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The Pregnant Princess

Anne Marie Winston



Vintage Desire

Anne Winston

The Pregnant Princess

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They shared a forbidden night of blazing passion...identities unknown. Now, months later, a precious secret growing in her womb, Princess Elizabeth Wyndham had come to the States to find the father of her child....Prince Raphael Thorton preferred hard hats over crowns, the Arizona desert over an island kingdom. And Rafe, the title he favored, had vowed never to marry royalty or to subject his child to the rigorous upbringing he'd endured. But that was before one unforgettable princess reentered his life—and changed his views about vows...and bringing up baby!

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Содержание

The Pregnant Princess	6
ANNE MARIE WINSTON	7
Contents	8
One	9
Two	16
Three	25
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	27

HEAR YE! HEAR YE! HIS MAJESTY, THE KING, ANNOUNCES THE MARRIAGE MERGER (AND IMPENDING PARENTHOOD) OF ELIZABETH, PRINCESS OF WYNBOROUGH, AND RAPHAEL, PRINCE OF THORTONBURG

LET IT BE KNOWN that passionate
Princess Elizabeth fell for her noble lover,
identity unknown. But this strong-willed
woman refused to settle for shotgun
vows to secure her secret baby's
legitimacy. She wanted the fairy tale....

LET IT BE KNOWN that heir-apparent-turned-apparent-
construction-company-CEO

Raphael "Rafe" Thorton has claimed the
remaining Wynborough princess as his bride,
solidifying the relationship between the two
island nations...and perhaps mending his own
relationship with his dad, the Grand Duke?
All of Wynborough—and Thortonburg—
celebrate these latest nuptials. But what's this
we hear about a shocking royal revelation...?

Dear Reader,

Please join us in celebrating Silhouette's 20th anniversary in 2000! We promise to deliver—all year—passionate, powerful, provocative love stories from your favorite Desire authors!

This January, look for bestselling author Leanne Banks's first MAN OF THE MONTH with Her Forever Man. Watch sparks fly when irresistibly rugged ranch owner Brock Logan comes face-to-face with his new partner, the fiery Felicity Chambeau, in the first book of Leanne's brand-new miniseries LONE STAR FAMILIES: THE LOGANS.

Desire is pleased to continue the Silhouette cross-line continuity ROYALLY WED with The Pregnant Princess by favorite author Anne Marie Winston. After a night of torrid passion with a stranger, a beautiful princess ends up pregnant...and seeks out the father of her child.

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Help us celebrate 20 years of great romantic fiction from Silhouette by indulging yourself with all six delectably sensual Desire titles each and every month during this special year!

Enjoy!

Joan Marlow Golan

Senior Editor, Silhouette Desire

The Pregnant Princess

Anne Marie Winston

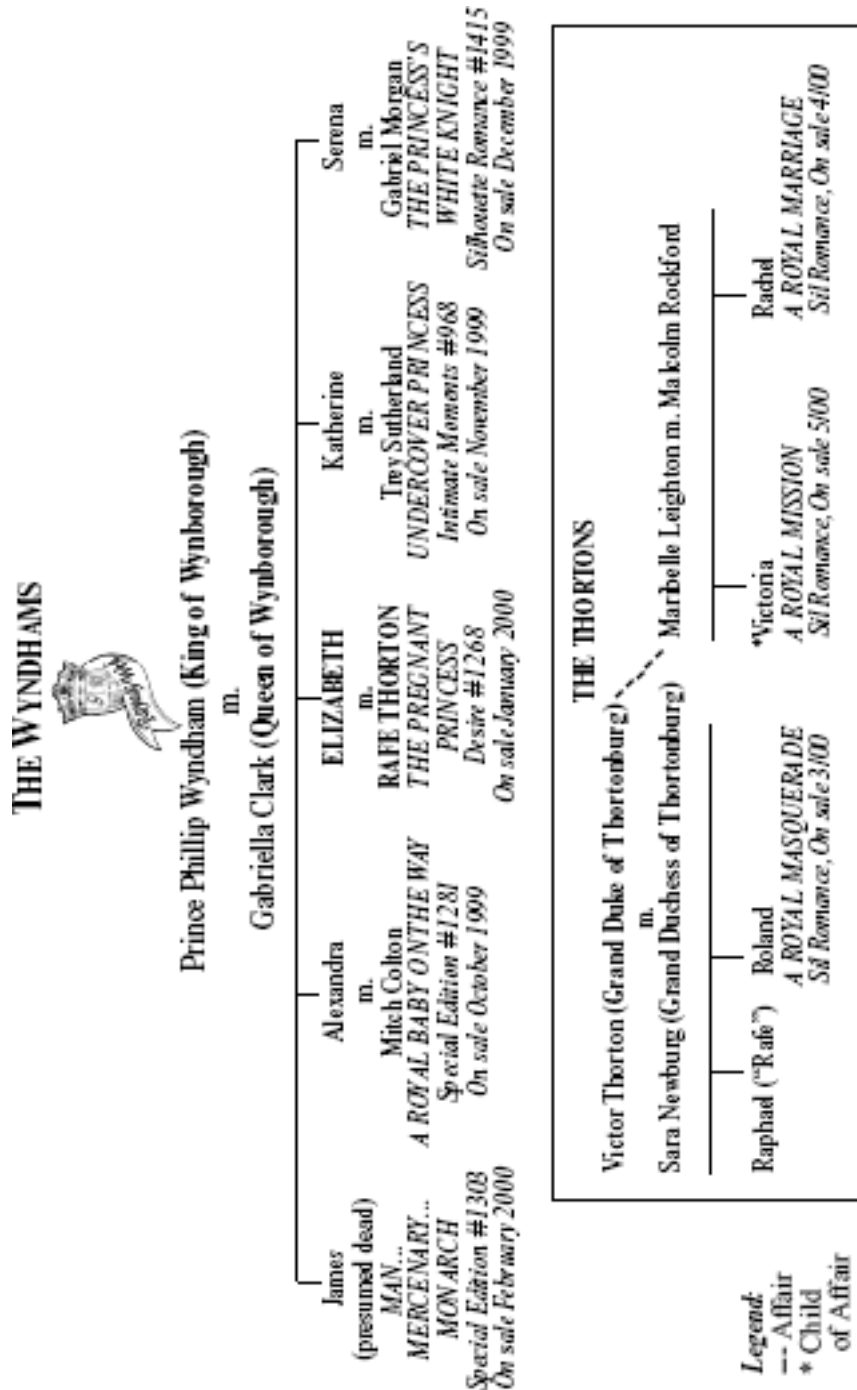


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BOON** www.millsandboon.co.uk

For Sandy,
sister of my heart

ANNE MARIE WINSTON

has believed in happy endings all her life. Having the opportunity to share them with her readers gives her great joy. Anne Marie enjoys figure skating and working in the gardens of her south-central Pennsylvania home.



Contents

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Epilogue

One

God, it was hot. Rafe Thorton ran a hand through his thick black hair and pulled his sunglasses down over his eyes. Arizona might be a great place for a guy employed year-round in construction, but he could do without the heat. It was only late January and the temperature today had reached the mid-eighties.

Rafe took a long pull of the water he'd just bought, then swung away from the cool interior of the convenience store into the heat of the afternoon. Juggling the bottle, he stripped off his T-shirt and swiped it across his chest, absently smiling at two women whose eyes widened in appreciation as they passed him. He glanced at the newspaper box on the sidewalk outside the store—and stopped midstride.

Wynborough Princess Dedicates Hospice.

Rafe stared at the headlines of the daily paper. Slinging the T-shirt over one shoulder, he set his drink atop the machine for a moment while he fished coins from the pocket of his faded jeans. He dropped a quarter and a dime through the slot, then opened the door and pulled out a paper.

