HARLEQUIN®

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February

AMERICAN Romance®

THE PRINCE'S TEXAS BRIDE

Victoria Chancellor

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The Prince's Texas Bride

Аннотация

Is Kerry Lynn Jacks's unborn child heir to the Belegovian throne? That's the rumor around the Ranger Springs water cooler. When Prince Alexi of Belegovia visited the small town a scant few months ago he was captivated by the spirited beauty. Seems their brief affair has resulted in a little secret of gigantic proportions.The fate of a country's monarchy now rests on Kerry's answer to Alexi's question: "Will you marry me?" But is the marriage one of convenience or something more? Perhaps from the seeds of a royal scandal, this couple will harvest the bounty of unending love….

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“Why didn’t you tell me?”

The man standing before Kerry looked intense and extremely sexy as he glared at her.

“Hello, Alexi,” she said hoarsely, past a lump that she couldn’t attribute to morning sickness.

“It’s been three months! Dammit, Kerry, you should have phoned me immediately.”

“And what could you have done? I’m having this baby whether you like it or not.”

“You think I don’t want you to have my baby? Don’t be absurd. I would never—”

“I don’t know that. We didn’t have much time to discuss the subject.”

“We managed to talk about almost everything else.”

“Including your upcoming nuptials to the contessa.”

Alexi’s expression grew fierce. “First of all, I’m not marrying Contessa Di Giovanni.”

“But—”

“Second, you and I are getting married. Our child will be the legitimate heir to the throne of Belegovia.”

Dear Reader,

It’s that time of the year again. Pink candy hearts and red roses abound as we celebrate that most amorous of holidays, St. Valentine’s Day. Revel in this month’s offerings as we continue

to celebrate Mills & Boon American Romance's yearlong 20th Anniversary.

Last month we launched our six-book MILLIONAIRE, MONTANA continuity series with the first delightful story about a small Montana town whose residents win a forty-million-dollar lottery jackpot. Now we bring you the second title in the series, Big-Bucks Bachelor, by Leah Vale, in which a handsome veterinarian gets more than he bargained for when he asks his plain-Jane partner to become his fake fiancée.

Also in February, Bonnie Gardner brings you The Sergeant's Secret Son. In this emotional story, passions flare all over again between former lovers as they work to rebuild their tornado-ravaged hometown, but the heroine is hiding a small secret —their child! Next, Victoria Chancellor delivers a great read with The Prince's Texas Bride, the second book in her duo A ROYAL TWIST, where a bachelor prince's night of passion with a beautiful waitress results in a royal heir on the way and a marriage proposal. And a trip to Las Vegas leads to a pretend engagement in Leandra Logan's Wedding Roulette.

Enjoy this month's offerings, and be sure to return each and every month to Mills & Boon American Romance!

Melissa Jeglinski
Associate Senior Editor
Mills & Boon American Romance

The Prince's Texas Bride
Victoria Chancellor

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To our Thursday Lunch Group, for your continued encouragement. Thank you Judy Christenberry, Jane Graves (w/a Jane Sullivan), Barbara Harrison (w/a Leann Harris), Tammy Hilz, Karen Leabo (w/a Kara Lennox) and Rebecca Russell.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After twenty-eight years in Texas, **VICTORIA CHANCELLOR** has almost qualified for “naturalized Texan” status. She lives in a suburb of Dallas with her husband of thirty-one years, next door to her daughter, who is an English teacher. When not writing, she tends her “zoo” of four cats, a ferret, five tortoises, a wide assortment of wild birds, three visiting chickens and several families of raccoons and opossums. For more information on past and future releases, please visit her Web site at www.victoriachancellor.com.

Books by Victoria Chancellor

MILLS & BOON AMERICAN ROMANCE
844—THE BACHELOR PROJECT
884—THE BEST BLIND DATE IN TEXAS
955—THE PRINCE'S COWBOY DOUBLE *
959—THE PRINCE'S TEXAS BRIDE *

Grayson Phillips' House
Hills
Creek
Travis Whitaker's Ranch
Springs
Hank McCauley's Horse Ranch
Wheatley Medical Clinic
Deer Lick Road
Kerry's Apartment Building
Rural Route
Police Station
Four Square Cafe
Bretford House
Ranger Springs Community Church
Bank
Branson Hardware
Summers Real Estate
Elementary School
Town Square
Parker Residence
Robin's Nest B & B
Drugstore
Rural Route
Middle School
Beauty Shop
Springs Gazette
High School
Grayson Industries
Kash 'n Karry
State Highway
Ranger Springs, TEXAS

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Prologue

Kerry Lynn Jacks pulled her blue chenille robe tight around her, fought back another urge to run into the bathroom and headed instead for the insistent pounding on her door. This had better be important. Mornings were not her best time of day. Hadn't been ever since that little test strip had turned blue—and she'd started turning green.

She wove her way around her coffee table and chair. The tile in the entryway to her apartment was cool on her bare feet even though August in Texas was anything but temperate. "This had better not be someone selling magazine subscriptions," she murmured to herself as she stood on tiptoe and peered through the peephole.

Her heart began to pound and she sucked in a much-needed breath. Either her friend Hank McCauley had started wearing designer clothing or there was a prince on her doorstep. Either way, she had to let him in.

She turned the deadbolt and doorknob, then took a shaky step back as the door swung open.

The man standing before her looked intense and extremely sexy as he glared at her from beneath furrowed brows.

Definitely the prince.

"Hello, Alexi," she said hoarsely past the lump in her throat that she couldn't attribute to morning sickness.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

She couldn’t pretend not to know what he was talking about. “I was going to.” She shrugged, then crossed her arms over her chest. “I just hadn’t decided how or when. You’re not exactly the easiest person in the world to get in touch with.”

“It’s been three months!”

“Well, yes, but it’s only been about a month and a half since I was sure.”

He ran a hand through his hair, looking suddenly weary. “Can we go inside and talk about this?”

“Of course.” She stepped back and gestured toward her living room. “Make yourself comfortable.”

She followed him, adjusting her robe, smoothing her blond hair into some semblance of order. The very feminine part of her wished she looked better—more pulled together, with a bit of makeup to hide behind. But Alexi would probably see through whatever cosmetics she might apply, so why bother? And since she’d already decided to tell him the truth, what did she have to hide…except her pride?

“If you want some coffee, you’ll have to make it. My stomach…Well, let’s just say I’ve given up on my morning jolt of caffeine for a while.” She sank into the chair across from the couch and curled her feet beneath her.

“I didn’t travel thousands of miles for coffee, even though I’m sure yours is excellent.”

“I’ve had a lot of experience making coffee,” she commented

casually, reminding Prince Alexi Ladislas of Belegovia that she had been a lowly truck stop waitress when they'd met. Reminding him that they lived in separate worlds and always would.

"Dammit, Kerry, you should have phoned me immediately."

"And what could you have done if you'd known a month or two ago? I'm having this baby whether you know about it or not."

"Then you admit it? This is my child?"

"This is my child," she stated, placing her hand over her slightly rounded stomach. "Maybe conception was an accident, but I want this baby. I don't need permission from you or anyone else to deliver my son or daughter."

"You think I don't want you to have the baby? Don't be absurd. I would never—"

"I thought I did at one time, but now I realize I don't know you well enough to know how you would react. We didn't have much time to discuss the subject in the short time we spent together."

He leaned forward and placed his forearms on his knees. "We managed to talk about almost everything else."

Kerry bowed her head and took a deep breath. She would not cry in front of him, even though her nerves were as jumbled as her thoughts. Even though her stomach clenched with tension and she had the urge to run out of the room.

"I suppose you found out from Gwendolyn." The idea that her friend had called him and revealed a confidence sickened her. Kerry thought she was a good judge of people, and Gwendolyn had seemed like such a loyal friend. But she'd been Alexi's

childhood buddy and then a trusted employee for years. Maybe that went beyond a three-month friendship based mostly on a set of bizarre circumstances that few people would believe…and even fewer knew to be true.

"She didn't call me to reveal your secret, if that's what you're thinking," Alexi said. "I was actually on the phone to her when you came to the ranch."

Kerry frowned, remembering yesterday's conversation clearly. "She told me she had to put a call on hold."

"Gwendolyn has many good qualities and abilities, but anything above the technology of a manual pencil sharpener is beyond her. She obviously thought she'd put me on hold, but she didn't because I heard every word. I immediately flew to Texas and went to your mother's house so we could resolve the problem, and she informed me where your apartment was located."

"My baby is not a problem!"

"I didn't mean it that way," he said quickly. "I meant that I wanted to talk to you about the situation. At least your mother was glad to see me."

