms go around him. The curvaceous mold of her figure melted into his hard body, denying him no part of herself. That mouth he'd likened to a wild red rose began devouring him with an insatiable hunger.

"You're right," he cried feverishly against those seductive lips. "Dio mio.I want you so much I could bite the heart right out of your beautiful body."

"Do it,tesoro. "

With skin like velvet and glossy black hair filled with the scent of sweet orange blossoms, he was helpless to do anything but roll her on her back and begin kissing her the way he'd done so many times in his other dreams.

This one was different.

Instead of her suddenly vanishing from sight where he couldn't find her, she stayed right where she was and kissed him in and out of oblivion. His legs tangled with her silky limbs. After all the years of aching, she was bringing him ecstasy. He wanted it to go on forever.

"Come here to me my precious, adorable Giannina. Closer—" he cried against her tender throat.

"I love you, Dizo. I always will. That's never going to change."

"Don't leave me,amore. "

"Never. Have no fear."

Once again he was swept away by rapture she brought with every sigh and caress. "I want to feel you just like this until the very second I wake up."

"Let's not wake up," she whispered against his lips.

"You think I want to?"

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"Then we won't. We'll go on like this into infinity."

"Into infinity?" he whispered back in a husky voice. "That's not long enough. If you knew the years I've been waiting…aching," he cried.

His mouth enveloped hers, drinking in her sweetness. He plunged his hands into her hair, loving the way the curls wrapped around his fingers. Still his dream didn't fade.

"Hey, Dinozzo—" came a discordant note out of the soporific waves. "I want to talk to my nephew. When are you going to get up? Do you know how late it is?"

Dizo realized his fantastic dream had ended. He couldn't bear it. The alcohol he'd consumed last night was supposed to have wiped everything from his subconscious. Instead a silken pair of arms had transported him to a place where he'd been given a taste of paradise.

On a groan he started to get out of bed, but felt something warm and soft lying next to him, preventing movement. He opened his eyes that were having trouble focusing and discovered a female body lying facedown next to him. The cap of glossy black curls looked shockingly familiar.

His jet-black eyes took in the trail of his clothes and her shoes and jacket starting at the door and ending at the bed. The sheet partially covering both of them revealed that the woman he must have picked up outside the bar last night was wearing a pale yellow and white flowered tank top. With trembling hands he carefully turned her over.

Holy mother of God.

Giannina.

He couldn't think, couldn't breathe.

Slowly her black-fringed lids fluttered open. Those brown eyes so fabulous because of their burgundy hue stared into his.

"Dizo—" came her urgent cry. Like a cat preening in the sun with delight, she stretched without inhibition and wrapped her arms around his neck. He felt her warm, sweet breath on his lips. Then it was the dream all over again as her mouth took him to that place he'd never wanted to leave.

This time there was a loud knock on the door bringing him fully awake. "Dinozzo! I'm getting worried. If you're not up on the count of three, I'm coming in."

Diavolo!

None too gently Dizo pushed her against the mattress. The second he threw the sheet over her head his uncle walked in.

"Your papa has already phoned twice. He has a mes—"

That was all that came out of his uncle's mouth. Scratching his balding head, he took in the scene of what could only be labeled wanton desire with his-and-her clothing and blankets scattered, pillows askew. Their gazes locked in silent communication.

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His uncle cleared his throat. “I’ll tell your father you’ll call him later.” He closed the door.

Muttering a curse, Dizo levered his tall, well-honed body off the other side of the bed. By some miracle he was still wearing his pants. While he was still disoriented, Gina peeked out from beneath the sheet covering her head. His heart slammed into his ribs to see her beautiful face framed by her disheveled curls. One dangled in the middle of her forehead. She was a living, breathing miracle.

In a minute he would demand answers, but for the moment all his befuddled brain could do was try to digest the fact that Princess Regina Schiaparelli Vittorio of Castelmare had spent what was left of the rest of the night in bed with him. Damn if he hadn’t been so drunk after leaving the tavern, he hadn’t been able to distinguish fact from fiction or realize that the divine pleasure she’d brought him was no dream.

She started to get up, pushing the sheet completely away. As she slid her shapely legs to the floor and rose to her feet, the yellow skirt that matched her top fell to her knees. She could wear any color and look gorgeous, creating a picture of summery elegance and sophistication only she could carry off.

Everything she bought or had made to wear was exquisitely cut to play down her curves, but he wouldn’t be a man if his senses didn’t quake at the sight of her voluptuous figure.

With unsteady hands he reached in the drawer for a clean T-shirt and pulled it down over his bare chest. “Explanations can come later,” he muttered. “What I have to do right now is get you out of here before my uncle learns who you are.”

“I don’t care if he knows.”

“You don’t mean that,” his voice grated.You can’t.

She was about to be married to the king of Pedrosa. In order to get near her, let alone touch her, you had to be royalty yourself. She was off-limits. Forbidden. That had been drummed into Dizo’s brain from the moment his father had taken the gardener’s job at the palace years ago.

Before her betrothal, more than one prince Dizo knew of had been after her. His brothers had kept him up on the palace gossip. From rumors they’d learned Gina’s mother had always favored the Spanish speaking Prince Nicolas, now king since his father had stepped down.

Dizo had seen him walking on the grounds with her. Occasionally they’d gone horseback riding. Many was the time Dizo had wished Nic’s mount had thrown him and broken his arrogant Catalan neck.

Gina’s expressive eyes glinted with pain. “You mean you don’twant me to mean it. Is that because you’re getting married at the end of the summer?” She faced him with the same forthrightness that had always been her trademark. Gina was only five feet five, but there were times like now when she took on invisible stature.

A tight band constricted his breathing. “Who told you that?”

“Your father. Who else? Is it true?” Her voice shook.

He grimaced. “We’ll talk about it later.”

“Then it is?” she cried. Her face suddenly lost color.

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Gina…"It's no secret you and I have always been attracted to each other, but that was all it ever could be. We both have to get on with our lives and right now it's first things first."

In spite of the tears glinting on those long black eyelashes, a daring smile broke the corner of her provocative mouth. "How do you propose I exit the room without your uncle seeing me?"

Dizo picked up her sandals and handed them to her. "Put these on and I'll help you out through the window. There's a fruit shed maybe a hundred yards from here. No one will be around at this time of day. Hide in there and wait for me till I come with the truck."

If anyone knew she'd been here,in his bed, her reputation would be tarnished beyond all recognition. He didn't even want to think how King Nicolas would react when he found out. Lucca would have every right to fire the entire Fornese family and shuttle them back to Sardinia. All the goodwill Dizo's father had built up over the years with King Rudolfo and his family would be destroyed.

The media would have a field day with Gina who up until this stunning escapade hadn't done anything to sully her name. Much to their frustration they'd never caught her in anything salacious. She'd remained as white and pure as the proverbial driven snow.

Until now…

After she'd slipped into her sandals he lifted the short-sleeved jacket to help her finish dressing. It took all his strength of will not to pull her back against him and finish what she'd started while he'd thought he was dreaming.

The untouchable twenty-six-year-old Princess Regina no longer bore that label. Her swollen lips showed signs of being kissed senseless. A faint rash from his five-o'clock shadow covered her high-boned cheeks. His touch was all over her even if he couldn't remember details. Traces of her fragrance still clung to his skin. How in hell was he going to live with that?

She flashed him that captivating white smile. "Your uncle's going to know how I disappeared."

Dizo pulled the shutters back and opened the two panes that swung outward. "It won't be the first time," he muttered, "but as he was young once himself, he knows better than to say anything, especially with nonna in the house."

For reasons he didn't dare contemplate right now, it was imperative Gina leave Sardinia immediately. He picked her up none too gently and swung her through the opening, then lowered her until her feet touched the ground. When he would have let go of her hands, she held on.

"Last night you told me you desired me. Over and over again in every conceivable way," she added with those wine dark eyes never wavering from his. "If the woman you're supposedly going to marry is still unaware of your feelings for me, then it's time you went to her with the truth."

While he stood there reeling from the implication that more might have gone on than he could remember, she stole away.

His jaw set, he closed the window and put the shutters back in place. After he'd slipped on his shoes, he left the room and practically ran into his uncle who'd just come out of his grandmother's room.

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"I owe you an apology," Dizo began in a quiet voice.

To his surprise his uncle broke into a smile. "No apology is necessary." He patted his shoulder, seemingly more affable than usual. "Your papa has worried. You know. No women for a long time, but I phoned him just now and assured him there's nothing wrong with his Dinozzo."

Dio mio.

"Then you'll understand I need your truck again for a little while?"

His head bobbed. "Si, si.I'll explain to yournonna you have business in town but will be back soon."

"I swear I won't be long.Grazie, zio. "

He took off out the back door for the truck. The keys were in the ignition where he'd left them last night. Gina must have seen him drive away from the house and decided to wait for him to return. When she realized he was on the verge of passing out, she'd helped him in the house and things had gotten out of hand from there. That was the only explanation he could think of that made any sense.

"Princess?" he called to her once he'd reached the entrance to the shed. "Quick—come and get in—"

When she didn't answer or appear, he frowned. "Princess?"

Nothing.

After climbing down from the driver's seat, he went inside. A thorough investigation revealed no sign of her.

His mind replayed the moment he'd helped her to escape. Only now did it occur to him that after delivering her last salvo, she'd had no intention of hanging around for him. Too late he remembered she never went anywhere without her network of staff and personal bodyguards.

Now his crime had more witnesses who'd watched him lower her out his bedroom window. It was conceivable the news had already reached her brother's ears. How long before Nic heard the worst—Dizo suddenly realized he was in the biggest trouble of his life.

He pounded a fist against his forehead. By now she was on the helicopter winging her way toward Castelmare. With no time to lose he raced back to the farmhouse.

After swearing his uncle to secrecy, he explained he had to go back to Castelmare on an emergency before the day was out. Six hours later his commercial flight landed in Nice, France. He rented a car at the airport, then drove over the speed limit to the capitol city of Capriccio in Castelmare fifteen miles away.

Before he did anything else he needed to talk to his father who would still be on the palace grounds. Since the death of Dizo's mother, Guido never left for home before seven in the evening.

When he walked in to the greenhouse, three pairs of Fornese eyes widened to see him appear unannounced. His father's slid away. Guilt had a way of revealing itself.

Over the years Dizo had worked out the important issues with his father, but he'd never been truly angry

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with him until now.

He flashed his brothers a speaking glance. “If you don’t mind, I have to talk to Papa alone.”

Both looked distinctly uncomfortable before they nodded and left, closing the doors behind them.

Dizo moved closer. “I’ve always been aware of your dislike for Princess Regina, but you chose the wrong day to tell her I left Castelmare because of my nonexistent impending marriage. Do you have any conception of the pain she was in after her father’s funeral yesterday?”

His father’s dark head with only a sprinkling of gray lifted abruptly. “How doyou know what I said to her?”

“She told me.” Inperson. In Technicolor. Dizo was still in shock.

“Of course. The telephone.” He slapped his own leg. “That young womannever leaves you alone. Because she’s theprincipessa of Castelmare, no place is far enough away from her, is it.”

After what had happened to Dizo last night, he couldn’t honestly answer his father.

“I may not have your college education,figlio mio, but I’m not as unintelligent as you think I am.”

“That’s your assessment, not mine.”

“Basta!”He shook his head in fury. “It’s exactly because I knew how hard it was on her I said what I did.” His index finger lifted, a sure sign a lecture was coming. “Since I took this job here sixteen years ago, I’ve seen her traipse after you like a lovesick puppy and you allowed it knowingnothing could ever come of it.”

Tell me something I don’t know, Papa. Gina’s destiny had been decreed the moment her royal parents knew another royal baby was on the way.

“Before your mother died, she made me promise I would put a stop to it, but I couldn’t persuade you to go back home to college. You planned your life so you could be around the princess. You think I don’t know you could have made triple the money doing another kind of part-time job away from the grounds?

“Only one man has ever mattered to her besides her father. That man isyou!

“When she came hightailing it in here yesterday after the funeral looking for you, I took matters into my own hands. She’ll be marrying King Nicolas of Pedrosa in the very near future. As long as you finally showed the good sense to leave Castelmare for good, I decided to make certain the umbilical cord got cut once and for all!”

Dizo inhaled sharply. “I’m afraid it didn’t work.”

“Obviously not. You’re back here in twenty-four hours looking like the very devil despite my big brother’s news that you were with a woman last night. What did the princess do? Order you back to the palace on some excuse about the plantings at her father’s grave?”

He experienced more pain remembering the day they’d talked about her father’s love of pine trees and how they could be incorporated when everything else was more tropical. It hadn’t been that long ago.

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"She did worse than that, Papa. It's the reason I've come to you for advice."

"Myadvice?" he mocked. "Since when did you ever want it?"

"Since this morning when I woke up to find her in my bed."

A stunning silence followed.

Aghast at the revelation, his father paled and staggered over to the chair to sit down. The two men stared long and hard at each other. "She showed up at the farmhouse?" he asked incredulously.

"I'm afraid so. I left Zitta's bar around two. Nothing else registered after that except that I had this fantastic dream about her. When I woke up, there she was."

A ruddy color spilled into his father's cheeks. "Did you—you know what I mean—"

Yes, Dizo knewesattamente what he meant.

"I don't really know. She still had her clothes on." Though admittedly not all. "I was wearing my pants and nothing else."

"That doesn't necessarily mean anything," he muttered.

Dizo had been thinking about that and had come to the same conclusion. "That'swhy I'm here."

His father wiped the sweat off his forehead. "Did my brother see her?"

"He saw someone in the bed, but I got her out through the window before he could identify her. Unfortunately you and I both know her bodyguards had to be close by."

"Si,and bodyguards talk." A serious moan came out of his father before he crossed himself.

"That's all I've been thinking about. I told her to wait for me inside the fruit shed, but when I drove up in the truck, she was gone."

He jumped to his feet. "It was a trick! She knows every one of them."

And they work every time.

Dizo rubbed the back of his neck. "Whatever it was, it got me back here on the double."

His father started to pace, then stopped in front of Dizo. "You don't have a choice but to go to Lucca and tell him the whole truth. Once King Nicolas finds out—" He shook his head in despair. "If there's any chance at all you impregnated the princess, her brother has to know before anyone else! That's one thing the bodyguardsdon't know yet."

"And then what, Papa? If she's carrying my child, she would never abort it. Nic would have to live with the knowledge that she'd been with another man first." There was a secret part in Dizo's heart that rejoiced at the very thought of her giving birth to his son or daughter.

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"She could never marry you, let alone acknowledge you or your love child in public, either! How does that sit with you?"

He shut his eyes tightly. "It doesn't. I have to pray to God I didn't make total love to her."

"But you don't know for sure."

"No," he said in a tormented whisper. "She's the only one who can tell me the truth."

"Have you ever known her to lie?"

"No." Gina didn't have a deceitful bone inside that breathtaking body, but since last night he realized she'd been willing to risk the unthinkable to be with him. He couldn't believe she would go that far. On the day she'd buried her father, she'd flown all the way from Castelmare in the dead of night to find him. It went against everything her royal training had taught her from the cradle. But it secretly thrilled him.

"Then you have to ask her what happened," his father said, bringing him back to the present.

"I intend to. No matter the answer, I'll go to her brother. He deserves to know exactly what happened before King Nicolas finds out."

Guido nodded. "Lucca's the only one who has the power to control her."

Dizo hated to tell his father, but no one controlled Gina. She'd always been a law unto herself. That was part of her incredible appeal. He'd been friends with Gina from the beginning. Their relationship had penetrated class barriers, allowing them to share their thoughts and interests.

His poor father came from a culture that couldn't conceive of a commoner being friends with royalty. Much to Guido's chagrin, Dizo's desire for Gina had gotten into the mix, making everything so much more complicated and painful.

What if Dizohad made love to her and she was carrying his child? He'd had dreams where it had happened, but he'd never wakened up before to find her luscious body under the covers with him.

When she'd been away at college in London, she'd managed to come home most weekends to study. He almost had heart failure every time she sunbathed on the grounds where he was planting or weeding. She'd lie on her stomach in shorts and a fetching little top with her head in a book. He'd stabbed his hand more than once with the trowel just watching her turn over.

"We Fornese's are honorable people." His father's sad voice trailed.

"You've always been honorable, Papa. My behavior has been questionable since the day I stopped listening to your warnings."

When their family moved to Capriccio, Dizo had been sixteen, old enough to tease his younger brothers and Gina who was six years younger than himself. Assuming she was a spoiled little terror, he'd determined to ignore her, but she'd turned out to be completely different. She fascinated all of them because although she was a real princess, she was fun and a good sport.

Though she had lots of cousins and friends, Dizo realized she preferred the company of the gardener's son. Being that she had an intelligent mind aided by a superior royal education, it flattered his ego. When

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she asked him to teach her his native language, he discovered she was an excellent student. He found he enjoyed her hanging around him while he worked.

Time went by. The day she came running to him because their family dog had died, he'd put his arms around her to comfort her. It had been the first time he'd ever really touched her except to help her in and out of the ornamental pool or help her down from a tree or some such thing.

But this time other feelings took over. When he eased her away from him he realized she'd grown up and filled out. It seemed like overnight the lovely young girl had become a beautiful woman, inside and out.

No other female compared. To his surprise and dismay, the women he had dated during college and graduate school only illuminated the difference between her and every other female. He found he wanted Gina in all the ways a man could want a woman. The rest didn't come close.

A deep sigh came out of his father. "This is all my fault. As soon as I saw what was happening between you two, I should have taken the family back to Sassari."

"Don't, Papa—her father asked you to come to Castelmare and work for him because you were the best gardener in Sardinia. I've always been so proud of you, yet this is how I show it," he said in bitter self-abnegation.

"I shouldn't have lied to her in her pain. That's what caused her to do something not even I would have expected."

"No. The blame lies squarely on my shoulders. I didn't know how to say goodbye to her so I chose not to. That's what drove her to do something reckless enough to cause real trouble. While the funeral was going on, I thought it the best time to leave."

Palace gossip had reached his ears that now her father was dead, her marriage to King Nic was imminent. Dizo hadn't wanted to deal with the pain and thought to escape it by going back to Sardinia.

Who would have dreamed Gina would come after him like that? It wouldn't surprise him if he were suddenly struck by lightning for feeling the joy of it. Heaven knew he'd been playing with fire for years, but he was so selfish, he hadn't counted on anyone except himself getting burned.

"I'm going to phone the palace. Her secretary will get word to her I'm here in the greenhouse waiting to talk to her."

Dizo's father patted his arm."Corragio, figlio mio."

This went beyond courage. Dizo didn't have a choice but to face the situation head-on. A scandal like this would rock Nic's world. It would undermine the honor of both his family and Gina's.

He thought of other royal families who'd been caught up in similar situations. Once the press got wind of what was going on in Castelmare, their lives would never be the same. They'd all be labeled and crucified. The torment would never end.

For himself, it didn't matter. For Gina, he would do whatever it took to protect her.

CHAPTER TWO

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REGINAwas on her way home from a town council meeting when she saw that her secretary was trying to reach her. She answered the call."Si?"

"Your Highness? Dinozzo Fornese is in the greenhouse awaiting your instructions about the trees you want planted at your father's grave. What shall I tell him?"

At last!

Her pulse raced so fast she went weak from excitement. "Tell him not to leave yet. I'll join him within five minutes."

"Very well."

After hanging up, Regina told her chauffeur to drive her straight to the greenhouse at the northwest end of the palace grounds. Dizo wouldn't have asked her to meet him there if his father and brothers were still around. This summons meant he'd arranged it so they would be alone. Good. No Guido to interfere.

She smiled. No matter how angry Dizo might be with her, he hadn't been able to forget memories of last night and this morning—those moments of unleashed passion they'd shared even in his highly inebriated state. His desire had brought him back on the first plane leaving for Nice.

Regina had never seen him drunk. Her tall, intelligent, fiercely proud, disciplined Dizo with those aquiline features and piercing black eyes of his Sardinian race didn't make mistakes. Except for last night.

To realize his secret flight from Castelmare to Sardinia had to be shorn up by emptying a bottle of alcohol lent him the vulnerability she'd been waiting years to discover. He would have slept in the truck for the rest of the night if she hadn't opened the door and coaxed him into her arms.

Caught with his guard down, he'd succumbed to her kisses. By the time they reached the back room he hadn't fought her as she helped him get ready for bed. Once her jacket came off, he pulled her down almost savagely and began kissing the daylights out of her.

She moaned when the alcohol he'd consumed finally took over and he fell asleep first. Regina slept a little, but toward morning she awakened to study the beautiful man who held her so possessively even in sleep. The hair on his chest matched the darkness of his wavy hair he wore longer most of the time because he was too busy to get it cut.

Though she had olive skin, his was darker. Such a strong, powerful man could have no idea how safe she'd felt cocooned in his arms. She'd pressed her face into his neck, loving the male scent of him. For so many years she'd only been able to look, not touch. To suddenly have him all to herself where she could show him what he meant to her made her euphoric. How could she possibly marry Nic after this?

Breathless for the sight of Dizo, she jumped out of the limo the moment it stopped in front of the greenhouse and told the chauffeur she wouldn't need him anymore. She noticed Dizo's rental car parked to the side. It took every ounce of composure to walk inside as if she really were going into the office to consult with one of the gardeners on a legitimate landscaping matter.

Her feet stilled the second she saw Dizo standing in front of a window looking out over the grounds. In a navy crew neck shirt and dark trousers, he took her breath. He was half-turned, giving her a glimpse of his chiseled profile. His thoughts had to be dark for lines to bracket the mouth that had driven her mad

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with desire during the night. It sent a frisson of nervousness down her spine.

"Dizo?"

His dark head whipped around giving her the full brunt of his scrutiny. With no alcohol left in his system he was totally in charge. Gone was the lover who'd cried her name over and over before morning, begging her never to leave him. Her joy dissipated as she sensed his quiet fury and was shaken by it, but she didn't dare let him know it.

His sharp intake of breath reverberated in the enclosed space. "The fairy tale came to an end when I woke up and found you in my bed this morning." His voice grated. "I only have one question."

She'd anticipated it. "We didn't cross the forbidden line."

"Whose fault was that?" His eyes held an ominous glitter.

"I flew to Sardinia to talk to you and find out why you left without telling me, but you were too drunk to do more than kiss me before you fell asleep."

"Grazie a Dio."His hands formed fists. "Will you please get your brother on the line and ask him to come down to the greenhouse?"

The blood pounded in her ears. "No, Dizo—"

"Yes,Principessa— " he fired back. "If you don't, I'll call him myself right now."

Regina had never seen Dizo this forbidding in her life. She didn't know him like this. His mouth had gone a bluish-white around the edges.

"W-what are you going to say to him?" she stammered.

He moved closer to her. "That's my business."

She shook her head in terror. "Don't make me do this."

"Hand me your cell phone, or do I have to take it from you."

Her eyes filled with liquid despite all her efforts to maintain control. "Dizo—"

"Tears won't work. You're about to be married to another man. End of story!" He grabbed her purse and felt inside for her phone. "Do I surprise your brother who might not be in the right circumstances to hear my voice coming from the other end? Or do you find a way to get your brother down here without causing him any more stress than necessary? The decision is up to you."

He meant it—every word of it. She hadn't expected him to go this far. Once Lucca knew…

"Time's up." He pressed button one, her private line to her brother.

In the last second she took the phone from him and put it to her ear. She could hear Lucca talking. "Regina? What are you doing? Where are you? Alexandra's about to give Catarina her bath. Come and join the fun."

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Her brother sounded so happy she couldn't bear for that to change, but it was going to.

"I-I'd love to—" she stumbled over the words "—but right now I'm at the greenhouse trying to decide on the trees to plant at Papa's grave. Dinozzo is here." She could feel his eyes impaling her, forcing her to carry out his demand. "If you could come f-for just a minute and help me make the final decision before he has to leave?"

After a definite pause Lucca said, "You don't sound yourself. Something's wrong. I'll be right there." He clicked off. Her brother's uncanny radar picked up on anything and everything. It was in full force tonight.

Regina averted her eyes. "He's coming," she whispered shakily.

Like a drowning victim she saw her life flash before her eyes.The one with Dizo. To imagine the rest of it without him was incomprehensible to her. How could she marry Nic?

While she stood there in agony, her body started to ice up and she felt sick to her stomach. Then she heard a strange ringing in her ears. The next thing she knew Dizo had lowered her into a chair.

"Put your head between your legs."

Dizo's hand had gone to the back of her neck giving her no choice. For a minute her head swam. He leaned over. "Princess?" he whispered anxiously. She hadn't thought there was a particle of concern for her left in him, but she was too light-headed to analyze it.

When the world finally righted itself again she lifted her head. "I'm all right."

Lucca chose that moment to walk in on them. After one look at her he muttered, "You're as white as a ghost." He hunkered down next to her and grabbed her hand. "What's wrong,piccina? "

Regina didn't know where to start. Her brother's worried gaze shot to Dizo for an explanation.

"Your sister has something to tell you, but before you arrived she came close to fainting. I'll get her some water."

She shook her head at Dizo, unable to believe he could be this cruel. He pulled a bottle of water from the mini-fridge. After removing the top he handed it to her. Needing the sustenance she drank thirstily. "Thank you."

"I'm sending for the doctor." As Lucca pulled his phone out of his trousers, she put a hand on his arm.

"I don't need medical help."

She must have convinced him because he ended up lounging against the edge of a table with his arms folded and waited. Dizo stood a few feet away with his legs slightly apart, his hands on his hips in the ultimate male stance.

Regina was too devastated by his betrayal to speak. Somehow she'd believed he'd loved her enough that he would risk everything for her the way she had him. Not true. By summoning her brother, he'd caused her to question the belief system she'd clung to all her life.

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In flying to Sardinia to let him know how much she loved him and couldn't live without him, she'd totally humiliated herself for nothing!

Dizo was marking time until she made her little speech. She'd already shown weakness by losing it in front of him a few minutes ago, but that was the last time it would ever happen.

She took a deep breath and stood up. Without giving Dizo a glance she faced her brother. "I did something foolish and went to visit Dizo in Sassari last night without being invited. Kind of a twist on the droit de seigneur thing, but he didn't appreciate it. Have no fear. He sent me on my way so fast my head is still spinning. It's clear he's terrified I compromised him and his family.

"Since it's evident he's afraid I won't leave him alone, he flew here this evening and demanded that you be told about it. Actually I'm glad he insisted you come down to the greenhouse. That way I can swear on the love of our dead father that Dizo has no more reason to fear me embarrassing him or his family again. After sixteen years he's free of me, so help me God."

Regina's head jerked around in Dizo's direction. "Does that satisfy you, or were you hoping I would give him chapter and verse? Before tonight I could have sworn you were my friend at least. However, all that has changed now that I've found out I made an earthshaking error in judgment by placing any faith in you.

