

Defying the Prince (The Santana Crown Book 5)

By Sarah Morgan

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Rumor has it the proud prince and the footballer's daughter are working on a charity concert. Will they make sweet music together or split, citing irreconcilable artistic differences?

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Editorial Review

Review

'Bursting with wit, emotion and cliché busters, I was sorry when it ended. Definitely recommend this one.'
Grade A The Good, The Bad and The Unread

'This is such a cute story of two people who have personalities that totally clash with the other, yet they somehow find middle ground and a really adorable romance develops.....Really enjoyed this one.' Mandi Schreiner, smexybooks.com

'Morgan wows with a rigid prince and an irreverent pauper who light up the pages with love scenes that sizzle.' 4 stars RT Book Reviews

About the Author

USA Today bestselling author Sarah Morgan writes lively, sexy stories for Harlequin Presents. RT Book Reviews has described her as 'a magician with words' and her books have been nominated for their Reviewer's Choice Awards and their Top Pick slot. In 2012 Sarah won the prestigious RITA® Award from the Romance Writers of America for her book *Doukakis's Apprentice*. Sarah lives near London with her husband and children who innocently provide an endless supply of authentic dialogue. Readers can find out more about Sarah and her books from her website sarahmorgan.com. She can also be found on Facebook and Twitter (@SarahMorgan_)

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She was a shameless exhibitionist.

Prince Matteo, second in line to the throne of Santana and hardened cynic, watched in grim-faced silence as a girl with a rippling mane of streaky blonde hair flirted outrageously with the lead singer of the local band which had been carefully vetted and approved as 'suitable' entertainment by palace officials.

This was a royal engagement party but apparently she hadn't let the dress code printed clearly on her invitation inhibit her choice of outfit for the evening. Wearing a dress of sparkling scarlet sequins, she stood out like a single slender poppy in a bouquet of white roses. Her appearance was sending out myriad messages to the stunned onlookers. Her towering peep-toed shoe-boots said *naughty*, the daring strapless dress cried *look at me*, her scarlet mouth shouted *take me*.

As her hair slid back to reveal smooth, bare shoulders, Matteo could almost feel the texture against his palms and taste the smoothness of her throat under his lips. Everything about her made him think of strawberries: that endless ripple of long blonde hair with its faint suggestion of pink; those rounded breasts pushing happily against that scarlet sequined dress; and those lips, those lips made him think of ripe, sweet, juicy fruit. Not the cultivated variety that were heaped into bowls for palace garden parties but the small wild strawberries that grew in abundance in the rich soil around his palazzo on the rugged west coast of the island.

Wild.

The word summed her up perfectly.

As he watched, those lips curved into a wickedly sexy smile. An explosion of raw sexual heat burned

through his body and the intensity of that reaction shocked him because he considered himself not just discerning when it came to the female sex but impervious to their tricks.

Matteo turned to his older brother. 'I presume from the total lack of social graces, her surname is Jackson and she's going to be another of your dubious relations.'

Alex lifted his glass. 'She's my future sister-in-law. Allegra's half-sister.'

'I thought the idea was to boost the reputation of the monarchy, not destroy it.' Even without confirmation from his brother he would have known that she was yet another member of the notorious Jackson family, most of whom were currently grinding vampy stilettos through centuries of royal protocol. 'Why are you doing this?' *Was it his imagination or was his brother drinking more than usual?*

'I'm in love with her.' Alex's gaze rested on his fiancée, Allegra Jackson, also resplendent in red, although her dress was considerably more restrained than her sister's. 'And she's in love with me.'

'Would she be "in love" with you if you weren't a prince?'

Alex gave a twisted smile. 'Ouch, that's harsh.'

'It's honest.' Matteo didn't apologise. At a young age he'd learned in the most brutal way possible to be suspicious of human nature and the lesson hadn't just been well learned. It had formed him.

Briefly, his gaze met his brother's.

Alex frowned. 'This is different.'

'You're sure?' An unwanted memory uncurled in his subconscious, like a wisp of smoke from a fire long extinguished. Without thinking Matteo glanced down at his left hand, at the less than perfect alignment of his index finger and the silvery scar that was now no more than a faint line from his wrist to this knuckle. Similar scars crossed his ribs and the upper part of his back. His chest tightened and, just for a moment, he was back on the ground with his face pressed into the dirt, feeling the trickle of his own blood on the back of his neck. Right there, right then, choking on his mistakes, almost dying of them, he'd realised that his relationships would never be like other people's. Did love even exist? He had no idea. He just knew it didn't exist for him. And he doubted it existed for his brother. 'I've yet to meet a woman who can separate the man from the title.'

'And you've met plenty.' Alex gave a faint smile. 'You mock the Jackson reputation but your own isn't exactly squeaky clean. Fast women, fast cars, fast jets.'

