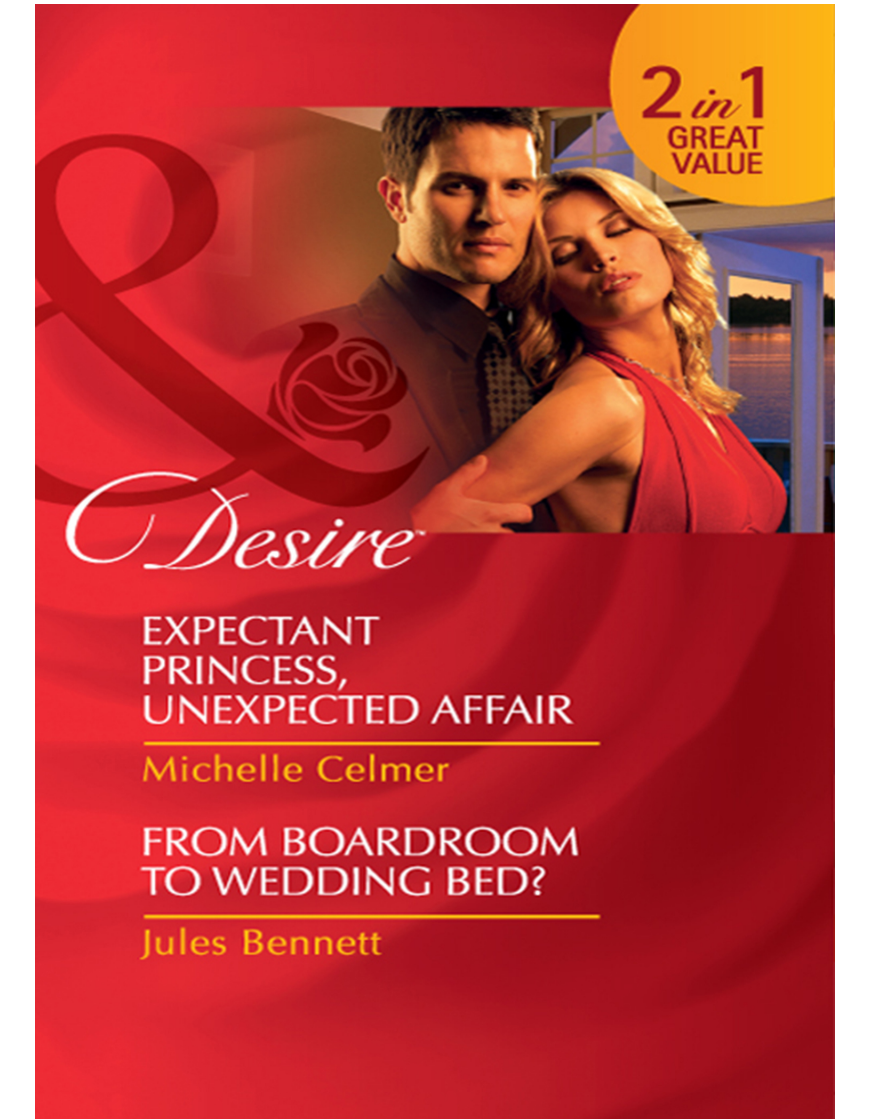




2 *in* 1
GREAT
VALUE

Desire

EXPECTANT
PRINCESS,
UNEXPECTED AFFAIR

Michelle Celmer

FROM BOARDROOM
TO WEDDING BED?

Jules Bennett

Michelle Celmer

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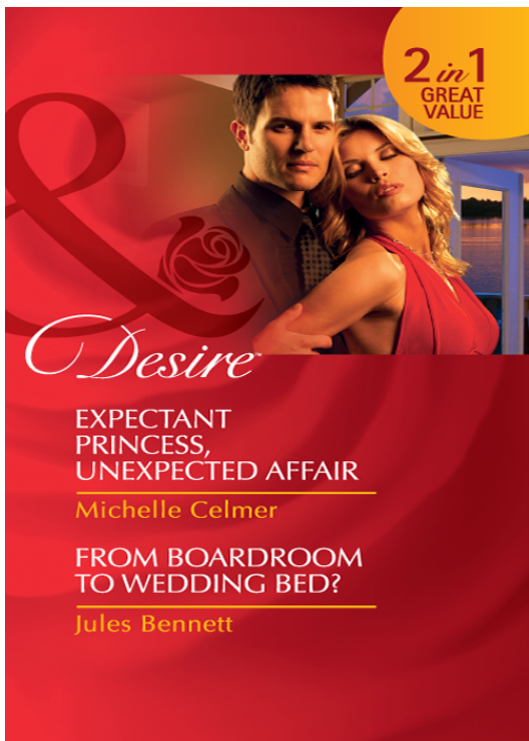
**Expectant Princess, Unexpected
Affair / From Boardroom to
Wedding Bed?: Expectant
Princess, Unexpected Affair**

Аннотация

Expectant Princess, Unexpected AffairHe'd danced with her on a dare. But Samuel Baldwin had seduced Princess Anne to quench his own desire. Chipping away at Anne's icy façade had been pure pleasure. . . until he learned their passion-filled night had left him responsible for one pregnant princess.From Boardroom to Wedding Bed?He'd been faced with the toughest decision of his life – a future full of wealth and power, or the love of Tamera Stevens. And self-made billionaire Cole Marcum had never regretted his choice. Until now, when circumstances forced him to work as partners with the woman he'd left behind. This time, would it be love or money?

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Expectant
Princess,
Unexpected
Affair

Michelle Celmer
From Boardroom

to Wedding Bed?

Jules Bennett



www.millsandboon.co.uk

Expectant

Princess,

Unexpected

Affair

Michelle Celmer

“I think you should marry me.”

He said it so calmly, so matter-of-factly, that the meaning of his words took several seconds to sink in. Then she was sure that she must have heard him wrong, or he was playing some cruel joke. That any second he was going to laugh and say, “Gotcha!”

“I know it’s fast,” he said instead. “I mean, we barely know each other. But for the baby’s sake I really think it’s the logical next move.”

My God, he was *serious*. He wanted to marry her. How was that even possible when only a few days ago it supposedly hadn’t been an option?

“But ... you want to be prime minister.”

“Yes, but that isn’t what’s best for the baby. I’m going to be a father. From now on, I have to put his or her best interests first.”

Dear Reader,

Welcome to book eight of my ROYAL SEDUCTIONS series, the story of Princess Anne Charlotte Amalia Alexander and the heir to the political throne of Thomas Isle, Samuel Baldwin.

I can hardly believe that this is my last book in the ROYAL SEDUCTIONS series. <sniff> It seems as though only yesterday I introduced you to the royal families of Morgan and Thomas Isle. Since then we've been through a lot together. Marriages of convenience, illegitimate heirs and secret babies ... just to name a few. And now an unexpected pregnancy has the royal family reeling.

There is a consensus on Thomas Isle that royalty and politics do not mix well. Leave it to Anne and Sam to put that theory to the test. And though you may think you know these two, what's going on in their heads, things are not always what they seem. There are family tragedies, boundaries pushed to the limit and mysteries solved. And this book ends with a *bang*...literally.

But I don't want to give away *too* much ...

Until next time, all my best,

Michelle

About the Author

Bestselling author **MICHELLE CELMER** lives in southeastern Michigan with her husband, their three children, two dogs and two cats. When she's not writing or busy being a mom, you can find her in the garden or curled up with a romance novel. And if you twist her arm really hard you can usually persuade her into a day of power shopping. Michelle loves to hear from readers. Visit her website, www.michellecelmer.com, or write her at PO Box 300, Clawson, MI 48017, USA.

To mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, family and friends. Cherish your loved ones and keep them close.
You never know what tomorrow will bring...

One

June

Though she had always considered her reserved nature one of her best qualities, there were times when Princess Anne Charlotte Amalia Alexander wished she could be more like her twin sister.

She sipped her champagne and watched from across the ballroom as Louisa approached one of the guests: a tall, dark and handsome gentleman who had been eyeing Louisa all evening. She smiled, said a few words, and he kissed her proffered hand.

It was so easy for her. Men were naturally drawn to her delicate beauty and enthralled by her childlike innocence.

But Anne? Men considered her cold and critical. It was no secret that people in society, men in particular, often referred to her as *The Shrew*. Usually she didn't let that bother her. She liked to believe that they felt threatened by her strength and independence. However, that was little consolation on a night like this one. Everyone around her was dancing and drinking and socializing, while she stood by herself, alone in her principles. But with her father's failing health, was it so hard to fathom that she just didn't *feel* like celebrating?

A waiter carrying a tray of champagne passed by and she snagged a fresh glass. Her fourth for that night, which was precisely three more than she normally drank.

Her father, the king of Thomas Isle, who should at least be able to attend the charity event they were holding in his honor, was too weakened by heart disease to even make an appearance. Her mother refused to leave his side. It was up to Anne, Louisa and their brothers, Chris and Aaron, to act as hosts in the king's absence.

Getting hammered probably wasn't in her or the rest of the family's best interest. But didn't Anne always do as she was told? Wasn't she always the rational, responsible twin?

Well, almost always.

She knocked back the champagne in two swallows, deposited her empty glass on another passing tray and grabbed a fresh one. She would drink this one slower, she promised herself, but already she could feel the alcohol warming her belly and she began to get a soft, fuzzy feeling in her head. It was ... nice.

She downed glass number five in one long swallow.

"You're looking lovely, Your Highness," someone said from behind her.

She turned to the voice, surprised to find Samuel Baldwin, son of the prime minister of Thomas Isle, greeting her. Sam was the sort of man a women looked at and instantly went weak in the knees. At thirty he was more cute than handsome—at least she thought so—with naturally curly, dark blond hair that never seemed to behave and deep dimples in both cheeks when he smiled. He was several inches taller than her own five foot eight, with a lean, muscular build. She had spoken to him a time or two,

but nothing more than a casual hello. The gossip mill pegged him as one of the island's most eligible bachelors, and he had been groomed since birth to take over his father's position.

He bowed in greeting, and as he did, a lock of that unruly hair fell across his forehead. Anne resisted the urge to reach up and brush it back, but couldn't help wondering what it would feel like to run her fingers through it.

She would normally greet him with cool indifference, but the alcohol was doing funny things to her head because she could feel herself smiling. "How nice to see you again, Mr. Baldwin."

"Please," he said, "call me Sam."

Out of the corner of her eye Anne saw Louisa on the dance floor, her mystery man holding her scandalously close, gazing into her eyes. A pang of jealousy soured Anne's stomach. She wanted a man to hold her close and look at her as though she were the only one in the room, as if he couldn't wait to get her alone so he could ravage her. Just this once she wanted to feel ... wanted. Was that really too much to ask for?

She finished her champagne in one gulp and asked, "Would you care to dance, Sam?"

She wasn't sure if his look of surprise was due to her barbaric behavior, or the actual invitation. For a dreadfully long and horrifying instant, she thought he might turn her down. Wouldn't that be ironic considering all the dance invitations she had declined over the years? So many, in fact, that men had stopped asking altogether.

Then a grin curled his mouth, his dimples a prominent dent in each cheek, and he said, "I would be honored, Your Highness."

He offered his arm and she slipped hers through it. Then he led her out onto the crowded dance floor. It had been so long since she'd danced that when he took her in his arms and began to waltz, what used to be second nature suddenly felt clumsy and awkward. Or maybe that was the champagne making her knees soft ... or the spicy scent of his aftershave making her light-headed. He smelled so delicious, she wanted to bury her face in the crook of his neck and breathe him in. She tried to recall the last time she'd been this close to a man she found so sexually appealing.

Maybe a little *too* long.

"Black suits you," Sam said, and it took her several seconds to realize he was talking about her gown, a floor-length, sequined number she had purchased off the rack in Paris. She didn't know if the color suited her so much as it had suited her mood when she'd picked it out. Now she wished she had worn something brighter and more cheerful. Like Louisa in her trademark pink, who, come to think of it, looked a bit like the Good Witch of the North. Which Anne supposed would make her the Wicked Witch of the West.

"Yes," she told Sam. "All that's missing is the pointy black hat."

It was the sort of remark that might put a man off. Instead Sam laughed. A deep, throaty laugh that seemed to vibrate through

her, causing delicious friction that warmed her insides. “Actually, I was thinking that it brings out your milky complexion.”

“Oh, well, thank you.”

A slow song began, and Anne couldn’t help noticing how Louisa’s mystery man drew her in even closer. A little *too* close.

“Do you know that man dancing with my sister?” she asked Sam, gesturing with her chin.

