

An Excerpt from *The Guardsman*, by Cat Treadgold

Relieved of the need to talk, Liam could observe. He was not going to satisfy their justifiable curiosity. God forbid he should tell them the whole story. Would they believe it? He'd mastered the art of deflecting questions with questions of his own. Laurie was quick to take the bait. Seeing their Northwest-casual attire—in Paul's case, more like Northeast-casual, with his Polo shirt and chinos—he wished he hadn't defaulted to his Israeli dress clothes. He might as well have been wearing a zoot suit. Joe wore jeans with crocodile cowboy boots and a button-down shirt. In Port Townsend Liam could opt for comfort over couture. He felt an instant connection to his new brother-in-law, abandoning his usual wariness. All he needed to know could be found in the new couple's eyes. Joe gazed at Ali as if he couldn't believe his luck. And, despite the advanced pregnancy, Ali had never looked so beautiful and happy.

Whenever he thought he could get away with it, Liam stole a glance at Teresa, who, he couldn't help but notice, was mostly quiet, with an expression that said, "little lost girl." She stirred all his protective instincts along with the baser ones. He didn't normally go for princesses. Her pasty-faced fiancé was chatting up her mother—an upper-crust society type he was all too familiar with. What did Teresa see in this guy, Paul? He was already hammered. Liam supposed he was a successful businessman with the right bloodlines. A woman like Teresa would need those qualifications. Although not once had she regarded her fiancé with the barest hint of fondness. She seemed more interested in pushing food around on her plate. Her mother looked far more smitten. No accounting for tastes. But now, Liam would be living next door to Teresa, a constant temptation. *She won't bother to tempt the likes of you*, he told himself, but then one of his glances met hers, and their eyes locked. He knew that look. A bolt of lust shot through him. Thank God he was seated.

She wants you too. So what? Nothing good can come of that. The Pauls and Carries would never get their snoots out of the air, even if Teresa did deign to lower herself to Liam's level. The best-case scenario would be a tawdry, secretive, guilty affair. Wasn't he done with those?

Even in casual clothing—*especially* in casual clothing—Teresa scrambled his brains. Her elegant curves, framed in designer jeans, and the creamy flesh he detected beneath the filmy blouse open to reveal a scant inch of cleavage had him close to slavering. His fingers itched to touch her hair, which fell in soft, loose curls to her shoulders. He gulped and tried to concentrate on the conversation in his immediate vicinity. Laurie was talking about real estate in Port Townsend—something about rising prices.

Dessert was served. Fresh strawberries for Teresa and Carrie and strawberry shortcake with whipped cream for everyone else. He watched as Teresa cut her strawberries into small bites. She was shorter than Ali—he guessed five-foot-six—and not much more than a hundred pounds, with a petite build. He saw the way her mother, equally slender, tracked every morsel that went into her daughter's mouth. Did Teresa really think she couldn't indulge in even a few bites of shortcake? Then he saw her reach for the whipped cream with a distinct air of defiance and grinned.

Ali caught his eye. "Are you having fun? It's nice to see you smile."

He chuckled. "Life is just one surprise after another."

“Don’t I know it.”

Rostand had turned the heat lamps on, along with the fairy lights that snaked through the clematis and wisteria.

His movements slow and deliberate as those of a man fifty years older, Paul headed toward the house, where he was received by Rostand. Liam hoped they had a guest room to accommodate him. They could hardly let him drive.

Liam scowled. The guy must have serious bedroom skills. He couldn’t imagine what else would bind a woman like Teresa to such a putz. Though the bonds must be tenuous. Why else would she agree to relocate, even temporarily, to Port Townsend?