

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a white, long-sleeved, high-collared gown with a fitted bodice and a full skirt, is seated on an ornate, dark wood chair with a gold-colored metal backrest. She is looking slightly to the right. The background features a window with heavy, gold-colored curtains. The overall lighting is warm and golden, with soft bokeh effects scattered throughout the scene.

ROYAL
REFLECTIONS

III

RAVISHING REIGN

ALEATHA ROMIG

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Book three of the Royal Reflections Series

Aleatha Romig

New York Times, Wall Street Journal, and USA Today
bestselling author

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RAVISHING REIGN

Book 3 of the Royal Reflections series

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RAVISHING
REIGN
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“If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher.” ~ Abraham Lincoln

Buried beneath the surface where Princess Lucille’s world is turned upside down, she must make impossible choices. Truth or deception, life or death, loyalty or love.

Who will survive?

Have you been Aleatha’d?

From New York Times bestselling author Aleatha Romig comes a brand-new contemporary romantic-suspense series, Royal Reflections, set in the world of the royal elite, where things are not as they appear.

*RAVISHING REIGN is book three of the Royal Reflections series that began with RUTHLESS REIGN, continued with RESILIENT REIGN and RAVISHING REIGN, and will conclude with RELEVANT REIGN.

Prologue

End of book 2, RESILIENT REIGN

Roman

As Francis got out of the car, I contemplated jumping into the driver's seat.

The duke leaned into the open door with a grin. "This is where I keep the good stuff, the cigars and bourbon your sister doesn't know I have."

Fuck.

Cigars and bourbon.

I opened the door to my side and stepped out onto the frozen ground. The pond again caught my eye. However, despite the water being completely frozen and snow covered, a small square was cut away. "Ice fishing?" I asked.

At the same time, the door to the cabin opened.

I stopped as I stared at my own image.

"Noah?" I questioned.

"Oh," Francis said, "remember how I was confused? You see, I was never told about Noah...about Noah not being Roman. Isabella still doesn't know."

Noah's dark stare was focused on me.

"Imagine my shock," Francis went on, "when I received a visitor, my brother-in-law. But my sister's brother was in Molave. I knew that. Fuck, I thought I was seeing double."

“You’re alive,” I said, stunned at the sight before me.

“You know my name. That means you found what I left behind.”

I nodded. “I was afraid you were dead.”

“I was supposed to be. Lord Avery got me to safety, not in time to save himself. The king was presented with two charred bodies.”

I took a staggered step backward. “King Theodore called for your death?”

“Tell me you’re smart enough to figure that out,” Noah replied. “You’ve also fucked up my hard work. You see, Theo was supposed to be the one dead, not me. I would have been king.”

“You’re free now.” I looked from Noah to Francis. “He’s free. Help him get away.”

Francis smiled. “We have a new plan.” He nodded to Noah.

My heart stuttered as Noah pulled a pistol from his back waistband. “Whoa,” I said, lifting my hands. “I took a damn job. If you want it back...” As the words came out, I knew I couldn’t let this man back near Lucille.

He stepped closer, the gun raised. “Did they promise you riches? Did they tell you to bed the princess? I suppose you’re supposed to get the whining cunt pregnant.”

Standing tall, I clenched my jaw. “You’re wrong about the princess.”

His nostrils flared. “There can’t be two of us.”

I turned to my brother-in-law. “Do something.”

“Whatever your name is,” Francis said, speaking to me. “Let me share a bit of family history.”

My gaze went to Noah and his gun. “Not a good time.”

“This pond, it’s where Theo and Anne’s first son drowned. I thought it was an appropriate place for them to find their

second son's body. Not that you're really their son."

"You can't be serious."

He nodded. "I could hand you a gun, too. Then the two of you shoot it out. With both of you gone, Isabella will rule."

"No, she won't," I said, hoping what I was about to say was true. "Lucille is pregnant. If that baby is a boy, he will rule."

"Fuck," Francis growled.

I turned to Noah. "Go. Leave. I won't tell anyone you're alive."

The gun wavered in his grasp. "I can't do this."

"Don't do this," I screamed.

The ground shook as the gun's blast echoed through the cold air and red spatter rained over the snow.

Lucille

I woke from my nap with a start as I looked around the unfamiliar bedchamber.

"Roman," I called out.

The door opened inward as Lady Buckingham appeared. "He's still gone with the duke."

My stomach twisted as I wrapped my arm around my midsection. Lady Buckingham came closer. "Are you still not feeling well?" She laid her hand on my forehead. "You're not warm."

I tried to think back to the procedure. It had only been two weeks, but I could have gotten pregnant before that. Looking up at her concerned expression, I whispered, "Did we bring a pregnancy test?"

Her eyes opened wide. "Yes, but the king would want the royal physician—"

“Get me the test.”

This wasn't the first time my mistress and I had stood over a small indicator stick. It was the first time the lines began to form as we waited the recommended three minutes. I reached for her hand, afraid my mind was playing tricks.

The result didn't take three minutes.

It hardly took any time at all for both lines to become visible.

I staggered backward to the wall. “It's positive.” I looked up at Lady Buckingham. “It's positive.”

She nodded as her smile grew. “You should rest.”

“I need to tell Roman.”

CHAPTER 1

Lucille

Pregnant.
With child.

I stared down at the small stick as a cascade of emotions I'd never before allowed myself to feel surged through me. I'd never thought it was possible to experience such an overwhelming array of feelings for someone I hadn't yet met.

Love.

Devotion.

Fear.

Concern.

One and all were bombarding me at once.

Was it normal to worry about someone who you'd yet to meet?

I experienced all the concerns of mothers-to-be throughout history.

Was my baby healthy?

Would my baby be happy?

Would my baby be a girl or a boy?

Was this a world in which to bring a child?

Blinking away new tears, my gaze again met Lady Buckingham's. "This is real? Tell me it's real."

"It's real, Your Highness. I would expect that the crown would like you to be seen by Mr. Davies as soon as possible."

Molave.

That meant traveling to the capital. My thoughts scattered with Roman's and my current itinerary. Tonight, I'd be with Isabella as Roman attempted to visit Inessa. Simply the thought of her name made my stomach twist.

Instinctively, I fell back to my knees, waiting for what remained within my stomach to make its way back up. Though my brow dampened with perspiration and my pulse increased, the queasiness subsided.

Looking up at my mistress, I forced a smile. "Tomorrow, Roman and I are talking to the people here in Forthwith." We weren't far from the border between Molave and Borinkia. "And then we'll head back to Monovia. Thursday, Roman has scheduled Cardinal Decoti to visit and perform a blessing on our marriage. The king and queen are planning to attend." I made my way to my feet. "I don't want to postpone any of those activities. Friday, the prince is headed to the Fifteen Eurasia Summit."

Lady Buckingham reached for my elbow as she wrapped her arm around my lower back. "Let me help you to the bed. Resting is best."

Dutifully, I followed. However, as we neared our destination, I had a change of heart. "My nap from earlier helped, and I'm too excited to sleep." Scoffing, I laid my hand over my midsection. "I suppose that will change." My stare met hers. "I want to tell Roman."

"I'll text Lord Martin and inform him you request an audience."

"Yes, but please don't disclose the reason."

"Of course not." She jutted her chin toward the bed. "Perhaps you could rest and read?"

I nodded. "By the fire." My gaze went to the windows framed by ornate thick draperies. Beyond the panes the cold air creaked the bare trees, the empty branches shifting as a light but steady snow fell. "Just looking outside makes me cold."

"I'll get you a blanket, Princess."

As Lady Buckingham draped the quilt over my knees, I reached for her hand. “They can’t get rid of me now.”

“I dare say getting rid of you has never been their goal.”

It was.

At least it was discussed.

I knew that fact now because the man who Thursday I would wed had told me. He’d been honest with me. I also knew he had believed that divorce was the way to save me.

What my prince didn’t realize was he already had.

He’d saved me from isolation, from the sense of being unworthy, from horrible loneliness, and now from being childless.

“Did you text Lord Martin?” I asked.

“Yes, ma’am. He hasn’t responded.”

Tucking my hands under the quilt, I chilled. A ghost of a shiver ran over my flesh.

Is Roman with Inessa?

Has Francis taken him to her or brought her to him?

The dreadful questions continued, swirling like the outside wind, a cyclone capable of destroying the happiness that accompanied the discovery I was carrying a child.

As Lady Buckingham left me alone so she could fetch warm tea, the book in my lap was unable to capture my attention. Truly it wasn’t the book’s fault. It was me. I was unable to concentrate on the words on the page.

Will my Roman be happy or would he feel trapped?

He didn’t sign up to become a father.

Is he the father?

Or is the IUI been responsible?

Will I learn?

What will happen if this Roman is the father and that information is discovered?

What will the king do if the heir isn't truly an heir?

Those questions and more had made sitting unbearable. After walking to and fro, I found myself standing at the window when I heard a knock. Spinning toward the door, I hoped for Roman's dark stare, the way his gaze washed over me as if he were seeing beyond the surface and deep into my soul.

"Your Highness," Lady Buckingham addressed me as she entered with a tray of tea and cakes. "The children are awake and downstairs. Would you rather take your tea down there?"

Tugging on my lip, I shook my head. "I'll go downstairs once I'm sure I can keep a few of the cakes down."

"Are you not feeling well?"

I shrugged. "Queasy is a good word. Not bad, but not normal. I have so many questions about how I should feel and what I should do."

"Ma'am, I've carried something with me for the last few years. If you'll allow me, I'll go get it. It doesn't have all the answers, but it will help."

Questioningly, I nodded my head. "Please."

In a few minutes, my mistress was back with a box. Her hazel eyes shimmered. "Better than anyone, I've watched you," she began. "It's a great honor to serve you, Princess. Your heart is kind and your nature generous. Fitting into the mold of the royal family hasn't been easy. I've watched as you tried. In the last few months, I've watched you not try."

My eyes opened wide.

A smile curled her lips. "It's a good thing. You've stepped out of the mold to become yourself, not a reflection." Her expression dimmed. "Even when news isn't good, you've pressed on. You are resilient and a blessing to Molave. If the prince is finally realizing that, it's truly an answer to prayer."

I swallowed the growing lump in my throat.

"He's trying," I admitted.

Lady Buckingham handed me the box with a single ribbon tied into a bow. Untying the ribbon, I opened the box as a smile came to my lips. When I looked up, my mistress was blurry. Wiping away my emotion, I thanked her. In my hand was a copy of *The Girlfriends' Guide to Pregnancy*.

“You’ve carried this with you?” I asked.

“I personally have never had a child. I hope you don’t mind; the spine is cracked as I’ve spent many nights reading. The author’s approach is informative and light. I want to be all I can for you. I can only imagine this is a time when you’d prefer your mother.”

“That’s a tricky question, Mary. I would love my mother to be with me. That doesn’t mean I’m any less pleased to have you with me on this journey.”

She looked at the plate that had contained three small cakes. Two were gone, and I’d taken a nibble from the third. “How were the cakes?”

“They seem to have settled my stomach.”

She grinned. “The book says that eating frequent small meals may help morning sickness.”

“This isn’t morning.”

“No, ma’am, the book says that too. There’s no definite road map.”

I laid my palm over my midsection. “I want to tell Roman.”

Lady Buckingham’s expression soured. “I’ve texted Lord Martin again and still no response.”

“That’s odd.”

“It is. Are you ready to go downstairs and take your mind off the prince, with the wee prince and princess?”

“I believe I am.”

CHAPTER 2

Roman

I'd heard stories of one's life flashing before one's eyes when dying or facing imminent death. Hell, I'd played the scenes in Broadway shows and on the silver screen. A rapid succession of memories, much like old filmstrips that rattled in the projectors in days gone by. Some of the strip was discolored with age—those memories from long ago. Other images were bright, pristine, even vibrant—their clear appearance representing the magnitude of their meaning.

As the ground shook and a second blast of the gun reverberated over the cold, frozen countryside, I experienced what up until that moment had only been myth.

It wasn't a myth—the phenomenon was real.

My life flashed before my eyes.

Thirty-eight years in only a few seconds. One would think it would be impossible to see so much in such a short time, but the truth—the reality—was the opposite. The images that resonated in my mind were more than my cognizant mind would ever be able to recall, as if nearing death caused the veil separating the conscious from unconscious to be ripped away.

Before me, I saw my mother's face as a young woman, proud and strong. She'd been a force to be reckoned with. Despite her pristine uniform, when her gaze met mine as her soft hand reached for my cheek as a little boy, I saw the woman beneath. There was the smile that curled her lips and the twinkle in her green eyes. It was the look she shared with my sisters and me.

Mom.

I wanted to go to her.

All too soon, her smile dimmed as illness stole her vitality. For only a brief second, I remembered her cold small hand in mine as she tried to speak about my father. The memory was dimmed by the overwhelming depth of sorrow I felt at losing the one person who had always been there for me, the one person who loved me unconditionally.

I wasn't alone. That intense emotion showed on my sisters' faces as well.

We'd been blessed with a love I'd never thought to emulate. A selfless love that put others before oneself. That flicker of reminiscence faded as other memories took its place.

A rapid onslaught of moments. They weren't the ones I would have guessed—the times when the audience applauded or the director nodded with a smile. My mind knew those times had occurred, but instead, in those flickering of seconds, I saw faces—friends, lovers, partners. It was the people I recalled as I prepared for my own demise.

Lucille.

In the span of months, she'd worked her way into my heart and into the slideshow of my life.

Stumbling backward, I recalled her beauty. It wasn't the outward display that many complimented. It was what was within her heart and soul, her dedication, her devotion, and her desires.

I couldn't leave her, not without telling her how important she'd become, how much I truly loved her, and how I wanted only the best for her.

Is a will to stay bound to this earth and explain what hasn't been said the way my mother felt as she held my hand, mumbling about a man I had no desire to know?

With unfocused vision, as if through a fog, I saw Noah only meters away—his resemblance to me similar. If I should feel concern over his being, that emotion was overshadowed by what he'd done to Lucille.

I couldn't die, not with him alive.

I wouldn't leave Lucille with him, not with Noah.

A third blast pulled me from my self-indulgent walk down memory lane. No longer was I secure in Lucille's embrace, hidden from the world in one of our bedchambers. No longer was I a child, looking up to the face of a mother's love. The accolades I'd received were irrelevant.

The frigid and stark world around me rang with gunshots echoing throughout the mountain ranges and over frozen tundra. In an instant, I was hyperaware as my fight-or-flight response sent hormones racing through my circulation. In a quick move, I sat upward, assessing my own mortality and the chance of my survival.

My breath came quick, creating a fog, and my trembling hands lost feeling.

I scanned the scene around me. My attention focused on the blood spatter marring the shimmering, snow-covered ground. Such as a camera focused upon each drop, I followed the evidence back to the source.

Moving to my feet, my gaze met Noah's as he slumped to the ground.

Our resemblance was truly visible, yet that fact was far from my thoughts as I scrambled toward him, prying the pistol from his hand. He gave little resistance as blood dripped from his temple, darkening the snow in a deep-red puddle. Turning on the safety, I slid the small revolver into the pocket of my coat.

"Fuck, Noah," I screamed, shaking his shoulders as his eyelids grew heavy. Ripping the leather gloves from my hands, I pressed against his neck, searching for a pulse.

With my ears still ringing, my body trembled with the unnerving silence that had engulfed the scene. Everything was clearer than it had been a moment ago. The sleeve of my wool coat was saturated with the same red as the snow, yet I felt no pain.

The man with my resemblance grew paler, his lips turning a shade of blue, yet I hoped I felt a faint pulse.

“Francis,” I screamed, my Molavian accent intact. “We need to help him.”

A quick glance over my shoulder and the sight of the duke shook me to my core. A second gun was in his grasp, pointed toward Noah and me. With his head shaking and confusion filling his expression, he seemed almost in a trance-like state.

I didn’t think.

There wasn’t time.

Retrieving the small revolver from my pocket, I released the safety and pulled the trigger. Unlike those around me, I wasn’t a killer.

I was a survivor.

My firearms training came early in my life. My mother taught my sisters and me what we needed to know—a healthy respect for the power in a gun.

My aim hit my brother-in-law’s leg.

Francis’s confusion faded as he too squeezed the trigger, his knee giving out, buckling under his weight, forcing his shot over our heads and into the air.

Dropping the gun, I rushed to Francis, now crumpled to the snow. “Fuck, don’t be dead.”

His eyelids fluttered as if he’d just awakened from a long hibernation. Questions swirled in his gaze as he squinted up at me. “What...?”

“Don’t fucking die, asshole.” My words hung in the air, suspended in condensation.

Francis’s brow furrowed as his mind seemed to catch up to reality. “You fucking shot me.” With a grunt and a wince, Francis pulled himself to a sitting position. It was then we both noticed the blood on his pant leg.

“Let me,” I said, moving toward his knee.

The click of a revolver stopped me dead in my tracks. I met my brother-in-law’s cold stare. My accelerated heartbeat

returned, and my mouth grew dry as we were wordlessly caught in a game of chicken.

The first to move or speak would lose.

I wasn't playing games. "Francis, think about what you're doing."

"This wasn't how it was supposed to go," he said, the gun unwavering.

"You're going to be okay. He" —I thrust my chin toward Noah while maintaining eye contact with Francis— "needs our help."

Francis shook his head. "He was right. There can't be two of you. You won't help with the Volkovs. It would be better if there were none."

None.

I wished for a script or a director, something or someone to direct my next move. Perhaps a rewrite as I eyed the revolver lying on the snow near Noah.

If this were a scene in the comic franchise, I would step aside, and a stunt double would appear in my stead. The irony hit me as I briefly considered who the double was, Noah or me. He was of no use.

There was no direction to be had.

No time for a rewrite.

Whatever happened next was up to me.

Physical abilities I hadn't utilized since arriving to Molave came back with a vengeance as I lunged at Francis, pushing him back. Another gunshot rang out, missing all targets, as I wrestled him for his gun. We both winced from our injuries as we cursed and rolled upon the icy ground. My left arm was mostly useless, but I had both legs. Quickly getting to my feet, I stomped on Francis's hand, the one holding the gun.

He screamed out profanities as the heel of my boot landed on his fingers. While Francis was younger than Roman, I

wasn't Roman. I was also in better physical condition than the duke.

The Lord Divisto from the comic universe returned.

Once the revolver was free, I reared back my fist and falling to my knees, threw a punch, connecting with the duke's cheek. The second one landed under his eye. From the first strike, my knuckles ached, sending searing pain up my right arm. I continued the abuse as blood came from his nose and lips.

So focused on survival, I didn't hear the approaching footsteps crunching through the snow. It wasn't until I heard my name—the one I'd sworn to uphold—that I sat back, breathing heavily with my body trembling, and realized the Duke of Wilmington lay unconscious beneath me.

“Prince Roman, stop.”

CHAPTER 3

Lucille

Rothy tugged on my hand. His dark eyes shimmered as his smile blossomed, lighting his round face. I looked questioningly toward Isabella.

“I believe he wants to show you something.”

Rothy nodded his head, causing his dark curls to bounce.

Lady Buckingham had been right. The children were the perfect distraction for my cyclone of thoughts. Allowing the young prince to take my hand, I let Rothy lead me toward the toy area in the family’s private den. Soon the young prince had a book pulled from the shelf and was showing it to me.

“Do you want me to read this?” I asked.

Rothy nodded again. It was as I sat on the rug that he climbed onto my lap. For only a few seconds, I closed my eyes, inhaling his sweet scent and entertaining thoughts of my own child.

“Are you well?” Isabella asked, her forehead furrowed as she sat on the rug with Alice in her grasp.

Feigning a smile, I shook my head. “It’s been a roller coaster the last few...” —I sighed— “for a while. One minute I see hope and the next it seems to disappear.”

“Auntie,” Rothy said, his pronunciation off with his child-speak.

Nodding to Isabella, I began to read the book he’d chosen. I soon learned it wouldn’t be the only story. The first book was about a very hungry caterpillar. As I spoke the words, I recalled this book from my childhood. Maybe children didn’t change. They were the same from generation to generation.

The world around them differed, but instinctively, they remained the same.

Dependent upon those who loved them.

Starved—as was the caterpillar—for love, attention, and knowledge.

As Rothy pointed at the pictures and repeated basic words, I had an overwhelming sense of duty. It wasn't to Molave or the king. It was the knowledge that within me was a little person who would look to me for all their needs.

I couldn't think about the role of my child's father.

My heart wanted my Roman to step up and willingly take the title of father. However, my mind was too aware of the truth. Oliver wasn't Roman. He wasn't my husband and very likely not the biological father. No matter what the future held, my child would know unconditional love from me.

“Another one,” Rothy said.

It was after a few books and a complete traffic standstill with toy cars and trucks that Sherry, the nanny, appeared. With a bow of her head, she looked to Isabella. “Your Highness, shall I take the children to their bedchambers? Dinner will be served soon.”

With Alice in her arms and Rothy's hand in hers, the nanny stepped from the den, leaving Isabella and me alone. As my stomach twisted with memories of our last conversation, I stood and brushed the front of my slacks.

Isabella reached out and grasped my arm.

My gaze met hers.

“Have you thought about what we discussed?” she asked.

“Among other things,” I said, lifting my chin. “You seem to believe I'm capable of persuading Roman in matters of state. You couldn't be more wrong.”

“Borinkia could be Molave's greatest ally.”

Borinkia.

Inessa.

Is Roman with her as we speak?

Taking a deep breath, I sat on a nearby sofa and crossed my ankles. “The United States is our ally. The countries present at the Eurasia summit are our allies. At this juncture, King Theo is the one who decides our allies.”

Isabella came closer and sat beside me, her knees near mine. “I love my father.” She shook her head. “He has a wonderful heart for those he loves.” Her shoulders drooped. “But Lucille, we are the next generation. It’s up to us to make Molave a better place for Rothy and mostly for Alice. Imagine having your own child.”

My nostrils flared as I nodded.

I’d imagined it more than Isabella could know.

“If your firstborn is a girl, shouldn’t she have the rights of the firstborn?”

“You’re aware of my lack of heirs.”

“There are ways.”

I shook my head. “I’m the moon to Roman’s sun. I will respect his decisions.”

Her forehead furrowed. “He’s worn you down.”

It wasn’t a question but an observation.

I didn’t respond. Two months ago, she would have been right. Now things were...different.

“I had hoped.” She frowned. “Many of us had hoped that you would want to steer the monarchy—”

“Steer?” I questioned as I stood, my volume rising. “I’m far from the helm, Isabella.”

“Then be the rudder.”

“What of Inessa?” My voice cracked with emotion I didn’t want to have, much less show.

Isabella crossed her arms over her chest and walked toward the windows. “You asked if I know her.”

I waited.

“I told you the truth. I do. I have for years. Francis and Alek have known one another since childhood. Inessa and I met while I was at university. Ten years my junior, she was a student in a class I taught.”

My lips pinched together. “You’ve known her that long.” Longer than me. I didn’t say the last part.

Isabella spun my direction. “She was spirited even then. I didn’t know about her and Roman, but maybe if you were more like her...”

My eyes opened wide as my lips pressed together. Finally, I replied, “Roman married me. I will not aim to be more like a mistress to keep my husband.”

“But the blessing. My brother wants your marriage to work. That’s what he said earlier today. The people of Molave are elated. They’d surely rebel if he divorced you. Father would never allow it.”

Squaring my shoulders, I met Isabella’s gaze. “Yes.”

She tilted her head.

“Yes, I’ve thought about the future of Molave and what that would mean to a female heir. In any case, you were born second. Roman is older than you.”

“Third, you forget about Theodore III.”

“Queen Anne has perfected the role of queen in King Theo’s eyes.”

“If being blind, deaf, and mute is perfection, Mum has succeeded.” Isabella let out a breath. “Don’t be her. Molave needs you to be more. I need you to be more. Alice...”

“It is unfair of you to ask me to do what you will not.”

“I can’t, Lucille. I am outspoken with my husband and even with Papa. One humors me and the other turns a deaf ear. Have you considered help conceiving?”

I tilted my head, trying to keep up with the conversation. “Help?”

“It was Mum’s idea.” Isabella’s voice lowered. “When Francis and I wed, I was already the age you are now. I suppose I wanted miracles—a wedding night conception.”

“I don’t understand. Rothy and Alice...? You and Francis wasted no time.”

“Rothy” —Isabella looked around the room— “he was conceived via IUI, intrauterine insemination.”

My gaze narrowed. “It was Queen Anne’s idea?”

Isabella nodded.

“What were Francis’s thoughts?” I asked.

“He was against it.”

“You did it anyway?”

Isabella feigned a smile. “I did. Mr. Davies told Francis they wanted to test...well to see if there was a problem. There wasn’t and” —she took a deep breath— “what I’m saying is that it could help.” She sat at my side. “I’m sure Mr. Davies has asked Roman for...samples. If the physician kept them...” She shrugged. “After the way the people responded to you today, I’m cheering for you. Roman could never change his mind if you were with child.”

Standing, I tried to process all that my sister-in-law was saying. As I did, a wave of nausea caught me off guard as simultaneously, a slight film of perspiration coated my skin. “I’m not in a good place to continue this discussion.” I looked toward the windows. “Have Roman and Francis returned?”

Isabella shook her head. “I’m beginning to worry.”

My pulse kicked up a few notches. “Why are you worried?”

“Francis was agitated after listening to Roman’s speech in Odnessa.”

“What would he do?”

“Nothing,” she replied too quickly. “I don’t know.” She turned away.

“Isabella?” I questioned, reaching for her shoulder. “If you know more than you’ve told me...Don’t hold back now.”

Before she could answer, a knock came to the door of the den. We both turned in time to see Lady Johana, Isabella’s mistress, enter. Her complexion was pale and her expression was off. “Your Highnesses,” she said with a curtsy.

My pulse that had been racing slowed to a crawl as if my body didn’t want to go forward in time. I reached for the back of a tall chair to keep from falling.

“What is it, Lady Johana?” Isabella inquired.

“It’s the duke and the prince, ma’am. There’s been an accident.”

An accident?

“Where is Roman?” I questioned. “Is he all right?”

CHAPTER 4

Lucille

“Ma’am,” Lady Johana replied.

As she spoke, Lady Buckingham appeared. With a quick curtsy, her hazel gaze met mine. With each tick of the clock, my pulse raced faster and faster. My fingers holding to the chair blanched as my grip tightened and my vision blurred.

“Roman?” I questioned, a swell of emotion percolating within me.

Lady Buckingham came forward and reached for my hand. “Your Highness.” She turned to Isabella. “Highnesses.” She nodded. “Lord Martin informed me that the prince and the duke are on their way to Molave Palace.”

I sucked in a breath.

“Why not bring them here?” I asked.

“Are they injured?” Isabella asked.

Lady Buckingham worked to keep her tone and tenor even. “Apparently, yes, there are injuries. Of course, King Theodore was immediately informed. He called for them both to be flown to Molave for the best of care.” She squeezed my hands. “They are both expected to make a full recovery.”

A stray tear slid down my cheek as I fought the horrible images in my mind.

How many times had I thought about something happening to my husband, something to make him stop his abuse and allow me to take a leading role? I’d dared to dream of such a thing. Now the concept of losing my Roman left me weak and filled with despair.

“What kind of an accident?” I asked.

Lady Buckingham shook her head. “We weren’t told. The king would like news of their accident, their injuries, and healing to be kept from the press for as long as possible.”

“Tomorrow,” I said, “we’re supposed to address the people in Forthwith.”

“I will be in touch with Lady Larsen and learn what your office as well as the prince’s and the king himself believe is best.”

“Our blessing?”

Lady Buckingham shook her head. “I’m sorry, ma’am. I don’t know.”

Isabella reached for me.

Spinning toward her, I was taken aback as she wrapped me in her embrace.

“We need to stay strong together.” Holding my shoulders, she moved me to arm’s length. “Our discussion and disagreements...they’re unimportant until we learn the status of our husbands. You love Roman.”

I wasn’t sure if it was a question, but as more tears found their way from my eyes to my cheeks, I nodded.

“I love Francis. Neither man is perfect, but I suppose I can even admit to loving my brother. We will all survive this.”

A new thought came to me. “Do you think this...” I looked to our mistresses. “Please give us a minute.”

My heart thumped with worry as Lady Buckingham and Lady Johana bowed and left us alone.

“What?” Isabella asked.

“Could this have to do with Borinkia? Would Alek dare strike against the duke and prince?”

Isabella shook her head. “No, I told you, Alek and Francis are friends.”

“Roman promised me he’d break off his relationship with Inessa. What if their meeting was a trap?”

Isabella’s dark eyes narrowed. “Roman told you he was planning to meet with Inessa—today?”

I squared my shoulders. “My husband and I are working on our marriage. Honesty is the best first step. Yes, he told me as much.”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Francis didn’t mention a meeting.”

This time, I reached for my sister-in-law. With her hand in mine, I decided for this moment in time we could accept our mutual concerns. “We must leave for Molave City.”

Isabella and I both turned to the door, knowing that beyond the barrier were our mistresses—the ones with the information.

We were the royalty, both of us princess and duchess. Our next move should be our decision. Neither of us believed that. We didn’t need to discuss it aloud. Our travel would be at the discretion of King Theodore.

Isabella went to the door. Opening it, she called for our mistresses.

“Princess,” Lady Buckingham said, her hazel stare meeting mine, “shall we go upstairs to your apartment and await news from Lady Larsen or the palace?”

I nodded.

Turning to Isabella, I forced a smile. “We will inform one another of whatever we learn.”

“Yes.”

Lifting my chin, I said, “I don’t mean to be rude, but I’ll be taking my dinner in the apartment.”

She nodded. “I think it’s best. I’ll be with the children. I don’t want them to know about their father until we know more. If you learn anything, you’re welcome in our apartments.”

We squeezed one another's hand.

As Lady Buckingham and I began to walk away, Isabella called out. "Lucille."

We both turned.

She stood taller, straightening her shoulders. "My brother has his princess, his future queen, in the woman he married. Show him that you are not only what Molave needs, but what he himself needs."

"I pray I have the opportunity."

My thoughts were everywhere and nowhere.

What has happened?

Is my Roman safe?

Does this have to do with Oliver not being Roman?

Does it have to do with the Volkovs and Borinkia?

My jaw clenched as I fought the thought of never seeing my Roman—Oliver—again.

Once Lady Buckingham and I were alone in the corridor to my apartments, I asked the question that had been on the tip of my tongue. "Do you not have any more information?"

"No, ma'am. I'll continue to try to learn. Lord Martin is with the prince."

"He is?" That alone gave me hope that the man I was being informed about was my Roman. "I thought he stayed here."

She shook her head. "From what I can glean, the prince and duke were away longer than anticipated, and Lord Martin went searching."

I let out a sigh. "I'm grateful."

As we entered the apartments, my gaze went to the book on the table near the fireplace, the one Lady Buckingham had recently given to me. New tears clogged my throat and filled my chest with sorrow. My hand went to my midsection.

“What if he...?” I began my question aloud, turning to Lady Buckingham.

Her voice was resolute. “The prince will survive. It’s what we were told.”

Will he?

If he doesn’t, will the monarchy allow him to pass away, or will he be replaced?

“What will I do?”

Lady Buckingham’s posture straightened. “You, Princess, will reign, a queen regent for your child.”

“I don’t know anything about matters of state.”

“King Theodore will teach you.” She looked down at my stomach and back to my orbs. “You are carrying an heir. Prince Roman will survive. However, if he doesn’t, one day, you will be the queen regent. Your duty is to keep Molave intact for the day your son or daughter can take the throne.”

Son.

Daughter.

By myself.

“Mary, I can’t.”

“Yes, Lucille. You can and you must. The people love you.”

“The king,” I said. “I need to call him.”

“It’s against protocol for you to initiate the call.”

If I were expected to take a position of authority, protocol would need to change.

I looked at my mistress. “Everything is against protocol. Have Lady Larsen connect the call. I must speak to the king.”

“Yes, ma’am. If you insist.” Her expression softened. “You must rest.”

I shook my head. “Not until I see my husband.”

As the fire crackled and snapped, my thoughts wandered back in time.

The first time my eyes met Roman's and the way the restaurant around us disappeared. His proposal atop the Empire State Building. The butterflies flapping their wings as I saw the same dark stare at the end of the aisle in the cathedral. Our courtship. Soaring through the air in his glider.

Glider.

Francis too was a pilot.

Did they fly to a meeting with Inessa?

As I was about to hurry to Isabella's apartment, Lady Buckingham appeared. "Your Highness, King Theodore is on the phone." Hitting the unmute button, she handed me my phone.

"Your Majesty."

"Papa."

"Papa," I corrected as my voice cracked with emotion.

"Lucille."

I didn't want to be soothed by his booming tone, but I was. Holding the phone in a vise grip, I went back to the chair before the fire, fending off the cold chill I couldn't shake.

"Please tell me about Roman."

"I'd like to discuss you first, Princess."

CHAPTER 5

Roman

High above the mountains, the helicopter flew in and out of icy clouds. The loud whirl of the helicopter's blades muted discussion. Nevertheless, for my own survival, I needed to stay aware.

From my seat, I stared over at the Duke of Wilmington. Francis's face was swollen, making him look as though he'd gone multiple rounds in a boxing match. The royal medic at his side stitched lacerations and applied a mask. From what I could gather, the mask had coolant to aid in inhibiting future swelling. I'd heard talk of a broken jaw.

For only a moment during our transfer, my brother-in-law had awakened. His words were mere muffled mumbles yet his ice-cold blue stare, the one coming from within purple contusions, was cognizant, accusing, and even threatening. His injuries weren't limited to his face. Fingers on his right hand were broken, that hand currently wrapped with ice packs.

I fought the memories of me inflicting his wounds.

A fighter wasn't who I claimed to be, not me Oliver, nor me Roman. In the moments that seemed to last forever on the cold ground near a pond prepared for my grave, I could look back and assess that I wasn't thinking rationally.

Survival mode was what I had come to call it.

All my life, I'd excelled in the arts.

