

The Princess & Her Bodyguard—The Cinderella Escape—Book #2

Excerpt

Chapter One

Cole Martinez was damned good at his job. He could track anybody or anything and had keen instincts that had never failed him. It wasn't like him to question himself, but he did so now. Surely he was in the wrong place.

He checked the address again. The cottage in the small French village perched along the hills above Nice was the right one, but the sight that greeted him wasn't.

Nor was the woman.

He'd expected jet-black hair flowing past a trim waist. He had mistakenly assumed she'd be wearing a timeless suit in neutral colors with sensible pumps.

But Raquel Santiago didn't hold up to any of his expectations. She'd cut her long hair to shoulder length and added some deep-red highlights. Pushed behind her ears, it flipped slightly at the ends. She wore a man's shirt, with the tail hanging almost to her knees, and a pair of skintight stretch pants.

Stunned by the beautiful heiress's casual, bohemian appearance, it was a moment before his senses registered the rest of the scene. Her cottage, which he now realized doubled as a photography studio, was filled with baby paraphernalia. A crib, painted candy-stripe white and red, was pushed against the far wall. Two mismatched rocking chairs sat beneath open windows draped in lace that fluttered lazily in the gentle September breeze. Toys were strewn about the hardwood floors, spilling out of a mesh-sided playpen.

In the corner there were oversize stuffed animals in a rainbow of pastels nestled against a bed of green cotton. And in the center was a baby, completely covered in pink fuzz with only its tiny round face peeking out of the costume. It was the cutest thing Cole had ever seen.

He leaned against the doorjamb and watched as Raquel snapped pictures and all but stood on her head to entertain the infant. He admired her skill and once again felt that tickling of surprise.

He had no doubt she'd balk when he stated his mission—to bring her home to their small nation of Valldoria where she could be properly protected. And though he could spend a lifetime just watching the enigmatic dynamo work, time was wasting.

Pushing away from the doorway, he moved into the room, making a mental note to speak with her about leaving her front door wide open. Engrossed in snapping pictures—and shaking her sweet tush to the beat of Madonna’s classic hits—Raquel Santiago hadn’t yet realized anyone had breached her sanctuary.

That is, until his second step landed on a rubber alligator that let out a dual-pitched, grating squeak.

Cole froze as the baby amid the stuffed animals turned wide, startled eyes on him. In delayed reaction, the infant’s eyes widened and its tiny face crumbled as it began to wail.

The day was going downhill fast.

Raquel whipped around, nearly losing hold of her prized camera. Her heart tripped as she stared at the man just inside the doorway. Tall and dark, he had a half smile on his face, an expression she knew from past experience that he used when he was determined to sway someone to his way of thinking. A man who was dynamite to look at, but a definite thorn in her side.

Cole Martinez.

“*Dios mio!* You gave me a fright! What do you want?” Though her insides quaked with emotions that weren’t entirely based on surprise, she carefully stepped between the stuffed animals and lifted baby Carmen, soothing the fur-covered infant. “There, there, *ma chérie*, do not cry.” Her native Latin accent gave the French words a smoky quality that got the baby’s attention.

It evidently got Cole’s, too, because he still hadn’t spoken. He just stared.

“Why have you come, Cole?” she asked again.

“To escort you home.”

Raquel shook her head, grateful that the child in her arms masked her trembling. Absurdly, Cole had always set her system off balance. “In case you had not noticed, I am in the middle of something here.” She reached for the remote and turned down the music.

He tossed the toy alligator in the air and caught it, his large palm squeezing another squeak out of it, and casually leaned one broad shoulder against the wall. “I’ll wait,” he said pleasantly.

The intensity of his blue eyes—compliments of the American genes on his mother’s side—speared her, rooting her to the spot. He wore a deep-charcoal suit with a French-blue dress shirt and Windsor-knotted tie. Always proper, Cole Martinez would definitely look out of place in this

artisan town. Her phone would be ringing any minute now with neighbors wanting to know who the stranger was.

Shifting the baby in her arms, she arched a brow. “You will have a very long wait, I think. I have no intention of returning to Valldoria any time soon.” Perversely, she hit the volume increase button on the stereo’s remote.

“Rebellion,” he murmured.

“Independence,” she countered.

He set the plastic alligator on a table and moved around the room, still keeping an eye on her, making her even more nervous. She tried to ignore him, to look busy, and wondered if he noticed that she was failing miserably.

Probably. Not much got past Cole Martinez. There was a toughness beneath the civilized veneer. She was fairly certain a shoulder harness and gun rested underneath his tailored suit jacket. The man was both sharp and deadly. And way too predatory for her comfort level.

