



THE PRINCE'S ROYAL DILEMMA

BRENDA HARLEN



*Cherish*TM

Brenda Harlen

The Prince's Royal Dilemma

«HarperCollins»

Harlen B.

The Prince's Royal Dilemma / B. Harlen — «HarperCollins»,

The prince and the nanny Crown Prince Rowan Santiago has just been informed that he will lose his throne unless he marries within six months! Nothing is more important to Rowan than his duty to his people. Royal nanny Lara Brennan is as loving to the children as she is exasperating – and unforgettable – to the prince. But gorgeous or not, innocent Lara can't be Rowan's bride, since she wasn't born in the beautiful Mediterranean principality. The prince faces a tough choice between the country he loves and the woman who has captured his heart...

© Harlen B.

© HarperCollins

Содержание

Available in July 2009	6
The Prince's Royal Dilemma	7
Prologue	8
Chapter One	10
Chapter Two	17
Chapter Three	25
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	31

“While I have no doubt that seducing you would be a great pleasure, I need to focus my attention on other things right now.”

Though the softly spoken words made everything inside her quiver, Lara refused to give Rowan the satisfaction of knowing it. “Do you think I would fall into your bed just because you wanted me there, Your Highness?”

“I think,” he said confidently, “that you would fall into my bed because you wanted to be there.”

Her chin lifted just a fraction. “Then you think wrong. I won’t be any man’s temporary amusement.”

“If I believed otherwise, we’d be having this conversation in bed.” He grinned. “Or maybe we wouldn’t be talking at all.”

Her heart was pounding wildly in her chest, but she managed to keep her voice steady. “Save the seduction routine for your bride. I’m not interested.”

Available in July 2009
from Mills & Boon® Cherish

Heart of Stone
by Diana Palmer
The Rancher's Surprise Marriage
by Susan Crosby
Hannah's Baby
by Cathy Gillen Thacker
Her Texas Lawman
by Stella Bagwell
The Prince's Royal Dilemma
by Brenda Harlen
The Baby Plan
by Kate Little
BRENDA HARLEN

grew up in a small town surrounded by books and imaginary friends. Although she always dreamed of being a writer, she chose to follow a more traditional career path first. After two years of practising as an attorney, including an appearance in front of the Supreme Court of Canada, she gave up her “real” job to be a mum and to try her hand at writing books. Three years, five manuscripts and another baby later, she sold her first book.

Brenda lives in southern Ontario with her real-life husband/hero, two heroes-in-training and two neurotic dogs. She is still surrounded by books (“too many books,” according to her children) and imaginary friends, but she also enjoys communicating with “real” people. Readers can contact Brenda by e-mail at brendaharlen@yahoo.com.

The Prince's Royal Dilemma

BRENDA HARLEN



www.millsandboon.co.uk

For Neill

—my real-life prince—
with much appreciation
and all my love.

Prologue

With its pristine sand beaches and crystal-blue waters, Tesoro del Mar is truly a treasure of the Mediterranean Sea. Though small in size, it has a huge appeal to visitors from all over the world.

Lara Brennan eagerly absorbed the details from her guidebook, anxious to learn everything about the island before the plane's wheels touched down at the Port Augustine airport.

Tanis Rowlands, her best friend and traveling companion, waved a hand in front of her face to get her attention. "This is supposed to be a vacation—why are you studying that book as if there's going to be a quiz at the end of our trip?"

"I'm just amazed—by the history, the culture, even the name. Did you know that it means treasure of the sea?"

"Tesoro del Mar." Tanis practically sighed the words. "I know that it even sounds like a fairy-tale kingdom."

"It's not a kingdom, it's a principality." Lara pointed to a line in the book.

"What's the difference?" Tanis asked.

"It's not ruled by a king, but a prince."

Tanis's blue eyes sparkled. "The country does have some hunky princes."

Lara laughed. Though she'd only ever met Prince Julian—who was happily married to Princess Catherine—she'd seen enough tabloid photos of the other three princes to know that they were all tall, dark and almost sinfully handsome.

"We probably won't even see any of Julian's brothers," she told her friend. "Rowan is an investment banker in London, Eric is an officer in the navy, and Marcus is at school in Switzerland."

Tanis pouted. "Well, at least we get to stay in the royal palace. How old did you say it was?"

Lara consulted the book again. "It was built more than four hundred years ago."

"That is old." Tan's brow furrowed. "Did they have flush toilets back then?"

"No, but I imagine there have been some renovations done and improvements made over the years."

"And the people speak English?"

"The island was settled by both the Spanish and the French, so it is officially a bilingual country, but a majority of the residents also speak English."

She skimmed over the history of Tesoro del Mar and the reign of the Santiago family, then turned the page. The photo of the castle was spread out over two pages to better capture the majesty of soaring towers and stunning turrets, wide stone balconies and high, arched windows. As much as she was looking forward to visiting the palace, she was looking forward to visiting with the family who lived there even more.

Twice every year, Prince Julian and Princess Catherine journeyed to Kilmore, Catherine's hometown in Ireland, to visit her family. Through a distant family connection, Lara had met them there four years earlier. On that visit, the royals had been traveling without their longtime nanny, and Catherine had struggled to balance the needs of her preschooler with the impatient demands of a new baby.

The princess had seemed surprised—and relieved—that her children had taken an instant liking to Lara, who had been just as enchanted by the young royals. On each subsequent visit, Catherine had invited Lara to spend time with the family, and she'd grown close to the children and they to her.

Three weeks ago Catherine had called to request that Lara visit Tesoro del Mar and meet the newest addition to the royal family. Lara had been thrilled by the opportunity, especially when Catherine had suggested she could bring a friend to stay for two weeks.

Tanis let out an excited gasp and squeezed her arm. "There it is."

Lara shifted her gaze from the book to the window and was immediately dazzled by the view.

The photos in her guidebook didn't begin to compare to the reality—certainly they didn't show the hills as being so deep an emerald green, the beaches quite as powdery white or the sea such a sparkling sapphire.

Then she caught a glimpse of the castle, and her breath actually caught in her throat.

"I wish I could stay here forever," Tanis said.

Lara heard the longing in her friend's voice but also the acceptance. Tanis would return home at the end of their holiday. For Lara the future was less certain, because the princess had offered her more than a Mediterranean vacation—she'd offered her the chance to make this island paradise her home.

Though Lara had grown close to Catherine's family over the past few years, she could never have imagined that the princess would ask her—the illegitimate child of an unknown father—to become the caregiver of the royal children. But that was exactly what Catherine had proposed. Now Lara had two weeks in which to tour Tesoro del Mar, get reacquainted with the children and decide if she was willing to leave her old life behind and make a new one here.

Catherine had urged her to take her time, to consider all factors. But in that first breathtaking glimpse, Lara's decision was made.

She was going to stay and be the new royal nanny.

Chapter One

Four and a Half Years Later—

Three days after the state funeral for His Highness Prince Julian Edward William Santiago and Her Highness Princess Catherine Mary Santiago, Rowan was still trying to accept that his brother and sister-in-law were gone, still struggling to come to terms with their deaths. And now this.

He lifted his gaze from the legal document on the desk to his brother seated across from him. “What were they thinking?”

“Probably that arranging for guardianship of their children was nothing more than a formality,” Marcus responded. “They certainly couldn’t have expected that they’d die in a freak explosion on their yacht.”

The outing had been planned as a family event, with Julian and Catherine’s three children scheduled to join them on the water. But Alexandria and Damon had both been in bed with some kind of twenty-four-hour flu bug from which Christian had just recovered, so the nanny had stayed back with the children while the parents decided to take a few hours for a romantic getaway instead.

