

Love in Laandia



Royal
RUMBLE

HOLLY KERR

ROYAL RUMBLE

Holly Kerr



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ROYAL RUMBLE

ONCE UPON A TIME, as the world celebrated the Diamond Jubilee of the British monarch and before a superstorm ravaged a tiny island in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, far away in the province of Newfoundland, a girl met a boy.

He was a prince of Laandia— “Prince Charming with the jaw carved out of Maritime rock and the heart as soft as a pillow—” is how People Magazine described him when he made the Sexiest Man of the Year issue. They also mentioned he looked more like a Viking god than even Chris Hemsworth in the Marvel movies. “A true Prince Charming in every sense of the word.”

She wasn't a princess, but she felt like one that night.

King Magnus of Laandia had arrived for the Royal St. George Regatta in nearby St. John's, Newfoundland, to cheer on his youngest son in the race. The other three princes—tall, blond, beautiful—were with him, and the crowd of excited women all felt the rush of being close to royalty, and such attractive ones as well.

When she stepped into the ballroom that night, her navy dress out of place among the jewelled colours and summer hues, she'd hugged the wall, trying to stay unnoticed like she'd been told. Her mask was firmly in place because that was the rule.

But he saw her.

He led her to the dance floor, again and again, and again, heads bent together as they whispered random questions, laughed at comments no one else would have thought funny, and couldn't stop smiling.

And when the fireworks exploded high overhead, after they had danced and laughed and smiled, they raced away. The grass was damp against her bare feet, the brightness of the moon competing with the exploding rockets.

It was a perfect night to fall in love.

***Letters from Lady Camille Dusain of Saint
Pierre to Prince Odin of Laandia, 2014-
2015***

Dear Odin,

Last night was the best night of my life. It was a fairy tale. You are perfectly cast as the Prince Charming, but I'm sure you hear that all the time.

I could email you this, but I thought it would be more romantic if we exchanged letters. And last night was so, so romantic that I want to prolong it. The way you found me in the room. The dancing. Smiling so much my cheeks ached. And laughing with you like I've never laughed with anyone.

And then what happened under the bridge...

There should be songs written about last night.

Maybe there will be. Do you keep a bard in your kingdom of Laandia, one that could write a Taylor Swift-like song about

the night we met?

That was a joke. I know there are no bards, just simple songwriters and poets, but this feels like a fairy tale to me.

The story of Camille and Odin.

All my love,

Camille



18th Letter

Dearest Odin,

I was so excited to get a letter from you!

I know you must be busy, being the second son of the king of Laandia, but I hoped to get a letter from you and now I have. But now that I've heard from you, I'd love to know more. What do you do all day in Laandia? Who do you spend your time with? And do you have a favourite spot there, like you do at Lake Quidi Vidi?

That even sounds like a lake in a fairy tale!

I love you desperately!

Camille



47th Letter

Odin,

It was nice to hear from you. You sound busy at school in America. Even though the distance from Saint Pierre is less, you seem farther away than living in your castle in Laandia. I can see the coast of Newfoundland from my bedroom window and it made me feel better knowing you were on the other side of the province. Silly, I know.

You fly over the island as you go to school. Wave to me as you go by!

Love,

Camille



78th Letter

Odin,

My father brought home a cousin to the Bourbon heir last night. He thinks we would make a good match, that it would strengthen Saint Pierre's ties to France.

I don't want to marry him, so you have nothing to worry about.

If you actually worried. I've seen pictures of you with girls with blonde hair and long legs, girls who look like they've come from the pages of fairy tales. I'm sure it's part of being a prince, and you told me not to worry, but I can't help it. I'm eighteen now, and my father is seriously talking about my marriage, and the way he speaks makes me feel like I don't have a choice.

I would like a choice in whom I marry.

I would like to love my husband like your parents seem to love each other. That is a true a love story. But it's important to find the right person to help me look after Saint Pierre when it's my time to become prefect. It may only be a tiny island, but

it's an important island, nestled in the heart of the Canadian Maritimes.

I wish it were closer to Laandia.

I can't wait to see you again next summer!

Miss you! Love you!

Camille



195th Letter

Your Royal Highness,

It's been weeks since I've heard from you.

I no longer have hope for a future with you.

I could tell you how my heart is broken, that my belief in romance has been crushed, and that any vision of a happily ever after is lost to me, but I won't because it is not just you who destroyed my dreams.

The girl who wrote lovesick letters is gone. I've realized the world isn't a fairy tale, but a place that is not fair.

I hope you have a nice life and good luck being a prince of Laandia.

—C



*King Magnus of
The Kingdom of Laandia
and Lord Prefect Arnaud Dusain
of Saint Pierre and Miquelon
are proud to announce the wedding of their children
Prince Odin Maximillian Patrick Henri
and Lady Camille Elisabeth*

*Valentine's Day,
Battle Harbour, Laandia*



1

Camille

THE INVITATION IS PRINTED on card stock that is thick and unyielding, the ink an unoriginal black, but the font more than makes up for it, the words written in a flamboyant, almost indecipherable, calligraphy.

“I can barely read my name.” I hand the invitation back to Jackson, my brand-new personal assistant, since all princesses-to-be need a personal assistant.

“The prefect approved it.” Jackson tucks it back into the leather portfolio, stamped with the crest of the royal family. The portfolio has been fused onto his hand since we stepped

off the plane yesterday, full of my daily schedules and menus for the next week—all printed on regular eight-by-ten recycled paper with normal, legible font— as well as correspondence from well-wishers and maps of Battle Harbour, the capital of Laandia.

I wish they sent along a map of the castle.

Because in Laandia, princesses live in castles, and I'm about to become a princess.

The realization clenches my stomach into an unpleasant spasm.

“Of course he did.” My father has approved everything about my upcoming wedding, except for asking me what I think about the whole thing.

He's been working at marrying me off since I was eighteen. Six broken engagements later, my father is positive this one will stick.

I'm not sure what I think. A great many things can result in a broken engagement, such as disagreements about living arrangements, wedding plans, and confusion about who exactly you're marrying. Marriages of convenience can often be for the wrong reason and if you're supposed to keep a secret, it's common courtesy to *tell* you the secret that you're supposed to be keeping rather than making you figure it out on your own.

That break-up led to an overworked publicist instructing me to sign an NDA legally forbidding me to discuss the events that led up to the parting of ways.

And then there's the media's twist on everything because being in the public eye means everyone has an opinion.

Sometimes, that does work in your favour. Poor Lady Camille gets a great deal of sympathy and not much blame.

Six engagements later, I'd almost given up hope of ever finding a marriage that works for me and Saint Pierre and Miquelon, and whatever country the husband-to-be may be from.

Also, the husband-to-be himself. He should benefit from the union as well.

Because there are so many pieces that need to fit into place, the whole concept of marrying for love has been off the table for—well, forever. I've always known a love match wasn't in the cards for me.

But then...

Tonight is the official announcement of my engagement to Prince Odin of Laandia. My schedule says I'm to arrive in the Great Room downstairs in thirty-eight minutes for a meet and greet with the press.

It seems like only thirty-eight minutes ago that Lord Arnaud and King Magnus approved the union.

The official story is that Prince Odin and I knew each other from years past, and recently rekindled our friendship after his stint as a contestant on the reality TV show, *The Suitorette*. He didn't get the girl on the show, but in a happy coincidence, it culminated in a whirlwind romance with *me*, resulting in an engagement full of all the happy romantic moments the world is looking for.

The reality is not nearly as swoony: Odin + Camille is an arranged marriage between Laandia and the French territory of Saint Pierre.

I need a husband.

Prince Odin needs a wife.

Love and romance not required.

What no one has explained to me yet, though, is why Prince Odin of Laandia was a contestant on a reality show at all. I mean...?

The second son of King Magnus, Odin is a *prince*. And he looks like the Prince Charming kind of prince as well. It kind of blows my mind that, instead of looking for an established princess, or even a nice Laandian girl to settle down with, Prince Odin appeared as a contestant on a reality dating show to find love.

Only two episodes of the show have aired so I don't know all the details but obviously, things didn't work out with Odin and the Suitorette, despite Odin receiving the coveted First Date Rose. But Odin is still looking for a wife and so has gone from reality romance to arranged love in less time than one of those reality romances last.

I'm not sure where I was on the list of potentials, but after the king's people and Lord Arnaud spoke, it was a done deal. Instant fiancée. Wedding scheduled in six weeks, on Valentine's Day.

It seems like a lot of time and no time at all.

But what no one knows, and what I'm trying not to dwell on, is that I've agreed to marry a man I was in love with ten years ago.

Notice the past tense.

"Will she be ready in time?" Jackson asks no one in particular.

We've been holed up in my assigned suite of rooms in Battle Castle all day, getting me prepped for tonight. It seems fitting that this is the castle Raggar the Red built to protect the Viking land from invaders across the sea because it feels, somehow, that I'm going into battle.

Isla, who has been provided by the royal family to do my hair and makeup, fluffs powder across my T-zone. "Five minutes more, and then she can put on the dress."

I close my eyes, enjoying the odd sensation. I've been to enough state dinners to have the prep time of getting ready down to a science, so it threw me when my "team" arrived three hours ago.

My father doesn't bring in stylists and makeup artists because one—*why?* And two, because he knows they won't last.

It takes a special person to work for Lord Arnaud. We've had many a staff leave from the prefect's residence in the middle of the night.

I always wonder where they go. Saint Pierre is an island, part of the archipelago in the Bay of St. Lawrence nestled between Newfoundland and Nova Scotia. Being an island means it's surrounded by water and impossible to run from.

I know. I've tried.

The *tippy-tap* of Betty White's nails on the floor distracts me and she whines for my attention. Bonus points for Jackson because he picks up my dog and puts her in my lap.

Having help to get ready isn't that bad. I lean back and close my eyes, hoping this night will be over soon.

Someone touches my foot and I kick out. "What are you doing?"

Crouched before me, Hugo raises his hands. "Just a foot rub, my lady. King Magnus swears by his reflexology before a competition."

"This isn't a competition, it's a press conference."

"Same thing for the king."

Even though it sounds strange, I motion for Hugo to continue. He presses firm thumbs into the arch of my foot, and immediately, a moan of pleasure escapes before I can stop it.

Kudos to the House of Erickson for doing all they can to help me relax. Because it's difficult to relax when you're about to be sold off like a prize heifer to a man you don't know.

Technically, I won't be sold, since dowries are frowned upon in today's society. And I *did* know Odin—at least I thought I did.

Odin Maximillian Patrick Henri Erickson.

The facts are that Odin is the second oldest, the third tallest, and the fourth member of the royal family to appear in *People Magazine's Sexiest Man Alive* edition. I know he's an advocate for Indigenous causes, outspoken about his desire to have the first Viking settlements in Laandia added to the UNESCO list and the only one of King Magnus's sons who is part of his council of advisors.

His book club rivals Reese's, but only for non-fiction.

What I don't know is why Prince Odin wants to marry *me* because, ten years ago, he made it clear he didn't want anything to do with me.

2

Odin

“ODIN!” KATE’S NOT-SO-DULCET TONES echo through my chambers. “We got to go.”

Mrs. Theissen sniffs with disapproval. “Kindly remember to address Prince Odin as *Your Royal Highness*, or *Sir*,” she tells Kate, her words clipped and curt.

Mrs. Theissen is part of the group my father poached from Buckingham Palace years ago. She’s the mistress of the castle, otherwise known as chief babysitter, and even though her loyalty towards the Laandian family has never been

questioned, Mrs. T makes it clear that we're not her first choice of a monarchy.

I take one last, long look at myself in the mirror. My uniform looks like it's been designed by a kindergarten teacher—cherry-red pants with a strip of leather up the side, highlighter-yellow jacket with navy sash—bold, primary colours that stand out on a podium.

“You look good, Highness, but your Viking ancestors would roll over in their burial boats if they could see you.” Kate suddenly appears beside me. Her laughing eyes skim over my reflection with a teasing grin, regardless of Mrs. T's rebuke. “Not a hair of a hide to be seen. You know, even that leather strip is vegan. No animals have been harmed for your fancy uniform.” She shakes her head with a *tsk*. “So very un-Viking-like.”

“We haven't been Vikings since the sixteenth century.”

“Once a raid-and-pillager, always a raid-and-pillager.”

“I seem to recall *your* family being descendants of the Vikings as well,” I point out.

“I didn't say it was a *bad* thing.”

Kate is the only one of my staff whose teasing borders on disrespect, but being best friends with my little sister does give her a certain leeway with me. If it were up to Mrs. T, Kate would be outlawed for her jokes.

“Are you ready to do this?” Kate asks, serious for once.

I take a deep breath. “I don't really have a choice, do I?”

She cocks her head with a worried frown. “I thought you were okay with this. You told the king you were ready to be married.”

“Saying it and going through with it are two different things,” I point out.

“And how is this different from you going on that television show?” Mrs. Theissen, listening in like she always does, gives a great eyebrow raise. That's all she needs to make her disapproval, displeasure, and disbelief known to all.

I've seen all three looks directed at me since my decision to go on that television show.

“Good point, Mrs. T.” Kate raises an eyebrow, possibly mimicking Mrs. T. “How is it different, *Your Royal Highness*? Other than the path to Lady Camille is free and clear and there were twenty-five of you after Esme.”

The show in question, *The Suitorette*, is the Canadian version of *The Bachelor* franchise where a Suitor—or Suitorette, in my case—meets and dates twenty-five contestants in an attempt to find true love.

The producers asked *me* if I would consider going on the show: *me*, not one of my brothers. I said yes, even though reality romance had never been something I watched, or followed, or gave any thought to before I got the call. Esme seemed like a nice person. My father, the king, wasn't thrilled at the thought of me baring all on TV but kept an open mind because my father is a huge fan of anything romantic. And at twenty-nine, I'm sure he thinks it's as good a time as any for me to fall in love.

But no—after less than a week, Esme gave me the yellow rose of friendship, which according to the show, means time to go home. Being dumped on television is bad enough, but it's the conversation I had with Esme that resulted in me being sent home that makes me cringe.

I'm sure there will be internet memes about it when the episode airs.

Tonight. The world—or at least those who watch *The Suitorette* in real time—will see me getting escorted out the door on the show, the same night we are announcing my engagement.

The timing is not a coincidence.

“It's a little different,” I tell Kate. “The press conference will be televised and most likely more people will be watching us than *The Suitor*. I hope.” Unease flares again, hopefully for the last time tonight. “The people want to see King Magnus.”

“Suitorette,” Kate corrects with a twitch of her lips. “You should make clear you were chasing the Suitorette, or that’s going to be a whole other can of worms.”

I can’t quite mask my sigh. “Either way, it was a bad decision to go on that show.” I wonder what Kate’s opinion would have been, had she been around for me to ask her. The king felt I might need PR help after the show and called in a favour to get Kate. Along with her familiarity with the royal family, she is really good at her job.

“It was unfortunate,” Mrs. Theissen is quick to correct as she does a last check of my uniform. “There are no bad decisions. Opportunities can come about after the most unlikely scenarios.”

I look down at her bent head; dark still, but the grey hairs have multiplied lately. I’m sure she’ll blame me for them. “You think marrying Lady Camille will be an opportunity?”

“Exactly,” Mrs. Theissen says, brushing non-existent lint off my shoulder. “Lady Camille is the daughter of the prefect of Saint Pierre and is in line to take over his position. I’m sure her training will reflect that. And allying with the island can strengthen our position in the fishing dispute.”

I wish I’d had a chance to ask Camille what she thought about the whole marriage thing. I wish I would have taken the time to talk to her about *anything*. But a conversation would have led to questions about *why* I arranged for her to be my bride-to-be, and that might have put an end to the negotiations.

I know Mrs. Theissen means well but her optimistic words don’t untangle the knot in the pit of my stomach. There’s no choice except for it to work out. I chose this path and I will walk it.

And I will walk it well.

As Mrs. Theissen heads to the door, Kate catches my eye and makes a face. She reminds me so much of my little sister—both a blessing and a curse.

“Oh, Odie,” she sighs, using my hated nickname. “It’ll be okay.”

I raise my chin. “I know it will.”

“You’ll be happy with Lady Camille. You’ll be friends again. Maybe this will be your love match after all.”

That’s only one of the problems of having Kate as my personal assistant—she knows my entire life story, including quite a few of my secrets. “Maybe.”

And after tonight, so will the rest of the world.

3

Camille

MY DRESS IS GREY.

It's not even a smoky grey or a silvery grey; it's a mix of grey and beige taupe.

Graupe. It's a graupe-coloured dress.

"You need to stay back, let Prince Odin take centre stage," my father had instructed when I mentioned my lack of appreciation for the particular colour. "If he's the type of man who would go on a reality show, he clearly likes the attention."

I never had that impression about Prince Odin.

I step out of my dressing room, expecting a flurry of compliments to greet me. This is the dress I'm wearing to announce my engagement to Prince Odin and it will be plastered across *Hello Royals* magazine and countless royal-watchers websites by tomorrow. Laandia may be a small country, stuck on the north-east edge of Canada, smack between the province of Quebec and the Atlantic Ocean, but the Ericksons are still a royal family, and King Magnus always tops the list of favourite royals.

Someone better lie and tell me it looks good.

But instead of watching me parade out of my bedroom, Jackson, Isla, and Hugo crowd around the television in my sitting room.

“What are you watching?” I snap.

Jackson's head jerks around like he's given himself whiplash. “Lady Camille. You're ready, and... I was only...”

“It's the episode where the prince is sent home,” Hugo pipes up. “Maybe you should watch it before you announce anything.”

“You look beautiful,” Isla adds in a soft voice. She's holding Betty White, who looks adorable in her red sweater. The castle walls are thick but there's not a lot to Betty White and she feels the cold. I make a mental note to request a few more sweaters to make sure she stays warm.

“Thank you.” I make a face at Jackson, who should have led the pack with compliments.

“That colour is...” Hugo trails off with a glance at my dress.

“Not my choice,” I say but my attention is on the television mounted on the wall above the fireplace.

Onscreen, Odin sits at a table, a plate of untouched food before him. I'm embarrassed to admit I've watched a few episodes here and there, and one of my pet peeves is how no one eats on the show. When you've got a plate of delicious-looking food in front of you, how can you not eat it?

“He’s so yummy,” Hugo says excitedly.

“He’s very good-looking,” Isla is quick to agree, giving me a smile of approval.

And he is. Prince Odin looks like a fairy-tale Prince Charming with his thick blond hair, ice-blue eyes, and an actual divot in his chin.

Dimple. I think it’s called a dimple. Bum chin can be another name for it, which takes away a bit of the perfection.

I have a flashback of touching that same dimple, long ago.

Esme, the Suitorette, appears, wearing a lime-coloured dress that makes me green with envy. My wardrobe has been full of black or navy or this graupe monstrosity for every formal event since I was twelve.

“Colour is not suitable for you,” Lord Arnaud told me once. “Nothing goes with that hair.”

I got my bright red hair from my mother, and Lord Arnaud has never stopped trying to make it—and me—blend into the point of disappearing.

At least he can’t control what Betty White wears. I hold out my arms for my dog and cuddle her close, for comfort and for warmth. Sleeveless dresses should never be allowed in this country.

“Ooh...here we go.” Hugo clasps his hands together.

Odin stands to pull out Esme’s chair and she sits with a forlorn expression on her face. “Prince Odin,” she begins, getting the addressing royalty thing wrong. I’ve been schooled in all things royal my entire life. It’s like Lord Arnaud *knew* a Laandia—Saint Pierre match would happen someday.

There’s no way he could have known because there’s no way *I* could have known.

Apparently, Odin isn’t one to nitpick on proper titles. “Just Odin,” he interrupts. His gaze hasn’t left the yellow rose in her hand. “I don’t understand.”

“You’re an amazing man,” she starts again. “It’s just, I’m not sure this is what you want.”

“I’m here to find a wife. To fall in love,” he quickly corrects.

“But I think you may already be in love.”

A collective gasp issues from Hugo and Isla, and yes, me too. This is my future husband and he’s already in love with another woman? “With whom?” Jackson demands, sounding like he’s offended on my behalf.

“Who do you think I’m in love with?” Odin echoes.

“The girl under the bridge,” Esme says gently.

I close my eyes but they pop right open because I have to see this. Last week, Esme asked Odin about his past relationships. Instead of telling her about some famous model or celebrity socialite he hooked up with—which is what he *should have done*—Odin told a story about meeting a girl at the Regatta Ball ten years ago and the magical moments that happened between them on the dance floor, and then later, when they snuck out of the ball, under the bridge on the banks of Quidi Vidi Lake.

That girl was me.

I’m the girl who shared the magical moments with Prince Odin at the ball.

I’m the one who accepted his offer to dance, so star-struck that I was unable to speak a word for the entire song. But then, instead of escorting me back to my corner, partially hidden behind the balloon arrangement, Odin kept me on the floor to dance for another song. Two more songs.

An hour later, I was relaxed enough to speak candidly, to laugh loudly, and had goosebumps and butterflies and all the things that happen when a girl starts to fall for a boy.

It had happened so quickly. One minute we were swaying together to a bad 90s song, my head leaning on his shoulder as he whispered to me and the next, flashbulbs lit up the room.

Of course they weren't taking pictures of us, but Prince Kalle, heir to the Laandian throne.

Still, it unnerved Odin, and he suggested we get out of there.

So we did, running hand-in-hand over the lawn to a spot on the bank of the lake, hidden from security in the darkness under the bridge.

On the previous episode of the show, for some unfathomable reason, Odin told the story of meeting *me*. He didn't give all the details, but he *implied*. It's what he didn't say happened that told the world what happened.

I would have been mortified if he had mentioned me by name. Instead, I was forced to watch the episode alone, listening to Odin speak like he actually cared about this person, and unable to tell a soul that it was me.

The reality of it all was a little skewed.

Odin closes his eyes for a long moment and shakes his head. "No." He looks across the table and makes a motion as if to reach for Esme's hand.

"Oh, don't beg," Hugo mutters. "It's never a good look."

"I was being vulnerable, sharing something from my past," Odin says. "It was ten years ago. Of course, I'm not in love with her."

"But you still talk about her," Esme argues. "You told me you wonder if she's out there thinking about you. There's been no closure."

"No." Beside me, Jackson winces at Odin's tone. "I don't need closure. I'm not in love with her. I came here to find love with *you*. We have a real chance together, Esme."

The camera pans to Esme's sympathetic expression and then breaks for a commercial.

"Brutal!" Hugo cries. "Not only is he getting kicked to the curb, he comes off looking obsessive, moping over some girl he knew as a kid. No wonder he's desperate for some good publicity."

Hugo's words seem to suck the air from the room.

Isla stares at Hugo with eyes as round as one of her makeup puffs.

"Not that this is only for publicity," Hugo splutters. "He's a good guy. You're a—a lady. This works. This makes sense. You and him."

My heart sinks all the way to the cold, cold floor. Is that why I'm here? The timing can't be a coincidence. Prince Odin humiliated on a reality show on the same day he tells the world he's found a bride.

It looks... it looks *bad*. For me. I'm the Band-Aid they're sticking over the road rash of embarrassment, and that never works because, when you rip the bandage off, half the new skin comes off too.

I pull out all my daughter-of-the-prefect attitude. "Turn that off," I demand. "And get out. All the way out. Leave. I can't believe you're standing here watching television instead of helping me get ready. Both of you." I give Isla an imperious jerk of my chin to the cosmetics and hair products. "I need calm. Not gossip. Not watching *reality* shows."

I sweep across the room, still cradling Betty White as I search for my shoes. "This floor is freezing," I cry. "How can they expect me to stay here? It's like a skating rink. *Where are my shoes?*"

"Lady Camille?" Behind me, Jackson holds my shoes as Hugo helps Isla collect her things. "I can take you to the Great Room now if you're ready."

"Do I look ready?" I set Betty White down and she scampers away from me, over to her bed by the fire.

I wouldn't want to be around me either.

I take a deep breath, and then another. *Be more Anna than Elsa*, Madam Carol says in my head.

Madam Carol has looked after me since I was a little girl, beginning as the house manager of the prefect resident and becoming more of a caregiver slash mother figure after my

own mother died, tasked with my entertainment after school hours. It was she who read me fairy tales and watched princess movies, making me Halloween costumes of my favourites.

Frozen had been a favourite of both of us. I could relate to the Ice Queen who could freeze someone with her thoughts.

But Madam Carol had encouraged me to be more Anna than Elsa; warmth and friendliness would help me more in the world than the cold abruptness Lord Arnaud preferred.

I really wish she was here with me.

But she's not. I'm on my own.

I study Jackson's neutral expression. Does anything faze him? And why is this bothering me? I'm getting married, which means I'll be able to do my duty for Saint Pierre. That's all that matters. I shouldn't care *why* Odin wants to marry me.

But I do. I care very much.

"Please tell me," I say through gritted teeth, "that this is more than a publicity stunt."

"Of course," Jackson is quick to assure me. "Prince Odin must have strong feelings for you."

He may have—once—but no longer. And Jackson doesn't know any of that. Odin just told the world there is *someone* in his past, but not *who*.

Not me.

Thank goodness. Because if he said it was me with him that night...

I put my hand on his shoulder for balance as I slip on my shoes. "You're not going to last much longer than the two of them if you keep feeding me *merde* like that," I say, my tone as icy as the freezing floor. "Truth."

Jackson takes a deep breath. "The timing can't be a coincidence," he admits.

I appreciate his bluntness. I keep telling myself this even though it feels like Betty White is raking my skin with her claws.

“It’s back,” Hugo calls, frozen in place with Isla’s makeup case in his hand.

There’s a rope around my waist dragging me back to see what happens. I know this isn’t a love match with Prince Odin. I never expected to fall in love and get married like regular people, but I never wanted my marriage to be a way of saving face. It looks like he rebounded and that’s not a good thing for me.

“I think it’s something you should explore.” Onscreen, Esme lays the yellow rose on the table between them. “I’m only an excuse. You’ve been hiding your feelings, and it’s time to focus on what you really want. I wish you the best, Odin. It feels wrong taking you away from that journey when there’s still so much you could do to find her.”

“I don’t need to find her. I know who she is,” Odin announces.

No. No, you don’t.

The air sucks out of the room, and I step back from the TV.

My body buzzes like one of those insect zappers that catches mosquitoes on warm summer nights. No, no, no, no...

Esme smiles for the first time since sitting down. “That’s wonderful. Now you can try again with her. Who is she?”

I close my eyes and wait because what else can you do when someone is about to end your life as you know it?

“Lady Camille Dusain. She’s the daughter of the prefect of Saint Pierre.”

Hearing my name come out of Odin’s mouth is a sucker punch of astronomical proportions. But what’s even worse is the gasps of disbelief from the others.

Even Betty White in her bed seems to be staring at me with shock.

“*Whaaa?*” Hugo clutches his chest in awe. “You’ve been holding out!”

“Is it true?” Isla demands.

“Lady Camille’s personal business should remain private,” Jackson says firmly. “Whether she knows Prince Odin—”

Hugo points to the TV, where Esme is now walking Odin to the big black SUV used to whisk away rejected suitors. “He kind of said you did.”

“And the story he told about it last week was so sweet,” Isla gushes. “That was really you?”

I hear the chimes of three phones signalling incoming messages and notifications and I have no idea what to say.

4

Odin

MY BROTHERS WAIT IN the Great Room with me.

The Great Room has the massive fireplace and exposed beams that make it fit within the castle vibe, but the reality is that it's more like a man cave combined with a neighbour pub, complete with big screen TVs, pool table and a wide variety of beer on tap at the bar in the back of the room.

The raised dais is set up across from the door so I'll see Camille the moment she comes in.

Like a wall, my brothers line the dais with solemn expressions and matching uniforms. Only the tapping of

Gunnar's shoe marks their desire to be anywhere but here.

For the first time, I wish they could stand in front of me, blocking me from sight.

There is Kalle, the firstborn, bronzed and beautiful on the outside but the promise of the crown weighs heavily on him, slowly crushing his insides.

At least that's what I think. Kalle never says anything personal to anyone, not even about the countless women who have passed through his life. Gunnar thinks the longest relationship our brother has been in might be six days, so Kalle isn't about to get married anytime soon.

Neither is Bo, the second youngest, who scowls more than he smiles and just wants to be left alone to chop wood for his cabin on the edge of the Wabush Forest. Being a prince is not something he enjoys.

I'm not sure Gunnar does either. He prefers wandering the world to his responsibilities to the crown. But at least they're here; I couldn't convince Lyra to come home to meet Lady Camille, even for a few days.

At the last minute, Dad steps out of one of the secret doors by the fireplace and hops onto the dais to stand beside me. He's not the type of royal who enjoys the pomp and circumstance, but tonight he made an effort. All of us are dressed the same, but somehow the flamboyant outfit works for Dad. Everything works for Dad.

"You freaking out yet, O?" King Magnus asks in the loudest whisper ever and gives me a big grin.

"Not really, no," I tell him with all the calmness I can muster.

Which is a giant lie.

He claps a hand on my shoulder. "You just wait until she walks in."

"How's he even going to know?" Gunnar wonders. "Seeing as he's never met her."

I press my lips together. No one has their phone, and not many of the staff will interrupt, save for a country-wide emergency, when the family is together like this, so chances my family won't know my... familiarity... with Camille until we've made the announcement.

This might be an emergency, depending on how Camille takes the news.

Maybe I should have filled them in.

I pull at the hem of my jacket until Dad puts his hand back on my shoulder to still my fidgeting.

Laandia is one of the smallest countries in the world; popular with the extreme-sports and nature-loving types, and prosperous because of the mining and the fish. Both have everything to do with my father. My great-grandfather decided he wanted to be king, my grandfather smoothed out the kinks of the new nation, and my father made it great. My brother...

The question of Kalle's tenure on the throne is a serious one for a great many people.

There's no time to worry about that now because there's a flurry of activity by the door. The prefect appears, tall and thin, with a sharp edge to his jaw and a greyish pallor to his face. He's wearing a pale grey suit and if I asked him to stand by the wall, he might become invisible against the stone.

So different from my own father.

A group of advisors and security follow him in, and I crane my neck for my first sight of Lady Camille.

Will she smile at me? Will she remember that night, all the nights spent writing to each other?

To be truthful, Camille did most of the writing.

Will she be excited about our reunion?

Gunnar nudges my arm. "Here we go." He smirks, and I can't wait for the day when our positions are reversed. When *he's* waiting to lay eyes on his bride-to-be.

But Gunnar—being Gunnar, and the slightly spoiled fourth son—will do things his own way, which most likely involve running off to get married without following the proper protocol.

After what seems like a parade-length of dark-suited men, I see a crown of red hair and there she is.

Lady Camille Dusain. My betrothed.

She pauses in the doorway, chin held high and spine as straight as a sword.

The mask is in place—everyone has one—but for a moment, there's a flicker in the dark eyes as she looks around.

Is she looking for me? Should I have met her at the door?

I wish I'd been right there at the door.

I arrange my smile—hopeful, eager, and a little happy.

Grey dress—it's the first thing I notice because it doesn't let me see anything else. An...interesting... coloured fabric covers Camille, from neck to fingers and the only hint of her form is the nipped-in waist. Her red hair is pulled tight into an intricate mass of braids on top of her head. No jewelry.

Her eyes, as dark as a bowl of melted chocolate, dominate her face and it takes a moment before I realize she doesn't look as excited as I expected her to. Or happy.

There's no smile. In fact, she looks kind of angry.

Very angry.

She must have seen the show.

The knot that's been tightening my stomach to ulcer proportions since opening my mouth to Esme, gives one last squeeze, hard enough for me to catch my breath.

I should have warned Camille.

I should have gone to her, and talked about it. We could have come up with a plan. Instead, I let Mrs. Theissen deal with the details of the marriage and told no one that I outed Camille as my mystery girl.

Or even that she was my mystery girl.

Big mistake. *Huge*.

Flashbulbs turn the room as bright as day and questions fire at Camille like a 21-gun salute. The king likes things casual in the castle, and press conferences are always a free-for-all, with reporters and photographers milling around with full access to the family. We hold them in the Great Room because it's close to the full bar, and visitors are always impressed by the guitars hanging on the wall. The King's Olympic medals are in a case by the bookshelves, along with the shot-put ball that won him the gold. The platinum records hang by the door.

King Magnus isn't your normal monarch.

No one thought to warn Camille what tonight would be like. She blinks at the rush of noise, and the attempt at a smile comes across like a gargoyle's grimace.

What have I done?

Camille says nothing, just keeps her eyes forward, like she's staring at me.

I don't think she is. I think she's looking over my head at the portrait of the first king of Laandia, my great-grandfather Leif that hangs over the fireplace. Apparently, he was quite manipulative when it came to getting Canada to give up Laandia.

I never thought that trait ran in the family, but here I am.

And feeling sick about it.

Finally, Camille's solemn march through the room is over. I move forward, and as I offer my hand to help her step up onto the dais at the back of the room, our eyes meet.

The night I first met Camille, I'd never been so excited about a girl. Camille *got* me. She understood my life, my obligations and the box I lived in. She listened to me. She saw me, like no one ever had.

And I let that go like sand falling through my fingers.

But still, watching her walk toward me is like taking a deep breath after being deprived of oxygen. Some of the tension that has been gripping my shoulders eases. And despite her stormy expression, I can't help but smile.

"Why?" Camille asks before I can say anything. The word, spoken in a soft voice, comes out like a shout.

I close my eyes, my smile disappearing. She's seen the episode. She knows I told the world about our night together.

I didn't mean to. Esme asked, and it's not in my nature to lie. But as soon as Camille's name popped out, I realized the ramifications. After we finished filming, I went straight to the powers that be. I begged and pleaded with the producers to leave out her name.

They said no.

It had been ten years ago. We had been kids.

The producers wanted to film a reunion between Camille and me.

I refused. I threatened lawsuits. They said I was under contract and they could use anything that took place in front of the camera. I might have said something about the Laandian Army. The producers of the show finally said they would edit out Camille's name.

They lied.

"Can we talk about this later?" I ask in a low voice.

"Lady Camille!" A reporter shouts, sticking a microphone between us. "What did you think of Prince Odin going on *The Suitorette*? Were you jealous of his connection with Esme?"

Camille looks at me with her big eyes, dark depths unreadable.

She's still so pretty, maybe even more so. Unconventional with the wide mouth and the tiny nose and those big, dark eyes. And the hair—I remember the hair. Pushing it away from her face, soft as silk between my fingers.

Her hair smelled of fruit and moonlight and promises.

Our gazes lock together like an old-time drawbridge fitting into place. I catch my breath. She's here. Right in front of me, after all this time.

And she's going to say something that will ruin all my work in getting the world to forget I just got dumped by the Suitorette.

"I'm more interested in our connection," Camille says, voice loud enough to carry over the din. She slides her fingers into my hand and I help her up the step.

I should tell her she's beautiful. I should say I'm happy she's here. I should *thank her* for not slapping me. Or kneeling me in the crotch. But the simple touch of her hand pushes away any bit of game I have left.

"Hi," I manage as she stands beside me. This is such a bad idea.

Not the marrying Camille part. That seemed—seems—like a good idea. Even without the optics of a romance coming full circle, allying Laandia with Saint Pierre is a solid plan.

At least the prefect jumped at the chance.

No, what's really horrible was the idea of not giving Camille the full story of why I chose her.

Or any of the story. Or telling anyone else; asking for help out of this mess.

This was my problem and I have to fix it.

"Do you prefer Your Royal Highness?" Camille demands.

I blink with surprise. "It's not necessary. Just Odin." She nods and drops my hand like it's on fire. I meet Gunnar's gaze as I move back to my place. He looks as bewildered as I do.

Of course he is. He was fourteen that night; he doesn't remember meeting Camille. Or have any idea that I did anything more than dance with her.

As Dad steps forward, somehow looking dignified in the clown uniform as he ribs with the reporters, I keep shooting sideways glances at Camille.

I wish she would smile. Right now, as she keeps her eyes downcast, her mouth narrows into a thin line smudged with soft pink lipstick. When she finally looks up and over at me, I meet her gaze with an encouraging smile.

There's a moment when a memory sparks in my mind, like a half-forgotten dream but then she looks away. Still no sign of a smile.

"Prince Odin, what did you think of Lady Camille the first time you met her?" calls one of the reporters.

She looks at me, a furrow deepening between her eyes. We don't want the public to know this is an arranged marriage. It's supposed to be a love match, but we're not going to fool anyone if we're standing two feet apart and not even looking at each other.

I can do this. I only hope she can pull it off.

I smile at Camille, studying her like I'm in the midst of a happy memory of the first time I set eyes on her.

And then I am.

The image of Camille at the ball at the Regatta all those years ago pops into my mind. Long, wavy hair the colour of fire caught up at the sides and cascaded down her back. She was one of the many girls there, most of them circling around me and my brothers, but Camille had been outside the group, at the edges of the room. In her navy dress, she looked like she wanted to be anywhere else.

It was her hair that grabbed my attention—a brilliant light in a dark night. Her hair, and the dark eyes and her smile, shy but not. She had a coquette's smile without even trying.

"I thought she was adorable," I say without thinking, caught in the grip of that night. "Beautiful, of course, but approachable. Fun. There was a spark there, and it drew me in. I couldn't get enough of it."

Camille's mouth opens slightly with surprise. "I thought she was amazing," I finish.

“Lady Camille,” several of the reporters call to her. “What about you? What did you think?”

She seems stunned, unable to answer, and I feel bad for coming up with such a flowery response. “I thought he was tall,” she says finally. “Very tall.”

The room erupts with laughter and Camille pastes on a smile that doesn’t reach her eyes.

What have I gotten myself into?

We allow several more questions and then Dad says a few words, giving sound bites about what he deems important. I know my marriage isn’t the only goal this evening. Being the king of Laandia is part politician, part local hero; Dad has advisors, but he runs everything and gives the final word on all things Laandian.

As Dad moves the press towards the bar—being of Viking descent, we always end press conferences with a beer or a glass of honey mead—Camille turns to me with eyes flashing with anger. “How *dare* you?”

I’m taken aback by the urgency in her voice. Also, the anger. “I... I had to say something,” I tell her in a low voice.

“No. You really didn’t. Not about *me*.”

“Camille, I’m sorry. Let me explain.”

She laughs, but it’s not a happy, musical sound. Luckily most of the press are already out of earshot, tempted by the king’s craft beer. “I’d love to hear what you come up with but I’m not giving you that chance.”

“But—”

Camille raises a hand. “Don’t bother trying. I’m going to my room.”

“You can’t!” My voice is loud enough for one or two people to glance over at us. “Camille. Please.”

“Please what?”

“You can’t walk out. Not yet.”

She looks up at me since I am quite a bit taller than she is, even in heels. Her eyes are still dark and stormy and the corner of her mouth curls in a grimace.

Even when angry, she's quite beautiful.

Her skin is pale for someone with such dark eyes but her hair, a rich copper-red, pulls the attention. I find myself reaching for her hand.

She stares as I touch her fingers, then looks up at me, the twitch becoming a mocking smile. "I can do whatever I want. You'll be smart to remember that."

With that, she steps off the dais without waiting for a hand and, with head held imperiously high, sweeps through the lounge like she's a descendent of Catherine the Great.

"Nice exit," Gunnar says admiringly.

"She'd make a great queen," Kalle mutters.

I watch Camille leave, without a clue as to what I'm supposed to do about her.

5

Camille

HE TOLD THE WORLD it was me.

Odin told the world what happened between us ten years ago, *on the same night he announced our engagement.*

It's actually brilliant timing.

Still doesn't make it right. I feel like I've been tossed off a boat into the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. Without anything to keep me afloat.

Surrounded by blind Greenland sharks who think I'm a seal.

My anger builds as I leave the man cave of all man caves, forced to walk in slow, careful steps because I am a lady, from the long stretch of my neck and set of my shoulders to the way I refuse to stomp out of the room.

Even when I really, really want to.

For ten years, I've tried so hard not to think of that night when Prince Odin danced with Lady Camille Dusain of Saint Pierre, his sort-of neighbour on the other side of Newfoundland; the night of the Regatta. He danced, he charmed, and he took her to a spot under the bridge, dodging security, guests, and fathers in an attempt to keep it private.

I was fine with the secrecy because it had been the beginning of Lord Arnaud's *marry-Camille-off* phase and I didn't want Prince Odin to be a part of that. Or to be scrubbed from the list because of me running off into the night with him.

We managed to keep the whole thing secret, from why we missed the fireworks to the letters I wrote to him every day for six months.

Although, I sent letters to him care of the castle, and when he wrote back to me, they had to be mailed by someone, so at least one person must have known.

The *few* Odin deigned to respond to. That should have told me all I needed to know.

If things had been different, this would all be a moot point. The announcement of our engagement might have been ten years ago.

The *what-ifs* with Odin haven't been easy to live with. The only thing that helps is thinking that Odin never thought about it, never thought about me. But finding out that he not only has memories of me living rent-free in his mind for the past ten years, he's *talked* to people about it. About me. After so many years of silence, to hear him mention me is like finding out your school crush liked you back and you were completely clueless about it.

That turns this easily arranged marriage into a big ball of confusion. The kind you need a mediator for, as well as his and her therapists.

I make it up to my room without running into anyone, including my brand-new assistant. I have no idea where Jackson is, nor do I care. He took the job to get away from Saint Pierre, so I have no qualms about leaving him here in Laandia as I make my escape. If I can find a ride to the airport, I can get on the next flight to anywhere.

Maybe I should have taken an interest in how the staff got away from Saint Pierre to give me some ideas for fast escapes. But it shouldn't be that difficult. Odin can—

“Camille!” The thunderous voice rolls down the hall towards me.

Two minutes. I would have been out of sight in two minutes. “*Merde*,” I say under my breath. I thought Odin might be the one to pursue.

Not Lord Arnaud himself.

Now is not the time for what will undoubtedly be another heartfelt father-daughter moment. There's never a good time for that.

Squaring my shoulders, I turn to face him. “Lord Arnaud.”

He looms, the hallway lit only by the odd, old-fashioned sconces which makes him seem monster-sized in the dimness. “What. Was. That?”

His words come at me like a slap, and I flinch. “I'm sorry.”

“Camille, you're to marry Odin, not storm off like a mewling toddler.”

Any hope of escape drifts away like the morning fog. So many times I've wanted to stand up to the prefect of Saint Pierre, tried to assert myself, but it's too little, too late.

“He's your last option.” Somehow his voice is colder than the icy wind blowing from the Arctic Circle. “Do not let bitterness over a childish fling destroy everything I've worked for.”

Everything *he's* worked for. Not me.

I *could* walk away from this. Walk away from everything—my position, this sham of a marriage, my responsibilities and obligations. But if I did that, the people of Saint Pierre would suffer. They would be disappointed. They would lose hope.

I can't do that to anyone and so I swallow everything I want to say. "Yes, Father. I'm sorry, Father."

But he's not my father. My mother, who also suffered through an arranged—and loveless—marriage did one thing to spite him.

She fell in love with another man. And the result of that indiscretion was me.

But no one knows that. Instead of causing a scandal, Lord Arnaud kept his mouth shut because he needed an heir to make sure France didn't lose control of the archipelago. And now he needs me to get married for the same reason.

Lord Arnaud deflates a bit with my apology. "We discussed this. You *need* to be married. Do you understand me?"

"Yes."

I understand perfectly. I need to be married because of an idiotic and archaic clause that specifies that the prefect—lord or lady—be married in order to assume the post.

And I'm next in line for the position. If I plan to take over—which may happen sooner than expected, thanks to Lord Arnaud's recent health scares—I need to be married.

If this doesn't happen before he dies, the position will pass on to his nearest relative, in this case, a third cousin, who is in the midst of making arrangements to pass control of the island to the Spanish government.

Not only is there a significant rivalry between the two countries that goes back to the Franco-Spanish war, the Spanish government has plans to raze the communities on the islands to create an Alcatraz-type prison.

I had no idea there were so many Spanish criminals.

The people of Saint Pierre don't want that, and neither do I.

Lord Arnaud points a finger at me. "You will marry Prince Odin. Do you understand?" I nod. "Do you understand?" he repeats in a louder voice.

"Yes," I whisper even though in my head it sounds more like a scream.

"Then we're in agreement. You will stay here until the wedding—"

"But I need to go home," I cry. This wasn't part of the plan. It was to be a quick trip, twenty-four hours max. "There are things I need to do at SealSave, check the birds and—" SealSave is my baby, the wildlife rescue centre I established on Petite Miquelon under my mother's name after she died.

He lifts a hand like he's stopping traffic. "No. Enough with those animals. You will remain here in the castle. Those other arrangements failed because you weren't present. We're not making that mistake again. Six engagements, Camille. And six broken engagements," he interrupts, taking a step forward to emphasize his point. "They were *your* fault."

His words quiet my argument. How much does he know about why the engagements were called off?

"This time, you stay here," he continues. "You will not destroy what I have worked for. Is that clear? Do you understand that?"

I can only nod.

Without waiting for a response, the prefect does an about-face and marches away, most likely back to the Great Room to brown-nose the king.

I wait until he's out of sight before I let my shoulders sag.

6

Odin

“S HE SEEMS SPUNKY.”

As Camille disappears from the Great Room, her grey dress blending just as well with the walls as the prefect does, Bo puts a hand on my shoulder. “That might take some work,” he says sympathetically.

“Work?” Gunnar laughs, jumping off the dais. “You’re already in the doghouse and it’s six weeks until the wedding even happens.”

With an apologetic shrug, Bo follows the always-smiling Gunnar through the crowd to the bar. Bo is the introvert, the

one who hides from the press and keeps to the outskirts of the room during social obligations. Gunnar is his polar opposite, sharing more of our father's robust personality than the rest of us, probably to make up for being the shortest brother.

Camille thought I was tall. That's all I got.

"Maybe a conversation should have happened before all this," Kalle says. He, unlike Gunnar, rarely smiles. He must do something right to get the constant line of women flocking to him. Maybe it's true: women like the brooding bad boys.

"Maybe being married shouldn't have been on the agenda," I snap. "Sorry," I add when Kalle grimaces. I can blame a lot on my older brother, but this was my own decision. "I shouldn't take it out on you. I've made a mess of everything lately."

"You really haven't." He sweeps a hand down his torso. "When you consider how the rest of us are doing. You're still the golden boy."

"I'm not," I mutter.

"You better go after her," Kalle suggests.

"I don't know." I stare across the room, at the hub of activity around the bar area. I should mingle. There are a few reporters I should talk to, and someone needs to smooth over Lady Camille's quick escape.

But if I go down there someone—everyone—will bring up *The Suitorette*. They might not be watching the episode on their televisions, but it'll be on their phones soon enough. It doesn't matter; everyone in this castle right now already knows what happened.

Announcing my upcoming marriage to Lady Camille should have eclipsed the episode from their minds but with her storming out, Camille might as well have held up a sign: Prince Odin is not marriage material.

Dumped on TV and in my own castle on the same night. It's got to be a record, even in my family.

“She’s angry.” Camille wasn’t supposed to be angry. She was supposed to be sweet and beautiful and smiling, holding my hand and pretending that we were in love.

“It’s easier to fix it now than if you let her stew,” Kalle says. It doesn’t surprise me that Kalle sticks around to offer advice. He may be Mr. Grumpy to the world, but he’s always been a good brother.

“And you know all about letting women stew?” I pull the teasing note into my voice with difficulty.