“I wonder,” he mused, “whether it was rebellion or independence that made you jilt a royal prince at the altar.”

Her heart did a funny tumble. It had been six months, but she was still surprised at herself. She’d never done anything so daring in her life. Brought up to be oh-so-correct, with never a hair out of place, running off to pursue art in lieu of marrying the prince she’d been betrothed to since birth had taken courage she hadn’t known she possessed.

“Neither,” she answered. With the child on her hip, she repositioned her tripod to catch the best light, wondering if she could get a few more shots before baby Carmen’s mother returned. “Anyone could see that Briana and Prince Joseph were in love. I did the nice thing and made the path clear for them.”

“At the expense of your family’s displeasure.”

She shrugged. “They will get over it.”

“True. They are no longer upset but they would like you to return.”

“No.”

His brows drew together. He reached over and turned down the stereo’s volume. “Do you think Madonna is appropriate for a child’s ears?”

“Carmen does not understand the words. It is the beat she responds to.”

“As do you.”

She realized she was moving her hips in time with “I’d Rather Be Your Lover,” and abruptly stopped. She felt her face flame when she focused on the lyrics. The half-smile on Cole’s lips told her he, too, was responding to the suggestive words.

Impatiently, she fiddled with her lens cap. “State the rest of your business, Cole. I am busy and I need to get on with it.”

“I don’t remember this testy side of you.”

“You never knew the sides of me.”

“You might be surprised by how much I knew.”

Growing irritated now, she blew out a breath, taking care not to squeeze Carmen in her agitation. The very softness of his voice sent chills up her spine and made her heart pound. If she didn’t know better, she would suspect him of coming on to her.

And that made her uneasy. All her life, people were nice to her because they *had* to be. She was an heiress from a prominent family—practically royalty in its own right. She’d learned a tough lesson with Lucian, though. He’d supported her love of art, given her the courage to leave Valldoria. She’d thought he’d cared about *her*. They’d agreed to meet up in France, made plans to become famous artists, Lucian a painter, Raquel a photographer.

But when her father, Carlos Santiago, had thrown such a fit at her disappearance and insisted he would disinherit her, Lucian had shown his true colors and bolted without even unpacking his bags. He’d wanted her money. Not her. He’d been nice to her for a reason.

And because of that experience, Raquel was wary and on guard. Now, with Cole, she intended to double those walls. He was head of the Royal Guard, a trusted confidant of both King Marcos of Valldoria and her own father. It had always been his job to protect her. It was what he was *paid* to do.

She cautioned herself not to forget that, especially in light of these ridiculous fluttering sensations just his mere presence caused.

She didn’t *need* or want a man. Period.

At last—after twenty-five years of chafing against strict custom and a sheltered existence that had schooled her to cater to a man’s every whim—her life was now full and exciting.

And free.

Cole’s unexpected appearance threatened her freedom. And that, she wouldn’t abide.

“You did not come all the way to France from Valldoria to play innuendo games with me, I am sure.”

“No.”

“Then what do you want?”

“Unrest surrounds your father of late, and there is a possibility that the danger could spill over onto you. I have been sent to bring you home.”

She was afraid of that. Raquel dismissed the danger to herself with an airy wiggle of her fingers. “If my father is threatened, why are you not there to guard him?”

“He’s in good hands, I assure you. And I’ll be glad to add my own capable hands to the job just as soon as you pack a bag or two.” He checked the platinum watch at his wrist. “The jet is waiting at Nice airport.”

“Then you must run along so you do not miss your flight.”

He wasn’t a man easily dismissed. She should have remembered that from the days when she’d tried to escape the family estate unescorted.

She remembered it now, though. Especially when he advanced on her like a panther stalking its prey. Like a true coward, she shifted the baby in her arms, using her as a buffer. One of his dark brows arched, but he did not stop his advance.

Her heart pounded and her insides tumbled. Girlhood fantasies teased her, embarrassed her. She’d watched him plenty of times, from her window, or from the corner of her eye as he’d fall into step beside her. She’d deliberately ducked him on more than one occasion in Valldoria. It had been a sport rife with sensuality—the sensuality being all on her part, images conjured in a sheltered young woman’s mind. Daydreams of a powerful man, of those strong hands reaching for her.

She could not duck him now. There was nowhere to run. Though she felt a deep-seated urge to at least *attempt* to run, her feet did not heed the mental command.

Softly now, the music wound a sensual spell around them. The air in the simple cottage became charged with something...something musky...something she could not put a name to, had no experience with.

He stopped in front of her, the warmth of his body carrying his unique scent right to her senses, turning her knees rubbery. Her mouth went dry as his deep, whisky voice wrapped around her.

