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by the author of

Illusions of Love and Seasons of the Heart

**CYNTHIA
FREEMAN**



**THE LAST
PRINCESS**

Her most captivating novel of bittersweet love
Piques your interest right from the beginning ...”

—NEW YORK TIMES

CYNTHIA
FREEMAN

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To Shelly, Carole, and Kimberly

Chapter 1

NOT since Gloria Morgan's engagement to Reginald Vanderbilt had New York society seen such a frenzy of excitement as was aroused by the announcement of the impending nuptials of Lily Goodhue and Roger Humphreys. Although few events elicited more than a yawn from New York society, as soon as the embossed, cream-colored invitations were received, the ladies of the Four Hundred promptly beat a path to their favorite couturiers. It was to be the marriage of the decade, a match—if one were inclined to embrace God—made in heaven; the coming together of two distinguished families who came as close to being aristocracy as was possible in America.

On the evening of the engagement party, the limousines lined the sweeping, tree-lined driveway to the Goodhues' Long Island mansion. Lily stood alongside Roger and her parents in the vast marble-floored hall, greeting their guests. Even among that galaxy of bejeweled society, her beauty was dazzling. It went beyond the fact that her hair was the burnished red of an autumn sunset, or that her eyes were the color of the huge emerald she wore on her ring finger, or that the features of her heart-shaped face were sheer perfection. She had an air, an inner radiance that few who saw her that evening would ever forget. It even outshone the expensive pink Chanel dress her mother had ordered from Paris.

As they stood posing for pictures which would appear in the next day's *New York Times* and *Herald-Tribune*, there could have been no doubt as to her parents' joy. Diminutive, southern-born Violet looked as youthful and lovely as the

day when she had burst onto the New York social scene as the bride of the tall, handsome rubber magnate Charles Goodhue.

The guests moved into the house, which was decorated with extravagant urns of azaleas, roses, and lilacs arranged to exquisite perfection. Beyond the open French doors of the ballroom the terrace and grounds were softly lighted, and the fountains at the far end of the pavilion played under dim yellow lights. Blood-red rhododendrons lined the path down to Long Island Sound.

Just then the band struck up "Lily of the Valley" and Lily circled the room in Roger's arms. There seemed no question that she was in love. It was evidenced by the smile on her face and the lyrical note in her voice as she greeted her friends. Roger, too, appeared delighted. Despite his unmistakably Brahmin reserve, he seemed unable to take his eyes off Lily. Yet as the evening wore on, Lily knew she had to get away for a few minutes, to escape the hundreds of eyes, so many of which were jealously hoping to find some flaw in this perfect evening. As Roger turned to ask a cousin to dance, Lily slipped quietly from the room, ran across the terrace, down the broad stone stairs, and along the path toward the conservatory. The glass doors closed behind her, leaving her in a silent world of exotic blooms.

Idly she let her gaze wander to the glass ceiling. The dazzling sight of a million stars in the midnight-blue vastness suddenly made her wonder how she had come to this moment. If she was shocked to find herself the focus of this evening's party, she supposed, she would—literally—have to go back to the cradle to trace the roots of her sense of unworth. . . .

Chapter 2

LILY had always felt herself to be an outsider in her own home. She had never really belonged and it seemed that she had been paying for the sin of her birth from the moment she had first seen the light of day. Was any of it her fault? That was something she had been trying to decide for almost twenty-one years.

Violet and Charles Goodhue had been childless for ten years of their marriage and had almost abandoned hope that they would have a child, an heir to the Goodhue fortune. It had been a dynasty hard won, a dynasty which had been established three generations before by ignorant Dutch immigrants, and by dint of fraud and corruption and ruthlessness it had flourished.

With the first generation's ill-gotten wealth, the second generation of Goodhues had bought respectability. At the same time, they saw that wealth quadrupled. Charles's grandfather, riding the crest of the new age of industry, had transformed a modest fortune into a staggering one in the rubber trade in the Amazon. The slaves who worked those South American fields were too far removed from the States to taint the Goodhues' ever luminous reputation.

So, by his day, Charles Goodhue felt confident that when the biographies were written, his antecedents would appear merely as swashbuckling cavaliers.

The roots of Violet's wealth were strikingly similar. She had come from a long line of rumrunners and slave owners. Her grandfather had made a small fortune into a great one during the War Between the States selling bootleg liquor to

both sides. Afterward, when other former slave owners found themselves dispossessed, Henri DuPres had emerged on the scene the triumphant master of the greatest and richest plantation in Louisiana.

