

A BWWM ROYAL ROMANCE

PRINCE *Un-Charming*



TYLA
WALKER

PRINCE UN-CHARMING

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TYLA WALKER

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CAESAR

“Did you really think I was going to let you get away that easily?”

Imelda slurs her words, pressing up against my body. She kisses my neck desperately, clinging to my blazer as if her life depends on it. Arousal flurries down between my legs as I thread my fingers through her blonde hair and return the kisses just as passionately.

No one will walk into this bathroom. At least, I hope not. We'll be in big trouble if they do.

This isn't the first time I've been with her. As the daughter of a distinguished diplomat, Imelda is expected to behave impeccably whenever she attends social events.

Considering this is a lavish gathering that I'm hosting with Alex as two princes of the royal family of Solvaria, we anticipated our guests would behave to the highest standard.

Not Imelda, though. If only the world knew just how dirty she gets whenever she gets a bit of alcohol in her system. She becomes insatiable.

And I, ever the gentleman, would never refuse a woman who desperately needs some release.

“I really shouldn't,” I tease gently, saying one thing as I do the opposite, enjoying the way she grazes her teeth along my chin. “Alex won't appreciate me abandoning him. Yet again.”

“Oh, whatever. Alex will be fine. He knows how to command the room on his own.” Then Imelda pulls away to look at me directly. “So do you.”

“Is that so?”

“Mm-hmm.” She nods, a coy smile lingering on her lips. Her lipstick is all but gone, with only a weak pink hue on her lips serving as a memory of a moment when she was more composed. “You attract everyone’s attention the second you walk into a room.”

“He’ll hate me for this.”

Clicking her tongue, Imelda shakes her head. One of her hands grazes down my neck, across my chest, and down between my legs. “He’s your family. It’s his royal duty to forgive you.”

Alcohol lingers on her words. I suck in a breath, allowing my eyes to close as she palms me through my pants. My head gently rests on the porcelain wall behind me, imagining my dick buried in her again.

There’s a reason I like spending time with her. She’s a good time. I don’t know if I can call her my favorite, but she knows how to leave her mark on a man.

Sometimes literally.

“Come on,” I say breathlessly, grabbing her by the shoulders. “Have some decorum.”

Imelda scoffs, but her hand still rests on my bulge. Relentless. “You’re one to talk.”

“This is an important event. I should be out there chatting people up.”

“You can do that afterward,” she replies nonchalantly, eyes half-lidded. “The night is still young. You’ve got lots of time to talk with those people.”

The friction on my dick makes it difficult to think clearly. My eyes close again, and I bite on my bottom lip, suppressing a moan as Imelda trails her mouth along my neck and nibbles on my ear.

We can be quick. So as long as no one finds us here, we’ll be fine. No one’s going to notice our absence.

Fuck it. My head isn’t working too well right now. The other one, however, is eager for some attention.

Imelda moans loudly as I crash my lips against hers again, grabbing her by the neck. Her fingers work effortlessly at the buttons of my dress uniform, but she falters as I guide her backward into the nearest cubicle. With my eyes open, I’m careful not to drive her into the wall with my movements.

Once inside the cubicle, I slam it shut behind me, but it doesn’t lock. That doesn’t matter. This won’t take long.

“Caesar,” Imelda whispers, gasping as my hand finds the spot between her legs that is sopping wet at this point. “Please.”

“I’ll give you what you want. You’ve been begging for it all night.”

“I’ve been wanting it since the last time I saw you.” She closes her eyes as my fingers tease her entrance. “Why don’t we do this more often?”

“This isn’t an ideal match,” I whisper, watching how her expressions change with each slight flick of my thumb. “And I know that you wouldn’t be loyal to me. I’ve heard the rumors about you and what’s-his-name.”

Imelda giggles. Then she clenches her jaw as her hand rests over mine. My fingers move more quickly this time around, prompting small gasps from her lips every now and then.

“They don’t mean anything.” Imelda swallows hard. “Why should I be loyal to you if you’re not willing to do the same?”

My eyes narrow at that. “Because I haven’t been promised to anyone yet.”

“Do you expect me to believe that the playboy act will stop the moment your father betroths you to some so-called noble lady?” Her tongue swipes along her bottom lip. Her back arches against the cubicle wall, while her fingernails claw into my skin. “I doubt it.”

“You don’t know what I’ll do.” My reputation precedes me. Not in a good way.

What no one knows about me is that for the right woman, I’m willing to change. Unfortunately, I haven’t found her yet. Most noble girls have a long line of men waiting to spend a night underneath their dress. The ones that don’t are already happily betrothed.

As I drop my gaze down lower, Imelda is tugging at her skirt. I help her by shoving it down her legs. She kicks it off quickly, but as she tries to get my shirt off, I stop her.

Imelda furrows her brows, moaning loudly as my finger teases her entrance. “Why don’t you take off your clothes?”

“We’re in a tight space. I don’t have time for all that.” Still, my hand trails down between my legs, fiddling with my zipper. “We have to make this quick.”

“Okay.”

Wrapping her hands around my neck, she pulls me in for another makeout session. This time, the sensations overwhelm me. The scent of her perfume, the sharp edges of her nails, the tiny noises she makes. Her breathing becomes quick and shallow. Her dilated pupils stare at me intensely.

“I need you now, Caesar,” she begs.

“It would be rude to keep a lady waiting.”

The bulge in my pants is becoming difficult to ignore. My eyes trail down to her breasts and how they’re straining against the fabric of her blouse with each breath.

Soon enough, my fingers are undoing each button until her bra is visible. “I don’t do this sort of thing with everyone,” she half-pants, half-moans.

“What makes me so special?”

“You’re...” Imelda’s breath hitches loudly as I sink my fingers into her. Afraid that she’s about to collapse on me, I press her against the wall and keep my knee between her open legs. “You’re you. You’re divine.”

I chuckle. “You’ve got a fine way with words.”

“And you’re such a tease that you turn slow deprivation into an art form.”

There’s something incredible about watching the way a woman squirms and moans underneath my hands before I give her what she wants.

If we had enough space, I would have gotten down on my knees and tasted her with my tongue.

I don’t stop until the woman I’m with is on the brink of madness. Only then do I satisfy her cravings. But Imelda brings a fire of her own. She chases what she wants until it’s hers.

She reaches out, bunching the fabric of my shirt within her fists as she grinds on me. She slips her tongue into my mouth effortlessly, and I allow her to dominate the make-out session for the moment. Moans slip out of her mouth as my hand trails down her back to her ass.

“Remember what I said, Imelda? We have to be quick. And quiet.”

She makes a small sound of defeat in response. Imelda has never been one to keep quiet in the bedroom or anywhere else, which can be a blessing and a curse.

“Get to it, then,” she replies brusquely, reaching down to find the zipper of my pants. She tugs on it so fiercely I worry she’s going to start literally ripping our clothes if I don’t heed her commands.

“You have no idea how badly I’ve wanted you tonight, Caesar.”

Those lovely words do wonders for my ego. They’re enough to make some of my hair stand on end.

“You did a good job of hiding it, Imelda. I had no idea you wanted this until you followed me into this bathroom.”

I tilt toward her, and she takes a sharp intake of breath.

“I couldn’t be too obvious about it.” Imelda bites her bottom lip. “My

father's here. He'd burst a blood vessel if he knew what we were doing right now."

"Let's make sure no one finds out, then."

She giggles, making sure to press her chest firmly against mine. Reaching between her legs, she starts sliding the fabric of her panties to the side for an easier entrance.

Finally losing myself, I grab the underside of her thighs and hoist her further up the wall of this cubicle. She has no intention of keeping quiet. I'm so lost in the throes of pleasure that I don't remotely care.

VIVIENNE

“Have you seen Prince Caesar?”

Aurora shakes her head. I would expect her, as the event coordinator, to know the whereabouts of both of the Vanecourt princes hosting tonight’s event. At the same time, I can’t fault her. While Prince Alex is a dream to work with, Prince Caesar gets slippery when he loses focus on what’s important.

I would know. I’m his secretary.

“He’s probably mingling in the crowd. I’ll keep an eye out for him. I’ll be in the kitchen if you need me. The hors d’oeuvres are about to head out soon,” Aurora says, jutting her thumb over her shoulder. Her blue eyes twinkle underneath the bright lights of the hallway.

Pressing my lips into a thin line, I nod and offer a small wave as she hurries off in the opposite direction. I sigh and lean against the wall behind me. I’m doing my best not to start chewing off all my fingernails right now.

Dammit, Caesar. Did you really have to choose this exact moment to run off?

That’s the thing about him. He’s never too worried about anything. He leaves that part of the job to me. And he knows he’s charming enough to get away with it with one incandescent smile.

When I met him for the first-round interview after I submitted my application, I was dressed in the finest outfit I could afford, an expensive white shirt and dark pencil skirt. I somewhat styled my curly dark hair and applied a bit of dark foundation and bright coral lipstick for the interview at

the embassy.

When he walked in, I didn't know who he was, but with the way he carried himself, he commanded respect. The type of man who'd be admired effortlessly.

"I read over your application. You're highly qualified." He looked me up and down, which made me fidget. Male attention made me nervous back then. Even now, at the age of twenty-four, it still does. "And you've certainly dressed the part."

"Thank you." I held a baby blue folder in my hands, holding all of the documents and credentials I'd painstakingly printed. "It would be an honor to work here at the embassy."

"Where are you from?" I caught another subtle glance down at my body, this time at my waist, cinched in my tight skirt. The heat of it made me physically weak, but I snapped back into focus.

"I live in New York City. I've got a degree in international relations from Columbia. But I grew up going back and forth between the D.C. area and Missouri. For my father's work."

"It's clear you're very smart. Or else you fake it very well." He flashed me a charming smile and held a hand out for me to take. "Prince Caesar Vanecourt of Solvaria. I'm sure I'll be seeing you around soon."

"What makes you so sure?"

He smiled at me in a roguish way that I was never able to forget. A look I'm sure has brought countless women to their knees just at the sight.

"Because I know you'll get this job."

And I did. Despite trembling violently and tripping over my words during the interview, my skills shone through. That wasn't enough for me to be satisfied, though.

I wrote him a formal thank you note for taking time out of his schedule to speak to me, written in calligraphy on embossed, monogrammed paper. He said he'd never gotten anything like it.

He'd never even seen an American operate with the sort of refinement he'd grown up with in his country. Being the daughter of a United States senator teaches you early on that those sorts of formalities can go a long way.

He called me immediately after receiving it to offer me the job. I started a few days later.

His cologne consumed me at the time, and he flashed me the same smile that I've been unable to erase from my mind. But he couldn't recall my name.

Somehow that lapse in his memory seems all the more pointed right now, as I'm stranded in the middle of a state event without the host, seemingly forgotten.

Suddenly, it gets difficult to breathe. I blink away the incoming tears and push off the wall. Glancing at my wristwatch, I realize that nearly ten minutes have passed and there's still no sign of Caesar anywhere. He hasn't entered the banquet hall with the rest of the guests.

"He's with someone," I whisper to myself. The realization leaves a bitter aftertaste on my tongue. The tightness in my chest intensifies. "This always happens. Always."

Clenching my fists, I storm down the hallway with the intention of dragging him out of whatever hole he's hiding in and shoving him into the spotlight. He's supposed to be helping Prince Alex with the event, not screwing someone in the shadows and completely ignoring his duties.

Sheesh, Vivienne. Where's all this anger coming from?

In a word? Entitlement.

I flinch suddenly, hearing slamming doors behind me. Turning around, I'm met with a wave of panicked faces as the kitchen staff and attendees start trickling out toward me in the hallway.

Something doesn't seem right. Hushed murmurs follow, which makes it difficult to hear what's going on out in the main hall.

Just as I'm about to join the rest of the crowd, Aurora reappears. The light has left her eyes and there's hardly any color to her face.

"Vivienne," she rasps, reaching out for my wrist and tugging me away. "Have you found Caesar? This is urgent."

"Why? What happened?"

"Something happened to King Francis. I heard some of the details. They're saying he's suffered a stroke. The princes are needed back at the palace immediately. He might not make it."

Oh, God. King Francis might be dying? The pit in my stomach deepens further.

Aurora stops suddenly, jolting me to a halt soon afterward. "Can you find him? He's needed. Now."

"I'll do my best." Shit. I don't even know where to start looking for him. "What's going to happen to the event?"

"We're postponing." Aurora wipes the back of her hand across her sweaty forehead. "This is the worst possible thing that could've happened

right now. I have to figure out how to get all these people out of here without anyone losing a limb in the process.”

“Good luck,” I reply earnestly, patting her on the shoulder.

“You, too. Caesar’s a vanishing act if I’ve ever seen one,” she mumbles before hurrying off.

As much as I don’t like degrading my boss, she’s got a point. It pisses me off how accurate that statement is.

Soon enough, I’m blazing down every hallway in the building, yelling Caesar’s name and nearly rolling my ankle on a few occasions. I stop a few staff members and ask if they’ve seen the Prince, but they all shrug.

We’re all running around like a bunch of chickens with their heads cut off. It’s pitiful. I’m pitiful.

Eventually, I make it to the last spot that I still haven’t checked. Considering Caesar isn’t anywhere else in this building, he has to be here in this bathroom.

I enter the bathroom quietly to a quiet symphony of moans. From across the bathroom entrance, which seems more like a lounge, I catch a glimpse of my disheveled state in the mirror.

My curls are out of place. My clothes are wrinkled. And there’s a seething fury hidden behind my dark glare that peaks the moment I hear those high-pitched moans.

“Prince Caesar!” A breathy scream resounds, followed by animalistic shrieks.

I punch one of the cubicle doors open, revealing a fully-dressed Prince Caesar being embraced by a blonde woman with her skirt on the ground.

I stare in the mirror instead of him, averting my gaze at the sight of this sloppy bacchanalia. If looks could kill, the scene in this bathroom would be a damn massacre.

“Caesar, are you just going to let this happen?” the blonde shrieks.

“Get off me, Imelda. Get dressed.”

“But...” She pouts like a spoiled child, which makes me even more enraged.

Caesar leans down, balls up her skirt, and shoves the slip of fabric to her chest. Meanwhile, I’m keeping my distance while they sort themselves out.

This is a mess I never wanted to be a part of. It’s difficult not to hunch over and puke my guts out following the sight I just walked in on.

Get yourself together, Vivienne. Caesar always pulls this crap. This isn’t

anything new. It is, however, a new low. Even for him.

“Please, Caesar,” I hear Imelda whisper.

Against my better judgment, I steal a glance. Imelda clings onto Caesar’s shirt while he zips up his pants.

“When will I see you again?” she whines. I have to roll my eyes.

“I don’t know!” Caesar snaps before pointing at the door. “Leave!”

Imelda opens her mouth to reply, but she ultimately decides against it. She glares my way before storming out of the bathroom. I’m focused on my breathing patterns. My wristwatch tells me my heart rate is out of this world and that I should keep an eye on it.

“Vivienne,” he says, stepping out of the cubicle. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to...”

“Please, with all due respect, save the explanation for another day.”

Yikes. I didn’t mean to let my frustration with him actually come out, especially with the blow I’m about to deliver. His eyes widen at my tone, but there’s no time for pleasantries or apologies.

“You’re needed back at the palace, Prince Caesar. King Francis has suffered a stroke.”

“What!” Caesar raises a hand to his mouth. “But... how? How did this happen? He was fine this morning!”

“I don’t know the details. But we need to return to the palace immediately. I assume your brother is already en route.”

Alex has his shit together, I want to add but don’t.

“Yeah. Okay.” Caesar nods. His Adam’s apple bobs with his swallow. “Let’s go. Did it take you a while to find me? I’m so sorry.”

“Let’s get going,” I reply softly, gesturing for him to take the lead.

There’s a vulnerability in the way he’s holding himself right now that cuts through my anger for just a moment. His trademark swagger is reduced to a sad shuffle at the prospect of becoming an orphan.

It makes me want to wrap my arms around him and tell him it will be okay, even though I have no idea if that’s true.

And then my anger rises in my throat again thinking about the position he’s put me in. I’m not in the mood to speak about what happened. The day has turned to shit, and I don’t have the energy to confront him about how disrespectful he was when his dad might be on his deathbed.

I just hope he realizes how badly he’s fucked up.

CAESAR

My body moves on its own as I rush into the palace and head straight for my father's quarters. Ever since Vivienne let me know about his stroke, my mind doesn't have space for any competing thoughts.

I'm glad that she was the one to tell me. Something about her presence always calms me and brings me back down to Earth, even when I know I make her crazy sometimes. If I'd gotten the news from anyone else, I might have really lost my shit.

The lack of information is driving me mad. My entire world has been rocked to the core. What's going to happen if my father dies?

Apart from the heartbreak of losing my dad, there are the practical questions. Is Christian going to be the next king? Will I still have my position at all? What's next if he doesn't make it?

"Father," I manage. My hand lingers on the door, grimacing once I see the state he's in. "May I come in?"

"Please." He beckons me in with a hand, a silent order I obey immediately.

Closing the door behind me, I hurry to his side and drop down to my knees. I enclose his weak right hand with both of mine.

"Where is everyone?" I whisper. "Alex and Christian. Have they been here to see you yet?"

"Of course." A dry cough follows. "They just left. You were the last one I was waiting to see, my son."

My heart clenches. "I'm so sorry. I left the banquet hall as soon as I heard

what happened to you. How are you feeling? Are you improving?”

“I’ve seen better days,” he quips unsteadily.

At least he still has some sense of humor, despite the troubling circumstances. I sigh, bringing my forehead down to his hand.

“What about you, my son? How have you been doing?”

Lifting up my gaze, my father looks at me with a solemn stare. I swallow hard.

“Well, it’s been going well. My secretary, Vivienne, has helped me stay on track with my work. I don’t know where I’d be without her by my side.”

“That’s good. It would pain me to hear that the son I’ve put in charge of international relations is losing focus.”

I smile weakly. My mind trails back to how Vivienne found me in that bathroom. God, how was I so stupid?

“And have you met a woman that has caught your eye yet?” Father asks. My jaw clenches once more. “A woman who you can imagine a future with?”

“I... I’m not too focused on that right now.”

“You should be. You’re at an age where you need to figure out who you’re going to marry. You’re twenty-eight. You can’t be a bachelor for the rest of your life.”

Where is he going with this? My eyebrows furrow together. Just as I’m about to reply, he beats me to it.

“Don’t give me that look. I’m right, and you know it.”

“I wasn’t going to argue with you on that front, but –”

“Caesar,” he interjects. He pulls his hand away from my grasp. “It’s about time that you started considering your future. For so long, you’ve lived your life without worry and gotten by on charm. You’ve spent years thinking that Christian was going to be the heir to the throne, so you’ve become complacent.”

I’m sure my face registers my confusion. “Of course, Christian is going to be the heir! Why wouldn’t he be?”

At that, my father shakes his head. “It’s about time that I’ve broken this archaic code. I want all of my children to have a fair chance at the throne, but this means you’ll have to fight for your spot. Either you take up my offer and put your name in for contention, or you lose your privileges as the head of Solvaria’s international diplomacy.”

I don’t understand. Why is he doing this? I don’t want to fight for the throne. I’m not the right one to lead Solvaria. The title, the position, the

responsibilities, all belong to Christian. Every single one of my brothers is better suited to be King. Not me.

“I don’t want to be King,” I blurt out. “I’m not the right person for the job. Everyone in this palace knows it.”

A deep exhalation from my father follows. “You’ve convinced yourself of that, Caesar, but it’s not true,” he replies. “You’ve become accustomed to living in Christian’s shadow. You’re far more than a spare. Now, this doesn’t mean that I want you to go to war with your brothers over the throne. That would never be my intention.”

“Then what do you want us to do?” It feels like I’m a little kid again, trying to decipher my father’s cryptic words. “I don’t get it.”

“I want you to spread your wings and find your happiness. This takes a lot of courage, I understand, but I hope my current state gives you the motivation you need to do so.”

“What?” At this point, I can’t believe what my father is telling me. “I’m happy! I don’t need to find happiness when I’m perfectly content with where I am in life.”

My father blinks slowly at me. Just like that, I know that he doesn’t believe me. “Are you sure, Caesar?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” That remark sounded more confident in my head. The moment it comes out of my mouth, my words waver. “I like where I am right now. I don’t see the need to change.”

“Do you think you’re going to be spending your whole life going about those sexcapades you’re used to?”

Damn. I wasn’t expecting that bullet out of my father’s mouth.

“Do you think you’re going to make your future wife happy if you keep bouncing from woman to woman? What about those parties every night? You won’t make it to my age if you keep corrupting your liver like that, boy.”

My father readjusts his position on the bed, but he nearly falls over. Despite the fact that he’s chastened me with his words, I still reach over and keep him upright. Still, it’s difficult to look him directly in the eyes.

“Tell me, Caesar. Are you truly happy?” Father tilts his head at me. “Do you find sustenance in your life when it’s being consumed by sex, women, and alcohol?”

“I...” Sucking in a deep breath, I can’t find the strength in me to answer. I wasn’t expecting to reflect on my actions when I hurried in here. Now that I am, the only thing I feel is embarrassment. Shame. Guilt.

“We have our answer. Don’t we?”

My gaze lifts.

“You have a choice,” he says, voice firm despite the frailty of his body. “Either you clean up your act and make a solid attempt at earning the throne, or I will be demoting you from your position. I don’t know what I’ll have you do instead, but I trust that you will make the right decision. Do you understand me?”

“How do I clean up my act? In your eyes?”

“By finding a good woman and marrying her, for starters. That would prove to me that you’re committed to moving past the debauchery that occupies your days.”

It feels like my head is spinning. How am I supposed to give up my current way of living? My position is the one thing that gives me purpose. It’s the reason I get up in the morning, eager to face a new day.

At the same time, it’s also the reason I have such a wide array of lovers to choose from, spanning across the globe.

I’m good at what I do. Not even Alex could take over this position. There’s a reason why Solvaria is held in such high regard in other countries. It’s not all me, but I’m a lot of it.

And if I do follow my father’s orders, what becomes of me? I’ll get married, tied to a woman who will want to settle down. She’ll want kids, vacations, time with the family. That’s not part of my plan right now. I have so much of the world I have yet to see. I have so much more life to live.

Losing your position will leave you empty. You have to consider this. Father isn’t the type to hand out empty threats. He will make good on his promises, no matter how inconvenient they are.

“Are you still with me, Caesar?”

“Yes. Yes, I am,” I whisper, keeping my head low.

Pushing off the bed and rising to my feet, I sigh. He hasn’t given me much of an option, has he?

“I agree to your terms, Father. I’ll work on cleaning up my act and...” My hesitation lingers with me, making it difficult to voice these thoughts aloud. “I’ll find a good woman to marry.”

“Good. Very good. I have faith that you’ll accomplish this, my boy. I wouldn’t be shocked if you surpass even my high expectations of you.” Another alarmingly violent cough rips through my father. Without another word, he waves me off. “Go on, now. I’m tired.”

Bowing my head deeply, I turn on my heels and make my way to the door. His words swirl in my mind, making it difficult to think clearly.

Just like that, my life has shifted dramatically. My autonomy has been taken from me by my father. The man who gave me life is also taking it from me.

He wants the best for me, but why does it feel like the opposite?

“What the hell am I going to do?” I whisper, pinching the bridge of my nose. “I’m screwed either way.”

VIVIENNE

Once Caesar leaves to speak with his father, I try to find something to do around the palace. I quickly remember how well-staffed they are, though. Servants swarm all around to ensure the King and Princes have everything they need.

I decide to head back to the hotel, seeking respite.

“Thanks for everything, Aurora,” I tell our de facto hostess. “You managed to bring calm in a storm.”

“Ah, don’t I wish. But thank you. You’re kind for saying that.”

Even the events that end the way they’re supposed to are a lot of work, and this one was far more taxing, for obvious reasons.

“Did you hear?” A murmur fills the hotel lobby when I walk through the large glass doors. It’s not much different from the same tense atmosphere I just left at the palace.

The hotel was built specifically for royal delegates and their aides, so I don’t have any trouble finding what I need. I run a bath, locating chamomile bath salts under the sink, and I take two squares of dark chocolate from the nightstand.

I pull a bottle of cabernet sauvignon from the wine fridge and set it next to the tub alongside vanilla candles.

Lowering myself slowly into the tub, I let the heat seep into my tired muscles. I crank up the jets and lean back, feeling their pulse against my neck. The one-way window beside the tub provides a panoramic view of the city.

I pour a glass of wine and reach for a novel. My, my, but today was awful. I dismiss the memory of Caesar in the bathroom stall and focus on the positives. The event was successful, the delegates had a good time, and the day is over.

Bang-bang-bang!

I'm tempted to ignore the knock on the door, but with all of the hubbub, it could be urgent palace business.

Boom, boom, boom. Wish denied. "Go away," I yell at the door.

"Vivienne?" I think I hear a muffled female voice through the wood. Maybe it's Aurora. Maybe there's something I forgot to do before I left. Did I forget something?

"Yes?"

"Get out here!" The knocking becomes less intense but no less insistent. Cursing the interrupter of my evening, I drag myself from the tub and wrap up in chenille.

I wish I could be rude, but there's no telling who could be at the door. If it's someone from the palace, I might get herded back to work. *Please don't be from the palace.*

I grimace and open the door like I'm the lead in a horror movie. It's always the Black girl who gets killed first, too.

It's a familiar face. One I'd hoped I'd never see again, much less banging on my hotel door after one of the worst days in recent memory.

"Is something wrong?" I ask, keeping the door half-closed so I can shut it as soon as humanly possible.

The blonde from Caesar's escapade in the bathroom earlier looks exactly the same, except for her red nose and waterfall of eye makeup staining her cheeks.

"Caesar?" she calls, pummeling her way into the room and craning her neck throughout the suite.

"*Hey!* He's not here. Why would he be *here?*" Blondie is rooting through my things, going through my suitcase, throwing my scarves on the bed. I'm approaching the end of my professionalism.

"I *know* he's here. *Caesar?*" She's about to go into the bathroom when I step in front of her and open the door myself.

"Caesar, you can come out now," I call into the bathroom. When nothing happens, I raise my eyebrows at the ridiculous person in my hotel room. "See? Nobody's here. Now, Imelda, is it? It's been a long day, so if you don't

mind –”

With a shriek reminiscent of a banshee, Imelda jumps at me, clawing at my face and pulling my hair. Nothing in my experience has prepared me for this part of the job.

“Security!” I yell into the hallway. I hope I don’t cause a royal incident. Although I suppose it can’t be worse than the one my visitor may have provoked with my esteemed boss.

I turn to the harpy having a meltdown before my eyes.

“I think the evening’s been long enough. Please leave now. Before you get yourself into worse trouble. If you care about Caesar, don’t start a scandal on his behalf.”

I hold the edges of my bathrobe together. No matter what she does to me, I will not be found naked.

“You whore! You fucking whore! You seduced him!”

“What?” I can’t help laughing, which enrages her further. “Are you kidding? No. Never. I don’t mix business with pleasure.”

“Oh, so he’s not good enough for you, is he? You stuck-up bitch.”

“Okay. You’re not making any sense now, Imelda. I think you need to go home before the guards decide to take you somewhere else for your own protection.”

She lunges at me, and I try but fail to hold her off. I hear heavy footsteps coming down the hallway.

Oh, thank God. Moments later, guards start filling the room, but she has my hair coiled in her fingers.

“Stop!” I scream at her, and the guards echo the same command. She doesn’t listen to their shouts to leave. A security guard wraps his arm around her waist while another pries her fingers out of my hair.

The man holding Imelda drags her from the room, giving me a few seconds to recover. I go straight to my purse and fish out my royal ID card, passport, and diplomatic travel document.

The guard nods, then stores the details with his device.

“Do you know why this woman attacked you?” he asks, looking up from his screen.

I know he has to look into the disturbance, but I want to be left alone. A shiver starts in my chest and spreads to my limbs, an aftereffect of the adrenaline.