“You will not always have a child to hide behind, little spitfire.”

For the life of her, she couldn't seem to look away from those penetrating blue eyes. She might not have a lot of experience, but she knew a sexual threat when she heard one. That it had come from Cole Martinez held her rooted to the spot in astonishment. Possibilities flitted through her mind, scenarios that sent her blood pulsing through her veins so fast, so hot, she felt dizzy.

There had been a time when she would have given anything to have Cole Martinez look at her just like this, a time when she'd imagined him to be her knight, her savior who'd rescue her from the smothering influence of her family, who'd climb the tower walls from the magical rungs of her long hair and declare his intentions. But that was a lifetime ago. She was a different person now. Her own person.

She saw his gaze shift, saw heat and purpose as he focused on her mouth. Breath suspended in her lungs *Yes!* she wanted to scream. *Do it!*

Baby Carmen let out a squeal that broke the spell, reaching her little fur covered arms in the direction of the door.

Horrified by her thoughts—especially with a baby in her arms—Raquel jumped back from Cole, knowing good and well there was a guilty flush to her cheeks.

A fact that was confirmed by Sasha St-Pierre's dancing expression. “Pardon, *s'il vous plai*t. Am I interrupting?”

Raquel stepped around Cole and moved toward Carmen's young mother. “No,” she said, pleased that her voice actually worked. Whatever had passed between her and Cole a moment ago had sent her into a mental tizzy. “I am finished shooting for the day. The light is no longer right, but I have enough photos for this segment.” Undoing the costume fastenings, she slipped the fur suit off the baby and cuddled the warm infant before passing her to her mother.

“Who is the stranger in the Armani?” Sasha whispered with a conspiring smile. The neighbors were always trying to fix Raquel up and despaired that she did not seem interested.

“An acquaintance from my country,” Raquel replied.

“He has the look of a hungry suitor to me.”

Raquel arched her brow. “You have been sniffing too many of your delicacies if you must characterize everyone as being hungry.”

“That is not the type of hunger I meant.”

Raquel stared at her friend blankly for a moment. A possible meaning jelled in her brain, but she didn't dare look at Cole to see if she was right. Instead, she pretended innocence.

"Perhaps he is weary from his flight. But famished or not, he is but an acquaintance."

"Oh, you are always so evasive. Margo and I will pull the details out of you later, I think."

"There are no details to pull." She'd known Cole would cause a stir in town. And she'd known that Sasha and Margo, the owners of the bakery next door, would want to know the full story. She *hadn't* known he'd create such havoc with her hormones.

"We will see," Sasha said with an impish grin. "He is quite a specimen."

Raquel opened her mouth to utter a denial, realized it was useless and remained silent. Cole was very easy on the eyes. He had a presence about him that would draw the attention of a nun.

"Shall I bring Carmen for the interview tomorrow?"

Still speculating on Cole's looks, it took a moment for Raquel to bring her mind back around to business. "No. Carmen is a definite for the layout. She's a love." She kissed the baby's fingers drawing a sweet giggle from the eight-month-old. "I will call you, though, when I get the schedule laid out."

Clearly Sasha was reluctant to leave, her gaze still darting surreptitiously to Cole. She pecked a friendly kiss on Raquel's cheek. "We will talk, *mon ami*. Very soon."

Raquel watched Sasha leave with baby Carmen. Unable to stall any longer, she turned back to Cole.

"Do your neighbors always walk in unannounced?" he asked.

"Yes. Especially when I have their baby."

"That is not a good practice."

"You walked in unannounced."

"Precisely my point. Your lack of common sense regarding your security makes me realize I've come just in the nick of time."

"Do not be ridiculous. This is a small town. I have many friends. Safety is not an issue."

"Safety is *always* an issue where you are concerned."

"No. It is not. Not here. I am not Raquel Santiago, the heiress. I am merely a friend, neighbor and businesswoman."

“I can’t believe your attitude. You were brought up to be careful. You were never unescorted—except when you gave us the slip,” he said dryly.

Raquel shrugged and dismantled her camera equipment. “It was a game.” She hadn’t meant to admit that, was afraid he’d pounce on the words and ask for clarification. Cole Martinez loved to ask questions.

In Valldoria he was always there whenever she tried to step out of the fortress, there to remind her of her duty and her place. He was obsessive about her security in a quiet, steely sort of way. Yet he seemed to get a kick out of watching her bristle when he fell into step beside her like a shadow. It had become a game with her, to see if she could shake him.

She couldn’t very well tell him that her girlhood goal had been to provoke a reaction out of him.

A sexual reaction.