Kalle grins sheepishly. “Remember, we’re a lot of family,” he throws over his shoulder as he hops off the dais. “Especially for outsiders. She’s probably just scared.”

I keep that in mind as I slip out of the Great Room in search of Camille.

I try her room on the third floor because the only other option would be the airport, and any pilot knows it’s never a good idea to take off from Laandia during a snowstorm.

I head up the back staircase and get there just in time to hear the tail end of a conversation between Lord Arnaud and Camille. “Six engagements, Camille. And six broken engagements,” Lord Arnaud says with a faint French accent. “They were *your* fault. This time, you stay here. You will not mess this up. Is that clear? Do you understand?”

The prefect’s words to his daughter reinforce everything I’ve ever thought about him—cold, arrogant, and confrontational.

The clip of angry footsteps sounds as I’m about to reveal myself. On second thought, I should talk to Camille first before I inform Lord Arnaud that he needs to rethink his tone when he’s speaking to my wife-to-be.

The hall is empty when I step around the corner and the only sound is a solid click of a door being shut. Without giving myself time to change my mind, I knock on Camille’s door.

My breath catches in my throat when the door is yanked open. Camille’s eyes are as dark and stormy as the sky during

Hurricane Igor. If she could figure out how to shoot lightning bolts at me, I think she would. “It’s you.”

I take a step back. I’m not proud of that. “It is me.”

She takes a step forward, shoes in hand. “Chasing after me to make sure your arranged marriage doesn’t blow up?” she snaps.

Kalle is wrong—this won’t be the easiest way to fix this.

“I came to check on you,” I manage, transfixed by how *mad* she is.

People don’t get mad at me. No one snaps; certainly, no one would ever shout but now I wonder how often I anger people and they don’t feel they can express it to me.

Camille has no qualms about expressing it. Her entire demeanour is that of a scorned princess because she truly does look like a princess. It’s not just the hair and the gown of questionable colour, it’s the attitude.

I can so see her perched on a throne, King Leif’s crown on her red hair, sceptre and orb in hand, draped in jewels. I slip back and forth between being mildly terrified and trying not to stare because she looks amazing when she’s angry.

I don’t suppose I should tell her that.

“Are you all right?” I ask.

Camille snorts. She may be a lady, wearing a dress that could keep several families fed for a month, with enough hairpins to keep a locksmith out of a job, but I’ve never heard a lady make a noise like that before. “I’m fine. Everything is *perfect*. Is that what you want to hear? Is that what you want me to say?”

I have no clue how to deal with her hostility, so I fall back into my royal politeness, cultivated in my family for generations. “May I come in for a moment?”

Camille steps aside and swoops into a mocking bow. “It’s your castle.”

I step inside. “These are your rooms.” But before she can respond, a tiny creature appears, paws clicking on the floor. “What—who—is that?”

It’s a dog. I think. It’s about the size of a small cat, with wiry fur the same grey-beige colour as Camille’s dress, or at least the fur that’s not covered by a thick red sweater. My suspicions are confirmed when it begins to bark—shrill little yips that would be amusing if the sound weren’t so annoying.

Camille bends down to scoop it up. “Betty White. She’s my dog.”

This is said in a voice that suggests I’m about to argue that fact. “It’s wearing a sweater.”

“Because *it’s* frigid in here and there’s not a lot to Betty White.”

“No. I mean, yes, it is cold in Laandia, especially in the winter. Let me put another log on the fire.” Before she can kick me out, I head to the open fireplace in the centre of her suite that warms both the sitting room and bedroom.

It’s one of the better guest rooms, where Trudeau, Obama, and Prince William often stay when they visit. The sitting room is more like a collection of rooms: the kitchen area with a sink and mini-fridge and Breville Espresso machine with a small table, the couch and two wing chairs, covered in navy leather, set before the fire with the plasma TV mounted on the wall over the fireplace, and the office area by the window with two tables and a collection of straight-backed chairs.

She only arrived today so the sitting room is empty of any personal effects but already smells of womanly products—powder and hairspray and sweet scents. The door to her bedroom is shut but I can see into it if I look through the fire.

I shouldn’t be looking into Camille’s bedroom. It’s none of my business what’s in her bedroom.

It will be my business soon enough.

I peer through the fire as I add another log to the dwindling flames—a four-poster bed still made with piles of pillows and the goose feather-filled duvet as warm as any parka.

The beds are very comfortable in the castle, but mentioning that to Camille when she looks like she's about to do a runner seems wrong.

"Don't you have people for that?" Camille demands, watching me poke the fire as she cradles the dog in her arms.

"I'm sure I have people for many things, but I don't mind doing it myself." Flames lick at the bark and it crackles and snaps. "Do you have everything you need?" I ask politely.

"I fired the makeup people," Camille says like we're still discussing the heat of the castle. She sets the dog down in the heap of blankets by the fire.

I set the poker down. "Oh." *That's a Mrs. Theissen problem*, I want to say. "I'm surprised. They certainly made you look beautiful. Helped you," I correct. "You don't need much help."

My words are meant to appease, but they are true. Standing so close to her, and focusing on her face and not the dress, Camille *is* beautiful. Although her hair is pulled back so tightly it looks painful, it makes her eyes look like huge dark pools in her heart-shaped face.

I feel like I'm stepping across a river, one wet stone at a time. I'm going to slip on something and end up soaked, and there's nothing at all I can do about it. "I'm sorry," I tell her, trying to buy more time.

Camille balls her hand into a fist and puts it on a cocked hip. "What exactly are you trying to apologize for?"

"For whatever it is you're most upset about." And I punctuate this with a lame smile.

I could charm my way out of this with promises and compliments. I am my father's son and have grown up making concessions and compromises and making people like me.

But I won't do that to Camille.

"Hmm... whatever I'm most upset about?" She lifts her chin like she's debating the choices. "I don't know, Odin, what would *you* be most upset about?"

My smile fades. “I don’t know.” I feel like I’m ten and Mrs. Theissen is reprimanding me for pushing Gunnar into the snow. “Probably the timing of everything.”

“The fact you wanted the announcement of our engagement to wipe out how you got dumped on national television from everyone’s minds?” The temper gives her a spark that was missing earlier. Or maybe it’s always there, and that was the mask she showed to the public. Either way, she seems brighter, like she changed out of her grey dress into something more colourful.

“That,” I agree. “And—”

“The other little fact that you *totally threw me under the bus*.” The dog yips a protest as Camille raises her voice. “You told *the world* about how I lost my virginity.”

I rear back. “I never said you lost your virginity!”

“No? Well, that makes it better—now the world knows I had multiple partners before I was seventeen years old.”

I didn’t. I never... I wouldn’t do that. But... “Camille—”

She holds up her hand. “So that’s why you want to marry me,” she says flatly. “That’s why I’m here. Because you’d already announced you were in love with me. Sorry, *not* in love with me. That’s what you told Esme, wasn’t it?”

“That’s not why you’re here,” I protest. This is not going well.

Not well at all.

“Then why?” she demands, and I flinch at her tone because it’s impressive. Questioning-criminals-about-their-treasonous-activities impressive.

I don’t have a reason that won’t make me look like an insensitive, self-absorbed brat. I’m really none of those things, but whatever I say, Camille isn’t about to believe it. “I’m sorry,” I say again. “They weren’t supposed to use that footage. They told me they wouldn’t air your name.”

“They *lied*.” She shakes her head with disgust. “Why would you go on that show anyway? You’re a *prince*. Women

line up to date you.”

“It’s not that long of a line,” I admit.

“You thought going on television would get you a longer line of women willing to date you?”

“I didn’t want a longer line. I don’t want a line at all.”

“Why wouldn’t you? Your brothers are quite popular with the ladies.” She says this with a heaping of scorn.

Great. She hates my brothers too.

“That’s not why I went on the show,” I tell, my frustration evident to both of us. This has gotten out of hand and it’s the complete opposite hand—or direction—as I thought it would take.

“Then I’ll reiterate my earlier question: why did you go on the show?”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“Probably not, but you could give it a try. But you’re not one for trying things, are you?”

I stare at her, my mouth agape. No one speaks to me like that. Not that I expect to be treated with kid gloves, but still. Rude.

Right.

Camille has every right to speak to me however she likes. I deserve it.

She takes a deep breath and smooths her expression, an impressive feat from one so angry. “At least I know the narrative. I can work with that,” she decides without waiting for my response.

“You’re staying?” The blank expression Camille wears is worse than her angry one. It’s a mask—we all have one—but it makes me uncomfortable.

It makes me want to take it off, to know more. Know what’s going on in her head.

“It’s not that bad,” I tell her in a rush. “It’s... romantic. Childhood sweethearts who found their way back to each other.”

“Which is a lie.”

“No one needs to know that.”

Camille huffs, which is better than screaming at me. I call that progress. “I haven’t seen you in ten years. How are we supposed to do this so it’s believable? That’s what you want, right? A fake relationship?”

I’m not sure exactly what I want right now.

I want this to all go away. I want Camille to stop shouting at me.

I want her to smile so I can see if her lips are as kissable as they were ten years ago.

Whoa—where’d that come from?

“People will believe what they want to believe,” I say, echoing my father’s words because they’re safer than what’s going on in my own head.

She stares into the fire, her face softening just a bit. “I’m not sure about this.”

The room is quiet, save for the noises of the little dog watching us intently. “Why do you call her Betty White?” I ask, hoping this is a safe subject.

“Because that’s her name,” Camille snaps, but her shoulders finally relax. “She’s my favourite Golden Girl.”

“I always liked Estelle,” I admit.

“You watched it?”

“My mother did. Options for television shows in Laandia were limited when I was growing up.”

“Same on Saint Pierre,” she reluctantly concedes.

“When did you get her?” I ask. This is good. This is a conversation. It’s a far cry from the letters Camille used to send me, detailing every little bit of her life with words and

descriptions that made me feel like I was experiencing it too, but it's a start.

“Seven years ago,” Camille says without looking at me. “Some idiot tourist abandoned her on the island and she ended up at SealSave.”

“Which is the wildlife-rescue organization you started.”

This gets a sideways glance. “Someone's been doing his homework.”

“There's a lot more I need to know. I *want* to know.” I resist the urge to reach for her hand. Not yet. “We were friends once.”

That snort makes me want to smile. “For twenty-four hours.”

“You wrote me every day for six months.”

“A lot of good that did me.”

“I still have your letters. Some of them anyway.”

Camille looks at me then, dark eyes studying, trying to figure out my angle, my motivation for this.

My motivation changed the moment she walked into the Great Room. Before that, I needed a distraction from my public humiliation. Before I saw her, I needed a wife.

Everything changed the moment I saw her again, only right now I still don't know my endgame.

Other than Camille being my endgame.

“Why did you let the makeup people go?” I ask. “Did they upset you?”

“They...” She chews on the inside of her cheek, her lips still slick with pink lipstick. “It *might* have been an overreaction. Hugo and Isla. That's their names.”

“I know who they are.” I don't tell her I know the name of every person who works in the castle. “Do you often overreact?”

She rolls her dark eyes. “What do you think?”

This time I let the smile escape but realize it's prudent not to comment. Or mention the freckles on the bridge of her nose. How did I never notice them before? "I'll talk to Mrs. Theissen and see what we can do. Did you like them?"

"What does that matter?" Scorn heaps like the snow outside. "I'm not here to make friends."

There's a pause, and the questions I want to ask her begin to spin on an endless loop. But I don't. Not now.

We'll have time enough for questions. "How are you finding Jackson?" I ask instead.

"He's fine."

"I understand he's new at the job. I'd suggest he talk to Kate, my assistant if he has questions. Mrs. Theissen can be..." Always diplomatic, I search for the proper word for the Mistress of the Castle. "Intimidating. On a good day."

"That doesn't bother me."

Two steps toward, one step back with her. "They should talk. After all, they'll be working closely together. Like we will."

"Is this what this marriage is for you? Part of the job? Another duty?"

"This is my life. Our life. And I'd like it to be a good one."

Camille stares at me, her eyes dark and unreadable. "Kind of starting off on the wrong foot, isn't it?"

I can't argue with that.

"If you'll excuse me," she continues, "I'd like to get out of this dress and into something warmer. If you want to know anything else about me, check my file. I'm sure everything is covered."

I nod. "Of course." There's more to say but I don't know how. It's as if I'm faced with a word jumble and can't sort any of the letters into recognizable words. And how do I find the words to admit just how badly I've messed this up, both past and present? "Goodnight, Lady Camille."

“Wait.”

I turn to see Camille looking *mad*, but not at me. “I forgot...I can’t. Can you—?” She turns around and points to the neck of her dress. It takes a moment to figure out what she’s asking.

Her dress. She needs me to unzip her dress. “Oh. Of course,” I stammer, practically leaping forward; not to see her undressed, but she asked *me* for help and that’s a start.

“There’s a hidden button,” she explains, her voice as tight as the collar. “I had trouble with it.”

“Sure.” I study the back of her dress, at the smooth expanse of grey satin and wonder where there might be a zipper hidden. But then I see the slight bump and with fingers suddenly as thick as sausages, I find the button. “Tricky little bugger, isn’t it?” I murmur as I manage to unhook it. “I might have people for this, you know.”

“You’re here now, so just get it undone.”

The zipper is next and I pull it slowly, like Camille is a skittish horse that I’m trying not to spook. Not that there’s anything horse-like about her but she’s definitely skittish and yes, I’m honestly afraid she’s going to kick out and catch me somewhere special.

Especially when I unzip a few inches and the dress shifts and the tiny glimpse of soft, pale skin grows suddenly wider as the fabric slips down her shoulders.

“I’ve got it now,” Camille gasps as she clutches her front. “Thank you.”

“Yes,” I say, transfixed by the sight. Six—no seven—birds have been inked along her shoulder. “These are new.” My thumb smooths the bird at the spot where her neck meets her shoulder. “Are they? The birds? I mean—”

How would I know the tattoos are a recent addition? Because I’ve seen her bare back. Ten years ago, I saw her back unadorned by any ink. I saw a lot more.

Reminding her of this fact will no doubt get me a backkick aimed somewhere special, so I take a long step back. “My apologies.”

“Sea birds,” Camille corrects, turning to face me, with both arms holding the dress up to her chin. “I can hide them with makeup.”

“No,” I tell her. “I like them.”

Her dark gaze, full of suspicions and secrets, meets mine, and she gives a tiny nod.

“When—?”

“You were leaving?” That is a dismissal if I’ve ever heard one.

“Yes. Goodnight, Lady Camille,” I repeat.

“Good night, Your Royal Highness.”

She shuts the door in my face.

“Just Odin,” I say to the thick door.

7

Camille

HE SAW MY TATTOO. And he had the utter gall to ask me if it was new?

Did Odin forget that he saw every inch of my back? And my front too? The last thing I need is to be reminded how immature, how irresponsible I had been that night. How—

My breath escapes in a huff as I think back to the feel of his thumb along my shoulder.

I push those thoughts aside and fight to fall asleep.

It takes a long time, but at least the bed is super comfortable, much more than mine in Saint Pierre. But still, when I wake up, my mood is as foul as I was when I went to sleep.

Because I wake up thinking of that night.

Ten years ago, I met Prince Odin at a gala. I had been there under Lord Arnaud's orders, and at seventeen, that had been enough to turn me into a sullen, selfish teenager.

But the night had been better than anything I could have imagined. It had been magical. A fairy tale.

I had been standing on the side of the room in my plain navy dress, invisible among the brightly coloured ballgowns. Or maybe I had stood out with my simplicity because suddenly, Odin was beside me, asking for a dance.

There are so many details I don't remember. That night, there was only Odin, and being held in his arms, and the way he smiled at me.

It was the same smile that he gave me last night when I walked into that room with the guitars on the walls and the shiny taps of the bar, and the so-tall princes of Laandia.

Four of them, with Prince Bo towering over the others, and the youngest, Prince Gunnar, smiling at me like he recognized me from social media. Like I was one of his fans, following his travel exploits.

I am, but he doesn't need to know that.

I noticed all of that in an instant because as soon as I caught sight of Odin, despite the shouts and flashes of the reporters, my heart gave an excited thump and I lost focus of anyone else.

I managed to stop the thump before I got to him. Odin didn't deserve my excitement.

He used it up that night ten years ago, when we stole across the lawn, hiding from parents and press, and security that wanted to protect us.

Ten years ago, I liked Odin. Odin liked me. We were teenagers. It should have been simple, but I was the daughter of a prefect and Odin was a prince, and that made it complicated. Looking back, I see that any dream of a relationship would have been far beyond what our inexperience and naivety could handle.

I wrote to Odin every day for six months, handwritten letters with my best cursive and colourful gel pens, full of questions and insights about my life. I poured out my thoughts and hopes and dreams in the letters instead of posting it all on social media like most girls my age were doing.

I received a few responses back, some postcards and funny drawings. I asked him to tell me more about his life, to be open like I was with him.

I saw pictures of him with other girls—pretty, perfect girls who knew how to dress and smile and pose with Odin. I have no idea if any of them meant anything to him because he never answered my questions.

Eventually, to save my self-respect and what little dignity I had left, I ended the correspondence, as one-sided as it had been.

And that was it.

I saw him years later at some event, a model hanging from his arm. By then, I had been in the middle of my second round of marriage negotiations. Odin was so blond and beautiful in his suit, so tanned and healthy compared to the picture of the prospective husbands I'd yet to meet.

He waved to me from across the room like we were passing acquaintances that didn't warrant a conversation. I stared, hurt beyond belief that he considered what we had shared was only worthy of a *wave*.

And *that* was it.

And now I'm here.

The sad part is that there's always been a tiny—minuscule—little ember of interest left, like a celebrity crush you follow on Instagram. Despite the rejection and the worlds-apart

situation that had done their best to extinguish the spark—like having your torch snuffed on *Survivor*—when King Magnus’s people contacted Lord Arnaud’s people about an arranged marriage, that ember flared up.

I’m embarrassed to admit that I got excited when they told me Prince Odin wanted to discuss marriage, more excited than for any of the other offers the prefect’s people had arranged.

Because it was *Odin*.

The six potential husbands had never been real options. Despite the fact I *had* to get married to take over as prefect, I never had any intention of marrying them.

Lord Arnaud never knew how I got out of the engagements.

My relationship with Arnaud Dusain, had never been an easy one, even before I found out he wasn’t my biological father. Having witnessed firsthand his complete absence of parental skills, it was actually a relief knowing there was a reason for his lack of interest.

Over the years, I’ve cut back on social events, mainly because I don’t want to spend more time with him. Some are required; most can be avoided or excuses made for. I’m content working with SealSave, fundraising and helping with the animals. For him to threaten to take that away from me—

I swing my legs out of bed, telling myself it’s the chill in the air that causes the sting of tears to my eyes. Twenty-four hours ago, there might have been excitement at the thought of marrying Odin. Now...

Knowing that I’m only here as a way for him to save face for his very silly decision to join a reality dating show changes things. It changes everything. That’s where the disappointment comes from. And to be really honest, the hurt.

As I get dressed, Betty White does her morning dance, telling me I need to take her out to do her morning business. Usually, I take her to the door and let her run out, but we’re in a castle now.

Like the huge, four-poster bed and blazing fire weren't enough of a reminder.

And who started the fire? Do they have a person for that, like a fire elf who sneaks into the room with kindling and matches? Jackson hasn't been here, and I must have slept so soundly in the super comfortable bed, I didn't hear a thing. Odin stoked it but it shouldn't have lasted all night. The two rooms are joined—and heated—by the same fire, the hearth wide enough to lie down in. I hope the little fire elf stayed out of my room. It would be beyond creepy if someone had crept in and seen me sleeping.

I've been told I snore.

I'm loathe to leave the warmth of the room, but Betty White is doing her pee dance.

Gottagogottagogottagonow.

There's not a lot of time to waste. I wish there was because this is my first morning waking up in a *castle*. It takes a few wrong turns before I find the main staircase, mainly because I'm distracted by looking around.

The halls of the castle are an interesting juxtaposition of Viking museum and family home, with both artifacts and framed photos dotting the walls.

I hope they let me explore. "*You will stay here until the wedding.*" Does that mean I have free range to wander, or will I be confined to my room like some modern-day Rapunzel to ensure I don't make trouble?

As I start down the grand double staircase, my steps slow once again. There are sprawling ceilings with chandeliers made of silver and wood, and carpets clinging to stone floors that are more like tapestries, with boats and figures running with spears woven into the fabric. I notice an alcove by the massive doors, with a coat tree and a tangle of shoes on the floor.

I wonder if there are secret passageways.

I'm so busy taking it all in that I don't notice a figure lurking at the bottom of the stairs.

“Lady Camille.” An older woman, who looks scarily like Linda Hamilton in the *Terminator* movies but with dark hair and no visible biceps, gravely nods her head. “Good morning.”

“Hello.” I’m used to the staff we have at home—the cook, the driver, the house manager, as well as Lord Arnaud’s secretaries—but it might take time for me to adjust to the number of them working inside the castle. When I arrived yesterday, there was a line at the door ready to welcome me.

A long line. Neither Prince Odin nor King Magnus had been there, but the staff was out in full force, and I recognize Mrs. Theissen as the person who escorted me to my room.

“Tabitha Theissen,” she reminds me. “Mistress of the Castle and Chief of Staff for the princes.”

This is who Odin said was intimidating. I lift my chin. “Yes, thank you. Hello,” I say in my best regal voice.

Her eyes flick coolly to Betty White. “You may want to use the side entrance,” she says, the suggestion sounding like an order. “And you’ll need a warmer coat.”

“This will do, I’m sure.”

“I’m sure it won’t.” Clicking with disapproval, she walks away and I’m left staring after her, unsure of whether to follow. “Come along, then,” she calls over her shoulder. “Lyra has some things that would fit you until we can get some of your own.”

The little alcove isn’t the only closet. Mrs. Theissen opens a hidden door to a room on the far side of the foyer, full of outdoor wear of every shape and colour.

Despite my protests, she outfits me in a warm coat and boots and insists on a hat and mittens before showing me the side door, most likely used for servants and deliveries. “The snow here isn’t what you’re used to,” she warns, shutting the door after me.

That’s an understatement.

Heaps of snow lie around the castle, thick and deep, and transform the grounds into a winter wonderland. It had been

snowing lightly when I arrived yesterday but these piles have been here a while. I resist the urge to throw myself onto the untouched areas to mess it up and set Betty White down to do her business.

Betty White does not like snow. She steps a tiny paw into it, then draws back with a curled lip. Luckily, someone shovelled and we follow a path leading across the lawn to the front of the castle.

With the new brightness, some of last night's disappointment seems to have faded. My emotions have been bouncing around like a pinball machine since I was told about the marriage—from anger to excitement, to hurt and back to anger.

Add in embarrassment about so many things.

Odin should have been angry at my quick exit from the party last night. I was supposed to take the attention away from his very public and somewhat embarrassing dismissal from *The Suitorette*. He should have been upset with me, but instead, he was polite and gracious when he stopped by. Apologetic.

He came to check on me. And he didn't seem mad.

And I was... kind of obnoxious.

Looking at it from Odin's side, it's obvious he's had a couple of bad weeks. Going on the show wasn't the best move, but maybe he had his reasons. Maybe he really liked the woman from *The Suitorette*? What was her name? Esme?

Maybe he really likes Esme.

I don't let myself go there because the relevant question is: What kind of woman sends a *prince* home?

The same kind of woman who has a temper tantrum? It wasn't even a good tantrum—finding out they used me as a distraction should have fueled the fire. Instead, it made me... sad.

And it hurt almost as much as finding out Odin told the world about our night together, like a locker-room discussion

with his new girlfriend.

I'm sure it wasn't locker-room talk. And technically, can the Suitorette really be his girlfriend when there are twenty or more men there and she kicked out Odin after knowing him for only three days?

I still can't get my head around why a woman would do that. Did she even look at him?

Ten years ago, Odin was all golden-haired, blue-eyed beauty. He was on the cusp of manhood, excited and clumsy in his eagerness. He was real—earnest and honest and very sweet.

His first kiss had been like brushing his lips over the back of my hand; the second had been...

He was all in for the second one. And the third...

I've thought about that third kiss so many times over the years.

I bet there's nothing clumsy about Odin now. He's a man now, tall and broad and hard, from his jaw to his handshake. Even in the colourful uniform, he took my breath away.

Then—and now.

Now I'm supposed to marry him.

Betty White whines her unhappiness from the path behind me and I pick her up. "Ready to go in?" I ask her, tucking her into the puffy coat. "We'll use the main door this time, and who cares if they say no."

It's not until I round the corner of the castle that I notice the group at the end of the drive. Fifteen or twenty people are gathered behind the closed gate, some with signs, others with phones out, taking pictures

Before I can take two steps, the first shout is heard.

"Camille! Lady Camille!"

I lift my hand in a wave, but then: "She looks like a lump in that coat!"

I can't have heard that right.

"What was wrong with you last night?"

"No comment." The response is automatic, but it doesn't stop them.

"You don't deserve Prince Odin!"

"You're not princess material."

"You'll never be queen!"

What? Who are these people...? The people of Saint Pierre have no love for Lord Arnaud but they've never been outwardly hostile.

"You're ugly!"

Or this mean.

"Go home! Get out of Laandia."

"We don't want you here!"

And more. And more. When they realize they have me in their sights, the vitriol increases tenfold. Part of me wants to scream at them to be quiet, using all the four-letter expletives I can think of, but I can't move. I've never felt such a wave of dislike. It threatens to pull me under.

Someone throws a snowball. It lands about six feet from me, and I stare with disbelief. What is wrong with this place?

What's wrong with me to have produced this much hate? They don't even know me, and already they hate me?

More snowballs fly over the fence, along with angry shouts.

A piece of ice flies through the air, rolling to a stop about a foot away.

Betty White growls in my arms, telling me to move. I set her down, and she starts to bark at the group.

They throw snowballs at *my dog*.

The bright whiteness of the snow forces tears from my eyes as I grab a handful of snow, rolling it tightly.

And then, using my best overhand throw, I whip it at them as hard as I can.

It lands in the middle of the group, scattering them.

“What are you doing?” someone shrieks.

“Stop shouting at me,” I cry, and quickly grab another handful. The snow is thick and perfect for packing.

Bend and scoop... throw. Bend and scoop... throw.

I know I shouldn't engage them. I know I should definitely not throw snowballs at them. Lord Arnaud would be most upset with me but I. Don't Care.

Nothing has gone right since I've been here, so why not blow it all up?

“I'm not going home.” I can't tell if the group hears me. “So you better get used to more of *this*—” —another snowball falls in the middle of those still grouped together and I almost laugh— “—if you're mean to me again.”

My aim gets better, and I start to grin as the group shrieks in protest.

Betty White dances around my feet, her sharp little yips egging me on. Bend and scoop... throw. I'll show them what a coat-covered lump can do.

I advance; a few retaliate, but the majority back away under my assault. A couple wave accusatory fingers at me as they jump in a car. “Chickensh—”

“Camille!”

This voice comes from behind. I glance around in slow motion, my arm cocked to throw.

Odin thunders out of the castle, big and broad, and, well, Viking-like. In any of his photos, I've never seen even a hint of a scowl on his face but now his eyes narrow and his mouth tightens and instead of being alarmed at the sight of an angry prince, I can't help but notice how very... *attractive*... anger makes him.

“What are you doing?” Odin plants himself between me and the group at the gate, tall enough to block the sun.

“They threw the first one.” I squint up at him, still holding a snowball that really wants to be tossed.

“Lady Camille, I’m not sure how you do things where you’re from, but here in Laandia, we don’t throw snowballs.”

We don’t throw snowballs. Did he really say that? “Well, we don’t have much snow where I’m from—which is Saint Pierre and Miquelon, if you don’t remember—but if we did have beautiful heaps of snow lying around, there would be snowballs thrown. Lots of them. But hey—when in Rome.” I lift my hands and slowly drop the snow. “You should maybe tell them that.”

He huffs and in a smooth gesture, pulls me against him with an arm firmly around my shoulders, and faces the mob. Somehow he manages a smile while still gritting his teeth. I glare at everything.

“Good morning,” Odin calls to the group. “I hope you’re showing Lady Camille how welcoming Laandians can be.”

“Are you kidding me?” I mutter.

The tone of the shouts changes immediately, and Odin keeps the smile on his face as he waves. The group cheers in response.

“They like *you*,” I manage, still tucked against Odin. The coat makes me look like the Michelin man, but even with the layers of goose feathers, Odin is *solid* beside me, like a well-defined tree.

I climbed trees when I was younger.

“You don’t have a coat.” It’s very cold; I’m sure Odin is quite aware he isn’t wearing a coat, maybe even more aware than I am.

I’m not sure that’s possible since I’m very conscious of his arm, strong and muscular arm, around my shoulder. Not that it’s keeping me beside him, but that I *want* it to keep me beside him.

I bet he could pick me up and throw me at the group.

“What did they say to make you attack them?” Odin asks under his breath.

Our gazes meet. And—*what’s that?* More than a spark and less than a jolt, but it’s an almost audible click between us, like pieces fitting together.

And I can’t look away from him. His eyes are so blue, shining and sparkling like water on a sunny day. And when his lips curve upwards, it makes his eyes even better.

This is the picture they needed last night—me, standing there staring at him.

I step away.

“They told me to go home.” I narrow my eyes. “Sounds like a good idea to me.”

8

Odin

AFTER I SEE CAMILLE safely back to her room, where she doesn't speak one word to me, I rush back down to my father's office. I had been on my way there to begin with, but when I came down the main staircase, I got a glimpse of Camille's red hair outside through the narrow windows.

I'm not about to admit to anyone that I watched her for a while as she strolled along the path with her dog.

And then she stopped. And stood there for long moments with the dog in her arms, only moving when she started throwing snowballs.

I didn't see the group at the gate until I got to the door.

They've shown up before, but they've never caused problems. To find out they threw snow at Camille is as much of a shock as my reaction to being so close to Camille.

It was like I sprinkled salt onto the ice and watched it melt, only I was the one who was melting. Those dark eyes snapping at me, that mouth saying things—I've been picked up and spun around and settled back beside her, only I wasn't settled. I was unbalanced.

Also, I didn't feel the cold, even though I forgot to grab a coat.

Being close to her was...

It was... unexpected. Not being close to her, but my reaction to the closeness. It was like seeing her for the first time, all over again, heightened from our conversation from last night.

I didn't handle that well. I haven't handled any of this well.

But it doesn't take away that she was throwing snowballs at my people while on the castle grounds.

I need to talk to my father.

"Someone get rid of the group at the gate. We need security for Lady Camille," I announce, storming into my father's office.

And then I stop, because he's not alone. Grouped around his desk is Duncan, who is basically the Hand of the King, Kate and Mrs. Theissen, along with Camille's assistant, Jackson, all watching the wall-mounted television screen.

Watching me. Watching Esme send me home.

"Oh, c'mon!" I throw up my hands.

The castle hasn't been able to ignore that clips of the show have gone viral, plus there are not only stories in all three Laandia newspapers, but also the *Huffington Post* as well as

People and *Entertainment Weekly*. I haven't checked the royal tabloids.

I've had forty-seven requests for comments, and those are only the ones who emailed me directly or slid into my DMs. There are countless texts from sympathetic "friends" as well, most of whom offered more than a shoulder to cry on.

I've had fourteen marriage proposals this morning alone.

To say I'm sick of hearing about *The Suitorette* is an understatement.

King Magnus, my father, is perched on the top of his huge desk, looking anything but kingly this morning, wearing a beat-up pair of jeans and a greying band T-shirt under a hoodie. One of the sleeves has a hole in it, and his thick blond hair, streaked with silver, stands up where he's run his fingers through it.

At least Duncan has the grace to turn off the TV. "We hadn't seen it yet," he says sheepishly.

I roll my eyes. "Well, now you know what I look like when I get dumped."

"It wasn't exactly a dump, per se," Kate offers. "More like she didn't see herself as a part of your journey. That's what she said in the diary room bit."

"She broke up with me. On television."

"Yes, but that's what happens to everyone unless you win," she points out.

"I'm watching purely for research purposes," Mrs. Theissen says in a prim voice, looking more than a little embarrassed to be caught red-handed watching a reality show. The only shows I imagine her watching are documentaries and BBC. Or maybe *Downton Abbey*.

She looks almost as uncomfortable as I am when I remember how much kissing I did with Esme during our date. A few of those moments have gone viral too.

"I'm still a little traumatized," Kate mutters. She makes kissy noises and my father gives one of his big laughs.

“Don’t worry, m’boy,” Dad says, reaching across the desk to slap my shoulder. “Everyone needs their heart broken now and again. It does the body good.”

“She didn’t break my heart.”

“I hope not, since you only knew her for a few days,” Duncan cuts in.

Duncan is more than an advisor to the king—he’s been my father’s best friend since they were both in the German metal band, *Kräftig*. Like my father, Duncan has had an interesting life, becoming one of the most recognizable romance book cover models after the band broke up.

“Is everything all right with Lady Camille?” Jackson demands. “What happened?”

I snap back to the crisis at hand. “Lady Camille is fine. She’s back in her room. But the group at the gate was not happy to see her. She’s not to go outside alone,” I instruct him.

“The Odinites?” Kate asks. “There’s a group that really *looves* Odin,” she says in response to Jackson’s quizzical expression. “They want him to marry someone local. They even make up stories about him and women from town, sort of like fan fiction.” She makes a face. “It’s weird.”

“They’d also like Kalle to step aside so Odin could be king,” my father adds cheerfully. “It’s always nice to be wanted, isn’t it?”

“Not like this.” I glance at the five of them. “What’s going on here?” I ask suspiciously. “There was no meeting in my agenda.”

“Daily staff meeting,” Mrs. Theissen says. “Nothing to concern yourself with.”

“Just getting our babysitting orders,” Kate assures me.

I narrow my eyes and Kate ducks her head. “There should be more people here for those meetings. And since when does the king get involved with staffing issues?”

Kate blanches. She’s always been a terrible liar.

“I’m concerned about Lady Camille,” King Magnus concedes. “Her happiness while she’s our guest at the castle is a priority.”

“They sent her without a proper coat.” Mrs. Theissen’s mouth tightens with disapproval.

The way she says it seems like I’m at fault. “I haven’t seen her in years,” I remind everyone. “I was in Iceland during the negotiations, remember.”

Kate coughs into her hand. “Hiding,” she says under her breath.

“Research,” I correct, even though she’s right. After being sent home from *The Suitorette*, I had been instructed to stay out of the public eye. Iceland has always been a good place to hide out since the people have always respected my privacy.

Dad’s words remind me of the conversation I overheard last night between the prefect and Camille. “Why isn’t Lord Arnaud here?”

“He left,” Kate says shortly. “First flight out.”

“That’s unfortunate.” Dad sighs. “I’ll have to get him on a Zoom call later and find out the whole story.”

“That’s not necessary,” I say shortly. “She’s angry with me.” All eyes fix on me and my face warms. “I can’t blame her.”

The king of Laandia is the only one who responds. “No. You can’t.”

“I’ll fix it,” I promise. “I’ll make sure she’s comfortable with all this.” I swallow, knowing there’s an uphill battle ahead of me. “Happy. With me.”

“And if that doesn’t happen?” Dad lifts his eyebrows. “The optics if she backs out wouldn’t look good for either of you. Plus, I’d appreciate having the support of Saint Pierre in the fishing thing.”

The “fishing thing” is a dispute as old as the country of Laandia. When Canada allowed my great-grandfather to have his country, they forgot to mention they were keeping the

fishing rights for a wide swath of the Atlantic Ocean along the coast. My father has spent his entire time on the throne trying to get them back. For a country full of nice people, the government of Canada plays hardball when it comes to their fish.

The king also doesn't have to tell me that if Lady Camille backs out now, it will look bad for me. Being the "popular prince" isn't my goal, but it feels better than heaping on more humiliation after *The Suitorette*.

But still—an unhappy Camille won't make my life any easier either.

"I don't want her to be miserable," I say. "We shouldn't have announced the engagement on the same night *The Suitorette* episode came out. It wasn't fair to Camille."

From the expression on Jackson's face, I know he agrees.

"I'll hold off speaking to the prefect for now, but see what you can do to improve her mood," Dad instructs. "Make nice. Hang out with her. You're a nice guy, O. Start with being friends."

"Security," I say. "If she's going to get snowballs thrown at her, I want someone watching out for her in case they throw anything else." I don't mention how security might stop *Camille* from throwing things as well.

Mrs. Theissen nods. "I'll see that it's done."

9

Camille

FROM THE REACTIONS OF the group at the gate, I come to the conclusion that I'm unpopular in this country. And I've only been here for twenty-four hours.

Since the snowball incident, I haven't left the castle. Or my room. I get the word through Jackson that Mrs. Theissen thinks it's best I stay out of sight and away from snowballs.

Jackson takes Betty White for her walks for the rest of the day. The next day as well. And the next.

I keep expecting Lord Arnaud to thunder in and tell me exactly what I did wrong, but it's not until the next day that I

find out he left Laandia.

Jackson also keeps me updated on the mood of the castle as well as on social media. No one seems bothered by my actions, and in fact, there is a contingent on Twitter that is happy I stood up to the Odinites.

Jackson also explained who and what the Odinites are, and to say I'm surprised is an understatement. To me, a monarchy suggests the people don't get a say in who the next king or queen is, but it seems things might be a little different here in Laandia.

I receive a written card from King Magnus, explaining he'll be away for a few days, a schedule dropped off from Mrs. Theissen, and a beefy man in a black suit now stands outside my door. I'm not sure if it's really to protect me or make sure I behave.

That part makes me feel a bit like I'm trapped, but they don't make avocado toast with tiny little tomatoes for prisoners or serve it with frothy vanilla lattes, so I keep my complaining to a minimum.

I have enough to keep me busy: I do Zoom calls with Miquel and Benoit, part of the team at SaveSeal. I ask for videos of the baby auks hatched the week before I left, and of Seymour, a thirty-four-year-old walrus who refuses to leave the sanctuary. I deal with the issues that keep cropping up for SealSave's fundraising gala and wish I were home.

I re-watch the episodes of *The Suitorette*, analyzing the apparent instant connection between Esme and Odin with the same lack of emotion I use when looking at the staffing budget for the prefect house back home.

Maybe a little more emotion than that.

Because it's strange watching Odin on television—or at least on my laptop screen. I want him to be different from the Odin I remember, but he's not. Same down-to-earth sweetness, same considerate charm. He's the exact same man as the one I met ten years ago.

At least, that's who he plays on TV.

It's surreal listening to Odin tell Esme about the night we met, detailing the boat races, the gala. Dropping names.

He never struck me as a name-dropper.

He tells Esme about meeting *me*, only he doesn't call me by name. Not right away. I force myself to listen as Odin uses words like *stunning*, and *sweet* and *fairy-tale-like*.

He got the First Date Rose, which means she picked him out of all the men there to spend the day with. I watch as, onscreen, they race around on ATVs and ziplining in the mountains of Western Canada.

I've never been ziplining, but it looks fun.

I wouldn't scream as much as Esme did though.

Even I can tell things start off well. There's *a lot* of physical contact. Odin can't keep his hand off her thigh, her hip. And the kissing.

I close my eyes the first time I have to watch Odin kiss Esme, telling myself they need their privacy. After that, I keep them open or I'd be sitting with my eyes closed for the rest of the episode. I'd say Odin was a frontrunner until they meet for dinner.

I turn it off before he gets to the name-dropping of my name.

After the *Suitorette* research is done, I spend hours online, scrolling through anything that has to do with the royal family.

King Magnus has the best Instagram posts.

And then there's television; I watch too many repeats of *The Golden Girls*, curled up on the couch under a blanket with Betty White until my brain goes numb.

Life in Laandia so far hasn't been too different than being in Saint Pierre, other than I'm staying in a castle, and I have to admit, the food is much better.

There is one big exception.

Prince Odin. My soon-to-be husband.

Whom I haven't seen since he rescued me from the mob.

"It's freezing in here." Jackson rubs his hands together by the fire after he comes in from walking Betty White.

"Castles are cold. Put on a sweater," I say from my place by the window. The castle sits on the edge of the cliff, so the view is incredible. My breakfast has been delivered and I'm tucking into it, with Betty White already perched on the chair beside me, watching my every bite.

I can get used to this part of being a princess.

Despite not seeing anyone, the castle still knows I'm here. Three meals a day, plus the offer of tea in the afternoon and cocktails in the evening.

Taking all my meals in my room is getting a little boring, however. And the solitude—other than Jackson—forces me to think of what to say to Odin. I made a horrible first impression, and my second wasn't much better. I threw snowballs at his people. The queen would be rolling over in her grave if she could see what kind of woman his son will be marrying.

"It's very cold," Jackson repeats. "You could close the window." He has a jacket over his sweater and grabs a lap blanket as he settles at his desk.

"That's very passive-aggressive, you know."

Jackson mutters a response. I only catch a bit about *working for you*. He was hired two days before I left Saint Pierre, the only male candidate out of a crowd of females eager to get off the island. I know this for a fact because most of those I interviewed were very clear about that. I doubt any of them could put up with me, nor did they want to. I'm sure they wouldn't have lasted a day before they ran off to Battle Harbour.

Jackson, on the other hand, hasn't really left my side. He's set up an office in my sitting room, as close to the fire as Betty White's bed is.

Sometimes she sits on his lap.

I like him. I'm not about to tell him I like him, but we get along. So many people don't get my lack of filter and frequent sarcasm. Jackson gives as good as he gets.

Don't be afraid to be soft, Madam Carol has told me more times than I can count. *Relatable. Let down the walls. Try to catch more flies with honey.*

It was confusing growing up, as Lord Arnaud tried to mould me into the type of leader he wanted me to be—strong and unyielding; fair, but without emotion.

He wanted a tough-as-nails robot who relied on no one except the few he surrounded himself with. His social circle was not friends but a network of advisors and yes-men.

Madam Carol saw the person I was becoming and tried everything she could to prevent me from becoming a clone of Lord Arnaud. He wanted a mini-me and for a long time, I thought I could be happy to follow his counsel and live my life like he did.

And then I met Odin.

In the last five years or so, Lord Arnaud realized Madam Carol's influence on me, and cut her duties to the bare minimum, so now, I only saw her for a few minutes every day. And he refused to let her come with me to Laandia when I really could use a friend.

I wonder what Madam Carol would think of Odin.

I know what she would think of my behaviour since I've been here.

"I like to listen to the waves," I tell this to the ever-present, cold January wind that whips my hair into tangles worse than the Gordian knot.

But Jackson must have heard me because I hear the scrape of his chair as he gets up. "Are you homesick?" he asks.

I glance behind me to see him throw his lap blanket around his shoulders. "Why would you think that?"

"You spend a lot of time staring at the water."

Laandia is a cold and rugged country, but it's a beautiful one. From the constant waves crashing the shore to the homes painted in shades of blue and yellow and pink, it's wild and colourful and foreign. The castle was built on the very top of the cliff overlooking the harbour, which provides an all-encompassing view of the Atlantic, with the boats and fishermen shrunk to toy size. It's not close enough to smell the fish, but with the window open, I can hear the waves.

It reminds me of home.

"I like the water. It's very beautiful, even in January." I point out the window. "Iceberg. Can you see it? Do you think whales come close enough for me to see them from here?"

"Can't say I know much about the hang-outs of whales. If I were them, I'd go somewhere warmer. But it's a nice country," he says grudgingly. "Interesting history."

I huff a breath and realize I can see it. Time to close the window because Jackson is right—it is freezing in here. "And why does this feel like the start of a history lesson?"

"Probably because I know you haven't read any of the files I've sent you. If you're going to be a princess of Laandia, you need to know something about it."

I shrug. "There are six weeks until the wedding."

"Have you spoken to the prince today?"

"I have not." Jackson raises his eyebrows but says nothing. "He hasn't been to visit. At all." I'm not sure how I feel about that. After the moment in the snow, I thought he would have come by to say hello. Or something.

And then I remember that I threw snowballs at his people. And was pretty rude to him when he came to check on me.

"He sends messages twice a day," Jackson reminds me. "He thinks you're sad or scared or homesick."

"I'm none of those things," I say quickly.

"But Prince Odin doesn't know that. No one knows what you're thinking."

“I don’t even know him. Of course he wouldn’t know what I’m thinking.” But he did know me once.

Or at least I thought he did.

“You could get to know him if you stopped hiding in your room.”

“I’m not hiding,” I protest. “Tell me about Laandia, then. Since I know you want to.”

Jackson settles into teacher mode, legs shoulder-width apart, hands clasped behind his back.

The blanket around his shoulders ruins the effect. “The country was first settled by the Vikings in the sixteen hundreds,” he begins.

“As evident by the princes,” I say. The wide shoulders. The rugged good looks. The piercing blue eyes. “Can you picture them with longer hair and beards and those funny helmets with the horns?” I stick up two fingers beside my ears. “They would have been great on *The Last Kingdom*,” I say, naming a Netflix show I watched for research.

Research for living in a country settled by Vikings. Not for the attractive leading man.

“They are quite large men,” Jackson agrees.

“Gunnar is a little short.”

Jackson sniffs. “Only compared to the rest of them.”

“Can you see them with an axe?” For a brief moment, an image of Odin flashes before my eyes—Odin with an axe, chopping wood.

Shirtless.

Then I blink, and the vision is gone, leaving an unsettled feeling in my stomach. “So. Vikings.”

“This land used to be part of Canada, called Labrador, which was part of the province of Newfoundland. They never joined the Confederation of Canada back in 1867 but during the Second World War, Labrador, led by Leif Erickson, fought off a German invasion of Battle Harbour. Over there.” Jackson

points to a fortress in the distance, rising off the shore. “Canada was so grateful that they offered Erickson whatever he wanted. He wanted to be king of his own country and Labrador became Laandia.”

“Was this King Magnus’s father?”

“Grandfather. Magnus is the third king of Laandia, and the most popular.”

“That’s because he’s really cool.” I hadn’t needed to do research on King Magnus; the world knew him as an Olympian—a three-time gold medal winner in shot put. Also as a founding member of the German heavy metal band, Kräftig, not to mention an author. He wrote one of the first vegan cookbooks, *“From the Land, to the Land.”*

These days, when he’s not busy with his kingly duties, he works in his micro-brewery in Battle Harbour with his special mead beer formula.

“He had four sons and a daughter with Queen Selene.” Jackson looks at me expectantly.

“I didn’t really have a chance to meet the brothers,” I admit sheepishly.

“You should really do that.”

“I should do a lot of things. When did Queen Selene die?”

“Almost seven years ago. There was an accident. I don’t know all the details, but Princess Lyra was with her.”

There’s a pang when I realize Odin lost his mother after meeting me. What else had happened in his life?

“What else do I need to know?” I ask instead, so I don’t have to dwell on Odin’s life without me.

“It’s a beautiful country, with many areas wild and untouched,” Jackson continues. His voice has just the right amount of enthusiasm. He’d make a good teacher. “The monarchy has a good relationship with the First Nations, giving them more rights and respect than in Canada. The main industries are fishing and mining, with a—”

“I don’t care about that,” I interrupt impatiently. “Tell me about the brothers.”

Jackson rolls his eyes. “Not much is known about Bo, the third brother, but I’ve heard rumours he was once married.”

“Interesting.”

“Not particularly. Gunnar, the youngest brother, is well-known for his travels and on Instagram.”