“Garrett Sutherland. He’s the richest landowner on the island. I’m surprised you don’t know him.”

The name was definitely familiar. “I know *of* him. I’ve heard my brothers mention him.”

“It looks as though he and your sister are quite ... friendly.”

“I noticed that, too.”

He watched Anne watching her sister. “You look out for her?”

She nodded and looked up at him. “Someone has to. She can be very naive, and far too trusting.”

He grinned, his dimples so adorable she wanted to rise up and press a kiss to each one. “Then who looks after you?”

“No one needs to. I’m entirely capable of looking out for myself.”

He tightened the arm around her back, tucking her closer to his chest, and his smile went from teasing to sizzling. “Are you sure about that, Highness?”

Was he *flirting* with her? Men never teased and flirted with her. Not unless they wanted their head handed back to them on a platter. Samuel Baldwin was a brave man. And she realized,

she *liked* it. She liked the weight of his hand on her back and the way it felt when her breasts skimmed the wall of his chest. She'd never been what anyone could call a sexual woman—not that she didn't enjoy a quick, meaningless roll in the hay now and then—but being close to Sam awakened feelings in her she never knew were there. Or was it more the champagne than the man?

No. No amount of alcohol had ever given her this warm, shivery, feverish ache. This primitive longing to be taken and ... possessed. To rip Sam's clothes off and put her hands all over him. She wondered what he would do if she wrapped her arms around his neck, tugged his head down and kissed him. His lips looked so soft and sensual and she was dying to know what they would feel like, how they would taste.

She wished she possessed the courage to do it, right here, right now, in front of all these people. She wished she could be more like Louisa, who was now walking arm in arm with her dance partner, out the doors and onto the patio, seemingly oblivious to the hundred or so pairs of eyes following their every move.

Maybe it was about time Louisa learned to fend for herself. For tonight at least. From this moment forward, she was on her own.

Anne turned her attention to Sam and smiled. "I'm so pleased you could attend our benefit. Are you having a good time?"

"I am. I was sorry to hear that the king wasn't well enough to attend."

"He has to have a procedure done and adjustments made to

his heart pump so he must stay in tip-top shape. Being in a large crowd could expose him to infection. His system is very vulnerable.”

Her siblings all seemed to think he was going to be fine, and the heart pump he had been attached to for the past nine months was going to give his damaged heart the time it needed to heal, but Anne had a bad feeling it was a waste of time. Lately he'd begun to look so pale and he had so little energy. She worried that he was losing his will to live.

Though the rest of the family was hopeful, deep down Anne knew he was going to die and her instincts were telling her that it would be soon.

A sudden feeling of intense grief welled up inside her, and hard as she tried to push it back down, tears sprang to the corners of her eyes and a sob began to build in her throat. She never got upset, at least not when other people were around to see it, but the champagne must have compromised her emotions because she was on the verge of a meltdown and she couldn't do a single thing to stop it.

Not here, she begged. Please not in front of all these people.

“Anne, are you okay?” Sam was gazing down at her, his eyes so full of concern and compassion, it was almost too much.

She bit down hard on her lip and shook her head, and he seemed to know exactly what to do.

He swiftly whisked her off the dance floor, while she struggled to maintain her composure. “Where to?” he whispered, as they

exited the ballroom, into a foyer full of people socializing and sipping drinks. She needed to be somewhere private, where no one would see the inevitable breakdown. A place where, when she finally pulled herself together, she could fix her makeup and return to the party as though nothing were out of the ordinary.

“My room,” she managed.

“Upstairs?” he asked, and she nodded. She was biting her lip so hard now she tasted blood.

The staircase was roped off and two security officers stood guard, but as they approached one unhooked the rope to let them pass.

“Her Highness was kind enough to offer me a tour of the castle,” Sam told them, which really wasn’t necessary. Then she realized he’d said it not for the guards’ sake, but for the guests who were watching them. She would have to remember to thank him. But the fact that he cared about her reputation, that he would be so kind as to help her avoid embarrassment, brought the tears even closer to the surface. They were halfway up to the second floor when her eyes started to leak rivers of warm tears down her cheeks, and when they reached her door and he ushered her inside, the floodgates burst.

She thought for sure he would leave her alone, but after she heard the door close Sam’s arms went around her, pulling her tight against him. The idea that he cared enough to stay, when normally she felt so isolated in her grief, made her cry even harder.

Anne clung to him, sobbing her heart out against his chest, both mortified and desperately grateful that he was there.

“Let it out, Annie,” he whispered, rubbing her back and stroking her hair. No one but Louisa had called her Annie, and it made her feel close to him somehow, which made no sense because she barely knew him. Still it felt as if they had shared something special. Something intimate.

As spontaneous and intense as the emotional outburst had been, it was surprisingly short-lived. As the sobs subsided, Sam handed her his handkerchief and she dabbed her eyes.

“She cries,” he said, sounding amazed.

“Please don’t tell anyone,” she whispered against his jacket.

“They wouldn’t believe me if I did.”

Of course they wouldn’t. She was the ice princess, *The Shrew*. She didn’t have feelings. But the truth was she felt just as deeply as anyone else, she was just damned good at hiding it. But she didn’t want to be the ice princess anymore. At least, not tonight. Tonight she wanted someone to know the woman underneath.

Sam cradled her face in his palms and gently tipped it up to his, wiping the last of her tears away with his thumbs. She gazed up into eyes as clear blue as the ocean, and she could swear she felt something shift deep inside her.

She wasn’t sure if he made the first move, or she did, or they met halfway, but suddenly their lips were locked, and in that instant she had never wanted a man more than she wanted him.

Any man who accused Princess Anne of being cold and

unfeeling had obviously never kissed her. She tasted sweet and salty, like champagne and tears, and she put her heart and soul, her entire being into it.

Though Sam wasn't quite sure who kissed whom first, he had the feeling he might have just unleashed some sort of wild animal. She clawed at his clothes, yanking his jacket off his shoulders and down his arms, tugging his bow tie loose. She fumbled with his belt, unfastened his pants, and before he could manage to catch his breath, slid her hand inside his boxers and wrapped it around him. Sam cursed under his breath, a word that under normal circumstances he would never dare utter in the presence of royalty, but he was having one hell of a tough time reconciling the princess he knew with the wild woman who was now walking backward toward her bed, unzipping her dress and letting it fall to the floor. She plucked a jewel-encrusted comb from her hair and he watched as it spilled down over her shoulders like black silk. She grinned wickedly, tempting him with eyes the color of the sky just before a storm—smoky gray and turbulent.

Though under normal circumstances he would find it juvenile and downright rude, when his mates dared Sam to ask Princess Anne, *The Shrew*, to dance, he'd had just enough champagne to take the bait. But never in a million years did he expect her to ask him first. Nor did he expect to find himself in her bedroom, Anne undressed to her black lace strapless bra and matching panties. And as she draped her long, lithe body across

the mattress, summoning him closer with a crooked finger and a seductive smile, he guessed it wouldn't be long before she wore nothing at all.

"Take your clothes off," she demanded as she reached around behind her to unhook her bra. Her breasts were small and firm and he could hardly wait to get his hands on them, to taste them. He ripped his shirt off, losing a button or two in his haste, then stepped out of his pants, grabbing his wallet for later. That was when he realized the mistake he'd made and cursed again.

"What's wrong?" Anne asked.

"I don't have a condom."

"You don't?" she said, looking crestfallen.

He shook his head. It wasn't as if he came to these events expecting to shag, and even if he had, he would have anticipated taking the woman in question home, where he kept an entire box in his bedside table drawer.

"I've got it covered," Anne told him.

"You have a condom?"

"No, but I have it covered."

In other words, she was on birth control, but that wouldn't protect either of them from disease. But he knew he was clean, and it was a safe bet to assume she was, too. So why not? Besides, Anne was wearing a look that said she wouldn't be taking no for an answer.

He dropped the rest of his clothes in a pile and joined her. As she dragged him down onto the bed, ravaging his mouth with

a deep, desperate kiss, rolling him onto his back and straddling him, he had the feeling this was a night he wouldn't soon forget.

They had barely gotten started and it was already the best sex he'd ever had.

Two

September

I've got it covered, Anne thought wryly as she dragged herself up from the bathroom floor, still weak and shaky, and propped herself against the vanity over the sink. What the bloody hell had she been thinking when she told Sam that? Had she not bothered to even consider the consequences? The repercussions of her actions?

Well, she was considering them now. And she had no one to blame but herself.

She rinsed her mouth and splashed cold water on her face and the wave of nausea began to pass. The family physician, whom she had sworn to total secrecy, had assured her that she'd feel better in her second trimester. But here she was in her fifteenth week, three weeks past that magical date, and she still felt like the walking dead. But it was worth it, she thought, as she laid a hand over the tiny bump that had begun to form just below her navel.

It was hard to believe that at first, when she learned she was pregnant, she wasn't even sure that she wanted to keep it. Her initial plan had been to take an extended vacation somewhere remote and warm, live in exile until it was born, and then give it up for adoption. Then Chris's wife, Melissa, had given birth to their triplets and Anne cradled her tiny niece and nephews in her arms for the first time. Despite never having given much

thought to having children—it had always seemed so far off in the future—in that instant she knew she wanted her baby. She wanted someone to love her unconditionally. Someone to depend on her.

She was going to have this baby and she was going to raise it herself. With support from her family, of course. Which she was sure she would get just as soon as she told them. So far only her twin sister, Louisa, knew. As for Sam, he obviously wanted nothing to do with her.

Their night together had been like a fantasy come to life. She'd heard her sister talk for years about destiny and finding one true love. And in fact, Louisa's dreams had come true at the ball—she was now married to her mystery man, Garrett Sutherland. But until Sam kissed Anne, until he made love to her so passionately, until, exhausted, they fell asleep in each other's arms, Anne hadn't truly believed in love. But now that she did, it would seem that Sam didn't share her feelings.

She had been sure that it had been as special for him as it had been for her, that they had connected on some deeply visceral level. Even when she had woken up alone and realized that at some time in the night he had slipped away without saying goodbye, she wouldn't let her hopes be dashed. She kept waiting to hear from him. For weeks she stayed close to the phone, willing it to ring, hoping to answer and hear his voice. But the call never came.

She shouldn't have been surprised, really. Sam was a

politician, and everyone knew that politics and royalty did not mix well. Not if Sam wanted to be prime minister someday, and that was what she'd heard. By law, no member of the royal family was permitted to hold a position in government. Could she honestly blame him for choosing a career he had spent his entire life preparing for over her? That was why she had made the decision not to tell him about the baby. It was a complication that neither of them needed. And one she was quite sure he didn't want despite the scandal it would cause for her.

She could see the headlines now. Princess Anne Pregnant with Secret Love Child.

No matter how liberal the world had become in such matters, she was royalty and held to a higher standard. The stigma would follow her and, even worse, her child, for the rest of their lives. But at this point, she saw no other options.

Feeling half-human again, she decided she should get back to the dining room and try to choke down a few bites of dinner. Geoffrey, their butler, had just begun to serve the first course when her stomach lurched and she'd had to excuse herself and dash to the loo.

She gave one last furtive look in the mirror and decided that short of a total makeover, this was as good as it was going to get. She opened the door and almost collided with her brother Chris, who was leaning against the wall just outside.

Bloody hell.

His grim expression said that he had heard her retching, and

he wanted to know what would cause her to be so ill.

“Let’s have a talk,” he said, jerking his head toward the study across the hall.

“But, supper ...” she started to say, and he gave her that *look*.

“Now, Anne.”

Since arguing would be a waste of time, she followed him. With their father in poor health, Chris was acting king, and technically the head of the family. She was duty-bound to follow his lead. And didn’t she always do as she was told? Wouldn’t everyone be surprised when they learned of her predicament.

She could lie and tell him that she had a flu bug, or a mild case of food poisoning, but at the rate her tummy was swelling, it wouldn’t be long before it was impossible to hide anyway. But she wasn’t sure if she was ready for the truth to come out just yet.

Or maybe he already knew. Had Louisa blabbed? Anne would kill her if that was the case.

Anne stepped into the study, and, shy of her mother, father and the triplets, the entire family was there!

Aaron and his wife, Liv, a botanical geneticist, sat on the couch looking worried. Louisa and her new husband, Garrett, stood across the room by the window. Louisa wore a pained expression and Garrett looked as though he wanted to be anywhere but there. Melissa, Chris’s wife, stood just inside the door, looking anxious. Not five minutes ago they had all been in the dinning room eating supper.

Her first instinct was to turn and walk right back out, but Chris

had already followed her in and shut the door.