"That's what's so sad about growing up in one night. You discover you can't depend on anyone but yourself. Papa gave me that warning more than once, but I thought he was talking about his own life as king.

"Arrivederci,Dinozzo Fornese."

To her joy his face had gone as pale as hers beneath his tan. The bleak expression in those black slits was cause for celebration. While she was still energized by excruciating pain, she left the greenhouse on her own power.

Gina's footsteps faded on the gravel outside, leaving an emptiness inside Dizo he couldn't begin to describe.

"You were right to come to me about this," Lucca spoke at last. "I'm not unaware my sister has always done the chasing where you're concerned. This was a lesson she's been needing for a long, long time."

Dizo had gone numb.

"My father often talked about his admiration for your family, for you. Before he died, Regina told him you passed at the head of your class. It made Papa very proud."

He couldn't take much more of this. "Thank you. I felt the same way about him. He was a wonderful man. We're all sorry for your loss."

Lucca nodded. "It's been hard, but he's out of his misery now for which our family is grateful."

"Of course."

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He felt Lucca's eyes on him. "You're a fine man, too. There's none better. If I know my sister, and I do, with her marriage to Nic soon to take place, she'll never come near you or embarrass you again."

A shudder racked his body. Though Lucca had spoken the truth, Dizo already knew she'd keep her promise. He'd done the unforgivable to ensure she stayed away permanently. Now that she was out of his life for good, the feeling had left him beyond desolate.

"Tell me your plans, Dottore Fornese."

Dizo took a steadying breath. "There are several veterinary practices in Sassari I can join, but I'm looking into other locales, too. In the meantime I'll stay with my uncle and grandmother. When I've found the situation that seems right, I'll get a place of my own."

Lucca extended his hand. "Congratulations on becoming a vet. Your father hides his feelings well, but he makes little comments here and there that let me know he's bursting his seams with pride over your accomplishment."

"Thank you, Your Highness."

"I'm Lucca. Surely after all these years of reminding you, you can finally bring yourself to call me by my first name."

Dizo liked and respected Gina's brother more than any man alive except his own father. "Grazie,Lucca."

"Prego,Dizo. I know that's Regina's name for you. It's a good one. Clever, just like my incorrigible sister." He stared directly into Dizo's eyes. "You have my undying respect for the way you've handled her attention to you all these years. Any other man would have taken advantage long before now."

"I've hurt her by coming to you," he muttered, "but I didn't know any other way to protect her."

"I thank you for what you've done for her, Dizo. One day when she's married with children of her own, she'll thank you, too."

"No." He shook his head. "Let's not deceive ourselves about that."

Lucca put a hand on his shoulder. "If there's anything I can do for you, all you have to do is ask." The man's sincerity resonated deep inside. "Castelmare needs more vets."

Notthis one. When Gina married Nic and went to Pedrosa to live, there would still be too many memories of her for him to stay on in Castelmare. "I'll think about it," Dizo lied.

"That's good because there's a new vacancy in Savono. As you know, my father was a great animal lover. One of his best friends ran the practice there, but he had to retire because of health problems. Another vet is temping until a permanent replacement can be found. Before father passed away, he asked me to tell you about it. Frankly he hoped you would take the position.

"The animal clinic is on the main street across from the civic center. Before you leave Castelmare, will you look into it as a personal favor to him and me? I understand you specialize in small animals, the clinic's specialty."

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Under the circumstances Dizo couldn't very well turn him down. "I appreciate the suggestion. I'll drive up there in the morning."Before I leave the country for good . "Thank you."

"Thankyou. Ciao, Dizo."

Dizo went out to his rental car and took off for his father's house, staggered by events that had plunged him from one inferno into another. No matter what decision he made, he was going to be scorched alive.

If he were totally honest with himself, Sardinia held no attraction for him anymore. He'd found that out last night when it had taken a whole bottle to help him bear the thought of being back for good. Though he would always go there for family visits, his old roots didn't tug at him. He'd made a life in Castlemare and had become entrenched ages ago.

Tonight while he was driving along the coast road and saw the white renaissance palace in the distance, his heart burned within him…because he knew Gina was there. Sixteen years of memories couldn't be torn out of his soul.

Her brother didn't know he'd opened up a new can of worms by mentioning the job opportunity in Savono. Dizo was touched by King Rudolfo's interest in him. He could picture the town in his mind's eye. It was only a mile above Capriccio to the west. Not far enough away from her at the moment, but then neither was Sardinia.

After her avowal tonight, he knew she'd leave him alone. With her wedding imminent, there was nothing more to fear on that score. They'd be living in Pedrosa. If he never ventured on the palace grounds again, the chances of meeting up with her were one in a billion. She would function with Nic in their privileged world, sealed off and protected from the average citizen. That's what was destroying him now.

With emotions eating him alive, he found himself taking the hairpin turns up the steep mountain road past pink and ochre villas whose gardens hugged the cliffs. Soon he reached his destination and drove through Savono, one of the most charming locales on the Ligurian coast.

Nighttime brought out the tourists. They strolled in and out of shops and ate on the cafe terraces while enjoying the view of the yachts in the bay far below. The jewelry stores with their displays of diamonds for which Castlemare was famous stayed open for business until late, drawing in the crowds.

He slowed down in front of a cluster of buildings across from the civic center. The plaque on the middle door read Savono Veterinary Clinic And Boarding Kennel. Dizo pulled to a stop, drinking in the perfumed air.

He could easily imagine himself living here, except that everything reminded him of her.

If he lived in Sardinia, nothing would remind him of her, but that wouldn't stop him from thinking and aching. His pain would probably be worse.

There was no question where Guido would like him to settle. His father loved Castelmare. He'd stayed on after Dizo's mother had died and his brothers weren't going anywhere.

Dizo stared at the clinic. A referral from Lucca and his father were as good as a guaranteed job offer. His dream to make something of his life was coming true, but without Gina, there would be no joy. This was worse than death. If she'd been the one to die, he would have been forced to accept it and go on living.

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Unfortunately his beautiful Giannina was very much alive and going to be married to someone else!

Not unfortunately—

Dio mio, he didn't mean that. He didn't know what he meant anymore. An abyss had swallowed him whole. Everywhere he turned he bumped into terrifying darkness.

As soon as Regina reached her suite in the palace, she kicked off her shoes and phoned her secretary.

"Will you please fax a note to Nicolas in the morning? Tell him I'm sorry it has taken me this long to respond to his invitation, but my father's passing prevented me from doing so until now. Let him know I'd love to spend the weekend with him."

Regina didn't care how it looked. She'd done all the mourning for two men there was to do in one life. Enough of that. If Nic wanted to make final wedding plans, so be it!

"Yes, Your Highness."

No sooner had she hung up than she heard her brother's rap on the outer door of her suite. She'd been expecting him. If he thought he would find her convulsed on the bed, he was in for a shock.

She grabbed a nail file out of the drawer in her bedside table and sat in the middle of her bed cross-legged against the silky duvet. "Come in, Lucca!"

When he walked in her bedroom furnished in shades of cream and pale green, she looked up at him. "If you've come to check on me, I'm fine. Go home to your wife and child."

He stood at the end of her king-size bed without saying anything. She could tell he was really angry with her. It shook her. He'd always been her sibling, but now he was a lot more than that. Somehow she hadn't fully realized it until now.

"Youdo understand why Dizo reacted the way he did—"

"Of course. I went too far and he called my bluff because he's the iron man. I thought I'd test him to see if he had an Achilles' heel." She flashed her brother a broad smile. "He doesn't, at least not where I'm concerned. I get it."

She started filing the nail of her index finger.

"It's called decency, Regina. Respect for the crown. What shocks me is that you thought you had the right to cross the line with him." Her brother was truly upset with her. Now that their father had passed away, he was feeling the weight of his responsibilities andshe was one of them. While she waited for him to speak, she didn't realize she'd filed her nail down to the skin.

"From the age of sixteen when Dizo first came here, he has known that any romantic association with you was out of the question. Taken to its furthest degree, he could never marry you. When he left for Sardinia, it was to start a new life as a vet. He never once made a wrong move with you."

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"You're right! He's got a stone where his heart is." Fire filled her cheeks. "How comeyou managed to get away with enjoying all the off-limits-women inyour life?"

"They didn't work at the palace," her unflappable brother came back with his indisputable logic. "Their fathers didn't have the kind of friendship Guido enjoyed with our father.

"Dizo is the product of his own strict upbringing. The Forneses have an enviable code of ethics handed down from their ancestry and are the finest people I know. Would that Alexandra and I can instill that kind of character in Catarina. He did the honorable thing so you could preserve your reputation. Think what you did by flying to Sardinia—"

"Honor be damned. When all's said and done, he didn't want me." A brittle laugh escaped her throat. "Saving my reputation," she mocked.

"Yes. And his family's. And Nic's." He stared her down. "In the end that's all any of us has."

Guilt smote her.

"I guess it's as good an excuse as any for admitting I don't have what it takes to turn him on." She tossed her head back. "Well, he did a superb job of it. Never mind those hours we were in bed together where he couldn't stop telling me how much he wanted me. That was only the alcohol talking in the heat of the moment. As soon as he was sober, he couldn't get rid of me fast enough.

"You should have seen his eyes light up once I told him he didn't need to worry about becoming a father. Would you believe he was so drunk he fell asleep before anything major could happen? Even out of control, Dinozzo Fornese wasin control." Her voice shook. "The joke's on me.

"Even if Guido lied about Dizo's forthcoming wedding, he was being prophetic. One day soon I'll learn that Dizo married a local girl from Sassari. They'll help take care of his grandmother and everything will be just as it should be in the Fornese corner of the world."

She tossed her file on the table. "Just so you know, I've accepted Nic's invitation for this coming weekend. He wants to talk over wedding plans. I think it's time. Let's agree that miracles only happen once. You got yours when Alexandra swept into your life at the midnight hour setting you ablaze.

"As Dizo informed me in his doomsday voice a little while ago, the fairy tale is over for us. I'm ready to marry Nic. The sooner the better. Unlike you, I want a life and childrenbefore I reach my thirties. By then I'll be too old to get down in the dirt and make mud pies with them."

There would be no fire with Nic. Nothing could equal what had taken place in the privacy of Dizo's bedroom where Regina had known rapture of a kind she had no idea existed. She looked away from her brother's all-seeing gaze.

"By now Catarina will be waiting for her papa to kiss her good-night. You'd better go or Alexandra will start to worry."

"I'm going, but I want you to call me if you need me."

"Thank you, but I won't."

The brother she loved had become even more protective now that their father had passed away, but

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there was only one man she needed and he was permanently unavailable.

CHAPTER THREE

"DR. FORNESE?"The voice of the receptionist came over the speakerphone in the surgery. "There's an important call for you from the palace in Capriccio."

Steady, Dizo.

Two weeks had passed since the night at the greenhouse. This phone call couldn't be from Gina. It was as if she didn't exist.

"I'm still putting in some sutures," he called through his mask. Signora Rossini's terrier had tangled with her neighbor's pit bull. The terrier had gotten the worst of it.

"Tell them I'll return the call when I'm through with this operation. Put the number on my desk."

Twenty minutes later he pulled off his gloves and mask and went into his office. After shutting the door, he sat down in the chair and reached for the cell phone in his lab coat pocket. He didn't recognize the number written on the paper.

After he punched in the digits it rang twice, then he heard the deep voice of Gina's brother."Ciao, Dizo. Come va?" The king's private line?

"Va bene, Lucca."

"I was pleased to discover you took the position in Savono."

"Thanks to you it's working out very well. Did you receive my note?"

"I did. It was much appreciated."

On the surface everything seemed fine, but Dizo sensed undercurrents and broke out in a cold sweat. "Is your family well?"

"Our little girl is thriving."

"That's good to hear." What about Gina? Was something wrong with her? Dizo got to his feet waiting for the other shoe to fall. It wasn't long in coming.

"A situation's come up I need to see you about. What's your schedule like this evening after you leave work?"

All his evenings were the same. Nothing went on. Not a damn thing. Some nights he spent with his family before returning to his apartment. Work was saving his life right now. "I'm free. If you want, I can be there within the hour."

"Good. Come to my office at the palace. The staff at the north portico will let you in. For your information I've asked your father and Regina to join us."

His heart thumped in reaction.Gina was going to be there?

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"I thought the four of us should meet unofficially before it turns into official business.A presto, Dizo."

His cryptic remark brought Dizo's pacing to an abrupt halt. It was a good thing Lucca had hung up. The groan that came out of Dizo would have deafened the party on the other end.

No amount of speculation was going to give him the answers he needed, but the fact that his father had also been summoned meant a situation of nightmarish proportions had developed. They'd been sitting on a time bomb after all. Yet as ugly as he knew it was going to get, the thought of laying eyes on Gina again caused an overriding explosion of excitement nothing could dampen.

Regina couldn't imagine why her brother wanted to see her in his office, but obviously he was working late. She explained that she needed to change out of her T-shirt and sweats. A shower was in order first, but he told her not to bother. He'd be waiting for her in the small conference room.

When he spoke to her like that in what Alexandra teasingly called his monarch's voice, no one dared argue with him, especially not Regina. Once upon a time she could tease her brother and get away with it, but no longer.

"I'll be right there."

She ran a brush through her hair before leaving her suite. Too bad she hadn't worked out in the gym this morning, but there hadn't been time. For the last two weeks she'd doubled her capacity to get things done in between visits to Pedrosa to be with Nic. As a result she hadn't been able to fit in the gym until an hour ago. Much as she hated the sticky feeling, her brother's request had first priority.

After passing by frescoed walls framed with gilt cornices, she descended the white marble staircase to the main floor with its checkerboard design of white and rose marble. It led to his work area that took up the entire west wing of the palace.

"Piccina."Her brother motioned for her to come in and sit by him at the conference table. He had a packet of papers in front of him. It looked like he'd called an emergency meeting and she was the first to arrive.

"What's happening?" She took her place at his right side. "Who else is coming?"

A sound at the entry supplied the answer.Guido . He had the look of a deer caught in the headlights.

Her head jerked toward her brother, but he was already on his feet to shake the head gardener's hand and ask him to be seated on his left.

Before their father's funeral, their mother had talked about erecting a flowered arbor at the end of the east rose garden. It was their father's favorite spot on the grounds. Regina was glad Lucca had decided to act on the suggestion. The fact that their mother wasn't here meant he intended to surprise her.

"Buona sera,Guido," she greeted him. She couldn't recall the last time she'd seen him dressed in anything but a work shirt and trousers. Tonight in a business suit and tie, he looked different. Attractive. Though shorter than Dizo, the resemblance to his oldest son in coloring and facial features was more pronounced. His brothers had inherited more of their mother's softer traits. At the thought of Dizo she

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fought to quiet the sob in her throat.

He nodded."Principessa."

An uncomfortable silence followed. While she was wondering what her brother was waiting for, Dizo suddenly appeared in the doorway.

A gasp escaped her lips.

He'd flown all the way from Sardinia to be here? Their gazes collided for a heart-stopping moment. Her hungry eyes fastened on his fiercely handsome face, reminiscent of an ancient Sardinian warrior. A light gray suit covered his tall, masculine physique. He looked absolutely…incredible.

Too late she realized she was staring and averted her eyes.

Don't pass out, Regina. Don't let him know the kind of power he has over you. Never again.

"Dizo?" Since when had her brother addressed him by the nickname she'd given him? "Would you mind closing the doors so we can be private?"

After doing Lucca's bidding, he sat down next to his father.

The shock of seeing him like this released a burst of adrenaline. It caused the back of her skull to throb, the sure sign of a headache coming on.

"I want to thank everyone for being on time. A situation involving the four of us has developed, one I can no longer ignore. At this point it needs to be resolved speedily because we're running out of time."

Lucca reached in the packet and pulled out some photographs. "During the last month before our father's death, Regina's pain reached its zenith. Our mother worried over her behavior. Frankly, so did I. To make certain she was all right, I asked her bodyguards to keep a close watch on her and report back if they thought she was in trouble and needed me."

Humiliated by the admission, Regina bowed her head.

"After her unannounced trip to Sardinia in the dead of night, they brought me some pictures they took to give me proof she might be endangering herself."

He distributed them around. One of the eight-by-ten black and white glossies showed Regina propping Dizo in the back doorway of the farmhouse. They were fused together in a clinch that practically set fire to the paper.

A cry escaped her lips. She shot Dizo a surreptitious glance. The evidence seemed to have turned his burnished complexion a strange ashen color.

"For the past two weeks my sister has been making formal plans for her wedding to King Nicolas of Pedrosa. However, the existence of these photographs makes a complete mockery of a marriage that should be considered sacred. Therefore Regina willnot be marrying Nic. Tonight my sister will phone the palace in Pedrosa and tell his royal highness she can't get married because she doesn't love him the way he deserves to be loved."

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Regina grabbed the edge of the table with both hands, convinced she hadn't heard him correctly.

"It's always been my opinion that the best defense is offense," he went on speaking. "Therefore I've made an unprecedented decision. Once Regina has done her honorable best by Nic, I'll arrange for a press conference tomorrow to announce the forthcoming marriage of Princess Regina to Dr. Dinozzo Fornese.

"As king of Castelmare, I have the right granted me to waive any law that could prove to be a serious detriment to the country's welfare in time of trouble. I would say Regina has unwittingly started a series of events that could have catastrophic consequences for everyone concerned, not to mention the pain it would bring to our grieving mother. It has to be stopped."

"No!" Regina cried and jumped to her feet. She was shaking so hard she almost fell backward. "I created this nightmare. Dizo has nothing to do with it!" Her mouth had gone so dry she could hardly talk.

"I'll call Nic as soon as I leave this room and tell him about what I did. He'll understand when I explain nothing happened! If he needs proof I'll get Dizo to talk to him.

"Bachelors do this sort of thing all the time before they get married. I'll show him the pictures and make him realize it didn't mean anything. It was simply a kind of dare to myself that backfired.

"But please don't make me marry Dizo! Youcan't ask that of him. He doesn't want any part of me! During the funeral he saw his chance to get away and couldn't leave soon enough!

"As you said, he was my victim growing up—a captive audience who didn't dare cause trouble because I was a royal. When I figured out what kind of power my title had over him, I was merciless. No wonder Guido has always hated me." Her voice shook.

"I know these photographs say something else, but Dizo was practically unconscious at the time. I threw myself at him and forced him to respond. He didn't know me from any other woman. A total stranger would have been acceptable under those circumstances. I've grown up since then and want no part of him!" She tore up the photo in front of her.

Her brother remained unfazed. "Maybe not, but before you dig in your heels,piccina, remember that Dizo has his personal and professional reputation to consider. His father, brothers and their families won't remain unaffected.

"I'd like to believe your bodyguards are honorable men, but we all know that some are not. The temptation to make money off these pictures might have induced one or all of them to make copies we don't know about. They might use them to extort money from me, or Nic, or they could make a small fortune by selling them to the tabloids."

While Regina sat there in shock, Lucca continued speaking in his sober tone. "If the palace in Pedrosa were to make an official announcement of your forthcoming nuptials, I have no doubt whatsoever these photographs will make their own headlines.

"Even if Nic could find it in his heart to forgive you, which I seriously doubt, the embarrassment to him and his family who've been good friends over the years will be devastating to say the least. That's no way to start off marriage with him as his queen."

Don't say anymore, Lucca.

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"However, the embarrassment doesn't stop there. The press will spin a tale about the gardener's son and the princess. It's a story that will take on matter, dragging all of us in this room and our families with it.

"Though the four of us realize Regina was in a tremendous amount of pain the day of the funeral—thus her nocturnal flight to seek Dizo's comfort—people who see these photos won't understand or care. The world can be an unforgiving place.

"They don't know Regina's history or how lonely a royal's life can be. I'm afraid happiness has eluded my little sister. Poor Dizo got chosen to be her friend whether he asked for it or not."

Stop, Lucca!

Regina buried her face in her hands, horrified to be so exposed over her actions that had brought them to this crisis. She'd hurt everybody. For the first time since her father's death she was thankful he wasn't alive to see what his little girl had done to dishonor herself and ruin the lives of everyone around her.

"However, by beating the media to the punch and announcing the marriage of Regina and Dizo, the gutter press can do their worst, but it won't rock the country's foundation or destroy anyone's reputation.

"For the princess to marry a commoner will produce the best kind of press. That's the good part. The bad part is that it all rests on Dizo who's being forced to marry in order to save the day and negate the publicity that will dog him and his family to the grave otherwise."

He turned to Guido. "What do you say to all this?"

The older man's thoughtful gaze traveled to his son whose face had been wiped of all animation. Then he looked at Regina. "Tonight your brother has shown he's a great king. Naturally I'd like to see the least amount of damage done for everyone's sake, but most of all I want my son to be happy. To my knowledge he hasn't been happy in years."

Guido had just confirmed what Regina had always believed. Even at sixteen Dizo's dark moodiness had been in evidence.

Lucca got to his feet. "While these two sort things out, let's go in my office, Guido. I'd like to discuss the possibility of planting a flower arbor in the east rose garden. We'll be back in a little while."

Regina didn't know what was worse. To be in the room with the four of them, or to be alone with the man who'd defined her world since she was a girl and had ultimately rejected her.

"Have you and Nic been intimate these past two weeks?" came Dizo's deep voice the second the door closed.

Of all the things he might have said to her after Lucca's stunning pronouncement—after all the questions he could have asked—she was least prepared for that one. "How dare you ask me that!"

He leaned back in his chair looking amazingly calm considering the bombshell her brother had just

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dropped on them. "I dare for all the obvious reasons."

"You mean because I was lusting so badly for you and got rejected, you assume I ran to the first available man who wouldn't turn me down?" she raged.

"No birth control is completely safe, Princess," he said, ignoring her outburst. "If you could be expecting Nic's child, then this emergency meeting your brother called has become even more complicated than anyone realized."

She leaned on the desk with her knuckles, pinning him with a frank stare. "Let's talk about the woman you're supposed to be marrying soon. Have you been sleeping with her?"

"No," he said without hesitation.

The one thing she could count on with Dizo was his innate honesty. His blunt answer filled her with breathtaking relief, which was ridiculous under the circumstances.

"You haven't answered my question."

"I don't need to. My brother thinks he can fix anything—even tamper with a law that has never been waived by a monarch of Castelmare—but not this time."

He sat forward. "Aside from the fact that what your brother says is law, let me refresh your memory about our problem." He slid one of the photographs across the table.

It showed her holding on to him as he was lowering her to the ground. He was trying to get her to let go of him, but she stuck like a parasite to its host. The picture was graphic evidence of her desperation. Which ever one of her bodyguards had taken these pictures had to have used a telephoto lens, but nothing in the close-up picture suffered for it.

She closed her eyes tightly to shut out the memory. Even hanging on to him when he was trying to get rid of her, she'd still been in denial about his feelings for her. She'd believed the words he cried out in his drunken stupor. What a fool she had been!

Most girls learned those kinds of lessons much earlier in life, but not Princess Regina, not until that night in the greenhouse when Dizo pulled rank on her for the first time in their lives. That forbidding man had tromped all over her feelings, destroying the fantasy world she'd lived in for too long. The hurt had done irreparable damage.

"I'll show Nic these pictures and confess everything to him. He'll—"

"He'll be destroyed," Dizo stated in a voice that sounded like Lucca at his most authoritative.

She turned away from him. "It's too bad your father and brothers didn't move back to Sassari with you. My brother's fears for the intrusion on their privacy wouldn't be as great otherwise."

"I didn't move to Sardinia."

Regina whirled around in more bewilderment and pain. "Iknew your father lied to me about your forthcoming marriage. What did you do? End up in Greece? You always wanted to live there for a time."

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He got up from the chair, drawing her attention to the well-defined male body she'd clung to during those few precious hours during the night a few weeks ago. "Actually I'm working at the animal clinic in Savono."

"Savono—" She stared at him in sheer disbelief. It was only a mile away. "You replaced Dr. Marano?"

"Si."

"You've been living there all this time?"

"Ma certo."

Of course he did if he was working there. She kneaded her hands. All this time she'd been in agony imagining him working in his native city, reestablishing all the old family friendships, making new ones with his own kind of women.

Her mind could scarcely comprehend it. "Why?"

"Why?" He gave an elegant shrug of his broad shoulders. "I've spent half my life in Castelmare. My family's here. What would be the purpose of going through another drastic uprooting?"

Regina's psyche couldn't take much more. "That explains your insistence in meeting with Lucca two weeks ago. You needed a fail-proof guarantee I wouldn't be darkening your door again. It all makes sense." He'd probably heard about the job opening through the university's veterinary department. The truth was so obvious, her anguish took her to a new low.

He nodded. "Once we're married, you have to admit these photographs won't have the intended impact on the public. My father has already weathered his own reaction to them. Evidently Lucca has shown them to your mother so her shock will have subsided by now."

His logic was even more cunning than Lucca's and that was saying a lot.

"As for you and me—" he kept it up "—nothing of any consequence needs to change."

Tight bands constricted her breathing. "How do you deduce that?"

"For the most part our lives don't have to be disrupted or dramatically altered. You do realize the upside to all this. Since you can never be queen, there's no worry about you being pressured to produce an heir. That should relieve your concern over wanting no part of me."

He sounded so happy about that prospect she wished the ground would swallow her alive. His mockery was spiked with a cruel edge she'd never heard come out of him.

Her head swerved in his direction. She flashed him a fatuous smile.

"You're right. And once our marriage is old news, the absence of children will make the dissolution simple enough."

His black brows quirked. "Dissolution? You really think your brother would be willing to pull another rabbit out of the hat for you,Principessa? "

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His question had more impact than a slap on the face. She would give anything to wipe that satisfied smile from his sensuous mouth. When she didn't think life could get any blacker, in walked Guido and her brother. His gaze flicked to Dizo.

"Have you two worked everything out?"

"We have, Your Highness." Dizo took the initiative, surprising the life out of her. Very recently she'd learned Dizo could be a devil when he wanted.

Lucca's eyes swerved to hers. "Then you'd better not waste any more time breaking off with Nic, piccina. "

Before she could reach the entry to the hall her brother said, "I'll call a press conference in the reception room for tomorrow afternoon at two." He might as well have been talking about tomorrow's weather forecast. "You'll both have to be here. Can you rearrange your schedule at the clinic, Dizo?"

"I'll get Dr. Bertholdi from the university hospital to cover for me."

Her training kept her from slamming the doors behind her. If Guido thought he didn't like her before…

Morning dawned softly in Savono. From the terrace of his apartment Dizo was up early enough to see the sun's rays tint the highest peak above the tiny hamlet of Dirupo a soft pink.

