

CELESTE BAXENDELL

THE  
WICKED  
PRINCE

ONCE UPON  A PRINCE

A ROBIN HOOD RETELLING

THE WICKED PRINCE  
ONCE UPON A PRINCE

CELESTE BAXENDELL

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THE  
WICKED  
PRINCE

ONCE UPON A PRINCE



A ROBIN HOOD RETELLING

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*For the cowards who can't stop running*



# CHAPTER I

Every so often, there were days where the stars aligned and everything seemed to finally be going Prince John's way. Enough that it made being king *worth* it.

Fine. Prince Regent. Close enough.

Regardless, today was one of those historic days. The day Prince John had caught Astren's most elusive, most wanted outlaw, Robin Hood.

Well... maybe not *that* exact day, if Prince John was being *technical*. And if they were getting into those pesky details, Prince John wasn't the one who *physically* apprehended her. Robin Hood had been apprehended a few days ago by the Sheriff of Ferren Forest. It *had* been John's plan... he just hadn't had a hand in executing it.

What was the point in being Prince Regent if he had to *do* things instead of make someone *else* do them?

Regardless, this was the day his outlaw was scheduled to arrive in Lathe. The day she would be brought before Prince John.

So that made today the important one. The one everyone would remember.

The second John had stepped out of his room that morning, he'd dismissed all the advisors and officials squabbling for his attention. Vultures. He'd taken an extra half hour to ensure everything was perfect. To make sure *he* was perfect. Of course they'd taken the opportunity to swarm him the second he had appeared even though there was no sense in even

pretending to do any work that morning. He would be too distracted waiting for the arrival of his outlaw.

And her band of Merry Men, he supposed. The Sheriff had succeeded in catching all of them, thanks to John's brilliant plan. It was so perfect a plan even an idiot couldn't mess it up—proven by the fact that the Sheriff had caught her and hadn't lost her in transit. Catching all of them at the same time had been the key. The many times one or two got away had always led to the rescue of the others. But this time there would be no escape or rescue. Her little band would be headed straight for the dungeons. Robin would be brought straight to him.

John sat on the king's throne—it was his right as Prince Regent—and he waited. As the morning wore on, his patience didn't falter. But he did drum his fingers on the arm of the chair, watching the way the gold rings caught the sunlight. Another hour passed. He should have brought something to occupy himself, but his usual hobby would have been too much hassle with all the rings on his fingers. His back started to hurt so he shifted, leaning back against the arm and swinging his legs over the other side in a display wholly inappropriate for royalty.

But who was going to stop him?

As long as Richard was gone, he was the highest authority in the kingdom. His brother was off in the desert fighting over who got more sand dunes behind their borders. No one in Astren held more power than John.

It was good to be king. Well, regent.

When a scrawny little page finally gave him word that the Sheriff and his prisoners had been spotted entering the city, John almost straightened back up into a proper position, but stopped himself. No. This would be better suited for his and Robin's second meeting, and his victory.

The doors opened, and the sight had John grinning as brightly as he had the day he'd come up with his brilliant scheme.

The Sheriff—John couldn't remember the man's proper name, but he also didn't care to. He wasn't important enough for that. Regardless, the Sheriff was a weathered man at least two decades John's senior whose incompetence was the only reason John knew who he was. But at least today his incompetence had proven no match for John's brilliance. Or rather, the painstaking step-by-step instructions John had given him so that there was no room for the Sheriff to make a single decision on his own.

He was holding what looked like a leash made of chains connected to a set of manacles and shackles. Two of the Sheriff's men hovered around the figure in chains, their hands on her arms, forcing her forward while the Sheriff pulled on the chain.

But the young woman would not move an inch without a fight.

The only reason she wasn't being dragged on the ground was because of the guards half-carrying her. The chains rattled as she struggled, trying to kick and twist and break free in any way she could. Her head thrashed around, sending her dark blonde hair flying in a thousand different directions as she screamed—or tried to. The gag around her mouth muffled it, but considering how loud she was even then, John was grateful his ears were spared.

It was like they were transporting a wild animal.

John's cheeks started to ache with how big his grin was.

The second her blue eyes landed on him, she redoubled her efforts. To no avail.

"Your Highness," the Sheriff called out over Robin's screaming. "We executed your brilliant plan perfectly. She was right where you said she would be, desperately trying to talk Lady Marian out of her wedding to Guy."

Robin's screaming grew even louder.

A lesser man might have felt guilty at missing the wedding of the man who was the only thing he had resembling a friend.

But friend was a loose term. And John's presence would only have raised suspicion and could have ruined his perfect plan.

Falling in love with Lady Marian and giving John the opening to plan the perfect trap was the only useful thing Guy had ever done in his life.

"Of course she was. Criminals like to think they're so much cleverer than the rest of us." John let his rings catch the sunlight for a moment before lowering his hand. "Well... until they're caught."

The guards threw Robin to her knees, and her screaming stopped. The Sheriff jerked on the chain, and Robin caught herself with her hands. She was a streak of grass and dirt wholly out of place amongst the glittering opulence of the throne room. Her head snapped up and never before had John seen crystal blue burn so brightly.

He gestured to her gag. "I know you spend your time running around a forest and following your impulses like an animal, but if we remove your gag will you prove capable of civilized conversation?"

Her eyes widened, then they narrowed. How quaint. It was a little late for her to be worried about getting caught in a trap. But she nodded.

"Are you certain, Your Highness?" the Sheriff asked, eyeing Robin.

John tightened his fist, showing off his brother's royal signet specifically and giving the Sheriff a lidded, sharp look. His voice was frozen solid and shook the room despite not being any louder than before. "Are you questioning me?"

The Sheriff immediately signaled for one of his men to take the gag out of her mouth.

It was good to be king. Well, regent.

Robin's cheeks were still flushed from her screaming. She licked her lips, swallowing as soon as the gag was gone. She didn't start screaming again, but she was still glaring at him.

“See? Was that so hard?” John leaned his chin on his hand and grinned at her with no substance.

“Get off that throne.”

It was the first time he’d heard her voice in almost six months. Although, the rasping, hoarse quality was likely just because of all the screaming she’d done. Still, it was a wonder they’d believed she’d been a young man at all, given her distinctly feminine, lilting voice. To be fair, stealing didn’t exactly facilitate conversation. And the one time he had spoken with her, she’d tried to disguise it.

John tsked and shook his head. “Criminals don’t get to give orders.”

“There’s only one criminal in this room and it’s not me.”

“Show the Prince Regent some respect!” The Sheriff jerked on the chains, nearly sending Robin face first into the floor, but she caught herself again and didn’t look away from John. She looked at him like she could send an arrow into his heart with her eyes alone. A thrill ran down his spine.

“False kings deserve no respect.” Robin got one of her legs beneath her, pushing herself back up. “And that throne isn’t yours.”

“Well, it’s not like Richard has a use for it while the Esmeans shoot at him. Besides, if they do kill him, then it *will* be mine.” What a fascinating woman she was. “Shouldn’t you be less concerned with my choice of chair and more about your own life?”

“I can do both.” Robin stood up straight, shaking her head to get her hair out of her face. “Don’t underestimate me.”

John grinned. “I’m the first person who didn’t.”

Robin rattled her manacles. “You can talk tough all you want, but everyone knows you’re too much of a coward to risk your own neck.” She strained against them as her lips curled up.

The young woman who looked like she’d been dragged out of a bush stared at him like he was the dirt on her skin. Perfect.

“I bet you won’t even watch when you have someone else execute me.” Her voice took on an airy superiority. “You wouldn’t want to upset your delicate nerves.”

John swung his legs off the arm of the throne and in one smooth motion pushed himself out of it and strode toward her. He tilted his head as he approached. “Who said anything about execution?”

Robin’s brow furrowed and she tried to take a step back, but the Sheriff kept a tight grip on the chain, preventing her even that. Her balance faltered, and John caught her shoulder, steadying her. Her gaze snapped to his and then she ripped herself out of his grip, hitting the floor with a sneer on her lips.

And people thought he was prideful.

They weren’t *wrong*, but still.

“Well, I don’t expect you’re going to let me go with a warning.” Robin looked up at him, her voice still rasping. Her tunic was belted at her waist, wrinkled and as dirt-stained as her breeches. He was going to have to have the servants scrub the throne room floor once they were finished. Had she been rolling around in dirt the whole way to Lathe?

Actually, given the struggle she’d given just on her way in here, that probably wasn’t far off from the truth.

Ugh. He should have had them at least dump a bucket of water on her before bringing her in to see him.

He reached down and grabbed the chain between her cuffed wrists and pulled her back up to her feet. The chain at least looked cleaner than she did.

Robin went completely limp, and John almost lost his grip on the chain. However, one of the Sheriff’s men grabbed her by the back of her shirt and hauled her back up, actually lifting her clean off the ground so she couldn’t do anything to be difficult.

That actually brought her eyes closer to his eye level. Perfect.



John reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded piece of parchment. As he unfolded it, taking care with the edges, he said, “You had to know it was only a matter of time until I caught you when these started appearing all over the kingdom.”

Robin’s nostrils were flaring and her breath was huffy as he held up a wanted poster. They’d had wanted posters for Robin ever since her first appearance, but those had been different. Vague descriptions and a drawing of a hooded figure. This was the first one that identified her as a woman and had her face. John held the wanted poster up to her face to compare them side by side.

“Let’s see how close I was,” John said. “I only got a glimpse of you, and the light was fading, so small inaccuracies can be forgiven.”

But there were none. John was excellent with details. The face on the wanted poster was a perfect recreation of Robin’s, down to the intensity of her eyes and the freckle on her right cheekbone.

Stunning. Breathtaking.

His handiwork, he meant.

He asked, “What do you think? It’s your face after all.”

“Unlike you, I don’t spend all day staring at my own reflection.” She tried to kick at him, but the guard jerked her back. “Some of us have more important things to do, like taking care of the people you rob blind.”

“Everyone has to have hobbies, even regents. Don’t you have any?” John lowered the wanted poster, starting to carefully fold it up again. “And no, crime doesn’t count.”

Robin went silent, still visibly fuming at him.

“Nothing else you want to get out? You were quite vocal on your way in.” No response. John leaned in a little, unable and uninterested in keeping his glee from seeping into his voice as he cooed at her. “Come on, all birds sing, don’t they? While our first night together was one I won’t forget, you

weren't very vocal. I like you much better when you speak. Or you can scream if you like."

John narrowly ducked back in time to avoid Robin's forehead slamming into his nose.

"You disgusting, *vile*—"

He caught her chin in his hand, tilting it up to look at him. His voice darkened. "You should be a little nicer to the man who has all your Merry Men's lives in his hands. I imagine you're quite attached to them."

Now that had her attention.

Robin's nostrils flared again, and she ground out, "Stop playing games and get to the point."

"The point is I don't want to *execute* you."

Robin still eyed him warily. He adjusted his grip, softening it and cradling her face rather than gripping it. When had his heart started pounding?

This was it. The moment for the history books. His eyes darted down briefly before returning to hers. He had the outlaw. Now...

"I want to marry you."

She started to jerk her head back, but he resecured his grip, forcing her to look at him. Her eyes were so wide they might as well have popped right out of their sockets. "Are you mad?"

Not the worst reaction he had anticipated.

"Not even a little." John reached forward with his other hand and brushed her wild, tangled hair out of her face, smoothing it down. His voice was soft, barely a whisper as he moved to paint his best work yet with it. "Doesn't that sound nice? Being a princess? No more running around the woods and sleeping on the cold dirt? Dodging arrows every day? Always looking over your shoulder?"

He was pleased to feel Robin lean into his palm and see her eyes flutter shut as he spoke, envisioning the possibilities. The tension she had been wearing as her armor started to melt

away and why wouldn't it? That was the real secret to his plan, giving her the thing she could never admit to herself that she wanted. Even the legendary Robin Hood could be tempted if someone only knew what weakness to press on.

He'd seen it in her eyes beneath the hood. She was tired. That kind of life would wear anyone down over the years, especially someone like her. She wasn't just tired; she was absolutely exhausted. He knew it well. She was ready to give in. He had her exactly where he wanted her.

He'd won.

His smirk grew when she let out a soft sigh. He brushed his thumb over her lip, and Robin's eyes flew open, burning brighter than the sun. And then she bit him.

She *bit* him.

John jumped back with a high-pitched, undignified yelp as searing pain ripped through his now bleeding hand. Did she have blades for teeth? What kind of savage *bites* someone?

Her mouth was coated red as the Sheriff's men grabbed her and started to haul her back. She spat John's blood onto the floor and screamed, "I'd rather shove a hot poker through my own chest than marry you!"

Fine. Maybe she wasn't quite ready to give in. She still had some fight left in her yet.

John held his bleeding hand in the other, clutching it to his chest and swearing under his breath. The guards continued dragging Robin back, as she now struggled against her restraints to get another crack at him. She screamed incoherently as one of them put her gag back on her, smearing the blood on her cheek.

Robin Hood was absolutely feral.

The doors slammed shut.

And Prince John was just getting started.

## CHAPTER 2

The second the Sheriff's men hauled Robin into the dungeons, her Merry Men started clamoring.

“Where did you take her?” Will Scarlet.

“Hey! Answer us, you big ugly brute!” Alan-a-dale.

“What did ye do to her?” Little Jon.

The guards didn't answer, instead choosing to throw her in an empty cell and locking it. Robin reached up and removed the gag, and their questions all started anew as the guards hurried away.

“Robin! Where'd they take you? Did you see Prince Parasite?” Will called out from the cell beside her.

“Are ye injured? What happened? Can ye speak?” Little Jon from the cell across from hers.

“If they put their hands on you, I swear, I'll—” Alan from the cell beside Little Jon. She waved her hand and they all fell silent as she pushed herself up.

She just grinned at them and said, “Don't worry, boys, this blood's not mine.”

“Whose is it?” Will asked, narrowing his eyes in the dim dungeon light. A girl hides a sprained wrist, a cut leg, an arrowhead in her shoulder, a twisted ankle, and other various small injuries a few dozen times and suddenly every man becomes a mother hen.

And this was exactly why. She couldn't let them worry about her. She had to put on a brave face. She had to be just as strong as them.

Robin wiped at her face with her manacled hands, making her filthy sleeve even filthier. "Prince John's."

Alan scoffed. "Be serious, Robin. If you're injured—"

"I am serious! It's not my fault no one ever taught him to keep his hands to himself!" Robin shook her head. "Apparently his royal education didn't tell him that wild animals are prone to biting."

Little Jon broke the silence with his deep voice, saying, "That's our Robin."

Will and Alan relaxed, and after a beat, started laughing uproariously. They'd been foolish to worry about her for even a second. That was exactly what she wanted.

Although she knew they would worry if she told them what Prince John had said. They'd lose their minds, and there was no sense in that while they were all stuck in their cells unable to do anything about it. Her men had done a good job protecting her ever since she came to them; she tried to return the favor and prove herself worthy of it. She owed them everything.

Besides, Prince John certainly hadn't been serious. Prince John hadn't been serious about anything a day in his life. He was a walking joke.

No. He'd only said that because he was trying to get into Robin's head and mess with her before he killed them all. *If* Robin couldn't figure out a way to break all of them out of the dungeons before then.

She'd been counting on the Sheriff to make a mistake while transporting them to Lathe, so they could escape before she ever had the misfortune to see Prince John's face again. She hadn't expected them *not* to make a mistake. They always made a mistake. They used to, at least. This time, they'd been extremely well prepared.

Robin looked over at her men, her family, and she cursed herself for being the reason they were all going to wake up to nooses. She'd gone running the second she heard Marian was going to marry Guy—the man who had been trying to arrest Robin for years simply to raise his meager status. The man who clearly was only pursuing Marian to marry his way into her nobility and wealth. The man who was the only known friend of Prince John.

Frankly, his association with Prince John alone was enough.

Although friend was probably the wrong term. Prince John wasn't capable of having friends. Lackey was probably more accurate.

Robin generally stayed away from Marian for her cousin's safety, but she wasn't going to be safe marrying someone completely in Prince John's pocket. She couldn't believe her cousin had gone through with it. Robin had been too late to stop Marian; she'd had to settle for trying to convince Marian to run away with her and the men, but apparently Marian actually *loved* Guy.

Marian had tried to explain it, claiming Guy wasn't the villain he seemed to be and had a good heart. But Robin wasn't buying it for a second.

Robin hadn't been able to save Marian from her own bad decisions, naivety, and traitorous heart. Now Robin was going to be responsible for the deaths of the men who had taken her in, had practically raised her, had joined her when her conscience could not bear watching Prince John bleed the country dry.

Robin spent the night tossing and turning on the floor of her cell, each time curling her legs up and wrapping a hand around her left. Prince John had won.

But they weren't executed the next day. Or the next. Or at all.

Every day, they were given food and water. Not a pittance, but not a lot. It became obvious after the first two meals

Robin's portions were a little bigger. A little better quality. Fresh fruit. A tiny, fluffy pastry the likes of which Robin hadn't had since she was a child, before she'd ever met her men. It had made her blood run cold. She had to take a slow, measured breath and convince herself it wasn't some secret message.

As they ate, her men's eyes were on her, but they never pointed it out. She didn't either. Acknowledging the difference in their meals meant questions, which meant telling them about the proposal, and that meant their overreaction.

Still, Robin didn't like the implication.

That maybe there was something serious to Prince John's offer.

The guards didn't even so much as rattle the bars of any of their cells despite the Merry Men jeering at them and banging on the bars. In other circumstances, Robin would have joined in. She had on the way to Lathe. It had gotten her bow snapped in half right in front of her and jeering from the Sheriff about how it would be her neck next.

Now she sat in silence, feeling the ghost of Prince John's hand on her jaw and his voice echoing in her ears. His soft, mocking words sank into her skull and rattled around at night.

She was exhausted.

She didn't know what that snake was up to, but she wasn't falling for it.

Whatever it was.

After a week in the dungeons and more than three dozen unrealistic escape ideas from them all—one of which for some reason involved Alan dressing as a lady-in-waiting because apparently Robin couldn't pass as one and everyone knew her face—like they wouldn't somehow figure Alan wasn't a woman when they saw his beard—the guards came in at the usual meal time, but they were short one portion. Robin's portion. But they still approached her cell.

Her three men immediately shot to their feet, creating a deafening clamor as they yelled at them to leave Robin alone.

Robin simply held her head high as the men grabbed her and hauled her out of her cell. She did call out behind her, “Don’t worry, boys! I’m going to be just fine!”

She hoped they believed it more than she did.

The halls of the castle blurred by her as she was dragged through them, her heart pounding faster with every step. She couldn’t help the sigh of relief she let out as the guards took her past the hallway that led to the throne room. She breathed even easier when they took her up a staircase and not out into the courtyard where they’d roll out the gallows.

But then she realized one of the places they could be taking her, and her blood ran cold.

She’d heard every story about Prince John there was. She’d made it a point to know her enemy. Every story, every rumor, every whisper, she knew. While this particular wickedness wasn’t one of them, for every terrible thing that was public, there had to be ten more he kept secret.

And since she’d made it clear she wouldn’t marry him willingly...

Robin started struggling.

When one of the guards flung a door open and shoved Robin through it, she stumbled, but her head snapped up. She was in a study. Thank the stars. Before she could get her bearings, a chair was in front of her and she was being forced into it. She struggled, but the guards managed to shackle her ankles to the legs and her wrists to the arms. She tried to bite one of them in the shoulder, but they were finished and heading for the door. Her head was twisted, facing the door as she glared at them as they left. If he’d just been a *little* bit closer, she would have had him.

“What are you, a rabid dog?”



## CHAPTER 3

Robin jumped in her seat at the voice revealing she wasn't alone in the study. Her head immediately whipped around to face him.

The study was huge, with several sizable windows and a bench stretched beneath them. Prince John was sitting on said bench with his legs on it, one knee up and his arm draped over it. He was watching her with something like amusement and something else like disgust in his eyes.

Robin's lips curled into a smirk as she spotted his bandaged hand. She pushed against her restraints, shifting the chair infinitesimally so she could glare at him better. She opened her mouth, but didn't get a word out as Prince John jerked back and pointed at her. "Ah! You stay right there! I've got stitches in one hand already—my drawing hand, by the way—I'm not letting you get the other one!"

Well, at least she didn't have to worry about him trying anything. She might be restrained, but he was still cowering on the other side of the room from her.

Good. Although now she felt a little silly for fearing something more nefarious in the first place. She was Robin Hood. There couldn't be any fear, only strength.

Wait, why had he said drawing hand instead of writing hand?

"I certainly can't like this," Robin said. "Is this how you treat all the women you propose to? Because then it's no mystery why you're not married."

Prince John perked right up at the word ‘married.’ He said in a sing-song tone, “*I’ve been in your head.*”

Spoiled, childish brat. Those rumors were true at least.

“I don’t care what I have to do in order to manage it. I will take your other hand clean off with my teeth!”

“And here I was hoping the chair would make you more civilized.”

“I feel very civilized being chained to it.” Robin rattled them again, the metal digging into her skin.

“You *bit* me.”

“You deserved it.”

Prince John laughed. “You are fearless.”

The admiration in his voice had to be a façade.

“Somehow that’s not really flattering coming from a man cowering on the other side of the room.”

Prince John pushed himself up off the bench seat and started moving toward an ornate covered cart. Robin hadn’t noticed that either; she’d been too focused on John.

He had a point. He was in her head.

He’d been in her head for years, the thing that got her up every day. He was the specter that governed her every step. His name had been a curse in her mouth since the moment they met. But her distant enemy on a throne wasn’t the same as the one that had been haunting her over the last week.

“If I let you have one hand, will you play nice?” Prince John paused by the cart, eyeing her.

Prince John was a lot of things, but he clearly wasn’t an idiot. The words he chose served specifically to remind Robin just who held all the power. John might be a coward, but he was a powerful one. The most dangerous kind.

“Depends on the game.”

But Robin wasn’t known for backing down in the face of danger.

John rolled his eyes and lifted the lid of the tray. “The game is lunch, you savage.”

He did have her brought during the usual time she and the men were fed. She had been starting to feel pangs of hunger before the guards had even arrived. Her portions might have been better than her men’s, but that hadn’t meant they’d been completely filling. And what was on the tray was of an even better quality and decadence than anything Robin had eaten in a long time. Her mouth started watering as she smelled the tender, smoked meat and the sweet berry cakes.

Robin looked back at John, who was watching her intently. She didn’t like that stare, but she was hungry. Was this a test? If he thought she was falling for it, maybe he’d lower his guard and let something slip. Or he’d leave her a knife she could throw into his neck.

She spoke in a dead, dry voice, “I promise the only biting I do will be to my food.”

“Now that is much better. I knew you had it in you,” John said as he pushed the tray between her and the desk she was sitting in front of. Once he had moved it, John moved to her right side, slowly, eyeing her warily for any sudden movements. Robin stayed still and John unlocked her right wrist, moving back quickly as soon as it was free.

Robin simply flexed her wrist and rolled it.

John picked up his plate off the tray and set it on the desk before taking his own seat behind it. Not really *his* seat at all. This was King Richard’s study.

For a minute they ate in silence. Unfortunately, she had not been left a knife. While she could try hurling the fork at him, she decided not to. She’d never be able to get herself out of the chair and rescue her Merry Men before John’s body was discovered. So she ate. And the food was amazing.

Robin was used to unseasoned meat, whatever her band had poached, or if they were lucky, the villagers they helped shared bread, fruit, and vegetables with them. She’d made her peace with it as soon as she’d joined her men and forgot there

was anything better out there until now. This was heavenly. And a reminder of the whole reason Robin had started her career as an outlaw. Because of the disgusting extravagance happening in Prince John's castle while the villagers watched more and more of their harvest disappear and worried if they would make it through winter.

Robin's stomach turned and she couldn't eat a single bite more.

"It's more wasteful if you don't finish."

Robin's gaze snapped up to John. "What?"

"Stars above—eat, woman. You feeling guilty about it isn't going to change anything. Either eat or it *does* go to waste and then you'll feel even worse about that."

Robin didn't move to keep eating. "What are you up to? Why am I here? Why are you feeding me or any of my men?"

Prince John rolled his eyes again before lowering his fork and leaning forward. He clasped his hands under his chin as he stared at her. "You're not stupid. You know why you're here and why I haven't had a hair on your precious men's heads harmed."

Cold dread ran down her spine, and she swallowed. "You've had your fun. I'm not falling for whatever scheme you've got up your sleeve."

John held up his bandaged hand. "You think this is fun for me?"

There was a light in his eyes that still said yes.

"You're just trying to mess with my head with that proposal." He had to be. "What do you really want?"

"I'm not messing with you. I meant what I said." John rose from his seat and moved to the side of the desk, pushing himself up and sitting on the edge. He left enough distance between them so Robin couldn't get him, but it was far more casual and almost intimate. He stared down at her, his gaze holding her down far more effectively than her chains.

"I want to marry you."

She couldn't find any hint of a lie. Her breath caught in her throat. She couldn't deny it. He was entirely serious.

"Why?" Robin narrowed her eyes. "You might be the most hated man in the country, but you're a prince. Surely you're not so desperate that the only woman you think you can convince to marry you is a criminal?"

John picked up a letter from the desk and turned it to her. Robin leaned forward, and she made out King Richard's signature and seal on it before John turned it back to face him and started reading. His voice was obnoxiously deeper and pompously stiff as he said, "The reports I've been receiving have been quite concerning, more so than anything I'm currently encountering in the Scaldier Desert with the Esmeans and the Faenics. I almost didn't believe them because they sounded *ludicrous*. Especially after you swore you could handle the responsibility of being regent. But then I started seeing the truth over the last year in the supplies sent to support me and the army. I've been patient. You've had plenty of chances, but it's clear you don't have any control over this situation."

Ugh. King Richard was risking his life to protect them all, and John was sitting safe in a castle, mocking him?

John looked up from the letter and right at Robin, saying in his regular voice, "You are the situation, by the way."

"Me?"

John continued reading in his ridiculous impression, "It's clear that this outlaw has the love of the people, thanks to the fact that you haven't handled it effectively. While I've been gone, they've built a hero in their minds against the prince they've always despised. This 'Robin Hood' must be dealt with. You cannot allow this to go on and continue damaging the war effort. One man will not be the reason we cannot properly defend our borders. You have six months. Deal with this or I will. Then you'll be the one the Esmeans are trying to shoot at."

"You've been blaming everything on me to King Richard?" Robin gaped at him.

John lowered the letter sharply. “That’s what you took from that? Also, didn’t you ever think of that when you attacked my tax collectors?” John scoffed. “War isn’t cheap, Robin.”

Oh. So this was apparently her fault?

“I didn’t start returning what the people need in order to survive because of the *war*. I did it because of *you*. Your ridiculous royal decrees that take away people’s livelihoods on the altar of your benefit. If you stopped swiping money off the top to spend on yourself and actually sent the king what he needed, he wouldn’t be threatening to send you to the front.” Robin’s lip curled up in a sneer. “Don’t blame your actions on me.”

John shook his head and set the letter back on the desk. “I received that five and a half months ago.”

But none of that explained his proposition.

“Congratulations, you’ve narrowly managed to succeed. You’ve got Robin Hood and her Merry Men. If all you need to do is stop me from stealing the taxes in order to prove your worth to King Richard, why haven’t you killed me and been done with it?”

“That was the original plan. The Sheriff assured me he knew you well enough to be able to devise a trap you wouldn’t be able to resist.”

Like the Sheriff had ever been capable of trapping her and keeping her. She grinned. “You’re not still sore about the business with the golden arrow, are you?”

“On the contrary, I was thrilled with how everything turned out. Thanks to the Sheriff’s terrible trap, I discovered the most wanted *man* in Astren was actually the most wanted *woman*. That’s when the plans changed.” John leaned in, his dark brown eyes piercing hers the same way they had that night five months ago. Only now he was the one looking down at her. He said, “From the moment I first saw you under that hood, I knew I would either kill you or marry you.”

Robin could hardly hear him over the blood thundering in her ears.

“And I don’t like to get my hands dirty, so that really only left one option.”

“That doesn’t make anything clearer.” Robin’s voice was barely a breath.

“Fine, let me put this in the simplest terms for you even though I know you’re smarter than this. I *could* kill you and your men and be done with it. But that’s shortsighted. Richard wants the Robin Hood situation put to *rest*. If you die, it lives on. I’ll be the tyrant who killed the people’s hero, and it just might be enough to push the current dissatisfaction over wholly into violent *unrest*. *Violent unrest* means Richard comes back and the last thing *I* want is Richard to come back.” John placed his uninjured hand on the desk and leaned on it. “But if we get married and the majority of the public believes you’re doing it willingly and in order to help them, the Robin Hood situation is put to rest. The people’s dissatisfaction will ease as their beloved heroine becomes their princess. They’ll believe that you’re still fighting for them, just now on the inside of the castle walls, and they’ll calm down. And Richard stays in the desert defending that worthless stretch of sand. I stay king in all but name.”

That made sense. Robin’s pounding heart started to slow. But that didn’t give her any reason to do it.

“I already gave you my answer. That hasn’t changed. I don’t know what ever made you think I would agree after what you’ve done to me. After what you’ve done to this country. I’d rather be dead than do anything to help you keep the throne, especially be married to you.”

“You’d rather *you* be dead, sure.” John shrugged, her words sliding right off him. A sharp glint entered his eyes, and she was falling through the air. “That much was clear. But have you thought about what will happen to your Merry Men then?”

His words hit her with a crack echoing in her ears.

The dread returned, rushing down her spine like ice. “Don’t you dare try to use them as leverage to manipulate me into marrying you.”

“Manipulate? I’m being completely honest about what your options are. If I execute you, I can’t just let them go. They’re as guilty as you are of the exact same crimes. Do you really think a trial will go in your favor? But... if you marry me, I can pardon them.” John leveled her with a look that was surprisingly honest. His voice softened as he said, “You’re a criminal, Robin. You can marry me, live, and become the people’s princess, or I can treat you like a criminal who has robbed the crown and you and your accomplices will suffer the consequences of your crimes.”

Robin hadn’t thought John was serious, so she’d never considered he would actually let them all live. It was her fault they were in this situation in the first place. She’d been the one to start the crusade against Prince John. She’d been the one who insisted she needed to talk Marian out of marrying Guy. The men hadn’t wanted to do either, but they’d done it all for her. They were the only reason she was alive. They followed her headfirst into her war, but they’d saved her long before that. She owed them all much more than her life.

“You really want to marry a woman of unknown origins who has spent the majority of her life running around the woods with a group of men who are not her blood relations?”

“The people who adore you don’t care about that. As long as they still sing ballads about you and don’t come for my head on a pike, I don’t care either.” John scoffed. “This isn’t a marriage about romance. I’m a prince. Not just that, I’m the bad seed, the evil scheming spare. Romance has never been on the table. I was always going to marry for power and politics.”

Robin eyed him. Was he being honest? Could she trust him? Terrible question. Of course she couldn’t. She flexed her left ankle against the shackles. But did she have any other choice she could live—or die—with?

“Look, I promise I will keep my hands to myself if you will. No trying to bite me or kill me or any violence and I’ll



leave you alone too.”

That was a reasonable exchange.

“You’ll still be the villain in everyone’s eyes. They’ll say all kinds of things about how you forced me into this even if we pretend you didn’t. Marrying me won’t make them adore you.”

“I’ve been the subject of such derision my whole life.” John gave a short shrug as he leaned back in his seat. The way he said it... like everything people used to justify their hatred wasn’t true, and it didn’t bother him one bit. To be hated for things he didn’t even believe he’d done. “I just need enough of them to believe you’re willing. As long as they adore you enough to obey the crown, that’s good enough for me.”

Robin had heard the stories about him even as a child. Everyone knew that he was a bad seed. Rotten from birth. How else could a child be so cruel and wicked?

There were too many stories to count. For years Robin had heard them all passed around fires the way they passed around the food she poached and the taxes she stole back. Did she know Prince John had made servants three times his age cry with his sneer? Had she heard how when he was twelve he’d yelled at a little girl and made her fall out of a tree and break her leg? Could she believe he thought he would get away with it?

Robin had more than believed it.

The only reason he hadn’t gotten away with it was because she was noble, so the story went. Everyone said he was spoiled and lazy. Why else would a second born prince dress himself in purple and gold and more jewels than his elder brother and spend most of his time hiding in his room? He was a coward. Why else would he be in Lathe while his brother, the king, the one who had more of a right than anyone to avoid the fighting, put his life on the line to defend their borders?

That’s what everyone believed. There was no reason to believe anything else.

She also knew the stories about her. How the truth could inflate. Robin stealing from one tax wagon with five guards became three wagons with twenty-five guards. How people said she'd been born with a bow in one hand and righteousness in the other, claiming she'd been stealing and giving back as early as five. There were currently four villages claiming they were where the infamous Robin Hood was born—at least until Guy or the Sheriff had shown up, where they would then point them in another direction. Being a mythic figure came with a lot of myths.

If Robin really wanted to know her enemy... she needed to know just how deep his rot went. If she was ever going to truly make him pay for every injustice he'd committed, she couldn't have doubts about any of them.

Robin knew her Merry Men would gladly die rather than see her do this.

But if she did, at least she bought their lives and maybe enough time to find a way out of this. And maybe she could get some answers for herself.

“Fine. You win. Let my men live and I'll marry you.”

John grinned, leaning forward in his seat again. “See? That wasn't so hard. We'll make an honest woman of you yet, Robin Hood.”

Prince John might think he held all the cards, but Robin always kept a few up her sleeve.

## CHAPTER 4

Now the real day Prince John had been waiting for arrived. The day he married his righteous outlaw.

The second Robin had agreed, he'd wasted no time. He'd already had everything mostly in place anyway. He'd just been waiting to make it official. He'd had over five months to plan. The only thing in question was whether or not the bride would agree. Now that he had that, he didn't want to give her enough time to reconsider. Not that he thought that was likely, considering the stakes if she didn't go through with it.

Still, John had what he wanted and he wasn't going to lose it.

He'd had the guards take Robin back to the dungeons for one more day while he had the servants prepare a room for her to stay in for the two weeks before the wedding. After that, she'd be moved to the quarters connected to his. The two weeks were mostly for a dress to be made for her. During that time, her men stayed in the dungeons. They'd get their pardon and their freedom after the ceremony.

But at Robin's immediate badgering, he did acquiesce that she could visit them. She claimed they were the only family she had. It was cute that she thought he'd believe that. He insisted she have guards with her when she did, so there'd be no breaking them out or creating escape plans. Robin didn't go anywhere in the castle without three guards. She was the prince's fiancée. She needed to be protected.

John also didn't trust her as far as he could throw her, and he couldn't throw anything very far, much less her.

But thankfully the two weeks passed without incident, other than Robin complaining about the extravagance the few times he saw her. John ignored her. It was a royal wedding. It demanded opulence. Robin didn't try to escape. He didn't actually see much of her; she chose to eat most of her meals in her room. She spent almost all of her time in her room when she wasn't visiting her men in the dungeons. She was allowed to go to most places in the castle, but instead, she stayed holed up like she was still a prisoner. On the occasions he did see her—mostly to fill her in on the details of their wedding—she never tried to attack him. She also never cared about the details.

That was fine by John. He had a vision for the wedding, so at least he didn't have to fight with her over that.

The day before the wedding he stopped by her room, mostly to make sure she hadn't broken the lock on her wardrobe and destroyed her wedding dress. She had just sat there as he'd fussed with the way the dress was on the hanger until he was satisfied and locked it back up. When he'd told her that Lady Marian had arrived in the castle that day for the wedding, she'd only narrowed her eyes at him. As he went to leave, he bit back a smile and threw over his shoulder, "Sleep well, we have a big day tomorrow."

Robin rose from her seat, arms still crossed and called out, "Why don't you hate me for everything I've done to you to make you miserable the last five years?"

The question stopped him in his tracks. He looked over his shoulder. "Who ever said I didn't?"

Did he? He hadn't really thought about it.

The last five months, he'd been thinking about how much he needed her. Whether he hated her or not didn't change that.

"You're marrying me. Until death is a long time to spend with someone you hate who hates you twice as much."

“Hmm. Maybe I value my life so much and hate you just as much that I could think of no better revenge than to condemn you to me until we die. Maybe I’m marrying you to make you as miserable as you’ve made me.”

Then he was gone.

He spent the night before his wedding tossing and turning, trying to figure out what Robin had been hunting for in her questioning. He didn’t like it. But whatever it had been, it wasn’t going to stop their wedding.

The morning of the wedding, John was fussing with the placement of his crown, trying to find just the right angle where it was secure while also making sure not a single hair was out of place, when a knock sounded on his door.

“Your Highness, I have an urgent matter.” The voice from the other side was the Sheriff.

John rolled his eyes and called out, “Come in.”

He heard the door open, but he didn’t look away from his reflection. He did see the Sheriff and Guy—now Lord Guy thanks to his recent marriage—in the corner of the mirror. John said, “What could possibly be so urgent on the morning of my wedding?”

The Sheriff and Guy looked at each other for a moment before the Sheriff took a long breath and said, “We believe Robin and her Merry Men are up to something.”

That was what they were interrupting him for?

