

NO SUCH KING



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CORALEE JUNE

NO SUCH
KING



No Such King by CoraLee June

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About the Book

A puppet, a prince, and a playboy. One arranged marriage. Three men I must keep at arm's length.

Atticus DuPont has been watching me from a distance, controlling my life like he controls the seedy criminal underground. He longs to own my mind, body, and soul.

Leo Winthrop is willing to do whatever it takes to protect me from the horrors of this castle, even if it means being cruel and pushing me away.

And Prince Augustus? He's a reluctant royal who would rather sleep his way through court than be forced into an arranged marriage with me.

I fled the kingdom three years ago, planning to never return.

But the king is dead.

The kingdom is in chaos.

My duty makes it impossible to walk away.

I know one thing for sure: I have to open my cracked heart, because this crown is too heavy for one lover to bear.

To Amanda Anderson, for loving this kingdom as much as I do.

Chapter One

AUGUST

Yachting offered a superior sexual experience.

I'd fucked on private jets, in penthouses, and in the bathrooms of exclusive clubs, but none of them compared to getting my dick sucked on the top deck of a multi-million dollar vessel.

The waves, the complete waste of money, and the flowing champagne made the entire *fucking* experience more extravagant. Ask anyone with enough cash for the experience, and they'd tell you the same. Yacht sex was better. Period. End of fucking story.

I was a man who loved the finer things in life. And let me tell you, the finer things loved me back. Hard. The wide open sea offered something the rigid castle walls couldn't—freedom. Escaping was the only thing that made me feel whole these days.

The beautiful woman kneeling before me had blushing knees. Even though she intimately massaged my cock with her throat, I'd forgotten her name. Raspy words like *baby*, *love*, and *sweetheart* tumbled encouragingly from my mouth as she worked my dick. Even if I remembered her name, I wouldn't say it. I wanted to avoid the drama as well as make it clear what I was after. This was a quick fuck, something to pass the time and drain my balls.

“Yes, love. Just like that,” I cooed.

She had this adorably determined look on her face. As if shooting my royal swimmers onto her tongue would somehow make me fall in love, swoop her up from whatever mediocre life she lived, and put a tiara on her head. She was pretty enough to hang onto my arm for official events, and she certainly gave head like a slobbery professional. However, she lacked a certain deviousness required of all royals. The eager little cocksucker had thick brown hair down to her waist, lips like pillows, and soft, oversized tits. But a porn star's body

didn't make your blood run royal. It took generations of corruption, murder, and sabotage to turn an ordinary girl into a queen.

I invited her onto my boat because the kind of fun I offered was mutually beneficial. She wanted to know what it was like to swallow the cum of a future king, and I wanted to escape the world for a short while.

I was all for reciprocity.

My cock came out of her mouth with a pop, and I tried not to show my frustration when she spoke. "You taste so delicious, Prince Augustus." I bumped my dick against her lips, wordlessly encouraging her to shut the fuck up and suck. I hated the way she called me by my title. Those closest to me called me August, the papers called me the twisted prince, and my father called me a fuckup. Royalty and power were a kink for some. I could tie a girl up and lick her clit until sunrise, but it was nothing compared to the mental orgasm people experienced when I stepped onto the throne.

The smell of coconut sunscreen and sex permeated the air. Her tempting, clipped accent and low, raspy voice made for delicious debauchery. In her small town, this beautiful girl had the power to turn normal men into gods whenever she got down on her knees. A wet dream. Perfection.

However, I was not like most men. This chick was just another fuck, another face I would forget.

"Come down my throat, Prince Augustus," she roared, bold enough to command me.

I wish she'd stop talking and move faster. I didn't need her to fuel my ego. I was aware that my cock was huge. I knew women loved to play with it. No doubt she'd one day get married and let some sorry sucker slam his meat into her with the lights off, and she'd still think of me. I wasn't an asshole about it, I just knew what I offered a woman—fun, orgasms, bragging rights, and memories to last a lifetime.

"Don't stop," I encouraged while watching the sun disappear into the water. Seagulls cried as they dived for food.

I licked my lips, tasting the salt in the air. Fuck the paparazzi hidden on the shore snapping pictures. I didn't care if this blow job ended up on the front cover of all the tabloids tomorrow. I didn't care about much of anything. My father was dead as of this morning, which meant I was fucking free.

I found out when my attendant walked into my room and bowed, waiting for me to thrust my hand in his face for him to kiss, as was customary for when an old king died and the next in line took the throne.

I was king now. Happened the moment his heart stopped. I was sure my publicist was preparing to share a statement on my behalf. The House of Lords were all mentally kissing my hand and swearing allegiance.

I wrapped her long brown hair around my fist and tugged, fucking her mouth with reckless abandon. She took every inch of me like a pro, letting my thick cock slide down her tight, humming throat.

I always fucked brunettes.

Never blondes.

Never anyone that reminded me of *her*.

I shook my head and worked her throat, letting her choke on me and drown my memories in pleasure. I didn't want to think about anything.

It was time to celebrate. Tonight, I'd hosted my own funeral in remembrance of my dear old dad. The occasion deserved a rager. An orgy. Ecstasy. Pot. Champagne. Every indulgence my asshole father shamed me for should be freely flowing to commemorate his unexpected passing.

In all honesty, I wasn't thrilled about the promotion. I couldn't give two shits about running our country. His legacy didn't tempt me into stepping up to the plate; it just pissed me off.

Ding dong, the dick was dead. Adios, motherfucker. Burn in hell.

The brunette sucking me off pumped me harder. I jerked my hips and grunted. It was kind of fucked up that I shot my load down her throat with thoughts of my dead father running through my mind. The royal therapist my mother had forced me to see since the age of eight would absolutely *love* to psychoanalyze what I was doing. However, I didn't have time for that. I was drunk and weirder shit had happened to me.

Getting off felt lackluster, but at least my whiskey dick managed to come. Every muscle in my body tensed as I came, then slowly relaxed. I felt liquid with my release.

Alcohol. I needed more.

She pulled back and wiped her lips with her thumb, flashing me a sly smile as she smeared her pale lipstick even more. "Did you like that?" she asked. They always asked. Most women liked to know if I would remember them later. It was their goal to blow my mind and settle me down. Considering I still didn't know her name, the chances of me thinking back on this were slim to none.

I was such an asshole. I wasn't proud of it, but she knew what she was getting into when she boarded my yacht.

Before slipping on my swim trunks, I replied with a bored tone, "It was great." She reached behind her back to tug on the strings of her bikini, anticipation and opportunity twisting her soft face, but I held up my hands to stop her. "It was fun, sweetheart, but I've got things to do."

Her hopeful expression soured, and I knew she'd sell our story to the tabloids by morning. It wouldn't be the first time someone released a tell-all about my abilities in the bedroom—or in this case, the yacht. I was instantly glad I had my security team take her cellphone before she got on the boat. After the sex tape debacle at the royal university, I learned to check for any recording devices. "But what about me? It would be nice to have some more fun together." Her voice was no longer sultry.

"My father passed away this morning. Thanks for helping me get my mind off things, but..." It was a shitty move, but I pulled the dead card nonetheless. Desperate times and all that.

Her mouth dropped open in shock. The news hadn't been released yet. I swear I could see the hungry dollar signs in her eyes.

“Oh, my gosh—”

I cut her off, worried she would think I was opening up to her and wanted a cuddle for my aching heart. “I'm not ready to talk about it.” My voice was snappy. I leaned forward and kissed her cheek to soften the blow of my tone. “Thanks for the fun.”

She nodded sympathetically and I walked away. If I wasn't an asshole, I would have felt guilty about leaving her on the deck without a reciprocal gesture. I didn't particularly enjoy leaving a woman wanting. I was the sort of man who prided himself on commanding the mystical clit, but I needed to go back home. If I wasn't walking through the front door of our castle by the end of the week, the queen would probably kick my ass. I had a part to play. We *all* had a part to play.

The sun had completely set by the time I made it down the opulent stairs and waltzed into the living room. I eyed the piles of bras and thongs on the floor. How many women did I bring back? Four? Five? Two of them were sleeping in the master suite. One was getting off in the hot tub, pressing her pussy against the jet like a greedy little thing. And one was lying on the deck and licking her dick-flavored lips, daydreaming about being a queen. Was I missing anyone? No? Oh well.

“Sir,” my assistant, Adonis, said. “Are you ready to head back home? Your mother has called eighteen times...” I tensed at his words.

Queen Isabelle was probably shitting a brick. Not because she mourned her husband, but because I wasn't at her side to cry for the cameras. It wasn't my intent to bristle at the mention of my mother. We shared the same DNA, but she wasn't maternal in the slightest. Father used to joke that I wasn't born in the traditional sense. Queen Isabelle chiseled me from the ice block in her chest.

“Drop my guests off back at the port and make sure they have a ride back to the bar I picked them up from, then we can

head back. How long will it take?" I asked, hoping for a bit of time before returning to hell.

"Two days. Three if we hit any storms. Would you prefer for me to arrange the private jet for you, sir?" Adonis asked in a formal tone. I wanted—no, *needed*—to prolong the inevitable. A private jet meant I would be back in Aldrich by tomorrow. I wasn't ready to be in my kingdom just yet. News would break about my father's death soon, and I would have to pretend to miss the sorry bastard. The dead king was more adept at acting than I was. My eyes were glued to my feet for a long time before Adonis spoke again. "Sir? The private jet?"

Adonis was a reliable man and had been working for me ever since I turned sixteen. He had olive skin, a nervous disposition, and often looked like he was gnawing on a lemon. I liked him enough. He kept me organized and put up with my bullshit. He also made sure I had fun without letting my parents or the press know. Like everyone I'd ever known, he always pushed me to be better, do better. I was a challenge for him. "I think it would be wise to get back to the kingdom as quickly as possible."

I scoffed at his pathetic attempt to make me do the right thing. "Nah. Three days sounds perfect. If you can make it five, I'll give you ten grand," I teased, knowing he wouldn't take the bribe. I'd probably bribed him with millions over the years. Never once had he taken a penny. Adonis pressed his thin lips into a barely discernible line. He wanted to question my choices but had no authority to do so. No one had the balls to stand against me.

"Right. I'll tell the captain," he replied stiffly.

"And make sure I have a never-ending supply of champagne in my room, yeah? I want to spend the next three to five days drunk off my ass."

"If you insist," Adonis replied before backing away slowly.

Yeah. I fucking insisted. "You're the finest, Addy."

"I know, Your Majesty."

I sat down on a nearby leather couch and leaned back as Adonis walked away to tell the captain of our travel plans. Soon, the entire world would know my father was dead. Soon, everyone would start pressuring me to grow up and start preparing for my role as king of Aldrich.

Soon, I'd have to face what I'd been running from.

There was a discarded glass of champagne on the nearby end table, and I grabbed it with trembling hands. Lifting the crystal up, I declared my first proclamation to the salty air.

“Long live the *motherfucking* king.”

Chapter Two

CHRISTINE

Funerals were nothing more than publicity stunts, last-ditch efforts to sway public opinion. There wasn't a soul alive that would miss King Frederick. His behavior was sexist and perverted. He voraciously defended racism, classism, and totalitarianism. Every terrible thing a person could be—he excelled at. King Frederick was an abusive sex trafficker and possibly even a rapist, though I had no evidence of that. He was a sinister, festering boil swollen with high society that oozed contempt.

Each polished wooden pew was occupied at the funeral. As I stared at the gold-plated altar, my attention was drawn to the display of wealth and power. The sanctuary was filled with beautiful stained glass windows and marble statues of saints and angels carved into every nook. Hosting the devil's funeral in such a sacred place felt sacrilegious.

"I'm so sorry for your loss," a faceless fool murmured before kissing the top of my hand. A shiver traveled down my spine, years of disgust rolling through my gut at his touch. Members of the court had that effect on me. Anyone acquainted with the Crown made me sick to my stomach.

His condolences were as forced and fake as my diplomatic smile. This was no loss.

When the news broke, there were parties in the streets. The bars in Aldrich were overcrowded with celebrating drunks. It was an embarrassment to the monarch. Throughout the world, King Frederick was mocked for how hated he was by his subjects. After seeing his lifeless photo plastered across the news, I skipped my morning class and hurried home to pour a glass of wine and sob with elation. As I savored that feeling of relief, I realized that the world now had one less powerful predator. I had fled Aldrich three years ago because of the king, and now his death had brought me back.

Luckily, I didn't have to attend the twelve days of fanfare leading up to his funeral. People around the world watched

from their couches, while news reports covered the days of mourning, the funeral procession, and the ceremonial transfer of power. I avoided it like the plague and showed up at the last possible minute. I would only be here for what was required of me, and no matter what happened, I would be on the next plane home.

I couldn't risk staying. The Crown was like a blade poised at my chest, my heart a beating testament that this was no longer my home. I had a comfortable life on the other side of the world. Attending the funeral was a small price to pay for privacy and independence.

"Welcome, Lady Christine. The entire kingdom rejoices in your return, despite the unfortunate circumstances." I nodded in response to the scrawny man bowing before me. There was always someone wanting to kiss the ass of the royal family. Since I was a product of high society, the last remaining heir of the House of Rose, and unofficially adopted by the queen, there was a long list of hopefuls that wanted to get in my good graces or between my thighs.

"I'm happy to be home," I replied mechanically, the lie like ash on my tongue. I needed to play nice so I could go to my actual home, which was as far as hell away from here.

"We are thrilled to host the House of Rose once more. Many hope you choose to stay." He bowed again, and I sensed that he was eager to hear some juicy gossip about my traveling plans.

I stiffened, nausea rolling up my throat like acid. My title seemed important to some. My father was a lord, my mother a wealthy merchant's daughter. I wanted nothing to do with any of it.

"I have plans to return to Harvington." My new home was on the other side of the world, far enough away to keep my heart safe and my head firmly attached to my neck.

At my side, Queen Isabelle stiffened. She wore a black dress and very simple makeup. The icy queen publicly mourned the late King Frederick, regardless of how

insignificantly she loved him. It was unclear whether she was cheering his demise privately, though.

Queen Isabelle was a graceful woman. Porcelain skin covered her body. Her hair was black as coal, and her sharp cheekbones framed an angry scowl. Every curve and point of her willowy body was delicate—except for her face. With a stern expression, she channeled all of her strength into her icy blue eyes.

I sat beside her as she tapped her pale pink nails on her knees. My adult eyes saw her through a cynical lens, but she was everything I remembered her to be as a child. Every time someone offered condolences, she nodded and whispered *thank you*. When anyone hugged her, she went rigid. She kept flickering her gaze toward the door. Queen Isabelle spent her entire life wanting to escape the responsibilities of marriage. Today was no different.

As a child, I considered her to be a hero. She took me in when my parents died and always seemed so in control of herself, a trait I longed for in myself. Sadly, she was now just a broken woman hurt by the same man who had haunted my nightmares.

“Behave, Christine. I know how difficult this is for you, but we all have a part to play,” she murmured under her breath, low enough for only me to hear. She knew just how *difficult* it was. Queen Isabelle witnessed my descent into hell.

I poured defiance into my response. “You’re lucky I’m even here, Your Majesty.” It was once my habit to call her Izzy, like my late mother did. No longer, though. The concept of nicknames and familiarity was reserved for family members or close friends, and we were neither. We were forced to conform to the Crown’s demands with a formality we both disliked. Three years ago, she placed a chasm between us that neither of us would ever cross again. “You said I’d never have to come back.”

“I’ve broken many promises in my lifetime,” she replied ominously.

“Where is August?” I asked, his name draining the blood from my heart. I had a feeling he would arrive at the last minute, sparking controversy with his entrance. It was in his nature to cause chaos.

Seeing him was the most nerve-wracking part of the day for me.

As a child, August was my closest friend. He was one of the few people in Aldrich that I missed. The twisted king hated me now.

It was better this way, though. Made forcing my soul to stop longing for him much easier.

A low voice called out, “Hello, Mother.” My stomach tightened as I turned my head toward the speaker. While I looked at the boy I once loved, my arms formed a barrier in front of me.

The last time I saw him, August was a prince.

Now, he was so much more.

His Royal Highness, King Augustus, or *August* as I grew up knowing him, was a monster of a man. His arrogant presence reverberated across the cathedral. Tall, muscular, and imposing, this was a warrior bred to lead the world. He had tan skin, likely from months abroad on his yacht, and the slight sway to his stance made me wonder if he was drunk. I couldn't blame him. This morning, I had stared at two small white pills for nearly ten minutes before swallowing them dry. It was only my prescribed relief from my anxiety that kept me sane and in these oppressive pews. The alternative would mean bloodshed, and I couldn't reveal my new skills just yet.

The temperature in my body dropped. My heels clicked against the marble floor as I bounced my restless legs. As my eyes scanned him, I tried to find traces of the boy I once knew. I remembered the child who held my hand during thunderstorms. He kissed me on the cheek and wiped my tears with his shaky fingers the night my parents died. There was a special bond between our mothers. As if by kismet, we were brought together.

Not anymore.

I closed my eyes, trying to stay calm. August and I could have been soulmates.

If we had met at another time.

If he didn't share blood with an evil man.

If I hadn't left without a word.

We probably would have fallen in love, eventually. It was a childish thing, to imagine a life with a man I no longer knew. But it was easy to pretend when you were ignoring the pain of his proximity and the toxic twist in your friendship.

There were plenty of people who would want to behead me if they found out what I'd done three years ago.

August wore pressed pants and a button-up shirt. His suit jacket was black as night. Although expertly tailored, it looked wrong on him, as if he was meant to wear jeans and Henleys instead of the latest royal collection. His eyes were brown, like the king's. His face was cold and calculating, like the queen's. "You look beautiful, Mother," he said in a low tone. Despite his kind words, there was no love in his greeting. No affection. No...nothing. Even the word *mother* felt like a lie.

As he settled in on Queen Isabelle's other side, I sat dumbfounded. He had not yet noticed me, and I wasn't sure if I wanted his darkened gaze to land on my face. In my teenage years, I wept rivers for the boy he was, but a royal drought stole my innocence and dried up our relationship.

I ached. As if by magic, the dead organ in my chest began to beat again. The experience was like being struck by lightning. There was only one thing I missed about my life in Aldrich, and that was him.

But I couldn't. I shouldn't.

The tabloids had always captured my interest over the years, and I'd be lying if I claimed to have never peeked at them. August was always a source of scandal in the kingdom. Traditions and his image didn't matter to him. A playboy, he

was. A party-hard, privileged royal with more money than God. Rules didn't apply to King Augustus of Aldrich.

August leaned back in the pew. I kept still, afraid to draw attention to myself.

"I'm happy you showed up," Isabelle whispered. "Aren't you going to say hello to Christine?"

At the mention of my name, August's spine stiffened. His rigid posture made my stomach drop. Slowly, slowly, slowly, he turned to face me. I braced myself for his frigid stare.

Our eyes clashed. His chest heaved. He looked me up and down in a single sweeping assessment, and I knew he wasn't impressed by what he saw. I wasn't the naive girl who left him without a word anymore. I was a woman.

My blonde hair was longer now. I'd grown into my features. My teeth were straight. My breasts, more voluptuous. My lips were fuller. My thighs, thicker. "Hello, Christine," he dutifully said. But unlike the empty greeting he shared with his mother, there was animosity in his tone. Pure anger and resentment. Watching the flare-up of his nostrils, I couldn't help but cringe. There was a single dribble of sweat dripping down the side of his temple.

I couldn't blame him for the cruelty in his gaze. We were best friends and then we were nothing. I was a woman determined to flee the dangers of this kingdom and start over. I left him here to fend for himself to save both of us.

"Hello, Augustus," I replied, intentionally withholding the nickname I had given him all those years ago. The distance was necessary. I'd spent years calling him *brother* in my mind to stop myself from thinking of him romantically. He clenched his fist and stared at me for a long moment before turning his attention back to the front of the cathedral. Religious artifacts that stood the test of time added a reverent layer of oppression to the moment.

"If we're going to be formal, please call me your Royal Highness. Are you here to celebrate or mourn?" he asked in a low voice before smiling at a curious diplomat that walked by.

I swallowed. “Neither,” I replied with a sigh. If I had my way, I wouldn’t have come here at all. Queen Isabelle side-eyed me. I could almost feel her curiosity and disdain. If the wrong person overheard us, it would result in another royal scandal. Oh, fucking well. “I’m here because I have no other choice.”

August scoffed. “You always have a choice, Lady Abernathy.”

The use of my last name caused even more distance between us. I absorbed the formal tone of his words like it was sunshine and I was letting the rays burn my skin. “I haven’t had a choice since the day I was born.”

Isabelle’s breath hitched. August glared at me. Maybe if he knew why I left, he’d have more sympathy for my situation. But I didn’t want to tell him. I couldn’t.

I just had to survive this and stand dutifully by the queen for a few photos.

Then, I’d once again be free.

* * *

It felt like my lips were threaded together with a needle and barbed wire. “Christine, will you be staying for long?” a paparazzo asked. Cameras flashed as I marched toward the vehicle waiting for us. I felt August’s angry presence at my back.

“I’m sure Lady Abernathy will be leaving as soon as possible,” the wicked king answered for me in a sarcastic tone.

I scowled.

A camera clicked.

It was inevitable that my angry expression would appear in a tabloid tomorrow.

Queen Isabelle took a separate limo back to the castle, leaving August and me to awkwardly reconnect in the privacy of an armored town car. The moment I sat in the cool leather

seat, I plucked a stray thread on my black dress and crossed my legs at the ankle. August slipped in beside me while unbuttoning the top of his shirt and loosening his black tie.

“Surprised to see you here,” August said in a low voice as the car slowly pulled away from the cathedral. Police surrounded us. Crowds of pedestrians waved excitedly from the sidewalk.

I forced my voice to stay even. “Your mother called the day it happened.”

“Of course, she did,” August replied. “You were always the favorite child, hmm?” His words made my breath stall in my chest. “The day my mother took you in, she forgot all about me,” he added bitterly. I released a sigh, then rolled my eyes. I was the favorite nothing. I was just the orphaned daughter of the queen’s best friend. Isabelle only saw my mom, her responsibility, and an endless chasm of shame when she looked at me.

Pedestrians watched our motorcade travel down the busy streets of Aldrich. My soul seemed hollow and empty as I stared out the window, but I felt August’s heavy, inquisitive eyes on me. “Why did you leave?” he asked.

I pinched my lips together. I knew this question was coming and had already practiced my snappy response in the mirror this morning. “Ask your mother.”

There. Easy enough. I wasn’t ready to rehash my trauma, and Queen Isabelle had forbidden me from breathing a word about it all. It was too risky.

After letting out a puff of breath, I felt a little relief, but it didn’t last very long. A few seconds later, August shook his head again and then reached over the seat to grab my chin with his hand. My childhood friend pressed his attention upon me, and I took in his whiskey scent while averting my eyes from the cruel gaze he cast.

I stared at his chiseled jaw.

The scruff on his chin.

His sunburned lips.

His furrowed brow.

No, no, no. It wasn't right. It was *impossible*.

"I *did* ask my mother—asked her too many fucking times to count. You didn't return my calls. Letters. You blocked me on social media. I would have sent a fucking pigeon if I thought it would get to you. And every time I asked Isabelle, she just said you *wanted* to leave. That night, you promised forever and then you disappeared."

My heart hurt at his words, but the distance was necessary. What the queen said was an oversimplification of the truth, but I was okay with her explanation. "I never meant to hurt you."

"But you did." His shoulders dropped, and for a split second, he looked like the boy I once knew. Disappointed. Alone. Desperate for the affection of parents incapable of giving it. Muscle memory demanded that I wrap him in my arms and give him the love constantly denied him. I had to pinch my thighs to keep myself from doing just that.

"I wanted to leave *Aldrich*," I clarified. "Not you."

August gripped me harder, his touch teetering on the edge of pain. I felt our past building up like a brick wall between us. My eyes watered, and memories threatened to spill over my cheeks. He let go and I immediately leaned back, putting space between us as my face bloomed with remnants of his harsh touch.

August rubbed his palms on his thighs, like he was trying to remove traces of my skin from his hands. I licked my lips. I was always attracted to August, but that intensity devoured me now that we were adults. "Do you remember when we used to sneak out and go to that club, Electric?" he asked, surprising me with the abrupt change in subject.

I blushed. How could I forget? Our sweaty bodies were practically fused together. We'd dance. We'd test the boundaries of friendship. We'd evade the paparazzi and see who would pull away first. I'd return to my room at the castle, panting and confused.

"Yes," I whispered.

“I’m going tonight. You should come. I’m willing to put up with Atticus if it’ll tempt you enough. I’m sure you plan on disappearing the first chance you get, but one night to remember the glory days won’t kill you.”

I scoffed. “Aren’t you worried what the papers will say if you’re seen partying the night of your father’s funeral?” I asked.

August smiled, his lips framing mischief and playfulness. “They’ll think I’m celebrating—which I am. And there’s not an honest man in the entire kingdom who would blame me. The only reason my mother mourns is because she’s terrified of pissing off the lords of the court.”

August scowled. I knew all about the sexist, corrupt court. They were the reason I fled.

“My flight leaves—”

“Just shut up and come, alright? I’m not the only idiot that misses you. Atticus has already messaged me five times, asking if you’ll be there.”

I chewed on the inside of my cheek and thought about the friends I left behind. Maybe if I were a different girl, I could have happily accepted his invitation and reunited with the guys I knew as a teen. But every second here threatened my safety. “I’ll think about it,” I whispered. It was a lie. There was nothing to think about.

He huffed. “Whatever. I learned not to get my hopes up about you three years ago when you disappeared without a word. I’m not willing to beg you to be a part of my life anymore. Come if you want to stop pretending that you left because you wanted to. Leave if you want to spend the rest of your life hiding away on the other side of the world because you’re too afraid to be honest with yourself. I couldn’t care less either way.”

Ouch.

I opened and closed my mouth, struggling with that invisible line of anxiety. I believed in part that I deserved his

harsh words, but I also knew that I was a victim of the situation. A sense of hopelessness pervaded the circumstances.

We rode back to the castle in silence, and I made the heartbreaking decision to leave once again.

Chapter Three

CHRISTINE

The bouquet of white roses in my fist had a powerful aroma. Each time I breathed in the floral scent, I was brought back to my earliest childhood memories. I could practically feel my mother's limber arms wrapped around me, her warm hug settling my wild soul. As a child, I teased her for being so affectionate. Now, I would give anything to feel her embrace.

My heels sank into the muddy dirt as I walked across the cemetery, moving slowly. There was a cool air surrounding me, and I felt goosebumps pebble up on my neck as I struggled to remember exactly where my parents were buried. My last visit here was quite some time ago.

As I walked, I remembered kneeling in the soil with my mother outside our home. We would spend hours in peaceful silence, trimming and working the earth with our nimble fingers. Most members of the elite had gardeners to tend their yards, but not us. Mum enjoyed getting dirt under her nails and kneeling in the filth. She used to sing to the worms she found and whisper prayers over her growing flowers.

The weeks my father was away for work were always the quietest. We would settle into a peaceful routine of pulling weeds and admiring the blooming shrubs. Gardening used to be one of her favorite pastimes. In so many ways, it was a very maternal act. Mum taught me about the right soil and the appropriate amount of sunlight and water. People driving by would stop to admire her masterpiece. The earth was her canvas.

My mother loved to create life; my father enjoyed ending it.

The roses I brought to her last resting place would make her grimace. It was a dismal offering for my departed parents—half-dead flowers tightly cradled in the fist of a negligent daughter. Even the thorns were trimmed off the stems. Mum

hated it when florists did that. Thorns should be respected and revered rather than destroyed, according to her.

The danger adds to its beauty, Christine.

Even though the hastily bought flowers were not ideal, I didn't have much time to find something worthy of my mother's preferences in the floral department.

As if it mattered at all.

I didn't practice any religion. It didn't comfort me to think that my parents were up in heaven, watching over me and worrying about things such as cheap flowers or prodigal daughters. Nothingness was the inevitable outcome of death.

It wasn't my intention to come here. It was common for some people to visit grave sites religiously, stopping by every day to speak with those they had lost. My parents were buried here the day I last visited. There was no point in talking to an overpriced rock engraved with their names.

Today, however, was different. As I thought about my parents, I felt a sense of boldness and sentimentality. My mother was a very special person to me, and I missed her terribly. The kingdom of Aldrich was a place of pain. These days, all I had was myself.

What a sad, lonely existence.

Though the man who raised me was buried beside her, I didn't dare look at him. He matched my mother's warmth with equal coldness. His icy determination and ruthlessness wasn't something I ached to look back on with fondness. I missed the *idea* of my father—of a man who loved the women in his life ferociously. As a young girl, I idolized the memory everyone else had, and grieved alongside those who saw the image he portrayed to the public. But as an adult, I remembered the bruises, the beatings, and the brutal words he spewed. Ambition killed my father long before his body died.

"I'm going to graduate with a degree in art history, Mum. You'd be proud of me. Sometimes, I think I love beautiful things because of you."

I paused, as if expecting my parents to respond. The quiet wind echoed their silence. I breathed in.

“I live in a flat in the city. You’d hate it, P-papa. It’s so loud that sometimes I can’t think. But it’s nice. I live on the top floor.”

Isn’t that what he wanted? For me to live above everyone else, peering down at the world from my perch? Was that why he made allies with corrupt men who promised us prosperity? Why he wanted the king to marry me off to the first lord that offered a fat check?

Occasionally, I felt conflicted by my calm career because it contradicted the violence buried deep within me. I inherited my father’s vengeful nature. It was impossible for me to control my desire to right the wrongs done to me.

My muscles ached as I shifted on my heels.

“I knew you’d come here,” a familiar voice said. I hadn’t heard that rugged tone in years. As I turned around and faced Leo, I dropped the roses.

Leo looked very handsome. There were some signs of aging on his face, highlighted in the slight lines framing his severe eyes. There was no longer that invincible air about him. Leo Winthrop towered over me. His left cheek had a faded scar that was new to me, although it seemed to have been there for quite some time. His long, dirty blond hair was tied in a bun on top of his head, and his green eyes scanned the length of my body with their sparkling gaze.

I whispered, “Leo.” I hadn’t seen him since the night I left. “What are you doing here?” I was shocked to see his stoic face. Before I left, Leo Winthrop was a young guard assigned to August and me. In his early years after graduating from the royal academy, he had that hopeful spirit about him, as if he was always searching for an adrenaline rush. He looked burdened by his job now. As I stared deep into his fierce eyes, I tried to find traces of the guy I once knew.

“The queen asked me to follow you. Not sure your presence warrants the fuss, though.” His voice was smooth

like dark chocolate but twice as bitter.

I wasn't expecting the hostility. The last time I'd seen him, Leo had saved my life. I still remembered the way he cradled me to his chest and stripped me out of my bloody clothes.

"There's nothing for you in Aldrich, Christine. Don't get any funny ideas about staying," he said before clearing his throat.

I peered into his eyes. "I'd like to be alone." My voice was strong despite the pain behind it. Being this close to Leo was difficult for me. It caused waves of shame to crash into my soul.

He knew the slopes of my curves, the face I made after the intrusion on my body.

He'd heard the slapping of weathered skin against my soft childhood.

He knew that I'd killed the lord the king wanted me to marry.

"I've been ordered to watch you." He gritted his words like they pained him. "They think you feel more comfortable with me, you know. We should always follow orders, right, Christine?"

I nodded. Of course he was forced into being here. I was too embarrassed. After all, he was the one who found me. The pity in his expression still haunted me to this day. It was one of those defining moments that changed us both forever.

We were friends once. Maybe even more.

Back before I was sent away, Leo was always surprising me with treats—my favorite flavor of ice cream or cheap beaded necklaces he bought at the market. He was somewhat of an older brother to me, but not quite. We were friendly, but I'd be lying if I didn't admit that my gaze lingered on him during our quiet moments alone. He saw me as a young girl he was sworn to protect, a stepping stone to rising in the ranks of the royal guard.

I saw him as...more...

But that was before.

“I don’t want to talk,” I murmured.

He ignored my request. “It’s strange seeing you without splatters of blood in your hair. That image has been burned into my brain for the last three years.”

A sob suffocated me, lodged in my throat. I replied with a cough. “Fuck you, Leo.”

“You’re all grown up. Using curse words like a man, now. Careful, I hear the nobility don’t like filthy mouths to suck their cocks.”

I choked out a bitter laugh, surprising him. “I should have spent more time cultivating my filthy mouth instead of learning how to curtsy.”

“You never fit in here. You should just leave.”

“I will,” I replied, looking at him. There was a noticeable increase in his size. With scruff covering his jaw, he had a pale complexion but rugged features. “You grew into your muscles.”

“I’ve been working out,” he replied in his clipped tone. “With you absent, there wasn’t much else to do, considering I was demoted and everything.”

I shook my head in confusion. “Demoted?”

He laughed and stepped closer to me. For some reason, I found myself terrified of Leo. I knew physically he wouldn’t hurt me. But emotionally, he could destroy what remaining sanity I had left. “You didn’t think that what happened only affected you, did you? After the queen shipped you off, I was left patrolling abandoned castles in the countryside. The only reason I’m here now is because I’m one of the few people who know why you walked away. You know how the royal family is about their secrets.”

It was impossible not to gape at him. His banishment shocked me. Leo was ambitious and intelligent. He was highly skilled and capable of running the royal guard. It was a waste of his talents to live in the countryside.

“I didn’t realize...”

“I didn’t want you to know,” he snapped. “One minute the king was calling you to his royal bedchamber, and the next thing I knew, Queen Isabelle was ordering me to dispose of Lord Geralt’s body.” His crass words made me flinch, a parade of memories stalking through my mind.

“It’s my right as a king to demand your body for whomever I choose. Your father wanted you to marry Lord Geralt. You’re eighteen now.”

I sobbed and shook. “But...I can’t...”

“Now bend over like a good lady and let Lord Geralt test you out before he buys you.”

“When are you going home?” Leo’s question drew me out of my thoughts, but my fingers still trembled.

I’d booked a flight for tonight, but for some reason, I felt compelled to change that. I didn’t like the idea of Leo suffering for what the king did to me. I needed to talk to Isabelle about reinstating him.

“Tomorrow,” I replied, deciding on the spot to stay an extra day and fix Leo’s career. It was the least I could do.

“Then why does your itinerary say tonight?” he asked, taking a step closer, punctuating his accusation.

“Because I changed my mind. I’ll talk to Isabelle about reinstating you. You shouldn’t be punished.”

He tipped his head back and let out a bitter laugh. “That’s not your problem to worry about. I deserved this punishment. They couldn’t let me keep my station. Sweet, innocent Christine Abernathy killed a lord on *my* watch. I was in the fucking hallway when he...when he *hurt* you. I wish you’d had a bit more fanfare when you ended his life. You could have cut off his dick.”

My stomach curdled, and it took a considerable amount of effort not to vomit. “He was vile.”

“The worst,” Leo agreed. “You know, I don’t hate you for killing him. I don’t hate you for leaving. I don’t even hate you

for getting me sent to the middle of nowhere.”

I swallowed nervously. “So why do you hate me, Leo?”

He laughed. “Lady Abernathy, I hate you for coming back.”

I sucked in a breath of air.

“I hate that you’re standing on Aldrich soil. I hate that you attended the funeral of the man that ruined your life. I hate that every second you’re here puts you at risk. And I’m going to make your life a living hell until you go back where it’s safe. Where I know you won’t get sucked back into this world.”

“Leo...”

He stalked after me, anger pounding through his boots. “We both know that August will convince you to stay, and I can’t let that happen. It was better when you were out of sight and he was getting drunk on his yacht. Get the fuck out of here, Christine. Go back home.”

I hung my head in shame and spun around to face my parents’ graves. I didn’t want Leo to see the way hot tears formed in my eyes and traveled down my cheek.

Leo moved to stand beside me. I didn’t look at him, but I breathed in his familiarity. Leo Winthrop always smelled like the outdoors. Woods and spice. Masculine musk you couldn’t buy in a bottle. It was a scent completely unique to him.

“I’ll leave in the morning.” My whispered promise sounded hollow to my ears. I followed his gaze to stare at my father’s tombstone.

Lord Donald Abernathy
Royal House of Rose
General in the Royal Guard
1961-2012
Beloved husband and father
Devoted to the Crown

Knighted by King Frederick

It hurt to see. Questions I once buried crawled up and clawed at my soul.

My father had insisted that I submit to the Crown in every way, and hatred had plagued me ever since King Frederick bartered my body for power. I still vividly remembered how he summoned me. How he forced me to grow up in the span of a night. He stripped me of my innocence.

The blood.

I remembered the blood.

Lord Geralt's grunts.

The way the king laughed as he walked out of the bedroom.

The lord's splintering skull when I slammed a heavy lamp against his temple. The way his blood scattered like ants when I landed blow after blow.

"I promise I'll leave," I whispered to Leo.

"Good." I turned to him and reached for his cheek, but he flinched away from my touch. "Don't make me push you away, Christine. You won't like my methods."

Chapter Four

AUGUST

There was a lot of alcohol sloshing around in my empty stomach. Christine did not grace us with her presence at the dinner prepared by the royal chef. I couldn't force myself to choke it down.

Queen Isabelle wanted me to indulge in a bloody, undercooked steak and loaded baked potato to commemorate my father's passing. I simply stared at my plate and willed the meat to develop a pulse before excusing myself and drinking an entire bottle of champagne. It was after I had drunk enough to ignore the queen's disapproval and the anger I felt, that I came here.

There was a warm welcome for me at the club.

The owners liked me here. Those at the bar appreciated the careless way I bought drinks. My arrival brought a great deal of publicity to Electric, and they welcomed the flood of hopefuls standing in long lines at their doors. Although there was no stage, the VIP room was like an exhibit at the zoo, with people watching me closely as I performed.

The twisted king lived his life under a magnifying glass.

The moment Christine walked through the door, my cock twitched. I saw her in the same ridiculous outfit she wore at my father's funeral, a costume of grief that fit her totally wrong. Her narrow shoulders were covered by the offending black material, and the bodice tied around her torso looked royal enough—everyone loved it when we wore traditional garb—but it looked like a prison on her. I hated the way the long fabric covered her legs.

Legs I wanted to pry apart.

Legs I imagined wrapping around my hips as I drove into her.

Leo followed in her shadow. I knew the sorry bastard would find her sooner or later. He was always drawn to Christine—as much as I was. *All of us were*. I saw beyond his

scowl. After Christine left like a thief in the night, Leo was reassigned to another position. I knew in my gut that her disappearance had something to do with him. Which made him number one on my shit list.

He'd looked like a kicked puppy dog ever since she'd left, his eyes swimming with the same disappointment and anger I felt.

He missed her just as much as I did, and I didn't like it one bit.

I was sitting in the VIP area with some blonde on my lap. Even though the music wasn't as loud here as it was on the dance floor, we still had to yell to be heard over the noise. My date was slathering sticky gloss on her plump pout. Smacking her lips repeatedly in front of her compact mirror, she looked ridiculous. This was a woman obsessed with her appearance, not that I cared or faulted her for it. I supported self-love, but I hated when a woman couldn't drag her eyes away from her own reflection for long enough to have a conversation. Normally, I would have shoved her off my lap, but there was a part of me that wanted Christine to see that I had moved on. I was no longer the sad baby duckling following her around the pond anymore.

At least, not publicly.

Inside, oh, I was *fucked*. My eyes were glued to her shapely body. She'd grown in the last three years. Her hips were like perfect shelves for my hands. She was softer. Her hair was longer. Her eyes, more burdened. The moment I saw her at the funeral, I was a fucking goner. She was everything I remembered and more.

And I fucking hated how much I ached for her.

Why come back now? Why come back at all?

I vividly remembered the first time I wanted to touch her. Kiss her. It was a stormy fall night, and we were exploring the castle gardens. I imagined wet, scorching kisses like the torrential rain that soaked our bodies. Her laughter was lost to the rumble of thunder—lost to the sound of my heart about to

beat out of my chest. She had lifted her skirt up to jump over a fallen log, flashing me her stark red panties. I always associated the color with her.

“There’s our girl,” Atticus said to my right, yanking me out of my memories. He had just rolled a joint and pressed it to his lips, eyeing Christine with barely contained hunger. He looked refined and calm, stoic on the velvet couch and at ease in her presence. Even though he paid plenty for the appearance of royalty, his parents couldn’t get him a title or a crown. Not one that was real, anyway. His parents managed to buy him an empire of his own, one soaked in the blood of their enemies and tainted by drugs, sex, and corruption. The brutal criminal heir ruled over the lowlifes of our kingdom, and buying my friendship gave them access to the elite. Our parents gathered us together in playrooms with our nannies for as long as I could remember. It was a friendship of convenience.

We grew to like one another because it was all we knew. He looked more like royalty than I did. He always wore perfectly tailored royal clothes. His parents trained him to have proper manners and to know all the elites of society. The only part of him that wasn’t royal was the tattoos covering his body beneath his suit and crawling up his neck, peeking just above his collar.

There weren’t lines of warped skin on his back from where his father beat him with a ten-thousand-dollar belt. In contrast to my sunburned, scarred skin, his was pale and smooth. Atticus’s eyes were a deep shade of brown and focused on Christine. He was *always* focused on Christine. Atticus stopped bothering to hide it from me around the same time I realized she was the girl I loved.

Against the debauchery of the club, Christine stood out as an innocent. Her hair was pulled up in a bun. Her scuffed heels glided across the floor, dodging drunks and people high off Molly and the night air.

“She isn’t *ours* at all,” I replied to his earlier statement.

Ours? No. Mine? *Abso-fucking-lutely*. Even if I dreaded falling for her again. *Trusting* her again.

“Whatever you say,” Atticus said before shifting in his seat. “Don’t fuck this up.”

I always fucked everything up. Perhaps it was a self-fulfilling prophecy, but I didn’t really care about doing things the right way. “Why? You think she’ll choose to stay here?” My tone held a sarcastic edge, but part of me hoped he’d say yes.

“I’m sure you’ll have her fleeing Aldrich by the end of the night,” he replied, his tone lethal.

“You’ve always wanted her.”

“I see no point in denying that statement,” he breezed.

“She doesn’t want you,” I snapped, forgetting my pouting date shifting defiantly in my lap.

“Baby, let’s dance,” she asked, trying to divert my attention from my best friend and Christine. I didn’t feel like grinding my dick against her ass for a couple of songs. It felt fake and forced. I normally had no problem entertaining a hot date for the night for the payoff of having my cock sucked, but tonight it seemed raw and hollow.