What a nightmare.

“I don’t suppose I have to tell you why I asked you here,” he said.

Ordered was more like it. Now she was sorry she’d agreed.

“We’re very concerned,” Melissa said, walking over to stand beside Chris. “You haven’t been yourself lately, Anne. For the last couple of months you’ve been pale and listless. Not to mention all the times you’ve dashed off to the loo.”

So they didn’t know. Louisa had kept her secret.

“It’s obvious something is wrong,” Aaron said. He normally wasn’t one to butt into other people’s business, so she knew he must have been genuinely concerned. Maybe waiting so long to tell everyone had been an error in judgment. She didn’t honestly think that anyone really noticed the changes in her or for that matter cared about them.

“If you’re ill—” Melissa began.

“I’m not ill,” Anne assured her.

“An eating disorder is a disease,” Chris said.

Anne turned to him, amused because Louisa had suspected the same thing at first. “Chris, if I were bulimic, I would be dashing off to the loo after supper, not before.”

He didn’t look as though he believed her. “I know something is wrong.”

“It all depends on how you look at it, I guess.”

“Look at what?” Melissa asked.

Just tell them, dummy. "I'm pregnant."

All through the room jaws dropped. Except Louisa's, of course.

"If this is some kind of joke, I'm not amused," Chris said.

"It's no joke."

"Of course!" Melissa said, as though the lightbulb had just flashed on. "I should have realized. I just never thought ..."

"I would be careless enough to go out and get myself in trouble?" Anne asked.

"I ... I wasn't even aware that you were seeing anyone," Aaron said.

"I'm not. It was a one-time encounter."

"Maybe this is a silly question," Chris said. "But are you sure? Have you taken a test? Seen the family physician?"

She lifted the hem of the cardigan she'd been wearing to hide the evidence and smoothed her dress down over her bump. "What do you think?"

Had his eyes not been fastened in they might have fallen out of his head. "Good God, how far along are you?"

"Fifteen weeks."

"You're *four* months pregnant and you never thought to mention it?"

"I planned to announce it when the time was right."

"When? After your water broke?" he snapped, and Melissa put a hand on his arm to calm him.

"There's no need to get snippy," Anne said.

Irony coming from her, his look said, the princess of snip. Well, maybe she didn't want to be that way any longer. Maybe she was tired of always being on the defensive.

"This isn't like you, Anne," Chris said.

"It's not as if I went out and got knocked up on purpose, you know." Although he was right. She had been uncharacteristically irresponsible.

I've got it covered. Brilliant.

"This is going to be a nightmare when it hits the press," Melissa said. Being an illegitimate princess herself, she would certainly know. Until recently she'd lived in the U.S., unaware that she was heir to the throne of Morgan Isle.

"And what about the Gingerbread Man?" Louisa asked, speaking up for the first time. "I'm sure he'll use the opportunity to try to scare us."

The self-proclaimed Gingerbread Man was the extremely disturbed man who had been harassing the royal family for more than a year. He began by hacking their computer system and sending Anne and her siblings twisted and grisly versions of fairy tales, then he breached security on the palace grounds to leave an ominous note. Not long after, posing as housekeeping staff, he'd made it as far as the royal family's private waiting room at the hospital. Hours after he was gone, security found the chilling calling card he'd left behind. An envelope full of photographs of Anne and her siblings that the Gingerbread Man had taken in various places so they would know that he was there, watching.

He would sometimes be silent for months, yet every time they thought they had heard the last of him, he would reappear out of the blue. He sent a basket of rotten fruit for Christmas and an e-mail congratulating Chris and Melissa about the triplets before her pregnancy had even been formally announced.

His most recent stunt had been breaking into the florist the night before Aaron and Liv's wedding in March and spraying the flowers with something that had caused them to wilt just in time for the ceremony.

Anne was sure he would pull something when he learned of her pregnancy, but she refused to let him get to her. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction. "I don't care what the Gingerbread Man does," she said, lifting her chin in defiance. "Personally, I'm all for drawing him out into the open so he makes a mistake and gets caught."

"Which we have agreed not to do," Chris said sternly.

Aaron asked the next obvious question. "What about the father of the baby? Is he taking responsibility?"

"Like I said, it was a one-night thing."

Chris frowned. "He didn't offer to marry you?"

This was where it was going to get tricky. "No. Besides, he's not a royal."

"I don't give a damn who he is. He needs to take responsibility for his actions."

"Liv and Garrett aren't royals. And I'm only half-royal," Melissa added.

"It doesn't matter. He's out of the picture," Anne insisted.

"And that was his choice?" Aaron asked.

Anne bit her lip.

"Anne?" Chris asked, and when she remained silent he cursed under his breath. "He doesn't know, does he?"

"Trust me when I say, he's better off."

Melissa made a clucking noise, as though she were thoroughly disappointed in Anne.

"That is not your decision to make," Chris said. "I don't care who he is, he has a right to know he's going to have a child. To keep it from him is unconscionable."

She knew deep down that he was right. But she was feeling hurt and bitter and stubborn. If Sam didn't want her, why should he be allowed access to their child?

"Sam may be a politician, but he's a good man," Chris said.

Once again, mouths fell open in surprise, including her own. She hadn't told anyone the father's identity. Not even Louisa. "How did you—"

"Simple math. You don't honestly think Melissa and I could go through months of infertility treatments and a high-risk pregnancy without learning a thing or two about getting pregnant? Conception would have had to have occurred around the time of the charity ball. And do you really think that Sam's sneaking out in the middle of the night would go unnoticed? "

No, of course not. They were under a ridiculously tight lockdown these days. "You never said anything."

“What was I supposed to say? You’re a grown woman. As long as you’re discreet, who you sleep with is your business.” He put both hands on her shoulders. “But now, you need to call him and set up a meeting.”

“Why, so you can have a *talk* with him?”

“No. So *you* can. Because it’s not only unfair to Sam, it’s unfair to that baby you’re carrying. He or she deserves the chance to know their father. If that’s what Sam wants.”

“He’s right,” Louisa said. “Put yourself in Sam’s place.”

“You should definitely tell him the truth,” Aaron said.

She fiddled with the hem of her sweater, unable to meet Chris’s eyes, knowing he was right. If not for Sam, then for the baby’s sake. “I’m not sure what to say to him.”

“Well,” Melissa said. “I often find it’s best to start with the truth.”

Sam had just ended a call with the Secretary of State of DFID, or what the Brits called the Department for International Development, when his secretary, Grace, rang him.

“You have a visitor, sir.”

A visitor? He didn’t recall any appointments on the calendar for this afternoon. This was typically his time for any calls that needed to be made. Had Grace scheduled another appointment she’d forgotten to mention? Or maybe she had entered information incorrectly into the computer again.

He was sure at one time she had been an asset to his father’s office, but now she was at least ten years past mandatory

retirement.

“Do they have an appointment?” he asked her.

“No, sir, but—”

“Then I don’t have time. I’ll be happy to see them after they schedule an appointment.” He hung up, wishing he could gently persuade his father to let her go, or at the very least assign her to someone else. But she had been with the office since the elder Baldwin was a young politician just starting out and he was as fiercely loyal to her as she was to him. Sam may have suspected some sort of indiscretion had it not been for the fact that she was fifteen years his father’s senior, and they were both very happily married to other people.

There was a knock at his office door and Sam groaned inwardly, gathering every bit of his patience. Did Grace not understand the meaning of the word *no*? “What is it?” he snapped, probably a bit more harshly than she deserved.

The door opened, but it wasn’t Grace standing there. It was Anne. *Princess Anne*, he reminded himself. Spending one night in her bed did not give him the privilege of dispensing with formalities.

“Your Highness,” he said, rising from his chair and bowing properly, even though he couldn’t help picturing her naked and poised atop him, her breasts firm and high, her face a mask of pleasure as she rode him until they were both blind with ecstasy. To say they’d slept together, that they’d had sex, was like calling the ocean a puddle. They had transcended every preconceived

notion he'd ever had about being with a woman. It was a damned shame that they had no future.

He must have picked up the phone a dozen times to call her in the weeks following their night together, but before he could dial he'd been faced with a grim reality. No matter how he felt about her, how deeply they had connected, if he wanted to be prime minister, he simply could not have her.

He had accepted a long time ago that getting where he wanted would involve sacrifice. Yet never had it hit home so thoroughly as it did now.

"Is this a bad time?" she asked.

"No, of course not. Come in, please."

She stepped into his office and shut the door behind her. Though she was, on most occasions, coolly composed, today she seemed edgy and nervous, her eyes flitting randomly about his office. Looking everywhere, he noticed, but at him.

"I'm sorry to just barge in on you this way. But I was afraid that if I called you might refuse to see me."

"You're welcome anytime, Your Highness." He came around his desk and gestured to the settee and chair in the sitting area. "Please, have a seat. Can I get you a drink?"

"No, thank you. I'm fine." She sat primly on the edge of the settee, clutching her purse in her lap, and he took a seat in the chair. She looked thinner than when he'd last seen her, and her milky complexion had taken on a gray cast. Was she ill?

"Maybe just a glass of water?" he asked.

She shook her head, her lips folded firmly together, and he watched as her face went from gray to green before his eyes. Then her eyes went wide, and she asked in a panicked voice, “The loo?”

He pointed across the room. “Just through that—”

She was up off the settee, one hand clamped over her mouth, dashing for the door before he could even finish his sentence. It might have been comedic had he not been so alarmed. He followed her and stood outside the door, cringing when he heard the sounds of her being ill. There was obviously something terribly wrong with her. But why come to him? They barely knew one another. On a personal level at any rate.

He heard a flush, then the sound of water running.

“Should I call someone for you?” he asked, then the door opened and Anne emerged looking pale and shaky.

“No, I’m fine. Just dreadfully embarrassed. I should have known better than to eat before I came here.”

“Why don’t you sit down.” He reached out to help her but she waved him away.

“I can do it.” She crossed the room on wobbly legs and restaked her seat on the settee. Sam sat in the chair.

“Forgive me for being blunt, Your Highness, but are you ill?”

“Sam, we’ve been about as intimate as two people can be, so please call me Anne. And no, I’m not ill. Not in the way you might think.”

“In what way, then?”

She took a deep breath and blew it out. “I’m pregnant.”

“Pregnant?” he repeated, and she nodded. Well, he hadn’t seen that coming. He’d barely been able to look at another woman without seeing Anne’s face, but it would seem she’d had no trouble moving on. And what reason had he given her not to? Maybe that night hadn’t been as fantastic for her as it was for him. It would explain why she had made no attempt to contact him afterward.

But if she was happy, he would be happy for her. “I hadn’t heard. Congratulations.”

She looked at him funny, then said, “I’m four months.”

Four months? He counted back and realized that their night together had been almost exactly—

Sam’s gut tightened.

“Yes, it’s yours,” she said.

He *really* hadn’t seen *that* coming. “You’re sure?”

She nodded. “There hasn’t been anyone else. Not after, and not a long time before.”

“I thought you said you had it covered.”

“I guess nothing is one hundred percent guaranteed.”

Apparently not.

“If you require a DNA test—”

“No,” he said. “I trust your word.” What reason did she have to lie?

They were going to have a baby. He and the princess. He was going to be a *father*.

He had always planned to have a family someday, but not until

he was a bit more established in his career. And not until he met the right woman.

“You’re probably wondering why I waited so long to tell you,” she said.

Among other things. “Why did you?”

“I just ... I didn’t want to burden you with this. I didn’t want you to feel ... obligated. Which I realize now was totally unfair of me. And I apologize. I just want you to know that I don’t expect anything from you. I’m fully prepared to raise this baby on my own. Whether or not you want to be a part of its life is your choice entirely.”

What kind of man did she take him to be? “Let’s get one thing perfectly clear,” he told her. “This is my *child*, and I’m going to be a part of it’s life.”

“Of course,” she said softly. “I wasn’t sure. Some men—”

“I am *not* some men,” he told her firmly. “I hope that won’t be a problem for you or your family.”

She shook her head. “No, of course not. I think it’s wonderful. A child should have both its parents.”

He leaned back in the chair, shaking his head. “I’m. *wow*. This is quite a surprise.”

“I can relate, believe me. This was not the way I imagined starting a family.”

“I suppose some sort of announcement will have to be made.” He could just imagine what his friends would say. For weeks after the ball they had tried to bully him into explaining his and the

princess's sudden absence from the party, but he'd refused to say a word. Now everyone would know. Not that he was embarrassed or ashamed of what he'd done. "You know that the press will be brutal."

"I know. When they learn you're the father and that we're not ... together, they won't leave us alone."