Rowan stared again at the document giving him legal custody of the children. His brother and sister-in-law wouldn’t have filled out the paperwork without his knowledge and consent, though when he’d given it, he’d never anticipated his role as guardian becoming a reality. Now it was, and Julian’s children—the future of the monarchy and the country—were in his care.

“I know you never expected—or wanted—to be in this position,” Marcus said. “But are you okay with it?”

“Someone needs to fulfill the royal duties until Christian is of an age to take the throne. But am I okay with it?” He shook his head. “How can I be when the only reason I’m sitting here, in Julian’s office, behind Julian’s desk, is that Julian and Catherine are dead?”

His gaze shifted to the photo on the corner of the desk. It was a picture of his eldest brother with his arm around his wife, their children around them. They looked so happy together—still obviously in love after fifteen years of marriage and completely devoted to their children. Every time Rowan sat behind this desk, his eyes were drawn to that picture—to the heartbreaking image of the beautiful family that had been torn apart by tragedy.

As if sensing the direction of his thoughts, Marcus reached forward and picked up the heavy pewter frame. His youngest brother’s eyes were troubled as he stared at the photo. “The whole family’s been dealt a tough blow—maybe I should delay my return to Harvard, stay around here to help out in any way I can.”

Rowan was adamant in his refusal. “Eric volunteered to extend his leave from the navy, too,” he admitted, referring to the middle brother. “And I appreciate your offer as much as his, but there’s really no need for anyone to change their plans.”

“Nobody but you,” Marcus noted.

But Rowan was only doing what needed to be done, as both of his brothers would do if circumstances warranted.

The Santiago family had ruled long and ruled well, and the citizens of Tesoro del Mar trusted in their monarch. As much as they had openly and genuinely mourned the passing of Julian and Catherine, they would accept Rowan’s rule. And Rowan, as much as he’d never wanted to rule, understood that it was his duty even more than his right, a duty that had been impressed upon all of them from their early days in the cradle.

“The truth is, I feel more equipped to step into the role of prince regent than guardian of three young children.” He stared at the photo Marcus had put back on the edge of the desk and felt the weight of the responsibility heavy in his heart. He was fond of his brother’s children, of course, but

after living in London for the past dozen years he didn't know them very well. And he didn't know the first thing about parenting.

Christian he could probably handle. The boy was twelve—old enough to listen to reason, already conscious of the fact that he would rule the country one day and undoubtedly capable of doing so.

Alexandria was eight, with a rebellious streak that Julian had often lamented was turning his hair prematurely gray, though there had been no disguising the pride his brother felt in his only daughter.

As for Damon, well, the only words Rowan could think of to describe his four-year-old nephew were “hell on wheels.”

“The children have a full-time nanny,” Marcus reminded him.

Rowan nodded. “The nanny is just one more reason I wonder what they were thinking.”

Marcus frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Don't you follow the news?”

“Not if I can help it,” his brother admitted. “The stories are more often about sensationalism than journalism.”

“And since she moved into the palace, Miss Brennan has given them plenty of splashy headlines.”

Marcus shrugged. “She's young and sexy and has a connection to the royal family—it's hardly her fault the press feeds on things like that.”

“A royal nanny should be mature and dignified.”

“Like Nanny Adele?”

It was with genuine affection that he thought of the woman who had raised not only his brothers and him but his father and his aunt before them. She'd passed away at the age of ninety-three while Catherine was expecting Damon, and his brother and sister-in-law had hired Lara Brennan—a twenty-year-old redhead who was the opposite of Adele Torres in every way.

“I guarantee there were never any front-page pictures of our nanny shaking her booty in a dance club,” he told his brother.

Marcus laughed at the image. “I would think not—at least not if they wanted to sell any papers.”

Rowan had no doubt the pictures of the royal nanny had sold lots of papers, and that was what concerned him. “What kind of example do you think that sets for Christian and Alexandria and Damon?”

“I didn't realize she took the kids with her when she went clubbing.”

Rowan should have expected such a flippant response from his brother. Marcus was another favorite subject of the press—not just locally but internationally. “You're deliberately missing my point.”

“I wasn't sure you had one.”

“She works for the royal family, therefore, her behavior reflects on the royal family.”

“You're not honestly worried about a silly tabloid photo that faded from the news more than six months ago?”

“That picture wasn't the only one,” Rowan reminded his brother.

“It's not a crime to have a good time,” Marcus pointed out. “Besides, she's great with the kids.”

Rowan couldn't deny that fact, especially not in that moment when childish giggles floated through the open window. Drawn by the sound, he pushed away from his desk and crossed the room to look down to the gardens below.

As he'd expected, Lara was there with Alexandria and Damon, on her hands and knees on the ground. He watched as Damon tried to climb over her back, then tumbled off in another fit of giggles. Alexandria, though four years older than her brother, was clearly enjoying the game, too, and her giggles joined his as they rolled on the grass.

But it was Lara who captured and held his attention, as she'd done from the first with her sparkling eyes and easy smile, and his fascination with the children's nanny continued to baffle and frustrate him.

"It's good to hear them laugh," Marcus said. "It's good to know that they can still find joy after everything they've been through."

Rowan moved back to the desk. "Dr. Marotta has assured me that children are amazingly resilient. I'm relieved to see that it's true—at least with respect to the younger ones. I can't get a read on anything Christian is thinking or feeling these days."

Marcus frowned as he, too, turned away from the window. "Where is the heir to the throne?"

"In the library working on lessons he missed while he was absent from school."

"He's still a child, too."

"It was his choice to get back to his studies." He glanced up at his brother, forced a smile. "As you must get back to yours."

"I will. Soon. I want to spend some more time with the kids before I go." Marcus smiled as fresh peals of laughter sounded from outside. "And maybe with Lara, too."

Rowan deliberately returned to his seat behind the desk, refusing to let himself be drawn into further discussion about the nanny. As far as he was concerned, Lara Brennan was just one more problem he'd inherited when his brother's yacht blew up, and a problem that he needed some time to consider how to deal with.

It took less time than he expected.

Only a few days after his brother had left to return to university, a new picture of the royal nanny was on the front page of the paper. This time she was on the beach, wearing nothing more than three tiny scraps of material that might have been a bikini.

She'd obviously been in the water, and her puckered nipples were clearly outlined by the clingy fabric. Her glossy lips were curved in a smile of mischief as her outstretched arms beckoned to someone beyond the frame of the picture.

The punch of lust came first—a deep ache that throbbed low in his belly and heated his blood. *Mi Dios*. She was so stunning, sensual, sexy. And he was a man, as weak and susceptible to temptation as any other.

But as a man who was also a prince, he had to hold himself to a higher standard. He had to be both selective and discreet in his personal relationships, and he especially had to rein in the primal instincts to claim and take that churned in his blood when he looked at that picture.

He shoved the paper aside.

He could curse himself for wanting her, but he couldn't deny that he did. As he couldn't deny that the obvious solution to his dilemma was to remove the source of his temptation.

While Lexi and Damon were playing in the garden, Lara was gathering their buckets and shovels for a promised trip down to the beach. Lexi hadn't been thrilled with the plan, but she hadn't protested too vehemently. Lara took that as a good sign. The little girl had been terrified of the water since learning that her parents had drowned, and she knew it would take time and patience to help her get beyond that fear.

On Saturday, before he'd had to leave to go back to law school, Marcus had gone down to the sea with them. Whether he was more in tune with the needs of his niece and nephews than the prince regent or just had more time on his hands, she appreciated his efforts to interact with the children.

And with her uncle's encouragement, Lexi had ventured close enough to the water to dip her bucket and fill the moat around her sand castle. Just the first step, but an important one. When Lara waded into the shallows and got soaked by an unexpected wave, the sound of Damon's and Lexi's exuberant giggles joining with Marcus's hearty laughter was like beautiful music to her ears.