Despite their combined inherited fortunes, and Charles's sharp business acumen which continued to make those fortunes more vast, he and Violet seemed denied by heaven the very thing they so desired—a child.

The sore lack was unmitigated by any wealth or possession he could ever hope to attain. Adoption was socially unacceptable for their set, and the idea of having a child not of his blood was abhorrent to a man like Charles Goodhue. What he longed for most was his own heir. Violet had less desire than he, but she was chagrined to disappoint Charles in an area that mattered to him so. Yet her barrenness appeared to be fait accompli.

Then one morning in Baden-Baden, where they had gone to take the baths, Violet awoke with a strange nausea. Never having been ill, for all her diminutive, fragile build, Violet immediately sought the counsel of Herr Doktor Steinmetz, the resident physician at the watering place.

So when Dr. Steinmetz congratulated her with the news that she was to be a mother, she greeted it with speechless shock. Then, as the reality of it set in, she all but flew from the room. "Charles! Charles!" she cried out, entering their room. "We're going to have a son! The gift I've wanted to give you for so long."

Neither of them doubted for a moment that she would bear the son they so wanted. In early celebration, Charles treated her to a new ruby necklace and matching earrings which might have turned her neighbor, Alice Vanderbilt, ever so slightly green with envy if she had seen them.

From that moment on, Charles treated Violet with even more than his usual adoration. He catered to her every whim. She was, after all, thirty years old—well past the usual child-bearing years.

He had the nursery remodeled in blue and had the vast dressing room adjacent to Violet's boudoir equipped for her confinement.

Faster than they had anticipated, that final day of miracles was upon them. The house was still but for the frantic efforts going on in Violet's transformed boudoir. The only sounds

that could be heard were the excruciating screams emanating from Violet herself. She had never known pain before and she could scarcely tolerate it. There was nothing fragile about the sounds coming out of her just then.

When at last the baby came, she cried out with relieved joy: "I gave you your son, Charles"—all the while thinking, *I will never, never, never go through this again.*

Motherhood was a joy she could easily have dispensed with. If it had not been for her strongly felt obligation to provide Charles with an heir, she would have taken every precaution against becoming pregnant. Now that her duty was done, she'd have no more of it.

Never again would she endure the nausea, the ungainly bulk, and worst of all, the isolation. In her day it was not fitting for an expectant mother to show herself in public. Violet and her lovely gowns remained closeted for two full social seasons.

The past nine months had proved sheer agony. Violet had spent most of that time in bed, out of sheer spite, and now she vowed that she would never, never subject herself to this again.

The infant was taken from her immediately following the birth. Violet was only too glad to have the child removed from her. She lay among her satin and lace pillows waiting for Charles's delighted praise. But it was grave eyes he turned upon her.

"What's wrong, dear? Is the child all right?"

He nodded. "Yes."

"What then?" she asked, extending her hand for him to come closer.

He could hardly form the words. "We do not have a son."

"What do you mean?" she cried.

"I mean, Violet, that you have given birth to a girl."

Impossible—impossible! How could that have happened? It had to be a son. A son was all Charles wanted. "I can't believe it!" she whispered.

Coldly he answered, "Believe it. It is a girl."

For the first time since their marriage, she heard censure in his voice, and she suddenly experienced an emotion quite foreign to her: overwhelming remorse.

Charles merely shook his head. "Yes, indeed, we have a girl and not even beautiful, like you, Violet. We have a red-

headed, skinny little monster. I don't know where that flaming red hair could have come from. Not from my side of the family, certainly."

When the baby was placed in Violet's arms, she looked down at the child and began to weep. This was not the chubby precious son she had expected. The baby was scrawny and unattractive, and if Violet had dared, she would have given her away and forgotten the whole thing. Her capacity to love was very limited. Charles received what little affection she had to give and there was none left over for an infant of the wrong sex.

Both parents had been so unprepared for a girl that they had never considered any name but Charles Goodhue II. It wasn't until the day before the baptism that Violet was willing to make a decision. Having come from a long line of southern beauties, whose names had been inspired by the beauty of roses, pansies, and violets, she was hard-pressed to come up with one for this ugly baby girl.

Lily? She thought bitterly of the Biblical verse: "Remember the lilies of the field—they toil not, neither do they spin." Useless—like this child. So just before the infant lay in Violet's arms at the baptismal font to be anointed in the faith of that famous lineage of blooms, Lily Marie Goodhue was grudgingly given an identity in the world.

