

Wanted: Royal Wife and Mother
Marion Lennox



MILLS & BOON®
Romance

Marion Lennox

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Аннотация

The return of a princess – and royal mum! For five long years Kelly has been separated from her son – the Alp de Ciel heir – and has been fighting tooth and nail to get him back. But with her estranged husband's death, Kelly finally can reclaim little Matty. Prince Regent Rafael de Boutaine wants mother and son to be reunited, but insists Kelly must embrace royal life... Kelly will do anything for Matty, and returns to the palace. But as she gets to know Rafael she starts to fall in love with the man behind the Prince. Kelly is in danger of doing what she never thought she'd do again – becoming a royal wife... By Royal Appointment You're invited to a royal wedding!

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WANTED: ROYAL WIFE AND MOTHER

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Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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It had been too long. Far too long.

Rafael...

She was kissing him back, as fiercely as he was kissing her, taking as well as giving, quenching her own desperate needs.

Needs she'd told herself didn't exist.

Only of course they did. Six long years of nothing. Isolation and loneliness and betrayal.

Rafael...

The kiss went on and on. Neither wanted it to end. Neither could conceive of it ending. The night was still and warm. There was no movement in the forecourt—the castle staff had long gone to bed. There was only this man and this woman, taking what they both desperately needed.

Marion Lennox is a country girl, born on an Australian dairy farm. She moved on—mostly because the cows just weren't interested in her stories! Married to a 'very special doctor', Marion writes Medical™ Romances as well as Mills & Boon® Romance. She used a different name for each category for a while—if you're looking for her past Mills & Boon® Romances, search for author Trisha David as well.

In her non-writing life Marion cares for kids, cats, dogs, chooks and goldfish. She travels, and she fights her rampant garden (she's losing) and her house dust (she's lost). Having spun in circles for the first part of her life, she's now stepped back from her 'other' career, which was teaching statistics at her local university. Finally she's reprioritised her life, figured out what's

important, and discovered the joys of deep baths, romance and chocolate. Preferably all at the same time!

Dear Reader

Palaces, princes, and the sheer indulgence of having someone else run the bath can be the basis of a fabulous indulgent read. But—and here I confess to a sad lack of first-hand knowledge—some aspects of royalty aren't all they're cracked up to be. My heroine knows this first-hand. She marries one prince in haste, and it takes another, the fabulous, sexy Prince Rafael, to transport my lovely princess and her child to her own personal happy-ever-after.

I do love a royal romance, and I'm hoping you do, too. I'm sorry if you're forced to run your own bath, but needs must. Hop in and do what I do—be a truly royal princess within the pages of this book.

Enjoy.

Marion

WANTED: ROYAL WIFE AND MOTHER

BY

MARION LENNOX



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With love and grateful thanks to the Maytoners.

True friends are gold.

Or should that be opals?

CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS the end of a long day in the goldfields, and Kelly had personally found almost a teaspoon of gold. The slivers of precious metal were now dispersed into scores of glass vials, to be taken home as keepsakes of a journey back in time.

Her tourists were happy. She should be, too.

But she was wet. She was dressed in period costume and raincoats hadn't been invented in the eighteen-fifties. As the day had grown colder Kelly had directed her tour groups down the mines, but she'd been wet before she'd gone down and the cold had stayed with her. Now she emerged from underground,

desperate to head to her little cottage on the hill, strip off her dungarees and leather boots and sink into a hot bath.

She might be a historian on what was the recreation of a piece of the Australian goldfields but, when it came to the offer of a hot bath, Kelly was a thoroughly modern girl.

The park horses—a working team that tugged a coach round the diggings during the day—lumbered up the track towards the stables and she stood well back. Horses... Once she'd loved them, but even now, after all this time, she hated to go near them. She waited.

Once the horses passed she expected her way home to be clear, but there were always one or two tourists lagging behind, as eager to stay as she was eager to leave. She had to manoeuvre her way past a last couple. A man and a child. They seemed to have been waiting for the horses to pass so they could speak to her.

Who were they? She hadn't seen them on the tour and she'd surely have noticed. The guy was strikingly good-looking: tall, tanned, jet-black hair—aristocratic? It was an odd description, she thought, but it seemed strangely appropriate. He was lean and strongly boned. Almost...what was the word... aquiline?

The little boy—the man's son?—was similarly striking, with olive skin, glossy black curls and huge brown eyes. He looked about five years old, and the sight of him made Kelly's gut clench as it had clenched countless times over the past five years.

How many five-year-old boys were there in the world?
Could she ever move on?

* * *

Could this be her?

Rafael stared across the track at the slip of a girl waiting for the horses to pass. Princess Kellyn Marie de Boutaine of Alp de Ciel? The thought was laughable.

She was wet, bedraggled and smeared with mud. She was dressed like an eighteen-fifties gold-miner, only most eighteen-fifties gold-miners didn't have chestnut curls escaping from under their felt brimmed hats.

He'd read the report. This had to be her.

But this was harder than he'd thought.

Back home it had seemed relatively straightforward. He'd been appalled when he'd received the investigative report. Like the rest of the population of Alp de Ciel, he'd thought this woman was a...well, no fit mother for a prince. He'd thought she'd left of her own free will, as unwilling to commit to her new baby as her royal husband had been.

But what the report had told him...

He cast a glance down at the child at his side. If the report was true... If she'd been forced away...

He had to step forward. If he did only this one thing as Prince Regent, it had to be the righting of this huge injustice.

Mathieu was gripping his hand with a ferocity that betrayed his tension. They'd come all this way. The child couldn't be messed around.

The woman—Kellyn?—was about to leave. The park was

about to close.

This had to be done now.

The horses were gone and yet they were still here. Man and child. Watching her.

‘Can I help you?’ Kelly managed, forcing forward her stock standard I’ll-make-you-enjoy-your-experience-here-or-bust smile that most of the staff here practised eternally. ‘Is there anything you need to know before we lock up for the night? I’m sorry, but we are closing.’

The rest of the group were moving away, making their way towards the exit. Pete, the elderly security guard, was leaning on the gates, waiting to close.

‘I can give you a booklet with pictures of the diggings if you like,’ she offered. She smiled down at the child, trying really hard not to think how like...how like...

No. That was the way of madness.

‘I see you came late,’ she said as the child didn’t answer. ‘If you like, we can stamp your tickets so you can come back tomorrow. It’s not much extra.’

‘I’d like to come back tomorrow,’ the child said gravely, with the hint of a French accent in his voice. ‘Can we, Uncle Rafael?’

‘I’m not sure,’ his uncle replied. ‘I’m not actually sure this is who we’re looking for. The guy on the gate...he said you were Kellyn Marie Fender.’

Her world stilled. There was something about this pair... There was something about the way this man was watching her...

‘Y...yes,’ she managed.

‘Then we need to talk,’ he said urgently and Kelly cast a frantic glance at Pete. She was suddenly terrified.

‘I’m sorry,’ she managed. ‘The park’s closing. Can you come back tomorrow?’

‘This is a private matter.’

‘What’s a private matter?’

‘Mathieu is a private matter,’ he said softly, and he smiled ruefully down at the little boy by his side. ‘Mathieu, this is the lady we’ve come to meet. I believe this lady is your mother.’

The world stopped. Just like that.

Death was the cessation of the heart beating and that was what it felt like. Nothing moved. Nothing, nothing, nothing.

She gazed at the man for a long moment, as if she were unable to break her gaze—as if she were unable to kick-start her heart. She felt frozen.

There’d been noises before—the cheerful clamour of tourists heading home. Now there was nothing. Her ears weren’t hearing.

