



TWISTED
Kings

K T ♡ S T R A N G E

TWISTED KINGS

RED, WHITE, AND ROYAL
KT STRANGE

HEART *Candies*
PUBLISHING

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*For Janna,
my lobster.*

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“Here’s your tip-out. Sorry, it’s not better.” Erica wrinkles her nose at me, handing me over a fistful of bills like it’s not great, but to me, it’s enough. Today’s shift was alright, with our regulars knocking back beers at the bar. There’s also a big stag party handing out bigger tips than I’m used to. It’s going to help significantly with me making rent this week. Since I got back from abroad, I’ve been living in a week-to-week rental on the ragged edge of NoHo. Before tonight fell into my lap with extra tip money, it looked like I would have to plead forgiveness from my landlord, Mrs. K.

Relief spreads through my whole body, and I lean over the bar.

“Can you pour me a Shirley Temple?” I ask. Erica grins at me and goes to get a disposable cup.

“To go?” She asks. I roll my eyes with a smile. I’m not a party girl. I wouldn’t say I like to hang out and get drunk with the patrons after I wrap up my shift. It’s not that this place is bad news or anything. Erica keeps everyone in line, given that she’s over six feet tall and has biceps the size of my head, and it doesn’t hurt she’s the distant cousin of one of the Earls of Hollywood. If I remember, it’s Beverly Hills that her fifth-cousin ten times removed, Bart, is the Earl of. That kind of thing gives you extra protection. The police are likelier to swing by ‘just to check’ on a random night and answer calls much faster.

Noble blood may run thinly through Erica’s veins; she’ll never inherit and certainly won’t be invited to any balls up in the

Hills, but it's afforded her some privileges. Being able to qualify for a loan to buy this bar is one of them.

"Here, with extra cherries," Erica says, setting the tall cup in front of me, lid already speared with a pink straw.

"Thank you," I reply, taking a grateful sip.

"Hey, heyyyy, girl," an arm drapes around me, and for a moment, I stiffen before I realize it's Gina. She's a close-talker, but she likes mint-flavored shots, so her breath is fresh as she presses her cheek into mine. "Look at you. You'd do so good if you were on my list, you know?"

Gina was one of the regulars I'd met in my first week here. Erica sighs as she looks carefully at Gina.

"Don't you dare steal her from me," Erica says, pointing at Gina with the business end of a swizzle stick.

"What, you pay her a couple hundred a week? She could earn five times that if she worked for one of my families," Gina slurs happily, giving me an enthusiastic squeeze. "You want to nanny, don't you? Get back in the game?"

Since starting, I've learned to stop talking about myself at the bar. I opened my mouth too much when I got here. Gina was from the 'before times' of that vital life lesson. On day three of working here, she discovered that I'd studied child care and then worked abroad as an Au Pair. Since then, she hasn't stopped pestering me to join her nanny agency.

The fact I don't have the full qualifications doesn't stop her. The fact that I'll never go back into that world again for love, or money, is what's stopping me. Just thinking about it makes my chest tighten up.

"I'm good," I say, giving Erica a meaningful look. "I'm happy here. Erica is a great boss."

The boss in question is hiding a smile behind a wash rag, trying to pretend to cough. I know she doesn't take it seriously that Gina is trying to headhunt me. But Erica picks up on my signals, watching me and then looking at the clock.

"You better head out if you're walking."

I nod at her words. I always do. It's cheaper, and my place is only ten minutes away on foot. But to get there, I must traverse some okay, and some not-okay streets. And it's nearing clock-out time, with the last call minutes ago.

I extricate myself from Gina's octopus grip.

"Thank you for always being so kind," I say to her. She gives me a toothy, happy-drunk grin before grabbing one of her business cards out of her purse.

"I'm seriously," she slurs, barely comprehensible, and pats her card into my hand before I can argue.

"Out!" Erica orders, pointing at me with a wink. I give her a sheepish smile in return.

"I'll see you tomorrow," I call her over my shoulder as I tuck my tips and Gina's card deep into my jeans pocket and duck out the door.

"Safe night, Eva," the doorman says, a steady guy named Tom with a face like a deflated football. He's been in a few fights, although less now that Erica has taken over at Shake's Revenge. I wave to him and move through the small crowd of smokers outside, trotting up to the curb. There's a limo there, putting out fumes, and I watch it with curiosity as I start walking toward the crosswalk behind it.

We don't get a lot of limos on this side of NoHo. Maybe in May, when all the kids are celebrating the end of their studying years and the entry into the world of service as they leave the schoolhouse for great households, or, if they're fortunate, more studying at one of the universities.

That was my path until money ran low, and I had to abandon my studies with only enough money to get over to Europe, where I'd entered service too.

Not in a great house, but one big enough to keep an Au Pair on to look after the children. The smaller houses make do with Au Pairs instead of real nannies. I could level up with Gina if I wanted, but I don't.

That world is not for me. It only has danger in it and heartbreak. The walk sign flickers on, and I skirt around the

limo that's half into the crosswalk.

Of course it's blocking my path and the path of every other pedestrian. Whoever's inside is obviously entitled. I huff under my breath and try to ignore it as I walk by until one of the doors flings open, startling me.

"Hey! You!" Several someones spill out of the car, tall men dressed in fine suits. Their clothing looks like they cost more than the limo itself. I let my gaze slide away, and I hurry to make it across the street.

A hand grabs me, turning me.

"You're pretty. I'm good to slum it; you wanna make an easy hundred?" My eyes meet his. Tanned skin, from vacationing on warm beaches or surfing, surrounds dark brown eyes. His hair is bleached blond, and there's a diamond in one of his teeth, a vulgar display of wealth, especially here in NoHo, where the average income couldn't even buy a single diamond for an engagement ring.

He grins at me, wide, the diamond sparkling in the lamp-light. My heart tightens in my chest, and I freeze as he reaches to cup my chin in his hand.

The contact of his skin on mine has me gasping, and I yank away.

"Don't!" The word hiccups in my throat as I stumble, and my back hits a warm, solid chest. Two hands descend onto my shoulders, and I tilt my head backward, mouth opening in surprise.

"Well, this is a nice birthday present," a liquid molten voice pours over me, and for a second, it's like the whole world has fallen away.

He's good-looking, criminally so, green eyes glinting with amusement, even with me looking at him upside down.

My breath hitches in my chest.

"What's your name?" He asks, my cheeks going warm.

"Hey, hands off!" Tom has woken up that not all is right outside Revenge, and he's off his barstool, walking toward us.

I pull away from the guy holding onto me, the world surging back into place around me, sounds blurring back into the present.

“She bumped into us, probably trying to get a settlement from the marquis,” the first man says, and I try to escape the crowd, their suits formidable and forbidding. “And who are you to talk to the Marquis of Hollywood like that?”

“Don’t name-drop; it’s classless,” the man who’d held me last, the one with the green eyes, says as I push through bodies and turn to glance at him.

I can still feel his hands on me.

He winks. At me. I shiver. The crosswalk squawks one final warning, and I take off running.

“Let’s slum it tonight, lads!” An accented voice crows, and I realize it’s a crowd of all high-born men, titled, wealthy, useless. They must be hosting someone from the English monarchy with them.

I dart across the street, breathing hard as I get to the other side. There’s a noise behind me, and I duck behind a low wall, trying to catch my breath. It sounds like there’s going to be a fight. I want to get home. I know Erica’ll be okay. She can roll with the best of them, and she doesn’t take shit, even from the high-born.

The streets are nearly deserted as I make my way home, and I fall into bed after texting Erica to make sure she’s okay. She sends me a smiley face back, and I let my eyes close, relief and sleep washing over me.

MORNING CRACKS LIKE AN EGG, and I beetle out of my single-room apartment and get laundry started, leafing through some newspapers and magazines left there by other residents as reading material.

MARQUESS IN A MESS, the headline blares from the front of a glossy magazine. My fingers go still on the cover, my

eyes widening. My pulse trips over itself as my heart jumps into my throat.

The man from last night. The one who'd said I was a birthday present with the liquid-gold voice and the green eyes.

There he is, right on the cover, at some red-carpet event, clearly out of his mind because he's got his hand in the front of a woman's dress, yanking it down for all to see. They've censored the picture, but they can't censor his grin. He's got a wild look on his face like he knows he can do whatever he wants and get away with it.

What the hell was he doing in NoHo last night, at Shake's Revenge, of all places?

Slumming it? My face burns with anger, and I slam the magazine into the trash as I leave the laundry room. I've got more chores to do, and I'm not going to sit around waiting for my clothes to wash. They're not at risk until the dry cycle when Mr. Jameson goes on his panty hunt.

Something's different as I turn the corner of the building and walk into the covered walkway that leads to the courtyard and my door.

A piece of white paper sticks out, lifting and falling, flapping in the light morning breeze.

It's a notice from my landlord. And I know exactly what it is. My heart sinks as I stare up at the rent renewal notice slapped on my front door. I'm covered in laundry-room dust and want to shower off, although the prospect of fighting the roaches in my cracked shower stall is not good. I swallow hard and pull the notice down with shaking fingers. The envelope is taped to the aging and flaking paint, and it pulls off a strip with it when I take it down.

Great. I hope they don't bill that to my damage deposit.

The AC has been off all day while I worked, and the heat hits me like I've just opened an oven when I step inside. Throwing open the windows and trying to make my place more livable, I finally stop procrastinating and open the dreaded envelope.

My heart immediately drops beyond just seeing the stupid thing minutes before.

My rent is doubling. *Doubling*. Oh fuck.

For a moment, I want to sink to my knees and start bawling my eyes out because I could barely afford this shit hole before, and I definitely will not be able to stretch my meager budget and savings to cover such a jump.

But I can't crumple. I have to push forward and deal with this. It's one more thing, but I need to handle it. The only thing that's kept me going over the last decade has been a thread of iron in my will, and even though it's wavering, it's all I've got. There is one option for me. It's not a great one, but what could it hurt? Europe is so far away. America is a whole different continent, a world away from everything that tried to sink me. I can't be haunted by my past anymore.

I grab my phone.

"Gina?" I say as soon as she picks up. I don't even wait for her to reply. "Hey. I want in. Do you have any jobs you're interviewing for right now? Are you still looking?"

I close my eyes and wait for her answer.

Because I am truly, and completely out of other options.

MASON

There's a knock at my door, and it pulls me out of my work. Again. The first interruption had been Avery, the butler, escorting in one of our family lawyers and a crisis management expert to deal with Benedict's *latest* scandal. A bar-brawl in North Hollywood. He might've been marquis of the whole damn lot, but he needed to learn to control himself.

And now, another disturbance. I hope it's less irritating than the last. The business of the estate won't run itself, and it will only get worse if I'm constantly being interrupted. It's been three weeks of this since Madeline's nanny—

I won't think of it. I close my eyes to banish the vision from my mind. I'd had plans for her. But again, my younger brother saw fit to interfere. Again.

"Come in," I command, knowing that the sooner I deal with this inconvenience, the better. My day will only get longer if I put off whoever is outside in the hallway.

The housekeeper, Mrs. Harris, enters with a brief curtsy. We've worked too long together for me to stand entirely on protocol with her, and she's getting on in years. I will not demand the deep curtses and bows from my elder staff. I'm not my brother.

Although my choice to relax on etiquette stays within the walls of my office.

Outside of this place where my most cherished possessions reside, I rule with an iron fist.

“Your grace,” she says by way of greeting, and I turn completely from my computer screen. “The agency has sent over a list of recommended names for Lady Madeline’s nanny. Did you want to review their photos and resumes?” She has a tablet in her hand, and she looks tired. She’s been running double duty, caring for my daughter and managing the staff under her command. There were times she had to raise my younger siblings and me, so I know she’s up to her current task.

But for how long? I can’t keep putting it off.

“Of course, bring it here,” I say, and she sets the tablet on the leather blotting pad on my desk. The first girl is blonde. No, never. I flick through a few more. They’re all wrong, though, their headshots might have been smiling, but they aren’t what this household needs.

Someone like the last girl. She had almost been perfect. If only she hadn’t fallen for my brother’s stupid games. I can still hear her sniveling as she cried and begged me to let her keep her place. After she let Benedict touch her? Never. I banished her from my sight, no matter though it caused Madeline to cry for a week. My daughter will get over it. The influencer of a harlot and a slut on my child? Irredeemable. My house only has room for those who can obey me in all things. I only tolerate Benedict because he is, for now, my heir.

“Are there any that suit you, your grace?” Mrs. Harris asks, and I sigh.

“Not—” I pause, coming to the end of the list. It’s a grainy headshot, not in the quality of the others, but the subject has long curling brown hair, and— “This one.” I say, pointing to the screen. “What are her qualifications?” I tap through to her resume—a few years of education and Au Pair experience abroad. Well, if she’s traveled somewhat, that gives her a leg up on most of the candidates. I need someone who won’t blanch at a plane ride. And isn’t afraid to eat strange and unfamiliar foods. As well... it’s her eyes, dark brown, surrounded by a heartbreaker’s set of lashes. She’s relatively plain other than that, which might convince my asshole brother to stay away from her. Not a flashy court beauty or one

of the more elegant maids that know they're going to do better on their backs than mopping floors but want the security of working for a great house to protect them.

But something is charming about her. Something that reminds me in a way of Madeline.

"Interview her. I want her for the job unless she's a complete idiot," I pause. "But make her want it, don't simply hand it to her," I say, pushing the tablet across the desk to her. Mrs. Harris takes it.

"Her, your grace? But there were so many more experienced —"

I cut her off with a dismissive wave of my hand.

"I want someone who can learn. The last girl knew too much about how she thought things should be done. Madeline requires someone I can mold." I'm thinking aloud, and Mrs. Harris gives me a curious look.

"You intend to take her training on personally, my lord?" She's right to ask. It's unusual and bordering on inappropriate.

"No, of course not, that would fall under your jurisdiction, of course," I say smoothly, and her feathers are still ruffled, but she looks somewhat appeased. "I just don't want someone coming in who has all these ideas that don't fit with how you run this household and how I want Madeline raised."

Mrs. Harris nods in agreement.

"Of course, your grace," she says, "it would be easier if the next nanny did not have so many preconceived notions. As long as you're quite certain."

"I am," I say with finality and turn back to my computer. "Now—"

The door bursts open, and Benedict strolls in without a knock or an announcement, with no regard for what I might be doing. And he wonders why I lock the door occasionally when I genuinely do not want to be disturbed.

"Angeles, I didn't know that you had company," he says to me before smiling at Mrs. Harris. She stops herself from rolling

her eyes. I can tell. He was always her favorite, up into recently. But he's been in her bad books for the last little while. If he stopped to think about why he'd have some personal revelations on the direction his life is heading. But that's not Benedict. He is charging ahead, with no mind for anything but what pleases him.

He should have never been heir. Not that I, or our father, had any choice in the matter. If only Madeline had been born a boy...

"Well, I'll leave you to it, thank you, your grace," Mrs. Harris has collected the tablet and walks out the room with a brief, shallowest of curtseys for my brother, Benedict King, Marquis of Hollywood and Long Beach.

The door clicks shut behind her, and Benedict whistles.

"She's crabby," he says with a fake pout. It's a stupid expression for a man in his mid-twenties, but I long ago realized I couldn't school my younger brother into better behavior or a proper mien.

He won't ever grow up until I am dead and the barony's coronet rests on his head. And probably not even then. I hate to think of the entirety of Los Angeles falling into his hands and how poorly he might manage it.

Our barony stretches for miles and encompasses one of the most significant financial engines in the whole world. So many people depend on our careful guidance for their employment, their entire lives depending on the strong shoulders of the King family. We have ruled here for the last five generations, distant relations to the original Kings who founded the city and were crowned duke and duchess of the area by the then Queen of America.

But Benedict will never understand what we owe to these people, who look to us for guidance and protection. He refuses to.

"What do you want?" I ask, not hiding my irritation and letting it fully color my voice. He huffs at me.

“So, a new nanny?” He asks a sly smirk stretching his lips upward.

I give him a flat look of warning.

“You are not to go near her,” I demand. Benedict flutters his eyelashes at me in the way I hate. It doesn’t suit him; overly dramatic.

“You could hire a boy, and then it wouldn’t be a problem,” he says, “but you’re stuck in the past, convinced caregiving is only for women. Who knows, if you hired a man for the position, Noah might come back—”

My teeth want to grind, but I don’t let them. Instead, I steel myself and steady my voice.

“I’m disinterested in a battle of wits today; what do you need? More spending money?”

“Vegas was a bore,” he says, explaining why his accounts are hopelessly empty. He sighs and drapes himself on one of the leather armchairs in front of my desk, usually for more important and less impertinent visitors than him. He’s got a leg over one arm, slouching in it in a way our old governess would have slapped him for.

I miss the days of the governess. Madeline won’t be brought up by one. It’ll be masters in different subjects to teach her, to give her the best foundation possible as a young woman who will come of age in D.C.’s viper-ridden courts. Her future is not in Los Angeles, and she will have to find a partner far from here, to strengthen business ties. Perhaps New York. Or...

There are two princes in the White House, after all. Aiming my sights high for her wouldn’t be wrong.

“Out of money again, then,” I say, tapping on my keyboard and bringing up the accounts. I frown. He’s run through twice what he’s owed this quarter alone. But he’s watching me with hooded eyes. Benedict knows what he can get away with. “If you keep squandering, there’ll be nothing left of what you inherited, and you’ll start dipping into the incomes from your ridings.”

He shrugs.

Of course, he doesn't care. It doesn't matter to him. Consequences mean nothing.

With a few clicks of my mouse and his accounts are full again, so he can fuck right off and leave me to run our estate and lands. I feel the pressure of building the coffers up so much that no matter what he does when he takes over, he won't possibly be able to run through the money in whatever's left of his lifetime.

We're only five years apart. I fully intend to live a long life. His time in my chair will be limited at best. Who knows, maybe he'll die before me? He does like to skydive. I try not to let that thought drive a smile onto my face. I wouldn't want him to think that his presence pleases me. In any form. The only way I could enjoy him is if he were dead.

"Your generosity belies your ill temperament," he says, adopting the most formal of speech patterns just to needle me. He gives me a two-fingered salute, casual and insubordinate. There isn't much I can or want to do about it though. His attitude will only hamper him. It's the main reason he hasn't been able to find a wife, a Marchioness, to hold his hand and give him children. He's offended half of the fathers at court, and even his good looks won't save him with the mothers. They keep their daughters well away from him, being known to be a complete rake and a despoiler of virgins.

Look what happened to the last nanny. It didn't take him long. Only a few short weeks and she was ruined.

"I want to remind you," I say as he makes his way to the door. "That your niece needs a stable presence in her life, and if you care about her at all, you'll leave her new nanny in peace."

Benedict gives me a look over his shoulder like he can't believe that I'm bringing this up now, when his wallet is newly flush with cash and it's his turn to run out and have some fun at the barony's expense.

Yes, that's me, Mason King, Duke of Los Angeles, and an absolute killjoy. Responsibility sapped out what little desire

for fun I'd ever had as a boy. My duchess took what was left of me, burning my soul right down to ashes. Now I'm hardened steel, ice-cold from the inside out and only able to thaw when I am truly in my daughter's presence.

And then it's only because I don't want to lay on her the damage that's been lain on me.

"Why, so you can have a crack at her first?" He asks, his words knife-sharp and meant for my heart. It's a miss though. He's a fool if I want anything out of her other than something that's purely transactional.

"Of course not. She needs to remain focused on her purpose here," I say coolly. Benedict has one hand on the doorknob and he's looking at me like he doesn't believe me.

"Truly?" He asks. "You aren't angry I fucked the last one before you could?"

I focus back on my computer screen with a sigh.

"Leave, Benedict."

"You were hard for her—"

"She was barely a child herself."

"Right. You're twenty-nine, not dead. Since when was someone seven years younger than you out of the age bracket? I know it's been a while since—"

He's going to say *her* name. The hair on the back of my neck stands up, and I push away from the desk, glowering at him.

"Get out," I tell him, before he can even mention her. He laughs, too loud, and forced.

"Oh, still in love? That's pathetic. Only a fool loves his wife." He sneers and I move, fast, around the desk. He bolts out the door and slams it behind him, knowing what's coming if I catch him.

The beating of his life. He's had a few from me, the worst the weekend that I realized Madeline and I were truly on our own.

When *she* walked out, vanished on us, decided that her duty wasn't worth it, that the people who were entrusted to our care

were not worthy of her time and attention.

The day she decided that Madeline wasn't worth staying in a loveless marriage.

I should have seen it coming. She cursed me the entire three years she wore my ring, and the baroness's circlet.

I stand here in my empty office, feeling the ghost of her presence, the twisted smirks she used to throw in my direction in order to infuriate me to the point I wanted to lay hands on her.

That I never did only convinced her more that I lacked in so many ways.

My eyes slide shut, the crackle of the fire soothing me.

If I'd had any choice, I would never have picked her for a wife, or the mother to my heirs. And because Madeline had been born a girl, I suppose, in a way, she hadn't given me an heir after all. Her final parting gift to me had been tossing our barony into an uncertain future with an unfit Benedict looking to take over the reins when I failed.

I can't even speak her name. Let alone hear it.

Benedict's lucky he was closer to the door than I was to him when he chose to needle me.

I stand there until my breathing evens out and it doesn't feel like my heart is going to burst right out of my chest. It doesn't matter what my feelings on it are, on anything, really. The business of the barony has to come first. People are depending on me.

Moving back to my desk, there is a notification waiting for me on the screen. I tap it, and the new nanny's photo pops up, with an appointment time of her interview. Three days from now, all will be settled and our household can go back to the normal running of things. I can handle everything until then. I hope Mrs. Harris can as well. And then...

I gaze down at her face. We will see.

I will see what came of it, this young woman on whom so many of my hopes rest. Maybe like the others she'll

disappoint. But maybe, just maybe, she'll rise to be what I need of her. There's no use of even thinking of it for now. I'll wait, and get back to the unrelenting and unending work of supporting the lives of millions of people.

Sitting a short walk from the ducal residence, Wester Hall, is sending my nerves fizzing. Sitting in front of the housekeeper of the entire property, is somehow even worse.

“Early childhood education for two years, with an experience abroad as an Au Pair for three,” Mrs. Charlotte Harris says, looking at my resume. I know I’m under-qualified for this job if the pinching way her brows pull together is any indication.

My fingers clench around the purse in my lap, and I try not to let my breathing speed up.

I. Need. This. Job.

“And what of your family? That’s an awful lot of time away from home. Are you sure they’re comfortable with you being gone again? The duke travels frequently, and you would be amongst the household to go with them,” she continues, glancing from the paper in front of her outlining my meager experience, and back up to me.

I swallow.

“I don’t have any,” I explain. Well, I don’t have any that I’d ever want to talk to again. “So I’m free as a bird, really.” That’s not a lie. Sometimes when a door shuts behind you, it’s no use in banging on it to be let back in. It’s better to walk away with your head held high.

“And you have no experience with a high net-worth family,” she tuts, almost to herself, and I swallow.

“I’m good at adapting,” I say, and that’s also not a lie. I’ve had to be flexible. “I’m good at being invisible; you won’t even know I’m here.”

She gives me a patient smile.

“You don’t need to beg,” she says, “my only consideration is that I think you would do well with some etiquette classes to learn more of how this household is run before I throw you into the fire.”

That sounds like...

But I don’t *dare* hope. But she’s smiling again, folding her hands, one over top of the other, across my resume.

“I do think you’ll suit the position, even though you lack some of the experience I’d like to see. It’s not a hard and fast requirement. And there’s something to be said about training you up the way we need you to be.”

My heart soars, lifting on invisible wings. My mouth is dry.

“I accept,” I say immediately, not allowing her to double-think it or backtrack.

“Let me go over the particulars,” she says, slowing my rush. The cool air of this first-floor room brushes over my skin, and I force myself to settle, demanding my leaping stomach to calm down. “It’s a live-in, of course,” she explains, which was the whole attraction. I can disappear into this place, this grand mansion on the top of a sweeping hill, and nobody has to know where I’ve gone or how to look for me. “And the pay reflects that. Extra bonuses for staying on through to the end of the year, and of course, if anything should happen that endangers you, there will be a pay raise to reflect that.”

Danger?

My ears perk up a little bit at that, and I blink at her.

She gives me another, more pained smile this time.

“The duke is a high profile target for the anti-Royalists, as many of them that are left in this day and age.”

“Oh,” I say, because of *course*. I’m stupid to have forgotten that. Of course it’s a risk. But no bigger one than staying where I am, with no job prospects. I’m lucky to have even gotten in through the side door here. And now I have a genuine job offer. My stomach clenches at the thought.

“When can I start,” I say, giving her a bright smile. I’m not worried about AR terrorists or even protestors. I can’t imagine that this place, with its guarded gates and cameras over every inch of the property, sees much if any, action. That sort of thing is centered around D.C., New York, and even the duchy of Chicago. Not here in Los Angeles, where life is filled with oranges and good weather.

She doesn’t look surprised, but then she knows that my last post as an Au Pair finished up a month ago, and I must be hungry for work and a paycheck.

“Immediately, if you have a mind to,” she says and gets to her feet. Her hands go to smooth down her woolen suit skirt. “There’s a uniform as well, although for outings, you’ll dress to the occasion to better fit in and not make a mark of yourself as the nanny. For security purposes.” She gives me an up-and-down look. “It’s a good thing you’re young, but not too young. Old enough to be sensible but young enough not to stand out as the help. And plain. Their eyes will pass right on over you.”

Her words are sharply assessing and for a moment I’m hurt at being called *plain* of all things, who even uses words like that any more? But I guess in a noble house, the language is more formal.

And to the point.

I clear my throat.

“Who’s eyes?” I ask. Her lips press into a thin line.

“His grace has many friends and acquaintances that you will be in the presence of. It’s best if you do not attract their attention. For which I think you’ll do quite nicely, as you are now.” She walks around the desk and moves to the door, opening it without looking back at me.

I should be offended. But if not being a great beauty means I've got the job, I don't even care. You turn into a shadow next to a glittering public figure like the duke. And nobody would think to look for me ghosting his footsteps.

The harsh words about my appearance, none of it matters. Because I'm here, I'm safe and finally free. The past is firmly behind me, and nothing that the duke, or his child, throws at me will shake me.

THE GROUNDS ARE MORE extensive than I had ever imagined. There's a vineyard, three tennis courts, an Olympic-sized pool, a clubhouse, a stable, turn-out paddocks, two horseback riding arenas (one covered and one not), and over thirty acres of forested trails to ride or hike on. Or take an ATV or golf cart since our first stop is the storage shed, where I'm loaded into one of the aforementioned golf carts and given a brief tour of the grounds. The California sun would be beating down on me unmercilessly if it wasn't for the golf cart sheltering the two of us. My eyes are wide the whole way because the amount of wealth is, well, eye-watering.

I can feel her watching me carefully as she drives, and all I can think is that she must be baking in her suit.

"So what's the uniform look like?" I ask as we pull back up to the small house near the front gate where I interviewed. It looks like a cottage now compared to everything I've just seen.

"Comfortable and suitable for working with a small child," she says simply. "You won't need to worry about doing your own laundry here, as the other staff takes care of that, but do keep in mind that our resources aren't endless, so try not to go traipsing after Lady Madeline into the mud." She gives me a good looking over as I sit on the padded golf cart seat. "Actually, remember to keep Lady Madeline *out* of the mud entirely."

"Got it," I say, slipping off the seat as it's obvious we're parked and done with the brief tour. "So the duke's daughter —"

“Lady Madeline,” she supplies as I follow her back inside, the cool air and terra-cotta tile underfoot instantly chilling me. I’ve gotten sweaty outside, and I hope she doesn’t notice. It seems like I have the job in the bag, but I don’t want anything to give her pause. Not until I’ve got my contract signed and my first paycheck in the bank.

No, my first five paychecks.

“I’m supposed to call her Lady Madeline all the time?” I’m right behind her, so I have to slam on the brakes when she turns around abruptly, one hand going to her hip as she stares at me like I’m some alien creature or insect instead of the nanny she *just* hired.

“Did you pay no attention in your high school Civics and Nobility class?” She demands, and I feel my cheeks heating up in pure defiance of the cold, air-conditioned air in the cottage.

“I—”

She makes a noise in the back of her throat, cutting me off, half-tsk, half-annoyance.

“I’ll make sure that book is included in amongst your study materials,” she says with a sigh. “Truthfully, if—” she pauses from whatever she is about to tell when a man a few years younger than me hurries into the room, his cheeks red-patched and puffed.

“They’re canceling the rest of the trip and coming right back,” he says before seeing me and doing a double-take. “Is this—”

“The new nanny, yes,” she says with irritation, although it’s not directed at him. “Coming back immediately? Alright, make sure you speak to Avery, and ask him if there’s anything that needs to be prepared other than stopping the repairs on the primary suite.”

She turns back to me as the young man boils out of the room at a flat run, and I wonder if they’ve, like, heard of cell phones. Or even walky-talkies.

The question must be on my face because she purses her lips.

“Yes, there are more advanced ways than running hither and thither all over the property, but those can be intercepted. His grace’s travel plans are guarded secretly, and we do our best to keep them out of technology’s hands as much as possible.”

“Oh,” I say, “Okay, well, it sounds like you’re about to have your hands full so, do you need me to do anything?”

She seems to draw herself up to her full height at my words, chest puffing out.

“Do you think this is the first time that his grace and the rest of the household returned, unexpectedly early?” She asks, and I’ve stepped in it. Whoops.

I lift my hands up to wave them in apology.

“No, no, I just wanted to be useful,” I say, “if I’m starting right away.”

She gives me an aborted glare and then turns back to her desk, opening a drawer and withdrawing a thick stack of paper.

“Read your contract,” she says, and stay here until I come for you. It should take you some time, so I’ll be back in about an hour.”

She points to a door to her left.

“There is the restroom if you have need of it while I’m gone.” She buzzes over to the door as I take my seat, the comfortable leather creaking under me again. I reach for the stack of paperwork.

But she doesn’t leave. Instead she hovers in the doorway, and I glance over at her, confused.

“Do not go anywhere other than this building until you have that paperwork signed,” she says, eyes severe.

“Okay, I won’t. Not a problem,” I say, already flipping through the top sheet. She nods once and then disappears. I hear her footsteps fading into the distance and the door swinging shut with a click.

The air rushes out of me in a flood and I feel like I’m deflating, sagging back into the welcome arms of the chair; the

last two hours of my life has taken it out of me.

Holy shit.

I got the job.

I glance down at the paper in my lap, my fingers curving around the sheets.

I got the job.

My eyes scan over the first few words.

NON-DISCLOSURE AGREEMENT it reads. Already I can feel a headache forming at the base of my skull. Well, she's going to be an hour. I may as well get stuck in. Who knows what this contract is going to say? If I'm going to keep this job, I need to pay attention and show from the first moment that I've got what it takes.

If anyone had asked me in high school if I knew what I wanted to be, I would have stared at them blankly. Because, in truth, I had no idea. I figured I'd fall into something. When part-time jobs proved dead-end, I started taking night classes in Early Childhood Education. Then my plan was to get out of America and over to Europe to be an AuPair. It was, for me, the best and only option. It's not like I could depend on my parents for anything. I'm not sure they noticed when I moved out after high school.

ECE was great for working with kids, but it wasn't good for figuring out the complexities of an NDA. My eyes blur as I try to make sense of the words, and after about fifteen minutes of trying to figure out what it all means, I scan the desk for a pen.

There is no choice for me. I have to sign because I need this job. And I'm good with kids. I get them. They're just tiny adults who don't know how to communicate their needs yet and don't know how to regulate their emotions. Feed them, nap them, clean them, and listen to them. That's been my standard care regime, and it's worked well for me in the past.

This is no different just because it's a duke's child. A real Lady. I grab a blue pen and scrawl my signature on the last page, inking my initials on the corner of every sheet, as a just-in-case. I don't want to give them any reason to take exception to my contract-signing skills.

I'm about to integrate myself entirely into their lives, even if I'm supposed to be invisible. It's going to mean a lot of opportunities to mess things up, so getting it right from the

beginning means they won't watch me so closely for every little mistake.

I hope, anyway.

Placing the contract back on the desk, I lean back in the chair and close my eyes. It's so comfortable and quiet in here. Peaceful, compared to my noisy apartment under the freeway overpass at the edge of K-Town.

I could almost...

There's a bang in the hallway. I jerk nearly out of my chair, right out of a sleep that snuck up on me. My heart thuds in my chest, and I stand up, turning around as heavy footsteps sound off in the hallway, coming toward me.

"Where the hell's— oh. It's you?" He's tall, dark-haired with soft curls swept off his forehead, his face tanned from time out in the sun. He's dressed *expensive*, in that tailored way that doesn't have logos anywhere, but you know every stitch is worth like a hundred dollars. He's wearing a tight polo that curves hungrily around his biceps, and he looks a few years older than me, maybe in his mid-twenties. He's got light green eyes set off by an incredible set of lashes that would make Gina instantly jealous. She's always trying out new makeup trends.

And there's something about him.

He's hot in that stupidly chiseled way, like he just stepped off the pages of a beach shoot, except less tousled. I can feel how sweaty I am just looking at him. He's a young god, and I'm... I'm garbage, I'm—

"I'm um, I'm the, I'm—" The words turn to potato mush in my mouth as he looks at me, amusement twisting on his lips. He cocks his head, hand lifting, fingers curling in a 'come here' gesture like he's asking me to spit it out.

"Awe-struck in my presence. Of course. Don't feel bad. It happens to everyone. And you didn't curtsy, but I'm not really here for the old ways or anything," he says, leaning against the open doorway, amusement coloring his voice.

Curtsey.

Oh shit.

He's—

The marquis. From the bar. Who grabbed me.

Not the duke.

My eyes bug out as he laughs. I said that last bit out loud.

“No, only his younger brother. For now, anyway, I’m the marquis. But you never know what could happen, and you could soon be addressing me as Your Grace.” He steps forward, and it feels like the doorway sags when he moves as if he’d been holding it up and not the other way around. He tops me by a good five inches, and I’m above average for a girl.

That’s when I notice he’s checking me out, just like I’m checking him out. My cheeks burn.

“What’s your name? We’ll start there,” he says, with a hint of kindness in his voice, some of that *douchey tennis-bro* vibe fading. I’ve met men like him before. Some of them are nice.

Most are not. Given that he’d called me a birthday surprise, the jury is out for me right now. But he did let me go that night at Shake’s without a fight, and I had stumbled into him, not the other way around.

The fact he’s asking me my name right now is a big step up though, and points in his favor.

“I’m Miss Evangeline Bell,” I say, hating the way my voice has gone soft. I used to talk like that in Paris. Pathetic and not authoritative. I need to break away from the girl I used to be. That’s how I got into trouble before.

And here, in this last salvation, I’m not going to get into it again.

“Pretty name,” he says, eyeing me, before holding out his hand. I stay still for a moment and then lift mine to shake his. But his fingers close around my palm, and he pulls my arm toward him, bending down toward me.

His mouth brushes across the back of my hand and I gasp, the feeling immediately electric. My skin tingles. The rush of it races along my arm, echoing through my whole body. From just one stupid little kiss. His eyes never leave mine, those dark coffee curls of his tumbling over his forehead, and he gives me the most filthy, dirty smirk I've ever seen as he straightens.

"I'm assuming you're Maddie's new nanny," he says, and just the way he emphasizes *nanny* threatens to set me on fire. My thighs tighten together and I step back, to give myself space, breathing room that's desperately needed. It's so hot in here. Did the AC stop working?

"I am," I say, my throat tight. He smiles.

"I'm also guessing you've never worked in a great house like this before?" He ventures, glancing toward the window. Outside the property sprawls, racing up to the hill-top where the main house sits, a monument to wealth and the American nobility system.

"Not exactly," I say, which I immediately regret because he looks at me, his curiosity piqued.

"Not exactly?" He asks, amusement fading slowly.

"What am I supposed to call you, because I don't know," I blurt out.

"My Lord is fine," he says, distracted by my question and I'm grateful for it. Then his smile is back. "*My Lord Marquis* if I've been bad," each word sizzles, and that tight feeling between my thighs spirals hotter. Fuck.

Maybe if he were much older, it wouldn't be a problem. A promise is a promise after all. But he's near my age, and I never swore off my age bracket—

"I want to know what you were doing outside that shitty little bar," he murmurs, taking a step toward me. My breath catches. There's something about the way he looks at me that has me wanting to tell him the truth. But Gina had made me promise to hide my short stint at Erica's bar from my resume. Instead

she'd vouched I'd been doing childcare for one of her many relations the last little while.

"Just seeing a friend," I say quickly, swallowing down the tightness from lying.

"A male friend?" He asks, eyebrows pulling together.

"Does it— does it matter, my lord?" I ask. His lips part, his tongue slipping out lightly as if he is hesitating to say what he's thinking.

He smiles, teeth coming together with a hungry click.

"I like the sound of that, my title, coming from your mouth," his voice is like liquid smoke again, curling around me, tugging me in.

"Um," is about the most intelligent thing I can manage. My face is so hot, it must be bright red, and I look away, toward the windows, and then move to them. There's fields beyond, beautiful vineyards. "So were you born here?"

Stupid. Of course he was.

He steps up beside me, looking out the windows as well.

"Yes. Specifically in the duchess's chambers. They had a doctor and nurse brought in to celebrate the occasion. No common hospital for my first moments on this planet," he says, shifting to gaze down at me. I stare steadily outside, not daring to look at him. I feel his presence close to me like the sun on my skin, sending a cascade of prickles all over me.

I've never felt like this near someone before. Not even—

"And where were you born? Evangeline?" He knows my first name. I try not to react.

"Miss Bell," I correct him, because it's beyond inappropriate, in a house like this, for him to address me with such familiarity. If I stay here for six months, or longer, it wouldn't be right. Even I know that.

I glance up at him.

He is smirking.

He well knows it too. He knows he's crossing a line, and violating every written and unwritten rule of etiquette and propriety.

From the look of him, he doesn't care. It's not a surprise given how he'd been at Savages, the kind of company he kept. They may have all been titled, but what mattered more was how *entitled* they felt. To me, my body, to grab me, to make a ruckus and start a fight outside Savages.

"Does your mother approve of your pulling down a lady's dress on the red carpet?" I ask, because I want to hit back at him, injure his pride in some way. I need to gain some ground on him, and prove that I'm a worthy adversary and that he better be wary.

Or my tenure here will be hell. He'll make it that.

He goes silent, face expressionless, and I wonder if I've crossed a line I shouldn't have. There's a certain amount of protection a young woman in service has, a little tartness allowed, to protect herself and her reputation.

How much is allowed, is always up for debate.

He laughs, breaking the moment and sending a wave of relief through me, chased by irritation.

I shouldn't have to be relieved. He's the one in the wrong.

"You shouldn't read that garbage. In fact, Mrs. Harris forbids that trash under this roof," he says, and steps closer to me. Again, he makes my breath catch. He's so beautiful it's almost painful to look at him. And from the expression on his face, he knows it. He knows the kind of impact he has on someone like me, beyond the weight of his title.

He reaches for my hand, fingers dragging along the inside of my wrist, liberties that he *shouldn't* be taking. My cheeks feel like I've been out in the sun for eight hours without a hat on. In fact, my whole body feels like it's reddened and burnt. All I can do is look at him, into those crazy intense eyes of his as he smiles and kisses the back of my hand, almost bowing over it.

"Don't let my brother boss you around too badly, he's a King, but not *the* king or anything," he murmurs just as the

housekeeper walks back in. She makes a scandalized noise, and he pulls back from me, expression smug. He gives me one last look and then he's gone, disappearing before she can scold me.

She stares at me, her mouth parted in dismay and I don't know what to say to her about any of it.

Well. I'm starting my new job off with a bang, that's for sure.

BENEDICT

Shit. She's hot. It'd taken me a bit to recognize her, but I knew I was in trouble as soon as I did.

There's no way I'm getting through this without tasting those lips. Which set of them, I don't care. Even now, away from her since our Mrs. Harris decided to shoo me from the room, I *want* Evangeline Bell.

Miss Bell, as she would correct me if she could hear me. I'd let her. And then I'd bend her over a couch, a desk, any closest service, and fuck her until she begged me to call her Evangeline.

I'm watching her even now, over the CCTV feed on my phone, imagining doing just that as she sits there, still talking to Mrs. Harris.

I'm in trouble. The best kind of fucking trouble.

Some guys look for their women amongst the sash-fuckers and title-bunnies. The beautiful, if common, ladies who hang out at our clubs and entertainment venues, dying for an invite back to an estate for the night or the weekend. But most of those will disappear without so much as signing an NDA if you're too drunk to make them do it in advance, and even if they do, you run the risk of them blabbing to the press or grabbing a dick pic of you while you're sleeping off the post-fucking haze.

Not worth it.

I pick my prey from two distinct camps.

The first is the few noble women who can be convinced to give it up fairly easily because they're insecure about their future position and want to convince you they'll make a good addition to your family tree. There's not a lot of them willing to do that, but I find one every so often.

The second group: the help. The servants are always willing to do a little extra in exchange for perks. Like protection, a reference for a raise, or extra days off. They're all signed and bound as well, and I've never had a single one go to the press or public. In my view, that's the safest way: to go hunting on your own land, where nobody can argue with you, and when you're done, if she gets a bit teary-eyed, you get Housekeeper to reassign her to one of the vacation homes you never ever frequent.

Tidy. Simple.

And there's always a fresh selection. Houses as big as ours have the staff to match, and there's always comings and goings of new young women.

Miss Bell is the newest addition, and I can't help but think that Mrs. Harris is doing this on purpose to taunt me.

Because Miss Bell is perfect. Exactly my type. Sturdy enough that I won't worry about breaking her, tall enough that I won't have to bend in two to kiss her, and that quiet kind of beauty that doesn't make another man look twice at her, so that nobody's going to ask questions or even assume that I'd ever have fucked her.

A man like me, with my pick of women, choosing her? Anyone would find it ridiculous. And I like to do things that people won't suspect me of doing. It makes living easier if nobody can accuse you of doing something that's out of character for a grand fellow like yours truly. Being unimpeachable is a key part of how I'm going to take my brother's title from him without him even knowing it.

Yeah, I've got plans.

But right now they don't extend too far beyond figuring out what it's going to take to get into Miss Bell's panties. And

from there, figure out how far I can push her before she breaks.

I give her one last look over the CCTV, that familiar, hungry feeling in my cock starting to warm up. It's been a while since I've had a woman I thought I could bend over my brother's desk and thoroughly fuck until she couldn't move.

My brother's desk. I smirk. That's a great idea. He deserves it too, the prick. That desk will be mine one day anyway, so I'm just taking what I'm owed a little early. There's nothing wrong with anticipating that transfer of power with a little game with the new nanny.

My phone buzzes, CCTV feed interrupted, and it's the man in question.

Mason. Ugh. I wait, three rings, four rings, five, until I know he's getting frustrated on the other end.

Then I answer.

"What do you want?" I ask, shoving my free hand into my pocket. I need to get up into my rooms, and relieve a bit of this pressure I'm feeling. But I don't want to think about *that* while I've got my brother on the phone.

Or while he has me on the phone. However that works.

"Do you know how much it's costing to clean up after your brawl down in North Hollywood?" Mason sounds more than irritated. He's got that tone of voice like he's gearing up for a big rant on responsibility and respecting my titles, which I'm frankly, not fucking available for right now.

I'll drop my phone down the nearest well rather than sit through another speech from him. Like he's got any room to talk. He's the worst culprit when it comes to disrespecting his duties. The fact that his duchess is—

"BENEDICT!" His roar shakes the phone from my hand, and I do drop it, but not on purpose. I scoop it up off the ground, sighing when I see cracks spidering across the glass. I'll need a new one, and my valet will *tsk* at me for breaking a second phone this month.

The first got trampled under my horse's hooves. Not like I could have prevented that. And it's also not like we can't afford it, either.

"I'm here, I'm here," I say hurriedly. I'm walking on thin ice with him, and if he's feeling nasty he'll cut me off for a few months. Fuck.

"The owner of that establishment is related to the Earl of Beverly Hills," my brother says, now that I've got my phone back to my ear.

"Ol' Bevvie? Why didn't you say so? I'll swing by with some whiskey. We've got some good bottles in the vault—"

"He is *personally* insulted," Mason says and I roll my eyes because nobody's around to see me as I walk back up to the main house. I could've taken one of the carts, one of the dirt bikes, or an ATV. Hell they would've pulled a limo or a horse-drawn carriage out for me if I'd wanted.

But what I really want is the sun beating down on me, and feeling like I can breathe air that hasn't been filtered a hundred times before getting to my lungs.

I wanted the real world for a minute. As much as our massive acreage of an estate could be considered 'real'.

"Bevs is always up his own ass, I'll deal with it," I say, and I feel a little bad. Bartholomew Dankworth, Earl of Beverly Hills, or Beverly or Bevvie or Bevs to his friends, isn't a bad guy even though he has the most unfortunate name. I got the better end of the deal with a B-name.

I had no idea he had a cousin down in the slums, though.

I'll need to have her sent flowers, or something. My valet can handle that. He's infinitely useful.

"I'll deal with it," I promise Mason, and he's silent. I can feel him on the other end of the line, silently judging me. Well, he can do that all day. He can rot in his feelings for me. We've turned animosity toward one another into an art form.

He hates me for everything I don't do 'up to standards', and I hate him for standing in my way. He's between me and the

duchy. If there'd been any fairness in the universe, I'd have been firstborn and he'd have been second.

I'd be a better duke by a measure, rather, I *will* be a better duke, because as it stands there's no way he and his duchess are producing an heir this century.

And I'm just running down the clock until I'm running the show.

When it's me in charge, everything's changing. My niece'll be taken care of, that's for sure. I won't leave Maddie out to dry. Just because she's the spawn of my older brother doesn't mean she needs to be punished for it. She's just a kid, anyway. She has no say in anything, and she's lucky that I give enough of a shit about her to make sure she's okay once I'm in charge.

Most dukes-in-waiting aren't nearly that fair. If my brother had produced a heir, Maddie's position in the world would be in trouble. As it stands, I have no problem fixing it so she wants for nothing even if she chooses a life of spinsterhood.

Bad shit happens when noble women are forced to marry to save themselves. And I'm determined that'll never fucking happen to Mads.

Not ever.

It's not happening if her uncle's around to have a say in it.

"See that you do... take care of it." my brother answers after a long moment of my intense thoughts, which was polite of him to wait for me to finish thinking before speaking. I'll send him a thank you card.

That thought makes me snort and I muffle it by sliding my thumb over the receiver microphone.

"Alright, well, nice chat," I say, and hang up on him before he can say anything else.

I'm halfway up the hill and starting to break a mild sweat from the strain. Our house, the King house, is built on the top of a hill that's on top of a hill. Vineyards sprawl in every direction, and when I turn around to survey the land, it almost takes my breath away.

It's beautiful here.

I close my eyes and let the feelings take me away. The sun slides over me, and I tilt my head toward it. I have my own small estate in Hollywood, of course, being marquis means that I have property, but it's not the same.

This is where I was born. My blood pumps thick with the water that runs through the land, and I wake up sometimes imagining I'm here. King of everything. My brother, nowhere to be seen.

It'll all be mine. The sooner, the better.

I open my eyes and let out the long breath I've been holding in. If the universe wills it, something terrible will befall my brother before the year is out. If the fates are fair. I'll be rewarded for all the shit I've been through and the pain I've suffered.

It doesn't have to be death for him.

My eyes are drawn to the long fence line to my left.

There's an ATV kicking up dust along the edge of the property, and I watch it silently.

What takes him down could be a disgrace. A scandal so great that he has to step aside. Leave me in charge. There are multiple options for how it'll happen, some already in the works. Not even by my hand, which I'm slightly ashamed to admit. My brother is not a nice man and has made himself his own share of enemies. Whatever happens to him, it might be so bad that he disappears. That'd be neat and tidy.

That thought makes me smile, my grin matching the strength of the sun, and I turn back to the great house. The corners of my mouth rise to challenge the sky, like I'm going to step up and challenge my brother.

Soon Miss Evangeline Bell is going to be under our roof. There's so much to look forward to in the coming months, but she's one spark of joy that I can enjoy right now. Who says that I need to be duke before I take everything our house has to offer? I can accept for myself what I want.

My brother can't, and won't, say anything about it. Especially not if he wants to keep his place. I know too much, after all.

I can feel it, the future, humming in the background of my thoughts, waiting for me to discover it. Everything is possible, even if for now I need to stay focused and act as I always do: like the foolhardy marquis, interested only in the women I have and pursuing the women I don't. My reputation precedes me, and makes my brother even less likely to suspect me in any kind of wrongdoing.

Wining, horseback riding, gambling, and chasing skirts. It's a hard job, but somebody's got to do it. And it starts today with Evangeline Bell. My brother can stay focused on all his troubles instead of me if I chase another one of Madeline's nannies off. He'll regret ever discounting me, and I intend to fully enjoy watching him realize that the person with the knife in his back has been me all along.

Half a week after that fateful interview, a car rolls up outside my building.

Erica is waiting at my window, and she turns to me, eyes wide.

“It’s here,” she hisses, “oh my god, they sent a limo!” My stomach turns over with nerves, and I race to stand beside her at the window. There’s a long black limousine down in the parking lot. I have no idea what the driver thinks about my run-down apartment complex. But I’m the domestic help. It’s not like I’m supposed to come from money.

“OK,” I say, “OK, this is it, this is really—”

I feel like I’ve got some PTSD burning in my chest. Am I making a mistake? Going here again? I promised myself that I would leave this kind of life behind.

“Hey, you OK?” Erica puts an arm around my shoulders. “You look like you’re about to pass out.”

I’m not OK. This is a huge risk, knowing that my past could come rushing up to greet me again at any moment and pull my world down around me. But living here is a dead-end, and I’ll be out on my ass either way as soon as my rent-increase kicks in. The bar job isn’t keeping me afloat, and I don’t have the education or the connections to fall back on like Erica.

“It’s just nerves,” I say, giving her a brief smile. She squeezes me tight.

“You’ll be amazing. You have no idea how many girls you beat out for this assignment. Gina said, it’s almost like—” She

pauses, and I blink at her.

“How many?” I ask. I knew my work abroad would help, and I’m just glad that Gina could fudge the background check on me. She knew where I’d been for several years and hadn’t needed to call my previous employers.

My secret would die in the ashes of this new job. I would stick around long enough that Gina, and Mrs. Harris, could give me a good reference. I’d be remade. The very thought fills me with so much relief I could cry.

“Over a hundred girls were short-listed, and then there was the final twenty-five. Honestly, it feels a bit like the universe is watching out for you, you know? Finally, something good.”

“Right,” I said, reaching for my luggage. “Then it’s better not to wait around in case something good decides to get gone without me.”

She grabs my second and third suitcases, and I look around my crappy bachelor, happy to leave it behind. The cleaning supplies are still on the countertop, and I sigh.

“You’re sure you’re OK cleaning up here?” I ask. She nods.

“Are you kidding? With the bonus I got for referring you to Gina, I’d clean this and your next-door neighbor, Mr. Fitz’s.” I wrinkle my nose. Mr. Fitz is a chain smoker, and I’m pretty sure he’s also a hoarder.

“Gross. OK, point made. Thank you,” I laugh as we pull my bags outside, and the limousine driver hops out, his jacket and cap looking abnormally formal in this broken-down shantytown place.

“Miss Bell?” He asks, and I nod. “I’m Wilson.” That’d be his last name. I’ve been studying that etiquette book Mrs. Harris gave me. Drivers are always referred to by their last name, without the honorific of *Mister* in front of it. “Let me get those for you.” He takes the three bags from us, and I turn to Erica, shrugging.

I want to cover up my anxiety with casual behavior. Maybe it’s working.

“This is it.”