"I'll bet. She had your autograph framed, you know." Charlene Jacks had probably loved playing matchmaker. It's a wonder she hadn't phoned to tell Kerry that a prince was on his way to her apartment. Of course, her mother didn't yet know why Prince Alexi might be in such a snit. And if he'd asked her to remain silent so he could surprise Kerry with his mere presence, she would have complied in a heartbeat.

“Why did you tell Gwendolyn instead of calling me?”

“I was so upset. I didn’t know who else to talk to. I didn’t even tell my mother, for Pete’s sake!”

Kerry took another deep breath, wishing she had some soda crackers and ginger ale to calm her queasiness. She wouldn’t go into the kitchen to get them when she and Alexi were in the middle of this conversation. Even though she didn’t want to discuss her baby at this moment, she knew she’d have to face him sooner or later.

“I just needed advice,” she admitted in a small voice. She looked into his eyes and saw a fading of anger. A smidgen of sympathy. “I needed to determine what I should do that would be the most fair to everyone. You, me and the baby.”

“And she told you about Belegovia’s laws of succession.”

“Yes.” She’d been surprised when Gwendolyn had volunteered the information, but then Kerry had realized that she had to consider all these factors to decide what was best for her baby.

“So you know that whether you have a boy or a girl, this child could succeed me as king or queen.”

“Yes,” Kerry said, lifting her chin, “but only if you declare it as your heir. Otherwise, any children you and—” she choked out the words “—the contessa have after your marriage will be your legitimate heirs. This baby would still be the half sibling of the royal heirs, but wouldn’t be in line for the throne.”

Alexi leaned forward, his expression once again fierce. “First

of all, I'm not marrying Contessa di Giovanni."

"But my mother told me that there was a big party this weekend where your engagement was going to be announced." Charlene Jacks was an avid royal watcher and had kept Kerry informed of every event involving Belegovia—until she'd realized her daughter was hopelessly in love with the prince.

Alexi held up his hand, obviously impatient. "Second, there won't be any half siblings."

She knew that as the crown prince he'd be expected to have at least two children to ensure the succession. His father, King Wilheim, had given him a deadline of age thirty to find a bride. Which had led him to run away while on a trip to Texas in May.

He'd run away with her.

Kerry's stomach clenched as she asked, "Why?"

He covered her hands with his, making her look into his sky-blue eyes. Her heart pounded at the warmth and strength of his grasp, the scent of his cologne. She hadn't seen him for three months, but it seemed like only three days.

When he spoke, his voice was softer, more intimate. "Because you and I are getting married as soon as I can arrange for the ceremony at the cathedral in Belegovia. Our child will be the undisputed legitimate heir to the throne."

Kerry took one look at his intense expression and knew it was too late for soda crackers and ginger ale. She leapt from the chair and fled to the bathroom, remembering in vivid detail just exactly how she'd gotten herself pregnant by the prince.

Chapter One

Three months earlier

"Hank McCauley, you devil!" the young woman squealed, throwing her arms around Alexi's neck. "Did you remember to bring me a present?"

Alexi, stunned by the feel of her firm breasts pressed against his chest, her soft-as-silk blond hair brushing against his neck and her light floral fragrance filling his senses, could only wrap his arms around her petite, curvy body and hold on tight.

Sooner or later he was going to tell her he wasn't Hank McCauley…whoever that might be.

Before he could gather his wits, she pulled back, grinned and placed a smacking kiss on his lips.

Her lips were as soft as her breasts were firm. She tasted of cinnamon and mint, and he immediately wanted her.

When she pulled back, her smile faded. Her arms slipped away from around his neck and he allowed his hands to slide down her arms until they were both standing in the truck stop, breathless and confused. Her light brown brows drew closer together over a cute little nose sprinkled with freckles.

"You're not Hank."

"No, I'm not."

She tilted her head. "But you look just like him." She stared, leaning forward to examine him as though he were an interesting

new species of insect. “You don’t have the little scar above your lip.”

“No, I don’t.” He folded his arms across his chest, expecting some accusation or scorn. “I didn’t mean to deceive you. You took me by surprise.”

“Are you British?”

“I was born and raised there, but I live in Belegovia now.”

“Belegovia. Where have I heard that name?”

“Perhaps on the news?” he offered.

Comprehension dawned swift and sure. “You’re the prince.” She grinned and shook her head. “You don’t look very much like the grainy photo I saw in the newspaper this morning.” She placed a uniform down on a stool—she’d obviously just changed clothes also—and reached for a section of the paper resting beside the cash register. It was crumpled from many people sharing the newsprint. “See. You look a lot more…stern in the paper.”

“Thank you, I suppose,” he replied, more and more fascinated by this young woman who seemed completely unimpressed by his position. He was about to ask for an introduction when Lady Gwendolyn Reed walked up, frowning. She’d probably witnessed the whole incident from her position by the double glass doors. Gwendolyn didn’t miss much.

“No, I mean you look better,” the petite blonde continued, sparing a quick look at Gwendolyn. “Like Hank McCauley. He used to be my boyfriend…well, for a little while. Not that we

were ever serious. We're just friends now. I thought maybe he'd come to visit me here at the truck stop."

"And bring you a present," Alexi finished.

The cute blonde grinned. "I like surprises."

Alexi felt his answering smile all the way down his body. "So do I." Especially when they come in such attractive packages, he thought.

"Your Highness, we really should be leaving," Gwendolyn said. She looked businesslike and slightly severe in her purplish woolen suit, black pumps and combination purse and briefcase. Her dark hair was pulled back in a simple clip. She appeared the exact opposite of the slightly disheveled truck stop waitress whose blond hair curled in an attractive style around her head.

"I'd introduce you," he said to his public-relations director, "but I have yet to learn the name of our new friend."

"Oh, I'm sorry." The young woman in question tossed the paper back onto the counter and thrust out her hand. "Kerry Lynn Jacks, from Ranger Springs."

Alexi turned it over so he held her fingers and kissed the back of her hand. "Pleased to meet you, Kerry Lynn Jacks. I am Prince Alexi Ladislas of Belegovia. May I present Lady Gwendolyn Reed, the formidable woman who is urging me ever closer to San Antonio and another round of boring public appearances?"

Kerry laughed. "Sounds like a difficult job."

"You have no idea," Gwendolyn said, her nostrils flaring as her eyebrows rose. Don't give me any trouble, she seemed to be

saying. Please, just get back in the Land Rover and we'll forget all about this little encounter.

Fat chance, he'd learned to say when he'd lived in the States several years ago. Sometimes he simply couldn't resist tweaking Gwendolyn's nose—figuratively, of course, as he'd done when they were much younger. She preferred a much more restrictive view of his public life than he favored. He enjoyed much of the baby-kissing and hand-shaking, but Gwendolyn scheduled a plethora of those appearances. He would rather focus on promoting tourism and stimulating economic development in his country, which he'd just done in Dallas. As far as he was concerned, he'd accomplished his mission to Texas. Gwendolyn, on the other hand, still believed he had several days of public appearances to endure before finding out if he'd be meeting the president on his Texas ranch late Saturday.

"Well, I'd better let you go. I'm sorry about assaulting you. I'm sure that doesn't happen often." She frowned. "Not that women wouldn't want to throw themselves at you. I just meant that I'm sure you're not usually confused with someone else."

Alexi smiled. "I can honestly say that has never happened before." And he couldn't have imagined a more pleasurable case of mistaken identity, either.

"Nice to meet you, Lady Gwendolyn," Kerry replied with a smile. "I hope y'all have a nice time in Texas."

She turned away with one more friendly smile over her shoulder. Alexi stood rooted to the spot, still tasting her lips and

feeling her petite, curvy body pressed to his.

"We really should be going," Gwendolyn reminded him. "Between the incident in the Land Rover and this distraction, we're nearly an hour behind schedule."

The "incident" involved a soft drink Alexi had purchased on their last stop. He loved American soft drinks. They tasted different in the States than in Europe. This particular bottle, however, had either been shaken on purpose or dropped by clumsy hands, because the minute he'd twisted open the lid, cold, sticky liquid had spewed from the bottle, soaking his shirt and the seat of the Land Rover, and saturated his hair and face.

He'd needed a change of clothing and the truck stop seemed a perfect place to wash his face, neck and hands. To his surprise, the large facility contained showers for both men and women, clothing, a variety of recordings and books, and every type of food imaginable. The combination showers and rest rooms separated the retail part of the truck stop from the restaurant, which occupied about one third of the building.

He'd chosen jeans, a Western-cut shirt in bright stripes and a tooled leather belt that he knew would remind him of Texas long after he returned to Belegovia. With his new wardrobe and impatient looks from Gwendolyn, he'd slipped into the men's showers.

When he'd emerged clean and in his new clothes, Kerry Lynn Jacks had launched herself into his arms.

Alexi narrowed his eyes and watched her hug two waitresses

and wipe a tear from her eye. “She’s certainly an interesting young woman.”

“One we don’t have time to linger over.”