Fighting in fiction was a choreographed dance. My thoughts briefly went to a musical written over half a century ago, *West Side Story*. When I auditioned for the University of Chicago, I'd performed "The Rumble," dancing the part of

Riff. The music was intense, the dance demanding. I'd worked for months to hit every mark.

I didn't want to think about the finale to the performance—Riff's death. It was emotional and sudden, the notes whirling to a crescendo. Performing the dance solo challenged me to create a scene so realistic the audience saw Bernardo as he plunged the knife into my gut.

Today's experience was nothing like that audition.

It was real, unchoreographed, and without rehearsal.

A part of me, a feral part that refused to die, rose up within me. I would need to convince King Theodore that the qualities I'd displayed were what was required in his son. A prince should fight for his life, his throne, his country, and those he loved.

The one bullet I'd shot hit my target. It wasn't Francis's heart I'd aimed for, but his knee, knowing such a wound would take him down. Currently, his leg was bandaged, and the bleeding stopped. Once we arrived in Molave City, I'd heard the medics say he would be headed to surgery.

Never in my life had I been as determined as I was at this moment.

The UDARVIS universe was exciting and challenging.

Broadway was exhausting and invigorating.

My career had ups and downs, highs and lows, peaks and valleys—name your metaphor. Each role mattered. From George Gibbs in the high school drama *Our Town*, to the infamous warlord, I surrendered myself to each performance.

Not one of those acts mattered the way my current role did.

As the helicopter continued our trek south, I knew that unlike the unconscious man resembling me, I wanted to stay Roman Godfrey. I needed to keep this role, not only for myself, but for Lucille. In my heart of hearts, I knew that neither of those reasons would convince King Theodore. I had

to make him realize that keeping me as Roman was best for Molave and above all, best for him.

What will I say?

To what will I admit?

Every once in a while, my attention went beyond the glass windows. This was my first ride aboard a helicopter. That was an interesting fact for a prince with Royal Air Force commendations. Perhaps it was the pain medicine flowing through my circulation, but I had the uncanny sensation of floating above the fray. Yet soon, I'd be back on earth and facing the consequences of what occurred.

When the royal helicopter arrived to Forthwith, it was prepared with three stretchers.

Only two were currently being utilized.

I was seated, not prone.

While the adrenaline within me waned, my injuries were mostly self-inflicted. My right hand ached, the flesh cut, and twice its normal size. The lacerations had been stitched and treated the best they could in its swollen condition.

It was difficult to assess without x-rays, but the royal medic believed I'd broken bones. As for my left arm, it had been disinfected and bandaged. More medical imagery would be necessary, but I was told the bullet entered and exited tendons and muscles, missing bone and major blood supplies. Physical therapy would be in my future but no serious damage.

The third stretcher contained the most severely injured patient.

As I stared at the tubes keeping Noah alive, I wondered why they chose to prolong his death. If what he'd said was accurate, and his death had been ordered by the king, why attempt to save him now?

More questions ran through my foggy brain. It was Lord Martin's presence, reassurance, and warning that kept me mostly mute. Closing my eyes, I thought back to the scene when he found us.

“Prince Roman, stop.”

Lord Martin’s voice was the equivalent to a director yelling ‘cut.’ The bubbling rage within me, the energy that had propelled me forward, evaporated.

Gone.

Exhausted and even stunned, I looked down, seeing the damage I’d inflicted as if I was seeing it for the first time. The carnage was beyond my comprehension.

Shocked to my senses, I reached for Francis’s shoulders. “Wake up. Wake up, you son of a bitch.” My order no longer held the urgency from before.

Crouched over Francis’s body, I turned to see Noah, still lying where he’d been. Lord Martin slowly approached Noah’s still body. Kicking the small revolver away, Lord Martin knelt and applied two fingers to Noah’s neck.

“Is he...?” I asked.

Lord Martin’s stare met mine. “It would be better if he were, Your Highness. Sadly, he has a pulse.”

I reached forward, applying my bloody fingers to Noah’s neck. Blocking out the sound of crunching snow, of Lord Martin’s voice, and of the world around me, I closed my eyes and felt the thump of Francis’s pulse.

With a sigh, I whispered, “Thank God.”

Lord Martin appeared at my side, his hand extended. “Your Highness.”

Forcing myself upward, I moved to my feet. Each and every muscle in my body ached as I stood. It was the first time I looked down at my left arm.

“You were shot?” my assistant asked.

I nodded and assessed the scene. “It happened fast. I don’t know who shot who.”

“Did you shoot?”

Again, I nodded. "Francis's leg. He was going to kill both of us."

Lord Martin's eyes closed and his nostrils flared. After a deep breath, he spoke, "The king must be informed. Your Highness, this incident must never be discussed." He turned to Noah. "He was not supposed to return."

"We can't just let him die. He's sick."

"Sir?"

"Drug addiction—steroids."

Lord Martin's eyes narrowed. "How do you know that?"

"Does it matter? I'm not a killer. I'm not going to assist in a murder. Contact the king. I want to speak to him."

Lord Martin's expression paled as he took one last look at the ruin around us and pulled his phone from his coat. One call to Sir Connery. My assistant walked away as he spoke. When he returned, he announced, "The king is sending a royal helicopter with medics. He wants all three of you brought to the palace."

"Three," I said with relief. "He will let Noah live?"

"How do you know his name, Your Highness?"

I was comforted to hear my title intact. It meant the charade was still in progress. "He told me before he pulled the gun."

I walked near Noah's body. "There were multiple shots. I don't know if Francis shot him or if his shot was self-inflicted." My gaze met Lord Martin's. "I want to speak to the king."

"You will, sir. Once you're to Molave Palace."

"What about Princess Lucille?"

"I suggest that you prepare yourself for King Theodore."

Now, as the helicopter neared Molave Castle, that was what I was doing, preparing for my most important audition ever, the one to keep my job.

CHAPTER 6

Roman

Mr. Davies suggested I rest, yet my body wouldn't obey. Pacing back and forth inside the private room within the palace infirmary, I prepared for my upcoming audience. King Theodore was coming to me.

That knowledge wasn't comforting.

In the nearly three months I'd been in Molave, never had King Theodore ever come to me. On every occasion, I'd gone to him. A wince and I looked down to my right hand. The x-rays revealed multiple broken bones. As with my arm, no surgery was required. I'd been given a strong dose of antibiotic to stop infection, and my gunshot wound was treated and bandaged. My hand was now supported by a fiberglass cast and immobilized. Moving my fingers was painful at best. I was promised once the swelling receded it would be more comfortable.

Nevertheless, I refused pain medication, exercising my rights and privileges as heir to the throne. It was reassuring, at least minimally, that no one had argued that claim.

Despite Noah's presence on the helicopter, I continued to be the one addressed as Your Highness. In the hour or more since we landed, I was separated from the other two patients. I assumed Francis was in surgery. As for Noah, I was afraid to speculate.

I stood tall as the door to the examination room opened inward.

"Your Majesty," I greeted as King Theodore entered.

His dark gaze narrowed as he scanned me from head to foot. Tilting his head toward two chairs, he said, "Sit."

Taking a deep breath, I maintained my standing. “While I initiated nothing,” I said, “I fought for Molave, for Lucille, and for my life.”

“Hmm.”

“Would you rather I died?”

“No.” His chin tilted again toward the chairs. “Do as I said.”

“Are you here to fire me?”

“I’m here to talk.” His volume rose. “Take a damn seat, Roman.”

It was a reflection of this ruthless world that hearing the name I’d taken, not my actual name, was at this point reassuring. With a sigh, I did as he said and sat.

Still standing, the king spoke, his volume lowering. “Mr. Davies informed me of everyone’s injuries.”

Everyone.

That included Noah.

“Does that mean Mr. Davies is privy to my identity?”

The king’s stance straightened. “Mr. Davies knows what the people of Molave know. You, Roman, are my son and the heir to the throne.”

“Surely—”

He lifted his hand. “To discuss this is treason. A man was found today, an impostor, attempting to impersonate you. He tried to kill both you and the Duke of Wilmington. His crimes are indefensible.”

“Francis?” I asked.

“Surgery. His jaw was fractured, requiring it to be wired shut for a period of time. His right hand suffered multiple fractures as well.” The king’s lips quirked. “Perhaps fortuitously, speaking or writing will be difficult for a time.”

Relief gave way to a never-ending stream of questions. No longer able to sit, I again moved to my feet. “Your Majesty,

must I live with the fear of one day being charged with an indefensible crime?”

“Tell me, son. If you were king and presented with evidence of crimes against Molave, collaborating with our sworn adversaries, involvement in a plot to assassinate a sovereign, and impersonating a royal to gain access, would you take mercy?”

“On my own son?” Yes, I knew Noah wasn’t Roman, but I would need to explore that truth before mentioning it to King Theodore.

The king lifted his chin. “Life presents us with difficult decisions. As king, the greater good is always a factor in those choices. The good of Molave outweighs sentiment.”

“I’ve...” I thought about the charges he’d cited. I squared my shoulders. “Decisions regarding life and death have never been up to me.”

“One day, they could.”

“Could?”

“I could outlive you. That isn’t a threat,” he quickly added. “It’s a fact. Today you faced death.”

Death.

I’d faced it.

I’d fought it.

“I’m not saying this is a genuine offer,” he began, “but if I were to suggest immunity and the ability to walk away sworn to secrecy, would you accept? You see, the opportunity is here and now. The crown could announce Roman’s passing. We have a body.”

A body.

I felt the blood drain from my face.

A body. That meant Noah was dead.

“Is he...dead?”

“Not your concern.”

“It is,” I protested. “He could help us, tell us what mistakes he’d made.”

“I asked you a question regarding your devotion to the crown, not to weigh in on the acceptable punishment for crimes committed.”

I looked down at my injured hand and over to my left arm. When my gaze met the king’s, I shook my head. “No, Your Majesty, I would not take immunity. I’ve spent the last few hours contemplating a similar scenario. I foresaw my exit as involuntary, at which point I’d decided to argue for my continued devotion.”

“Why?”

“I can’t answer that with the clarity that I should.” When he didn’t respond, I went on. “I won’t bore you with the whole of my life before coming to Molave, but as I faced death’s stare, my regrets weren’t for things I did or didn’t do in the past. My regret was for failing you and Lucille. I fought death because I didn’t want to leave this life, this role. I can’t explain the connection I feel to Molave. It’s unwarranted and unlike anything I can recall. Here, in this country, I have a calling and a purpose.” I shook my head. “Forgive me for being sentimental. I’ve never died before.” A smile came to my lips. “Not in real life.”

“Rest,” King Theodore said. “Don’t concern yourself over the fate of others.”

“Francis? I was the one...”

“The duke will need time to recover. Once he’s able to speak, we will ensure that all our stories match.”

“And that story?”

King Theodore opened the door and motioned for someone to enter.

Elizabeth Drake, the chief minister, joined us. After a neck bow to both of us, she turned her attention on me. “Your Highness, I’m pleased to see you relatively unscathed.”

A gunshot.

Multiple broken bones in my hand.

I wasn't in surgery or in a morgue.

"Subjectively, I agree."

The king spoke, "Mrs. Drake has the information that will be going out to the press."

Of course, she did.

"Go on," I said to the chief minister.

"You, Your Highness, and the Duke of Wilmington were victims of an attempted assassination. You were ambushed on Forthwith, causing the duke's car to crash into a tree, resulting in injuries to the duke. Security is being tightened on all royal grounds. The attacker could be rogue, but the royal guard and Molavian Bureau of Investigation is investigating claims that he may have ties to anti-royal extremist groups throughout Europe. Unfortunately, we will never know for sure. As your battle with the attacker proceeded, he chose to take his own life, instead of facing his consequences. That obviously limits our ability to learn more. Thankfully, both you and the duke survived. Boldly, you fought to overtake the attacker before he committed suicide."

"Suicide," I repeated.

"His head wound was self-inflicted. That has been verified," Mrs. Drake said.

"And Francis will corroborate this?"

"He will," King Theodore answered. "He doesn't have a choice."

"Lucille?" I asked. "Was she told the same thing?"

"It is the only story to be told," Mrs. Drake said. "And the princess's office was informed."

"Her office? I should call her."

"I have already spoken to her," King Theodore said.

CHAPTER 7

Lucille

After completing the call with King Theodore, I stood for a moment in the warmth of the flames. The fire before me crackled and snapped such as my nerves, synapse after synapse exploding beneath my skin, making my flesh tight. For once, I wanted to go to my husband, to be by his side, and at the same time, I was honored by the trust King Theodore had bestowed.

Walking to the large windows, I stared through the frost-covered panes out to the now-dark countryside. Headlights cut through the nightfall, canvassing the sparse roads within the castle grounds and beyond. Near the illuminated gate to the castle, the duke and duchess's guards patrolled on foot.

As long as the guards were still searching, we were to stay put, secure in the castle. Watching the activity, I imagined disobeying the king and heading for Molave Palace. Forthwith was foreign and unfamiliar. If only Roman...every thought circled back to him.

He was safe in Molave.

King Theo relayed to the best of his knowledge what happened earlier today.

While on a drive, Francis's car was ambushed on the grounds of Forthwith. It was believed that in an effort to elude the perpetrator, Francis inadvertently crashed the auto into a tree. Roman then fought the perpetrator.

My breathing hitched as the king informed me that both Roman and Francis had been shot. My respiration didn't resume until he added the gunshots were nonlethal.

Shot.

My Roman had been shot.

And still he fought.

As the king described Roman's actions, I believed in my heart that man he referred to as Roman was indeed Oliver. His predecessor wouldn't have fought back. Noah may have been quick to raise his hand to me, but I doubted he had the gumption to fight an armed attacker. As for the real Roman, I no longer knew what he would do or if I'd ever met him.

Is it wrong that the man I care about is the man who was at my side earlier in the day?

A smile lifted my cheeks.

The warlord would fight—he had.

My prince.

My warlord.

My husband.

The marriage blessing we had scheduled for Thursday came to mind. We would have it. If not in Monovia then in Molave City. I quickly sent a text message to Lady Larsen, asking her to contact Cardinal Decoti. If this attack was meant to keep us from recommitment, I would ensure that it failed.

Laying my hand over my midsection, I spoke quietly to my child.

“I love him, the man I pray wants to be your father. If I ever tell you how we met, know that it wasn't wrong. It was fate. I wished him into existence, conjured him from far too many tears and heartbreaks. The Cardinal's blessing will be our vows to one another and to you.”

My heart ached at the knowledge that Roman didn't know about the pregnancy. I vowed he would as soon as I could get to him.

Time was a tricky thing. Sometimes it flew by and other times it dragged. There was no way to control the ticks of a clock. My thoughts were a concoction of relief, fear, and suspicion.

Who would dare attack the prince and duke?

Why?

I was deep in thought when a knock came to the apartment door.

“Come in,” I called, peering over my shoulder, expecting Lady Buckingham or my evening meal.

Isabella’s stare glistened with unshed tears. “Papa called.”

I nodded, turning to face her.

“They’re safe.” She rushed toward me, her arms surrounding me.

Returning the embrace, for a moment in time, we stood united holding tight to one another.

When she took a step back, her gaze met mine. “Roman saved them.”

“I’ve been told. I think I’m still in shock.”

“You knew?”

“Yes. I called the king. After we spoke, he asked me to wait to go to you. He wanted to speak to you first.”

She swallowed. “Francis is injured.” A tear slid down her cheek. “He’s in surgery.”

“King Theo says he’ll make a full recovery.”

Isabella nodded. “Did you speak about tomorrow’s appearance in Forthwith?”

I squared my shoulders. “The king asked me to go ahead with it.” I turned toward the window. “I’ve been watching the royal guards. Where were they?”

“What do you mean?”

“How did the person get within the grounds? How did he get so close to Roman and Francis? Why didn’t the guards stop him?”

Isabella shook her head. “I don’t know.” My sister-in-law moved to my side, also peering through the window. Together,

our breath created fog upon the glass. “I don’t know where they were. Papa said that now the guards are scouring the area, trying to determine if the man who ambushed Francis and Roman was acting alone.”

My stomach twisted. “He promised I’d be safe tomorrow. He’s sending additional guards from Molave City.”

“What about the ones that accompanied you here?”

Wrapping my arms around my midsection, I replied, “He didn’t explain.”

“He’s concerned about connections to the Eurasia anti-royal extremists.”

I hummed, unsure I believed that hypothesis.

Isabella reached for my arm. “Lucille, tomorrow I’d like to appear with you. Forthwith is our home, where Francis and I live. News of what happened will travel fast. Together, we can show that we have a united front.”

This day had been a roller coaster of emotion. The speech in Odnessa seemed as if it occurred weeks ago, not hours. My thoughts were filled with joy and sorrow. My temples ached and my filter was gone.

“Do we?” I asked.

“Do we?”

“Have a united front,” I answered.

“Well, yes, of course.” Her inflection went an octave higher.

“If news of Roman’s and my recommitment to one another is the reason for the ambush, what will you appearing with me say to the Volkovs?”

“What made you say that? Papa said anti-royal extremists. There’s no evidence or link that the Volkovs are responsible for what happened.”

Isabella was right about the evidence—or at least of what we’d been told.

My accusation was a feeling deep in my gut, one I'd devised while staring out into the night. I narrowed my gaze. "How would Francis feel about you appearing at my side, supporting the daughter of Lady Astid, a Letanonian baroness?"

Her hand went to her hip. "I thought I was supporting my sister-in-law."

Letting out a deep breath, I shook my head. "Of course." Maybe I was wrong to focus my attention on the feeling of betrayal that came earlier with Isabella's confession of friendship with the princess of Borinkia. "Don't you find it odd that this happened to our husbands when Roman was supposed to meet with Inessa? Who else would know their whereabouts on the grounds?"

"I told you; Francis never mentioned a meeting."

"Did he tell you he's helped Roman communicate with Inessa?"

Isabella took a step back. "No. That's not true." She shook her head. "That's so Roman."

I didn't respond.

"My brother has never taken responsibility for his mistakes. It's just like him to drag Francis into it."

I turned back to the window. "Tomorrow after the speech, I'm headed to Molave Palace. King Theo has given his approval."

Disappointment sounded in Isabella's tone. "He told me to wait."

"Why?" I questioned, turning back to her dark stare.

"Francis will be recovering. As I said, his injuries were more severe than Roman's."

"Are his injuries from the car crash?" I asked. "Still, you should be with him."

"I should." She took a deep breath. "I'm going with you. If Papa's concerned about danger, then the children will stay

here. I'll double the guards. They'll be safe, and I should be at my husband's side."

"The king...?"

Isabella's smile grew. "It won't be the first time that I've disobeyed my father."

We both turned to the sound of my ringing phone sitting on the table beside the chair where I'd been perched in front of the fire. Lying next to the phone was the book Lady Buckingham had given me. As I reached for the phone, I turned back in time to see the questions in Isabella's stare as she read the title on the spine.

Looking down at the screen, I sighed. "This is Roman. I'd like to take the call alone."

Isabella took a step closer. "Lucille, are you pregnant?"

"Always hopeful." I smiled. "If you'll please excuse me?"

As she walked away and closed the apartment door in her wake, I answered the call. "Your Highness, tell me this is you."

"My princess."

His.

It was all I needed to hear as my knees grew weak and I collapsed to the edge of the soft chair. "My prince. Is the news true? Are you well, and did you fight off an unknown assailant?"

CHAPTER 8

Roman

Lucille's voice was a melody, lifting my spirits and reminding me why I was still in Molave.

"My prince. Is the news true? Are you well, and did you fight off an unknown assailant?"

"I'm well," I answered, looking down at my bandaged hand. "The gunshot was through my arm. I'll be sore for a while. As long as they keep the infection away, I'll be fine."

"Is that all?"

"My hand," I said with a scoff. "Next time I decide to punch someone, I should wear boxing gloves."

"Oh, Roman."

"Papa said you're still going to speak in Forthwith."

Lucille hesitated. "I have mixed feelings."

"Why?" I asked.

"I want to go to you. I wanted you beside me as we had been in Odnessa."

"I'd feel better if I were. I insisted on doubling the guards. The people will understand the guards and my absence once word gets out about today's ambush." I hated not being completely truthful with Lucille. I told myself I would tell her the truth in person. Phone calls still had me unsure about who was listening.

Is it paranoia when someone was actually out to get me?

It wasn't a stretch for me to call what happened an ambush.

I was ambushed.

“I don’t know anymore,” she said. “Do you believe it’s safe to speak to the crowd and travel?”

“With the extra guards, I have faith.”

“Good, because after the speech, I’m headed to Molave Palace.”

“I heard that too.” I replied with a new levity to my voice. “I’ve contacted Cardinal Decoti. Our blessing will take place Thursday, here, in the palace.”

“You still want the blessing after... this...your life was in danger?”

Hearing the uncertainty in her voice made me want to be beside her, to reach for her delicate hand and lift her knuckles to my lips. “I still want it, Lucille. Have you changed your mind?”

“No,” she replied. “I contacted Lady Larsen to inquire if the cardinal could meet us at the palace instead of Annabella castle. I’m happy to say it seems you were a step ahead of me.”

“The people of Molave may want this blessing, but never believe that it’s all about them.”

“I miss you.”

“I wanted to hear your voice,” I confessed. “And for you to hear from me.”

“Thank you, Your Highness. I’ll sleep better knowing you’re safe. What of Francis?”

“I was told he’s still in surgery.”

Lucille groaned. “What happened to him?”

Nothing he didn’t deserve.

“Trauma to his face as well as a shot to his knee.”

“Face? Was it from the car accident?”

“It’s all a blur, Princess. There was the ambush, gunshots, and fist throws.”

“I’m so sorry. You shouldn’t—”

“Shouldn’t divulge what has yet to be stated,” I interjected. “Good night, my princess. I will arrange for a call with you prior to your appearance in Forthwith.”

“Roman?”

“Yes.”

Lucille exhaled. “Isabella asked to attend the speech with me, to present a united front to the people of Forthwith.”

I clenched my teeth with each word.

United front.

I didn’t have any evidence that Isabella was involved with the Volkovs, not as Francis was. Nevertheless, as she was Francis’s wife, I didn’t trust her.

“I’m asking for your opinion,” Lucille said.

Swallowing, I shook my head. “No. You will speak alone. Blame me. You and I will speak more of it in person.”

“Okay.” She sighed. “Thank you.”

“Tomorrow, show them your heart, Princess. And let them know our recommitment is still in motion.”

“Good night, Your Highness.”

“Good night, my princess.”

Disconnecting the call and leaning back in the office chair, I laid my phone on the top of the large desk. The computer before me was dark. After all, I wasn’t supposed to be in my office at Molave Palace but rather on a mini-tour with Lucille. My mind went back to Annabella Castle and the treasure trove of information hidden in the secret room.

The thoughts of Noah’s fate left me conflicted.

After all he’d done to Lucille, he deserved to face judgment.

Is death a fair penalty?

If he were allowed to live, I might have the chance to learn from him.

A knock took my attention to the door as Lord Martin entered.

“Your Highness,” he said with a bow.

“For another day, it seems.” I stood. “I haven’t had the chance to thank you...for what you did.”

His expression darkened. “I shouldn’t have allowed you to leave the castle alone.”

“I’m the prince. Isn’t that my decision?”

“Yes, sir. However, my intuition was speaking to me.”

I slapped Lord Martin on the shoulder with my left hand and grimaced before speaking. “If that intuition talks to you again, inform me.”

“Sir, your success—”

“I understand,” I admitted. With a grin, I added, “I was debating a bourbon or the pain medicine Mr. Davies prescribed.”

“First, King Theodore asked me to escort you.”

The small hairs on my arms and neck woke, standing to attention. “To where?”

“Within the palace, sir.”

“Did you save my life only to assist in taking it?”

Lord Martin’s eyes opened wide. “No, sir, I would never.”

I lowered my voice. “Noah said Lord Avery saved his life but lost his own.”

My assistant nodded. “I hadn’t heard, but I’m not surprised.”

“Where are you supposed to take me?”

“The king wants to see you in the infirmary.”

“Does this have to do with Francis?”

“I believe it does.”

Going back to my desk, I reached for my suit coat, wincing as I lifted the garment with my left hand. “Gah,” I muttered.

“Let me help you,” Lord Martin volunteered.

While in the past it was my assistant’s job to dress me, for the first time, I truly required his help. My right hand and wrist were immobilized in a fiberglass cast. My left arm was bandaged and ached from the gunshot. Unfastening the sling, Lord Martin helped me ease my right hand through the sleeve. After the left arm was sleeved, my assistant reconnected the sling and eased the cast hand within.

Due to the late hour, the palace hallways were relatively quiet as we made our way to the infirmary. Through the passage to the royal rooms, we walked. Instead of stopping, Lord Martin went to the end of the hallway and after inserting a key, opened a doorway to steps heading down.

“Where are we going?” It was the same question I’d asked Francis earlier in the day.

“You’ll see, sir.”

With each step along the way, my anxiety grew. The buzz of fluorescent lights and the tap of our shoes echoed as we followed another corridor. The hospital scent of disinfectant mixed with the damp aroma of mildew. Lord Martin slowed as we entered a final hallway. Four doors were shut along one side, all but one with darkened windows at their side.

“This reminds me of a prison,” I said.

“Yes, sir.”

The first room was lit with monitors and desks.

When we came to the fourth door, Lord Martin stopped. “King Theodore will be here soon.”

“This is freaking me out, man. Am I about to be imprisoned?”

“No,” King Theodore’s voice boomed as his loafers clipped along the tile floor, coming our way. “Thank you, Lord

Martin.”

“Your Majesty,” Lord Martin said with a bow before retreating the direction we came.

My gaze was set on the window. The monitors near the head of the bed offered barely enough illumination to make the scene within visible.

This wasn’t a prison.

This was a hospital ward on lockdown.

I felt my eyes widen and my lips drop open at the sight of the patient within.

“You,” King Theodore began, “are not the first man to take the role of Roman Godfrey.”

While this news wasn’t unknown, hearing it from the king’s lips was something altogether greater. “Yes, sir,” I said, my attention still focused on the man within the room.

I took a step back.

The king was sharing more information—additional reasons why I could never walk away from Molave. At best, I’d end up like the unconscious man chained to the hospital bed. Of course, he had the added crime of treason to his list of offenses.

“He said his name is Noah,” I replied.

King Theodore nodded. “I do my best to forget that the Roman standing before me had another life.” Crimson seeped from his neck up to his cheeks. “The world on a platter. A kingdom to rule. It’s what you’ve been given, son. He was too, but he failed.”

“Your Majesty, where is the real Roman?”

The king shook his head. Finally, his dark stare came to mine. “You’re the first one to be given the knowledge I just shared.”

I inhaled.

“The damage he did...” The king paced back and forth.
“You were right. We need to question him.”

“And if he doesn’t cooperate?”

“He’ll meet his consequences sooner rather than later.”

“Why?” I asked. “Why show him to me?”

“You saw him today. Was he the one to ambush you?”

“Yes and no.”

The king turned to me. Age had shortened his stature but not his presence. Although I was centimeters taller, I was dwarfed by his power and authority.

“Tell me the truth, Roman. I’m counting on you. Molave is counting on you. I didn’t want to burden you with the sins of brothers; however, today left me no choice. I can assume that Francis is aware.”

I nodded. “Francis told me we were going to go to a cabin at Forthwith, near the pond.”

The king’s eyes closed and opened.

“He said it was where he kept the good bourbon and cigars. I planned to speak to him about Inessa and figured the cabin would be remote.”

“What happened?”

“As soon as we arrived, Noah came out of the cabin with a gun. I don’t recall verbatim.” I shook my head. “It happened very fast. At first Francis said Noah and I could shoot it out and the one who lived would be prince. Francis also said Noah appeared at his doorstep a few days ago. It was after the state banquet.”

“That’s a problem.”

“Sir?”

“Where was Noah during the months I’d been told he was gone? Who else knows of his existence?”

I sighed. “You’re right. I’ve been a bit preoccupied to even consider that.”

“You are the one who attacked Francis.”

While he hadn't phrased it as a question, I nodded. “It was my life or his. At that point Francis said with both of us gone”—I gestured to Noah and to myself— “Isabella would rule.”

Pacing back and forth, King Theodore shook his head. “This was never supposed to happen.” His gaze met mine. “As you can imagine, few people are aware of Noah's presence.”

“Mr. Davies?”

“The royal physicians... Yes, of course. They have been informed since the beginning. Each time, each new...” He spoke in disconnected clauses. “We always hope it's the last.”

My mouth opened in shock at his openness.

The king continued to shake his head. “I could send royal or ministry guards to question Noah, but I am asking you.”

“Me?”

“When he awakens, you'll have the ability to enter his room.” King Theodore handed me a key. “Find out everything you can. Mr. Davies expects Francis to be unable to speak coherently for possibly up to six weeks—the time it will take for his jaw to heal. However, even with broken fingers, he will try to communicate. Get me something—anything—to keep the duke silent, to hold over him and ensure his allegiance. If that doesn't happen, I will be forced to conclude that the Duke of Wilmington is guilty of treason.”

“Isabella?”

“The monarchy is a ruthless world, Roman. There are no lines that are uncrossable when it comes to saving Molave. If the time ever came for Isabella to reign, it would be as regent until Rothy is of age. Francis Eriksen II will never have that kind of power. I will not allow it. You will reign.”

My gaze went back to Noah.

“Roman, after what Francis did to you today, I have to ask, wouldn't you agree that keeping Francis from the throne is a priority even after I'm gone?”

Slowly, I nodded. The only road to Francis's power was through my demise. "Francis's loyalty isn't to Molave."

"And yours?"

"Yes, Papa. Mine is." I looked the king in the eye. "I need to know everything, starting with the real Roman."

King Theodore grasped his hands behind his back. "In time."

CHAPTER 9

Lucille

Oatmeal and dry toast churned in my stomach as the royal guard opened the door to the armored car and the cheers from the crowd gathered at Forthwith grew louder. Signs similar to those in Odnessa were held high in the air. My name was chanted on repeat as a guard escorted me to the podium.

Questions came from around the venue:

“How is Prince Roman?”

“How is the duke?”

“Is the prince going to be all right?”

“How were they injured?”

Molave Palace released an official statement earlier this morning. The wording was straightforward with relatively little detail.

‘The Prince of Molave, Roman Godfrey, and the Duke of Wilmington, Francis Eriksen II, were injured while traveling the Forthwith grounds. Both men are recovering from their injuries.’

“I thank you for your concerns, prayers, and wishes of goodwill. After I speak with you today, I’ll be on my way to my husband’s side in Molave City.” I peered out at the people. Despite the cool temperatures, the crowd was as large as the venue could accommodate. All eyes were on me. “I’ve spoken with the prince multiple times. He’s in good spirits. The

cardinal's blessing of our marriage will go on as planned with a change of venue. Nothing nor no one will stop us from recommitting to one another."

The crowd cheered.

I went on to discuss the same items as yesterday: shipping concerns, supply-chain issues, the opening of markets, and access to health care. I even spoke about the commissions that Roman was spearheading within each province.

Everything was on schedule when one of the guards whispered in my ear.

"Your Highness, there's been a threat. We must escort you to the car immediately."

My gaze flashed over to Lady Buckingham standing just off the platform with other guards. Her pinched lips and hazel stare told me she agreed with the guard.

I lifted my hand. "Thank you for coming to see me today."

"Princess," a woman shouted from the crowd. "Without the prince present, do you have a statement about Prince Roman and Princess Inessa of Borinkia?"

The elation of my speech evaporated as I saw the article in my mind, the picture of Roman and Inessa.

"How can you support women and forgive what he did?"

"Princess," the guard said, motioning to the cars.

I took a deep breath. "My only statement is that the prince and I are recommitting to our marriage. We are stronger together than apart and never doubt, we will support and serve the women and men of Molave."

Applause erupted.

Waving, I said, "I'm off to see the prince. Thank you for your gracious reception and for coming out in the cold to see me."

Lady Buckingham reached for my hand as guards moved us toward the cars. It was as I bent to sit on the edge of the seat

that I heard the sound—a whirling and whining noise from above. Pausing, I looked up.

“Princess, in the car,” the guard said.

As the guard closed Lady Buckingham and me inside the car, the thick doors muffled the sound of the startled crowd.

“What was that?” I asked Lady Buckingham.

The guard in the front passenger seat was the one who answered, “A drone, Your Highness. We’d been warned of its presence.”

“A drone? Whatever was it doing? Where is it from?”

I jumped at the sound of an explosion beyond the car; at the same time, the driver began moving the car away. Craning my neck, I looked through the back window. “What happened?”

“The guards took down the drone, Princess.”

“Why?”

“The drone was flying in restricted airspace. We’ll know more once it can be examined.”

Lady Buckingham held tight to my hand. “Relax, Lucille. The guards are here to keep you safe.”

“Who means me harm?” My question resonated in the space of the enclosed car, no one venturing to answer.

Releasing Lady Buckingham’s hand, I laid mine over my midsection. Everything had changed. In the last twenty-four hours, my world had tilted. No longer was my concern only about Roman or even myself. If someone meant me harm, that amounted to wanting our child harmed too.

“We’re safe,” Lady Buckingham reassured. “The crowd”—she smiled— “they were appreciative that you didn’t cancel.”

Before I could answer, my phone in my purse vibrated. I opened my handbag and saw the name on the screen.

“Your Highness,” I answered.

“Lucille, I was informed that there was a threat.”

Hearing the prince’s voice stirred the emotion within me. “We’re safe. It was a drone.” I shrugged. “No one knows if it was truly a threat.”

“I will contact the royal guards. I want to be fully informed.”

A smile curled my lips. “Aren’t you supposed to be recuperating, my prince?”

“If that means spending the day in dreadful meetings, then the answer is yes. Nothing is as important as you. Tell the driver to take you back to Forthwith and change cars.”

“Your Highness?”

“Do as I said.”

The small hairs on my arms stood to attention at his change in tone. “Yes, Your Highness.”

“Speak to the driver now. I want to listen.”

Taking a deep breath, I moved the phone from my ear. “Excuse me.” The guard in the passenger seat turned my way.

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“The prince would like us to change cars at Forthwith before heading to Molave City.”