“Best of luck, you’ll be brilliant,” she promises. “And call me as soon as you’re settled in.” She hugs me, and the driver waits after stowing my bags. I hesitate and then smile at him. He opens the rear door for me, and Erica waves as I slip inside.

“Won’t be more than an hour, Miss,” Wilson says, and the door shuts. Erica waits a moment, then rushes back inside my apartment with a final wave. The car moves, dipping as the driver sits in the front, and then we’re pulling away.

Leaving this world behind, and bringing me into a whole other galaxy. I look around the limo, the fine black leather seats making me feel grubby and unpolished. I close my eyes.

I can do this.

Everything will be better after this. And I won’t need to worry anymore.

THE DRIVE IS an hour at maximum. Our car is allowed on the private mirroring road along the highway out of the city, meant only for a particular, elevated group of people. I guess I’m in that group now. As we head for the hills, Los Angeles slips behind me, and I turn back to look at the skyline as we go.

The next time I’m on L.A.’s streets, I’ll be a part of the duke’s household. It’s a feeling that has me nervous like I’m drunk and dizzy. I push those feelings aside and let the landscape on the drive up to Wester Hall soothe me.

Mrs. Harris greets me, and ushers me inside the servant’s entrance.

“You’ve arrived, good, leave your bags for the footmen. I’ve got to show you around to get you acquainted and then start to prepare—his duke is entertaining this weekend, and we’ve got a house party. You’ve come at just the right time.” She’s busy already, and I trail after her, trying not to gawk or look like I don’t know what I’m doing.

I'm out of place here, that's for certain. Everyone's in uniform denoting their place in the house. I see at least four maids in neat, deep-blue uniforms with lighter blue aprons over top, and when we go past the kitchens, I see a woman in white, the chef, hollering at her two assistant cooks.

"This way," Mrs. Harris says. "You'll be spending most of your time on the family's side of the house, so we won't spend too much time looking at the servant areas." She walks quickly, and I must speed up to keep up with her.

"This is the entry hall," she says as we exit through a tall door, that I realize is disguised to look like wall paneling as soon as we're through it. When it closes shut behind us, it virtually disappears. I suppose that makes it so that the servants seem to appear out of nowhere, and disappear once they're no longer needed.

It's a neat way for the high-born to pretend that servants don't even exist and that the nice things in their lives happen by magic, I guess.

I bury that uncharitable thought under an admiring smile. The entrance hall to the great house is beautiful, two stories tall, with large doors carved all over with the animal from the duke's crest. Two large bears rear up on each door, the sky above them studded with dark metal stars.

"I bet people feel pretty small when they come through here," I say mostly to myself, but Mrs. Harris gives me a side look that tells me she heard me just fine. I bite my tongue. I don't want her to think that I'm against the nobility, or the high-born. And I'm not, not really. They have their place. Their purpose.

It's just already been a bad one in my opinion. There's always been the opportunity to hurt us, because there's so many of us and so few of them. We're replaceable, and we're treated like it.

We walk by some sweeping stairs, splitting on either side of the hall to the second floor.

“The men’s wing to the left,” Mrs. Harris says, “and the women’s to the right.” I blink. That’s old-fashioned. I’ve only seen one great house while I was in France, but they didn’t separate the genders like this.

“Isn’t that...” I pause and Mrs. Harris looks at me with both of her greying eyebrows arched.

“What?” She asks, sounding slightly testy.

“Um, a bit *older*?” I ask. She *hmmphs*.

“Maybe in Europe they don’t have sensible rules to keep accidents from happening, but here, we do, Miss Bell. Come.” She walks between the two staircases, and we’re in a long hallway lined with portraits and statues in recessed nooks.

Accidents.

So that’s what they call it here. My ears burn and I follow her. She’s stopped in front of a grand painting, ten feet tall and five feet wide, the gilt frame glittering in the light of the hallway.

It’s of two people, the fashions current to a few years ago. It must be the duke and his duchess.

I gaze up at the familial painting.

“It was their graces’ wedding portrait,” Mrs. Harris says, watching me look at them. The duke is painted in his ceremonial dress, stiff shoulders, and award medallions that line his chest. The sash of his office, deep blue with red fringe and white stars along it, hangs across him from shoulder to hip. The Duchess is in a deep blue dress that spills over her knees to pool gracefully on the ground in front of her. Stars adorn her hair, a nod to our flag. Even in this personal portrait, nobles must be patriotic. A dog, reddish with long fur, sits beside the duke, looking up at its master with loyalty in its expression.

There is something familiar about the duchess’s face, that sounds off in the back of my mind. Of course. She looks like Lady Madeline, who’s picture was tucked into my welcome packet.

“It’s beautiful,” I comment, and Mrs. Harris nods, saying nothing as she continues to walk me down the grand hallways.

“The ballroom. Lady Madeline takes her dance lessons here, although at her age, it’s mostly running and jumping,” Mrs. Harris says, with a kind affection on her face as she gestures into two large doors that are open into a brilliantly lit room. My breath catches in my throat as I walk inside and look around. The ceilings arch high above me, doming up to the sky. Glass is set into them, colored and stained, shooting a rainbow of beauty across the wooden floors.

“I would’ve thought it would be marble,” I say, distracted as I look at all the decorations this room has to offer. It must hold five hundred people easily, or more. Columns line the wall, and a second story balcony gives a place for people to look down and watch the festivities.

“It’s harder on the dancers,” Mrs. Harris says, “we can’t have the ladies fainting from the exhaustion of dancing on the hard stone after only an hour.” She crosses the floor with me, until we stand in the center of the room. At the far end is a raised dais, a foot up, with two chairs sitting on it in the center. Although ‘chairs’ is probably the wrong word. They’re carved dark wooden thrones, with peaked backs that strain toward the ceiling. They’re each set with an inlaid stained-glass star at the top of their graceful arches.

“His grace and her grace sit there when they entertain.”

“Are there events often?” I ask, “Does Lady Madeline go too?” I want to know where she sits, when they hold parties in here.

“Not frequently. Less so in the last few years. Perhaps that will change though.” Mrs. Harris sweeps past me, and I trail behind her, looking up. The stained glass ceiling tells a story, I realize, stars, and ships on the ocean, crossing the sea. I pause under one dome, there are five in all in a straight line across the center of the roof. It’s so beautiful, I can’t help but look up.

Mrs. Harris waits for me at the other set of doors, patiently. The awe I feel makes my skin tingle, and I feel every single year of this building’s existence weighing down on me. How

many lifetimes have been lived under this roof? How many relationships between lords and ladies have blossomed under these stars?

I jerk my head down as she clears her throat.

“It tells the story of the first duke and duchess, the original King family that crossed the ocean to make a new life here,” she says, answering me before I can ask.

“The first?” We’re leaving the room, into another hallway, the floor transitioning from wood to marble under our feet. She’s right about stone being harder on a person than wood. I’m going to need to get better shoes with my first paycheck, something good for running around after a little girl.

Now getting rid of all my Au Pair gear after coming back to America seems stupid, but I didn’t think I’d ever be in this kind of role ever again.

“Their line nearly died out, but then the first of the new Kings, the current duke’s Great-Great-Grandfather was found amongst the cousins. And so they carry on the duties of the duchy, ensuring all of Los Angeles and the surrounding areas are looked after,” Mrs. Harris stops in front of another portrait. This time, it’s the duke himself, sitting against the backdrop of the library with a young girl on his knee. Of course, him and Madeline. She’s got the same dark intense blue eyes as he does, looking almost black on the painting. The artist let a hint of it escape in a highlight of blue wash in the paint.

“There’s more to show you, of course, the music room, the drawing room—”

“Drawing room?”

She nods.

“Where her Grace accepts company, when she’s up to it. Well, never mind, that’ll be for some time down the road. Let’s go up and see your rooms—” She pauses as I hear footsteps, and I turn to look where they’re coming from.

He’s unmistakable even at a distance, his height and the curl of his hair, even a glimpse from fifty feet away means nothing.

It's the marquis. He's striding toward us, dressed casually in jeans and a t-shirt, which surprises me. None of the upper class that I knew before dressed like this. Not ever unless they were the type to grub around in the garden as a hobby.

"Harris, is this the new blood?" He calls, his voice echoing toward us.

"You know it is," she says with a sigh, glancing at me for a moment. "Can I help you, my lord?"

"No, just wanted to make sure you hadn't done a bait-and-switch on us," he says as he catches up to us, grinning wide. He's more tanned than when I saw him last, and there's a spatter of mud on his arms and shirt, I realize, and the hems of his jeans. Maybe he's into horticulture after all?

He looks me up and down.

"No uniform yet, make sure you get her into something nice, not what you put the maids in." He makes a face. Mrs. Harris looks like she's eaten a lemon, rind and all.

"She's just arrived," Mrs. Harris says sternly. "And I don't have time for your games today, my lord."

He smiles at her.

"Of course, you're so busy, keeping us all in line." He turns to me. "Make sure she shows you where my rooms are."

"My lord!" Mrs. Harris's voice nearly cracks and I take a step back.

"Don't tell my brother I said that," he replies smoothly, fishing a hundred dollar bill out of his pocket and patting it into her hand. He closes her fingers around it before she can argue. Then he winks at me.

"See you later," he promises me, and I silently promise that no, he won't. He's exactly the kind of problem I need to avoid, under the pain of death. He disappears into the ballroom, feet slapping the ground, and I realize that he's in flip-flops. My eyes nearly pop out of my face, they're so wide.

"Ignore him," Mrs. Harris says as he disappears from view. "And—"

“You don’t need to say it, I’ll avoid him,” I murmur and step closer to her. “The rest of the house?” She gives a long, suffering sigh.

“Yes. Right this way, I’ll show you Lady Madeline’s rooms, and your own.”

“Now, don’t expect to take commands for duties from anyone but myself, or Avery, the head Butler. On occasion, you might see the household manager, Mrs. Wright, or even the estate manager Mr. Barnsworth, but he is quite busy and does not trouble himself with directly contacting the staff,” Mrs. Harris says as I tag along behind her like a bedraggled kitten.

The house is enormous. I knew that from looking at it from the outside but in another way, I feel like I should have gotten a clue that it was even bigger than I could imagine. It was just me, not paying enough attention. The whole estate feels like it’s going to swallow me whole.

Already I’m lost, I think.

“There’s the duke’s office,” Mrs. Harris says, pointing out a pair of double doors that stretch the full height of the first floor which seems to go two flights tall, at least in these large rooms. The ballroom was even bigger than this, with the ceiling going four floors into the air. It makes me ill to think about who has to clean up that high. Do they bring in a crane for the work? Those windows must need cleaning at least twice a year.

Mrs. Harris stops and turns to me. I nearly run into her, but manage to save face by not looking like I’ve almost tripped at her feet. Casual, casual. Keep it casual.

“And one thing, even though it was in your contract, and I don’t want to do you the disrespect of assuming anything, I must say as the duke made clear to me this morning to be

communicated to you—” She hesitates, glances around, and lowers her voice. “You are not to, under any circumstance, fraternize with any of the men on staff. Especially the footmen. They like to get into trouble, and you’ll have no part of it.”

Oh. Of course. My eyes widen.

“I wouldn’t think of it,” I say quickly, because I’m not stupid. I know why I’m here and why they’ve brought me on. Nobody wants to hire a nanny that falls into bed with the first person who’s nice to her.

That would be all too easy here as well, where I feel so lost and alone already.

“You’re pretty enough,” she says looking at me, and the compliment takes me by surprise. Nobody’s ever said that about me. Not even hi— “But we’ve lost more than one girl from here who thought she could play in the sheets and not suffer the consequences. You were selected out of hundreds, Evangeline, and please do not make me regret it.”

I almost startle at how she uses my first name, so casually, but it must be the intensity of the topic that makes her break protocol.

“I promise,” I say to her with every inch of sincerity I can muster. “I’m only here to be a good nanny, and represent the household well.”

She regards me for a long moment and then gives me a brief smile and nod. I’ve passed the test. I let go of a breath I’d been holding, as she turns away and keeps walking, toward one of the big staircases that curves to the second floor.

“We won’t speak of it again then,” she says, and that’s a relief. There’s no way I could handle her scrutiny like that time after time.

Mrs. Harris has a way of walking up the stairs that makes it look like she’s floating, and I try to emulate her delicate steps that are quiet and non-intrusive. It’s probably in a manual somewhere for housekeepers, on how to move around and not disturb the families they work for.

I'll get better at it, I'm sure.

"Here, in the ladies' wing, is Lady Madeline's rooms," Mrs. Harris says, taking a turn down a pastel hallway, opulent wallpaper of gold and mint green lining the walls. We pass a few doors, and then one with a pink ribbon on the doorknob.

She smiles and knocks, then opens it.

There's nobody inside.

"We always knock, just as a matter of protocol," she says to me over her shoulder. "Wait a moment, if you are at the duke's chambers or his office, or the marquis. But with Lady Madeline, there is nothing that should prevent you from entering."

My jaw nearly hits the floor when we walk inside.

Holy shit.

So this is how the other half, no, the point one percent, live. Or rather, their children do, anyway. Twelve foot ceilings painted purple, hanging tapestries of embroidered unicorns decorate the walls. Gauzy curtains filter the sunlight, and a giant princess bed against the far wall with a throne splitting apart make up the primary furnishings. There's a fireplace with a plush rug in front of it, and a scatter of dolls on the floor, waiting to be played with again.

"Light housekeeping is part of your duties, helping her to tidy up her things once she's ready to start another activity." Mrs. Harris bends to pick up a toy, and I take over for her, grabbing the dolls.

"Where?" I ask, motioning with the toys. She gestures to a cupboard on the far wall, cream white with gold trim.

"In there."

The walls next to the fireplace are bookshelves, floor to ceiling and crammed with picture books.

"Her ladyship likes to read," Mrs. Harris says, and I'm not going to lie, I'm surprised.

“She sees her teaching masters during the day, so you’ll need to get her up for those lessons, have lunch with her, then make sure she attends her afternoon classes as well.”

Mrs. Harris sweeps around the room, picking up a doll here that’s fallen over, and a small unicorn plush before placing it back on the bed.

“The maids will make the bed, and do any deep cleaning during the day that’s necessary, as well as returning her tray after breakfast.” She fusses at the curtains for a moment before walking to a door in the far wall.

“The bathroom is through here,” she says and turns to me. “Any questions?”

Other than wondering how much the furniture costs in this single room, no.

I shake my head.

“Your rooms, of course, are attached to Lady Madeline’s,” Mrs. Harris says, opening a door set into the wall between two bookcases in the opulent little girl’s room. I follow her, trying not to let the rich surroundings get to me. I knew what I was signing for when I scrawled my name on that NDA and employment contract.

Sort of.

I could never have imagined all of this. Silk bed covers, for a child? My grandmother would have had a heart-attack.

I glance into the smaller room and breathe a sigh of relief. My bedroom isn’t anything as special. The door leads us into my room with a single bed pushed under the window, a desk next to it, a dresser, and a sitting chair. In the corner is a sink, and there are three doors, one I’m sure which leads to the bathroom, another to the hall, and another to a closet. Just guessing.

Everything is plain and utilitarian, but still well maintained. The walls are painted a thick, fresh creamy white though, and there’s not single speck of dust anywhere. Not on the crown molding, not on the wooden floors, or in the windows that reach the full height of the ceiling.

“In case her ladyship needs you in the night, she will be able to find you here,” Mrs. Harris says, then turns to me. I could cross this room in five good paces, but it’s nicer than I expected. “There’s a night nurse, but sometimes Lady Madeline is particular.”

I swallow and nod. A night nurse? Most parents are lucky to have a few hours of childcare on a weeknight or weekend day, let alone two nannies that worked opposing shifts and one separate one for the weekends as well.

“That’s enough for now,” she says with a sigh, glancing around the room. Your luggage will be up in a few minutes. I will see you soon.” She walks to the door, determination in her steps.

The door to the hallway closes behind her with a soft click, and I am enrobed in the silence of my room. I walk to the window and look out. A courtyard below shows off beautiful shrubs and flowers, and the yard opens up and spills into a strip of green grass beyond, curving around a corner and disappearing. A tall oak shades the ground, its leaves fluttering in the spring breeze.

I sink down onto the bed as reality swallows me whole. I really did it. I’m here. Safe. There’s nowhere safer than I could ever possibly hope to be. I run my fingers over the plain linen of the duvet cover. I once again am reminded that I’ll be virtually invisible here. Lady Madeline is a young child and is rarely seen at public events. The Duke of Los Angeles is notoriously press-avoidant.

My past will stay dead as long as I keep to the shadows.

My breath tumbles out of me in a shaky rasp, and I curl my arms around myself. Thoughts swirl in my mind, and I try not to think about the marquis and his flirtatious behavior. He was just playing with me. Like a cat plays with its dinner. I’m nothing to him. He’ll forget he ever met me, that he’d ever touched his lips to my hand like I was someone of note, a lady worthy of his attention.

The domestic help in these big houses always fade into the background. I saw it in Paris, and I am counting on it now.

A knock at the door has me jumping, and as I turn, a man with sandy-blond hair and dark skin in his early thirties pokes his head through the doorway. He smiles when he sees me.

“Miss Bell?” He asks. “I brought your things in.” I swallow and nod, answering him with a smile. This is going so fast, but it’s not like I have anywhere else to be. And nobody else to turn to.

He rolls my suitcases in, the three of them lined up with my life’s possessions inside of them. He crosses the room, extending his hand out.

“I’m Clark, Clark Sheffield,” he says, “although one day I know I’ll be butler to Lady Madeline.” His eyes twinkle, sweet brown, and it sets me at ease. “First time in a big house?” He asks as my shoulders come down from around my ears, or so it feels like anyway.

“I’ve worked for families before, but nothing like this,” I say, gesturing to the room and out the window. He laughs, gaze following the sweep of my hand.

“I grew up in it. My grandmother was housekeeper to the previous duke, and my mother is a lady’s maid,” he says with a shrug, his words precise and proper. “I suppose I could have gone into the army if I’d wanted, the last duke would have written me a commission, but I prefer this work.” His eyes are focused on the outside land before switching back to me with a smile on his face. “Well, if you need anything, just holler.”

“I doubt I’ll be doing much of that,” I say, trying to mirror his warm, but less-casual speech. Being here is definitely a step up in the world for me, and I’m going to have to work hard at not bringing my old life with me as I go.

I don’t want them to think less of me, and I don’t want them to find reason to get rid of me. Life-lines don’t come around often enough, especially not ones that arrive with a roof, bed, and three square meals a day.

He sees himself out and I’m alone again, walking to the windows and staring out of them. Work starts in a few hours, with the evening meal. I need to get unpacked and ready into

my uniform. It'll be my first time with Lady Madeline, and I want to make a good impression.

And cross my fingers the whole time, hoping this situation works out for the better for me. I can't afford it not to.

“Dinner is at eight; the duke and his household dine late, so we take our final meal now,” Mrs. Harris says, sweeping by me into the room. “Lady Madeline, you look like you’re having a delightful time.” I step into my little charge’s rooms for the second time that day and see the lady in question, or girl, as she sits in front of a dollhouse, toys scattered around her in all directions. She’s wearing a pink and white dress, looking more like a cupcake than a little girl. When she turns to the Housekeeper and me, she’s smiling, eyes lighting up when she sees me.

She squeaks and gets to her feet, buzzing across the floor to wrap her arms around my legs. I nearly topple in surprise, but don’t, not quite anyway. I steady my hands on her shoulders.

“My lady, that is not how we greet anyone, let alone our nanny,” Mrs. Harris scolds, but her tone is warm enough.

Madeline detaches herself from me and gives me an appraising look, top to bottom, taking me all in.

“She looks just like my last nanny, but her hair is different,” Madeline says with that detached bluntness kids always seem to have. “It’s nice to meet you. I hope you’ll be my friend.” Her eyes are deep blue, when she tilts her head up to look me in the eye as much as possible with her short height.

I bend down instead of staying standing, so we’re on the same level. I see a flicker on the Housekeeper’s face, but she says nothing about my casual demeanor.

“It’s wonderful to meet you,” I say to Madeline, because what else do I say to a young lady? She is different from my other charges and at the same time, isn’t.

Madeline makes a face.

“Do you like to read stories?” She asks, “Because my last nanny—”

“That’s enough about the last one,” Mrs. Harris says, smoothing her hands over the skirt of her dress, an unconscious habit I don’t think she realizes she has since it’s the third time I’ve seen her do it today.

Madeline’s face falls, and there’s something inside of me that twists. It’s almost unfair that this kid, this child, has to grow up in such a strict, structured environment. I can’t imagine what she’s had to experience already in her life. Something under my breastbone warms, a blossom of protectiveness that grips me tight, unspeakably confusing and strange. I’ve always felt over-protective of kids, maybe my upbringing has something to do with that.

When you are born into a world, into family, that sees you as lacking any value at all, when you’ve never had people to love you just as you are, you want to wrap up every single child you see in love and flowers.

Or at least I do.

“I love to read stories, Lady Madeline,” I say gently, and Mrs. Harris’s skirts twitch, but there’s a look of approval on her face.

I’ll do, I think, for now. At least in her mind. Hopefully I can prove myself worth it.

A MAID COMES to Madeline’s rooms and tells me that she’ll watch over the young girl while I go down to meet the duke.

As soon as she says those words, my nerves start thrumming like a car engine. It’d been easy to sit with Madeline. Even though she might be better born, she’s no different than any other kid I’ve taken care of.

Oh, except for her manners. She's got better manners than most adults I know, let alone children.

Despite those manners, she pouts a little as I get up off the floor. We're surrounded by books we've picked to read.

"I'll be back soon, and we'll have more stories then."

"I'll read to you, my lady," the maid says, getting down on her knees and picking up a book as I slip from the room.

Each step I take down the big stairs to the main floor has my heart sinking further in my chest. What will he be like? I don't know anything about American dukes. The man and woman I Au Pair'd for in Paris were... well... better not to think about them.

This day from the beginning to now had my poor mind on overdrive with adrenaline and hormones flooding into it, and now...

My shoes land solidly on the bottom floor, the marble floor quiet under them. If I remember right, his office is off to the left—

I take a few turns, get lost for a moment by a large statue, and a helpful footman (not Clark) points me in the right direction. I stop outside of the duke's office, hovering, unsure if I should knock or not.

Mrs. Harris comes out of the room, the tall doors open behind her.

"He'll see you," she says, giving me one last once over. "Remember to curtsy and address him as 'your Grace'. And Miss Bell—" She pauses as I try to swallow down the storm of angry bees that have taken up residence in my abdomen. I look at her with anticipation, hoping for some final words of encouragement. I've never met anyone this high up the food chain in my life. Sure I've read my fair share of romance novels where the average girl working in a coffee shop ends up being swept off her feet by a handsome prince and made a princess of America. But that doesn't give me any illusions about what's happening here. This is real life. I'm a nanny for

his daughter, a ladybug underfoot of a lion. All I can do is hope not to be stepped on and crushed.

Mrs. Harris sighs.

“Just be your own true self. You got on well with Lady Madeline today, and that speaks well for your future here. The duke is firm and can seem unkind, but remember your place.”

I swallow, my throat tight and scratchy, then nod.

She gestures to the door, and I walk through it. If I thought Lady Madeline’s bedroom was well-appointed, I’m looking at a wealth in books, furniture, and technology in here. Large windows, nearly floor to ceiling at the far end with window seats sunk into them show off the gardens and the vineyard beyond on a sloping hill. A TV, flat-screen and embedded into the wall opposite the desk has the news playing with no sound, a fireplace below it crackling with real logs. Real logs means a person to clean it, and someone to go to the bother of sourcing the wood and splitting it. A luxury most people and households cannot afford.

Hand-scraped wood floors glint in the light from the windows, the other walls lined with books, Eames chairs arranged near the fire on a rug that looks about two hundred years old but still plush.

And across from the fire is the desk, and behind it, the man himself. He’s busy at his computer, a stack of paper at his right hand, his left on the keyboard as he frowns at the screen.

I get a good look at him. My breath stalls out. It feels like time stops as I stare at my new employer. My jaw tightens. Staring at him is like looking into the sun.

He’s...

They say that high-born men are more attractive than low, that there’s something about them you cannot define. And watching him now, I know it’s true. I’ve seen models in magazines that didn’t come close to his own features, but it’s more than that. He seems to take up space in this huge room and makes it small just by his presence.

Even sat behind a desk. Focused on what I think is a spreadsheet. His jacket is off, his shirt and tie immaculate, his hair neatly trimmed, like his every moment is ruled by precise calculations.

I know I can't put a foot wrong with him. He'll notice something an inch out of place from across a ballroom.

He glances at me, a cursory look.

"Come in," he says, waving to the middle of the room in front of his desk.

Feeling like I'm going to trip at any second, I walk, forcing my legs to move even though they suddenly feel like rubber. I can't do this. I'm much too small, stupid, and the shadows from the last year are creeping up on me—

"It's good to meet you, your Grace," I say, my mouth feeling like it's full of sawdust. The air is different in here, the scent like paper and leather. The whole of it is overwhelming and I remember, with a start, that I'm supposed to—

My knees bend, and I wish I'd paid more attention in school.

I look up from my curtsy, hoping it's deep enough, hoping I'm steady enough, but the duke isn't even looking at me.

"Mmm," he says, avoiding meeting my eyes as he taps on his keyboard. "I don't want her spoiled," he says to the screen, even as he talks to me.

"Of course, your Grace," I reply instantly.

"I don't want her growing up thinking she's too good for a day's work, but also knowing that her place will be beside another duke or, God willing, the next king, so it's important she learn when to speak and when to be quiet," he continues and I stare at him.

When to be quiet? He's already thinking of who she'll marry? She's not even ready to go to the school-room for full-time hours each day. She's barely out of toddlerhood.

He sounds so clinical and detached, like he's giving me instructions on how to water his begonias. It shocks me, and I think of my own parents raising me.

They never cared much for me, or any of my siblings, doing what they had to in order to survive their marriage to each other, but— at least they taught us to speak our own minds. I guess they wanted us to go our own way in the world and not be sent back to the leading strings because we couldn't defend ourselves, or speak out when needed.

But what am I supposed to say?

“Of course, your Grace,” I say, quietly seething. His eyes lift off of his screen for the second time since I've walked into the room, and he properly looks at me. He goes still, his eyes boring into mine.

I freeze, a deer caught in the predator's gaze.

“Do you think my demands unfairly harsh?” He asks, voice quiet and hushed. It's a dangerous trap. He's allowing me a moment to show myself, if I want to.

“Of course not, your Grace,” I reply. His face, neutral up until now, turns up into a grim smile.

“The courts in D.C. are filled with vipers. My daughter will have to navigate that with all risk that comes with it. She cannot secure the duchy through her line, and must make her own way in life without that title to afford her protection.” He's staring me down, as if he knows exactly what I think about him and his little plan to 'school' his daughter, and finds me lacking the experience to understand why it must be that way. “She needs to know when to be quiet. It may be the only thing that saves her at times.”

He smirks.

“Just like you know when to be quiet and not contradict your employer,” he says as he waves a hand toward himself. “Or did you think that your impotent rage went unnoticed? Mrs. Harris wouldn't like your tone. She'd call it impertinent.”

“I'm sorry, your Grace,” I say, taking a breath before I speak so that I can say his title without gritting my teeth. He might be handsome, but he's arrogant. His ego emanates from him. “I wouldn't know, but if I had a choice in the matter, I

wouldn't send my daughter to any court or place where she'd be eaten alive for speaking."

Ah, shit. Shouldn't have said that.

I'm dead. His gaze flickers, and he laughs, a short, sharp bark.

"How little you know," he says, "and how very much you inform the world on what knowledge you do not possess."

His words are like a slap right across my face, and even though I should shut my mouth right now, and say nothing more, I can't help it. It spills out of me, an unstoppable force, spurred on by his rudeness, his *lack* of grace despite the title.

"I know enough that you considered me a serious contender for the role of looking after your daughter," I say, drawing myself up, refusing to be brought small by him. In that moment everything falls away. My need for the job, my need to hide here in these guarded walls. None of it matters. There have been so many women like me, like the woman Lady Madeline will be one day, who've been asked to stay quiet. What would the duke say, if I told him of Benedict's behaviors? The marquis is as much a bad apple as any man who thinks he can take what he wants. And women like us are expected to stay silent about it. It rasps over my skin like a burn, and I will not back down. "So clearly I have something you want."

He gets to his feet at my words, surging forward. His chair rolls back, and his hands grip the edge of his desk, and for a moment I think he's going to come over the top of it at me, grab me by the throat and physically toss me from the room. I jerk, stepping back as his eyes flash.

His jaw is tight, column of his neck hard as he stares me down. His fingers flex on the edge of the desk, and our eyes are connected for a long moment.

He's staring at me like he wants to destroy me.

My heart is slamming hard and fast inside my rib-cage. Every instinct is screaming at me to run. He's a predator. I'm prey, helpless and weak. I should never have challenged him like this.

His lips part.

He's going to tell me to get out.

Instead his gaze slides away from me, toward the windows, to watch the breeze in the vineyards beyond the glass.

"You're dismissed, Miss Bell," he says.

"You're firing me?" I squeak and he snorts, sitting back down, relaxing into the back of his chair with a sigh.

"No. But get out of my office." He waves a hand lazily toward the door. I hesitate. "Now!" He snaps and I bolt, rabbiting out of the room. I pull the door closed behind me, and Mrs. Harris is standing there, staring at me like I've grown an extra limb. She obviously heard most of my exchange with the duke.

"Have you lost control of all your senses?" She hisses, and then shakes her head. "Never-mind. Let me show you to the kitchens, you'll be down there quite a bit. If you last the week."

I follow her, meekly, my shoulders rounded.

I'm an idiot. And I don't deserve this job.

But hopefully, maybe, if I keep a lid on my feelings, I can keep it.

So much for crossing my fingers.

We make no more mention of my meeting with the duke and how I'd stepped into it. Mrs. Harris is kinder than her stern exterior leads me to believe because she doesn't bring it up again. And anyway, the day keeps me busy, learning my way around the vast household. Even though I'm sure I'll forget to use it, I'm given a cellphone with a map on it so I can't get lost.

"Keep this on you at all times," Mrs. Harris says, "anything I, or Lady Madeline, or his Grace needs, will be communicated to you there if you aren't with one of us in person."

She shows me through the kitchens on the first floor near the back of the house. Windows set in the far wall give me a good view of a tempting vegetable garden beyond.

Mrs. Harris catches me looking and she smiles.

"That supplies most of the organic produce that the kitchens use to feed the duke and his family, and the staff of course." I raise my eyebrows.

"That's a lot of people to feed—"

"We bring in extra when we need to, but there are further gardens out on the property." She turns to a meal chart that's up on the wall, with Madeline's name above it.

"You'll eat with Lady Madeline, of course, in her room for breakfast, and lunch either in the dining room or out on the terrace if the weather is good. Dinner is usually the same unless his Grace has company for which she cannot join him."

I absorb this, pretending like I'm going to be here for long enough to put it to use. Mrs. Harris might not be saying anything about my conversation with the duke, but I know she hasn't forgotten it. And neither has he. I don't want to be fired, but I'm feeling like that might end up happening, *ha ha ugh*.

"Where she goes, you'll go, unless she's with one of her teaching masters." Of course. I'm not a real teacher. I flick my phone open and scroll through the calendar. My phone is loaded up with Madeline's schedule, which is surprisingly busy for a five-year-old. I don't know why I'm shocked, but I thought noble girls would have less responsibility, maybe? I'd been helping out on the family farm when I was her age, as much as I could, anyway. And then I had school start shortly after that. Money changes nothing, I guess.

Madeline has piano classes, and violin lessons, and there's a note on the master calendar app that she's starting equitation soon. French in the afternoons. There are no naps built in, and I'm getting tired just thinking about everything she has to do. I won't even be with her most of the day, since her education masters will come to her schoolroom. I'm surprised with her even needing a nanny during the day.

I'm shown the laundry, an outbuilding across from the kitchens, and Mrs. Harris turns to me as we walk through the lavender hedgerows that line the gravel path back to the main house.

"You'll only need to go there if there's something specific the maids haven't brought up," she says. "Her ladyship is young and doesn't have the accouterments of, say, Lady Ruby."

"Lady Ruby?" I ask. Mrs. Harris nods as we enter the kitchens, busy already with the cook and her two assistants. The vaulted ceilings sweat with the steam from cooking.

"His grace's younger sister, twinned with Lord Noah," she answers. One of the kitchen assistants glares at me as I get in the way of her making pasta, and I scoot around her to keep from being a problem. We leave the noise of the kitchen behind and enter a hallway. "They're out on tour."

"Right, and—"

“You met Lord Benedict, the marquis,” she says, looking annoyed. “He’s—”

With a sigh, she tugs me into a side room, a pantry with the walls floor-to-ceiling packed with jarred food, neatly labeled in tidy handwriting. She closes the door.

“What—” I say, but she cuts me off with a shake of her head.

“You’d do best to stay out of his way, that one. He’ll have your skirts over your head before you can blink, and that’s one thing the duke will not tolerate. Your speaking back, impertinence, some of that is expected because you’re caring for the duke’s child and her wellbeing is your priority. That means you may disagree with the duke some of the time, and he understands that. But the marquis?”

She gives me a flat look.

“Hands off?”

“Don’t even meet his eyes if you know what’s good for you,” she says. “He’s ruined more than one of the ladies on staff here.” I swallow.

Ruined.

Of course. A woman isn’t worth anything if she gives it out to anyone, even an ‘anyone’ with a title. I know that bitter truth deep inside me. It’s why I ran from a good job, and a good place, with a decent family. And now, here I am, trying to build a new life on shifting sands. It doesn’t matter. I school my face into neutrality. What Mrs. Harris doesn’t know about me won’t hurt her and won’t hurt me.

But I feel that truth in my heart, cutting me open from the inside.

There’s more than one person in my life, more than one woman, who’s been ruined. It doesn’t matter how many rights we’re given or how far into the future we fling ourselves.

Some things stay the same.

Keeping our legs tied shut until marriage is one of them.

“Thank you for the warning,” I say. She gives me a disgruntled look.

“It took me months to find you. Do you think I’d risk that again? I don’t have time to be child-rearing, now that my own are grown.” She opens the door, and the day continues, unfurling out in front of me. I’m exhausted by the time Madeline is ready for her afternoon tea. I sit with her in her bedroom while she drinks, and she makes up tea for me as well. It’s herbal, lavender, flavored deeply with honey, and the biscuits we eat with them are iced with flowers.

“It’s so pretty,” she says, looking down at the cookie in her hands, decorated to look like a field of tulips.

“Don’t eat too many, or you won’t have room for dinner,” I tell her. She wrinkles her nose but doesn’t argue or complain. I’m right, too, because she’s hungry enough for her dinner later, taken in her room since the duke and the marquis have guests.

Bring Madeline down to read by the fire in the drawing room. Mrs. Harris texts me shortly after we’re finished eating, and one of the maids has come up to get our trays. I stand and hold my hand out for the little lady. She looks up at me with the same green eyes that belong to her father and uncle.

“Are we going down?” She asks, her voice hushed with excitement. I nod.

“As long as you promise to be good.”

“I swear it,” she says and sticks to my side like a burr. The drawing room doors are flung open, talk and chatter from inside spilling out as we approach, and I lead her in. We’re ignored by the adults, clustered near the roaring fire, drinks in their hands. There are women standing inside, the high-born sort, in long evening dresses, shawls over their shoulders and drooping from their arms. They talk to men in suits worth more than a month of my salary.

“Over here,” Madeline says, tugging on my arm. I follow her to another fire opposite the big one, a chaise in front of it perfect for curling up. “My books are over there.” She points at a low bookcase with candlesticks decorating the top. I pick

out four to read and sit with her. She's instantly curled at my side and insists on reading for me. "I like this one," she says, pulling out a picture book written about the first king of America.

I settle back, the chaise cradling me, and I could get used to the warmth of the fire washing over me and the quiet in this corner of the room.

There's laughter over by the adults, and I lift my head to look at them. They look so different and alien to me, like a strange group of people, separate from myself. But they're not, even though I'm sure they all have titles, and I don't.

In the end, we're all the same, right? The first King, King Johnathon, had been the son of a farmer. I'm the daughter of one too, but that doesn't matter now. If things had been different, and the first President of the United States hadn't been the last, I could've been more than I am today. The whole of society would look different.

But it's not.

Madeline shuts the book with a snap, done reading, and looks over at the adults too.

"Their dresses are pretty," she says, sounding tired. I wrap an arm around her, and she lets me. She leans into me, her tiny body a curl of warmth against my ribs.

"Are you tired? Do you want to go up?" I ask her. She shakes her head but lolls it against my shoulder, her eyes sliding shut.

I hold my breath for a moment and don't move. A minute stretches out, and I realize she's out cold. Today has been long for her, it's been long for *me*, and I'm not a five-year-old trying to learn which fork to use and which war was Napoleon's best and then writing poems about it.

"You're very good with her," that familiar voice, like warm honey, pours over me, and I look up from where Madeline is sleeping against me, her eyes closed tight.

The marquis is standing in front of me, the fire behind him crackling softly and silhouetting him in a glow.

“Children are easy, if you listen to them as much as you ask them to listen to you,” I say, trying to figure out how I should be getting up to curtsy to him, without dislodging my sleeping charge.

“Don’t move,” he says, shifting to sit beside me on the deep couch. Madeline sighs and turns her head into the pillow. “I don’t want her to wake up and have my brother give you daggers.”

He looks over at where the duke is holding court in the far corner of the room, a grouping of men around him, talking business with drinks in their hands. The sparkling women I’d seen earlier are there, in their long gowns, listening attentively. Only Benedict is here with Madeline and me, and it doesn’t seem like any of them have noticed that he’s gone.

“So, is this what happens every night?” I ask, curiosity boiling inside my stomach. Reading a book to Madeline after dinner here by the fire seems like an excellent way to end the day, even if she might be cranky when I wake her up to go to bed later.

“Pretty much. We dine and entertain guests. My brother strengthens his alliances over meat and potatoes and then cements them with whiskey later.” Benedict reaches over to touch one of Madeline’s curls.

“The duchess doesn’t like to join for meals?” I ask, and Benedict pauses for a moment before pulling a blanket off the back of the couch and tucking it over Madeline’s dress. She doesn’t even make a sound, sleeping deeply.

“No,” Benedict said softly, “she does not.” He looked intently at Madeline and then lifted his gaze to meet mine. “You should probably get her to bed. Why don’t I help you? I can carry her.”

I shook my head.

“That’s my job—”

“Let me,” he says, shifting Madeline into his arms and lifting her slowly, tucking her chin against his shoulder. I never thought much of nobility before this since it always feels like

they're making our lives miserable and not doing much for us in return for the hard work society does to keep them wealthy. But Benedict's effortless composure, the way he lifts Madeline up with no difficulty at all, and more to the point, he wants to do it— that's confusing to me. It's nothing like the demanding way he's touched me, either. He's careful with her. I never thought of nobles as anything but stuffed shirts, winning Olympic medals in horse jumping and opening up expensive night clubs to make themselves richer and more famous. Or debauching maids and nannies without a single care.

We walk toward the exit, unnoticed by the cluster of glittering people by the fire, the duke still holding everyone's rapt attention until I get to the door, Benedict slipping out ahead of me. Something in the corner of my eyes has me pausing.

The duke's gaze is on me for what must be a split second but it feels like an eternity. His eyes burn bright, the rest of the people in the room fading away until it's only him and me.

This is the first time he's even looked at me tonight. And his expression changes to one of fury, so hot that it shocks me. My skin prickles, my breath catches, and he is *enraged* by me, my presence. My lips part; I want to ask him what's wrong, call out to him, something, but my mouth is dry—

He looks away, laughing at something someone's said, breaking the moment like a glass bowl hitting the ground. The sound shatters around me, and I stare at him, confused. I must have imagined it, because he's smiling, handsome face joyful with no hint of anger at all.

"Miss Bell?" The marquis asks from the hall, and I jerk forward through the doorways into the dimly lit hallway.

"Sorry," I breathe, "I thought—" Benedict is looking at me, one eyebrow quirked, Madeline passed out on his shoulder, her face smushed into his jacket collar.

"You thought what? That you'd say goodnight?" He's amused, maybe a few inches away from laughing at me.

"No, of course not," I say with a shake of my head. "Let's go up."

The duke has no reason to look at me with rage in his eyes, anger, or hate. I must have imagined it. But there's a shadow of feeling that follows me as I trail behind the marquis. That prickling sensation never entirely leaves my skin, even when I lay down in my bed an hour later and fall asleep.

I didn't think that I'd have as much free time as I do when I took this job.

But Madeline is busy. B-U-S-Y. She has so many lessons that it makes my head spin, and half the time, more than half the time, she's not even in my care. It feels more like I'm the person hired to walk her twenty feet from one room to the next and then make myself scarce for forty-five minutes, or longer, while she learns some new skill, or expands her education in some other area. And that's only when she's not in the main school room, where the masters rotate in and out themselves, and she stays put.

I swear though, if she keeps up this rate of studying, her brain is going to be three pounds heavier than the average by the time she's ten.

Still, I can't complain for myself, because it's nice. Not being expected to do much more than a bit of tidying around her room in the morning and at night, and I'm somewhat 'untouchable' when it comes to being randomly assigned tasks by other members of the staff, I decide that I'll take an early lunch from the kitchen on my fourth day there and go sit out in the sun.

What's the point of working in one of the most beautiful estates in the country, if I'm not going to take advantage of it?

I beg a sandwich from the cook, and snag myself a bottle of water, and go walking.

The late morning sun is hotter than I thought it would be. I wish I'd considered bringing a hat. The road that curves out from the entry of the great house leads toward the front gates, where I first took my interview. I remember that there were paths that lead from there into the vineyards, and down to the stable area. I find myself walking along one, the shade too tempting to ignore.

The trees arch overhead to shelter me, and the pathway, wildflowers growing without any form or function under them. It's sort of nice to see something untamed, since the rest of the estate is planned with military precision.

The sound of an engine behind me, and wheels over gravel, has me turning, preparing to smile at whoever is there.

I stop in my tracks.

The duke is riding on an ATV, and my lips part in surprise. He's dressed for outdoor work, in jeans and a t-shirt. It's so different from the few times I've seen him when he's been in a suit and tie.

My eyes flick over him without meaning to. His brother Benedict is dangerously attractive, but Mason King?

He radiates power, even riding on a stupid ATV in a tee and jeans. My face is flushing and I'm an idiot. What's wrong with me? I step off the path so he can get by, lowering my gaze to the ground.

I expect him to just ride by, but he stops. My heart stutters to a halt, too, and I inhale a big breath, lifting my eyes to meet his.

"Your grace," I say, "it's good to see you out today."

It's good to see you out today?

I sound like an idiot.

I am one. Ugh.

He's staring at me.

"Where are you headed?"

I swallow, feeling like I've been caught doing something wrong. I nod down the path.

“Walking, to see the vineyards, and eat my lunch. Lady Madeline is in a lesson,” I add the last few words hurriedly, in case he thinks I’ve stuffed his daughter into a closet and locked the door.

“It’s a nice day for that, but make sure next time you tell someone where you’re going,” he says, and I bite the inside of my cheek.

“I have my phone on me,” I say, “if anyone needs to get ahold of me.” I pat my pocket. He looks like he wants to say something, but doesn’t, and it’s that piercing gaze of his— it’s so cold. It slips over me like a sheet of rainwater, making me need to shiver.

“Madeline doesn’t travel much, but when she does, you’ll be with her, and over time, certain bad actors will come to know who you are,” his words are clipped, stern. “Don’t make yourself a target. Always tell someone where you’re going, preferably Mrs. Harris.”

My cheeks must be pink, from embarrassment and surprise.

“I’m sorry,” I say and he cuts me off with a shake of his head.

“Never-mind. Next time, make sure you leave word. Alright?” His thumb taps on the steering wheel of the ATV.

“Of course, your grace, I’m sorry. Next time, I will tell someone,” I stumble over the words.

“Apology accepted. Enjoy your walk.” He nods in parting and I manage a clumsy curtsy. The ATV turns around, engine rumbling along and he starts to drive back the way he went.

Did he...

Did he come all the way out here, to find me?

His back is straight and stern as he drives away. A lump forms in my throat and I swallow around it, trying to make it go away.

Oh my god. Mrs. Harris is going to kill me. The duke himself came to find me, like I was a lost puppy that had gotten out.

She’s going to *murder* me.

Awkward, and uncomfortable, I find a place to sit on the side of the road and eat my sandwich, not really in the mood to go for more of a walk after that.

As time passes and logic starts to sink in, none of it makes sense.

Why did the duke come looking for me? Why not just *call*? Why not send a footman, or a gardener? Someone beneath him, if he was so concerned? A man of his position wouldn't trouble himself looking for a servant, not ever. Not unless...

Unless he was actually concerned enough, that he felt driven to look for himself.

My hand goes still around my sandwich and I set it down in my lap, not able to take another bite.

Why, out of all people who actually mattered to him, would the duke be concerned about me?

I can't eat. I have to get back to the house, and beg forgiveness from Mrs. Harris and promise not to make any more disturbances in the duke's day.

I jog back, confused and terrified of what I'll find when I get there. My phone has been silent, with no messages, so if she's upset, she can't be too angry.

At least, I can hope that's why the radio silence.

I nearly skid into the servant's hall, and one of the footmen is playing cards on the table, solitaire. He looks up at me and raises an eyebrow.

Oh shit.

"She's waiting in her office," he says.

Fuck. Fuckity-fucker. With extra fucks on top.

I rush off and he whistles sharply. I stop.

"You're red in the face," he says, "and your hair—"

I catch sight of myself in a mirror positioned by one of the doors that lead out to the family's part of the house. My cheeks are blotched pink, and my hair is a mess. The duke saw me

like this? I look awful. I grab one of the combs that are waiting there for a person like me who desperately needs to groom themselves, and brush my hair back into its ponytail.

“What were you doing that you got the duke all angry?” The footman asks, watching me. “He bolted out of here like he’d seen his father’s corpse reanimated.”

“Um, nothing,” I say, brushing some leaves off of my dress, where I’d picked them up on my little adventure.

I swear I will never leave the house again without express permission if I end up being able to keep my job after this.

“Come *in*, Miss Bell,” Mrs. Harris says from her office, and I dart in, my chest full of air and waiting to explain myself. She takes one look at me, and points at the chair in front of her desk. Her computer screen glows, and I feel kind of bad for her. There’s no windows in here, although I guess that’s better for reducing glare on her computer monitor.

She folds her hands together as she looks at me, as if she might tease out the mystery of why I went on a walk from just staring me down.

“I didn’t know I had to tell anyone when I left the house if Lady Madeline was in class,” I say, swallowing hard. “I’m very sorry and I won’t do it again.”

Mrs. Harris gives a long-suffering sigh, like I’m the biggest problem in her world right about now, and I don’t blame her for feeling that way.

The fact the duke tramped all the way out through the fields to find me is embarrassing. I might not think much of the nobility system, but the fact I inconvenienced someone who was so busy running a big estate, and had better things to do than to track me down, is eating at me.

“You’re learning,” Mrs. Harris says, “I can’t fault you for making simple mistakes, however—” She drags that last word out.

I wait for her to finish her sentence. She glances at the door significantly. I get up and close it without a word and retake my place on the chair. It’s a wooden thing in a dark stain that

has seen better days. To call it rickety would be nice. I perch gingerly on it.

“Lord Benedict has registered an interest in you,” Mrs. Harris says bluntly. My face feels like all the blood has drained from it, and she nods, looking equally as disturbed. “I assured the duke that the feelings were not returned—”

“Of course not!” I burst out, and then clapped a hand over my mouth, trying to keep from hyperventilating. That high-born, high-cheekboned asshole is going to get me fired.

My eyes burn, and I realize I’m in tears. I blink them away furiously. Mrs. Harris sighs, almost deflating.

“I thought as much. Of course you wouldn’t be so foolish to fall under his spell in your first week here, and I don’t want to imply that you’re that simple, but it’s happened before.” She taps her fingers on her desk, like she’s thinking. “And I just want you to think about that when you speak with him. You can’t avoid him, not when he’s a member of the family and lives here most of the time, but there’s no need to act in any way that might encourage him.”

I nod furiously, grateful for her calm tone and assurance that she doesn’t think badly of me. The storm in my stomach is settling. A little bit. It still feels like there are thunderclouds in there, lightning crackling up my sternum and fizzing my nerves.

“I’ll do my best,” I promise, and then falter. “What do I do if he doesn’t... listen? Or, take the hint?” I ask, feeling overwhelmed. It’s one thing to corral Madeline. She’s easy-going for a kid, and is too tired after her full day of learning to put up much of a fuss with me.

Mrs. Harris looks disturbed.

“Are you saying that he might force himself upon you,” she breathes out in a hiss, “has he—”

“No, no, it’s fine,” I reply quickly, shaking my head. “No, I just, I can’t control another person. Especially not the marquis.”

“No, of course not,” she says, relaxing slightly. “Just do your best to keep your head down. The Season will be starting soon anyway, and he’ll be too busy to create trouble for you.” She eases herself against the back of her chair with a sigh. I sit opposite from her, wondering how to ask the question without seeming like a complete idiot.

I spent so long overseas, and I was never in a house that participated in any of the annual events that ruled the noble lives that in turn ruled ours.

“The Season? That’s not for awhile yet though, right?” I finally ask, swallowing down my pride. She glances at me.

“The ducal Season. Young women are introduced at the duke’s court here, before moving on to other courts further afield if they don’t find an eligible match. Normally the duchess—” She stops herself. “Never-mind. Maddie is at least twelve years away from her first Season, but the marquis will be looking for a wife this year perhaps, to settle him. It’s what the duke wishes anyway. As soon as the families arrive, it’ll be busy for all of us, especially Lord Benedict.” She seems to take a grim pleasure in the idea of him being run off of his feet.

“Don’t they go to D.C. for the Season too?” I ask, with a frown, remembering something I’d read in Civics. Mrs. Harris gets to her feet.

“That’s later in the year, in the winter. If a girl hasn’t made a match in her local area, or if her family thinks she can do better, then she goes on to D.C. to be presented to the king.” She dusts off her apron. “Now get along. I’m sure Lady Madeline will be done with her classes shortly. And you don’t want to be late to retrieve her.”

“You, girl, come here,” the history master says to me as he pokes his head out of the schoolroom. I’m cooling my heels, bored out of my mind while waiting for Madeline to be done with her last class. There’s a small bench outside the school room, located on the fourth floor of Wester, in a dark-ish hallway with a window at the far end. It smells like paper and candles up here, the ceiling not nearly as high as on the bottom three floors.

I lift my head and look at the teacher. He’s in his early forties, I’m guessing, with a touch of silver at his temples and frown lines between his eyes.

“Yes, sir,” I say, getting to my feet. I usually don’t meet the masters directly, instead collecting Madeline from the classroom door. At the same time, they clean up inside from whatever lesson they’ve taught.

“I’ve prepared some homework for Lady Madeline,” he says as I walk toward him, holding out a sheaf of paperwork for me to take. I tuck it against my chest, crossing my arms over it. Homework for a five-year-old? I try not to frown, keeping my expression as neutral as possible. I’m outside of the servant hierarchy, but I still owe deference to the masters. That much has been made clear to me without anyone saying anything.

If I can’t be given tasks by the average staff or servant, the masters cannot be criticized by me unless they’re doing something *really* awful. And I’m not sure homework qualifies as terrible. Well, awful, maybe, but not really.

“As she won’t be attending lessons tomorrow—” he continues, and I give him a blank look. He stops. “You were informed of the change in her itinerary, yes?”

Obviously not, but I’m not going to say it.

“Of course,” I lie, although I’m not sure how much he believes me. I need to check my phone and figure out what I missed. Madeline comes to the door, peeping shyly around it. Her long brown hair is coming out of her braids, and I’ll need to fix that before her dinner.

The master gives me another weird frown and then nods.