“You are no fun,” he told Gwendolyn, who was single-minded in her duties. Mainly she scheduled, then escorted him from event to event, competently and without any surprises. And she never scheduled any temptations.

With one last look at Kerry, who had picked up a canvas tote bag and was waving goodbye to her friends, he turned away also. “Okay. Let’s get on the road.”

“You don’t need to sound so disappointed,” Gwendolyn chided. “This trip was your idea.”

“The meetings in Dallas were my idea. The photo ops were for you and my father.”

“Whatever.”

They emerged into the bright morning sunlight. The newly cleaned Land Rover with their Texas driver, Pete Boedecker, and Alexi’s man, Milos Anatole, stood ready at the door.

“We’re off to San Antonio, Mr. Boedecker,” Gwendolyn announced. She stood beside the vehicle door, waiting for Alexi to enter first, as was his right. He still had a hard time remembering to observe the formality when he was in the States. He’d lived in Boston for five years, never once failing to act courteously to women—most of whom knew him only as Alex.

Just when he was getting ready to enter the vehicle, a loud compact car, partly blue and partly rusted, pulled up beside them.

Milos immediately stepped in front of him, but as soon as Alexi saw who was driving the disreputable automobile, he smiled.

"It's okay, Milos. I don't think the young woman is going to abduct me."

"Prince Alexi," Kerry called out breathlessly, "I almost forgot to ask you for a big favor."

"What is that, Miss Jacks?"

"My mother is a huge fan of all the European royalty," she explained as she stepped out and walked around her sorry excuse for a car. "If she found out I'd met you and didn't get her an autograph, she'd tan my bottom."

The image of Kerry Lynn Jacks's firm, round bottom popped into his mind and wouldn't leave. Not that he wanted to "tan" her, but he would like a peek at what was hidden by her jeans.

"What would you like me to autograph?" he asked, straight-faced.

She handed him an envelope from the truck stop and a pen that had been chewed on the plastic end. "Would you make it out to Charlene Jacks, please?" Kerry asked, peering at the paper he held as though she didn't trust him to give a proper autograph.

He smiled. "Of course. Are you going home now?" he asked, to make conversation while he worded an appropriate message.

"No, I'm on my way to Galveston."

"Galveston!" He looked up, remembering the island from his check of the map before his trip to Texas. "Surely not in—"

"Now, don't say anything rude about Delores," Kerry

admonished with a grin. “She may be old, but she’s been real good to me for the past eight years. We’ve been through a lot together.”

“Really?” Alexi wondered if any of those memories involved the back seat of the aging vehicle, but a quick glance inside confirmed his suspicions. The back seat was too small for any decent-size man.

“I don’t want to demean Delores, but perhaps you should reconsider driving all that way. Surely you’re not going alone?”

“I am. My mother is working and my sisters are busy. I have to be back on Saturday for my college graduation ceremony, but I’m going to see my aunt and uncle. I’m getting my aunt’s mother’s car. It’s in real good shape—only twenty-one thousand miles and not a dent or a scratch.”

“I see.” College graduation? How old was Kerry? She’d appeared several years older than an undergraduate. “What type of degree?”

“My bachelor’s in business. It’s taken me ten years, but I’m finally finished.”

Alexi breathed a sigh of relief. At least he hadn’t been lusting after a twenty-one-year-old. Kerry was at least twenty-seven or twenty-eight—just a few years younger than his age of thirty.

“Your Highness,” Gwendolyn said, warning him she was serious by the use of his title, “we really must be going.”

“Lady Gwendolyn, I’ve just learned this young lady is driving all the way to Galveston by herself in this rather questionable

automobile. Surely I can't let that pass."

"Surely you must, Your Highness," she insisted.

Alexi laughed. "How far is this trip of yours?"

"In hours, I'd say around six or so."

"Six hours in Delores," he said, turning to Gwendolyn. "That seems rather unfortunate, don't you think?"

Gwendolyn tugged on his sleeve. When he leaned down, she whispered fiercely in his ear. "So buy her a bloody ticket on an airplane and let's be on our way!"

Alexi laughed. "You can't solve everything with money, Gwennie."

"Alexi Ladislas," she whispered, reverting to the tone of voice she'd used when she was peeved with him, "forget any idea that might be forming in your head."

"I can't imagine what you're talking about."

"I can see you're busy," Kerry said with a sigh. "Thanks for the autograph. My mother will be so proud."

"Just a moment, Kerry," Alexi said.

"Alexi, no!"

He smiled down at Gwendolyn. "This is fate, don't you think? If that soft drink hadn't exploded. If we hadn't stopped in this particular place."

"Fate is sticking to your schedule. Who knows what momentous events await you in San Antonio?"

"I've never been to Galveston."

"You've never been to San Antonio, either!"

"Yes, but Galveston has a beach." He turned to Kerry. "It does have a beach, doesn't it?"

"Yes," she answered, obviously confused. "Galveston is actually an island."

"Ah, you see, an island. You do remember how I love the islands. Besides, all my important meetings are complete. Relax for a few days, Gwennie. You need a holiday as much as I do."

"Alexi, don't!"

"I must, dear Gwendolyn." He turned to Kerry. "As a gentleman, I cannot allow you to make the treacherous trip alone. It would be my honor to accompany you to Galveston in your faithful steed, Delores."

KERRY COULDN'T BELIEVE she was driving State Road 46 toward Interstate 10 with a genuine prince. He was sitting on the passenger side, his backside resting on her Wal-Mart imitation leopard-print car seat cover, looking as though he were having the time of his life. The wind blew his brown hair across his forehead and plastered the Western shirt he'd bought in the truck stop to his chest. His really nice, impressively muscular chest.

She was usually a good judge of character, but Prince Alexi had poleaxed her from the moment she'd kissed him, so she might not be thinking straight.

She almost moaned aloud. Jeez, she'd kissed a prince! She still couldn't believe she'd done that. The only explanation she could come up with was that today was her last day as a waitress. She'd

said goodbye to her fellow waitresses and regular customers, all emotional about this change in her life, including her college graduation on Saturday. Then a prince walked into her life. And not just any prince, but one who was so good-looking he made her eyeballs hurt.

She wanted to watch him instead of the road, inhale his scent instead of the dusty highway breeze, and most of all, she wanted to kiss him again. Which was crazy. She had to keep reminding herself that he was a prince.

Why was he sitting in her aging Toyota? If he'd wanted to see Galveston, why hadn't he hopped on a jet or into his fancy Land Rover? Why would he care if she drove there in Delores when he didn't even know her?

"What kind of music do you like?" he asked, reaching for her radio.

"Almost everything but rap," she replied. "It might be hard to pick up a station between towns, but I have a CD player. CDs are in the back seat, in that black zippered case."

"You have a CD player?"

She glanced over at her passenger. "What, you don't think Delores deserves a nice stereo?"

"I'm just surprised, that's all."

"The new CD player and stereo radio was a gift from my mother two years ago. I spend—spent a lot of time commuting from home to school to work."

"Where is Ranger Springs?" he asked as he reached for her

CDs.

"West of the truck stop, about twenty-five minutes." She grinned. "In Texas, we often give distances in the minutes it takes to drive rather than the actual miles."

"I only visited Dallas. I have some business contacts there."

"I thought you were in the business of being a prince."

"I have some other interests."

"Really?" She glanced over and saw him flipping through her CDs. Garth Brooks, vintage Bee Gees, the music from Phantom of the Opera and a half-dozen other groups.

He sighed as if he didn't want to talk about himself. "Some investments of my own."

"Ah. So you're not just another pretty face with a crown." Maybe if she joked about his good looks, she wouldn't keep thinking about how interested she was in him as a man.

He laughed. "Thank you for the compliment, I think. I suppose that is the view of royalty, especially in Texas, where everyone values their independence."

Kerry nodded in agreement. "We're big on independence, but fascinated by everything bigger than life. Rich folks. Movie stars. Royalty. My mother is one of the biggest fans of the British royals, but she doesn't discriminate. When I give her your autograph, she's going to be doing the happy-happy dance all around the living room." Kerry chuckled as she imagined her mom squealing in delight. "As a matter of fact, I may have to keep that car seat cover just because you sat on it."

"Maybe you should bring me home and really make her day." He slipped one of her favorite Dixie Chicks CDs into the stereo.

Kerry shook her head. "I'm not sure her heart could stand it." Maybe her heart couldn't stand it, either.

"Is she ill?" he asked, concern evident in his voice.

Kerry chuckled again. "No, she's as healthy as a horse. And she's not that old, either. She just turned fifty. I was exaggerating."

"That's another trademark of Texans, isn't it?"

"Only when we're talking to Yankees."

He laughed and turned up the volume on the CD player. "I'm having a good time, Kerry Lynn Jacks."

"I'm glad…."

