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Vintage *Cherish*

The Prince's Heir

SALLY CARLEEN

Sally Carleen

The Prince's Heir

Аннотация

THE PRINCE'S BRIDE When Prince Stephan Reynard swept into the tiny Texas town to lay claim to his royal nephew, he never dreamed the boy's adoptive mother would prove so resistant—so alluring. Seemed not even a king's ransom could convince the spirited Western beauty to part with the cherished heir she'd once cradled in her loving arms. Seemed, too, that for all the prince's blue-blood wealth and station, Mandy Crawford saw him simply as a man... though the feelings she stirred in him were anything but simple. Because increasingly his mission to produce the precious monarch was turning into a mission to woo—and wed—this uncommon woman....

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He made her feel really good...and that was bad.

Prince Stephan hadn't even been here twenty-four hours and already Mandy was getting in over her head. She had to put a stop to this attraction before it went any further. She had to remember that he wasn't just a good-looking man who set off fireworks in her body.

He was a prince—a wealthy, titled foreigner who'd come to steal her son.

Maybe she ought to write it a hundred times, the way she made her students write things over and over so they'd always remember them. Maybe if she never looked into his eyes again or listened to him talk or laugh or got close to him or thought about him...

Even if she could avoid him—and she didn't see how she could—getting him out of her thoughts was going to be a lot tougher.

Dear Reader,

Silhouette Romance blends classic themes and the challenges of romance in today's world into a reassuring, fulfilling novel. And this month's offerings undeniably deliver on that promise!

In *Baby, You're Mine*, part of BUNDLES OF JOY, RITA Award-winning author Lindsay Longford tells of a pregnant,

penniless widow who finds sanctuary with a sought-after bachelor who'd never thought himself the marrying kind...until now. Duty and passion collide in Sally Carleen's *The Prince's Heir*, when the prince dispatched to claim his nephew falls for the heir's beautiful adoptive mother. When a single mom desperate to keep her daughter weds an ornery rancher intent on saving his spread, she discovers that McKenna's *Bartered Bride* is what she wants to be...forever. Don't miss this next delightful installment of Sandra Steffen's *BACHELOR GULCH* series.

Donna Clayton delivers an emotional story about the bond of sisterhood...and how a career-driven woman learns a valuable lesson about love from the man who's *Her Dream Come True*. Carla Cassidy's *MUSTANG, MONTANA*, *Intimate Moments* series crosses into Romance with a classic boss/secretary story that starts with the proposition *Wife for a Week*, but ends...well, you'll have to read it to find out! And in Pamela Ingrahm's debut Romance novel, a millionaire CEO realizes that his temporary assistant—and her adorable toddler—have him yearning to leave his *Bachelor Boss* days behind.

Enjoy this month's titles—and keep coming back to Romance, a series guaranteed to touch every woman's heart.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Peg-Thomas Hussy". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "P" and "H".

Mary-Theresa Hussey Senior Editor

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The Prince's Heir

Sally Carleen



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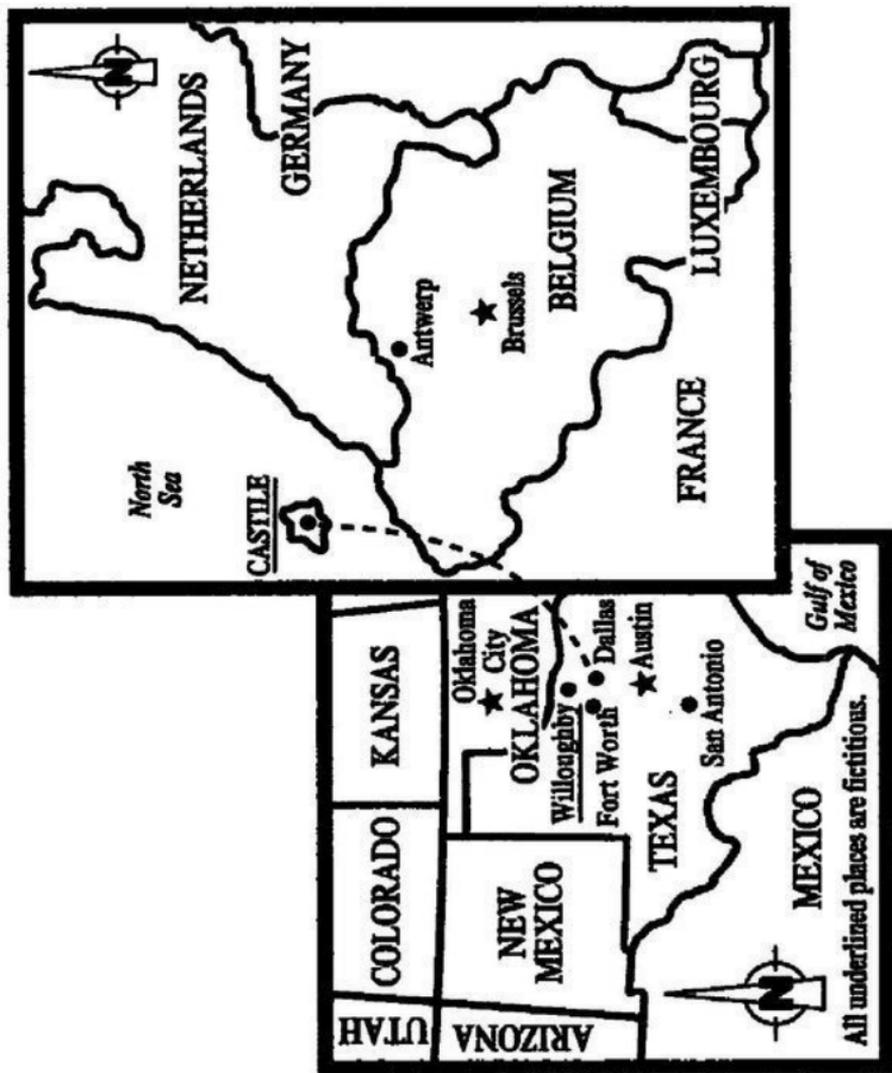
To Veda and Dee, the greatest in-laws ever.

Thank you for taking me into your family.

SALLY CARLEEN,

the daughter of a cowboy and a mail-order bride, has romance in her genes. Factor in the grandfather in 1890s Louisiana who stole the crowd at political rallies by standing on a flatbed wagon and telling stories, and it's no surprise she ended up writing romance novels. Sally, a hard-core romantic who expects life and novels to have happy endings, is married to Max Steward, and they live in Missouri with their very large cat, Leo, and their very small dog, Cricket. Her hobbies are drinking Coca-Cola and eating chocolate, especially Ben & Jerry's Phish Food ice

cream. Sally loves to hear from her readers: P.O. Box 6614, Lee's Summit, MO 64064.



Chapter One

“Mama, Mama, Mama!” The screen door banged open and Joshua charged out as fast as his chubby little legs would carry him. At the same time a large dog, who appeared to be part basset hound, part collie, part horse and all mongrel, gallumphed around the corner, his deep barking amazingly synchronized with Josh’s excited shouts.