“I’d like to be helpful, sir, but all I know is she seemed to be looking for

my boss, Prince Caesar Vanecourt. He's my employer."

The officer knits his brows and rubs his neck. I thought my job required me to deal with nonsense, but I guess it could be worse. I could be security in a hotel that caters to people with obscene bank accounts and diplomatic immunity.

"I'm sorry to say this, ma'am, but someone in her position can cause a lot of trouble, crazy or not. It might be best if I take a look around, if you'll grant me permission. Just in case she says something different, we'll have evidence that you've done nothing wrong. Would that be okay?"

His shoulders are hunched as he asks. I can tell he's uncomfortable at having to be subject to the whims of people like Imelda, but I can also tell he's used to it.

"I understand. Yes, you have my consent to search." I go with him from room to room, turning on lights and picking up my things from where Imelda threw them.

When he's finished, I thank him and show him out.

"You're welcome. Be safe."

"Thank you, sir. You, too."

He side-eyes the outside hallway with a nod, indicating Imelda, then gives me a thumbs up. As I close the door, I can still hear Imelda. Now she's arguing with the officer about going back to her room.

"What about her? Don't they know she's seducing Caesar!"

"Ma'am, last I checked, that's not against the law."

"It's a crime against decency."

Pot, meet kettle. I keep the door open a crack to listen for a second. If rumors about me get started tonight, it's in my interest to know what they are.

"Ma'am, you need to leave. Now. Or I will force you to come with me."

I suspect he hopes that she complies on her own, not so much for her sake but so he doesn't have to spend more time babysitting her. The officer tries to get her to leave gently, but she wrenches her arm away from her and wobbles down the hall on her own, like a baby gazelle.

She's shrieking incoherently. "She's just pretending to be a secretary! Nobody with an ass like that is just a secretary."

There are about a million old black-and-white movies that say otherwise. My face burns. I don't want to hear it after all. I gently close the door, then slide to the floor and hold my head in my hands.

What a nightmare. And to think it all happened because another girl was

jealous of me.

It isn't the first time one of Caesar's diversions has assumed we're more than coworkers, either. If they only knew that he can barely remember my name half the time.

I can't say I blame them. It's probably easy to lose it around a guy like Caesar. The name, the title, the cars, the parties, the charm, the looks. A girl could get pretty caught up in all of it.

They probably drive themselves crazy thinking they'll be the one to end his playboy ways, only to watch him drive off into the sunset with some other flavor of the week a few days later.

I find myself blaming Caesar more than people like Imelda. That's when I start to get angry all over again. But given his natural charm and how easy it is to get sucked in, I'm glad I have a job that puts me close to him. Otherwise, I might not see his flaws – and then I might get sucked in, too.

I have a flashback to that morass of skin I walked in on in the bathroom, and it makes me sick to my stomach.

But then it does something else to me.

His lips on her neck, his hands in her hair, and our eyes met for a fleeting moment. I can almost feel his mouth on my body. It's as if I were in that bathroom stall. It's as if I wish I had been.

My hand flies to my mouth. I can hear my pulse beating in my ears. *You're ridiculous, Vivi.*

I know how intoxicating a man like Caesar can be. Even after watching him throw women away, I get lost in thoughts about what it would be like. No. I can't afford it. Not now.

Pulling myself up from the floor, I head to my own soothing bath and dip my fingers in the water in the tub. It's ice cold.

My relaxing evening was a wash. I may as well sleep. I brush my teeth, turn off the lights, draw the curtains, and crawl into bed.

What an awful end to an awful day.

CAESAR

I've got to get out of here. Striding from my father's wing, which is overrun with people running around in a frenzy, I walk past the assistant to Haverty, the King's Steward, and I retrieve my coat from the cloakroom.

I hear the assistant say something into his earpiece. The Steward will be along shortly.

"May I call a car for you, sir?" Haverty asks.

"Hey, Haverty. I'm just going out for some air. I'll take the Benz."

My father's steward is sharp as a tack and handles complex chaos with the best of them. At times like these, there might be less pressure on all of us if his family ran the country instead of mine.

The car pulls up to the side entrance before I can open the door myself. *Good old Haverty*. I slide into the driver's seat and settle in, dialing Marcus before starting the vehicle.

The phone rings on the speaker as I speed down the driveway and out through the mile-long tunnel of trees surrounding the palace.

"Caesar," Marcus greets me. "Where are we going tonight?" Marcus is always my willing partner in revelry.

"Gray's," I say shortly.

"Really? Gray's? Seems a little... sedate. I was expecting something a little more raucous."

"I need a subdued evening. I'm not sure if you heard the news."

"Hey, come to Shira's instead. I have a party you can get lost in." That's usually our favorite hangout, a loud, energetic nightclub downtown.

“Great. See you there soon.” I swerve into the next lane to turn around. Maybe at Shira’s I can forget everything my father said.

“Marriage. Just, why?” I say into the steering wheel. There are a lot of questions bouncing in my head right now, but that’s what it all comes down to. Of all the things my father thinks will be good for me and the Kingdom, why a wife?

It’s not that I have anything against marriage, in theory at least. I’ve seen plenty of people I care about settle down in healthy, happy marriages. I always planned to settle down someday, like most people. Just not yet.

Why not give me more responsibility on the diplomatic front if he wants me to be serious? For that matter, why not just have me tone down the partying instead of rushing into a commitment?

I agonize over it all the way to Shira’s. My father has always been the enigmatic type, but I’ve never seriously questioned his choices. I don’t want to question him now, either, but I need clarity.

Once in the club, I search the faces for Marcus and come up empty. I recognize everyone. Threading my way through the crowd on the dance floor proves difficult. I shift my weight to squeeze around them and make my way to the bar.

Gray’s, with its hole-in-the-wall pub atmosphere, would probably be a better place for this conversation. Shira’s never fails to lift my spirits, though.

“Hey, Caesar.” A gorgeous redhead slinks her way toward me and takes my arm, one of the hostesses who works at the club. “Here for business or pleasure?”

“Business, all business, all the time these days. Have you seen Marcus?” Any other night, I might entertain this line of conversation, but I really don’t want to talk to anyone right now until I’ve talked to Marcus.

I don’t want to get drunk and wind up spilling about my father’s demand with some random stranger. I’ve already shared enough with strangers apparently, according to my dad.

She lets go of my arm, uninterested in playing if I won’t be any fun. “I think he stepped out.”

As she walks away, I admire her shape under her tight dress. An amusing thought occurs to me. Why don’t I marry *her*?

For that matter, why don’t I marry anyone in this bar? I mean, I hear it’s a rite of passage for a little girl to dream of being a princess one day. It would be easy, not to mention convenient. I keep my status. She gets fame and

fortune. Everyone wins. Right?

Yeah, but then what? That nagging doubt at the back of my head won't leave me alone. I know the answer. I just don't want to think about it. Then we're married, and that's it.

It stuns me to realize this has never occurred to me before. I never thought about the kind of woman I wanted, just the fact that I wanted more. I thought I would try them on until one fit, but this deadline looming over my head has me suddenly choosy.

Dad, you sly dog. There are still a lot of things I don't understand about his methods, but I have to respect the effectiveness of the strategy.

I make my way to the bar and order a gin and tonic, then send a quick text to Marcus. I sit and listen to the pulsing music for a minute, trying to lose myself in the ocean of bodies and noise. It's proving harder than usual.

"Hey, stranger. Why the long face?" It's one of the women I see occasionally, suddenly sitting next to me and running her long, manicured fingernails up my leg.

"Can you blame me? You weren't here yet."

Where is Marcus?

She laughs, her voice husky and soothing. "Want to get out of here?" She raises an eyebrow suggestively.

One last night of pleasure doesn't sound too bad, but I would only be thinking about my father's request the whole time. "Maybe some other time. I'm waiting for a friend."

She nods and moves on.

Marcus replaces her. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Speak of the devil! How were the pyramids?"

"The what?"

"You took so long, I assume you went the scenic route. Through Egypt."

"Ha. Ha. Got a little held up, that's all." His hair is mussed, his breath smells of alcohol, and there's lipstick on his rumpled collar. I know exactly what he's been up to.

"What's the emergency?"

"Well, first, I don't know if you heard, but my dad is ill. He had a sudden stroke."

Marcus gasps. "I'm sorry, man."

"Yeah. It was a shock. He's got a good chance of a recovery, they say, but who knows. There's more, though."

“Really? That’s a lot for one night.” We’re both shouting over the music.

“Tell me about it. So my dad called me to his sickbed with one demand. I have to get married.”

I’ve never seen anyone go so pale so quickly. Marcus drags me to the back room so fast I almost spill my drink. The confused faces that whip past as I rush by catch my attention. We usually bring our dates back here.

That would be a funny rumor, that I’m having a love affair with my best friend. I wonder how my dad would react to that one.

Marcus sends everyone else out and shuts the door to block out the music. “Okay. I just want to make sure I heard you right. Did you say *married*? You’re joking right?”

I shake my head grimly. “I’m completely serious.”

By the time I get the whole story out, he’s sitting on a couch by the wall and staring at me, totally sober.

“What are your options?” he asks. “You can’t not be a prince, man. I know you. You’re a workaholic who loves the high life. You wouldn’t last a week.”

“I’ll have to do it. I have to get married. But it has to be someone I know, because it has to be quick. But I have to be able to stand her.”

“So fake it,” he suggests.

“But then what? Win the award for happiest fake couple? Have a couple of fake kids? What good does that do anybody? All a fake marriage does is end in fake divorce, and that just sounds depressing.”

“Right.” Marcus thinks for a minute. “So you need a real person for a real marriage to someone you can really live with, at least for a while.”

I sigh. “Yeah, but when you put it that way, it sounds impossible.”

His eyes widen. “Hey! What about your secretary?”

“Vivienne? You’re joking. She’s so squeaky clean and by the book, she would never go for it.”

“No, no, it’s perfect! She’s already on the payroll, so you could make it a work thing, like a contract marriage. Give her a bonus for hazard pay.”

I shoot him a look.

“And you get a bonus, too. She won’t fall for you.”

“Hey, why wouldn’t she fall for me? I’ve never failed before when I set my mind to someone.”

Marcus rolls his eyes. “She knows you too well. Think about the last time she saw you with another woman. Was it this week?”

Specifically, today. The bathroom pops into my head. “Okay, you may be right. But being married? How would we even pull that off?”

Marcus grins. “It’ll be a contract marriage. You can stipulate anything.”

I can’t believe I’m considering this, but the longer I think about it, the better it sounds. With Vivienne, my father’s request could be less of a nuptial straitjacket and more of an opportunity to extend the fun in a new way.

I think of her gorgeous dark eyes, that bouncy curly hair, and those incredible curves. It might not be so bad getting to know her better. Even platonically, she’ll be nice to look at.

There’s almost no downside. I have to admit, I don’t know her all that well, but there’s no time like the present for getting to know someone. She’s beautiful, smart, funny, and she’s already ridden the royal roller coaster for a long time. If anyone can handle it, she can.

I raise my empty glass toward Marcus in a mock toast. “To Vivienne!”

“To Vivienne!”

VIVIENNE

I fly back to New York early to deal with an emergency. Bree, the lady who fills in for me when we travel, noticed a double booking in the system that I'll have to handle personally. People don't like it when they shell out the cash to book a prince, and he doesn't show up.

When Caesar arrives a couple of days later, we don't discuss his father, Imelda, or any of it. Truthfully, I don't want to know. We never speak about his personal life, and I like it that way.

"You have the groundbreaking ceremony at the Garriford Center tomorrow evening, the meeting with the Bryant Park Society on Thursday, and we're working through a mountain of invitations to galas and dinners, so buckle up." I brief him on his weekly schedule, but he seems distant.

It must be difficult having a father like his. If my dad were sick, I would be at his bedside, but Caesar has to return to work like nothing happened. There are countries to run and people to rule.

"Hmmm?" He snaps to attention.

"I'll email you your schedule." I feel oddly protective of him when he must be going through such a hard time, as if I can keep the world at bay by picking up some of his slack at work.

"What do you think about these curtains?" he asks suddenly.

"I don't know, sir." It's a strange question. Not only has he never asked my opinion about anything, but I've never known him to even notice the decor, much less have thoughts about it.

"What about the curtains, sir?"

He shrugs. "Never mind. That'll be all."

For the rest of the day, I do my best to leave him alone, but when I come in to take his lunch order, he strikes up a conversation. Then he calls me back ten minutes later to invite me to eat lunch together.

I order our food and take it to him, sitting opposite him at his miniature conference table.

"Everything okay, sir?" I ask about ten minutes into the meal.

"Yeah, everything's fine. Why do you ask?"

"You're, um... staring. I thought something might be wrong." I start touching my face, thinking I might have a remnant of salad dressing on it.

He smirks. "I've never invited you to eat with me, have I?"

I shake my head. "No, sir."

He wrinkles his brow. "You know, I don't know very much about you, Vivienne. We've worked together for a long time, but I hardly know the first thing about you."

"I keep my private life pretty private most of the time. What's to tell?"

"I don't know. You haven't told me." He flashes that winning smile again, then looks down at the pita stuffed with glistening meat and creamy tzatziki. "Do you even like Greek food?"

"Of course. Who doesn't like gyros?"

He shrugs. "No one in their right mind. But I want to know more about you. What's your favorite color? Favorite food?"

"I like red. And my favorite food is Chinese." And here I was just a minute ago, thinking about how much I like keeping my personal life personal while I'm here. Leave it to him to find an opening.

"I like Chinese, too. What's your favorite dish? And, very important, have you ever been to Dim Sum in Flushing on a Sunday morning? Even if you hate Chinese, it's one of the great experiences of the world. The Chinese ambassador to the U.N. took me the last time he was in town. I'll have to take you some time if you haven't been. Or even if you have."

"That sounds fun. No, I haven't done that before. As for my favorite dish, hmm. Spicy Chinese eggplant maybe." I take another bite of my gyro as an excuse to stop talking. "How about you, Caesar? Favorite color and food?"

"I like the color of sunset, that deep burnt orange. The sunsets in Solvaria are magnificent. But you know that."

"I do."

"Like that poster over there." He points to a high-quality photo print that I

noticed the first day I came into the office. It's stunning, showing a craggy mountain overlooking a crystalline Mediterranean Sea, and a tomato-orange sunset behind it.

"Yes. It's beautiful."

"I took that actually. I love that color."

"Mount Feruka, right?"

"You are good, Ms. Carter. Very good."

"I have to get back to work, but it was nice talking to you, sir." I excuse myself and go back to my desk. But I don't get a break from him even then.

Every few minutes, he calls to ask my opinion on what color rug to get for the office or ask about some drink places in D.C. for when he goes down to the embassy. He's about to drive me crazy.

Everything comes to a stop when a severe weather alert pings in my pocket. I ignore it. If I don't check some more things off my to-do list today, I'll be overwhelmed tomorrow.

"Are you going to get that?" Caesar asks from over my shoulder.

I jump. "How long have you been standing there?"

"A minute. Your phone's ringing."

It stops ringing at exactly that moment, of course. "Sorry, I didn't hear it. I'll check the messages and make sure it wasn't urgent."

"Sounds good."

Caesar just stands there, and I'm not sure why. It's unsettling seeing him behind me in the reflection from my monitor.

I turn in my chair toward him and muster my calm. "Sir, it's hard to work with you standing over my shoulder like that. There's a storm coming anyway. Shouldn't you get home?"

He looks out the wall of windows surrounding us. "It doesn't look too bad out there."

"Not yet. That's why it's a weather alert. So we can prepare now, before the emergency hits. The app I use only ever notifies you for big ones."

Caesar thinks for a minute. "Okay, I'll drop you off."

I don't understand what he's saying at first. *Drop me off where?* Then I realize he means escorting me home. He stands to the side and holds his elbow as if he's escorting me to a dance.

"I have a lot more work to finish up this afternoon. I can't leave."

"Sure you can. You have the boss's permission. I'll drop you off at your place. Get your things, and we'll go."

When it finally sinks in, I'm incredulous. Asking me about my likes and dislikes is one thing, but my *apartment*? That's too far. "Please don't worry about me. You go. I'll be fine. If I don't do more work today, it'll affect your schedule, and I know you don't want that."

He cocks his head. "I'll deal with it then, and I'll take the blame for it. What I won't take, at least for this, is 'no' for an answer. I'm not letting you stay here when there's a big storm coming. I'll get Bree and some others in the office tomorrow to help you with the extra work."

There is no way out of it. "Okay, sir. Has anyone ever told you you're persuasive?"

He laughs hard. "Come on. Let's go down. I'll call Ted, and he'll get the car from the garage."

We lock up our section of the office and say goodnight to the guard, then head down in the elevator. Ted is already waiting outside in the Lexus.

I take a deep breath and hop into the backseat, and Caesar sits next to me. He keeps up his line of questioning, and I start to give him a little more, talking about what brought me to New York.

"I came here for school, and I just never left."

"Do you think of living anywhere else?"

"Maybe, but for now I'm happy. I have a job I like and all."

By the time we arrive at my apartment, the sky has opened up. When Caesar offers to walk me up, he makes it difficult to refuse.

What am I doing? My heart races as he proffers his arm to lead me to my apartment building's door. There's never been a man in my home before.

I try to calm down when the doorman lets us in. Then I try to calm down in the elevator, my thoughts going a mile a minute. I don't know how these things work or how to ask him to leave politely.

When we get to my apartment, he takes the key from my shaking hand, lets us in, and steps directly into the kitchen. He surveys my cabinets, retrieves two wine glasses, pulls a bottle of white from the fridge, and sits on my couch.

"You coming?" He's looking back at me with an expectant expression.

"Don't you have to get home?" I ask.

"Nope! It's coming down out there. I gave Ted the rest of the night off. I'll get a cab home after we eat. Let's get Chinese. I heard it's your favorite."

"What?" I'm flabbergasted. My boss has invited himself into my apartment and is sitting on my couch drinking my wine and offering to order

me my favorite meal. *How did this happen?*

“Sit.” He extends his arm to gesture toward the seat at his left. Mechanically, I join him on the couch. “So you were talking about your family. Is this them?”

He notices a picture on the coffee table. I nod as he picks it up. “Whoa. I had no idea your dad was a U.S. Senator. Carter as in Delano Carter?”

“The very same.”

“How come you’re in New York and not D.C. in that case?”

I shrug. “I wanted to go into international relations, and I kind of wanted to escape the family business. He’s always supported me.”

“Why did you decide on international relations?”

“I guess I just wanted to make my mark on the broader world. I was raised to be good at diplomacy, so it seemed like a natural transition. And I love going to different places and meeting a lot of people.”

He chuckles to himself. “Sounds like me. Except instead of being an intelligent, competent, educated woman, I’m... well, me. That’s got to irk you at least a little, that you’re working for me rather than me working for you? You’re the more qualified one.”

He flashes that winning smile, which warms me up like always. I laugh.

“Maybe it irks me but probably less than you think. You’re good at your job, Caesar. And it’s an honor to work for you.” I bow my head exaggeratedly so he doesn’t take my compliment too seriously. I don’t know how much of that is the wine talking anyway.

“I admire your diplomacy. I could learn from it. Another glass?” He pours me some more wine, we order Chinese food, and we talk long after we’re finished with our takeout. Every once in a while, lightning streaks across the sky.

He asks deep, intentional questions and listens for my answers. It’s late by the time the storm is over. He orders a car, says a short but sincere goodbye, and I walk him out to the elevator.

I’m left sitting in my now-strangely silent living room, staring at an empty bottle of wine and takeout containers, wondering what the hell just happened.

CAESAR

Since going to Vivienne's for dinner yesterday, I have more questions than answers. I practically had to force her to let me take her home, but after a while, she seemed to enjoy herself.

I pictured coming home to her, and even earlier in the office, I wondered if it would be an austere experience. But the warmth of our conversation showed me that she's great company once she gets comfortable.

Marcus's idea keeps tickling the back of my brain. I want it to stop, especially the more I learn about Vivienne. But I'm not sure. She should have an opportunity to enter the world of foreign affairs on her own terms.

On the other hand, what better way to enter the diplomacy world than by becoming a princess and wife of a diplomat? She could go to her own events, be her own boss, have her own secretary, and make a difference. A title comes with power. I know she would handle it responsibly.

"Vivienne, would you come in here, please?"

As she enters the room, I watch her walk. I notice the grace in her gait, how she floats from place to place like a swan.

"You needed something, sir?" Her tone is formal after last night, more distant. We had a nice time, but maybe she's rethinking it. I did, after all, twist her arm to come by.

Her curly hair bounces, and I never noticed the dimple on her left cheek. The arc of her neck and the slope of her shoulder call to mind a Venetian sculpture.

"Yes, do you have the numbers for the Keffries Gala? The King expects

me to host it in his absence.”

“Certainly, sir.” As she leaves, I hear the rustling of her practical black skirt, her signature color.

Sitting at her computer, she tucks a pencil behind her ear while she taps away on the keyboard. She puts on a pair of glasses and then takes them off to chew on the earpiece. She prints out a spreadsheet and lays it on my desk.

I know I’ve disrupted her to-do list for the day, but even so, she is perfectly unruffled. I’m curious about what musical tastes she’ll share.

She has loads of other work to do, but I keep giving her tasks that will bring her in for conversations. I wait for her to register any sign of displeasure, whether through a roll of her eyes or a little scoff, but she’s pure agreeableness.

I have her sit at the low table in the corner with me. I notice her slipping off her shoes and tucking her feet underneath her on the sofa, adding intimacy to the moment. Through her stockings, I notice an odd flash of red.

Yes, she mentioned yesterday that her favorite color is red. I imagine her in a red blouse that complements her eyes perfectly. Or maybe a red nightie that she wears when no one is around. I find myself getting excited by the notion and quickly suppress it. But somewhere underneath that serious exterior is a woman who might enjoy some fun.

As soon as she sits back down at her desk, I press the button on the intercom I rarely use. “Coffee, please. Cream, two sugars.”

With no hint of discernible frustration, she rises from her desk and prepares the coffee in a fluid motion. Pouring a cup for me and one for herself, she puts cream and sugar into one and leaves the other black.

I drink black coffee in most places, but I always find it too strong for me here. Now I know she likes it black as well, and it only adds to her charm.

After Vivienne returns to her desk, I overhear Bree coming in to talk to her about a situation with a caterer. She patiently responds, taking time to formulate thoughtful, helpful responses.

After a few minutes, Bree laughs at something Vivienne says, and I wish I had caught it. When Bree leaves, Vivienne returns to her work.

About an hour later, Marcus waltzes in unannounced. I peer out, and Vivienne has slipped out without my noticing. It must be her lunch break.

“Marcus! I didn’t know you were in town.”

“Just flew in. Came to check on things.” He tosses a meaningful glance over his shoulder at Vivienne’s empty chair. “How’s it going?”

I lean in conspiratorially. “Better than I could have imagined.”

“Really?”

“You might consider a career in contractual matchmaking. She’s perfect!”

“Why do you sound so surprised?”

“Aren’t you? I mean, we all knew she was a kind, decent person, but who knew she was also... fun?”

Marcus knits his brows. “Everyone who meets her?”

I’m taken aback. “Am I the only person who missed how compelling this woman is?”

“Maybe. People also tend to let coworkers fade into the furniture.”

He’s letting me off easy, and I know it. “I don’t see how I could have missed her, though.”

“So when’s the proposal?” If I have a reputation for being impatient, it’s only because Marcus doesn’t work here. Then they’d really see impatient.

I hold up a hand. “Slow down. I haven’t even thought about how to ask.”

Marcus looks confused. “I thought it was a contract marriage.”

“Doesn’t that make it even harder? Since we’re not dating.”

“Yeah. She’s the straightforward type. You have to make it clear from the get-go. And cut to the chase about what’s in it for her because she won’t be interested in the money.”

“You seem to be awfully confident. You don’t even know her.”

“I’ve met her,” he reiterates. “And I have a sense for people. Besides, you can’t be impartial. You’re too close.”

I think for a minute. “So what do I do if she says no?”

Marcus looks at me sharply. “Caesar Vanecourt, are you nervous?”

“Of course not! But I have one shot and no backup plan.”

“People don’t go into proposals with a backup plan, man. You’ll have to take a leap.” I know he’s right, but do the same rules apply when the proposal is not exactly real?

The more I find out about her, the more I know that no one else is going to compare. Marcus is right. I’m going to have to take a leap. “So what next?”

He holds up his left hand, wiggling the fourth finger next to his face. “Isn’t there traditionally a ring involved?”

VIVIENNE

Mr. Vanecourt has been watching me like a hungry lion for the past week.

I admit it was a little bit thrilling to feel his eyes on me at first. My skin would start to tingle, and when I looked up I would catch him staring. He would swiftly look away but not for long.

The idea of someone like Caesar Vanecourt taking an interest in me makes my heart beat faster. A member of royalty, looking like that, can have any woman he wants. It's exciting to pretend that woman could be me, even if it's just for a moment.

It's gotten to the point where I can picture his hazel eyes in my sleep. I imagine he's hiding in the corners of the room, setting his gaze on me while I drift off. Watching over me. But I can't tell whether it's to protect me or if he's waiting to pounce.

A part of me honestly wouldn't mind at all if he decided to pounce.

But the rest of me is beginning to feel self-conscious. I can't help but wonder if there's something I'm doing wrong. Is he silently evaluating my every move, deciding if I'm worth keeping on? These doubts linger in my mind, although the amount of attention that he's showering on me, I'm hoping it's not that.

I can't take it anymore, so I finally knock on his door. "Mr. Vanecourt? Do you have a moment?"

He opens it and gestures for me to enter. "Of course, Vivienne. Please come in."

Something about the sound of the door closing behind me sends a jolt of

electricity up my back. Mr. Vanecourt sits down at his desk, and I sit opposite him.

The intensity in his eyes is even more pronounced up close. It's almost as if he is daring me to look into them.

I subtly angle my chair toward the door before I sit down. He smiles, but his eyes are active as if he's scanning me, taking me in.

"So," he says after a moment. "What did you want to talk about?"

I decide to simply be direct. "It seems like something's up. Is everything alright with my performance?"

He seems surprised. "What do you mean?"

"Just the extra attention, the extra work, coming with me to my apartment. And the extra scrutiny. I'm just curious if I've done something wrong or anything." I pause, choosing my next words carefully. "I'd just like to know if my job is in jeopardy. I hope this isn't about anything that happened in Solvaria. Or anything I saw."

His eyes soften. "I'm definitely not firing you, Vivienne. You're an incredible employee. It does have to do with Solvaria, but not with you."

"Alright." I breathe a sigh of relief. "I'm here to help you, Mr. Vanecourt. I just hope you respect me enough to be honest with me."

He lets out a long sigh and looks down toward his desk. After seeing him so poised and calm at countless speaking events, catching a glimpse of him in such a vulnerable state is new to me. I have to resist the sudden urge to reach over and pat his hand.

"You already know that my father is not doing well. And he's thinking about his legacy, considering we don't know what could happen from one day to the next."

I'm not used to seeing him like this, having trouble formulating his words.

I nod. "I know that was hard for you to see him like that. That must be affecting things for you in a lot of ways, I guess."

"Yeah. It is. I'm concerned for him. But there's more to it. He's thinking of succession, and he wants the best candidate to ascend regardless of age or rank."

It takes me a moment to understand, but then I have to hold back my gasp. "So you could be named King?"

I sit back, still trying to wrap my head around this change of fortune. Not only am I not in danger of being fired, I may end up working for a King.

He nods. "I could. I don't want to, mind you. I like my life. I like my role. Still, I have to show him that I am prepared to fight for the crown or I'll lose my title. But it's not as simple as just throwing my hat in the ring."

"No? What, like a battle royale? I should hope not."

He lets out a dark, dry laugh. "No, thank God. Back in the old days, that might have been easier. But the King had a different condition."

He looks at me deliberately, the same look I've gotten used to over the last week, as if he can see inside my thoughts.

"He needs me to settle down. To prove that I'm ready to be a mature and stable leader. He says I need to marry a decent woman."

