PRINCESS IN THE MAKING

Michelle Celmer

Desire™

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Princess in the Making

Аннотация

Pretty single mother Vanessa Reynolds believes she's going to marry his father, but Prince Marcus Theodorou will do everything in his power to prevent that marriage.The lovely American and her adorable baby girl could make the debonair prince's life complete. Yet the powerful bachelor knows he may be forbidden to ever truly make her his own.

Содержание

About the Author 7
Princess in 8
One 9
Two 23
Three 36
Four 47
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 53

“I thought you wanted me to give you a chance,” he said.

But why the sudden change of heart? She couldn’t escape the feeling that he was up to something. “Of course I do. You just didn’t seem too thrilled with the idea.”

"My father thinks it would be a good idea for us to get to know one another, and has asked me to be your companion in his absence. I'm to show you and your daughter a good time, keep you entertained."

Oh no, what had Gabriel done? She wanted Marcus to give her a chance, but not by force. That would only make him resent her more. Not to mention that she hadn't anticipated him being so …

Something.

Something that made her trip over her own feet and stumble over her words and do stupid things … like stare at his bare chest.

Dear Reader,

My office is currently under construction, so I'm sitting at my temporary desk (which today is my bed) wondering what I should write about. And feeling, unfortunately, quite uninspired. So I've decided to do another "About Michelle" letter.

Like everyone, I have quirks. Here are a few that my husband has so graciously pointed out for me …

If someone asks me a question, any question, and I don't know the answer, I have to look it up online. And I mean, that very second or it will drive me crazy. I honestly don't know how I managed all those years without Google, or maybe Google is to blame for my obsession. Who knows.

I'm impulsive. Once I make up my mind that I want to do or buy something, I want it now. And until I have it/have done it, I'm obsessed. It's all I can think about. I will spend hours and hours online, searching articles and reviews, looking for the best

deal. The internet is my enabler.

And last but not least, I have a *horrible* memory. Tell me your name, and five minutes later I will have forgotten it. I'll forget what I'm saying halfway through a sentence. I'll walk into a room to do something and completely forget why I'm there. I know there are nifty methods to improve memory, which I could probably look up on Google, but …

I'm sorry, what was I saying?

Michelle

About the Author

Bestselling author **MICHELLE CELMER** lives in southeastern Michigan with her husband, their three children, two dogs and two cats. When she's not writing or busy being a mom, you can find her in the garden or curled up with a romance novel. And if you twist her arm really hard, you can usually persuade her into a day of power shopping

Michelle loves to hear from readers. Visit her website, www.michellecelmer.com, or write her at PO Box 300, Clawson, MI 48017, USA.

Princess in the Making

Michelle Celmer

www.millsandboon.co.uk

To Patti, who has been an invaluable source of support through some rough times.

One

From a mile in the air, the coast of Varieo, with its crystal blue ocean and pristine sandy beaches, looked like paradise.

At twenty-four, Vanessa Reynolds had lived on more continents and in more cities than most people visited in a lifetime—typical story for an army brat—but she was hoping that this small principality on the Mediterranean coast would become her forever home.

"This is it, Mia," she whispered to her six-month-old daughter, who after spending the majority of the thirteen-hour flight alternating between fits of restless sleep and bouts of screaming bloody murder, had finally succumbed to sheer exhaustion and now slept peacefully in her car seat. The plane made its final descent to the private airstrip where they would be greeted by Gabriel, Vanessa's … it seemed silly and a little juvenile to call him her boyfriend, considering he was fifty-six. But he wasn't exactly her fiancé either. At least, not yet. When he asked her to marry him she hadn't said yes, but she hadn't said no either. That's what this visit would determine, if she wanted to marry a man who was not only thirty-two years her senior and lived halfway around the world, but a *king*.

She gazed out the window, and as the buildings below grew larger, nervous kinks knotted her insides.

Vanessa, what have you gotten yourself into this time?

That's what her father would probably say if she'd had the guts to tell him the truth about this visit. He would tell her that she was making another huge mistake. And, okay, so maybe she hadn't exactly had the best luck with men since … well, *puberty*. But this time it was different.

Her best friend Jessy had questioned her decision as well. "He seems nice now," she'd said as she sat on Vanessa's bed, watching her pack, "but what if you get there and he turns out to be an overbearing tyrant?"

"So I'll come home."

"What if he holds you hostage? What if he forces you to marry him against your will? I've heard horror stories. They treat women like second-class citizens."

"That's the other side of the Mediterranean. Varieo is on the European side."

Jessy frowned. "I don't care, I still don't like it."

It's not as if Vanessa didn't realize she was taking a chance. In the past this sort of thing had backfired miserably, but Gabriel was a real gentleman. He genuinely cared about her. He would never steal her car and leave her stranded at a diner in the middle of the Arizona desert. He wouldn't open a credit card in her name, max it out and decimate her good credit. He wouldn't pretend to like her just so he could talk her into writing his American history term paper then dump her for a cheerleader. And he certainly would never knock her up then disappear and leave her and his unborn child to fend for themselves.

The private jet hit a pocket of turbulence and gave a violent lurch, jolting Mia awake. She blinked, her pink bottom lip began to tremble, then she let out an ear-piercing wail that only intensified the relentless throb in Vanessa's temples.

"Shh, baby, it's okay," Vanessa cooed, squeezing her chubby fist. "We're almost there."

The wheels of the plane touched down and Vanessa's heart climbed up into her throat. She was nervous and excited and relieved, and about a dozen other emotions too jumbled to sort out. Though they had chatted via Skype almost daily since Gabriel left Los Angeles, she hadn't been face-to-face with him in nearly a month. What if he took one look at her rumpled suit, smudged eyeliner and stringy, lifeless hair and sent her right back to the U.S.?

That's ridiculous, she assured herself as the plane bumped along the runway to the small, private terminal owned by the royal family. She had no illusions about how the first thing that had attracted Gabriel to her in the posh Los Angeles hotel where she worked as an international hospitality agent was her looks. Her beauty—as well as her experience living abroad—was what landed her the prestigious position at such a young age. It had been an asset and, at times, her Achilles' heel. But Gabriel didn't see her as arm dressing. They had become close friends. Confidants. He loved her, or so he claimed, and she had never known him to be anything but a man of his word.

There was just one slight problem. Though she respected him

immensely and loved him as a friend, she couldn't say for certain if she was *in love* with him—a fact Gabriel was well aware of. Hence the purpose of this extended visit. He felt confident that with time—six weeks to be exact, since that was the longest leave she could take from work—Vanessa would grow to love him. He was sure that they would share a long and happy life together. And the sanctity of marriage was not something that Gabriel took lightly.