Her only regret was that Christian hadn't been there, but maybe she could entice him to join them today. He'd shown little enjoyment in anything since his parents had been killed, and she thought it would be good for all of them to spend a few hours on the beach together.

The request to attend the prince regent's office threatened to put a crimp in Lara's plans, as well as unleashing a swarm of hyperactive butterflies in her tummy.

His Highness had never summoned her to his office before. Then again, he'd never had any reason to deal directly with her before. In fact, whenever he'd visited from London, he seemed to go out of his way to avoid her. Though he was too well-bred to express his disapproval in her presence, she knew Rowan had questioned his brother's decision to hire her to care for his children.

Four and a half years later, she had no reason to believe that his attitude toward her had changed, and though she hadn't worried about his opinion too much when Julian and Catherine were alive, their deaths changed everything. Rowan was in charge now—of the country that she'd grown so fond of, the palace that had become her home and the children whom she loved more than she'd ever imagined possible.

And because he was in charge, she worried what this summons to his office could mean.

She rubbed suddenly damp palms down the front of her shorts. Lionel, Rowan's personal secretary, turned on his heel and disappeared, obviously trusting that she understood the import of his message.

She did, of course, but the children were a different matter.

"Where are you going?" Damon demanded, wrapping his arms around one of her legs in a desperate attempt to keep her from leaving.

She brushed a hand over his soft, unruly curls and responded, "I'm going to see the prince regent."

His little brow furrowed. "Who's that?"

She smiled. "Your uncle Rowan."

"Oh." He still didn't relinquish his hold on her leg.

"But you said we were going to the beach," Lexi said.

"And hopefully we'll still have time to do that when I get back."

"I want to go now," Damon said, somehow making the statement sound like a royal command.

She had to smile. It was unlikely that Julian and Catherine's youngest son would ever have the responsibility of ruling his country, but she didn't doubt that he would be able to do so. The arrogance and charm he already exhibited were as much a part of his Santiago heritage as his blue blood and dark curls.

"Unfortunately, Prince Damon, it's the prince regent who makes the rules now and I really can't keep him waiting."

Damon's eyes filled. "I liked it better when Daddy made the rules, when Daddy and Mommy were here."

She dropped to her knees on the ground beside the little boy and took him in her arms. "I know you did, honey. And I know you miss them both so much."

"I miss them, too," Lexi said, and threw her arms around Lara's neck.

She had to blink away the tears that filled her own eyes as she hugged the young prince and princess. "You need to remember that though your daddy and mommy are gone, they will live forever in your hearts."

"I don't want them to live in my heart," Lexi said stubbornly.

"Me, neither," Damon agreed. "I want them to live in the palace."

It was easier for her to ignore a royal summons than the children's grief, and more than half an hour had passed by the time she got them settled in the nursery with some books and puzzles and knocked on the door of the prince regent's office.

He was annoyed. That much was obvious to Lara by the cool, clipped “Enter” that answered her knock before she even stepped foot inside the room. Her impression was confirmed by the grim set of his mouth and the hard stare of his dark brown eyes.

She immediately dropped into a curtsy—a ridiculous and archaic formality, she thought, made even more ridiculous by the fact that she was still wearing the old shorts and faded T-shirt she’d put on to play with the children. Julian and Catherine had both insisted that she abandon such formalities when they were behind closed doors, but Rowan had given no indication that he would tolerate bending the rules. More likely, he’d see it as a breach of protocol and reprimand her for it.

“You wished to see me, Your Highness?”

“A while ago.” His gaze raked over her. “Obviously, you weren’t using the time to make yourself more presentable.”

She forced herself to remain silent and ignore the flutters deep in her belly. From their very first meeting, she’d been nervous around Prince Rowan—much more so than she was around any of his brothers. Part of it, she knew, was self-consciousness because of his evident disapproval. Another part, though she’d never admit it to anyone else, was that she’d fallen head over heels in lust with the solemn, scowling prince the first time she’d laid eyes on him.

It wasn’t logical and it certainly wasn’t smart, but there was just something about the man that stirred her blood. She didn’t know why she responded that way to Rowan and not any of his brothers, but she did. Despite her imaginative fantasies, she knew he would never see her as anything other than the children’s nanny and a poor choice of one, at that.

And she feared that the background that hadn’t caused Julian or Catherine to raise an eyebrow wouldn’t be so readily accepted by the prince regent—if he were made aware of it.

“You have a leaf in your hair.” His curt statement drew her attention back to the present.

“Oh.” She felt her cheeks flush as she reached up, found the offending piece of foliage and quickly crumpled it in her fist. “I came directly from the garden.”

“But not immediately.”

“No,” she acknowledged. “Princess Alexandria and Prince Damon were distressed, and I didn’t want to leave them in such a state.”

“When you are summoned to my office, your wants are irrelevant.”

She might have a crush on the prince, but she wasn’t oblivious to the fact that he could be a royal ass at times. It seemed that this was one of those times. As the flutters in her belly became knots of apprehension, she forced herself to take a deep breath and mentally count to ten before she responded. “I beg your pardon, Your Highness, but I was under the impression that it was my job to care for the children, and that is what I was doing.”

“And what were you doing when this picture was taken?” he demanded, tossing a newspaper down on the top of his desk.

Lara’s gaze dropped, her annoyance giving way to shocked embarrassment, then fury. “I was on private property,” she told him. “I don’t know how this could have been taken.”

“There’s no such thing as privacy beyond the gates of this estate,” he reminded her. “You should have learned that long before now.”

It would be smart, she knew, to keep her eyes down, fold her hands together and apologize for her obvious error in judgment. But she hadn’t done anything wrong, and her pride refused to let her beg for his forgiveness.

“Instead, you’re again on the front page, looking like you belong in a centerfold.”

Though her face was hot with a combination of embarrassment and anger, she managed to respond evenly. “I’m flattered you think so.”

His dark eyes narrowed on her. “If you think I’m amused by this, you’re sorely mistaken.”

“On the contrary, I wouldn’t think you’re amused by anything, Your Highness.”

“Certainly not, less than three weeks after the deaths of the Prince and Princess of Tesoro del Mar, a picture of their nanny—” he slapped his hand down on the paper “—cavorting on the beach.”

“Cavorting?” she challenged.

“Is there another explanation for this?”

A very innocent one, in fact, but he obviously wasn’t prepared to listen to anything she had to say. “Ask your brother,” she said instead. “He was there.”

She saw a quick flicker of surprise in his eyes before they narrowed again. “Marcus?”

“Yes.”

His jaw tightened. “It seems that at least two of my brothers have exhibited questionable judgment where you’re concerned, and though I didn’t agree with Julian’s decision to hire a nanny so young and obviously inexperienced, it was his decision to make. But the children are my responsibility now, and I have to do what’s best for them.”

Now she did drop her gaze, so he wouldn’t see the tears that filled her eyes. It was her own fault, she knew, for baiting him. But his self-righteousness grated on her and overrode her common sense. It was only thoughts of the children that enabled her to ignore both her anger and her pride. For them she would grovel, she would plead—she would do whatever was necessary.

“Whatever you think that picture means, it has nothing to do with my ability to care for the children.”

“On the contrary,” he said mockingly, “it has everything to do with knowing what is best for them and proves to me that your judgment is lacking.”

His tone was decisive, his expression stony, and she knew that groveling and pleading would have no effect on this man. Along with the realization came a stab of pain that struck deep into her heart.

“You can pick up your severance pay from the finance office on your way out,” he said.

The anger was stronger than the hurt now, and strong enough to override the reason that had held her temper in check. “Is that supposed to make everything okay? Do you really think monetary compensation would make me want to abandon the children?”