While he drank his coffee, his gaze fastened on the view of Castelmare whose southern boundary was the Mediterranean. When Dizo's father had moved their family to Capriccio, Dizo hadn't been prepared for the sight that awaited him.

At his first glance of the palace and grounds, he knew he was looking at the most beautiful spot on earth. It came complete with an adorable, fairy-tale princess. The enchantment lasted until the day he looked up from the hole he was digging to plant some begonia bulbs and discovered the little black-haired royal had grown into a beguiling woman more fascinating and desirable than any fantasy his fertile imagination could have conjured.

That was the day he was seized by an unhappiness even greater than losing his mother. Since then the last ten years of his life had been a living hell—until last night when fate had stepped in and her brother unexpectedly opened the gates that released him.

Only a prisoner of war suddenly freed after a decade of solitary confinement could begin to understand Dizo's feelings right now. But they were conflicted because Gina had plunged another dagger in his heart when she'd fought her brother. At the last minute she proved that shedid want to marry Nic so she could be queen of Pedrosa.

She'd always wanted to be queen, but with Lucca on the throne, it wasn't going to happen in Castelmare. Now, because of his astounding dictate as king of Castelmare, she wasn't going to be anyone's queen.

Who could have imagined a scenario where Princess Regina ended up being a commoner's wife? Dizo's wife.

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He might have won the prize that had always dangled before him out of reach, but he would be facing another kind of war until the day of victory. That day would never come unless all she wanted was to be queen of his heart.

Like his warrior forebearers who carried their two-handed broadswords onto the field of battle to obliterate their enemies, defeat wasn't part of Dizo's vocabulary, either. He was fighting the enemy within her and he was determined to win.

An hour later, after a shower and shave, he entered the clinic in a dark suit and tie to check on three of his patients. After leaving instructions for Dr. Bertholdi, he drove to his father's house in Capriccio. The family had agreed to meet there first.

After his father got in Dizo's car, his brothers followed in theirs and they took off en masse for the palace. Guido didn't say anything until Dizo made a left onto the grounds. "Who would have thought."

They were both on the same wavelength. "Who would have thought," Dizo whispered back.

"I told your uncle to watch the coverage withnonna. He's going to be in shock when he finds out who was sleeping in your bed."

Dizo's hands gripped the steering wheel tighter. "Not as shocked as I was."

His father squinted at him. "You really didn't know?"

"No, but now that I look back on it, the spectacular dream was more real than all the others."

He nodded. "Were there a lot of them in the past,figlio mio? "

"More than I'm willing to admit," he ground out.

"I knew it." His father patted his arm.

Dizo took a quick second breath. "You don't really hate Regina, Papa."

"Frankly, until I saw the look in your eyes when Lucca said he would waive the law, I hated the idea that she existed at all."

Regina hurried into her parents' suite. "Mama?"

"I'm ready." Her mother emerged from the bathroom looking lovely in a hyacinth two-piece silk suit. Regina wore a cream one trimmed with lace. "Darling, before we go down, I want to know what Nic said to you on the phone this morning."

She bowed her head. "He was still angry and upset after my call to him last night."

"One day when he meets the right girl he'll be glad you ended it. I'd hoped you would develop romantic feelings for him, but it didn't happen. Did you tell him you're marrying Dinozzo?"

"Yes." The silence that had followed her confession to Nic had been so awful she knew she'd crushed

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him.

Her mother sighed. “Lucca showed me the photographs.”

“I wish he hadn’t.”

“I’m glad he did. It would have been too cruel for Nic to see them without being prepared, especially with the broadcast this afternoon. That’s what I have to discuss with you.”

Alert to an odd inflection in her mother’s voice, she eyed her warily.

“Your brother and I talked half the night and decided your marriage should take place in the chapel before the conference.”

Regina reeled.

“Timing is everything, darling. I believe it’s a necessity. All has been arranged. The archbishop has consented to marry you. Since there’s no time for a mass, it’ll be a short ceremony. He’s waiting for us downstairs.”

Aghast, Regina shook her head. “I can’t get married today!”

“Why ever not?” She brought out a corsage of gardenias from the suite’s kitchen and pinned it on Regina’s suit jacket. The fragrance smelled bridal, making everything too real.

“Well for one thing Dizo doesn’t even know.”

“He’ll find out when he gets here. I would imagine he has already arrived and Lucca is taking care of him.”

“What if he doesn’t want to.” Her voice trembled in terror.

“Don’t be ridiculous. It was all settled last night. What difference will it make to him when it happens? Like any groom he’ll be glad to get this over and done with today while his family is here to witness it. Don’t forget he has a veterinary practice to run. The less fuss, the less the media can interfere with your private lives.”

Regina hadn’t forgotten anything.

“People will think wehad to get married.”

“You did, just not for the usual reason. Lucca believes this has to be done in case the bodyguards aren’t trustworthy. Your father would agree and so do I. Alexandra will bring her veil to the chapel for you to wear.” She went over to her jewelry box.

“Here. Give this to Dinozzo.”

She looked down at the simple gold ring. “This is Papa’s wedding band!”

“That’s right. Like your brother who broke a rule for you, your father also broke one when he refused to have this buried with him. He made me promise that when he died, I’d save it for you to give toyour

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prince. He knew he wouldn't live long enough to see you married, so he wanted you to have something personal of his."

By now both of them were in tears.

"Mama? Tell me something honestly. Do you think Lucca did the wrong thing to waive the law?"

"It's not for me to judge. I'm not in his shoes, but I know for a fact that if your father were still king and had seen those photos, he would have done anything to protect his precious little Regina. In my opinion Lucca's solution is the best one for an insoluble problem.

"Now we'd better go. The newscast is going to be delayed as it is."

"I now pronounce you Dinozzo Romali Fornese and you Regina Schiaparelli Vittorio, princess of Castelmare of the House of Savoy, husband and wife from this day forth. What God has bound together, let no man put asunder. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen."

"Amen," Regina murmured, not daring to look at Dizo. She was his wife! The moment was surreal.

The archbishop made the sign of the cross. "Do you have tokens to give each other?"

"Si,Father," Dizo answered in a smooth tone and slid a gold band onto her ring finger. Where had he come up with it? She went hot, then cold. This was really happening!

"And you, Regina?"

She'd been clutching her father's ring in her right hand. With trembling fingers she reached for Dizo's left hand and slid it home. The ring fit perfectly.

"You may kiss your bride."

Dizo was so much taller he had no trouble lifting the veil back in a graceful arc. She closed her eyes, waiting for his mouth to descend. Just so he wouldn't think she'd been panting for this moment, she kept her lips tightly together during the brief moment of contact.

But they opened to let out a quiet cry when he unexpectedly pressed another kiss to the base of her throat where her pulse was throbbing wildly. Everything he did from here on out would be a mockery, causing her more grief.

While Dizo's family congregated around him, her mother hugged her, then Lucca approached. He gave her a brotherly squeeze before shaking Dizo's hand. "Welcome to the family, Dizo. You've saved our families and the country untold embarrassment and pain. For that I'm eternally grateful."

CHAPTER FOUR

WELLthank you, brother dear.Regina might as well have not existed.

"Shall we go in for the broadcast now?" Lucca suggested.

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"Wait—" Alexandra caught her arm. Regina's glamorous blond sister-in-law kissed her on the cheek. "You look so lovely. Let me take this veil off so you'll be more comfortable," she whispered.

Lovely is as lovely does. Regina had done something so wrong, her brother had gone against the established law at his own peril as king to make things right.

"T-thanks, Alexandra," she said brokenly. "I've been terrified of tripping over it as I walk in there." Alexandra was tall and could carry it off.

"Be thankful you didn't have to go up and down the cathedral steps, my worst nightmare."

The cathedral steps…

Regina would never have to worry about climbing them for her own wedding. She was already married and living a nightmare, one where she'd promised to love, honor and obey a man who'd been forced into a marriage he could never have anticipated and didn't want. But even he couldn't withstand her brother's official edict.

In all these years Dizo had never once encouraged her. Except for that one night two weeks ago, she'd never seen him in any other condition than stone-cold sober. Without the alcohol he wouldn't have allowed her to get physically close to him, not when she was the princess of Castelmare.

The words he'd cried to her in his drunken state had talked of desire, not love. Being a red-blooded man, he'd have told any other woman who'd flung herself at him the same thing.

Now Lucca had stepped in to put the best fix on a virtually explosive situation she'd created and Dizo was legally bound to her. The way Lucca had gone about things by inviting Guido, who despised her, to sit in on the demoralizing moment had made it so much worse. She couldn't imagine where they would go from here.

After the archbishop gave her a slight bow, she felt a strong, warm hand clasp hers. "It's time to act the part," Dizo whispered in her ear. Not only his touch, but his pretended compliance was tearing her up inside.

Left with no choice but to make the most of this drama, she walked out of the chapel with him. It was a long trek from the east to the west end of the first floor where the larger conference room had filled for the occasion.

Regina could see her brother had called for the whole cabinet to assemble. Combined with members of the press, it made a huge gathering. Almost as big as the one when Lucca had announced his ascendancy to the throne. She watched her mother and Alexandra take their places in front of the raised platform. Guido and the rest of his family followed suit.

Together with Lucca, she and Dizo stepped on the platform where all the microphones were poised for the newscast. Her brother approached the lectern.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the cabinet, ministers and people of the press. Thank you for assembling on such short notice. Fifteen months ago I stood in this very spot to announce my forthcoming marriage to my wife, Alexandra. Since then there's been the birth of our first child, Catarina, and the death of my father, Rudolfo.

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"Now I'm pleased to announce that my sister, Princess Regina Schiaparelli Vittorio and Dr. Dinozzo Fornese were married by the archbishop in the palace chapel earlier today."

Regina heard gasps and hushed cries of shock coming from all corners of the ornate room. They'd been expecting the announcement of her forthcoming marriage to Nic! Every cabinet member was now aware of Lucca's unprecedented action in allowing this unorthodox marriage to take place. When she started to tremble, Dizo gripped her hand a little tighter.

"My sister realizes that in taking this step, she's no longer in line for succession to the throne. It places our daughter Princess Catarina in that position, but Regina has made this decision of her own free will and the family is one hundred percent behind her. We've known Dr. Fornese and his family for many years and approve wholeheartedly of this union.

"At this time Regina and her husband will be happy to take a few questions from members of the press."

No, Lucca—

But even as she was shrinking from the onus just put on them, Dizo drew her the few steps to the lectern where Lucca had moved to the side. Flashbulbs went off. She could hear camera shutters clicking. Camcorders had zeroed in on them.

"Princess Regina? Where and when did you meet your husband?"

She tried to swallow, but couldn't. "On the palace grounds many years ago."

"Would you describe your relationship as long-term then?"

"No—I mean—"

Dizo put his arm around her shoulders. "What Regina is trying to say is that she and I became friends over the years I worked here under my father, Guido Fornese, who is head gardener. It wasn't until very recently we made the decision to marry."

Try an hour ago!

"Dr. Fornese?" another voice called out. "Are you a medical doctor?"

"I'm a licensed veterinarian."

"Were you born in Castelmare?" came another question from the back of the room.

"No. I'm Sardinian, but since I was transplanted to Capriccio I claim both countries."

"Are you going to live at the palace?"

"This is Regina's family home and of course we'll visit here often, but I'm afraid I have other plans for us."

Since when!

"Princess?" another media person spoke up. "It's obvious that love rather than ambition has prompted

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you to choose a commoner over your chance to be on the throne one day. How soon did you know you wanted to marry him?"

It felt like all the blood in her body rushed to her face at once.

Again Dizo intervened as if he'd always been in the spotlight and could handle anything. "When she was fourteen and I was twenty, I happened to overhear her tell the family dog Sebastiano she would choose me for her husband when she was all grown up and not even her father could stop her."

While Regina died of mortification over the unexpected disclosure, the whole room exploded with laughter and broke into clapping.

Lucca's broad smile was the last straw. Her brother moved to the lectern, signaling the event was over. "Ladies and gentlemen, that last question brings this press conference to a close. I want to thank all members of the press and television networks for coming. If you will please clear the room quickly so my sister and her new husband can enjoy the reception planned in their honor."

Regina was ready to duck out, but Dizo held on to her hand preventing escape. Within seconds they were besieged on every side with congratulations by the government officials pressing forward. Regina was well acquainted with all of them, but it was Dizo they swarmed to and engaged in lengthy conversation.

Though his potent masculinity and dark, striking features would always turn more heads than any world famous film star, it was his intellect that held their interest. As they were coming to find out, he had depth and substance.

Dr. Maria Salino, the fifty-five-year old minister of health, pulled Regina aside. Her arched brows lifted. "To think that all these years you've had that attractive man in your sights every time you looked out the window and nobody knew it. If I could live with him, I would never want to be queen, either. By the time this news has gone around the world, you're going to be the envy of every woman alive. I hope you have a plan to go into hiding."

"As a matter of fact we do." Dizo had suddenly materialized, leaving Regina to wonder how much of their conversation he'd overheard. It seemed to be a habit of his. Just remembering what he'd blurted to the audience about her talk with Sebastiano caused her body to burn with embarrassment. "In fact we have to leave now. I'm sorry. If you'll be kind enough to excuse us."

Dr. Salino's knowing smile was the last thing Regina saw before Dizo whisked her out of the conference room through a private door only the family used. More of Lucca's doing.

Outside in the drive stood a dark blue compact car several years old. She blinked when he opened the front passenger door and helped her inside. In the back seat she saw one of her suitcases and her purse.

"Where are you taking me?" she demanded the second he got behind the wheel.

Dizo started the engine. "On our honeymoon, of course."

After he helped her in, they took off. Regina had never driven in a car with Dizo before. As they passed through the gate to the main road, a strange foreboding crept through her. After sixteen years she had thought she knew him so well, but it felt like she was riding with an implacable stranger. The overcast sky, unusual for this time of year, didn't exactly bolster her confidence.

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In as calm a voice as possible she said, “On your way back to work, drive me around the other side of the grounds and let me out at the secret entrance. I’ll get back to the palace on my own.”

“I’m afraid I can’t oblige you,” he muttered. “There’s a string of security and paparazzi along for the ride with us. Once they see you leap out of the car and burrow into the hedge like a scared rabbit, you’ll undo the very thing your brother committed unprecedented political suicide over to prevent…according to some,” he added in a suave tone.

For a moment shehad forgotten. Being alone with Dizo drove every other thought from her consciousness.

“The media will do their worst,” he kept talking. “Are the newlyweds already fighting? Is the princess regretting that she’ll be living with her husband now that she’s given up all chance of gaining the throne? Is she horrified to discover she has to manage on her husband’s humble salary? Has the idea of those gardener hands on the royal person begun to pall?”

Regina shivered to hear that kind of cynicism come out of him. It was a revelation she could have done without. “When you threw me out of the farmhouse window, I should have realized your cruel streak runs much deeper than I’d first supposed.”

“There’s a great deal you don’t know about me,Principessa .” He took a sharp left so they were headed along the coast highway.

“Don’t call me that!” It reminded her too much of his own father’s animosity toward her.

He shot her an oblique glance. “I never realized it bothered you so much. If you’d just given me your personal permission, I would have called you something else in private years ago.”

She blinked.

“Let’s see. If I’m not mistaken Regina means queen, a very apt name for a princess with aspirations. However, since you’ll never be one now, I think I’ll settle on Gina.”

You fight fire with fire if you want to put it out.Those were her brother’s words when he’d waived the law to prevent what she’d done from becoming a scandal none of them would ever live down. That was the best way to handle Dizo.

“Why not Giannina?” It delighted her to bait him. “That’s the name you called me while I was in your bed.” Wouldn’t she love to tell him the other endearments he’d whispered against her lips, but in his saturnine mood she didn’t dare go too far.

He grimaced. “As you’ve learned to your detriment, alcohol has a lot to answer for and ultimately lost you the crown.”

Dizo loved to remind her of that. She turned her head and stared out her side window so she wouldn’t be able to see his firm jaw in her peripheral vision.

They’d passed the border into Italy. Before long the greenhouses dotting the world famousriviera dei fiori came into view. Interestingly enough every visitor to the palace in Capriccio claimed the grounds were much more beautiful.

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That was because of Dizo who, like his father, was a master gardener. Together with his other brothers and a team of gardeners, they'd created a showplace of flowering plants and trees that had no equal.

Regina had been happiest during those years when she could run out on the grounds any time of day and he would be there. Once her private tutoring sessions were over, she was free to find him so they could have one of their fascinating conversations. Then came the awful moment when he started college and could only help out part-time.

Her excitement shriveled because she had to plot and wait for those moments to chat with him. Some mornings he was out planting or weeding at five in the morning before his first class. She would choose that time to take her father's black Labrador for a walk. But the worst came when her parents insisted she attend college in England. That meant months at a time being away from him.

The separation was so traumatic and painful she begged to come home on the weekends. Her parents finally relented, believing it would help her get over her homesickness. In reality she couldn't bear to be away from Dizo.

Once she'd graduated in economics, she began to run the Capriccio animal shelter, her favorite family charity. It was there she'd fallen in love with an abandoned mongrel she'd named Antoneo. He had a limp.

She'd brought him home to show Dizo who immediately took it to the animal hospital to give it a checkup. When he returned, the dog had a cast on its leg. After a month it came off and his leg was good as new.

At the memory, Regina fought to tamp down her emotions. Dizo had been the constant in her life and could do anything and everything…exceptlove her.

He was her husband now, but the old adage about "being careful what you wish for" had come true with a soul destroying twist of vengeance.

"I'd like to know where we're going, Dizo," she asked quietly.

"It's the groom's prerogative to keep his bride in suspense."

She could stand anything but his incessant jibing. "In that case I need to make a phone call to my secretary." She undid her seat belt and reached in back for her purse. After opening it she cried, "My phone—it's not here!" She kept rummaging to no avail.

Dizo remained unfazed. "Maybe it's in your suitcase."

Still leaning between the two front seats, she undid the catch and lifted the lid. "It's not in here, either. The maid has hardly packed anything! What could she have been thinking?"

"That you were going on your honeymoon?"

His facetious aside almost made her bite her tongue. "I don't seeyour suitcase."

"I don't need one."

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Her heart thudded in her chest before she turned around and buckled up again. Obviously baiting him hadn't worked. Maybe she'd achieve better results by using extreme politeness. "May I please use your phone?"

"Scusa,Gina, but I'm on my honeymoon and didn't bring it."

She jerked her head toward him. "I don't believe it!" she cried in frustration. "Your family might need you." A thrill of alarm passed through her body to realize she really was Dizo's prisoner. Hislegal prisoner. What good did it do her to have security if she couldn't contact them?

Don't let him know you're nervous. Reason with him. "There might be a real emergency, Dizo."

"There could be several. The point is, I'm on vacation and plan to do whatever I feel like. That means no phones, no deadlines. I'll eat when I want, sleep when I want. When was the last time you took a week off with no cares?"

She swallowed hard. Knowing how he felt about her, he still planned for them to be gone a wholeweek?

After falling painfully in love with Dizo at a young age, life had never been the same. To ease the pain of constant separations from him, she'd filled her days with the responsibilities of her position as princess. Her secretary lined up her daily itinerary. She attended official events for Lucca all the time. They shared official business in the event she needed to fill in for him during a temporary crisis.

All of it had been in preparation for a day years and years down the road when Lucca might have to step down and she would be forced to take over the reins of government. Of course that wouldn't be happening now. Not ever, and she'd ruined Dizo's life in the process.

"You can't remember, can you," he drawled, bringing her back to the present. "If nothing else, this ought to be an instructive experience for you."

She bristled. "Are you insinuating I'm a driven person?"

"I was only making an observation."

"How long do you plan this informative journey to last?" She let the sarcasm fly.

His bark of laughter held a devilish ring. "If you're asking that question already, I'm afraid you're in trouble."

"So are you if we don't turn around anytime soon. We're almost to Genoa! I have to get back before tonight to start planning next week's series of library lectures."

"What happened to the time you blocked out for this weekend?"

She frowned. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Forgotten so quickly about your visit to Nic? Wasn't the scenario to go something like you would manage to fit in marriage to him as soon as there was an opening in your hectic schedule? Before Lucca showed us the photographs, he was under that distinct impression."

Warmth flooded her cheeks. "That's not funny, Dizo."

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"It wasn't meant to be. Lucca did everyone a favor by forcing you to break your engagement to Nic. He just doesn't know it yet."

Trying to have a civil conversation with him was impossible. It would be better to ignore him. As her head whipped around toward the water she noticed the sky had darkened considerably. Soon they left the highway and were headed toward the harbor. At six in the evening there was a lot of traffic. Before she knew it they'd entered a tunnel.

Her hand clutched the side of her seat. "What's going on?"

"Apparently you've never been on this road before. Don't be nervous because you're no longer flying in the family helicopter designed to separate you from humanity," he said as if she were a little child.

"I'm not nervous!" she lied. "I'd just like to know what you have in mind."

"Why? You're so regimented by the strictures of your former royal existence, you don't know how to let life happen. Given the chance, you might even learn to tolerate slumming without an agenda."

Shocked and confused she cried, "That's the second time you've said something judgmental and hurtful."

"Come on, Gina. I'm the gardener's son, remember?"

They'd reached the other end of the tunnel and were coming up fast on the loading dock of a good-size ferry.

Dizo switched lanes with practiced ease, joining the lineup of cars starting to go on board.

Was he taking her to a beach town further down the coast?

Her mind drifted to thoughts of them enjoying such a break together in different circumstances—happier ones. In anticipation of his passing his boards, Regina had used part of her allowance to buy Dizo an all-expense paid trip to Athens. She'd given Lucca the envelope with everything Dizo would need. Her brother was to present it to him as a gift from the Vittorio family.

Her plan had been to bump into Dizo accidentally and spend some time with him away from everyone else, but that was all before the nightmare that was now her life. Now, she needed to get the envelope back from her brother and destroy its contents.

After learning how Dizo really felt about her—or didn't feel—what a ghastly disaster that trip would have been.

"Gina?"

His deep voice broke in on her tortured musings. To her surprise he'd come around to her side of the car and had opened the door. "Let's go." With one hand holding her suitcase, he cupped her elbow with the other.

Together they walked behind the car passengers toward a stairway leading to the upper decks. Between his height and darkly handsome features and her still dressed in her wedding suit and corsage, everyone

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stared at them. Several times her hip brushed against his rock-hard physique, sending a weakness through her body.

She thought they would go up to the promenade deck and stand against the railing to watch the coast recede at least. Instead he ushered her down a corridor lined with cabins. He stopped in front of one and opened the door.

It swung open to reveal a tiny room with a single bed against the wall and a single fold down bed above it. Dizo walked in behind her and shut the door. She heard the click of the lock, realizing they were really alone in this enclosed space. No bodyguards or paparazzi in here. There was barely room to turn around. Regina got a fluttery feeling in her stomach.

He flipped on the light switch. Her glance fell on the built-in dresser and closet. Next to it she saw a bathroom through the half-open door. A small table and two chairs provided the only other accoutrements.

Dizo stood directly behind her. She could feel his warmth. “I dare say all this could fit into your closet at the palace and still have room to spare,” he taunted.

Regina spun around on her high heels, furious at him for trying to make her out to be a spoiled child, but it was a mistake. She hadn’t counted on their bodies being so close. As they made contact, his strong arms automatically went around her locking her in place.

“Let me go, Dizo,” she spoke against his chest.

In response his hold tightened. “In case you didn’t know it, this is what a husband does when he finally gets his wife alone and in his arms.” He kissed the spot at the base of her throat where her heart was jumping.

She had to do something to counteract his effect on her. “You’re not a normal bridegroom.”

“I’m more normal than your royal sensibilities could ever imagine.” So saying, his mouth swiftly covered hers. He gave her a long, lingering kiss. Why was he doing this when he hadn’t touched any alcohol?

“Dizo—” His passion thrilled her, but he was only pretending to be the besotted bridegroom. She couldn’t bear it that his sense of duty, not love, was driving him.

He urged her closer. “Don’t hold back,amore. This is no dream. We’re not going to wake up and have to go our separate ways. Our marriage is for infinity. Do you remember?”

Yes, she remembered everything that had happened that night, but it shocked her that he recalled any part of it.

His mouth made a foray to hers in a kiss, hot with desire. “Help me,caro. This isn’t like the other night. Most of it is still a blurry memory. I want to enjoy my beautiful new wife until all visions of you with Nic are erased and you no longer want to be his queen.”

When the thrust of his comments sank in, she tore her lips from his in shock. “I never wanted to be his queen. Youknow I didn’t.”

He grasped her shoulders. “I think you did. After Lucca ascended the throne, your thoughts turned to

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Nic who could offer you a crown. It may not have been the one you initially wanted, but it would do."

His black eyes examined her steadily. "Unfortunately your brother's brilliant solution has chained you to a commoner like me. Admit it's a very bitter pill for you to swallow."

Oh, Dizo…She was paying for all those years she'd borne her heart and soul to him out on the grounds. His steel trap mind never forgot a thing she had told him, never mind that most of it was the innocent rambling of an insecure girl who didn't know what she was talking about and who had simply wanted to impress the gorgeous male teen she'd loved.

The accusation he'd just thrown at her stung her to the core. "If you find me so ambitious, then I can guarantee you won't like being chained to me. I don't know why we're even having this conversation."

"Because it's time the blinders came off, Princess."

"Why do you insist on calling me that?"

"Because it's what you are. I'm not saying this to be cruel, Gina, only to make you open your eyes. You could never change that part of you any more than I could change the part of me who's Guido's son.

"Did I ever tell you that when I was a boy my parents were beyond dirt poor? You could never know what that was like. Half the time I couldn't go to school because Papa needed me to work the farm with the men.

"I had one outfit to wear. There was no running water, hot or cold. I could never get the dirt out from under my fingernails. We didn't starve, but we came close to it."

A moan rose deep in her throat.

"Driven to find extra jobs to support us, Papa worked on the grounds of the Piazza D'Italia in Sassari. When the king of Castelmare came to the city for the festival of the candeleria, he was impressed with my father's contribution and offered him a gardener's job at his palace in Capriccio.

"You'd have thought I'd be happy for our family. It meant steady work, better living conditions and pay. Papa was able to send money back home, but I didn't want to be taken away from my world to one that only existed in fairy tales. It was a storyline that said you can look, but you can't touch. You can want, but you can't have. The lines were irrevocably drawn between the endowed and the unwashed."

Gina was aghast. "That's how you really felt?"

"In the beginning, yes, because that was the reality. But then a precocious little princess with a crown of bouncy black curls befriended me and taught me about her world. Slowly she softened my hardest edges." He pressed another sensuous kiss to her lips.

She couldn't believe what she was hearing. "At ten years of age I couldn't have known your feelings."

