Silhouette
1820
June
SILHOUETTE
Romance
If The Slipper Fits
ELIZABETH HARBISON

Elizabeth Harbison

If the Slipper Fits

«HarperCollins»

Harbison E.

If the Slipper Fits / E. Harbison — «HarperCollins»,

LIVING IN A FAIRY TALE…Prince Conrad of Beloria arrived in New York to host a charity banquet n his family's honor, his playboy reputation preceding him. Every eligible society girl in town wanted to accompany the wealthy royal to the ball. But to his stepmother's dismay, the handsome prince only had eyes for one woman….The wrong woman.Hotel concierge Lily Tilden wasn't A-list, but Conrad was immediately smitten with her beauty, brains and poise. And while his position required a more appropriate candidate, Conrad would need all the cunning his noble legacy had taught him to now reconcile the duties of the crown with the desires of his heart…

© Harbison E.
© HarperCollins

Содержание

“Truth doesn’t matter much to gossip columnists.” 6
If the Slipper Fits 7
Books by Elizabeth Harbison 8
ELIZABETH HARBISON 9
Contents 10
Prologue 11
Chapter One 12
Chapter Two 19
Chapter Three 23
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 25

“Truth doesn’t matter much to gossip columnists.”

Prince Conrad continued. “Charity doesn’t matter at all. They want the promise of a fairy-tale romance at best or a sex scandal at worst.”

Lily nodded. “I imagine that happens a lot with you.”

“Indeed, and it seldom matters but this week it does. I need to have a woman—the right woman—to accompany me to the foundation ball. Someone to stand by and allow the press to conclude there is romance where there is none.”

Well, there is no shortage of women who are willing to do that,” Lily said.

“There is only one person I have in mind,” Conrad said. “You can begin and end with her.”

“Who?”

“You.”

Dear Reader,

After looking at winter’s bleak landscape and feeling her icy cold breezes, I found nothing to be more rewarding than savoring the warm ocean breezes from a poolside lounge chair as I read a soon-to-be favorite book or two! Of course, as I choose my books for this long-anticipated outing, this month’s Silhouette Romance offerings will be on the top of my pile.

Cara Colter begins the month with Chasing Dreams (#1818), part of her A FATHER’S WISH trilogy. In this poignant title, a beautiful academic moves outside her comfort zone and feels alive for the first time in the arms of a brawny man who would seem her polar opposite. When an unexpected night of passion results in a pregnancy, the hero and heroine learn that duty can bring its own sweet rewards, in Wishing and Hoping (#1819), the debut book in beloved series author Susan Meier’s THE CUPID CAMPAIGN miniseries. Elizabeth Harbison sets out to discover whether bustling New York City will prove the setting for a modern-day fairy tale when an ordinary woman comes face-to-face with one of the world’s most eligible royals, in If the Slipper Fits (#1820). Finally, Lissa Manley rounds out the month with The Parent Trap (#1821), in which two matchmaking girls set out to invent a family.

Be sure to return next month when Cara Colter concludes her heartwarming trilogy.

Happy reading!

Ann Leslie Tuttle

Associate Senior Editor

If the Slipper Fits
Elizabeth Harbison

MILLS & BOON www.millsandboon.co.uk

Books by Elizabeth Harbison

Silhouette Romance
A Groom for Maggie #1239
Wife Without a Past #1258
Two Brothers and a Bride #1286
True Love Ranch #1323
*Emma and the Earl #1410
*Plain Jane Marries the Boss #1416
*Annie and the Prince #1423
*His Secret Heir #1528
A Pregnant Proposal #1553
Princess Takes a Holiday #1643
The Secret Princess #1713
Taming of the Two #1790
If the Slipper Fits #1820
Silhouette Special Edition
Drive Me Wild #1476
Midnight Cravings #1539
How To Get Your Man #1685
Diary of a Domestic Goddess #1727
Falling for the Boss #1747
Silhouette Books
Lone Star Country Club
Mission Creek Mother-To-Be

ELIZABETH HARBISON

has been an avid reader for as long as she can remember. After devouring the Nancy Drew and Trixie Belden series in grade school, she moved on to the suspense of Mary Stewart, Dorothy Eden and Daphne du Maurier, just to name a few. From there it was a natural progression to writing, although early efforts have been securely hidden away in the back of a closet.

After authoring three cookbooks, Elizabeth turned her hand to writing romances and hasn't looked back. Her second book for Silhouette Romance, Wife Without a Past, was a 1998 finalist for the Romance Writers of America's prestigious RITA® Award in the "Best Traditional Romance" category.

Elizabeth lives in Maryland with her husband, John, daughter Mary Paige, and son Jack, as well as two dogs, Bailey and Zuzu. She loves to hear from readers and you can write to her at c/o P.O. Box 1636, Germantown, MD 20875.

To Connie Atkins, the best mother, supporter, proofreader and cheerleader there ever was. Thanks, Mommy.

Contents

Prologue
Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Epilogue

Prologue

Twenty-five years ago

"Easy now, climb down slowly. Slowly." Panic surged in Sister Gladys's chest as she tried to persuade the small blond toddler down from the top of the jungle gym.

The child, Lily, was always getting into things. She was fearless. Ever since she and her sisters had been left in the church adjacent to the Barrie Home for Children, it had been evident to everyone that this child was the leader of her little pack.

Sister Gladys knew that when she brought Lily and her sisters, as well as a handful of other children from the Barrie Home for Children, outside to play. But it was such a beautiful day and they'd all been stuck inside because of rain for weeks now.

It was an impulsive decision she regretted now. Virginia Porter, the director of the home, had a rule about no more than five children per adult outdoors. Maria was out shopping and would have been back soon enough to help Sister Gladys, if only she'd waited.