When he opened his mouth to speak, she shook her head. “Oh, that’s right—what I want is irrelevant.”

A muscle in his jaw tightened, but he only said, “That will be all, Miss Brennan.”

She made her way to the door, brokenhearted and defeated by the knowledge that there was nothing she could do now. On the other hand, she had nothing left to lose. She paused with her hand on the knob and turned back to him.

“No, that’s not all,” she said. “You say you’re doing this because it’s best for the children, but how could you possibly know? Do you think that spending a few hours at the dinner table with them on special occasions has made you an expert on what they want or need?”

He deliberately kept his attention focused on the papers on his desk, as if she was already gone. But Lara wouldn’t be dismissed so easily.

“Did you know that Christian struggles with algebra and hates scalloped potatoes? Did you know that Lexi’s favorite color is orange and that she dreams of being a dancer?”

He glanced up, his eyes hard and cold, but said nothing.

“Did you know that Damon hasn’t slept through the night since he heard about the explosion on the yacht?”

There, finally, just the slightest flicker of something, though she couldn’t have guessed whether it was surprise or distress or annoyance. And when he spoke, it was only to say, “Are you quite finished now?”

She shook her head. It was too late to hope that he would reconsider—the prince regent wouldn’t let his decisions be questioned, never mind changed—but, for the sake of the children, she needed

him to understand. “They need more than a watchful eye and instruction on their royal responsibilities—they need to know that they’re loved.”

His jaw hardened. “You are dismissed, Miss Brennan.”

The tears that she’d tried so valiantly to hold back, tears of frustration and anger and hurt, spilled onto her cheeks, but she held her head high. “And you are an arrogant, pompous ass.”

Chapter Two

"You really called him that?" Tanis's grin was as wide as her eyes.

"I really did." Lara sniffled as she nodded.

She'd hardly stopped crying since she'd driven through the gates of the palace, away from the children she'd grown to love as if they were her own. The children to whom she hadn't even said goodbye.

Prince Rowan hadn't refused to let her see them, so she couldn't blame him for that. No, that responsibility was entirely her own, because she'd known she would never be able to face them without falling apart and because she didn't know how to explain to them that she was leaving—at least not without revealing Rowan's part in causing her departure. As angry as she might be with His Highness, he was the children's legal guardian and she had no right—nor did she want—to interfere with that. But, oh, how her heart ached.

Lara figured that when a person was feeling battered and bruised, she should go home. Unfortunately, home was nearly a thousand miles away, so she'd asked the palace chauffeur to take her to Tan's house instead.

Tanis had returned to Tesoro del Mar two years after Lara had settled on the island, partly to avoid her mother's attempts to marry her off but mostly to be closer to her best friend. An art history graduate and struggling artist, she worked full-time at a local café to pay the rent and part-time at the Port Augustine Art Gallery to buy her canvases and paints and—she kept hoping—make some professional connections. In light of her busy schedule, Lara was lucky to have caught Tan at home—and grateful.

"I would have loved to be a fly on the wall for that conversation." Her friend brought a bottle of merlot and a couple of glasses to the table.

Lara knew that even if she could explain her vehement outburst, her behavior was still inexcusable. "I was just so hurt and angry."

"And understandably so." Tanis poured the wine. "You've devoted four years to that family, and he tosses you out on your butt because of a sexy photo in the paper."

She winced. "I don't even want to think about that picture. I still don't understand how it could have been taken. It was a private beach—and Lexi and Damon and Marcus were there, too."

"Telephoto lens," her friend said matter-of-factly. "Then some creative zooming and cropping and instead of a picture of the royal nanny spending a day at the beach with the kids, the photographer has a front-page sex kitten."

"Thank you so much for your support."

Tan just grinned.

Lara sipped her wine. "Do you think he can have me deported for what I said to him?"

"He's the prince regent—he could probably have you deported for jaywalking, but why would he bother?"

"Good point."

"You know," Tanis said, bringing a platter of assorted sweets to the table, "you should consider the possibility that His Royal Arrogance did you a favor."

"How's that?" she asked miserably.

"Because as long as you were working and living at the palace, you were never going to get over your infatuation with him."

Lara selected a macademia nut brownie and bit into it. "Which is the same problem you have with your work at the art gallery."

"Now at least you're free to do what you want when you want," her friend continued, ignoring the reference to her own life. "Maybe even go out on a date every once in a while."

"You make it sound like I was locked up in the palace tower for the past four years."

"You might as well have been."

"I've been on dates," Lara said, just a little defensively.

"Have you ever gone out with the same guy more than twice?"

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"No," Tanis answered her own question. "Because you mentally compare everyone to Rowan, and what normal guy could even hope to compete with a prince?"

She couldn't deny it was true, even if the comparisons had mostly been subconscious, so she said nothing.

"You're twenty-five years old," her friend continued. "Way too young to be thinking about marriage, in my opinion, but if you really want to have a dozen kids of your own someday, you have to stop living in a fairy-tale world and start looking for daddy prospects."

"You're right," she finally admitted.

Tanis's smile was smug. "Of course I'm right. And I know just the man to make you forget all about His Royal Arrogance."

She groaned. "Please tell me you're not talking about a blind date."

"Actually, I'm not talking about a date at all, but a job." She broke a peanut butter cookie in half and popped a piece into her mouth.

"What job?" Lara asked.

"Taking care of Luke's kids."

"Your Luke?"

"My boss," her friend clarified.

Lara had met him a couple of times at the art gallery and knew a little of his basic background from Tanis. A hunky widower with twin girls, if she remembered correctly. And the object of her friend's secret affection. "I thought he had a nanny."

"He did. Until last week when she ran off with a sculptor whose work was on display at the gallery."

She managed a smile. "And you think he's desperate enough to hire a nanny fired by the royal family?"

"I know he'd be lucky to have you," Tanis said loyally. "In fact, I'll give him a call right now if you're interested."

Lara was tempted to say no, to let herself dream that the prince regent would somehow realize he'd made a mistake and ask her to come back, but she knew that would never happen.

"But if you're not sure, you can take some time to think about it," Tanis continued. "You're welcome to stay here as long as you need to."

"Thanks," Lara said, grateful for the offer, though she knew she couldn't accept it. Her friend's apartment was barely big enough for one person, even without all the art supplies scattered around. "But I think starting a new job would be good. I need to move on."

"Then I'll call Luke right away." Tanis was already reaching for the phone.

Lara sipped her wine while her friend made the arrangements.

"He wanted to come over and pick you up right now," Tanis said when she disconnected the call.

"I could go now," she agreed.

"No way. It's a rare occurrence for us to have the same day off and I want to go shopping."

"Shoe shopping?"

Her friend grinned. "Is there any other kind?"

"I guess a new job calls for new shoes," she agreed, but her eyes filled again with tears.

Tanis touched her hand. "It will get better."

"The worst part of this whole situation is that I wasn't prepared and I should have been. I knew Prince Rowan never liked me—I just didn't realize how much he actually disliked me." She swallowed. "It was almost as if he was looking for an excuse to fire me."

"That's because he's an arrogant, pompous ass," Tanis declared with such conviction that Lara had to smile.

"Married?" Rowan stared at Henri Marchand, certain the information he'd just been given couldn't possibly be true. "You must be joking."

"I'm afraid not," his political advisor and longtime friend said solemnly. "If you don't marry within six months of your thirty-fifth birthday, you risk losing the throne."

"Can I challenge the law? Change it?"

"You could try, but it would be a difficult and time-consuming process and your birthday isn't far away."

Rowan scanned the highlighted portion of the text again, shaking his head. "Which means that I have little more than six months to find a suitable bride."

The corners of Henri's mouth curved just a little, and Rowan knew he was amused by the thought of his avowed bachelor friend finally sticking his head in the marriage noose.

