

The Prince & His Cinderella—The Cinderella Escape, Book 1

Chapter One

Nausea churned in Briana Duvaille's stomach as her gold evening sandals sank into the sinfully rich carpet of the Monte Carlo grand ballroom. Her nerves were stretched to the breaking point as she imagined that everyone in the room knew her secret.

Would intermingling with people spark her memory, as Crystal had suggested? Just one day, she thought. One single day that her mind refused to recall. A memory blip that had turned her life upside down.

She hesitated, tempted to turn and run, then checked the impulse and gathered her courage. She'd never been a wimp and had little patience with the turmoil that refused to let go.

Taking a deep breath, she pressed a hand to her stomach. The Principality of Monaco was a little world of dreams. The sea, the rocks, the ancient narrow streets, the gardens that knew no seasons, full of flowers and sweet, heady perfume. All of it should have made the realm an oasis of serenity where love and contentment thrived.

But the Riviera getaway had recently turned into a waking nightmare for Briana.

She was seriously afraid she was losing her mind—a horrible thing for a woman of twenty-six.

She shouldn't have let Crystal talk her into attending this charity function—a fairy-tale ball in a room that sparkled like the Royal Palace—but her cousin's allergies had flared at the last minute and she'd insisted the invitation not be wasted.

Briana's hand trembled against the borrowed sequined bag as she slipped her wrap from her shoulders and moved toward the coat check.

A man stood there, his back to her, his shoulders broad beneath the jet-black tuxedo jacket, an overcoat draped over his arm. She stepped up beside him, and in her nervousness, the evening bag slipped from her fingers.

They bent at the same time. Fingers touched and shoulders brushed as they both reached for the bag. Off-balance, Briana tipped forward. Simultaneously their heads turned...and his lips glanced off hers.

A simple accidental brushing of lips that set off sparks electric enough to rival a dazzling display of fireworks against the French Riviera skyline.

Briana nearly toppled over in her haste to jerk away. The man—who stared back at her with a similar look of spellbound astonishment—simply took her breath away. She tasted the scent of his cologne on her lips.

For what seemed an eon, he stared, as if he could see right into her soul.

Surely he didn't suspect...?

No, no one knew her secret. For tonight, she was someone else; she could forget—forget the choices that would have to be faced. Still, the way he looked at her, she imagined he could see what she so desperately wanted to hide.

And then he smiled—a smile so brilliant, she felt the chaos of her real life slip away, felt her insides turn molten.

He glanced down at the silver-embossed invitation she still held clutched in her hand.

“Crystal Duvaille?”

She almost didn't answer, in fact had an urge to glance around for her cousin. Then she remembered. The switch. Crystal's allergy attack. The reason she was here instead of her cousin. *Mingle*, Crystal had said. *Maybe something will come back to you.*

Briana cleared her throat and stood up. She held out her hand. “And you are?”

“Joseph Castillo. And a handshake seems so tame after that auspicious meeting.” His softly accented voice held her entranced, as did his actions. His palm slid against hers, slowly, so sensually she nearly melted. Instead of the traditional formality she'd expected, he drew her hand to his lips and gently brushed a kiss to her knuckles, his gaze holding hers as gently—as surely—as the mere tips of his fingers. Prickles of warmth arched up her arm straight to her heart.

Briana felt the blush start at the roots of her red hair and cursed her telling complexion. Crystal wouldn't have blushed; she would have flirted.

And that was when Briana realized that she could, too. She wasn't herself tonight; she was somebody else. What would the harm be?

Steadier now, Briana felt her smile blossom. “I'm charmed. It's been awhile since a gallant gentleman kissed my hand.”

“Likewise, Miss Duvaille.”

Laughter tickled her insides. “Gallant gentlemen kiss your hand, too?”

Amusement twinkled in his velvety brown eyes. “Would it surprise you if I said yes?”

She bit her bottom lip. “Maybe. You strike me as being very proper, yet I’d have pegged you as being, uh... straight.”

His brows shot upward. “And you’d be absolutely correct. Allow me to clarify. I meant that I too, am charmed.” His dark gaze touched her like a caress, held her, his voice a mere whisper. “More than you know.”