Mandy Crawford dashed to the porch, catching Josh as he started his usual tumble down the three front steps. He laughed as she lifted him into the air and whirled him around. “How’s my boy? Can I have a kiss?”

He puckered up and planted a sloppy one on her cheek, then laughed some more.

The dog danced around them, woofing and wagging. Mandy set her son on one hip and reached down to pet the dog, scratching behind his floppy ear, as well as the one that always stood erect. “Good boy, Prince,” she praised, knowing how desperately he wanted to jump on her but didn’t since she was wearing her go-to-work clothes.

“Guboy,” Josh echoed and leaned over to plant a kiss on the dog’s head.

“Yuck! You’ve got a good heart, kiddo. Lousy judgment but a good heart.”

With Prince temporarily quieted, she carried Josh back inside the house. “How about you? Have you been a good boy? Did you mind your Gamma today?”

“Gamma!” Josh wriggled down onto the faded area rug of the living room, wrapped a hand around Mandy’s finger and launched into an enthusiastic but mostly incoherent monologue as he led her toward the kitchen. Gamma, Nana and An Say See were the only words she recognized—Grandma, Mandy’s mother, Nana, Mandy’s grandmother, and Aunt Stacy, Mandy’s sister. The rest of the words were immaterial, anyway. Family was all that mattered.

“Mom! I’m home!” she called. “Do I smell fried chicken? Dad must be on his way. Is he closing the store early today? He should, as hot as it is.”

“In the kitchen, sweetheart.” Her mother’s voice sounded oddly strained, and Mandy hesitated for a moment, fingers of fear tracing down her spine.

Josh tugged on her finger, and she tried to shrug off her unfounded fears. Ever since Cramps died three years ago, she’d been on edge, looking for trouble everywhere and all the time. She had to stop doing that. Life was good, and it was going to stay that way.

She let Josh lead her through the dining room and into the big old kitchen. Golden light streamed through windows on two sides, as well as through the screen door that led to the backyard. White-painted cabinets reflected and amplified the light, while yellow curtains, tied back at the sides of the windows, fluttered in the breezes created by the attic fan. It was Mandy’s favorite room and the room where their extended family always seemed

to congregate.

Standing beside the white enamel gas stove, Mandy's mother looked up from taking pieces of chicken out of the pan and laying them on a platter. There could be no mistaking the anxiety in her face, and Mandy's stomach clenched. Was her grandmother ill? Had something happened to the baby her sister-in-law was carrying?

As if drawn by a powerful magnet, her gaze moved to the rectangular oak table that filled one side of the room. A stranger rose from the chair between her sister Stacy and their grandmother.

It was hot in the room, even with the attic fan pulling in shade-cooled air, but the sober expressions on all the faces sent a chill down Mandy's spine.

"Mandy, we have a guest." Her mother's voice was tight, as if it would explode should she relax her grip on it.

Mandy looked more closely at the tall, elegant stranger. He was movie-star handsome with a square jaw and chiseled features. His hair was black like the summer sky just before dawn and his eyes were as blue as that same sky would be an hour later. For a flickering instant those eyes seemed as deep and as filled with tantalizing promises as that morning sky, but it must have been a trick of the bright light. In the next instant his gaze was glacial and distant, more like a January day when the winter stretched behind and ahead with no end in sight.

Mandy was both drawn to the man and disturbed by him.

His expression was set in stoic, controlled lines, his posture erect with a bearing that went beyond military—as if it were a part of him, something in his blood. His demeanor fit perfectly with his dark suit, white shirt and conservative tie.

No one dressed like that in late June in Texas.

Mandy's mother turned off the flame under the empty skillet and ran her hands down the front of her apron. "Mandy, this is Stephan Reynard. Mr. Reynard, my daughter, Mandy."

Stephan Reynard, Prince of Castile.

Her adopted son's biological uncle.

The smell of fried chicken became cloying and stuffy. The room blurred, with only Stephan Reynard's face in blindingly sharp focus.

She picked up Josh and held him tightly against her.

She should have recognized the resemblance to his brother immediately. Their features were similar, and he had the same stiff demeanor. But Lawrence Reynard's eyes had been gentle and sad, the eyes of a poet and a dreamer. Stephan was obviously neither.

"Hello, Ms. Crawford." His accent was the same...vaguely British with an underlying hint of something earthier, Scottish or Irish maybe.

"What do you want?"

Her sixteen-year-old sister stood and held out her arms. "Hey, Josh, why don't you come with Aunt Stacy? We can go outside and play with Prince for a little while."

Josh reached for his aunt, and Mandy reluctantly let him go.

Reynard arched a dark eyebrow. "Prince?"

"Our dog," Mandy said smugly. "He's the royalty around here."

"I see."

The screen door slammed behind Josh and Stacy.

"All right, what do you want?" Mandy repeated, more insistently this time.

"Mandy," her mother said sternly. "Where are your manners? Mr. Reynard is our guest."

"That's quite all right, Mrs. Crawford," the stranger said. "This isn't a social call."

"I didn't think it was."

"Perhaps we could go somewhere private to discuss this matter."

Mandy folded her arms across her chest. "This is as private as it gets. In fact, we really ought to wait until my dad and my brother, Darryl, and his wife, Lynda, get here, sort of a meeting of the entire royal assembly. Here in America the family is the ruling class, in case you haven't heard."

"Mandy," Rita Crawford said, moving over to wrap one arm around her daughter's shoulders, "why don't you take Mr. Reynard into the living room? It's much cooler in there."

Mandy shook her head. "No. This affects all of us. Doesn't it, Mr. Reynard?"

He inclined his head slightly and indicated an unoccupied seat

across the table from him. “Very well. Then perhaps you’d care to take your seat in the ‘royal assembly.’”

Mandy lifted an eyebrow. “Mother, why don’t you go ahead and sit down. I’ll remain standing. Isn’t that appropriate in the presence of royalty?”

Reynard crossed his arms in imitation of her, but she doubted that she had that same haughty air that enhanced his gesture and made it something more than a brave front. One corner of his mouth quirked upward in a movement that could have been the beginning of a smile on a face less stoic, and for the first time Mandy had a glimmering of understanding of the strong, inexplicable attraction Alena, her friend from childhood, must have felt for Lawrence. There was something compelling and dynamic about this man in spite of the circumstances.

“Only a moment ago you held the heir to the throne in your arms,” he said. “I think we’ve gotten past formalities.”

The heir to the throne. She’d known what was coming from the moment her mother announced this man’s name, but hearing it put into words caused her stomach to clench into a hard, cold knot and her heartbeat to skip erratically.

It’s all right, she tried to reassure herself. Everything about the adoption was legal, every i dotted, every t crossed.

But Lawrence had warned her that the island of Castile lived by the rules of its country, not by anyone else’s, like the stupid decree that would make an illegitimate son heir to the throne if no legitimate heir existed.

But that wouldn't apply here.

"Lawrence did his duty. He went back home after Alena's death and married that Lady Barbara. They'll produce a legitimate heir. Give them a little time and leave Josh alone."