“I follow him. He’s funny.”

“Evidently,” he says in a sour voice.

I wonder if that means Jackson doesn’t approve of TikTok. Or funny. Or Gunnar Erickson. “What do you know about Lyra?”

“She missed her brother announcing his engagement. I think that says a lot about her.”

“She may have a good reason.”

“That’s very accepting of you.”

“You’re right. It is. That doesn’t sound right.”

Jackson makes a noise that might be a laugh, quickly smothered. “And then there’s Kalle, the heir to the throne...” Jackson seems to be searching for the right words. “His relationships seem to be... frowned upon by the people. He owns a bar in town and has made it quite clear he has no desire to be king.”

“Which leads to the Odinites wanting Odin to take over. But Prince Kalle is next in line.”

“Yes. But this group wants him to abdicate and for Prince Odin to be the next in line. They want Odin to be king. And from what I have learned, due to Kalle’s reluctance, King Magnus and his advisors are considering it.”

“That would mean...” Most of the moisture vanishes from my mouth and I have to swallow twice to replenish it. If Odin were the heir to the throne—

“You would be queen.”

10

Odin

STANDING AT THE WINDOW of my office, I watch a bird swoop towards the harbour as Kate comes in. “Your Royal Highness,” she says with a mocking smile in her voice.

“Tell me again why I hired you?” I turn, taking a last mouthful of my cooling tea.

“Because I am the best at what I do.” She tosses a handful of envelopes onto my desk, the desk that has always been pristinely organized until Kate started working for me.

“Any messages?”

“Other than your fan club?”

I hate that I have to ask. “Lady Camille.”

Kate smirks as she sinks into the chair behind the desk she insisted on moving to my office. I offered to set up her space in another room, but she refused. “If I’m going to work *with* you, I’m going to work *with* you,” she’d said, rearranging the room to meet her needs. Kate doesn’t seem to understand the hierarchy here—me as her boss, her as my employee.

Then again, she’s transformed my life since she got here, so maybe she really is in charge.

“Ah.” Kate starts to go through my mail. “The lady who hasn’t left her tower since she got here.”

Despite sending messages, I’ve heard no word from Camille for two days.

The one-sided snowball fight was a bit of a surprise, to say the least. I’m not sure what I expected from her, but it wasn’t that. Neither is locking herself in her room for two days. I have no idea what to do about it. So I go about my business, with Kate taking up more and more space in my office.

“You got cookies again.” She drops the tin into the garbage pail with a *thunk*.

I glance wistfully into the pail as I set my teacup on the desk. “I wish they wouldn’t send food. It’s such a waste. And they smell really good.”

“Ask the kitchen to send up a plate of cookies if you’re hungry. Nothing that comes in the mail goes in your mouth,” she reminds me, giving me a suspicious glance. “Now, what are you doing today and what do I have to do to fix it?”

“You don’t have to fix anything.”

Kate cocks her head. “O. We both know that’s why the king called me home. To fix things.”

I hate that she’s right. When I accepted the offer to go on *The Suitorette*, Dad instinctively knew I’d need more guidance than what Mrs. Theissen, who thinks all social media platforms are an elaborate dating site, could provide.

Kate has already proven her worth in dealing with the Odinites, getting ahead of Camille's reaction to them, and even smoothing Camille's exit during the announcement.

"I'm not sure how to fix this," I confess. "Camille. Locking herself in her room."

"And you're asking me?" The mail now in piles on my desk, Kate scrolls through her iPad, tapping out messages and confirming appointments for me.

"I don't know what's wrong. Is she homesick, or sick—"

"Odin." I glance at the firm tone in Kate's voice. "She got left alone in a strange country and had people tell her they hated her the first day she was here. She's hiding. Jackson gives me updates."

I throw up my hands. "Why didn't you tell me? I've been worried."

"That's a good sign."

"That I'm worried?"

"That you like her."

"Of course I like her," I say automatically.

Do I? I haven't given much thought to liking Camille. Ten years ago, I liked her more than I should, but a lot has changed since then. And honestly, there hasn't been much to like about her since she's been here. She's been rude; she left me hanging. I need to be on her side to help her face any backlash, but it would be nice if she were on my side too.

But there was something in her eyes when I found her outside.

"Not yet." I think Kate is trying for a Yoda-like voice but it sounds more like E. T. "But you will. Oh, yes, you will."

"Like you know me so well," I scoff.

She waves her notepad. "I know you better than you know yourself. I know your favourite colour is blue, that you claim to like broccoli but really can't stand it because of the smell,

and you won't let yourself sleep past seven a.m. because you think it's indulgent."

"I think you've been working for me too long," is my only concession to Kate knowing *everything about me*. It's like she stripped me naked.

Not that I ever want Kate to see me naked. Or me her. She's a beautiful woman, but she's like a little sister. Closer to me than my own sister now.

"I've been here two weeks." Kate smiles so widely that her cheeks push up and make her eyes mere slits. "What's it going to be like at the end of the month?"

"If you make it that long," I threaten, trying not to smile. "Mrs. Theissen still thinks you need to show me more respect."

"Mrs. Theissen is jealous because she didn't know about the broccoli. Now, what are we going to do about the lady in the castle?"

"This is all new territory for me." I take a deep breath. "I made a mess of it last time with her."

"You were nineteen. You can't *not* make a mess of it at that age." She gives me a wry smile. "Look what I did. *Huge* mess."

I lean my hip on the edge of the desk. "I think that had more to do with my brother than anything else. Have you seen him since you've been back?"

Kate and Gunnar. No one likes to talk about it, and I definitely don't like to think about it, but Kate has proven her worth and I do care about her.

Kate gives her head a quick shake. "Not necessary and not a good idea. Back to you and Lady Camille," she says briskly, and I'm more than happy to take the cue to drop it.

"Marrying into our family isn't going to be easy," I muse.

"I'm beginning to think marrying Lady Camille isn't going to be easy either, especially if she won't leave her room. But you've had other relationships before."

“Not like this. Or not like I want this to be.”

“What about that actress from a few years ago?” I shake my head. “The second cousin of the Canadian connection to the British royals?”

“I met her twice.”

“Annabeth Hastings?”

“That was in high school.”

“You can still be in love in high school.”

“Not the kind of love I need to be in to make this last.”

“What about Saoirse Ronan?”

Another shake of my head. “I said hello to her once.”

“Lola Kirk? Daisy Ridley?”

“Same. If I speak to a woman in public, we are automatically in love and planning to marry as soon as possible.”

“You should stay out of the public eye,” Kate offers. “But then you go on a reality dating show...”

“I know.” It comes out more like a sigh. I have few regrets in life, but agreeing to appear on a reality show is definitely one of them.

But would I still feel the same if things turned out differently? If I won Esme’s heart and were now planning a wedding to her?

I’ve done a lot of soul-searching since Esme sent me home, and what I’ve only started to admit to myself, is that I honestly have trouble imagining a scenario where I ended up with a happily ever after with her. There was a connection, but would that have been enough? If I’d stayed, would I have actually fallen in love with her? Or settled for fond affection, and proposed anyway?

“Can I ask you something?”

I stare down at Kate, thoughts of Esme thankfully fading away. “Are you asking as my private secretary or my little

sister's best friend?"

"While I feel it's my duty to know all the dark and dirty details of your oh-so-exciting life, I'm asking for Lyra." She grins. "You know she'd want to know. Plus, it's only fair, since you're the one who found out about Gunnar and me way back when."

I groan, covering my eyes. "Please don't remind me. The image of the two of you has been burned into my brain."

She slaps at my shoulder, the only person other than family I'd ever allow to do that. "It wasn't that bad."

I raise an eyebrow, really not wanting to revisit the memory of stumbling across my youngest brother and Lyra's best friend in a compromising position in the dungeons. I'd gone down to research my paper on Canada's influence on the criminal justice system of Laandia and found Gunnar had made a little bedroom for himself and Kate in one of the cells.

Not a good moment.

And not a fair trade to what I suspect Kate wants to ask me. "Lyra can ask me anything she wants herself."

"So, it's not really for Lyra then. Why on earth would you talk about private matters on television?" she asks, suddenly serious. "We won't even get into why you named names."

I rub the back of my neck and blow a heavy breath. "I don't know," I admit. I've asked myself the same questions so many times. "I had to tell Esme something, and as you unfortunately now know, I don't have a lot of experience to pull from. When I met Grayson, he told me to be open and vulnerable, so I tried. It's not easy."

"Grayson, as in baseball player? Grayson Grant?"

"He also was *The Suitor*," I remind her. "He's the new host now."

"I've never really been a fan of reality shows," she muses. "Especially ones that objectify and push the concept of competition between women."

If only I'd asked Kate's opinion before I accepted the offer. "That makes two of us. Not doing that again."

"Live and learn, my mother always says," Kate relates, happy because she never poured her heart out on television and then got shot down.

"I guess." I rifle through the cards and letters on the desk, automatically separating those that look official from those that smell of perfume. My mail has increased exponentially since my name was released as one of the contestants on *The Suitorette*, and since I was sent home, it's been piling up even more, with women everywhere sending cards of commiseration.

And that's just snail mail. I have thousands of unread emails of dubious content.

"Is it offensive to ask if you know anything about Lady Camille's history?" I drum up my courage to ask. "Just in case there might be some insight about why she's holed up in her room."

Kate turns to her iPad. "Her romantic history, you mean? There aren't any real details, so I don't think you're offending anyone by asking, considering it's all public knowledge. Your Lady Camille has been engaged six times—"

I gape at Kate. "Six times?"

"Never married, though," she says blithely like it's a common occurrence to have six engagements in your past, which means six *failed* engagements. That must be some sort of record.

"Why didn't I know about this?"

"I have no idea. Did you ask? And you could, you know. You can ask her anything you want to know about her."

"If she ever comes out of her room," I mutter.

"Odie, have you thought of walking upstairs and asking her?"

"Asking her what?"

“To come out of her room. Or why she hasn’t. Or even to spend time with you. Ask her on a date! You’re engaged to be married—shouldn’t you be going on dates? It’s really the best way to get to know someone, you know.”

“Oh.” Dating my wife-to-be. It makes sense. I should have thought of that.

Why didn’t I think of that?

This will be a marriage arranged for reasons other than love, but it doesn’t have to stay that way.

Camille and I had a connection once. I need to remember that rather than only see her as a way to stop my embarrassment of being dumped on television. Esme sending me home because she thought I was still emotionally involved with Camille and then me ending up with Camille is the romance I want to tell the world about.

Even though it’s not exactly true.

But it could be. Couldn’t it? Could Camille and I get that connection back?

That night, so long ago, when we wouldn’t stop talking, laughing, and touching each other. The next day, reality broke into the bubble, and I couldn’t get it back.

I’ve always wanted to. It’s what I’ve been searching for, in all the wrong places. Instead of the *what*, I should have looked at the *who*.

Camille.

“I guess that makes sense,” I muse.

“You guess. For a smart dude, O, you’re not that smart.”

“Okay. So I should... just ask her out?”

“It’d be a good start,” Kate says with a laugh.

Camille

“THAT’S NOT GOING TO happen,” I tell Jackson. “Me being queen.”

“It is a possibility,” Jackson argues. “One you need to get used to. Prince Kalle may be the oldest, but for many in this country, Odin is the logical choice.”

Filled with the need to move away from that opinion, I stalk over to the fire, stretching out my hands to warm them.

“I apologize if this may be overwhelming for you,” Jackson says.

“It’s not you who should be apologizing,” I mutter.

“If you want to run away, I will see that it happens.”

I whirl around, expecting Jackson to have a quirk of a smile on his face, but he’s solemnly serious. “You’d do that? Risk everything to whisk me away?”

Jackson shrugs. “I’ve only had the job for a week. Yes,” he says, ignoring my snort of laughter. “I would do whatever it takes to get you out of your engagement if that’s what you need.”

The thought of Jackson having my back sparks a warm sensation in my chest, one I’m not accustomed to, but I’m not about to admit that to him. “Gold star for you. I could have used your help with some of the others.” I rub my hands together, thinking of the six betrothals in my past and what I did to get out of them.

“Lady Camille?”

I turn, because this sounds like it’s going to lead to a series of questions. I’ve spent the last three days closeted in here with Jackson and he’s never once asked the most important one. Which is—

“Why are you doing this?” he asks.

“Because it’s my duty,” I reply automatically.

Already I know Jackson well enough to recognize the expression on his face when he’s searching for a diplomatic way of saying something. “I realize arranged marriages are still common among royal families, but it is *your* choice to marry Prince Odin, isn’t it?”

Is it? I knew I needed to marry before I was ever interested in boys. The Republic of France ensured I had to marry if I wanted to take over as prefect after my stepfather.

And I do.

I do.

I first saw the spreadsheet of eligible suitors when I was eighteen. It’s an actual Excel spreadsheet, password protected,

with details on family, fortune and whether fame would be a benefit or deterrent for them.

It's hard to remember a time when I met a man without considering his benefits and what he could do for Saint Pierre.

That's not true; I do remember a time when I thought of my own happiness first. It had been when I first met Odin when neither of us thought about duty or responsibilities or ruling a country someday.

I never thought of him as a prince of Laandia. He was just Odin, who made me feel amazing about myself.

But that was ten years ago.

"It's fine," I tell Jackson, not really answering his question. "I'm fine. I always am." And I will be. I'll get through the next few weeks until I marry Odin and can go back to Saint Pierre. He can come with me, or stay here, and we'll live ever after.

Whether it's happily ever after is yet to be seen.

And I don't even consider the Odin-becoming-king aspect of it. If this is a marriage in name only, it wouldn't be unheard of for me to be in Saint Pierre and for him to stay in Laandia. We could summer together. Spend holidays in the castle. It could work.

Then why do I feel like a hundred-pound weight is pressing down on my chest?

"What are you going to do?" Jackson asks, adjusting the blanket around his shoulder. I should really keep the window closed for his sake.

"For a start, I think I'm going to get out of this room," I tell him. "I'll take Betty White for a walk through the castle. Maybe she'll find a set of armour she can pee on. And then you'll really have to whisk me away, so be ready." I trade my fuzzy slippers for my Uggs and wonder how chilly the rest of the castle is and whether there are fires in every room.

"Do you need me to accompany you?" Jackson's tone is polite and deferential but his expression is anything but.

“You can stay here, huddled in your blanky. Betty White,” I call. “Walk. Inside,” I add when the dog makes no move to climb out of her bed by the fire.

“She wasn’t that into walking when I took her out earlier,” Jackson warns.

“If I have to keep busy, so does she.” I bend down and pick up Betty White, who seems content to leave if I’m carrying her.

I know she’s spoiled but she’s also old.

“Don’t get lost,” Jackson calls after me.

“I think I can manage to find my way around a castle,” I throw back as I flounce out the door.



Of course I get lost.

The castle is much, much bigger than the prefect’s residence I grew up in: five floors, four turrets, and multiple staircases, traditional castle-like with thick walls, cold floors, and priceless antiques. There’s evidence of the family’s Viking history—cabinets full of helmets and shields and axes on every floor. Spears hang over doorways, swords are crossed on the walls.

There are weapons *everywhere*.

I set Betty White down and lean against the glass top of a table to peer at the glittering jewels on the handle of a broadsword.

Despite the ancient death toys and the cold floors, the castle seems lived in, warmer and more comfortable than the house I grew up in. Christmas boughs and balls are still wrapped around the banisters and I find one of many trees in the hall overlooking the main entrance.

This is a home.

Paintings hang on walls and I recognize several of the masters, along with a surprising number of contemporaries: George Condo, Cecily Brown, and Peter Doig as well as

several indigenous artists, the stone walls a perfect backdrop for the bright and vibrant canvases.

My steps slow even more as I drink in the colours, Betty White trailing after me, sniffing anything she can poke her nose into.

There are framed photos mixed in with the art—a younger Odin, King Magnus with his late wife, and one with all five children laughing on the castle lawn.

This is not what I expected.

It's the home of the king of Laandia and his *family*. I didn't take much notice of the princes standing alongside Odin the first night, other than noting Kalle and Bo were also very tall, and all but Bo were smiling. They must be aware of the arrangement, the coincidence of the announcement, but they were there to greet me. To support their brother.

To welcome me into their family.

Marrying Odin means becoming part of a family, royal or otherwise.

That's as foreign a concept to me as a free bar during a press conference.

Despite the timing of the announcement, they have done everything possible to make me feel welcome: Isla and Hugo, the flowers and fruit waiting in the room for me, even the fire which never seems to go out.

I keep walking through the main floor. Jackson mentioned the king isn't in residence, so I don't have to worry about bumping into him, but I don't know the whereabouts of Odin and his brothers. Do they live here?

Am I allowed to walk around in their home like this? Like I'm snooping?

I pass a ballroom, a library that tempts me with the fire and the shelves of books, and the room where they announced my engagement. Heading down another hall, I find a fitness centre that includes a pool and a row of Pelotons.

Do the brothers work out together? Because that would be a great picture for the next *People's Sexiest Men* issue.

I pass another room with the door open and hear grunts coming from within.

Of course, I look.

Odin stands in the middle of the room with a VR headset covering his eyes. It takes a moment for me to comprehend what's in his hand—

It's a sword.

Not any sword—it's a broadsword, like the ones hanging on the wall, at least three feet long. Odin swings and thrusts like he's fighting an opponent, which he might be, thanks to the virtual reality technology.

It's impressive.

I watch him, because when else do I have the opportunity to watch a sword fight? At least a one-sided one. But as I stand there, I realize I'm focused less on the sword he's waving around and more on the arms that wield it.

His arms are... impressive.

Odin wears gym shorts and a sleeveless shirt damp with sweat, and I'm transfixed by the sight of his arms. Defined biceps straining and bulging when he slashes, the tight, taut triceps...

Can I say his arms are sexy?

Six engagements aside, I know I can be described as *sheltered* and *protected* but I've seen my fair share of the manly form and have admired some of them. I've seen Miquel and Benoit in the water working with the animals at SealSave and they weren't wearing shirts. There are always fishermen at the docks in Saint Pierre, and in the summer, there are a lot of bare chests. I've seen enough but I've never considered arms as one of the more attractive body parts. And I've never had such a visceral reaction to them.

I had no idea arms like that were hiding under Odin's suit jacket. He's got Thor-arms; they gave him the wrong Viking

name. He should be called Thor.

He should never wear sleeves.

A major downfall of arranged marriages is that you rarely get to pick a mate based on physical appearance. There's a list of pros and cons for each man before the negotiations begin, but attractiveness is never considered. At least Lord Arnaud never mentioned it, and after seeing a few of the candidates, it's obvious he never thought of it.

My fourth engagement was with a distant cousin of the heir to the French throne. He was four inches shorter than me, underweight, with ears that stuck out and were slightly pointed, and he had one of those receding chins that look better with a beard. Unfortunately, there was no beard, only a mustache, a thick, 1970s style only popular in adult films.

There's nothing weak about Odin's chin. Or anything else about him.

The night we first met, those arms held me when we danced, tucked me under his arm when he introduced me to someone whose name I've forgotten. Those arms wrapped around me when we first kissed, stayed strong and firm when we—

I close my eyes and swallow down the memory. There's no need to be thinking about those details of that night right now. Or anytime.

But still, I stand at the door watching Odin's solo sword fight for longer than is polite for a lady. I should avert my eyes, as well as Betty White's, but I can't bring myself to stop staring.

Gawking.

Possibly drooling.

Sweat should not be sexy, but on Odin, it somehow works.

It might be because I can't stop thinking about that night and what we shared, and how he cared, and everything that kept me smiling for days after. I don't watch Prince Odin—

I'm looking at the man who had been my first love, and will be, unbelievably, my husband.

Unfortunately, distracted by the thoughts and the arms, I'm not paying attention to my dog. Betty White isn't fascinated by the swinging sword and the arms that wield it. Once she tired of sniffing the hall, she lets out a sharp series of barks.

Stop mooning over him!

Odin stops, and then winces like he takes a hit. "Who's there?"

Betty White scurries into the room before I can catch her. "That wasn't an invitation," I hiss. She stops at Odin's feet, barking furiously at him, which, because of her size, is more like high-pitched yipping.

"What the—?" Odin hops back, pulling off the goggles. He gapes at Betty White, still barking, then turns to me. "Lady Camille?"

He looks surprised, confused... and not really that happy to see me.

"Betty White. Come." Then to Odin, "Sorry to bother you." There's no warmth in my voice since any heat is rushing to my face. "I'll just—"

Betty White isn't moving, so I have to step into the room to scoop her up. I can't look Odin in the eye because he just caught me staring at him like some lovesick royal watcher. If he knew what was going on in my head—Thor-arms?

I should have stayed in my room. "I'll leave you to your sword," I finish, backing to the door. "I didn't mean to disturb you."

"Don't go," Odin calls after me.

12

Odin

“S TAY,” I SAY.

Camille stops at the door, the dog cradled in her arms, and glances over her shoulder with suspicion. “Why?”

She sounds like I told her to take a flying leap off the highest turret.

Which is the one looking westward, according to the Laandia tour book.

“Well, because—” I stammer since Lady Camille is the last person I expected to see hovering at the door of the fitness

rooms. “You’re here.”

“I’ve been here for days,” she says drily. “I guess you didn’t notice.”

“I meant here. Out of your room.”

“Am I not allowed to leave my room? Is that what the security guard is for?”

“No, of course not.” This is not going well. I take a deep breath and give it another try. “Why are you here? Do you need something?”

“No. I don’t.” She drops a perfect curtsey. “Sorry to bother you.”

“It’s no bother. And please don’t go.” I motion with the sword for her to come in, desperate not to lose her back into her room for another half week. I promised Kate I would go talk to Camille, but I had come here first. Physical activity helps sort out my thoughts and I had time for a quick workout before getting the door slammed in my face again. “I’m only practicing.”

“You practice sword fighting?” Camille’s voice echoes through the room but she does join me in the middle of the floor. The practice room is empty save the shelves at the back and the mirrors covering one of the walls. “Is this what the modern princes do with their time these days?” She sets the dog down and holds out her hand. After a moment, I offer her the hilt of the sword.

I can tell the weight is heavier than she expected. The dog stares suspiciously, almost like she’s asking me why I’m being nice to Camille. “I’ve been studying Viking martial arts since I was a boy,” I offer.

“What exactly does one do with the knowledge of Viking martial arts?” she asks, her focus on the sword rather than me.

“Not much,” I admit with a rueful smile. “I’m sure I’d be popular at a Renaissance festival or medieval faire, but I’m not sure of the optics of a prince competing.”

“You just swing swords for fun?” For emphasis, she slashes and doesn’t try to hide her smile as I step back. Betty White loses interest and heads to the mirrored wall to sniff.

“I... er... yes.”

Because my father had such varied successes in his life, my brothers and I were encouraged to follow whatever interests we had. And because we were a family with means, not to mention royal standing, both of which opened and shut many doors, we had a lot to choose from. Kalle went into sports. All sports. He started for Team Laandia Junior hockey when he was seventeen, was drafted by the Baltimore Orioles when he was nineteen, with two starts as a second baseman a few years later, and led the national curling team to a fourth-place finish in the Worlds.

Now he plays darts; fitting for an owner of the King’s Hat pub.

Bo stuck to nature—particularly forests. He competed in lumberjack competitions around the world under an assumed name. Now he spends his time with the wildlife rescue centres that he set up around Laandia. Gunnar went for speed, riding bikes almost before he could walk and competing in BMX and dirt bike races. Then there was the boating phase and he practically lived on the water for several years. An accident forced our mother to put her foot down on his burgeoning race car driver career, and that’s when Gunnar started to travel.

My favourite, though, had always been his trampoline exploits when he was nine. I loved bouncing on the trampoline set up behind the castle.

Lyra liked being a princess, with all the more feminine interests that went with it, until she was sixteen and decided she wanted to do everything my brothers and I did, and more.

“You’re very Viking-like.” Camille’s voice is cool and disinterested, but at least she’s talking to me. I have to start somewhere.

“Family genetics. Kalle is more so.” I watch carefully as she swings the sword. “And Bo. You should see Bo with his

axe.”

“Your brother has an axe? A battle-axe, like the ones in the case?”

“We’re not that bloodthirsty. He has a cabin and likes to chop his own firewood.” Which is an understatement, but we don’t have to get into Bo right now. There’s time enough for Camille to get to know my brothers.

I’d rather she get to know me.

“They don’t live here?”

“Gunnar does, but he’s never really here. Kalle keeps his rooms on the top floor but stays in the apartment over his bar.”

“That doesn’t sound very kingly-to-be.”

“That’s Kalle,” I say lightly.

“What about Princess Lyra?”

“She’s in Chicago. She hasn’t been home in a while.”

“Can I try?” Losing interest in the subject of my family, Camille gestures to the headset.

“You want to play with my sword? I mean,” —I stutter and again, Camille doesn’t hide her smile— “It’s quite a large one. I mean—”

“I like to fence,” she says, taking pity on me.

“Fence! Do you really?”

“I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t.”

“Ah. You must be quite... athletic. At least, the way you ran off the other night made that clear.” I pause, not knowing if she’ll realize that I’m teasing her. Or whether I *should* be teasing her. “Also, I was impressed with your aim with the snowballs.”

Camille blinks at the smile that quirks at the corner of my mouth. “Are you angry?”

“They deserved the attack, although I’d advise you to keep the snow on the ground next time. As for the running off—it was unexpected,” I admit. “And possibly deserved.”

“Just possibly?” she asks in a cool voice.

I study Camille. Her hair hangs in waves down her back, an improvement over the tight bun the other night. From what she is wearing—loose pants, baggy sweater, both grey—I assume she didn’t intend to run into anyone. Or maybe that’s her preferred outfit. Either way, it’s definitely not princess attire, or what the citizens of Laandia would expect to see her wearing. Although, I’ve seen Lyra run around the castle in her pyjamas when we had the President of the United States visiting, so who am I to say what princesses wear?

Camille won’t be a princess until we marry.

The thought seems less certain with her standing before me with those dark eyes narrowed, chin raised. Camille might not look like royalty at the moment, but she still knows how to act like it.

“That’s something we can discuss at a later date,” I concede.

She motions to the VR headset that I’m still holding. “Can I try?” she asks again.

“You’re serious?”

“Again with the surprise.”

“More like worried that you might slip and stab me.” But I hand her the headset.

“Just make sure you don’t deserve to be stabbed and you’ll be fine.” Camille steadies the hilt of the sword between her knees as she adjusts the headset around her ponytail. “But maybe you’d better hold my dog.”

I set up *Sword Master* on the beginner level and stand back holding the dog awkwardly under my arm.

“She’s not a football,” Camille chides.

“I’m not in the habit of holding dogs.” But I shift so that Betty White is pressed against my chest, with my arm under her belly.

Camille clicks her tongue. “Cuddle her. She’s little. And she’s getting old. She doesn’t weigh much.”

“I think her sweater weighs more than she does.” But I do as I’m told and cuddle the tiny dog. Betty White stares at me with beady eyes for a moment until she deems herself comfortable and relaxes in my arms. “Better?” I ask her.

Once Camille decides her dog is safe, she pulls the headset down over her eyes. And once those eyes are covered, I feel safe enough to study her a little more intently.

In other words, I stare.

I watch as she hefts the sword above her shoulders, feints to the right and then drops her shoulder to slash up.

I wince, because that would hurt a man if it connected.

Lady Camille, looking very un-princess-like with her boots and a sweatshirt that covers most of her hands, thrusts and parries like she knows what she’s doing. Her hair flies around her face, all sorts of shades of red. At one time, she spins around and slashes with a move that might have removed a head from a neck if she’d gotten enough weight behind it. She’s like a Valkyrie in battle.

She’s impressive. And yes, I’m surprised. Not just that Camille left her room, and ended up in the fitness centre, but this—playing with my sword and being pretty good at it.

With a sinking feeling, I realize just how little I know about my bride-to-be.

And that’s all my fault.

Betty White keeps her attention on me rather than Camille and I get the sense she’s judging me. “What?” I finally mouth at the dog. “She’s good.”

I still can’t take my eyes off her. And it serves her right since I have no idea how long she was watching me for.

Too soon, she pulls off the goggles. “She might like you after all,” Camille says, a little out of breath.

“You do?” I stammer.

“Betty White.” Camille motions to the dog, seemingly content in my arms. “She’s comfortable with you now. She doesn’t let many hold her.”

I look down at the tiny head, grateful that it knocks me out of my stupor. “I’m very likable.”

“Mmm,” she murmurs. “How did I do?”

“Amazing,” I say honestly.

“We should do it for real.”

I laugh and then realize she’s serious. “Really? You’d like to fight? Me?”

“Is that illegal? Treasonous or something?”

“Not that I know of.”

“What’s the problem, then?” There’s an edge to her voice and I get the feeling she’s not just talking about sparring with me.

Ten years ago, I did not treat her well. I open my mouth to apologize but the coolness in her expression stops me. I need to explain a lot of things to Camille, but I have to do it *right*. Not just blurt out a quick apology. She’s worth more than that.

“No problem,” I say instead. Setting the dog down, I take the headset and the sword from her, putting them in their place at the back of the training room. “But maybe we’ll start with something less pointy.”

“What’s wrong with pointy? I’m used to pointy.”

“Sharp, then.” At the far side of the room, I pick up two training swords, made from a composite material. They don’t break the skin but they still can pack a punch. “I used these with my brothers when we were younger.” I hand one to Camille.

Her lip curls. “Toys. I’m better than this.”

“It’s definitely not a toy and it won’t lead to you running to Mrs. Theissen to tell her you stabbed me.”

She tosses the sword from hand to hand. “You think I’d stab you?”

“I think you might try.”

She laughs evilly and my heart skips at the sound. None of this has gone as planned, but at least she laughs, so maybe it’s not so bad.

Betty White seems content curled up on my discarded towel, so I won’t step on her.

I sense *that* would be bad. Lifting my arm as if I’m holding a shield, I raise the sword over my head in the ready position. “Shall we?”

Camille swings first and with all of her strength. I block, the vibrations making my arm sing, and she takes another swing. She slashes and stabs, at ease with the composite sword, and I’m forced to defend.

“You seem to be able to handle yourself,” I say, finally getting the upper hand. I outweigh her by at least eighty pounds and tower over her with a far longer reach, but she’s strong and fast on her feet.

“I was born able to handle myself.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

She feints right again—that’s a tell—and then twirls around me, her arm brushing my shoulder, leaving a heady scent in her wake. She’d be dangerous if I’d given her a real sword. And she’d be great during a real battle, if that were still a thing.

I spin around and barely get my blade up to block.

“Almost got you.” There’s a fierce gleam in her eyes that would alarm me if I wasn’t having fun.

“Not even close.”

She grins in response and there—it’s the same smile she gave that night when I suggested we leave the gala. The warrior is gone and before me is the same Camille from ten years ago.

It's the same smile she gave me when I pulled her out of the ballroom, and then when the first of the fireworks exploded. A smile of fun and mischief and delight, and it transforms her face—her wide, full mouth, almost too big for her delicate face, is perfect for smiling.

It's also perfect for kissing.

Ten years is a long time, but I still remember what it felt like to kiss Camille. Like waking up after a good night's sleep. Hearing your favourite song on the radio. Getting good news in the mail.

I remember how I felt—like I never wanted to stop.

And the memory knocks me back and gives Camille the opening to smack me in the arm with the sword.

13

Camille

“**G**OT YOU THAT TIME,” I say with a smirk and sliding back from Odin’s slash.

Sword fighting is like a dance. And I’ve taken every style of dance imaginable, only I’m not that good at any of them. I can remember steps, keep time to the music, and get so bored that I almost nodded off in the middle of a waltz once with the third fiancé.

Put a sword in my hand—or at least a pointy stick—and it’s another story.

Lord Arnaud pushed me into so many activities when I was younger, telling me I needed to excel at anything that I came across. I think it was mainly to keep me busy and out of his hair. Fencing had been a fluke, and only because I expressed interest in a statue of Joan of Arc while we were visiting Quebec. I had been fascinated by the Maid of Orléans and deep down, I wanted to lead my own army, sword in hand.

I don't have an army—yet—but I do know how to wield a sword.

“I was distracted,” Odin protests.

“By what?” I scoff.

“You.”

There's no complaint or accusation in Odin's voice. It's almost, I can't tell for sure, but it sounds like maybe *flirting*?

This time it's me who freezes for a moment, staring at Odin with wide eyes. The tone in his voice—it was the same as that night, when it was me who interested him; me he wanted to be with. Me—

I dance away just in time as the tip of his sword catches the arm of my sweater.

“Ha! See how you like it.” When Odin laughs, his face brightens, making him look younger. As young as he was that night.

Which I am *not* going to think about.

I slash and parry and block. Block again. And again. Odin is strong and he's been doing this longer than I have. But I'm good at this as well, and with every thrust of my sword, something loosens inside of me. The tight ball of bitterness I've been adding to for years relaxes just a little and, weirdly, feels like it flows out of my arms. Some of the anger and frustration and hurt releases every time the swords clash together.

It's like throwing snowballs at that group of haters.

I back away, wishing I could call for a break to slip off my sweatshirt. But I don't want to stop. Because despite the

aching arms—I know I’m going to feel it tomorrow—I’m having fun.

It’s been a while since I’ve let go like this.

“We can stop any time you want.” Odin isn’t even breathing hard and seems to be *smirking* at me, like he knows I’m getting tired.

With a low growl, I feint right and go in for the kill shot—

Only for Odin to move behind me and slide an arm around my waist, lifting me right off my feet.

My breath whooshes out like he got a hit, not wrapping a strong arm somewhat gently around my stomach. And holds me dangling.

“Not fair,” I cry.

It’s not, because there’s no way I can retaliate being held like this.

Is that such a bad thing? Being held like this?

I wouldn’t know since it’s happened exactly never. Not since Odin.

“Did you just *growl* at me?” He laughs, swinging me around like I weigh nothing. Those arms... It’s hard not to drop the sword as I grip his forearms, the cords of his muscles tense under my hand.

My back presses against his chest, my feet kicking weakly. “Ladies do not *growl*,” I say imperiously, but the laugh that bubbles up ruins the effect.

“There was nothing ladylike about that. You play dirty.” Odin laughs again, his arm tightening around me. His chest feels like a brick wall.

“I play to win.” I crane my neck so I can look at him.

He’s smiling. Smiling and relaxed and... happy. And... Odin. With the hand that’s not holding me and the sword, he reaches up and gathers my hair to the side, almost like he wants to see my face. His fingers dance along my neck.

Goosebumps. All over, like I've stepped outside with bare arms, But better.

"I'll remember that," he says in a low voice. "Next time."

It doesn't sound like he's arranging the next sword fight. It sounds... more.

"Next time," I repeat, fighting to catch my breath.

Betty White interrupts with a bark, and Odin turns us to see a man slouched in the doorway, watching us. The warning yap wasn't enough and Betty White's nails skitter across the floor as she rushes over to the intruder with her protective barks, a little more high-pitched than her regular yips.

"Betty White," I call. Not only is the man watching us, but he's smiling in a way that suggests he's not one of the castle staff. I shove against Odin's arm until he sets me down.

"Hey. I didn't think you were coming," Odin says easily.

The man pushes off from the doorframe and comes toward me, hand outstretched. "I take it this is the Lady Camille?" he asks Odin. Silvery grey eyes study me intently. "I think she can take over for me as your sparring partner."

I resist the urge to wipe my face as I try to look as regal as possible, which is difficult when you're sweating and out of breath. And also super conscious of Odin standing beside me, who is very aware that I'm sweating and out of breath because he was just holding me.

Holding. Me.

"Lady Camille Dusain, Spencer Laz." Odin makes the introductions as Spencer studies me, before taking my hand in his firm grasp.

The name clicks. I recognize Spencer from social media—a childhood friend of the princes, the son of the king's advisor. The fifth prince, most call him. This is like meeting Odin's brothers, and he's caught me swinging sticks and wearing a baggy, grey-on-grey outfit—a groutfit?

Lord Arnaud would be very displeased.

“I thought you had a meeting,” Odin continues.

“I got out early, thought I’d see if you were still here.” Spencer keeps his attention on me and I watch him just as carefully. He’s tall, even taller than Odin, with thick dark hair in need of a trim, and even thicker brows. “How did he rope you into playing?” he asks me. “Most run scared when he pulls out the training sticks.”

I lift my chin. “I asked.”

Spencer lifts an eyebrow. “Interesting. How are you finding the castle?”

The way he says it suggests he’s aware I haven’t left my room in days. Heat rises in my cheeks. “Cold,” I tell him.

“A rematch would warm you up. Don’t let me stop you,” he offers but I’m already shaking my head.

“Another day,” Odin suggests, wiping the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand and glancing down at me. “You’re good.”

“I know. So are you,” I concede, handing over the composite sword.

“I never would have guessed there was an expert swordswoman in there,” he says, the admiration evident in his voice.

“There’s a lot about me that would surprise you,” I say pertly.

“Did it at least make you feel better?”

I glance sideways at Spencer but he seems as interested in my response as Odin. There really are no secrets in this castle. “You think whacking you with a sword makes up for all of *this*?”

“*This*—as in the last few days of media scrutiny?” Spencer asks before Odin can respond.

“I don’t pay attention to the media,” I lie.

He chuckles. “That’s good for you,” he says, slapping Odin on the shoulder. “Maybe she missed a certain little

episode.”

Odin turns to him with an icy gaze. “Nope. Guess she didn’t miss that,” Spencer says with a grin.

A smile pops out before I can stop it. “Look,” Spencer juts his head in my direction. “You can make her smile without manhandling her.”

“I don’t manhandle,” Odin mutters, and I bite my bottom lip. Manhandle or not, that arm around my waist was... comfortable.

“I’ll be going back to my room now,” I tell Odin, not wanting to think of the warmth of being close to him. I’m still mad at him. I shouldn’t be cozying up to him.

“Oh. Really? I thought...” Odin looks disappointed before the mask snaps back into place. “If that’s what you want.”

“No one has actually asked what I want,” I say without thinking.

“Well, there wasn’t... No. Not really, I guess. Odin looks sideways at Spencer, who takes it as a cue to wander off to the back of the training room, followed by a suspicious Betty White. “I think we should spend time together,” he says, dropping his voice.

I blink and, for a moment, hope blooms in my chest. Happiness. But then I ruthlessly tamp it down. Because spending time with Odin should be natural and easy, and maybe it could have been once, but not now. I don’t know how I’m supposed to act around him.

Trying to hit him with a stick seems easy. Making conversation might be another story. “Why?”

Odin’s eyes pop with surprise. “Well, because we’re going to be married.” He says that like he’s not exactly sure.

“Yes, but I’m not sure I want to be all lovey-dovey in public because then your people will have more reasons to hate me,” I say.

This isn’t me being more *Elsa* than *Anna* as Madame Carol would say, but me being honest. Myself.

If there's anything I've learned about Odin is that I can always be myself.

"They don't hate you," he says automatically.

I tap the sword on the floor. "I beg to differ. That group at the gate threw ice at my dog and snowballs at me. Are we going to talk about that at all?"

"That won't happen again. I'll make sure of that."

"It will be something else. I know how public opinion works."

"We do need to be seen in public," Odin concedes, passing his sword from hand to hand. "But I'm asking because I would like to get to know you. Again."

"To make this whole sham more believable?"

"No. Well, yes, that would help."

Good thing I shoved down that little flicker of happiness at the thought of Odin actually wanting to spend time with me.

I click my tongue to summon Betty White. "Don't worry. I'm a good enough actress that I'll make you look like excellent marriage material, like that Esme is an idiot for sending you home. That's what you need, right?"

"It's not that." Odin runs his hand through his hair. "It's—you stopped writing to me."

Where is this coming from? "*I stopped writing to you?*" I burst out loud enough for Spencer's head to turn toward us. "You didn't even start, so why are you upset?"

"I—"

"*That's* why you want to spend time with me? To find out why I stopped writing?" The sudden sadness stabs me sharper than the sword could have.

I can't read the emotions that flash across Odin's face but his mask can't cover them. "Camille..."

I don't understand any of this. Odin is one way, and then he's another. The simple fact that he agreed to marry me to

save face completely goes against the way he looks at me, like I'm someone that matters. Yes, Odin is a good man and I'm sure he'll end up caring for me, but now?

He looks at me like the last ten years never happened.

And I don't understand. "I've agreed to marry you, so you don't have to worry about me changing my mind. I'm a woman of my word. If you think—"

"Have tea with me this afternoon."

That catches me completely off guard. "Is that an order?"

Odin can't hide his sigh. "It's a request. Would you like to have tea with me this afternoon?" he asks in a more formal tone.

"Tea," I repeat.

"The caffeinated beverage with milk and sugar. The kitchen puts on a nice spread. Perhaps four o'clock?"

"Four o'clock?"

"Are you going to keep repeating everything I say?"

"I wasn't expecting an invitation," I admit. "One minute I'm mad, and then next you want me to come for tea."

"I wasn't expecting for you to show up during my training session, and look how well that turned out."

I don't reply, and Odin presses on. "Tea, then? Four o'clock?"

After a moment, I nod.

Odin

SPENCER RAISES HIS EYEBROW as Camille, Betty White cradled in her arms, hurries from the room. “That’s the new missus, then?”

“Lady Camille.” I stare after her. “I don’t think she’d appreciate being referred to as that.”

Camille is joining me for tea. That’s a start. She spent time with me today. Also a good start. But will it be enough, considering the wedding is less than six weeks away?

I don’t expect to fall in love by then, but it would be nice if she liked me. Or at least not try to stab me.

“She seems...” Spencer appears to search for the right word and I expect “spunky” or “feisty” or some such description. “I think she likes you,” he says instead.

I turn to him in disbelief. “How can you say that? She would have stabbed me if we had real swords.”

“Doesn’t she have a reason to be angry?”

I run my hand through my hair. Camille has every reason to be upset; so many reasons, probably more than I have the emotional maturity to come up with. Since I met her, I haven’t done anything to warrant her *not* being angry with me. “I’ve mucked it all up, Spence,” I tell him, shoulders slumping.

Spence’s silver eyes search my face. He has this ability to ferret out exactly what the problem is and make it not so bad, which means talking to him should always be a priority. Gunnar always said he should have been a therapist instead of going into law. Being the family lawyer means he gets to do both. “Does this warrant a visit to the King’s Hat?” he asks.

Kalle owns the pub in Battle Harbour. The heir to the Laandia throne owns and operates a gastropub, and the king is perfectly fine with it. Other monarchies don’t understand our family at all.

I shake my head at Spence’s suggestion. “I have a security meeting and then a phone call with Justin and Macron. Dad’s trying to give me more responsibility in the fishing dispute.”

Two months ago, I was happy with the extra duties, the challenge. Now, the challenge of Camille seems overwhelming. I need to get her out of my head to focus on the responsibilities of my position.

I suspect Camille won’t be easily bumped from the centre court of my thoughts by a chat with world leaders about fishing.

“Kalle will be happy not to have to deal with it, but this is important too. This is your soon-to-be wife we’re talking about. You have to make time to fix it.”

Still holding the swords, I scoop up the VR headset and put everything away on the shelves. “How do I fix it? I told

the world I hooked up with her. If that's not bad enough, I told her to pretend we're in love when I have no idea how she feels about me after all that. I suspect she hates me."

"She likes you. I told you that."

"I can't believe that. Maybe once..."

"That's what is going to fix this. Once upon a time, she was in love with you." Spencer cocks his head and looks at me with laughing eyes. "If that's possible. Were you really that lovable back then?" He slaps my shoulder as I roll my eyes. This is how he does it. Serious, with a sidenote of teasing.

The main question about Spence is, why hasn't some woman grabbed him up? And why am I asking him for relationship advice when he hasn't figured it out for himself yet?

"But seriously," Spence continues. "What did she say about that? You did apologize, didn't you? You might have been a kid, but still—I heard about the letters and never writing her back. Dick move."

No one needs to remind me of that. And as for a grand apology— "Not yet," I admit. "This is the first time I've talked to her since she got here. That was my first mistake."

"I beg to differ." He laughs. "How you handled wanting to marry her is the first in the list of mistakes."

"Thanks for pointing out there's a list."

"Always here for you, O." Spence grins and it's impossible not to feel a little more hopeful. "Talking to her might be a good way to start."

"Tell me how to do this, Spence," I plead. "You've messed things up with women and managed to fix them."

"Thanks so much for pointing out *my* list," he says drily.

"I haven't—" I mash my lips together. Spence has always been popular with the ladies, much like my brothers. Kalle and Gunnar have had a revolving stream of girlfriends since they hit puberty. But me— "You know my history with relationships," I manage.

“Well, no, I don’t, because you’ve kept ridiculously quiet about it. I’ve never even heard about Lady Camille until it flashed all over the internet. I didn’t watch you on the show, by the way. No desire to see you making out with some random beautiful woman.”

“It wasn’t like that with Esme.”

“Did you like her?”

“Of course I liked her. She’s a very special woman.”

“Special. Do you like her enough for Camille to be worried?”

“Worried about what?”

“O! Worried about her being your second choice! You’re really bad at this, you know.”

“I do know. It has to be bad for me to talk to you.”

“And here I thought I was your favourite brother-from-a-different-mother.” Spence pulls a rueful grin from me. “Just take it one step at a time. Talk to her. Tell her why you went on the show, that she has nothing to worry about. Tell her she’s your first choice now. And tell her why you never spoke to her again after the night at the regatta.” He shakes his head. “Again, I didn’t know anything happened that night. I saw you dancing with her, and then poof, you’re gone. I thought you bailed.”

“I didn’t bail. But I guess I did—I bailed on her.”

“No argument there. But you had your reasons. So go tell her.”

Camille

I'M TAKING TEA WITH the prince this afternoon.

“What do I wear?” I call to Jackson. The closet is dark and tiny and clearly not fit for a princess. Not that there's a problem fitting my clothes in the space—back in Saint Pierre, the house manager, Madam Carol, didn't packed much for me, since we both assumed I'd be home within a few days.

There is a pair of dressy pants and a few blouses and a dress. Grey, of course. Two pairs of leggings, one of jeans. None of the shirts are warm enough for castle weather.

If I'm going to be here for six weeks, I need to go shopping.

I'm not going to be much of a princess. People hate me and I have nothing to wear. But at least I got to fight with a sword. Joan of Arc would have been proud.

"You're asking *me*?" Jackson stands at the door of my bedroom but doesn't look in.

"You're my secretary," I say the word like they do on *The Crown* with the letters pushed together.

"Why do you say it like that?"

"It's my attempt at a British accent."

"It's not a very good attempt." There's a long pause, one I fill by rooting through the closet again. "I called Kate. Odin's secretary. She'll be here in a minute."

"What did you tell her?"

"Nine-one-one."

"This is not a nine-one-one."

Jackson peeks into the room. This time I'm the one swathed in a blanket, but unlike Jackson earlier, I don't have anything underneath. Most of my clothes are strewn across the bed. Betty White is currently napping on my dress from the other night. "I think it might be one."

"How fancy is having tea in a castle?" I demand, alarmed with the note of hysteria in my voice.

"It's a *castle*," Jackson retorts. "But, you know, the king isn't the type to have formal occasions. Kate says—"

I stop rifling through my sweaters and stare expectantly at Jackson. "Again with the Kate." He immediately smooths his face. Jackson would have made the perfect courtier in a king's court. "You have the inside scoop on everything Kate?"

