

## The Prince & The Mommy—The Cinderella Escape—Book #3

### Excerpt

#### Chapter One

Chelsa Lawrence sat on the enclosed porch of her rented bungalow, her arms wrapped around her two daughters. A storm had slammed into the Mediterranean coast, fierce and unforgiving, turning the small island of San Alegra into a state of unstable anticipation. The surf pounded and the wind howled. It was almost midnight and Chelsa knew the girls should've been in bed hours ago, but the fear of tidal waves and rooftops blown off by winds had both little girls huddled close, watching the specter of nature unfold.

Their imaginations were vivid, as was their mother's. After all, the children's books Chelsa wrote, *The Adventures of Water Babies*, were fashioned after her own girls, Emily and Sophie. Chelsa marveled at their little minds, their endless questions, and used them in the stories she wrote.

But tonight her thoughts weren't on sweet, innocent stories. Perhaps it was the ferocious intensity of the storm, but she felt a sense of foreboding.

Her arms tightened. She would keep her daughters safe.

"Momma, you're squishing the bref out of me."

"Sorry, Sophie." She eased her grip on her four-year-old.

"Momma?" This time it was Emily's quiet voice. "Do you think that boat will hit the rocks?"

"Hmm?" She hadn't noticed a boat.

Sophie wiggled out of her hold and perched forward on the bench. "Pirates," she whispered.

"There's no such thing as pirates," Emily admonished. Being six, she felt her knowledge was much more superior than her younger sister's.

"Uh-huh! 'Member Hook? And Tinker Bell?"

"That's just movies, silly. Right, Momma?" Superior, she might be, but still a little girl who got scared.

"Yes, sweetie. It's just a movie. But it's fun to imagine." Of course, there were still pirates roaming the seas, but none so dramatic as the movies might depict.

“See!” Sophie chirped and rested pudgy hands on equally pudgy knees. Emily rolled her eyes because her little sister still didn’t get it.

Chelsa stood. Pirate or not, that boat was in grave danger. The sea roiled and spat, tossing the sleek craft around like a rubber duck in a washing machine. Waves crashed over the rocks that jutted maybe fifty yards off shore, cascading over the sides in a beard of frothy foam. It appeared the skipper was attempting to head for the beach, but the gusty winds and churning swells thwarted his efforts.

Her heart started to pound and adrenaline kicked in. The beach was pitch-black, illuminated only by the light of a partial moon against the foamy crest of the waves. The power was out in the house and the phone lines were down. Cell service on this island was non-existent. If the ship crashed, there would be no way to call for help.

But then, Chelsa shouldn’t even be considering calling for help. She had no business getting involved, especially since there was no telling who was aboard that ship—including a modern-day pirate.

And at all costs, she had her children to think about. Their safety.

In a matter of two weeks or less, their lives could very well be in danger. All of their lives.

A sinister blast of wind sprayed sand and sea salt, testing the strength of the screen door. The pounding of angry water against unforgiving rock superseded the sound of splintering wood as the yacht lost its control against nature and slammed into the rocks. Like straw in a dust devil, debris scattered, whirling, projected into the air, flung high and wide at the mercy of the storm.

And in that instant before impact, Chelsa saw someone dive for safety. The girls were jumping now, both terrified and excited.

“Momma! The rocks broke the boat!” Sophie screamed.

“Momma! A man jumped over the side!”

“Yes,” Chelsa said, her hand hesitating at the screen door, indecision screaming within her.

“Go get him, Momma.”

“Wait,” she said. “Hush, now.” She had to think, didn’t quite know what to do.

“But he’s not swimming. He’s just floating,” Emily said.

“You gotta get him, Momma,” Sophie said, her solemn blue eyes round with worry. “Willy can’t save him in the big waves.”

She was talking about the whale in *Free Willy*. Her children watched entirely too many movies, Chelsa decided.