"You haven't heard about Lawrence's death?"

Lawrence's death? Mandy felt the blood drain from her face.

"Ms. Crawford? Are you all right?" The voice seemed to come from far away, part of the whirlwind of fear and confusion that spun through Mandy's head. If Lawrence was dead without leaving a legitimate son, that meant—

Stephan silently cursed his lack of tact as he hastily crossed the space separating him from Mandy and reached to catch her before she fainted.

As he grasped her slim shoulders, however, the color shot back into her pale cheeks. She took a deep breath, straightened and glared at him from eyes that were the same deep, glistening shade of green as the trees and grass they'd flown over on the last leg of the flight to Dallas.

He dropped his hands. "Are you all right?" he repeated, and was shocked to realize that he half wished she would say no, would give him an excuse to touch her, to support her and hold her willowy body in his arms, to lift that wild tangle of copper hair off her neck, run his fingers through the curls and see if they were truly composed of fire. The combination of jet lag and Texas heat was having a most peculiar effect on him.

"I'm fine." She moved away from him, over to the table to sit

in the chair he'd indicated.

Just as well. He had more important things to do than lust after an attractive woman...especially a woman who was, without doubt, going to cause him all sorts of problems before this was over.

Mandy's grandmother took Mandy's smooth, slim hand in her wrinkled one and squeezed it in a comforting, protective gesture, and an unexpected, inexplicable spear of envy shot through Stephan's chest.

Ridiculous. He was tired from the long trip, worn out already, though negotiations had barely begun. He was a member of the ruling family of Castile. They neither had nor could they afford to have pointless emotions.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I assumed you'd know about Lawrence's death. That was presumptuous of me. What makes for big news in our country likely doesn't merit a mention on the back page of the paper in your country."

"How did he die?" Mandy asked, her voice suddenly much softer than when she'd squared off against him a few moments ago.

"In an automobile crash. It happened two months ago."

"I'm sorry. He seemed to be a good person."

"Yes, he was. He would have been a good king."

"But now he's gone and you've come to take his son." She shook her head. "I can't believe he told you about Josh. He went to so much trouble to be certain your family would never find

out.”

Stephan returned to his chair and sat across the table from her. “Lawrence didn’t tell us. The Taggarts were traveling in Europe when they saw the story. They contacted me.”

“Alena’s parents? Why would they do that?” Her eyes hardened to green ice and her lips tightened. “Oh, never mind. I can guess. They saw his picture and realized who Lawrence is. Was. Discovering that the father of their daughter’s illegitimate child was a prince suddenly makes that child socially acceptable, even desirable.”

Stephan considered Mandy’s words. He’d always suspected the Taggarts might have had a hidden agenda in telling him...that it hadn’t been just a case of “doing their duty.” He hadn’t liked their smarmy attitudes and had hoped their story about Lawrence fathering a child would prove to be a fabrication, but it hadn’t.

Rita Crawford set a glass of iced tea in front of Mandy, then took her seat at one end of the table. She was shorter than her daughter, and her hair was smooth and blond instead of wild and red, her eyes a tranquil blue. Yet even at a glance it was obvious the two were related. They both held their heads at that same proud angle that stopped short of being arrogant. Rita’s eyes held the same fires as her daughter’s, though Rita’s were subdued, a lesson probably learned through experiences Mandy hadn’t yet been through.

Vera Crawford, Mandy’s grandmother, was a tiny woman with snow-white hair and a regal bearing that made her seem taller.

Her eyes were a softer green than Mandy's, and she had a quiet, dignified beauty that transcended her years.

When Lawrence had first come to America to attend graduate school in Dallas, he'd regaled Stephan with stories of how different American women were, how independent... especially Texas women. They were, he'd said, all fluff and beauty and fragility on the outside, smiling and friendly, but their spines were tempered steel. No women in the world were prettier and none were tougher.

Now, flanked by three of them, Stephan truly understood his brother's words for the first time.

Mandy's grandmother gave her hand a final pat. "Don't worry, baby. Everything's going to be all right." She turned her attention to Stephan. "Now that Mandy's home, let's get on with things, Mr. Reynard, and discuss our options."

There was only one option as far as he was concerned, but in the interest of diplomacy Stephan complied, anyway. He folded his hands on the smooth wood of the table, carefully avoiding the glass of cooled tea dripping condensation onto the table. When Rita Crawford had offered him tea, he'd expected it to be properly hot. Lawrence had failed to mention this peculiarity of Americans. Although, in this stifling heat, he could understand why they'd want their beverages cold.

"Shortly after Lawrence's death, my father received a letter from Raymond and Jean Taggart. According to this letter, they'd been traveling abroad when they saw my brother's picture in

a newspaper and recognized him as their deceased daughter's lover, the father of her child. Naturally my father assumed it was a hoax, but he sent an investigator to check out the story and discovered evidence that Lawrence had indeed been involved with their daughter."

"Lawrence and Alena loved each other very much," Mandy confirmed quietly. "But of course he couldn't marry a commoner." Her voice rose slightly and she spat out the final word.

"Lawrence was the heir to the throne of his country. He had certain duties."

"I know all about that garbage. Alena told me. And those duties didn't include making any of his own choices or falling in love, but he did both of those things in spite of his family."

And look what came of his defying his duty, Stephan thought, but he refrained from saying it. Obviously Mandy Crawford approved of such rebellion.

"And Joshua is the result," he said instead.

"My son," she said firmly. "Everything about his adoption is totally legal. When he was born—" She bit her lush lower lip, and a film of moisture sprang to her eyes. To his amazement, Stephan felt a sudden wash of grief as if Mandy's emotions were so strong they reached from her all the way inside him.

She cleared her throat and continued. "I presume the Taggarts told you that Alena died giving birth to Josh. They were there when she said she wanted me to raise her son. Lawrence was

there, too. Of course, the Taggarts didn't know he was a prince. Alena and I were the only ones who knew that. She told everyone else he was a poet. He was, you know. That's what he really wanted to do, not go back and spend his life in a fishbowl, doing and feeling only what your rules of royalty permitted him to do and feel."

"I know all about his hobby of writing poetry. My brother and I were very close." Stephan studied his clasped hands. Not all that close, evidently. Not close enough for Lawrence to tell him about Alena or Joshua. "He was instructed to keep his identity a secret. The idea was for him to attend your schools and study your culture without anyone realizing who he was. That was the only way he could hope to truly learn things. The poetry was a part of that disguise."

Mandy shook her head. "The poetry was part of Lawrence, the part that Alena fell in love with. Anyway, orders from the king or whatever had nothing to do with why Lawrence kept his identity secret from Alena's parents. The Taggarts may live in a million-dollar house in Dallas, excuse me, Highland Park—that's much more prestigious, you know—but they both grew up right here in Willoughby. They were dirt poor until Alena's father hit it big wildcatting—"

"Wildcatting?" Stephan had an image of a man fighting with a wildcat. He'd heard some men wrestled alligators in America. Anything was possible over here.