"Not at twenty-six years, either," he stated bleakly, wounding her.

"That's unfair, Dizo."

"Even so, it's the truth. You're my wife now and have no comprehension of what it's going to be like to

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function as a woman in a normal household with normal situations."

"Our home life at the palace was normal," she defended. "You could always have been a part of things, but your father wouldn't allow you or your brothers to mix in. Papa made arrangements for you and your family to live in one of the big suites on the third floor. When your father wouldn't hear of it, Papa told Guido to treat the palace as a second home.

"Papa thought the world of your father and wanted your family to enjoy all the facilities inside and out. You could have gone swimming or riding whenever you wanted."

Dizo was quiet so long she said, "Your father never told you any of that, did he? Once you started college I know for a fact Papa practically begged him to let you use the library whenever you wanted. He turned him down flat."

She heard him take a labored breath. "Papa's a proud man. The culture clash between him and your father was too great for him to breach."

In Regina's opinion Guido was too proud.So are you, my darling Dizo . Regina had the scars to prove it. "I understand that now, but I'd like you to know one more thing. Papa set up a trust fund for you and your brothers. It's still there."

After a short silence Dizo murmured, "I came to learn your father was a wonderful man, Gina."

"I wish Guido would have accepted his friendship. Papa was so proud of you for getting through medical school on your own. You probably aren't aware how much Lucca liked you, too. In fact you hurt my brother when he sought your friendship and you rebuffed him.

"Lucca's circle of friends was limited of necessity. I saw him try again and again to make overtures, but you cut him off as if he weren't good enough for you. That hurt both him and me."

Dizo's hands fell away unexpectedly. With his defined male features looking like they'd been set in stone, he muttered, "I'll be back in a minute. You can come with me, but with all the curiosity seekers waiting to catch a glimpse of you, I'm afraid it won't be a pleasant experience."

Haunted to learn about some of the demons that had tortured him for so many years, she'd forgotten how difficult this must be for him to deal with bodyguards dogging their footsteps to keep people away. Lucca would have assigned extra security to protect them.

More than once Dizo had told her how glad he was he'd never have to deal with them. Today he'd been given a wedding present he could do without, she mused with a troubled sigh.

Only after he'd left the cabin did she feel the vibrations from the engines. The ferry must have already moved out of the port made famous by Columbus. Not having any idea where Dizo had gone or why, she hurriedly took advantage of being alone to freshen up in the bathroom. There was no shower, only a toilet and sink.

She unpinned the gardenias before getting out a change of clothes from her suitcase. Except for her nightgown, a purple bikini, some changes of underwear and a pair of sandals, the only outfit she found was a pair of white cargo pants and a short-sleeved navy knit top.

Quickly she removed her suit and shoes, exchanging them for her casual clothes and sandals. She was

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just hanging up her wedding outfit when Dizo came back in with a tray of food and drinks.

He set it down on the table, then removed his suit jacket and tie, tossing everything on the lower bunk. Pushing his shirtsleeves up to the elbow, he flashed her a piercing black glance. "Your feast awaits you."

The second she saw the sandwiches she realized she was starving and didn't need any coaxing to join him. She had no idea how long he intended to remind her of her former status. The only thing she could do was ignore it as much as possible. Or better yet, serve him honey instead of vinegar.

"This looks good. Thank you."

While he stood nearby devouring a ham and cheese sandwich in a couple of bites, she sat down on the chair and reached for one of the oranges. After she finished peeling it, she handed him a section. "Do you realize this is the first time we've ever eaten a meal together off the palace grounds?"

Through narrowed lids he watched her put a section in her mouth before he took her offering. "This is hardly the fare you're used to. Enjoy the novel experience while it's still new."

"This sandwich tastes exactly like the ones I have sent up to my room from the palace kitchen for dinner. The lemonade's the same brand I drink and this orange tastes even fresher than the one on my lunch tray yesterday."

His mouth formed a thin line before he reached for his soda and drained the bottle. "When you've finished eating, I'll take you out on deck for some air, but I'm cautioning you now that everyone on the ferry is aware the princess is on board. It's your choice."

She swallowed the last of her sandwich. "I'd prefer to stay in here."

"Without a radio or TV, it'll be a long night," he cautioned with understated relish. "We won't dock at Porto Torres until the morning."

Her pulse raced. Porto Torres was only a few miles from Sassari. They were going back to Sardinia, the scene of her crime. If it was his intention to torture her because he'd lost the freedom of bachelorhood, he was doing a good job.

He reached in his trouser pocket and pulled out a deck of cards he tossed on the table. "Have you ever played Briscola?"

"I would wager Lucca and I have played it more times than you and your brothers."

His eyes roamed over her features. "How did you know about that?"

"When you took breaks in the nursery shed, I used to spy on you."

"Then you know I never lose. Let's find out what kind of an opponent I'm dealing with."

For the first time since the wedding ceremony he'd spoken without delivering one of his debilitating blows. A temporary pax? She didn't dare breathe in case she said or did something to upset him.

He set the tray on top of the dresser, then hooked one of his powerful legs around the chair and straddled it. Using the chair back for a prop, he shuffled the pack.

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Beneath her long black lashes Regina's hungry gaze took in the play of muscle across his broad shoulders as he dealt them each three cards.

After he'd turned up the suit card, she turned over one of her cards and thus began a fast-paced game of taking tricks. He won the first round hands down. They played a second and a third. Still he came out the winner. Another two rounds, but she couldn't win. Something was fishy.

When they were halfway through the sixth round she pounced on his hand and turned it over. He'd concealed a cache of trump cards. "I knew it!" She wrenched them out of his palm and threw them at him.

A burst of wicked male laughter resounded in the small cabin. It reached down into every atom of her body.

"You're an evil man, Dottore Fornese."

"It rubs off on you when you grow up on the back streets of Sassari."

CHAPTER FIVE

LIKEquicksilver Dizo's mood had changed back, reminding her of a dark angel. She didn't know how to deal with that side of him who believed she'd wanted to be queen more than anything else.

Levering himself from the chair, he gathered up the cards and put them on the table. "I'm still thirsty. What can I bring you?" Evidently he couldn't get away from her fast enough all of a sudden. Under the circumstances she welcomed the respite from his truculent disposition.

"A cola?"

"I'll see what they've got." He left the cabin taking the tray and remains with him.

While she stood there, she became aware of the ferry's movement and had to grab hold of one of the chairs for support. Normally the Mediterranean was calm, but it seemed the darkening sky had portended bad weather further out from the mainland. The wind had picked up.

Regina wasn't a good sailor. That was the main reason her family always checked on the weather conditions before they took her on the family yacht with them. She doubted Dizo ever thought about such things. To show any weakness in front of him would give him more ammunition to ridicule her. If she went to bed now, she could pretend exhaustion.

In case she became seasick, she stole a hand towel from the bathroom. Hoisting herself from the end of the bottom bed with some difficulty, she flopped onto the top bunk. No sooner had she removed her sandals and settled beneath the sheet and blanket than Dizo walked in with some drinks and what looked like a box of biscotti.

"Gina?"

"I'm up here," she called out.

His dark gaze flicked to hers. "That's good," he said to her surprise. He put his purchases on the table.

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"We're headed into a storm. They're rare around here, but they do happen, so bed's the best place for you. If it starts to get rough in the middle of the night I'll fasten the restraints so you don't fall out."

As the ferry dipped into the valley of another swell, she pulled the sheet over her head and turned toward the wall.

She heard him go in the bathroom. After he came out again, he turned off the light, leaving them in a pitch-black room. Since he hadn't brought a suitcase, she presumed he'd sleep in whatever he felt like…or not…

Images of the night he'd pulled her down on the bed with him refused to leave her mind. Ironic to think they hadn't been married then, yet for those few precious hours she'd felt his desire for her despite the alcohol in his system. Could he really have responded like that to any woman lucky enough to get that close to him? Regina would give her life to know the answer to that question.

The way she was getting tossed around in her bunk, she had the very sure premonition she might just get that chance before morning.

She slept on and off and kept checking her watch. At four in the morning she could feel every lift and plunge until she thought her head was going to burst. So far she hadn't been sick, but at this rate it wouldn't be long. To be sick in front of Dizo would be the height of humiliation for her.

At one point the ferry lurched so hard, she couldn't prevent a cry from escaping her lips. The next thing she knew a strong pair of arms removed her from the bunk and lowered her to the bottom bed. In the process she could tell Dizo hadn't changed out of his clothes.

"It's going to be all right," his deep voice assured her. He could have been her father just then, the last emotion she wanted to provoke from him.

"You shouldn't have to give up your bunk for me."

"I haven't been to bed so don't worry about it."

"Have you been sitting there in the dark all this time?"

"I've gone out on deck a few times to watch the progress of the storm. This is just a squall. It'll be over before we dock."

She'd have much preferred it if he'd offered to hold her for the rest of the night, but short of begging him, that miracle wasn't about to happen. He'd see it as another ploy to get into his arms. Even if he was her husband now, there was no way she'd make that mistake again, not when he thought she still preferred Nic for what he could give her.

"Here." He handed her the towel she'd taken from the bathroom. "The moment we got in line to board the ferry you should have told me you get seasick. I would never have subjected you to this otherwise."

"And give you another reason to mock the pampered little princess?" All this time he'd known she was seasick. Nothing escaped him.

"Gina…"

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"Don't say another word," she cried. "I learned my lesson the morning your gardener hands dumped me outside the farmhouse window. Do yourself a favor and sleep in my bunk for what's left of the night. I'll drag myself to the bathroom if I have to. There's no point in both of us losing sleep."

"I'm staying here in case you need help walking."

"That's right. Her Royal Highness can't even be sick by herself."

Dizo grimaced, realizing he deserved her scorn and much more. Today he'd kidnapped her from the only comfort zone she'd ever known. So far she'd survived much better than he would have given her credit for.

Instead of hysterics, she'd met him with surprising grit. After the kiss she'd eaten those sawdust sandwiches without murmur. When she'd thrown the cards at him, it had actually been in fun.

Every reaction of hers defied his preconceived notions of how it would be to spend time alone with a woman who'd been royally pampered from the cradle.

Who would have thought?

The question reminded him of what his father had said as they'd driven through the gate to the palace. Certainly Dizo never dreamed the day would come when the little princess would grow into a captivating woman who now bore his name and was lying here sick in the dark because of him.

Everything was his fault. Though she'd been the one to follow him to Sassari, Dizo had been the one who'd hung around the palace grounds too many years putting his own needs first. For that selfish act he was condemned to suffer for the crimehe'd committed, not Gina.

The reality of what he'd done twisted something deep in his gut. After seeing those photos, Lucca had been given no choice but to act on the evidence.

When Lucca had commanded that they marry, Dinozzo Romali Fornese had embraced the edict like a dying man in the desert springing for water. Now Princess Regina was no longer entitled to ascend any throne. In taking what he wanted, she would learn to despise him.

No matter how much she might deny it, she'd been planning on being queen one day. She'd adored her father and wanted to make him proud by preparing herself to rule. He remembered the day Gina made her big confession to him. It was on her thirteenth birthday. She'd brought him out a generous piece of birthday cake which, to her amusement, he'd gulfed down in short order.

While they ate she said she wished she'd been born first so that when her father died one day, she could carry on his legacy. "Iwant to be queen. Papa says I'll be the perfect monarch, but Lucca has to be king first even if he can't stand the idea. I don't think it's fair a man has to be first when he doesn't want to do it. Do you?"

"Life isn't fair," Dizo had muttered, not knowing what else to say. She finally left him to his weeding and ran back to the palace. He'd been the wrong person to come to for comfort. He'd always been the wrong one.

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A few weeks ago in her grief she'd made a fatal mistake and was already paying for it in ways he didn't want to think about. This wasn't a situation that could be reversed. How long would it be before she couldn't stand the sight of him because he'd come between her and the throne? How was Dizo going to live with that?

Yesterday morning he'd experienced euphoria for having been let out of prison. Twenty-four hours later he realized he'd just exchanged one set of bars for a lifelong sentence with no possible means of redemption.

His body broke out in a cold sweat. He jumped up from the chair aware the ferry had weathered the storm and was entering smoother waters. Gina had finally fallen asleep.

He swept his hair back from his forehead. Much as he feared Gina might not want to go back to Sardinia, he'd talked to his bedridden grandmother before the ceremony and had promised her he'd bring his wife home to meet her before he did anything else.

As for his relatives, they would be in shock for years to come. Like his father they'd be civil to her, but he feared they'd hold themselves in reserve because it was their way. Gina was the one who'd never be happy again and there wasn't a thing in hell he could do about it.

"Gina?" Regina felt someone nudging her. "Wake up. It's time to get off the ferry."

When she opened her eyes she saw Dizo's handsome face so close to hers she could pick out the stress lines around his deeply compelling mouth. He'd had no sleep. The shadows beneath his eyes told their own story. A hint of a beard had darkened his jaws. His shirt unbuttoned at the throat looked a little wrinkled, yet he'd never been more attractive to her.

She sat up slowly, relieved the wild night was over.

He handed her a bottle of water. "Drink this first."

Regina did his bidding. It tasted good and she swallowed all of it. "Thank you."

"I'll bring you something to eat."

"No." She shook her head. "I—I couldn't."

She inched her legs over the side. It was heavenly to know the ferry had come to a stop. No more pitching and rolling.

A solemn-faced Dizo helped her to her feet. As his arm slid round her waist, slivers of desire shot through her sensitized body. He felt warm and solid. It would only take a twisting motion to end up against his chest. Her breath caught just thinking about it.

"All right?" he whispered anxiously.

It would be easy to play the victim so he'd be kind to her, but she wanted his attention because he was in love with her and for no other reason. That wasn't going to happen.

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"I'm much better than I thought I'd be." She eased out of his hold and went into the bathroom to deal with herself. One look in the mirror at her mop of curls and she reached for her hairbrush.

After brushing her teeth and washing her face she felt a little more presentable. An application of red lip gloss to add some color to her wan complexion and she was ready.

When she emerged from the bathroom she discovered Dizo packing her lacy cream-colored suit and high heels in her suitcase. She added her toiletries. He threw in his tie before closing the lid.

To her surprise he'd found her sandals in the top bunk and had put them on the floor for her. "You're more efficient than my personal maid," she said as she slipped them on. Pleased to see the way he ground his teeth, she reached for a cookie from the opened box. Maybe she could tolerate one. "Breakfast, too. Every princess should be so lucky."

He tossed his suit jacket over his shoulder, then opened the door. "You don't want your corsage?"

"No. The gardenias have withered." If he'd given them to her, she would have kept them and pressed them in her scrapbook. Under the circumstances, to keep them would be a reminder of the day he'd been forced to marry her. Regina wasn't that much of a sadist.

On their way to his car they had to walk the gauntlet of fascinated onlookers who shamelessly took pictures. It was a huge relief to climb in the front seat while she waited for him to drive them off the ferry.

In another minute they'd entered a world of sunshine. Porto Torres was a charming port town full of Roman antiquities. When she felt better, Regina would love to explore it, but after the way she'd just spoken to him, she knew better than to even suggest it for another time.

Soon they were out on the twisty road leaving the port behind. As she'd learned from her short visit here a few weeks ago, Sardinia didn't have regular highways. Her eyes feasted on the yellow wheat fields filled with red corn poppies. "It's so beautiful."

"You're seeing the island in its summer glory. The best time to come is Easter when the whole place is in bloom. Then the countryside is a riot of color with wild gorse and mimosa. The fragrance of the lavender blues and white cistos bushes blends with the wild violets. Orchids hug the walkways. Everything grows here."

"Even herbs with strychnine."

He sent her an amused glance. When was the last time she'd seen that look?

"I'll never forget the day you gave me a lesson on Sardinian flora to improve my royal education."

Dizo had lifted his head from the plants he was weeding. "The 'sardonic' grin," he'd started out, "comes from the grimace of those poisoned by a certain herb found in my country that contains strychnine. My ancestors would poison any family members who could no longer take care of themselves or afford help."

Regina had stood there paralyzed by his words, waiting for him to tell her it wasn't true.

She stirred in the seat. "I'll have you know that particular lesson gave me nightmares for years."

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"I decided to add a little color to your knowledge."

So spoke the warrior turned master gardener. Their glances met as they both recalled that moment. There'd been hundreds of wonderful times of sharing. She'd give anything if they could capture those feelings again.

Her gaze took in this island where his genius had been born. Working alongside his father they'd created a garden of Eden on the palace grounds, but if they hadn't needed more money to live, they would never have come to Castelmare. She wouldn't have known of Dizo's existence.

The thought brought such a sharp pain, she sucked in her breath.

His dark head swung around. "If the car's motion is making you sick, I'll pull over. We're in no hurry except to make you comfortable."

"Thanks for your concern, but that won't be necessary. I'm simply admiring the view. It's just begun to dawn on me what I missed two weeks ago by sneaking into Sassari in the middle of the night on my suicide mission."

The words flew out of her mouth before she could stop them. If she kept this up, they'd never be able to rekindle anything from the past. Already she noticed his knuckles had turned white as his hands tightened on the wheel.

The car accelerated for the rest of the short drive to the medieval city where Dizo had been born. Known as a university town, they drove through its heart passing libraries, gothic churches and small palaces. He'd walked these streets and grown up speaking a language she'd begged him to teach her. In the end she'd learned some basic phrases to impress him, but their sporadic moments together prevented any real in-depth study.

"Does your uncle know you're coming?"

"The whole family's anticipating our arrival. Unfortunately they expected us several hours ago, but the storm dictated a change in plans."

Thank you for giving me time to prepare.Except that Regina realized there was no way to prepare for a meeting with his relatives who probably despised her as much as Guido did. Imagine a whole world of Guidos!

By now his uncle knew that Regina had been the woman in Dizo's bed and wouldn't thank her for ruining his nephew's life.

She lowered her head. The person she worried about most was his eighty-two-year-old grandmother. According to Dizo this last year had been hard on hisnonna. Crippling arthritis kept her down and medicated to decrease her pain. Regina had an intense curiosity over the woman who'd played such an important role in Dizo's early life.

En route he stopped in front of a flower stall. "My nonna loves wild lavender." In a minute he was back with a sheaf of small purple flowers. They grew from egg-shaped centers with lavender spikes. Regina took the tied bundle from him so he could drive. The scent was so strong it filled the interior. If she weren't feeling queasy, she'd love its fragrance.

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Before long they'd reached the outskirts on the other side of the city. Any minute now and they'd be at the farmhouse. Regina had been reared to face audiences of hundreds of people and be in control of any given situation, but those crowds had always been sympathetic.

The thought of confronting his family who would blame her for a wedding none of them could condone or be happy about caused her palms to moisten in apprehension. The daunting prospect of being introduced to them made her shrink inside until she felt worse than ever.

Regina wasn't a native Sardinian. She didn't come from a local family who shared their culture and customs. The only thing she had in common with them was her fierce love for Dizo. She'd wanted him above all else, but she wasn't so naive she didn't know how they felt.

They only saw her as an aristocrat who hired people like Dizo to work for them, but would never admit him into her society. In order to marry him she'd had to give up her right to the crown. In their eyes that element alone would make his family feel he was second best and always would be.They would always feel second best. Nothing she could say or do would change their attitude or the situation.

It was horrible. All of it. Regina wanted him to love her with the same all-consuming need she felt, but he didn't. She wished they could run away together and leave the world behind to work out this travesty of a marriage, but that wasn't the way life worked.

"We're here, Gina," Dizo's gravelly voice penetrated her consciousness.

She raised her head, surprised to discover they were already parked next to the rear door of the farmhouse.

"You're still fighting seasickness. Once we're inside, you're going to bed. I'll bring you something to eat. There'll be time enough this evening to meet the family."

It was deja vu and yet it wasn't. This time it was Dizo helping her out of the car and into the back hallway. This timeshe needed propping because she was too weak to make it on her own.

The second they reached his room, he carried her to the bed and lay her down. She sank against the mattress with a sigh. Before her eyes closed she registered his grim expression as he removed her sandals. "I'll be right back," he vowed with an intensity she'd come to associate with him.

No doubt his family was assembled in the other part of the house, but it was so quiet she could believe she and Dizo were the only two people around. She wasn't aware he'd come back in until he called her name.

His anxious black gaze studied her features. "You need food. Try some of this soup. If it doesn't appeal I'll bring you something else."

"You sound like a doctor,Dottore ." She'd said it in a teasing tone so he wouldn't look so worried, but the lines marring his arresting features didn't relax.

Regina made an effort to sit up against the headboard. She took the bowl from him and swallowed several spoonfuls. "This tastes delicious. Thank you." The more she ate, the better she felt. He'd pulled a chair next to her and handed her a roll.

"Fabulous bread," she said after devouring it. "Do you think whoever made it will give me the recipe?"

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His chest heaved. "Stop pretending."

Her eyes widened. "About the recipe? I'll have you know I'm an excellent cook. It's my one hidden talent."

"Gina…I'm talking about how you feel."

She handed him the empty bowl. "As you can see I ate it all and feel much better. I guess one cookie for breakfast wasn't enough."

The frown between his black brows deepened. "I would have fed you on the ferry."

"Please, Dizo—I'm fine now. Give me an hour to sleep and I'll be ready to do whatever you have in mind. Don't keep your grandmother waiting any longer. She's going to love the flowers you brought her."

He stared at her through shuttered eyes before getting to his feet. "I'll check in on you in a few minutes. The bathroom's the first door on your left down the hall."

"I'll remember," she murmured before turning away from him. He was being so wonderful to her right now, the only thing she could think about was pulling him down on the bed with her. Barring that, she had no choice but to ignore him.

The linen on the bed gave off a faint lemon scent. It was so fresh she buried her face in the pillow. This was Dizo's bed when he came to visit. This was the place where she'd learned what real passion could be like between a man and a woman. She wanted it to be the place where he made urgent love to her, where he possessed her with all his faculties alert and on fire for her.

Six hours later Regina came awake disoriented. She rolled onto her back. The second she saw the shuttered window, everything came rushing in on her. After checking her watch she realized Dizo had allowed her to sleep, but she was wide-awake now.

The bathroom was on the left. She took what she needed from her suitcase, grabbed her purse and headed out the door. Voices from the front of the house drifted down the hall, but she couldn't make out words. While Dizo was still occupied, she took a quick shower and washed her hair.

It didn't take long to brush it dry and put on lip gloss. When she left the bathroom wearing her wedding suit, she hadn't noticed a door was open opposite her. A gray-haired woman was sitting up in bed.

"Principessa—come here, please, and shut the door. I wish to talk to you in private."

Her pulse sped up as she crossed the hall and entered the bedroom. Dizo's wild lavender flowers had been arranged in a vase placed on an end table next to her bed. His grandmother stared at her out of those same jet-black eyes. She was small in stature yet showed traces of the same soft beauty of his deceased mother.

Regina put her things down on a chair and approached her. "How do you do,signora ." On impulse she leaned over and kissed her on both cheeks. "For many years I've longed to meet you. I'm so sorry you've been in pain. Dizo has suffered over you."

His grandmother studied her without smiling. "His defection leaves me to believe otherwise. It seems

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your foolish behavior has stripped you of your right to the throne. What a disappointment to your family who had dreams for you long before you were born. I, too, had dreams for my Dinozzo."

While Regina was still trying to catch the wind hisnonna had just knocked out of her, the older woman lifted a hand cruelly gnarled by her condition. "If you cause him as much as one more hour of suffering, that, too, will be on your head. My daughter told me you were the most beautiful girl she'd ever seen. That's an even greater tragedy…"

"Thank you, Signora." Regina refused to show weakness in front of this bold speaking woman whose blood ran through Dizo's veins. It was either that or fall apart and give her more reasons for objecting to their ill-fated marriage. "Your daughter was a lovely woman in her own right and very kind to me. Now I can see why."

A hint of something akin to admiration lit up her eyes. "Spoken like a princess meant to be queen."

Dizo's penchant for mockery was no longer a mystery. The only thing Regina could do was pretend she didn't hear it.

"I have a small gift for you to keep." Regina reached for her purse and took the picture packet from her wallet. Every photo was of him. Over the years her collection had grown. She pulled a very special one from the clear plastic envelope. "A long time ago I took this on the palace grounds without Dizo or your daughter being aware. It's my favorite. Please don't tell him." She handed her the photo. "Ah—"

That one sound contained a world of love and delight.

Her swollen index finger traced the mother and son images. Regina showed her the rest of the pictures. She might not have done anything else right, but for his grandmother this was tatamount to finding buried treasure in the most unlikely place—or in Regina's case, from the most unlikely person.

A rap on the door brought her head around in time to see an incredibly handsome Dizo cross the threshold dressed in a black T-shirt and jeans. Since last she'd seen him he'd showered and shaved. The smell of the soap he used mingled with the lavender to create an intoxicating scent.

When she had the presence of mind to look back at his grandmother, the picture was nowhere in sight. Regina sent her a silent message of gratitude.

Dizo's penetrating gaze took in her change of outfit before it passed to hisnonna . "I had no idea you two were getting acquainted."

"I asked her to show me her wedding ring." His grandmother spoke up. "It looks like the plain gold one she gave you. Did you pick them out together?"

Regina bit her lip. Without looking at Dizo she said, "Actually it was my father's. He wanted me to give it to the man I married."

His grandmother gave a gruff laugh. "First King Rudolfo lured my son-in-law away. Now my grandson wears his wedding band. Interesting, the circle of life." She stared at Regina. "I think we've said all there is to say that's important."

The older woman was right about that.

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"The princess needs some food, Dinozzo." But she'd said it without that mocking tone accompanying the appellation. Regina didn't mind it at all. In fact his grandmother's usage sounded almost affectionate. "Don't you think it's time you fed her?"

Again Dizo looked at them, only this time it was with a puzzled scrutiny that said he knew something was going on he wasn't party to and he'd leave no stone unturned until he had answers. His glance flicked to Regina.

"You're hungry now?"

"Starving," she declared without hesitation. After having broken the ice with his grandmother, Regina didn't dread the meeting with his family nearly as much.

"Good!" hisnonna exclaimed. "My daughter-in-law spent all day making culurgiones for you."

Regina looked to Dizo for an explanation. His hand rubbed the back of his neck, a gesture that indicated he didn't quite trust the status quo. "It's a type of large oval-shaped ravioli stuffed with fresh Sardinian ricotta and potato in a tomato sauce."

"An old family recipe," his grandmother interjected.

"I can't wait to try it. Let me just take my things back to the room."

Too late she realized she hadn't returned the picture packet to her wallet. Heat swamped her cheeks as she gathered up everything and hurried out the door, but she wasn't fast enough for Dizo who followed her to his bedroom and watched her stuff the packet in her purse.