I wanted to celebrate, but it was difficult to do when your past was here in the flesh and your father’s death was on everyone’s tongue. Gossips, all of them. I’d end up in all the headlines tomorrow. *King Celebrates His Father’s Death at Popular Nightclub*.

“Sure, sweetheart,” I said back before running my hand up her thigh and sinking into the heat between her legs. She giggled and wiggled and creamed my fingers as I played with her bare cunt. The Plastic Princess wasn’t wearing panties. Easy access.

Atticus rolled his eyes, like he was somehow above all of this. He was just as fucked up as me; he just wasn’t as willing to admit it. Because of his parents’ empire, he was more careful about his image, choosing to fuck around in private so he could maintain an air of mysteriousness. They relied on looking like royalty by funding their appearance with seedy

activities. Our parents were allies because we ruled both sides of a devious coin: those in power and those seeking power.

His approach to status was ironic, considering I should be the one more concerned with public opinion. But I never did shit the right way.

My date for the night stood up and guided me to the dance floor. Keeping me in her claws, she passed by Christine and Leo with a wicked smile. Because I liked seeing Christine's sorrowful eyes, I let the bitch whose name I'd forgotten mark her territory. I paused right in front of Absentee Abernathy and grabbed my nameless date's tit with my hand, squeezing and kneading it in front of her. I was a nasty bastard who'd kiss the fuck out of Christine with the taste of someone else's pussy on my lips. I wasn't a lovestruck fool anymore, damnit.

I was high on grief. Drunk on release. I had more expensive champagne running through my veins than blood.

Christine watched me with raised eyebrows. Leo rolled his eyes and gruffly guided her to the VIP area. Atticus was running his hands through his hair to tame his curls. He'd probably ask her polite and innocuous questions about what she'd been up to. However, I didn't give two shits about what she had been doing for the last three years. I only cared that she *wasn't here*. I wish I could be so quick to forgive, but she left me when she said she wouldn't. She disappeared when I needed her most.

My date pressed her sweaty body against me, and I pushed through the crowd to dance. It was as if the music was pumping through my veins. As her mojito breath blew over me, I felt a chill run across my skin. The hot air made slick sweat drip down my spine. "Want to have some real fun, Your Majesty?" my date asked before pulling a baggie out of her cleavage. I eyed it like an addict, eyes wide, mouth suddenly parched for the freedom she offered. She used her free hand to stroke the royal crest pinned to my chest.

I smiled. "What do you have in mind, love?"

She placed a small white pill on her tongue and leaned in close for a kiss. I opened my mouth and let her sweep it into

my mouth. We kissed. I lost myself in feeling okay for a little bit, not worrying about the consequences, not caring if pictures of us dry humping on the dance floor surfaced tomorrow. This was a celebration, after all. Fuck what happened. A solitary pill couldn't kill me. I was invincible.

My dry mouth slammed against hers. I nipped at her glossy lip, and it stuck to mine. She cupped my junk, and the song changed.

She didn't taste right, though. "We need more drinks," she purred.

"I need you to suck me off in the bathroom, lovely." Getting off sounded like just what I needed. My heart started to race. My skin felt hot.

"That sounds like fun. I want you to grab my hair. Drag me to my knees, my king," she rasped. Fucking yes. Just what the doctor ordered. "But I have a few questions, first," she replied before kissing my neck. "How did your father die? They said he passed in his sleep, but the autopsy hasn't been released yet."

Sobriety washed over me in one mighty swoop.

I pulled away and cupped her neck. "What tabloid are you with, sweetheart?"

"I'm not with one. I was just curious..."

I eyed the bouncer. They had an unspoken rule that the king could kick out whoever he wanted. He headed over immediately.

"Out," I said.

"Oh, but we were just getting started!" she exclaimed while clawing at my chest. I grabbed her wrist and shoved her off me and into the bouncer's open arms. She licked her lips and laughed maniacally. "Enjoy the Molly, Your Highness."

I rolled my eyes and turned around to stumble up to the VIP room. Fuck her. Fuck my father. Fuck this entire fucking kingdom.

And most of all, fuck Christine Abernathy for stealing my heart and stomping on it.

* * *

Wired. That was the best way to describe how I was feeling. I tore at my clothes. I moaned into my pillow while writhing against satin sheets.

“You sure he’ll be okay?” Atticus asked. Or at least, I think it was him. “Sorry you have to do this on your one night in town.”

“He’s just hurting,” a soft voice said. “People do crazy things when they’re hurting.”

I felt a soft hand wipe at my brow and shove my brown hair back. My skin was buzzing with foreign awareness. Every sensation, every touch felt like hot, tingling, and uninhibited pleasure.

“I hope he pukes on you,” someone mumbled.

“Drink some water, August,” Christine said while holding up a chilled bottle to my lips.

I kept my lips closed like a platinum challenge. I wasn’t worried about drinking. I craved the fucking relief. No, I was afraid to be a total pussy and beg Christine to stay.

“Come on, August. Drink some water,” she pleaded.

I parted my lips like my dry mouth was a motherfucking altar for an offering at the church my father’s funeral was at.

Bells, they played bells when they put his body in that forever tomb.

What was his cause of death?

It was probably bad to tell the paparazzi that he was possessed and that the devil living in his chest finally ate him from the inside out. The icy cool water traveled down my throat. Sweat collected on the back of my neck. My cock was hard as hell but worthless. Buzzing, buzzing, buzzing.

Christine put the bottle on the nightstand. “Why don’t you go to your room, Christine? We can watch over him tonight.”

“No,” I moaned. “Don’t leave yet.”

The mattress dipped beside me. Christine was wearing my shirt. Her hair was still in a bun on top of her head. Her lipstick was smeared. Her eyes glowed like the lightning bugs we used to catch in her mother’s garden.

The smell of roses wrapped around my nose. What was happening? Jitters like shooting stars and orgasms flowed through me. Hot.

I took something, didn’t I? I drank too much. My body was sluggish. My mind on fire.

“Go to sleep, August,” Christine whispered. “Go to sleep, August,” she repeated when I cried for a man who didn’t deserve my tears.

“I’m sorry, August.” I wasn’t sure if she said that, or my father’s ghost.

My disorderly heart pounded as she watched me break.

Chapter Five

CHRISTINE

I was deeply aware of every rise and fall of August's chest beside me, even though my eyes were closed.

In. Out. In.

Pause.

Heart pounding. Sleepy moan.

Out.

It was my belief that my upbringing influenced my tendency to pay attention to minor details. Dad used to tell his men that a deep sleeper was a dead sleeper. After I murdered Lord Geralt, I taught myself how to sleep with one eye open.

Being back at the castle made it impossible to sleep at all.

I found it extremely difficult to rest last night, even though I was emotionally and physically drained from the day before. Being here awakened a part of me I'd buried deep. And of course, lying next to August was beautiful, delirious torture.

I shouldn't have stayed. Not after all the nasty things he said to me on the limo ride home.

I hate you, Christine.

Would he remember the venom he spewed? Would he care? Drunken words were sober thoughts, after all. I believed that philosophy was the reason Mum never drank wine when my father was home.

As soon as I stepped into the club, I knew I shouldn't have gone. My motivation for doing it was unclear even to me. After slogging through four hours at the cemetery and watching the sun dip into the night sky, I wanted to prolong my trip back to the castle that contained all my sins. As Leo drove me back to the castle, I told him to take a detour.

At first, he refused. Seeing August was a trigger for me. I craved him desperately, and if anything was going to derail my plans of leaving Aldrich, it was him. But once Leo learned

where I wanted to go, a devious, knowing smile crossed his face, and he whispered, “As you wish.”

He knew how bad August had gotten and was happy to give me a front-row seat to what awaited me should I choose to stay.

What I got at Electric was a harsh slap in the face—a brutal twist I was unable to escape. I showed up expecting to relive happier times, but the experience left me humiliated. Nothing was the same. It was foolish to think that Aldrich was a time capsule for the friends I left behind. We grew up and grew apart.

August evolved as the evening continued. It was like watching a rabid deterioration. By the night’s end, he was practically foaming at the mouth and snapping at me. August sped through the stages of grief like he was in a one-man race. He was cruel. He was lost. He gave in and sobbed himself to sleep, unaware of the audience watching him break.

“Are you done pretending to sleep? I’m hungry, gorgeous,” Atticus said from his spot on the leather loveseat by the large window. I knew the wannabe royal was here, watching me snuggle next to August like he was the only source of heat in a blizzard. However, his voice still startled me. When I was a girl, I used to sleep in the very chair he currently occupied. I’d spend hours curled up in a blanket, listening to August mumble in his sleep.

I nuzzled deeper into the feather mattress. I wasn’t ready for the quiet moment to be over. I also wasn’t ready to continue our conversation from last night.

While August was losing his mind at the club, Leo spent the evening glaring at me, but Atticus? Atticus asked far too many questions. It felt more like an interrogation than a reunion.

What are you up to?

How have you been?

Did you miss me?

Do you remember our kiss?

That last question escaped his lips as he pressed me against the wall in the hallway leading to the restroom. I had to fight the instinct to push him off and bruise his windpipe with my elbow. I knew he was following me, and his persistence was probably the only thing that stayed the same these last three years.

I still wasn't sure if Atticus truly wanted me or wanted the idea of me, though. Three years ago, I was open to entertaining his affections, but too much time had passed, and my heart was now a muddled, dead organ beating in my chest.

No matter how much time had passed, the answer to his unspoken question was still the same:

No. I don't love you back. I force myself not to feel anything these days.

“Pretending not to hear me. Cute. Maybe I should just wake August and see if he's hungry, huh? I'm sure all those awful things he said to you in the car ride home really worked up an appetite.”

I didn't have to look at Atticus to know that he was disappointed in me. I could clearly picture his crestfallen face and the scowl on his mouth in my mind's eye. Once again, I was chasing after August. Once again, Atticus was disgusted with my obsession and wanted my focus to be solely on him.

The heart wanted what it wanted, I suppose.

And the heart was a foolish fucking fool. My stubborn heart needed to hide away where it was safe.

I sat up in bed and turned to gaze at Atticus. He wore a wrinkled suit fit for the royal court and was leaning back in the loveseat, his legs stretched out in front of him as he stroked his chin. He looked like a lazy god, looking down upon his subjects.

“He was high,” I said. I was used to giving excuses for August's behavior. We might have been good friends, but that didn't mean he was a saint.

“What was it he said?” Atticus asked while staring hungrily at me. “I believe he called you a *pathetic waste of*

space. Then he commented on the size of your ass and laughed about your degree plan. Said it was a good thing you had a trust fund waiting for you, because you'd never amount to anything with an art history degree. End. Quote."

Atticus smirked. I cut my heart out of my chest so it could stop hurting so much. Figuratively speaking, of course.

"He hates me," I mumbled, not bothering to defend him anymore. What was the point? August didn't understand why I left. The queen had told him I wanted to study abroad. That was the story she told everyone.

"You can't hate someone you don't know," Atticus replied with a refined wave of his hand. He leaned forward on his chair and rested his arms on the tops of his legs.

I gave him an incredulous look. "August knows me... well...*knew* me." The boy sleeping off his drugs had no idea who I'd become or what I was capable of now.

"He never knew you. He knew himself through you, tied his identity up in your existence without letting you shine on your own."

I frowned. "You seem to have put a lot of thought into this."

"I have."

"Why?" I asked.

"I put a lot of thought into all things related to you. Particularly the events that led to your escape three years ago. Tell me who hurt you."

I swallowed. "No one hurt me."

"You lie like you breathe. And when we're together, I make your lungs clench, Miss Abernathy."

As if commanded by his words, a gasp escaped my lips.

"No one hurt me," I stammered.

"Then who did *you* hurt?"

I looked over at August. From the looks of it, I'd hurt my best friend.

But it was for the best. I had to. I still had to.

“What does it matter to you?” I boldly asked. “What could a perfectly privileged man like you do?”

A storm of emotions crossed his face. “You have no idea what I'm capable of, Christine. I was a lovesick fool when you left, and now I'm a ruthless man determined to stake his claim. We all changed that spring.”

I let out a bitter laugh. “Ruthless? August hides behind his title. You hide behind your money. Have you ever let your knuckles bleed, Atticus? Have you ever taken matters into your own hands and clawed yourself out of a grave someone else dug for you?” I was goading him, fully aware that he had demons of his own. I knew on some level there was more to Atticus's family fortune than he explained to me. You didn't get to the top without stepping on people to get there.

He smirked as if he knew something I didn't. There was danger in his smile, a secret I wanted to pry apart with my mouth. “One day, I'll show you.”

Atticus had always been a mystery to me, a secret he crafted so expertly. I knew his family had insurmountable wealth; they had their fingers dipped into money streams crossing every industry. But there was something about him I didn't understand. Something edgy and dangerous. He'd sometimes disappear for weeks at a time when we were young, showing back up looking pristine but with scrapes along his knuckles.

“You won't get the chance. I'm leaving today, Atticus. They only force me back for funerals and weddings.”

He tilted his head to the side. “Are you saying all I need to do for some time with you is roll some heads?”

He was joking surely, despite the seriousness of his tone. “Or propose to some sorry heiress that wants you for your cash,” I replied.

“If there will be my ring on anyone’s finger, it’ll be yours,” he said. I chewed on my lip, my heart stalling. “You never answered me last night. Do you remember the night I kissed you?”

I shoved the smooth sheets off my legs and stood up, forgetting that I was only wearing one of August’s oversized shirts. It made the entire conversation feel even more uncomfortable than it already was. The queen would be scandalized. Aldrich had an unspoken dress code. Long, flowy dresses. Corsets. Hairstyles that took hours to recreate. “I try not to dwell on all the things that happened here before I left,” I admitted. It was an honest statement. Lingered in the past only paved a road that led to heartbreak. I was forging a new future. “And it was hardly a kiss.”

Atticus stood up. “I remember it,” he admitted. “Just the brush of my lips on yours, and you were practically melting for me. And then August showed up and you followed after him like I never existed. It never made sense to me. He was always so bloody blind.” I froze when Atticus cupped my cheek. This greeting felt rushed, like three years hadn’t passed and the man standing in front of me was still a friend. “I’m going to kiss you again, Christine. You’ll beg for it. Beg for *me*. Next time I get the chance, it won’t be a chaste tease. I’m going to *devour* you. You were meant for me. Always meant for me.”

His words stirred my soul. “Things change,” I whispered.

“Oh,” Atticus said while leaning down, “I’m counting on it.” We both had morning breath. His eyes were bloodshot from partying too hard the night before. His tie was loosened, and we were so close that I could see every strand of stubble lining his jaw. Atticus was perfect. Refined beauty. Rugged determination and grit tied up with a pretty bow.

He was a boy raised to want everything August had.

I didn’t pull away from Atticus because I wasn’t attracted to him, or because I wanted August more. The night I escaped this kingdom, I left him standing in a ballroom with his heart on his sleeve and rejection in his heart because I knew that he

didn't truly want me. I was just another toy he wanted to steal from August's clenched fist.

"I should get dressed. I'm going to talk to the queen before my flight leaves," I whispered. Atticus was still so close. Heat zipped between his palm and my cheek. I shifted my weight between my feet, and his brown eyes slipped down to stare at the short hem of my shirt and where it barely covered my upper thigh.

"I'd beg you to stay, but I liked you better gone," he admitted.

"Why?" I replied with a frown. "Because you like having August all to yourself?" I wasn't sure if their friendship was by malicious design or if Atticus acted on a convenient opportunity, but their relationship was all about checks and balances.

His expression soured. "Because it's harder to pretend to like him when you're around. The longer you are here, the closer I am to being convicted of crimes against the Crown. Go home, Christine. I'll come to you."

His lips found the corner of my mouth. It was chaste and teasing. Dark. Assuming. He pulled back with his arched brow raised before walking out of August's suite.

As soon as he was gone, I exhaled. There was something about Atticus that made you hold your breath.

I searched the ornate room and found my clothes quickly. Nothing had changed about the space. August had a large four-poster bed draped with rich fabric and painted dusty gold. The tall sun-blocking curtains made it hard to tell what time it was, but I could smell the bacon on the breakfast cart left outside his door.

My funeral dress was neatly folded in a pile on the oversized dresser. There was no doubt in my mind that Leo had picked it up off the floor and carefully set it aside for me. He was always the most disciplined member of the group. Disorganization was a grave concern for the stoic bodyguard. Last night, I'd been in such a hurry to help August that I

stripped and left each piece of my dress on the floor. It did not matter to me that both Atticus and Leo were standing just a few feet away from me.

Last night, like I used to do when I was a teenager, I shuffled through August's drawers to find something comfortable to sleep in. After finding a sleep shirt, I slipped it on. Only after lifting the goose feather duvet did I realize that both boys had seen me stripped bare. Fortunately, August was too out of his mind to give me a hard time.

Or at least, the old August would have.

Last night had felt painfully familiar but beautifully normal. For so long, I'd only associated this kingdom with the terrible things King Frederick forced me to do. I forgot all the other little moments that molded me into a woman here. The rebellious antics I did as a teen weren't revolved around murders and blood.

"What are you doing in my room?" August asked with a groan. I jumped, dropping my pile of clothes. "Get out." He sounded so much like his father just then.

"Do you remember last night?" I asked before bending down to grab my slip. Once I was upright, I found myself staring at August. His eyes widened when he saw what I was wearing. I was sure my blonde hair was a mess of waves, and his shirt was wrinkled. I didn't need a mirror to know that my eyes had dark circles beneath them.

Our silent staring match lasted for an entire minute. "I don't hand out participation trophies to my one-night stands," he finally said while sitting up. August scratched his scalp. I stripped out of his shirt then stepped into my black satin slip and pulled the thin straps over my shoulders. His assumption hurt, but the way he didn't care hurt more.

Perhaps I should have mentioned how much he cried last night and how he begged me to stay, but I didn't need the validation. "We didn't fuck. I just stayed to make sure you didn't choke on your own vomit."

August blanched at my vulgar choice of words. “I don’t need a babysitter,” he said before rolling his eyes.

“And I don’t need to waste my time on someone who hates me. I heard you loud and clear last night, August.”

“I don’t even remember what I said. I’m tired, okay? Can we just do this later?”

“I’m leaving this afternoon,” I replied with a shrug. Grabbing my long dress, I put it on and cursed the long line of buttons up my back. I hated the traditional clothes of Aldrich. I’d gotten used to wearing linen pants and flowy blouses back in Harvinton. The clothes here were just as oppressive as the king. Vintage fashion never faded into history, it just evolved.

It suddenly seemed to dawn on August that I wasn’t a permanent fixture in his life. His eyes widened as he realized what was happening.

This reunion was temporary.

“I forgot. Wait, why did you come last night?” August squeezed his eyes shut, likely trying to piece together the broken shards of his memory.

“I thought maybe we could spend time together before I left. But you went supernova self-destructive. You said some pretty awful things, and I stayed up all night to make sure whatever drugs you took weren’t going to kill you.”

August looked like a little kid for a moment, his expression bleeding with remorse. “Shit, Christine. I’m sorry. I asked you to come out last night, and I fucked it all to hell.”

I didn’t offer him forgiveness. “I better get going. See you...at the next funeral.”

And with that morbid statement, I gathered my shoes and started walking toward the door.

“Christine! Wait.” I paused, one hand on the doorknob, one hovering over my chest. “I’m sorry. Let me try this again. I’m not ready for you to leave. I’m sorry for the participation trophy shit, too. It just sort of freaked me out, seeing you in

my clothes. I couldn't remember what happened and you're... you."

What the hell was that supposed to mean? I twisted the knob. "Maybe Atticus is right," I said in a low voice. "Things are better when I'm gone."

I walked out and shut the door.

Goodbye, August.

Chapter Six

CHRISTINE

At the prospect of meeting the queen, my stomach churned with anxiety. The last time I saw her, I was coated in a dead man's blood, my wild eyes seeking comfort from a woman who wouldn't give it. She efficiently ordered a team to clean up my mess and informed me that I'd leave the kingdom at once.

I knew she was saving me, but I still resented the way she seemed exasperated by it all. As if I hadn't endured the greatest trauma of my life but created an annoyance for her to overcome.

The papers said Lord Geralt died peacefully in his sleep seven days after I'd left. The funeral was a closed casket. The Pope attended.

I'd assumed that King Frederick didn't want to ruin his reputation and admit an eighteen-year-old girl murdered a prized lord in his court. And I was long gone before I could endure his wrath. My new home was far away from his jurisdiction, but I still lost sleep in fear that he'd risk a war to get to me. I never understood why he simply let me go. Queen Isabelle promised me she'd take care of it all. I just never imagined she'd be so effective.

The queen's sitting room smelled like a funeral home, with roses encompassing every surface. She didn't start obsessing over flowers until after my mother died. I supposed it was her way of keeping Mum's memory alive. The wallpaper was antique and immaculate. The couch in the corner was a stark shade of ivory. Tall windows from floor to ceiling were covered with teal window dressings. In the middle of the room, Queen Isabelle sat at a tea table surrounded by platters of food.

She was wearing a long black dress that looked regal and thick. Her black hair was in curls framing her face, and the flawlessly applied makeup she wore told more secrets than her pristine appearance. Isabelle hadn't shed a single tear over the

death of her husband. Her mascara was too perfect for genuine grief. I couldn't blame her, but the charade she was playing infuriated me. Why not tell the truth? Why support him even in death?

I sat down at the table, feeling like a child. She used to invite Mum and me to afternoon tea when I was a young girl. Mum would dress me up and curl my hair. She was always happiest when visiting Queen Isabelle. They'd sit in the loveseat and stare at one another. Sometimes I'd catch them cuddling and crying silent tears. The only time I ever saw Isabelle break was the day Mum died.

I remembered playing on the floor at their feet while they discussed my father's trips with cryptic statements. It wasn't until I got older that I realized what they were about.

"Want me to send him on another assignment? I see the bruise on your jaw, Hannah." Isabelle reached across the table and grabbed my mother's hand.

"Can you please?" Mum said while choking on a sob.

"This room hasn't changed one bit," I said before sitting down. I'd changed into a light blue dress with a floral print and scooping neckline. I looked fit for a meeting with the queen. I also managed to wash the smell of her drunk son from my skin.

"Nothing in this kingdom ever really changes. Not if you pay attention, Lady Abernathy."

I scoffed. "Your devotion to the late king is proof enough of that, I suppose."

She leaned back in her chair and dismissed the server standing in the corner with a slight wave of her hand. I rolled my eyes at her need for privacy. "You of all people should know that a divorce isn't always the simple choice. Sometimes we are bound to our status."

"What is that supposed to mean?" I asked, although I knew the answer. I liked to pretend that my parents had a happy marriage and that my father wasn't an ambitious traitor willing to sell his own daughter even in death.

“You know what that means. Your mother showed up on my doorstep littered in bruises. I did what I could, but it was safer most days for the two of you if she stayed. Your father might have been vicious, but my husband was the devil.”

At least she was being honest. I just wished she wouldn't whisper about his evil in privacy. I wanted it shouted from the rooftops. I looked down at my hands in my lap. I had threaded my fingers together and was squeezing them tightly, urging myself not to leap across the table and act on the anger I felt.

“Why did he never come after me?” I asked softly. “Why did King Frederick never chase me down and drag me back? He had to have known what I'd done.” It was a question that bothered me. I hated spending my existence looking over my shoulder. It was a relief to know he was dead.

Her answer was immediate. “Because Lord Geralt died of a heart attack.”

I looked quizzically at her. “But...I...”

“The truth is what I make it, Christine. Paid doctors can be very convincing. Autopsies can be adjusted. I sent you away to Harvington because you were a distraction for August. King Frederick didn't have any more lords waiting to marry you off to, so he allowed it.”

“It couldn't have been that easy,” I argued.

“It's more plausible than the truth.” She sipped her tea, then continued. “You've always been a tiny little thing. Killing a lord twice your age? It's absurd. You cried when that blue jay crashed into our stained glass window and broke its wing. You aren't ruthless, Christine. You aren't cunning and you definitely don't defy us. You're an obedient pet who follows the rules. Sure, you cried when my husband told you of his plans for you. But you still sat on that bed, spread your legs, and accepted your fate. When my late husband walked out the door, he had no doubts in his mind that you'd do what was required for the Crown. It made everything else easier. I know better than anyone. The facade of compliance makes it easier to get away with things.”

My eyes welled up with tears as she so plainly described what happened. “I fought back in the end.”

I still remembered the burst of defiance that flowed through me. The way my trembling hands wrapped around the heavy lamp. The roar that escaped my lips when I slammed it against his skull.

Her lips twitched. “Yes, I suppose you did.”

“I should thank you for saving me,” I said while raising my chin in rebelliousness. I wasn’t feeling appreciative, but she deserved it nonetheless. Isabelle was used to me cowering at her feet.

“I never wanted you to marry that pompous pig. But you caught Geralt’s eye, and Geralt caught my husband’s ear. I promised your mother I would protect you, and unfortunately I failed that night. I never expected you to have your father’s damned determination, though. Such a brutal death. Made covering it up very difficult. Had to convince his mother that a closed casket was necessary because the funeral home messed up.”

I refused to feel guilty for saving myself, and even if I resented the queen, I still appreciated her rescuing me that night and keeping King Frederick from me for the last three years.

“I want Leo reinstated.”

The corner of her lip quirked up. I knew immediately that she saw my request as leverage. “Leo knows too much. It’s safer to send him away.”

“Leo won’t tell anyone what happened.” I was certain of it.

Queen Isabelle lifted her spoon and stirred some sugar into her china cup. “You’re predictably compassionate, Christine.”

“Better than the alternative,” I snapped.

She lifted the cup to her ruby lips and took a long sip. I waited patiently, my stomach too twisted in knots to participate in the teatime ritual. “Leo is charming in a rugged

sort of way. I understand the appeal, though I'd always expected you to fall in love with my Augustus."

I swallowed a thick ball of emotion. "It's about doing what's right. He was an asset to the royal guard."

"He was a liability to the queen. It's not just your neck on the chopping block, Christine. I helped you clean up that bloody mess and escape."

"Please," I begged. "He's proven his loyalty. The king is dead."

"What will you do to bring him back? How much are you willing to give?" She leaned over slightly, somehow maintaining her perfect posture as she did.

Everything was a transaction in the kingdom of Aldrich.

"What do you want?" I choked out.

"You're not leaving here, Christine." Her words were even and laced with authority.

My spine turned to steel. "What?"

"I'm ordering you to stay. Your passport has been flagged. All the money in your accounts, frozen. As we sip tea, the university in Harvington is being informed of your withdrawal. I'm so sorry to do that, by the way. Just one semester to go. We can look into online courses if you'd like." She spoke as if she were discussing the weather.

My skin felt tight, the frown on my face stretching so deep that it burned. "Why? I can't come back. If someone found out ___"

"Exactly, Christine. It would be incredibly easy for me to tell the world that you killed Lord Geralt and covered up his murder."

"Why?" I asked. "Why now? What do you want from me?"

Isabelle smiled politely, though I knew she had brimstone for teeth. "The House of Rose is a very influential family. Though you don't have access to your trust fund until you're

twenty-five, the title attached to your name has been there since you were born. Many people respect your father's legacy and adore your mother's gentle heart. You're the darling of the kingdom."

I shook my head. "But I don't care about any of that. I want to live a normal life."

"Women like us don't get normal lives, Christine. We get power struggles and polished bodies primed to be fucked and bred by royalty."

Her words made me flinch. "You're going to marry me off." My mind instantly went back to the king's sinister words. He'd handed me over to the lord with a grin on his face, convinced my worth was only tied to the pleasures my body could give another man and the title my father had earned.

"My husband limited your potential. An arranged marriage with a lord was well beneath your station. I have much bigger plans for you."

I started to shake, the idea of being forced into another wedding without my consent made me sick to my stomach. "Who?"

She preened excitedly. "Augustus. You will marry my son, Christine."

My reaction was conflicted. All I'd ever wanted was to end up with the boy I fell in love with. If I'd had to pick anyone to marry in this godforsaken kingdom, it would have been him.

But the traumas of my past made me reject the idea of being queen. I didn't want to be a pawn for the Crown. I didn't want to trap myself in the scheming or abuse the court offered. Fleeing this kingdom was the best thing I'd ever done, the taste of freedom too sweet to give up. "No," I whispered.

"I once thought I had a choice, too, darling."

"I don't want anything to do with this kingdom. You know what happened to me. You know how I was raped by a man twice my age here. Why would you want to chain me to a castle that holds all my grief? My mother would be rolling in her grave. After everything," I said while shaking my head.

“Your mother would understand. As parents, we have no standards of morality when it comes to the safety of our children.”

“Why me?” I asked.

“There are many who don’t think my son is up for the job. They think he’s wild and reckless—”

I scoffed. “He is.”

Ignoring me, she continued, “There are enemies waiting in the wings to tear him down. I need him married to an obedient girl beloved by the public. Someone who will help keep him in line while he settles into his role. That girl is you.”

I licked my lips. My heart rate picked up. “I killed a man. What part of that makes you think I’m obedient?”

She smiled at my bloodthirsty words. “You’re obedient when it counts and deadly when it’s necessary. The perfect makings of a queen. Plus, I have enough leverage on you that it’ll be easy to keep you under my thumb.”

Another sip of tea, another morbid truth shoved through my chest.

She continued. “The king was murdered. And we’ve found evidence that Augustus is next. Someone wants to end the royal family, which means I need someone I can trust at my son’s side.”

I fought the urge to laugh. “There’s always someone that wants to end the monarchy. Your husband had many enemies. Some of those enemies extend to me.” It was a fact that kept me up most nights. “I’m not surprised he was murdered. He was cocky. He thought he was invincible.”

“This silent enemy has deeper pockets and a farther reach than the usual traitor. They’re dangerous. I let my son live abroad on that ridiculous yacht because he’s safer away from here. But he can’t leave now. The court will vote to crown him by the end of the month, and it’ll be *you* at his side, Christine.”

“You have an entire army at your disposal,” I replied.

“And my son is a self-destructive idiot. I don’t want him to know that his life is in danger. He’ll step down. The court will take over. You know how sexist they are. We can’t allow that to happen. I’m the only thing progressing our country past the dark ages, and I refuse to let those stuffy men win. They’re vile. Evil. I’ll be damned before I let them come into power.”

I shifted in my seat while looking around. Part of me was worried about August. If last night was any indication, he was an easy target. He accepted drugs from a random girl and nearly drank himself into an early grave. It was terrifying. If I wasn’t there...

“Does Leo know?” I asked.

“He does. I promoted him this morning and brought him back to the castle. He’s been assigned to you. I figured if I was going to make you stay, you deserved a little reward. You can marry my son, but there’s no reason you can’t have a little fun on the side.”

Her words made me blanch. The way she so casually suggested an affair was unnerving.

“I can’t do this, Isabelle. Please don’t make me stay. There’s too much pain in Aldrich for me.”

Isabelle leaned over the table and grabbed my hand. Her cold eyes were veiled by unshed tears. The bones in her body trembled as she stared at me. Holding onto me, she forced me to take in her expression of terror. “This isn’t a deal, Christine. When you wanted to leave this kingdom, I helped you escape. I sent you to a country where Frederick would have no jurisdiction. I also sent you money until your trust fund kicked in. I kept your secret. I did what I could to protect what was left of your innocence. I need you to stand beside my son, now. I don’t trust anyone but you. And Leo has earned my trust with his silence.”

I jerked my hand back and rubbed at the skin blooming with pain from her harsh grip. “I’m not the obedient little pet I used to be, Izzy.” The nickname rolled off my tongue before I had time to tame it.

She grinned. “Then I’ll break you into submission once more, my darling little girl.”

A knife came flying at me. I heard it whooshing through the air and headed straight for my skull. Time slowed. I could feel the shift in the air and practically sense the threat in my soul. My blood turned cold. I spun around and grabbed the hilt and assessed the room in three seconds. There was a man hiding behind the curtain. One at the door. One rushing the queen.

I threw the blade at the man rushing her, first. I didn’t know why I did it. I owed her nothing. I knew it made more sense to attack the one with the gun by the window. My training hit me like a freight train. The sharp blade stuck its landing, sliding effortlessly into his neck and making a spray of blood shoot out of the wound. It showered the queen with his crimson death.

My muscles warmed as I sprinted in my heels across the floor to the man behind the window. I grabbed the curtain and wrapped it around his wrists. He dropped the gun in his hand. The Glock fell to the floor. I kicked it away before snapping his neck.

It was too easy. He collapsed on the ground instantly.

The third man picked up the gun and aimed it at me.

Once again, easy. *Too easy.*

As soon as I saw him, I rushed to him. As I screamed, my heart pounded. Grabbing his arm, I forced him to bend at the elbow and tightened my grip. I then grabbed the gun and pressed it under his chin before kneeing him in the balls. He bent over, forcing himself to rest against the barrel of the gun.

“Enough,” Queen Isabelle said.

I pulled the trigger.

It wasn’t enough. It was never enough. Blood and brains splattered across my face. Drips of death landed on my lip. It coated my blonde hair. It saturated my skin.

“Enough!” Isabelle said when I spun around, still holding the gun. Time seemed to slow as I processed what had happened. Isabelle clapped her hands together and eyed me with wonder. “Marvelous. My spies said you’d been training, but I never imagined...”

I slowed my breathing like my lessons had taught me to, letting the bloodlust drain out of me. “What was this?”

“A test,” she breezed. “You didn’t think you could spend three years becoming a killing machine without me knowing, did you?”

I let out a harsh breath, adrenaline still coursing through me. She knew. I thought I’d been training in secret. All those hours conditioning my body. Learning how to fight past my reservations and weak stomach. Preparing for war.

My breath hitched. “What choice did I have? I spent every moment of my life fearing King Frederick would come for me.” I aimed the gun at her. There was no one here to stop me. There were still more bullets in the magazine. I could have ended her life if I wanted to. “Look at me,” I growled, the low tone foreign to me. “I’m not a docile member of the court anymore. I learned how to defend myself so none of you could ever use me again.”

She sat in awe. “You’re glorious, Christine. A perfect match for Augustus. You’ll keep him safe—I know it.” Isabelle stood up. My hand shook, the adrenaline flooding every cell of my body. “Do it,” she urged while stepping up to me. “Kill me, Christine. Prove how bloodthirsty you’ve become.”

I pulled back the safety. “Stop talking,” I yelled.

“But I know the truth, Christine,” she continued while stepping forward. “I know that you’re not a killer. You’re a protector. You’re your mother’s child. And she saved me. I need you to save August.”

I lifted my chin. Blood dripped down my face. Soon, guards would be running here. I’d be arrested on the spot. “Fuck you,” I whispered before dropping my arm to my side.

She tilted her chin up like the royal woman she was, looking down her nose at me with pride. “Look how beautiful you are. Covered in blood. I can almost picture the crown on your head,” Isabelle said softly. It felt like defeat. I should have fled the country last night. “You won’t be leaving Aldrich today. I had a suite prepared for you next to August. See you at dinner, Christine.”

Chapter Seven

AUGUST

I was wearing a hot and stuffy royal suit, the golden crest pinned to my chest glimmering under the chandelier overhead. I'd bathed in my Ambre Topkapi cologne to hide the lingering smell of pot on my skin. As much as I disliked admitting it, I spent the majority of the day sulking in my suite, smoking, and dealing with a huge hangover. Over the course of the day, I consumed one gallon of water and had a greasy breakfast by myself. My thoughts turned to Christine as I lay in bed.

I was a dick. A cocky dick that probably deserved a gigantic kick in the balls for the way I acted, but I'd never admit that out loud. Taking random drugs from a girl I didn't know didn't even make the list of top ten stupidest things I'd ever done. Last night was just a blip in a long line of poor decisions. The only difference was, the first girl I ever loved got to see the new me. I liked to fuck random women. I liked to party. Hard. I liked to take little white pills and throw back bottles of expensive liquor.

I didn't even know what Christine liked anymore. She seemed so different. So closed off and cautious. The girl I knew wasn't scared of the world. She controlled the earth's rotation with her nimble index finger. I didn't fucking understand it. There was a part of me that hated how eager I was to unravel her mystery.

"Are you my new babysitter?" I asked Leo, who was standing stoically at my side, fingers threaded together in front of him as we waited for my mother to arrive. I'd rather fracture my dick than attend this diplomatic dinner with these stuffy council members and my coldhearted mother. However, since I was in town and since my father was dead, I had to step up.

It was like stepping back in time. Expensive costumes. Decorum and unspoken etiquette.

I wanted to be on my yacht. I wanted to be fucking some faceless girl who liked to grind her clit against my tongue, so I could get Christine out of my system. But no. I was here.

“Your mother decided my talents were best used here,” Leo replied. His tone was robotic. Was he always this loyal? This obedient? He wore a dark navy suit. I could see the outline of a gun holstered to his hip. His hair was pulled back into one of those ridiculous man buns that bitches loved. There was no doubt that Leo was taller and stronger than me. My goal was to look good naked, not to win fights. The type of muscle mass he had was only possible through roids or anger.

“Are you sleeping with the queen, Leo? You probably had to pay her in sexual favors to get out of that blasted countryside. Why did she banish you, anyway?” I asked. “Christine disappeared, and then they reassigned you the next day. One might think the two events were related.”

I was pressuring him. I knew damn well they sent him away because of Christine. I just didn't know why. It was quite the thorn in our friendship. I liked Leo. He was cool. And when we were teens, he let me get away with lots of shit, mostly because he liked saving me. I supposed now that he wasn't banned anymore, he would have plenty of opportunities to dive in front of rogue bullets aimed at my chest.

A group of men walked by us, heading for the large dining room. It wasn't until they were out of earshot that Leo spoke up. “You need to tell your mother to send Christine away, August.”

I scoffed. “Christine is already on a plane flying back to Harvington.”

“Are you sure about that?” Leo asked while nudging me. I looked up, then followed his line of sight, frowning when I saw the most beautiful fucking woman I'd ever seen in my goddamn life walking toward me. Christine was a dream. Her hair was curled like loose ribbons and flowed down her back. Her neck and face were red, almost as if she was perpetually blushing or had spent hours scrubbing at her skin. And her dress? God damn alive. Her dress was sinfully tight. The

fabric was like water over her body, gracefully moving with every step. The rose color brought out the gold highlights in her blonde hair.

“Send her home,” Leo urged. I barely heard him.

“Why the fuck would I do that?” I asked in a daze while drinking her in. Christine looked like a wet dream. I imagined fucking her out here in the hall where everyone could see.

There was one aspect of her appearance that made me pause, though. Her gaze was distant. Haunted. Despite the smile on her full lips, she seemed off. Selfishly, I couldn't help but feel elated that she'd stayed. She was here. Did my mother have any say in this?

“Because she isn't happy here,” Leo replied under his breath. “Because this isn't her.”

If Christine wasn't happy, then I supposed I would make it my job to make her happy. Was that why she left?

As I strolled up to her, I felt confident despite the look of annoyance on her face. She held both of her fists tightly at her sides. As she stared over my shoulder and gave Leo fuck me eyes, I felt a burning sense of anger. She batted her lashes and inhaled at the sight of him. Fuck that. I wanted her attention. “You're still here,” I whispered before wrapping her up in a hug. I probably shouldn't hug her so tightly. I was sending mixed signals, wasn't I? Pushing her away and holding her close.

I was such a dick.

I didn't really care.

She reluctantly melted against me. Fuck, she felt so good. She smelled like vanilla and clean soap. I ran my hands along her spine, and her lips brushed along my neck. My cock twitched in my pants, and I felt like a fucking preteen again, trying to hide the embarrassing hard-on I had growing.

No. Fuck that. I wasn't embarrassed. I wanted her to feel how much she affected me. “I had no choice,” she whispered. “Your mother flagged my passport. I can't leave the kingdom.”

I stopped myself from cupping her perky ass to process her words. “Why?” I asked. What the fuck was happening?

As if summoned, my mother’s voice rang out. “Come along now,” the illustrious former queen said with a smirk. Even though she’d lost her title the moment my father died, she still spoke with an heir of superiority. She was walking into the dining room with her entourage on her heels. I hadn’t even noticed her approaching. My mother looked apologetically giddy—and far too excited for a meeting with the sexist pricks that made our lives a living nightmare. I hated the lords, but we all had a part to play. I needed to know what she had planned.

Christine let out a huff of air and followed my mother. She looked like a motherfucking goddess, with her shoulders rolled back and her chin tilted up in defiance. Even though I had no idea what was going on, I refused to let it get to me. With Leo hot on my tail, I scurried up to Christine and grasped her slender arm in order to walk beside her.

“What’s the deal? Am I a total dick for being happy that you’re staying? Do you think we can sneak out of here early? Why are you at a dinner for diplomats, anyway?”

Each question made me feel pathetic.

Christine clenched her jaw, as if the rigid, silent strength could force the words she wanted to scream to dissolve on her tongue. Something was wrong. Didn’t she have a meeting with my mother this morning? She didn’t answer a single question, and that made me worry even more.

My voice was tender as I whispered, “Are you alright?” With one hand on her back, I guided her to her seat and sat beside her. Queen Isabelle positioned herself at the head of the table. Surrounding us were a couple dozen assholes decorated in the royal crest and wearing black suits of mourning. Some men were so old that hair was growing out of their oversized ears. Christine and my mother were the only women sitting here. I’d never noticed before how unbalanced these dinners were. Mom always carried herself so effortlessly. Though she was challenged often, the lack of diversity in the room never

really occurred to me. But now that Christine was fidgeting in her seat, it felt different. I didn't like the way all the men stared hungrily at her.

"I didn't realize this meeting was open to *everyone*," a stuffy man said, eyeing her. "This was supposed to be a formal meeting."

I scowled at him, and another one piped up. "Oh, I don't mind. It's been a while, Christine. You've grown into quite a striking young woman. Shame your father didn't spawn a male heir. It would be pleasant to have the House of Rose on our council again."

Christine pursed her lips and nodded in greeting.

"I'm sure a pretty thing like her would rather shop than discuss royal matters," another diplomat chimed in, earning a chorus of laughter. My mother's eyes thinned ever so slightly. It was the quiet equivalent of her saying *fuck you*.

"She is a pleasure to look at," another said. "And she's quiet. The perfect woman. I remember Lord Geralt wanted to marry her the moment she turned eighteen. Youthful women are so much easier to keep docile. As they get older, you have to deal with opinions. God rest his soul, he would have molded her beautifully."