"Oil wells. He made a bundle in oil, then invested it in the

computer business. That's when they really hit it big. They moved to Dallas when Alena was thirteen, and they've been trying to break into society ever since. If they'd known Lawrence was a prince, they'd have gone totally bonkers, bragged to the world, conspired to somehow get their daughter married to him, and when she died, they'd have kept Joshua or given him to you. Whichever, neither Alena nor Lawrence wanted that for their son."

Stephan thought of the rough-cut couple he'd met, of their eager, obsequious attitudes and knew Mandy was right about them.

"Since they didn't know about Lawrence," she continued, "Alena's parents were only too happy to sign the adoption papers giving complete custody to me. It's all legal."

"But Lawrence didn't sign any adoption papers."

Her jaw tightened. "No. Alena didn't put his name on the birth certificate. It was something they both agreed on. Neither of them wanted to take any chances that their son would ever be discovered and have to live the way Lawrence had to live."

Stephan's mouth went suddenly dry. He reached for the glass of tea and sipped some of it. It didn't really taste very much like tea, but it was wet and cool. "As the heir to the throne, Lawrence led a life of luxury. He had everything he wanted."

Mandy's delicate chin firmed, and white pressure lines appeared around her full lips. "Your brother had everything he wanted except love. He found that when he met Alena, and that's

the gift he wanted to give his son. My family may not have a lot of money. Joshua will never ride to school in a limousine or have a private tutor, but he has one thing neither of his parents ever had...plenty of love.”

For a moment Stephan lost the thread of the conversation as he observed Mandy. What must it be like to experience such passion? Her emotions were completely out of control, swaying with the circum-stances... anger, grief, defiance. It was something he'd been schooled from infancy not to do...and he was totally intrigued.

He drew himself up and drank more of the cool, sweetened tea. “If Joshua truly is Lawrence’s son—”

Mandy shot up from her chair, her eyes blazing green fire, scorching him even from that distance. “If he’s Lawrence’s son? Exactly what is that supposed to mean?”

Again he found himself so fascinated by her passion he was momentarily speechless.

Vera Crawford stood, put a hand on her granddaughter’s shoulder and stretched up to murmur something so low Stephan couldn’t catch all the words.

Mandy nodded—reluctantly, he thought—then sank into her chair, leaned back and faced him defiantly. “If you have any doubts that Joshua is Lawrence’s son, then maybe you’d just better haul your—”

“Mandy,” the older woman interjected in a warning tone.

“Sorry, Nana.” But he could tell she wasn’t at all sorry for

what she'd said or whatever she'd been about to say. She spoke the words to placate her grandmother, but continued to glare at him. "Perhaps it would be best if you took the next plane back to your big, cold palace and left us commoners to muddle along the best we can." Her amended suggestion was delivered in a fairly good imitation of his own speech patterns and he found himself wanting to smile in spite of the insult.

"A simple DNA test will resolve any doubts."

"I see." She clasped her hands on the table in front of her, again in imitation of him, and he braced himself for her next jab. She smiled tightly, her eyes still stormy. "You know, it just goes to show how deceptive appearances can be. I'd never have guessed until this very minute that you were dumb as dirt."

"Mandy," Vera Crawford cautioned again, though her tone was less stringent this time. She didn't really disapprove of her granddaughter's behavior.

"Dumb as dirt?" Stephan repeated.

"That's the only possible explanation for your assumption that I'd agree to a DNA test that would leave my son open to being shipped off to an island in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean where the people are more frigid than the climate!"

"If Joshua is Lawrence's son—and I believe he is or I wouldn't be here," he added hastily, "he is a prince, a descendant of a long line of kings. He should be permitted to come to his country and learn our customs and laws. One day, when my father steps down from the throne, Joshua will become a king. He'll be the ruling

monarch of an entire country.”

“You know, if Lawrence couldn’t marry Alena because of his duty to his country, it doesn’t seem exactly fair to me that now her son should be forced into princehood.”

He smiled wryly at her naïveté. “Fair or not, that’s the way it is. The decree dates from 1814.”

She waved a hand. “I know all about King Ormond and that stupid decree, and I don’t care. The man’s been dead almost two hundred years.”

“What decree, Mr. Reynard?” Rita asked.

“King Ormond,” Stephan corrected. “The Decree of Illegitimate Ascension. In the early 1800s King Ormond II produced one son who died in infancy and seven daughters. At his death, his illegitimate son by his acknowledged mistress came forth to claim the throne. Stafford was already popular with the court and the people. He was smart and well liked and he had a lot of good ideas for running the country. Even the queen approved of him, so the precedent was set. If Lawrence had produced a legitimate heir, Joshua would have been bypassed. But Lawrence did not. When my father steps down, Joshua will succeed to the throne. He may choose to abdicate that throne, but he should have the right to make that choice.”

Mandy lifted her glass of tea and took a deep, slow swallow. Her eyes were closed, the long lashes casting a shadow on her porcelain skin. She set the drink down carefully, drew a slim finger through the condensation on the outside of the glass and

turned it a couple of times, her attention seemingly focused on the activity. Finally she again clasped her hands and looked up at him, and he saw that she was no longer angry but sad.

“It broke Lawrence’s heart that he wouldn’t be around to see his son grow up. When he put Josh in my arms, he cried.”

She paused as if to let that phenomenon sink in. Stephan wasn’t as shocked as he might have been, as he had been the first time he’d come upon his brother unexpectedly, a few months after his return from America, and found the tears streaming down his cheeks. Now he knew why.

“Your brother had a heart,” she continued. “He cried when Alena died. He cried when he had to leave his son. Joshua has his father’s heart and his mother’s soul. He’s a warm, caring little boy who will grow into a warm, caring man.”

“He’s a prince. He has royal blood in his veins. He belongs to his country.”

“It’s always bothered me a little,” she went on as if he hadn’t spoken, “that Joshua’s family would never get to see him. My brother and his wife are expecting a baby in December, and I can’t wait to see my niece or nephew. I’m almost as excited as they are. If someone told me I’d never get to hold that little baby, never get to see him grow up, I’d be devastated. When I walked in and saw you here, I was terrified that you’d be able to take Josh from me. I was terrified that you’d insist on holding him and you’d fall in love with him immediately and you’d tell me I had no right to keep your nephew from you. Lawrence said you were

an all-right guy, so I was worried.”

“Then you agree that the boy should be returned to his family.” Even as he spoke the words, he knew they weren’t true.

She arched an eyebrow. “But you didn’t do any of those things I’d expected and feared. You didn’t show any interest in Joshua because he’s your nephew and a neat little kid. Your only interest is in your stupid country. You have no heart, no emotions. You’re exactly the way Lawrence described the rest of his family. You’re a part of the reason he didn’t want the son he loved to return there and be as lonely and miserable as your family made him.”

She slid her chair back and stood, then leaned over the table and for one wild, heart-pounding moment, he thought she was going to kiss him. Instead she grabbed his tie by the knot and drew him closer. Her face was mere inches from his, and he could see a dusting of golden freckles that her makeup didn’t quite hide across her nose, could feel her breath warm and sweet, but mostly he could see the flames that blazed in her eyes. “You go on back to that country and take over the throne as next in line of succession, produce cold-hearted, unfeeling sons who can carry on the family tradition, but don’t you even think about trying to take Joshua with you or I’ll teach you the meaning of the term Texas wildcat, and I’m not talking about anything to do with oil!”