But they were so eager to play. Sister Gladys had thought there would be no harm in just taking them out for a few minutes…that is, until little Dudley fell and hurt his ankle. Gladys had spent no more than one minute with her back turned to the girls and in that time mischievous Lily had climbed to the very top of the metal contraption while her sisters looked on.

"One step at a time," Sister Gladys said, taking one step up onto the jungle gym. She was terrified of heights, even low ones, so she was about the worst person for this job. But she was the only adult here. She couldn't leave, even to ask for help. It was up to her.

Lily, meanwhile, giggled, showing no signs of concern at all. Her pale golden hair glowed almost like a halo, though this child was not always an angel.

"Come on, dear." Gladys held a shaking hand out toward the child. Fortunately, Lily began climbing down. "Good girl. That's a good girl."

"Lil," a little voice called. It was Lily's more cautious sister, Rose. She frowned up at Lily, the sun bouncing off her copper hair. "Come down, Lil."

"I coming." Lily climbed confidently down the metal rungs.

"Careful," her other sister, Laurel, said. Then she became distracted by a butterfly. "Flutterby!"

Good, Sister Gladys thought, as Lily took the last step down onto the safety of the ground. The fewer witnesses, the better. If Virginia found out about this, she'd—she'd—

"Let this be a lesson to you," a voice said sharply from behind her.

Sister Gladys turned to see an angry Virginia scowling at her. "This is exactly why we have the rule requiring adult supervision for all the children when we go outdoors."

"I know. It was just such a beautiful day."

"It could have turned into a terrible day." Virginia picked up the blond child and gave her an affectionate squeeze. "Especially with this one around. You know she's always up to something." She smiled at the girl. "You have too much energy, little one." She sighed. "And way too much determination." Lily ran off as soon as Virginia put her down.

"But she's a good girl," Sister Gladys objected. "She's such a sweet little thing."

Virginia raised an eyebrow. "True, but she is as headstrong as they come. Once she decides she wants something, she won't let anything stand in her way." She shook her head and looked at the child. "It's almost uncanny how she always gets her way."

"Like when she got the cookies off the top shelf in the kitchen?"

"Exactly." Virginia smiled. "We kept telling her no, but the minute she got her chance she went for the cookies and got them. To tell you the truth, I almost admire her for it. I just hope it doesn't get her into trouble some day."

Chapter One

"The Belvedere Suite is for Prince Conrad of Beloria. His stepmother and stepsister, Princess Drucille and Lady Ann, will be in the Wyndham Suite." Gerard Von Mises ran his fingertip down the ink-stained register of the Montclair Hotel, listing the guests that concierge Lily Tilden would be in charge of. It was old-fashioned, but that's the way Gerard, the owner of the hotel, preferred it. Computers, he said, were too impersonal.

Lily didn't tell him that she kept the records on her laptop in the office as well, just in case there was a conflict that they didn't notice on paper. Tradition was great, but a girl had to be practical as well.

"The prince and his entourage will be here tomorrow," Gerard said. "And I've arranged to have the full staff here to greet him, as his stepmother is quite…exacting about such things."

Lily nodded. She had already taken several calls on behalf of Princess Drucille. Requests were for pink towels and verbena-scented soap, and a particular brand of French spring water that Lily had paid hefty customs taxes to acquire.

"Mrs. Hillcrest leaves the Astor Suite tomorrow," Gerard continued, looking over the book. "Which leaves us with just Prince Conrad, Princess Drucille, Lady Ann, Samuel Eden and, of course, Mrs. Dorbrook for you on the executive level. The rest of their party will be on the lower floors." He sighed and turned to Lily. "It is good clientele, but business could still be better."

"Things have been tough all over the city as far as tourism goes," she assured him, though she knew the situation was serious. "It'll pick up. Especially with Prince Conrad coming. The Post gossip column has been positively filled with stuff about him."

Gerard gave a smile. "He's popular with young ladies, that much is true."

"Well, popular playboys tend to get a lot of photo ops. So you see? We'll probably get lots of business from that alone," Lily said, but she wasn't so sure. They had hosted popular celebrities before, but it usually resulted in more autograph-seekers and paparazzi hanging around outside rather than clients checking in. Still, the fact that Prince Conrad was coming would undoubtedly raise the profile of the hotel and she knew the Montclair needed that pretty desperately.

"All right." Gerard closed the book. "You've almost convinced me." He smiled. "You've worked a long day. Go home."

"You've got it." Lily had been on her feet for nearly ten hours, and it wasn't the first time this week. Since Gerard had cut the staff back, she'd had to sleep at the hotel more often than any of the guests, except for Bernice Dorbrook, who had been a resident since her oil-rich husband had died in 1983.

Now all Lily wanted to do was go home and soak in a nice hot bath, maybe with some Epsom salts thrown in. Lately there had been more long days than short ones at work, and although it was getting to her, she knew Gerard couldn't afford to hire another concierge. Between herself and Andy, they would have to handle whatever came up. "See you in the morning."

She went to the back office to collect her things. She would take a cab home tonight. She just didn't have it in her to wait for the bus and make transfers. Fortunately, Samuel Eden had given her a generous tip after she'd gotten him tickets to a sold-out Broadway show his wife had been wanting to see, so she could afford a few extra bucks to get home faster.

"Good night, Karen, Barbara," she called to the women working the front desk. "See you tomorrow!"

Karen laughed. "It's almost tomorrow now."

"Don't remind me." Lily smiled and made her way across the rich Oriental carpet that Gerard had centered proudly on the marble lobby floor. It represented his only foray into the twenty-first

century—he'd won it from an online auction after Lily had seen it there and persuaded him to bid. Even stubborn Gerard had been unable to resist the bargain.