“Well then, that’s it for the day; excellent efforts today, my Lady,” he says to Madeline with a half-bow. She looks exhausted, with dark circles under her eyes. I wonder if I can convince her to have dinner in the bathtub and then go to bed.

No five-year-old should be run this ragged. It makes me chew the inside of my cheek in frustration.

I offer her my hand, and she takes it, walking three steps before she yawns. The master has disappeared inside the school room, and it’s just her and me.

I bend down in front of her and look her straight in the face.

“What do you say,” I ask quietly so we can’t be overheard, “that I get Cook to make you something you can eat in the bathtub tonight? Then books in bed?”

Her heavy eyes light up.

“Can I eat in the bathtub?” She asks, lips parting in surprise. It’s breaking rules of etiquette for sure, but with me the only one with her while she eats, who’s going to tell?

I nod.

“Absolutely. It’s the best; you can dine like a princess.”

She wrinkles her nose.

“Auntie Rose says that real princesses are mean,” she replies with a frown.

“Maybe, but that’s their problem, not ours. C’mon.”

I set her up in the hot tub full of sudsy bubbles and order a kid's delight of grilled cheese and SpaghettiOs. Maddie's head is drooping when I bring the tray in, and she barely lifts it long enough to eat a few mouthfuls before I can tell she's going to try to drown herself if I make her finish.

It's not easy to maneuver a floppy, tired kid who seems like she's sprouted up an inch since I got here, but I wrangle her into bed. She doesn't even ask for a book, and I'm turning out the lights and closing her curtains so she can sleep deeply before six o'clock.

Something is wrong with a child being that tired. Part of me is wondering if and when I should talk to the duke about it, but it's his schedule he's set for her.

Maybe he lived through the same thing and thinks she's capable of handling it? I don't know, but it's setting off alarm bells. In Europe, the children I cared for as an Au Pair, well, their schedule could have been more rigorous.

I stand in the corridor, debating on whether to march right down to the duke's office where I know I'll find him (he's clearly trying to rub his own workaholic tendencies off on his kid), or looking into why I wasn't told about her schedule change for tomorrow.

A passing maid nods to me as I put my finger to my lips and pat Madeline's door. At least she'll tell the other staff to be quiet in the ladies' hall.

One thing that has struck me here is the extreme loyalty that the staff has towards the duke and his family. It makes me wonder because I've never known servants to be so focused on the needs of one family, to the detriment of not even having or leading their own lives.

Especially where Lady Madeline is concerned. They are that devoted. This means that if I have a concern, I will only be seen as devoted too. A week here had given me more confidence than before. I walk through the doors, and I make my way downstairs before I can stop myself.

"Miss Bell!"

Oh no. I turn to the sight of trouble. Benedict is leaning against the wall, casually resting his hand on the head of what I'm sure is a priceless statue that stands there.

"Yes, my lord," I say patiently, guarding my tone. Every time I run into him, he's bad news. From the grin on his face to the button-down shirt he's wearing, without a tie, collar loosely around his neck.

My eyes drag down the exposed skin for a moment before I catch myself.

"I wanted to make sure you had everything you needed for our little adventure tomorrow," he says.

Fuck. I need to look at my schedule to see if anything has been added. Obviously, Maddie's mini-vacation from classes includes Lord Benedict.

He takes a few steps towards me, and I'm tempted to back up but stand my ground. I lift my chin and settle my shoulders as imperceptibly as I can. I don't want to challenge him, but I do want to set a boundary.

"I haven't been given a packing list, but I'm sure Mrs. Harris will have one to me before the end of the night," I say, covering my ass neatly from not knowing what the hell is going on, and I can only hope I sound and look professional.

Like someone who knows what she's doing. Not someone who's watching her boss's brother approach her, one step after languid step like he's a predator stalking prey, and the prey is finding it very hard to think. His gaze is hungry.

Why he's looking at me like that is anyone's guess. I try not to shrink my shoulders into my neck.

"I'm taking Maddie into the city. There's a red carpet premiere of a children's movie coming up that I know she'll love." He's a few feet from me now, less than is proper, further away than I want him to be. He's not the kind of man who douses himself in cologne, but I've smelled it on him a few times, faint, and discreet. Like he only wants you to know it's there if you get close to him.

Like he wants that single scent to set off alarm bells that you're within his thrall, and you can't escape.

Right now, I can just catch a hint of it, teasing at deep forests, a little hint of cedar, a bit of leather. Even that small whisp of it has shivers running along my skin. It threatens to fill my lungs, and I try not to breathe.

His eyes hold mine, and my tongue feels stuck to the roof of my mouth.

“That’s... very good, sir, I mean, my lord,” I correct myself quickly. I’m having trouble thinking, apparently, and he’s distracting.

His smile widens, as if he knows. It’s not right to think vile thoughts of your employer, but right now all I can think is:

Shit-disturber.

Fucker.

Fuck-able.

Fuck.

“Excellent,” he says, grinning wide. “We’ll have a good time. You can even meet a few of my friends, instead of the boring dead-woods my brother is always hosting.” He jerks his head toward the end of the hall, where the main sitting room is that I’ve been in the last through nights, watching the duke host and hold a miniature court while Madeline reads her books to me.

This is something new, though. A familial outing, and one where it sounds like the marquis is going to want me to be less than invisible. And—

“You said red carpet,” I blurt out. “Like, press, and cameras?” *Of course that’s what it means, idiot.* I’ve got that spacey feeling like my soul’s about to exit my body.

Benedict laughs and runs a hand through the back of his hair, making it even more impossibly tousled. But it’s attractive. If I did that, I’d look like I’d had fifty-five kittens playing in my hair all night. He pulls it off.

It's more than a little unfair.

"Yeah, there's a bit of that. I'll do it with Maddie if she wants to, although brother-dearest gets pissy when Mads gets in front of the camera," he drawls. "You won't be on the gauntlet if that's what's worrying you."

"It's just a lot of people," I say, by way of excuse, and wait. He takes it at face value.

"You'll need to get used to it if you stick around," he says and then steps away, as a maid walks down the corridor and her footsteps echo. He puts enough space between us that it's proper again, something that confuses me. He has no problem skirting the line in front of the duke, but he cares about what a maid thinks?

"I'll check with Mrs. Harris before I go to bed tonight," I say, and that's the wrong word choice because his eyes glint, knowingly. The maid is close by now, passing us, and he gives me a lazy salute with two fingers.

"See you in the morning, captain," he replies as he turns on his heel and stalks toward the big stairs, and disappears down the dimly lit hall. I hold my breath until he's out of sight, and then collapse against the wall, alone with my thoughts, my worries and—

The weird ghost of a feeling in me, imagining wrongly what it'd be like tomorrow if I wasn't a nanny, if I was someone that would walk the red carpet.

My eyes close and I can feel it, the sun beating down on me, the lights, the flash of cameras that are so intense and overwhelming it blinds me. The sound of the crowd, of a thousand voices talking at once until it becomes a mess of noise. Someone takes my hand. I look up. Benedict is there, holding my fingers gently in his.

"Are you coming?" He asks, and tucks my hand into the crook of his arm.

My eyes pop open and I jerk forward like I've been zapped.

The hall is empty and dark as ever. I'm alone. I turn and hurry up the stairs, leaving it behind, the ghost of a future that

can *never* be.

BENEDICT

If there's one thing my brother is, that's predictable. A second thing? He's not able to say no to Maddie for anything. He might act stern, and he's thrown me around more than once (and fuck if I've given back as good as I got), but with his daughter, he might as well be a toasted marshmallow.

The best part is that he knows he's easy, what I'm doing tonight, and he's letting me get away with murder. He's probably betting on it being too big of a crowd at the movie premiere, that it's a children's comedy flick, and that'll keep me in line. No lie, I'd never do anything to make my niece feel uncomfortable. But a lot can go over a kid's head if you word it right.

I don't mind going to a children's show because the scriptwriters will pack it with things to make *me* laugh. Double-fucking-entendre indeed.

Nothing's out of the ordinary as Maddie meets me after breakfast with a big hug and loads into the limo without a thought. She has two books in either hand and a pink backpack carried by a footman stuffed with even more.

I'm sure she gets her reading addiction from my brother. Her mother's not exactly the literary type.

Miss Bell appears a few moments after I've gotten settled in the back of the limo, Maddie under one of my arms. Miss Bell's got another backpack, and what looks like a thermos, in her hands. Her face is grim, like she's going to war.

I watch Miss Bell for a few minutes as Maddie tries to read to me, my fingers curling absently in her hair. The limo's already moving, and we'll be on my home turf soon enough, away from my brother and all his idiotic rules and pronouncements.

"I'm sorry your father couldn't come," Miss Bell says to Madeline, who lifts her eyes from her book for a moment before burying back into it.

"He's working," she says.

I'm not sorry at all. I don't say it, but Miss Bell looks at me like she heard my thoughts.

I know she's not a mind-reader. The fact she even got into this vehicle in the first place tells me she possesses exactly zero psychic ability.

She'd have handed in her resignation three nights ago if it were otherwise.

Unless she is psychic and is just fine with all the filthy thoughts I've been having about her—

We slow down in traffic, and Maddie's already three books into her stack that she's liberated from her backpack.

"Did you want to do the red carpet?" I ask her. She shakes her head, and goes back to her book. Is it just me, or does Miss Bell sag in relief against the back of her seat?

I grab a bottle of water for them from the fridge, and Miss Bell's eyes light up.

"Can I put her lunch in there?" She asks, not phrasing it right. It should have been, 'Can I put Lady Madeline's lunch in there?' but I'm not going to stand on protocol.

I hold out the bottle toward her, urging her to take it.

"Of course," I say. She reaches, her fingers brushing against mine.

So far watching her has given me electricity, made it hard to think when she's in the room, because all my thoughts turn to fucking.

Even now.

Which makes me a disgusting beast. I've been doing what I can to wrestle it to the side, because this is a *family* event today, and I don't need another red carpet blunder for my brother to use an excuse to deny me taking Madeline anywhere.

Partly because I love my niece. Also partly because where she goes, so does Miss Bell.

And right now, Miss Bell's touch has sent a shiver up my arm, down my chest, and straight to my cock.

Not now.

I'm not an out of control monster. I just have a problem, and that problem is shaped like Miss Bell.

Even now, when she's clearly not dressed for attention. She's in black trousers, probably with enough stretch into them that she can run after a five year old, *or have them be shoved down around her hips so—*

Stop.

Her button-down blouse is plain too, gray this time, to hide dust and dirt but not black so she looks like a damn caterer.

And her hair, that cascade of deep brown hair, is held back in a tight bun at the nape of her neck.

I'm not even going to bother pretending I don't want to grab it and use it to wrangle her to do whatever I want.

Because I'm not a liar. Most of the time.

I breathe out and the driver pings over the intercom, the light *bong bong* of him needing our attention the only sound in the car.

It means we're here, and I glance out the window. It was faster than if we'd been forced to drive on the same roadways as normal people, but one of the recently passed laws in the last two decades as car travel increased and so did congestion, was a dedicated lane for members of nobility. And emergency vehicles of course. But mostly for us.

I help Madeline out of the car and then offer Miss Bell a hand but she blushes. Demure, she looks away.

She wouldn't be out of place at a debutante's ball, I swear, but she isn't high-born. She just acts prudish like one that's been scared witless by her matchmaking mother and grandmother.

Maddie takes one look at the red carpet entrance, and shakes her head so hard it threatens to pop off.

"We don't have to," I say to her patiently, and then gesture to the step-and-repeat that shields the second walkway from prying cameras. We're in the drop-off area, a circular drive, and most of the cameras aren't pointed in our direction. They're focused on the stars walking the carpet, and the lords and ladies who've come to see and be seen.

Most, anyway.

I see the dark circular eye of a camera lens, and step in front of Madeline to shield her from it.

"We can go in that way, where we won't be bothered. Alright?" I ask, and straighten up as Maddie slides her hand into mine, looking more confident.

I glance at Miss Bell. She stares behind me, past me, and I follow her gaze. There's a photographer taking pictures of us.

"Ignore it," I say, "we're wallpaper. Let's go."

Miss Bell wordlessly follows us, as we're greeted by a woman in a sharp red suit, skirt grazing the bottoms of her knees. She's pretty, strawberry blonde, and normally I'd grin at her and try to snag a number. My black book can always use some new entries, right? Even if not for me, for a friend, or two.

But not today. Maddie smells popcorn, and there's a whole inside playground area filled with shrieking, well-to-do children putting to the test the gel their nannies used on their carefully combed hair.

Maddie's blue dress, frothy with a petticoat and so many ruffles they could choke a goat, goes flying as she leaves my side with a gleeful squeak.

Well, I'm not one to waste a fucking opportunity when it's handed to me.

"Do you want something to eat?" I ask as I turn to Miss Bell, who's stopped beside me, watching Maddie with hawk eyes.

"No," she says, distracted, finally looking up at me. "But thank you, my lord."

"You know this is just a big cattle call," I say, "there's caretakers in the movie theatre. It's not even the kind with real seats. It's got beanbag chairs for all the scrots. Want to join me in the lounge where the real fun is?"

Her lips part, and she moves forward toward me, just an inch, like she's thinking about it.

"No," she breathes, "that wouldn't be right. And Lady Madeline's been talking about this since I woke her up this morning. I want to watch it with her."

Well shit.

Does she... actually care? About watching a kid's movie? It's one thing to be dedicated to Maddie's needs, but watching a movie with her isn't one of them, right? I don't screw up my face in confusion, but I want to. And then just like that, she's a dandelion puff leaving my side like a wish, going to trail after Maddie, who's gotten herself into trouble in what looks like a ball-pit that's sunken into the ground.

That petticoat is going to get tangled in everything this indoor playground has to offer. And the shrieking of children is beginning to get to me.

I retreat to the adult salon, and look for whiskey.

"Hollywood!" Someone calls my name, and a grin rises to stretch my lips wide. This is where the fun begins... I'll stay a few minutes and then go out to get Miss Bell.

I DID NOT GO OUT to get Miss Bell. Well, I did, but Madeline was stuck to her side like a burr, and I didn't have the heart to pry them away from each other.

Now Mads is bouncing in the limo after the movie, talking a mile a minute and even though we have our own dedicated lane, that doesn't take into account *all* the nobility that are choking it up as they leave the Even of the Season.

I'm regretting the whiskey. And regretting not sitting next to Miss Bell, on a fucking bean bag chair, for an hour and a half, because that would have been better than the idiots who tried to bend my ear the entire time.

Sometimes I forget that my brother isn't the only one with so-called responsibilities. That it's me too, with people who think that I care about what new building is being built somewhere it shouldn't be, and what are we going to do about all the noise pollution, and don't we need to have more shade in downtown Hollywood that isn't just palm trees?

Palm trees are fine. I tune it out most of the time, when I have to listen to one of my agents speak to me about it, and the reports I get sent collect dust on my desk.

If something's really important, they'll talk to me.

And I'll probably ignore that too, but there's other things that I need to pay attention to.

Like the sweet wisp of hair that's curling down the side of Eva — Miss Bell's neck as she bends to read to Maddie, who's finally sitting still.

I want to trace that lock of hair until it meets her collar, then wrap my fingers in the fabric of her shirt and pull her toward me.

But I don't. I can't. Not now. My gaze slides outside, and I see the Hollywood sign, mocking me as we go.

I feel deflated. My niece has had an amazing time today, a change of pace from the dreary life of school-room learning and piano recital prep, I've been out and seen some of my set, back-slapped for another great production I've paid for, and yet—

What I really wanted to have happen didn't. She's sitting three feet from me, within arm's length distance, and yet I can't have her. And that fucking infuriates me.

There's a tremor inside me that's threatening to crack me open if I don't *touch, taste*, something. Anything.

Maybe because I know that it would infuriate my brother, because he's got a hard-on for the nannies remaining pure and untouched, even though I've had half the chamber maids and he's never cared.

But this is one thing that he demands stay his, even if he doesn't *have* them in that way. Maybe it's something to do with them being care-givers to Madeline.

I chew on my lip for a moment before letting it go.

Maybe it's because of what happened between me and the duchess before she up and abandoned her family and duty.

Bad memories for Mason, and all that.

Well, not my problem. And as I watch Miss Bell, Evangeline, spelling out some concept in a children's book to Maddie, I make up my mind.

I will have her. Tonight. My brother be fucking damned.

Benedict is quiet on the trip home and barely notices when Madeline hugs him goodbye, thanking him for the day. I take her upstairs to wash up for dinner and don't think anything of it.

I didn't see him in the theater itself, which, true to his word, had bean-bag chairs, and I understand why.

It's one thing for me as a nanny to sit down on the ground and watch a movie surrounded by kids; it's another thing for a marquis. Most of the other adults in the room had been nannies, exchanging understanding looks. We're the ones that stand by the children as they grow, their only close-by source of love and affection in between brief encounters with their high-born parents. So I wasn't exactly surprised that the marquis didn't join us.

We eat a quiet dinner, alphabet soup, a portion of kale that Madeline completely ignores, and some dinosaur-shaped nuggets. I glance at the homework on her small writing desk and wonder if I can't make some excuse to her teaching masters. There's no way Maddie, with sleepy eyes and yawning mouth, will get any of that done. She doesn't even ask to see her father for a goodnight before crawling into bed, out like a light minutes later.

My duties discharged for the night; I pick up around her room before turning the lights out so she can sleep until morning. I need to talk to the duke about how overworked she is.

I'm closing her bedroom door when a hand wraps around my shoulder. I jerk and whirl around, surprised.

Lord Benedict stands there, a severe look on his face.

"I'm sorry, my lord, Lady Madeline's only just gone to sleep," I say, voice quiet. He shakes his head. So he's not here for her, then.

"Come with me," he replies and takes my wrist in his, command in the iron grip of his fingers. His touch is warm, firm, and insistent. Butterflies flutter in my stomach. I can't argue, and as he starts to walk, I'm like a kite being dragged behind a child.

There's a dinner on tonight, and the hallway is empty, same with the upper servants' stairs, which he leads me toward. I tense up with the surprise of it. The fact he even knows where the servants go is a surprise to me, and he waits, on one landing, hearing a noise below. He lifts a finger to his lips, eyes glittering in the semi-darkness as he watches me.

I hold my breath.

I can't be caught like this, alone, with him, of all people. I've only been here a short time, and I already know what kind of man he is. Any association with him is a promise of whispers starting up. I stay quiet, and he smirks, knowing why I'm silent and not asking questions of him.

The bottom floor goes quiet, and he pulls me out of the door onto the second floor.

"My library," he says, turning a corner down a long hall. There's a low door to my left, not like the giant double doors that reach from floor to ceiling like on most of the great entertaining rooms on this level, and he opens it. "Inside." He gives me a gentle push on the small of my back and I'm inside, turning to ask him *what on earth* as he shuts the door behind him. The lights come on, and I inhale, my eyes going wide. I walk to the center of the room.

Thick woven rugs of deep red cover the wooden floor, low brown leather couches arranged by the fireplace. There's a

desk by the windows where the heavy curtains are drawn closed. That isn't what fully catches my eye, though.

It's not just a gentleman's library. It's an art museum. Tall bookshelves host many well-worn hardback books, and between them are the paintings. Paintings and photographs scattered on the walls of women, all of women— parts of their bodies—

My face heats up, and I stare steadily at him, refusing to look anywhere but right at him. If he brought me here, to this den of intellectual debauchery, to see my reaction, then all he's going to get is my pink cheeks.

"Ever the proper miss, aren't you," he says, voice formal, walking toward me slowly.

"It would be a good idea if you told me what you need to speak to me about," I reply, bracing myself as he comes closer. "I have a lot of work to do before I sleep tonight."

He nods.

"Of course. I wouldn't keep you beyond what you're comfortable with," he murmurs, "it's only that this the most private place I can think to have this conversation beyond my bedroom."

My heart skips a beat or three in my chest, and I exhale.

"I really need to go," I say, and start walking to the door.

"Don't," he says, his voice aching with something I do *not* want to dig into, and he holds out a hand in my way, stopping me. I look up at him.

"I've got work," I plead softly, hoping he'll understand that whatever he wants to ask me for, I can't give.

It doesn't even make sense to me. He's a marquis. He could have any one he wanted. But he's here, in this private, quiet corner of Wester Hall, staring at me like he wants to devour me, and he'll die if he doesn't.

"I want an understanding," his voice is pitched low and raspy. "And I think you know what I mean."

“You want to know I understand what kind of understanding you want? With me?”

I gesture to my chest, and he smiles, slow like honey, his green eyes so intense and bright. A shiver rolls through my whole body. I can't stop it.

“Where are my manners? Let me turn on the fire,” he says, leaving my side. He walks to the fire and bends to it.

I could go now. I could walk right out the door instead of falling deeper into whatever this is that he's doing. My legs are rooted to the floor though, and I can only watch while my better self is detached in the distance, screaming at me to go.

This is different from before.

I'm not like who I was in Paris.

I've learned my lesson, haven't I?

The fire sparks up, gas flames spearing into the air, and I shudder as he turns to me, shadows across his face from the warring lights.

“Come here,” he offers, motioning to the couch.

“I don't think I should.” Why can't I move? Why can't I move toward the door?

“Then I'll come to you.” He crosses the room, and I feel each of his footsteps like a heartbeat in my chest, until he reaches me. His hands come up, and he cups my chin. His fingers feel like they're burning my skin, but it's my imagination. And when I stare into his eyes, I know I'm lost.

It's happening again. I am the same person.

His lips touch mine, and *I can't*. I pull back with a gasp, yanking myself from his grip. My whole body is shivering with adrenaline. Cringing, I expect him to be angry. Some lordlings still think they own everyone under the roof of their household and sometimes beyond. It doesn't matter that it's the 2020s and how far we've come with service-workers rights.

“I’m sorry,” I mumble out, looking at the floor, waiting for it to come. The cuff to the side of my head. The cursed words.

Other girls I’ve known have had worse for less.

His breath is shallow and rapid, and he clears his throat.

“Eva, look at me.”

The shock of hearing my name on his lips makes my head jerk up out of reflex. He’s frowning, fingers flexing at his sides, like he wants to grab me again but is holding himself back.

And here I stand, just waiting for it.

Waiting for him to make his move. It’s all I can expect. It’s all I’ve *known*.

“If you say no, I won’t touch you,” he breathes out the words, and I wonder who this man is standing in front of me. Benedict keeps confusing me. In public, in front of the bar, he was someone else entirely, his touch demanding that I be his.

After my interview, he was a casual playboy, smirking and smug.

And now, he kisses me, then asks for my permission after? My heart is never going to recover from this back and forth.

“You don’t know what you’re asking,” I tell him, and my eyes burn, tears threatening to fall. His throat tightens, bobbing as he swallows.

“What do you mean?” His whole body is tense, leaning forward like he wants to touch me and is fighting himself. The veins fairly bulge on the backs of his hands, disappearing up his wrists into the sleeves of his button-down shirt. My mind, my eyes, want to follow them, as they wrap around his muscled forearms. He’s the kind of guy with what the magazines call ‘lickable arms’.

“I can’t *kiss* you, my lord,” I say his title precisely and with perfect enunciation. “You know that even being in here with you will end up with my ass being fired.” My cheeks are warm and probably pink, and I’ve sworn in front of him, but it doesn’t matter.

At this point, a little swearing is the least I can do.

“Call me Benedict,” he urges me. I stare at him. His eyes narrow. “I command it.”

“Are you serious?” I hiss and step further away. “I’m leaving —”

“That’s not what you want, is it?” He asks, tracking me with his own steps, so I can’t escape him. There’s a hunger in his eyes as he watches me, and I want to be angry at him, but my feelings are just confused. What is going on? He’s making me... want him.

I stop moving, standing my ground, and he walks toward me until he nearly bumps into me.

He’s stopped right before me, hands loose at his hips. He wants to grab me again, I can feel it, and it’s so very the opposite of what I need to be doing, but I can’t help it.

My eyes slide shut, and I tilt my head up.

“Thank you,” he whispers, and then he kisses me. His hands wrap around my waist, warm through my clothing, and he pulls me close.

I haven’t felt this way since—

My whole body lifts up toward him, electric and shivery. He kisses me like I’ve never been kissed, not ever, and I dig my fingers into the loose fabric of his shirt-sleeves, clinging to him.

“It’s not so dangerous,” he says, pulling back with a smirk, eyes-slitted.

“It’s completely reckless,” I breathe, and then kiss him again, chasing that taste and heat on his lips that I want.

I want it to consume me.

I want to drown in him, and it was so easy for him to pull down my defenses, wasn’t it?

The walls are crumbling all around me as he strides over them like they’re nothing. His hands span my waist, sliding up my

back to enshrine my shoulders in his fingers, thumbing at the base of my neck to find my pulse.

“I always knew I’d have you like this from the first moment I saw you,” he breathes between kisses, and kissing was never so much and not enough at the same time.

But something in his words pushes me away, and I fist my hand against his chest, shoving at him.

“Don’t stop,” the words rush out of me in a panic, and he lets me go, his eyes hectic with the need for me.

“What’s wrong? You liked it, no, you love it.” He lifts a hand as if he’s going to stroke the side of my cheek.

No. I can’t. It’s all going wrong. I turn and run for the door, the flicker of fear growing into an inferno.

“Eva,” he calls, but I fling the door open and run, the dark halls sheltering me from his touch, taste, and look.

I can never go back. Not now, not ever. It’s not until I’m locked inside my room, under the covers of my bed, shivering and shaking, that I finally feel safe enough to let out a breath I’ve been holding.

He doesn’t know, and it wasn’t his fault, but he’s not the first to touch me. He’s not even the first to say words like that.

And last time I got burnt so badly I had to run away from my whole life. So if I need to put a few floors of space between us now, and some distance for the next while, I’ll do that. I let my eyes close.

It won’t be Paris, I promise myself. It’ll never, ever, ever be like Paris.

MASON

Benedict's rooms are dark. He doesn't sleep in them often, either at his home in Hollywood or here. Why do I know this? What does any older brother do when he worries about his younger sibling? He waits up. He watches. As I do right now, sitting in one of the wing-back chairs by his fireplace, waiting for him to get in.

I know he's not with *her*. I ensured that much. Mrs. Harris knows the four of us better than any people in the world, and she's already marked Benedict's inappropriate interest in Miss Bell. There will be hall boys and footmen up and down the ladies' corridor tonight, carrying off small errands and making it impossible for Benedict to slip up to Miss Bell's door.

The thought makes a smile cross my lips for the first time today.

Nobody ever said that I play fair. If Benedict thinks he can have whatever he likes under my roof, he's sorely fucking mistaken.

I let my head rest back against the leather and close my eyes. How the hell did we get here? Ruby and Noah saw the writing on the walls and left last year, on a whirl-wind tour, away from the raging fight brewing between their older brothers. I was sad to see the twins go, but in a way, I needed the time to dedicate to fixing whatever was broken with Benedict.

And see to taking care of my daughter.

Now I've learned that there is no fixing Benedict. He's gone too far, and past the point that I can help him. He's refused

every off-ramp offered to him. I am resigned to leaving him to his fate. He is who he will be, and I can do nothing for it.

But he will not drag an innocent girl down with him.

Miss Evangeline Bell is an innocent; untouched and pure. She is everything I want for my daughter's caregiver and role-model. It doesn't hurt that—

The door opens and I don't shift an inch, my focus going forward, to him as he enters the room. He grunts, reaching for the light switch, his eyes not adjusted to the murk of his bedroom.

He manages to flick it on and get the door shut behind him, blinking in the light. His eyes are red-rimmed, and he's drunk.

Of course. Did he stay up this late, gambling with his friends? Losing another full account's worth of cash to the card sharps and degenerates he hangs around with? I feel my lip curling in disdain.

He takes two steps and stop short.

"Holy shit!" He shouts at the top of his lungs, staring at me, finally seeing me. "Warn me, Christ above." He reaches out for someone to steady himself on, and stumbles sideways, as there's no one there.

There's only me, sitting in this damn chair, waiting for him to return so I can put him in his place and remind him under whose sufferance he is tolerated.

Mine.

The power is all mine. I haven't cut him off yet, although it's been near-miss in recent months. My eyes blaze with fury, and he twists up his face in a sneer.

"Don't look out me like that," he slurs, his words confused, "you'd be doing the same if the roles were averted."

"Reversed," I correct him, getting to my feet. Standing, we're nearly the same height. I miss the days I could pick him up, when he was a boy, a child, that I could set on the right path. When he was a kid who believed in me and listened to me.

Instead he walks this trail alone, to ruin and wreckage, determined to drag this house along with him.

I will not allow it.

“Yeah, yeah, fuck off. I’m gonna sleep.” He starts to stagger toward his bed, and I cross the room in three strides, grabbing him by the shoulders. I twist him around and give him a shake.

“What the hell are you thinking?” I demand. He stinks of alcohol. Our set is the kind that has to indulge for politeness’s sake every once in a while. I have wine with dinner. I’ll share a whiskey or a brandy at night while I talk to my contemporaries.

But this?

He’s falling down drunk.

He wrinkles his nose, makes a noise, and then spits in my face. Saliva hits my cheek, and the carefully controlled rage that’s been simmering in my gut for years gives a tremor. He must see it in my face. His mouth tightens, his throat hitching as he swallows hard. He backs off, averting his eyes.

“I didn’t ask you to fix anything,” he says, with a hiccup in his words. “You always try to fix it, well guess what, *brother*—”

“You can’t be fixed,” I say flatly, cutting him off. “I know. I see that now. I’m sorry for even having attempted.”

He stumbles back as his spit drips off my cheek and hits the floor. The backs of his knees find the edge of the mattress, and he sits down with a muffled thud, staring at the ground, cradling his head in his fingers.

“You should’ve—” He mumbles, trailing off, his words buried into the palm of his hand. “Never-mind. Whatever. Fuck you.” He lifts his head to glare me down. “Go get fucked. Choke on your ducal sash.” He falls backward, arms spreading wide as the mattress welcomes him. His eyes close. My chest is tight. How the hell did we end up here? He was my best friend when we were children.

But life isn’t what it promises. The universe sticks you, not even from behind, no. It stares you in the face as it sinks a

blade between your ribs. Fate twists the knife in your chest and laughs as you go down to your knees, choking on the blood there, watching as it bubbles out of your lips.

The silence in the room closes in on me, thickening the air and making it hard to breathe. I came here for a purpose. I pull out the handkerchief from my pocket and wipe the wet from my cheek.

I came here for a good reason, and I'm not leaving until I've said my peace. Whether he's drunk or sober, that doesn't change what I need to say.

"I'll go when you swear to stay away from Miss Bell," the words are out of me without hesitation.

He lifts his head. He stares at me.

Fuck.

There's a smirk on his face, and he braces one hand on the bed, getting to his feet. His movements are unsteady, but his intention isn't.

He's misstepping physically as badly as I've miscalculated verbally.

"It's staying away from Miss Bell," he slurs, savage amusement in his tone. "Is that it then? The only thing you've ordered from me?" He looks up at the ceiling and lets out a short laugh. "Could you be more fucking obvious?"

He licks his lower lip as I debate shoving him back down on the bed and leaving. He's drunk enough. He might just stay if I put him in his place like that.

"Why don't we go to her right now, see which one of us she chooses," he threatens and starts walking to the door. It's impossible. I've poorly played my hand here, and he knows it. Even drunk, he knows.

I follow him, grabbing him by the upper arm, and wrenching him down to the ground. He stumbles and then swings for me, catching me across the face. Red flares along my jaw, the pain exploding in my bones. I reach for the back of his head and grab him by his hair, whirling him around. With a shove of my

knee into the back of his, he slams into the wall. I pin him there, arm barring against the nape of his neck. He lets out a growl, my whole weight pressing into him.

He tries to claw at me, but I grab his wrist with my other hand and twist his arm up behind his back until he lets out a breath,

“Mercy,” he grinds out, but I shove his wrist higher, making his shoulder strain. “Mercy!” He snarls. “Asshole, let me go!”

“Stay away from her. The help are not your playthings. Swear you will not take advantage,” I say between breaths, my adrenaline running on overdrive. How did we fall so far? How did we even get here? It breaks me apart, the world melting around us until nothing matters or counts except him.

He’s my younger brother. I hate that this is where we’ve ended up, barely able to stand being in the same room together. What kind of legacy have I left for Ruby and Noah to follow?

“I swear it,” Benedict says like a curse, and I let go, stepping back. He sags into the wall, his eyes closing like he’s in ecstasy. He shakes his arm and turns to look at me, leaning against the wall. “Bastard.”

“Hardly, or I wouldn’t be here,” I say loftily so he doesn’t see how much those words hurt. I want to think that my opinion of him matters as much, but I know it’s not true.

Somewhere along the way, I lost him. His respect, his familial love. He’s empty now, drained out of anything that kept him close to me.

I can’t focus on it. I have to think of Maddie and the two remaining siblings I have that still want to be in my presence for any other reason than to piss me off.

He bows his head, chin dipping to the ground, and laughs.

“You know, I used to give a shit about you,” he says, echoing my thoughts. “I wonder what happened to that guy, right? You ever ask yourself?”

I stare at him, unsure where he’s going with this, but I’m not liking it.

“Go to bed, Benedict,” I reply. He hitches his shoulder, his eyes in shadow.

“Go fuck yourself, Mason,” he spits back, standing up tall, although he’s favoring the side I twisted up. I feel a little guilty about that.

He takes a step toward me.

“We’re done. You gave your word. I’m leaving,” I say, and turn, walking toward the door. His laugh stops me in my tracks, feet away from exit.

“I gave my word, yes,” he says, and I turn slowly to look at him. He’s got his arms spread wide, like he’s trying to make himself as big as possible in the presence of a predator.

Is that me? Am I his predator? My chest hurts and I need a drink.

“I gave my word I wouldn’t take advantage,” he says, his sparkling with rage. “Never said I wouldn’t make her love me,” he threatens.

I’m silent in return. He wants more of a fight, and I’m not inclined to give it to him. I need peace and quiet.

“Goodnight,” I say, moving to the door. It swings open and he laughs behind me.

“You’ll fucking regret your words,” he says, whooping after me.

He wouldn’t. He’s drunk and ridiculous. He’ll sleep it off and be more sensible in the morning. If I need to speak with him again, I will. The nobility aren’t being spared a recent wave of claims of sexual harassment and intimidation from their staff.

He’ll see sense when he’s sober.

I close the door on his broken laughter, and hope he makes it to his bed. I pull out my phone and shoot off a text to his valet. Timms has been with Benedict for almost ten years, and is built like one of those football players. He can manage Benedict, and ensure he doesn’t do something stupid like hurt himself. Or drown in the bathtub.

I close my eyes, and let the peace of the house at night fill my lungs and my mind.

He gave his word. I'll have to hold him to it, but at least, he gave it.

“Miss Bell,” Madeline’s sly expression over her oatmeal makes me think she is about to ask some great favor to get out of her day’s lessons, maybe.

I still need to think about how to approach the duke over her workload. She doesn’t seem unhappy, but in her place I’d feel like I was a prisoner, being tugged this way and that.

“Yes, my lady?” I’m eyeing her tea and her oatmeal. She’s eaten enough that if she wants to stop, she can.

“I was wondering if you could stay,” she sits up properly, lifting her chin. “For my riding lesson.” Her gaze flits across my face nervously, like she’s worried I’ll say no.

There’s nothing else I’m supposed to be doing while she’s in her lessons, as far as my phone tells me, there’s no trip to prepare for or other outing. It’s just a regular day.

“I’d love that,” I say to her, and her smile broadens. It’s as if the sun has come out from behind the clouds, and for a moment I wonder if the duke looks like this when he smiles.

That’s not something I’ve seen him do yet, but maybe one day. He’s so severe and tied up by whatever occupies him that his expression is always solemn. I’d like to think that if I were a duke, with my own estate and miles and miles of land to explore, with a full staff and billions of dollars at my disposal, I’d smile more.

Maybe it’s true what they say, that a title doesn’t bring you happiness.

Benedict seems happy enough for the both of them. A little *too* comfortable.

“What do you think?” Madeline asks me later that afternoon, clipping her blue velvet helmet on, her dark brown curls braided into two tails over her shoulders. She looks like a miniature of some great riding lady, small button-down shirt a little too big on her, and cream riding breeches free of a single smudge. That won’t be the case once she’s done riding, but for now, there’s not a stray hair out of place.

“You look very chic,” I tell her, and she beams. The outdoor riding ring is shaded with a giant retractable ceiling which shocked me when I first saw it. Such a thing is so expensive, but I guess the duke can afford the very best.

“Does your father ride?” I ask her as we walk through the side gate and I pull it closed behind me. At the far end, her riding master waits, with a tacked-out pony and a mounting block.

“When he has time. Uncle says that he used to do it a lot more before I was born, but things are busy now.” She sighs, the footing soft and scuffing over the tops of her boots. “You’ll get mad if I’m too messy,” she says, looking down at where they’re already collecting dust.

“Not in the slightest,” I reply, “the whole point of riding is to get dirty.” I pat her shoulder. “If I don’t see at least three smudges on this white, I’ll be disappointed and think you didn’t have any fun.”

Madeline smiles up at me, heartbreakingly sweet, and my chest clenches. Whatever I’m doing here, hiding from my past, trying to eke out a financial cushion for myself, there’s a little girl who is in desperate need of love and attention. It’s obvious the duke barely has time for her, and her uncle is nothing more than a lecherous drunk. And I haven’t seen hair or whisper of the duchess—

“Excellent my lady, you look ready for the day, thank you nanny,” the riding master says, a red-haired man named Jethro about my age, who barely looks at me before helping Madeline into the saddle. I duck under the riding ring rails, a set of raised bleachers there with cushions every few feet

waiting for me so I can sit and watch. There's a breeze under the roof here, but the day is already baking hot, and I can feel the sweat gathering at the back of my neck under my hair. I wish I'd brought a pin to twist it up and out of the way.

Jethro's walking alongside Madeline as her pony trots, and he's trying to help her correct her seat and posture.

The bleachers vibrate and clang. I look to the side, and my breath catches.

Benedict stands there, looking out of place here in a baseball cap, white t-shirt, and scruffy, ripped jeans. The California sun sets his skin on fire, and the breeze tugs at his dark hair. All I can think of is his hands, tracing my body, pulling me close, the firebrand of his mouth on mine.

My breath stays caught until my chest feels like it's going to explode, and a shiver runs along my spine. My skin tingles. He walks toward me, careful on the slippery metal of the bleachers.

"This seat taken?" He asks, eyes sparkling with mirth at his own stupid joke.

"Yes," I reply, and look forward at the ring, where Madeline is now trotting on her own, posting beautifully, her braids bouncing along her back.

"Liar," he breathes, and sits next to me, too close. His knee brushes mine, and I can feel his presence like the heat of a fireplace, or the crackle of a raw electrical wire, dangerous to touch.

He's pure peril, sitting an inch from me, so close that if I breathe too hard, my arm will touch his. If I shift, my thigh will press into his.

He leans forward, the proud profile of his face is too handsome for fairness, and I'm sure that I've seen him in some magazine prior to ever meeting him. Probably a shoot in *Town and Country* if he's proper, or *Hello!* if he's not.

Lordling takes it all off! Showing the other half are just like us!

March Marquis Madness - These five eligibles have all the ladies in a swoon

Lord Benedict: Top Five Characteristics He Likes in a Woman

My mind spins through possible headlines as he turns to me, knee bumping mine, his green eyes shadowed with want.

Definitely not proper. He's absolutely been in *Hello!*, because I've seen that look before, and it wasn't one of the few times I let him into my immediate sphere.

I pull my hat off and begin fanning myself with the braided grasses, shifting away to give us both some space.

Not that he wants any. Not that I want it either, but I can't do this, not again, I need to keep myself safe.

"You're very good at pretending you're not interested," he murmurs, as if there was any risk that Jethro and Madeline could hear us at the far end of the ring. There's no way they possibly would though, not over Jethro's commands, the wind, and pony's hoofbeats.

"I need to stay focused on my charge," I say, and his eyebrows lift.

"You're also very dedicated, admirable in a nanny. Most—" He pauses, and a frown starts forming on his lips as he glances toward his niece.

"What?" I ask him, captured by the hitch in his voice. "You're not exactly the kind of man who holds himself back." I don't know why I'm speaking so frankly, but with him, I can. With me, at least, he doesn't stand on protocol. He barely demands it from anyone else in the world. He can talk fancy all he likes, I know that inside he's crying out for something. Real connection, maybe. Truth and tangibility. He's aching for it.

Men of power chase after help for a few reasons. One, to reassert their dominance over the world in some quiet corner, forcing their own feelings of inadequacy on a maid or hall boy depending on their sexual tastes.

But when Benedict pursues me, it doesn't feel like he's doing it because he needs the power.

He reaches out and grabs my wrist, the single touch sending a charge through me so strong I surge forward on my cushion, heels pressing into the metal of the step under me. I gasp, my gaze shooting across the ring.

Jethro and Madeline are still far away, and it looks like he's fixing her stirrup.

"Don't pull away from me," Benedict orders, bowing his head to my ear, his words caressing my skin.

"I am not under your command," I remind him, but my voice is shaky and undetermined. I don't want to pull from him even though I should. My eyes close, and I imagine what would happen if I yanked out of his grip and ran.

If he'd follow. Where I'd go, where I'd hide, until he found me and—

"Most nannies we've had aren't interested in her care," he says, his grip on me iron-tight. "But you are. Didn't you take this job to be in the laps of two eligible noble men?"

My head turns so I can look at him, and I twist my arm, slowly working it out from his fingers.

"Not in the slightest," I reply and he smirks.

"But I'm making it difficult for you to resist," he replies.

"Hardly." I look forward. Jethro's calling to Madeline to canter, and I sit forward, ignoring Benedict entirely.

She comes up in her saddle, bending forward, heel slipping back. The pony is too well-trained to be stubborn, and surges into a canter. Her face lights up immediately.

I feel Benedict's focus shift from me, to his niece.

"That's it," he mutters under his breath, and I flicker a glance to his face. He's staring at her as she comes toward us, riding the rail hard, her cheeks pink. The ring is gently curved, and there's a deep trail dug around it where countless other horses have ridden.

I'm stuck by how intense Benedict looks, completely having forgotten me as Maddie gets to the corner.

"Stay with him," he breathes out, and as she turns, knees tight on her horse, he lets out a sigh, reaching for my hand and holding it tight.

She canters away from us, pony's hooves kicking up puffs of dust from the ring's footing. His chest deflates and he relaxes, turning to glance at me with a wry smile.

"I tumbled on that corner when I was her age," he says, sheepish. His hand is still on mine, fingers twined.

"Could you—" I ask, tugging away from him. He grips tight and pulls me close, forcing my body against his, thigh to thigh.

"I know that your only focus is my niece and her needs, which I find admirable if frustrating," he says, and his eyes are bright and intense, our faces inches from each other. "But I want to know what I would need to do for you to find *me* acceptable."

My face is probably already pink from the heat, flushed and warm, but this is so much more. I'm grateful that we are so far away from Madeline and Jethro, at the far end of the ring so they can't hear us or see how close we are. It's beyond inappropriate. Anyone looking closely would *know*.

And they can't ever know. As soon as someone finds out what you've done, they have that much more power over you and your life.

Just the thought of that sends a shiver through my body. Benedict smiles at me, like warm syrup pouring over pancakes, and I hate that he wakes me up from the fog I've walked in for the last countless months.

He makes me want to forget Paris.

"Your silence only convinces me that your answer will not be no," he murmurs, and inches closer, his mouth close to my cheek. I can feel the slow spread of heat from his body, his hand sure on mine. "I'll chase you as long as you'll let me. But when I catch you?" Thick promise is in his voice, and I shudder.

“I can’t, don’t you know what I’m risking?” I finally find my words. “It’s not you that’s going to pay for it.” I pull away.

He doesn’t follow, and for once it feels like he’s actually listening.

“You want me, though, what does tomorrow matter?”

“A lot. Everything,” I say, not able to keep the acid out of my tone. “Look around you. All of this belongs to you and stays with you. I’m not a part of this world, and I don’t get to keep it when I cross the line.”

“You’re shaking—” he says, and takes my hands in his, holding them gently. “Why would you have to leave?”

I stare at him like he’s crazy.

“Didn’t you lose your last nanny because you couldn’t keep your hands off her?” I ask, pulling away from him. “Or are you focused on—”

“Your breasts?” He asks, wry grin twisting into place again. My mouth opens and he reaches for me. My hand comes up before I can stop it, and I slap him across the face.

It’s so hard and loud that across the ring, Madeline stops short, her pony halting in a skid. Jethro shouts out in surprise.

My whole body goes cold, the blood draining from it.

Oh.

God.

Benedict’s staring at me, frozen in place, like he never in a million years imagined someone laying hands on him.

Let alone a servant.

The shakes start in my gut. I touched nobility. Hit a high-born. The shudder rolls right through me.

There’s one thing that’s more unforgivable socially than touching and being touched in our master-servant relationship. And that’s an act of violence. That’s not just unforgivable, that’s *criminal*.

“I—” My eyes are wet. I’ve just ruined everything. I should’ve let him have what he wanted, taken from me until he was bored and left me to my own devices. Someone like Lord Benedict is looking for a fun time, not a long time, and now—my whole life is forfeit. Cracked and spilled through my fingers.

“Well,” he says, glancing away, his whole demeanor shifting. “That told me, didn’t it.” He whistles to Madeline. “Go on then, canter again!”

I think I’m going to be sick. I can’t move, waiting for the universe to crumble around me.

“Meet me in my room tonight,” he says into my ear as Madeline turns away, Jethro casting us a dubious glance before focusing again on his charge.

I inhale, sharp. He grabs my knee, fingers wrapping around it and he stares at me.

“If you don’t want me to speak of this to my brother, you will meet me in my room, tonight, after everyone goes to bed.”

There’s a solid lump in my throat I can’t seem to swallow down. I stare at him, the shaking starting to subside, my whole body feeling numb and chilled.

I nod, once, and he smiles, dark and meaningful.

“Good girl,” he says, his voice pitched quiet and low.

Oh god. What... have I done.

What is he going to do?

I turn back to watch Madeline, and he gets up, the bleachers ringing out as he steps down and walks away.

Maddie was so tired that she went to bed before dinner, and I took my meal down with the rest of the staff in the servant's halls. We eat well in the duke's house, better even than I did in Paris, which is saying something. I never had things like grilled salmon with a lemon-*creme* sauce there, and I deeply wish I could enjoy it.

Instead I'm picking at it, flaking my salmon filet away bit by bit, leaving a mess on my plate. Mrs. Harris gives me a look.

"I hope you're not coming down with something," she says, before glancing down the line of servants eating their dinners, keeping her voice low under their talk. We sit at the head of the table, even though I'm new to the household, my position makes me more senior than the maids, the groomsmen from the stable, the footmen and others. "A cold will rip right through the household and absolutely upend everything."

I shake my head.

"No Mrs. Harris, it was hot out at the riding ring, that's all, and Lady Madeline wanted more stories than I had energy for." The last bit is a lie. Madeline barely made it through one reading of *The Paperbag Princess* before her eyes were shut and she was half-way to snoring.

But I can't exactly tell Mrs. Harris the truth. My stomach is sour and my whole body feels like one big shake. I might've thought Benedict was attractive, my body certainly did, but right now—I feel caught. Like a fox kit with its paw in a trap. Do I chew myself loose? Do I stay and wait for slaughter?

My eyes have been burning half the day as I blink back tears. And now dinner is almost over, the servants eat late, and I've got to go to my room and wait.

There are no parties tonight, no entertaining, and so people are already talking about retiring for the evening to read books or watch movies in their rooms. It's a good life, serving. A life of it gives you a solid pension, excellent medical care, and most things taken care of. You give up your free time to provide a life of leisure for others, but it's better than working Out There. The world is unforgiving to most people, with few protections.

Jobs among the high-born are coveted, and that's reflected in the quality of people attracted to and retained by this job.

It's why Mrs. Harris spots my hectic eyes and the color in my cheeks a mile off. She's got a sharp vision that misses nothing.

"I hope you're settling in well," Avery says, scooping up a last bit of *lemon-creme* on a spoon, sighing over it with the sorrow of a man mourning his dead bride.

"She's doing excellently," Mrs. Harris says, which surprises me. My eyes lift from my plate to meet hers and she gives me a kind smile. "The duke already speaks highly of you. Lady Madeline has never been happier."

My mouth goes dry. They have no idea what I've done today. Or what I'm going to do tonight. If they knew— I'd be out of here with my things thrown out the gate behind me. And I'd probably be riding in a paddy wagon on top of it all.

My face burns like a house fire, and I hope they think it's embarrassment at being praised. Making my excuses that I need to get Madeline's clothes ready for the next day, I get up, and hurry out of the room.

The halls are cool and dark, as I climb the stairs, trying to make as little noise as possible. I need to be small, invisible, but everywhere I go, turning down the halls to reach my room, I feel like Benedict's watching me.

I feel his hands on me. I hate how they make me feel, how my whole body responds to his touch and his kiss like—

I can't even relax when I'm in my room finally, the door shutting behind me and closing the rest of the house out. I lean into the thick solid wood, my belly trembling, and I wonder what would happen if I just don't go.

Am I stupid? He'll report me. Or he'll come find me myself, here, in this room. I glance around the walls. He wouldn't, not here, would he? With his niece right next door?

I rush to the bathroom and wash my face, scrubbing my hands and under my nails, feeling like I need to get rid of some dirt there that I can't even see.

After, I curl up on my bed staring at the wall. Time drifts. My phone chimes, one AM already. My throat is closing up and I reach for it, turning off my alarm. Everyone should be asleep already, given how early we all rise. I'm at the door and questioning myself. I could stay in here, safe and locked away.

What would he do?

Bang down the door? Wake the whole household to get to me?

God I can't even think about it.

I slide outside into the hall, ghosting over the carpets, drifting slowly toward his bedroom door. I've never been inside his rooms, but I know where it is. That grand door waits, a demon on the other side. Statues, large shadowy gryphons, loom on either side of the door, their claws extended, welcoming or threatening, I'm not sure.

I'm twenty feet from it, and I can't make myself go any closer. Staring it down, I know he's in there, biding his time, knowing the kind of hold he has over me, over my whole life. Is he applauding himself, for his cruelty and manipulation?

My eyelashes feel cold in the gently air conditioned hallway and I wipe away the wet tears making them that way. It's not fair. He'd been the one crossing the line, not me. The feel of my wet finger-tips, damp from my own tears, snaps something in me.

No. I'm not giving in. I'm going to march in there and tell him exactly what I think of him. If he expects me to bow my head and beg, to let him do whatever he wants to me—

I surge forward, fire lighting up my spine, determination sparking in my heart.

How *dare* he?

I lift my hand to knock loud and hard on his door, not caring who knows I'm here.

A shadow to my left moves and I startle out of my skin, mouth opening to shriek. A hand claps over it, and Benedict pulls me into his chest.

"Silence," he orders, voice harsh, before pushing me away, eyes boring into mine in the semi-darkness of the hall. I go still, fire dampened as fast as it roared to life in me. "Be still and silent."

He doesn't seem like he's going to let me go unless I agree.

Then I nod. He's satisfied with that and lets me go, leaving me to gasp softly in front of him.

"You nearly made my heart give out," I growl, keeping my voice down, though why I'm protecting him I have no idea. I'd been expecting him to be in his room, naked on his bed, waiting for me to do... whatever with him.

Instead, here he is, fully dressed, in a black wool coat, over a sharp dark suit. He hands me a navy cloak.

"Put this on, it gets cold out here at night."

I stare at the offered clothing, unsure of what to say.

His eyes narrow.

"You are coming with me, *now*." He wraps the cloak around my shoulders, fastening it at my neck. His thumb brushes my pulse, for a split second, then his hand wraps around my wrist and he pulls, tugging me along after him.

I'm forced to go, although part of me wonders what he'd do if I dug my heels in and hollered. There's something different about him now, an energy I haven't felt before. I hate to admit it, I'm kind of curious. At least enough to see this through.

