



## To Claim His Heir by Christmas (Harlequin Presents)

By Victoria Parker

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**To Claim His Heir by Christmas (Harlequin Presents)** By Victoria Parker

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### **...and back again?**

Now, as Christmas approaches, the prince has just one thing on his mind—winning Luciana back. And if Thane can convince her to trust him with her secret, he could get the greatest Christmas gift of all—a beautiful queen and an heir!

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## **To Claim His Heir by Christmas (Harlequin Presents) By Victoria Parker Bibliography**

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

From Debbie Haupt, RT Magazine; 4 1/2 stars! 'Parker's tale is a fantastical retelling of Romeo and Juliet mixed with Beauty and the Beast. The flashbacks give excellent insight into her broken hero and wary yet courageous heroine with secrets - and the little prince co-star is delightful'.

#### About the Author

After years of stifling her writers muse and acquiring various uninspiring job-titles, Victoria Parker finally surrendered to that persistent voice and penned her first M&B romance. Turns out, creating havoc for feisty heroines and devilish heroes truly *is* the best job in the world. In her spare time she dabbles in interior design, loves discovering far flung destinations and getting into mischief with her rather wonderful family.

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He was going to propose. Any minute now.

It was every little girl's dream. A handsome man, one of the most beautiful she'd ever seen, sat opposite her at an intimate table for two, with a velvet box nestled in his inside pocket. Aristocracy, no less. The suave Savile Row sophisticate who was Viscount Augustus. The man who'd set the scene so superbly.

Dimly lit chandeliers cast a seductive romantic ambience throughout the room of the critically acclaimed restaurant, where Michelin chefs were famous for creating masterpieces of haute cuisine. Open fires crackled and crystal tinkled as exorbitantly priced champagne flowed, poured into flutes in an amber rush of opulent effervescence. And beyond the wide plate-glass windows lay the majestic vista of the Taren-taise Valley—Savoie, bathing in the rose-pink wash of dusk, its white-capped mountains towering from the earth like watchful sentinels over the exclusive lavish ski resort of Pur Luxe.

Stunning. Awe-inspiring. The stage was set. All that was left were the words. And Princess Luciana Valentia Thyssen Verbault was paralysed with dread.

*Please, God, please get me out of this somehow...*

*There is no way out, Luce. Not only do you have a duty to your people but a deal is a deal. And you made one with the devil himself.*

Lord, she hated her father right now. 'Go to the Alps,' he'd said. 'Take a few days to think things over, get your head together.'

Luciana had taken in his seemingly sincere autocratic face, paler since she'd last seen him as his health continued to deteriorate, and thought, yes, a few days to ponder. After all, she'd thought, she had years before her coronation, plenty of room to breathe, to barter for more time. But, as the saying went: Men plan. Fates laugh.

King Henri of Arunthia was being pushed by his doctors to retire. So she'd come to inhale the invigorating

crisp air, to infuse her mind with solace. Reassess. Come up with a strategy where matrimony wouldn't equate to losing the only person she lived for. What her father *hadn't* said was that he was dropping her smack-bang in the midst of her worst nightmare by sending Augustus to seal the deal.

She supposed she should have seen it coming. Avoiding the Viscount via any means possible since her return home from China three weeks ago obviously hadn't worked a jot. All she'd done was delay the inevitable.

*You can run but you can't hide.* Wasn't that what they said?

Truth was, for so long she'd been living on borrowed time, wishing with all her heart that time would miraculously stand still. But time, as she'd soon realised, waited for no man. Let alone a woman as desperate as she was to avoid the ticking clock.

Now she would pay the ultimate price for bartering with her father five too short years ago. Five years of living a normal existence, well hidden in her sanctuary near Hong Kong. Five years of latitude and liberty in exchange for total compliance—starting now.

'Luciana? Is the *filet* not to your liking, *querida*?'"

Her eyelashes fluttered as she fought the urge to squeeze them shut. Pretend she was anywhere but here. *Querida*... Lord, she wished he wouldn't call her that. Wished too that she could extinguish the heat banked in his blue eyes. Hadn't he had enough carnal relations for one afternoon? She almost asked him. If he'd enjoyed the brunette in his suite. The one who'd answered his door half naked and ravaged. But the truth was she couldn't care less. It was the endearments she loathed. They hinted at affection and love and there would be none in this marriage. On either side.

He was playing a part, though, wasn't he? She wondered, then, if he was going to get down on one knee. While she sincerely hoped not, he was a virtuoso at playing the press and they'd want the fairy story.

*Fairy story.* Yeah, right. A fool's dream. Like so many others that taunted her day and night.

'It's wonderful, thank you,' she said, attempting another small mouthful even as her stomach roiled.

It could be the best *filet mignon* in the world and it would still taste like black ash. Though no one would ever know it. Trained by the best, she was the perfect picture of elegant refinement. Graceful to a fault.

'Good. I want tonight to be perfect,' he said softly. Slick and skilful.

Luciana whipped out the serene smile she'd perfected since the cradle—not too bright or flashy, nor too dull. *Just perfect*, as her mother would say. Neglecting to add the tiny detail that it would strip her throat raw every time she faked it.