More laughter. Christine turned impossibly pale.

I might like to fuck my way through the entire northern hemisphere, but I wasn't about to sit here and let them talk to Christine like that. Not when she was a flight risk.

I shouldn't have had that edible and probably should have taken my Ritalin today.

Christine trembled slightly, and I decided enough was enough. I was all over the damn place.

"Enough," I growled while slamming a fist on the tablecloth. "No leering at Christine and keep your comments to yourself." A few of the men gave me surprised looks. I shocked myself with the outburst. I am rarely fucked enough to care about these meetings. My parents might have groomed me to be the future king, but they both struggled with

relinquishing control. I hadn't stepped into my role because I hadn't had to. And I sure as fuck didn't *want* to.

Mother looked pleased. "You'll have to forgive August. He's learning how to navigate his newly assigned role."

"A king never bothers himself with the feelings of a bitch," one of the elderly men said, spitting his words as he rolled his eyes.

Oh, hell no. You did not just call Christine a bitch.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"Advisor Kerick," he replied with a grumble, as if offended I had to ask. Fuck you, Kerick. You're nothing.

"So you have no birthright or title, correct? You aren't a *lord*?" I asked, making some of the men chuckle. Fuck them. So what if I didn't know everyone's job? This was why they shouldn't crown me as the damn king.

"No, Your Majesty. Your grandfather hired me forty years ago."

"Sounds like it's time for you to retire then. You're fired," I snapped with a growl.

My mother's brows raised, and the entire room erupted. "You can't do that," Advisor Kerick yelled. His voice was old and worn.

"I think I just did," I growled before leaning back in my chair and popping my neck. What good was being the king if I couldn't get rid of assholes on the advisory board? And since my father wasn't here to veto my opinions, I could actually do something.

"His father isn't even cold in the ground, and he's already clearing house," Lord Ash said loud enough for the entire room to hear. What a prick. He was always stirring up trouble. I was about to go on a rampage. Christine looked alert, her eyes taking in every aspect of the room and absorbing the scowls on everyone's faces.

"Enough," my mother said while standing. People still mumbled angrily, but she spoke over them. "August became

king the moment my husband died. Did you not swear allegiance to him?" she yelled again. "You *will* listen to him." Slowly, the rumbles of disapproval quieted.

My mother looked everyone in the eye before continuing. I knew she loved making everyone hang onto her words. "August is in charge. He took the proper time for mourning, but time is of the essence. The people need to see that he is ready to settle down and establish himself as a good and proper ruler." I had to force myself not to laugh. Didn't she know I was high right now? "He is well within his right as the king to appoint advisors he feels will best serve the Crown. I fully support his decision. You are dismissed, Advisor Kerick." There were a few murmurs of disapproval. The old man got up and stormed out of the room, screaming some shit about us regretting this. Fuck Advisor Kerick. And fuck anyone else that talked shit about Christine. Was this why she left? Was she bullied and I didn't know about it?

"You will respect Augustus. You will surrender to his authority," my mother continued. She was every bit the regal queen. This was the woman I knew. This was the woman who raised me with an iron fist. This was the person who should be leading our country. She was still young. Healthy. Capable. But they wanted someone with a dick and a pure bloodline. "...And that respect and reverence will now extend to his betrothed. August and Christine asked my permission this morning to get married, and I have chosen to formally approve their request now. Please welcome the future queen of Aldrich."

Mom stood up and raised her wine glass with a smile. Her eyes were trained on me, as if daring me to defy her.

What the fuck? Christine dropped her fork and glared at us both.

I looked at Christine. Had she planned this? I knew an arranged marriage was a possibility—way down the fucking road—but I wasn't expecting this.

It took a while for my mother's audience to realize they needed to raise their glass or show some outward expression

of support. A slow clap surrounded us, and I reached under the table to grab Christine's thigh. She was frozen in place, staring at the blood-red merlot in her glass and ignoring the queen's performance.

Yeah. Christine knew something was up.

I would sort this out.

"The Abernathys have a history of supporting the Crown," one lord said. "God rest her father's soul. But do you think this marriage is what's most beneficial for the kingdom? Maybe someone wealthier? Someone with more patriotism, perhaps? Hasn't Christine spent the last three years studying abroad?"

Someone grumbled in agreement. Another person was whipping out their phone and likely ordering a complete background check on Christine to secretly sell to the tabloids. I didn't even have a fucking ring. Yeah. Christine needed a ring. A big one. Something that told everyone in the motherfucking kingdom that my cock was huge and she was moaning my name every night.

"And is this truly the right time to make an announcement? We just finished our twenty-seven days of mourning, and the funeral was yesterday. It would seem dispassionate and rude to celebrate an engagement so soon afterward."

My mother shrugged. "The people need a reason to hope. A distraction."

"We should wait six months to announce it."

I growled in frustration, but my mother spoke before I could. "People need to see August making commitments and settling into his role. You've seen the tabloids. No one trusts that he's taking anything seriously. What's more serious than a marriage?"

"My decision is final," I snapped, even though it wasn't my decision. Even though this was a lie. Even though this was fucking *insane*. "As king, I am more than capable of picking a wife fit for the Crown."

"But, sir, we've already started planning your coronation. You've formally ascended and are *acting king*, but we need to

coordinate the ceremony. A royal wedding would disrupt our timeline.”

“Wedding first,” I snapped. “I want to be married first.” Maybe I was too high to be making decisions like this.

Wide eyes stared back at me from around the room.

“Don’t you think it’s more important for people to witness the coronation?” an older man asked. “To establish yourself formally as the king? You can’t even technically call yourself ___”

I glared at him. “I established myself when my father died, did I not? It’s my heart that still beats, my blood that is still royal. I’m king with or without the ceremony. But Christine won’t be my wife until I say my vows in a church. I’d like to focus on the more pressing issue.”

“It goes against what’s always been done!” a man shouted.

I slammed my fist on the table. “It is what I desire. Wedding takes priority.”

I couldn’t let Christine slip from my fingers. If I allowed too much time to pass, she’d find a way out of this. I just knew it.

I didn’t like how they were doubting me. I might not have been around for a while, but the lack of respect rubbed me the wrong way.

Was my mother predicting tyranny? Was arranging my marriage with Christine her way of protecting the Crown? The world was one big chess board for my mother, and now that my father was dead, she was moving pieces to protect our family.

But from what?

And why did I care?

Chapter Eight

CHRISTINE

The dinner was a blur. After the queen announced our engagement, I tuned the rest of the affair out and focused on my breathing.

I'd learned that shock was one of the most ineffective responses to trauma. I was taught how to suppress my humanity by my trainer, Hudson. When he found me punching a bag at the local gym with tears streaming down my face, he didn't introduce himself or avert his eyes. He walked up to me and said, "Your hits are weak. If you really want to hurt the person who hurt you, you'll need to build up your muscles."

I'd been glued to the old man's side ever since.

Over the course of three years, I met with him for three hours a day, seven days a week. An ex-military man with a wealth of experience in black ops, he learned why I'd fled Aldrich and turned me into a killing machine. Finding each other was serendipitous and eventually had deadly results. My mind often wondered how a man so skilled found a desperately hurting girl like me. However, I was a mess those days, a shadow of a girl who was fighting fate with her fists, willing to cling to anyone.

When Hudson decided I was ready, he took me on several jobs. Initially, it was pretty easy. He found vulnerable victims and let me loose on their attackers.

The first kill after Geralt was hard.

The second one was easier.

I didn't even flinch the third time.

Over time, I became better at what I did. With Hudson's guidance, I punished my own criminals. Killing Geralt wasn't enough. I had a bloodlust that couldn't be satisfied.

I felt as if a switch had been flipped in my mind. The cold-blooded murderer in me did not cry when she was covered in her enemy's blood. I knew how to get away with things.

Hudson taught me to wash off the blood, burn the evidence, then silently suppress every instinct to sob or feel guilty.

“Christine?”

I closed my eyes and walked down the opulent hallway, away from that dining room and all the men that were sitting at King Frederick’s table. I recognized a couple of them. Patronizing idiots. It made them feel superior when they put me down. I was certain that I could snap their necks, and that empowering thought kept me calm while they talked about my birthing hips and how pretty I’d look in a wedding dress. “Christine?!”

A hand came down on my upper arm, and I whirled around.

How many men had I killed now? I think today made eleven.

Always be on the defense.

Always be ready.

“Are you okay?”

I peered up at August through my thick lashes. He seemed completely unaware of what I’d done in his mother’s sitting room this morning.

No one ever suspected me. It’s why Hudson said I was the best at what I did. Even the queen alluded to what I was capable of doing. My most effective weapon was how everyone seemed to underestimate me. The previous life I lived became a costume I wore, which I used to disarm anyone who came into contact with me.

Those who underestimated Christine Abernathy would die regretting their decision.

“I’m fine.” I knew he was asking about this dinner, but I was referring to the three men I murdered in the queen’s sitting room. I was used to this part of killing. Used to pretending like I hadn’t become a murderer—like I wasn’t a monster. I learned how to defend myself and those weaker than me. It was an act of survival, and my body had been trained to react whenever it

was in danger. No king on earth would ever intimidate me again. No lord would conquer my body for his own personal gain.

August didn't know about my enhanced skills. And I prayed he never did.

He licked his lips nervously. "Are you sure? You seem off."

Before shrugging free from his grip, I whispered, "What do you care?" I needed some space. The blood on my skin had to be washed away. In spite of scrubbing my body for four hours today, it still didn't feel like enough. Though I had passed the queen's tests, my innocence had failed.

He stared incredulously at me. "I might be an asshole, but I care. Of course I fucking care. I just fucking fired a guy for you."

If he cared, he wouldn't have told me he hated me last night. "I don't need you to fight my battles, August. I can handle those bastards."

He flinched. "Since when? The girl I know used to hide under her mother's dress whenever the lords of the court showed up."

I laughed. He wasn't wrong. I was once a weak girl, but not anymore. "I don't hide anymore. A lot has changed."

He took a step closer to me, his tone softening. "And I want to know all about those changes. I guess we have plenty of time to go over them all now. Did you know about this?" August asked while nodding back at the door leading to the dining room.

I tilted my head back and let out a single laugh. "Which part? Did I know your mother was planning to force us to get married or that she would announce it to a room of men who despise me?" I asked.

August nervously scratched the back of his head. I watched the movement with fondness. He used to do that a lot as a boy. "Both?" he asked.

“I knew. She told me this morning at our meeting.”

“You didn’t think to warn me?” August asked.

“I figured you were already aware. Hell, I’ve been wondering if you requested it, considering you’re so determined to keep me in this damned castle.”

He reached for my wrist and wrapped his hand around it, squeezing tightly. “If I knew that was even an option for me, I would have married you when we were eighteen.”

A shiver traveled down my spine at his words, not because of flattery, but because eighteen seemed to be the magical number for Lord Geralt, too. Old enough to be fucked and young enough to be innocent. The appropriate age for being bent over someone’s knee and broken like a wild filly. August was not like Lord Geralt, but I always thought that arbitrary number was sinful. Childhood shouldn’t have a legally binding finish line for predators to stalk.

I forced my mouth to form words. “I don’t want to marry you.”

Off to our left, Queen Isabelle was standing in a group of men and talking to them but watching us out of the corner of her eye. “We don’t always get what we want, Christine,” August replied before releasing my wrist to thread our fingers together.

“What are you doing?”

“Holding my fiancée’s hand,” he replied with a malicious grin. I looked at him. His eyes were like pinpricks.

“We aren’t getting married,” I replied.

“My mother says otherwise.”

“Well, she can go fuck herself,” I said a bit too loudly. Isabelle looked over the crowd and stared at me. I stared right fucking back.

I didn’t believe in royal authority. I denounced the policies of the Crown the moment Lord Geralt slammed his body into mine. The old king ruined the monarch’s reputation in my eyes. I didn’t listen to Isabelle because I felt restricted by her

rule; no, I did it because she knew everything I had done—everything I was capable of. If she wanted, she could have me murdered for my crimes. No one would see me as an innocent girl forced to kill the lord. They'd see me as a monster. They always blamed the person holding the sword, not the person who ordered the kill. You can't punish a dead man, and I was still very much alive.

"I suppose I should get you a ring, huh?" August asked, drawing my attention back to him.

"Please do not," I pleaded while crossing my arms over my chest. "You seem awfully calm for a man who was just informed of his engagement to someone he supposedly hates," I challenged.

He looked confused for a moment. "What are you talking about?"

Shit. I didn't want to bring this up. It was embarrassing how much his words rang in my mind. It's too late now. "Last night. In the car, you said you hated me. You also mentioned my fat ass and said my degree plan was a waste of time. I guess you were right on that front. Not like I'll be able to finish my studies now. My schedule will be filled with etiquette classes."

Goodbye, my normal life. Goodbye, peace. Goodbye, a fear-free existence far away from Aldrich.

"Yeah, so I'm a dick when I'm high? And drunk. And basically, all the times between," August replied sheepishly.

"And I get to marry you. How lucky am I?" I replied with sarcasm dripping from every syllable. I loved August—or at least the boy he was—but this version of him was a mess. What happened? We'd both changed so much.

"Come on, Christine. Aren't you even a tad curious about how I would be as a husband?" he asked before reaching up to stroke my cheek. Could he see the blood? Could he smell death on my skin? "We used to be best friends, you know. Before all of this. Before you left."

“You’re so quick to forgive, August. Don’t forget I *did* leave. Left you without a word,” I added. It was easier to push him away if I reminded him of that. I couldn’t stay. Too much was at risk. August snapped his hand back, but I continued spewing venom. “I suppose marrying the August I knew three years ago would be an honor, but the man I’m looking at right now inherited an entire kingdom. He hasn’t stopped for a single moment to think about how crucial that is. You fuck around and don’t give a damn about the implications of your actions. You were always so rambunctious. I never imagined you’d grow up to be a loser, August.”

He grabbed his chest, like I’d wounded him. Stunned, he stared at me, hurt flickering in his gaze for a brief moment before burning with anger. “Yeah? Well, fuck you too, Christine. I don’t want to marry a heartless bitch, but here we are.”

“Enough, you two. We have an audience,” Leo said. I hadn’t even noticed him standing behind August.

“I always have a fucking audience,” August snarled while running his hands through his hair. “I’m about to buy you the biggest goddamn ring money can buy.” August grabbed my neck, and I fought every instinct to incapacitate him. If I wanted, I could have August lying dead on these marble floors. “I want the whole goddamn world to know that you’re betrothed to a loser, Christine.” He squeezed. Leo placed his hand on the Glock strapped to his waist.

August leaned over and kissed my lips. He was sloppy and angry. His fingers squeezed tighter and tighter around my neck. My head grew dizzy, and I knew that soon I’d have to show him just what I was capable of.

His sweeping tongue caressed mine, and his free hand pawed at my body, as if the space between us was too vast. His fingers bent as he dug into my breast, my corset blocking the brutal touch but only slightly. The groan that escaped his lips swallowed me whole.

I thought of thunderstorms and promises. A sweet boy that captured my demons and let them loose in his soul.

Then, he let go of my throat, his reluctant fingers releasing me from his hold. I gasped for air, and his tongue invaded my mouth the moment my lips parted. I was choking on his taste. Sputtering as he lapped me up and bit my lip.

“Happy engagement, Christine,” August said before pulling away and leaving me in the hallway.

“Happy engagement, stranger,” I rasped back while rubbing my neck where his hands were.

* * *

“Who trained you?” Leo asked. He was standing in the middle of my bedroom, watching me with his stoic gaze.

He’d seen the footage from the queen’s sitting room. I’d expected disgust and horror, but his curiosity surprised me.

“A friend.” I wasn’t about to name Hudson as an accomplice. He was the one who kept me alive the last three years and gave me purpose. He was more like a father to me than my own.

Lines of concentration deepened along his brow and under his eyes. “This friend taught you a lot. You moved so quickly, like it was second nature,” Leo said before glancing over at the collection of knives I requested on my dresser. I wanted to spend all night sitting in my room and sharpening the blades.

“I don’t have the luxury of hesitating, Leo. I decided to learn how to defend myself the moment I fled Aldrich.”

His jaw clenched, his eyes slightly narrowed. “Self-defense is one thing, Christine. What you did was...”

“Ground beef where his chest used to be,” I whispered. It was something Hudson once said to describe one of my kills. That enemy was a serial rapist. He deserved to die.

His eyes widened. “Fuck, Christine. I don’t like this.”

He didn’t have to like it. This was my new reality, and it was either kill or be killed. Now that I was staying here until the foreseeable future, I had to always be on my guard.

I let out a laugh. “You think I wanted to become this?”

“I don’t know *what* to think. I’ve been convinced this kingdom would destroy you if you came back. Been worried out of my mind about having you here in the castle. But turns out, it’s everyone else that should fear you.”

My chest constricted. His words were truthful but made something inside of me flare up. I had to be this. It was the only way I’d survive.

“And that’s how I prefer it,” I whispered, lying a bit to myself. I would have preferred to keep my innocence. Would have preferred not *needing* to become a killing machine.

Leo eyed me, as if reading my thoughts. “I’d prefer if you left. But I’m not sure I want you to return to this friend. What has he done to you?”

The disgust in his tone emboldened me. “He made me a survivor. And I’m not going back, Leo. The queen has restricted my travel.”

“Something tells me you’ve become resourceful over the years. If you wanted to leave, you would. This is about August, and you know it.”

I let out a sigh. Though my heart refused to admit the truth, there was a small part of me that didn’t want anything to happen to him. I wasn’t sure if I’d follow through with the marriage, but I definitely wasn’t willing to leave until I knew he was safe.

“Are you intending to bully me until I leave, Leo?”

His eyes held a sheen of purpose. “If that’s what it takes. I know a man with a fleet of ships. I could easily—”

“No.”

“Christine, what if they find out what we did?”

His question landed like a lead balloon on my chest. “You did nothing. You simply scrubbed blood out of the carpet and bagged the trash.”

“I’m an accomplice. If you’re here—”

I frowned. “Are you worried about me or you?”

I thought Leo cared about me. Even for all his cruelty at the cemetery, I knew there was still a part of him that wanted to protect me. It was in his nature. But perhaps time made him more self centric.

He shook his head and softened his tone. “I’m worried about *all* of it. The queen is determined to hold this over our heads as long as she can. What else is she going to force us to do? And now you’re some fucking weapon. She will use that to her advantage. No one would expect Christine Abernathy to be a cold-blooded killer.”

I looked up at Leo, who had a crease in his brow and an unflattering curl to his lips.

“I thought you were coming here to work on our security plan,” I replied easily. Hudson taught me to keep calm.

He ran his hand down his chest, and I imagined his skilled hands touching me. “I’m here to tell you to leave.”

“And what will you do if I don’t?”

His eyes swept across my figure, lingering on the way my dress pushed my breasts up. My nipples were straining against the fabric at his longing look. “I’ll make you.”

My raspy voice answered him. “You can try.”

He heaved, his chest rising and falling with slow, steady breaths. “I look forward to the challenge of breaking you.”

His words made my heart stall. “Lord Geralt said the same thing,” I croaked.

Leo puffed out his chest, his veins bulging in anger. “I’m nothing like that fucking rapist. I have other ways of torturing you, Christine. I’m going to make sure you see every woman August brings home. I’ll point out the hickeys on his neck and the pills on his tongue. He’s so self-destructive it won’t take much to break your heart and send you fleeing again.”

His words angered me, and I felt the sudden urge to knock him off his axis. “And what if it’s *you* I want, Leo?” I asked. “How will you hurt me then?”

He bit his lip, his eyes taking on the lazy haze of lust. He took a step closer to me, his chest rising and falling. “Then I’ll bring you to the edge and deny you again, and again, and again.”

My breath hitched and the image of Leo lapping up my clit made an unladylike blush cover my cheeks. I knew there was always *tension* between us. Always the hint of more lingering between our bodies like an exhale. But he’d never been so brazen. So bold.

“Well, until then, we need a plan of action,” I breezed, determined to keep my voice steady.

He cleared his throat. “Fine. We need a chain of command.”

“I don’t have a chain of command,” I said back before picking up a knife and sending it sailing toward him. Leo turned once he heard the whoosh of the blade cutting the air and rolled his eyes when it stuck in the wall behind him. He seemed more annoyed by my skills than impressed. I liked that he adapted to that quickly. “I work alone.”

He cocked his head to the side. “What about your friend? Did he just send you into the crossfire without backup?”

“Yes.”

Leo took another step closer to me. Wisps of blond hair had escaped his bun and were framing his face. “Yeah, that won’t work for me.” I averted my gaze and looked around, focusing on something else. *Anything else.*

The suite Isabelle had prepared for me was nice. The color scheme was a sweet shade of pink with gold accents. The white bedding coordinated well with the blood on my hands.

He snapped his fingers. “Are you even listening?”

“I’m listening,” I replied with a sigh before pinching the zipper to my dress at my side. “I’m just choosing to ignore how we’ve been on this assignment for all of four hours and you’re already trying to boss me around.”

“I’m not bossing you around. There are protocols we need to follow so we can keep you both safe.”

“They forced me into this job because I’m competent at what I do, Leo. If I see a threat, I react. End of story.”

Leo clenched his fist as my dress fell to the ground. I felt bold, forcing him to look at me. *Really* look at me. Something about this coy game with Leo made me feel alive and made me almost forget how terrible of a situation I was in.

His eyes widened as he took in the heavy swell of my breasts and the delicate curve of my neck. He gulped. “I know you’re skilled at what you do,” he whispered. “Fuck, I saw it all today. It’s like you just flipped this switch. You float from one extreme to the next. I’ve seen nothing like it.”

Shame enveloped my psyche.

I spun around to hide my expression. “I’m in complete control,” I whispered before finding one of my sleep shirts on the floor and putting it on.

I heard him shuffle closer to me. “Are you, though? Your reaction time was instantaneous. I need a baseline to work from. This will allow me to have a better understanding of how to keep you safe. Or maybe it’s everyone else that needs protection from *you*.”

My breath hitched; the audible break in my cool facade felt like a scream. “You couldn’t stop me,” I replied while throwing my hair up into a tight bun. My words were like a challenge, and Leo didn’t like having his ego tested.

I heard him coming for me way before his hard body connected with mine. I allowed him to tackle me to the floor. It would be easier to get the upper hand from a lower center of gravity. I knew all about beating opponents taller than me. I landed on my chest, with his heavy body on top of mine. It briefly knocked the air out of me, but Hudson used to hold me under water until I passed out. I didn’t need air to survive. I didn’t need air to kill Leo.

I flipped us both over and sat on his waist. He grabbed my wrists and pinned them behind my back. Rookie mistake. My

knives were close enough for me to reach once I got free. My only objective was to fight for my life. Kill or be killed.

“I know you’re thinking about that pretty collection of knives on your dresser,” Leo grunted. I leaned forward and head-butted him, forcing him to release my wrists. Pain bloomed where our skulls connected, but I ignored it. He let out a curse. I supposed it would take more pain for him to give in. “What else is running through your mind?” Leo asked, sounding out of breath.

I lifted with my legs and slammed down on his lap, crushing his balls in the process. Men were so fucking weak. His cries of pain were like music to my ears. I grunted. “I’m thinking about your carotid artery and how difficult it is to get blood stains out of expensive rugs,” I spat while crawling away. He grabbed my ankle and jerked me toward him. I could tell he was reeling from the pain I’d inflicted on him, but he wasn’t giving up that easily. I supposed he was tougher than I gave him credit for. But not tough enough.

“I’m trying to understand,” he gritted. “How do you process an attack?”

I screamed before kicking him in the gut. He started coughing and I smiled. “I’m thinking of the most efficient way to kill you. I’m thinking of how easily I could snap your neck. I’m thinking it’s either you or me. My job isn’t done until my attacker is dead. And you know the most terrible part, Leo? It doesn’t even feel like I’m the one thinking these things. But I am. This is who I am.”

“You can turn it off,” Leo said through clenched teeth. “I saw you do it with the queen.”

“I can turn it off. But then I’m just weak little Christine Abernathy getting raped by a lord and commanded by the Crown.”

Leo grabbed my throat and slammed me to the ground. I sputtered in shock as years of training crawled up my throat like acid, burning me up from the inside out. *Never let your guard down, Christine.*

I kicked and fought. He held me. The more trapped I felt, the more lethal I became. Soon, I wouldn't be in control of my own mind. Instinct and adrenaline were a powerful thing.

Until his lips found mine. Until I wrapped my legs around his waist and moaned.

He flipped my anger on its head and attacked me with a wet kiss filled with hot longing. Leo kissed me harder, deeper, and with a fervent, urgent need that completely consumed me. I felt devoured at that moment. Sugary-sweet, his kisses contradicted the surly expression cemented on his face. I knotted my fist in his shirt, forcing every ounce of my attention to fall onto his lips.

Kiss. Kiss. Dirty. Fucking. Kiss.

His hand reached down and cupped my thigh as I curled around him. It was too much. I couldn't stand feeling so needy, not when just seconds before I was on the edge of murdering this man. My veins throbbed. I could feel him everywhere. Hard body on mine. Against an unyielding soul, my tongue tangled. Fuck you, Leo. Fuck you for kissing me.

“What are you thinking about now?” Leo asked as he pulled away. I didn't dare open my mouth. I didn't want to admit the power he wielded. Leo Winthrop controlled me with nothing more than a kiss. A melting kiss. A destructive kiss. “I think we can work with that,” he whispered, the corner of his bruised lip curled up in amusement.

I reared back to hit him in the face, but he caught my fist before it could land on him. “Should I kiss you again?” Leo asked, taunting me. I felt like a teen again, being teased by this handsome man. “Remember when I used to sneak chocolate into your room, Christine?” he asked as I wiggled out of his grip and stood up. Out. I needed out. My conflicting dispositions made my head pound with uncertainty.

“Did you have a crush on me then?” I asked, flipping the switch. “I was what, sixteen? You were twenty-three. What kind of pervert slips into a sixteen-year-old's bedroom at midnight?”

Leo was an honorable man. Even if we'd occasionally flirted, he would have never crossed that line with an underaged girl. But I wasn't underaged now. I met that ridiculous finish line of eighteen, where the law determined I was legally fuckable. "You know it wasn't like that," Leo argued before wrapping his hands around my waist and yanking me to the ground.

"It wasn't?" I asked, testing him. "Because I remember touching myself to thoughts of you." As I said this, I parted my thighs so he could settle between them. Shock registered across his face first, then shame, *then unbridled lust*.

One of the first lessons I learned was to mimic my opponents' attacks. Leo started a war when he kissed me.

"I feel how much you want me, Leo. Is this your kink? You want to fuck a murderer?"

He pulled back. I laughed.

I reared back and punched him, and this time, I didn't miss. Leo's head rocked back. Yep. Got you, fucker. He reached for my wrists, and I struggled to move. His muscular body had me pinned. His hair had fallen out of its bun. Drops of sweat collected on his brow. One wrong move. One mistake.

Struggle and reach. He released my wrist and tried to grab the blade from my fingers. My pinky finger bent at an awkward angle, making my eyes widen in pain. I'd broken my finger too many times from punching the brick walls of Hudson's home. Learning to take a hit was a lesson my father taught me, and my training taught me how to land one.

The weak bone seared with pain.

"Shit. Did I just break your finger?" Leo stopped immediately. Weak. He was weak. Never quit. Never surrender. It's you or them, Christine.

Every pained instinct within me urged me to scream out in agony. But I didn't. No, I was too well trained for that. Not a single tear was shed. Not a single tremble. I wasn't me right now; I was the person I had to become to survive. "It's fine."

Leo got off me. “Let me look at it,” he said while reaching for my finger.

“We aren’t done fighting,” I growled.

“What did you think this was, Christine? A fight to the fucking death? Let me look at your finger!”

I pulled away and got up before lunging for my knives. Leo stopped me. Pain erupted in my side as I was tackled to the ground. “Look at me,” Leo said. A cloud of rage filled my vision. “Look!”

I snarled and writhed. I felt like a rabid animal.

“What did he do to you?” was the last thing I heard before hands wrapped around my throat. Seconds passed as I fought and clawed. And then, I blacked out.

Chapter Nine

AUGUST

“Where is Leo? I thought he was your new babysitter?” Atticus asked while inspecting his cuticles. He looked completely at ease while I was fucked up inside. We were sitting in the rear of my royal motorcade headed downtown. Going anywhere was a huge production when you were king. I missed the days of aimlessly wandering on my yacht.

“He isn’t here,” I gritted. I didn’t *want* Leo to be here today, so I gave him some bullshit patrol job at the front gate of the castle. Far from Christine. Far from me. I knew my mother would reassign him once word got back to her, but it was nice to give him a shitty job nonetheless.

Atticus’s question was innocent enough, but it pissed me off all the same. Just thinking about Leo made me want to punch some drywall. I’d been gritting my teeth all morning. And it wasn’t just because he was an annoying, presumptuous shadow. No. He did something last night that made me *rage*.

In the early hours of the morning, I caught a glimpse of Leo leaving Christine’s room. I was just coming back from getting high in the gardens when I saw him sneaking out and looking all kinds of just fucked.

His long blond hair was messed up. He had a wild look in his eyes. Leo had definitely gotten some action with *my* future wife, and I wanted nothing more than to rip his balls from his body and serve them to the sharks.

Well, burn my paper heart.

It was time for Leo to leave.

The moment I saw him, I felt a sense of fury that was unlike anything I’d ever experienced before. I felt like the *real* heir of the late King Frederick. The brutal dead king possessed my body, and I wanted to show the world just how many of his bloodthirsty tendencies I’d inherited.

I realized Atticus had asked me something. “Hello? August?” Atticus said while staring impatiently at me. “Leo? Where is he? I figured he’d be your personal shadow again. The man watched you like a hawk when we were in school.”

An idea suddenly came to me, and a broad grin crossed my face. I didn’t have to kill Leo.

Atticus would do it for me.

I faked a bored yawn before responding. “I’m pretty sure he’s with Christine.” I couldn’t sound *too* eager with him. There was something satisfying about fucking with Atticus. He was just as in love with Christine as I was, and he’d handle this little problem. I tapped my knee with my fingers. Christine and I ended things in an unpleasant manner yesterday. Ideally, I would have stormed into her room and demanded to know why she was messing with my personal guard. However, I did not have the right to ask her that question. Just a few weeks ago, a photo of me getting a blow job in a nightclub surfaced. Last year, I had a sex tape that was leaked. I wasn’t the poster child for celibacy, but the idea of Christine being with anyone else was enough to make me consider locking her down.

I’d be monogamous if she would. Yeah? Maybe.

Maybe not.

I wasn’t even sure Christine wanted that with me. There was a time when we were friends, and then we became strangers. Now? Now we were engaged.

How the fuck could I navigate all of this without losing her forever?

“Are they close? He’s always been like an older brother to her, hmm?” Atticus asked. Nosy fucker. I had him right where I wanted him.

I snorted before letting out a bitter laugh. “Lately they’re more like kissing cousins. I saw him leaving her room at three a.m., his hair a mess and his clothes wrinkled. Had that freshly fucked look about him.” As Atticus stared at me, I couldn’t help but feel a great deal of joy in seeing him hurt by that

news. His eyes darkened. His lips set into a firm line. Hook, line, and sinker. “I’m hoping to find Christine a gorgeous rock for that sweet little hand. Then I’m going to remind Leo that fucking the future queen is bound to get him killed.”

“The monarchy truly needs to bring back public executions,” Atticus said in a deathly low tone while staring out the window. I turned in my seat to stare at him. “Where is he now? I can have one of my associates talk to him.”

That was code for *I’ll have one of my men break every damn bone in his body.*

I was tempted by the idea, but I didn’t need the mafia killing my guard. I just wanted to scare him a bit. Maybe make him piss his pants and think twice before pursuing her again. I had a sinking feeling that if we did any more, then Christine would be pissed. She was only vaguely aware of all the things Atticus did, and I preferred it that way. She didn’t need more reasons to flee the fucking country in terror.

“We don’t want to scare her away and take her shiny new toy. If Leo is keeping her here, then I’ll endure it for now. Once she gets a taste of me, she’ll forget about the poor little bodyguard.” I let out a sigh. “But I might want you to threaten him a bit. Make it clear that he can’t have her.”

“Shouldn’t *you* be the one threatening him? You’re the king. Her fiancé.” His lip curled as he glared out the window. “Fucking Leo. I should have known. He was always bringing her stupid chocolates when we were younger. Pervert. Isn’t he like thirty?”

“Twenty-eight,” I answered. “Joined the guard when he was eighteen.”

“I won’t kill the bastard, but I’ll have men keep an eye on him,” Atticus said while pulling out his phone. I might have been the future king, but Atticus’s wealth and power gave him enough influence to get the job done. “And I’ll let *you* threaten him. I can’t do *all* your dirty work, Your Majesty. It’s insulting you think I’m gullible enough to risk pissing off Christine like that. Even if I want to murder anyone that touches her.”

I fucking hated Atticus. Why the hell did I put up with him? “I thought you liked Leo. The two of you have always been cordial.” I watched him type out a quick message and put his phone back in his pocket. So maybe I was poking him a bit. Whatever. He cast the first stone.

Atticus crossed his arms over his chest. “That was before I learned of his relationship with Christine. She’s been back two fucking days. How is he already... Don’t answer that.”

Atticus was such a fucking hypocrite. “I’m the one marrying Christine, and here you are helping me pick out a ring. What’s the difference?”

It wasn’t long before Atticus tipped his head to the side and began laughing as if it were the funniest thing ever. I had never heard such a pretentious sound before in my life. Even his broad shoulders shook. Did I mention I hated him? He had to wait a good three minutes before he was calm enough to utter an answer to my question in a way that I could understand. “Christine doesn’t *want* you. That’s the difference. You might have had a chance when you were a teen and your mild acts of rebellion were cute, but we’re all grown up now. She’s not amused by your antics. Marriage between the two of you will just be a piece of paper. If she ever fucks you, it’ll be out of pity.”

I didn’t want him to be right, but Atticus was always adept at finding my deepest insecurities and poking them with a switchblade. I didn’t even know why we were friends anymore. “Fuck you. I should have brought my mother.”

“Your mother doesn’t know jewelry as well as I do.”

“Maybe I should have gone to our jewelry vault and picked up an antique instead. My grandmother’s ring was nice enough.”

Atticus scowled. “She wants nothing to do with your family. Don’t make her wear jewelry that belonged to your father’s mother.”

I peered curiously at him. “And why does she want nothing to do with us, exactly? What do you know?”

I still didn't understand it. Christine had a good life here. Before she left, Christine was the Crown's darling. Everyone loved her, adored her, *wanted* her. I had to make sure every sufferable asshole at the royal academy kept their distance. Why the hell would she want to leave all of that?

"You don't think she ran away for fun, do you?" Atticus replied, his tone stiff.

His answer frustrated me. What did he know? "I think you know more than you're letting on. Tell me."

"And watch you burn the kingdom to the ground? Never. You're too reckless. Too impulsive. If Christine wanted you to know, she'd tell you."

"But how do *you* know?"

Atticus smiled. "I know everything that happens in this kingdom. Every filthy, dirty thing."

Filthy? Dirty? "What happened to Christine?" The hair on the back of my neck stood on edge.

"She ran away. And then she became a force to be reckoned with." Atticus smiled when we pulled up to a posh shop downtown.

I wanted to ask him what the hell that meant, but we were out of time. I'd force the answer out of him though.

Christine's disappearance was a mystery, and it was damn time I got to the bottom of it.

Atticus's family had plenty of legitimate businesses to launder their money, and the high-end jewelry store was one of them. It just fueled the illusion that they were rich, upstanding citizens.

But I knew the truth.

In frustration, I looked at the sidewalk and let out a groan. There were paparazzi already parked out front, ready to take my photo. Just another part of this experience that was ruined by my role. It didn't take me long to realize that Atticus had arranged this. His family owned this jewelry store, after all. It was an effective publicity campaign. When we were together,

there was always a positive response to the media coverage. In part, this was the reason why his parents were able to gain the trust of the royal family.

“Time to put on a show for your fans,” he said with a casual smile.

“Bloody hell,” I groaned, dreading it.

As soon as we stepped out of the limo, we started walking toward the door. I learned long ago not to linger when cameras were flashing. If I gave them too much of an opportunity, I’d say something stupid and have to deal with the fallout. Squeals and shouts assaulted me. My security team crowded me while pushing through the hordes of people screaming questions and allegations at me.

“August, would you like to comment about the night of your father’s funeral? It’s been reported that you were out partying at a club,” someone shouted. I forced myself not to smile. So the fuck what? I wanted to celebrate and forget for a little while. The royal publicist had a field day with that one.

“August, do you have any comments about the rumors of an engagement?” someone else asked.

Another paparazzi shoved to the front and tapped my shoulder as I passed. “Is it Gabriella Star? The model we saw you—uh—kissing last month?”

Kissing was a quaint way of saying I ate her pussy out in a hotel elevator. Gabriella was nothing but an amusing companion to pass the time with. “No. Sorry, fellas. I can’t chat today. I’ve got an engagement ring to pick out.” I winked at the camera and followed Atticus inside. His family would be pleased. It wouldn’t be long before all the newspapers would have DuPont’s Jewelry store in their headlines.

“Welcome to DuPont’s Jewelers,” a woman with oversized tits and a cheerful smile greeted us the second we entered. She was short, the right height to give a clear indication of how she’d look on her knees. There was nothing wrong with her appearance. Through her thick long lashes, she looked up at

me and bit her lip. Chaser of crowns. How painfully predictable.

I took a moment to observe her, wondering if it would be worth the miniscule effort it would take to bring her back to my bed. It would have been the perfect revenge. If Christine wanted to fuck Leo, then I could have my fun, too.

But...

I couldn't quite convince myself that was a good idea. And I couldn't help but compare her to Christine. She didn't look as angelic. As fierce. As...heartbreakingly beautiful.

In the past, I would have been hard as a rock for this kind of girl, but she didn't do anything for me. Not a damn thing. I even stared for a moment longer, willing my cock to do a happy jig at the sight of her thick legs and grabbable ass.

"You're such a prick," Atticus said while rolling his eyes. "You're here to buy an engagement ring, and you're already eye-fucking my employee."

I ignored him and shook her hand. "It's lovely to meet you."

"You, too," she replied. "I'm here to help with all your needs. Ring shopping needs, that is."

Oh, she was a cheeky one, wasn't she?

Atticus huffed in annoyance.

Fuck him. He didn't know shit. Hell, I would have been happy to ogle this chick. It would make things a whole lot easier. But no, my damn dick was obsessed with Christine. So was my brain. And if I had a heart, that bullshit organ would be obsessed with her too. I wasn't sure when it happened, but she waltzed right back into my life and fucked everything up. I wanted her like I wanted my next hit, and that was a problem.

I didn't like it when people had control over me. It's why I was a fucking royal. It was in my blood.

The woman looked between Atticus and me, then blushed. "Mr. DuPont informed us that you are here to buy an

engagement ring. Do you have any preferences for style, cut, or size?" she asked. "What is she like?"

What a loaded question. I felt like I hardly knew her anymore. "Something big and expensive," I replied. If it wasn't personal, then it would damn well make a statement. "Something very fucking ostentatious. Something that will warn off astronauts in space."

Her eyes widened at my words. "Oh-okay," she said with a nod.

"You don't fucking know Christine at all," Atticus cursed. Yeah, asshole. I was already kicking myself about that and had every intention of intimately getting reacquainted with her.

I glared at him. "And you do?" I snapped.

With a pretentious roll of the eyes, Atticus said, "I know she would rather bite off her own finger than wear an oversized ring." Hell. He probably had a point. Atticus was always right. It was one of the reasons he annoyed the ever-living fuck out of me.

"Fine. What would you get her then?" I asked. I hoped he picked something ridiculous so I could call him a stupid fucker and pick out what I wanted.

The salesperson helping us looked like she was watching a tennis match, her eyes dancing between the two of us. "You're excused. I've got this," Atticus said with a wave of his hand.

"Of course, Mr. Dupont." She bowed, like he was the king here, not me. Then she scurried off.

"Come here," Atticus said before gliding over to a display case in the corner. Like his entire family, his jewelry shop was gaudy. Expensive chandeliers hung from the ceiling. Velvet drapes lined the expansive windows. Every surface sparkled. Gold-plated everything. Persian rugs that cost more than most people's homes. It was almost tacky.

"Emerald cuts exude elegance and refinement. The elongated shape and step-cut faceting is just right for someone on the more understated side," Atticus said while pulling out a ring and gently setting it on a velvet pillow. "This cut is best

suiting for women who have discerning taste—those who prefer classic with an edge. It mirrors Christine’s taste in art.”

I blinked twice. “Was I really that high the other night? You must have had lots of time to talk if she was opening up about her taste in art.” I might have said that with a bit of a sarcastic undertone. Atticus was really annoying the fuck out of me today. I hated that he pretended to know *my* future wife better than me.

And most of all, I hated that he probably *did* know her better. I was a selfish king that didn’t try hard enough to bring her back, and now the girl was a complete stranger to me.

“Christine doesn’t talk about her likes and dislikes, August. You must pay attention to see what she’s attracted to. You can’t blink.” He pulled out a polishing cloth and rubbed it along the stone. “Not even for a second.” His voice trailed off for that last part.

“So how do you know what she likes?” I asked. Christine had been away for three years. He spoke as if no time had passed at all.

“I just do,” Atticus said, his lips twisting into a secretive smile. “Here. Look at this.”

I looked down at the ring in his hand. It was beautiful, but not nearly what I had envisioned for my future wife. Understated was the most appropriate descriptor. It was big, though. I imagined how it would look on her dainty finger. I wondered how those fingers would look wrapped around my coc—

“I’ll take it,” I rushed out.

Atticus arched his eyebrow. “Are you sure? You haven’t seen any others.”

“It’s perfect. You’re right. Christine never liked flashy things. How many times did we catch her digging in the dirt and helping the royal gardener back when we were kids, huh?”

“Too many to count,” Atticus replied, his tone distant. *Go ahead and reminisce, asshole. Memories are all you’re ever meant to get.*

“What else does Christine like?” I asked. It still didn’t sit right with me that Atticus was acting like he knew everything.

“She liked her Art History TA. He was a bit too flirtatious for my liking. He was mysteriously terminated in the middle of the semester, though.”