If that was some sort of hint as to the future direction of their relationship, he hated to disappoint her, but he was not about to give up everything he had worked so hard for, his lifelong dream, for a one-night stand.

He cared for Anne, lusted after her even, but a marriage was absolutely out of the question.

Three

“The press will just have to get used to the idea of us being friends,” Sam told her.

“I hope we can be, for the baby’s sake.”

“And your family? How do they feel about this?”

“So far only my siblings know. They were surprised, but very supportive. My father’s health is particularly fragile right now, so we’ve decided to wait to tell him and my mother. I have to admit that *you’re* taking this much better than I expected. I thought you would be angry.”

“It was an accident. What right would I have to be angry? You didn’t force me.”

“Didn’t I?”

He wouldn’t deny that she had started it, and she had been quite ... *aggressive*. But he had been a willing participant. “Anne, we share equal responsibility.”

“Not all men would feel that way.”

“Yes, well, I’m not all men.”

There was a short period of awkward silence, so he asked, “Everything is okay? With the pregnancy, I mean. You and the baby are healthy? “

“Oh yes,” she said, instinctively touching a hand to her belly. “Everything’s fine. I’m right on schedule.”

“Do you know the sex of the baby?”

“Not for another month, at my next ultrasound.” She paused, then said, “You could go, too. If you’d like.”

“I would. Are you showing yet?”

“I have a little bump. Want to see?” She surprised him by lifting up the hem of her top and showing him her bare tummy. But why would she be shy when he had seen a lot more than just her stomach?

Her tummy had indeed swelled and was quite prominent considering how thin she was. He wasn’t sure what possessed him, but he asked, “Can I touch it?”

“Of course,” she said, gesturing him over.

He moved to the settee beside her and she took his hand, laying it on her belly. She was warm and soft there, and the familiar scent of her skin seemed to eat up all of the breathable air. His hand was so large that his fingers spanned the top of her bump all the way down to the top edge of her panties.

Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea. Knowing they couldn’t be together didn’t make him want her any less. And knowing that it was his baby growing inside her gave him an almost irrational desire to protect her, to claim her as his own.

And hadn’t he felt the same way the night they had made love?

“Have you felt it move?”

“Flutters mostly. No actual kicks yet. But press right here,” she said, pushing his fingers more firmly against her belly, until he hit something firm and unyielding. She looked up at him and smiled, her mouth inches from his own. “You feel it?”

Did he ever, and it took all of his restraint not to lean in and capture her lips. He breathed in the scent of her hair, her skin, longing to taste her again, to ... *take* her. But a sexual relationship at this stage, with her all hormones and emotions, could spell disaster.

She seemed to sense what he was thinking, because color suddenly flooded her cheeks and he could see the flutter of her pulse at the base of her neck. Without realizing it, he had started to lean in, and her chin had begun to lift, like the pull of a magnet drawing them together. But thank goodness he came to his senses at the last second and turned away. He pulled his hand from her belly and rose to his feet. His heart was hammering and she'd gone from looking pale and shaky to flushed and feverish.

"This is not a good idea," he said.

"You're right," she agreed, nodding vigorously. "I wasn't thinking."

"It would be in our best interest to keep this relationship platonic. Otherwise things could get confusing."

"Very confusing."

"Which could be a challenge," he admitted. Total honesty at this point only seemed fair, as she had been forthcoming with him. "It's obvious that I'm quite attracted to you."

"There does seem to be some sort of ... connection."

That was putting it mildly. It was taking every bit of restraint he could gather to stop himself from taking her, right there in his office. Pregnant or not, he wanted to strip her naked and ravish

her, drive into her until she screamed with release. The way she had that night in her bedroom. He'd never been with a woman so responsive to his touch, so easy to please. He couldn't help wondering if her pregnancy had changed that. He'd often heard that it made women even more receptive to physical stimulation. And maybe it was true, because he could clearly see the firm peaks of her nipples through her clothes. Her breasts looked larger than they had been before, too. Rounder and fuller. What would she do if he took one in his mouth ...?

He swallowed hard and looked away, turning toward his desk, so she might not notice how aroused he was becoming. "You mentioned an ultrasound. Do you know the time and date, so I can mark it on my calendar?"

She rattled off the information and he slid into his chair behind the safety of his desk and made himself a note.

"Maybe we could have dinner this Friday," she said, then added quickly, "A platonic dinner, of course. So we can discuss how we plan to handle things. Like the press and custody."

That would give him three days to think this through and process it all. He always preferred to have a solid and well-considered plan of action before he entered into negotiations of any kind.

However, he wasn't sure he was ready to be thrown in the mix with her family just yet. Not that he didn't feel as though he could hold his own. He just felt these matters were private, between himself and Anne, and in no way concerned her family.

“How about we eat at my place,” he said. “Seven o’clock?”

“If you don’t mind your residence being swarmed with security. We’re still on high alert.”

He frowned. “Is the royal family still being harassed?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

All he knew of the situation was what he’d read in the papers. “So it’s serious,” he said.

“More than anyone realizes, I’m afraid. There have been threats of violence against the family. I should probably warn you that once we’re linked together, you could become a target, as well.”

He shrugged. “I’m not worried. As far as the baby goes, I’m assuming that until you’ve told your father, there will be no announcement to the press.”

“Of course not.”

“I do intend to tell my family, but they can be trusted to keep it quiet.”

“Of course you should tell them. Do you think they’ll be upset?”

Her look of vulnerability surprised him. He didn’t think she was afraid of anything. Or cared what anyone thought of her. But hadn’t he learned that night at the ball that she wasn’t nearly as tough as she liked people to believe? “I think they’ll be surprised, but happy,” he told her.

He just hoped it was true.

Sam stopped in to see his parents that evening to break the

news. When he arrived they had just finished supper and were relaxing out on the veranda with snifters of brandy, watching the sun set. Despite his father's career in politics, and his mother's touring as an operatic vocalist, they always made time for each other. After forty years they were still happily married and going strong.

That was the sort of marriage Sam had always imagined for himself. He had just never met a woman he could see himself spending the rest of his life with. Until Anne, he admitted grudgingly. How ironic that when he finally found her, he couldn't have her.

He wasn't quite sure how they would react to learning that they would be grandparents to the next prince or princess of Thomas Isle, but under the circumstances, they took it pretty well. Probably in part because they had been vying for grandchildren for some time and Sam's older brother, Adam, had yet to deliver.

"I'm sure I'm going to sound old-fashioned," his mother said, "but ideally we would like to see you married."

"Mother—"

"However," she continued. "We understand that you need to do what you feel is right."

"If I married Anne, I would be considered a royal and I would never be prime minister. That isn't a sacrifice I'm willing to make." Of course, with that in mind, he shouldn't have slept with her in the first place, should he? He suspected that was what his mother was thinking.

“You would be giving your child a name,” his father pointed out.

“I don’t need to be married to do that. He had my name the moment he was conceived.”

“He?” his mother asked, brows raised.

“Or she.”

“Will you find out?”

“I’d like to. And I think Anne would, too. She has an ultrasound in four weeks.”

“Maybe I could invite her for tea,” she suggested, and at Sam’s wary look added, “I should be allowed to get to know the mother of my future grandchild.”

She was right. And he was sure Anne would be happy to oblige her. Didn’t pregnant women love to talk about their condition with other women? Especially the grandparents? “I’ll mention it to her.”

“You know that this is going to be complicated,” his father said. “They think differently than we do.”

“They?”

“Royals.”

“Not so different as you might expect,” Sam said. “Not Anne, anyway. She’s actually quite down-to-earth.”

“I’ve only spoken briefly with the princess,” his mother said. “But she seemed lovely.”

There was a “however” hanging there, and Sam knew exactly what she was thinking. What they were *both* thinking. He

couldn't deny he'd thought the same thing before his night with Anne. "I know you've probably heard things about her. Unfavorable things. But she isn't at all what you would expect. She's intelligent and engaging." And fantastic in bed ...

"It sounds as if you're quite taken with her," his mother not-so-subtly hinted.

He was. Probably too much for his own good. He just hoped that once Anne began to look more pregnant, and especially after the baby was born, it would be easier for him to see her only as the mother of his child and not a sexual being.

"I have every hope that Anne and I can be good friends, for the child's sake, but that is as far as it will ever go."

He knew they were disappointed. This wasn't the sort of scenario his parents had envisioned for him, and honestly neither had he. He had assumed that it would have been like it had been for them. He would meet a woman and they would date for a reasonable period of time, then marry and have a family. Sam would eventually become prime minister, and his wife would have a rewarding and lucrative career that still allowed her time to put her family first.

So much for that plan.

"As long as you're happy, we're happy," his mother said.

Sam hoped she really meant it. Even though they gave no indication that Sam was disappointing them, he couldn't help but feel that he'd let them down. That he had let *himself* down.

Even worse, was he letting his child down?

What had happened was an accident, but ultimately the person who would pay for it would be the baby. The baby would be the one relentlessly dogged by the press. And being a royal, the stigma of illegitimacy could potentially follow him or her for life. Was it fair to put the baby through that for his own selfish needs?

It was certainly something to consider.

He had just arrived home later that evening when he got a call on his cell phone from Prince Christian's assistant, with a message from the prince. It was odd enough that she would call at almost 10:00 p.m., but how had the prince gotten his private cell number? The prince's calls typically went through Sam's office line.

Silly question. As acting king, he probably had access to any phone number he wanted.

"His Royal Highness, Prince Christian, requests your presence in the royal family's private room at the Thomas Bay yacht club tomorrow at one-thirty," she said.

Oh did he? That was an odd setting for a business meeting. Unless it had nothing to do with business. "And the nature of this meeting?" he asked her.

"A private matter."

Well, so much for believing that this would stay between Sam and Anne. He should have anticipated this. Prince Christian probably considered it his obligation to watch his sister's back. That didn't mean Sam would let him intimidate or boss him around.

“Tell the prince that I would be happy to meet him at three.”

There was a brief pause, as though the idea of someone actually refusing an invitation from the prince was beyond her realm of comprehension. Finally she said, “Could you hold, please?”

“Of course.”

She was off the line for several minutes, then came back on and said, “Three will be fine. The prince asks that you please keep this meeting to yourself, as it is a sensitive matter.”

This suggested to Sam that Anne probably had no idea a meeting was being arranged and the prince preferred it to stay that way. He didn’t doubt that the prince would try to persuade him to marry Anne. Truth be told, if Sam had a sister in a similar situation, he might do the same thing.

But this was the twenty-first century and people had children out of wedlock all the time. On occasion, even royalty. Prince Christian’s wife, Princess Melissa of their sister country, Morgan Isle, was an illegitimate heir. In fact, with two illegitimate heirs, and a former king who reputedly lacked the ability or desire to keep his fly zipped, the royal family of Morgan Isle was positively brimming with scandal. By comparison the royal family of Thomas Isle were saints. Would a little scandal be so terrible?

But was it fair to the baby, who had no choice in the matter? Wasn’t it a father’s responsibility to protect his child?

But at what cost?

Sam slept fitfully that night and had trouble concentrating at

work the next day. It was almost a relief to leave the office early, even though he doubted his meeting with the prince would be a pleasant exchange.

He arrived five minutes ahead of time, and the prince was already there, sitting in a leather armchair beside a bay of windows that overlooked the marina. He rose to greet Sam.

“Your Highness.” Sam bowed his head then accepted Prince Christian’s hand for a firm shake.

“I’m so glad you accepted my invitation,” he said.

The Prince requests your presence sounded more like an order than an invitation. “I wasn’t aware it was optional.”

“I’m sorry if you were given that impression. I just thought it would be appropriate, in light of the situation, if we had a friendly chat.”

Friendly? Sam doubted that.

The Prince gestured to the chair opposite him. “Please have a seat. Would you like a drink?”

A few too many glasses of champagne had gotten Sam into this mess. Had he been sober, he probably never would have approached the princess, much less danced with her. “Nothing for me, thanks.”

They both sat.

“No disrespect intended, but if the *situation* you’re referring to somehow involves my being the father of your sister’s child, we have nothing to discuss, Your Highness.”

His blunt statement seemed to surprise the prince. “Is that so?”

“It is.”

“I’m afraid I disagree.”

“This is between me and Anne.”

“No one wishes that were the case more than I. Unfortunately, what Anne does affects our entire family. I had hoped you would do the right thing, but I understand that’s not the case.”

“Of course I’ll do the right thing. But I’ll do what *I* feel is the right thing.”

“And may I ask what your idea of the right thing is?”

“As I said, that is between me and the mother of my child.”