*I want tonight to be perfect.'*

Guilt trickled through the turbulent maelstrom of emotions warring for dominance in her chest. He was trying, wasn't he?

*Of course he is—he wants a throne of his own. Of course he's pulling out every weapon in his cultivated arsenal.*

Still, it wasn't his fault that the 'arranged marriage' part of her conditioning hadn't quite taken root. It wasn't his fault that she dreamed of another. It wasn't his fault that she had a taste for dark and dangerous.

*Yes, and look what trouble that landed you in. Surely you've learned your lesson by now?*

And Augustus was good-looking. Very handsome, in fact. Sandy blond hair artfully shorn and midnight-blue eyes. He had women after him in their droves. Yet he was her duty—tall and fair. The man she'd been ordered to wed. And from there to his bed.

A phantom knife sliced through her stomach and instinctively she bowed forward to ease the lancing pain... Then she forced her poise to kick in, reached gingerly for her glass and poured the amber liquid down her throat. Maybe if she got tipsy enough she'd have enough anaesthetic on board to say yes without shattering into a million pieces.

Flute back to the table, Luciana picked up her fork to push the tenderised beef around her gold-rimmed plate on the off-chance that he'd reach for her hand again. Once this evening was more than enough.

Would she ever get used to his touch? It was nothing like when *he'd* touched her. Nothing like the wickedly high jolt of electricity that had surged through her veins, or the blaze of her blood creating a raging inferno inside her.

*Stop! For the love of God, Luciana, stop.*

Problem was, as always, she found it impossible to halt the flow. The fiery rush of memories. Memories of a man who'd given her a gift to last a lifetime.

Pain and secrecy thumped inside her ribs like a dark heart. Because no one could know. No one could ever, *ever* know.

Princesses of the realm, first in line to the throne, were *not* meant to disgrace themselves by breaking free of their dutiful chains. Not meant to alter their appearance beyond recognition to avoid the paparazzi and go to rock concerts in Zurich dressed like a hippy, doling out false names. Not meant to fall in love...no, *lust* at first sight and have wild, passionate love affairs. They especially weren't supposed to have them with Arunthia's enemy. Not that she'd known exactly who he was when they'd met.

Such an ironic twist of fate. One she would have reduced to a dream if she didn't hold and squeeze and hug and kiss the living proof of her reckless walk on the wild side every single day. Yet, despite it all—despite knowing she'd given her innocence to a treacherous, dangerous man—she could never, *would* never regret it. Because her first and only lover had given her a gift that was the single most brilliant, bright spark of joy in her world...her son.

Discreetly she sneaked a peek at the mobile phone hidden in her lap to see if Natanael's goodnight text had come through. Nothing. She stifled the melancholy of missing him by picturing him playing happily with her sister Claudia and baby Isabelle, while Lucas watched on adoringly, protectively. Possessively.

At times it physically hurt to look at them. The perfect family. So deeply, devotedly in love. Their beautiful marriage was eons away from the unions she was used to. Luciana hadn't known such a thing existed. She would do anything for that. Pay any price.

Envy, thick and poignant, pierced her chest with a sweet, sharp ache and she cursed herself for feeling that way. Wanting what she couldn't have. Plunging lower than the black trench of despair she'd dug beneath her own feet. On the verge of letting loose the scream that was irrevocably bottled up inside her.

*Come on, Luce. You know happiness isn't written in the cards for a royal firstborn. Only duty.*

Luciana tried to swallow and block the lash of repercussions her trip down the aisle would provoke before anguish swept her mind away on a tide of insanity.

*Stop this! You're protecting him—just as you've always done.*

But how was she ever going to leave her heart? The person she needed in order to breathe, as if he were the very air itself? Her gorgeous little boy.

Claudia had sworn she'd save him from the oppressive walls of Arunthe Palace, love him as Luciana did until she could figure out a way for them to be together always. As Queen she'd have more power. She would think of something. She *had* to.

In the meantime Luciana would always be near—but what about his tub time, and the way he liked to be tucked tight and snug into bed? Luciana wanted to run his bath with his favourite bubbles that made his tender skin smell sweet. And what about when he called for her in the night when he was having bad dreams? *She* wanted to hold him when he was scared.

The thought of him asking for her and her not being there... It tormented her mind. How she was going to explain it all to him she had no idea. And how was she going to leave Natanael behind if this man dragged her to his family estate in Northern Arunthia?

*So tell him. Tell him. He might understand. Support you. Help you.*

This man? No. No, she didn't trust him not to betray her confidence. Didn't trust anyone.

*You made a deal, Luciana. Now you pay.*

Ah, yes, a deal made in naive, youthful folly. In desperation such as she'd never known. A pact etched in her mind like an effigy on a tombstone. A shiver ghosted over her as she was haunted by the past.