John laughed as he turned around to face the other men. “Did you two come here just to waste my time with something so obvious?”

“Your Highness,” Guy said, stepping forward. “We believe Robin and her men have some kind of code they’ve been speaking in so they can create their plan without giving it away to the guards.”

Obviously they had a code.

That had to be what her questioning the day before had been about. Her strange way of trying to discover if he’d

found her out.

John gave Guy a sympathetic wince. “I take it your new wife isn’t too happy with you if you’re concerning yourself with this instead of enjoying being married.”

Guy sighed. “You could have warned me that you were going to use my wedding to capture the outlaw.”

“Where you would have ruined it by telling Marian and cost me my chance to catch Robin?” John scoffed. “It’s no wonder the two of you failed spectacularly to capture Robin for years before I got involved.”

“My wife thinks I was involved!”

“Blame it on me.” John waved his hand dismissively. His hand was healed and thankfully not infected. He hadn’t been certain Robin didn’t have diseases. She lived in a *forest*. “She’ll get over it. She’s also lucky I’m not going after her as Robin’s accomplice. Be grateful. Now, will the two of you oafs stop wasting my time?”

“Your Highness, if Robin and her men have been able to use this code to plan under your nose this whole time—” the Sheriff tried again.

A code John had cracked after his men had been instructed to memorize what they were saying word by word.

“I have everything handled. Now get out.”

They did.

John finished getting ready in peace. There were no other incidents or interruptions, and by midafternoon, John stood by the officiant in the throne room, the room packed full of as many nobles and castle officials as could make it on such short notice. John had caught a glimpse of the crowds outside the castle gates. They were creating quite a clamor.

Apparently there were mixed feelings about the match.

Still, this wedding was happening. Nothing could stop it.

Not even the bride.

The doors opened and John stopped thinking about anything else. He'd known Robin's wedding dress was going to be the most beautiful garment to ever grace the continent—he'd designed it, after all—but he hadn't thought about what it would look like on her. Or what *she* would look like in it. Despite the fact that he'd spent a lot of time over the last six months thinking about what she looked like.

His heart started beating faster, and he could barely breathe watching Robin come down the aisle. She was stunning. Her hair was half-up, half-down, pinned back with gold and pearl pins, slightly curled and falling down her neck and back. It was the perfect shade, not quite brown but not obnoxiously blonde. Her veil was covering her face, and John's fingers were itching to lift it before she'd even made it halfway down the aisle.

The dress was fit perfectly to her figure; John had ensured he had the best seamstresses in the country working on it. It was a brilliant white and shone in the light, the gemstones on the bodice were blindingly brilliant amethyst and citrine, matching her jewelry and John's own wedding clothes. The sleeves were off-the-shoulder and long and flowing, falling back from Robin's hands as she carried a bouquet of hydrangeas. The bottom of the sleeves were indistinguishable from the skirt. The skirt was full and made of countless layers of white silk, draping down to the floor and in a long train behind her.

If the dress was purposefully designed to be difficult to try to run away in, well, weren't all wedding dresses? It was no less magnificent.

Once Robin finally reached him and had handed her bouquet to Lady Marian—who was openly glaring at John—he lifted her veil and grinned at the intense blue eyes that greeted him. The officiant had started speaking, but John barely heard him as he met Robin's eyes and reached for her hands. She placed her hands in his. Her expression was neutral, but her eyes were a storm.

John couldn't imagine a more perfect bride.

“Your Highness, do you take this woman to be your wife, to love her, comfort her, honor and keep her, in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others, be faithful to her, as long as you both shall live?”

“I do.” Prince John couldn’t stop himself from squeezing Robin’s hands as he spoke.

She squeezed back, digging her nails into the spot where she’d bitten him. John just grinned wider. She hadn’t even noticed what the officiant had said. Or rather what he hadn’t. Her name.

“Do you take Prince John to be your husband, to love him, comfort him, honor and keep him, in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others, be faithful to him, as long as you both shall live?”

As soon as the officiant said his name instead of ‘this man,’ Robin’s eyes widened and she looked over to the old man. But it was too late. John tightened his grip on her hands and pulled her closer. She took a short, shallow breath before she weakly said, “I do.”

“Have you come here freely and without reservation to marry?”

Robin’s hands started to pull out of his for a moment. But then she looked over her shoulder, not at the crowd, but at the window that faced the castle gate in the direction of the crowds.

She said, “I have.”

John wasn’t able to stop his own soft sigh at those words. The officiant continued on, but his words were like a fly buzzing in John’s ear. All he was focused on was Robin as he slid a gold ring onto her finger and she his.

“I pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

John didn’t need to be told twice.

He grabbed her waist with one hand, pulling her toward him and cupping the back of her head with the other as he



crashed his lips against hers. Robin startled, bracing her hands on his shoulders, but he just deepened the kiss, tilting her head back and keeping her in place as he kissed her with the kind of reckless abandon and passion that could be the only reason a prince would possibly lower himself to marrying an outlaw of unknown origins who had been crusading against him.

When he was confident he'd gotten the message across, he pulled back and Robin gaped at him. She blinked and then hissed, "What was that?"

John took her hand and beamed at the crowd before he leaned in and whispered, "It's our wedding, we have to put on a bit of show."

The officiant brought out the marriage contract John had drawn up. Robin had been given a draft earlier in the week, but now they would sign it before the witnesses.

John took the quill and signed his name with all the elegance and flourish he signed every official document. As he passed the quill to Robin, he stepped behind her, hovering right at her shoulder, looking everything like a loving, adoring husband.

Robin determinedly started signing. She got through 'Rob' when John leaned in, pressing his front against her back as he caught her wrist. He whispered, "Your real name."

Robin looked at him out of the corner of her blue eyes, putting on a good portrait of confidence, but he could see the cracks. She whispered, "Robin is my name."

"No. It's not."

Robin froze completely beneath him.

"Sign your name, Roberta."

He could feel her swallow thickly and struggle to breathe. She stared at her hand, the ink staining her fingers from where she'd stopped signing. "How do you know that?"

John laughed softly, leaning his head against hers and murmuring, "Sign. The people are waiting for their princess."

Robin signed.

Lady Roberta of Locksley.

As soon as the quill had left the page, he squeezed her waist and said, “When you turn around, smile. Just because you tried to weasel out of this deal doesn’t mean I’m going to fail to uphold my end or that you can get away with not doing your part. The unrest doesn’t go away if the people don’t buy our marriage is somewhat willing. They’ll think I trapped you.”

Robin straightened up against him as the officiant took the quill from her and took the papers away. She whispered, “You have.”

Fine. Maybe it was a trap.

Like everything John did, it was magnificent at the very least.

## CHAPTER 5

Robin didn't know how she did it. How she managed to face the crowd in the throne room and walk out of it. How she ended up on a balcony, looking down at a crowd of people, Prince John's hand on her waist keeping her side pressed against his, as he gave some kind of speech. She looked for faces she recognized, for anyone she'd ever helped, but they were too far away.

She had no idea what Prince John said other than the fact that he called her Princess Robin. Not the other name. He took her hand and lifted it up to the crowd, trying to show off the gold band that Robin doubted anyone could even see. Then he was pulling on her arm and she realized she needed to kneel as the officiant—who had apparently been with them on the balcony the whole time—opened a box containing a tiara.

Oh. Right. This was also a coronation.

Of course John was doing it in front of the people he was more worried about and not the nobles in the throne room. The veil was pulled out of her hair and handed off to someone—Marian?—as John placed the tiara on her head and started going through her vows to the country now that she had already said vows to him.

She couldn't remember saying the words, but she must have because at some point a hand was beneath her chin, tilting her face up as another hand took her arm and helped her rise. She stumbled on her ridiculous, voluminous skirts, her legs tangling up in the fabric. She was saved from falling back to the balcony floor by John snaking an arm around her back

and pulling her flush against him. She caught herself on his arms and started to get her legs beneath her but then John's lips were on hers again. Her legs buckled again as he kissed her for a much different crowd, covering her near fall by making it look like an impassioned movement.

She regained just enough awareness to make use of the ridiculous skirts she had on to kick John in the shin hard enough that he pulled back, but he still had that awful smirk on his face.

The sun was setting.

John turned back to the crowd and said in lieu of an exclusive ball in the castle that would normally accompany such a royal wedding, because he was marrying a woman of the people, they were taking the celebration to the city and creating a new tradition, involving the people in their happy day and not just the noblemen.

Robin's stomach turned. It was all politics, just for show, but it was clever. Just like their marriage.

But it did take the crowd that had been a mix of jeering, booing, and cheering aback.

Somehow she made it off that balcony, and once she was out of sight of the public, she started hyperventilating. She couldn't breathe. The tiara on her head and the ring around her finger were so much heavier and so much tighter than any of the chains she'd been in before. Her vision blurred, and she had one hand on the bodice, the jewels on it digging into her skin. Why was it so tight?

She'd signed her real name.

She was actually married to Prince John. There would be no escape.

She should have taken the gallows.

“—not helping, Your Highness!”

“Well, I'm not going anywhere. You might have forgotten because it happened *so* long ago, but I'm her husband. If anyone has a right to be here, it's me.”

Robin blinked. She wasn't in a hallway anymore. Someone had an arm around her shoulders and was rubbing her arm comfortingly. The hand was too small to be a man's.

"She's like this because of you!" Robin's hair fell into her face. The same person holding her was pulling Robin's hand out of her hair. "Rob, it's alright, just take a deep breath."

Marian. It was Marian.

Robin reached for Marian's arm, clutching her cousin closer as she tried to breathe.

"M—Marian."

"I'm right here. It's alright. Everything is going to be alright. What can I do to help? What do you need?"

The last time Robin had felt like this...

"J—Jon," Robin choked out. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Prince John standing in the room. His eyes widened, and for once he looked completely caught off guard. Robin tightened her grip on Marian. "Little Jon."

Robin was too focused on her breathing to do anything but barely register the way Prince John's face fell and then hardened.

"That's not happening."

"Your Highness, you don't understand. Little Jon practically raised her." Marian continued to rub her hand up and down Robin's back.

"That might be, but that doesn't mean I'm letting her anywhere near him or her other lackeys. In fact, I have every right to send them to the gallows."

Robin wasn't sure where the noise she made came from, but it was something completely animalistic, and Marian's arms tightening around her was the only thing that gave Prince John enough time to scramble far enough away that Robin couldn't claw his eyes out. "You wretched, conniving coward!"

“*I’m* conniving? I’m not the one that tried to get married under a fake name!”

Robin stilled completely. Marian’s grip around her was still tight, but they all knew Marian wouldn’t be enough to stop Robin. Her cousin was half her size. Robin could see a little more clearly now. Guy hovered near Prince John, a hand on the hilt of his sword, his eyes on his wife.

“Go.” Robin rolled her shoulders, dislodging Marian’s grip.

“Rob, are you sure?”

“I want to speak to my *husband* alone.” Robin’s voice darkened into something guttural on the word.

“Your Highness, I don’t think—” Guy started, eyeing Robin, but Prince John met Robin’s gaze and silenced Guy with a raised hand.

“As my wife, your princess, commands.”

Robin didn’t look away, but she heard Marian and Guy leave, the door clicking shut behind them. Now that she could breathe and see, she realized she had no idea what room she was in. She’d never seen it before, but it was full of ornate green and brown furniture. It wasn’t the one she’d been staying in for the last two weeks. The one Marian and an army of handmaids had gotten her ready in that morning. That morning when she hadn’t had a single nerve because she’d had a plan.

A plan now ripped to shreds.

After a moment of silence, Robin’s turning stomach making her too sick to even speak, John put a hand on his hip and gestured with the other. “Well? Did you really think I’d fall for your little annulment trick?”

“You trapped me.”

“I made a deal with you and you tried to give yourself a loophole, an escape hatch, a way to get an annulment.” Prince John huffed, his hand moving through the air, one finger up. “And no. You know what? *Yes*, I did trap you. I came up with

a trap and I caught you, and I'm *proud* of it. The outlaw everyone said couldn't be caught, *I caught*. Not just once, but twice." He held up two fingers. "I saw every option, every way you could escape and I blocked every single one. So sure, call it a trap if you'd like. But at least I was honest about it, *Roberta*."

The sound of her real name brought out another guttural scream. "Don't call me that! How do you even know that?"

"Right, that's a little formal now that we're married. Well, since you insist, Berta—" Robin grabbed the closest object, disappointed it was only a pillow, and threw it at him. He batted it away and continued, "—when you stole the golden arrow right out from under me and I saw underneath your hood, I discovered everything we thought we knew about you was wrong. So I needed to find out who you were. How else did you think I created the perfect trap I did? I discovered you were Marian's cousin everyone believed was dead, and I knew you wouldn't miss her wedding. Especially to one of your enemies."

Wait... If John had known who she was this entire time...

"Discovered?" Robin rasped. Not remembered?

"I had to do some digging. I looked at every appearance there was of you. I noticed you often visited Locksley, enough so to earn Guy's personal enmity as he tried to court Marian. I dug into the circumstances around Marian's family inheriting the Locksley estate, after the main Locksley line was all declared dead, including the daughter, Roberta, in a tragic fire accidentally started by some candles left burning. She was the right age, the right appearance, the right area. With the golden arrow, you knew the room I would be in—the room designated for any of the royal family visiting the castle. The first time we met, the way you moved even as you drew your bow, you had an elegance that could only be from someone of noble birth."

"You figured out who I was based off *that* first meeting?"

"Obviously." Prince John crossed his arms. "I'm Prince Regent. I'm not an idiot."

He was a lot of things according to a lot of people. Robin had thought she'd known them all.

Now she wasn't so sure. She wasn't sure what he was to her.

Prince John let out a long slow breath. "So... You know how I figured you out, and your little ploy didn't work. We're married. That's the end of it. I'll even keep my end of the deal since you abandoned your loophole and upheld yours. I'll start working on the pardons."

He was... keeping his word?

The reason Robin and her men came up with the idea of being able to annul the marriage by signing with her alias was because she worried he wouldn't. She'd wanted leverage.

"Don't look so shocked that I'm trying to make our marriage work, Little Birdie." John took a step toward her.

Robin hated it.

She hated him.

"Stay away from me," she snapped, holding her arm out between them. "If you ever try anything like you did out there again, I will kill you. I don't care about the consequences."

"I had to sell the story." He rolled his eyes and lifted his hands up, palms out. "Give the people what they wanted. I said *after* we were married, I'd keep my hands to myself, and I will."

"No, you didn't."

"The after was implied."

Prince John pulled a key out of his pocket and tossed it toward her. Robin caught it as he gestured to the room and one of the doors. "This is your room, and that key will keep that door—the door to my room—locked. Even if I wanted to—which I don't—I wouldn't be able to come in here if you don't want me to."

Robin looked down at the key. Then she looked up. "And I presume you have one to keep me out?"



“Do I need to?”

Never mind. She knew what he was. He was an idiot.

Robin blinked. “Aren’t you worried I’m going to try to kill you?”

“You’ve been very clear about the circumstances under which you would kill me. I don’t intend on tempting you.” Prince John started to head for the door to his room.

Robin took a small step toward him. “You really think I’m not going to try to kill you to get out of this?”

“Little Birdie, I know you won’t.” Prince John looked over his shoulder as he stood in the doorway. “If you were going to kill me you would have taken the opportunity when we first met.”

Robin wished she had.

## CHAPTER 6

Five months before...

If Richard wasn't threatening John with the frontlines, the last place he would be was sitting outside in the early autumn chill, pretending like he knew anything about archery, much less enough to judge an archery competition. He was reliably informed by the Sheriff and Guy all he had to do was pay attention to whoever was closest to the bullseye, but he wasn't convinced.

But they were also convinced that this was a brilliant plan that would finally catch the outlaw that had been harassing them for years.

As much as John had his doubts, he did genuinely want the plan to succeed. The faster Robin Hood was caught, the sooner he was safe.

So he would sit in an uncomfortable chair on a raised platform outside of the Locksley estate, pulling his cloak tighter as a breeze cut through the air and watching a bunch of backwater peasants try to outshoot each other while he desperately wished he could have a sketchbook or something to do instead of pretending to pay attention.

But so far, even now that they were at the final round of the archery competition with a golden arrow as a prize, there was no sign of Robin Hood. John had seen the Sheriff's men searching the crowd for anyone who could be Robin Hood or his Merry Men, although frankly, John didn't know what they were looking for. They had no description of the young man's

face. Some of the Sheriff's men that had altercations with Robin Hood said he had long dark blonde hair. How long they weren't sure. The one man who had gotten a glimpse of his face, for only a fleeting second, couldn't recall anything about it other than youthful. His height wasn't entirely certain either given that the giant in his band made all of them look short, but Robin certainly wasn't the tallest. They believed he was likely younger than the others, but how he became their leader was a mystery.

Other than that, John knew nothing but that Robin Hood was ruining his life.

Guy was supposed to be watching the other archers in the competition to see if one of them matched Robin's vague description and skill, but he'd been eliminated relatively early on because he spent more time staring at Lady Marian than his target. Pathetic.

So now John was watching some shriveled up, hunched over older man with brown and gray hair, a red tunic, and an eyepatch, beat every other able-bodied young man.

In hindsight, that probably should have been the first clue.

Hadn't the Sheriff claimed he'd know Robin Hood just from his shooting alone?

But... John's job was to declare a winner and give Robin Hood a speedy trial to make it official enough for legalities and then a swift execution. He wasn't there to figure out which archer was Robin Hood.

But there was something about the old man's face... Like the wrinkles weren't actually shadows... And his hair... the roots weren't brown or gray, they were dark blonde. His tunic was too big, and he wore a closed cloak despite the fact that not wearing it would make shooting easier.

But then there were his eyes, and John doubted. They were a brilliant blue, but they were tired, exhausted, and worn down, with a weight to them that seemed like it could only come from age. The way John felt most days.

If he'd known when Richard had appointed him as regent what it was actually going to entail—particularly that some folk hero was going to crawl out of the woodwork to make it even more of an impossible job—he'd have thought twice. In thinking twice, he would have thought about all the swords, the arrows, and the soldiers and how he would have the biggest target on his back in a war zone and he still would have chosen to be regent. But it would have taken more time to decide.

At least in Astren he had guards, a castle, and the people out for his head were peasants and not killers.

When the old man straightened up and drew back for the last shot, John spotted the lining of the cloak was a vivid green. It wasn't lining. The cloak was turned inside out.

That was when everything went really wrong.

A scrawny little page ran up to John to deliver a message. Apparently the reason the Sheriff's men hadn't spotted any of the Merry Men in the crowd was because they were robbing the tax wagons. That, apparently, the Sheriff had arriving on the same day as his big plan to catch Robin Hood, hoping the competition would be a sufficient cover instead of thinking that *maybe* the tax wagons were the bigger draw for the thieves *famous for robbing tax wagons*.

No wonder they hadn't even gotten close enough to this outlaw to have a description if this was the level of competency John was working with.

It was chaos.

And the old man wasn't really an old man, and instead of shooting at the target, shot at the Sheriff. Within seconds, the figure quickly inverted the cloak back to green, ripping the eyepatch off and throwing the hood up. Robin Hood.

Like every intelligent man, when any sign of danger appeared, John immediately turned tail and ran in the opposite direction as fast as he could to the safest place in the city.

The castle.

But not before grabbing the golden arrow. There'd been no winner of the competition, and he wasn't going to lose it to some backwater uppity peasant who'd crawled out of the forest and was too good with a bow for John's own good.

His guards brought him safely to his room, where he was going to wait and hope the Sheriff wasn't so incompetent as to completely fail to catch the outlaw that had shot at him.

John had no desire to be anywhere near the fighting.

He could get hurt.

By the time the sun went down, John received word that the Sheriff and Guy had pursued Robin Hood and his Merry Men into the forest.

Where they had made off with the taxes.

Again.

John tossed the golden arrow onto the ground and collapsed into his bed, his temples throbbing. The last thing he needed was this problem to solve on top of everything else.

Every day it was something new. Someone else unhappy with the way he did things. Always complaining. Always something. Even though Richard was gone, he still found ways to berate John about everything he did wrong in his letters.

A shuffling sound broke John's unpeaceful sleep.

If it was the Sheriff back to tell him that he'd failed, John was going to send *him* to the frontlines.

John rolled over and opened his eyes, sitting up to chew out whoever it was, and that was when he spotted the cloaked figure, standing in front of the open wardrobe. The hooded head turned toward him, and the figure froze just like he did.

The only light came from the moon and through the open window, and everything in the room was in shadow, except for the figure. The cloak was green.

John had never had a criminal in his room before. He was frankly shocked to find himself speaking. "You're supposed to be in the forest."

The figure moved in a blur, and an arrow was pointed at John. He lifted his hands immediately. Robin Hood's voice was strangely garbled. "Scream and I'll shoot."

If the criminal who knowingly and unknowingly held John's fate in his hands was in front of him, he was going to take advantage of it.

"Was it a decoy in the competition?" The city had been shut down because of the chaos. And the time it would take for the outlaw to run into the forest to get away and then double back and sneak into a closed off city was improbable. "Or a decoy running into the forest with the others?"

"I want my prize. The arrow, Highness."

A decoy that ran into the forest then. It made sense for someone so well known for his skill in archery to actually be in the competition.

"It's somewhere on the floor." John stayed completely still, glancing toward the window. "Where have you been hiding? The roof? You didn't come through the door."

Robin Hood started to lower the bow, saying, "You saw me shoot. You know if you scream, I'll kill you before the guards can even open the door."

There was something about Robin's voice... like it was trying too hard to be low and rough. John watched intently as Robin kept his bow and arrow pointed in John's direction but directed his gaze toward the floor. It was too dark to see even a gold arrow easily.

What happened if the criminal didn't find the arrow?

Well, if John was going to get shot either way...

Robin had backed away, looking at a dark corner, sweeping his foot—a very petite foot—off balance. John went for the door.

He threw himself to the floor, narrowly avoiding the arrow that flew through the air. Well, he thought he did. When he tried to dart away, he was jerked back, pinned in place by an

arrow in his shirt, in the narrow space between his skin and the end of the fabric.

“I should break your leg for that. I told you not to move.”

“You told me not to scream.”

“Not moving was implied.”

“You’re going to kill me over an implication?”

“You’re Prince John. There are plenty of reasons to kill you.”

The more he heard... the more Robin Hood sounded like he hadn’t gone through puberty at all. Or... he wasn’t a *he* at all. If Robin could disguise himself as an old man, what else could Robin be disguised as?

Robin scoffed, drawing back again, and John was ready to scream anyway.

That was when both of their eyes landed on the gold arrow right by John’s foot. They both went for it. Robin dove for it. John twisted his legs and got his foot on top of the shaft. Robin grabbed his leg and twisted his ankle causing him to yelp, and he kicked at Robin’s face, landing a hit square on the archer’s jaw.

Technically, it was more of a flail than a kick.

And Robin still got the arrow.

But John got Robin’s face.

Her face.

And her brilliant blue eyes. They were the exact same as the hunched-over archer. Beautiful but tired.

She had the golden arrow in her hand, and then she was gone.

Robin Hood was a young woman.

And John? John had a much better idea than an archery competition. Robin could have the golden arrow.

John was going to have Robin.

## CHAPTER 7

This wasn't the first time a plan had blown up in Robin's face, although it might be the last. Signing her alias in order to later invalidate the marriage contract hadn't worked, but just because Robin was trapped didn't mean her men had to be.

Surprisingly, Prince John wasn't dragging his feet or trying to weasel out of that part of their deal. He probably just wanted them out of his hair.

Robin had spent the whole night after their wedding watching the locked door, clutching the only thing resembling a weapon she had access to—the curtain rod she'd pulled down from the wall—but nothing happened. The next day, she watched Prince John sign the pardons himself in King Richard's study and make the transport arrangements. The day after that, she stood behind King Richard's throne while John sat in it as her Merry Men were brought in from the dungeons to receive the news.

Robin glared at John as she tried not to make her discomfort in her dress obvious. It was a perfectly fine dress—well, it was more than fine. It was a dress fit for a princess—but Robin wasn't used to wearing dresses fit for royalty or nobility, not since she'd become Robin anyway. She'd gotten away with wearing her tunic and breeches in the weeks leading up to the wedding—she suspected the only reason she had was because she'd gone to the laundry rooms to wash her clothes herself. Now the only clothes she had in her new room were dresses. Her tunic and breeches had probably been



cheerfully burned by the laundry girls. She'd seen the looks they'd given her clothes. Now that she was a princess, she was expected to dress like one. John didn't have to claim responsibility for it; she knew he was behind it.

Robin felt off-balance, vulnerable. The last thing she wanted to feel while around Prince John.

But then the doors opened and she saw her men again, and nothing else mattered.

She hadn't realized she was moving until the guards blocked her path.

But before she could demand to be let through, John said in a lazy, bored voice, "Let her pass. They're chained up; they can't do anything."

Robin hadn't been expecting that. The second the guards stepped to the side, Robin shot forward, hiking her skirts up so she didn't trip as she barreled toward her men who all lit up at the sight of her and called out her name.

Chains rattled as Robin launched herself at them, crushing them into a hug. It had only been a few days since she'd last seen them visiting the dungeons, but it felt like years.

She ignored the cold dread that ran down her spine when the realization hit her. She might not see them for years after they were pardoned. She might not see them again.

Robin pushed that away and focused on trying to squeeze the life out of Little Jon.

"Robin, are ye alright? Has he hurt ye?" Little Jon's voice was deep and gruff. The wrinkles on his forehead deepened as he looked over Robin.

"He must have! She's in a dress!" Will Scarlet said, his chains rattling as he pointed at the green skirts.

"But it's Prince Parasite, you think his scrawny arms have the strength to kill a fly?" Alan laughed.

Will rolled his eyes. "His guards I mean."

"And this was why you weren't invited to the wedding."

Robin whipped her head around to see Prince John leaning his chin on his hand, propped up on the arm of the throne. The gold rings caught the light, but John's expression showed how dull he found it all. He didn't even look offended by their comments.

"Ye went through with it?" Little Jon asked, his hands catching Robin's arm as best they could while manacled.

She knew what he was asking.

Now that caused John to sit up straighter with a smirk as everything clearly became entertaining again. "Go on, Little Birdie, tell your little friends all about the ceremony."

Robin turned back to her men and softly shook her head.

Her men deflated. She lowered her gaze. She couldn't bear to see in their eyes the devastation and horror she'd been feeling ever since she'd lifted the quill from that paper.

John's voice was bursting with smug superiority. "Lucky for you she did go through with it and signed her real name. Otherwise, all of you wouldn't be free men."

It was hard to remember she'd agreed not to kill him.

"Don't feel very free in these, Your Cowardliness," Alan said, rattling his chains.

Robin braced herself for an outburst, but all Prince John did was roll his eyes.

She turned back to her men, placing her hand on Little Jon's forearm. "I owe all of you so much. I'm the reason any of this happened in the first place. I guess there's a trap not even I can escape."

Out of the corner of her eye, John's smug grin faltered and was quickly replaced by his bored expression from before.

"Yes, yes, shelve the sappy goodbyes and heartfelt declarations. Let's move this along." John gestured with his hand. "We've got a lot of ground to cover."

Robin stood with her men as he started going through the pardons, a hand on Little Jon's bicep—the height of her

forehead—and the other on Will's shoulder. He was the youngest along with her, and with similar coloring and height, had always been her decoy, and like a brother. Alan had been like an older brother while Little Jon had been like her father.

She still remembered how terrified she'd been of him at first when he'd come across her in the woods. How she'd only cried harder when he'd spoken because he sounded so rough and intimidating. She'd thought he was a troll about to eat her.

That was all she was thinking about as Prince John went through the official spiel for the pardons, one by one. It barely registered to her that she wasn't given a pardon, but it had to be intentional. A way for Prince John to have some leverage over her. Instead, she was thinking about how Will had sat beside her the first night and told her he was like her. An orphan. The way Alan had reached over, mussing up their hair with his hands as he said they were all orphans in one way or another. How they had laughed when she'd told them to give her a bow and some arrows and she'd prove her worth. How after she'd split her own arrow in two, Little Jon had hoisted her up onto his shoulders and said they had a new bowman.

Robin didn't stop reliving her memories as they left Lathe to take her men back to Ferren Forest before they were released from their chains and free to go. She certainly wasn't going to stay in Lathe and give Prince John the chance to cross her. She was going to make sure he released her men without a scratch on them.

Robin was forced to ride beside Prince John on the trip, surrounded by a ridiculously large retinue of his soldiers. She watched her men as they walked, their wrists still restrained. She thought of when they'd heard King Richard had left to defend their borders from Esmea, and that he'd appointed Prince John as regent. Robin had chalked the bad feeling she had up to the winter and how the cold made old injuries ache. But then spring came, and so had the tax collectors. Their band hadn't been outlaws at that point. They were just people who made a living from the forest by sticking together. Little Jon as a lumberjack, Alan as a minstrel turned hunter to try to win his sweetheart—the plan ultimately failing, but he was good at

recreating animal calls to summon prey. Will's parents had been foresters and friends of Little Jon's and he had nimble fingers good for snares, and Robin? Robin had been their archer. When Alan or Will had gotten her prey, she shot it.

Until Prince John had declared any unlicensed hunters in Ferren Forest would be poachers and punished accordingly. Royal Decree Four Hundred and Eighty-Three.

They'd applied six times and were denied five. When they were finally approved on the sixth, they couldn't afford the fees.

Then the tax collectors came more frequently to the city of Ferren and all the villages their crew traveled to looking for work now that theirs was no longer legal. The wagons got bigger. There was no work. People could barely feed themselves, much less offer anything as payment despite how badly they might need another set of hands.

Robin had been thirteen when she'd pulled the hood of her cloak up and gone back to Ferren Forest alone. She'd finally caught onto how Little Jon, Alan, and Will alternated between skipping their meager meals so she never had to. She didn't need to be coddled.

When Robin had returned with a deer and several rabbits that would feed the whole village they were staying in, the whole air had changed. People ran out of their homes to greet her. As she'd passed out what she'd poached, mothers with hungry children embraced her and called her a hero.

Frankly... it had been the most intoxicating thing she'd ever experienced.

The only one who hadn't been happy with her had been Little Jon. He'd grabbed her by the arm and hauled her off to a corner and said, "Do ye know what ye have just done? Ye know Prince John's decree. Ye don't have a license!"

"*License,*" Robin spat, shaking her head as she shifted her weight off her left leg. "Prince John can throw himself off the castle parapet for all I care about his decrees!"

“The Sheriff and his men are going to care! What were ye thinking? Poaching and putting yourself at risk like that!”

Robin had looked up at the man who had saved her life. She’d tightened her grip on her bow. “Better to poach than to starve.”

From that moment on, she’d been a criminal.

Little Jon had sighed and shaken his head before looking back at the whole village, gathering around fires as they cleaned and cooked the deer and rabbits. Smiling and laughing for the first time since their band had arrived looking for work. “If I tell ye to stop, ye won’t, will ye?”

Robin had looked back as well. When a woman with five children whose husband was off fighting for King Richard beamed at them and waved, and her children all waved shortly after, Robin’s decision had been made. Prince John’s decrees didn’t care whether they all starved or not.

“I can’t.”

Little Jon had let out a long sigh, shaken his head, and started back toward the rest of the village. He had looked over his shoulder at her and said, “Ye go back to that forest alone again, and there will be consequences.”

Robin had grinned as she raced after the giant and back to where Alan and Will were cooking their rabbit. Alone, he’d said.

To be fair, she’d never gone back to that forest alone. Or stolen from a tax wagon alone. Or done anything without her men.

Now it was her family going back to the forest without her.

When they reached the edge of the forest, Prince John finally signaled for his men to unchain hers. Robin held her breath as she sat atop her horse, sidesaddle since she hadn’t been able to find a pair of breeches in Lathe that fit her before they’d left. It had to be Prince John’s doing, just like the wedding dress.

He saw every opportunity to escape and closed it off miles before Robin could get there.

Fortunately, Prince John's men didn't stop her from dismounting and rushing over to her men one last time. Prince John called out after her with a bored tone, "Make it quick."

Robin ignored him. Now that her men's hands were free, they were able to fully return her embrace, Will squeezing her tightly and whispering, "We're not going to stop. No matter what that snake threatens."

Part of Prince John's pardon had included the warning that if they committed any crimes, no matter how minor, their pardon would be waived and they would be executed.

She couldn't ask them not to, but she did whisper, "Be careful."

Alan was next, sweeping her up in a big hug and rubbing her head, messing up her braid. He whispered, "Same goes for you. More so. You just have to hold on, Robin, we're not going to stop until you're free too. We'll prove to you we are capable of coming up with a good plan without your brains."

Robin didn't know if she could afford to think there might still be a way out of the mess she'd gotten herself into.

Robin was lifted clear off the ground by Little Jon's bear hug, and she returned it just as fiercely. Something slipped down her sleeve. A dagger. Little Jon said, "He takes one unwanted step toward ye, ye take care of him, ye hear?"

Little Jon must have had it the whole time, waiting to give it to her. They'd all gotten good at finding ways to hide small weapons or lockpicks and every so often, they were successful in keeping them hidden during searches. Of course. He'd been looking after her, Alan, and Will before himself for years.

Robin's feet hit the ground. The leather sheath pressed into her skin. "I'm glad that it was you who found me. Most people aren't as lucky as I am in that I not only got to have a second family, but that mine was all of you."

"Alright, if you're done manhandling my wife, go on. Get back to whatever it was you did before you started terrorizing

the countryside.”

Robin looked over her shoulder to see Prince John had also dismounted and was glaring at them.

“Spoiled little snot, ain’t he?” Alan murmured.

“It’s been an honor and a privilege.” Robin saluted her men with the wrong hand, so as not to dislodge the hidden dagger. She walked backward toward her horse and Prince John. “I couldn’t have chosen a better crew to commit crimes with and help me terrorize the man who terrorizes the countryside. Goodbye, boys.”

As she reached her horse, John moved toward her and she immediately jerked away. Her back brushed against her saddle as she narrowed her eyes at his hands and said, “What are you doing?”

John held his hands up and shrugged, saying, “I know you’re not used to being around gentlemen, but fine, if you want to get yourself up on that horse in that dress, be my guest.”

Like she was going to give him an excuse to get handsy with her.

She’d been managing just fine the first half of the trip.

Robin shot him a pointed look, hiked the front of her skirt up and climbed inelegantly into her saddle. She turned and looked down at him as she let go of her skirts and said, “See?”

Prince John’s eyes weren’t on her face as he said, “Wow, you really showed me.”

Robin glanced down to see she’d instinctually climbed astride and her skirt was hiked up above her knees, exposing her legs. While it was functionally no different than when he’d seen her in breeches before, it was still different. Heat rushed to her cheeks as she quickly shifted her legs to sidesaddle and draped her skirts back down, covering them completely.

Prince John’s gaze still lingered on her legs with a smirk. Ugh. He had the gall to call himself a gentleman seconds

before he eyed her like a piece of meat. Robin fought the temptation to make use of the dagger right then.

John mounted, and they started the trip back to Lathe. He wore that infuriating smirk the whole way back. Robin also caught him glancing at her legs beneath her skirts more than once.

But they returned to Lathe without incident.

Robin had no idea what her next step was. Or what would even happen next.

She didn't know what game John was playing, but she knew she couldn't afford to lose, not a third time. Not to him.

He could pretend he was honest all he liked, but she knew a snake in the grass when she saw one. He'd been one since birth, and their first meeting had proven it.

Robin wasn't letting her guard down for a second. But other than looking at her on the way back to Lathe, John didn't say or do anything. When they got back to Lathe, he didn't really even look at her. They were almost never in the same room.

Robin still kept the door connecting their rooms locked, and the first week she didn't sleep. She watched the door with the curtain rod in one hand and the dagger Little Jon had given her in the other.

Unfortunately, while she'd been seeing her Merry Men off safely, Marian had left Lathe to return to Locksley, on the other side of the forest from where Robin and Prince John had released her men. Marian was newly married and somehow in love with her husband despite Robin's bewilderment, so she supposed it made sense they were enjoying their new marriage. People who married because they liked each other did tend to enjoy it.

Now she had no one in Lathe.

After the first week back, Robin stopped staying up all night and watching the door. The knob never even so much as rattled. She still kept it locked, but instead of driving herself



insane watching it, she took the metal curtain rod and some yarn to set up a tripwire.

She'd never been as good at them as Will, but she managed.

If someone did try to come through the door, she'd have enough warning to grab the dagger under her pillow.

When Robin would wake up for the day, she'd slipped the dagger into a sleeve or the bodice of whichever least ridiculous dress she chose that day of the ridiculous dresses she had in her wardrobe.

Surprisingly... Robin was left alone.

By more than just Prince John.

She was a princess, and that usually meant handmaids and entourages. And since she was, well... a woman who'd spent eight years running around a forest and not getting a noble or royal education, she'd assumed there'd be something, some kind of tutor so she didn't embarrass the royal family. Nothing.

It looked like Prince John wanted just what he said he wanted.

A political marriage to satisfy King Richard's demands to stop her criminal behavior and satisfy the people's displeasure with their regent.