Wynborough was a tiny kingdom; its royalty rarely received the kind of press that Britain's royals were subjected to regularly. There was a brief press release accompanied by one small candid photo, a blurry shot of a small, slender woman stepping out of a car.

Holding the paper close to his face as if that might bring it into better focus, he stared at the grainy picture. The woman's hair obscured much of her face and he couldn't discern its color from the black-and-white shot. Still...it could be her.

The features that had consumed his dreams for the past five months floated before his mind's eye as he scanned the article. Memories bombarded him, and his pulse sped up. Princess Elizabeth would be arriving in Phoenix, Arizona, this afternoon. She'd be staying for several days, making an appearance tomorrow to raise funds for a local children's hospice.

Elizabeth! Was that her name?

He tossed the paper across the seat as he climbed into his truck and started the engine. Wynborough. Five months before, he'd attended one of the royal charity events, a masquerade ball. It had been the first time he'd been home in ten years, the first time since the day he'd informed his father, the Grand Duke of Thortonburg, that he had no intention of assuming the title or of living under his father's thumb. And hearing himself addressed as the Prince of Thortonburg by his family's servants, the title that had descended onto his shoulders along with all the other responsibilities he'd been trained to handle all his life, had reminded him forcibly of all the reasons why he'd made the decision to live in the States.

He didn't want those responsibilities.

Wryly, he wondered what his father, who'd harped on responsibility all his life, would think if he knew Rafe had seduced one of the Wynborough princesses in a garden house five months ago. Not a very responsible act, even if the lady had been as hot and ready as he had been.

He'd thought about her a great deal since then. She'd been gentle and sweet, with a hint of innocence that had turned out to be more than a hint. But she'd been so warm and willing that he'd found himself unable to resist her, even though he had better sense. At least he'd told her right up front that he would be leaving the next morning, he thought. She couldn't accuse him of not being honest about his intentions.

But that was a moot point. He hadn't told her who he was, and he had never expected to see his pretty lover again. He just hadn't anticipated that she'd be so deeply embedded in his memory that he caught himself thinking of her at all hours of the day and night.

Yes, he'd thought about her far too much.

Irritably, Rafe drummed his fingers on the steering wheel, waiting for the light to change. Although he couldn't imagine that she'd known who he was, years of thwarting his father's machinations had honed his suspicious nature. His mouth tightened. Did he discern his father's matchmaking hand in the princess's sudden appearance in Phoenix? Had the old man found out somehow about that night?

He felt his shoulders tensing and he took a deep breath, forcing himself to relax. Maybe it was simple coincidence. Maybe it wasn't even the right princess, if indeed his mystery lover had been one of the Wynborough princesses.

Then again, maybe years of living away had dulled his instinct for self-preservation. His father had an incredible capacity for trying to force the issue of a royal marriage on his firstborn son. If he'd even heard any of Rafe's firm denials, there certainly was no evidence of it.

But he didn't intend to marry anybody with royal blood. Ever. Being heir to the damned title his family so revered had caused him more grief in his childhood than any kid should have had to bear. He had no intention of foisting it onto any offspring of his own. No, the Duchy of Thortonburg would pass to his younger brother Roland.

As for marriage... when and if he ever felt the time was right, he planned to find a nice American girl of common ancestry and settle down in anonymous wedded bliss.

No way was he marrying a princess!

He picked up the discarded paper and read the article again. She was staying at the newly opened Shalimar Resort. Now that was handy. His company had gotten the bid to complete work in a courtyard at the Shalimar, and he still had a crew there. Maybe he'd run by there right now and see how the work was progressing.

It was a lovely hotel, Elizabeth thought, admiring the muted dusty rose and pale marble colors of Phoenix's newest five-star resort. But then, she was used to lovely things. What she wasn't used to was freedom.

She supposed to most of the people milling around in the lobby as she moved toward the restaurant, walking alone through a five-star hotel was so ordinary as to be forgettable. But to her, accustomed as she was to bodyguards and security systems, schedules and surveillance cameras, it was incredibly exciting. Daring.

A little scary.

"Ma'am, do you have a reservation?" the maitre d' asked as she approached.

She smiled. "Yes. Elizabeth Wyndham. One for dinner."

Instantly, the man's inquiring expression changed to one of delight. "Ah, Princess Elizabeth! Your Royal Highness, may I welcome you to La Belle Maison. Your table has been prepared." He bowed low and gestured for her to precede him, pointing to a candlelit alcove where a server stood with napkins at the ready.

Elizabeth took the seat they had prepared, allowing the men to fuss over her every comfort, refusing wine and asking for a menu. But as she perused the selections, her mind was still out in the lobby, where for a few minutes she'd walked alone, free, with no one to worship her, no one to worry about every step she took or every person she passed.

She sighed. "I'll have the special, a salad with your house dressing, and the carrots. No potato, thank you."

As the waiter rushed off, she felt a slight but very real movement pushing at the wall of her womb. Discreetly covering her abdomen with one hand, she patted the small bulge beneath her fashionably loose-fitting pants and tunic top. Hello, my sweet one. Perhaps we'll meet your daddy today.

She rested her chin on one hand. Oh, how she hoped she'd be able to find the mysterious man with whom she'd shared such a wonderful night of loving five months ago. He'd said he was American,

though he'd sounded as if he'd been a native of her father's kingdom. And though he'd had to return to the States, he'd left behind his card—a clue—letting her know where she could find him.

Thorton Design and Construction, Phoenix, Arizona. U.S.A. Apparently her baby's father worked for the firm.

She'd hoped he would come back for her and, of course, that was still possible. In fact, she was sure he would, since she was absolutely positive he had felt the extraordinary bond between them as strongly as she had.

But she couldn't wait much longer. He didn't know she was on a rather urgent schedule now. Her spirits took a mild plunge. Soon she was going to have to tell her parents about her pregnancy. It was becoming difficult to hide it with clothing. When she'd had the opportunity to come to the States with her three sisters to search for their long-lost brother, she'd seized the chance, hoping for the opportunity to slip away and seek out her mystery lover.

It had been the sheerest good fortune that their search had led them to Hope, Arizona, to a foster home where their kidnapped brother might have been brought nearly thirty years ago. And even better fortune that Catalina, where she was going to interview a man who might be that brother, was but a few hours' drive from her current location, providing her with a perfectly good reason to stay in Phoenix.

Arranging a charity event for the hospice project had been easy. Now she could only hope that the excuse the event had given her to visit Phoenix brought back into her life her Prince Charming from the charity ball.

Oh, he'd been so handsome, so wonderful. From the moment their eyes had met across the crowded ballroom at her sister Alexandra's annual Children's Fund Ball, she'd known he was destined to be someone very special in her life. They'd danced and drunk champagne, and within hours she'd fallen head over heels in love with a man whose name she didn't even know! No, that wasn't true. She'd fallen in love the moment their eyes had made a connection across the ballroom. And she was fairly sure her lover had felt the same way.

The memory of that perfect evening still made her smile. She'd talked Serena into telling the guards she already had retired to her rooms for the night. And then Elizabeth had led him to the little octagonal pavilion at the far end of the formal gardens.

The glass-walled house was furnished with simple chaise lounges for whiling away long, lazy summer afternoons. One of those lounges would forever linger in her memory. He'd kissed her until she thought she might die of pleasure, and then he'd gently drawn her down onto the chaise and—

“Take me to the princess's table.” The brusque, masculine voice penetrated her daydreaming.

“The princess is dining alone, sir. I don't think—”

Her heart began to beat frantically as it recognized her lover's voice. She'd planned on visiting him tomorrow, hadn't expected to see him so soon! She half stood, and her napkin slid to the floor.

But she didn't notice. All her attention was riveted on the man standing in the archway of the dining room.

