

The Surprising Enchantress – book iii by Kae Elle Wheeler

Essie's stomach clenched. All signs of panic started at the tips of her toes, working their way up through her blood stream. Her fingers began to tingle. The Conte was trying to marry off Alessandro to that nitwit, Kendra Frazier? Why, she was naught but a prissy—

"I shall not marry Lady Kendra, *Padre*," Alessandro said quietly.

Essie let out a held breath. It echoed in the chamber. Premonish angst rippled through her, along with the strongest wish to cover her ears. Yet, she was frozen in that bizarre world of morbid curiosity.

"No?" The Conte sounded amused now.

Obviously, Alessandro's steely resolve failed to penetrate.

She gripped the edge of the sheeted settee, relieved at the resolve she heard in his tone.

"Lady Kendra shall suit my purposes adequately enough. Her *padre* is an earl—a distant cousin to England's throne." His excitement penetrated the air.

"Suit *your* purposes?" The sound of a chair scraped wood, followed by the chair toppling over. Essie flinched at the fury. He'd kept his passionate nature well hidden.

The Conte's tone hardened. "*Si*. You shall betroth yourself. You must do your duty with an heir or two. If Lady Kendra does not appeal, perhaps Lady Esmeralda is more to your tastes?"

The hair at her nape raised, along with the chilled pricks on her skin, air constricting in her throat. Her eyes began their awkward fluttered fury. Dust stirred in the room as the furniture coverings billowed in protest. She fought an imminent sneeze at the stirring dirt.

"*Lady Esmeralda*? You have truly lost your faculties, if your ambitions go so far to bind me for life to a woman whose eyes flutter so furiously 'tis enough to create an avalanche in these Pyrenees Mountains?" Alessandro sniffed in disgust.

Essie froze as the insult penetrated her seared sense, gripped her stomach at the sharp stabbing pain.

But, apparently, Alessandro de Lecce had not quite completed his annihilation of her—compelled to pound that final nail.

"I have availed myself for your purposes long enough." His strong voice resonated through the empty corridors. "Once this Coronation Ceremony is over, 'twill be time for us to return to our beloved Italy. I will not marry a woman able to change the weather on a whim. Not for you. Not for *anyone*."

That voice, distinct, accented, belonging to none other than a man she'd pined over for four long years, gone, in the thrust of a knife straight through her lower abdomen—so great, she bent at the waist. The candle she held tilted in trembling fingers, spilling wax on the dusty coverlet.