"She's been a help with scheduling," he says blandly. "Plus, you've sequestered yourself for the last three days. I needed someone to talk to."

“Mm-hmm. Has anyone told you that you’re very passive-aggressive?”

“Other than you? No. My advice? Don’t wear that,” he adds, grimacing at the blouse in my hand. It’s an odd shade of beige, striped with taupe, with a ruffle along the mock turtleneck. “Never wear that.”

I stare at my clothes and heave a sigh. “I need a personal shopper.”

“That is *not* in my job description,” Jackson says quickly.

Kate arrives in record time. Jackson escorts her to my bedroom and I can’t help but notice how they whisper, heads close together. I’d assume they were talking about me if it wasn’t for the smiles on their faces.

“Lady Camille,” Kate says cheerfully. “How can I help?”

“Why don’t you ever say that?” I accuse Jackson.

“Because you have no problem telling me exactly what you want me to do,” he shoots back. “Dress her,” he implores Kate. “That’s beyond my job description. I’m taking Betty White out for her afternoon constitutional.”

The door to the suite slams behind him, as much as a castle door can slam. I look at Kate with suspicion. She looks back with a cheerful grin. “I don’t know what to wear for tea,” I finally grumble, pulling the blanket cover-up tighter across my chest.

“Jeans might be okay if they’re the dressy, stand-up kind.” Kate glances at the pile of clothes on the bed. “Odin likes to look like he’s come from a board meeting, but the others are pretty casual.”

“I’m not marrying the others. And I don’t have any jeans like that.” I point to a pile of dirty clothes on the floor because there’s no hamper. “My jeans are like that.”

“You need laundry service,” Kate says. “I’ll get Mrs. Theissen to set it up. And you need more clothes.” Kate takes the hangers out of my hand—a cream silk blouse and a full-

length black dress with a high neckline—and returns them to the closet. “You don’t have a lot of colour in here.”

“There isn’t a lot of colour in Saint Pierre.” I hold up a grey sweater dress. “Is this too much?”

She flicks through the hangers, giving me a moment to study her. I’d guess her age is a few years younger than me, plus she’s taller, thinner, and prettier. She’s got the Laandian height, Laandian blonde hair, and an openness that I have no idea if it comes from the country since I haven’t really talked to anyone since I’ve gotten here.

And now I’m supposed to spend at least an hour drinking tea with the prince.

Odin requested my presence for tea like he was asking me on a date.

I’ve been to balls and dinners with men, both casual and formal, but I’ve only gone on one official date in my life. The kind where the man makes a point of asking you to do something with him. The kind that makes you giddy with anticipation and you spend hours considering the outfit, the makeup, and even the underwear.

I’m wearing my high-cut bikini briefs, so the underwear is covered.

Not that anyone will be seeing my underwear, other than Kate, since she may be planning on standing here as I get dressed. How does royalty have someone dress them without feeling all weird?

I’m rarely nervous, but uncertainty makes me uncomfortable. It’s a given that I’m to marry Prince Odin, but it’s the reality of it that weighs on my mind. How do I live with him as my husband? Will we be compatible? Are we still compatible—in that way?

Once upon a time, I liked Odin. I *really* liked him. I’m not sure I’m able to get back to that. Or if I want to because... it hurts.

The pouring out my heart to him, making plans for the future, and getting nothing from him other than letters that

sounded more like a report than anything.

And then even those stopped. But Odin wants to know why *I* stopped writing?

I have my own questions for the Prince of Laandia.

Kate turns her attention to the dress I'm holding and reluctantly nods her approval. "That will have to do. You really didn't bring much."

"I wasn't expecting to stay. My—" I never knew what to call Madam Carol. She acts as both mother and best friend, assistant and boss. "Someone else packed for me."

"Someone older, I'm guessing?" At my nod, she grins again, showing a tiny gap between her front teeth. Freckles dot her nose. "What did you know about all this before you got here?" she asks as she turns around.

I guess she's not leaving.

"I know that there is an agreement in place for me to marry Prince Odin." My voice takes on the formal tone that I use for affairs that concern the prefectship, muffled now as I pull the dress on. The soft wool does a real number on my hair as my head pops out of the turtleneck top.

"That's it? That's... all?"

"I came here to meet him and announce the engagement. After that..." I attempt to smooth my flyaway hair. "Lord Arnaud left without giving instructions."

"Instructions. That's—wow. That's different. I mean, O's a great guy—"

"O? You can turn around now."

"Prince Odin," Kate corrects, flushing at the overstep, "is a good man. I heard about some of the other guys you hook—were betrothed to," she amends hastily. "They didn't sound like fun."

I wonder if she's digging for herself or Odin. Those men are out of my life and not worth my energy discussing. "How long have you worked for Prince Odin?"

Kate looks me up and down. “That works. Do you have tights? You’ll freeze in bare legs.” Without waiting for a response, she heads to the dresser and begins opening the drawers, exactly like Madam Carol would have. But I’ve known Madam Carol all my life, and I’ve only met Kate.

“I’ve been here a week,” Kate continues, rummaging through my underwear until she finds a pair of black tights that I had no idea were in the drawer. “But I’ve known O—Odin— all my life. His sister, Lyra, was my best friend growing up. When all this came down, Odin asked me to come work for him.” Her chin lifts slightly. “I’m very good at what I do.”

“What exactly do you do?” I ask as I accept the tights and perch on the edge of the bed to put them on.

“I look after Odin, same as everyone in the castle.” I’m not sure if I imagine the low-level threat in her voice, but I can’t blame her. She’s loyal to Odin and that’s how it should be.

For a moment, I wish she could be loyal to me. It would be nice to have a friend here.

“I worked in marketing, got into event planning,” Kate continues, oblivious to my thoughts, “and I was junior executive assistant to the Lieutenant-General of Canada. Odin is right up my alley.”

“You’ve done all that?” I can’t keep the envy out of my voice. I’ve known women with full-time careers, but never spoken to one so young with so much experience.

Kate only shrugs. “What about you?”

I lift my chin. “I’m the daughter of the Lord Prefect of Saint Pierre. I have duties and responsibilities.”

Kate waits for a beat. “Sounds fun,” she says when I don’t add anything else.

“If extremely boring is fun, then sure,” I admit and Kate laughs.

“But you’re part of France. Don’t you get to go there? I’ve been to Paris and I loved it.”

“I haven’t been for a while. Not since...” I’m not sure how much to tell her but she’s already looked through my underwear, so there’s not much more to hide. “There was an incident at the Louvre a few years ago,” I begin reluctantly. “Things were said to me. I said something back. They didn’t like it and one of them tried to put his hands on me. I didn’t like that, and put my foot on him, an alarm went off, the *gendarmes* were called—”

Kate’s jaw drops. “Oh my God, I saw that on YouTube! That was you?”

I smile slightly, dropping my gaze. Standing up for myself has always been one of my proudest moments, but the reaction from Lord Arnaud highlighted the shame rather than the pride. He made it very clear that I had overreacted, and that it would never happen again.

“Wasn’t the guy some son of an important minister?” Kate asks, delight and admiration ringing in her voice. “There were a couple of them that you took out. You stabbed one with a pair of serving tongs from the buffet!”

“It was more like a firm poke than a stab,” I correct, trying to hide my smile. Lord Arnaud did his best to cover it up—impossible, thanks to the video—and refused to allow me to discuss it. “They thought Saint Pierre—and me—were part of their property. I took offence.”

“I guess you did.” I like the way Kate looks at me now—with respect. It’s been a long time since anyone has looked at me like that. Then her face clouds with confusion. “There’s a lot online about you. How you stood up for yourself, and it wasn’t the first time. You stand up for others. Your activism and the wildlife rescue centre you established. You’re... impressive.”

“Thank you,” I mutter, trying not to let on how touched I am at Kate’s observation. “Unfortunately, that’s why the prefect prefers to keep me on Saint Pierre.”

“But you—you’re kind of a badass. I know, politically, the marriage is good for both Laandia and Saint Pierre, and Odin,

too, but you—I don't understand why you let yourself..." She trails off, unsure if she's spoken too out of place.

I know this because I know what it looks like when you speak out of place. "Get married to a man I don't know?" I finish for her.

"Well, yeah." She waits expectantly.

I want to tell her. I really want to tell her, because even though I don't know Kate well, I like her. I think, in different circumstances, we could be friends.

Or maybe the circumstances are why we *should* be.

Still, even though I may like her, I'm not about to do a tell-all with her. "Trust me, I have my reasons."

The disappointment is evident on Kate's face. "If you say so. It would have to be a pretty amazing guy to get me to do what you're doing. Then again, O is a really good guy."

"You sound like you want to marry him."

"Odin? *No*. Just... no." She shivers. "But you know what he's like. Or, at least you did."

I did. But that was a long time ago, and things are very different now. I'm different.

I'm not the Camille Odin used to know.

I wonder if that's a good thing or if it will blow up this whole arrangement.

16

Odn

I PACE THE FLOOR as I wait for Camille, wishing I were back in the fitness centre, or at least had something to keep my mind occupied.

Kate threw the list of wedding guests at me for my final approval before she disappeared without a word. Looking at the names of people who will watch me marry Camille doesn't help me stop thinking about her.

That look in her eyes. The way her red hair flew around her face.

The way she felt against me when I picked her up.

Is having tea like a date?

When I agreed to appear in *The Suitorette*, I fully expected Esme to pick me at the end. It's not arrogance; it's only that I've had twenty-nine years of experience being told I'm irresistible to women. I've been told that it is widely believed that I am the prince to catch if one wants to become a princess. I'm considered marriage material. Kalle and Gunnar, and even Bo, are the princes for you if you want a good time.

Which is why my romantic history is spotty at best.

I have a past, but it wouldn't make much of a steamy read. I'm careful around women. Respectful. I don't let myself get carried away in the heat of the moment.

I've let myself get carried away exactly one time.

At exactly four p.m., Camille appears in the sitting room on the main floor. It's one of the warmest spots in the castle, filled with light and plants and the third-biggest fireplace.

My mother used the room when she entertained guests or even when she wanted to spend a few minutes reading. I think she'd approve of me inviting Camille to spend time here.

I'm surprised to see Kate as well as Jackson hovering behind Camille. "What are you doing here?" I ask Kate. My five-minute warning, which Kate gives me before any appointment, came via text, but I thought she was somewhere in the castle.

Somewhere not with Camille.

"We're going to work on your schedules," Kate says blithely, sneaking past Camille in the doorway and leading Jackson across the room. "Over there." She points to the balcony that had been converted into a greenhouse for my mother. "Won't bother you at all. Go ahead with your tea."

Camille still stands in the doorway, wearing an uneasy expression on her face. A mass of red curls and corkscrews tumbles past her shoulders to the middle of her back.

She has a lot of hair. It's like being close to a fire—snapping and smoke curling and giving off sparks.

I don't know if it's the dress or the hair, but right now she looks like a different person from the woman who suggested I have a sword fight with her.

I wonder which one is the real Camille?

"Hello." I stand with my hands behind my back, wondering if I should shake her hand. Or hug her.

Or nothing.

"Thanks for joining me," I continue, opting for waving at the spread on the table. "Would you care for some tea?"

"I'm here, aren't I?" Camille asks shortly.

"Yes. Er... I'm very happy about that," I say, trying to fix my mask of bland neutrality into place.

I'm not sure if I succeed because Camille laughs. "You sure about that?" she asks under her breath.

I don't know how to answer so I ignore it. I suspect it's a rhetorical question anyway. Still, she takes a seat on the couch.

"So. Tea." She waves at the cups and the teapot on the low table between us, along with the full tea service—milk, sugar, cream, honey. Plates of scones and squares and tiny sandwiches are set out as well. Mrs. Theissen even added flowers. "Is this what you do here? Have tea parties?"

I begin the tea dance, one I've done countless times before. Pour, offer sugar, milk. Suggest one of the sandwiches or something sweet. Camille likes tea with honey. I make a mental note. "There are some guests who appreciate it."

"Do *you*? Is this your idea of a fun time?"

"I take it that it's not yours."

"This is a full-out high tea. I feel like I should be wearing a fascinator."

"No need for that."

Camille has a way of watching me like she's studying for a test. The way she speaks to me is even worse. She's very

direct. It's like she's trying to make me uncomfortable and throw me off my game.

I have no game with her. None at all. I go in one direction; she switches gear mid-way through and heads in another.

“Is this how you woo your potential princesses?” There she goes again. Sharp. Stabby. Every word meant to prick my armour.

“I'm sure you know that there haven't been many potential princesses.”

I don't know whether to block and repair or whip off my armour and let her do her worst to get it over with.

“Esme would have been if it had worked out.” Camille wears another grey dress; this one is the colour of stone with long sleeves, a high neck, and ends well past her knee. She looks uncomfortable with her knees bent at an awkward angle, like someone instructed her on the proper way to sit while having tea.

Is it bad that I wish she'd relax? Maybe I wouldn't have to dodge so many stabs.

“The show was a long shot,” I say, dismissing it like I wish I'd done when the producers first asked me to do it. “What do you like to do for fun?”

Block. Attack.

Not much of an attack, but it's an attempt.

“The list is long and varied,” she says sarcastically.

“Let's start with athletic endeavours. Other than fencing and wanting to stab me with my own sword.”

That produces a smile. “It was fun,” she concedes. “Next time I want to use the pointy ones. I play pickleball,” she admits.

“We have a court,” I say with an overabundance of excitement. “My father—the king—”

Camille selects a lemon square and a few crumbs drop on her dress. “Yes, I am aware he's the king.”

Her sharpness is unsettling. “Yes. Well, he likes to play and he built a court around the back of the castle. It’s a lot of fun,” I finish.

“What do *you* like to do?” she asks. “Non-athletic endeavours.”

“I like to read.”

Camille juts her chin towards the bookshelves. “I got that. No, actually, what I really want to know is why you went on *The Suitorette*?”

I look up with surprise. I expected to start with small talk, sharing bits of information before moving on to the big stuff. With a sigh, I pick up the teapot. “More?”

She holds out my cup. “Is that your way of not talking about it?”

“It’s all I’ve been doing,” I say, sharper than intended. “First, I had to explain the show, then why I wanted to go on it, then find a way to justify it, and then *not* talk about it. And then when it was finally on TV, all I do is apologize for it.”

Camille gives me a disgusted look. “Why are *you* apologizing? She’s the one who sent you home?”

“Thank you. But I’m sure it’s like you apologizing for the engagement breakups.”

Her eyes widen so I know I scored a hit. Two can play the game of awkward questions.

To give her credit, Camille doesn’t hesitate. “I’ve had to apologize for six so you’ve got some catching up to do. But, seriously, though, I apologize for others because I’ve had a neglectful father figure who has done nothing to cultivate my sense of self-worth.”

I blink at her candour. “Someone has done her therapy.”

“It’s mandatory when you’ve got mother issues.”

Raising my teacup, I smile ruefully. “Welcome to the club.”

Camille leans forward to clink her cup with mine. “But why?” she pushes, clearly not willing to let this go. “You’re the poster boy for Prince Charming. Why a reality show?”

“They asked. The sense of obligation is quite strong in my family.” I chuckle slightly. “Or maybe just me.”

“I’ll remember that.”

“Plus, I’m of an age where I should think about marriage.”

“That doesn’t mean you had to do it.” I pause and she huffs at my hesitation. “Odin, we’ve agreed to do this. There are things you need to know, and things I need to know. We might as well get them out of the way, learn as much as we can, and then I can go home and you can go on with your life. You can do all the sword-fighting you want without me and Betty White interrupting you.”

“You didn’t bring her along. It looks like she could afford to eat a few scones.”

She practically bristles at the perceived criticism. “I’m not convinced she likes you.”

I’m not convinced I like her either but I’m not about to admit that. Not now, when we’re still tiptoeing around the elephant in the room.

Several elephants in the room.

“Is that what you need to know?” I ask. “My reasoning for going on *The Suitorette*?”

“Among other things. It’s a good place to start,” she concedes.

Why did I go on the reality show? Have I really admitted the truth to myself? But Camille, with her dark eyes staring expectantly, and the tiny bit of lemon on her lip that I have the urge to remove with a flick of my tongue, practically demands I tell her my secrets.

I should stop staring at her mouth and thinking of my mouth being somewhere near it.

“It’s simple, really,” I say slowly, focusing on her eyes. “They asked.”

“They must have asked a lot of people. *They* didn’t agree to it.”

“They asked *me*. Not my brothers.”

Camille’s mouth opens slightly, but nothing comes out. Instead, she nods solemnly like she understands. “I’m sure your decision to find love with an outlander wasn’t all that popular with the Odinites,” she finally says.

Relief at not having to unpack my reasons washes over me enough that my hand holding my cup shakes slightly. I set it down. “That’s not their official name.”

“No, that’s what Royalpedia calls them. ‘The obsessive group of fans who push for Prince Odin to become king of Laandia as well as marry a citizen of Laandia, preferably one of their ranks.’ You have quite the fan base. More so than your brothers.”

“That sounds like you’re reciting it word for word.” I enjoy my popularity but the obsessive nature of the group makes me uncomfortable. Especially the ones who continue to argue for me to take the throne.

It makes me guilty when I think of Kalle hearing their calls, finding out about their petitions.

“I’ve spent a lot of time online in the last few days while hanging out in my room avoiding people who don’t like me.”

I tighten my lips. “I apologize for them. I apologize that they upset you. I don’t think I’ve told you that yet.”

“I never asked you for an apology. It’s not your place to apologize for their behaviour.”

“It won’t happen again,” I assure her. “We’ve tightened security around the castle, and you’ll have someone with you at all times.”

“That doesn’t exactly make it better.” She reaches for a shortbread cookie, seemingly unperturbed by discussing her

safety. “I only wish I’d been closer and might have hit one of them.”

I stare at Camille’s mischievous smile. It does something *miraculous* to her face, lights it up like a ray of sun has fallen over it. “I think your aim was pretty good.” I chuckle. “But it would have made it worse had you hit them.”

“I’m sure it would have,” she says. “I do know how to be well-behaved and discreet, but I don’t always choose to be so.”

Before I can say anything, she turns away, smile fading, and studies the room. The wall of bookshelves, filled to bursting, until the hand-drawn map of Laandia hanging over the fireplace catches her attention. “What do you need to know about me?” she asks quietly without meeting my eyes.

There are many things about Camille that I’m curious about but only one question that has been swirling since I’ve seen her again. “Why did you stop writing to me?”

Her gaze turns back to me with surprise. “That’s what you want to know?”

“I do.”

“You already asked.”

“And you didn’t answer.” Camille sips her tea and I get the sense she’s struggling. “The truth, please. I was honest with you about the show.”

She nods into her teacup. “I found out the prefect, Arnaud Dusain, isn’t my biological father,” she says in a low voice.

That’s news to me. “I hadn’t heard that,” I say in a carefully measured tone.

Camille flicks her gaze to where Kate and Jackson sit at the partners’ desk at the far end of the room. “No one knows. I don’t know if this will affect us getting married—your king might not like me being illegitimate—but you wanted the truth.”

“It’s always better to be honest. And we’re a royal family; we can deal with illegitimacy concerns.” It’s not the first time,

is what I don't tell her.

"Still. I'm sure I shouldn't tell you this, but here goes. It was an arranged marriage; my mother never loved Arnaud. She met someone else and fell in love with him, and then came me. This all came out years after her death, so I never got to ask her about it. I had a difficult time dealing with it," she finishes.

"I can imagine." I fight the urge to take the hand that's fisted in her lap.

"It came out during our pen-pal time."

"I wish you'd told me."

"I didn't think you'd want to know. No—" She holds up a hand to stop my protest. "I didn't think you *should* know. It was private... and embarrassing."

"So you stopped writing to me rather than tell me something private that you were dealing with."

"You weren't a good pen pal anyway," she accuses. "It took you forever to get back to me. I wrote *every day*."

"I still have some of your letters," I admit.

"*Why?* Especially now, with the press wanting to know every detail about your life. If anyone found them..." She winces. "Please don't let anyone find them. Some of the things I wrote..."

"I won't." I try and sound reassuring because the last thing I need is to embarrass Camille again. "But I thought they might have some historical significance. I imagined them being found long after I was gone. People might like to know I had a great love in my youth. And now that we're going to end up together—"

Camille stills when I mention the word love. "But this isn't a love story."

Her words are an arrow aimed straight at me. Maybe not to the heart, but glancing off my shoulder at least.

“No.” The word is garbled, almost undistinguishable, because, to me, Camille *was* my great love story.

I just didn't realize it then. But thinking about it, seeing Camille again makes me hyperaware that there hasn't been anyone since her who has made me feel even remotely as alive as I did that night we spent together.

Unfortunately, it seems she no longer feels the same.

Camille

S AINT PIERRE DOESN'T HAVE hotels that serve high tea for little girls to go with their grandmothers. Plus, I don't like tea. It has no flavour and it smells. And I like the crusts on my sandwiches.

But the lemon squares are pretty good, and the tea isn't as bad as I thought, and Odin...

I don't know what to think about Odin.

When I say this isn't a love story, an expression crosses Odin's face that has my stomach twisting like a screw. It's as if

he doesn't agree. But... how? Why? I thought it was all one-sided. It seemed one-sided.

If Odin felt the same as I did, I must have missed several big signals about it—which is possible, but still...

"You know who might have a love story happening, though..." I lower my voice as I jerk my head across the room where Kate and Jackson are laughing together. I'd much rather talk about someone else's relationship than my own. Not that this can be classified as a relationship.

Yet. We're still tiptoeing around. The endgame is set, but the question is how we get there.

"Who?" Odin demands.

I put my finger to my lips. "Your person and mine. No, don't look!" Odin whips his head around to look over at them. "It's cute." I noticed quite a bit of laughing as Kate helped me get ready. Not that she did much; I think she stayed to talk to Jackson. He smiles a lot when she's around.

"What's cute?" Odin demands.

"The two of them. Our minions."

"Minions?"

"People," I concede. "Have you noticed how tongue-tied Jackson gets whenever Kate is around? It's very surprising since he's very capable at his job. Don't tell him that, though. And your Kate—"

"She's not my Kate."

"I'm sure she could have been once upon a time."

"No." He shakes his head. "Gunnar."

"Ah." That will need further investigation. "She becomes very smiley when Jackson is around."

"Kate is always smiley. She's a very happy person."

"Very smiley. Too smiley. I there might be a connection."

"I think I'm missing something."

He's really not getting it and his obtuseness is... adorable. Like rubbing-off-some-of- my-sharp-edges-adorable. Making me smile kind of cuteness. "I think my Jackson and your Kate like each other. Like, really like each other." I make a circle with my thumb and forefinger and poke my other finger through it.

Odin looks horrified. "I don't need to know that." He seems startled when I laugh and sneaks another peek across the room. "Are they really together?" He leans closer.

Close enough that I notice he smells really nice.

"Not yet," I say in a low voice. "But they could be. We should help them."

"Kate doesn't need any help."

"Of course *you* don't think so. You're getting married and you haven't done any actual proposing."

He sits back quickly. "I... no. I haven't?"

"I don't think so. I don't recall hearing anything of the sort." I take a sip of tea, very interested in trying to read Odin's emotions. He was no doubt raised as I was: don't show what you're feeling.

Living in my Saint Pierre bubble means I don't mingle much with high society. My father used to take me to events when I was a little girl, as a replacement for my mother, but puberty coincided with my inability to keep my mouth shut. I'm not sure what was worse—my lack of femininity or my lack of a filter.

I've always had problems with the latter, hence the throwing of the snowball. But I've never seen Odin break. He's like a statue. A big hunk of finely chiselled rock.

That is now showing a hint of erosion. "Should I have made you an offer myself?" he asks with all seriousness.

If we weren't discussing a marriage proposal to me, I'd think his expression was earnest and sweet. But we are discussing me, and him and the fact that he actually never proposed isn't sweet at all.

“Does that bother you?” Odin asks.

Yes. But I bite my tongue because that is seventeen-year-old Camille’s answer. “Of course it doesn’t bother me,” I scoff with more heat than necessary. “This is an engagement between the fathers more than you and me. Might actually have been fun to have them propose to each other. Lord Arnaud, down on one knee, pledging his heart and soul to the king. He’s had pretty good practice with potential fathers-in-law.”

Odin smiles slightly, no doubt imagining the reserved and refined prefect with his more outspoken father. “Potential fathers-in-law,” he muses. “Let’s bring that into the discussion, shall we?”

I roll my eyes like it means nothing. “Six engagements. Six broken engagements. I’m sure you got the memo. Men find it difficult to remain attached to me.” Add in a shrug. “What can you do?”

“Who were they?” he asks.

“I’m sure it was in the file.”

“It shouldn’t be unless you want to share it. Your past is your business.”

“Until it’s broadcast all over the internet and you get a group of lovestruck fans throwing ice balls at your betrothed,” I point out.

“I told you, it will be the last time that happens,” Odin says and his sudden authority makes me look at him in a new light. “There will be interest, however. The world likes a love story, so there will be added attention until the wedding, but it won’t last forever.”

There’s that word again. *Love*. Each time he says it, the neck of my dress tightens a little more.

“Maybe all this attention is because you got dumped on television,” I muse, my tone sharp with a little of the bitterness oozing out like honey. “I’m just here to pick up the pieces. I’m a nice photo op. You have to admit, the timing for all this is more than a coincidence.”

Odin reaches forward and offers me the plate of scones. “Try one. They’re good with some of the blackberry jam.”

I can’t help the surprised laugh but don’t take one. “Is that going to be your response when I’m rude to you? To feed me?”

His lips curve up, hinting at a smile as he takes a scone and breaks it open, adding a dollop of jam. His moves are slow and careful and I don’t need to be an expert in behaviour to know that he’s trying to find the right words to smooth this over. “I don’t see you as rude,” he says finally, handing me a jam-covered half. “I see a strong woman, probably slightly opinionated and who has had to work to get what she wants.”

I pause, still holding the scone.

“I thought announcing the engagement would offset the embarrassment of the show,” he admits, his face once again expressionless. “It was an unfortunate mistake.”

“No.” I shake my head, setting down the scone on the plate. “It was a good move. I can’t be upset because I would have done the same thing. It just didn’t feel good for me. A heads-up might have been nice.”

“I’m sorry,” he says, his voice and expression sincere.

I stare at him for a long moment. “I really think you are. Why did you tell Esme about me?”

Odin’s cheeks redden and I have a feeling the Prince of Laandia flushes with shame.

Shame about *me* or about outing me? “You’re not holding back with asking the tough stuff, are you?” he asks with a nervous laugh.

“I told you, let’s get this over with and get on with our lives.” I motion for him to continue as I take a bite of the scone. It *is* good with jam.

“When Esme asked me about my past, I needed something to tell her. Something romantic,” Odin says, his words rushing together.

This time I can't hide my surprise. "And that was *me*? I was your most romantic?"

He meets my gaze, solid and unwavering and— "Yes."

"Me?"

Every thought, every hope and dream about the night we first met comes rushing back.

It wasn't just me.

It wasn't only me who fell head-over-heels with a stranger. Whatever happened after happened, but that night was as real for him as it was for me.

My shoulders lift and my heart puffs, swelling enough to take flight. I stare at my plate so he doesn't notice the sudden wetness in my eyes.

"Why do you find that so surprising?" Odin asks in a gentle voice which snaps me out of it.

We met *ten years* ago and a lot has happened since then. But in many ways, nothing has happened. I may be his romantic memory, but that was a long time ago. "Have you looked at yourself lately?" The flirtatious note in my voice falls flat and breaks the connection.

Odin stares into his teacup. I find myself watching him. Wondering about him. "I apologize for mentioning your name," he says finally. "For throwing you under the bus, as you'd say. But in my defence, the producers promised to edit out your name."

"It's not much of a defence."

"No. It's not. I was trying to prove something, and I ended up hurting you."

I take the last bite and set the plate back on the table between us with a note of finality. "Thank you for apologizing. I suppose it could have been worse."

"Will this clear the air between us?" he asks in a low voice.

It's easy to push down the hurt, but it's the other strange feeling that I'm having trouble with. The feeling that likes looking into Odin's eyes and seeing the softness there. The part that likes seeing him smile.

"There's only one more thing," I say. I jerk my head to the far end of the room. "What are we going to do with them?"

Odin looks confused. "Why do we have to do anything with them?"

"Because it will be nice. I'm not saying we meddle *much*, but they deserve to be happy. I can't imagine it's easy being at your beck and call. I know it's not for Jackson."

Odin chuckles and the strong, stoic rock crumbles a little. "What did you have in mind?"

"Nothing too strenuous. We have to spend time together to make this look real, don't we?"

"We do need to be seen in public."

"We'll take them with us. Everywhere. If we constantly throw them together, then the magic will happen."

His eyebrow lifts at *magic*. "Unless they hate each other."

"Does it look like they're going to hate each other?"

"True. So, what's the plan?"

We lean over the tea service and soon there is more whispered conversation between us than at the far side of the room.

Another brick falls off the wall around my heart and I catch my breath. This is supposed to be an arranged marriage, but it might be starting to feel like a real one too easily.

18

Odin

I WALK CAMILLE BACK to her room after tea, with Kate and Jackson trailing after us.

Tea lasted longer than expected—so long that I am going to have to rush to get ready for the fundraising dinner in Battle Harbour tonight.

I'm surprised how much I'd like to bring Camille with me. I could bring her—I am a prince of Laandia, although I don't like using the prince card unless I really have to—but I know my hostess won't appreciate the extra person at the last minute.

“I won’t be able to have dinner with you tonight,” I tell Camille apologetically.

“You haven’t had dinner with me since I’ve been here.” She laughs. “Why start now?”

Because things feel different. I let down my guard with Camille and it changes things.

At least it does for me.

“Tomorrow night,” I promise.

“With the king,” Jackson adds, checking something on his phone. “He’s back tomorrow and he’d like you to join him for a family dinner.”

That’s news to me as well. “Really?”

“Are you part of this family dinner?” Camille asks me. “Since you seem surprised.”

I smooth my expression as I glance at Kate. “It’s on your schedule,” she whispers.

“Of course I’ll be there,” I say in a hearty voice. “Looking forward to it. But tonight, I have a prior engagement in town.”

Camille smirks. Normally, I don’t appreciate smirking, but on Camille, it’s... attractive. “Got a hot date?”

“No!”

“You don’t date?”

“Of course not! I mean, I did, but now—”

“Are you saying we’re exclusive?”

A laugh bursts out at the absurdity of the conversation. We’re engaged to be married and she’s talking about me dating? And then Camille smiles with the mischievous gleam in her eye.

“There is nothing hot date-like about tonight unless you call making small talk and asking for money hot.”

She shakes her head. “I really don’t. But it’s necessary at times. Have fun.”

“What will you be doing tonight?”

She turns to Jackson. “I don’t know, what will we be doing tonight? I know!” She glances at Kate. “Why don’t you join us and we’ll talk about you taking me shopping. With Jackson.”

Jackson’s expression suggests he’s not completely on board with the shopping idea.

“Want to join us?” Camille asks me.

“Odin should not come shopping with us,” Kate says quickly.

“I like shopping,” I protest.

“Uh-huh.” Kate eyes me with unease. “Do you remember the last time you went shopping?”

“There’s nothing to worry about,” I soothe.

“You bought a horse!” Kate exclaims. “And a Vespa. And a table for twelve, which is probably still in storage.”

“The table was handmade,” I protest. “It was a beautiful table.”

“And cost more than what I made in a year, at my last job, which paid so much better than what you’re paying me, FYI.”

“We’re not talking about your salary,” I point out.

“Yes, but it’s fun to bring it up because it makes you uncomfortable,” she sings and Camille smoothers a laugh. “But back to the topic at hand. You have a shopping problem, O, you know that, right?”

“I don’t,” I argue still watching Camille’s expression. I like hearing her laugh. Kate might find herself getting a raise if she makes Camille laugh more.

Camille smiles widely. “Oh, it’s going to make it a much better day if you come along.”

“I’d had a bad day. It made me feel better,” I mutter.

“It did not make the castle coffers feel better, which is why *you* have to tell Mrs. T if you come with us.”

“Fine.” Right now, confessing my shopping sins to Mrs. Theissen would be worth it to spend more time with Camille. “I’m coming. And Camille?”

She looks up at me, mid-laugh, with soft eyes. “I do consider us exclusive. Just so you know.”

The laugh fades but a smile still teases at the corners of her mouth. “Duly noted.”



After I leave Camille, I know I should get ready for the fundraiser.

Instead of putting on my tuxedo, which hangs pressed and ready for me, I head into the depths of my dressing room.

I keep a box of personal items there, far away from the prying eyes of my brothers and the housekeeping staff.

I wasn’t entirely honest with Camille; I didn’t keep a few of her letters to me.

I kept them all.

One hundred and ninety-five letters addressed to Odin Erickson, number one Cavefree Drive, Battle Harbour, Laandia, like I’m a normal, regular person.

Six months of letters from a girl to a boy.

The envelopes range in size, and Camille used a variety of pen colours, but what was inside remained the same—Camille told me about her life.

There were day-to-day events that made her laugh—or sad—or something she thought I’d find interesting. She spoke of the politics of Saint Pierre, what she agreed with and what she didn’t. There were more of the latter, and she would go into detail about what she would change if and when she had the opportunity to become prefect of the French territory.

I’d forgotten how much she once wanted the position.

Camille wrote of her plans and goals, hopes and dreams, like any other girl would to the boy who stole her heart.

I didn't mean to steal it and never meant to hurt her. But I couldn't help being drawn to her—then, and now. Camille had fascinated me since I laid eyes on her.

She still does. That part hasn't changed a bit.

19

Camille

THE NERVES FROM THE thought of spending the day with Odin aren't as bad as before we had tea.

I still don't know what to wear, but that's the point of the shopping excursion.

Excursion is a good name for it since there is an enormous SUV waiting at the castle door for us.

Odin is also waiting at the castle door, dressed in jeans and a thin jacket over a navy wool sweater that does magical things to his blue eyes.

Not as much as the jeans also do magical things. His legs look endless, the fabric hugging his thighs, his— “Good morning, Betty White,” Odin says cheerfully as I approach, his gaze sliding from the dog in my arms to my face and back again.

Those four words both soothe my unease and ramp it up when I realize I’ve been looking forward to spending time with Odin.

Maybe since I’ve been here.

Betty White growls deep in her chest, but no barking. “Good job in your attempt to win her over,” I say.

“I aim to please,” Odin says.

I set Betty White on the ground in case she needs to go potty before we start off. Everything is still snow-covered and I suspect will be for a while, but it’s lost the freshness-after-a-new-snowfall feeling. “You’re not training this morning?” I ask him, trying not to stare at the legs in the jeans.

Odin shakes his head. “Time to shop instead,” he says. “Plus, I thought you might join me again tomorrow.” He raises his eyebrow expectantly, and I nod. And keep nodding as he motions me to the car.

What am I so happy about? He asked me to work out—it’s not like he went down on bended knee.

Which, we confirmed yesterday, he has not done. I don’t expect him to, now that I’m a done deal, but if the surge of excitement at his wanting to train with me is anything to go by, what would it be like if he really did actually propose?

The thought of that eclipses my concern about another group crowded by the castle gates. Odin takes my hand as he waves at them, and they cheer.

Betty White barks at them even as she leaves a little present on the snow-covered castle lawn.

This time, with Odin by my side, the crowd doesn’t jeer—or even mention me—which is better.

But no one likes being ignored.

Especially when Odin drops my hand. I scoop up Betty White and climb into the SUV.

Kate and Jackson climb in after us, taking the far seats in the back. This feels more like a date than drinking tea in the castle, except for the security detail.

Odin catches me stealing glances at Tex. Or Turk. He did introduce them, but both men looked like carbon copies—bald, wide-shouldered and barrel-chested, and shorter than Odin. The way he wielded a sword, I imagine Odin is perfectly capable of defending himself. “I think we’ll be fine with only my security today,” he says, misinterpreting my glance.

“I should hope so.” I pause for a moment. “I don’t need a bodyguard. That’s what Betty White is for.”

Odin looks at the dog seated on my lap. Betty White curls her lip at him. “That may be so, but you’re going to be a princess,” Odin points out. “You’ll need security when we get married, especially when you become more well-known.”

When we get married.

I know that’s what’s going to happen, but hearing Odin say the words really drives it home.

I did a lot of thinking after Jackson left for the day yesterday. He left with Kate, which I think is a good sign.

I did a lot of thinking about Odin—revisiting memories, self-reflecting about the months I spent writing to him and unpacking the hurt I felt when I never heard from him again.

I told Betty White all about that night. Yes, I talk to my dog, because at times, she’s the only one who will listen. Plus, I’m alone in a castle—I need to hear my own voice at times.

Last night was one of the first times in a long time that I was lonely. I’m used to being alone, and I don’t mind it. But after Jackson left with Kate, and knowing Odin was out doing something without me, and that there wasn’t another person in the castle who cared about me... Lonely.

It made me wonder what life with Odin would be like.

Being lonely made me think about that quite a bit.

The SUV heads out of the castle grounds and Odin, with a grim smile, waves to the group.

I'm pleased when the group has to move off the road and into a snowbank.

I'm completely anonymous at home, which is a good thing since Lord Arnaud isn't very popular. I've had a few of the old-timers confuse me with my mother, but other than making me miss her, it's not a bad thing.

"You'll get used to it," Odin says into the quiet of the SUV. "When you spend time with me, we'll use my security team. They're very discrete. You'll barely notice they're around."

Kate laughs from the backseat. "Yeah, right."

"When do I have to spend time with you?"

It's not the best way to ask such a question, as proven by Jackson's hiss of warning from the seat behind, but sometimes there's no stop-gate in my mind to prevent me from putting my foot in my mouth.

This one isn't too bad; it only puts Odin on the spot for a moment.

"When would you like to spend time with me?" It almost sounds like Odin is eager. Excited at the thought.

"I don't know," I tell him honestly. "I don't know anything about how you spend your days, other than that you like to swing your sword. Do you have a job?" An innocent question but it comes out harsher than I meant to. "I mean," I correct before Jackson can hiss another warning at me, "how do you like to spend your days?"

"Technically, I don't have a job, but I do have responsibilities," Odin says. "With Kate's help, I'd like to reschedule some of the less pressing ones so we can get to know each other better. Would that be acceptable to you?"

"Yes, that will be acceptable." I glance down at my hands so Odin can't see how my eyes dance at the thought.

"I'm glad we're in agreement." When I look up, Odin is watching me and a little bit of me melts, like chocolate left in

the sun. “Look,” he says, pointing to the side window.

The car rounds a curve and the sight of Battle Harbour opens before us. We’re still high enough for the town to look like a Playmobile playset, but even from this distance, it looks more alive and bustling than the towns back home. And the view of the ocean from here is breathtaking—the whitecaps roll in, boats rocking against the pier.

I can see a fishing boat set off into the Atlantic on its lonely journey. “That looks cold,” I say, hugging Betty White.

“It is, even in the summer. Each of my brothers and I spent a summer working on a boat, catching cod. Amazing experience, but not sure I could do it for life.”

“My father—biological father—was a fisherman.” I keep my voice low but I have no doubt the others are listening. “That’s all I’ve been able to find out. He wasn’t from Saint Pierre, so I can’t ask his family.”

“There has to be a record of him somewhere. Maybe we can find out more,” Odin suggests. “If you’d like to.”

It’s been ten years since I found out Lord Arnaud wasn’t my father. The first few years, I drove myself crazy trying to find out more, all the while keeping my search a secret, and then I gave up.

“Maybe,” is all I say.

It’s like Odin knows not to push.

It’s a quick ride into town and I spend it staring out the window.

“Turk, can you leave us by the main square?” Odin asks as we arrive. “Everything we need should be within walking distance from there.”

Turk has day-old scruff, whereas Tex is clean-shaven. Hopefully, they don’t switch that up on me.

Up close, Battle Harbour looks even better than from my view from the window of the castle.

“There’s so much colour,” I exclaim, turning slowly in a circle, holding Betty White in my arms. The main square is something out of a Disney movie. Storefronts are painted blue and green and pink, with yellow and magenta signs hanging down. Christmas boughs speckled with snow adorn the streetlights and grace containers in front of every store, red bows giving them another pop of colour.

And like in the movies, everyone is out and about with friendly words and wide smiles on their faces, almost as if they’re about to break into song.

It wouldn’t even surprise me if they did.

Maybe it’s because there are three pubs, two restaurants, and a candy store surrounding the square. Happy, laughing people full of food and beer and candy.

Doesn’t seem like a bad place to live.

“They’re a vibrant people,” Odin says. “They live at the edge of an ocean, in a cold and often unforgiving country, and yet there is a love of art and music that still astounds me.”

The pride in his voice is startling. I’ve heard my father speak of the people of Saint Pierre and he’s often dismissive and annoyed. Odin would be a much different ruler than my father.

“Is there anything in particular you’d like to see while you’re in town?” Odin asks. “There’s the Maritime Museum and a display of Viking artifacts in the town hall that is interesting.”

A strange sensation floods me—embarrassment. I did no research on the country he’s so proud of. I had no idea that people paint their houses a rainbow of shades more suitable to a stuffed animal collection. I don’t know if attending the market in the centre of town is a social as well as a shopping event. I’m not ready for the smiles on everyone’s faces, including Odin’s.

“Maybe we can start with coffee,” I suggest.

“I think she needs a unicorn froth,” Kate says.

“Coffee it is,” Odin says, placing a hand on the small of my back to steer me in the direction of a nearby shop. “And then we hit the stores.”

“You’re entirely too excited about this shopping,” I grumble. But who can stay grumpy with Odin beside them, so attractive in his navy sweater and aviator sunglasses? He stays close enough for me to smell the citrus and woody scent of his cologne, and I’m not ashamed to admit I take quite a few deep breaths.

How did that Suitorette not kick everyone off the show to keep him?

Odin leads us across the square with a smile and a kind word to everyone who stops him, and there are many. He’s so natural. I have a feeling Odin treats everyone the same—from the woman trailing three children who asks about his sister, the older man who shares his complaint about the rowdiness of the fishermen on the wharf at the end of the week, the man who grabs his shoulders from behind—

“Gunnar!” Odin exclaims.

“Brother!” Gunnar’s smile is directed at me rather than Odin. “And new sister-to-be. Fancy meeting you here.”

Odin glances sideways at Kate, who seems to melt into the crowd trailing after us. Gunnar notices and his smile falters a bit at the sight of her. “Good to see you, Kate.”

“Hello, Gunnar,” she says in a tight voice.

“Hello, Kate’s friend,” Gunnar says, in an equally tight voice.

“This isn’t—he’s only—” Kate stammers.

It’s Jackson who steps forward. “Jackson Henry, assistant to Lady Camille,” he says formally. “Nice to meet you, Your Royal Highness.”

Gunnar nods, quickly regaining his composure. “Did you know I was in town?” Odin asks him.

Gunnar turns on the twinkle again. “Course I did. Mrs. Theissen is always happy to share your whereabouts with me.

Especially when I take it upon myself to come meet your lovely bride-to-be before family dinner tonight.” Instead of holding out his hand to shake, Gunnar reaches for mine, clasping it in both of his. “Lady Camille. Welcome to Laandia.”

“I’ve already welcomed her,” Odin mutters.

“Then this is twice as nice,” Gunnar says, his blue eyes never leaving mine.

“Hello,” I say. Gunnar Erickson has a presence—shorter than his brother, and of equal attractiveness, but his smile is bigger and brighter and his eyes a shocking shade of blue.

“Hi.” Gunnar squeezes my hand and doesn’t release it. “Where are you kids off to?”

“We’re getting coffee, and then some shopping,” I offer, wondering how to extract my fingers from his grip. And why I feel a strong need to do so.

“Coffee,” Gunnar repeats with a grin at Odin. “Here less than a week, and you’ve already corrupted Odie with coffee.”

“There are other things to drink,” Odin says. “You can let go of her hand, you know.”

“Her hand was unclaimed. Someone should be holding it.”

“It doesn’t have to be you,” Odin mutters, and I glance over with surprise. If I didn’t know any better, I might think he is bothered by his brother’s attention to me.

“There are other things to do in town!” Gunnar insists, blithely ignoring the thundercloud of Odin’s expression. “The docks and the pub and, I know, that little spot behind the school where I caught you kissing Yasmin Harvey. Your first day out—”

“I want coffee,” I announce, trying to ignore the jolt that came from the notion of Odin kissing someone.

“She wants coffee.” Odin smiles at me, and just like that, the colourful people and storefronts and homes, and even Gunnar, pale in comparison.

It's a different smile than what he shared with the townsfolk, sending a much different jolt through me at the sight.

I like this one better.

"Let's get you coffee," Gunnar cries, stepping between Odin and me, with his hands on our shoulders.

"I think we're good on our own," Odin tells him, pulling away from his brother.

"It was nice to meet you," I add. I smile at Gunnar, reaching over to tuck my hand into the crook of Odin's arm.

Odin puts his hand over mine, his smile widening as we walk away.

When I glance over my shoulder, Gunnar stands there with a smirk on his handsome face.

They're all so handsome. Gunnar with his twinkling eyes, and Odin—

I can feel the strength of Odin's arm through his jacket. This is the first time I've intentionally touched him and it came naturally like we should always walk like this.

"So who is Yasmin Harvey and why were you kissing her in a place where your little brother could see?" I ask with my own smirk.

Odin laughs and tightens his hand on mine.

20

Odin

FREE OF GUNNAR, I lead the way across the square to the coffee shop, pointing out The King's Hat as we pass.

"It's quite profitable," I say, proud of what my brother has accomplished.

"I would think it would be *very* profitable." Camille slows her steps as we pass, the wooden sign overhead creaking slightly in the constant wind. "Are we going inside?"

Ahead, Kate pauses and glances over her shoulder, as if waiting for my decision. "Not today," I say firmly, leading Camille past.

“Do you not want to see any more of your brothers today?”
Camille asks with a quirk of her lips.

“Not right now, no.”

“Any reason why?”

I’m not about to tell Camille that when it comes to me and my brothers, I’m always pushed to the side. I’m the serious one, the responsible one. Gunnar has the charm, Kalle his broody bad-boy persona, and people just want to fix Bo. It’s why I gave Gunnar the brush-off—if he came along with us, or if we stopped in at Kalle’s, I would lose her attention.

And I want to keep it all to myself. Not because I want to keep her to myself in a possessive way but because I enjoy her company. And today, I’d like to keep her focus on me.

“You’ll meet the rest of them tonight,” Kate calls over her shoulder.

Camille continues on, her hand still tucked in the crook of my arm but she keeps her eyes on the door of the pub as we walk by. “Do you want to be king?” she asks suddenly.

The question is worse than getting pushed aside by my brothers. “Why? Why do you ask?”

“I think I have a right to know, especially since if you were king, as your wife, I would be queen. Isn’t that how it goes?”

“I’m not going to be king,” I say firmly.

“The people seem to want you to.”

“Laandia is a monarchy, not a democracy. I want my father to always be king because that means we’ll never lose him. But since that’s not possible, Kalle will make a fine king.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

Because I don’t want to. It’s too confusing and complicated for a nice day.

“How’s this for coffee?” I ask instead as we reach Coffee for the Sole, with the colourful painted fish on the windows. Even though Turk and Jackson both jump forward, I hold the

door open for Camille. The smell of freshly ground beans blows out into the chilly air.