"Wait," he pauses, and then turns on me, hands going to my waist. My lungs expand, the intake of breath sharp and shrill

as he grabs me, hands running up to my ribs, and back down again. He's—

“There it is,” he says, fishing my phone from my pocket. He glances at the screen, turning off, before setting it on top of the nearest statue, a black marble vase. My mouth drops open. What is he even thinking? “You can't be tracked where we're going. Come.”

My heartbeat speeds up, this cloak and dagger (almost literally, since I'm in a cloak), makes me follow him if for any reason because I need to know what he has planned.

This Benedict is a different man from the one I've known so far. He's barely flirted with me at all, hasn't even looked at me like he wants to devour me. It has me off kilter to the point that I tag after him without a question. In my gut I know that I'll find out in due time, and something is telling me that I *must* know. Everything hinges on it. I don't know why my guts are screaming it at me, but I can't do anything else but listen.

He squires me down the stairs and out a side door. We're in a rose garden, with gravel paths. The moon is red and hangs heavy over the world, a bold eye witnessing our quiet escape.

“You'll tell me where we're going eventually—” My words cut off in a gasp as a root snags my ankle.

Benedict turns, and grabs me as I tumble, holding me tight, inches from the hard, sharp-stone ground. I breathe harshly through my mouth and he sets me back on my feet, steady and stable, looking me in the eye.

“Alright?” He asks. A tremble rolls through my body.

“I'd feel better knowing what's going on,” I say, hoping to get to the bottom of this particular mystery adventure without needing to go anywhere with him.

He's got danger spelled out in his name, looping tight around the letters like a snake coiled and ready to strike.

He gives me a flat look.

“You know better than to ask, don’t you?” He turns away, although he keeps a firm grip on my arm this time. I’m not sure whether it’s to stop me from running or falling. I keep pace with him as we start to walk downhill. It’s a long way to the edge of the property which is where I think we’re heading, and even though the night is cold just like he promised, I’m working up a sweat, nervous and exertion-wise.

He stops short and I bump into him, tugging me to the right, through a break in the bushes and hedgerow.

“Here,” he murmurs, “watch your step.”

We’re at the edge of a steep incline, a curving, curling set of wooden stairs that pitch right down to a ravine waiting for us. It’s only lit up because of the moon overhead, and the height is break-takingly horrifying. The stairs look like they’re older than the house, and not fit to carry either of us.

“Benedict,” I say, in warning, and I can barely make out the way he raises an eyebrow at me.

“Bold, are you?”

“Since you’re basically kidnapping me—”

“Blackmailing,” he says in a practical tone, with little shame in his words. “And I’d like to say we’re going on an adventure together.”

“This is *not* an adventure,” I hiss at him but he ignores me and starts down the stairs. God above, I’m stupid. I should run back to the house. But something is going on here that I need to know the answer to. He’s set a puzzle in front of me that I have to solve.

So I follow in his footsteps, like an idiot, each step promising to send me plunging into the depths of the ravine below.

Down we go, the curve and switchback of the stairs unending. It keeps giving me miniature heart attacks until we get to the bottom, and I’m grateful to be on solid ground. I hear the crinkle of creek water over rocks, and a low bridge crosses a stream that emerges from the brush as he walks forward and I follow.

“Right through here,” he says, our feet beating hollow on the bridge’s planks. I’m so far from the big house that there’s no going back at this point, and when I look up the ravine behind me, the stairs gleam in the moonlight like a threat.

“I didn’t know this part of the estate existed.” It’s not on the maps I’ve seen, and it’s not on the map on my phone either. Maybe I hadn’t been searching for the right thing, though.

‘Deathly Ravine’ wasn’t something I’d exactly been looking for.

There’s a forest on the other side of the stream, once we cross I’m plunged into darkness, hidden from the moon.

“Benedict!” I hiss again. He’s tugging faster than I’m comfortable, forcing me to walk quickly.

“Relax,” he says, sounding the opposite of that, a note of tension in his throat. “They should be right—”

Light spills across my face as he pulls me into a small clearing.

I exhale at the sight of a cabin, smoke puffing out of its tall chimney, steeped roof and stone walls welcoming as much as they’re surprising here. What was I expecting, in the middle of a wooded area, down a murder staircase and over a troll bridge away from the estate house?

The light nearly blinding me is from a front door that has swung open, and a man’s silhouette stands there, beckoning to us.

“Hollywood, you finally came,” that man calls, and I swallow, looking up at Benedict. He steps forward, assured of himself. I hang back for a moment, the man who called to us disappearing inside the cabin. The door swings shut behind him.

“Wait, what is this?” I ask, pitching my voice low. I dig my heels in and refuse to go any further until Benedict turns around to look at me, frustration evident on his face.

“What do you think it is?”

“I don’t know, your den of inequity? A Turkish bath?” He scowls at my words, glances behind him before grinning at me, mysterious and infuriating.

“This is nothing more, and nothing less, than the beginning of my brother’s downfall,” he says. “We’re replacing the duke with yours truly.” He rests his hand on his chest, as dread spills out of my heart and races along my veins, filling up my body. “And you, sweet girl, are going to help me.”

“Who’s the girl?” There are men ranged around a table, cards stacked up high and dealt between them. There’s a tower of chips in front of each man. They look like Benedict, a group handsome, entitled noblemen dripping in expensive clothes and bad attitudes.

I barely acknowledge them. Benedict’s words gripped me and pulled me into this viper’s nest. Now I stand here, to his left and slightly behind him, trying to be absorbed into his shadow.

“Ignore her. She’s bound to me.” He waves a hand toward me like I’m nothing, easily dismissed and small. The rest of the men glance at me for a moment before turning back to their card game. I give him a look that I hope is menacing, but he doesn’t even notice, crossing the room to take a spare, empty seat.

I stand there, dumbstruck, and count them. There are seven of them seated at the table. Seven men plotting the duke’s downfall. Demise? I’m not sure. How often are dukes deposed from their titles and lands? I can’t even remember it ever happening. Not in recent, modern history.

Back in the early days of America, sure. There were poisonings. There were hangings. Evil men did evil things. But that doesn’t happen anymore. No matter his crimes, there’s no way for someone at the top to fall so low.

And the duke might be a cold, unfeeling recluse who seems disinterested in anything but the contents of his computer

screen, but that doesn't mean he deserves the same kind of fate that met his kind two hundred years ago.

A snapping of fingers brings me out of it, and I look at the person trying to get my attention. It's the man who came to the door, his mustache as blond as his hair, his eyes dark brown and humorless. He looks like he's *real* fun at parties.

"If you're good for something, serve," he says, pointing at me and then flicking his hand toward a kitchenette in the corner of the room. This cabin is small, enough for a main living area and a staircase that leads to a loft upstairs where I think I see a hint of a bedpost. There's a single door other than the front, which I'm guessing holds a bathroom. How they have plumbing and electricity out here when I've never seen this place on any of the maps of the estate I've studied is a mystery.

My gaze meets Benedict's for a fleeting moment, and he nods at me, giving me the go-ahead. Never mind that I'm not a footman or a serving girl, I've strayed into deep waters, and if I'm not careful, the current will pull me under here. What Benedict has planned is far more dangerous and removed from my past mistakes.

His one look tells me everything. *Not a single wrong step here.*

There are beers in the fridge, frosty-cold on my fingers, and I snap off the caps, bringing them around to the men. Benedict's got a handful of cards already, although he's watching me out of the corner of his eye as I go.

"My lord," I say to the first man, offering him a beer and taking away his nearly empty.

He catches my arm with his hand, yanking it forward and pulling me off balance. My eyes widen, and I jerk.

"This isn't the usual piece you bring, Hollywood," he says to Benedict, a cigarette hanging from his mouth and a disgusting cloud of smoke puffing out with his words. I try not to inhale, and I try not to cough.

"No. Let her go," Benedict says mildly, "or I'll gut you along with my brother." He tosses a few chips into the middle of the

table and goes back to ignoring me. The man holding me eyes me carefully but loosens his grip and lets my arm slide through his fingers.

“You weren’t this way when we were growing up,” another one of the men says, mildly reddish-blond hair and accent betraying the fact that he is very much not American. England, on the south, probably, given how loose he holds his vowels. He gives me an up-and-down glance before shrugging. “And I’ll never understand the American fondness for including the *help* with things that are above their station.”

A third man laughs, tossing his cards down on the table, and all of them groan.

“And that’s why you lost the war,” he says to the British noble. They are noble, all of them must be. I see it in the way they hold themselves and barely even acknowledge me as I bring beer after beer to the table. There’s a full ashtray that needs emptying, and I don’t want to touch it, but ignoring it would call attention to myself.

And if I’m in a snake pit, the last thing I want to do is draw notice. Instead, I memorize their faces, committing to memory the way they talk and how they refer to each other.

Benedict is Hollywood. Of course, their titles are more important than their actual names. The others are Dallas (the smoker who grabbed me), Brighton (the man from England), Wyoming, Orlando, Boston, and Columbus, who first asked who I was when we walked into the room.

“The help are useful. Especially when they know the benefit more from keeping their mouths shut—”

“I prefer it when they keep their mouths and legs open,” Boston laughs, tilting his beer to me. “You ever ridden a train?” He leers at me as I pass him by, and I try not to freeze up. The thought of any of them touching me, of *all of them*, is nauseating, and my body wants to bolt. I can’t, though. That’s what he wants. If I react, he’ll only get worse and—

Benedict slaps his hand down on the table, his eyes flint hard and furious.

“Enough,” he barks, leaning forward so fast the table shakes, threatening to upend all the chip towers. The other men protest.

“Leave her alone,” Brighton says, giving me a good once over. “I wouldn’t be tempted. But Benedict has his own reasons and tastes.”

I’m not offended. Brighton has an upturned nose and looks like he’s been kicked by a mule. I wouldn’t be tempted by him, either.

“You’re such an ass, insulting a lady,” Orlando says with a roll of his eyes.

“She’s no lady,” Brighton shoots back. I get one final beer before retreating to the corner, not sure what to do with myself, but the less attention I draw to myself, the better. Right now, even my existence seems to be causing a stir.

I shrink into myself and watch them, head tilted down, making myself small and still. It’s a skill you learn when your mother is a drunk and the nights are long and abuse-filled, I guess.

“Well, have at it. You dragged us out here to this corner,” Wyoming says, Brighton and Dallas nodding in agreement.

“Do you know what a pain it is now that the Concorde isn’t functional anymore?” Brighton grouses, and Dallas gives him a strange look.

“You don’t fly on your own jet?”

Brighton growls, bristling at the comment so fast and furious that his face pinks up with rage.

“Sore point,” Benedict answers. “His older brother cut him off.”

All seven men at the table are silent for a moment, and then I realize it. What binds them together brings them here, to this small cabin on the edge of the estate that doesn’t belong to any of them.

They’re all younger brothers. Earls, lords, in their own right, barons, maybe, but from what I barely remember, the metroplex of Dallas-Fort Worth is a secondary duchy under

the control of its larger proper of the entire principedom of Texas.

And so the rest of them are under similar control, under the thumb of some older brother who's titled and has more money than sense. The only one of them owning to a title properly is Wyoming, an entire state never made into a principedom either, despite its vast land mass.

I'm watching a collection of highborn malcontents. My mouth goes dry. And they're planning on killing the Duke of Los Angeles. My fingers start to tremble, and I hide them in the pockets of my dress, moving slowly so I don't attract their notice.

But why would any of them help Benedict?

They fall into silence, Orlando dealing out the cards, and I watch Boston under my eyelashes. He's quieter than the rest, having not said much of anything, holding his cards close to his chest. A ring glints on his wedding finger, the polished band platinum. No lordling like him would be caught dead in silver.

The rest have bare fingers, un-married, all of them. I wonder what Boston's lady-wife thinks of where he is right now? Does she know?

Columbus casts his cards on the table, and each man lets out a groan.

"Give it up, boys," he says, leaning in to gather up the chips with a laugh that ought to shake the dust from the rafters of this small building.

Who lived in it anyway? Maybe a gamekeeper?

"My brother is going to complain," Orlando says with a sigh before glancing over at me. He taps his beer bottle and tilts his head to the fridge. At least he's asking nicely. Comparatively, anyway. I slip to the fridge as the men talk, Benedict's voice a low buzz in the background.

"He doesn't take risks," Benedict complains, "so that option is out."

“I swear my brother’s wife encouraged him to take up hunting larger predators in the hopes he’d end up gutted by a lion,” Dallas comments idly, playing with some of the chips he has left. He lifts them up and drops them again, letting them slip through his fingers. They click together rhythmically.

“How’s he with the help?” Orlando says as I set the beer down in front of him. He lifts a hand and reaches for my wrist. “Does he look at you, girl? A knife in the bedroom is a lot more efficient than any other kind of killing.”

His fingers graze the inside of my arm, and I jerk away and back.

Benedict makes a noise of warning in the depths of his chest.

“What?” Orlando says, glaring across the table at his friend. Dallas chuckles.

“You wouldn’t say no to a few million dropped into a bank account somewhere foreign, would you, girl?” He asks me directly, and I’m caught in their spotlight, all eyes on me. “A new passport, a new name. What’s your life worth, anyway?”

I tear my gaze from his and stare at Benedict, letting the weight of my anger speak for me. He clears his throat.

“Leave off Dallas,” he says with a wave of his hand. “I haven’t ruled it out yet, but I’d prefer not to—”

“Lose your new plaything? She’s not much to look at,” Brighton says with a dismissive sigh, gathering up his chips. “I’m done for tonight, chaps.”

His insults glide right over me. I’m nothing to them, and they know it. I’m possibly a means to the end of the duke. It still doesn’t answer why. Except they’re all younger sons. That sticks in the back of my mind like a thorn in my palm, burning and demanding I work it out.

I melt back into the shadows.

“You’ll call the car for me; I’m not hiking up through those woods. I swear they’re haunted,” Brighton continues complaining, and I feel bad for any of the servants under his control and the people that he rules over. He’s a mean, petty

little man, and I'm surprised that Benedict even makes time for him.

They all make my skin itch.

"Nothing in America is haunted," Wyoming says with a roll of his eyes, getting out of his seat. "So still, no plan?"

He glances at me with a meaningful purpose, and I hold my breath. I'm not going to kill someone. Not for millions of dollars, and when I flick my gaze to Benedict, I hope he sees the conviction in my eyes.

I really have to wonder if he's serious about this. I thought he was a useless playboy with an empty title, but here he is, planning the over-turning of one of the major duchies in the entire country. How deep runs the hatred he holds for his older brother?

And does the duke return the sentiment?

Benedict gets to his feet, walks to the wall, and flicks a switch I hadn't noticed. It lights up once, then dies. It's a call button, I realize. There are a few in the house for alerting the drivers that a car is needed. There must be a drive, even gravel, nearby, and cars waiting for these men.

"As long as all of you still hold firm—" he says, turning to them.

"My brother's next on the list," Dallas says, sounding irritated, and I have to bite the inside of my cheek to stop myself from gasping. Are they all planning to get rid of their older brothers? "So I'm not backing out now."

"Patience," Benedict urges, glancing at each of them, holding his hands out as if to stop them physically from moving. "If this is going to work, each of you needs to exercise that steel will you brag about having."

Oh. God. They are planning it. Fratricide. Murdering sitting earls, dukes, and lords. *Treason*.

I watch Benedict from the shadows, trying not to breathe, trying not to *blink*, as the men file out of the room, muttering with each other. Benedict watches them go, then turns to me.

“And now this involves you as well,” he says, “payment for my saying nothing of that love tap you gave me.”

The door closes with a click, and I exhale.

“You want me to seduce your brother and kill him in his sleep?” I ask him, incredulous, not even able to keep myself from saying it. He rolls his eyes.

“It’s one thought.”

“Not a serious one,” I tell him, and he looks taken aback that I have opinions at all. He’s between me and the door, but at this point, I’ll charge him if I have to. I need to get out of here and marshal my thoughts. This is way beyond anything I’d ever imagined I could be involved in or walk in on. “A massive plot to kill all of the elder sons across seven of the nation’s founding families?” I ask him softly, taking a step toward him. “You’re crazy.”

“Insane with thwarted purpose,” he replies, “you wouldn’t understand. You can go anywhere and be anything.” He turns away, and his shoulders are tight.

He is not the playboy I met outside of Revenge in North Hollywood. He’s not the flirtatious younger son who teased me after my interview in the carriage house. He’s not even the man who’s kissed me, touched me, and made me want him even though I shouldn’t.

He’s someone else entirely, dark-shadowed and dangerous, if only to himself.

“They’ll find you out, and you’ll hang for it,” I tell him.

“Not another word,” he replies and opens the door. “They’re gone.”

“To their waiting cars, butlers, and drivers? Not exactly subtle.” I’m twisting the knife, treading the line, even as his back stiffens and he turns, expression irritated.

“A gentlemen’s gathering of cards in the old huntsman cabin is nothing suspicious.”

“It is when none of you brought your phones,” I reply. “Who needs to hide their whereabouts? People who are plotting.” I

point my finger at him. “Do you even know the first thing about planning an assassination? About not getting caught?”

“You’re under the delusion that I care for your opinion.” He’s irritated with me, and I follow him out. Someone’s going to be by to clean up the mess. Has he thought of *that*?

“What about every time you and your little crew meet up? Who’s cleaning up the glass bottles and emptying the ashtrays?” I ask him. We’re outside, the night air so fresh it prickles my lungs after the smokey innards of the cabin.

He doesn’t answer me, and I track behind him. Over the bridge. Up the nauseating staircase. I’m trying not to pant hard, sweating by the time we get to the top.

“Somebody is going to see something they shouldn’t,” I needle him, my breaths puffing out of my lungs between words. He’s still silent, and the trip back to the house is faster than the trip from it.

“See, now I have all these questions,” I hiss at him as we go inside the big house. Something’s changed between us, with how quiet he is, and how, oh, I don’t know, he’s let me in on the fact he’s trying to commit murder. Mass-murder. Of the ‘hung drawn and quartered for treason’ kind. Maybe it’s that, or the night air, or how tired I am, that’s taken ahold of any sense of self-preservation I have.

The servants’ halls swallow us up, silent and still with everyone in bed. Even the hall boys will be asleep, although I’m not trying to keep my voice down. He’s got his back to me, walking onward like he intends to just go upstairs to the family levels as if everything is normal.

He’s insane.

“You’re going to end up dead, and I won’t have any part in this,” I call after him. He stops in his tracks and turns. He comes back to me.

“I could have had you,” he says, without addressing anything I’ve said to him over the last fifteen minutes. His eyes are burning. There’s an exit sign hanging above us, casting off

demonic light, and he looks like the devil, handsome and deadly.

I swallow the taste of metal in the back of my mouth and smoke.

“What—”

“After what you did today? Your body was as good as mine. I could have used you for my own desires, made you love me, and had you take care of him out of love for me. But I thought, why waste time seducing you when I could just implicate you in the same plot?” Benedict tilts his head, his sharp cheekbones thrown in red relief, and I inhale. “I made that first mistake with the last version of you. Not this time. You were there tonight. If I swing, so do you.” He grabs my arm, fingers digging into the flesh of my skin. My heart is hammering like a bird’s wing, slamming into my ribcage so loud I can barely hear him over it. “So what will you do?”

“I—”

He doesn’t even let me get out another word, chasing me down, stealing my breath.

“You think my brother is so saintly? Maybe I should let you know what he has in store for you.” His eyes are liquid glass, bottle-green with blown pupils.

“I wouldn’t believe it,” I whisper because nothing Benedict says is the truth. All of it is twisted words like sharp, broken glass.

“No, I don’t suppose you would,” he says and then pulls away. “Go to your room,” he rasps. “Before I do something I regret.”

I shudder at that because something in the way he talks to me makes the fire in my belly grow stronger. It’s not right. He’s planning to murder the duke, and he wants me to go along with it.

His eyes narrow, and he gives me a gentle, if firm, push.

“Go,” he demands, and when my breath catches and I don’t move, he lunges toward me. I scramble back, feet slipping on the floor, turn, and run, my feet pounding on the wooden floor.

Benedict's laugh, whiskey-laced and terrifying, follows me, echoing off the walls.

“Miss Bell?” Madeline’s hushed voice breaks through my sleep, and I open my eyes. Sun is streaking through the curtains in my room, and she’s perching on the edge of my bed. I sit up with a gasp.

“Oh god,” I whisper and stare at my small charge. She’s still in her nightgown, dressing robe wrapped around her, and hair in braided pigtails. I’ve slept in. And the world doesn’t care that my entire universe was thrown into jeopardy last night. Today has arrived bright and cheerful and demanding attention. My heart slows down as Madeline crawls onto my bed, curling up like a kitten. “What time is it?” I croak and look for my clock. She giggles as I see the time.

Thank God. I only slept over by thirty minutes. She’s not late for any lessons.

“I can skip breakfast,” she offers helpfully as I slide out of bed, trying not to dislodge her and dump her on the floor.

“No, I don’t think so,” I say, “give me a minute, and I’ll be dressed, and then I’ll get you ready.”

She watches me rush around my room and then slips from the bed.

“I can dress myself,” she says quietly, catching my attention for a moment as I grab my hairbrush.

“What? You don’t have to—” But she’s gone, running through the door that joins our rooms. I sigh. I dress as fast as I can, brushing my teeth in double time, and true to her word, she’s already half-dressed when I find her in her bedroom,

surrounded by about ten princess dresses that she's dragged out of her giant closet.

"You know it's the blue linen during lessons," I remind her, as she's got one arm stuck out of the neck hole of the lilac, floaty dress she's trying to pull on.

"But I like the purple," she insists. I bend down and help her out of it.

"Not for lessons, but you can wear it later, okay?" I promise her, laying the pretty dress on the bed for the evening. "I think your father has guests tonight, so this dress will be just right for that." I smooth the lacy curls on the many silken layers of the dress. This garment alone is worth in the thousands, and she's got a good twenty more in the closet. She must grow out of them in months, only for more to be sewn, tailored to her exact measurements.

It seems like a waste on a child. What do they do with them when she's a new size? But it's not my money.

No, it's only the tax money that everyone in the state pays that goes to clothe a single child for sixty days. While other children starve.

"See, I can do it now," Madeline insists, and I turn, shaking off that thought. She's in her white button-down and a blue linen apron-skirt, ready for her first lesson. After breakfast, though.

Mrs. Harris gives me a *look* when I bring the breakfast tray down because even though I got Madeline off to her first lesson on time, I missed the window for the maid to come collect the tray.

"Anything you want to tell me?" She asks as I breeze by.

"Nope, everything's great," I lie through my teeth, setting the breakfast tray down and rushing off to go straighten up Madeline's room.

I open the door and slam right into six feet somethin' of somebody. He grunts and my eyes snap up to his face.

Oh crap.

The duke stands there, looking as surprised to see me as I am him.

“I’m sorry,” I blurt out, bowing my head quickly. “Your grace.”

“No, it’s—” He sounds like he’s shaking off his shock at being bulldozed into by me, “it’s fine Miss Bell.” That way he says my name... it catches me and I lift my chin. He’s giving me a strange look.

“I found this of yours,” he says after a moment and holds out his hand. My heart stops.

It’s my phone. I take it from him and slip it into my dress pocket.

“Sorry about that,” I say, apologizing again.

“I’m not going to ask how you managed to lose it on top of a priceless statue right outside my brother’s room—”

Oh. My. Fucking. God.

I will my face to stay blank, and pinch the inside of my palm with my thumbnail, trying to keep any heat from my face.

“Miss Bell,” he starts, and then stops, thinking through his words, picking them carefully. “My brother is a troubled man.”

You have no idea.

Wait. Unless the duke *knows* about Benedict’s plan to murder him and sit on his throne?

Is that what the duke is talking about?

“He seems complicated, your grace,” I say, trying to put it in ways that couldn’t be taken one way or the other. He can’t know that I snuck out with Benedict last night, can he? If he does, I’m dead.

But if he does, why would he have me keep looking after his daughter today? He can’t be that hard up for a nanny that he’d want a murderous traitor under his roof.

And he tolerates Benedict's presence. No. From the slight hint of a sad smile on the duke's face, he thinks that I'm falling for Benedict.

"I'm dedicated to my job, my lord," I say, "your daughter, Lady Madeline, is my only true care and charge here, and I'm focused on her needs alone."

"I've heard nothing other than that from all reports," he replies warmly, the first glimmer of it I've seen from him since coming here.

He's stern, to be certain, but is it more than that?

You have no idea what my brother has planned for you. Those whispered words in the back of my mind make me shiver.

"I've got to get her room cleaned," I say, giving a polite mini curtsy and duck by him. "We had a bit of a slow start to the day."

He watches me go, I feel his eyes on me as I start to pick up her clothes. All those dresses that she pulled out of her closet in hopes she could wear them. When I turn, three of them tucked over my arm, he's still there.

"Is there something else I can help you with, your grace?" Just seeing him stand there, in the doorway, like he's got nowhere else to be when he's probably the busiest man in this entire estate with demands on his time like I could never understand, is odd.

"My brother can be charming," he says quietly, his words meant only for me, in case anyone should be passing by in the hall outside. But he leaves the door open, to give no illusion of impropriety if someone finds us. "But make no mistake, he has hurt more people than I can count, and I don't think he knows how to care anymore."

His words strike at my heart and I lift my gaze from the dresses I'm about to slide onto hangers, to his face.

The duke's expression is sober, so like his brother, but older, more refined. There's lines at the corners of his eyes, I realize, more than there should be at his years.

How heavy the weight rests on the strongest of shoulders.

He's like his daughter. Busy, focused, working hard— and Benedict is planning on pulling it all down around their ears. My heart flutters in my chest, a feeling of protectiveness that I don't think I've ever known, growing there. It's warm, and small, but as I stare at the duke, a man I should have no pity for, my chest feels like it's going to explode.

He's going to kill you.

I want to say it. The words are thick in my throat, a bubble of confession, and never mind what it means for me. Surely in the face of unearthing that kind of conspiracy, my hitting the marquess wouldn't mean anything, would it? All would be forgiven?

And what, I confess what I know, and he pleads innocence. With what proof? I have none. It's my word against his.

"Did he ever, your grace?" That's all I can muster. But it'll give me some more insight into Benedict. Before I know it, I'm crossing the room, Madeline's dresses clutched in my hands.

"Care?" The duke glances out the nearest window, expression softening. "Maybe. I'm not sure. Titles do things to us, I think." He's gentle like this, not so severe or strict, and he almost looks sad. Like he's remembering his brother when they were younger, and life wasn't so unyielding. "The loss of our parents—"

"That's hard," I breathe, feeling that same ache. My parents aren't gone, but they might as well be. Sometimes we make choices that mean we can never go home. I've done just that. "How did it—"

"Nautical accident," he says, voice growing clipped, and there's that look of forbidding comes back into his eyes. The walls come up, and I'm shut out, just as I'm about to get some more answers.

I need to know more, about him, about the marquess. There's no way I'll be believed if I say anything now, but if I somehow

insert myself into this world, get closer to the duke, gain his confidence?

I could save his life. I could rescue him from whatever horrible end Benedict has planned for him, and Madeline won't have to grow up without her father. There's so much more I want to ask him, to pry open the secrets that this house holds.

"Surely the duchess has a good relationship with Lord Benedict, being that the mother is the heart of the family," as soon as the words are out of my mouth, I know I should have kept my teeth clenched shut.

"You are too familiar, Miss Bell," the duke says, staring at me with incredulous irritation as I choke on an apology.

"I'm sorry," the words mumble out of my mouth and he shakes his head once.

"You'll speak to Mrs. Harris about this. Good day." He's gone, leaving me in the middle of the room feeling like the floor has been yanked from beneath my feet and I'm falling. Of course, I was stupid to even think he was anything but what he'd been since I arrived here. He's the same as ever, and I'm not sure why I thought he was anything more than this. All nobility are that way. You think you've gotten through to them, somehow, that the gulf of difference between who you are and who they are has closed.

My eyes are stinging. I look to the floor, and two tears drip down my face, landing on the expensive, jewel-toned rug at my feet. Why is it bothering me so much?

I breathe in one shuddering, shaking breath when it comes to me, emerging from the darkness in the back of my mind.

No matter what kind of closed-off, superior-ass the duke is, he doesn't deserve to die for it. And despite the sunlight streaming into this room, cheerful with its pinks and lavenders and twinkling star decorations, my whole body feels cold. I know what I need to do.

There's something in this house, in this family that's so dark that the light can't even touch it.

I feel the whisper of it wrapping around me, threatening to tug me down, under the surface until I drown. Already it has each of them in its thrall, they're on borrowed time. If Benedict kills the duke, Benedict will die too. And then what will happen to Lady Madeline? Will she go to the care of her other uncle, the lord I haven't met? It's always the children that get hurt. I know that, too well. Don't I?

That's the worst of it. She's in the crosshairs, the one with the most to lose, innocent and undeserving of any of it. I have to protect her. It's the only way to truly make up for... well. It doesn't matter.

My whole body feels like it's going to start shaking, and the tears are fully falling, pattering onto the silken rug below as I stand in the silence and promise the universe the only thing I can do to make this better.

I swear it. I won't let anything happen to that little girl. Not while I still have breath in my body.

I will stop Benedict from his insane plan, to protect the King family from their own poison. Even if it costs me everything. Even if it kills me. It's the only way.

“There isn’t more to it than that, so absolutely no comment from anyone in the household,” Mrs. Harris is saying when I walk into the servant’s hall. Madeline spent too much time in the sun yesterday afternoon, and today it’s all she can do to lay in bed and read. She’s as pink as a rosebud and miserable with heat exhaustion. I’m furious with Jethro, who decided to take her on a trail ride without asking me if it was alright. He’s lucky that the duke hasn’t noticed his daughter is laid up in bed yet, but when I finally go tell his grace, Jethro will *get* it.

“As if we could say anything, even if we wanted,” mutters a maid to her friend, the both of them walking past me to get to their duties.

Mrs. Harris looks toward me as I enter. She’s standing near the head of the servant’s dining table with Mr. Matthews, and given the serious looks on both of their faces, I’m not sure they have a lot of time for what I’m about to tell them.

“What’s wrong now?” Mrs. Harris asks me, the stress lines between her eyes deep and shadowed. “I don’t think I could handle any more bad news today.”

“You can, and you will,” Mr. Matthews assures her with a smile that’s more kind than stern.

“I’m sorry for interrupting,” I say. Mr. Matthews shakes his head.

“We’re done; there’s just a small hiccup, that’s all,” he replies, and I glance around the room. The servants are leaving, their

finished breakfast dishes being cleared away by one of the kitchen staff.

“Lady Madeline is overcome from her ride yesterday with Jethro,” I say, trying to keep a lid on my anger even though it’s simmering inside of me. “He took her out, without sunscreen, on a trail ride. He never asked my permission, and I think she has heat exhaustion now.”

The two of them exchange looks.

“Call the doctor,” Mr. Matthews says, and Mrs. Harris puts a hand on my shoulder.

“Thank you for telling me; Mr. Matthews will speak with Jethro,” she tells me as Mr. Matthews’s face looks like a storm cloud and he leaves the room. I don’t feel remotely bad about it either. He should have known better than put Madeline in danger like that.

She moves to the house-phone on the wall and speed-dials the doctor, and is on the line with his nurse murmuring softly. Of course the duke would have a concierge medical service to come to his home. I go into the kitchen, hunting down the cook for some lemonade for Madeline, and ice.

I’ve packed it all into a basket to take upstairs when Mrs. Harris arrives at my elbow.

“I’m supposed to talk to you about your interaction with the duke the other day,” she says, looking pained, and my stomach clenches tight. “But not right now. Can we just agree that you are not to ask about the duchess?” She takes the basket from me, and I let out the breath I’ve been holding.

“I, um, of course,” I reply, trying not to ask why it’s such a sensitive subject. It’s become increasingly obvious she’s not in the house. There’s no assistant for her. She’s never at any of the meals. Nobody ever talks about her. I don’t even know her name.

The kitchen bustles around us, but we’re in a quiet pocket, Mrs. Harris giving me a serious look.

“I know you must be curious—”

Who wouldn't be? I'd have to be dead not to wonder what's going on.

She looks like she's chewing on her tongue to keep from saying before shaking her head.

"It's not for knowing, that's all. Can you make your peace with that?" She asks me, and then bustles off, basket in her hands, leaving me behind to wonder.

Maddie never talks about her mother. Ever. And after the way the duke reacted when I asked him, I don't want to bring it up with her. I know the duchess isn't dead.

A dead duchess is big news. The monarchy and nobility system keep the press hopping, filling up pages of newspapers and magazines, and online sites like Twitter and TikTok with gossip. If she was dead it'd have been first page news. The whole of Los Angeles would have had to go into mourning, since she was, is, our duchess and all. But not a peep of it, anywhere. In fact, the duke has been so public-averse the last few years that I think we all got used to having it that way. Not like the Duke of New York. He spends his days drinking and chasing women up and down 5th Avenue.

"Get out of the way," a kitchen maid tells me and I jerk forward and to the side to stop from being run over. She rushes by me with a tray full of baked hand pies, the berry-and-butter scent rich as it trails behind her.

"Want one?" A smooth voice asks me, and I glance to my left, at the curved cased doorway that leads from the kitchen into a main hallway of the bottom floor. The voice's owner is one of the footmen, Wilder if I remember right. He looks a lot like the other two footmen in that they all have dark hair and brown eyes, a matching set. I secretly think it's on purpose so they look good together in uniform, but the thought that the duke cares about something so trivial is an unlikely one.

"No, they just smell good," I give him a brief smile. I haven't had much to do with the other servants other than Mrs. Harris and the cook, at least so far. I'm busy with Madeline and when I'm not, they're overwhelmed with their own duties.

Taking care of a house this big even though the family itself isn't all that gigantic, means everyone needs every minute of time during the day. Plus modern labor laws are a lot more restrictive. Now a person can only work four hours on before needing a break, and no more than ten hours of work in the day itself. At least two days off consecutively every two weeks, and a minimum of two days off each week itself, even if they're split up.

It's not like the early 1900s when everyone got a half day off once a month, or worked sixteen hours straight. There's something to be said for worker protections, even if our great-grandparents nearly had to revolt against the monarchy in order to get it.

Even with those safe-guards, it's weird to see Wilder, leaning against the casement of the archway, watching the kitchen girls race back and forth like he hasn't gotten anything to do right now.

I go to walk past him, and see how Mrs. Harris is doing with Madeline, but Wilder reaches out. His fingers close around my upper arm. My eyes widen and he pulls me in, shoulder to shoulder with him, each of us facing the opposite direction.

"Jethro's my cousin," he says, voice-pitched low. "And I heard you tossing him over the side with Mrs. Harris and Mr. Matthews." His tone is angry, ice-cold, and the fingers of it drag down my spine. "If he gets thrown out because of you—"

I jerk out of his grip, just as Mrs. Briar, the cook, yells out at us.

"Wilder, stop flirting!" I turn, and she's looking up from her stove, pot boiling away with steam billowing out.

My lips part to explain, but Wilder steps away from the doorway with a grunt and moves past me, slamming his shoulder into mine as he goes. He hits so hard that I see white for a moment, the air sucking out of my lungs as the pain travels from my shoulder through my collarbone and into my neck.

I stand in shock, and by the time my vision clears, he's gone.

“What was that all about?” Mrs. Briar asks, walking up to me, her finger-tips stained purple from all the berries she’s been handling during the day’s making of jam and pies. I glance at her and shake my head.

“I don’t know,” I lie, “I think he was trying—”

“Well I know what he was trying. He’s made both of my girls cry in the last month.” She’s angry, rubbing her hands over the front of her apron like she’d like to get her fingers around his neck. “Any more of that and I’ll have him up before Mr. Matthews.” I swallow down the words I want to say. It’s not worth making a fight about it, especially if Wilder is pissed that I just got his cousin in trouble. And never mind that Jethro should’ve known better. According to Wilder, that doesn’t matter.

Mrs. Briar puts a hand on my shoulder.

“Are you alright?”

“I just don’t need to be making enemies in this house,” I reply and she gives me a knowing look.

“Above stairs or below stairs?” She asks, like she has full understanding that I’m not just talking about Wilder. My cheeks stain with warmth, and I realize she’s right. I’m not just worried about Wilder, or Jethro. This job and this life are so much more complicated than I could have ever bargained for.

“All of it,” I say, before giving her a brief, meaningless smile. It’s not like I can tell her what I witnessed in the huntsman’s cabin.

The very thought would shake this house from roof to rough-in.

And if it got out beyond the walls of the estate...

People would die. Benedict would, certainly, as the ring-leader. That thought makes my throat hurt and I don’t know why.

“You’re looking very concerned these days,” Mrs. Briar says, and I’m surprised she hasn’t been called away yet to some sort of pastry emergency. I kind of wish she would be, given how

closely she's treading to discovering I have more to worry about than getting Madeline to her lessons on time.

"Still settling in," I reply quickly and then glance around the kitchen. "Is your jam supposed to be boiling over like that?" I ask. Her eyes widen and she turns without another question to me, crying out as she runs toward the stove. The opportunity isn't going to present itself to me again and I bolt out of the room, as she curses and swears at the kitchen staff for not noticing the pot.

I'm halfway up the stairs, stopping on the landing to catch my breath, when I hear him.

Benedict has seen me, on the third level, and he's staring at me as he comes down the stairs toward me. My whole body starts into a shiver that I can't do anything to stop. Just the sight of him, his hair tousled, his green eyes intense, that expression on his face—it pins me to where I stand, weighing me down until I can't move.

He's dressed for a night of card-playing at a gentlemen's club, the kind that *doesn't* have strippers. Well, not \$2 Bettys anyway. His button-down shirt is opened around his neck, tie completely absent, with a sport jacket tossed over his arm.

"I heard that you've had the doctor called for Maddie," he says with a frown as he stops beside me. "What's wrong?"

"Heatstroke, I think," I reply, trying not to meet his eyes. He's so near, I can smell the faint whisper of cologne. He's such a monster. So why does my skin tingle when he comes close? My breath is hot and tight in my chest, and I finally look up, meeting his gaze.

"It was that stupid equitation master, wasn't it?" He asks, looking furious. The way his brows pull together, for once angry at somebody other than his brother—"I warned my brother," he says. Oh, nope, I was wrong. He's definitely mad at his brother. "He never listens to anything I say."

"Maybe if you tell him you're planning on murdering him and deposing him, he'll start to." My hand twitches, nearly rising

to clap over my mouth, as Benedict stares at me like I've slapped him.

The world shifts around us, under my feet, changing dangerously, threatening to crack open and swallow me up. He could have me killed. He could kill me. His eyes narrow.

I wait for it, unmoving, not breathing, staring him straight in the face.

His lips tilt up at the corners, and he inhales before looking away.

"You are a fucking mystery," he says, and it's quiet between us, the dangerous moment having passed on, a predator deciding I wasn't worth it. Not today, anyway.

The next second blinks by, and he strikes, snake-fast. He grabs me by the shoulders and presses me into the alcove behind me, next to a marble statue of a very naked lady gazing off into the distance.

My back meets the wall as I gasp, air thrown from my body, and he glares down at me.

"I don't think you remember why, exactly, I involved you in my future-planning," he says, making it sound like it was some kind of strategic business meeting for a big company, and not, you know, murder.

"Is that what you call it?" I wheeze, his hands still on me, keeping me pinned to the wall.

We're in the shadows here. No way for anyone to see us, not without us hearing them coming down the stairs, or up, from a long way off.

He's less than six inches from me, fingers clenched around the tops of my shoulders.

"So what's this, a morale improvement seminar?" I can't help it, the way he acts, like he can just do whatever he pleases, infuriates me. "Gotta say, needs work." I hate the way my voice shakes when I talk to him, but I force each word out so he knows I mean business.

His eyelashes flutter as his eyes close and he sighs.

“You have a lot of attitude for someone whose life hangs in my hands,” he murmurs, his thumbs digging in just below my collarbones. I wince and jerk my shoulder.

“Stop that,” I order him, and when he doesn’t move, I shove forward, brushing my chest against his. I twist and duck out of his grip, stumbling out of the alcove and onto the stairs. My breath is rapid and shallow, and I turn to level him with a glare that should ignite his skin into flames if there’s any fairness in the world.

Instead he looks back at me, like he’s surprised I got out of his grip, or maybe he’s more surprised that I’m fighting him.

I don’t know, and I don’t care.

“I will never be okay with what you’re planning, and I am going to make your life hell every step of the way,” I spit through clenched teeth. “And don’t touch me like that again.”

He’s silent, surveying me as he stands there, handsome and terrible as ever.

Then his expression shifts. His eyes go half-lidded, and he smiles, almost sweet.

“How would you rather I touch you?” He murmurs and takes a step toward me. All threat has evaporated from how he holds himself, and he reaches out for me. I don’t move. I *can’t*. I’m caught as he changes in front of me, from terrifying menace to...

Something I’m ashamed to admit makes my stomach flutter nervously.

His fingers skate up my bare forearm until where the sleeve of my dress starts at my elbow. His fingertips turn in from there, tracing over the dip of my inner elbow, where I can feel my pulse start to beat madly.

“Don’t,” I whisper, but still, my legs, my feet, refuse to listen to me. Run. I need to run, up the stairs, or down them, somewhere many someones are, away from this trap that he’s laid for me.

“Alright,” he replies, casually and pulls away. He glances up the stairs. “Thank you for looking after my niece. Your focus on her well-fair, well—” He clears his throat. “You’ll have many *uses* in the future, won’t you?” The way he says it turns filthy so fast that my heartbeat, which was starting to slow down, fires up to 60MPH in three seconds.

“I have to pee,” I say, the absolute first thing that comes to mind as a quick escape that guarantees he won’t follow. The shock on his face turns to mirth as soon as I take a step away, but I run up the stairs, as his laughter follows me. It’s like the night at the huntsman’s cabin.

Except this time, he doesn’t sound horrifyingly evil, a madman plotting the death of his brother. This time, the sound that bounces after me, chasing me along the hallway, pulls me in as opposed to chasing me away. It calls to me, even as I end up at Lady Madeline’s door just in time to meet the doctor who’s arrived by helicopter.

That laugh. My reaction to it.

I don’t, can’t, think about it.

BENEDICT

You'd think with all my experience in machinations, I'd be a lot better at engineering ways to pull Evangeline into my company. I'm guessing at some level that my brother is interfering, but he does it in his own quiet way. Eva is never where I expect her to be. I go to the riding ring when Maddie should have her lessons, except she's not there. The music room is empty. When I ask Mrs. Harris, she says that Eva and Maddie are out looking at butterflies in the vineyards.

"What do you have need of Miss Bell?" Mrs. Harris asks me, a frown on her face, her eyes narrowing. Mrs. Harris has been around since I was in diapers, and there's very little that I can do that'll pull the wool over her eyes. Or the linen-apron.

"I wanted a better idea of Madeline's schedule," I say quickly, the excuse springing to mind as I try not to sweat it out obviously.

I still remember Mrs. Harris and her wooden spoon. She wasn't the cook, but she'd carried it all the same when we were younger. Thankfully it'd been retired when I turned fifteen and never came out again after Maddie was born.

But that doesn't mean Harris won't crack me over the head with it if she gets the chance. The staff don't love me like they love my brother. But then, he's not the heir, he's their patriarchal leader. He means something to them.

I'm still the spare. And if something happens to me? There's Noah. It's not like the duchy is hanging on the brink of ruin.

Which is why, when I take the helm, no-one will protest. We'll have Noah as the spare until I can produce my own lineage.

Mrs. Harris taps her finger on her hip and I know that look. I have about three seconds to explain myself. It doesn't matter that she's the help and I'm titled and landed. There are some people you don't cross. She's one of the very few in my world I don't like to piss off. Her, and my valet, Timms.

Nothing is worse than a pissy valet. You want all your favorite cufflinks to get lost, or worse, the women you want in your bed to 'accidentally' get shown to a different man's room on the way to yours? Piss off your valet.

"Is there a particular reason you need to know of Lady Madeline's schedule?" Mrs. Harris asks, rightfully suspecting me of plotting something. It would be unfair if it weren't true.

I am plotting something.

"I'm going to have a house party," I say, "next week." Her eyebrows lift, and her lips purse. I know the next question out of her mouth will be—

"Here, my lord?" She asks, because I should be having it in my own home, down in Hollywood. But I don't want to. My place is fine. It's just... not here.

It's not where she is. And there's too many stupid fucking memories haunting the halls of my estate.

"There's no good riding," I say with a shrug. Mrs. Harris's lips get even thinner and whiter, and if I'd stuck a grape between them to begin with, I'd be wearing juice on my shirt by now.

"Has his grace said yes?" She asks, and my temper, already roughened, begins to fray.

"I have rights as heir, to this property and the use of it," I can't keep the acid out of my tone, and her back straightens, the grey in her hair glinting under the lights in her downstairs office. I'm being unspeakably rude.

And I don't fucking care.

I'm going to have my house party if I goddamn have to do every bit of work myself. Not only will my co-conspirators in

the Mission come if I ask, further cementing their loyalty to me as they wine and dine and fuck women I have brought up for them specifically for that purpose, but it'll be an opportunity to show more of my world to Eva.

So she knows what she's getting into.

Why am I saying that like she has a choice? She signed her fate the moment she stepped foot onto the estate property. She was meant to be mine from that very day. My brother thinks he brought her here for his own use, but really he delivered the most beautiful, useful, tool into my lap.

"Very well, my lord, a house party," Mrs. Harris says. "I'll speak with Mr. Matthews, and we will sort the details if you give me the number."

"I think fifteen," I reply, thinking of who I know will be free and, more importantly, who will make themselves free at my request, "men and women of note, and we'll need all the entertaining rooms opened, as well as the pool house."

"Quite the party," she says and then dismisses me with a flutter of her hand, turning to her computer. "In a week, I think we can manage with the staff we have."

"Everyone will have their own valets and maids," I point out, not liking the resentment in her voice. I go to her door, it's ajar, and I turn back before leaving. "What was it you wanted to do this summer?" I remind her.

She glances back at me.

Her lips part in surprise.

"My sister's birthday," she says, almost in shock that I've remembered.

"You wanted to go on a trip with her, that cruise. I'll pay for it. Just make this party one to remember. No expense spared." There's something in the way that her eyes light up that makes my heart clench. It's not quite pain, but it's not happiness either. I shove it away and leave the room, slamming into one of the footmen.

“Watch where the hell you’re going,” I thunder, glaring at him. It’s Wilder, looking stunned from the hit. Well, I top him by a few inches, and at the shoulders too. He stumbles back and bows his head.

“Sorry, my lord,” he mumbles, as I brush by him. There’s only one more person I need to track down and talk to.

Evangeline Bell herself.

I find her, hours later, ensconced in the library with Madeline at her side. The two of them are sitting on a low, green leather couch in the middle seating area. The walls are two stories tall, and lined with books, stained glass windows letting in a rainbow of light across the room, but it’s the pink and red dappling over Eva’s hair that has my throat going tight when I walk into the room and see her there.

The door slams, heavy, behind me. Both of them jump, a book in Maddie’s hands, where she’s been reading to Eva.

Madeline squeaks at the sight of me and tosses her book at Eva before slipping off the couch. She barrels toward me and I open my arms wide. She hits me like a baby goat, not even knocking me back an inch. I hug her tight. There’s so many reasons why I’m planning what I am. Her welfare is just one of them.

She deserves a father figure in her life who cares more about her than he does about the estate, and the city beyond it. She deserves a man who’ll make raising her his priority, instead of leaving it to lesson masters and nannies. When I’m her guardian, I’ll never go on trips without her. And any woman who wants in my life, will love her, more than the duchess ever did or would.

When I lift my gaze to Eva, she’s smiling at Maddie’s enthusiasm, regardless of how she may feel about me. Maddie is her priority too. That twists it in my gut. I know what I have to do. She might not be noble-born, but not every woman who graces the arm of a duke has to be. This is America, and the high-born ranks are littered with the lower class. We’re not like the fucking English, or the Canadians every fifty years who keep trying to have democracy and not recognizing that

it'll be an utter failure every time. The people need stability in their governance, after all, and that's what the ruling monarchy provides.

"I came to tell you both that next week, something exciting is going to happen," I say, mostly to Maddie, but I watch Eva's reaction out of the corner of my eye. Maddie bounces on her heels, rocking back.

"What is it?"

"I'm going to need you on your best behavior," I say to her, and there's a flicker on Eva's face.

A twist of a smug, sardonic smile. Of course, it's fucking rich that I'm asking anyone to behave themselves, especially to someone like Evangeline who knows all that I have planned for the future.

"What is it, what is it?" Maddie pleads, tugging on my hand. "Uncle, please."

"We're having a house party," I say, and tap her on the nose. She squeaks again. "And you'll ride out with us on your pony when we go, I promise."

"Not like last time?" She asks, her face falling. I shake my head.

"Last time you had strep throat," I remind her, "you were miserable and in bed for a week." She huffs and then turns to Eva.

"There's food, and music, and more food, and cake, and we get to ride every day—"

"If the weather is good," I interrupt Madeline's excitement, and watch Eva for a reaction. "My friends will be arriving toward the end of the week, and will stay through the weekend and for some of next week too. Mrs. Harris should be able to help you know what to prepare for Maddie, but I imagine she won't have time for lessons."

"A house party?" She asks, blank look before swallowing. The column of her throat is bite-able. How is it that a woman with nobody and nothing in her background of note is so attractive?

She shouldn't be. She isn't heroine-thin, doesn't remind me at all of the women I've surrounded myself so far in my life. She's nothing like the women who've been thrown at me, first and second daughters who would die to make a match with me. I might not be a duke, yet, but I'm still a marquis.

But—

“There's a book I want to read with you tonight,” Maddie cuts in and then races off. This library has the seating area in the middle by the doors, and extends on either side nearly the full length of the width of the house, with a good twenty rows of bookcases at each end. The children's section is at the very back of one end, and she disappears around a corner.

I look back at Eva. She's still sitting on the couch, although etiquette dictates she should have gotten to her feet to greet me.

I'm not going to argue that, or point it out. There'll be time for all of that. A house party is a busy, distracting event. Many people, mostly drinking, some taking drugs, making noise. Maddie will either be running around having fun and begging piggy-back rides, or she'll be fast asleep in her bed.

It'll be the perfect time to take what's mine. What Mason thinks belong to him.

Evangeline Bell. Sitting there on the couch, watching me with confusion on her face. In another lifetime, I'd have been duke, and I'd be bringing her to her knees already. But I have to take my time, wait to fully have her as *mine*, and completely destroy any of Mason's plans.

He has no idea what I have in store for him.

And she's lucky, because she has no idea what he has in store for her.

“I guess it'll be a busy week,” she says, trying to make light talk. She gets to her feet, and my heart surges in my chest as she takes one step, and then another, toward me. “Are your... friends, from the cabin, coming?” She's apprehensive. I can see it, in the faint lines around her eyes. There's a tremble in her voice.

“You don’t have to be afraid,” I say, “this is not the time for us to put our plan into action.”

A cloud shadows her face.

“We need to talk about that,” she whispers, dropping her voice low. “I think you’re making a mistake, one that’s going to cost you your life.” She looks at me with such earnest honesty that, for a moment I believe her. That she actually cares about me, and my future, and isn’t just trying to wriggle out of something that could be dangerous for her.

Then she does something I never would have expected. She lifts her hand, and puts it on my chest, right over my heart.

“I can’t truly believe that you’d ever want to hurt your brother, your niece’s father,” she murmurs. The fury that erupts in my chest has nothing to do with love, and this is why I don’t *fall* in love. I just take.

I want to take her by that beautiful throat of hers, hold her tight and kiss her, force her down on her knees and make her take every inch of me. That smart mouth of hers won’t be able to do anything to me except make me feel good.

I grab her by the wrist, and clamp down until her eyes widen.