Once before he'd commandeered it to get her phone. She wouldn't put it past him to take it from her and find out what it was she didn't want him to see. To her relief he simply waited in the doorway.

"I'm overdressed, but I didn't want to meet your family in clothes I'd slept in all night."

His eyes made a slow, thorough perusal of her body, causing her to feel weak for an entirely different reason than before. "You're the personification of a princess bride. They never dreamed they'd meet a true descendant of the House of Savoy in person. This is a red letter day for them."

For Regina, too. She'd finally met the woman who loved him with equal ferocity. How hard it must have been on her when her son-in-law took his family away in order to give them all a better life. Only Regina's advanced-thinking father could have persuaded a headstrong Guido to make the most of his outstanding gardening talent elsewhere, but it had meant uprooting his wife and children.

Thank heaven Guido had listened and acted, otherwise Regina wouldn't be married to his remarkable, brilliant, complicated son. If nothing else she could love Guido for that.

Knowing her days were numbered with her new husband, she would honor his grandmother's warning and cause the least amount of suffering possible until he couldn't take any more and wanted out.

CHAPTER SIX

UNTILmuch later that evening Gina held court with Dizo's extended family. She broke through his aunts' reserve when she asked them to write down their recipes for everything they'd prepared for the

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dinner.

His nieces and nephews were entranced by her stories regarding her experiences and life at the palace. With each revelation concerning her bodyguards and various adventures with Lucca, their eyes rounded a little more.

Dizo's uncles and male cousins behaved like his father. They took it all in with their usual reticence, but he noticed they couldn't keep their eyes off her. None of them left the gathering to find something else to do or go outside to smoke a pipe. They were riveted by the woman who would never have a chance to be queen one day because of him.

He was so filled with anguish he almost missed the next thing to come out of her seductive mouth. "You have no idea how much Dizo has missed all of you, so we've planned a surprise. We'll have to work out the dates with you of course, but we plan to fly all of you including yournonna to Nice in the family jet right away."

At her announcement the women broke into excited conversation and started asking her questions. With a natural gift she continued to weave her magic.

"There's a surgery at the palace in Capriccio. A doctor will be on call for her at all times. After a few days there with Guido and Fonsi and Pasquale and their families where you can swim, play tennis and ride horses, we'll board our family's yacht for a week's cruise on the Mediterranean."

Her surprising declaration almost sent him into cardiac arrest. "It, too, has a doctor. Everything you could ever want to do is available on board. If the adults want to sleep all day, that's fine. I'll help tend the toddlers to give you a break."

By now all the adults, male and female, had lost their reserve and had become as animated as the children. The children who ranged from two to eighteen-year-old Giovanni erupted with excitement beyond anything Dizo had ever witnessed. A couple of the younger ones flew around the room and hugged Dizo so hard they almost knocked him over in their happiness.

"Dizo's going to need a rest, too, after his long years of study. Did I ever tell you about the time he saved one of my favorite dogs at the shelter from losing his leg? It was right before another horrendous exam, but he dropped everything to help. He brought the dog back from the hospital. After a month in a little cast, Dizo took it off and the dog walked without a limp."

While she held them spellbound, Dizo slipped from the room. Though he wanted to tell his grandmother the news, he needed a minute alone to process everything.

His naturally friendly and clever Gina, had offered his family something that couldn't be taken back. She'd always been an amazingly generous person, but this went over the top. In front of the children she'd given them all their Christmases at once. The adults couldn't possibly say no.

For once in his life Dizo had no pride and didn't want to say no. This was the Gina he adored. He wanted anything and everything she was willing to offer. He wanted her love so badly it had become a sickness with him.

His grandmother made an odd noise in her throat, drawing his attention. "What are you standing out there in the hall for? Come all the way in and tell me what the excitement's about."

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He went inside and shut the door before walking over to the bed. “I’ll enlighten you after you tell me something first.”

She eyed him shrewdly. “I can’t betray a confidence. You know that.”

“So therewas one.”

“In a sense.”

“You’re being cryptic.”

“Then stop minding business that isn’t yours,” she fired.

His grandmother was a tough woman who’d held the family together when there wasn’t anything going for them but faith and very little of that. Through all the dark times she’d told Dizo to keep dreaming his dream to make something unique of his life and one day it would happen.

Incredibly that dreamhad come true, just as she’d predicted. But there’d been a price to pay. Gina would never be able to do what she’d been born to do. Dizo had realized it too late. Now he could never make it right and that would be his cross to bear.

He’d already confided his deepest sorrow to hisnonna. Relying on her prophetic powers he queried, “What am I going to do?”

“Feel your way a minute at a time.”

He didn’t want to hear those words because she couldn’t tell him what the end would be like, but that was as much wisdom as he could expect to get out of her. She looked tired. Her nightly pain medicine had started to work.

“Buonanotte, cara.In the morning I’ll tell you all about Gina’s gift to the family.”

After kissing her forehead he went back to the living room. It looked like the party had broken up. There was no sign of Gina. “Where’s my wife?” he asked his uncle.

“Giovanni showed her the motor scooter he bought last month and asked her if she’d like to take a ride.

“They’ll be back in a few minutes.” His uncle nudged his shoulder. “Have a drink with me. I saved this bottle of canonnau for a special occasion.” He poured them both the rich red wine they favored.

One celebratory drink. That was all. He needed his wits about him tonight. A minute at a time his grandmother had said. From here on out that would be his modus operandi.

Gina assumed there wasn’t going to be a wedding night.

She’d assumed wrong.

When Giovanni brought Regina back from their ride, Dizo was out in front of the farmhouse with his uncle. It was probably too much to hope that he’d missed her and was waiting for her.

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One of the reasons she'd gone with his cousin was to give Dizo a break so he could have a good visit with his grandmother. Giovanni had driven her by everyone's houses so she could get a sense of community. The winding roads had made it a fun diversion and he'd taught her some slang expressions in Sarassese. She was still laughing as he brought the motor scooter to a stop.

His cousin had been easy to talk to. He'd treated her like she was an ordinary person. The difference between him and Dizo's immediate family was like comparing night to day. Poor Guido hadn't known how to lighten up. Regina no longer looked upon him as an ogre. The key now was to help his son.

Whatever he and his uncle had been talking about, it didn't seem to have improved his earlier mood. He stepped forward and helped her off the seat where she'd been sitting sideways. No doubt in her bridal outfit he saw her as an incongruity, but as his piercing eyes played over her, she couldn't gauge his state of mind.

"Did you enjoy yourself?"

"It was fun. Gio drives this thing like a pro."

"Gio?" Dizo didn't even try to disguise his surprise. She had the feeling he wasn't amused. Why?

"That's my new nickname," Giovanni exclaimed with obvious pleasure, darting Gina a cheeky grin.

"Youknow, Dizo. Like the one I gave you," she reminded him. "Gio could give my brother a real run for his money. When everyone comes to Capriccio, Lucca will have to let him use one of his motorcycles and they can do some serious laps around the track in Monaco."

Giovanni looked happy. "We're going for another ride tomorrow."

"That's very generous of you—" Dizo spoke before she could "—but I'm afraid we won't be here."

Regina darted her husband a curious glance. She never knew where she was with him.

"Why not?" his cousin asked.

Dizo trapped her gaze as if warning her not to contradict him. "Because Gina and I are on our honeymoon."

"Si, si,I know that, but I thought you'd be staying around for a while. Gina said she'd like to go again."

"I'm sure she would, but I have other plans for us."

Giovanni was no match for Dizo. Regina took pity on him. "Tell you what. If we return here before we have to leave the island, we'll let you know. Otherwise we'll see you when you come to Castelmare."

He looked disappointed, but he recovered fast. "Sounds good. Ciao, Dinozzo." He nodded to his uncle, then flashed her a wide smile. "Ciao, Gina. You're the best thing that ever happened to this family." On that note he took off for his parents' home several kilometers down the road.

She glanced at Dizo whose brooding countenance reminded her how unhappy he was. Of course she had to remember he hadn't gotten any sleep last night. He'd been too busy worrying about her. Luckily

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tonight they were on land and it was balmy out. He could go to bed and sleep to his heart's content knowing she wasn't going to be sick.

There was just one trouble. The bed was a double bed, and he was a big, hard-muscled male who needed his space. Other than asking his uncle if she could sleep somewhere else in the house which no doubt would anger Dizo because he was such a private man, the only thing to do was lie on her side close to the edge of the mattress and brazen it out until morning.

Armed with a plan, she thanked his uncle for being so good to them and started in the house ahead of Dizo. The rest of the family had gone to their rooms. She tiptoed past his grandmother's room.

It was a novel experience to be under one roof where everyone ate and slept in such close quarters. However, when she thought of how lonely it was in her wing of the palace with no one but herself around, she liked the coziness here. Of course she had to admit that was because of Dizo.

She could scarcely breathe when she thought about getting into bed with him in the next few minutes. Last night she'd been too nervous and seasick to think about anything except wishing the rocking motion would stop. Tonight she couldn't do anything but think and ache for him.

He filed in the bedroom behind her. "Go ahead and use the bathroom."

Regina had trouble swallowing. "What about you?"

"I'm ready for bed now."

Her pulse picked up speed. She reached for her suitcase and took it with her. Once the door was closed she removed her clothes and put on her simple knee length nightgown. It was sleeveless, free-flowing and pale yellow. After brushing her teeth, she repacked, then there was nothing more to do except join Dizo.

With the door ajar she could see he'd left the light on. She hurried inside and turned off the light before shutting it. In the semidarkness Regina could tell he was lying on the far side of the bed with his back toward her. That made this much easier. She slid under the covers and turned away from him.

"Gina?"

The sound of his deep voice stirred her senses. "Yes?"

"Am I really wearing your father's wedding ring?"

Her hand gripped the hem of the sheet. "I wouldn't lie to your grandmother."

He let out an indecipherable curse. "That wasn't what I was implying."

She drew the covers to her lips. "Then I'm sorry. I can understand why you're so surprised. So was I actually. Mama gave it to me about one minute before we went down to the chapel. It was supposed to have been buried with him, but before he died he told her to keep it for me. I didn't know anything about it until then.

"It served the purpose of getting us through the ceremony, but if it's too abhorrent a reminder of what you've been forced into, then don't wear it."

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"No one held a gun to my head."

"It's been pointed at you for years," she challenged. "I finally pulled the trigger."

"If you've noticed, I'm not dead yet."

"No more trying to humor me, Dizo. I know what I've done and I'll be paying for it for the rest of my life. As long as we're talking rings, where did you get the one I'm wearing?"

"Lucca provided it at the last moment."

Her eyes closed tightly. "I thought so. The palace jeweler comes in handy once in a while."

A strange sound came out of his throat. "Papa offered me his, but it was too big and would have fallen off you."

"Lucky him. That's one sacrifice I'm sure Guido's thankful he didn't have to make."

"Don't say that, Gina. My father doesn't dislike you. He doesn't know you."

"He doesn't like me, either."

Dizo let out a frustrated sigh. "He's typical of the provincial world he was born into, but I don't want to talk about him. For the sake of what's happened, why don't we try to make the most of our marriage."

"I—I'd like that," she admitted in a faltering voice.

"Right now I'm thinking about tonight." His breathing had grown ragged. "Let's start over again. Suppose we recreate the night you flew here to talk to me about your father and go from there."

She felt the bed move. He rolled toward her and put a hand on her shoulder. "My uncle gave us some champagne for our wedding night. Why don't we drink a toast to our future. Maybe then we can stop crucifying each other and just take things as they come," he whispered in a husky tone.

Her skin prickled with heat. "Does that mean you can't work up enough passion for me without help?"

"Dio mio—that's not what I meant and you know it."

"Do I?" she questioned honestly. "After all the time we've known each other it should have been clear to me that my powers of seduction made no impact on you."

"That's not true," came his deep response.

"I—I don't know if I ever mentioned that I can't tolerate alcohol. It makes me sick, so the idea of champagne and everything that goes with it is out for me. I'd rather remain the virgin nonqueen."

His arm snaked around her waist and pulled her against him. "You don't really mean that." He spoke against the side of her neck.

For once she didn't tremble. "Maybe not, but knowing I'm married to a man who needs a prop before

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he can make love doesn't help me. Everyone I know tells me that after a certain amount of time passes, making love isn't that great anyway."

"Then you don't know the right people." He turned her toward him. "You can find out now," he whispered against her lips. "I'll show you how wonderful it can be all the time."

A shiver coursed through her body. "I already know what it was like. You fell asleep and everything ended in disaster. As you told me in the greenhouse, the fairy tale's over." Her eyes took on a fine sheen. "I don't believe in them anymore. At least you did me one favor and turned me into a realist."

"That's good becausethis is real," he argued savagely. In the next breath his mouth covered hers with a hunger that seemed genuine enough, but Regina didn't believe it and couldn't respond to him. There'd been too much pain.

She put her hands against his chest and pushed him away. "The best idea for us is to go to sleep so we can face tomorrow. Though you already know what you're going to do with the rest of your life, I don't." She turned away from him and buried her face in her arms.

Undaunted, he rubbed her back with growing urgency. "Gina?" His warm breath disturbed the curls against her neck. "If you're this miserable, we can leave."

"I'm willing to do whatever."

After a slight pause he said, "I'd planned for us to spend our time swimming on the Costa Smeralda, but first thing tomorrow I'll make arrangements for us to go home."

Another door slammed in her heart. That part of the Sardinian coast was purported to be one of the most beautiful beaches in the world. To see it with him…

"I don't have a home anymore."

"You do with me," he ground out, "but that's beside the point. I'll phone your brother and ask him to send the helicopter for you."

She shot straight up in bed, forcing his hand to fall away. "Don't you dare! Haven't you humiliated me enough in front of him? Since I'll beslumming for the rest of my life—your word, not mine—I'll fly commercial from Alghero. You stay here and enjoy being with your grandmother."

Suddenly Dizo had levered himself from the bed and was on his feet. He moved so fast she was dazed.

"Where are you going?"

"To phoneGio ." She winced at the way he said the nickname. "Since my cousin's so anxious to be of service to you, he can drive the car to Porto Torres. You and I will fly to Genoa and meet the ferry."

"But what about your grandmother? She's so thrilled you're here."

"Once upon a time she had an unforgettable honeymoon and will assume we need more privacy for ours. I'd rather she were allowed to hold on to her dreams for my happiness."

"But you weren't worried about a phone call to spoil Lucca's dreams for mine. That's because he

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knows our marriage is a farce!"

His hand rested on the doorknob. "It doesn't have to be, Gina. What if we try to be friends at least?"

"I asked that same question in the greenhouse, but you were so intent on telling Lucca everything, you never heard me."

A pause ensued before he said, "Tonight your heartfelt invitation to my family brought them joy. If they see us at odds, it's going to prove what they've always believed."

Regina knew what he was going to say and preempted him. "You mean that nothing but doom can come from the union between a gardener's son and a princess? I know the line by heart."

After he left the bedroom she burrowed into the pillow, trying to smother her sobs.

When Regina saw the tall brick lighthouse of the port city in the distance, she realized their plane was approaching Genoa. Her mind had been reflecting on Dizo's family who'd turned out for another meal before his uncle drove them to the airport. While they ate, the date for the family vacation was decided for a month's time.

From Fertilia airport they'd boarded a late afternoon flight where they were served another meal. Once in Genoa they'd taken a taxi to the harbor and arrived just in time to retrieve the car from the ferry.

No one knew their destination but his uncle. The family assumed she and Dizo were taking off for some exotic location. Though Regina kept a smile on her face, the parting with his grandmother had been an emotional one. When she'd kissed her and promised they'd be together soon, hisnonna had held on to her face and kissed her back, a gesture Regina felt signified something special.

On the plane Dizo had kept up desultory conversation, but now they were in the car headed back to Castelmare, he'd retreated behind that remote mask no one could penetrate.

With the wedding ceremony out of the way and the visit with his extended family over, that left the two of them to figure out how they were going to coexist. Regina's heart ached like a throbbing nerve exposed to the air. As they passed different cars on the coast highway, she saw couples of different ages laughing and talking together. They all looked happy. Anyone glancing at her and Dizo would feel a distinct chill in reaction.

By the time twilight got swallowed up in darkness she glimpsed the palace lit up like a glowing white jewel on the steep hillside. She quickly looked down, too pulled apart by torturous emotions to bear it. Always before she'd associated it with Dizo and her heart would leap knowing he was somewhere on the grounds.

Yet how was it that now she was his legal wife and didn't have to be separated from him anymore, not even at night, she'd never felt so alone and lonely for him? It was a paradox within a paradox.

He exited at Capriccio and the car began the climb. She noticed he didn't give the palace a glance, either. The memories only brought him pain. In the beginning he hadn't wanted to move here. His mother had passed away here. He'd gone back to his home in Sardinia in the hope of establishing his practice and marrying a local woman, but even that dream had been denied him the moment she'd followed him

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to Sassari. Once Lucca had summoned him back to the palace and passed those pictures around the conference table, everything had blown up in his face

"If you don't mind, I'd like to stop by the clinic before we go home," Dizo muttered into the unsettling quiet.

They'd already reached Savono? She'd been too deep in agonizing thought to notice. "Of course I don't."

He pulled to a stop in front of the complex along the main street. The night was so beautiful the locals and tourists were still enjoying the nightlife. Regina had been here with her father many times to see Dr. Marano. To think Dizo was now the vet…She was so proud of him.

After undoing his seat belt he darted her a hooded glance. "I'm afraid you'll have to come in with me. Even if you'd prefer to sit out here, I can't allow it."

"You've made a wrong assumption, Dizo." She undid her seat belt. "I'd like to peek in on your boarders." Before he could come around, she hurriedly got out of the car dressed in the top and cargo pants Dizo's aunt had washed for her. It was amazing how well she'd gotten along with only one change of clothes.

Suddenly a member of the paparazzi who'd somehow gotten past security was in her face. "How about giving us one for the camera, Princess." For a second it caught her by surprise. In the next instant a ferocious looking Dizo grabbed the camera from him and pocketed the film clip before tossing him back the apparatus.

"How about you disappear before you get hurt."

The threat was implicit. Her tall, black-haired warrior was in conquest mode and made a terrifying adversary. Regina stood there in awe of him. Whatever he'd once learned on the streets of Sassari had put the fear in the other man who slinked away white-faced.

"Are you all right?" Dizo asked in a low aside. Anxiety had replaced the dark mask he'd worn earlier.

She nodded.

"You're trembling."

"I was just caught off guard. That doesn't happen very often."

Though it was true, it was Dizo's instantaneous defense of her that had thrilled her to her very soul. He wouldn't have done that if he didn't have some deep-seated feelings for her, would he? Or was she still in denial over how he really felt about her?

He put his strong arm around her shoulders and walked her to the door of the clinic. After inserting the key in the lock, he ushered her inside the comfortable looking reception room she remembered from before and turned on the lights.

"Matteo?" he called out.

Regina followed him down the hallway lined on either side by an office and three examining rooms. They

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found the night assistant in the kennel behind the glass door at the end of the hall.

The attractive looking man in his mid-twenties with longish brown hair glanced up from the cage where a sad looking white dog lay on its side not moving. "Dr. Fornese—I didn't expect you back yet."

Dizo stiffened, causing Regina's insides to churn. "My plans changed. Let me introduce my wife. Regina? This is Matteo Luzzi. He's in his first year of medical school right now."

The other man's hazel eyes flared with male interest as he took in her features. "It's an honor, Princess."

"Thank you. I'm happy to meet you, too, but please call me Regina. I'm Dizo's wife, something I always wanted to be." There. She'd said it in front of her husband whose jaw went slack. From all appearances she'd shocked him by not saying something hurtful.

"If you wish," Matteo murmured.

"I do." Her gaze traveled to the dog. "What's wrong with the bichon?"

"Her owner dropped her off the night before last. Since then she won't eat. Not even for Dr. Bertholdi. I've tried everything to coax her. After I take her for a run in the courtyard, she just comes back and lies there."

"Oh—the poor thing. She's missing home. How long does she have to be here?"

"A week. Signor Ferelli had to fly to Paris on business."

"What's her name?"

"Valentina."

Without hesitation Regina put her purse on the top of the cage and undid the door. "A whole week's too long isn't it, Val? I like short names so that's what I'm going to call you." She reached inside and gathered the dog to her chest, crooning endearments into its fluffy fur.

The dog raised its head and started sniffing her everywhere. When she kissed her mouth Regina laughingly kissed her back. By accident her eyes lifted to Dizo who broke into a smile with no darkness in it, illuminating her world. It only lasted a moment, but the sight was so rare she'd treasure it forever.

She took a quick breath. "While you two catch up, I'll take her in one of the rooms and feed her on my lap. That should do the trick."

Matteo shook his head. "I didn't know you were a vet, too."

"My brilliant husband's the vet." The words poured forth. She didn't feel like holding them back. In Sassari Dizo had told her he wanted them to make the best of their marriage. She did, too, but there was a penalty for so much honesty because her face went hot.

Dizo stared at her as he gathered up the bowls of food and water. "Regina has run the Capriccio animal shelter for years, Matteo. I dare say my bride knows more about animal behavior than anyone on the medical staff at the university."

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The unprecedented compliment gave Regina her second thrill of the night, the first being the way he'd protected her outside. She hugged it to her heart and preceded them out of the kennel to the first examining room. Once seated with the dog, she reached for a little kibble. The dog's tail started to wag and she began eating it from Regina's hand.

"Will you look at that," Matteo said, sounding bemused.

When she held the bowl of water in front of the dog, she started lapping it up.

Matteo grinned. "You can't go home now."

"I'll come back tomorrow and give her some extra attention. That's all she needs."

Regina was surprised when Dizo stayed in the room to talk business with Matteo.

She listened intently to their conversation trying to pick up what she could. Pretty soon the dog had eaten everything and finished off her water.

"Good girl, Val. We'll have you fat and sassy by the time your owner gets back." Aware of Dizo's black eyes trained on her, she raised her head. "I have an idea, Dizo. Would you mind going out to the car and bringing in my nightgown? I'd go myself but I don't want to upset Val."

No doubt it was the most amazing request he'd ever heard, but his intelligent mind didn't take long to grasp the reason for it. The other man just scratched his head in puzzlement while Dizo left the room.

Getting up from the chair, she took the dog back to the kennel. Dizo returned in record time with the frothy object. Without her needing to say anything he lined a corner of the cage with it. The dog willingly went inside and started sniffing the material, connecting it with her scent. After arranging and rearranging it, she lay her head down on it.

Regina shut the door. "See you in the morning, Val. Be a good girl."

The dog got back up and barked.

"Where do you keep the doggy treats, Matteo?"

"I'll get her some."

As he turned away, Dizo's hand slid up Regina's back to her neck, sending a wave of exquisite pleasure rippling through her body. He squeezed gently. "I think we'd better leave beforeVal decides to keep Matteo up all night crying for you," he murmured into her hair.

Dizo…When he was like this…

They said good-night before he guided her through the clinic to the front door. In another minute they were ensconced in the car headed for his apartment.

Her heart thudded to realize they were going to his home together. Their home now. No one else would be there. She could swear her temperature had risen several degrees just anticipating being alone with him. Too many times over the years she'd longed, yearned for this moment. Now that it was here, she was breathless.

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Once again they were climbing higher where the Mediterranean-styled villas hugged the mountain. He turned into the driveway of one with an overhang of brilliant purple bougainvillea. Flowering pink and orange plants lined the steps leading up to the main floor with a terrace dripping of passion flowers, all Dizo's handiwork. From that vantage point one had a panoramic view of the bay.

He took her on a quick tour. The white interior with its splash of vibrant colors was pure delight. She adored the profusion of potted herbs on the tiled kitchen counter. The bistro-styled table and chairs fit in perfectly with the decor. Down the hallway she discovered a laundry area, a bathroom and a small bedroom.

In the living area he'd arranged two large sofas around a coffee table that reminded her of the one she'd seen in his uncle's house. An antique armoire housed the television. Between his possessions from Sardinia and his many books, the charming apartment had his stamp all over it.

A wooden stairway led to the second floor with its master bedroom and bath. While she surveyed everything, he put the suitcase down and lounged against the wall with his arms folded. "Welcome to your new home, such as it is, Signora Fornese."

"Such as it is?" she cried. "It's gorgeous! Beautiful! I love it!"

She waited for some hateful, mocking comment to follow. When it didn't, she let out a sigh of relief and eyed him frankly.

"It's you down to the framed Greek paintings of Mycenaean art hanging over the bed."

One black brow dipped. "But not quite the home you're accustomed to."

"Don't say it, Dizo," she begged. "The palace belongs to the House of Savoy. You don't have any idea what it's like to live in a monument where you can't express yourself the way you've done here. Though I never saw it, I always envied you for having your own place in Capriccio.

"Every time I need to do something at the palace, I have to walk a mile. It may be good for my health, but it gets old. Promise me you won't bring it up again. I love this apartment. You can tell a man with discerning taste lives here."

He moved away from the wall. "Feel free to add whatever you want so when people come inside, they'll know my beautiful, intuitive wife lives here with me."

She felt the blush that swept into her cheeks.

"Youare beautiful, Gina," he said in a husky tone. "Matteo came close to losing it when you walked in to the kennel tonight. Val's already your devoted slave. As for Giovanni, he would have driven off into the sunset with you if he'd thought he could get away with it. Both my brothers have nursed a secret passion for you for years. However, Nic is the only man who had a right to his feelings for you."

But you don't have those kinds of feelings for me. Is that what you're trying to say in the kindest way, Dizo, without crucifying me again?

"I admit I was cruel to you by forcing Lucca's hand. No one knows better than I how much you revere him and the crown, so be honest with me. What I need to know is, how deep did your feelings for Nic

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go?"

"What?"

He nodded. "How much of a sacrifice was it to say goodbye to him? There may be a lot of things wrong with our marriage, but I at least want your truth about that."

Regina hadn't expected this kind of honesty from Dizo, either. "I liked Nic."

"Only liked?" Dizo demanded.

She shrugged her shoulders. "You asked for the truth."

His dark eyes impaled her. "Like can mean many things."

"It means exactly what it means!" she said, growing more exasperated by the second. "It means he was a wonderful person who'll make some other princess a terrific husband, but I never felt like flying to his family's palace in the dead of night and climbing into his bedroom via the balcony in order to be with him."

"Yet you were prepared to marry him," he fired back.

She averted her eyes. "No. It was only bravado talking. I told my brother I'd decided to set the date with Nic because I was angry. I'm sorry about that now. The truth is, though Nic had strong feelings for me, he was always aware I wasn't enthusiastic about our relationship. Otherwise we would have married five years ago.

"So even before Lucca summoned me to the conference room, I would have broken off our betrothal and probably remained single all my life."