I turned my head to look at Atticus, his statement ringing in my ears for a moment as I processed it. “Are you saying you knew where she was this entire time?” I asked, forcing my tone to stay even.

“Are you saying that as the future king of the most powerful country in the world, you didn’t use *every possible method* at your disposal to find her?” Atticus replied with a dark laugh. “Or were you too busy sulking and fucking and making this about you? Living on that stupid ass yacht and crying because your father didn’t hug you enough as a child.”

I set the ring down and shoved Atticus’s chest. “Shut the fuck up. I tried, alright? Why didn’t you tell me? Did you ever see her?”

“Why would I make this easy for you? Why would I help you get a girl you don’t deserve? Look around you, August. Your mother is the only reason you’re engaged to Christine. I’m the only reason you’re getting her a ring she’ll actually like. You just have everything handed to you, don’t you?”

I shoved him again, then balled my fist. Fuck him. “You have no right—”

He cut me off. “I *earned* the right to care about Christine. I followed her. I watched her for three goddamn years. I flew out there for weekend trips. I took care of her. I got rid of every obstacle in her life. I made her *stronger*. You weren’t man enough to grow the fuck up.”

I blinked twice, gaping at him as I did. “Does she know you did this?”

Atticus picked up the ring and put it in a velvet box. “No. She wanted an escape.”

An escape? What did that mean? Once again he was hinting that she ran, and I didn’t like what that meant for me.

What if Christine was hurt? What if she was suffering all this time and I did nothing to help her? “So, you stalked my fiancée?”

“That word has such a negative connotation, but yes. I suppose you could call it that.”

“I’m surprised you would admit it so easily,” I replied.

Atticus handed me the velvet box and smiled at me. “I just want you to know the lengths I am willing to go. Christine is mine, August.”

“A fucking criminal like you? I don’t care if you have more money than God, Atticus. You’ll never buy a crown; you’ll *never* be a royal.”

He frowned at me, malice seeping through his carefully constructed expression. “Why be a king when I can be so much more?” He straightened his spine before continuing. “Good luck giving her the ring, though. Want me to put this on your tab?”

I didn’t want anything from Atticus DuPont. Accepting that ring would be admitting he knew her better. I didn’t want it to be *another* thing handed to me. “Actually, I think I’m gonna try to find something else. Thanks for your help, but I know how to find her a fucking ring,” I replied. I’d buy her the finest damn ring money could buy. And it would be meaningful and shit. Damn it.

“Right. Well, I’ll wrap this up just in case you get high and forget,” Atticus said as he walked away, whistling to himself and thrusting his hands into his Armani pant pockets. Fucking asshole. Maybe he was right. Maybe I wasn’t the man Christine deserved.

But I could be.

I would be.

Chapter Ten

CHRISTINE

I felt raw and ashamed when I awoke. There were two versions of me. The woman I had to become and the girl still coping with the trauma of the Crown's abuse. I was never sure which girl I was going to get. My two halves were constantly at war with each other. My clenched fist and strained muscles battled against my gentle heart. It was as simple as flipping a switch to summon my murderous alter ego. One moment was all it took.

The sun was still rising when I rolled out of bed, my finger aching from where I'd sprained it the night before. On my nightstand was a pair of pain pills, a press itinerary, and a pristine velvet box. I reached for the pills first, swallowing them dry, before scanning my schedule for the day.

I'd forgotten what it was like to have every moment of my day planned out for me. My throat closed up as I read each line and what was to be expected of me.

The queen wanted us to announce our engagement to the world. It was risky, announcing something so close to King Frederick's funeral, so they made sure to plan out every smile and provide us with scripted responses.

It was all so goddamn fake.

I tossed the paper off to the side, dreading the day. Then, my eyes drifted to the other item left for me. When I reached for the velvet box, a sinking sensation weighed down my stomach. I flipped it open and stared at the sparkling emerald on the gold band. It was a beautiful ring, something understated yet still impressive in size. The green gem was a princess cut, and the piece fit perfectly on my ring finger.

I had a feeling this ring was hand-selected by someone on the publicity team. There was probably some mysterious symbolism in their selection that the tabloids would gossip about in the coming weeks. I wouldn't be surprised if they made the expensive jewelry a focal point of my wardrobe.

It hurt to know I didn't get a proper proposal. I wasn't much of a traditionalist, nor was I a romantic, but the clinical way it was left on my nightstand by one of the maids made the experience more hollow. Although I expected plenty of fabricated fanfare in the hours to come, there was something anticlimactic about sliding it onto my finger and going about my day.

The royal stylist and her entourage of cosmetologists stormed my room like a skilled military fleet. It had been a while since I'd been plucked, prepped, and primed for an event. I'd gotten used to it in my youth; the idea of getting dressed up like a doll for the royal court was something I'd conditioned myself to view as normal long ago.

Now, it felt intrusive and wrong.

I hated the way they inspected my body and whispered to themselves about my toned arms or muscular back. How they picked at the birthmark on my shoulder and the dried ends of my hair. I let them paint my face with expensive makeup and curl my hair.

I disassociated during the entire experience, ignoring their murmured voices of discontent.

The tight corset wrapped around my ribs was like a cage locking me tight. My thigh-high stockings hooked to a lace garter belt, and the long green dress had gold accents and a neckline that was both demure and lusty.

I looked the part of the dutiful wife, but I hated the costume. It no longer felt like *me*.

When I moved to Harvington, I traded my dresses for yoga pants and athleisure wear. No one else in the world was forced to wear such ridiculous clothes, but the royal family liked to stand out and have a dress code all of their own.

"Beautiful," the royal stylist said. She inspected me like one would inspect a used car, circling me and tugging at fabric so it lay properly on my frame. "The king will be pleased."

I ran my hands over my stomach, my muscles clenching. August had plenty of women to occupy his attention, and I

doubted he'd look twice at me. This was all a facade.

When they filed out of the room, I opened up my weapons drawer and pulled out my favorite blade. It took some creative maneuvering to strap it to my thigh, but the moment the cool metal touched my skin, I breathed a sigh of relief. I knew I had to cling to my ruthlessness if I wanted to maintain my identity in the nostalgia of it all.

I moved to the floor-length mirror and stared at the girl I thought I lost. I almost expected to see an eighteen-year-old version of myself staring back at me.

But the girl in the mirror had a jaded scowl on her lips and a broken soul hidden behind her eyes. Her buffed skin had a few more scars. Her heart had a few more cracks.

They could dress me up, but I was still the murderer that fled this kingdom three years ago. The queen might take my freedom, but she'd never claim the fight within me.

I smoothed my dress one last time, my engagement ring catching in the light.

And then, I went to war.

* * *

I waited for August in a holding room with his mother. August was running late, but I expected that. He was probably off taking pills from a random woman or drinking his way through the wine cellar.

A formal press release had gone out last night and this morning. Every headline in Aldrich boasted of our engagement. The castle's publicist spun the lie of our romance so effortlessly that I almost believed it myself. They were worried that people would speculate about our engagement so soon after King Frederick's funeral, but they made it sound like we'd been in contact as friends these last three years. According to the script, losing his father made August realize he didn't want to waste any more time. We were destined for one another and meant for bigger, better things.

It was a romantic concept. Distance and grief had literary merit that even the average citizen could relate to.

Too bad it was all a lie.

“Where is August?” Isabelle hissed to Leo, who was typing something on his phone. I didn’t see him yesterday, and it wasn’t until last night that I realized August made him stand guard at the gate. I was certain the king was fucking with him, but I didn’t know why. They got along well enough when we were kids. But I wasn’t too upset. I didn’t want to talk about our fight *or* our kiss.

In fact, I wanted—needed—to pretend it didn’t happen. It was reckless and foolish.

Isabelle huffed. “We have a crowd of over a hundred thousand waiting outside the castle for the formal introduction. If we aren’t on that balcony in ten minutes—”

Leo nodded. “Of course, Your Majesty. I will radio his guard.” He then disappeared behind a red velvet curtain that separated us from the hallway, giving me one last longing glance on his way out. I loathed the flutter in my belly that resulted from his green eyes traveling up and down my body.

Isabelle turned to me. “Don’t forget to smile, but not *too* big. We are still in mourning. A humble grin will suffice. Be sure to hold onto August’s arm and give him adoring looks for the cameras. We want to give the illusion that you’re deeply in love.”

I nodded, mostly because any skilled war general knew when to pick their battles. Isabelle wanted me to play my part, and I fully intended to do just that.

For now. As much as I hated to admit it, she was right. I needed to keep my head down and smile for the cameras until I figured out what I was going to do.

A woman wearing a black pantsuit stumbled over to the queen while holding a tablet. “I compiled a selection of photos for their exposé, Your Majesty. I think the ones from your family trip to Gatts Island will highlight the deep roots your

families have. Both her parents are in the photo, and Augustus had his arm around Christine.”

I took confident strides across the patterned carpet to look at what they were discussing, and the image on the tablet stole the breath from my chest.

I remembered that trip. We went the year before my parents died.

Gatts Island was a resort community off the coast. My father worked the entire time, and even though we were on a beach in the peak of summer, my mother wore long sleeves and a pair of sunglasses even indoors. August and I spent hours swimming in the water and splashing one another. It was a bittersweet trip, but at the time, I remember feeling overjoyed to spend time with him.

“This is perfect, Victoria. Well done,” Isabelle said.

The publicist beamed just as August and Leo waltzed in from behind the curtain.

“Sorry I’m late. I didn’t want to come,” August said with a lazy bow. He had on a navy blue suit with enough pins on his chest to give the illusion of a war general, though I knew he wasn’t the type of man to get his cuticles bloody. “You didn’t have to send *Leo* after me, Mother. Shouldn’t he be guarding the gates?”

I sighed. “What’s your problem with Leo?” I asked, curious as to why he was being so cruel.

“I think you know what my problem is, Christine,” he said, making my heart stall in my chest. Did he know that I kissed him? What difference did it make? It wasn’t like this marriage was real.

So why did I care?

“Let’s get this sham over with,” he grunted, annoying me once again.

Leo shook his head in frustration at the annoying king while I tilted my chin up defiantly. “I see you managed to sober up at least,” I said to August.

He arched his eyebrow. “I don’t do coke before noon, darling.”

“Enough,” Isabelle snapped. “All you have to do is walk out on the terrace and wave at your subjects. Do you think the two of you can handle this? We *must* get it right.”

August picked at the cufflink on his wrist. “I’ve got it covered, Mother. Should I kiss Lady Christine? Perhaps even grab her ass?”

I scowled at him. August was incapable of taking anything seriously. “What is your problem?” I asked, my eyes boring into his.

“Forgive me for not wanting to stand in front of thousands of people and pretend to be madly in love with the girl who abandoned me three years ago. The girl who promised to stay and then disappeared a few hours later.”

I shook my head while staring at the ceiling, righteous indignation flooding my emotions. “You are one selfish bastard, you know that?”

He took a step closer to me. “I don’t know why you’re so upset. This is what you wanted, isn’t it? When we were teens, you always followed me around like a lost puppy, staring at me like I was God’s gift to man. I could’ve had you then, but I didn’t. And now that I have you, I want nothing to do with you. You’re a flight risk, Christine.”

“You’re an asshole,” I spat.

He grinned, as if the insult was something to be proud of. “Unless you left for a reason, hmm? Do you want to tell me what *really* happened?”

“Enough,” Isabelle seethed. She walked over to her son and gave him a death glare. “One of these days, you will look back on this moment and feel ashamed of yourself. Christine left under my command.”

His eyes widened. “What? *You* told her to leave?”

Isabelle straightened his jacket as he glared at her. “And you quickly believed it. A king takes charge of the situation

instead of sitting back and accepting everything at face value. It was a bitter lesson that you have yet to learn. So right now, you're going to go stand on that platform and wave at the crowd. You're going to look madly in love with Christine. And you're going to grow up. If you want someone to be angry with for her disappearance, then you aim it at me. I'm not going to sit here and watch you ruin everything I've done for you because of your petty insecurities."

August's face burned red with anger, and maybe even a hint of embarrassment.

He looked over his mother's shoulder at me. "Why didn't you tell me? What *aren't* you telling me?"

His mother snapped her hand up and jerked his chin so that he was staring at her. "Stop acting like you're a normal boy with a normal life. Stop *hoping* the world will bend to your will, and *demand* it. Start bleeding like a king." He swallowed. Trumpets outside began playing loudly. "That's our cue."

Isabelle shoved her son over to my side, and then she lifted his arm up for me to take. It was a shitty time to step out on the stage. I wasn't sure how we could look madly in love when there was still so much turmoil sitting stagnant between us.

Sucking in a deep breath, I braved a curious glance at August and was overwhelmed by the pain in his expression. I wished Isabelle hadn't told him that it was she who sent me away. It was easier to keep distance between us when I could take on the burden of that responsibility. Because if August knew what really happened, I wasn't sure he would ever look at me the same way again. I would rather have his disappointment than his hate or disgust.

With his spine rigid and his chin held high, August took large strides across the room, pulling me along. Two attendants opened the door, and I forced a smile. The moment we stepped outside, crisp spring air caressed my skin, and the screaming crowd made my knees buckle.

August jerked me forward, and we both positioned ourselves at the guardrail. My eyes scanned the crowd, noting

a few women who were crying, and some royal enthusiasts held signs that said things like, *Marry me, King Augustus*.

August looked at me for a moment, and I couldn't tell where our roles ended and his true feelings began. It was a look that held so much tenderness and care that my heart nearly stopped beating. "Wave at the crowd, Lady Christine. Because the moment we're done here, you have some explaining to do."

Chapter Eleven

AUGUST

The roaring crowd swelled as I clasped Christine's hand in mine. She played her part well, wearing the mask of a dotting, blushing bride as she tossed humble smiles at the paparazzi. Time seemed to slow as I stared at her. The sun made her blonde hair glow, and a brief wisp of wind made a stray strand brush against her pink cheek.

Her fiery gaze landed on mine, and she squeezed my hand harder, challenging me.

My mind was racing with a million possibilities. My mother bruised my ego, but it emboldened me, too. She was right. I was the fucking king, and it was time I demanded answers. I couldn't sulk like an asshole because Leo was staring at my bride like she was water in a desert. I couldn't fight with Atticus because he called me out on all of my shit. And I definitely couldn't let Christine keep her secrets any longer.

I wanted to know what happened three years ago.

I spun around and pulled Christine away from the platform and through the glass doors. The protest died on her lips when she saw my expression. I dragged her away from my disappointed mother, the power-hungry crowd, and the expectations placed on both of our shoulders.

My mother tossed a scowl my way before positioning herself at the podium and waving at the crowd. Always the polished queen, ready to clean up my messes. I didn't care what anyone thought. I was king, damnit. And it was time I claimed life like the royal I was.

Christine snapped her hand away from me once we were in the hallway. "What are you *doing*?"

Leo took a step toward us, but I held up my hand to stop him. "Leave us. If you follow me, I'll send you back to the fucking countryside. My mother might have brought you back here, but I'm in charge." He opened and closed his mouth.

“And another thing. If you so much as breathe in my bride’s direction, I’ll break both your legs.”

Christine gasped, and Leo’s lips pressed into a thin line. “Yes, Your Majesty,” he grunted.

“August? What the bloody hell are you doing?” Christine’s voice was shrill and laced with confusion.

I turned to her, a storm brewing in my chest. “I’m doing what I should have done three years ago.”

She gasped when I reached for her wrist. The moment my fingers clasped around her, I started dragging her down the hallway. She was stiff in my hold but still shuffled her heels after me, her dress flowing behind her as I guided us to the end of the hall to the base of a dilapidated staircase no one used anymore.

“We used to play tag here, Christine. Do you remember?” I asked her while looking up at the entrance to our secret hideaway.

She shook her head. “We’re not children anymore. Is this why you dragged me away? We have responsibilities, August. This isn’t a game.”

“I’m not playing,” I rasped. “Run, Christine. I’ll catch you.”

She stared at me with those big, beautiful blue eyes of hers. I expected her to laugh at me, to ignore the tension simmering between us. She inhaled, her breasts rising so delicately I wanted to drag my teeth along the swell and ride her breaths.

“Why?”

I licked my lips. “I need this.”

“*Why?*”

I was a shit king and an even shittier friend. Villains didn’t get redemption. They got egos and destruction. I lowered my voice and ducked my head, my lips hovering just inches from hers. “You’ve been running from me for as long as I can remember. Let me catch you, love.”

Staring at her, I saw traces of innocence peppered somewhere behind the chill in her gaze. I knew Christine was still the girl I loved. Still the friend that I cared for.

And she was hurting.

I knew the moment she decided. The spark in her eyes gave her away. She gathered her dress up in her fist and, with a shuddering breath, sprinted up the stairs. I watched her for a moment, listening to the slam of her heels on the tile and devouring the sight of her blonde hair flowing behind her.

She paused to look over her shoulder at me, doubt crossing her features. I could practically see the questions forming in her soul.

This time I would chase my queen, and she would never doubt me again.

I sprinted after her and she ran harder up the winding staircase. Our harsh breaths echoed across the brick. She dragged her delicate fingers along the wall as she rounded another curve.

There was a time I knew everything about Christine Abernathy. Every nuance, every fear and joy. We used to count the steps leading up to this very tower, and I knew how long it would take her to get to the top.

She stumbled on a step, and I reached for her. A child-like giggle escaped her lips as she pulled herself back up and continued to run.

At the top of the tower, she paused to look around at the dusty space we used to roam. It was nothing more than a circular tomb for our childhood. A discarded board game sat scattered on the floor, and a pillow was propped up against the wall. We used to have slumber parties up here when we were little, pretending it was a camp out.

I grabbed her hips and walked us both toward the towering window. “You caught me,” she choked out between harsh breaths.

I pushed her against the glass. Below us, the crowd was still gathered, staring up at the castle and dreaming of a life

where they had the world at their fingertips.

My world was standing in front of me, with a quivering lip, eyes full of secrets, and a body I wanted to bury myself inside of.

I stared at her, ready to ask the question that had been bothering me for three years. “Why did you leave?”

She gnawed on her lip, and I felt the urge to bite it. “August. You heard your mother. She sent me away.”

“Why? Was it my fault? Were we too close?” It was something that worried me. My father had punished me enough for it over the years.

Stop wasting so much time with her.

Grow up.

You can't act like a child forever. Stop playing with the girl, August.

Her gaze softened. “Of course not.”

“Why, Christine? I just need to know.”

She looked down at her feet, her eyes swimming with tears that made me feel weak. “I...I can't.”

I pressed my body against hers and wrapped my hand around her throat, my fingers forming a necklace that looked damn good against her pale skin. Her pouty little mouth popped open, and I had dirty thoughts about what I'd like to glide across her tongue and shove down her throat. She'd been choking on the truth since she came back, and I knew just how to dislodge it.

I pressed my thigh between her legs, the damn dress she wore putting too much space between us for my liking. “What are you doing?” her breathy question made my cock twitch.

Her shallow breaths made her breasts rise and fall so delicately. “I imagined kissing you in this room so many times.”

She glanced over her shoulder at the crowd below. “Someone could see us, August.”

“Good.”

I closed the remaining physical distance between us with a kiss, even though our hearts still felt a castle apart. She tasted so divine, like sugar and warm honey. The little moan that vibrated in her chest had me devouring her—and desiring more.

She opened so beautifully for me, dancing her tongue with mine as we clashed. I palmed her breast as she arched her back. When I pulled at her dress, she slammed against the glass window, rattling the iron bars covering it.

Kissing Christine made me feel like a man. I’d never truly felt like a king before this moment. She made me feel like I could conquer anything.

“We should stop,” she rasped when I licked her neck. Her pulse thudded against my tongue, and the whimper she released made my cock strain.

“Love, we’re not stopping this until you’re screaming.”

She tugged at my hair, forcing me to expose my neck to her. “I thought you wanted to talk.”

I hissed when she dragged her tongue across my jaw line. I struggled to speak, because she was twisting my mind up, making it impossible to think about anything but driving into her. “We can talk after you’ve come all over my face, love,” I whispered before dropping to my knees. I shoved her dress up, dying a little when I saw the knee-high stockings strapped to her corset. “Fucking bloody hell. You’re like a present.” I leaned forward to drag my nose along her silky skin. She bloomed like a flower, parting her creamy thighs in invitation.

“August...” she moaned when I slid her panties to the side and licked a long line up her slit. She tasted like fucking heaven. Sweet and wet. It thrilled me to know I could turn her on.

I stopped to admire the sight of her slick pussy, the swollen lips begging to be sucked and toyed with. She grabbed my hair again and shoved me against her center like a greedy little

thing, but I didn't give in that easily. "You've got a king kneeling before you." I teased her with another quick taste.

"You're not a king right now, August," she whispered. "You're mine."

I loved how she commanded the space, like a true queen. I went to work on her clit, circling it with my tongue and groaning when she writhed against my lips. She held her dress up with one hand and continued to hold me in place, controlling me. *Commanding me.*

I liked the way she demanded her pleasure.

I found a rhythm that made her squirm and sob with satisfaction. Her bucking body made savage smacks against the window pane. The crowd cheered below. I doubted anyone could see us, and if they could, it was just her body leaning against the glass. I'd admit, I loved the idea of public sex. Maybe it was a kink born from a life in the public eye, but I also didn't want anyone to see Christine like this. So vulnerable, so in charge, so high on the feel of my tongue that she could barely contain herself.

It pissed me off that I'd missed out on three years of this.

I wrapped my hands around her thighs, digging my fingers into her soft skin as I moved faster, harder, lapping her up like a good man while my cock cried in my pants.

"August, I'm close," she breathed, encouraging me. The crowd cheered louder. Her legs shook. I moaned against her clit, feeling like her taste was the only thing I needed. Her breath came in long, surrendering moans that made me want this to go on forever. I wanted to spend eternity with her grinding her clit against my mouth.

A rush of passion surged through her delicate body, and it was hard not to smile triumphantly against her beautiful pussy. She came so beautifully. Her entire body stilled for a moment, and she threw her head back, a high-pitched scream piercing the air. "August!"

I licked her through every wave, coaxing her orgasm with flicks of my tongue as she rode my face.

“Oh fuck,” I said before pulling back to look at my handiwork. Her cunt was glistening and begging to be touched again. I wanted to do that until she couldn’t stand.

That was everything I needed and more. I had every intention of spending a lifetime between her creamy thighs.

I’d expected to see a blissed-out expression on her angelic face. I was feeling pretty proud of myself, already preparing to strip her bare and thrust my cock into her. But when I looked up at her, there were tears sliding down her cheeks. She looked haunted. Broken. My heart shattered at the sight. This was the best moment of my fucking life. So why was she crying?

I wiped my mouth on the edge of her dress before standing up, feeling unsure and worried about what she would say. Was this about why she left? I cleared my throat. “What’s wrong, love? Did I hurt you?”

She violently shook her head as tremors overcame her. I took a step back, not sure what I did wrong or why she was reacting this way, but wanting desperately to do whatever necessary to make it stop. Seeing Christine hurt did something tragic to me. It tore me up from the inside out. It made me rage. It made me want to fix it.

But something haunting in her expression made me think this was something I couldn’t fix.

Hyperventilating, she grasped her chest. Her eyes were unfocused and heavy, frantically scanning the room while avoiding looking at me.

“Christine...”

“I’m sorry. I’m not normally...”

She quickly fixed her dress and slid against the wall, moving away from the window while keeping distance between us. I moved to approach her, and she clenched her fist at her side. “Don’t come any closer.”

She looked...terrified. I could see the white in her eyes, the way her lip trembled. She was breathing so fast that it physically pained me to look at her. I felt a sickening sense of horror. This wasn’t a woman freaking out because her

childhood friend had eaten her out. This was a woman stricken with trauma. It was evident in the way her eyes had glazed over in fear. She was breathing hard, like she was on the verge of a panic attack.

Something triggered this.

Was it me?

Was it this castle?

Was it...

Realization dawned on me at that moment. I took a step closer to her. "Who hurt you?"

She snapped her icy eyes to me. "What?"

I wasn't going to let her hide this from me anymore. "Who the fuck hurt you, Christine?"

She fiddled with the ring on her hand while eyeing the door. I saw the urge to run in her before she even took a step. "August. I can't..."

I knew it was an asshole thing to do, but I rushed her, pinning her body against the wall while I examined every single nuance of her expression. There was terror in her eyes. "Love..." I croaked. "Who *hurt* you?"

She sucked in a deep breath as I held her hips in my hands, refusing to let her go. Her face twisted up in pain as more tears raced down her cheeks. She pondered for a moment, and I waited with bated breath, watching her come to terms with whatever truth she needed to spill before me.

She slowed her breathing.

She blinked a few times, as if willing the fear away.

A strange calm washed over her, and a vacancy crossed her gaze. She tipped her head up, rolled her shoulders back, and exuded an icy persona, as if she'd gone numb right before my eyes.

Her monotone voice shocked me. "The night I left, your father tried marrying me to Lord Geralt. He wanted to...try me. Lord Geralt raped me, August."

My breath stalled; it was like getting hit by a speeding train. The pain was instant, knocking shame into every cell of my body. I had to repeat her words in my mind over and over again for them to make sense.

Lord Geralt raped me, August.

Lord Geralt raped me, August.

Lord Geralt raped me, August.

Lord Geralt raped me, August.

“What?” I didn’t know what else to say. The single-syllable word sounded so hollow when compared to her confession. I wanted to kick myself for such a lame response for so terrible an admission. Christine was hurt. No wonder she fled.

“That’s not all,” she said while cocking her head to the side. She had this faraway look in her expression that felt all wrong for the conversation.

I ran through my muddled thoughts, trying to remember who the fuck Lord Geralt was. There were so many members of the court I could hardly keep track of them all. If he was alive, his severed head would roll through the kingdom by nightfall. “What else?”

“I killed him,” she said, a slight lift to the end of her sentence, though her words were deadly. “I beat his skull in and got blood all over the carpet.” She rolled her shoulders back. “I killed him, and I left.”

My initial response was to say *good*. He deserved to die—to suffer. But I didn’t even have time to say this, because Christine shoved at my chest and ran past me. I was stunned still for a moment, my boots rooted to the floor as I processed her words.

I killed him.

It was impossible to think of the girl I’d grown up with murdering anyone. She was the girl who carried every spider and mouse caught in the castle out to the gardens. Life

bloomed from her fingertips in her mother's garden. She wasn't a murderer. She was...Christine. Innocent, lovely, pure.

But she was also hurting.

Lord Geralt raped me, August.

Lord Geralt raped me, August.

Lord Geralt raped me, August.

Lord Geralt raped me, August.

I was angry, shocked, and confused. But more than anything, I was worried about Christine and angry at myself.

I shook my head clear of the rampant thoughts running through my mind, and sprinted after her. I thought for sure her heels would snap as she stomped down each step, her long dress gathered in her clenched fist as she tried to put as much distance between us as possible.

“Christine!” I called after her. This conversation was far from over, and I was getting tired of her running away from me. We'd been doing this for three fucking years.

But I'd be damned if I ever let her get away again.

She landed on the bottom step with grace and turned to look over her shoulder. I paused on the step, my chest heaving as she shoved her blonde hair out of her face. “I need space,” she said.

I shook my head. “I need *you*.”

She licked a stray tear that had collected on her top lip and then faced away from me. I took one step closer, the move spooking her. Immediately, she continued running away from me. A royal attendant pressed their body against the wall as she breezed past them. My long legs carried me after her. I pumped my fists as I sprinted down the hall, passing gold frames with paintings of lords and ladies in them.

She knocked over a vase of roses on an end table, sending thorns and petals flying as water splashed on the floor. Atticus appeared out of a room, and she ran past him in a hurry, nearly pushing him in her rush to get away from me.

Atticus looked after her, his jaw clenched as I came to a halt at his side. “What did you do to her?” he asked me before taking a step, likely intending to chase her down. I reached out to grab his arm, my pulse raging as I glared at him. He looked down at where I held him. “Get your hand off of me.”

“Did you know?” I asked, my veins throbbing.

He jerked out of my grip. “Know what?”

I looked around, frowning at the watching castle workers. “Did you fucking *know*, Atticus? Did you know why she left?”

The realization in his expression made me sick to my stomach. He did know. I could see my answer clearly in the sad way his eyes dimmed. He lowered his voice and spoke. “We should discuss this in private.”

I shoved his chest toward the door he’d just come out of. “Yeah. We’re gonna fucking discuss this, you asshole.”

Atticus shoved me back, his palms landing right in the middle of my chest. “I suggest you keep your hands off of me, Your Majesty.”

I grabbed the collar of his shirt and slammed him against the door. “I’ll fucking kill you.”

Atticus smirked at me. “No you won’t.”

“Hey!” Leo yelled while sprinting toward us, gun raised and aimed at Atticus.

“I don’t fucking need your help!” I yelled at him. Atticus might be a bloodthirsty DuPont, but the viscous anger coursing through my veins was just as lethal.

Leo lowered his weapon and stared at us. “What’s going on? Where is Christine?”

Feeling frustrated by his question, I whirled around to address him. “Christine is none of your fucking concern. Don’t think I’m unaware of the way you watch her. You’ve *always* wanted her, but she’s well above your station, and you’d be smart to remember that.”

The guard's lip curled in anger. Silence stretched between us, and I saw the murder in his gaze. With each passing moment, he was imagining ways to kill me in my sleep. "Yes, *sir*," he replied, his tone anything but respectful. I wanted to hit someone. To rage. To make the world pay for hurting my girl.

Atticus ran a hand over his hair. "If you want to know what happened to Christine, perhaps you should ask Leo. He's the one with a firsthand account, after all."

I swallowed, my Adam's apple bobbing as I processed this information. He was there? Did he let it happen? What the fuck!?

Leo turned pale as a sheet. "Is it true?" I asked, my voice a deadly whisper.

Leo looked around, sweat gathering on his brow. "We need to discuss this somewhere no one can eavesdrop."

I reached for the door handle behind Atticus and twisted it. Inside was an empty bathroom. "Go. Now. Both of you."

"Is that an order, *sir*?" Atticus asked, a smirk on his mouth. I hated that knowing look in his eye, as if he reveled in keeping me in the dark.

"A motherfucking command from your king," I replied.

Leo shoved past us into the bathroom, and Atticus followed after him. I looked around before entering. "Check the stalls," I told Leo. He kicked each one open, and once we knew for sure we were alone, I continued my tirade. "Tell me everything."

"What do you want to know?" Leo asked.

"Start at the fucking beginning."

Leo looked at Atticus, then back at me. "Your father summoned her. I was told to wait in the hall. The king left, but I thought it was strange that Christine was still in his bedchamber."

I started pacing the small space, feeling this angry sort of energy I couldn't get rid of. "Then what happened?"

Leo paused for a long moment, his eyes fixated on the ground. "I heard her scream."

I stopped pacing.

Atticus cursed.

Leo reluctantly continued. "There was this tunnel in your father's room, hidden. I'd never seen it before. I ran through it, and there was this...this fucking sex room. Whips. Chains. Everything you could imagine. Christine was sitting in a puddle of blood. I swear to fucking God, my heart stopped. It was splattered all over her face, under her nails, drenching her nightgown."

"Was she hurt?" Atticus asked, his tone haunted. His hand rested over his belt where I knew a Glock was strapped to his side. He looked angry enough to pull it out and go on a shooting spree.

"He fucking raped her," Leo replied in a dejected tone. His shoulders were slumped with heavy guilt. "Lord Geralt. I didn't even know he was there with the king. They set all of it up. Christine took a lamp and beat his skull in. I can't even imagine the amount of strength it took for her to do that." He ran a hand over his head, then dropped it at his side.

"And what happened after?" I asked. I was sick to my stomach but needed to hear more.

"I took her to your mother. She instructed me to collect the body. She bathed Christine, got her dressed, and sent her away within the hour. I didn't even get to say goodbye."

Atticus nodded. "A week later, it was announced that Lord Geralt died of a heart attack. Seems your mother is efficient at cleaning up messes."

"*Too* efficient," Leo agreed, his fists clenching at his side.

Icy fear twisted around my heart. This was why Christine ran away. I'd been hating her for three years, and she *needed* me. She fucking needed me.

I glared at the guard. "Why didn't you come to me?"

He scoffed. “You were hardly reliable enough to trust with something like this. I went to your mother because...well...I knew she was good at keeping secrets. She made me swear not to discuss it ever again. I’m probably going to disappear tomorrow because I’m telling the two of you.”

I continued my pacing. “My father never went after her?”

Atticus scoffed, answering for Leo. “My informants have told me that Lord Geralt made a deal to help him with the Redview riots in exchange for Christine. King Frederick already got what he wanted from Geralt. He didn’t care if the bastard died before he was able to claim his end of the deal. And Christine was gone. My guess is, the king was too self-absorbed and arrogant to even question it, something I’m sure you can relate to, August.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” I asked, my jaw clenched tight as I waited for his answer.

“It means exactly that,” he replied, tilting his head to the side condescendingly. “You didn’t question things. You just let Christine disappear, and then you threw a pity party on your yacht.”

“Of course I questioned it,” I seethed.

“Did you, though? Because you didn’t go after her. You didn’t use every single resource at your disposal to get her. You sat around feeling sorry for yourself because it was easier than seeking the truth—”

“Watch how you speak to me; I am your future king!” I roared.

“No,” Atticus replied while looking down his nose at me. “You’re just a sad little brat with a title.”

I stumbled at his words but wanted to wound him just as badly as he did me. “And you’re a stalker! You followed her there without her even knowing!”

Leo snapped his attention to Atticus. “Is that true?”

He sneered at the guard. “It is. I know *everything* that has happened with Christine from the moment she left this

kingdom. When she struggled to find an apartment in her new town, I bought a building by her favorite park and rented her a room with a view. When she had a bit of trouble getting into one of her classes, I made a sizable donation to the school in exchange for getting whatever schedule she desired. The doorman greeted her with coffee every fucking morning that *I* ordered for her.”

Leo shook his head in disbelief. “And her... extracurriculars? Did you have anything to do with that?”

“What extracurriculars?” I asked while eyeing them.

They seemed to have an unspoken conversation, and I watched them exchange knowing looks that I wanted to pick apart with a blade. Atticus answered. “I arranged for her to have self-defense classes. She was in a vulnerable state after everything, and I wanted her to be able to defend herself.”

I nodded. That seemed like a good idea. After hearing about Lord fucking Geralt, I wanted her to continue her lessons. But still, something wasn’t adding up. “Why didn’t you just make your presence known?”

A shadow crossed DuPont’s face. “She needed to heal.”

I sensed a hint of insecurity in his tone. “Really? Three years and you didn’t see her once? You didn’t talk to her? You sure do place a bunch of expectations on me, but when it comes down to it, you’re just as much of a disappointment.”

Atticus paused for a moment, letting the silence stretch between us while he chewed on his words. “My decisions are none of your business.”

“You didn’t go to her because you were afraid,” I noted. “You didn’t want her to reject you. Again.”

“Shut the fuck up, August. You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

I smirked. “You know that Christine will always choose me. It doesn’t matter how much you love her, how hard you fight for her. At the end of the day, it’ll always be me, and that *destroys* you.”

He lunged for me, his veins popping in his neck as he roared. Leo jumped between us at the last second, pushing Atticus away before he could swing his fist. “Enough!” Leo yelled. “Christine has been through a fucking trauma and is in more danger than ever before. Now is not the time for a dick-measuring contest.”

His statement seemed to gather both of our direct attention. “Explain,” Atticus demanded while taking a step back.

Leo shook his head. “The queen is threatening to tell everyone Christine murdered Lord Geralt if she doesn’t marry you, Augustus. She’s holding it over both of our heads.”

I clenched my jaw as Atticus continued to question him. “Why?”

Leo shrugged. “The king was assassinated. She thinks the royal family needs to put on a *strong* show.”

Atticus’s eyes widened in horror for a fraction of a second, and I wanted to examine the expression closer, but I was too stunned by Leo’s words. I cleared my throat before asking another question. “Assassinated? The autopsy said—”

“Your mother has already proven how proficient she is at doctoring reports,” Leo cut me off with his bitter words. “It’s a shit show, *sir*.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Why hasn’t anyone told me this? Everyone is keeping me out of the loop. Why don’t you trust me?”

Atticus tossed his head back and laughed. “Trust you? You’re high half the time and drunk the other half. You’d spill every secret you have to any pretty girl willing to suck your cock. No wonder Christine didn’t trust you. No wonder she ran away. She *still* is running by the looks of it.”

Shame filled me from the toes up.

“Why *did* she run away just now? She passed me in the hall and looked very upset,” Leo said while stroking his chin.

I looked around the room. If I was an asshole, I’d tell them how I made her come with my tongue, how she screamed my

name and shook the walls of the goddamn castle. But it felt wrong to brag about something that brought her so much pain. I felt like a royal dick for making her cry. If I had known, maybe I would have been more gentle. More loving.

Atticus peered at me. “What did you do?”

“Nothing. We were up in the tower.”

Leo’s ears perked up. “What were you doing in the tower?”

I licked my lips, the taste of her still there.

“Oh fuck. You had sex with her, didn’t you? Were you so bad she ran away crying?” Atticus asked. Though he sounded playful, there was a menacing way about him.

“Not that it’s any of your business, but we were just having a bit of fun. It was fine until she got off. Do you think she’s still...coping?” Fuck, I didn’t know how to navigate that. I just knew I never wanted to upset her ever again.

“I don’t think that’s it,” Leo mused before clearing his throat. He seemed lost in thought, but I dragged him back to the present.

“Why does it sound like you’re speaking from experience, Leo?” I asked.

He eyed Atticus and me. “She...she kissed me. She didn’t seem upset by that.”

Atticus cursed again. “You stay the fuck away from her.”

“*Both* of you stay the fuck away from her. She’s my bloody wife,” I yelled. I walked over to the tile wall and slid down it, feeling a little helpless and overwhelmed by everything I’d learned. “She’s my responsibility. My fucking *best friend*. And I failed her.”

Atticus didn’t hold back any punches. “Yeah. You did.”

“Fuck off,” I growled.

“So are you going to go check on her, sir? Or should I?” Leo asked while bouncing on the balls of his feet.

I felt stuck. I didn't want to make it any worse. What if it was *me* that triggered her? What if she'd never be able to look at me without seeing my father?

My fucking father.

I wished he wasn't dead so I could punish him for what he did to her. And I needed to have a conversation with my mother. She was overstepping her role and not keeping me informed. I was the bloody future king.

“Well, would you look at that, Leo?” Atticus said. “See that look on his face? I think a king was just born. *I'll* go check on Christine.”

Chapter Twelve

CHRISTINE

“So, you’re engaged?” Atticus asked. I didn’t process his words at first because I was lost in thought, sitting in a heap on the library floor while trying to steady my racing heart. “Christine?” I snapped my head up and stared at him intently.

There was a look of concern on Atticus’s face, but he did not approach me. He seemed to understand how much I needed space. I held up my hand and swiped away a tear before wiggling my fingers. A gleam of light reflected on my emerald engagement ring. I decided to focus on his first question. “It’s beautiful, huh? Do you think it was the queen or the PR team that picked it out?”

His eyes were fixed on me. I didn’t want to talk about why I was crying on the floor, and he seemed to pick up on my desire to talk about anything but the pain in my expression. “I tried to persuade August to select something more meaningful, but he got angry and stormed out of my jewelry shop. I suppose whoever chose it has good taste, but it’s not from my jewelry store, so I’ll have to keep my enthusiasm reserved.”

“It’s not a DuPont ring?”

He shook his head. “No.”

I eyed the jewelry in speculation. “Hmmm. I suppose I like it a little less now. All the posh ladies of the court wear DuPont diamonds.”

His lip quirked up. “It pleases me that you want a DuPont ring on your hand. Perhaps you should ditch the king, and we can make that happen.”

I rolled my eyes. “I walked right into that one.”

“I truly appreciate the setup. Flawless execution on my part.”

I clapped for him like I was attending a tennis tournament. “Well done, Atticus.”

“You don’t look like a happy bride-to-be,” Atticus said before stalking closer, moving slowly as if I were an animal he was terrified to spook. He was wearing sleek black pants and a button-up shirt. His hair was curled at the ends, framing his sharp face. I eyed the tattoos on his skin, creeping up over his collar and adding a hint of danger to his refined look.

“And here I thought you were going to avoid the elephant in the room,” I sighed.

Atticus sat down on the ground beside me, running his fingers over my dress. “My father once told me there was only one way to eat an elephant.”

I’d heard this one before. “A bite at a time? Such a cliché. And who would want to eat an elephant? They’re majestic creatures.”

Atticus and I bantered back and forth until my heart stopped racing. We danced around the subject of my torment until the tears on my cheeks dried up and my mouth stretched into a tiny smile that took more effort than I’d care to admit. “Do you want to talk about it?” he asked after a long moment of silence.

“No.”

He smirked. “August was so bad in bed he sent you fleeing. I’d hate to be him right now.”

I wasn’t sure *how* Atticus knew about what had happened. Hell, it might be all over the news by now since we weren’t exactly secretive about it. I shouldn’t have let him do that to me in front of a window. In fact, we shouldn’t have done that at all. “You just couldn’t hold it in, could you?”

He pressed his palm to his chest. “I have to know. Does he have a micropenis? Did he get lost on the way to your clit?”

Tears started welling up in my eyes once more. “No,” I breathed. “He was actually...perfect. Sexy. Sweet. Attentive ___”

“I get it,” he said, cutting me off.

“It was *me* that ruined the moment.”

Atticus waited for me to explain. He didn't push me or prod for more, he simply sat at my side and matched his breaths to mine. He looked god-like. As if he was perfectly sculpted for his symmetrical face and strong jawline.

"I want to go home," I whispered. "There's too many memories in this castle. Just when I thought I'd overcome it all, something here brings me back."

"You did seem happier in Harvington." He eyed me, anticipation bleeding through his expression as he waited for me to connect the dots.

I had a feeling Atticus had been following me. He knew too much and had hinted at it when we were talking in August's bedroom. But he was brazen for admitting it so clearly now.

I moved quickly, rolling on top of him and pinning him against the floor, pressing my elbow into his neck. I glared at him, that familiar rage bubbling in my chest as I pinned my knee between his legs. "You followed me," I said in a deadly tone.

He smiled and reached up as much as he could, despite the pressure I was applying to his neck. Our lips were just an inch apart. "I did," he whispered. "Once a month for three years, I visited you. Watched you. Understood you."