She was about two yards from the gilded revolving door when it creaked to life and two dour-faced men walked in, wearing black suits and expressions that made her think of mobsters in old movies.

"The royal party is arriving in five minutes," one of the men said.

"Tonight?" Lily asked, glancing quizzically back at Gerard and Karen at the front desk.

Panic had frozen Gerard's features in something of a grimace. "But—but I was told Prince Conrad and his family were arriving tomorrow."

"We've had a change of plans," the other man said, his accent thick with guttural Germanic tones. He frowned. "Are you saying you cannot accommodate them?"

"Of course not!" Gerard burst. "It's just that—that we wanted to greet them properly and we are short-staffed at this hour of the night."

The men exchanged knowing glances, and Lily imagined they were both anticipating the reaction of Princess Drucille.

"I have some requests from Her Highness." The man produced a sheet of paper from his pocket. "This is what she would like. Dinner from Le Capitan as well as some champagne and a certain kind of flower." He looked at the paper and frowned. "Birds of Paradise."

For Gerard, it probably couldn't have gotten worse. Everyone knew Le Capitan was the new hot spot in Manhattan. It was so popular that even some A-list celebrities had been turned away at the door. The food was extraordinary, but the main reason people wanted to go there was to be seen. If Lily were to ask them to deliver a meal, they would laugh at her.

However, she knew a bartender there and she was pretty sure he could put together a take-out order for her to pick up.

She sighed inwardly. So much for a hot bath and a good night's sleep. "I'll take care of this," she said to Gerard, taking the paper from him. She looked at the paper and almost laughed. Three plain salads, no cucumbers, no dressing. Three beef filets, cooked medium, no sauce. Two triple-fudge cakes. She could have gotten this food almost anywhere for a fraction of the cost, but royalty wanted to eat—and pay—like royalty, she supposed.

She looked at an item scribbled on the bottom of the page: Dom Pérignon 1983, four bottles. It was already 11:00 p.m. It wasn't going to be easy to get the champagne tonight. And the flowers? If the hospital gift shop didn't have them, she'd be out of luck.

That's what her job was about, though. Achieving the impossible for guests. And she did have a touch for it, she had to admit. Sometimes she couldn't even believe her own luck. Seat reservations would be canceled just as she was calling to ask for them; caterers would have last-minute availability. Once a famous Broadway actress had even come in from the rain just as an ambassador's assistant was asking if there was any way to win an audience with her. That coincidence had seemed nearly supernatural, but she wasn't one to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Lily was about to leave when two women, clearly mother and daughter, entered with an exaggerated air of self-importance.

"I imagined that the great Montclair would have more staff than this waiting to greet royalty," the woman said indignantly. She was almost as wide as she was tall and Lily didn't know how she managed to affect such a regal aura, but she did.

The younger, and maybe even wider, woman with her raised her chin in haughty agreement.

"We weren't expecting you until tomorrow, Your Highness," Gerard said, hurrying over to her. He gave a small, awkward bow. "Please accept my apology. I am Gerard Von Mises, the proprietor."

Princess Drucille sniffed. "Prince Conrad will be most displeased with this reception."

Lily could only imagine what Prince Conrad was like, given his stepmother's attitude. She hated to see poor Gerard struggling with this woman's insults, knowing that business had been so rough recently that he was lucky to have the staff he had.

"When will he be here?" Lily asked, hoping, for Gerard's sake, that he might be far enough behind to get a better showing of staff members, even if it meant pulling people off of other floors.

Princess Drucille looked as if she'd heard a fly buzzing nearby but couldn't tell exactly where it was.

"He is here now," the younger woman, Lady Ann, responded. "So you are too late."

"Tell me, boy," Princess Drucille said to Gerard, "has Lady Penelope arrived yet?"

Gerard went pale.

Lily went blank. Lady Penelope? Who was that?

"Lady Penelope," Princess Drucille said again, and, answering Lily's unasked question, she added, "The daughter of the Duke of Acacia. My secretary made a reservation for her as well."

Gerard snapped his fingers behind him and Karen and Barbara quickly looked in the book, but Lily knew there was no Penelope on the list, Lady or otherwise.

"She hasn't arrived," Lily said quickly. "But the Pampano Suite is ready for her." There was no Pampano Suite, but once, when a Russian dignitary had checked in at the last minute, they had configured two adjoining rooms and called it the Pampano Suite, in honor of the waiter who had come up with the idea.

Gerard looked relieved. "Of course, the Pampano Suite. Yes. I remember."

"Excellent." Princess Drucille began walking again. "Then we will retire to our rooms now and wait for our dinner. I expect it won't be too long," she added pointedly.

"Not too long, no," Gerard said. Then asked Lily quietly, "Can you do it?"

She looked at him. He was clutching his hands so tightly in front of him that his knuckles were white. His brow was drawn up as if it were being pulled by a string. "Sure," she said to him, with a little more confidence and a lot more energy than she felt. "Don't you worry about a thing."

"I don't know how you always manage these things," Karen whispered. "But if you can score dinner from Le Capitan, I will be amazed."

"Me, too. Just keep your fingers crossed for me," Lily told her.

She was about to go into the back office and start making calls when the prince himself came through the door like a cool breeze on a stagnant summer night. Lily wasn't often impressed by fame or title, but something about the man's energy, and the way he carried himself, was absolutely commanding. For a moment she couldn't take her stunned eyes off him.