She put a hand out, fighting for balance in a world that had suddenly jerked at a crazy angle. She might fall. She had to get her heart to work if she wasn’t to fall. She had to breathe.

The man’s hands came out and caught her under the elbows, supporting her, holding her firm, forcing her to stay upright.

‘Kellyn?’

She fought to get her next breath.

Another. Another.

Finally she found the strength to stand without support. She tugged away a little and he released her, watching her calmly as she took a couple of dazed steps back.

They were both watching her, man and boy. Both with that same calm, unjudging patience.

Could she see...could she see?

Maybe she could.

‘Mathieu,’ she breathed, and the child looked a question at the man and nodded gravely.

‘*Oui.*’

‘*Parlez-vous Anglais?*’ she asked for want of anything more sensible to ask, for she’d already had a demonstration that he did, and both man and boy nodded.

‘*Oui,*’ the little boy said again. He reclaimed his uncle’s hand and held tight. ‘My Aunt Laura says it’s very important to know *Anglais.*’

‘Mathieu,’ she breathed again, and her knees started to buckle again. But this time she was more in control. She let them give, squatting so she was on the child’s level. ‘*Tu est Mathieu. Mon... mon Mathieu.*’

The little boy hesitated. He looked again at his uncle. Rafael nodded—gravely, definite—and the little boy looked again at Kelly.

He kept on looking. He was taking in every inch of her. He put a hand out to touch her dungarees, as if checking that they were real. He looked again at her face and his small chin wobbled.

‘I don’t know,’ he whispered.

‘You do know,’ Rafael said gently. ‘We’ve explained it to you.’

‘But she doesn’t look...’

Kelly had forgotten to breathe. It seemed the child was as terrified as she was. And as unbelieving. He blinked a couple of times and a tear rolled down his cheek, unchecked.

She had an urgent need to wipe it away. To touch him.

She mustn’t. She mustn’t even breathe. She had to wait.

And finally he came to a decision. He gulped a couple of times and gripped his uncle’s hand as if it were a lifeline. But the look he gave her... There was desperate hope as well as terror.

‘Uncle Rafael says you are my mama,’ the child whispered.

And that was the end of her self-control. She, who’d sworn five years ago that she was done crying, that she’d never cry again, felt tears slip helplessly down her cheeks. She couldn’t stop them—she had no idea how to even try. She couldn’t think what to do, what to say. She simply squatted before her son and let the tears slip down her cheeks.

‘Oi! Kelly.’ It was Pete on the gate, concerned at her body language, concerned to get these stragglers out of the park. ‘It’s five past five,’ he yelled.

Rafael glanced down at Kelly, who was past speaking, and then called to Pete, ‘We’re not tourists. We’re friends of Kellyn’s.’

‘Kelly?’ Pete called, doubtful, and Kelly somehow stopped gazing at Mathieu, gulped a couple of times and found the strength to answer.

‘Lock up, Pete,’ she called unsteadily. ‘I’ll let them out through the cottage.’

‘You sure?’ Pete sounded worried. The head of security was a burly sixty-year-old who lived and breathed this park. He also treated the park employees as family. Any minute now he’d demand to see Rafael’s credentials and give Kelly a lecture on admitting strange men into her home.

‘It’s okay,’ Kelly called, straightening and forcing her voice to sound a lot more sure than she felt. ‘I know...I know these people.’ Her voice fell away to a whisper. ‘I know this child.’

The park—a restoration and re-enactment of life on the goldfields in the eighteen-fifties—had mineshafts, camps, shops, hotels and also tiny homes. As much as possible it was a viable, self-supporting community and the homes were lived in.

Kelly’s cottage was halfway up the hill. There were ten of these cottages in the park, and Kelly felt herself lucky to have one. It might not have mod cons but it had everything she needed and she could stay steeped in history and hardly ever step out into the real world.

Which was the way she liked it. She didn’t think much of the outside world. Once, a lifetime ago, she’d ventured a long way out and been so badly hurt she might never venture out again.

Now she stepped through the front door of her cottage feeling as if her world were tipping. The warmth of her wood-stove reached out to greet her, and it was all she could do not to turn round and slam the door behind her before these strangers

followed her in.

For the more she thought about it, the more she thought this must be some cruel joke. Fate would never do this to her. Life had robbed her of Mathieu. To hand him back... It was an unbelievable dream that must have no foundation in reality.

But here they were, following close on her heels, allowing her no time to slam the door before they entered.

The child's gaze was everywhere, his eyes enormous, clearly astonished that behind the façade of an ancient weatherboard hut was a snug little home. There was no requirement by the park administration that the interiors were kept authentic but Kelly loved her ancient wood-stove, her battered pine table, the set of kangaroo-backed chairs with bright cushions tied to each and the overstuffed settee stretched out beside the fire.

She had soup on the stove—leek and potato—and the smell after a cold and bleak day was a welcome all by itself.

Now they were inside, she didn't know where to start. The man—Rafael—was watching her. She watched the child. Mathieu watched everything.

'Is this where you live?' the little boy asked at last. He was backing away from eye contact with her now. The mother-child thing...neither of them knew where to start.

'Yes.' She couldn't get enough of him. She didn't believe—yet—but she wanted to, oh, she wanted to, and for this tiny sliver of time she thought what if...what if?

'Do you have a real stove?'

‘This is a real stove. Do you want to see the fire inside?’

‘Yes, please.’

She flicked open the fire door. He stared at the pile of glowing cinders and frowned.

‘Can you cook on this?’

‘You can see the pot of soup.’ She lifted a log from the hearth and put it in. ‘My fire made my soup. It’s been simmering all day. Every now and then I’ve had to pop home to put another log on.’

‘But you must have a stove with knobs. Like we have in the palace kitchens.’

The palace kitchens. Alp de Ciel. Maybe... maybe...

‘I do have an electric stove,’ she said cautiously, feeling as if she were buying time. She opened a cupboard and tugged out a little electric appliance—two hotplates complete with knobs. ‘In summer when it’s really hot I cook with this.’

‘But in winter you cook with fire.’

‘Yes.’

‘It’s very interesting,’ Mathieu said, while Rafael still watched and said nothing. His gaze disconcerted her. She wanted to focus exclusively on Mathieu but Rafael had unnerved her.

‘Does it cook cakes?’ Mathieu asked.

‘There’s a cake in the pantry,’ she said. She’d been miserable last night and had baked, just for the comfort of it. There’d been a staff meeting planned for this morning and she’d intended to take it along, but then one of the guides had called in sick and she’d had to take his place. So the cake was intact.

She produced it now while the child watched with wide-eyed solemnity and the man kept watching her.

‘It’s chocolate,’ Mathieu breathed.

‘Chocolate’s my favourite,’ Kelly admitted.

‘Uncle Rafael says you’re my mother,’ Mathieu said, still not looking at her but eyeing the cake as if it might give a clue to the veracity of his uncle’s statement.

‘So he does.’

‘I don’t really understand,’ Mathieu complained. ‘I thought my mother would wear a pretty dress.’

It was too much. Kelly stared at the child and she thought she was crazy, this was crazy, there was no way this was real.

I thought my mother would wear a pretty dress.

This little one had a vision of his mother. As she’d had a vision of her child.

‘I feel like crying,’ she said to the room in general, thinking maybe that saying it might ward it off. But shock itself was stopping her from weeping. Every nerve in her body was focused exclusively on this little boy.

‘I don’t understand either,’ she said at last as both males looked apprehensive. They were also looking a little confused. No, she wasn’t wearing a dress. She was wearing dungarees and a flannel shirt and leather boots. She was caked in mud. She was no one’s idea of a mother.

She hadn’t been a mother for five years.