And they expected her to be a heroine. She'd never felt less like a heroine in her life. But with two sets of expectant, round eyes looking up at her, she had little choice.

"Stay right here. Both of you. Don't move a muscle. Do you understand?" At their twin nods, Chelsa kicked off her sandals and raced across the cool sand.

She saw him surface. Like a bodysurfer with the aid of unseen hands, he rode the crest of a wave, the momentum dumping him onshore right at her feet. Battling winds that slashed at her clothes, whipping her hair in a wild frenzy, she flipped him over, gripped him beneath his arms and tugged. Wet and shaking, adrenaline lent her strength as she dragged him free of the fierce current.

The horrendous weather was like an omen, an evil one. She felt exposed, yet knew she was overreacting. Her life was in chaos, though, and the weight of it was sucking her down, much like the ocean was swallowing the remains of the boat.

She set those thoughts aside for the moment and checked her beached sailor. He was breathing, thank goodness, but his eyes were closed.

"Can you hear me?" she shouted over the force of the storm.

He didn't respond. Unconscious. And no wonder. With the way that yacht had exploded against the rocks, it was a miracle he was even drawing a breath.

"Is he dead?"

"Is there any blood?"

Her head whipped around. "I thought I told you girls to stay on the porch!"

"Sophie got scared," Emily blamed.

"Nuh-uh!"

"Stop it, both of you. I don't need this right now."

The girls flanked her, wrapping their arms around her in apology.

Chelsa took a steadying breath. "Sorry, girls. Momma didn't mean to shout."

"That's okay," Emily said. "What are you going to do with the man?"

"Get him to the house, I guess." And get her daughters out of the open, exposed, where anyone might see or harm them. Fear over being seen doubled her determination. Stretched out

on the wet sand, the man appeared to be over six feet. And he outweighed her by a good eighty pounds.

But there was no one else to rely on for help, a truth she'd become all too familiar with lately.

With the hem of her dress swirling around her ankles, threatening to trip her, she waded into the tide and snagged a piece of canvas before the surf could carry it out again. She didn't know a lot about fancy yachts, but it was obvious this was part of the sail. Once again, she realized this man should be counting his blessings. It would take horrendous force to rip this sturdy canvas. It was a wonder this man's body wasn't in the same shape.

Praying she wasn't setting herself up for a lawsuit over moving an individual who might have a neck injury, she rolled him onto the canvas and tugged.

His feet cut deep furrows in the sand as she backtracked the hundred or so yards to the bungalow. Straining, her shoulder muscles feeling like they were on fire, she managed to drag him into the house—though the porch steps scraping along his back gave her grief and made her wince. The girls were more hindrance than help, but she didn't have the heart to tell them so. They were so proud of themselves for doing their part.

For an instant, she considered making him comfortable outside, on the screened-in porch, but that offended her ingrained Southern hospitality. Her own mother would've had a fit.

By the time she had him settled in the bed, she was exhausted. Candles burned, casting a shadowy glow over his still features.

When she got a good look, she sucked in a breath.

Oh, no. Handsome as sin. Easily recognizable.

Her heart raced as she charged to the window and jerked down the shade.

"Emily, lock the doors. Sophie, go with your sister."

"Why—"

"Just do as I say. And stay inside."

The last thing she needed was the possibility of lurking photographers, some hungry journalist snapping pictures of her girls. And where this man went, paparazzi were sure to follow.

She took another breath and looked back at the unconscious, soaked man lying in her bed. Hands trembling, she fisted them and ordered herself to relax.

There was work to be done still—the highly interesting task of undressing this virile, exquisitely thrilling celebrity.

The royal Don Juan who set both Latin and American women’s hearts aflutter.

Even in repose, he oozed charm. And the instant she touched his bare skin, she learned that a harried mother of two from Mississippi wasn’t in any way immune to the magnetic draw of Prince Antonio Castillo of Valldoria.

\* \* \*

Someone was pounding on his head. He pried his eyes open and was immediately sorry that he’d done so. The throbbing increased.