Watching from his pew, Charles could not refrain from staring enviously at his friend Henry Ford, as he stood with his young son at his side. How had he, Charles, offended God so much so as not to be allowed a son of his own? He felt his ancestors looking down at him with contempt. Without an heir, the fortune they had amassed had no meaning. Violet was so frail, he dared not let her risk another pregnancy; she had barely survived the trauma of this delivery. Much as he longed for a son, he couldn't face life without Violet. His love for her was the only thing on earth that exceeded his obsession for an heir.

Over the next few years, as Lily turned from infant to toddler to schoolgirl, she seldom saw her parents. She was enchanted by their elegance and glamour, but whenever she reached out to embrace them, they quickly withdrew, becoming remote, cold figures who never seemed to notice her existence. They spent their winters in the house on Fifth Avenue and traveled

extensively through the continent while Lily was left on Long Island in the care of nursemaids and governesses, almost forgotten. In time she gave up her efforts to reach out to her parents, knowing from a very early age that any such attempts would be spurned. In spite of the incredible luxury of her Long Island home, she grew up with an overwhelming sense of deprivation.

It was impossible to mistake their indifference. She was unloved by her own parents, for which she felt a sense of shame, as if she was unworthy of their affection.

Had it not been for her cousin Randolph Goodhue, three years her senior, who was sent from Manhattan to visit from time to time, she would have had no friends at all. But even then, her sense of worthlessness increased when she was five and Violet, despite her vow never to have another child, unexpectedly became pregnant. Her memories of Lily's birth had faded and she was almost enthusiastic about the possibility of giving Charles a son. And this time, she swore, it *would* be a boy. She had just returned from a trip to Europe late in her sixth month when Lily first became aware of the change in her mother's figure.

"Mamma, why is your tummy so fat?" she asked that night at dinner.

Violet looked at her daughter reprovably. "Children should be seen and not heard."

That night Lily asked Michelle, her French nursemaid, "*Pourquoi est-ce que Maman est si grosse maintenant?*"

"Parce que ta maman va te donner un frère, mon petit chou."

Lily squealed in excitement. "*C'est vrai? Un bébé!*"

She was ecstatic the day little Charles was born. He was so beautiful, like a little doll—her very own baby brother.

However, her joy was short-lived. She was chastened every time she tried to embrace him or make him smile. And as Charles began to walk and talk, she found herself standing silently by, watching, as her parents lavished love and affection on him. Seeing her mother and father play with Charles, Lily felt a sense of loss so strong, it was almost a physical pain. She decided the reason they never played with her was that she was so ugly. Everyone said so. She heard them whispering, even fat old Cook. And she would gaze into the mirror, comparing her thin childish form and unruly red hair, first with her mother's dainty perfection, and then

with Charles's fat rosy limbs and curling dark hair, and be filled with self-loathing.

At night, she would cry into her pillow with unfulfilled longing. Michelle, fiercely loyal, would try to comfort her. "But you are beautiful, *chérie*—you are! And of course your parents love you."

"They don't love me!" Lily would sob. "I'm ugly. I wish I could die!" And sometimes her thoughts were darker still. If Charles would die, she would be all they had. Surely they would love her then. She knew such dreams were wicked, but no matter how she fought them, they came back, unbidden.

As little Charles grew, the children became a little closer. The Long Island house was a lonely place and even their affection for their son did not keep Violet and Charles from their extensive travels. Lily had almost overcome her resentment by the time she was eleven. She rather liked having someone to follow her around.

Then, one Indian summer day, glorious and warm, Lily rode her dappled mare into the field at the rear of the Long Island compound. Charles was on his fat little pony. It was a lazy, lovely afternoon as the sun filtered down through the trees. While the children rode, the elderly English governess gradually nodded off.

She was awakened by Lily's screams. "What is it?" she cried out, her heart pounding.

"It's Charles. He fell off the horse!" Lily screamed hysterically.

"The horse? You mean the pony!"

"No, no—I let him ride my horse for a minute, and he fell off!"

Tears pouring down her cheeks, she led the governess to where Charles lay on the ground. His face was covered with blood, and as the governess came closer, she saw with growing horror that his head was turned at an unnatural angle. Falling to her knees, she pressed her ear to his small chest, listening for a heartbeat. "Oh, dear Lord! He's dead!" she cried, grabbing his wrist and searching frantically for a pulse.

"You evil girl, you devil," she shouted at Lily. "How could you let Master Charles ride your big horse?" The woman knew that she had been at fault for dozing off. She dreaded the consequences. She would never be able to find another

job. And all because of this wicked little red-haired monster!