"Call me Alexi."

"That seems kind of wrong. I mean, just because you and I are on a road trip, you're still a prince."

"Can you put that aside for a couple of days?"

"I don't know," she answered truthfully. "I can try."

"Please, try," he asked, placing a hand on her shoulder.

She tried not to react, even though her skin felt suddenly overheated…and not from the warm May temperature. "Okay." She passed a pickup truck heavily laden with bales of hay as she thought about forgetting that the man beside her was a prince. The name Alexi sounded so foreign. Maybe if she had a nickname for him, she wouldn't think of him as the prince. And what about when they stopped, or got to her aunt and uncle's

house? She couldn't call him by his real name without alerting everyone that the prince was slumming around Texas with a truck stop waitress he'd just met.

"What's your middle name?" she asked as the Dixie Chicks sang about women striking out on their own. What appropriate music. Kerry was just getting ready to start her new life. A professional life in which she would never have to wear a uniform again. And she'd have an apartment all her own. She could stay out late without anyone worrying. She could sleep late on Saturday morning and only wash dishes when she felt like it.

"Which one?" Alexi asked, breaking into her fantasy. "I have several."

She made a face in his general direction. "Just tell me, okay? I need to call you something besides Alexi, or Your Highness, or whatever else is appropriate, because people are going to be a bit suspicious. They'll either think I'm crazy as a loon for calling Hank a prince, or that you're crazy for running off with me."

"My full name is Alexi Karl Gregor MacCulloh Ladislas."

"Wow."

"My sentiments exactly. While attending college in Boston, I rarely used anything but my first name, usually shortened to Alex. And I found the computer forms weren't understanding about more than one middle initial."

"All your names sound real European except MacCulloh. Where did that come from?"

"My mother is English. Her grandfather was from Scotland

and honored him by giving me his surname."

"That's nice, and it's also perfect. Can I call you Mack? Anyone who hears us talking will think that you're Hank McCauley."

"Ah, yes. The man who looks like me. Tell me, now that we've spent some time together, do you still think we resemble each other that closely?"

She glanced over at him again. "Yes, you do, although your expressions are different. Hank's more…well, I guess you could say he's spontaneous. He's also a big tease, and he's a Texan through and through." He also didn't make her heart race with just a smile.

Alexi was silent for a moment. Kerry glanced quickly at him and noticed he was frowning. Finally, he asked, "What does he do for a living?"

"He trains cutting horses now, but he used to be a champion bronc rider. He's retired."

"Retired…at what age?"

"I guess he's thirty-one now. Around your age, I suppose."

"You cut me to the quick," he replied with mock indignation. "I'm a relatively young thirty."

Kerry chuckled. "Sorry. I wouldn't want to add a whole year."

"I was dreading my thirtieth birthday enough. I can't imagine the next one."

"I thought women worried more than men about aging."

"Oh, I'm not worried about getting older. It's just that my

father, King Wilheim, has decided that thirty is a magical number. It's the age at which I should settle down and choose a bride."

"Choose a bride? That sounds so…archaic."

He shrugged, then rested his arm on the open window and stared at the passing flat plains dotted with patches of wildflowers and barbed-wire fences. "What can I say? I'm a prince. You can't get much more archaic than that."

As she neared the intersection of Interstate 10, Kerry wondered if that was what this whole "road trip" incident was all about for Prince Alexi. Running away from his life. Running away from the responsibility of finding a bride.

She wondered if the men in her life would always lack reliability and maturity. Her father had loved gambling and excitement more than his family. Hank was a nice guy, but he flirted and teased his way through life. And now she was on a road trip with a prince—a prince, for goodness' sake!—who'd left his entourage with the drop of a hat. What did that say about him? That he didn't care? Or that he couldn't be trusted? Or maybe both.

He certainly didn't seem excited about marrying one of the "beautiful people" among the elite in Europe. He'd marry someone tall, slim and elegant and within a few years they'd produce the next generation of tall, elegant royalty. She'd never seen a photo of royalty in which the women were petite, freckled and "wholesome"—a description she'd heard from family and

friends one too many times.

The difference between Prince Alexi and her long-gone father, Kerry mused, was that dear ol' Dad had run away after he'd fathered three daughters. He'd left four people confused and angry, while Alexi had infuriated his public-relations director… and maybe disappointed his king. He certainly wasn't married yet, so maybe he'd settle down someday soon.

She risked a glance at him, wondering why he didn't remind her more of Hank since they looked so much alike. Alexi's striking profile was highlighted by morning sunlight streaming in through the windshield. His handsome features and confidence probably came from generations of blue blood. She imagined that he was used to getting whatever he wanted, even if his whim was a trip to Galveston in an un-air-conditioned car named Delores.

Perhaps he was a little like her dad, she thought as she headed east on Interstate 10, but not much. Not too much, anyway…

Chapter Two

Alexi settled back against the fake leopard fur seat and let the warmth of the Texas day seep into his bones. He'd taken several short vacations in the past year or so, but they'd involved rushed trips to the Mediterranean or skiing in the Alps, hiding from the paparazzi, trying to have a personal life in impersonal fancy suites and ski lodges. Nothing at all like a long drive across the Texas prairie in an aging Toyota.

Nothing at all like a trip with Kerry Lynn Jacks.

"You have a real 'cat ate the canary' smile on your face," she said, her voice drifting through the drowsy noontime like feathers through mist.

"Hmm. Well, I do feel rather contented at the moment."

She chuckled. "You're an easy man to please…Mack."

"I know a score of people who would disagree with you. Starting with my public-relations director, who is probably still fuming."

"That was kind of mean of you—leaving her standing there in the parking lot, stamping her foot."

Alexi smiled. "Yes, that was rather bad of me. I'll make it up to her, though. Besides, I told her I didn't want to make the appearances in San Antonio. She was filling in some time until we discovered if the president was going to come to his ranch for the weekend."

The car swerved as Kerry gasped. Alexi opened one eye and looked around.

"The president! You mean you were supposed to meet with the president and you ran off to Galveston with me instead?"

"The meeting wasn't assured. We had no idea if he'd be traveling to Texas. You know how things come up."

"Oh, of course," she said in a highly stressed voice. When he glanced at her, she made a sweeping gesture with her hands. "I know exactly how things can just come up with you heads of state."

"Really, Kerry, I doubt that the meeting would have occurred. Congress and world events can be very unpredictable. Besides, originally I had wanted to take a few days of holiday, but Lady Gwendolyn insisted we keep to a tight schedule."

She shook her head. "I can't believe I'm in my car, having a conversation with a prince who was going to spend the weekend with the president."

"No, you're driving to Galveston with your good friend Mack."

"Hey, I'm the one having the fantasy, okay?"

"Are you so sure?" he asked. Kerry might not look like the models and aspiring actresses who attended the events he usually frequented. She was cute rather than beautiful, petite rather than statuesque and honest rather than calculating. He found her honesty and natural charm extremely desirable. "I can't imagine anyone I'd rather spend time with, and that includes your current

leader."

She opened her mouth, but no words came forth. For once, he'd managed to silence her somewhat saucy remarks.

Closing his eyes, he settled back against the seat once more. The sound of the tires rolling down the highway lulled him into sleep, and he dozed, a vision of Kerry's amazed expression bringing a smile to his lips.

"WHERE ARE WE?" Alexi—or Mack—slowly opened his eyes. Lord, he looked good when he woke up. Really, really sexy. How was she going to keep her hands off him for three days?

"We're in Sealy, about an hour outside of Houston." She drove past the Wal-Mart and several fast-food places until she spotted a service station with a food mart. "Are you hungry? We can get a snack, although I'd like to wait to eat supper with my aunt and uncle tonight, if possible."

She pulled off the interstate onto the service road.

"Very good. I could use a cold drink." He raised his lean, muscular torso off Delores's seat and stretched, as much as possible, inside the tight confines of the car. "I hadn't realized I was so sleepy," he said as she pulled to a stop at the gas pumps.

Kerry tore her eyes away from his tempting body and reached for the door handle. "You can get a soft drink or some water if you'd like. I won't be long."

"I'll help you," he said, opening his own door.

"No, that's okay." She needed a few minutes apart from him. For the past several hours, she'd had time to think about this trip.

About him. About what she was doing driving a real, live prince around Texas.

Maybe this adventure was a big mistake.

"It's been several years, but I think I can remember how to fuel up your vehicle."

"You don't have to—"

"Kerry, if I truly were Hank, wouldn't you let me help?"

"Well…"

Right there beside the gas pumps, Delores's poor old engine popping and wheezing beside them, he used one finger to tip up her chin. "I'm Mack, your friend, remember? Treat me just like you would Hank."

"I'm having a hard time with that," she whispered.

"Kerry Lynn Jacks, you are thinking too much," he answered with a smile.