The room suddenly feels smaller, and it's spinning around me. I blink at him, my heart pounding against my chest. It's ridiculous for me to feel jealous about the idea of Mr. Vanecourt getting married. But it feels like a punch to the gut nonetheless.

A strange ache settles in my heart as if an opportunity has been snatched away from me. I can't help but feel a deep sense of regret for the loss of our dynamic.

I almost blurt out that he can't, that I won't let him, but I swallow my confession before it reaches my throat. He's my boss, and we're professionals. There are boundaries. I'm too old to act like a schoolgirl with a crush.

The blood is pounding so loudly in my ears that I barely hear what he says next.

"And I can't think of a more decent woman than you."

I look at him. "Excuse me? What was that?"

Caesar smiles. "I don't need a whirlwind romance, and I don't need to meet the love of my life. All I need is a marriage contract with a decent woman. And it turns out that there are shockingly few decent people in my life."

I nod, my mind flashing back to the unpleasant encounter I had with his most recent spurned lover.

He leans forward as if reading my thoughts. "You've seen the kind of women I've been with. You know as well as I do that the King would not be impressed if I were to marry any of them. So I've been racking my brain, and I keep coming back to one person."

His gaze is steady on me. "Vivienne, you're right. I have been observing you more closely. I needed to confirm what I was thinking, that you'd be the

perfect person for this. No one would convince him as well as you that I'm prepared to run the Kingdom."

I can't speak. This can't be happening. Not like this.

"So I guess what I'm trying to say is..." He pauses as he reaches into his desk drawer and pulls out a small box, setting it on the table. "Vivienne Carter, will you be my temporary contractual wife?"

I blink at him for a full minute. He picks the box back up and gives it a shake, and there's no rattle. "This is actually empty, but after we hammer out the details we can go pick out a ring."

"I'm sorry," I cut him off, still unable to fully grasp what he is saying. "A ring?"

"For you to be my wife. At least until all this succession business is taken care of. But we can cross that bridge when we come to it."

It all suddenly makes sense. I find myself jumping up to my feet on instinct.

"Are you fucking insane?"

CAESAR

"I know this is sudden," I try to tell Vivienne as she stares daggers at me from the other side of the desk. "But if you'll let me explain..."

She cuts me off. "No. I don't want to hear anymore. Mr. Vanecourt, I'm sorry to hear about your father, but this is not appropriate. I have to go."

She's already at my office door by the time I get to my feet. It slams behind her, and I'm left alone.

I can't believe she could dispose of me that quickly. Her eyes looked as if she was disgusted that I could even ask her.

I try to catch a glimpse of her through the blinds, but I can only see the elevator doors closing. I didn't even have a chance to ask her what she would want in return. I would make this mutually beneficial.

But as I stare at the empty chair and imagine our conversation from her side, I can't think of a single thing she could ask for that would equal what I'm asking of her. I just asked her to enter a fake engagement with me to give me a chance at becoming King. And I had honestly expected her to just agree.

No wonder she thought I was crazy.

I look at the little empty ring box still sitting on the desk. I had hoped she would see it as a cute gesture to defuse the tension of the moment. Now it sits there as a symbol of how poorly thought out this was.

I pick the thing off the table and chuck it at the wall. It cleanly snaps in two along the hinge. It's fitting. I couldn't even pick out a ring box right.

My anger with myself turns into a cold terror that seizes me. I didn't just

ask any woman to be my fake wife. I proposed to my secretary.

She called it inappropriate. This is a scandal waiting to happen.

How could I have been so stupid? All the royal privilege in the world won't do me a lick of good if this gets out. One call to the press and I'm finished.

I rush out of the office. When the elevator doors open, the guard gives me a wave. "Emergency, Mr. Vanecourt? I just saw your secretary leave in a hurry."

I shake my head as I walk past him. "Just another day in international affairs."

Entering the garage, I scan the lot for any sign of Vivienne on the sidewalk. If she just hears me out, we can put this behind us. She's a professional. That's part of what attracted me to her for this.

No. Not attracted. Don't use that word. Even if it's true.

I let Ted know I'll be driving myself today, and I get into my car that's parked in the lot, not the chauffeured one.

I let out a frustrated grunt and punch the steering wheel a few times. It helps calm me down enough to place a call to Marcus. This is all his fault.

"Hey, what's up?" I hear him on the other line. How can he sound so casual?

"We have to meet," I tell him. "Now. Carlo's in Midtown."

Carlo's is a dimly lit private bar that never gives up a secret. I arrive first and secure a room in the back. I spend the next twenty minutes nursing a cocktail and wondering how I let Marcus get me into this mess. I thought he was my friend.

The door creaks open, and Marcus saunters in. His hopeful smile instantly fades as he picks up on my defeated expression. He slides into the chair opposite me.

"Things didn't go as planned," I mutter, swirling the ice in my otherwise empty glass. "Vivienne dashed out of the office before I was even done asking."

Marcus nods solemnly and sighs. "That's rough. But I think you can turn it around with a little bit of your princely charm. You owe it to yourself to try."

I can only scoff at him. "She stared at me like I was the village idiot. Why would I possibly want to set myself up to be looked at like that again?"

"I'm serious," he protests. "Vivienne is your best chance at getting into

your father's good graces."

I place a drink order on the tablet and shake my head. "You're not wrong, Marcus. But if you saw the way she reacted, you'd know there was no chance she would come around. And if I push it again, she might sue for sexual harassment."

"I doubt she'd do that. But let's explore some other options, then. Money is not an object. You can hire an actress. You could pay for an escort. You can give any woman anything they could possibly want, so all you need is a woman who wants something."

I find myself shouting him down. "What I need is a *decent* woman. A woman with no ulterior motives. Do you think I could bring a call girl to Solvaria and pass her off as my bride without the King figuring it out? Honestly."

The bartender slips a glass into the room and places it on the table just inside the door. I take a long sip while I collect my thoughts.

"It would have been so perfect with Vivienne because the King has already met her. He knows she's educated and dedicated to her job. He knows where she comes from, and she already knows how to maneuver around the royal family without causing a fuss. And she's the daughter of a U.S. Senator. That can't hurt."

Marcus gives me a peculiar gaze that makes me second-guess myself. "What?"

He lets out a bemused chuckle. "You were just telling me that Vivienne will never say yes, but it really doesn't sound like you want to consider any alternative."

I slam my glass on the table, mostly angry because he's right. "You're the one who keeps saying she's the best option! You've put it in my head, that's all."

Marcus shakes his head. "You can keep telling yourself that. But I think you need to really stop and think about what you want before you make any decision."

"What I want is to find a woman who will say yes!" I snap at him.

"Then we'll have to pick someone else," he says with a shrug.

I let out a low grunt. "Someone less than perfect."

"Right," he agrees. "If you're okay with less than perfect, then I have a lead for you. There's a guy I know. He specializes in fake families and companions. He doesn't use call girls. These are highly trained performers

who understand this kind of situation. Totally above board. Has connections with the theater world for people who need work."

He pulls out a cocktail napkin and a pen. "We just have to jot down some notes on the ideal companion to wow the King. He'll take care of the rest. And fortunately, we already have a template to go off of for perfection. How tall do you think Vivienne is?"

I stand up so fast that Marcus cowers back. "We're not creating a fake woman! Figure something else out."

I storm out of the room, my face burning with frustration. I walk back onto the sidewalk, squinting as I adjust to the brightness. My mind is a jumble of thoughts, about my father's health, fear of losing my position, and shame for how things went in the office.

But all my thoughts keep coming back to Vivienne.

For the briefest moment, I considered what Marcus was saying about crafting an imitation. But it felt wrong. Something is keeping me from moving past the idea of her.

Back in the car, I can't shake the image of Vivienne's face this afternoon. Even with all my staring, I'd never looked at her with such an exacting amount of detail before. Her eyes were magnetic, even as they looked at me in disgust.

The soft lines of her cheekbones lead down to her neck so gracefully. Her professional dress and unassuming manner make it easy to overlook the elegance of her form.

"Get a grip, Caesar. She's your secretary, not your girlfriend." *No matter how much I might wish otherwise.*

Tomorrow, we will simply act like today never happened. I will forget I ever looked at her in any way other than my employee, and I'm optimistic she'll follow suit.

I pull the car over and call Marcus back. "Hey, Marcus. You know what? Give me the number of your friend."

"Really?"

"No, actually. Just have him send me a list of candidates. The kind of women who would impress a King. I'll vet them myself."

"You got it."

I wait until he hangs up. Then I let out a long sigh. "Time to find a wife."

VIVIENNE

If I were a normal New Yorker, I'd be starting my Sundays with a sunrise jaunt around the Central Park Reservoir, paying tribute to Jacqueline Onassis Kennedy's favorite walking spot.

Then, with marimbas in my head, I'd have bubbly bottomless brunches with my millennial versions of Samantha, Miranda, and Charlotte. Of course, I'm Carrie, just mine is played by Issa Rae.

But no. I'm not a normal New Yorker, or even really a normal girl of my generation. I probably skip right past Generation X and fit in best with the boomers.

So, I'm in the car, heading to the Poconos, about to spend my Sunday with my mom and dad in the cabin they bought so their children could gather together as soon as they started giving them grandchildren. They're still waiting for mine, though. I have to have sex first for starters.

Being old before your time is just what happens when you're the youngest child in a brood of six, especially when your father happens to be Delano Douglass Carter, U.S. Senator from the great state of Missouri. Not to mention when your mom is Adela Carter, the woman behind the man.

As far as dads go, I think I got off easy. Just look at all the trouble Caesar's dad is causing.

"Will you marry me? Geez." I scoff at myself, thinking about his question. "Who's crazier, him or his old man? Or me?"

I'm coming down to the cabin solo, of course. Just me, myself, and Weekend Edition on NPR, spending some quality time together.

I pull into the gravel parking area and wonder to myself how long it will take for my mother to raise the topic of my single status. I'll bet an hour.

Three of my nieces and nephews, Eva, Marty, and Dougie, come running and shrieking down the pine stairs of the enormous wraparound deck.

"Aunt Vivi's here! Aunt Vivi!" they shout, jumping up and down.

"Come sit with the brainy bunch!" Marty yells.

That's what the Carters call ourselves. It's four daughters – Bobbi, Loretta, Dionne, and me – and two sons, Malcolm and Cory. Between all of us and Mom and Dad, there are more advanced degrees among us than people, not even counting honorary ones. Three Ph.D.s, five master's degrees, four J.D.s, three MBAs, and one M.D. At least I think that's the current count. Not to mention all my siblings' brilliant kids.

I'm among the least educated of us, and I studied international relations at Columbia.

As I approach, the group waves hello, lifting their bloody marys and Pimm's cups in acknowledgment.

"Vivienne! Hi, honey!" It's my sister Dionne, the sibling I'm closest to, both in age and in general, ambling down the wooden stairs. She holds her little baby boy, Felix, and I just want to squeeze his chubby little cheeks.

We kiss each other on the cheeks, and then I move on to the bundle of cuteness in her arms.

"Nom-nom, let me eat your toes!"

I pretend to eat his perfect little brown feet, and he thinks I'm the funniest person alive. If only everyone were that easy. Purely coincidentally, I have that thought while looking at my mom.

I make my rounds and kiss everyone, starting with Mom and Dad.

"Hi, sweetheart," my dad says. I love the peppery smell of his cologne. It reminds me of being in his beautiful Capitol Hill office, watching him sign letters.

"Hi, baby. I missed you." My mom kisses me on the cheek and wraps me in a hug.

"I missed you, too, Mama."

My mother looks past my shoulders as if she's waiting for someone to pop out of the bushes.

"Just you?" she asks.

Well, that took considerably less time than an hour. "Oh, what? You don't see him, Mom?"

“See who? You brought a man?” My mom starts looking around, and my siblings are looking at each other, shrugging.

“Yeah, right here.” I pretend to put my arm around someone. “The ghost of relationships future, Mama.”

Her glare could melt ice.

“You know, it’s funny, Mama.” I’m so angry I’m on autopilot. “You always wanted me to study so hard that I’d never had time for boys. When did I hit the line where I became an old maid?”

“Right... about... now!” It’s my sister Bobbi, who’s fifteen years older than me. Her kids are in high school now.

My father joins my mother in glaring. Even if he finds the joke funny, if my mom’s upset, he’s twice as mad.

“Vivienne Gloria Carter. You apologize to your mama right now. Don’t talk to her like that.”

“I’m sorry, Mama.”

She nods. “I’m very serious though, Vivienne Gloria.” Her tone falls somewhere between annoyance and concern. “You’re a beautiful, brilliant girl. You deserve a man who works hard to make you happy and takes care of you. A man like Daddy.”

I know deep down she means well. But I also know deep down her ‘solutions’ won’t solve my relationship problems. Specifically, the problem of not having one.

I hear her out, though. Whatever she has to say can’t be worse than the proposition I got this week.

“I’m sorry, Mama. You’re right.”

“It’s okay, darling.” She pauses to look at her phone, types something quickly, and then looks back up, satisfied with herself. “I have an idea that I think will be good for you.”

“I’m listening. What’s your idea?” I’m listening but very skeptical, I might add.

“My friend, Whitney Castell? Do you remember her son Edgar?”

Unfortunately, I do. I had to listen to him drone on about Pokemon cards for two hours at his bar mitzvah.

“Um, maybe? Refresh me.”

“Well, he’s a doctor...” *Of course.* “Well, a resident.” *Even better.*

At least if he works one hundred hours a week, I’d never see him.

“He lives in New York, too. I don’t know if he’s near you...” *Probably*

not.

“Okay. What does he need?” I play dumb.

“He has some time off to study for his boards. Whitney told me she’d love for you two to get dinner. We always thought you’d be good together.”

“No, Mom, not a blind date...”

“It’s not blind! You know each other.”

I hear the ominous sound of her phone ding. “He’s free tonight, Vivi!”

My siblings are snickering, side-eying, and looking at this scene intently. If the situation weren’t so tense, I’d ask who wants popcorn.

“I’m not going, Mom.”

“Yes. You are.”

“How do you know I don’t have anything going on tonight?”

“Do you?”

“Mom. I can find my own man. I don’t need to go out with your friends’ sons.”

“You can? Because you haven’t. And those dating apps, I don’t like the idea of you on them. Tickler? What’s it called?”

My siblings all die laughing, as do my older nieces and nephews. Why do I have to be the one forced to keep a straight face right now?

“Mom. No. I’m not going.”

“Yes. You. Are.” She takes my hand, and her tone gets serious. “Look, sweetheart, we’ve wanted to talk to you about the future. Your dad and I have been making our will, and we’re going to leave this cabin to you, you know.”

I just nod, uncertain where this is going.

“All of your siblings are so much older. They’re established. You’re the baby. And I see you as being the glue one day. But until you’re married, I want to change who the cabin goes to. I want this to be a place where a *family* can come. Not a single woman.”

My father stands up, his face like the Easter Island statues.

“That’s enough, Adela. I think she understands. I don’t like this.” He disagrees with my mom, but it’s not a battle he wants to fight at this moment. Especially because he probably has no worries about me finding someone who’s worthy of me.

On principle, how dare my mother use this place I love and the fear of their deaths as a bargaining chip? I only deserve something if I have a man?

I gather my bag and stand up.

“I think I’d better leave. I have a lot of work to do if I’m going to find a

man. I'd better get started now. Text me the info for Edgar or whatever."

I turn around and walk down the stairs.

"Wait..."

"Viv... Don't go..."

"Aunt Vivienne! Don't leave yet..." That last voice, Marty, breaks my heart. She's like a younger version of me, with her curly hair, dark brown eyes, and idealism.

Dionne runs down the stairs again. Only the sight of Felix's little face cheers me up. She gives me a hug. "Viv, don't pay her any mind. You're fine. When I was twenty-four..."

"I need to just collect my thoughts, Dee. I love you. We'll talk soon, okay? Promise."

I get in the car and start the engine, seeing the faces all turned in my direction. Let them look. I feel myself shaking. Why can't I just have a nice, normal lunch with my family? Why are all the families I keep hearing about so dysfun...

And then I think of the most dysfunctional family I've heard about lately. I have the craziest thought – that maybe Caesar isn't that crazy.

It would feel pretty great to have a ready-made husband to shove in their faces right now.

I speed up the Turnpike faster than I should, then zip through the Holland Tunnel and straight to Caesar's condo. I park, use the key card to go up to his floor, then ring. No answer. I call him.

"Pick up, pick up..."

On the third ring, he answers. "Vivienne? Is everything okay?"

There's tinkling piano music and an echo that sounds like a restaurant. *Is he on a date?* I start getting annoyed. Then I think of my arranged blind date. Then I get sympathetic.

"Hi. I'm outside your condo. I need to talk to you."

CAESAR

Jessica snorts loudly, covering her mouth with a hand. I force a smile, moving around the pasta on my plate but never bringing myself to take a bite.

The food is delicious, without a doubt. However, her coarse manners and boorishness are sapping my appetite. This is my third date this week and within minutes, I knew it was going to be another bust.

Who said the third time's the charm? Whoever they are, they're liars. All I can think about is how much I'd rather be having dinner with Vivienne.

God dammit. Why do I keep getting stuck at horrible dinners with these kinds of girls? I guess because I'm getting set up by Marcus' shady friend.

"I don't mind a good drink every now and then," she says, sloshing around her white wine violently enough to spill on the tablecloth. She makes a small noise, something akin to a weird laugh, and she uses her napkin to wipe up the mess. "It loosens me up a bit. Gets me talking."

"That's wonderful. I'm glad you're feeling comfortable." I wonder what she'd have to take to stop talking.

"So, is it true? You're a prince?" Jessica flutters her eyelashes at me. "I've never met a prince before. I always see them in magazines or whatever. You're better looking than all of them."

"Thank you. Where are you from, Jessica?"

I'm already planning my escape. It would be too rude to get up and leave, but I'm so tempted.

I zone out, practically meditating on the crystal chandeliers of the highbrow French restaurant. She immediately ordered the Osetra caviar

appetizer and the surf and turf for dinner, knowing who was footing the bill.

Not exactly charming.

She's been eying me as if I'm her ticket out of here or something. She's telling me a story about how she found a rat the size of a shoe living in the ceiling of her old apartment.

God, doesn't she know not to talk about things like that at the table? Ugh. I can just imagine how that would go over with my father.

If she keeps rambling on about her life, I might lose my mind in the end.

Why can't Marcus or one of his many oddball friends find me a woman who's like Vivienne? Sophisticated, smart, knows her shit. A woman who has everything together. A woman who speaks her mind but phrases it in a way that's always thoughtful.

She's also beautiful. Her refined features, flawless dark skin, and curly hair make her stunning, even when she doesn't realize it. Any man would be lucky to have her on his arm. There's an innocence about her, too.

Finding a wife is not going to be fun. If only Vivienne could accept my proposal. At this point, I'm pretty sure that ship has sailed. But still. I wonder if there's anything I can do to change her mind. Why do I have to keep looking if I've already found the perfect woman for this? Vivienne Carter.

I blink back into reality, remembering I'm still on a date with this loud brunette across from me. She's a good-looking girl, but the way she talks is enough to convince a man otherwise. There are some lights on in her head, but no one's home. It's not a good look.

Letting out a deep breath, I straighten my back and nod toward her dish. I reach for my wine.

"Enjoying the lobster?"

"I am! It's great."

She picks up the lobster tail and starts flopping it around. My nose wrinkles up in distaste. I've never liked seeing people play with their food, and in a setting like this, it's embarrassing.

"I've never been a big fan of seafood, but this is delicious. We should come to this restaurant again."

That nearly makes me spit out my wine.

When my phone starts ringing, Vivienne's name appears. My breath hitches in my throat for a moment. I answer embarrassingly quickly, turning away from Jessica.

"Hello?"

“Hi. I’m outside your condo. I need to talk to you.”

“Be right there.” I hang up before she can ask any questions, and I turn to my dinner companion who won’t be staying my companion for long.

“I’m sorry, Jessica, but I have a work emergency.” Not a lie. Just not the whole truth. “I have to go. It was a lovely evening. I don’t think I’ll be in the country much longer, unfortunately, so I don’t think I’ll be seeing you. Take care, though. Good luck with the rats!”

I place some hundreds on the table, take a final swig of wine, and hurry out too quickly for Jessica to catch up.

Vivienne’s waiting. I have no time to waste.

Getting into my car, I have the vague awareness that it’s not just me out here, but I still drive like a man on a mission. I swerve out onto the street, and a few times I nearly rear-end a few cars. I want to get there as fast as possible.

Excitement rushes to my head. I want to see her. I want her close to me. She’s a breath of fresh air compared to the women I’ve been forcing myself to spend time with this past week.

I reach my building in record time. See how fast you can travel when you completely ignore traffic laws? Tossing my car keys to the nearest valet, I rush into the building’s lobby and punch the button for the thirty-third floor to my condo.

“Hurry up, hurry up,” I say to the empty elevator, watching in agony as it travels far too slowly for my liking.

The elevator stops for a tiny white-haired woman holding a matching white dog in her purse. She’s going up, too, but she stops at the thirtieth floor. I force a smile as she leaves the elevator, but that façade drops quickly once she’s gone.

Why is it taking an eternity? I tap my foot incessantly. Finally, the doors swing open. Vivienne is right there, dressed in her usual modest attire, standing outside my condo.

She gnaws on her bottom lip as she grips tightly on the strap of her purse. She’s so cute, and outside of the office, she always looks more glamorous. I wouldn’t mind coming home to her each day.

“Vivienne.”

Our eyes lock, and she stiffens once she sees me.

“Hello.” She gives me a kind, demure smile that just ruins me. “I hope I didn’t interrupt something important. It sounded like you were somewhere

crowded.”

I notice she’s holding her reading glasses, which for some reason is adorable.

“Nope, not at all. In fact, you saved me. I was so happy to see your call anyway. But you got me out of an uncomfortable situation. You made my day.”

“Really? That makes my day to hear that.” Vivienne raises a brow and stares at me with her big dark eyes that make it nearly impossible to turn away.

To be honest, I like studying her features. Those eyes, and those lips, immediately called out to me when I first met her. *I made her day, too.*

“So, what did you want to talk about, Vivienne? I assume it’s important.”

I cross my arms over my chest, but there’s a spark of hope in my heart that flutters at the chance that she’s going to mention the proposal. She would solve all of my problems in an instant.

“Yes, it is.” She picks at her lips before continuing. “I’ve thought about it for a while and…”

She takes a deep breath and nods.

“Yes.”

“Yes?” My eyes widen. Is she saying what I think she’s saying? Holy shit. My stomach clenches up on me.

“Yes what, Vivienne? You’ll have to be more specific.”

A weak laugh falls from her lips. She averts her gaze and runs a hand through her curly hair. That should be my fingers threading through her locks. I bet they smell good. She always smells good, like a field of flowers.

“Yes, Caesar. Let’s get married.” She opens her arms wide before dropping them loudly at her sides. “I spelled it out for you. Are you happy now?”

I am. I’m very happy now.

Vivienne wants to be my wife. Fake wife. Fake or not, she’s the answer to my prayers.

VIVIENNE

Waving my hand in front of his face, I try to bring Caesar back to reality. It seems like I've scared him.

"Are you alright?"

"Hm? Yes! Of course." He smiles and nods, his eyes glowing with something I can't decipher. Caesar reaches into his pocket and fumbles for his keys. "Let's talk about this more in private, okay? Not out here."

"Sure. Whatever you want."

The moment we step through the threshold of his condo, I'm surprised to see the state of his home. I know he's normally meticulous in his apartment based on the times I've been here for work.

It's much messier than usual. Crumpled shirts litter the floor. A couple of empty pizza boxes lie askew near his shoe stand. Then my eyes drift towards the empty wine bottles not too far away.

"Ignore the mess. Please, come and sit." Caesar rushes forward and snaps up the shirt on his sofa, bunching it up and tossing it somewhere in his bedroom.

"No worries. I'll turn a blind eye to the cockroach on the wall."

"The what!"

"Kidding." I smile wide as I lower myself onto the couch. "Can I ask what a marriage between us would entail, Caesar? I assume we want to get this in writing."

Caesar snaps his fingers. "Absolutely. We'll get to that."

He disappears into the kitchen but soon returns with two wine glasses and

a red that I know from the wine store is expensive. “But first, I would like to know what changed your mind. Out of curiosity.”

As he pours me some wine, I relax on the couch. My purse strap falls down my arm, and I allow myself to loosen up a little bit.

“I was getting tired of all the blind dates my family kept sending me on.” I take a quick sip of the wine and relish the way it burns my throat. “I’m also under some recent pressure from my mom to have a man in my life. There’s a cabin in my family... I don’t need to get into all the details, but this will help cure my problems, too.”

“I see.” A slight grin grows on his lips. “Well, I’m glad to hear that I can assist you.”

He tosses back half of his wine glass and then starts pouring himself some more. He opens up his laptop and puts it on the table for both of us to see.

“I just need you around so that my family can see this is a legitimate relationship,” I say. “We need to act as if we’ve been in love for a while and that nothing will ever separate us. Also, you’ll have to stop being such a playboy.”

I lean forward, placing my wine glass on the coffee table. Caesar glances at me, and I send him a knowing look.

“I’m serious. No more tabloids. Thankfully, they don’t reach America too often, but my parents know enough about you to need some reassurance. Besides, you’d be married to the daughter of a U.S. Senator. We’d be an even bigger target together.”

“Alright. I hear you. I won’t see anyone during the duration of our marriage. In fact...” He types a few words on his laptop and pulls up a file. “That was one of the clauses I added to our agreement. No cheating from either party. I hope you can agree, too.”

I snort. “You act as if I have a long line of men waiting to be with me.”

“You don’t? Well, you could’ve fooled me.” He perks a brow and reclines against the couch. He sips his wine while I skim through the document.

In reality, I’m watching him diligently in my peripheral vision. There’s nothing too concerning about this agreement. No cheating. Occasional public dates and public displays of affection. Sticking with him whenever he goes to events. I don’t mind any of this.

Honestly, it sounds like a dream relationship. I get to spend time with a handsome prince. He’ll dote on me and always remain loyal to me and only

me. This sounds like something I would've dreamed up when I was a little girl before I knew about the realities of relationships.

"Alright." I slide the laptop back his way. "I agree to these conditions."

"Amazing. I'll send this to my lawyer for some final touches. Then all you'll have to do is sign."

Wetting my lips, I wring my hands together. Something in that wine has made me a bit audacious. I'm not a fool regarding what married couples do behind closed doors. And I also know that men, especially ones like Caesar, have their needs like everyone else.

"As your wife, I know that I'll have some... um... expectations," I begin, keeping my eyes away from him. Already, I can feel a heat rising to my cheeks. "And since you're not going to cheat on me, I'd be willing to care for your needs. On my own terms. I don't want to feel pressured or rushed, but still."

Caesar stays quiet. When I finally muster up the courage to look at him, he's staring at me with wide eyes and his mouth slightly ajar. I swallow. Did I overstep a boundary?

Oh, God.

Reaching for the wine again, I take a big swig. I welcome the burn, but I know my head and my stomach might be pissed at me later on for that.

"Vivienne, that was the last thing I was expecting." He rubs his hand along his chin. "I would never force you to do anything you didn't want to do. But, if this is something you're interested in... I won't stop you."

"It seems like the right thing to do, doesn't it?" I shrug. "I mean, I don't know. I have no idea what I'm doing."

"Me neither. But I like it."

He sets down his glass and starts typing furiously on his laptop, probably sending the document to his lawyer as we speak. I hope I made the right decision.

I mean, if the wetness beginning to pool between my legs is anything to go by, I might have made the right decision. A thousand times over. This might be my only chance to be with a man like Caesar. This opportunity will never happen again, so I might as well make the most of it.

I will never admit that I desperately wanted something like this to happen. Never. If anything, I can just pretend that I was forced into this whole situation and I'm only making the most out of my circumstances.

That seems fair, right? Caesar and I both get something out of it. He gets

a wife to please his father. I get a husband to please my family.