He was taller than she'd realized—his broadly muscled physique made him look more compact in photographs. Also, his eyes, even from a distance of several yards, were the most striking pale blue she had ever seen. She didn't know if that was an optical illusion because of his raven-dark hair and tanned skin, or if they really were as vivid as they seemed. He slowed as he came into the lobby and his eyes locked onto hers. For one wild moment she felt as if someone had whispered in her ear, sending shivers down her spine.

All that and a royal title, too.

No wonder women fawned over him.

Not that Lily had any intention of doing so.

"Good evening," he said, his voice clipped, and just barely accented.

"Good evening, Your Highness," she said, feeling a little silly using the unfamiliar formality.

"Ah, you know who I am."

"Of course."

His gaze was the definition of penetrating. "I'm a day early, I realize. Are my quarters ready?"

She nodded. His manners were slightly better than his stepmother's—at least he acknowledged that they might not be prepared for him. "Yes. And I'm getting ready to call Le Capitan now."

His driver came through the door carrying several heavy-looking dark suitcases and an expression of fatigue, his breath bursting out in short shots.

"Le Capitan?" the prince repeated quizzically.

"For dinner, darling," Princess Drucille said, almost fawning but for the hard edge to her voice. "You remember."

He looked at her coolly. "I have an appointment tonight."

Her smile was false and self-conscious. "Very well."

Lily gave her very best customer-service smile. "Is there anything else we can do to make your stay more comfortable, Your Highness?"

Prince Conrad leveled his blue gaze back on her and she felt a tremor course through her. "Give me privacy," he said.

She felt taken aback by his tone and the implication that she intended to sit around and chat with him. "Of course."

He gave a short nod. "And I expect that when I have guests, you will be…discreet."

He was referring to women, obviously. Guests. Plural.

Lily had to ignore a lot with this job. This was just more of the same. Yet something about Prince Conrad's demeanor made it a little less palatable than usual. "Of course," she said again, reminding herself that any media attention he brought to the hotel would only do Gerard's business good. And she was all for anything that helped Gerard.

"Good." He turned his gaze to Stephan, who was standing at the front desk with Karen, and asked him something in his native tongue.

Stephan nodded and held up the key Karen had just handed him.

Prince Conrad gave a single nod, and both Stephan and the other man jumped to attention, picking up the suitcases and carrying them toward the elevator.

Princess Drucille watched him with a sneer, then said to Lily, "I'll be waiting for my dinner in my suite. I assume it has a dining area."

"Yes, it does, of course," Lily said, still watching Prince Conrad walk away, his trim shape and well-cut suit slicing through the atmosphere like an arrow, as Princess Drucille followed

"Lily…Le Capitan," Gerard reminded her in urgent tones, drawing her attention back. "Her Highness does not look like a woman who likes to be disappointed."

"No, she certainly doesn't. I'm tempted to go to the nearest chain restaurant and bring her a quickie salad and steak."

Karen chuckled until Gerard gave her a silencing look.

"Oh, don't worry, Gerard, I'm not going to do it. I just said I'd like to." Lily reached into a drawer and took out the hotel credit card. It was worn almost smooth from use. "I'll be back soon."

She stepped outside. The familiar scent of exhaust, tomato sauce and roasted chestnuts hung in the crisp November air. There was no breeze tonight, unusual in the city. It felt downright balmy. Once she started walking she found she didn't particularly want to stop. She could have just walked straight on home. It was the nature of this job, she realized, to have to occasionally work longer hours and do more legwork than she wanted to do.

Her first stop was the hospital gift shop, which had a large and costly floral arrangement that included Birds of Paradise.

Score.

Luckily, she was able to get a cab right out front and the driver waited for her while she got both the dinner and the bottles of Dom Pérignon from her friend behind the bar at Le Capitan in exchange for money and the promise of theater tickets he'd been unsuccessful in getting himself.

The deal in place, Lily returned to the hotel. To her surprise, Karen was busy at the front desk with another last-minute guest checking in—the infamous Baroness Kiki Von Elsbon.

The baroness had been to the hotel more than once, and she often appeared when there was a rumor of some eligible bachelor checked in. Last time it had been media mogul Breck Monohan. Before that, A-list movie star Hans Poirrou. Now it was Prince Conrad. It seemed no high-profile bachelor was safe from the spoiled ex-wife of the late Baron Hurst Von Elsbon.

On top of being a singularly hungry manhunter, the baroness was also one of the more unpleasant guests Lily had had to deal with in her tenure as concierge. So when she saw Kiki at the desk, she hurried down the hall to the elevator bank. She pushed the button and waited impatiently for the elevator to arrive. She took it to the second-floor kitchen to find someone to deliver the princesses' food.

"Where's Lyle?" she asked the chef. "I need him to deliver room service."

Chef Henri shrugged broadly. "He has gone home with flu. Elissa and Sean as well. And Miguel is still in Puerto Vallarta on vacation." He took his coat off the rack. "For that I have been here an extra hour myself. I'm going home."

Henri was temperamental and the recent staff shortages had made him even more so. Lily had learned a long time ago not to argue with him. In truth, she preferred it when the other chef, Miguel, was on duty.

She sighed. "Okay. Do you know where I can find a cart setup so I can take it myself?"

He gestured vaguely toward the pantry. "Elissa made some up before she left."

"Thanks," Lily said, carrying the bags of increasingly chilly food over to the cart. She stopped and looked back at Henri. "Look, I know it isn't the best method, but I have three steaks here that are getting cold. Can I stick them in the microwave to heat them up?"

Henri looked horrified. "You jest, surely!"

She shook her head. "Sorry, I'm not kidding. So, can I do it?"

He gave a dramatic sigh, then nodded. "The meat only. No more than thirty seconds." He rolled his eyes. "But I am not taking responsibility for the end result."