His expression morphed. “I will need to—”

I sat taller and steadied my voice. “Do as the prince orders.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I brought the phone back to my ear. “As you ordered.”

“Call me when you get to Forthwith.”

“Your meetings?”

“May be interrupted by my princess.”

When I disconnected the call, my gaze went to my mistress’s, and I shrugged. Lady Buckingham’s response was a

gentle patting of my coat-covered knee. It wasn't until we arrived at Forthwith that I learned of my new travel partner.

As the car door was opened, I met my sister-in-law's stare. "Isabella."

"It seems I've been summoned."

"By the king?"

"No, by my brother."

"Roman called for you?"

Isabella nodded as her staff loaded her things into one of the waiting cars. My staff was busy doing the same, moving my luggage from the car we'd been using and transferring it into another. Stepping inside the foyer of the castle, I called Roman.

"Your Highness," I said, "we've arrived at Forthwith."

"Is Isabella ready to travel?"

"Yes, but why?"

"Do you question me?" he asked, his volume louder than before.

"No. I'm confused."

"Lucille, travel in Isabella's car with her. I will speak to you when you arrive to Molave Palace."

My stomach twisted. After the way my sister-in-law and I left things last night, I wasn't looking forward to a three-hour car ride at her side. I was about to voice that to my husband, but before I could, the line went dead.

"Your Highness?" Lady Buckingham questioned.

"I will be riding with Isabella."

"The car seats six."

Opening my eyes wide, I grimaced. "I don't think I can ride facing backward, not for that long."

She reached for my hand. "I'll face you, ma'am."

“Let me go into the residence, and I’ll hurry back so we can leave.”

As the door was opened for me to enter, Isabella was at my side. “Aren’t we to leave?”

“Yes. I’ll be only a minute.”

She linked her arm with mine. “Let me accompany you.”

“Isabella, I’m capable of seeing myself to the toilet.”

“There is something I need to tell you.”

Isabella spoke nonstop about the rarity of Roman calling for her attendance. She couldn’t recall an instance in the last fifteen years, certainly not since she’d been married. Did I think this was about Francis?

I wasn’t sure what the change of plans was about, only that once within the confines of the bathroom, I enjoyed the silence. When I was done, I opened the door and to my surprise Isabella was gone. As I approached the foyer, I heard footsteps on the grand staircase.

Footsteps were not a rarity in any of the castles or palaces. There were always members of the staff, maids or secretaries, moving about. One quick look and I caught a glimpse of the woman near the upper landing. She turned in time for me to see her from a distance. It took a moment to register. Never had I seen her in person.

My forward progress came to a stop, and a cold chill skirted over my skin as for only a moment we locked gazes.

Inessa Volkov, the princess of Borinkia.

In my sister-in-law’s home.

With a deep breath, I lifted my chin, straightened my stance, and turned my attention on the doorway as a butler opened the door and addressed me. “Your Highness.”

Isabella was waiting by the car with a too-wide smile. “Your mistress informed me we were riding together.”

“It is as Roman requested.”

“Are you all right, Lucille? You seem pale,” Isabella said.

“Stress,” I said with a feigned upturn of my lips. “Perhaps we can all rest on our drive.”

Sitting beside Isabella and across from Lady Buckingham, I wondered if I’d imagined the princess, if instead she was one of the castle staff.

Is my mind playing tricks?

Isabella’s hand covered mine. “No matter the reason for Roman’s mandate, I’m happy to get to see Francis.”

“Who is staying with the children?”

“Sherry, their nanny, of course.”

CHAPTER 10

Roman

As the chief of the ministry spoke on and on about increasing security, I watched the clock. This wasn't to say that security didn't need increasing. My mind was elsewhere. The ticks continued slower and slower as I awaited news that the princesses were nearby. Pushing back from my desk, my chair rolled as I stood.

"I'm not satisfied. Call me paranoid," I said, facing Mrs. Drake. "What have we learned about the drone?"

"You're concerned, Your Highness, not paranoid. Concern is an admirable trait. As for the drone, very little. All the parts recovered from the machine are en route to Molave Palace. The only thing we can assume is that it wasn't an explosive. If it had been, taking it down would have caused it to detonate. The breakage happened on impact."

"Wasn't taking it down risky? What if it had exploded? There were hundreds of people and the princess."

"It was a calculated decision. If the princess was the drone's target, the armored car would protect her even in the case of an explosion. Thankfully, there were no serious injuries."

"Serious? You're saying that there were people injured?"

"Two were admitted to the hospital." She looked down at her phone. "Five others were treated and released."

Letting out a breath, I sat back down in my leather chair. "We need to find out who was operating the drone."

"We were fortunate to spot it. One drone is difficult, if not impossible, to identify on radar. The size makes it hard to identify. Most drones have what is known as drone ID. It's a

broadcast sent out by the drone to identify the digital license, serial number, speed, and controller's position. Even military drones are required to broadcast the drone ID." She squared her shoulders as she looked up from her notes. "Your Highness, the drone taken down in Forthwith did not have drone ID."

"That means whoever was operating it wanted to keep their information secret."

"Yes. Once what was recovered is brought here, we have a team of specialists who are able to disassemble the remains and give us a better picture. For instance, where the drone was manufactured is a start. That will be determined by the parts."

Holding my cast hand against my torso, I used my left to type on the keyboard. "It says here that a large number of drones are used for aerial photographs, basically reconnaissance missions."

"It could have been a test of our security, taking pictures to see how the royal and ministry guard were aligned to protect the princess."

My teeth clenched. I should have been with her. "No chance it was simply a child's toy in the wrong place at the wrong time." I was relatively certain that wasn't the case, but if it were, our security threat had lessened.

"High-end consumer drones travel up to eight kilometers. Military drones can travel a far greater distance."

"And this was military?"

"Due to the size, we can assume."

Leaning back, I inhaled and exhaled. "Am I the only one considering the drone came from Borinkia?"

"No, Your Highness, you're not. We've contacted the authorities in Oslo. This could be a warning shot before the Fifteen Eurasia Summit." Mrs. Drake sat straighter. "May I ask why you insisted the princess change cars?"

"I read that it's possible to program drones to follow a tracker." That wasn't completely true. In the universe where I

ruled that could be done. I went on, “GPS essentially. If the royal car had been identified with a tracker, another drone or worse could find her on her way here.”

Mrs. Drake’s complexion paled. “Without a drone ID, the usual mode of operation is GPS.” She nodded. “I’ll have the cars searched.” She paused for a moment. “If I may, sir?”

“Go ahead.”

“This position, that of authority, makes one paranoid. That doesn’t mean it’s wrong to act on your instincts. Lord Martin regrets he didn’t do that yesterday.”

“Lord Martin made it to me in time. For that he should be commended.” Thoughts of Noah in the bowels of the palace infirmary came to mind. “How did you find me, Mrs. Drake?”

“I came to your office, Your Highness.”

I lowered my voice. “The resemblance...how did you know? How did you find Noah?”

“This is not a conversation I’m at liberty to have.” She sat back and momentarily flashed a grin. “To be honest, I’m surprised you haven’t figured out the answer. You’re intelligent and quick. I can’t help but believe if five years ago we would have chosen you, instead of...” She pursed her lips. “I believe we wouldn’t be in the precarious spot we now find ourselves. The problem was at that time you appeared too young.”

Five years ago.

I was thirty-three.

Roman would have been thirty-eight.

I appeared too young.

That meant I’d been on the crown’s radar for at least five years.

Before I could come up with a sensible response, there was a knock on my office door.

“Your Highness,” Dame Williamson, one of my secretaries, said with a neck bow. “The princess’s motorcade

has entered Molave City.”

I let out a sigh as I stood. Turning to the chief minister, I dismissed her. “Return to me when you have more information on what we’ve discussed.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

Once my secretary and the chief minister were gone, I sent a text message.

“My princess, come immediately to our apartment.”

Tucking my phone into my suit pocket, I stepped out into the outer office.

“I will be away for the immediate future,” I announced to the room of secretaries and assistants.

“Your Highness,” Dame Williamson said, standing, “the king has requested you contact him. Shall I connect the call?”

“No, I’ll call from my cellphone.”

The entire office staff stood and bowed or curtsied as I left. Throughout the castle others addressed me and bowed or curtsied. If things would have gone differently—if Francis had prevailed—I wouldn’t be here.

The realization was a revelation. I wanted to be where I was.

Halfway to the grand staircase, my call reached King Theodore.

There was no greeting or salutation. As soon as the call connected, the king spoke, “He’s awake. Go to him.”

“I’m on my way to greet Lucille. I’ll be quick about it.”

“This is your priority, Roman.”

“First, Lucille. We have the blessing tomorrow.”

He hummed. “Yes, I almost forgot. Don’t be long. I want a full report.”

Disconnecting the call, I began to return my phone to my pocket, but as I was doing that, I saw a missed text message.

“Yes, Your Highness.”

A new smile came to my lips as I imagined those words coming from Lucille’s pink lips as her blue gaze looked into my eyes, unapologetically staring as if she were seeing a real prince, her real prince, the man she’d conjured in her mind.

Anticipation prickled my flesh as I made my way up the staircase and through the corridors toward our apartments. Barely twenty-four hours had passed since I’d last laid eyes on my princess, and yet simply the knowledge she was near and most importantly, safe, had me as giddy as a teenager.

Entering our apartment and closing the door behind me, the worry over Lucille’s safety returned concerns about the drone to my mind.

My knowledge of such things came from scripts, not research. As soon as I was told about the incident, I knew I couldn’t not act on what little information I had, be it accurate or fictional. If it were possible and Lucille’s car was tagged, she would have been an easy target on the deserted roads from Forthwith to Molave City.

Isabella was my extra shield.

If Francis was working with the Volkovs, his wife would remain safe.

I spun toward the door as it opened with a flurry and Princess Lucille appeared. She was ravishing, her cheeks flush, her lips pink, and her chest heaving against the bodice of her blouse as if she’d run from the entry.

“My princess.”

Barely stopping to close the door in her wake, Lucille rushed toward me and I toward her.

“Oh, Roman.” She stopped short of an embrace, concern lining her face as she stared at my hand. Her dainty fingers landed softly on the wrapping of the cast as her blue stare swirled with worry. “Does it hurt?”

Snaking my left arm around her, I pulled her flush to me and seized her soft lips. My hand, the one pinned between us, was forgotten as her soft curves pressed against me and her melody of noises filled my ears.

Moving my fingers to her hair, I pressed my lips against her as my tongue sought entrance, and for a moment, the curses of the world around us disappeared. When she pulled away, her lips were swollen and a deeper shade of red.

Lucille’s palms framed my face as her stare searched mine. “I’ve been so worried.”

“I’m well. I’ve been frantic since the drone.”

“I have so many things to tell you.”

I ran my thumb over her cheek. “And I you. Unfortunately, now isn’t the time. The king has an assignment that can’t wait.”

“Please don’t tell me you’re leaving the palace.”

“No, the assignment is here in the palace.”

“Tonight, may we talk?”

I nodded. “I want nothing else.”

Lucille tilted her head. “First, will you tell me why the change of cars? Why ride with Isabella?”

I ran my left hand over her arm and intertwined our fingers. “We will talk. I was hoping that the change in plans would get you to me in one piece.” My smile returned. “And all that matters is that it worked.”

“Roman, was this the Volkovs?”

My forehead furrowed. “Why do you ask that?”

“Because you were supposed to see Inessa and break off your” —she shrugged— “I hate the word...affair. Did you?”

“No, I didn’t get a chance. Things...went to hell.”

“And yet the Volkovs undoubtedly heard about our commitment in Odnessa to our marriage.”

I nodded, my jaw rigid. “There’s no time now to contact her or Alek before the Fifteen Eurasia Summit.” Letting out a breath, I reached for Lucille’s hand. “I wish I could go into our blessing tomorrow saying I’d seen her and whatever was started was over.”

Lucille inhaled, squaring her shoulders. “I didn’t speak to her, but I believe I saw her.”

CHAPTER 11

Lucille

Roman dropped my hand as he took a step back. “You saw her—Inessa. Where?”

“I *think* I saw her,” I corrected. “I’ve never officially met her—not in person, but I believe it was her.”

“Where? Was it at the speech?” His jaw clenched. “Do you believe the Volkovs were in Forthwith watching you? Did you see the prince? What...?”

I closed my eyes as his questions continued, his volume rising, and his gestures becoming more animated. In many ways, this Roman had truly taken on the mannerisms of his predecessor.

His gentle grasp of my shoulders came milliseconds before he spoke, his tone now softer. “Lucille, don’t leave me.”

Blinking, I stared up at his handsome face, seeing the concern in his furrowed brow and the swirl of emotion in his dark eyes. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Roman lowered his forehead to mine. “I didn’t mean to raise my voice. As soon as I did, I watched the color drain from your cheeks. Closing your eyes was your way to leave. Is that what you did with Noah?” His final question was a mere whisper, the subject eliciting my skin to prickle and my breath to catch. Moving his palms to my cheeks, he smiled. “I’m not him, Lucille. I may speak loudly, but I’m not angry, not at you.” He kissed my nose. “And even if I were, you have no need to shield yourself or fear me.”

Exhaling, I wrapped my arms around his torso and laid my cheek against his chest. The accumulation of this day—of the last few days—combined with a concoction of hormones was

almost too much. Listening to the steady beat of his heart calmed me, each thump returned me to the security of my husband's embrace.

Roman's voice softened. "Talk to me."

That was exactly what I wanted to do. I wanted to talk to him, not about Inessa Volkov but about him—and his wellness. About me—about the pregnancy. I also wanted sufficient time for both of those conversations.

In the opulence of the palace, time was a luxury we didn't currently have.

Lifting my face to his, I smiled, blinking away the moisture in my eyes. "I'm sorry." I softly shook my head. "I'm not apologizing." I explained. "I think I'm worried, tired, and emotional. I know you're not him. It's that sometimes—"

Bringing his finger and thumb to my chin, Roman lifted my face higher. "You, Princess, have had a busy day. I'm certain worrying about me and the drone was unnerving."

I scoffed, thinking that in the list of concerns for my day, the drone didn't make the top five. "You have been my greatest concern. I was afraid I'd lose you."

"As long as that's in my control, it won't happen."

His control.

That was my worry.

We both knew he wasn't the only master of his destiny. "May we dine alone?" I scanned the parlor. "Here?"

"I've already told Mum that we'll attend dinner in the dining room."

From Roman's expression, I saw I'd failed to keep mine from reflecting my disappointment.

"After dinner," he said with another kiss to my lips. "I love you, Lucille. Mum wants to discuss the blessing. Despite all that's happened. She's..." He inhaled and exhaled. "...pleased would be an understatement. Where do you believe you saw the princess of Borinkia?"

“At Forthwith, in the castle upon my return from the speech. Only briefly,” I explained. “I went inside to the toilet, and...” I shook my head. “It was odd. Isabella escorted me inside. When I returned, I heard footsteps coming from the foyer. When I reached the entry, a woman was at the top of the staircase. We made eye contact. I’ve never met the princess, but I believe she was the woman I saw.”

“This was before your drive to Molave City?”

I nodded.

“Did you speak to Isabella about it during the drive?”

Stepping back and wrapping my arms around my midsection, I shook my head. “No. I’m currently unsure how I feel about my sister-in-law. Isabella told me she and Inessa are friends, yet Isabella swore she didn’t know about you and her—the princess. Do you trust her?”

“The two people I trust are in this room.” Roman scowled as he stepped back and removed his cell phone from his breast pocket. With a growl, he read the screen and returned the phone to his pocket. “I wish I could stay with you.”

“You’re the prince. Your duties won’t wait.” I focused on his hand, the one in the cast. “Before you leave, please tell me if you are truly in pain.”

“Only at leaving you.”

“Your hand was shot?” I asked, realizing I’d not received detailed information.

“My left arm was shot. I broke my hand.”

My eyes opened wide as I scanned his left arm. Being it was within the sleeve of his suit coat, I hadn’t noticed a change. “*You* broke your hand, how?”

“We’ll talk tonight.”

“Did you know your attacker?”

His finger landed on my lips. “No more questions until we can discuss everything in full and in private. I don’t want to

give you an answer and then walk away without explanation. I *will* answer, Princess. I promise. Just not yet.”

I nodded, both trusting him to keep his word and also knowing the way Roman felt. I wanted to tell him about the pregnancy but not as he was rushing from the apartments to whatever awaited meeting was on his schedule. “Tonight, my prince.”

“My princess.”

With a kiss to my cheek, Roman bowed his head.

“Your Highness,” I said with a curtsy.

Watching Roman as he walked to the door, I scanned from his dark mane to his loafers. During the last months, he’d trimmed down and allowed his hair to grow darker. They were subtle changes, yet I noticed the difference. He’d told me he’d demanded that the padding beneath his suit be reduced each week. As for his dark hair, let the tabloids discuss the possibility he was afraid to age. I knew he was making Roman Godfrey into his real being.

For that, I couldn’t be happier.

Is it wrong that I’d fallen in love with a man I only recently met?

That question reminded me of our upcoming marriage blessing.

It was insanity for me to fret over my feelings.

Love wasn’t something one could control. I knew that now.

I’d fallen in love or lust with the man who proposed at the top of the Empire State Building. Our courtship had been what some called a whirlwind, truly a shorter courtship than the time I’d spent with Oliver. And then, slowly, I’d fallen out of whatever it was we’d shared. Each morning I’d remind myself that I was Roman’s wife. I’d remind myself of the way he had once made me feel. I hung onto those feelings despite the alarm bells sounding. Day after day was a constant battle; however, I refused to surrender to the idea that love was gone.

Everything has changed.

It wasn't instant the night we formally met.

The change happened slower, yet also fast.

Time was so subjective.

My feelings didn't morph in an instant, but with each hour I spent in his presence and with each encounter as we learned more and more about one another. Looking back, I was unable to pinpoint the moment when I knew he was the husband I'd dreamed of. Some would say it was too fast. In my defense, according to the king and the Firm he was my husband.

What did Roman say that Mrs. Drake told him?

She said for him to stop thinking like an American and to understand that here in Molave, the king made the rules. Well, that same king replaced my husband without consulting me.

I hadn't looked for another man.

No. I wished him into existence.

Whether the way I felt was right or wrong, I was deeply connected to the man who recently left our apartments. Morally correct or a sin worth damnation, I wanted him in every way and every day.

Tomorrow those concerns would be gone. We would receive the blessing of the Church of Molave.

My thoughts swirled as a knock on the door refocused my attention toward the entry.

Lady Buckingham appeared. "Your Highness. Are you ready for your midday meal?"

Truly, the time was past midday. Traveling had eaten up the hours. Despite the time, I wasn't hungry, but then again, I was no longer eating for only me.

"Yes. Thank you."

"I'll have something sent up immediately. Lady Larsen has a few items for you downstairs in your offices."

"Mary, I think I'd like to rest."

Her expression melted into one of concern. “Are you not feeling well?”

“Tired.”

She came closer. “I stayed away until the prince left. It’s not my business, but I was wondering how he...?”

“I didn’t tell him.”

Her eyes widened as she pursed her lips.

“I don’t want my announcement to be fit in between hellos and him rushing off to meetings.”

Lady Buckingham nodded. “I understand. Would you like me to schedule an appointment with Mr. Davies?”

With my hand over my midsection, I contemplated her question. Finally, I met her hazel stare. “Not yet. Roman should be told before the news circulates to the king.” With a glance down to my traveling clothes, I spoke my thoughts aloud. “I’d like to change into something more comfortable and after lunch, rest. After that, I will speak with Lady Larsen.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

CHAPTER 12

Roman

With Lord Martin at my side, we entered the infirmary, following the same path we'd traveled the day before. His low volume resonated to my ears only. "I've been informed only you will be allowed to enter."

My steps slowed as I took a sideways glance at my assistant. "Is there more I should know?"

"What you've been asked to do is above my security clearance."

His response would be laughable if my assignment wasn't so serious. "You've taught me—"

My assistant shook his head. "I've done and will continue to do my best. You, Your Highness, have progressed beyond my need to know. I'm simply accompanying you as your assistant. Any questions that arise must be taken to the chief minister or King Theodore."

As if I wasn't already uncertain about this assignment, now it seemed as though I was trudging through quicksand—make that an obstacle course where the view was impeded by dense fog and the footing was booby-trapped. "You're throwing me to the wolves."

"No, sir. I believe in you."

As we turned the corner, an armed guard came into view, standing near the entry to the final stairs and corridor. I lowered my volume. "This is new."

"Yes, you'll officially be entering a secured location."

Keeping my shoulders straight, I met the guard's gaze.

"Prince Roman Godfrey," Lord Martin announced.

Without hesitation, the guard bowed before opening the door to the hallway. I took one step inside as I realized the connection and dependence I'd formed with Lord Martin. Through the doorway, I felt the loss of my support, my director, and my helper.

"I will await your return," he said.

The soles of my shoes echoed in the concrete stairwell. Once reaching the lower level, I focused on the last door on the left. It was at the first door that I stilled. The command center of monitors I'd seen the night before were now being manned by two people dressed in scrubs, watching and assessing the vitals.

My mind told me that I was witnessing two more people who knew about Noah. Two people whose lives were now compromised by the Firm's secrets. Each time, I was stunned that the Firm would broaden the umbrella of knowledge regarding their impostor scheme.

A few more steps and I learned the misjudgment of my thought process. The medical personnel were not solely present for the impostor. Beyond the glass of the third room, the only light came from monitors. Unlike last night, this locked cell was also occupied.

Francis.

Despite the bandages and tubes, I had no doubt of the occupant within. Reminding me of a mummy from an old horror movie, Francis's face was wrapped, leaving only slits for his eyes. His left leg was in a cast and being held up by some contraption. His right hand was also four times its normal size due to bandages and was immobilized.

As he had the night before, King Theodore appeared, entering from the other end of the corridor. "The duke is not your concern," the king's deep voice reverberated off the walls.

My stomach rolled. "I did that."

"Never admit that again, to anyone. His injuries were sustained during the accident and subsequent battle with your

attacker.”

“He knows the truth.”

“That is what we must silence.”

My gaze met the king’s, unsure what he could be thinking or doing.

He lifted his chin. “I’d told Isabella to stay away,” he continued. “Now, she’s a problem.”

Swallowing, I nodded. There was no reason to fabricate an excuse. Too many lives were on the line. “Your Majesty.” I bowed my neck before continuing our eye contact. “I apologize for not discussing Isabella’s travel with you. I believe both Francis and Isabella are connected to the Volkovs. After the drone was taken down in Forthwith, I told Isabella to ride with Lucille.”

He inhaled. “Your order was to protect Lucille.”

“Yes.”

His palm came to my shoulder with a pat. “When you are king, my son, you will need to rethink your decisions. It’s not an easy task, but emotion must be removed from each situation.”

“Would you risk the queen’s life?”

“She is my one exception.”

“Lucille is mine. I take back my apology.”

With a slight grin, King Theodore nodded. “Good. A king doesn’t apologize.” He tilted his head toward Noah’s room. “We only have a few hours before Francis regains consciousness. Learn what you can.”

“He—Noah,” I clarified, “has a dependency, sir. He mentioned it before the attack began.”

King Theodore’s bushy eyebrows knitted together. “Dependency?”

“Steroids. I don’t know more,” I lied. “I would guess that he might ask for them. He asked for more the other day.”

“Impossible, unless he developed an addiction since leaving.”

“I don’t know details. I’ll tell you when I do. If he asks, may I promise him drugs for information?”

“Use your discretion. We need to know all that he’s done to jeopardize Molave.”

I nodded and removed the key from my suit coat pocket. “May I?”

“Report to my office immediately following this interview.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

King Theodore took a step to the window as I opened the door. For a brief moment as he looked at Noah, the king’s expression softened.

Is he sad that Noah failed?

Is it difficult to look upon two different Romans, knowing neither is his son?

The light within the small room brightened automatically upon my arrival. A toilet and sink were to the side of the bed as well as a chair. At the onslaught of illumination, Noah stirred, his dark stare veiled beneath his swollen eyelids as his jaw clenched, tightening the muscles of his face. Mrs. Drake’s comment that I was too young came back to me. Whether it was running for his life, his steroid addiction, or all his turmoil rolled into one, Noah had aged well beyond the reflection in my mirror.

Gaunt cheeks, dark circles around his eyes, and an overall emaciated appearance were a stark contrast to the man he was or who I am.

Without a word, I pulled a metal chair closer to the bed.

The cuffs around his wrists were soft, yet the chains attaching them to the railing rattled as Noah shifted. Finally, he spoke, “You should have taken the out. Dying is better than what you have in store.”

An unexpected combination of emotions swirled within me, coursing through my circulation as I focused on the man before me.

Pity.

Sorrow.

Empathy.

Sympathy.

Anger.

Wrath.

Loathing.

I wasn't a monster, and I wasn't king.

Emotions couldn't be ignored or removed from the scene before me. A small part of me felt badly for his plight. That same small voice reminded me that what I was seeing could one day be my reality. However, a louder voice reminded me what Noah had done to Lucille, the hell he'd put her through, the despair, the self-doubt, and the ridicule.

"Why didn't you?" I asked. "Why didn't you take the out?"

He squirmed and grimaced as he pressed the button to his side, activating the bed to move and him to sit taller. The bandage around his head appeared thick and heavy. When the bed stopped moving, Noah laid his head back with a sigh. Instead of looking at me, his focus was straight ahead toward the window. From this side, it appeared as a mirror. Noah was staring at his own reflection.

"Who do you see in the mirror?" I asked.

Noah scoffed. "I could ask you the same question." He moved his eyes to me. "You found my stuff."

I debated my answer, looking around the small room. Monitors beeped and flashed near the head of the bed with different readings, numbers, and a linear chart that continued to move. There were also bags of fluids hanging from tall stands with IV tubes attached to Noah's hand. My gaze skirted

the seam where the walls and ceiling met, looking for a camera or a recording device.

“I know who you are,” I replied. “I know you weren’t happy.”

“No shit.”

“I know you took that unhappiness out on Lucille.”

He smirked. “Are you tired of her whining yet? God, it was annoying. Don’t worry, if you aren’t, you will be soon enough.”

I applied more pressure to my molars, willing them not to crack.

Noah spoke again. “Why didn’t I get away. That was your question?”

“Yes. You were free. You said Lord Avery gave his life for yours.”

He closed his eyes and his nostrils flared. After a deep breath, he said, “I had no one. The money they promise is a lie. It’s all a lie. The life I’d had before was gone. Those who knew where I went are no longer. That isn’t all. They didn’t only kill them, they killed me.”

“You’re alive.”

He opened his eyes. “No. The real me, my identity. Once I was away from here, I traveled to Norway, to where I’m from. That’s when I learned the real me is dead. I went to my grave and read my headstone. What a fucked-up thing. Not being anyone is worse than being Roman. Standing there in that cemetery, I realized, I am no one. With no money and no identity, it’s fucking impossible to start over.”

“Is that what you want, to start over?”

“Don’t kid yourself. You can’t make me any promises.”

Scooting my chair closer, I lowered my volume. “I can. I will do my best to get us all where we want to be. First, you need to come clean with me. The Fifteen Eurasia Summit is in a few days. I need to know everything. Tell me about Inessa.”

For a second, a smile threatened to crack his sober expression.

“Do you love her?” I asked.

“No,” he replied immediately. “She was a tool, like the rest of us. This life is a fucking game of 3D chess.” His hollow dark eyes turned to me. “You know how to win at chess, right?”

“Take the king.”

“In this game it’s kill the king.”

“Don’t you think King Theo wanted you to succeed? Do you think he likes replacing his son over and over?”

“It’s power...Roman? What the fuck is your name?”

“You may call me Roman.”

“From this day to the end of your days,” he said mockingly. “Don’t get too comfortable, the end is coming sooner than you expect.”

I sat back and unbuttoned my suit jacket. “You said Inessa was only a tool. A tool for what?”

“To keep Alek happy.” A new more sinister smile emerged. “I know I’m not giving you new information. If you think I’ll do that, that I’ll spill what I know out of some sense of duty to Molave, Lucille, or the crown, you’re wrong. I could have shot you, but instead, I chose to place the gun on my own temple.”

“And yet here you are.”

He shook his head. “Yeah, I can’t even kill myself.” His gaze went to his right arm. It was the first time I’d noticed the bandage on his upper arm. “Something hit me as I was about to pull the trigger. I’m not getting much information. I wanted to know why the Firm would keep me alive when they wanted me dead, and now I understand.”

“What do you understand?” I asked.

“You need me.”

“I just asked you for information.”

“It’s more than that,” Noah replied. “You figured out who is responsible for everything, and the only way to know what occurred is through one of us.”

If this was a game of chess, I believed I was far from winning.

“Responsible for what—everything?”

His grin grew. “King Theo wants information, information that only I’ll share. Here’s the deal. Guarantee me a new life—not Noah’s and not Roman’s. The Firm can watch me and if I fuck up, take me out. Give me a goddamned chance, and above all, get me my steroids. If you can promise that, I’ll...as they say, turn state’s evidence. If I’m going to die in this cell, then fucking kill me now and you have nothing.”

Standing, I buttoned my suit coat and began to walk toward the door.

“Wait,” Noah called.

I turned. “I came for information. I’m not blind. I know I could end up where you are, but instead of fighting the system, I’ve decided to help it succeed. My job isn’t to negotiate, but if you want that, you need to be the first to give me something.”

“What do you know? What have you figured out?”

“Tell me something I don’t know, something that will show King Theodore you are serious.”

Noah took a deep breath and for a few moments kept his lips pressed together. As I turned to the door, he stopped me.

“Tell Papa it was me. I can’t take full credit for the plan, but I’ll admit I was the one to carry it out. A little every few days. You see, too much would draw attention and a lethal dose would warrant an investigation.”

“Do what?” I asked.

“Have they brought you cherries? Cherries with pits?”

This seemed like a shift in gears; nevertheless, I answered, “Yes, a small bowl with each breakfast.”

“Do you know what comes from cherry pits?” While I searched the recesses of my mind for the answer, Noah sighed. “It’s up to you, Roman. You can take that information to *Papa*” —he emphasized the endearment— “or you may see the beauty and ease of the plan and continue it yourself. The prize is the throne and complete control. Damn, it was a nice pipe dream.”

“Tell me about Francis,” I said. “Why did you go to him for help?”

“No one else would have helped. In case you wonder, he was honestly taken aback.” Noah chuckled. “To think, he’d been plotting with an impostor.”

“Plotting? With Borinkia? Against Molave?”

Noah shook his head. “That’s all I’m giving you. Take what I’ve said to Papa. If you return with a promise, I’ll share more. If you don’t, my time is done. When I die so will all I know.”

CHAPTER 13

Lucille

In the dining room, seated beside my husband, I worked to maintain my façade—my posture straight, my expression even, and my attention on Queen Anne. After all, with the five of us present, including the king and queen, I wouldn't say the act was easy, discussing tomorrow's blessing as Isabella glared from the queen's side.

Hours ago, when Isabella appeared at the door of Roman's and my apartments, I sensed the tension in the air.

The duchess arrived as I was finishing my midday meal.

"Princess Isabella is here to see you," Lady Buckingham announced.

"Tell her I'm resting—"

Before I could complete my response, Isabella pushed the door farther open and stepped inside the apartment. "Will you truly turn me away after all these years?"

Sighing, I nodded to Lady Buckingham, and placed my napkin near the bottom edge of my plate. The egg-salad sandwich, bowl of fish chowder, and small salad were barely settled in my stomach. Leaving the table, I stood. Speaking to Lady Buckingham, I said, "I'm done with my meal. I'd like some ginger tea."

"Yes," she answered before turning to Isabella. "Duchess, may I get you a cup of tea?"

"No, I need to speak to Lucille."

Another nod to Lady Buckingham and I walked toward the arrangement of sofas in the corner of our parlor. "Please, Isabella, have a seat."

She looked quickly toward the door as Lady Buckingham disappeared, leaving us alone. Sitting, she reached for my knee and looked up at me, her dark stare so similar to her brother's. "I need your help."

"I've told you before, I have no power here."

"You do," she insisted.

The newly eaten food rolled in my stomach as I basked in the recent change of stature. Isabella was coming to me, asking for my aid. Only a few short months ago, I'd been on the outside of the family—the monarchy—completely unaware of what was happening in and out of the palace in Molave. I reminded myself that when I asked Isabella for information, the princess had helped.

Or had I only thought she'd helped?

I sat back and took in my sister-in-law. She was still wearing the same clothes as when we traveled from Forthwith. Her hair was pulled back into the same low ponytail, with stray strands framing her face. If I were to guess based on her smudged makeup and puffy eyes, she'd been crying.

"What happened?" I asked with a tilt of my head. Genuine concern infiltrated my voice. "Isabella, have you been crying?" I gasped. "Is it Francis? Is he all right?" As the question came forth, I realized during Roman's and my brief conversation, Francis hadn't been mentioned.

"They won't let me see him." She sat taller and wiped her cheek with the back of her hand. "I waited for two hours for Papa, and he never appeared. Mum is in their apartment. I went to Roman's offices and was told his schedule was full." Her volume increased and her voice cracked. "He called me here and won't speak to me."

Listening to her despair reminded me of the way I felt not that long ago. "I can't help you with seeing Francis. Did you go to the infirmary?"

She nodded. "I was told he wasn't there."

My neck straightened. "What? Where is he?"

Isabella stood, wringing her hands as she walked the length of the parlor and back. “Do you think something terrible...?”

“No,” I replied, standing. “Of course not. I spoke with Roman upon our arrival.” I shrugged my shoulder. “I’m sorry. He didn’t mention Francis.”

“How could he not mention him? They were together.” Her pacing resumed. “And Roman is here, too busy to see me”—she looked my way and repeated what she’d said— “when he’s the one who demanded I travel.” Her dark eyes met mine. “I’ve never felt isolated, not like this. You know the feeling. Please help me.”

I reached for her hands. “What do you want me to do?”

“Speak to Roman.”