‘You know Mathieu’s father is dead?’ Rafael said gently, and

her eyes jerked up to his.

‘Kass is dead?’ She stared wildly at him and then looked down at the little boy again. ‘Your papa?’

‘Papa died in a car crash,’ Mathieu said in a matter-of-fact voice.

‘Matty, I’m so sorry.’

Matty. The name Mathieu had been chosen by his father. It had seemed far too formal for such a scrap of a baby. Matty was what she’d called him for those few short weeks...

‘Aunt Laura calls me Matty,’ he said, sounding pleased. ‘Aunt Laura says the nurses told her my mama called me Matty.’

‘But...’ Her head was threatening to explode. She sank on to a chair because her legs wouldn’t hold her up any more. ‘But...’

‘Matty, why don’t you do the honours with the cake?’ Rafael suggested. With a sideways glance at Kelly—who was far too winded to think about answering—he opened the cutlery drawer, found a knife blunt enough for a child to handle, found three plates and set them on the side bench. ‘Three equal pieces, Matty,’ he said. ‘You cut and we’ll choose. As wide as your middle finger is long.’

Matty looked pleased. He crossed to the bench and held up his middle finger, carefully assessing. Clearly cake-cutting would take a while.

Rafael pulled out a chair and sat on the opposite side of the table to Kelly. He reached over, took her hands in his and held them. He had big hands. Callused. Work worn. They

completely enclosed hers. Two strong, warm hands, where hers were freezing. She must be freezing, she thought. She couldn't stop shivering.

She'd had the flu. She wasn't over it yet. Maybe that was why she was shivering.

'I should have phoned,' he said ruefully. 'This has been too much of a shock. But I was sure you'd have heard, and I didn't understand why you didn't contact us.'

'It's me who doesn't understand,' she whispered.

'You don't read the newspapers?'

'I...not lately. I've been unwell. This place has been hopelessly understaffed. What have I missed?'

'Alp de Ciel is only a small country but the death of its sovereign made worldwide news. Even right down here in Australia.'

'When?' What had happened to her voice? It was coming out as a squeak. She tried to pull her hands away but failed. She couldn't stop this stupid shivering.

He was still holding her. Maybe he thought she needed this contact. But he was a de Boutaine. Part of her life that had been blocked out for ever.

Matty was a de Boutaine. Matty was in her kitchen cutting cake.

'I've had flu,' she whispered, trying to make sense of it. 'Real flu, where you don't come out from under your pillow for weeks. The whole park staff's been decimated. For the last couple of

months, if we haven't been sick we've been run off our feet covering for those who are.'

'Which is why you're trudging round in the mud,' he said softly. 'My informants say you're a research historian here.'

His informants. That sounded like Kass. 'What I do is none of your business,' she snapped.

'The woman who is responsible for Mathieu is very much my business.'

She stared at him. Staring seemed all she was capable of. There was nothing else to do that she could think of.

'Who...who are you?' she whispered.

'Kass was my cousin.'

She moistened her lips. 'I don't think...I never met...'

'Kass and I didn't get on,' he said, with a sideways warning glance at Matty. There were things that obviously couldn't be said in Matty's presence. But Matty was doing his measuring and cutting with the focus of a neurosurgeon. These cake slices would be exactly equal if it took him half an hour to get it right.

'My father was the old prince's younger brother,' Rafael said. 'Papa married an American girl—my mother, Laura—and we lived in the dower house at the castle. My father died when I was a teenager, but my mother still lives at the castle. She and my father were very happy and she never wants to leave, but I left when I was nineteen. For the last fifteen years I've spent my life in New York. Until Kass died. Then I was called on. To my horror, I've discovered I'm Prince Regent.'

‘Prince Regent.’

‘It seems I’m the ruling Prince Regent of Alp de Ciel until Matty reaches twenty-five,’ he said ruefully. ‘Unless I knock it back. Which I don’t intend to.’

So the Prince Regent of Alp de Ciel was sitting at her kitchen table. Unbelievable. She didn’t believe it. She was fighting a mad desire to laugh.

How close to hysterics was she?

‘So you’re Prince Regent of Ciel.’

‘Yes.’

‘And you’ve come to Australia...why?’

‘Because Matty needs his mother.’

That was enough to take her breath away all over again.

‘Kass decreed he didn’t need his mother five years ago,’ she whispered. She shot Matty a quick glance to make sure he wasn’t a figment of imagination. She’d been delirious for twenty-four hours with influenza. She was still as weak as a kitten. This was surely an extension of her illness.

But no. Matty was here. He was evening up his slices, taking a surreptitious nibble of an equalizing sliver.

‘My cousin,’ Rafael was saying, softly so the words were for her alone, ‘had the morals of a sewer rat. I heard what he did to you. You were a kid; he married you and then you were in no man’s land. Mother of a future Crown Prince. Only of course you’d signed your rights away. As a commoner marrying into royalty, you had to sign an agreement saying if the marriage

ever broke down full custody of any children would stay with the Crown. So when you had an affair...’

‘I had no affair,’ she said, dragging desperately on to truth as a lifeline.

‘It seems now that you didn’t,’ Rafael said grimly. ‘It was the only thing that made it palatable to the world. That there were men who claimed to be your lovers. That you were proven to be immoral. Everyone knew Kass never had any intention of being faithful to a wife—he only married you to make his father furious. But...’

‘I don’t want to talk about this.’

‘No, but you must.’ His hands were still holding hers. She stared down at the link. It seemed wrong but it was such an effort to pull away. Did she have the strength?

Yes. This man was a de Boutaine. She had no choice. She tugged and he released her.

‘The story as I knew it,’ he said softly, ‘is that Kass married a commoner who was little better than he was. Together you had a child, but the only time you came to the castle was in the last stages of your pregnancy. By the time you had the child, the word was out. Your behaviour was said to be such that the marriage could never work. Kass’s public portrayal of your character was so appalling he even insisted on DNA testing to prove Mathieu was his son. Then, once Mathieu was proven to be his, he sent you out of the country. He cancelled your visa and he didn’t allow you back. The terms of the marriage contract left you no room

to fight, though the people of Alp de Ciel always assumed you were well looked after in a monetary sense. You disappeared into obscurity—not even the women’s magazines managed to trace you. You weren’t a renowned beauty looking for publicity. You weren’t flying to your lawyers to demand more money. You simply disappeared.’

‘And Matty?’ she whispered. For five years... every minute of every day he’d stayed in her heart. What had been happening to him?

But Rafael was smiling. Matty had the three slices even now, but there’d been a few crumbs scattered in the process. He was carefully collecting them, neatening the plates before he presented his offering to the adults.

‘Matty’s been luckier than he might have been,’ Rafael told her. ‘Kass couldn’t be bothered with him and abandoned him to the nursery. My mother had been in the US with me for the few weeks while you were at the castle—she knew nothing about you, and as far as she was concerned the reports about you were true—but when she returned there was a new baby. He had no mother and a father who didn’t care. My mother loves him to bits. Every summer when Kass closed the palace and disappeared to the gambling dens in Monaco or the South of France, she brought him to New York to stay with me. Kass didn’t care.’ He smiled. ‘My mother cares, though. Which is where I come into the picture.’

There were too many people. There was too much

information. 'My head hurts,' she managed.

'I imagine it must,' he said and smiled again, a gentle smile of sympathy that, had she not been too winded to think past Matty, might have given her pause. It was some smile.

'My mother took Kass's word for what sort of woman you were,' he said. 'We knew Kass had married to disoblige his father and that he'd married a...well, that he'd married someone really unsuitable seemed entirely probable. When Kass told the world how appalling you were he was believed—simply because to marry someone appalling was what he'd declared he'd do. You disappeared. The lie remained. Then, when Kass died, his secretary finally told me what really happened.