His first marriage had spanned three decades, and he claimed it would have lasted at least three more if cancer hadn't snatched his wife from him eight months ago.

Mia wailed again, fat tears spilling down her chubby, flushed cheeks. The second the plane rolled to a stop Vanessa turned on her cell phone and sent Jessy a brief text, so when she woke up she would know they had arrived safely. She then unhooked the straps of the plush, designer car seat Gabriel had provided and lifted her daughter out. She hugged Mia close to her chest, inhaling that sweet baby scent.

"We're here, Mia. Our new life starts right now."

According to her father, Vanessa had turned exercising poor judgment and making bad decisions into an art form, but things were different now. *She* was different, and she had her daughter to thank for that. Enduring eight months of pregnancy alone had been tough, and the idea of an infant counting on her for its every need had scared the crap out of her. There had been times when she wasn't sure she could do it, if she was prepared for

the responsibility, but the instant she laid eyes on Mia, when the doctor placed her in Vanessa's arms after a grueling twenty-six hours of labor, she fell head over heels in love. For the first time in her life, Vanessa felt she finally had a purpose. Taking care of her daughter, giving her a good life, was now her number one priority.

What she wanted more than anything was for Mia to have a stable home with two parents, and marrying Gabriel would assure her daughter privileges and opportunities beyond Vanessa's wildest dreams. Wouldn't that be worth marrying a man who didn't exactly … well, *rev her engine?* Wasn't respect and friendship more important anyway?

Vanessa peered out the window just in time to see a limo pull around the building and park a few hundred feet from the plane.

Gabriel, she thought, with equal parts relief and excitement. He'd come to greet her, just as he'd promised.

The flight attendant appeared beside her seat, gesturing to the carry-on, overstuffed diaper bag and purse in a pile at Vanessa's feet. "Ms. Reynolds, can I help you with your things?"

"That would be fantastic," Vanessa told her, raising her voice above her daughter's wailing. She grabbed her purse and hiked it over her shoulder while the attendant grabbed the rest, and as Vanessa rose from her seat for the first time in several hours, her cramped legs screamed in protest. She wasn't one to lead an idle lifestyle. Her work at the hotel kept her on her feet eight to ten hours a day, and Mia kept her running during what little time

they had to spend together. There were diaper changes and fixing bottles, shopping and laundry. On a good night she might manage a solid five hours of sleep. On a bad night, hardly any sleep at all.

When she met Gabriel she hadn't been out socially since Mia was born. Not that she hadn't been asked by countless men at the hotel—clients mostly—but she didn't believe in mixing business with pleasure, or giving the false impression that her *hospitality* extended to the bedroom. But when a king asked a girl out for drinks, especially one as handsome and charming as Gabriel, it was tough to say no. And here she was, a few months later, starting her life over. Again.

Maybe.

The pilot opened the plane door, letting in a rush of hot July air that carried with it the lingering scent of the ocean. He nodded sympathetically as Mia howled.

Vanessa stopped at the door and looked back to her seat. "Oh, shoot, I'm going to need the car seat for my daughter."

"I'll take care of it, ma'am," the pilot assured her, with a thick accent.

She thanked him and descended the steps to the tarmac, so relieved to be on steady ground she could have dropped to her knees and kissed it.

The late morning sun burned her scalp and stifling heat drifted up from the blacktop as the attendant led her toward the limo. As they approached, the driver stepped out and walked around to the back door. He reached for the handle, and the door swung open,

and Vanessa's pulse picked up double time. Excitement buzzed through her as one expensive looking shoe—Italian, she was guessing—hit the pavement, and as its owner unfolded himself from the car she held her breath … then let it out in a whoosh of disappointment. This man had the same long, lean physique and chiseled features, the deep-set, expressive eyes, but he was *not* Gabriel.

Even if she hadn't done hours of research into the country's history, she would have known instinctively that the sinfully attractive man walking toward her was Prince Marcus Salvatora, Gabriel's son. He looked exactly like the photos she'd seen of him—darkly intense, and far too serious for a man of only twenty-eight. Dressed in gray slacks and a white silk shirt that showcased his olive complexion and crisp, wavy black hair, he looked more like a *GQ* cover model than a future leader.

She peered around him to the interior of the limo, hoping to see someone else inside, but it was empty. Gabriel had promised to meet her, but he hadn't come.

Tears of exhaustion and frustration burned her eyes. She *needed* Gabriel. He had a unique way of making her feel as though everything would be okay. She could only imagine what his son would think of her if she dissolved into tears right there on the tarmac.

Never show weakness. That's what her father had drilled into her for as long as Vanessa could remember. So she took a deep breath, squared her shoulders and greeted the prince with a

confident smile, head bowed, as was the custom in his country.

"Miss Reynolds," he said, reaching out to shake her hand. She switched Mia, whose wails had dulled to a soft whimper, to her left hip to free up her right hand, which in the blazing heat was already warm and clammy.

"Your highness, it's a pleasure to finally meet you," she said. "I've heard so much about you."

Too many men had a mushy grip when it came to shaking a woman's hand, but Marcus clasped her hand firmly, confidently, his palm cool and dry despite the temperature, his dark eyes pinned on hers. It lasted so long, and he studied her so intensely, she began to wonder if he intended to challenge her to an arm wrestling match or a duel or something. She had to resist the urge to tug her hand free as perspiration rolled from under her hair and beneath the collar of her blouse, and when he finally did relinquish his grip, she experienced a strange buzzing sensation where his skin had touched hers.

It's the heat, she rationalized. And how did the prince appear so cool and collected when she was quickly becoming a soggy disaster?

"My father sends his apologies," he said in perfect English, with only a hint of an accent, his voice deep and velvety smooth and much like his father's. "He was called out of the country unexpectedly. A family matter."

Out of the *country?* Her heart sank. "Did he say when he would be back?"

"No, but he said he would be in touch."

How could he leave her to fend for herself in a palace full of strangers? Her throat squeezed tight and her eyes burned.

You are not going to cry, she scolded herself, biting the inside of her cheek to stem the flow of tears threatening to leak out. If she had enough diapers and formula to make the trip back to the U.S., she might have been tempted to hop back on the plane and fly home.

Mia wailed pitifully and Marcus's brow rose slightly.

"This is Mia, my daughter," she said.