His smile slowly faded. Her lips slowly parted. He leaned closer, closer…Just when she thought he might kiss her, her car let out a particularly loud ping. Blinking, Kerry stepped back.

"Seriously," she said. "I'll pump the gas. If you'd like to do something nice, you can buy me a soft drink. Anything cold with caffeine."

"Very well," he said with a sigh.

"Oh, and Mack," she said, emphasizing the nickname, "whatever you do, don't use the word schedule." His pronunciation of "shed-yule" would give him away immediately.

He chuckled, waving off her concern, and she went back to

filling up Delores's tank, probably for the last time.

After they'd both used the facilities, they piled back into the car. In the few minutes they'd been apart, Kerry had gotten herself under control again. Okay, so she was chauffeuring a prince around Texas. And pretending he was someone else. She could do this.

But he had to help.

"Look, if you're going to be 'Mack' instead of Prince Alexi," she said as she started Delores's reluctant engine, "you need to talk like you're from Texas instead of London."

"We can work on that on the way to Galveston."

"Okay. So tell me about your family—your real one, that is, not something you'd make up to fit your Texas persona—but use your best Texas accent."

"Hmm, very well," he began.

"Wait just a minute. Don't say 'very well.' Texans just don't talk that way. You can say 'okay' instead."

"Okay," he responded with a tight smile. "I'm the oldest son of King Wilheim of Belegovia. I have a brother who lives in our country and a sister who is attending university—"

"Nope, she's 'goin' to college,'" Kerry interrupted.

"Okay, she's goin' to college at my alma mater, Harvard."

"Pretty classy," Kerry said with a grin. "You're getting better, by the way. Just relax. Go ahead."

"Let's see…Oh, yes. My mother lives in England."

"Are your parents divorced?"

“No, but they haven’t lived together since shortly after our country became a separate entity after liberation from the Soviet Union.”

“Okay, tell that to me again in Texas-style English.”

Alexi laughed. “Sorry. Belegovia is an old monarchy that was swallowed up by the Soviet Union after World War II. My grandfather fled the country with his family and sought asylum in England.”

“So the queen took you in.”

“Actually, I—”

“No ‘actually,’ either. Just go ahead and tell me.”

“Very…er, sorry,” he responded with a grin. “My father was a very young man when they settled in England. I wasn’t born yet.”

“Oh, so that’s why your mother is from England.”

“Right. And she prefers to live there. You see, she never expected my father to become king. After all, he didn’t have a country when they married, and there wasn’t any clue that we’d ever get it back.”

“So she didn’t want to be a queen.”

“She didn’t want to give up her life, her home, her friends,” Alexi said, his expression showing he’d resigned himself to his parents’ situation long ago. “My father taught history. She was much happier being married to a professor than a king.”

“I suppose I can understand her point. I mean, there’s got to be a lot of hassles when you’re a monarch. Lack of privacy, lots of expectations.”

“And don’t forget all those public appearances,” he said with a grin.

Kerry gave him what she hoped was a chastising frown.

“To give her credit, she tried to fit in for a short while, but the country was still chaotic when we returned to Belegovia. The parliament and some of the courts were in operation, but the palace had yet to be restored and the role of the king was still tenuous.”

“Texas talk, remember?” she prodded.

“Oh, of course.” He frowned for a moment, then brightened. “The place was a damned mess,” he finally said with a grin and a drawl.

Kerry laughed. “By George, I think he’s got it,” she said in her best Henry Higgins imitation.

She sipped her soft drink as they drew closer to Houston. She hoped they missed most of the rush hour traffic, which could be brutal, from what she’d heard from her aunt and uncle. They avoided “the city,” which meant anywhere in or near Houston, whenever possible, preferring the slower pace of life on the island.

“Tell me about yourself, Kerry Lynn Jacks,” Alexi said, breaking into her thoughts as she passed a semi.

“I have a mother and two sisters. No father, at least not for years. He left when I was thirteen.”

“That must have been difficult for your mother.”

“Yes, it was. She’s a waitress at the Four Square Café in

Ranger Springs, which doesn't pay really great. I've been helping out as much as I could, mainly because tips at the truck stop are a lot better than at the local diner."

"I see. What about your sisters? How old are they?"

"Carole is just a year and a half younger than me—nearly twenty-seven. Cheryl is twenty-six. Both of them live in Ranger Springs."

"Do they resemble you?"

"Your Texas accent is slipping," she said, mostly to collect her thoughts. "And yes, sort of."

"Then they must be very beautiful."

"Oh, puleeze," she said, already feeling her cheeks heating. "You don't have to say things like that just because I'm giving you a ride across the state."

"That's not why I said it."

"Look, I'm slightly cute, okay? But beautiful people are tall and thin and dress in incredibly fantastic clothes. They live in New York and California and exotic places, not Ranger Springs, Texas."

"You've been reading too many fashion and celebrity magazines."

"No, I've just learned to be a realist. I'm not unhappy with who I am. I'm content to be short and cute." She took a big breath, then smiled at him. "Besides, I'm also smart and stubborn. That makes up for a lot of slinky clothes and exotic locales."

"So what is a smart, cute woman like yourself doing after

graduation on Saturday?"

She brightened at his question. "I have a great job at Grayson Industries as a financial analyst. Gray Phillips moved his company to town two years ago and married our doctor, Amy Wheatley. Business is booming, so he's expanding his financial staff. I'll be looking at things like cash flow, financing and inventory management."

"Sounds interesting."

"Are you just saying that?"

"No. Why do you think I went to Harvard? They don't offer degrees in 'princely deportment,'" he teased. "I got my MBA to help manage my own investments and help my father. Besides, there was a good chance I'd need to get a job, since the title 'prince' doesn't translate into a living in the real world. There was no guarantee that Belegovia could successfully return to a parliamentary-style government with a titular monarchy."

"Really? I guess I hadn't thought about it." She'd assumed that he'd always been assured of his position in the world. But now that she knew more of his background, she understood that being a prince wasn't something he'd grown up with, not like the British royal family. From the day they were born, they knew what their role was going to be. Alexi had grown up as the son of a history professor who happened to have royal blood.

And now that he'd turned thirty, his father demanded he get married. A princess bride. If she'd read about it in one of her mother's royalty magazines, Kerry knew she'd think the situation

romantic. After all, hadn't she watched the last big royal wedding with tears in her eyes over the fairy-tale quality—the ivory satin gown with the long, long train, the tiara, the beautiful flowers?

Now that she knew the situation from Alexi's point of view, she understood the pressure he felt. This trip was obviously a rebellion against his father's mandate. She'd taken only one course in psychology, but she understood such motivation.

"If you get tired of driving, please let me know. I'll be glad to take over," he said, breaking into her thoughts.

"We're almost to Houston. The traffic is pretty bad and it's almost rush hour. I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy."

"Actually…sorry." He slipped into his version of a Texas accent. "I meant, I was a darned good driver when I lived in Boston."

"Do you even have a driver's license?"

"Of course," he said with mock indignation. "Duly issued by the Belegovian Department of Transportation. I even took the written test. And I drove a Formula One racer in a charity event in Monte Carlo last year."

Kerry laughed as she shook her head. "Just hang on, Mario Andretti. I'm taking you into the final lap. We'll be in Galveston in less than two hours."

ALEXI ENJOYED viewing the sprawling metropolitan area of Houston. He could barely see the downtown area from the eastbound interstate highway, just south of Houston. Various groupings of high-rise buildings gave the impression of several

different “downtown” districts as Kerry deftly dodged traffic.

She would have been a big hit in the charity race in Monaco, he thought with a smile. He could just see her layered blond hair peeking out from a helmet, her petite, curvy body encased in the one-piece, form-fitting, emblem-emblazoned driver’s suit.

His smile faded as his body responded to the image. Shifting in Delores’s fake-fur seat, he glanced at Kerry. She was absorbed in the heavy traffic, so he looked his fill. She was right; she was cute. Her skin was lightly freckled, her hair naturally streaked by the sun. But her animated features and endearingly honest personality made her beautiful in his eyes.

When he’d impulsively decided to accompany her on this trip, he’d wanted to explore the instant attraction he’d felt for this Texas sprite. Now that he knew more about her, he liked her even more. He wasn’t sure how many days he could spend with her —surely they’d return for her graduation on Saturday—but he would savor each moment.

He really hoped the president was too busy to go to his ranch this weekend. After all, they had nothing of substance to discuss; Belegovia’s contract with the United States for the removal of old Soviet Union missile silos was secure. The U.S. had granted much-needed foreign aid for Belegovia’s cooperation in making sure the region was safe from nuclear accidents.

Besides, Alexi knew he’d much rather spend time with Kerry than the leader of the free world.

They exited the loop and headed south for Galveston, passing

one of Houston's airports, Kerry informed him. Soon the buildings and the traffic cleared. The flat plains of south Texas met the water in marshes on either side of the highway.

