

# *The Princess Pact*

## *Epilogue*

### **Reunions**

Somehow riding through the Northhelmian palace gates on horseback felt very different from entering on foot. A laugh drew Rafe's attention to his right, and he decided that it wasn't the horse that made the difference.

He let his eyes linger for a moment on the pale blonde of his betrothed's hair. His betrothed. He savoured the words and then let out a chuckle of his own. Certain members of his family would be astonished to discover just how much the frivolous and light-hearted third prince of Lanover was enjoying his newfound commitment.

As their large party began to dismount, he considered how much his life had changed. When he first entered the kingdom of Northhelm, he had been looking for adventure and a way to break his sister's curse. When he first entered the Northhelmian palace, he had been one of a band of refugees, exhausted and confused.

He gazed at the white stone of the large structure. It was too dissimilar from its Lanoverian counterpart to give him any feeling of homecoming. He hoped that would change soon, though. He'd already told Marie he was willing to make Northhelm their home, and her exuberant thanks had been all the payment he'd needed for his sacrifice. Of course, the kiss that had come with them had also been gratefully received.

"Should I be worried about what's behind that expression?" asked an amused voice beside him.

He looked down at Marie, and a wicked grin spread across his face. "I don't know. How about I show you what I'm thinking and you can make up your own mind?"

Before she had time to do more than look slightly puzzled, he swept her off her feet, into his arms and pressed his lips firmly against hers. For the briefest moment she melted into his embrace. Then she found her feet and pushed him roughly away.

"Rafe!" The admonition came with a mock glare, but there was enough laughter in her eyes to let him know she didn't really mind. "Are you trying to shock the entire court? We do things a little more formally here in Northhelm."

"Sorry." His hands continued to lightly grip her waist. "I couldn't resist."

Marie shook her head and smiled. "When I first met you, I'd just been wishing for a bit of excitement to shake up the boredom of court. Somehow, I suspect I won't need to make that wish again."

"I promise to do my best to make your life exciting, Princess." He let her go and bowed with mock solemnity.

"Children, children, behave." William strolled over to join them.

Marie poked him in the side. "You're just trying to avoid going inside now that the entire palace knows you ran off on a hare-brained scheme and got yourself caught."

William assumed a haughty expression. "Caught by a master enchanter, if you please. Anyone might have made the same mistake."

Rafe let out a bark of laughter. "That's perfect. You should look just like that when you say it. You'll have them all convinced in no time."

William gave him a pained look that dissolved into amusement. "I'm not sure that I approve of your choice of husband, Mare. He seems entirely too light-hearted for the Northhelmian court."

"Yes, I know." Marie's eyes glowed with love. "It's delightful, isn't it."

William made a retching noise and Marie poked him again.

"Children, children, behave," said Rafe, making both of the siblings laugh.

William slung an arm around Rafe's shoulders. "You know, I think I might find it in my heart to smooth your way with the court. I'm a great favourite with them, after all."

Rafe would have laughed back at his soon to be brother-in-law, but he knew from Marie's stories that the crown prince was speaking the truth. He had somehow perfected the art of projecting a responsible and serious demeanour. Rafe had a lot to learn from him.

"On one condition," continued William.

Rafe raised one eyebrow in question.

"You have to promise to introduce me to your sisters. The beauty of the Lanoverian royal family is famous throughout the Four Kingdoms, after all."

"Why, thank you," said Rafe with a straight face. "I do pride myself on my beauty."

Marie snorted. "I really don't know which of you is more ridiculous." Her expression turned curious. "Will any of your sisters be coming for the wedding, Rafe?"

Rafe caught her around the waist again. "Absolutely not. Since we're going to be married tomorrow, there won't be time for them to get here."

Marie smiled and shook her head in exasperation, but she blushed a little, too, at the warm look in his eye.

William let out a great, "Ha!"

When Rafe looked at him enquiringly, he grinned back. "If you think you're getting out of a big, fancy wedding, you are mightily mistaken."

"I'm not the heir," said Rafe. "Nor is Marie. Surely our wedding will be nothing to yours."

"That's why I'm planning to elope," said William.

"Is that a suggestion?"

"We are *not* eloping," said Marie firmly.

"No," said a quiet voice behind them, "you most certainly are not."

All three of them turned around slowly, Rafe dropping his hands from Marie.

He had only met Queen Louise once before, but he recognised her easily enough. She still exuded the strange combination of dignity and warmth that he remembered. Since Marie had been fretting about the reunion with her mother all the way back to the capital, he stepped back, wanting to give them space.

Marie moved towards the queen, her hesitance obvious in every line of her body. "I'm so sorry for doubting your love, Mother. For saying such hurtful things. Will you forgive me?"

"Forgive you?" Queen Louise sounded horrified and Rafe was nearly overwhelmed by the desire to rush forward and shield Marie. "Forgive you? It is I who need forgiveness! I should have told you the truth from the beginning."

Rafe breathed a sigh of relief as Marie ran forward the last two steps and fell into her mother's arms. Both women began crying.

Rafe glanced over at William, expecting to share the awkward look of outsiders witnessing someone else's emotional moment, but William's gaze was trained on the ground. He looked unhappy rather than awkward, and Rafe remembered there was still one more reunion to go.