Hearing her name, Mia lifted her head from Vanessa's shoulder and turned to look at Marcus, her blue eyes wide with curiosity, her wispy blond hair clinging to her tearstained cheeks. She didn't typically take well to strangers, so Vanessa braced herself for the wailing to start again, but instead, she flashed Marcus a wide, two-toothed grin that could melt the hardest of hearts. Maybe he looked enough like his father, whom Mia adored, that she instinctively trusted him.

As if it were infectious, Marcus couldn't seem to resist smiling back at her, and the subtle lift of his left brow, the softening of his features—and, oh gosh, he even had dimples—made Vanessa feel the kind of giddy pleasure a woman experienced when she was attracted to a man. Which, of course, both horrified and filled her with guilt. What kind of depraved woman felt physically attracted to her future son-in-law?

She must have been more tired and overwrought than she

realized, because she clearly wasn't thinking straight.

Marcus returned his attention to her and the smile disappeared. He gestured to the limo, where the driver was securing Mia's car seat in the back. "Shall we go?"

She nodded, telling herself that everything would be okay. But as she slid into the cool interior of the car, she couldn't help wondering if this time she was in way over her head.

She was even worse than Marcus had imagined.

Sitting across from her in the limo, he watched his new rival, the woman who, in a few short weeks, had managed to bewitch his grieving father barely eight months after the queen's death.

At first, when his father gave him the news, Gabriel thought he had lost his mind. Not only because he had fallen for an American, but one so young, that he barely knew. But now, seeing her face-to-face, there was little question as to why the king was so taken with her. Her silky, honey-blond hair was a natural shade no stylist, no matter how skilled, could ever reproduce. She had the figure of a gentlemen's magazine pinup model and a face that would inspire the likes of da Vinci or Titian.

When she first stepped off the plane, doe-eyed and dazed, with a screaming infant clutched to her chest, his hope was that she was as empty-headed as the blonde beauties on some of those American reality shows, but then their eyes met, and he saw intelligence in their smoky gray depths. And a bit of desperation.

Though he hated himself for it, she looked so disheveled and exhausted, he couldn't help but feel a little sorry for her. But that

didn't change the fact that she was the enemy.

The child whimpered in her car seat, then let out a wail so high-pitched his ears rang.

"It's okay, sweetheart," Miss Reynolds cooed, holding her baby's tiny clenched fist. Then she looked across the car to Marcus. "I'm so sorry. She's usually very sweet natured."

He had always been fond of children, though he much preferred them when they smiled. He would have children one day. As sole heir, it was his responsibility to carry on the Salvatora legacy.

But that could change, he reminded himself. With a pretty young wife his father could have more sons.

The idea of his father having children with a woman like her sat like a stone in his belly.

Miss Reynolds reached into one of the bags at her feet, pulled out a bottle with what looked to be juice in it and handed it to her daughter. The child popped it into her mouth and suckled for several seconds, then made a face and lobbed the bottle at the floor, where it hit Marcus's shoe.

"I'm so sorry," Miss Reynolds said again, as her daughter began to wail. The woman looked as if she wanted to cry, too.

He picked the bottle up and handed it to her.

She reached into the bag for a toy and tried distracting the baby with that, but after several seconds it too went airborne, this time hitting his leg. She tried a different toy with the same result.

"Sorry," she said.

He retrieved both toys and handed them back to her.

They sat for several minutes in awkward silence, then she said, “So, are you always this talkative?”

He had nothing to say to her, and besides, he would have to shout to be heard over the infant’s screaming.

When he didn’t reply, she went on nervously, “I can’t tell you how much I’ve looked forward to coming here. And meeting you. Gabriel has told me so much about you. And so much about Varieo.”

He did not share her enthusiasm, and he wouldn’t pretend to be happy about this. Nor did he believe even for a second that she meant a word of what she said. It didn’t take a genius to figure out why she was here, that she was after his father’s vast wealth and social standing.

She tried the bottle again, and this time the baby took it. She suckled for a minute or two then her eyelids began to droop.

“She didn’t sleep well on the flight,” Miss Reynolds said, as though it mattered one way or another to him. “Plus, everything is unfamiliar. I imagine it will take some time for her to adjust to living in a new place.”

“Her father had no objection to you moving his child to a different country?” he couldn’t help asking.

“Her father left us when he found out I was pregnant. I haven’t seen or heard from him since.”

“You’re divorced?”

She shook her head. “We were never married.”

Marvelous. And just one more strike against her. Divorce was bad enough, but a child out of wedlock? What in heaven's name had his father been thinking? And did he honestly believe that Marcus would ever approve of someone like that, or welcome her into the family?

His distaste must have shown in his face, because Miss Reynolds looked him square in the eyes and said, "I'm not ashamed of my past, your highness. Though the circumstances may not have been ideal, Mia is the best thing that has ever happened to me. I have no regrets."

Not afraid to speak her mind, was she? Not necessarily an appropriate attribute for a future queen. Though he couldn't deny that his mother had been known to voice her own very potent opinions, and in doing so had been a role model for young women. But there was a fine line between being principled and being irresponsible. And the idea that this woman would even think that she could hold herself to the standards the queen had set, that she could replace her, made him sick to his stomach.

Marcus could only hope that his father would come to his senses before it was too late, before he did something ridiculous, like *marry* her. And as much as he would like to wash his hands of the situation that very instant, he had promised his father that he would see that she was settled in, and he was a man of his word. To Marcus, honor was not only a virtue, but an obligation. His mother had taught him that. Although even he had limits.

"Your past," he told Miss Reynolds, "is between you and my

father."

"But you obviously have some strong opinions about it. Maybe you should try getting to know me before you pass judgment."

He leaned forward and locked eyes with her, so there was no question as to his sincerity. "I wouldn't waste my time."

She didn't even flinch. She held his gaze steadily, her smoky eyes filled with a fire that said she would not be intimidated, and he felt a twinge of … something. An emotion that seemed to settle somewhere between hatred and lust.

It was the lust part that drew him back, hit him like a humiliating slap in the face.

And Miss Reynolds had the audacity to *smile*. Which both infuriated and fascinated him.

"Okay," she said with a shrug of her slim shoulders. Did she not believe him, or was it that she just didn't care?

Either way, it didn't make a difference to him. He would tolerate her presence for his father's sake, but he would never accept her.

Feeling an unease to which he was not accustomed, he pulled out his cell phone, dismissing her. For the first time since losing the queen to cancer, his father seemed truly happy, and Marcus would never deny him that. And only because he believed it would never last.

With any luck his father would come to his senses and send her back from where she came before it was too late.

Two

This visit was going from bad to worse.