"How much farther?" he finally asked.

Kerry smiled at him. "You sound like a little boy."

"Those are fightin' words," he said, mocking a Texas accent.

Kerry laughed. "Actually, you sounded a lot like Hank then. Keep it up and Aunt Marcy and Uncle Bob will never know you have blue blood in your veins."

"So my goal is to be a little over the top?"

"That's Hank. And to answer your original question, about half an hour."

Alexi settled back in the seat and watched the salt marshes whiz by. Hank. He kept coming up in conversation. Had Kerry been in love with the cowboy? Was she over their romance? The questions bothered him more than he wanted to admit. But that was probably because he was so curious about all aspects of Kerry Lynn Jacks. Wondering about her previous relationships was normal…right?

So what if he couldn't recall ever thinking about the previous lovers of any of the women he'd dated. Kerry was different in so many ways, but they both knew their time together was limited. Perhaps that made the experience so much more intense. They had a lot to learn in three short days.

He'd love to learn how she would look, flushed with desire, her blue-gray eyes smoky and mysterious. She was so expressive, so

spontaneous. Kerry would be a wonderful lover, he was certain. But she was also a delightful person, and until they arrived at their destination and he knew what sleeping arrangements were offered, he was content to watch her drive and listen to her speak of her friends, family and home state.

"I should warn you that Aunt Marcy is in a wheelchair. She gets around so well that sometimes I forget, but I didn't want you to be too surprised when we get to their house."

"That's fine. Was she in an accident?"

"No, she was one of the last cases of polio before the vaccine was developed in the 1950s."

"Bloody horrible disease," he muttered, then held up his hand. "And no comments about saying it in Texas English."

"I wasn't going to," she said softly. She drove for a few more minutes, then gestured to the left. "I know you went off without much from your luggage. If you need to get anything, there's a mall up there. Galveston clothing shopping is pretty limited unless you want souvenir T-shirts and tropical shorts."

"That's very thoughtful. I should pick up a few things. If you wouldn't mind…"

"Not at all."

They shopped at several stores for khaki slacks, another pair of jeans and a package of underwear. He let Kerry pick out several shirts since he wasn't sure what Hank would wear. They both laughed over the wide variety of swim trunks, which he'd need for the beach. She playfully suggested bright green baggy

tropicals with huge pink and purple flowers. He preferred solid blue with a discreet red stripe up the side. They compromised on a moderate red and white pattern.

At the cosmetics counter, he picked up a bottle of his usual cologne, some lotion and sunscreen, since they were going to the beach. Kerry appeared a bit surprised, but he couldn't see ignoring personal grooming just because he was on a road trip.

Within an hour they were back on the road, his new duffel bag stowed in the back seat. He looked forward to meeting Kerry's aunt and uncle and spending time in a typical American family home. He hoped his presence didn't disrupt their sleeping arrangements. If so he could always get a hotel room, which he assumed were plentiful in this island city.

Or he could offer to bunk with Kerry, he thought with a grin. He'd be willing to sacrifice sleep for the opportunity to hold her in his arms and get to know her much, much better.

Just then they approached a high bridge.

"This is the only bridge on and off the island," she explained. "When a hurricane warning is issued, Aunt Mary and Uncle Bob told me traffic is a nightmare."

They passed over a bay with boat docks lining the shores. A little farther ahead, he saw waterside homes to the right, and a strange pyramid structure. "What's that?"

"Moody Gardens. The Moodys are a wealthy Texas family who give a lot to different charities and universities. I've never been to Moody Gardens, but Aunt Marcy loves to go. They have

a tropical habitat with butterflies."

Soon the highway turned into a city street with a wide, tree-lined median as they went past small businesses and modest, sometimes shabby houses. So far, except for the scruffy palm trees and blooming shrubs, the city didn't look like a semitropical island, but he hadn't seen the beach yet.

"The old part of Galveston is up ahead," Kerry said, pointing to the left. "Tomorrow we can tour some of the homes if you'd like. Or we can go to the Strand, this Victorian section near the pier, with shops and restaurants."

"Anything is fine with me. Whatever you'd like to do, I know I'll enjoy it." He was especially looking forward to seeing Kerry in her swimsuit. He didn't suppose he'd be lucky enough to discover she wore a bikini. "When will we go to the beach?"

"Almost anytime. As a matter of fact, we can take a walk along there tonight. My aunt and uncle live only two blocks off the seawall."

"Fabulous," he said with a grin when Kerry turned off the main thoroughfare onto a numbered side street. He couldn't wait for a romantic moonlit walk along the beach with his Texas tour guide.

KERRY PULLED DELORES to a stop in the driveway behind her aunt and uncle's van. She had to stop herself from running for the door and giving them both a big hug. She hadn't seen Aunt Marcy and Uncle Bob for almost a year. She'd taken more class hours this last year, but continued to work a full

shift at the truck stop. Between family, school and work, she hadn't taken a vacation. And her aunt and uncle didn't enjoy traveling much. Most houses didn't accommodate Aunt Marcy's wheelchair, so visiting was difficult.

Uncle Bob opened the door, grinning as he spread his arms wide. Kerry smiled and ran up the ramp to the front porch.

"It's so good to see you," she said against his pipe-tobacco-scented shirt.

"We're so proud of you, Kerry girl," he murmured as he gave her a bear hug. "It's good to see you, too."

She looked back at the car. Alexi was standing by Delores's bumper holding his duffel and her suitcase. She gestured him forward.

"Uncle Bob, I want you to meet my friend, Mack."

"Mack? Why, isn't that Hank McCauley? Your mother sent us a picture of the two of you at a rodeo a couple of years ago. I thought you called him Hank."

"Oh," she said, waving her hand dismissively, "Mack is my special nickname for him.

"Mack, this is my uncle, Robert Jacks, but you can call him Bob."

"Pleased to meet you," Alexi said, holding out his hand and grinning. He sounded enough like Hank to fool someone who had never actually met the cowboy.

As the men shook hands, Kerry slipped behind them to find Aunt Marcy, just inside the living room. She leaned down and

gave her aunt a big hug.

"I'm so glad to see you."

"I'm so glad you brought a friend with you. I was worried about you driving across the state all by yourself in that old car."

"Delores did just fine, thank you very much," Kerry said, smiling at her aunt. "She might be a little old and have a lot of miles on her, but she's never let me down yet."

"I'm sure your new car will be just as good."

"Oh, I'm sure it will, too. I'm just going to miss my old clunker. You'll try to find her a good home, won't you?"

Aunt Marcy nodded her head. "Of course we will, but you should have never named that car."

Grinning, Kerry turned to see "Mack" and Uncle Bob enter the room. "Kerry brought a friend—Hank McCauley."

"Wonderful," Aunt Marcy said, reaching out her hand. "We have plenty of room and an extra sofa bed, Mr. McCauley."

"Please, call me Mack," Alexi said, giving his words a slight twang even as he bestowed his most charming smile on her aunt. "And as long as you're sure I won't be in the way, I'd love to stay in your home. If not, I can get a hotel room."

"Nonsense," Aunt Marcy said, turning her wheelchair around and heading for the hallway.

Kerry breathed a sigh of relief since the introductions were out of the way and no one was suspicious of her prince. They moved into the kitchen. Aunt Marcy was in the process of preparing dinner. Kerry hadn't eaten since an early light lunch just before

she met Alexi at the truck stop.

Aunt Marcy scooped fried okra out of the skillet and onto a paper towel-lined platter. The unique smell filled the yellow-and-white kitchen, which had been modified for a wheelchair. Most of the countertops and appliances were low, so they could be reached from the sitting position. As the vegetable cooled and drained, Aunt Marcy transferred ground beef patties to the sizzling skillet.

"Need help?" Kerry asked.

"No, I've got everything pretty well prepared. We weren't sure when you'd get here, and I didn't want dinner to get cold."

Kerry smiled as Alexi eyed the fried okra. "Try it," she urged. Of course, Hank had eaten this type of food all his life. He selected a single piece and, after testing the heat in the palm of his hand, he placed the okra discreetly into his mouth.

He even chewed neatly. Politely. She'd never seen him eat a meal, but she was certain he had perfect manners. She couldn't imagine Prince Alexi doing anything badly.

"I'll get some clean sheets for the Hide-A-Bed sofa in the den," Uncle Bob informed Alexi as he also popped a piece of fried okra into his mouth. "I put both your bags in Kerry's room, temporarily."

"That means you can get your bag anytime you'd like, as long as it's not in the middle of the night," Kerry explained.

"Sure," Alexi agreed casually.

Uncle Bob folded his arms across his chest and faced them

both. “Not that I don’t trust you two kids, but we have a rule in the house—no wedding ring, no hanky-panky.”