Thankfully he let the subject drop, but the speculation in his intense blue gaze told her he’d filed the incomplete data in that sharp mind of his and reserved the right to call it up at a moment’s notice. She was only off the hook temporarily.

Unless she could get him out the door and back to Valldoria where he belonged.

He glanced at his watch again. “How much time do you need?”

“For what?”

A muscle twitched at the corner of his eye. “To pack.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

She saw his chest expand as he took what she assumed was a calming breath. “Your father wishes otherwise.”

“I know. That’s precisely why I’m in France and not Valldoria.”

“Can you not conduct your business in your home country?”

“Are you kidding? My family views my art as a hobby. They are sure I will come to my senses. But it’s not a hobby, Cole. It’s my business.” She had to make him understand. Her family was both powerful and persuasive. And Cole had the authority and backing to carry out their orders. She didn’t want to fight him on the matter, but she would.

“So far, I am doing poster art and greeting cards—my own line. Soon, I hope to branch out, perhaps in publishing. The possibilities are unlimited.”

“I appreciate that you enjoy your work, but face it, you don’t need the money.”

“This isn’t about money. It’s about freedom, self-fulfillment. Standing on my own. I am sole proprietress of my venture. I answer to no one but me.”

“And that’s important to you?”

“Very.”

He studied her for a long moment, and she fought not to squirm.

“I imagine your name helps with sales.”

“You are wrong.” She nearly bent the leg of her tripod as she snapped it closed. “And I resent that insinuation. I am good at what I do, Cole.”

“Ah, spitfire, you misunderstood. I didn’t mean to imply that your name and status were all you had going for you. I can *see* your talent.” His gaze touched on the prints of babies that hung on every available wall space. “I meant that it would be an added bonus.”

“As I told you, no one here knows that I am an heiress. I have kept my background private. Here in France I am merely Mademoiselle Raquel.”

“But you have the distinctive look of a beautiful, exotic *senorita* about you.”

Her heart lurched and she firmly pulled back on the reins of her runaway emotions. He wanted something from her. Compliance. And she suspected he’d use any means to attain it.

“Flattery will not get you your way.”

He shrugged, a half smile tipping his lips. “A man can try. I understand women like compliments.”

“Sincere ones, yes—and I get plenty from the local boys of the village.”

Cole felt his chest tighten. Jealousy, for crying out loud? “There is a difference between a man and a boy, Raquel. I’ll be glad to demonstrate if you like.” He saw her jolt, saw the fine trembling in her fingers, the slight twitch at the corner of her full mouth. But before he could feel too smug, she astonished him with her next words.

“I ought to call your bluff.”

Raquel Santiago *had* grown up. He hadn’t expected her to see through him. Few did. Because he didn’t allow it. He must be slipping.

“You think I’m bluffing?” he asked softly, dangerously, taking a step closer, hemming her in, crowding her. He saw her nervousness, saw her fight it with the squaring of her shoulders.

“Put up or shut up, Cole Martinez.” Her voice trembled, but her dark eyes were direct. Innocent eyes, asking for a taste of forbidden fruit.

And he *was* forbidden fruit. His own rules. One did *not* dally with one's charge. Especially when that charge was an heiress. She wasn't in his class. His job was to protect her.

And that included protection from himself.

Still, he couldn't seem to stop himself from responding to her challenge. Before he could check the movement, he tipped her chin up, tested the new, shorter length of her hair, rubbing the silky strands with his fingertips. Her tongue skimmed the seam of her lips, leaving them wet and alluring. The action slammed into him with the force of a rifle kick.

A game, she'd said earlier. Could Raquel Santiago be entertaining an attraction? God knows the attraction wouldn't be one-sided. He'd fantasized about this woman for more years than he cared to recall. Fantasies that were definitely off-limits.

"You're playing with fire, little one."

Raquel placed a palm on his chest, felt the silk of his tie, the heat of his skin through the French-blue cotton, the pounding of his heart. He was so close, she tasted the warmth of his breath. She'd deliberately taunted him and wondered if that was such a smart idea. He could very well be more man than she could handle. Still, she wanted to experience him. Just once. Because the opportunity would more than likely never present itself again.

"Maybe I like the heat," she said.

His blue eyes flared. She gave a slight, experimental tug to his tie. And met with resistance. As she'd half known she would. Cole was a master at evading her. It was as if he wore armor around his emotions.

Loosening her hold, she flattened her palm against his chest and gave a gentle shove. "Chicken."

Before she could even turn, Cole gripped her arm and yanked her to him, pressing her solidly against his body. She felt an instant of fear—or maybe it was excitement—before his mouth came down on hers, surprising her with his gentleness. After all, she'd prodded the tiger. It stood to reason she'd get bitten.