He studied her for a heart-stopping moment as if ascertaining the veracity of her words, then he slowly nodded before disappearing into the bathroom. When he came out, he tossed her a blue and white striped robe. "I'm sure Val is appreciating your sacrifice tonight. While you shower up here, I'll use the bathroom downstairs. What would you like from the kitchen when I come back up?"

"A piece of fruit maybe and a drink?"

"That can be arranged."

CHAPTER SEVEN

REGINAwatched Dizo grab something from the dresser before leaving her to her own devices. After a quick shower that included washing her hair, she brushed her teeth, then reached for one of the fluffy towels to dry her curls.

When she reentered the bedroom wearing Dizo's robe, she discovered him lounging like a great, dark jungle cat on top of the spread with its brown and black geometric design. The sight of his well-defined physique wearing the bottom half of a pair of navy sweats sent a wave of desire through her body so intense, she was in pain.

"An apple to tempt Eve." He held out two items.

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"And an orange soda." She sat down on the side of the bed before taking both from him. "Thank you. I didn't realize Adam was so resourceful."

While she munched, he took a big bite from his own apple with those beautiful white teeth. Even the way he ate his food fascinated her. Dizo was clueless about his effect on her senses. His slumberous black gaze fastened on her mouth, causing her palms to ache.

"If Eve looked anything like you, I'm sure he would have done anything to please her. I'm prepared to please you, Gina."

"You already have." She'd seen the playing cards. "How about not cheating this time."

"I swear it." He handed her the pack so she could shuffle. Then he lifted his hands to show her his palms.

"Why do I get the feeling you're setting me up for something?" She dealt the cards.

Dizo eyed her narrowly. "Maybe because I like to win."

"So do I."

"That's what makes us so good together."

Her brown eyes flashed in surprise. "Since when?"

"Since the first day we met and you told me I was a rude, crude plebian."

"If I said that, you must have deserved it." She decided he wasn't paying attention because she won the first four tricks.

"It forced me to buy a dictionary so I'd know what the word meant. There were three definitions of the noun. The first said, one of the common people of ancient Rome. The second said, a member of the lower classes. The last was more of the same. A vulgar or coarse person. I made up my mind to become educated so a ten-year-old princess would never get the best of a sixteen-year-old again."

Her smile faded. "Did I really use that word with you?"

"I provoked you." He raised up on one elbow. "Your tennis ball had fallen in the pool by accident. When you asked me to get it, I decided I wasn't going to be one of your servants and told you to get it yourself. I didn't learn until later that you were afraid of the water."

She eyed him thoughtfully. "Thanks to you I overcame my fear so I could show you I was the best eleven-year-old swimmer in Capriccio."

"You see?" he reasoned. "Despite what appeared to be the contrary, we've always been good for each other."

"I'm sorry I hurt you, Dizo."

"I know. I can feel it. The one thing I could never accuse you of was thinking you were better than

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anyone else. Arrogance, intolerance were never part of your makeup."

Too much flattery set off the alarm bells. "Why are you being so nice?"

"Can't a bad boy behave properly once in a while?"

Her heart raced. "A bad boy wouldn't have lasted five minutes at the palace. Lucca has always been my watchdog."

"I noticed," he drawled, "but he's not here now. I've decided I want you to kiss away my hurt for your unintentionally cruel remark to me years ago."

She avoided his gaze. "We're not children anymore."

"No we're not,grazie a Dio. I've been a man for some time now and would like to make up with my wife in the only way I know how. Is that blunt enough for you?"

The cards slipped from her hands.

"Surely you're aware I've always found you incredibly attractive. That fact has never been in dispute. A man would have to be blind not to notice you. Since the night you waited for me outside the farmhouse, I have to conclude I don't exactly repel you.

"Physical attraction might not be the only component in a good marriage, but it's a very necessary one. Weare married. I want to make love to you, Gina."

His admission sounded sincere. She wanted to trust him. After biting her lip she asked, "I know that your father was lying to me when he told me you were marrying at the end of summer and I can understand why. But I wonder how many other women you've said that to. I would say it's a fair question considering you now know all there is to know about Nic."

He placed the cards in a pile and put the deck on the end table. "I've slept with four."

Gina struggled not to react. As numbers went that wasn't very many for a thirty-two-year-old single man, not when you were talking about Dizo who made every other male look pathetic in comparison. "Were they brief affairs, or something more lasting?"

"One lasted for a year. Another eight months."

She smothered a groan. "Why didn't you marry one of them?"

"In the end I discovered we weren't compatible."

"You mean the desire was no longer there."

"It died, yes."

"On whose part?"

"Mine," he answered with disturbing bluntness, "but there were reasons. Rest assured what happened to me still doesn't prove your theory that making love isn't as great after a while. There has to be a

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connection of the mind to keep the fire burning."

Regina happened to agree with him about the mental excitement. Only one man had ever set her on fire body, mind and soul, but the dream had been cut short before they could go up in smoke.

She looked at him from beneath veiled lashes. "I've known you long enough to sense you're holding something else back from me. What is it?"

He raised himself to a sitting position with one hard-muscled leg leveraged against the floor. She noticed he hadn't visited a barber for a while. Several black whorls clung to his bronzed neck. Give him an earring and he'd make a dangerously gorgeous pirate.

"Why the inquisition?"

"You sound nervous. I can tell you are by the way a tiny nerve keeps throbbing at the corner of your mouth. It only does that under duress. Like the time you found out your mother had been taken to the hospital. I felt so terrible for you, I called my chauffeur to drive you there, but you'd left the grounds before he came around."

His eyes clouded. "You did that for me?"

"Yes. I knew how much you loved her. I couldn't bear for anything to be wrong. If I'd thought you wouldn't mind, I would have joined you at the hospital. She was such a lovely person and so kind to me."

Dizo darted her a stunned glance. "I didn't know." He reached out to squeeze her hand.

She so rarely surprised him over anything, it gave her intense satisfaction to watch his reaction. "That same little nerve is noticeable now. I was referring to a certain conversation with your grandmother."

"What exactly didnonna tell you?"

"It came out as a warning.If you cause him as much as one more hour of suffering, that, too, will be on your head ."

"Too?"

"She mentioned something about my family being disappointed because of my actions. In the same breath she alluded to her disappointment over your broken dreams."

In the next instant he relinquished his hold and got to his feet. Maybe now she would get the answer to something that had been tearing her apart ever since their visit.

"You misunderstood her, Gina."

"No. I'm good at language. Under no uncertain terms she laid the source of your great suffering at my feet. She had every right of course.

"I'm the one who created the emergency situation that got us all in trouble. The truth is, I'm not good like Lucca who would never put his own selfish desires over the welfare of the government. I loved our father, but my brother's love went a step further. He honored Papa.

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"If he hadn't found Alexandra, he would have married our mother's favorite and he would have remained faithful to her despite any personal unhappiness. Lucca's worthy to be king.

"I was never worthy to be queen. For my many sins, I'll never have the title bestowed on me which is a great relief to my conscience. You have to earn the right. I forfeited it a long time ago."

His body had stilled like a statue. "What are you talking about?"

"You've only seen one side of me, Dizo, but I have another side no one else knows about except your father."

He looked dumbfounded. "How did Papa get into this conversation?"

"Guido has always been a part of it, didn't you know?"

"Make sense," he demanded.

"From the first day I was introduced to your family, I was so excited to have some new friends who would be around to talk to. Your mother was a sweetheart, but your father set up boundaries that excluded me. It was a new experience to learn there was someone in my life I couldn't win around. Early on I recognized he'd become my nemesis and my challenge."

A bleakness entered Dizo's eyes. She knew how much he loved his father.

"I know we've already talked about him and I understand so much more than I did before. But you have to understand that back then every time I drew a circle to include you, he drew a bigger one to separate me from you. He was so clever he could have taught warfare tactics to General Bonaparte."

"Gina…"

"It's true. He knew I'd singled you out. During my teens I was foolish enough to believe that if he and I could become friends, he'd unbend and let you spend time with me after your daily jobs were done. It didn't happen.

"No matter what technique Guido came up with to get rid of me, I would go around him because I believed in my heart you wanted to be with me. You see my father told me I was a wonderful daughter and a girl believes her papa. I took him to heart so completely that I went a step further by convincing myselfyou thought the same thing."

His face darkened with lines. "You know damn well I did."

"Not really. A girl needs proof and a little help, Dizo. The guys my parents encouraged me to date had no problem seeking me out."

"You mean theprinces. "

"They wereguys underneath their titles, guys just like you and your brothers.

"Eventually I realized there were only certain men I would be allowed to marry.You weren't one of them, but as you overheard me tell Sebastiano, you were the man I wanted. So I wove dreams about

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you becoming my lover."

Dizo looked like he'd gone into shock. "Be serious."

"I am," she cried softly. "I was obsessed by dreams over you."

He sucked in his breath. "You think I didn't have the same dreams?"

"I wouldn't have the slightest idea since you never shared your private thoughts with me."

His eyes had become black slits.

"When I turned eighteen, my mother encouraged me to spend more time with Nic. Our parents were good friends. At first I went along with it to please her, but deep down I'd made a decision to forego marriage and keep you for my lifetime lover even if it meant I could never be queen."

Dizo's face seemed to lose color.

"I swear your father could see into my soul and knew my wicked thoughts. The harder I tried to undermine his efforts, the more he showed his aversion to me. In my naivete—and this is the important part, Dizo—I refused to understand that all the years he'd been trying to keep us apart, it was because he knew youwanted to be protected."

"Wrong, Gina!" He started around the bed toward her.

When she saw the intent in his eyes she backed away. "Please don't touch me yet. I haven't finished."

They were only a few feet apart now. His mouth had thinned into a white line.

"Your grandmother had every right to say what she did to me. After lurking around the farmhouse to trap you, I deserved her enmity along with your father's. In hindsight I don't blame either of them. Your father was simply trying to shield you from the unscrupulousprincipessa. "

"Because he knew of my desire for you."

"Then I was the last person to know it. When he admitted in front of Lucca how unhappy you'd always been, I couldn't bear to think I was the source of it because you'd never liked me hanging around you."

She hugged her arms to her waist. "I shouldn't have let you go through with the marriage and sacrifice the little happiness you had in order to save my reputation, but I was in a quandary and didn't know what to do.

"In the end I honestly didn't want your father and family to have to live down the disgrace of those photos for the rest of their lives. Lucca didn't leave you with a choice. I thought that by saying yes I could atone for my sins, but that gesture had about as much value as straightening deck chairs on the Titanic."

He grasped her shoulders. "Do you honestly think I took Lucca up on the option to marry you in order to save your reputation?"

"I know you did," she said quietly. "Yournonna is privy to all your secrets. She wouldn't lie about your suffering."

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"You're right." His eyes probed hers. "She had to watch me writhe in pain over my hopeless passion for a princess."

Regina shook her head and eased out of his arms. "I want to believe you, Dizo, but from my point of view there was nothing hopeless about it. I chased you without mercy and was always there for the taking. I made it criminally easy for you to reach out, but you never did."

"Youknow why," he ground out.

"But when I told you where I was living in London in case you could get away for a weekend, you never came. Instead you said you had work your father left for you to do. What an idiot I was not to realize you used him as an excuse so you wouldn't have to deal with me."

"Yes, I used him." His eyes glittered dangerously. "I knew if I ever gave in, it would spell disaster."

"I knew it would, too, but that didn't stop me from setting foot on Sardinian soil to be withyou. I actually got in your bed and begged you to make love to me. I was prepared to be your lover for as long as you wanted me. Even then you weren't interested and not because you were too drunk.

"Guido knew you better than I did. By the time the episode in the greenhouse was over, I realized I'd been angry at an innocent man for most of my life. It's clear your father is a wonderful man who was only trying to protect you."

She drew the lapels of his robe together. "It's been a mess, but I'd like to leave all the misunderstandings in the past where they belong."

"So would I," he murmured emotionally.

"I've been thinking about your suggestion."

"I've suggested a lot of things," his voice rasped. "Which one?"

"To be friends. For the sake of your family who'll be coming to visit next month, I'd like us to get along. Like Lucca said, I never gave you a choice about anything, but if you're willing to start over, so am I."

"You mean by settling down to be my common, ordinary housewife?"

"Yes. Don't laugh."

"I'm not laughing."

"Ican cook."

Without missing a heartbeat he said, "How about taking that offer a step further and becoming my assistant at the clinic? I'm in desperate need of one."

He wouldn't lie about that. "I'd love it, but I'm not a medical student like Matteo."

"You have other qualities I need more. Val is a case in point. With that economics degree, you can be my bookkeeper, too. Heaven knows you've had a lot of experience running the animal shelter. I'm not

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good with credits and debits. To be honest, the business side of my work needs a lot of help."

"That's right." Her lips curved. "You're a man who likes to get his hands dirty—or licked."

He eyed her mysteriously. "You know me better than anyone."

There'd been a time when she'd believed that. Maybe working with him she would get to know all the sides of Dizo he hadn't allowed her to see before. While she was deep in thought he turned off the lights and got into bed. Once she, too, was under the covers he asked, "What will you do about your volunteer work now?" They were facing each other.

"Papa said the sign of a good monarch is the ability to delegate. I'll put other people in charge. It's nice to know I can still use some of my training for a worthy cause."

Five minutes later she lay there in fresh pain because he hadn't reached out in the darkness for her. Why wasn't he fighting her to the death over her assumptions that he'd never loved her?

Tonight he'd confessed a lot of things to her, but it had to be lip service because she wasn't in his arms right this minute being ravished while he convinced her he couldn't live without her. As usual he'd retreated to the place where Dizo lived by himself and she couldn't follow.

"I'll drive us to the palace in the morning," he volunteered. "After you've picked out what you want to bring back to the apartment, I'll load up before we go to the clinic."

"That's very generous of you. I imagine you're getting pretty sick and tired of seeing me in the same outfit every day."

"I was just going to say that for a woman who has a change of clothes for every day of the year, you've convinced me your wardrobe isn't one of the top priorities in your life. You've handled the situation better than any woman I've ever known."

She warmed to the compliment. "Thanks. Until now I've led such a public life, they've been a necessity." Emotion swamped her. "I want you to know I'm thrilled about the job offer, Dizo. It'll be my first one. I promise to do my best."

"You couldn't do anything else."

"Thank you," she whispered. "I also want you to know I had a wonderful time in Sardinia meeting your family. They're lovely people."

"The feeling was mutual."

"I hope so, but I'm not holding out any hope for your father to come with us on the yacht."

"These are early days yet, Gina."

In our marriage, yes. "You're right. Well,buonanotte. "

Dizo leaned over to press a brief kiss to her lips."Buonanotte, mia moglie." Then he turned so his back was facing her.

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Maybe he'd decided to take her literally about starting over again as friends. He'd just called her his wife. She loved the sound of it. Perhaps if she became invaluable as his assistant, they would gain a new closeness and their marriage would grow from there.

By six the next evening, the clinic had closed for the day. Matteo would be coming any minute to take over the night shift.

Now that Regina had spent quality time with Val and the other boarders, she could finish putting up the last of the three large-framed photographs she'd had delivered from her palace suite this afternoon without Dizo's knowledge. The reception room needed some help to give it personality.

While she worked for Dizo, she much preferred to look at him and her favorite dog Antoneo hanging on the wall in the clinic's reception room where she would be spending most of her time from now on. The pictures represented the before, during and after photos as she called them of the mongrel Dizo had operated on to fix its limp. The middle picture showed him holding the dog with the cast he'd just put on him.

When Dizo had run her by the palace to pick up some clothes and bring her back to the apartment to deposit them, she'd found a hammer and nails in one of the kitchen drawers. Waiting until he wouldn't notice, she'd stashed them in her purse. Knowing he was anxious to get to work, she'd insisted they leave her belongings inside the living room to be put away later.

The second she saw that Dizo had exchanged the lab coat for his gray suit jacket, she realized it was time to go. Their eyes met before he strolled over to her. Every time she saw him and realized he was her husband, an explosion of need assailed her body.

"What do you think?" she asked to counteract her intense attraction to him. "Now when children come in here sobbing their hearts out over their pets, I can offer them visual proof that Dr. Fornese will make everything better. This is my gift to you for becoming Castelmare's finest vet."

He studied the photographs for at least a minute before taking the hammer from her. Then he lifted both her hands and kissed her fingertips. The eyes burning into hers resembled black fires. "I think no one has ever given me anything I'll treasure more."

Her surprisehad pleased him. She could tell by the huskiness in his voice.

"This calls for a celebration, Signora Fornese."

Dizo hadn't said princess. All trace of mockery was gone. At least for the time being. That was progress and something to treasure.

"Those are a very nice addition to your clinic." Matteo spoke from across the room.

"I couldn't agree more," Dizo said, still staring at her.

"Isn't anyone going to tell me the story behind them?"

"Tomorrow, Matteo. Tonight my wife and I have plans."

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Warm faced from Dizo's possessive tone, Regina removed her hands from his and turned to the other man.

"Before we leave I should tell you we had a call from the owner of the pug Cianni. They'd like to pick her up tonight around nine. I put a can of special dog food on top of her cage. It's the kind of supplement we sometimes use at the animal shelter. Send it with her.

"If they put a teaspoon of it in her regular food and mix it around, it'll make her more interested in eating and shine up her coat. Oh—I discovered Val prefers the ham flavored doggy treats and the boxer Nera likes the peanut butter."

Matteo's surprised glance darted to Dizo whose lips twitched. "Don't look at me. I'm just her husband."

Dizo was still chuckling when they went out the door of the clinic. He grasped her hand and they started walking up the street.

"What's so funny?"

"Here I was afraid it would take a long time to drum up business. Hiring you is going to bring it in by the truckloads. Before long I'll be forced to take on a partner."

"That might not be a bad idea. You've worked so hard all your life, you deserve more time off to have fun."

He squeezed her fingers. "Now that I have a friend to have fun with, I like the idea."

You and I could have been having fun for years, her heart cried, but it was better not to go there.

They came to Rinaldo's, a favorite restaurant in Savono. "I'm in the mood for scampi."

"I love it."

"This is as good a place as any."

Having lived so close to the sea in Sardinia, Dizo was a fish man. He guided her inside, but it was already in overflow. The middle-aged host was telling some tourists there would be an hour and a half wait. Then his glance happened to see Regina and everything changed like it always did the second she was recognized.

Suddenly fingers were snapping, waiters were running and the clientele craned their necks to get a good look at her and her new husband. "How many in your party,Principessa? "

"Two," Dizo declared, chiseled-faced. Suddenly he was all locked up, no longer the man who'd seemed almost carefree a minute ago. She could have wept.

"Right this way." It was like walking the gauntlet on the ferry all over again. The host showed them to the best table in the house with an unimpeded view of the bay that had been her backyard since she was born. What an irony when tourists had traveled thousands of miles to sit where they'd just been seated, depriving someone of the privilege.

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Regina could have told him she and Dizo preferred to wait like everyone else, but it would have been a worse punishment to stand there for an hour and half while they were stared at. Dizo was such a private person she couldn't do it to him, so it was better to go with the flow.

"It's not fair is it," she said, purposely reminding him of a certain conversation they'd once had.

"No," he answered with the same belligerence as before.

"Pretend we have the place to ourselves," she whispered once their order had been taken.

His glacial expression didn't inspire hope. "How do you do that?"

Out of desperation she smiled impishly at him. "Unless you've had twenty-six years of practice, you don't."

The wild look in his eyes had to be a throwback to his youth on the streets of Sassari. "We won't be eating here again."

"I'll cook dinner for us from now on. I promise you won't starve."

"I'm holding you to that."

A shiver of excitement raced through her. How many times had she dreamed of living with him, doing all the things a normal woman did with the man she loved.

Their entree appeared in record time. No sooner did they start to eat than she heard another familiar male voice speak her name from the person whose chair was at her back. She swung her head around.

"Professor Morelli—"

"Tomaso." The man was very attractive. She'd thought so the first time she'd met him at the palace. He was tall and lean with such dark brown hair, it looked black from a distance. "I saw you on TV. Congratulations on your marriage."

"Thank you. Are you dining alone?"

"I was with some colleagues, but they just left."

"Then join our table and I'll introduce you to my husband."

"You're sure he won't mind?"

No. She wasn't sure of anything, but this was no time to be fainthearted.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"PER FAVORE, TOMASO."

"I can't say no to that." He brought his chair around, but he didn't sit down. Not when her husband sat there looking so fierce.

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"Dizo? I'd like you to meet Dr. Tomaso Morelli. Tomaso, this is my husband, Dr. Dinozzo Fornese."

Dizo rose to his full, intimidating height. Right now butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. The two men shook hands.

"Sit down, Tomaso," she urged.

"Grazie."

She leaned forward. "Dizo, Tomaso's on the staff at the University of Capriccio. He's the teacher who gave Alexandra her first formal lesson in Italian when she arrived from the States."

"Only one?" Dizo queried, borderline polite.

Tomaso laughed. "My engagement didn't last long,"

"You know why don't you?"

His green eyes lit up. "May I speak frankly?"

Regina chuckled. "I wouldn't have asked otherwise."

"When your brother walked in the school room and heard Alexandra and me laughing, he almost took my head off."

"The green-eyed monster had bitten him, Tomaso. That's when I knew my brother was in love."

"I figured as much when his secretary phoned my office and told me my services were no longer needed."

"I'm sorry he treated you that way. I think that was the only time in his life he was intentionally rude to anyone."

"All's fair in love and war, eh? As it turned out he sent me a large bonus and invited me to the coronation. Who could ask for more?"

Poor Tomaso. His interest in Alexandra had been unwittingly immediate. Under other circumstances Regina wouldn't have been surprised if her sister-in-law had felt an attraction to him, too. But it wasn't meant to be because she'd already fallen headlong in love with Lucca. The painful kind Regina felt for Dizo.

"Will you be teaching a full schedule at the university this fall?" her husband asked, deciding to be more approachable.

"Actually I'm going back home."

"I didn't think you were from Capriccio," Dizo commented, capturing Regina's attention. "After listening to the thousands of tourists walking on the grounds at the palace, you learn to pick out differences in accents. Certain words you say sound Neopolitan."

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Tomaso flashed him a genuine smile. "You have a good ear. I was born in Naples. My father runs a big business there, but he had a fall. I'm going to help out for a while until he recovers. Unfortunately he thinks my education is pretty much good for nothing, so we'll see."

"I have a father and know all about that," Dizo mused. "How soon do you leave?"

"Day after tomorrow."

"Then I'm glad we ran into you," Regina interjected. "Please don't be a stranger. When you're back in Capriccio, come by my husband's veterinary clinic. I'm working there now. It's just down the street. We'll all go out for an evening together."

Regina had a feeling that given half a chance, the two men had enough in common to become friends.

"I'd like that. Thank you, Princess."

"Regina, please. I don't want to be called that anymore."

He winked at her before shaking Dizo's hand again. After he'd excused himself, Dizo eyed her speculatively. "How much time have you spent with him?"

If Regina didn't know better, she'd think Dizo was a trifle jealous himself. "I saw him one other time when Alexandra and I were out shopping for Lucca's wedding ring."

He put his napkin down. "If he wanted a relationship with you, it's too late now. Shall we go? I'll buy us some dessert on the way home."

His mood somewhat improved, Regina nodded. He tossed some bills on the table, then helped her up. Together they made their way through the tables of wide-eyed diners to the outside.

Since people had heard she was dining there, the typical big crowd had assembled out in front, many with cameras. Dizo cupped her elbow and kept walking as if the world around them didn't exist. He was catching on fast, but the curse he let out once they were in his car was so hilarious she couldn't stop laughing.

"We're going to be all over the front page tomorrow!"

"Afraid so, but it will keep up the fiction that we're the happy newlyweds. That was the point of our hasty marriage, to avoid scandal. So far it's working. Lucca was right. If those photographs from Sassari ever do show up in the tabloids, they'll have the impact of last year's gossip."

"I'm beginning to understand why your life was so lonely," he muttered. "You can't do a damn thing without the whole world knowing about it."

"There's a price to pay for everything whether you're the endowed or the unwashed. Which level of the caste system do you prefer at this point?"

He reached for her hand and kissed the palm. "I was a fool to think those thoughts back then, Gina. Forgive me."

His words combined with his touch reduced her limbs to jelly. "There's nothing to forgive. What matters

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now is that we don't have any more misunderstandings."

"Agreed."

After letting go of her hand he revved the engine and sped away. She was still so bemused by his change of mood she almost forgot. "Dizo? We need groceries. Let's stop at the store before we go home."

"You're willing to be mobbed again?"

"I'm used to it, but I realize you're not. You stay in the car, I'll run in. How much money do we have to spend?"

In a quick motion he turned the corner. Several blocks further and he pulled into the parking area of the only supermarket in Savono. After he'd shut off the engine he looked at her with an amused glint in his eyes.

"How much were you planning to buy?"

"I—if you can't afford a lot, that's fine. I just wanted to get a few items for tomorrow."

"A few items…Hmm, like what for instance?" Was he testing her?

She shook her head, causing her curls to bounce. "I don't know what you have on hand, but I would say we need fruit, eggs, cheese, olive oil, bread and meat. Things like that. Don't we?"

He chuckled. "Yes, we do." In a surprise move he kissed her cheek before levering himself from the car. He came around her side to help her out. It was such a joy to do something as simple as going grocery shopping with her husband, she slid her arm through his.

Dizo kept it tucked beneath his even after they'd entered the store and he'd grabbed a cart. Slowly they moved up and down the aisles. While she picked out the best roma tomatoes and fresh basil, he reached for anything that appealed to him. Lots of biscotti and gelato. Maybe the way to Dizo's heart was through his sweet tooth so she bought some chocolate and a small bottle of raspberry cordial with the idea of making him a torte cake.

While they stood in line at the checkout counter, their faces were so close she only needed to move an inch or two and they'd be kissing. His eyes studied her mouth. "I take it you're planning to whip up some kind of delicious surprise."

She gave him a secretive smile. "It was Papa's favorite dessert. When I first tried cooking, I'd use Sebastiano for a guinea pig. He was a picky eater. If he ate it, then I knew Papa would, too."

Right in the middle of the crowded store Dizo threw back his head and laughed. It was the deep, rich kind of male laughter she'd only heard come out of him once before. When it subsided he said, "That poor dog. I remember after your sixteenth birthday you decided to dye a spot on his fur to do a test before you turned yourself into a blonde."

He would never let her live that down. Dizo had burst into laughter. His reaction had told her she'd made a terrible mistake. She'd rectified it at once by getting it dyed black again the next day.

She moaned. "A gentleman wouldn't bring that up."

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"I thought we agreed I wasn't one," he said as they walked back to the car with their groceries. "But if it will make you feel any better, I laughed at you that day to hide my feelings."