And we also might get to please each other a whole lot. Mind-blowing sex with one of the hottest men alive? Um, yes, please.

I try not to fixate too hard on that detail, but I can't shake it from my mind.

But still, everything will move at my pace. It has to. I've never initiated sex with anyone before, so I have no idea how it starts and how it ends. I've never had sex at all. I've got a lot to learn.

There are magazines for this sort of thing, right? Websites I can skim? Forums I can stalk? I'll have to start researching tonight.

In the meantime, Caesar and I enjoy our wine. He offers to get some food delivered, and I graciously accept. The sounds my stomach is making are too loud to ignore.

As we're enjoying some sushi rolls, his lawyer sends back the document. I sign electronically and that's that. Marriage proposal settled. Caesar and I are to be wed.

"Well, it's been a pleasure doing business with you, my lovely fiancée," he says with a teasing flair. He sticks out his hand for me to take.

I set aside my plate of food and shake his hand. The touch sends a bolt of electricity up my arm and down my spine, igniting my body in an indescribable way. My eyes trail his features down to his lips, but I don't let them linger for too long. That's dangerous.

"How about we fly to Vegas tomorrow? We can get married there. Then we can have a more formal wedding in Solvaria," he suggests, then dips his tuna roll into some soy sauce nonchalantly.

"Yeah, we can do that." I nod. "I never thought I'd be having an impromptu Las Vegas wedding."

"There's a lot of firsts you'll be experiencing with me," he says suggestively. "I'll make sure you're comfortable every step of the way."

I clench my legs closer together, not wanting to think about how he'll be the first man to take me to bed. The thought makes me lightheaded and a bit scared of what's to come.

But my desire for him supersedes any sort of doubt I might feel about the marriage that's just on the horizon.

CAESAR

“**A**nd now, you may kiss the bride!”

With Marcus as our only witness, I swoop down to Vivienne in my arms and kiss her. She laughs against my lips, but the passion is there. I feel it, as much as she tries to hide it.

Everything happened in a blur. Just yesterday, we were in New York City, bonding over some wine and sushi. Then, we hopped onto a red-eye flight to Las Vegas and got married.

I paid for Marcus’ flight, and I did the same for Vivienne’s cousin, Sarah. She’s not here yet, but she plans to join us for dinner later.

As I pull away from her lips, I stare at Vivienne in all her beauty. The moment we landed in Vegas, I took her shopping for a dress. Unsurprisingly, she chose a modest option. No plunging v-neck or sharp slit down her thigh, though I would have loved to see her curves in a more revealing style.

She chose a simple dress with a shawl that covered her shoulders, as well as a short veil that complemented her curly hair well. As for the makeup, she did it herself. Some mascara, lip gloss, and maybe a bit of foundation.

She doesn’t need makeup. She’s naturally beautiful, and I’m not afraid to remind her of that. There’s a nervousness to her movements that I can’t ignore, and it lingers with her all the way to our first dinner as a married couple.

It’s at a Michelin-starred Chinese place by a celebrity chef, in honor of Vivienne’s favorite cuisine.

“Order whatever you want,” I announce to both Vivienne and Marcus.

“It’s all on me.”

“This year of Roederer is incredible, I’ve heard,” Marcus says, his gaze fluttering between me and Vivienne. “You can’t put a price on good champagne.”

“Apparently you can.” Vivienne looks down at the wine list skittishly. “Here, it’s five hundred dollars.”

“Get two if you want,” I say. “Go wild.”

“I’ll remind you of that when the bill comes, my friend.”

Vivienne furrows her brow slightly as she gazes at the menu. Reaching over, I place my hand over hers and give her a gentle squeeze. She meets my eyes and offers a small smile. I get the distinct impression that she’s nervous.

I can’t blame her. Everything moved so fast between us, but it was the right thing to do, not just for me but for her, too. Besides, I couldn’t risk the chance of her developing cold feet and abandoning the plan.

“Vivienne!”

It’s Sarah, her cousin, dressed in a sparkly blue dress and striding into the restaurant herself with unflappable confidence. I notice the way Marcus is staring at her as she approaches the table. I’ve seen that look before. He’s intrigued.

“May I speak to the bride in private?” Sarah asks.

“She’s your family, right? I’m no one to hold her back,” I say without missing a beat.

“I believe she’s your family, too, now.”

“You have a point, my dear cousin. But go, my beautiful bride.” I let go of Vivienne’s hand and gesture for her to follow her cousin. “We’ll put in our orders when you ladies come back.”

Sarah and Vivienne speak privately off to the side. Meanwhile, Marcus lets out a low whistle.

“She’s cute.”

“My bride or the cousin?”

“Your bride is beautiful, but she’s not the one I’m interested in.”

“Good answer.”

Sarah and Vivienne return to the table just as the waiter comes to take our order. We don’t hold back at all. My bride deserves the best, after all.

Marcus has somehow turned into a comedian with Sarah around, spurred on by the alcohol. Eventually, the two of them start having their own conversation while I focus on Vivienne.

“How are you feeling?” I ask gently, trailing my thumb along her knuckles. “Is everything alright?”

“Mm-hmm. Everything’s wonderful.”

“You’ve hardly touched your garlic fish and eggplant.” I eye her plate. “Do you want to send it back? Is it not up to your standards?”

She swats at my arm playfully. “It’s perfect. I’m not too hungry, that’s all.”

“What if you get hungry again back at the hotel?”

“They have food there, I’m sure.”

‘There’ is the palatial presidential suite at The Venetian, with a private game room, private spa, private workout room, and luxurious, sumptuous furnishings, including the room’s true centerpiece, the bed.

I’m not expecting sex tonight since I doubt Vivienne will be ready to make that jump. Still, her dress and the way it hugs her body is doing something to me. I can’t keep my eyes off her.

My hands never linger far away from her. I’m desperate for her touch, her kisses, and her warmth, but I understand that she calls the shots now. Not me.

It’s getting difficult to ignore the growing bulge between my pants. Thankfully, Marcus and Sarah are both too tipsy and enthralled with each other to notice.

After paying the bill, we return to the hotel, where we depart to our rooms. I’m surprised to see that Marcus and Sarah aren’t hurrying off together. It seems like Vivienne and I aren’t the only ones trying to take things slow around here.

“Tired?” I ask, tapping the keycard and opening the door, which reveals an opulent new world with a view overlooking the city. “It’s a suite, so if you’d like, there’s more than one bed.”

“Don’t be silly,” she replies, walking in with a confidence that I wasn’t expecting. “It’s fine. It would be strange to sleep in different rooms on our wedding night.”

“True. What a pragmatic bride I have.”

I allow the door to slam shut behind us. Vivienne takes a moment to gaze at the room and all of its amenities as I shrug off my blazer.

“I think it’s important we start getting used to each other’s presence. Don’t you think so?”

“Exactly. No one will believe we’re in love if we don’t play the part.”

She unhooks the shawl from her dress, freeing her shoulders. I try not to

think about how her skin would taste on my lips.

“Would you like some wine to celebrate?” she asks.

The dazed look on my face is soon replaced with a grin. She leads the way to the mini fridge that carries a wide selection of choices.

Vivienne, classy as ever, chooses a bottle of rosé. I uncork it and pour two glasses. I follow her to the couch that sits by the wide floor-to-ceiling window.

“This city never sleeps either,” I remark, taking a sip. “If you want, you can head out and have an adventure before we travel back to Solvaria.”

“And leave my husband all alone? Or you’d come on the adventure with me? I want to stay with you regardless.”

“You’re too kind.” I reach out and place my hand on her knee. “You’re doing all this because you want to. Right?”

She narrows her eyes at me. “I’m not a child, Caesar. I can make these decisions for myself.”

“I know, but I understand that it’s a lot. Your feelings matter to me.”

Another sip of wine. I’m starting to feel the effects of the multiple glasses I’ve had all at once. My head starts spinning, and my mouth starts running. “You look beautiful today, by the way. I couldn’t ask for a more beautiful bride.”

“Do you mean that? This dress isn’t...” She looks down. “It’s a conservative choice.”

“You look stunning. It suits you.” I can’t stop myself from gazing down the expanse of her body, imagining what she would look like with nothing on.

“Why didn’t you have a boyfriend? Before me. Before this.” In normal circumstances, I might be afraid of overstepping, but I have two things going for me. I’m tipsy, and she’s my wife.

“I don’t know. I guess I was too focused on school, then work, then my ambitions. I’ve always been pretty serious if you hadn’t noticed,” she says quickly. She swallows the rest of her wine in one go, then pours herself some more. “I’m a little embarrassed to admit that I don’t have much experience.”

“Why? It’s cute.”

“Cute?”

“Sure. I’ve never been with a woman like that before.” My head feels heavy right now. “It’ll be a new experience.”

“Caesar...”

Somehow, I'm falling into her. And somehow, she doesn't reject me. Instead, her hands are at my shoulders, gripping me tightly as my lips find her skin. I'm at her shoulders first, planting gentle kisses until I find her neck.

Once I do, she gasps quietly and arches into my body. Her hands thread into my hair, pulling my mouth upwards until my lips are near hers.

Then, she kisses me with a fire that I always knew she had within her. I reciprocate passionately, groaning into her mouth as she directs my movements with each tug of her hand.

"God, Vivienne," I whisper, sneaking my tongue into her mouth. Thankfully, she allows me to. "You're perfect."

I'm intoxicated, with Vivienne being more potent than any bottle of alcohol this world can offer me.

VIVIENNE

I want him. I want him desperately. But it's not the right time. Not yet.

Caesar is everything I ever wanted. From his stares to his touch to the way his tongue moves inside my mouth. He drives me crazy, and I'm sick of hiding it.

But I'm not ready. I know myself. Having sex with him tonight, although it's my wedding night, just isn't the way I want to do this.

"Caesar," I say gently, pushing him away although I'm dying to do the opposite. "I can't."

He immediately pulls away and sits at the far end of the couch. He runs a hand through his hair, making it messier than it already was, and nods.

The prominent bulge between his legs is calling to me. I want it. But not yet.

I'm the reason for that. He wants to have sex with me.

"Thank you for stopping this before it got too crazy. I want you. A lot. But only at your pace."

I sigh, rubbing at my eyes. I'm sure I'm smearing some of my makeup, but it doesn't matter to me anymore.

"I just... I don't think it's the right moment. You know? I'm not ready. I don't think either of us are right now, in this state. We're both drunk. We're not thinking straight."

"Yeah. Absolutely." He rolls his neck and relaxes further into the couch. I see the exhaustion in his limbs coming out in full force, although his erection is still in full force, too. "I'll sleep in one of the other beds if you'd like."

My shoulders slump. “Caesar, I didn’t want to make things awkward for us. I...”

“No, no, you’re right. Maybe it’s best if I keep my distance from you, at least for tonight.” He clears his throat and straightens his posture. “I want you so badly, I don’t think I would be able to hold back if I were touching you.”

He touches my arm hungrily, and I think of how easy it would be. My knees buckle, but I keep my composure.

I’m the one who’s putting a stop to things. I’d look like a fool if I ran back into his arms right now, no matter how badly I want to latch myself onto his body and have him fill me. Feeling his lips against my skin awakened a deep desire. I’d have trouble holding back, too.

“I’m so attracted to you, Vivienne. You’re so unbelievably hot. You’re a man’s dream come true. You tick all the boxes.” He flicks his finger through the air, mimicking that ticking motion with his eyes closed. “And I may sound like a bastard or a pervert right now, but I can’t stop thinking about what you look like beneath those clothes.”

I swallow hard. I have to stay strong.

“I’m sorry for saying that out loud,” he says soon afterward, chuckling softly. He shakes his head. “But when I want something...”

“Oh, you get it. I am aware.” I nod, knowing better than anyone else how he gets whenever he wants to conquer something. Or someone. “I...”

My heart pounds loudly, so much so that I can hear it in my ears. As much as I want to leap onto his lap and give him everything he wants, I can’t. I need to have restraint.

Besides, maybe he only wants to get in my bed because I’m a challenge. No one else has been with me before. *Once he’s done with me, he’ll add me to his mile-long list of ex-lovers and forget.*

Suddenly, it’s as if the haziness in my mind clears away, and I start thinking straight again. I won’t give up my virginity that easily, no matter how attracted I am to Prince Caesar Vanecourt.

I know I’m going to be dreaming about his kisses and his touch tonight. That will suffice for now.

“Good night, Caesar,” I manage before rushing to the master bedroom of the suite and closing the door, then locking it.

I realize I’m face to face with what would have been the honeymoon bed. The spot where Caesar and I should be having sex as newlyweds. With a sigh, I turn away and head to the bathroom.

I can't make my fantasy a reality tonight, as much as I wish I could. Instead, I turn the hot water on and indulge in a steamy shower. Images flash behind my closed eyes, thinking about Caesar and how he would devour me in bed. I imagine him here in the shower with me, caressing my body with his soft hands and warm lips.

He would push me against the wall, trailing his lips along the expanse of my neck before...

"Stop it," I scold myself, allowing the hot water to hit my face directly and wash away the ghost of his touch. "There's no time for lust. Tomorrow, we'll go back to Solvaria, and things will go back to the way they used to be. Kind of. Maybe."

Who am I kidding? How are things supposed to return to normal between me and Caesar now that I know he wants to have sex with me? And now that he knows I want to have sex with him?

That night, I hardly get any sleep. I toss and turn for the most part, snuggling with a fluffy pillow that I pretend is Caesar's body. If our circumstances were different, he would be in bed with me. Spooning me from behind, whispering soft things into my ear that make me swoon.

I go to sleep alone, and I wake up alone.

By the time I get up and start tugging my luggage out to the suite's main room, I realize that Caesar is already up. He's on a video call, actually.

It's King Francis, who looks stronger than the rumors would have the public believe.

"Ah, Vivienne!" King Francis greets me with a wave. "It's so good to see you, my dear!"

"Say hello to my beautiful bride, Father. We'll be coming back home to Solvaria this week."

"You married Vivienne?"

I'm half-expecting him to launch into a tirade on how this is the silliest mistake of our lives, but instead, he lets out a jovial laugh.

"Wise choice, my son. You need someone who will whip you into shape when you need it. She's the perfect one for it."

I approach the phone so that I can hear King Francis more clearly. It may be my imagination, but it seems like he lights up to see me.

"Vivienne, discipline him as you see fit. If you ever need to knock him upside the head, go ahead. You have my permission. In fact, I encourage you to do this as often as you can."

“Wow, thanks, Dad,” Caesar replies. “I’m glad I have your vote of confidence.”

I squeeze Caesar’s shoulder to let him know that I’m sticking by his side no matter what. He gives me a smile that warms my heart.

“In all seriousness, Vivienne, Caesar values his commitments,” the King tells me. “He won’t do you wrong. I promise. And if he ever needs more motivation, I’ll make certain he does.”

“Thank you, King Francis. Your son is a wonderful man.”

A loud bang at the door pauses the conversation. At first, I don’t think much of it, but then I hear my name being screamed on the other side.

“Vivienne!”

“Hold on,” I whisper to Caesar.

I hurry to the door to answer. When I do, it’s Sarah pushing her way inside with an anguished expression. “Sarah, what is happening?”

“I’m so sorry, Vivienne! I didn’t mean to do it!”

“What’s going on? My God, did you kill someone?”

“No! But your family knows about the marriage now.” Sarah covers her face with her hands. “I’m so sorry! I was on the phone with my sister, telling her about what happened. And one of *your* sisters was visiting. I didn’t know!”

I blink, unable to find the right words to say. Sarah keeps on.

“So then she told your parents, and now the whole family knows, and it’s a mess, and it’s all my fault!” Sarah’s eyes are filled with tears. “I’m so sorry! I would’ve never said a thing if I knew your sister was going to overhear!”

“I... It’s... It’s alright. It was an accident.”

I haven’t spoken to my parents since the last failed blind date incident. My mom wanted me to get married so I could have the cabin, but I think she assumed she would at least be a guest at the wedding. She and my father must be panicking, doing damage control and trying to figure out what to do next.

I figured that I would be the one to tell them about everything going on. Sarah, bless her heart, took that opportunity away from me. And now I’m terrified to deal with the consequences.

Across the suite, Caesar stares at me with wide eyes. At my side, Sarah is sobbing into her hands.

Congratulations to me.

CAESAR

“I ’m so sorry!”

At this point, Vivienne wraps an arm around her cousin and tries to calm her down. My video call with my father continues, which makes me realize that he must’ve heard most of her story already.

With a smile that hides my concern, I turn back toward my father. “Well, that was unexpected.”

“Do you have anything you want to tell me, my son?”

“What’s there to tell? You wanted me to find a good woman, so I did. In record time, I might add.”

I watch in my peripheral vision as Vivienne tries to defuse the situation on her end. With such a calming presence, Vivienne quickly calms Sarah.

“That’s the important thing. Right, Dad?”

Father’s looking at me as if the obvious answer should be no. The point of this whole plan was to satisfy him, not piss him off.

“Yes and no, Caesar.” I want to roll my eyes, but unfortunately, it’s on video. “I wanted you to marry a good woman, and yes, you’ve done that. But you didn’t have to do it as if you had to beat a live grenade. It’s not a great look to elope without even enough time for her to tell her parents.”

I shake my head. “Vivienne is so much more than a good woman, Dad. She’s amazing in every single way.”

“Ah.” His eyebrows perk up slightly. “I stand corrected then.”

“Besides, it will be good that we didn’t put any strain on the coffers of the people of Solvaria.”

“Not a bad point.” He tilts his head, considering my words. “In any case, Caesar, you have to make things right with Vivienne’s family.”

“I know, Father. I understand.”

“I’ve tried to warn you that your decisions will come back and bite you, but I suppose it’s about time you learned the hard way. A rash decision will come with repercussions, regardless of the venue in which they’re made.”

I smile, bowing my head. “You’re right. I’ll sort out this mess.”

“Good luck to you, my son. I can’t wait to welcome you and Vivienne back to Solvaria after you’ve settled the issues with her family.”

Father waves and I hang up the call. Rolling my neck and cracking my knuckles, I turn on my heels to face Vivienne and Sarah. They’re sitting on the couch together, with Vivienne passing her cousin some tissues every now and then.

“Change of plans,” I announce, opening my arms wide. “We’re visiting your parents instead.”

Vivienne stiffens. “We are?”

“Yes. We need to make things right. No time like the present.”

“I... I told them I couldn’t go home for the family reunion because we’d be in Solvaria. Hopefully, they’ll be happy we’re coming. We’ll meet them in Sandyville and play it by ear from there.”

Waving off her worries, I start gathering my luggage and hers. It’ll be a long flight back to Sandyville where they live. I truly hope that Vivienne doesn’t bite off all her nails as we go. Everything will be fine. I think.

We take a private jet to the airport. I wish I had a fear of flying so I could offer her anxiety medication to calm her nerves. I’ve never seen her show fear before, but the prospect of displeasing her parents seems to terrify her.

Her hometown of Sandyville, Missouri, is adorable, with tree-lined streets and a charming downtown.

I thought my family was large, but it’s nothing compared to the Carters. They’re not even all here yet. It’s her mom and dad, but so far the only relatives who have arrived for the reunion are Malcolm and Bobbi, her oldest brother and sister, along with their spouses and kids. There are three more siblings who will be on their way, in addition to some of her aunts and uncles.

Vivienne thought she’d have to miss it and told them she was traveling for work, which was partially true. Now they know the whole truth. Well, most of it.

They're all at the doorway when we arrive. There's a boisterous welcome for Vivienne when she walks through the door and a more muted reception for my arrival.

"It's so good to meet you," I say to Vivienne's mom and dad, shaking their hand. "I'm Caesar Vanecourt, Prince of the Kingdom of Solvaria."

Vivienne's mom, Adela, purses her lips together before glaring at her daughter. "Is this a joke?"

"No, Mom, not at all." Vivienne links her arm with mine in a show of support "You said you wanted me to find the right man to marry. So, here he is!"

Adela crosses her arms. "Yeah, I said the *right* man," she spits. "Not your playboy boss that you somehow up and married within the last... what? Week? Day?"

I grimace. Putting it like that makes it sound awful. Vivienne places her hand on my forearm and squeezes. Still, this family is after me like a pack of rabid dogs.

In hindsight, I should have prepared better for a welcome like this. I wanted to show my father. I thought, *I'll get married if that's what you want*. But I should have thought it through better. My father's words echo loudly in my mind – rash decisions have repercussions.

Delano, Vivienne's father, observes us from afar, sipping from a glass of water, clearly ice cold from the condensation.

"This can't be real," Vivienne's mom continues, furrowing her brows together. "This has to be an arrangement of some kind. Right? No way would a daughter of mine marry a damn prince this quickly otherwise. It's not right. It makes no sense!"

I wrap my arm around Vivienne's shoulders, while my wife looks like she's about to cry.

"Vivienne and I got married because we knew that we were right for one another, Mrs. Carter."

Vivienne forces a shy smile and stiffens.

"We're happy to be together," I continue. "We want to share this happiness with the rest of you."

Her mother huffs, resting a hand on her hip. "Vivi, is this true?"

"Yes." Vivienne nods. "I wanted to be with him, Mom. And to celebrate, we wanted to join the family at the reunion. I thought it'd be nice to take my husband back to the town where I grew up and to meet the extended family."

Don't you think?"

Her parents share wide-eyed looks. Then her mother retreats into the kitchen with a sigh. Her father nods our way.

"Welcome to the Carter home, by the way, both of you," he jokes. His voice is smooth and relaxing, kind of like Vivienne's own. "My wife's a bit on edge."

Aren't we all?

"Come on." Vivienne tugs at my sleeve, leading me up the stairs. "I'll show you my old room."

The home comes alive with boisterous laughter and conversation from Vivienne's enormous family. There's a pang of longing, wanting to be welcomed into such a close-knit crew, but I understand their reluctance.

I'd probably be unsettled, too, if my sweet youngest daughter showed up married to her boss. Especially one with a reputation like mine.

"Here it is," Vivienne says with a lack of excitement in her tone. "This is where it all began. Sort of."

Her childhood bedroom is so quintessentially her. Awards line the walls. Photographs hang all over of a younger, smiling Vivienne at science fairs, competitions, and academic decathlons.

There's a valedictorian plaque that lingers above her bed, along with a certified recognition that she earned a 4.0 G.P.A during her time in high school, and close to 5.0 weighted with her Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses.

"My God," I whisper, spinning slowly on my heels to take the whole room in. "You're a genius. I always knew you were, but this is... Wow."

"I'm above average, I guess."

"What?" I gesture towards her valedictorian plaque. "I haven't met many people who can say they graduated first in their class. And don't think I missed that summa cum laude distinction on your college diploma. You're amazing."

"My siblings are the real geniuses," she says, bringing her fingers to her lips. "They have so many degrees between them. And look at my father. A United States Senator."

My shoulders soften. "Well, I think you're amazing. And I see that your family does, too."

She shakes her head as her eyes turn glassy. "Maybe. But I know my mom is going to find out what's going on. I've never been able to hide

anything from her. She's going to find out."

"How?"

"I don't know. She has some special intuition. If she doesn't have any physical proof to work with, she starts talking about how she suspects something wrong because she saw it in a dream or something."

At that, I snort. "Maybe my father should hire her as the royal dream interpreter."

"I'm serious."

Reaching out, I take her hand in mine and bring her knuckles to my lips. "Do you trust me, Vivienne?"

She lets out a shaky breath. "Yes, I do."

"I don't intend to mess this up. Let's make this as real as possible to make sure she doesn't find out. Okay?" I don't break eye contact with her, and she keeps her gaze level with mine.

She nods. I kiss her hand again.

"I'll be the best son-in-law she could have ever asked for."

"She's a tough person to win over. It'll be difficult."

"I love a good challenge. When have you known me to shy away from one?"

I smile at Vivienne, then guide her to sit on her bed. Finally, a bright smile emerges on her face.

VIVIENNE

I don't speak much, but even then, Caesar refuses to give up or leave my side.

I help my mother get ready for the guests, and Caesar dutifully helps, even though I'm sure he's not used to domestic work. He does it like a champ.

He knows how to play the part of a doting husband, I'll give him that much.

We're married. This is how married couples are supposed to act. They're supposed to care for one another no matter the circumstances, going as far as giving up some comforts to make sure the other one is doing alright.

"Here, let me do that, Vivi. I can fold it better," my mom says as I try to put some of the linens away. Her tone of voice is scolding, not comforting. Even when she offers to help, she knows how to make it feel like a form of punishment.

Caesar shoots me a comforting smile, a way of telling me he knows I didn't do anything wrong. I wish my mom would give him a chance.

What if he really were the man I'm in love with? She doesn't know he's not. Fake or not, it hurts for her to treat the two of us like this.

I guess I can't blame her. All she's known about Caesar up until now is the stories I told them of his raucous adventures, and we weren't even dating before we got married. My mom knows how innocent I am, too.

If he were the man I was in love with, I could see how scared she'd be that he'd break my heart or take advantage. Growing up, I never focused on

boys at all. Not even the sweet ones who would sneak me flowers or handwritten cards in my locker.

This is new to my parents. It's new to me, too. I'm glad that Caesar has done everything to make me feel like it's the right choice. If he were making it difficult, I'd be thinking it's the worst mistake of my life.

The doorbell rings, and the guests start arriving. It's a stately historic house, with plenty of rooms for all the family who's coming to stay. I run down to the door to open it.

"Aunt Denisha!"

"Vivienne! You look so beautiful, baby!"

My mother's sister wraps me in a tight embrace and smothers me in kisses. Around me, my smiling cousins are hooting and jumping as they come inside. Caesar and I help Uncle Tommy with the luggage from the van they came in.

Thankfully, my aunt's family is more receptive to Caesar than my parents are. I think my siblings will like him, too, when they get here. Especially Dionne.

"Where'd you get those gorgeous shoes?" Johnny asks, pointing at the buttery Italian leather wingtips Caesar has on. "I've never seen ones quite like those."

"I believe I got them when I was in Milan. I have a big collection of shoes back at home. If you want, I can have some sent for you and your brothers."

"No way!" my younger cousin Lionel balks. "That's too much money. What are you, a millionaire?"

"Lionel!" Aunt Denisha hisses. "You can't run around and ask people how much money they're making!"

Denisha pats my cheek before approaching my mother. She still doesn't seem too happy, but at least the sight of her sister warms her up.

"We've got your rooms ready," my mom says.

"The house looks beautiful, Adela." Aunt Denisha touches my mom's face. "Hey, what's wrong, Addie girl? You look like you had a taste of something bad."

"No, Denisha. I'm fine," my mother says, convincing no one. I see Aunt Denisha look at her skeptically, then she throws her arm around her.

"And how are you, my beautiful niece?" Uncle Tommy asks. "That's the new husband, huh?"

"In the flesh." I stick my hands into my pockets, watching as Caesar

shows something on his phone to Johnny and Lionel.

“Just make sure he takes good care of you,” Tommy says.

“I will, Uncle Tommy.”

“And don’t worry about your mama. She’s just protective. She was the same way when I started dating her baby sister, you know.”

“Really?”

“Oh yeah. She takes a long time to warm up.”

“Well, hopefully not too long.”

The rest of my siblings arrive, and I introduce Caesar one by one.

“I thought I had a lot of siblings,” he says to me.

Loretta pulls out the decades of photo albums and framed pictures that my mom keeps meticulously. We always loved looking at them.

Caesar trails his fingers along the wooden frames, carefully observing each image with delight in his eyes.

“Is that you? In high school?”

I suck in a deep breath. “Yep.”

“She was a beauty in disguise,” Loretta says.

It’s hard not to grimace at what I used to look like. Messy curls. Braces. Big glasses. The epitome of a nerd. “That’s the photo from the robotics team. I think I was the only girl who was even interested in that sort of stuff.”

“Who’s that?” Caesar points to a photo of myself and another girl. She’s blonde, wearing braces like I am.

“That’s Tammy. She was a good friend of mine during high school before she turned boy-crazy.”

“I thought all girls in high school were a little boy-crazy.”