But now Robin didn't know what to do. If Prince John wasn't going to try to actually make her embrace her new position as a princess, she was a little lost. Although, maybe it was because she was less a princess and more a prisoner. A prisoner with a nice room and shiny jewelry.

Not that Robin ever touched the full jewelry box on her dresser. The only jewelry she wore was the wedding band.

She took most of her meals in her room. The meals she did take.

Robin was used to eating sparse meals once or twice a day, just enough to keep her and her men in fighting—stealing—shape. They always gave more food than they kept.

Robin never sent for food, but a servant showed up three times a day asking if she would like a tray or if she would take her meal in the dining room. She always took it in her room since she suspected Prince John took his in the dining room. *If* she took it at all. She often dismissed the servant for lunch or dinner, saying she wasn't hungry.

When Robin did leave her room, three guards—almost but not quite rivaling Little Jon in size—followed her. Robin mostly wandered the halls, seeing if there was anywhere they weren't going to let her go. So far she hadn't found it.

She went all the way down to the dungeons and stared at the empty cells her men had been kept in. She went all the way up to the tallest tower and looked out the window at the courtyard below. Falling from that height, anyone would be lucky if they only broke a leg.

The second week back from Lathe, she tried her luck. The guards didn't stop her from leaving the castle and stepping into the courtyard. She walked around the whole castle, wandered through the stables and petted a few horses. She spotted the guards' barracks and their training grounds; her hands itched for her bow and quiver. Her heart panged and the echo of her bow cracking beneath the Sheriff's hands rang in her ears. It had been a gift from Little Jon for her last birthday when she'd turned eighteen.

She pushed her luck a little further and started toward the gate. That was when she discovered her limits. The guards stepped in her way. Apparently if she wanted to leave the castle grounds she'd have to "schedule" it with the Sheriff—Prince John's new Captain of the Guard as a reward for helping in her capture, although everyone was still just calling him the Sheriff. That way he could give "the new princess sufficient protection." Robin wasn't foolish enough to believe that would ever happen.

As she explored, she found a small, private courtyard, on the same side of the castle as her room. She could see her window—curtainless, the only curtainless window on this side of the castle. It was similar to the guards' training grounds, but much smaller. A few targets, a dummy to practice forms on.

She looked at the guard to her right. They hadn't stopped her from stepping into it. She asked, "What is this place?"

"King Richard's private, personal training grounds."

"Not the royal family's?"

"You can call it that, but I've never seen Prince John use it, Your Highness."

Robin still wasn't used to the guards and servants using the honorific.

"Do you have orders to stop me from using it?"

"Our orders are only to prevent you from carrying weapons back into the castle. We've received none about preventing you from accessing them while in the courtyard."

Likely an oversight on Prince John's part, but still... better to ask forgiveness than permission. Besides, she hadn't seen him since they'd returned from Lathe, so how was he going to know about it?

However, all she had to wear were ridiculous dresses not made for any kind of manual labor, much less fighting. She'd settle for a peasant's dress that was at least good for the labor of a house or a field. Those were made for movement.

Although... maybe Robin could make something suitable.

It was something to do, at least. A way to keep her skills sharp until she came up with a new plan.

She was getting out of this marriage if it was the last thing she did.

## CHAPTER 8

Prince John found marriage quite suited him. Maybe not in the traditional sense, but now that he had what he wanted, there was nothing left but to enjoy it.

Two and a half weeks after they returned to Lathe, Robin's guards had told him she'd come across Richard's training grounds. The next day, he sent her an invitation to join him in the dining room for dinner. Well, invitation might not be the right word.

Robin glowered at him from across the table. The other side of a very long banquet table.

"The servants are starting to talk. If we want the people to believe you're here of your own free will, we need to be seen voluntarily spending time together."

That was actually true. Prince John had been receiving reports that the prevailing theory behind his marriage to Robin was that he'd forced her to marry him and was keeping her prisoner despite the stunning wedding and passionate embraces he'd included as part of the show. That theory was not helping decrease the number of people that would like to see his head roll.

He had his money on her ragtag ruffians spreading that like wildfire. He should have made silence a condition of their pardon.

"Then they'll believe a lie," Robin snapped.

How could a criminal be so naively idealistic?

“Says the woman with an alias who was pretending to be not just a man, but an old man in order to win a golden arrow.”

Robin stared at him with those captivating blue eyes. “Dinner. Only. And I sit here, as far away from you as physically possible.”

“Obviously you sit there. That’s where the queen sits.”

Her fingers twitched on the silverware and he could see her debating whether she’d be able to throw the fork she was holding far enough to reach him all the way on the other end.

That night, he’d pulled out his sketchbook and drawn as fast as possible, trying to capture the scene from dinner before it faded from his memory.

Now that his hand was better and the whole wedding business had settled down, he could draw again. He didn’t truly have the time for it, but that hadn’t stopped him before.

He woke up before dawn broke, and as soon as he’d dressed—he never cut corners getting ready, he had an image to maintain, but he did have it down to a science so it took him the minimal amount of time—he was accosted by officials and nobles who all wanted his ear before he received the stack of matters that could no longer be put off another day and John set to work. He paused only for dinner, otherwise taking his meals in Richard’s study, and after dinner he went back to Richard’s study for a few more hours, and then to his own room to retire.

He didn’t know how his father had always made it look so easy.

Or how Richard had. Richard had spent half his time sparring and training and still managed to stay on top of everything that a king was required to do in order to keep a kingdom running.

John had cut all the extraneous things from his schedule—he wasn’t that sad to stop listening to petitioners or giving speeches with how they always ended—to focus wholly on what was necessary to keep the kingdom functioning, but the work was never ending and always growing.

Even if he wanted to be as much of a thorn in Robin's side as she'd been in his, he didn't have the time.

He heard about what she was up to from her guards, he saw her at dinner when she glared at him while she stabbed her dinner with far too much force, and then if he could keep his eyes open by the time he retired to his room, he sketched in the candlelight.

Two weeks after Robin had found Richard's training grounds, one afternoon he had a splitting headache, and he couldn't stand the squawking of everyone around him demanding his attention, wanting him to do something to help them, and when he did someone else started squawking about how he'd harmed them. It was never ending.

No one was ever happy.

He couldn't think straight.

He just wanted one hour.

John couldn't remember the name of the official standing in front of him, but it didn't stop him from snapping at him, shoving the stack of papers toward him, and telling him to figure it out. He stormed off and headed for his room. He'd close his eyes for just one hour and hopefully the headache would at least stop trying to split his skull in two.

He breathed out a long sigh as he stepped into his room and everything was quiet.

Almost.

He heard soft huffs and the sound of wood tapping.

He moved to the window and pushed the curtains out of the way to see Richard's sparring grounds below.

Robin was the source of the noise.

He smirked.

He'd made sure there weren't any breeches in the castle she could get a hold of. He wanted to see how long until she would swallow her pride and just ask a servant for them. Or if she would resign herself to wearing a dress while practicing

archery. He'd made sure there were at least two in her wardrobe that would allow her arms that range of motion.

But no.

Instead, she butchered a dress that cost more than most men would earn in their lifetimes.

John would recognize that white silk anywhere, he'd gone through a thousand fabrics before finding the perfect one. He should have had the servants take her wedding dress and box it up.

Robin had taken the skirts and fashioned some kind of loose, flowing trousers from them as well as a strange, flowing shirt, belted at her waist with another scrap of fabric, but sleeveless and tied around her neck.

But the good news was that considering the amount of fabric that had been in the skirt, she'd likely only destroyed the top layer in order to make her outfit.

John wasn't sure what the purpose would be in salvaging the wedding dress other than that he'd designed it. It was beautiful, and he liked beautiful things.

The intense urge to close his eyes faded as he watched Robin move. To his surprise, she didn't have a bow in her hands. She had a quarterstaff.

He didn't need to look at the collection of information he'd amassed and kept in his room to know Robin using a quarterstaff as a weapon wasn't in there. She used a bow. Always a bow.

Or in his case, her teeth.

She spun the staff around, fluidly shifting through her movements as she attacked the dummy again and again. She would dodge imaginary blows, throwing herself into rolls or springing back with a grace he didn't see on even the most elegant dancers.

Although her makeshift outfit didn't allow for much admiration of her form, John couldn't look away. The silk whirled with her in a way that the longer he stood there by the

window, leaning against the glass, the less he cared about her tearing the dress he'd designed to shreds.

His fingers twitched and he gave in. He grabbed his sketchbook and charcoal and pulled a chair up to the window to sketch. He wanted to sink his hands into her messy braid and unravel it, but since he couldn't, this was the next best thing.

He didn't let himself examine why he wanted to pull her hair loose and spill it over her shoulders like it had been the day she'd been brought before him other than the fact that Robin was an objectively beautiful young woman and he was a young man with a taste for the finer things in life who very much enjoyed beautiful things.

He could have feelings about her objective attractiveness that were completely separate from how fascinating he found her as a person. Now that he'd won and she was serving her political purpose, she was a hobby, like drawing, nothing more.

He'd promised to keep his hands to himself, and unlike some people, he kept his word. But he'd never promised he wouldn't look.

Robin finished, sweeping the staff behind her as she stood up straight, panting for air, sweat dripping down her brow. She was smiling.

John hadn't ever seen her smile. A real smile, not the fake thing she'd given to the crowds at their wedding upon his command.

John flipped the page and sketched faster than he had before in his whole life. Robin rolled her shoulders and started to head back to the cloak dropped on the ground, clearly done for the day.

John cursed at her.

He stared down at the half-started sketch. He hadn't even gotten close. Who knew when he'd see that smile again to capture it?



His hour was up. His headache returned, but he set his sketching aside and went back to work.

That night, when Robin joined him for dinner, he couldn't get the question out of his head. What had made her smile? He almost believed he'd hallucinated it because of the migraine, given how she scowled at him from across the very long table.

Why was this table so long?

And how long would it take Robin to notice if he had new tables commissioned an inch shorter in descending increments and every day had the table replaced with the next smallest until she was no longer what seemed like miles away?

They never really spoke during dinner. The tension was always too thick for words. Robin's hatred was hot enough to heat the room as they inched deeper into autumn.

"How was your day?"

John only realized he'd spoken after the words had left him.

Robin narrowed her eyes so they were slits. "What are you doing?"

"I'd hoped that you'd have acclimated to polite society by now enough to recognize a simple pleasantry when it's presented to you." John was excellent at recovering even when he was the one who took himself by surprise.

"You might be simple, but you're not pleasant."

Oh, she knew how to wound a man.

"Cute, but you know I'm anything but simple, and I've been very pleasant to you."

This was more fun than silence at least.

"Being pleasant to your prisoner doesn't make them any less a captive."

"Most people wouldn't call being a princess imprisonment." Otherwise John would be considered just as much a captive as she was. Actually, considering Richard's threats, John wasn't exactly a free man either. At least he

wasn't a criminal. "There are things that come with the position."

"You don't have three guards who dog your every step while in your own castle."

"I'm also not capable of slipping out a window and trapezing my way across the roof. But if I wanted to leave the castle, I most certainly would have at least five guards if not more. That standard is the same for you."

Robin rolled her eyes. "Like the Sheriff is going to give me those guards. I'm not stupid. You're keeping me inside these walls. Just because you pretend it's because I'm a princess now doesn't change anything. A spade is still a spade."

She was infuriatingly stubborn. He'd known she was going to be a challenge.

But wasn't the challenge supposed to be over now that he had her?

John tried again the next night.

"How was your day?"

"You don't care."

"That's presumptuous of you."

And again.

"How was your day?"

"Ask me that again, and I'm throwing this apple at you. You'll see my aim isn't constrained to just arrows."

Her aim wasn't constrained to just arrows.

Luckily for John, he was good at running away and dodging.

"How was your day?"

"Boring. Will you let me eat in peace now?"

"What did you do?"

“I went to the stables during lunch and fed your horse a bunch of carrots and sugar cubes to make him fat.”

She hadn't. John had taken his lunch in his room and watched her split three arrows down the middle in the private training grounds.

Did she think he didn't know?

It seemed to be her fatal flaw. Underestimating how much he knew about her.

He wanted to know more.

She was the only person in the castle who wanted nothing from him. What she specifically wanted was nothing to do with him. To be as far away from him as possible.

She was the most fascinating creature he had ever come across. A noblewoman turned orphan who chose to let the world believe she was dead and joined a bunch of strange men in the woods, and not even that was enough. She chose to disguise herself as a man and become a criminal not for personal gain but to give it away.

She had the prince she had dedicated her life to fight against completely helpless and she hadn't killed him.

Sneaking away to watch her train and watching her desperately try to figure him out at dinner were the only things getting him through the day. Robin was a wonderful distraction and the perfect subject for his sketchbook.

He just needed to figure out how to get that smile again so he could capture it on paper. Apparently having captured Robin wasn't enough for him. Now he wanted to see her *smile*.

## CHAPTER 9

Robin had resolved to figure out what Prince John's game was, but so far she seemed to be the only one driven up the walls.

John was a snake.

She didn't believe for a single minute all his little innocuous questions at dinner and his mysterious absence from his room were coincidences. Every morning Robin hovered by the door connecting their rooms, carefully avoiding triggering her own tripwire, pressing her ear to the wood and listening for any sign of life on the other side. Every night Robin did the same. She marked the time he left his room in the morning and marked the time he returned. He left earlier than she'd expected, given his reputation, and returned later than she'd imagined either.

As regent he had to put up a façade of doing his duties, but where was he otherwise?

Robin wasn't stupid enough to play her hand and ask. Besides, he'd probably lie to her. No, she wasn't going to figure it out sitting at the other end of a banquet table—one that felt somewhat shorter than it had the first time she'd sat down at it, but it had to be her imagination. She needed to go into the monster's den.

Fortunately, he didn't go to his room immediately after dinner. That was the perfect time.

Robin unlocked the door, stepped over her tripwire, and into Prince John's room.

For a brief moment, Robin considered that maybe this was the trap. She'd fallen for John's traps twice now.

But the other option was to sit there and wait. If Robin had been made to sit around, she never would have become a criminal in the first place. So snooping it was.

It was as opulent as she expected. It was Prince John. At least she was right about something.

It was very purple and gold and elegant. It was the same level of quality and was clearly modeled to the tastes of the person who had chosen the pieces in her room with the same clear care and coordination.

Which meant Prince John had personally picked every single thing that was in her room. She opened his wardrobe and while she'd seen his ridiculous clothing on him, seeing them all together meant she could also not deny he had clearly handpicked every single article of clothing in her own wardrobe as opposed to simply instructing someone in the generalities. Like saying 'no tunics and breeches.' Or saying 'make sure they're all hard to do anything more than a brisk walk in.'

It made her skin crawl.

It had to be part of his manipulation; Robin just couldn't see what he was trying to manipulate her into this time. He got the marriage. What more did he want from her?

Robin shut the wardrobe doors, looking over her shoulder at the bed, feeling the eerie similarity to when she'd snuck into his guest room in Ferren to claim her prize.

She'd won that arrow fair and square, and while they had made off with the tax money, an arrow of pure gold was enough to feed a large village for a year and then some.

There was no way she believed Prince John about the money all going to the war effort when he was willing to offer a gold arrow as a prize for an archery competition. He was clearly mismanaging it and overindulging himself while shafting King Richard and the brave soldiers fighting for their

country, which only served to drag out the conflict that kept Prince John as regent.

Everyone knew that.

Robin was disappointed to see there wasn't a desk. All the good stuff was kept in a desk. Whatever his plans were, they had to be in a desk.

But of course there wasn't a desk because Prince John didn't *work*.

He schemed.

And she wanted his schemes.

Robin put her hands on her hips and turned to face the rest of the room. Curious.

There was a plush armchair pulled up to the window with the curtain half drawn back. Prince John liked a view, apparently.

There was also a small sitting table with a sofa that matched the plush chair.

There were a couple of pieces of parchment on the table, but they weren't documents of any sort. They just had a few lines of charcoal and were then scribbled over. Whatever they were supposed to be was completely indistinguishable.

Not helpful.

She needed a journal. Didn't all truly terrible leaders keep some kind of record close by of all their plans for how to gain power and inflict pain on people?

There was a trunk at the foot of his absolutely ostentatious canopy bed. Robin paused.

If this was a trap, that trunk had to be it. But if he was going to keep a record of his wicked schemes, it had to be the locked trunk. Robin dismantled her tripwire so she could take the curtain rod again.

She took the metal rod and with great concern, wedged it in the 'u' of the padlock and started working the rod back and forth to bend the metal bar of the lock. This method had served

her well before when she and Alan had to rescue Will and Little Jon after Guy and the Sheriff had arrested them a couple years back. She didn't have any lockpicks, and even if she did, she was terrible with them.

Lockpicking had been Will's job.

Robin doubled over, huffing from the effort it was taking to manipulate the metal through brute force. And it hit her.

It had been a month and a half since she'd last seen them.

Robin had known she was completely, utterly alone. However, the realization hadn't hit her until that moment as she was sweating, huffing, and cursing everything that she didn't have Will picking the lock while Little Jon gave Alan a boost onto a roof to act as the lookout while Robin held her bow and an arrow at the ready for the first sign of trouble, hood pulled over her face.

They didn't really speak during missions because they didn't need to. Also, it could give them away. They worked in signals and codes, but it was still communication. And when they'd make it back to their camp, they'd laughed and cheered as Robin came up with their next plan. When they brought the people's money and food back to them, Robin would chatter away with the friends and allies they'd made. She didn't worry about disguising her voice or hiding her face among friends. She trusted them. They wouldn't rat her out, and they hadn't. It'd just been bad luck that Prince John had seen her face.

Now the only person she spoke to *was* Prince John.

And only because he was trying to—she didn't know what he was trying to do by asking about her day, but he was the only person she spoke to. She didn't count the three brutes who followed her around. If she did exchange words with them, it was only about the most basic of things. Even then, she went through most days not saying a word to them, letting them figure out where she was going in silence. They didn't follow her into the private training ground, so she couldn't even do something like discuss technique with them.

Maybe that was Prince John's plan. Isolate her until she lost her mind. Then he could declare her insane and a danger to him and society so he could kill her without increasing the civil unrest.

Well, it wasn't going to work. Robin was completely sane as she continued to abuse her own muscles wrenching the curtain rod back and forth in the padlock. As Prince Regent, he really should have a higher quality lock.

Finally, she worked it enough to break the soft, dented metal, and she wasted no time ripping the padlock off and throwing open the chest. Whatever John had in there had better be worth—

Robin stared down at the open trunk.

It was... It was...

It was full of what appeared to be sketchbooks, given the loose parchments sticking out of the sides with charcoal marks. But that wasn't what had Robin completely frozen as she gaped at the sight before her. The loose sheets of parchment scattered throughout the rest of the trunk in haphazard piles were the problem.

Because on those sheets, she could figure out what the drawing was supposed to be.

It was her. Her face.

Robin reached for the first stack and pulled it out of the trunk. She started flipping through them and the subject didn't change. The whole stack was sketches of her face. Robin stared at them for a moment. The angle, the blank space left at the top and the bottom were familiar...

These were for wanted posters.

Why did Prince John have a stack of unfinished wanted posters of her?

Robin tossed the stack to the ground and reached for the next one. If the others had left no question as to the fact that they were her face, these... were questionable. They were similar in that the size and placement left were also obviously



the template for a wanted poster, but these had writing on them.

The first one had an arrow drawn, pointing to the eyes and the note read: *Eyes too small.*

And there was another arrow pointing to the curve of the jaw and said: *Too soft; she's a criminal, not a flower.*

Critiques for the artist of the wanted poster.

Robin kept flipping through the stack and attempt after attempt to capture her face, quite a few of them undeniably her, but the writer was never satisfied. Something was wrong with every single one. Most often, it was her eyes. The strangest complaint, often repeated, was the claim her eyes weren't tired enough.

Rude.

But there was something about this stack of rejections. Robin glanced down at the stack of perfect recreations and she held the final version of the wanted poster next to the reject. There was something different about the artist's style. Robin wasn't certain whoever had drawn the rejects had drawn the final version.

Given the amount of rejects, she could imagine whoever it was simply deciding they'd do it themselves since the artist couldn't get Robin's eyes right.

And... Given where she was standing... there was only one person who could be the artist of the final version. So had... Robin swallowed and moved for the next set of loose papers.

Had Prince John himself drawn every single wanted poster that decorated the kingdom?

The chill down her spine returned but Robin pressed on.

There were loose pieces of parchment not organized in a neat stack and Robin pulled them out one by one. They appeared to be John's first attempts at capturing her face, given the similarity of angle and the scribbles over them indicating his displeasure and abandonment. There was a

sketch of her standing in front of the open wardrobe in Ferren. Her with the hood pulled low, pointing her bow at the viewer. Her holding the gold arrow as she darted out the window.

A very familiar building, but this time the only figure was small and shadowy with no details. A drawing of the Locksley estate just starting to catch fire.

Robin dropped the sheet and clasped her hand over her mouth as the smell of smoke flooded her nose and vivid orange seared her eyes. For a moment all she could feel was the wind as she ran. Branches tore at her arms and her little feet slammed against the ground again and again but she couldn't outrun the image forever burned into her the same way the estate had burned.

Once her racing heart slowed, she was able to remind herself that she was Robin Hood. And Robin Hood could handle anything, even her own memories. She looked back at the paper again. The name Roberta was scribbled on it, and her hand tightened, crinkling the paper, but she didn't tear it. Yet. Off to the side under her name was a list of everything it seemed Prince John knew about her after discovering she was Roberta.

But he didn't mention her bad leg. So... he didn't know she had a bad leg.

Robin tossed the paper to the side and went for the sketchbooks. So far every single piece of paper in this trunk had one thing in common.

Robin opened the sketchbook and her own face greeted her, this time her hair tangled and dirt smudged on her cheeks as guards dragged her away. Then her rolling her eyes as she'd been sitting in King Richard's study, chained to a chair. Robin's pace increased, page after page was of her. When she came to the end of the sketchbook, the last one was of her, her arms around Little Jon as the giant of a man had embraced her during their goodbye. Robin's stomach turned at the sight.

Robin grabbed another sketchbook and let out a sigh when she opened the page and her face wasn't what greeted her.

It was just a drawing of a dress.

A wedding dress.

Robin blanched. It wasn't the one she'd worn, but that was probably because on the page was written: *The simple cut would flatter her, but despite the appeal it is not fit for a royal wedding. In a pinch, this could do.*

Robin turned the pages and there were several more dresses. She held her breath as she could see through each iteration John get closer to the dress that she had walked down the aisle in. Past that were sketches of furniture, color schemes, sketches of normal dresses that she recognized from the wardrobe.

When Robin came across the page with the dress she was wearing at that moment, she flung the sketchbook as far away from her as possible. She reached for something else, surely that was the worst of it—

She started flipping through the next one. There had to be some indication of his plans. Robin froze again when she spotted a drawing of something Prince John shouldn't have been able to capture.

Robin in the training grounds in the outfit she'd scrapped together from the skirt of her wedding dress, mid-swing with the quarterstaff.

Robin looked over at the chair beside the window with the curtain drawn back. Of course.

He'd been watching her.

Robin was going to be sick.

This... This was sick.

## CHAPTER 10

John's head was pounding from hours of looking at accounts that he could not fathom a way to untangle without upsetting enough people that they could easily storm the castle and have his head. All he wanted was to pick up his charcoal and capture the way the candlelight had reflected in Robin's eyes, more intense and determined that night at dinner than normal.

It was good to be king. Regent.

When he opened the door to his room, he barely got a step inside before he realized he was not going to have the opportunity.

He should have known that look in her eyes had been because she was up to something.

Robin was on the floor, her legs tucked under her skirts and surrounded by a mess of loose papers and open sketchbooks, all with her as the subject. She didn't even look up as he walked in. She may not have even heard him. John suspected she was too busy trying not to throw up, given the expression on her face.

He wasn't really sure why.

He'd been very clear about the fact that she'd held his focus for quite some time and he'd been determined to catch her. He also hadn't drawn anything invasive or imaginary. Other than the fire at the Locksley estate, he had observed all of it with his own eyes.

"I can frame some of them for you if you'd like."

Robin's head snapped up at his voice, and he realized he probably shouldn't have said it. Too late.

"Explain. Now." Robin's voice was dark and guttural, the way it had been when they'd first met and she'd been disguising it.

"It seems pretty straightforward to me. I'm an artist. I draw. The noblewoman turned outlaw turned princess makes for an interesting subject."

Robin gestured to the papers around her. "*This* is far more than just an interesting subject."

He supposed it did look rather... obsessive. He'd thought it a good idea at the time to separate out his work for organizational reasons. He had plenty of landscapes... they just weren't stored in his room. Of course, when he'd done it, he hadn't expected Robin to break into it and find them.

Robin grabbed the stack of spares for the wanted posters and shook them at him. "You drew every single wanted poster!"

"So?"

She gaped at him. "Why?"

John crossed his arms, unable to look her in the eyes. He stared at the stack of rejects and muttered, "No one else got them right."

It was his dedication to excellence and his determination not to let an inferior artist be the reason he didn't catch Robin. His life depended on it.

John was under no delusion he would last more than five seconds on the frontlines.

"I don't..." Robin whispered, dropping the sketches like they were burning her as she stumbled to her feet, tripping on her dress. She shook her head. "I don't understand."

"I told you, I draw—"

Her gaze landed on him again. "*You*. I don't understand you."

John didn't really know what to say to that.

Robin kicked one of the sketchbooks, sending it across the room.

He'd designated that one for the wedding plans, including getting what would be needed for her room and wardrobe.

"Well?" she snapped. "You love the sound of your own voice, but now you're silent?"

"Would you rather have had furniture that didn't match and dresses that didn't fit?"

John blinked and then his head slammed into the floor as something dug into his stomach and knocked the wind out of him. He reached out for something—anything—and his fingers closed around something metal, and he quickly pulled it up, just in time for it to clang against more metal.

He had a curtain rod in his hands, bracing it in front of his neck, and it was the only thing keeping Robin's dagger away from his skin. Robin's knee dug into his stomach farther and he tightened his grip on the curtain rod, his heart pounding as he sputtered and wheezed.

"You listen to me, and you listen well," Robin snarled, pushing back against the curtain rod with one hand while poisoning her dagger over his heart. "Whatever sick little game this is to you? I'm not playing it anymore. I'm done."

John couldn't even get enough breath to ask what in all the stars' light she was talking about.

"Your obsession with possessing me ends now. You can trap me in this marriage, and you can send my family to the ends of the continent, but that's all you're going to get. I'm done being your prisoner and a pawn for your amusement. Your manipulations aren't going to work on me. You're not going to isolate me. You're not going to keep me in this castle like some little doll to position and dress and play with while our people suffer and starve." Robin reached forward with her other hand, grabbing his jaw and saying, "I decided to stand up to you when I was thirteen with nothing more than a cheap hunting bow and some mismatched arrows. I vowed to put a

stop to your injustices and that vow will be first in my heart above any words you might have coerced out of me. Play whatever games you want. But you're *not* going to break me."

Robin let go and shoved the curtain rod back into him before she climbed off him and ripped it out of his weak grip.

John coughed and rolled onto his side, reaching for his stomach as she stormed toward the door connecting their rooms. Even if he had any words to say, he couldn't get them out past his desperate choking.

Robin took no care as she stormed through the drawings spread across the floor, several of them ripping beneath her shoes. Then the door slammed shut, and he heard the lock click. He rolled onto his front, his arm buckling for a moment before he managed to get himself onto his knees.

He ran a hand through his hair as he caught his breath and the ache in his head deepened.

He wasn't really sure how long he sat there before he slowly moved to pick up the drawings and sketchbooks she had left scattered and ripped in her wake. Once he'd gotten through what was still whole, or at least only a little crumpled, he reached for the ripped drawings.

There was no point in saving them.

He should probably put the whole trunk into the fire.

The first one he picked up was from the first day he'd seen Robin in the training grounds. The sketch he'd done of her with the quarterstaff before he spotted her smile.

He shredded it further.

John wasn't going to get her smile. He'd captured her, and held her precious men's lives over her head to get her hand. Everything he said or did to her would always be questioned. Always some kind of trap she was trying not to fall into. She'd never lower her guard around him.

She was just a tool to keep Richard from dragging him to the frontlines.

But fine. She thought he was a monster? She thought he was always playing some kind of sick game?

His outlaw was out of her depth, and he'd be happy to show her. She wanted games?

He'd play.

And he'd win.



## CHAPTER II

**R**obin was through the gate before anyone could stop her or her galloping steed.

Getting out had been surprisingly easy now that she'd spent enough time studying the layout and routines of everyone in the castle courtyard. She'd put on her training outfit, pulled her cloak over it and headed toward the training grounds, leaving the guards outside it. She had no idea why they always stayed outside, but she was grateful.

It was the only reason her plan worked.

With an excellent shot, Robin dislodged the rock holding her rope back and the loose end tumbled out of her open window. The other end was secured around her heavy bed. Robin stored the bow on her back with the quiver and she grabbed the rope. It wasn't exactly easy, but she kept one hand wrapped around the rope, a loose knot keeping the end around her waist in case she slipped as she used the rope to help her walk the castle wall. More like run, as she used it to build up momentum to swing herself up high enough to catch the closest overhang and pull herself up onto the roof.

From there it was easy to sneak into the stables, saddle a horse, and make a break for the gate.

She was Robin Hood, after all.

She laughed at the guards as she galloped by, narrowly avoiding the cart delivering flour and earning a few dark curses. She didn't stop, but as she rode through the city streets,

she heard people gasp at her green hood and say it was Robin Hood.

They said Robin Hood.

Not Princess Robin.

She technically wasn't Princess Robin, but if anyone tried to call her by her real name, she'd sock them. Prince John was the only one who had tried. She didn't think anyone else other than Marian—and probably Guy—knew it even then. She'd told her Merry Men she was Marian's cousin, but she'd never told them her legal name wasn't Robin until the fake name had become their plan to save her from her marriage. Mostly because she never intended on anyone using it again.

When Robin came upon Lathe's biggest market square, she slowed her horse to avoid trampling anyone in the crowd. The second she did, people were surrounding her, and even if she'd expected to make it to the city walls and outside of Lathe, she wouldn't now. Her plan hadn't been to make a true escape, not when she didn't have a way to annul her marriage, but to make a point. The second she dismounted, the crowd enveloped her.

Robin was used to it with village crowds. City crowds were a little bigger than she was used to. But she could handle it.

Robin shook hands and smiled at people as they surrounded her. There were so many voices it was hard to hear even the person right in front of her, but she tried. It was a cacophony of demands and questions.

“Why haven't we seen you since you and Prince John returned?”

Did they think she'd abandoned them? Robin turned to address the man at her right. She raised her voice so as many of them as possible could hear her. “Today is the first chance I've had to get away!”

Gasps went through the crowd and a woman to her left called out, “Get away? Does he have you locked in a tower?”

What? Where had that come from? “I—”

A hand grabbed at the cloak, pulling on it and exposing her bruised arm. It had happened the other day when her grip on her quarterstaff faltered and she'd smacked herself with it. The woman let out a choked gasp and Robin stumbled back as the woman asked, "Is he beating you, Robin?"

"What?" Robin pulled the cloak out of her grip and tried to pull it back over her arm to hide the bruise, but more people were grabbing at her. She was insulted that was their first thought. She was Robin Hood. "I—"

"Have you just escaped his clutches?"

What was she supposed to say? Denying it would be like defending him, but the rumors weren't true.

He didn't have her physically locked in a room, and he certainly didn't hit her. Given how easily Robin had pinned him the night before and had her dagger over his heart, she doubted he would even if he could.

He was a different kind of evil.

"Have you forgotten about us now that you're a princess?"

Robin turned on her heels, trying to find who called out.

"Do you even care about the people who couldn't put food on the table now that you have more food on yours than you could ever eat?"

"Of course—"

"You claimed you would always fight for us, so why hasn't anything gotten better? You're a princess, why haven't you done anything?"

Hands grabbed at her sleeves as she moved through the crowd. She tried to focus on the people who smiled at her and not the ones who had started jeering.

"Must be nice not to have to worry about staying warm this winter since you'll be warming Prince John's bed!"

"Watch your tongue!"

Robin knew that voice.

Even though it was trying very hard not to sound like a man's.

“Robin would sooner cut the head off that snake than let him within five feet of her!”

She pushed her way through the crowd until she saw Alan. Well, Alan beneath a wig and about ten pounds of rouge. Alan made for a hideous woman, but at least he'd shaved for it.

Her eyes welled and she reached forward, clasping his arm as the crowd continued to try to each hold her attention. “Ala—”

“—lice! It's me, Alice!” Alan pitched his voice up even higher as he pulled her to him, wrapping his arms around her. “Your friends have been worried sick about you, including her ladyship. Sent me here on her behalf!”

Robin tightened her grip on Alan and whispered, “Marian sent you?”

“Not quite. She called us ‘absolutely insane’ and said that we have a ‘death wish,’ and that we would only make things worse and to trust that you knew what you were doing.”

She wished she knew what she was doing.

“We're working on a plan. You just have to hold on a little longer.”

She whispered, her throat tight, “I'm not supposed to be the princess waiting to be rescued.”

“It's alright to be rescued once in a while. How many times have you saved one of our sorry behinds? Right now, we've got to figure out how to get you out of the marriage so Prince John has no recourse to pursue you. He can't hold us against you now, but there's no telling about Lady Marian, especially with that blackguard of a husband she has.”

Robin couldn't imagine how Marian could have fallen for Guy's ridiculous lies, claiming that he'd changed and had become a better man because of his love for her. She loved Marian to death, but she was apparently that naïve. And if during the last year she'd spent as Robin Hood there'd been

less to steal back near the Locksley estate where Guy usually haunted, it was only because Guy was too busy wooing Marian to shake down the villages properly.

“Besides, you’re Robin Hood. You’re not going to sit around helpless. You’re going to fight. You always have. This is just a different kind for now.”

Alan was right.

Robin looked over her shoulder at the gaunt, hungry faces surrounding her. She had to keep fighting for them.

“Back! Back away from the princess!” The guards rushed in and the crowd scattered before them, opening up a path to her.

“Run!” Robin hissed, but Alan was already gone. Hopefully the guards wouldn’t pay too much attention to the ugly “woman” Robin had been speaking with.

She glared at the guards as their horses surrounded her. She held her hands up and away from the bow and arrows still on her back.

It might look like a surrender, but it was the start of a war.

---

It occurred to Robin when the door to King Richard’s study shut behind her, she’d never actually seen Prince John angry.

He’d always been smug, bored, or afraid.

Now he looked livid.

She’d gotten under his skin. For the first time since Robin had laid eyes on Prince John, she was winning.

Now that she’d gained ground, she wasn’t going to give an inch back. She had to keep pushing forward if she wanted to get anywhere.

Robin put her hands on her hips and said, “I’m a little surprised you didn’t have me chained to the chair again.”

Prince John was pacing by the window, and he pointed at her. “Don’t tempt me.”

She bit the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing. She’d really gotten under his skin. “Sorry, I forgot to send a memo to reschedule the time you spend creepily spying on me. I’ll remember tomorrow.”

“There won’t be any repeats of this!” John snapped. “Did you not stop and think for a second about your own safety when you abandoned your guards?”

Robin couldn’t control herself a moment longer and her laugh ricocheted off the walls. “Please, I’m not so stupid to think you care about my safety! This is about controlling me. If you even thought about trying to sell that lie for more than a second, you’d have come with your guards and fetched me yourself! Thankfully you’re too much of a coward for it to occur to you before now!”

“Fine! Even if you’re delusional enough to believe you are invincible, you still did not think about your actions. Do you have any idea what you just did?”

“Got to actually speak to people who aren’t on your payroll?”

“By this time tomorrow everyone is going to be talking about your little escape and they’re going to think—”

“That I’m a prisoner and we’re not *madly* in love.” Robin put a sneering simper to her words. “They already know I’m a prisoner. Half of the people out there were convinced you’ve been keeping me chained up in a tower where you visit me only to beat me. Pretending this is a happy marriage isn’t going to make anyone out there love you.”

“Who said I wanted their affection? That’s what you’re here for.” John scoffed, gesturing at her. “You keep them at bay with your reputation so I don’t have to worry about them coming for my head. You trying to run away only leads to them coming for my head.”

Was that really such a bad thing?

“Maybe we should just give the people what they want.”

“The desires of the mob are no way to rule a country.”

He couldn't be serious.

She scoffed, “Like you know anything about actually ruling a country.”

Then the anger vanished, and John looked at her with a strange tranquility. He said, “You truly do not understand a single thing about me.”

Obviously.

“Upon reconsideration, I've determined it's a wholly futile endeavor and have abandoned it lest your maniacal tendencies spread like a cold.” Robin tightened her grip on her arms. “Whatever rot there is in your soul that makes you this wicked creature, I'll have no part of it.”

John just paused by the desk and leaned on it, crossing his arms with a lazy grin. “What did you hope to accomplish with your display today?”

She blinked at the abrupt shift again in topic.

“I think I made myself clear last night. I was proving that you can study me all you want, you can obsess over every detail until you get it perfect in your little sketches, but it's not going to be enough for you to break me. I'm not going to stop fighting you every step of the way. And I'm not going to stop fighting for the people down there who suffer and starve because of you.”