Lily smiled. "Merci, Henri. I appreciate it."

"De rien." He waved his hand and headed for the exit before she could ask any more potentially offensive questions. "Good luck."

She needed it. When she got up to Princess Drucille's room, she was ushered in by a small, mouse-faced girl with worried eyes.

Princess Drucille was leaning back on the chaise lounge, talking to her daughter and another woman. "I don't care what he wants, he needs a wife, or else the entire monarchy will dissolve. And that would not suit me at all."

Lady Ann nodded urgently.

"So, wait," the other woman said, and Lily recognized her accent as south Jersey. "Is he or is he not engaged to this Lady Penelope?"

"Not yet," the princess said crisply. "So if you know of any eligible debutantes, I would be open to meeting them. Your paper might be very interested in having you cover this in your column."

"Search for a new princess." The woman nodded with a gleam in her eye. "I like it."

"And, at the end, he'll almost certainly propose to Lady Penelope, and I promise you will be the first to know. It will be a Caroline Horton exclusive."

Ah, Caroline Horton. The Page Seven gossip columnist for the New York Tattler.

Caroline stood and put her hand out. "You have yourself a deal, princess."

It was obvious that Princess Drucille preferred more deference, but she accepted the woman's hand anyway. "Remember to keep our conversation confidential."

The girl who had let Lily in flashed her a nervous look, and Lily gave a silent nod and took a step back. When Caroline Horton started for the door, Lily moved back into the room as if she'd just arrived.

"Your dinner is here, Your Highness, along with the champagne and—" she gestured at the flower arrangement "—your flowers."

Princess Drucille moved to the cart, and said crisply, "One of the salads and steaks is for Prince Conrad."

Lily was confused. "It was my impression that he didn't want to be interrupted."

"Nonsense, he's expecting you. Take it to him now before it's cold." The princess made a shooing motion with her hand. "Run along."

Lily picked up the platter with the extra plate and headed for the door. It had been her distinct impression that Prince Conrad didn't want to be disturbed, but if the princess said he was expecting her, Lily was not in any position to argue.

But when she got to his room, she found the prince had company in the form of Brittany Oliver, a Hollywood It Girl from a couple of years back. It was obvious he was not expecting her and that, moreover, she had committed the one sin she'd so confidently told him she wouldn't: she'd invaded his privacy.

"I didn't order this," Conrad said, his voice tired, as if he'd expected just this kind of infraction from Lily.

Lily might have felt stung except that he was absolutely correct, he hadn't ordered it, his stepmother had. "I apologize for the interruption," she said sincerely, "but your stepmother said you were waiting for this." Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Brittany Oliver repositioning herself on the sofa so that she was more clearly in view. "She said I was to bring it to you right away."

"My late father's wife says a great many things that are best ignored." His eyes narrowed, and his jaw tightened. "This is an excellent example of one."

"I'm sorry," Lily said. "But it's my job to not ignore the wishes of our patrons, so when she said—"

"I told you I wished to have privacy."

"Yes, I realize that, but when your stepmother—"

"My late father's wife."

"—told me you wished to have dinner…. But since that is clearly incorrect, I'll take it away."

For just a moment, Lily thought she saw a spark come into his eye. "If I refuse this now, you'll have to return it to Drucille and Ann, is that right?"

Lily kept her face impassive, even though she would rather have eaten wasps than return to Princess Drucille's room tonight. "Yes."

He kept his eyes on her for another moment before taking the platter from her. His mouth curved into the slightest smile. "That will be all," he said, setting it down on the foyer table. "Thank you."

Lily nodded and was turning to leave when the actress on the sofa spoke.

"Um, excuse me? Waitress?"

Lily turned to face the woman. "What can I do for you?"

"I think there are photographers outside. Wanting to take my picture…?" She gestured airily toward the window.

Lily stood in place. "Really?"

The girl gave an exasperated sigh. "Can you look?" She gave a completely false laugh and looked at Prince Conrad. "You know how they are. Always looking for a story about me."

Lily went to the window and looked out. There was no one there. The occasional car drifting past served as the city equivalent to crickets chirping. "I don't see anyone," she said.

Brittany scrambled to her feet. "You don't?" She rushed in an unbecoming fashion to the window and looked out, her face falling when she saw no one. "But I told them…" She looked at Conrad. "I told my people to keep them away and I guess they did. That's good." She cleared her throat delicately and said, "Would you excuse me for a moment while I go…powder my nose?" She

headed toward the bathroom, but Lily noticed she stopped for a moment to take her cell phone out of her purse.

Lily watched her go, then turned to Conrad. “Will that be all?”

He was looking in the direction of the window, and had obviously not seen Brittany take her phone. “Have there been photographers out there tonight?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“To your knowledge has anyone on the staff made it known that I arrived early?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Hmm.” Again he looked in the direction of the closed bathroom door, then back at Lily. “Please hold all of my calls this evening.”

“Certainly. Is there anything else?”

“No.”

“All right. If you need anything, touch Zero on the telephone keypad and ask for the concierge.”

“Would that be you?”

“I’m one of them.”

“Then shouldn’t I be able to ask for you by name?”

“Well…sure…but I might not be here. If I’m not, anyone else will be able to help you.”

“Conrad!” Brittany called and she stepped gingerly from the restroom.

He glanced at her, then back at Lily and said, “Thank you.”

Lily left thinking Prince Conrad looked like a man who would have better taste than to fall for a pretty but vacant starlet. On the other hand, maybe there weren’t a lot of men who would take substance over appearance.

And if Prince Conrad’s reputation was even half true, he was not a man who was out for substance.