The man whose steady gaze compelled her not to look away, as memories of their hours together sizzled through the air between them as surely as a silky finger over sensitive skin.

His eyes were a dark, dangerous blue, screened by thick black eyelashes that any woman would have killed for. The last time they'd met, those blue eyes had been warm with desire. Right now, they were flashing with a combination of puzzlement, wariness and what she was pretty sure was a touch of anger.

“Never mind. I see her.” His voice was deep and tough as he started forward, completely ignoring the fluttering waiters hovering around him.

“But...sir! You are hardly dressed for—sir! A tie and jacket are required in the dining room...”

As her broad-shouldered lover advanced toward her alcove, she took a deep breath, ignoring the sudden doubts that fluttered through her brain.

He'd be happy to see her. Of course he would. And he'd be as thrilled about the baby as she was.

The baby! Some protective maternal mechanism prompted her to resume her seat. Quickly, she reached for her napkin and draped it over her lap, pulling loose the folds of her tunic so that the barely noticeable swell of her abdomen was hidden. She didn't question the instinct that told her this was not the time to tell him of his impending fatherhood. That could come later. After they'd gotten to know each other better.

The thought made her feel hot all over. Raising her chin, she let the warmth of her feelings show in her eyes as she smiled at the man approaching her table. The man whose set, unsmiling face didn't offer anything remotely resembling the welcome she'd prayed he would extend.

He was huge. That was the first thing that registered now that she'd gotten over the surprise of seeing him so unexpectedly. Oh, she'd remembered he was big, but the man striding toward her, wearing a white T-shirt, faded jeans cinched by a snug leather belt with a heavy silver buckle and dust-covered work boots was simply enormous. But as she focused on his face, she knew he was indeed the man to whom she'd given her heart—and so much more—five months ago.

His hair was raven-black, gleaming in the discreet lighting of the dining room. It had been ruthlessly groomed the night they'd met, but by the time the evening had ended, it had been every bit as rumpled and disheveled as it was right now. Shadows emphasized the hollows beneath high, slanted cheekbones, and his firm lips, lips she remembered curved in a sensual smile, were as full and sensual as ever, though they were pressed into a grim line at the moment.

“How did you find me?”

Whatever she'd expected, that wasn't part of any greeting she could imagine. “Your card,” she said, raising her hands helplessly. “The one you left for me.”

“I didn't leave you any card.”

“Oh, yes, don't you remember? It was on the chaise when I—” She halted in sudden acute embarrassment.

Then the meaning of his denial struck her. He hadn't meant to leave his card behind. Hadn't intended that she ever know who he was. The idea was crushing, and for a long moment she couldn't even force herself to form words. Finally, lifting her chin, she put on the most regal expression she possessed, the expression her entire family used to cover emotion from prying eyes and paparazzi. “Apparently I was wrong to assume you intended me to look you up if I was in the States,” she said in a cool, smooth voice. “I apologize.”

“I told my father years ago I wouldn't marry any of you.”

Her face reflected her bewilderment. This conversation was making no sense. “What?” She shook her head. “What are you talking about?”

“About an arranged marriage. To one of the princesses.” He crossed his arms and scowled at her. “To you.” He stabbed a finger in her direction. The move made his muscular arms bulge and the shirt strained at its seams across his chest. He still stood over her, and if he wanted to intimidate her, he was doing a darn good job.

But she wasn't going to let him cow her. Never mind that her hopeful heart was breaking into a thousand little pieces. Thank heavens she hadn't had a chance to share any of her foolish dreams with him. “I didn't come here to marry you,” she said in a slow, measured tone that barely squeezed past the lump in her throat.

His expression darkened even more, if that was possible. Slowly, he uncrossed his arms and leaned forward across the table, planting his big palms flat on the surface. He was invading her space and she forced herself not to scoot backwards, away from him.

“I am not amused by your little act,” he said through his teeth. “If you came here hoping to take me back to Wynborough like some kind of damned trophy, you can think again, Princess.”

It was so far from the passionate greeting that she'd imagined all these months, like a stupid fool, that she had to fight the tears that welled up. What was wrong with him? She hadn't done anything to make him so angry.

"I didn't come here to take you anywhere," she said, swallowing hard to keep the sobs at bay. "I am here on another matter entirely—although I did wish to talk to you."

There was a tense silence. The man who'd been her lover didn't move a muscle for a long second. She felt a tear escape and trickle down her cheek, but she didn't even raise a hand to brush it away. "Who are you, anyway?" she asked in a shaky voice.

He smiled. A wide baring of perfect white teeth that somehow was more of a threat than a pleasantry. Reaching across the table, he picked up her small, fisted hand and bowed low over it. "Raphael Michelangelo Edward Andrew Thorton, Prince of Thortonburg and heir to the Grand Duke of Thortonburg at your service, Your Royal Highness," he said. "As if you didn't know. Expect me for dinner in your suite tomorrow evening at seven."

Before she could pull away, he pressed an overly courteous kiss to the back of her hand, his gaze holding hers. Despite the animosity and antagonism that radiated from his big body, a vivid, detailed image of the intimacy with which those finely chiseled lips had traveled over her body leaped into her head. Her cheeks grew hot and she mentally cursed her fair complexion, because in his eyes flared awareness—he knew exactly what she was thinking.

Then his lips compressed into a thin line as he straightened abruptly. "And be ready to answer my questions this time, Princess."

Elizabeth paced the suite nervously as the clock struck seven the following evening. The Prince of Thortonburg! She still couldn't believe it.

As children, she and her sisters had made fun of the stern Grand Duke. She could still remember Serena swaggering across the playroom, doing a deadly accurate imitation of the man, boasting about his eldest son's educational achievements in England and America, that had had Katherine and her in stitches. Even Alexandra, whose over-developed sense of responsibility and position as the eldest had often made her seem stuffy to the younger girls, had laughed until the tears ran.

When the girls grew old enough to be presented at court and began to attend the balls and royal functions of the kingdom, they'd speculated about the invisible Thortonburg heir. Though he wasn't that much older than Alexandra, none of her sisters had ever seen him. He'd been away at Eton and Oxford for years, then to the States to Harvard, she'd heard, and not long after that there had been rumors of a quarrel between the Grand Duke and his elder son. If it weren't for Roland, the personable younger son of the Grand Duke, who vouched for his brother's existence, she would have thought Raphael was a hoax. When he hadn't even shown up for Roland's twenty-first birthday party, it had only fueled the fires of her sisters' curiosity.

Well, he existed, all right. She rested a hand on the slight swell of her belly, hidden beneath the loose, floating gauze of the dress she'd chosen to wear this evening. She could guarantee that he existed.

The worries of the present receded beneath a wave of memories that could still make her blush. She remembered the first time she'd seen him. He'd been wearing severe black evening dress, which had made him look impossibly tall and broad-shouldered compared to every other man in the room, as indeed he was. His only concession to the masquerade ball had been a small black silk mask that concealed the upper half of his face.

She'd been standing across the ballroom, dressed in the costume of a medieval princess, when their eyes had met. Within minutes, he'd cut a decisive path through the crowd to reach her side.

"Good evening, fair lady. Might I have the pleasure of your company in this dance?"

Up close, he was so much larger than she that he could have been intimidating. But as she allowed him to take her gloved hand, his eyes glowed a warm blue through the slits in the mask, and she had felt the oddest sense of security surround her. He drew her into a very correct ballroom position

for the waltz that followed, and silently they danced. He didn't even ask her name. Enjoying the game, she preserved the pretense of two strangers, but as the evening progressed, he gently urged her closer to him until she could feel his big hand splayed across her back, his long fingers nearly caressing the upper swell of her bottom, the strength of his muscled thighs pressing against her through the light gown she wore.