Briana’s knees threatened to buckle. The power of his sensuality wrapped her in a cloak of excitement. Before she made a total fool of herself, she turned and handed her wrap to the waiting attendant and accepted the claim check. A single look from Joseph Castillo had made her feel as if she were halfway to heaven, sent there on wings of an emotion she’d never felt before.

Moderation was in order, she decided. A little distance to gather her wits. For with his hint of a Spanish accent and his spellbinding gaze, she had an idea she could easily be swept away by this man.

And one foolish mistake in a lifetime was enough. Even if she couldn’t remember committing that foolish mistake.

While he was engaged in checking his own overcoat—a necessity due to the gentle rain falling outside—Briana slipped away.

She made several attempts at conversation with other guests, sipped expensive champagne and drank in the opulence of the ballroom. Still, her gaze strayed to Joseph Castillo. And each time she looked his way, he was looking back.

The room was filled with attractive men—dignitaries and a couple of recognizable TV stars—but this man in particular stood out. There was an air of strength and a touch of arrogance about him. His chocolate eyes were faintly bored; his mouth, full and sensual, curved in the barest hint of a smile.

He wore his tux as if he’d been born in one—casually, with an ease that bespoke power and confidence. He had presence, she realized. Although he stood off to the side, he naturally commanded respect and awe. She noted several women dressed to the nines make overtures to get his attention, yet with an almost-imperceptible shake of his head he discouraged the socialites.

Odd, Briana thought. It was as though there was some sort of protocol surrounding this man—a protocol that everybody knew about but her—making it a social blunder to approach

him without invitation. People seemed to treat him just a little differently, with deference, she thought, yet he hardly noticed.

Then again, how could he? Briana wondered. He appeared to have eyes only for her. She glanced away, but the power was stronger than she could resist. Like a magnet, his eyes captured hers once more.

He seemed to understand how impossible it was for her to keep from looking. His slow, sexy smile slammed into her like the force of a Grand Prix race car.

His carriage was erect, his stride sure as he crossed the room. And Briana was rooted to the spot, helpless to do little more than stand there and wait for her destiny.

Coup de foudre, she thought. Love at first sight. Oh, dear heaven, why now? It was the worst possible time in her life to be blinded by such a silly notion.

But like a sheep without a will, she stood where she was. Watched him. Waited for him. Felt her heart pump and her mouth go dry.

Fine crystal tinkled as glasses were raised and lowered. The orchestra played softly in the background—a waltz, she noted with the small part of her brain that still functioned.

He stopped in front of her, the smell of his cologne surrounding her. She licked her lips; imagined that she could still taste him there.

“It appears we cannot avoid one another,” he said softly, his fingertips brushing the tendrils of hair that had escaped her French twist. “Dance with me?”

This is the way a man should touch a woman, Briana thought, dazed, as the pads of his fingers gently caressed her neck and toyed with her hair. He watched her, waiting for permission, an answer to his question. For the life of her, she couldn’t remember what that question was. It was as if he were every one of her fantasies rolled into one incredibly virile package, as if she’d known him all her life, when in actuality they’d only exchanged a few words and a few more heady looks.

Then a new thought struck her, one that threatened her sanity like a splash of ice water in the face, sobering and shocking.

“Have we met before?” she asked, her voice sounding faint even to her own ears.

He grinned and Briana shook her head.

“Believe me,” she clarified. “That wasn’t a line.” One day, she thought. One day that was thoroughly wiped from her memory bank. She had no idea whom she’d met that day or what she’d done. Well, perhaps she had an idea what she’d done, but it didn’t bear thinking about.

The madness battered at her again, threatening to bring her down. Turmoil built like a scream. She searched Joseph Castillo’s features, praying, yet not even sure what she was praying for.

His smile was gentle, his voice soft. “I would remember if we’d met before.”

“One would hope,” she muttered.

“One would know,” he returned and slipped his hand around her waist, holding his left palm up in the time-honored dance position. “May I?”

She allowed him to draw her close, felt the warmth of his palm seep into her, both calming and thrilling. “We’re not on the dance floor.”