She looked at her watch. It was a few minutes past midnight. She had to be back here in six hours. There was, once again, no point in going home. Especially with several staffers out with the flu.

It was to be another night in the back office. She sighed. Fortunately, the office was as comfortable, if not more so, than the rooms at the Montclair. Gerard wanted only the best, and it didn’t matter if it was the best bed for a guest room, the best sofa for the office, or the best garbage can for the alley. He wanted the best, and that was what he got.

Lily stopped at a supply cabinet and took out a light blanket, then went to the office and lay heavily on the sofa. It felt good to get off her feet. Really good.

She didn’t know how long she’d laid there—it felt like seconds but it might have been an hour or two—when the telephone rang. She roused herself from the sofa and went to the desk. It was an in-house call, relayed by the switchboard to the front desk. She picked it up and tried to sound as if she were awake.

“It seems there has been a security breach,” said a voice she recognized as Prince Conrad’s.

Lily was on alert immediately. A security breach? Had someone broken into his room? Threatened him? Her mind raced from one horrible possibility to another. “What is it?” she asked, as calmly as she could. “Should I call the police?”

“No. It’s reporters. They’re outside.”

“Huh?” She quickly put on her professional voice. “I’ll have security get rid of them.”

“I don’t care so much about that. What I really need is for you to find a way to get my guest out of your hotel undetected. As quickly as possible.”

Lily tried to put the pieces together but was still too fuzzy-headed to manage. “I’m sorry, I don’t know what you mean.”

“My guest, Ms. Oliver,” he said pointedly. “She needs to leave. And you need to make it happen without anyone seeing her go. Contrary to your previous assertion, there are photographers outside and I don’t want pictures of her leaving my hotel in the papers tomorrow.”

Chapter Two

"I'll be right there." Lily hung up the phone and muttered an oath. She was not in the mood for this, no matter how rich, famous, or powerful the guest was. She was not in the mood for it.

Lack of sleep was really getting to her.

She stalked to the front of the building, where a group of about five photographers with large cameras stood, looking bored or tired, smoking cigarettes and eating doughnuts.

She braced herself, then went outside. "What are you doing here?"

"We got a call that Brittany Oliver's here with Prince Conrad of La-dee-dah Land," one of them said, stubbing out his cigarette on the entry gate. "So, what's the story, they an item?"

"I have no idea who you're even talking about," Lily said. "But I do know that you're making our guests feel rather uncomfortable."

"Look, lady," another said to her, "we're just trying to do our jobs, just like you. Brittany Oliver's old news, so maybe this was all set up by her publicist, but we know Prince Conrad is in town for some UN event, and he's hot right now. So, forget Brittany Oliver. Is Prince Conrad here or isn't he?"

"I've never even heard of him," Lily responded, in a voice so sincere she almost fooled herself.

The photographer narrowed his eyes and looked at her for a moment before saying, "You've never heard of the Playboy Prince of Beloria?"

She shrugged. "Sorry."

"His father died a few weeks ago, so he's here to host some charity ball, then accept some award for his father at the UN. You've heard of the United Nations, haven't you?"

She gave a tight smile. "Vaguely."

"So the guy's pretty important in those circles. And word is, he's staying here because this is where his father used to stay, back in the days when this was a happening hotel."

"Then the word is wrong." She refused to take the bait about the hotel not being what it used to be. "But you're welcome to back off a little bit and take all the pictures you want of the place." She tried to smile, but it came off as more of a smirk. "It's really beautiful, isn't it?"

He watched her for a moment, then said to his companions, "She looks like she's on the up-and-up."

"I don't know," another one said. "If he is there, it's her job to tell us he's not."

Lily sighed. "Listen—like I said, you can do what you like off the property. If you publish pictures with the hotel's name, so much the better. But you cannot stand here and do it because you are making my guests uncomfortable." She smiled sweetly. "Please don't make me call the police."

"Forget it," said the lone woman in the pack. "I'm not waiting here all night to take pictures of Brittany Oliver, no matter who she's with or how many silly girls are ga-ga over him."

Several of the others began to put their equipment away.

"Thank you," Lily said to them.

"I'm not budging," one of them said. "A shot of His Royal holier-than-thou-ness is worth a hell of a lot more than a shot of the inside of my apartment."

This caused a small rumble of agreement among them. Lily knew that arguing further at this point would make her look suspicious, so she shook her head and said, "Just make sure you stay back from the property, then, or I will call the police on you for loitering."

She went back into the building trying to formulate a Plan B. By the time she got back to Prince Conrad's room, she had decided that the best place to hide a person—especially in a case like this—was right out in the open.

"How about if you put on a hat and coat, and we simply have one of the employees pick you up in his private car and drive you back to your hotel?" she suggested to Brittany.

"Aren't the photographers looking for me?" Brittany asked, in a way that made Lily think that a "no" would have been far more upsetting to the actress than a "yes."

"Yes," Lily conceded. "Which is why, when you walk right out, they won't even look at you. They'll be looking for you to be smuggled out with the laundry or some other such nonsense."

Conrad smiled for the first time since Lily had been in the room. "You're right. It's a good idea."

Lily was disarmed by his smile, and told herself it was because it was unexpected, not because he was so incredibly good-looking. "I think it will work."

Brittany glanced back and forth between the two of them. "What if one of them recognizes me?"

"Then they'll take your picture and speculate about your involvement with a man who may or may not be here," Lily said simply.

This seemed to satisfy Brittany.

At the same time, it seemed to irritate Prince Conrad—he lowered his brow and his jaw tightened a bit, but he said nothing.

"Should I call Mike to bring the car around?" Lily asked, wishing to get this exercise over with.

"Let's do it!" Brittany said, clapping her hands together. "This is going to be fun."