Terrified by the insane look in the governess's eyes, Lily ran to her horse, leapt on, and galloped off into the nearby trees.

Blinded by tears, she almost didn't see the high stone wall looming up ahead, but she reined in just in time, slid from the saddle, and flung herself down in the high grass, weeping hysterically. She had committed the most horrendous crime imaginable in allowing Charles to ride her horse. It was no excuse that he had been begging her for weeks. His voice echoed in her ears, even as she covered them now with her hands. "Please let me ride Sugar, Lily. You have all the fun. It's not fair. I have to ride around on this slow old pony. Come on, please?"

"No, Charles. You're too little."

"How come you get to ride Sugar? You're mean," he pouted.

"No, I'm not mean, Charles. I'm eleven and you're only six. And just because you ask doesn't mean you get everything you want. Maybe with Mother and Daddy, but not with me."

Charles, lip trembling, had pleaded, "Please, Lily, please! I'll love you forever." He looked so sweet she had given in. She had been planning to mount behind him when Sugar reared at a garter snake and bolted.

Shrieking, "Hang on, Charles," Lily had leapt onto the small pony. She was desperately trying to catch up when the mare drew up short before the property fence, catapulting Charles over her head.

No wonder she was unworthy of love—she was unworthy even to exist. She *had* wished Charles would die—and now he had. Closing her eyes, she willed Charles back to life. Maybe this was only a dreadful nightmare and she would awake in the morning in Michelle's arms. But Michelle too was gone, dismissed for some minor infraction when Lily was eight.

Gradually the shadows lengthened and night descended. It was pitch-dark when she saw lights flashing in the distance. They had come for her. Maybe they would kill her too or lock her away in the cellars. Too frightened to run, she sobbed convulsively. The last thing she remembered was a dark figure looming over her as she lost consciousness.

When she woke up she was home in her own bed. But she was hardly safe. When she tiptoed into the hall she saw all

the draperies had been drawn. The servants tended her needs in silence as if she were too evil for speech. From time to time she heard Violet weeping, but neither her mother nor her father came to see her.

Then, after so much silence and her mother's occasional weeping, came the sound of an automobile on the cobblestone driveway, the door opening, then the murmur of subdued voices. With trepidation, Lily slipped from her room and crept to the balustrade, looking out between the posts.

Below, in the vast hall, was a small black casket, and she saw Charles lying there on ruched satin. His mouth was delicately red, his cheeks pink, and his dark hair curled about his face. He looked so lifelike, she almost cried out, "Charles, you're not dead! You're just pretending!"

But he was, and the heavy scent of hundreds of white gardenias wafted upward, making her ill. She ran to the bathroom and vomited, then stood drenched in perspiration. She felt so dreadfully sick, she knew she must be dying.

But she had survived, and the next day she was ordered to dress for the funeral. She could scarcely bear it. At the gravesite, the smell of the gardenias almost made her sick again. Oh, why hadn't she died instead of Charles? She sobbed uncontrollably until the tiny casket was lowered into the grave, when once more she was rescued by merciful oblivion.

It wasn't until another week passed that her father spoke to her. Towering over her like the wrath of God, he spoke quietly and deliberately. "Even though you may have meant no harm, you are responsible for this terrible tragedy. Your mother is totally destroyed. She will recover faster perhaps if she doesn't have to face you. I think it would be best if we send you away to school." Then, as a fresh wave of grief washed over him, he added, "Right now I too would be glad never to lay eyes on you again."

Lily willed herself not to hear those devastating words, not to remember them. But they left a scar that never healed.

Enrolled at Madame Sauvier's, a school for girls in Lucerne, she was unable to forget the past. Although her room looked out on a vivid blue lake, surrounded by Alps, beneath which was a green pasture with yellow buttercups, she saw little of the beauty. Her eyes were always clouded by the past. There was no reprieve. Her nights were filled with anguish, and her days were spent in loneliness. She was too withdrawn

to make friends. It was too painful for her to try to play with the other girls whose families loved them and cared about them. As children will, they whispered about her behind her back, and Lily shrank from them, knowing herself to be an outcast.

Her parents saw her twice a year. On her birthday, and at Christmas, but their visits were coldly formal and they never suggested she return home. Had it not been for Randolph, she would have been utterly friendless. He wrote regularly and after a year he actually came to see her. He was with his parents in France and took the train alone to come to Lucerne. It was the happiest day of her life when she met him at the station with the inevitable chaperone.