My head shook from side to side. “I have. He said he’d be busy until after evening meal.” I remembered our cover. “I think the only reason he made an effort to speak to me is because our blessing is tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Yes. You knew that. You heard about the speech at Odnessa.”

“A date wasn’t mentioned.”

I took a step back. “I told you that we wanted the blessing before the summit.”

“Roman and Papa are still attending the summit, after what happened?” She spun around, lifting her arms before they fell to her sides. “Lucille, our husbands were attacked.”

“They were careless and without guards,” I said. “That won’t be the case in Oslo.”

“But what if...?” Her eyes widened. “The drone in Forthwith...what if someone is trying to harm the Godfrey monarchy?”

“Do you know something?” I asked, my volume lowering.

“No, Lucille, I swear I’m helplessly uninformed.” She took a step closer. “I need to see my husband. What if something happened in surgery? My place is at his side.”

“If something had happened, you would have been told. And how would hurting Francis affect the Godfrey monarchy?”

“Our children are heirs—third and fourth in line.”

“The Godfreys have never crowned a woman.”

She let out a long breath. “They’ve never had to. The males have always prevailed. Papa was an only child, but his father, our grandfather, Theodore the first, had two sisters, one older than he and one younger. It didn’t matter that Eloise was older; Theodore was a boy. Every generation has had a boy. My generation has a boy, Roman. Two boys, if you include Theodore the third. If someone is trying to hurt the Godfrey monarchy, taking out Roman would make me next after Papa.”

“And your children after you.”

“That’s the way it works,” Isabella said as lines formed near her eyes. “What if they mean my children and me harm?”

“Who? Who do you suppose would do this?”

“I can’t dare to guess.”

Lifting my chin, I asked, “What about the Volkovs? They invaded Letanonia. Perhaps they now have their eye on Molave.”

“No,” Isabella said defensively. “Alek wouldn’t wish harm on his friend. Francis wouldn’t allow it.”

“What about Inessa?”

“Lucille, I regret telling you about her and Roman. I know it hurt you—”

“I saw her, in your home.”

Isabella stood tall. “You’re mistaken.”

“Who was the woman with light hair on your staircase?”

“I don’t know. One of the staff, I would assume.”

Inhaling, I met my sister-in-law's stare. "I have loved you as a sister, and you have been there for me. I will be here for you, but I can't help you if you're dishonest with me."

"Yet you will stand beside Roman after he cheated and made a public spectacle of your marriage?"

One nod.

It was all I did.

Silence hung in the air.

We both turned as Lady Buckingham returned with my tea.

"Your Highnesses."

"Lady Buckingham," I said, "I'll take the tea in my bedchamber. The duchess is leaving."

"Lucille," Isabella said, a mixture of resolve and request in her tone.

"I'll see you at dinner, sister." With that, I turned and made my way to my bedchamber. It wasn't until I was behind the second set of doors that I exhaled.

In that second in time, a new resolve came to me. I was done being played, being a pawn in the games of others. The powers over the last five years had tried to relegate me to a shiny accessory, a doll to be paraded around on the prince's arm, and an optionless, speechless token American.

Those days were over.

"Don't you agree, Lucille?" Queen Anne asked.

My mind came back to the present. "I'm sorry. Agree with what?"

"A small reception. Cardinal Decoti will be here for an informal ceremony at eleven."

As she spoke, I tried to ignore the glare coming from Isabella at the queen's side.

The queen continued, "Have you chosen your jewelry?"

Isabella stood and tossed her napkin on her plate.

“Isabella,” King Theo reprimanded. “This meal is not done.”

“It is for me, Papa. My husband is God knows where, injured and alone.” She gestured toward Queen Anne. “And Mum is discussing jewelry.”

As an awkward silence filled the room, Roman sat back. “I was hoping you would stand with us.”

I worked to keep the shock from my expression as I turned to Roman and back to Isabella.

“Family unity. I heard it was what you wanted in Forthwith.”

It was why she wanted to accompany me to the speech.

Isabella shot her stare from me back to her brother. “Is that why you demanded I accompany your wife to Molave Palace?”

“What other reason would there be?” Roman’s tone and tempo were smooth as silk, almost charming.

I could see by her expression that his rarely witnessed charisma left Isabella a bit uncertain.

I spoke. “I would be honored, Isabella.”

“There,” Queen Anne said, “it’s settled.” She turned to the king. “Why hasn’t Isabella been taken to Francis?”

King Theo reached over and covered the queen’s hand. “Anne, this is too upsetting for you to concern yourself with. Isabella and I will speak after we both finish our meal. My dear, you concentrate on the wonderful state of affairs concerning Roman and Lucille.”

Queen Anne’s gaze turned toward us. “I’m thrilled the blessing will be here. After what happened to Roman and Francis, we need to show the people hope.” Her orbs settled on Roman and me. “You know, all marriages hit difficult patches, even ours.” She reached for King Theo’s hand. “It’s unavoidable. The trick to a successful marriage is honesty and understanding. It must be a partnership.”

Roman reached for my hand beneath the table.

Do the king and queen have a partnership?

Are things different than they appear?

Before I could give that more thought, Isabella, again sitting at the queen's side, said, "I always thought love was the secret."

The queen looked over at King Theo. "Love is the glue. Without it, everything falls apart."

CHAPTER 14

Roman

“Do you think the king and queen are partners—in a partnership?” Lucille asked as we climbed the grand staircase.

I laid my left hand in the small of the princess’s back, splaying my fingers. “I don’t know. When I began this, I would have said no.” We both kept our volume low. “You’ve been here longer. What do you think?”

“I’m beginning to think that there’s a whole world behind the curtain, so to speak, a world I was in but one I never saw.” Lucille’s smile was radiant as she peered up at me. “For the first time, I feel like we are—partners.”

I lowered my timbre. “Dismiss Lady Buckingham early. I’ll dismiss Lord Martin.” My cheeks rose as my smile grew. “I want to spend as much time alone with you as the clock will allow.”

“As soon as I’m bathed.”

“Princess, you’re perfect as you are.”

A rosy hue filled her cheeks. “I will hurry.”

As we approached our apartments, I scanned the corridor, ensuring we were indeed alone. Tugging Lucille closer, I stopped walking.

“What?” she asked, wonder and innocence sparking in the blaze of her blue orbs.

Running my thumb over her cheek, I slowed my cadence. “In only an instant, you make me forget everything I want to say.”

Placing her petite hands on my shoulders, Lucille turned and pushing her hips forward, pressed her soft body against mine. “Tell me, Your Highness, how do I do such a thing?”

“Mere presence. I find myself lost in your eyes. Lost and helpless.”

“No, my prince. You must never be helpless. Our future depends on that.”

I took a deep breath. “You’re right.”

“What did you want to tell me?”

“It was a question to ask you,” I replied. “What’s happening with Isabella? She was different at dinner.”

“She’s upset. She’s feeling dismissed and wants someone, King Theo, Queen Anne, me, or even you to help her. She asked for my help.”

“What did you tell her?”

Lucille sighed. “I told her the truth. I hold no power.”

“On the contrary. You hold all the power.”

Lady Buckingham and Lord Martin appeared farther down the corridor. Lucille smiled. “I promise to hurry. I have much to talk about too.”

In that moment, I knew that talking wasn’t how I wanted to spend our evening. In the short time Lucille’s curves had been against my hard planes, my body had come to life, resurrecting from what could have been my last day. The ache in my arm and soreness in my hand disappeared as my blood changed its course of circulation.

Reaching for her hand, we entered the connecting parlor as our assistants followed a step behind.

“Good night, Princess,” I said, knowing I was being overheard. “Alert Lady Buckingham of my plans.”

Lucille bowed her neck, shielding her smile and pink cheeks. “Your Highness.”

After the princess spoke, Lady Buckingham stepped to her side and the two disappeared into her private apartment suite. My attention went to Lord Martin. "I'm ready for this day to end."

"I'm sorry, Your Highness. King Theodore demands your presence in his office."

My nostrils flared.

I'd spent over an hour with the king after leaving Noah. I remembered something from dinner. "I thought he was to see Isabella after dinner."

Lord Martin remained still. "I only know what I've been told."

"Accompany me," I said, turning the way we'd come. "Let's get this over with."

The king's outer office was uncharacteristically quiet, with only one secretary present. He stood and bowed his neck. "Your Highness." When he looked up, he said, "King Theodore is waiting for you."

Giving Lord Martin a glance, I followed the secretary. As he opened the door to the inner office, the secretary announced my presence. "Prince Roman is here, Your Majesty."

King Theodore wasn't at his desk as usual. Instead, he was standing near tall windows at the far end of the room with a crystal tumbler in his hand. A fire within the nearby hearth bathed the room in a warm orange hue, there was a faint remaining aroma of tobacco, and beyond the windows night had fallen. Slowly, the king turned my direction.

"That is all," he said to the secretary. The usual exuberance was absent from his voice.

"Your Majesty," I said with a neck bow.

The king took another drink from the tumbler and pointed to a cluster of soft chairs. "Scotch?"

I shook my head, sitting as I watched the monarch with a strange sense of concern. "Are you all right?"

He huffed before adding more amber liquor to his tumbler with a trembling hand. When he finally took the chair at my side, he leaned back and muttered, “Amygdalin.”

I waited for more. When he remained silent, I spoke, “I don’t know what that is.”

“Amygdalin is a chemical found in the seeds of some fruits.” His dark stare met mine. “One such fruit being cherries.”

The pieces were clicking together, such as a game of Tetris, in my brain. “A chemical in cherry pits. What does it do?”

“When the pits are crushed and ingested, the body converts the amygdalin to cyanide.”

The small hairs on the back of my neck stood to attention—tiny warriors ready to do battle, to go to war for a cause they didn’t fully understand or believe in. “Cyanide poisoning?” I tried to recall any knowledge. “I thought cyanide was a gas.”

“It can be.” He took another drink and abruptly stood. “The information Noah shared. He poisoned me, not enough at any one time to result in death—which in itself is tricky—but enough to make me ill.” His eyes met mine. “I hadn’t put the pieces together—how much better I’d felt since you took his place—but now it makes sense.”

I could hardly make the words come out. “He was using crushed cherry pits to kill you?”

The king nodded. “I spoke to Mr. Davies before dinner. The symptoms I experienced over time support the hypothesis.” He turned to me. “The physician explained that while I metabolized the poison, there were most likely harmful effects that are irreversible.”

“What?”

“Damage to the heart and brain. Something about the poison preventing cells from using oxygen. Now that he knows, he wants to run tests.” King Theodore slammed his glass on the mantel and his voice found renewed vigor. “That

treasonous, vile criminal should be hanged in the city square for all to see.”

“That’s a bit archaic, don’t you think?”

“By God, son, are you listening? The man in the infirmary tried to kill me, the king.”

Standing, I pressed my palms against my temples. “I’m in shock.”

“Get out of it,” he said louder than before. “No longer is he only charged with an attack on you and Francis, but for the premeditated crime of working toward my demise.”

The synapses in my mind were ringing and dinging like an old-fashioned pinball machine, the little silver ball hitting target after target as I feverishly pushed the flippers, praying the ball wouldn’t fall in the space I couldn’t reach.

Kill the king.

Noah’s life was over.

His days were numbered.

Nothing—no negotiation, no mediation—would save him.

My gaze narrowed. “Why would he admit to this?”

The king turned to me. “You said he did.”

I lifted my hand. “He did. I’m asking why? Surely after five years he knows the confession is a death sentence.” The answer hit me. “He wants to die. He tried to do it himself and failed. This is another attempt.”

“He is guilty of what he confessed. Mr. Davies confirmed the symptoms match the poison.”

“Noah said it wasn’t his idea.”

“You didn’t tell me that.”

“Fuck. I forgot.” Protocol was forgotten with the onslaught of new information. “I told you what I remembered.” Despite my use of profanity, my Molavian accent was in place.

The king’s dark gaze narrowed. “Noah said it wasn’t his idea.”

“Yes,” I said, nodding as I paced and tried to recall. “He said it wasn’t his idea, but he was the one to do it.” I looked up in time to witness the reflection of my own reaction in King Theo’s expression. “Francis?”

King Theo took a step back. “I need that confirmed.”

“What of Isabella?” I asked, feeling a little guilty that I’d brought her into this mess—into Molave Palace.

“She is to see Francis this evening. He’s being moved upstairs and placed in a comfortable room.”

“Even after this?”

“Mr. Davies has assured me that the duke will remain unconscious. My daughter will then be pacified, and after the blessing, she will return to Forthwith. Her children need her.”

Forthwith.

The castle where Lucille thought she saw Inessa.

“Sir...” I began.

The king looked up from the swirling liquid remaining in his tumbler. In that second, he seemed lost in thought, detached in a way I’d never seen or never noticed. The questionable presence of an adversary would need to wait.

“The damage...” I asked, “is it permanent?”

Inhaling, he slowly released the breath. “Mr. Davies tells me that cells die all the time. Growing new ones is key.”

“Could this affect your ability to rule?”

“No,” he bellowed with his familiar boisterous tone. “Get me the answer to our question.”

“I can’t ask for more information without offering Noah a concession of some kind.”

King Theo shook his head. “He’ll know it’s a lie. After his confession, I won’t allow him to live. Give him a reason to want to do what’s right.”

The muscles in my shoulders pulled tight. “You’re not giving me much to work with.”

“Welcome to difficult decisions, son.”

I thought about Roman, Noah, and any others that may have been in the line of succession. “Do you stand behind every decision you’ve made?”

For a moment, the king seemed to contemplate my question. “The short answer is yes.”

“The long answer?”

“I will give you that answer when the time is right. Know this, son. I’m proud of the choices you’ve made. Whether you were aware or not, you were born to be where you are at this moment. I’ve never been more positive.”

“Do you want me to go to Noah tonight?” I asked, hoping he’d say no.

King Theo walked to the cabinet and poured more scotch into his tumbler. “Wait until after the blessing. I’d rather not know the answer until Isabella is gone.”

“Your Majesty.”

“She’s yours, Roman. There’s no going back. This life isn’t all work. Learn to find the balance.”

“She?”

“Lucille.”

I stood straighter. “She isn’t yours to offer.”

“Perhaps not. She is yours to take. Tomorrow you’ll have the church’s blessing. Today, you have mine. Good night.”

My jaw clenched as I replied, “Good night.”

“Papa.”

“Papa,” I repeated.

CHAPTER 15

Lucille

With my earlier-than-normal arrival time and uncertain if Roman was alone, I knocked on the outer door to his suite of apartments. Wearing only a nightgown and dressing gown, I basked in the warmth coming from the fire in our connecting parlor. Scanning the room, I noticed the heavy drapes covering the windows and blocking out the night skies. The only change since our short trip north to Annabella and Forthwith was a fresh bouquet of flowers on the round table near the main entry. Everything else, every piece of furniture, every item on each surface, and every book in the built-in bookcases was exactly as it had been.

Impatiently, I knocked again.

The second knock alone proved what I was coming to realize. I sensed it in every cell of my body—my surroundings were the same, but I was different, changed, and renewed.

I reached for the knob and turned, pushing the door inward as Lady Caroline simultaneously opened the door from within.

“Your Highness,” she said, startled, moments before she curtsied.

“Prince Roman?” I asked.

“He’s not returned from the king’s summons, ma’am.”

“The king. I didn’t know. He told me...” I stuttered.

“I will be happy to inform you once he’s returned.”

Squaring my shoulders, I smiled. “No, I’ll wait for him in his bedchamber.”

“Ma’am?”

I took a step inside. As it was at Annabella Castle, our private apartment suites were a mirror image of one another's. I met Lady Caroline's stare. "I'll be in his bedchamber."

"He's not here," she said, a little less certain of our interaction.

"That's fine. When he arrives, you can tell him where I am."

"It's standard..." she began.

With a placating smile, I listened. Once she was done, I repeated my mandate with a clarifying addition. "Lady Caroline, Prince Roman is my husband. As you know, I'm his princess. Tomorrow, my prince and I are receiving the blessing from the Church of Molave. We've committed to reconciling our marriage. In truth, I'm only giving you this information because you obviously tend to and assist the prince. I know he respects your service. From this day forth, respect my position."

She took a step back and curtsied again. "My apologies, Your Highness." She motioned toward the corridor leading to Roman's bedchamber as if I needed a tour. "I can escort you."

"As you're aware, the prince and I have been married for over five years. I'm most certain I can find my way on my own."

"Yes, Your Highness."

A satisfied smile curled my lips as I padded barefoot toward Roman's bedchamber. In the past I would have never been as bold. I also wouldn't have wanted to wait for Roman; obeying his summons was all I could barely tolerate.

Upon opening the tall doors to his bedchamber, I scanned the large room. As out in the connecting parlor, a fire was stoked, infiltrating the air with warmth and the subtle scent of burning wood. The blankets of his bed were turned down on one side and his satin pajamas laid near the foot of the bed.

Running my fingers over the soft material, I allowed myself a moment of self-indulgence as my focus moved from his desk to a small round table near the window. In my private

apartment suite, that was the table where I often took my morning meal or afternoon tea. Those uses weren't in my thoughts as I recalled the unbridled passion Roman and I shared on a similar table at Annabella Castle.

I tried to think back to the night before our wedding—over five years ago.

It was impossible to remember the specific feelings and thoughts I'd entertained that long ago.

Was I the same as any other woman in her late twenties the night before she wed?

Settling in a chair before the fireplace, I let my mind wander.

Marrying a prince wasn't particularly normal. By the time our ceremony occurred, I remember exhaustion, relief, and anticipation. While the Firm had counseled both of us regarding the importance of not consummating our marriage until it occurred, we hadn't listened.

My cheeks warmed at the realization; we hadn't listened this time either.

I laid my hand over my midsection.

Despite the drudgery of the last five years, the night before our wedding I'd been filled with hope, desire, and promise. Yes, I'd even believed there was love. Tonight was different and the same. The similarities were positives—hope, desire, promise, and love.

Those elements had returned.

The difference was also positive.

I wasn't entering into tomorrow's blessing with blinders on. The last few months brought more than the prince of my dreams: they brought clarity at the world around me. My Roman and I were partners, as the queen recommended. We were honest with one another and understanding of each other. She'd said all marriages have rough patches. I'd argue Roman's and mine had been dealt more than a rough patch

with what the king and the Firm had done. And yet somehow, we were back on smoother ground.

“Lucille.”

I turned to the door as Roman entered. Despite his injured hand and his wound beneath his suit, the man coming my direction took my breath away. In this short time, I’d become addicted to the way he looked at me. Even now, as he came closer, simply the glint in his dark eyes and the smirk of his lips made my nipples tighten and my stomach do flip-flops.

With each wordless step, Roman was a predator in search of his next meal. With the grace and agility of a leopard, he had his sights set on his prey and was moving toward the attack.

Undeterred by my prince’s dominating presence, his regal demeanor, and his determined strides, I stood, meeting his gaze, and welcoming my fate.

One of Roman’s arms snaked around my waist as he pulled me flush to his chest. Words weren’t necessary as he hungrily took my lips, claiming them as his own. I lifted my hands to his shoulders, pushed up on my toes, and took equally in proportion to what he was taking from me.

Roman may be the prince claiming his princess, but I was no longer a fair doe about to be consumed. The woman I’d always believed I was capable of being had broken the shell I’d meticulously formed around myself.

Step by step, Roman pushed me backward until I was pinned against the wall.

Reaching higher, I wove my fingers through his dark mane, parted my lips, and allowed his tongue entrance. Moans echoed throughout the room as my heart rate quickened. With the use of only one hand, Roman tugged the sash from my dressing gown, causing it to gape open.

I gasped for air as Roman broke our connection and took a step back.

His brown eyes swirled with a storm of emotion as he brushed the dressing gown from one shoulder and then the

next. The white satin pooled at my feet. He reached for my chin. “What will I find under your nightgown?”

My tongue darted to my lips as the topics of discussion I’d contemplated throughout the day faded into this mutual cloud of desire, a cloud so intense, it filled my thoughts with a wanton fog. “Nothing, Your Highness.”

The shake of Roman’s head was barely perceptible. He released my chin. “No, Princess. I don’t believe you. Lift the gown over your head.”

It wasn’t a request.

Nevertheless, the obvious effects his deep, reverberating voice had on me were like nothing I could recall. My body quaked. Goosebumps prickled my flesh. My nipples drew harder than diamonds, and my core dampened.

“Must I repeat myself?”

Hastily, I reached for the silk fabric and pulled it upward. As the gown went over my head, my long hair cascaded around my shoulders and more goosebumps materialized.

Taking the gown from my hand, Roman stepped back. The storm in his dark orbs grew to hurricane strength as he scanned from my head to my toes. “Turn around—all the way around.”

The tenor of his baritone command was such as the striking of steel on flint. Sparks ignited, creating flames engulfing my body in a firestorm. Obeying his demand, I slowly pivoted until our gazes again met.

“You’re wrong,” he said once I stopped, standing before him completely nude.

“Your Highness?”

“You, Lucille, are a masterpiece, a goddess beyond the likes of which the ancient artists could ever begin to replicate. You’re perfection in every sense of the word.”

He ran the tip of his finger from behind my ear, down my neck, over my shoulder, between my breasts, and lower. His touch progressed down my stomach until he reached my core.

With each ghostly movement of his hand, his gaze followed, and my breathing deepened.

His tenor exuded desire. “Under your gown was not nothing, my princess. What you’re showing me and offering to me is everything I desire.”

Warmth radiated through me.

“We have much to discuss,” Roman said, “but first, I want you, Lucille. The last few days have been hell, and I want nothing more than a reprieve. I want you. I need you.”

His was a simple request.

Primitive even.

The coming together of two people.

A union that had been occurring since the beginning of time.

And yet the request overwhelmed me with its significance.

Roman wanted me, needed me.

I was who he sought, the one person in the entire world.

“Yes,” I said, reaching for his suit coat and pushing it from his shoulders. “Take me. Use me. I want to be the person you desire most.”

Roman winced as I pushed the jacket from his shoulders.

“Oh, I’m sorry. You’re injured.”

He shook his head and reached for my hand. “Lucille, know this. You are the only person in this world I desire, not just the most but the only. You are my world.”

Tears threatened to fall as I nodded. “I want you, too.”

“Come with me.”

Soon I was perched on the edge of an antique desk, my chest heaving with each breath as Roman unbuckled his belt, unbuttoned his pants, and pulled down the zipper. Even as his pants slid to his ankles, in the game of equality, he had many more items of clothing to shed.

Removing himself from his boxers, Roman stroked his rigid penis, once and again. Veins grew more visible as the tip of his erection glistened in the firelight. I failed to maintain eye contact as I watched with wonder and desire.

Tugging me closer to the edge, Roman lifted each of my feet, setting them to either side of the desk, my knees high and my core on full display.

“You’re fucking beautiful,” he growled.

I’d never been as totally on exhibit, and yet there was no modesty or self-condemnation. On the contrary, his actions and words had me on the brink of orgasm, and he had yet to touch me where I needed him most.

My gaze flickered between his erection and dark stare. “So are you.”

His smile quirked. “I’d ask you if you were wet, my princess, but I can see you are.”

“I want you,” I panted.

I closed my eyes as Roman came closer. My hands fell back and my spine arched as we became one. There was no controlling the noises I made as he stretched me in the most wonderful of ways.

“Fuck,” Roman growled.

Opening my eyes, I watched the beauty of the scene before me. Still mostly clothed, Roman was completely focused on the two of us. The contortions of his expression, the reverberation of his guttural sounds, and the movement of his thrusts were cinematic excellence. The friction of our coming together and pulling apart set off more explosions. My core tightened as the pressure built.

Needing more, I sat forward, wrapped my arms around his neck and dug my heels into his lower back. The new position was indescribable as Roman’s pace increased, and I too joined the attack. Up and down, I bounced, the muscles in my torso tightening until every nerve imploded. Unable to stifle my scream, it rang off the walls as my body stiffened, and I held tightly to his neck.

Roman's quest was yet to find an end as he pounded feverishly. With time, his grasp of me tightened. A few exaggerated thrusts and the bedchamber echoed with his praises and curses. Our breathing filled our ears as we both reveled in the aftershocks of our encounter.

The fall to earth was surreal, floating like a feather gently gliding through the breeze. I continued holding his neck, my face buried in the nook of his neck and shoulder as our erratic heartbeats found their rhythm.

Roman leaned away until our eyes met. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

"We need to talk."

I nodded. "I wish this could be our only concern."

"Me too, my princess."

CHAPTER 16

Roman

Guiding Lucille to the edge of the desk, I reluctantly broke our union. In my thirty-eight years, I admit that I failed to recognize the grandeur in sex—making love. That wasn't to say I hadn't enjoyed the act however it was labeled.

Sex.

Fucking.

Lovemaking.

Within that paradigm, the benefits were numerous. The rush of endorphins and oxytocin activated pleasure centers in the brain, creating an incomparable high. Those chemicals flooded our circulation, washing away stress and pain.

Since thoughts of my injuries hadn't entered my mind once since seeing Lucille across the bedchamber, I could attest to the pain relief. As for stress, the stressors were still present; however, as I watched the severing of our connection, seeing the combination of our essence glistening from my dick, I momentarily gave no fucks.

Cupping Lucille's cheek, I guided her blue-hazed eyes to mine. "I should really have more self-control when it comes to you."

Her bruised pink lips curled. "If you would, I'd question if you wanted me."

"Never question that, Princess."

Leaning back on her outstretched arms, she kept her gaze on me. With her long hair tousled, her fair skin abraded from

my day of beard growth, and her core red and swollen, Lucille was a vision to behold.

“You’re ravishing.”

“Is it wrong that I want to stay like this all night? There’s so much I want to know and things I want to share, but this”—she scanned from my hair to my boxer shorts, now in place—“is a bubble I could stay in forever.”

After a kiss, I kicked off my shoes and pants. “Lord Martin is upset with you.”

“Me?”

“I told him you were taking his job for the night.”

“His job?” Her eyes opened wide as she sat forward, and her smile brightened. “Caring for you? I can do that.”

“I never doubted.” I offered her my left hand as she jumped down from the desk. “Tell me, Princess, did you bathe?”

“Yes. Lady Buckingham would faint if I were to visit your bedchamber without a bath.”

A chuckle bubbled from my throat. “Tell her I like you dirty.”

Pink rose from Lucille’s neck to her cheeks. “Do you mean literally or are you talking about my behavior?”

“Both. I’d take you bathed or not, and I must admit, I enjoy your curses and profanities when you’re coming undone.”

Her eyes opened wide. “I do not curse.”

“You do and it’s both sexy and cute.”

Her hands went to her cheeks. “I didn’t realize.”

“That, Princess, is a good thing. Now, as my night was filled with even more—for the lack of a more encompassing word—shit, if you’re not opposed, I thought we might bathe together.”

“We’ve never—”

I placed my finger on her luscious lips. “Then it shall be our first time.”

“Can you? What about your arm and hand?”

“I’m supposed to keep them dry. I was hoping you would be willing to help a bloke out.”

Lucille bent down to pick up her robe.

“You don’t need that.”

Her eyes sparkled as she shook her head. “I have a hair tie in my pocket. Come, Your Highness, I will undress you and help you bathe.”

“Undress me and we will bathe together.”

“As you wish.”

Once in the bathroom, Lucille carefully removed my necktie and unbuttoned my shirt. After the cuff links were removed, she gently released first my right and then my left arm. It was the first time she’d seen the bandage covering my bicep.

“I can’t believe you were shot.”

“I’m thankful it wasn’t worse.”

“Should we cover it?”

I showed her where the plastic wrap was that Lord Martin used to keep the bandage dry. With each wrap of the plastic, Lucille stepped back and forth intent on keeping the bandage dry. After the fourth or fifth layer, I laughed. “I promise, you’ve done enough.”

“If I fail, Lord Martin will never trust me with you again.”

“It’s not his trust you need. And you have mine.”

“What about your hand?”

“You should wrap it too.”

After both bandages were thoroughly water resistant, Lucille lifted my white undershirt over my head. Her fingers splayed over my chest.

“Your padding is gone.”

I pulled her nude body close, pressing her breasts against my bare chest. “Next to being with you, it’s the best thing to come of the last few days.”

“I didn’t realize when you were dressed.”

“No one did. Good riddance to it.”

One by one, she removed my socks and finally got to my boxers. When she reached for the hem, I stopped her. “Have you ever disrobed a man before?”

By the change in her expression as she looked up, I immediately regretted my question. “It’s okay. You don’t need to answer.”

“When we began dating—you and I—the Firm asked me for a detailed account of my sexual history.”

“What?” I asked, my nose scrunching. “That’s none of their business.”

“When you agree to marry into royalty, everything is their business. Even Lady Buckingham’s presence. I thought it would be odd having someone care for me...intimately.” She sighed. “It’s like I told you when we met, the life of a royal isn’t all that Americans imagine.”

“You don’t need to answer my question.”

“I don’t need to, but I will. We’ve promised honesty. Yes, I’ve disrobed a man. Roman wasn’t my first. When I answered the Firm honestly, I was told to forget my past. A deacon from the Church of Molave visited me and gave me penance to repent for my past sins.”

“Fuck, Lucille. You didn’t deserve that. That entire subject is archaic.”

Her head tilted. “I often wondered if Roman had dealt with the same. If he’d had to repent. The two of us never discussed our past relationships because after the deacon’s visit, mine were supposedly washed away. Were my actions the only sinful ones in the eyes of the church and the Firm?”

“That information hasn’t come up in any of my studies.”

She looked up at me, her words laced with determination. “In Molave, the king is the head of the church.”

I nodded.

“When you’re king, you can change things.”

Her statement hit me like a punch to my gut. My gaze narrowed. “Lucille, I can’t be king.”

“Yes, you can. Molave will need you. I need you.”

Lucille pivoted, knelt near the tub, and turned on the water flow. Once she was satisfied with the temperature, she capped the drain. When she looked back, her gaze sparkled under the bright lights. “Now, may I finish my job of disrobing you, my prince?”

“You don’t need to ask.”

A few minutes later, I settled in the warm water. With her long locks now piled on top of her head and still without a stitch of clothing, Lucille dampened a flannel. “Keep your arms outside the tub,” she said as she began to wash me.

“No one has ever done this for me besides Lord Martin and yes, that’s odd.” I reached for her hand. “It isn’t odd with you. Thank you.”

Lucille smiled. “I’ve dreamt of being more. Thank you for allowing me.”

Once I was washed, Lucille let out some of the water and replaced it with hot before stepping into the tub herself.

“Come here.” I motioned toward me.

Soon we were seated with Lucille between my legs, her back on my chest. “I wish I could wash you.”

She craned her neck over her shoulder. “Get well and I’ll fire Lady Buckingham.”

Inhaling the scent of soap and the floral bouquet of Lucille’s hair, I jumped into what we needed to discuss. “You asked today if the king and queen are truly partners. My gut

says no, but I listened to what you said about behind the scenes. We never truly know what happens there, do we?"

Lucille shook her head.

"I want us to have that." I leaned my head back. "You spoke about me being king. I can't give that too much thought right now." When Lucille began to speak, I kissed her neck. "May we agree to discuss that later? There is too much happening right now."

"Okay."

"I've been sworn to secrecy, my princess, but I can't bear not telling you the truth."

Her petite frame stiffened in my grasp.

"Tell me now if you would rather not know," I offered.

Again, she craned her neck. "I've been made blind or chosen not to see for too long. What were you sworn not to tell me?"

"Not only you."

"I'm frightened." She ran her hands up and down my legs. "But I have you. Please tell me."

And so, I began.

With warm, humid air hanging in the bathroom and fogging the mirrors, I started my story at the point when Francis offered the ride in his car. I didn't hold back, sharing the reason for my acceptance to his offer—hope at arranging a meeting with Inessa. I recounted the shock, terror, and rage. I described seeing Noah, viewing our resemblance for myself.

"He's alive?" she asked.

"For now."

My story continued as I relayed the frantic scene and the gunshots. "My broken hand is the result of breaking Francis's cheekbones and jaw. I've never been what others would call a fighter, yet I couldn't stop, Lucille. I kept pummeling him."

Lucille sat up and turned. The water swooshed. “I’m so thankful.”

“Thankful? Thankful that for a moment in time I was so outraged I broke a man’s face?”

When she blinked, a tear rolled down her cheek. “I’m afraid, my prince, you don’t see your actions as I do. From what you describe, it was you or him. Thank you for fighting back. I couldn’t bear to lose you.”

Cupping her cheek, I pulled her lips to mine. “I realize it doesn’t make sense.” I furrowed my brow. “You’re the only one I can be completely honest with.”

“What doesn’t make sense?”

“Out there in the cold, faced with Francis and Noah, I didn’t want to die.”

“Of course not. That’s survival.”

I stopped her. “It’s more than that. Looking at Noah and knowing his despair, having read about it in his journals, I had the revelation. Even though he didn’t, I want this life. Here. Us. Even the madness of everything. I want it. I care.” My gaze met hers. “For you, I’d lay down my life. That’s love. I understand that. Why do I care about a country I didn’t know existed three-plus months ago? Why do I care about King Theo? I shouldn’t. He could easily have me replaced as he’s done in the past, and still—”

“You care,” Lucille said.

“I do. Tonight, Papa said I was born for this, for portraying his son. It was an odd thing to say and yet” —I scrunched my nose— “I feel it.”

“I’m so sorry that happened at Forthwith. What is King Theo going to do about Francis and what about Noah?”

“I’ve already endangered you by telling you about me. I don’t—”

This time, Lucille placed her finger on my lips. “A partnership.”

Sighing, I acquiesced, “Lean back, my princess.”

With her petite frame against me, as the water cooled, I shared all the truths I’d been told to hold close. Nothing was held back as I spoke about the cells beneath the infirmary and the patients—both of them. I even spoke of Noah’s confession and the king’s mandatory meeting after she and I had returned to our apartments.

Sharing was cathartic and therapeutic.

Hearing the words from my own lips gave them new meaning. It was as if I could see the occurrences from another point of view.

Holding Lucille’s hand, I turned it over in my grasp. “We need to get out of this water, my princess, or you will shrivel away.”