“And have I ever lifted a finger or said a word to try to stop you?”

She didn't know where this was going now, but she didn't like it. “Stop me from...?”

“Whatever it is you want to do that you think can help those people you say you want to help. You say I'm the root of all evil in the world, yet you have not cut me out. If you did, you'd be regent and could do what you want.”

Did he... want her to kill him?

Robin's confidence had faded when John's anger had. A calm John was a scheming one.

"I don't want to be regent."

"Why not? Clearly I'm the wrong man for the job." John started opening drawers and tossing large, thick books onto the desk, one on top of the other. "You went out there because you're trying to prove a point; how about you stop grandstanding and take action? I'm a tyrant who is starving our people and our army to death with my grandiose extravagance. Obviously."

Robin took a small step forward as the stack grew with each book, but John was oblivious as he continued on.

"So now that there's someone who is part of the royal family and painfully loyal to Richard and has the people's best interests at heart, I can stop playing regent and hand the running of the kingdom off to someone so obviously much better suited for it. Here." John punctuated the word with a final book on the now towering stack, as tall as him, and while he was scrawny, he was not short.

He patted the top of the stack and gave her a smirk that should have sent her running as he cooed, "My righteous outlaw, my brave princess, my hateful wife, save your people from their greedy, wicked tyrant."

Robin didn't have to understand a thing about John to know this was a trap. Somehow he'd twisted the game into his favor again right in front of her.

But knowing it was a trap only made it all the more tempting.

She had known the Sheriff's competition had been a trap set for her. It had been obvious. That was how she'd easily devised a plan to win the arrow and the taxes that day. John's traps, however, weren't obvious, and that was why Robin had fallen for them.

But if she knew it was a trap... why not spring it?

The previous traps had only worked because she'd underestimated how much John knew about her. He was



underestimating her this time, assuming her noble upbringing had been abandoned by her completely and that she knew nothing of how to run things or any sense of economics. But Robin knew plenty, and better, she'd lived it. No one had seen more than her the effects of these taxes and John's policies.

As long as she was careful not to underestimate him, she could navigate this trap like she had every single one that she'd come across before John. He wasn't special. Just sneaky.

Robin grabbed the stack of books and hoisted them into her arms, bracing them against her chest as she peered around them and sneered, "Gladly, my cowardly husband. Sit back and watch the people's hero save them again."

John took a seat at the desk and put his boots up on the edge and stretched his hands to hold the back of his head. "I'll send them your way."

"Who?" Robin paused by the door and looked over her shoulder.

"Little Birdie..." John licked his lips and grinned. "Everyone."

Fight. Alan had told her.

Robin tightened her grip on the stack of books.

No matter how daunting the challenge, Robin never backed down. Even if this fighting style was completely foreign to her, she would conquer it.

And Prince John.

## CHAPTER 12

At the break of dawn the next morning, John, already dressed and ready for the day, stood in his doorway, leaning his back against the doorframe and crossing his arms. The second the door to Robin's room opened, he smirked.

Robin was chased out of her room by three handmaids and two courtiers. She nearly tripped on the hem of her dress as she juggled the books in her hands, wide-eyed and only giving the courtiers nods and hums as the men talked a mile a minute about Robin's schedule for the day and the matters that needed her attention first.

Oh, yes. This was John's most brilliant idea yet.

When Robin did get her books back in order and she looked up, her panic instantly vanished as she spotted him and a steely determination replaced it. His smirk grew. He waved at her and blew her a kiss before calling out, "Have a good day, darling!"

Robin was already being ushered down the hall, her guards falling into place with the entourage, but she whipped her head around even as the courtiers dragged her and she ground out, "Oh, I will, my love!"

John laughed.

And then he looked at the empty hallway. He hadn't had a morning free since he'd been eighteen, before Richard had left Lathe for war six years ago. What was *he* going to do with his time now?

Maybe he hadn't thought this through as much as he should have.

Hopefully Robin would crack before the first day was up so he wouldn't have to figure it out.

But until then, he figured it would be nice to read something that wasn't an accounting document or a whiny demand from a noble. Prince John spent his morning in the library, perusing the shelves before settling on reading an old favorite of his mother's. He had fond memories of her reading it to him as a child. She would have read it to Richard as well if John's brother had been able to sit still for longer than a minute.

That occupied him until about lunch.

He spotted a few nobles in the hall and as they bowed while he passed, he raised an eyebrow and waited for them to start making demands, but they just scurried away. Good. They'd gotten his orders: they weren't to bother him but instead go to Robin with anything and everything.

Afterwards, he went back to his room and started to head for his sketchbooks, but when he looked at his trunk all he could see was Robin's horrified, repulsed expression. It made his stomach turn, and he couldn't even bear to look at it.

John set out to locate his trunk full of his other work. When he found it, in a storeroom with a bunch of antique furniture from royals past, he found a set of paints and an easel in the trunk.

John hadn't painted in years. Not since the conflict at the border started.

Sketching he could get away with. It wasn't as time consuming and his excellence only served to increase his speed. But painting took far too much time.

He spent the afternoon leafing through his old sketches and paintings of Astren's landscapes. He went to dinner and ate alone. He was informed Robin was taking dinner in her room as she still had some urgent work to finish. He grinned for a

moment until he realized how much emptier the room was without her.

When he went back to his room, for the first time since they were married, he approached the door connecting their rooms and knocked. The sound of papers shuffling on the other side stopped. He called out, “Have a good day, my darling wife?”

“A most productive one, my loving husband!”

John could practically see Robin’s sneer on her face.

She didn’t break on the first day.

Or by the end of her first week.

It became a ritual of sorts. John was always dressed and ready to watch Robin rush out of her room in the morning, struggling to keep up with her new entourage. There was a brief moment before she spotted him when he could see how overwhelmed she was. It was only a matter of time until she admitted she had no idea what she was doing.

But then, every single time, John was left unsure what to do with himself. Robin wasn’t cracking as quickly as he’d anticipated. He’d also thought it would be more fun to watch her struggle. Of course he got smug satisfaction out of it, but he didn’t actually get to watch Robin much. He needed something to do.

John went back to the storage room with his landscapes, grabbed the paints and easel, and ordered the first servant he saw to locate some canvases for him.

He set it up in his room, changing his silk shirt to an old, ratty one that he had, which was still immaculate, but it wouldn’t matter if anything ruined it. Once he had his canvas, he rolled his sleeves up and started painting.

For the first time since he had laid eyes on Robin, his hands created something that had no connection to her at all.

First, he painted his mother—reading from the book that had also taken up a permanent residence on his nightstand since he’d handed off his duties to Robin had inspired him.

Then he painted a memory of when he would watch Richard and their father, using the private training grounds, swords clashing before he'd been written off as a lost cause. Then he painted Lathe. His city, the capital, full of people who used his name as a curse while he desperately tried to keep the country together. And finally, he painted the desert three weeks after handing his duties off to Robin.

He knew what had landed on Robin's desk first thing that morning. It always arrived on schedule. First day of the month every other month.

The most recent report of the casualties at the border.

How many men were dead. How much money they needed for more men, for more food, for more weapons.

Those worthless sand dunes made up an abyss that swallowed any resource sent its way.

He hadn't realized how late he'd stayed up, painting by candlelight until he was finally done. The painting was also a useful distraction from the rumblings he'd heard in the castle about how horrible Robin was at being regent and why hearing that had made him feel a strange flash of... concern. The few times a noble or courtier had been brave enough to try to tell him to his face that his wife was ruining everything, he'd snapped at them and threatened them with the stocks for insulting her and him. Hopefully she would finally crack so he could get back to being the one ruining lives.

His back ached as he finally pushed himself off his stool. His fingers were stained in a multitude of colors, and there was a swatch of yellow on his forearm. His sleeves were rolled up past his elbows, and he wiped at his forehead, holding his brush and palette in his other hand.

He glanced at his candles; they were all burning much lower than he expected. It had to be past midnight. Well past.

He started to move to put them out, and when he bent to blow one out, he spotted a little bit of light at the crack of the door connecting his room to Robin's. Was she still up?

Or had she fallen asleep and forgotten to put out a candle?

John knocked softly on the door but received no response. If Robin had fallen asleep and left a candle burning... it could cause a fire or a mess.

Richard would absolutely send John to the frontlines if he burned down his castle. Not to mention Robin's parents had died in a fire started by unattended candles. And he hadn't seen her for more than fleeting seconds for weeks...

John was surprised to find the knob turned under his hand. Robin really must have fallen asleep if she hadn't locked the door. When had she unlocked it in the first place? He was just going to put out the candle and then leave before Robin woke up and killed him. Simple.

But when he pushed the door open, he spotted Robin sitting at her desk, the candles centralized to provide the most light there. They framed Robin in their glow, and John forgot how to breathe for a moment.

Her hair was down fully, not a tangled mess but perfectly brushed and spilling over her shoulders. She was in a nightgown and robe, designed to match, the robe belted shut at the waist.

Robin had several books open on the desk in front of her, stacked on top of each other, and papers scattered around her. Her elbow was on the desk and her chin was propped up on it, her whole body leaning into it. Her fingers were tangled in her hair, gripping it tightly as she stared at the mess before her. Her eyes shone with water in the candlelight.

John stayed in the doorway and called out, "Robin?"

She was wholly absorbed as she didn't even blink.

John took a deep breath and stepped into the room, slowly moving toward the desk lest she rip that dagger out of thin air and plunge it into his heart for his approach. He said, "It's late, Robin. Go to bed."

Robin finally looked up.

There was no anger. No rage at him having crossed the boundary between them.

He'd never seen her look quite like this. Not when she was in chains. Not even when she signed her real name and forever bound herself to him. Even then there'd been some assurance in her eyes, some kind of fire.

Now... she looked utterly helpless.

"You win," she whispered.

John stared at her from the other side of the desk.

When he didn't respond, she shook her head and sat back in her seat, looking away from the papers in front of her. "I can't... I can't make it work. I can't fix it." Her voice cracked and she pulled her hand out of her hair and continued, "We're hemorrhaging money at the border. It just goes and goes. And if we cut back, this gets bigger." Robin pointed to the report on her desk that John knew had to be the casualties. Then she gestured to the window. "But if we don't do something the people here will end up dead too."

"It is a conundrum. Withhold from the army to feed the people today; they lose their lives tomorrow when Esmea arrives. Take from the people to supply the army today; will there be a country left for them to come back to?"

Robin ran a hand over her face for a moment before looking up at the ceiling. "I tried—I looked at all the expenses. Even if I slashed the expenses of the castle, cut out every frivolity, pinched every penny, made us live like peasants, that money would be only a fraction of what the army needs and what the people need. But I thought it was better than doing nothing, so I started, but then there were the contracts. Stars above," Robin groaned, punctuating it with a kick to the desk with her right leg. "Those cursed contracts!"

John knew exactly what she was talking about. He stayed silent and let her continue.

"The second I tried, I turned around and someone was furious with me. I change the orders for food supplies for the castle to eliminate excess, and the butchers show up demanding to know why I'm trying to break the contract they have with the castle. I try to adjust the order to buy less

expensive cuts and the nobles in the castle declare I'm insulting them and degrading them, and the butchers still aren't happy because they're getting less coin even though I'm trying to explain it will mean less leaves their pockets next time." Robin looked close to tears again. "And I tried to cut down the castle staff and shutter guest rooms that aren't in use, and then I'm accused of taking their livelihoods and now they're going to starve; they have no other profession and nowhere else to work in Lathe. And that's just our people!

"I switched my attention to our foreign contracts because at least then maybe I could find some additional money in the budget without hurting any of our people in the process, but those contracts and treaties are so much worse. I so much as look at a trade deal with a foreign ally and think of increasing taxes on the imports so that I can decrease the taxes on our people, it would cost us the support they are already showing us in the aid they've sent for the army. And even if I could, increasing those taxes would only increase the cost of the goods so our people would still suffer." Robin lowered her head, burying her head in her hands. "I can't make it work. I can't..."

Then she took a long, shuddering breath and lifted her head. All the emotion was gone. She was completely empty as she looked at him and said, "Congratulations, John, you win again."

John didn't like this game.

As he stared at Robin in the candlelight, he had a strange realization.

He didn't want to win if it meant Robin lost.

John slowly moved toward the desk and started to close the books and gather the papers. He kept his gaze low, feeling Robin's eyes burning into him. He murmured, "It's not easy being king. Or regent." As he finished, he moved to the side of the desk and leaned against it. "No one wins."

"If I try... they'll all hate me." Her gaze was on her lap.



He could only imagine how terrifying that was to someone who had known only their adoration. John though...

He knelt in front of Robin, desperately wishing he had the courage to reach out and place his hand on her knee but not daring to. He caught her gaze and said, "No, they won't."

She scoffed. "I didn't even make it a full month without upsetting everyone I came into contact with."

"No. They're going to hate me." John shifted closer, looking up at her tearstained cheeks and using every ounce of his little restraint not to wipe them away himself. "Let them blame me for it all. Let them blame me for famine and flood. Let them believe I am the one responsible for all ruination."

Her watery eyes widened, and her mouth parted. His restraint nearly fractured as she took in a short breath. "What? What are you proposing?"

Something so much grander than he had envisioned when he first saw her as the answer to all his problems. She was so much more. She was the answer to all of Astren's problems.

"You vowed to help the people who are suffering and starving, but there are no easy answers. I don't want the people to die either. Dead people can't pay taxes. They can't harvest crops. They can't fight wars. And the more those things happen, the worse our economic situation gets. The men who are alive and fighting don't have food. No food. No taxes. No soldiers. We all suffer, even me. So let's stop fighting each other."

"And the unrest?" Robin took a deep breath, and his eyes traced her fingers as she ran her thumb under her eyes. "If we cannot help without hurting, how do we stop the people from boiling over? There were already people in that crowd turning on me simply for my inaction. I saw what happened when I did take action."

"Then they won't be *your* actions. I'll be their villain so you can be their champion."

He'd be the most hated man in the world twice over for her sake.

Robin's breath hitched. "I don't understand you."

"This. This is the reason I married you." He took a risk and put his hands on the arms of her chair and rose to his knees. "Because I think you are the key to helping me hold Astren together until Richard wins the war and comes back. The people need a hero to believe in with Richard gone, and they chose you. So let's make it you. You're better suited for being a hero, he's better suited for war, and I'm better suited for bearing the people's displeasure. I've had a lot of practice. I have been reviled since childhood. It will be no burden for me."

Robin looked toward her window and whispered, "A different kind of fight."

John wasn't entirely sure what that meant, but he didn't dare do anything that could cause this to all fall apart.

"I still hate you. I'll never trust you." Robin tilted her head and examined him. "But for other reasons now. Maybe... You don't want to run Astren into the ground. If only so you still have people to tax to pay for your ridiculous extravagance."

He raised an eyebrow at her.

She raised hers right back as she said, "Don't act like even with Astren's best interests at heart you don't still want your extravagance."

"Some people simply appreciate the finer things in life, you savage."

Her eyes lit slightly and her lips twitched. His breath caught in his throat, but the smile didn't appear. "I suppose, though, we can put aside everything else and focus on doing what's best for Astren. Instead of fighting against you, I'll fight with you."

She stretched her hand out towards him. He stared at it for a moment before slowly taking it and she firmly shook his hand. He didn't breathe until she had pulled hers back, sliding out of his grip, and it took all of his willpower not to hold on and drink in the feeling of her skin on his for even just a moment more.

This was more than John supposed he could ever hope for.

Although... he couldn't shake the part of him that still wanted her smile.

## CHAPTER 13

Robin was living some kind of strange dream or nightmare. She wasn't sure which because now she and John had some sort of alliance between them instead of some sick, obsessive game.

While her Merry Men worked to find a way to free her from this marriage, she was going to make use of it. Do what she could for the people as best as she could while she had the opportunity to do it. If John was somehow on board with it, she supposed she couldn't complain.

Robin's peaceful days where all she did was train were gone, and she couldn't slam the door on them fast enough. The morning after she entered into her pact with John, instead of being harangued by courtiers, she was beset by an army of royal tutors. The handmaids stayed the same though, shoving Robin into baths, practically tearing her hair out as they brushed it and pulled it back, and trying to kill her with impractical footwear and dresses meant to swallow her whole.

For a month her days from dawn till dusk were filled with lessons, trying to cram a lifetime of royal training into them. Fortunately, she had a foundation of her education as a noble, but only until she was ten. At least it meant she wasn't completely clueless. She only saw John at dinner, where she didn't actually get a reprieve for her poor mind because he would quiz her on her lessons. The original banquet table that had them sitting on opposite ends of the room had been exchanged at some point for a much shorter table that would have allowed them to actually reach out and touch—if they

were both standing up and were stretching their arms as far down the table as possible, so not actually all that different from the original distance since they weren't really at risk of bumping elbows, but it still felt far less formal than their original meals had been. She couldn't recall when it had happened, but her focus was on her lessons, not the furniture.

Robin did nothing halfheartedly. She decided she would excel at this so she would have a better understanding of the position the country and the castle were in so none of those pesky contracts would ever catch her off guard again. And she did.

After a month, Robin was deemed competent enough to assist. In the most minor of ways, but it was something. John apparently believed people learned better hands on. It meant her lessons were reduced to just mornings while she spent the afternoons working with him. She'd initially expected that John would have her shadow some courtier, but to her surprise, when she asked what she'd be doing and who she'd be assisting, he'd simply looked up from Richard's desk, grinned, and said, "I'm not sending my wife away to go assist someone else when I have plenty she can do for me."

Robin wasn't sure if it was because there was lingering distrust or some kind of masculine pride thing she'd never fully understood despite spending so much time surrounded by the creatures.

Either way, she sat at the low table in the study and got her own stack of papers and quill, so she was satisfied. It wasn't going to be easy. It wasn't going to be quick. But there was work to be done, and despite all the reasons she shouldn't, she trusted that John had the country's best economic interests at heart.

And surprisingly—

"Ah!" John snatched the paper she'd been about to sign out from under her quill. The order to shutter the fifth floor's west wing and reduce the staff accordingly. She blinked up at him as he slid another piece of parchment back in its place. The order to find new positions for those let go by the palace

among the nobles' estates. With a list of those estates and the current vacancies.

John shook the order to let staff go and said, "I sign these." He gestured to the order in front of her. "You sign those."

He seemed to have meant everything he'd said, including taking the blame for the problems and giving her the credit for the solutions.

Most of her time she spent reading reports and relaying the information to John. But it seemed there was always someone interrupting them and keeping them from making a dent in the paperwork. Usually it was an in-person visit to get in their demands even though their paperwork was somewhere in the mountain that Robin and John had to get through.

Well, Robin was never the one truly interrupted as the nobles and courtiers pled their case to John. At least, she wasn't until one afternoon John had stormed off in a huff, throwing over his shoulder an order for her to deal with it. Robin had listened to the noblewoman's request, permission and assistance from the crown to repair the dam that fell within her province—specifically, she needed workers and money to pay them. She could pay for the supplies, barely.

Robin had stolen the last round of taxes the noblewoman had collected—she still wasn't sorry. One of the problems she and John needed to address were the nobles over-collecting the taxes in comparison to what they were required to send to the crown. But that was a different day's problem. Today's problem was the dam. If the dam wasn't repaired it could ruin the fields and crops when spring and the spring storms came after winter.

Robin put together why John had stormed off. She told the noblewoman she would make sure she got the men and the loan but warned there was going to be little she could do about the terms John would impose on it. The noblewoman had shaken her head and said it would be better they be able to pay the crown back with that harvest than not have it at all. Even if the interest was high, it was better than losing half of the people, first in the flood and then to starvation. And she'd

expected it to come at a high cost. It was Prince John; no one expected anything less from him.

So it quickly became their routine as well. When officials and nobles caught John's ear, he handed them off to her, faking disapproval when he wanted her to give approval or sending her out of the room when he refused.

It was a strange thing, almost feeling like a game with exceptionally high stakes, but one where they were on the same team.

Robin's work didn't stop when the two of them did for dinner. Well, neither of them did. After a brief quiz on her morning lessons, she and John continued working, discussing the next day's issues, the next problem to tackle, who they were going to upset next as they tried to find solutions and how to mitigate it. John would then go back to the study to finish what he could while Robin went back to her room to complete any assignments or reading her tutors had given her.

She didn't know when she had stopped locking the door between their rooms, but one night she heard John moving about in his room, and since her question wasn't answering itself, she rapped her fist on it and received a bewildered, "Yes?"

She opened the door and peered her head around it to see John standing by an easel, dressed in a paint-stained undershirt with his sleeves rolled up like the night they'd come to a truce. The canvas on the easel was a half-finished recreation of Lathe at sunset.

Robin had been so distraught and sick with everything that she'd barely registered his appearance that night, but now? It was... strange. She was used to seeing him perfect in his extravagant finery in his purples and golds. Here he looked... like a man.

A real man, not a name people spat and cursed when they spotted the tax collectors. Not the distant figure she had cursed during long winter nights when her aches, new and old, kept her up at night and all she could see were gaunt, hopeless faces.

Now she was just staring at him. Well, his exposed forearms.

She didn't know where the heat crawling up her neck came from as she took him in. She tried hard not to think about him like a man. But he was. He was also a very handsome one. It had little effect on her most of the time because of how polished his veneer always was. It was always so obviously fake and put on. But tonight he was dressed down. Messy. His hair wasn't perfect, a little ruffled. There was a tiny smudge of paint on his strong jaw that she was struck with the urge to try to wipe away. His brown eyes were lighter and warmer—

And real.

And she didn't like it. She didn't like the idea that there was something real under it all—something that didn't actively repel her, and maybe something she was even—No. She wasn't going to even let herself think that. But she also could not deny what she'd seen the night of their truce. And those doubts started to creep back in.

She quickly shook it off and held up the book she was reading. "I had a question about our wool exports."

John raised an eyebrow and said, "Ask away."

Thankfully he didn't seem to be aware of the... whatever that had been that she'd just experienced at the sight of him like this.

"Why don't we make our wool the center of our trade with Glaciar? With their weather, they need all the warmth they can get."

After John gave an abridged explanation as to why that had fallen by the wayside, Robin took a step into his room and started pushing him on the subject. Why couldn't they bring it back into focus? The more trade on that end, the more taxes they collected without having to raise the percentage.

Robin never in a thousand years thought she'd be standing in front of Prince John trying to find a way to collect *more* taxes, but there she was. If it meant getting the money the



army needed without taking it directly from their people's pockets, it was worth it.

John abandoned his painting and darted into her room, grabbing her materials and then spreading them out over his table as they resumed the discussion and began to make plans. Robin hurried to take a seat across from him.

Now that they'd both crossed it, Robin never thought about locking the door again. And after that, she almost never went a night without flinging open the door, an armful of books and papers to dump onto his table and continue their work from the day.

As autumn faded, Robin dimly registered that she'd been married to John for six months, half of a year.

Robin hoped she'd hear something from her men soon, but until then... She supposed this wasn't the worst way to spend her time.

Robin watched the candlelight frame John's face as he jotted something down.

Maybe John wasn't the worst person to spend time with.

## CHAPTER 14

John had known that at some point working with Robin was going to return to bite him in the rear.

“It’s a bad idea,” John said, without even looking up from the papers he was signing. He could still feel Robin’s gaze on him from the other side of the study. “They don’t want to see me; they want to see you, and we can’t risk you having to say no to someone. It’s out of the question.”

Robin wanted him to accept petitioners again. While it was impossible to avoid the officials and nobles begging for his attention—although Robin’s assistance made it more bearable—that didn’t mean he had to open the castle doors to the rabble, and he wasn’t going to.

“Fine. But we should still do something. It’s going to be a hard winter. The people need to know we’re trying to lessen the impact as much as possible.”

“If it involves ‘the people’ and me, it’s a bad idea.”

It had taken weeks for John to get the smell of rotting fruit out of his hair, and he’d had his clothes burned after the last speech he gave three years ago. That had been the last straw. He knew when he wasn’t wanted.

“You think most of my ideas are bad.”

“They are. I just keep you around because you occasionally have a good one.”

“I’m saying if you just... owned up to your mistakes and you were honest and fought to show everyone you’re not what

they all think you are... maybe people just might surprise you.”

John laughed so hard he nearly fell out of his chair. “Little Birdie, you understand nothing of politics.”

“You told me yourself the other day that you know some of your early decrees backfired in effect. Why not publicly announce you’re rescinding them and fix them to give the people hope for the future?”

“Any sign of weakness is a mistake. Leaders can’t admit to any error outright. It would be like throwing open the castle gates and putting my neck in the noose for them.”

“What about me?”

“What about you?”

“I mean, what if I go address the people without you?”

It was a reasonable suggestion.

But there was something in the back of his head that he still didn’t like about it. The idea of Robin giving a speech alone... too much could go wrong. The whole reason he had her was because she was universally beloved, but she was a princess now. What if something happened to her? When she’d run out into the main square, people were already turning on her just for that. What if they turned on her while she was speaking to them? What if they treated her the way they treated him?

No. It was too risky.

“We should stop your morning lessons. Clearly they’re doing you no good if you’re not paying attention and instead coming up with these ideas. You need a hobby.”

“Well, if you’re going to give me time in the mornings, I am starting to get rusty.”

She wanted to go back to the training grounds?

“What does it matter if you get rusty? You have three personal guards.”

“You’re right, I’ll go ahead and start preparing my speech.”

“Training grounds it is.”

John gave the instruction to reduce Robin’s lessons so she would have an hour each day to go to the training grounds and beat a dummy with a twig to her heart’s content. As long as it meant she didn’t do something stupid like try to reason with a mob that would sooner behead anyone that had a crust of bread they didn’t.

It seemed to do her good because by the time she joined him for lunch and their afternoon work, she had a bounce in her step and a pleased look in her eye.

Although he still hadn’t wrangled a wretched smile out of her.

He’d gotten smirks. Tiny grins, but nothing close to that bright, blinding thing he’d glimpsed. If the training grounds were the way to get it, it was a sacrifice he was willing to make.

It also didn’t hurt that he and Robin left their rooms at the same time in the morning, so he always spotted her in said training outfit—she still had not simply just *asked* for a set of training clothes—as she pulled her cloak over her shoulders, so he usually got to admire it for a full second. Even though it was looser than most of the dresses he saw her in, there was something more appealing about it because of that fact. Maybe he just liked the reminder of how feral she really was. Her handmaids had been instructed to come later in the morning since John knew they would have a conniption if they saw her in it. John wasn’t complaining.

And he was pleased to see her guards never appreciated her unconventional outfit the way he did.

Good. He would hate to have to have their eyes cut out.

One morning, he was running a little behind, thanks to how late he and Robin had been up the night before arguing over her idea to still give a speech to try to rally people and show them how much they’d done, but it was routine now, so

he didn't think twice about rushing out to see her off like he always did. Once he had, he stepped back inside to finish his preparations for the day. As he finished, he passed by his curtain, still drawn back from the night before to let in some moonlight. He paused by the window, unable to resist the draw despite the trouble it had gotten him into before.

He hadn't picked up any of his sketchbooks since that night. He'd spent what little time wasn't devoted to work and working with Robin on painting, occasionally painting while Robin would work on assignments from her tutors on the sofa. He didn't know why she kept working in his room when she didn't need him, but he certainly wasn't going to raise the issue and send her away.

Robin released an arrow, watching it sink into the bullseye before turning around, but before she made it all the way, she froze and locked eyes with him. She made a gesture with her arm toward her.

John carefully pushed the window open. Robin yelled up at him, "If you want to join me, you don't have to just stand there and watch like a creep from the window!"

Well... John supposed they'd been making excellent progress on the never-ending pile of work. He gave into the strange impulse. He had no idea what he was going to do, but Robin had invited him, so he went.

When he passed Robin's guards and stepped into the private training grounds—he hadn't set foot in them in years—he was hit in the chest and had the wind knocked out of him. He scrambled to catch the object and saw it was one of the staffs he'd seen her practice with.

Robin held a second in her hand. "You've taken it upon yourself to give me an education. Now I think it's time I return the favor."

He gave her a blank look as he weakly held the staff. "I don't need to know how to fight."

Robin scoffed. "Yes, you do."

“Why?” He narrowed his eyes at her. “Are you planning on changing your mind and killing me?”

“I might be.” Robin raised an eyebrow. “And I want you to be able to at least give me a challenge.” Robin shook her head. “It was rather embarrassing for you.”

Being soundly pinned down and threatened wasn't exactly the height of pride for him, but John knew what he was and what he wasn't.

A fighter of any kind, he wasn't.

John narrowly avoided the swing of the staff with a yelp, stumbling back on his feet. He glared at Robin. “Are you insane?”

She grinned. “Come on, don't be so dramatic. I was moving like a snail.”

John paused. It was a grin, not quite a smile. But still... this might be the only way to get the real thing.

John reluctantly gripped the staff. “Alright, if you insist on us beating each other with sticks, I at least need to make sure you don't get my face. It's my best feature.”

Robin's eyes flickered to his arms for a moment before she looked back up and said, “We'll see. Now, you can hold it that way if you want, but I'll warn you, one hit and I'll send it flying across the grounds.”

“There is no—”

Oh. There it went.

John held his arms up in surrender as Robin held the end of her staff up to his throat.

That was the beginning of John joining Robin at the training grounds every morning and letting her spend an hour beating him half to death. If he'd known this was where he'd have ended up, he would have thought twice about marrying her.

He still would have.

Because when she'd had enough of his poor grip and posture, she'd come over to him, rolling her eyes as she wrapped her arms around his and manually adjusted his grip, her front pressed to his back, sending a rush down his spine. She would murmur in his ear about the placement of his hand, curling his fingers around the quarterstaff, and it was all he could do not to lean back into her. And then she was gone after just a moment, never lingering. It didn't really motivate him to grip the weapon properly if she was going to do that when he was wrong.

Every bruise he got was worth it for moments like that.

Winter had arrived, and when the first large cold front came in, Robin still insisted on her hour of training, so John abandoned the dying warmth of his fireplace and bedding and trotted out after her.

Although, as they stretched to warm up—Robin insisted it was important—he noticed there was something about the way she was moving that was different. He paid more attention as Robin took her stance with her quarterstaff; it was off balance, not enough that it would really make a difference against his inadequacies, but enough he could tell. It was her left leg.

Before John could go any further with his observations, Robin had started. Hitting the *cold* hard ground was so much worse than hitting the normal hard ground.

That afternoon while they worked he had ample opportunity to observe. Robin was doing a good job acting normal, but he'd spent a very long time learning every detail of her features and had gotten to know the rest of her quite well too. He knew when she was putting on a good face to hide pain. When she thought he wasn't looking, her expression would twist and she would bend down and rub her left leg over her skirts for just a moment before going back to her work.

John also knew Robin was so stubborn and self-sacrificial that she wasn't going to say anything about it.

That night, Robin was sitting on his sofa, her legs pulled up onto it with her skirts spread over them, her legs tucked

close enough so she could reach over and rub her leg when she thought he wasn't looking. John was sitting in the chair closer to her front, their documents and research spread all over the table like normal. A fire was crackling behind them, but the air still had a harsh bite to it.

Robin was clearly biting the inside of her cheek in her discomfort, and John finally said, "You don't have to do that."

Robin immediately sat up and said, "Do what?"

"Pretend that your leg doesn't hurt."

Robin rolled her shoulders and looked down, reaching forward to shift papers that didn't need moving. "It's just a bruise. You managed to get a good hit in yesterday for once. There's nothing to be done about it."

He let out a soft sigh. "You don't have to do that either."

"What?"

"Lie to me. I know exactly why you're in pain. It's from an old injury not a new one." John leaned forward as Robin's eyes widened and her breath hitched. "A broken leg."

"You..." Robin shifted back, her knuckles whitening. "How do you know that?"

"Because I've seen it before. This happened to my father every winter too." John watched as the tension eased and she sank down a little. John hesitated over what he wanted to say next. It was Robin, so the chances were high she would take it poorly and he could undo all of the progress he'd made with her. That was terrifying.

Now that Robin spent time with him and talked to him and most days didn't seem to actively hate him, nothing terrified him more than losing what he had with her.

But Robin was in pain and there was something he could do about it.

So that was enough for him to open his mouth despite his thundering heart.

"I could help."



Robin shook her head. “There’s nothing to be done about it. This happens every winter, and all I can do is just bear it until spring. Some days aren’t so bad. My men tried to find ways to help. Little Jon gave me every plant there was that was supposed to ease pain. Alan tried to make me laugh so hard I couldn’t feel it. Will would give me his blankets so I could wrap my leg in them at night to keep it a little bit warmer. But the ache still kept me up. It’s just what old injuries do.”

Thank the stars he had her now if that’s how those ruffians tried to take care of her. It was a miracle she’d survived with them.

“There might be nothing you and your outlaws knew to do about it, but when the king suffers that kind of ailment the physicians don’t rest until they find a solution. I’m not saying I can make it go away, but I can help make it bearable. Will you let me show you?”

Robin eyed him warily. “Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why do you care if my leg aches?”

“Because—” The small fraction of courage he’d managed to find in his weak, pathetic heart died. “Because it’s distracting you and getting in the way of our work.”

Robin narrowed her eyes, and he froze, hoping she couldn’t see right through him. Then she bit her lip and rubbed at her leg for a moment before sighing. “Fine.”

John immediately shot out of his seat and started pushing furniture out of the way, clearing the space between the sofa and the fireplace. He then pushed the sofa up closer to the fire while Robin looked over the back of it at him.

He could feel the heat crawling over his skin as he moved back to the front of the sofa. He took a seat on the end opposite her and gestured to Robin’s legs, curled up between them. She pulled them in tighter and her eyes narrowed again. He said, “If I’m going to help you with your bad leg, reason suggests I might need said bad leg.”

Robin glanced over at the curtain rods before looking back at him. “This is just an excuse to get handsy, isn’t it?”

She was accusing him?

“First of all, you really have no right to say that given you can’t keep your hands off me always ‘correcting my grip and stance.’” Robin sat up, opening her mouth, but John held a finger up and continued, “Second of all, it’s not like you didn’t show me and the entire troop escorting us your lovely calves when we were leaving Ferren Forest. I promise this is strictly below the knee.”

Robin’s cheeks were tinged red as she looked at the fire, and he couldn’t tell if the flush was from the heat or something else. But she did stretch her leg out, carefully hitching her skirt up so she only exposed her leg from the knee down and let him take it.

The instant his palm touched her leg, she nearly jumped out of her skin but stayed where she was. John lowered his gaze, unable to bury his smirk. He started gently massaging her leg, making sure not to press too hard or dig in too deep. He didn’t want to risk causing her more pain and her declaring he had no idea what he was doing and pull away.

He tried not to think too much about what he was doing and simply fall into the rhythm of his movements. It wasn’t like he was doing anything inappropriate. They were married even if it was in name only. But that didn’t change the fact that his palm was running over her skin, and if he spent the rest of his life doing this, he wouldn’t complain. Her cold skin warmed beneath his touch and the heat of the fireplace, and the tension he could feel in her muscles slowly ebbed, and she sank into the sofa a little more.

He slowly, carefully looked up as he continued massaging her leg to see Robin had her head leaned against her hand, propped up on the arm of the couch and she was watching him, her cheeks still flushed, but a sharp look in her eyes.

His throat was dry and his tongue felt like lead but he managed to say, “See? I’m good for something after all.”

“Your father had physicians do this every night for him?”

“At first,” John said, lowering his gaze again and focusing his attention on her ankle and the green slipper on her foot that perfectly matched the shade of her dress. Her handmaids’ doing no doubt given she couldn’t match an outfit to save her life. He’d once spotted her with black slippers under a tan and green dress. Feral woman, at least she had worn shoes. He rubbed his thumb over her ankle as he said, “Then my mother had the physicians teach her how to do it and then she took over.”

“Why?”

John gave a small shrug as he looked up again at Robin. Her fingers were tangling in her hair, starting to knock the pins loose and send a few strands dangling. He forgot to breathe for a moment before he said, “Because it was her way of showing him that she loved him.”

“Didn’t he know?”

“Theirs was a political match, like many royal marriages.” The ‘like ours’ went unspoken, but Robin immediately turned back toward the fire. She shifted and pulled her leg back slightly, not out of his lap completely, but putting distance between the rest of them. John’s palm was splayed out on the middle of her calf, fingers curling around the side unable to let go yet.

“Couldn’t she have just told him?”

If only it was so easy for some people.

“My mother was always the kind of person who wasn’t good at voicing her feelings; she let her love show in other ways. She liked to take care of the people she loved however she could.”

Everyone knew how Richard was practically their father reincarnated. John was nothing like him, but he was very much like his mother.

Lucky for him he didn’t have anyone he loved.

By the time John pulled his hands back, Robin had dozed off into her hand, no pain in her peaceful expression and a small smile on her face.

Well... he'd thought he didn't.