But the vision wasn’t too bad. *An angel*, he thought.

Before he could fully appreciate the magnificent sight, two cherubs bounced on the bed. Well, only one of them bounced. The other stood next to the bed, right by his head, poking at the dimple in his cheek that stayed indented whether he was smiling or not.

And he was not at the moment. The pain hammering away at his temples was excruciating.

Three females hovered over him—two miniature and one nicely put together. *Very* nicely put together.

He felt at a distinct disadvantage. Even under the incessant throb of his head, he had enough sense to realize he was naked beneath the wedding ring quilt. And he didn’t imagine he’d been the one to do the undressing.

“Good morning, Your Highness,” the lovely vision said.

*Ah*, Antonio thought. *Southern*. He was a man who had a weakness for women with those sexy American drawls.

Then he realized what she’d called him, and he laughed. A big mistake. Nausea churned at the sharp pain, but he dismissed it. He’d crashed million-dollar race cars and been in worse shape. A knock on the head from a damaged sailboat was of little concern.

“Good morning to you, too. And Antonio will do fine. My brother, Joseph is the heir, I’m just the spare. Where am I?”

“On your island.”

“Valldoria’s not an island.”

“No, San Alegra.”

“Ah. The land of happiness. At least familiar ground.”

Chelsa put a trembling hand on Sophie’s shoulder before the child could poke Antonio Castillo’s dimples again. That smooth-as-silk Latin accent sent shivers up and down her spine. The man might denounce his title, but he was still a prince by right of birth. A reputed *playboy* prince.

Even with the goose-egg-size bump on his golden brown forehead that was fast turning an interesting shade of purple, he was handsome as sin. The myriad photographs taken of him around the globe didn’t do him a bit of justice.

Good night, if she wasn’t careful, she’d be the one stroking those dimples rather than her daughter.

“Did you buy the whole ocean?” Emily asked.

“No, little *diosa*. Just the land. And technically it is my family who owns it.”

She giggled. “What’s *dossa*?”

“*Diosa*,” Antonio pronounced, tickled by the little girl’s infectious laughter. He appreciated laughter in any form. “Goddess.”

The little cherub next to the bed crept closer. “Like da lil’ mermaid?”

“Something like.”

“Girls, go have your breakfast and leave Mr., uh...”

“Tony,” he supplied, realizing she was hesitating for fear of creating a faux pas over calling a prince by his surname. But Antonio wasn’t one to stand on ceremony. Any ceremony.

“And you are?”

“Chelsa. These are my daughters, Emily and Sophie. Go now, girls.”

“But Momma,” they chorused.

“No buts.” Her voice was soft, with a firmness that commanded instant attention and action. “Sophie, you let Emily pour the milk this time.”

Antonio noticed that the littlest one started to object then apparently thought better of it. Ignoring the evil ghoul in his head wielding a hammer, he got a tighter grip on the quilt when Emily bounced down off the mattress. His lips kicked up in admiration as he watched the girls scramble to obey their mother.

*And oh, what a mother*, he thought, always one to appreciate loveliness. She wasn’t beautiful like the starlets he normally gravitated toward. “Wholesome” was how he’d describe

this woman. Blond hair, streaked by nothing stronger than the sunlight, created a curly, shoulder-length halo around a smooth, peaches-and-cream complexion. He imagined the humidity would play the very devil with all that natural curl. A sprinkling of freckles kissed the bridge of her nose. Clear blue eyes, unadorned by cosmetics, were round and intelligent...and just a bit wary.

To Antonio's way of thinking, it was a sin for any woman to display wariness in his presence, and he set about to correct it.

"Tell me, *bella*, is it just Chelsa, or do you have a last name?"

She took a step back and folded her hands at her waist. Short nails, he noted, no artificial tips or polish. And no wedding ring.