His expression darkened. He obviously didn’t like that Sam wasn’t falling into line. But Sam would be damned if he was going to let the prince, or any member of the royal family, walk all over him.

Prince Christian leaned forward slightly. “I won’t see my sister’s reputation, not to mention that of her child, decimated, because you couldn’t keep out of her knickers.”

What was that phrase the Americans used? It takes two to tango? “If blaming me for this situation makes you sleep better, I can live with that.”

“You’re being unreasonable.”

“On the contrary, I’m being very reasonable. I’m considering your sister’s privacy.”

“This concerns more people than just you and Anne. You know that our father isn’t well. A scandal like this is more than his heart could take.”

So now not only was Sam decimating reputations, but he was essentially killing the king? “I’m sorry to hear that, but I’m still not talking to you.”

“I could make your life unpleasant,” Prince Christian said ominously. “If I feel that you’re disrespecting my sister’s name, I will lash out at you in any way I see fit.”

So much for their *friendly* chat. He couldn’t say he was surprised.

Sam shrugged. “Knock yourself out, Your Highness. I’m still not discussing my and Anne’s private matters with you.”

For a long moment Prince Christian just stared at him, and Sam braced himself for the fireworks. But instead of exploding with anger, the prince shook his head and laughed. “Christ, Baldwin, you’ve got a pair.”

“I just don’t respond well to threats or ultimatums.”

“And I don’t like giving them. But I have an obligation to look out for my family. The truth is, if it weren’t for my father’s fragile state, we wouldn’t be having this conversation. He’s in extremely poor health and it would make him very happy to see his oldest daughter married before she has a child.”

He found what Prince Christian was doing utterly annoying, but in a way Sam actually felt sorry for him. “I’m truly sorry to hear that your father isn’t well. I hold him in the highest regard.”

“And I sympathize with your situation, Sam. I honestly do. It’s common knowledge that you intend to follow in your father’s footsteps and I believe you have the fortitude to pull it off.

But marrying my sister would make that impossible. For what it's worth, you've built a reputation as one hell of a foreign affairs advisor. If there *were* a marriage, you would be offered a powerful and influential position within the monarchy."

After serving in, and being around, government for most of his life, the idea of taking a position with the monarchy was troubling to say the least. Not that they weren't on the same side when it came to serving the people of the country. But in Sam's eyes it had always been something of an "us against them" scenario.

Not to mention that, while he enjoyed foreign affairs, he had set his sights higher.

"Have you given any thought to how difficult it could be for your child, being illegitimate?"

"That's *all* I've been thinking about." And the more he thought about it, the more he came to realize that marrying Anne might be the wisest course of action. They may not have planned this pregnancy, but it had happened, and from now on he would have to put the welfare of his child above all else. Including his political ambitions.

"What's it like?" Sam asked. "Being a father?"

The prince smiled, his affection for his children undeniably clear. "It's exhilarating and terrifying and more rewarding than anything I've ever done. Ever *imagined*. I have these three perfect little human beings who are completely helpless and depend on me and their mother for everything they need to survive. It can be overwhelming."

“And if someone gave you a choice? Give up the throne or your children would live a life of disgrace and shame.”

“No question. My children come first.”

As it should be.

“You know that my wife was born out of wedlock,” the prince said.

Sam nodded.

“She didn’t find out that she was a royal until she was in her thirties, but it was *still* extremely difficult for her. To lay that on a child? As if life as a royal isn’t tough enough already. Kids need stability, and consistency.”

Things that would be much harder to give a child who was being bounced back and forth between two parents, two households, all while being under the microscope of the press.

Sam had grown up in an ideal situation and had always hoped to provide the same for his own children. Didn’t his child deserve that?

He had gone from flirting with the idea of marrying Anne to seriously considering it. And now, after talking to the prince, there seemed to be little question in his mind.

He could give it more thought, mull it around in his head for a while just to be sure, but he knew deep down the decision was already made.

He was going to marry the princess.

Four

Sam's home was not at all what Anne had expected.

She'd pictured a modern-style mansion or a seaside condo with every amenity a wealthy bachelor could want. Instead, as her driver pulled up the long gravel drive, what she got was a scene straight out of *Hansel and Gretel*.

Sam lived in a quaint cottage tucked deep in the forest and nestled under a canopy of towering pines and lazy oaks so dense only dappled sunshine dotted its sagging roof. It was quiet, and secluded, and utterly charming. Not to mention a security *nightmare*.

"Maybe we should have had dinner at the palace," she told her bodyguard, Gunter, who sat in the front seat beside her driver.

"Is no problem," he replied in a thick Russian accent. He checked his reflection in the side mirror, running a hand through his blond brush cut. Preening, she thought with a quiet smile. Physically Gunter bore a striking resemblance to Arnold Schwarzenegger in his early *Terminator* days, with a face that, Anne hated to admit, was far prettier than her own. Women swooned in his presence, never suspecting that a man so ridiculously masculine and tough lived with a cat called Toodles and a life partner named David. He had a killer fashion sense and was more intuitive than most women she knew. In fact, he had guessed that she might be pregnant before anyone in her family

had even noticed. She had been in serious denial and Gunter showed up for duty with a pregnancy test.

“Is good you should know, yes?” he’d said, then he’d sat on her bed waiting while she took the test, then listened to her vent after it came back positive.

He was also ex-KGB and could snap a man’s neck like a twig without breaking a sweat.

The car rolled to a stop and Gunter got out to open her door.

“I do sweep,” he said, as he helped her out.

“He’s the father of my child. Is that really necessary?”

Gunter just gave her one of those looks and she knew it wasn’t even worth arguing. She blew out an exasperated breath for good measure and in her best annoyed tone said, *“Fine.”*

The door to the cottage opened as they started up the walk and there stood Sam, looking too adorable for words, wearing dark blue slacks and a sky-blue button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled to the elbows. He smiled, both dimples showing, and she caught herself hoping that the baby looked just like him.

Out of the corner of her eye she noticed Gunter’s brows lift, almost imperceptibly, and she could swear she heard him say, *Nice*, under his breath.

Up until that instant she had only been a little nervous about seeing Sam, but suddenly her heart was going berserk in her chest and her hands were trembling.

“Hi,” she said as she stepped up to the tiny, covered porch complete with a rickety rocking chair and a terra-cotta pot

overflowing with yellow and purple petunias.

Sam leaned casually in the doorway, the sweet smile not budging an inch, taking in her taupe cotton skirt and yellow silk sleeveless blouse. It was the most cheerful outfit she could dredge up that still fit. Only lately had she realized just how dark and dreary her wardrobe had become over the past few years. She swore that when she got around to buying maternity clothes they would be in only bright and cheerful colors. She was turning over a new leaf so she could be someone her baby would respect and be proud of. The way she respected her own mother.

Sam's eyes traveled very unplatonicly down her body then back up again, clearly liking what they saw. "You look beautiful."

"Thank you. You look nice, too." Talk about swooning. Being close to him did funny things to her head. Neurons misfired and wires crossed, creating total and utter chaos.

You're only here to talk about the baby, she reminded herself, not to indulge your ridiculous crush.

Beside her Gunter softly cleared his throat. Right. The sweep. "Would you mind terribly if Gunter did a quick security check of the house?" Anne asked Sam.

It was the kind of request that might insult some people, but Sam just shrugged, gestured inside and said, "Have at it, Gunter."

Gunter pinned her with a look that said, *Don't move*, but she knew the drill.

"Wouldn't want to meet him in a dark alley," Sam said, after he disappeared inside. "Gunter. German, right?"

“On his mother’s side, but he was raised in Moscow.” Anne peered past him into the cottage. It was just as quaint and old-fashioned as the exterior, with older but comfortable-looking furniture and more knickknacks that even Gunter would deem appropriate for a man. And it smelled a little like ... old people.

“Your house is lovely,” she said. “Not at all what I expected.”

“Needless to say, I’m exceedingly secure in my masculinity.”

“I guess so.”

He laughed. “I’m sorry but no man is that secure. The truth is, it’s my grandmother’s place.”

Which explained the geriatric bouquet. “You live with her?”

“Only in spirit. She passed away three years ago.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.”

“I’m just staying here temporarily. While my place is being worked on.”

“You’re remodeling?”

“You could say that, although not by choice. I’ve had a leak in the roof for a while, but when my bedroom and kitchen ceilings started to droop, I decided it was time to finally do something about it. But then I figured, since I would be gone anyway, it only made sense to update the kitchen while I was at it. So, three days’ worth of work turned into more like three weeks.” He gestured inside. “Can I give you the tour?”

“I can’t, not until I get the all clear.”

“Right,” he said. “Just in case I have an assassin hiding under the davenport.”

“I know, it’s ridiculous.”

His expression turned serious. “Not at all,” he said, then he reached out and placed a hand over her baby bump. The gesture was so surprising, so unexpected, that her knees went weak. His eyes locked on hers, clear and intense, and his mouth was close. Too close. “Not if it keeps you and Sam Junior safe.”

Hadn’t they agreed that it would be prudent to keep a safe physical distance? That when they got too close they—Wait, what did he say? “Sam who?”

He grinned and gave her belly a gentle pat before he moved his hand away. “Sam Junior.”

“So you think it’s a boy?”

“That’s the beauty of it. It works for a boy or a girl. Samuel or Samantha. Either way we call it Sam.”

She folded her arms across her chest. “It would seem you have it all figured out.”

He pinned his eyes on her, his gaze so intense she swore she could feel it straight through to her bones. “I’m a man who knows what he wants, Your Highness.”

His eyes said he wanted her, but she knew he was probably only teasing. But if Gunter hadn’t reappeared at that very second, she might have melted into a puddle on the doorstep.

“Is all clear,” Gunter said, stepping onto the porch and gesturing her in. As Sam closed the door, Anne knew that Gunter would stand on the porch, in a military stance, unmoving until it was time to leave.

“Ready for that tour?” Sam asked and she nodded. Although, honestly, there really wasn’t that much to see. The front room had just enough space for a couch, glider and a rickety television stand with a TV that was probably older than her. The kitchen was small but functional, with appliances that dated back to the dark ages. But if the flame under the pot on the stove, and the hum of refrigerator, were any indication, they were both still working. The loo was also tiny, with an antique sink and commode and an antique claw-foot tub.

Next he took her into the bedrooms. The smaller of the two was being used as an office and the larger was where Sam slept. As they stood in the doorway, Anne couldn’t help thinking that the last time they had been in a bedroom together they had both been out of their brains with lust for each other. It seemed like so long ago, yet she recalled every instant, every detail in Technicolor clarity.

“Sorry it’s a bit of a mess,” he said.

The bed was mussed and there were clothes piled over a chair in the corner. The entire house had something of a cluttered but cozy feel. And though the entire square footage was less than her sleeping chamber at the castle, she felt instantly at home there.

“I was under the impression your family had money,” she said, feeling like a snob the instant the words were out. “I didn’t mean that the way it sounded.”

“That’s okay,” he said with a good-natured smile. “The money came from my grandfather’s side. My grandmother grew up here.

After her parents died, she and my grandfather would spend weekends here. After my grandfather died, she moved back permanently and stayed until she died.”

“I can see why she moved back,” she told him as they walked back to the kitchen. “It’s really lovely.”

“It’s not exactly the castle.”

“No, but it has loads of charm.”

“And no space.”

She shrugged. “It’s cozy.”

“And it desperately needs to be updated. Did you see that tub?”

She gazed around. “No, I wouldn’t change a single thing.”

He looked at her funny. “You’re serious.”

She smiled and nodded. She really liked it. “It’s so. peaceful. The minute I walked in I felt completely at home.” She could even picture herself spending time here, curled up on the couch reading a book or taking long walks through the woods. Although, until the Gingerbread Man was caught, that would never be allowed.

“I’m glad,” he said, flashing her the sexy grin that made her knees go weak. “Would you like something to drink? I have soda and juice.”

“Just water, please.”

He got a bottle from the fridge and poured it into a glass with a wedge of lime. As he handed it to her, their fingertips touched.

“Something smells delicious,” she said.

“Chicken soup. My grandmother’s recipe.”

Not your typical summer food, but that was okay. “I didn’t know you could cook.”

He grinned and wiggled his brows. “I am a man of many talents, Your Highness.”

Oh, did she know it. Although under the circumstances many of those talents were best not contemplated. “What else can you make?”

“Let’s see,” he said, counting off on his fingers. “I can make coffee. And toast. I can heat a pizza. Oh, and I make a mean tray of ice cubes. And did I mention the toast?”

She smiled. “So in other words, you eat out a lot?”