They'd danced like that for hours, until every nerve in her body quivered with desire. Her fingers had explored the heavy muscles of his arms and shoulders, slid up into his hair, and she felt his big body shudder against hers.

He brushed a kiss over her ear. "Let's get out of here."

A jolt of need surged through her. Had she ever felt like this before? The answer was so clear—none of the polished suitors who came sniffing around the royal residence had ever made her feel so much as a fraction of what she felt for this man.

She lifted her face to his, studying his thick-lashed eyes through the mask, the clean line of his jaw and the slight curve of chiseled lips. His gaze held hers, demanding her answer, and, as suddenly as that, she knew this was the man with whom she wanted to spend the rest of her life. She'd lifted herself on tiptoe and brazenly brushed her lips over his, then reached back and unlinked his hands from behind her back.

"Just let me visit the powder room," she said. "I'll meet you on the terrace."

But as she turned away, he caught her by the wrist and lifted a big hand to her face, caressing the soft flesh along her cheek with one long finger. "Don't be long," he said in a deep voice that sent shivers of excitement racing through her, and her body contracted in an uncontrollable sexual response.

Turning her head, she kissed his finger as she slipped away. "I won't be," she promised.

And she wasn't. It took her mere moments to locate Serena, flirting cheerfully and shamelessly with a crowd of young men, and she unapologetically drew her aside. "Cover for me tonight. I met someone."

"Who?" Serena's green eyes went wide with anticipation.

But Elizabeth shook her head. "I'll tell you tomorrow. Just cover for me, okay?"

"Okay."

Since they'd been children, the two of them had shared a longing for freedom from the ever-present bodyguards who shadowed their every move. Alexandra, immersed in correctness, and dear, quiet Katherine never seemed to mind the oppressive atmosphere, but she had longed for freedom, as had Serena. It had been a great game to elude the guards, and often, one of them would murmur, "Cover for me," just before committing some daring vanishing act, invariably sending the guards into frantic scurrying which the hidden sister watched with glee.

It wasn't particularly difficult to shake her observers. The royal bodyguards took their work seriously, but they were no match for a young woman who'd had years of practice in evading them.

Slipping out a side door into the garden, she approached the terrace from the lawn, her heart thumping heavily as she recognized her handsome dance partner standing on the other side of the low stone wall of the terrace.

"Hello, there," she murmured.

He turned, immediately picking her out of the darkness and strolling to the edge of the wall. "Hello, beautiful," he said. And in one powerful, lightning-swift move, he vaulted over the wall and dropped to the ground beside her.

She pressed a startled hand to her mouth, then released a nervous laugh. "Some people use the steps," she pointed out, gesturing to the marble stairs at the center of the terrace.

"But you weren't near the stairs," he replied in a perfectly reasonable voice.

She smiled. "No, I wasn't, was I?"

He cupped her elbow, drawing her away from the lights of the terrace and into the dim evening coolness of the gardens. “I thought perhaps you weren’t coming.”

She caught her breath in dismay, turning to face him and clutching his arm. It suddenly seemed vitally important to reassure him. “I’m sorry. It took longer than I expected. You see, I had to—”

But her words were stilled when he gently placed one large finger against her lips. “Hush. It doesn’t matter.”

His gaze held hers as he slowly, without any hurry or fumbling, placed his hands at her waist and drew her closer. She found she was holding her breath as his mouth drew nearer and nearer. “I’ve been wanting to do this all evening,” he murmured. His lips were a heartbeat away now, and she found she was holding her breath as she leaned forward the scant distance that separated them and allowed his lips to meet hers.

It was heaven, was all she could think. His mouth was warm and tender, competently molding hers as he gathered her closer. Suddenly, within the space of a second, a flashfire raced through her system as desire spread. She sank against him, and instantly his arms tightened, his mouth grew firmer, less tentative and more demanding. He kissed her as though she were the only thing in his entire world, his tongue invading her mouth in a basic, primitive rhythm that grew stronger, more insistent and demanding until she locked her arms around his shoulders, straining against him as he plundered her lips.

He groaned, deep in his throat, and one hand slid down her back to her bottom, sliding around and over the tender flesh, tracing the crease of her buttocks with one long finger, then clasp ing her firmly in his hand and lifting her strongly against him. She gasped against his mouth as she felt his hard body pressing into her, the blatant surging against her soft belly and the driving need his shifting hips communicated. She realized her hips were moving, too, slipping back and forth against him as her body sought relief from the need racing through her.

His mouth blazed a trail down her throat, pressing a string of stinging kisses to her collarbone and firmly sliding down over her heated flesh until his face was pressed into the full swell of her breasts. He turned his head, and she jumped as a hot breath seared her tender flesh, and then his mouth began to move again. Her head fell back as he brushed over one straining nipple, suckling her through the thin fabric of her gown, and she moaned, twisting against him, her hands coming up to clutch at his hair, combing restlessly through the black silk strands.

He lifted his head, and he was breathing heavily, harsh gasps for air. “Where can we go?”

His voice was so deep and guttural, it was nearly a growl, and her feminine nature recognized the primitive possession in the sound, her body drawing into a nearly painful knot of need. “The—the garden house,” she said breathlessly. “Down this path—oh!”

Before she could complete the sentence, he had lifted her into his arms, his head coming down again, his lips slanting over hers in a complete claim that it never occurred to her to resist. She might not know his name, but her body recognized his. And as he began to stride down the path, she relaxed in his arms and gave herself to the embrace that should have felt strange but only felt...right, as if finally, after twenty-seven years of waiting, she’d found what she hadn’t even known she’d been waiting for.

Two

On the dot of seven, Rafe knocked on the door of the Royal Princess of Wynborough's suite. Almost immediately, the double doors swung inward, as if Elizabeth had been waiting on the other side.

Elizabeth. She'd been nameless for five months now. Her real name was going to take some getting used to.

Her eyes widened, and he knew she must be contrasting the image he'd presented yesterday in his work clothes with the charcoal suit he donned now. She shouldn't be that surprised—she'd seen him in a tux.

For that matter, he thought with a surge of grim humor, she'd seen him wearing a whole lot less.

"Good evening," she said, stepping back and waving a hand in invitation for him to enter. "Please come in."

"Thank you, Your Highness." He gave the title the faintest emphasis and was gratified to see a blush climb her neck as he stepped into the room.

She was dressed simply, in a pretty, lightweight dress in a silky fabric that swirled loosely around her body and draped over the full swells of her breasts, drawing his eye as he passed her. His body sat up and took notice as he remembered the soft mounds that had filled his hands a few months ago.... He mentally shook himself, annoyed that he was letting his sex drive get the better of his good judgment again. Just like the first time he'd seen her.

The Children's Fund Ball was an annual masquerade event, and he still didn't know what had possessed him to attend. Once he'd seen this woman, though, he'd ceased to wonder. He and his mysterious lady had complied with the ball's unspoken rule, not identifying themselves. Still, he was almost positive his paramour had been one of the princesses. Her demeanor had been refined, almost archaically elegant compared to the brash American women whom he'd seen throw themselves at a man. Even compared to other women at the ball, British royals as well as those of his native isle, she'd seemed exceptionally genteel.

If she were one of the princesses, that would make sense. He'd never even met one of them, despite his own royal status. Granted, they were all several years younger than he, and he'd been away at school most of his life before he'd escaped Thortonburg, but rumor had it that King Phillip employed the tightest security to keep his remaining family safe.

Rafe supposed that if his infant son had been kidnapped and presumably killed, he'd be overprotective with his other children, too. Yes, given all those factors, he'd been nearly positive that his lady fair had been one of King Phillip's four beautiful daughters.

"Could I offer you a drink?" She had moved across the room behind him and now stood behind the small breakfast bar.