“You *forget* yourself,” I growl. Then a sound I never want to hear from her erupts between us, her lips parting in a pained gasp. My body flashes cold, her eyes wet at the lashes, and I drop her like she’s burned me. Her hand goes to her wrist, and she rubs it, looking down at the ground.

Good. She needs to fucking remember who I am, a monster on the inside, not just a pretty lord as she’s seeing me. I step away from her, as Maddie rushes back through the stacks, running at top speed and waving a book, breaking the moment so neither of us has to say anything.

It’s better that way. I have to stay focused and not think about anything but my next steps.

I can’t look at any of these complicated feelings Eva’s bringing up in me.

Like having me think twice about my Grand Plan.

Nothing is going to get in the way of me finally getting what I want. There's no version of my reality where my brother lives and I stand by the wayside, watching the whole world worship at his feet and leave me in the shadows.

I'll have my chance to step into the light, bask in all of its warmth.

The universe *owes* me.

And I mean to take it for every single cent.

The rest of the week blurs by with me avoiding the duke and the marquis as much as possible. Thankfully Madeline's schedule, in preparation for the upcoming house party, is more slammed than normal. To the point, I'm about to make a complaint that a five-year-old should not have back-to-back classes all day until she drags her tiny, thin body into bed and passes out when the weekend comes and the guests arrive.

"Don't look them in the eye, don't go in their rooms unless more than one of you is there, and for god's sake, do not even think about taking up with a single one of them no matter how much money or jewelry they offer you," Mrs. Harris is lecturing the maids in the servant's hall, Mr. Matthews at her side, with Mrs. Briar over-seeing from the entry into the kitchen.

I'm at the back of the room, looking over the schedule as it is on my phone calendar for now. Most of the daytime events, Madeline can go to. At night time, I'm planning on locking her up in her room (with me for company) and a pile of books.

I can already tell it's going to get rowdy. Nobody needs to warn me. A bunch of high-born idiots, especially the kind that Benedict likes to pal around with at Savage? And at least four of the men from the cabin are coming.

Alcohol, stupidity, bravado, and men. Horrible mix. I don't know why the duke allowed it, and neither does Mrs. Harris. She complained to me for four long hours about it yesterday as we went and did a last-minute round check of all the guest bedrooms that had been opened up and dusted out.

Mr. Matthews catches my eye as I'm about to duck out, and go collect Madeline from her last lesson before the house party begins. The staff, along with the family, will go out to greet everyone as is customary, and I want to make sure she's cleaned off and in a nice dress.

"Miss Bell," Matthews says as I walk to the arched doorway. "Are you all prepared for this week?"

"As well as I can," I say, with a smile. He doesn't smile back, before bending his head to murmur in my ear.

"I'd avoid Wilder if you can. He's still angry about Jethro."

I swallow and nod.

"Thanks for the heads up," I say, and then duck out of the hall, my phone beeping at me to tell me I'm going to be late if I don't run.

I can't exactly stay out of Wilder's way. He's a footman, and he'll, along with Mr. Matthews and the other footmen, be serving drinks and attending to the house party guests for meals and parties. Where Maddie goes, I do too, and she'll be around Wilder. The fact he's mad at me that his idiot cousin made a huge mistake and was finally fired for it earlier in the week, upsets me. It feels like someone's dragged their cold fingers down my back.

There's nothing I can do about it now though.

I've got Madeline into a blue print dress with tiny sailboats on it ("Daddy owns three yachts," she tells me as I tug it over her head), and we're waiting in the entrance hall. The sun is beating down already outside, and I've got a shady parasol to hold over our heads as soon as we get out into it.

Madeline swings her arms back and forth, humming *Clair de Lune* to herself as we wait.

"There they are," Mrs. Harris says from the doorway, and the footmen, and Mr. Matthews, walk out first. Wilder gives me a side-eye, but I pretend not to notice him, instead fussing at the ties of Maddie's dress where they're already coming undone from her fidgeting.

It's baking hot out, and I try to keep Maddie in the shade from the parasol as much as possible as we watch limousine after limousine arrive, pulling up in a long row on the curved driveway at the front of the house.

The first man out is Brighton. I'd recognize his red hair and rat face anywhere. My throat goes tight, Benedict walking out of the house and past me without a single look to greet his friend. Maddie's bouncing on her heels and I put a gentle hand on her shoulder.

The less movement, the less attention. She is the duke's daughter, of course, so she'll have to say hello, but I want to stay in the shadows.

A woman is next, as Benedict goes to say hello, Brighton cranes his neck to look at all the stories of the great house, waiting for the rest of the guests to arrive.

"Where's the duke?" Asks the woman as she glides out of her limo, the driver holding the door for her. She's icy-pick thin and tall, her blonde hair pinned up in a crown of messy braids that make her look like an Icelandic queen.

When she turns to smile at Benedict, her eyes are so blue they're almost white. Madeline lets out a small gasp.

"She looks like a princess," she murmurs, because the woman does. She's dressed in an expensive silk suit jacket and matching skirt, and her driver hands her a purse that I'm fairly certain is worth more than a year of my wages.

I shrink down behind Madeline as much as I can without obviously moving.

More people arrive, greetings from Benedict, and then a throat clears behind me.

"So the zoo's all here, hmm?" The duke brushes by me, shooting me a glance as he does. There's a quirk in his eyebrow, a slight smirk on his face, but he looks tired. Like the week has worn on him, and he's not ready to be receiving guests.

The expression melts in a moment though, and he holds out his arms.

“Welcome, friends, I’m glad you could join Benedict and me for this weekend. Your staff all arrived earlier today, and we’re ready to entertain you into next week if you last that long.”

The ice-queen coos at the duke, before turning to us.

“And this is Lady Madeline,” she says, holding out her hand. I didn’t catch her title, but Maddie knew what to do, kissing the back of the woman’s hand and curtsying. I try not to let my eyes widen. The party begins to make its way inside, the duke introduces Madeline.

Brighton sees me, eyes flickering over me for a moment, but that’s the only moment of recognition anyone has for me.

As I turn to go inside, Benedict’s hand brushes along my back. I freeze.

“Well played, invisible girl,” he murmurs into my ear, and then he’s gone, laughing with Countess Ice Queen, or Dramelia of Myrtle Beach, as I later find out is her name and title.

And just like that, we’re over-run. It feels like everywhere I turn, there are *people*, and while the great house is huge, massive, absolutely awe-inspiring, it’s no match for a group of very noisy, very titled, very entitled people and their entire staff that have come with them.

Maddie wants to be in the thick of it as well, much to my displeasure and the feeling of being watched only grows, making my skin prickle.

We’re in the drawing room, everyone settled and the duke is the only one missing from the party, having needed to take an important call. The late afternoon sun slides over the rugs and sets the glowing wood on fire. It’ll be dinner time soon, but for now, Madeline has gotten herself into the center of the crowd, talking and asking questions.

“Got your nose,” laughs one lordling, teasing her, pinching her nose until Maddie sneezes. He shakes his hand out and reaches for a handkerchief, which a footman hands to him immediately. I swear he mutters *brat* under his breath, but I can’t quite hear him. Dramelia leans over from where she’s draped on a chaise.

“You know what I have in my pocket,” she says to Maddie, who’s curled on the floor as I stand near the wall and watch carefully.

“What’s that?” Maddie asks, edging closer.

Dramelia pulls out a set of keys, counting through them until she finds one that looks particularly antique.

“This is a belly-button key,” she says, smirking. “If I put it in your belly-button and turn it, your bum will fall off.”

Maddie’s mouth drops open, and all the adults roar with laughter, even Benedict, although when I glare at him, he coughs and turns his head away. Dramelia moves as if to close in on Madeline, who scrambles to her feet and runs to me. I put an arm around her shoulders.

“Did you see her face?” Dramelia crows, turning to Benedict. “She certainly doesn’t take after your intelligence, now, does she?”

“Well, my brother isn’t me, so it’s not her fault,” Benedict says with a lazy shrug. Maddie inhales at the implied insult against her father and her, and turns into my side. I need to get her out of here.

“Do you want to go to the horse barn and see the new kittens?” I ask her quietly as the group of idiots talk about gambling later, and a ride out in the morning to tour the vineyards. Maddie nods, wordless, and it’s not until we’re outside in the sunshine, her hand pocketed in mine, that she speaks.

“I didn’t really believe her,” she says, her voice hushed, and she looks behind us to see if we’re being followed.

“She made you not feel good though, and it’s okay to leave if someone does that,” I tell her, because god willing, nobody else on this planet is telling Madeline she deserves to feel safe with adults and to be able to walk away if she doesn’t. It makes me nearly vibrate with anger. I am absolutely going to have words with Benedict later.

Lord or not.

If he cares about his niece at all, he'll keep Countess Dumbfuck away from Madeline for the rest of the trip. And he'll stop flirting with Dramelia long enough to realize how much he just hurt his niece's feelings.

Petting marbled kittens, gray and orange, goes a long way to erasing Maddie's hurt feelings, and if there's a bit of wet kitten fur from salty tears, I ignore it. Madeline has the right to cry quietly to herself if she wants to. I read the room and order her dinner straight to her bedroom.

"You're a lot nicer than my last nanny," she says sleepily, freshly washed in a hot bath, dried, and tucked into bed. The sun is slipping below the horizon, and it'll be dark enough for her to sleep comfortably with the curtains open. She likes it better that way, so she can greet the day when the sun rises again.

"Oh yeah, how do you figure that?" I ask her, stroking my hand over the damp hair on her forehead. Her eyes flutter shut, and she sighs.

"Nobody's ever guessed what I needed before I needed it," she mumbles, and then drifts off. She's so small in such a big bed, and my heart aches for her.

I go to lock her door from the inside because there's no point in inviting trouble not that I think any of Benedict's friends would be stupid enough to bother the duke's daughter, but still.

Drunk people think it's fun to do all sorts of moronic things, including throwing open doors and singing at the top of their lungs to whatever poor person is inside trying to sleep.

I haven't seen the duke since the early afternoon greetings, though, and I'm annoyed enough with today that I'm going to go talk to him. I slip out my bedroom door, and bump almost directly into Benedict.

He towers over me, and I gulp down the yelp I was about to make.

"Before you say anything," he says, "yes, she was being a bitch, and I'm sorry I made Maddie feel stupid."

I glare at him.

“I know you have worse things planned for her life,” I hiss, keeping my voice pitched low and scanning the corridor for anyone who might be lurking and listening, “since you’re thinking it’s a good idea to murder her da-”

He claps a hand over my mouth, grabbing me by the shoulder with his other hand.

“That’s enough of that,” he growls. I narrow my eyes, putting all of my anger and rage into my expression. If he’s going to silence me, I’m going to tell him what I think, with my body. He’s lucky I don’t knee him in the junk for being a complete jackass.

I step back, and wrench my shoulder out of his grip.

“You want my help in your nefarious little plan, then hear me,” I point a finger in his face, my voice shaking. “You *do not* silence me. I am putting my life on the line—”

“Because you owe me for hitting me—”

“I’ll hit you again if I have to,” I spit, and his eyebrows hike up, like he’s surprised at the heat in my voice. “I’m already in shit, and you’re asking me to commit treason. So when I speak, you will listen.”

I nearly stamp my foot for emphasis, but that seems a bit too childish.

Benedict’s mouth is in a straight line, and then he snorts, laughing with a shake of his head.

“You really are something else,” he mutters.

“What I am, is fed up. You say you’re sorry to Lady Madeline tomorrow at breakfast, and you *make* that hideous witch apologize. And tell your dumb friends to cut it out with man-handling my lady, and no more cruel jokes.” I put my hands on my hips because if I don’t do something with them, I might just strangle him.

And then I’ll go to jail, and who’ll look after Maddie then?

Benedict clears his throat.

“I will talk to them. And I will apologize—”

“And that bitch better—”

He holds up a hand to stop me.

“She will apologize.” He watches me, cautiously, and then smiles. “You’re sexy when you’re angry and protective,” he muses. That does it. In an effort not to murder him, I choose to exit before this situation devolves further.

“Goodnight,” I snap at him, and retreat into my bedroom, slamming the door in his face. A wince immediately crosses my face. I hope I didn’t just wake Maddie.

There’s a soft knock on my door, not a moment later, and I freeze, listening.

“Goodnight,” Benedict says, on the other side, his voice pitched low. “Sleep well.” There’s a wistfulness in his voice that’s absolutely out of place, and dangerous. It races up my spine, traces along my skin, and evaporates the anger that’s simmering in my chest.

I throw the lock, just in case, and the last thing I hear before his footsteps move away, is a low, rich chuckle that sends me running to my bed.

I didn't know I could hate mornings more, but having a party of assholes in the house makes them even less fun. Maddie's up with the sun, and there's a plan to ride through the vineyards today, which means I need to be prepared with sunscreen, sunscreen, and more sunscreen.

They're all gathered in the courtyard of the stables after breakfast, mounts being brought out by the stablehands and footmen. I don't know much about horses, but even these animals look a cut above what I've seen in my past life, beautifully groomed with glossy coats and tack that gleams in the sunlight.

The duke even makes an appearance as I wait for Maddie to come out of the stable with the new equitation instructor. I haven't met her yet, but Mrs. Harris told me her name is Joan Framer, and she's supposed to be an improvement on Jethro.

"Good morning," the duke says to me as he walks by, the first of them to acknowledge my presence. Benedict's avoiding looking at me, and I wonder if he's annoyed I told him off last night.

"Will you be joining us, Angeles?" Brighton asks, shamelessly cheerful given what he knows about Benedict's plot to overthrow the duke. I try not to look sharply at the duke, wondering if he'll go with them. If he does, he's putting his life in danger. I have no doubt of it. There's so many things that can go wrong on a trail ride with horses. It wouldn't take much.

“I’ll be on the ATV,” the duke says, and I try to discreetly breathe a sigh of relief.

“Boys ride ATVs, men ride horses,” Benedict says, and I can see the duke’s eyes flashing in annoyance. I think of that moment the duke came to find me, riding his ATV, his shirt ruffled and pulled by the day’s breeze. There was nothing boyish about him then. “Anyone can master a machine. But how many can say they hold the same over flesh and blood?”

“You’re showing off for your friends,” I mutter under my breath, even though he can’t hear me, as Madeline comes out on her pony, Joan at her side, walking. She’s a tall woman, with dark skin that glows in the sunlight, her coiling black hair pulled into a tight bun that sits low under her riding helmet. Joan smiles at me and nods her head as they approach, Madeline grinning from atop her pony.

“I’ve got my mount tacked up and ready to go, if you don’t mind standing with Maddie for a moment,” Joan says, dressed to ride, and sticking out her hand in greeting. “I’m Joan, you must be Miss Bell.”

“Eva’s fine,” I say quietly, shaking it back. Firm, but not arrogant or challenging. Joan is an absolute improvement on Jethro, and I hope I’m not the only one who thinks so. I wonder where he is and what he’s doing? Joan would probably know. There’s no time to ask though, as one of the footmen breezes past me from inside the stable kitchen, a tray in his hands with small espresso cups on it.

Just as he passes by, a sharp pain explodes in my arm, and when I look up, it’s Wilder, smirking at me before he goes up to the first gentleman, offering the tray.

He hit me with his elbow, so hard that I want to rub it to make it feel better.

Joan’s gone inside, but Maddie’s quietly watching me, her eyes wide under the shadowy rim of her helmet.

“Did that hurt?” She asks me, voice pitched low, “did he do it on purpose?”

“Never mind, I’m fine,” I say with a smile. “Now are you going to listen to Joan today for the ride?”

Maddie’s eyes go even wider.

“I love her,” she confesses in the barest whisper. “She’s so nice. And she said she’d show me how to braid Champagne’s mane later with ribbons, pink ones.” My heart melts.

“That sounds perfect,” I tell her. “I’ll watch and you can teach me after so you remember it better.”

“Here’s me,” Joan says, and I turn. She’s on a huge grey gelding, dappling over his shoulders. Her legs are so long that she probably needs a horse that large just so she doesn’t look ridiculous.

I step back and wave them goodbye as they leave the yard, and head out toward the vineyards.

Only the duke remains. He watches as they go, waving to Madeline when she turns to wave goodbye.

As soon as they’re over the first hill and out of sight, he turns on me, determination on his face. My stomach cramps up, because the look on his face is not good.

“What did Dramelia say to my daughter,” are the first words out of his mouth, and I breathe a sigh of relief. So, nothing to do with my behavior, then.

“She implied she would make Lady Madeline’s rear fall off with a special key, your grace,” I say. It’s a childish, mean prank to play on a little girl who still believes in Santa and fairies. It sounds stupid when I say it out loud, but it terrified Maddie, and I want Dramelia to be held to account. He closes his eyes, jaw going tight and tense.

“Did she sleep alright? No nightmares?” He asks. I’m assuming he means Maddie and not Dramelia. What kind of name is Dramelia anyway? Her parents should be shot. That being said, it’s a horrible name for a horrible person, so maybe they did pick properly for her.

“Yes, just fine,” I reassure him. “We read a few books and sang some songs before she went to sleep, and she slept right

through the night. And—”

I pause. Should I tell him?

He opens his eyes and stares at me.

“What?” He asks, clearly anticipating more bad news or bad behavior.

“I’m sorry if it wasn’t my place, but I told your brother to make his friends apologize and to get them to leave her alone,” I say it quickly, to rip the bandage off and not feel the sting as badly.

The duke stares at me, and I feel the tension creeping up my spine, rising in a slow spiral that sprawls across my ribs and threatens to choke off my oxygen.

“And how—” he pauses, clears his throat, “how did he respond? No, never-mind.” He shakes his head, and looks out across the hills of the estate. I hold my breath. Now would be a great time, a perfect moment, to tell him what I think of everything that’s going on in Madeline’s life. That I think his daughter is being heavily overworked and overscheduled for someone of her age, and that it’s going to hurt her more in the long term.

I wring my hands in front of me, and then when he glances at me, his brows pulling together as if he’s going to comment on it, I pounce.

“I’ve been wanting to speak to you about something, your grace, if I might be so impertinent to suggest, something I’ve noticed—“ I fumble for the right way to say it and then take a deep breath. “I think that Lady Madeline is being asked to do too much.”

“I bet your pardon?” His words are immediately frosty, and I know I’ve stepped in it. But it doesn’t matter if he’s angry at me for the truth, I need to tell him. Somebody needs to say something.

“I’m not sure who’s been the one who is guiding her schedule, but she barely has time to breathe, let alone rest and recover, to play, and be creative, like all children should have the

opportunity to,” with each word I say his shoulders grow tenser and his frown deeper, his eyes narrowing.

“And this is your opinion, that she is being... overworked?” He growls out the last word, like it’s filthy, and I don’t think I’ve ever seen a man so infuriated before without spoiling for a fight. I hold my ground.

Deep breaths, Eva. This is the *right* thing to do. Maddie needs someone to speak for her.

“I would stake my place on it, your grace,” I say softly, going quiet to bring down his energy, refusing to match him as he gets wound up.

“And what would you say if I told you that it is I who decides her schedule, that oversees her education and grooming to be a world-class leader and a balm to whatever future estate and the people she rules over?” He asks, and it all clicks into place.

Of course it’s him. The duke, who barely stirs outside of his office for anything other than work, frequently eats his meals at his desk, can’t be bothered to have a horse tacked up for him to ride up, instead he picks an ATV which is much lower class but it’s instant and fast.

I have to say it.

“You think that working her to death when she’s five years old is going to turn her into a good leader?” I ask, not able to help myself, crossing that line, not just crossing it, but bolting over it with no regrets.

He inhales.

Holy fuck.

I straighten my shoulders and lift my chin, staring him down.

“I’ve taken care of a lot of children. It’s my duty to inform you, as her parent, that she is exhausted, and you are not helping her by piling work on her like she’s an able little pony. She’s a child, not a farm beast.” His expression is inscrutable, and emboldened, I ramble on. He hasn’t stopped me yet. “In fact, I think the children who are overworked become more resentful, more prone to depression, and more likely to take a

dislike to *any* responsibility given to them in the future. If you want to ruin your daughter for her entire life, then, by all means, *your grace*, carry on.”

I cross my arms, gulping up a lungful of air before he murders me.

He hasn't moved an inch, not even to blink, his cool, handsome face serene. Like he doesn't care about a single word I've just said. Because it doesn't matter to him. I'm just another little fly who can be flicked off, a minor inconvenience—

“If you're going to fire me,” I say, and he laughs, the sound shocking me like a punch to the face. He looks up to the sky, hands unclenching, and he reaches up to grasp at his chest, laughing so hard, it's all I can do to stand there, shocked. The duke, smiling? *Laughing?* Is it going to start raining blood?

“Fire you. Christ above.” He bends forward, his carefully swept-back hair falling into his eyes, untidy and... my cheeks flush with warmth.

A little bit handsome.

I dash that feeling, that thought, away, chasing it with a clearing of my throat.

“I'm a little...” well if I'm not fired, in for a penny— “Yes, your grace, you are working her to death. She needs time to play, to explore the world, and not be in so many lessons that she almost falls asleep in her soup course every night.” Each word might feel like I'm signing my own severance package, and the duke has stopped laughing now, but instead is looking at me, somber and interested.

And so far, he is not having me escorted off the property, my things in a cardboard box. Maybe God is smiling down on me. Brave fools are rewarded, sometimes.

He's quiet for a long moment and then breaths out through his nose, reaching up to pinch the bridge of it like I've given him a headache but he's willing to hear me out.

“And what would you suggest, when she is the wife of a great man and has many responsibilities, hospitals to oversee, the

poor to tend to, the oppressed to minister to,” he says softly, hands falling to his sides. “What will she do then, when she’s soft, and not used to hard work?”

My mind spins.

“When she’s what, thirty years old? Emotionally mature and intelligent? Did your father make you do all of those things when you were barely out of the nursery?” I shoot back. His expression goes blank.

Oh. *Oh.*

“He did,” I whisper, “the exact same... schedule? The same... everything?” I can’t help the horror that creeps into my tone, and he flinches, like I’ve hit him.

He pulls off his jacket.

“I want you to see what comes of being soft on children,” he says, his voice rough. He rolls up his sleeves, to the elbow, frowning down at his cufflinks. I shift my weight. Is he going to... hit me?

He turns out his arms.

“This. This is what happens when you are soft on children.”

I choke on my breath.

His arms are a mess of scars. Burns litter his forearms, up and down, some shallow, some deep craters, like the moon’s surface, pitted and shadowed. I count twenty... no... over forty... too many...

Horror wells up in me. When I finally look up, to his face, I want to be sick. His expression isn’t furious, but surprisingly peaceful.

“Did you... Do that... did you hurt yourself—“ I can’t say it, it’s too horrible. I can’t. My eyes are wet. I lift my arm to my face and wipe at it, the linen of my uniform soft and warm against my cheeks.

“No, I did not hurt myself,” he says, “but when I was found deficient, I paid the price. I will never have that be Madeline. She will *never* be found wanting.” He jerks his sleeves down,

the white cotton wrinkled from being shoved up his skin. “I will never give anyone the chance to have even the slightest excuse to hurt her.” He stares at me steadily.

I feel like someone’s yanked the rug out from under me, and my head whirls. What happened to him, when it happened, so many questions flood my mind. But one thing comes crystal clear, through the noise, and the static.

How can he think that running her ragged now could prevent something like *that* happening to her in the future?

My lips part, and my voice shakes when I finally speak.

“I can’t agree,” I say finally, when I find the right words for it. “You are hurting your daughter. Maybe not in the exact way as someone abused you, but it’s harming her just the same.” There’s a painful lump in my throat, scratchy and refusing to go away no matter how many times I swallow hard. My eyes water again, and I blink away the tears. “And I hope you know that no matter what you did, you never deserved *that*.”

There’s something in the depths of his eyes, a shadow that seems to lift for a moment.

“I must ride out,” he says, and that tiny crack in the wall cements over. He turns away from me, and leaves me standing there, only the sight of his back, ramrod straight and stubborn visible as my vision blurs over with tears.

What happened to him? And what have I stumbled into? This place is a mess of vipers, a nest of them, and I should run from it, if I have any sense of self-preservation.

But I won’t go. It’s too important; caring for Maddie keeps me here. If someone is going to shelter her from these monsters, it has to be me.

And the Duke and Benedict, they need you to save them from themselves, a whisper of a thought floats up from the depths of my mind. A shiver races along my skin, a breeze picking up and brushing through the bushes and trees that shelter the edge of the courtyard.

I’m trapped, tied down and tied up by a prison of my own making, all because...

I think I'm starting to feel something for them, these stubborn, horrible, arrogant, entitled men.

I close my eyes, and turn, focusing on the next thing that needs doing: going inside, and preparing for Madeline's return.

“Don’t take your eyes off of her, not for a minute,” Mr. Matthews tells me as I go up to get Madeline ready for the dinner party. It’s being taken in the gardens as the sun starts to set. It’ll be so late for her, but she’s been humming excitedly about it ever since she got back from her ride. Matthews’ words buzz in my ear as there’s a flurry of maids and valets in the hallways, rushing by me as they make sure their masters and mistresses are ready for an evening of dining under the California stars.

I let myself into Maddie’s rooms, only to find her surrounded by a circle of dresses. She turns to me, face still smudged from her ride but a lot less clothed, and smiles.

“Which one do you think will look nice?” She asks, and I sigh. She’s already got her party shoes on, a pair of light blue slippers with bead embroidery all over them, picking out the constellation of Ursa Minor over the toes, her personal sigil.

“We can decide together,” I say, “*after* your bath.” I chase her into the bathroom as she giggles, and get her into the bubbles. Lots of soap, perfume, rollers in her long hair, a standing hair-dyer, and what seems like a million bobby pins later, I lead her from her rooms in a floating deep blue drop-waisted dress to match her earlier choice in shoes. It flutters around her knees, crepe-backed satin overlaid with three tiers of chiffon. There’s streaming ribbons clutching her waist and bunched at her shoulders into straps. She looks like a tiny fairy, dipped in the colors of dusk, and my heart lifts. She knows how beautiful

she looks, and the smile on her face is a relief after the hurt Dramelia caused her.

“Shall we—“I’m about to take her hand in mine to help her down the steps when a movement to my left makes me start.

“My lady,” Benedict stops us at the top of the stairs, emerging from the shadows like he’s been waiting. His appearance has my breath catching in my throat. He’s dressed to the tens, white-tie and all, dress tails firm over his shoulders in a way that makes me drag my eyes from him.

I don’t want to look at him, not like *that*.

He’s not talking to me, though. Not even looking at me.

Madeline squeaks in delight as Benedict bends down in a low bow, and he offers her his hand.

“Will you dine with me tonight?” He asks her, and her eyes light up.

“Yes, please, uncle,” she says. He straightens and winks at me over her head as she glances down the stairs.

“What are you doing?” I hiss at him, a foot behind him as he starts to descend. “You know she has to eat at her father’s side.” He’s going to get me in shit tonight, I can tell already.

Madeline, oblivious to my whispered rage, chatters to Benedict about her pony, and if he thinks there’ll be clementine juice at dinner for her, the sparkling kind she likes.

The ceiling arches over us as we descend the stairs, lights sparkling in the giant chandeliers that throw off rainbows along the deep red rugs. I seethe, a few steps behind them, and Benedict ignores me the whole way.

“I’m sure Cook has mousse for your dessert,” he assures Maddie as we reach the foyer, the grand sculpted pillars towering along it.

The gathered party is there, the ladies in dresses that wink with crystal beads, the men all in white tie like Benedict.

None of them can hold a single match to his inferno, though. And they all know it, every single one of them. He lights up

the whole foyer, the crowd turning to him like flowers to the sun. Dramelia glides across the carpeted floor, her footsteps barely registering.

“Hollywood, who’s your date?” She teases, her nose turned up. Maddie tenses, and I wait for Benedict to give Dramelia some kind of scathing look, or word, to send her scuttling back to her cave where she came from.

“I believe she’s *my* dinner accompaniment,” his voice cuts through the group like a scythe, and they part. I didn’t even see him there, near the doors, his head held high, eyes like a forest on fire as he crosses the room.

The duke bows to his daughter, and she immediately drops Benedict’s hand, curtseying in response. The party bows their heads to the duke. The power shifts, the room seems to expand around the two spinning axes of the duke and his brother. I hold my breath, as their eyes meet. For a moment I wonder if there’ll be a fight, here, over who the five-year-old sits with at dinner for pity’s sake, but—

Benedict’s lips twist into a sarcastic smile and he gives his brother a two fingered salute.

“After you, brother,” he draws. The duke gently puts Madeline’s hand over his forearm.

“You’re beautiful, my love,” he says to her. The group of people exhale silently, but the air quivers with it, and they fall behind the duke as he leads Madeline to the front doors. Footmen stand at each door, holding them open at attention, their eyes straight-forward as the head of the party, the duke and his daughter, pass below the peaked arch above them.

Benedict stays still, Brighton nearby, and Dramelia further beyond that. The two of them are talking, ignoring Benedict, for the moment at least.

“You overplayed,” I mutter to Benedict as I walk by, “she’s his daughter.”

His hand shoots out, snapping around my wrist, and for a moment I wonder if Brighton and Dramelia will see

this, *hear* this. My eyes swing up to look at Benedict's face, panicked.

His gaze is in shadow.

"He can have her for now," he breathes, fury in every word. "But she will love me as a daughter would, in time."

"Not if you murder her father, she won't," I snap back. I twist my wrist in his arm, breaking his grip, almost staggering to get away from him. I march toward the open doors, and as I pass Brighton and Dramelia, she watches me go, her expression carefully neutral. Let her think what she wants to think. She's a horrible, evil person, and I have no time for her at all.

I'm not sure what's prettier; the stars above or the lights that trace along the tree branches that the party eats under. They're lit by strings of bulbs, purple and blue, surrounded by clusters of soft tissue fabric that flutters in the breeze. The beautiful lights hang above the diners, although they don't seem to notice all the effort that's gone into making this look gorgeous for them, with the way they carry on talking to each other.

I stand off in the shadows between two trees, waiting for some sign from Madeline that she's tired and ready for bed.

There's already been five courses, and I know her little stomach must be full to bursting. I glance at my phone, burying it back in my pocket. It's about time for the dessert course, and then there'll be wine and cheese for the adults, and it'll be time for me to usher Madeline back to the big house and get her into bed.

So far, the conversation has been light, most of them discussing the day's ride, and a plan for a polo match that one of the other local estates has on for the end of the weekend.

My eyes slide shut, the night's breeze washing over me. Dinner'll be waiting for me in the servant's hall when Madeline is tucked into bed, and my stomach rumbles, ready for whatever it is Cook and her minions have prepared.

A whisper of noise off to my right has me looking, into the trees beyond the clearing where the table is set and the diners sit.

The moon is coming up, enough that even beyond the lights I can see two figures standing.

My mouth drops open, and I freeze.

It's Lady Dramelia.

And...

Wilder?

I go still. Feet from me on either side are footmen, waiting to serve the next course as it comes out from a tent pitched on the other side of the dining table and clearing.

Dramelia had slipped away for personal reasons, with a soft *excuse me*, because noble-born women never debased themselves as to say they needed to powder their nose. That was for the middle classes.

But she'd left minutes ago... long enough to be relieving herself, but not so long as to be raising suspicions.

I shift my weight and recede further between the tall trees, brush on either side me as I duck down, unseen. I creep toward where Dramelia stands, close to Wilder, closer than she should be to a manservant who isn't hers. How have they not noticed he's missing?

"And can you imagine, they're trying it again?" Loud, semi-drunken words behind me explode into the night's air, shocking my system and making me freeze.

"A democracy, think on it, the lay and peasants allowed to vote," someone else, exuberant and male, joins in with a laugh.

I'm hidden by a large, thick bush, but I can still see Dramelia, and Wilder. They were talking, but now she pulls away from him, walking down a path that'll take her back to the outside rest-rooms, built for the exact purpose of hosted parties.

And Wilder... he stands there, silhouetted by the moon. Whatever they were doing, some kind of assignation, I'm shocked by it, but maybe not that surprised.

It's not... unheard of. Absolutely inappropriate but not unheard of. My heartbeat is thudding in my mouth, in the back of my throat, as I sneak back to the dinner table.

Dessert has already been served in the minutes I was away. Madeline's eyes search along the edge of the clearing, along the tree-line, for me. I gulp and move toward her, someone nearly bumping into me as I do.

Angry eyes under a dark shag of hair greet me. It's Wilder, moving with a tray of drinks.

"Watch it," he mutters to me, as I skirt around him, trying to shake off the shiver that rolls down my spine. What was he doing with Dramelia? Had they been really...

Ugh. It's too gross and horrible to even think about.

"Yes, my lady?" I murmur to Madeline as I appear at her side. She gives me a relieved look.

"I'm tired, if I can be excused?" She asks her father, gaze sliding between me and him. The duke gives me a glance and nods.

"Of course," he says, getting up. The gentlemen rise, in deference to her position in the household. Even she outranks them here, daughter to a duke, and not even six-years-old. She curtsies to her father and I take her hand, leading her away. The trees, white blossoms sweet-scented, line the path back to the house as we put the party of loud diners behind us.

"They were getting drunk," she says with a wrinkle of her nose as we get far enough away that they won't hear us.

"Smart of you to retreat," I tell her and she gives me a sleepy smile.

"I felt like a princess tonight," she says, her voice hushed. "Father says I might be one, one day." She covers a yawn with her free hand.

"Mmm, maybe, if you want to," I tell her, although there's princes in the White House, my heart hurts to think her being locked into something so big and heavy. She needs, no, deserves, freedom in whatever love she finds. The world is

determined to grind her down as it is. Being on the international-stage like that is enough to break even the most resilient young woman.

Not even fifteen minutes later, sheets rustle around her small form, tucked into a nightgown and even more layers of comforters and quilts, and her eyes are drooping shut.

“You don’t want a story?” I ask her in the quiet of her room, enjoying the stillness. She sinks beneath the sheets, burrowing up to her nose in them with a slow shake of her head.

“No, nanny,” she mumbles, forgetting to use my name in her exhaustion. Tonight’s done her in. It’s like the whole world is organized around running her ragged. This country, this life, is not meant to nurture a young child the way they need to be.

I hold her hand until her breathing steadies, and then for a few minutes more, the cool air raising the hair on the back of my neck. She’s good and asleep when I slip from the room, locking the door as I go.

Drunk adults make for endangered children, and I’m not forgetting Mr. Matthews’s words from earlier any time soon.

I’ll grab my dinner fast, and get myself into my own room in case Maddie needs anything—

I’m sleep walking, practically anyway, down the stairs. Watching Benedict and Mason fight each other is going to be the end of me. How am I supposed to save them from themselves when they do everything they can to hurt each other at every turn?

“Oh good, you’re here,” Mrs. Harris says as I enter the dining hall. There’s a few drooping maids, nearly falling asleep over their plates, and Mr. Matthews is holding court with the valets, giving them the instructions for the following day.

“Mmm, yes,” I say, willing some energy into my wrung out body, as I sit across from Mrs. Harris. A kitchen girl sets a wide, low bowl in front of me, the colors of radishes and kale glowing quietly next to a pile of raw tuna and a half of avocado. I raise an eyebrow at her and she blushes briefly.

“With all the extra mouths, there wasn’t time to do more than this,” she says, before disappearing into the kitchen in a flutter of her white apron.

“The wealthy in the city call them poké bowls,” Mrs. Harris says, with a look that seems to disapprove of the fashion.

“I call it lazy,” Mr. Matthews interrupt his speech to the valets to tell us his opinions before turning back to them.

“Yes, well,” Mrs. Harris sighs with an uncharacteristic roll of her eyes. “How was the day for you?”

“Busy but not unmanageable,” I reply carefully, picking at my bowl. I’ve never been a big fan of seafood, but if this is dinner, this is the *only* dinner, and I’m too hungry to turn down calories. Mrs. Harris is fidgety, something I’ve never seen in her before, and she reaches across the table, to grab my wrist. I stare at her in surprise. Her touch is gentle.

“I must say,” her voice is low, “that the duke is pleased with you, girl, though for what I cannot say. He says that you brought a matter of great importance to his attention, and he wants to see you thanked.”

My eyes widen, and she lets go of my hand. My cheeks warm. She’s giving me a look that tells me she doesn’t quite believe that I did something good, and perhaps I’d done something *else* like a personal favor to his grace.

“I told him I felt Lady Madeline was being overworked,” I say carefully and quietly, because it’s personal and Maddie doesn’t deserve the servants to know her own business. But I need to tell her the truth. Mrs. Harris is on Madeline’s side more than not. I know she’s loyal to the family to a fault. You don’t rise to the position of head housekeeper without being die-by-the-sword faithful. Mrs. Harris is staring at me like I’ve just laid an egg in the middle of the servant’s dining table. “She is. She’s exhausted every day, and she’s a child. No little girl can learn like that.”

“And what did—” Mrs. Harris croaks, and takes a sip of her tea before continuing to speak. “And I suppose he was pleased with this... this...”

“Well obviously he was, since he told you that I’d done a good job,” I reply, and fork up the last bit of food on my plate. I’m starting to feel full. Mrs. Harris is still looking shocked, but is calming slowly. “I know that this is a great house, and there are things that we can and cannot do, but you didn’t hire me to run Lady Madeline into the ground. I’m here to take care of her. And I will.” I set my fork down. One of the kitchen maids grabs it before I can blink.

“Right you are to have done so,” Mrs. Harris says, somewhat weakly, but I’ll take it. I smile and get to my feet.

“And I’ll take whatever the duke has in mind for a thank you,” I finish. She nods.

“An extra day off, perhaps,” she murmurs, more to herself as I leave the room, ready for bed. That was a small heart attack and a defense of my choices I didn’t need tonight, but Mrs. Harris means well. I know she does.

The stairs seem to grow exponentially in front of me, and I’m barely on the third floor when a hand reaches out and grabs me by the back of the neck.

My mouth opens in a scream, but another hand claps over the bottom half of my face. I’m tugged against a body, into the shadows, next to a statue.

“There’s a pretty girl,” a barely-familiar man’s voice croons. My eyes flicker up to his face, what I can see of it.

It’s Lord Frisco. My heart shatters in my chest from beating so hard and I kick at him, scrabbling at his hands to get free.

“Yes, fight me,” he hisses, “I like it best when they fight.” Panic flares in my chest and I bite down on his hand, blood-metal taste exploding in my mouth as my teeth cut his palm. “Stupid bitch,” he snarls, letting go for a moment. I get only two feet away when he’s grabbed me again, shoving me into the wall. His hands pin my wrists above my head, nails digging into the skin until I let out a choked sob.

His breath his heavy with wine, and I choke on the miasma of it as he presses his body into mine.

“I’d fuck you here in the hall; it’s all your good for,” he growls out, thrusting his hips against mine. The hard chair-rail of wood behind me slams into my lower back, which blossoms with red-hot pain.

He smirks, biting his lip before he leans in, to kiss me, to do something—

I slam my head forward, catching him right below the eye, and he howls, dropping me. Bolting past him, I run, rabbiting down the hall. Around a corner, in the darkness, this wing barely lit with all the entertaining outside and in the drawing room for the evening. But someone has to be here. Someone has to hear something. Someone has to—

A body is in front of me and I skid to a halt, nearly banging into them, and look up. It’s Wilder.

“What’re you running for?” He asks, and I gulp. He smirks. “Oh is it a game?” He looks behind me. “Who’s chasing you? That’s dangerous. The duke’ll have you out on your ass for entertaining with his guests.”

I shake my head and push past him. There’s no explaining anything to him.

The library is up ahead, it’s large doors still open. That will be my refuge, for now, until I can call for help on my—

My phone.

As I skid into the library, pulling the doors shut behind me, I realize my phone is upstairs, besides Maddie’s bed, where she’s sleeping.

The doors slide shut, and I’m in the darkness. Alone, and utterly vulnerable.

The doors opening crack my heart into two. Frisco is coming for me, and there's nothing between him and me but a bunch of books. I've run to the back of the library, hoping to find safety in the stacks, but I know it's a matter of time.

Before he finds me.

Before he gets his hands on me.

My nose burns with the hint of tears, and my eyes threaten to water. Is there anything that I can use to protect myself?

"Where are you, pretty girl?" His voice is a hoarse whisper, and my heart races, stumbling over itself, my whole body threatening to shake. The smell of old papers envelopes me as I try to sink into the bookcase, the leather spines of books soft under my touch as I press against them.

"Come on, don't fuck around," he's losing patience, and his footsteps are muffled, his voice bouncing off tens of thousands of books. I close my eyes and do the closest thing I can to praying because if God is real, he'll pull me out of this situation. The scratches on my wrists are burning, and my cheeks are just as hot. I want to cry, but I can't. Any noise I make—

A light flickers down at the end of the stack that I'm hiding in, and I clench my hand around my mouth, to stop myself gasping.

"The fuck is that bitch," he mutters to himself, his voice slurring with the alcohol. I can almost smell it down at the end here, too. I reach for a book, something with sharp, rigid

corners. Maybe I can use it to defend myself, throw it at him, anything—

His footsteps lurch toward me, and a light flares in my eyes, blinding me.

“Why’d you hide?” He asks, as if he doesn’t know, his tone sing-song. I stumble back, holding the book up to stop the light from his phone from keeping me sightless, blinking away spots in my vision as I do. “You know you can scream,” he purrs, within ten feet of me. I tense up, ready to strike. He’s drunk, I’m sober, and even if hitting him is an offense— I’ll do it.

“They won’t come running,” he whispers. Five feet. My arms are shaking. He’s vile. Closer, closer—

He reaches out for me and I lunge forward, smashing the book down on his hand. Light flashes through the air as the phone hits the ground.

“Bit—” He chokes off his next word as I slam the book onto his head, flat front first. He staggers, stunned, and I dart around him, dropping the book at his feet as I run.

He falls into one of the stacks, reaching for purchase, and there’s the sound of books hitting the ground as he tries to keep himself upright. The blackness has me, swallowing me whole and my hand is the only thing keeping me going in the right direction, as I drag it on the spines of books, running down the stack.

Stars streak across my vision as I crash into somebody, a body that’s taller than mine.

“Eva, what the fuck?” Benedict curses and grabs me, holding me still. The breath that explodes from my lungs is hysterical, and I try to duck behind him, hide behind him.

“Hollywood?!” Lord Frisco snarls from down at the end of the stack. I can hear his lumbering footsteps. “She got my phone —”

“Please,” I whisper, “please believe me, please, I didn’t ask for this, I swear it, my lord, I didn’t—” I’m pathetic and I’ve hurt

a *lord*, and it's even worse than when I slapped Benedict. This is so, so much worse.

Benedict wraps his hand around my wrist and pulls me to him, his phone in his free hand. He taps it with his thumb, and the library lights come up, dousing us in reality. I can't hide anymore.

Lord Frisco stands there, holding out his hand like his fingers are hurt, his other fist clenched and braced against the stack shelf. Behind him are a pile of books, tossed to the ground, spines up and pages to the floor.

Benedict looks down at me, his gaze furious.

But that core-deep anger is not with me. He lifts his eyes to Frisco, and lets out a low growl, a sound I've only ever heard from dogs protecting a bone.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" Each word drops from Benedict's mouth, a hot stone hitting water, hissing at the end. Benedict holds me tight, to his chest, pulling me into him, my back to his front. There's the faint hint of his cologne, leather and tobacco blossom, and the steady feel of him behind me.

And not a single whiff of alcohol. How has he not been drinking all night? I'd avoided looking at him most of the evening while taking care of Madeline, but still. I must remember him drinking something, a glass of wine, anything.

His arm comes around me, a profoundly protective move, as Frisco walks toward us, gait unsteady.

"She's one of those, not better than she ought to be, c'mon, Hollywood, what're you doing? Give her over." He makes a grabbing motion. Benedict twists me behind him and his fist flashes through the air. He catches Frisco across the jaw, so hard I hear the crack.

Frisco hangs in the air for a moment, I can barely breathe, and then he goes down.

He's on the floor, in a heap.

Benedict stands over him, shoulders bunched, ready to go again, but Frisco doesn't move an inch. My eyes are wide as I

pull away from Benedict to check Frisco's pulse. I bend down, my knees hitting the wooden floor. His skin is clammy under my touch, and for a moment my heart flutters in panic. Did Benedict kill him?

I let out a sigh as I feel the first beat of his pulse, and I sag in relief.

It's steady under my fingers, and he's breathing. But he's definitely out cold.

"We need to call Mr. Matthews," I say, standing up. Benedict makes a scoffing sound, and I glance up at him.

"No," he replies, and as I turn to him, he gently takes my wrist in his hands. "Did he do this to you?" He turns my wrist over, palm-up, to the light. Deep gouges on my skin, purple weals, crawl up the inside of my forearm. I'd forgotten the pain of Frisco attacking me and holding me captive, but now it comes rushing back to me. I shudder and glance away, turning my head. Benedict makes a pained sound. "I'll challenge him," he says, and that sends a bolt of fear striking through my body so fast that I jerk in his grip.

He lets me go, and I stare at him, more than shocked. I'm numb, stricken. Challenges have been illegal for over a hundred years, but they still happen, rarely. But still, a challenge, over a domestic servant? It's unheard of. Over a noble's sister, wife, cousin, of course, they happen. It's sometimes brushed off as a suicide when it does, if the person who's issued the challenge and won the fight is powerful enough to get away with it.

But Benedict is a lord, not an earl or a duke. He doesn't command that kind of sway over the courts, or the police. And, for me? To risk all of that, for *me*?

"He's not worth it," I say, my voice trembling. Benedict's eyes narrow and he takes a step toward me.

"But you are," he says, my mouth going dry. He means it, and what implies stealing my breath and sending warm frissons of energy through my whole body. He means it. I'm worth risking everything, his life, *everything*, for.

“Don’t think you don’t know what you do to me,” he murmurs, “how you captivate my whole existence.” My heart feels like it’s going to stutter to a stop. How is this even real? How is this moment not a prank, a cruel trick a—

His gaze holds mine, demanding I do nothing but look at him, not letting me escape, the pressure of this moment bearing down on me like a vise. He holds out his hands. Trembling, I put mine in his, and he closes his fingers around them. He lifts each one to his lips, kissing one, and then the other.

The tremor crackles up my spine as he turns my hands over, and kisses the marks on each wrist, his eyes sliding shut.

I... I want to pull away but I don’t. I let him, his lips warm and smooth over my minor injuries, the little hurts that seem to throb less once he’s blessed them better.

He bends to me, his head sliding next to mine, and he brushes my hair back behind my ear.

“I would make you my queen,” his words rasp over my skin, and I exhale a shaky breath. What is he thinking, saying things like that? I close my eyes and lean into it, unforgivably folded into his dangerous secrets. Of course it’s a lie, a pretty one, because he wants my help with his devious plots. I can’t let the feelings of this moment overwhelm my good sense.

I’m low-born and always will be. He’ll be a murderer, at least once over, if his plans come to fruition. Nothing about this can be what he’s saying, and I have to remind him of that.

And myself. The darkness in him will drag me down under if I’m not careful.

“It’d be duchess, and no, you won’t,” I swallow hard as I pull away, trying to gather myself so I don’t caught in his web. I can only go so far along with this, only indulge him *so* much. It’s a fine line, courting his desires so that he’ll tell me his plans, but not so much that I’ve implicated myself.

And when you save the duke, do you think he’ll thank you for it? Or will you risk everything for him, just to be thrown aside like all nobles do to people like you?

“Leave the wretch here,” Benedict says, stepping away. “Come.” I follow, without a look behind me, the drunken feeling of relief flooding my body more and more with each step. He leads me from the library, and bars the door behind him. He gives me a smirk. “Let him explain how he got locked in there to my brother,” he sneers.

I stand there, not sure what to do. I should go to my room, I should—

Benedict watches me, and then steps close, stepping into my space.

His hand comes to my chin and he tilts my head up. My eyes are wide, his closing, as his mouth covers mine. I can’t help it. He’s so warm, such a contradiction, broken and protective at the same time. I lean into him, pressing up on my toes until he catches me around the small of my back, his arm encouraging me to stay.

I’m falling into this. It’s happening again. I’m caught, my baser nature cheating me out of a promising, honest future. My body wants what it wants, and my heart—

It’s lost to him. He’s caught it, in his hands, keeping me close. I can’t pull away. I don’t want to.

He makes a sound, deep in his throat, that has me shuddering.

“I think you want this more than you’re willing to admit,” Benedict whispers to me, slowly pinning me against the wall, his hands on my wrists. I’m not afraid though, not like with Frisco.

Because he’s right. I do want this. I want him to absolutely wreck me. The last minutes of panic and terror fade away, replaced only by a burning need for him, for him to hold me still, for him to take whatever he wants. My breath keeps catching and I can’t do anything about it, his superior height and weight holding me here.

If I’m not lying to myself, there’s something more to it than his superior strength.

It’s him. The way he smirks, the way his hair falls over his forehead and into his eyes, and the fire in his expression when

he looks at me. Like he's really seeing me, for *me*. I'm more than just a domestic help to him, and he knows it.

I know it.

A flash of warning sounds off in my belly. This is the same old path I've walked before, and last time, God, last time, it ended with me in hell. But it was never like this, was it? Paris was never like this house, Benedict was not like the last man I let touch me.

But still—I can't. I shouldn't. I open my mouth to protest and he kisses me, not letting me speak. My words dissolve into a moan instead, his hands sliding down my wrists, down my arms, to my shoulders. His fingers pull at the neckline of my shirt, the urgency in it setting me on fire. My thighs tighten together, that familiar flush of heat flooding between them. I want him. It's such a mistake, but I do. I want him to fuck me right here, while everyone is within earshot so I have to keep quiet.

It's filthy and horrible, and I'm signing my own proverbial death warrant. Why am I risking everything for him?

Is there something wrong with me that I can't keep it together around him? I'm such an idiot. His hands wrap around my breasts through my uniform, the thin linen doing nothing to hide the warmth of them and how big they are, dwarfing me. He bites his lip, dead sexy, and it kills me as he groans, though he keeps it quiet.

"I want you right here," he says, mirroring my earlier thoughts, "I want to fuck you into this wall and not care who stumbles out to see us. They'll be drunk anyway." He kisses me again, tongue finding mine, and he gets a hand down between us where his hips are pinning mine to the wall. The gasp slips out of me as he works his fingers up and under my uniform, between my bare thighs, teasing right over my pussy through my underwear.

"Don't," I whisper, shaking my head. We'll get caught and I'll pay the price but he won't. It's me who'll be thrown out on my ass and then everything I've worked for— everything I've run from, it'll find me.

It's all going to come crashing down around me.

"Why not? We own you," he whispers, and that shouldn't be hot, it should be *wrong*, the way he says it. "I can take what I like." His eyes glint in the darkened hall, but he pulls back, with one last drag of his thumb over my pussy.

He stands apart from me as I try to catch up with my breathing, my head spacey and focus narrow on him. There's a noise at the end of the hallway, and I move lightning fast to smooth my uniform down.

"Benedict?" Holy sh— It's the duke. Mason's emerged from the evening's gathering and is walking toward us, bearing down on us like a wrecking ball. He's going to see my uniform's all messed up, and that my lips are kiss-swollen—

Benedict steps in front of me, hiding me from view for the most part.

"Brother, is the conversation not scintillating enough for you?" He asks, as the duke reaches us. I bob the tiniest of a curtesy, ducking my head and not meeting the duke's eyes when he looks at me. His gaze cuts to his brother instead.

"I was wondering why you abandoned Dramelia, when she was your guest for the evening. She'll think your interest is waning," the duke says, ignoring me completely, and I'm grateful for that. But— wait, Dramelia was *Benedict's* specific guest for this house party? My heart pinches, and it shouldn't hurt, but it does because I am a fool and an idiot. Of course. I'm just a play-thing. It's all the same with men like the marquis.

"Ha!"

I lift my head at his barked laugh, and Benedict's back is mainly to me, but the outline of his face shows me an irritated expression.