She released her grip on his tie, whirled around and strode out the back door, slamming it behind her. “Would you like another glass of tea, Mr. Reynard?” Rita asked.

Stephan blinked then suppressed an insane urge to laugh. Her

daughter had made an impassioned speech, threatened him with the wrath of a Texas wildcat and left. Even so, Rita Crawford observed the social amenities. Perhaps Texas and Castile weren't so different after all.

"No, thank you," he said and rose from the table. "I must be leaving now. I know this has been a big shock for all of you. Here's the number of the hotel I'm staying at in Dallas. When you've had a chance to assimilate everything, please call me there."

Vera Crawford nodded. "We will, Mr. Reynard."

Stephan considered setting a time limit for them to call, warning them that if he didn't hear from them in three days, he'd contact them again.

But that was unnecessary. They'd call. They were honorable people.

He hadn't been prepared to like this family, but he did.

Mandy was wrong when she'd labeled him unfeeling. In the short time he'd been with her, she'd caused him to feel many things—respect, amusement, admiration and, last but not least, desire in the age-old way in which a man desires a woman. Royalty was not always free to indulge such desire, but that didn't mean he didn't feel it.

He, like Mandy's mother, realized the value of observing the amenities, of refusing to indulge emotions and let them influence one's life. As a member of the royal family—the future king, unless Joshua's claim to the throne could be validated—he could

never afford that indulgence.

Yet as he stood and said goodbye to the Crawfords, and everyone smiled and mouthed the proper pleasantries, he had a very emotional feeling that before this was over, Mandy, with her fiery hair and blazing eyes, her porcelain skin brushed by freckles and her passion for everything, was going to test the limits of his restraint.

Chapter Two

Mandy leaned against the side of the house, half-hidden by a crepe myrtle bush, shaking in fear and anger as she watched Stephan's rental car drive away. How was it possible that her whole world could have changed so much in less than an hour?

Though she supposed she shouldn't be surprised. The last few years had been constant upheaval... leaving her small hometown, Willoughby, for college in Dallas, fifty miles away, renewing her friendship with Alena, then her grandfather's death three years ago followed closely by Alena's death, adopting Josh and moving back to Willoughby. She'd thought she could regain stability by returning to the small town and the family she'd once wanted to leave. And she had regained that stability for a while. She'd traded in her MBA to teach first-grade children, some belonging to her former classmates.

Except for her grandfather and her best friend being gone, the time since she'd come back had been like a return to her childhood when she was surrounded by love and everything was secure and unchanging. She'd been given a second chance, and

this time she truly appreciated what she had. This time she was holding on with both hands and not about to let it get away from her.

Only a few hours ago she'd left to do her morning of volunteer work at the library, confident that things would be the same when she returned. Then she'd come back and walked into the home where she'd lived since she was a child, where she'd always felt safe, into the kitchen where she'd eaten breakfast that very morning with the people she loved.

But in that kitchen, sitting at that same table, she'd seen Stephan Reynard.

And she had a horrible feeling that her life would never be the same no matter how tightly she tried to hold on to the status quo.

The worst thing wasn't even that he wanted to take Josh. That was unthinkable, of course, but even worse was that she was inexplicably, insanely attracted to the man who wanted to steal her son, the brother of the man who'd caused her best friend's death.

For some reason she'd never be able to understand, her hormones had turned on her and focused their attention on this enigmatic man who was the antithesis of everything she wanted out of life. He had wealth and power and that always spelled heartache. If she needed any confirmation of that fact of life... and she didn't...all she had to do was look at Alena's life, especially after she became involved with this man's brother.

Stephan Reynard was from another country. Not just another

city an hour's drive away, but a completely different country, thousands of miles away in distance and lifestyle.

And he was the enemy, the man who thought that country had a claim on her son, who wanted to yank him away from her and from the life she'd so carefully constructed for him.

Yet as much as she feared Stephan and hated him, just as much was she drawn to him. There was something about him, some banked fire in his eyes, something predatory about the way he moved, something primitive buried beneath the layers of civilization and conservative clothing that reached to a part of her she hadn't even known existed before...and really didn't want to know about now.

When he'd callously announced Lawrence's death, she'd been completely disconcerted, not only because she'd liked Lawrence and had been shocked at the news, but also because that meant Stephan had a legitimate reason to take her son. The room had started to spin about her. Stephan must have spotted her weakness, and he'd rushed over to her. For one insane instant she'd wanted to collapse into those arms and be held against that wide chest, to free those uncivilized urges she somehow knew he possessed.

Fortunately she'd recovered her good sense before doing anything that stupid and had not, she hoped, given him any sign of her absurd reaction.

When she'd grabbed him by that ridiculous tie and invaded his space to issue her warning, she'd been fighting dual urges to

use that tie to choke him or to pull his lips to hers. Even now she could remember the sizzle that had seemed to pass from his body to hers, though they hadn't actually touched physically. Even now his elusive scent that was both foreign and familiar, civilized and wild, tantalized her memory.

She snapped a leaf off the bush beside her and crumpled it in her fingers. Her hormones must have gone into overdrive, focusing on the first attractive man they spotted, causing her to attribute to that man all sorts of traits that he didn't possess. Stephan Reynard was a stuffy, snobbish, arrogant prince who wanted to take her son.

She had to shove her rebellious hormones back into their cells and launch a crusade against Stephan Reynard. She had to protect Alena's son—her son now—keep her promise to Alena and Lawrence and keep her family intact.

She drew in a deep breath, determinedly pulling in the familiar scents of honeysuckle and trees and dust in an effort to drive out Stephan's enigmatic, enticing scent.

Spine straight and head high, she returned to the backyard where Stacy, Josh and Prince were involved in one of Josh's favorite games. Stacy threw Prince's bone, then Josh raced with the dog to see who would retrieve it.

"I'm going in to talk to Mom and Nana, Stacy. Would you keep Josh out here for a little while longer?"

Stacy tossed the bone, then when Josh and Prince ran after it, she turned to Mandy, a worried frown marring her young

features. “What’s going to happen, Sis?”

“Nothing. We’ll figure out some way to deal with this.” She had no idea what that way might be, but she would find it. She couldn’t conceive of anything else.

Josh charged back, jubilantly clutching the plastic bone and chattering happily.

“Good boy!” Stacy approved. “See how much easier it is to carry it in your hand than in your mouth?”

Mandy scooped him up and gave him a big hug, loving him so much it was almost painful. Josh wrapped his chubby arms about her neck and hugged her back, gave her a sloppy kiss, then demanded to be allowed down again so he could play with Prince. She set him on his bare feet and he scampered away.

“He doesn’t appreciate how much he’s loved because that’s all he’s ever known,” Mandy said. “That’s the way it ought to be, and it’s not going to change.”

“I’m with you all the way,” Stacy replied.