'Crater...'

'You remember Crater?'

'Yes.' All too well. An elderly palace official—the Secretary of State—with an armful of official documents, clearly spelling out her future. He'd sounded sympathetic but implacable. Telling her she had no rights to her son. Showing her the wording of the documents she'd signed in a romantic haze, never believing there could be any cause to act on. Telling her she had no recourse but to leave.

'He's felt appalling for five years,' Rafael told her. 'He said that six years ago Kass left the castle, furious with his father, and met you working on site on an archaeological dig. He said you were pretty and shy and Kass almost literally swept you off your feet. He could be the most charming man alive, my cousin

Kass. Anyway, as far as Kass was concerned you fitted the bill. You were a nobody. You had no family. He married you out of hand, settled you in France and made you pregnant. Only then, of course, his father died. Kass was stuck with a wife he didn't need or want. So he simply paid his henchmen to dig up dirt on you—make it up, it now seems. Crater had doubts—he was the only one who'd met you before you were married when Kass had called on him to draw up the marriage documents—but there was little he could do. The prenuptial contracts were watertight and you were gone before he could investigate further.'

'Yes...' She remembered it every minute of her life. A paid nanny holding the baby—her baby. Matty had been four weeks old. Kass, implacable, scornful, moving on.

'I'm cancelling your visa this minute, you stupid cow. You won't be permitted to stay. Stop snivelling. You'll get an allowance. You're set up for life, so move on.'

She'd been so alone. There had been a castle full of paid servants but there had been no one to help her. She remembered Crater—a silver-haired, elderly man who'd been gentle enough with her—but he hadn't helped her, and no one else had as much as smiled at her.

She had to go, so leave she had. And that had been that. She'd gone back to France for a while, hoping against hope there'd be a loophole that would allow her access to her little son. She'd talked to lawyers. She'd pleaded with lawyers, so many lawyers her head spun, but opinion had all been with Kass. She could

never return to Alp de Ciel. She had no rights at all.

She'd lost her son.

Finally, when the fuss had died—when the press had stopped looking for her—she'd returned to Australia. She'd applied for the job here under her mother's maiden name.

She'd never touched a cent of royal money. She'd rather have died.

And now here he was. Her son. Five years old and she knew nothing of him.

And Matty? What had he been told of his mother?

'What do you know about me?' she asked the little boy, while the big man with the gentle eyes looked at her with sympathy.

'My father said you were a whore,' Matty said matter-of-factly as he carried over the plates, obviously not knowing what the word meant. 'But Aunt Laura and Uncle Rafael have now told me that you're a nice lady who digs old things out of the ground and finds out about the people who owned them. Aunt Laura says that you're an arch...an archaeologist.'

'I am,' she said softly, wonderingly.

'My mother and I have told Matty as much of the truth as we know,' Rafael told her. The cake plates were in front of them now, and they were seated round the table almost like a family. The fire crackled in the old wood-stove. The rain pattered on the roof outside and the whole scene was so domestic it made Kelly feel she'd been picked up and transported to another world.

'Kellyn, my mother and I would like you to return,' Rafael

said, so gently that she blinked. Her weird little bubble burst and she couldn't catch hold of the fragments.

'Return?'

'To Alp de Ciel.'

'You have to be kidding.' But she couldn't take her eyes from Matty.

'Mathieu is Crown Prince of Alp de Ciel.'

She couldn't take this in. 'I...I guess.'

'I'm Prince Regent until he comes of age.'

'Congratulations.' It sounded absurd. Nothing in life had prepared her for this. Matty was calmly sitting across the table eating chocolate cake, watching her closely with wide brown eyes that were...hers, she thought, suddenly fighting an almost irresistible urge to laugh. Hysteria was very, very close.

Matty was watching her as she was watching him. Maybe... maybe he even wanted a mother. He wanted her?

This was her baby. She longed with every fibre of her being to take him in her arms and hug him as she'd dreamed of holding him for these last five years. But this was a self-contained little person who'd been brought up in circumstances of which she knew nothing. To have an unknown woman—even if it had been explained who she was—hugging and sobbing, she knew instinctively it would drive him away.

'I'll never go back to Alp de Ciel,' she whispered but she knew it was a lie the moment she said it. She'd left the little principality shattered. To go back... To go back to her son... Her little son

who was looking at her with equal amounts of hope and fear?

‘It would be very different now,’ Rafael said. ‘You’d be returning as the mother of the Crown Prince. You’d be accepted in all honour.’

‘You know what was said of me?’

‘Kass said it over and over, of all his women,’ Rafael said. ‘The people stopped believing Kass a long time ago.’

‘Kass was Matty’s father,’ she said with an urgent glance at Matty, but Rafael shook his head.

‘Matty hardly knew his father. Matty, can you remember the last time you saw Prince Kass?’

‘At Christmas?’ Matty said, sounding doubtful. ‘With the lady in the really pointy shoes. I saw his picture in the paper when he was dead. Aunt Laura said we should feel sad so I did. May I have some more chocolate cake, please? It’s very good.’

‘Certainly you can,’ Kelly whispered. ‘But Kass... Kass said he intended to raise him himself.’

‘Kass intended nothing but his own pleasure,’ Rafael said roughly. ‘The people knew that. There’s little regret at the accident that killed him.’

‘Oh, Matty,’ Kelly whispered, and the little boy looked up at her and calmly met her gaze.

‘Ellen and Marguerite say I should still be sad because my papa is dead,’ he said. ‘But it’s very hard to stay sad. My tortoise, Hermione, died at Christmas. I was very sad when Hermione died so when I think of Papa I try and think of Hermione.’

‘Who are Ellen and Marguerite?’

‘They’re my friends. Ellen makes my bed and cleans my room. Marguerite takes me for walks. Marguerite is married to Tony who works in the garden. Tony gives me rides in his wheelbarrow. He helped me to bury Hermione and we planted a rhod...a rhododendron on top of her.’

He went back to cutting cake. Rafael watched her for a while as she watched her son.

‘So you’re in charge?’ she managed at last.

‘Unfortunately, yes.’

‘Unfortunately?’

She gazed across the table at his hands. They were big and strong and work-stained. Vaguely she remembered Kass’s hands. A prince’s hands. Long and lean and smooth as silk.

Rafael’s thumb was missing half a nail and was carrying the remains of an angry, green-purple bruise.

‘What do you do for a living?’ she asked. ‘When...when you’re not a Prince Regent.’

‘I invent toys. And make ’em.’

It was so out of left field that she blinked.

‘Toys?’

‘I design them from the ground up,’ he said, sounding cheerful for a moment. ‘My company distributes worldwide.’

‘Uncle Rafael makes Robo-Craft,’ Matty volunteered with such pride in his voice that Kelly knew this was a very important part of her small son’s world.

‘Robo-Craft,’ she repeated, and even Kelly, cloistered away in her historical world, was impressed. She knew it.

Robo-Craft was a construction kit, where each part except the motor was crafted individually in wood. One could give a set of ten pieces to a four-year-old, plus the tiny mechanism that went with it, and watch the child achieve a construction that worked. It could be a tiny carousel if the blocks were placed above the mechanism, or a weird creature that moved in crazy ways if the mechanism was in contact with the floor. The motor was absurdly strong, so inventions could be as big as desired. As kids grew older they could expand their sets to make wonderful inventions of their own, fashioning their own pieces to fit. Robo-Craft had been written up as a return to the toolshed, encouraging boys and girls alike to attack plywood with handsaws and paint.

‘They say it encourages kids to be kids again,’ Kelly whispered, awed. ‘Like building cubby houses.’