"My interest? I haven't been interested in six months. I invited her here out of pity," Benedict says, and his voice is casual and almost cruel, it hurts to hear him talk like that.

Like all noblemen talk. Like all men of business and power, speak of the women that are dependent on them for money, for

titles, for *life*.

It's not the way Benedict usually speaks, not around me anyway. And I hate watching him take on the same attitudes that I've heard all my life, the ones that have gotten me in trouble and hurt me.

He was like that, in Paris. He thought he could have everything. And when I finally said no to him, well...

Here I am.

My whole body is shaking, and I take a step back, hoping to disappear into the shadows.

"And what are you doing with the nanny?" The duke finally asks about me. He doesn't even look at me when he speaks about me though. He talks about me like I'm some kind of... tool, an object. My breath hitches, and that hurts in a way I hadn't expected. Pain flares under my breast-bone, an ache that doesn't die. It just grows, and grows—

"Playing, you should try it sometime," Benedict taunts his brother, leaning in close. The two of them square off, two apex predators eyeing each other up and looking like they're about to rip each other apart. "Maybe you'd be less... tense. She's right here, why don't you do it while I watch?" He waves a hand back toward me, and I can't stop it. A sound hiccups in my chest, a sob, my eyes watering as he debases me like this, when moments ago, minutes ago, he was promising me everything.

Mason draws himself up to his full height, and his eyes flare with anger. They're so much alike, when they're angry, and I stuff my fist into my mouth to stop from making any more noise. I need to stay still, until they're distracted enough, then I can run. Maybe someone else will come out from the party.

"Go to bed," he orders Benedict, like Benedict's not an adult, but a child. Benedict breathes hard, letting out a gust of air. Mason takes a step toward him, and Benedict looks away, glancing at me.

"You're not worth it," he says, words cutting deep. If they were a blade, I'd be dropping to my knees, bleeding out from

them.

As it is, I'm barely hanging onto my strength, hardly able to stand upright, as he stalks away into the dark, disappearing up the stairs without another word to me.

No more looks. No indication that what he saved me from, and what we shared afterward was anything other than a game to him. Another way to draw me in deep, pull me into his plotting and planning. Of course that's all it was. I blink away the tears, and stand here, in front of the duke.

Benedict left me to pay for his sins, and mine, all by myself. My lungs feel like they're going to collapse.

I can't even look at the duke. I can only wait for him to drop his punishment down on my shoulders, for the transparent way Benedict debauched me, and I let him.

Mason sighs, and the sound crackles up my spine. I freeze. Here it comes.

"You should avoid spending time with my brother," Mason says, in the empty hall, just the two of us to witness my shame. My eyes flick up to his face, taken aback his first words aren't *get out*. His eyes linger on the wrinkled, rumpled fabric of my dress, and my face must be so red because it's on fire from horror.

"I—"

He holds up a hand, stopping me from saying anything else.

"I don't need or want excuses from you." His gaze is flinty, hard, as he looks at me. "I know what my brother is. This time, it's not your fault. But you need to know who he is as well. You're not the first, or the last, of the household staff he's seduced—"

"I haven't done anything with him," I protest, cutting him off. The duke's lips press into a thin line, not a smile, but a grimace.

"And let whatever happened tonight be the last of it," he says sternly, and I hold my breath. He's really... not going to punish me? Throw me out? I should be out the door right now,

with not even time to pack my things. “Or you will be leaving Wester Hall, do you understand? Do not let him catch you, or use you. Come to Mrs. Harris, Mr. Matthews, or myself if the other two are unavailable.”

I nod, mute, tongue stuck to the top of my mouth. Would he still send me away if he knew what I was doing to save his life? That his survival depending on me unraveling the knots and twine that his brother has looped around his neck? I should be grateful for this reprieve. What happened tonight was such a huge failing. Not with Frisco, but with Benedict after. The panic of nearly being assaulted took over my senses. But I don’t know how to tell Mason this, because if I do, it might come out that I hit Lord Frisco.

He gives me one more look over before shaking his head, and I hate seeing that expression on his face, like he knows all he needs to about me, and has made up his mind and found me wanting. It makes a shiver race across my skin, because I want to open my mouth to tell him, to spill the whole truth about Benedict’s plot.

The rage between them is too raw and easily ignited, though. If I speak out I know it’ll just lead to the worst thing happening. He’ll come after Benedict, and they’ll both be lost. I can’t trust the duke not to fly into a fit and try to kill his younger brother, and I can’t trust Benedict not to fight back. They’ll try to settle this like nobles, instead of like civilians. And that’s a promise of death by hanging for both of them.

But still... he should at least know about Frisco, in the library, sleeping off Benedict’s mean hook. I open my mouth, but he cuts me off with a sharp slice of his hand through the air.

“Bring Madeline to my rooms tomorrow morning after her breakfast. Pack for a week-long trip. I’ll be taking her away on a trip. And—” He turns away from me and begins walking back toward the party where light spills at the end of the hall, festive noises emerging from the drawing room. My eyes widen. A trip? My tongue is thick in my mouth, throat tight. This wasn’t on any itinerary, in fact if I remember right, Madeline has a piano recital before the weekends.

He pauses, shoulders straight and broad, like he can carry the whole world on them and not even flinch. When he speaks next, his voice is cast low, and rough, “lock your door tonight. My brother dislikes being told no.”

He disappears back into the drawing room, the light falling on him and enveloping him for one last moment before he’s gone.

I press my fingers to my lips, to try to stop them from tingling.

That was so close, too close. Without another thought, I turn and run to my room, locking the door after me and sinking down to the floor, adrenaline coursing through my whole body.

MASON

“Is there anything else, your grace?” The air steward asks me, his suit neat and sharply pressed. It’s barely seen service in the last few years; it looks brand new. There’s a whiskey on the table between me and the seats facing mine and a plate of cookies with an abandoned teacup belonging to my wayward child.

We’re almost landing in Tahoe, and I’ve hardly touched my whiskey. I shake my head and look back to my newspaper. On the floor, across the aisle in the second grouping of seats, my daughter sits and plays with her toy horses while Eva watches closely.

She seems to have gotten used to the jet’s movements. I didn’t think to ask for a nanny that handles international or flight travel well. I travel so infrequently now that I’m older that there didn’t seem to be much point.

I clear my throat, and Eva lifts her head, gaze narrowing in on me immediately.

“We’ll be landing in a few minutes,” I tell her, folding my paper with a sigh. She nods and gets to her knees.

“Let’s tidy up, my lady,” she says to Madeline, helping my daughter put her horses away in their bag, a blue leather duffel stamped with our family’s crest all over. Maddie yawns and climbs into the seat next to me, and I lean over to buckle her in, fastening her small body into safety. She closes her eyes, and Eva relaxes into her own seat, her gaze on Maddie for any hint, any sign of discomfort or need. Warmth flares in my

chest. There felt something proprietary in how I watch the two of them, protective even. I'd never seen my duchess treat Madeline with anything other than thinly veiled contempt. And Madeline was her child. Unfamiliar feelings lurk under my breast bone at the sight of Eva, treating a child not even her own, like spun sugar.

Our plane hits the ground with a barely perceptible bump, and Eva is leading Maddie down the stairs to the outside. Crisp air, the hint of mountain hanging in it, fills my lungs, and the sun glints off their identical brown heads, Maddie glancing up at Eva.

From behind, the nanny has straight shoulders, her carriage excellent for a commoner, almost as if...

She could almost be...

I stumble over the last stair as she turns to me, her profile lit up by the early morning sun, along the slope of her nose and the plane of her cheeks. Her mouth drops open and she takes a step, then a second, her hand grabbing mine to steady me.

Heat explodes in my hand, up my arm, as her fingers close around mine. Air goes still around us, her face so close to mine.

"Are you alright, your grace?" She asks, her voice muffled and distant. All I can see is her eyes, bright and near.

I'm cursed by these feelings, the way she draws me in like the north star. Most days I curse that I was even born. Now, the scent of her perfume, lilacs and tobacco blossom, I wish I was anything but a duke.

Anyone at all, someone who could have a woman like her. A woman so strong, beautiful, *common*. Entirely unsuitable for me, even less so to be the parent figure for my daughter and future children. And yet, here she is. The only thing about her that is remotely unacceptable is the circumstances of her birth and place in life.

And that... that is... a problem that is surmountable.

"Your grace?" Her eyes search my face, worried, and Maddie giggles.

“Daddy, are you stuck?” She asks, and I drop Eva’s hand, clearing my throat.

“Thank you,” I can’t keep the gruffness out of my voice.

Our bags are brought out, the stewards hurrying to the limo waiting on the tarmac, the crew of the plane lined up along the red carpet that spills toward our ride. They stand at attention, wallpaper against the backdrop of the open sky, and Maddie clings tight to Eva, hand in hand.

“Your grace,” my Tahoe driver greets me, holding the door open.

“Ladies first,” I murmur and turn to Eva who is a step behind me with Maddie. Her eyes meet mine, and I swear there is the faintest pink of a blush across her cheekbones as she ducks her head and climbs inside, Maddie throwing herself in after with an excited squeal.

“I want to go swimming as soon as we get there,” she’s saying to Eva, eyes wide as she bounces on the seat. The limo pulls away from the plane, the crew in stiff salute as we go. I sigh and pick up my phone. There’s probably emails and notifications piling up...

“You have a pool at home,” Eva replies to her, “why are you so excited to swim in the lake?”

“It’s *not* the same,” Maddie sniffs, nose in the air as she looks out the window, but her eyes gleam with greed for the day ahead, and Eva catches my eye, a laughing smile on her face despite or maybe because of my daughter’s water snobbery.

Emails have flooded my inbox, and I can feel a dull headache in the base of my neck starting up. I’m going to have to go right into my office as soon as we get to the lake house—

Regret wells up inside me as I glance at my daughter. I wanted to spend time with her. This trip had multiple purposes, but putting away work and actually getting to live a life as a father for a few days was one of them.

“Anything wrong, your grace?” Eva asks when Maddie’s got her nose in a book a few minutes later. I clear my throat and give her a questioning look. She smiles, hesitantly. “You’re

frowning. I thought the point of a break away was to rest, relax, smile.”

“I’ll smile when these emails are handled,” I say, lifting my phone and then go back to the screen with a sigh. Sometimes it feels like life is only handling one emergency after another, without a single chance to catch my breath. When the hell am I going to actually get to live?

Maddie squeaks and crawls over me minutes later, depositing herself into my lap, and my phone hits the seat in the middle of an email. It bounces and slides to the floor, my arm wrapping around her to prevent her from spilling off of me.

“Madeline,” I say, voice sharp, but her impish smile up at me stops me in my tracks from truly being angry with her. Eva’s grinning too, and she gets my phone, sitting up with a gasp as we pull into the semi-circle driveway that leads up to the lake house. Her jaw drops at the sight of it, and I glance over my shoulder as we turn.

“Lake, lake, lake, lake,” Maddie chants, squirming in my lap, unable to contain her energy and excitement. I haven’t seen her this alive in...

Months. Longer.

My throat tightens.

“This is it,” I say to Eva. It’s redundant, but I need to cover my feelings. There was every reason to come. Maddie’s delirious joy was one. Seeing Eva also relax, was another. Here she is far away from my brother, and safe from his advances while I plan my next move...

To keep her from him and bind her to my side forever.

Maddie spills out of the limo as soon as we’ve stopped and one of the lake-house staff has opened the door. There’s only four of them here, a woman who is housekeeper as well as cook, a lifeguard trained in remote first aid, a footman, and the driver. All four line up for us, and I nod to them with a smile. Life is a little less constrained here, social rules are somewhat relaxed.

I can smile.

What a fucking difference.

“C’mon Eva, you have the room next to mine, and it’s beautiful,” Maddie yells, racing up the walk through the front garden. Tall pines stretch to the sky around us and around the house, so different from the ancestral home of Wester Hall. This place is all wood, gleaming red beams and glass windows, affording us the best views of the trees and lake.

“Good afternoon,” I greet the housekeeper, Mrs. Harris, and she smiles.

“It’s good of you to come, your grace, perhaps just what you need?” She tilts her head. The front doors are open, two large arched monoliths, and Maddie has disappeared inside with Eva trailing after her.

“Yes, exactly what we all need,” I murmur.

“Tea is waiting on the deck for you,” she replies and I nod, following after my daughter and my... obsession. Eva is nothing *but* that. I know because I am not interested in sitting out and reading the newspaper, taking tea against the backdrop of clear waters and mountains.

I just want to find her and see Tahoe through her eyes. Watch her drink it in and discover it. Let her sink into the waters and let down her burdens.

And her hair. I want to see that neat bun she wears come down and spill over her shoulders, soft brown waves wet at the tips from swimming.

But I resist the urge to chase after her and Madeline. I force myself out on the deck. They’ll come when they’re done exploring.

The lakehouse is perched right at the edge of Emerald Bay state park, a perk reserved for only the titled and high-born, to have property so close to public lands.

Because public lands are only public at our allowance. I step outside into the sunshine, and the lake stretches out in front of me, mountains sloping in the distance. I could disappear here, into this simple, quiet, still world. I rarely, if ever, entertain here. There are no people to please, nobody to be concerned

over whether they're upset with their seatmate at dinner. There are no scheming nobles, nobody with a barely-titled daughter trying to foist her off on my younger brothers.

And there is nobody to disturb myself or Madeline.

An unholy shriek splits the air behind me, and the temporary hellion that has replaced my daughter pounds out onto the wooden deck, her feet bare. She's already in a swimsuit. Eva follows her and gives me a brief smile, a towel over her arm and a bottle of sunscreen in one hand.

"No running," she calls to Maddie, but it's a lost cause. Madeline is already half-way down the dock that stretches into the crystal waters, right up to a diving board mid-way along it. She doesn't even stop, barely making the sharp turn without toppling.

The diving board hardly bends under her weight and she's popping off the end, water splashing up into the sky as she breaks the surface.

There's a muffled curse behind me, and I raise an eyebrow at the lifeguard, a young man I haven't met before, who goes running down the dock after Maddie.

"Is that alright?" Eva asks me, uncertain, about to step off the deck and onto the dock to follow.

"He'll make sure she's fine," I say, and then gesture to one of the lounge chairs, wooden and stained with a deep red gloss and made more comfortable with a cushion. "Can I get you a tea?" I ask, and her eyes widen in surprise.

This isn't Los Angeles.

The rules aren't the same here. And she's so close, the warm sun drawing out red highlights in her hair, copper-golden strands that glimmer in the light. I want to tangle my fingers in those waves of hers and pull her in close to me. This is so fucking dangerous, but this is what I want.

I brought her here for a reason. And not just to keep her away from my brother.

That's only part of the story... and I can't lie to myself.

“Eva?” I ask and she’s blushing, and then lifts her chin a little, settling her shoulders.

“That would be nice,” she says, and she perches gingerly on the wooden lounge chaise, glancing at me as if expecting me to yell at her for sitting in my presence. When I don’t, she slips off her shoes and tucks her feet underneath her, curling up on the chaise to watch Maddie swim.

My daughter cuts through the water like an otter, under the careful eye of the lifeguard who stands on the dock, waiting to dive in at the first sign of trouble.

I pour Eva a tea, and she eyes me with hesitant suspicion as I bring it to her, taking to the chaise next to hers.

She sips it slowly, a frown on her face.

“Is the view not to your liking?” I ask, amused. She shakes her head, turning to me.

“How do you know how I like to take my tea?” She asks.

“You use a criminal amount of sugar,” I muse, and her eyebrows arch. I sigh. “A good employer knows what makes his staff happy,” I reply. “Four sugars and heavy cream, it’s more dairy and sweet than it is tea. Unusual. I took notice.”

She buries her nose in her cup and drinks deep.

I swear her mutter,

“It’s not *that* weird.”

A smile lifts the corners of my mouth and I watch Madeline, the water spraying up from her hands as she flips her in the water, her legs flashing through the surface. My breath slows in my chest, in and out, as the peace of our surroundings sink into me.

And beside me, Eva sits, quiet and still, her chin lifted, eyes glued to Maddie, not able to look away despite the lifeguard on duty. My chest tightens.

Yes.

She is absolutely perfect.

Which is completely, thoroughly a problem.

If the great house was a monument to wealth and historical importance, the lake house is the opposite but no less luxurious. I do have the room next to Madeline's, but that's an understatement. It's got its own sitting room that leads onto the front deck, a stand-alone bathtub in the bathroom with floor-to-ceiling windows so that even when bathing you're reminded that you're in the wilderness. I'd worry for peep-toms, but I get the feeling that this enclave, despite the lack of fencing, is well protected and secluded enough that the only way someone could spy is from the waters itself.

And from what I recall, Lake Tahoe is heavily patrolled by security. There are too many high-profile titled people who own property here.

The house is all wood and stone but modern, built sometime in the last twenty years, and it doesn't have the weight of the ages rooting it into the ground. It feels airy and light, and as I get Madeline showered off and dressed for dinner, she begs for a simple sundress with not even an undershirt, the straps hugging her thin shoulders. We don't even dry her hair, and I french-braid it wet.

"You'll sit with us," Maddie asks, eyeing me in the mirror. "The usual rules are not the same here." I smile, not able to help myself.

"When I was your age, it was all I could do to hold my fork and then not even properly. And here you are, knowing all the etiquette."

“Lack of manners is to ask for death,” she replies, so solemn that I stop, fingers pausing in mid-twist.

“That’s awfully serious,” I comment lightly. She shrugs and smiles.

“I don’t think they actually mean *death-death*,” she says. I tie off her braid and pat her on the shoulder.

“Well, yes, if your father is alright with it, I’ll sit with you at dinner.”

She gets a determined look in her eye, a stubborn gleam I recognize.

I’ve seen it on Benedict’s face.

“Your grace must approve,” I say, reminding her that rules are still rules, even if we’re deep in the wilderness.

“Mmhmm,” she agrees, amiable, but I know it’s just to get me to let my guard down. My concern is for nothing because as soon as we enter the dining room, his grace is standing by the windows in a white button-down loose at the neck and a pair of jeans, the most casual I’ve seen him. Ever. He turns to us and goes to pull out a chair for Madeline, and then with a glance at me, he pulls out another chair. My heart flutters in my chest as I tuck myself into it, his steady hands pushing it under me to catch me.

It might be my imagination because this place feels like a private fairytale, the tall ceilings inviting the mountains in and a log-fire crackling at one end of the room, but I catch him watching me throughout dinner.

Madeline’s conversation is a background bubbling that I try to stay focused on, but I keep looking over at the duke.

And he’s still watching me, hardly touching his dinner despite it being a beautiful cedar-planked salmon with perfectly cooked flesh that flakes up under my fork.

My stomach trembles. What’s going through his mind? I can’t place the expression on his face, even as dessert is served. The cook here has outdone herself for someone managing on her own because Madeline gasps as a cake is presented, deep

chocolate frosting topped with a whip of pink flossed sugar on top, so tall it's nearly bigger than the cake itself.

"Would my lady like to cut it?" The footman asks, offering Madeline a gleaming silver cake knife. Her eyes are wide and she nods, getting to her feet.

The duke sits back, loosely clenched fist resting on the table as he watches her with amusement.

"I'll have to speak to Cook about spoiling you here," he says, "don't expect the same treats at home when we get back."

"Don't ruin this for me," Madeline hisses, grinning like a sugar-fielding maniac as she cuts into the cake, and I have to stifle a snort. Vacation mode has truly set in for her. She cuts a quavery-looking slice and glances at me, not sure how to get the plate across the table to me when her arms are short.

"Let me, my lady," the footman steps in with kindness, helping her plate the slice, and then walks around to me.

"That was polite of you," Mason says to his daughter, and she beams.

"Eva gets to eat with us the whole trip, right?" She asks, "because she's just as good as family, isn't she?" The footman clinks the dessert plate down in front of me a little more sharply than he should, and the duke clears his throat to change the subject.

"Cut me a slice, won't you?" Mason asks and Maddie agrees, making sure to pull off some cotton candy for him. He looks amused as the footman delivers him a plate, and we eat in silence, even Maddie too happy over her dessert to say much.

"Reading, then bed," I say several minutes later, not able to meet the duke's eyes. He's gazing at me again, I feel the pressure of his attention like the sun on my skin.

Maddie runs from the room, because apparently being here means she can't do anything unless she moves at top speed. The duke rises from his seat as I get up, and as I pass him, he holds up a hand.

“Join me by the fire pit outside after she’s asleep,” he says quietly. There’s a slight movement from the footman as his expression flickers. He’s overheard the duke’s request. I don’t know why I suddenly feel naked, but I do.

“Of course, your grace.”

I flee the dining room with as much composure as I can manage and get Maddie loaded into bed.

“You can go,” she says, surrounded by pillows and books, her eyes bright as she cracks open the first one. “I promise I’ll turn off the light after—“ She glances down at her books, counting them.

“There’s no schedule for tomorrow, so why don’t you stay up late for once and do what you like?” I ask. It’s honestly nice to see her so awake at this time of day, and not drooping like a seven-day-old cut flower.

She beams at me and burrows down into the covers as I let myself out.

In the hallway, the smooth polished floor warm under my bare feet, I take a breath.

What could the duke want?

I start the long, terrifying walk back to the sitting room. The double doors are open out to the deck, and sure enough, the fire pit is lit, flames dancing into the night sky. The mountains in the distance are a thin dark link of blue against the inky universe overhead, and stars, so many of them, scatter in the black above.

The duke is standing by the fire, back to me, hands clasped behind him as he looks out over the lake.

Its surface glitters, and I clear my throat.

“You asked for me, your grace?” I say, not sure what I should be doing, exactly. What he expects of... me.

He turns, slowly, and the firelight caresses his features. He’s handsome like this, and I realize he really is a different person here. He’s barefoot, looking more like Benedict than the buttoned-up duke he normally is at the great house.

His expression is warm, his posture relaxed as he takes me in.

I hesitate at the edge of the main part of the deck, a line in the wood separating the overhang of the lake house's roof with the open deck.

"Have you ever seen anything so beautiful?" He asks, but he's staring at me, not the lake. He can't possibly be talking about me.

Not in a million years.

But his scrutiny is exacting and intense, the soft breeze off the lake the only thing cooling my heated cheeks.

I lift a hand to my hair, brushing back some stray strands that are being tugged loose. He gestures to one of the low Adirondack chairs by the fire pit.

"Are you hungry? I am pretty sure there's supplies for marshmallows," he offers. "Or... a drink?" There's a low heat in his voice as I come to sit by the fire. I try to ignore it, but there's a buzz in my stomach,

"I don't think that my lady would forgive me if I roasted marshmallows without her," I point out. I wasn't sure how, but I feel in my gut that Maddie would just *know*. That kid has a sixth sense for bullshit and snacks like nobody I'd ever met.

Well... she is a King. And both Mason and Benedict seem to be cut from the same cloth. Maybe she gets her cleverness from them. The thought annoys me, given how both of them seem committed to making my life a supreme difficulty in more ways than one.

I watch Mason from across the fire pit, the golden light licking at his skin. His eyes are relaxed, and he looks strange and foreign to me here, in this place, under this light. A burst of laughter erupts from me and my eyes widen as I clap my hand over my mouth.

He pops an eyebrow, leaning forward, taking the poker to roll over one of the logs.

"Care to share what you find so amusing?" He asks. I bite the inside of my cheek and try to control the quiver of my

stomach.

“I just realized why you look so different to me right now,” I reply, deciding on the route of honesty as much as possible. He looks curious, and not angry, so I venture further into this shadowy, new territory. “You’re not sitting behind a desk,” I say, and my cheeks begin to warm. He stares at me for a long moment before his shoulders chug upwards in a silent laugh, and he glances away, out toward the water. The moon sparkles on the broken surface, rippling in the breeze.

“Lord above, you must think I do nothing but work,” he murmurs.

“That and glare soulfully,” I comment, not sure what is taking hold of my tongue and letting it wag freely like this. I’m not even drunk. He looks at me with curiosity, amusement curling his lips up.

“I do more than glare soulfully,” he says and there is an intensity in the look he is giving me that has my breath catching in my throat.

“Well of course. You rule with... fairness and equity?” I try, the mountain air getting to my head. The cool breeze off the lake washes over me, its seductive song calling to me. What am I doing here, talking so casually to the duke? Am I trying to risk my position? For what?

But looking at him from across the fire, his concerns are miles away. He’s not even focused on my silly words. There’s a distance clouding his eyes, sparks and stars littered across their surface, hiding their green depths in shadows. What is he thinking about?

“You have the care of the most important thing in my world, Miss Bell,” his voice runs rough over my name, sending a shiver up my spine, my skin starting to tingle all over. “And yet...” He falls into silence, and we sit there, the darkness consuming us, the fire beginning to die.

He gets to his feet. My head tilts up and my breath hitches in my chest, my whole body feeling electric. He’s coming toward me. His gaze holds me pinned, trapping me in my chair, until

he's standing over me. He blocks out the firelight, leaving me in near-shadow. He bends down, and the subtle scent of his cologne drags me in. My eyes close, and my body is waiting for, my lips tingling, the kiss that's coming, his mouth on me, the ghost of that warmth already haunting me—

“And yet, while I shouldn't compromise your focus, I can't help myself,” his voice is like a slowly rising fog, threatening to consume me.

His fingers brush over my bottom lip. I gasp. His head bends down next to my ear, and my eyes open wide. He's inches from me. “You are an absolute torment,” his voice rasps. My body is locked up, my muscles tight and tense, and I can't move. His lips brush across my ear. He stands up with a snap of his spine. I stare up at him, but he refuses to meet my gaze. My whole body is chilled and warmed at the same time. “Goodnight,” he sounds like he's fighting to hold back a beast clawing at the door, and he pulls away, moving past me, his footsteps ringing hollow on the deck floor.

Warmth from the dying fire blooms over my face as he disappears, his shadow and bulk no longer blocking the glowing coals.

Despite it though, or maybe because of a curl of a breeze coming up off the lake, I sit there and shiver.

I... I need to get to bed. Now. And not think of the duke for the rest of the night.

“You are a torment.”

Those words haunted me, all night long, until I woke up with the sun as it crept into my room. Outside the windows lived the sky distantly gray and purple, clouds rolling over the hills at the lake’s far shore like shaved ice dropped into water, curling and mistily formed.

I sit up in my bed, pulling my knees tight into my chest, wrapping my arms around my legs. I can still feel the whisper of his lips against my face, the ghost of his touch on my lips. The shiver starts deep inside me, hot and icy all at once, and shakes through my entire body until I wrap myself in the blankets, trying to contain it. It’s too much though. I need him.

I want him.

Oh god. It’s happening again. I’ve done it. I promised myself, and here I am, waiting to fling myself off the precipice yet again.

I can’t and I won’t. I have a good position, a good place, and I can’t risk it. Not for him. I shake the feelings off, trying to ignore the way they want to cling to me. I’m going to get up and face the day, and the duke.

And I’m not going to let my feelings get the better of me. No matter how badly his body is calling to mine.

IT’S TOO chilly in the morning to swim, and the duke shows no signs of retreating to whatever desk or office the lake house

might offer after breakfast. I do my best to stay focused on Maddie, and when he suggests we go into town for some shopping, her eyes light up. It's easy to pay attention to her when she's glowing with joy, and I soon find myself in a toy store, footman at the door standing at attention and at watch while we shop. The duke has gone next door to a coffee shop. It seems like I'm not the only one looking for a distraction. Does he regret what he said last night to me? I try not to wrestle with those worries.

There are lots to be diverted by here. This place is a wonderland of games and toys, puppets hanging from the rafters, and stuffed animals big and small on every shelf. Maddie is enraptured, and I follow her a few paces behind as she shops. What must it be like growing up in a house where your every desire is granted? I watch her carefully, with no envy.

She pays for every inch of privilege she's granted. Her childhood is nothing like mine, but I'm not sure I would trade, no matter how hard things were for me growing up.

The bell above the door rings and I look up, glancing toward the front of the shop. Madeline's still quietly talking herself through the pros and cons of her purchase, and doesn't need my help. I can't exactly debate the merits over Royalty Barbie and Dance Party Barbie with her. It's a big decision she needs to make for herself. For someone who has so few choices, I'm not going to insert my unneeded opinion into her toy-buying.

"Eva?" That familiar voice. I double-take back to who's walked into the shop. The footman is tense, looking between me and the stranger, ready to intervene if necessary. My mouth drops open. It won't be necessary for him to step in.

Gina stands there, in a long dress, sun-hat perched on the top of her head. Her eyes are wide and she lets out a small shriek before running toward me.

Her arms envelop me tight in a hug. Instantly I'm brought back to months prior, to when I was barely hanging onto this planet, ready to let go and fall off, drown in space. Until Gina rescued me, and put me on this dangerous path I'm treading.

Somehow it seems more treacherous than where I've come from, but I'm still grateful.

"Miss Bell?" Madeline's voice cuts through our reunion, and Gina pulls back. I immediately turn to my noble charge.

"Lady Madeline King, please meet Miss Gina McClean. My lady, Ms. McClean runs the agency that your father hired me through in order to be your nanny."

Madeline stares up at Gina and then before I can stop her or even realize what she's about to do, she launches herself at Gina, hugging her tight around the waist.

Gina freezes, eyes flicking to meet mine, before she hugs Madeline back, patting her gently on the shoulder.

"Thank you," Madeline says, breathing out the words with all her heart. "Miss Bell is my best friend." She pulls away to tuck her hand in mine, glancing up at me shyly. "You're allowed to be my best friend, right?"

Uh oh.

Gina's giving me a *look*. I know exactly what she's thinking. We're close with our charges, of course. In some cases, we'd die for them. But that's different. That's giving your life in service, serving a direct purpose.

I'm crossing a line, and Gina knows it on sight. We're not supposed to be *this* close. Not so much that they get feelings and become attached. High-born families don't like it.

"Of course, my lady," I tell Madeline, despite the expression of absolute panic on Gina's face.

"So I'm guessing the placement is going well," she says to me, voice falsely bright.

"Evangeline, do you know where—" The duke walks into the shop without realizing we have a witness. A very concerned witness. "I beg pardon," he says to Gina, and then his gaze slides down to where Madeline is clinging to me, her arm practically wrapped around my leg to hold on tight.

Gina makes a soft sound like a muffled tea kettle and I'm not sure if she's just had an aneurysm or she's about to have one.

“Your grace, please meet, Miss McClean,” I say, averting my eyes from his. What is he thinking? Gina’s as white as a sheet, which she shouldn’t be, since she has so many high-level clients. The duke might be her highest, but she’s used to rubbing shoulders with nobility. Or at least, I thought she was.

The duke nods to Gina, and his gaze glides right over her to me.

“How do you feel about seafood for tonight’s dinner?” He asks, and he couldn’t be more casual, which sends Gina into fits. She looks like she wants to disappear into the floor, or the clothes rack of hoodies behind her. Normally Gina’s so relaxed, or at least that’s what I remember of her when she spent time drinking while I tended bar. This is different though. This is vacation-Gina-accidentally-running-into-clients. I don’t want her to think I’m not doing a good job either. What if the worst happens and I have to get another placement? She’ll never give me one if she thinks I’m...

Loose. Relaxed. Overly-familiar.

The duke, looking casual and comfortable in a small gift shop, on the edge of lake Tahoe, is something so out of the ordinary that if you’d told me about it five months ago, I wouldn’t have believed you. But this is him now, and I’ve accidentally stepped in it.

“Help me pick?” Maddie breaks the moment, and drags me away to to the rack of dolls. My attention is split between her, and the tableau of Gin and the duke.

“I must thank you,” he murmurs to her, his voice just loud enough for me to catch it. I can barely breathe.

“What for, your grace, it’s just good to see that Evangeline is fitting in well with your family-“Gina sounds faint, and strained, but is holding it together.

“She has brought a light to my daughter’s eyes I have never seen before,” his words hit my heart, and make it begin to glow with warmth. I sneak a look through a rack of teddy bears, and the two of them stand formally distanced, Gina

looks calmer than before and more composed. And even... pleased.

“That is good to hear, so you are satisfied with her placement?”

“Almost,” he says, a slight wry smile. “I’m sure as she gets further comfortable with us, her relationship will blossom.” Those words drop into the waters of my heart like stones, rippling the surface. I am stock still, unable to move. There’s double meanings in everything he says, and my face is heating up, as if I am sitting in front of the fire pit again and his fingers are moving over my skin. My eyes slide shut.

I can feel it now. His thumb dragging over my lip, down my chin, my neck. It’ll catch in the hollow of my throat and he’ll pause there, feeling for my heartbeat. My whole body wants to shiver. It’s like I’m not even in my skin anymore, lifted up by the fantasy of him.

“I look forward to seeing her flower,” he says, and I inhale sharply.

“Eva?” Maddie’s voice breaks through the moment, sharp and worried. I glance down at her, flying back into my body with the speed of light. “What do you think?” She’s holding up a doll, this one hand-sewn, sparkling fibers for hair, and two shiny shell buttons for eyes.

“I think it’s lovely,” I say, “look how she has the nicest ballerina skirt.” I clear my throat, my head spinning and distant. I need to focus.

Gina is saying something to the duke, but I can’t hear it. It’s like my hearing is muffled, stuffed with cotton batting. Instead of focusing in on the two adults, I take Madeline by the hand gently.

“Let’s get it for you,” I say quietly, and lead her to the front, to the cashier. Even if I’m further away from the duke, I can feel his presence like a weight on my shoulders though, like he’s watching me and it pulls me down. I’m caught in his undertow. I know it.

And worse...

Gina knows it.

She catches me outside, in a half-second moment between when the duke calls Madeline back to look at something in the shop.

Gina's hand wraps around my wrist and my gaze meets her.

"What's going on, Eva, do you need me to get you out?"

I can't answer that, my mouth dry, and I swallow to try to call some moisture to it, so I can find the words and the energy to tell her. That there are deep plots entangling the King family, that threaten to choke them out like poisonous vines.

"It's just a bit complicated," I finally say, managing a smile. "But they're a good family." Lie. "And I'm comfortable with them." Lie. "And I'm keeping it professional, of course." The biggest lie.

She scans my face before giving me a brief, worried smile.

"Call me if you need anything. And—" She pauses, stepping away from me, her hand coming up in a soft wave of farewell. "It's good to see you."

I exhale as she goes, the door opening up, greeting me with the tinkling of a bell.

"Daddy got me another doll," Madeline exclaims, wrapping her arms around me from behind, and I exhale. I glance down at her. She's beaming, eyes flashing with joy. "Is it warm enough to go swimming now?" She asks, her voice bending to plaintive. I laugh, the shadows and cobwebs shaking from me.

"Yes. And I'll even come in with you this time," I promise her. The duke joins us, the footmen holding the door for him.

"I'll have the driver come, your grace," he says to Mason, who nods without much of a word. The duke stands beside me on the wooden boardwalk, the row of shops brightly colored and cheerful on an early sunny afternoon.

I'm looking away when I feel it.

The ghost of a touch up my back. Two fingers dragging along the linen of my dress, pressing the fabric into my spine. It's

firmer now, distinct. I inhale as Madeline chatters away at her new dolls, hugging them close to her chest.

Don't look.

I close my eyes.

Don't... look.

The duke's touch is pure electricity, and if I move, the moment will break. He'll stop. And I'll—

The sound of the limousine pulling up shatters the air around us, and when I open my eyes, the duke is moving past me, toward the door, reaching his hand out for Maddie's, like nothing happened at all.

God.

I'm in so much fucking trouble.

I'm being hunted. Stalked. There's no other word for it. The duke follows me with his eyes no matter where I go in the house. It starts when I get into the lake with Madeline.

His eyes are on my form, my modest swimsuit feeling like the most transparent mesh as if he can see right through it. His gaze burns over my skin worse than the sun's rays.

At dinner, he toys with his food, barely eating, and leaves his glass of wine untouched. He's silent, and I am too. Madeline talks enough for all of us. It feels like the world is whirring past the duke and me while we're locked in place. We're standing still, the planet moving while we play out a silent battle.

He's willing me to look at him. Daring me. His eyes score my skin with marks invisible to anyone but him.

He wants me to return his heated gaze. I'm doing everything but, instead, focusing on the sun and sky, the lake shores, and the waters. Anything to get away from the subtle, silent pressure he's got me under.

But deep down, I know that I'm about to break. The way he looks at me. This time is different. It feels different. He's not the same man, and I'm grown up now. I know myself better. Don't I?

That's why I'm not surprised when Madeline goes down to sleep for the night, and the household of servants have gone to bed, I find myself drifting into the lake house's kitchen.

Looking for someone.

Begging to be found.

This is the most beautiful mistake.

The room is dark, only lights from the outside deck letting me see by. This whole house is open-plan, more modern, and rockstar-like than the formal and ancient walls of the great house.

This means I'm visible, alone and vulnerable, standing by the kitchen island.

His scent, of clean soap, thick paper, and a hint of crisp denim announces itself a moment before his warmth as he crowds behind me. His hands slip over my hips, and I stop the gasp from escaping.

We are quiet shadows, in this big house, nothing to see here.

No one to be seen by.

His hands trace up my body, wrapping around my wrists loosely. I've changed into my night-dress, a simple cotton dress suitable in case Maddie wakes up. But with his touch on me, it feels like I'm wearing something provocative.

Something dangerous.

My clothes are a threat and one the duke seems determined to put to rest. He pulls at my nightgown, slowly slipping it up my hips, up my waist.

I can't breathe, staring out the windows. Lights flicker across the wavelets on the water, as he reveals every inch of my body, thin fabric falling to the ground at my feet.

I'm naked in front of him, in this dark place, but it feels like I have every spotlight on my person. I rock back on my heels, and feel him behind me, grounding and rock-solid. His chest is firm, under a thin, open button-up, and his jeans' denim pulls rough at my underwear.

He turns me slowly, and I can't hide from him anymore. His eyes drag down my body and I feel like it like a physical touch.

“Take off your panties for me,” he commands, and my cheeks burn and tingle.

“I—”

“Eva.” He’s not asking. His eyes are so intense that I feel like they’ll burn the fabric off of me if I don’t push them down. My fingers hook in the elastic waistband and he lets out a pained exhale of breath, stepping back to watch me fully.

I’ve never felt... this beautiful. He looks at me like I’m artwork, something precious, but a flicker in his eyes speaks of a deep-seated hunger that threatens to undo his firm composure.

My underwear hits the floor with a ghost of a sound.

He is still, and the moment stretches out like a thread, promising to snap.

He moves, like lightning, caging me in his arms, his mouth finding the side of my throat. He kisses me there and he’s going to consume me alive.

“Do you know why I told you to lock your door? That night of the party?” He asks into the column of my neck, and I can’t stop the breath from escaping me in a heady whisper, the rasp of it in my throat. “It wasn’t because of my brother. I had him handled that night, and made sure he was occupied with gaming and drinking.”

I close my eyes, his hands sliding between my thighs, pushing them apart. I let him, the warmth that follows his touch spreading along my skin, building that coiled tension inside of me.

“W-why?” I’m impatient to know, impatient for *more*. He pulls back from me, surveying me, and I nearly cry out with the anticipation. I bite my tongue to stop making noise, sighing in relief when he lifts me onto the kitchen counter. He spreads my thighs, and fingers teasing along my skin, making me shiver. My face is burning, on fire, as he parts the folds of my pussy, exposing me.

“Because I knew if your door was unlocked, nothing would stop me from walking right into your room and doing this to

you.”

He falls to his knees.

A duke, on his knees, for me. The warmth of air from his lips is the only warning he gives me before his tongue is laving over the damp skin of my pussy. Oh god, it’s everything I thought it would be. My head tilts back and my whole body staggers. My hands hit the marble countertop behind me as I brace myself, the bare skin of my thighs shiver-cold on the chilly stone.

Mason is devastating in his accuracy, and the singular focus that he puts into pulling soft sounds out of me is nothing like I’ve ever felt before. The flat of his tongue slides through my folds and teases over my clit, not enough pressure to do more than bring me higher without pushing me over the edge. My legs tense, squeezing around his shoulders, and his hands dig into the flesh of my inner thighs, keeping them spread so he can do whatever he wants to me.

It’s not hard to know that he’s determined to make me feel exactly what he wants me to feel, not when he groans into my skin, tongue sliding deep into me until my legs are trembling, and I can’t stop crying out. He reaches out in a heartbeat, slapping a hand over my mouth, silencing me.

I breathe hard, air rushing over his fingers, eyes closed tight.

“You’re going to come hard for me, Eva,” he threatens, or promises, as two of his fingers, thick and rough, slide against my entrance. “And then I’m going to fuck you over this countertop until you come for me again. You won’t remember any name but mine after tonight.”

His fingers spread me open, and my body jerks. It’s too much. I wrap my hand in his hair, pulling him closer or wanting to push him away; I don’t know.

His tongue flicks over my clit, once, twice, and I’m over the edge, my whole body drawing up into the white heat of it. He’s touching me, fingers fucking into me with each shudder that rolls through me. He’s pulling the orgasm out of me,

dragging it out until it's too much, the shock of his touch each time making me whimper into his hand.

He slips his fingers from me, sliding them through my wet folds. His thumb draws over my clit and I can't help it, I bite into the palm of his hand as he holds it clamped tight over my mouth.

"Easy," he murmurs, getting to his feet, cupping my pussy with his big, warm hand, soothing me with blunt pressure.

My breathing is hysterical in my lungs, my whole body ready to fall into sleep.

If he'll let me.

His words, his touch, his gentle, but his eyes are not. They're narrowed on me, dragging me in like the undertow. I can't stop it, or him. Instead I collapse against him, his fine white shirt open around my chest and fluttering in the breeze that blows in off the lake through the open windows.

"Are you going to sleep?" His voice rumbles through his chest, my ear pressed to it. "I told you what I'm doing to you next." He pulls away. "Stand up."

My eyes drag open, heavy and unwilling. The look on his face sends a bolt of arousal right through me, and even though every inch of me is wrung out from the hard and powerful orgasm he just gave me.

"I don't think I can," I say, throat dry. He sighs and reaches for the tap, and pours me a glass of water. He holds it to my lips.

"Drink," he orders. The water is cold as it spills down my throat, and when I'm done, he sets it aside. It's a soft kind of caring I'm not used to. No one's ever... ever cared for me like this. Not when I've been intimate with them.

But then, there's only been one. And he wasn't very good. Not to me. Not *for* me. Thinking about him hurts.

"What's wrong?" He asks, reaching for me, and when he brushes a hand over my cheek, I realize I'm crying. Salt-wet tears are dripping down my cheeks. I choke back the feeling, not sure why I'm so overcome. Maybe it's the tenderness that

he's holding me with, treating me with. "Shit." He wraps me in his arms and I bury my head in his shoulder, hiding my eyes in his neck as the shivers course through me. His breathing is even and steady, his body a safe place to hide from the whole world.

His hand strokes up my bare back, soothing my skin, like he's trying to fix it the best way he can, or knows how.

"I'm sorry," I mumble, waterlogged and feeling stupid. He must think I'm an idiot. His fingers catch under my chin and he lifts my face to tilt up toward his.

"I've used you, without even asking," his eyes are shadowed with a dark grief, and I swallow, shaking my head.

"No, no that's not it at all, I—" How do I find the words to tell him that sex is frightening. That it's been used as a tool over me, my own body turned into my enemy by a malicious demon in the past. That my whole life was threatened if I didn't give it, when I finally realized that I was only sharing a bed, and not a heart, with the man who twisted all good things and corrupted them.

The words stick in my throat, but he sees them on my face. His grip is firm on me, and he refuses to let go.

"I should have asked," he whispers, "I'm sorry." He presses a kiss to my temple, and the simple sweetness of it reaches deep inside of me, to the half-scarred place in my heart, the scabs that still exist, the flesh raw and broken.

"I'm not—" dirty. Used. I'm not. Even though I feel like I am. I don't want him to think that. Not about me. Not this great, beautiful man, who seems to carry the whole world on his shoulder. He doesn't need my burden. He doesn't need one more person to fix.

His eyes close, and he lets out a long breath.

"Let me take you to bed. Your bed," he corrects. "Let me walk you to your room."

I feel fragile, like a snowflake heading toward earth, knowing that it's doomed to melt as soon as it hits the ground. And I don't want to be alone. But the look on his face is so pained,

as if knowing that I've been hurt is hurting him too much to bear it. I can't put that on him.

"I'm alright," I promise, and pull away, my body going cold as I leave him. He bends to take my nightgown and helps me into it, fingers grazing my shoulders. I swallow hard. He must be in some pain, aren't all men, when they're denied their own passion and release?

But he says nothing, helping me into my underwear, lifting them up my legs, averting his gaze as he dresses me with a gentle tenderness that threatens to crack my heart open.

When he finally stands, I can't stay. I can't even say anything else. My throat is too choked with pain.

I'm ruined. Not by him, but by the past. Paris looms over me, a shadow that will forever stain my future. No matter how far I run, I'll never escape it.

"I— goodnight," I choke out, and turn, running from the room, the only hint that he's sad to see me go is the ghost of his touch along my wrist as I flee.

The stars seemed to call to me while I slept, disrupting my dreams and making me toss and turn. I wake in a tangle of sheets, my hair in my face. Groggy, and unsure of the time, I stagger to my feet and stare at the clock.

It is afternoon. Panic squeezes my chest and I throw my clothes on, not even taking a moment to brush my teeth before I rush to my guest-room door. My bare toes feel paper, the sound of me stepping on it giving me a start, and I glance down.

A note had been pushed under my door. In elegant pen on a thick piece of cream paper, waited his words.

Sleep in and sleep well.

Madeline is visiting with an old friend of mine.

She won't be back until evening.

~ *M*

I gulp. How had I slept through my alarm? Even after everything that happened last night with Mas-the duke, I'd still set my alarms before sleep.

I stand there, flooded with relief, and confusion, when I look up and catch a glimpse of myself in the large floor mirror that leans against the far wall. My dress is on backward. How had I not even noticed that, either? I'm an absolute mess.

A knock at my door stops me still, and I hold my breath.

“Miss Bell?” I close my eyes. It’s him. The rush of last night floods over me, the warmth of his touch, the memories it brought up, the *crying*.

God, the crying.

“Evangeline?” His voice is close to the door, like he’s almost leaning against it. “I... must apologize to you.”

I fling the door open, not about to accept him falling all over himself to say sorry. My face is burning, my cheeks must be bright red. He stares down at me, his gaze dragging down my body—

My dress is still on backward.

Ah, fuck.

His lips quirk.

“I caught you at a bad moment,” he says, his voice smooth and amused. I clear my throat.

“Um, sort of,” I say. He glances behind me into the room.

“May I come in?” He asks. My heart stutters in my chest and I step back to let him inside. He passes by me, looking around the room. “I haven’t been in here in some time. It’s been a while since we made a visit to Tahoe.”

“I imagine you’ve been busy. If your grace would excuse me a moment—“ There’s a changing screen in the corner of the bedroom area, with a walk-in closet tucked behind it. I fix my dress hurriedly, and re-emerge to find him in the sitting-area. There’s a sound from the bathroom as well, and when I peek in on my way to join the duke, I notice the bath is running, steamy water rising from the tub.

What...?

He’s standing at the doors that lead to the deck, watching the water, but when he hears me, he turns. His body language is loose and comfortable, and he’s dressed again casually in jeans and a simple white button-down shirt, the sleeves long on his arms.

I guess to hide his scars. The thought makes my chest hurt.

“I will understand if you want to give your notice,” he says, “what I did last night—“ His gaze is insistent, not looking away from me as he watches me, looks for my reaction to his words.

A shiver rolls through me.

“I’m sorry,” I say, my voice raspy and weak. He frowns.

“What? You have nothing to apologize for. I was the one who wronged you, took when I should have asked. If you give notice, you won’t want for anything. A good reference, an excellent reference, and six months pay—” He says and steps toward me. I can feel him, his whole body pulling me in like he’s the moon and I’m the tide, arching toward him. I want him to take me into his arms and hold me, and make me forget the fact I cried all over him last night when he was only giving me the hottest moment of my short and unimportant life.

“I don’t want to leave,” the words escape me like a dam breaking, giving way under the power of how deeply I feel right now. I should be running from him; I should escape and take the easy out he’s giving me.

But Mason King stands before me, apologizing to *me* after giving *me* the best orgasm I’ve ever had, after holding me tight and trying to soothe a hurt he never caused. His brother wants to kill him, his peers are scheming against him, he has the care and stewardship of millions of lives and the worry of raising a daughter in a viper’s world...

And yet here he stands, in front of me, telling me that he’ll fix my life for me, leave me better than when I came to this position. My heart feels like it can’t get any bigger, flush with emotion that I can barely stand to feel.

“I don’t want to leave,” I whisper, “I’m sorry I ran, I just—“

He destroys the space between us in three paces, wrapping me up in his arms, and his mouth is on mine before I can say anything else. His lips sear mine, a brand that is marking me as his, and last night’s tears are far away. This man is beautiful, is *perfect*, and I never saw it before, but I do now. His stubbornness and focus on work, I know what that is now.

He just can't stop worrying about everyone else in his world. And there's too many of them, no wonder he's drowning under the pressure, unable to be everything to everyone and see all that goes on.

His hands tangle in my hair, and I bite his lower lip. The growl that rolls up his chest, vibrating right to my core, has me nearly shaking. I'm warm all over, and he's threatening to undo all of my good promises I made to never cross this line with anyone again.

But he's so gentle in his determination to wreck me, his mouth moving down my neck. His hands are on my dress, sliding it up my hips.

"I never thought for a moment you would, but wanted you to have every choice," he murmurs into my skin, and starts stepping backward, walking me into the bedroom. The water is pounding in the bathroom and I suddenly realize what he means. He knew I wouldn't go, but didn't want to force me. "Let me take care of you." His green eyes are dark like the forest, shadowed and intent. How is he so unlike anyone else I've ever met?

My dress hits the floor, and again, he's fully dressed while I'm nearly naked in front of him. He drinks me in, devouring the sight of me, and pulls me toward the bathtub. The heat and moisture in the air already is pulling my waves into tighter curls, and I slowly drop my bra. His hands skim up my belly to cup my breasts, thumbs stroking over the nipples. The drag of his skin against mine has a flood of heat coiling between my thighs.

He smiles, the expression pouring warmth down over me, and he bends to kiss me.

"Perfect," he promises me, "beautiful and perfect." He takes my hands in his, fingers tangling with mine, and he guides them down my sides, over my hips, until together we slide my panties down my thighs.

His eyes are locked on mine, and no, nothing I've ever been through before could compare. I can't even think on it. All I know is him.

This.

Here.

Now.

My eyes shut tight when he slips my hand and his together between my thighs.

“Last night you were the most beautiful creature I’ve ever seen,” he says into the shell of my ear. I lean into his chest and can barely breathe as his finger teases along my clit, his hand holding my palm firm against the subtle rise of my pussy. He strokes over me, finding me wet already, his fingers slipping between my fingers to touch me.

My toes curl against the white marble floor, my legs tense and straining to keep me upright. His other arm bands around me, holding me tight.

“Let’s get you into the tub,” he says, and guides me over, never stopping the slow exploration of my pussy with his fingers, urging me to take careful steps. I’m trying to focus on walking and on him at the same time and can’t. The edge of the tub arrives just in time, and he helps me into it, until I sit on the furled ceramic edge, my legs in the hot water.

The lake stretches out beyond the glass in front of us, shining in the early afternoon sun, and his hand slips between my thighs again, urging them apart. He stands behind me, bent so he can reach me, the cotton of his shirt soft on my back. He kisses the edge of my ear, and then my temple.

“Watch the lake,” he says quietly. “Tell me what you see.”

His thumb grazes my clit. Heat spikes inside me and I clench down on nothing, desperate for something inside of me. I can’t speak, all I can do is arch into his touch, the warm water splashing up my legs as he strokes me, teasing me, making my body respond to him. I let my eyes slide close and two of his fingers slide down between my folds, threatening to take me completely.