“Not this one,” Loretta says, getting up to join Mama in the kitchen. “Couldn’t get her away from the books. I’ll see you later.” She gives me an encouraging look.

“When the house got too loud, I’d go out there,” I tell Caesar, pointing out the window to the backyard. “No one would come up to follow me.”

“Is that a...?” Caesar squints, pointing out the window. “A treehouse? Do kids here really have their own treehouses in their backyards? I thought that was just in movies.”

“That’s funny. I thought castles were only in movies growing up.” We both laugh. “But yeah. We did.”

“I always wanted a treehouse.”

“You were a prince! You didn’t get a treehouse?”

“My father said I would break an arm and a leg if I got one.”

“So that’s why you’re such a risk-taker. Too few opportunities as a kid.”

“Might be. Or who knows how many more risks I’d take now if I had one. My brothers and I used to play rough with each other. I can definitely see one of us getting shoved out of a treehouse.”

I can see him craning his neck, looking out longingly.

“Let’s go up, come on.” I take his hand. “It used to be my hideout. I’d go up with a good book and the hours would pass by. I think my mom has a fear of heights, so she’d leave me alone when I was up there.”

“I’d love to go in. You’ll be making one of my dreams come true.”

Just as we’re about to exit the room, Caesar reaches out for my hand and squeezes it. My breath catches in my throat, wondering if he has ulterior motives for taking me into my old childhood treehouse.

And honestly, I wouldn’t mind. We both deserve a little fun after today.

My posture stiffens as he grabs my hand. I’m still not used to him touching me, as much as I like it. He notices immediately and strokes my hand softly.

“We should act comfortable around each other. Like a couple who’s madly in love. Someone might be looking, and we want them to be convinced.”

“Right, yeah. Of course.”

I act more relaxed, but inside I’m filled with questions. I can’t tell if he really likes me and wants to touch me, or if it’s all for the act to get into my parents’ good graces.

Caesar offers me another hand squeeze as he leads the way out the sliding glass door into the backyard. I desperately wanted to escape when I was living through the moments in the photographs, but looking at the treehouse, it feels so safe and comforting. Like I want to be back there again.

“Thank you, by the way,” I say. “For everything you’ve done for me today.”

He responds with another hand squeeze. “Thank you, Vivienne.”

I’m not sure exactly what he’s thanking me for, but I nod. “You’re welcome.”

CAESAR

Orange and purple hues dance across the sky as the evening sun departs. Vivienne smells like lilies as she leads me up to her childhood treehouse.

Is it a good idea to ensconce myself in such close quarters with her? Maybe not, but I could care less about that right now. I just want to be close to her and get to know her better. She's like a labyrinth I want to explore.

"Were you the only one who came up here?"

"Nope." Vivienne allows me to climb up first before she hurries close behind. "My sisters and I would host little tea parties here."

It's amazing how spacious the interior is. There's a small loveseat in the corner, along with a tiny table and chairs. Miniature bookshelves line the walls. Typical kid stuff, alongside various mementos.

"That's Cheeky," Vivienne remarks, pointing at the small plush sheep in my hand. "I won him at the town fair when I was like six. He was the first thing I ever won, so I cherish him a lot."

I set him down gently and pat his head. Vivienne crosses the little room, opening the window with a grunt and allowing the warm sunlight to pool in. A gentle breeze follows, and I relax taking in the crisp air.

The carpeted floor beneath us feels nice underneath my fingertips. I lower myself to sit down. Vivienne does the same, bringing her knees up to her chest. We stare at the open window in a peaceful silence.

"How did it feel to grow up here? This town is so lovely."

"It was nice. We went between here and the house in Maryland when Congress was in session. I spent a lot of nice moments here with my siblings.

The treehouse brings back a lot of memories.”

Leaning back on my palms, I stare at her while she gazes out the window. “All you really need for a good life is beautiful surroundings and good company. With a life as fast-paced as mine, it’s easy to forget that.”

Vivienne smiles, rubbing at her forearm absentmindedly. I lick my lips inadvertently, imagining it is me trailing my hands across her skin.

“It’s beautiful,” I continue, rolling my neck and relishing the soft evening breeze. “I’m very glad we came here.”

I’m making strides in patching up the rift with Vivienne’s family, and it’s making me feel more grounded. I’m taking this seriously. I’m sure my father will be pleased to hear that I was getting tired of that life. I certainly am pleased with it.

When I was young and dumb, partying and sleeping around felt like the pinnacle of my existence. Now I know there’s so much more to life than that. Vivienne is lending me a new sense of purpose, one that makes me excited to wake up and be by her side.

Does this really have to end? I don’t want it to. Does she?

“Did you have a fun childhood?” I ask.

“It was pretty normal, all things considered. Half the time we were here, half the time following Dad to D.C. I didn’t realize he was one of the most powerful people in the country until I was older.”

“Yeah, I know that feeling,” I say. She’s a lot more like me than I ever realized.

“My mom always seemed like the powerful one. One summer here, we had the cops called on us because someone broke a fire hydrant. I wasn’t afraid of my dad, but Mom terrified me. Once the cops found out we were the kids of Delano Carter, they apologized to us for coming.”

“Yikes.” I chuckle, scooting a bit closer to her. “I’d get into some trouble, like you’d expect. I ruined one of my father’s dinner parties by throwing an octopus onto the table.”

“What?”

“I was mad because they started without me. I was really excited for this dinner party because they were serving one of my favorite foods at the time, caviar on blinis.”

“How old were you?”

“Around ten, maybe.”

Vivienne laughs, shaking her head. “My dad shielded me from a lot of

those events. I was in my teens before I had caviar.”

“Anyway, I was really excited about the whole thing. I went through a lot of effort making sure I was wearing some nice clothes for the occasion. All for my younger brother, Ishmael, to tell me that they had started eating without me.”

As Vivienne covers her mouth and laughs at me, I continue.

“I tracked down one of the household staff who was handling these exotic sea creatures for Christian’s birthday party. And I took one of the octopuses from its tank, the biggest one, and I brought it to the dining room. Then I flung it onto the table. You can imagine the chaos, I’m sure.”

“Oh, my God.”

“Everyone was really mad at me. But I was mad at them, so I guess it evened out.” I’m close to Vivienne at this point, able to reach out and caress her face. I contemplate it.

“So you’ve always been a little wild,” she says.

“Yep. Since I was a baby. I hope you don’t mind that flaw about your husband.” I casually place my hand on her knee, and it feels electric. When she doesn’t pull away, I keep going.

“Not at all. It makes you even more exciting.”

Exciting. That’s all I need to hear.

Placing my hand underneath her chin, I pull her forward and bring her into a soft kiss, testing the waters. It’s gentle at first. I’m following her cues for going further.

The moment she starts sneaking her tongue across my bottom lip, I roar to life. I pull her in close as she wraps her arms around my neck, moaning softly as she bucks into me. My dominant hand trails her body, starting at her hair and coursing down her neck.

My fingers skim over her breasts, which earns me a sweet gasp that is muffled by my mouth. I enter uncharted waters as my fingers voyage down between her legs. As I’m about to slip my hands underneath the fabric of her underwear, she stops me with a hand.

“Wait, please.” She holds up a hand. “I’m not ready for that yet. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. Of course. Thank you for telling me. I shouldn’t have done that in the first place.” Leaning back, I try to ignore how painful the erection in my pants is. This is getting excruciating.

“No, I...” Vivienne pauses, still grazing her fingers along her lip. “I really

like you, Caesar. I want to do this when I'm ready, and I promise you that it'll be soon. You have my word."

God, she's so beautiful. It's a shame that I can't take her right now on the floor of her childhood treehouse, but if I need to wait, then I can accept that.

As my eyes study her features and her mannerisms, I wonder how she used to act in college. I'm sure she was swarmed with men once she lost the braces and started putting herself together more often. Did she keep them waiting, too?

Or is it possible that she truly kept herself away from men? Maybe she's not exaggerating. She could be completely inexperienced. I can tell by how desperate and unstudied her kisses can be.

Nothing wrong with that, though. In fact, I love it when she gets to that point.

"I should go," she says after a pause, straightening out her clothes. "My mom may be serving dinner soon, and I should help."

"Vivienne." I reach out and take her hand, and she stops and turns around. "You won't be able to stop yourself when the moment is right. That's how you'll know."

She doesn't tear her eyes away, and she stares more deeply into mine. For a moment, I have a glimmer of hope that she's going to tackle me to the floor again and start stripping off my clothes.

She gently pulls away her hand and makes for the exit. I watch as she retreats down the ladder, and I watch her as she walks away, her beautiful body swaying as she moves.

I sigh, raising my head to the ceiling and closing my eyes. I've never experienced blue balls like this before. It's driving me crazy. *She's* driving me crazy.

That's probably the reason why I'm so obsessed with her. I want her completely. Her body, her mind, her soul. It all needs to belong to me.

VIVIENNE

Thank God he didn't follow me. I don't think I have the strength to reject his advances for much longer. Pacing around my bedroom, I try to make sense of what happened just then.

I wasn't about to have sex with him in the treehouse. I wasn't about to taint childhood memories with my siblings and cousins simply because I got a little hot under the collar. Hell no.

Still, what's going to happen if I keep refusing him? Is he going to get bored? Is he going to search for someone else to fulfill his desires? He promised he wasn't going to cheat, but when a person is driven to their breaking point...

I smack a hand across my forehead. Why is this happening to me?

I peek out my window at the sound of voices in the backyard. Caesar stands at the foot of the treehouse entrance, speaking with my dad. Both of them carry somber expressions on their faces.

"Dear God," I whisper, lightly banging my head against the wall. "Please don't let my parents find out that this whole thing is a sham. They'll kill me. They'll want nothing to do with me."

"Hey, cousin."

I whip around, seeing little Johnny in my doorway. He's wearing an apron. He likes to help in the kitchen whenever he can.

"Dinner's almost ready. Your mama wants you down there so we can say grace."

"Thanks for letting me know. I'll be down soon."

“Do you need some water or something, Vivi? You look a little... tired or something.”

“Me? No, I’m fine, Johnny.” I wave him off, and he disappears down the hallway. I hear his footsteps bouncing down the staircase to join the noisy dining room.

How am I going to get through the night without faltering?

I want to be with Caesar so much. Every time I’m around him, I soak through my panties. It’s becoming difficult to fight him off when my body craves him so intensely. And from the sound of it, he wants the same thing I do.

When I join the rest of my family at the dining room table, I realize that I’m the last to sit down. Caesar’s already seated across from my parents. It’s all five of my siblings and their families, plus my parents, Aunt Denisha, Uncle Tommy, and my cousins. Full house.

“Right on time, cousin,” Lionel says.

“Hush,” Uncle Tommy says, glaring daggers.

Aunt Denisha hustles out of the kitchen, carrying a crock of steaming mashed potatoes that she sets in the middle of the table. My mom carries the ham. Then they whip off the kitchen mitts and complete the chain of hands as we pray.

Little Johnny leads prayer this time around, thanking God for the food and hoping that the Lord gives his parents some clarity to buy him a new toy car come Christmas time. That earns some chuckles around the table, while my Aunt Denisha scolds him and tells him not to ask for such things while saying grace.

Everyone digs in. Meanwhile, I don’t have much of an appetite besides some mashed potatoes. I serve myself some spoonfuls of macaroni and cheese, hoping it will seem as if I’m eating more than I actually am.

“Vivi, do you like the mac and cheese?” Johnny asks. “I helped make it.”

“It’s great, Johnny, thanks. I have a bit of an upset stomach right now, but the food is amazing.”

Loretta snorts. “Pregnant already, huh? Was that the reason for the fast marriage?”

“Loretta Gillian Carter.” Dad sets down his fork. “Do not bring that nonsense to my table.”

Caesar laughs. “I assure you that she’s not pregnant. Right, Vivienne?”

“Of course not,” I snap. I can’t believe how quickly I became the topic of

the dinner conversation yet again. It doesn't help that he's making a joke out of the whole thing as if it's nothing when I'm agonizing over the question of whether to lose my virginity to my husband.

Shoveling down the last of the food, I finish first, but that's mainly because I didn't start with much to begin with. I take my water and excuse myself to bed, which earns me a few concerned stares from my parents and aunt. I don't feel like dealing with their questions. It's Caesar's turn to keep the wolves at bay.

Serves him right for mocking me.

I feel like a frustrated child again. Gently closing the door to my bedroom, I flop onto my bed and lay on my side, gazing out the window. From where I'm lying, I can hear fragments of their conversation wafting through the floor panels. Aunt Denisha has a distinct, loud laugh, as does my father.

I hope Caesar is enjoying himself down there. They're probably bombarding him with questions about us and our phony relationship. So as long as he's confident, he should come away unscathed. And he's always confident. I love and hate that about him.

I start to feel guilty for leaving him alone. Maybe I shouldn't have.

As much as I want to sleep the night away, I can't. I'm too restless. I keep checking my phone for the time, wondering when dinner's going to end.

It's nearly nine o'clock when Caesar finally slips into my room, careful not to creak the door too loudly. I cling to my pillow and close my eyes, pretending to be asleep. Caesar walks past me and into the bathroom. Soon enough, the shower turns on. I release the breath I was holding and open my eyes to the glistening stars and full moon outside.

I stay in that position until his shower ends. When he comes out of the bathroom, fresh with a towel around his waist, my eyes close quickly. Judging by his footsteps, he brings himself to the side of my bed. He looms over me, and for a moment, I wonder if he's going to join me under the covers.

If he does, what am I going to do? He's naked. I'm going to feel him, all of him, rubbing up against me. That'll drive me crazy, without a doubt.

Instead, I hear a soft sigh as he retreats to the couch in the corner. After a few minutes of silence, I take a chance to glance at him. He's lying down, snoring softly. He didn't even bother getting dressed for bed. No pajamas, nothing. Just a thin towel covering him.

My heart's in my ears at this point. He went to bed? Just like that? As I lower my head back down, I'm starting to get confused by my own emotions. I wanted to be left alone, didn't I?

So why do I feel so disappointed that he didn't make a move just now?

With Caesar snoring on the opposite side of the room, the tension in my body slowly ebbs away. Finally, I feel myself relaxing on the mattress. Exhaustion finally catches up to me, dragging me down into sleep while I think about Caesar and his kisses. I fall asleep gazing at him, taking in his features while my eyes slowly close.

The next morning, I wake up to a clear blue sky. And no Caesar.

He's no longer on the sofa, which makes me a bit concerned. I sit up quickly, rubbing the sleep out of my eyes. It's nearly ten o'clock, which stuns me. I usually wake up at six. Seven at the latest. Maybe it's jet lag.

"Hey, sleepyhead."

The bedroom door opens. Caesar enters with a tray of breakfast food, from pancakes to scrambled eggs to sausage and bacon. There's also a pitcher of orange juice, along with a small flower vase.

"I would love to take credit for this incredible meal, but it's all thanks to your Aunt Denisha. She gave me some tips on how to make some amazing eggs."

"Did you already have breakfast?"

"A little," he says, carefully setting the tray over my legs. I stabilize it. "I didn't want to wake you. You had a rough day yesterday, so I wanted to let you rest for as long as possible."

"Thank you." The smell of eggs, bacon, and maple syrup makes me salivate. "You don't have to stay with me if you don't want to. You can go down and talk to my family if you'd like."

"No." He shakes his head, taking a seat near my feet. "I don't want to. I want to hang out with my wife."

"Do you mean that?"

"Of course."

He keeps his word. We spend the rest of the morning together, relaxed and enjoying each other's company. He makes sure I'm comfortable.

If only he knew that by staying by my side, he's making my whole day. It's heaven being with him, being treated as the center of his world. Sometimes I let myself believe that it's more than just an act.

CAESAR

“Come on!” Vivienne calls out to me, beckoning me over with a wave of her hand. “You’re not afraid of hikes, are you?”

“You’re lucky we’re in Sandyville and not Solvaria,” I reply easily, effortlessly shifting between light conversation to banter within seconds. “I would have you sanctioned for such a statement.”

“No, no. Dictatorship never ends well. You of all people should know that,” she says with a smile.

“Whatever. Could be fun with a ruler like me, hmm?” There’s a glint in his eye, and I have to laugh.

I make my way to the market with Vivienne in one of the Carters’ beat-up old trucks. In the few days I’ve been here, I’m starting to feel like I’m becoming a real part of her family.

I’m excited to showcase our relationship to the world. She lists off a few people she hasn’t seen in a while, hoping to get a chance to speak with them at the market.

Wherever they go, the Carters always seem to attract flocks of people to talk and catch up. They know what sorts of things her father has done for the community in the U.S. Senate, and they’re proud to have such a distinguished figure come from their humble town.

She’s been loyal to me for so long, for the two years she’s worked for me. And yet, I still feel as if I have so much to unravel about her.

At a stoplight, a passing couple grabs each other’s hands and lightly swats at each other’s arms. In an instant, I’m reminded of one of the past nights

when she and I stayed up in her family's kitchen, playing the role of a doting couple and making a plate of pasta.

"Look at those lovebirds," I tease, one hand on the manual shift. "We should act like that at the market."

"I don't know if I have it in me to do all that," she says. "I've never been one for PDA."

"You might have to start if you want people to believe we're actually married. Wouldn't be wise to let rumors start flying now."

In hindsight, the pasta-making should have been easy. Instead, I got distracted by her beauty and couldn't stop staring and smiling at her stories. As a result, it was definitely cooked longer than al dente. She still ate a whole bowl just for me.

A loud honk grounds me back to reality. One quick glance at the rearview mirror and I'm seeing wild gesticulations from a big man in the equally huge truck behind mine. I'm sure the words firing past his lips right now are not the nicest, but that does nothing to dampen my mood.

"My God, what's his problem?" Vivienne remarks. The driver makes the most aggressive swerve I've ever seen. "Some people shouldn't be on the road, I swear."

"Don't worry about him. It's not good to focus on people like that. Not worth our time."

The sight of Vivienne right beside me calls up so many memories of moments we've shared, both on this trip and in the years we've worked together. I took it all for granted before now.

Gardening with her parents. Who else besides her could get someone like me, a spoiled prince, down on my hands and knees to till the earth, sprinkling some seeds on the ground and straining my back for some carrots?

She's worth it all. Actually, I loved it. The warm sun on our skin, the large sun hats we all wore thanks to Vivienne's mother, and the lovely aroma of fresh dirt clinging to our skin afterward.

I want to do it again with them. All of it and more. Right here in Sandyville with the Carter family feels like the place where I should have been all along.

Sometimes, I tense up at the reality that this is all a ruse. A temporary game. A plot needed to fool the rest of the world. But the feelings are becoming real.

After Marcus pointed out how great she is that night at the club in

Solvaria, my affection for her has intensified more than I could have ever imagined. I can't believe it's only been a month since that night. Just a few weeks since I proposed, a week since we got married.

"Caesar, be careful!"

I slam on the brakes, nearly missing a small squirrel that darts to the other side of the street as quickly as he shot out from underneath a car. I place a hand over hers while she tightly grips the side of the passenger door.

"I'm so sorry, Vivienne. Are you okay?"

"Geez. Are you lost in another world right now?" she jokes, before falling into one of her cute laughs that makes her close her eyes and hide half of her face.

If only she knew. Instead, I shrug it off and put the car back into drive. We're not too far from the market now.

When we arrive, amid the tables selling all sorts of crafts, produce, and artisan products, there is a sea of kind faces that swarm us with smiles and heartfelt congratulations.

"I can't believe Delano and Adela's youngest finally got married!" A sweet old woman with a small hunch and large glasses comes over and shakes Vivienne's hand with both of hers.

"Thank you, Miss Abigail!" Vivienne says.

"You're most welcome. Congratulations." Then Miss Abigail turns to me. "You take care of her now. Or else this town will be after you with a bunch of pitchforks."

"Miss Abigail, I can assure you, no one takes care of me like Caesar does. I love him. I know he'll treat me right." Vivienne links her arm with mine.

I observe the gesture silently, feeling a knot starting to form in my throat. *This is only a performance, Caesar. She doesn't mean any of this. None of it is real.*

There's a part of me that hopes for it, though.

"Seems like the whole town knows that we're married," I whisper to Vivienne once we're out of hearing range of Miss Abigail.

Vivienne smiles. "It's a small town. News travels fast."

"Faster than light, I suppose."

She leans her head onto my shoulder, and I melt. We walk through the market hand-in-hand, waving and greeting all of the people who congratulate us. I'm losing track of all the names and faces we've seen in the past five minutes.

I'm starting to learn how things are done in a town like this, and it's not much different from the small villages of Solvaria. For that matter, it's not much different from international negotiations, just on a different scale.

I witness haggling across the tables. "Can I get two rolls of bread for a dollar instead of two? We've been neighbors for years!"

"Sure. Of course, Kevin," the vendor says.

We go to get a smoothie, and I see my wife's talent for haggling at work.

"Kellyanne, you know I love you with all my heart. But I can't fathom paying ten dollars for a strawberry banana smoothie."

"Baby, the prices are high right now!" Kellyanne says, wiping her hands on a rag with a big smile.

A green smoothie costs close to fifteen dollars, made with kale and broccoli. The strawberry and raspberry flavor is twelve.

Outrageous prices, but then again, I come from a kingdom where it's not uncommon to spend a thousand dollars at every restaurant outing. I don't bat an eyelash.

Just as I'm about to pull out my wallet and pay twenty dollars for two smoothies, Vivienne puts up her hand and tells me to step aside. In a town like this, connections get you far. It seems like she's known this Kellyanne woman for years since they talk like lifelong friends.

"I'm willing to sell for seven each. I have to make a profit, honey."

"Deal."

"Make sure you tell your mom and your Aunt Denisha that I'm expecting an extra loaf of banana bread." Kellyanne winks as she slides over the smoothies.

I go to pay, of course, and slide the woman thirty dollars. I hold a finger to my mouth to signal to her to keep quiet. She nods, pocketing the money and moving on to the next customer.

After our smoothies, we get ice cream cones. I enjoy watching the way her tongue swirls around it as we walk. I shove the racy thoughts to the side and link my hand with hers.

Imagine if I met her sooner... All the romantic dates we could have had. All the sights we could have seen.

But I know her now. We can do it all now.

"Did you have a fun time?" she asks.

"I did."

I don't think it's possible not to when I'm with her. We join her family

for a gathering and we stay up late, just laughing, drinking, holding each other's hands, and basking in the glow of each other.

VIVIENNE

“Goodnight,” my mom tells us as she’s cleaning up from the little party she had. Our empty glasses of wine are still on the table.

Caesar takes my hand and we head upstairs to my old room. I’m practically trembling with anticipation.

Is tonight the night? I love the feel of his hand holding mine so tenderly. How would it feel to have those hands wandering all over my body?

I want to know. I’m ready. I’ve waited a long time for the right man. Forever, in fact.

When we were eating ice cream earlier, sharing our cones with each other, I wanted to grab his ice cream cone and take his mouth into mine instead.

I stumble a little bit as we walk down the hall, and he catches me. He’s so strong. I grab his arm, and he steers me into the bedroom. Tonight, I plan on giving myself to him. The first time for me, with anyone.

I shut the door behind me and lock it. We both slide off our shoes. He walks over to the window and looks out. The moonlight shines on his face.

What a beautiful man. I was right to wait.

I tiptoe across the room and wrap my arms around his waist. I press my face into his back and breathe deeply. He smells delicious. I want to taste him everywhere. He takes my wrists and turns me around in his arms, then looks down at me.

“Hi.” I stare up at him.

His hazel eyes feel like lasers running through me. A yearning starts deep

within me and spreads throughout my body. I can feel it everywhere, down to my fingers and toes. Every cell in my body is alive, buzzing with wanting him.

The strongest feeling of all is between my legs. The unmet need combined with my desire is maddening. I want him now. No. I need him.

“Vivi.” He cradles my face and tips it up to him.

I part my lips ever so slightly, hoping he understands the invitation. His lips brush against mine, then press down harder. His hands pull me in closer, and my breasts compress against his chest.

His tongue slides between my lips, and I moan. His tongue delves deeper, filling my mouth. I slide my hands down and grab his butt, grinding my lower body into his. He groans.

I can feel his erection through his clothes. And it’s so close to where desperately I need him to be. I just need to undo his pants...

He grabs my hair and pulls my head back. His warm mouth closes on my neck, and one of his hands snakes up my side towards my breast. All I can do is stand there, touching him, supported in his arms, feeling everything he is doing to me.

He cups my breast and squeezes it gently. He slides his hand up and strokes my skin above the neckline of my shirt. I gasp as his fingers touch my bare skin.

His mouth moves lower, planting soft kisses everywhere. I look down at his head and slide my fingers through his soft dark hair. It brushes against my neck, and I breathe in sharply. He looks up at me, smiling.

“Take me, Caesar. Now.” I say it like it’s the most serious thing I’ve ever said in my life. Maybe it is.

“Vivi.” He stands up and caresses my face. “Not tonight.”

No. Just pick me up and throw me on the bed and...

“Don’t you want me?” Red-hot rage rushes through me. I grab his cock as best as I can through his pants. “You do. I can feel it.”

He covers my hand with his. I expect him to rip my hand away, but he just presses it down more firmly.

“Obviously, I want you. Very much.”

“But?”

With both of his hands, he holds my face, kissing me very gently.

“I think you’ve had a little too much to drink.”

“I haven’t.”

I've had just enough, enough to have a pleasant warm feeling. Maybe it gave me the courage I needed to do this, but that doesn't mean that it isn't right. Every day since we got married, I've found myself more and more attracted to him. I know this is right.

"You're the one who said when it was right I'd know. And I know."

He kisses my forehead, grabs my hand, and leads me over to the bed. He lays down and pulls me down next to him. I lay on my side and reach for the top of his pants. He gets in bed with me. It's going to happen. It has to happen. I need it.

He grabs my hand and lays it flat on his erection. I sit up.

"What?"

"Not tonight. It has to be perfect. You're too special."

"But..." I move my hand up and down on his big, throbbing dick, and he moans.

"I won't give in, Vivienne. I mean it. If you still want to do this tomorrow, we will."

"But not now?"

I squeeze his cock and move my hand up and down. "Not now. My mind is made up on that point. You won't change it. I suggest you don't try."

"Why not?"

He pulls me back down beside him and kisses my forehead.

"Because the faster we fall asleep, the faster tomorrow will be here."

"Caesar..." I beg.

"Shh. Just sleep in my arms. Please." The sincerity in his voice is touching.

He means it. He wants to do right by me. And as infuriating as it is, he's right.

I want the first time – my first time ever and our first time together – to be as special as possible. You only get your first time once.

I lay my head down on his chest. I don't know how I'm going to sleep. Our breaths sync up and slow down. The next thing I know, it's morning.

I'm alone. Disappointment fills my body after dreaming of him all night. I thought for sure he'd wake me up in some delightfully sexy way. In my dream I was naked and he was kissing me all over.

I sit up and realize there is a note on the nightstand. I pick it up.

Sorry I had to leave. You are far too beautiful and tempting. Caesar

Yes. My decision is yes. I get up and go to close the curtains. I need a

shower. There are voices out in the yard, and I look down. My parents and Caesar are out there, holding cups of coffee.

My mom and dad seem to be doing most of the talking and a whole lot of gesturing. They are probably telling him how overgrown the backyard was when they bought the house. They did all the work to fix it up themselves.

I go into the bathroom and turn on the shower. As the water heats up, I pull my clothes off. The smell of Caesar hits me. I fell asleep crushing myself up against him, and it must have rubbed off onto my shirt.

I shower quickly and get dressed. I pick up my perfume bottle, which always sends a calm feeling rushing over me. I'm going to spend all day tingling with anticipation about what is going to happen tonight, and I'll need the extra comfort of a scent I love.

I go downstairs and pour myself a cup of coffee. My parents and Caesar are still out in the backyard. They've settled in the Adirondack chairs around the firepit.

"Good morning." Caesar rises up out of his chair as I approach.

My mom nods hello. "Did you have a good night's sleep, honey?"

"Yeah, mostly. I couldn't stop dreaming." I set my coffee down on the end table and wrap my arms around my husband's neck.