"That's right, Your Highness."

"And if I refuse? Would the throne then pass to Eric?"

It was a hypothetical question, really, because he wouldn't ever ask his brother to give up the career he loved in the navy just to help him avoid a pesky little matter like marriage. And if the throne passed further down the line to Marcus—no, he couldn't even imagine it. His youngest brother was barely old enough to be responsible for himself, never mind an entire country.

"It's not that simple," Henri warned. "Because Tesoro del Mar is a cross between a hereditary and an elective monarchy, the appointment of your successor would need to be approved by the royal council."

"As mine was approved."

"Yes. Much to the annoyance of the princess royal."

Rowan frowned. "My aunt Elena objected to my appointment as prince regent?"

"When a ruler dies without an heir of legal age, his successor is to be chosen from all eligible members of the royal family, and your aunt thought her eldest son, Prince Michael, should have at least been considered for the position."

"And Michael is already married."

Henri nodded. "I don't know that your cousin is even interested in the position, but there's no doubt his mother wants it for him, and if you choose to ignore this legislation, she will find a way to use it against you."

Rowan folded his hands on top of his desk, not wanting to give any further indication of the frustration churning inside. He understood that it was his duty to fill the role of prince regent until his eldest nephew was of an age to take his rightful place on the throne, but he sure hadn't been thinking about marriage when he'd accepted the position. Now he was being pressured not just to find a wife but to do so within a specified time frame—or put the future of the monarchy in jeopardy.

"Okay," he said to his friend. "You're supposed to be my advisor. Advise me. How exactly am I going to pull this off?"

"With all due respect, while marriage seems to be a political necessity, the choosing of a bride should be a personal decision."

Rowan just scowled.

"You've escorted any number of beautiful women to various social events," Henri reminded him. "Surely it wouldn't take much persuasion for one of them to accept a permanent position at your side."

“Choosing a suitable companion for a state dinner or a few pleasurable hours behind closed doors is entirely different from deciding who will be not just the next princess of Tesoro del Mar but the person with whom I share the rest of my life.”

“There must be someone who made an impression,” Henri said. “At least one woman you couldn’t stop thinking about after you’d said good-night.”

Rowan tried to summon memories of the women he’d gone out with in the past year but found his efforts diverted by the image of Lara that hovered in his mind. He couldn’t remember any other woman’s eyes, only her vibrant green ones—the way they softened to the shade of moss when she talked about the children or sparked like emerald fire when she was angry. He’d kissed more women than he could remember, but it was somehow the lips he hadn’t had the pleasure of tasting that beckoned him—Lara’s lips, soft and full and so tempting. He’d dated women with long hair—some with flowing blond tresses, others with spiraling dark curls, but all he could remember now was the way the copper of Lara’s hair glinted in the sun and the way the short choppy layers emphasized her delicate bone structure and creamy ivory skin.

“Obviously, there is.” Henri’s comment broke through his reverie.

Rowan pushed aside the haunting image and forced himself to ignore the almost painful yearning that stirred deep in his belly. “No,” he lied. “There’s no one.”

His friend responded by arching his brows but didn’t challenge his statement. “Well, then, you better start looking. Though I’ll warn that you will likely be inundated with bridal candidates as soon as the media gets wind of this, as you know they will.”

He nodded, having long ago accepted the fact that every aspect of his life was subject to public scrutiny, even—or maybe especially—his choice of female companions. “You’re sure there’s no way around this?”

“I’m not a lawyer,” Henri reminded him. “But I’d assume that the law has stood as long as it has because it is supported by the people.”

Rowan nodded again. “Thank you, Henri.”

He bowed and retreated to the outer office.

His friend’s comment about not being a lawyer reminded Rowan that Marcus soon would be. He picked up the phone to call his brother.

Marcus Santiago was jolted from a dead sleep to wide awake on the first ring. A quick glance at the clock had his heart leaping into his throat as he grabbed for the receiver. The last time he’d received a call from home in the middle of the night, it was because his eldest brother and sister-in-law had been killed.

“What’s happened now?” he demanded in a gravelly voice.

“Everyone’s okay.”

Marcus let out a sigh and sank back into his bed. “Then why couldn’t you have waited until morning to call?”

“It is morning,” Rowan told him.

“Barely.”

“And I wanted to be sure to catch you before you headed off to class.”

“I don’t have any classes that start earlier than 10:00 a.m. local time,” he reminded his brother.

“I’m going to fax you some pages,” Rowan said, ignoring the complaint and pushing ahead with his own agenda.

“What pages?”

“A copy of an archaic piece of legislation that somehow still happens to be in effect. I need your interpretation of it and, more importantly, I need you to figure out how I can get around it.”

Now this was unexpected...and interesting. “Tell me you haven’t violated Tesorian law.”

“Not yet,” Rowan said, then proceeded to fill his brother in on the details of his recent conversation with Henri. By the time he was finished, Marcus was hooting with laughter.

"I don't care that you find this amusing," Rowan said to him. "So long as you find me a loophole."

"Maybe instead of fighting this, you should look at it as an opportunity," his brother suggested.

"How is this anything but a disaster waiting to happen?"

"You've been thrown into the roles of prince regent and guardian of our niece and nephews, which hardly leaves you any time for a social life."

"You have enough social life for both of us," Rowan interrupted.

"You can't let one unfortunate and long-ago experience sour you on the prospect of marriage forever."

"I'm happy with my life, with the freedom to date a different woman every night of the week if I want."

While Marcus could certainly appreciate that option and did, he knew that his brother had once wanted something different—until Margot had killed those dreams.

He also knew that Rowan wouldn't want to be reminded of the ill-fated affair of which he still bore the scars, so he only said, "You used to envy Julian his luck in meeting and falling in love with Catherine."

"Turns out he wasn't so lucky after all, was he?" Rowan said bitterly.

"I'm just suggesting you could look at this legislation as an opportunity to find someone special."

"I'm not opposed to the idea of marriage—just to having it forced upon me, and within a legislated time frame, no less."

Marcus could certainly understand that. "Send me the paperwork," he said, "and I'll see what I can do."

Ten days after Miss Brennan left the palace, Rowan was still trying to convince himself that he had no reason to feel guilty. But every time he looked into Damon's tear-streaked face or saw the abject misery in Alexandria's big gold eyes, he wondered if the decision he'd made was really what was best for them. Even Christian, usually so stoic and accepting, seemed to miss the nanny. And then there was his conversation with Marcus—two days after he'd fired her—wherein his brother explained the circumstances behind the picture of Lara on the beach.

He'd made a mistake—he'd reacted emotionally instead of rationally, and without having all of the facts. But the picture had done something to him, churned up desires he hadn't even been aware of possessing. It was one thing to want a woman—he hadn't lived well into his thirty-fourth year without experiencing the pull of desire and the pleasures of making love. But Lara was the children's nanny, and he was appalled by the weakness within himself that he could want a woman who was so clearly off-limits, and want her desperately.

He'd thrown the paper in the trash, but somehow that tempting image of her was burned into his brain. He couldn't sleep at night without dreaming about her, fantasizing about that slim, sexy body wrapped around him. And when he woke in the morning, hard and aching with wanting her, he could only be grateful that she was gone—far out of the reach of temptation. But after the initial wave of relief passed, the guilt settled in—guilt that, while he might have made the decision that was right for him, he'd made it for all the wrong reasons.

Of course, the decision had been made, so there could be no going back. Damon would cease throwing temper tantrums when he realized they had no effect; Alexandria would regain her appetite; and Christian would smile again. He had to remain firm in his conviction and trust that their rebellious behavior would pass. They just needed a period of adjustment. The new nanny had only been in residence for a week, and Rowan was confident that it wouldn't be too much longer before life settled into a normal routine again—and Damon would, hopefully, settle down.