“I asked what you could see,” his voice runs rough over my skin, making me shiver. I shake my head, disobedient, because

I want to push him. I want to see what I'll do when I don't obey.

This is the one place that I have all the power, and I know it, even with my thighs spread for him, and his hands warming my body. Outside this room I'm a servant, no better than anyone and utterly replaceable.

In here I'm a queen.

His fingers slide inside me, bottoming out at his knuckles, and my eyes fly open as he curls them upward and in, calling my body to answer him.

The gasp rushes between my parted lips and he does it again, low twists of his wrist between my thighs until I'm grabbing for his forearm, trying to get back the control I feel slipping away from me. It slides through my fingers, and evaporates as my muscles tighten up and that piercing white light flares across my vision. All I want is this moment to stretch into eternity.

The lake, the sky, they're infinite. I am so small in his arms, leaning into him as he holds me tight. Sensations are bright pin-points in this fuzzy moment. The warmth of his skin, the intensity and sound of his breath as he inhales my scent, his face buried in my hair. The swirl of water around my legs.

My body shakes and then that tight coil inside me, that indescribable feeling of urgency and desperation, cracks open in a flood of heat that turns my muscles liquid.

He holds me tight, steadying me, his fingers slowing to a stop inside me, until all we are is quiet and still, the only sound the rasp of his breath. He's hard in the small of my back, and I turn to him, stifling a gasp as his hand slips from me.

"Do you—" I don't know how to ask him if he wants more, if he wants *me*. The words die in my throat, refusing to come out, my bravery evaporating along with the heat of the moment.

Instead of answering, he kisses me, his hands gentle on me as he holds me, dipping his fingers into the water and dragging the wet up my legs, over my thighs.

“Let me care for you,” he murmurs, and he helps me down into the bathtub. I sit there, knees pulled to my chest, watching him. The heat of the water is curling in his dark hair, making the fabric of his shirt limp.

“Only if you take that off,” I reply, my voice soft and trembling. I’m sure he’ll say no. His eyes flicker, from me, to away, to me again. His throat tightens, Adam’s apple dipping down. I’m asking him for so much, to expose all his hurts to me. But hasn’t he seen all of *me*?

The shirt slides down his shoulders, his arms, the horrible evidence of abuse crawling along his skin slowly revealing itself, and I vow to fix it. Make it all better. He swallows again, and my gaze lingers on the tight line of his adonis belt, proud and arched. For a man that desks about all day, he’s...

“You’re very fit,” I say, and he raises an eyebrow at me, his lips smirking at the corner, and I’m grateful to have made him smile in this tight, tense moment. I bite my lip. “I want to see all of you,” the words flood out of me, and he clears his throat.

“Alright,” he replies, eyes on me as he slowly strips down. His trousers hit the floor, following the shirt, and he is rock-hard in his boxers, the plain black doing nothing to hide just how much he wants me.

My cheeks are red from the heat, and from the way he never pulls his gaze from mine. His thumbs hook into his underwear, and I hold my breath, wanting to sink under the surface of the water. The moment stretches, expanding out into nothingness.

The fabric joins its mates, and I let my gaze drag down his body like a physical touch.

He exhales, his foot hitting the water, splashing me. His cock is...

Prodigious.

That’s the only word my mind can come up with, and I nearly laugh about it as he kneels down in the water in front of me.

He reaches for my hand, and I let him guide it to his cock. We encircle his erection, his skin warm and silky-smooth under

my fingers. His eyes slide shut, and I want to see him come apart for me.

I want to blur the sight of those scars, trailing across his forearm, I want to blur them with the sight of his own ecstasy.

This man who never asks anything of himself, who only gives of himself in service to everyone around him. Even me.

But that changes, now. I shift in the water, the warmth of it splashing up my belly, and I lean up. My other hand pulls around the back of his neck.

I kiss him, my mouth on his, insisting he let me in. He's tense at first, but when I twist my hand, down his cock, teasing him slowly, he groans and relents. His body goes loose, and he bends to me, kissing me back. He lays me down against the slope of the bathtub, my hand still around him, stroking up and down the length of his cock. His breathing hitches, the pretty line of his lashes dark against his cheek as he closes his eyes.

His stomach muscles tighten, and he lets out a groan that nearly undoes me. Heat flares between my legs and I curl my knees around his hips, urging him close. He gives in to me, mouth opening over mine, his hips thrusting into my hand, fast, faster. His breathing spills over my lips and across my cheeks. I can barely breathe myself, his cock inches from my pussy, water splashing as I twist my wrist over and over.

His fingers tangle in my hair and he pins me to the wall of the bathtub, and he comes hard, his whole body wound up and tight. His come spills over my stomach, through the water, and I gasp to see his eyes, slitted open and meeting mine.

He's staring at me. Like he wants to devour me. He kisses me again, manic and intent.

"You are mine," he says, each word shuddering through me, as we still, together, in the warm bath, steam caressing our skin.

Movement to my left has me turning my head, and I freeze, the blood draining out of me, my whole body turning to ice.

Outside the footman stands there, shock on his face, taking us in, naked as the day we were born.

Oh...

Oh *fuck*.

“Father, why can’t you come back with us?” Madeline’s confused voice stabs into my temple. I barely slept last night. His grace spent most of the evening in his study at the lake house, avoiding me. I took dinner with Madeline in her bedroom, so as not to have to see the footman, whom, the duke assured me, would be dealt with.

I didn’t know what that meant. I don’t know what it means, as we’re outside, waiting to be loaded into a large, black SUV, with bullet-proof doors and thick glass windows. Had the one that brought us here had the same? I can’t remember.

“Because, my sweet, I have a meeting to make while I’m here, and you must get to your classes,” he says, picking her up off the ground. She squeals, her eyes lighting up. I try not to look at him. He’s in a suit, broad shoulders strong and firm as he holds her tight, hugging her. I can’t help but think of him, yesterday, undone with me, telling me that I belonged to him.

And now...

My stomach clenches on a breakfast of confusion and dismay. He hasn’t said hardly a few words to me.

He sets her back down as a driver comes around the back of the car to load our bags, opening the door up for us and setting a black leather step stool down.

“My lady,” he says to Madeline as he helps her into the car. My gaze flickers to the duke. He studiously disregards me, watching Madeline get settled.

“And when will you follow, your grace?” I finally ask, determined not to leave this place without him at least looking at me.

Look at me!

I take a step toward him, my breath catching in my throat. Everything we shared this weekend, and this is what he does? He acts as if he can't even stand to look at me? I want to reach out to grab him by the collar of his suit jacket and shake him.

That's silly, of course, he is much taller and stronger than me, and I couldn't make him budge if I wanted to.

But I need to push him off balance, to make him feel an ounce of the distress I'm feeling in return, with the way he's ignoring me, sending me back home, as if I'm done something wrong—

My eyes sting and heat and I blink away any hint of tears. I refuse to cry for him, not now.

That's when he turns to me, his gaze meeting mine.

And I go still.

The fire in his gaze, the intense burning desire, strikes me like a wave of lava, incinerating me in one single moment.

His lips are pressed thin and tight together, like he's daring himself not to say anything, and his fists clench at his sides. He does not look like a man who is bored of me, who had his satisfaction and is done with me.

He looks like he wants to *devour* me. Everyone around us will know, will see it. I can't breathe. The whole world falls away from us, and it's just our two selves, standing outside the lake house. The sound of the breeze in the trees is a distance muffled noise, fading in the power and intensity of the way he looks at me.

“Have a safe journey homey, Miss Bell,” he rasps, giving the briefest nods of his head. I curtsey, trying not to wobble as he turns away and walks back up the path to the lake house. I gulp.

“Eva, come read me a story!!” Maddie cries from within the car and I swallow again, my whole body wanting to shiver and

shake.

“Magic words,” I admonish Maddie gently as I climb in the car. She blinks at me, frowning.

“Are you crying?” She asks, suddenly, as the driver shuts the door behind me and walks around to the front.

“No—“ I turn away from her, to the window, grabbing for my seatbelt, and stroke my thumb across my cheek. Warmth, dampness, greets me.

I *am* crying.

And as I see the duke disappear inside the house, I know why.

Because I have no idea what he is thinking, and he brings up a storm of confusion inside of me so great it threatens to destroy me. My fingers drag on the glass as we pull away. And I have nobody but myself to blame for it.

It'll always, *always*, be like Paris.

THE FLIGHT HOME IS UNEVENTFUL. The house party has dispersed, and Mrs. Harris is pleased to see Madeline and me ordering us upstairs to have hot baths.

“I’ll take care of her tonight,” she offers to me, “you look positively wrung out.”

I sink beneath the bubbles of my bath in my private bathroom with a sigh and dutifully guide my mind away from thinking of him. Sleep steals over me when I finally drag myself, pruny and bone-warm, to bed.

Clatter! Clash-crash!!

I wake up to noise in the hallway much too early to be alive. Blinking blearily, I sneak next door to Madeline’s room, peeking in at her.

Batter-crack!

I am going to fucking murder whoever is making that noise. Thankfully Madeline has slept through it because it’s six in the morning. My whole body is one big ache from not enough

sleep, but I get into my uniform and throw my hair back into a pony-tail, ready to face the day, no matter how early it's begun, disappearing into the shadows of the night any thought of the duke, or the way he touches me.

Outside in the hall, I've got my best frown on, and my hands on my hips, ready to rip a strip and down the body of whoever's making the noise.

There's two of the footmen, moving in and out of one of the larger bedrooms, and I glare at them. They're carrying furniture, and trunks with them, a range of things set outside the door.

"What's going on?" I ask in a hush as I walk up to them as they see me and stop, setting down their burdens. They exchange a look.

"You'd better get downstairs, Mrs. Harris is about to have a heart-attack," says Jonah. I glance at the accumulated furniture and personal effects. None of it looks familiar to me. There's a velvet chaise, deep red, almost blood-red, a collection of peacock feathers in an inky-black vase, and a stack of hat-boxes, all in deep blue.

"Whatever this is, it can wait until Lady Madeline is awake," I say, knowing now I have a bit more authority, at least in this area. "So go make yourselves useful elsewhere for now." They're both red in the face, so a break would probably be welcome. I have no idea where they've been hauling all of these things from.

"Right, but when Mrs. Harris yells at me for stopping work, I'll let her know it was your fault," Reggie says, while Jonah punches him in the shoulder. I throw my eyes up to the ceiling and then back at the two of them.

"And if you wake Lady Madeline up, we'll all pay. So go. Now." I make a shooing motion at them and they begrudgingly leave the hallway. I give the collection of things one last look. It's a mess out here, but they'll keep for now.

When I emerge down in the servant's hall for breakfast, safe in the knowledge that Madeline will likely sleep another few

hours before waking, I walk right into the thick of the chaos.

“How was I to know they’d return so early?” Mrs. Harris is saying to Mrs. Waters, the household manager, as they stand at the long dining table, a laptop out and two cellphones on the wooden table-top, showing a travel itinerary. “The last we had from Lady Ruby and her *valaid* was that they’d be gone for the rest of the month on tour.” She turns as I walk in and gives me a harried but welcoming smile. I’m grateful that whatever fuss is being kicked up right now is going to distract me from... the duke. My face warms just remembering. I need to watch myself. It feels like Paris is shadowing me, old choices I promised I’d never make again are happening all over. How can I be so helpless to my own mind? It’s my worst enemy. Can we pretend that we never touched?

The way he looked at me before I left Tahoe says no.

I’m so fucked. Without having been actually fucked.

“Oh good, you’re here,” Mrs. Harris turns to me, her skirts swishing. She looks more like Mrs. Harried this morning, bags under her eyes that I’m going to be nice and *not* point out. Nobody likes being told they look tired. Ask me how I know, as both giver and receiver of those words in the past.

“There was noise in the hall, I thought it was going to wake up my lady,” I say, and funny how weeks ago using those titles seemed so formal and distant, and now I say it casually. Like it’s normal for me to be in this world. As if I belong.

The duke’s whore.

My cheeks flame alive, and I swallow hard, hoping Mrs. Harris doesn’t notice. What is wrong with me?

I’m not. I’m not those horrible names, those bad words. I’ve seen the duke as he really is, haven’t I? And...

I think he feels something for me.

“Yes well, the twins are returning with no notice at all, so I had to send the boys up to open Lady Ruby’s room. It’s filthy with dust, I think the maids have been dodging it since she left,” Mrs. Harris sighs like the avoidance was purposeful and

intentional, meant to set a problem for her specifically. I say nothing, wisely skirting that argument.

“The... twins?” I ask, even though I know who she’s talking about. Mason and Benedict’s younger siblings. I know enough about them now, having come across their portraits, or heard small stories of them here and there. Snatches of information, really. Not enough to make up an image of who they might be or what they might be like to the staff or to Madeline.

But I stand straighter for hearing the news. Mrs. Harris is going to need all hands on if this list rue.

“It says more to your management of the maids,” Mrs. Waters mutters, and then shakes her head, looking down at the laptop. “They’ll land in Burbank at noon—”

“Noon!” Mrs. Harris exclaims. “We have no time at all then. Miss Bell, is it possible for you to arrange some outing for Lady Madeline to go on today that doesn’t require your attention? We’ll need you at the house.”

“The traffic from Burbank to here—” Mrs. Waters is talking to herself as Mrs. Elliot, the cook, brushes by with a clipboard in her hand, trailing her assistant Claire behind her.

“We need to change the menus for tonight. You know Lady Ruby doesn’t eat meat, and Lord Noah can’t get enough of it,” Mrs. Elliot says, sounding equally irritated and stressed, sparing a glance for me. “Lady Madeline’s breakfast will have to be simpler today.”

I’m still wondering why everyone is completely besides themselves right now, because it’s just the two younger King siblings returning, not a visit from some other great noble family head. At the same time I’m trying to think if there’s any sort of appropriate outing for Lady Madeline at all that would take up most of the day and not require me watching her. So I can be prepared too.

“Well, she is supposed to be getting ready for her next piano examination,” I say carefully, “I think if I called her piano master, he might be able to come and teach her for a few hours after breakfast, and then—”

“Send her to riding lessons after lunch,” Mrs. Harris says, looking at Mrs. Waters with a thoughtful frown. “Do you think a horse could be brought up from the lower farm? She’s a bit young to start, but it’ll occupy her at the very least, a new mount, a smaller one, instead of her pony?” They stare at each other, and I can practically see the wheels turning in their heads.

“Can I ask...” They look at me and I swallow down my doubt for speaking out. “Why is it so, um, frantic? The marquis and the duke are here every day and I don’t think I’ve ever seen either of you this...” Would it be appropriate to say crazed? I can’t pick a word that won’t insult the two of them.

“Her ladyship and his lordship have been a curse on this household since the day they were born,” Mrs. Harris says bluntly, in a way I never thought I’d hear her speak. Mrs. Waters nods in complete agreement. My throat goes tight.

“I, okay, that still doesn’t—”

“Giving birth to them killed her grace, not right away, not that night, but she wasted for six months before finally giving up and leaving us. Then, when they were older, they— they terrorized the staff, tormented their older siblings,” Mrs. Harris pauses, and I wonder if she *actually* thinks they’re cursed. “And now as young adults, they set the whole of the country on end wherever they show up anywhere.”

“Yes, a curse, the both of them,” Mrs. Waters says empathetically, and that’s a bit to chew on. They eye me up. “You’ll want to stay away from Lord Noah, for certain.” My eyebrows head skyward.

Oh. So he’s one of those. If they think that about him, what do they think of the marquis? Of the duke? Both those men have had their hands, and their lips on me, as much as I’ve tried to avoid it. The memory of them touching me makes me want to blush. I need to shake it off though. Distance between them and me, that’s what’s needed now. I can’t just let them have whatever they want.

Especially if two more members of the King clan are coming to Wester Hall. And one of them is handsy. More handsy than

the older Kings, if these new rumors are to be believed.

I do not need any more trouble with a single King. Lady Madeline herself is enough work for anybody, and then on top of it...

My body starts to warm at the thought of the duke. His face appears in front of me, like a mirage, but so real. I go still, the beat of my pulse steady in my throat. His green eyes, so insistent and raw—

And then, as if by magic, the shape of his nose changes, his lips morph. Benedict. What would he think of the duke touching me?

I close my eyes. Part of me wonders if he would be jealous.

He would be. He would rip your clothing from you and do to you what his brother did, and more, just to prove that he was the better love. The words whisper into my ears like a fairy's said them. Only fairies aren't real, and my work is. I jerk my thoughts back to the present.

"If I'm squaring Lady Madeline away for the day," I say, seeing my escape from this awkward conversation, "I need to make some calls. Excuse me."

"Don't go far," Mrs. Harris calls after me as I leave the room to go to my small office. "I'll need you back in thirty minutes!"

PIANO MASTER, sorted. Pony, sorted. I vetoed the horse idea, but Madeline is going out on a long trail ride and I've even gotten Mrs. Elliot to put together a picnic for her. I'm two for two when I go back to the servant's dining room and find that the household manager is gone and only Mrs. Harris remains. She looks at me with relief and drags me off to go sort through piles of clothes in the storage room she calls 'the vault', a room set in a level below the laundry.

The stairs are narrow down here, and I follow behind Mrs. Harris. A large, metal door appears in front of us, without a handle on it.

“Um-“ I start but Mrs. Harris is pressing her palm against a scanning plate on the wall.

“There’s a small country’s fortune of treasures in here,” she says to me over her shoulder, as the door makes a hissing sound, and swings open. The door itself is thick, like a bank vault, and I already feel small and meek as I tag behind her. My eyes bug out as soon as we step inside of it.

With the high ceiling and lack of windows, this place is a paradise wonderland of fashion. The walls are lined with glass doors, each one looking into a long rack sunk ten feet deep. The end of each one is in shadows, because they’re all crammed with dresses and other garments.

My lips part, in surprise at the sight. She wasn’t joking about the clothing down here probably being enough to fund a small army. The doors nearest me have the beginnings of the rainbow in their glass fronts, blue dresses, starting at midnight and navy. I peek inside. The rack runs straight from the back of the cabinet to the front, and I count twenty... no... Fifty hangers alone, behind this one small armoire door.

My gaze scans this room, with more armoires in the middle of it, cutting off my view for how deep and far it goes, floor-to-ceiling stand-alone closets. How many are there in here?

How many dresses?

How much money is wrapped up in this one room, hidden beneath the laundry and behind a vault drawer?

“Every gown the family has had made for it, every suit, that hasn’t worn out of course, is down here,” Mrs. Harris says, “starting from over a hundred and fifty years ago—“

My jaw drops.

Over a century of fashion. This place isn’t just a vault; it’s a museum. My heart flutters in my chest as we walk down the aisle.

“The other wall has the dresses,” Mrs. Harris says, and I peek along the rainbow. It’s fading into light blues now, ten armoire doors along, and going into whites.

Glittering dresses, ballgowns even, are all encased in their garment bags, tagged with print photos on the front so we don't have to open them up fully to see the shape of them. And on my right, we pass by stand-alone armoires that lead to more aisles. One row holds shoes, in cabinets lit from within.

"This room is humidity controlled, of course, and we catalog everything we take out," Mrs. Harris says, giving me a sharp look. "So don't think to secret anything along with you."

"I would never," I breathe and then swallow. "I'm not much for fashion anyway."

"Mmmmm," she says with a shake of her head as she takes a turn down one middle aisle, and I trail after her. "I don't know how long they'll be here, so I need to be prepared," Mrs. Harris says, "and the maids are all busy getting things cleaned now that I've discovered the absolute shameful job they've done in keeping those quarters up to shape."

I nod, even though this is all a bit beyond me. We stop in an open dressing space, with a thick rug on the ground, and we're surrounded on three sides by double racks of dresses and clothing. These are only in garment bags, not behind glass doors of armoires, and I'm taken in again by how carefully this space has been built. This storage room is huge, high ceiling overhead, and below ground with no windows to prevent any of the clothes from being exposed to sunlight and being ruined by UV rays. I glance up at the racks, swallowing hard. Where would someone start? I don't know the first thing about fashion.

"What sort of things should I be looking for?" I ask her as she is pulling garment bags down off a double rack with an extendable hook, and putting them on a smaller rack in the middle of this dressing space, flanked by white leather benches, tufted and long, ready for somebody to sit and watch. In the far end of this alcove, is a break in the racks, where two long, white velvet curtains hang. I'm guessing there's a private dressing space behind there.

"Longer dresses for parties, nothing white, it's not the right time for it, and stay away from orange or deep green, they

make her look like a pumpkin or a watermelon depending on the color,” she says. “Pick at least five, and hang them over there.” She points at another rack by the entrance to the aisle we came through. “We can have them out and steamed in case Lady Ruby chooses to go out tonight after resting from her travels.”

A knot in my throat begins to form. This is the sort of true living that people often imagine the titled and noble lead. Having millions of dollars worth of dresses and clothes at their disposal, and servants to prepare it all for them. But seeing it is different than dreaming it, and as I take a garment hook to go to the racks and pull something I think the mysterious Lady Ruby would like, my heart grows more and more pained and tight.

How could I think for a moment it was okay to even entertain the thought of Benedict’s touch? Or the duke’s? The *wealth* they have, not even at their fingertips, but buried below their lands. What other treasures does this estate hide?

And how could I think that the duke was doing anything but toying with me?

When he said I belonged to him, he meant it.

Like this blue tea-dress I’ve pulled down, with fluttery chiffon around the breast, meant to drape across the chest and flatter the wearer. This belongs to him too.

I’m nothing more than a garment. Something to be put on and taken off, as useful and as desired, and as discarded.

“We’ll need shoes, and purses, oh, and—“ Mrs. Harris waves me over to a shelf, where there are shoeboxes waiting, photos of each pair stuck to the outside.

At least it’s organized down here.

I start pawing through them, trying to remember what the recent fashions were on the runways. Is Lady Ruby a fashionista? Mrs. Harris didn’t mention it. Just that she looked like a gourd in the wrong color of clothing.

There’s an unholy shrieking from above, and I sit up, eyes wide, my arms full of boot boxes.

“What on earth,” Mrs. Harris says to me, standing up from where she’s begun steaming the wrinkles out of a long elegant gown. The shrieking is getting louder and forming words, and there’s a clatter on the stairs down to the vault, echoing toward us.

Shoes slap the ground, and we both turn to the mouth of the aisle, where one of the maids appears, her apron nearly falling off her shoulders, her face puffy and red from running.

“They’re here,” she squeaks, all out of air. “They’re here!”

Mrs. Harris nearly drops the dress she’s holding, but the steamer goes clattering across the floor, breaking open and spilling water everywhere.

“How!?” Mrs. Harris looks pained and I put the boot boxes down and go to pick up the steamer. “That’s not possible.”

“They choppered in. I guess there was an accident on the freeway and they didn’t want to sit in traffic,” the maid’s sagging against one of the low leather-padded benches, trying to catch her breath. Mrs. Harris looks at me, eyes dark and ominous.

“We must go up, now,” she says, and points to the broken steamer in my hands. “Set that aside.” I swallow, my heartbeat starting to stutter in my throat.

Wonderful. The real trial by fire begins now, I guess.

NOAH

Ruby's green around the gills; flying by helicopter always does that to her, but I'm feeling fine and ready to jump out into the warm embrace of our home set. We've been gone so long that it feels like I hardly remember the look of the place.

Beside me, Ruby groans as we land, leaning forward with a pinched expression on her face.

"If I puke on one of the footmen, do you think they'll get upset?" She asks. The last few months have been hard on her. Ruby from before never would have cared. But New Ruby? New Ruby cares too much about what everyone and their dogs think. I hate it, it infuriates me, and while I know there's something I could do to fix it, she won't let me.

"Maybe try puking to the side," I advise my twin sister sagely. She rolls her eyes and then winces, the movement making her feel more nauseous. I observe her for a moment as our pilot checks in on us, turning around in his seat.

"Alright there, my lord, my lady?" He asks over the comms. I give him the thumbs up as Ruby moans softly, and looks out the window.

Out toward our home. My mouth practically waters at the sight. It's been too long since we've been away, but that can't be helped. Ruby needed what she needed, and I, as her twin, and protector, gave it to her. Mason and Benedict would understand. They always do, when it comes to us. Especially because I think in some way, they almost prefer us to be out of the house so we're not witness to their stupid feuding.

But now I'm back, and just like I protected my sister, I'll stop the two of them from fighting each other as well. Ruby is almost, *almost*, ready for marriage, and it's high time our older brothers turned their thoughts from destroying each other toward the task of finding her a suitable husband and the best possible match.

Nothing but the best for her. I swear it to myself as we step out into the fresh air, and I help her down onto the tarmac.

"Okay, I'm definitely going to be sick," she mumbles as we stop halfway across the tarmac on a red carpet rolled out just for us. A footman nearby, shoulders back and at the ready, watches us with wide eyes.

"Well, a sick bag," I say to him, snapping my fingers. He nearly jumps into the air to get it to us, racing the few paces to us with one in hand. I hold it for Ruby, glaring at the footman. "Look *away*," I growl at him, as she bends over, emptying her stomach into the bag, swaying into me with exhaustion and nausea. "There's it, that's alright," I soothe her, rubbing her back and pulling her long brown curls out of the way. She's a beauty, delicate nose and a smattering of freckles over them just like our mother had.

Not that I would know from personal experience, seeing as I can't remember what she looked like. But we have enough photos, and portraits, of our dear departed lady-mother that I know what she looked like almost as well as I know my own face, or Ruby's.

Ruby's face lifts from the bag as I hand her a handkerchief, and she wipes at her mouth and then coughs.

"I'm so sorry," she mumbles, looking a little less green now. The footman approaches again, taking the sick bag from her without a word. I offer her my arm.

"Don't worry about it. We all know what you're like," I say, not hiding the teasing lilt from my voice. She rolls her eyes and sighs, taking my arm.

"Whatever, just don't tell Benedict."

“Mmm, and have to share a secret with him? Never. Come on. Let’s go in.”

It’s good to see the staff lined up to greet us as we walk to the house, the breeze tugging at Ruby’s hair as we do, her curls fluttering around her shoulders and down her back.

Mrs. Harris is there, the creases at the corner of her eyes etched deeper, and I nod to her, as we approach. Everyone’s all here, a few new faces and then—

I nearly stop short when I see her. My throat closes over.

There she stands, a few feet back from Mrs. Harris and to the side, in the plain gown of a nanny ready to chase after her charge.

My new toy.

That had been the words he’d texted me. Benedict’s text had been cryptic, a few weeks back, with a simple photo of a girl asleep, a woman, rather, in a bed, her hand up by her face profile turned to the side. She’d been so peaceful, so beautiful, the smooth rose of her lips begging to be kissed, and bitten. It’d taken all my willpower not to jack off to that one photo alone, which was kind of pathetic. It was just a photo of a girl sleeping. But why did it hit me so hard? I’d ignored it and ignored him, not bothering to text back. I don’t take my brother’s leftovers. I have my damn pride.

I’d assumed he’d just gotten laid again and was bragging about it. Not that I cared. I could be as bad as him like that when I’m not taking care of—

Ruby.

I clear my throat, and turn to her, dragging my eyes away from the girl.

I can’t fucking believe fucking Benedict is fucking the fucking nanny.

I focus on my sister instead, trying not to let my gaze be pulled back toward her. The nanny.

The stupid nanny.

“It’s so good to see you both again, Lord Noah, Lady Ruby,” Mrs. Harris says, lying through her teeth. She hates me and that’s fair. I’ve made her life difficult. Well that was old Noah. New Noah has responsibilities that old Noah would have paled to even think of.

She curtsies and Ruby nods and smiles, glancing across the gathered staff.

“We’ve readied your rooms,” she says, and I clear my throat.

“In the women’s corridor?” I ask, glancing at Ruby. “There’s a slight change of plans. I will be staying in the rooms next to my sister.” Mrs. Harris gives me a blank look, before her brow furrows in irritation.

“I beg—”

I hold up my hand before her words can betray how annoyed she is.

“My sister has had a difficult journey back to the family set, and I want to ensure that I’m available for her every need.”

Ruby is fidgeting, her breath becomes rapid and shallow as I speak, and I step closer to Mrs. Harris, jerking my head to indicate she is to step away. Now.

She is too well-trained, too loyal, to scowl at me, but her whole body stiffens. We take ten paces away from my sister and I pitch my voice down.

“Lady Ruby had a scare while we were abroad,” I say, letting my meaning color my words. Mrs. Harris pauses, and frowns, glancing over at my sister. She’s not looking at either of us, instead gazing up at the tall bulk of our home, the magnificent profile it cuts across the sky. I’ve missed it, but not the shadows that haunt its hallways. My brothers and their petty feuds. Now that I’m home with my twin, I’m putting an end to all of it. I’m not the boy I used to be. I’m a man now, and they’ll listen to me.

For Ruby’s sake, they’ll have to.

“Of course, my lord,” Mrs. Harris says after long strained moments, and I can see the ripple of surprise on the faces of

the gathered staff. They'd been expecting to greet us, the returning children, and instead had found two grown adults ready to face every complication.

My gaze slides over them and comes to a stuttering stop on *her*.

The nanny.

Immediately a flare of rage lights up in my gut, ripping up my spine. I can see the resemblance. The hair, the shade of her eyes, of course *he* picked this one. My jaw tightens. This farce, this... scandal, will end now that I'm home.

My brother will hear me.

And he will get rid of her.

"Come, sister," I say, turning to Ruby. She tucks her hand around my bicep and I lead her inside, the staff following us like ducklings. The halls greet us, their cool air immediately enveloping us, the shade a relief from the hot, punishing air outside.

"I'm tired, Noah," Ruby murmurs to me as we step into the entry hall, the grand staircases soaring up into the darkened rafters, leading to our floors.

"A rest would be appropriate. Do you want me to see you to your room?" I ask, knowing what her answer will be. But I want her to have a choice.

"No," she replies, an exhausted smile on her face, weak and flat. "I'm fine." She leans in and kisses my cheek before leaving my side, taking to the stairs that will lead to the ladies' corridor. I watch her go, feeling the clutch of staff gathering behind me, waiting for orders, or perhaps an indication of what I'll do next.

"If you would be so kind as to prepare my rooms next to Lady Ruby's, Mrs. Harris," I say without looking at the housekeeper. "I need to speak with my brothers. Where are they?"

"His grace has not returned from his travels yet, but we are expecting him later today," Mrs. Harris says from behind me,

and I hear the rustle of fabric as the lower staff start to move away, putting into action my commands. “His lordship is in the Green room; I believe he has company, however.”

My resolve stiffens. I want to know what Benedict knows about the nanny, about our eldest brother’s plans.

“Thank you,” I reply and stalk toward the room with the billiards table. Behind me, I hear a soft murmur.

“So that was the third brother?” It’s her voice. I know it. It thrills along my skin, lighting up my veins with purpose, and I will have her thrown out of this house, out from under our roof, before the end of the night.

Mark me. I may be the third in line to the dukedom, but I have never been denied anything I’ve asked for in life, and I’m not going to start now. My brothers know better than to cross me.

The doors to the Green room are wide open, cigar smoke circling the ceiling where quiet fans slice through the evidence of my brother’s excess.

He’s standing, his back to me, surveying two other men as they play billiards. A third man is by the fireplace, eyebrows lifting as he sees me enter the room. He stands with a woman, her silk dress shorter than is appropriate for this time of day. She leans away from the fireplace, eyes widening at the sight of me.

“Ben,” I say by way of greeting, and all four of the guests bow or curtsy to greet me.

My brother turns, drink in one hand, his hair unruly and longer than when I last saw him. His smile is broad, although how long that will last depends on how pleased he is at my intention to ruin Mason’s plans.

“Noah,” he exclaims and crosses the room, wrapping me up in a hug that would squash a bear. It used to choke the air out of my lungs, but I’m not a boy anymore. I hug him back, the slap of his hand on my shoulder sharp and well-missed. “Your appearance could not come at a better time,” he murmurs into my ear. When I pull away, he gestures to the men playing pool, and the two other courtiers by the fireplace.

“You’ve met Brighton, haven’t you? And Boston. And by the fire, that’s—”

“Dallas, of course, and—” I haven’t met the woman standing next to Dallas, but she gives me a simpering sort of smile, and glides along the floor to me, offering her hand.

“Lady Emilia,” she says, casting a glance up at me from under deeply lengthened lashes. They’re crass and coarse. Ruby had tried them for a few months, and then had given them up. When they started to fall off, they gave a lady the appearance that she had spiders crawling along her eyelids. Mildly horrifying.

“A pleasure,” I say, before glancing over at my brother. “And Mason?”

“Our duke takes his pleasure in Tahoe. Madeline and her keeper returned today, before you,” Benedict replies. “So it’s just us, masters of our own universe before Mason decides to grace us with his presence again.” I can’t miss the bitter hint of violence in Ben’s tone. While there’s no love lost between the two of them, I’m not in the mood to tolerate it anymore. I give him a sharp look, and he pauses, popping an eyebrow at the slight scowl on my face. “What?” He demands.

I clear my throat and look for one of the footmen, standing by the bar. He immediately turns and begins preparing one of my favorite drinks.

“So, Lady Emilia,” I say, stepping up to her again. She’s drifted back toward the billiard table, but I see her spine stiffen as soon as I speak. She turns, fluttering her eyelashes at me again. Is she setting herself at me? That would be stupid. My goals are to see Ruby settled, dispatch of Mason’s little side-piece before he can do the wrong thing, and solve the rift between my older brothers.

I have no time for women.

“You’ve been traveling for some time, haven’t you, Lord Noah?” She asks, lifting her hand slowly as if she wants to place it on my inner forearm. It’s too familiar of a move for

me to accept it though, especially from someone like her. I step back.

“Can I cut in?” I ask Boston, who nods and hands me the pool cue. He might outrank me, in the grand scheme of things, but this is our land and a lord is always king on his own estate. Here I only bow and scrape for the King, and he’s not likely to set foot on California soil for some time, if ever.

The East keeps to itself, and the West stays free.

Lady Emilia looks disappointed as I take over from Boston, chasing the balls around the table with the white, while Benedict watches me closely.

“Our youngest brother likes to travel. I’d almost say that he prefers the world out there to his own birthplace,” Ben says of me, a smirk on his face when I glance at him.

“I was busy doing what brothers do. I was showing off our sister, a task neither you nor Mason have spared the time for,” I remind him, and Lady Emilia titters, *honest to fucking god titters*, and I’m tempted to beat her over the head with my pool cue. Who laughs like that? Idiots do.

Benedict rolls his eyes and leans against the pool table as the accompanying men wander over to the bar, where the footman is preparing them another round of drinks. They all sense this a long time conversation that’s been waiting in the wings, between brothers. Best to make haste and scatter.

Smart of them.

Lady Emilia doesn’t, because she’s short a few pegs between the ears. But Benedict doesn’t even look at her, so I decide to give her exactly the same amount of attention that he does.

As in, none.

“I have been tasked with bigger arrangements,” Benedict says, moving close to me, pitching his voice down. “You’ve been dragging Ruby across the world; she must be exhausted.”

“She needed to go,” I say, my gaze searching his for some hint that he understands the seriousness of Ruby’s needs. Our sister

is precious, a jewel not only in name, but unlike the three of us, she is truly good.

She is the one good thing to ever come out of our line until Maddie, both born of this soil and blood but somehow not twisted like us. And someone nearly wrecked her, destroyed her. I'll never let it happen again. She must be the center of our universe until I can be sure that my best friend, my sister, my twin, is whole enough that I can trust her not to crumble and dissolve into dust and smoke at first chance.

"You said in your letters."

"Which you never returned."

His gaze slides away, and there's guilt in them, like he knows he's neglected us.

"You handled it," he says, voice gruff with feeling.

"I shouldn't have had to. Yes, I handled it. I had him *handled*." A gentleman who cares to not make an international incident manages situations like that delicately, but the outcome was the same. The one who'd tried to defile her was feeding the fishes, my hands are clean, and my future clear. But that didn't mean Ruby is recovered.

"He didn't manage much," Benedict says, as if that excused his lack of action on the matter. I make a sound in the back of my throat that has him jerking his head up.

"He didn't *need* to, she is damaged all the same. And all of her brothers should have been there with her. It should not have been up to only me. So tell me, what exactly has kept you away from us all this time?" I pin him down with a gimlet stare I perfected in Europe. It's good for reminding other men of their place in life, even my betters.

Benedict's face is starting to show the first hints of age, wrinkles at the corners of his eyes folding there, telling me that something deep, something dark, has been dragging him down in the months since our last meeting.

It's that face that seems to transform as I press him for answers, and his eyes darken, jaw tightening in fury. My stomach turns, clenching. This is not the same brother I left

behind when Ruby and I went on our travels. This is someone else altogether, and as the fire of anger licks up inside his eyes, I realize something.

He has become like me. Hard, *harder*, because we've had to be.

"Do not test me," he says, his voice pitched low, but his tone anything but soft. And with that threat hanging in the air, he turns from me, and goes back to the billiards table. My stomach refuses to unknot. *Something*, something terrible, has happened to my middle brother, and I'm not sure what I've brought Ruby into, but our home is not the safe place for her it once was.

One look from my brother has told me all I need to know. He is ruthless, and has some other goal than simply being a noble dandy. Whatever that plan is, that singular focus of is, it's a mystery to me, for now.

My guard will need to be up here, perhaps even more than it was in Europe. And I'll need to get to the bottom of what has taken control of his heart and stolen his thoughts, and destroy it.

Even if it's the nanny.

Especially if it's the nanny.

“And don’t forget, she’s going to need her dress *before* the luncheon, so get it now,” Mrs. Harris says to me, and I groan internally. There just isn’t... time for this. I’ve got so much to do today, and now...? One more trip out to the laundry, and my legs are already screaming from all the running around I’ve done.

I hurry down the stairs, leaving Mrs. Harris to huff and puff her way along the upper halls. At least my bed is soft, and I’ll be able to collapse into it tonight.

I turn the corner and gasp, nearly running into a broad, firm chest. My gaze skates upward, and of course, being my luck, it’s him. The youngest brother. Lord Noah King. He might be the youngest, but that’s not to say he’s *young*. He’s older than me, a stern look on his face.

“I’m sorry, my lord,” I say, with a brief curtsy, not able to meet his eyes any further.

“Hold for a moment,” his words carry the same weight as Mason’s, although his eyes? They remind me of Benedict. Mischief and something else hiding in them I can’t quite put my finger on. The absolute entitlement of a man who believes he’s right to take what he wants, and to hell with what I’m actually needing?

No, maybe not that. But something close to it.

“Of course, my lord,” I say, still doing my best not to look right at him. Unfamiliar nobility are an unknown entity, and I don’t know what side Noah falls on.

If he falls on either side. If he even knows what his middle brother is plotting against the eldest. Would he care? I have no idea what the family relations are like between the three. It's been so busy that barely anyone spared the time to talk about the twins while they were gone, least of all to me.

"So you're the one who has charge of Madeline's care," he says, his voice smooth and silky, wrapping around a core of danger I sense is there.

"Yes, for a few months now. She's a brilliant young lady," I add on the end, hoping that'll endear me to him. He clears his throat, part-chuckle, part something else. I lift my head to look at him fully, trying to steady my breathing.

This isn't the first time I've been in front of a noble, and given where I'm currently living, it won't be the last. I have got to calm the fuck down. But even as I try to breathe in deep and slow, my heart races, my eyes searching his face, chasing the hints of Mason and Benedict in the lines of his jaw and his cheekbones.

His eyebrows mirror theirs, but his nose is entirely his, refined and distinct.

And his eyes.

Deep green whorls I could get lost in. My body feels like it's starting to sway, as if the ground is falling out from under me.

"I don't see you in the magazines like I do the marquis," I blurt out, for stupid reasons, to distract him from the fact that I'm staring at him, maybe.

His mouth tugs into a sly smirk.

"Benedict is loud. I'm quiet," he says, and takes a step toward me, closer. My skin hums with electricity, his nearness is too much. But if I step back, that's rude. The corners of his eyes crinkle.

He knows it. He sees the flight-or-freeze warring inside of me, and he's laughing about it.

So he's on *that* side, I guess. Mason, for all his gruff demands, doesn't like to terrify me. Benedict does. So how close, or far,

is Noah to the marquis and his plot to disrupt the household line?

Noah thinks I'm freezing, aching to flee. But I have teeth too.

"Quiet, or boring?" I ask, letting my tone go flat. The insult hits, and for a moment he's confused, that I, a mere peon, a peasant, would dare to lash out in any way other than physical.

His reaction is measured in millimeters, not inches, a silent storm marching through his eyes as he stares at me.

Then he smiles.

"I'd heard you were clever. Good that my sources haven't disappointed me." He reaches out and grabs me by the chin, fingers wrapping around the back of my neck as his thumb tucks across my lips, holding my mouth shut. "I can start rumors just as quickly as I hear them," he says, and he bends in close. My heart kicks up speed, his nose inches from mine, my body starting to arch to move away from his.

But his grip on me tightens, tips of his fingers digging into the back of my neck between the tendons.

"Don't let me send you running from these halls in disgrace," he murmurs, that silk voice of his going low, rough, promising the threat to be very real. "You aren't the first maid I've ruined for good employment. Unless you liked working at the bar?"

Instantly my body is cold. How does he know? That wasn't on my resume. The placement agency had purposefully kept it off.

"Her pupils widen, her breath stalls, and suddenly the prey knows that the wolf has her in his jaw," His mouth is next to my ear, barely whispering those words. My eyes close.

"Noah!" The whip-sharp crack of Benedict's voice shatters us, and Noah pulls away, letting go of me so fast and hard I nearly stumble backward.

Down the hall, Benedict is striding toward us, fury on his face.

Noah, his body language shifting from young-asshole-noble to young-man-caught-shoplifting, shoves his hands into the pockets of his trousers.

“So good to see you brother. Hug?” Noah asks, although he must be joking. Benedict face is in a scowl, and one of his fists is clenched, a promise of a punch more than a filial greeting.

And I stand here, gasping for air quietly, and feeling the ghost of Noah’s hand on me still. My skin tingles, the muscles in my legs shaky, and I should run, make some excuse and go. But I can’t. I’m stuck, frozen, my whole body refusing to do anything but exist. At least my heart is still going, my lungs still expanding, demanding air.

And Benedict looks like he’s about to visit holy hell on Noah’s head, although hopefully not on my behalf.

I don’t know why he would bother on my behalf.

“You’ve met the nanny,” Benedict says, “I trust she is to your satisfaction?”

“Oh, some, but I’ll get the measure of her later. The more important question, is she to yours?” Noah’s words drip with extra meaning, and Benedict glares, before looking at me. His eyes soften a bit, and my throat closes up in response. Why is he looking at me like that? Like he...

“Did he touch you?”

“In a way you’ve touched her? Don’t be so jealous, Ben, or selfish. We always like to share, don’t we?”

My body flashes to cold, then hot, and I take a step back. So... maybe Noah isn’t on Benedict’s side. And I don’t know what he means, that they share. My heart is beating rapidly and strongly, so much so that I can feel it in my throat.

“I need to- “

“Don’t move,” Noah demands.

“Don’t go,” Benedict says, his voice gentler. “He’s not going to bully you. You belong here as much as anyone does.”

“She’s not family,” Noah scoffs. “You’ve gone soft in the head if you think—”

Benedict makes a noise in his chest that reminds me of a wolf, and Noah stills, then smirks.

“Oh it’s like that?” The two exchange equally terrifying glares, like they’re about to throw down and begin fighting. “Do you know she’s gone for our eldest brother? Has her eye on the coronet, if I’m not mistaken.”

“I do not!” My cry rings out in the hallway, up and down, bouncing off of the marble floor and gilded wood walls. Both men turn to look at me and I give Noah an even stare. I’ve had enough. “You run your mouth like you’re common. Where’s the manners of the nobility?” I ask, lifting my chin and standing as tall as I can. In my mind, I feel like I’m a dragon, mantling my wings to show him how scary, how fearsome I can be. It’s a bet, a gamble, it might not work. But I have earned my place here, not on my back. I deserve it with all the hard work I am putting in to keep Madeline happy and well-adjusted while her moronic family insists on running around trying to murder each other in between parties and attempting to woo me. Or whatever it is they think they’re doing when they’re putting their hands on me and looking at me intensely. This whole household is insane.

“You know, I’ve changed my mind. She can stay,” Noah says, although there’s a malicious tone to his voice I don’t like. I glare at him.

“It’s not you who gets to decide,” I remind him, “it’s his grace, and no-one else.”

“He takes my word and opinion seriously,” Noah retorts, crossing his arms, and glaring at me, but it feels good that I’ve gotten under his skin. These Kings need to be put in their place, and sometimes it feels like I’m the only one in the position to do it.

“He can very well make his own mind up,” I reply. “He’s a good judge of character.”

At my words, Benedict makes a noise of derision, and both Noah and I glance to him, our focus pulled from one another.

“And what makes you think my brother, a paragon of vice, can make any good judge of character?” Benedict asks me, pinning me in place with his hot stare. I swallow, the intensity

in his voice shifting and making my stomach tighten and grip onto itself.

“I know you hate him,” I say, my eyes flitting to look at Noah, and then back to Benedict. “But I can’t understand why. He works hard for his people. He loves his daughter—”

Benedict’s face seems to transform with every word I say, becoming more angular, more furious, the lights in his green eyes melting to shadow.

“My brother, the duke, isn’t the upstanding citizen you think he is. He’s got his own secrets, after all. Do you think the duchess stays away apart for her health? Sunning herself somewhere due to nerves?” Benedict sneers. Noah grabs him by the front of his shirt, fingers fisting in his button placket.

“Shut up,” Noah grinds out, and the two of them are nearly forehead to forehead as Noah manhandles his older brother around until they’re face to face.

I just stand there, confused, and also tempted. Almost nobody has so much as uttered the word ‘duchess’ in my presence, and now... this is too much. I need to know.

“So why does she stay away?” I ask, even as Noah shoots me a glare.

“It’s not for you to ask,” he says.

“Don’t tell her what to do,” Benedict says, shaking his younger brother off and giving him a shove. Noah staggers back a step from the force. Benedict turns to me, a cruel smile crossing his lips.

“You think the duke a hero, don’t you? Put him on a pedestal, you’re enthralled with him. Foolish, but I don’t blame you.” He cocks his head. “Have you been to her rooms? Wandered them? Ghost town. She fled here, just like you’d do if you were smart enough.” He takes another step closer to me, his eyes going liquid soft. “Maybe if I showed you who he really was, you would finally come to me.” Those last words are just for me alone, barely whispered, the back of his hand coming up to caress my cheek. His touch captures me, and I lean into it, not able to stop myself. These men are like a toxin, getting

under my skin, controlling me. I inhale, sharp and hysterical, the shuddering sound whispers out of my throat. His eyes flutter shut.

“Oh for fucks sake,” Noah spits, “she’s a servant!” I jerk back, the moment broken. And I’m grateful for it. I need to get out of here, before something worse happens. Like my clothes spontaneously melting off or something.

Benedict gives Noah a fierce look, furious and righteous, before looking back at me.

“Go to her rooms. Tell me that they aren’t an effigy to a woman who had everything and would rather be anywhere but here. And then ask yourself what was so bad about my brother that she gave it all up to run away from him.” He jerks his chin at me, Noah standing behind him with arms crossed.

I take a step backward, and Noah cracks a grin.

“Go. We might be here when you get back, and I promise you it’ll be a sight to see.” Noah reaches over Benedict’s shoulder and grabs another fistful of his shirt, before whirling him around. Benedict turns, just in time for his jaw to meet Noah’s fist with a crack.

His head snaps back, his body arching, before he snarls and lunges for his younger brother. The fury whips off of them, the energy crackles through the hall, and I turn, bolting down the hallway to get away from it.

Because it’s magnetic. And it’s pulling me in. It’s a whirlpool threatening to drown me.

Their violence should be pushing me away. It’s doing anything but. I need to find answers about the duchess. It might be the key to unraveling this whole poisoned house, and maybe, it’ll keep me distracted long enough that I can avoid draping myself across Benedict’s lap.

Or... worse. Noah’s.

My brother, the duke, isn't the upstanding citizen you think he is. He's got his own secrets, after all. Do you think the Duchess stays apart for her health?

Those words echo in my mind as I creep through the upper hallway, turning the corner to the ladies' wing. I shouldn't be here, but it's the middle of the night, and the whole house is quiet. I can't really believe I'm doing this.

But Benedict, I mean, the marquis, is right. The Duchess hasn't been here since I've arrived; I've never seen or spoken with her. Her absences have been dismissed as her being a recluse, or away on a traveling visit, but to not even see her own daughter?

I can't take Madeline asking after her mother any longer. I need answers. And it's obvious someone as cold and forbidding as the duke will never give them to me.

I creep up to her door, the white-painted wood carved into a hundred filigrees. Despite the way the rest of the house is cleaned from top to bottom, at this end of the ladies' wing, the intricate designs on the Duchess's door are— they're dusty. I run my fingers along them, a soft smear of dust collecting along the tips.

Holding my breath, I turn the handle, and the door opens inward, swinging into darkness. Silence greets me, and I can see in the dim light that comes from behind the curtains and spills in from the hall.

The furniture is all covered in sheets. The air is stale in here. The curtains are pulled back, with only the gauzy inner sheer curtains covering the windows in a way that wouldn't be if someone were sleeping in here.

My stomach settles. I knew there wouldn't be anyone here. I don't even know why I worried about stumbling upon some sleeping Duchess in her bed tucked away for the night.

I leave the door, bravery swelling in my chest, and walk into the middle of the room.

It's huge. Twenty feet long, or more, with a large four-poster bed at one end, all covered in heavy sheets. There's a sitting area set up, more sheets dragged over the couches and chaise, and a fireplace at the other end of the room, with what looks like a covered piece of art hanging above it.

The windows beckon me, and when I look outside, I can see the lake glistening in the moonlight. Lanterns light the path around it, and it must be beautiful to sit here and watch the moon rise and fall over it, with a book in your lap.

But none of this tells me where the missing Duchess is, and why I've been lied to this whole time.

A voice behind me clears, and I jump, my heart slamming into my ribcage, setting off a firework of adrenaline through my nerves and veins. I whirl around.

"She's not here." It's the duke. He stands there, dressed casually in jeans and a t-shirt, barefooted like I've only seen him in Tahoe. He's not frowning at me like he usually does, his hair not smoothed to the side but soft and relaxed.

"Your grace," I say, trying to find a good excuse for why I'm here. I hadn't expected to be discovered, let alone by him. If anyone was going to catch me out, it would have been one of the hall boys or a maid.

Now I'm caught. And stuck.

But the duke doesn't look angry. He looks tired, almost resigned.

“I don’t need to ask why you’re here,” he says, like he’s reading my mind. “My brother told you there was some great mystery, some secret reason the Duchess was never around, and you wondered, didn’t you? Of course you did.”

He walks into the room, and I stand there like an idiot, shifting my weight as subtly as possible and wondering if he can see the way my throat tightens as I swallow my internal freak-out down.

He looks around the room with a long sigh and then glances at me.

“She left us. She left us without granting me a divorce or an heir, and of course, my brother would love the world to know it. It places him directly next in line to inherit.” The duke smiles, but it’s a grim, angry one. He looks out the window, his jaw going tense and tight. “And so he pokes and prods, hoping that my secret will spill out into the daylight.”

I have no idea what to say. Benedict doesn’t hide his frustration at his brother from me, but I had *no* idea this was the truth. That the Duchess was actually gone.

“I thought she just hated people,” I say. The duke lets out a derisive sound.

“You thought I’d had her killed and hidden the body, didn’t you?” His gaze cuts to me, and his mouth twists into a mocking smile. “This isn’t 1920s England. There’s no murder mystery to solve. If you can find my wife and bring her back, I’d reward you handsomely but not because I love her.” His eyes burn, and there’s that anger again. It isn’t aimed at me, though. He’s furious at his ex, and my curiosity is burning up. I want to know why. This whole world he inhabits is full of mysteries, even if he wants to deny it. It’s like catnip, and I need more. The burning sensation in my chest will only be satisfied if I finally get the real answers.

