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By Natalie Anderson

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1. Knowing she must conceal the father's identity.
2. And wondering what it means for the career she worked so hard for?

Because Stella's baby bombshell is the result of one shockingly sensual afternoon on a deserted beach with Prince Eduardo De Santis. And with an out-of-wedlock heir on the cards, Stella knows the playboy prince will demand marriage!

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Natalie Anderson adores happy endings, so you can be sure you've got happy endings to enjoy when you buy her books, she promises nothing less. She loves peppermint filled dark chocolate, pineapple juice & extremely long showers, plus teasing her imaginary friends with dating dilemmas! She lives in New Zealand with her gorgeous husband & four fabulous children. If you love happy endings too, come find her on [facebook.com/authornataliea](https://www.facebook.com/authornataliea), twitter @authornataliea, or www.natalie-anderson.com

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Stella Zambrano felt as if she was sitting outside the principal's office, knowing she was in trouble without a clue as to why. All she could do was wait and try not to think the worst.

The military wing of the San Felipe palace was designed to impress and to intimidate. It succeeded in both. The vaulted ceilings were metres high, the floors tiled in a headache-inducing intricate mathematical pattern, and the walls plastered with gold-framed portraits of the De San-tis predecessors—princes, military leaders, powerful men.

San Felipe, a famed island principality in the heart of the Mediterranean, was currently ruled by Crown Prince Antonio De Santis. Austere, yet beloved, and devoted to duty, Antonio was aided by his charming, utterly adored younger brother Eduardo. The public face of San Felipe, risk-taking, suave Prince Eduardo almost single-handedly kept the tourism industry afloat.

The most recent portrait in the vast room depicted the two brothers standing side by side in full military regalia. It hung on the wall directly opposite, dominating Stella's field of vision. She opted to stare at the floor. The sweat on her back iced. She desperately hoped the Princes were not present in the palace today.

'Lieutenant Zambrano?'

She looked up as her name was called.

'The General will see you now.'

Finally.

Stella searched the Captain's face for clues, but saw that if he were any more expressionless he'd be dead. She was uncomfortable, conscious that she ought be wearing her sharply pressed midnight-blue trousers and a starched white shirt, topped with her gold-trimmed blue jacket. Her brass should be gleaming, her ribbons immaculate, her star straight on her shoulder. Instead she was wearing sweat-stained fatigues and muddied boots.

She'd just finished her morning run when a stony-faced sergeant had appeared and said it was urgent and that she didn't have time to change. He'd driven her straight from the base to the palace, where the General of San Felipe's army had his official quarters.

Now she felt conscious of the marks on her clothing, the grime on her face. But perhaps the General would overlook her untidy appearance. Perhaps this summons was to give her the overseas mission orders she'd been waiting so long for.

But the unnatural silence spiralling in the waiting room warned her differently. This call was too soon after her last rejection. Too unexpected. And the carefully blank faces of the civilian staff present... The way they wouldn't look her in the eye...

Slimy snakes of doubt slid down her spine.

'Lieutenant?' the Captain repeated sharply.

She blinked, her brain lurching back to the present. Mortified, she stood. A superior officer had never been required to repeat orders to Stella before. She stiffly followed him to the large carved door that was firmly shut. He opened it and impassively waited for her to pass through.

Stilling her nerves, Stella walked into the room, then stood to attention at a respectful distance from the desk. The heavy door behind her closed with a thud.

The uniformed man seated behind the large desk didn't look up. He didn't tell her to stand at ease. Didn't tell her to sit. Didn't tell her anything. Instead he stared down at the personnel file open before him. She knew it was hers, but kept her gaze fixed on the wall behind him—yet another portrait of the Prince's. Peripherally she was aware of the man's greying hair and that he was wearing glasses to read the report. The General had been serving in this army for almost fifty years. Other men his age would have retired already. He never would. He was there for life. Because his life *was* the military.

She respected that. She understood that. Because she felt the same.

'Lieutenant.' He finally addressed her. 'Yes, sir.' She saluted.

He still didn't look up. 'On the afternoon of July the twenty-sixth you were based at the San Felipe barracks, is that correct?'

Her stomach dropped. That date was branded on her brain.

'I believe so, sir.' She licked her horribly dried lips.

There was no waiting now. Her instinct had been right: this wasn't the new mission she'd been hoping for.

'Did you remain on the base, as required, for all that afternoon and evening?'