Fun, Lily thought wearily. This "fun" was interrupting her valuable sleep time. "Okay, I'll meet you in the lobby," she said to Brittany. "It would probably be best if you stayed in the suite, Your Highness, so you're not seen."

"I'm not used to hiding."

No, he was probably just used to hiding his dates.

"You should stay here, Conrad," Brittany said. "If you come out and tell them we're just friends or something, it will only fuel the fire." It may have been a trick of the light, but Brittany looked hopeful.

He looked at her curiously for a moment, then shrugged. "Whatever you wish. Thank you for coming tonight. I enjoyed our meeting and I appreciate your help."

Lily felt a little ill at this characterization of what was obviously a romantic tête-à-tête. More than that, she did not want to be here in the middle of things during their goodbye, but she was stuck.

"Me, too." Brittany threw her arms around him and kissed his cheek, while pressing herself against him in a way that made Lily feel as if she should leave them alone.

Conrad pulled away first. "Please return and let me know when Ms. Oliver is safely on her way," he said to Lily.

She sighed inwardly. Her time could be much better spent sleeping, but the guest was always the priority. "Very well," she said to him. "I'm sure it will go without a hitch."

She led Brittany down the hall and to the elevator. "We have several coats that were left behind a long time ago and never claimed," she said. "You could use one of them to cover up."

"I am not going to wear some stranger's smelly old coat," Brittany said haughtily. Suddenly her sweet and cooperative act was over. "No way. I've got my own coat."

"Yes, you do," Lily said, looking at the long, plush mink coat—probably real—that the actress was sporting. "I was just thinking that perhaps you would be less conspicuous in something else."

The elevator arrived and Lily pulled back the metal gates and ushered the actress on board.

"At this point, if I'm recognized, I just can't help it," Brittany said, and the look in her eyes left no doubt that she was counting on being recognized and photographed. "Prince Conrad and I have much more…business…to do together, so we'll just have to get used to the attention, I guess."

Lily was fairly certain Brittany would make sure of that. "Your driver is right outside the front door," she said, swallowing one or two sharp comments about Brittany's intentions. Then, to ensure that the actress wouldn't stall any longer, she added, "But I'm afraid I already see some photographers."

"Really?" Brittany turned a delighted face to the night and Lily took the opportunity to bid her goodnight and return to the hotel.

She was down to a possible five hours of sleep, and that was if she fell asleep right now. Unfortunately, she had to go back to Prince Conrad's suite first and assure him that his guest had gotten into the car safely.

She plodded back up to his suite, reminding herself with every step that this was helpful to Gerard and the hotel in general. The photographer had been right about one thing: once this had been a grand place, and very popular with royalty and dignitaries, yet since 2001 business had slowed down and, so far, it hadn't really picked back up.

They had done promotions, and Romantic Weekend packages, and so on, but what they needed was something to make the hotel interesting again. Brittany Oliver wasn't going to do that, of course, but maybe the dashing Prince Conrad could.

Lily would do everything she could to protect his privacy—she would always do her job the best she could—but that didn't stop her from sort of hoping the photographers had gotten an interesting picture or two that could show up in celebrity magazines with a caption about the location.

She figured Gerard probably hoped the same thing, but neither one of them would ever say it out loud.

When she got to Conrad's suite, and he opened the door at her knock, he looked nearly as tired as she felt.

"Has she gone?" he asked, without preamble.

"Yes, she left several minutes ago. I don't think there were any photographers there."

"Good." He met her eyes, sending shivers down her spine with his cool blue gaze. "I appreciate your discretion."

"I'm only doing my job."

"What, exactly, is your job anyway?"

She was thrown by his question. "I'm the concierge."

"Yes, you said." He nodded. "But I'm not used to the workings of such a small hotel. Does it mean, as at larger hotels, that you are charged with doing whatever is in your power to make sure your guests are comfortable and happy?"

"Within reason," she said cautiously, lifting an eyebrow in question. Something told her he was headed toward something she wasn't going to be entirely comfortable with.

"I believe, miss—" He raised a questioning brow.

"Tilden. Lily."

He looked genuinely puzzled. "Tildenlily?"

"No." She smiled. His English was flawless, but hers, she was often told, was too fast. "Lily Tilden."

"Miss Tilden," he said, as if rolling fine wine over his tongue. His voice, the low timbre, the faint accent, was magnetic. It was the voice of a hypnotist. "I'm afraid you may be in for some trouble, Miss Tilden."

She swallowed hard. She was embarrassed to admit, even to herself, that this man made her feel nervous. Lily never got nervous. "Oh? How so?"

"My father's wife can be—how do I say it?—demanding. You will get little rest while she's here, I'm afraid. I'd like to offer you my apologies up front."

"Well," Lily wasn't sure how to respond, "thanks for the warning. I guess. But I can handle it."

"Indeed." He gave a shrug, as if to say I warned you. "Good luck, Ms. Tilden."

She smiled. "Sounds as if you think I'll need it."

He smiled back, a dazzling movie-star smile. "Where my father's wife is concerned, we all need some luck."

Lily started to go, then stopped and turned back. "I don't mean to be impertinent—"

He raised an eyebrow and looked so amused that she nearly lost her train of thought. “Please do.”

She went on, a little disconcerted, “Well, Princess Drucille spoke with great authority when she said you were expecting me to bring your dinner to you, but apparently she was…incorrect.”

He nodded, and continued to look amused as Lily ran the risk of hanging herself.

“My question is this—if, in the future, she should give any of the staff instructions where you’re concerned, should we assume…” She paused, unable to come up with a nice way of saying “She’s not to be taken seriously” or “She’s full of it.”