Vanessa sat beside her sleeping daughter, dread twisting her stomach into knots. Marcus, it would seem, had already made up his mind about her. He wasn't even going to give her a chance, and the idea of being alone with him until Gabriel returned made the knots tighten.

In hindsight, confronting him so directly probably hadn't been her best idea ever. She'd always had strong convictions, but she'd managed, for the most part, to keep them in check. But that smug look he'd flashed her, the arrogance that seemed to ooze from every pore, had raked across her frayed nerves like barbed wire. Before she could think better of it, her mouth was moving and words were spilling out.

She stole a glance at him, but he was still focused on his phone. On a scale of one to ten he was a solid fifteen in the looks department. Too bad he didn't have the personality to match.

Listen to yourself.

She gave her head a mental shake. She had known the man a total of ten minutes. Was she unfairly jumping to conclusions, judging him without all the facts? And in doing so, was she no better than him?

Yes, he was acting like a jerk, but maybe he had a good reason. If her own father announced his intention to marry a

much younger woman whom Vanessa had never even met, she would be wary too. But if he were a filthy rich king to boot, she would definitely question the woman's motives. Marcus was probably just concerned for his father, as any responsible son should be. And she couldn't let herself forget that he'd lost his mother less than a year ago. Gabriel had intimated that Marcus had taken her death very hard. He was probably still hurting, and maybe thought she was trying to replace the queen, which could not be further from the truth.

Looking at it that way made her feel a little better.

But what if he disliked her so much that he tried to come between her and Gabriel? Did she want to go through life feeling like an intruder in her own home? Or would it never feel like home to her?

Was this just another huge mistake?

Her heart began to pound and she forced herself to take a deep breath and relax. She was getting way ahead of herself. She didn't even know for certain that she wanted to marry Gabriel. Wasn't that the whole point of this trip? She could still go home if things didn't work out. Six weeks was a long time, and a lot could happen between now and then. For now she wouldn't let herself worry about it, or let it dash her excitement. She was determined to make the best of this, and if it didn't work out, she could chalk it up to another interesting experience and valuable life lesson.

She smiled to herself, a feeling of peace settling over her, and gazed out the window as the limo wound its way through the

charming coastal village of Bocas, where shops, boutiques and restaurants lined cobblestone streets crowded with tourists. As they pulled up the deep slope to the front gates of the palace, in the distance she could see the packed public beach and harbor where everything from sailboats and yachts to a full-size cruise ship were docked.

She'd read that the coastal tourist season stretched from April through November, and in the colder months the tourist trade moved inland, into the mountains, where snowboarding and skiing were the popular activities. According to Gabriel, much of the nation's economy relied on tourism, which had taken a financial hit the last couple of years.

The gates swung open as they approached and when the palace came into view, Vanessa's breath caught. It looked like an oasis with its Roman architecture, sprawling fountains, green rolling lawns and lush gardens.

Things were definitely starting to look up.

She turned to Marcus, who sat across from her looking impatient, as though he couldn't wait to be out of the car and rid of her.

"Your home is beautiful," she told him.

He glanced over at her. "Had you expected otherwise?"

Way to be on the defensive, dude. "What I meant was, the photos I've seen don't do it justice. Being here in person is really a thrill."

"I can only imagine," he said, with barely masked sarcasm.

Hell, who was she kidding, he didn't even *try* to mask it. He really wasn't going to cut her a break, was he?

She sighed inwardly as they pulled up to the expansive marble front steps bracketed by towering white columns. At eighty thousand square feet the palace was larger than the White House, yet only a fraction of the size of Buckingham Palace.

The instant the door opened, Marcus was out of the car, leaving it to the driver to help Vanessa with her things. She gathered Mia, who was still out cold, into her arms and followed after Marcus, who stood waiting for her just inside the massive, two-story high double doors.

The interior was just as magnificent as the exterior, with a massive, circular foyer decorated in creamy beiges with marble floors polished to a gleaming shine. A ginormous crystal chandelier hung in the center, sparkling like diamonds in the sunshine streaming through windows so tall they met the domed ceiling. Hugging both sides of the curved walls, grand staircases with wrought iron railings branched off to the right and the left and wound up to the second floor. In the center of it all sat a large, intricately carved marble table with an enormous arrangement of fresh cut exotic flowers, whose sweet fragrance scented the air. The impression was a mix of tradition and modern sophistication. Class and a bit of excess.

Only then, as Vanessa gazed around in wonder, did the reality of her situation truly sink in. Her head spun and her heart pounded. This amazing place could be her home. Mia could grow

up here, have the best of everything, and even more important than that, a man who would accept her as his own daughter. That alone was like a dream come true.

She wanted to tell Marcus how beautiful his home was, and how honored she felt to be there, but knew it would probably earn her another snotty response, so she kept her mouth shut.

From the hallway that extended past the stairs, a line of nearly a dozen palace employees filed into the foyer and Marcus introduced her. Celia, the head housekeeper, was a tall, stern-looking woman dressed in a starched gray uniform, her silver hair pulled back into a tight bun. Her three charges were similarly dressed, but younger and very plain looking. No makeup, no jewelry, identical bland expressions.

Vanessa smiled and nodded to each one in turn.

"This is Camille," Celia told her in English, in a flat tone that perfectly matched her dour expression, signaling for the youngest of the three to step forward. "She will be your personal maid for the duration of your stay."

Duration of her stay? Were they anticipating that she wouldn't be sticking around? Or more to the point, hoping she wouldn't?

"It's nice to meet you, Camille," she said with a smile, offering her hand.

Looking a little nervous, the young woman took it, her eyes turned downward, and with a thick accent said, "Ma'am."

The butler, George, wore tails and a starched, high collar. He was skin and bones with a slight slouch, and looked as though

he was fast approaching the century mark … if he hadn't hit it already. His staff consisted of two similarly dressed assistants, both young and capable looking, plus a chef and baker, a man and a woman, dressed in white, and each looking as though they frequently tested the cuisine.

Marcus turned to George and gestured to the luggage the driver had set inside the door. Without a word the two younger men jumped into action.

A smartly dressed middle-aged woman stepped forward and introduced herself as Tabitha, the king's personal secretary.

"If there is anything you need, don't hesitate to ask," she said in perfect English, her expression blank. Then she gestured to the young woman standing beside her, who wore a uniform similar to those of the maids. "This is Karin, the nanny. She will take care of your daughter."

Vanessa was a little uncomfortable with the idea of a total stranger watching her baby, but she knew Gabriel would never expose Mia to someone he didn't trust implicitly.