“Constantly. But I wanted to impress you and I figured the soup might be good since you haven’t been feeling well.”

It was sweet of him to consider her temperamental stomach. He was so considerate and ... nice. And oh, how she wished things could be different, that they could at least try to make a go of it, try to be a family. She wanted it so much her chest ached. It was all she had been able to think about since their talk in his office the other day. He was, by definition, the man of her dreams.

But some things just weren’t meant to be.

“I think maybe it was stress making me feel sick,” she said. “Since I told you about the baby, I’ve felt much better. I’ll get nauseous occasionally, but no more running to the loo. I’ve even gained a few pounds, which I know will make my physician

happy.”

“That’s great.” He lifted the lid off the pot of soup and gave it a stir with a wooden spoon. “The soup is ready. But would you prefer to talk first and get it out of the way? So we can relax and enjoy dinner.”

“I think that would be a good idea.”

He gestured to the front room. “Shall we sit on the sofa?”

She nodded and took a seat, and he sat beside her, so close that his thigh was touching hers. Was this his idea of platonic?

He had given no indication that he would be difficult, or make unreasonable demands when it came to the baby, but she still wasn’t sure what to expect. Sam, in contrast, sat beside her looking completely at ease. Did the man never get his feathers ruffled? When she had fallen apart at the ball he had snapped into action and rescued her from imminent public humiliation. When she told him about the baby he had been calm and rational and even sympathetic. She had never seen, or even heard of him ever losing his temper.

She, on the other hand, always seemed to be irritated and cranky about one thing or another. She could learn a lot from Sam. Although, if he knew the truth, if he knew that this little “accident” could have easily been prevented, he might not be so understanding. She would just have to be sure that he never found out.

“Before we get started,” she said, “I just want to tell you again that I appreciate how well you’ve taken all this. I know things

could potentially get complicated at some point, with custody and financial issues, and even different parenting styles. I just want you to know that I'm going to try my best to keep things civilized. I know I don't have a reputation for being the most reasonable woman, but I'm going to try really hard."

Sam's expression was serious. "Suppose I thought of a way to make things exponentially easier on both of us. On all three of us, actually."

She couldn't imagine how, but she shrugged and said, "I'm all for easy."

"I think you should marry me."

He said it so calmly, so matter-of-factly, that the meaning of his words took several seconds to sink in. Then she was sure that she must have heard him wrong, or he was playing some cruel joke. That any second he was going to laugh and say, "Gotcha!"

"I know it's fast," he said instead. "I mean, we barely know each other. But, for the baby's sake, I really think it's the logical next move."

My God, he was *serious*. He wanted to marry her. How was that even possible when only a few days ago it supposedly hadn't been an option?

"But ... you want to be prime minister."

"Yes, but that isn't what's best for the baby. I'm going to be a father. From now on, I have to put his or her best interests first."

She had a sudden, unsettling thought. "My family isn't making you do this, are they? Did they threaten you?"

“This has nothing to do with your family.” He took her hand and held it between his two. “This is what I want, Annie. What I think is best for everyone. We have to at least try, for the baby’s sake.”

She was thrilled to the center of her being ... and drowning in a churning sea of guilt. If she had just acted responsibly, if she hadn’t lied about being protected, they wouldn’t be in this situation. He wouldn’t be forced to give up everything that he had worked so hard for.

What if it was a decision he regretted someday and he grew to resent her and the baby? But what if he didn’t? What if they fell in love and lived a long and happy life together?

She folded her other hand over his two. “Sam, are you *sure* about this? Because once we’re married, that’s it. A divorce can only be granted with the consent of the king.”

“Let’s try this another way,” he said, then he dropped down on one knee in front of her and produced a diamond ring from his pants pocket.

She could hardly believe that this was really happening. It was a real, honest-to-goodness proposal.

He took her hand, looked deep in her eyes. “Will you marry me, Annie?”

There was only one answer she could give him. “Of course I’ll marry you, Sam.”

Grinning, he slid the ring on her finger. It was fashioned from white gold with a round cut diamond deeply set and surrounded

by smaller stones. Despite its shine it was clearly an antique, not to mention exquisitely beautiful.

“Oh, Sam, it’s amazing.”

“It was my great-grandmother’s,” he said.

“We must have the same size finger,” she said, turning her hand to watch it sparkle. “It’s a perfect fit.”

“I had it sized.”

“But how did you know what size to make it?”

“Princess Louisa.”

“You asked my sister?”

“Is that okay?”

“Of course. I just can’t believe she didn’t say anything. She’s horrible at keeping secrets.”

“I guess she wanted our moment to be special.”

“It is.” She threw her arms around his neck and hugged him and he hugged her back just as hard. It felt so good to hold him, to be close to him. It felt like ... coming home. And she realized, she was truly happy. The happiest she had been in a long, *long* time. Maybe ever.

It was astonishing how, out of such a complicated situation, something so fantastic could arise. Ideally, he would have slipped sentiments of love somewhere between the rationale, but she was sure that would come later. Not that she believed it would be all smooth sailing. She knew that marriages took work and this one would be no exception. But they seemed to be off to a fairly good start under the circumstances.

“I know he’s not well, but if at all possible, I’d like to be there when you tell the king and queen,” Sam said. “I’d like to do this by the book and have the chance to ask for your hand.”

His words made her practically burst with joy, because he would be giving her father something he had always looked forward to. “We’ll go to them tomorrow,” she said, already excited at the prospect, because she knew that her parents would be thrilled for her. Even if Sam was a politician. And they would be so excited about the baby.

“Needless to say, we should have the wedding soon,” he said. “I was thinking next week.”

That was really soon, but he was right. The sooner the better. It would have to be a small ceremony, if for no other reason than her father’s health. It was the reason Louisa had kept her own wedding small and intimate, despite having always dreamed of a huge, traditional affair.

Not one to like being in the spotlight, Anne would be quite content with small and simple. That didn’t mean there weren’t a million things to do to prepare.

Her mind was suddenly flooded with all the plans they had to make and the short amount of time they had to make them. Where would they have the ceremony and who would they invite? And would the king be well enough to walk her down the aisle? And what about a honeymoon? Where would they—

That thought brought her mind to a screeching halt.

What about the honeymoon? And even more important, the

wedding night?

Suddenly she was ultra-aware of Sam's arms around her, his body pressed against hers. The heat of his palms on her back and the spicy scent of his aftershave.

Suddenly her heart was beating so hard and fast she was sure Sam must have felt it through her clothes and skin. And all she could think about was getting him naked again. Touching him and kissing him all over. He must have been able to read her mind, because his breath hitched and his arms tightened around her.

"So, I guess this means that we don't have to keep our relationship platonic any longer," she said.

"Funny," he said. "But I was just thinking the exact same thing."

Thank God. Because frankly, a marriage without sex would be bloody awful.

She turned her face into the crook of his neck and kissed the side of his throat, could feel the heavy thump-thump of his pulse against her lips, and knew that he was just as aroused as she was. "We could make love right now if we wanted to."

"We could," he agreed, groaning when she nipped him with her teeth. She felt as though she wanted to eat him alive. Swallow him whole. She lifted her head, and the second she did he captured her lips with his own, but instead of the slick, ravenous kiss she was expecting, *hoping* for even, his lips rubbed softly, almost sweetly over hers. He kissed her chin and her throat,

working his way down.

“Take me into your bedroom,” she urged, sliding her hands up to tangle in the curls at his nape, feeling so hot she could burst into flames. “Right now.”

“God knows I want you,” he said, brushing his lips over her collarbone. “I’ve wanted you since that night. It’s all I’ve been able to think about.”

“You can have me. Right now.”

He trailed his way back up to her mouth and whispered against her lips, “Or we could wait until we’re married.”

She groaned her disappointment. She wasn’t even sure she *could* wait. “I feel as though I might go out of my mind if I can’t have you right now.”

“All the more reason to wait,” he said, sounding far too rational. “Think of how special it would be on our wedding night.”

She opened her eyes to look at him and smiled. “Isn’t that supposed to be *my* line?”

He grinned. “Poke fun all you want, but you know I’m right.”

Yes, he was right. Not that anything about their relationship up to this point could be called conventional. She might have worried that he just didn’t want her, and was trying to let her down gently, but the tent in his pants and the color in his cheeks said he was just as aroused as she was.

“Is that really what you want?”

He took her hands from around his neck and held them, his

expression earnest. “I think we should wait.”

It was clear that this wasn't an easy decision for him to make, and if she pushed the issue he would probably cave and make passionate love to her all night long. She didn't really understand why this was so important to him, but it clearly was. Besides, what was a few more days?

She would respect his wishes and wait for her wedding night, she decided grudgingly. But that didn't mean she had to like it.

Five

Anne was barely home for five minutes that evening when Louisa knocked on her bedroom door. It was nearly eleven—well past Louisa and Garrett’s usual bedtime. Garrett had taken over management of all the royal family’s vast farmlands so their brother Aaron could go to medical school, so he rose well before sunrise every morning. Not to mention that Louisa and Garrett were still newlyweds. They were constantly holding hands and touching. Sharing secret smiles and longing glances, as though they couldn’t wait to be alone.

Anne would even admit to being jealous a time or two. But soon it would be her turn.

“You’re up late,” Anne said, pretending she had no idea why Louisa was so eager to speak to her, keeping her hand casually behind her, so she wouldn’t see the ring.

“I just wondered how your date went,” Louisa said, stepping into the room and closing the door behind her.

“Technically it wasn’t a date,” Anne said, walking to the bed and sitting down with her hands under her thighs. “We just had things to discuss.”

Louisa sat beside her. “What did you talk about?”

“The baby mostly.”

“That’s it?” Louisa hedged.

“Pretty much,” she said, then added casually, “Oh, and he

asked me to marry him.”

Louisa squealed so loudly Anne was sure the entire castle heard her. “Oh my God! Congratulations! What did you say?”

She shrugged. “I told him I would think about it.”

Louisa gasped in horror, looking as though she wanted to throttle her. “You didn’t!”

“Of course not.” She grinned and pulled her hand from under her leg, flashing Louisa the ring. “I said yes.”

Louisa threw her arms around Anne and hugged her. “I am so happy for you, Annie. You and Sam are going to be perfect together.”

“I really hope so,” Anne said.

Louisa held her at arm’s length. “You will. If you believe it, it’ll happen.”

She wished that were true, that it were that easy. “I just keep thinking about you and Aaron and Chris. You all found the perfect person for you—you’re all so happy.”

“And you will be, too.”

“It just seems as though every family has at least one person who goes through life always ruining relationships. What if I’m that person? I’ve always been so negative. What if I don’t deserve to be happy?”

“After all we’ve been through with our father, don’t you think we *all* deserve some happiness? Besides, nothing is predetermined. Your life is what you make of it.”

“That’s what I’m worried about. Up until now, I’ve made a

mess of it. Especially my love life.”

“That was just bad luck. You just happened to meet a string of jerks. But anyone who knows Sam will tell you he’s a great guy. And he’ll be a fantastic husband and father.”

Anne didn’t doubt that at all. She never would have accepted his proposal otherwise. It was herself she was worried about. For the first time in her life she had a real shot at happiness—and she was terrified that she would find a way to screw it up.

“I’m sure you’re right,” she told Louisa.

“Of course I am,” she said, as if there was never a doubt. Her relentless optimism never ceased to amaze Anne.

After Louisa went back to her room, Anne changed into her softest pajamas and crawled into bed, but her mind was still moving a million miles an hour and she was practically bursting with excitement. Thinking that a cup of tea might soothe her nerves, she climbed out of bed and put on her robe. The halls of the castle were silent but for the muffled wail of a baby crying from Chris and Melissa’s room. Five months from now Anne could look forward to the same. She *and* Sam, she reminded herself with a smile.

She expected the kitchen to be empty and was surprised, when she switched on the light, to find their butler, Geoffrey, sitting at the butcher-block table. He squinted at the sudden bright light.

“I’m sorry,” Anne said. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“No need to apologize,” he said. His jacket was draped over the back of his chair and his tie hung loose around his neck. In

front of him sat a bottle of scotch and a half-full highball glass. “What brings you down here at this late hour, Your Highness?”

“Couldn’t sleep. I thought I would make some tea.”

“You should have called down,” he scolded. “I’d have brought it to you.”

“I didn’t want to bother you.”

He rose and gestured to an empty chair. “Sit. I’ll make it for you.”

Because this was Geoffrey’s domain, and he could be a little territorial, she did as he asked. She gestured to his drink and said, “Rough day?”

“Worse than some, better than others.” He put the kettle on to boil. “How about you? “

“Actually, I had a very good day.”