"Good or bad? You didn't have a nightmare, did you?" Definitely not a nightmare.

"No, Mom, it was fine." I turn to Caesar. "Good morning, dear husband."

I plant a kiss on his lips. When we connect, I pull my lips and his apart, ever so slightly. I'm not going to French kiss him in front of my parents at the firepit first thing in the morning. But I'm definitely thinking about it and want him to know.

I pull away and look into his eyes. I know he gets the message.

CAESAR

Vivi dashes off to the kitchen to put a plate away, and her parents give me a smile. I'm glad Adela and Delano seem to be warming up to me. But right now, I just want to get upstairs. I'm sure my wife knew exactly what she was doing when she kissed me this morning.

She was subtle but relentless the whole rest of the day, letting me know how much she wanted me. And driving me mad while I tried to conceal a raging hard-on around her entire family.

Walking down the street, she slid her arm around my waist and dropped her hand down to my butt. I came up behind her looking at a painting in a gallery, and she tilted her ass back and felt everything. I damn near exploded.

"Goodnight, Delano and Adela," I tell her parents, who have insisted I call them by their names.

"Goodnight, Caesar. Goodnight, Vivi, my love." Her parents hug and kiss her, and I just want my bride upstairs now.

I walk up the stairs short of breath, knowing my wife is just behind me. She shuts the door behind us and locks it.

I take her in my arms. Her dark eyes lock on mine, and I feel electricity shoot through me.

"You're not going to make me wait another night, are you?" she asks, playfully touching my nose. "I didn't drink anything at all."

"Only as long as you're sure."

"I'm sure..."

I kiss her. The hunger that's been growing in me all day – for weeks –

ignites. I'm on fire, and she's the only thing that can put it out. I run my hands up and down her body.

It has to be slow, I tell myself. My cock is straining, pushing out against my pants. It would be so easy to rip her clothes off and just take her. The need to be inside her, to make her completely mine, is unbearable. But I also want to make sure it's done right. Perfect.

She pushes me off her. Oh, God, did she change her mind?

Slowly she undoes the buttons on the front of her dress to her waist. I watch her, holding my breath. She pulls her arms out of the sleeves, and the dress drops to the floor. She kicks it away.

"Oh my." I don't so much say the words as exhale them.

I run my eyes up and down her body. The white lace bra and panty look amazing against her dark skin. I reach out and with one finger trace the curve of her waist from the bottom edge of her bra to the tiny bit of lace on her hip.

I hook my finger through the delicate ribbon of fabric and pull her to me. She draws in her breath sharply as our bodies collide. I don't want to let go of her. I grab her butt tightly and grind her up against me.

"Caesar."

The need in her voice is obvious. I scoop her up and place her gently on the bed. Then I strip down naked to my underwear and lie down beside her.

We face each other, side by side. All along the length of my body, I can feel her naked skin against mine.

I kiss her, opening my mouth and welcoming her. She hesitates and then her tongue probes my mouth. Cautiously. I swirl my tongue around hers, and she grabs my upper arms tightly.

I gently nudge her crotch with my own and am rewarded with the sound and vibration of a low moan rising up from deep inside her.

I could kiss her forever, but my hands have a mind of their own. They cup her firm ass, and I marvel at how perfectly each of her cheeks fits in my hands. Then my fingers slide north. As soon as I reach her bra, I unhook it. She gasps.

I slide the strap off her shoulder and pull half the bra away. I stop kissing her to look down at the treasure I've just uncovered. One perfect breast, which I cup and caress. I tease her nipple with my thumb, and it hardens under my touch.

I look up into her face. Her lips are slightly parted and quivering.

"Oh. My Vivi."

I push her onto her back and take her breast in my mouth. Her hands lovingly caress my hair as she moans my name. I peel off the other side of her bra and give her other breast the attention it deserves.

She writhes under my touch. I slide one of my hands down her stomach and into her panties. I look her in the eyes. I want to see her reaction when I touch her for the first time. Her eyes widen as my fingers gently probe her. She's wet and warm.

She runs her hand down my stomach. She reaches the top of my underwear and hesitates. Then, mercifully, she slides her hand in. She grabs my shaft firmly and makes circles around the tip with her thumb. I moan and she smiles.

I massage the area between her legs with my whole hand. Then I carefully part her and lay my finger along the length of her opening. She grabs my wrist.

Our eyes meet and she nods. "Yes."

I slide off her panties and my own underwear. I look her over carefully, one more time, trying to memorize every detail of her. Then I push her legs apart and climb between them.

She grabs onto my shoulders. I push the tip off my cock up against her. She digs her fingers into my skin, and I start pushing inside her. She cries out, but her eyes are still locked on mine and I can tell she's urging me on. Then I feel it.

"This may hurt a little," I whisper.

"Do it."

There's no hesitation in her voice. I do as she says, ripping through her with one swift motion. She lets out a sharp cry. I wait, not daring to breathe. After a moment's pause, she nods again.

I slide all the way into her and then pull back, slowly. Then I do it again. I can see the excitement start to overtake the small amount of pain. As I move in and out of her, slowly, deliberately, her body comes alive under me.

Her hands, no longer holding on for dear life, slide down my back, scratching me lightly with her nails. Her hips rise off the bed, accepting, wanting each long deep thrust I give her. I go a little bit faster and a little bit harder. Her nails dig into my back, then my butt, urging me on.

She pants and squeaks each time I drive into her. I up the intensity. I could let go and come right now, but I have to wait for her.

"Ahhhh," she moans, and we continue, me in and out, caressing her, her

stroking me with her hands.

The start of her orgasm is too much for me to bear. I stop trying to hold back and let go. My body takes over, and the feeling spreads through my body. I can hear her crying out, feel her writhing under me. We thrash together, coming together, pulling apart, but never separating.

Spasms rock both of us, and I just catch myself before I collapse on top of her. We both struggle to catch our breath. I pull out of her and gather her in my arms.

“That was your first time.” It’s not a question. I feel her nod.

“I’m glad it was you.” She’s smiling, and I take her hand. “It was... amazing. You only get one first time. And I’m so glad.”

“Whew.”

We laugh together. Her breasts jiggle. They are tantalizing. I grab one.

“You know.” I pause, trying to sound thoughtful. “You also only get one second time.”

“That’s true.”

She smiles, her eyes sparkling. I slide my hand between her legs. She grabs my cock, no hesitation at all.

“So...”

“So.”

She licks her lips and opens her mouth, but I cover it with my own before she can speak. We fall into each other, and I want to ensure that the second time for her is even better than the first.

VIVIENNE

“Good morning.”

I open my eyes and blink. Caesar is staring at me. All the memories from last night come flooding back.

Wow. It wasn't a dream. It really happened. It was better than any dream I've ever had.

“How long have you been up, Caesar?”

“Not long.” Under the blanket, his hand runs up my side and cups my breast.

“Give me a minute.” I slide out from under his touch and start to walk into the bathroom in the bedroom. That shower is about to be put to very good use.

I turn my head to him and grab his arm. “Caesar.”

Yes?”

“Come with me.”

He's completely naked and completely at attention. The sight of him sends a craving through me. I need him inside me again.

He grins and leans against the doorway. “Can I help you with something?”

“Yes. You can.” I reach out, grab him by the cock, and pull him toward me. “I need you to wash me.”

I sink down to my knees in front of him. I cup his balls with both my hands and place a tiny kiss on the tip of his cock. Then I look up at him.

The steam is running, and I'm touching his naked body as water pours

down. He kisses me under the water.

I lean down, and I swirl my tongue around the tip of his cock. His facial expression doesn't change, but he does draw in his breath sharply.

I open my mouth and slide it down over him. He moans. The sound he makes – and the fact that I made him make it – is unbelievably sexy. I take him as deep in my mouth as I can and then draw back, dragging my lips slowly off him.

“You...”

I grab him with my hand as I take my mouth away. I bend at the waist and suck on him some more. He runs his hands over my back and reaches under me to caress my breasts.

“How about some soap?”

My mouth is full of him so I just nod. I'm sucking him slow and hard, I want so much to please him. His hands leave me and then return, sliding over my body, riding on a thin sheen of soap. It's thrilling.

I concentrate and open my throat, then take him in even deeper.

“God, Vivi, how are you doing that?”

I run my hands up and down his body and grab his butt. He grabs my hair and guides me, setting the pace he wants.

He slowly pumps some soap into his palm and rubs his hands together. Then he studies me up and down critically.

“I think I'll start here.”

He just barely grazes my nipples with the palms of his hands. He moves them up and down, barely making contact. The desire shooting through me is maddening. I arch my back, pushing my chest toward him. He grins and closes his hand on my boobs, making slow, slippery circles.

I reach down and pump some soap into my own hand. While he concentrates on my chest, I start on his shoulders, moving back and forth. Slowly I work my way down to his upper arms, then his forearms. Then I copy his motion, my hands on his chest.

“Kiss me.”

Our lips meet and then his tongue fills my mouth. We slide our hands up to each other's shoulders and our chests collide. I compress my breasts against him, and he moans his appreciation into my mouth.

He turns me, pushing my back up against the wall of the shower. I let my hand slide down his body, while he does the same. I grab his shaft and slide my hands up and down while his fingers dance between my legs.

He probes me gently, then inserts one finger all the way inside me. I grab him tighter and kiss him harder while his finger explores me thoroughly.

“You are so sexy.”

He looks me right in the eye when he says it, pulling his finger out of me. I rub his cock harder and he plunges his finger back into me. I cry out, but I keep looking at him. We tease each other like that, our hands working more and more frantically as we torture each other in the best possible way.

“Caesar...”

He picks my leg up, pinning it against the wall. His fingers separate my folds and hold me open. Then he lines the tip of his cock up against me. I kiss him.

Then I look him right in the eye. “I want you to fuck me. Hard. Now.”

He shoves his cock all the way inside me with one hard thrust, looking me deeply in the eyes.

“Yes.” I grab his shoulders as I cry out. “More.”

Instead of being cushioned, the hard wall of the shower behind me gives me no choice but to take every inch of him as he gives it to me. He shifts slightly so he can slide his hand between us. Then he starts massaging me as he continues his relentless, perfect pounding.

There’s nothing I can do but hold on. Under his touch, my excitement grows. He leans up against the wall, placing his free hand next to my head. I can feel his breath. His eyes are so close, I can see flecks of gold in them.

Then he slows down. As he slides gently in and out of me, he rubs my clit in perfect rhythm. He slowly raises the tempo. The feeling grows in me, swelling, filling me up.

He starts and stops again, slowly. My clit is positively throbbing under his touch. If he picked up the pace I would come immediately. I’m glad he’s not, as much as I crave release.

He goes slightly faster, with just a little bit more pressure. It’s like he knows exactly the pace to keep the excitement building but not to push me over the edge.

“Please. Make me come, Caesar.” I’m begging.

I’ll promise him whatever he wants if he just makes me come now, immediately.

He kisses my cheek. “Not yet.”

Over and over, he brings me to the brink only to take it away. I’m pinned against the wall with his cock and his hand and all I can do is endure the

sweet, sweet suffering he's imposing on me.

I give up begging and pleading, and I enjoy every moment of him ramming into me against the wall, slowly then fast in repetition. He kisses my cheek and then moves his mouth to my ear.

"I think it's time."

The whisper sends a shiver through me and I find my strength, grabbing onto him and bracing myself. He starts rubbing me harder and faster, then pounding as deeply as he can, over and over.

He kisses me and his tongue delves deep into my mouth. We rise higher and higher as he picks up the pace. He grabs my other leg and picks me up. My breasts bounce against his chest and then I'm there. I fly off the cliff into an abyss of endless pleasure.

I hear him cry out and feel him empty himself inside me. My body goes limp, and he tightens his grip on me.

We lean against the wall together as the wonderful feeling slowly ebbs away. Then slowly he sets my legs down and we stand there, clinging to each other and panting.

As the water runs over us, he starts washing my hair. "Gotta make my dirty girl clean again before we start the day."

We spend the rest of the day with my family, all of us enjoying each other's company. But all I'm thinking about is getting him back into bed, or the shower, or wherever, and him having his way with me over and over and over.

CAESAR

Beams of sunlight streak in through the bedroom window, rousing me from a wonderful dream of Vivienne's body entwined with my own.

I dreamed of our limbs wrapping around each other, trying to feel as much of her against me as possible. I dreamt of her sweet voice losing all words until only moans remained.

It wasn't a dream. Vivienne is here in my arms, naked, revealing all the beauty of her smooth brown skin. Her head against my chest is rising and falling with the rhythm of my breath. I don't want her to wake up.

It's something I don't remember ever thinking the morning after. I was always ready to hop out of bed and onto the next conquest. But now I find myself wishing for time to stand still. I need her to stay just as she is, nestled against me like this.

As I breathe in her distinctive floral scent, it hits me. This week has been the best time of my life. The best days and nights of my life were found in a marriage that was supposed to mean nothing.

"You mean everything," I whisper, as softly as expelling breath.

I think back to the women I've been with before. They were all stunning in their own way, and our encounters had passion. But compared to the sex I had with Vivienne, they all seem lackluster. It was the difference between a perfunctory fuck session and a night of deeply shared, soul-rending passion.

As I gently run my finger over the perfect curve of her shoulder, I remind myself that she was a virgin before the other night. I hadn't cared one way or the other before, but now it makes everything that much more special. She

trusted me to be her first sexual experience, and together we made it something extraordinary.

I could only wish that my first time could have been that meaningful. I was a bundle of teenage hormones, tensed up with unrealistic expectations. It was an absolute disaster from start to end and over before it had barely begun. It had been so dreadful that I've never actually shared the story with anyone.

I find my gaze lingering on the curves of her body in the soft morning glow. There's an unspoken elegance to her form, a graceful beauty that takes my breath away. To think of how long this magnificent creature had been mere feet away from me and I hadn't taken the time to appreciate her. Now I can see that every part of her is a piece of art.

"You're mine," I whisper with equal measures of gratefulness and disbelief.

My fingers absently dance between the dark curls of her hair. She finally begins to stir, eyelashes fluttering open to reveal her beautiful dark eyes. She gives me a sleepy smile.

"Good morning," she says with a yawn. She pushes herself up onto her arms and leans forward to gently kiss me.

With a soft sigh, she nestles her head on my chest, whispering into my skin. "I could stay here forever. But we should probably start getting up."

I pull her closer, pressing a lingering kiss on her forehead before getting up from the bed. My hand reluctantly leaves her warm skin and begins to tingle with the desire to feel her again. With one last glance at her beautiful form, I head off to take a shower, remembering the ecstasy there yesterday morning.

After I finish drying off, I find her waiting for me outside. She smiles with a playful glint in her eyes. "Let's make the most of this beautiful day," she suggests. "How about a picnic?"

A picnic. It's so quaint, so normal. I love it. It's a plan that reeks of domestic bliss, a stark contrast from the world of international politics.

"A picnic sounds perfect," I reply. The idea of spending a lazy day together as a real couple is enticing.

We find a spot under a large oak tree, its branches providing a welcoming shade against the mild heat. As we lay down our blanket, a gentle breeze rustles the leaves overhead and brushes against the blades of grass. It's like a brief glimpse of heaven.

Lunch is a delightful affair. Vivienne doesn't have her appetite entirely back, but she's eating a little more.

At one point, Vivienne decides to toss a grape aimed for my mouth. With a girlish giggle, she launches the grape, but it bounces off my nose instead. This causes her to erupt into a fit of laughter so infectious that I can't help joining in.

"That wouldn't have happened to Leandro," I say to her. Her curiosity piqued, I tell her the story. "Leandro was a famous circus animal, at one time considered the treasure of Solvaria. He was a majestic white lion with piercing blue eyes, capable of snatching nearly anything out of the air. His speed and grace were legendary."

I run my fingers through the grass. "Of course, we don't have wild animals in the Solvaria Circus any longer. But that's okay. Things really do usually change for the better, I find."

She smiles. At that moment, all I want to do for the rest of my life is see her do it again.

As we lie back on the blanket after lunch, our gazes drift to the clouds overhead. To me, the fluffy formations appear like a great armada sailing across the ocean above, commanding and regal. Vivienne sees something different.

"Look," she says, pointing towards the shifting patterns in the sky. "They're a herd of galloping stallions." I squint my eyes, trying to see what she sees. I let out a soft chuckle.

"You're right," I admit, my tone brimming with fondness. "I thought they were boats. But they definitely make better stallions."

As the day continues to move forward at a rapid clip, we each take out a book from our picnic basket. I rest my head on her lap while she gently runs her fingers through my hair. Her absentminded caress sends tingles down my spine.

We fall into a comfortable silence, broken only by the rustle of pages and the occasional sharing of a particularly poignant passage or interesting quote.

"It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife," Vivienne reads aloud, a teasing lilt to her voice as she looks down at me. I chuckle, recognizing the quote and the implication it brings with it.

The natural rhythm of the interaction paints a picture of a well-worn habit, like that of an old married couple, despite being a young one.

Everything we do feels as if it is a part of our daily routine. It's a comforting glimpse into a future that I hadn't even considered before meeting her.

A future where we don't have to play pretend for the benefit of anyone.

As the sun makes its descent, we reluctantly pack our things, leaving the tranquility of the park behind. We return home and offer to cook for the family. Vivienne suggests a barbecue, another way to spend more time outside together.

With a spatula in one hand and a pair of tongs in the other, I man the grill. The sizzle of the meat fills the air with a mouthwatering aroma. Vivienne, far more experienced in these matters, tries to guide me through the art of grilling.

I find myself continuously distracted, captivated by the tender look in her eyes, the gentle curve of her lips, and the sound of her laughter echoing in the warm evening air.

I can't keep myself from diverting my attention away from the ribs and sneaking another kiss on her cheek. Or running my hand up her back while she's speaking, making her shiver and forget the instruction she's trying to give.

With a teasing tone, she pushes me away from the grill. "As my daddy would say, there's no need for romance when the charcoal's already lit. You handle the plates, I'll handle the cooking. Although I'm still not feeling one-hundred percent."

I set the plates, and Vivienne brings over a perfectly cooked meal. As we sit down to eat with her family, the sun begins to set. Our perfect day together is coming to an end.

I imagine the sun setting in Solvaria. Despite the warm breeze, the thought chills me to the bone. I want to stay in the cozy embrace of her family, not have her run through the gauntlet of pomp and tradition she'll be forced to endure as a new member of the royal family.

VIVIENNE

There will come a day when all this has to end. I dread it. I don't even want to think about it, but it's a thought that festers in the back of my mind. Anxiety grips me in my stomach, souring my appetite.

Caesar lifts up his gaze. "What's wrong? You've hardly touched your food."

The chicken parmesan stares up at me enticingly, practically beckoning me to pick up my fork and start digging in. Even still, I sigh and shake my head in the romantic Italian restaurant.

"Not feeling very hungry right now, that's all. You know I haven't been feeling my best lately."

We're supposed to be enjoying this outing together, but knowing how many changes are coming, I just can't bring myself to smile like I normally would.

The dim lights heighten the ambience. Multiple couples sit throughout this quaint little restaurant, ordering wine bottles and sharing easygoing conversations. While I'd like to imagine Caesar and I are just another couple enjoying a simple dinner together, I can't do it.

When we go back to Solvaria and things return to normal... Who am I kidding? Things will never return to normal between me and Caesar. We've been here for three weeks, and we keep extending our stay. It feels like home here. I can tell he feels that way, too.

I wonder if he's missing his duties at all. At this point, I think he would rather stay here forever.

Caesar raises a brow, picking at his food with less enthusiasm than before. He tilts his head, staring at me with those beautiful eyes that have captured my heart.

“There’s something on your mind, I can tell.”

“We have to go back to work soon,” I say slowly. “We can’t hide out in Sandyville forever.” I offer a hesitant smile, despite the disappointment that must be evident in my tone.

“Don’t worry about that. We can stay for another week.”

“Another week? Are you sure that’s a good idea? I’m sure your presence is deeply missed.”

At this point, what are the odds that he just sends for his luggage and settles here in my family’s home permanently?

At that, he sets aside his utensils and reaches for both of my hands. Reluctantly, I give in. It’s very difficult to say no to him. I’ve learned that time and time again, especially in the bedroom when his hands are between my thighs and his lips are on my neck.

“Are you getting tired of me, Vivienne?”

“Of course not. I’m just being practical.” I shake my head. “As much as I want to stay here, I know that you’re needed back in Solvaria or back in New York. Not in the middle of the Midwest. You’re a prince. It’s only a matter of time before something lures you back.”

He gently pulls away his hands while his gaze returns to his food. “Yeah. I know that. So that’s why I want to relish our time together as best as we can.”

Pressing my lips into a thin line, I suppress a sigh. I’ve fallen for him. I can feel it in my chest whenever I look at him. There’s a flutter in my heart that only starts whenever he’s around. When he kisses my cheek and holds my hand, there’s nothing else in the world that matters to me.

Everything else melts away.

This will be my only chance to be his wife. I hope to make the most of it before this illusion is popped sharply by the needle of reality. I’ll have to resign from my post as his secretary when this ends. I have no choice.

We can’t go on with a professional relationship after all the things we’ve done to each other. There’s too much tension between us that will never truly go away. The longing stares, the yearning in each other’s eyes.

That’s not something that disappears overnight. In some cases, it never disappears at all.

“I don’t want you to worry about my duties. I can worry about them for both of us, Vivienne.” He pours me more champagne, the most expensive bottle on the menu. “You’re making me feel as if you’re getting bored of me.”

“That’s impossible, Caesar, and you know it. You’re the best. I used to think my hometown was so boring. But with you around, it feels like a brand new place. There’s so much more to discover.”

Caesar reaches into his pocket. “And I can’t wait to discover everything with you. Honestly, this is the most fun I’ve had in a long, long time. Maybe ever.”

I hear a muffled ringtone, and Caesar pulls out his phone. His face shifts at the caller.

“I’ve got to take this. Hold on.” When he answers the call, his voice becomes somber. More business-like.

Clearly, this call is coming from somewhere back in Solvaria. Ever since he’s landed here in Sandyville, that haughty persona has ebbed away, and now it’s inching back from whoever’s on the phone.

He’s more at ease here. With no responsibilities and no paparazzi swarming him, pestering him about his new escapades with yet another diplomat’s daughter, he can relax.

An escapade with a diplomat’s daughter... My fists tighten around the satin napkin in my lap. When this ends, he’ll probably go back to doing stuff like that. I’ll have to see that in the papers and social media. And I might bash my head in once I do.

“Seriously?” Caesar says suddenly, eyes widening. “Tell him congratulations! I can’t wait to meet the lucky woman who’s captured his heart.”

His eyes twinkle as he sends me a gaze. Now, it’s my turn to raise a brow. Someone’s getting married, it seems.

“I’ll gladly return to Solvaria in that case. I want to let him know that he has my full support.” Caesar wets his lips, nods his head, and traces patterns into the deep red tablecloth. “Thank you for letting me know. I’ll start making plans to return home soon. Goodbye.”

Once the call ends, he drops the phone on the table and starts pouring himself some more champagne. Then he lifts it up for me to clink.

“Alex is getting married.”

“Oh, wow. That’s incredible. So we’re going back to Solvaria soon?”

Alex can be difficult to win over, especially when he gets consumed by his ambitions and desires to make the royal family proud.

Just like that, Caesar visibly deflates. “I don’t want you traveling and overexerting yourself. You haven’t been feeling well, and you’re having such a nice time with your family.”

“What? That’s ridiculous. I’m feeling fine. I can go back to the kingdom with you.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea. I care about you, Vivienne. And I know how much you love it here with your family. I don’t want to ruin your family vacation with my responsibilities. You know what it’s like there, all the pressure. And I don’t want you to feel like you’re working the whole time.”

Pulling away, a pang of fear rocks me. Why is he so adamant about leaving me behind? Why can’t I return to Solvaria with him? Does he have someone else waiting for him?

Is he trying to get rid of me after all?

“I see.” My voice is small and weak. “Well, if that’s what you want, then I won’t stop you.”

There goes any sort of appetite, joy, and reassurance that was gradually building within my body. Blinking away my tears, I pick up my fork and start playing with my food.

“Vivienne. Please don’t act like this. Trust me, I’m doing this in your best interest.” Caesar’s shoulders sink. As he reaches for my hand, I pull away slightly.

“I get it.” Right now, it’s difficult to look at him directly.

I’m afraid that if I try, I’m going to burst out into tears and ruin this dinner. So I suck it up and keep my eyes glued to my food.

“But you’re not happy about it, I can tell.” He frowns. “Do you want to talk about this some more?”

“I thought that this was settled,” I snap. “You don’t want me to go, so that’s that. I’ll stay put.”

“Okay.”

He starts eating his food again. I try to do the same, but my stomach twists. My jaw clenches at the thought of Caesar traveling all the way back to Solvaria, finding another woman who catches his attention, and doing God knows what with her.

How can I trust that he won’t resort back to his old ways while I’m not

around?

For the rest of the night, I force myself to smile and laugh at his jokes. On the inside, I'm withering away.

He's going to leave me behind. I just know it. And there's nothing I can do.

CAESAR

I arrive at the palace happy, buzzed from memories of Vivienne. The last few weeks have been the best of my life, all because of her.

My favorite times have been the quiet evenings at her family's home, telling stories. Like the time her father lulled to sleep during a vote on the Senate floor, or the time I hid behind a tapestry in the throne room for hours during an apparently abandoned game of hide and seek.

Somehow, she's present everywhere, even from thousands of miles away. I want to tell her about everything or to tell her that everything here reminds me of her.

When I see Ishmael, I imagine the ways he and Vivienne might rib each other. As rough as my brothers can be, I think Vivienne would mesh more with them than I give her credit for. They might treat their distinguished, beautiful sister-in-law slightly better than her ne'er-do-well middle-child husband.

"Well, hello, big brother!" Ishmael greets me with a hug as I leave the car. "You're looking every bit the love-struck puppy. I didn't think there was a woman alive who could tame this foul beast!"

"You thought wrong!" I drop my jaw in faux shock and fold him into a hug. "Can you believe it?"

I roll my eyes with a smile and shove him playfully, donning my sunglasses in a futile attempt to ward off further 'lovestruck puppy' comments.

"Where is she, though?"

“She needs preparation before I subject her to the full fury of my feral brothers. Coming as my secretary is a little different from coming as my wife.”

Don’t get me wrong, I love my family. But my brothers have a knack for detecting the slightest weakness. Once they sniff it out, it’s over. They attack and tear you to pieces. We Vanecourt boys can be a pack of jackals when we’re all together.

Ishmael chuckles. “That or you didn’t want her to see the way you are at parties.”

“Joke’s on you. She loves me at parties.” I laugh.

“That’s what she says when she’s tipsy.” Ishmael raises his eyebrows dramatically. “Ask her the next day.”

I still think not bringing her was the right decision, between her absent appetite and how much fun she’s having with her family. But I feel a pang of longing and wonder what time it is there. *Is it too late to call? Too early?*

I stride through the red-carpeted corridors to the dressing rooms outside the banquet hall to prepare for the party in honor of Alexis’ engagement.

My tuxedo is laid out for me. Twelve-year-old Scotch graces a silver tray by the wall. It’s all perfectly arranged, measured to the millimeter. It’s beautiful, if stuffy.

Good as I am at all this bowing and traditional courtly behavior, it never fails to strike me as a stale anachronism.

These self-important rituals are a perfect symbol for why I didn’t bring Vivienne. I don’t want to expose her to all this. She’ll be in my life for the long haul, and she deserves to become a part of it at a slower pace.

We got married so quickly to begin with. We can take our time for her to have to face all of the stress of being an active member of royalty.

A smile stretches at the corners of my mouth thinking of how much I want to be with her. I never would have dreamed that giving up my fast bachelor lifestyle would have been so easy. But Vivienne makes it that way.

I dress quickly, comb my hair for the millionth time, pour myself two fingers of Scotch from the decanter, and toss the lowball glass back.