"It's very nice to meet you," Vanessa said, resisting the urge to ask the young woman to list her credentials.

"Ma'am," she said, nodding politely.

"Please, call me Vanessa. In fact, I've never been one to stand on formality. Everyone should feel free to use my first name."

The request received no reaction whatsoever from the staff. No one even cracked a smile. Were they always so deadpan, or did they simply not like her? Had they decided, as Marcus had,

that she wasn't to be trusted?

That would truly suck. And she would have to work extra hard to prove them wrong.

Marcus turned to her. "I'll show you to your quarters."

Without waiting for a reply, he swiveled and headed up the stairs to the left, at a pace so brisk she nearly had to jog to keep up with him.

Unlike the beige theme of the foyer, the second floor incorporated rich hues of red, orange and purple, which personally she never would have chosen, but it managed to look elegant without being too gaudy.

Marcus led her down a long, carpeted hall.

"So, is the staff always so cheerful?" she asked him.

"It's not enough that they'll cater to your every whim," Marcus said over his shoulder. "They have to be happy about it?"

With a boss who clearly didn't like her, why would they?

At the end of the hallway they turned right and he opened the first door on his left. Gabriel told her that she would be staying in the largest of the guest suites, but she hadn't anticipated just how large it would be. The presidential suite at the hotel where she worked paled in comparison. The main room was big and spacious with high ceilings and tall windows that bracketed a pair of paned French doors. The color scheme ran to muted shades of green and yellow.

There was a cozy sitting area with overstuffed, comfortable-looking furniture situated around a massive fireplace. There was

also a dining alcove, and a functional desk flanked by built-in bookcases whose shelves were packed with hardback books and knickknacks.

"It's lovely," she told Marcus. "Yellow is my favorite color."

"The bedroom is that way." Marcus gestured toward the door at the far end of the suite.

She crossed the plush carpet to the bedroom and peeked inside, her breath catching. It was pure luxury with its white four-poster king-size bed, another fireplace and a huge, wall-mounted flat screen television. But she didn't see the crib Gabriel had promised.

The weight of her sleeping daughter was starting to make her arms ache, so she very gently laid Mia down in the center of the bed and stacked fluffy pillows all around her, in case she woke up and rolled over. She didn't even stir.

On her way back to the living area Vanessa peered inside the walk-in closet where her bags were waiting for her, and found that it was large enough to hold a dozen of her wardrobes. The bathroom, with its soaking tub and glass-enclosed shower, had every modern amenity known to man.

She stepped back into the living space to find Marcus standing by the door, arms crossed, checking his watch impatiently.

"There's no place for Mia to sleep," she told him, and at his blank expression added, "Gabriel said there would be a crib for her. She moves around a lot in her sleep, so putting her in a normal bed, especially one so high off the ground, is out of the

question."

"There's a nursery down the hall."

There was an unspoken "duh" at the end of that sentence.

"Then I hope there's a baby monitor I can use. Otherwise, how will I hear her if she wakes in the middle of the night?" Though Mia slept through most nights, Vanessa was still accustomed to the random midnight diaper changes and feedings, and an occasional bad dream.

He looked puzzled. "That would be the responsibility of the *nanny*."

Right, the nanny. Vanessa had just assumed the nanny was there for the times when Mia needed a babysitter, not as a full-time caregiver. She wasn't sure how she felt about that. Vanessa worked such long hours, and was away from home often. Part of this trip was about spending more time with her daughter.

"And where does the nanny sleep?" she asked Marcus.

"Her bedroom is attached to the nursery," he said, in a tone that suggested she was asking stupid questions. In his world it was probably perfectly natural for the staff to take full responsibility for the children's care, but she didn't live in his world. Not even close. Surely he knew that, didn't he?

She would have to carefully consider whether or not she wanted the nanny to take over the nightly duties. She didn't want to be difficult, or insult Karin, who was probably more than capable, but when it came to Mia, Vanessa didn't fool around. If necessary, she would ask Marcus to move the crib into her

bedroom, and if he had a problem with that, she would just sleep in the nursery until Gabriel returned. Hopefully it wouldn't be more than a few days.

"If there's nothing else you need," Marcus said, edging toward the door. He really couldn't wait to get away, could he? Well, she wasn't about to let him off the hook just yet.

"What if I do need something?" she asked. "How do I find someone?"

"There's a phone on the desk, and a list of extensions."

"How will I know who to call?"

He didn't roll his eyes, but she could see that he wanted to. "For a beverage or food, you call the kitchen. If you need clean towels or fresh linens, you would call the laundry … you get the point."

She did, although she didn't appreciate the sarcasm. "Suppose I need you. Is your number on there?"

"No, it isn't, and even if it were, I wouldn't be available."

"Never?"

A nerve in his jaw ticked. "In my father's absence, I have a duty to my country."

Why did he have to be so defensive? "Marcus," she said, in a voice that she hoped conveyed sincerity, "I understand how you must be feeling, but—"

"You have no *idea* how I'm feeling," he ground out, and the level of animosity in his tone drew her back a step. "My father asked me to get you settled in, and I've done that. Now, if there's

nothing else."

Someone cleared their throat and they both looked over to see the nanny standing in the doorway.

"I'll leave you two to discuss the child's care," Marcus said, making a hasty escape, and any hope she'd had that they might be friends went out the door with him.

"Come in," she told Karin.

Looking a little nervous, the girl stepped inside. "Shall I take Mia so you can rest?"

She still wasn't sure about leaving Mia in a stranger's care, but she was exhausted, and she would have a hard time relaxing with Mia in bed with her. If Vanessa fell too deeply asleep, Mia could roll off and hurt herself. And the last thing she needed was Marcus thinking that not only was she a money-grubbing con artist, but a terrible mother as well.

"I really could use a nap," she told Karin, "but if she wakes up crying, I'd like you to bring her right to me. She's bound to be disoriented waking up in a strange place with someone she doesn't know."

"Of course, ma'am."

"Please, call me Vanessa."

Karin nodded, but looked uncomfortable with the idea.

"Mia is asleep on the bed. Why don't I carry her, so I can see where the nursery is, and you can bring her bag?"

Karin nodded again.

Not very talkative, was she?

Vanessa scooped up Mia, who was still sleeping deeply, and rolled her suitcase out to Karin, who led her two doors down and across the hall to the nursery. It was smaller than her own suite, with a play area and a sleeping area, and it was decorated gender-neutral. The walls were pale green, the furniture white and expensive-looking, and in the play area rows of shelves were packed with toys for children of every age. It was clearly a nursery designed for guests, and she supposed that if she did decide to stay, Mia would get her own nursery closer to Gabriel's bedroom.