I started to breathe heavily. Atticus's minty breath washed over me in waves. My chest rose and fell with every inhale. "Fucking creep. You never could leave me alone," I whispered, though my accusations felt hollow. Everyone was so quick to give me up, but Atticus didn't. My own best friend didn't wonder what happened to me, *but Atticus did*. "How much did you see?"

"All of it."

My breath hitched. Time slowed as I processed his words. "How much do you know?"

He smiled. "Everything."

I held my breath, preparing myself for the onslaught of shame that would inevitably hit me. Atticus knew. He knew

everything.

He wrapped his free hand around my thigh. “I see you for exactly what you are, Christine. And you know what?”

He paused to lift up slightly, my lips hovering over his in the most delicious and threatening way. I found myself wanting to close the distance and kiss him. “What?” I asked, aching for an answer.

“I still want you.”

I stalled and stared at him. The plush cushion of his lips, the sincerity in his eyes.

“No you don’t,” I finally said before rolling off of him, my back hitting the ground as I stared at the ceiling. “You can’t possibly mean that.”

“Is that why you ran, beautiful? Because you were afraid August would peel back your layers and not like the fractured soul you’re clinging to?”

“Stop,” I begged while placing my hands over my eyes. More tears seemed to well up. They were never-ending.

He poised himself above me, ripping my hands from my face so he could peer at me with his brown gaze. “You’re perfect, Christine. If he can’t see the real you and be man enough to love even the bloodiest parts of your soul, then he doesn’t deserve you.”

“What if I don’t deserve him? What if I don’t deserve any of you? What if I’ve become a *monster*?”

“Then I guess I’m a monster catcher, baby,” he whispered. I had a physical reaction to him; it was like my soul calmed. He continued. “I’m patient. I don’t want you until I don’t have to share you with anyone else. Let them show you how unworthy they are. I’ll be waiting for you to realize who you belong with.”

He let go of my hands and slid away from me. I felt his absence almost immediately. I didn’t want distance between Atticus and me. Something about him calmed me down, even if it was wrong, even if it confused me. My body grew cold

and I felt this overwhelming emptiness. I couldn't help but feel like he'd be waiting forever. "I'm engaged," I sputtered, not sure why I felt the need to defend my fake marriage. Atticus sat up, his shoulders raised with tension.

I felt the blast of his icy gaze as if I was hit in the stomach with it. "I'm used to being in August's shadow. I've spent my entire life thriving in the dark. I'm not afraid to do the immoral. I'm not afraid to fuck you with his ring on your finger, Christine. Why do you feel the need to defend a man who doesn't care?"

"He cares," I snapped.

"He's a selfish bastard with a silver spoon practically glued to his tongue. He's an addict. A whore. He gets these fleeting impulses where he tries to be good, but I wouldn't hold your breath. You'll get a beautiful wedding. He'll kiss you in front of the cameras. Then you'll spend a lifetime finding photos of him with his head between the thighs of models in the tabloids. He'll overdose before he turns thirty if you're lucky."

I didn't want to hear it. It sounded like such a bleak future for the two of us. "August could still change."

Atticus bit the inside of his cheek for a moment before responding. "Your faith in him is deplorable. But I can wait. Eventually, he'll break your heart past repair. Eventually, you'll realize what's been in front of you all along. Eventually, I'll bring you into my world, and you'll never want to leave."

I swallowed, not sure what to say.

"It's nice to hear what you really think of me, mate," August's voice cut through the tension. I turned to look at him, and my heart panged when I saw the hurt in his eyes. I hadn't even heard August enter the library. His tone was sharp like a blade and laced with sorrow. I felt ashamed even though I'd done nothing wrong.

August and Atticus had always had a strange friendship. It was full of jealousy and competitiveness. I never understood it. But the one thing that kept them together was at least polite silence about their differences. They'd sometimes snap at one

another, but at the end of the day, they both swallowed their problems and put on a smile for the tabloids.

This felt like a step toward destruction, though.

Atticus stood up and held his hand out for me. I reluctantly took it and he pulled me to my feet.

Atticus, who seemed more bold than usual, sneered. “It’s nothing you don’t already know.”

I felt stuck between them but also didn’t feel loyal to either of them. August had hurt me plenty of times in the last couple of days; he didn’t deserve me rushing to his side to comfort him. And Atticus had been stalking me. Neither were innocent in this. I wasn’t a piece of rope to be tugged back and forth between them.

“I was just coming to check on you, Christine,” August said with a frown before turning to look at me. “Are you okay?”

I nodded stiffly. I didn’t know how to explain how I was feeling. It wasn’t the intimacy that made me freak out. I couldn’t stand finally having something with August while I felt so hollow because of the secrets between us.

“My mother wants us to meet her for the scheduled interviews...” August looked like he’d rather pluck his eyes out than go to an interview after all the revelations of the day, but we didn’t have much of a choice, not with my past hanging over my head.

Atticus straightened his tie and smiled at us. “The show must go on, I suppose,” he said before walking out of the room. “Looking forward to seeing the happy couple in all the papers. I’ll call you, Christine.”

Once he was out of earshot, August shook his head and cursed. We stared at one another, a tense moment passing between us. I opened and closed my mouth. The girl I used to be would have immediately comforted August. He still had a lot to prove to me, and I needed to know if he was capable of loving the monster I’d become.

“Why did you run to him?” he asked, his lips curled in anger.

I hated this. “He found me. He *followed* me.”

He stormed up to me and looked me up and down. The wrath of a future king would have made many cower in fear, but not me. “You’re mine,” he whispered. “You understand? Mine. No one else’s. I don’t care if I’m a bastard that doesn’t deserve you.” He reached out and wrapped his arm around me, pulling me close. “Your lips are mine,” he whispered before lightly brushing his mouth against mine. I melted at the contact while hating myself for responding to him so. He reached up and grabbed my breast, his large hand covering my swollen flesh. “This is mine, too,” he whispered before kissing my neck.

His hand drifted lower. My legs trembled. My breath hitched. He pressed his palm over my dress and between my legs, cupping me. I involuntarily spread wider for him, as if on instinct. “This beautiful pussy? It’s mine. Am I an asshole for touching you even now? I can’t seem to help myself whenever I see you with him.”

I was so wet that it was almost embarrassing. Could he feel the heat? I was still aching for him.

It occurred to me just then that August was the only person in the world able to make me feel weak anymore.

He ran his soft lips over the shell of my ear. “I’m capable of taking care of you, you know. You don’t have to run to Leo or Atticus. Or even my mother. *I* can protect you. I can keep you safe. I’d burn down the bloody castle to keep you at my side. And I might not have proven that three years ago, but I’m going to fucking prove it now.” He moved his hand from between my thighs and cupped my face with both hands. “Stop running from me.”

“I didn’t run from you,” I whispered.

“Oh? So you *didn’t* sprint down the hallway after grinding your clit against my tongue? You *didn’t* drop a bomb in my lap

and leave without another word? What did you do, Christine? Enlighten me.”

“I was scared, okay?” I admitted. I’d worked damn hard to avoid being scared ever since Lord Geralt ruined my innocence.

“Of me?” August asked, taking a step back.

I shook my head. “Of that look.”

He furrowed his brow. “What look?”

“Pity. Fear. Disgust. I didn’t want to see the boy I love look at me like I was a murderer.”

He gasped and I realized where I went wrong. I said I *love* him.

“You caught me off guard,” he admitted, thankfully not bringing up my admission. “I’m sorry I didn’t school my expression or handle it the right way. I’m sorry I didn’t chase after you three years ago. And I’m sorry I don’t deserve you now.”

I chewed on the inside of my cheek, then responded, “I wish we could be what we were before all of this. It would make things so much easier. I was weak and naive, willing to compromise my own heart for the sake of yours.”

He frowned. “But we aren’t them anymore, are we?”

“No. We aren’t.”

“So what do we do?”

I took a step away from him once more. “We do what is asked of us. We follow their rules and say pretty words. We pretend.”

He closed the distance between us once more. “And what if I don’t want to pretend?”

My shoulders dropped. “Then I guess you’ll have to convince me this is real.”

Chapter Thirteen

CHRISTINE

In an instant, Leo slammed me onto the mat, his muscular arms throwing me down with ease. I was not in the right headspace to engage in a fight today, so I was unable to predict his attacks as well as I would have liked. I knew I was more than capable of taking him on. If I flipped the switch in my mind and truly unleashed all my rage, he'd be a broken mess on the training room floor. I knew his weaknesses and strengths. I knew he had an old injury on his right knee that made him favor that leg. I *also* knew that Leo was cocky. He relied on his brute strength to take down his opponent, but his strategy needed work. He was good at analyzing a situation, but executing that knowledge was where he had a disconnect.

I knew all of this, but I just couldn't motivate myself to do much about it.

He pinned my arms over my head and pressed his hard body against mine. "Push me off of you."

"I'm trying," I said lazily. If I truly wanted to push him off of me, I would have already done so. I would have used the ballpoint pen on the ground at my side and driven it through his eye socket. If I *truly* wanted to win this training session, he would have already been dead.

But I didn't want to win today. I didn't want to snap into that training mode of *kill or be killed* with Leo.

"Come on," he urged before pinning me harder.

"This is boring," I mumbled, even though my cheeks were flushed. My mind was preoccupied and it felt impossible to focus.

Yesterday's press tour had drained me, and I was raw from my interaction with both Atticus and August.

He knew.

They both knew.

All of them knew what had happened to me that fateful night three years ago, and it was a relief to have my truth out in the open, but also a burden.

For years I had been wondering what it would be like to tell August about the horrible things that had happened to me. I wondered how he would respond, how he would treat me afterward. Nothing could have prepared me for the pity in his gaze or the tenacious way he declared kind promises that felt hollow to me. I wanted to believe that this wouldn't change how he viewed me, but we didn't even have a baseline for normalcy anymore. I was once the girl that loved him, then I became the girl that ran away.

Now I was the murderer determined to flee again.

“You aren't even trying,” Leo said. He hovered over me, his hands pressing into the mat beside my head as he looked me in the eye. “I know you're more than capable of taking me down, so why are you just letting me kick your ass?”

I rolled my eyes and shoved him off of me before standing up. “I'm not in the mood to train today,” I said before walking over to a water bottle and taking a sip.

When I spun around to look at him, he had a scowl on his perfect face. Strands of blond hair had fallen out of the messy bun he'd tied up on top of his head, and beads of sweat rolled down his exposed chest. “You're not in the mood?” he asked incredulously. “Well, then get in the fucking mood. You need to keep your body conditioned.”

He lunged for me and I let out a sigh before thrusting my water bottle at the ground and widening my stance. Just moments before he punched me in the ribs, I lifted my hands to block him. His blow landed on my forearm, and I grew cold. “You're pissing me off, Leo!”

He wiped his lips with the back of his hand before crouching. “Good.”

He kicked me in the stomach, knocking the air out of me for a brief moment. I wrapped my hands around his shin and jerked him forward, forcing him to lose his balance and fall on

the ground. He let out a choked moan when he hit the mat. He looked up at me with his striking green eyes and smirked. “You’re quick.”

“I’m *lethal*,” I snarled. “I spent three years training, Leo.”

“How did your other coach teach you?” he asked before rolling onto his back. I thought he was about to get up, but instead, he whipped his legs around and knocked them into my ankle, sending me to the ground with a grunt. He scooted closer and locked his arms around me.

“He beat the shit out of me. Over and over again. Till it stopped hurting,” I answered him. “He taught me how to fight by breaking me—” My words were cut off with a grunt when he locked his thighs around my lower body. I could feel his hard cock digging into my ass. I arched my back, making him hiss. “—breaking me down and building me back up.”

Leo brushed his lips over the shell of my ear, sending a shiver down my spine. “Looks like I have you pinned,” he said. His cocky tone made me grin.

“It would appear that way,” I agreed. I jerked my head back, but instead of hitting him in the nose, I clipped his jaw, making my skull throb.

“I saw that one coming,” he preened.

I licked my lips and stretched my neck. “Bet you won’t see this.” I chomped down on the top of his hand, sinking my teeth into his tender flesh until blood poured into my mouth. I spit it out as he let me go with a yelp.

“What the fuck, Christine?” he roared before sitting up and holding his bleeding hand to his chest.

I whirled around and slammed my fist into his jaw. The whiplash from my hit sent his head back. I laughed as he recovered, blinking a few times while his brain rattled. “Want to keep going, or are you done?” I asked, polishing my nails on my tank.

He groaned and rubbed his jaw with the one hand that *wasn't* bleeding everywhere while staring incredulously at me. “What the fuck was that for? We were just practicing!”

“You fight how you practice, Leo. Can’t hold back.”

He stood up and grabbed my discarded water bottle on the floor. Pouring it onto his hand, he cleaned the bite wound and inspected the deep teeth marks there. “I might need stitches!” He glared at me and I shrugged. “You’ve got some blood on your chin.”

I lifted up the hem of my tank top and wiped my mouth. “Better?” He gulped at my toned stomach, and I casually lifted my tank a little higher, showing him the bottom of my bra. “Like what you see?” I asked.

“Don’t tease me. It’s not right,” he croaked.

“I’m not teasing.”

Leo looked exasperated, his wide eyes staring at me like he wasn’t sure what to do. “Augustus made it clear that I need to stay away from you. He’s a brat that doesn’t like when others look at his toys. The only reason I’m here is because his mother is determined for you to keep up with your training and conditioning.”

I matched his frown with an equal look of annoyance. “Don’t look at me like that. I had a long day yesterday, and you pulled me out of bed before sunrise. The queen wants me to meet with a wedding planner this morning, a journalist wants an exclusive interview, and don’t get me started on all the damn staged public appearances.”

Leo sat down on the mat, his legs bent and planted on the floor as he rested his forearms on his knees, his jaw already blooming with a bruise. “I figured after yesterday, maybe you needed an outlet. Thought sparring would help, but obviously I was wrong.”

I chewed on my lip before walking over to him. “It was never an outlet for me,” I admitted.

A look of surprise crossed his features. “Then what was it?”

“Survival,” I said, my voice curt. “I knew I needed to be the strongest person in the room. If King Frederick ever came looking for me, I wasn’t going to die without a fight.”

Leo looked up at me, his intense green gaze absorbing every aspect of my expression. “Why did you come back when the queen summoned you for the funeral? It would have been easy for you to stay behind.”

I shrugged. “I guess I wanted proof.”

“Of what?” he asked.

“That the king was really dead. I also missed you, missed August and Atticus. I was morbidly curious, I suppose.”

Leo’s eyebrows squished together in apparent confusion. “Curious?”

I nodded. “Yes. *Curious*. I wondered how you all had been. I wanted to know what you were up to and if you...”

Leo slowly stood up and walked over to me, his sneakers pounding into the mat. “If we what?”

It was hard for me to admit this. At first, I pretended that I was being forced to come here, that I didn’t have a choice. But I was strong enough and capable enough to refuse. It was embarrassing to say out loud, but I wanted to be honest with Leo. “If you missed me,” I admitted. “I know it’s silly. I just wondered. I disappeared and didn’t hear from any of you, not that it was allowed. Did I even matter?”

“Of course I missed you,” Leo snapped. “I wondered about you every damn day I was stuck in the countryside. I worried you were hurt, that the queen was lying about your whereabouts. There were some nights I didn’t get a wink of sleep because I was so fucking consumed by my thoughts of you.”

I rubbed at the goose bumps on my upper arm. “Leo...”

“And then you came back, and I realized there was something far worse than missing you, Christine.” He paused to cup my cheek. “I still wish you’d consider my offer about leaving.”

I slapped his hand away, not sure how I felt about his declaration. Leo had made it very clear how he felt about

having me here. “Why exactly do you want me gone?” I asked.

“It’s hard to look at you. Even now, I see you with blood splatters in your hair and that wild look in your eye. You were never meant for this kingdom, Christine. I knew it the first moment we met. I failed you that night.”

Sending me away didn’t make the hurt disappear, it just made it harder to see the bruises my trauma left behind. “You feel guilty,” I said.

He growled. “Of course I fucking feel guilty. I was supposed to protect you, Christine.”

“You’re not responsible for what happened to me, Leo. The men that hurt me are dead now. I don’t blame you. You know that, right?”

“I blame myself!” he growled while thrusting his hands through his hair in frustration. “I was an obedient soldier sending you to be fucking slaughtered. I took an oath without even considering the consequences.”

I shook my head. “What could you have possibly done? Defying King Frederick had consequences. You could have been arrested or killed. The only reason I’m even alive is because I’m a lady of the court and the queen cared about my mother. I was privileged enough to get away with murder.”

He huffed. “Privileged. Everyone keeps fucking reminding me how fucking goddamn privileged you are. How perfect you are. How much fucking better than me you are. You were good enough to get away with murder, and I wasn’t good enough to save you.”

“You had your family to think about. You couldn’t just go off risking yourself for me. Your mother needed you. Your sister—”

He cut me off with determined words. “I would give up everything to go back in time to that night and stop them from hurting you.”

I looked up into his eyes, wishing I could absolve him of the guilt he felt. But he had to sort through his own feelings.

“Leo.” My tone was gentle as I looked up at him. “I don’t blame you for what happened. I truly don’t. And when it’s just us, I don’t feel like the future queen or even a lady of the court.”

He averted his gaze, a move that seemed almost shy. “I was saving up to find you, you know,” he admitted. “I was... curious too...I suppose.”

“About what?”

He reached out to tuck my hair behind my ear. “What you’d be like, stripped bare of the titles and obligations. Who you’d become when you didn’t have any royal expectations or rules placed upon your shoulders. Who we would be outside of this castle.”

I smiled up at him. “We probably could have been perfect.”

He leaned closer. “If I wasn’t a guard.”

I lifted up on my toes, our eyes locked. “If I wasn’t the future queen.”

He inhaled deeply, his eyes hooded with desire as the space between us got smaller and smaller. He eyed my lips, drinking in the sight of them with a hunger I knew well. “If I hadn’t failed you. If you hadn’t killed him.”

I flinched. His words were like a bucket of ice being dumped on my head. “If I hadn’t become a murderer, you mean. You can’t stop seeing me like that, can you?”

He sighed. “It’s not like that, Christine.”

“I did what I had to do.”

He stood taller and his voice grew louder. “But you didn’t have to keep doing it!”

“I needed to become stronger. I had to protect myself,” I argued.

“Protect yourself, fine. But you took it farther than that. I saw what you did in the queen’s sitting room. That wasn’t normal self-defense.”

I tossed my hands up. “And why does that bother you so much, Leo? Is it the fact that I became someone strong enough to never be taken advantage of again or that I became someone who doesn’t need your protection?”

He took a step back and placed his injured hand to his chest. Leo wanted to slay my dragons while I attempted to outrun this kingdom, but the earth was nothing more than a curve that would always lead me back home, no matter how hard or how far I ran. So I stopped running. I picked myself up off the floor, and I became a girl who didn’t have to fly away from her pain.

I learned to fight it.

“You should leave,” he grunted. “Shower and get dressed for your duties today.”

I inhaled deeply through my nose and exhaled, my lips parting as I stared at him. “Right.”

I turned my back to him and walked toward the door leading out of the gym. “Christine?” he called at my back, and when I looked over my shoulder, he had a solemn expression on his face.

“What?”

“I can save you, you know,” he whispered. “I’m not the man terrified of the consequences anymore.”

I smiled. “I’m not afraid of the consequences either.”

Chapter Fourteen

AUGUST

For a solid minute, I stood without moving, staring at my bedroom door and listening to the flurry of activity just on the other side. I knew as soon as I opened the door, there would be an entire team of people asking questions and *demanding* shit from me.

It had been this way since I stepped off my yacht and came back to the castle. First it was the formal ceremony for the transfer of power. The procession. The viewing. The only good thing about the entire ordeal was seeing Christine at the funeral, but even then I was fucked in the head about seeing the girl I loved.

And the engagement gave me a little bit of a break, but it was still a beating. Press conferences and photo shoots. The day I made Christine come with my tongue was one of the best and worst days of my life. I finally had her, but she was a ghost and we were publicity tools, neither of us able to talk about what happened while the world picked us apart.

Yesterday, I stayed away. Christine had dress fittings and wedding plans to make. I had pills to take.

I didn't want to leave my room today.

I probably could have avoided them all. I had some coke in my nightstand, and Adonis would bring me champagne if I asked him to. I was the fucking future king, which meant I could bloody well do whatever the hell I wanted to.

And believe me, I wanted to sit in bed and sulk for the rest of the day.

So why wasn't I?

I knew the answer to my own question. It all started and ended with the same person.

Christine.

I took one day to be self-destructive, but I couldn't wallow forever.

I had to step up for her and grovel like my life depended on it. All this time, I'd thought she'd abandoned me, but it was the other way around. She was alone on the other side of the world, licking her wounds and coping with something *I* could have and should have prevented.

And it fucking *killed* me. I kept imagining her alone in her apartment. Crying. Feeling alone. I'd just fucked off on my yacht while she suffered. Knowing that made me sick to my stomach.

It was time to fucking man up and do the job I was born to do.

I reached for the handle and opened the door, greeted with the sight of seven people holding clipboards and staring expectantly at me. I let out a low growl of disapproval. "Let's get this fucking shit over with. Keep up." I shoved through the crowd and started making my way down the long hallway, heading toward the queen's sitting room to break something.

Victoria, the royal publicist, cemented herself to my side. She was a middle-aged woman with red hair always pulled back tight into a bun. If I was being honest, the woman annoyed the hell out of me, but she *always* cleaned up my messes. She was good at her job, even though she hated my guts.

"There has been an opinion piece about your engagement to Christine published in the Daily News. Many people are excited to see you settle down but are skeptical about the whirlwind romance story. I'll set up for you and Christine to have brunch in the gardens later this week and will tip off the paparazzi. Be sure to look in love."

I swallowed. That wouldn't be hard. Every time I looked at Christine, I felt my heart fall out of my ass. I just wasn't sure I was ready to see her again. I was still so goddamn ashamed about my part in this.

"Got it," I said before walking down the hall. Everyone followed after me like I was a mother duckling; they waddled after me in silence, pissing me off. I snapped my fingers when

no one spoke up. “Are you all going to follow me around all day, or does someone have something to say?”

A brave soul cleared their throat. “Your Majesty, the invitations have gone out for the engagement party. When we asked Lady Abernathy about her preference for the menu and color scheme yesterday, she declined input,” a woman with a rather large proboscis that stuck out on her slender face said in a nasally voice.

I frowned. “If she doesn’t want to plan it, then she doesn’t fucking have to. It’s a party. You’ve done plenty of them.”

She squeaked while her short legs struggled to keep up with me. “But, sir, it’s customary—”

“I don’t like repeating myself. If. Christine. Doesn’t. Want. To. Plan. An. Engagement. Party, then. She. Doesn’t. Have. To. Put it together and make it worthy of the Crown. I don’t understand why you’re wasting my time by even asking me this.”

She stopped walking, her mouth hanging open as I continued on my path. Maybe my tone was dickish, but I wanted to set the record straight. Christine got whatever the fuck she wanted, no questions asked. My mother was forcing her to marry me with some fucking blackmail. She shouldn’t have to plan the sham of a wedding, too.

I made a mental note to talk to my mother soon. She’d conveniently gone to one of our homes in the country for the rest of the week, likely avoiding me.

As I continued walking, I felt myself grow more agitated. The castle was too damn big. Took at least ten minutes to get from one side to the other. “Sir,” a man in a suit said while matching my strides. He had slicked back hair and a gun strapped to his chest. “My name is Franklin Yellow, and I’m the Head of Castle Security. We would like to go over the new protocols—”

“Send them in an email,” I grumbled.

“I *did* send them in an email, but you haven—”

“What are the protocols, then?” I asked while pausing for a brief moment. Another mouse of a man—the royal tailor—took the opportunity to measure the length of my legs while I waited for Franklin *fucking* Yellow to respond.

“We’ve improved security on the grounds but need your approval to increase the budget and hire more men. With your father’s passing and the upcoming wedding, there’s more scrutiny on the royal family. We’ve received intel that is concerning and—”

I’d heard enough. Whatever. “Fine. Hire however many men you want.”

A woman carrying a clipboard cleared her throat while planting herself at my side. I practically choked on the pungent perfume she wore. “Excuse me, Your Majesty. My name is Millie Tilsworth. I am an assistant to the Head of Treasury.”

The man measuring my pants legs grazed my dick, and I slapped his hand away before continuing on my walk. “I’m assuming you also want something from me, Millie?” I said before clenching my teeth.

She coughed. “I’m just not sure it’s within the budget to hire more security.”

Franklin argued. “It needs to be a priority.”

Millie glared at him. “We need to have a budget committee meeting to go over this last quarter. We’re burning through funds with no clear plan for additional revenue. This wedding alone will cost thirty-four million dollars. I’ve discussed televising the event with public relations, but they said you haven’t approved it. Your father made some very questionable investments—”

“How questionable?” I asked while pausing in front of a table of flowers. I stared at the wilting petals, and it made me angry for some reason.

“We are at a loss of sixteen million and climbing right now.”

I stared at the flowers longer, thinking of Christine. “I want a full report of my father’s failing business ventures on my

desk by morning and a clear plan of action for recouping the funds. I also want you to find room in the budget for security. I'll marry Christine in a fucking cardboard box if that's what it takes. Safety needs to take priority over vanity, Millie."

Her eyes widened, but she quickly nodded. "Yes, sir. But your mother and the lords have made their desires for the wedding very clear—"

"My mother isn't the one getting married. Do as I ask." I nodded at Franklin while turning the corner. "I want to see the files of every person working in this castle. Leo Winthrop will be in charge of hiring." It killed me to give him *any* sort of power, but he knew what happened to Christine, which meant he had insider information. I needed people I could trust, and even if it pissed me off, he wouldn't let anything happen to her.

Franklin scoffed. "Leo Winthrop was demoted—"

"And reinstated. I trust him to make sure the security team is running top notch."

His face bloomed red. "Your father put *me* in charge."

I laughed bitterly. "And my father's dead. In fact, that makes you significantly less trustworthy in my book. What's your title again?"

He looked around in disbelief at the rest of the entourage following me. "Head of Security, Your Majesty."

I looked him up and down while someone brought me a coffee and muffin. "Not for long," I replied before leaving him as he gaped in the middle of an archway.

I shoved the chocolate muffin into my mouth and continued my trek across the castle. Some more people walked up to me, asking me to sign something, approve something else, or listen to a complaint.

"We need to address the rumors that Christine is pregnant..."

"Lord Alton needs to discuss the new interstate being built by his second summer home."

“I need to confirm your attendance for the diplomat dinner with the men from Cherish, Your Majesty. Have you had time to look over the treaty?”

“The court is demanding an emergency session to discuss your formal coronation..”

One voice and their demands stuck out the most, though. “The Lord Bishop of St. Idyll, Nathan Croft, is demanding an audience with you, sir. He is claiming to dispute your marriage with Lady Christine as his family is claiming they had made arrangements for her hand three years ago,” Harold, one of the liaisons between the court and Crown stuttered. I stopped walking and his pudgy face turned beet red.

“What did you just say?”

“The Lord Bishop of—”

“Stop with the bloody titles and give me a name.”

He let out a shudder. “Nathan Croft, Your Majesty. Younger brother of the late Lord Geralt.”

I crushed what was left of the muffin in my fist. “And what does he want?”

Harold cringed. “He claims your father arranged a marriage between Lord Geralt and Lady Christine. An alliance of sorts. He would like to petition the court. He says as the remaining House of St. Idyll heir, he rightfully has claim to her.”

Fury like nothing I’d ever experienced in my life burned my veins. My heart was practically threatening to beat out of my chest. He wanted to claim her? I might not have been able to protect her three years ago, but I damn well would let this asshole know he couldn’t have her.

I stopped walking and clenched my fist, the urge to hit something overwhelming me. “You can tell Nathan fucking Croft that he can rightfully shove a brick up his ass. The only person who has a claim to Christine is herself.” I turned to Adonis, my assistant. “Get me Atticus on the phone. Now.”

Adonis fumbled with the cell phone and handed it to me, Atticus's phone already ringing. I pressed it against my ear as Harold ran off. I couldn't barely function, my anger so potent that it made me dizzy. What if he *did* have a claim? What if they knew? "Yes, Your Majesty?" Atticus answered with a yawn. "Did you wake up at a whorehouse somewhere and need me to pick you up?"

I growled. "Shut the fuck up and listen to me. I need you to pull every bit of information on Nathan Croft using your *resources*."

Atticus went quiet for a moment, likely sensing the seriousness of my words. "Lord Geralt's brother?"

I looked at the people crowding me and suddenly felt overwhelmed. Everyone was too close. Their breathing too loud. It was all too fucking much.

Their eyes were trained on me, eavesdropping on my call so they could discuss it later. I just wanted to be alone. "Yes. I want to know every dirty secret he's got. And I might need one of your men to pay him a visit."

He scoffed. "You want one of *my* men to visit him? Do you know what you're asking?"

"It's Christine, Atticus."

Atticus breathed into the phone receiver. "What's going on? Is she in danger?"

"Do what I asked. Find out information on him. I'll keep in touch."

I hung up on him and tossed the cell phone at Adonis. He caught it midair with a breezy, "Thank you, Your Majesty."

I spun around and faced the crowd of ten people still following me, the walls seemingly closing in as I stared at their demanding, cautious expressions.

"Where the fuck is Leo?" I snapped, my breathing growing heavy. Was the room spinning?

Adonis spoke up. "With Lady Christine, sir."

I ran a hand through my hair. “Good. Good.”

I pointed at the woman who wanted my approval on a dinner with a diplomat from Cherish. “Yes to the dinner, no to the treaty they sent over.”

She scribbled a note and ran off as I turned to another member of my team. “Submit a press release that Christine is *not* pregnant. Yet.” I had every intention of putting a baby in her belly one day. Not because I wanted an heir, but because I wanted to create something with *her*, which was a wild fucking thought. Now I was thinking about babies?

As if she’d ever fucking let me.

If I ever became *worthy* of such a thing.

I let out a shaky breath. “Tell the court they can put a fucking crown on my head whenever they want, but I’ll be selecting my advisors. I suggest they start kissing my royal ass if they want to continue to have a job. If they need a hint, tell them I’m particularly fond of Christine Abernathy, and I’ll keep anyone that makes her life easier. Close friends of my father that share his views can pack their bags.”

“Sir,” a man said. “I’m not sure that’s the best course of action.”

“And I’m not sure I give a fuck,” I snapped.

I stomped over to the queen’s sitting room and braced my palms on the door, but it didn’t budge. My anxiety grew and grew. My heart seemed to thud painfully fast. It felt like I was standing at the edge of a cliff and all of my responsibilities were pushing me toward the ground. “Why is this door locked?” My voice sounded panicked.

Someone squeaked. “It’s being renovated, sir, while your mother is visiting the countryside.”

I scowled. Renovated? My mother was all about tradition; it was rare anything changed in this castle. “I want my mother to come back immediately.”

“She has meetings with Lady Attlee tomorrow to discuss a charity gala, then—”

“Fine. Tell her I want her in my office in two days,” I barked.

Adonis leaned in. “Your office, sir?”

I let out a frustrated breath. “Yes. *My* office. My father is dead, is he not?”

Adonis’s lip quirked. “He is, sir.”

“So his office is now *my* office. Bring me my mother immediately. If she argues with you, tell her the *king* demands it.”

I turned to find the damn office where my father worked. I used to avoid the room like the plague, so I couldn’t exactly remember where it was.

Once again, everyone was staring at me.

Always fucking staring.

My chest grew heavy, an invisible weight bearing down on my shoulders as I looked at the crowd. “What the fuck are you looking at?”

Some scattered off. Adonis placed his hand on my back. “Shall I accompany you to your office, sir?”

I shrugged him off but was...comforted by his presence. Adonis always seemed to recognize when I needed him. Maybe *he* should be an advisor. The old man smiled encouragingly at me, and I eventually—reluctantly—nodded. “Everyone else leave me be,” I grunted before following after my assistant. Once we were alone—or at least as alone as anyone *could* be in a bloody castle bursting at the seams with people—I let out a sigh.

“Quite the display of authority, sir,” Adonis said while giving me the side-eye. He was always such a sassy bastard.

“I’m the king now,” I replied. “I’m just trying to step up.”

“I think you did a good job,” he lied.

“You’ve always told me what I wanted to hear, Adonis. I used to appreciate your ass-kissing, but I’m starting to see the value in a man who tells the truth.”

“Fine,” he said with a wave of his hand. “You’re freaking out and everyone knows it.”

I laughed. “That obvious?”

I slowed my pace and he stopped walking to answer me. “Yes. Which part intimidates you, sir?”

“All of it. They all just stare at me, waiting to ask their questions and expecting answers.”

“Do you want them to report to me? I can gather a daily task list and field questions. You can delegate smaller responsibilities and decision-making to me, and then I’ll start your day with a list of tasks in order of priority.”

I pondered his words for a moment. “Is that...is that something my father did?”

Adonis laughed. “No, sir. He liked having an entourage following him, basking in his presence. I think you’d thrive with a little organization. I’d be happy to do this for you, sir.”

I nodded. “I still want to be informed. I just...”

Adonis placed his hands behind his back and continued his leisurely walk. “I remember you hiding in the bathroom at your first ball. Everyone wanted to talk to you, but you just wanted to eat the chef’s award-winning pumpkin cake.”

I grinned. “Such good cake.”

“Superior cake, sir.”

I bit my lip before continuing. “So I’m just a coward?”

“No. You’ll make a great leader—eventually. But I’m here to help you find a process that works for you. I’d, too, feel overwhelmed if I was greeted with ten people first thing in the morning. All demanding something of me. They need a point of contact.”

I waved my hand. “Whatever the title, whatever the pay, you’ve got it. Hire yourself an assistant, too.”

Adonis nodded, but the proud way he puffed out his chest made me feel...good...about this decision. The poor bastard had to put up with me over the years. He’d driven drunk girls

home and cleaned up my vomit. He deserved a raise. There wasn't anyone I trusted more.

"Thank you, sir," he whispered so reverently that it made me flinch.

"You deserve it, Adonis," I whispered back.

We continued on in silence, the weight of my burdens lessening with every step. I thought about Christine and how I wished I could spend the day with her. We hadn't discussed what she'd told me two days ago, mostly because I was too much of a chicken shit to bring it up and she fled the room whenever I entered it.

Eventually, we'd have to talk.

Eventually, I'd make it right.

Adonis guided me toward a large hall that made me pause. My mouth dropped open in horror as I came to a skidding halt.

Row after row of marble statues of my father lined each wall. Paintings of him wrapped in fur and sitting in front of the fire greeted me, the careful brush strokes showing off his fierce face.

"For fuck's sake, Adonis, what the hell kind of cruel hell is this part of the castle?"

Adonis bit his lip. "Your new office is just this way," he said while pointing to a set of double doors with ornate gold handles at the end.

"Fuck, this hallway is terrifying. Is my father's cock hanging out on that statue, Adonis?" I asked in disbelief while looking at a suspiciously large marble appendage.

Adonis sighed pretentiously in that way only his snooty self could recreate. "I've never seen your father's cock, sir, but I know the artist took certain liberties."

I shook my head, feeling trapped once again as I stared down the rows of carved faces and paintings. "I need all of this cleared out. Like, yesterday, Adonis. Bury it with my father for innocent eyes to never see again." I cringed when I saw one of him standing naked on a rock, sword in hand.

“Absolutely, Your Majesty. What art would you like to replace it?”

I swallowed, a strange ball of emotion rising up my throat. “Christine,” I rasped.

“Sir?”

“Christine. Just one of her.” A warmth flooded my chest, and I sucked in the stifling castle air. “Let’s get to work, shall we?”

Chapter Fifteen

CHRISTINE

My mind wandered to all the ways I would murder August as I lay in bed, dragging a dull blade along my thigh.

Three days had passed since our moment in the tower. Three days of pining and feeling inadequate. I had avoided these feelings for the past three years. I couldn't even blame him for his reaction. I was stunned by his protectiveness and relieved by his care. But the terror and pity in his expression cut me deep. August was well within his right to feel uncomfortable. I was a murderer, and he wasn't even aware of the extent of my bloodlust.

But I still expected *something* of him. His anger made sense, but the distance did not. Did he fear me, now? Did he want nothing to do with me?

I also couldn't shake the memories from my mind. The way he pried my legs open and tasted me. The filthy words he said were on repeat, taunting every moment of my day.

Part of me wondered if August was waiting for me to go to him. Spilling my trauma at his feet exhausted me. I hardly wanted to leave my room, and when I did, I was bombarded with responsibilities and questions that made me want to flee this place. I had a purpose here, but I couldn't seem to force myself to do it. I was avoiding all of it, refusing to leave my room despite my duties.

I had hoped that my rebellious refusal would force August to come to me, but still I remained alone in my bedroom. Alone with my thoughts, alone with my regrets, and alone with the fear that I was back in the hell I had run from.

My doorknob twisted, and I held my breath in anticipation, a giddy excitement fluttering in my stomach at the thought of seeing August again. But instead of a king, I was greeted with the dark gaze of someone far more dangerous.

Atticus walked through the door and gave me a smirk, noting the way my silk pajama strap hung off my shoulder, and the blade in my grip.

“A day of lounging?” he asked before sitting on the edge of my mattress. He crossed his legs and placed his hands in his lap. I admired the way his hair was effortlessly styled. The scruff on his jawline added a ruggedness about him that made me bite the inside of my cheek.

“I’m avoiding my responsibilities. If they make me do one more press circuit, I think I’ll scream.” I didn’t bother lying to Atticus; he had this ability of seeing the truth no matter what.

He smirked at me. “You’re not the type to avoid anything. Run, perhaps, but never avoid. You become stronger. Dive headfirst into your demons and conquer them. It’s one of the things I love about you.”

I set the blade down and sat up. My nightgown slipped up my thigh, exposing more creamy skin that had Atticus’s eyes growing heavy.

“Why would you say that?” I asked.

He cocked his head to the side. “Say what?”

“That you love anything about me. You hardly know me anymore.”

He laughed. “I know you better than any of these idiots here. I know the sound you make when you’re plunging a knife in someone’s gut. I know the exact shade of red that caresses your cheeks when you’re embarrassed or longing for someone. I know that for the first year that you were gone, you had nightmares.”

I scoffed at him, despite the heavy feeling in my chest. I used to have to drink a bottle of wine to force the nightmares away. “Watching and experiencing are not the same thing, Atticus. You can’t watch me through the window and still think that you know me.”

Atticus crawled along the mattress, closing in on me with his heated stare. I sucked in a breath as he grabbed my thigh

and yanked me forward, forcing my back to hit the mattress and slipping my entire body beneath his muscular frame.

“I breathe you in, Christine,” he said before leaning down to run his nose along the curve of my shoulder, dragging it along my creamy skin until his lips were brushing against my neck. “You’re in my lungs. You’re in my soul. And I’m in your head. Tell me I don’t know you, Christine. Give me a reason to prove otherwise.”

My breath hitched, and for a fleeting moment, I wanted nothing more than to give in to the distraction Atticus offered. But I knew if I allowed things to move forward with him, there would be no crawling out of the hopeless pit of my affections for him.

The truth was, if I allowed myself to jump off that cliff—to fall for Atticus—there would be no getting back up. And how was a woman supposed to love two men at the same time? How was a woman supposed to love *three*?

My heart wasn’t big enough. My soul was too jaded and too ruined for such a task.

“Get off of me,” I said, though I didn’t sound very convincing. My raspy voice betrayed me.

Atticus ran his lips over the shell of my ear, breathing and testing the boundaries of our relationship. “Yes, Lady Abernathy.”

When he pulled away, I felt a deep sense of loss. It was as if he hollowed me out, leaving nothing but a shell of grief in his tracks. I hated this feeling. I hated that August left me, and I hated that I couldn’t act on my affections for anyone else without feeling an overwhelming sense of guilt. I hated that I felt unworthy. I hated that I was *worried* August would never look at me the same way.

I didn’t want to be a broken queen.

Atticus stared at me. “Why do you have tears in your eyes, pretty girl? Who do I need to murder?”

I licked my lips. “It’s nothing. Let me be.”

Atticus shook his head. “It’s August, isn’t it? He’s the one who always seems to put that look on your face. What did he do?”

I let out a shaky sigh, feeling stuck between wanting to open up to Atticus but also feeling protective of August, too. “He hasn’t spoken to me since I told him. It’s been three days, Atticus.”

He nodded, soaking in my words for a moment before responding. “Rumors have it that the future king has stepped into his role. He moved into his father’s old office and is running the kingdom—albeit perhaps floundering about—but still making an effort.”

For some reason, that made me feel even worse. The Crown always came first. The *kingdom* always came first. The responsibilities of running this country would always be above my best interests. It was why King Frederick was willing to sell me to an evil man. Would August use me, too?

I whispered my response. “I wish he’d make an effort with me.”

Atticus seemed conflicted, opening and closing his mouth again and again as he considered his options. I waited patiently as he settled on the mattress, dropping his feet to my bedroom floor and turning his back to me. “He’s trying in his own way, I suppose. It kills me to say it, but he wants to make the kingdom a place you feel safe in.”

My mouth popped open. “What?”

Atticus looked over his shoulder at me. “He feels like stepping into his role is the best way to make sure nothing like that ever happens again. Think about it, Christine. You were in danger—you were harmed on his watch. He’s going to make sure you never have to experience something like that again. And he’s probably terrified he’s going to fuck things up with you, because that’s what he does. He fucks things up. Maybe he’s trying to be a man and create a home for the two of you while giving you space to process.”

I shook my head. “I don’t want space. I want him to tell me that he doesn’t see me as this monster—this murderer.”

He looked at his lap. “What did I tell you? I’m the monster catcher. Besides, monsters can be beautiful, too.”

I leaned forward to rest my head on his shoulder, curving my body around his back like touching him was the only thing that could bring me comfort. “Are they?”

He reached up to stroke my cheek while keeping his eyes trained on his lap. “*I’m* a monster. I’ve done...terrible things I didn’t think myself capable of.”

I sucked in a breath. “Tell me.”

“Do you know how my family came into power, Christine? Truly? How we gained our fortune?”