No. He couldn't. He was just confusing himself. He was obviously attracted to Robin; that had been evident since the first time he'd seen her. He was drawn to her and fascinated by her which had spurred on his schemes to catch her and marry her instead of executing her. Despite the rocky start, she genuinely had fulfilled her purpose of protecting him from being sent to the frontlines and had made his life easier as regent. She worked hard and while there were plenty of people still unhappy with the crown, there were plenty who believed Robin was working against him as princess to protect them. He couldn't deny he enjoyed her company; they spent the vast majority of the day together, mostly working, sometimes her beating him into the ground with a smirk, but John would rather all of that than give up a second in her presence. They'd settled into an amiable friendship as a result of spending so much time together and working toward the same goals. He cared about her.

He couldn't love her. Because even if she didn't vehemently hate him anymore—and he had no idea if she was just good at putting it aside while it still sat in her heart and her resentment toward him for trapping her festered—she could never love him.

The expression on her face when she'd found his drawings of her... Even just that had gotten him a knife pointed at his heart. She would be repulsed even more by any kind of feeling that was deeper than their current truce.

So he couldn't love her. Because he couldn't bear what would happen if it slipped out. He couldn't lose what little he did have with her. No matter how much he wanted more.

He was the scheming villain who'd caught her in his trap, and she was the righteous hero making the best of her fate. They were a noble tragedy, not a love story.

Robin shifted in her sleep, stretching her other leg out and onto his lap as she relaxed even further. Her hair had fallen out of the pins and was spilling over her shoulder.

John rested his hand on her leg again and closed his eyes, unable to pretend he didn't feel his heart swelling so much it was about to break right out of his chest.

He loved her.

And he could never let her find out.

## CHAPTER 15

Robin was torn between her humiliation and her relief every time John caught her rubbing at her leg when they were working at night in his room. After the fifth time, she stopped putting up a fight and was just grateful no one was ever going to know about it. Robin didn't like needing people. She'd relied on her men of course, but they'd needed each other. Their skills all worked together and they looked out for each other. It had ensured their survival, and she'd done everything humanly possible to prove herself just as capable.

This... This was something else.

Robin couldn't figure out what John got out of it.

Half the time it ended their work for the evening anyway as Robin almost always found it impossible to stay up with the fire flushing her cheeks—and nothing else contributing to the crimson—and the ache in her leg easing at John's careful ministrations.

One morning, Robin's handmaids laid out a dress she'd never seen before—not that she really knew her own wardrobe well, but she was familiar with it and she knew she didn't have any wool dresses. When she'd questioned the girls, they'd started tittering behind their hands about it. While Robin wanted to strangle them half of the time for their comments about presenting herself properly as a princess, she had grown fond of them—they were sweet things. One of them finally revealed it had been on John's order to get her 'dresses appropriate for winter.'

And then they revealed the other new addition to her wardrobe on John's orders. A long-sleeved, woolen tunic and breeches with a note as well reading: *To replace your current training clothes. At least for winter.*

The girls hadn't wanted to give it to her considering how much they abhorred her in anything that wasn't strictly appropriate for a princess, but it was under Prince John's orders. She didn't need new clothes, and they were trying to lower expenses as much as possible, but... Robin let the girls help her into the wool dress. The clothes were already made and it got her through the day a little easier until she ended up with her legs in John's lap on his sofa every night.

When her men came through, she was leaving this part of the story out for them. They'd never let her live it down. And she would never want to admit such weakness and fragility to them, that her old injury could reduce her to letting Prince John put his hands on her. Especially considering—

“How did you break your leg?” John asked one night.

Robin was pulled out of her idle thoughts and dozing. She murmured, “Does it matter?”

“Fine. I'll guess. Well, my father broke his falling off a galloping horse during battle, and given the amount of running from the law you've done, that seems possible.”

Robin snorted into her hand. Maybe she should just tell him. He clearly had no idea.

“Alright, not that. Well, how about running along the roofs or scaling walls?”

“Not quite.”

Unless he was just playing dumb. He played a lot of things very well.

“You spent a lot of time in the forest; did you fall out of a tree?”

Robin still wasn't entirely sure who he was. Not to her. She needed more time to figure out the truth.

“Something like that.”

John was satisfied with that answer, and Robin saw no need to dive into the details.

One morning, halfway through winter, Robin dropped to the ground beside John, both of them huffing for breath, after a long bout of sparring with the quarterstaves. Robin was in the woolen outfit John had given her and she looked over at him. She watched his breath condense in the air, his eyes closed and his hair falling back toward the ground. He'd improved quite a bit since they'd started, even if she still had to manually correct his grip and stance every once in a while.

She'd been married to him for over half a year and she had no better understanding of him than she did the day he proposed to her and she bit him in response.

They needed to head back to their rooms and get cleaned up for the day.

Instead, Robin asked, "Why do you do it?"

John cracked an eye open and asked, "Do what?"

"Put on the act you do."

"What act?"

"The tyrant. The lazy, spoiled, greedy, cowardly man clinging to his brother's throne."

He closed his eyes, resting his head on his hand and speaking with a lazy drawl. "Who ever said that was an act?"

Robin jabbed her hand into his side, causing him to hiss and shoot up, curling in on himself. Robin pushed herself up onto one hand and said, "Well, I'm not buying it. I know you're not a tyrant, otherwise you never would have agreed to work with me to minimize the damage being done to Astren. You're not lazy. The amount of work we do? It's all we do, not to mention you still show up here every day and put in the effort to improve, no matter how bad you are at protecting yourself even though you profess there's no sense in it. Spoiled? Well, you might be a little spoiled. You're terrible at sharing, and you might be a little greedy in that you have a taste for extravagance, but you have agreed to cut things from



the castle's budget, so obviously not that greedy. It's not wealth for wealth's sake."

"I'm not disagreeing that I'm spoiled but of all those attributes what makes you think that one is accurate?"

Robin gestured to the training grounds. "You're a prince with a private training ground that even our personal guards aren't allowed in. I think that makes anyone spoiled."

"*Your* guards aren't allowed in here. If I for some reason gave leave of my senses and ended up here without you, any guards with me would be allowed to stand here to keep watch."

"Why my guards then?" Robin gaped at him. "That oversight is what allowed me to escape the castle gates in the first place, and even now you haven't fixed that leak in security."

John gave her a pointed look. "Are you planning another reckless ride out into the city with no proper protection?"

He was tempting her to.

"No, but you're avoiding the question. Why *my* guards? I could use a sparring partner that will give me a challenge."

John leaned on his own hand, staring Robin down. "Because I'm not going to let anyone leer at or get a handful of my wife."

"Leer?" Robin sputtered, trying not to feel the strange shiver that went down her spine at the words 'my wife.' "Those men barely pay attention to me at all. You think they'd try to 'get a handful' of me? I'm surprised they even notice enough to follow me when I leave a room."

"Good. They know their place."

Robin rolled her eyes. "This. This is why you're spoiled. So it's fine for you to watch me train and put your hands on me but no one else?"

"I'm your husband."

Robin dug her fingers into the dirt and ignored the strange way her heart twitched at his words as he continued, “It’s different.”

John shifted back, and it was only then Robin realized how little distance there had been between them. He shifted his shoulders and said, “Besides, if I ever looked at you the way some of those men look at any beautiful woman, much less touch you any way you didn’t want me to, you’d kill me.”

Robin bit her tongue so hard she tasted blood, pushing down the strange girl-like words that threatened to spill out. *‘You think I’m beautiful?’* She’d been humiliating herself enough lately around John, she didn’t need to add any more to it. She was Robin Hood, the most wanted criminal in the country, not some little girl tongue-tied around a handsome boy.

John wasn’t a handsome boy.

He was a handsome man though.

Especially as they sat on the ground side by side, still flushed from sparring and the cold, his hair in complete disarray, and his brown eyes burning hotter than any fire she could wish for in such a chill.

He said, “And I rather like being alive, as you know—that’s why you’re here, after all.”

“Yes, because Richard threatened to have you go to the frontlines so he could return to deal with me.” Robin pushed past the strange feelings and returned to her original goal, figuring out why he acted the way he did. “What I don’t understand is why he went to the frontlines in the first place. He’s the king and you’re...”

“The spare, yes, I’m aware.” John rolled his eyes. He gestured to all of him. “But you’ve met me. You’re the one who dragged me out here claiming I’m such an embarrassment to men because I’m so weak I was bested by you in a matter of seconds. I’m obviously the wrong choice to send to war if you want to win. Soldiers don’t take orders from cowards.”

Robin stayed silent. She had no evidence she could present to disprove it. It was the one trait she had decided not to address at all.

John drew a knee up to his chest and leaned his arm on it. “Richard runs to battle. I run from it. Going anywhere near the border would be a death sentence for me. It’s far too dangerous, and I am far too incapable and terrified. I would never go anywhere near it, not willingly, not for anything. I’m not like you, Robin.”

He then looked over at her, and there was something strange in his eyes. Almost admiration, something like security, and a little bit of longing.

“Heroes like you die young and painfully. Cowards like me live to see another day.”

“You can’t spend your life running from everything that can hurt you.” Robin swallowed, unable to even so much as twitch a finger under the weight of his gaze. “Besides, not everything can be run from. It’ll always catch you.”

“I suppose I should believe you. I caught you after all.”

There was a severity to his words that Robin couldn’t quite comprehend, like there was some meaning in it she should grasp, but it just slid through her hands like water.

## CHAPTER 16

John had known this would happen eventually. He was a little surprised it had taken this long though. They truly were incompetent without Robin.

All the stories ever focused on was her skill with a bow. They always brushed over what made her truly extraordinary, her brilliant mind that had come up with every scheme she'd gotten away with, at least until she'd come up against him.

Her men clearly weren't the brains of their operation.

John stared down at the man in the cell in front of him, what was his name again? Whit Red? Wes Burgundy?

Robin didn't talk about them in front of him. He didn't bring them up because he didn't want to remind her that he was responsible for the fact that she was separated from her companions. Robin also didn't know one of those companions had been caught and thrown into the dungeons. She currently thought he was in a meeting with some advisor about some important report that he'd made up.

Will Scarlet. That's who this one was.

The young man was trying to spit some kind of insult toward John, but it was lost behind the gag in his mouth. John could imagine it was as flattering as most people's comments about him. John turned to the Sheriff and said, "Where did you grab him again?"

"Found him trying to sneak out of the kitchens. He got through the gate hiding in what was supposed to be a barrel of wine for the upcoming ball."

It was hard to plan a ball fitting for a princess when said princess detested extravagance and excess. Knowing she would fight him every step of the way, he was planning it in secret. That was a whole other challenge, planning a ball for the woman he spent almost all of his day with and keeping her from discovering said plans. It was almost as hard as keeping the very same woman he spent every day with from discovering how pathetically in love with her he was.

Now he had a third secret.

He'd caught her men trying to rescue her.

"He must have had someone help him. And there's two more of them that could be about." John gestured at Will. "Ungag him."

The Sheriff shook his head but complied.

The second he did, a string of heinous insults fell out of the young man's mouth.

"—vile, belly crawling vermin! You—"

"That doesn't really make me inclined to not kill you."

Really, did the boy not have a brain or any sense of self-preservation?

"How would he know that? You married a girl who bit you," the Sheriff muttered.

John sneered at the Sheriff. "Maybe that's why I married her. Maybe I like that."

"Shut your filthy mouth about her!" Will spat, his chains rattling as he struggled against them. "I swear if you've put a hand on her—"

"You'll what?" John rolled his eyes, crossing his arms. "What do you think you can do to me when I've got you chained up and am debating what method I'll be using for your execution?"

Will fell silent, glowering at John. Hmm. John was hoping that would get him the location of the other two buffoons. Or at least confirmation that they were around for a rescue.

There were only two options here. John couldn't keep him in the dungeons, or else Robin might discover he was there. That would cause problems, possibly even an escape. If John executed him and Robin found out, she would hate him more than she did currently—whatever that level was. She would never forgive him. But if he let her men go... they'd keep coming back, trying to take Robin from him.

No matter what he did the end result was almost guaranteed. Losing Robin.

It just differed in what way.

Will stayed silent, just glaring at him.

“That's right. There's nothing you can do about it if I have my hands on my wife. And I do. Every night.” John smirked as Will's face matched his surname. “And she enjoys it.”

The best part was it was true, just not the way he was implying.

Will spat at him, causing John to jump back to avoid it. His shoes cost more than the boy's life was worth. Will snarled, “You can kill me, but one day you'll pay for what you've done. To her. To everyone. You'll regret the day you ever saw her.”

John had no doubt he would.

He muttered to the Sheriff on his way out, “Search every inch of this castle and this city until you find the other two. Then throw them all out of the city walls and make sure they can't get in again.”

But that didn't mean he wasn't going to hold onto her as tightly as he could until that day came.

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John would have been attached to Robin's side even more than usual if he didn't already spend so much time with her that it wasn't really possible to be more attached. He couldn't increase her personal guards without raising her suspicion so

he increased the overall number of guards in the castle and city.

The Sheriff caught a man in a wig and dress pretending to be a new hire in the laundry room. John thought the man's name started with an A, but it didn't really matter. He'd made for a very ugly "woman", and they hadn't had a new hire since he and Robin had started working to cut costs.

Two down.

One left before the day of Robin's birthday and the ball that night.

While John had been doing everything not to raise Robin's suspicions, with three major secrets, it wasn't surprising she was suspicious of at least one of them.

"There's been a lot of people arriving at the castle this week. Nobles, right? I confess, I don't remember much about the other noble families."

"They get bored during winter. Come here to pester me. For the last few years it was about how I was doing nothing about the notorious Robin Hood stealing all across their lands. This year they get their revenge; they get to drive you as crazy as you drove them."

Robin had groaned and thrown herself back into her paperwork. Not five minutes later, John left her in the study, summoned by the Sheriff. When John saw what the Sheriff had for him, he started grinning and he couldn't stop.

A man that looked like a bear had been caught. He hadn't even gotten anywhere close to the castle. He'd been spotted in the marketplace. A man his size couldn't really hide or sneak.

John only remembered this one's name because its spelling was a mockery of his own.

Little Jon.

Like there was anything little about him.

They were taken and released well outside the city the morning of the ball and Robin's birthday. Every road back into

Lathe was closed. The castle gates were closed after they left and weren't going to open until the next morning.

John could not focus on a single piece of paper in front of him, even though he was assured there would be no attempts to steal his wife from him. Now that he *was* so assured, he was left to fear said wife's reaction to the ball he was throwing.

She hadn't made any mention of her birthday, nor had she acted any differently that day than any other. He could only assume that she believed he didn't know her birthday. Honestly, he would have thought she'd go through life assuming he knew whatever there was to know about her, given how many times it had been her downfall.

But it was a mistake he was glad she was prone to making because it meant she was absolutely bewildered when her handmaids collected her from the study in the early afternoon and made off with her. Those girls worked very hard to make her look like a royal despite Robin's best efforts otherwise.

When John abandoned the work he wasn't getting done to begin his own preparations, the second he shut his door behind him, he heard, "*John!*"

There was a rustling sound coming from Robin's room and the far softer sound of one of her handmaids saying something John couldn't make out.

John called out with a smirk, "Yes, Little Birdie?"

*"I'm going to kill you!"*

He laughed. "No, you're not!"

Once he was dressed, he waited for her outside her door, heart pounding in his chest. He didn't think she would actually kill him, but that didn't mean she wasn't going to give him an earful about it.

When her door opened, she stormed out of it, mouth open, looking like she was ready to tear into him when she froze. John went completely still as well at the sight of her. Her ballgown was a deep forest green with gold brocade and detailing over the fitted bodice that hugged her figure. It had short, off-the-shoulder sleeves that nestled perfectly in the



curve of her bicep, showing off her archer's arms that he rarely got to see now that he'd had her training clothes replaced for winter. Her old outfit that had showed her arms had more than once been distraction enough for her to take his feet right out from under him. Her hair was pulled up and back with the green jeweled pins complementing her dark blonde hair perfectly, and her tiara—that he knew she hadn't worn since their marriage—was set securely on her head.

It was better than he had imagined.

“You're wearing green,” Robin finally said, and he realized she'd been gawking at him as much as he had her.

He was. He'd had their outfits designed to match. It was their first official function since their marriage. There'd been functions, but none since he and Robin had started working together since she was so against them. And he hadn't been stupid enough to try to convince her to attend any before then. He only attended for his reputation's sake.

“Is that a problem?”

“You don't wear green.” Robin stepped out of her room farther, her skirts rustling as she did so. “You wear purple and gold. Sometimes silver. Occasionally red or dark blue. But you don't wear green.”

“Clearly I do because I am.”

How strange though... that she'd been paying that close attention to him.

“You wear *purple*,” Robin said it like the emphasis on it alone would magically change the color of his clothes. He heard what she didn't say, though. Green was her color.

He held his arm out to her and said, “Tonight I'm wearing green. Now, shall we get on with it so I can explain myself and avoid being brutally murdered by you in my sleep tonight?”

Robin took his arm but continued eyeing his clothes. He launched into his explanation of why he was throwing this ball for her birthday, although it was really the excuse he'd come up with to give her because he'd started out with the idea of wanting to do something for her birthday and trying to find a

way to justify it to her. He wanted to celebrate her birthday, even if they were the only ones who knew it because he didn't tell everyone they were celebrating her birthday.

“—meet them anyway. It's not like yours is a temporary position, and we just might make a dent in getting the resources Richard and the army needs,” John finished as they approached the doors.

He wasn't convinced Robin had heard a word he said about getting nobles to part with their own fortunes to subsidize the army because she was staring at their arms, the matching fabric against her skin and pressing slightly against her bodice, the gold wedding band on her finger. John had never seen her without the wedding band. Not even when she'd vehemently hated him and threatened to kill him had she taken it off. He tried not to read anything into it.

He could get hurt.

He reached over and placed his hand on the one resting on his arm, covering it wholly with his own and finally drawing Robin's gaze back up.

She said, “They're not going to try to call me Roberta, are they?”

That's what she'd been thinking about?

John laughed, squeezing her hand and said, “I don't think any of them even remember your legal name despite the fact that you've been signing orders with it. If they try, we shall find plenty of ways to ensure they don't make that mistake again.” He leaned closer as he motioned to the footmen to open the door and whispered, “No one calls you Roberta before I get to, Little Birdie.”

Her cheeks started to tinge pink and she hissed, “Try it and see what happens.”

“Are you going to bite me again?”

“Don't tempt me.”

“Ooh, that sounds like a promise. Maybe that's what I want.”

The heralds were announcing them and he was pulling Robin with him to make their entrance as Prince John and Princess Robin with Robin's cheeks still delightfully pink and a glower in her eyes reserved just for him.

As John pulled her arm in even tighter, forcing her to step closer as he led them into the ballroom, every eye in the room was on them as the nobles bowed and curtsied at their approach. All of them, peering up and trying to see if he'd managed to tame the most troublesome criminal Astren had ever seen, and what they would see was him in her infamous color. It was as clear a stance as one could take.

## CHAPTER 17

“R ob!”

John had anticipated precisely who would be bold enough to approach them first.

“Marian!” Robin immediately dropped John’s arm and launched herself toward her cousin. Marian’s husband was forced to let go of her as Robin barreled into the woman, clutching her with a fierceness John didn’t think he’d ever experience from her.

Marian returned it just as fiercely as she laughed, “Have you gotten stronger these last few months?”

“I feed her well,” John said, succeeding in getting Robin to look over her shoulder and narrow her eyes at him.

“I’m surprised you’re able to feed her at all. I would have thought you’d have to have her locked up for everyone’s safety,” Guy said, eyeing Robin warily as Robin directed her sharp gaze onto him and held Marian tighter.

“Guy,” Marian admonished, huffing and shaking her head.

“While locking her up might benefit your safety, you’d be better served watching your tongue when you speak about my wife, Lord Guy,” John said, stepping forward. “Disrespect toward the crown will not be tolerated even from friends and family.”

John could feel Robin and Marian’s gazes on him, but he did not dare turn his harsh gaze away from Guy.

“My apologies, Your Highnesses,” Guy said, bowing his head.

Just when John had forgotten how good it was to be in charge.

Marian then cleared her throat and started dragging Robin away toward a servant carrying wine glasses, saying, “Now, Rob, you have to tell me everything! Have you forgotten how to write a letter?”

“Oh. *Letters*. I forgot about letters.”

John watched them go, biting his lip to keep from laughing at Robin’s expression. She’d never tried to write and send a letter, not that he would have stopped her. Or really would have been able to stop her, given how resourceful she was.

“Oh no.” Guy’s voice had John pulling his gaze away from Robin and back toward the other man.

“Be careful with the next words that leave your mouth.”

“You’re in love with her.”

John immediately looked back over at Robin, but she was far enough away and completely engrossed in her conversation with Marian that she didn’t hear.

John hissed, “You’d be wise to stop talking from now until you die lest I find a good reason to shut you up myself!”

Unfortunately, John’s threats had little effect on Guy who had long since grown used to them and they were more often empty than not. You fail to actually go through with executing your only friend a few times and it loses its power.

Guy did lower his voice as he said, “Anyone can see it written on your face the way you were looking at her like a lovesick little boy.”

“More or less the way you looked at Marian for years before you finally did something about it?”

“So you admit it.”

“I admit nothing to anyone whose business it is not.”

“And what do you think is going to happen next? This war won’t last forever. What happens when Richard comes back and finds out you married a criminal? The one responsible for hurting his war effort? Do you really think he’ll let you keep her?”

“We both signed with our legal names. If Richard tries to take her away, good luck. He’ll need a reason to annul the marriage.”

“He’s the king. He’ll find a way.” Guy shook his head. “I never liked this scheme of yours. Trying to turn an outlaw into a princess was always destined to fail.”

“I hardly think I’ve failed.” John gestured to the packed ballroom around them. “Quite the opposite in fact. Astren is in better shape than it has been in years.”

“You captured an outlaw and offered her death or your hand. Just because she chose your hand over the noose doesn’t mean she’ll give you her heart.”

John had no witty response to such a cold, blatant fact that he had long since accepted.

He had marked himself as hers, but that did not make her his. No matter how many times he called her his wife.

“I’ve had to deal with her schemes and the three men that trail behind her for years, Your Highness. She’s just biding her time until you make a mistake and she sees the next opening. And you’re foolish enough to give her one that will tear your own heart out with it. She’ll never love you because she will never choose to. She will never choose you over her men or her freedom.”

John refused to look at Guy, keeping his gaze on the crowd, trying to determine who he and Robin should fleece first. He said, “You thought she was a man and chased after her on horseback a couple of times while trying to woo her cousin. I’ve spent every day with her for months. I know her. She’s my wife.”

If he called her his wife enough times maybe it would be true in more than just name.

“She’s a pet. And she’s not even yours.”

Guy was only half right.

“Shut up before I have you thrown in the dungeons. Now *that* you know I will do.” John left Guy and strode toward Marian and Robin.

John had thrown Guy into a cell once for waxing on about Marian instead of delivering a plan for what he was going to do about the criminal who had just made off with the taxes Guy and the Sheriff had come to Lathe to deliver.

“—months. I thought... by now...” Robin said, her voice low.

John slowed in his approach, making sure to walk up behind her.

“Then maybe they listened to me for once and let you go the way they should have the minute you told them who you were,” Marian said.

John swallowed. They had to be talking about her men. Who were actually desperately trying to get to her.

“*Marian*. You’ve never liked the fact I chose to stay with my men instead of coming back to you and taking the Locksley name, but it was where I belonged. Besides, by the time I saw you again, I was already wanted for poaching. It would have been a matter of time before everyone discovered I was Robin Hood. I’d found my purpose, and I wasn’t going to give that up for anything.”

Could she ever be happy in Lathe?

“Purpose?” Marian scoffed. “You had a vendetta against Prince John and wanted to make him pay however you could. Decrees and taxes were just the excuses you could use to justify it and make yourself a hero for it. How about for the chance to do some real, substantial good? To have a life and a home that has walls and a roof?”

“I did real, substantial good, thank you very much! I didn’t have to have a castle or fine things to be happy. My life and my home were out there with my men.”

Could she ever be happy with him?

“Look at everything you’ve done these last few months! Just because you didn’t realize you were allowed to write if you chose doesn’t mean we haven’t been hearing about everything you’ve done.” Marian shook her head. “You have done more good for Astren here these last few months than you did those years you were attacking tax collectors. I’ve been following every order you’ve put your name on. It may not be immediate and obvious like dumping coins back into people’s hands, but you’re making real change that’s going to help Astren for years to come.”

“Marian, you need to know that’s not—”

John cleared his throat before Robin could reveal the fact that she was not the sole architect of everything good.

She spun around, her skirts whirling and she nearly pitched over—he assumed because of the unfamiliar new shoes she was in. He quickly stepped forward and caught her arms, steadying her as he said, “Eager to make your way to the dance floor?”

“Don’t think I don’t know that you probably had these shoes designed this way just to drive me insane.”

“I wouldn’t have to; you’re already insane.”

Robin’s lips were twitching as she said, “You’re not funny.”

John grinned. “Dance with me.”

“I knew it.” Robin breathed out, her hand tapping on his chest. “You almost had me fooled, but I was right all along. You’re absolutely insane.”

“For wanting to dance with my wife?”

“For thinking I’m even capable of it.”

“I’ve had the immense pleasure of watching you shoot and train and you move with an elegance this court wishes they could have even a fraction of.”



“Hitting you repeatedly with a quarterstaff because you don’t know how to keep a guard up is not the same thing as knowing all the little steps to a courtly dance.”

Marian spoke up, “Rob is just trying to weasel her way out of it. She knows most of these dances already from childhood.”

Robin’s head snapped back toward Marian. “I forgot them.”

“It’s like riding a horse; you never really forget.” Marian nodded toward John. “Besides, don’t you think all these other stuffed shirts are going to absolutely hate it if you stroll onto the dance floor with your history and prove yourself the better dancer?”

Bless Marian.

Robin bit her lip and glanced at the nobles, most of whom were watching them again. Then she looked down to where her forearms were still in John’s grip. But then she pulled her arms out of his and straightened up, saying, “It’s cold. My leg hurts too much.”

“Does it? Because I recall you saying last night that you thought the air was starting to warm a little and it didn’t hurt so badly.”

“I lied because I wanted to get through the report we were working on.”

John stepped closer, bending his head down and lowering his voice so not even Marian could hear them. “If your leg hurts so much, I’ll take care of it right now.”

Robin’s cheeks immediately flamed red. “*John.*”

“Indulge me. Please.”

Robin gaped up at him. He wasn’t entirely sure what it was about his needy entreat that took her aback, but before he could figure it out, her hand was in his. “One. You get one dance.”

John knew he would not be satisfied with just one. But his greed for Robin knew no bounds, so he would simply have to

take whatever she would give him.

He didn't waste a second, sweeping Robin off to the dance floor and pointedly ignoring the exasperated look Guy gave him.

John relished the feeling of her hand in his and the warmth of her waist beneath his other. Her hand rested on his shoulder, slightly lower so the bottom of her palm rested on the top of his chest—not the proper placement, but John wasn't going to point it out. The music started, and John led them through the dance, leaning in and murmuring the upcoming steps into Robin's ear as she stared determinedly at his neck, never looking at her feet or his face. When she stumbled or missed a step, he pulled her closer each time until very quickly her feet were practically on top of his and her front brushed his as they moved.

Robin muttered, "This is not the proper form. I know that much at least."

"I'm not going to let any of the nobles have a reason to disparage you, not even for something as minuscule as your dancing skills."

Robin's grip tightened, his shirt wrinkling. He tightened his own on her waist and was rewarded with a hitch in her breath.

"Besides, as much as you might abhor the expense and the extravagance, there is a price to doing business with the nobles, and that involves dancing. Might as well get started now. Yours is not a temporary position."

If he said that enough times, maybe he'd believe it too.

He pulled his hand away from her waist just long enough to catch her chin beneath his forefinger and tilt it up to his face and not his chest. "Besides, you're proving to be a quick study."

"Yes, we did say until death, didn't we?" Robin let out a slow breath. "But that doesn't mean as much when you've died once already."

Is that what she thought?

“You didn’t die in that fire.”

“Roberta of Locksley died with her parents in that fire. Just because you made me sign that name doesn’t change that.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why didn’t you go back? Marian’s parents would have become your guardians until you were old enough to inherit the estates. Why did you choose those vagabonds over your birthright? Over your family?”

Another song started, but Robin didn’t seem to notice or care that she was giving him more than just the one dance.

Robin looked up at him with the eyes that had been haunting him since the moment he first saw them. “Because I *couldn’t* go back. I couldn’t be her anymore. Not without my parents. The sun had set and I’d lost track of time. I was coming back from practicing my archery, and I saw that fire... I just ran, and I’ve never stopped running since. I can’t. I ran until I collapsed, and that’s where Little Jon found me. When he asked me what my name was, I started to say it, but I couldn’t. I was choking on smoke or bile or something, and I saw a robin, so I pointed at it as I choked on the first syllable. When he asked me about my parents, I told him they were dead. I knew there was no way they could have survived that fire. Sometimes... I wonder... I heard later it was an unattended candle, but no one knew where. I wonder some days... was it my fault? If I’d come back on time, would it have changed things enough to have saved them? Am I responsible?”

John didn’t even care that they’d stopped moving and were standing in the middle of the floor. He tightened his grip on her, trying to find the words and utterly failing.

“And I just... I couldn’t do it.” Robin’s voice was so soft John had to strain to hear it over the music, pulling her closer.

He whispered, “Do what?”

“Live. If Roberta had been back on time, she would be dead. So I let her be dead. In order to survive, I had to become

someone else. Someone who couldn't be caught, not by anything, especially not by my past. And my men, they took me in, as I was, no questions asked. They didn't expect anything of me other than to just survive. And I could forget. There was nothing to remind me of my parents, of Locksley, of Roberta at all. Marian only found out I survived because she spotted me when Guy caught me before I'd really figured out what I was doing as Robin Hood. Fortunately for me, Guy's security measures were lacking, Marian was clever, and my men loyal to a fault. I took more care after that and never got caught unless I wanted to be."

"Never?"

If that was true—

"Almost."

He pretended like that one word didn't pierce his chest harder than any arrow from her bow could.

"And still you stayed an outlaw."

Robin moved even closer, her grip relaxing and her fingers splaying out over his shirt. She whispered, "Guess you're not the biggest coward in Astren after all."

## CHAPTER 18

John paced the length of his room in just his undershirt and trousers, having discarded everything else as it felt so tight he couldn't breathe, waiting.

As the ball had been winding down, Robin had said there was one thing she wanted to take care of, but she'd be right up. He'd made her promise, and he imagined she likely assumed it was because of his ritual of massaging her bad leg, given the wry grin and roll of her eyes. While he would, absolutely, there was another reason.

He pulled at his collar—that was nowhere near his neck, the ties loose and open leaving the V-shape wide open—and he rolled his sleeves up. Why was it so hot? It was still winter.

He was in the middle of going for the window to throw it open when the door between his and Robin's rooms flew open. He spun around as Robin said, "Why didn't you tell me you were going to have all the leftover food distributed to the poorest section of the city tomorrow?"

John heard her question but he was too busy taking her in.

Her hair was down, completely loose and spilling over her shoulders in a wild mane. She'd abandoned her ballgown for a nightgown. Every night when they met up, Robin was still in her dress from the day, and it was only after she was half-asleep that she stumbled her way back to her room and would change into nightclothes. John assumed, at least. It was just as likely she didn't bother changing at all. He had occasionally

seen her in nightclothes, but always with a robe over her nightgown.

It wasn't even an immodest one. It was long sleeved and made of thick, warm wool, and fell to mid-calf. But it was still an intimate sight that caused his heart to speed up.

“John!”

He blinked, pulling his gaze back to her face and away from the little embroidered collar. How could it be higher than the neckline of her ballgown and be the sight that most appealed to him?

“Why?” she asked.

His tongue felt like lead but he said, “Because I knew that's what you would want. You also want to give a speech. We're doing that tomorrow as well.”

“No. I mean why did you say it was my idea? This was you. It was all you!”

“Because no one wants it to be from me. They want it to be from you.” John crossed his arms and looked back at the window. “That's the whole arrangement. The people see me as the villain and you the hero.”

“Have you ever considered that maybe people would see you as something more if you stopped just accepting it and started fighting it?”

Him? Fight?

“You know very well I am no fighter.”

“Not even for something that matters?” Her shoulders dropped as her voice lowered.

John stared at the training grounds below, her crystal blue eyes too much for him to handle.

“John?”

He turned around. “I still haven't given you your gift yet.”

“Don't change the—” Robin paused. “What do you mean? Wasn't the ball, the dress, having the leftovers sent to the poor

all your gifts to me for my birthday?”

“Those things *involved* you, but they weren’t *for* you.” John hurried over to his easel, keeping his gaze lowered to the floor so Robin couldn’t catch it. He couldn’t let her see what was in them. The second she did, he would lose her. He shifted his feet as he wrapped his fingers around the sheet covering the canvas.

“John...” Robin’s voice was barely a breath and a warning at the same time.

He almost let go. He almost lifted his head and told her he was just teasing her. But for what might have been the first time in his life his courage didn’t fail him.

He pulled the sheet off, and Robin let out a choked gasp.

John’s head snapped up, to see whether tonight was going to be his last.

Robin had stepped back, a hand over her mouth. Her brilliant blue eyes were wide and watery. She was shaking.

This had been a mistake.

“I’m sorry. I—I’m so sorry. I did this before you told me—and I should have realized—” John stuttered, fumbling with the sheet to throw it back over the canvas. “I should never—”

“No!” Her scream pierced his ears. Before he could get the sheet back over the canvas, her nails were digging into his arms, ripping it back down. Robin shoved him away from the canvas as she reached for it, her hands still shaking. She grabbed the side of the canvas with one hand while the other with trembling fingers brushed the face on the left. Then the face on the right.

Lord Robert and Lady Elizabeth of Locksley. Robin’s parents.

Standing in the middle of them was Robin. A formal family portrait.

Robin’s legs shook as she stumbled back and finally pulled her gaze to her own face. John had painted them all in green

and gold. Robin in the very same dress he'd had made for the ball.

"How—" Robin's voice cracked, and she abandoned the question.

"Lady Marian. She sent me what survived the fire. The one that had been commissioned when you were born. It was enough. And well... you know very well I have no trouble capturing your face on paper; now it's on canvas."

"Why?" Robin croaked.

"Because you didn't have a portrait of them, and you should. I didn't know you blamed yourself—but you shouldn't. I just thought you should have been able to have one with them as a woman."

It was the first time he'd painted her. The first time he captured her face with his hands at all since the night she'd found his drawings of her and threatened him.

"Because... you don't have to keep running. Not anymore." He bit back, *'Not with me.'*

Robin stepped back from the easel. Then another. Slow, stumbling steps toward him. John stayed perfectly still. Whatever punishment she gave him for crossing the line that had sent her over the edge so long ago, he would take.

Then she was in front of him. Her hand sank into his collar, low on his chest. Over his heart. Her hand was shaking.

She opened her mouth, closed it, and shook her head. He braced himself for the hit.

It never came.

Instead, her arms slid around his waist, her chest pressed against his, and her face buried itself in his neck as she wrapped herself around him, crushing herself to him.

John's arms hung at his sides. His head spun dizzily as he had stopped breathing the second her hands touched his waist and he didn't know how to start again.



But since he was as still as a statue, the trembling was all Robin. Then he heard the first soft sob, muffled against his skin. That brought him back to consciousness.

He brought his arms up, wrapping one around the length of her back and sliding his hand into her hair, cupping the back of her head. Robin's hands clenched into his shirt. He ran his palm up and down her back, his fingers brushing the skin of her shoulders when he reached the top.

John wasn't sure when, but at some point one of them sank to the ground, pulling the other with them. John leaned his head against Robin's, taking in the feeling of her hair against his cheek and in his hand. It was a horrid thing, to be trying to memorize what it was like to hold her while she cried, but John could not help his greedy, wicked heart. If this would be the only way Robin would ever be close to him, he was going to take it and engrave it into his memory.

Slowly, the soft noises she made faded, and all he could hear and feel was her breath on his skin and his movements stilled. Slowly, while John bit down on his tongue to stop the desperate pleas for her to stay in his arms threatening to fall out, Robin lifted her head and started to pull her hands back from his waist.

He let her pull back, but she did not leave his arms completely. She pulled back enough to lift her face from his neck.

Then he saw the most incredible thing.

Robin, with her eyes red and tear tracks on her cheeks, smiled at him. Not a pained grin or an annoyed smirk.

But she beamed at him the way she had smiled that day in the training grounds, the smile he had been chasing ever since, directed at him. Because of him.

The light that radiated out of her smile and her eyes went straight into the heart that seemed to beat only for her. It took root there and started to grow. Hope.

If he loved her enough without saying it, maybe she could love him in return.

## CHAPTER 19

The day after her birthday, Robin finally got her speech as well as distributing the leftovers herself. John was even going to be part of the speech with her. Even further, he insisted he also go with her afterwards.

Even if he wasn't taking the credit, she hoped the people could still make the association that he approved or maybe at least was capable of indulging her.

As the carriage rolled through the streets, Robin could hear people calling out and caught glimpses of the crowd being held back by the guards escorting them.

John sat across from her, running his hands through his hair, his crown on his knee. He was leaning as far back in his seat as he could and away from the windows while he fussed with his hair and bounced his knee, threatening to send the crown to the ground. He looked like he was going to be sick.