The idea of sharing a bedroom with Gabriel, and a bed, made her stomach do a nervous little flip-flop.

Everything will work out.

She laid Mia in the crib and covered her with a light blanket, and the baby didn't even stir. The poor little thing was exhausted.

"Maybe I should unpack her things," she told Karin.

"I'll do it, ma'am."

Vanessa sighed. So it was still "ma'am"? That was something they would just have to work on. "Thank you."

She kissed the tips of her fingers, then gently pressed them to Mia's forehead. "Sleep well, sweet baby."

After reiterating that Karin was to come get her when Mia woke, she walked back to her suite. She pulled her cell phone out of her bag and checked for calls, but there were none. She dialed Gabriel's cell number, but it went straight to voice mail.

She glanced over at the sofa, thinking she would sleep there

for an hour or so, but the bed, with its creamy silk comforter and big, fluffy pillows, called to her. Setting her phone on the bedside table, she lay back against the pillows, sinking into the softness of the comforter. She let her eyes drift closed, and when she opened them again, the room was dark.

Three

After leaving Miss Reynolds's suite, Marcus stopped by his office, where his assistant Cleo, short for Cleopatra—her parents were Egyptian and very eccentric—sat at her computer playing her afternoon game of solitaire.

"Any word from my father?" he asked.

Attention on the screen, she shook her head.

"I'm glad to see that you're using your time productively," he teased, as he often did when he caught her playing games.

And obviously she didn't take him seriously, because she didn't even blink, or look away from the cards on the screen. "Keeps the brain sharp."

She may have been pushing seventy, but no one could argue that she wasn't still sharp as a pin. She'd been with the royal family since the 1970s, and used to be his mother's secretary. Everyone expected she would retire after the queen's death, and enjoy what would be a very generous pension, but she hadn't been ready to stop working. She claimed it kept her young. And since her husband passed away two years ago, Marcus suspected she was lonely.

She finished the game and quit out of the software, a group photo of her eight grandchildren flashing on to her computer screen. She turned to Marcus and caught him in the middle of a yawn and frowned. "Tired?"

After a month-long battle with insomnia, he was always tired. And he wasn't in the mood for another lecture. "I'm sure I'll sleep like a baby when *she* is gone."

"She's that bad?"

He sat on the edge of her desk. "She's awful."

"And you know this after what, thirty minutes with her?"

"I knew after five. I knew the second she stepped off the plane."

She leaned forward in her chair, elbows on her desk, her white hair draped around a face that was young for her years, and with no help at all from a surgeon's knife. "Based on what?"

"She only wants his money."

Her brows rose. "She told you that?"

"She didn't have to. She's young, and beautiful, and a single mother. What else would she want from a man my father's age?"

"For the record, your highness, fifty-six is not that old."

"For her it is."

"Your father is an attractive and charming man. Who's to say that she didn't fall head over heels in love with him."

"In a few *weeks?*"

"I fell in love with my husband after our first date. Never underestimate the powers of physical attraction."

He cringed. The idea of his father and that woman … he didn't even want to think about it. Though he didn't doubt she had seduced him. That was the way her kind operated. He knew from experience, having been burned before. And his father, despite

his staunch moral integrity, was vulnerable enough to fall under her spell.

"So, she's really that attractive?" Cleo asked.

Much as he wished he could say otherwise, there was no denying her beauty. "She is. But she had a child out of wedlock."

She gasped and slapped a hand to her chest. "Off with her head!"

He glared at her.

"You do remember what century this is? Women's rights and equality and all that."

"Yes, but *my* father? A man who lives by tradition. It's beneath him. He's lonely, missing my mother and not thinking straight."

"You don't give him much credit, do you? The king is a very intelligent man."

Yes, he was, and clearly not thinking with his brain. No one could convince Marcus that this situation was anything but temporary. And until she left, he would simply stay out of her way.

Vanessa bolted up in bed, heart racing, disoriented by the unfamiliar surroundings. Then, as her eyes adjusted to the dark and the room came into focus, she remembered where she was.

At first she thought that she'd slept late into the night, then realized that someone had shut the curtains. She grabbed her cell phone and checked the time, relieved to see that she had only slept for an hour and a half, and there were no missed calls from Gabriel.

She dialed his cell number, but like before it went straight to voice mail. She hung up and grabbed her laptop from her bag, hoping that maybe he'd sent her an email, but the network was password protected and she couldn't log on. She would have to ask someone for the password.

She closed the laptop and sighed. Since she hadn't heard a word from Karin, she could only assume Mia was still asleep, and without her daughter to take care of, Vanessa felt at a loss for what to do. Then she remembered all the bags in the closet waiting to be unpacked—basically her entire summer wardrobe—and figured she could kill time doing that.

She pushed herself up out of bed, her body still heavy with fatigue, and walked to the closet. But instead of finding packed suitcases, she discovered that her clothes had all been unpacked and put away. The maid must have been in while she was asleep, which was probably a regular thing around here, but she couldn't deny that it creeped her out a little. She didn't like the idea of someone else handling her things, but it was something she would just have to get used to, as she probably wouldn't be doing her own laundry.

She stripped out of her rumpled slacks and blouse and changed into yoga pants and a soft cotton top, wondering, when her stomach rumbled, what time she would be called for dinner. She grabbed her phone off the bed and walked out to the living room, where late afternoon sunshine flooded the windows and cut paths across the creamy carpet. She crossed the room and

pulled open the French doors. A wall of heat sucked the breath from her lungs as she stepped out onto a balcony with wrought iron railings and exotic plants. It overlooked acres of rolling green grass and colorful flower beds, and directly below was the Olympic-size pool and cabana Gabriel had told her about. He put the pool in, he'd bragged, because Marcus had been a champion swimmer in high school and college, and to this day still swam regularly. Which would account for the impressively toned upper body.

But she definitely shouldn't be thinking about Marcus's upper body, or any other part of him.

Her cell phone rang and Gabriel's number flashed on the screen. Oh, thank God. Her heart lifted so swiftly it left her feeling dizzy.

She answered, and the sound of his voice was like a salve on her raw nerves. She conjured up a mental image of his face. His dark, gentle eyes, the curve of his smile, and realized just then how much she missed him.

"I'm so sorry I couldn't be there to greet you," he told her, speaking in his native language of Variean, which was so similar to Italian they were practically interchangeable. And since she was fluent in the latter, learning the subtle differences had been simple for her.