I breeze out the door with my tie untied and search for Haverty on my way to the party. His encyclopedic knowledge of different knots and talented fingers mean that he can tie anything from a half Windsor to a Van Wijk knot in less than thirty seconds.

I find the family entrance to the royal engagement hall. Haverty greets me

with his customary stiff upper lip. “Would you like some help, sir?”

“Only if it means I get to spend some quality time with you, Haverty. Be a dear and tie a man’s tie?”

I see Christian enter out of the corner of my eye, his practiced stare fixed straight ahead. A lesser man would shake his head in derision at my enlisting help. Not Christian!

“Certainly, sir,” Haverty asserts, eyes like a basset hound and every bit as loyal. A look of confusion fills his stoic, candle-wax face. “Where is your beautiful young bride, Your Highness?”

I smile at his concern for Vivienne. “She was feeling unwell when I left. I’ll send your regards.”

He nods and stands to the side, allowing me to enter with the rest of the family. I take a place at the back where I prefer it, so I can see all the action.

“May you both find a world of happiness,” Haverty says quietly and bows as I pass.

It surprises me, I admit, but it warms me. I always thought Haverty viewed me as just another royal mess to clean up. It’s nice to know he has warm wishes for my future.

Entering the ballroom to *oohs* and *aaahs* from the crowd, I think about how riveted they’d be by Vivienne if she had come. Would she wear her classic black or something livelier, like pale blue or coral?

Isabella dazzles everyone as the couple makes their grand entrance, which is always a highlight of an engagement banquet. She floats down the stairs trailing tulle and satin with the grandeur of a prima donna in *La Traviata* on opening night. She takes Alex’s arm as they descend together, unable to keep their eyes off each other.

The beginning of the party is every bit as beautiful as I thought it would be. Every place setting of bone china and silver is perfectly arranged. Every flower petal is precisely in place.

It strikes me how competent and professional my father’s staff is. Every detail is seen to and everything goes swimmingly for the new couple. Until about halfway through, that is.

Partway through Christian’s toast, like an intruder in Greek mythology, Alexis’ mother Janice storms in, throwing accusations. It’s like a storm has crashed through and spit out the room in disarray.

We all sit and stare silently as she heaves the family’s dirty laundry across the crowd. Looking at each of my brothers, it’s apparent that none of

them knew about Alexis' true parentage, including Alex himself.

He's not the son of Prince Ronaldi and Princess Janice after all. He's the son of my father, but his mother isn't Queen Amaranta. It's an American named Lily Adams, and she's here right now in Solvaria. She's Bella's adopted mother.

The man of the hour looks like he's about to puke, understandably so. Isabella looks mortified. I can't imagine having to watch my bride get thrown to the wolves. I would destroy someone if they did to me and Vivienne anything close to what Janice has done.

The consolation is that, if there's one thing the family is good at, it's PR. Throughout the rest of the party, we all work together to absorb the blows. Janice is escorted out, and we all assure our guests that the family is a unit. We all stand by our brother.

A reporter grabs my attention in the melee asking for comment.

"I lost a cousin and gained a brother," I exclaim. "Alex is a wonderful man. I'm glad to know he's closer than I thought."

When asked what I think will happen with his fiancée, I shrug with a smile.

"They seem great together, and I hope they have a long and happy union, but that's their choice." I can't help but feel for Alex.

He and Isabella look so joyful together, but Janice's accusations must have broken his heart. I hope they're both okay. After a few hours of damage control, it's time for me to go.

Placing a half-drunk flute of champagne on a tray, I stalk out. A crowd of paparazzi gathers at the entrance. I strike a few practiced poses before I feel a hand on my shoulder. Out of nowhere, I'm forcefully spun around into the lips of a curvaceous siren I've never met.

All thoughts disappear from my head except for one. *Vivienne*.

Someone is kissing me, and I do my best to push her off. It feels wrong to have any woman's body against mine but Vivienne.

I've done red carpet walks a thousand times, but suddenly, the explosion of lights – along with the out-of-body feeling of kissing someone against my will – warps my sense of space and time.

I climb in the back of the hired car and immediately dial Father.

When I don't get an answer, I dial a second time. Then a third.

"Hello?" Finally, he picks up.

"I know you're dealing with a lot right now, Father, but something's

happened.”

“Something else?” He sounds tired. “Okay, what’s wrong?”

I explain as succinctly as possible. I’m bracing for his anger at the fact that after just marrying someone as wonderful as Vivienne, I’m already in a situation that encourages the playboy reputation.

Instead, he’s calm and concerned despite his current crisis. “Don’t worry. It’s going to be okay. I know the editors of all the papers who were present this evening. I’ll do my best to make sure those pictures never see the light of day.”

I breathe a massive sigh of relief. “Thank you, Your Highness. And how about you? Are you doing okay?”

“Honestly? No. But I’m ready for the truth to come out. I’ve lived long enough to know that we’ll make it through by sticking together.”

Wow. I had never pegged my father as the philosophical type, but it suits him. “You’re right. We’ll be okay. More than okay. We’ll be great. Let me know if there’s anything you need. I love you.”

“I love you, too, my dear son.”

My next call is to Vivienne. I’ve been thinking of her the last few days since I’ve been here. I miss her. And, unfortunately, she needs to know about the photos on the red carpet, just in case they leak.

When I hear her bleary, “Hello?” I melt. But she sounds too miserable for me to bother her with bad news. It sounds like whatever she has is getting worse.

At first, her feeling under the weather was just a cover to keep her away from the minefield of my family. But now it seems like it was the best thing to do if she’s really sick.

“I just wanted to hear your voice.”

“How was the party?”

“Terrible. But I think it’ll be okay. We’ll talk about it soon. I miss you. Get some rest.”

“I will. Thanks for calling, Caesar.”

“Goodnight.”

VIVIENNE

The banging on my bedroom door does nothing to help my splitting headache.

“Vivi? I need to talk to you. Now.” It’s my mother, and she sounds frantic.

What is it now?

I went to bed late last night, hoping beyond hope that Caesar would call. But when he did, it was over almost as soon as it started, and I was tired from worrying about him.

He sounded a little winded but otherwise normal. I tried to detect the sound of a lustful encounter in his voice, then hated myself for being suspicious.

“Vivienne?”

Why do I feel so awful? I didn’t drink last night. I ate some chicken soup and went to bed. *Ugh*. The thought of that soup is making my stomach roil.

I notice the doorknob turning, and I sit up, finally facing my mother.

“What are you doing? I am a grown, married...”

“Maybe not for long.” My mother thrusts her phone in my face. A video is playing on her screen, but my vision is still blurred.

“Mom, what am I looking at? It’s too early for this.” I blink and rub my face, trying to make out something I recognize among the sea of bodies and flashing lights.

“Right... there! Did you see it? Here, let me rewind it. There!” Mom taps the screen to pause it.

“Just tell me what I’m supposed to be seeing. I feel terrible.”

She searches through her phone for a shot from a different angle. When she finds one, it’s bad.

It wakes me up more quickly than strong coffee.

Caesar is in the tabloids, as usual. He’s tousled and handsome, as usual. And, as usual, there’s a leggy, blonde bombshell on his arm looking like she just gave him a rollicking good time.

I can feel the blood drain from my face. This isn’t anything I haven’t seen before, but it hurts so much more than usual. How stupid could I have been to believe him when he told me it would stop? *I should have been there.*

Mom, still focused on her phone, doesn’t see that I’m dying of humiliation. Instead, she pulls up another video, this one from the front.

There’s no denying it now. The woman pulls him into a kiss he clearly wasn’t prepared for. He holds up an arm to call for a car.

The headline? *Newlywed Prince Up to His Old Tricks.*

My heart is pounding, and my nausea rises. Mom is reading off more headlines from other papers and opinion pieces.

“These are ridiculous, Viv. ‘Boys Will Be Boys.’ ‘Can’t Keep a Playboy Down.’ And my personal favorite, ‘Mrs. Vanecourt Has Post-Wedding Blues!’”

She doesn’t notice that I’m not listening until she hears me retching over the toilet bowl. “Vivienne?” she asks like I can answer her.

When I finally finish, I’m a wreck. Tears and snot are all over my face. If there had been a part of me that wished Caesar had been home last night, it’s gone now.

Grabbing a towel from under the sink, I soak it and start to clean up as best I can through my sobs. I feel hands on my arms pulling me out of the bathroom, but I push them away. They’re immediately back, dragging me gently but insistently into bed, pulling up the covers, and washing my face with a washcloth.

I close my eyes for a few minutes and wake again when I feel pressure next to me on the bed. My mother is looking at me with softness and love in her eyes.

She’s grim, but there’s a touch of something else. If I didn’t know better, I would call it empathy. “Vivienne. Are you pregnant?”

I bite my lip, wishing the sourness in my belly would go away. “Probably.”

She nods. "Okay. Drink this."

A hot cup of something has magically appeared on my nightstand. I shake my head vigorously, but she holds it to my lips. After a few sips, my boiling insides reduce to a low simmer.

"Get dressed. I'll take you to the doctor." Mom leaves the room, brooking no argument.

I force myself into something resembling an outfit, brushing my teeth and combing my hair. My mother is acting very suspiciously. She should be railing at me, insulting me, or anything but this. Instead, she's acting *nice*. I've never known my mother to be *nice*.

My phone is ringing off the hook, but I've been ignoring every call. I don't even know what Caesar would say if given the chance.

He's never justified any of his actions to me before, and I don't think I can stomach his cocky, women-just-hang-all-over-me attitude. Especially right now, when everything makes me feel nauseated.

How could I have let this happen? My mind keeps going to the promises he made me, but I feel so stupid for believing them. This is all my fault. I knew what he was, but still I bought it when he said he would change. I am such an idiot. Switching off my phone, I head out.

Mom has the car ready and waiting in the garage when I stuff my feet into some shoes and climb in. I lean my head against the back of the seat and pretend I'm in a plane that's going to take me far away from here.

The doctor confirms what we suspected. We leave with a prescription for nausea medication, recommendations for vitamins, and very conflicted feelings. Mom doesn't say anything the whole time. Instead, she fills my prescription and drives me to the park for hot dogs.

"How did you know I was craving hot dogs?"

She shrugs and hands me one, sitting down on the bench. "I couldn't get enough mystery meat when I was pregnant with you all. It's tradition with all your sisters. They loved hot dogs, too, when they were in the family way."

Leaning her head back and closing her eyes, she lets the breeze play with her hair a moment before looking at me again. "So tell me."

"Tell you what?" I'm not hedging, but the insightfulness of her words astounds me.

"That thing you're hoping I won't find out that would explain this whole mess."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I say, completely

unconvincingly.

She levels the same glare at me that wouldn't let me get away with anything when I was a teenager. I decide to just spit it out.

“Caesar approached me a month or two ago and asked for a contractual marriage.” She blinks, and I plow on. “He doesn't want to be king, but his father told him that if he didn't pick somebody and settle down soon, he would lose his role in the family. So he picked me because I'm... a nice, decent, responsible girl. Or was.”

Instinctually, I place a hand on my middle. Maybe not that responsible, considering the part where I got knocked up even though I knew it was only a matter of time before the whole thing came down around my ears.

I wait for the tirade from my mother to match my inner voice, but it doesn't come. When I sneak a glance over at Mom, she's chewing thoughtfully on her hot dog and staring out at the trees.

“Don't you have anything to say?” I prod.

“Well, honey, I knew you were dedicated to your job. But this is a bit much, wouldn't you say?” Laughter tickles my nose and throat until I can't keep it in any longer. Letting it out feels good.

“You're not mad?” I ask.

“Mad? Of course, I'm mad. That rat bastard tricked you! He knew you were about the best thing ever to happen to him and he thought, 'No sense letting her out the door,' so he took advantage of everything you have to offer.”

“I'm not a child, Mama. I made this choice, too.”

“I know, I know. But you shouldn't have had to, that's all. You've worked your entire life to make a difference your own way. You fought to make a name for yourself, and you were going to, way before he came into the picture.”

“You think so?” She's never talked to me like this before.

“Yes!” She hesitates as if realizing where the question is coming from. “I may not relate to you like I do your sisters, or like your daddy does with you. But you know I love you with my whole heart.”

“But all the ragging on me about getting married... Some of this was about that, too, you know.”

She shrugs and stammers, trying to explain herself but not quite finding the words.

“You were always so... controlled. And felt like you needed to be

perfect, even when there's no such thing. I was afraid you would miss out on some of life's biggest joys because they were too messy."

"Well, you can be happy that now I'm familiar with messes, Mama." We both laugh.

"Oh, honey, this just confirms what I was hoping. There's still some life in those neat freak bones of yours. Two lives now." She laughs, and I push her. "You're still the most responsible person I know, even knocked up."

"I don't know what I'm going to do, Mom." I look at her looking at me. I think she can see my heart breaking.

She sighs. "Do you love him?"

Tears brim over my eyes, and I nod.

"Then you'll figure something out."

I start to cry, and she holds me, stroking my hair.

"Oh, baby. Oh, my baby." She wraps her arms around me in a big hug. "I'm here. Mama's here, always. Through everything."

I hope Caesar is, too. Even though I'm so angry with him, I just want him to hold me. To make me feel better.

CAESAR

This is bad. Vivienne isn't answering my calls, and her family members aren't, either. I've been calling everyone for the three days I've been stuck here trying to assess the damage. I can't get a hold of anybody.

Finally, I call Christian. I figure Father has enough on his plate today.

"Hello?" Christian answers wearily.

"Hey, sorry to add to the firestorm. But I need to go back to the States, like, now. Have you seen the tabloids?"

"Yeah," he answers grimly. "It's not looking good. I'm not sure where the miscommunication happened, but I'll call Bill and have him track it down."

I relax a little. Bill has the best libel connections in Solvaria.

"Going back to New York so soon?" Christian asks.

"Yeah, Vivienne isn't answering my calls."

"Well, I don't envy you with that. But I wish you luck."

"Thanks. And thanks for taking care of the rags."

"I'm sorry about Vivienne. I know you care for her," Christian assures me.

"A lot. Thanks, Christian. Love you."

"Love you, too."

Calling the pilot from the car, I inform him that we're taking off ahead of schedule so that he can change his flight plan at the airport. When I arrive, the plane is ready to go.

It's only when I land in Sandyville that I realize I left all of my things

back at the palace. It strikes me as more of an annoyance than anything else. Just another problem to deal with.

When I reach the house, everything is quiet. None of Vivienne's brothers and sisters are out and about. The garden is deserted, and all the curtains are drawn. I half-expected some paparazzi or something, but they must not have gotten wind of the scandal here yet.

I run through the yard and ring the doorbell. It swings open a few seconds later, revealing a very upset Adela blocking my entrance.

"She doesn't want to see you." She moves to close the door, and I angle my body to hold it open.

"Vivienne!" I call past her, hoping my wife can hear me. "Vivienne, I need to talk to you!"

"She's not here." Adela surprises me with that. "How could you treat my daughter this way?"

One look at her face alerts me to tread carefully.

"Mrs. Carter, I'm in love with your daughter."

I realize this may be the first time I've said this out loud, but I love the way it sounds when it comes out.

"I love her with all my heart. I'm going to tell you the truth. Someone set up those photos. The royal family has enemies. I don't know who or why. But I would never do that to Vivienne. I promise. I've never felt like this in my life, and I wouldn't do anything to jeopardize what we have. I wouldn't do anything to hurt her."

She shakes her head. "Why should I believe you? If you had just taken her there, nothing like that would have happened. What happens the next time the tabloids accuse you of infidelity? Didn't you think of anything before you came up with this scheme?"

Scheme? It's then that I notice the sheaf of papers in her hand. She waves it by her face. "Yes, we've been going over Vivienne's copy of the contract. This is quite an interesting document."

My face flushes. Vivienne must have been quite upset to tell her parents the truth, let alone hand over the document like they were her lawyers. "With all due respect, ma'am," I say, trying to unclench my teeth, "Vivienne is a grown woman and a brilliant, thoughtful one at that. It's my opinion that she can make her own choices."

"Yes, she can. Her siblings took her into town to clear her mind. Delano and I offered to go over the contract while she's out, to see what it will take

to sever the union. To get to the business of moving on.”

Moving on. So that’s what she wants – to move on. I’ve come too far to give up now.

“I’m going to have to hear that from her. I don’t believe it.” I swallow hard and blink. We just got married. I don’t want to think about divorce. Especially not with her. She’s the love of my life. I can’t lose her.

“She pointed us to a clause that speaks directly to your situation. It says that in the case of infidelity, the marriage will be dissolved.”

“I wasn’t unfaithful.” I know I’m on thin ice, but I try anyway to convince her.

“How are we supposed to accept that with all your history?” She has a point. “Doesn’t this work for you? Now you can be free to go be yourself.”

“I don’t want to be free. I want Vivienne. More than anything, I want her to be by my side forever. And I want to be by hers. Please, Adela, let me stay until she gets home so I can talk to her. If she wants me to go after that, I’ll go.”

Delano appears at the door. “She does want you to go, Caesar. It’s over. And you need to leave.” He closes the door firmly, leaving me on the porch.

I drive around Sandyville, hoping I’ll catch sight of Vivienne somewhere, but I can’t find her. Stalking wasn’t the plan when I came here, but they left me no choice.

I show up at the house every morning for the next three days but never get Vivienne at the door. First, it’s her dad. “Hi, Delano, is Vivienne home?”

“No,” he says with finality, and he moves to close the door.

“Can I come in? I just want to talk.”

“Vivienne wants nothing to do with you. I don’t see why I should, either. You messed up big time, son. It’s time to move on.” There it is again, *moving on*. He closes the door, and I leave the roses I brought with me on the porch.

The next day, I bring an apple pie from the diner down the street. I notice with a glimmer of hope that the roses are gone. Even if they only made it to the trash, Vivienne might have seen them. I knock on the door and her brother Cory answers.

“Hi…”

“Can’t you take a hint?” he interrupts. “She doesn’t want to see you. Get out of town or I’ll *make* you get out.” He slams the door, and I leave the pie on the porch.

The day after that, I come to the door with a card. The pie is nowhere to

be seen. This time, her sister Loretta answers. "Hi, Loretta. Can I come in?"

She tosses a doubtful look over her shoulder. For a moment, I think I have an in. "Look, I'm kind of on your side here. If Vivienne didn't want to take the risk of you showing up in the tabloids, she shouldn't have married a royal, especially one like you."

It's kind of backhanded, but I'll take it. "I just want to talk to her. Five minutes. Two. If she doesn't want to talk, I'll leave peacefully, but I've got to hear it for myself."

She shrugs and shakes her head. "I'm sorry. To be honest, I think it's all really romantic, but I can't breach Vivi's trust like that. I think you should go."

"And do what?" I hate to sound perturbed with the first person who's shown me any kindness, but I'm getting desperate. "We're married, not dating. I'm in love with her. I can't just walk away from that. I'm not some disappointed schoolboy. I'm her husband."

"Look, things happen. You should go home and let the chips fall where they may. Love always finds a way, right?" She closes the door, an apologetic look on her face.

I've never been somebody who leaves things up to chance. I wash up at my hotel, then camp out on her street in my car, waiting to see if I can spot Vivienne at all.

If any of them sees me, they don't give me a clue, but they're not giving me an opening. One morning, Loretta brings a cup of coffee to my car window and knocks. I roll it down, and she bends to my eye level, holding the mug out for me.

"Thanks," I say groggily. It's been a string of very long nights.

"Don't mention it. Everyone is out back having a picnic breakfast, so I don't have long. She's going on a beach trip with the cousins soon to take her mind off everything."

I sigh. "For how long?"

"A week."

"Which beach?"

She shakes her head with that same shrug and over-the-shoulder glance. "I can't tell you that. I just thought you might want a break."

"I'm not going anywhere," I insist gruffly.

Loretta chuckles. "I didn't say you were. And the family might be getting the hint, too. But I don't want to give you hope. She hasn't talked about you."

You should probably leave.”

A pang of despair hits me in the gut, but I ignore it. “I know I don’t have the right to expect anything, but if you tell her anything, tell her I’m not giving up.”

She shrugs again, a noncommittal gesture, and goes back into the house.

I wait until the van pulls away loaded with baggage, and then I check into a hotel for a few more nights. I call her a few times a day in case something gets through, but it always goes straight to voicemail. Five days later, I’m right back where I started, parked outside the Carter house in case Vivi comes home early. Whenever they get back, I’m going to be here.

Vivienne has to talk to me at some point. And I have nothing but time.

VIVIENNE

“Come enjoy the waves! You’ve been checking that phone all day!” My cousin Sarah shouts over the sound of the surf at the beach.

I thought coming here would ease the tension and get my mind off of Caesar, but all it’s doing is delaying the inevitable. And it’s making me miss him more, thinking about how much fun we would have here, even though I never want to talk to him again.

The list of things I have to do to dismantle my life keeps scrolling through my head.

First, I have to turn in my two weeks’ notice. It sounds simple enough, but I have to give it directly to Caesar in writing as per the terms of my contract. If that isn’t awkward enough, I’ve come to the conclusion that there won’t be a more convenient time to serve him with divorce papers.

I want to have the class to do it all calmly and in person, but Caesar hasn’t called since the day the papers came out. If I had known how much radio silence would hurt, I would have answered one of the calls in his initial barrage.

My stomach rolls, and I press a hand to my middle. I still haven’t decided what to tell him about the baby. He needs to know at some point, but it needs to be when I have the energy to handle a fiasco. Right now, I don’t have the energy for anything.

“Vivi! Join us!” Sarah and Nicole call to me from the water.

I wave back, hoping they’ll cut me some slack. A week at the beach sounded like the perfect distraction when they brought it up, but I wasn’t

thinking about how the unrelenting sun and constant rolling of the sea would affect my morning sickness.

My cousin Nicole strides up on the beach. “Hey, I know you’re not feeling too hot, but it’ll help to go for a walk.” She points at the sky. “Look, some clouds are rolling in, and we might get a nice, refreshing drizzle. The water will feel good on your legs, and you can look at the solid land from the water instead of the other way around.”

She has a point. This may be my first time around the block, but Nicole has been pregnant three times.

Swallowing hard, I force a smile and let her help me up off the sand. Hooking her arm through mine, she sets a steady pace to keep us moving and starts to chatter. “I’ve sent the kids to pick up some shells to make picture frames. Would you like one?”

“Sure,” I offer. Nicole is full of kind gestures, but I wonder how much of it is pity for my current situation.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

There it is. I shake my head, and she nods.

“Okay. Just know that I believe you’ll get through this.”

Tears fill my eyes. “Thanks, Nicole. I appreciate it. You were telling me something about the kids?”

In this way, one day at a time, I make it through the week. The tide slowly wears away the sharp edges of my sadness until it’s as smooth and heavy as the boulders on the coast. I turn my attention away from my to-do list and focus on things that make me think of everything I love about life.

The day we’re supposed to head back to the house in Sandyville, I wake up the sickest I’ve been yet. Nicole calls Mom for the recipe to her morning sickness tea, and I pack between bouts of vomiting.

My cousins offer to let me stay at the hotel for an extra day and hire me a cab back to Sandyville, but the thought of staying behind is worse than the thought of making the trip back. I lie across the backseat with a trash bag and try to stay quiet.

When we get back, Mom helps me inside while Dad gathers my bags. “Oh, you poor baby.” Mom fusses over me. “Let’s get you in bed. I’ll call the doctor.”

Thirty minutes later, she discovers I was taking the wrong dosage of my medication and comes in with another pill and some soup.

“We’ve got to get this figured out for you before you get back to work,”

she says, placing the tray on my nightstand and rearranging my pillows.

“I’m not going back to work.” All the air leaves the room as her eyes meet mine, hard and disbelieving. I would have expected a similar reaction if I had said, “Mom, I want to be a serial killer.”

“What do you mean?” Her eyes narrow.

“I mean, I’m going to turn in my two weeks’ notice and give Caesar the divorce papers. Then I’ll train my replacement and be gone.” She raises her eyebrows. I raise mine back.

“And then what?” she asked.

“Then nothing. I’ll find another job. I have some savings until the divorce is final, but he won’t contest my terms. I’ll make sure we’re taken care of and that’s that.”

“I don’t mean financially.” She softens, sitting on the side of the bed and placing her hand over mine. “What are you going to do with your life? I thought the whole reason you were working for Caesar in the first place was to get onto the world stage and make a difference.”

“I can still figure out a career, with or without Caesar Vanecourt. You know that. I can work on the Hill, for Daddy even. I can work for a non-governmental organization. I can do anything I put my mind to, Mama.”

“That may be. But it might be a little fun to sit in that office for a while, while you look for another job, and to make him watch you get bigger every day carrying his child. Then he can watch as you use his money and influence to be a better diplomat than he ever could have hoped for himself.”

I hesitate, chewing my lip.

Mom sighs. “I don’t mean to lecture you when you’re down. But you have a support system here. If things look different than you thought they would, that doesn’t have to cost you everything you hoped for. We’ll make sure none of this stops you from your dreams coming true.”

I look her in the eye so she can see my tears.

“Oh, honey. I love you.”

“I love you, too, Mom.”

She smiles. “Won’t be too long now, you’ll have someone saying that to you.”

I start crying harder, wanting to hear it from Caesar. I know he will probably never say those words.

My mom leaves the soup, medicine, and water for me. I realize she’s right. This may not have been the way I wanted to start a family, but I have to

make the most of it.

After the pill kicks in, I feel much better physically, but the extra burst of energy only serves to make me feel restless. The walls are closing in on me, so I retreat to my old refuge, the treehouse.

I climb up and bring the ladder up with me, which always made me feel safer as a kid. No one can get up, even if they wanted to.

I bring some photo albums with me up there and leaf through old pictures. I allow myself to think about my baby's future for the first time. I consider the summer camps she might go to or the friends he might make at school.

I imagine him sitting at the table doing his homework or learning to garden with my family. Checking my phone for the umpteenth time since that awful morning, I see that Caesar still hasn't called.

"Well, peanut, it looks like we're on our own," I say to my belly. "I'm going to take such good care of you."

It's then that I hear rustling in the grass and a shuffling noise. Caesar's head appears above the rim of the floor.

CAESAR

This was not the entrance I had wanted to make.

Vivienne stares at me in shock as I temporarily struggle to pull myself through the doorway. She clutches her beloved stuffed sheep to her chest. "What are you doing here?"

"I am risking my life to see you," I mutter out. I had hoped to make a more elegant, even romantic entrance. When I realized that she was most likely in the treehouse, my plan had been to run across the yard and bound up the rungs.

When I arrived at the foot of the tree, I discovered that the ladder had been pulled up. My eyes darted across the garden for anything to use as a makeshift ladder. But there was nothing to be found.

For a moment, I thought I could call out for her. But I doubted that she would answer me if I did. It was entirely up to me to figure out how to get up the tree.

"Wait," Vivienne asks. "How did you even get up here?"

I brush the dirt off of my pants. "The only way I could. I did something I hadn't done since I was eleven. I dug my fingers in, and I climbed."

The rangers of the Solvarian National Forest had taught me how to climb the grand oaks while camping one summer. It had been easier to find purchase in the nooks and crannies of the bark when my fingers were small and nimble.

I struggled to find deep enough grooves to hold on to, and my feet kept slipping underneath me. But I was driven by a stubborn determination to

reach her.

"I dragged myself up inch by inch. Because I would have done anything to see you. To talk to you."

Vivienne looks at me in amazement, but then shakes her head. "No. I can't do this right now. Please. I need you to go."

I reach out. My hands are aching, not from the climb but from the need to touch her. "Vivienne..."

She pushes me away. "Don't. Don't come up here and say my name with that voice. Don't look at me with those eyes. Don't make me think I'm yours."

That fucking photograph.

Vivienne sits down with her back to me. "You can just send the divorce papers along with my final paycheck."

"What?" I manage to sputter.

"I'm tendering my resignation as your secretary," she says softly. "And as your wife."

A grim, heavy silence floats in the air between us. Vivienne wraps her arms around her legs and refuses to look at me.