“We have a floor beneath our feet and music surrounding us.”

“Literal, aren’t you?”

He smiled and moved her smoothly into the waltz. Guests parted for them as he guided her toward the center of the room. He smelled like heaven and Briana’s heart sped up—which had little to do with the exertion of the dance and very much to do with the man who held her so tenderly in his arms.

She felt as though they were the only couple in the room—like in a Cinderella fairy tale. Her world narrowed to encompass just the two of them, thighs brushing, feet gliding with graceful sensuality.

And all the while, his gaze never left her face. It was as if he were determined to memorize every line, every nuance. Likewise, Briana was drawn to him. His sweet breath fanned her cheek, his mouth was so close....

She’d never wanted to kiss a man so badly in her life. Without permission, without invitation. Just to reach up and press her lips to his, taste him, to see if the wild zing pummeling through her system could become any stronger.

Watch out, she told herself, closing her fingers into a fist against the fabric of his tux, resisting the urge to test the texture of his hair at the nape of his neck.

“*Una diosa*,” he whispered, his lips curving slightly.

And with that, Briana gave herself a reality check. She chuckled. “I’m hardly a goddess.”

His dark brows rose. "You speak Spanish?"

"Mmm. And French and German. Enough Japanese to get me by. I majored in languages."

"Where?"

"Ohio State." She grinned. "You look surprised."

"I wondered. Duvaille is decidedly French, yet your accent is predominantly American."

He dipped her into a turn and Briana followed as though they'd been dancing together for years.

"Deceiving, isn't it. The name's been handed down since my great-great-grandfather. He married an American and since then, the family lineage has become somewhat watered-down.

And yours? Castillo is definitely Spanish and you have the accent to go with it."

"I am afraid my lineage is impeccable."

"You make that sound like a curse."

"Sometimes I think it is."

She wondered at the flash of discontent she saw in his eyes, but told herself it was none of her business. This was just a dance, just one night with an attractive man whom she didn't intend to see again. There were too many uncertainties in her life at the moment and she wasn't about to drag an innocent man into the chaos. No matter how compelling she found him. No matter how right his touch felt.

"So, are you here on holiday?" he asked.

"Yes and no. A working holiday, you could say. And you?"

"Definitely a holiday. I'm looking for someone...a woman."

Briana felt a swift jolt of pain she had no business feeling. "Have you found her?" Might as well stick the knife all the way in.

"I think I have."

"Then what the heck are you doing dancing with me?"

"Who's to say *you* are not that woman?"

Briana laughed. Oh, she'd missed this. The thrill and ease of interacting with a man. The engaging of two minds, the ability to pretend for a while that real life didn't exist. "Get real."

Joseph nearly missed a step in the waltz. Her laughter was full and unrestrained, yet oh-so-feminine. It invited participation. More than one guest looked in their direction, their lips drawn into a smile.

She was an intriguing package. Fairly tall for a woman, yet he liked it. She fit in his arms as if heaven had designed her specifically for him. She had a wholesome complexion like the blush of a new peach, a face that could belong to the girl next door or grace the cover of a magazine. Sexy tendrils of autumn-colored hair escaped a comb studded with rhinestones and fell softly around her neck. Teardrop pearls set in gold hung from the pierced lobes of her ears.

She should wear emeralds, he thought, set in platinum. Brilliant green stones to match her expressive eyes.

She had a mouth that fired his fantasies, lips that appeared to smile often, their natural rose shade subtly accented with gloss.

What intrigued him most of all was that she treated him like a normal man. He couldn't remember anyone ever telling him to "get real." No one would have dared. Nor would they have laughed at his compliment.

"You find the idea of a relationship between the two of us amusing?"

What Briana found was that she couldn't quite meet his eyes. "We've just met."

"Ah, but when in France..." He paused, a dimple appearing in his smooth-shaven cheek. "There is a French expression—*coup de foudre*."

For some ridiculous reason, Briana felt her throat snap closed. There was no way he could have known that was her exact thought just minutes ago. And if her voice actually cooperated, she wasn't about to address that statement. "I'm impressed. Your accent is right on."