The wariness he'd detected flickered in her eyes like sparklers on Independence day. His curiosity and hero's heart went on full alert. He loved women of all shapes and sizes, their smell, their softness, their quirks. It was both a talent and an obsession to learn what made them tick.

But patience was a virtue and Antonio had plenty of it. Any man with a set of eyes could see that beneath the exterior of reserve were banked passions and fire. He wanted to know what made her hide behind all that Southern poise.

At last she unknotted her hands and tugged at a wrinkle on the quilt. "It's Lawrence. Chelsa Lawrence."

He reached out and took her hand in his. "I am pleased to meet you, Chelsa Lawrence. And I believe I may well owe you my life." Slowly he brought her fingertips to his lips and kissed the back of her knuckles, his gaze holding hers. "Thank you, *bella*."

Chelsa wasn't sure she could draw a breath, much less speak, but she gave it a shot. "You're..." She cleared her throat and straightened, easing her hand away. Good night, she hadn't felt a zing like that in a long time...if ever. "You're welcome. And speaking of saving, I looked as best I could with the storm and all, but I didn't see evidence of anyone else with you when the yacht hit the reef."

"No. I was captain and crew alone."

She shouldn't have been astonished, but she was. "On a ship that size? Not very sensible."

"Ah, but I am excellent at what I do. *All* that I do."

She saw the flirtatious challenge in his dark eyes and wickedly sensual smile. She might have been put off by bragging, but his widely publicized reputation substantiated the claim.

Latin Lover. At last she understood the meaning, or at least the draw. With a mere look, a simple touch, he made her feel utterly, exquisitely female. And with a probable concussion at that. *Talk about potent*, she thought, barely resisting the urge to fan herself.

But she hadn't traveled—or run, rather—across an entire continent to swoon beneath the power of a man's confidence and sex appeal.

"Perhaps not *all* that you do. Otherwise your fancy boat wouldn't look like a pile of toothpicks littering the beach." She saw his dimples deepen, saw the corners of his lips start to climb and knew she had to get out of here. "I imagine you're probably hungry, so I'll go fix you some breakfast. It'll only be cold cereal. The power's still out from the storm."

Her hormones screaming like a Mississippi steam engine, she fled the room, the sound of his soft laughter following in her wake.

Dear heaven, he was the wrong man to elicit such a powerful response. A reputed playboy, Prince Antonio Castillo of Valdoria was both recognizable and newsworthy worldwide, not only in the tabloids and gossip columns, but in the sports pages of every major newspaper across the country.

And whoever happened to be with him garnered national headlines, as well.

Rick was an avid sports fan. He'd never had much interest in the tabloids, but newspapers were a different matter—an obsession actually for a man who tossed his ante in every bet pool available.

And she had a fairly good idea he'd have access to the sports pages in that cushy Mississippi penitentiary.

She couldn't take a chance on him finding out her whereabouts. If he did, she might as well kiss her life—and the lives of her daughters—goodbye.

\* \* \*

Not one to lay about in bed, Antonio wrapped the sheet around himself and gingerly sat up on the side of the mattress. So far so good. A little woozy, a sharp edge of pain, but manageable.

From the bay window facing the ocean, he watched a moody moment of changing light and drama. The bluster and blow of the coastal squall had passed, and for now the sea was calm and the winds quiet. To the east, a tranquil window of fleeting sunlight vied for position with the persistent after-grays, neither ready to concede the slowly clearing sky.



Sure enough, debris of the *Diablo Plata* were strewn on the pristine sand. He was sorry about the loss. It was a sweet sloop; he'd won two first-place cups in the sleek beauty.

From the looks of the pitiful remains, though, he was lucky to be alive.

The sound of little-girl giggles and the soft, Southern drawl of his hostess drew his attention. A cursory search of the room didn't turn up his clothes, so he settled for a flowery kimono he found hanging from a hook on the back of the bathroom door. Chelsa's obviously. It carried a hint of her scent. Citrus. The shoulder seams strained a bit, but he managed to get the robe tied at the middle to preserve his modesty.