It's as busy as always, the tiny tables filled and a shorter than usual lineup. Like everything in Battle Harbour, it's colourful with chairs painted every shade of the rainbow and colourful prints depicting the history of the town on the walls.

I greet a few people, smiling at all, but I know the patrons will leave us alone. It's why I feel so comfortable bringing Camille into town without a full security detail; the people of Battle Harbour aren't fazed by the royals who live among them. It's mutual trust and respect and it's the way my father has always done things.

It's the way I would do things if I were ever king.

I catch hold of Kate's arm as she heads to the counter. "You okay?" I ask in a low voice. Kate gives a sharp nod. "First time you've seen him since you've been back?" Another nod and I give her shoulder a sympathetic squeeze.

It was awkward when it was Gunnar and Kate, but it's almost more uncomfortable now.

Still, Kate doesn't look fazed as she steps up to the counter with a smile at Silas, the red-haired barista who took over the coffee shop from his parents. "She came back," Silas crows.

Kate rolls her eyes. "She came back."

I nudge her shoulder. "You could at least sound happy about it," I grouse good-naturedly.

"Why wouldn't I be happy, being at your beck and call 24/7?" Kate asks sweetly as she makes a face.

"There's still always a place for you here if you can't hack the castle life," Silas assures her with a grin. His gaze shifts to me, and the grin widens. "Highness."

"Silas. I'd appreciate you not trying to poach my staff." I've been friendly with Silas for years, teaming up on various fundraisers and town events. I have my Viking settlements I'm trying to raise money and awareness for, and Silas, a budding astronomer, spearheads the new planetarium outside of town.

Silas raises his hands. “Can’t help it. She’s still the only one I trust to make me tea. What can I get you all today?”

While Kate gives our order, I glance at Camille, who is looking around the shop with unconcealed interest. “Best coffee in town,” I tell her.

Camille scrunches her nose. “Coffee... and fish?”

I chuckle. Along with the colourful chairs and ceramic dishes, there is a lot of fish décor, like the nets hanging from the ceiling, aprons covered with various cartoon fish, the clock with salmon for the hour hand, and one of those tacky mechanical fish that start flapping when you walk by.

“We are a fishing village,” I tell her. “Silas likes to remind the townsfolk of that. Silas?” I raise my voice and put a hand on Camille’s shoulder. “I’d like you to meet Lady Camille,” I say when he looks over. “My fiancé.”

I hear Camille’s quick intake. This will take some getting used to, for both of us.

“I wondered if this was her.” Silas wipes his hands on his apron and reaches across the counter. “It is my great pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lady Camille.” He offers his hand and Camille takes it, pink staining her cheeks.

“I like your shop,” she says, sounding a little flustered and I wonder if it’s meeting a friend of mine, or how I introduced her.

I like to think it’s the fiancé word I used.

“Thank you. Third-generation purveyors of the finest coffee in Laandia. Welcome to Battle Harbour.”

“Thank you.” When she turns to me, Camille’s eyes are shining, and I have to wonder what life was like for her on Saint Pierre.

We take the drinks to go and wave goodbye to Silas. Heading back outside, the scent of roasted coffee beans masks the ever-present smell of the sea.

“What is this?” Camille asks with delight. Her cup has no lid and the frothy steamed milk is pink, blue, and green.

“Vanilla latte,” Kate tells her. “With an added bonus. It’s called unicorn froth.”

“You said you like colour,” I add.

Camille looks up at me and my insides give a pleasurable twist. “I do.” Suddenly, she scoops a fingerful of whipped cream from my cup of hot chocolate. “I like whipped cream too.” She pops her finger into her mouth, sucking off the cream.

Watching her, it takes me two attempts to swallow. “Did you want to share?” I ask hoarsely.

Camille laughs. “Sure.” And then she dips her finger into her colourful froth and wipes it on the end of my nose.

Of course there’s a flash of a camera before I can wipe it off. “Maybe I don’t want to share,” I grumble as I track down the camera across the street.

I pose with Camille because it’s expected of me.

I put my arm around her because I want to.

“I’ve never been that good at it,” Camille says after the impromptu photo shoot has finished. She’s as cheerful as I’ve ever seen her. “Sharing, that is. Let’s get this shopping stuff done.”

“I don’t understand why you don’t like to shop,” Kate asks as we cross the street.

“Jackson,” Camille says. “Would you like to tell Kate where there is to shop in Saint Pierre?”

“There’s the Carrefour,” he offers.

“Which is like your Walmart,” Camille adds. “Good store, but I prefer a little more variety in the clothes department, especially when I need something for a formal occasion.”

“Let’s see if we can find you something here.”



First up is Helen’s Hunt, where the young woman behind the cash register almost has an apoplexy when we walk in. Most

of the townspeople might not cause a scene when we walk around but they still get excited.

Once inside, Helen herself steps in to help Kate find jeans and casual shirts for Camille.

“This is too much,” Camille complains as Helen escorts her to the changing rooms at the back of the store. Betty White skips around, sniffing in corners and under racks, followed by Jackson trying to keep an eye on her.

“Just try things on,” Kate urges. “It doesn’t mean you have to get it all.”

“There’s no way I *can* get it all. Saint Pierre doesn’t exactly have a royal coffer, and even if it did, there’s no way I have access to it.”

“It’s my treat,” I call, rifling through a rack of men’s flannel shirts and wondering if Bo needs anything. I enjoy shopping, but since there’s not much I need for myself, I like to take the time to get things for others. Buying presents is even better than getting things for me.

“No, it’s not.”

I look up to see that Camille has pulled open the heavy curtain and stands with hands on hips, glaring at me.

I don’t want to focus on the glare because those hips...

Since she’s been here, every time I’ve seen Camille, she’s been wearing some shapeless dress or baggy clothes, so much that I’ve forgotten that there is a *body* under those clothes. One with curves and *curves*. Curvy curves.

“I like those jeans,” I say unnecessarily since I can’t stop staring. Faded blue, snug in all the right areas, worn with a rust-coloured shirt that also hugs certain... things. She’s even taken the time to sling a belt into the loops, the brown leather emphasizing a tiny waist.

I had my arm around that waist yesterday and I’m hit with a very strong urge to put my arm around it again. Maybe both arms. “And that’s a nice shirt.”

“You’re not buying them.”

“Okay,” I say, my gaze fixed on how Camille’s hand settles on her hip. “I mean—no, I’ll get them for you.” I drag my eyes upward, to her heart-shaped face and stormy eyes. “It’s my treat.”

“I don’t need a treat,” she says slowly.

I blink. “I know that,” I stumble on the words because seeing her in something other than grey is more of a treat for me than unicorn froth can ever be.

“You’re not paying for my clothes. This isn’t some Pretty Woman shopping trip.”

“But I’d like to,” I tell her. “You’re my guest.”

Kate sighs. “He likes buying things for people,” she says to Camille. “It’s not worth arguing.”

“I’m not people,” Camille insists. “And I’m not a *guest*. I’m going to be your wife and I pay my own way.”

I hold up my hands in surrender as I take a step toward her. “You are going to be my wife, and that means you’ll be joining the royal family, which means, you’ll have access to the royal coffer, as you call it. Right?”

“Yes, but I’m not... I don’t want to be...”

“A burden? Dependent on me?” I offer. “Trust me, you’ll earn everything I spend today and more. Members of the royal family have duties, like a job, and you’ll be no exception.”

“A job?”

“Pretty much.”

Kate has quickly taken herself away to the other side of the store with Jackson in tow. And Tex stands a few feet away, expression stoic, eyes fixed on the door, so he’s not a deterrent to my fingers reaching for Camille’s hand still on her hip.

I bypass her hand and slide my arm around her waist. As I stare down at Camille, her eyes flicker shut for a breath before popping open for another glare.

This one is a bit softer.

“You’re not buying everything for me. I don’t need much.”

Kate explained the contents of Camille’s closet to me earlier. “You’re welcome to get as much as you want. What about you pay for every third item?” I suggest. “We’ll share the cost. Equal partnership.”

“That’s not equal.”

“I’d prefer to get it all for you, so at least it’s a start. I can compromise.”

Camille’s scornful expression droops at my words. “I’m not that good at it,” she admits in a low voice.

“I’ve noticed.” She hasn’t made a move to step away from me, which is good because I might have to step with her. I like being this close to her.

My hand strays around her waist, slowly moving up and down even as I keep holding her gaze, which widens as my fingers splay along her lower back. “We can work on that.”

“Work on what?” Camille’s voice is hesitant, like she’s having trouble catching her breath.

“Compromise. Equal partnership. I really like this shirt,” I add in a low voice. “It’s a very nice material.”

Camille’s eyes have lost the storm. She worries her bottom lip. “I like it, too.”

“It’s a pretty colour.” Before I can stop myself, I push a wayward curl behind her ear. “You’re pretty.”

Her face relaxes into a shy smile. “Thank you,” she whispers.

“I should have said that earlier.”

“You told me... before.”

Before... In the darkness under the bridge, with the fireworks in the distance providing just enough light for me to see her face.

The face I kissed; her eyebrow, the tip of her nose to make her laugh. Those wide, smiling lips...

“You’re prettier now.” I lean closer, the scent of apples surrounding me, wondering if Camille would taste the same. “If that’s possible. I think—”

“I found something else for Lady Camille,” Helen calls, bustling toward us with something blue in her hand.

I bite back a curse and manage to smile at the owner as Camille disappears back into the changing room. “I’m sure it will be perfect.”

Camille

O DIN WAS ABOUT TO kiss me.

I think.

Maybe.

Even the possibility sends me into a frenzy of dancing feet, hopping around the tiny cubicle with both hands pressed over my mouth in case an unladylike squeal tries to escape.

Can Odin see my feet?

Oh, he so can. If he looks down, Odin will see me dancing in here like an idiot.

The realization still doesn't stop my smile. Pressing my back against the mirror, I touch the spot on my waist where Odin had his hand only a moment ago.

What would have happened? Maybe...?

I don't want to hope. I *can't* hope because that has never worked out for me. I keep my expectations low because if I assume something, it never works out. If I want it, I'll be disappointed. I learned early never to wish on a birthday candle or even a falling star because it's been proven time and again—if I make a wish, the worst will happen.

I still my racing heart, letting my smile fade. *Maybe*. That's all I'll give myself.

I'm buying this shirt.

I buy a lot more; the pile Kate helps me carry to the cash register tips over as Helen neatly folds everything into bags. Like Odin promises, I pay for every third item of clothing.

I may not be a fan of shopping, but there is something about seeing the bags of new clothes, with more shades than a rainbow, that makes me happy. And no one who is with me would question, criticize or say *anything* about what I want.

It's a heady feeling. Add in the way Odin watched me every time I came out of that changing room to show off something new, with the hint of a smile and this look in his eyes, and I can see why people like shopping.

But I make a point not to stand next to him again because if being around Odin can change my mind about shopping, what other superpowers does he have?

Our next stop is Otto's Outside. According to Odin, I need a new coat and boots, suitable for Laandia winter. He talks like he's trying to scare me by throwing temperatures in the low minus at me. All I can think about is how warm it got between us a few minutes ago, so a little bit of cold might not be a bad thing, especially with a crowd.

"It gets cold in Saint Pierre too," I remind Odin, cutting off his story about the coldest winter in seventeen years.

“Not like here.”

“I live on an island in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. I’m used to the winds coming at us from every direction, and yes, it does get that cold. We might not get the snow, but that doesn’t mean it’s not cold.”

“Do you argue about everything?” Odin asks with an amused smile.

“Yes. I don’t need a coat that puffy. Something smaller, less puffy, please,” I say, handing the garment in question back to Otto, who has been doggedly following us around the store.

“I think you should reconsider. That one gives you protection up to -20. Plus, it—”

“No.” I’m not about to repeat what the group of Odinites shouted at me, that I looked like a lump wearing Lyra’s coat, which looks a lot like the one Odin wants to get me.

I’ve been called many things that I don’t want repeated and that’s one of them.

We settle on a warm, but slimmer-fitting coat and a pair of boots. Because Odin is so concerned with how warm I need to be, I let him pay for it.

Snowflakes lazily drift down as we leave the store, giving the small town a holiday air. I can’t stop staring at how bright and cheerful everything is, from the arrangements by the door to the expressions of the people we pass.

Odin is stopped by a group of older women, one reprimanding him for going on *The Suitorette*, the others joining in with teasing smiles. He pauses to help a young mother maneuver a stroller over a snowbank. He waves at cars passing, faces pressed against the window of a restaurant and calls a greeting at a customer heading into the bank.

He introduces me to a few people, and I shake hands and make small talk, wondering if they, too, want Odin to marry a local girl.

Odin is certainly loved here.

And I am not.

“You mentioned that you live in Saint Pierre,” Odin mentions in a low voice as we leave the town square, heading to the next store.

I give him an incredulous glance. “If you don’t know where I’m from, you’re very bad at this whole arranged marriage thing.”

“It’s just... You said *live*. As in, you’re planning on going back. I wondered if that was your plan for the future.”

“It had been,” I tell him truthfully. “The other... the other arrangements wanted it that way. They made it clear they didn’t want to spend much time in Saint Pierre. It worked for me, since I had no desire to cohabit with them.”

“You don’t want to live with your husband?”

“They didn’t want to live with me,” I correct matter-of-factly.

“You don’t know that.”

“Oh, I do. One of them put in in the marriage contract.”

“You’re serious?”

“Why would I lie about something like that?”

“What about us? You didn’t think about where you’ll—we’ll—be living?”

Us. *Us*. This is the first time I’ve thought of me and Odin as an *us*.

It’s a little confusing. This whole day is confusing. “Did you?”

“I assumed you would move here. To the castle.”

Here. In Laandia. Where I could visit Battle Harbour every day, enjoy those unicorn lattes, and have people smile at me.

Only, they won’t.

“Well, there’s your first problem,” I tell him, sharper than I intended. “If you expect to have the kind of love marriage where we live in the same place, you should consider my feelings on the matter.”

“Isn’t that what you want?”

“For you to consider my feelings? Of course!”

“To have a love marriage.”

That blows away some of my steam. Because yes, that’s what I want. What I’ve always wanted—to find a husband who loves and respects me as well as appreciates what I bring to the table and what Saint Pierre can offer. And I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t thought of Odin as that perfect specimen.

But that all changed when I got here and found out *why* he picked me. All my hopes and wishes and expectations about what life with Odin might be like? Gone, blown away in the wind that chills my cheeks.

And I have to remember that, regardless of how close Odin stands or how it feels like every single butterfly in the vicinity of Laandia takes flight from within my stomach when he touches me.

Because Odin gave up on us, and that *hurt*. And I didn’t handle it well. I’m afraid of what might happen if I give him the chance to do it again.

“You’ve said that a few times.” Odin sounds like he’s trying to be casual, but I want to tell him he’s failing miserably. “Talked about a marriage based on love. Is that what you think?”

“About what?”

“Do you think this—” he motions between us— “—could ever become a love match?”

I catch my breath because the way Odin says it... The way his voice sounds...

He sounds *hopeful*.

“That’s what I would like,” Odin says, confirming it. Does Odin mean he wants to fall in love with the person he marries, or does he want to fall in love with *me*?

Because if that’s what he wants—

That’s what I would like, too.

The words catch in my throat and I don't say anything. Because I don't know how to.

How do I admit that without confessing that I've lived with that tiny ember of hope for all those years, that Odin and I would somehow end up together?

Even the thought of it is too humiliating to put into words, and it's much less embarrassing to just stop. Talking. Not admit anything.

It's awkward.

After a few moments of silence, Odin opens the door of Sera Sports for me.

The store is small and crowded but clean and cheerful. There's no musty odour that clings to the places like in Saint Pierre. And once again, the owner who greets us is so friendly and welcoming that all I want to do is come back, again and again.

If I'm being honest, I have to admit that all of Laandia has been welcoming—except for the snowball group.

In Saint Pierre, newcomers are greeted with uncertainty and suspicion. There aren't many tourists, despite my best efforts to bring them in, and those moving to the island will face challenges trying to compete for the limited number of jobs.

There aren't many smiles on Saint Pierre.

Here, at least in Battle Harbour, all I've seen are bright smiles and colours, friendly words and, other than the Odinites, real interest and curiosity about me.

Why would I want to go back to Saint Pierre?

Because that's always been the plan. To get married, yes, but to return to the island to someday take over from Lord Arnaud and lead the people into... what? The same kind of life they've been living for the past hundred years? They may not be happy, but they're content, and no one likes change.

That has always been the plan.

As I wander through the store, I glance over to where Odin is looking through a rack of women's T-shirts with one hand, while cradling Betty White. I meet the tiny eyes of my dog and like always, she seems to be giving her own opinion on what's going on in my mind.

Why don't you come up with a new plan?

Odin

I PUT IT OUT there and Camille didn't say a word.

I'm not sure what to do about that. I can't blame her, because so far, I haven't really given her much indication that this is anything but the usual, run-of-the-mill royally arranged marriage; what's good for the country isn't always good for the man.

Will it be any different with Camille? I thought she enjoyed having tea with me. And the moment in the fitness centre.

And the one just a few minutes ago.

What would have happened if I had given in to my urge to kiss her?

In Sera Sports, Camille ignores the shorts I selected for her, passing them over for leggings. “Why would you want me to wear shorts if you think it’s so cold here?” she says with a flash of mischievousness.

I thought she’d look good in the shorts. I am a man, after all.

At least she’s happy with the running shoes I picked out.

I’m quite happy being with her.

There is physical attraction between Camille and me—at least there is for me. She’s a beautiful woman, and the more she smiles, the more her beauty increases. There’s a history between us, a past I’ve always regretted not following up with. Ten years ago, we were different people, but there was potential. The possibility of more... and I let it go with a nineteen-year-old’s indifference.

Now, I have a sharp-tongued Camille who keeps me on my toes. But it’s not deterring me, mainly because I suspect that’s her intention. Camille, I’m beginning to discover, has no problem with conflict or confrontations or picking her battles.

Game on.

The next stop is Arnold’s Attire for formal dresses. There are several sizeable towns and cities in Laandia, and while Battle Harbour isn’t one of the biggest, it does have the largest selection of shops such as these, mainly because having a castle nearby and a royal family who likes to entertain means there’s always a need for formal wear.

“How many clothes do I need?” Camille grumbles, the first hint that shopping is truly as she said—not her first love. “I can always send for some of my things if I’m going to be here much longer.”

“What colour is your wardrobe at home?” Jackson asks quietly.

“Maybe I could do with a couple more things,” Camille concedes.

“How about this?” Kate holds up a blue dress, a strapless satin the same blue as the sky.

“I like that,” I say quickly.

“What about the green?” Camille pushes the blue aside. I prefer the green as well.

I’m a quick learner.

With an armful of clothes, Camille disappears into the changing room with Kate, and I hover nearby, scrolling through my social media feeds. Kate has taken a few pictures of the shopping trip and sent them to me, and I post them with the hashtag #becomingaprincess

Standing out here means I can also hear Camille’s conversation with Kate.

“Seriously, how many dresses do I need?” Camille complains. “Will there be that many things I have to dress up for?”

“Depends on how many events Odin gets you invited to. I know he’s trying for a few since he never likes going to the fancy things alone.”

“Does he have a packed social calendar?” Camille’s voice takes on a high-pitched tone.

“Busy enough. He does a lot to raise awareness for the Viking village restoration. That’s the big thing for him now.”

“Who does he usually go to the fancy things with? Since you said he doesn’t like to go alone.”

I can’t help but perk up at the question.

“Sometimes he gets Gunnar to go with him,” Kate says. “There are a few cousins he might take. A couple of women from around here who will do when he really needs someone.”

Camille is silent for long minutes.

“Okay, what do you think of this one?” Camille finally calls out. She must mean to get Kate’s approval, but I crowd into the area leading to the changing rooms to look.

Camille stands outside the cubicle, in the green dress, with her hair bunched in her hand and white socks on her feet. The dress is strapless, fitted from her chest to her hips, and then billows out in layers of chiffon.

My mouth begins to dry out as I stare, and I realize it’s hanging open.

“That goes great with your hair,” Kate says admiringly.

Her hair... the creamy shoulders rising above the green satin... “You look beautiful,” I manage. “But maybe I shouldn’t tell you that.”

“Why shouldn’t you tell her that?” Kate demands.

I still haven’t taken my eyes off Camille. “Because she won’t buy it if she thinks I like it.”

The way Camille’s mouth quirks suggests I’m right.

“But do you like it?” she asks quietly.

The way she holds my gaze is like a caress. “Very much.”

“Then you can buy it.” With a toss of her head, she disappears back into the cubicle with another dress.

I laugh.

Camille

SHOPPING IS EXHAUSTING.

I've never been a woman who enjoys the frivolities one can afford in my position—the non-stop shopping, days spent at the spa trying out the latest in self-care, and long, leisurely lunches with friends.

The latter is because I've never really taken the time to cultivate friendships.

Kate may be the first woman in a while whose company I enjoy. She's smart, funny, and treats me like an equal instead

of fawning over me with compliments, and I love how she teases Odin.

Kate helps me pick out several evening dresses, including the green—and a variety of less formal ones. All range in colour from sea-foam green to cinnamon, with a solitary black dress since Arnold, of Arnold's Attire, insists every woman needs a little black dress.

There's even a gold dress that I may love more than the green.

Having the range of colours before me in the changing room makes me feel like I'm looking at a rainbow. It's surprising how it affects my mood.

I'm lighter. Happier. It's amazing how a day of shopping can do that to me, especially since my feet ache from traipsing from store to store.

My arms would ache as well if Odin didn't have people carrying the bags to the car for me.

A thought flickers at the far reaches of my mind like a loose light bulb, that maybe it's *Odin* that has affected my mood. That being around him makes me happy.

I don't want to go there yet. I can't.

Ten years ago, I was a few weeks from chucking away my life in Saint Pierre and moving to Laandia to be with Odin. He didn't know my plans. No one did.

I would finish my studies with my tutor, Eliot, and then I would move to Laandia. To go to school, to work at the polar bear outpost in the north—I hadn't thought that far ahead, but I knew I wanted to be near Odin. Be with Odin.

Even though he wasn't the best at writing me, and we'd never had the promised visit at Christmas, I knew his heart and that he wanted to be with me too.

I *thought* I knew his heart.

When I got the news that my father wasn't my father, my first instinct was to tell Odin. But his life as a prince of Laandia stopped me.

I knew being the daughter of the prefect of Saint Pierre didn't make me a royal, but at least it moved me within Odin's vicinity. But being the illegitimate daughter of a fisherman changed things.

And it changed things with Odin because when I stopped writing him, he never got in touch with me to find out why. A week became a month, and then two, and then the summer ended and it had been a year since I'd first met him.

When the regatta passed in late August, and I hadn't received an invitation, I knew there was no longer anything between Odin and me.

At least my head realized that. My heart took a little more time.

I asked Odin tough questions yesterday, but the one thing I couldn't bring myself to ask was what happened between us all those years ago. Was there someone else? Did he not feel the same as I did? Did he feel *anything*?

I was afraid of the answers he might give.

I'm still afraid, but after Odin *stared* at me when I wore the green dress, it didn't seem as important. That was ten years ago, and we're both different people now.

We're engaged to be married now, whatever that may entail.

And the way Odin looked at me suggests he might think that means something different than an arranged marriage in name only.

"You can wear the green dress to the wedding rehearsal," Kate says, ruffling through the dresses. "The black one will do for dinner with Justin next month."

"Justin?"

"Trudeau. He invited you to his place in Ottawa. In Canada," she adds.

"I know where Ottawa is." I've never been there, but at least I know where it is. And now I know who Justin and Sophie are. "You sound more like my assistant than Jackson."

Kate laughs. “If he wants to help you with your clothes, that’s fine.”

“I really don’t think he does.”

“I don’t think he does either.”

“He’s very capable in other ways,” I point out.

She looks at me strangely. “I’m sure he is.”

“He is. He’s a good man—decent, hardworking. He’s supportive and understanding...I don’t know how I would have gotten through this last week without him.” I don’t realize that’s the truth until I say it out loud. “I don’t think I’m supposed to be friends with my assistant.”

“I don’t see how you can’t be. Odin is my friend. It’s better to like the people you work so closely with.”

“I guess. I’ve never—”

“Do you miss your friends back home?”

I suddenly realize I don’t miss anything about Saint Pierre. Not the grey and rocky countryside with the constant drizzle; not the people, exhausted and bitter from fighting to make a home on the little spit of land; not the home I grew up in.

All I’ve thought of this week was going home, but what is really there for me?

“I don’t have many friends,” I tell Kate, regret a tinge in my voice. Or sadness. I’ve always been content to be on my own, but now that I have the potential to have friends here—Jackson and Kate, and yes, Odin—it makes me sad that it’s taken me so long to get them.

“I can’t imagine it’s easy for you,” Kate sympathizes. “It’s like that for Odin. He feels so much duty and responsibility for Laandia and he gives so much of himself. It’s difficult to keep enough for himself, and even harder to share himself with others. I think it must be very lonely being him. Being you.”

“I think so too,” I confess.

“Then it’s good the two of you found each other. Again,” she adds. “Not really found each other. More like got put

together. It's good. You'll be good for each other."

"I think so too," I repeat. No one had ever thought I would be good for the other men I had been paired up with. It was what they were getting from the marriage—quite a bit in some cases—and what I was getting.

The only thing in it for me was the opportunity to take over as prefect. It's been what I've been groomed for, taught to strive for my entire life.

If I marry Odin, I'll be able to do that.

"Mrs. Theissen told me they need to start fittings for your dress the day after tomorrow," Kate says as she gathers the dresses over her arm.

"Another dress?" I groan.

"Your wedding dress."

I still. The goal has always been to get me married.

I forgot that there's going to be a wedding.

I don't know how I could have forgotten, since it's the reason I'm in Laandia. That's why Odin is spending the day trying to pick out clothes and paying for them. It's the reason I have Jackson as a so-called assistant and am speaking to Kate in a changing cubicle.

But somehow, I did forget, probably because it's such a wide and far-reaching concept, one that I didn't want to deal with.

Also, most likely because I never thought it was actually going to happen.

In the past ten years, I've had six men agree to marry me. The closest I got to an actual wedding was discussing a venue in France. The longest engagement was six months when I was eighteen, and that's only because we weren't planning on having the ceremony until I was twenty-one.

But when I saw an out, I took it.

I found ways out of the arrangements for all of them. Some took a little time, most took some effort, but I managed to

extract myself from all six pseudo-relationships without looking like *I* did anything wrong.

The only people who don't look at me as *poor Lady Camille who got her heart broken over and over again* are Madam Carol, who's looked after me since I was a baby and who was privy to all my plans, and Lord Arnaud. He doesn't actually *know* I'm not the victim, he just assumes.

I found a way to get out of those arranged marriages because I didn't want to marry those six men. They were picked for me. I didn't want to get married at all, but it's required if I ever want to be prefect of Saint Pierre.

I could take over right now—not only does my stepfather have issues with those living on the island, but his health hasn't been good for several years. This is why he's been pushing to get me married.

If I don't take over as prefect, who knows what might happen to Saint Pierre? But lately, I've wondered whether the unknown might be a better thing for the people.

So the actual getting-married part of the arranged marriages isn't something I waste much energy on.

But with Odin...

I didn't know I wanted to marry Odin until it was suggested by King Magnus's people. And then when I got here and everything went down, I didn't want it.

And then I did.

And then I didn't.

Right now? I don't know what I want.

All I know is that Odin is handsome and decent and kind, and he's done nothing but make me feel welcome. And I feel guilty having doubts, especially when, after *The Suitorette*, and the jokes and memes made at his expense Odin could really use a win.

But I'm starting to think I'd like him to *want* to marry me, not look at me as some sort of solution. We're in a fake

relationship right now, and I might need some guidance on how to proceed.

If I want to.

I can't look at Odin as I come out of the changing room, followed by Kate and a heap of colourful fabrics over her arm. But I do notice him not-so-discreetly hand Kate his credit card as she heads to the cash register.

It doesn't matter who pays for my new clothes now—I'll have Jackson transfer money for them to Odin and have Kate make sure it goes into his account.

I can pay my own way. Just like I learned to rescue myself and not wait for it to happen.

“Anywhere else you'd like to go?” Odin asks.

My shoulders droop. “No more shopping,” I beg. “My feet can't take much more.”

“Are you all right for a little more walking? There's one more place I'd like to show you. We can take the car if you like, but it's not far.”

“I can walk. Just no more shopping.”

“Really not a fan.”

“Really not. But you are, and you didn't get anything for yourself.”

Odin smiles down at me. I've noticed his smiles reach his eyes more and more, making them shine brighter. Not that he needs any more improvement to his eyes—they're still as brilliant a blue as I've ever seen.

He's handsome when he's stoic, when the lines on his forehead wrinkle as he contemplates decisions and actions paramount to his country—or even just considering what to get to drink. But when Odin smiles, it's as if the sun breaks out from the clouds, warming everything in the path. And visiting a chilly country on the edge of Canada, it's nice to be warm. “I've always found it more enjoyable to get things for others. It's more fun for me,” he says.

Tex heads to the door with my bags, but stops suddenly, lifting a fist that holds shopping bags like he's giving military commands. "Your Royal Highness," he snaps. "We have a situation."

Turk elbows Odin behind him. Odin positions me so I can't see out the front window. "What is it?"

"There's a gathering outside. I recognize a few faces."

Not only does Odin have a warm smile, he has a warm body. The store is small enough to feel cramped and overheated with the four of us in here, not to mention Tex, Turk, owner Arthur, and his saleswoman flitting back and forth finding me things to try on. Odin shrugged off his jacket as soon as we came in, and as tempting as it is being pressed up against his fisherman's sweater, I don't need him to feel like he has to protect me.

I wriggle out from behind him, looking toward the window, where a row of faces peer inside. I blink from the flashes from their phones. Arthur locked the door after we came in, which is the only reason they haven't flooded the store. "The Odinites."

Most are smiling, ironic when I notice what their signs say: "Go home, Camille." "Go back to your fish." "Leave Odin alone."

"They still don't like me much," I say wryly.

Odin grimaces. "It'll be fine," he assures me.

"There's no back door," Tex barks, frustration evident from his tone.

"What can they do?" I wonder. "Just don't give them any snowballs, and we'll be fine." Everyone looks at me. "What? Maybe if they see us together, they'll know they can't run me out of here."

Silence as everyone looks at each other. "That's fine," Odin decides. "I'd like to walk to the shelter, so let's do that. Maybe it won't be so bad."

“Maybe it will,” Kate mutters. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Jackson take her hand.

At least they’re moving forward.

“Arthur, I’m so sorry for the disturbance.” Odin reaches across the counter to clasp the older man’s hand. “You’ve been wonderful to Camille today, and I won’t forget your consideration and kindness.”

“It’s always my pleasure,” Arthur says, his eyes crinkling. “Lovely to meet you, Lady Camille—and don’t you let a bunch of yobbos run you out of town.”

“I definitely won’t be letting any yobbo do anything to me,” I tell him with a grin.

My confidence wavers as we take positions—Turk leading the way with Kate and Jackson to offer cover, then Odin and me, with Tex bringing up the rear. I feel like I’m on a mission instead of walking to another store.

Odin takes my hand, which makes it more surreal. He also picks up Betty White and tucks her under his arm like a football.

We leave my dresses at the store, and Tex promises to return for them as soon as we’re in a secure location.

It’s all so weird. Back home, I can do anything and no one notices or cares. But that could have been *because* the people of Saint Pierre didn’t care—about me or who governs them. It’s one of the last bits of French territory, close to Canada and autonomous from all, except for the prefect who answers to a president thousands of kilometres away.

Laandia is different. The people here care about the royal family, so much that they feel like they own Odin.

“How did they know we were here?” Jackson asks looking at Kate.

“I have no idea,” Kate says. “We’ve been followed before. It’s possible—” She glances at Arthur. The man looks to be eighty years old, and I doubt he has much use for posting on Instagram.

“It was me,” Odin admits.

I attempt to slide my hand out of his grip, but Odin hangs on. “You *told* them we were here? Did you want them to come say hello, in their very special way which includes yelling insults at me?”

“I didn’t think they would show up, at least not before we were finished. I didn’t think,” he says simply. “I posted a picture so Arthur might get more business. That’s it.”

No one says a word. “Well, then, let’s do this,” I say. “So Arthur can get more business instead of having us holed up here all day.” And I nod to Turk to move out.

24

Odin

AS SOON AS I step out of the door, I find myself in the middle of a storm.

My name is shouted again and again, with love and reverence. Insults are hurled at Camille.

Why would they think reviling her would make me accept them? I don't understand that thinking at all.

Kalle tried to explain it to me, after he overheard a few of the more die-hards at his bar. Holding a meeting in the bar owned by the heir to the throne, to discuss how these people

want me to become their next king, really shows how little these people *do* think.

Kalle's opinion is that the people of Laandia see me as the face of the monarchy. Our father has his interests outside ruling, and my brothers clearly have no interest in ruling at all, so I've always felt an obligation to show the people I'm there for them. I try to be approachable and understanding, generous and honest, and as Kalle puts it, "It's bitten you in the butt."

The people seem to love me so much, they don't want me with anyone but them. Especially not an outsider like Camille.

I clutch her hand, cradling Betty White with the other, and the dog barks in shrill little yips all the way to the shelter. Maybe she knows that we're visiting the rescue dogs and is expressing her displeasure.

More likely the poor thing is frightened by the mob.

Turk leads us across the square and people stare. We walked through earlier with simple greetings and conversation, but that has all changed with the rabble trailing along behind.

I stop at the corner of the street and turn to face the group. "Please, stop," I call. I drop Camille's hand to raise my own. "I appreciate your support—"

"That's support?" Camille mutters.

"But please don't come any further. I would like to visit the animal rescue shelter with Lady Camille, and you'll frighten the dogs if you continue on like this. Please. Don't."

"That's not going to work," Jackson says under his breath.

But surprisingly, it does.

Being considered to be the son of the people does give me some power at times. The only problem is, I can't always count on it.

The crowd pauses in their cheers and jeers, and Turk hisses for us to get inside. "You have twenty minutes to play with the dogs," he instructs. "Tex will go retrieve the car and park out front."

“Dogs?” Camille perks up as Turk holds the door open for us. We hurry inside the space, warm and noisy and smelling of dog.

“This is nothing like your wildlife centre, but I thought you’d like to see what we have in terms of a rescue centre.” My shoulders relax a little at the surprised delight in her face. I gesture to Betty White under my arm. “I know you like dogs.”

“I didn’t think *you* do, though. I thought that’s why Betty White didn’t like you. She can always tell.”

“Looks like she likes him fine now,” Kate points out.

I step forward and introduce Camille to Stella and Ajax, who run the shelter. Camille is right: I’m not a huge fan of dogs, but it’s one of the many non-profits I support.

I never thought it would be an advantage when it came to my wife-to-be.

Camille is beyond excited. Chattering non-stop to Ajax, they follow Stella to the back where the dogs are housed in pens and cages. Dog beds are crammed into every corner, along with food bowls and pads that I suspect are for puppy accidents. The smell of dog kibble hangs like a cloud.

I trail after Camille, still holding Betty White with a bemused smile.

“Someone’s happy,” Kate grouses as she gives me a poke.

“I thought this might be something she’d enjoy,” I say defensively. “Especially since she wasn’t a fan of the shopping.”

Kate gives me an approving smile. “You thought right. Good job.”

Within minutes, Camille is locked in a pen, sitting on the floor with eight frantically wiggling puppies crawling over her.

She’s never looked happier.

“Do you think...?” I begin; Jackson hangs over the edge of the pen, leaving Kate at the back of the room with me.

“That Camille is happy?” Kate guesses. “Yes.”

“That she likes me,” I say in a low voice. Kate studies me with her head cocked to the side and a furrow between her eyes. “What?” I demand.

“You like her.”

“Of course, I like her. She’s a—”

“You like her, like her.”

“Well... maybe? Yes,” I decide. “I like her. I always have.”

“This is different. Don’t worry, O,” she says with a hand on my shoulder and a reassuring smile. “I’ll help you out.”

“I don’t need help.”

Her expression suggests otherwise. “You’re as close to a Prince Charming as you can get. It’s about time you get your happily ever after.”

Her words send a flash of warmth to my chest, as well as a shot of fear. The last time I tried for a happy ever after, I got shot down on a reality show. “What about you?” I ask Kate, wanting someone else to feel that same fear, so I know I’m not alone in this. “You seem to be getting along with—” I jerk my head toward Jackson, his hands now full of puppies.

Her eyes widen, and then she shakes her head. “We’re work colleagues. That’s it.”

“Are you sure about that?” I don’t want to share Camille’s theory on the two of them, but I’ve spent most of my attention on Camille today rather than trying to ascertain if there’s something going on with our assistants. “Because you know, after everything with Gunnar, you deserve your happy ever after too.”

“Oh, I’m well aware of that,” Kate says with a laugh.

“Odin?” Camille calls, and just like that, I forget all about Kate and Jackson. Camille is still on the floor, dogs crawling over her, chewing the hem of her jeans, the zipper on her coat and most of one hand.

Her eyes are shining, with the biggest smile I’ve seen on her face.

“Could you bring in Betty White?” she asks. “I know we don’t have a lot of time, but she needs to meet the puppies. Oh, hello!” She drops a kiss on the head of one, sweeps an arm around to cuddle another.

“This should be some sort of therapy,” Kate says, leaning over the railing of the pen. “You could charge a fortune for it.”

“Puppies make everyone happy,” Ajax agrees.

“Twelve minutes,” Turk snaps.

“Except for Turk,” I say with a grin. I carefully slide into the pen with a practically vibrating Betty White in my arms. “I’m not sure this is a good idea,” I warn Camille.

“She’ll love it.”

“She’s growling.”

“She always growls.”

“Whatever you say.” Slowly, I bend my knees so I can put the tiny dog on the ground. “She’s your dog.”

Betty White is surrounded before I can stand up—for about ten seconds. Then, with a series of yips that sounds more authoritative than anything Turk barked at us, Betty White clears the area between her and Camille as all the puppies rush to get away from her.

Betty White then trots to Camille and settles into her lap like the queen she is. The puppies venture out, and as each one gives her a sniff, she curls her lip until one meets her approval and she allows it to climb into Camille’s lap.

“There’s the one,” Camille says with a tearful smile.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Ajax marvels.

The puppy—already looming over Betty White, and from the size of her paws, will be at least four times bigger than her—seems happy with her new status as the It Girl.

“Time to roll,” Turk calls after a few minutes. “They’re starting to gather out front.”

“Oh, no.” Camille looks from me to Ajax and back to me.
“Can we come back?”

“Any time you like,” Ajax says before I can respond.

She gives the puppy a last cuddle and manages to touch each of the other ones as she climbs to her feet, still holding Betty White. “I love all the puppies,” she declares.

“See?” Kate laughs. “You’d make a fortune with puppy therapy.”

We manage to get to the front door in record time with Turk urging us on. Even before we get outside, the roar of the crowd is louder than the barks of the dogs.

“I’m sorry we can’t stay longer,” I tell Camille.

She bristles as much as Betty White did earlier. “It’s not your fault.”

“Your Royal Highness—with me,” Turk barks and I put an arm around Camille and the dog.

“Thank you,” she calls to an anxious Ajax and Stella as we’re swept outside.

The noise is deafening, and frightening, and it’s unimaginable that this is happening on a street in downtown Battle Harbour on a regular day.

Turk has the door to the SUV open and is motioning us in when Camille stops. “Hey,” she shouts.

“Camille—”

She breaks free from under my arm and faces the group.
“Stop it!”

The shouting pauses for an instant and then resumes with more jeers than cheers. “I said, stop it!” She raises her voice even louder. “What are you trying to prove?”

No one answers, but she does have their attention.

“If you’re trying to make me leave, it’s not going to work,” she says, her voice strong and authoritative. “I’m not leaving just because you’re mean to me. I can handle people being

mean to me. And if you keep up this nonsense, it's only going to do one thing—make us stronger. Us—him and me. See?”

And then Camille rises on her toes and kisses me.

25

Camille

IT HAPPENED SO FAST, and I didn't mean to do it, or even plan to, but one second, I was yelling at the mob, and the next, my lips were pressed against Odin's and we were kissing.

It wasn't much of a kiss because I surprised him—his lips didn't move nor did he touch me.

Or maybe he didn't *want* me to kiss him and I read every interaction totally wrong.

And it was over in an instant; Turk yelled at us to get in the car and there was no resistance from Odin when I stepped

away.

Maybe he really didn't want me to kiss him.

Just in case that's how it is, I don't look at Odin as the SUV roars away from the shelter. I still smell puppy breath and there's something about the smell that lingers—much like babies, I would imagine.

“Did you like meeting the puppies?” I coo to Betty White because I have no idea what to say to Odin. Do I apologize? Ask if he enjoyed that? Vow never to do it again?

So I talk to my dog as Kate and Odin have a whispered conversation over the seats.

Betty White gives me a calculated expression. *You know I don't like puppies. But I didn't mind one of them.*

“Did you make a friend?” On the seat beside me, Odin clears his throat and I look over at him. “Thank you for taking me,” I say. “It was the perfect place.”

It's better to concentrate on the cute little dogs than the fact that *I just kissed Odin.*

In front of everyone, plus the group that hates me.

“Yes. Er...” Odin's at a loss for words.

“Lady Camille,” Turk interrupts, swivelling in the passenger seat to look back at me with what I assume is his intimidating expression. “What were you doing back there?”

“She was telling them off, if you didn't notice,” Kate replies from the far back. “You go, girl.”

I giggle and Odin's eyes bug. The adrenaline of the confrontation hasn't worn off yet.

Neither has the headiness of kissing Odin.

“I defended myself,” I say, speaking to Turk but looking at Odin. “I know you can't do that. There's no way you can side with me—an outsider—over the needs of your people.”

“I'm not sure what their needs are,” Odin mutters.

“They want me gone. Whatever else they may have issues with, I’m sure you’ll find out and accommodate them the best you can. Because that’s what you do. But right now, I’m still a visiting French citizen, and I have no obligations to them. I can say whatever I like, if it is defending myself. I know I can’t attack, or incite a confrontation, but I don’t think I did anything wrong. It may not be the way you do things here, but again, I’m not from here. And if I end up marrying you, they’re going to find that out very soon.”

Turk’s mouth hangs open as much as Odin’s. “She’s right,” the security guard finally admits. “I don’t like it, but she’s right. But please, Lady Camille, do your best to hold your tongue next time.”

I can’t help myself. “I didn’t use my tongue,” I say softly. Odin’s eyes open even wider when I wink at him.

It’s a quiet ride back to the castle after that.

Odin walks me back to my room with Kate and Jackson following to help carry my things. He still seems a little stunned by my actions.

“Thank you,” I say politely as we reach my door.

“I’m going to take your things inside,” Kate interrupts loudly, giving Jackson a nudge. “Maybe start hanging them up.”

“I’ll help you. But not putting them away.” Jackson follows her in.

“Not in your job description or don’t want to check out my unmentionables?”

Odin chokes on my response, but Jackson only shakes his head. “He’s getting used to me,” I say to Odin as the door closes behind them, leaving us alone in the hall with Betty White. Despite Odin’s silence, I feel lighter than I have in a long time. Today was... today was a *good* day. Even with the shopping and the insults, I had fun.

I had fun with Odin.

I kissed Odin.

And I'm back to that.

"It might take a little longer for me to get used to you," he admits, watching as the dog sniffs around his feet. "You're—"

"I'm not apologizing for defending myself," I snap.

"I'm not asking you to," he says, raising a hand defensively.

"What are you saying, then?"

"I don't want that to be our first kiss," he blurts.

I take a step back. Definitely not expecting that. And neither is Betty White since she growls softly. "Technically, our first kiss was ten years ago."

"You know what I mean. A first kiss should be a private matter between the two of us."

Odin sounds...

I'm not sure what he sounds like. Or if this is a criticism or a complaint or... something else.

"Should I apologize for kissing you?" I ask, summoning my iciest tone, just in case he has a problem with my actions. "And for me, that wasn't much of a kiss. More of a peck."

A shadow crosses his face and I regret my words, my tone, my everything. Because Odin looks *sad*, if that's possible.

"I don't want you to apologize." Odin runs his hand through his hair. I've never seen him so flustered. He seems so steady I had no idea he even could fluster. Knowing that it's because of me is strange—I'm not sure if I've upset him with my actions regarding the Odinites, or the kiss.

Maybe he didn't want me to kiss him. Maybe I did read it wrong.

Not that I read anything; it was an impulse, a way to provoke a reaction from those who don't like me. It's not the first time I've gone that route, and it won't be the last.

Obviously, it's not the way Odin deals with things.

“What *do* you want then?” I’m suddenly tired, exhausted from the shopping, seeing the town, smiling at people. Being happy is exhausting, because that’s what I was today.

The realization is startling.

Happiness has never been something I strive for. I have responsibilities and duties and if I do those well, I’m content. Happiness has been a foreign emotion, something I’ve had yet to translate.

Maybe it doesn’t have to be.

This is not how the day should end. I had fun, felt a connection with Odin, and now it’s like I’ve been flipped upside down. Again.

Marriages of convenience should be convenient.

This is not.

“I don’t know.” He shakes his head and pushes away from me. “I have to meet with my advisors.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Because of me?”

“I didn’t say that. But you certainly didn’t help matters.”

Maybe I didn’t fluster him. Maybe I annoyed him. If that’s the case, there’s nothing fun about that. “If you think I’m going to stand there and let them attack me—”

“I should be the one defending you,” Odin snaps. “It should be me protecting you, not the other way around. You’re going to be my *wife*.”

The word jolts as much as it did when Kate spoke of my wedding dress. But I stand my ground. If Odin is serious about this, he needs to know what he’s in for. “I’m not the type of wife who stands silently to the side. You need to know that.”

“You’ve made that quite clear.” He nods curtly and steps back. “I have a meeting with my advisors now, but we have dinner with my father tonight at eight. I’ll see you then.”

Dinner with the king tonight. “And I’m supposed to meet your family after this?” I call after him. “That’ll be fun.” His footsteps on the stone stairs are the only reply.

“Are you kidding me?” I scoop up Betty White and flounce into my room, where I find Kate and Jackson, still holding my shopping bags, in the middle of a conversation. “Did you hear that?”

“*That* conversation’s not part of my job description,” Jackson says quickly.

“There isn’t going to be a conversation about it.” I set Betty White down with a last pat on her head. “You were supposed to have this afternoon off, so you might as well take off. I’ll unpack my things.” Which is the last thing I feel like doing.

“I’ll give you a hand,” Kate offers. She gives Jackson a strange glance.

“You were talking about me, weren’t you?”

“Yes, but only because I thought there might be an issue with Odin.”

“What do you think his issue is?”

Jackson backs toward the door. “I don’t think I should be listening to this,” he says. “Seems kind of, oh, I don’t know—treasonous.”

I point to the door. “Go. See you tomorrow.”

Jackson nods with a hint of a smile. “My lady.”

“Odin hates it when I use that tone,” Kate says. “Bye, Jackson.”

I wait until the door is closed behind him. “Will you be seeing Jackson later tonight?” I ask.

Kate beams. “Why, I just might be.”

I nod. “Good. What’s Odin’s issue?”

“Ah, Odin. C’mon, let’s put this stuff away.”