She swallowed hard. It had been one hour. One hour in which she'd—

No. Don't think about it. Don't remember.

Calling on all her years of discipline, she blocked the memories from her mind, as she'd been doing almost successfully these past few weeks. But betrayal curled around her.

Someone had told.

'Lieutenant?' the General prompted. 'Did you leave the base without authorisation that day?'

These past couple of months her nerves had been at breaking point as she'd wondered—waited—to see if anything would happen as a result of that madness. But nothing had and she'd finally begun to think the danger had passed and that she'd gotten away with it.

She hadn't.

'July twenty-sixth,' the General repeated. 'Do you recall that afternoon, Lieutenant?'

'I...' Bleakly she realised she had no answer that she could utter aloud. She licked her lips again. 'I was nearby. I left the boundary only for a little while.'

'You were on call at the station. You did not have permission to leave the base.' A cold statement of fact.

She'd climbed down the cliff and gone to the bay, only metres away. She would have heard if the sirens had gone off—they hadn't. And she knew no one had come to her room for her because surely they'd have said something later? Wouldn't they have asked her?

'You had your routine medical check last week.' The General looked down at the paperwork again.

'Yes, sir.' Stella swallowed, nervy and surprised by the change in topic.

'Your bloodwork showed a problem.'

Problem? Edgily she waited, only just holding her silence, knowing her superior would inform her when he was ready and not before.

But she was fine, wasn't she? Fit and strong. Admittedly she'd been more tired than usual on her run this morning, but other than that—

'How long have you known you're pregnant?'

'*What?*' Stunned, she forgot to address him formally.

'A soldier on active duty cannot be pregnant,' he said crisply. 'You've not reported your condition to your superior officer. Another rule you're in breach of.'

Pregnant?

'I'm not...' She drew a shocked, shuddering breath. 'I *can't* be...'

It was impossible. There'd only been the one encounter in that one hour. And she'd used protection.

The General's already frosty expression turned Arctic, but Stella's blood had frozen anyway. No *way* could she be pregnant. It was the one thing she'd sworn would never happen.

He held up a piece of paper. 'The test was repeated with the second sample taken. There is no question of your condition. Do not make your exit even more ignoble.'

'My exit?' Uncaring of proper decorum, she grasped the back of the chair beside her, her head spinning.

This couldn't be happening. It couldn't be true. It *wasn't* possible.

'You are relieved of all duties.' He passed judgement in an expressionless drone. 'You went off base without permission. You concealed your condition. You are discharged from the San Felipe Armed Services, effective immediately. Upon your return to the barracks you will surrender the uniform you are wearing. All other property of the San Felipe principality has already been removed from your room and your personal belongings are packed. You will take them and leave the base. You will have ten minutes before you are considered to be trespassing and escorted off.'

Nauseating dizziness swept over her and the edges of her vision blurred. She was being booted out of the army. The only place she thought of as home. The only place she had to go. And she was *pregnant*.

Stella struggled to process the barrage of instructions. She couldn't be pregnant. Not by—

Bile rose, burning the back of her throat. Did they *know* who she'd met in that mad moment? Who it was who'd made her cast aside every inhibition as if it was as of little importance as a chocolate wrapper? Who it was who'd sparked that intensity and had her acting in a way she'd never done before? Did they *know* that she'd been the biggest idiot on the planet?

Pure panic threatened to derail her completely, but then her defences kicked in with a last spurt of survival instinct. She rallied, fighting to keep her thinking clear. To keep hold of her own future.

'Shouldn't I be court-martialled?' she asked, ignoring the catch in her voice and hoping he would too. 'Shouldn't there be a soldier present, recording this conversation?'

She did *not* want preferential treatment. Not because of what she'd done and who she'd done it with.

Or because of who *she* was.

The General muttered something incomprehensible. Not a regulation response. It was his first slip in this meeting—a flash showing he might actually be human. She thought she saw a fleeting expression in his eyes before he looked down at her paperwork again.

But the expression wasn't the one she'd wanted.

'We thought it best to save your blushes,' he said curtly.

His abrasiveness dashed the last of Stella's hope.

Who was the 'we' who'd made this decision? And was it really to save her blushes? Or someone else's? Someone much more important than her.

Did they want this swept under the carpet and for her to disappear quietly? For this 'incident' to go away? For a moment rage blinded her. She wanted to scream this betrayal to the world. This unfairness.

But she couldn't. Because it was her own fault that her life had been totalled. *Her* poor choice that afternoon. But this preposterous claim that she was pregnant... It *had* to be false.