"Please." He walked to the bar and hooked one foot around a stool, drawing it to him and propping himself on the edge of the seat with his feet splayed. "Nice place."

"Yes. It's very comfortable."

"I guess you wouldn't know what it's like to live somewhere that wasn't."

Her eyes flickered to his for an instant. "I've never had the opportunity to find out," she said in a neutral tone. Busying herself for a moment, she laid a napkin on the bar and set a highball glass in front of him.

He stared at the drink for a minute. "How do you know what I drink?"

The color that had begun to subside began to climb her neck again. "If you'd prefer another drink, that's fine. This is what you were drinking...the last time."

"This is fine." Abruptly, he picked up the drink and took a quick gulp. When she'd first seen him yesterday in the restaurant, there had been warm, intimate welcome in the depths of her green

eyes until he'd scared it away. Today, the same wide eyes held only wariness. Her hair was a beautiful copper, shiny as a new American penny. Tonight she wore it down, curling softly around her shoulders and framing her heart-shaped face.

He recognized that face. Now that he knew who she was, he felt like an idiot for doubting his instincts before. It could almost have been her mother's face at a younger age, except for a slight dimple in her chin, courtesy of her father, the king.

The king.

Anger began to rise again and he ruthlessly pushed it back and shut the door on it. He intended to have his questions answered this evening.

Elizabeth continued to hover behind the bar. She had made herself a drink as well, though he'd seen her put nothing in it but cranberry juice. She gestured to the center of the room, where a coffee table surrounded by several chairs and love seats held a silver tray full of canapés. "Shall we sit down?"

He rose from the stool and gestured for her to precede him. "Certainly."

Her gaze flew to his, then whisked away again, and he saw her swallow. Then she stepped from behind the bar and quickly walked to one of the chairs, sinking down and demurely crossing her legs at the ankle while she fussed with the loose folds of her oversize dress.

Rafe followed her, taking a seat at an angle to hers and accepting the plate she offered him. He'd worked all day and had only gotten home in time to shower and change before heading over to the hotel, and he was starving. As he filled his plate with a selection of the hors d'oeuvres, he glanced at her. "Aren't you going to eat?"

She gave a single nervous shake of her head. "I'm not particularly hungry. You go ahead."

"If you're sure." This rigid courtesy was getting to him already. One more of the reasons he didn't intend to return to Thorntonburg.

She only nodded.

There was an uncomfortable silence for a few moments. Judging from the way she fidgeted, it bothered her a lot more than it did him. He applied himself to his food until his plate was empty, but he held up a hand in refusal when she offered him a second helping.

"No thanks, this will hold me for the moment."

A faint smile crossed her face. "As you wish." She studied him curiously. "You're very American, aren't you?"

He supposed she meant the slang expression, because he knew his voice still carried the clipped accents of his homeland. "This is my home now," was all he said.

"This country appeals to you so much more than Thorntonburg?" she asked softly.

"When I was younger, anyplace that didn't have my father in it was appealing," he said with grim self-mockery. "Now...yes, I like it here. It's warm, it's sunny almost all the time—you certainly can't say that for the North Atlantic." Only a short distance off the coast of the United Kingdom, the country of his birth was frequently rainy, cloudy and chilly. On its good days.

"No." Again, a small smile played around her lips. "You certainly can't."

He watched her lips curve, aware of the flare of sexual attraction deep in his gut. She was every bit as beautiful as he remembered, and every bit as seductive. His good humor faded.

"Why did you seduce me?" he asked bluntly.

Her green eyes widened and her head snapped up as if he'd struck her. Her face went white, then vivid color filled every centimeter of her fair complexion. "I didn't seduce you!"

He considered that. "Okay. I'll give you that. It was definitely a two-sided deal, as I recall."

For a moment, she simply stared at him silently and he watched, fascinated, as a deep rosy hue flushed her cheeks. Finally, in the same neutral voice she'd used a minute ago, she said, "Why ever would I want to seduce you?"

"Does the word betrothal ring any bells?"

She had a bewildered look on her face as she shook her head. "But I'm not betrothed to anyone."

He snorted. “Do we have to continue this little game of make-believe? Okay, so it didn’t have to be you. My father isn’t particular as long as the union occurs. You know full well one of you will marry the future Grand Duke one day. You were trying to get a jump on your sisters, weren’t you? After all, if you can’t have a king, a grand duke is the next best thing.”

“You think I’d marry for a title?” She gaped at him for a moment, ignoring the rest of his heavy-handed sarcasm. “My father never arranged a marriage in his life. I don’t know why you believe he would do something like that.”

“Maybe because my father’s been telling me since I was four years old that I would marry one of the princesses one day?”

“We’ll marry whomever we want, your father’s wishes aside.”

“Umm-hmm.” It was a skeptical sound.

“There was no arrangement of any kind!” she insisted. “Anyway, my eldest sister is already married. She married a rancher from right here in Arizona. They’re expecting their first child—”

“I don’t give a bloody damn if they’re expecting ten children,” he said through his teeth.

Her eyes widened again and though she didn’t actually move, he had the impression she’d reared back out of his reach.

“You’re... what? Second eldest?” he asked.

She nodded. “Third, actually. My brother was—is—the eldest. Katherine and Serena are younger than I am.”

Why had Elizabeth been steered his way instead of one of her sisters? It was a puzzle that he couldn’t find the right pieces for, and he didn’t like unfinished puzzles. But for now, he set it aside. “My father and your father must have gotten their heads together since I left the country,” he said. “And you were the sacrificial lamb. I wonder how the King decided which daughter to send. A roll of dice? A flipped coin?”

“I told you my father would never arrange a marriage for me,” she insisted, and her voice was agitated. “There is no scheme.”

“Not anymore there isn’t,” he said, not caring how cold and implacable he sounded. “You might have been a virgin, and you might even have been the hottest sex I’ve ever had, but I’m still not falling for it. Go home and tell your daddy I’m not marrying you.”

The color that had infused her cheeks drained away. For a minute, he thought she was going to cry. Then she drew a deep breath. “I’ll tell my father nothing of the sort.” She leaped to her feet and stomped across the room, yanking open the door of the suite. “He didn’t plot for us to meet or marry, and if you think I’m trying to trap you into matrimony you couldn’t be more wrong. You may leave, sir, and don’t come back. I plan to forget we ever met.” Grandly, she flung her arm wide to encourage him to leave.

About to take her up on the invitation, Rafe rose from the chair—and stopped in his tracks, all thoughts of leaving forgotten. His eyes narrowed in disbelief.

She was pregnant.

Shock ripped through him as the silhouette of the princess was outlined through her thin dress against the light flowing in from the hall... the light that clearly showed the bulge of pregnancy beneath the flowing style he’d assumed was merely fashionable. Her outflung arm pulled the garment tight across her midsection, making it impossible to miss her condition.

Temporarily struck dumb, Rafe stalked across the room toward her.

Elizabeth must have recognized the bone-deep rage tearing through him, because she backed up until the wall beside the door stopped her retreat.

He didn’t hesitate until he was practically standing on her toes, the protrusion of her belly only inches from his body and her wide, fear-filled eyes gazing up at him defensively.

“You...little...bitch,” he ground out. “So that’s what this surprise reunion is all about. You’ve got a bun in the oven and let me guess...” He paused and allowed a mocking grin to slide across his face. “I’m supposed to believe it’s mine.”

She gasped. When her hands came up and shoved hard at his stomach, he was surprised enough that he let her push him back a step or two. Again, she was flushing that bright red that only a redhead could manage, her whole body shaking. Her face looked shattered, and he thought she was going to cry, but when she spoke, her voice trembled with rage. “It is your child,” she said. “My sister Serena thought it was only fair that you know.”