She leaned forward to try to catch the crown before it fell, but before she could, John said, "Sit straight. Don't wrinkle your dress."

Robin rolled her eyes as the crown fell to the floor of the carriage. "Stop messing up your hair then."

"I'm *fixing* it," John snapped.

"I don't think anyone out there is going to care." Robin sat back. "They're barely going to notice you're there while I speak."

"Let's hope so," he muttered.

“Think of this as the chance to fix a poor first impression.” Her lips twitched up. “You were able to improve upon my first impression of you, if only marginally.”

He rolled his eyes. “Your first impression of me was me cowering on the floor while you pointed a bow at me. It’s not hard to improve on that.”

“Well... that wasn’t actually the first time I’d ever seen you.” Robin’s heart leapt into her throat as the words fell out of her mouth. Was she really going to tell him?

John’s eyes widened. “What are you talking about?”

Robin’s grandest scheme was the one where she’d made the world believe she was any different from Prince John. A coward.

“The first speech you ever gave. I snuck into the crowd. I wasn’t famous yet. I’d only just started poaching.”

John tilted his head, fussing with his hair still. “The problem with the speech was that I was the one giving it. I wrote it, and I wrote Richard’s last speech for him before he left with the army. Of course you can guess which one was better received.”

She couldn’t help her sheepish grin. “I loved King Richard’s speech.”

“And?”

“I hated yours.”

“Precisely. Because who says it matters more than what is being said.” John settled back into his seat, having proven his point. Then he blinked. “Why did you stay for my speech? Half the crowd left after Richard was done. The other half was only there to see if they could spit far enough to hit me.”

“I don’t know. I don’t really remember. Guess I was curious to see if you matched your reputation.” Robin twisted the truth. Maybe she didn’t want answers anymore.

She wasn’t sure she would like them. The answers could ruin everything. Strangely enough, she liked what she had. This alliance with him.

Temporary alliance.

The gold ring on her finger seemed to tighten.

As the carriage rolled to a stop, John eyed the door like stepping off it would be stepping off the edge of the world. He picked up the crown and started to slide it back on as he moved toward the door. Robin put a hand out, stopping him. He turned to her, opening his mouth, but Robin was already blocking his path as she leaned across the aisle.

She reached forward, taking the crown off his head and brushing her fingers over a stray lock to tuck it into place. John's eyes were wide and locked onto her, but she focused on what she was doing and not whatever was in his gaze. She reached down and fixed his collar—his shirt green again. She set the crown on her bench before taking off her tiara and running a hand through her hair. “Now they’ll be too busy noticing you don’t have it at all to care about anything else. We’re making a statement.”

“We’re royalty,” John said, frowning his brow.

“We’re also people, just like them,” Robin said, gesturing to the door. “Now let’s show them.”

John moved for the door, leaving the crown behind and stepping out first. To her surprise, he reached back and offered her his hand to help her down. Robin took it and stepped down. They were surrounded by a small army of guards, and she could immediately hear people in the crowd whispering, mostly about John. A few people spotted her as he helped her down and then her name was carried through the crowd too.

Although she was fairly certain they were saying he *pulled* her out of the carriage and not *helped* her down. John was right. People loved a villain.

The guards escorted them to the back stairs of the platform and Robin went up first. She reached behind her and grabbed John by the sleeve to make sure he was with her. He whispered, “They don’t want to see you holding onto me.”

Robin looked back at him. “Since when do you care what anyone thinks?”

“I always care. But the real issue is I don’t think *you* want them to see you holding onto me.”

“Then maybe you don’t know me as well as you think you do.”

As Robin stepped onto the platform, John’s fingers looped through hers and he nearly crushed her hand in his grip. That was when Robin recalled the last time he’d given a speech to the public. That last speech she hadn’t attended. She and her men had been busy taking advantage of Guy’s absence to steal back the flock of sheep Guy had taken from a small village as tax in lieu of coin.

When the news had reached Robin that Prince John’s speech in Lathe had ended with someone throwing a pie of rotten fruit at him—hitting him square in the head, she’d laughed and said he deserved worse but now he was too much of a coward to ever face a crowd again.

It couldn’t be easy, even with a small army at one’s back, to face a crowd that had attacked him before.

Robin squeezed his hand and pulled him up to her side as she reached the center of the stage. The crowd immediately erupted into a mixture of cheers and jeers. John shifted behind her slightly, not actually hiding himself since he was taller than her. His hand left hers to rest on the small of her back as she held her hands up and the crowd started to quiet. She called out and started to speak.

Robin had never given a real speech before. She’d spoken before villages and small crowds, standing on wagons to be seen and telling them they couldn’t give up and let Prince John get away with all of this. But they’d never been planned. She’d never been a great orator or writer. She still wasn’t. Every word that left her mouth about everything she’d done had come from John’s hand.

But if he tried to say any of it, if he tried to take credit for any of it, the crowd certainly wouldn’t be cheering.

Even as they applauded “her” accomplishments, she could still feel the air of tension brought by the mere presence of the

man behind her. As she spoke, she could see people eye him and whisper behind their hands.

Robin reached behind her as she reached the last announcement, grabbing John by the arm and pushing him forward and saying, “Now Prince John has a new decree to announce.”

Prince John looked over his shoulder at her, but she just grinned and squeezed his arm. He then turned back to the crowd and cleared his throat. “Effective immediately, the laws on poaching in Ferren Forest from Royal Decree Four Hundred and Eighty-Three are rescinded.”

He was met with dumbfounded silence. But Robin was beaming.

As they hurried off the stage, the crowd all whispering to each other about what had just happened, John leaned in and whispered, “The taxes we get from hunters selling in the marketplace better be worth it.”

Robin said, “They will be. And you’ll have more meat available to purchase and send to the frontlines. Richard will love you for it.”

“I didn’t do it for him,” John muttered. As they climbed off the platform, he looked over his shoulder at the crowd and grabbed Robin’s arm and ushered her back into the carriage. “Let’s just get a move on and get this over with so we can get back to the castle.”

“Come on, this next part is the best part. I promise,” Robin said as his hand slid off her side while she climbed in. Giving back was always the best part.

Robin might be a little addicted to admiration and gratitude, but considering her crimes, that really was the least of them in her opinion.

## CHAPTER 20

It took longer for them to get to the part Robin actually cared about since the guards had to go through the streets to clear enough space and set up a perimeter to keep a huge mob from forming, restricting it to just those who lived in that section of town. Robin shot out of the carriage as soon as they were given the word, ready to do what she did best, but to her surprise, she wasn't doing it alone.

John also climbed out of the carriage after her, and he didn't hover off to the side with the army of guards. There *was* an army of guards all up and down the streets, but John stayed right by her side, escorting her, his hand on the small of her back as Robin went from house to house.

It was like the old days again. Kind of.

She didn't have Little Jon with five children all climbing over him and trying to get at the basket he had in his hands, laughing as he held it far out of their reach. She didn't have Alan flirting with the single young women whose fathers were off to war. Or Will who was completely oblivious to the way young women Alan tried to flirt with were trying to flirt with him instead. Robin had always been the face of it, taking the baskets from Little Jon and passing them to the grateful mothers and fathers, to the old and young widows with too many mouths to feed, the grandfathers who couldn't fight or work anymore. She would return embraces and clasp arms and brush off their thanks with a humble air even though it still sent a thrill down her spine every time they called her their hero.

Now she was still the hero, but the John with her was a very different man.

And she wasn't running at the sight of the men in guards' uniforms.

Most people were grateful and lovely to Robin even if they eyed Prince John at her side with apprehension. Some... weren't.

Robin hadn't remained in everyone's good graces.

"You let him walk you like a dog; what else do you let him do?"

Robin froze in the middle of the street at the sound of that voice. John's hand on her back tightened as he whipped around. She looked over to see two men standing down the street outside of a house that was beyond the guards' perimeter. She recognized one of them. The one who'd heckled her the last time she'd been outside the castle.

"You were supposed to stop him and save us, but now you're his pet! What is all this about? Trying to placate us?"

The other one said, "You're carrying his cursed spawn, aren't you, traitor? You set out to stop his evil but you're just going to bring more into this world!"

Robin took a step back, heat flooding her cheeks as she bit her tongue to keep from retorting about how wrong he was, but John still held onto her as he barked, "Guards!"

"What? Did he take out your spine when he—"

"Arrest them! Now!" John snapped, cutting him off before he could finish the thought, but Robin could finish it on her own.

Robin put her hand on his arm and leaned in, whispering, "Don't undo all the progress we've made today. They're just words, and they aren't even true."

John said, "No one insults my wife in such a vulgar fashion right in front of me and gets away with it."



Huh. He never batted an eye at an insult to him, but apparently harassing her was a line too far?

To Robin's surprise and gratitude, instead of giving them some severe punishment, John's orders were simply to have them removed and thrown in the stocks for the day. When they reached those men's houses, their wives and families were profusely embarrassed and apologetic. He didn't try to stop Robin from still giving them a basket. Instead, he'd stood behind Robin, a hand on her shoulder, and he'd even made a joke to the wives about how he couldn't imagine any man being so disgruntled and displeased with his life when he had a wife as lovely as her and children as polite and good as hers. They were a credit to her, far more than they were to him. Robin couldn't help but gape at him. Then he'd said he and Robin would be lucky beyond measure if they were ever blessed with children half as sweet as hers in the future.

Robin's bright flush returned and she tried not to strangle him on the spot.

That night, she and John took dinner in his room instead of the dining room after their long day. He finished his glass of wine and sank back into the sofa, throwing his arms back over the side and the arm of the chair. His hair fell back as he looked up at the ceiling and said, "We're never doing that again."

Robin pulled her legs up onto the couch as she turned to face him, her own arm over the back of the sofa as she adjusted and said, "Come on, you were enjoying yourself by the end of it! Wasn't it nice? To actually physically give back? To stop pretending to be the villain and be something else?"

John cracked open one eye. "Pretending?"

"You know what I mean. I'm just saying, maybe people will start to think more of you now that they've seen you doing some good, and maybe those men's families will tell them to be grateful you didn't jail them or fine them."

"Oh, don't count on it, Little Birdie." John closed his eyes and shifted back again, gesturing in the air. "They'll spin it and spin it and spin it until the story becomes I had them flogged

for looking at you. I ripped you out of the carriage and shoved you up onto that stage and I was whispering in your ear with a knife at your back, making you say all of that and then I dragged you from house to house before finally dragging you back to the castle where tonight I'll beat you or starve you or do any number of horrible, unspeakable things to you. And you'll suffer it all so nobly and bravely and the truth doesn't matter."

Robin scoffed and jabbed her bare foot into his thigh, her slippers abandoned on the floor. John immediately sat up, grabbing her ankle and pulling it into his lap. Robin lightly tried to tug her foot back, but he didn't let go as she said, "You are so dramatic! That is not what everyone is saying right now."

"That's exactly what they're saying. And if you weren't on the other side of it, you wouldn't believe any differently, would you?" John opened his eyes again and looked at her.

"I—" Alright. He caught her there. But she had good reason to. "I wouldn't now."

His lips twitched into a smile. "Then that's what matters. That and the fact that they all saw you out there doing the exact same thing you used to do, just in a dress and without three savages trailing behind you."

Robin tried to pull her ankle back again, but John just pulled it back. "And that just goes to show you're not immune to prejudice either. Just because they're not princes doesn't mean they're savages."

He lifted his head and rolled his eyes. "Their fearless leader bit me. If that doesn't make them savages, I don't know what does."

"Leader," Robin scoffed. "We were a team. I only became the 'leader' because it was my idea to start stealing and I was the one who came up with the plans. Everything was a team effort. We were a family."

John's hand stilled and it was only then Robin realized his thumb had been moving in a slow, small circle on her ankle.

“That explains it.”

“Explains what?” Robin sat up straighter, but this time not taking advantage of the chance to pull her leg back.

“Why no one ever seems to recognize you for your real talent. And no, I’m not talking about archery. You were the schemer, and they were...” He tilted his head. “Is that what all of them were to you? A second family?”

Schemer? John was a schemer. She was... the one with the plan. There was nuance.

But the fact that he thought that was what her greatest gift was...

“Little Jon was like a father to me and Will. Alan was like our older brother, and Will was like a brother as well,” Robin spoke softly.

A weight settled in her chest and her stomach turned as she realized some days she didn’t even seem to miss them as much as she should. She should be feeling their absence like a boulder on her back or a hole in her chest. But most days she was...

“Still. Not everyone with blood brothers can claim such loyalty and closeness. Those three were just the first to see what everyone else would later when they appointed you their savior.”

“What is the deal with you and Richard?” Robin asked.

“There’s really nothing to say. Despite what the general public might believe, I’m not secretly sending assassins after him or plotting all the ways I’ll poison him and steal the crown for good. That doesn’t mean I’d follow him to the ends of the earth. He was the heir, the warrior king, the inspiring leader and hope for the future and I was... quiet.”

A distant look entered John’s eyes and Robin held her breath as she wondered if maybe this was the moment every question she had about John from the moment she’d agreed to marry him would finally be answered. She still wasn’t sure she wanted the answers... But maybe it wouldn’t be as bad as she feared.

“Lonely. Richard always got on well with everyone and it was always so effortless for him. Two people as different as us could never be close. He was always a man of action. I kept to myself with my sketchbooks. Anything I wasn’t good at that he was, I stopped doing because I didn’t want to always be compared to him and have it always highlighted how I was second best. Not a fighter. Not a leader people wanted to follow. When trouble comes, I give up. When danger approaches, I run.”

Something deep settled into her chest. There was nothing she understood more than running away. She’d been running for so long she didn’t think she could ever stop.

The portrait he’d painted of her and her parents still sat in his room behind them.

Even if she didn’t have to keep running... when had that ever stopped her?

John sighed. “When I was younger, before our parents died, I did attempt to defend myself, but I also wasn’t a saint. I hated how easy everything was for Richard and how much harder it was for me. Sometimes... I did receive blame for things I had done. Stealing Richard’s assignments and painting over them so he’d have to re-do them was just one among the many I was caught for. So my reputation wasn’t wholly unearned; I wasn’t likable like Richard was. I always said the wrong thing. The cruel thing. I lied. So anytime there was the chance to be blamed, I was the easiest person to blame. No one ever believed me when I wasn’t lying and I wasn’t at fault. So... it became easier just to be what everyone expected. There was a moment where I was more power hungry. I did want to be regent. I wanted to be something. But I mostly didn’t want to be dead. Richard was set on the idea that someone should lead the army from the desert, and I’ve never been able to stand up to him, but I begged for him to let me stay in Lathe. I was so relieved when he agreed he would go to war and I would rule. Now that I wasn’t terrified for my life, I thought that maybe finally I could be powerful and respected and everything he always had been as heir and then king. But I know better now. I will never be beloved the way you and

Richard are. Truth doesn't matter. Everyone has long since made up their minds about me, and I've made my peace with it."

Robin had thought her mind had been made up about him. She'd thought the truth had been one thing. Maybe it was another. But with a man who didn't care to fight for it, how was she ever going to know?

Robin did finally pull her leg out of his grip, only so she could shift closer, her legs brushing his as she sat beside him. She shook her head. "You have no faith in people."

He looked up at her, her head slightly above his as she sat on her knees, holding herself up with the back of the sofa. He said, "You have too much."

Maybe that was true.

Maybe she had too much faith in him.

## CHAPTER 21

Just when Robin thought she was getting a handle on John, he started acting... not necessarily strangely. Robin couldn't really even put her finger on it; there was just something different after her birthday.

Things settled back into their usual routine, but Robin was thrilled that Marian was staying at the castle for a while. She was less thrilled Guy was also staying at the castle—she still had to fight the instinct to start running in the opposite direction when she saw him in the hallways—but she got to actually spend time with her cousin and not just secret visits under the cover of night.

So Robin actually spent less time with John—not much—she just wasn't going to lose a single day with Marian while she was there, so she didn't spend the whole afternoon working with John. He assured her that he could handle it and that she should enjoy herself. Besides, they'd still have their morning training sessions and the time they'd work in his room at night.

Two weeks after her birthday, Robin held her quarterstaff to John's neck as she had him pinned on the ground, her knees on the ground trapping his legs between them. She said, "It's like you've gotten worse. Or stopped trying at all."

John's hands came up and rested on the backs of her legs, just above the knee. He said, "I'm pretty sure I've always been this hopeless. Besides, who said I wasn't trying?"

“If you were trying, you should have been able to pin me down by now. At least once. Even terrible fighters get lucky, not to mention your height and natural strength advantage even if you still have a lack of skill. Plus, I often leave openings for you to take advantage of on purpose and you never do.”

“Oh, so you want me to take advantage of you?”

Robin pulled the quarterstaff back and started to sit back, but John’s grip on the back of her thighs stopped her. “John—”

But before she could finish, the world flipped on its axis, and Robin’s back hit the grass and now she was staring up at John. He sat straddling her, his hands on either side of her head as he leaned over her, his face hovering above hers, and he said, “Is this better?”

Robin couldn’t think for a moment.

When she did, her palm slammed into his chest hard enough that he wheezed and she scrambled out from under him and didn’t stop running until she’d made it back to her room.

John had always been forward, but there was something different about this. There was something in his eyes when he looked at her that Robin couldn’t figure out. She couldn’t figure out what it was. She couldn’t figure out what she felt about it.

And then there were the gifts.

One night, when she’d come back into her room, there’d been a box on her dresser. Robin approached it warily and opened it to find a beautiful but surprisingly plain necklace. It was gold, but compared to all the other pieces that sat in the jewelry box Robin never willingly touched, it was plain. It was a simple, thin chain with a small pendant, a thin gold arrow.

When Robin confronted John about it, telling him they were supposed to be cutting costs, not commissioning jewelry, he hadn’t even looked up from the painting he was working on—a scene from the ball he’d held on her birthday—and said all it had cost was the price of the jeweler taking one of his

mother's necklaces and reworking it into the arrow, and he'd been paid in the leftover gold from the original pendant that hadn't been used, so it really hadn't cost anything.

When Robin asked why he would even think to have one of his mother's necklaces melted down for her, he'd simply shrugged and said better to turn it into something she'd wear than let it remain something that was just going to gather dust.

"Besides, you won that first gold arrow fair and square. I don't know what you did with it, but it was my prize to give you, so there it is."

Robin didn't buy his casual air.

He was up to something.

The next gift had been waiting for them at the training grounds one day. Since the day John had bested her, she'd stopped using the quarterstaff and switched back to a bow and arrows. Waiting at the targets was a new curved bow and a set of arrows with green fletching. When she'd whirled around to confront John, he'd had his hands up and said he would have just given her original bow back but the Sheriff had destroyed it, and really she should have a bow that was hers and not one of the pathetic ones from the armory. Besides, the man who'd made it had been thrilled to do it. He was now the man who'd made Robin Hood's new bow; that was going to get him business for the rest of his life, so really they were helping him.

Now that spring was creeping closer and the nights were no longer so cold in the castle with the roaring fires, Robin's leg no longer ached. However, they didn't return to simply sitting across from each other and working. John still stuck by her side, closer actually now that her legs weren't stretched out on top of him.

She jumped when the first strand of hair fell to her shoulder, and she whipped her head around to see John holding a hairpin. He simply said, "You have a headache and with how tightly your hair's pulled back that's obviously not helping."



She didn't know how he'd figured out she had a headache, but she rolled her eyes and reached up to take the pins out herself. Before she could, John had caught her hands and pulled them down. He stared at her and there was something almost desperate in his eyes as he whispered, "Let me."

Before Robin could regain her senses enough to come up with a good reason to decline, he'd started again, and suddenly they had a new ritual. Robin couldn't say it bothered her. She couldn't say she despised the way it felt to have his hands in her hair, gently working the pins out so he didn't take a single hair with him. She couldn't say she didn't lean back into his touch as he would run his fingers through her hair when he'd finished, letting it spill over her shoulders.

She couldn't even pretend his soft hands didn't have her dozing off within seconds.

It made it incredibly hard to figure out what game he was playing now.

Robin sighed and buried her head deeper into her pillow. She didn't want to wake up and have to deal with everything. With all the paperwork that haunted her. With whatever John was up to. She just wanted to stay right where she was for the rest of her life. Warm and comfortable and away from it all.

She took a deep breath—if there was one thing she didn't miss about living in a forest it was the smell. The smell of clean sheets and a soft mattress would be enough to make anyone reconsider a life of crime—but it wasn't quite what she was used to. With the smell of the soap the laundry girls used there was also the smell of parchment and paint.

Robin then realized there was a weight on her hip, above her thick woolen dress—she must have forgotten to change—something resting there.

Robin opened her eyes and froze when she saw she hadn't just forgotten to change out of her clothes from the day before. She'd forgotten to go back to her room, period.

Her foot twitched, knocking into the papers she and John had been looking at that were still on the foot of the bed.

They'd needed more space than his small table provided, so she hadn't thought much about spreading it all out on the bed and sitting on it to get a bigger picture. She hadn't imagined she'd stay there.

At the sound of paper fluttering to the ground, the hand on her hip flexed, sinking into the fabric of her skirts.

Robin forced herself to look at John, and there was almost no space between them. He was lying on his side, facing her, his head buried in a pillow and one arm underneath it with the other on her.

Robin didn't think her heart had ever beat faster than it did right then. No desperate chase through the forest where a single mistake meant her capture had her heart pounding like it did while she lay still beside John.

*"Must be nice not to have to worry about staying warm this winter since you'll be warming Prince John's bed."*

A freezing cold sensation went down her spine and stopped her heart.

This. This shouldn't have happened. She'd gotten too comfortable. She'd let her guard down. So much so that she apparently trusted him enough to fall asleep right beside him in his own bed.

When Robin started to push herself away, the hand on her hip tightened even further, bunching her skirts desperately, and there was a whisper, Robin barely heard it. She pretended she didn't. She slipped off the top of the covers and rushed back to her room, John still too out of it to be aware.

"Stay," he'd whispered.

Instead, she ran.

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Marian laughed at her.

"It's not funny!" Robin grabbed the nearest throw pillow and chucked it at her cousin who caught it and simply dropped

it to the ground beside her chair.

“Rob, you could have hit the tea set and made a mess,” Marian said, still laughing.

“We both know I have better aim than that. And stop laughing! I knew I shouldn’t have told you any of this!” Robin crossed her arms and pouted at her cousin. She’d spilled every detail she’d been holding onto about John’s strange behavior recently to Marian, desperately hoping she would have some insight on what John could be up to.

“I’m only laughing because it amazes me how clueless you are about men despite the fact that you ran around the forest with three of them for years!”

“I’m not clueless! Those men I know. Prince John is a whole different kind of creature! He’d be insulted to even be considered in the same realm as my men.”

“Trust me, Rob, he’s not that different. You are a little clueless, and that’s just what happens when you spend the years you should be courting escaping dungeons and shooting at guards.”

“What are you talking about?”

Marian rolled her eyes and reached for her tea. She took a sip and said, “I’ll rephrase. Didn’t you say once that Alan told you the story of how he became a hunter and joined up with Little Jon and Will?”

Robin furrowed her brow. “Yes. He was a minstrel, but since that wasn’t exactly providing a steady career and he was in love, he became a hunter to make himself a better suitor so he could court her. But she chose someone else, so he left the village rather than watch her marry someone else.”

When Robin had first heard the story as a twelve-year-old, she had been so offended on Alan’s behalf, she tried to get the girl’s location out of him so she could go leave a bunch of dirt in the girl’s bed and teach her a lesson. Alan had reached over, roughly mussing her hair and laughing while telling her that her loyalty was appreciated but unnecessary.

“And when he was courting her, what did he do?” Marian spoke to Robin like a child. It had her looking for another throw pillow.

“He gave her things, trying to show her he could provide. Gave her a deer pelt as a rug for winter. Used the money he got for the venison to buy her a bracelet. He saved up and got her a new spinning wheel since hers constantly broke down and made it so she couldn’t spin yarn.”

Marian simply raised an eyebrow like that had somehow made a point.

Robin stared at her blankly.

Marian set her cup down with a rattle and pinched the bridge of her nose. “You are hopeless.”

“Marian, I need your help with John. Not Alan. Although it’d be nice to have help getting in contact with them because I know they haven’t just given up and left me here.”

“I’m going to make this as plain as possible. Alan gave his sweetheart something that would help take care of her during winter. He gave her jewelry he thought she would like. He gave her a spinning wheel to show her he cared about the things she cared about and wanted her to have the tools necessary to do the things that mattered to her. Does any of this sound familiar?”

Robin opened her mouth to tell Marian to get to the point, when she realized she was fiddling with her necklace. The little arrow.

Oh.

The wool dresses and training clothes for winter.

A necklace that he thought she would like because of its simplicity and minimal cost.

A new bow and quiver of arrows.

That was just the surface.

“But—I—No. Marian, no. Alright, that’s not—” Robin stuttered.

“Men really aren’t all that different when they’re trying to win a woman’s affections. It just looks a little different when you’re a prince than when you’re a pauper.”

“But men do that in order to convince a woman to marry them. We’re already married!”

“Men do that when they want a woman to *want* to marry them. John wants you to want to be his wife. Not simply be stuck as his wife because he caught you.”

“Why?”

Marian huffed. “Because he’s obviously in love with you!”

No. *No*. That couldn’t be possible. It was Prince John. He couldn’t be capable of it.

Yes, he might not be the manifestation of evil that she’d once thought, but that didn’t mean he could fall in love. Especially with her.

She was everything a prince wasn’t supposed to want.

“Rob, he wrote to me so he could personally paint a portrait of you and your parents because you said you couldn’t even remember what they looked like.”

Robin couldn’t even remember saying that. He’d remembered some kind of small off-hand comment and it was enough for him to go through all that work for her?

It was too much. Robin couldn’t—

“Why haven’t the Merry Men come for me?” Robin grabbed onto the nearest issue instead. The only thing that could help her avoid this realization. “Alan said they were coming.”

“Do you even still want them to?” Marian whispered. “Have you ever considered... maybe you’re wrong? That maybe this isn’t a prison? That maybe this was where you’re meant to be in order to do the most good? That you can choose to be happy? That you can choose to love?”

Not after what he’d done to her. Not Prince John. Not a wicked coward.

## CHAPTER 22

Just when everything seemed to be falling into place, something changed. John just couldn't figure out what.

He couldn't say what he'd been doing had been *working*, but it hadn't *not* been working. It wasn't easy trying to figure out how to get the wife he'd trapped in marriage to fall in love with him. He tried gifts that weren't too extravagant to offend her sensibilities. He tried physical closeness without being too amorous and pushing too far. But one day it was like all the progress he had made vanished.

Robin declared him proficient enough that he probably wouldn't be immediately killed if someone came at him and stopped going to the training grounds at all. Their afternoons were still together, but Robin was wholly focused on work and often scheduled herself meetings or spent time with Marian. Their dinners now included Guy and Marian, and Robin spent the entire time talking to Marian. John ignored Guy's pointed looks as he watched Robin. The worst part was Robin had stopped coming into his room.

The first night, John had fallen asleep on the sofa waiting for her. The second he paced the room until dawn. The third he'd knocked on the door and received no response.

The fourth he turned the knob. Well, he tried and couldn't. It was locked. He spent that night sitting up against the door, his head in his hands.

He had no idea what he'd done wrong so he couldn't even try to fix it.

That didn't even include the issues he now had with the Merry Men, who could not leave well enough alone.

It seemed every other day the Sheriff was pulling him aside and telling him they'd caught one. John always gave the same order: wait until nightfall and have them thrown outside the city walls and make sure they couldn't get in the same way again.

Somehow, they kept finding new ways.

And John was terrified one day the Sheriff wouldn't catch them before they got to Robin.

And Robin was pulling away from him, so he wasn't even around her as much to ensure they didn't get close enough to take her away.

She was doing that all on her own.

One glorious afternoon where Robin was actually sitting in the study, working with him, he saw her rubbing at her temples. Her hair was pulled back tightly by a flurry of hairpins. He should pay her handmaids more for such a golden opportunity.

John was a desperate man whose pride had abandoned him when Robin did. So he shamelessly rose from his desk and crept toward her. She didn't notice him until he took the seat beside her on the sofa. She looked up, and he heard her breath hitch in her chest as she stared at him.

His fingers brushed her temple, skimming back to her hair. "May I?"

Robin swallowed and turned her head to give him access to the back of her hair style. "If you must."

John's fingers were in her hair immediately. He moved slower and gentler than he ever had before, like she could vanish beneath his fingertips at any moment.

By the time half her hair was draped down her shoulder, she whispered, "Why do you do this?"

Because he was a coward.

“Because you’re my wife. I don’t like seeing you in pain.”

“Why do you say it like that?”

“Say what?”

“‘My wife.’ You say it—” Robin sighed. “You say it like you’re trying to say something else.”

John’s hands stilled, resting on her neck. “What do you think I’m trying to say?”

Robin turned around in her seat, bracing herself on the back of the sofa and the arm. He shifted closer, blocking her in. Her eyes darted up from his lips to his eyes. “Marian thinks you’re in love with me.”

Oh no.

“Who cares what Marian thinks?”

“She’s my cousin. I care.”

“What does it matter if your cousin thinks that? What does it matter if everyone thinks that? They’re supposed to. You’re my wife.”

“Like that! You’re saying it like—” Robin’s gaze darted down again. “Like you’re saying—”

He knew what she was about to say, and he couldn’t let her. Once those words were in the air, everything was going to collapse. So John did the first thing he could think to do.

He kissed her.

Robin made a muffled squeak as his lips crashed into hers, his hand sinking into the half of her hair he had pulled down. He shifted even closer, grabbing her waist and pulling her up against him. He was a man who’d spent days in the desert without water as a storm broke above him. After so long without it, he was going to drown himself in it.

Robin’s hand landed on his shoulder, and when it tightened into his shirt instead of pushing him away, he threw himself into the kiss deeper. He didn’t care that his desperation was pouring out of every inch of him as he kissed her again and again. He didn’t want it to end. He was terrified of what was



going to happen when it ended, so he was going to keep going in the hope that maybe he could kiss her long enough to make her forget what she'd been about to say. To make her forget the words she was going to use to break him.

He was going to kiss her long enough to make himself forget about what was going to happen next.

“John...” Robin breathed out against his lips and finally her hand was pushing him back.

John stumbled back, right off the sofa and to his feet as Robin stared up at him, her face flushed and her lips swollen. Her eyes were wide and John knew he had failed. So he had to speak first.

He whispered, “Is it truly so terrible a thought that you cannot even bear to be near me? Is it really so awful to consider that I could be in love with my own wife?”

“I—” Robin’s breath was labored. She started to push herself to her feet, stumbling away from John. “I’m not doing this. Not with you. I’m not playing your games. I’m not falling for another one of your traps!”

That’s what she still thought of him? After all this time? After everything he’d done?

“You think I’ve wanted this? To be reduced to a pathetic mess, begging for scraps of attention from my own wife?”

“Stop saying that!” Robin yelled. “Stop saying it like you love me when you just want to own me!”

He went completely still. He’d never had a hope, had he?

“Own you?” John whispered.

“What else am I supposed to think? Those drawings of me? Everything I have here is because of you—directly because of you. You designed every piece of clothing I wear, every piece of furniture in my room. You give me things I don’t want or need. You do things you think I’ll approve of because you want me to lower my guard. Simpering over me, finding all these little ways to put your hands on me while pretending you care about me. The portrait of me and my

parents, trying to make me into Roberta and not Robin Hood. You want me to give up and accept this—accept you! But I finally figured out the game you’ve been playing for months now, and I can’t believe I was naïve enough to miss it all this time. You’ve just been turning me into your little pet!” Robin’s face was now bright red, but it was clear rage. “You want me to need you so you can own me.”

He was losing her. He could feel her finally slipping through his hands, so he threw it all to the wind to at least do *something*.

“I love you.”

“You don’t know how to love something without owning it.”

“What would you have me do then?” He did not care how desperate his pleading was or how it mixed with his terror and cowardice until it looked far more like anger. “I cannot go back in time and erase our wedding from existence so I can do this properly! And even if I could, you would have nothing to do with me if it weren’t for this situation. I cannot win with you!”

“No. John. You’ve been winning this whole time. You just can’t win me.” Robin lifted her chin. “I will not let you make me into the image of a wife you desire.”

Why did she always have it wrong?

“You are what I desire! Did I not just prove that?” John gestured to her still swollen lips.

It was the wrong thing to say, as Robin flushed once more. “That—*That* will never happen again. You will stay away from me.”

Even as she tried to push him away, pretending she hated him, he could see through it. The way he’d seen her exhaustion the first time they’d met. He would not let her deny what she’d just done as well.

“If I am so undesirable to you, why did you kiss me back?”

Robin ran for the door.

John reached the open doorway and spotted Robin hurrying down the hall, running away from him. “For the record, it’s not a crime to kiss your husband, but maybe I should make it one since apparently that’s the only way to catch your interest!”

Robin was gone.

John leaned back against the doorway, closing his eyes and praying to the stars above he hadn’t just lost her for good.

## CHAPTER 23

Robin ran into her room, slamming the door shut behind her. She rushed over to the door connecting her room to John's, making sure it was locked. Once she had, she stepped back and breathed again. She ran a hand through her hair, still half up since John hadn't finished.

He couldn't love her. No matter how much he professed to.

He just wanted to possess her. They were completely different things.

He just thought he loved her. Which was exactly why Robin had to control this and stop it before it went any further. Before she went too far.

Before she was in too deep. Before she couldn't stop.

She couldn't give her heart to him. If she did, she'd never leave this castle, never see her men again, never be Robin Hood again. She'd just be his wife, the princess, Roberta of Locksley.

And—

And—

And she couldn't remember why that would be so terrible a fate for a moment.

Which was exactly why she couldn't let him in. Why she had to shove him away and put back all the distance they'd crossed over the past months.

Robin sat on her bed and reached down and rubbed her bad leg even though it didn't ache.

She couldn't let herself love him. She couldn't.

Because then it would all have been for nothing. All the years she'd worked as Robin Hood to save people from his crippling taxes and iron fist would have been a waste.

Because if John wasn't what all the rumors claimed he was, a monster from birth, then that meant he hadn't—

“Psst!”

Robin looked up.

“Hey, princess, sorry it took so long. Still ready for that rescue?”

When she was presented with the chance to run away, Robin had never turned it down. Not since the day she stopped being Roberta and became Robin. She'd sworn never to go back.

---

“I'll kill them. I'm going to strangle them when we find them! They are not taking her from me again!”

John could hear Marian rail at Guy behind him. But it might as well have been on the other side of the country.

Or wherever Robin was.

Because she wasn't there. She was gone.

John sat on the edge of Robin's bed, staring at the open window and the rope swinging in the air outside. The wardrobe was open, the dress Robin had been in earlier discarded on the ground, and the wool tunic and trousers he'd given her for the training grounds gone. Otherwise, the room was exactly as it always was.

That was how John knew she hadn't been kidnapped.

Guy was promising he was going to get the Sheriff and they were going to find Robin and the Merry Men, and John wanted to throw something at him. Guy's words were exactly the same empty promises he couldn't meet years ago before John had ever laid eyes on the outlaw.

Guy couldn't find or catch Robin if she fell out of a tree and broke her leg right in front of him.

"Oh, you don't even know where to look!" Marian huffed. "They were so desperate when they came to me for a legal solution to annul the marriage but since they clearly never found one, they must have just decided to go for her and figure it out later. And now they could be taking her anywhere!"

"They've never been far from Ferren before," Guy said. "They've never left Astren before."

"They've never been trying to make off with Prince John's wife before!"

"Get out."

Marian and Guy turned to John. He tightened his grip on the dress he'd picked up off the floor. He yelled, "Get out!"

Guy took Marian's arm and rushed her out of the room, shutting the door behind them, leaving John alone.

John rose from the bed, flinging the dress to the ground as he started pacing the room. Robin was gone.

Her men had finally found a way in and had gotten to her before the Sheriff and the guards could stop them. It had only been a matter of time. He'd always known he'd lose her.

He'd just...

He'd started to hope he wouldn't. That over time, she might not slip out a window and back into the woods from whence she came, leaving him standing there like a fool because he thought he could convince the righteous outlaw to love the cowardly tyrant.

The portrait of her and her parents still hung on the wall.

She'd told him. He couldn't even blame her. She'd told him Lady Roberta of Locksley was dead and all that was left was the outlaw, Robin Hood. She'd told him she'd started running and had never stopped. He shouldn't have hoped that maybe she would stop running just because of him.

And why shouldn't she run?

She knew him. He was no great fighter. He was the biggest coward to ever walk the continent. He'd exposed every truth and vulnerability about himself to her with wide eyes, hoping that if he bore his rotten soul out before her maybe she would find something in it worth staying for.

But of course there wasn't.

John walked up to the dresser. He should have thrown himself at her feet in his study and grabbed her skirts and begged her not to run. His pride wasn't worth this.

The sun was low in the sky, its last rays slipping into the room and shining off the small gold arrow and the thin chain. John brushed his fingers over the gold, shivering at how cold it was.

He let out a scoff. She couldn't even leave a note. She'd just thrown it all to the wind and leapt out the window the second she could.