But his tender kiss was even more dangerous. Strong hands held her in place as his lips explored her mouth. It was like nothing she'd ever experienced. Lucian's kisses had been dry and polite and respectful. There was nothing polite about the way Cole kissed her. He kissed her with an expertise that had her forgetting her own name.

It was the kiss of an experienced lover. Sure and firm and no-nonsense. The type of kiss that mussed the hair and took a woman right out of herself, tapped into her femininity in no uncertain terms.

And even as these impressions surfaced, the kiss was over and he was pulling back. The unreadable mask was once again in place, and Raquel could have hit him. Her heart raced and she felt dizzy, as if she was floating. Every nerve ending she possessed screamed for more. She felt out of control.

Cole, in contrast, appeared perfectly *in* control.

She wasn't sure whether to be happy about that or scared as hell. Cole Martinez was the last man she should even consider getting involved with.

His life was in Valldoria. Hers was here in France.

Good thing he wasn't staying.

"Satisfied?" he asked roughly, giving her the impression he might not be as controlled as he appeared.

"No," she said bluntly, honestly. "But then I wasn't looking for satisfaction."

"Weren't you?"

She shrugged.

"Careful who you toy with, *senorita*. You might end up over your head."

"Not much chance of that. You'll be in Valldoria. I'll be here. Out of sight, out of mind."

Yeah, fat chance after that toe-curling kiss.

"Wrong, spitfire. You're coming home with me."

"Obviously you have not been listening. I dislike repeating myself—unless, of course, it's for my sweet babies—but I will make an exception for you. No. Once and for all, no."

"Must you be so stubborn?"

She sighed, all traces of sassiness gone. "Cole, don't do this to me. I cannot go back. Not yet anyway. I'm just finding my feet. You have assured me my father is well. And I am confident that you and your men will see to it that he remains so."

"Was it that bad?"

He was asking about her upbringing. It was unseemly for a woman such as herself to mention any hint of discontent or let slip the smallest detail that could be construed as airing the Santiago dirty laundry. But Cole knew the family secrets. He was paid to know them.

“To an outsider looking in, I must seem like a spoiled brat for saying yes. But I was smothered at home, wilting. Here, I can bloom like a flower. I am thriving. You must understand.”

Cole raked a hand through his hair. Perhaps he did understand. She was definitely different. A happy glow surrounded her. But that didn't solve his problem. “There is a matter of your safety.”

“I am safe here.”

“Oh yeah? What about your open doors? I walked in and was here several minutes before you even noticed. What if I'd intended you harm?” He'd done much worse. He'd kissed her, given himself a taste of what he could not have.

“I have only to yell and the neighbors will come to my aid.”

“What if they're not home?”

“Margo and Sasha operate the bakery. Someone is always there. Otherwise the village would starve.”

He didn't respond to her teasing. “I have orders not to leave you unguarded.”

“I do not need a baby-sitter. Consider your orders rescinded.”

“Sorry, spitfire. You don't have that authority.”

Her breath actually hissed. “If you are worried about job security, I shall speak to my father.”

“No. You shall not.” Clearly he was affronted, and she didn't really blame him. It was a reminder of their differences. He worked for her father, and that gave her a certain amount of power over him. In theory only. No one really had power over Cole Martinez. He was a force unto himself. And because of that, he wouldn't like her pulling rank on him—assuming that was even possible.

“It appears we are at an impasse.” For her own self-respect, she could not give in. And Cole didn't appear ready to budge, either. “What now?” she asked.

“I'll stay here.”

“You will not.” The very thought of such a notion sent her hormones straight back into a tizzy. As though it had a mind of its own, her gaze darted to the bedroom door. *Dios!* Her imagination was becoming entirely too creative.

“Two choices. You come with me, or I move in. That's as far as I'll go in negotiations.”

“I *can't* come with you. I have babies scheduled for auditions tomorrow and the rest of the week. I have a deadline for this shoot, a firm business contract. I have given my word. It is impossible for me to leave.”

“Then we go with plan B. I’m moving in.”

“The cottage is too small.” It was absurd to even consider the arrangement. And there was no excuse for the way her heart fluttered. “My guest quarters have been turned into a darkroom. Where will you sleep?”

“The couch will do.”

She eyed his six-foot-three frame. “You will not fit.”

“I’ve slept under worse conditions.”

“But it is not necessary.”

“Yes. It is.”

She knew finality when she heard it. She was no match to bodily throw him out. And judging by the rigid set of his square jaw and his widespread stance, that’s what it would take.

So she gave in, albeit ungraciously. “Fine. Suit yourself. But stay out of my way.”