Her words rocked him to the core, but he managed to cover his reaction with a sneer. “And you expect me to believe that? Do I really look like that big a sucker?” He crossed his arms and his own rising anger made his voice rough. “That could be anybody’s baby.”

Her eyes darkened, dulled, and she swayed. Alarmed, he reached out to steady her, but she backed away from him so quickly that she nearly fell over a chair. She slapped his hand away.

“As you so kindly reminded me, I was a virgin.” Her voice was low and unsteady, and her body shook from head to toe. He had a moment’s instinctive concern for her condition, but before he could think of anything to say that might calm her a little, she whipped around and ran across the suite to a far door, entering it and slamming the door so hard the frame shook.

Considering she’d caught him by surprise, he reacted quickly, sprinting after her. But she’d had just enough of a start that by the time he reached for the doorknob, he heard the distinct metallic click of a lock and then the final hammering sound of a deadbolt being thrown into place.

“Elizabeth!” he roared, rattling the knob. “Come out here!”

There was no answer, but through the door he could hear the sound of water running in the bathroom. And then another sound. Weeping. He rested his fists against the door, fighting the urge to batter it down. Frustration and fury mounted as the feeling of being trapped rose within him. Any sympathy that her crying had aroused died as echoes of his childhood swamped him. He’d sworn he would never have a child, would never do to a child what had been done to him. Never.

He gave the door a hefty kick with the flat of his foot. “Nobody makes my life plans for me!” he shouted through the door before he spun on his heel. “Not my father, and not you!”

His mood was only marginally better at nine the next morning. He had tossed and turned half the bloody night. This morning, his eyes felt gritty and he was drinking industrial-strength coffee in an effort to revive the brain cells that were comatose from lack of sleep.

But there were a few brain cells that were alive and well. With no effort at all, he could recall the look on Elizabeth’s face when he’d told her that the baby she carried could belong to anyone.

She’d been shattered.

He felt like pond scum. He might not have any intention of marrying the girl, but he wasn’t a total jerk. He knew, as sure as he knew his own name, that she’d never had another lover. Before him, impossible. After him... If she’d been a bedhopper, she wouldn’t still have been a virgin when he had met her. He wasn’t sure how old she was, but he knew she had to be in her mid-twenties. Definitely not promiscuous.

And her baby was his.

My sister Serena thought it was only fair that you know.

What in bloody hell did that mean? That Elizabeth wouldn’t have told him otherwise?

He might not want it, might be furious about this whole bloody mess, but he wasn’t a man who walked away from his responsibilities. He’d fathered a child, and he’d support it. She’d waited, damn her, far too long for abortion to be an option. He’d counted in his head during the endless nighttime hours, and he figured she was about five months along now.

Abortion. In his heart, he knew he couldn’t let her do that, anyway. It certainly would have been the easy way out, but the solution gave him a sick feeling. Together, he and Elizabeth Wyndham had created a life, and he didn’t believe either of them had the right to end it.

No. Biologically, he was going to be a father, though he had no intention of getting involved in this child's life. He wondered if Elizabeth had considered adoption. As far as he was concerned, that would be the best thing all around, but somehow, he doubted his redheaded lover would see it that way. Nor would the royal family, come to think of it.

Oh, well. If she wanted to raise the kid, he couldn't stop her. And he certainly wouldn't have any trouble supporting it financially. Even though he'd refused to use any of his family's money, except that from his grandmother's trust, he'd managed to build quite a respectable business for himself here in the States. Regardless of the hidebound, ambitious schemer he had the misfortune to call his father.

Hell. He wasn't going to get any more sleep, and he knew he couldn't work until he'd straightened things out with Elizabeth. Dumping the coffee in the sink, he grabbed his car keys and headed for the garage.

Twenty-five minutes later, he stood in the suite where he'd been only last night, clinging to his temper by a thin thread while the personal assistant provided to Elizabeth during her hotel stay spread her hands helplessly. "I'm sorry, Mr. Thorton, but the princess insisted. I didn't think it was wise for her to rent a car for herself, but there was simply no stopping her."

"How many were in her party?"

"Her party? Oh, no one else, sir. She was alone."

She hadn't even taken a driver or a bodyguard? The vague tingle of apprehension that had hovered since he'd learned the princess had left the hotel that morning became a full-fledged itch. "What about her bodyguard?"

"She didn't bring one, sir."

Rafe swore, a string of curses that clearly shocked the young woman before him. "Where did she go?"

"I don't know, sir. She was meeting a man, I believe. All she told me was that she planned to be back by the dinner hour."

Dinner hour. In Wynborough, that could easily mean eight or nine in the evening. No way was he waiting that long to be sure she was all right. With the hotel employee to vouch for him, it was an easy task to get the concierge to supply him with Elizabeth's intended destination and to get a description of the vehicle she was driving.

Driving! As sheltered as her life had been, he would bet she'd rarely, if ever, driven herself anywhere in her whole life.

Not to mention the little fact that Americans drove on the other side of the road from what she was accustomed at home.

As he waited impatiently for the facts he'd requested, the assistant's other words sank in. Meeting a man. A man! Who the hell would Elizabeth know in Phoenix other than him? She was pregnant with his baby, damn it!

Five minutes later, he was climbing back into his truck and heading for the highway.

He drove south out of Phoenix on Interstate 10, heading toward Casa Grande. The concierge had told him that Elizabeth had asked for directions to Catalina, a little town nestled between the Tortolita mountain range and the Coronado National Forest just north of Tucson. She had maybe an hour's start on him—how the hell was he going to find her?

Especially if she was meeting some other man.

It was only with the greatest restraint that he could keep himself from snarling at the woman's naïveté. She didn't know the first thing about men. Elizabeth had no business haring off to meet another man, and when he found her he was going to let her know in no uncertain terms that as the father of her baby, he wouldn't tolerate another man hanging around his...

His what?

Nothing, he told himself. Nothing. She doesn't belong to you. You need this princess in your life like you need heat rash.

It was hot.

She didn't think she'd ever experienced this kind of heat before. She'd vacationed on islands in warm climates, but nothing she could recall resembled this dry, draining heat that leached every ounce of energy from her. Of course, she'd never been on a tropical island when she was pregnant, either, and she'd nearly always had a pool or a beautiful ocean in which to cool off.

Elizabeth bent over the motor of the rental car again. This was dreadful. She had no idea what she might be looking for among all the black, greasy parts and metal pipes. All she knew was that a white, billowing cloud of smoke had begun to leak from beneath the bonnet of the automobile about thirty minutes ago, and that when she'd pulled off the road to investigate the sedan wouldn't start again.

Fear coiled and her fingers shook as she tentatively reached forward and lightly tapped a piece of metal. It was easy to call herself a dunce. An hour ago, a jaunt down an American highway to find the man who might be her brother had sounded like a grand lark. Now it sounded like the height of folly.

No chauffeur. No bodyguard. No car phone. Off the main road on a little side highway with not a building in sight. Her parents would be terribly distressed if they knew. It hadn't seemed so foolish to her when she'd had the idea. She was so awfully weary of being followed, escorted, fussed over everywhere she went. This had seemed like the perfect time to see how it felt to be normal.

Now all she could think was that if someone would rescue her, she'd offer him a title in his own right. Peering into the engine one more time, she picked up the black umbrella she'd brought along and held it open above her head, providing a bit of shade from the sun if not from the heat.

The thought of what Rafe would say if he were here only served to lower her spirits even more. He thought she was a silly, helpless girl who'd been sheltered from the real world her entire life. She could see his disdain in his eyes when he looked at her.

Was he right? She thought of the organ donor campaign with which she'd consented to work, of the hospital visits she'd made in the name of her other charity, a hospice in Wymborough's capital city. She'd seen suffering. She'd seen death. She wasn't a hothouse flower who had fluff for brains.