Kate is as good as her word; she helps me pull everything out and put it away in my closet, even calling housekeeping to find more hangers.

And as she does that, we talk.

I made my first real friend when I was nine. Before that, the only kids who played with me were the ones told by their parents to do so, because their parents wanted something from my father. I didn't mind, mainly because I didn't know any different. I was happy. I had my animals, Madam Carol, and—starting the next year—Eliot, my tutor, who homeschooled me. When my mother was alive, we spent days together wandering the shore and learning about the birds and beasts that crowded the rocks along Saint Pierre.

Because I was a late bloomer in the friend department, I've always been a little awkward, a little uncomfortable with gestures of friendship. But it seems different with Kate.

“O has a *huge* sense of obligation,” Kate begins, placing my new leggings in a drawer by my bed. “Huge. He should be king just for his duty toward the throne.”

“But he won't be.”

At first, Kate shakes her head but follows it with a shrug. “He takes his responsibilities toward the people of Laandia very seriously, but he's also extremely loyal to his brothers, especially Kalle. If O ever becomes king, it won't be his doing. But it doesn't mean he wouldn't want to be. And that's the problem with the Odinites. He knows he should shut them down for what they say about Kalle, but he respects their rights. And who wouldn't want to be loved like that by his own people? Maybe not quite like that,” she concedes.

“Should you be telling me all this?”

Another shrug. “He's not going to. And you are going to be his wife, aren't you? You should know the score. Same as he should know all about you.”

“You seem like you know him really well,” I say. “Oh, right—sister's best friend.”

“There's that. Also Gunnar and me. Past tense,” she quickly adds. “Past tense Gunnar and me.”

“There was never a you and Odin?”

“Odin. No.” Kate sinks onto the bed and I start slightly at how comfortable she is with me. It's more surprising than how

comfortable I feel with her. “O is the best of the bunch by far. He’s special.” She looks at me curiously, which has the effect of raising my hackles like Betty White when she sees a cat.

“You look like you’re about to tell me I don’t deserve him,” I snap. “Because he’s so special.”

To give Kate credit, she doesn’t even flinch from my outburst. “Not at all. You may be the only one who does. I have a confession to make.” She pauses and I stare expectantly, wondering what’s to come. “I read your letters.”

“Pardon?”

“The letters you wrote to Odin. Lyra found them about a couple of years after you met, and we read them one afternoon. I’ve never told Odin,” Kate confesses, her face flushed with remorse.

“Why are you telling me?”

“Because I feel bad. They were personal and heartfelt—and so many!” There’s a sympathetic light in her eye. “You must have really been in love with him.”

“What do you mean, so many?” I decide to focus on *that* rather than the embarrassment of two teenage girls reading my secrets.

“There were at least a hundred of them. More, probably.”

More. How can that be? Odin told me he only kept a few. He must have gotten rid of them after the girls found them. Too bad it wasn’t before, because knowing they’ve been read unsettles me, like being interrupted in a bathroom stall. “I guess you know everything about me,” I say in a feeble attempt to sound nonchalant.

“I am sorry.” Kate’s eyes shine with sincerity. “I’m sure Lyra will be too when she meets you.”

I shrug and tuck the uncomfortable feeling back behind my wall to deal with later.

Or never.

“There’s nothing I can do about it now.”

“There’s one good thing that came out of it.” Kate smiles cheerfully. “I feel like I already really know you.”

I have to laugh as I sit down beside her. “I guess you do. You better start telling me all your dirty secrets, then, so we can be even.”

“Before I do that?” She smiles sheepishly. “Tell me more about Jackson.”

Odin

THE PINT GLASS SLIDES across the bar with a trail of frothy foam dripping over the edge and stops right before me. “She kissed me,” I say, morosely hunching my shoulders.

I told Camille I had a meeting with my advisors. I didn’t say my advisors were my brothers and Spencer, or that we were meeting in The King’s Hat.

After I left Camille, Tex drove me back into Battle Harbour so I could make sure there wasn’t any lasting damage from the small protest. We took his car and I wore my disguise—a corduroy bomber jacket and slouchy toque with a pair of

black horned-rimmed glasses. It's not much, but it manages to keep me from being noticed in a pinch.

Of course, that's impossible when I'm with my brothers and we're sitting at Kalle's bar.

Luckily, it's late afternoon and not as busy as it will be later in the evening, although there's always a good crowd. But other than a few careful nods and muttered greetings, those at the tables take little notice of me. A few even move away from the bar to give us privacy.

It all demonstrates how effective and respected my brother is as a pub owner.

I've no doubt he'll make an effective king someday.

"Kissed you." Bo narrows his eyes. "That's a good thing. Isn't it?"

"She did it because she yelled at that group, you know, the ones—"

"The Odinites?" Kalle finishes for me.

While there are some disadvantages to having three brothers, the best thing about it is when I need them, they come running. Even Bo. And Spencer, for years considered an honorary Erickson, ducked out of his office early. So when I get to Kalle's bar, they are there waiting, with a cold pint on the counter for me.

I'm onto my third now.

It doesn't matter how many I have—The King's Hat will always be one of my favourite places. Kalle designed it as a man's cave with TVs in every corner, pool tables and dart boards, plus revolving kegs of local craft beer. Even so, there's always a good population of women hanging around, probably trying to get the attention of Kalle himself.

But it's the people who come here that I appreciate. They treat each of us as one of their own. Like we're no different than those who catch fish or crab for a living, work in one of the stores, or raise their children on the edge of the Atlantic Ocean.

Things may change when I see them outside on the street, but when I'm sitting at the bar, with a cold pint in my hand, they treat me the same as anyone else.

"I heard about the mob. And the yelling." Spencer always has a finger on the pulse of Battle Harbour, even more than me. "Things settled down after you took off."

"They chased us out of town." Technically, I ran, which makes it worse.

"They chased *you*," Gunnar corrects. "Doesn't seem like she was going anywhere. You've got a saucy one there, don't you?" He smirks, his usual expression.

"I think so." I stare glumly into my glass before draining a third of it.

Another pint glass thumps down in front of Gunnar. "It's not saucy to stand up for yourself." Edie, Kalle's right-hand-woman, glares at Gunnar even as she serves him.

"Saucy's not a bad thing," Gunnar protests. "I like a woman to have a little spice."

"I didn't think you had any requirements," Edie shoots back. "Female." She slaps a hand on the bar. "That's it."

"Hey," Gunnar widens his eyes with his innocent look. "I have very discriminating tastes."

"Blonde or redhead?"

"Oh, Edie." Gunnar gives a theatrical sigh as she goes to serve another customer. "I've always liked her," he adds to Kalle. "Now *she's* a saucy one. Thank you for the beer," he calls to Edie's back with a smile before he turns back to us. "Where were we?"

"Kissing Odin. Camille kissing him. That's a good thing, right?" Bo repeats, frowning into his beard. "There's no way any of us should be settling down with a quiet girl. She'd be eaten alive at family dinners. Not by us, but *her*."

"Lyra." Spencer shudders with a grin.

“Not to mention she needs to know how to stand up to Mrs. Theissen,” Gunnar cuts in. “You know, I wasn’t really into this whole arranged marriage thing when you told me, but from what I’ve seen of Camille—and heard about her—she’s a good match for you.”

“What do you mean, ‘you heard?’”

Gunnar tries to look casual and fails. “I asked Kate about her.”

Kalle slams his glass down on the counter. “No.”

“No way,” Bo seconds.

“Maybe ask *me* next time,” I try for diplomacy, which doesn’t always work with my younger brother.

“You leave Kate alone,” Kalle orders just in case Gunnar missed something. “You messed her up enough the last time.”

“I didn’t mess her up,” Gunnar mutters, refusing to look any of us in the eye. “It was a complicated relationship.”

“The only thing complicated is how you couldn’t keep it in your pants,” Kalle says flatly. Kate’s older brother is Kalle’s best friend, so Kalle has a different perspective on the matter than the rest of us. Even so, he never hesitated to take on the role of Gunnar’s bodyguard when it came to defending him.

“We were broken up,” he protests.

“I don’t think Kate remembered it like that.” Kalle shakes his head at Gunnar. “But we’re not here to talk about you.”

“I met her.” Spencer raises his beer. “Camille. She had a sword in her hand. I think our boy here should consider himself lucky it was one of the play ones.”

“So, what we know about the princess-to-be is that she kisses you and asks to play with your sword. I don’t see the problem.”

Spencer chokes on a mouthful of beer. I just shake my head at Kalle’s comment.

“O wanted their first kiss to be a little more special than in the middle of the street, in front of everyone and their brother.”

Bo raises an eyebrow. “Right?”

Each of my brothers has qualities that, while beneficial for a lot of reasons, don’t always work out for me. Like Bo’s talent for insight and observation.

I drop my shoulders, unable to deny it. “It’s not even our first kiss, as Camille was happy enough to remind me.”

“Ah. The past.” Gunnar brushes his shoulder against Spencer as they both lean in. “Which we’ve heard nothing about.”

“None of your business.”

“I tell *you!*” Gunnar clutches his chest. “I told you all about Kate.”

“Even though none of us really wanted to hear it,” Bo says under his breath.

“But I was still open and honest with you.”

Kalle straightens and stares down at me. He’s the biggest and the broadest and the brightest of us all. “You like her,” he states, tapping into Bo’s well of insight. “You always have, but you didn’t realize it. Because if you did, we wouldn’t be in this mess. You could have married her years ago.”

“Yes.” I can’t even deny it. I pushed thoughts of Camille away for years, mainly because I felt shame for how easily I let it end. Or how little I did to keep it going. She wrote me *every day*. And what did I do? Acted like a silly nineteen-year-old who didn’t know a good thing when it came up and stabbed him with a sword.

“For fear of copying Bo, that’s a good thing, isn’t it?” Gunnar demands. “You’re marrying someone you like.” He spreads his hands, almost knocking over Bo’s beer. “What’s the problem?”

What is the problem? After a series of ups and downs, relationships that didn’t work out, decisions that I regret, and a couple of bad judgment calls, I’ve settled into a relationship with a woman I actually have feelings for. What’s so bad about that?

“The problem is,” Spencer holds up a hand. “Does Camille feel the same way?”

“When are we going to meet this new sister-in-law anyway?” Gunnar demands before I can reply. “For longer than a minute. You really whisked her away today. She seems fun.”

“From what I saw the other night, fun isn’t a word I might use to describe her,” Kalle offers, and the simple statement has me jumping to Camille’s defence.

“She might be. She fences.”

Gunnar winces. “That doesn’t make a person fun.”

“But at least it gives you someone to practice with,” Kalle points out.

“We’ll meet her at dinner tonight,” Bo says. He drains his glass and sets it before Kalle. “Another. Please,” he adds as Edie magically appears. “And thank you.”

“Should I put this on his tab, boss?” she asks Kalle. “How are you boys getting home, anyway?”

I glance over my shoulder at Tex lounging at a table with his back to the wall, eyes on the front door. “Him, I hope. Dinner won’t be that bad,” I say.

“Speak for yourself. You’re the only one who hasn’t disappointed our father.”

Gunnar winces before I can respond to Bo. “I have a date. D’you think—?”

“No,” Kalle says flatly. “You’re an idiot if you think you should bring a date.”

“Does that mean I’m an idiot?” I ask him.

Kalle studies me carefully. Out of all of us, he looks more like our mother, with her hazel eyes and auburn hair giving Kalle a reddish tinge to his beard. He also has her way of cutting through the fat to see what’s underneath. “You’re an idiot if you don’t take this thing with Camille and run with it,”

he says finally. “You’ve got a good chance to make something out of it. Don’t blow it.”

“What should I do about this group?” I ask. “There’s such a backlash against her. I don’t want Camille upset.”

“That group should be the last thing you’re concerned with,” Kalle says. “I don’t let them bother me, and they’re telling me to step down from the throne before I even get there.” His words are casual, but I don’t think ignoring the group has ever been that easy for my brother.

Gunnar laughs. “You’re an idiot if you take them seriously. They’re full of it, O, so stop worrying.”

“Gun’s right,” Bo chimes in. “Tell them to go stuff themselves, especially if they’re talking trash about your woman.”

Is Camille my woman? Today, I saw a different side of her, from the puppies to the yelling—and what she looked like in that green dress. And the kiss.

Maybe it’s the beer, but I like the thought of her being my woman.

Camille

I'M DINING WITH KING Magnus of Laandia tonight.

My future father-in-law.

I'm not sure what makes me the most nervous; I've met royalty before, but not a king. The closest I've come is the cousin of the heir to the French throne, which doesn't really count since there's no longer a French monarchy, thanks to the Revolution.

I've met a few possible fathers-in-law, but none like King Magnus. But before I meet the king, I need to meet the princes.

And that scares me more than anything.

I hear the laughter as I come down the back stairs—not the main ones, but the ones closer to the kitchens, Kate informed me. She also instructed me to go more casual than the dress I planned on wearing, so I have on a pair of high-waisted black pants and one of the shirts I bought today—silky dark green, fitted at my waist with a lower neckline than what I’m used to.

I resist the urge to give it a tug as I pause at the doorway of the dining room.

“There she is!”

I don’t recognize who calls out, but it’s Gunnar who steps forward to pull me into the room. “How was shopping?”

“Good.” I smile nervously, my gaze tracking the four very tall, very handsome men standing before me.

And Odin.

My nerves about seeing *him* fade as soon as I clock the smile—shy but happy, all at once. He’s gone from flustered to ruffled. It must have been some meeting.

Gunnar leans down. “Before you say anything, *I didn’t do it*,” he says in a loud whisper.

“Didn’t do what?” Gunnar motions toward Odin and that’s when I notice the bemused expression on his face. And then I smell him. “You’re drunk?”

“I am not drunk,” Odin says slowly and enunciates each word. “I am merely on the verge of becoming slightly intoxicated.”

“I told him to stop.” I catch my breath because Kalle—broody bad boy Kalle—is *grinning*. At least I think he’s grinning. His beard is far from as bushy as Bo’s, but it does manage to hide most of his mouth.

“You kept serving him,” Bo corrects, slapping his brother on the shoulder. That looks like it should hurt since Bo looks like a cross between a Viking and an actual bear. Hair, beard, leather vest—

It all works, though. It works for all of them.

“Technically, it was Edie serving him,” Kalle protests. “And I told her to put it on your tab!”

Kalle *laughs*, which startles me more than Odin being drunk.

“Let’s get you a drink so you can catch up,” Spencer suggests, heading for the bottle of red wine already open on the table. Each of the brothers is holding a glass. “I’m always invited to family dinners,” he confides in response to my unasked question. “I’m family, but not really, so I’ll be on your side, no matter what. I think we need another one of these.” He drains the bottle into my glass, almost reaching the rim.

“That’s too big of a pour,” Kalle warns him as Spencer, using both hands, hands me the glass.

“Like you should talk about big pours,” Gunnar scoffs. “I’ve seen you level a martini glass so you can’t get the olive in.”

I turn to Odin with confusion. “I thought you had a meeting.”

“I did. With my advisors.”

“He needed some brotherly advice,” Kalle explains, resting his hand on Odin’s shoulder.

“About you,” Odin admits sheepishly.

“Me?” I whisper.

“We told him not to mess it up with you,” Gunnar cuts in with a laugh. He raises his glass. “Here’s to the newest lady in the house!”

“You can’t refer to Lyra as a lady,” Bo argues. “She’ll kick you in the crotch.”

“Me neither,” I say, trying to keep my voice level because this display is overwhelming. Odin has *this* in his family?

I’m going to have them as my brothers.

Even the thought of it starts a warmth in my chest like Betty White is curled up on me.

“Not that I’ll be doing any kicking. I’m a lady in title only,” I add.

Kalle winks and gives another heart-stopping grin. “Yeah. I heard about the snowballs.”

By the time the king arrives, I’ve finished my glass of wine and am already feeling very comfortable with the princes of Laandia.

Including Odin, who takes every excuse to touch me, brushing my hand or arm, and once, pushing a tendril of hair off my cheek.

I’m feeling *very* comfortable with Odin, especially after my chat with Kate.

Even the room seems designed to put me at ease. It’s large, but not formal, with a roaring fire at one end with a circle of chairs set before it, and a full bar at the other. Half of the long table is beautifully set.

“This is the small dining room,” Odin whispers into my ear as he pulls out my chair. Spencer takes the seat beside him.

The brothers sit across from us, and I try not to stare; not because they are all quite good-looking, with similar features arranged just a little differently, but because I’m in awe of their relationship. I’ve never thought of having a brother, or a sister, but watching the interactions with the family, it’s clear that it would be nice to have someone who always has my back.

Now I have three, according to Gunnar when he raises his glass in another toast to me. Four, if I want to count Spencer, which they obviously do.

Gunnar also peppers me with questions about the shopping trip, compliments me on the green of my top, and tells me about other places in Battle Harbour that I *have* to visit. He even offers to take me.

He only mentions Kate four times.

Bo asks a few questions about life in Saint Pierre, but he is definitely the quiet brother.

Kalle is the revelation: a cross between outgoing Gunnar and introverted Bo, but I see much of Odin in him. He's smart, well-spoken and funny. There's no sign of the broodiness he's known for nor the infamous bad-boy-ness.

Except for the pranks he has played on his brothers, which Odin and Gunnar happily tell me about.

Of course, everything comes to a halt as King Magnus arrives.

He walks in with no fanfare—a busy man coming for dinner with his family—with a smile on his face, a tankard in his hand, and a seriously beautiful man with a mane of silver hair and Spencer's eyes following behind him.

"I'm late. Again," the king announces, waving his arm over his head. "It's Dunc's fault."

"He's always late," Gunnar tells me. "And always blames Duncan."

Recognition kicks in—of course. Duncan Laz. He's been on the cover of dozens of romance novels. The king's best friend, former band member, and partner in the honey mead venture. He's almost as impressive as the king.

Almost.

"Lady Camille." The king pauses at my chair and I scramble to get to my feet. Should I bow? Offer my hand?

King Magnus of Laandia hugs me.

He's a bear of a man—as tall as Odin with a barrel-like chest—and when he pulls me into his embrace, I expect it to feel like hugging a mountain.

But he's surprisingly gentle, even cupping the back of my head as he pulls away to smile at me. "I'm so glad you're here," he says, his voice DJ deep. "And I apologize for keeping you waiting."

There's an aura about him, a charm that all the best royals have. I would happily go off to war for this man, and I've only just met him.

"It's no trouble," I manage. "Thank you for having me."

"This is my number one, Duncan Laz." He motions to the tall man who takes the seat beside Odin, on the right side of the king. "He does the butt-kicking around here."

"He might, if he wasn't such a softie," Gunnar chortles as Duncan nods at me with a truly heart-stopping smile. "But no complaints!"

"Hopefully my boys haven't tried to corrupt you too much." King Magnus grins, holding the back of my chair as I sit back down. "Just so it's clear, the roof of the greenhouse at the back is off-limits."

Gunnar rolls his eyes. "I was *twelve*."

"And you broke three of the windows trying to get up the turret." Magnus grins as he takes the seat at the head of the table beside me. "Great to finally get a face-to-face with you," he says to me. "I hope my boy here has taken good care of you while I've been away."

"He has," I manage, stunned by his magnetism. I thought Gunnar had a presence; he has nothing on King Magnus.

"Good, good. I want to hear all about it. Maybe not everything," he adds with a wink. "You've met my other oafs?" He waves at his sons with a grin and I nod. "Great. Let's commence eating, then. I have no idea what we're having, but it won't be fish. I had a feeling you've eaten enough fish at home for a few lifetimes, hmm?"

It's as if his words are the signal for the kitchen staff, and two men in white chef's jackets carry trays into the room.

"Hamburgers?" I ask with surprise.

"Lamb burgers," King Magnus corrects, rubbing his hands together with glee. "And spicy potato wedges. Yum."

The king of Laandia describes burgers and spicy potato wedges as yum.

Odin

I'M NOT SURE WHAT I expected of dinner with my family and Camille.

Spending the day with Camille still hasn't given me a clear understanding of her. She can be tart and sharp one moment and all smiles the next. She ignored me for days, and now I think she might be flirting with me?

To say I'm confused would be an understatement.

And now, seeing her smile and charm my father, laugh at Gunnar's asides, and even take a few moments to try and bring Bo into the conversation, I'm confused even more.

Who is this woman?

Outwardly, Camille has transformed right before my eyes. Gone are the conservative grey and beige clothes, more suitable for Mrs. Theissen than a young woman. Everything Camille bought—everything *I* bought—is bright and imaginative. She’s a colouring book with the pages filled in. She’s a new person.

I’m a little in awe of her.

I don’t know what’s going to come out of her mouth, and so I can’t take my eyes off her, to the extent Kalle has to wave to get my attention.

I finally have to pull my gaze away from her. “Sorry, what was that?”

He holds up his phone with a frown. “They had a gathering of your Odinites in the bar after we left.”

I hate that Kalle knows there’s a group of Laandian citizens who want me to take the throne instead of him. Technically, I should hate the idea of there being such a group in the first place...

There’s always been a sense of competition among the four of us. Five of us, since Spencer is our brother in every way that matters. Who wins at Manhunt, laser tag, and two-on-two? When we were younger, the main one was always who had the most popular girl for a girlfriend—Kalle, with Gunnar a close second—and who had the first and most memorable kiss.

That was Bo.

I never won any contests when it came to girls, because I was the only one who listened to our father who cautioned that discretion and even abstinence was a good idea for princes in the public eye. He pointed out scandals in other royal families and asked us to avoid being talked about, if at all possible.

No one else listened, leaving me with a lack of experience with women that is frankly embarrassing for a prince.

At least that’s what Gunnar enjoys telling me.

The only thing we never competed for is Dad's love because he gives it by the boatload.

"What do you need me to do?" Spencer asks Kalle. He's the assistant Crown Attorney of Laandia with friends in the police department as well as every aspect of the government. We all consider him and his father as part of the family, but even if we weren't as close, they would still do anything to protect the family.

Kalle shakes his head. "They'll be gone before we can get there. And they're usually no trouble."

"But they're riled up today. Let me make a few calls." Phone in hand, Spencer pushes away from the table before Kalle can protest.

"Don't worry about it," Bo says to me in his quiet way. "Kalle doesn't."

"You'd think they'd meet at a different place."

"No one says these are the smartest lots of the bunch. They want *you* to be king, after all." And Bo winks at me. It always makes me feel better when he tries to tease us.

Normal family dinners have at least three conversations happening at the same time. So I don't hear exactly what is being said between my father and Camille, but I clearly hear her response to one of his questions.

"I'd break from France," she says.

Dad's eyes widen. "You would? If you were prefect, you would leave the republic?"

"I've been seriously considering it," she says firmly. "It's clear France doesn't respect Saint Pierre and Miquelon. They've no problem letting us flounder, without helping enough to jump-start the economy which has been in a decline for years, and now is in a free fall. Fishing is our only industry and the boundary disputes have made it impossible for the people to make a living, let alone prosper. They're leaving in droves, some of them with nothing. I'm not sure we could make it as a country on our own, but I think we can bring a lot to the table."

“Who would you turn to?”

“Canada is the most likely choice.”

“What about Laandia?”

“Is that why I’m here?” Camille counters. “So you can be the front-runner?”

“No politics,” I interrupt and both turn to me. “This is a family dinner so we can get to know Camille. If you want to talk about Saint Pierre, request a meeting with her and the prefect.”

Dad looks between Camille and me and I see the respect in his eyes.

It makes my chest swell.

“O’s right,” he says. “No more talk of business. But I will say, Lady Camille, you’re here because I want all my children to find the happiness that they deserve. I think the two of you would be a good fit. I think you can make him happy.”

Camille turns to me with her mischievous grin that makes my stomach flip. “I think we got his blessing.”

Dad rumbles with laughter. “You’ve had that from the beginning. Now, enough of that talk. How have you been keeping busy since you’ve been here? Or at least since you’ve come out of your room,” he teases Camille.

“It’s a nice room,” she protests with a laugh.

Camille can *laugh* at herself. I didn’t see that coming.

“The all-knowing patriarch,” Gunnar says with a rueful grin. “It was certainly a pain growing up.”

“We had tea,” Camille continues. “And we went shopping.”

“Shopping!” Dad laughs. “That’s my boy.”

“You’ve always liked to shop,” Gunnar teases.

“And you’ve always liked it when I bought you something,” I shoot back.

“True.” He gives Camille a questioning look and wiggles his eyebrows at me. Then he gives me a discreet thumbs-up.

One brother down. And the others fall like dominoes.

After dinner, after I’ve drunk more than I suspect is good for me, I offer to walk Camille back to her room.

“That’s a lot of stairs,” Bo says with one of his rare grins. “And a lot of beer. You sure you can make it?”

“I’m fine,” I grumble, careening off a chair as I try to leave the room. Of course, Camille laughs with the others.

“I have to take Betty White out for her last walk,” Camille tells me. “Why don’t you stay here while I run up and get her and you can walk her with me. You said I shouldn’t be alone,” she adds with a twinkle.

Is that her way of telling me she wants to spend time with me?

“Betty White is in the castle?” Dad asks with confusion. “I thought she died.”

“You explain,” Camille tosses over her shoulder to me as she heads for the door of the dining room. And then she stops. “King Magnus,” she stutters. “Your Majesty.”

She looks like she’s about to drop into a curtsy and Gunnar laughs. “Don’t bother with that.”

And Dad waves his glass of wine. “No need for that in here.”

“I’ll be right back,” she promises.

“Bring this Betty White,” he calls after her.

As soon as she’s gone, four pairs of eyes zero in on me. “What?”

Bo sums it up for all of them. “Don’t mess it up.”

Camille

DINNER WENT BETTER THAN I ever could have imagined.

We never had family dinners at home, since for years, it's only been me and Lord Arnaud. When the two of us sat down for a meal, the conversation was brief, often stilted, and there was a fair amount of criticism directed my way.

There are memories, hidden beneath layers of hurt, all bottled up and locked in a box, of dinners with my mother. Of smiles and laughter and warmth.

It's been a very long time since I've enjoyed a dinner like the one I just had with King Magnus and his sons.

Odin waits for me at the bottom of the stairs as I come down with Betty White and King Magnus's face creases into a wide smile.

"She's a *dog*." His laughter booms through the hall, eliciting my own smile. "Not the real Betty White."

"She's my dog. I am a big fan though." I set down Betty White, who rushes to the feet of the king of Laandia and barks at him. "Betty White," I scold, scooping her back into my arms. "Don't be rude. I apologize, Your Majesty."

"Enough with the majesty nonsense. Call me Mag, for now. I'm off to watch *Real Housewives*," he says, giving Betty White a pat on her head.

She growls at him, and he laughs.

But then King Magnus leans down and drops a kiss on the top of my head. "Good night, Camille."

It's such a sweet gesture, such a *fatherly* gesture, and I drop my head so no one can see the moisture under my eyes. "Good night..."

"Mag," Gunnar finishes for me. "C'mon. You can do it."

With a laugh, the king heads off down a hall and Odin smiles at me. "Let's go walk your dog," he says.

"You're starting to like her, aren't you?" I demand, turning away to swipe at my eyes.

"He likes you, so you should be happy with that," Kalle says and Odin pretends to tackle him.

This is a family, and I'm about to be a part of it. I never expected to be so accepted, and so quickly. It's a heady sensation and one I'm not used to.

It's as if the brothers opened their arms and gave me a hug.

The night is cold—bitterly cold, even with my new parka. "Should have gone for the warmer one," Odin teases as he leads me to the back of the castle. I haven't been back here

yet, and I look around with curiosity. The half-moon provides some light but there's not much to see, as most of the lawn seems to be covered with dark mounds covered with snow.

“Pickle-ball court.” Odin points off to the side. “Basketball—Bo made the national team one year—and stables and garages are over there.

“Garages.” I emphasize the plural.

“For the cars-es,” he mocks and I laugh.

Whatever tension was between us earlier has drifted away and I wonder if I have the brothers to thank for that. The fact that he went to *them* about *me* produces a slightly squeamish feeling—whatever Odin said, it didn't turn them against me.

He cared enough to talk to someone about what happened.

But the uncertainty of what was said.

All this adds up to produce a little heave in my stomach that has nothing to do with the amount of wine I've drunk with dinner.

Speaking of amount of wine... “How drunk are you still?” I ask.

Odin smiles, then sighs. “I have an extremely high tolerance for alcohol. All of us do.”

“Is your high tolerance because you were born in Laandia or because you were born with brothers?”

“Both. The amazing one is Lyra actually. She's challenged us in drinking games more than once, and done quite well, considering she's about half our size.”

Betty White is quick to do her business but despite the cold, I'm not ready to head inside. Odin seems to realize that because he ushers me along a path behind the castle, recently shovelled so we can walk beside each other. “Does your sister look like a Viking like the rest of you?” Now that I've met the brothers, I'm intrigued to learn more about the princess of Laandia.

“She takes after our mother. Small. Redhead, at least last time I saw her.” There’s a wistful note in Odin’s voice.

“Do you miss her?”

“I do. And I really wish she were here to meet you.” He looks down at me with a crooked smile and my heart does a strange leap.

“Me too.” It slips out before I can stop it. After meeting Odin’s brothers and father, I can’t wait to meet his sister. Suddenly I want to know everything about him, like getting a new book you can’t wait to start reading. “There’s still time. I’m not going anywhere.”

Odin glances at me. “Oh, no? I thought you were ready to run back to your island?”

I did say that. I did want that. But despite the leaping heart and the butterflies and wanting to read Odin like a book, I don’t know the words to tell him how I feel.

Or maybe I’m too scared to. “Now that I have all my new clothes, there’s not the same need,” I manage in a breezy voice.

“Right,” he says with a sideways glance.

I bite my lip and look away.

The backyard of the castle seems to go on forever. Lit by the moon and solar lights a few feet off the ground, I’m sure it’s beautiful in the summer months, but now all I see are paths cutting through the snow. There’s a forest in the distance, and on one side, the ground drops away. Odin leads me toward the cliff rather than the forest, which I’m happy about since there are paw prints through the virgin snow in that direction that don’t belong to Betty White and are quite a bit bigger.

We stay outside longer than expected, walking along the paths in the moonlight, following Betty White as she explores the garden.

I think she may be starting to like Odin. At least she’s not barking anymore.

He asks me about SealSave; tells me about New Iceland, the restoration of the Viking settlements not far from Battle Harbour.

“L’Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland is the first recorded Viking settlement outside Europe, but here, in the middle of Laandia, is where they really lived,” Odin explains.

“Your ancestors?”

“They lived here in the nine hundreds, peacefully among the First Nations. It was thought that they came to invade and got stuck here for the winter. Maybe something happened to the boats, maybe they got sick, or maybe they realized crossing the Atlantic in the winter is never a good thing, but whatever their reason, they made a home for themselves here.”

“I’ve been to L’Anse aux Meadows. I’d like to see your restoration.”

“It’s been a pet project of my father’s since before he took the crown. He’s recreating the main hall to show more of what life was like.”

“He must really like his Viking history.”

“My family is one of the few in the area who can trace Scandinavian descendants on both sides. Most of the other families eventually merged with First Nations or other European descendants.”

“You’re telling me you’re pure Viking.”

“Pretty much.”

“Odin seems an appropriate name for you.”

“King of Aasgard.”

“But the Vikings weren’t nice at all, were they? All that pillaging and plundering.”

“At least we didn’t guillotine our leaders.”

“Are you comparing the French Revolution with a Viking attack?” I ask in mock outrage.

“It’s a bit like apples and oranges.”

“Or a bloody massacre and a snowball fight.”

“You’d know all about those,” he says with a laugh.

“They threw first!” I protest.

“That was impressive tonight.” Odin slows his steps as we wait for Betty White to sniff a patch of yellow snow. “You and my father.”

“He’s an impressive man.”

“I meant you.”

I meet his gaze and hold it. There’s admiration there and what might be respect and despite the chill in the air, I’m flooded with warmth.

“Most people are pretty tongue-tied when they speak to him. But not you. You seemed comfortable. Maybe it’s because you hang out with royalty...” He trails off with a rueful shrug.

“Definitely not. He made me comfortable.” I catch my breath. “You did. You all did. It was... fun. I’m not used to dinners like that.”

“What are dinners like for you?”

“Quiet.”

“There’s not much quiet when we’re together.”

I want to ask him about his “advisor” meeting with his brothers earlier, but I can’t. He said it was about me, and a good guess would be that it was about how I kissed him, but I don’t want to hear about how inappropriate I was. How it wasn’t ladylike behaviour.

That’s what Lord Arnaud would say. But I’m tired of trying to act like a lady. I’ve never been very good at it. And Lord Arnaud is not here.

I’m very glad he’s not here.

“I like them,” I say. “Your brothers.”

“They weren’t even on their best behaviour tonight, so that’s saying something.”

“What’s their best behaviour?”

“Gunnar, as you can tell, is a flirt. Bo can charm the pants of anyone when he puts his mind to it, and Kalle bats his eyelashes and women drop like flies. Spencer, too, when he’s not working. He works too much.”

“You all seem close to him.”

“Duncan has been with Dad forever. It’s funny, though.” Odin kicks a pile of snow that’s fallen on the path, sending Betty White chasing after it. “Dad always tells us how they grew up as bitter enemies. It wasn’t until they started the band that they got so close. It was Duncan who convinced Dad to be king.”

“He wasn’t going to be king?” I can’t imagine Magnus as anything but a king, even though he’s had some interesting jobs before he took the crown.

Odin shakes his head. “The band had really taken off—you’ve heard them? Kräftig? German heavy metal?”

“I have.” I hunch my shoulders. “It’s not really my type of music. Interesting sound, though. They did quite well.”

“I have no idea whose type of music it is,” Odin laughs. “But *Danke Meine Liebe* was a huge hit, and after the tour, my grandfather called Dad home and basically told him to choose. Was he going to be a rock star or was he going to be king? It was like he knew he only had a few more years and wanted to get things in order.”

“Who would have been king then, if not your father?”

“My uncle, Dante.”

“I didn’t know you had other family.”

“They keep a pretty low profile, to my cousins’ dismay. There’s some... resentment. It’s one of the reasons we’re so close to Spence. We can trust him. My cousins—not so much. Anyway, Dad picked the throne and cut back on performing so he was ready to step up when Grandfather passed. He thought Duncan would keep playing, but he followed Dad back home and he’s been the right hand of the king ever since.”

“Between modelling.”

“Ah.” Another smile, this one coming with a teasing gleam in his eye that is easy to see in the moonlight. “I wasn’t sure you read those kinds of books.”

“You mean romance novels?” I ask archly.

“Dad calls them bodice rippers. He’s always bugging Duncan about the covers mainly, I think because he’s always been jealous of Dunc’s hair.” He laughs.

“I like your family,” I tell him. “The ones I know, anyway.”

“And they like you.”

“How can you tell?”

“They’d like anyone that I like. It’s like an unwritten rule.”

“You... like... me?”

He looks down at me, his smile wide and creasing his blue eyes and I realize, this is what Odin looks like when he’s happy. And slightly intoxicated.

I want him to look like this all the time. The happy part, anyway.

“Yes, Camille,” he says, his voice husky with affection and amusement. “I like you very much.”

After today, it’s difficult not to suspect as much, but hearing Odin say that starts a swell of hope and happiness that won’t be easy to tamp down.

I hope that’s not the alcohol talking.

But then he takes my hand, our glove-clad fingers twining awkwardly together. “I’d take off my glove but I think my fingers might freeze,” he says, feigning nonchalance like he doesn’t know my heart is galloping like a racehorse. “You really should have bought that other coat.” He lifts his chin and stares off into the distance. “You should really listen to me.”

“What?” I gasp. Just as my heart begins to sink, Odin turns to me with a grin and I know he’s teasing. “Not a chance.”

He shrugs. “Suit yourself.”

I drop his hand, reaching down to scoop a handful of snow. “You should listen to me when I tell you that you should run.”

And then I throw the snowball at him.

Odin

I TURN JUST IN time so the snowball only grazes my shoulder. “I’ll have you know that snowball fights can get pretty brutal around these parts,” I tell Camille as she dances away.

“Is that so?” Camille reaches down and scoops another handful of snow.

“What do you think you’re doing?” I ask as I ready my own snowball. “Are you trying to provoke me into having a snowball fight with you?”

“Haven’t you figured out that I can provoke you into doing whatever I want you to do?” she calls from the far end of the path. Betty White barks a protest or encouragement—it’s hard to tell.

“I played rugby.”

“Rugby. That’s a big ball. This is—” She draws back her arm and her aim is true, drilling me in the upper chest.

Hard.

It’s not surprising since I’ve already seen her in action.

“Snowballs are the same size as a baseball.”

“Is there something you haven’t told me?”

“You know nothing, John Snow.” With a laugh, she throws another and hits me in the arm.

“That’s it.”

It’s fifteen minutes of chaos. Camille can pack a snowball as quickly as she can throw them and it’s as if Betty White was told to get under my feet as much as possible.

Finally, I attack, running in a zig-zag formation straight at her, with arms up to defend against the onslaught. Just before I reach her, Camille turns with a shriek to run and I take a flying tackle and bring her down.

We wrestle in the snow, both of us scrambling to make one last snowball. Both of us laughing and laughing as snow covers our faces and Betty White barks as she hops around us.

Until Camille stills. We lie in the snow, my weight pinning her down.

And she doesn’t seem to mind one bit.

“Truce?” I offer.

“You mean, you’re giving up?”

“I have the advantage here.”

“For now.” She begins to wriggle to free herself, and I counter by pinning one of her arms over her head in the snow.

Her eyes are so dark. For once, her smile isn't scornful or sly but joyous. Happy. And then—

“Look at the stars,” she breathes, staring over my shoulder.

I roll off, the cold biting into my legs. High above us, stars prick the purple-blue sky like strings of Christmas lights.

“A shooting star!” Camille points.

“I think that might be the International Space Station.”

“I think I know a shooting star when I see one.”

“Do you argue with everyone or is it just me?”

Camille turns her head to look at me. “I'd love to say I save it all for just you, but I'd be lying.” She giggles. Her hat is askew, wet curls are plastered to her cheeks, and her eyes are dancing.

She looks absolutely breathtaking. I'd really like to kiss her. Kiss that mouth as she smiles, those lips that are slightly blue-tinged—

“You must be cold,” I say.

Why did I say that? This would be the perfect moment to kiss her. What is wrong with me?

“I can't feel my toes,” she admits with a cheerful grin. And then, with a yip that borders on whining, Betty White tiptoes through the snow to Camille's side with such a look of disdain on her canine face that I know I've completely blown the moment.

I haul myself out of the snow and help Camille to her feet, without kissing her.

I kick myself the entire time it takes to walk back to the castle.

And longer.

Camille

THE NEXT MORNING, I'M rewarded for having one of the best days of my life by a lethargic Betty White curled up on the pillow beside me.

"Betty White is sick," I exclaim to Jackson when he arrives, carrying her out of my bedroom like a baby.

She sneezes. "I've never heard her sneeze before," I wail.

"That was a sneeze?" I glare at him in response. "Has she been out this morning?"

I shake my head, my worry increasing. “She didn’t wake me up to take her out. She always wakes me up.”

Jackson reaches for her tiny form. “I’ll take her out. Maybe some fresh air will help.”

But it doesn’t.

When Jackson returns, I’ve dressed and my breakfast has arrived. I tempt Betty White with toast crusts and bites of egg as Jackson works on the fire to make the room as warm as possible for her.

She’s never been sick a day since I’ve got her.

Her little eyes are heavy and she feebly licks my hand when I ask her what’s wrong. “Madam Carol would know what to do,” I say to Betty White. “I wish she were here.”

“Do you want me to find Mrs. Theissen?” Jackson suggests, clearly at a loss on what to do.

That gets a little laugh, but no response from Betty White. “Thanks, but I’ll keep her warm, try to get her to eat something.”

“I’ll ask the kitchen if they have something she’d like. Maybe chicken. Or ice cream.” At my questioning glance, he shrugs. “I like ice cream when I’m not feeling well.”

“I don’t think it’s the same for dogs. We were outside too long last night,” I fret. Gone are the happy feelings from my snowball fight with Odin, replaced with dread about my dog.

“What happened last night?” Jackson asks.

“Odin and I took her out after dinner last night. We walked around the castle and had a snowball fight and looked at the stars—”

“Snowball fight.” Jackson mouths the words and shakes his head. “That explains the wet clothes.” He points to the pile made up of my coat and pants heaped by the fire.

“Snow is wet,” I say defensively.

“You don’t say. How was dinner with the king?”

“Good.” I look up from Betty White, and despite my worry, I smile foolishly. “Really good.”

“Really good?” The expression of surprise is there before Jackson wipes his face clear.

“They’re a family.” I sigh. “They get along and they like each other and they tease and laugh, all together.”

A family, together.

When Odin brought me back to my room last night, I spent a long time thinking about things.

Rethinking things.

Meeting the king and Odin’s brothers has shifted something within me. Softened it a little. Softened me. Even during the short conversation with the King—Mag—I didn’t fight to show myself as the strong leader I could be. I didn’t ramp up the arrogance, the abrasive side that Lord Arnaud insists I need as a woman ruler. I was myself, and I spoke the truth. My opinion.

It’s been a long time since I spoke from my heart.

There’s no way one simple dinner could have affected me so much to make me drop my guard so easily. And what I came to the conclusion last night is that it might be *Odin* who has affected me.

Odin, who is softening the sharp edges like Madame Carol told me I need to do.

“It was never like that for you at home, was it?” Jackson asks with a note of sympathy in his tone.

I don’t like for others to pity me, but for once I allow it.

“I have brothers,” Jackson says simply. “I like them. I’ll go check with the kitchen and see what I can find for Betty White.”

“Maybe some ice cream?”

Jackson flashes an almost smile before he leaves.

I gently stroke Betty White's head, the only thing visible in her nest of blankets on the couch. "It's good that he came with us," I tell her. "It's good that we're here. Even if you got sick. I'll make you better."

Betty White looks at me with her big brown eyes and manages to lick the back of my hand.

It is good we're here.

Not long after Jackson leaves, Odin shows up which makes me wonder if Jackson reported Betty White's illness to Kate. "How is she?" Odin asks, sitting on the couch on the other side of Betty White.

"I shouldn't have kept her outside with us last night."

"It looked like she was having fun." He offers her the back of his hand to sniff, and for once Betty White doesn't bark or even growl at him.

"She's so sick that she's starting to like you."

"I'm not such a bad guy." Odin's hand is so big that he uses two fingers to stroke Betty White's head. "Your mother is starting to like me too," he confides to the dog. "At least I think she is." He looks up, meeting my gaze, and instantly I'm transported to the castle grounds last night, without the wet snow and cold.

Lying in the snow beside him and wanting—hoping—that he'd kiss me.

"I don't know what to do," I admit in a soft voice.

He touches my cheek and I want to lean into his palm. "She'll be okay."

It's not exactly what I meant, but reassuring me about Betty White is acceptable. "You don't know that."

"There's that arguing again," Odin says, bemused.

I huff. "Well, you don't know."

"No, I don't. I don't know a lot of things."

The way he looks at me makes me wonder if we are talking about the same thing. Namely us.

I feel like there's an *us* now, more than just on paper.

"It's nice you came to check on her."

"I wanted to. Check on both of you, that is." He holds my gaze over Betty White. "I had fun with you last night."

"Don't sound so surprised." I grimace as soon as the words come out of my mouth. Especially at his expression of surprise. "I mean... so did I. Have fun with you. At dinner. And after..."

"I'm glad."

"Me too." I drop my gaze to his mouth, then quickly to Betty White as I tuck the blankets closer to her. It's not an uncomfortable silence, but it's a little awkward, mainly because I can't think of much other than kissing him.

Has he gotten better since that night he kissed me? Has he had much experience?

That's obviously a big *yes* for the latter, but he *had* been a good kisser. Gentle, and the way he brushed my hair back—

"What are you thinking?" Odin asks.

Heat rises to my cheeks. "You don't want to know."

"Oh, I think I do."

I mash my lips together to keep in the words as I shake my head. "You really don't."

"Later, then."

Later sounds like a promise rather than an obligation. "What are you doing today?" I ask, wrenching my focus away from his mouth.

"That's what I came to tell you," Odin says reluctantly. "I'm sorry but I won't be able to train with you today. There's a meeting and I'm afraid I'll be gone most of the day."

"That's okay." I'm surprised at the rush of disappointment that swells. "You're a busy prince."

“I’ll check in with you when I get back and see how Betty White is,” he promises.

“That’s fine.” There’s nothing I can tell myself, nothing he can say that won’t make me think he’s come up with a mysterious meeting to get out of spending time with me.

You’re an idiot, Betty White seems to be telling me.

Maybe I am.

“I am sorry to leave you alone for the day.”

I glance up with surprise. How did he know that’s exactly what I was feeling sorry for myself for? Is it possible for eyes to become even bluer when he sounds so sincere?

“You left me alone for three days,” I can’t help but bring up.

“But things are different now, aren’t they?” His hand brushes mine before he stands, towering over me. “And that won’t happen again. You can’t hide from me that easily.”

With a last smile and a glance that I can’t understand, he heads for the door.

“I hope not,” I whisper after the door closes behind him.



Betty White only moves from her nest to my lap and stays there for most of the day, so I’m stuck on the couch. Jackson brings me my laptop and I manage to go through my inbox and approve plans for enlarging the aviary at SealSave, all the while reliving last night. Yesterday. Lying in the snow with Odin.

It’s thrown me off balance like I’m on board one of the fishing charters heading out to sea. I came to Laandia not expecting to have a resurgence of my feelings for Odin; this arranged marriage was to be more arrangement than marriage.

That little iota of hope that I kept tucked away was dashed once I found out the arrangement was a way for Odin to save face.

It wasn't exactly hope that Odin would take one look at me and fall madly in love, but more of a fond memory and a *maybe this time*. And I thought it was gone but now I'm not sure.

After Odin broke up with me—break up isn't exactly the right description since we were never really together, at least not after that night—after I stopped writing to him, I was so hurt. And angry. Disappointed. I didn't let myself hope for the best because that would leave me vulnerable and I would get hurt again.

I'd been hurt enough.

So I closed up shop. I pulled down the steel shutters and locked the iron-clad doors. No one was getting in.

And no one did get in. But a little piece of the fond memory stuck around and I couldn't get rid of it, no matter how hard I tried. And that little piece has blown up in the last couple of days, threatening my carefully barricaded heart.

Hope is a strange thing. It makes you lighter, almost buoyant-like, you have the ability to stay afloat on the storm-lashed ocean. Excited to see what the days ahead can bring. And hope can make you happy.

Or maybe it's just the thought of Odin that is making me happy.

Dinner brings a surge of energy to Betty White, enough that I let her walk to the main staircase to take her outside instead of carrying her. Once back upstairs, she curls up on her bed by the fire instead of my lap, so maybe the worst has passed.

I'm cuddled up under a blanket on the couch watching an episode of *Golden Girls* on my laptop when there's a knock on the door.

Since Odin visited this morning, I've had Kate stop by four times, Mrs. Theissen twice, and even Gunnar dropped by to say hi. I expect it's one of them again.

It's Odin.

He carries a box in his arms. “I got you something,” he announces with a smug smile. The whine from inside the box spoils the surprise, but still.

But still.

That little bit of hope *explodes* in my chest. I want to jump up and down. I want to throw my arms around myself—around Odin.

I want to jump up into his arms.