Mandy went back inside to her mother and grandmother who sat at the table, waiting for her.

“We got problems,” she said.

Her grandmother grinned wryly. “You always did have a talent for understatement.”

She flopped into the chair beside her. “Any thoughts on what we’re going to do?”

Nana shook her head. “When you told us you were adopting Josh, you didn’t tell us about that decree of illegitimate

ascension.”

Mandy sighed. “It didn’t seem important. I thought Lawrence would marry the woman his parents had picked out for him and have lots more sons. It’s the male who determines the sex, you know, so the odds were pretty good on that one. I certainly had no idea the Taggarts would ever in a million years find out about Lawrence. It’s not like they would be on a guest list for the palace ball and recognize him.”

The front door slammed. “Hi, honey! I’m home!”

“In the kitchen, Dan!” her mother called.

Mandy had to fight the urge to jump up, run to her father and throw herself in his big, capable arms, the way she had done when she was a little girl, when he could make everything all better with a kiss. “You’re going to wish you’d stayed at the hardware store!” she shouted instead.

Dan Crawford appeared in the doorway, a large, smiling man with auburn hair fading to a lighter color and streaked with white. He took one look at the three of them and his smile vanished, concern furrowing his brow instead. “What’s wrong? Has something happened to Lynda and the baby?”

“No, they’re fine,” Rita assured him. “Sit down, dear. We need to have a family meeting.”

Dan took a seat at the table and listened quietly while Mandy told him the whole story.

“We need a plan of action,” she concluded. “I don’t think this is going to go away like the chicken pox did.”

Dan Crawford leaned back and exhaled a long sigh. “What did this Stephan Reynard say he plans to do next?”

“He didn’t say,” Rita replied. “He’s staying at a hotel in Dallas and we’re to phone him there after we’ve had time to discuss everything.”

“There’s nothing to discuss,” Mandy said adamantly. “Joshua’s my son now. Both his parents wanted him to have the kind of life I had, not the kind they had.”

“Stephan Reynard is Joshua’s uncle,” her father said, his voice quiet but resolute. “He may not have any legal rights, but don’t you think he’s entitled to some kind of relationship with his nephew? Someday Joshua’s going to want to know about his heritage.”

“Stephan Reynard doesn’t want a relationship with his nephew. He wants to steal him and turn him into a carbon copy of himself, and we can’t let him do that. Josh would be just as unhappy in that role as Lawrence was.”

She rose, unable to sit still any longer, and paced across the kitchen, then turned around and leaned back against the cabinet as if for support. “When I was little, I envied Alena. She had so many toys and clothes and her own suite of rooms. But she always wanted to come to our house to play. I didn’t understand that. Then I went to Dallas to go to school and we got really close again and she told me she’d been lonely and envied my family.”

She wrapped her arms about herself and smiled weakly. “That was the first time I’d been away from you all. I used to think

it would be wonderful to have a place of my own, central heat and air, my own private bathroom. Well, it wasn't. I never told you how much I missed all of you because you were so pleased about my getting that scholarship and going to school. But I did. Something terrible. If I hadn't had Alena, I wouldn't have stayed even that first semester. When Gramps died, it really hit me how valuable you all are to me. Then Alena died, too, and Lawrence put that tiny baby in my arms, and it was like everything shifted and I totally understood. I knew that making lots of money and having lots of things the way Alena had always had was not what I wanted. I'd had the world and given it up. I couldn't get everything back. Gramps was gone. But I could reclaim the rest of my life, and I wanted Josh to have what you gave me, such a good life that he'd never comprehend loneliness. And he does. Where his ancestors came from doesn't matter. Love is the only heritage that matters."

"You're almost right, baby," her grandmother said. "Love is the most important, but do you really want to deprive Joshua of knowing about his biological heritage? You're always saying how it makes you feel connected to live in the house built by your ancestors. Shouldn't Josh at least know about his?"

Mandy sighed in resignation. Her grandmother was right. Even if she'd had a choice...and she suspected that fighting an entire country didn't give her one... she wouldn't be able to keep Stephan away from his nephew.

"I'll call Stephan Reynard tomorrow," she agreed dully.

“You must invite him to stay with us,” her mother said.

A rush of hot blood surged through Mandy at the thought of Stephan Reynard sleeping under the same roof with her. “Absolutely not!”

Rita Crawford ignored her daughter. “I’m sure he can’t be comfortable in that hotel. I’ll clean and air the guest room on the third floor.”

“I’ve got a real strong feeling that Stephan Reynard, Prince of Castile, is quite comfortable in that luxury hotel with room service and valet service and maid service. No way is he going to want to move from there into a third-story room in an old house that doesn’t even have elevators or central air or chocolates on the pillows at night”

“Mandy,” her grandmother said, “your mother’s right. When Mr. Reynard has a chance to see how happy Joshua is with us and how much we love him, he’ll realize he can’t take him away.”

“It’s the polite thing to do and the smart thing,” her father said firmly. “You’re outvoted, baby doll.”

There was a down side to living with an extended family, Mandy thought grimly. Like being outvoted.

“Fine. I’ll invite him because it’s the polite thing to do and because you all insist, but I don’t think he’ll come.”

Maybe he’d be so embarrassed when he refused that he’d stay away from her family.

It wasn’t much, was pretty lame, actually, but it was the only hope she had at the moment.

Heaven help her and her renegade hormones if he accepted.

Stephan had a restless night. Jet lag. Traveling to a time zone six hours behind his. That's all it was. His troubled dreams about the Crawford family, Mandy Crawford in particular, were caused by the jet lag.

He rose early, awakening as usual just before dawn as if the energy of the sun was so strong it made sleep impossible and urged him to be up and busy doing things. He showered, dressed and ordered room service, then stared out his window at the Dallas skyline.

Dallas was a big, fast-paced, modern city, the complete opposite of everything in Castile. Lawrence had brought back glowing reports from America and ideas for bringing Castile into the twenty-first century. Though he'd been fascinated with both New York City and Dallas, he'd expressed a decided preference for Dallas. After learning about Alena and the child, Stephan had wondered if Lawrence's perceptions had been tainted.

Stephan's own education and travels had focused on the capitals of Europe, and, in spite of Lawrence's reports, he'd halfway expected to find Dallas uncivilized and overrun with cattle and cowboys. But he had to admit he'd been favorably impressed. The vitality and energy of the city were almost palpable, yet the people, like the Crawfords, were polite and friendly.

He certainly hadn't expected to like the Crawfords. The Taggarts had described their socio-economic status as "low

class,” “dead broke,” “the whole family living in a run-down old house.” He hadn’t liked or trusted the Taggarts when they’d traveled to Castile for an interview with the king after their claim had proven accurate. He hadn’t been sure how much to believe of their analysis of the situation concerning the Crawfords. Nevertheless, he had fully expected to find Lawrence’s son living in squalor.

He’d been prepared to march in boldly, demand a DNA test from people who would, the Taggarts assured him, be only too happy to relinquish the infant prince into his custody in exchange for a sizable deposit in their bank account. He had certainly not been prepared for the immaculate old house or for the cultured, well-mannered Crawford family who obviously adored Lawrence’s son.