"What feelings?" She was totally intrigued.

He put her in the car, then went around to the driver's seat. "That you were a very sexy young woman whether you had green, red or purple hair."

Regina blinked. "You thought I was sexy?"

"Come on, Gina. You sent every male on the estate into cardiac arrest and you know it."

If Regina hadn't noticed, it was because Dizo filled her vision to the exclusion of any other man.

"The truth is, your black hair is stunning," he admitted.

"So's yours," she said with her heart thudding. "Since it's truth time I always thought of you as my Sardinian warrior. From my balcony I used to watch you work and pretend I was the captive princess you were guarding to keep me safe from marauders."

His eyes flashed. "You'd be surprised how many times I wanted to climb up there and drag you off to some place far away where we could be alone."

"You wouldn't have needed to drag me," she confessed. "I would have run away with you at any time."

After a silence he said, "Did your dreams ever include taking groceries with us?"

She laughed gently. "No. I wasn't that practical back then."

"Reality has a lot to answer for."

His last comment sobered her for the rest of the drive home.

For the next three weeks life went by on a pretty consistent routine. They were friends who got up every morning and went to work together. More often than not they took turns cooking the meals. Dizo had invited his father repeatedly to have dinner with them, but he'd always come up with an excuse why he couldn't. It pained Regina, but she didn't know what to do about it.

On the weekends she volunteered at the animal shelter in Capriccio while Dizo spent time with his brothers.

In her spare time she made plans with the palace staff in preparation for the Forneses's visit. Including herself and Dizo there would be twenty-seven of them. After consulting his family, the decision was unanimous. They wanted to cruise the waters along the coast of France and Spain and enjoy side trips en route. All the plans were going well except for one thing. Guido had told Dizo he wouldn't be going on the cruise. The news was so upsetting to her she felt she had to do something drastic to bring him around if only for her husband's sake.

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The week before his family would be flying in, she made a decision. As they were leaving the clinic to drive home she turned to Dizo. "Could we go to the palace and invite your father to come to the apartment for dinner tonight? I made that pasta of your aunt's."

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. "Let's try it and see what happens."

"Thank you."

His hand slid to her thigh, setting her on fire. He hadn't touched her in weeks. "I appreciate you wanting to do this." He gave her a small squeeze then removed it, leaving her bereft.

It was hard to drive up to the greenhouse and confront the memory of the night that had shattered every dream, but for everyone's happiness she was willing to chance a conversation with his father.

Guido's truck was still parked outside. "If it's all right, I'd like to go in first."

He shut off the engine. "I'll wait here for you."

She nodded before alighting from the car. "I'm sure you won't have a long one."

With adrenaline pouring into her system, she entered the doors and called out to his father. He was standing by his desk talking to someone on the phone. When he turned and saw who it was, he cut the conversation short and hung up.

"Principessa?"

"Can we talk for a minute?"

A worried look entered his eyes. "Has something happened to my son?"

"He's fine," she assured him. "In fact he's right outside. I just wanted to ask you if you'd come to the apartment for dinner as soon as you're through here."

He shook his head, delivering his first blow as only he could do. "I have other plans."

Regina couldn't prevent angry tears from welling in her eyes. Her emotions had been ragged for weeks. "If I invited you tomorrow night or the night after that, your answer would always be the same, wouldn't it? Fine, then. Don't come.

"You may think I'm the most vile creature who ever crossed your path, but it might do you good to look in the mirror and see what you're doing to the most wonderful man who ever lived. By refusing to come to our apartment or on the cruise, can't you see you're punishing him, not me! I'm already in hell because he was forced to marry me, but he'll always love you!

"Lucca once said, he hopes he can raise Catarina to have the same qualities that make up the character of the Fornese family. You're the head of that family, but I guess your dislike of me has caused you to lose sight of that fact."

The words penned up inside of her for so many years had flown out of her mouth before she could stop them. Afraid she would have a complete meltdown in front of him she turned and left the greenhouse. Dizo saw her coming and got out of the car.

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"Please can we just go?" she cried frantically.

Halfway home he said, "Was he cruel to you?"

She'd been staring blindly out the passenger side window. "Not any more than usual. He's a man of few words. No, no and no."

"I'm sorry, Gina."

"So am I for coming between the two of you. Tonight I'm sure he's wishing he'd never taken my father up on the head gardener job."

"Thank heaven he did or you wouldn't be my wife! Forget my father. The only thing that matters is you and me." Dizo shot into the driveway. Before he'd turned off the ignition, she'd slipped out of the car and rushed up the steps.

"Gina—" He was right behind her and pulled her into his arms. "I love you,amore. Do you hear me?"

She lifted a tear-drenched face to him. "I hear you, Dizo, but for me to be convinced I've needed to hear it over the last ten years. I needed to hear it the night I came to the farmhouse. I needed to hear it the next night in the greenhouse." Regina shook her head. "I put my life and love on the line for you, but you never said the words, let alone backed them with action."

"I was afraid to tell you how I felt."

"Dinozzo Fornese afraid?" she mocked, jerking away from him.

"Ten years ago I was terrified of telling you how I felt for fear you'd reject me," he said grimly. "My parents used to give me lectures about you. They'd tell me at least once a week that if I kept playing with fire, I'd get burned because in the end you'd marry your own kind. Before Mama died she begged me to forget you, but I couldn't do it.

"Every time I saw you with men who made it on your parents' approved list, Papa would grind it into my soul that my name would never be on it. I was good enough to be toyed with until you were through playing with me, then you'd toss me in the rubbish.

"I hated hearing it. I didn't want to believe him. Every time you sought me out after being with another man, or being away period, I rejoiced and flaunted it in front of Papa. That's when he delivered the coup de grace.

"Do you honestly believe she could love any man more than she lovedher papa? Don't you know she plans to sit on the throne one day? Lucca's thirty-four years old and still doesn't want it, but shedoes. She's waiting, Dinozzo, and she can't be queen without marrying a consort from a royal line.

"What do you plan to do? Hope she's willing to let you make love to her in the wings of her life? Wait for those clandestine moments when she throws you a few crumbs? Is that how you want to live out the rest of your existence? Skulking around in the shadows with no hope of your own marriage and family?

"Or worse. Taking a wife you don't love and being unfaithful to her for the whole of your life while you live in desperation for a few hours alone with the queen? And believe me they'll be few after she's given

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birth to a royal heir or two."

Regina could hear him talking, but it was like listening through cotton swabbing. "Even if everything you've said makes perfect sense, my brotherdid get married, and he took on the monarchy. Obviously I wasn't going to be queen."

"Unless you married Nic, Gina. You used to tell me how much you wanted to be queen one day."

"That's true. I thought I did because I didn't know anything else, but I was a girl then. My priorities changed when I became a woman and dreamed about being your wife. Though at the time I thought it wasn't possible, I still dreamed.

"Those dreams had nothing to do with being queen and everything to do with living with you day and night, having your babies and no one else's. Even if we could only be lovers, I was willing to be and do whatever it would take to have your love.

"While you were getting lectures from your father, I was getting lectures from Lucca. Stay away from Dinozzo. He's trying to do his work. If he were really interested, he would have found ways years before now to be alone with you, and damn the rules. Trust me on this,piccina. "

"I hated it that Lucca was always right. I didn't want to believe him, so I put his words to the test and came after you, convinced you'd carry me off into the sunset and we'd never be seen again." Her eyes clouded in agony. "We both know how that turned out, don't we."

As she brushed past him and put her key in the lock, beams from someone's headlights in the driveway illuminated them.

Dizo cursed before he realized who it was. "That's Papa's truck."

For a dizzying moment she had to cling to the door handle. "I don't believe it."

"Whatever you said to him produced an emotion strong enough for him to follow us home."

He pressed a hard kiss to her mouth before releasing her so she could go inside. A thank-you kiss now that Guido had come? Did it take kindness to his father to produce that kind of emotion in Dizo? He couldn't possibly comprehend her agony. She opened the door and dashed inside the house.

"Papa?" Dizo walked around to the driver's side. He put his hands on the door handle to help him out.

"I'm not coming in."

He breathed in sharply. "Then why did you bother to drive up here?"

"To tell you I've decided to be a part of my family's vacation."

Dizo closed his eyes tightly for a moment. "I'm glad to hear it. It'll be the experience of a lifetime."

"That's not all." His father sounded cryptic.

"If this is about Gina, I don't want to hear it. She's my wife now, the only woman I'll ever love. If you can't accept that, then—"

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"Does she know that yet?" he broke in, squinting up at him.

The question set him back. "What do you mean?"

"She thinks you don't love her. That's my fault."

"It's been no one's fault, Papa."

"Yes, it has," he countered. "Guilt has a lot to answer for." They eyed each other with an understanding that had been missing since the day they'd moved here from Sardinia. "Forgive me,figlio mio. "

"I was just going to ask you the same thing." They hugged each other through the open window. Then Dizo rested against the door. "In the last few weeks I've found out for myself Gina doesn't care she can't be queen. That has changed everything for me, but getting her past the hurt I've inflicted is proving much more difficult than I would have imagined."

"Go gently with her," he cautioned.

"Nonnasays the same thing."

"Your grandmother is a wise woman. She's glad you married Gina. I am, too."

Dizo's throat swelled with emotion. "In that case you should know something special. During the family's stay in Capriccio, Gina has put you in King Vittorio the First's suite on the third floor. It's a great honor.

"He loved nature like you, especially flowers, and has dozens of paintings of them hanging on the walls, some he did himself. Apparently he was the one who had the vision to buy the property the palace stands on. She's confident that in the next life he'll greet you with open arms. Gina thinks of you as the master gardener. Just thought you ought to know."

Guido's eyes grew suspiciously bright before he started up the truck and backed it out of the driveway.

After waving him off, Dizo took the steps two at a time and raced through the apartment to find his wife. She was busy in the kitchen getting their meal on the table.

Her expectant gaze met his. "Where's your father?"

"The truth?"

She nodded, but he could tell she was already let down. It killed him to see her look that vulnerable.

"He's a shy man beneath his exterior, Gina. Maybe next time he'll stay to eat with us, but at least this time he came to tell us he's going to come on the cruise."

A hand went to her throat. "He really is?"

"Yes, and it's all because of you. Before he drove off he said, 'Your grandmother's glad you married Gina. I am, too.'"

"I—I don't believe it! He honestly said that?"

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"Yes. My father's a hard one, but you're winning the war. Now let's eat. Your pasta's to die for."

She smoothed her hands over her hips in an unconscious gesture. "You're not just saying that?"

"Haven't you been able to tell we never have leftovers since you started cooking? I'm the luckiest husband alive."

The next day Regina asked Dizo to run her by the palace before they went to work. She told him she needed a few more items from her wardrobe, but it was an excuse. While he finished taking her things out to the car, she hurried up to the third floor to Lucca's suite in the west wing of the palace.

If she didn't find her brother there, she'd go down to his office on the main floor. What she had to say to him wouldn't take long.

After knocking on the outer door she heard Alexandra call out she was coming. In a minute she answered it holding the baby.

"Regina!" She looked surprised.

"I know. I didn't give you any warning I was coming."

Her sister-in-law nodded before giving her a big hug. "Come on in."

She followed her silky robe-clad figure into the sitting room. "Can I hold Catarina?"

"Of course."

Regina sat down to study her beautiful little niece who was fighting sleep. "Oh, Alexandra. She's so darling. I've only been away three weeks or so and already she's changed." She cuddled her against her shoulder.

"I know. Every day I see something different. Lucca's so crazy about her he never wants to go to work. I had to throw him out this morning."

"Is he downstairs?"

"No. He's at a banker's convention until three. Have you seen your mother? She's dying to talk to you."

"Not yet." She kissed the baby's golden head. "Lucca's the only one who can help me."

"Help you?" Alexandra's compassionate gray eyes rested on her. "Would it help to unload on me?"

Regina clutched Catarina tighter. "I—it would be a relief," she stammered.

"I can see that." She got to her feet on those long, elegant legs and took the baby from her. Lucca was crazy about his wife who made him ecstatically happy. How Regina envied them. "Catarina just finished nursing. She's asleep now. Let me put her in her crib, then we'll talk."

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She relinquished the baby, but felt so empty she grabbed one of the pillows to hug while she waited. Alexandra came right back and sat down on the love seat opposite her.

"How's it going at the clinic?"

"I love working there."

"With your love of animals, he'd never be able to find anyone better."

"Thank you."

"And the honeymoon? How was it?"

"His family's wonderful, but it was a disaster. That's why we came back early. I might as well tell you since you and Lucca don't have any secrets from each other. Dizo's so good to me, but he doesn't love me the way Lucca loves you."

"What?"

Tears gushed down Regina's cheeks. She'd been holding in the pain all night. Now that she was with Alexandra, she could let it go. It was like water spilling over a dam as she told her everything. Last night she'd thought Dizo would reach for her in bed and make love to her, but it didn't happen.

"He treats me more like a cherished sister. Our marriage can't go on like this. I love him to the depths of my soul, but since he doesn't feel the same way about me, he needs to be free."

"Then why did he marry you at all?"

"To save everyone's reputations."

"Did you believe that before you agreed to marry him?"

"Yes."

"Then why did you marry him?"

"To bring the least amount of shame to our families."

"So you both had your reasons for getting married without either of you truly wanting it?"

"Oh, I wanted it, but only if he did, too. Since Lucca was the one who made it possible, he's the only one who can see about us getting a divorce. I need to find out how soon we can obtain one. If it's a lengthy process I want to get started on it right away. Hopefully after we've gone on the vacation with his family, we can have a legal separation until it's final."

She had no idea how long these things took since no one in the Vittorios's past had dared ask for a divorce. Hers would be the first. Princess Regina's greatest claim to fame. How was that for a lasting legacy.

Her sister-in-law rubbed her hands up and down her arms in agitation. "You're right. This is a monarchial matter." She cocked her dark-blond head. "Does Dinozzo know that's why you're here this

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morning?"

"No. He has no idea."

Alexandra looked pained. "Has he already gone to work?"

"Not yet. He's loading some more of my clothes into the car. I would imagine he's out in the north portico right now waiting for me."

"Lucca will be calling me when they break for lunch. What would you like me to say to him?"

"Tell my brother what I told you. It'll be a lot better coming from you. Ask him to call me when he has the time."

"I will."

She jumped up. "I'd better go. Thank you for listening." Regina hugged her hard before hurrying out of the suite.

Halfway down the center staircase she saw Dizo's powerful frame clad in familiar jeans and a formfitting polo shirt. With boundless male energy he came up the steps two a time. When he saw her, he slowed to a stop.

His eyes played over her face. "Did you get to play with the baby?"

"Yes. She's adorable."

"I'm glad you could see her. Is there anything else I can do for you before we leave?"

I'm dying inside,but he couldn't see that.

"You've worked miracles getting my things moved. Thank you. I'm ready to go."

CHAPTER NINE

THEday turned out to be a busy one at the clinic. Dizo had to perform three emergency surgeries along with caring for the usual stream of sick animals. At times the waiting room didn't have enough chairs to accommodate everyone. The doctor side of him handled each problem with such compassion, he won people over. She loved him so much. Too much.

Around three o'clock Dizo walked out into the reception room to tell the waiting family that their pet's bad heart hadn't survived the operation. Their four-year-old daughter Lucianna became inconsolable. Regina knew exactly how she felt. Dizo got down on his haunches to hug her, but nothing seemed to help.

"We have to go now, Lucianna," her parents told her.

"No—" the little girl cried hysterically. "I want Fabriccio!"

"He's gone to heaven," her mother said.

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Regina couldn't stand it any longer. She walked over to the little girl and knelt next to her. "Lucianna? My dog died. too."

The little dark head turned to her. "W-what was his name?"

"Sebastiano."

Tears streamed down her cute little cheeks and she started crying again. "I want him to come back."

"I know, sweetheart." Regina smoothed the hair of her forehead. "Do you know what?"

"W-what?" She hiccupped.

"Fabriccio doesn't want you to cry. He's so happy now because he's all better. Now he wants you to take care of another dog he knows about who doesn't have a family."

She blinked. "What kind of a dog?"

"It's a little basset hound named Benito. Do you know what those dogs look like?"

"Yes."

"This one is so cute, and he likes peanut butter treats. What kind did Fabriccio like?"

"Peanut butter."

"There, you see? If it's all right with your parents, would you like to meet Benito?"

The parents nodded through their tears.

"Then you go with your parents. They can follow me in their car to the animal shelter in Capriccio. Benito will be so happy to see you, he'll jump into your arms."

Lucianna sniffed. "He will?"

"I promise."

She turned to her parents. "Can we go?"

The father said, "If it's all right with the princess."

Regina got to her feet and turned to Dizo. "If it's all right with my husband. Can you manage while I'm gone?"

His black eyes were thanking her. At least she could be thankful for that much emotion coming from him. "Take all the time you need," came his husky voice.

The next two hours were a joy as Lucianna became acquainted with the abandoned little bassett hound. He was such a loving little dog he responded to her crooning sound and licked her face immediately. It was a match made in heaven. That's what Lucianna's mother told Regina before she gave her a heartfelt hug.

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"We will never forget what you've done for our little girl."

"I was little once, and I know exactly how she feels."

Regina followed them out to their car and gave them some dog food and treats. The little girl poked her head out the window. "I'll bring Benito to see you."

"I can't wait! Goodbye."

After they drove off, Regina got in the car and headed back to the clinic to pick up Dizo. He was waiting for her. When he got in the passenger side, he leaned across the gearshift and pressed a firm kiss to her mouth. "You were an angel of mercy for that little girl today," he whispered. "I'm keeping you."

The drive home to the apartment was bittersweet for Regina who could feel his gratitude for helping him in a tense situation. But she wanted more than that from him.

"I'll fix dinner."

"Nothing for me," he said before disappearing upstairs. When he came back to the kitchen, he was dressed in his robe and just stood there watching her, making her distinctly uncomfortable.

"What's wrong?"

"Suppose you tell me."

She shook her head. "I don't understand."

"I think you do," he fired in a forbidding voice.

"Dizo—"

"Why not tell me the truth about your conversation with Alexandra?"

Oh, no.

"I had an interesting phone call from your brother while you were at the shelter."

Her lips pressed together. "About the divorce, I—"

"There isn't going to be one so you can forget it! We haven't even had our honeymoon yet."

"That wasn't my fault, Dizo." She looked straight into his eyes. "I care deeply for you. I always will. You've been the biggest part of the fabric of my life. But that scene in the greenhouse killed something inside me. Because of what you've meant to me, I'll do everything in my power to set you free. I don't know how long it will take, but I swear on my father's good name a divorce will be granted."

"Not if I have anything to say about it."

"Youdon't. This is a matter between royals."

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"The hell it is!" His hands went to her shoulders. "I'm your husband and you're my wife. There's no room in here for anyone else. The fact of the matter is, Lucca won't grant you one."

She searched his darkly handsome face. "Is that the truth?"

He looked furious. "You want chapter and verse? He said to tell you there would be no divorce. Ever."

"Oh, Dizo…what have I done to you?"

He shrugged his broad shoulders, causing the lapels of his robe to part enough she could see the hair dusting his chest. "I could have told you that would be his answer. If Henri VIII couldn't persuade the pope to annul his marriage to Catherine so he could marry again, did you honestly think Lucca would have more sway with the archbishop after one rule has already been waived for you?"

She let out a moan before breaking down in great heaving sobs. Dizo had no problem letting her cry her guts out. If he had to be Petruchio to his Kate for a time, so be it. He wasn't going anywhere. Neither was she. Ever!

For a little while Regina had the yacht's swimming pool to herself. It was their last day at sea and everyone had gone ashore at Cannes, evennonna who'd always wanted to see the famous French city of the jet-setters. Together with his father, Dizo was giving his grandmother a short wheelchair tour.

Tomorrow they'd dock at Nice where the bulk of the family would deboard. From there they'd be flying back to Sardinia. The rest of them would take limos back to Capriccio.

So much had been packed into the vacation complete with shore excursions Regina had organized, she needed an hour to catch her breath. To say it had been an unqualified success would be an understatement. One of her great joys had been to watch Guido interact with the family and relax.

By some miracle he'd been surprisingly pleasant to her. The blowup with him had been cathartic for her. To some extent it seemed to have cleared the air between them.

When he laughed out loud at something one of the younger children did, it warmed her heart. She doubted he'd been this happy in a long time.

Dizo, too, had put on a great show and had been the quintessential host. He projected an urbane sophistication that gave nothing away of his inner struggle. During the day they were friends, but at night no one knew that behind closed doors he slipped in their bed after she'd gone to sleep. When she awakened in the morning, he'd already gone off to do an activity with one of the family members.

Unfortunately the vacation was coming to an end. Once they were back at the apartment, what would Dizo do? Their days would be filled with work, but at night he wouldn't have an excuse to enjoy a drink in the ship's bar with one of his uncles or brothers. He'd be well and truly stuck with Regina. Without the hope of divorce there was no relief in sight.

She had to do something to stop the pain.

In agony she started doing laps. The next time she lifted her head she saw Giovanni dive in the water and speed toward her.

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He'd sought her out often during the cruise. It was something she knew her husband had observed without saying anything, but there were times when she felt his disapproval. He'd get that unsmiling proprietorial gaze like Guido used to get when she showed up on the grounds looking for his son.

Though she enjoyed Giovanni's company a lot, Regina had thought she was alone for a change. Before he could reach her she heaved herself out of the water and slipped into her beach robe. When his dark head emerged, he looked disappointed to see that her workout was over.

"Ciao,Regina."

"Ciaoyourself, Gio." She sat in one of the deck chairs. "How come you didn't go into Cannes with the others?"

He smiled up at her while he treaded water. "I've been hoping to talk to you alone. When I saw that you stayed behind, I did, too."

She pulled the sunglasses from her pocket and put them on to reduce the glare. "What's on your mind this beautiful day?"

"School. My parents want me to stay in Sassari, but I'd like to go to the University of Capriccio like Dinozzo did."

She had no idea all this had been going on inside him. "I think it's wonderful you're considering college, but Sassari has one of the oldest and finest universities anywhere and you'd be able to live at home."

"I know, but you have to admit Capriccio's the coolest place ever."

She smiled. "I was born there so I'm biased of course."

"I was wondering if you'd talk to Dinozzo and ask him to put in a good word for me with Papa. He'll listen to him."

"Why don't you talk to Dizo yourself?"

He squinted at her. "You don't know Papa. You don't ask anyone for favors."

The Fornese men were all alike. Stubborn. "I guess that means you haven't asked Guido for a job yet, either."

Giovanni shook his head. "I wouldn't dare."

Regina could relate.

"If Dinozzo approves, I won't have any problems." He levered himself out of the pool and sat on the edge by her.

Everyone loved and admired Dizo. The younger ones hero-worshipped him, the older ones marveled over his accomplishments. Hisnonna adored him. At an early age she'd recognized he was marked for something extraordinary. Regina loved her for encouraging him to go after his dreams.

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He was the only one in the Fornese family ever to go to college, let alone carve out a medical career. It was only natural Giovanni wanted to follow in his revered cousin's footsteps. He, too, showed an independent nature that would take him far given half the chance. Regina would do what she could to help him.

"Tell you what. As soon as Dizo has a free moment, I'll broach the subject with him."

He broke out in a broad smile. "You're the best.Grazie. "

"I think she is, too."

Regina's pulse jumped to hear Dizo's voice behind them. She had no idea he'd come back on board. Before she could turn around he put his hands on her shoulders and gently kneaded them. It seemed like months instead of a week since she'd last received any physical attention from him. Her body melted with pleasure.

Giovanni's face was lifted to the sun. Since the beginning of the trip, he'd gone several shades darker, reminding her of Dizo before his studies kept him out of its tanning rays. "Ciao,Dinozzo. Is everyone back already?"

"No. I'm the only one. When your father noticed you weren't with all of us, I told him I'd look for you."

"We've been having a serious conversation," Regina interjected, attuned to his mood. "Since you're a major part of it, now would be the perfect time to let you in on it."

Slowly relinquishing his hold on her, Dizo pulled another deck chair around to join them. With his powerful physique he looked fantastic in a silky, pale blue sport shirt and khaki trousers.

Sunglasses had their uses. Regina could feast her hungry eyes on him without him being aware.

"Go ahead, Gio. Tell him everything you told me."

He sat up and locked his arms around his knees. "I've told Mama and Papa that I want to go to college in Capriccio like you did. They're against it and won't discuss it."

Regina sat forward. "They're probably afraid you'll end up leaving Sardinia for good and they don't want to lose you."

Dizo was sitting back with his long legs crossed at the ankles. In the hand-sewn Italian sandals that completed his outfit and his beautiful olive skin picking up a golden tone, he appeared more aristocratic than any legitimately titled person she knew.

"Gina's right. In my case Mama and Papa had already moved there to work at the palace. They didn't lose me."

His cousin eyed Dizo for a long moment. "The first time you laid eyes on Capriccio, didn't you think you'd died and gone to heaven?"

"No," he answered without hesitation. It startled Giovanni, but Regina knew from the first day that Dizo had arrived in Castelmare with a giant chip on his shoulder.

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"How could you not have loved it?"

"I hated being poor, but I hated it more when my own father had to take us all away from our home to find work in another country as someone else's servant. My hatred of our situation was so acute, I couldn't see anything clearly. In Capriccio we were out of our depth. At home we were among our own kind at least where you could still hold up your head.

"Too many times I heard some rich tourist at the palace say, 'Isn't it amazing that migrant workers from the poorer countries know how to make the grounds this beautiful. If I could trust any of them, I might be persuaded to put a few to work for me'."

His words chilled Regina because she knew that was how some ignorant people viewed the world. At his age and under his unique circumstances, Dizo could only have interpreted it as cruelty.

"If I'd felt the way you did, I wouldn't have stayed on," Giovanni declared.

"I didn't have a choice," Dizo muttered. "I was too young to run away and Papa needed me."

Regina had needed him, too. More than he could ever have known.

"It wasn't until I turned eighteen and had the right to leave the family that I realized Capriccio did indeed have its attractions." He grasped Regina's hand, sending a river of warmth through her.

"Well, yeah." His cousin laughed. "I kind of figured that part out already. No wonder you never wanted to leave."

Oh, Giovanni…if he only knew the truth. Regina used the excuse of removing her sunglasses to pull her hand away.

"I determined no one was going to talk that way about me and my family again." Dizo's words sounded lethal.

"And as they say, the rest is history," Giovanni concluded. A shudder vibrated inside her because it hadn't all been written yet. "I don't know where I'm going to end up living for the rest of my life, but I know what I want to do with it right now. Will you put in a good word for me with Papa?"

The earnestness of his plea caused Regina to hold her breath while she waited for her husband's answer. He possessed enough of Guido's genes to make her the slightest bit worried.