Not that he was all that modest but there were *niñas* in the house.

He nearly collided with Chelsa in the doorway of the kitchen. As it was, the bed tray smacked him in the stomach—a stomach, he realized, that was tender. Obviously he hadn't taken a complete inventory of his injuries other than the throbbing in his head.

He placed his hands over hers, steadying the tray. Milk sloshed over the rim of the cereal bowl.

"Careful," he said, noticing that her hands trembled. *Excitement?* he wondered. *Or fear.* There was something about this woman that made him think of a damsel in distress.

"You shouldn't be out of bed."

She wore a tank-style dress that hung from spaghetti straps and skimmed her body right down to her bare toes. He wanted to spend a good long while just staring at her, drinking in the soft cadence of her sexy Southern drawl.

But they had an avid audience and Antonio was a man who valued privacy when it came to intimacies and wooing. "A little bump on the head won't keep me down."

"Lord save me from macho men. Suit yourself." She let go of the tray and stepped away. Good thing he had a decent hold on the plastic or there'd have been a mess.

Antonio grinned and set the tray on the table where the two little girls were spelling words with their alphabet cereal. "We meet again, *mi bellas*. May I join you?"

Emily giggled. Sophie, her pudgy cheeks full, simply looked up at him with round, innocent eyes.

"You're wearing Momma's robe," Emily said.

“Ah, little goddess, you are astute to be noticing fashion at such a young age. Do you not consider it quite the thing?” He held his arms out to his sides like a European model on a runway, careful not to rip the satin.

Emily went off in another gale of laughter. Sophie, the solemn little cherub, popped the spoon out of her mouth. “Boys aren’t s’posed to wear flowers.”

“Sophie!” Chelsa scolded. Antonio noticed that she was making a valiant attempt to keep a lid on her amusement. Her enticing lips quivered charmingly at the corners.

It didn’t bother him a bit that the amusement was at his expense. “That is quite all right, little mermaid.” Sophie’s eyes widened in thought at the title. “Boys might object to the silliness of flowers, but when they grow up to be men, they soon learn that if they feel strong on the inside, the outside package doesn’t matter.”

Emily bobbed her head. “Cuz they’re secure in their mask’a’linty.”

He felt his brows shoot upward. “How old are you, goddess?”

“Six,” Emily said, straightening importantly in her chair.

“Ah, yes. That would explain why you know about such things as masculinity.” He spared a glance at Chelsa, who appeared resigned rather than scandalized by her daughter’s announcement.

“Course she knows ’bout it,” Sophie inserted. “Cuz of the water babies.”

“The water babies?” Perhaps the bump on his head was more severe than he had first determined. He was suddenly and thoroughly lost in the conversation.

“Yep,” Sophie said, as if that were that.

He looked at Chelsa for clarification. She appeared to be waging a battle with herself over divulging information, as though she were guarding an international secret. Before she could come to a decision, though, Emily picked up the thread of explanation.

“Momma writes *The Adventures of Water Babies*. ”

“*The Adventures of Water Babies?*” *Dios*, he was becoming a parrot.

“Children’s books, silly.”

His brows shot up again. He liked kids well enough—other people’s kids, that was—and these two little imps intrigued the hell out of him.

He grinned. “Yes, silly me. Of course they’re for children. That would be why I have never read them.”

“You could if you wanted. Momma gots lots of copies.”

“Girls,” Chelsa said. “I’m sure Mr. Castillo isn’t interested in—”

“Tony,” he corrected. “And I *am* interested. However, we have become sidetracked from the original subject of flowers and feminine wear and masculinity. And Emily was about to be so charming as to enlighten me.”