“If I require something, I’ll ask for it directly,” Conrad supplied, finally letting Lily off the hook. “Otherwise…” He shook his head. “Don’t take another’s word for it.”

Her shoulders sagged in relief at his comprehension. “Good. I’ll let the staff know.”

He nodded solemnly. “I’d appreciate it. If someone arrives at my door every time Drucille wants to use my name, I’ll never get any peace.”

Chapter Three

To the surprise of no one, especially Lily, all of the late edition papers carried a mention of Brittany Oliver and Prince Conrad the next afternoon. There were photos as well, but none clear enough to identify the hotel. Lily had decided not to point it out to Gerard, but it didn't matter, he saw it himself.

"It would have been nice," he said, closing the paper and setting it aside. He sighed and raked a hand through his thick gray hair. "I don't know how much longer we're going to be in business if things don't get better soon."

Lily's heart ached to see this man she cared for feeling so down. Gerard Von Mises had worked hard all his life. In all the years Lily had known him, he had never missed a day at work. Yet now it was beginning to feel as if it was all for nothing, and she hated to see how despondent he looked.

"Things will pick up," she said, as she'd said hundreds of times before. But she, like Gerard, was losing faith.

It wasn't for herself that she was concerned. She could get a job almost anywhere, and had often toyed with the idea of living overseas, in Europe or Japan.

But this was Gerard's life, and he'd put his whole heart into it. Every detail of the hotel had his fingerprint on it, and Lily couldn't bear the idea of that disappearing.

"I'm sure they will," Gerard said, effectively closing the book on the conversation. "It will be all right. It always has in the past."

Lily glanced at the register, and at the number of empty rooms, and simply said, "Yes."

The phone at the concierge desk rang and Lily said, "Excuse me. Duty calls."

"That's what I like to hear," Gerard said.

She smiled and picked up the receiver. It was Stephan, Prince Conrad's bodyguard, calling to inquire about security on the perimeters of the property. Lily detailed property boundaries for him, and explained the law as far as trespassing on private property versus standing on public property. With a little prodding, Lily learned that it was not Prince Conrad who was concerned so much as Stephan himself, as he was head of the prince's security.

The prince, it turned out, did not like to have any security at all, but it was in deference to his late father's wishes that he brought the token team of two along with him. But Stephan had worked for Prince Frederick as well, and agreed with the late prince that there should be much stronger security around a royal.

After trying to reassure him that the hotel itself was quite secure, Lily ended up giving him the name of a local security company, where he could hire additional guards if he saw fit. Personally, she didn't like the idea of a whole lot of security personnel stationed about the hotel, but it was not her place to tell a guest that their security wasn't important enough to mar the environment.

When she'd finished with that call, there were three more in rapid succession; Lady Ann, who had a list of snack foods she wanted picked up from the local market; Kiki Von Elsborn, who needed the name of the general manager of Melborn's department store because a salesman there had "unfairly" accused her of shoplifting when she "accidentally" wore two pashmina shawls out of the store; and Portia Miletto, a wealthy young Italian who had left her PDA—and all of her private information—in a cab and needed Lily to track it down.

That took most of the afternoon.

When Lily finally got back from the tailor shop of the man who had found the PDA, she was fifty reward dollars lighter and several hours more exhausted.

Yet when the call came from Prince Conrad's suite that he wanted to have a moment with her, her adrenaline surged and reanimated her.

She went upstairs and knocked on his door.

He opened it after a few moments and said, “Lily. Thank you for coming.”

“It’s not a problem. What can I do for you?”

He looked at her for a moment, his handsome face still. Then he frowned slightly and said, “Could you come in for a moment and join me for a drink?”

Lily was taken aback. She was used to delicately avoiding the advances of male guests at the hotel…but then again, she was used to those male guests being a lot older and a lot less attractive than Prince Conrad.

He must have sensed her hesitation because he added, “I require your help with something.”

“All right,” she said. “Anything I can do to help.”

“Please. Come in.” He led her into the sitting room, which of course she knew as well as the back of her hand. “Have a seat.”

She sat on the sofa.

He poured a glass of champagne and held it up to offer it to her, but she shook her head. “On duty,” she explained.

“Ah.” He smiled and set the glass down, instead taking out two of the pricey mineral waters Princess Drucille had ordered. He opened one for Lily and handed it to her. “Most women don’t turn down champagne.”

“I’m sure there are a lot of things women don’t turn down when you offer it to them.”

He smiled and studied her for a moment, before he said, “You don’t have any undue respect for my position, do you Ms. Tilden?”

“I respect all of our guests equally.”

He laughed out loud. “Good answer. Your candor is quite refreshing.”

Despite herself, she flushed under his praise. “So what was it you needed my help with?”

He sobered immediately. “It’s a little…awkward,” he began. “We spoke of discretion last night and this is a matter that needs a great deal of it.”

Lily shifted her weight in her seat, suddenly fearing the worst. Had he killed someone? Did he need help disposing of the body? Just how far did her job loyalty extend? “What is it?”

“Brittany Oliver.”

There it was. He hadn’t killed someone. She almost wished he had—it would have been easier than dealing with Brittany Oliver. “Yes?”

“Well, she’s…I believe she may be—” he paused “—determined when it comes to seeing me again. In other words, I think she may come back to the hotel.”

Lily wasn’t quite sure what to say. On the one hand, she was quite sure he was right and, moreover, she was quite sure Brittany Oliver could become a huge pain in her backside over the next week. But on the other hand, Lily was a little put off by the fact that Prince Conrad, who had spent quite a bit of time with Brittany in his private suite doing heaven-knew-what last night, was now evidently trying to scrape her off completely.

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.