But I don’t do any of that.

“You got me a dog because you thought Betty White was going to die,” I accuse. “And I would blame you.”

Betty White is in the process of climbing out of her bed to investigate but stops and stares. At me.

With that look in her eyes.

At the same time, I hear Madam Carol’s voice in my head. “*More Anna, less Elsa.*”

It’s okay to soften the edges. To open the door.

“I wouldn’t blame you,” I add awkwardly. “If anything happened to Betty White.”

Well, I might, but nothing is going to happen to her, so that’s a moot point.

Odin sets the box on the floor close to Betty White’s bed by the fire. With a glance of disgust at me, she gives the box a cursory sniff and a few yips.

“I didn’t think she was going to die,” Odin protests as he opens the flaps. Inside is the puppy from the shelter, cowed and frightened. “I got you a dog because I thought Betty White might need a friend here.”

I lift out the puppy. She peed in the corner of the box, soaking through the cardboard, soaking into Odin’s pants. He hasn’t noticed. I cuddle the dog close as Betty White circles me, barking impatiently. “You got a dog for Betty White.”

The explosion of hope goes nuclear and I bury my face in the puppy's fur so Odin can't see how much this means to me.

He got my dog a friend. And that right there tells me this is going to have to be a different kind of marriage than I planned.

"Maybe you should let them meet," he suggests. "They can do the sniff test."

I laugh as I set the puppy on the floor, my heart full, yet somehow lighter.

"Her name is Bea Arthur," Odin adds.

Odin

I REST MY HEAD on the back of the couch and glance at Camille beside me. “This is nice.”

I’m not sure how I got here but I’m definitely going to enjoy it while it lasts.

When I brought in the puppy, I thought Camille was going to tell me to get out. I expected she’d keep the dog but I wasn’t sure if she wanted to keep *me*.

In the last few days, I’ve realized there are two sides to Camille: the smart, funny, strong-willed side and the one that isn’t.

At times, Camille barks worse than Betty White and I think she'd bite if I get too close. She's got really high walls that I doubt I'd be able to scale, so I'm doing my best to break them down instead. Camille is amazing—sometimes. Other times she's tough and abrasive and possibly nasty if you cross her.

Someone did this to her and I have a horrible suspicion that it might have been me.

Luckily, Betty White seems to have recovered from whatever was bothering her today and accepted Bea Arthur without too much question. There was some growling, a little barking as I settled onto the couch in Camille's sitting room to watch the getting-to-know-you moments.

I didn't realize I had pee on my leg until Bea Arthur had another accident, mainly because she was excited, Camille said.

Camille seems excited about her present. Rather, Betty White's present.

Ajax and Stella from the shelter sent puppy supplies and I helped Camille set everything up, all the while learning more about dogs than I ever wanted.

Hours later, both dogs are asleep, Betty White curled up in her bed and Bea Arthur on the floor beside her, as close as she can get without touching.

They're sweet together.

I don't realize I've spoken aloud until Camille shifts on the couch beside me, also as close as she can get without actually touching me. "Some might say the same about us. At least when I'm not arguing with you."

"I've noticed you are a tad confrontational." I point to the remains of two pizzas on the table. "We couldn't even agree on what pizza to get."

"I like my pineapple."

"I'll remember that. You like dogs, pineapple, and throwing snowballs."

“There are other things too,” she says with a laugh.

I’m looking forward to finding out more. “I know you have good aim.”

“But look where it gets me. No Odinites at the gate when we took the dogs out.”

“Because they’re afraid of you!”

“I do have good aim.” Her smile falters. “I’m glad there wasn’t any fall-out over that.”

“Hmm,” I muse. “For a moment there, you sound almost regretful for pelting my subjects with snow.”

She lifts her chin, showing that toughness. “I don’t regret it.” And then, right in front of my eyes, she softens and drops her gaze, toying with the blanket thrown over her lap. “I would feel bad if you got in trouble for it though.”

“That’s nice to hear. But it wasn’t a problem. That group has been the bane of the castle for a few years now. This is private property, so they really don’t have a right to be here. I’ve just never given the order to have them removed.”

She grins. “And now you don’t have to.”

Staring into the flames, I wonder if I can get away with putting my arm around her. “Do you have any regrets?” I ask instead of making a move.

“About throwing snowballs at them?”

“No, anything at all.”

“Regret is a waste of energy, so I don’t see the point,” she says, her smile fading. “But once, I did something that indirectly hurt someone, someone other than the person I was trying to hurt. I regret that.”

I shift so I can see her face. “You might have to explain that a little more.”

“Is that a royal command?”

“I don’t think I’ve ever given a royal command. Asking nicely usually does the trick.”

She frowns and I hope it's because of her regret rather than me. "It was the third attempt to arrange a marriage. Marcus of Belgium; he was good on paper when he was all the way across Europe. What did Madam Carol call him? Good from afar but far from good? It only lasted a few months because I knew I had to get out of it. He was not a nice man. He was far from a nice man."

"Couldn't you just go to your father—the prefect?" I correct.

Camille gives a tight shake of her head. "I handled it."

"Can I ask how you would handle such a thing? Just so I know what to watch out for." I aim for lighthearted, but the coolness in Camille unnerves me.

"You don't have to worry," she tells me.

"No... really."

She presses her lips together and makes a humming noise, almost like she's growling. "I found out something about him," she says finally. "Something that would humiliate him and, I hoped, would send him running back to Belgium with his tail between his legs. Which he did. I kept that ring." She continues to stare into the flames. "But there was another person involved and when I went to the press, they were hurt. I didn't mean to."

"I'm sure you didn't."

"But I did mean to hurt Marcus. Because if I didn't, I think he would have hurt me."

Her words send a prickle of fear through me; fear for her. Anger at this Marcus from Belgium. She'll never have to worry about anyone hurting her ever again.

Why all the arranged marriages for her? What were Lord Arnaud's intentions in marrying her off?

I never asked. I never considered Camille might have her own agenda.

When Esme sent me home from *The Suitorette*, I was supposed to stay out of the public eye for ten days. I have no

idea why it was ten; what would change had I been seen on the street on day nine? I left the compound in Alberta where the show was being filmed, and thanks to friends and their private plane, managed to get back to Laandia without anyone recognizing me. I stayed at the castle for twenty-four hours before I left for Iceland, long enough to tell Duncan what I wanted.

Find me a wife.

And he did.

I never asked questions or wondered why Lord Arnaud seemed as eager for the match as I did. When I found it was *Camille*, pretty Camille from the gala all those years ago, I had mixed reactions: did she remember me? Did she hate me for treating her like that—looking back, I wasn't sure exactly what I had done wrong, only that I knew that I did something to hurt her.

Did she still have feelings for me?

That question grew to broadsword proportions, stabbing me with hope and fear when I least expected it.

There's a coolness in Camille's eyes and it feels like she's given me a shove to move back. I can tell it's not easy for Camille to open up, but I wonder if it's because there haven't been many people she could trust.

"It doesn't seem all that comfortable sitting here with me now, does it?" she asks, turning back to the fire. "Now that you're starting to learn my dirty little secrets."

There's a lot I don't know about Camille, about what she's capable of. It should worry me, but it doesn't.

I think I'm lucky to have her on my side.

"I think you're capable of doing a good many things. Good things that will benefit others," I tell her. "And I'm still glad to be here with you."

She smiles, her eyes softening with gratitude. I wonder how many people see Camille and accept her the way she is.

She plucks at my hand resting between us, not holding it, but lifting a finger, only to drop it. She does it a few times. The way she catches her breath makes me think she's drumming up the courage to tell me something. "What is it?" I finally ask.

"You haven't kissed me yet," she whispers, her focus on my hand. "After what you said, I thought you might."

The fire has chased the chill out of the room, but all of a sudden it gets a lot warmer. With my other hand, I twist a finger through a red curl. "Do you want me to kiss you?" My voice deepens, more husky, and I ready myself. Should I cup her cheek, or just move in to touch her lips?

Those lips have been haunting most of my waking hours today, as well as my sleeping ones last night. I *knew* I should have kissed her last night when I had the chance.

My fingers drift down her cheek.

"Not *now*." Camille rolls her eyes. "You'd be doing it because I said something."

That's as effective as a bucket of ice water being thrown on me. I pull back my hand. "You don't think I want to kiss you?"

"You haven't yet, so I don't know what to think."

Camille is an enigma, wrapped up in a cherry-flavoured Fruit roll-up, tucked into Betty White's dog bed. There's sweetness, but you have to hunt for it and pull off all the stray dog hairs before you get a taste.

I chuckle, a little too loudly because Betty White lifts her head. "Shh," I soothe. "I'm sorry."

"Did you just apologize to my dog?" Camille demands.

"I disturbed her."

"I want to kiss you more now."

I laugh out loud with delight. Happiness. Because whatever I'm feeling about Camille, she's feeling it too. "Sorry, sorry," I say quickly when Betty White stirs. "I have

wanted to kiss you,” I admit, feeling my cheeks warm. “I do want to. But I wanted it to happen naturally. I didn’t want either of us to feel like we had to. We both had our reasons to enter into the engagement, but I don’t want you to feel obligated to kiss me if you don’t want to.”

“Thank you. That’s very sweet.”

“Did the others—did they...?”

“They weren’t as sweet,” she says flatly. “But it clearly showed me I didn’t want to marry them.”

“I’m glad you didn’t want to marry them.”

“There were quite a few extenuating circumstances.”

“I really have to go back and read your file,” I tell her.

She laughs quietly and I put my hand over hers. She flips over her palm and our fingers entwine. “I think it’s a good idea to check if you’re compatible. This may be an arranged marriage, but we do have a choice, unlike our ancestors.”

“We do.” I lean forward slightly, once again, readying myself to kiss her, because if that wasn’t an embossed invitation, I don’t know what is.

“Don’t kiss me now,” Camille says quickly.

Betty White looks up at my hiss of frustration. “Why not?”

“It wouldn’t be natural, there’s too much pressure... the dogs would see.” Her nervous laugh makes me smile.

“No pressure here,” I say quickly.

“I already kissed you.” Her words come in a rush of embarrassment and pink cheeks. “And you didn’t like it. Maybe it wasn’t the kiss, but it was the situation and the timing—or maybe it was the kiss. Maybe it was because *I* kissed *you*.”

“It was not that,” I tell her quickly.

“Whatever the reason, you got upset and I don’t want you to be upset. And I don’t want to be upset. I don’t want anyone to be upset.”

“Not even the dogs.”

Her eyes flash, a spark of anger in the brown depths. “You’re laughing at me.”

“I’m understanding you,” I correct. “Or at least I’m trying to.” I point to the dogs, Betty White with one eye open watching us. “They are important.” I point between us, my finger stopping just shy of touching her lips. “Can wait.”

“It’s not like the dogs are more important,” she argues.

“Betty White’s been around longer than I have.” And, I suspect, may have been the one constant of giving and receiving Camille’s love and affection. “I bow to her superiority.”

“You’re a prince,” she mutters. “You shouldn’t have to bow to anyone.”

I chuckle. “If only that was true.”

Camille holds my gaze for a long moment and I think, maybe, she’s changed her mind, but then she gives her head a shake. “I shouldn’t have to explain myself.”

“You’re right. You shouldn’t ever have to explain why you don’t want to kiss me.”

“There’ll be a better time.”

This seems like a perfect time, but I’m not about to start another argument with her. Especially when I’ve yet to understand most of her actions since she’s been here.

Instead, I stay where I am and hold her hand.

“It’s not like we haven’t kissed before,” she points out with a shy smile. “Before I was here. And that went... well.”

“It did go well.”

Camille must be thinking the same thoughts I am—the fireworks in the distance, the cool satin of her dress, the warmth of her pressed against me.

The feel of her lips against mine.

After that night, Camille's mouth haunted me for weeks. Her taste, the feel of her lips moving against mine.

The way they looked after, swollen, with her lipstick kissed off, cheeks reddened by my stubble.

The night with Camille hadn't been my first with a woman, but it had been the most meaningful. And that might have been the reason I had run scared. Because at nineteen, I was too young to find my happily ever after. Love at first sight happened in fairy tales, not at the Royal St. George Regatta, in St. John's, in all places.

It did not happen to a modern-day prince with years to go before he had to wed, and a world full of women to meet before it happened.

I regret listening to those thoughts. I'd been young and immature, not worthy of the love Camille was ready to give me. Sitting here with her, with the dogs asleep before the fire, the room smelling like leftover pizza and the sweet scent of Camille, I think listening to those idiotic thoughts might well be my worst regret.

"I still remember it," she whispers, her tiny hand in mine. "That night."

"Every moment."

We sit silently for long minutes, both lost in our memories until Camille begins to yawn. "I'm going to let you go to bed," I say reluctantly. "But I'll see you in the morning."

"Wanna fight?" she asks with a gleam in her eye. "With swords, of course."

"Tempting, but you have an appointment with the dressmaker," I remind her.

"Ah, yes." Her shoulders slump. "Another dress."

I allow myself a small stroke of her red hair. "I only hope you'll enjoy this experience more than you did the other day."

"What do you mean? That was the day we found Bea Arthur." She looks fondly at the dogs asleep by the fire. "It was the best day."

“Because of Bea Arthur?” I tease.

“No,” she hedges. “Maybe other reasons.”

The way Camille looks up at me, the unspoken words caught in her gaze makes the feat I’d felt ten years ago fade into insignificance.

I know I was an idiot, but the reasoning is getting hazier by the minute.

I have to go. Because if I don’t get away from Camille now, I’m going to kiss her, and the dogs are going to watch, and while that sounds fine with me, she doesn’t want it.

Not yet, anyway.

I haven’t busted through all her walls yet, so there are still a few to scale.

“I’m glad it was worthwhile.” I stand up, tugging her up with me. “I won’t kiss you,” I promise. “But can I at least give you a hug good night?”

She nods and I pull her close.

She fits perfectly. Her arms wind around my waist, her cheek resting against my chest. One of my hands falls to the small of her back, the other remains at her shoulder blades, my fingers tangling in her curls. They feel like silk.

When I lean over to rest my cheek against the top of her head, all I smell is apples.

I like apples.

I like her.

With a sigh of resignation, I give Camille a last squeeze. “Just so you know,” I whisper into her hair. “I do want to kiss you. Quite badly, actually.”

And then I leave before I do.



The next morning, I get a sealed envelope when my breakfast is delivered.

I should have let you kiss me.

Camille

THE NEXT MORNING, I wake up thinking about the night I met Odin.

Or maybe I was dreaming about it.

Either way, I lie in bed for a few extra minutes, listening to the soft snores of the dogs. The shelter had sent a few puppy pee pads so I didn't have to take Bea Arthur out in the middle of the night, but neither of us got much sleep.

I'm not sure if it was Bea Arthur's quiet whimpers or thinking of Odin.

I should have let him kiss me.

What I remember most about the night we met is the smell of the ocean, the cool grass, damp from dew, and the warmth of Odin's hand. If I close my eyes, I can bring back the sensation of his arm tight around my waist when we danced or the memory of how he bent his head back when he laughed.

He asked my permission to kiss me. I remember how he touched my chin just before his lips met mine.

I can still see it all, like I'm watching myself from a distance.

The entire night Odin made me feel safe. Seen. Important. Like what I said, what I thought, believed in, mattered. I was listened to. I was considered. And when things fizzled between us, died a slow death like a bee trapped in a jar, it hurt so much because I'd never had a chance to feel that way with anyone else.

I'm sure that's why I let things get so far. I was the definition of innocent before I met Odin. After—not as innocent, a little more knowing. It wasn't because I thought such a big step was expected, or felt pressured or simply wanted the experience to be with a prince; I was caught up in the maelstrom of emotions, giddy at being the centre of someone's attention.

Is that why I feel this way? Like Odin is a heat source I have to be close to.

Does he feel the same way?

We're under the same roof, but it feels like Odin is so far away. I need more time with him so this will stop being so confusing.

There is a message from Odin, sent via Jackson and confirmed with Kate when she arrives to take me to my appointment with the dressmaker.

It seems Odin doesn't have much to do today and is, as Kate puts it, waiting to hang out with me. While the news sends a thrill through me, it might not happen, thanks to Mrs. Theissen.

“Good morning, Lady Camille,” she greets me. The older woman wears a charcoal gray suit buttoned to the throat, severe, but still stylish. Unlike back in Saint Pierre, gray doesn’t seem to be the worst colour here. “The dressmaker will see you now.”

I wish I wasn’t intimidated by her. I wish being around her didn’t make me miss Madam Carol so much. But at least she’s helpful with the wedding details, and I suspect that if I ever need anything, or had a question I couldn’t ask Odin, Mrs. Theissen would be the one to go to.

“Thank you,” I say, following her into the second-floor room that’s been set up like the back room of a boutique with sewing machines, yards of fabric and enough buttons and needles and notions to set up a British haberdashery. “Do you know how long—?”

I stop, because... The Dress.

The Dress—in all caps—hangs from a hidden nail on the wall. I vaguely remember approving a design before I came to Laandia, but seeing the sketch turned into something wearable in less than two weeks is miraculous. Not only wearable but—

“That looks amazing on you!” Kate claps her hands with delight as ten minutes later, I step out of the dressing room.

I’m wearing The Dress. Kate carefully helped the dressmaker, Mademoiselle Zoya, lift the heavy, cream-coloured silk over my head, and Mrs. Theissen stood behind me and with cold fingers, buttoned the hundred or so tiny satin-covered buttons that line the length of my spine.

There’s not even close to a hundred but it seemed like a lot.

And all I can think of is Odin unbuttoning them on our wedding night.

If we have a traditional wedding night. I’m not sure how royalty works these days. Will Mrs. Theissen join us in Odin’s room to help me undress, or will I be escorted to my own room? Will I be allowed to stay with him?

Will Odin want me to stay with him?

“Camille?” From a distance, I hear Kate’s voice and focus on her concerned expression. “You okay?”

“It’s...” The wide straps rest heavily on my shoulders, and even wearing a sleeveless dress in the chill of the four-hundred-year-old castle, sweat dots my brow.

I want to be happy. I want to be excited. I want to be everything brides-to-be get to be, but the reality is only two weeks ago, there was no Camille-and-Odin, just a formal meeting of Duncan and Lord Arnaud to discuss whether a marriage between Saint Pierre and Laandia would be beneficial.

And now I’m wearing The Dress.

“It’s a lot,” I say faintly.

“It is,” Kate agrees. “Just focus on the dress right now.”

I stare at my reflection in the oval mirror that must be a hundred years old. The Dress is simple—V-neckline that dips low, but not too low, pleated cummerbund waistband that nips in my waist as tiny as it ever has been, which has never been tiny. A train sweeps behind me.

I look princess-like, but not overly so.

No lace, no ruffles, and minimal embroidery on the hem of the skirt. Nothing fancy, just heavy silk, but the design flatters everything and hides anything I need hidden.

“I love it.”

Kate claps her hands and even Mrs. Theissen allows a rare smile.

“There are pockets.” Mademoiselle Zoya points out in her accented English, and Kate cries out with joy as if she’s wearing the dress. “And a mess insert that might go here—” All eyes fall on my cleavage, which is considerable, but not too much.

“I don’t think so,” the dressmaker decides with a sniff. “Bosoms will not be hid like they are being punished.”

Kate doesn't bother to muffle her snort of laughter. "Are you sure?" I ask.

"His Royal Highness will approve, I'm sure."

My face flaming, I make the mistake of meeting Mrs. Theissen's gaze in the reflection of the mirror. I might have found her intimidating before, but now she's downright scary.

"You have a tattoo," she announces in a cool voice, her finger pointed at my left shoulder where two of my birds are visible, the strap not wide enough to hide all seven of them.

I lift my chin. "His Royal Highness approves of those too." There's a loud explosion as Kate manages to morph her laugh into a cough. Even Mrs. Theissen's lips twitch in what be a smile. "But I'm sure I can use makeup to cover them if it will be frowned upon."

"No need." Mrs. Theissen steps out and crosses before me, her hand on the small of her back, with a finger pointing down.

I match Kate's wide-eyed expression—I think Mrs. T is telling us that she has her own tattoo.

"We don't have to do much with it," says Mademoiselle Zoya as she plucks at the strap "Are you sure you don't want a little lace here?"

I shake my head. "It's perfect the way it is." I look at Kate's reflection in the mirror and raise my eyebrows.

"It's beautiful," she assures me. "Just perfect. Odie—Prince Odin—will love it.

Mrs. Theissen suddenly takes my hand. "He'll love everything about it," she says, blinking at the *wetness* in her eyes. "Queen Selene would have loved to meet you."

Odin's mother won't be there to see her son marry me, but neither will my own. It makes me sad but, at the same time, ties me to Odin in a way I never imagined. The death of a parent—the death of a mother—gives us more in common, in a morose sort of way.

Talking about Queen Selene also makes Mrs. Theissen a little less intimidating, which is good since, after I try on the dress, there are many more meetings to get through today.

Jackson joins us and Kate excuses herself to look after Betty White and the puppy as Mrs. Theissen unveils a whiteboard with different coloured and shaped magnets, indicating some three hundred guests that have been invited to my wedding.

Three hundred guests.

“There are a few heads of state from Europe that haven’t yet responded,” Mrs. Theissen says, like organizing a royal wedding is an everyday event for her.

I know it’s not, at least for the Laandian royal family, since Odin is the first to get married.

He’s getting married to me.

I wonder what he thought of the note I sent him this morning.

There are three such boards—one for the ceremony, one for the reception, and one for the dinner. Mrs. Theissen walks me through the events of the actual day and the two days preceding it. We talk about the guest list and if there is anyone else I would like to invite.

There is not.

This is all new for me. None of the other potentials got to the planning stages. There was no dress, no invitations. There were negotiations with the six men Lord Arnaud deemed suitable, and then there were the responses, and then there was my research and plans on how to extract myself because once the trigger was pulled, I didn’t want to go through with it.

It’s going to be more difficult extracting myself from Odin. If I want to.

If I think I should.

Mrs. Theissen leads me through four hours of wedding preparations. I make it through maybe forty-five minutes until I’m distracted by thoughts of Odin.

Lots of thinking about Odin.

Lying in the snow with him. Telling him not to kiss me—I think about that a lot.

I regret that a lot.

I think about what it will be like to be married to Odin.

I think about *that* a lot.

By mid-afternoon, my stomach is growling in protest but instead of letting me escape, Mrs. Theissen orders us lunch. “There is still quite a bit to go over,” she insists.

Flowers, charitable donations, more about the guest list, etiquette.

Quite a bit about etiquette, actually.

Dealing with the press takes up more than an hour. Thankfully, Jackson takes notes on everything for me.

The entire day has been taken up by wedding planning.

It might have been more fun if Odin had been with me. Mrs. Theissen says Odin has his own responsibilities for the wedding but doesn’t need to be a part of these meetings.

Through the window, I see the sun has set and prompt Jackson to excuse himself to check on Betty White and Bea Arthur. There’s no way Mrs. Theissen will let me escape until the last detail has been ironed out. By now, I’ve lost any interest in which desserts will be served and what reporters from what papers I’m allowed to talk to at the ceremony, and how I always need to let King Magnus sit down first at the reception.

A knock on the door rouses me from my stupor.

“Sorry to interrupt.” Duncan stands in the doorway, dressed all in black with his silver mane pulled back, his warm smile including both me and Mrs. Theissen.

The smile lingers on Mrs. Theissen just a little bit longer than it does on me.

Hmm.

“Nice to see you again, Lady Camille.” Duncan drops his head in an informal bow. “And you, Tabitha.”

Tabitha? It takes a moment for me to realize he’s referring to Mrs. Theissen. I forgot that was her name because she *does not* look like a Tabitha.

Hmm, indeed.

“I wonder, Mr. Laz, if you’ve noticed that I’m in the middle of something with Lady Camille?” Mrs. Theissen’s faint accent blooms, giving her words an extra coating of ice.

“And that’s why I’m here.” Is it possible for a man to be *too* handsome? Just the sight of Duncan makes me believe in happily ever afters, as well as make me want to cuddle up to him and have someone take a picture. The man must have made a fortune for romance authors everywhere. “I just finished a meeting with Odin and he sent me with a message from Kate that he has a dinner and will be back later,” he continues like Mrs. Theissen isn’t scary at all. Maybe she’s not when you get to call her Tabitha. “Odin would like to come and say good night to Lady Camille when he returns.”

Mrs. Theissen frowns, but my heart gives a happy leap.

“Thank you,” I say. “For the message.”

I want to see him. To know more. We’ve been circling each other like some old-fashioned dance, briefly meeting in the middle before separating again. I thought I would be content with that—to know Odin, but not really know him.

Now, after last night, I want more. I want to find out what makes him tick. What does he think about when he lies awake at night? Does he want to be king?

Why did he stop writing me?

That’s a big one.

Because if Odin was able to let me go so easily, then the connection I thought we had wasn’t as strong as I thought. And that means the connection I think we have now might not be there. It might be in my head. After six strikeouts, I may be imagining things.

“He also asked if I wouldn’t mind dropping this off, seeing as he’s off to some dinner.” Duncan sets a small box on the table before me. “He didn’t think you’d want to wait to see this.”

“What is it?” The box is tiny and covered in black leather. If I didn’t know better, I would say it looks like a—

“Open it,” he suggests.

—a ring box.

With an actual ring inside it.

Nestled in the box is a sapphire, bigger than any I’ve seen before, surrounded by diamonds and a strand of pavé diamond entwined within the platinum band.

It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. My finger *aches* to try it on, but I leave it in the box.

I glance from Duncan, who smiles as widely as if the ring comes from him, to Mrs. Theissen, who looks colder than ever. “That’s the queen’s engagement ring,” she says, mouth twisting in a disgusted frown.

“Odin thought Lady Camille might like it.”

My expression follows Mrs. Theissen’s rather than Duncan’s. “Beautiful,” I murmur, unwilling to touch it. “But wouldn’t Odin prefer to give it to me himself?”

“I—oh.” Duncan is flustered and Mrs. Theissen titters at the sight. “Is that what you’d prefer, Lady Camille?”

“No, Mr. Laz,” Mrs. Theissen says drily. “Lady Camille prefers *you* to give her an engagement ring.”

Duncan makes a move to pick up the box. “I’ll take it back and tell him—”

My heart sinks. Just when I was starting to get excited about Odin—a little overwhelmed, but excited nonetheless—he shows that he still thinks of this only as an arranged marriage.

Which is what it is, and I should do well to remember that.

I snap the box closed under Duncan's fingers. "You'll tell him nothing. If he wants me to take the ring, I'll take it."

"Do you have a message for the prince?" Duncan has lost his smile and I've never expected to see such a handsome, poised man look so confused.

It would make me laugh if I wasn't already trying to keep the tears from pricking my eyes.

Why should I be sad? This is an arranged marriage between Laandia and Saint Pierre. Odin and I are only proxies.

"No, thank you."

"I have a message for the prince, but I will be sure to tell him myself." Mrs. Theissen scoops up the ring box. "Since I'm sure that *no man* in this castle is able to come up with a romantic gesture, let alone give a suitable message."

"I can give him a message," Duncan protests.

"No." She gives her head a firm shake. "I doubt very much that you could give him my message. Now, if you'll excuse us, there's much for us to finish up."

Odin

“YOU LET *Duncan* give her the ring?” Gunnar blows an exasperated raspberry as Tex drives us back to the castle after dinner with the head of the Laandian medical association. “Are you an idiot?”

I feel like one now.

On my request, Duncan had gotten my mother’s engagement ring out of the safe and I was so excited to get it to Camille, that I asked Duncan to drop it off to her.

“I never thought,” I groan, holding my head in my hands.

“You haven’t been doing much of that this whole time, have you?” Gunnar loses his teasing tone and sounds sympathetic.

“No.”

“Usually, a man is that clueless when he’s head over heels.” My brother looks at me with suspicion. “Are you?”

“I don’t know.” I push back against the headrest, wishing I could have a do-over for the last week. The last year.

The last ten years.

Because if I could do it all over again, I would do things differently. I wouldn’t try and compete with my brothers for the most worthless relationships. If I could do things differently, I would see what a good thing I had with Camille and not throw it away.

“How do you feel about her?” Gunnar asks. “I know this is an arranged thing between the two of you, but the other night, it kind of seemed more than that.”

“I don’t know,” I repeat, frustrated that I have no other answer. There *could* be something between Camille and me. I feel it, but there are so many unknowns.

So many things I don’t know about her.

The castle looks shut down for the night when Tex pulls up in front of the door. “I’m going to go talk to her,” I say. “Try to explain.”

“Might be tough when she’s probably asleep.”

“It’s not that late. Plus, I gave Kate a message to tell her that I’ll stop by when I get home.”

“You should really start talking to the lady directly rather than letting other people say your words.”

“It’s not that easy,” I burst out.

“You’re telling me.”

My expression is one of exasperation. “You sound like you’re sympathetic but you’ve never had problems with

women.”

“There’s a lot you don’t know, O. About Camille and, obviously, the rest of us too.”

“What’s going on with you?”

Gunnar waves the question away. “You’ve got enough to worry about than getting fussed about my problems.”

“Gun...”

“Seriously, big brother, go talk to the lady. The last time you ticked her off she barricaded herself in the tower for three days, and I like to see her smiling face around the castle. Not that she’s always smiling, but when she does, it’s nice to see.”

I look at my brother—the youngest, the most popular, the one everything comes easy for. His usual smile is absent and had been for most of the night, I realize. Granted, it was a pretty boring dinner, but Gunnar has a way of turning the most mundane events into something fun. “Gunnar, if you need to talk to me—”

“Not on your life.” He laughs. “No offence, but you’re the last one I’m coming to for advice about women.”

“So you’re having problems. Who is she?”

“She is no one. I need a great date for your wedding and the pickings are pretty slim right now. But never fear, I’ll find someone absolutely amazing to bring.” He gives me a shove. “Now, get out of the car.”

My wedding. Gunnar’s quick mention is like getting a face full of snow. Maybe I shouldn’t bother Camille. She was with Mrs. Theissen all day going over wedding plans, and if she’s not excited about the wedding, I’m the last person she’d want to see.

But I need to explain things to her. So many things.

I say goodnight to Tex and Gunnar and head straight up to Camille’s room before I change my mind.

I know exactly where her room is. Should the power ever go out, I can find myself there in the dark. I know how many

stairs are between the third and fourth floors of the castle, and I know that it takes longer to get up there if you use the back staircase.

I don't even look to check the time before I knock softly.

The dogs bark, so at least Betty White knows I'm there. After a moment, Camille comes to the door.

"What are you doing here?" she demands, eyes sleepy and hair hanging over her shoulder.

She's also wearing something that resembles a nightdress that wouldn't look out of place in the nineteenth century. "What have you got on?" I ask, goggle-eyed.

"Excuse me?" Offence drips from her words. "What are *you* wearing?"

I can feel the weight of her gaze as she takes in me in my tuxedo, the soft inhale as she studies my form.

Then she steps back, lips in a tight line of annoyance.

This isn't going as I hoped. "Can I come in?"

"*No!* I was in bed. I'm wearing my nightdress."

"There is more fabric in that than ten nightdresses, so even Mrs. Theissen wouldn't think it's inappropriate for me to be here."

"It's been a long day."

"For me too, and I'm about to make it longer. Please." I glance down. Betty White sniffs around my feet while a tired-looking Bea Arthur thumps her tail against Camille's legs. "I'm sorry Duncan gave you the ring."

"You're asking for it back?" she snaps.

"I should have given it to you myself."

Camille looks at me for a long moment. "That might have been nice." She turns and heads for the fire, bare feet padding along the floor. I take it as my invitation and follow Betty White inside.

Since Camille has arrived, it's been two steps forward with us and about a thousand back. This isn't how I planned it, and it's not how it's going to continue. I have to make sure of that.

Because this could be good with Camille.

She bypasses the couch and heads straight for the bedroom, climbing under the covers with a shiver. "It's cold," she says unnecessarily.

I pause in the doorway. The room is lit only by a lamp beside the bed, but there's enough light for me to see the sadness in Camille's eyes. The sight of it gives me a boost of courage because I don't want her to be anything but happy with me. "I'm not good at this," I begin.

"Being cold?"

"Being with a woman. Relationships," I quickly correct. "I'm not good at relationships." Camille shrugs, pulling up the blankets. "I wasn't exactly honest with you about why I went on *The Suitorette*."

"You said it was because they asked you and not your brothers. What's your reason this time?"

"That's why, but it's not the only reason." I take a deep breath and wonder what will happen if I actually try and enter her bedroom. Betty White sits before me at my feet, like she's a tiny barricade. Not very effective, but the curled lip is intimidating. "The people of Laandia might love me, but that doesn't mean women do. My brothers don't understand, because they've never had problems attracting women."

"I can't see you having much problem either," Camille points out.

"Yes, but they're not women that I want. And the ones that I want, I have no idea what to do with them. I thought if I went on the show, the least I could do was learn from the other men how to manage a relationship. And the best-case scenario would be that Esme would pick me because I'm a prince, and I wouldn't have to do anything."

"That would be your best-case scenario? To meet an insincere and disingenuous woman who only wants you for

your social status and proximity to the throne?”

I blink at the ice in her voice. “Uh...”

Camille frowns. “What exactly do you mean, you don’t know what to do with a woman?”

“Talk to her. Trust her. Be honest and open and... and woo her.”

The corner of Camille’s lips quirks up. “Wooing is even more old-fashioned than my nightgown. But you know that’s what you’ve been doing for the past few days, right? We’re getting to know each other. You’re... wooing me. At least that’s what I thought you might be doing.”

“Is that what you want me to be doing?” I ask hopefully.

She sighs and pats the bed. “You make me nervous when you hover.”

“I don’t want to impose.” But I step around Betty White, who gives a low growl, and perch on the edge of the bed.

Camille frowns. “I think we should stop tiptoeing around each other. Either we forget we ever knew each other and start fresh or else build on the friendship we once had.”

“I don’t want to start fresh.” I study Camille’s face and flash back to so many memories of her, memories I don’t ever want to forget or pretend never happened. “I don’t want to forget. I can’t.”

With a shaky breath, her face creases into a smile. “Neither do I. The second thing we need to decide is whether we want this to be a marriage of only convenience, or if we would like to see if it might be more.”

“It’s not that convenient for me,” I say. “When I have to keep apologizing to you.”

“That may be a good sign that you don’t want a simple arranged marriage.”

“I don’t. I never have. But I haven’t been able to figure out how to fall in love.”

“I don’t think there’s a formula. It just happens. At least, that’s what I think.”

“Have you ever been in love?”

The way she drops her gaze tells me yes, and a swell of something that might be disappointment or anger or hurt rushes through me.

And then it stops because... what if she means *me*? What if Camille had been in love with nineteen-year-old me who couldn’t even keep up a written correspondence in the time of texts and emails?

Maybe that was the problem. Maybe Camille’s love of the written word, written on actual paper with glitter pens was the problem.

No, that’s not fair. The problem was me.

“Why did you stop writing?” she asks in a quiet voice. “The truth, please.”

There’s no good explanation and I know it. “Because I was nineteen. Because I was an idiot. And because it didn’t seem real. You—you weren’t that far away, but you didn’t seem real. I couldn’t fathom how a woman thought I was as amazing as you claimed I was.”

“Do you still feel that way?”

“No. Maybe. I’ve grown up a lot.”

“Odin, you’re a good man. Decent, and kind and compassionate. You may not be a bad boy like Kalle, or broody like Bo, or a player like Gunnar—”

“You got all of that from one dinner?”

Camille rolls her eyes. “Have you seen your family’s presence on social media? There is *a lot* about your brothers. Some women like that type of man. But some like the good, decent ones. You need to remember that. *I* like the good, decent ones.”

“So you won’t fall in love with my brothers?”

“After that dinner?” She gives a mock shudder and I grin, more than a little relieved. “I’m looking forward to getting to know them as my brothers, though. Now, Duncan, on the other hand...” She gives a mischievous smile. “I can’t promise anything if he keeps showing up with beautiful rings.”

“You liked it?” I ask in a nervous voice. I knew I would be giving it to Camille as soon as it was arranged, but I didn’t want to let on how special the ring was to me. It’s like a symbol of the love my parents shared.

A sign that maybe Camille and I...

“I loved it,” Camille breathes. “And the fact it was your mother’s...” She leans over to the nightstand to pick up the little leather box. “But I want *you* to give it to me.”

I take the box and make sure I brush her fingers as I do it. “Is this like the kissing? I’m supposed to wait until the moment is right?”

Camille smiles and my heart gets a kickstart. But instead of revving my nerves, it does the opposite. “I want you to wait until you know it’s real with me,” she says, the fingers pleating the sheet covering her a contrast to her composed voice. “Because... I’m going to say it. I want it all, Odin. We both deserve that.”

I breathe deep through my nose. She wants it too. Whatever this is. Whatever it may turn into.

I think it can turn into something great.

“I think we do, too,” I agree. “Will you tell me about your...I don’t like to call them fiancés. Your intended husbands?”

“My suitors?” she asks with a hint of that mischievous grin.

“Ha ha.”

“I don’t really like to call them anything,” she admits. “There’s not much to tell you about them.”

“Did you know them long?”

“Six weeks, three days, four years, two years, and about a month. One I knew all my life.”

I wanted to ask her why none of the relationships worked out. I want to ask if she’s upset that she’s not marrying any of them.

But the main thing I want to know is if any of them kissed her. Our ten-year-old first kiss was okay; the second was much better. Does Camille remember all the kisses we shared? And if she does, does that mean she remembers *their* kisses?

I can’t ask—it wouldn’t be polite. But I edge closer, wishing that Camille would meet me in the middle. All these things I’m feeling—I want her to be feeling them too.

“Do you want to lie down?” she asks suddenly, sliding over to the other side of the bed. “Rather than sitting there looking uncomfortable.” She turns to her side, resting her head on a pillow with her hands tucked under her chin.

“I’m not uncomfortable, but you lying there looks pretty cozy.” With a glance at chaperone Betty White, I mirror Camille’s position, resting my head on the crook of my arm as I study her.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she asks.

“Just wondering.”

“About what?”

“About... six engagements.” Camille wrinkles her nose. “Who did you like the best?”

“I didn’t much like any of them. Obviously. Or I would have married one of them.”

“You must have had a favourite.”

She flips onto her back. “Probably Phillippe,” she says reluctantly. “I’ve known him all my life. He would have been okay to marry.”

“Just okay?”

“He had a boyfriend his parents didn’t approve of. While I felt comfortable with him, I wanted at least a fighting chance.

We talked... he ended up coming out to his parents. They still wanted me to marry him, but Phillippe called things off. Lord Arnaud was not impressed.”

It’s clear Lord Arnaud had his own agenda, and Camille’s well-being didn’t play a big part in it.

“Do you think we have a fighting chance?” I ask.

I hear the inhale but she doesn’t turn to face me.

Camille

DO WE HAVE A fighting chance?

Ten years ago, I would have said we had more than a chance, we were a sure thing. Ten years ago, I fell in love with Odin on a night of moonlight and fireworks and self-discovery. I found out I was a woman capable of love and passion and even deception because we kept it all a secret. I learned I could laugh and love and have *fun*.

I had so much fun with Odin that night.

And then... nothing. We lost our chance.

So I want to say yes to his question.

I want to say yes *so badly* because, after tonight, it's everything I want. I want it so much that it hurts in my heart. It feels like my insides are clenched tight, waiting, watching.

Wondering.

Hoping that there is no reason for this *not* to work.

But things had looked good with Phillipe, and that crashed and burned. And with Dale and Louis, for a little bit. But none of them were Odin.

They didn't make me clench.

They didn't make me wonder and want... and hope.

And so, instead of telling Odin what's in my heart, I roll over to him.

Roll into him.

Hands searching, lips only slightly trembling, I kiss him.

There's no reaction for a long moment, but just as I try to pull back, Odin cups the back of my head and then...

And then...

He makes a sound like a growl. His lips move, part and then he's kissing me back like a man who hasn't been kissed in a good long time and has been missing it.

Missing it a lot.

Odin's arms—the Thor-like arms I so admire—wrap around me and pull me close. So close, but the blanket is still between us and that's too much between us.

"Wait," I whisper, my hand on his chest.

Of course Odin takes that as *stop*. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have." He makes a move to pull back, but then finds my hand fisted in his shirt.

"Wait."

"Camille." Odin doesn't pull me close because his eyes are searching me—my face, down the length of my body—in a

way that makes my stomach give a nervous leap, and then settles it with enough warmth to light the fire in my bedroom.

“I want it all,” I whisper. “I want a chance, and I want to make it work and I want you as my husband. In every way. I always have.”

His face is one of regret but I touch his lips with my fingers before he can say anything. “It’s okay,” I assure him. “We’ve got time.”

“I’ve wasted so much time.”

I rest my forehead against him and breathe deeply. This is Odin. This is who I want, always wanted. I can make it work with him.

We can do this, make this more than an arranged marriage benefitting two countries.

We can make this good for us.

“Let’s not waste any more time,” I tell him, and then he kisses me again. And then...



Odin leaves my room in the early hours before dawn. He tiptoes past a sleeping Betty White but Bea Arthur gives a thump of her tail as he passes by.

I drift after him, not even feeling the cold on my bare feet because I want one last hug, one last kiss before he leaves me for the day.

We talked about everything. About what we want, and hope for and about the last ten years apart. Dreams and regrets and funny things.

We kissed—a lot, like we were trying to make up the time spent apart. We touched... but that was it.

For now.

And now I’ll be away from him for the day and I already miss him.

It's not even an entire day, only a few hours. I'm going to meet in the gym to spar, and this time he said we can try the real swords

Everything is different now.

"Go back to bed. You'll get cold." Odin wraps his arms around me and lifts me up so my feet dangle a few inches from the icy floor.

"Only if you come back with me."

This is a new side of me. Like when we first met, Odin brings out something in me. Something alive. He makes me feel things that I never thought possible.

He makes me act in ways I never thought I could.

And the smile on Odin's face tells me he likes this side of me.

"Tonight?" he offers. "We could...?" he trails off with a wiggle of his eyebrows.

"We could."

"It's a date," he says.

"We're doing this backward. We're getting married and we haven't even been on a date."

"I think I should meet your father. Lord Arnaud, I mean."

"No." It's as if Odin dropped me from the top window in the tower. "No. Why? You've met him."

"It's different now." Odin doesn't hear the note of obstinacy in my voice. "We're different. This is a whole other type of arrangement."

"It's not. It is, but it's not. No. I don't think you should see him."

"Camille..." He gently sets me on the floor and immediately I feel the cold against my toes.

"It will make it real," I burst out.

"I thought we wanted it to be real?"

How can I explain that I'm afraid of something popping this haze of happiness I'm in. Lord Arnaud would destroy this web of intimacy we've created. He would ruin everything.

Even with Odin here, with his arms around me, it doesn't feel real. Despite the ring as big as my knuckle and the dress almost finished and hanging in a room upstairs, and the tiara that's being made for me, it's not real.

If it were real, I wouldn't be this happy.

"He doesn't deserve to be part of this," I finally manage. "I want to keep this—" I gesture between the two of us. "I want to keep it safe."

"You don't want to tell anyone? Because there's no way I can keep this quiet."

"I don't want to tell *him*. Not yet."

Odin nods. "Whatever you want. But this is a good thing, Camille. Everyone will think so. To have us together, really together and..."

He smiles but I know why he stopped. Neither of us is ready to use the word *love*. It's there on the edge of the cliff, ready for the last push to go flying into the unknown, but I'm not ready yet.

Soon. But not yet.

I want to enjoy this feeling a little longer before I label it.

"It's a good thing," Odin says again.

I know it is. But I still don't want Lord Arnaud to know.

Odin

IT'S A SHOCK HOW quickly the days fly by.

Camille is swamped with dress fittings, and Mrs. Theissen sets up weekly meetings to go over wedding details. Mrs. T gives her homework and tests her on who is coming, and why they're important.

Mrs. Theissen is nothing if not thorough.

Even with her wedding duties and my responsibilities, we make a point of spending part of each day together. A few times, I've taken her to various fundraisers or social events, slowly introducing her to my world. She trains with me, we

take the dogs for long walks, me carrying Betty White as Bea Arthur frolics in the snow, and we share dinner the nights when I'm home.

We have family dinners at least once a week; Dad makes his famous chicken fajitas—a once-a-year event because the kitchen staff thinks he makes too much of a mess.

We visit Battle Harbour, and luckily the Odinites' fervour seems to have died down. Or maybe Camille is simply winning them over like she seems to be doing with everyone. A day doesn't go by without Gunnar or Spencer—or even Kalle once or twice—texting me with questions or suggestions or requests to hang out with her.

One day when the sun shone brightly and the wind had died down, we posed for an engagement picture in front of the main door of the castle, the same spot where my parents had posed for theirs.

Camille was awkward and cold, standing at my side like we were strangers, even though my arm was around her, and her hand rested on my chest, showing off the ring.

But Jackson, who had been tasked with keeping Betty White and Bea Arthur safe and secure, wasn't as effective as he could have been, and the dogs escaped and ran across the snow-covered lawn, Betty White's tiny legs working like pistons as she chased Bea Arthur.

Camille laughed. Her shoulders relaxed, and that was the shot, my hand covering hers trying to warm it.

“That's it,” I called.

“But we can't see the ring.”

“I don't care. Lady Camille is cold and you've got enough.”

Camille's expression of gratitude warmed me more than the fire.

Do I love her?

It's a distinct possibility.

I've never been one to believe in love at first sight, which is why I didn't put much faith in my first meeting with Camille. Sure, there was attraction, infatuation, feeling like I stuck my finger in a light socket shock, but love at first sight?

I don't think that's possible for me.

At least, I didn't.

Now—it explains a lot.

Each day I find out something new about Camille. Some things—like how she loves to dance alone in her bedroom to '90s dance music—are sweet. Others—how much she takes to video games after I introduce her to MarioKart on my PlayStation—I can appreciate since it gives us something to do together.

She's strong and tough and speaks her mind. She's funny, shows her softer side when she's with her dogs, and has struck up a friendship with Kate.

We talk about everything now. No secrets.

The only thing I haven't shared with Camille are my thoughts about proposing to her before the wedding. A real proposal.

Instead of my brothers, I go to my father with this one.

“How do I know if I'm in love?” I ask him after the meeting with the Canadian ambassador in his office. Asking it like that makes me feel like I'm twelve. So does fidgeting with the miniature shot-put he uses as a paperweight.

Dad has heard all manner of questions from his children, especially since my mother passed away, and nothing seems to faze him. “Is there a particular reason you feel like you may be in love?” He leans a hip against his desk and takes the ball from my fingers.

“There may be a list,” I admit.

“Oh ho!” He slaps me on the shoulder hard enough to bend a lesser man. Thankfully, I'm used to both giving and receiving Erickson slaps on the shoulder. “Have you spoken to Lady Camille about this?”

“No. Not yet. How did you—do you think it’s possible?” The eagerness is evident in my voice, as is the want that it might be true.

A love match—it’s what I’ve always wanted, but I’ve never thought it was in the cards for me. A marriage like my parents, with true love, honesty, and mutual respect, has always been the goal. It’s why I’ve always been careful with the girls I’ve dated. Vetting them to see if there was potential, keeping a close hold on my heart when there wasn’t.

I’ve never felt such a visceral pull toward someone as I did with Camille, all those years ago. And when I saw her again, walking toward me past the scrum of the press, it was like no time had passed.