"Lily, Lily, Lily—I'm so happy to see you!" he said, lifting her up and twirling her around.

He tucked her hand in his as they ran to the village, the chaperone trailing behind them. Walking the narrow streets, Lily saw the real beauty of Switzerland for the first time.

As she sat across from him at the pâtisserie, sipping her hot chocolate, he observed her eyes above the rim of her cup. The brutality she had endured at her parents' hands was scored in their expression. She had been wounded, as surely as if she'd been struck. Randolph raged silently at the waste. Couldn't her parents see how beautiful and sensitive Lily was? He had always hated the way Uncle Charles and Aunt Violet had favored Charles, but it seemed incredible that they could blame her for the little boy's death. He resented his own parents for not intervening.

"Lily, how are you?" he said, taking her hand.

"Fine, Randolph, really. Fine." Lily smiled, but her eyes remained sad. She seemed so beaten.

"Have you made any friends yet?" he asked gently.

"No," she shrugged, a little hopelessly. "They don't seem to like me much. I guess it must be my fault."

"That's not true, Lily," he said softly. "You're the most lovable girl in the world."

"No one else seems to think so."

"You're wrong, Lily. Your parents do."

Lily looked at him incredulously.

"Well, even if they don't, Lily, I do. I've always loved you, ever since we were little."

Tears welled in her eyes, but she quickly brushed them

away. "Do you, Randolph? Even with these glasses, and the bands on my teeth, and my red hair?"

"Especially your red hair," he laughed.

Over the years, Randolph's visits and the knowledge that he loved her slowly repaired Lily's self-esteem. She began to do more things with the other girls and gradually made a few friends. By the time she finished Madame Sauvier's and went to the College of the Holy Sepulchre in Bern, she had come out of her shell. She even had a best friend, Colette Valois.

The two girls were totally different. Lily was five feet six, with pale skin and flaming red hair. Colette was four feet eleven, with olive skin and dark brown curls. Her parents referred to her as their *précieuse poupée*. She giggled and bubbled. Life had been good to her. She was the youngest of five, her four older brothers ranging from twenty to thirty, all tall and handsome.

"You are beautiful, Lily," said Colette. "When the braces come off your teeth, you will be *magnifique*."

Lily laughed. "I don't think that getting rid of my overbite will bring about a miracle."

"You will see, *chérie*—Colette has plans for you."

She was right. When the bands Lily had worn for four years were removed, her mouth was perfectly sculptured, her teeth white and even. True to her word, Colette whisked her off to Paris, where her mother spent two days transforming the awkward schoolgirl into a swan. Her hair was styled, her face made up, her nails manicured, and even her eyebrows plucked. Then Colette took her to her favorite couturier and made her buy a wardrobe that really set off her slender height. That evening as Lily dressed for dinner, she saw herself as she really was, and not through her parents' eyes. And the girl who gazed back at her from the mirror was truly beautiful. She had a delicate heart-shaped face with provocative cheekbones, and the emerald eyes which had always been hidden behind glasses and bangs were large and luminous. Her body, which just last week had seemed gangling, was now slim and lovely in her new dress which showed just enough rounded bosom to make her desirably feminine.

When she went downstairs she flung her arms around Colette's mother, but she knew she would never be able to thank her enough.

Chapter 3

UPON graduation, Lily asked permission to stay abroad with cousins who lived near the Valoises in Paris. It had taken little persuasion on her part for Charles and Violet to say yes. With their lack of blessings, she closed her eyes and found herself catapulted into a glamorous new world of excitement of holidays in Biarritz, skiing in Gstaad, and weekends in the country outside of Paris. She was no longer protected by the strict rules of a Catholic school, and men began to pursue her. Most were impoverished aristocracy and they weren't seduced just by Lily's beauty. One had to be smart to secure one's future these days and her money was worth more than their titles. Who cared about coronets anymore, except for their value in securing a wealthy American wife? Still, her dazzling looks made the chase all the more exciting and she was soon considered one of the most desirable American women in Paris.

For the next year or two, Lily was wined and dined in almost every European capital. She had more proposals than she could count—but her answer was always no. She had yet to fall in love. Each time a man aroused her feelings, she pulled away. She found she could not give herself, emotionally or physically. Had her parents' rejection permanently crippled her feelings? Having never been loved, was she incapable of loving? The thought frightened her. She wanted to be loved, to have a family, children of her own.

She was celebrating her twenty-first birthday at the Valoises' villa in Cannes. Corks were popping and the champagne flowed,