She'd named herself Robin. Of course she acted like a caged bird.

And she was. He couldn't pretend he hadn't rip her out of the sky and stuck her in the most magnificent cage in Astren, hoping she'd sing for him.

John moved to the window and loosened the rope, throwing it down to the training grounds below. He then moved to shut the window.

The light caught the little gold arrow again.

John froze. She'd taken the time to change her clothes and abandon the necklace.

But she hadn't left her ring.

She'd *never* taken her ring off.

She'd taken her ring with her.

Why?

Why wouldn't she leave it behind as well if she was going to leave him?

He'd only discovered Robin was gone because he'd come to her room to grovel at her feet and try to explain himself. He'd been hoping the words would come to him when he got there. Or he'd just be the same needy, pathetic mess he'd been earlier that day, but maybe it would work out better the second time around as he begged her not to run from him.

Some kind of apology. Some kind of attempt at honesty, telling her the truth of his feelings and intentions. Some kind of desperate plea for her not to leave him.

He should have moved faster. Now it was too late.

Because even if he could overcome his cowardice and find the words to convince her to stay, he wouldn't even know where to begin looking.

Unless...

Oh no. But where else would they go?

Where else would her men take her but the one place everyone knew John would never go?

But John wasn't a fighter. Not even for what mattered to him. And Robin had mattered most.

He was a coward. And a villain. And he didn't deserve Robin.

So he should let her go. Let her men take her wherever they wanted. Enact whatever scheme they had to free her from him fully.

John looked back at the dresser.

But... Why had she taken the ring?



## CHAPTER 24

The second Will had popped up over the windowsill with a rope in hand, throwing it into her room, Robin hadn't wasted a second.

She'd pulled Will into the room, changed into trousers and a tunic, and thrown off the arrow necklace. When she looked at her hand, at the ring that had been on it for so long now, she didn't take it off. Instead, she just grabbed the bow and quiver, trying not to remember the smirk and the light in John's eyes when he'd watched her pick it up. She couldn't go without a weapon.

Although she didn't think as to what she was going to need protecting from.

Robin wasn't entirely sure what happened after she secured the rope and went out the window after Will.

It was like she blinked and she was on a horse, galloping away from Lathe. She looked back only once at the castle as the sun started setting. Then Little Jon called out her name and she turned back around and followed them into the forest. They rode all night and stopped only when dawn started to break and their horses could go no farther.

Little Jon grabbed her and swung her off her horse, burying her in a bear hug that brought tears to her eyes. She was ten again, being found after running and she was going to run for the rest of her life. Then Alan and Will were joining in, and Robin was biting her tongue and shaking, trying not to cry.

She wasn't supposed to cry. Not in front of her men. She had to be strong enough to keep up. The one with the plan, calling the shots.

So she didn't. Robin took a deep, shuddering breath as she stepped out of Little Jon's grip and pulled Alan into a hug and then Will. She did not cry.

She was leaving that behind in Lathe, that weak, sniveling mess of a creature Prince John had turned her into.

"Oh, Robin, it is good to see ye well!" Little Jon said, clapping a strong hand on her back. "Ye wouldn't believe how worried we've been about ye."

"You should hear the stories everyone's been telling about you!" Alan said. "Everything from Prince John dragging you to some secret courtyard and beating you every morning to you curling up on his lap like some declawed cat every night! Sometimes people were telling both at the same time."

Well... they were half-right. And apparently her handmaids were massive gossips.

"Of course it suited Prince Parasite to have people believe that," Will said, scowling. "Running around telling people all sorts of lies about you."

"Like what?" This was the first she'd heard of John saying anything about her. "He always told people to stop gossiping about me."

Will scoffed. "Did he? Because he told me lies right to my face. Claiming he put his hands on you—and worse that you wanted him to! Saw right through it, I did, obviously, but the fact that he dared to put your name in his mouth like that made me want to end him right there."

Robin hoped they couldn't see how bright red her face was in the shadows of the trees. Of course John would crow and make insinuations about her letting him help her with her bad leg. Wait...

"To your face? When was this?" Robin turned on her feet. "Have you all tried to rescue me before and been caught?"

Little Jon looked up at the trees as the birds sang in the early dawn light. Will blanched while Alan winced and held his hand out, tilting it from side to side. "Eh... A handful of times."

"And you escaped every time? And didn't get me? I was in the castle every day. How did I not know this?"

"Not so much escaped every time, but, uh, released," Little Jon said.

"I think he liked it," Alan said. "Like some sick little game. Catch, release, catch, release, but we just needed one success, and here we are!"

They'd been coming for her for months and John had known. He'd hidden it from her. Of course he had. He'd been playing her for a fool. Always a game with him. Nothing he said was true or genuine.

At least she'd regained her senses before it had been too late.

"Well, thankfully we're all done playing his games. We're making our own now," Robin said. She gestured ahead. "We should keep moving."

But... he'd said he would go back on their pardon if they tried. That he would kill them. But instead he'd let them go.

No. She couldn't let herself go down that road. Not if she was going to keep running down hers.

They started forward again, leading their horses to give them at least a bit of a break while still putting distance between them and Lathe.

Will and Alan pulled ahead, debating between them how many men Prince John was going to send after them. Robin wasn't convinced John would send a bird after her. What man would want to expose himself to such rejection again?

"Robin..." Little Jon said, falling into step with Robin and squeezing her shoulder. "We all know how ye put on a brave face. But if there's something ye want to tell us, maybe not

now, but when ye're ready... Ye know ye're like a daughter to me."

They really thought—

"I promise, Prince John was—" Robin shook her head. "I don't know what he was, but I can assure you this. He did not hit me. He did not try anything with me, and he knew very well if he tried, he would not succeed. I made that abundantly clear. I was not defenseless."

Robin tried not to remember John's face as she'd bolted out of the study, hurt and humiliated as she could not answer him. She could not answer why she'd kissed him back.

She still couldn't. She didn't want to.

"Well, don't worry. We've got a plan. Prince John won't be able to lay a claim to ye when we're done."

"Where are we going? And how? I signed my legal name."

"We're not completely incapable without ye," Little Jon said. At Robin's pointed look, he shrugged. "Marian might have mentioned it as a ridiculous offhanded comment, but when she made it clear she wasn't getting involved and was happy about ye not running around with us anymore, we did our own research."

Robin twisted the wedding band still on her finger.

---

"You know this is a terrible idea, right?"

John ignored Guy as he turned to the Sheriff. He gestured to the small retinue of guards gathered in the castle courtyard. He said, "These are your best and fastest?"

"They are, Your Highness, but I must agree with Lord Guy." The Sheriff crossed his arms. "First of all, the outlaw isn't worth this effort if you're right. Second of all, if you are right, there's no need for you to go. You're only going to put yourself in danger. Let Guy and the men go and you stay in Lathe."

John glanced around the group of soldiers and to his and Guy's horses being held by a stable boy. He waved the boy over and turned back to the two of them. "You're not serious, right? The last time I left my outlaw in your hands, you failed to catch her every time. I'm not leaving the two of you to mess this up again."

John took the reins to his horse as Guy shook his head and said, "This is different. If your hunch is right, we know exactly where they're going. I'm more than capable of handling this. I'm properly motivated. Marian will kill me if I fail."

Speaking of whom, the castle doors flew open and Marian rushed down the steps. She ducked around the guards and right up to John and she said, "Are you going?"

"I'm still trying to talk him out of it," Guy said, rolling his eyes as his wife brushed right past him.

Marian glared at him. "Stop that! He has to go!"

John knew that, but he didn't expect anyone else to. "I do?"

"Obviously!" Marian turned back to him. She shook her head and said, "You're what she's running from. So if we have a hope of bringing her back for good, *you* have to convince her."

"Did I do something to suddenly make you like me?" John eyed Marian. "Because I distinctly remember you were not thrilled with me at the wedding."

Marian crossed her arms as Guy placed a hand on her shoulder. "Oh, I definitely hated you at the beginning for Rob's sake. But I also don't like those men who kept her from her proper family for years either. I don't like how you got her to marry you, but I do like her not being shot at by my husband or sleeping in a forest. Besides, the rumors about you I once believed might have been slightly exaggerated. And I know enough about how things run in this country to know all those orders with Rob's name on them couldn't be done behind your back. The two of you are good for this country. And somehow, you're good for her. So show her."

“How?” John whispered, tightening his grip on the reins. “I don’t know how I’m going to show her.”

“Robin might be running right now, but I know my cousin. Not even she can outrun the faith she has in people.”

John swallowed and nodded. He turned to Guy and said, “Mount up.”

Guy let out a long sigh and kissed his wife goodbye, but not without muttering to her, “You couldn’t have just slept in and let me convince him to stay here?”

“Sorry, I want my cousin back too much to trust you to be able to do it. Be safe, love.”

The Sheriff gestured for his men to open the castle gates as he muttered, “All this for an outlaw you should have killed when you had the chance.”

John climbed into his saddle. “No. All this for my wife.”

---

There was a massive, horrible, uncomfortable truth Robin could not deny.

She’d gotten soft.

Spoiled.

She blamed John.

Robin found she could not keep up with her men as easily as she used to. She tired a little faster, slept longer, ate more to feel full—well, she tried; they didn’t have the rations or the time to hunt properly if they wanted to stay ahead of whatever forces John might send after her.

Robin told her men John wasn’t going to send anyone after her.

*“You are what I desire!”*

Maybe.

As they traveled, Will and Alan pestered her for all the details about what had happened over the last year. Robin mostly shrugged and said there wasn't much to tell. John married her for political reasons and left her alone. Anything he might have said to them or any rumors were just him trying to get under their skin. Robin told them she spent her days trying to keep herself sharp, dedicating quite a bit of time to refining her quarterstaff skills—which she showed off to Little Jon, who still proved to be the master—and doing what she could to help people where she could.

When Little Jon narrowed his eyes at her and asked her how she was able to work around Prince John, she shrugged and said her taking on some responsibility meant he had less. Her men accepted that answer, buying into the implication that it was because John was lazy.

That night, as Robin struggled to sleep on the cold ground, rubbing her hand over her left calf, she refused to feel guilty about it. She failed.

She woke up with bags under her eyes and a headache from her tight braid. She refused to look at her left hand.

Robin instead focused on being back with her family that she'd desperately missed for so long. She had them regale her with all the stories of their rescue attempts. She'd demanded Alan explain why he thought dressing as a woman would work a third time when it didn't the first two. Will told her how the Sheriff had caught him hanging upside down, tangled up in a tapestry as he'd tried to sneak up to Robin's floor. Little Jon watched her, a knowing look in his eyes that Robin didn't like.

One night, when Robin was on watch, Little Jon took a seat beside her at the fire.

They were close, only a week and a half out from their destination and where they promised Robin would have her freedom again.

“What really happened, Robin?” Little Jon whispered after Will and Alan were out cold.

Robin wrapped her arms around her knees and rested her chin on them. “I really wish I knew.”

“I think ye know. I just think ye don’t want to.”

It was always the Johns who knew her best.

“What happened doesn’t matter anymore. John was just playing the long game, and I fell for it like I did all his other traps. Thankfully, you came and got me before it was too late.”

“What was the long game?”

“The same as the others. All he ever wanted was to have in his full possession the criminal causing him grief. The first part was finding me. The second was catching me. The third was binding me. The last was having me give in.” Robin tightened her grip. “He almost had me. I almost made a huge mistake.”

“When one of us mentions him, ye don’t have the look of someone who was just rescued.” Little Jon eyed her. “Ye look like ye did when I first found ye. Like ye’re running away.”

A chill ran down her spine. “Isn’t that similar enough?”

“There are right reasons to run from something. There are also wrong reasons. I love ye, Robin. We all do. Ye’re our family. And no matter what, we’ll be with ye if ye’re running for the right reasons or the wrong, but ye should at least know.”

*“You don’t have to keep running. Not anymore.”*

Robin whispered, “He gave me a portrait of me and my parents for my birthday.”

Little Jon blinked. “Didn’t it all burn up in the fire?”

Robin shook her head. “One survived, but not that one. He painted it himself.”

Little Jon hmphed. “Didn’t know he was an artist.”

Robin tightened her grip on her bad leg. “There was a lot about him I didn’t know either. He wasn’t... He wasn’t what I thought.”



“What was he then?”

“He wasn’t a tyrant. Or lazy.” Robin looked up at the stars peeking between the tree branches. “Or as greedy as I believed. And...”

*“I love you.”*

“Braver than I imagined.” Robin shook her head. “But that doesn’t matter. He’s still a coward. He won’t be coming after us, not personally. Not where we’re going. That I know.”

If Robin had to be the bigger coward, she would be.

## CHAPTER 25

John had never ridden so hard and fast in his life. He barely ate or slept and only when Guy reasoned with him that they had to stop and rest or else they'd kill the horses and slow themselves down even further.

All John could think about was Robin.

He had to reach her before he lost her.

If this was the end...

For the first time in his life, John was going to at least go down fighting.

---

Robin stared down at the papers in front of her.

The air was dry. Of course it was. It was the desert, after all.

“Why isn't she signing?” Will hissed in the background.

The day before, Robin and her men had arrived at their destination.

King Richard's encampment in the Scaldier desert. Her men were quite resourceful even without her. Maybe she wasn't the only one who could come up with a plan. Those months she'd been in Lathe, after Marian had refused to help them, they'd gone to the only person who had power over Prince John. King Richard.

Robin could barely recall meeting him now. It had been such a whirlwind, her heart in her chest as she knelt on the sand in front of him as he examined her, the girl his brother had married. The outlaw who had been ruining his war efforts.

He'd gone through the story her men had told him. How John had captured her and coerced her into marrying him. How John was a villain starving the people and withholding funds from the army.

And that was when everything sort of rushed back into clarity as she'd pushed herself to her feet, declaring that wasn't true.

King Richard had raised an eyebrow and said, "So you mean to say your own men are liars and have wasted my time?"

"They're not liars. What they told you is mostly true. But John wasn't trying to starve anyone or withhold from the army."

"But it is true he coerced you into marrying him?"

Robin had fallen silent again, spinning the wedding band around her finger.

Richard continued on. Either way, there was a legal error. John had pardoned the Merry Men following their marriage.

He'd never pardoned Robin. Not before or after. Which meant Richard had the power to annul the marriage with her consent since she was still a criminal under the law, and once the marriage was annulled, he could pardon her. Everyone would win, except for John.

All Robin had to do now was sign. So once the paperwork had been drafted, a day after they'd arrived, she was staring down at it sitting on Richard's desk.

The quill and inkwell were to her right.

All she had to do was sign her real name.

Roberta of Locksley.

And it would be like it had never happened. Legally at least.

“Come on, Robin, it’s really easy. You do still remember how to spell your legal name, right?” Alan asked from behind her.

There was the sound of someone cuffing someone else in the head. Little Jon huffed, “Of course she knows how to spell her name.”

“Is the quill broken?” Will asked.

Robin was perfectly still.

“Men, if you’ll give me a moment with my sister-in-law before she stops being my sister-in-law,” King Richard said, gesturing to the tent flap. Robin watched her men leave out of the corner of her eye, Will and Alan whispering to Little Jon and eyeing her with utter bafflement.

She held her breath. The day before, in all their meetings with Richard, her men had been there, doing most of the talking. This morning, the king had simply set the annulment papers he’d had drawn up on the desk and told her she could sign.

He came back around to the desk and said, “Is there a reason you’re so hesitant to sign?”

Robin had a better question. “Why are you so willing to just give me an annulment?”

Richard blinked at her for a moment before letting out a soft laugh. “It’s not often I’m questioned on my motives.”

“You have no reason to help me. You threatened to send John here because of how much of a problem I was for you. So now you’re just giving me what I want, no strings attached?” Robin leaned back in her chair, crossing her arms. “You’ll forgive me for being suspicious, Your Majesty.”

“Fair enough.” Richard leaned on the edge of his desk. “When your men first showed up here months ago, I had no intention of helping the outlaws that were costing me much needed supplies for this war. But then the other men in the

camp discovered they were your Merry Men. Even my soldiers have been hearing the stories about you, and they love telling them. They love anyone who gives my brother a hard time. It makes them feel better about being out here sweating, suffering, bleeding, and dying while John is in a castle living in luxury if they know someone is making him miserable.”

Robin tightened her grip on her arms. “Alright. Let me guess then. You think if you don’t give me the annulment and a pardon to spare me from your evil brother, your soldiers are going to—in some way—make things harder for you, disobey your orders, disrespect you, something along those lines?” His silence and the smirk twitching on his lips was answer enough. Robin scoffed. “You and John are not as different as you have the country believing.”

“I suppose we might have a similarity or two. I’m trying to win a war, outlaw. I need soldiers dedicated to that and not whispering behind their hands about the way I treated a folk heroine and left her trapped in a marriage to my evil brother when she came to me begging for my help. It’s not a good look for a king.” Richard’s eyes then traveled down to her left leg. “But why I’m doing any of this really isn’t the question. The question is, why aren’t you signing?”

Robin shifted her left leg in slightly and straightened up. “I need to know exactly what I’m doing and what the consequences will be. You and John aren’t the only scheming masterminds around here.”

Richard shook his head and let out another laugh. “Don’t tell me you’re thinking of not signing it after you came all this way and begged for it?”

“No, I’ll—” Robin started to reach for the quill but stopped herself. Her hand fell to the desk the second she spotted the wedding band around her finger.

Richard stared at her hand for a moment and then her leg before returning his gaze to her face. “It’s not easy for any of us to let go of our obsessions.”

Robin immediately jerked back. “What? John is the one who has been obsessed with possessing me since he saw under

my hood.”

The king raised an eyebrow. “So it’s a coincidence that Roberta of Locksley is the very same girl who decided to take up a crusade against Prince John almost immediately after I appointed him regent? Or that you stayed so long in Lathe even though we all know you were more than capable of escaping the castle and the city to disappear into the night and leave Astren completely?”

Robin shot out of her chair. “You remember?”

Richard shifted back. “Of course I do. Now what better way is there to put an end to this than for you to free yourself so he can never torment you again?”

“He hasn’t—” Robin wrapped her arms around her stomach and started pacing. “I don’t—Your Majesty, what if it wasn’t like that at all? Do you really think he—”

But before Robin could answer the question that had been running through her head for years, the tent flap shifted and a scout said, “Your Majesty, we have an urgent matter. Someone’s approaching.”

Richard sighed and pushed himself off the desk. “Hopefully it’s just our scouts. Robin, take all the time you need.” As he left, his eyes darted from her left hand down to her left leg. “I know you’ll make the right decision.”

Then King Richard and his soldier were gone.

Robin held her left hand to her chest, spinning the wedding band around her finger.

She should sign it. It’s what she’d wanted from the beginning. Her men alive, pardoned, free. An annulled marriage. Her freedom.

So why couldn’t she sign it?

John didn’t love her. Not the way he claimed to. It was just a game. Just trying to make her love him so he could have her fully the way he’d always wanted. He didn’t care about her. It had all just been a manipulation.

Hadn’t it?

John was a coward. The only way he knew how to love something was to possess it. But he would never fight for it. He'd told her himself. He wasn't capable of fighting. Not even for the things that mattered.

She couldn't love a coward.

He couldn't fight for himself, much less someone else. His entire life he just let everyone lie and spread rumors about him and spin him into something he wasn't. He wasn't what everyone believed him to be. He was worse. Because he wasn't, and he wouldn't fight it. If he couldn't stand up for himself, how could he fight for anything?

That was how she knew he didn't love her, not truly.

Because if he did—

*“What have you buffoons done with my wife?”*

Robin whipped around to face the front of the tent.

John.

## CHAPTER 26

The second John spotted those cursed Merry Men, he flung himself off his horse, leaving it for Guy to take care of as he stormed up to them. He could see Richard heading in their direction as well, but he couldn't let himself focus on that.

John had been furious since the second he left Robin's room, and he hadn't stopped the entire way to the desert. He couldn't stop. If he was angry, he wasn't afraid. And he was not going to let his fear stop him this time.

"What have you buffoons done with my wife?" John barked. Will and Alan practically jumped out of their skin with horrified expressions, while the giant crossed his arms and was unperturbed.

Richard's wide eyes had vanished as he reached Robin's men at the same time as John, and now he was smirking. Of course he was.

"We saved her from your schemes!" Will spoke up.

"She's signing the annulment right now!" Alan said.

John's heart crashed to the ground. He was too late.

John turned to Richard and snapped, "Tell me these blithering idiots are lying!"

"When I told you to take care of the Robin Hood problem, I didn't mean *marry* the outlaw." Richard rolled his eyes. "Although, I suppose I should have expected a creative solution from you. You never just do anything normally. But I



cannot also in good conscience approve of a marriage you forced the girl into. The fact that she's here at all shows she does not want to be married to you."

John had spent the last few weeks ignoring that fact.

"John?"

He forgot all about the men he wanted to throttle in front of him at the sound of her voice.

He pushed past them and toward Richard's tent as he saw Robin for the first time in weeks.

She stood, holding the flap of the tent up as she gaped at him. John could drown in those blue eyes.

But before he could make it any farther, hands were on his sleeves and he was being jerked back. The words he had been summoning for Robin were wiped away as he saw Richard out of the corner of his eye, his hands crushing John's shoulder as Robin's men darted around him and toward her, putting themselves between them.

John moved to shove Richard away. No one was going to stop him from speaking to his wife—although she might not be his wife anymore. He was still going to say his piece.

But Richard was a brick, and he said, "It's wonderful to see you, little brother. It's been *too* long. I believe we have a lot to discuss." John opened his mouth again, but like always Richard talked over him and called out to Robin's men, "The four of you can wait in there. This might be a while."

John twisted, trying to break Richard's grip as Richard started pulling him away to another tent. He looked over his shoulder, Robin's name in his mouth as she was practically being herded back inside by her three ruffians.

John stumbled into the tent Richard pushed him into. John pulled himself away and started brushing off his clothes as the general who currently occupied the tent scurried out after Richard was in. Once he was gone, Richard drew himself up, crossing his arms and saying, "It never ceases to amaze me the mess you make of things."

John couldn't stop the sneer on his face. "Really? I'm the one that's had six years to win a war and is nowhere close?"

Richard narrowed his eyes. "Would you like to try your hand at it?"

John blanched but managed to cover it. "That's not what I'm here for."

"Right. You're here for Robin Hood. Or Roberta depending on who you ask," Richard said. "Honestly, the fact that you're here at all, I still haven't fully gotten my head around."

Frankly, neither had John.

"Just say whatever you're going to say or tell me what it is you want me to say so I can do what I came here to do," John snapped.

"What exactly is it you came here to do?" Richard's brow furrowed. "You had to know I wasn't going to just let you drag her back to Lathe kicking and screaming to a marriage you trapped her in."

John bit the inside of his cheek and heat crawled up his neck. He would gladly tear himself open and lay it all at Robin's feet to see if there was a sliver of a chance he could still salvage this. But showing his raw, exposed heart to Richard? That was mortifying.

"My marriage with Robin is not your business, and if you think I could drag her kicking and screaming anywhere, you severely underestimate her."

"I'm king and your brother. Your marriage is most certainly my business. Especially when your wife is asking for me to draw up annulment papers."

"Did she ask or did her men ask?"

"Does it matter as long as she signs them?"

John's lip curled up into a sneer. "And that just shows how you know absolutely nothing about this situation, so are we done here?"

“Not by a long shot.”

John braced himself as Richard launched into a lecture and tirade their father would have been immensely proud of. With Richard in the desert fighting for the last six years, John had gotten used to them coming in letter form. It was a poor substitute for the real thing.

John imagined Richard had been waiting for this moment for a while.

Most of it wasn't even about Robin.

A lot of it was about John's failures as regent before he married Robin. How universally hated he was. All the decisions he'd made that Richard didn't like—how had Richard even heard of them? Maybe that was why they hadn't won the war. Richard was too busy fretting over every little thing John did to focus on the real enemy.

They finally did get back to Robin.

“—a mess of that too! How could you think it was going to end any possible way but this? After everything you did to her?”

John had settled in, willing to just take it like he always did, but that dug under his skin like sand. He snapped, “Like what? Spared her life? Didn't force her to do anything she didn't want to do? Kept my hands to myself? Worked with her to try and keep our country together? Painted a portrait of her parents and her because I love her? Gave a speech and put myself amongst people who would like to see my head roll because she believes in them? Came running after her the second she ran away so that I could have one last chance to make it clear to her how much I love her and value her and have a hope that maybe she'll see me for more than the weak coward I was before I ever met her?”

Richard's eyes widened.

John was slightly out of breath from his own outburst, but he just straightened up. He couldn't think of any time in his life he'd spoken to Richard like that. Snide comments. Disrespectful jabs. Short curt responses to orders.

And when necessary, begging for something. Like when he'd begged not to be sent to the frontlines.

He'd never stood up to Richard before. Not like this.

"You don't remember," Richard said.

"Remember what?"

But instead of answering, Richard nodded and said, "So I should let a criminal help you run my country because you love her? A criminal who doesn't even want you."

"If she doesn't want me, she's going to say it to my face."

"And... what if I say no?" Richard half-sat on the desk in the tent. "What if I say I'm putting an end to this right now? Forget the annulment. You never pardoned her before you married her or after. I can have her arrested and tried right here and now."

John's stomach hit the ground, and no air seemed to get through to his lungs. He'd what?

He'd... forgotten to pardon Robin.

He choked out. "You're not serious."

"Deadly. I might have appointed you regent, but I'm still king. Maybe you've forgotten who is actually in charge here, and maybe it's time I do something about it."

There had to be a way to fix this. So he'd messed up one step in his plan, but he could still—

"I'll pardon her. Right now. You—"

"Again. John. I'm king. You're regent. Your authority does not extend past me. If I want to have her tried so I can get my country back to rights, I will."

"She has been saving your country, you idiot," John spat. "And so have I. This past year that criminal and your brother—who you think can't do anything right—have been holding Astren together by the seams as you keep pulling at it with the resources you need for this war. You won't get away with putting her on trial. You harm a hair on her head and the people will never forgive you. I—"

“Well, be honest John, when word gets back to Astren, who are people going to blame? Me or you? I could go out there and tell them all it was me, and they’ll still find a way to blame you and justify me. There might be some who turn on me, but it will be forgotten when I return as a war hero who saved our country. Is it right? No, but you and I both know that’s how things have always been.”

John’s mind was spinning. This wasn’t what he’d planned for. This wasn’t the Richard he remembered. Maybe war had changed him.

“Pardon her and I’ll stay.”

Maybe John had changed too.

Richard almost fell off the desk. He stumbled off it instead and choked on his breath. “What?”

He wasn’t sure where the words had come from, but he was certain of them. If that was the way to fix his mistake that now had Robin at risk, he’d do it. Maybe there was only one thing in this world that could make him less of a coward, and Robin was it.

“You want to set Astren to rights? Fine. Go back to Lathe. Do it. I’ll stay here, and I’ll probably get myself killed before you even make it back to the castle, but I’ll stay here. As long as you pardon her, and you leave her alone.”

Richard continued to gape at him.

And Richard had a point. He had made such a mess of this. If dying—because John wasn’t foolish enough to believe he wasn’t going to die if he spent more than a week in the desert being shot at—would fix it... then that’s what he would do.

He’d done all of this in the attempt to preserve his life, but he would not preserve it at the cost of her. Maybe it was time to free her completely from him if that was the only way to free her from this.

“And the annulment?” Richard finally managed to get out.

“That’s Robin’s decision. I came here to make my case. For once in my life, I was going to at least put up a fight for

something. But... If you agree to pardon her, then all I ask is at least the chance to talk to her and plead my case. Even if the best result I could ask for will just end in making her a widow and freeing her that way, I might still get some time with her before then.”

His words faded away and silence settled over them. John was left with his terror at what he'd just offered. He felt like throwing up. Running away.

But there was also a strange sense of peace on top of it. Because no matter what at least Robin would be alive, safe, and hopefully happy. Even if it wouldn't be with him.

“You...” Richard shook his head. “You are not who I left behind in Lathe six years ago.”

The tension in the air was thick, and John couldn't stop himself from blurting out, “I should hope not. I was an eighteen-year-old idiot who had no idea what he was doing with everyone out to watch him fail.”

Then Richard laughed, deep and booming.

John wasn't sure if that was a good sign.

“That sounds a little more like the John I remember.” When Richard straightened up, he had a grin on his face. “And when this war is over, I'll be looking forward to getting to know this newer version better.”

John didn't quite understand. Surely Richard didn't think John would survive it if he was—

“You're not staying, John.” Richard's voice was softer but solid. “I will be pardoning Robin no matter what. It's the fact you offered it at all that matters to me. Besides... despite what you might think, I have kept up to date on what you've been doing in Lathe, and not just the things I disapprove of that I've already covered. I kept up when you married Robin and followed the good the two of you have been doing. Now, I'm not revoking that annulment if she wants to sign it, but at the very least, I'd rather have you in Lathe continuing that work than out here.”

John's breath caught in his throat, and his legs buckled. He barely stopped himself from hitting the ground by grabbing hold of the nearest chair. Then he looked up and narrowed his eyes. If it wasn't treason, he'd kill Richard. "That was a test?"

Richard had a wry grin. "Anyone can ride off after a runaway wife. I wanted to know what you were willing to lose for even just the chance to keep her."

John got his legs back under him and scoffed. "I can't believe everyone thinks I'm the evil, scheming monster and you're the pure-hearted, noble hero."

"Public perception is powerful." Richard shrugged and then gestured to the tent flap. "Now, go on. Go catch your criminal one last time."

John didn't need to be told twice. He rushed out of the tent, wincing immediately at the blinding light bouncing off worthless sand dunes. He had a chance at least. He had something worth fighting for.

And that was when he saw her, also hurrying out of the tent she'd been in, her men right on her heels. Two of them were speaking over each other to the degree that it was impossible to decipher what they were saying.

John didn't care. All he saw was Robin.

She turned around and saw him, and she froze in her tracks as she looked at him anew. Everything he'd been drowning in when he first arrived in the camp came flooding back at the sight of her.

## CHAPTER 27

John supposed part of what he felt might also be that he was still burning from Richard's deception, but it was mostly the fire that had caused him to get up and follow her from Lathe to the desert in the first place that ruled him now.

He meant it. He wasn't going to just let the best thing that he had ever known run away without a fight.

"You!" John said, pointing at her as he stormed toward her. "You do not get to just climb out a window and run away! I will not let you become a coward. If you're going to leave me, you're going to do it to my face!"

But Robin barely seemed to hear him as he came up to her. She whispered, "You came. Here. To the desert."

"Obviously. I'm not an idiot, and you always underestimate how well I know you. Of course you'd come here to the one place on the continent I swore I would never go in order to get away from me!"

"But you're here," Robin whispered, moving even closer. "So I was wrong."

"You've been wrong about a lot of things, especially when it comes to me." John crossed his arms. He tried to hold onto the anger that had come rushing back, but it was slowly slipping away now that he was looking at her wide eyes and slightly parted lips. He had to dig his nails into his skin to stop himself from grabbing her and crushing her to himself.



She'd come out of Richard's tent. He was too late. She'd signed the papers.

She wasn't his wife anymore.

"Yes..." Robin breathed. "I've had it all wrong."

John blinked at her. That... hadn't been what he'd expected.

"You—You have?"

"Robin, come on, don't waste your breath on him!" Will called out.

John refused to pull his eyes away from Robin now that they'd been laid on her. She also did not look away from him, the awe in her eyes causing him to shift his weight.

Robin asked, "What was your plan? When you got here, what were you going to do?"

"I... I wasn't entirely sure. I just knew I had to do something. You were running away with the wrong idea, and I couldn't just let you go without a fight."

"And if I asked you to let me go, what would you do?"

John closed his eyes.

Could he?

He'd told Richard he would, but actually doing it was so much harder.

"Are you asking me because you despise me and the trap I've had you in?" John opened his eyes. "Or because you've been running for so long you don't know how to stop?"

When had they gotten so close?

He swallowed thickly. "Because if it's the first, I will not destroy you just to have you. But if it's the second, I would beg of you, please, stay."

"If you do not wish to own me, why the drawings?"

"Because from the moment I first saw you, you had captured me."

“Personally designing the furniture? My clothes?”

“Because I wanted you to have things you would like.”

“Working with me?”

“Because I value your intelligence and dedication and I need it as much as Astren does.”

“Training with me?”

“Because I admire your ability to protect yourself and others and I wanted to be close to you.”

“My leg? The wool clothes?”

“Because I wanted to take care of you.”

“Not telling me you were catching and releasing my men when they tried to rescue me?”

“Because I knew I would lose you and I was desperate to put it off for as long as possible.”

“The green and gold for my birthday?”

“Because I wanted everyone to see I belonged to you.”

“The portrait?”

“Because I love you.” John’s hands brushed Robin’s arms. “All of it because I did not know how to tell you I love you. But I do. I love you, and if I must lose you, I will have you face me.”

Then Robin’s hands were in his collar, and her lips were crashing into his. John stumbled, catching himself on her waist as he threw himself into it, deepening it. It could very well be the last time, and he was going to make it count.

He distantly heard Robin’s men in the background exclaim their bafflement and call for Robin to stop and that she must have lost her mind in the desert heat. John just sank a hand into Robin’s hair and gently tilted her head back as he continued kissing her again and again.

Ever since he’d kissed her before she’d gone running, the memory of it had been haunting him at night. He had wished he’d taken more time to memorize the details. Now that he had

another chance to sear it into him for the rest of his life, he wasn't going to waste it.

It was desperate and needy and everything Robin made him, but he didn't care. He just kissed her with everything he had in him, curling his fingers tighter as he kissed her harder and faster, his breath quickening as it brushed over her skin.

When he finally rested his forehead against hers, struggling to catch his breath and feeling her breath on his face, he didn't dare open his eyes. He did not want this moment to end. Because when it did, she was going to be gone for good.

He tightened his grip on her waist, clutching her to himself.

Her hand was on his cheek, her thumb brushing over the skin. She whispered, "John, open your eyes."

He bit his lip and shook his head slightly. She was going to ask him to let her go, and he would. He would, but he couldn't. He just needed a few more seconds to memorize the feel of her waist under his hands.

"Please, my husband."

John opened his eyes to see Robin pull her left hand back from his cheek. The wedding band was still on it.

"You..."

"I didn't sign them. I'm not going to. I'm staying with you."

Robin's arms sliding around his waist stabilized him as his legs buckled, and he staggered, his leg brushing hers.

"You're... I thought—I don't understand."

"I am too much of a coward to be able to love one. But you are no coward. And... you make me less of one." Robin's hand rested on his heart. "I became Robin Hood because of you. You've always made me braver. Your brother called me out on it. I've accused you of being obsessed with me, but the truth is I have been obsessed with you for far longer. You made me brave enough to pick up my bow and start poaching.

Hating you and obsessing over what I could do to ruin your plans kept me going for years. I lay awake at night with my aching leg and I cursed you, and that anger propelled me forward into becoming everything I am. But there was still this lingering sense in my mind—Do you think I really went to the first speech you gave just because? Do you think I really came back that night just for that golden arrow?”

John was still a little too dazed to really follow what she was trying to get at.

“It was for you. I’ve spent so long running away, and at some point I was chasing after you just as much as I was running from everything behind me. But I could not outrun the reason I started chasing you in the first place. And then I ran right into your trap. And by then I’d shelved my doubts. I knew I wasn’t everything everyone said I was, but I believed you were everything those same people said you were. Until you asked me to marry you.”

Robin’s ring over his heart caught the light, and he could feel it beat harder, like it was trying to break out of his chest and place itself in her hand.

She continued, “When I first agreed to marry you, part of it was for the pardon for my men, but the other was because of the first time we met. I couldn’t remember what was true and what was false. What you’d actually done compared to the rumors you let everyone believe.”

John blinked down at her. “What? I didn’t do anything other than see your face when we first met.”

“Not when you first met Robin Hood.” Robin smiled up at him. “When you first met Roberta.”

“I didn’t meet you until you were Robin Hood.”

“No. I discovered after marrying you that you just don’t remember it... It was a beautiful day. I was seven. My parents were so honored to be hosting the royal family, but I couldn’t care less. I just wanted to be outside in the forest, so I put on my plainest clothes and slipped out. It drove my parents crazy, but they couldn’t stop me. I was good at running away even

then. I went out to the edge of the forest on the estate and started climbing, like I always did.”

John furrowed his brow. There was something in the back of his mind starting to rise up, but it was still out of reach.

“Eventually, it was getting late. I knew my parents would be looking for me, so I started to make my way back. Of course, through the trees. That was when I spotted a boy, about twelve. He was sitting beneath a tree with a sketchbook in his lap.”

Wait... if this was what he thought it was—

“I... I think I’m starting to remember this.” John’s stomach pitched and he tightened his grip on her as all the color left his skin. “You—You were the girl in the tree?”

“Let me finish,” Robin said with a small smile. “I made my way through the branches, trying to find a spot that would let me see what you were drawing. I was a nosy little thing with no care for my own safety, so I had one leg wrapped around the branch as I craned my neck to see, and sent a few leaves falling. Then, you slammed your sketchbook shut and leapt up, demanding I show myself. And I fell.”