“You’ve owned lots of businesses and properties—”

He cut me off. “We’ve *controlled* lots of businesses. We’ve claimed people and killed enemies. We’ve dedicated our lives to running the criminal underground. My father is a dangerous felon with a fat bank account, good connections, and a deadly inclination to kill anyone in his way. When I turned sixteen, he had me kill his first rat.”

I gasped and wrapped my arms around his chest, linking my fingers together while I rested against his back. I knew his family was involved in dangerous enterprises, but not to this extent.

“If someone tried to claim our turf, I killed them,” he admitted. “If someone challenged us or stole from us, I chopped their bodies up and put them in the Ghanes Lake.”

“Atticus...”

“And I don’t regret a minute of it. Not a single bit. You want to know why?”

I hugged him tighter. “Why?”

“Because power allows me to be closer to you. To protect you. To take care of you. August is king, but I am not afraid to be a monster, Christine. A monster isn’t hesitant to fight or to

get their hands bloody. I can accomplish things he wouldn't get away with. I don't have a moral compass, which means I don't give a fuck who I have to hurt to get to you. Monsters aren't afraid of the dark, baby."

Tears fell down my cheeks as I held him for a moment. I thought of the man who was willing to do anything for me, and how he'd spent the entirety of our friendship watching me pine after someone else.

"I'm sorry I'm not deserving of such a devoted monster," I whispered. "I'm sorry you've had to watch me love him."

He chuckled lightly. "But I still get to watch."

I unlaced my fingers and pulled away. He twisted to look at me as I adjusted the strap of my short, thin nightgown. "You want August to come here?" he asked, his gaze lingering on the way my nipples pebbled.

I shook my head. "Atticus, we don't have to talk about him." I didn't want to hurt my monster any more than I already had.

"You're hurting, baby," he whispered. "And I just said I have no moral compass. I might not want to share you, but I do want to see you happy."

I chewed on my lip as he dug in his pocket. I couldn't see what he pulled out because I was too focused on the way he leaned closer, closer, closer.

Our noses were a breath apart. He stared at my mouth with a hungry intensity that made my stomach clench. "I'll get him here. For you. Always and anything for you, baby."

He leaned in and sucked on my bottom lip, pulling it between his teeth and biting slightly. I gasped as he reached up to tug the strap of my nightgown down, cool air fluttering over my hardened nipple as he did.

A moan rumbled in his chest as he moved to grab my breast, digging his fingers into my plush skin as he lavished my mouth with his tongue. I melted at his touch, heat turning me slick with need.

I clawed at his body, digging my fingers into his back as I arched closer. Kissing Atticus was deliriously perfect; he was dangerous and decadent. He captured my soul as he stroked my tongue.

The sound of a camera clicking made me pull away in a daze. “What was that?” I asked.

He pocketed his cell phone and stood up, adjusting his impossibly hard cock in his trousers as he did. “A kiss.”

I shook my head. “What did you do?”

He leaned forward, bracing his hands on the mattress while looking me in the eye. “I’m making you happy.”

And with those words, he straightened and left my bedroom.

I couldn’t help but smile as he walked out the door.

Chapter Sixteen

AUGUST

The first thing I did when I set up my father's desk was decide I needed to redecorate the entire office. I didn't like his opulent style or the uncomfortable gold-plated chair with the red cushion he'd spent decades ruling in. His desk was tall, heavy, and made with only the finest wood imported from Natalia, a kingdom to the east. Everything about it screamed of his own self-importance, and I didn't want to think of all the bloody agreements and shady deals he did in this very spot.

I didn't want to think about him at all.

Because when I thought of my father, I thought of all the terrible things he had done—and when I thought of all the terrible things he had done, I thought of Christine.

When she looked at me, did she think of him? Would my father's ghost always be a wall between us?

I stole a desk from an abandoned guest room on the fourth floor and brought out the cushioned gamer chair I used occasionally, though I had a feeling I wouldn't have much time or patience for video games in the coming years. Running a country took all of my attention. I popped Adderall like it was candy just to get shit done.

All the paintings had been stripped from the wall, leaving an outline of faded paint. My office was mismatched and barren but still fitting for how I felt as the new king of Aldrich. I wasn't put together. I was a collective mess, and the only good thing I'd done so far as a leader was hire Adonis as my advisor. He had done exactly as promised, and it was much easier to wake up to a list of action items than to an entourage at my door.

But the list kept growing.

My chest felt tight from the anxiety.

"You should have the royal decorator redo this space," my mother said as she looked around with a disapproving frown.

She came back, but she wasn't happy about it. If she wanted to run from my wrath, I'd chase her down, too.

How dare she know what happened to Christine and not tell me?

"Adonis is working on it," I replied. I didn't summon my mother here to talk about my office or the upcoming engagement party. In fact, I didn't want to see her at all. I had always been a little apathetic toward my mother. Perhaps a son was supposed to love the woman who gave him life, and in some ways I could appreciate the fact that we were related and bound by blood and trauma. There weren't many people in this world who understood what it meant to be raised in corruption, and I learned how to navigate this awful kingdom through her strength. But that strength disgusted me now. I used to think my mother put up with her husband because she had no other choice, but now I wondered if she was an accomplice to his crimes.

"I'm assuming you summoned me here for a reason?" she asked.

"Christine told me everything." I released the truth like it was a grenade, letting the explosion of it settle between us and singe our souls.

If she was surprised by my admission, she didn't show it. My mother was an expert at schooling her expression. It was a skill many members of the court and the royal family had. "And are you here to yell at me? Punish me?"

I considered her question for a moment, trying to decide how I wanted to handle this. Part of me wanted to punish her. But part of me was thankful for her, too. After I had taken some time to think about everything I'd learned, something became very clear to me. My mother kept Christine safe when I couldn't. And even though I wished she would've involved me in that decision, I understood why she didn't. She put my best friend—the girl I loved—on the other side of the world. She kept my father away from her, and for that, I would show her grace. The only person I could blame for not seeking Christine out and taking care of her myself, was the man

currently wearing the crown. The man I had to see every day in the mirror.

I had resources and power. I had Christine in my goddamn soul and was stubborn enough to find her if I had truly wanted to, but I was too caught up in my hurt to do anything about it. At the end of the day, I didn't seek Christine out because I was scared to find her. I was scared that we would both realize I didn't deserve her.

But I could only escape those dark thoughts for a little while. Now, I knew with complete certainty that she would always be out of my league. I was a king but also a foolish man. And she was everything.

"I brought you here for answers."

My mother looked around the barren office, and when she didn't find a chair to sit in, she moved to the edge of my makeshift desk and leaned against the corner, her cruel blue eyes appraising me. "What would you like to know?"

I tried to sound confident but couldn't stop the anxiousness I felt bleeding through my tone. "Did father ever try to find Christine? We both know he was a vengeful asshole. How did you cover it up?"

She frowned, as if surprised that was the first thing I asked. "His own arrogance helped me cover it up. He thought Christine was helpless and naive. Her obedience helped sell the story, and since his cash cow had died of what he thought were natural causes, it didn't take much to convince him that having Christine away would help you focus. It was surprisingly easy. Christine has her own reputation to thank for that. No one would have ever expected her to be capable of the things she did that night."

I licked my lips. "That's not necessarily true. There's a man—a lord—on his way here now for a meeting. Lord Geralt's brother is claiming that he has marriage rights to Christine. I want to make sure he doesn't have an ulterior motive or suspicions."

My mother's mouth curved with tenderness and a hint of pride. "You surprise me, Augustus. Not only are you handling this calmly, but you're thinking like a true king."

I slammed my fist on the table, making her jump with the suddenness of it. My veins bulged in my neck, and my mouth took on an unpleasant twist. "Do not mistake this conversation. I'm thankful that you got Christine to safety, but I am not pleased with how you did it. You should've told me ___"

"And put Christine even more at risk?" she cut me off. "You are reckless. You wouldn't have approached it with a clear head, and Christine would've been collateral. I saved you both when I sent her away, and I will not apologize for that. I will never apologize for keeping you safe. I won't apologize for *still* keeping you safe, either. I thought you'd be thanking me. I knew you loved that girl from the moment you met her. And now, with my help, you're marrying her."

I glared at her, cold fury turning my veins to ice. Her expressive face changed and became almost somber. And although she had a sense of regret about her, her eyes glowed with a wild inner fire. My mother was fiercely protective.

"I'm a man now," I replied.

"No," she replied. "You are a king."

"And I will do whatever is necessary to keep Christine safe. I want the blackmail to stop. The engagement is settled, but I don't want you holding that night over her head anymore."

She gave me a sly smile that made my chest feel heavy. "Without the blackmail, she has no reason to stay here. Are you sure you want me to stop before the marriage is solidified?"

I didn't know how to answer her. I didn't want Christine to leave, but also didn't want her to feel forced to marry me. All of this was a clusterfuck of epic proportions.

I decided to ignore her question until I had an answer for her. "Tell me what you know about Lord Geralt's family. His

brother will be here any moment, and I want to be prepared. Do they suspect anything?"

Her lips thinned with irritation, as if angry I would doubt her expertise on the situation. "Of course not. No one ever suspected anything. Geralt was a drunk. Hardly a picture of health. I had to do a lot of work behind the scenes, but from what I gather, his family was all too happy to claim his inheritance and title. You know how these things go. The members of the court care more about their position and status than they do about grief. They don't question things that benefit them."

"But now someone is questioning my right to marry Christine," I gritted. "That is a problem."

My mother casually flicked her wrist and huffed. "You're king. You can marry anyone you like. They can protest all they want, but at the end of the day, you rule. They're probably just trying to grasp at whatever power they have."

I assessed her for a moment, trying to decide if she was being cocky or truthful. A knock on my office door made us both turn to look. "Come in."

Adonis entered the threshold and bowed respectfully. "Lord Geralt's brother, Lord Nathan Croft, is here to see you, Your Majesty."

I nodded. "Let him in."

My mother stood up and pressed her back against the wall, clasping her hands in front of her like the obedient former queen she was. For a moment, I regretted not furnishing my office before agreeing to this meeting. I wanted to put on a show of strength. I wanted to rip his eyeballs from his very skull.

I could hear footsteps in the hallway leading toward my office, so my mother hissed, "Stay calm and confident, August."

The man who walked through the door was younger than I expected. He had dark brown hair, beady little eyes, and a sheen of sweat on his forehead. He wore the typical fashions

of our kingdom, a detailed pantsuit in a deep shade of forest green with gold needlework and a bow tie that was disproportionate to his thick neck. The moment he walked in the room, he slowly looked around and appraised the space before offering a stunted bow, an obvious sign of disrespect. “I see you’re still getting settled, Your Majesty,” he said before straightening his spine and looking me right in the eye.

I leaned back in my chair, feigning boredom as I assessed him with a critical eye. He didn’t look muscular, and he was on the shorter side. I could take him in a fight if I needed to.

“As you’re well aware, I have been quite busy taking over and making wedding plans. I’m engaged, although your house is the only member of this court that hasn’t offered their formal congratulations. I’ve been informed that you are under some delusion that my future wife somehow belongs to you. If you are here to protest my upcoming marriage, you will be very disappointed.”

It both sickened me and surprised me to hear how I spoke. I sounded as pretentious and royal as my father, years of forcing down my birthright abandoned all for the sake of defending Christine. I never liked the pompous formality of it all—and I definitely hated being an intimidating motherfucker. But I supposed it came in handy today.

Lord Nathan gave me a narrowed, glinting glance before addressing my mother, another insult. I was the king. I was running the conversation. “My lady, I have the marriage contract your late husband drafted. It is legal and binding, according to my lawyers. I had always intended on claiming Christine, I was just waiting until she returned from her studies abroad.”

He pulled out an envelope from inside his suit jacket and moved as if to hand it to her, but she kept her hands firmly clasped in front of her, a wordless refusal to acknowledge the contract in any way while also deferring to me. My mother frustrated me, but she stood at my side when it counted. Even when our family suffered through the friction of being forced together by our bloodlines, we understood that our power was

infinitely stronger when we were together. Loyalty was forged under the harshest of climates.

When she didn't take it, Lord Nathan then turned back to me. He dropped the contract on my desk unceremoniously, once again showing a lack of respect that would not work in his favor. At first, I wanted to just humiliate the man and assert my power, but now, more so than ever, I wanted to kill him. It was crazy how quickly I assumed the role of king.

“Regardless of the contract and what your lawyers think, *I* am the king now. Any agreements of such a nature made under my father's rule are void. Besides, Christine is well above your station. It would be a rather unsuited match. I'm sure you can find another lady of the court more available. Or has your family's reputation become so tarnished that you have to rely on kings to arrange marriages for you?”

He bristled and ran his hand through his hair, and I cataloged the nervous tic for memory later. I wanted nothing more than to pour myself a drink and watch this man bleed out, but he was persistent and I had my hands tied.

Lord Nathan gave me a look full of scrutiny. “It's such a shame my brother died before he had the chance to solidify his marriage to Christine. So odd, the circumstances regarding his passing. I always found the entire ordeal incredibly suspicious. If he hadn't died, we wouldn't be having this conversation. Christine would be married and possibly have a few children by now. How serendipitous for you that he's out of the way.”

The image of Christine having children with another man made me sick, but I schooled my features to continue feigning boredom. “Serendipitous that an alcoholic died? I find nothing odd about that drunkard's death.”

Lord Nathan took a step closer to my desk, and I sat up taller. “The papers have narrated quite the love story between you and Christine. Everywhere, they're discussing how you've been in love with her your whole life. It seems to me you would've been angry at the arranged marriage your father coordinated. And sometimes, I wonder what lengths a man would go to for what he wants.”

I took a moment to process his words, not exactly mad at what he was insinuating, but still concerned. I was fine with him thinking I was the one who killed Lord Geralt. In many ways, I wish I had. I wanted him to suffer. I wanted him to pay for what he did to Christine. And if Lord Nathan thought I was his brother's killer, that took attention off Christine, and my purpose in life was taking as many burdens as I could off of her shoulders.

"You won't ever have her," I said, my voice deathly low. "I don't care about your contracts or your theories. Christine Abernathy will never *ever* belong to your family. And you can fight this all you want, but you are nothing and I am a king. I suggest you bend the knee and learn your place."

I expected my threat to affect him, but instead, he gave me a confident grin. "Change is on the horizon, Your Majesty." The way he said *Your Majesty* made the title sound like a joke. "I have more allies than you think, and your people are losing confidence in you with every passing moment. I suggest you be very cautious from here on out."

My mother stiffened, and I clenched my fist.

"Threatening the king?" a new voice said, and I turned my gaze to the door, where Atticus walked in. He appraised the situation with scrutiny, raking his gaze up and down Lord Nathan's body as if his eyes were made of daggers and he wanted to slice his skin up. "Why, that's treason. Greater men have died for lesser reasons," he said before moving to stand beside me behind my desk. Atticus looked lethal, his arms crossed over his chest as he boasted an air of superiority. I couldn't help but feel like he seemed more like a king in this office than I did. He had a threatening energy as he clenched his mouth tighter.

"I'm well aware what kills men in this castle," Lord Nathan said while slicing his eyes to me. All the while, my mother remained dutifully silent, allowing us to engage in a pissing match that would likely end in bloodshed.

Atticus looked at me. "Is this the lord that thinks he has claim to Lady Abernathy?" he asked, though I knew damn

well he already had the answer to that. Atticus was sickeningly effective at finding things out about people. He probably already had a spy implanted in his home.

“I am the lord that will claim the property my family is owed,” he sneered.

I was about to say something to dispute him, but Atticus reached across the desk and grabbed his collar. The criminal mastermind yanked Lord Nathan down and crushed his nose against the hardwood of my makeshift desk. Blood splattered on impact, gushing out of his nose as he groaned in pain. It was swift and effective.

Brutal.

I was thankful that Atticus had done that, but also jealous, too. I wished I had gotten to work out some of the frustrations coursing through me. I wanted to punish this man for referring to Christine as property.

Atticus gripped him by the hair and pulled him up, glaring at him. “You will stay away from Christine. You won’t look at her. You won’t think about her. You won’t even breathe in her direction, or I will end your life. August is king, his word is law, but I am not. I am not bound by ethics or morals. I will cut your body up into tiny little pieces and feed them to my dog if it so pleases me. We will destroy you. Ruin your reputation. Claim your family lands and ban you from court. Augustus will strip you of your title without hesitation. *You. Overstep.*”

Jealousy surged within me. I wish I had said all of that. I wish I would’ve threatened him or used the powers I had to nip this in the bud much sooner. But I was thankful for Atticus, all the same.

“Do you understand? We will ruin you,” I added, wanting to be a part of this. My gaze flickered over to my mother, but if she was bothered by the blood and aggression, she didn’t show it. Something told me she had seen much more over the course of her marriage to my father.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” he gritted, though there was no respect in his tone. Lord Nathan was dripping with malice, and nearly all of it was aimed at Atticus. Even though my best friend annoyed me endlessly in his pursuit of Christine, there were benefits to having a crime lord at your side. I was bound by customs, rules, and etiquette. Where he reigned, brutality made the rules.

“Get out of here,” Atticus said. “And watch your back.”

Lord Nathan straightened and adjusted his bow tie for a brief moment before storming out of the office. My mother released the breath she was holding and stared at both of us. “I’m going to make sure he doesn’t get lost on his way out,” she said before bowing her head and leaving the room.

Once we were alone, I regarded Atticus. “I had it handled.” I sounded like a petulant child embarrassed to have his older brother fight for him.

“That man deserved it. I have half a mind to have someone follow him home and suffocate him in his sleep.”

I stroked my chin. “He hinted at a possible uprising,” I said, my voice distant.

“There’s always a potential uprising,” Atticus drawled.

“Still, I don’t like this. He’s up to something. He insinuated that *I* killed his brother,” I said.

“Good,” Atticus replied. “It’s better he thinks that you did it and not Christine.”

I stared at the puddle of blood on my desk and once again wished it was me who gave him that bloody nose. With any luck, his nose was broken.

“Why are you here?” I asked him.

A mischievous grin crossed his features, and he started digging in his pocket for something. “I wanted to show you something that might interest you,” he said before pulling out his cell phone and clicking on the screen.

“What?” I asked in annoyance. Based on his expression, I already knew that it would probably piss me off. Atticus

thrived on pissing me off.

He handed me the phone, and the moment I saw what was on the screen, my breath stalled in my chest. It was Christine and Atticus wrapped up in a warm embrace. She was sucking on his lip, and her soft body was tangled with his. My initial reaction to seeing this was rage, but the sight of her flushed skin, silky pajamas, and hooded eyes made my cock harden. I didn't like seeing her with anyone else, but there was something intoxicating about the way she looked so needy.

"Do you have a death wish?" I asked, every muscle in my body tense.

"It would be a beautiful way to die," Atticus replied. "She tastes so lovely. She is so responsive. Her nipples are like hard little marbles I want to tug on with my teeth."

It was an excruciating kind of pain to see Christine so wrapped up in my best friend. I'd been keeping my distance these last few days, too ashamed of my own actions to approach her. I was scared. A fool. All I wanted to do was make this castle—this kingdom—a safer place for my bride. And Atticus saw an opening and went for it.

"Are you going to kill me, Your Majesty? You've never been bloodthirsty, but I wonder if the prospect of Christine enjoying me more than you could push a man to those extremes."

I started breathing faster, my pulse thudding. "No," I replied. Standing up, I made my way toward the door and didn't bother looking back at him as I said my parting words. "It just means I need to eat her pussy until she forgets your name."

Chapter Seventeen

CHRISTINE

I stood with my palms pressed against the cool tile in the shower, with hot water cascading down my back and shoulders. My mind was fuzzy with disappointment and eagerness. Seeing Atticus always set me on edge. Being near him made me question myself, but it was pointless. I couldn't have him. Soon, I would marry August, and my life would be planned out for me. There was a time that I would have been excited about this. I was in love with August for many, many years. And it wasn't that naive childhood love, either. It was something I felt bone deep, an admiration and acceptance I felt for him that carried me through some of my darkest times.

I couldn't give that up. Not only because we were trapped in an arranged marriage that was forcing us together, but because I still had hope for the boy I once knew. The boy I once loved fiercely. I was devoted even to his faults, and it was kind of scary to think I would lose myself in that love.

With August, I had to become what I feared. With Atticus, I got to accept the darkest parts of my soul. And somewhere between all of that, Leo was there too. We were trauma bonded, the rugged bodyguard and I. I would always remember him as the man who pulled me from the deepest pits of hell, with blood splatters on my skin and fire in my heart. Something like that was impossible to ignore. I would always feel connected with him in some way, even if he wanted nothing to do with me.

All three of them had captured parts of my soul, but at the end of the day, I would be marching down the aisle with one of them. I couldn't help but feel regret for my situation. Not only because August seemingly wanted nothing to do with me, but because I wondered if it was possible to dive fully into a relationship with him while neglecting parts of myself that were difficult to let go of. A queen could not be a murderer. At least not a hands-on one. My dreams, aspirations, and future were all wrapped up in whatever August did. There was no individuality for a queen, only service. And I wasn't sure if I

was falling for Atticus because he offered a sense of freedom or because I genuinely loved that he was a monster like me.

I was about to turn off the water and figure out something to do for the evening, but the bathroom door crept open, sending my senses haywire. I scanned the room, hoping to find a weapon, but August's voice knocked me out of my fear.

“Christine?” he called softly.

I sighed in relief. “What are you doing here, August? Shouldn't you be avoiding me?”

I heard him curse softly as I turned off the water. When I opened the door of the shower and fully looked at him, there was a wild spark in his gaze. The smile in his eyes contained a sensuous flame, and he dragged his smoky gaze up and down my body. “I've been busy,” he replied distractedly.

“Hand me that towel?” I held my hand out, but he didn't move.

“I prefer you naked.”

The last time I had seen August, I freaked out. It was embarrassing and triggering for me. I had had sex a couple of times since my attack. I fought for the right to enjoy sex without thinking of the king or Lord Geralt. But something about being in this castle—being with August—triggered me. I worried that he would start treating me like a delicate glass ornament. Something pretty he'd hang up, but not something he would ever stick his dick into again. Especially not if I was going to have a panic attack every time we fucked.

I stepped out of the shower and grabbed the towel myself, a blush spreading across my cheeks that reminded me of all the times I used to gawk at August like he was currently eyeing me. “You're very confusing,” I replied before stopping in front of the mirror and grabbing a comb.

“How so?”

“One minute you're a lazy, spoiled prince with a drug addiction and a line of women ready to suck your dick. Next, you're a dedicated king determined to faithfully serve his

country. I haven't seen you in three days, and everyone keeps telling me how *busy* you are."

He shrugged before reaching out to grab the comb from my hand. Positioning himself at my back, he started running it through my long blonde hair as I stared at my reflection. "For starters, I still have the drug addiction. I had to take a Percocet last night to fall asleep, and I've been popping Adderall like it's my job. As far as the women wanting to suck my dick, I can't help that I have such a fabulous cock that women want to shove down their throats."

I giggled a little, but that timeless, acute insecurity I used to feel as a teen flared within me. I remembered having to watch the boy I loved chasing skirts and getting off every chance he could. "Why don't you go find one of those pretty women then?" I said. My voice was hoarse with frustration.

"It's ironic to hear you sound jealous, considering I just saw a photo of you and Atticus," he replied. "If you want to keep me all to yourself, then I expect the same in return."

The comb snagged on a tangle, as if accentuating the tension between us. I spun around to face him, and he dropped it to the ground before bracing his palms on the sink at my sides. "I wouldn't have to go to Atticus if you would stop avoiding me."

To my surprise, there was a heart rending tenderness in his gaze. I tried to swallow the lump that lingered in my throat as he considered his words for a brief moment. "I didn't know what to say."

For some reason, hearing him admit that, made things worse. My trauma felt like a chasm between us. It would always hold him back. He would never see me the same way again, and I hated myself for reacting the way I did up in that tower. Even though we were forced together by an arranged marriage, we could have been happy. I could've loved him. But now this would always be something that held us back, and it made me sick. "I see," I mumbled.

"Why do you look like that?" he asked before grabbing a wet strand of blonde hair and pinching it between his thumb

and index finger.

“Look like what?”

“Like I just kicked you. Like I just broke your fucking heart.”

I braced my palms on his chest, preparing to push him away, but stopped at the last moment so that I could feel the muscles beneath his button-up shirt. “I don’t want you to see me differently,” I admitted.

The truth twisted and turned inside me, like a thorny vine growing up my throat. “I do see you differently,” he admitted, breaking my heart with those five simple words. “You’re stronger. In my mind, you are the bravest woman I’ve ever had the pleasure of meeting. You’ve always been better than me, Christine.”

I furrowed my brow, confused by this change of direction in the conversation. “What are you talking about?”

“I’ve always known that I didn’t deserve you,” August replied, shocking me. All this time, I thought he was unattainable. His status, my insecurities were keeping us apart. But the devotion in his tone and the determined way he looked at me made an impact on my soul. “And now I fear that I never will. I know you don’t want me to see you differently, but the truth is, it’s myself I’m finally seeing for the first time. Every single thing I’ve ever done wrong is like a never-ending list constantly running through my mind. I’m thinking of all the changes I need to make to be worthy of you. I’m thinking of how I can make this kingdom feel safe for you once again. It hurts to look at you, because now, all I see are the ways that I have completely and utterly failed.”

I shook my head, slowly processing his words. “I don’t want that.” He pressed his forehead to mine as I spoke softly. It was such a tender move that made my heart cautiously soar. “I don’t want your pity,” I whispered.

“It isn’t pity, Christine.”

“Then what is it?”

He reached for the towel and ripped it from my body, the chill in the air kissing my moist skin. "It's rage. Vengeance." He trailed his fingers over the curve of my breasts and pinched my nipple. "It's fear." He leaned in to kiss my neck, my eyes rolling back. "It's jealousy. *Fuck*, it's jealousy." He shoved his palm between my legs, and I grinded against it. "Because deep down, I know Atticus would be better for you. Hell, even Leo could give you a better life."

My breath hitched as I rocked against his palm.

"And it's selfishness," he rasped. "Because I don't want to share, Christine. I want to be good enough."

My stomach clenched as he kissed me deeply, and I closed my eyes to savor the feel of his sweeping tongue dancing across mine. He sucked tenderly against my bottom lip while I parted my legs, aching for him to slip his finger inside of me and fuck me with his hand.

"Look at me," he commanded, abruptly ending the kiss with brutal words. I snapped open my eyes just as he thrust his finger in my pussy. "It's *my* finger you're clenching with your pussy, Christine." He moved in and out, grinding his palm against my needy clit while locking his eyes with mine.

My mouth dropped open when he curved his digit, pressing against the deepest desire within me and coaxing a wave of pleasure forward. "Do you like getting off on my hand, love?"

I nodded, too overwhelmed by his touch to speak.

"Answer me with words, Christine. I want to hear how good I make you feel."

"Yes," I rasped.

"You're so soft and wet. Look how you hold my hand, love. Such a romantic. We could take a stroll in the garden with your hot cunt on my palm and my finger getting you off. A nice fucking frolic like normal couples."

I was fully aware of his hard cock straining against his pants and pressing against my thigh. I ran my hands down his chest and went to cup it, but he pulled out of me and slapped

my hand away. “No,” he barked. “You’re not touching me. This is about *you*.”

He ripped off his shirt and picked me up. As I wrapped my legs around his hips, he kissed me deeply while walking us back into my bedroom and setting me down on the bed.

“This room smells like fucking Atticus,” he groaned in disapproval before thrusting my thighs apart and placing his head between them. His hot breath feathered over my center as he spoke. “Did he touch you? Kiss you? Did he make you feel good, Christine?”

I squirmed a bit, uncomfortable by his line of questioning. August held me down, his fingers sprawled out over the tops of my thighs as he licked my slit, slow and steady. My whole being flooded with desire.

“Tell me he touched you, Christine. I want the truth.”

“Stop talking about him and lick my pussy again, August,” I demanded, making him chuckle.

His tongue slipped inside of me, and he moaned with pleasure, lapping me up and thrusting like he wanted to see how deeply he could taste me. I writhed, the concave hollow of my spine tingling with every expert move of his mouth.

“I want to fuck the soul from your body, love,” he whispered reverently before diving back in for my clit, circling it with his velvet tongue. I thrashed and my mouth popped open as filthy sounds filled the room. The wet slap of his mouth. My guttural, frenzied cries.

August was messy, wiping his face all over my pussy, and when I looked down at him, his cheeks and lips were glistening from my arousal. “August, I’m so close,” I rasped.

He flicked his tongue over my clit once more, and I felt the rising tide of pleasure, just within reach.

“Oh!”

And then he stopped. He fucking stopped.

I snapped up and stared down at him. “Why the fuck did you stop?”

“Why the fuck did you let Atticus kiss you?” He pressed his palm against my chest and slammed me down against the mattress. I landed with a little bounce and stared at the ceiling in frustration for a moment, tears welling in my eyes as I swallowed the anger burning in my chest.

The sound of August’s belt buckle made me sneak a peek at him, and when he jerked his pants down his thick thighs, I chewed on my bottom lip as I appreciated his long, thick dick and the bulging veins wrapping around it. He was hard as a rock, his cock bobbing freely. God, he was handsome. His muscles were perfectly defined, and I wanted to run my tongue over every groove. My mouth watered, and I suddenly wanted to reach for his dick and slide it down my throat.

When I tried sitting up again, he shoved me back down onto the mattress. “I’m in charge, love.”

A low whine escaped my lips. “But I want—”

“You want my cock? Where do you want it, Christine? In your tight, pretty little pussy? You want to choke my dick and ride me until you can’t think straight?” He eyed me, his words making my need grow tenfold. “No. You want to *taste* it. Do you want to ride my face while slurping down my come? A tasty treat for my queen.”

I nodded, eager for exactly what he described. “Yesss.”

“Too fucking bad,” he replied before climbing on top of me and rubbing the head of his cock over my clit. “I’ll be right here. Just close enough so you can feel how good I could fill you up.”

I jerked my hips forward, hoping to urge him closer to my entrance, but he pinned me down and started sliding his dick up and down my folds, massaging my pleasure just torturously slow enough for me to feel good but still ache for more.

“Fuck, August. Fuck me.”

He reached for my throat, wrapping his fingers around my delicate skin before looking me in the eye. “You didn’t say please, love.”

He thrust against my clit. Again. And again. And again. My heart beat erratically, every cell in my body practically on fire as he brought me closer and closer. I pinned my lips, knowing if I said I was on the verge of coming again, he'd stop.

And just before that wave of bliss could hit me full force, he pulled away once more. "Goddamn it, August."

"Something wrong, beautiful?" he asked.

"I want to come!" My pout simply made him smile.

"And I want to own you," he replied before rolling off of me and grabbing my hips in one fluid movement. Lying on his back, he guided me to his face with surprising strength, easing me down onto his mouth until I knew he was going to suffocate.

I looked down at him and frowned at the wicked gleam in his eyes.

And then he sucked on my clit.

Oh, glorious torture. He dug his fingers into my hips, holding me down while he lavished my body with his tongue. I rode his face, knowing damn well if I wanted my own release, I'd have to encourage it.

But when I curved my body and found a rhythm, he stopped me once more, pinning me still while he licked his lips.

"Fucking asshole!" I roared.

He shoved me off of him, and I landed on the mattress once more. Not wanting to give him time to manipulate my body into another cruel position, I reached for my clit and tried to get myself off without him.

He wrapped his hand around my wrist. "Such a naughty girl. You can try, but it won't feel as good. You want my cock to fill you up, love? Want me to slam into you? Pull your hair. Let you ride me?"

The cocky motherfucker. I knew he was right. If I got off now, it would just piss me right the fuck off. I wanted him to

make me feel good.

“Tell me, love. Who am I?”

His hand shoved mine away, and he pressed against my asshole with his finger. “August,” I whispered, my back arching once more.

“Say my name again, Christine.”

“*Fuck*. August.”

“There is no one else in this room. Just you. Just me.”

“You’re torturing me,” I said as he moved to massage my clit once more. He reached over to kiss me, and I tasted myself on his tongue. The curved smile of his mouth against mine made me want to punch him.

I wanted to finish what we started.

“You’re so close I bet I could command you to come with my words. Want to try it?” he whispered.

“I want to feel you, August.”

“I like to hear you beg for my cock, love. Been dreaming about it for a while now, actually.” I pushed his hand away and got on top of him, straddling his length while looking him in the eye. He was right there, so close. I observed him for a moment, hovering just over his cock to tease him just like he teased me. The excitement in his gaze was his tell. He wanted this just as much as I did.

“Careful, love. Once we go there, we can’t go back.”

“What do you mean?”

He bent upward, closing the distance between our faces as he propped himself up on his elbows. “Once I’ve been inside of you, you’re *mine*. No one else’s.”

I hovered over him for another moment, the implication of his words like ice to my system. Was that what I truly wanted? To give up Atticus and potentially Leo for August?

He gleamed, as if he had me right where he wanted me. I could take him, if I wanted. If I wanted to sell my soul to him

for the rest of my life and give up on the others.

But I wasn't sure.

I was so fucking close, but I couldn't do it. Not like this.

I rolled off of him, and his reaction was instant.

“No!” He pinned me down, his hand back to my throat as he positioned his hard length right at my entrance. “You *are* mine, Christine.” He thrust inside of me, and I swear I fucking saw stars. He was so thick, so goddamn filling. He squeezed at my throat just enough to make me gasp for air as he started fucking me raw and relentlessly. “God, you feel so good. So tight. So perfectly made for *me*. Only me.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to remind him that I didn't choose just him, though. I'd stopped this but he wouldn't let me go. He demanded my body. “No,” I croaked when he released my throat. He pinched my nipple and pistoned again and again, rocking my body so hard that the bed shook.

The flames of passion burned between both of us as he looked me in the eye. “You might not choose me, but I choose you. You will be mine, Christine. I will be—” His voice was cut off as he let out a moan. “I”—thrust—“will”—thrust—“be”—thrust—“good enough.”

He rocked my body hard. The wet pounding sounds filled the room, and I lifted my leg up to feel him deeper.

An orgasm crashed through me. It was powerful, rolling on and on and on forever, it seemed.

August fucked me through every pulse of bliss, riding it out as hard as he could while I screamed his name and practically levitated off the fucking mattress. I loved the feeling of his hard body on top of mine, the wild thrusts of his body, the ache in my core, the relief of release.

He kept fucking me.

And fucking me.

I knew I'd be sore tomorrow, my body bruised, my pussy spent.

Another orgasm hit me full force, my entire body tensing up, then releasing.

I'd expected him to stop. To find his own release and collapse on top of me. But he kept panting. Kept fucking. Kept burning himself onto my soul with every move.

He moved his thumb to my clit and circled it, but I was too sensitive. "August, I can't."

"I'm not stopping until you know the only pleasure you'll ever get is from my hands..." He paused to thrust three more times. "From my tongue." He leaned down to kiss me, plunging his teeth into my bottom lip, drawing blood. "And from splitting you with *my* cock."

He pounded my pussy until I screamed helplessly, another fucking orgasm making my stomach clench.

And finally, he came hard, his spine rigid as he spurted hot ropes of cum over and over again, whispering filthy words while he filled me up.

"Yes, Christine. This pussy is *mine*."

And at that moment, I wanted to agree with him.

But when we both rolled onto the mattress, with his cum seeping out of me and drenching the sheets and with the sounds of our erratic hearts the only thing we could hear, I felt numb.

My body wasn't the problem. He could claim that all he wanted.

No, the problem was my heart. The problem was my fucking soul.

Chapter Eighteen

CHRISTINE

I applied creamy foundation to the hickey on my neck, smiling to myself as I thought of August and our time together. I was deliciously sore and emotionally drained, stuck between wanting to give in to the claims August made and still feeling tentative about all of it. I looked at the long A-line dress hanging from my wardrobe and sighed. I would kill for a pair of yoga pants and a cozy sweater. The pink gown with gold detailing represented what my life would be like living here with August. Pretty uniforms, public appearances, and political chess moves that ultimately did nothing for the greater good. Here, I was a pawn. A face to plaster onto currency and a name for people to curse when August did something unfavorable. I was nothing more than a scapegoat and a head for the crown to sit on.

I walked past the dress and found my coziest pair of yoga pants and slid them on, sighing at the soft material against my legs. Then, I found a soft sweatshirt and slid it on over my sports bra. I didn't put on makeup, either. Instead, I threw my wavy, soft hair up in a clip and felt content by the normalcy of it all.

I had a full day of obligations. A ribbon-cutting ceremony at a children's hospital. A meeting with my new etiquette advisor. Afternoon tea with the former queen.

It was strange calling her the *former* anything. Even stranger to view myself as the next in line for the duty.

But I didn't want to do any of it today. I wanted an escape.

I popped my head out of my bedroom door and addressed the guard stationed outside of my room, surprised to see it wasn't Leo with his back against the wall and rifle clutched in his grip. The man was older with wispy hair combed over a bald spot and vacant brown eyes. "Where is Leo?" I asked.

He cleared his throat. "Taking a personal day. He went downstairs to leave."

I furrowed my brow. A personal day?

I looked down the hall left and right before grabbing my cross-body purse and slipping outside. “I’ll be right back,” I lied, having no intention of sticking around for the day and following the agenda the royal publicist, Victoria, created for me.

He pushed himself off the wall and started following me.

Fuck. Couldn’t even escape this damn place without someone on my tail. “You really don’t have to follow me,” I called over my shoulder. “Just going to the kitchens for a snack.”

“I’m happy to accompany you, Lady Abernathy.”

I rolled my eyes and started walking faster, my feet shuffling across the ornate carpet while I navigated the winding, moody castle hallway. “I’d like to be alone,” I huffed while marching down the stairs.

“Lady Abernathy, it’s my duty to—”

I spun around and snapped at him. “It’s your duty to obey my requests.”

He scowled. “With all due respect, it’s *my* duty to follow the king’s orders.”

I scanned the space and spotted a guard with a blond ponytail. “Leo!” I called out before sprinting over to him. A few maids stopped cleaning to eye me curiously. I certainly looked out of place, wearing these clothes and sprinting after a guard. It wasn’t what was expected of the future queen.

Fuck their expectations.

Leo stopped and looked at me. He seemed a mixture of surprise and worry as he noted my attire and the frantic way I ran toward him. I was slightly out of breath when I came to a halt, and the guard at my back looked like he wanted to throttle me for being a pain in the ass. “Please inform this guard that I’m capable of going somewhere on my own,” I said, praying he’d play along. Leo was a higher ranking officer

now. August was probably giving him whiplash with all the demoting and promoting.

Leo looked at me, then back at the guard. "I'll escort her to the king. You're dismissed," he breezed easily. A little too easily.

The older man looked like he wanted to protest but ultimately decided it wasn't worth his time or effort to argue with me. "Of course." He bowed and started walking back upstairs, and the moment he was out of sight, I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Whew. I thought he'd never leave," I said before smiling at Leo.

Leo checked his watch, a look of annoyance on his face. "What do you want, Christine? I'll be late catching my bus."

I looked around at the eavesdropping maids and grabbed his arm, steering both of us outside to the courtyard. The moment I breathed in the crisp air, I felt like my lungs were expanding for the first time in days. "Where are you going?" I asked.

"To visit my mother and sister. I haven't seen them in a while since I was stationed in the countryside and haven't gotten a chance to visit since I'd returned."

I grinned. I loved Leo's family. They were warm and supportive. "Can I go with you?" I blurted out. "We can take a car. You won't have to catch the bus. Please, Leo?" I pouted and put my hands together in a prayer pose, looking up at him with doe eyes that made the corner of his lip twitch.

"Don't you have a full day scheduled?"

I blushed. "Can't we both pretend for just a moment that I'm not a future queen?"

"I don't make a habit of playing pretend. Tends to lead to disappointment."

I rolled my eyes. Leo was always so melodramatic. I reached for his wrist, and his entire body went rigid, as if my

touch made all his muscles clench. “Leo. Please. I don’t want to be here.”

“You could always leave. Permanently.” His words were tense and low, and his eyes scanned the room, as if afraid someone would overhear him.

He made it sound so easy. But I was too tangled up with affection and hope to fantasize about going back now. Besides, something told me that August wouldn’t let me get away that easily, and Atticus had already proven he’d find me wherever I went. My time for running was over. “But then you wouldn’t have me here to annoy you,” I replied playfully. There was something about Leo that thrilled me. In that moment, I felt flirty and carefree, rebelling against my obligations. He was the guard that always followed me, sinking into the shadows. Watching me blossom.

But today I wanted him to be more.

He looked around the room once more. “Fine. Let’s go. I’m only saying yes because my mother asked about you, and I can’t trust that you won’t do something stupid while I’m gone since you seem hell-bent on breaking the rules.”

He stared at where I still held him, the two of us lingering in a tense standstill. “Let’s go,” I whispered before pulling back.

He cleared his throat. “Fine.”

* * *

Getting a car had been a little more difficult than I anticipated. Everyone had questions. Where were we going? Did August know? Why wasn’t I dressed for the scheduled events?

“At this rate, I’m never getting to my mother’s flat, and I’ve already missed my fucking bus,” Leo grunted, annoyed that not even his new rank could get us permission off castle grounds.

“We could sneak out,” I whispered while we walked away from the parking lot.

“August has probably already been informed that you’re trying to leave. I’m going to get fired, and you’re going to get manhandled into a dress.”

I scowled. “Maybe August will let me—”

“He won’t.”

I let out a sigh as an expensive-looking black car started traveling up the cobblestone drive. It slowed down in front of us, and Atticus rolled down the window. “A little birdy told me you were looking for a car?”

Leo cursed. “Fucking hell.”

A broad grin crossed my features. “Why? You going to be my knight in shining armor?”

“Depends. Where are you going?”

Leo shuffled on his feet. There was a commotion behind us, likely more guards trying to track me down. A thrill shot through me at doing something I wasn’t supposed to. My guard reluctantly answered him, “Going to visit my family. Lady Abernathy wants to avoid her duties for the day.”

“Does August know?” Atticus asked while sliding his aviator glasses down his nose.

“I’m sure he does now,” Leo grunted. Always so grumpy.

“Then I guess you should get going. But it’ll cost you.” I leaned into the window, my arms resting on the car as I smiled at Atticus. I never got to thank him for forcing August to come visit me. I didn’t know exactly what that meant for us that he was basically bringing me together with the man I was marrying, but if I thought too hard about it, it made me sick to my stomach.

Atticus lowered his voice. “Kiss me in front of him. Like you mean it, Little Monster.”