"I miss you," she told him.

"I know, I'm sorry. How was your flight? How is Mia?"

"It was long, and Mia didn't sleep much, but she's napping

now. I just slept for a while too."

"My plane left not twenty minutes before you were due to arrive."

"Your son said it was a family matter. I hope everything is okay."

"I wish I could say it was. It's my wife's half sister, Trina, in Italy. She was rushed to the hospital with an infection."

"Oh, Gabriel, I'm so sorry." He'd spoken often of his sister-in-law, and how she had stayed with him and his son for several weeks before and after the queen died. "I know you two are very close. I hope it's nothing too serious."

"She's being treated, but she's not out of danger. I hope you understand, but I just can't leave her. She's a widow, and childless. She has no one else. She was there for me and Marcus when we needed her. I feel obligated to stay."

"Of course you do. Family always comes first."

She heard him breathe a sigh of relief. "I knew you would understand. You're an extraordinary woman, Vanessa."

"Is there anything I can do? Any way I can help?"

"Just be patient with me. I wish I could invite you to stay with me, but …"

"She's your wife's sister. I'm guessing that would be awkward for everyone."

"I think it would."

"How long do you think you'll be?"

"Two weeks, maybe. I won't know for sure until we see how

she's responding to the treatment."

Two weeks? Alone with Marcus? Was the universe playing some sort of cruel trick on her? Not that she imagined he would be chomping at the bit to spend quality time with her. With any luck he would keep to himself and she wouldn't have to actually see Marcus at all.

"I promise I'll be back as soon as I possibly can," Gabriel said. "Unless you prefer to fly home until I return."

Home to what? Her apartment was sublet for the next six weeks. She lived on a shoestring budget, and being on unpaid leave, she hadn't had the money for rent while she was gone. Gabriel had offered to pay, but she felt uncomfortable taking a handout from him. Despite what Marcus seemed to believe, the fact that Gabriel was very wealthy wasn't all that important to her. And until they were married—if that day ever came—she refused to let him spoil her. Not that he hadn't tried.

The wining and dining was one thing, but on their third date he bought her a pair of stunning diamond earrings to show his appreciation for her professional services at the hotel. She had refused to take them. She had drooled over a similar pair in the jewelry boutique at the hotel with a price tag that amounted to a year's salary.

Then there had been the lush flower arrangements that began arriving at her office every morning like clockwork after he'd flown back home, and the toys for Mia from local shops. She'd had to gently but firmly tell him, no more. There was no need

to buy her affections.

"I'll wait for you," she told Gabriel. Even if she did have a place to go home to, the idea of making that miserably long flight two more times with Mia in tow was motivation enough to stay.

"I promise we'll chat daily. You brought your laptop?"

"Yes, but I can't get on the network. And I'll need plug adaptors since the outlets are different."

"Just ask Marcus. I've instructed him to get you anything that you need. He was there to greet you, wasn't he?"

"Yes, he was there."

"And he was respectful?"

She could tell Gabriel the truth, but what would that accomplish, other than to make Gabriel feel bad, and Marcus resent her even more. The last thing she wanted to do was cause a rift between father and son.

"He made me feel very welcome."

"I'm relieved. He took losing his mother very hard."

"And it's difficult for him to imagine you with someone new."

"Exactly. I'm proud of him for taking the change so well."

He wouldn't be proud if he knew how Marcus had really acted, but that would remain hers and Marcus's secret.

"Your room is satisfactory?"

"Beyond satisfactory, and the palace is amazing. I plan to take Mia for a walk on the grounds tomorrow, and I can hardly wait to visit the village."

"I'm sure Marcus would be happy to take you. You should ask

him."

When hell froze over, maybe. Besides, she would much rather go exploring on her own, just her and Mia.

"Maybe I will," she said, knowing she would do no such thing.

"I know that when you get to know one another, you'll become friends."

Somehow she doubted that. Even if she wanted to, Marcus clearly wanted nothing to do with her.

"I left a surprise for you," Gabriel said. "It's in the top drawer of the desk."

"What sort of surprise?" she asked, already heading in that direction.

"Well, it won't be a surprise if I tell you," he teased. "Look and see."

She was already opening the drawer. Inside was a credit card with her name on it. She picked it up and sighed. "Gabriel, I appreciate the gesture, but—"

"I know, I know. You're too proud to take anything from me. But I *want* to do this for you."

"I just don't feel comfortable spending your money. You're doing enough already."

"Suppose you see something in the village that you like? I know you have limited funds. I want you to have nice things."

"I have you, that's all I need."

"And that, my dear, is why you are such an amazing woman. And why I love you. Promise me you'll keep it with you, just in

case. I don't care if it's five euros or five thousand. If you see something you really want, please buy it."

"I'll keep it handy," she said, dropping it back in the drawer, knowing she would never spend a penny.

"I've missed you, Vanessa. I'm eager to start our life together."

"If I stay," she reminded him, so he knew that nothing was set in stone yet.

"You will," he said, as confident and certain as the day he'd asked her to marry him. Then there was the sound of voices in the background. "Vanessa, I have to go. The doctor is here and I need to speak with him."

"Of course."

"We'll chat tomorrow, yes?"

"Yes."

"I love you, my sweet Vanessa."

"I love you, too," she said, then the call disconnected.

She sighed and set her phone on the desk, hoping there would come a day when she could say those words, and mean them the way that Gabriel did. That there would be a time when the sort of love she felt for him extended past friendship.

It wasn't that she didn't find him attractive. There was no doubt that he was an exceptionally good-looking man. Maybe his jaw wasn't as tight as it used to be, and there was gray at his temples, and he wasn't as fit as he'd been in his younger years, but those things didn't bother her. It was what was on the inside that counted. And her affection for him felt warm and comfortable.

What was missing was that … *zing*.

Like the one you felt when you took Marcus's hand?

She shook away the thought. Yes, Marcus was an attractive man, too, plus he didn't have the sagging skin, graying hair and expanding waist. He also didn't have his father's sweet disposition and generous heart.

When Gabriel held her, when he'd brushed his lips across her cheek, she felt respected and cherished and safe. And okay, maybe those things didn't make for steamy hot sex, but she knew from personal experience that sex could be highly overrated. What really mattered was respect, and friendship. That's what was left when the *zing* disappeared. And it always did.