Finally Marie broke away from her mother, and they both mopped their eyes and laughed – more from happiness than humour, Rafe judged. He expected William to step forward and greet his mother, but the young man didn't move.

The queen looked across at her son and put her hands on her hips. "Now, *your* unfortunate adventure I take no responsibility for!"

For some reason, her stern rebuke caused all of William's tension to drain away. He looked up and gave her a tentative smile.

"It was rather stupid of me, wasn't it?"

His mother's indignant expression melted into one of love. The softness suited her much better than the harshness had done. Clearly, both of her children had instantly recognised that her reproach wasn't serious.

"Well, the two of you did manage to quell the rebellion singlehandedly, so I suppose I can't be too angry with you." She stepped forward and embraced her son. "Even if you did manage to terrify me in the process."

"We didn't do it entirely alone," said Marie, pointing in Rafe's direction.

All three of them turned to look at him. He felt unaccountably nervous under the queen's scrutiny. Queen Louise had liked him when they had met before. Hadn't she?

It took only a moment for her warm smile to reappear, and he gave an internal sigh of relief before turning on his most charming smile in return.

"I'm very happy to see you again, Prince," she said, giving special emphasis to his title.

The king had sent a full report back to the palace ahead of them, so Rafe wasn't surprised by her knowledge. He did his best to increase the charm in his expression. "My deception was painful to me, Your Majesty, and I hope you will quickly forget it."

"Of course," she said, nodding graciously. "You watched over my daughter and then saved my husband's life. I could forgive much worse than an omission about the name of your parents. In fact, it gave me great comfort while you were all gone to remember that you were with Marie."

"We are sorry for causing you so much concern, Mother," said William.

The queen sighed. "It's not your fault that I let myself be ruled by fear for most of my life. I was so afraid that the worst would happen. And then it did and I nearly fell apart. It took a couple of unexpected visits – first from our neighbours and then from your godmother – to remind me that I'm not alone. No matter what happens from here, I know I'll be supported by both the Four Kingdoms and the High King. They will give me the strength to get through it."

"You saw Godmother, too?" Marie's eager excitement suggested that the godmother to the Northhelmian royal family was a little softer and less no-nonsense than the one who aided the Lanoverian royal family. Not that he could blame his godmother exactly; she did have rather a heavy load.

"Too?" Queen Louise eyed her daughter curiously. "I'm afraid your father's report stuck to the basics. I hope you'll tell me everything that happened to you, when you get the chance."

"Of course I will," said Marie, coming over to slide her arm around Rafe. "Although you've already heard the most important bit of news."

She blushed and Rafe tried not to be distracted by the adorable red in her cheeks. It still felt amazing to know that he was the cause. If she didn't stop looking so enchanting, he was going to forget himself and kiss her in public again. And apparently the people of Northhelm frowned upon such displays of affection.

But then the people of Northhelm also thought it strange that their princess wasn't as beautiful as all princesses were supposed to be. So, clearly, something was wrong with them.

Rafe had already forgotten that he had once agreed with the general populace. Every day since he had first met her, she had grown more beautiful in his eyes. A strange parallel with the way his feelings for her had deepened each day.

He just knew his family were going to love Marie. After all they, more than anyone, knew that strength and intelligence and noble bearing were more important than beauty.

As always, thoughts of his family led him to thoughts of his cursed sister. Only this time, the usual sadness was tinged with hope. He had already sent off a message to his parents. If her curse had been done under Rumpelstiltskin's power, they now had the key to breaking it. He could only hope it would be that easy.

"Ah, yes, about that," said the queen, pulling his attention back.

Rafe struggled to remember the topic of conversation.

"I've been thinking that a Midwinter wedding would be nice," she said.

"Midwinter?" For some reason William sounded amused.

Rafe followed the other prince's eyes across the courtyard and caught sight of Ferdinand, just as William waved him over.

The major joined them and bowed respectfully to Queen Louise.

"Ah, Ferdy," she said, her voice warm and welcoming. "Thank you so much for your role in protecting my son and daughter. I knew I could trust in you."

"Thank you, Your Majesty." Ferdinand bowed again.

"Yes, yes, never mind that," said William. "We've just heard the news that it's to be a Midwinter wedding, Ferdy."

Rafe looked between the two of them, still wondering what was causing William so much amusement. Unlike his royal friend, Ferdinand looked glum at the pronouncement.

Unfortunately, the expression drew Rafe's attention to the slightly bulbous set of Ferdy's eyes. He remembered Marie telling him that the palace children called him Major Frog. He hoped they did it in a friendly rather than mocking way, since Ferdy seemed like a truly decent person.

"Sorry old chum," said William, clapping Ferdinand on the shoulder. "Sounds like you won't be able to come up with an excuse to flee the capital this Midwinter."

Ferdinand sighed. "But just think of all those balls!"

William rubbed his hands together. "Think of all those balls, indeed." He grinned at Rafe. "Midwinter should leave enough time for some of your lovely sisters to attend, don't you think, Rafe?"

Marie ignored them both and smiled up at her betrothed. "I think a Midwinter wedding would be perfect."