And nothing could have prepared him for Mandy Crawford.

This matter, which should have been simple and easily resolved, had become quite complicated.

He turned away from the window, folded his arms and took in a deep breath. If he was completely honest with himself, he’d have to admit that it wasn’t the jet lag at all that had kept him awake most of the night. It was the situation he’d unexpectedly come into. Specifically, it was one tall, slender woman with wild red hair, flashing green eyes and a burning passion that seemed to extend to everything around her, a woman he’d touched briefly when he’d thought she was going to faint, then been inches away from when she’d gotten in his face to warn him to leave her son

alone, a woman who stayed in his mind far more vividly than any of the women he had touched much more intimately through the years.

The phone rang and he knew it was Mandy, as if his thoughts of her could have compelled her to call...or as if her thoughts of calling him, of picking up the phone, of thinking about what she might say to him, were so strong, so passionate, that they reached across the miles.

He snatched up the phone on the first ring, then, irritated at his own eagerness, answered with a crisp "Hello."

"Stephan Reynard?" Mandy spoke crisply also, but still her soft voice reminded him of the way the wind had breathed through the leaves of the big trees at her house yesterday.

"Speaking," he replied, ignoring his fanciful thoughts.

"This is Mandy Crawford."

"I know."

"We need to talk."

"Yes, we do."

"When would be convenient for you?"

"I'm at your disposal."

"Good. That means we can work around my schedule." Her tone was confrontational, but Stephan found himself smiling. Texas women were definitely different from any he'd known before. Or maybe it was just that Mandy Crawford was different from anyone he'd known before.

"I'll be delighted to work around your schedule. What time is

convenient for you?”

“How about two o’clock in the lobby of your hotel?”

It was a good choice for him, his turf rather than hers, and it was air-conditioned. After experiencing the Texas heat yesterday, that was most definitely a positive aspect. Yet he felt a vague disappointment that he wouldn’t be returning to the hot, stuffy old house overrun with the Crawford family.

“Two o’clock is fine. The restaurant here is quite good. Will you join me for a late lunch?”

“My family and I eat lunch together after we get home from church.”

Stephan flinched. That comment put him in his place, let him know that he had no part in her family, including any part in the child’s life. He could almost see her as she spoke, her chin tilted upward, eyes glowing with righteous fervor. He supposed he should find her defiance upsetting or, at best, amusing, but somehow he didn’t. Somehow he found it admirable and endearing.

“I’ll see you at two,” he agreed.

He hung up the phone, somehow reluctant to break the connection even as he was a little aghast at how much he was looking forward to seeing her again. This was purely business, of course. He would not—could not—become personally involved to any degree. That sort of thing only caused problems. He’d always known that, been taught that from the cradle, and Lawrence’s fiasco certainly proved it.

He couldn't avoid seeing Mandy Crawford again, but he could stop himself from looking forward to it. He knew how to control his emotions.

Mandy stood in the elegant lobby of the hotel, tapping her foot on the marble floor. Two o'clock and no prince. She'd give him the benefit of the doubt. Maybe his watch was slow. Maybe they didn't value punctuality in Castile. But five more minutes and she was out of there.

If he couldn't even be on time, that surely showed he wasn't all that interested in Josh. Or maybe it just showed his complete disrespect for her and her family. After all, they weren't royalty, not even by the American standards of wealth and success. But they were a family, and that counted for more. If he measured them differently, then he was using the wrong standards.

"Ms. Crawford. How nice to see you again."

She whirled at the deep, mellow sound of his voice, the rounded, elegant intonation of his words with that underlying hint of uncivilized ancestry.

And somehow all her righteous anger melted in the depths of his eyes and the width of his smile.

"You're late," she snapped, irritated at herself, and taking it out on him. Why not? He was the cause of her problems, wasn't he?

He glanced at his gold watch then arched a dark eyebrow. "One minute."

"Oh. Well." She shifted her shoulder bag.

“Would you join me in a cup of tea? As I mentioned, the restaurant is quite nice.”

“Yes, thank you. That would be...nice.”

He extended one hand in the direction she should go, then placed the other in the vicinity of her waist, almost but not quite touching. She sucked in a quick breath. He might as well be touching her. She could feel the pulsating, vibrant heat from his hand through her cotton dress, and it was all she could do to refrain from letting that heat pull her to him, to lean slightly backward and feel his hand on her body.

She was being ridiculous again, letting her hormones control her brain, take over her imagination.

She walked faster, marching past the huge columns and into the restaurant that would have made Julius Caesar and his cronies feel right at home. A glass wall on one side looked onto a pool surrounded by lush vegetation. Quite nice was a gross understatement

Mandy experienced a single, quick stab of anxiety that she was completely out of her element, in over her head. Without any overt effort, this man compelled her. He was a prince, born to rule. He had money and power. He was right at home in luxurious surroundings like this hotel. He was dangerous.

She sank into the chair the waiter held for her and gave herself a mental slap. She couldn't afford to lose her perspective. This man had money and power, but she had family and love. He was in over his head.

She started to order a glass of iced tea, then changed it to a cup of hot, the same as Stephan requested.

“Hot sounds good,” she said after the waiter left. “It’s chilly in here.” She rubbed the goose bumps that covered her bare arms. The sleeveless summer dress she’d worn to church was not adequate for the frigid air of the hotel. Stephan, of course, wore a dark suit, white, long-sleeved shirt and a tie, just as he had the day before and probably the day before that. Maybe he even slept in them.

No....

Sitting across from him, surrounded by pompous elegance, she was again struck by the intense savagery that seemed to lie just beneath his cultured veneer. With a clarity she didn’t want, she knew this man slept in the nude.

She folded her hands on the white tablecloth, shoved aside that image and prepared to launch into battle. “Well, Mr. Reynard, or should I call you Your Highness or maybe just Prince?” She bit back a nervous giggle at that thought. Yo, Prince! Sit, Prince! Stay, Prince! Good boy!

He smiled. “Prince? The name you reserve for your dog? I’m flattered. But I insist you call me Stephan. Your country isn’t as formal as mine.”

“Oh, are we playing by my country’s rules?”

“I think that’s appropriate considering we’re in your country.”

“Good. My country doesn’t recognize royalty. Josh was born in this country, to an American citizen. That means he’s an

American, and by our rules, he can't be a prince. That should settle our differences."

He smiled again and inclined his head in a slight bow. "Touché. Legally speaking, I'm sure you're correct. Nevertheless, Lawrence's son is the heir to the throne of my country."

"So? You never did answer my question. What do you want? Do you think I'm going to just turn him over to you, let you take my son...and he is my son under the laws of my country...let you take him thousands of miles away, raise him in a style his biological father hated? Ruin his life?"

"When I first scheduled this trip over here," he said, his voice quiet and noncommittal, "I had planned to return with Lawrence's son—"

"Stop calling him that," she interrupted. "He's not just your brother's son. He's a person. He has a name. Joshua."

"Of course," he acceded. "I had planned to return with Joshua so that he could be raised in the palace and trained for the duties he will one day undertake."