It was all coming back.

“And you broke your leg,” John whispered. “I broke your leg.”

But what shocked him more was now that he remembered she’d been that little girl, he was more aghast at how she’d simply handed that leg over to him countless times throughout the winter to soothe what he’d broken.

“I thought that for a long time. I hit the ground with a horrible snapping sound and it was a pain I had never felt before. I was screaming and crying. I couldn’t help myself, and I started to pick myself back up, not realizing of course that would only make things worse, and it did. And everything was hazy and jumbled, and then Prince Richard was carrying me back into the house. Afterwards, everyone told me what had happened. That Prince John had scared me on purpose to make me fall and break my leg, and thankfully Prince Richard

came along quickly and carried me back. That Prince John had just been standing there, enjoying watching me cry in pain.”

John’s own recollection was hazy, growing clearer by the minute, but before he could try to make any sense of it, Robin’s fingers were softly shifting on his chest, and she was continuing, “And I thought I remembered for a moment, you looking up out of the corner of your eye, that you’d seen me in the tree before I sent the leaves falling. At least that’s what I told myself when everyone said you had done it on purpose. What I remembered was someone running a hand through my hair for a moment, but I convinced myself I was just mixing up the timeline, surely that had been my mother after I’d been brought back. I thought I heard someone telling me that I just needed to be quiet for a moment so he could think, and I told myself that had to be the physician. That the person holding my hand had been my father. That the screaming for help was me. But... I always had doubts.”

John was starting to remember that day. He hadn’t known who the little girl was. It hadn’t mattered. The second she’d fallen out of the tree, he’d known what was going to happen next. That no one would believe it wasn’t his fault. He had never bothered denying anything. There would have been no point.

Richard had been the one to finally find them. John didn’t have the strength to carry her; if he had tried, he’d only make it worse.

“But then my parents died; I became Robin. Your parents died. Richard became king. The conflict at the border started and you became regent. It’s why I went to that speech. To see if I could spot any hint in you that maybe my doubts weren’t unfounded. Or at least confirm your reputation so wholly accurate that my doubts were ridiculous. Then you were there at the golden arrow trap, and those little doubts I was good at burying started to nag at me a little again. You seemed to be everything everyone said you were. I believed what everyone said. It made more sense. In what world did the cruel tyrant hold my hand and tell me help was coming?”

“And then you caught me. And you asked me to marry you instead of killing me. And you knew I was Roberta, but you didn’t seem to remember that day. I wondered all over again. I wondered what had really happened. If what I remembered was true. That you brushed a hand over my cheek, wiping my tears away and begged me to stop crying. You said, ‘Indulge me. Please.’ But Prince John doesn’t say please. He doesn’t comfort people. He doesn’t care about anyone but himself. But you do, and for some reason you let everyone believe you don’t.”

John remembered it all now. He remembered how terrified he’d been. For her. For the fact that he was going to be blamed. He remembered how her desperate, pained screams and sobs had made him want to claw his own ears off since there was nothing he could do.

“You said it yourself. I’m a coward.”

It had always just been easier to let everyone believe it until it had cost him Robin.

Robin shook her head. “A coward wouldn’t be here right now. I married you because I wanted to know the truth. I wanted to know if I was wrong about you, and I was. But I was scared, and I am ashamed to say I let it rule me. But not anymore. My brave husband, I made a vow, and I intend on keeping it. I love you. I’m not running from it anymore. I’m not running from the past anymore.”

John had her face in his hands and kissed her again before whispering against her lips, “Say it again.”

“My husband, I love you.”

He kissed her cheek. “Indulge me. Please.”

“My husband, I’m staying. I love you.”

He pulled her left hand up to his face, kissing her palm and then her ring finger before wrapping his fingers through hers and smiling against her wrist. “My wife, can I call you Roberta now?”

“Oh, not on your life. I didn’t just choose Robin for fun. I’ve always hated Roberta. It’s a horrid name!”

“Roberta is a beautiful name. But whether it’s Roberta or Robin, as long as you come home with me, I will call you whatever you want.”

“Your wife,” she said. “I love the way you say ‘my wife.’”

He kissed her again.

Until he let out a short yelp and jerked back. “Did you just bite my lip?”

Robin grinned, pulling his hand and rubbing her thumb over the spot where she’d first bitten him. “Oh, come on, that was more of a nip. Besides, I promised to if you got handsy. I’m a woman of my word.”

John laughed and buried his head in her hair.

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Of course, now that Robin had made her choice, she had to face the consequences.

The second King Richard cleared his throat, John dropped his head to Robin’s shoulder. King Richard said, “So I take it there will be no annulment?”

Robin bit her lip to keep her grin from splitting her face in two as John lifted his head and looked over his shoulder at his brother. He said, “If the papers in your hand aren’t a pardon, I’m not interested!”

“I’m still king and your brother.” Richard raised an eyebrow. “I can change my mind and take you up on that offer.”

Wait—

“What offer is he talking about?” Robin shifted back so she could look up at John. “What happened between the two of you?”

John immediately looked over his shoulder and glared at Richard. “Don’t—”



But Richard was grinning as he held up the papers in his hand and said, “He offered to stay here on the front lines to make sure I pardoned you.”

John immediately closed his eyes and tilted his head back as Robin’s eyes nearly fell out of her skull. She tightened her grip on him and said, “Were you going to tell me that?”

“Probably, eventually,” John muttered. “It’s a long story. Richard was—”

But she’d grabbed his head and jerked it down, crashing her lips to his again. He gasped, and his chest stuttered against hers for a moment before he returned her passionate embrace with as much fervor as she had started with. She tightened her grip on the back of his head, curling his hair into her fingers gently as she shifted, kissing the corner of his mouth so she could breathe out, “Anyone who ever calls you a coward again, I will shoot.”

She kissed him again and pulled back just long enough to add, “And never value your life so little as to make that offer again.”

John’s hands caught hers and he pulled back just enough to say, “It wasn’t because I valued my life so little, but because of how much I value yours. Even if it wasn’t shared with me.”

Then Robin was kissing him again, this time curling a hand into his collar as she pushed herself up onto her toes. She murmured, “Still, I would not let you. Or I would have stayed with you here. I love you too much for that.”

Before she could kiss him again or he could respond, Richard cleared his throat again. “As heartwarming as this is, John, I’m going to need you to make sure I’ve covered every crime she’s been accused of, and the accurate number of counts. Just to be safe. I trust you kept better track of the charges than she and her men did.”

John sighed and shifted back, and that was when Robin distinctly felt three pairs of eyes on her—that had been on her since she’d run out of the tent unable to answer them as to why she hadn’t signed the annulment papers.

Robin tightened her grip on his shirt and whispered, “My men are going to kill me.”

“That’d be a shame. They went to a lot of effort to rescue you just to kill you.” John pulled back as Robin let go of his shirt and reluctantly turned around to see Alan with his mouth open, Will holding himself up by Little Jon’s shoulder, and Little Jon with his arms crossed and an indecipherable expression.

Robin couldn’t help her snort of laughter as she stepped out of his arms and said, “Fine, maybe they won’t kill me. They probably want to kill you though. You go deal with your family, and get me the pardon you should have given me a year ago—honestly, how do you forget to pardon the criminal you’re trying to marry?—and I’ll deal with mine.”

“Apparently, much to both of our shock, I am capable of making a mistake in my most brilliant of schemes,” John said, reluctantly stepping in Richard’s direction as his brother held the tent flap open. “And after?”

“Then we go home,” Robin said.

Before Robin could enjoy the soft smile John gave her, Will was making a choked, strangled noise, and she turned to go deal with them instead. As she approached her men, she saw John duck into Richard’s tent out of the corner of her eye.

“What—I—*Robin*—What in all the stars’ light was that?” Alan finally managed to get out, gesturing to where she and John had been standing.

“Have you lost your mind?” Will asked.

Little Jon said nothing.

Robin let out a long sigh. “Look, I don’t expect you to understand, but I’m not going to sign the annulment. I’m going to stay married. I appreciate you coming for me, bringing me here so I can make that decision, but I’m settled.”

“You want to *stay* married to Prince Parasite?” Alan gaped.

“Is this some kind of plan? You can tell us. We’ll always help you with whatever plan you’ve got,” Will said.

“The plan is to keep doing what I’ve been doing for months and help Astren from inside the castle instead of outside.” Robin reached for Alan and Will’s arms and squeezed them. “There’s no secret plan, but I would love to have your help.”

“I’m not following...” Alan shook his head. “How can any paper you sign in the castle be worth—” Alan gestured at where she and John had been passionately embracing “—*that!*”

Little Jon let out a long sigh and then cuffed Alan and Will on the backs of their heads. When they looked at him, he said, “She’d stay married to him even without all of that. She loves him.”

“You *what?*” Will nearly fell as he turned on his heel, rubbing the back of his head.

Robin could feel the heat rushing to her cheeks but she crossed her arms and lifted her chin. “Look, it’s a long story, but yes. I do love Prince John. I’m staying married to him. And I really hope you all will come back to Lathe with us.”

“Alright, quick, we gotta get going and find a witch or someone to fix her,” Alan said, clapping his hands together.

It was like arguing with a wall.

Before she could continue trying to convince them she hadn’t been bewitched or brainwashed, a commotion behind her caught her attention.

“—oted. Thank you, Your Majesty. We’ll be on our way and leave you to your war!” John was calling out as he walked backward out of Richard’s tent, holding the signed pardon.

Robin couldn’t help her laugh as she saw him. As soon as it hit the air, John turned and spotted her while Will muttered, “Oh, this has to be magic. This cannot be natural.”

Robin ignored them and turned to face John as he hurried over to her. She took a few steps toward him, and said, “Am I officially an upstanding citizen again?”

John smirked as he handed her the pardon. “Officially, you’re a princess. A little different than a citizen, but you are clean in the eyes of the law. Now, can we go? I promised your cousin I’d bring you back as soon as humanly possible.”

Robin grinned. “You’re just afraid the desert is going to dry out your skin.”

“Forgive me for having some pride in my appearance, you savage.”

“Really? This one? Come on, Robin!” Alan was pinching his brow out of the corner of her eye.

John quickly looped a hand around her waist and pulled her back into his front as he narrowed his eyes at Alan. “Huh. You look better when you’re pretending to be a woman.”

Alan’s face immediately turned bright red as he opened his mouth.

“Alright! Look, we’re going to have a long few weeks ride back to Lathe where we can all insult each other and argue and drive each other insane,” Robin said, holding a hand out between her and her men.

“Pardon?” John said, craning his head to look at her.

Robin narrowed her eyes at him. “They’re free men, aren’t they? Besides, you’re the one who insists I have three personal guards; who better than my men?”

John paused for a moment and then tilted his head, seeming to consider it. Then he nodded and said, “Well, I suppose it’s better than having to throw them out of the city gates every week.”

Robin turned back to her men and gave them a wry smile. “Come on, boys. We could use you.”

“Work for Prince John—” Will started.

“We’d be honored to, Robin. Wouldn’t we?” Little Jon said, narrowing his eyes at Will and Alan.

She could feel John startle against her at Little Jon’s support. Will and Alan looked at each other, then at her and

Prince John, then at Little Jon and she could see the little wheels in their heads turning before they finally nodded. Will said, “Fine. We would be happy to be Robin’s guards.”

John squeezed Robin’s waist, and Alan’s gaze immediately darkened. Robin rolled her eyes as she turned in John’s grip to give him a reproachful look, but he only returned it with a smug grin. He said, “Now can we go home, my wife?”

Will made a disgusted noise, but Robin pushed herself onto her toes and pressed a kiss to his lips. “We can, my husband.”

Even better than the day Prince John caught Robin Hood was the day Robin Hood chose Prince John.

## EPILOGUE

John knew he was going to regret keeping the Merry Men around. But having them around made Robin shine brighter. She laughed often at something they said or did, so he supposed it was worth it just for that.

Other than the snide comments, they weren't much trouble at all. It was also easy to get back at them. All he had to do to get under their skin was kiss his wife.

For all that Robin accused him of being handsy, she was surprisingly more so. John wasn't complaining.

Their work continued. It was tedious work, but having someone to do it with made it bearable. Slowly but surely, John could see his and Robin's work take effect in the numbers. In Richard's reports on how the war was going. They weren't being decimated. They had supplies. People had food. They were able to spend a little more in the market. Things were getting better.

He knew most people still thought it was in spite of him, but when Robin nagged him into giving a speech with her or making some kind of public appearance, each time he feared a little less about a mob coming for his head.

Then one day, after months of progress, with autumn fast approaching, and two weeks of Robin being sick in the mornings, he came in to check on her at lunch, and she was up, pacing the length of their room.

Something was... not wrong. But different. Tense.

He paused as he came in and said, “Are you feeling better?”

Robin paused in the middle of the room, put her hands on her hips, then her stomach, then crossed them. Then she blurted out, “I think I’m pregnant.”

John froze.

Robin swallowed, her hands falling back to her stomach. “I wrote to Marian to ask her how she knew for certain, but I only just sent the letter. And I wasn’t going to say anything until I was certain. You and I have never actually talked about this part, but I just have this feeling—”

John had crossed the room as she spoke, cutting her off as he took her face in his hands and kissed her soundly. Robin let out a muffled noise before catching herself by grabbing his shirt and kissing him back.

When he finally pulled back, still holding her head in his hands, she whispered, “So, good news?”

“The best news,” John said before wrapping his arms around her waist and curling around her.

Robin sighed as she looped her arms around his neck. “Good. When we’re certain, we can announce it. There will be some talk—I’m sure you remember what those two men started saying when they suspected I was pregnant around my birthday—but I’m sure most people will see it as good news to celebrate. Although, I don’t know what your brother will think \_\_\_”

“I don’t care,” John muttered into her hair.

To his surprise he meant it. He’d let people think so many things about him, about his relationship with Robin because it was easier, but that never meant he hadn’t cared. But now?

“As long as you’re happy with the news, and I cannot express how happy I am at it, that’s all that matters.” He curled his fingers into the back of her dress. “I don’t care what anyone else thinks.”

He did care when the morning after Robin announced their news to her Merry Men, Robin dragged him down to the training grounds, much to his confusion. The second he stepped inside, he had to duck to avoid the staff thrown at his head.

Little Jon stood in the middle of the grounds, holding his own staff.

John looked at Robin and the beast of a man who John couldn't tell if the man hated him or barely registered his existence. At least the other two actively hated him. "What's going on?"

"Robin tells me she's taught ye the basics," the man grunted, gesturing to the staff on the ground. "Now that ye have a babe on the way, ye need to be better. Frankly, ye should have been better before ye even so much as deigned to look at Robin. I don't care if ye're a prince and have an army of guards. Every man needs to be able to protect himself and his family."

"Was this your idea?" John asked, turning to Robin who was grinning at him.

"Well, since I'm pregnant and forbidden from doing my own intensive training, I need something to entertain me." Robin placed a hand on her stomach and gave him a wry grin. She leaned in and said, "I know things between you and my men are still tense. But this was actually Little Jon's idea. I think it's an olive branch, a way to get to know you better."

"Oh, the things I do for you," John muttered as he picked up the staff on the ground, but Robin's beaming smile was enough of a reason.

That night she rolled her eyes at him and told him he was being dramatic even as she nursed his injuries from his disastrous first lesson with Little Jon. A bruise the size of an apple was most certainly a big deal.

But little by little, John got better at it—mostly when Robin wasn't there watching so he wasn't tempted to look at her instead—and Will and Alan would come and watch. And



eventually joined in. After watching Little Jon soundly beat them the way he beat John, John felt a little better about the whole thing. Will and Alan started antagonizing him a little less after that. And when John managed to actually beat Will in a spar, Little Jon looked at him with something John suspected might even be respect.

Everything seemed to be going John's way.

Until about six months into Robin's pregnancy.

John received a letter. From Richard. About the war.

That night, he'd waved Robin off and told her to enjoy a meal with her men so he could do some painting, and he went back to their room and read the letter that had been weighing on his mind all day.

It was precisely what he'd feared.

When the door opened, Robin walked in, one hand on her baby bump and a huge smile on her face. But then she froze when she saw him and said, "Oh no. What is it? What's happened?"

John pushed himself off the sofa, shaking his head. "It's— Nothing that can't wait. What is it? What were you rushing in here for?"

Robin ducked around him and over to the sofa. She took a seat on the sofa and grabbed the letter. John ran a hand through his hair as she read it. She turned around and held it up. "Isn't this good news?"

"For Astren, yes," John said as he came over and sat on the arm of the sofa. "But for me? For us? I don't know."

Robin set the letter down and she reached for his hand. "Whatever happens next for us? We'll be together. Your brother can't deny that his victory in the desert was because of our work over these last two years. He won't cut you out of everything completely. He's been away for a long time. He's going to need you."

John shook his head. "He'll be lucky I managed to convince him to let me keep you around."

“Well, we’ll have to let him do some running of the kingdom since by the time he gets back we’ll have our hands full with our son,” Robin said, pulling on his hand and shifting over, making room for him on the sofa with her.

John slid down to sit beside her, saying, “I suppose it would be nice to have fewer responsibilities so we can spend our time focusing on our daughter.”

He didn’t know why Robin was convinced they were having a son. They were obviously having a girl who was going to be just as much a thorn in his side as her mother was.

“Richard knows how valuable you are to him even if the people still use your name as a swear—did I ever apologize for that? I’m pretty sure I was the one who started it—” Robin took one look at his expression and flung her hand up. “Forget I said that. Regardless, you’d better have a good name for me by now because I’ve got nothing.”

John rolled his eyes and shifted, wrapping an arm around Robin as he stretched one leg down the sofa and dangled the other off the side. He pulled her into his chest as they both leaned back. As Robin sank into him, resting her head in the crook of his neck, he said, “How about Lark?”

Robin laughed, “You want to go with a bird name?”

“Why not?”

“First of all, we need a boy’s name. Second of all, even if we have a girl we’re not naming her Lark.” Robin’s head shifted and then she grabbed John’s hand and pulled it up onto her stomach. “Feel this! Lark is too sweet for whatever our baby is doing to my insides right now!”

As soon as Robin pressed John’s hand against her stomach, all his breath left him. He could feel against his hand the tiniest tapping. Their baby was kicking.

John then caught sight of the portrait hanging in their room now that Robin no longer used hers anymore. He said, “What about Roberta?”

“Why do you hate our baby?” Robin groaned, tightening her grip on his hand. “We’re not naming her that. Besides,

we're having a boy, so we need a boy's name."

"I happen to think it's a lovely name!" John huffed. "Fine. How about Robert for a boy and Elizabeth for a girl?"

Robin settled back into him as he started running his hand over the bump with all the gentleness of a feather. She said, "I like those."

He could see her eyes fluttering shut as she started to fall asleep in his arms. He leaned his head against hers, and he didn't care that Richard was going to come back, and he was no longer going to be regent. He didn't care anymore. He had Robin. They were having a baby.

That was enough.

Whatever came next, he wasn't going to lose that.

"Besides," Robin whispered, sighing against his neck. "Roberta's my name. We can't give the baby my name. It'll be too confusing."

"No one calls you that," John muttered, feeling the weight of sleep starting to pull his eyelids down as well. "You hate it anytime I've brought it up."

"I changed my mind about you. I can change my mind about this. Besides, no one else is going to call me that but you." She curled into him. "Please, call me Roberta, John."

John smiled into her hair as she drifted off. The outlaw Robin Hood. Roberta of Locksley. John was just grateful she was his wife.

"Fine, as you demand, Little Birdie, my wife, Roberta."

She hummed contentedly, and he held her even closer.

In the end, he was right.

They went with Elizabeth.

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# THE MIDNIGHT PRINCE

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THE MIDNIGHT PRINCE  
CHAPTER ONE

## KIRРАН

My father gapes at the wine-red stains on my hands and forearms as if they're the sign of a curse. For an autumn fey, they might as well be.

“Kirran.” He rubs his fingers over his mouth and down his chin, curling his hand into a fist beneath it. With his other hand, he grips the polished wooden armrest of his throne. “What have you done?”

I stare at him, shoulders squared. “Won.”

My father grimaces and shakes his head.

His skin is brown, the dusty shade of dying leaves. The color my hands were when I left the palace seven years ago. When we kill, our sin inks us with barren branches stretching up from our hands, like our victim's blood silently crying out from our skin. Every life taken extends the marks, deepens the branches to a brackish red and beyond, until they mirror the darkness of a cavern.

I don't know any soldiers without at least a few branches. But the marks can evidently reach a point where the old bloodstains they mimic hit their apex, where the branches don't grow any darker or thicker or longer. Though it's not for lack of trying.

What have I done? It should be obvious.

Without taking his eyes off me, my father beckons a servant over. The man listens for a moment, bows, and scurries from the room.

A pace to my right, General Zeccar clears his throat. “If I may, Your Majesty. Prince Kirran’s presence on the frontline made the difference between victory and defeat on numerous occasions.” His folded hands flex at his back. Dozens of stains mar his skin, more than most other officers’. But his magic isn’t killing magic. He meets my glance with a half-smile and settles his attention on my father. “Merciless enemies must be met with mercilessness. You should be proud of him. He has honed himself into a formidable foe.”

Zeccar would know. His enhanced memory magic allows him to forget nothing, and since he stuck close to my side, he’s probably seen me kill more times than anyone else has. Both with blades and my mind.

“As you hoped.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Zeccar dips his head in a bow.

My father’s hard gaze slides between us. The stained-glass windows high above fling pale daylight across his crown and shadows over his face. “Unfortunately, a weapon’s place is on the battlefield. Yet here we are, in a palace. Tell me, what use is honed withering magic in a palace?”

I bristle but say nothing. Zeccar keeps his head down. His jaw tightens.

My father studies Zeccar for a moment longer, all the while idly tapping the armrest. The jeweled ring on each finger glimmers. “General, you may take your leave. I wish to speak with the crown prince.”

The air locks in my chest. Never before has that title been applied to me.

Zeccar salutes and turns away, flashing me the slightest wince where my father can’t see it. His steady footfalls soften in the distance.

The instant the main doors close behind him, my father pushes up from his throne. He steps down from the dais, planting his hands on his hips as he scans me. If he tries at all to hide the way his focus lingers on the stains, he fails. When I left, we were about the same build. Whether time has



strengthened me or simply shriveled him, I can't tell. Or perhaps it's due to his thirtieth year as king approaching its end.

In the weeks it's taken my army to return since the human king of Codrin surrendered, I did find time to clean my armor, at least. So he can't complain about that too.

"Am I to believe that this is how you will behave as king?" He gestures at my hands. It isn't concern in his voice, merely mockery.

"What, winning?" I allow a faint smirk to skim my lips. "Yes, I intend to keep winning."

"No, Kirran, being reckless and ruthless, refusing all diplomacy in favor of...carnage."

A cold laugh almost spills out. I settle for icy words instead. "What kind of diplomacy do you think happens on a battlefield? At least one path actually gets the job done." I shrug and start past him toward the back doors of the great hall. "Guess you should've had more sons so the crown definitely wouldn't get down to me."

"Kirran —"

I whirl back to face him, my boots scraping across the stone floor. "What?"

My father snags the pair of dust-colored gloves from the returning servant and holds them out. "You will wear these tonight."

"Tonight?" My plans for tonight include food, drink, and some much-needed sleep — none of which require gloves.

He blinks like he's unsure whether my response is confusion, a joke, or idiocy. "The masquerade."

A scoff escapes. "I'm not going to a ball. I'm going to bed."

His eyes flare, and he shakes the gloves at me. "You will in fact attend all three balls, Kirran."

Back-to-back evenings. Even better.

“As is custom, this shall be a traditional masquerade — to honor your homecoming and celebrate our victory, as well as present you as the crown prince.”

I’m a little more prepared for the title this time, but it still lands like a blow to my gut.

“On the final night, also as per custom, you will announce your choice for a bride.”

I tense. An unbidden memory of sunlight-gold hair and river-deep eyes glimmers to the surface. I grit my teeth to repel it. Everything within me still coils as if to lash out.

My reaction is nothing more than being in this place again. Certainly not because of the word *bride*. Or the thoughts of the treacherous girl I’d once foolishly imagined marrying.

I wrangle the disgust and pointedly spread my arms. “Don’t you think my future wife should know exactly what kind of monster she’s marrying? Isn’t it deceitful to attempt to conceal such information?” My brows tick up, and I let my arms fall to my sides. “You are aware that every single soldier in the army has seen this, yes? Plenty of others here too.” I tip my head toward the nearby servant, who snaps his gaze away.

“Perhaps, but regardless, you will wear them. For the *duration* of the masquerade.” My father holds my stare without flinching and tips his chin up to meet my challenge. He thrusts the gloves out again. “It is not a request, son.”

For a prolonged moment, we don’t move. Then I snatch the gloves from his grasp and yank them onto my hands to cover my sins.

“Better?”

“Much.” He matches my sneering smile. “Get some rest and get cleaned up. You are to be presentable — and in a better mood — by dusk.”

I don’t humor him with a response, just spin on my heel and stride from the throne room. A throne room that shouldn’t be mine, yet will be. And far sooner than I can wrap my head around.

The reality of it all claws at me more with every step I take toward my old quarters. I lengthen my stride. As if my boots thudding across the smooth marble floor could drown out the memory of my eldest brother's earnest words mere days before his assassination.

*“Father said he’ll begin the transition ritual when I return.”*

Even now, I can see the compassion and resolve in Farrid's golden eyes as he spoke of taking Father's place, accepting the thirty-year responsibility of kingship. The knowledge that he'd be bound to the people and land had never daunted him. Even when we were all boys. Neither had the fact that, in his final year, as those threads started unraveling and his magic weakened, he'd have to relinquish the kingdom to someone else. Or the binding magic would kill him.

Just like it'll kill Father if he remains king a day beyond what the magic allows.

Of the four of us, Farrid had always been closest with Father. Always anticipated the day he'd relieve Father of the burden, allowing him to enjoy his final years with Mother.

If Father were that worried about my potential rule, he would've named a different successor years ago. Perhaps he truly considered such precautions unnecessary. After all, he had Farrid, his perfect reflection, down to their matching storm magic. And if not Farrid, then Sammir, the second-best, gifted never to grow tired and to imbue strength to others. Then Rassul, with his ability, like Zeccar, to remember everything. All of them suited for life at court or as leaders.

Me, fourth in line, gifted to extinguish life? Of course I'd never be king.

Each rapid step I take pounds in time with my heart.

Sammir and Rassul never left the battlefield. Farrid never made it home from negotiations with Codrin's crown prince. Now my father has three and a half months for a ritual that can take three.

And just me.

Servants skitter out of my way as I stalk down the hall. Some offer breathless greetings while others pin their gazes to the floor in reverence. I start to acknowledge them, but the instant I catch myself wanting to look for golden hair, I snap my gaze straight ahead and quicken my pace even more. I can traverse these halls with my eyes shut. Still, I don't dare close them, lest my mind betray me there as well, bring her face back to haunt me.

My chamber smells of stale dust and old leather.

Crinkled leaves litter the corners of the room, as if someone left the windows open and forgot I was coming back today. Or maybe that's how I left it, abandoned in rage. Maybe someone thought I preferred it in that state. Either way, it's somehow fitting. At first glance, nothing has changed inside the room. Yet decay lurks in the shadows and crevices. I don't want to pretend it isn't there, hasn't followed me here.

My hands are evidence of that, as Father so aptly implied.

For the first time in nearly two centuries, the autumn fey will have a killer for a king. One whose private rooms should stink of death.

I once thought of my people, my magic, as bringing change, offering quiet reflection and solace. Beauty. Growing up, autumn was beautiful. The turn of the seasons. Summer's vibrant, loud sun making way for a softer solace before winter's chill stepped in.

That was before I saw my powers siphon the life from people. Before I watched their bodies wither to shells at my mind's command. Before I became a weapon.

Behind me, the door creaks, and glass slippers clink against the floor. Familiar enough to recognize the woman wearing them.

I shift to face her and give a stiff nod like that will keep me from shattering. "Mother."

"Kirran. My dear — my boy..." She extends a delicate hand and starts toward me, her crimson and amber gown sparkling in the patchy sunlight.

I take a step back, into the shadows my canopy bed makes on the stone floor between us.

Emotion floods my chest, pulling me down until I sink onto the mattress. The clean linen scent washes over me. That makes it worse — that the servants didn't clean the room but did freshen the sheets. Probably in preparation for a woman to join me in it. Within days.

Like I'm ready for that. For any of this.

I press a hand to my forehead, flinch at the sensation of fabric, and rip off the gloves. They land on the floor with a soft pat.

My mother hasn't moved from her spot near the doorway, but I can feel her gaze slide over my hands. Her dress rustles. "I'm so glad to see you, darling."

"No." It comes out choked. I grip my knees, my attention on the mahogany skin set against my black trousers. Shadows make my hands the inky color of wet leaf mold, but sunlight reveals the ruddy brown tinge — a sickening shade that sucks all light into it. "Don't call me that."

She inhales but falls silent.

She stays that way so long that I peek up to see if she's still there.

Her tender smile meets me first. Unshed tears glitter in her golden eyes. She tips her head to the side, and the rubies on her crown glimmer. "Do you think I love you less than your brothers?" A soft step closer. "That my heart doesn't sing to see you?"

"I know it doesn't." Bitterness I don't intend for her laces the words, and I rip my gaze away. But I can't stop talking, spewing feelings I thought I'd long since subdued. "How could you be happy? How can you not —" My voice hitches. I grit my teeth and try again. "How can you not be... disappointed that *I'm* the one left?"

"Kirran." Another rush of fabric, and she's in front of me, kneeling. Her smooth, light brown hands grip my red ones. "I have *never* been disappointed in you."

She waits until I look up, then smirks, mischief in her eyes that once mirrored my own. Before war ripped me to shreds and reassembled me as this.

“Annoyed with you at times, yes,” she says, “and exasperated, definitely. More often than I was with your brothers. But you are only joy. Seeing you...” She unwraps one hand from mine and touches my cheek. My breath falters, and I set my jaw. “I’m so deeply glad you’re home, my love.”

Everything in her manner melts too much of my resolve.

“Father’s not.” It comes out weak. Like a little boy’s voice. I haven’t been that in a long time.

She shakes her head and squeezes my hands as if she doesn’t notice the color or know what it means. “He is in his own way. Grief touches us all differently. As does fear.”

Grief and fear. Two things I know. Too well.

We sniff in unison, and she stands and shifts back. “By the way, this isn’t the room you were intended to stay in. Hence —” She gestures to the leaves and then the cobwebs in the canopy above me. I hadn’t noticed those before. Her expression turns solemn as she looks back at me. “You were to be brought to the bedchamber of the crown prince.”

A shudder seizes my chest, rebellion burning as sharply as the pain. “But I’m not —”

“You are, love.”

“I want this room.” I let out a breath and focus on the floor between us until I steady myself. “My room.”

She peers down at me, purses her lips, and nods. “Very well. I will inform the servants, then. For bathing purposes, use your brother’s room. Until they get everything ready here.”

It’s slight, but I hear it — in the way she won’t use Farrid’s name. What must it be like to have had four sons and only welcome home one? We grieve the same absences, but she’s right. We grieve differently.

She grieves as one who did not get to say goodbye.

I grieve as the one who watched two of them die.

Her voice pulls me from the ravaged battlefields, the human and fey soldiers strewn across the countryside. “You’ll be able to retire here tonight, after the ball.”

I sigh and force myself to stand. “Thank you.”

She touches my shoulder and casts another purposeful glance over me like she’s taking in what the last seven years have made me. Her grip tightens, and soft eyes search mine. Offering affection that I can’t take hold of.

Then she glides out of the room without touching me again.

I remain there. Frozen in the empty place where I spent the first eighteen years of my life. A place that should feel like something beyond a hollow. But it doesn’t.

The door opens. Two light-haired servant girls startle and gasp out apologies.

I wave a dismissive hand and breeze past them into the corridor before I try to get a good look at either young woman.

The sooner I leave my chambers, the sooner they can clean them, and the sooner I can leave my dead brother’s room and return to this one. Return to a bed that is mine but no longer my own, in a palace that was once home but is more foreign than welcoming, in a kingdom I now stand as the next in line — no, as the only one in line — to inherit.

As much as I wish to leave such thoughts behind, they follow me to Farrid’s former bedchambers, cramming their way inside with me as I crack the door and slip through. Mother was right about this room being cleaner. Daylight floods in from four vaulted windows. No leaves or dust to be seen. Nor do I care to look.

I turn to the right and head toward the washroom. A handful of servants scurry around the tub, tossing different spices into the water. Another servant uses her magic to heat it. Within seconds of my approach, they scramble out of the washroom, bowing their heads in a flurry as they make their escape.

Steam wisps from the water, inviting me closer, but I don't move. The swirl of spices and oils darkens the surface. If I squint, it could easily be spilled life mixing with rainwater. Never mind that every time I've bathed in the last seven years, I've gone without spices or oils. Sometimes without warm water.

*How am I supposed to do this?*

I move forward on wooden feet, forcing away the instinctive feelings that I'm invading my eldest brother's privacy. If Farrid were still here, he wouldn't care, would have laughed at me for it. Yet if he were still here, I wouldn't be entering his chambers or taking his place as crown prince.

I could let my legs turn to branches in the washroom doorway, rooted in place. This place that is not mine.

*Only until tonight.*

Even as I think it, I know that's not what my mind means with its soundless cry.

*This role is not mine.*

With listless movements, I undress and step into the water. It flushes over me, scalding but not hot enough to burn my thoughts and cares away. How I can feel both nothing and everything at once, I do not know.

I tip my head back against the tub's smooth edge and finally let my eyes close. I brace myself for flashes of combat. For flaxen hair between my fingers and her soft lips smiling up at me. There's only darkness. And apart from the sloshing of water, there's silence.

It won't last, can't last, but for this moment, it remains. And I wrap myself in it.

But my mind won't stay silent.

A masquerade ball. To celebrate my return and our victory over the humans who just don't know when to quit. That celebration part, I suppose I can accept. It's the other part.

*Finding a bride...*



Again, my insides tense at the word. Like any of this pomp matters. It's a waste of time, resources, food. Completely unnecessary and all for show. My father should've just picked a woman from our kingdom — even from one of the other fey kingdoms — and presented her as my bride.

Though he probably assumed I'd rebel against the woman he chose.

A younger me would have. A different me. This me, whatever husk of a man has come home from the frontline, can't even pretend to care who I marry. I won't be able to love her, so it doesn't matter who she is or what she is. She doesn't even have to be pretty or kind or close to my age — might be easier to ignore her if she's undesirable in nearly every way.

Though I'll still have to produce at least two heirs. I'd probably best remember that.

The notion turns my guts to ash.

Once, I would have cared. Had cared. Had wanted everything that came with romantic love. Once upon a time I wish I could forget, I thought I'd found her. Had been so *sure* I'd found her.

But now? Now, any woman is fine. So long as she doesn't expect anything from me. Least of all for me to want her. Marrying me — it's a dreadful fate for any woman who will attend over the next three nights. I already pity my wife. Not one girl knows what she's walking into. What kind of marriage she'll actually face if she's chosen. Maybe the splendor of being queen will be enough to appease her, give her a happy enough existence.

*Still would've been better to make it entirely political.*

Even a magic-based match would've been better. Because forest knows, she has to have magic.

I draw my hands up through the water to wipe my face. Bubbles fizz across my skin and lazily dissipate. Deep red hands and forearms, matching the bloodstains I no longer bear on my body. Decay encases the heart in my chest. Though I

live and breathe, inside, I'm cracked and stone-cold and lifeless. The way I've left everything else I've touched.

So, no. I won't watch for that golden-haired traitor tonight or imagine that, somehow, she might have returned to work in this palace. I won't lose myself in the magnificence and clamor of the festivities and presume, for even a moment, that maybe I could find someone to be happy with.

I'll simply single out whatever acceptable woman seems the most like she doesn't want to be there, and that'll be it.

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# A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Thank you so much for reading *The Wicked Prince*! I hope you enjoyed John and Robin's story and seeing things from the prince's perspective, especially a villainous one!

If you'd like to help more readers discover *The Wicked Prince*, feel free to leave a review on Amazon, Goodreads, BookBub. I genuinely appreciate every review!

I also want to thank my beta readers, Leigh, Constance, and Alora, my editor, Carrie, and my proofreader, Nic. Without them, this book wouldn't have happened!

I hope to see you all again in the next book. Until then, feel free to join me at my website, [CelesteBaxendell.com](http://CelesteBaxendell.com), for behind the scenes content and updates on future books.

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Celeste Baxendell has always read anything she could get her hands on, but once she read her first fantasy novel, she was hooked and hasn't looked back since.

Her love of magic, adventure, and romance hasn't waned with age, and she endeavors to write nail-biting stories with compelling, complex characters, and finding light in dark times.

She is incredibly blessed to spend her time writing from her favorite chair with her legs curled up under her as she fights the southern heat. When she isn't writing, she's either reading, drawing, or sewing, in that order, and most likely thinking about writing as she does.

For more information about Celeste, her books, or her writing process, go to [CelesteBaxendell.com](http://CelesteBaxendell.com)