I looked over my shoulder at an annoyed Leo before turning back to Atticus. “Why?”

He leaned closer, the minty smell of his breath washing over me. “Because if I’m going to let him steal you away, then

I want him to remember who you belong to.” I looked down at the ring on my hand and frowned. Who *did* I belong to? Lately, I just wanted to belong to myself.

Atticus placed his hand over mine, blocking my engagement ring from view. “One kiss?”

“We don’t have time for this bullshit,” Leo urged.

Atticus ignored him. “I could make you suck me off, but the asshole is right, we don’t have time, and I wouldn’t want to bruise your pretty knees. The ground is hard.”

My raspy voice whispered back, “I like it hard.”

Atticus leaned forward and kissed me. I gasped at the cruel ravishment of his mouth against mine. His kiss was punishing and angry, and he claimed me with every sweeping pass of his tongue, every suck of my bottom lip, every moan vibrating in his chest.

He cupped my cheek and stroked my soft skin, and even though I could feel Leo at my back, eyeing us with anger, I was too lost in Atticus to care. When he pulled away, my pulse was roaring. “When he kisses you later, remember this.”

I straightened and cleared my throat. “He wouldn’t.”

Atticus looked past me at Leo and smirked. “He will.”

Wordlessly, Atticus got out of his car and tossed me the keys. “What kind of car is this?” I asked distractedly while getting into the driver’s seat. Leo stared Atticus down while circling the car and settling in the seat beside me, Leo’s expression a mask of stone.

“Rolls-Royce, the Boat Tail model to be exact.”

I revved the engine, adrenaline coursing through me. “Is it expensive?”

“Very.”

I gripped the steering wheel. “So if I scratch it, you’ll kill me?” I asked. August never let me drive his expensive cars when we were teens. Said I was too delicate for such power.

“Total it, baby. As long as you don’t hurt yourself, I don’t give a fuck about the car.”

Swoon.

“Can we fucking go already?” Leo asked.

“Can you tell August I’m safe and I’ll be back by the end of the day?” I didn’t want him chasing us down and ruining Leo’s only day off. But I still needed a bit of a breather from this place.

“Can I let him stew for an hour, first?” Atticus asked.

“Fine.”

Atticus tossed me his aviators and, with a wink, started walking up the path toward the castle.

I drove off with an angry Leo riding at my side.

* * *

After the excitement of kissing Atticus had worn off, I settled into uncomfortable silence with Leo. He seemed to be stewing with anger as I drove down the streets of Aldrich, turning heads in this fancy as fuck car that hugged the curves in the road like a skilled lover.

“You should have just stayed at the castle,” he grunted finally. We were only a few minutes away from his mother’s flat.

“I didn’t want to spend my day with a smile plastered to my face, wearing an uncomfortable dress and making public appearances.”

He let out a belittling laugh. “So leave. You’re about to spend the rest of your life doing that. You don’t want to be here. You don’t *need* to be here. You could leave and enjoy your freedom. Leave me the fuck alone and marry a nice boy that won’t fuck every model that walks by.”

I shook my head. “August would find me.”

“He didn’t before,” Leo snapped.

“He would now.”

Leo stared out the window while angrily shaking his head. “Right. You’ve got a magic pussy, and suddenly he cares.”

I checked the rearview mirror for cars behind us and, when I saw it was clear, slammed on the brakes, throwing the car in park before glaring at him. “What the fuck is your problem, Leo?”

He twisted in his seat to look at me. “You! You are my problem. You were safe, Christine. And now you’re back here in the thick of it. You’re going to let those men chew you up and spit you out. And what? I’m just supposed to watch it happen? Break you out for a little fun rendezvous but bring you back to *him* at the end of the day?” He got up in my face, the veins in his neck thudding with anger. “I still see it, you know.” He tapped his temple manically. “I still see you, hovering over Lord Geralt with his blood on your skin. That fucking look of terror in your eyes. I can still feel—” He paused to pat his chest just over his heart while lowering his voice. “I can still feel you trembling in my arms.”

The visual he summoned in my mind made my throat close with emotion. I usually pushed those thoughts as far back into the recesses of my memory as possible. I hated resurrecting the weakest version of myself.

“Stop,” I croaked.

Leo wasn’t deterred by my pain. “Feel that, Christine? That hopeless feeling, that *weakness*. That’s what the rest of your life is going to be if you stay, and you won’t fucking listen.”

“I can’t leave. You want me to just hop on some fisherman’s boat without a plan? Without money? You’d lose your job and potentially get arrested. I doubt I’d make it a day. What about your mother, hmm? Your sister?”

“Then let Atticus help you leave!” he roared. “You’re pretty cozy with him. He has the resources to get you safely out of here. You could kiss this kingdom goodbye and never look back.”

“Atticus would just keep me for himself,” I whispered before turning to look out the windshield, a torrent of emotions coursing through me. “You know what I hate most about the castle, Leo? It isn’t the trauma of my past or even the memories. It’s feeling out of control of my own life. August wants me to be his wife. Atticus wants me to be *his*, and you —” I stopped to twist in my seat and look at Leo. He had this tortured expression that made my chest ache. “You want me to leave. No one ever asks what *I* want. King Frederick certainly didn’t ask when he sold me off to Lord Geralt. Everyone wants to use me, control me, *own* me.”

“What else do you want?” he asked so softly that I almost didn’t hear him.

“I want to have autonomy over my own decisions and future. You think I don’t know how much danger I’m in? You think I don’t recognize that I’m playing with fire? Tempting Atticus when I know it would start a war if I truly gave him all of me.”

“And you don’t think you’re playing with me?” Leo asked, his heartbreaking tone sending pain searing through my chest. “I’m nothing. Nobody. Not a king. Not a fucking crime lord. Just a man in love with a queen and torn up with the knowledge that the only protection I can offer her is getting her as far away from the Crown as possible.”

“Leo,” I breathed, shocked by his admission. I’d thought the only thing Leo saw when he looked at me was responsibility and guilt. But the love shining in his gaze cracked my heart wide open and filled it with venom.

A palm slapping the window made both of us jump, destroying the tender moment. I cleared my throat and turned to look at the police officer, who was motioning us to get moving.

I put the car in drive and headed to his mother’s flat, feeling unsure about everything. I was playing a deadly game. Clinging to Leo, seeking comfort from Atticus, and stringing August along. I was a cruel woman tempting fate and risking all of our happiness for what? My own indecision.

I was kissing Atticus. Fucking August. Risking Leo's happiness and taunting him with the tension simmering between us.

It was time for me to come to terms with my job. I was the future queen, and running from it wasn't going to change anything.

I pulled up in front of the building with tears streaming down my cheeks. "I'm going back to the castle," I whispered.

Leo snapped his head to me. "What? We just got here. My mom wants to—"

"You're right," I replied. "I don't know what I'm doing here. It's...cruel. And I don't want to hurt you more than I already have."

"Christine. You haven't...it's not like...I'm sorry, okay? I shouldn't have—"

"I'll go right back to the castle. Enjoy your time with your family, Leo. If I hurry, I can make it to the ribbon-cutting ceremony."

He hovered for a moment, his mouth opening and closing, as if trying to figure out what to say. "Christine..."

"Please go."

He sighed and lingered. Indecision like a war waged across his expression.

And when he got out of the car, I broke. Tears streamed down my face, and I caught sight of the angry blotches of skin on my cheeks. I was so twisted up in regret I could barely see the road ahead of me. I felt like I was driving away from part of myself, the girl that overcame. The playful idea that I could escape my trauma. It was devastating.

Atticus was wrong about one thing, though. Leo never kissed me.

And from this day forward, I vowed never to kiss my monster again, too.

Chapter Nineteen

AUGUST

I watched Christine from a distance, noting how her smile didn't quite meet her eyes. She looked picture-perfect, wearing a gown worth more than a mortgage payment for some of the members of my kingdom. Her hair was styled, her makeup—flawless. There wasn't a hair on her head unkempt, and I wanted to tangle my fingers in those blonde locks and pull it while I fucked her from behind.

But there was something off about her I couldn't quite put my finger on. Ever since she disappeared for a couple of hours with Leo, she seemed distant. Vacant, almost. Like the castle was bleeding her dry and leaving nothing behind but an empty shell.

Over the last few days, I tried to grab her hand and tease her, doing everything I could to make her smile. At night, I snuck into her bedroom and held her close, cuddling her sweet body against me while kissing her soft skin. We had our bogus brunch in the gardens, but it all felt fake.

I hated it.

Something was definitely wrong with her, and I couldn't help but worry that it was something *I* did. That it was this castle. That it was this kingdom.

That it was our time together.

Fuck, I couldn't get the feel of her body clenching around mine out of my head. She felt perfect. Soft and demanding. We fit together so effortlessly that I lived in a perpetual state of arousal just daydreaming about it.

And because I was a selfish asshole, I couldn't let her go.

We were hosting a charity event, something my publicist planned in an effort to improve my public image. Elementary students were getting a grand tour of the castle led by Christine. Now wasn't the best time to ask her what was wrong, but the more I watched her, the more worried I grew. Leo followed her like a shadow, but it didn't escape me how

he looked at her with longing, his puppy dog eyes trailing her every move. Something happened between the two of them, and I was going to get to the bottom of it.

If he made a move toward my future wife, if he made her *cry*, I would end his life.

“Lady Christine! What’s your favorite room in the castle?” one of the kids asked.

She opened and closed her mouth, a glossy look crossing her expression. I could see the pain in the way her lips pressed into a thin line and her entire body went rigid. That was the fucking problem. Everything about this place was a trigger.

She shook her head and cleared her throat. “Probably the gardens,” she said with a forced smile.

A little girl pulled her thumb from her mouth and gawked at her. “You’re so pretty. I like your princess dress.”

Christine looked down at her gown and tugged at the thick fabric. “Thank you. I like your sparkly shirt!”

The little girl beamed, then pouted. “It’s not as pretty as your dress.”

Christine bent down. “I’d rather be wearing pajamas,” she whispered conspiratorially.

The girl giggled. The royal publicist, Victoria, cleared her throat. “Any more questions?” the insufferable woman directing this entire publicity stunt asked. These events were getting out of hand, and it annoyed me endlessly, but I couldn’t tell her to stop. Lord Nathan needed to know that he didn’t have a chance with my girl.

A little boy spoke up. “Do you have a crown?”

The excitement in his eyes was endearing, but Christine paled. “Not yet.”

Another boy spoke up. “Does King August get King Frederick’s old crown? I heard he was buried with it.”

A shadow crossed Christine’s features, something fleeting but still sharp enough to poke the phantom heart thudding in

my chest. It was pain so vibrant and damning that I wanted to burn this whole fucking castle to the ground just to ensure she never looked like that again.

“I’m not sure about his crown,” Christine murmured.

Atticus entered the ballroom, an angry look on his face. I could tell something was up, because he hadn’t bothered to straighten the tie wrapped around his neck. I could see the tips of his tattoos peeking over his wrinkled collar, and his brown hair was messy. Atticus was always put together, and seeing him disheveled thrilled me; it was nice to know I wasn’t the only person falling apart these days. I just wished that Christine wasn’t breaking, too.

He stormed over to her, but she shook her head, silently eyeing the gaggle of children surrounding her. He huffed in frustration, then stalked over to me. The moment we stood toe to toe, he seethed. “What the fuck is wrong with Christine?”

I scowled. It wasn’t his responsibility, but maybe he knew something I didn’t. I wasn’t exactly wanting to let him know something was up, though. If he thought I couldn’t make her happy, then he’d swoop in and try to do it himself.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I lied.

“She texted me last night, saying she couldn’t talk to me anymore. Did you have something to do with this?”

Well, fuck. That wasn’t what I was expecting, but it made me feel like I was ten feet tall. Maybe I made Christine come so hard the other day that she realized she didn’t need anyone else. I preened at his words, and I could feel my expression turning to a dazed look of longing. “Oh,” I whispered while licking my lips, imagining prying her creamy thighs apart and —

Atticus growled and snapped his fingers in front of my face. “What did you do to her?” he growled.

I looked at him, the corner of my mouth curled in disgust. “Nothing,” I snapped. “Maybe she just realized she wanted me. We’re getting married, Atticus. I’m sure you were a fun distraction while she sorted through her feelings, but don’t

blame me because she wants to focus on her future *husband*. I make her happy.”

Atticus raged. Reaching forward, he grabbed my collar and yanked me toward him. The guards surrounding us tensed and closed in, but I held my hand up to stop them. “Look at her,” he growled. “Does she look happy to you?”

He tugged on my collar, forcing me to look at my girl, who was staring at us with her mouth wide open. I searched deeper than her shock, finding the same sadness that had been worrying me. She *did* look sad. She looked broken.

An attendant herded the children into another room, and she took a deep breath before walking over to us. I hated that Atticus was right. She looked sad. Empty. It was killing me to see her this way.

Atticus let go of me to meet her half way, and I followed after him like a fucking idiot because I wanted to hear what they had to say. “Everyone out,” I ordered. When Leo turned to leave, I shouted again. “Not you, Winthrop.”

Christine closed her eyes in frustration as everyone filed out.

“Tell me,” Atticus said, his tone like steel. “Tell me why you won’t talk to me anymore.”

Christine looked at me, which apparently was the wrong thing to do, because he grabbed her chin and forced her to look back at him.

“I can’t do this,” she whispered.

“Let her go,” I demanded, but he ignored me.

“Do what, Little Monster?” he whispered so softly I almost didn’t hear him. What the fuck? They had pet names now? I needed a cute name for her. Like *mine* or *tightest pussy I’ve ever dicked*.

She sighed, her pouty lips parting and wobbling with emotion. “I can’t be with you. I’m getting married, Atticus. It’s not fair to either of us—”

“Since when do I give a fuck about what’s fair? And yeah, you’re getting married. An arranged marriage you don’t want —”

I was about two seconds from punching him in the jaw, but Christine spoke before I could risk my life and beat the ever-living shit out of him. “But I *do* want to marry August. Maybe not like this. Maybe not in this damn castle in these damn clothes under a damn microscope, but...” Her eyes fluttered to me for a brief moment. “I do love him.”

And it should have felt good. I should have been fucking fist pumping the air with excitement. But she sounded like loving me was the worst thing in the world. And she was right. None of this was ideal. Christine deserved better, and I didn’t know how to make that happen.

“Look,” I said. “I’m not thrilled about Atticus trying to get in your pants.” *Yeah, real eloquent, Your Majesty.* “But did something happen?”

Christine jerked out of Atticus’s hold and looked at Leo, as if willing him to explain himself. Atticus followed her gaze, and I knew that the second she was out of the room, he’d be slamming his fist into the guard’s jaw.

And if I was being honest, I’d probably get a kick or two in, also.

“I just realized it’s not fair,” she mumbled. “I...I care about you. All of you. But what kind of person would that make me? It’s hopeless to pursue something, so I need to take a step back.”

I was in a tricky spot. Part of me wanted her all to myself, but the other part didn’t want to make this shitty situation even worse. She’d been through enough.

“Atticus is your *friend*,” I said, putting emphasis on the word *friend* because I didn’t want him trying to lick her kitty. Give him an inch, and he’d take a fucking mile—and her ass. “You can still talk to him. And Leo is boring as hell, but there’s no reason to cut them out for our sake.”

She shook her head and folded her arms around herself, like they were a protective barrier. “I can’t just be friends with either of them. I...”

She didn’t finish her sentence, because she didn’t have to. Yeah. I understood. And it pissed me off.

I didn’t have time for this. Things would be a lot better for all of us if I were enough.

But I wasn’t enough.

I was a shitty king. A shitty fiancé.

I didn’t deserve Christine and that’s why she needed to find comfort elsewhere.

I took a step closer to her, knowing that I had to burn my pride to say what I needed to say. “Baby,” I whispered. Maybe this was what love meant, saying shit that killed you from the inside out, if only to do the right thing.

Her eyes were misty as she looked at me with shame. “August, I’m sorry. I feel so stupid.”

And then she started full-on crying.

There was something awful about a crying woman. The way her slender shoulders shook from the force of it made me want to punch the drywall.

I wrapped my arms around her, making Atticus growl and Leo shift uncomfortably on his feet. “I love that you want to marry me. I love that we have our whole entire lives to look forward to.”

She nuzzled my neck, and I swear if cuddling could get me off, I would have splooped into my pants. “I know. It’s why I need to focus on us,” she admitted, though she didn’t sound happy about it.

I clenched my jaw, hating every fucking second of this. “No, you need to focus on being *happy*. This job—this kingdom—has stolen enough of your peace already. Does Atticus make you happy?”

She nodded against my skin, and that simple move made me want to punch something.

“Does Leo make you happy?” I forced out. Fuck Leo. And fuck Atticus, too. They could both suck a dick made of thorns for all I cared.

She nodded again.

“Okay,” I whispered. It was like chewing on tar. Bitter to the taste. Uncomfortable. Unnatural. “Then be happy.”

She pulled away from me and looked up through those impossibly long lashes at me. “Why?”

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell her all the nasty things I thought about myself. How I wasn't deserving. How I was a selfish prick that didn't know how to keep her. How knowing she felt anything for anyone but me made me sick to my stomach.

“Because you're mine,” I replied. “I'm not worrying about your friendship with them, and neither should you.”

I picked up her hand and stared at the ring there. “I'm going to work. Why don't you talk to Leo and Atticus, okay?”

I dropped her hand and took a step back. This was for the best. Plenty of people had marriages of convenience in my world. Maybe this needed to happen. Maybe I wouldn't inevitably disappoint her if I ended us before we started.

“August,” she said, her expression slipping. I knew it was just a temporary disappointment. She'd move on, and Atticus would be there to wipe her tears. Leo, too. “Don't go. This isn't what I want.”

I pulled away from her and made my way toward the door, feeling like a fucking asshole for giving up so easily. But if it was tearing her apart to pick me, then why the hell was I forcing it?

I was shuffling away, licking my wounds, trying my goddamn best not to feel like a pussy.

And then a man with a gun walked into the ballroom.

A fucking gun.

I stalled, freezing at the sight of him and immediately thinking of Christine. I'd been around guns my whole life, but the weapon grasped in his fist made every muscle in my body clench. He looked shaky and manic, his pudgy hands raising the weapon and aiming it at me.

Everything slowed for a moment. I noticed his thinning hair. The hole in his jacket. The mud on his boots. He was older. Pale with rosy cheeks. Snot dripping down his nose. The man was shorter than me, with bloodshot eyes and gray spots on his teeth. "Don't you fucking make a sound," he said.

I heard movement behind me and a whispered hiss of words I couldn't make out.

"Who are you?" I asked, trying to buy us some time for the guards to arrive. They would arrive, right? What if they didn't?

"I said shut up!" he said more forcefully, not wanting to shout but still getting his point across.

Seeing him aim the barrel at my chest made me realize I kind of liked fucking living, and I had a woman I had every intention of marrying—which I couldn't do if I was six feet underground. "You are not the rightful king," he said while straightening his spine. "It's time for a new man to take the crown."

He was shaking so hard I doubted his aim was really good. My frantic mind wondered if he'd ever pulled a trigger before.

And just when I was about to risk it all and scream for the guards, a flash of tulle and silk rushed forward. I could hear her heels pounding against the marble tile, see her blonde hair flowing behind her as she pumped her arms. "No!" I screamed. Why wasn't Leo doing something? Why was Christine sprinting toward the man with the gun?

A bullet sliced through the air, clipping my cheek as it went. I let out a yelp and ducked just as Christine collided with the shooter.

Everything happened so fast I could barely make out her swift movements. She pressed her palm to the side of the gun before kneeing him in the balls. The moment he bent over with a grunt of pain, she jerked the weapon from his grip.

“Christine!” I screamed as Leo grabbed my arm and pulled me back, shielding me.

Why the fuck was he worried about me? He needed to save *her*.

Christine swept her leg out, knocking the shooter forward until he landed on the expensive tile headfirst, blood gushing from his mouth and nose.

She then quickly straddled his back and pinned him down. In a flash, she lifted her skirt and pulled a blade that was strapped to her thigh

She moved too quickly, as if she was trained to defend.

As if she was trained to *kill*. She pulled his head up and locked eyes with me, a fire in her gaze that was both vibrant but terrifyingly empty. There was nothing but pure rage pulsing through her veins as she pressed the blade to his neck and dragged the sharp edge along his jugular, red blood spilling from the cut almost instantly.

“No! We need him al—”

Leo’s words were too slow.

The flow of blood made me sick to my stomach. Christine looked primal, with her dress bunched up around her waist, the blade clutched in her manicured fingers. She hunched over him, so deep that the ends of her blonde hair were dipped in the blood of her kill.

She dropped his body and stormed over to Leo. “We need to get him to a safe location. There could be more.”

I gaped at her as Leo tugged on my arm again. I wanted to pull from his grasp, but he was too strong and I was too stunned by what I’d just witnessed. Atticus, who had remained surprisingly quiet during this entire ordeal, whispered something that made venom travel up my closing throat.

“Beautiful.”

Leo dragged me over to a hidden doorway in the ballroom. The entire castle was full of hidden passages should we need them. The last thing I saw before he forced me inside was Christine wiping the blade on her dress.

Chapter Twenty

CHRISTINE

“I want to know who the hell that man was and how the fuck he got into our castle, within the hour,” Isabelle yelled at her team of security guards. We were in her private study, and I stood with my back pressed against the wall, with dried blood on my hands. My mind was locked in that trauma-induced haze of bloodlust.

I shouldn't have killed him. He had answers.

But he threatened August.

He had to die.

Isabelle dismissed everyone and glared at me. The lines around her pursed lips aged her some, but not a hair was out of place. “If anyone asks, Leo apprehended him.” I nodded once. I had an image to maintain. She took a step closer to me, her eyes drinking in my disheveled appearance. “Your eyes...” Her tone was haunting, bleeding with concern that felt foreign to me. She'd always been so cold, so calculating. But at that moment, she sounded...remorseful.

I stopped staring at the way she clasped her hands in front of her and met her gaze, knowing she saw how empty I was. Whenever I killed, it was like the girl I was stepped out and the woman I had to become took over. She was heartless. Ruthless. Deadly. “The castle has been cleared. August should be released soon. You should clean up before he finds you.”

I nodded once, the dutiful killing machine.

“Christine?” she said before taking another cautious step toward me. The warmth in her tone made a spark of innocence flare in my chest. I pushed it down with a cold swallow. I couldn't let her out just yet. She needed to be safe. “Thank you for protecting him,” she whispered finally. But the guilty way her eyes swept over me made my spine tingle. “Are you...are you going to be okay?”

I clenched my jaw. “Now you care?” The snappiness in my tone made her flinch. Good. There was something satisfying

about startling a queen. “You brought me here for this reason. If you don’t like the results, then you can find other ways to protect him.”

She looked around and closed the remaining distance between us. “Of course I don’t like this,” she hissed. “If your mother could see what you’ve become...she’d be *devastated*.”

Her words were painful enough that the killing haze faded. I blinked twice and shame held me like an old friend, wrapping its suffocating arms around my body and squeezing so tight that it crushed my bones.

“If you’ll excuse me,” I said before tilting my nose high up in the sky and walking out of her study.

Aside from a few guards, the castle was mostly empty. The staff was evacuated because of the terrorist threat, and people hadn’t been allowed inside because they were conducting interviews. The few guards that remained stared at me with wide eyes. I knew rumors would circulate about me, but it wasn’t my job to navigate those.

I was here to wear pretty dresses and be submissive.

I was here to protect August.

I was here to kill the Crown’s enemies, even though I was technically an enemy myself.

I made my way to my room, shuffling in heels that were too tight for my feet and staring at the ornate decor. I wanted Atticus to tell me I wasn’t a monster. I wanted Leo to make me feel safe. I wanted August to make me forget.

But August now knew the truth. He knew what I was capable of. And he’d never look at me with love again.

My room looked the same. Pale pink. Pristine. I stripped out of my dress, knowing that not even the best detergent could get the stench of death out of the designer threads. I slipped off my shoes and shuffled to the bathroom. And when the water was scalding hot, I stepped under the spray and let it burn the blood off my body.

I scrubbed.

And scrubbed.

It always felt like the first time. I didn't know the name of the man I killed today, but his blood felt like Lord Geralt's. My body still felt like a tool for the Crown. My innocence still felt stripped bare, poked, invaded, claimed and manipulated. I lathered more vanilla soap in my wash cloth and dragged it down my arm, wishing the material wasn't so soft. Wishing I could take a knife to my creamy skin and cut out my shame.

Wash away the blood, Christine.

"Christine!" August's voice boomed, making me jerk in awareness. I kept washing my body as he stormed into the bathroom and ripped open the glass door. He stared at my pink, angry skin with wide eyes, his hands trembling as he reached for me. "Are you okay?"

I looked up at him, the flicker of innocence dancing between us. If I'd run to August that night, would he have protected me? Would he have defended me? Would I have had to become this killer if I'd had a knight in shining armor?

Did I want someone to save me? Or did I want to become lethal enough to save myself?

Maybe a little of both.

"I'm...fine," I grunted before reaching for more soap.

He grabbed my wrist, stopping me. "You're rubbing your skin raw."

"I need to get the blood off," I said robotically, my monotone voice stunning him for a moment.

He released me and turned off the water. It wasn't enough, though. I needed to get clean. I needed to *feel* clean again.

He grabbed a towel and wrapped it around me like a gentle lover, towel drying my body with gentle pats, as if he was scared a sudden movement would send me into another killing spree. "Stop touching me," I gritted before stepping out of the shower. We kept meeting like this. In the bathroom. With me naked. With him trying to steal parts of my soul.

"Tell me what happened," he whispered.

“You saw what happened. He threatened you. I killed him.”

I shoved past him. The moment I was in my bedroom, cold air hit my skin, sending goose bumps all over my flesh. “That’s not what I mean, Christine. Explain how. How you just...did that.”

He couldn’t even say it.

“You knew I was in self-defense training,” I said, knowing it was only a half-truth.

“I didn’t know it was like...like...”

“August,” I sighed. “I’m not really in a good headspace to have this conversation with you.” And I wasn’t. Not only because I was coming down from my kill, but also because I wasn’t ready for the judgment, the fear, or the fucking pity.

He ignored my wishes and kept fucking talking. “You learned...*that* because of what my father did to you. What Lord Geralt *did* to you,” he said, his tone confusing. I couldn’t tell if he was disgusted or angry.

I grabbed a nightgown and put it on before spinning around to face him. His eyes were downcast, and he had a frown on his face. “I did,” I finally said.

“And Leo and Atticus knew,” he said, sounding angrier.

“They did,” I said, this time less confident.

“Is that why you connect with them? Because they know about...about *this*?” I just wished he’d fucking say it.

“I don’t know. I haven’t really put much thought into it,” I admitted. I knew Atticus understood me in a way that no one else would. We fought similar demons and knew how to claw our way out of a fight. August was a party-hard playboy who didn’t get his hands dirty unless it was to reach up some heiress’s skirt.

No, that wasn’t fair. He was evolving. For me.

And I didn’t deserve any of it.

“It bothers me that they knew. Why didn’t you tell me?”

I plopped down on the bed and stared at the floor. “I didn’t know how to tell you. And what does it matter? Not too long ago, you were giving me up, remember?”

He ran a hand through his hair in frustration, messing up the careful style before marching over to me. “Yeah? Well, I didn’t fucking want to. I figured they’d be better for you. I didn’t think I was enough. But now I know the truth!”

I looked up at him in confusion. “What the hell are you talking about?”

He sat down beside me and let out a lengthy huff. “Of course you’ve been going to them. They knew about this part of you. Now that I know, you can come to me about this, too.”

He sounded excited. Too excited. This wasn’t what I expected at all.

“August. It’s not that simple.”

He reached for my hand and squeezed. “I want to know everything about you, Christine. Every fucking dirty little secret rolling around that beautiful head of yours.”

“You don’t get it,” I said while tugging my hand free. “It’s not enough to *know* my secrets. Atticus understands me—”

“I can understand you, too!”

“Atticus is a monster,” I breathed.

For some reason, this made August laugh. “I suppose he is. Fucking bastard.”

I shook my head again, feeling angry. “August. I’m a monster, too. I connect with him because he gets it. He knows what it means to scrub the blood from under his fingernails.”

He paled. “You speak like this wasn’t just a one-time thing.”

“It wasn’t. I...this wasn’t my first kill, August. And it won’t be my last.”

I let the truth simmer between us. He processed it, diving headfirst into his racing thoughts while leaning closer to me. “Okay,” he said.

“Okay?”

The veins throbbed in his neck. “I said okay! What more do you want from me? I can accept that. I can accept *you*.”

Fuck. I didn’t realize how much I needed to hear him say that. But it wasn’t enough. “August. I love that you can accept me, but you’ll never understand that side of me. You’ll try to make sense of it and resent me in the end. Don’t you see?”

He waited for me to continue. My voice was shaky. My body felt spent. “You know the side of me that was innocent and in love. The grieving girl with stars in her eyes. Leo saw me at my worst. The broken mess barely keeping it together. The survivor with trauma. And Atticus sees me as the monster. The person I had to become to get past it all and thrive. All three of you represent parts of me. I...I don’t even know what that looks like or why I need every part to make sense of this crazy, fucked up life. But that’s why. And it’s selfish. And it’s wrong. And at the end of the day, I *want* to be the girl who chased you in rose gardens and promised you forever. I know that’s what I *should* be. But I’m also a broken girl. I’m also a blade at the throat of my enemies.”

He absorbed my speech like it hurt him, his face dripping with pain that *I* put there. He processed it in silence, and I waited for him to reassure me. To tell me I could be all three. That he could *love* every stage of existence I’ve danced with.

“So right now, what do you want to be? What’s going to help you the most?”

I was surprised by his question. “What?”

His voice grew, frustration littering the edges of his words. “What do you want to be *right fucking now*, Christine? Are you still the monster? Are you broken? Or do you want to be innocent?”

My throat felt like it was closing up. I didn’t know how to answer him, but the words came to me before I could think better of it.

“I’m broken, August,” I said softly. And it was true. I *was* broken. I was hurting. I was struggling with the aftermath of

my kill and what that meant for my relationship with August. What people would say. What new threat would come our way.

August nodded, then stood up. I watched him walk away without a word, and my heart crumbled. Was this what my life would be like? Would he always walk away when things got hard?

He opened the door and spoke sternly to someone outside. “She needs you,” he said.

My ears perked up.

“I don’t give a fuck what you need to do right now. Get in here.”

August reached past the threshold and tugged Leo inside my room before slamming the door shut. He spun on his heels and stared at me. “Be broken, love. I’m always here for you. Every bit of your soul. But I want you to have what you need. Even if that’s not me right now. And if you need someone to tame your monster, I’ll get Atticus here. He’s already fighting with the guards, demanding to be let inside the castle anyway.”

“What’s going on?” Leo asked as August blew me a kiss and left my room.

I felt drained and wasn’t in the mood to talk to Leo. I was still trying to figure out how I was going to navigate all of this. August might have been willing to let me explore the other parts of my soul, but that didn’t mean it was fair to Leo to lead him on when all of this felt so damn hopeless.

“Good job getting August out of there,” I said before moving the comforter and sliding underneath it. I welcomed the warmth and cozy feelings. It was nice to settle in. All I really wanted was a nap—some time to disassociate from everything.

“Of course, it’s my job,” Leo said before shuffling on his feet. “Did you need something?”

I chewed on my lip, then turned my body so that I wasn’t facing him. I needed him. I needed someone to wrap their arms around me and make me feel safe. Hold me so tight all

my broken pieces were forced back together again so I could pretend to be whole.

A soft tear fell down my cheek. I wanted to leave this damn castle and escape all the memories plaguing me. "Leo?" I whispered.

I felt the mattress dip. "Yeah?"

"Can you just...hold me for a little while?"

It felt wrong to ask this of him, but I never did the right thing. Maybe I was destined to cling to whatever hurt me. I heard him move. The comforter shifted. His warm arms wrapped around my shaky body. His mouth hovered over my ear.

"Rest, Christine. I'll be right here."

I sobbed until I fell asleep.

Chapter Twenty-One

AUGUST

Atticus stormed into my bedroom like he owned the place, his jaw red and swelling. He had a bruise forming, and I wished it was me that gave it to him. “Why the fuck did I have to wait an entire day before coming here?”

Because you’re an insufferable asshole, and I didn’t want to deal with you.

“We were on lockdown until the threat was neutralized. Had to interview everyone and make sure it was safe,” I breezed, sounding like my mother when she made her statement late last night. She begged me to step up to the podium and speak, but I didn’t have the energy to answer questions from the nosy journalists horny for a good story. Rebellion sold newspapers. Murder made headlines.

“Bullshit. You just wanted to keep me from seeing Christine,” he seethed.

I shrugged while slipping my arms through the sleeves of a button-down shirt. I’d gotten barely any sleep last night, and it had nothing to do with the security threat we faced. I couldn’t stop imagining Christine with Leo. Were they fucking? Was he making her moan those sweet noises I wanted to keep to myself?

Atticus looked wrecked, from his wrinkled clothes to the frantic curl of his hair. I was enjoying this a little *too* much. “You’re here now. I’m assuming you’ve come to explain yourself?” I said before shrugging on my forest green jacket and scowling at my reflection in the standing mirror. I had to look poised. I had to look like I had my shit together. I had to look like facing my mortality yesterday didn’t freak me the fuck out.

“Explain myself?”

“*You* coordinated Christine’s fucking self-defense lessons, right? You...made her into *that*.”

He stormed up to me, his fist clenched at his side. “I turned her into a *survivor*. I encouraged her to mold her trauma into something empowering. You wouldn’t understand. You cope with pills.”

I let out a bitter laugh. “And she copes with spilling blood. I’m not sure which is worse.”

Atticus shoved my chest, nearly knocking me off my feet. “At least one keeps her safe.”

I smoothed my jacket callously, trying not to be bothered by the asshole testing me. The only reason he was still breathing was because Christine had demons that needed taming and apparently, he was the only one who could rein them in. It pissed me off, because we all knew I didn’t understand this side of her. I didn’t know how she could just fucking *snap* and slice that motherfucker’s neck. I was a lover, not a fighter.

But I’d fucking fight for ownership of her clit if that’s what it came down to. I wasn’t above letting her ride my face to let her know where she belonged. But the other shit? I had no clue how to navigate that, nor did I know if I *wanted* to. It was scary, watching her fight. She moved like a robot, acting on instincts I didn’t even know she had. And it wasn’t the blood or the gore that terrified me, it was the way her eyes flared with lust. The way her muscles were so controlled—so *deadly*.

What scared me most was being unable to recognize the girl I loved.

“Christine is stronger. Now we know she can take care of herself. With everything going on, it’s a good skill to have,” Atticus finally said, sounding surprisingly sad about it all.

“I’m not arguing that,” I snapped. “I’m glad she’s okay, but what if the next time she isn’t? We shouldn’t want her running *toward* the danger, Atticus.”

My words stumped him, and his shoulders slumped. “I know.”

I resumed getting ready for the day, flicking a piece of lint off my jacket before letting out a sigh. I had a feeling my

mother would want us to put on a strong, united front today. If people were doubting our power, then we needed to show them just how powerful we were. The Military Games were coming up, and Victoria had made it her mission to use that as a tool to show our strength. “Did you see the news today?” Atticus asked, his tone...curious.

“I’m sure it’s drowning in speculation about the assassination attempt,” I replied with a wave of my hand.

“Not quite,” Atticus replied before pulling out his phone and showing it to me. I scanned the bold words, and rage filled me.

***Lord Nathan Claims Christine Abernathy Is His Betrothed.
Rebellion Questions if Augustus Is Fit for the Crown.***

“That fucking little weasel. I’ll kill him.” My throat clenched with anger and also a hint of doubt. Was I truly fit for the crown? Did I have the people’s best interest? What if they saw what I saw in myself?

A failure.

A *loser*.

“I have a few men following him. If I had to guess, he’s behind the attack yesterday. But since Christine killed your witness, we have no proof.”

My jaw ached from all the clenching. I really needed a stiff drink. Or maybe something stronger. “Does it matter if we have proof?” This was normally something I’d need to discuss with my advisor or maybe even my mother, but Atticus knew how criminals worked, and he had his ear to the ground.

“Unfortunately, yes. He is picking up a lot of underground supporters. People unhappy with your father’s legacy. People unhappy with *you*.” He stroked his chin. “I could make him easily disappear, but it would just embolden them. Many are treating your attacker like a martyr—something I’m sure you’re familiar with.”

“Fuck him. You go against me, and there will be consequences,” I said, sounding too much like my father for my comfort. “Why even are people rebelling?”

Atticus sighed, as if annoyed that he had to be explaining this to me. Yeah, asshole, I knew I wasn't fit for this job, too. My father thought he was immortal, thought he had more time to train me up and turn me into the future king he wanted. But he was just a man. A dead man. And I was someone with formal training but no inside experience or desire to lead.

“Your father has been raising taxes, and the unemployment rate is higher than it's ever been. Social services slashed. Hospitals are crumbling. Homeless shelters are overcrowded. Ironically, business has never been better for me. People resort to crime when they can't put food on their table. I'm surprised an uprising hasn't happened sooner than this.” He checked his watch. “They want a leader, and it looks like Lord Nathan wants to be the face of this little uprising. It's a delicate situation.”

Fuck. I knew all of this, but hearing Atticus say it so plainly made me furious. I'd been pouring over documents about the state of the kingdom this last week. Adonis and the finance committee had put together enough facts and figures to make my head spin.

“So you're saying we can't kill him?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

Atticus shrugged. “We *could*. Easily. He's a cocky fucker with hardly any security. But the backlash might be difficult to navigate. You could fight him the way all good kings fight.”

“How?” I asked, hating that I was asking him for help.

“Ask your advisors. Ask your mother? I'm more skilled at finding less than savory solutions. You can use the law. Hell, *make* a law. You're the king with resources at your disposal, are you not? I have a future queen to check in on. And possibly spank.”

That caught my attention. “What are you talking about?”

Atticus fumed. “You stole my moment, yesterday. Did you know that? It was about me and Christine. You had to go and be a martyr and make it about you. Everything is *always* about you, isn’t it? First with that bloody declaration breaking Christine’s heart while you dramatically walked away from probably the one girl who ever loved you despite all your glaringly annoying faults. Then you had to almost get yourself killed.”

“I’m so sorry that *my* conversation with *my* fiancée was such an inconvenience for you. You’re the one who stormed in looking like an asshole getting pissy because she wanted to focus on her upcoming marriage.”

Atticus clenched his fist. “I had every right to confront her. She sent a text. A fucking *text*. Telling me that we couldn’t be together. That she’s *sorry*. After everything we’ve been through. Just because she doesn’t know I’ve been planning this for years doesn’t mean it isn’t real. I followed her for years. Scared off every asshole that thought they could kiss lips that belonged to me. I made her a fighter—”

I walked over to the bar cart in my bedroom and poured myself a glass of bourbon before lifting it to my lips and swallowing a gulp. It burned nicely on the way down. “Yeah. You made her a fighter. A fucking mindless killer—”

“Don’t. Don’t say that about her,” Atticus said, his voice strained. “You didn’t see her after...”

His words caught my attention. I moved to the desk in my living area to sit down, knowing that it would be difficult to hear what he had to say. “Tell me how she was.” It was a command. He’d already told me this, but I needed to hear it again. Without the secrecy.

He leaned against the wall, one arm wrapped around his middle and the other resting on it, his fist propped under his chin. “It was bad, August. I...she was so scared of the world. So alone. Didn’t leave her flat for days. Was scared in crowds. I wanted to comfort her, but I was scared I would trigger her. She didn’t want anything to do with her life in Aldrich. When she started going to the gym, I saw an opportunity and took it.

Slowly, she came back to life again. I wouldn't change my decision for anything."

I felt like breaking something. What he described was my worst nightmare. I hated thinking that Christine had to go through all of this alone, but maybe it was good that she was far away from this castle. And even if I was nervous about her *self-defense* skills, I was thankful she found something that made her steal a bit of her power back. And I'd be lying if I wasn't thankful to know she could handle herself if shit went south, and I had a feeling things would only get more difficult from here with this rebellion on the rise.

"I suppose I should thank you, though it still pisses me off that you were there for her when I couldn't be," I gritted.

"And I'll continue to be there for her. I don't need your permission. Or hers, for that matter. And I definitely don't need you to make her feel even worse for being with me." He straightened and smoothed his shirt. "And on that note, I'll be going to visit her."

"You might want to wait. She's preoccupied at the moment," I said, feeling somewhere between happy to piss Atticus off and sad that Christine was with the person she really needed at the moment. Was it being a martyr if I truly didn't think I deserved her? If I recognized that I'd never be the person she needed?

"What is that supposed to mean?"

I cleared my throat and debated on chugging a bottle of whiskey. "She spent the night with Leo."

His eyes widened. "I didn't think he had the balls."

I groaned. Truthfully, I didn't think he had them either. "I forced him to. She needed him last night."

And she didn't need me.

He ground his teeth for a moment. "You know, when I worked out this happily ever after, I didn't factor in a third."

I blanched. "But you planned on..." I paused to gesture between the two of us. "Two? What? Did you just think we'd

share her?"

Atticus's lip curled. "You want to know my plans, Your Highness?"

I leaned back in my seat and crossed my arms over my chest. Oh, this was going to be good. "Sure. Lay them on me."

"Before she came here, my plan was to visit her and convince her she was in love with me and that I could protect her. But your mother fucked that up when she announced your arranged marriage."

"She would have never fallen for that shit," I spat.

He ignored me. "So I came up with a plan. First, I'm going to somehow turn you into a decent fucking human being. Someone good enough for Christine Abernathy. I'll admit it's a lot harder than I anticipated. You're a real piece of work, you know that? And you only respond to insults."

"You're already off to a great start," I mumbled.

"Then, I was going to let her marry you but be in love with me."

I scoffed. "How bloody generous of you."

He slammed his fist on the desk. "It *is* generous. You want to know why? Because you're a cunt, Your Majesty. A royal fuck up. If I wanted to, I could steal Christine away, and you'd never hear from her again. And you *know* I have the means to do it and the army to defend us. She might be mad at first, but she'd fall in love with me."

I nodded sarcastically. "Right. You'd just kidnap her and convince her she cares about you."

"I'd rescue her from a husband who won't fight for her and a crown that is slowly killing her spirit." He straightened. "But I won't do that, you know why?"