CHAPTER 17

Lucille

Roman insisted on walking me to my bedchamber. The parlor between our private suites was cool and dim with only embers glowing in the hearth. The temperature didn't rise as we stepped into my bedchamber. After helping me under the blankets, Roman added more logs to the fire and stoked the flames. When he returned to my side, the room was brighter.

He sat on the edge of my bed. "I'm sorry for dominating the conversation."

I covered his hand with mine. "You had a lot to share."

"You'd said you wanted to tell me things. Is now the time or should they wait?"

My heart and mind wrestled with the answer to his question. "I'm tired," I replied honestly. "I know you need rest to heal. Could you rest with me?"

Roman nodded.

After he settled under the covers, I curled to his side, splayed my finger over the soft hair on his chest, and relished his radiating warmth. "Tomorrow," I asked, "are you sure you want to receive the blessing?"

With a thumb and finger to my chin, he lifted my gaze to his. "If I could outright marry you, Lucille, I would. I'm not a man of strong faith." He chuckled. "I suppose that's not something the future head of the church should say."

I shook my head.

"My mother believed in something greater than us and taught us to believe the same. That said, faith was a part of our

lives, not a pillar. That part that has faith wants to have the blessing.” He took a deep breath. “I’m not certain we will ever learn the true fate of the real Roman or when he was replaced. As long as I’m able, I want to be at your side, I want to be your partner, and to be the person who loves you. Yes, I want the blessing. I hope you do too.”

“I do,” I said, holding back the emotion.

Roman’s gaze met mine. “Talk to me.”

“In Forthwith—”

“You saw—”

I shook my head. “No, Roman, this isn’t about that. Please let me finish.”

He sat back, facing me, and I scooted until I was sitting against the headboard. Pulling the blankets over the neckline of my nightgown, I took a deep breath. “In Forthwith, I wasn’t feeling well.” His eyes opened wider. “I’m well. It’s just that...I’m pregnant.”

In the seconds that followed I witnessed a kaleidoscope of expressions on his handsome face. As if time suddenly stopped moving, I watched for what seemed an eternity. Each change of expression was a vivid display.

Surprise.

Hesitancy.

Happiness.

Uncertainty.

With the spinning of the kaleidoscope slowing and the colors shining through the darkness of his orbs, Roman lunged toward me and pulled me to his chest.

“Oh, Lucille. That’s wonderful.”

“It is?”

He reared back and met my stare. “Yes. Are you well? Have you been sick? Oh...I’m sorry. Is sex prohibited? Should

we have done what we did? Was it too much? Is sex safe?" He shook his head with a scoff. "I know nothing about this."

"That makes two of us." Reaching for his hand, I intertwined our fingers. "Please don't feel trapped."

"I don't." He lifted our hands and peppered mine with kisses. "I feel happy. I want the child to be mine, but" —he inhaled— "it would be better if the pregnancy was from the procedure."

"I've given that a lot of thought. I've decided in my heart that I know without a doubt this child is yours. I want the child to know he or she was conceived in love or at least lust," I added with a grin. "Not created by a medical procedure. I'll never allow anyone to question."

"This child will be the heir," Roman said.

"If the child is a boy."

Roman shook his head. "When I'm king, I'll change that."

When he's king.

Hearing him say those words made everything feel real.

He went on, "Any child we will have after this one will no doubt be ours." He sat up straight. "I don't mean... this child is ours too. Or that there need to be more. That's up to you." His phrases came faster with each one.

I laid my hand on his knee. "Do you believe what you said?"

"All of it." He grinned. "Which part in particular?"

"That this child is ours?"

"Yes. There's no question. Lucille," he said, the storm in his eyes swirling, "I will not fail. This right here and right now is more than I ever considered living. It's a life I never imagined, and at the same time, it's the life I want. We must succeed because the stakes just got a lot higher."

Laying my hand over my midsection, I nodded. "It's why I didn't confront the woman at Forthwith. Every decision since yesterday has been weighed against the knowledge that I'm

carrying a miracle.” I looked up as tears teetered on my eyelids. “I used to pray for a child to save my marriage. Now, I’m praying for a real marriage to give our child two parents.”

“We have that. The Firm believes it has ultimate control, but it doesn’t. Noah is still alive. He nearly succeeded in killing King Theo. You and I are a team.” He lifted his hand and stopped mid-air. “May I?”

“I don’t recall you asking if you could touch me when you entered your bedchamber.”

Roman grinned.

I took his hand and laid it over my stomach. “You may. I’ve read a little. Depending on exactly how far along I am, there’s not a lot there—a group of cells multiplying by the second.”

“*Our* group of cells. Mine and yours.”

I hadn’t thought of it in that way, but hearing him say it made me even happier, if that were even possible. “Ours.”

After a kiss to my forehead, Roman said, “We will keep this news from the king until after the Fifteen Eurasia Summit.”

“If that is your wish.”

“It is.” His expression sobered. “I’ve never seen Papa as distraught as he was tonight. Granted, I have a limited exposure time, but I did watch decades of film.”

“I can’t believe Noah tried to kill him.”

“I must talk to him, Noah, and learn more. When Francis wakes, he could refute the story that’s been given. Before that happens, we need something to hold over him.”

As I unsuccessfully stifled a yawn, Roman pressed another kiss to my forehead. “Sleep, Princess. Tomorrow, you officially become mine.”

Moving down beneath the blankets, I looked up at him. “I never thought I’d be this happy.” I laid my hand over his in the

cast. “Even with all that happened, I’m truly happy, Roman, I am.”

Once again, I curled against his side with my eyelids heavy and drifted into a blissful sleep—until I opened my eyes with a start before squinting at the onslaught of light.

“Your Highness,” Lady Buckingham said.

“What time is it?”

“Nearly eight, ma’am. I’ve tried to wake you a few times.”

Exhaling, I stared up at the ceiling. “I must have been tired.”

“Lady Larsen called. She would like to speak with you after your morning meal.”

I vaguely remembered my secretary asking to meet yesterday. “Do you know what it’s about?”

“No, ma’am. Your breakfast should be here in a few minutes.”

As I’d been lying in the bed, the world was right, making me feel as though I was ready to take it on. That all changed the moment I started to sit up. Closing my eyes, I fell back to the bed and held my stomach as perspiration covered my skin. “Mary...”

From beyond my closed eyes, I heard Lady Buckingham move about the room. Each breath I took in and let out was thoroughly conscious as my stomach slowed its churning.

“Lucille.”

Tentatively, I opened my eyes.

Her tone was reassuring. “I took the liberty of bringing dry toast and ginger tea. Maybe you could try a few nibbles?”

Lady Buckingham had been right. This was a time when I wanted my mother. Asking the baroness to visit Molave when there were tensions with Borinkia would put her in danger. I nodded, thankful for the support of my mistress.

With a sigh, I met Mary's hazel gaze and reached for the toast. "Thank you."

"I have a basin if your stomach is too upset."

Such as a mouse, I nibbled the toast.

Slowly, the slice disappeared.

"Your color is better," she said with a smile.

"I may make it."

And make it, I did.

After taking care of business in the toilet, still wearing my nightgown and dressing gown, I made my way to my parlor. My usual menu of oatmeal tasted bland and thick. I gave up eating after consuming another piece of toast and a cup of ginger tea.

"The blessing is scheduled for eleven. May I tell Lady Larsen to visit you in your apartment as you dress, or would you rather wait?"

With the dawn of a new day, the bubble of partnership Roman and I had fortified popped, exposing both of us to the dangers of the world around us. The difference was that we knew one another's dangers and secrets, and had each other's confidence. Despite being in separate locations, we were not alone.

I took a deep breath. "I'm feeling better." I met Mary's gaze. "If it's important, let her know that she may come to me. If whatever she wants to discuss can wait until after the queen's reception, then schedule a meeting for this afternoon."

"You went to the prince's apartments last night," Lady Buckingham said.

"Yes."

"Ma'am, I've been worried all night. Was he angry?"

"Angry?" My uncertainty at her question was due to what my Roman had done since our meeting each other that made me forget the man before him. "About the baby? Oh, Mary,

heavens no. I told him, and he was pleased. This is what we've both wanted."

Her smile grew as she came forward and wrapped me in an embrace. "I'm so relieved."

I took Mary's hand in mine. "We are serious about the blessing today. Both of us want to work on our marriage. We both made mistakes." Before she could disagree, I added, "Mine was in accepting and ignoring." I laid my hand on my stomach. "Those days are over."

"I couldn't be happier. I'll message Lady Larsen, and we can get you ready for the blessing."

CHAPTER 18

Roman

Lord Martin tugged my suit coat over my shoulders as he peered over one into the full-length mirror. “I was concerned about the absence of the padded shirt. No one seems to have noticed.”

There was one person who did, but despite the rather intimate relationship Lord Martin and I shared, speaking about Lucille and our private encounters was something I wouldn’t do. Instead, I turned sideways, viewing my profile. “It’s a hell of a lot more comfortable.” I turned to face my assistant. “Do you have any advice for the blessing?”

“I’m afraid, sir, you’re sailing into uncharted territory—at least recently uncharted. The last royal marriage to receive a blessing was King Theodore and Queen Anne’s.”

Tugging on the cuffs of shirt sleeves and exposing the diamond Godfrey cuff links, I looked up. “Why on earth did they need a blessing?”

Lord Martin clasped his hands behind his back. “It was before my time. I only know rumors and those aren’t for me to spread.”

My night with Lucille had lifted a bit of the burden of the last few days and lightened my spirits. I flashed Lord Martin a smile. “Come on now. Throw me a bone.”

“I’d rather—”

“If there are secrets in these stuffy old corridors, as future king, I believe I should be informed.”

“At the time, I was quite young. The stories have of course been whispered for years, and most likely they’ve grown in scandal and lessened in facts.”

“You’ve piqued my interest.”

Lord Martin lowered his tone to a whisper. “Rumors, sir.”

I nodded.

He sighed. “In his younger days, King Theodore was rumored to have roamed. It would explain why he wasn’t upset about the article regarding you and the Borinkian princess.”

“He was angered,” I replied.

“As they say, he without sin...cast the first stone.” Lord Martin shrugged. “It’s only a rumor. The world was a different place back then.” He shook his head. “Scandals were commonplace and easily ignored or swept under the rug.”

“When was this?”

Lord Martin carried a sash with multiple pins and ribbons to me. “I’m not sure—thirty or forty years ago.”

As he secured the sash over my suit coat, I considered the various awards and honors. “I should learn to fly planes.”

“You know how.”

“I don’t. What if one day it was required?”

“It would be rather difficult to give you, Prince Roman, lessons on a task you already mastered.”

“Hades, man, you’ve managed everything else. Inquire as to what you can do about that.”

“Yes, Your Highness. I’ll move that to the top of my list, after the marriage blessing, summit, and future meetings with heads of state.”

“Did Noah pilot?”

Lord Martin’s expression froze.

“It’s a question,” I justified.

“I advise you to forget his name. And as for your question, not to my knowledge. Your Highness, *you* have not piloted a plane in over five years.”

“Then there’s the answer. I’m rusty. Imagine stories of the Duke and Duchess of Monovia soaring through the air. Romantic, don’t you think?”

“Dangerous, sir. That’s what I think.”

Pushing back my right sleeve, I peered down at my watch. “It’s about time to meet with Cardinal Decoti.”

“Princess Lucille will join you in the parlor.”

Together we turned, leaving my bedchamber, going down the hallway and through my private parlor. As Lord Martin opened the tall doors to the adjoining parlor, the matching doors on the other side opened.

Lucille was a vision, dressed in a long vibrant blue gown with full skirt, a tight bodice, and a scooped neckline. I couldn’t take my eyes off her. The dress was the same color as the sapphires in her necklace and crown. Her long hair that had been tousled the night before was fixed into a stunning updo, creating a perfect nest for the tiara. Diamond-and-sapphire earrings swayed from her ears, accentuating her slender long neck. And pinned to the front of her gown was the badge of the royal family order.

Lucille veiled her eyes with her long lashes as she curtsied. “Your Highness.”

When her blue orbs met mine, they sparkled with anticipation.

“Princess, you’re ravishing to behold.” I offered her my hand. “Shall we show Molave and the world we are committed to one another?”

Lucille placed her petite hand in mine. “Yes, Your Highness.”

As her hand moved to the crook of my arm, we walked side by side down the grand staircase and long corridors to my offices. Those we passed stopped, bowed, and curtsied.

We were scheduled to meet with the cardinal first and then, at eleven, in one of the many parlors, Lucille and I would receive our blessing. After which, Mum had a small banquet

planned for the immediate family, local ambassadors to the crown, and a few vetted reporters.

I hadn't given the reception much thought, but as we walked the corridors of the palace, I saw the genius in the queen's plan. The ambassadors residing in Molave City represented countries from around the world. Their attendance and that of crown-friendly reporters would ensure that news of our recommitment to one another made headlines far beyond the Molave borders.

As Lucille and I met privately with Cardinal Decoti behind the closed doors of my office, he didn't ask about my loyalty to the princess or lapses in judgment. No penances were demanded, and no rebukes were given. The meeting seemed simply to cover the necessary protocol to commit to the blessing.

He posed one question, simply asking if we were both entering into this venture of our own free will.

Considering the circumstances, what Lucille called the 'behind-the-curtain' truth, the question was a quandary of sorts. In my mind, I boiled it down to the bare minimum—Lucille and Oliver. Two individuals ready and willing to make a public declaration of their commitment to one another and to Molave.

After the private meeting, Lucille and I followed the cardinal from my office suite to the east parlor. Being a bit larger than other parlors, the room fit rows of chairs and had three tall sets of French doors that led out into the courtyard gardens. With the calendar into November, it was too cold to open the doors. Yet as I stared beyond the panes, I recalled memories of Lucille's and my first true encounter—the night in the gazebo when I shared my suit coat and told her I was an impostor. I recalled her honesty, her bare feet, and her boldness when speaking to a stranger.

The memory seemed distant, yet the significance of the encounter hadn't waned.

Entering the east parlor, I noticed that it wasn't decorated for a wedding or a renewal of vows. There was no need for

frivolous flowers or candles. We were standing in a grand parlor in Molave Palace. Faces of past monarchs filling four-meter-high paintings watched over us from ten meters above. Ornate carpentry and craftsmanship exuded the opulence of the regal dwelling. Pillars and archways trimmed in gold, and marble floors all shone under the light cast by crystal chandeliers.

The people in attendance stood as Lucille and I walked the aisle between the rows of chairs. Arm in arm with her, my mind no longer thought of what I was doing as acting. The performances had ended long ago. That didn't mean the curtain had fallen. On the contrary, the curtain had been ripped from its valance, incapable of closing.

Lucille and I took two of the chairs near the front.

The chairs behind our row were occupied by the dignitaries and reporters invited to the blessing and reception. I'd been given a list of names with headshots. There was one lone reporter from the States who stood out. She'd been on assignment in Molave for a different story and when her publication caught wind of our blessing, the powers within contacted the Firm. Now she was seated amongst the honored guests—Betsy Scholl, an award-winning journalist from *Rolling Stone* magazine.

Betsy was known for her ruthless critiques of Broadway roughly a decade ago. That was before she made her way out of theater and onto the national stage, bringing spotlights to celebrities around the world. She was respected for her relentless pursuit of the story and known for uncovering what others missed.

Her presence during this blessing would ensure that the Duke and Duchess of Monovia, Prince and Princess of Molave would make headlines in the States. I'd been told that as long as her story was positive, her byline would make for the perfect prelude to our US tour coming in the new year.

The entire room remained standing as King Theodore, Queen Anne, and Princess Isabella arrived, sitting in the front row on the other side of the aisle. I reached for Lucille's hand.

She turned, her entrancing blue stare looking up at me before we turned our attention to the cardinal.

His sermon centered around the bonds of marriage as he quoted scripture and recounted parables. Finally, he asked Lucille and I to come forward. Standing, I offered the princess my hand, leading her to the altar. Next, we both knelt on the velvet-covered platform and joined hands. The royal family was directed to stand as our witnesses. Though my back was to them, I pictured Papa, Mum, and Isabella also standing as the cardinal prayed.

His words were mostly lost on me as my thoughts flowed much like a rushing rapids, never staying too long on any one subject. That was until he mentioned blessing the continuation of the monarchy, the monarchy's relevance in the world in which we live, the health of our king, and the church's blessings on future heirs.

I squeezed Lucille's hand with the knowledge there was no turning back.

When the prayer was finished, we both stood and turned toward the onlookers.

Lucille's gasp came at the same moment I too saw the couple seated in the last row. Her hand trembled in mine as the cardinal said his final words.

CHAPTER 19

Lucille

As Roman bowed and I curtsied to King Theodore and Queen Anne, my heart thumped too quickly—so fast I feared the organ may leap from my chest. I wanted nothing more than to run down the aisle.

Alas, protocol trumped.

Roman and I stepped toward the monarchs.

“Roman,” Queen Anne said, reaching for his cheeks and placing a kiss on one.

His deep voice rumbled with his appreciation. “Mum.”

When Roman stood before the king and began to converse, I found myself face-to-face with Queen Anne. “Your Majesty?” I asked, working to keep my tears at bay.

She reached for my hand. “I called Lady Astid as soon as I heard about the blessing. It was my plan to bring your parents with us to Annabella Castle. It took all my willpower not to spoil my own surprise last night at dinner.”

My chest tightened. “They were here, in the palace?”

“Yes,” she said with a smile. “I hope you don’t mind. I’ve broken protocol for today’s reception, seating your parents at our family table.

Blinking, a tear or two tumbled from my eyes. “I don’t mind. I couldn’t be happier.”

She reached for the king’s arm. “Shall we begin the procession?”

I curtsied to the king. “Thank you, Papa,” I said softly.

He smiled with a nod.

The guests stood as the king and queen were the first to return up the aisle.

Roman and I followed with Isabella behind. When we reached the back of the room, I released Roman's arm and reached for my mother. It had been over a year since I'd looked into her caring eyes. "Mom."

"Lucy," she cooed as we embraced.

Polina Sutton, the wife of Senator Edwin Sutton, was also known as Baroness Astid of Letanonia, the daughter of Lord Nieminen, the Baron of Lieksa and Lady Stanley of Jan Mayen. Since settling in the States, my grandparents dropped their titles and settled on the surname Astid. My mother was the last of the Astid line to emigrate to the States. Alas, my grandparents breathed their last in the States, my grandfather around the time of my high school graduation and my grandmother while I was at Columbia.

To those close to my mother, she gave up her long list of titles and was simply Polly.

Currently, in her late fifties, Polina Sutton was stunningly beautiful in my opinion. Her coloring was lighter than mine, showcasing her Nordic heritage. Her blond shoulder-length hair and her bright blue eyes complemented and contrasted my father's lighter blue eyes and once-dark hair. The stories I'd been told were that my parents fell in love at first sight. My father was completely taken by the beautiful woman in his political science class, totally unaware that she was of elite heritage from a country that no longer existed.

The concept of love at first sight eluded me until the night I first saw Roman. While what I felt at the time seemed real, unlike my parents, ours faded—only to be rekindled one cold night in the rain. If only I'd realized Noah wasn't the man I married.

My experience led me to believe that love wasn't truly ignited by sight. Sight sparked desire, but that was only the beginning of a fire. A spark could easily extinguish. Love took more work, the stoking of the ash and the addition of kindling to bring back the flames. The tinder needed wasn't something

we could see with our eyes. It was buried deep within a person's soul, showing itself in words and actions.

One couldn't truly love an exterior if the essence within was unlovable.

The soul—the essence—of one's being was where love existed.

Nodding quickly, I held Mom's hands in mine. "I didn't know you would be here. I've missed you."

From the corner of my eye, I saw my father offer Roman his hand in greeting. The cast on Roman's right hand made that gesture impossible. They settled for a nod and verbal acknowledgment. Finally, Roman reached for my elbow, more aware of protocol than I.

"We should go," he whispered.

My mother smiled. "We'll see you at the reception."

As Roman led me away, I held tightly to his arm. "I can't believe they're here," I whispered.

He leaned close to my ear. "I may have misjudged Mum."

"Why?" I whispered.

"I'll tell you later."

Instead of being seated as we were at banquet with each royal separated by a guest, for this reception, our seats were arranged less formally, more in line with a common wedding reception.

At the front of the room, sat our head table. The king and queen with Isabelle were seated to one side of Roman and I to the other. My parents were seated to my right. As my mother took the chair next to me, I turned her direction. "How long can you stay? When did you get here? How are you? Isn't this a busy time for you to leave New York?"

My mother laughed. "When the Queen of Molave calls and requests your presence, you don't decline. After all, it's not often we're invited to the official blessing of our daughter's marriage."

“It is the first official blessing.”

“I’m glad we’re here,” she said.

“I wanted you here. Things happened so fast. I even mentioned to Roman...”

I’d told Roman I wished I could invite my parents.

Could Roman have had a hand in this? No, he wouldn’t.

“Queen Anne mentioned our invitation was Roman’s idea,” Mom whispered.

I turned toward my husband who was speaking with his parents. When he turned my way, his lips quirked.

“You knew?” I asked.

“No, my princess. I didn’t. If you haven’t noticed, things have been hectic.” He grinned. “Last week, after you and I spoke about the date and you mentioned your parents, I planted a seed. Mum took it from there. I hadn’t been told that they were invited or that they’d accepted.”

My gaze went out over the entire room as butlers and servers scurried from here to there. If I were to guess, I’d say it appeared there were fifty or so guests. And while this wasn’t as formal as the banquet, there were still rules.

Holding my hand over my mouth, I whispered. “If I wouldn’t lose my badge of the royal family order, I’d kiss you right here in front of the king and queen and all the guests.”

Leaning closer, Roman’s deep voice rumbled my core, and his warm breath tickled my neck. “Save those thoughts for later. Let’s not give Mum a heart attack.”

When I turned back to my parents, my father reached for my hand and grinned. “Sweetheart, it appears you haven’t hungered for peach pie.”

“No, Dad. I believe I now know why you two were worried. We can talk later. I’m not happy about what happened, but I love Roman, and he loves me. Maybe the rough patches in life are there to remind us of what we have, what we want, and what is worth fighting for.”

Before we could speak more, Cardinal Decoti led the room in a pre-reception prayer. Next, King Theodore stood and offered his wishes of well-being for our marriage, offered his blessing, and stated that our renewed commitment was a sign to the world that the Molave monarchy was strong. Lifting his glass of wine, he offered his toast.

I took my glass in my hand and brought it to my lips before setting it down without a drink.

As the meal progressed, it was easy to become overwhelmed with the jubilation of the day. However, it only took one glance at my sister-in-law at the far end of the table to remember that not everyone had reason to celebrate.

Nearing two in the afternoon, King Theodore stood, thanking everyone for coming before concluding the reception and dismissing the guests. While the dinner portion was over, the celebration wasn't. There would be the meet-and-greet portion to follow.

“How long can you stay?” I asked my parents.

“We need to leave Saturday,” Mom said.

I feigned a smile, wishing their stay was longer. “Then we shall spend today and tomorrow catching up.” I scrunched my nose. “First, we will need to speak with the guests.”

Mom patted my hand. “We're not here to be in the way. We're here because I wanted to see for myself that you are happy.”

“I am, Mom. More than I dreamt possible.”

My parents and Isabella walked behind Roman and me into the designated parlor. Soon the guests began to filter in. Unlike the banquet when I was well prepared, I was at a bit of a loss regarding the names of the current guests. Some I recognized and others I didn't. The queen mentioned that Molave-based dignitaries were invited, but I couldn't recall much more than that.

Mom and I were talking when we were approached by a slender woman closer to Mom's age than mine. She was

striking with her hair secured in a tight bun, high cheekbones, and impeccable style.

“Excuse me, Princess Lucille,” she said with a neck bow.

“Yes,” I replied with a smile.

“I’m Betsy Scholl, from *Rolling Stone*.”

My eyes opened wide. “Welcome. I’m surprised a marriage blessing is newsworthy for such an esteemed publication.”

“We focus on celebrities and that would include you and the Duke of Monovia. Would you mind if I asked you a few questions?”

I looked to my mother who took a step forward. “Hello,” she said, offering her hand. “I’m the princess’s mother, Polly Sutton. This is a celebration.”

“Yes,” Betsy said, her gaze narrowing. “You’re Baroness Astid.”

“In another life.”

Betsy looked around the room. “Is the senator here?”

Mom stood taller. “We’re simply parents, here for our daughter.”

“Days before the Fifteen Eurasia Summit. That’s interesting timing.”

I reached forward and laid my hand on Betsy’s arm. “You had a question for me?”

As she began to speak, Roman stepped behind me. I didn’t need to turn to know it to be true. It wasn’t Betsy’s expression that gave away his presence. I sensed him, the scent of his cologne, his protective presence, his radiating aura, and his being. We were two halves of a whole, and when those two halves neared one another, there was an undeniable pull—a magnetic attraction.

Craning my neck over my shoulder, I smiled and turned back to the reporter. “Betsy, let me introduce the Prince of Molave, Roman Godfrey. Roman, this is Betsy Scholl.”

The reporter bowed her neck. “Your Highness.”

Roman wrapped his arm around me. “Miss Scholl, how are things at *Rolling Stone*?”

“I’m honored you’ve heard of me.”

“The guest list was at my discretion.” He tightened his grip of my hip. “Of course, we are honored to have you here. Someone to take the truth back to the States.”

“I must admit I was skeptical. Timing and all.”

“Skeptical?” I asked.

She looked directly at me. “The people in America want to know if this is show or real.”

I was the one to answer. “I can assure you and the people in the States, Roman and I are real.”

“There have been rumors—”

Roman interrupted. “Ms. Scholl, I don’t appreciate your putting my wife or me on the spot on our special day, especially in front of my in-laws. That said, I have made mistakes, and I own them. My devotion is to Lucille, the king, and Molave.”

“In that order?”

Roman looked down at me and back to the reporter. “At this particular moment, after our recommitment, yes. Ask me tomorrow at the summit and my answer will differ. No one commitment is less important than the other.”

She forced a smile. “Well, congratulations. I’m pleased I agreed to attend. I wish the two of you only happiness.”

“Thank you,” we said in unison.

Betsy tilted her head. “My apologies, Your Highness.” She was looking at Roman. “I have the strangest feeling we’ve met before.”

“Do you cover the Molave monarchy or our parliament?”

“No, sir. I cover celebrities.”

“We are hardly celebrities,” Roman responded.

“I beg to differ. You’ll see when you arrive in the States. I’ll warn you; my article will encourage even larger crowds. Every now and again, the world needs a good love story, a second chance that gives others hope.” She bowed her head again. “I would like to arrange an interview when you’re in the States?”

“You can speak to our offices,” I replied.

Roman turned to my mother and smiled. “Thank you for coming. It means the world to Lucille.”

Mom’s blue eyes moved from Roman to me and back again. “I look forward to some private time before we leave.”

“I’m afraid I must travel early tomorrow for Oslo and” — he looked at me— “my afternoon is dreadfully full.”

Noah.

That was his afternoon.

Instead of thinking about that, I nodded with a smile. “We’ll see you tonight for dinner.”

After a nod, he squeezed my hand and disappeared into the crowd.

Mom leaned close. “Tell me this isn’t some PR move for the crown.”

I quickly shook my head. “It’s real. I have more to tell you,” I whispered. “But let’s wait for that privacy. Please come to our apartments. I have a brief meeting with my secretary, and the rest of the afternoon is yours.”

CHAPTER 20

Roman

The guard allowed me entry to the protected corridor. My initial gut-wrenching reaction to this catacomb of cells had faded.

Is it so easy to grow numb to injustices?

The first room remained the medical command center—a nurse’s station of such. Currently, there was only one caregiver within. The same man I’d seen yesterday. My steps slowed as I peered into Francis’s cell. The king may have allowed him to be moved upstairs last night for Isabella, but now he was back in the dungeon.

I knew nothing about medical procedures. Hell, I couldn’t even recall portraying a doctor. Nevertheless, as I read the numbers and watched the lights on the monitor, everything seemed status quo.

On to the fourth room, I waited, wondering if once again King Theodore would appear. When he didn’t, I inhaled, removed the key from my pocket, and opened the cell. At the sound of the door, Noah’s gaze turned to me. The room grew brighter, and the chains attached to his wrists rattled as he shifted. His face was covered with gray and brown hair growth.

“I thought I was done with you,” he said with a sneer.

Tugging the metal chair over the tile, I brought it to the side of the bed. “It’s what you want.”

“What do I want?”

“To die. You tried at Forthwith and your confession was your ace in the hole. You thought I’d tell Papa and your misery would be over.”

Noah scoffed. “He’s not my papa or yours. He’s a madman who will stop at nothing to achieve immortality.”

Humming as I sat, I contemplated Noah’s statement. “He’s already immortal. He will forever be remembered as King Theodore II of Molave.”

“Don’t you see that Molave is slipping through his fingers? He is determined to lay the ashes of this country at someone else’s feet. When Molave is no longer, the victor will come for the monarchy. Theo’s entire scheme is about laying blame at anyone’s feet but his own.”

Sitting back, I took in Noah’s stare. His brown eyes were clearer than they’d been the day before. Even with the beard growth, his complexion was less gaunt. Even the dark circles around his eyes were fading.

“They’ve been giving you the steroids.” I didn’t need confirmation. I’d witnessed too many friends with addiction problems. The only way one made a quick recovery—the word was relative—was to use again.

He tilted his chin toward the IV. “No one tells me shit. I don’t know what they’re giving me.”

Leaning back, I crossed my ankle over my knee. “I took your story to King Theo.”

“He doesn’t believe you.”

“On the contrary,” I said. “I believe he does. Mr. Davies confirmed his symptoms could have been caused by the exposure to cyanide from cherries. I’ve done some research on my own. The one question I can’t answer is how you knew the amount to dose him. Most cases of cyanide poisoning are fatal within thirty-minutes. In the rare cases of survival, the body metabolizes the chemical.”

“Yeah,” Noah replied. “Hydrogen cyanide is soluble. But each exposure causes irreparable damage to cells.”

“What did you do...before?”

Noah sighed, laying his head back against the pillow. “I wasn’t a chemist or scientist if that’s what you’re asking. What

about you?”

“Apparently, I was wandering the earth aimlessly before learning my true destiny.”

A laugh bubbled from his throat. “They’ve got you. You really think you can pull this off.”

“I’m going to try.”

“Why?”

Standing, I paced back and forth beside Noah’s bed. “Who gave you the idea about poisoning the king?”

“It was my idea.”

“No. Yesterday, you said it wasn’t your idea. You said it was a good idea, but not yours.”

“I saw it on a show on the telly. Yeah, I’m no mastermind—obviously. I took the idea and ran with it.”

“Why protect him? You don’t want to be here. You said your real life is gone. Why protect Francis?”

Noah met my stare. “We both know I’m not going to get out of here. Hell, Theo will have me killed or leave me here for eternity to waste away. Either way, my life is over. Francis has a shot. He can do what I couldn’t.”

“Which is?” I asked.

“Rule Molave. Negotiate an agreement with Borinkia. Get back the power he lost when he married Isabella.”

“That’s what Francis wants?”

Noah raised his voice. “Are you daft? He wants that and so does Alek. They’ve both been ostracized for reasons beyond their control. They want their places at the table.”

“And I’m to believe you?” I asked, crossing my arms over my chest. “Give me something substantial.”

“Something you can take to Theodore and screw Francis?”

“Give me something to take to Papa that will get you closer to your goal.”

He lifted his arms, jingling the chains. “What is my goal?”

“Life away from here. Or death. Either is a possibility,” I said. “The alternative is where you are right now. You’re feeling better. I see it. What happens when they take the steroids away again? You’ll go through withdrawals. I’d guess you’ve been there.” Noah looked away, but I continued, “It’s unbearable to watch. I’ve seen it. He was a man I worked with—talented. He was intent on building muscle. When exercise alone wasn’t giving him the results he wanted, he relied on the steroids.

“What is it like to be the one so out of your mind that you’re delusional, shitting and peeing yourself?” He didn’t respond. “I didn’t know they were going to supply you with steroids, but now that I think about it, I get the plan. You must have had some in your system yesterday, after all you weren’t a shaking mess. And you were shaking at Forthwith. You said something hit your elbow. I say you were having spasms.

“The Firm isn’t going to kill you, Noah. When I started this, I was told Molave imprisons rather than kills. They’re going to fucking torture you—imprison you and make your life a living hell. You gave them the damn means. They’re going to make you feel good—get you on a high and then take that shit away, let you fall into the pits of hell and when you’re at your brink, they’ll fucking bring you back. How many times do you think your body can go through that?”

Noah’s jaw was clenched and his temples visibly throbbed as he slowly met my stare. “What do you want?”

“Give me something to keep Francis quiet. The world has been told” —I debated being untruthful, but truth on my part seemed necessary if I wanted honesty from him— “the duke and I were ambushed. The assailant took his own life. When Francis wakes, he needs to corroborate the crown’s account.”

As a tear slowly rolled down Noah’s cheek, I had a fleeting moment of pity. That was all it was. I didn’t need to think about his attempt to assassinate the king to want this man to get whatever he deserved. I only had to think about Lucille.

Her expressions in the videos I watched.

The abrasion on her cheek the night we were in the gazebo.

The way she still tries to hide in plain sight when my voice raises.

This man put her through hell.

I wasn't against him experiencing a greater level of damnation.

More than that, I wanted to succeed. I wanted Molave to stay independent. I wanted the life I'd found with Lucille. If that meant I would approve Noah's suffering, so be it. I was also willing to reduce it.

"Come on, Noah. I said your name." His dark eyes flashed my direction. "Talk to me before they take you back through withdrawals."

Shaking his head, he asked, "Why do you care?"

"I don't fucking know." I stood and straightened my suit coat. "Give me something, or I'm leaving."

"Don't leave."

CHAPTER 21

Lucille

Once the meet-and-greet session was concluded, Lady Buckingham and I went directly to my offices on the first floor of Molave Palace. Normally, I would have gone to our apartments and changed clothes. It wasn't my habit of walking around the palace hallways in a gown and tiara—another common misconception. Today was different. I wanted to expedite this meeting and get to my parents.