‘Uncle Rafael helped me build a cubby house in the palace garden,’ Matty volunteered. ‘We did it just before we left.’

‘So you do spend time in the castle?’ she asked him. She was finding it so hard to look at anything that wasn’t Matty, yet Rafael’s presence was somehow...intriguing? Unable to be ignored.

‘I’ve been there since Kass died.’

‘But not before.’

‘My mother still lives in the dower house. I didn’t see eye to

eye with Kass or his father and left the country as soon as I was able, but my mother...well, the memories of her life there with my father are a pretty strong hold. And then there's Matty. She loves him.'

So it seemed that at least her little son had been loved. Her nightmares of the last five years had been impersonal nannies, paid carers, no love at all. But thanks to this man's mother... And now thanks to this man...

'What do I do now?' Kelly whispered, and Rafael looked at her with sympathy.

'Get to know your son.'

'But...why?'

'Kelly, my mother and I have talked this through. Yes, Matty's the Crown Prince of Alp de Ciel, but you're his mother. What happens now is up to you. Even if you insist he stay here until he's of an age to make up his mind...no matter what the lawyers say, we've decided it's your right to make that decision. You're his mother again, Kellyn. Starting now.'

CHAPTER TWO

TO SAY Kelly was stunned would be an understatement. She was blown away. For five years she had dreamed of this moment—of this time when she'd be with her son again. But she'd never imagined it could be like this.

It was ordinary. Domestic. World-shattering.

'Why don't you take a bath and get some dry clothes on?' Rafael suggested, and the move between world-shattering and

ordinary seemed almost shocking.

‘Excuse me?’

‘You’re wet through,’ he said. ‘You’ve been shivering since we met you, and it’s not just shock. You’ve been ill. You shouldn’t stay wet. Matty and I aren’t going anywhere. We’ll stay here and eat your chocolate cake and wait for you.’

‘But...where are you staying?’

‘We have a place booked in town,’ he said. ‘But there are things we need to discuss before we leave. Go take your bath and we’ll talk afterwards.’

She had no choice but to agree. Her head wasn’t working for her. If he’d told her to walk the plank she might calmly have done it right now.

And she couldn’t stop shivering.

So she left them and ran a bath, thinking she’d dip in and out and return to them fast. But when she sank into the hot water her body reacted with a weird lethargy that kept her right where she was.

She had no shower—just this lovely deep bath tub. The water pressure was great, which meant that by the time she’d fumbled through getting her clothes off the bath was filled. The water enveloped her, cocooned her, deepening the trance-like state she’d felt ever since she’d seen Matty.

She could hear them talking through the door.

‘She makes very good cake.’ That was Matty. As a compliment it was just about the loveliest thing she could imagine. Her

grandmother had given her the chocolate cake recipe. Her son was eating her grandma's chocolate cake.

'I think your mama is a very clever lady.' That was Rafael. His compliment didn't give her the same kind of tingle. She thought of the lovely things Kass had said to her when he'd wanted to marry her, and she still cringed that she'd believed him. This man was a de Boutaine. Every sense in her body was screaming *beware*.

'Why is she clever?' Matty asked.

'She's an archaeologist and a historian. Archaeologists need to be clever.'

'Why?'

'They have to figure out...how old things are. Stuff like that.'

'Was that why she was at our castle? Trying to figure out how old it is?'

'I guess.'

'It's five hundred and sixty-three years old,' Matty said. 'Crater told me. It's in a book. Mama could have just read the book.'

'People like your mama would have written the book. She could have worked it out. Maybe you could ask her how.'

'She does make good cake,' Matty said and Kelly slid deeper into the hot water and felt as if she'd died and gone to heaven.

What did they want? Where would she take things from here? No matter. For this moment nothing mattered but that her son was sitting by her kitchen fire eating her grandma's cake.

She hadn't taken dry clothes into the bathroom. This was a

tiny cottage and her bathroom led straight off the kitchen. She hadn't been thinking, and once she was scrubbed dry, pinkly warm, wrapped in her big, fuzzy bathrobe and matching pink slippers she kept in the bathroom permanently and with her hair wrapped in a towel, she felt absurdly self-conscious about facing them again.

There was hardly a back route from bathroom to bedroom unless she dived out of the window. Face them she must, so she opened the door and they both turned and smiled.

They'd been setting the table. There were plates and spoons and knives in three settings. Rafael had cut the bread on the sideboard. The sense of domesticity was almost overwhelming.

'That's much better,' he said approvingly, his dark eyes checking her from the fluffy slippers up.

'You look pretty,' Matty said and then amended his statement. 'Comfy pretty. Not like the ladies my papa brought to the castle.' She flushed.

'You're pink,' Matty said, and she flushed some more.

'I guess the water was too hot.'

'At least you're warm,' Rafael said. 'Sit down and eat. I know we've done this the wrong way round—cake before soup—but it does seem sensible to eat. That is, if you don't mind sharing.'

'I...no, of course I don't mind. But it's all I've got.'

'Until next pay day?' he asked, teasing, and she flushed even more. Drat her stupid habit of blushing. Though, come to think of it, she hadn't blushed for a very long time.

‘I meant soup and toast is all there is.’

‘After a hard day down the gold-mines? It’s hardly workman’s fare.’

‘I need to get dressed,’ she said.

‘You’re not hungry?’

She was hungry. She’d fiddled with her cake, not able to pay it any attention. Now she was suddenly aware that she was ravenous.

But to sit in her bathrobe...

‘We’re jet lagged,’ Rafael said, seeing her indecision. ‘We need to get some sleep pretty soon, but this soup smells so good we’d love to share. If you don’t mind eating now.’

She gave up. Thinking was just too hard. ‘Fine.’

‘Great,’ he said.

‘We can’t find your toaster,’ Matty told her, moving right on to important matters.

‘I make my toast with the fire.’

‘How?’

Okay. She was dressed in a bathrobe and fluffy slippers and nothing else. She was entertaining the Prince Regent and the Crown Prince of Alp de Ciel in her kitchen. A girl just had to gather her wits and teach them how to make toast.

She tied another knot—firmly—in the front of her bathrobe, flipped open the fire door and produced a toasting fork. She pulled a chair up to the stove, lifted Matty on to it—she couldn’t believe she did that—she just lifted him on to the chair as if it

were the most natural thing in the world—she arranged a piece of bread on the toasting fork and set him to work.

It was the first time she'd touched him. She felt breathless.

'Wow,' Matty breathed and she smiled, and Matty turned to see if Rafael was smiling too, and so did Kelly and suddenly she didn't feel like breathing.

It was the shock, she told herself. Not the smile. Not.

It was his cousin's smile. The de Boutaine smile.

She remembered almost every detail of Kass's courtship. One moment she'd been part of a team excavating in the palace grounds; the next she'd looked up and Kass had been watching her. He had been on his great, black stallion.

He'd been just what a prince ought to look like—tall and dark and heart-stoppingly handsome, with a dangerous glint behind his stunning smile. And his horse... She'd spent half her childhood with thoroughbreds but the stallion had made her gasp. The combination, prince and stallion, had been enough to change her world.

'Cinderella,' he murmured. 'Just who I need.'

It was a strange comment, but then he left his horse, stooped beside her in the dust and watched her brush the dust from an ancient pipeline she was uncovering. He seemed truly interested. He spent an hour watching her and then he asked her out to dinner.

'Anywhere your heart desires,' he told her. 'This Principality is yours to command.'

He meant it was his to command. Kass's ego was the size of his country, but it had taken her too long to find that out.

Stunned, she went out to dinner with him. She was mesmerized by his looks, his charm and the fact that he seemed equally fascinated by her. It was heady stuff.