He hadn't hired Edna Harris because of her gray hair or long skirts or thick clunky shoes, but he considered those to be definite bonuses. She'd been in the business of caring for other people's children longer than he'd been alive, and she wasn't a woman he'd need to worry about going clubbing

on her night off or sneaking out of the palace for a midnight rendezvous with a lover. And he definitely wouldn't be distracted by the image of her laughing eyes, smiling lips or shapely curves.

Yes, Edna Harris was the best thing for all of them, especially now that he was facing a deadline to marry. He had to focus his attention on the future and trust that his erotic dreams about Lara would fade and he'd be able to sleep again at night.

His hopes in that regard were dashed by the sharp poke of a finger in his side.

He shook off the fog of his restless slumber and pushed himself up, trying to focus through the darkness on the child standing beside his bed. "What's the matter, Alexandria?"

"Damon's throwing up again."

He scrubbed a hand over his face. "Where's Mrs. Harris?"

"In the nursery."

"Then why are you here?"

"Because you can fix him."

Rowan frowned at the note of certainty in her voice. "What do you think I can do that Mrs. Harris can't?"

"Bring Lara back."

Mierda. "You have a new nanny now," he reminded her gently.

"She doesn't know the song," Alexandria told him.

He was wide-awake now, but still not able to make sense of the conversation. "What song?"

"The one..." Her voice faltered and even in the pale moonlight, he saw the shimmer of tears that filled her eyes. But she blinked fiercely to hold them in check and tilted her chin to meet his gaze. "The one Mommy used to sing to us. The one that Lara sings when we have bad dreams."

Rowan squinted at the clock beside the bed. It was three o'clock in the morning and he had a 7:00 a.m. meeting with the minister of state, but he somehow knew that his handling of this crisis could have more immediate and long-lasting repercussions than anything he discussed with Lorenzo over breakfast.

"Damon's been throwing up every night since Lara went away," she told him.

He frowned. "What do you mean—every night?"

"Mrs. Harris didn't tell you?"

"No," he admitted.

She sighed dramatically. "Damon's been having nightmares since Mommy and Daddy died. Lara used to sing to him, but now she's gone and he just screams and cries until he makes himself sick."

Rowan pulled his robe out of the closet. "Miss Brennan has been gone for ten days."

Alexandria nodded.

"Are you telling me that your brother has been waking up every night for the past week and a half?"

"Every night since Mommy and Daddy died," she said again. "But he's only been throwing up since Lara went away."

The realization that no one had bothered to tell him about this was making him feel ill. "Let's go see your brother, then I'll call Dr. Marotta."

Despite Mrs. Harris's entreaties, Alexandria refused to leave her brother's side, and Rowan didn't have the heart to force her. Instead, he encouraged the nanny to turn in, promising that he would wait for the doctor, then see to his niece himself. The woman pursed her thin lips in obvious disapproval but acceded to his wishes.

Dr. Marotta arrived within thirty minutes of Rowan's call. Unfortunately, he had no magical cure for the little boy, though he did give the child a mild sedative to help him settle. When Damon was asleep again, Rowan took Alexandria to her own room.

It was rare for him to be home without guests or other obligations when it was time for the children to go to bed, so he wasn't accustomed to sharing in the nighttime ritual. But as he helped the young princess into her bed and pulled the covers up under her chin, he found comfort in the routine—and sorrow in the knowledge that it should have been his brother tucking her in. He would give anything to bring Julian and Catherine back for their children, but not even a prince had that kind of power.

“Good night, little princess.”

Her eyes were already closing. “G’night.”

On impulse he touched his lips to her forehead and saw her lips curve in response to the gesture.

He was at the door when she spoke again.

“You’ll get Lara to come back, won’t you, Uncle Rowan?”

His fingers tightened on the knob. “I’ll talk to her.”

It was the most he could promise, but it was enough for his niece, who smiled again as she drifted into sleep.

Dr. Marotta was waiting for Rowan when he exited her room.

“Thanks for coming out tonight, Doctor.”

The old man inclined his head. “It’s an honor and a privilege to serve the royal family, Your Highness.”

He managed a weary smile as he moved down the hall. “Even when you get called away from your bed at four o’clock in the morning?”

“Always.”

He led the way to the library and dropped gratefully into a butter-soft leather chair. “What can you tell me about Damon?”

“Probably nothing that you don’t already know,” the doctor said. “He’s had a lot of upheaval in his life over the past few weeks. He’s confused and upset and he’s grieving.”

“What can I do?”

“Just be there for him.” But he frowned, as another thought occurred to him. “I spoke to Miss Brennan about this a couple of weeks ago, and she gave me the impression that these incidents were decreasing in both frequency and intensity. Maybe I should speak with her again, to inquire if something may have happened to cause a relapse.”

“The children have a new nanny now,” Rowan told him.

“Oh.”

It was all he said—a single syllable—and yet Rowan sensed his unspoken disapproval. Or maybe it was the weight of his own guilt that chafed at him.

Though he suspected he wouldn’t like the doctor’s answer, he had to ask the question, “Do you think it was a mistake to replace Miss Brennan?”

“I wouldn’t presume to advise you, Your Highness.”

“Even if I’m asking for your advice?” Rowan said.

The doctor considered his words. “What I can tell you is that Miss Brennan has been caring for the children for the past several years. Having just lost their parents, they would naturally be resistant to any other major changes in their lives.”

Rowan nodded and thanked him again.

As he headed back to his own room, he thought about Lexi’s plea for him to fix the situation—to bring Lara back. He wasn’t sure that he could, or even if he should.

He was the prince regent now, and as a leader, he had to be decisive and he had to stand behind his decisions. He shouldn’t let a child’s tearful pleas or the memories of the nanny’s impassioned speech create doubts in his mind. He had to do what was best for the children, to ensure they got the guidance and discipline they needed.

Do you think that spending a few hours at the dinner table with them on special occasions has made you an expert on what they want or need?

Even as Lara's words echoed in his mind, he knew that the situation with Damon clearly proved he was not.

He'd done what was necessary for his own peace of mind, and he'd used his concerns about the children to justify his actions. It didn't matter that he'd truly believed he was doing what was best for all of them—he should have remembered about good intentions and the road to hell.

Tomorrow he would walk straight down that road and face a woman who could tempt him to sin more easily than the devil himself.

Chapter Three

Lara tiptoed toward the doorway of the room that Marci and Kayla shared to check on them one last time before heading off to her own bed, as she'd always done with Christian, Lexi and Damon.

The thought came automatically, as so many thoughts and memories of the Santiago children did, and was accompanied by a sharp pang of longing. She rubbed a hand over her chest, as if the action might assuage the ache in her heart. She knew there would come a time when she would think of them with fondness and without pain, but she feared that time was a long way in the future.

Pushing open the door of the girls' bedroom, she saw that Marci's bed was empty. Her heart jolted, then settled when she noted the two heads snuggled close together on Kayla's pillow.

She wondered if one of the girls had had a bad dream or if they sometimes just preferred the comfort of sleeping close together. She'd have to ask Luke. After more than a week with his family, she was still getting to know them, learning their routines, discovering their likes and dislikes.

The twins had accepted the news that she was to be their new nanny easily, if not warmly. They were quiet children, polite and well mannered. Certainly they'd given her no trouble, nor had they given any indication that they wanted or needed her presence in their lives.

Luke, at least, seemed grateful to have her around. The widowed father never failed to notice the little things she did—the fresh flowers in the parlor, the tidying of the books in the library, the weeding of the flowerbeds out front—and he was always appreciative of the simple meals she prepared. Though cleaning and cooking hadn't been part of her responsibilities at the palace, she was grateful for the additional tasks now because they helped her feel as if she was making a real contribution.