As the door opened, the staff within stood, curtsied, bowed, and acknowledged my presence. In the years past, I'd had a sort of impostor syndrome when it came to entering these rooms. I was a princess with a staff and little to no responsibilities. As my staff greeted me, I felt that self-deprecating image fade away.

The irony wasn't lost on me that it had taken an impostor to make me feel legitimate.

"Your Highness," Lady Larsen said, greeting me in the outer office.

"I hope this won't take long," I said as I led my head secretary into my rarely used office. The room was as it had been over the years, since Roman and I married. The ornate woodwork of the built-in bookcases glistened, reflecting the sunlight streaming through the large windows. The dark wallpaper that had been present when we married was replaced at my suggestions with light cream paint. The heavy curtains were replaced with plantation blinds and airy sheer golden curtains. My leather desk chair was cream and the paintings gracing the walls were from some of my favorite artists. I'd always had a soft spot for Georgia O'Keeffe,

Gustav Klimt, and Monet. As a youth, I would wander the Met for hours, and now I had my own private collection.

It took me a moment to arrange the long gown as I took a seat behind my desk. “Please,” I said, motioning to the chairs opposite me, “have a seat. I realize I’m overdressed.”

“Congratulations on the blessing.”

“Thank you. I should have gotten to you yesterday. What is it you wanted to speak about?”

Perched on the edge of her chair, Lady Larsen looked down at her tablet before meeting my gaze. “We’ve been in contact with the prince’s office. It’s a mutual decision to pause your speaking engagements.”

“Why?”

“Safety. The incident with the prince and duke and also the drone.”

I hated that I agreed with their decision. “Do we know any more about the drone?” I asked.

“I’ve been told that the palace has experts who are dissecting the machine. At this point they don’t know more. There is one more thing.” I waited. “Ma’am, I’m no expert on drones. The royal ministry called for a thorough evaluation of the car you were riding in to the speech in Forthwith. Hidden in a wheel well was a type of GPS transponder. They had another word, but essentially, it was a very small beacon, the size of a coin. The beacon sent a signal to the drone.”

My stomach twisted. “I was targeted?”

“It could have been the prince who was targeted. No one knew he wouldn’t be with you until that morning.”

“Would that mean the attack on Roman and Francis was a smaller part of a bigger plan?” I had reason to doubt the entirety of that question, but the gist of the idea could be true.

Was the drone a backup plan for Francis or the Volkovs?

Lady Larsen sighed. “So much is unknown. That’s why we, your staff, have come to the decision. Of course, you and

Prince Roman may overrule our concerns. Please know, Princess, we are concerned. I wanted to speak to you before making any public statements.

Nodding, I thought about the bug attached to the car. “Where were the cars stored?”

“The one you were riding in was sent to Forthwith by the king. It was his plan to get you new cars in case the attack on the prince and duke somehow compromised your cars or guards.”

I leaned back, covering my stomach. “Compromised—the guards? My guards were from Annabella Castle. Does the king worry my guards were compromised?”

“Ma’am, it seems currently, no one is immune from suspicion. All the cars were at Forthwith overnight. No one is calling out Annabella guards or even Forthwith guards and certainly not the ones King Theodore sent from Molave Palace. Every decision going forward is precautionary.”

I tried to recall. “We had five more stops on our tour following the Fifteen Eurasia Summit. The plan was to go out unified after our blessing to show the people of Molave we’re committed to one another and to them.”

“Yes, that was the plan.”

“Did Prince Roman have a say in this decision?” I asked.

“I believe he was briefed. I haven’t heard what he said. While this was your staff’s concern, we’ve heard a similar plea from the top.”

King Theodore.

Inhaling, I sat back. “Given the happenings of the last week, perhaps it is better to sit tight. We can reevaluate after the summit.”

Lady Larsen nodded. “I wanted to speak to you about a statement. With everything that’s happened, especially the blessing,” she added with a smile, “I feel it would be best if your office and the prince’s sent out a joint statement,

something about spending time together, being committed to your duties, and resuming tours after the first of the year.”

After the first of the year?

“I will go along with whatever the prince’s office drafts. Is there any more word on our tour of the States?” I asked.

Lady Larsen looked down at her tablet. “We are working out the particulars for dates in February.”

“Please keep me informed. Don’t finalize anything until Roman and I are consulted. When it comes to stops, I’m partial to New York.”

Laying the tablet on her legs, my secretary leaned forward. “We’re waiting until after the summit. There are concerns. Until the summit is complete, we are keeping a possible US tour from being publicized.”

“What concerns?”

She lowered her voice. “Unofficially, the palace is buzzing with the news.”

I shook my head. “I’m sorry. I’ve been preoccupied. What news?”

“It hasn’t been announced, but it’s rumored that Aleksander I has passed away.”

My pulse sped up. “Making Alek, his son, king?”

Lady Larsen nodded. “His father was ruthless in the invasion of Letanonia. That was decades ago. No one knows what to expect from the younger Aleksander.”

“How did Aleksander I die?”

She shook her head. “No one knows. And according to rumors, Princess Inessa is missing.”

“Missing?”

“She hasn’t been seen in public for a few weeks. Of course, she may have been at her father’s bedside.”

Or at Forthwith.

“Where are these rumors coming from?” I asked.

“You know how rumors can be. Borinkia has a strict policy regarding the release of information. These reports are coming from secret communications within Borinkia and from individuals who have left the country. Borinkia closed its borders this morning.”

I furrowed my brow. “What does all this mean?”

“We’re waiting to find out.”

As we were conversing, it didn’t occur to me that this was more information than I’d ever been given on any subject in the past. It wasn’t until Lady Larsen left the office and I rolled the mouse to the computer before me that the revelation hit me.

Typing in *Borinkia*, I waited.

Rolling my lower lip between my front teeth, my eyes widened as I took in the numerous articles from different news agencies. The information was there before me.

I typed in *Molave*.

Again, a plethora of articles appeared. The top article was an opinion piece asking if the recommitment between the prince and princess should be believed. I cringed as I scrolled through comments left by people I never met, people who thought they knew what was best for my husband and for me.

My heart ached at the comments condemning me for forgiving Roman for his infidelity. These people didn’t know the entire truth.

What right do they have to judge?

I was lost in the rabbit hole of threads when a knock came to my door. Looking up, I began to tell the person to enter, but she already had.

Lady Buckingham appeared. “Your Highness, your parents are—”

“Oh.” I stood and turned off my computer as I freed the layers of skirts from the confines of the desk.

“Is everything all right?” she asked.

“It isn’t, but something has changed.”

“What is that?”

“I’m not shielded anymore.”

“You aren’t? I hadn’t been informed.”

I kept my voice low as we left my offices. “Lady Larsen informed me of state matters that in the past, I never would have been told about. After she left, I checked, not to verify but to see if I could learn any new information.” I reached for Lady Buckingham’s arm. “I did. It’s more than I’ve seen in years.”

“Ma’am, may I suggest you use what has been bestowed upon you wisely. It’s a matter of trust that you’ve been given. I would hate for you to lose that trust too soon.”

I furrowed my brow. “You’re not talking about my parents, are you? They’re trustworthy.”

“I’m saying that trust is easier to lose than gain. Either King Theodore or the prince has made the decision to allow you access to what was once shielded. Whoever made that decision will be cognizant of what you do with your access.”

Swallowing, I nodded, acknowledging that Lady Buckingham had a valid point. Together we ascended the grand staircase.

“Your parents are in the connecting parlor, ma’am.”

“Thank you.” I looked into her hazel eyes. “My mother is only here for a short time. I want you to know I’m still happy I have you.”

Lady Buckingham closed her eyes and opened them. “I’m not your mother, Princess, but I want to be whoever you need.”

“You have been, Mary. I’m not sure I would have survived without you.”

“As your mistress, I’m pleased with the changes in the prince. As your friend, I’m weary.”

“Don’t be. We are working as a team.”

Lady Buckingham opened the door to the apartments. As soon as I saw them, I rushed forward, pulling them into an embrace as Mom and Dad stood. “I’m sorry I made you wait.”

“You’re the princess,” Mom said.

“We understand.”

I looked down at the gown and back up. “Let me change and we will talk.” I smiled at Dad. “It’s too cold for the gardens.”

Mom turned a circle. “This—your apartments—is beautiful, Lucy. We can talk wherever you want.”

Lifting my hand to her, I implored, “Come with Lady Buckingham and me while I change.” I looked at Dad. “We won’t leave you alone for too long.”

The door behind me opened.

Turning, I met my husband’s stare. “Your Highness.” He was as handsome as ever in his custom suit from our blessing. Only the sash with his various accommodations and honors was missing.

“Lucille.” He turned to Dad. “The senator and I will talk while you ladies take care of whatever it is you do.”

Despite the lightness to Roman’s tone, I saw a change in his disposition.

Has he received the same news as I about Borinkia?

Is he the reason I am now unshielded?

The questions continued as Mom reached for my hand, and she led me into my apartments with Lady Buckingham a step behind.

CHAPTER 22

Roman

I walked to the highboy and opened a rolltop, revealing a crystal decanter of bourbon. This hidden nook of a liquor cabinet had escaped my notice until our last visit to Molave Palace. “Drink?” I asked the senator.

Edwin Sutton stood with his hands clasped behind his back as he watched my every move. “It’s early.”

One shake of my head and I poured myself two fingers of the amber liquid. With the use of only one hand, my pour was slow. After taking a hearty sip, my throat tightened at the welcome burn. Next, I poured another two fingers in a second tumbler and carried it across the room, handing it to my father-in-law.

“Your Highness.” Edwin took the tumbler, lifted it toward the window, and swirled the alcohol.

“It’s safe.” I’ve never crushed cherry pits—I didn’t say the last part as I finished the contents of my first glass. Walking back to the liquor cabinet, I poured another two fingers and walked to the soft chairs near the fireplace. As it had been each day since the late autumn temperatures plummeted, a fire crackled and radiated warmth within the hearth. The bourbon circulating through my bloodstream added warmth from within.

Lucille’s father took the chair to my side. Raising the glass, he asked, “What’s the occasion?”

My jaw clenched as I snapped my attention to him. “Have you not heard?”

He set the tumbler on the table. “Heard what?”

“Aleksander I is no more.”

The expression of shock on the senator's face was either well-rehearsed or genuine. I'd yet to make my decision.

"No," he said, standing. "I hadn't heard." He reached for the phone in his inner suit coat pocket and after swiping the screen, stared down. His curse was more of a mumble. "Fuck."

"It complicates things," I said, unbuttoning my suit coat and sitting back. Lifting my ankle to my knee, I moved my focus from the orange flames to Edwin's face. In the few moments that had passed, the color had drained from his cheeks.

The senator's feet shifted before retaking the chair to my side and reaching for the bourbon. Once he took a drink, he turned my way. I hadn't paid attention during our first meeting, but seeing him this close, I saw the difference in his blue eyes. They weren't the same color as his daughter's. Where hers were vibrant and full of life, her father's contained a gray hue that left them dull.

"From a quick look at my messages," he said, "I see the news has reached the US."

I swirled the liquid. "The timing is unfortunate."

"Is it ever a good time to die?"

Pressing my lips together, I shook my head. "You're right. The timing is opportune."

"I apologize if I'm not up to speed on Molavian politics."

Sitting forward, I smiled. "It isn't Molave's politics. It's the United States'."

"What are you suggesting?"

I shrugged. "I'm not suggesting anything." I lowered my voice to a whisper. "For Lucille, I'm pleased you and the baroness were here to witness the blessing. For your daughter's sake, I won't mention to her any of what I'm about to say. She loves you."

"We love her."

“That’s why you’re going to do whatever it takes to undo the deal you have with Prince...no, correction, King Aleksander II.”

“Roman, I don’t know what you—”

Shaking my head, I stopped his unnecessary rebuttal. “I have proof, Edwin. I’ve had it for a while. I just didn’t realize what I had. I guess I was blinded by the assumption of your loyalty if not to your daughter and the country she’s accepted as her own, then to your wife and her late family.”

“My family is first in my thoughts.”

“I forget, how much were you offered?” When he didn’t speak, I added, “The Duke of Wilmington has had a change of heart. You see, he’s chosen to support Molave over Borinkia. You and I had a gentlemen’s agreement. You will make sure our agreement proceeds through your Congress and is signed by the president—with these stipulations: thirty-five billion upfront and we can go ahead with the ten percent increase in exports a year to which I earlier agreed.”

“That’s outrageous,” Edwin said. “I can’t simply add five billion to the budget. The recent election has Congress in a tailspin. Every penny is being scrutinized.”

The US had trillion-dollar budgets. I doubted anyone was counting pennies. If they were, they’d be counting them to the moon and back.

“Take the money from somewhere else,” I said. “How you accomplish this isn’t my concern.” I took another drink of the bourbon. “And in case you’re wondering, what was between Inessa and me is over. I’m devoted to your daughter and for that reason, I won’t inform her about the role you played in merging Borinkia and Molave.”

“Borinkia is...the US won’t negotiate.”

“Openly,” I said.

A sheen of perspiration on Edwin’s brow glistened in the fire’s light. “You don’t understand the pressure.”

“I’m sure I don’t. You answer to your constituents and your peers while justifying padding your own pockets. I have only my father.”

Edwin stood. “I thought things seemed odd during my last visit. I’d hoped the change was positive between you and Lucy.” He met my gaze. “Was I right? Is this about my daughter?”

“Lucille is a factor. Other than her, I can’t pinpoint one thing. I’m determined to keep Molave independent.”

“What of the people of Molave?” Edwin asked.

The doors to Lucille’s apartments opened and she and her mother came forward. No longer wearing the gown and jewels, Lucille was radiant in slacks and a blouse with her long hair flowing in waves as she walked closer. Standing at my side, the sweet scent of her perfume filled my senses as she ran her hand over my shoulders. Lifting my left hand, I covered hers.

“The people,” I said with a smile, “they love you.”

“Our tour has been postponed.”

I squeezed her hand. “Postponed, not canceled. And as far as I’m concerned, you’re not leaving this palace until I know you’re safe.”

“Do you plan to keep me prisoner?” she asked.

Although her question was voiced in jest, as the pieces of the various plots were coming together, I was prepared to do just that. Standing, I met Lucille’s gaze. “If I must.” With a neck bow to my mother-in-law, I spoke, “Baroness, I wish I could spend more time in your presence. The world is upside down, and there’s much to prepare before the summit.”

Mrs. Sutton took a step toward me. “I know Lucille is a grown woman. Please know, Roman, we’re counting on you to keep her safe and to make her happy. I can’t forget what’s occurred, but I can forgive. Don’t ask me to or put me in a position where I must forgive again.”

“Mother,” Lucille admonished, “Roman is the prince.” My wife turned to me. “Roman, she—”

I lifted my hand. “Thank you, Mrs. Sutton. Forgiveness is more than I deserve.”

Lucille’s eyes closed as she exhaled.

“I need to go.” I leaned close to kiss Lucille’s cheek.

“I was hoping you could stay with me when I speak to my parents.”

“The king...” He hasn’t been told. I didn’t voice the end of the sentence.

Lucille’s eyes pleaded, the wish infiltrating her words. “My parents are here.”

The excitement in Lucille’s gaze was too much for me to squelch. I reached for Lucille’s hand. “Go ahead.”

Her fingers squeezed tightly as she spoke. “Mom and Dad, Roman and I are going to have a child.”

Mrs. Sutton’s fingertips flew to her lips as her eyes filled with tears. “A baby.”

“I haven’t seen the royal physician,” Lucille went on. “We haven’t even told the king and queen, so you mustn’t say a thing. I just took the test a few days ago.”

Mrs. Sutton came forward and wrapped her arms around her daughter. After a moment, she took a step back and stared up at me with glistening tears in her eyes. “Your Highness, a hug from your child’s grandmother?”

I nodded.

“Dad?” Lucille asked as the baroness hugged me.

“Oh, sweetheart,” Edwin said. “this is wonderful news.”

After kissing Lucille and promising to be at dinner in the family dining room, I bid her and her parents adieu and met Lord Martin in the corridor.

“The king is waiting,” he said.

“Once I explain, he’ll understand.”

Our shoes tapped on the marble floors as we hurried to the king's offices. Along the way I was greeted with congratulations for Lucille's and my blessing. I wished I could revel in the goodwill and celebrate with my wife.

Between now and the opening of the summit, there would be little jubilation.

CHAPTER 23

Lucille

My parents remained quiet as Roman left our apartments. Once the door closed, Mom came closer and reached for my hand. “I can’t believe you’re really going to have a baby.”

“I know, Mom,” I said, “me either. I’m excited and...” I didn’t finish.

“Frightened?”

I nodded. “When will I stop being concerned?” I laid my hand over my stomach.

“Never,” Dad replied. “I’d like to tell you it gets easier, but it doesn’t.”

“Especially when your baby lives an ocean away,” Mom added.

For the next few hours, the three of us chatted about everything and nothing. Mom filled me in on all that was happening in New York. This time of year, she was involved with numerous organizations, some that she sponsored, some whose boards she sat on, and others she simply supported. Their schedule was filled with fundraisers that varied from ten-thousand-dollar-a-plate dinners to local toy and coat drives. As Mom spoke, I heard names I hadn’t thought about in years.

Memories of my youth in New York bombarded my thoughts, working in the homeless shelter and sitting until late at night or early the next morning at my mother’s side, doing whatever needed being done. She was never all about delegation. If a task was needed, she would step in and volunteer.

Off and on during our talk, Dad stepped away, preoccupied by his phone. Every now and then, he'd ask to enter my private apartment to take a call or make one in private.

Mom shrugged. "I'm sorry about your father, dear. This is a busy time for him. Congress is under deadline before the holidays. He insisted on joining me for your blessing."

"It's all right," I said. "I don't mind that he's busy. I'm just glad you're here."

"Queen Anne doesn't know about the baby?"

I shook my head. "Only Lady Buckingham, Roman, and now the two of you."

The two of us went on talking about how I was feeling. I showed Mom the book Lady Buckingham had given me.

"In my day it was *What to Expect When You're Expecting*."

A smile came to my face. "This one has a humorous undertone that makes the facts a little easier to accept."

Ten centimeters.

The thought gave me chills.

Time flew by as we spoke. I couldn't recall a time I'd enjoyed more simply chatting with someone I trusted and who knew me, not as Princess Lucille, but as Lucy.

During one instance when Dad was in my private parlor, Mom lowered her voice and confided, "I'm concerned about some reports regarding Borinkia."

"What have you heard?" It was the first time we'd mentioned anything resembling matters of state. I had no doubt that I trusted my parents implicitly. Nevertheless, Lady Buckingham's warning about using my information wisely and keeping it secure was somewhere in the forefront of my mind.

Mom answered, "Only that tensions are growing. I don't know what you've heard, but from what they're saying on the news in the US, it's not only tensions with Molave. Borinkia has made aggressive moves toward other countries."

“I hadn’t heard that.”

She patted my knee. “I’m sure that with your recent discovery, international affairs aren’t high on your priority list.”

Standing, I walked to the window and turned. “I can be more than an heir maker, Mother.”

“Of course. That’s not at all what I meant.”

“You probably realize that in the past, I was guilty of disparaging myself about many perceived inadequacies, one of which was not conceiving. The thing I can’t explain is that I made the decision to stand up for myself to Roman, King Theo, the chief minister—to everyone—and show them I am capable. I did that first. Things are changing here in Molave. I do care about Borinkia, more than just about their marriage-wrecking princess.”

“It takes two, Lucy.”

“I know that,” I said too loudly. “And she’s half of the two.”

The door opened to my private apartment as I spoke. Dad’s eyes were wide. “Have you heard that she’s missing?”

Inhaling, I lifted my chin. “She’s an adult woman with the financial means to do whatever she wants and without the restrictions someone like myself must learn to navigate.” When my parents looked confused, I added, “She isn’t married. Does she report to her father or brother?” Yes, I knew her father had recently passed, but I hadn’t discussed that with my parents. “The point is, maybe she doesn’t want to be found.”

Dad took a deep breath. “Some of the calls I’ve been fielding, . . . they’re about you. About Prince Roman, specifically.”

“What about him?” I asked.

“The last time Inessa Volkov was seen was before you and Roman appeared in Odnessa and made the announcement about your reconciliation. Now she’s expected back to

Borinkia and she's not there. At the same time, you two rushed your blessing. It's just..." He hesitated. "...the timing of all of it is raising red flags."

"Why?"

"Edwin," Mom reprimanded. "Lucy doesn't need to be bogged down with this right now."

"What red flags?" I asked again.

"The Borinkian crown has released a statement saying that Inessa is to be returned to the capital or there will be retaliation."

"I don't understand. Is Alek insinuating that Molave has something to do with her disappearance?"

"Specifically, your husband," Dad replied.

Covering my midsection, I sat on a nearby chair. When I looked up, I squared my shoulders and met my father's stare. "He doesn't."

"You can't be certain."

I stood again, keeping my posture stick straight. "Yes, I can."

"Lucy," Mom said, coming toward me. "We shouldn't be upsetting you."

"You aren't. The insinuations are. I'm telling you without a doubt, Roman had nothing to do with Inessa's disappearance."

"I hope you're right," Dad said. "My office is getting inquiries from fellow Congress members about Molave breaching the US sanctions against Borinkia."

"That's crazy," I said a little too loud. "The sanctions are regarding trade. No one is trading the princess for goods."

"For peace."

"Excuse me?"

Mom reached for Dad's elbow. "Edwin, we should let Lucy rest." She smiled my direction. "Dear, we'll be at dinner with you, Roman, and the king and queen."

My focus was still on my father. “If you have something to say about my husband, now is the time.”

Dad shook his head. “I only have to say that you are loved by more than the Molavian people. Your mother and I love you. You have friends in the US who worry about you—never hear from you. Countless Americans, people who haven’t met you, love you. Never be afraid to ask for peach pie.”

Ignoring Dad’s reference, I turned to Mom and exhaled. “I’m glad Queen Anne invited you to dine with everyone.”

Though there were a few more hours before dinner, the sun beyond the windows began to fade. Mom reached for my hands and dropped her forehead to mine. “Your father is concerned. I want you to know I’m happy at what I’m seeing between you and Roman. It breaks my heart that he broke yours, and I want this recommitment to keep your heart from being broken again. Just know you are always welcome to come home. And it goes without saying we’d welcome our grandchildren. Don’t let a baby shoulder your marriage.”

For a moment, I contemplated my response. While I was currently edging toward the defensive, in my mother’s defense, three months ago her concern would have been merited. Smiling, I replied, “Mom, there was a time when your fears may have been warranted. I’d wanted a baby to help our marriage. Now I’m excited about a baby, not to save our marriage, but to join our family.”

Mom’s smile widened. “We’re so proud of you.”

“I decided,” I said, looking into her blue eyes, “not to give up on what I wanted and at the same time, to stop compromising. You’ve been a great example. There are so many things I want to do for the people of Molave.”

“I know you will. Remember, I love you.”

“I love you, too, Mom.”

Dad kissed my forehead. “Peach pie, sweetheart. Say the word.”

“No, Dad. I’m on a peach-free diet. Don’t forget,” I said to both, “no mention of the baby at dinner. Roman and I want to

tell his parents in our own time.”

I watched as they exited the parlor with a mix of emotions circulating through me.

“Your Highness,” Lady Buckingham inquired after we were alone. “What can I do for you?”

“I think I’d like to rest before dinner.”

“Come with me.”

Lying in my bed, I closed my eyes as the memories of the day came back to me. While the blessing wasn’t as big of an exhibition as our wedding had been, its impact was exponentially greater. A new sense of security settled over me as I curled under the blankets, hopeful that the Firm was done replacing the man at my side and my Roman and I had a real chance at life-long happiness.

CHAPTER 24

Roman

Lord Forsberg, the minister of foreign affairs, appeared unannounced in my office shortly after my arrival from speaking to King Theodore. Lord Forsberg informed me that King Aleksander II had issued an all-points bulletin for his sister. The international news media was looking at Molave as a possible source of her disappearance.

“Where is Isabella?” I asked the foreign minister.

“Your sister?”

“Yes.” I picked up the telephone to my secretary. Hitting the buttons, I began to speak, “Dame Williamson, send for the Duchess of Wilmington. I want her in my office right away.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

Lord Forsberg narrowed his gaze. “What does the duchess have to do with the Borinkian princess?”

“I think she should be able to clear this up.”

The door to the office opened and Dame Williamson stepped inside. “Your Highness, the duchess is on her way back to Forthwith. She left the palace directly after the reception.”

I tried to recall if she’d been at the meet-and-greet but couldn’t remember.

Dame Williamson asked, “Do you want me to contact her drivers and have her return?”

With the king and me leaving for the summit, I knew he wanted Isabella away from Molave Palace. “No,” I said, shaking my head.

“Your Highness,” Lord Forsberg said. “I must be told. Are you in contact with the sister of King Aleksander II?”

“No.” Standing, I repeated myself, louder the second time. “The answer is no. I’ve told you, it has been months since I’ve spoken with her.”

“Do you know her whereabouts?”

Sucking in a deep breath, I paused and turned my attention to my secretary. “Get Mrs. Drake in here immediately, and if for some reason she’s left the palace, have her return at once.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

Dame Williamson closed the door, leaving Lord Forsberg seated across from my desk. He shook his head with a tsk-tsk. “This is horrible publicity going into the summit.”

“The Borinkian princess shouldn’t be Molave’s publicity. The rumors aren’t true. What is true is that Princess Lucille and I are committed to one another, the crown, and the people of Molave.”

“News of your blessing was quickly replaced by news of the missing princess. It’s the way it is in news cycles—tragedy supersedes pleasantries every time.”

Exhaling, I sat back in my chair. The ache in my right hand reminded me of the men currently residing in the bowels of the palace infirmary. My gaze met the foreign minister’s. “Remind the news outlets of what has occurred in Forthwith—the attack on the duke and me, the concern over the drone. Lead with danger if you must. Honestly, with all of that and Lucille’s and my recommitment, kidnapping the princess of Borinkia couldn’t possibly have been squeezed into my schedule.”

The telephone on my desk rang with a direct line to Dame Williamson. “Yes?” I said by way of answering.

“Mrs. Drake will be here posthaste.”

“Thank you.”

“Your Highness,” the foreign minister said, “perhaps if you could give me something to go on.”

Clenching my teeth, I stared at the minister. “Sir, I have answered your questions beyond what is required of me. I have no personal knowledge of the princess’s whereabouts. If you will excuse me, my schedule is much too busy to waste any more of my time on rumors. Work with the Firm’s public relations and quell the nonsense.” When he remained seated, I added, “You, sir, are dismissed.”

With a huff, he stood. After a quick neck bow, he turned, seeing himself out.

After Lord Forsberg retreated from my office, I went to the sideboard and poured myself a tall glass of still water and contemplated what Lucille had shared with me the night before. She believed she’d seen Inessa at Forthwith.

If the Borinkian princess hasn’t been seen in weeks, could she have been staying at Forthwith?

Could she be the one who helped Noah?

Would that be possible without Francis’s or Isabella’s knowledge?

I needed to get back down into the cellars and question Noah.

“Mrs. Drake,” Dame Williamson announced, opening the door.

“Your Highness,” Mrs. Drake greeted as she entered with a curtsy.

“Come in,” I called, carrying my glass of water back to my desk. “Please.” I gestured toward the chairs.

“This is rather sudden.”

“Lord Forsberg was just here, telling tales about Inessa Volkov.”

Mrs. Drake nodded.

“He seemed to be under the impression that the entire continent of Europe believes we’ve kidnapped her.”

“Posts are trending on social media concerned about her whereabouts. My office is working with the crown’s social

media account to deflect the rumors.”

“Deflect? Not deny?”

She shook her head. “That’s not how this works. We don’t address the concerns head-on or we’re likely to be ambushed by some unknown source. Instead, we flood the airways and social media sources with news of your recovery after a brutal attack, the marriage blessing and renewed dedication to Princess Lucille, and the news that you and Lucille will postpone the rest of your tour until after the first of the year.”

I lowered my voice. “I don’t know firsthand where the princess of Borinkia is currently. However, I have an idea.”

Mrs. Drake’s eyes opened wide. “You do?”

“Forthwith.”

“Why do you say that?”

Leaning back in my chair, I replied, “I didn’t see her. I was told that she might have been in the castle. Someone thought they saw her.”

“Who?”

“I’d rather not say.”

“When?” Mrs. Drake asked.

“It would have been earlier yesterday.”

“And you’re just now mentioning that.” Mrs. Drake began tapping feverishly on her phone. “The Duchess of Wilmington is still an hour out from Forthwith. We can have ministry guards to the castle in forty-minutes to do a sweep.”

“What if I’m wrong?” I asked. “What if the person was mistaken?”

“Your Highness, what if the person was right? It’s a lead we can’t let pass by. I should have been notified immediately.”

I began to speak, but in a brazen move, Mrs. Drake lifted her hand as she communicated in text with someone.

When she looked up, she sighed. “I apologize, Your Highness. This is time sensitive. If you’re right, we’ll have

her.”

“Have her? And do what?”

“It’s against Molavian law for anyone to enter Molave from an exiled country without the proper documentation. If she’s in Molave, she is so illegally.”

“You’re going to arrest the princess? Her father just died. Her brother is unpredictable.”

“Detain is a better word, sir.”

“If this information is wrong?”

“If it is incorrect, the only damage will be in the eyes of the Duke and Duchess of Wilmington. I have no doubt the duchess will voice her opinion about her home being searched, especially with the children present.”

The children.

“Is there any way to shield them?”

“Time is of the essence.” The chief minister met my gaze with a shake of her head. “Decisions must be made and I’m making them.” Changing her tone, she asked, “What have you learned during your interviews?”

“I’ve taken my findings to King Theodore.”

“I’ve been told,” she replied.

“Do you think it’s enough to keep Francis quiet?”

“It depends. If the princess is discovered at Forthwith, it opens a whole new source of questions. Was Francis the person hiding Inessa Volkov from her brother or was the duke carrying out instructions from King Aleksander II? If he’s sold his soul to Aleksander II, keeping him quiet could require more drastic measures.”

Letting out a breath, I confessed, “I’m not confident I’m up for this job.”

“I’m confident. King Theodore and Queen Anne are confident. We’re all counting on you.”

“The queen?” My forehead furrowed. “She knows?”

Mrs. Drake tilted her head. “Of course she knows.”

Before I could give that revelation more thought, my computer chimed with an incoming video call. As I read the screen, I spoke to Mrs. Drake. “I must take this call. Thank you for coming so quickly. I want to be told what the guards discover—or who.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” she said, standing. After a neck bow, she said, “I’ll report directly to you.”

“You’re dismissed.”

As Mrs. Drake disappeared behind the closed door, I connected the call. “Your Majesty.”

King Theodore spoke directly into the camera. “We’re leaving for Oslo in forty minutes.”

What?

Forty minutes?

“I was under the impression we were leaving tomorrow morning.”

“Why? What would make you think such a thing? The summit begins tomorrow morning. Tonight will be filled with informal discussions critical to what we can expect during the summit.”

“I hadn’t been told.”

“You were, Roman,” the king said dismissively. “It’s standard protocol to arrive a night early. We will be staying at the Molavian Embassy.”

Closing my eyes, I exhaled.

Opening my eyes, I lowered my voice and spoke directly to the screen. “In the last twenty-four hours I’ve uncovered an assassination plot, given you and the ministry information on the Duke of Wilmington, had my marriage blessed, and been accused of kidnapping. Forgive me for not remembering protocol that I’d never been told in the first place.”

King Theodore placed his hands on his desk and exhaled. “Because of everything you just mentioned, our presence

tonight is crucial. If we're a minute late, the rumors regarding the princess of Borinkia will grow. Hell. The next thing you know, she'll be found in your suite at the embassy."

"I need to inform my assistant."

"The motorcade is leaving the palace in a half hour. I expect you to be ready."

The screen went black.

"Fuck," I growled as I turned off my computer, stood, buttoned my suit coat, and made my way out of the office.

Lord Martin caught me as I was entering the corridor.

"Did you know we were leaving in a half an hour?" I asked.

"I'd been told to have your luggage prepared. I was on my way to inform you."

"The king beat you to it."

"I'm sorry, Your Highness. We can make it to the car without any problem."

"I'm going upstairs to see Lucille first."

"Sir, I don't advise—"

My face snapped toward my assistant. "I've told you what subjects you may or may not advise me. My wife isn't one of them."

"Yes, Your Highness."

My wife.

Despite the shit show overtaking the script of this day's performance, I could now consider Lucille my wife. My smile only lasted a millisecond, but it was there nonetheless.

CHAPTER 25

Lucille

I opened my eyes as the spicy aroma of cologne met my senses and a kiss came to my forehead. “Roman?”

“I’m sorry to wake you, Princess.” His deep voice rumbled through me, pulling me away from whatever dreamland I’d been wandering.

Scooting up to the headboard, I blinked as Roman sat on the edge of the bed.

“I’m leaving for Oslo.”

“So soon? I thought you were leaving tomorrow.”

“So did I. Apparently, it’s standard to leave a day early. No one told me.”

I shrugged. “I wouldn’t have known. I was rarely informed of your schedule.”

“Oh, Princess, those days are over. I hate that we’ll be separated. From what I understand, I’ll return Sunday. I’ve already informed Lady Buckingham you’re not to leave the palace.”

Nodding, I reached for his hand. “I heard about King Aleksander I.”

“I wanted to be sure you knew.”

My smile grew. “My electronics are no longer shielded. Lady Larsen gave me the news, but when I tried to verify it, I could see everything.”

“Be careful, my princess. I authorized your electronics. I can’t promise you’re not being watched.”

Leaning forward, I brushed Roman's lips with my own. "Thank you. You've kept your word. In everything."

"I'm not done." His expression sobered. "Have you heard about the princess?"

"Inessa," I replied, "I heard that they're saying she's missing. Has she been found? Is she still at Forthwith?"

Roman shook his head. "I don't know. International news is saying we—Molave—have her here. I confided in Mrs. Drake that she may have been sighted at Forthwith."