The next morning he met her at the stables. He mounted her on a mare, almost as beautiful as his stallion, Blaze, and they rode together into the foothills of the mountains in the early morning mist. The magic of the morning blew her away. It left her feeling mind-numbingly, blissfully in love, transported to a parallel universe where normal rules of sense and caution no longer applied.

That night, as she finished work, he appeared again, in his dress uniform. Regal and imperious and still utterly charming, he was focusing all his attention on her. He'd just come from a ceremonial function, he told her, but she suspected now that he'd dressed that way to overwhelm her.

And overwhelmed she was. Royalty and stallions. Swords and braid and wealth. He chartered a private plane to take her to Paris. No matter that she had nothing to wear—they'd shop for clothes in Fabourg Saint-Honoré, he told her. He'd take her personally this night, before their weekend started.

For Kelly, the only child of disinterested academic parents, whose only love had been her neighbour's horses, this seemed a fairy-tale.

Instead it was a nightmare. One where she ended up losing

everything.

So now Rafael was smiling at her and there was no way she was smiling back. That way led to disaster. Royalty...no and no and no.

‘I’m not Kass,’ he said and she blinked.

‘Pardon?’

‘I know there’s a family resemblance,’ he told her, and there was a note of anger behind his studied gentleness. ‘But I’m not Kass and I’m not like him. You have no reason to fear me, Kelly.’

‘I...’

‘Let’s make toast,’ he said, and smiled some more and supervised turning the bread on the toasting fork. ‘You pour the soup.’

So eat they did, by the fireside. Matty was hungry and Kelly was hungry for him. She could scarcely take her eyes from him.

‘He’ll still be here tomorrow,’ Rafael said and leaned over the table, filled her soup spoon and guided her lifeless hand to her lips. ‘You look like you need a feed as much as Matty.’

‘You’ll still be here tomorrow?’

‘Yes.’

There should have been a fuss, she thought, bewildered. She thought of Kass, flying to Paris that first weekend she’d met him. There’d been minions everywhere—pomp and pageantry, recognition of Kass’s rank and dignity.

‘Why aren’t there reporters?’ she asked, forcing herself to drink her soup as Rafael had directed, if only to stop him force-

feeding her. He had the look of a man who just might.

He was frowning at her. He looked as if he was worried about her. That was crazy.

‘Just how sick were you?’ he demanded and she flushed and spooned a bit more soup in.

‘It was a horrid flu but I’m fine now. You haven’t answered my question. Why are there no reporters? If you’re indeed Prince Regent...’

‘We came incognito.’

‘Oh, sure.’

‘It can be done,’ he said. ‘In fact I changed my name to my mother’s when I left the country. I have an American passport—I’m Rafael Nadine.’

‘And Matty?’

‘Trickier,’ he said. ‘But not impossible when you know people in high places.’

‘As you do.’

‘As we do,’ he said gravely. ‘It was important. To sweep in here in a Rolls-Royce or six with a royal entourage behind me... it wouldn’t achieve what I hoped to achieve.’

‘Which was what?’

‘To find out for sure what my investigators have been telling me. That you are indeed a woman of principle. That you are indeed a woman who should have all the access to your son that you want.’

‘Oh,’ she said faintly.

‘Eat your soup.’

‘I don’t think...’

‘We’re not talking about anything else until you’ve eaten your soup and at least three slices of toast,’ he said roughly. ‘Matty, something tells me your mama needs a little looking after. As a son, that’s your duty. Finish your soup and then make us all some more toast.’

Matty crashed. Just like that. One minute he was bright and bubbly and enthused about toast-making, but the next minute, as he ate his third piece of toast, spread thickly with honey, his eyelids drooped. He pushed aside his plate, put his head on his hands and sighed.

‘My head feels heavy,’ he said. ‘Uncle Rafael...’

‘We need to go,’ Rafael said ruefully. ‘We hadn’t meant to stay this long.’ He smiled at her—that damned smile again. ‘It’s your fault. The soup smelled so good.’

‘Where are you staying?’ she asked.

‘The Prince Edward.’

‘But that’s...’ She paused, dismayed.

‘That’s what?’ Rafael said. ‘We found it on the Internet, Matty and I. It looks splendid. We checked in this afternoon and it seems really comfortable.’

‘Yes, but it’s over a really popular pub,’ she said. ‘Thursday night here is most people’s pay night. The Prince Edward is the party pub. By two in the morning it’ll be moving up and down on its foundations.’

‘Oh,’ he said, in a voice which said that if Matty hadn’t been present he might have said something else.

‘I need to go to sleep,’ Matty said unnecessarily.

‘You can stay here,’ Kelly said before she realized she intended to say it.

‘We can’t...’

‘I’ve just got the one bedroom,’ she said quickly. ‘But it’s a double bed. You and Matty could have it and I can sleep on the settee.’

‘This settee?’ Rafael asked. There was no separate living area from the kitchen in this cottage. The settee stretched out along one wall, big and piled with cushions and incredibly inviting.

‘I could sleep on that,’ Matty announced.

‘So you could,’ Rafael said. ‘If that’s okay with your mama. I’ll go back to the Prince Edward.’

Matty’s face fell. ‘I want to go with you,’ he whispered.

Of course. Kelly was his mother but he’d known her for all of two hours. Rafael was his security.

But now she’d said it, Kelly knew the invitation had come from the heart. She so wanted them to stay. She wanted *Matty* to stay.

Rafael was watching her face. He wouldn’t have to be brilliant to see the aching need she had no way of disguising.

The thought of them going to the Prince Edward, where she knew they’d lie awake all night rocked by the vibrations of truly appalling bands was almost unbearable. But in truth the thought of Matty going anywhere was unbearable. She’d put up with

Rafael—with a de Boutaine in her house—to know that Matty was under her roof.

‘So here’s a plan,’ Rafael said gently, looking from Matty to Kelly and back again. ‘Matty, your mama says the hotel we’re planning on staying in is very noisy. She’s invited us to stay in this little cottage with her. Would you like to do that?’

‘Yes, but only if you stay here too,’ Matty said, and his bottom lip trembled.

‘Then I will,’ Rafael said. ‘But you know, you and your mama look as tired as each other. Why don’t you pop under the blankets on one side of your mama’s bed? Your mama can sleep on the other side and I’ll sleep by the fire.’

‘Why can’t you and mama sleep in the bed while I sleep by the fire?’ Matty whispered but he was losing force. He was drooping as they watched.

‘It wouldn’t be dignified,’ Rafael said. ‘You know Aunt Laura says you and I need to learn to be dignified.’

‘It’s not dignified to sleep in the same bed as my mama?’

‘For you, yes. For me, no.’

‘Okay,’ Matty said, caving in with an alacrity born of need. ‘Can I go to bed now?’

And an hour later she was in bed with her son.

It felt like a weird and spacey dream. She lay in her big double bed and listened to him. Her son was breathing.

No big deal. To listen to a child breathe...

How could she go to sleep? She’d left the blind open and

the moon was shining over her little vegetable garden, into the window, washing over her little son's face.

Normally she blocked the moon out. She had a single woman's need for security—privacy—so the blind went down every night.

There was no way the blind was coming down this night. She lay and watched Matty's chest rise and fall, his small face intent even in sleep, the way his lashes curled, the way his fingers pressed into his cheek...

She could see his father. She could see the de Boutaine side. But she could also see little things about herself. She had funny quirky eyebrows, too thick for beauty. Whenever she had a haircut, the hairdresser tut-tutted and thinned them out.

Here were those same thick brows.

On a guy they'd be gorgeous.

On Matty they were gorgeous.

Her son.