As she turned away from the girls' bedroom, she found herself thinking again of Julian and Catherine's children. She wondered if their new nanny checked on them at night, if she made sure Christian had turned out his light before falling asleep, if she gently brushed Lexi's hair away from her face, if she tucked Damon's covers around him. And she wondered—and worried—who was comforting Damon when he awakened in the night.

Not Prince Rowan, she was certain. His rooms were on the fourth floor of the palace, and the nursery was two stories below. But maybe Damon's nightmares had finally stopped. For his sake, she hoped so, though she suspected that it would take some time still before he accepted the loss of his parents and managed to sleep without dreaming of them.

She was pulling back the covers to climb into her own bed when she heard a knock at the door. She frowned and glanced at the clock on her bedside table as the knock sounded again. It was almost eleven, and though she was hesitant to answer the door at such a late hour, she was even more reluctant to have the girls awakened by the pounding.

And it was a pounding now, as whoever was at the door was obviously growing impatient.

She grabbed her robe from the back of the chair and shoved her arms into the sleeves, reaching the bottom of the stairs just as the door of Luke's office swung open. The disheveled hair and creases on his cheek confirmed that he'd fallen asleep at his desk again.

"I've got it," he said.

Lara hovered behind him, her curiosity turning to shock when he opened the door and she saw who was standing on the porch.

But Luke clearly didn't recognize the prince, because the furrow in his brow deepened. "Can I help you?"

"I need to speak with Miss Brennan." Rowan's gaze moved past Luke to settle on her.

She was suddenly conscious of the way she was dressed—or rather not dressed—as she automatically dropped into a curtsy. "Your Highness," she murmured.

“Your Highness?” Luke echoed, immediately stepping away from the door and offering an awkward bow. “Forgive me, I didn’t realize—”

“It’s all right,” the prince said, interrupting. “I’m the one who should apologize for intruding at such a late hour. I wanted to come sooner but got held up at dinner with the Japanese ambassador.”

His eyes again shifted from Luke to Lara, narrowing as he took in her employer’s rumpled appearance and her nightclothes. His jaw tightened, but he made no remark.

He didn’t need to. She knew what he was thinking, because she knew he’d always had a less-than-favorable opinion of her, and she didn’t care. Not anymore.

She lifted her chin. “Why are you here, Your Highness?”

His eyes lifted to hers, and the intensity in that dark gaze sent a jolt of heat straight through her. Then he spoke the words she’d never thought she’d hear him say, four words she was helpless to resist.

“Because I need you.”

There were any number of people Rowan could have sent from the palace with his inquiry, but he knew that passing off the task would have been cowardly. He needed to see Lara—Miss Brennan—himself, to apologize to her personally and to make his appeal directly. It was the only way he could be sure that she wouldn’t refuse.

She didn’t owe him anything. He was all too aware of that fact. Just as he was aware that she would want to turn down his request. He had enough of both pride and stubbornness to recognize those qualities in someone else. He also recognized weakness, and he knew Lara Brennan had three: Christian, Alexandria and Damon. Yes, she would want to turn him away, but she wouldn’t refuse the children anything.

The man who answered the door—her new employer? her lover? Rowan pretended it didn’t matter—excused himself so the prince could speak with Lara in private.

She led him into the kitchen and gestured for him to sit, though she didn’t take a seat herself. Instead she tightened the belt on her robe and turned away from him to make a pot of tea.

He could have told her that he didn’t want any damn tea, but he knew that what he wanted wasn’t really important right now. And she seemed to need to do something to keep herself busy while she considered the implications of his appearance on the doorstep.

She set the kettle on the stove and flicked a knob to turn on the burner before she faced him again. “Why do you need me?”

One corner of his mouth lifted in response to her blatant skepticism. “I suppose I can’t blame you for being doubtful. And the truth is, I considered every other option before I came here tonight.”

“How did you know where to find me?” she demanded.

“Your friend, Tanis—the one you went to see the day you left the palace.” The chauffeur had given him the address to which he’d taken her, though getting further information from her friend had proven quite a bit more difficult.

“You mean the day you fired me?”

“I wouldn’t have thought you were the type to hold a grudge, Miss Brennan.”

“But you really don’t know anything about me, do you, Your Highness?”

“You’re right,” he agreed. “But I’m hopeful that you won’t let your animosity toward me prevent you from helping a child.”

“Who is it? What’s wrong?”

This immediate reaction confirmed his assessment of her character. “It’s Damon,” he told her. “He’s been having nightmares.”

Her tension visibly leaked away. “He’s been having nightmares since his parents died.”

“I know.” He looked away. “I mean, I know now, but I didn’t realize how bad they were.”

She didn’t say anything.

“Dr. Marotta said they’d been getting better, that you were helping Damon deal with the loss.”

“I don’t know that anything can really help.”

"You can," he insisted.

She just shook her head.

"It's not just Damon's nightmares," he continued. "Alexandria is hardly eating and Christian barely speaks without the words having to be pried out of him."

"What do you think I can do?"

"You could come back," he said.

"No." She turned away from him again, but not before he saw the shimmer of tears that filled her eyes.

"Just like that? You won't even think about it?"

"I have another job now."

"The man who answered the door—"

"Luke Kerrigan," she told him.

"You work for him?"

"What did you think, that I'm just here to sleep with him?"

He knew she was baiting him, and still the thought filled him with inexplicable fury. While she switched off the burner beneath the whistling kettle, he took a deep breath, forced his hands to unclench and calmly said, "I'll talk to Mr. Kerrigan. I'm sure we can come to some kind of arrangement."

"You mean you're going to pull rank."

"I'm going to do what's best for my brother's children."

"What about Luke's children?"

"I'm sure they'll miss you," he said solicitously. "But I doubt that they've formed the same kind of attachment to you in a week and a half that my niece and nephews have in the past four years."

Lara was tempted to laugh, but she was afraid that if she gave in to the emotions that were swirling inside her, tears and rage wouldn't be far behind. "Am I supposed to thank you for finally acknowledging that fact?"

"No," he said. "I don't expect you to thank me at all. But I do expect that my visit has raised questions in your mind and that you'll want to come back to the palace to at least check on the children."

"You're wrong. I don't want to come back to the palace."

She pulled cups and saucers from the cupboard, mindless of the delicacy of the china as she banged them together. So much for keeping a rein on her emotions. But honestly, the prince seemed to have an innate talent for pushing her buttons, and his unapologetic manipulation infuriated her. Though at least some of her anger was directed at herself for being tempted by his offer.

Why would she even consider what he was asking?

She wouldn't. She couldn't.

And she was going to tell him just that.

She hadn't heard him get up but when she whirled around to face him again, he was standing directly in front of her. She chose not to step back—she wouldn't retreat again.

"I don't want to return," she repeated. "And you have no right to come here now and ask this of me."

"I know," he admitted, and touched his hand to her arm. "I'm asking anyway."

It was little more than a stroke of his fingers against flannel, but she felt the heat of the contact sizzle through her veins. She would have thought, after the way he'd treated her, she'd have gotten over her silly infatuation. But all it took was a simple touch, and she was in danger of melting in a puddle at his feet.

Then she glanced up and found his gaze locked on her, and all the air seemed to back up in her lungs as her heart pounded furiously inside her chest. There were flecks of gold in his eyes. She'd

never noticed that before. Had never been close enough to him to notice. And though she knew she shouldn't be this close to him now, she couldn't seem to move away.

It wasn't until the prince dropped his hand that she managed to breathe again. And she knew that Tanis was right—Lara was never going to fall in love with anyone else so long as her heart remained enamored of Prince Rowan.

She swallowed and took a step back. "I can't."