“I respect your principles,” Alexi said.

“Uncle Bob! We’re just friends.”

“Enough said,” he muttered. “I just wanted to make myself clear. Kerry, you never have brought a male friend to visit us before.”

“Well, Mack rather…insisted. He was worried about me driving down here in Delores.”

“I respect you, son,” Uncle Bob said with a laugh.

“I’m glad I’m not the only one who was worried,” Aunt Marcy added.

Kerry threw up her hands. “Gesh, I’m twenty-eight years old and I’ve been driving for twelve years. You’d think I could find my way from Ranger Springs to Galveston on my own.”

“We just worry about you, dear. You’re so independent,” Aunt Marcy said, patting Kerry’s hand. Her aunt turned to Alexi. “Kerry helps her family so much, and not just moneywise. She pitches in until we wonder how she gets her schoolwork done. But she must, because she’s graduating cum laude even though she works full-time.”

“Okay, now I’m embarrassed,” Kerry said, feeling her cheeks heat up. “I’m taking A—Mack away before you reveal any more family secrets.” She grabbed his hand and dragged him toward the small bedroom she’d stayed in many times when she’d visited. Once inside, she drew open the curtains, but couldn’t

see anything outside due to the early evening shadows. A mirror image of her and Alexi, standing close together, stared back.

"My aunt and uncle are just curious. Plus, they want to impress you with how wonderful I am," she added flippantly to lighten the mood. "They always say I'm their favorite niece, but I suspect they say the same thing to my two sisters."

Alexi laughed. "I don't need them to expound on your virtues. I'd already figured that out on my own."

She grabbed her suitcase and slipped it onto the bed. "I'm disappointed. I wanted to be a woman of mystery."

"Oh, I'm sure there are many layers I have yet to uncover," he responded in a sultry tone that made her breath hitch and her palms grow damp. He leaned against the door frame and crossed his arms over his chest, confident, powerful and just a little mysterious himself.

She wished he didn't make those suggestive comments in such a sexy voice. Her mind filled with all types of "uncovering" possibilities.

"I'm going to unpack real quick, then help Aunt Marcy get supper ready. If you'd like to wash up, or look around, go ahead."

He didn't immediately take the hint, watching her intensely from the doorway. She wasn't locked in a room with him; she could push by him if she wanted and be in the hallway of the relatively small house. Or she could just shout her aunt or uncle's name and they'd be here in an instant. But she didn't feel threatened…at least not in an uncomfortable sense. A kind of a

welcome, yet edgy sense of awareness flowed between them.

This felt different from their time together in the car, probably because they hadn't been staring at each other. This felt… dangerously thrilling.

Could Prince Alexi be her reward for ten long years of hard work?

Chapter Three

After a dinner of surprisingly tasty hamburger steak with grilled onions, mashed potatoes and fried okra, Alexi welcomed a walk along the beach. He and Kerry took a towel to sit upon and a flashlight to see their way to what she called "the seawall."

"Your aunt and uncle are charming," he said as they neared the busy thoroughfare that ran along the coastline. Several other couples, some young people and a few families were also out on foot tonight. When there was a lull in the automobile traffic, he could hear the waves breaking against the shore. The smell of saltwater coated the warm, humid air.

"They are wonderful people. It was their idea for the family to take up a collection and buy Marcy's mother's car. She went into an assisted-living facility in Alvin, which is just south of Houston. Since Aunt Marcy is in a wheelchair and needs a specially equipped van, they didn't need an extra car."

"I'm sure everyone will feel more confident now that you have a much newer car," he commented, remembering their earlier conversation.

"Yes, but the funny thing is now that I've graduated, I'll only be driving about four miles round trip."

"That's all the distance from your mother's house to this Grayson Industries?" he asked as they crossed the street.

"Actually, I'm getting my own apartment. I'm moving in next

week." She turned to look at him, her face alight with joy. "You have no idea how much I'm looking forward to having my own place for the first time in my life. No sharing a bathroom. No being quiet because everyone else is sleeping. No one to steal my food from the refrigerator."

Alexi laughed. "I know what you mean. My first flat in London was absolute heaven. I did all the typical bachelor things. My flat was messy, smelly and tastelessly decorated."

Kerry laughed. He felt his own smile fading as he remembered other things about living on his own. Girlfriends, some attracted to his title, some hoping for an introduction to one of the British princes, some just looking for a good time. Easy sex, although not nearly as much as some might have assumed. He didn't want to think that Kerry would have the equivalent experience. Boyfriends. Easy sex of any sort.

"What's wrong? Don't you like the beach?"

He turned his attention back to the present and Kerry. Forcing a smile, he took her hand. "I adore the beach."

"You're slipping into your British accent again."

"I know, but let me be myself for a while. I've been very good at playing Hank McCauley, if I do say so myself." He pulled her aside as three people on in-line skates whizzed past. Kerry's leg brushed his as their hips bumped briefly before she stepped away.

"Yes, you have." She swung their linked hands while strolling along the sidewalk, apparently not as affected as he by their

contact. “This seawall was built after a huge hurricane in 1900. The whole island was raised to keep it from ever being submerged again, and this seawall was built of concrete and rock to keep the water from washing away the shoreline.”

“Very impressive—both the history and your knowledge of the area.”

“My aunt and uncle are great history buffs. They have a book on Galveston you might find interesting, just in case you have trouble sleeping.”

“Good to know,” he said as they started down the steps that took them to the beach. He had an idea he would have trouble sleeping with Kerry so near, yet so far away. Ever since seeing the cozy bedroom she’d be occupying, he’d envisioned her stretched out on that small bed, an alluring smile lighting up her cute, freckled face.

The smell of the ocean was stronger here, the sand deep as they stepped off the wooden steps onto the beach. The sound of the waves was even and reassuring as he again took Kerry’s hand. Lamps from the seawall illuminated the area enough that they could see where they were walking. Other couples strolled closer to the water, where the sand was firm and wet. White foam on the waves gleamed silver in the artificial light.

“I suppose it’s not as wonderful as those Mediterranean beaches you’re used to.”

Alexi chuckled. “Actually, European beaches are almost all rocks. We have very little sand, especially something this fine

and pale."

"Really?"

"For truly wonderful beaches, we go to the Caribbean or Central or South America."

"I'd love to travel someday," she said wistfully. "I get two weeks of vacation a year, but I have to wait six months to take part of that. After five years, I get three weeks."

"Sometimes shorter holidays can be very relaxing."

"Yes. We have Memorial Day, the Fourth of July and then Labor Day coming up. Maybe I can plan a long weekend someplace fun. Corpus Christi or Las Vegas or New Orleans."

He didn't correct the impression she'd gotten from his use of "holiday." In England, the word was used instead of the American "vacation." But whatever Kerry called time off from work, he wondered if she would venture somewhere alone. Or would she have a boyfriend to accompany her on one of these upcoming weekends?

Perhaps he could fly over and take a holiday with her.

Perhaps their brief relationship didn't have to end with him going back to Belegovia on Sunday. Unless, of course, he immediately became involved with someone else at the insistence of his father. Unless he became engaged to one of the European elite who had been selected for him.

"I love it here," Kerry breathed, barely above a whisper. He had to lean close to catch her words over the rhythmic pounding of the surf. "The sound of the waves is so peaceful. Sometimes

I just sit on the rocks," she said, pointing to a man-made rocky pier that jutted into the surf, "and watch for hours."

"I feel that way when I'm on a boat," Alexi admitted. "Especially a sailboat. There's nothing like the rocking motion of the water, the slap of the waves against the hull, to lull your brain into semiconscious bliss."

"Exactly," Kerry said softly, turning toward him. "I knew you'd understand."

She wants you to kiss her. The knowledge was so certain that for a moment, Alexi thought someone had spoken the words into his brain. But he was only reacting to Kerry. Her wide eyes and parted lips beckoned him.

Semiconscious bliss. That's what he felt when he pulled her close, their bodies touching everywhere. His brain shut down, giving over to sensations. Her rapid breathing. Her small, shapely breasts brushing his rib cage. Her thighs nestling against his.

He looked into her luminous eyes until he lowered his head. She tasted like the orange sherbet he'd eaten for dessert—sweet and tangy, just like Kerry. Then he lost himself when she parted her lips and her tongue touched his. His hands tightened against her back, pulling her closer. She met his passion with equal enthusiasm, kissing him thoroughly until neither could breathe.

They broke together and sucked in air, still clinging tightly. Her breath tickled hot against his chest as his hands moved restlessly over her back. He longed to reach lower, cup her bottom in his hands and pull her higher, until she wrapped her

legs around his waist, but he didn't dare. Not in public. Not yet.

But the urge was there, stronger than ever. They had two days, possibly three, before they each began new lives. Could that be enough for either of them?