There were vague sounds from outside and she looked out of the window in time to see the security guards wandering past her back fence. Yes, she should get up and close the blind. It wasn't safe.

It was safe, for just through the door Rafael de Boutaine was stretched out on her settee.

Her son was in bed beside her. The Prince Regent of Alp de Ciel was just through the door.

'As if that makes us safe,' she muttered into the night.

But...but...

'He's different from Kass. He's honourable, I know.

'How do you know?' She was whispering in to the dark. Her hand was lying on Matty's pillow. She wouldn't touch him. She wouldn't for the world wake him, startle him. But with her hand on his pillow she could feel his breathing. It was enough.

'Rafael brought him home.

'There must be some underlying motive.

'Maybe, but he's brought him home,' she whispered and the thought of Rafael lying in the darkness just through the door remained solid. Good. Comforting in a way she hadn't been comforted for years.

Her little boy was asleep beside her. Rafael had brought him to her.

What more could a woman want?

'I have my son,' she whispered into the dark and thought how could she sleep with such happiness?

But she was still recuperating from the flu. She hadn't slept well for weeks.

She leaned up on her elbows and gazed for one long last moment at her son. She touched her lips with her finger and then transferred the kiss to her son with a feather touch that wouldn't disturb him for the world.

She snuggled down on to her pillows where she could watch her son's breathing.

He breathed. He breathed.

Rafael was just through the door. Prince Regent of Alp de

Ciel. A prince who'd brought her son to her.

She felt warm and safe and almost delirious with love.

She slept.

Kelly woke to the smell of coffee. She opened one eye. They were standing at the bedroom door, smiling. Both of them. Identical smiles, where warmth and mischief combined.

Rafael was dressed in the same casual cords and soft sweater he'd been wearing the night before. Last night Matty had been wearing jeans and a soft blue coat. Now he was wearing almost identical cords to Rafael and a sweater of the same colour as well. They looked... They looked...

She blinked fiercely. She'd been awake for seconds and she was close to tears already.

'H...hi.'

'Hi, yourself, sleepyhead,' Rafael said, carrying in a mug of steaming coffee. 'Mathieu. Toast.' Mathieu almost saluted, but his hands were occupied in balancing a plateful of toast.

The toast was spread liberally with marmalade and butter. Yum. But...

She glanced at the bedside clock and sat bolt upright as Matty reached the bed with the toast. It was almost a calamity, but not quite, for Rafael moved like a big cat, pouncing on the plate, lifting it away while spilling not a drop of coffee.

She was stunned, but she was still staring at the clock. 'It's after nine,' she stammered. 'How...'

'We turned off your alarm clock,' Matty said proudly and

removed the plate of toast from Rafael's grasp and put it carefully on her knee. 'Uncle Rafael and me woke up really early because it doesn't feel like morning. Uncle Rafael says it's because we're all the way round the other side of the world and the sun hasn't caught us up. Uncle Rafael says if we keep flying we'll catch up with it again but we don't want to keep flying yet 'cos we have to give you toast. And the man outside in the uniform said you've been really, really sick and someone ought to look after you 'cos you sure as hell don't look after yourself.'

He paused, looking up at Rafael with uncertainty. 'Did I say that right? In *Anglais*?'

'You certainly did,' Rafael said. 'I told you my mother's American,' he told Kelly. 'Matty's been brought up bilingual. Isn't he terrific?'

'Terrific,' Kelly said and managed a smile. Terrific? He was more than terrific. He was...he was...

Her son.

But there was still the little matter of the time.

'I'm supposed to be at work.'

'You're not. Rob's back,' Rafael said. 'The two tour guides are back at work today. There's no urgency. The powers that be say you're to take the day off if you need.'

'The powers that be...'

'We've been busy,' he told her. 'We went back to the hotel to get our gear. Then we visited your administration. The lady there—Diane?—she was in at eight. We introduced ourselves.'

‘You never told her...’

‘We said we were relations,’ he said, placating her. ‘And we were worried about you. It seems Diane is worried about you too.’

‘She’s a mother hen,’ Kelly said fretfully, wondering what Diane would be thinking. Knowing what Diane would be thinking. ‘Look, thank you for the thought but I need to...’ ‘Take us through the theme park,’ Rafael said. ‘Matty’s aching to go down a gold-mine. We thought we might do that first, if it’s okay with you.’ He smiled down at her with that heart-stopping smile that sent her brain straight into panic. ‘That is, unless you’d like to stay in bed and sleep while Matty and I explore?’

Matty explore without her? The idea had her reaching to toss off her covers but Rafael caught her hands and stopped her.

‘No,’ he said, gently but firmly. ‘You stay in bed until you’ve had your toast. Matty and I are going to eat more toast until you’re ready. You’re not to rush. We have all the time in the world.’

‘Really?’

The smile faded. ‘No,’ he admitted. ‘Not really. But for today I’m going to pretend that’s true, so I’d like you to play along if you will. Let’s get ourselves breakfasted and go find some gold.’

She wore her favourite dress. Matty’s words stayed with her—*I thought my mother would wear a pretty dress*. So she did.

Most of Kelly’s work in the theme park was done in the administration. She researched new displays, she assessed the veracity of potential tenants for the commercial sites—were their wares truly representative of the eighteen-fifties? She worked

with the engineers as they combined authentic mining methods with new-age safety. She examined artefacts as they were found, donated or offered for sale.

In the short times she was off site she wore what the park staff loosely termed civvies, but while she was in the park, like every other employee, she dressed for the times.

She loved her clothes. Yes, she had the hard-wearing moleskins and flannels for when she needed to go underground, but mostly she was a woman wearing clothes that a woman would have worn in the eighteen-fifties—hooped skirts, shawls, bonnets. She loved the way her skirts swished against her, how they turned her into a citizen of a bygone age. She loved disappearing into the world of nearly two hundred years ago.

And this morning Matty was waiting for his mother. So she chose a pale blue muslin gown, beautifully hand-embroidered herself in the long winter nights before the fire. She teamed it with a soft woollen shawl of a deeper blue and cream. She tied her soft chestnut curls into a knot and placed a bonnet on top, a soft straw confection with ribbons of three colours combined. Then she pinched her cheeks to give them colour as girls used to do in times past. She smiled to herself. She was dressing for her son. Surely he wouldn't notice colour in her cheeks.

She was also dressing for Rafael and he might.

Which was a nonsense, she told herself, suddenly angry. She wasn't dressing for Rafael. She'd never dress for a de Boutaine again. She wanted nothing to do with the family.

But her son was a de Boutaine. How could she swear never to have anything to do with a royal family headed by her son?

It was too hard. It made her head spin. She picked up the little cane basket she carried instead of a purse and opened the door to the kitchen.

They were washing dishes. Rafael was washing, Matty was wiping. Rafael had his sleeves rolled up. He'd used too much soap and suds were oozing out of the porcelain bowl and on to the wooden bench. Matty was manfully trying to wipe suds off plates. He had suds on his nose.

There it was again. The combination of de Boutaine sexiness that made her want to gasp.

She swallowed it firmly, but both guys had turned to her and were looking at her in frank admiration.

'Wow,' said Matty.

'Wow,' Rafael repeated and she felt herself blushing.

'I...it's what we all have to wear.'

'My mama's pretty,' Matty said, satisfied. 'Isn't she, Uncle Rafael?'

'She certainly is,' Rafael agreed. 'Modern men don't know what they're missing.'

'It certainly covers me,' she said, struggling for lightness. 'There could be absolutely anything under these hoops.'

'Hoops,' Matty said. He walked forward, fascinated, and gave one of her hoops a tentative poke.

Her skirt swayed out behind her.