But her shaky whisper was drowned out by the ring of his cell phone. With a quick apology, Rowan pulled the instrument out of his pocket and connected the call.

Lara was reaching for the teapot when he held his cell toward her. She glanced up at him questioningly, warily.

"It's Alexandria."

She took the phone, cursing herself again when the brush of their fingertips made her heart skip and her knees quiver. "Lexi?"

"Lara!" The joy in the child's voice was unmistakable. "I know Uncle Rowan promised to talk to you, but I wasn't sure that he would do it today. Are you really coming back? Tonight? We've missed you so much, Lara. Damon woke up screaming again but settled down when I told him you were coming home. He'll try to be really good if you come back. We all will."

As she listened to the little girl ramble on, panic and love warred inside of her. After having her heart ripped out once already, how could she possibly go back to them? How could she not?

"Mrs. Harris came the day after you went away," Lexi continued. "But she's really old and she wears ugly clothes and she never smiles. Christian said she was probably around when there were still dinosaurs, and I know that was like a billion years ago."

Lara wasn't surprised that Rowan had hired another nanny, but it was a balm to her bruised ego that the children hadn't shifted their allegiance so easily.

"She makes us do lessons all the time. We hardly ever get to play in the garden anymore 'cause she makes me wear dresses so that I'll learn to be a proper lady. But I'd rather be like you, Lara," the little girl said loyally. "'Cause you're pretty and fun."

Though the backhanded compliment made her smile, Lara couldn't help but wonder if she had given the children too much latitude while they were in her care. But it seemed to her that they had so little time to actually be children and the rest of their lives to be royal.

Pushing aside both yearning and regret, she finally managed to end the conversation without making any promises and handed the phone back to Rowan.

"Did you give her permission to stay up past her bedtime to make that call?" she asked him.

"I didn't set it up," he said. "But the truth is, if I'd thought it would sway your opinion, I might have."

"I wouldn't have guessed you were the type to fight dirty, Your Highness."

"But you really don't know anything about me, do you, Miss Brennan? Because if you did, you'd know that when I must fight, I fight to win."

She poured the tea, though she knew neither of them was going to sit and drink it. "If I agree to go back with you, I need some assurance that you aren't going to change your mind again." As she feared he might do after he found out the truth about her background.

"You have my word."

"I don't want your word—I want a contract."

Rowan wasn't accustomed to being challenged, and he certainly wasn't used to having his word questioned.

He took a moment to pretend to consider her request, though the truth was, he would have promised her almost anything to secure her agreement to return to the palace. But when she swept her tongue over her lips—moistening them, tempting him—he hesitated, wondering again about the wisdom of acquiescence. The children needed Lara. He had finally, reluctantly, acknowledged that

fact. But he needed to find a wife, and having Lara back at the palace could be a major roadblock in that path.

“A legal agreement would help clarify our respective expectations,” she pointed out.

He nodded, because he couldn't renege on his promise to Lexi any more than he could renege on the promise he'd made to Julian and Catherine to raise their children as they would have done. “I'll put my attorneys on it first thing in the morning.”

“Thank you.”

She still insisted on speaking with Luke before she would go anywhere with Rowan, to ensure the other man would be able to manage without her while he interviewed for her replacement. Rowan finally offered to send Edna Harris to the Kerrigan residence, figuring it was the least he could do for the nanny whose services would no longer be needed and the man who was being left in the lurch.

But his thoughts were focused exclusively on Lara as he led her out to his black Mercedes SUV and opened the passenger door for her. He caught a whiff of her scent—something both subtle and sexy—as she moved past him to climb into the vehicle.

He felt the now-familiar and always-frustrating ache low in his belly and knew that living in close proximity to this woman was going to slowly drive him out of his mind.

She barely said two words to him throughout the journey back to the palace, but he hadn't expected that she would. He'd once thought her quiet demeanor was an indication of a docile nature. He now knew better. She had spirit and courage, and he found himself admiring those qualities as much as he worried about them.

He wasn't usually so far off in his assessments of people, but he'd made some major miscalculations where the young nanny was concerned. She was a woman of strength and depth, warmth and compassion. She was obviously devoted to his niece and nephews and clearly not intimidated by his title or status.

He knew he should be pleased. He'd gone out tonight with the express purpose of bringing Lara back to the palace, and he'd got what he wanted. So why was he so uneasy?

He glanced over at her, noting the softly faded jeans that hugged her hips and the pale-yellow sweater that clung enticingly to the gentle swell of her breasts. She hadn't put any makeup on, but her natural features didn't need any artificial enhancement. Her deep green eyes were framed by thick lashes, her cheekbones were high and sharp, her lips full and soft. She was more beautiful than any woman he'd ever known, and more tempting than any woman should have a right to be.

He tightened his hands around the steering wheel and forced his attention back to the road.

He might have thought he'd got what he wanted, but the truth was that he wanted so much more.

Lara exhaled a silent sigh as Rowan signaled to the guard in the security hut beside the tall iron gates and started up the long, winding drive toward the palace.

To a naive young woman venturing away from her home for the first time on her own, it had been like a fantasy. Four and a half years later, the sight of those impressive columns and elaborate cornices still took her breath away.

Rowan parked in front of the steps that led to the main entrance, and Lara opened her door and climbed out before he could come around to help her. She wasn't a guest; she was a servant. And whatever she might think she'd seen in his eyes when he'd been standing so close to her in Luke's kitchen, she couldn't let herself forget that.

Maybe he did desire her. And maybe it surprised her to realize he could and did. He'd always seemed so serious and disapproving, more likely to scowl at her than smile—which was probably a good thing, considering how everything inside her went to mush when he smiled. But she wasn't so innocent as to believe that wanting equaled liking, and she wasn't going to make the mistake of weaving any fantasies around a man who clearly thought so little of her.

She followed him through the front door, nerves jumping in her belly as she glanced around the spacious foyer. She'd never expected to come back, and now that she had, she was as overwhelmed as

she'd been the first time. It was more than the glossy marble floors and the chandeliers that dripped with crystal, more than the heirloom rugs that muffled her footsteps and the sweet scent of fresh flowers that spilled out of enormous urns. It was a sense of homecoming, a feeling of complete happiness that she wasn't sure she'd ever known before.

He passed her suitcases to Hannah, whose warm smile reassured Lara that the housekeeping supervisor wasn't annoyed at being summoned from her bed to help get the young nanny settled back in.

"I know you're probably tired," Rowan said to Lara when Hannah had gone, "but I'd appreciate a few more minutes of your time."

"Of course," she agreed.

"We never did have the tea you made earlier," he noted, leading her into the parlor. "Would you like me to call for some now?"

"Not for me, thank you."

He crossed to the camelback settee, as if he was going to sit. Then apparently changed his mind, because he moved back toward her again.

"I don't like to make mistakes," he finally said. "But I believe in accepting responsibility for my actions. And the fact is, I owe you an apology."

"Marcus explained the circumstances behind the picture in the paper," he continued. "About your efforts to help Lexi get over her fear of the water. I wish you'd told me yourself."

"Would it have made any difference?"

"I like to think so, but...I honestly don't know. I thought I was doing what was right. I didn't think you were what the children needed. I was wrong."

He lifted his eyes to hers, and she felt those familiar and frustrating shivers chase down her spine again. Just a look—and she was ready to melt. But she refused to let him see the effect he had on her.

Instead she stiffened her spine and lifted her chin. "Is this where I'm supposed to apologize for the things I said as well, Your Highness?"

Rowan couldn't help but smile at the fierce thrust of her chin and the determined glint in her eye. She was like a warrior ready to do battle, and he marveled that he'd never before realized she was as much steel as silk.

"The circumstances being what they were, Miss Brennan, no, I neither expect nor want an apology. I do, however, hope that your opinion of me will change over time."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.