He pulled a cup down from the cupboard and dropped a tea bag in. “Would that have something to do with a certain young man and that ring on your finger?”

“It might.” She should have realized he would notice the ring. Geoffrey didn’t miss a thing. He may have been getting up in years, but he was still sharp as a tack. He had been with the family since before she was born and in some ways she had come to think of him as a second father. As far as she knew he had no family of his own, no one to care for him if he ever became incapacitated. But after so many years of loyal service, he would always have a place at the castle with the royal family.

“I suppose you heard about the baby.”

"I might have," he said cryptically, but knowing him, he'd probably suspected all along.

"Are you disappointed in me?"

"If you had murdered someone, I would have been disappointed in you. A child is a blessing."

"Yes, but I know you *have* ... *traditional* values."

He poured boiling water into her cup then set it on the table in front of her. "Then I suppose you'll be surprised to learn that I was once in a similar situation."

Surprised? For a moment she was too stunned to even respond. She never knew him to have a girlfriend, much less a pregnant one. He'd never spoken of any family. "I—I had no idea."

He sat across from her. "It was many years ago. Before I came to work here."

"You have a child?"

He nodded. "His name is Richard."

"Why didn't you ever say anything?"

He shrugged, swirling the amber liquid in his glass. "It isn't something I like to talk about."

"Do you see him?"

He shook his head, looking remorseful. "Not for many years."

"What happened?"

He downed the last of his drink then poured himself another. She wondered if the alcohol was responsible for his sudden loose tongue. He looked so sad. And when had he gotten so old? It was

as though the lines on his face had appeared overnight. Or maybe she just hadn't wanted to see them.

"His mother was a cook for my previous employer," he told her. "We had an affair and she became pregnant. I did the responsible thing and married her, but it didn't take long to realize that we were completely incompatible. We stayed together for two years, then finally divorced. But working together was unpleasant for both of us, so we decided it would be best if I left and found a new job. That was when I came to work here."

"When did you stop seeing your son?"

"When he was six his mother remarried. At first I was jealous, but this man was good to Richard. He treated him like his own son. A year later he was offered a position in England. I objected at first, but my ex pointed out what was obvious. I didn't have time for my son and his stepfather did. She convinced me that it would be best if I let him go."

"That must have been devastating for you."

"It was the hardest thing I've ever done. I tried to keep in touch with phone calls and letters, but we drifted apart. I think he just didn't need me any longer."

He looked so sad that tears burned the corners of Anne's eyes. She reached out and placed a hand on top of his. Learning this was such a shock. Had she never considered that he had a life that she knew nothing about? Had she believed his life hadn't really begun until he'd come to work for them? That his world was so

small and insignificant? “I’m so sorry, Geoffrey.”

Even his eyes looked a bit misty. “I was saddened, but by then I had you and your siblings to chase around. Only now I fear I made a terrible mistake by letting him go.”

He looked so sad it made her want to hug him. “You did what you thought was best. And that doesn’t mean you can’t try to contact him now. Do you have any idea where he lives? What he does for a living?”

“The last time I talked to his mother, he was serving as a Royal Marine Commando.”

“Goodness! That’s impressive.”

“She bragged that he was some sort of computer genius. But that was more than ten years ago.”

“You could at least try to look him up.”

He rubbed his thumb around the rim of his glass. “What if I do, and I don’t like what I find?”

She wondered why he would think a thing like that. He should at least try to find him.

Geoffrey swallowed the last of his drink and looked at his watch. “It’s nearly midnight. I should turn in. And so should you, young lady.”

She smiled. He hadn’t called her that in years. “Yes, sir.”

As he walked past her to his quarters behind the kitchen he patted her shoulder. She was struck by how his capable hands were beginning to look wrinkled and bony.

She looked down and realized she hadn’t taken a single sip of

her tea, and now it had gone cold.

The king had been out of the public eye for such a long period of time that Sam was genuinely stunned when he saw him the following afternoon. Though he knew the king was in ill health, never had he expected him to look so pale and fragile. Practically swimming in too-large flannel pajamas and a bulky robe—that Sam was sure had probably fit him at one time—the king looked painfully thin and small. A mere shell of the larger-than-life figure he used to be. And it was obvious that the months of sitting at his side had visibly taken their toll on Anne’s mother. The queen looked utterly exhausted and beaten down. Her features, once bright and youthful, now looked drawn and tired, as though she had aged a decade in only months.

But the grief they suffered did nothing to dampen their joy when Sam announced his intention to marry Anne and asked them for her hand. Though the king may have been physically fragile, when it came to his mental faculties, he was clearly all there. “I had hoped you would do the right thing, Sam,” the king told him. “For my grandchild’s sake.”

“Of course you’ll want to have the wedding soon,” the queen told Anne. “Before you’re really showing.”

For a moment Sam felt slighted, since they had agreed to tell her parents together, then he glanced over at Anne, saw her stunned expression, and realized that she hadn’t said a word.

So much for the news being too much for the king’s heart to take, Sam thought wryly. His children obviously underestimated

him.

"I'm going to kill Louisa!" Anne growled, looking as though she would do just that. "Or was it Chris who snitched?"

Sam folded his arms across his chest and casually covered his mouth to hide a grin. So this was the feisty side of Anne he had heard so much about. He kind of liked it.

"No one said a word," the queen assured her. "They didn't have to. I know my daughter."

"And though I may be an invalid," the king added, shooting a meaningful look Sam's way, "I stay well-informed as to what goes on in my castle."

Things like Sam sneaking out of his daughter's bedroom in the wee hours of the morning.

The king chuckled weakly. "Don't look so chastened. I was a young man once, too, you know." He looked over at his wife and smiled. "And there was a time when I did my fair share of sneaking around."

The queen reached over and took his hand and they shared a smile. It was clear that despite all they had been through, or maybe because of it, they were still deeply in love. Sam hoped that someday it would be like that for him and Anne.

"Why didn't you say anything?" Anne asked, looking genuinely distressed.

"Sweetheart," her mother said. "You've always been one to take your time and work things through. I assumed that when you were ready for us to know, you would tell us. And if you needed

my guidance, you would have asked for it.”

“You’re not upset?” Anne asked, looking a bit like a naughty child who feared a sound lashing for misbehaving.

“Are you happy?” the king asked her.

She looked over at Sam and smiled. “I am. Very happy.”

“Then what do I have to be upset about?”

“Well, the baby—”

“Is a blessing,” the queen said.

Their casual attitude toward the situation surprised Sam, but then, after all they had been through, and knowing the king was living on borrowed time, what point would there be to make a huge fuss and create hard feelings?

Sam had always respected the king, but never so much as he did now. And despite what his father believed about them thinking *differently*, they seemed to be exceptionally well grounded in reality.

“I assume that you intend to live here, at the castle,” the king said.

Anne glanced nervously his way. Where they would live hadn’t yet come up, but Sam knew what was expected. “Of course, Your Highness.”

“And of course you will work for the royal family.”

Sam nodded. “I would be honored.”

“Have you thought about what colors you would like for your wedding?” the queen asked Anne.

“Yellow, I think,” Anne said, and she and her mother drifted

off to discuss wedding plans while Sam spoke to the king about his future position in the monarchy. He assured Sam that his talents would not be wasted, nor would they go unrewarded. Sam's inheritance guaranteed him a financially sound future, so salary wasn't an issue, but he was happy to know they valued his service. And relieved that under the circumstances, this entire situation was running as smoothly as a well-oiled machine.

So well that, were he not such a positive thinker, he might be waiting for the other shoe to fall.

The following Friday, with only the royal family, Sam's parents and a few close friends in attendance, Sam and Anne were wed in a small, private ceremony in the garden on the palace grounds. The weather couldn't have been more ideal. Sunny and clear with a temperature in the low seventies.

Louisa was the matron of honor and Sam's older brother, Adam, flew in from England to be his best man. A musician and composer, Adam couldn't have been less interested in politics, yet the artist in him understood Sam's lifelong passion, and his desire to follow in their father's footsteps.

"You're sure you want to do this?" he asked Sam just before the ceremony was about to begin. "If you're doing this to salvage the princess's reputation—"

"I'm doing this because my child deserves to have parents who are married."

"A one-night fling does not make for a lasting relationship, Sam. You barely know her. If the royal family is forcing you into

this—” “This is my choice, and mine alone.” Adam shook his head, as though Sam were a lost cause. Then he grinned and said, “My baby brother, a *duke*. Who would have thought?”

Sam appreciated his brother’s concern, that after all these years Adam was still looking out for him. But Sam had already put the political chapter of his life behind him. He’d spent the last two days cleaning out his office at work since, as of that morning, he had been given the official title of duke and by law could no longer serve in government. His secretary, Grace, had tearfully said goodbye, telling him what an exceptional boss he’d been and how she would miss him. She said she was proud of him.

“I know I haven’t been the most efficient secretary and I appreciate your patience with me.”

Of course he felt guilty as hell for all the times he’d gotten frustrated and snapped at her or regarded her impatiently.

After he and Anne returned from their honeymoon Sam would take up his new position with the monarchy. He couldn’t say he was thrilled by the prospect, but he was trying to keep an open mind and a positive attitude. At least they didn’t try to force him into their agricultural business. A farmer, he was not. He didn’t know the first thing about managing farmland and raising crops. Nor did he have any inclination to learn.

His new goal was to surpass his new position as foreign affairs director and when Chris officially became king, become his right hand.

The music began, and Sam looked up to see Anne and her

father taking their places. She wore a crème-colored floor-length dress with layers of soft silk ruffles. But even that did little to disguise the fact that she was pregnant. Not that everyone there didn't already know. He would swear that since she had come to see him last week her tummy had nearly doubled in size. But as far as he was concerned it only made her look more ravishing.

Her hair was piled up on her head in loose curls with soft wisps trailing down to frame her face. And of course she wore a jewel-encrusted tiara.

Everyone stood to receive her, and Sam watched, mesmerized as she walked slowly toward him, looking radiant. She seemed to glow from the inside out with happiness.

It was obvious, the way the king clung to her arm as he walked her down the short path, that it was taking every bit of strength he could muster to make the short trip. But he did it with grace and dignity.

Here we go, Sam thought, as the king linked his and Anne's hands together. It was the end of life as he once knew it. But as they spoke their vows and exchanged rings, instead of feeling cornered or trapped, he felt a deep sense of calm. He took that as a sign that he truly was doing the right thing. Maybe not just for their child, but for the two of them, as well.

Following the ceremony, drinks and hors d'oeuvres were served under a tent on the castle grounds. After a bit of mingling, Sam stood by the bar, watching his new wife. She was chatting with his brother and Adam seemed quite taken with her.

Under the circumstances Sam might have expected some tension between their families, but everyone seemed to get along just fine. Almost *too* well.

Price Christian stepped up to the bar to get a drink, and told Sam, “Nice wedding.”

Sam nodded. “It was.”

He got his drink then turned to stand beside Sam. “I’ve never seen my sister so happy.”

She did look happy. And Sam was glad that his family had the chance to see this side of her, the one so unlike what they had read in the press and heard about through the rumor mill. He liked to think of this Anne as *his Anne*, the real woman inside, whom he had rescued from an existence of negativity and despair.

They had done a lot of talking this week in preparation for their wedding and she’d opened up about some of the past men in her life. The ones who had used and betrayed her. After all she had been through, it was a wonder she hadn’t lost her ability to trust entirely.

She saw him watching her and flashed him a smile.

“Your sister deserves to be happy,” Sam told the prince.

“I think so, too.” Then he added with a wry grin, “And if you ever do hurt her, I’ll have to hurt you back.”

Sam was quite sure, despite the prince’s smile, it was said only partly in jest. “I’ll keep that in mind, Your Highness.”

From across the tent a baby’s cry split the quiet murmur

of conversation and they both turned to see Princess Melissa wrestling with two squirming bundles.

"I guess that's my cue," the prince said. He started to walk away, then stopped and said, "By the way, since we're family now, you can drop the 'Your Highness' thing and just call me Chris."

"After all these years of addressing you formally, that might take some getting used to."

"Tell me about it," Chris said with a grin before he walked off to rescue his wife.

Sam felt a hand on his arm and turned to see Anne standing there.

She slipped her arm through his and tucked herself close to his side and said excitedly, "Can you believe it, Sam? We're *married*."

"Strange, isn't it?"

"Do you think it's odd that I'm so happy?"

"Not at all." He leaned down to brush a kiss across her lips. "I would be worried if you weren't."

"How soon do you think we can sneak out of here? I'm guessing that we could squeeze in some alone time before we leave for our honeymoon."