‘It’s like a little tent,’ Matty said. ‘Mama could have really, really fat legs. Or she could be hiding something. A little dog.’

It was said with a certain amount of hope and for a dumb moment Kelly wished she had a dog.

A dog under her skirt. Right.

‘There’s nothing your mama needs to hide,’ Rafael said, turning his back to the suds, eyeing them with a degree of bewilderment and then sternly turning back to her. ‘Let’s go play on the goldfields.’

‘You haven’t finished washing up.’

‘My suds seem to be taking over the world,’ he said. ‘I just shook the little holder with the washing up liquid in and suds went everywhere. I think we should go out and shut the door and lock it after us. And hope like crazy the suds don’t follow us down the mineshafts.’

They loved it.

Kelly could do the guide thing on autopilot. She walked them through the little town, down to the creek where tourists were panning for gold. She showed the boys how to use the tin pans and then sat on a log and watched them.

The park was quiet. The flu epidemic had hit the whole state. It was autumn. Nearly all the staff had been laid low early and were now returning to work. With the worst of the sickness past, they’d be almost overmanned for the rest of the season. So she could afford to take this day. To simply watch as Matty and Rafael explored.

They were so alike.

Rafael wasn't even Matty's uncle, she reminded herself. Rafael had been Kass's cousin. That made him—what—second cousin to Matty?

But Matty loved him. He trusted him absolutely. Their two heads were bowed over the pan, searching for specks of gold, and she thought that Rafael could easily be his father.

What sort of man was he? The Prince Regent of Alp de Ciel. It didn't matter.

It did matter, for there was a burning question hanging over her head. Where did she go from here?

She'd been handed back her son, but Matty was his own little person. He had allegiances. There were people he loved, and those people didn't include her.

Rafael had said it was her decision to make.

She'd keep him here. She watched as he found a tiny speck of gold in his pan and held it on his thumb, admiring. He could live with her here. She'd take care of him. He could have a wonderful life, living on the diggings. Lots of staff had their kids here—he'd be part of the kid-pack who wore period clothes and treated the park as their personal playground. He'd go to school here. She'd keep him...

Hidden?

It was on the tip of her tongue, the edge of her thoughts. That was what she'd been doing, she thought. For the last five years she'd been hiding. She was hiding still, behind her hoops and her

bonnet and her period self.

The Kelly who'd looked up to see Prince Kass gazing down at her, the Kelly who'd ridden out with Kass at dawn, who'd launched herself into life six years back, had been locked firmly away.

Yes, she was hiding. She was still in there somewhere, the Kelly who craved excitement and adventure and...romance? But she was very firmly hidden and there was no way the sensible Kelly would ever let her emerge again.

Pete was walking down the hill towards them. Trouble. She knew the security guard well and the expression on his face had Kelly standing up, moving automatically between Pete and the two gold-panners.

Between the outside world and her son.

'What's wrong?' she called before he reached her, and Rafael looked up from gold-panning, handed the pan over to Matty and came to join her.

'There's media at the gate,' Pete said harshly. 'They're asking Diane where to find someone called the Prince Regent of some country or other. Diane told them she's never heard of anyone like that but they described—' he hesitated as Rafael reached them '—they described you, sir.'

'Damn,' Rafael said, but he said it wearily as if he'd expected it.

'We'll go back to the cottage,' Kelly said, uncertain, but he shook his head.

‘They’d find us there. We’ll be forced to stay inside while they camp and wait for us to come out. It’ll just delay the inevitable.’

‘I can see them off,’ Pete said. ‘Begging your pardon, but... are you a prince?’

‘For my sins, yes,’ Rafael said ruefully. ‘And this is a public theme park. They can demand admission. I’ll have to head them off. Kelly, can you blend into the tourist scene with Matty?’

‘I...sure. Are they looking for me?’ She sounded scared. She knew it but there wasn’t anything she could do about it. Five years ago she’d been hunted as the press had searched the world for her. She’d been turned into the wicked princess, reviled by all.

To have photographers here now...

‘Not yet,’ Rafael said. ‘At least I hope not. I hope it’s just that they’ve tracked me down. They’ll assume Matty’s at home in Alp de Ciel.’

‘What have you told them? Do they know you’re letting me have access to Matty?’

‘I’ve told them nothing,’ he said, looking grim. ‘But it’s not going to last.’

‘What’s going on?’ Pete demanded, bewildered.

‘It’s private,’ Kelly said urgently, but she knew Pete’s brain was forming questions more quickly than his mouth could ask them.

‘They’ll find us soon,’ she whispered.

‘Yes, but I’ll buy time.’ Rafael shrugged. ‘I’m sorry, Matty,’ he said. Matty had straightened from his panning and was looking bewildered. ‘It’s the press,’ he said, as if that explained all, and

Kelly could see that the words were meaningful to her little son. He'd been hounded by the media in the past, then. 'I need to go.'

'Will I come with you?' Matty drew himself up and Kelly had a flash of recognition. This was a prince in training. His shoulders came back and he met Rafael's look directly. 'Do they wish to talk to me?'

'They might eventually,' Rafael conceded. 'But your job here is to protect your mother. If it's okay,' he said to Kelly, 'I'll leave—I'll give them some sort of interview and try to deflect them—and come back when the park is closed. Matty, is that okay with you?'

'Y-yes,' Matty said but his bottom lip trembled again. He really was a very little boy.

'We'll have fun,' Kelly said, stooping to look directly into his eyes. 'Matty, we can go down a gold-mine. We can play tenpin bowling with old wooden skittles. Do you know how to bowl?'

'Y-yes.'

'We can learn how to make damper—it's a lovely type of bread that's really Australian. Then we can go back to my little house and sit by the fire and read books. Before you know it, your Uncle Rafael will be back.'

'I want my Aunt Laura,' Matty quavered, and Kelly couldn't help herself. She gathered him to her and hugged. His little body was stiff and unyielding.

'They're coming this way,' Pete said urgently and Rafael looked up the hill and swore.

‘Damn, I...’

‘Just go,’ Kelly said, holding Matty tight. ‘Please.’ She wasn’t ready to face the media yet and the thought of cameras aimed at Matty was unbearable. ‘But you will come back?’

‘Of course I’ll come back.’

‘Thank you,’ she said simply and, as Pete moved up the hill to deflect the dozen or so men and women walking purposefully towards them, she crossed the little bridge over the creek and carried Matty away. Hoping the media had been too far away to guess that she and Rafael had been together.

The Chinese camp was just behind them. Yan, the camp guide, was a personal friend.

‘Can I take Matty through the Joss house?’ she demanded and Yan stepped aside. The inside of the Joss house was a sacred place, out of bounds for anyone but worshippers.

‘Go,’ he said without asking questions, his eyes flicking to the group of men and women clustering about Rafael. Shouting questions. Lifting cameras high and taking photographs over people’s heads.

She went. But before Yan closed the gate behind her she turned with Matty in her arms to take a last glimpse of Rafael.

Royalty.

She wanted no part of it.

She had a part of it. He was in her arms right now, tense and frightened and to be protected at all costs.

Her Matty. Her son.

The only person standing between Matty and the media—between Matty and the world—was Rafael.

A de Boutaine.

Her world was upside down.

‘Let’s go underground for a while,’ she whispered to Matty as she fled out through the back entrance.

‘I don’t think I want to go underground,’ Matty said and Kelly thought, neither do I.

She’d had five years of being underground.

Maybe it was time to emerge.

Maybe she had no choice.

CHAPTER THREE

THEY explored the goldfields until Matty’s legs gave out. He was cheerful, interested and polite. They ate their dinner early—a damper they’d made together and a thick Irish stew. Kelly settled him into her big bed and his eyelids drooped.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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