"Your mom and dad anxious to meet their grandson, are they?" she asked sarcastically.

He stared at her blankly for a moment, his expression confused as if he were trying to comprehend a question couched in a foreign language, then a flash of something else swept across his features. He blinked and it was gone, but just for an instant Mandy could have sworn she glimpsed sadness in his winter eyes. "Of course the king and queen are anxious to meet Lawrence's

—to meet Joshua.”

“They don’t want to meet Joshua. They want to meet the heir. That’s all he is to any of you. Alena told me how Lawrence was raised. One nanny after another, practically having to request an audience to see his parents. How can you want to do that to a little boy?”

“He’s a prince. He has obligations and duties to his people.”

The waiter returned with their teas, and Mandy busied herself adding sugar and lemon, trying to keep her fingers from trembling visibly. She wasn’t going to get anywhere in a head-to-head battle with this man. All she was doing was letting her anger and fear spoil her judgment. She had to be as cool as he was, fight him at his own game...and win. For Joshua’s sake, she had to win.

“This is a beautiful hotel,” she said, searching for a neutral subject to give her a chance to regain her equilibrium. “Is it similar to the hotels in your country?”

Stephan looked around him. “The service, yes. But we are a small country and very steeped in tradition. Even our renovated hotels are about a hundred years behind yours. That was why the king sent Lawrence to America, so he could bring back progressive ideas. We’re badly in need of change.” He smiled wryly. “As the world heads into the twenty-first century, we’ve barely entered the twentieth.”

She didn’t miss the fact that he had, for the second time, referred to his father only as “the king.” After what Alena

had told her about Lawrence's childhood, she wasn't surprised. Perhaps Stephan was more like his brother than he'd first appeared. Perhaps the fact that he had no real family had occasioned that brief glimpse of sadness she'd seen earlier when she'd mentioned his parents.

"So Lawrence came to America to study progress, and you went to Europe to study history."

He nodded and sipped his tea.

"Don't you have a sister? Alena mentioned a sister."

His taut features seemed to relax infinitesimally, and his long fingers curled around the small cup. He had a soft spot beneath that rigid exterior after all. "Yes, I have a younger sister, Schahara"

"And where did she go for her studies?"

"She's a woman. The queen taught her all she needs to know at home."

Mandy set her cup on the table so hard a bit of tea sloshed out onto the immaculate white linen. "Excuse me?"

He chuckled. "I told you we needed to learn about progress. In defiance of tradition, my sister has traveled extensively all around the world on her own accord. She's really the one with the ideas on how to bring about the progress we so desperately need. She's already computerized the household records and constantly monitors world happenings by using the Internee."

"You have computers in your country? Computers aren't nineteenth century."

He laughed then, a delicious, low sound that traveled from her ears through her body like a curling, rhythmic wave. “We’re not completely primitive. We have electricity and indoor plumbing and even computers, though only the wealthy can afford the luxuries like televisions and computers, and many of our people still live without most or any of the modern conveniences.”

“That’s part of the changes you want to make?”

“A big part. As I said, Schahara has many plans already mapped out. The king wants to maintain the status quo and doesn’t give much heed to her ideas. However, she will be an excellent adviser to the present king’s successor.”

“And who will that be if Joshua doesn’t...um—”

“If he doesn’t return to Castile? Then I’ll succeed to the throne.”

That was the first encouraging bit of news she’d heard since yesterday. “Well, so, wouldn’t you like to be king?”

“It’s not a question of whether I’d like to be the king. It’s a question of who is the rightful heir to the throne.”

“But you would like to be king.”

“I neither like nor dislike the idea. It’s a duty. If I have to perform it, I will, of course. But Lawrence’s son is—”

“Joshua! His name is Joshua Crawford and he’s my legally adopted son and you can’t just throw him over your shoulder and take him off to another country.” She bit her lip and looked down at the table. She was losing control again.

“I assure you, I have no intention of doing that.” And he

was completely in control, as always. “Once I met your family, I realized my original plans couldn’t happen. You and I must find a compromise. I’ve given it quite a bit of thought and have decided perhaps both sides would be best served if we could work out an alternating schedule of living arrangements while he’s underage, say six months a year in each country. That would give him a chance to be with your family as well as to learn about his country.”

Mandy’s stomach clenched. She gazed at Stephan in horror. “Divide him up? Tear him in two? Keep him so unbalanced he never feels at home anywhere, never has a chance to settle into either life?”

“Very well, then what do you suggest?”

It was, she decided, time to play her trump card. She had no other choice. She leaned back in her chair and tented her fingers on the tabletop. “I suggest you get to know him and let him get to know you before we make any decisions.”

“That sounds fair.”

“My mother’s cleaning out the guest room for you even as we speak. You can move in tonight and start getting to know your nephew immediately.”

His eyes widened, and for a moment those banked fires she’d imagined she’d seen in his dark gaze sprang to life as awareness surged across the table between them, tingling along her skin and dancing around her breasts.

She swallowed hard and fumbled with her cup, lifting it to her

lips and trying to focus on the lukewarm liquid inside rather than Stephan's scorching gaze.

When she looked back, the distant January skies had returned to that gaze and once again she had to wonder if her imagination and overactive hormones had created a delusion.

"Very well," he said. "I'll check out of here and move into your guest room tonight for a two-week stay. That should give us time to make all the necessary decisions." Despite his proper language, his voice was husky and raw and she recalled her earlier certainty that he slept in the nude.

And he'd be sleeping under the same roof as she tonight.

Chapter Three

A number of factors had compelled Stephan to agree to Mandy's offer—or, more precisely, her challenge—for him to stay in her home. A large part of that decision had sprung unexpectedly from her comments about the way both he and Lawrence had been raised. Until she brought it up—threw it in his face, to be precise—he'd shoved to the back of his mind the way he and his brother and sister had huddled together when they were small children in a big, cold palace, ignored by their parents, clinging to each other. Lawrence had been the oldest and the first to recognize that dependence on the succession of nannies was futile. He'd shared that knowledge with his younger siblings, pointing out that they were royalty and couldn't afford to become attached to people.

Certainly Stephan realized that a prince had to be rational and

avoid sentimentality. Even so, he couldn't simply take this child off to a foreign country and into the midst of strangers. It was imperative he get to know him first. Joshua wouldn't even have a brother or sister to cling to.

But there was more to his decision, something elemental underlying the battle he and Mandy were waging, something that tugged at him and drew him to her, something that stirred his blood and tightened his groin. That something had him speeding to her house with his suitcases in the trunk of his rental car, anticipation and dread sharing equal space in his chest.

When he pulled up in front of the big old house, he wasn't surprised to see the entire family sitting on the porch, drinking that strange iced tea. Mandy, her mother, grandmother, younger sister, a tall older man with reddish hair streaked with white, who must be Mandy's father, a younger man with auburn hair who was holding hands with a smiling brunette—undoubtedly the brother and his wife—along with Joshua and the mongrel they called Prince. At least he didn't have to worry about giving in to any of those lustful tuggings for Mandy, not with that many people around.

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