He was about to say, *as soon as possible*, when an explosion pierced his ears and shook the ground beneath his feet. Startled cries from the guests followed and Anne screeched in surprise. Sam instinctively shielded her with his body and looked in the

direction of the sound as a ball of fire and smoke billowed up from the north side of the castle. At first he could hardly believe what he was seeing—his first instinct was to get Anne somewhere safe as quickly as possible—but before he had an instant to act, the entire area was crawling with security.

“What the bloody hell is going on?” Anne demanded, shoving past him to see, and when she saw the flames and smoke darkening the clear blue afternoon sky, the color drained from her face.

Security was already rounding everyone up and guiding them in the opposite direction, away from the blast.

“It’s him,” Anne said, looking more angry than afraid, watching as acrid smoke began to blow in their direction. “The Gingerbread Man did this.”

Threatening e-mails and occasional pranks were an annoyance, but this was a serious escalation. He was obviously out of control. If it was even him. “For all we know it could be an accident,” he told her.

“No,” she said firmly. “It’s him. And this time he’s gone too far.”

Six

As Anne had suspected, the explosion had been deliberate.

The device had been hidden in the undercarriage of a car that belonged to Sam's aunt and uncle. The police bomb squad still had investigating to do, but as far as they could tell, the bomb had been detonated remotely.

Four other cars had been damaged in the blast and the castle garage had taken a serious hit. Four of the five doors would need to be replaced and the facade would require repair. Thankfully, no people had been seriously hurt. He'd had the decency to do it when there weren't a lot of people close by. Or maybe that had just been dumb luck. A few maintenance people walked away with mild abrasions and first-degree burns, but it could have been so much worse.

Sam's poor aunt and uncle, whose car had been sabotaged, were beside themselves with guilt. They felt responsible, even though Anne and her siblings assured them repeatedly that they were in no way being blamed. There was only one person responsible for this.

The Gingerbread Man.

They knew this for a fact now because shortly after the explosion he'd sent an e-mail to Anne via the security office.

Sorry I couldn't make it to your wedding. Heard it was a blast.

"This has got to stop!" she told Chris, who sat slumped in

a chair in the study, nursing a scotch. The wedding guests had all been driven home in the royal fleet—since their own cars had been casualties of the explosion—and most of the family had gone up to bed. Only she, Sam and Chris stayed behind to talk. Or in her case, castigate. She was so filled with nervous energy she hadn't stopped pacing, hadn't stopped moving in hours. "Someone could have been seriously hurt. Someone could have *died!*" "

"You think I don't know that?" Chris said, looking exhausted. "We're doing all that we can. What else would you have me do?" "

"You know what I think we should do," she said, and his expression went dark.

"That is *not* an option."

"What's not an option?" Sam asked from his seat on the settee. He had been so understanding about this, considering his wedding day had literally gone up in smoke. But she had warned him that being with her could potentially suck him into this mess. And so it had. She shuddered to think what would have happened if the Gingerbread Man had waited until the guests were leaving to sink the plunger. She was sure Sam had considered the same possibilities.

"She wants us to try to draw him out so we can catch him," Chris said.

"Draw him out *how?*"

"I assume by using one of us as bait."

Sam turned to look at her. "You're not serious."

“Maybe I trust our security team to do their job. Besides, no one else has had a better idea. How long are we supposed to go on like this? Living like prisoners, in fear of what he’ll do next. He’s obviously escalating the violence.”

“*Obviously*,” Chris snapped. He rarely lost his cool, so Anne knew that he was much more upset about this than he was letting on. “And now we know what he’s capable of. He’s not just some twisted stalker. He made a bomb. He’s more dangerous than *any* of us anticipated.”

“Okay,” she acknowledged. “Maybe luring him out wouldn’t be such a hot idea after all.”

“I think that, in light of what happened, it would be best if you two canceled your honeymoon.”

“What!” she screeched, indignation roiling up in her like a volcano. “You can’t be serious.”

“I’m very serious.”

“But you’re the one who suggested we go there, because it would be safe.”

She and Sam had been invited by Chris’s brother-in-law, King Phillip of Morgan Isle—the sister to Thomas Isle—to use their family hunting lodge. In fact, they should have been on a boat to the other island hours ago. If things had gone as planned, they would already be celebrating their honeymoon.

“I thought it would be the safest place for you, but—”

“Louisa went to Cabo for her honeymoon and no one gave her a hard time,” Anne reminded him.

“Circumstances have changed.”

“Chris, he *ruined* my wedding. I refuse to let him ruin my honeymoon, too. We’ll have plenty of security there. We’ll be *fine*.”

He still looked hesitant.

“The location was kept so hush-hush that by the time he figures out where we are, and comes up with his next diabolical plan, we’ll be back to the castle.”

“All right,” he finally agreed. “As long as you promise not to take any unnecessary risks.”

“Of course.” Did he think that she was a complete dolt? She wanted the man caught and brought to justice, but not so badly that she would endanger the life of her child.

Chris looked at Sam, who nodded and said, “We won’t.”

Is that how it would be now? Her family looking to her husband to keep her in line?

She realized she was clenching her fists and forced herself to relax. Getting this worked up wasn’t good for her or the baby. What she needed was an outlet for all this tension and stress. And she didn’t have to look far to find one.

She gazed over at Sam. Her *husband*. He was still wearing his wedding clothes but he’d shed the jacket and loosened his tie. The hair that had been combed back from his face earlier now fell forward in soft curls across his forehead. He looked too adorable for words and she couldn’t wait to put her hands all over him.

Her wedding day may have been decimated, but they still had

their wedding night. After four months of missing his touch, and a torturous week of waiting for this very night, she was determined to make it a memorable one.

“I’m exhausted,” she announced, forcing a yawn for added effect, when in reality she was so awake she was practically buzzing. “Are you ready for bed, Sam?”

He nodded and rose from the settee.

“I’ll arrange to have the boat ready for your trip to Morgan Isle at 10:00 a.m.,” Chris told her.

“Thank you,” she said, taking Sam’s hand, leading him out of the study and up the stairs to her room. Make that *their* room. Most of Sam’s clothes and toiletries had been moved in earlier that morning, which had necessitated her clearing a place in her closet for him. Sharing her space again would require some getting used to. Louisa and Anne had shared a bedroom until they were thirteen and Anne could no longer stand the frilly pink bedcovers and curtains, the childish furnishings. Furnishings Louisa had still used until a few months ago.

What Anne really hoped was that when this Gingerbread Man business was behind them, she and Sam could spend time at his grandmother’s cottage. Away from her family and the confines of her title. A place where she could just be herself. A place where, unlike the castle, portraits of her relatives didn’t stare accusingly from every hallway. And where she could make herself a cup of tea without feeling like an intruder in the kitchen. Where she could make love to her husband and not worry that someone on

the opposite side of the wall would hear her.

Privacy. That was what she wanted. A place of her own.

“I need to apologize,” Sam said.

She looked over at him. “For what?”

“Until today, I really didn’t take this Gingerbread Man thing very seriously. It seemed more an annoyance than a serious threat. But when that car exploded, I swear I saw my life flash before my eyes.”

She squeezed his hand. “I’m sorry I dragged you into this.”

He looked at her and smiled. “I’m not. I just want you to be safe.”

Which he had proven. The first minute or so after the blast was a bit of a blur, but the one thing she did remember with distinct clarity was the way he had used his own body as a shield to protect her. She could say with much certainty that in a similar situation, the men who had come before him would have ignored her entirely and saved their own asses.

And now it seemed only fair to reward him for his chivalry. Right?

They reached her room—*their* room—and the instant they were inside with the door closed, she launched herself at him. He let out a startled “Oof!” as she threw her arms around his neck and crushed her lips to his. But it didn’t take him long to recover from his surprise, before his arms went around her and he leaned in, took control of the kiss. In that single joining of their mouths, the tangling of their tongues, they seemed to unleash months of

pent-up sexual frustration. She curled her fingers through his hair and sucked on his tongue, wishing she could crawl inside his skin, anything to be *closer* to him.

When they came up for air they were both breathing hard and he was wearing a slightly confused expression. "I thought you were exhausted."

"What was I supposed to say? Let's go upstairs so you can shag me silly?"

A slow smile curled his lips. "Is that what I get to do?"

"If you want to," she said, already knowing by the look in his eyes the answer was yes. She pulled the pins from her hair, shaking it loose and letting it spill down over her shoulders. His eyes raked over her and she could swear she actually felt his gaze caressing her skin.

"Unless you'd rather just go to sleep," she teased.

To answer her, he wrapped an arm around her waist, tugged her against him and kissed her. And kissed her.

And *kissed* her.

A part of her wanted to drag him to the bed, rip off his clothes, impale herself on his body and ride him to ecstasy. The other part wanted to take her time, draw out the anticipation and make this last.

She broke the kiss and backed out of his arms, wearing a come-and-get-me smile as she unzipped her dress and pulled it over her head. All she wore underneath was a beige lace bra and matching panties.

“Take it all off,” he ordered, transfixed as she unhooked her bra and dropped it on the floor.

“They’re bigger,” she said, cupping her breasts in her palms.

“I don’t care what size they are, as long as they’re attached to you.”

How was it that he always knew the exact right thing to say?

She gave each one a gentle squeeze, careful to avoid her nipples. They had been especially sensitive since the second month of her pregnancy. Sometimes just the brush of her pajama top made them hard and tingly, almost to the point of pain.

“The panties, too,” he demanded.

She slid them down, anticipating the slow smile that curled his mouth when he realized what she was hiding—or more to the point *wasn’t* hiding—underneath.

“I think I just died and went to heaven,” he said.

“It was Louisa’s idea,” she told him, touching her fingers to the smooth skin from the recent Brazilian wax that her sister had *insisted* would drive Sam wild. If the look on his face was any indication, she was right.

“Louisa, huh?” He shook his head. “She just doesn’t seem the type.”

No kidding. For someone who had clung to her virginity until her engagement several months ago, Louisa seemed to know an awful lot about sex. “She said it enhances sensation.”

“I guess we’ll have to test that theory.”

She was counting on it. She backed toward the bed and Sam

watched as she pulled back the covers and draped herself across the mattress, letting her legs casually fall open. Giving him a view of the full package.

He started to walk toward her but she shook her head and said, “Uh-uh,” and he stopped in his tracks. She gestured to his clothes. “Your turn to undress. Take it all off.”

If there were a land speed record for disrobing, he probably broke it. And he had the most beautiful body she had ever seen. Long and lean and perfect. Simply looking at him made her feel all hot and fidgety and anxious.

“Lie down,” he ordered.

She scooted over and lay back against the pillows. Sam crawled in and settled down beside her. She was so ready for him she ached, but she didn’t want to rush this. She wanted to savor every second. Sam seemed content just lying there looking at her, lightly caressing the tops of her breasts, the column of her throat.

“You are so beautiful,” he said, his eyes already shiny and heavy-lidded with arousal. He cupped her breasts, testing their weight in his hand, then he leaned over and licked the dark crest of one. She knew her nipples were sensitive, she just hadn’t realized *how* sensitive until he nipped one with his teeth. Her body jerked violently, as though he were holding a live wire to her skin, and a strangled moan ripped from her throat.

He lifted his head, looking equal parts alarmed and intrigued. “What just happened?”

“I don’t know,” she said, her voice unsteady with shock and

arousal. "I've never felt anything like that."

"Was it bad?"

"Not exactly. It *felt ... electric.*" Pleasure and pain all wrapped up in one.

"Should I stop?"

She shook her head. "Do it again."

"You're sure?"

She bit her lip and nodded. He lowered his head to try again and she grabbed his shoulders, bracing herself. But nothing could have prepared her for the assault of sensation as he sucked her nipple into his mouth. There was a tremendous, almost unbearably intense throb between her thighs, as if her breasts had somehow been hardwired directly to her womb. A moan rolled up from deep in her chest and her nails dug into his flesh. Then he did the same to the opposite side and she nearly vaulted off the bed, so far gone that she was on another planet.

Sam released her nipple and gazed down at her, looking fascinated, like a child who had just been handed a new toy. "Wow."

No kidding. This was completely crazy. He'd barely touched her and already she was hovering on the verge of an orgasm. Her body was so alive that if he so much as looked at her cross-eyed, she was going to lose it.

"If you do that again, I'll come," she warned him.

"Seriously?"

She nodded.

He looked like he wanted to, if for no other reason than to see if she really would. He even started to lean forward, then seemed to change his mind at the last second. Instead he pushed himself up, pressing her thighs apart and kneeling between them.

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