A life without her. Every fiber of my being recoils at the thought. There's no way I can go back to the nights of meaningless flings and hollow promises. Trying to recapture my old shallow life would be hell.

I step forward. "Well, I refuse to accept it. Do you want to know why I came here?"

"No. You couldn't be bothered to call."

"Are you kidding me? All I did was call you."

"Well, why didn't I get anything?"

"I have no idea." I dig for my phone. "Look. I'll show you."

As she sees the record of hundreds of outgoing calls and texts over the last two weeks, her jaw drops.

"There was no other way to reach you. I don't know, I guess I was blocked. Maybe you did it subconsciously. I've been trying for days. Calls. Text messages. Vivienne, all I've wanted for the past week was to hear your voice. And when all that failed, I scaled a tower for you. Looking for my beautiful princess."

I try to show her the indentions that the tree made on my palms.

She shakes her head. "I'm not a princess."

"You're right. You're better than a princess. I've never met a princess who could fill out an Excel sheet worth a damn. You're brilliant. You're

determined. You're capable of anything. And you're the woman I love."

She turns her head to look at me over her shoulder. "What?"

"I love you, Vivienne. I honestly didn't even think it was a thing I was capable of. But when I'm not with you, you're all I can think about. And when I am with you, I feel..."

I struggle to find a word that ties all my feelings together. "Content. Whole. Like there is nothing else in the world that I need."

Tears start to fall from Vivienne's eyes. "God, I wish I could believe you. But I can't. I just can't."

She pulls away, burying her face in her hands. "I've known you too long. I've seen the way you are with women. I've seen you with too many. So when they printed that picture..."

Vivienne's voice trembles as she forces the words out. "I've been struggling with this. Sometimes things feel so real, like it's not an act anymore. Seeing a starlet in your arms, someone glamorous and exciting, it reminded me of everything you'd be leaving behind to be with me."

She starts fully sobbing. "I can't spend my whole life wondering if I'm enough for you."

I reach for my phone. "That picture was a setup, a stunt gone wrong. I tried to forward you the details of the investigation into it. Look."

I quickly pull up my email app. It's there, from the official email address of the Solvaria Justice Minister. I hand the phone to her, and she takes it hesitantly.

Her eyes scan over the message detailing the trespassing that took place to stage the photo. The email is filled with legal jargon, but the message is clear. The whole scandal was a calculated setup, and the truth was on my side.

"Look how many times I tried to tell you." My entire phone record is only her name, repeated one hundred times. Every call was ignored.

"I should've told you about the photo as soon as it was taken. I tried to. But you sounded so tired and sick on the phone, and I was assured it wouldn't see print. I messed up, and I am so sorry. But in a way, I'm glad that I got to see it. It made something so clear to me. I never want to be the person in that picture ever again. I just want you."

Vivienne finally turns all the way around to face me. Wet tracks from her tears glimmer on her cheeks. Her voice is barely a whisper. "I'm just a regular girl."

“Vivienne, you are everything. I whispered that to you when you were asleep on my chest after we made love, while you were asleep in the morning. I meant it then, and I mean it now.”

VIVIENNE

It all sounds too good to be true. A prince, and a damn sexy one at that, is looking into my eyes and telling me he will love me forever. I'd be crazy to believe it.

And yet I think I do.

Caesar's voice has never sounded more genuine. All of my doubts about whether we could move from a fake marriage to a real couple are close to melting away. There's only one thing that still makes me pause.

I look down so I can gather my thoughts.

"If you say you always want me near you, then why did you go to the wedding without me? And don't try to say it was for my health. We didn't even know I was pregnant then."

I pause, realizing what I just let slip. I slowly look up at Caesar to see his reaction. His eyes widen in surprise, and I see tears begin to fill his eyes.

"You're... pregnant?"

I can only nod silently.

He bows his head and starts to shake. I can't tell, but I think he's crying. I can't tell if they're tears of sadness or tears of...

The sound that comes next is laughter. He looks back at me with a joyful smile. Yes, they are tears of joy.

"You're pregnant! I'm going to be a dad!"

He throws his arms around me and kisses me.

"This is wonderful. I meant every word I said, darling. I want to build a life and a family with you. And I will be the best dad I can be. Our child will

never doubt how much they are loved and cherished. I promise you. And I never want you to doubt it either, my love."

I gently push him back. "Before we build anything together, I still need to know what happened at the wedding." I pat my stomach. "For both of our sakes, I have to know the truth."

"You're right." He takes a long, deep breath. "The reason that I didn't want you to come, the real reason, is my family."

I shake my head, confused. "Your family? Are you worried about what they'll think of me?"

"No, no, never. Just, your family is so loving and close. Your dad is a Senator, but he's still a father first. But with my family, we have all of the rules and protocols. We're not casual and cozy with one another. I didn't want to sour it all with exposure to that kind of life, the stiffness, the severity. The coldness."

Before Caesar had spoken of his royal duties with a sense of pride. But now, his distaste is clear as day. He arranged our marriage to preserve his royal status, but it's an aspect of himself that he finds so difficult that he views it as something to protect me from.

"It's such a different life that I'd be asking you to be a part of," Caesar says. "I worried you would run. It's one thing to come as my secretary, to see the madness from afar. But to have to be subjected to it, especially when you're the center of it all as my wife. I thought I could prolong it a while longer. Keep things from changing. They were just so perfect."

"Caesar, that's..."

He looks off into the distance. "I should have just been honest with you."

I put my hand on his chin, and his eyes turn back to mine. "Yes. You should have. I could have reminded you that I've been with you in Solvaria. I've been by your side before. I've made small talk with your brothers."

"I guess that's true. But you could get away from it then."

"It won't matter where we are. Whether we're here, or in New York, or in Solvaria, we can make our own little world however we want it."

I pat my stomach. "The three of us. Together."

Caesar leans over and kisses me deeply. Every atom of my body ignites with joy. I put both my hands on his face and kiss him, over and over again.

"Say it again," I ask him.

He stares into my eyes and smiles. "Vivienne, I love you."

"I love you, too." I start to well up with happy tears. I kiss him again until

I have to stop to breathe. "We're going to need to get everyone else on board, though."

He nods. "I know. Let's go talk to them."

He gets up from the bed and walks toward the tree house entrance. He puts the ladder back down and looks at me with a sly grin. "I wish you could have seen me climb this tree. It was extremely sexy."

I smile back and roll my eyes. "Oh, I'm sure it was."

As we enter the house, I see my parents huddled together on the living room sofa. The sight of me standing alongside Caesar clearly takes them by surprise.

My father is the first to his feet, his eyes darting back and forth between the two of us. "Vivi, what's all this?"

I cut straight to the chase. "Were you blocking Caesar from reaching me?"

My father sheepishly looks away from me. My mom stands up from the couch and touches my dad's arm. Emboldened by her support, my dad turns back to face us.

"We don't know what you're talking about," my father says.

I glance at Caesar, who promptly hands over his phone. I navigate to his call log and show them the bulk of outgoing calls to my number, all of which, mysteriously, never went through. They exchange guilty glances.

Finally, my mother breaks the silence, her voice carrying a note of regret. "Vivienne, dear, after seeing how hurt you were, we just thought it was the best way to protect you."

I take a moment to collect my thoughts before I speak.

"I know you did it because you love me and want to keep me safe. But I'm not a little girl anymore. I can handle things myself."

I can see the worry on their faces.

"All I need from you is to love me, to support me, and to trust that I can make my own decisions." I glance at Caesar, who is standing beside me, his hand now intertwined with mine. His tight squeeze tells me he agrees with what I've just said.

"You're right, Vivienne," my mother admits. "We're sorry. It hurts to see your baby in pain. But that's no excuse for what we did."

Both my parents step forward, taking me in a warm, comforting hug. After a moment, they release me and look toward Caesar.

"Can you find it in your heart to forgive us, Caesar?" my father asks, his

voice steady.

Caesar smiles warmly at them, and he doesn't hesitate. "Of course. I understand why you did what you did. I've made my own mistakes trying to guard Vivienne, too. But you've raised a strong, extraordinary woman. She doesn't need protecting. I love her, and I want to take care of her."

My mother eyes Caesar suspiciously. "Well, there's something I need to understand first. Is this going to be a real marriage, or is this still part of your arrangement?"

Caesar looks at me, then at my mother and father, before he begins to speak. "You're right, Adela. Our current marriage is contractual, and that's not good enough. Not for Vivienne. Not for the woman I love."

"Vivi, did you tell him what you told me?" she asks. "Did you tell him you love him, too?"

"Of course I did, Mom. I love him with all my heart."

Caesar gently untangles his hand from mine and takes a step forward. "So there is something I'd like to do. Something the right way."

He turns to me. "Vivienne, I want to give you a real wedding. And not one for the throne, but one for us. A wedding made to celebrate the life we'll build together in our own way."

"And if we're going to do this the right way..." He looks back at my father. "Senator Carter, sir, I would like your permission to marry your –"

Before he can finish, I interrupt, my voice ringing clear and confident in the room. "Yes," I say, a wide, genuine smile spreading across my face.

My proclamation is met with laughter throughout the room.

My father chuckles, shaking his head with amusement. "Well, it appears you two have made up my mind for me. But, yes, of course, Caesar. I'd love for you to be my son-in-law."

He extends his arms, and Caesar steps into his embrace. My mother and I join in, and the four of us hug, laugh, and look forward to the rest of our lives.

CAESAR

Once I grew up – and made my peace with wearing a suit and the dreaded tie – I figured if I ever got married it would be a state event. It wasn't until I met Vivi that I realized that none of that matters. All that matters is her.

When I sign in, the clerk only recognizes me as one of the guests we booked a block of rooms for. He has no idea I'm a prince. He tries to hand me one of the gift bags Vivi and her mom made for the people coming in for the wedding.

"Thank you so much. But I don't need one. I appreciate it."

"You're sure? Everyone is supposed to get one."

"I'm the groom. I have the best gift of anyone."

His face brightens. "Oh, congratulations. And good luck."

I just have a small overnight bag and the tuxedo I bought for the occasion. Every time I wear it for a state event, it will remind me of my wedding day.

I know we got legally married in Vegas, but this feels like the real thing. Vivi and I have already decided that this wedding, the one we do for love in front of her family and friends, is the one we are going to celebrate as our anniversary.

I get to the church an hour before the ceremony, where Alexis and Isabella are waiting for me. They came to Missouri from Texas, and it means so much to me for them to be here.

"Remember all that time ago, when I went missing and Vivienne had to find me? And now here I am, marrying her. The woman of my dreams."

"She's wonderful, Caesar. You lucked out," Alexis says. Isabella kisses

me on the cheek.

I confirm the cake has been delivered to the country club, and I talk with Alexis and Bella about our honeymoon reservations.

“I suggested we go to Hawaii or the Azores, but Vivi really wanted to go to Solvaria. She’s determined our baby will know my culture as well as hers.”

“And don’t worry. We won’t tell them. We’ll keep it a surprise,” Alexis says.

“Vivienne really wants to say it in person.”

“Dad’s going to be so happy.”

“About you, too, Alexis.”

I walk into the church and stand by the altar. Out in the small seated crowd, I recognize so many of Vivi’s relatives. It makes me feel complete, like I’m joining a family I already love. Aunt Denisha, Uncle Tommy, Lionel, Johnny, Malcolm and Cory.

Adela comes down the aisle and takes her seat in the front pew.

Vivienne appears in the doorway on her dad’s arm as the processional music starts. She takes my breath away, in her full skirt with a bodice that highlights her beautiful figure. No one would ever guess she was pregnant.

I can’t help myself. I step down off the altar and walk toward her a few steps. A chuckle rumbles through the audience.

Let them laugh. I don’t want to wait a second longer than I have to.

Vivi and her dad exchange kisses and then she holds out her hand. I take it and lead her down the aisle to the altar.

When the minister asks if anyone objects, she squeezes my hand tightly. The audience remains silent, and she breathes out in relief.

I know she still has anxieties about everything that went on with her family and how they tried to keep us apart. I hope with my vows, I can put her mind at ease, once and for all.

The minister goes through the ceremony, and I begin to say my vows.

“Today is not just a joining of two people, but of two families. In my family, this has been a matter of great importance for centuries.”

“Caesar.” Vivi’s whisper is barely audible to me. I smile at her and try to tell her with my eyes to trust me. She nods, affirming once again we are always on the same wavelength.

“I’m marrying the love of my life to start our new life, fresh, with a new beginning. No matter what came before, all that matters now is our love. I love you now and forever, Vivienne. I will always take care of you. Your

family is mine, and mine is yours.”

I turn back to Vivienne, and her eyes are shining with tears.

“I mean it.”

Our life starts now. What matters is what happens from this moment on.

“Vivienne, would you like to do your vows?” the minister asks.

“Caesar, I love you. Every day, you surprise me. Every day, you find a new way to show me just how much you love me. And every day, I love you more. I promise to love you forever, to take care of you when you need it, and to let you take care of me when I do. I love you.”

The minister shoves his hand between us, holding up the simple matching gold bands we picked out together. They are engraved with today’s date and the letter A with the squared symbol beside it. For ‘aeternum amor’ in Latin. Eternal love.

We promise to love, honor, and cherish each other, and we slide the rings on each other’s fingers. Then at last the minister says the words I’ve been longing to hear since I saw her coming down the aisle to me.

“You may kiss the bride.”

I take her in my arms and dip her gracefully to the side. Our guests go crazy, whooping and cheering. She smiles at me and reaches up to stroke my cheek. I breathe deeply, smelling the soft gardenias in her perfume which blends perfectly with her own scent.

I kiss her, and she kisses me. My wife. Our lips touch, and I tighten my hold on her. The world seems to disappear. There is just her and me, with all the love flowing between us and the endless possibilities our life together holds.

We go back up the aisle, and the next twenty minutes are a whirlwind of hugs and introductions and reintroductions. I’m usually amazing with names, but today I don’t want to look at people and memorize their faces. I just want to look at my wife.

We exit the church under a flurry of bubbles and climb into the Rolls-Royce. The ride to the country club takes less than ten minutes. We spend it trying to finish the kiss we started in church. Thankfully, it will never be finished.

Vivienne has one surprise left. After our first dance, she removes the skirt from her dress, revealing a tutu that goes down to her knees.

“Do you like it? I thought it would be better for dancing.”

I hold her hand up over her head, and she spins. The fabric flares out,

revealing a flash of her gorgeous legs.

“I love it.”

Then we need to cut the cake. I feed Vivienne her piece. She closes her eyes and sighs with delight.

“Is it good?”

“Chocolate tastes even better when you are pregnant.”

“Well, then, maybe you should be pregnant a lot.”

“I don’t know about that, but I’ll let you try as much as you want.”

I wrap my arm around her and kiss her on the cheek.

“You kill me, you know that?” I lean down and lower my voice. “Do you think your family would see it as a huge transgression if I took you right now on top of the cake?”

“Unfortunately, yes. But I’ll make it up to you later.”

No matter what I say, she’s always got the perfect comeback. I’m going to spend the rest of my life constantly desiring her. And I can’t wait.

VIVIENNE

“Are you ready?”

Caesar grabs my hand. I look at him. The last two weeks have been wonderful. We slipped into Solvaria without telling anyone in his family. Twice – once on the beach, once at an outdoor market – people told us that he looked like a member of the royal family.

One sweet old lady even insisted that he was a dead ringer for Ishmael. He took a selfie with her. The rest of the time, we were just a couple on their honeymoon.

And what a honeymoon. We did everything except rock climbing. Caesar said absolutely not in my condition and probably not after.

We fly home in just a few more days. Caesar wanted to see his father while we were here. But we know we’ll be back soon, too.

“I’m ready.”

I think he’s worried about what his father will say. Of course, Caesar would never admit that. I know we’ll be fine. But I want to have a good relationship with his family, for my husband’s and baby’s sake.

Caesar puts the car in drive and goes up to the gate. He pulls out his key fob, and the gate opens. He pulls slowly into the large plaza in front of the palace. Instantly, we are surrounded by guards. He warned me to expect this. He rolls down the window.

“Hello.” He gives a little wave.

The guards look at each other, then at our rented car, and we laugh.

“Prince Caesar?” The hesitation in the guard’s voice is obvious.

“In the flesh.”

Caesar holds out his diplomatic passport, and they allow him to proceed, looking stunned.

“Put it in the garage next to my Porsche.”

The man he hands the keys to is too dumbstruck to speak.

Hand in hand, we walk together into the palace. Caesar has on blue trousers and a polo. Even when he’s doing nothing important, he looks effortlessly chic. I feel like I swallowed a beach ball, although Caesar says no one can tell.

I already love my baby so much, but I’m glad we’ll have some nice wedding photos. Caesar says all the time I look beautiful, but I just try to concentrate on the life growing inside me. I still can’t believe it sometimes.

“Hi, Haverty. Where’s the King?”

The steward looks up, startled. “Caesar?”

“Yep.”

“He’s in his private apartment, as far as I know.”

“Thank you. Nice seeing you!”

Caesar leads me through a labyrinth of hallways to a part of the palace I’m not familiar with. He knocks on a large door, and a butler opens it.

“I’m here to see His Majesty, the King. My father.”

If the butler is shocked by Caesar’s appearance, he hides it well. He disappears and comes back a minute later to usher us into the King’s bedroom. After we go down another hallway, the butler opens the door and steps aside to let us in.

We walk into the King’s bedroom. And in the corner, sitting in a recliner that very much does not match the décor of the room, is the King. Caesar walks across the room and gets down on one knee to kiss his father’s hand.

“Caesar.”

“I know you are surprised to see me.”

The old man studies him carefully.

“Did you really think you could enter our country without me knowing? You didn’t want to be disturbed, whatever the reason. I honored that. Oh, Vivienne, my sweet daughter-in-law. You look beautiful, my dear.”

The King looks at me, and I quickly drop into a curtsy. When I look up, I can see his eyes lingering on my stomach. I wrap my arms around my middle protectively.

“Father, I’m here to tell you I’m withdrawing my name for the throne. I

know you wanted us all to compete, to see the best we each had to offer. But my best life is with Vivienne.” He grabs my hand and pulls me forward. “We got married in her hometown, in addition to our wedding in Las Vegas. And we are having a baby.”

“I can see that.” The King smiles. “While I wish you had come to me sooner, please know you have my greatest blessings.”

“You’re... not mad that I don’t want the crown?”

“Of course not. All I ever wanted was for my children to be happy. I wanted to make you think about what you really wanted out of life. One of my sons will succeed me, I know that. I just wanted to make sure that whoever does choose that path, it will be his sincere choice.”

The King holds out his hands to me. “Come here, dear. Let me hug you.”

“Of course.” It’s easier said than done. I lean over to hug him as best as I can.

He tells us to sit, and the butler appears out of nowhere with a tray of teas and coffees. “Oh, I have missed this coffee, Your Highness.”

I say it somewhat mournfully. I already had a cup of coffee at breakfast, and I’m limiting my intake. The butler picks up one and hands it to me. I begin to gesture no.

“I took the liberty of preparing decaf in case that was what you wanted. At the instructions of His Royal Highness, the King.”

“How do you know everything, Dad?” Caesar asks, both of them laughing. The butler bows his way out of the room.

“So.” The King rubs his hands together. “Do you know? Is it a boy or a girl?”

I shake my head. I had an ultrasound, but the baby was, as they say, shy. We’re going to get another one done soon.

“Do you want to know?”

“We do.” Caesar and I answer together, then grin at each other. I love it when that happens. It’s like the universe is affirming how right we are for each other.

“So, will you let me do something for you? You’ll stay for dinner?”

“Nothing big, Father.”

“No, no, just family. And we will reveal the gender, if that is okay with you, Vivienne.”

“But how?”

“Go.” The King motions for us to leave. “You know where to take her,

Caesar. I'll make sure they are ready for you."

When we leave the King's apartment, I turn to Caesar.

"What's going on?"

"I would guess you are going to have another ultrasound." Caesar leads me down a flight of stairs to a suite of offices. A woman rises from a reception desk.

"Right this way," she says.

I'm given a hospital gown with the royal insignia printed on it. After I change, I go into a room where Caesar is waiting with a technician.

"You have an ultrasound machine here?"

Caesar nods. "X-ray, too."

"No MRI?"

"They've ordered both the MRI machine and the CT scan before," the technician says. "The need was greater at the hospital, though."

Caesar nods. "Are you ready?"

The technician holds up the tube of goo. Caesar holds my hand, and we look at the baby together. It's amazing. We can see little fingers and toes.

"Can you tell?"

The tech shakes her head. "I wouldn't dare get this wrong. I'm sending it to the hospital. Apparently, you will all find out tonight together." She prints out a picture and gives it to me. "Take as long as you need. We shouldn't need the machine anytime soon."

Caesar shows me to his private suite and goes to get the luggage out of the car. I curl up on the bed. The next thing I know, he's gently shaking my shoulder.

The dinner is in the King's apartment, and, as promised, it is a small gathering. After the main course is cleared, everyone goes out onto the balcony. The King's butler hands me a tablet with a live video feed pulled up already.

"His Highness has asked that you video-call your parents so they may join us for this moment."

"Vivi? Are you okay?" My mom is frantic on the screen.

"It's all good, Mom. Just listen."

I hand the tablet to the butler who points it at the King. "Tonight, we find out if Caesar and Vivienne's baby will be a boy or a girl!"

I hear my mom squeal. The King turns around and looks up at the mountain.

Far in the distance, I hear a small pop, followed by a whistle. Then a firework bursts apart. It's pink. Caesar and I look at each other.

"Is it –"

The sky explodes. Hundreds of pink fireworks light up the sky along the whole ridge.

"A girl."

The King's voice is jubilant. I can hear my mom shrieking and my dad trying to calm her down. I look at Caesar. He sniffs loudly, and I throw myself at him.

"A girl."

His voice is filled with amazement. I look at his face and the King's. The butler brings me back the tablet, and my mom and dad are both crying.

"Do you know how much you are loved, little one?" I ask, looking down at my stomach. I give her the answer. "So much."

CAESAR

As the last of the pink glow fades from the sky I look at my wife. She is cradling her belly. I often catch her doing that, and the usual warm feeling I feel when I see it spreads through me.

I can see the love for our baby on her face. Every time I see it, I fall in love with Vivi all over again.

I love our baby so much already. But what makes me so sure that this is going to be wonderful is Vivi. The well of love in her is infinite. I know there are a lot of changes in store for us, but I'm also certain every step I took in my life was ordained to bring me right here.

We go back inside. While we were watching the gender reveal fireworks, a small dessert buffet was set up.

Vivi's eyes light up when she sees the assortment of traditional Solvarian pastries. There is a small cake. Written on top in icing it says, *It's A Girl*. The pastry chef is standing off to the side. He has two tubes of icing, pink and blue. Our eyes meet, and he winks before he leaves the room.

My father asks Vivi and I to slice the cake together.

"Oh, chocolate," she says as we remove the first piece.

She offers it to my father, who shakes his head. I'm not sure what his dietary restrictions are these days. Or maybe he is just tired. I whisper to Vivi that we should maybe have dessert in our room. Together we go to say goodnight to the King.

"Thank you for everything." Vivi smiles warmly as she grasps my father's hands. "Especially for making sure my parents got to be a part of it."

“I hope they will come here with you on another visit soon. I would love to host them as guests. They should get to know Solvaria as well as you have.”

“I’m sure they would love that.”

I make up a full plate of pastries to take with us. As we leave the room, I ask my father’s butler to send up some of the leftovers first thing in the morning. These days, Vivi is always ravenous when she wakes up.

We walk back to my suite and head out onto the balcony. Vivi takes a bite of a pastry. “Oh, so good.”

I chuckle.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing. I just... used to be the one to make you moan like that. Now all you need is a pastry.”

“Try it.”

She dips her finger in and holds out a heaping scoop of filling. I grab her wrist and close my mouth around her finger, slowly dragging my mouth away. “So good.”

Before she can respond, I suck on her finger again. She giggles. I walk over to the edge of the balcony. She comes to stand by my side. I wrap my arm around her, and she rests her head on my chest.

“We have to go home so soon. Did you enjoy your honeymoon?”

She looks up at me and nods. “Very much.”

I kiss her and gently stroke her breasts. I reach behind her for the zipper on her dress, then slide the dress off her shoulders.

She looks down. “I’m huge.”

“You’re amazing.”

I bend down and kiss her stomach. It thrills me to see the life we created growing inside her. She’s more beautiful than I’ve ever seen her.

I take her bra off. Her breasts, always so lovely, are fuller and firmer these days. Exploring her body as it’s been changing over the past few months has been one of the hottest parts of pregnancy. Something I never expected and something I love.

I stroke her breasts gently, then take one in my mouth carefully. She’s more sensitive these days, and it drives me wild.

She entwines her fingers in my hair and pulls me closer. I suck on her nipple, luxuriating in the feel of it growing erect under my tongue. Then I do the same to the other side.

I pull back so I can look at her again. A stiff breeze picks up, and she shivers. I run my hands over the tiny bumps that rise up all over her body.

“So beautiful.” I pull her panties down.

“Caesar.”

Her whisper of my name conveys so much. I can hear the longing in her voice, with just a pinch of nervousness. But also ever-present love. I push her up against the railing of the balcony. She grabs the end of the stone ledge it is topped with, bracing herself.

I run my fingers up the inside of her leg. The soft skin of her inner thighs is intoxicating. I kiss my way up her leg. As I get closer to my target, she moans.

I taste her, marveling at the change the pregnancy has wrought in her. It seems like every time I taste her these days, her flavor has changed ever so subtly. I dip my tongue inside her and then focus on her clit. She grabs my head tightly.

Yes. I want to hear her come. I want to feel her throbbing under my tongue. I want to make her cry out because the pleasure is too great to contain and hear the sound of her ecstasy echoing back to us from the mountains in the distance.

Slowly, I work her up, teasing her. Her breath grows heavy, and her moans fade into sharply inhaled breaths. I sweep my tongue back and forth, faster and faster. Suddenly, she is there, screaming, a low guttural noise that rises out of her from right under my tongue.

I slide my hands up her body, feeling the orgasm travel along her skin. Her breasts are taut and heaving. I cup them, and she releases my head to clamp her hands on top of my own. I continue gently brushing her clit with my tongue until she stops whimpering and falls silent. Only then do I remove my head and look up.

“Darling, may I?”

She nods and turns around, leaning over the railing. The stone top is at least two feet wide, so there is no worry of her falling. I stroke her back before reaching for the top of my pants. She’s still breathing hard.

I drop my pants to my knees and grab her hips. She tilts her butt up in what is unmistakably an invitation.

I start pushing inside her. She’s swollen and tight, pulsating. I pull out and push in just a little bit harder. She moans.

I pull out and give her a little bit more. Once I’m as deep in her as I can

be, I tighten my hold on her and slide in and out several times. Then I bend over and whisper in her ear.

“I want to watch you come so hard, you have to scream.”

She nods, and we rise up together. She reaches back and grabs my butt before sliding her hand between her legs. I move in and out of her while she stimulates herself. I never want it to end. She gasps with each thrust I give her.

She cries out again, quieter this time, and I let myself go. The feeling sweeps through me, enhanced by her tightening up around me.

I lay my upper body down on top of hers, and we lie there trembling together. Off in the distance, we hear a chorus of owls.

“I think we have a cheering section.”

She laughs. “Does Solvaria have any laws about... indecent behavior?”

I pretend to think about it. “Not that I know of. But if there are, I’ll get them changed. I know the King. And I think you have always made a very good impression on him.”

“Oh, good. Family is important. Especially if you need any owl laws changed.”

I laugh, and she squeaks as my cock moves inside her. I pull out of her and pull my pants back up. She looks back over her shoulder as I button up.

“Going somewhere?”

I come over and pick her up in one swift motion and take her inside.

I put her down on the bed and kiss her stomach. Then we lie down together, and she puts my hand on her stomach and holds it.

Immediately we both feel it. The baby is awake and kicking. We look at each other. I know she’s thinking the same thing as I am.

Family isn’t just important. Family is everything.

THE END.

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