"I, too, studied language."

Thank goodness he'd let the subject go. "At Oxford?"

"Harvard. And you did not respond to my excellent French expression."

So, she wasn't off the hook. She hoped she wasn't as transparent as she felt. "No, I didn't."

"Ah, *querida*, I do believe you hold the power to wound me."

"I doubt that. You look like a pretty self-assured guy to me."

"At the moment that is debatable. So, we will come back to this attraction thing later, I think. Tell me of your family."

"Just your everyday family. Dad's a professor, Mom's a nurse. Two sisters and a brother still at home. I'm the oldest."

"And your dreams? What are they?"

In a mess right now. “I’d always dreamed of travel. My dad and I used to pour over travel brochures of exotic countries and places. He was never free to do the wanderlust thing because of us kids, but he encouraged me to go for it. So after college I headed for Paris to try my hand at modeling.”

“Let me guess. You were on the cheer squad in school, perhaps the drama club, and some smart talent scout discovered you.”

“You get two out of three. There wasn’t a talent scout. I went in search of that myself.”

“And why are you not still in Paris strutting down runways and wearing scary fashions?”

Briana laughed. “Scary is right. Some of those getups are really far-out.” Her bare shoulders lifted in a shrug. “Competition’s tough in Paris. You either have the look or you don’t. I didn’t, and I’m particularly fond of eating, so I gave it up.”

“And came to Monte Carlo?”

“Mmm,” she hedged, realizing she was on shaky ground, here. He still thought of her as Crystal. And for some reason she didn’t want to correct that misconception. “I have a cousin who lives close by. She invited me to stay, so I came on over.”

“An adventurous woman.”

“Sometimes more than I should be.” Especially that one day. The day she still couldn’t recall. Good heavens, just how adventurous she’d been didn’t bear thinking about! “So, what are you doing in Monte Carlo?” She paused and grinned. “Or is this starting to sound a little like the Spanish Inquisition?”

He returned the smile. “No. I find it refreshing. The getting-to-know-you process. And I very much want to get to know you.”

Briana nearly fanned herself in response to his heated look. A woman could spend a lifetime just listening to that smooth Spanish accent. “You’re such a flirt. What do you do, Joseph Castillo?”

The hesitation was only slight. “I’m a businessman of sorts. An ambassador of goodwill for my country.”

She grinned, enjoying a little flirting herself. “Is there ill will you’re trying to repair?”

“No.” His brow arched, his eyes were amused. “We are a peaceful lot. But charity functions such as this and public-relations opportunities are part of my duties.”

“Which I imagine means a great deal of travel.”

“You sound as if that is a bad thing.”

“No. Just my envy showing.”

“You’d be surprised how mundane forced travel can become.”

“Oh, I’d imagine it’d be pretty tough...what, flying around in a private jet?”

“Guilty as charged. Occasionally I take the yacht.”

“My heart goes out to you,” she teased. “You lead a rough life.”

“You are making fun.”

“Yes.”

His thumb stroked her cheek, her smiling mouth. “Your smile is *muy bella*.”

“Flatterer.”

“An honest compliment.”

“Thank you.” She knew very well she wasn’t a spectacular beauty. Her figure was too well rounded, her feet were the size of small boats, and her eyes were too wide-set. She did have good teeth and a nice smile, though. “Sort of pretty” would be her best description. Still, his compliments made her feel special. And tonight she needed to feel special. Needed a break from the turmoil she would once again face in the morning.

“Tell me about your travels, the places you’ve been.”

And he did. He described the snow in Switzerland so vividly she could almost feel the frigid bite of the wind against her cheeks. He told her of the verdant hills of Ireland, the lush peacefulness of an Amazon rain forest, the smog-filled basins of Los Angeles, the white-sand beaches of Cabo San Lucas, the operas and ballets on several continents.

His subtly accented voice was smooth and rich, quiet and sensual. It drew her in, held her in a spell. His descriptions made her ache with wanderlust.