Oh? Then why are you standing here in the heat beside a crippled auto?

She was going to pray to God Rafe never found out about this. Then again, why should he? When he'd slammed out of her suite last night, she'd known she would never see him again.

Far down the road, something distracted her from her morose thoughts. A car! A car on the highway coming toward her. It was moving quite fast over the straight, flat terrain, and as it drew closer she could see it was a truck. Not that it mattered as long as the driver would be willing to take her to Catalina. In Catalina she could accomplish her goal, which was to locate Samuel Flynn, the man who once was an orphan in The Sunshine Home for Children, the home she and her sisters were sure their kidnapped brother had been brought thirty years ago.

Her stomach quivered, and she hoped it was at the thought of locating her brother, presumed dead for so long. What a coronation anniversary gift that would make for her father!

Her stomach quivered again, and she wiped a drop of sweat from her temple before it could trickle down her cheek. The truck was drawing to a halt behind her car now, and she squinted as the driver stepped out, forcing her dry lips into a welcoming smile. Until she recognized the big broad-shouldered figure of the Prince of Thortonburg walking toward her.

Curses. The day was rapidly assuming the proportions of a major disaster. She closed her eyes, hoping he was a mirage, but she was forced to open them quickly by a wave of vertigo. He was still there.

His expression was forbidding as he strode toward her. "What do you think you're doing?" he demanded.

"It's lovely to see you again, too, Mr. Thorton. How coincidental that you should be traveling the same road as I." She tilted her chin, determined not to give him the satisfaction of seeing her squirm.

“You know perfectly well it’s not coincidence. I was coming after you. You have no business traipsing around an American desert without an escort.”

“Thank you for your opinion. Where I traipse and with whom is not your concern, sir.” She would have stuck her nose even higher in the air, but she was forced to close her eyes as another round of dizziness seized her.

“Elizabeth!” She felt his big hands catch her elbows.

“You may address me as ‘Your Royal Highness’—oh!” She squeaked in alarm as Rafe scooped her up in his arms and swung her around, and she clutched at his shoulders as the world spun crazily around her. “Put me down!”

“Gladly.” His booted feet crunched on gravel as he set her on her feet, and she opened a cautious eye to see that he had brought her around to the passenger side of his truck. Keeping one arm about her, he leaned around her and opened the door, then set his hands at her waist and easily lifted her into the enclosed cab.

He’d left the engine and the air conditioner running. Beneath her legs in her thin dress the leather seat was cool, and she was blessedly shaded from the vicious sun. She almost whimpered with delight, but she wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction. Instead, she lay her head against the back of her seat and blotted her forehead with a tissue from her purse.

“What’s wrong with the car?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I was trying to figure that out when you came along.”

“Right.” He gave a snort of amusement. “Why did you stop along the road in the middle of nowhere?”

“There was smoke coming from beneath the bonnet.”

“Smoke?” He looked alarmed. “Are you sure it wasn’t steam?”

She shrugged. “I haven’t a clue. Smoke, steam, something like that.”

“There’s a pretty big difference,” he informed her. Then he straightened. “Put your seat belt on.” He slammed the passenger door with more force than necessary, making her wince.

She watched through the windshield as he walked back to the blue Lincoln and retrieved the keys before locking its door and coming back to the big truck. Today he was wearing jeans again, jeans that caressed the solidly muscled contours of his legs like a lover’s hands. She remembered the feel of those strong limbs against hers, the heat of his skin and the rough texture of the hair liberally sprinkled over it. The feminine core of her tightened with pleasure, but she sternly reminded herself that theirs had been a single encounter, that the Prince of Thortonburg had made it abundantly clear that she was going to be no part of his life.

A lump in her throat warned her to change the direction of her thoughts, and as Rafe approached the truck, she catalogued the rest of his clothing. With the jeans, he had donned a white shirt, the sleeves of which he’d turned back several times. On his head was a broad-brimmed white straw hat like American cowboys wore. And, as he had since she’d first seen him again, he was wearing a pair of boots. She’d noticed last night that even with his suit he’d worn a polished pair of black leather boots with intricate stitching.

He slid easily into the driver’s seat and fastened his own seat belt before backing the truck up and turning a wide circle in the highway.

“Wait! I want to go to Catalina,” she said.

“Tough.” He didn’t even look at her. “You’re coming back to Phoenix and going to the doctor, then you’re going to lie down and rest.”

“To the doctor?” She gaped at him. “I don’t need a doctor.”

“I want you to be looked over anyway,” he said. “You were mighty close to heatstroke back there.” He reached behind the seat and pulled a thermos forward. “Drink. You didn’t even have extra water with you,” he said in a scathing tone.

“I’m not used to the climate here,” she said with quiet dignity. “I’m aware that you think I’m a brainless fool, so you can stop rubbing my nose in it.”

“Princess,” he said, “I haven’t even started. What in hell are you thinking, running around here without a bodyguard?”

“I don’t need a bodyguard,” she said through clenched teeth. “I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself. And anyway the hotel assistant and the concierge knew my destination.”

“They wouldn’t have been much help if you’d spent hours out here in the sun.”

The only answer to that was silence, and she turned her head to gaze out the window, closing her eyes to shut him out.

She must have napped, because she woke, groggy and disoriented, as they were entering the outskirts of Phoenix. Hastily, she straightened in her seat, hoping he hadn’t noticed.

“Have a good nap?”

So much for wishes. She didn’t answer him.

“Why were you going to Catalina?”

She was growing mightily sick of his constant interrogations. “I wanted to visit the next of my many lovers to see if he could be the father of my child,” she snapped.

There was a moment of silence in the truck, a silence that nearly vibrated with electricity.

“I apologize,” he said in a low growl. “I know it’s my child.”

He did? Momentarily stunned, she turned her head to stare at him. He glanced over at her and his blue eyes were dark and sober. He looked nearly as shocked as she felt.

There didn’t seem to be much to say after that. She went back to staring out the window, though she was no longer seeing the landscape that was so foreign to her, no longer enjoying the contrast between what she’d grown up with and the stark, dry, blindingly bright Arizona desert.

He believed her. That one thought kept running through her mind, and she wondered what had convinced him. Yesterday he’d appeared to doubt her claim. The memory of her naïveté made her wince inwardly, and she took a deep breath to stave off the tears that wanted to rise again.

She’d promised herself last night that Rafe Thorton, under whatever name he chose to use, was never going to make her cry again. She’d been stupid and she’d learned a lesson from her stupidity. Several, in fact.

“How do you feel?” Rafe’s voice broke into her thoughts, gruff and deep and distinctly noncommittal.

As if you care, she thought.

“Fine, thank you.” She made her voice as chilly as possible while still being scrupulously polite.

“You’re not used to this climate,” he stated. “You’ll have to be doubly careful of the heat, especially in your condition.”

“Thank you for the advice. I’m sure it will prove invaluable.”

His mouth tightened and she was pleased to see that she was annoying him. He didn’t speak to her again, but picked up the phone that was installed in the truck and punched in a number, then tapped his fingers impatiently against the wheel while he waited.

She wondered who he was calling, then decided she didn’t really care. But she couldn’t prevent herself from glancing over at him.

“Hey, gorgeous!” Rafe suddenly became animated. Apparently someone had answered on the other end. Someone female, she suspected, from the way his face relaxed and his teeth flashed in a grin that sent an arrow through her heart. He’d smiled at her like that once, she remembered.

And you fell for it, dummy.

“In the desert,” he said and she reasoned that the woman had asked him where he was. “Listen,” he said, “I have a weird question. I need to know the name and number of a reputable obstetrician in Phoenix.”

There was silence on his end and one black eyebrow quirked up, then he laughed, a low and intimate chuckle that set Elizabeth's teeth on edge. "A friend," he said. "That's all you need to know."