"You did?"

"From all accounts, Alek, King Aleksander II, is unpredictable and looking for a reason to increase tensions. If she's here in Molave, the crown needs to know."

"You mean the Firm."

Roman inhaled. "I mean, *we* need to do whatever we can do to avoid confrontations."

"What did Mrs. Drake say?"

"She sent ministry guards to Forthwith."

A sinking sensation twisted my stomach. "Everything changes so quickly."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean a few months ago, I was on the outside. My electronics were shielded. The guards searched Annabella numerous times. Overnight, Isabella is where I was. I feel badly for her."

"Hold off judgment on that for a bit, Princess. I'm expected in the car in minutes. Please be careful. And I know you love your parents..."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying, Lucille, we must be careful with whom we trust."

"You don't trust my parents?"

“At this moment, the only one I fully trust is with me, her stunning blue eyes on me and” —he looked down, laid his hand on my midsection, and spread his fingers— “our child inside her.”

Our child.

Roman looked down at his outstretched fingers. “Be good for your mom.”

Watching this handsome man speak to our future child caused tears to prickle the back of my eyes.

When he looked up at me, Roman’s smile was dashing. “There are rumors that I’m hiding Inessa. Don’t get conned into commenting. You and I know that isn’t true.”

“If they find her at Forthwith, the world will know the truth.”

Roman shook his head. “If they find her, Mrs. Drake said she’ll be detained.”

I opened my eyes wide. “Roman, I don’t like this. I wish you and the king weren’t going away—especially so close to Borinkia.”

“You are safe. We will be too. We’ll have our guards.”

Guards.

Lady Larsen had questioned the loyalty of the guards yesterday.

“I don’t want you to leave.”

“I’ve kept my word to you, Lucille. I’m a man of my word. I promised the king I’d accompany him. My word to you is that I’ll be back.”

“I believe you, my prince.”

Roman’s firm lips took mine in a kiss. As the clock ticked, the heat and passion sparking from our connection surpassed a simple goodbye. With his hand at my neck, he pulled me closer, bruising my lips and stealing my breath. My moans echoed through the bedchamber as I became lost in his taste and touch.

By the time we parted, I gasped for breath. “I love you, my Roman.” I reached for his large hand and held it between both of mine. “Don’t ever wonder if I know exactly who you are. I know you’re my fate and my prince charming. I know life brought us together in some crazy mix of manipulation and politics. I also know I love you—not who you represent.” I lifted my hand to his wide chest. “I love the man you are.”

“You’re my princess, Lucille. There’s no one else.”

I sat back against the headboard as Roman turned and walked away. Still wearing his custom suit, he was regal in every way. From his posture to his gait, my Roman had successfully taken on the demeanor of a prince, perhaps even that of a king. Whether it was the Firm’s doing or solely from within, he’d perfected the role. I only prayed it was enough for him to stay the part.

Nearly two hours later, I was seated at dinner with Queen Anne and my parents. As it always was within the dining room with the queen, we were in a bubble. Our talk was of the blessing and reception. We discussed the meal as we ate and the weather outside. There was little talk of the fact that two seats were empty or that tensions were building between Molave and Borinkia.

It wasn’t until dinner was nearly complete that Lady Buckingham entered the dining room. With a curtsy, she apologized and asked if I could take a call, saying it was very important. My first glance was at the queen.

“Your Majesty, I apologize. My mistress wouldn’t interrupt if it weren’t urgent.”

Queen Anne nodded. “Lady Astid, the senator, and I will wait for your return.”

Leaving my napkin on my chair, the signal that I wasn’t done eating, I hurried from the dining room. “Is it Roman?” I asked.

“No, Your Highness, it’s the Duchess of Wilmington.”

My forehead furrowed as I took the phone. “Isabella?” I questioned through the cellphone.

“Lucille, please help me.”

Holding the phone to my ear, I made my way to a small library a short distance from the dining room. “What’s happening? Why didn’t you call the Firm?”

“They searched my home. Ministry guards. Can you believe it? They were in my home. Rothy and Alice are traumatized. Francis is still unable to communicate. I can’t call the Firm. They’re the ones who did this.”

“Come back to Molave.”

“I’m scared.”

“Isabella, you’re safe in your home. What are you afraid of?”

“I can’t tell you over the phone. I promise I just learned this the other day. Oh, Lucille, there was so much I didn’t know.”

Shaking my head, I looked around, making sure I wasn’t being overheard. “I don’t know what I can do.”

“May the children and I go to Annabella for a while?”

“Annabella. I should speak to Roman.” I inhaled, thinking about our home. “How is Annabella safer than Forthwith?”

“No one will know I’m there. Call your house master, let her know we’re coming. Lucille, please think of the children.”

The small faces of Rothy and Alice came to mind. I saw the young prince’s brown eyes and dark hair and Alice’s blue eyes and golden hair. Whatever was happening, they were too young to be mixed up in it.

Straightening my neck, I replied, “I’ll call Mrs. Templeton and have her prepare rooms. You’re welcome to stay as long as you need. I’m sorry I can’t join you. Roman has bid me to stay in Molave.”

“Lucille, I’m worried that Francis was involved in more than I knew.”

“What did he do?”

“I don’t know,” she replied.

I stood taller. “Go with your most trusted guards. Isabella?”

“Yes.”

“During the speech, there was a tracker found on my car. They believe it was placed as a GPS target for the drone. Have your guards thoroughly check any car before risking traveling with the children.” I looked at a tall grandfather clock within the library. “If you leave soon, you should be to Annabella before ten. Be careful. The roads are hazardous in the daytime. At night...please be careful.”

“Thank you. Please don’t tell Roman or Mum. I have a bad feeling.”

“I can’t promise I won’t tell Roman. He’s my husband.”

“He’s the reason this is happening.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“I’ll call once we’re to Annabella.” The line went dead.

When I stepped from the small library, Lady Buckingham was waiting. “This is confidential,” I prefaced with a whisper. “Call Mrs. Templeton. Tell her the duchess, prince, and princess are on their way to Annabella Castle. Have her prepare for their arrival.”

“Yes, ma’am. How long will they be staying?”

“I don’t know.” I continued shaking my head. “I need more information.”

“The prince?” she asked.

“I can’t reach him. He’s with the king.”

“Will he be angry you’re helping the duchess?”

I shook my head. “He’ll understand.” I hoped. “I did it for Rothy and Alice.”

Mrs. Buckingham nodded. “Yes, ma’am. I’ll call Mrs. Templeton.”

“And tell everyone that this is confidential. No one needs to know we have guests. Isabella doesn’t want anyone to know.”

My mistress nodded.

Taking a deep breath, I made my way back to the dining room.

“Is everything well, my dear?” Queen Anne asked.

“Yes,” I said with a feigned smile. “A minor crisis at Annabella.”

“Oh, these old castles. There’s always something,” the queen said.

As the conversation continued around the table, I recalled the long night of Roman’s confessions. He’d said that both Noah and Francis were being kept in rooms beneath the infirmary. Maybe if I made my way down there, Francis could give me the answers to what was happening.

CHAPTER 26

Lucille

The dim palace corridors were quiet, meaning the staff were either sleeping or in their private quarters. Beyond the inner walls, guards stood at attention as others patrolled. It was inside that I roamed. After Lady Buckingham helped me bathe and ready for bed, I waited. Unlike the night I decided to go for a walk in the gardens, tonight I left my nightgown and dressing gown in my bedchamber, donning the slacks and blouse from earlier in the day. Complete with boots, I was now making my way through the various wings of Molave Palace.

A single medical worker was seated at a desk as I entered the infirmary.

“Princess Lucille,” she said, standing and curtsying. “Are you in need of care?”

“No, I’m here to visit a patient.”

“Our ward is empty, ma’am.”

“Mr. Davies asked me to come.” I peered toward the hallway Roman described. “I’ll be but a few minutes.”

“Your Highness, I should call you an escort.”

“Nonsense,” I said. “Forget you saw me.” Without waiting for a response, I entered the familiar hallways. Doors of examination rooms were left ajar, allowing me to see inside. Each room held a story of one of my many visits. Tests, examinations, ultrasounds, and more tests. Each room held memories of heartbreak and defeat I could too easily recall.

When Roman relayed his visits to the lower level, my familiarity with the infirmary allowed my mind to create vivid pictures of most of what he described. Five years of trying to

conceive made me intimately acquainted with this part of Molave Palace. Reaching the final door on the right, I hesitated, fearful of an alarm. With a deep breath, I turned the knob and pushed through.

The pounding of my heart was the only warning. The organ raced at the pace of a sprinter, and yet I was walking a slower than normal gait. This hallway held offices and supply closets. Each door was closed, the accompanying windows dark. Turning the last corner, I met a guard. Instead of standing, the armed man was seated in a chair beside the door.

For a moment, I hoped he was sleeping. The click of my boots against the tile woke him from his trance, causing him to look up, his eyes fixed on me. In a second, he was standing at attention. The closer I approached, the taller he seemed.

“Your Highness,” he said as he kept his focus straight ahead.

“Princess Lucille,” I said with my chin high. “I’m here to see one of the patients.”

“I wasn’t informed of your arrival.”

“Nevertheless, I have arrived. You may contact the prince or king if you wish to waken one of them.”

The young man’s gaze met mine before returning to the forward unknown.

“Open the door, sir. I command it.”

Either the guard was hard of hearing, or my pulse wasn’t thumping as loudly as it sounded in my own ears. I couldn’t believe he couldn’t hear it.

Taking my phone from my pocket, I said, “Which royal would you prefer to wake?”

The guard took a step back. “Ma’am, it isn’t safe for you alone.”

“I won’t be alone. Medical personnel are present twenty-four seven.”

With a shake of his head, the guard removed a key from his pocket and opened the door.

“I’ll inform my husband of your good service,” I said, stepping onto a landing. Stairsteps descended from the landing to a corridor below. The sound of the door behind me closing and locking echoed off the cement blocks. With each step, I held tightly to the banister, as I made my way into the darkened lower level.

By the time I reached the final step, my sight had adjusted. Light cascaded from a room at the beginning of the corridor. Feigning confidence, I didn’t have, I walked toward the light. A man wearing scrubs sat by monitors with his attention focused on the phone in his grasp.

Trying to quiet my steps, I continued onward. According to Roman, Francis was in the second room from the end. I didn’t stop there. My curiosity got the better of me as I kept walking to the last room.

A sheen of perspiration coated my skin as I peered through the window. The only illumination came from the monitors near the head of the bed. Even when he was asleep, I recognized the man as the one I’d been told was my husband.

Five years.

I wasn’t certain the exact moment my feelings changed toward this man. Perhaps if I tried to analyze each day, I could come up with a season or maybe a month and year. My chest heaved as my breath came faster and my jaw clenched. The visceral reaction was beyond my consciousness.

Never in my life had I hated another person.

Or so I thought.

Closing my eyes, I felt the rage I’d kept to myself bubble to life. I recalled each strike of his hand and each poisonous word he spat. My stomach roiled at the memories of what our sex life had become—of what I had become.

Used.

Reviled.

Revolted.

Repulsed.

Reaching for the doorknob, I turned it, ready to confront the man who had made my life a living hell. Condemnations were on my tongue. I wasn't the woman in *Game of Thrones* with a pack of dogs to release, but I was a woman with an abundance of anger to unleash.

Noah deserved to hear every word I had to say.

He deserved more than that.

The doorknob barely rattled.

It was locked.

At my attempted entry, Noah's eyes opened, and he stared toward the door.

I was wrong to assume my Roman and this man shared a resemblance. Noah's dark eyes were nearly black—dead. Doll's eyes or those of a shark. The spark and simmer that smoldered in my Roman's gaze were absent, leaving a void that I now saw. It was such as a black hole, stealing the air and energy for its own needs.

Staring through the glass, I saw what Noah had truly become. He was a dead man forced to stay alive. This wasn't the hell and damnation the priests described. No. There were levels to that perdition. Noah was only on level one. The level that was suffered on earth.

"That's right, Your Highness," I said to myself. "I see you. My Roman sees you. King Theodore sees you. The hellfire described in the church's teachings is a solitary doom. This cell below the infirmary doesn't give you that luxury." I recalled being paraded around cities and banquets on his arm—the public watching my agony. "Welcome to public damnation."

Patting the key in my pocket, I shook my head. "You don't deserve sympathy." Removing the key, the one I'd found in Roman's bedchamber, I inserted it into the keyhole. A quick

look toward the room down the corridor with the light and I twisted the key.

Pushing the door open, I stood in the doorway.

Noah lifted his head, looking my direction.

“Did you bring me more medicine?”

I took one more step within. The light from above illuminated as the door behind me shut.

Noah’s eyes opened wider as the chains holding him to the bed rattled. “Fuck, Lucille.”

I didn’t say a word as I walked closer.

Pushing a button, Noah lifted the head of his bed.

Scanning him with my eyes, I saw less of a man than I’d known. He’d lost weight. Unlike my Roman who was fit, this man was thin, with loose skin. His cheekbones were too prominent, his cheeks in need of shaving, and his hair was grayer than it had been.

“He told you about me?” Noah smirked.

“I wanted to see you for myself.”

Noah’s dark eyes followed me as I walked around to the side of his bed. Finally, he spoke, “I bet you dreamt of this.”

“No, I dreamt of worse.”

“Don’t worry, they’re going to kill me.”

“I hope not too soon.” Before he could respond, I added, “I would prefer to watch you suffer as you made me suffer. I could command them to stop your medications. What do withdrawals look like, I wonder?”

He scoffed. “I always knew behind your mouse-like persona you were a vindictive cunt. I almost feel sorry for the new Roman. Fucking you. It’s like fucking a dead fish. The only way I could get off was by tasting your tears.”

A smile curled my lips. “You can’t hurt me anymore. Your words are powerless.” I reached for the chain connecting his wrist to the bed. “You’re powerless. You tried to take me down

with Molave and you failed. I'm still here. And now I have a husband at my side—one who supports me.” I spun around. “Your life is nearly over and what remains will be spent in this cell.”

Noah laughed. “You keep believing that.”

“You don't exactly look like you have the upper hand.”

“Since you know about me and the new Roman—whoever they allow to fuck you these days—you know something else, Princess.”

“What?”

Noah shook his head. “Nothing is as it appears.”

“You're wrong about my dreams, Your Highness,” I said the title with an exaggerated sweetness. “I don't dream about anyone's demise, not even yours.”

“Of course not. The perfect princess.”

“I don't dream about that because I reserve my dreams for far better things. In my conscious thoughts, I relish the knowledge that your last days on this earth are hell and that beyond this earth, your damnation will last forever.” I took a deep breath. “Goodbye, Noah. You are not missed.” With that I turned toward the door.

“Lucille,” he called louder than before.

I turned.

“For what it's worth, what has yet to come out wasn't about you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You were right. This is hell on earth.” He grinned. “It's not the final destination. I'm driving the bus, and I promise, I made room for everyone in this bogus family to have a seat. Hold on.”

“Words from a man chained to a bed don't frighten me.”

“Shame really. I might get hard if you shed a tear or two.”

Closing my eyes, I turned toward the door. The knob didn't turn. Perspiration dampened my skin as I rattled it again. The handle stayed in place—not a budge.

Noah's deep voice echoed through the cell. "Do you have tears for me?"

As I was about to turn and tell him off, I saw the keyhole.

Of course, the door took a key from both sides.

Without replying, I inserted the key, turned the knob, and pulled the door open. The door closed behind me as I stepped into the dim corridor. Leaning back against the cool solid door, I remembered to breathe as my pulse slowed and my heart returned to a normal beat.

Another look toward the first room and I walked to Francis's window. Despite my heart rate resembling a normal rhythm, my hands still trembled. Through the window, Francis lay prone with bandages around his head and face. His right hand and leg had casts and the leg was suspended in the air.

Trying to forget the man in the other room, I stared at my brother-in-law, wondering if he'd regained consciousness. My thoughts went back to Noah. It was stupid of me to confront him.

The dominos in my mind began to fall.

Noah knows I know about him and my Roman.

What if he tells someone?

What if he tells King Theodore?

I pushed those thoughts from my mind as I inserted the key into Francis's door. I had to talk to him. Francis was the only one who could tell me what he'd done, why Isabella was frightened and hiding at Annabella.

"Shit," I muttered under my breath.

The damn key didn't work in his door.

Turning to my left, I heard voices and saw the shadow of the man with the monitors. The door at the far end opened and two guards entered. They were asking the man questions. As I

pressed myself against the wall, I recalled how dark the corridor appeared from the other end and hoped I was not visible.

Holding my breath, I heard the guards mention my name.

Panicking, I scurried past Noah's room.

Around the corner, I found another door. As quietly as I could, I opened the door and stepped inside. Again, I held my breath as the door closed. In the darkness, I ran my hands over the door and the knob, finding a deadbolt. I pushed it closed as the sound of voices rang from the other side.

I jumped as someone pounded on the door.

"She couldn't have gone this way," a man's voice said. "The door is locked." His voice muffled as if he'd turned. "Is Samwell sure the princess came down here?"

"No one has been down here," another voice said.

"Tell Samwell to stop dreaming about the princess on the job."

"Not a bad dream," another voice said, followed by low laughter.

With my pulse coursing out of control, I took a step back and bumped into a raised level. Turning, I faced a tall set of stairs leading into more darkness.

CHAPTER 27

Roman

I expected more from an embassy. That wasn't to say that I was totally unaccustomed to staying in a small suite. Hell, there had been times in my life I was happy to have a room to myself. I didn't need to think back too far to recall contacting a friend in New York City to sleep on his couch.

Maybe the last three months had softened me. I'd become accustomed to the finer things in life. As it was, King Theodore and I were protected in a small second-story wing, where we each had our own bedchamber and en suite bath. Lord Martin and Sir Connery were roommates in a nearby room. From the description Lord Martin had given me, it reminded me a bit of the hostels where I'd stayed as a young man.

My mother and stepfather moved my sisters and me back to the United States when I was nearly a teenager. After living my younger years moving from one air force base to another, I missed the adventure when back in the US. I couldn't wait to graduate high school and travel. My travels lasted one semester and my money ran out. It was then that I returned to the States, specifically, Chicago, and auditioned for the University of Chicago as a theater major. If I were writing an autobiography of my career, that would be the place where I would say "and the rest was history."

Looking out the windows at the street below, I knew that history was still in the making. The roles I'd played on stage and in film meant nothing compared to my current role. During the years that I played Billy Flynn in the musical *Chicago*, when the curtain fell and the audience made their way out of the theater, I left the fast-talking, tap-dancing lawyer backstage with the makeup and costumes. Whether I

joined my castmates for a drink at a nearby tavern or went back to my apartment, I was Oliver Honeswell. The same could be said of the warlord. Yes, removing the makeup took longer, but once it was done, so was I.

During Rita's and my on-and-off relationship, we maintained our own identities. Whether we were costarring or on separate projects, off the set we were simply Rita and Oliver. If she was into role-playing, I never got the memo.

With Lucille, I was becoming Roman, in heart, body, and soul. It wasn't role-playing as much as it was my identity. No matter how I analyzed it, the answer was the same. There was no longer a black-and-white differentiation between Oliver and Roman. The two were melding into one.

Into me.

In a matter of three months, I'd lost the ability to leave the character behind.

Twenty-four seven I was Roman Godfrey.

Even on a night such as tonight, staring out at the traffic beyond the embassy windows, my thoughts were no longer Oliver's. Thinking about the man with that name was as if I were thinking of someone else. My mind was too consumed with Roman's thoughts.

Am I a dedicated actor or a man possessed?

Mrs. Drake called our plane when the king and I were en route. Inessa Volkov was not found inside the castle at Forthwith; however, items belonging to the princess were discovered in a secluded suite away from where Francis and Isabella resided.

She had been there.

It was difficult to assess the king's thoughts on the matter. If I were to guess, he wanted to believe his daughter to be innocent while declaring her husband guilty. His complexion reddened as veins came to life on his forehead at Mrs. Drake's phone call. Once the call was done, he changed the subject.

Preparing me for the next two days was still a work in progress.

King Theodore's and my evening began as soon as we arrived by car to the venue for the diplomat cocktail hour—hour being a misnomer. The gathering lasted for nearly four hours. On the plane the king had warned me again of the people who would be present. Unlike the banquet held at Molave Palace, we walked into a large room with monarchs from throughout Europe and Asia. There were prime ministers I'd only read about or seen on the telly. Even the Americas had representation.

King Theo reminded me of something he'd said when we first began to work together. "Do not look upon any world leader or dignitary with honor. Each one thinks they're more important, more unique, more special than they are. Everyone can be replaced. After all, we're all replacements of another. The title of prime minister for Britain has been bestowed upon three people in less than a year. Elections replace world leaders on a regular basis. You are the crown prince of Molave. Your future is not dependent on the vote of the people but on your success. That places you in a position the others envy. Remember that."

Not everyone in attendance was part of the Fifteen Eurasia Summit, yet they were present to rub elbows and speak with their peers. There was another summit happening in Sweden, beginning tomorrow and tonight was a chance for representatives from throughout the world to see and be seen.

Tonight's event was one of the gatherings Alek Volkov had wanted to attend. The untimely death of his father was the obvious reason for his absence, saving the fifteen representatives from taking a vote. Nevertheless, his name was still whispered in conversations across the room.

Despite King Theo's advice, I entered the gathering with a sense of amazement. I bowed and shook hands with men and women who were truly awe-inspiring in their accomplishments. Even so, I managed to portray the crown prince of Molave without raising any questions as to my

identity. I'd done my due diligence, studying names and faces. My homework paid off.

By the time our entourage returned to the embassy, the king and I had done our part to quiet the rumors regarding Princess Inessa. Our country was focused on increasing our exports, refining the shipping commerce, and creating a coalition with our citizens to improve communication. On a personal note, I was on the mend from the unprecedented attack. And even more personal, the princess and I were recommitted to one another. I'd admitted my shortfalls and together we'd moved forward.

When we returned to our rooms, I'd wanted to call Lucille, but due to the late hour, I feared she would be asleep. Instead, I sent her a text message, telling her I missed her and loved her. With all that was happening, I was happy she was safe in Molave Palace.

I should be soundly sleeping, but my mind was a cyclone of activity. There was so much I wanted to know. If I were at Molave Palace, I would have gone back down to Noah's room for more answers. The information he'd given me earlier regarding the US intervention allowed me to push Edwin Sutton on the trade agreement. It also painted a somewhat clearer picture regarding Francis's connection to King Aleksander II.

Hopefully, confirmation that Alek and Francis together had concocted the notion of poisoning King Theodore would keep Francis silent.

Even though the hour was late, I couldn't contain the new thought that just occurred to me. Reaching for my phone, I began to make a call.

Could I call the king at this hour?

His son could.

I hit the call button.

King Theodore answered groggily on the third ring. "Do you know the time?"

"Papa, I need to speak to you."

“I’m assuming you wouldn’t call at this hour if it could wait.”

“If I’m right, time is of the essence.”

“Come to my room.”

Our rooms were separated by a parlor the size of my personal one at Annabella. Our assistants were asleep in an adjoining room. Outside the door to the entire apartments were two armed guards.

Wearing my pajamas with the Godfrey crest, I slipped out of my room, closing the connecting door behind me, and walked to the king’s bedchamber. One soft knock and the door opened. In my time as Roman, I’d only seen King Theodore as he appeared to others. With his pajamas covered by a robe, and slippers on his feet, the regal presence was replaced by that of a grandfather, ready to join his grandchildren for breakfast.

Standing inches taller, I stepped inside and closed the door. “Amygdalin,” I said.

King Theo narrowed his gaze. “What about it?”

“If Alek was involved with Francis in initiating the scheme against you, the one they told Noah to perform, would Alek be above doing the same to his father?”

The king inhaled as he took a step back.

“Think about it,” I said. “The plan didn’t work on you because a sudden death would have caused an investigation. Will an investigation take place in Borinkia?”

“That will be up to the new king.”

“Noah worked with Francis and Alek to peacefully merge the two countries. Their plan would have damaged Molave in numerous ways; nonetheless, the three were in on it. By not working with Aleksander I, that means they were working independently. In order to succeed, they need to be in control of one or both countries. Let’s assume Aleksander I didn’t agree with the plan.”

“He captured Letanonia, killing or imprisoning the families loyal to the Letanonia monarchy. Aleksander I would have done the same to us if he thought he could.”

“Maybe he didn’t think it would work,” I said. “Maybe he was tired and wanted to enjoy what was his. No matter what his opposition, he’s no longer around to voice it.”

King Theodore was awake, pacing back and forth. “It would stand to reason that if Aleksander I was willing to carry out the plan against Molave, it would have already been initiated.” He shook his head. “Even if you’re right, we can’t accuse the new king of patricide without proof.”

“We won’t accuse the king. We accuse Francis. The ministry guards found evidence that Inessa had been at Forthwith. We know Francis was working with Noah to kill you. We accuse him of working with Alek to kill Aleksander I.”

“And do what, have him extradited to Borinkia?”

“No. We threaten to extradite.” I let that sink in. “And then we give Francis just enough rope to hang himself. He wants power. He and Alek are lifelong friends. Francis won’t risk the public ridicule that would come with a statement of guilt from the crown. He’ll go along with the story we’ve shared. But when he gets the chance to turn on us—you, me, Molave—he will. And we catch him.”

The king nodded.

His expression morphed. “What of Isabella?”

“That’s your decision, Papa.” By the look on his face, I could tell even the thought pained him. “You told me that Molave must come first over emotion. You also said Queen Anne was your one exception.”

“She’s our only...daughter.”

“Then together, we will do what we can to keep her and the children separated from Francis’s fate.”

CHAPTER 28

Lucille

Placing my ear against the door, I waited until the men's voices and footsteps faded away.

What would happen if they found me?

I was the princess. Those guards had no right to limit where I could go or who I could see. While my pep talk made perfect sense, I was fearfully aware that nothing happening in Molave Palace made sense.

Taking a deep breath, I looked upward.

Where does this staircase lead?

Who could be waiting?

Even though I didn't have the answer to those questions, I knew what would happen and who would find me if I returned to the corridor containing Noah's and Francis's cells. If not in the corridor, then when I reached the door to the infirmary, a guard would be waiting.

Placing my hand over my stomach, I whispered. "I don't think we have a choice, little one."

Step by step, I went up. Higher and higher I climbed, and yet the top didn't appear. Surely, I'd gone up more than one story. If only I'd brought my phone, then I'd have a flashlight. As it was, I could barely see my own hand in front of my face.

And then it happened.

A faint line of light.

Quietly, I hurried to the top landing. As I had done at the bottom, I used my fingers to feel my way. There wasn't a doorknob, but then I found it—a lever. Saying a prayer that the

panel wasn't locked, I slowly lifted the lever. As I did, the panel before me moved. It didn't swing inward or outward but slid back toward me.

Fearful it would push me from the landing, I stepped to the lower stair. The movement of the panel was similar to the bookcase in Roman's Annabella bedchamber, but not quite the same. Once the panel moved backward, it stopped. Reaching for the edge, I pushed it to the side. As if on a track, the panel moved sideways. With only centimeters opened, I held my breath. My lungs burned the longer I waited to be discovered. The erratic beating of my heart pounded like drums as I strained to hear anything.

Nothing.

Step by small step, I inched closer to the opening.

The light I'd seen beneath the panel came from what remained of an untended fire. No longer crackling flames, only glowing embers were visible behind a screen in the hearth. The fireplace itself was much like the many fireplaces throughout the palace. Pushing the panel wide enough to squeeze through, I took a step out into the room and scanned from side to side.

Floral wallpaper covered the walls. In the fire's glow I saw the elegant silhouette of the French provincial décor. The pieces were accented with detailed carvings and curved edges. A quilt was draped over a love seat, where someone had been sitting. On the table to the side was a thick book. On the mantel, two bouquets of fresh flowers sat on either side of a lovely antique clock with marble columns. Another larger bouquet sat on a round table near the window.

A parlor.

I was in a parlor.

Turning back to the door from which I'd entered, I assessed that this wasn't a bookcase, but a panel covered with wainscoting, identical to the other panels on the wall. Tugging the panel closed, I searched for a lever. My mouth dried as I came up empty, looking up and down. It was within the trim

that I saw the seam—virtually unnoticeable if I hadn't been looking. Lifting the trim, I pulled the switch toward me. The panel came forward, filling the space as if it were part of the wall. As it was with Roman's, the secret passage was nearly impossible to detect.

Quietly, I wandered to an open rolltop desk.

My circulation dropped to my feet as I read a series of notes written on a tablet. It wasn't the words that registered but the writing. I recognized it immediately. It belonged to the queen. I'd received enough personal notes from her over the years to recognize her elegant script.

Spinning around, I realized I was in Queen Anne's private parlor.

"Shit," I muttered, peering all around.

Queen Anne was most likely sleeping down the hall.

Walking softly, I went toward the two large doors. The hinge squeaked as I pulled one door inward. The fire in the parlor's hearth beyond flickered with flames, indicating that the tinder had recently been stoked. Across the large room, I saw the doors to the king's apartments.

Again holding my breath, I tiptoed my way to the main doors.

My mind searched for a story to recite if I were to be caught.

The queen invited me.

No, she would know that wasn't true.

I came to talk, but the doors to the private apartments were closed.

Why would I arrive in the middle of the night?

The baby.

How did I get inside without being seen?

I came earlier, waiting for her to emerge.

Yes, I came to tell Queen Anne about the baby, but she was in her private apartments and never came out.

The story was on the tip of my tongue as I opened the door to the main corridor.

Looking left and right, to my great relief, the hallway was empty.

“Oh, thank you,” I whispered.

Repeating my story in my thoughts, I caught my breath and walked with a normal gait toward Roman’s and my apartments. Despite my fears, I didn’t meet another person until I turned the final corner.

The crystal blue gaze meeting mine caught me off guard. “Mom? What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to speak to you alone. Where were you?”

Reaching for my mother’s arm, I led her into our connecting suite. “I’m missing Roman terribly and decided I couldn’t wait to tell Queen Anne about the baby. I went to her apartments, but she’d already retired to her private quarters.”

“It’s better, Lucy. You and Roman should tell her together.”

I nodded. “You’re right, Mom. What did you want to talk about?”

“Are you sure you’re not too tired?”

“Come with me while I get ready for bed. I’m lonely without Roman.”

Mom grasped my hand. “Is this true, Lucy? I don’t understand.”

I tugged her toward my private side. “You know what? I don’t either, but instead of questioning it, I’m accepting our fate.” I briefly thought of the man chained to a bed. “I guess people can change.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“Me too.”

Entering our apartments, Mom apologized for earlier, fearing Dad had upset me. I assured her I was fine. I understood my parents' reservations about my husband. I only asked that they give him another chance.

The next day passed as I spent more time with my mother. The sun warmed enough for us to walk through the gardens. My father spent most of his time in the apartments where the two were staying. Being a Friday, he had calls and emails he couldn't ignore.

I didn't mind spending time alone with Mom. This was a luxury we would rarely have even when I was to visit New York. On Saturday morning, I bid them both goodbye.

While I was sad, I was more excited about Roman's return. He had one more day left of the Fifteen Eurasia Summit. While I'd tried to watch for news, I found very little.

By Sunday, my husband and I'd only spoken a few times on the phone. Neither of us were confident that our conversations were private. I'd wanted to tell him about my visit with Noah, but I couldn't bring myself to say the words over the phone. I did tell him about Isabella. Without seeing his expressions, I couldn't tell if my husband agreed or disagreed with my decision to allow her and the children into our home.

He would make that clear upon his return.

Thankfully, people do change.

I wasn't fearful of his response, only curious about his thoughts and reasoning.

Lady Buckingham and I were preparing for Sunday's evening meal when the door to my bedchamber opened without a knock. We both turned. "Your Highness," we said in unison.

Despite protocol, I no longer stood and curtsied each time he entered a room. It wasn't for lack of respect or acknowledgment of his position. It was because during the last few months, our relationship had shifted to a more level plane.

Roman was still the prince.

I was still his princess.

Yet my greeting wasn't about a curtsy. It was the way his sexy stare twisted my core, beaded my nipples, and dampened my thighs.

He scanned from my recently styled hair to my bare toes. His gaze lingered on the dressing gown in between, as if it had magically disappeared, leaving me in only my undergarments.

"Lady Buckingham," Roman said, "you may leave us. Have our dinner brought to the parlor. We're dining alone."

"Yes, sir."

"Oh," he said with a smirk. "The princess won't need your assistance tonight to ready for bed."

Warmth filled my cheeks as I veiled my eyes and imagined all Roman had in store.

"Princess Lucille?" Lady Buckingham inquired.

"I'll be just fine, Mary. You heard the prince. I'll see you in the morning. Enjoy some free time."

Lady Buckingham gave us both a neck bow and disappeared through the doors, closing them in her wake.

Standing, I started to move toward Roman.

"Stay there, Lucille," he said, his deep voice lowering to a growl.

My pulse increased as I tried to read his expression. "I've missed you."

His steps were regal and graceful as he stalked across the bedchamber. If this were one of his movies, the musical score would reflect the suspense in his approach. Roman grasped my shoulder and teasingly kissed my neck. His warm breath sent shivers from behind my ear over my flesh. "Tell me, Princess." The baritone of his timbre reverberated through the room. "Should we fuck first, or should we get your punishment over with?"

I spun in place. "What are you talking about?"

“I think you know.”

CHAPTER 29

Roman

Cupping the princess's cheek, I watched a kaleidoscope of hues swirling in her gorgeous blue orbs. "Did you think I wouldn't be told?"

"Told what? Roman, I was going to tell you everything, but we were on the phone. I know how you worry about privacy..." Her neck pulsed with the speed of her heart, and her responses came quicker with each phrase.

Silencing her reply, my lips captured hers.

Three days of desire exploded as we connected. Splaying the fingers of my left hand on her lower back, I pulled Lucille to me as our kiss continued. Mint and ginger teased my tastebuds as erotic noises filled my ears. Taking as much as giving, Lucille's lips parted, our tongues dancing the dance they'd repeated hundreds of times. Her hands came to my cheeks, holding me to her, as our faces turned, bringing us impossibly closer.