Time sped past in a haze of laughter and gentle touches, heated gazes and silent speculation. They moved onto the terrace where the lights of the Riviera twinkled like magical diamonds, enchanting, reflecting off the yacht-filled harbor, and stretching along the terraced hillsides and Maritime Alps.

She shivered in the brisk evening air and Joseph removed his tuxedo jacket, draping it around her shoulders, the heat of his body now warming hers.

“Better?” he asked, his knuckles brushing skin bared by her strapless gown.

She smiled. “Thanks. It’s beautiful out here, isn’t it?” Her voice was hushed, as though to speak louder might disturb the enchantment.

“Yes. Unique and elegant.”

She glanced at him, noticing that he looked at her instead of the view. The power of his gaze was almost blinding. Briana cleared her throat.

“Are you one of those lucky ducks with a yacht moored out in the harbor?”

“Mmm.” His scent surrounded her as he eased closer, his arm stretching past her. “See the one there?”

“Which one?”

He leaned closer, so that they were cheek to cheek. “Follow the path of my finger. See? The one with the white lights strung from the mast. Just to the right, toward the tip of Nice.”

Her eyes widened. “You’re kidding. That’s not a yacht. It’s a cruise ship!”

He chuckled. “Would you like to go on a cruise with me?”

She turned to him, wondering if she sounded as gauche as she felt. This man was out of her realm. She was no American debutante used to living the high life. She’d dabbled in an array of jobs to support herself, from driving a limo to modeling in Paris. Her family was working-middle-class. Like it or not, Joseph Castillo simply awed her.

She expected to see teasing in his eyes. But his dark gaze telegraphed something entirely different. Intense and serious, he watched her, and she realized his offer was genuine. He wasn’t toying with her. He truly wanted to see her again.

He made her feel like a princess. She saw his gaze drop to her mouth, knew he meant to kiss her. He slid his thumb beneath her chin, his dark eyes smoldering with need. A need that matched her own.

“May I?” he whispered.

She licked her lips and must have nodded. His hands framed her face. Slowly, gently, he lowered his mouth to hers.

The thrill that shot through her was powerful and drugging. Her hands crept up his shirtfront, rested against his collar, touched the hair at the nape of his neck. Everything seemed to register at once—his taste, his scent, his soft touch that held her more surely than any bonds.

He moved very gently, reverently, the tip of his tongue skimming across the seam of her lips, nipping, teasing, yet never really asking for entrance. It was as if he were afraid to cross some boundary of respect, content to just enjoy, to savor.

She'd never felt so cherished in her life.

Coup de foudre echoed in her mind once more, startling her. This man could easily become an obsession. She drew back, touched the corner of his sensual mouth with a single finger, felt her heart twist.

She couldn't have fallen in love so quickly. It was a ridiculous notion. Yet everything within her told her it was so.

And the power of it scared her to death.

She caught the glint of silver at his wrist and read the illuminated dial of his expensive watch.

"Oh, my, look at the time." Her breath heaved in and out as though she'd just run a marathon.

So caught up in Joseph's eyes and voice, Briana had lost track of the evening. She'd never felt so comfortable in a man's presence. She felt as if she knew him, body and soul; as if he were her missing half.

But time had a way of catching up. And her coach was about to turn into a pumpkin. Reality washed over her like the shock of a sucker punch—reality that she'd been able to forget for a few blissful hours.

But now it was back. And she needed to get away. Run before she got in any deeper.

This was a night made of dreams. A man made of her dreams. But he didn't belong to her. She couldn't allow herself to get caught up in the feelings. The hope. Could never—especially now—entertain the idea of love at first sight.

She slipped from his arms and thrust the tuxedo jacket at him. "I've got to go."

She didn't wait for the protest she saw in his eyes, knew was on the tip of his tongue. She simply turned and hurried back through the emptying ballroom as if the hounds of hell were at her heels.

She had to get out of here. Run before she lost her head completely and succumbed to the temptation—to the fire and longing she saw in Joseph Castillo's handsome gaze. A temptation and fire that matched her own, yet was hopeless.

Hopeless because Briana Duvaulle, perfect little Catholic girl from Ohio, was pregnant and had no memory of doing the deed.