'Not any more.'

'Last time I looked you were still driving a sports car and escorting the delightful Katarina.'

'I was talking about the jets.' He missed it, he realised, more than he would have anticipated given the years that had passed. 'And we were talking about your engagement—'

'No, *you* were delivering dire warnings. Have you *ever* trusted a woman?'

Just the once. 'Do I look like a fool?'

He knew that everyone he met had an agenda. He knew that those who spoke to him, approached him, flirted

with him, all of them were interested in what he was and what he could do for them, not who he was. As a result, he trusted no one. And he especially didn't trust the Jackson swaying seductively on the stage. She looked as if she'd just dragged herself from a wild night in someone's bed and hadn't even bothered to brush her hair. Her raw sex appeal jarred in the atmosphere of rigid restraint and Matteo wondered if he was the only person in the room with a sick feeling of foreboding. Yes, the king wanted his eldest son living in Santina and taking up his responsibilities as Crown Prince, but did he want it so badly he was prepared to sanction a liaison with a family like the Jacksons? On the surface the public was in love with the idea of a prince marrying a commoner, but how much would they love it when the whole thing came crashing down?

He wasn't even aware of the tension in his shoulders until he felt the dull ache spread through his muscles.

This felt so wrong.

Experience told him that the girl on the stage was the worst kind of opportunist. 'She is loud and attention seeking. She looks like a ripe plum that's going to burst out of its skin at any minute.' He switched from strawberries to plums because he disliked plums. It was a more comfortable analogy.

'But very sexy.'

It seemed like an odd comment from a man at his own engagement party and Matteo would have said more but at that moment he saw a group of Jacksons gathered round a priceless portrait and winced as he heard the oohs and aahs.

'They're trying to guess the price of the Holbein.'

As one of them commented in a loud voice that the colours were a bit dull, he closed his eyes briefly, wondering whether there was any way of stopping this before it exploded. 'They don't know Michelangelo from Michael Jackson. Is she really going to be your mother-in-law?' Watching Chantelle Jackson peer at a priceless vase, Matteo shook his head in disbelief. 'Any moment now she is going to drop it into her bag. And no doubt it will be for sale on the internet on Monday.' Suddenly he wished he had a closer relationship with Alex. 'You were supposed to be marrying Anna. What happened?'

'I fell in love.'

Something about that bland response didn't ring true and Matteo wondered whether this engagement was an act of rebellion on Alex's part. 'Perhaps you should take more time?'

'I know exactly what I'm doing.' He paused. 'And Chantelle won't be my mother-in-law. She is Allegra's stepmother.'

It seemed like an odd comment. Matteo was about to ask a few probing questions when he saw that the strawberry girl was now centre stage.

And suddenly those knowing eyes were fixed on him as she started singing a song she dedicated to her sister, a song about getting your guy, which was all too appropriate, Matteo thought.

In the world of social climbing his brother had to be the equivalent of Mount Everest.

No wonder the Jacksons were celebrating.

As she leaned forward and sang cheekily into the microphone he saw movement out of the corner of his eye as Bobby Jackson, an ex-footballer whose colourful and varied love life was catalogued by the tabloids, tried

to remove his daughter from the limelight.

Matteo watched with mixed feelings.

It was definitely time someone prised her away from the microphone, but the fact that it was the flamboyant, scandal-ridden Bobby simply magnified the transgression.

'Come on, love.' Bobby Jackson made a clumsy grab for his daughter's arm but she shrugged him off and he almost lost his balance. 'Give the microphone back, there's a good girl.' His face was the colour of a Santina sunset. The deep hue could have been the result of intense embarrassment but Matteo suspected it was more likely to have been caused by an overindulgence of the very best champagne. Bobby Jackson was too thick-skinned to suffer from embarrassment. Matteo knew he'd dragged himself up from nothing and was determined that his family should do the same, although apparently that ambition didn't stretch to encouraging his daughter to sing.

Matteo glanced at his own father and saw that the king's features were as rigid and inflexible as one of Michelangelo's statues.

'Izzy!' Bobby made another abortive grab for his daughter. 'Not now. Best behaviour and all that.' Izzy.

Of course.

Matteo realised where he'd seen her before. He recognised her now as the five-minute wonder who had exploded onto the manufactured pop scene after appearing on a reality TV singing show. Izzy Jackson. Hadn't she hit the headlines for wearing a bikini on stage? Basically for doing everything but singing. Presumably she had a voice like a crow with a throat infection, like most of the wannabes that warbled and croaked their way onto people's TV screens, which was why he remembered nothing about her singing.

Even her own family didn't want her to sing in public, he thought, watching as her father tried to drag her from the stage.

It was like pulling a mule. She dug her legs in and stood, chin raised, eyes flashing as she carried on belting out the tune.

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