Men like Marcus thrilled, then they bailed. Usually leaving a substantial mess in their wake. She could just imagine the string of broken hearts he'd caused. But Gabriel was dependable and trustworthy, and that's exactly what she was looking for in a man now. She'd had her thrills, now she wanted a mature, lasting relationship. Gabriel could give her that. That and so much more, if she was smart enough, and strong enough, to let him.

Four

Marcus was halfway through his second set of laps that evening, the burn in his muscles shaking off the stress that hung on his shoulders like an iron cloak, when he heard his cell phone start to ring. He swam to the side of the pool, hoisted himself up onto the deck and walked to the table where he'd left his phone, the hot tile scorching his feet. It was his father.

He almost didn't answer. He was sure his father would have spoken to Miss Reynolds by now, and she had probably regaled him with the story of Marcus's less than warm welcome. The first thing on her agenda would be to drive a wedge between him and his father, which the king would see through, of course. Maybe not right away, but eventually, and Marcus was happy to let her hang herself with her own rope. Even if that meant receiving an admonishment from his father now. So he took the call.

"Father, how is Aunt Trina?"

"Very sick, son," he said.

His heart sank. He just wasn't ready to say goodbye to yet another loved one. "What's the prognosis?"

"It will be touch and go for a while, but the doctors are hoping she'll make a full recovery."

He breathed a sigh of relief. No one should ever have to endure so much loss in the span of only eight months. "If there's anything you need, just say so."

“There is something, but first, son, I wanted to thank you, and tell you how proud I am of you. And ashamed of myself.”

Proud of him? Maybe he hadn’t spoken to Miss Reynolds after all. Or was it possible that he’d already seen though her scheme and had come to his senses? “What do you mean?”

“I know that accepting I’ve moved on, that I’ve fallen in love with someone new—especially someone so young—has been difficult for you. I was afraid that you might treat Vanessa … well, less than hospitably. But knowing that you’ve made her feel welcome … son, I’m sorry that I didn’t trust you. I should have realized that you’re a man of integrity.”

What the hell had she told him exactly?

Marcus wasn’t sure what to say, and his father’s words, his misplaced faith, filled him with guilt. How would he feel if he knew the truth? And why had she lied to him? What sort of game was she playing? Or was it possible that she really did care about his father?

Of course she didn’t. She was working some sort of angle, that was how her kind always operated.

“Isn’t her daughter precious?” his father said, sounding absolutely smitten. Marcus couldn’t recall him ever using the word *precious* in any context.

“She is,” he agreed, though he’d seen her do nothing but scream and sleep. “Is there anything pressing I should know about, business that needs tending?”

“There’s no need to worry about that. I’ve decided to fly my

staff here and set up a temporary office."

"That's really not necessary. I can handle matters while you're away."

"You know I would go out of my mind if I had nothing to do. This way I can work and still be with Trina."

That seemed like an awful lot of trouble for a short visit, unless it wasn't going to be short. "How long do you expect you'll be gone?"

"Well, I told Vanessa two weeks," he said. "But the truth is, it could be longer."

He had a sudden, sinking feeling. "How much longer?"

"Hopefully no more than three or four weeks."

A *month*. There was no question that Trina—*family*—should come first, but that seemed excessive. Especially since he had a guest. "A month is a long time to be away."

"And how long did Trina give up her life to stay with us when your mother was ill?"

She had stayed with them for several months in the final stages of his mother's illness, then another few weeks after the funeral. So he certainly couldn't fault his father for wanting to stay with her. "I'm sorry, I'm being selfish. Of course you should be there with her. As long as she needs you. Maybe I should join you."

"I need you at the palace. Since Tabitha will be with me, it will be up to you to see that Vanessa and Mia have anything they need."

"Of course." He could hardly wait.

“And I know this is a lot to ask, but I want you to keep them entertained.”

Marcus hoped he didn’t mean that the way it sounded. *“Entertained?”*

“Make them feel welcome. Take them sightseeing, show them a good time.”

The idea had been to stay away from her as much as humanly possible, not be her tour guide. “Father—”

“I realize I’m asking a lot of you under the circumstances, and I know it will probably be a bit awkward at first, but it will give you and Vanessa a chance to get to know one another. She’s truly a remarkable woman, son. I’m sure that once you get to know her you’ll love her as much as I do.”

Nothing his father could say would make Marcus want to spend time with that woman. And no amount of time that he spent with her would make him “love” her. “Father, I don’t think—”

“Imagine how she and her daughter must feel, in a foreign country where they don’t know a soul. And I feel terrible for putting her in that position. It took me weeks to convince her to come here. If she leaves, she may never agree to come back.”

And that would be a bad thing?

Besides, Marcus didn’t doubt for an instant that she had just been playing hard to get, stringing his father along, and now that she was here, he seriously doubted she had any intention of leaving, for any reason. But maybe in this case absence wouldn’t

make the heart grow fonder. Maybe it would give his father time to think about his relationship with Miss Reynolds and realize the mistake he was making.

Or maybe, instead of waiting for this to play out, Marcus could take a more proactive approach. Maybe he could persuade her to leave.

The thought brought a smile to his face.

"I'll do it," he told his father.

"I have your word?"

"Yes," he said, feeling better about the situation already. "You have my word."

"Thank you, son. You have no idea how much this means to me. And I don't want you to worry about anything else. Consider yourself on vacation until I return."

"Is there anyplace in particular you would like me to take her?"

"I'll email a list of the things she might enjoy doing."

"I'll watch for it," he said, feeling cheerful for the first time in weeks, since his father had come home acting like a lovesick teenager.

"She did mention a desire to tour the village," the king said.

That was as good a place to start as any. "Well then, we'll go first thing tomorrow."

"I can't tell you what a relief this is. And if ever you should require anything from me, you need only ask."

Send her back to the U.S., he wanted to say, but he would be

taking care of that. After he was through with her, she would be *sprinting* for the plane. But the key with a woman like her was patience and subtlety.

He and his father hung up, and Marcus dropped his phone back on the table. He looked over at the pool, then up to the balcony of Miss Reynolds's room. He should give her the good news right away, so she would have time to prepare for tomorrow's outing. He toweled off then slipped his shirt, shorts and sandals on, combing his fingers through his wet hair as he headed upstairs. He half expected to hear her daughter howling as he approached her room, but the hallway was silent.

He knocked, and she must have been near the door because it opened almost immediately. She had changed into snug black cotton pants, a plain pink T-shirt, and her hair was pulled up in a ponytail. She looked even younger this way, and much more relaxed than she had when she stepped off the plane. It struck him again how attractive she really was. Without makeup she looked a little less exotic and vampy, but her features, the shape of her face, were exquisite.

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