"I'll do better than that, Giovanni. You want a part-time job with Papa?" He nodded. "Then I'll arrange it.

"To make certain your parents don't feel like they're losing you altogether, you'll have to promise to go home between semesters. While you're here you can stay in Gina's suite where Papa and I can keep a close eye on you. Now that we're married it's going to waste and should be put to some practical use."

At this juncture Regina almost fell out of her chair. As Giovanni's eyes swerved to her in a complete euphoric daze, what else could she do but go along with Dizo's largesse. He was right of course. Every room in the palace not being used was a waste. Everything he said and did made her love him all the more. Especially his kindness to Giovanni.

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"Tonight the family will be having dinner on deck," Dizo informed him. "While we're eating, I'll use one of my wife's tactics and bring it up in front of everyone. We'll see what happens."

"You're the best!" Giovanni jumped up and gave Dizo a bear hug before dashing off to change.

He was the best.

The unsettling glance Dizo flashed at her made her nervous. "Papa was too proud to accept your father's offers of generosity. I'm not too proud to offer your former suite for Giovanni's sake. If you have a problem with it, let me know now and I'll tell him before dinner."

She couldn't understand why he was being so defensive."Mi casa es su casa."

"Except your casa has a king living in it."

"Lucca won't even notice," she mumbled.

"He notices everything."

"True, but he'll love the idea that someone in your family has finally accepted our family's hospitality. You and Lucca share the same feelings about equality. In fact you have more in common than you can imagine."

He got up from the chair and pulled her to her feet. His eyes roved over her features. "Let's go down to the stateroom and get you out of this sun. You're looking a little too pink."

"At least that's a change from white," she teased to cover her emotions. He watched over her like a hawk, but she knew he hadn't suggested they go below so he could make love to her. More than once he'd indicated his worry that she was working too hard and should take some time off for herself.

The last thing she wanted to do was be alone where she would dwell on the disaster she'd made of both their lives.

"The sun isn't as strong as it was earlier and I need to check with the kitchen about tonight's dinner. I purchased some gifts in Grasse yesterday and want to put them at everyone's place. That's going to take a little time. You've been going nonstop all week. Why don't you go down and take a nap? I'll wake you up when it's time to eat."

He studied her for a moment, obviously pondering her suggestion. "My family's never had a vacation like this. I don't know where to begin to thank you." His voice sounded husky.

She took a fortifying breath. "You can say that to me after the way I ruined your life? You're a good man, Dr. Fornese. There's none better."

Sooner than he knew he was going to receive his reward. Regina wasn't worried that her impending disappearance would upset Dizo. Lucca was always in touch with her bodyguards and would know she was safe. He'd pass that information along to Dizo without giving anything away.

Dizo might not be able to marry again, but she could at least give him the freedom to find a woman he desired and live with her if he wanted to. As for Regina, she was floundering in a bottomless void. Her Sardinian warrior had always been the center of her universe, but she couldn't view life through that lens

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anymore.

To sever every tie with him except for the one on paper would be like being born all over again, but that was the reality she faced. For that she needed some time on her own…

While Dizo's immediate family drove on to Capriccio in the limos, Dizo and Gina boarded the jet for a final goodbye with those family members flying back to Sardinia. Since she was engaged in conversation with Giovanni and his father, he went into the bedroom to kiss his grandmother one more time.

"Did you see the sheaf of fresh French lavender she gave me? It smells like heaven."

He searched her face to see if there were new pain lines. "I saw everything. Now tell me the truth. Was this trip too much for you?"

There was a gleam in her eye. "I only enjoyed one vacation more. Why haven't you had a honeymoon with your wife yet?"

A tortured sigh escaped his throat. "A month ago I couldn't get through to her. After talking to you, I decided to take your advice and proceed a minute at a time. For the last few weeks we've been friends, but once we're back in Savono it will begin with or without her cooperation."

She nodded. "Good. She chased you for long enough. Now it's time to chase her until she lets you catch her. I promise you she wants to be caught no matter how much she pretends to fight you."

His eyes misted over. "You're the wisest person I've ever known." He kissed her on both cheeks. "I'll phone you,nonna. "

"Not until you can tell me the news I want to hear."

After talking to the doctor aboard the jet about her medication, he walked through the body of the plane looking for Gina. When he didn't see her, he decided she'd already gone outside and was waiting for him. Much as he loved his family, he'd been counting the seconds until he could get her to himself.

He frowned when he reached the bottom of the stairs and couldn't spot her in the back of the limo. "Where's my wife?" he asked one of his security men standing by.

"Someone forgot their gift so she took a limo back to the yacht to get it for them."

"Did she ask the pilot to hold the plane?"

"Si."

Frustrated, Dizo got in the rear of the limo. Since she'd be returning, there was no point in chasing after her. He'd wait here so they could drive home to the apartment together. Once he locked the door, they wouldn't be coming out for a long time.

He'd already told Dr. Bertholdi he'd be gone for two weeks. With everything at the clinic covered for another seven days, he intended to concentrate on Gina. She didn't know he'd had the apartment stocked with food so they wouldn't have to leave for any reason. It felt like he'd been waiting all his life

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to pour out his love on her, but the agony was almost over.

After a few minutes he pulled out his cell phone to call her and find out how much longer she was going to be. She answered on the second ring. "Dizo?" She sounded breathless.

"I understand you went back to the yacht. Why didn't you wait for me?"

"I thought I'd give you a little more time with your grandmother."

The furrow between his brows deepened. "Where are you now?"

"I'm sorry. I can hardly hear you. The phone's breaking up. I couldn't find Maria's gift so I phoned the pilot and told him to take off. I'll mail her another one tomorrow."

The knot in his gut tightened. "Where are you?" he repeated the question.

"Almost at the apartment."

Was that a lie? If so it would be her first to him.

"Gina?"

"I'll—"

When the phone went dead he tried her again. Nothing.

The hairs stood up on the back of his neck Like pure revelation he knew she'd been orchestrating something since they'd docked in Nice. This morning she'd been up before he was. When he went on deck to find her, she'd avoided him without being obvious. At the time, her vague excuse that she needed to tie up any loose ends before everyone left the yacht didn't ring any particular alarm bells.

After telling his driver to get him to Savono on the double, he tried to reach her bodyguards, but they didn't answer. He tried his own security men. They could shed no light.

Twenty minutes later he dashed inside the apartment calling her name. She didn't respond. He raced up the stairs to the bedroom. An envelope with his name on it was propped on the dresser. His body broke out in a cold sweat before he reached for it and read the contents.

Dizo, I tried to get us divorced. It didn't work, but it doesn't mean we have to live together. I wouldn't be that cruel to you. Forgive me for leaving you short handed at the clinic. That's a situation easily remedied. Regina.

The note slipped from his hands before he flew out of the apartment to the garage. Once in his car, he drove over the speed limit to the palace. Leaving it parked in the north portico, he rushed inside past the guards and headed straight for Lucca's office.

"I need to see the king. This is an emergency."

The secretary took one look at him and picked up the phone. In about five seconds Dizo was told he could go in his private office. When he opened the door, Lucca was already halfway across the room to meet him. "What's happened?"

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"Gina's left me. Do you know where she went?"

Lucca shook his head before inviting him to sit down, but Dizo couldn't. "I need your help to find her. She's my life!" his voice shook.

"Regina's obviously hurting, but I doubt she's gone far. Considering she was on a trip with you until an hour ago, she had a destination in mind where all the arrangements were already worked out."

He went around his desk and pulled a manila envelope out of the drawer. "If you take my helicopter to Genoa, my other jet will be waiting to fly you to Athens. Since she'll be traveling commercial, you should be able to reach the hotel ahead of her."

"What hotel?" Dizo whispered.

"It's all in here." He handed Dizo the envelope. "This was meant to be Regina's gift to you for passing your boards. I was supposed to give it to you as a gift from the Vittorio family so you would never know she was the donor. That was before she staked her claim the night she flew hell-bent to Sardinia to find you.

"I could be wrong, but my instincts tell me she's headed there to nurse her wounds. Come on. I'll walk you to the helipad."

Dizo needed no further urging.

In a minute he'd climbed aboard the helicopter. Before he sat down he grasped Lucca's hand in a fierce grip. "How can I ever thank you for this?"

"That's what brothers-in-law are for. If I know mypiccina, she'll be so happy you found her, the entire Vittorio family will be able to sleep again nights." On that note Lucca gave a nod to the pilot and shut the door. Soon the blades started to rotate.

Dizo strapped himself in the seat and rifled through the contents inside the envelope. There was a first-class round trip airline ticket good for any day to Athens from Nice. It was made out to Dr. Dinozzo Romali Fornese. She'd bought it two months ago.

His heart skittered around his chest cavity as his gaze fell on the hotel voucher made out to him. The five-star Royal Parthenon. Good for a week including all meals and privately escorted excursions in and around Athens.

Gina…

Two hours later a limo, compliments of Lucca, dropped him off in front of the hotel located in the heart of the city he'd always wanted to visit with her. He hurried inside to the front desk.

"I'm Dr. Fornese from Castelmare." He laid his passport on the counter.

The clerk checked his picture, then smiled and handed it back to him. "The palace faxed us the information that you were coming."

"Has my wife checked in yet?"

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"No, Signore. The princess isn't expected for another hour."

The band around Dizo's chest burst, allowing life-giving air inside once more.Bless you, Lucca .

"Good. Do me a favor and don't let her know I already arrived. I want to surprise her."

"I heard you were on your honeymoon cruise. I won't say a word."

"Thank you. One more thing, could you ring the room after she's checked in to let me know she's on her way up?"

"Of course. Enjoy your stay."

We intend to.

A few minutes later he looked around the room located on the top floor. She'd gone all out to give him a suite for a VIP. After a shower, he put on the robe provided for guests and wandered out on the terrace, trying to quell the frantic beat of his heart. His adorable Gina would be walking in here soon.

He couldn't help but reflect back on their history together. Her friendliness had delighted him. Her intelligence challenged him. Her knowledge astounded him. Her wit disarmed him. Her honesty awed him. Her generosity humbled him.

Dizo hadn't even started on her looks.

Regina couldn't get up to the hotel room fast enough. The sound of Dizo's cry over the phone still rang in her ears. She'd cut him off brutally, but it had been the only way to stop the bleeding. Athens seemed the fitting place to say a final goodbye to him in her heart. For that she had to be strictly alone.

When the elevator reached the top floor, she fled down the hall toward her room with her overnight bag, desperate to separate herself from the world. With the key card still in her hand, she started to use it when the door unexpectedly opened.

The man standing there in the blue robe looked real enough and painfully familiar, but hecouldn't be here. It wasn't possible. She was hallucinating because she wanted him so badly.

Her bodyguards couldn't be trusted after all, but at this very moment she didn't care.

He took the purse and suitcase from her lifeless fingers, setting them aside. "I knew you were in the sun too long yesterday. Let's get you in on the bed before you faint on me again."

"D-Dizo—" was all she could get out before he picked her up and nudged the door shut with his foot. Her head swam as he carried her through the lounge to the bedroom, then followed her down on the bed, covering her body with his own. She could feel his heart thundering against her chest.

He buried his face in her neck. "We got this right while I was under the influence." She felt his mouth kissing every inch of hot skin. "I think we can do even better now that I know you're not part of a dream.

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"I love you, Giannina Vittorio. I've been in love with you since you were fifteen years old. You know it's true. You're the most beautiful thing in my life. Without you I'm nothing! Do you hear me,amata? "

His lips searched for hers, trapping them with a hunger that caused both their bodies to burn like fire. "We've done all the hurting we're going to do. We've said all there is to say. Now I just want to love you, my beautiful, enchanting wife. You don't know what it's been like for me all these years. Long ago you became the bride of my heart."

Regina moaned feverishly."Caro—" She wound her arms around his neck, trying to get closer. "I've been in love with you forever," she half sobbed. In his strong arms at last, she could finally break down and pour out her love on him, knowing he was breathless for it. too.

He kissed the moisture from her eyelids and cheeks. "We've both suffered far too long,bellissima. Now it's going to end. Hold on to me. Kiss me, Giannina. Love me and never stop," he cried urgently.

Hours later he groaned when she started to move off his chest. His arms and legs tightened around her, preventing movement. "Where do you think you're going?" Passion had slurred his speech.

"To give you room to breathe," she cried softly. She'd been too possessive of him, not allowing him any part of himself.

"When I want air I'll let you know." Once again his mouth closed over hers with a voracious hunger, teaching her the meaning of ecstasy. "You have the most gorgeous face and body of any woman alive. I'll never be able to keep my hands off you now. You'll have to beat me off."

"I have the same problem with you," she whispered into his vibrant black hair. "There's never been a man to compare to you. I spent most of my life imagining what it would feel like to be with you like this."

He kissed her scented throat. "We both did too much of that. The reality is so much better than the dreaming, I can't believe we had to wait this long to realize it. I have such great longing for you,amore mio, I don't know that I'm ever going to let you out of this bed."

"Then we won't leave it or each other. We'll go on like this into infinity."

His fingers caught in her luxurious curls. He loved every beguiling scintilla of her. "I remember hearing you say that before."

She traced the line of his sensuous mouth with her finger, exulting in their intimacy. "What else do you remember?"

He caught her to him. "Keep loving me and I have no doubts it will all come back."

CHAPTER TEN

"MAMA?"

"Angioletto mio!I didn't realize you were back yet!"

Regina rushed into her parents' sitting room to hug her mother. "There was a delay at the airport. Our flight from Athens didn't arrive in Nice until late last night. We took a taxi to the apartment and went right

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to bed."

Dizo had been right. For the last week they'd been so enamored of each other, they'd hardly left their hotel room. When they did, they couldn't keep their hands or mouths to themselves. Athens would have to be visited another time.

After a lifetime of forced deprivation, they were both so fearful of separation for any reason, they clung to each other with a desperation borne of the deep love they could now express.

"I'm thankful you're back safely. Where's Dizo?"

Now her mother was calling him that, too. She loved it. "He's gone on to the clinic. I'll join him later."

"Sit down by me and let me look at you."

"I've missed you, Mama. How are you?"

"Now that I've seen you, I'm fine." She reached out to touch one of her curls. "Your hair's getting longer. I like it very much."

"Dizo doesn't want me to get it cut. He likes my Gypsy look."

Her mother's shining brown eyes appraised her. "I've never seen you this happy in your whole life. I wish your father could see you like this."

Regina's eyes smarted as she nodded. "I love Dizo so much I can hardly breathe."

"Isn't it lovely that he wants you working with him. Your father and I loved our close association. Some couples can't spend that much time together, but you and Dizo saw each other every day for years. I dare say it has become a habit you couldn't bear to break."

"Sometimes I feel so much joy, I'm frightened."

Her mother smiled. "That's good. The long struggle you and Dizo had to get where you are will ensure you never take each other for granted."

"Never!" she cried. "When Lucca met Alexandra and I saw how much they loved each other, I envied them so terribly I wanted to die."

"We were all aware of your pain." Her mother leaned over to hug her again. "I take it you believe your brother did the right thing by waiving the rule for you."

Regina sat back in the love seat. "Iknow he did."

"Obviously you have no regrets."

"None!"

"Then you need to tell Lucca."

She blinked. "Why do you say that? He knows Dizo's my life."

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Her mother's expression sobered. "Have you talked to him this morning?"

"Not yet. I wanted to see you first. What's wrong?"

"After Dizo came to the castle a week ago absolutely frantic because you'd left him, your brother went through some agonizing moments. In trying to fix a problem, he feared he'd made a fatal mistake and has been suffering for it ever since."

A frown married Regina's features. "I was still trying to sort out my feelings. Dizo hurt me so much that night in front of Lucca, I didn't think I'd recover, but all this doesn't sound like my brother, he's never been unsure about anything in his life."

"Except where you were concerned. You must admit you gave Dizo a very hard time, otherwise he wouldn't have cut your honeymoon short in Sardinia."

Regina bowed her head. "It's because I thought I knew him inside and out, but I didn't. It took the last month and a lot of talking to make me understand what went on inside him all these years."

"I think this is something you need to hear from your brother. Why don't you go to his office right now and talk to him. I just got off the phone with him, so I know he's there. He went down early to get some work done. Later today he's taking Alexandra and Catarina on a picnic"

"All right, I'll go see him, but I'll be back. I want to hear about your trip to Spain." After kissing her cheek, Regina jumped up from the love seat and left the suite to find her brother.

She entered his inner office through a rear door only the family used. With his back toward her she was able to study him. Though there was a stack of documents in front of him, he did seem distracted, adding weight to her mother's comments.

She sneaked up behind him and covered his eyes with her hands.

His body tautened before he pulled them away and jumped to his feet. Then he turned around."Piccina," he murmured, studying her intently. "No news is good news. I take it you've gone back to Dizo."

"Forever." Her voice throbbed.

The worried look on his face started to fade. After a minute she heard him whisper, "Thank God."

The emotion in his words stunned her. "Mama told me you've been upset, but you don't need to be. I'm the happiest woman alive, though Alexandra would argue with me."

Her little joke didn't produce the wanted reaction. "Lucca? What's wrong?"

He raked a hand through his hair. "Where do I start?"

"I don't understand."

"I guess nothing but a full confession is going to make me feel better. While Alexandra and I were on our honeymoon, I couldn't help but want the same kind of happiness we experienced to happen to you. I knew how much in love you were with Dizo.

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"When I saw those pictures, it gave me the help I needed to call off your marriage to Nic. Our parents were always worried about your infatuation with Dizo. Papa would have waived the rule if Dizo had come to him and told him he wanted to marry you, but we both know why that never happened, not when he was Guido's son."

"Papa said that?"

He nodded solemnly. "He told our mother. But even with those photos, I couldn't use them until I could be certain Dizo was as hopelessly in love with you. Kissing you senseless in his drunken state was one thing, but dumping you out the window after he woke up didn't exactly tell me everything.

"When he said he was going back to Sardinia to start a veterinary practice, I put him to a test by telling him that Papa wanted him to take that position in Savono. I knew in my gut that if he truly loved you, he'd do it because he couldn't stand to be that far away from you.

"A week later I received a note thanking me for telling him about the opening. He'd decided to take it. That's when I made my move and called you and Guido in for that conference."

"I had no idea."

"That conference was a gamble. And unfortunately when you ran away from him after the cruise, the fear that I'd done the wrong thing has kept me awake nights. Dizo was so desperate for help, I gave him the trip voucher for Athens, praying that's where you'd gone. Someone upstairs answered it."

His troubled eyes searched hers. "Can you ever forgive me for putting you through so much hell first, piccina? "

Regina threw her arms around him. "You're the most wonderful brother on earth! If you hadn't done what you did, I wouldn't be his wife.

"Thank you, thank you, darling brother. Do you remember what Papa always quoted? 'Greater love hath no man than he lay down his life for his friends.' I'm going to substitute the words and say 'for his sister.' I love you, Lucca." She kissed his cheek.

"Ditto,piccina. "

"Could I ask you a favor?"

"Of course."

"Could I have that packet of pictures back?"

"They're all yours."

He walked over to his drawer and handed the envelope to her. She drew out the glossy black and white photo of her hanging on to Dizo outside the farmhouse window. She knew exactly what she wanted to do with it.

"Thank you." Regina put the envelope under her arm. "Now I've got to go to the clinic." She started for the rear door. "Dizo's not going to believe it when I tell him everything."

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First however, she had a couple of important errands to run before she joined her husband.

Dizo finished examining the sick kitten and wrote out a prescription for the owner to fill. He went back out to the crowded reception room to call in his next patient and owner. He ought to be overjoyed that business was booming, but Gina wasn't back from the palace yet.

After the kind of honeymoon they'd shared, he knew she loved him to the depth of her being, but old fears had a bad habit of dying hard. He wouldn't breathe easily until she came through the door of the clinic walking her little walk that caused every male in sight's jaw to drop.

Besides everything else, his wife was blessed with a glorious face and figure. When she entered a room, he couldn't look anywhere else. After being given a taste of Princess Regina Schiaparelli Vittorio, no other girl or woman ever looked good enough to him, let alone measured up.

In any event she was family now. A Fornese. He loved the sound of that. Giannina was all his. Just thinking about tonight after they went home shot his temperature through the roof. No one gave like she did.Dio mio.

It wasn't until afternoon while he was arranging for the bulldog with a tumor on his left front paw to come in for surgery that Gina arrived. She looked so radiant he forgave her for keeping him on tenterhooks while he waited.

The two-piece summer suit happened to be a heavenly shade of peppermint-pink. With her flouncing black curls and seductively curved mouth, he had the strongest urge to eat her up centimeter by luscious centimeter. She flashed him that heart-stopping I'll-be-with-you-in-a-little-while smile, then took over in the reception room.

Dizo found himself counting the seconds until their last patient left the clinic. After discarding his lab coat he went to find her in the kennel where she was checking on their boarders. Needing her like he needed sun and air, he slid his arms around her irresistible body from behind.

"I've needed this all day," he murmured against the side of her neck.

"Not as much as I have." She spun around, pulling his head down so she could give him one of those soul destroying kisses he craved. They ended up against the wall trying to merge.

"Much as I find you gorgeous in this outfit, too many clothes are separating us,amore. Let's go home."

She kissed his eyes and nose. "Have I told you how much I love you and our home? Our own private haven? You've made me so happy," her voice caught.

"Gina—" he cried, devouring her mouth again. "I'm going to need all night to show you how I feel. Come on."

On the way to their apartment she darted him a mysterious smile. "When we get there, I have something important to tell you."

He slid his hand up her leg. If she was within touching distance, he couldn't resist.

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"We're going to have a baby?"

"Maybe. After Athens it's more than possible." She squeezed his fingers with her own. "I hope. I've wanted to be pregnant with your child for a long time. But right now I'm talking about something else."

"Do I have to wait?"

"Yes." Her carnelian-brown eyes implored him. "I thought I'd tell you over the special dinner I made for us."

Dizo's heart beat faster. "That's why you didn't get to the clinic until after lunch. I thought you'd probably decided to spend the whole day with your family. I would have understood."

"I know you would, but in case you haven't noticed, I have this passion for a certain handsome Sardinian. To be apart from him a second longer than necessary causes me excruciating pain, which I prefer to avoid at all costs. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

He made the turn into his driveway. "Better than you do,bellissima. "

She preceded him inside the apartment. "After you've freshened up, dinner will be waiting on the table."

"Why don't we freshen up together?" He grabbed her and planted a lingering kiss on her lips.

She pushed him away. "Because if I go upstairs with you, we'll never come down."

"You're right about that. I'll hurry."

Regina had made one of his aunt's recipes, a potato clam dish. Thanks to Guido who told her the name of Dizo's favorite wine, she was able to provide it. When he walked in the kitchen fresh from the shower, everything was ready.

"Come and sit down."

"What's this?" He picked up the gift she'd put by his plate.

"Go ahead and open it."

He tore off the paper. She had to wait a minute before he responded. "Lucca gave you this I presume."

"I asked for it."

His dark head reared. "Why?"

She took a deep breath. "If you ever find yourself doubting me in any way, I want you to take a good look at this picture. That's a desperate woman holding on to you for dear life. A lovesick woman who put her love on the line for you, Dinozzo Fornese. One glance tells it all."

Dizo pressed the framed photo to his chest before sending her a penetrating gaze. "What was the other

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important thing you wanted to tell me?'

"My brother has suffered, wondering if he'd done the right thing to allow us to marry."

"I know. He told me."

It was the last response she would have expected. "You knew?" she cried in shock.

He pushed himself away from the table and reached for her, pulling her out of the chair into his arms. "I figured it out after you left the greenhouse that night. Once Lucca had thanked me for not taking advantage of you, he looked me in the eye and said, 'If there'sanything I can do for you, all you have to do is ask.'" Following that astounding remark he told me your father wanted me to take the vet job in Savono.

"That was about the time I began to understand he might conceivably be on my side and was encouraging me."

"I told you Lucca always wanted to be your friend."

Dizo nodded. "I acted on those instincts to see where they would lead. To my joy he offered you to me on a silver platter. I didn't have to think. I grabbed for you with both hands."

"Dizo—"

While the food grew cold, they clung to each other. Once again he had to support her because her body had gone limp from emotion. She burrowed her wet face in his neck. "I was so awful to you."

He kissed her long and hard. "I hurt you by rejecting you in front of Lucca, but I knew that if there was any hope of us having a relationship, I couldn't afford to alienate your brother. He was the king and held all the cards."

She lifted her head and looked into her husband's dark eyes. "You wouldn't have left me, even if we couldn't have married?"

"I tried it for one day and you saw what happened. I was back within twenty-four hours. Lucca knew I couldn't stay away from you."

A groan escaped. "I was the last person to know it. After I invaded your inner sanctum, your grandmother had every right to be upset with me, but we made our peace with each other before I left Sardinia."

Dizo studied her intently. "What went on between you two? She refused to tell me."

"I'll show you." She reached for her purse and pulled the picture packet from her wallet. He braced his hip against the counter and went through each photo. She watched the various emotions crossing over his face as he reacted. "I gave her my favorite one of you and your mother. No matter what she thought of me, she realized you were my whole life."

For a moment he stared into space. "Now I understand why she told me to take it a day at a time. She knew you loved me."

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He put down the pictures before his eyes swerved to hers. They were blazing with unbridled desire. "Gina—forgive me, but I'm not hungry for food right now."

"Neither am I,caro. " She gravitated to his arms. He picked her up, but they only made it as far as the downstairs bedroom. By the time they reached the bed, they'd left a trail of clothes on the floor.

It was deja vu except that when morning came, the person doing the knocking on the front door wasn't his uncle.

"Dizo? It's your father. Are you awake?" he called out in a loud voice.

Her husband wrenched himself from her arms and shot up in bed. "What's he doing over here?"

She put a hand on his cheek to bring his face around. "He's just checking to make sure we're enjoying our honeymoon. I think he wants breakfast."

He let out an epithet. "How many fathers do you know who check on their thirty-two-year-old son's honeymoon?"

"How many thirty-two-year-old sons marry a princess who's known for unorthodox exits and entrances?"

Deep male laughter burst out of him. "You have a point."

"I think it's sweet. I love your father." Regina pressed a hot kiss to his lips. "Go let him in,amato, and tell him everything's fine. I'll fix us breakfast."

"Stay where you are. I'll bring you your robe."

"Thank you. I much prefer you to my personal maid."

He threw a pillow at her before pulling on his shorts and shirt. In a minute she heard the sound of two male voices coming from the living room. Dizo and Guido together in her happy home at seven in the morning.

Who would have thought…

ISBN: 978-1-4268-2987-1

ITALIAN GROOM, PRINCESS BRIDE

First North American Publication 2009.

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