I wasn't sure I wanted to know why, but I humored him all the same. "Why?"

"Because for some fucking reason, that girl thinks you're worth it. So fucking man up and act like the person she thinks

you are. Your self-pity isn't doing anyone any good. And if you ever walk away from her again, I'll put a knife in your back."

I was shocked. Was Atticus seriously suggesting we *share* her?

But wasn't that what I suggested when I brought Leo to her room?

This was all so fucking confusing.

"Fine," I conceded, mostly because I needed time to think about all of this. "And what about Leo?"

Atticus walked toward my door. "I'll need time to figure out how he fits into the plan. But if he helps her, then..."

Then...

We both didn't finish that thought. He walked out of my suite, and I tried to figure out a way to convince myself that Christine Abernathy could eventually love me back, fuck-up prince and all.

Chapter Twenty-Two

CHRISTINE

Leo left before I woke up. The side of his bed was still warm from his body, but my pillow case was wet from my tears. I was disappointed to be alone. Hell, this whole castle made me feel so damn lonely. Maybe that's why I wanted to be with him during my most vulnerable moments. Leo made me feel seen. He was always watching over me. Always noticing the little things about me that no one else did. He shadowed me most of my life.

It had been a while since I'd broken down like that. I'd promised myself a long time ago that I'd never give my demons that sort of power over me, but being here, seeing *them*, and feeling the blood on my skin was too close to a memory I'd long since pushed to the deepest, darkest corner of my mind.

I didn't regret doing what was required of me. And I had no qualms about killing an enemy.

I was mourning so much more than any of that. I was mourning a carefree existence where my only concern was a prince I couldn't have.

A knock sounded on the door, and I sat up in bed, eyeing the knife on my nightstand with anticipation. Yesterday showed me that I couldn't let my guard down for even a minute. The Crown had too many enemies. "Who is it?" I shifted so I could defend myself.

But instead of an intruder, something much more dangerous waltzed through my door. Atticus twisted the doorknob and let himself inside my suite, a masterful sense of purpose in his expression. He was dressed in the same suit from yesterday, a bruise covering his jaw. It was oddly disheveled for him, but he looked good. "Hello, beautiful. I have a big day planned for us."

I arched my brow skeptically. I wasn't even sure what day it was. My body needed rest, and I knew there were at least

three untouched meals left in my suite. “Does the queen want me to make more public appearances? I figured she’d have an itinerary and fashion team at my door by now.”

I wasn’t expecting him to show up here.

I knew I needed to talk to him about that text.

That damn text.

I’d sent it to him in a moment of shame, feeling like I needed to set proper boundaries now so that he’d stop tempting me with his pretty words and sinful mouth. I couldn’t keep leading them on. My future had already been planned out for me. I was going to marry August and live in this cage for the rest of my days under a massive microscope. Sleeping around with other men wasn’t a possibility.

Loving them would be impossible.

But distancing myself wasn’t what I wanted. Not even a little bit.

“You have much more important things to attend to today,” Atticus said, a menacing glint to his tone that made me nervous. I knew he was mad and demanding—a lethal combination for someone who wanted to claim my heart.

I forced my words to sound confident despite my reservations. “And what would that be?”

“Fittings for your engagement party dress.” He crawled across the mattress over to me, his eyes dark with intent. “Since you’re hell-bent on marrying that idiot and focusing all your attention on *him* instead of *me*, I figured I’d help you with finding the perfect gown. We’re friends, after all. That’s the line in the sand, isn’t it?”

My eyes widened as I processed his words. I thought he’d want to check on me after the murder. But this was unexpected.

It was rare that I got nervous anymore. I’d learned to switch off my fear and lean into the numb haze of survival when necessary. But Atticus had my heart racing. “*Monster*,” I whispered. “Can we talk about this?”

“What’s there to talk about, baby?” he asked while hovering over me. “You said all you needed to say in that fucking text, did you not?”

I didn’t really have the emotional capacity to worry about that damn text message, but surprisingly, it was nice to think about instead of the threat on our lives. This felt like a game—a game I wanted to win.

“What about the killing?” I asked.

He stroked my cheek. “Do you need to talk about it?”

I shook my head. “Do you?”

He smiled. “I love every part of you, Christine. You were so fearless and brave. Watching you take charge and slit his throat was a turn-on. It makes me happy to know you can defend yourself.”

Whoa. I wasn’t expecting that. “Really?”

He brushed his nose against mine. “I’m not scared of bloodshed, Little Monster.”

I swallowed. He was so close, and yet so far. “So, the dress?” I asked, needing to change the subject. It was strange. Part of me felt okay with the killing, part of me wished I didn’t have to. I wasn’t necessarily comfortable with the idea of ending a life, but I wasn’t against it either. I had many parts to my soul, and each man brought out a different aspect of it. I liked that I could be a monster with Atticus, though.

He ripped the comforter off of me and looked down at my silky pajamas. I felt my heart race from his perusal. “Strip. Since we’re friends, you won’t mind trying all of it on for me, would you?”

And with those words, he rolled off of me and went back out in the hall.

I let out a shaky breath and made my way over to the bathroom. After running a brush through my hair, I cleaned my face and scrubbed my teeth. The bathroom door opened and Atticus shoved me a beautiful matte black box with a red bow on top. “Put this on first.”

He shut the door before I could ask him what he was doing. After debating for a moment if I wanted him to push me around, I gave in and pulled off the ribbon, then opened the lid, gasping at what was inside.

It was a deep green, strapless bra that was so detailed it felt too precious to touch. Sitting on emerald tissue paper was a matching thong. I ran the tips of my fingers over the material, loving how soft it felt. "Hurry up, Christine."

I stripped out of my pajamas and put it on, noting how the cups pushed my breasts up and the underwear left little to the imagination. I reached for my robe but stopped. This was a game after all. If Atticus wanted to see me wearing this, then I'd give him a show.

I opened the door and stepped into my chilly room. He had his back to me and was running his hands over a rack of clothes he'd wheeled in, softly caressing the dresses hanging like he was imagining they were me. I held my breath while waiting for him to turn around.

"Are you dressed?" he asked.

"Yes."

He casually looked over his shoulder at me, and if it wasn't for the way his hand paused and clenched into a fist, I would have never known he was affected by me. "Let's try this one on first," he said while grabbing a hanger with a deep red gown on it.

I stepped up to him, poising myself just inches from his back. I could smell his expensive cologne and feel the heat radiating off of him. "Okay," I said while reaching around him to grab it from his hand. He let out a harsh breath and spun around to face me. His eyes swept up and down my body in such a hungry way that I could barely focus.

Atticus and I were damning. There was something about him that drew me in. Even though I knew it was wrong. Even though it was *impossible*.

"Do you need help getting dressed, Little Monster?" he rasped.

I licked my lip and he eyed it with desire. “Please?” I replied, craving the feel of his skilled hands on me.

He leaned closer and breathed me in. “Of course.”

Yes. I wanted this. I needed this. Fuck that damn text.

Then, Atticus snapped away from me, cutting the tension in the air in an instant. “Leo!” His bellowing voice stunned me.

The door opened and I quickly held the garment up to my chest to hide myself as the guard who held me as I cried last night stormed inside. “Everything okay?” he asked before glancing at me.

I looked at Atticus, wondering what in the hell he was playing at. “Everything is lovely. Christine needs help getting into her dress.”

Leo’s cheeks turned red and I watched him scan me before looking back at Atticus. “I can fetch one of her attendants.”

Atticus was quick to respond. “That won’t be necessary. Come help her.”

Leo’s mouth dropped open. “I don’t think—”

“Come. Help. Her.” Atticus’s words left no room for arguing.

Leo slowly and reluctantly shut the door behind him before walking over to me, his chest rising and falling dramatically as he rolled his shoulders back. I drank in the sight of him in his uniform. His hair was tossed in a messy bun on top of his head, and the veins in his hands stuck out as he reached for the dress. “Yes, Lady Abernathy,” he said softly.

I moved to stand in front of my floor-length mirror, and Atticus smiled to himself as he sat down in one of my chairs, crossing his legs as he continued to stare at me. Leo got the dress off the hanger and walked over to me. We moved like two fumbling teens, with me holding his shoulder as he knelt for me to step inside of it. The soft material was silky against my skin, and when he pulled it up, I realized this gown was far too revealing for a royal event.

The straps were incredibly thin, and the stomach was mesh, showing off my toned stomach. The completely backless dress showed off the lingerie Atticus made me wear, and there was a slit that went all the way up to my hip.

“I can’t wear this,” I mused. Leo gulped while staring at me, his twitchy fingers dancing at his side.

“I don’t know. It’s definitely a statement piece, don’t you think, Leo?” Atticus said.

Leo nodded silently, not daring to speak what his mind was thinking. I ached to hear his true thoughts. He was always so secretive about his feelings for me. Pushing me away. Putting distance between us.

“The royal publicist would have my head,” I said with an awkward laugh.

Atticus leaned forward in his seat, like he wanted to be nearer to me. “Tell me, Leo. Does the back look like it fits right? Run your finger down the seam along her skin. I want to make sure it’s secure.”

My breath hitched, and I expected Leo to protest, to argue that Atticus was being unreasonable. But instead, he closed the small distance between us and did as he asked. The moment he touched me, my nerves lit up. I felt the sensuous way he trailed his index finger down from the strap all the way to my lower back. I chewed on my bottom lip because it was nearly impossible to keep from squirming.

“It fits well. Perfectly,” Leo grunted.

“Good. Well, we can save that for another time. Why don’t you pick the next one to try on, Christine?”

I nodded and went over to the rack, finding a black gown that looked gorgeous. The detailing in the bodice caught my eye. It looked like an elegant wedding gown that had been dyed black. Shimmering diamonds were sewn into it, making it look like the night sky. “This one,” I said.

“Good choice.”

I slipped out of the red dress without any assistance and tossed it on the bed. Leo helped me step into the black dress, this time moving a bit more confidently than before, though there was still anticipation in the air. Even though he hadn't said a word, I could feel the way he looked for an excuse to touch me. How his eyes lingered on the curve of my breast. My stomach tightened as we pulled the dress up, and he moved to my back to tighten the corset bodice.

"Beautiful," Atticus said while standing up. He moved over to my front and inspected the gown while Leo was behind me, tying up each lace with precision. "Do you like this one, Little Monster?"

He stood at my side while I inspected the gown in the mirror.

And it was *stunning*.

The bottom of the dress was fluffy tulle, but the top was sinfully tight. Leo dragged his knuckles down my spine as he tightened the corset, making my breasts sit up higher in the gown.

Atticus leaned in and brushed his lips along the slope of my neck. "You look delicious, Christine. Such a shame it's all for August. A dress like this should be enjoyed by *all*."

I shivered at his words. "I was just trying to do the right thing," I whispered so softly Leo leaned even closer at my back to hear. They were both so close. It was driving me mad to have their undivided attention.

"Since when do monsters do the right thing, hmm?" Atticus asked, his lips migrating to my jaw. He peppered soft kisses there. "Monsters *take* all the pleasures they desire." He wrapped his hand around my waist and dug his fingers into me. "They claim without remorse or shame."

What was he suggesting?

"All done," Leo choked out, ending the tense moment.

I rolled my shoulders back and spun around to face Leo, feeling bold. "What do you think?"

He eyed me, and I saw feral hunger in his green gaze. He wanted me, that much was evident. I could see it in the way his hooded eyes drank me in and in the steady rise and fall of his chest.

But he also wanted me to get the hell out of here. The last time we'd truly spoken, I'd run away, overwhelmed that I was leading him on.

"You're...breathtaking, Christine... Augustus is a lucky man."

Atticus chuckled. "August isn't here right now, Leo. You're the one tying up her dress, *you're* the one standing just inches from her—close enough to touch. Are you going to spend the rest of your life in the shadows?"

Was Atticus encouraging this?

Why?

Leo opened and closed his mouth, as if he wanted to say something but couldn't find the words. I ached to know what was running through his mind. "I really need to get back to my post," he finally forced out.

I tried not to feel the disappointment, but it still hit me like a crushing wave.

"Your loss," Atticus said as Leo quickly scurried out of my suite, not even bothering to look back at me.

Once the door shut, I glared at Atticus. "What was that?" I asked.

Atticus shrugged. "A test."

"A test? What the fuck, Atticus, that was cruel."

He grinned and grabbed both my hips, forcing me to face him. "Cruel? I allowed him to see *my* monster in lingerie. I gave him a gift."

I blushed at how brazenly he claimed me. "Why?"

Atticus pressed into me, and despite the thick gown, I could feel how hard he was. "I was curious about how he feels and wanted to know what he responds to. I think Leo needs

someone to tell him what to do. The good little soldier likes following orders, and August and I like giving commands. I think the dynamic could work.”

I shook my head. “What are you even saying?”

He released his hold on my hip to tap my nose. “Nothing you need to worry about. But we do need to discuss that text.”

I slumped. “Atticus...I’m sorry, okay? I just...”

He gripped my back and tugged me close, his sprawling hand caging me in. “If you *ever* try to leave me again, I’ll tie you to my bed and make you scream my name until the whole castle hears. I’ll give you everything, Christine. Everything your beautiful heart desires. You want to go on a killing spree? I’ll line up men at your door. You want to share your heart with someone? I’ll rip mine from my fucking chest so you can see how it beats for you. I waited *years* for this. Watched you. Cared for you from afar. I’ve known since we were both teens that you were it for me. So don’t let something as fucking ridiculous as worrying what someone else will think get in my way. I’ll destroy them all if I have to.” I gaped at him for a moment, too stunned to speak. “Nod like a good girl so I know you understand.”

I did what anyone would do at that moment.

I nodded.

Chapter Twenty-Three

CHRISTINE

The smile on my face spread as I clenched my fist at my side. My mouth was dry, and I avoided licking my lips and ruining the red lipstick expertly painted on my pout. We were in a tunnel leading into the arena, and I could hear the crowd chanting in the stands.

“Long live the king! Long live the king!”

I wondered if they were paid actors.

Victoria, the royal publicist, paced in front of me, a notebook in her hands. Her knuckles were white from how hard she clutched it. “The Military Games are a longstanding tradition in the kingdom of Aldrich,” she began.

I knew this but didn’t bother to remind her. In spite of the fact that the woman was stressed to the point of exhaustion, talking seemed to calm her down. It was impossible for me to blame her for being high-strung. In the past few weeks, the Crown had experienced a number of events, including a funeral, an engagement, and an assassination attempt.

The Military Games used to be one of my favorite events. When we were young, August and I used to go every year. The competition was a fun opportunity for members of the royal guard to demonstrate their toxic masculinity and compete for a gold medal. In the past, I enjoyed the thrill of it, but now it just felt like another obligation. A week had passed since my engagement dress fitting with Atticus, and now August and I were standing here, ready to put on the show of our lives. “It’s very important that you both look in love,” Victoria added, giving us both pointed stares.

August huffed beside me. I’d only seen him a couple of times this week. He was busy trying to stop rumors about the rebellion in its tracks, putting on a display of strength, and navigating the less than favorable headlines. “I get it, Victoria,” he gritted.

She ignored his aggravated tone and continued speaking. “Sixty percent of citizens polled agree that Christine should have the right to pick her own husband. The other forty percent think that she should honor the arrangement King Frederick made with Lord Geralt.” She flipped through her notebook, and my stomach flipped. Seeing that headline had ruined my lunch. I hated that Lord Nathan was insistent on this marriage. I knew it was just a plot to gain power—most lords were *always* scheming—but it still made me nervous. August had assured me that I had nothing to worry about, but I still felt a sense of unease. I wanted to stay as far away from that man as possible. “We want to lean into the idea that what’s best for the country—what’s best for *Christine*—is this marriage. You need to look doting and kind, but also stern. This event is meant to display your strength, Augustus. So look confident, in love, but also in control.”

August’s knuckles brushed against mine. “You make it sound so easy,” he scoffed.

I bit the inside of my cheek, holding back a chuckle. It was obvious that he didn’t want to be here. “Your Majesty, you’ll be announcing the winner,” Victoria said, ignoring his barb. “And Lady Abernathy will award the medals.”

August went still. “I don’t like the idea of Christine going out into the arena alone. She’s an open target.”

The protectiveness in his tone surprised me.

Victoria looked to Leo, who was standing at our backs. He wouldn’t be participating in the events today because he was Head of Security now. “We’ve taken all the necessary precautions to ensure Lady Abernathy is safe. She’ll be escorted down to the field. We had a sweep of the building this morning. All organizers of the event have been vetted, and every person that enters the arena has to step through a metal detector. We also have the bomb squad on standby.”

I wasn’t necessarily afraid, but hearing how serious they were taking our security now that there was an active threat against us made me nervous. I knew I could defend myself, but there was still tension in the air.

“And what about our *special* guest?” he asked, making my ears perk up.

“We have all our men in place,” Leo said. “They’re gathering intel. If he tries anything, we’ll not only have documented evidence, but we’ll be clear to take him down. He shouldn’t be a problem.”

August nodded as Leo walked toward the wall to speak quietly into his radio. “Who is the special guest?” I asked. Victoria was busy making sure the photographers were ready and the announcer had the updated speech.

“It’s nothing you need to worry about,” August quickly replied. *Too* quickly.

I gave him an incredulous look. “I didn’t think we kept secrets between us anymore, August?”

We were running out of time, but I saw how conflicted he felt. His lips were pressed into a thin line, and his eyes scanned the space. “I know you’re aware about the claims Lord Geralt’s brother is making,” he said in a low voice. “It’s impossible to ignore; the papers are eating it up like it’s prime pussy.”

I giggled at his words, even though I felt the weight of anxiety on my chest. Lord Nathan was determined to get his story out there. Victoria had given me a rundown on the situation and how we were responding, but talking about it now made it all feel more real.

“Yes,” I croaked.

August snapped his full attention to me, bending so that he could peer into my eyes. “This is why I didn’t want to tell you.”

I forced myself to stand tall. “I can handle it.”

He cupped my cheek. “I know you can. I just don’t like causing you unnecessary pain. I spoke with him. He is being insistent about his claim on you. I’m handling it, but I also have reason to believe he’s behind the attack. I just want to keep an eye on him.”

“Why didn’t you ban him from the event?” I asked. I wasn’t angry that he was here, but I was still confused. August had the power to strip him of his title and forbid him from attending.

“Atticus seems to think this could be a good way to get intel. See who he’s talking to. See what his motives are. He won’t be in our suite. I made sure of that.”

I nodded. This entire ordeal wasn’t pleasant, but now it became significantly more intense. “I can handle it,” I said, mostly trying to convince myself.

“*We* can handle it,” August whispered. “And if you don’t trust me, then you can trust Atticus. He’s sharing a suite with Lord Nathan.”

I smiled a little to myself. I knew Atticus would keep us safe. “For the record,” I began, “I trust you, too, August. You sounded a lot like a king earlier—talking to Leo about security. It was impressive.”

I’d expected August to like my compliment, but his lips dipped into a deep frown. “I don’t want to sound like my father, Christine.”

I suddenly realized why my words upset him, and I grabbed his arm. “Your father would have never made sure I was safe,” I whispered. “You made sure I was taken care of *and* you told me the truth when I asked. You don’t just sound like a king, August. You sound like a *good* king. A good... husband.”

A big band started blasting music, but we locked eyes for a lingering moment. When the curtains were pulled open, we were still staring lovingly at one another, his eyes soft with adoration. My hand clutching his arm as I reveled in the comfort he offered. We ruminated in that moment as the crowd cheered and cameras flashed.

“Perfect!” Victoria hissed. “Keep looking like you love one another, and we might get through this.”

I blushed and finally released him, feeling bashful. And as August puffed out his chest to address the crowd, I realized

this farce of a marriage might be real.

* * *

I watched as a member of the royal guard stared at the target. It was the last competition of the day, and I was on the edge of my seat, watching with bated breath as the man focused.

“You’re enjoying this,” August said with a smile.

The process of pretending to have fun was easier than I had anticipated. August had curtains installed in our suite, so I was unable to see the room next door where Lord Nathan was sitting, and the crowd was eager to watch the games. During the duels, August brought me chocolate and popcorn, and I watched with a sense of excitement, gasping when a guard fell. During the archery competition, people cheered when a man hit the bullseye, but no one screamed louder than I did.

Knife-throwing, however, was the most thrilling event.

His right leg was braced in front of him as he practiced his aim, his muscles flexing as he calmed his nerves.

“Think he’ll hit it?” August asked me playfully. The crowd started cheering louder and louder, their excitement growing like a roaring crescendo.

“He has good form, but the weight of the blade makes it difficult to cross the distance. He’ll need to account for that. And he looks incredibly strong, but it’s control that will send it to the target,” I said, thinking of my years of training.

August cocked his brow. “Maybe you should compete.”

I flashed him a glance before staring back at the arena below. “I’d embarrass all the king’s men.”

The guard threw the blade and sent it spiraling through the air. I held my breath as it struck the target, just millimeters away from the center.

The crowd cheered wildly. I huffed in disappointment.

“Why do you look so disappointed? He won,” August said.

“But he didn’t hit the center.” I waved my hand toward the arena and grumbled.

“The future queen demands perfection, hmm?” he asked, though I sensed a twinge of insecurity in his playful words.

I grabbed his hand and squeezed. “Only with knife-throwing. Perfection is unattainable. I only expect happiness.”

My whispered words seemed to shock my king. He nodded once, then started staring at the men below, lost in thought.

“Time for the awards. Remember what I told you. Just put the medal around their neck and smile for the cameras,” Victoria said before holding her arm out, wordlessly telling me to get off my ass and follow her into the tunnel.

“Hurry back,” August said as I stood. “And don’t go fawning over those burly men.”

I laughed. “As you wish, Your Majesty.”

Victoria gathered me up and Leo followed us down the tunnels to position me to hand out the medals. It took us a while to take the metal elevator down to the ground floor, but when I entered the sand floor of the arena, everyone cheered wildly.

“Are you ready?” Leo asked.

I peered at the crowd. “Ready as I’ll ever be.”

As the announcer read my title to everyone, I walked down to the awards podium with my head held high.

“We are honored to have Lady Abernathy from the prestigious House of Rose, the future queen of Aldrich, present medals to the winners of our competition.”

Boos from a few crowd members caught my attention.

I struggled to trek toward the podium, the angry yells sporadically throughout the crowd catching me off guard. “Ignore them,” Leo said.

Easier said than done.

The men earning medals puffed out their chests when I walked up to them, and I positioned myself by the table full of bronze, silver, and gold medallions.

And when I spun around, I was greeted with a direct line of sight to the man I didn't want to see. A man I knew immediately was my adversary.

Lord Nathan looked different in his photos in the papers. He was shorter. More sinister. The smirk on his face as he raised his glass of champagne to me sent a shiver down my spine. The curt bow he tossed my way felt sacrilegious and demeaning. "Christine?" Leo said, though I barely heard him.

My heart started racing as I glared at him. The righteous indignation he practically vibrated with could be felt deep in my soul. He looked at me like I was meant to be his.

And I didn't like that.

I was no one's property.

"Lady Abernathy," the announcer said. In a flashy suit, with a bleached white smile, he was a tall, thin man. Everyone became silent when he addressed me, curious to hear us speak.

A microphone was thrust into my hands. This wasn't in the plans. I wasn't supposed to speak.

I forced myself to stop staring at Lord Nathan's beady eyes to look to Victoria. She looked frantic and angry as she waved her hands at me, mouthing something I couldn't understand.

I took the microphone and forced a smile on my face, though I could feel Lord Nathan's intrusive, violating, vile stare.

The announcer beamed at me. "Did you enjoy seeing the best men Aldrich has to offer?" he boomed, hyping up the crowd.

Everyone screamed excitedly while I forced my nerves down. I'd been raised in the castle. I knew what was expected of me. I could speak to the crowd.

Even with Lord Nathan glaring in my direction.

Even with my trauma bubbling up my throat.

“It was very exciting. We have fine men *and* women in our ranks. I’m proud to know they serve the best kingdom in the world.”

Even though the Military Games were a sexist boys-only club, I wanted to show my support for the women.

“I have to agree, we do have the best of the best.” He paused for applause, which he seemed greedy for. “What was your favorite competition of the day, Lady Abernathy?” he then asked.

I opened my mouth to answer, but I saw Lord Nathan again, and the sight of him made my words stall in my chest.

I hated the power that his family held over me.

I loathed feeling weak.

“Lady Abernathy?” the announcer said again.

“The knife-throwing,” I choked out while shaking my head. I could feel my limbs tremble. “I quite enjoyed the knife-throwing.” Lord Nathan tossed me another smile full of malice, and rage burned in my gut. I wanted to show him that I wasn’t a fragile tool he could use to boost his ego. I wasn’t helpless anymore. “In fact,” I added. “I happen to be quite the knife-thrower, myself.”

Many men in the crowd laughed at my words. Some of them so humored by the idea of a lady tossing blades at a target that they had to hold their bellies and tip their heads back for a drunken chuckle.

I lifted my head up as the announcer spoke. “Oh? A fine lady like yourself couldn’t possibly know how to throw a blade.”

My eyes burned with passion, and I felt that numb haze floating over my system. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Victoria jumping and wildly waving her hands, furiously trying to get my attention and stop whatever tangent I was on.

But I didn’t want to do the right thing, I wanted to do the *strong* thing. I wanted to show Lord Nathan it would take a lot

to bring me down.

I shoved the microphone into the announcer's chest, making an unpleasant sound echo across the arena, and marched toward the podium. The men standing, waiting for their awards, gave each other curious looks. "I'm assuming one of you has a knife, yes?" I said while holding my palm out.

They seemed flustered and unsure about all of this. "My lady, perhaps you should—"

"*You* should hand me the blade strapped to your belt so I can show all of you how it's done," I snapped.

The bronze winner, a man with long black hair and dark eyes shrugged. "If the future queen wants to throw a blade, I won't be the one to stop her." He pulled a knife from his belt and handed it to me. I made a mental note to get his name because I liked that he was the only one that listened. Obedience would be rewarded.

I spun around, testing the weight of it in my palm while staring at the target. I could feel everyone's eyes on me. I hated how tight my dress was and accounted for how it restricted my arms. Murmurs floated across the stands. Victoria was glaring at me.

I stole a look at August, who had concern etched into his features. His arms were crossed over his chest, and I could practically feel his disapproval.

Then, my eyes fluttered to Lord Nathan's suite, where Atticus was standing by the rail, watching me with his haunting eyes.

Little Monster, he mouthed.

His endearing pet name emboldened me.

Leo was at my side, silently encouraging me like the shadow he was.

I raised the blade. I let out a quick breath.

Calculating the distance and the weight of the blade, I focused on how hard I'd need to throw. When I needed to let

go. How long it would take to sink into my target.

And just as I tossed the knife, sending it soaring through the air. My fierce, deadly eyes connected with Lord Nathan as it landed right in the middle of the target.

Perfect throw.

Perfect execution.

The crowd was stunned silent for a moment and then erupted in cheers. It was so loud I flinched from the severity of it. A smile broke out along my face, and I rolled my shoulders back.

I was no one's property.

I would fight for myself.

Chapter Twenty-Four

CHRISTINE

“Our approval ratings are through the roof!” Victoria excitedly said while inspecting my dress for the engagement party. I’d been plucked and prodded all day for this event, and the royal publicist was riding the high of my demonstration at the Military Games. “People are calling you strong and the firm hand Augustus needs. Women everywhere are praising your independence. We have merch going live, and there is a waitlist!”

I smiled at her. The poor woman deserved some good news after everything this castle had put her through. “I’m glad,” I said, though I wasn’t feeling very *glad*. Truthfully, I was nervous. I shouldn’t have let Lord Nathan rile me up like that. Part of the plan was to be lethal *in secret*. By showing off just a fraction of my skills, I put a big target on my back.

People were supposed to think I was incapable of murder.

What would happen if they investigated Lord Geralt’s death more closely?

“Remember,” Victoria said. “Once you’re announced, you’ll meet Augustus in the middle of the dance floor and you’ll waltz.”

I nodded. Isabelle had forced us into dance lessons when we were both young, so I was well versed on it, even though we hadn’t had time to practice. August had always been clumsy on his feet when it came to dances, but he enjoyed spinning me around and making faces at our instructor.

“I understand. I can handle this, Victoria.”

She nodded and checked her iPad. “It’s almost time. Officer Winthrop will escort you. I need to visit with some ambassadors and get confirmation that they’ll attend the wedding.”

She fluttered out the door, barely saying goodbye before slamming it shut, leaving Leo and me alone in the waiting room before going out to the ball. I gave him a cautious

glance. Things had been so damn busy, even though he was always there, watching, waiting, silently drinking me in with those sultry green eyes. We hadn't really spoken.

"Will you be my shadow all night?" I asked.

He nodded once.

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Are you going to speak to me?"

Leo seemed to debate how to answer, his muscles rigid with tension. "I'm not sure what you want me to say."

"Anything, Leo. Say anything. You aren't just a shadow with me."

He swallowed, and I watched his throat bob as his eyes danced along my exposed collarbone, the way my breasts were pushed up, and the tight accentuation of my hips in my gown. "It's safer to be a shadow, Christine."

I walked up to him, my dress ruffling with every move. All you could hear in the room was the sound of fabric shifting and both our heavy breaths. Once we were toe to toe, I looked up at the handsome guard, with his royal uniform on and his blond hair pulled back into a clean ponytail.

"Shadows can't touch, Leo," I whispered before running my hands over his shoulders. "They can't kiss..." I leaned in and brushed my lips over his, taunting both of us with that invisible line in the sand that we'd both drawn. "Shadows don't *love*." I pressed my palm to his chest, right over his heart. I could feel the way it beat wildly just for me. "You can hover in the background all you want, but I'll always see you, Leo. Even with this ring on my hand. Even with the pain of our past. You make me feel safe. You pick me up when I'm broken. Don't hide from me. I can handle a lot of things, but I can't handle that."

He reached for my cheek, and I leaned into the feel of his rough hands on my skin, my eyes fluttering closed as I melted against him. There was something so incredibly warm about this cold guard. Something that brought me relief even in my

most vulnerable moments. I knew any future between us would be impossible, but I couldn't walk away.

“Shadows are always there,” he whispered. “And I'd rather follow you around, *protecting* you, than be banished again. It's a price I'll happily pay for the rest of my days, Christine. This is a line I won't cross, because I can't lose access to your life, and I don't trust your future husband *or* Atticus not to rip me away for getting too close.”

I furrowed my brow. “Leo...”

“We must go.”

He dropped his hand, and an emotionless expression fell on his face like an anvil, striking away the adoration he was showing me just moments before.

“We will discuss this later,” I said.

He didn't respond.

I walked down the carpeted staircase, feeling everyone's eyes on me. But it wasn't their intrusive stares that made my neck flush. It was the whispered words ricocheting like rogue bullets between them.

“I could never marry such a wild woman. A lady should be tamed.”

“I think she's lovely. Did you see the way she tossed that blade? She was fierce.”

“I think Augustus will get bored of her soon enough. A man with power like his wants a submissive wife, not an unpredictable brute.”

At the base of the stairs, I scanned the open space, looking for August. And when the crowd parted, he took a step forward toward me.

August looked handsome but too polished, too constructed for his normal self. If we were another couple with different obligations, we might have celebrated our engagement on a private beach with a bonfire and comfortable clothes. We would have walked along the shore hand in hand while whispering about the future.

Maybe one day we'd have that reality.

Around us, everything was decorated emerald green, echoing my engagement ring. Women wore their best dresses, while men picked custom suits embroidered with their self-importance. A string quartet was up on the stage, waiting for me to put my hand in his and start our dance.

"You look beautiful," he whispered for only me to hear.

"I'm uncomfortable," I admitted.

He took me in his arms and positioned our bodies for a dance. "So am I. They're all looking, aren't they?"

The music started. "Of course they are."

"Then I suppose we should put on a nice show so Vicky doesn't murder us in our sleep."

I laughed and he guided me around the dance floor, his feet more skilled than I remembered. He lacked the confidence of a skilled dancer, but he seemed determined to move with proud purpose, moving us by sheer grit.

I scanned the crowd nervously, searching for familiar faces and finding none. "Looking for Atticus?" he murmured in my ear before dipping me.

"Is he here?" Just as the question left my lips, I saw him enter the ballroom and adjust his bowtie. He was breathing hard and had an angry scowl on his face. Behind him, Isabelle entered, too. But where Atticus was feral fury, she looked...

She looked terrified.

I furrowed my brow. "Something wrong?" August asked before spinning me. When I collided with his chest again, my left foot stumbled. But he caught me before I fell, though the gasp and whispers traveling throughout the crowd let me know my misstep didn't go unnoticed.

"I just saw your mother walk in with Atticus."

August scanned the room. "Perhaps they were talking about Lord Nathan. You know my mother. Always scheming something. I'll ask her later."

I nodded, though I wasn't quite convinced. Something looked off between them, and I wanted to get to the bottom of it. "All the emerald green is giving me a headache," I said softly. Certainly the music would be done soon?

"It matches your ring."

I scoffed. "The ring Victoria picked out?" I stopped being bitter about it a few days ago but still felt the weight of it on my hand.

August stopped dancing and looked at me. "Victoria didn't pick it out," he said, his eyes narrowing. "I did."

My own eyes widened in surprise. "You did? When? How? And why did you leave it on my nightstand?"

The music faded to an end, the talented musicians noting that we were done dancing, and August waited for the polite applause to stop before dragging me off the floor and toward the side of the ballroom away from everyone else. "I picked it out at a shop downtown. Not a well-known jewelry store...but the woman selling it to me was very nice. Eager for the sale, too. She said..." He paused and a faint blush covered his cheeks. "She said emeralds stand for truth and love. I suppose I always want to be truthful with you, and I *do* love you. At the time, I was hoping the damn magic rock would make you tell me why you left three years ago."

"Oh, August," I said while placing my hand on his chest. "It *is* beautiful." My eyes looked down at the ring, the way it glimmered delicately under the chandeliers. "And that's a lovely sentiment."

"I wanted to give you a proper proposal, not one orchestrated by my mother. But I was worried you'd say no, so I left it on your nightstand."

"You can ask me now," I said softly. I knew what my answer would be. Despite the war in my heart and the reservations I had about living life in the public eye, I saw a future with him.

"I'm afraid I can't ask you," he replied. "You see, Christine, if I asked, that would imply you had any say in this."

But it's not my mother, this Crown, or your so-called crimes that draw us together. It's...fate. As obscure and obsolete of a construct as that is, you've been mine since the day you were born. You've had my heart since that night you moved in. We have been meant to belong together for as long as I can remember. It's too late to stop now. It's too late to ask."

My eyes shimmered with tears, and I lifted up in my heels to softly kiss his lips, not caring if the photographers caught us, not caring that there would be whispers. "I love you," I said.

"I love you, too, Christine Abernathy."

He wrapped his arm around my lower back and looked over my head, his eyes dimming at whatever or whoever he saw. I wasn't ready for the moment to end.

"May I have this dance?"

I spun around and nearly collided with Atticus. He was standing so close that the smell of his cologne filled my nose. The raw power rolling off of him made me feel weak in the knees, and some dark part of me *enjoyed* standing between him and August, soaking up their affection and intensity.

"I suppose I can share her for a dance," August replied tersely.

Atticus held his hand out for me to take, and I gingerly placed my manicured fingertips in his palm. "So kind of you, Your Majesty." Everyone watched as he guided me to the dance floor, and unlike August, Atticus didn't wait for the music to start. He placed my hand on his shoulder and *held* the attention of the room by moving me effortlessly. Controlling me.

Where August guided my steps, Atticus commanded them.

"Such a lovely dress you're wearing, Lady Abernathy," he said while tilting his chin up. Somehow, Atticus managed to intimidate onlookers while looking at me.

I gave him a bashful smile. "My stylist was a ruthless bastard. I had quite an interesting dress fitting."

He spun me around and crushed me to his chest, inhaling deeply before nuzzling my neck, consequences be damned. “Your stylist has impeccable taste.”

I tried to pull away, not because I wanted to, but because I could feel everyone’s judgment at my back. But his splayed hands over my spine held firm, not letting me move even an inch away. “If this were our engagement party, I’d play Eric Whitacre; you always liked that composer.”

My lips parted in surprise. “I’m surprised you remember.”

“Don’t you know by now, Little Monster?” He kissed my cheek. “I know everything about you.”

A shiver traveled up my spine as he moved me toward the edge of the dance floor. “Everything?”

“And more,” he replied. “I know your fears. Your heart’s demands. I know how you take your coffee, darling. And I know that when push comes to shove, you always rise above. They have no idea just how ruthless you are.”

“And you do?”

He spun me once more and pressed my back against his chest. His hand landed on my hips, and we swayed to the music. I had to shut my eyes to avoid the intrusive stares of onlookers. “We’re monsters, baby.”

As if commanded by his words, a loud explosion went off. Licks of fire caressed my exposed skin, and Atticus fell forward, blocking most of the debris and heat from singeing me. He let out a short cry of pain and a grunt while people everywhere started screaming in shrill octaves.

“Atticus!?” I yelled, my ears ringing from the explosion and my bones weak from landing on the ground. Smoke quickly filled the room as he yanked me up off the marble floor, which was covered in ash. You could hear the timbers of the room creaking and groaning.

“We have to get out of here!” Atticus’s words could barely be heard over the commotion. Blurs of bodies moved quickly around us. Shouting members of the guard bellowed directions, but no one was following them.

The selfish people of the court were in survival mode. It was every elite for themselves.

“What about August?!” My throat felt like it was closing up. With watery eyes, I scanned the room, terrified that something bad had happened to him.

“We don’t have time to get August. I have to get you out of here!” Atticus yelled.

A screaming woman with her arms on fire sprinted past us, wailing in pain. The smell of burning flesh singed my nose. I looked at the ground and gasped when I saw black hair in a puddle of blood.

A royal gown soaked crimson.

Nimble, lifeless fingers.

“Isabelle...” I whimpered.

Tears and soot dragged down my face as Atticus lifted me up. I sobbed hard, as no amount of numbness could save me from the turmoil and fear. I felt helpless and limp.

“I’ll get you out of here, Little Monster.”

My mind faded in and out. Every breath hurt. Inhaling was like dragging blades along my windpipe.

Atticus placed me in a car.

We drove away.

The last thing I saw was the castle burning before my world went black.

Epilogue

ATTICUS

THREE HOURS EARLIER

“Is a meeting right now truly necessary, Atticus? I don’t like being summoned.” Isabelle glared at me, and perhaps a normal man would have flinched under her scrutiny, but I wasn’t normal. I was a king in my own right. “It’s August’s engagement party.”

I poured myself a drink and eyed the former queen. There were cracks in her image. Fear in her eyes. Lipstick on her teeth. She wasn’t as prim and proper as she liked everyone to believe.

And I knew *all* her secrets.

“Yes. Your son’s engagement. I’m still not happy about that,” I said. Admittedly, this farce of a wedding was of no consequence to me. For some fucking reason, Christine was happy whenever August was around, and she needed time to acclimate to being back in Aldrich. I’d been working on a plan in my head, but I struggled with the reality of it.

Isabelle sneered. “I promised you that I would bring Christine back once Frederick was dead and find a way for her to stay without raising her suspicions. If you don’t like my methods—”

“I don’t,” I snapped. “We both know you saw an opportunity when I told you about her *skills*. You wanted someone to protect your son from the many enemies coming his way. You wanted a publicity stunt. And although it angered me, your methods *were* effective. I’m sure Christine wouldn’t have liked getting abducted at the airport by my men. And I didn’t want her running back to Harvington when she’s meant to be here.”

Isabelle licked her pink lips and crossed her arms over her chest. “So why the meeting? As you can imagine, I’m very

busy.”

“Lord Nathan is a problem. I need to know what he knows. You told me you’d have someone investigate his little rebellion, but so far it’s *my* men that have found intel of use. I’m starting to wonder what you even have to offer anymore.”

She scoffed. “These things take *time*.”

“Killing a king takes *time*. But when you came to me, worried that he’d find out about your dirty little secret and August’s *real* father, you gave me twenty-four hours to clean up your mess. You came to me with a problem, and I fixed it. There were terms to my agreement, and you keep finding ways to defy me.”

She took a step toward me and hissed. “We swore never to speak of that.”

I lifted my glass of bourbon to my lips and took a sip. “We swore many things to one another. Tell me who else knows about August’s real father? About his illegitimacy.”

Isabelle shook her head. “No one, I swear.”

“Then why is Lord Nathan building a rebellion with claims that August isn’t the rightful heir?”

Fear flashed across her eyes, saying more than her words ever would. “No one knows. They can’t know. Frederick is dead!”

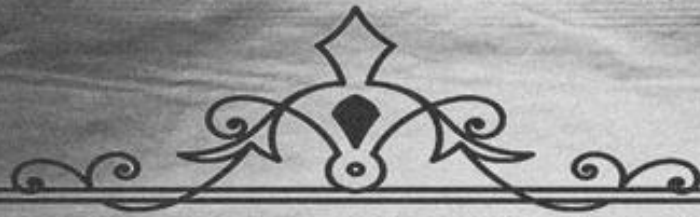
“But did he tell anyone before I got to him?”

She pressed her fingers to her lips. “No. We were careful.” Her eyes flashed to me. “Perhaps it was *you* who leaked the information. I’m not a fool, Atticus. I know how you pine for Christine and how willing you are to remove anyone in your way. I had hoped you cared for my son more than that, but perhaps not.” Isabelle walked over to me, standing so close I could smell the desperation on her skin. “You’ve become a liability. I suggest you tread very carefully from here on out.”

I smiled, refusing to acknowledge her accusations with a response. “With all due respect, Isabelle, I suggest the same to you.”

And with those parting words, I spun on my heels and left.

One thing I knew for sure. I'd do *anything* to keep Christine safe.



The Crown Times

Former Queen Isabelle Asher the Third
and Lady Abernathy of the House of Rose
pronounced Dead at Attack on Royal Engagement Party



Blazing inferno of the castle during the attack on the royal engagement party. The fire raged for hours, consuming the entire structure. The flames were so intense that they could be seen from miles away. The fire department arrived quickly but was unable to contain the blaze. The cause of the fire is still under investigation.

The fire destroyed the entire castle, including the royal engagement party. The fire was so intense that it could be seen from miles away. The fire department arrived quickly but was unable to contain the blaze. The cause of the fire is still under investigation.

Thank you for reading!

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