*'Please...please, Father. I can't do it. I can't get rid of him.'* She knew he was small, so small inside her, but she couldn't take him away, she couldn't give him up. *She couldn't.*

*'Luciana, you are not married. You will bring disgrace on us all. You are the heiress to the throne and the father of the child you carry is an enemy of this nation. Do you forget his assassination attempt? On me? He is a traitor to the crown.'*

*'Yes, but I didn't know who he was. I—'*

*'If this man ever discovered your child's existence he could use him as a pawn to gain power over us. He could take Arunthia. And do you honestly want his Satan of an uncle getting his hands on your son? We have avoided war for sixty years—do you want your people to live in tyranny as those in Galancia do?'*

*'No, no. But...no one need ever know. I could go away for a while. Please, I'm begging you. Pleading with you... Let me keep him.'*

*The King's deep sigh filled the oppressive air stifling his office and she teetered on the precipice of throwing her pride to the gale and plunging to her knees.*

*Then he said, 'Five years, Luciana. Five years of freedom. That is all I will give you. But the world must never know he is yours because Thane must never, ever find him. You will never be able to claim him as your son and heir. Do you understand me?'*

*'Yes. Yes, I understand,' she said—wild, frenzied, frantic. Unthinking of the consequences of what she was agreeing to. So desperate she would have sold her soul in that moment.*

*'You will be hidden well in the Far East, and in five years you will return to take the throne and do your duty. You will marry, Luciana, am I clear?'*

*'Yes—yes, I swear it. I'll do whatever you want. Just let me have him.'*

*His steely eyes were clouded with disappointment and grief and sorrow. That gaze was telling her she would rue this day, this bargain.*

*Luciana ignored it. As long as her son got to take his first breath, got to walk upon the earth and live life to the full, without the constraints of duty like a noose around his neck, she would make a deal with the devil himself. And so she did.*

\* \* \*

Augustus's voice shattered her bleak reflection and she tuned back in to the chatter that fluttered around them in a hushed din.

All she had to do was remember that her happiness came second to Natanael's safety. And she *would* keep him safe if it was the last thing she did.

'Luciana? Would you like coffee and dessert or...?'

*Or... ?* Lord, not now. Not when she was falling apart at the seams. She wasn't ready to hear those words. Not yet. *Not ever.*

She felt powerless. Completely out of control. Like a puppet on a string.

The room began to spin.

'Yes, thank you, that would be wonderful,' she said, her voice thankfully calm and emotion-free as she plastered a cringe-worthy beatific smile on her face.

Coffee. Crème brûlée. That would buy her another twenty minutes, surely.

Panic fisted her heart as the tick of the clock pounded in her ears. Tick-tock. Tick-tock.

The walls loomed, closing in around her, crushing her lungs.

*Calm down, Luce. What are you going to do—hyperventilate and pass out? Make a total fool of yourself?*

She needed air. She couldn't breathe.

'I'm sorry—please excuse me. I think I need...' To go out on the balcony? No, no, no, he'd follow her and drop to one knee, she knew. 'To visit the restroom. I'll only be a few minutes.'

After all that she realised he wasn't listening. Someone on the other side of the room had caught his eye, and Luciana frowned as his lightly tanned face stained a ghastly shade of grey.

'Augustus? Are you all right? Did you hear what I said?' Slowly he shook his head. 'I do not believe it. Luciana, you will never guess who is dining in this very room. I had no idea. Your father will be most displeased. I am so sorry...'

He was *sorry*? Ah, wonderful. One of his women, no doubt. The buxom brunette from earlier, come to ruin his perfect proposal? She didn't want to know. It was her parents' marriage all over again. No doubt she'd be faced with his mistresses most mornings too.

*Well, that's better than you warming his bed, isn't it?*

Anything was better than that.

'Don't worry about it, Augustus. Your secret is safe with me.' Her father wouldn't care less who the man whored with. There was more likelihood of mutual backslapping. 'I'll be back soon.'

Ignoring her, on he went. 'Of all the places in all the world.'

Luciana bit into her bottom lip, stifling the impulse to run like a world class sprinter. Praying for this evening to be over. Praying someone would rescue her from this nightmare. Before the truth escaped on the scream that was building gradually, inexorably, and she single-handedly destroyed the very life she was trying to protect.

'Of all the places in all the world... What an unpleasant surprise.'

His cousin, Seve, who was seated to his right at the oval dining table, leaned his upper body sideways in an effort to be discreet.

'I can see the sweat beading on his upper lip from here. It's your old pal from that exclusive rich joint you were sent to in Zurich. Viscount Augustus.'

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

#### **Janet Magnuson:**

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#### **Robert Landers:**

A lot of people always spent their very own free time to vacation or maybe go to the outside with them family or their friend. Did you know? Many a lot of people spent these people free time just watching TV, or maybe playing video games all day long. If you wish to try to find a new activity this is look different you can read some sort of book. It is really fun for you personally. If you enjoy the book that you simply read you can spent the entire day to reading a book. The book To Claim His Heir by Christmas (Harlequin Presents) it is very good to read. There are a lot of individuals who recommended this book. These folks were enjoying reading this book. In the event you did not have enough space bringing this book you can buy the e-book. You can more easily to read this book out of your smart phone. The price is not too expensive but this book possesses high quality.

#### **John Smithers:**

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