AS KERRY FIDGETED restlessly in the guest bedroom, she couldn't stop thinking about that kiss. Wow. Alexi might look like Hank, but the two men were worlds apart. She'd never reacted to her former boyfriend like she did to this prince. The chemistry was just so…intense. Different. She didn't know why, but Alexi brought out a side of her she'd only slightly explored. Sure, she and Hank had kissed a couple of times, but there hadn't been any sparks.

Now she felt like a Fourth of July firecracker waiting for the match to strike.

Rolling onto her back, she stared at the ceiling. When she was a child, she used to imagine she could see the shapes of animals in the plaster of this bedroom. Directly above the bed was a lion's head. Near the window was a flying bird. And beside the closet door was a lamb. She'd indulged her fantasies by making up stories of why they were here, what they were doing. Especially at night. The animals romped around a lot at night.

Now she had more grown-up fantasies. Of romping on the beach with Alexi. Of falling to the cool sand with him. Of making love to him as the waves surged around them. Her girlhood fantasies were as tame as that lamb, but she was really a lion as an adult. Especially when she imagined raking her

fingernails down his back as she pulled him closer, closer…

Sighing, she flopped onto her stomach and hugged a pillow. She'd thought earlier that Alexi might be her reward for years of hard work. For studying during her work breaks, for staying home when her friends were going away for the weekend, for helping her mother and sisters instead of partying.

She'd been a good girl—with just a couple of unremarkable lapses—and now she wanted it all. Her freedom, her career and her prince.

Except he wasn't her prince. He was going to marry someone from European royalty or at least blue blood. Someone his father would approve as the future queen of their beloved country.

But while he was in Texas, he was hers. She didn't have to use her imagination very much to indulge that fantasy.

ON THURSDAY they ate a hearty breakfast of pancakes and sausage with Aunt Marcy and Uncle Bob, then headed out for a tour of the island around ten o'clock. Kerry thought Alexi might enjoy the Victorian sights, since he'd grown up in such historical settings. England was steeped in tradition, and Belegovia probably had one of those old, drafty castles. A few of the houses in the historical district were made of stone and looked like castles.

"Where should we go first?" Kerry asked, driving her new car. Actually, the Saturn was three years old, but it still smelled new. Aunt Marcy's mother had never so much as nibbled a French fry inside this sedan.

“Have you gone on any of the tours or visited any of these sights? I’d like for you to see something new.”

Oh, I like what I’m seeing right now, she wanted to say, but kept quiet as she negotiated the narrow streets of the residential section. “Let’s go to the Bishop’s Palace.” The huge mansion looked like a castle. “I’ve never toured that house and it’s supposed to be spectacular.”

Galveston wasn’t that large, and within a few minutes they arrived at the huge red stone mansion. A new tour wasn’t starting for ten minutes, but after Alexi offered a substantial contribution to the historical society that operated Bishop’s Palace, a private tour was offered.

He looked perfectly comfortable in his “Hank clothes,” walking beside the middle-aged tour guide, making the woman blush and stammer with his compliments and charm. Kerry watched it and smiled, thinking she’d created a monster by encouraging him to use a Texas accent and swagger like a cowboy. While Alexi appeared every inch a prince, Alexi as Hank could charm the spines off a cactus.

After the tour they drove to the Strand, which had a unique Victorian waterfront charm. There was one really nice hotel with a restaurant, but Alexi opted for soft drinks, burgers and fries they could eat outside, to take advantage of the warm weather. Since the tourist season hadn’t started yet, they had the small patio to themselves.

The Strand was only a block from the piers. The smell of

saltwater mingled with city odors such as exhaust and food, but the mix wasn't unpleasant.

"This trip was just what I needed," he announced as he polished off his burger—very neatly, Kerry noticed as she struggled with her second paper napkin. He'd lapsed into his "prince" mode, but she didn't remind him since they were alone.

"What were you expecting when you hopped into my car?" she asked. After spending all day with him yesterday, kissed him on the beach, then spent most of the night fantasizing about him, she felt comfortable asking the question. Although she never forgot he was a prince, he seemed much more of an ordinary person.

An ordinary person with excellent manners and lots of money, charm, good looks, etc.

"The wonderful thing about my impulsive action is that I didn't have any expectations. Oh, I wanted very much to get to know you. And, I must admit, I wanted to tweak Gwendolyn's nose just a bit to make up for her scheduling of the public appearances in San Antonio. But as for what we'd see and do, I had no idea." He spread his arms and smiled. "I was perfectly willing to leave myself in your hands."

Kerry smiled. "I could have been a crazy woman. Or someone who'd go to the tabloids with the story. Or any number of other unpleasant possibilities."

He shook his head. "I knew you weren't. I'm an excellent judge of character and I trust my instincts."

"So you're not…disappointed?"

“Not at all! Why would you think such a thing?”

“I don’t know. I thought maybe you were expecting a woman who was a little more…demonstrative.”

He appeared confused, so she forged ahead. “You know, affectionate.”

“I find you very affectionate. You are especially loving with your aunt and uncle, which is a charming quality.”

“No, I meant with you. Someone who would jump in the sack with you because you’re a prince.”

He appeared genuinely surprised. “Don’t be silly. That wasn’t what I expected at all.” His expression softened, and he leaned closer. “Although if you get the urge, by all means, I’ll cooperate fully.”

Kerry laughed, knowing he was joking…sort of. “I’m not a prude, but I don’t…I mean, I’m not into one-night stands.”

“I never thought you were, Kerry Lynn Jacks,” he said, covering her hand with his. “You are delightfully honest and refreshing. I’m having a wonderful time, although I do rather miss the king-size beds in those nice hotels.”

“I’m sorry about that. If you’d rather, I can tell Aunt Marcy and Uncle Bob that you have an old rodeo injury and need a firmer mattress. They’d understand if you want to go to a hotel.”

“No, I wouldn’t think of it. The couch bed is fine for tonight.”

“What else would you like to do while you’re in Texas? I have one more free day and a fairly new car to chauffeur you around.”

“Tell me, if I weren’t along, what would you want to do?” he

asked, squeezing her hand slightly.

"Me? Well, I'm not sure. Probably just hang out at the beach, then head back home."

"But if you could do anything, what would you like?"

She had to think about it for a minute. Sipping her soft drink, she stared out at the brick street lined with Victorian buildings. She'd always been drawn to old architecture, and one thing she'd wanted to do was stay in one of those beautiful, gingerbread houses built around or before the turn of the century.

"I suppose if this were my vacation and I had the time and money, I'd like to go to a bed-and-breakfast. One of those really nice ones with two or three stories and wide porches and lots of bric-a-brac, as my mother would say. With big trees and lacy curtains. There are a lot of them in East Texas."

"Then that's what we shall do," he announced.

"Oh, but—"

"No, I insist. My treat. We'll find a lovely bed-and-breakfast wherever you'd prefer. It will be my graduation present to you."

"That sounds…wonderful." But would they be staying in separate rooms, or would he want to find a place with a king-size bed that two could share?

LATER THAT NIGHT, after sightseeing, a dip in the Gulf—when Alexi learned that Kerry wore a modest one-piece instead of a bikini—and dinner at the family's favorite restaurant, Gaido's, they settled into the living room to watch the evening news. Kerry had stated earlier that she needed to check on the

weather since they'd be driving tomorrow.

The idea to go to a bed-and-breakfast had been an impromptu one, but something Alexi felt was a great opportunity. While he enjoyed getting to know Kerry's family, he longed for more time alone with her, where he could be himself. Where they could talk without fear of anyone discovering his deception. Where he could fantasize about coming back to Texas, or having her fly to Europe, so they could continue their relationship. He didn't know where this attraction was going, but he wanted to find out.

He hoped they had enough time before he had to choose a bride. Once he was engaged, he wouldn't dishonor his future wife or Kerry by having an affair.

"Would anyone like popcorn?" Bob asked.

Everyone groaned. "I couldn't eat another bite," Alexi stated, making sure he rubbed his stomach and put a little extra twang on the word bite.

Kerry grinned at him. "Me, either."

Alexi felt perfectly relaxed in his role as "Mack," although he still had to be careful when he spoke. Kerry usually found a way to remind him gently when he began to speak, which helped tremendously. Sometimes he forgot to be so "over the top" as Hank McCauley, but no one seemed to notice. As he'd heard somewhere, people saw what they expected to see; a man dressed in boots, jeans and a Western shirt was a cowboy.

Not that he was a real cowboy, but he did feel differently than he had yesterday morning, before running away with Kerry.

Perhaps the relaxed pace of life in Texas, perhaps the intimate homey atmosphere of the Jackses' home. For whatever reason, he felt more attuned with his "softer side." He'd never really known what that silly phrase meant until now. The tender feelings he rarely had time to acknowledge seemed to swell with each hour spent around Kerry and her relatives.

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