He scabbled in the side pocket on his door and came up with a piece of paper and a pencil, tossing them at Elizabeth. "Write this down," he mouthed.

She glared at him, but as he repeated the name and number she did take them down, then slid the paper back across the seat to him.

"Okay, babe. You're one in a million. I'll call you later today." Removing the phone from his ear, he punched the button to cut off the connection and let it dangle from his fingers for a moment while he drove. Then he studied the information on the paper and dialed again.

While he was talking, Elizabeth sat in miserable silence. Could things get any worse? Obviously, Rafe had a girlfriend, or someone special in his life. The silly fantasies she'd woven about him—about them together—seemed pathetic and ridiculous now. How could she have been so stupid? She might have led a somewhat sheltered life, but she knew what the world was like. Men got women pregnant every day of the week because they acted on sexual attraction without thinking. The resulting condition had nothing to do with affection or love or respect or long-term plans.

Now she was another one of those sad statistics, and her child would be fatherless because of her carelessness.

The words appointment this morning, penetrated her absorption, and she was startled into looking over at Rafe again.

"No! I don't need a doctor."

He ignored her.

"I won't go." She tugged at his forearm to get his attention. A mistake. Beneath her fingers, his bare flesh was hot, and the thick hair that grew along his arm was silky in texture.

"Cancel it," she said fiercely.

"Thorton," he said to the person on the phone. "Elizabeth Thorton."

Her fingers clenched on his arm. Then she realized she was still holding on to him and she snatched back her hand. Again his eyebrow slid up into a bold dark arch as he threw her a questioning look. But before she could find her voice, he'd concluded the call and hung up again.

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

"Making you a doctor's appointment," he said easily. "I want to make sure you and the baby are none the worse for wear after spending the morning standing in the sun."

"I don't need a doctor. Go on back to your girlfriend and leave me alone." She tried to infuse the words with command, but even to her she sounded weak and cranky.

"My girlfriend..." He shot her a smug grin. "That was my secretary on the phone. She has twin grandsons, so she's not exactly competition."

"I'm not competing." So there. "Why didn't you use my real name?"

"Would you rather I'd given your real name?" he asked.

She drew in a sharp breath as his words penetrated, then slumped back against the seat. "No," she admitted in a muted tone. "My parents don't know yet."

"Mind if I ask how long you were going to wait?" He sounded more than slightly shocked.

"I wanted to tell you first," she said quietly. "When I get home, there won't be any reason to delay."

"You're going home soon?"

Did she imagine the slight sharpness in his tone? She shrugged. "As soon as my business here is concluded."

"Your business in Catalina? You never did tell me why you were going there."

"No," she said with more calm than she felt. "I didn't."

Three

She wasn't one bit happy with him, Rafe reflected as he unlocked the door of his Phoenix home shortly after lunch. He eyed the rigid line of Elizabeth's back and the regal tilt of her small, dimpled chin. They didn't call her Princess for nothing.

When she'd realized that despite her protests he was adamant about taking her to a doctor, she'd become quietly furious. Through the appointment, and the quick lunch they'd had afterward, she hadn't spoken one word to him beyond the absolute minimum civility required. If she appreciated his concern for protecting her anonymity, it sure didn't show.

Now he ushered her into his spacious foyer, wondering what she thought of the skylights that let in the bright, cheerful sunlight, the flagstone floors and the soft pastel colors of the desert that he'd wanted for his private spaces. He'd designed it himself, initially intending to use it as a display for potential clients. But he'd liked it so much, he hadn't been able to part with it in the end.

Elizabeth halted about three feet into the foyer and turned to face him. "May I use your telephone, please? I'll put any charges on my calling card."

He glared at her, oddly disappointed that she didn't even seem to notice his home, and irritated that she would bring up a silly thing like telephone charges. "The phone is right through here."

He showed her into his casually appointed den, then left her to go into the kitchen and get each of them a cold drink. The doctor had felt that Elizabeth was in good condition although he had advised her to drink plenty of fluids while she was in Arizona, a dictate Rafe fully intended to see she followed.

From his vantage point around the corner he could clearly hear Elizabeth's conversation. His upbringing and conscience protested the eavesdropping, but since she wouldn't talk to him, he told himself he'd have to find out all he could through any method available.

"Yes, this is Elizabeth. Is my mother there?"

A ten-pound load dropped from Rafe's shoulders. So she wasn't calling another man! She was calling her parents. Not that it mattered terribly to him, he assured himself.

"Mummy? Hello, it's Eliz—yes, yes, I'm fine. Yes, I was afraid you'd worry since I didn't call on time. Oh, please don't cry. Mummy? Maybe you'd better put Daddy on the line."

There was a pause, and Rafe remembered to clink a few ice cubes around in the glasses so she wouldn't think he was spying.

"Hello, Daddy. Of course I'm fine. I'm sorry I didn't call first thing this morning as I promised. I rented a car but it broke down on a highway while I was on a little day trip. But I'm fine. I've met someone you know. Well, I suppose he's an American now, but he was from Thortonburg once. He calls himself Rafe Thorton now, but you know him as the Prince of Thortonburg. What's that? Oh, no, I doubt I'll see much of him. It was really more of a courtesy call on his part—Rafe!" She glared at him as he removed the receiver from her hand and held it to his own ear.

"Hello, Your Majesty. This is Thorton." He knew he sounded clipped and discourteous, but talking to King Phillip was the last thing he'd planned on doing today. Or any day, for that matter.

"Hello, Raphael." The King's voice sounded warm and cordial. "It's been far too long. The States must agree with you." He didn't sound annoyed, particularly.

"Give me that!" Elizabeth reached for the phone he'd taken out of her hand, but he held it above her head until she hissed at him and backed off.

He couldn't resist grinning at her as he returned the receiver to his ear. She might pretend to be a lady, but there was fire beneath her calm surface. "Excuse me, Your Majesty. I rescued your daughter this morning from a spot of folly. Did she tell you she had no bodyguard or driver with her?"

"No one at all?" King Phillip sounded alarmed, but not particularly surprised. "I'm afraid Elizabeth doesn't fully understand how careful she must be. She and her youngest sister spent hours

trying to outwit their bodyguards as children. She'd become quite adept at sneaking about, and it's made her a bit overconfident."

"I agree, Your Majesty. I was a bit concerned myself."

"Thank you for your assistance." The monarch's tones were as friendly as Rafe remembered from his childhood. He never had been able to understand how a man who appeared as nice as the King could conspire with a man as class-conscious as his own father. "Elizabeth will soon be leaving. I believe the dedication ceremony occurred yesterday."

"It did." Rafe hesitated. He should be leaping at the chance to get the princess out of his hair, but the thought of her flying back to Wynborough, thousands of miles away, bothered him. He needed more time to think, to decide how to handle this sticky situation with her and the baby before he let her get away.

"Sir, I don't believe the princess should fly right now," he said, turning his broad back on Elizabeth's accusatory face. "She was through a bit of an ordeal this morning. Nothing serious, of course, but I'd be happy to offer her my hospitality until she feels herself again."

"Thank you, Raphael." The King sounded relieved. "That's quite kind of you to look after her for us."

"It will be my pleasure to look after her," he said, turning to pin Elizabeth with a meaningful glance.

Her fair skin colored. She avoided his gaze as she reached for the phone, which he let her have this time. "Daddy, I'm twenty-seven years old," she said into the receiver. "I hardly think I need looking after. In fact, I'd planned on leaving Phoenix today. I want to do a little sightseeing and then I'll be returning to Mitch and Alexandra's for a few days before I come home." She laughed a little, but to Rafe's ears it was a forced sound. "Yes, I know I'm the only one left. No, I promise I won't run off with a cowboy."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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