Step by step, I walked, never severing our kiss. We didn't stop until Lucille was pinned between a wall and me. Taking a step back, I tugged the sash of her dressing gown, the material gaped, revealing her dark lace bra and bloomers.

"You're intoxicating, my princess."

She veiled her blue gaze with her long lashes. "Your Highness told me the only place he would bruise was my lips."

I clenched my jaw, meeting her stare. "You were foolish and reckless."

Swallowing, Lucille continued our stare-down. "I am the princess. I have the right—"

Laying my finger on her lips, I shook my head. “You don’t have the right to threaten all that we’ve built. Was it worth it? Did your trip to the infirmary accomplish what you wanted?”

Moving from the wall, Lucille took a step away and cinched her robe. “Yes. You don’t know half of what he did to me.”

“You’re right. I probably know less than half. However, given my previous line of work, I have a very vivid imagination. I saw your cheek that night in the gazebo. If you don’t think I’ve thought about that every time I speak with him, you’d be wrong.”

“Don’t you understand? My facing him wasn’t about Molave or even about you.” Her voice grew louder. “It was about me.”

“And when the king is informed of your nighttime wandering?”

“They didn’t find me.”

I ran my hand over my hair. “You spoke to a nurse in the infirmary and a guard at the entrance to the basement. And then you disappeared. Did you think no one would follow through? My God, Lucille” —my volume rose— “they feared they’d lost you.”

Her expression cracked. “No one approached me.”

“Because I forbade it.”

Lucille rolled her lower lip between her teeth. “When were you told?”

“Late Friday night. Fuck, maybe it was early Saturday morning.”

“King Theo?” she asked.

“I told the royal guards I would handle it. I also said that if you returned, you were forbidden entry.”

“I’m the princess.”

My volume rose higher than I intended. “And I am the prince. You obey me.”

Lucille's eyes closed as she exhaled.

Grasping her arm, I turned her to me. "No going away, Lucille. This isn't a game. If the guards had called Papa instead of me...Hell, if they'd called Mrs. Drake..."

She pulled her arm from my grasp. "You've made your point."

"No. I don't think I have."

My princess lifted her chin. "And what do you plan to do about it?"

Taking a step closer, I grasped her chin between my thumb and finger. "Princess, I have given this a lot of thought." Releasing her chin, I again untied the sash. This time, I pushed the soft satin material from her shoulders. The dressing gown fluttered to the floor, creating a white puddle around her bare feet. The navy-blue lace of her bra and bloomers contrasted her fair complexion. Round globes peered from above the lace cups. Bringing my gaze back to her blue orbs, I continued, "I've imagined reddening your fine round ass."

Lucille crossed her arms over her breasts.

Running my thumb down her cheek, I walked around her, my voice lowering an octave as I left a ghost of a touch on her exposed skin. "I fantasized about you on your knees, obeying your prince's every command."

Inhaling, Lucille turned away.

Reaching for her chin, I brought her gaze to mine. "I considered those options and more."

A tear trailed down her cheek, yet her stance remained stoic.

Using my thumb, I wiped the tear and cupped her cheek. "I'm not him, Lucille."

"I know that."

"This isn't about hurting you."

She lifted her chin. "I'm not a child to be reprimanded."

Exhaling, I turned, stalked away, before spinning toward her. “What you did was beyond childish.”

“No, it wasn’t,” she replied. “I went to see Francis. I wanted to speak to him about why Isabella was so frightened. The key didn’t work on his door. I didn’t go down there with the intention of confronting Noah, but then I saw him.” Her expression soured as she shook her head. “Five years he tormented me, hated me. Yes, I spoke with him. I didn’t think of the consequences.” Emotion cracked her voice. “Don’t you understand? I needed that. I’m glad he’s not dead. I’m glad I had a chance to show him that while he’s facing whatever becomes of him, I’m still here. I’m happy.” She turned. “I thought I was.”

Stepping in front of her, I shook my head. “Don’t do that, Lucille. I’m not him. I’m upset. I have that right. I’m not as angry as I was when I received the call, but yes, I’m mad. We can do that. You’re right; you’re not a child. You’re an adult. So am I. Adults get upset. Adults argue. That doesn’t mean I’ll turn into him or do what he did. It means if we are going to work as a team, if one day we’re going to celebrate our fiftieth anniversary, the birth of children and grandchildren, then we will disagree.” I motioned between us. “This, Lucille, is a disagreement. It’s not the end to happiness. Fuck, it’s part of happiness.”

Nodding, she looked down. “I know you’re right. It’s just that—”

“He fucked you up.”

She nodded again.

I reached for her chin. “I’m wrong, Lucille. He tried. He may have won battles, but you, my princess, are winning this war. You’re not fucked up. You’re rattled, but you are strong.” Releasing her chin, I reached for her hand. “We’re a team. For your own sanity, you have to face the demons. I don’t want you to do that alone. Facing him alone” —I shook my head— “I can’t think of the possibilities that could have occurred without seeing red.”

Lucille tilted her face. “Sometimes I need to do it alone. The other night, I needed that.”

“Fuck,” I murmured. “I get it. I don’t want to understand.” My grin quirked on one side. “I was looking forward to turning your ass red.”

A giggle bubbled from her throat as she came to me, pressing her soft body against mine. “I know you’re teasing.”

“No, Princess, I’m not.”

“Roman, I am happy, and I’m sorry for being reckless. I’ll take your punishment, as long as you keep your word and it remains what you promised.”

“Bruising your lips?”

She nodded, bringing her lips to mine and wrapping her arms around my shoulders. “I missed you.”

“I missed you, too.”

Taking a step back, Lucille picked her dressing gown off the floor, giving me an idea.

“I’ve come up with your punishment.”

Her blue stare came my way as she slid her arms into the sleeves and tied the sash.

“Tonight’s dinner will be eaten in your private parlor.”

“Okay?”

“And you will come to dinner as I requested weeks ago.”

Lucille’s eyes grew to the size of saucers. “Without clothes? I will not.”

“Oh, you will.”

“And will you dress accordingly?”

I shook my head.

“What if I’m cold?”

“If you’re cold, I’ll enjoy watching your nipples bead.” I took a step closer. “And if you find it as erotic as I am

imagining, I'll enjoy watching you squirm as your core dampens."

"And if I do that, the subject of punishment is done?"

Raising her chin, I began a kiss, and nipped her lower lip.

"Roman?" she exclaimed.

"When we're ready to retire, if we're not both completely satisfied with your punishment, you and only you may bring the subject back up for discussion. First, I want your word that you will not return to the cells below the infirmary."

"Even with you?"

"Never. It's not safe. The guard called because you entered and then couldn't be found."

"They're chained to their beds."

"I want your word."

Lucille nodded. "You have it."

I grinned. "Do we have a deal, my princess?"

A rosy blush filled her cheeks. "Yes, Your Highness."

CHAPTER 30

Lucille

My long hair was tousled, and my body worn out in the best of ways. The blankets on my bed were a twisted mess. With Roman keeping an earlier promise, the bed had not been the only place we'd made love. As I marveled in the postcoital satiation and endorphins flooded my circulation, I lifted myself over Roman's wide chest and ran my fingertips through the soft curls. Looking up at his striking face, I scanned his dark mane, prominent brow, dark penetrating eyes, cheekbones, and chiseled jawline.

"You two don't look alike."

His eyebrows knitted. "You shouldn't mention him."

"It's true. When I looked at him, I didn't see the man I married. It was as if he were a ghost of Roman, not Roman."

"Addiction is a bitch."

"I'm sorry for talking about him, but you're the only one I can speak with honestly."

Roman leaned back against the pillow, his dark stare on me. "I haven't been told you spoke with Noah. Francis just recently regained consciousness. You couldn't have spoken to him. His jaw is wired shut."

"Oh," I said. "I didn't know that."

"I'll be seeing both of them in the morning. I didn't know you went into Noah's room until you told me. I only knew you went down below the infirmary. How did you disappear?"

I sat up. "There's a door at the far end of the corridor, past Noah's room."

"There is?"

I nodded. "I hid behind it and was able to lock it from the inside."

"A closet?"

"No. There's a steep staircase. It leads to Queen Anne's parlor."

"In her apartment?"

"Yes."

His eyes widened as his jaw clenched. "The queen's?"

Nodding, I said, "I'm most certain. I've never before been in her private parlor, but the décor was feminine. There was a desk. The notes on the desk were in her handwriting."

"You're sure?"

"Yes, I knew where I was when I exited. I was in the king and queen's wing."

"What did the notes say?"

I sighed. "Roman, I was too scared of being caught. I didn't commit the words to memory. I was trying to come up with a story if I was caught."

"That is why you shouldn't—"

Pressing my finger on his lips, I nodded. "Yes. You're right."

Roman sat up against the headboard. "There's a corridor from Queen Anne's parlor to beneath the infirmary? Don't you think that's odd?" His lips pressed together. "Twice the king has met me in that corridor by the cells. That must be how he gets down there."

"The thing is," I said, "it's not a door. In her parlor, there's a panel of the wainscoting with a mechanism similar, but different from the one in your bedchamber at Annabella."

"A secret passage. If the king and queen use one, why couldn't the guards find the one at Annabella?"

I shrugged. "Maybe the ministry guards don't know about the queen's passageway."

Roman shook his head. “Mrs. Drake made a comment about the queen. She said the queen knows about me.”

“That you’re not Roman? Has she ever indicated that she knew?”

“No. And Papa acts as if she doesn’t.”

“I can’t imagine allowing your son to be replaced.”

“Do you think she’s delusional?”

My mind scrolled through my interactions with Queen Anne. “I don’t. I think she allows King Theo to pamper her, but she’s not delusional.” I brushed his firm lips with mine. “Is my punishment complete, Your Highness?”

He teased a rogue strand of hair away from my face. “Our agreement is such that only you can bring it up.”

“Oh, are we ready to retire?”

Roman laughed with a shake of his head. “Fuck, Lucille. You’ll be the death of me.”

“Yes, to your first statement.” I grinned. “But I don’t want to be the death of you.”

Roman scooted down, laying his head on the pillow, and I positioned myself with my head on his hard shoulder, staring up at the high ceiling. “I should make an appointment with Mr. Davies. The king and queen should be told about the baby.”

“After you see Mr. Davies, we’ll plan to tell them.”

Rolling back, I pressed my breasts against his chest. “How was the summit? Were there any security issues?”

Roman shook his head. “The security was tight. It’s not like Borinkia was our only concern. There are extremist groups who are an ongoing threat. There was some chatter and a few protestors, but nothing or no one that got through the guards. Thankfully, Alek was quiet. It is believed that he was preoccupied with his father’s death and the fact that his sister is missing.”

“Is she still missing?” I met his gaze. “Isabella said Forthwith was searched. Have you heard if they found

anything?”

“They found evidence that the princess had been there. They didn’t find her.”

Exhaling, I lay back. “I did see her.”

“What do you remember?”

For a moment, I gave his question some thought. “By the time I reached the foyer, a woman with blond hair was at the top of the grand staircase. I don’t remember anything about her—her clothing or anything—it was her stare. It was stark as she looked down at me.”

“I told Papa that Isabella fled to Annabella Castle.”

“Roman,” I said, turning toward him. “I promised.”

“You promised, my princess, not I. My goal is keeping you, our child, and myself safe. If Isabella is a casualty, so be it.”

“I know she isn’t your sister, but think of the children.”

Roman rolled, placing his hand over my midsection. “I’m thinking of one child right now. That child supersedes all others.”

Laying my hand over Roman’s, I sighed. “It shouldn’t be like that. It shouldn’t be one or the other.”

“Francis told me he wants Isabella to rule Molave until Rothy is old enough. This isn’t about which child is Grandpa’s favorite. This is real and losing isn’t an option.”

“I don’t have to like it,” I said.

“No, Princess, you don’t. Your like or dislike isn’t a factor. Noah tried to kill King Theo. We know the plan was Francis’s idea or he relayed Alek’s idea. They believed the way to rule Molave was by regicide. I disagree. King Theo is tired. He wants an heir to carry on what he holds dear—his family and above all, Molave. I will work to be that heir.”

“Because you want to rule?”

He shook his head. “Because it’s what will be best for us and our children.”

“Did anything happen at the summit?”

“The first night was more about mingling. Saturday morning was filled with meetings on topics important to our region and the world. Saturday afternoon, we held individual meetings.” Roman turned to me. “King Theodore allowed me to conduct most of the negotiations. He was there, but less in control than I expected.”

“He’s trusting you.”

“I suppose. On Sunday, I was the one to face the reporters.”

“Did they ask about Inessa?” I hated saying her name.

Roman nodded. “Mrs. Drake prepared a comment. I stuck to it. Basically, I haven’t spoken to her in months and do not know her whereabouts.”

“Was the whole ordeal god-awful?”

Instead of answering, he said, “The reporter from our blessing, Betsy Scholl, was there.”

“The one from *Rolling Stone*?”

“Yes. I don’t like the way she looks at me.”

I lifted my head to meet his gaze. “Should I be jealous?”

Roman’s smile was gone. “She wrote a scathing review over a decade ago about a show on Broadway. She’s written many scathing reviews.”

My smile dimmed. “Were you in the show?”

Roman nodded.

“She said you look familiar.”

“I’m the prince of Molave. My picture and image are commonplace. Surely, she doesn’t see the resemblance.”

“What has happened to you?”

He brought his lips to mine. “I’ve fallen desperately in love.”

“No. To Oliver.” I spoke softly. “Did you just disappear?”

Roman’s gaze met mine. “I don’t know. I’ve been too busy to think about it. Noah said he was dead; he saw his own tombstone.”

A cold chill scurried over my skin.

Roman placed another kiss on my forehead. “Overall, surprisingly, the summit wasn’t awful. I enjoyed talking about receiving our marriage blessing. I also enjoyed the presentations on everything from warfare to the environment. These are topics I never gave much thought, but now I see how important they are and how far-reaching the decisions of leaders can be.”

“Wherever the princess is, I hope she heard about our blessing.”

“King Aleksander II is our concern. Nevertheless, I refuse to follow what Noah did.”

“I’m glad.” Curling toward him, I said, “I’ll go to Mr. Davies tomorrow.”

Roman kissed my forehead. “Good night, my princess. Let me find us the bedcovers.”

Soon, I was warm and tucked in beside my husband. The worries of the day faded as I surrendered to sleep. It was before five in the morning when Roman woke me. Through the darkness, I could tell he was dressed in his pajamas.

“I’m sorry, Princess. Lady Buckingham shouldn’t find you naked.”

I grinned, lifting my hand to his. “Lady Buckingham is an adult. She knows what married people do.”

He handed me a nightgown. “I found this in the cupboard.”

“I’d forgotten I’d never put one on last night.”

“I’m afraid your mistress will insist on taking her job back. Instead of bathing you before bed, I sullied you.”

My cheeks rose. "I rather liked that better." It was as I scooted to sit up that my stomach twisted. Pushing back the blankets, I scampered past my husband and ran toward the toilet. Falling to my knees, I welcomed the new day as I retched and spit.

Roman's hand came soothingly to my back. When I looked up, he had a cup of water and a towel. "Are you all right?"

Taking the cup, I rinsed and spit. Next, using the towel, I dabbed the perspiration from my face. When my eyes met Roman's, I forced a smile. "I seem to recall something about you wanting me on my knees."

"This, Princess, was not what I had in mind." He reached for my hand and helped me stand. "What can I do?"

"Yesterday, Mary had dry toast."

"From now on, you will have dry toast or crackers or whatever you need at your bedside."

I tipped my forehead to Roman's shoulder. "I think now I want to try to sleep."

"Lift your arms."

After Roman dressed me in the nightgown, he tucked me back into bed. "I'm not sure if I should leave you."

"The answer, Your Highness, is never."

"I'm ready to do away with this archaic ritual of sleeping in two rooms."

"I sleep better when you're here."

"Then it's settled," he said, "I will add the move to my schedule." He leaned down and kissed my hair. "I love you, Lucille."

"I love you, too."

One wouldn't think that I'd be able to fall back to sleep, but I did.

Somewhere between dreams and reality, I was back at Forthwith. The corridor from the toilet to the foyer was longer

than before. I kept walking toward the sound of footsteps. When I finally reached the large entry, I peered up in time to see the woman staring down at me.

Gasping, I woke with a start, sitting up and fighting for breath.

As I looked around, my bedchamber was still dim, the drapes still drawn, and shadows darkening the corners. The memory of the dream remained.

My heart continued its accelerated beat.

I laid my head back on the pillow.

The image was too real.

“It was only a dream,” I told myself. “It wasn’t real.”

If only words could make it so.

CHAPTER 31

Roman

My first stop was Noah. Stepping inside his room, my nose scrunched as the light brightened. The stench of an unbathed man and most likely a bedpan in need of emptying filled the air. His cheeks and chin were covered with beard growth more gray than dark and his hair was a mess. I lifted the back of my hand to my nose.

His dark eyes squinted as he turned my direction.

I didn't say a word as I walked to the metal chair and moved it to the side of his bed.

Noah hit the button, making the bed move.

"You could use a bath," I said, resolving to tolerate the disgusting odor.

"Put in a good word for me. No one asks my opinion."

"Why would I do that?"

"No one asks, but I can talk. I didn't tell anyone about my unexpected visitor."

"She told me."

He grunted.

"For the hell you put her through, I could easily watch you rot in your own filth."

"What happened to needing my help?"

"Things have changed," I said casually.

"What things? It's not like I'm connected to any source of information here."

“Do you swear it was Francis’s idea for you to poison Papa?”

Noah growled. “Stop calling him that. Yes. I didn’t know shit about fruit pits. He’s the one who told me, cautioned me about how much to use and when to give it to him.”

“Can you prove it?”

“I wrote it in my journals.”

“You probably have a hundred. Any idea on when?”

“A year or two ago.”

I stood. “That’s not exactly helpful.” I walked back and forth, hoping for fresher air. “Why is Isabella frightened?”

“Not my worry. I avoided her at all costs.”

“Why?”

“Francis didn’t want her involved. It was easier to maintain a tense relationship. You should try it.”

“I honestly don’t give a fuck about Isabella. I need to know why she would run from Forthwith.”

Noah scoffed. “She ran from Forthwith? Figures.” He looked up at me. “Talk to Francis.”

“He’s my next stop. Thing is, he’s not talking.”

“Make him.”

“His jaw is broken in a couple of places. Wired shut. He’s going to be eating through a straw for the next few weeks.”

Noah sniffed. “What happened?”

“Car accident,” I lied.

“I thought it might have something to do with that broken hand of yours.”

I hummed.

Noah lifted the sheet and blanket over his lower half. “For the love of God, either get someone in here to kill me or bathe me.”

“One last chance,” I said. “You said you didn’t love Inessa.”

“I didn’t—don’t.”

“You slept with her.”

“That didn’t sound like a question,” Noah responded, “but yeah. Can’t say she’s that great of a lay, but compared to Lucille, she’s Aphrodite.”

My steps took me closer to the bed and the source of the toxic air. “I’m tired of being blindsided. Was there someone else, someone you confided in—maybe loved?”

Noah’s nostrils flared as he laid his head back.

Shit.

“Who?” I asked.

He shook his head. “You won’t be blindsided. It’s a fucking lonely life once you sign that name. I wasn’t looking, but yeah, there was someone. No need to worry. The identity won’t come up in a tabloid or on social media. I was even careful in my journals.”

“How can you be sure about outside sources? Maybe she told someone.”

His eyes met mine. “I’m sure. On that, I’d swear my life.”

As if that is a large bet.

“Fine.” I began to walk toward the door.

“Roman,” he called.

I turned back. “What?”

“What’s your real name?” His question came in Norwegian.

I answered in the same language. “Roman Archibald Godfrey, forever more.”

We were back to English. “You’re a fucking fool.”

My smile quirked. “I’m not the one chained to a bed and sitting in my own shit.”

“I’ve had a lot of time to think.”

Exhaling, I crossed my arms over my chest and leaned against the wall near the door and mirror. “You want to share? Share.”

“Why the fuck do you think this room exists?”

“The palace is centuries old. I would guess they have been used for many things.”

He nodded. “Yeah, it doesn’t feel right.”

“No part of this is right.”

“I wrote the journals because I didn’t know if I was the first replacement or the tenth. I thought if I wrote shit down, it would tell the person after me—if there was one—something more than I had. I keep going back to *how*.”

With my lips pressed together, I tilted my head. “How...?”

“Where the fuck do they find us? You’re obviously younger than I am. By birthdate, I am older than Roman, not by much. Why us?”

I had to hand it to Noah, I’d been wondering the same thing.

“It’s fucking bonkers,” he said.

“I’m going to Francis now,” I said. “Anything you’d like to pass along?”

“Tell the fucker I didn’t have enough in the tank.”

“You didn’t have enough what?”

“It. The energy or the desire. I just want out.”

“Francis isn’t exactly in a position to facilitate that.”

“You might be. Theodore is. Let me go and I’ll disappear.”

“The thing is, Noah, you had the chance, and you came back.”

“I guess I wanted to know if what she said was true.”

I waited.

“The last time I spoke to Inessa...” He shook his head. “Get me a bath and I’ll tell you more.”

Inserting the key, I opened the door, welcoming the musty odor of the corridor over the literal shit in the small room. Passing by Francis’s room, I went to the room with the medical staff.

“The patient in the last room needs attention,” I said.

A woman in green scrubs bowed. “Your Highness, I’m waiting for my coworker. It takes two to bathe him and change the sheets. I’m sorry you had to experience that.”

“Why isn’t he allowed to get up, move about, and use the toilet? The room is locked.”

“That would take the order of the king, sir.”

“I’m the prince. You have my order.”

“I’ll inform my partner.”

Leaving the medical person, I went to Francis’s room.

The interior was set up the same way as Noah’s with a bed, sink, and toilet. The thickness of his bandages had decreased over the last few days, revealing more of his face. The skin around his eyes was dark purple, but the swelling had gone down. His right leg was set with a cast from his thigh to his calf and hanging from a contraption.

Inserting the key, I opened the door.

Francis didn’t stir even as the lights grew brighter.

The monitors at his head were beeping with no indication of alarm.

“Francis,” I said, speaking over the monitors.

As he turned, I saw that his wrists were no longer bound. His gaze met mine, small blue flints surrounded by contusions.

“Good morning.”

Francis grunted. The muscles along the side of his face tightened, but the wires wouldn’t allow him to open his mouth.

“Good to see you too,” I said. “Do you want to go upstairs to a nicer room?”

His blue eyes sent daggers my direction.

“Here’s the deal...” I went on to tell him the story of what happened. We were ambushed. Our attacker took his own life. At this time his identity is still unknown. The car crashing into the tree caused most of his injuries, but nevertheless, the Duke of Wilmington gallantly fought at my side. And, oh yes, we were shot.

Like blue embers in a pit of ash, hatred glowed from his orbs.

“Aleksander I is dead,” I said.

Francis blinked his eyes.

“Did you know this was part of the plan?” I hesitated. “Blink once for no, two for yes.”

He blinked once.

I waited for more. It didn’t come.

“That’s a curious answer. You see, the Firm has reason to believe you aided in the regicide of King Aleksander.”

He exaggerated a single blink.

I shrugged and lied. “We’ve confirmed he was poisoned—amygdalin.”

Another blink.

“It’s from fruit pits, including cherries. When the pit is ground or chewed, amygdalin is released. In the body it changes to cyanide. Extremely poisonous.”

His gaze stayed fixed on me.

Continuing, I said, “It’s an extremely effective poison. Noah confirmed your knowledge. He said you were the one who told him about it.” I had Francis’s undivided attention. “The ministry guards searched Forthwith and found jars of canned cherries in the cellar.”

He shrugged.

“I get it. Maybe you eat cherries. Here’s the thing, they found jars of pits.”

Francis closed his eyes as he exhaled.

“I suppose your guilt or innocence will be up to King Aleksander II after your extradition.”

His eyes opened wider. Francis hit the button making him sit straighter. He grimaced as the bed moved, yet all the while he kept his attention on me. Unintelligible noises came from the back of his throat as spit drooled from his chin.

I narrowed my gaze. “Are you trying to tell me that you never conspired to assassinate a king.”

Two distinct blinks. Francis lifted his left hand to the top of his head.

“Charades? Okay.” I watched his motion. “Hat.”

One blink.

“Crown,” I said.

Two blinks.

“I’m not king, but I can take this conversation to him.”

He shook his head, lifted his hand with his finger and thumb a few centimeters apart.

“Smaller than king,” I said. “Queen?”

One blink with a shake of his head.

“Rothy and Alice?”

Two blinks with a nod.

“Corroborate the story I told you and your wife and children will be fine.”

Francis exhaled.

“Why is Isabella frightened?”

Opening his eyes, he shrugged his shoulder.

“She ran from Forthwith and is hiding.”

Again, his hand went to his head, with fingers high.

“Crown.”

He nodded and lifted his hand as high as he could.

“Big. King.”

Two blinks.

“King Theodore.”

One blink and a shake of his head.

“Aleksander II?”

A nod with two blinks.

“What about him?”

Francis made the motion of writing.

“A message?”

Nod and two blinks.

“What do you want to say?”

Exhaling, he laid his head back. Finally, he made the small sign again.

“About your children?”

Shake of his head.

“Isabella?”

One blink.

My mind scrambled to understand. “You want to message Alek about...Inessa?”

Two blinks.

“She’s missing.”

He shook his head.

“She is,” I replied. “Alek is looking for her.”

One blink.

“What are you trying to tell me?”

CHAPTER 32

Lucille

Mr. Davies confirmed what I'd known. I was pregnant and according to the ultrasound, I was almost four weeks along. The royal physician emphasized that more than once.

"We can always claim you're only three weeks."

The date of the procedure.

"Does everything look...the way it should?" I asked.

Mr. Davies smiled. "Yes, Your Highness. Everything looks healthy. Of course, we'll keep you closely monitored."

"Mr. Davies," I said, "we will not talk of conception again. The Firm may be informed of the procedure. The world will know my husband and I are reconciled. No further clarification is needed."

He sighed. "I promise, Princess. Everything will be all right. Your child is an heir."

"Thank you."

Lady Buckingham stood as I entered the outer office. When she looked questioningly at me, I nodded. Mary reached for my hand. "This is wonderful news."

We both stopped dead in our tracks as Queen Anne appeared, coming our direction. Her light hair was perfectly styled, and she was dressed for her day in a pale pink dress and sturdy-heeled shoes. Her standard string of pearls was around her neck, and her smile was in place.

"Your Majesty," we both said with a curtsy.

"Lucille."

“Are you ill?” I asked. “You’re headed to the infirmary.”

“No,” she said with a shake of her head. “Lady Buckingham, if you’ll excuse us, Princess Lucille will be joining me for tea.”

“It’s morning, ma’am,” I said, confused.

Taking my hand, she led me toward her offices. The apartments were a catacomb of rooms, some resembling offices, most resembling parlors or sitting rooms. It was where she met with staff and others from outside the Firm. As we walked, the queen spoke about the coming of snow and the onset of the holidays. Soon the palace would be decorated. We finally arrived to one of her private sitting rooms.

Once I was seated, the queen sat at my side.

“Do you know why people believe I’m oblivious to what occurs in my own home and country?”

“Ma’am, no one—”

She lifted her hand. “Yes, they do. And the reason is because I want them to think that. This life is too complicated to try to control every aspect. I leave that to Theo and Roman. The blessing of others thinking I’m unaware is it gives me the opportunity and ability to watch and listen.”

Inhaling, I sat taller, wondering if this was about Roman.

Queen Anne clasped her hands in her lap and smiled. “You haven’t drunk your wine.”

“Oh,” I said with a nervous giggle. “When one’s trying to conceive—”

She interrupted. “Today you called for an appointment with Mr. Davies.” Her lips pursed. “Oh, please, Lucille, tell me.”

“Roman wanted to be with me when you and the king were told.”

Queen Anne’s smile grew as she lifted her hands to let them fall. “I knew it. You’re ravishing, dear. This is

tremendous news. It is exactly what we've been praying for. I realize things were not always easy with Roman."

"People change."

She tilted her head. "For the better?"

"Yes, ma'am."

The queen lifted a small bell and shook it. The door opened as Lady Kornhall entered.

"Your Majesty," she said with a curtsy.

"Bring the princess and me tea. Earl Grey for me, ginger for the princess."

"Yes, ma'am."

I waited until the queen's mistress was gone. "Please act surprised when Roman and I tell you. We'd like if we could tell the king."

"Of course," she replied with a nod. "Lucille, I feel it's time that you and I have a talk. It's an extremely important one, but one I'd like you to keep to yourself."

"Roman?"

She shook her head. "I'm not advocating for secrets. My dear, life has too many. I understand how upset you were with the news of the Borinkian princess."

Sitting straighter, I nodded. "That is behind Roman now. It is inconsequential."

"What matters is your marriage and heirs. Things may seem unusual, but what is usual?"

"Ma'am?"

Her lips came together as she straightened her neck. "I'm asking you to forgive Roman."

"I have," I answered quickly.

"It's important for the two of you. That said, don't forget."

I wasn't sure what to say.

Queen Anne stood and walked to a tall table near the side of the room. As she returned, she had an envelope in her hand. My stomach twisted with memories of Isabella's bombshell.

"I'm the one to tell you this because I want you to understand the possibilities." She handed me the envelope.

Slowly, I opened the flap. Inside was a picture.

"I'm scared," I admitted.

"No, dear. You are the future queen. It's your responsibility to keep the Godfrey name going."

"I'm pregnant."

She tilted her chin toward the picture.

I turned it over.

Tears blurred my vision.

Swallowing, I looked up, meeting Queen Anne's gaze. "I saw her at Forthwith."

"She's showing."

My eyes closed. "I know it doesn't make sense, but it isn't my husband's child."

"That child is a Godfrey."

I stood. "I'm sorry, ma'am, but it's not. I can't explain—"

Queen Anne shook her head. "We need to face the facts. Your child will of course be heir, but the other one—is a Godfrey. You must understand, we cannot allow a Godfrey to be raised in Borinkia. If she were from somewhere else...but she isn't."

"What are you saying?"

CHAPTER 33

Roman

Leaving the infirmary, I barely spoke to Lord Martin as I rushed to our apartments. Lady Buckingham met me on the grand stairs. “Where is the Princess? Is she upstairs?”

“No, Your Highness. She’s with the queen.”

The queen.

Changing directions, I headed toward the king’s offices. He’d told me not to rule with emotion, but at this moment, that felt impossible. The emotions were bubbling within me, reaching a boiling point.

“Sir, what is happening?” Lord Martin asked.

“I need to see Lucille. If I can’t, I must speak to the king.”

“I will call for an appointment.”

“Fuck that,” I growled.

Lord Martin stayed at my side, stride for stride, as we hurried past faceless people in the corridors. Some greeted me and others bowed. I didn’t slow. Pushing my way into the king’s outer office, I said, “I must see the king.”

“Your Highness,” one of his secretaries said, standing. “He isn’t expecting you.”

“Is anyone with him?”

“No, sir, but...”

I didn’t bother waiting for the guard to open the door as I pressed on, pushing open his office door.

“Roman?” King Theodore said, looking up from his desk. “What is this about?” He waved off the guard.

I waited until the door closed. “I just came from the infirmary.”

“Princess Lucille is expecting,” the king said with a smile as he stood. “I’m elated.”

“Yes. No.” I shook my head. “Inessa Volkov is hiding from her brother because—”

“She’s pregnant with your child. The guards found the pregnancy test. There’s no need to worry. We have her now.”

“It’s not mine—the baby. I’ve never met her.” The words he’d just spoken registered. “You have her. What does that mean?”

“Son, it means a great day for Molave. You have two heirs on the way.”

Thank you for reading RAVISHING REIGN. I hope you’ll read [RELEVANT REIGN](#), book four. Don’t miss the dramatic conclusion of Royal Reflections where all the answers to your questions will be revealed.

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October 2019

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August 2020

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aleatha Romig is a New York Times, Wall Street Journal, and USA Today bestselling author who lives in Indiana, USA. She has raised three children with her high school sweetheart and husband of over thirty years. Before she became a full-time author, she worked days as a dental hygienist and spent her nights writing. Now, when she's not imagining mind-blowing twists and turns, she likes to spend her time with her family and friends. Her other pastimes include reading and creating heroes/anti-heroes who haunt your dreams!

Aleatha impresses with her versatility in writing. She released her first novel, *CONSEQUENCES*, in August of 2011. *CONSEQUENCES*, a dark romance, became a bestselling series with five novels and two companions released from 2011 through 2015. The compelling and epic story of Anthony and Claire Rawlings has graced more than half a million e-readers. Her first stand-alone smart, sexy thriller *INSIDIOUS* was next. Then Aleatha released the five-novel *INFIDELITY* series, a romantic suspense saga, that took the reading world by storm, the final book landing on three of the top bestseller lists. She ventured into traditional publishing with Thomas and Mercer. Her books *INTO THE LIGHT* and *AWAY FROM THE DARK* were published through this mystery/thriller publisher in 2016.

In the spring of 2017, Aleatha again ventured into a different genre with her first fun and sexy stand-alone romantic comedy with the USA Today bestseller *PLUS ONE*. She continued the “Ones” series with additional standalones, *ONE NIGHT*, *ANOTHER ONE*, *MY ALWAYS ONE*, and *QUINTESENTIALLY THE ONE*. If you like fun, sexy, novellas that make your heart pound, try her “Indulgence series” with *UNCONVENTIONAL*, *UNEXPECTED*, *UNFORGETTABLE*, and *UNDENIABLE*.

In 2018 Aleatha returned to her dark romance roots with *SPARROW WEBS*. And continued with the mafia romance *DEVIL'S DUET*, and most recently her *SIN* series.

You may find all Aleatha's titles on her [website](#).

Aleatha is a “Published Author's Network” member of the Romance Writers of America and PEN America. She is represented by Kevan Lyon of Marsal Lyon Literary Agency and Dani Sanchez with Wildfire Marketing.