“Well,” Emily drawled, pleased to hold center stage, “when the water baby frog was messin’ around and fell off the lily pad, the wicked old cricket laughed at him and made fun. And the water baby should’a got all embarrassed cuz the ladybug with the flirty eyelashes was watchin’ him. But he climbed right back on the lily pad—even though his face was red and he was now wearing a daisy on his head like a lady’s church hat—and he winked at the ladybug and smiled real big like, just as pretty as you please. That’s cuz he was secure in his mask’a’lnty—”

“Masculinity,” Antonio coached.

Emily nodded. “And the ladybug thought that was very special. The water baby didn’t get mad and he went right on wearing the flower like it was meant to be, and it was the cricket who felt like the silly one for acting so ugly and pokin’ fun.” She folded her hands primly in front of her on the table, suddenly looking much older than her years. “But I’m sure my little sister wasn’t makin’ fun of you in Momma’s robe.”

Sophie shook her head from side to side, sending her cap of frizzy blond curls swinging. She’d been as caught up in the tale as though she’d never heard it before. “Nuh-uh.”

Something warm and gentle passed through Antonio as he studied these three beautiful acquaintances he’d literally dropped in on. He liked the soft smile that transformed Chelsa Lawrence’s smooth features as she’d listened to her daughter regale him with stories. A story she’d evidently written. And he was more than a little in love with these heartbreaker cherubs who said whatever crossed their young minds.

“Of course you were not making fun,” he said to Sophie. “I am sure you both have excellent manners. Actually, it is I who should apologize to such fine ladies for appearing in the dining hall wearing nightclothes.” The tiny breakfast area was hardly formal, but he got a kick out of surprising reactions out of the children. “However, I could not find evidence of my own garments...I do hope I arrived with them?”

Both little girls giggled. “Momma taked ’em off you.”

Their mother flushed scarlet.

He met her eyes, thinking it was a crying shame he hadn't been awake and alert for the undressing. A first for him. When a beautiful woman stripped him naked, he liked to be a participant.

"They're in the dryer," Chelsa said.

"Still wet, I would imagine, since we as yet have no power."

"Yes. I rinsed them by hand."

"You should not have gone to the trouble. I could have done that myself."

Her blond brows lifted, though her cheeks still glowed like the blush of a new peach. "A prince does laundry?"

"This lowly one does. I travel alone a lot. At sea, I do not carry the staff with me."

"You should at least employ a crew."

"At times I do. However, had I been sailing with a full crew, your bungalow would be bursting at the seams and I doubt you would possess enough garments to clothe them all."

If he hadn't been watching closely, he would have missed the slight tightening at the corners of her clear blue eyes. Obviously this woman wasn't keen on having her privacy invaded. He wondered why. Those questions would best be asked in private, he decided. Whatever caused her to grow silent and wary, however fleeting, was probably something she would rather shield her little girls from.

Then again, he could be all wrong. Perhaps she was simply annoyed at having her vacation interrupted.

With his brain finally revving up to speed, another thought struck him like a lightning bolt straight from the gods. A question any respectable playboy was reluctant to voice, but Antonio knew he must. He glanced once more at her unadorned finger, then back to her clear, lake-blue eyes.

"I have apparently lost the last twelve hours or so of my memory, and it has rattled my decent manners. Perhaps it will appear unseemly and in poor taste if your husband were to return while I sit in your breakfast nook wearing your robe...?" He let the words trail off, but his sheepish smile soon faded.

The sudden silence in the small bungalow was strained and thick enough to cut with a machete. Outside, the surf rolled onshore and ebbed out. A gull wheeled overhead with a high-pitched cry, and its mate answered.

As though it were a prearranged, choreographed movement, Chelsea stepped behind her daughters and put a protective hand on each of their shoulders. Emily reached beneath the table and took her sister's hand.

"I'm no longer married."

"Oh." He wasn't sure what to say, or how to say it. Had the man died? The protective circle the three Lawrence females presented told him something wasn't right.

He wasn't in any way prepared for four-year-old Sophie's matter-of-fact declaration.

"My daddy got put in the jailhouse."