'I'm not pregnant,' she reiterated forcefully. She refused to believe it.

'You're dismissed.'

The blunt order stopped her cold. He'd made it clear her career was destroyed and he wasn't interested in her reaction or her defence. He didn't care. He just wanted her gone, quickly and quietly.

She stared at the greying, ageing man who wielded so much power. He couldn't know who it was she'd been with, because if he did he'd be angrier than this. He would care more.

Run, her instinct screamed. She needed to run before he *did* find out. Before anyone found out.

But she had nowhere to go. She had no permanent home of her own. When on furlough she travelled. Often on shorter periods of leave she stayed on the base and volunteered for extra shifts. So where? She couldn't go to him. And as for her childhood home.

She looked again at the older man who was now studiously ignoring her with that utterly impassive face. She tried to ask him. 'Sir—'

'You're dismissed.'

His emotionless repetition stripped the last veneer of confidence from her. All she had left was a plea. 'Father.'

General Carlos Zambrano, operational leader of the San Felipe Armed Services and Stella's sole parent, didn't respond. He merely put the paperwork back into the thin manila file that was all that remained of the military career she'd worked so long for.

She'd done the one thing she'd vowed never to do—had never done until now. She'd broken that barrier between professional and private. The barrier both she and her father had enforced.

Defeat twisted and she didn't try to speak again. Unbearably hurt, she turned and walked to the door. With every step she hoped her father would call to her. Stop her. That he would want to help her.

But he never had before, and today there was nothing but the inevitable disappointed silence.

Disappointment on both sides.

Glancing back as she closed his door behind her, she saw him still sitting at his desk. Still looking away. Still refusing to acknowledge her.

Once more she'd let him down. And there was no coming back from something this catastrophic. She'd never redeem herself in his eyes. She'd lost everything she'd worked so hard for.

She paused, clutching the door handle for support. She had no idea what to do or where to go.

Slowly she became aware of the surreptitious, speculative glances from the personnel working in the room. It was unusual for someone of her rank to be called into the General's office. They probably thought it was preferential treatment because she was his daughter.

But perhaps they already knew. That thought horrified her. Did they all know what she'd done and who she'd done it with?

And it *was* preferential treatment. She should have been dishonourably discharged or, at best, formally warned and demoted. Instead her father had used his rank to ensure her removal from the service was done in secret.

So there was no embarrassment for anyone.

Except she was left with nothing. No job. No home. The reputation she'd worked so long and so hard to build had been burned with the strike of a single match.

Everything was gone because of that one hour in which she'd lost herself. The one hour that no one was ever supposed to know about...

'I'm ordered to drive you back to the barracks.' The Sergeant from earlier materialised in front of her.

'Thank you,' she said, but the words barely sounded.

She sat in the back seat of the car and wound down the window, trying to get fresh air to clear her head. Her gaze skimmed over the grand homes, with their marble columns and gorgeous gardens, and beyond to the aquamarine waters of the glorious coastline. The beauty of the wealthy island now oppressed her. She willed the Sergeant to drive faster. She had to find a place and space to think. And that was not San Felipe.

Doubts and questions scurried in her mind. It was just over three months since that afternoon in the blazing sun. How could she be three months pregnant and not know about it? Horror filled her at the prospect—pregnancy had *never* been part of her life plan.

As soon as the Sergeant pulled up to the security station at the base she got out. No one came within sight as she walked to her room, but once she was there it was obvious someone had been very busy in that short time. Her space had been completely cleared. All that was left was a large duffel bag that leaned against the foot of the stripped bed. She opened it and her hurt deepened. Someone had taken methodical care to pack away her few personal possessions. It felt invasive and pointed—and why were the soldiers she'd considered more than colleagues so conspicuously absent?

Blocking the stabbing wounds and setting her mind to the task, Stella quickly phoned for a taxi to collect her at the gate, then stepped out of her drill uniform and pulled on the first things that came to hand—an old grey tee shirt, black yoga pants. She stuffed her feet into thin, flat-soled trainers. And she added a sweatshirt, because despite the early autumn heat she was freezing.

She left the clothing she'd removed in a neat folded pile on the end of her bed. Then she hoisted her duffel onto her back and walked past Security.

In and out in less than eight minutes. Not that her father was ever going to be impressed by anything she did. No matter how hard she tried.

'San Felipe airport, please,' she instructed the taxi driver, and slumped back against the seat.

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