What will it be like to see her walk toward me, wearing her wedding dress?

The thought starts a thrum of excitement.

“O, I thought that’s why you picked her for this marriage thing,” Dad says with a rueful smile. “It was the only thing that made sense. You always wanted a love match, and to give up, especially after the TV thing, wasn’t you.”

For once, *The Suitorette* reference doesn’t make me cringe, because there’s something more important at stake. “You think I’m in love with her.” It’s a statement, not a question, and even saying it makes something bloom inside me. Bloom like one of those blooming onions I tried in an American steakhouse once—deep-fried crunchy, but soft inside, with just enough spice to make your mouth tingle.

It’s a lot.

“Think, thought—I figured it was the reason you came to me with the offer for Lord Arnaud. You tell the world you had a thing for Camille when you were younger, then you arrange to marry her. I thought it was a good way to move the process along, that you were in love with her.”

“That’s what I wanted everyone to think,” I protest. “That was my reasoning to get married *now*. To help with the humiliation.”

“You were humiliated?”

“I got dumped on TV! Wouldn’t you be?”

“Did you actually think she would pick you? That *Suitorette*?” His expression shows his amazement. “You did, didn’t you.”

“I thought I had a good chance,” I mutter. “I’m a prince, after all.”

“You are. A prince of Laandia, and a prince of a man. She would have been lucky to have you, as is Camille. Whatever your reasoning was, I think you made a good decision. What does she think of all this?”

What does Camille think? The need to run to her to find out has me gritting my teeth to stay and finish the conversation with my father. “I haven’t really spoken to her about it. She was upset the first night because she figured out how I had arranged everything to get my own narrative out there, instead of playing catch-up with *The Suitorette*’s version of things.”

“And she didn’t jump to the theory that you really did have feelings for her, like I did?” He chuckles and slides around the desk to his chair. “Not surprising, since she had her own agenda. I’m glad to see that she got past that.”

Everything stills, and whatever had been blooming, freezes in place. “Agenda.”

Dad sits in his throne-like leather chair and pulls a folder across the desk. “There’s a clause in place that insists she be married to take over as prefect. As a woman in this day and age, I’m sure she—”

“Wait. What?”

“Camille needs to be married as well,” he says, indifferent to my world crashing down on me. “Different reasons, same outcome. I thought that’s why they accepted so quickly since I’ve never been privy to the little ten-year secret the two of you shared—Odin? O, wait!”

I race out of the room, hot-footing it up the main stairs and not even slowing when one of the maids looks at me with

horror.

That's why Camille is marrying me; not because of some long-ago warm memories, or feelings, or because she wants *me*. She needs a husband.

She had six options—that's why all the engagements.

It all makes sense.

My steps slow on the way up the stairs leading to Camille's room. She doesn't want to marry *me*—she needs anyone so that she can take over as prefect. My rush to confront her with all of my questions falters now that I know the answers.

There's still one more: why didn't she tell me?

That's easy to answer as well: she's a coward. Too afraid to take responsibility but quick to judge and condemn me for my actions.

I find myself at the top of the staircase by her room, the same place I was in that first night when I heard her conversation with Lord Arnaud. He'd made it clear that she needed to be married, but I assumed he was being a controlling father.

It was right there in front of me and I didn't realize it.

This isn't real between us. Whatever I'm feeling, it's just me.

There's no sense talking to her now. I don't want to see her because then I'll say something I'll regret. If I can pull back my feelings, it will be better. If I go into this like any other arranged marriage—a contract that benefits both parties—it will be easier.

It won't hurt as much.

I turn to go back the way I came and see her at the bottom of the staircase. "Odin!"

I close my eyes, wincing at the happiness in Camille's voice. She bounds up the stairs, carrying both dogs. Bea

Arthur strains to jump free, and before I realize it, I meet her and take the puppy.

“Thanks.” Her smile stretches across her face, reaching her eyes, her cheeks, even her nose. Every last bit of her seems happy to see me. “She’s not great on the leash yet and if I want your father to like me, there’s no way I’m about to let her loose in here.”

And then her expression shifts as she really looks at me. “What’s the matter?”

“Why did you agree to marry me?” Each word is like a slash of my sword and Camille’s expression tells me everything I need to know.

Everything I didn’t want to know.

“Can you explain this clause I’ve only just heard about that insists *you have to be married?*” I raise my voice, eliciting a growl from Betty White.

“Yes,” is all Camille says.

“Yes, what?”

Her lips tighten, but to give her credit, she never once turns on her glare. “Back in the 1700s, when the Republic of France established the prefect of Saint Pierre and Miquelon, they included a decree that whoever held the position must be married. Apparently, the first prefect was a single man and he created a bit of drama amongst the fisherwomen on the island. Insisting he take a wife was the way of soothing the ruffled feathers of the husbands and fathers. They thought it might make him settle down. It didn’t—he got syphilis and died—but at least he got married and had a child first. And when his daughter took over, the powers that be in France didn’t think she could lead without a husband. It’s been the way ever since.”

“And that’s where I come in.” I don’t realize I’m squeezing Bea Arthur until she yips a protest. “You have to marry me to become prefect.”

“I thought you knew,” she says in a voice devoid of emotion. All of the happiness has drained from her face.

“I did not.”

“The king did. I thought he would have told you. And that you didn’t care—that it didn’t bother you.”

“The king just told me. And it does bother me,” I say stiffly.

“I can see that.”

“I don’t understand why you wouldn’t have told me. I deserved to know.”

“Just like I deserved to know you wanted to marry me because you embarrassed yourself on a reality show,” Camille shoots back.

“I was not embarrassed,” I say. “And I’ve tried to be nice and make it up to you—”

“You *tried*? You tried to be nice? You didn’t want to be?”

“I didn’t say that!”

“Sure sounded like it.”

“What am I supposed to say? I’ve been feeling horrible about everything, and now I find out you have your own agenda?”

“It’s an arranged marriage. Of course I had an agenda.”

I close my eyes, trying to steady my breathing. This is wrong. This is all wrong. “Does that mean you don’t want to marry me?”

“I didn’t say anything of the sort,” Camille says quickly.

But she didn’t say she *wants* to marry me. “What are you saying?”

“What are *you* saying?”

I thrust Bea Arthur back at her. “Take your dog.”

“What are you saying, Odin?”

“I’m not saying anything! I don’t have your love of confrontations.”

“This isn’t a confrontation, it’s a conversation.”

“It’s not a conversation I want to have!”

“Do you still want to marry me?”

I know her well enough to hear the hurt in her voice and the sound of it raises my anger. Because this time, Camille doesn’t have a reason to be hurt.

I do.

I don’t turn around to see her standing at the top of the stairs holding both dogs because that would be too much for me. “Oh, we’re getting married.” My foot stomps punctuating the words.

Because there’s no way I’m about to embarrass myself again.

Camille

“ODIN,” I CRY AS Odin stomps down the stairs.

He doesn't answer. I don't expect him to.

“Fine,” I call after him. “If that's how you want to play it, it's fine with me.” But even as I turn back to my room, my own footsteps turning into stomps, a yawning crack seems to open inside of me, swallowing all my happiness and ease from the last couple of weeks.

Taking with it my little spark of hope for a happily ever after.

I want to run after Odin and explain, but it won't work. He has his agenda for this marriage, I have my agenda, and they work well together.

I thought we did too.

I have to set down Betty White to open the door, and by the time I get inside my room, Bea Arthur is wriggling so much I dump her out of my arms with a muffled curse. She then proceeds to streak through the sitting room.

"A puppy was a bad idea," I mutter.

Then I look at Betty White, at her dark eyes and mournful expression as she ignores the energized puppy and heads for her bed. "You needed a friend, didn't you? Odin figured that out."

I hadn't realized how much I needed a friend until Odin walked away.

"Lady Camille?"

I shriek and lose my balance as both dogs bark a greeting. "What the—?" I had *no idea* Jackson was sitting quietly by the fire. "What are you doing here?"

He picks up his iPad. "What do you need?"

"I'm fine," I say stiffly, not wanting his pity.

"I didn't ask if you were since I can clearly see that you aren't."

"Were you listening?"

"I listen to many things, but the door was closed and the walls of the castle are thick if you're referring to something in particular."

I glance at him with suspicion as Bea Arthur finally slows. Jackson knows everything about my life, so I shouldn't worry if he overheard my conversation with Odin.

My fight. Was that a fight? Was that our first fight? I don't count the many arguments we've had because they were small and unimportant.

This feels important, almost as important as finding out he only agreed to marry me to save face.

And how did that feel?

My shoulders sag. “What happened?” Jackson quickly asks.

“He knows I need to marry to become prefect of Saint Pierre,” I tell him in a quiet voice.

“Ah. I take it from your expression it didn’t go well.”

“What expression? I don’t have an expression.”

“You have many expressions. This one is hurt and confused and trying to hide it.”

There’s no mirror in the sitting room, but I know Jackson is right. “I thought he knew.”

I sink down onto the couch, the same spot where I sat with Odin that night in front of the fire when we talked about kissing. It feels a lifetime ago.

“That was a good assumption,” Jackson agrees, his expression devoid of emotion. I should take a page from his book.

“Especially since he had his own reasons.” Talk about hypocritical.

But he could say the same about me.

“He did have reasons for arranging things with you,” Jackson says. “I assume he’s upset.”

“You should never assume.”

“Definitely not with you.” Jackson gets up from the table and sits cautiously on the couch beside me.

“He was upset,” I confirm. “I’m not sure what to do.”

“Talk to him,” Jackson says immediately.

“What if he doesn’t want to talk? What if he doesn’t want to marry me?”

“Is that what he said?”

“He said we were getting married and then just walked away. He left.”

Like everyone does.

“Camille.” I’m surprised to find Jackson’s hand covering mine. He’s never initiated a touch before, and it feels strange.

Nice strange.

“The prince is upset. This was a surprise, one that he wasn’t expecting.”

“That’s usually what a surprise is.”

“Let him process it, and then talk to him. I’m sure the two of you can figure this out.”

I meet Jackson’s gaze—calm and sure and comforting. Like a friend. “What if we can’t?” I whisper. “What if he ends it?”

He presses my hand. “Then we’ll go home. But I don’t see that happening.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Haven’t you noticed how Prince Odin looks at you?” The beginning of a smile appears at the corner of Jackson’s mouth. “He’ll want to work it out. It’s a misunderstanding, nothing more.”

“What if it isn’t?”

“Lady Camille, do you want to marry the prince?”

“Why would you even ask that? Look at him! Look at me! He’s got so much to offer anyone, and I’ve got... I don’t have anything.”

Jackson chuckles with disbelief. “Are you serious?”

“I’m always serious. The only reason he agreed to me is because he needed a wife and I was the only one available.”

Jackson’s hand tightens on mine. “You’re an amazing woman and anyone would be lucky to have you.”

“You can’t expect me to believe that’s what you think.”

“Maybe not at first,” Jackson admits a little shamefaced. “But since I’ve gotten to know you—since you’ve let me get to know you—it’s clear you are an extraordinary woman. You’ll make an incredible princess, a wonderful addition to the royal family.”

“Thank you, Jackson.”

“I speak the truth, just like you do.”

“But you know how to keep quiet better than I do.”

That’s always been my problem. *More Anna than Elsa.*

But what’s the point if I’ve lost Odin?

Odin

I IGNORE CAMILLE'S FRANTIC calls and stalk down the stairs to my room below to find Kate inside at my desk. "I don't want to talk to you," I tell her, enunciating every word.

She takes one look at me and sets down her pen. "I should think you would want to. Is this about Camille?"

"Who else?"

"Exactly. Who did she throw something at this time?"

Me. Camille threw a sucker punch that knocked me flat. "No one. She needs to be married to take over as prefect.

Everyone knows it.”

“I didn’t. And I guess from your expression that you didn’t either. What do you want to do?”

I run both hands through my hair and start to pace in front of the desk. “I don’t even know what I *can* do. The wedding is in—” I check my calendar on the desk. “My God, it’s a little over a week away.”

I’m supposed to be married in nine days’ time. Yesterday, that realization would have excited me. Now, I’m just confused.

Again.

“Do you want to marry her? Because you don’t have to,” Kate says in a low voice like what she’s about to suggest might be some sort of treason. I have no idea if that’s the case. I don’t think so. “You don’t have to get married; now, or ever.”

Her question stops me in my tracks. “I always thought I did,” I confess. “The others—they figured out there was more to life than being a prince. Kalle’s got his bar. Gunnar is never here, travelling the world and not giving a damn who’s running the kingdom. And Bo is practically a hermit. And Lyra—”

“Lyra never felt she had a place here.” The hard tone of voice suggests Kate’s loyalty might well be for someone before me. But I can’t begrudge her friendship with Lyra.

“She left before she gave it a good try.”

“This has nothing to do with Lyra,” Kate says, her voice now surprisingly gentle. “It’s about you feeling like you have no choice in all of this.”

“I have a choice.”

“Do you? Do you really?”

I heave a sigh, feeling the weight of twenty-nine years as the second son of the king of Laandia on my shoulders. “No. Maybe I did... once.”

“I think you still do. I think your father wants you to be happy. With whatever you want to do.”

“King Magnus has the country to think about.”

“He’s still your father. And he loves you. That’s so obvious.” She takes a deep breath. “Do you love Camille?”

“What does that matter?” The thought of love has me exhausted and in need of a nap. “I’m a prince who needs to get married. Love shouldn’t factor in.”

“But it does, because, Odie, you deserve it. And you want a love marriage, just like your parents.”

Which is exactly what my father said. “I don’t know how I feel about her,” I say brusquely.

“Wrong. You always know what you want, Odin. It’s what’s amazing about you.” She holds up her hand as I’m about to respond. “Don’t answer yet. Just think about it. You do have a choice. You always have. You can walk away from Camille and find someone to fall in love with, a love that doesn’t have an agenda, that’s natural and nice.”

Nothing about Camille has been natural and nice, but still...

She’s where my mind goes when I wake up in the morning and where it rests before I go to sleep. Maybe I don’t need natural and nice.

Maybe it’s been here all along.

Camille

THE KNOCK ON THE door rouses me quicker than an alarm clock. “It’s Odin,” I gasp, jumping to my feet.

Bea Arthur beats me to the door, leaping at my feet with excitement. I share her excitement, but it’s quickly doused when I open the door.

Gunnar slouches against the door frame. “Princess.”

“I’m not a princess,” I snap. “And not about to become one anytime soon.”

Gunnar raises an eyebrow and glances at a stony-faced Jackson, who rises from the couch. He seems to have borrowed from my not-hiding-my-expression handbook this time. If looks could kill, Gunnar would have been blown backward and down the stairs. “What’d I miss?”

“Why don’t you ask your brother?” Jackson says in a cool voice.

“Lovers’ spat already?” The words spur a bout of furious barking from Betty White. And then Bea Arthur starts. And all Gunnar does is smirk at me. “So this is the new puppy,” he says, sliding past me into the room. “I came to check her out.”

Betty White bares her teeth at Gunnar and I call her over to me. Bea Arthur, on the other hand, begins to run laps around the room again. “This is the puppy.”

“That *is* a puppy. A lively one.” He looks down at me, studying me so intently that I feel like he’s trying to see inside my skin. I ready myself for the barrage of questions.

None come. At least, none that I expect.

“Are they okay to be left alone?” Gunnar asks.

I blink with surprise. “Not really, no.”

“Hello, Kate’s friend.” Gunnar nods at Jackson, his first acknowledgment of my assistant. “Would you be able to dogsit for a bit while I borrow my soon-to-be sister-in-law?”

I glance at him suspiciously. “Why?”

“Thought I’d see if you wanted to have some fun in Battle Harbour with me.”



It’s a bad idea going with Gunnar. Not only will Bea Arthur probably destroy my room, it just feels wrong.

Jackson clearly shares my doubts because there’s a whispered conversation between him and Gunnar as I’m changing in my bedroom.

“O will end up there,” is the only part I hear.

Odin. At least I know Gunnar doesn't have nefarious intentions toward me. And how much trouble can I get into with Odin's little brother?

I give Jackson hurried instructions about the dogs and leave the castle with Gunnar. Despite everything, it feels good to burst out the doors into the chill evening air.

We don't see any of the staff and Gunnar doesn't have security following him. Perfect.

He doesn't even try and help me into his truck—a massive pickup that I need a stepladder to climb into. “I'd expect Bo to drive something like this,” I say as Gunnar heads out of the castle gates.

“What type of car did you think I'd drive?”

“Something fast. Flashy. Completely irresponsible.”

“Is that what you think of me? Fast and flashy?”

“You did just basically kidnap your brother's fiancée.”

“Trying to be a friend, Cammie, just a friend.”

Cammie. The name warms my anger. My mother was the only one who ever called me Cammie.

Gunnar takes the road to town too fast, but instead of pointing out his lack of respect for the speed limit, I stare out the window at the lights of Battle Harbour.

My mother would have hated to see me married because I had to, not because I wanted to. She wanted me to marry for love because she wasn't able to.

I knew this, but I never even considered the option. And now that there was a slim possibility, it's gone now.

“What are your intentions toward Kate?” I ask Gunnar as he speeds around a curve. “And you drive too fast.”

“I drive within the limits of my control. And Kate? Where did that come from.”

“I know about the two of you.”

Gunnar glances over at me for a moment, then returns his focus to the road. “It’s not surprising, considering how much you’ve been hanging out. I’m sure she knows all your dirty little secrets too. Want to share some with me?”

“I have no dirty secrets.”

“That’s not fun at all. At least tell me what went on between you and my big brother.”

“You’ll have to ask him.”

“And you think it’s fine to ask me about my intentions toward Kate. Of which I have none, by the way.”

Something about the tone of his voice... “Are you still into her?” I press.

“I haven’t seen her in years,” he says flatly.

“Exactly. But you had a... thing. Now that she’s moving on—”

“Who’s she moving on with?” he quickly asks.

“That’s none of your business if you have no intentions toward her. Where are you taking me?”

“You can’t do that—waltz in with that, then not give me the full story.”

“I actually can’t waltz. Do you think I’ll have to do that for the wedding?”

Gunnar stares, mouth hanging open. “What are you talking about?”

“Waltzing or Kate?”

“We’re not talking about Kate because there’s nothing to talk about. I hope she and your guy are very happy together. As for waltzing, I’m taking you to the perfect place to work on your moves.”

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Odin

AFTER MY TALK WITH Kate, I head to the fitness centre. I know I have to talk to Camille, but I need to get some of my frustration out before I attempt that.

I slip on my VR headset and grab my sword.

A pile of headless bodies later, I surface to find a flurry of messages on my phone.

I don't know what surprises me more—the message from Kalle or that he tells me to get to his place in town to pick up Camille.

Tex drives me, his face a stony mask once he realizes Camille left the castle. “I am here to provide protection for her, and it’s difficult to do that if she doesn’t inform me of where she’s going,” he mutters, the car speeding down the darkened road to town.

“I don’t think she wants protection,” I point out. “That was the whole idea about sneaking out.”

“Which is irresponsible, not to mention dangerous, especially since we don’t know the reactions of the people. The king will be told.”

“The king doesn’t need to be told.” Tex glances at me with as much surprise as I feel. Did I just say that? Since when have I ever thought that the king didn’t need to know something?

“If you say so,” he grumbles.

When Tex pulls up to the back entrance of Kalle’s bar, I hold up my hand. “I think it’s fine if I go in on my own. You can make sure we don’t get surrounded if the word gets out.”

“As you wish,” Tex says, his tone suggesting I’m an idiot.

“It’s Kalle’s,” I point out. “Perfectly safe.”

Perfectly safe because Kalle is adored by the townspeople, more than any of us. No one wants the death of the king, but the consensus is that the kingdom would be happy with Kalle on the throne.

I know this because I organized the survey to get the information after the mob showed up during the shopping trip. Odinites may want me in charge, but they seem to be the only ones.

Kalle will make a fine king, and the fact he hates the thought of taking over irks me beyond belief.

It will more than irk me if he lets anything happen to Camille.

I hear the music before I can even open the door. It seems I shouldn’t worry about anything happening to Camille.

I should be worried about Camille happening to everyone else.

The King's Hat is a British pub-like drinking establishment with dartboards and a pool table and a chef whom Dad is always threatening to steal. The people of Battle Harbour go there to relax and have a few pints of Dad's latest craft beer concoction.

Except for tonight.

The music of Great Big Sea crashes out of the speakers and the tables have been pushed back to form a makeshift dance floor. In the middle of it is Camille. She looks like she's doing a set of energetic callisthenics as she jumps and squats to "When I'm Up."

Alan Doyle, former lead singer of the Newfoundland band, sits at the bar with Kalle and Bo. "Alan." I nod my head.

"Your Royal Highness. You've got quite the woman there."

"She's quite drunk," Kalle informs me. "Not my fault."

Alan raises his hand. "That might be mine. Also—" He points to the small group surrounding Camille. "Your brother." He slides from his stool. "I'm off to dance with the princess-to-be," he says, quick to be away from us.

"What's going on?" I ask Kalle.

"You tell me." He pours a beer, the head thick and frothy, and sets it in front of me.

"I'm not here for advice," I say grimly but still accept the beer. "I'm here to find out how Camille got here." On the makeshift dance floor, Camille has linked arms with Alan, both spinning around the floor. She laughs, head tipped back and curls cascading down her back, looking like she doesn't have a care in the world.

The sight of it is another of those sucker punches.

I watch her for a long moment. She's wearing the jeans and one of the shirts I bought her, and a pair of snow boots, which have left a slushy mess on the dance floor.

She looks happy, like the earlier conversation—or confrontation—never took place.

She's beautiful.

The hair, that smile. The dark eyes that are full of secrets that I want to know.

The butt in those jeans.

“Gunnar showed up with her and gave her Screech,” Kalle says, and I whip my focus away from Camille's bottom, which is wiggling like a mad woman. It makes me smile. “The only thing I got out of him was she was upset. What'd you do?”

My smile fades. Screech is a fairly potent alcohol well-known in neighbouring Newfoundland. It hits the spot when you need it, and sticks around the next day when you don't.

I wonder if a Screech hangover will make Camille more or less *Camille*? “What makes you think it was anything *I* did?”

Kalle cocks his head as he works the taps, lining up pints of beer. “She's pretty cool.”

“What does that have to do with it?” Kalle shrugs. “You don't think I'm cool?”

“I think you're a lot of things, O. I never thought you getting into this arranged marriage was cool, though.”

“He's right,” Edie says, appearing at my shoulder with a tray.

“Does no one think to talk to me about this?” I mutter, taking a mouthful of beer.

“Would you have listened?” Edie places the pint glasses on her tray, more than any woman her size should be able to carry. “If you're anything like your brother, I doubt it.” She throws a wink at us and hefts the tray, quickly disappearing into the crowd.

“Look,” I continue after I swallow two more mouthfuls. “This works. I had my reasons and, apparently, so did she. We'll be perfectly content, as long as she goes through with it.”

I didn't want Camille to have a reason to marry me. I wanted Camille to marry me because she wanted to.

That's a lot of wanting.

And that's the problem here. She didn't want me for me.

"Did she say something?"

"No, but she ducked out of six engagements, so it's only a matter of time with me."

"Too bad," Kalle says lightly, working the taps like the pro he is. "Because the way I looked at it, the two of you could be perfectly happy together if you let yourselves."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Exactly what I meant it to mean. When's the last time you did something that made you happy rather than what you thought you were supposed to do?" Kalle's eyes have never been more like our mother's—direct and full of care. It's the only reason I don't take my beer and leave.

"Being born a prince isn't easy," Kalle continues like he knows he's drawing me in. "Especially for you. You care too much, O. Do something that makes you happy for once, like finding a wife that you want, not because she's good for the country."

"I think I do want her," I admit slowly. "That's why I picked her."

"Well, what's the problem?"

"What if she doesn't feel the same way?"

"The only thing you can do is ask her."

Such a simple answer has never seemed so complicated. Only—it's not.

"And if she doesn't," Kalle adds, "it doesn't mean she *won't* sometime in the future. You've got time. You don't have to get married next week. You can get married whenever you want. There's no rush."

There is no rush.

A weight I didn't know I carried lifts off my shoulders.
There is no rush.

Announcing my engagement on the night of *The Suitorette* episode served its purpose by putting the spotlight on me and Camille. And even that has dimmed.

No one really cares who I'm with as long as I'm happy.

The thought makes me smile.

I'm not going to be king. I don't owe the people of Laandia my life. I'll do my duty and serve their interests, but that's not my entire life. It shouldn't be even if I were slated to be next on the throne.

"There's no rush," I tell Kalle.

My brother grins. "That's what I just said. Finally getting it, are you?"

Camille

THE FLOOR SUDDENLY FEELS like I'm onboard a boat cruising over the swells and I'm not sure if it's because I'm dizzy from the dancing or because of the shots Gunnar bought me.

"You are a rock star." I stab my finger into Alan Doyle's chest. I listened to his music when I was younger, not ever expecting to be dancing to his song with him.

"If that makes you happy, then yes I am."

"And an author, and an actor! You can do it all. You're like Selena Gomez."

Alan tips back his head and laughs, big and booming. “My lady, you are the first and only one to ever use that comparison.”

I laugh and laugh. “This is so fun,” I cry as Walter, a fisherman who lost a finger to frostbite and his front teeth swordfish fishing twenty years ago, pulls me from Alan to give me a twirl. “I should have snuck out of the castle a long time ago.”

“I think your fun might be coming to a close, Lady Cammie,” Walter says.

I blink at him. “You called me Cammie.”

“That’s what we call you.”

“My mother used to call me Cammie.” I sigh heavily. “She was the only one because my father hates shortening names. I like it though.”

“Princess Cammie.” Walter nods at me, his smile wide and holey. “Looking forward to using it more. But now, looks like your prince wants to steal you away from us.”

Prince? I turn my head so quickly that it makes the room spin. When it settles, I see Odin standing there at the bar with Kalle.

I give Walter’s arm a squeeze and back away. “Uh-oh.”

Slowly I walk to where Odin stands, avoiding eye contact with those who call out to me. Everyone has been friendly and kind tonight. Whoever the Odinites are, and whatever their problem may be, those at Kalle’s bar don’t share it.

I like Kalle’s bar. I’d like to come back here again, maybe after the wedding—

“Lady Camille,” Odin says in his deep voice.

I have to tilt up my head to look at him. “You’re so tall.”

“You’ve said that before.”

“You have *very* nice arms,” I inform him. “Never told you that. Very, nicely defined and muscularature-like. Muscature.” The word doesn’t want to form properly. “*Muscular!*” I shout.

Kalle chuckles and slaps his brother on the nicely defined shoulders. “You’re in for a treat getting her home.”

Odin grimaces but he doesn’t look angry. In fact, he looks

I’m not sure what he looks like, other than really, very good-looking. Have I not noticed this before?

I have, but it’s like the Scream, or Shriek, or whatever Gunnar gave me makes everything clearer, like one of those eye tests where they switch the lens and tell you to read the line of letters. Whatever I drank gives me twenty-twenty vision when I look at Odin.

And yet, makes everything else somewhat muddy, like the floor.

But Odin, with his elbow on the bar and his eyes on me, is crystal clear. With possibly a colourful halo around him.

I give my head a shake and stumble. “What’s in this stuff? I feel... wonky.”

But Odin has me; his hand warm on my arm, his other sliding around my waist like it’s meant to be there.

Maybe it is.

“It’s time to go home and turn back into a pumpkin,” I tell him. “Like Cinderella after the ball.”

Odin smiles down at me. “I’m afraid this isn’t the ball.”

“But you’re Prince Charming. Only I’m not Cinderella. Madam Carol told me to be less Elsa, and more Anna. From *Frozen*,” I explain. “The movie.”

“I don’t think I’ve seen that one.”

“You haven’t seen *Frozen*?” I smack a hand on Odin’s very wide, very *very* wide chest and look around him to where Kalle smirks at me. “He hasn’t seen *Frozen*.”

“Bo might have. You should ask him.”

“I will.” I nod emphatically and turn to look for him.

“He’s not here,” Kalle calls.

“Oh. I thought this was a brother inter-vening-vention.” I frown at Odin. “Words aren’t coming out right.”

“They’re big words.” Odin smiles and with the sight of it, my stomach actually flips over, so much that I clutch it with both hands. “And you’ve clearly drank too much Screech. You okay?”

“Are *we* okay?”

Even with the melty smile Odin doesn’t answer me. “You shouldn’t come out on your own,” he chides me.

“I *wasn’t* on my own,” I emphasize with a boot stomp. It makes such a good noise, that I do it again. “I was with Gunnar.” I turn to look for the youngest brother only to find him with his head bent, chatting up a pretty girl at the other end of the bar. “Looks like he’s picking up. Guess he really doesn’t have a thing for Kate anymore.”

“Is that the only reason you’re here?”

The music suddenly quiets as someone realizes I’m no longer leading the dancing. “I had to make sure he wasn’t going to rock the boat for Jackson and Kate. Speaking of boats —” —I pause, letting my eyes drift closed— “I really feel like I’m on one. I really, really think this place is moving. Do you think it is?”

Kalle laughs and leans over the bar with a glass in his hand. “Nothing is moving but your mouth. You’d best be on your way home, Princess. But drink this first. You’ll thank me in the morning.”

I look at it warily. “Is it more Shriek?”

“I have no idea what’s in it, but it’ll help. Edie’s recipe.”

“I like Edie, so I will drink it.” I turn to Odin. “She was very nice to me tonight. Everybody was. I didn’t have to throw snowballs at anybody.”

“Smart girl,” Kalle says as I down the glass, which tastes like plain water but with a bitter aftertaste.

“Tex is waiting in the car,” Odin informs me as I set the glass a little too loudly.

I wince. “Angry Tex? And angry Odin. This won’t be a fun ride home.”

“Who says I’m angry?” Odin reaches back for his beer and drains half the glass before coming up for air.

Viking princes can *drink*. I’m very wrong if I think I can keep up with any of them.

“Let’s go home.” And then, surprise of surprises, Odin takes my hand, tangling his fingers with mine. The sensation produces a ping of memory, like plucking a string. Of Odin holding my hand, leading me across the grass, the damp seeping into the hem of my dress...

“I don’t understand,” I say, staring at our hands.

“I don’t either,” Odin admits. “But it feels right. I think that’s all that matters.” He smiles and my heart swells like a balloon about to take flight.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you,” I say. “I honestly thought you knew.”

“It doesn’t matter.” He looks at me curiously. “That’s the first time I’ve heard you apologize for anything.”

“I’ve never been sorry before.”

He smiles, and it makes me feel... it makes me feel *hope*, like I didn’t mess up what might be the best thing that’s ever happened to me.

Or it might end up being the worst. Before Odin showed up, I thought I had no chance, but now...

“Thanks for the call,” Odin says to Kalle as I continue to stare at our hands, fingers intertwined so it’s hard to see where his begin and mine end.

“Get some sleep, Princess,” Kalle says, and the eldest Laandian prince grins down at me. “You’ve had a big night. You got this place hopping and that’s never happened before.”

“G’night all!” I cry, waving my hand at the group still waiting for me on the dance floor. “I have to go home, but see you all at the wedding!”

A cheer erupts. “Camille,” Odin says in a low voice.

“They’re not coming to the wedding, are they?” Odin shakes his head. “After-wedding after-party,” I call. “Drinks on King Magnus.”

Another cheer as Odin pulls me out of the bar to where Tex is waiting in the car.

Tex says nothing as Odin helps me into the car, but his icy silence speaks volumes. “He’s so mad,” I whisper to Odin as Tex pulls away from the pub.

He remains silent, but his eyes glance at me via the rearview mirror.

“He looks like my father when he’s mad at me,” I continue. “He gets mad a lot.”

“Did you have an enjoyable evening, Lady Camille?” Tex surprises me by asking.

“I did,” I say cautiously.

“I would appreciate a little warning next time you decide to venture out,” he continues. “Just to make sure you find your way home. Screech is a particularly potent brand of alcohol and can be a little hard on the body if you’re not used to it.”

“Kalle gave me Newfie steak with it,” I tell him. “I don’t know what it was, but it kind of tasted like baloney.”

“That’s because it was.”

“At least he gave her something to soak it up,” Odin mutters and I move closer so that I can rest my head on his shoulder.

Such a big, broad shoulder...

I may have said that out loud.

And then I fall asleep.

42

Odin

CAMILLE RESTS HER HEAD on my shoulder on the drive back to the castle and the simple gesture soothes me as much as it confirms what I should do.

She falls asleep before we make it out of town, her mouth open and softly snoring.

It's kind of adorable.

She's adorable.

It's not the first word that pops into my mind when I think of her, but this was a new side of her tonight.

Relaxed, comfortable—yes, a little drunk, but she was having fun.

I suspect there hasn't been much fun in Camille's life.

I could say the same for me. I've always taken my duties and responsibilities seriously, putting them before my own happiness. Yes, I had a happy childhood, and yes, I enjoyed my twenties, but I could have done so much more.

Gunnar has travelled the world, experienced things that I would never dream of. Kalle has easily put being heir to the throne in second place to living his life. And Bo and Lyra, they've done their own thing.

And our father is fine with that. He wants us happy, not doing what looks best for him.

I should be grateful for that, not wasting the opportunity I've been given.

Camille is still sleeping when we pull up in front of the castle. I look down at her in dismay, not wanting to disturb her.

“Should we give her a little time to sleep it off?” Tex asks quietly.

I meet his gaze in the rearview mirror. “That might be best. Thank you.”

“I'll wait in the castle for you, in case you need help getting her to her room.”

He shuts the door as quietly as he can, but Camille stirs, eyes fluttering for a moment before her breathing evens out again.

I look at the castle, seeing it through Camille's eyes. She's from a small island without castles, or much of a family. And she came here on her own, without advisors or even a friend.

Because that was her duty; to marry so that governing Saint Pierre would stay within the family because of some archaic law.

For all I know, she came without question, not knowing what the reaction to her would be. She didn't know anything

about what I felt, because I never even saw her. Spoke to her.

I didn't even read the contract that would bind us together.

I stopped our correspondence ten years ago because—I still don't know. Fear? I didn't want to settle down with a girl who had made my heart soar more than it had in all my nineteen years?

Because I was an idiot?

And Camille *still* agreed to marry me. Because of duty.

I can understand that.

And after breaking off six engagements, she's still here. With me.

I don't know how long I sit there, the engine of the SUV still running, radio playing softly with Camille's head on my shoulder until she inhales a strand of her hair and coughs.

Her eyes open. "Odin?" she whispers.

"I'm here."

"I'm glad."



I let Camille take a few minutes before we climb out of the SUV. Tex must have been watching because he suddenly appears before we take more than a few steps toward the door.

"Do you need any help, Your Royal Highness?" he asks, looking from me to Camille.

She shakes her head. "I think I slept off the worst of it. Hopefully."

"Glad to hear."

"And again, I apologize, Tex, for leaving the castle without letting you know." Her voice is clear and strong and for a moment all I can think about is how she will make an amazing ruler, for whatever country is lucky enough to have her. "It won't happen again."

Tex nods with what might be a hint of a smile. “Thank you, Lady Camille. Have a good rest of the evening.”

“I think all I want to do is go to bed,” Camille groans as Tex leaves us to see to the car. “These boots are definitely not dancing shoes.”

“There’s something I need in the fitness centre,” I say as I open the side door for her. “Do you mind? I can walk you to your room after.”

“Of course.” But her tone is subdued and as I help her off with her coat, I have to wonder if this is the best time for this.

As we make our way to the fitness centre through the front hall, Camille looks at the decorations. Red and white flowers, with a double silver heart accent on the vases and pots.

Valentine’s Day is eight days away. It’s the first time I can remember having decorations other than for Christmas in the castle.

“This is pretty,” Camille says in a soft voice.

“It’s for the wedding.”

Our wedding will be the first for the castle. My parents married in my mother’s church across the border in Quebec.

The first I know of at least—the castle was built in the 1600s. Maybe someone else stood in front of their friends and family and promised to love and honour.

They were Vikings, so probably not.

Camille follows me into the fitness centre. “I ran out of here earlier and I don’t want to leave it in a mess,” I explain as I flip on the lights.

The VR headset is in the middle of the floor, along with my sword. “That’s a mess?” Camille says with a laugh. “I’m more of a mess than this room is.”

I pick up the headset but Camille beats me to the sword. “I think I should take that,” I say, holding out my hand. “Swordplay and Screech are never a good idea.”

“I feel fine now,” she assures me but hands it over. “It’s you I should be worried about. You’re mad enough to ‘accidentally’ run me through.” She uses her fingers as quotes.

“I don’t think either of us are about to run the other through.”

“No, we’re quite good at hurting each other in different, less bloody ways.” She holds my gaze, her eyes steady.

I nod and put my things away. Camille stands in the middle of the room and I slowly walk back so that I’m standing in front of her. She tips her head back to see my face. It’s easy to use my height as a tool to intimidate, but that’s not my intention with Camille. I need to hear some things, I need to tell her more, and I really wish we were sitting on her couch for this conversation.

Instead, we’re in the empty, echoing training centre, the chill forcing Camille to wrap her arms around herself.

“Why did you agree to marry me?”

Camille rolls her eyes. “I thought we covered this.” Her voice has lost the faint slur, but her eyes are tired.

“I want to hear you say it.”

She clicks her tongue. “Fine. I agreed to marry you, Prince Odin of Laandia, because I need to be married if I want to take over as prefect, and you were the best option.” The words are darts being thrown at my chest. They sting, but it’s not fatal. I can come back from this.

I open my mouth to respond, but Camille isn’t finished.

“But really, I agreed to marry you because my seventeen-year-old self was doing cartwheels at the thought of another chance with you.” Camille stares steadily at me, the only sign of her unease is the gnawing of her bottom lip.

My insides contract like I’ve been hit with a defibrillator. I have to focus on breathing so it’s a moment before I can respond. “And now—”

“Now?” She sounds sad. Defeated. “I don’t know.”

“What don’t you know?”

“How you feel.”

I hesitate for only a moment. Now is not the time for hesitation. Now is the time to be brave, like my Viking ancestors running off to battle, not knowing if they would live or die, but giving it their all.

Camille deserves my all.

“I had my reasons for this. You know that.” I hope she hears the sincerity in my voice. I hope the sleep helped sober her up. I hope— “But now... I like you.” The words come in a rush. “I like you. I... I don’t know. Maybe I love you. Maybe I’ve always loved you.” Camille’s eyes are too dark to read but her face softens. That might be a smile. That might be— “What does your seventeen-year-old self think of that?”

Camille reaches out like she’s about to touch me, but stops. “My twenty-seven-year-old self likes to hear it,” she says carefully. “But I don’t know what to say though. It might be too soon to use those words.”

I love you. Those words. I could easily say them but I can’t be sure if I’d mean them. She might be right. This thing with Camille is real, but I can’t tell if it’s really love.

Yet. I’m confident we can get there, but now?

This time I reach out and take her hand. Her sweatshirt falls down over her wrist, leaving her fingers bare. They’re cold and I fight the urge to hold them close to my heart. Hold her close to my heart. “We’ve got time,” I tell her in a low voice.

“Lots of time. Right?” Her smile is tremulous and more vulnerable than I’ve ever seen her. The sight of it doesn’t tug on my heart but practically drags it out of my chest, almost bringing me to my knees.

“Do you still want to marry me?” I hold my breath but then her mouth widens into a sight that I love to see.

“You’ve really got to work on your proposing skills.”

“Do you want to try it then?”

And oh—Camille steps closer, so close that I can smell the hint of her perfume, and puts a tentative hand on my chest. “I’d rather you kiss me,” she whispers. “We could keep going over and over things, but what’s the point when we could be kissing now?”

I don’t need to be asked again. Tucking my hand into the side of her neck, I tilt her chin up, running my thumb against her bottom lip. “It won’t be like before,” I warn her as I lean down.

“Better?” she whispers.

“I can try.”

“We both will.”

We’re both smiling as I press my lips against hers. And then again. There’s a sound from the back of Camille’s throat and I wrap my arms around her.

She feels good being this close to me. Like she belongs here.

She belongs with me.

I kiss her for long minutes before I take pity on how she has to tilt up because of the height difference. “We should take this somewhere else.” My voice is suddenly husky. “This isn’t the most romantic of places...”

And hers is breathless. “It’s perfect.”

“You think so?”

She looks around the training room, her cheeks pink. “Yes, because I had this thing for your arms when I saw you with the sword for the first time—”

“My arms?”

“You’ve got very nice arms. You’ve got Thor-arms.”

“I assume you mean Chris Hemsworth?” Camille nods and I smile. “I’ll tell him you think so. But before I let you anywhere near him—” Taking a step back, I drop onto my knee. “Lady Camille Dusain—”

She covers her mouth with her hand to hide the smile.

“Will you do me the supreme honour of being my bride? Of becoming a princess of Laandia and someday the prefect of Saint Pierre? But we don’t have to do it right away,” I add, dropping the formality. “We can wait for as long as it takes until we can both say I love you.”

“I might be able to say it now.” Her eyes dance with delight.

“I might too,” I confess. “But I’d rather wait until you’re not under the influence.”

Camille laughs, eyes now shining bright. “I’m fine now.”

“So you say, but...”

“It doesn’t matter. I’ll say it again in the morning, and mean every word. Yes, Odin, I’d love to marry you for all of those reasons but mainly because of you.” She cups my cheeks and kisses me, keeps kissing me as I stand up and wrap my arms around her again because it’s where she belongs now. However things may have started.

This is where she’ll stay.



EPILOGUE

Gunnar

“D O YOU THINK I really need a date for the wedding?” I ask Odin as we work out together in the fitness room.

He wanted to spar like he always does, but I told him to save his strength for Camille. As odd as it seems, the couple seem happiest when they’re fighting. With swords.

Instead of having a slash-and-stab round, I suggest the Pelatons, so we ride side-by-side, with the vista of Spain on the screens.

I can’t help but point out the places I’d been.

“Yes,” Odin answers my question without a moment of hesitation. “If you don’t, people will spend the entire evening wondering why you’re there alone, and I want the attention on Camille.”

“Yes, but does Camille want the attention on Camille?” I counter. My soon-to-be sister-in-law spent a lot of time on her own before Odin, and has shown she’s not exactly comfortable with crowds and being the centre of attention. She’s getting better, but it doesn’t take a genius in psychology to realize it’s still tough for her.

“She deserves to be the centre of attention,” Odin says. “I’d rather not have the romantic exploits of my brothers outshining her.”

“But I’m very shiny.” Odin makes a face and I laugh. It’s easier joking about my frequent appearances in the tabloids than getting into what it really feels like to be discussed ad nauseam. What they say about me isn’t even true.

Not all of it anyway.

“Fine, I’ll be good,” I concede. “And I’ll find a date. But, I have to admit, I’m offended with you calling my love life *exploits*.”

“Prince Gunnar’s Romantic Exploits in America—How he Wooed the West,” Odin recites the headline of the latest cover of US Weekly.

I’m not impressed with how the coverage of my trip to the United States has been received, even less when both Kalle and Spencer asked me to autograph their copies of the magazine.

“And you believe everything you read?” I ask.

“Yes.” Odin’s curt response could have been because of the steep incline.

“I’m not as bad as Kalle,” I protest.

“I’ve had the same discussion with Kalle.”

“I’m very happy to hear that. You know, you sound rulerly when you talk like that,” I tell him slyly.

“Maybe the word you’re looking for is mature.”

I grin at my brother. “It definitely sounds like you’re in looove.”

And Odin blushed.

I’m happy for him and Camille but I’m not looking forward to finding someone to take their wedding because things are bound to get messy.



Odin and Camille are headed for the altar!

But the next question is—will Gunnar be able to find a date?

Find out in [Royal Retelling!](#)



Want more Odin and Camille?

More about the wedding and just why Odin stopped writing to Camille?

You’ll get a BONUS EPILOGUE when you sign up for my newsletter!

[Sign up now!](#)

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THANK YOU!

Thanks so much for reading Royal Rumble, the first book in my Love in Laandia series

To be honest, I was a little leery about starting another sweet romance series. I love the genre, but after finishing my Suitor Science series, I thought of switching back to women's fiction for a time or trying something new. And I will be doing both those things, but I've fallen in love with Laandia so here comes the series!

I first wrote Royal Rumble as part of My Funny Valentine anthology back in 2023 and when I was introducing the Laandian princes – Odin, Kalle, Bo and Gunnar – the lightbulb

went off. What a perfect idea for a new series! Hot royals with a Viking background – yes please!

Gunnar's story is next up.

Fun facts:

The fictional kingdom of Laandia is inspired by the real-life province of Newfoundland and Labrador on the Atlantic coast of Canada and is said to have been first settled by Viking explorer Leif Erickson.

The archipelago of Saint Pierre does exist and is a French territory but I have no idea if the Prefect needs to be married to govern.

Princess Lyra was first introduced in Loving the Wrong Guy, part of my Suitor Science series.

Before you find out what happens between Gunnar and Stella, I'd love it if you'd take a minute to tell others what you thought of Royal Rumble, either on Goodreads or Amazon. Here's a link if you could post a quick review. A really quick review like *Awesome read* or *Loved it!* would be great! You can post it on Amazon [here](#).

And I'd love it if you joined my mailing list to find out more about me and my books!

Sign up [here](#)

Thanks so much for spending your time with me and my books!

Holly

Acknowledgments

Along with a big THANK YOU to you, the reader, there are a few people I need to give kudos to. Writing is a solo gig but it does take a village to get a book out to you.

First and foremost – my editors! Thanks to Regina for making the time to fix my typos and the interest in wanting to do so. This time around, I have to include Kaitlin Kerr (yep, you read that right – she’s one of mine!) for double-checking my revisions and edits for the final go-around. Also, thanks need to go to my Advanced Reader Copy readers who point

out anything we missed, especially the eagle eyes of Bernadette Cinkoske!

Thanks to Dylan at @simplydylandesigns for Odin, Camille and Betty White on the cover.

I want to mention all those involved in the final version of My Funny Valentine anthology, especially those who organized it. Thank you to those involved in the end result; I have other words I'd like to say to those who made the last month of the collaboration a stressful nightmare, but since this is a sweet and clean book, I won't mention them here.

And as always, thanks to my Mom and E for their neverending support, and my kids Kaitie, Sam and Sarah for still thinking it's cool that Mamoosca is an author!



Suitor Science

**Hating the Chemistry Teacher
Falling for The Suitor
Fraternizing with the Ex
Marrying the Billionaire Best Friend
Loving the Wrong Guy
Finding the One**

Love & Alliteration

**Perfectly Played
Beautifully Baked
Pleasantly Popped**

Don't

**Don't Tell Me You Love Me
Don't Want to Be Friends
Don't Stop Me Now
Don't They Know It's Christmas**

Sisters in a Small Town

**Coming Home
Hanging On
Stepping Up**

Charlotte Dodd

**The Secret Life of Charlotte Dodd
The Missing Files of Charlotte Dodd
The Best Worst First Date Ever
The Hidden Past of Pippa McGovern
The Last Stand of Charlotte Dodd**

**Unexpected
Unexpectedly Happily Ever After**

Absinthe Doesn't Make the Heart Grow Fonder

Oceanic Dreams - I Saw Him Standing There

Kid Lit

**The Dragon Under the Mountain
The Dragon Under the Dome**