“I think since I am taking care of your child, I deserve to know, at least as much as you can tell me.” It’s a risk, making a bold demand like this, but from the glower on his face, then the resignation that flashes across it a moment later, it’s the right move.

“You’re not what I had intended for my daughter’s care-giver,” he says, his tone twisting to the sardonic. With a glance around the room, he reaches for one of the sheets covering a chaise. He pulls at it slowly, a puff of dust emerging from the cotton as he does so. “Sit,” he demands, and my knees nearly fold themselves to do so, my butt hitting the chaise. The command in his voice is so strong. I guess that’s what happens when you have decades of other people obeying you. The expectation that you’ll be listened to, without question, forms the ability to require obedience immediately. His gaze slides over me, to the bed at the end of the room, lingering there, and he’s quiet for a long moment. I wonder if he’s going to sit too, or just hover there, a dark spectre. The two brothers are so different. Where Benedict is flash and light, the duke is quiet fury, the shadows running deep in him. He’s so still that when he clears his throat, I feel myself jumping slightly, moving forward in my seat.

“Ours was not a love match,” he says, “I think if anything, it would have been more akin to a match of extreme hatred. I am shocked a child even emerged from our union, although she cursed me the day she discovered she was pregnant, and I’m certain that her rage made her give me a girl instead of a boy.” He’s not even looking at me as he speaks, his eyes resting on some spot above my head. He also sounds detached, like he’s telling a story that belongs to someone else.

Not him.

What’s it like to be so far removed from reality that you don’t even feel attached to your own life’s experiences? I’m watching it in real time. For me, I feel every single moment of my past, swelling up behind me like a tidal wave threatening to take me out at any moment. How he can forget about his own, speak dispassionately of his wife— It has me sitting there, still as he is, holding my breath. I’m waiting for him to break. I realize it, he’s a branch bent too far, and either it’ll whip right around and blind me, or it’ll snap.

“I thought that all of the high-born had some say in their marriage. Why did you marry someone whom didn’t love you?”

“Who,” he corrects my grammar, so quickly and suddenly it’s like a slap, and I blink at him. He rolls his eyes. “My apologies. Old habits with Benedict and...” He shakes his head. “Never-mind.” He looks at me directly. “What you don’t know of this way of life could fill my entire library. You think that our families would risk the bloodline, the estate and house, to just anyone? For the sake of love?” The tone of his voice tells me thinks my assumptions are absurd. “She was selected for me from a good family that my mother approved of. She could bring in a decent enough dowry that my father was satisfied with. And that was enough. All else did not matter.”

“So like, not even being sexually attracted to each other?” I blurt it out before I can censor myself, and he coughs.

“Of course not,” he says, “I would do my duty no matter what.” His eyes half-close and he looks at me with an intensity that has my skin tingling. The way he says duty sounds sexy. It rolls in his throat. “But it is hard to find someone attractive when you suspect they’d rather cut your heart out than ever accept you.”

I sit there, confused. The duke is strict, complex, and even unpleasant at times, but how could any woman truly hate him? I don’t. Even when he is demanding and stubborn with Madeline’s care, I know he means the best for her. He loves his daughter even if she isn’t a proper heir and can’t carry on the line on his behalf. It’s obvious in how he talks to her; those rough edges of his soften.

“So what happened? You hated each other but obviously sat still long enough to make Lady Madeline,” I say and my words make him laugh, unexpectedly.

“Yes, I suppose that’s true,” he muses, and sighs. “She was born in this room.”

My eyes flicker wide.

“This room? You didn’t, she didn’t— I mean, hospitals?” I stammer out and he raises an eyebrow at me.

“What a security risk that would be,” he murmurs, “but I suppose you wouldn’t think of it that way. She was born here. Conceived here.” He glowers at the bed like it’s a hated thing. I’ve only ever been with people I really loved, or thought I did, anyway. I can’t imagine what it would have been like to have to be with someone who I didn’t love.

Or even like.

My skin crawls at the thought.

“So I guess this room doesn’t hold a lot of great memories for you,” I say, “but okay, so you hated each other, she gave you Lady Madeline—”

“The only good to have come out of my congregation with her,” he says stiffly.

“And now?”

“She left,” he says it like the words are choking him. “She just, left, as if Madeline meant nothing. I knew she held me in nothing but contempt, but to abandon our daughter?” He breathes through it, the hurt in his voice, as if he could never comprehend such a base evil as that.

It all makes sense now though. Why no one ever talks about the Duchess. Why I never see her maid, how she’s never there for Madeline at all. She left the family, the title, all of it.

Well, her not being around makes sense, but why she held such animosity for the duke was still a mystery.

Maybe he’d offended her, like he did to me on the daily with his cutting comments and abrasive personality.

It was a distinct possibility, I thought as I watched him from beneath my eyelashes. He wasn’t looking at me, his fists clenched as he gazed steadily at that bed.

“Why don’t you get rid of it?” I ask, the thought occurring to me suddenly. He jerks, like I’ve hit him, and he turns.

“What?” He asks. I clear my throat. Did I stutter? No, he’s just shocked at my suggestion.

“Burn it. The bed. If it has such horrible memories for you, then get rid of it. I mean, it’s pretty old-fashioned anyway.” It is. The posters look about a hundred years old, or more, and whatever’s hidden under the cover sheet can’t be any better. “It’s probably got fifty pounds of dust-mites in it now, right? How long has that mattress been sitting there?”

He chokes, his eyes going wide and I’ve really stepped in it. Why can’t I keep my stupid mouth shut? I’m not just being impertinent, I’m risking my whole job to say such things to him. The help aren’t supposed to talk like this, not to the high-born, not unless they ask us our opinions. And then, only a very close valet or butler might venture a thought.

I’ve learned that much in the last few months here at Wester. No matter how much we’ve shared, I still have to be careful.

My breath catches and holds tight in my throat, and then he surprises me. He throws his head back, and laughs, his hand going to his chest, gripping at his shirt like it’s painful. He looks at me and shakes his head.

“Burn it. Of course. Only you would suggest such a thing,” he says with a dying chuckle in his throat. “Lord above, who sent you to torment me?”

“I didn’t mean,” I say, my face flushing. His brow raises.

“Oh did you not? Of course you did. Mrs. Harris couldn’t beat the impertinence out of you even if she was allowed to lay hands on you.” He walks toward me. “So you suggest we burn it?”

“Or sell it. I mean, it’s gotta be worth some cash—” He’s a foot away from me, and when I glance up at him, his face is different.

Not like he has a different face, but his expression.

It’s soft.

Gentle. Unguarded. He’s not telling some joke to a group of his contemporaries, carefully curated to amuse them. He’s not ordering the servants, or speaking to one of his business partners.

“Why are you so...” He doesn’t say what I am, doesn’t clarify. Instead he cups my chin in his hand, the touch so electric that I nearly lift out of my skin. The gasp hitches inside me, his skin warm and rough at the same time. He bends down.

Oh my god.

His mouth touches mine, and the shiver rolls through me. My eyes close, and I don’t even hesitate, kissing him back. I lean up into him, his grip tightening on me, fingers demanding I give him everything.

Even in this, he is relentless.

I pull away with a shudder, jerking my chin out of his grasp. My whole body feels the echoes of that one kiss, his lips claiming me for his very own. My fingers dig into the cushion of the chaise, curling around the edge of it as I try to breathe.

His eyes glitter, and there’s no regret in his expression. Then they harden, and that shield comes down, his defenses armed once more. The duke is back. The man who kissed me is gone, in a single split second. It’s like he doesn’t even remember our time at the lake, doesn’t remember how much of myself I’ve given to him. He’s just frozen solid, from the inside-out.

“You will tell no one,” he says, “and stop making such stupid comments to me. You forget yourself and your place.” He steps away from me as I sit there, struck and shocked.

He’s walking toward the door, and I twist on the chaise to watch him go.

“Cover up the furniture before you leave,” he says, as the adrenaline starts to surge through my body.

The door shuts behind him, and I’m left there, shaking.

I had to wake up way too early this morning, after barely sleeping last night. There was something about the way the sheets slipped over my bare legs that kept me up, my lips burning far into the morning hours from the duke's kiss.

There won't be a family breakfast today, my phone reads as I get out of bed, checking it. Breakfast in the bedroom then. That's fine. The linen of my dress rubs rough against my body as I pull it on, and my brush rakes through my hair, tidying it into a ponytail. Maddie's already awake when I walk into her bedroom, and the maid knocks at the door almost as soon as we're settled.

And I can't stop thinking of him. That kiss.

It shouldn't have thrown me like that. But it did, and I'm ashamed to admit it. I don't want him to have that kind of power over my body, to make me feel things like that. He's such a... horrible human, demanding respect from everyone when he hasn't earned it.

I take a deep breath. I'm not being fair to him. He does his best and... I know he cares, about everyone.

And especially me. That thought is frightening.

It makes my stomach burn, and I'm unfocused as Madeline eats her breakfast at the small play table in her bedroom. She's got her nose in a book thankfully, and this morning I'm not going to correct her. It's just me and her anyway.

I watch her carefully after yanking myself out of my thoughts of her father (so wrong), and try to puzzle out what parts of

her she got from the duchess and which ones are from the duke. Her eyes are all the duke, dark blue, and intense like his. Whatever her singular focus is, they burn into it, like her book right now. She's barely touching her apple slices, and I smile.

"My lady, you need to eat your apples," I remind her. She lifts her gaze from the page she's on, a tiny pouting frown on her lips. Thankfully they don't remind me of the duke at all. I don't need to be thinking about him right now. His daughter what matters, her care, and her happiness. She barely has a father that focuses on her, and now I find out her mother's completely out of the picture too?

She's basically an orphan.

You and me, both, kid.

"I don't like them. They're too tart," she says, wrinkling up her face. I don't think I ever spoke with such clarity at her age, but then I wasn't raised in a veritable palace surrounded by servants, tutors, and a world-class education that involved piano lessons daily and violin in the afternoon.

She is barely out of toddler-hood, but she is already more accomplished than most adults I know.

"I get it, but at least eat one for me. Here." I sprinkle some brown sugar on the apples, and her eyes light up.

"Thank you," she says politely, taking one and chewing on it thoughtfully. After a swallow, she smiles. "Much better, Nanny."

I try not to cringe at the title. I don't think I'll ever get used to it. The family I worked for in Paris weren't nearly so formal. But here, everything, including titles, matter. It's why I can think of her Madeline in my head, but never out loud. Never, ever out loud. Rules are rules and all that. And no matter how much this family is sucking me in with their mystery and intrigue, I can't forget why I'm here.

To hide.

To recover.

To rescue myself.

“What’s your book about?” I ask her.

“A princess who has nothing to wear but a paper bag,” she says, going back to it. “I can’t imagine not having anything but one to wear. Wouldn’t it be cold in the winter?”

“Probably, but that’s why you put on an extra bag. At least one more, and I think it’d be okay,” I say, and she bursts into a giggle, like a tangle of tinsel on the wind. She grins, happy and wide.

“I think plastic would do better, but it’s bad for the environment,” she says, feeling her way around that last word carefully so as not to mispronounce it.

“Probably,” I reply. “Are you done with breakfast?” She looks at the table-top then nods. “Good, you’ve got piano after you’re dressed for it, and then I thought we could go look at the horses. You’re not riding today because your boots are being mended, but we can still stop by the stables. What do you think?”

She blinks slowly, thinking it over.

“I’d like that,” she says, “I want to see the new foal. But first can we see Daddy?”

I raise an eyebrow at her.

“Father,” she corrects herself. I wish I didn’t have to ask her to change how she spoke, but the rules are rules. It’s weird to think I’m bringing up a future leader of America, because she might get married to some other duke, or even, if she was lucky, a young prince.

And if she was really lucky, the whole system that forced girls like her to grow up to early in to proper young ladies would be absolutely demolished. The chances of that happening were next to none, though. We’d sooner see a democratic voting system put in place. They’d tried it in Canada shortly after World Word Two, but the royal house still held firm there even to this day.

The high-born families in America would *never* stand for such an upheaval to their way of life. I couldn’t even imagine who

would be on the backs of our coins? A Prime Minister? Absurd.

I sleep-walk with her to the music room. Madeline tags at my side, humming softly to herself, what I'm pretty sure is *Four Seasons*, maids scurrying about their duties to clean and dust every square inch of the house as they do each day. It's exhausting to watch them, and I hold Madeline's hand down the slippery marble steps. She looks up at me, eyes sparkling.

"Uncle Benedict says that when I'm a bit bigger, he'll teach me to slide down the bannister," she says in a conspiratorial, low whisper.

"I only hope I'm no longer here so I don't have to get in trouble on your behalf," I reply and she giggles, her fingers clenching on my hand. We get to the duke's office door and she knocks, too fast and too loud. It echoes in the hallway, and when she reaches for the doorknob, it refuses to turn. The door is locked. A frown crosses her small face.

Footsteps sound off, and I see Mrs. Harris walking toward us.

"I'm afraid that the duke has been called away," she says, her gaze on Madeline's face. "We've got you all to yourselves for the rest of the week, my lady."

Madeline's mouth opens in protest, a look of sadness haunting her eyes, and it hits me that he didn't even say goodbye to her.

So much for how deeply he cared for his daughter. He couldn't even be bothered to say goodbye before leaving—

A cool feeling rushes over me, followed by a blast of heat.

Our kiss. Did he run because he kissed me? He'd forbidden me from saying anything to anyone. And after everything else we've done, everything he's done to my body, a single kiss is what did it? It broke him? Oh god. Is it my fault that he's fucked off? My stomach clenches, gut miserable. I hope it's not visible on my face.

"That just means we can have more fun without as many rules," I say to Madeline, and Mrs. Harris looks like she's sucked on a lemon. I shoot her a quick look. "Right? Hard to

be sad he's gone when we set up a fort in the music room and sleep there tonight. What do you think?"

Madeline's expression shifts fast from disappointment to joy.

"Yes, oh yes, please?" She looks at Mrs. Harris, who sighs, and gives in.

"I don't see why not," she says reluctantly, and Madeline squeaks, letting go of my hand to take off running down the hall toward the music room. "I hope you know what you're doing," Mrs. Harris says to me, looking displeased.

"Her mother's gone and her father left this morning without saying a single word to her," I say, noticing the flicker of shock on Mrs. Harris's face.

"You—"

"He told me," I say, sharp and quick. "And I wish you would have said before I agreed to this job." Not that it would have changed anything. I still needed the employment, and the protection it was affording me.

"Does it matter? There are many great families with a dead mother or—"

I cut her off with a raise of my hand.

"Dead is different from deserted," I remind her and start walking toward the music room. Mrs. Harris follows me, like a puppy on a lead. She seems to be shocked that the Truth has been revealed to me. That now I'm in the inner fold, and somehow it happened before she could approve of it.

"It was several years ago. Lady Madeline was barely out of her bassinet, and certainly doesn't remember the Duchess," Mrs. Harris says as we pause outside the music room. Inside, Madeline is already tearing into the couch cushions, pulling them apart from the couch, classical music playing on the stereo system. Well, if she doesn't get her practice in today, at least she can listen to something educational. That's a compromise I'm sure she's willing to make, given how much she loves Bach.

“The duke told me it wasn’t a love match,” I say, keeping an eye to how far open the door is, and how low our voices are pitched.

“It hardly could be described as amiable, let alone love,” she replies, confirming what the duke had said to me last night.

It makes me wonder what it had been like between the two of them. He didn’t love me, and yet when he’s touched me, when he’d kissed me—

My lips start to tingle, and burn. I lift my hand up, fingers brushing over my bottom lip to stop the prickling sensation. My whole body warms, and all I can think of is Tahoe.

Tahoe, *Tahoe*. The look on his face as he took me apart. In my memory, his face morphs into Benedict. Fresh warmth floods my body, and then—

That wicked smile. It curls up.

And it’s Lord Noah.

I jerk backward, and gasp, my eyes blinking wildly. Oh. God.

I... I think I’m wet. Jesus.

I need to get myself together.

Mrs. Harris looks at me funny and I give her a smile, trying to cover up my idiotic daydream. What the hell is wrong with me?

“Do you think we should order her tea up here? That way she can have fun, and not worry about her father being gone,” I say, covering for my quick descent into memory land. It can’t happen. Whatever this thing is that’s building between me and the duke, and me and the marquis, all of us, this complete fucking madness that I’ve been ensnared in, I need to put a stop to it. For my life. For my job.

Priorities and all that.

I just don’t know how.

My phone chimes softly just as Maddie's eyes slide shut. She turns her head into her pillow and sighs, breathing evening out. She'll be asleep in minutes. I get up, storybook still in hand from our reading, and pick up my phone.

Please come to my rooms when you are able. ~ Lady R.

Ruby. I tap my fingers against the side of my phone case for a moment and glance back at Madeline. She is already sleeping, her chest rising and falling in slow movements. I pull her drapes closed and make up my mind. It's not like I can ignore a direct request, especially if Maddie is tucked in for the night. My nerves are buzzing, though. The mysterious sister of the King clan. And she wasn't expected back for months. All I can think about is her dresses down in the vault, hundreds, thousands of them, dripping crystals, beadwork, and sequins. What kind of life has Lady Ruby led compared to my own?

I push away that thought. There is no use comparing us since we're as different as the dirt and the sun.

And she's the sun.

I slip out of Maddie's bedroom, the door clicking shut behind me, and I make my way down the hall toward Lady Ruby's rooms. There was no point in changing, right? She wouldn't expect me to be in anything other than my nanny's uniform. Why am I suddenly questioning my every mo-

A hand emerges from a shadowy alcove and grabs me by the upper arm. I let out a squeak, but another hand claps over my mouth. I'm pulled against a firm body, and I inhale sharply

through my nose. Leather, tobacco blossom, and crisp cotton fill the back of my throat, an expensive cologne that wraps around my senses.

My eyes drag up, to try and catch a glimpse of my assailant in this dark, shadowy spot.

My strangled breathing staggers to a stop.

Lord Noah.

“A single sound,” he threatens, and I nod slowly. “What are you doing near my sister’s bedroom.”

Is he... guarding her room? I glance out into the hallway, trying to keep myself from hyperventilating.

Stay focused...

My phone, still in my hand, pings quietly again, and Noah’s eyes, a dead ringer for Benedict’s, narrow.

He pulls away and holds out his hand, palm up. There’s a silent command that I have to obey. It’s been drummed into me since I was little. You always listen to and immediately respond to your betters. There’s nothing I can do but give him the phone. It’s in his hand, and he’s flicking through the messages before I can so much as blink.

His eyebrows lift and a look of scornful derision crosses his face.

“And what would my lady sister want with you?” He glances down at me, finally letting go of my upper arm. I swallow; he’s so close. Something curls in my stomach, fear or maybe excitement; I can’t tell. But it spreads through my bones, right to the heart of me. My skin tingles, and I can feel the ghost of his hand still on me even as he passes me back my phone.

“Are you just,” I can’t help myself. The words spill out of me, insubordinate and absolutely crossing the line. “Are you just haunting the hallway, hoping to catch someone entering your sister’s room?” I ask.

He goes very still. I’ve barely met this man, but with his face drawn into a severe expression, his brow furrowed, he reminds

me so much of both Mason and Benedict. I wonder if they see it in him as well. That brotherly resemblance is substantial.

And if his temper matches theirs...

I brace myself for the tidal wave that's about to crush me to the ground.

He gives me a gentle shove, his hand on my shoulder again.

"Go see to my sister, and whatever she asks of you... make sure you report it back to me," his tone is even and measured, even if his expression is not, and I can hear the tightness in his chest. Like he's holding himself in. But... from doing what? My eyes search his face.

He scowls. And I hate that he's beautiful even when he is frowning. It's not fair. My family used to say I looked like an old woman when I was angry.

"Go." That one word is all it takes to jerk my body out of my frozen state, and I'm halfway to Ruby's door. My trembling hand fists as I lift it to knock, feeling the piercing stab of his gaze on me from behind. I turn my head to look.

But I can't see him in the shadows. I know he is there, though. His energy, the feel of his emotions tumbling out of him, his frustration, all of it, boiling under the surface, it follows me.

"Come in," Ruby's soft voice from within calls to me. I swallow hard and slip inside. Her rooms are beautiful, the arched ceilings beamed with old wood, dark with age. The walls are thickly wallpapered in what looks like something closer to fabric than actual paper.

Ruby sits in a living area, doors behind her that are open, and a luxurious four poster bed with velvet curtains waiting for her, I suppose, to sleep.

But for now she glances at me, a book in her hands, her pale skin even paler in the dim light from an overhead chandelier that's been turned down low.

I curtsy. She sets the book aside. It's thick, hard-cover, and well-worn. Made Madeline is not the only King who likes to read.

“Let me look at you, properly,” she says with a smile that has no hint of the usual King cruelty I’ve come to expect from her brothers.

I step closer, to a round woven rug that’s made up of a riot of flowers and twisting vines. There are two long, low couches, one of which Ruby is sitting on, and two chairs beside me. I step into the center of it all, and try not to feel nervous. This family has me constantly on edge. If I’m not already going gray, I will be in another month. No, week.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t here earlier, my lady, your brother-”

“Is lurking outside my door?” She raises her delicate brow, and then smirks. “He has nothing better to do. Ignore him. It reminds him of his proper place in life.”

She twirls her finger in the air and I try not to swallow my tongue. The thought of me ignoring any of the family is ridiculous, w which she knows, but she’s allowed to be sassy. I have to keep that on the inside.

Still, I turn, like she’s asking me to.

“Sturdy,” she comments when I’ve done a full circle. “Hard work. I bet you grew up on a farm.” She looks at me appraisingly. My throat goes tight, thick with memories I don’t have time for.

“Something like that,” I say.

“I’d also bet you give Maddie a run for her money. She hasn’t escaped you at all, yet, has she?” Ruby smiles, demure, and then reaches to the side table next to her. Her fingers tap on a small circular object, sitting beside a smooth, round quartz-hinged jar.

“No, she hasn’t, my lady. So far we seem to be getting along just fine.” I shift my weight.

“I’m having tea sent up. Why don’t you sit.” She gestures to a chair and my throat tightens up. It’s a direct request, but it feels loaded somehow. Everything with the Kings is a double-edged sword. It promises to cut me if I try to grab at it.

“Please,” she says, her smile not even straining, the corners of her eyes crinkling. She means it. And I hope... that there’s nothing hidden underneath her words and her expression, waiting to trap me somehow.

“Thank you, my lady.” I sit down on the nearest chair, right on the edge of it, not feeling fully comfortable enough to take up the whole space. Lady Ruby gives me an appraising look. In this space, she seems completely at home, and intimidating.

“I can see why my brother hired you,” she says, and I straighten up without thinking about it, trying to meet her strong gaze but the roiling in my stomach is almost too much that it doesn’t let me. Not really.

If she only knew what her brother, her brothers, have done to me. How they’ve put their hands on me. And as she surveys me, the churning in my gut builds, a fiery ball of acid, and starts to creep up the back of my throat.

“You don’t put up with a lot of nonsense do you?” She asks. There’s a crisp knock at the door, saving me from speaking because I don’t think I can. Not with the hot-cold sensation rolling across my skin, or the scratchiness in my throat.

“Come in,” Ruby says, relaxing back into her seat with a sigh. The door swings open, and a maid pushing a cart, laden with items for tea, arrives.

I can’t help it. My eyes widen. This is a proper tea, meant for an afternoon chat between old friends. Not for a mid-evening discussion directed from master to servant.

I go still, my body feeling like it’s weighed down, sticking me to my chair.

The maid glances at me, her eyes wide to see me sitting like I am, in front of one of the family. This’ll be all over the servant’s hall the second she gets downstairs.

“Thank you,” Lady Ruby demure as the maid retreats with one last glance at me. I’m going to have so much explaining to do. My regret for coming continues to grow, and I wish that I’d said Maddie needed me, or something.

The door clicks shut and Lady Ruby gets up. My mouth opens in shock as she pours me a cup of tea.

“Sugar?” She asks, but I shake my head, not even able to make a noise. She sits, with her own tea in hand, and gestures to a plate heaped with sandwiches and another with scones and delicately frosted pastries. “Please, help yourself. And try not to look so horrified. I offer hospitality to anyone who sits in these chairs.” Her mouth quirks. “I’m not my brother.”

I want to ask her what she means but instead the words pop out-

“Which one?” I can’t help it, but she smiles, biting into her lower lip, like she’s trying not to laugh.

“They’re all a bit ridiculous,” she offers, which well, okay. True. Ridiculously brooding, handsome, complicated, and terrifying. But I can’t say that to her.

“Thank you for the tea.” I sip mine, and the milk in it swirls, clouding the liquid.

“It’s a bit of a bribe,” she pauses, “I always feel that people will agree with you more easily if you tempt them with food first.” She gazes at me over her cup, the steam lifting off of it in a curl. “Oh don’t look so horrified, I’m not going to ask you to do anything awful or horrid. I’m asking you to attend an event I will be hosting, here, in a few weeks. I’d sent out invites when I knew we’d be coming back, and absolutely everyone will be coming.”

“I...” The words are stuck in my throat, half-formed and confused. Me, attend an event, for her? What kind of event would that even be?

“I’m hosting a ball,” she says, eyes sparkling with amusement, crunched up like she can tell I’m confused and don’t know how to answer. “A masquerade, obviously, everything else is so vulgar. How are you supposed to be chased, or chase, if everyone can see your face and know that you’re behaving like an absolute slut?”

My teacup clinks heavily against the saucer, and my throat goes dry.

She can't possibly mean...

"I can't," the words scratch across my tongue, my throat hoarse. "I couldn't. Not if you intend for me to- "

"Dress up, in one of my own gowns, of course, yes, I do. Exactly that." She narrows her eyes, this time in determination, and stares at me from across the low coffee table between us. She leans forward, and in that moment the angles of her face transform. She looks exactly like Benedict when he's about to take something he wants. When he knows that 'no' will do nothing to stop him.

"You will be there," she says softly, "at my side, to accompany me at all times, and you will appreciate every moment of it."

I am frozen, stiff, shocked at her invitation, even more struck by how she framed it.

At her side.

At all times...

Her fingers tremble on the handle of her tea-cup, and she looks away, for a brief second, the harsh and demanding expression slipping.

There is something she's not telling me. I'm sure there's so many things she's not telling me.

Something, a feeling, unfurls inside of me, protective, like the spreading wings of a bird. She looks smaller in this instant, tiny, as if her shadow is shrinking in on itself.

I want to ask, but I don't know her well enough to do it. But I've seen that look before. When someone's being hunted, or haunted, by a bad memory.

"I'm honored that you would think to invite me," I say, putting as much warmth into the words as I can. I want to breathe the color back into her cheeks. She's gone pale, and drawn.

She looks at me, smiling tremulous.

"Thank you," she says, voice soft and folded-down. "It's hard to host these kinds of events and not feel exhausted with the managing of it all. So having you there will be a comfort."

“I couldn’t possibly wear one of your dresses,” I say, because she can’t mean it. It might be something for me to be waiting behind her, in the shadows, as she entertains. But not in a ballgown.

“You must,” she says with a sly smile. “It’s all a part of my plan. A grand plan.” Those words hit my heart with a spike of dread. I cling to my tea-cup, as if it’s an anchor that will keep me upright.

“A plan, my lady?”

Her eyelashes flutter.

“You’ll see. Drink your tea. And tell me all about Maddie’s progress in her lessons,” her tone tells me there’s no arguing with her. The glint of iron in her eyes says that she may seem to be a delicate, gently-reared noble woman, but she is made of the same granite as her brothers.

There will be no getting out of this. I only hope nobody asks too many questions, about why I’m having tea with her, or why I’m going to be dressed up in silk and lace and displayed at a masquerade, when I should be sitting with my charge in her room, reading books and singing lullabies.

And if I’m lucky, there are three men that won’t notice the attention Lady Ruby is giving me. I have a feeling that the King brothers won’t like it, at all.

Having the twins at home has changed nothing and everything. The family now has breakfast with each other, all at once, in one of the less formal dining rooms. Madeline is expected to attend and sits next to Ruby, who supervises her meal choices.

I'm left to stand up against the wall, watching them as Ruby talks to her niece, and Maddie, excited to have her uncle and aunt back in residence, chatters at them both. She brightens up everything, and a breakfast days later, she saves the entire thing from being mortifying and uncomfortable for everyone.

"Good morning, love," Ruby says as she sits down in her seat, taking Maddie by the hand and helping her into her chair. "Did you dream well?"

"I dreamt about a flying pony," Maddie replies, laying her napkin across her lap and beaming up at her aunt.

"That must have been magnificent," Ruby says and smooths a hand over her lap. She's dressed in a magnificent day gown of peach silk, drop-waisted and dripping with beads. Not the sort of thing that would be practical for me to wear, but I can't help but stare at it with longing.

Ruby catches me looking, and she flutters her eyelashes.

"The peach would suit your complexion," she says, and Maddie looks up from her breakfast to see who Ruby is talking to. "My *valaid* is quite good with a needle if you think your uniform could use some decoration."

The door to the breakfast room opens, and Mason steps in, already in suit and tie, ready for a day of receiving local

businessmen or attending to some paperwork. My cheeks blush immediately at the sight of him and I step back, trying to sink into the shadows.

Stupid of me, to think he wouldn't see me. To think he wouldn't notice me.

He looks at me immediately, pausing, as if he's surprised to see me. He hasn't been at any recent morning meals, not since Lady Ruby returned.

Was he thinking I wouldn't accompany Lady Madeline to breakfast?

"I can't imagine what she would do dressed in glitter and beads like you do every day," he says drily, his gaze finally breaking from mine as he smiles at his younger sister, and his daughter. "Although she seems a good deal more practical than you. I can't fathom her running through her clothing budget the way you do," there was a hint of rebuke in his tone, but Ruby beamed at him.

"What's the point of a budget if you don't spend it," Ruby countered, then nodded her head toward Maddie, watching all of this back-and-forth with rapt attention. "Take note, and don't let your future husband dictate to you what you spend your money on."

"Ruby," Mason's voice is whip-sharp and fast. Her shoulders fly back, and the air in the room stills, frozen for a moment. Footmen stand at attention, unsure of what to say or do.

Maddie breaks the moment, laughing.

"That's silly, I am never getting married," she says with the absolute certainty of a child who hasn't been beaten down by life yet.

The icy moment shatters open like an egg, and Mason laughs, eyes screwing up tight. I feel like I can breathe again. It's also one of the rare times I've heard or seen him laugh, and my heart thuds unevenly in my chest.

He sits and immediately a footman is at his side, serving up breakfast to him without more than a *good morning, your grace*. Mason doesn't give me another look for the rest of the

meal, and Benedict and Noah are conspicuously absent. Ruby lingers over her toast, and Maddie is fidgeting to go, when Ruby turns to me.

“You wouldn’t mind if my brother took Madeline out for a walk, would you? Does that disrupt her morning classes much?”

Mason makes a noise in the back of his throat, raising an eyebrow at her like he disapproves. But before he can swallow the mouthful of coffee he’s just consumed in order to argue with her, Maddie sits up, clapping her hands together with a squeal.

“I can make arrangements, my lady,” I say to Ruby, ignoring the heated look Mason is giving me. He should have more time with his daughter, anyway.

“Excellent, it’s set. Don’t argue, brother; it’s not polite to disagree with a woman.”

“I will talk to your twin,” Mason mutters under his breath, but gets to his feet despite his feelings on the matter, and offers Madeline his arm. The smile he gives her is anything but upset though, and there’s a softness in his expression I haven’t seen before.

Well. Maybe once before.

I look away before the way my face is heating gives me up. I need to get ahold of myself. I can’t keep falling to pieces every time he looks at me. Anyone could tell what we’ve shared. Maybe not exactly, but they’ll have a good guess. And then I’m ruined. Over.

Ruby waits until Maddie and Mason are gone, before she turns to me.

“Now,” she says, with an enthusiastic glint in her eyes. “Let’s go look at dresses.”

I’ve already been down in the wardrobe vault below the laundry, but this time is different. I’m not frantically working with Mrs. Harris, and am instead being trailed by two maids, and Ruby’s *valaid* as we go downstairs.

The *valaid* is unusual enough, it's a rare lady that won't be waited on by a true lady's maid, but can't, for obvious reasons relating to chastity and obnoxious social demands, be served by a valet.

Ruby has a *valaid*, a personal attendant who identifies as neither male nor female, and to be honest, I find them a little intimidating. Jolan stands nearly six feet tall, and is more muscle than curves, and when they serve us tea while we look at dresses, their hands look like they could crush the teacup they hand me.

Ruby watches me watching Jolan, and when they leave to attend to something, she turns to me with a smile.

“Maids are all well, but Jolan offers me something a maid does not. Freedom from questions, freedom from the risks of being out and about in society without Noah glued to my side as chaperone. I'm sure you understand, how difficult it is to navigate a world that seems to hate women at the same time it says it cherishes us?”

I look at her, helpless, because I don't know how to answer that. I know what she means. This world, the way it's built, has us all pinned down, our every move dictated. Sometimes I think my life was planned out before I was born. But the cruelty of it, what I've lived through? It doesn't make sense.

“A *valaid* is the perfect accompaniment for a young lady,” Ruby continues. “No man threatens me with Jolan around, and my virtue is never questioned.” She shrugs and then smiles, clapping her hands together. “Shall we look at dresses? Something, perhaps, to catch my brother's eye?”

I go still, the air in my lungs turning to ice. Her gaze is steady on me, the curve of her lips not cruel, but calculating.

She knows? But how does she know? I've been obvious. I've been stupid—

My vision swims, blurring over, and hot tears form, clinging to my lashes.

Hands wrap around mine, as the teacup I'm holding threatens to fall.

“Oh, dear, no, I’ve upset you,” Ruby says, and the gentle touch of her fingers on mine grounds me. She takes my cup and saucer, setting them down on a large leather footstool, where they’ll be safe from falling and shattering.

“I’m so sorry,” she says, as I blink away tears. “I’ve said the wrong thing.”

“No, my lady, you have every right,” I sniff, not able to force myself to meet her gaze, but knowing I must or be considered impudent. My lower lip trembles.

“Don’t be ridiculous, I don’t have any rights to your private thoughts or wishes,” she says, “but please tell me that my twin hasn’t used you ill, not so soon after we’ve arrived. He can’t have moved that fast despite you captivating his interest to intensely.”

My heart trips over itself, my lungs squeezing tight. Lord Noah? She thinks that Lord Noah is... that I’ve caught his attention?

Relief floods through my whole body, my blood practically tingling with it. A laugh bubbles out of me that I can’t stop. She doesn’t know. My secrets with Mason, with Benedict, remain just that.

“I can’t begin to think what you might mean, but I would never dream to attract your twin’s attention,” I say, because that is the whole truth. I have my hands full trying to manage what parts of the King family I can. I don’t even know what I am to either of the older King brothers. A convenience, maybe. Someone who’s slipped into their lives accidentally.

Ruby gives a playful roll of her eyes.

“Surely you’ve read a romance novel, or two, of a maid marrying up. It’s quite a popular trope, I’m to believe. Rags to riches, and all that.” She gets to her feet, but not before handing me a tissue so I can wipe my eyes. “But don’t worry, I’m not accusing you of anything improper. I just like a good bit of intrigue.” She smiles and folds her hands together in her lap in front of her. “Well, don’t worry. Let’s look at dresses, shall we?”

She rings a small bell sitting on the tea tray and my throat tightens as maids flutter into the room. They pull down an array of dresses, and I'm frozen, like a lost little spirit, surrounded by chattering women who keep offering up dress after dress to Lady Ruby. They don't ask me what I'd prefer.

And why would they? She's the noble born. I'm the servant. Do they even know her plans, to dress me up like a doll, a plaything, and let me loose in her ball?

"The theme is hunted and hunter," Ruby says to one maid who pulls a dress made of black velvet with a caped fall of silk organza gathered at the shoulders. The thin transparent material falls to the ground. "So I think that would be perfect."

"But my lady, you already wore this, two years back, to the Chesterton winter ball," the maid says, turning the dress back and forth. I hold my breath. The cape isn't plain black silk like I had thought, but has a full moon picked out on it in an array of beads, gray, silver, dark gray, black, white, showing all the crevices and craters of its magical surface.

"Oh, not to worry, although we'll have to take the hem up somewhat since she's much shorter than me." Lady Ruby turns her luminescent eyes on me, smiling broadly, and the maid inhales, while all the others stop in their tracks. They look to me.

"H-her, my lady?" The maid asks. There's a rustle in the air, whispering, as they realize what's going on.

"It's my prerogative to have a guest of honor at my ball," Lady Ruby says, standing up and gesturing to me to do the same. "See to it that she's fitted by next week, and girls—" She turns to them, drawing herself up to her full height. Like this, she is queenly, and I want to fall to my knees at the immense wave of power she gives off.

The girls nearly do, curtsying to her, heads bowed.

"This will be our little secret," she says, voice commanding instant and complete obedience. My heart nearly stops in my chest. I would throw myself into traffic for her. I would jump off a cliff for her. I would—

“My lady, your twin requests your presence,” Jolan interrupts us, their quiet and firm demeanor slipping under the moment and only elevating it. They have stepped back into the room, not a shining blond hair out of place, their brown eyes resting only on Lady Ruby’s face, ignoring the rest of us as we aren’t of consequence.

“Excellent. I wondered when he would wake up,” Ruby says, and sweeps out of the room. Jolan follows her, without a glance to me or any of the maids. Footsteps retreat upstairs, Lady Ruby’s voice fading into the distance.

“Eva,” whispers one of the maids, as we are left alone. I look at them, and they return my gaze, scandalized and concerned. “What on earth have you done?”

“I don’t know what you expect me to do at this point,” I say, trying to keep the stress out of my tone as Mrs. Harris watches me from across my bedroom. There’s a hairdresser, supplied by Lady Ruby, doing my hair, and my heart is frantically beating in my chest. I want to vomit. But that would ruin my black velvet dress, the sweetheart neckline threatening to show off my breasts more than I’ve ever shown them before. If I vomit, they’re likely to pop right out. It’s altogether a bad idea.

“And there was no way you could refuse?” Mrs. Harris asks me before wringing her hands and sighing. “Of course not. I am being foolish. But truly, you will be noticed. Someone will know you don’t belong.”

“Lady Ruby has been teaching me some dances,” I say, and I bite the inside of my cheek. And it won’t be the first time I’ve moved among the higher born. *He* took me to an opera, dressed me in satins like I was one of the French aristocrats, and then proceeded to debauch me in his private box.

That was back then. Before I knew better. Now I know better, and still manage to get myself into trouble, but at least I feel like I have some say in it.

At least now I’m knowingly, willingly, ruining my life and my future. Beside, the masquerade may be a saving grace. Invitations went out weeks ago, and most of Benedict’s co-conspirators in his little plan to unseat Mason have said they will come. This is my chance to walk beside them, listening in, and learning as much information as possible while remaining

invisible. Invisible and unimpeachable. No one has to know that I'm not what I appear.

And then what? You just give Benedict up when you have enough facts? See him hang?

I ignore the swirling thoughts and the hairdresser steps back, admiring her work.

"Beautiful," she says, "comparable to any young miss from a good family."

"Surely not!" Mrs. Harris exclaims. The hairdresser turns to her, a knowing smile on her face.

"Half of them have more nose than they'd like to claim, or faces as long as horses. This miss looks the picture of a society beauty." She moves back toward me and lifts up the lid from a silver box sitting on the dressing table. Inside is a black silk mask, eye holes lined with sparkling, clear crystals. Silver whorls of glittering paint tease across the fabric. She pulls it out.

"One last touch," she murmurs as she puts it across my face. I close my eye. There's a tug of my hair, and she must be pinning its tying ribbons directly into my waves and braids. "Perfect."

I look at myself in the mirror, and hold my breath. A strange creature looks back at me, ripped right from the photos of the society blogs.

I look high born. I am not, but I look it. My stomach shivers, sending vines of trembling, sparkling sensations through my body. This is it. This is really happening.

"Whatever you do, do not get yourself into trouble," Mrs. Harris says, grabbing my arm as I go to leave my bedroom minutes later. "There won't be room for you in this house, no matter how much his grace has taken to you, if you get yourself into trouble."

"I'll stick to the shadows, no one will know I'm there," I insist. She looks at me with doubt framing her eyes.

"If you say so."

My slippers whisper down the stairs to the private waiting room Lady Ruby told me to hide in. The plan was for me to wait, and then I would slide in after most of the guests had arrived.

The room is still, but I can hear the muffled sound of conversation beyond its far-curtained door and the strains of classical music soaring through the air. It feels like each step I take will see me tumbling to the ground, that even in here, in this small box of a room sparsely furnished with a few sitting chairs, a mirror, and a rug, I'm being watched.

I have to remember that I'm wearing a mask. No one will know. Once I'm out there, amongst the hordes of hungry social climbers and nobility, I'll be completely invisible.

Just like always. Except now, instead of being a servant hiding in the shadows, I'll be one of them.

A bell, hanging close to the curtain that keeps me separated from the ball itself, chimes softly. That's my cue. I toe up to the curtain and pull it aside slowly, peeking out. As promised, the lights in the main ballroom have been dimmed, and I slip in, ducking behind two men who have just walked past my curtain.

"Hollywood is fooling himself if he thinks he and his brothers can keep Lady Ruby off the market for much longer," one says, and my ears feel like they're perking up. I hadn't expected to hear gossip so soon.

"She's here somewhere, I imagine she'll be in a red dress, of course."

"Red as the blood she'll shed wh—"

Someone bumps into me, and my hands come up to shield myself from them, as a man steps into my view.

"A dance, if you would be so kind?" He asks, his voice a light baritone that resonates through the air. I swallow and can't say no, not without being rude. He takes my hand before I can stop him, and he's pulling me into the fray, the crowd seething around me.

“Aren’t you lovely,” he murmurs, his body curling close to mine, his one arm pulled around my waist. His breath smells like wine, heavy and unpleasant against my cheek, and my heart starts to speed up. His fingers, seeking through the velvet of my dress, to cup my ass. I let out a startled noise of fear, and he laughs, a low chuckle that fills me with dread.

And memory.

I am struck still. Trapped.

“You remember this, don’t you Eva? You loved this the most.” His smiling face looks up at me as he shoulders between my thighs. Except I don’t want it, This game stopped being fun months ago, and now I just want him to leave me alone. I look away, ashamed of what I’ve allowed him to do to me.

SLAP!

His hand cracks across my thigh.

“Look at me when I’m speaking, whore!”

I’m knocked from the past into the present as the man I dance with grabs me harder.

“All you bitches are the same,” he hisses, silky tone turning foul, and I jerk out of his grip, running from him through the crowd, chased by memories and his touch. I need to be back in the safety of my room. I’ve flown too close to the sun.

A hand wraps around my wrist and tugs me around. I would scream, but it’s him.

I would know him anywhere.

Even with a mask on.

Mason.

His eyes are shadowed behind his mask, but his touch is gentle on me, almost cherishing.

He bends down, and whispers into my ear.

“I would know you anywhere,” he says, mirroring my thoughts. “And you’re wearing my sister’s dress.”

My eyes slide shut. The rest of the world falls away, and I am here with him. Safe, and embraced. My throat closes up and I can't speak. His arm come around me.

"Dance with me?" It is a question, and I nod, knowing I could never refuse, not even after what passed between us in Tahoe and his efforts to ignore me since. When he's close, I am secure. I am more than I ever could be.

His body presses against mine, and all the fear, all of yesterday that haunts me, vanishes. There's only him, his scent, his skin. His cheek, the hint of stubble on it, brushes against my temple, and then his lips press there. It sparks off a series of trembles in me. I should be out hunting information down, not letting him hold me.

His life is in danger.

"Mason," my voice is shaky, rough, when I finally find it. I need to tell him.

His thumb comes up and brushes over my lips, hushing me.

"No names, not tonight. Not now." He holds me so close, I can feel him, and my cheeks heat up. He's hard, through his trousers, the cut of his suit jacket pulling away to tell me how much he wants me.

"She had you in one of the hidden rooms, didn't she?" He asks, and there's desperation that threads through his voice. A neediness in there that strikes me like a slap, pushing me forward into him. I need this. And him.

Now.

Tomorrow can wait.

I nod and he takes me by the hand, pulling me toward the curtain I had hidden behind earlier.

We slip into the room in the darkness, and he immediately pulls me into him, kissing me so hard I rock back on my slippered heels.

"Say yes." It's a request, but I know it's also a demand.

My throat tenses and I nod.

“Yes, please, yes, oh—“My words cut off as he scoops his hands under my thighs and lifts me up, pressing me against the nearest wall, under the bell that had chimed for me.

He is rock hard, his muscles tight and insistent as he holds onto me.

There’s a whispering sound of metal on metal, and he’s undoing the zipper of his pants. His cock is out and pressing between my thighs, teasing over my pussy through my panties. He yanks them aside, and plunges into me, not waiting a single second to see if I’m alright but I don’t care.

My body arches up for him. I light up inside, and my eyes clench tight. This is what I was made for, what I was put here for. To be in his arms. His breathing is harsh in my ears, ragged as he loses himself inside of me. I look up at him, almost wanting to shake from the disbelief of having him so close to me.

His hand curls between my thighs, fingers splitting around his cock to tease me, the palm of it grinding against my clit. Red mists and collects at the edge of my vision, turning to white as heat frissons through my whole body, centering from where he’s inside me, spreading out along my skin. Each thrust of his cock up inside me has his whole body pressing me firmly into the wall. I’m trapped, or maybe I’m set free by him. I open my eyes, gaze locking with his, my cheeks flushing to see how hard he’s staring at me. He’s always had a look that catches me, but right now?

I’m his captive.

“You will always be mine,” the words spill out of him, in a merciless rush, and without giving me a chance to answer, his thumb drags over my clit as he kisses me. I cry out into his lips, his tongue finding mine and demanding I submit.

His mouth leaves mine to press against my ear, and I can hear him even closer, his breathing staccato and making mine own stop in my chest. It’s too much, all of it, his closeness, the intensity of white-heat riding through my body. His thumb and finger close around my clit, and I cry out, spinning off the

edge into a rough orgasm that has my thighs clenching around his hips so hard he stills for a moment.

Then he moves, slowly, dragging out the pleasure until I can't stand it, and I'm pleading with him.

"It's too much," I beg. His hand curls around my mouth and he shakes his head, a cruel glint in his eyes that's driving me to madness. My head falls back against the wall and I let my eyes sink shut. He's going to do this no matter what I say, and somehow, that just lights the fire harder and hotter inside of me. It's like I can't come down from it, his cock relentless, his movements designed to keep me from ever feeling anything but him inside me.

"Again," he demands, and I cry out into the palm of his hand, his other hand teasing me, his hips jerking against me. Each time he pulls out I slip down the wall, like I'm chasing him, until he meets me again, thrusting hard inside me and pressing me up to meet him.

"I won't," I manage to get out from behind his fingers, because how is that even possible? Another orgasm? My mind is spinning, but with the way he's looking at me, sheer determination in his eyes. He's not going to let this go. He's not going to let *me* go without giving him what he wants.

My breathing is shaky, and I can feel it. The moment it turns from too much inside me, too much sensation, to a raw hunger that starts to consume me. The heat blossoms underneath my skin, and I cry out again, my voice breaking in my throat. His eyes are shut and he presses into me one last time. He stills, and I can feel the wet-hot pulse of him coming inside me. Somehow that pushes me further, until the trembling sharp edge of my orgasm falls away, leaving just me and him.

Breathing. My heart racing. I want to feel his heartbeat too, but it's like I can't lift my fingers to drag along his neck, find his pulse. To really know if this has him as caught as it has me. I'm so scared.

He holds me close, I'm tight around him. How deep he's buried in me, I never want him to leave. I don't want to let him go.

His breathing is starting to calm, and he drops his head to kiss me, catching my lips with his. It's less crazed, but deeper somehow. This moment has me drowning in him. His fingers tangle in my hair.

"You can't go back out there," he murmurs as he slowly pulls out of me, and I hate feeling the loss of him. "Everyone will know what I've done to you." He lifts his fingers to my hair, rueful smile on his face.

I lift my head to look him squarely.

"I want them all to know," I whisper, "I want them to see you on me."

His lips part, and there's a look of surging hunger in his expression I have never seen before. He moves toward me, but a burst of laughter just beyond the curtain has him stilling.

"I will never ruin you," his words are low. He sighs, and then rubs his thumb over his lips, pulling it away and smiling to see my lipstick blurred there. I shiver, not wanting him to go, but knowing he has to. And he's right. I glance in the mirror.

My hair is a mess.

There's no way I can go back to the masquerade. Even with my mask on, I'll still be marked, for tonight at least, as a loose woman. And I'm wearing Ruby's dress. Someone will notice.

Someone will say something.

"Go," I say as I turn to him. "Go and I'll see you—"

"In my rooms, tonight, after the ball. I'll retire as early as I can." He looks at me with that unquenched hunger, the desire ripping right through my body. I squeeze my thighs together under my skirts.

He smirks.

"Go, before I change my mind," I challenge him. He raises an eyebrow.

"You may give the orders now, but in a few hours..."

I tremble at his threat. He gives me one last look, up and down my body, and then he is gone, back from behind the curtain,

into the throng of people all waiting for a piece of him.

My body is slowly cooling, my heart rate slowing. I should go to my rooms, dress in something less showy. I can't have him ripping Ruby's dress from my body. And I have a feeling he's going to want to.

I turn and walk to the wooden door that leads to the hallway, and the curling stairs beyond.

The moment I open it, I feel him.

Benedict stands there, eyes dark, staring at me, betrayal on his face.

"Well," he says, barely capping his rage, his words clipped, a mask dangling from his fingertips. "I see you have picked which brother you are backing, haven't you?"

My heart drops.

Oh. Shit.

NOAH

I have to stop my brothers from doing something stupid. Like fighting over a fucking nanny. The insanity of this whole situation is boiling over in my mind. I watched Mason fuck her over the CCTV. I watched Benedict blow it by confronting her outside her little love nest.

I watched her slap him and run from him up the stairs. I saw her hesitate before turning away from her room and seeking refuge in the one place neither of them would think to look.

Does she really presume I am less mercenary than my brothers? That I won't take what she is unconsciously offering, my hiding in my dressing room?

Absurd.

Naive.

Childish.

Perfect.

The smile that spreads across my face is cruel and delighted. And I walk to my room, cherishing every step I take. My heart is beating triple time when I get to the door, knowing what I'll find inside.

I shut the door firmly behind me, knowing she'll hear it. Knowing it'll strike fear right through her body. After the night she's had, she's probably trembling, running on anxiety and adrenaline.

I take my time, unbuttoning my shirt, tossing my jacket to the side, and loosening my tie. I kick my shoes off, and let my

shirt slide to the floor. I'm only in my trousers when I open the dressing room door and see her, standing in the middle of the room, with nowhere to hide.

She looks... resigned. As if she knows what's coming.

"The party still bubbles over, and yet you're here," I say to her, cocking an eyebrow.

She looks... beautiful. Debauched. Thoroughly fucked. The flush Mason's pounded into her hasn't faded from her cheeks, and her run-in with Benedict has done nothing to diminish it. In that dress she's wearing, she looks like a queen.

A queen I want to drop to my knees and worship between the thighs of until her screams of my name have died into a bare whisper.

That thought flares through me and I realize that I want something very different from her now than I did three minutes ago.

Before, I wanted her to tell me every little secret she has collected on my brothers and their feud. Now I want to know the secrets of her body.

And I won't stop until I have them.

"Come here," I demand. She doesn't move. The growl coils in my belly, hot and insistent, before it erupts from my throat. "Now!"

She jerks, moving forward a hesitant step, but then comes to me.

"My sister likes you, and that's the only reason I haven't thrown you from this house," I tell her. Her eyes widen, and that only Mason can fire her is clearly something she doesn't know. "What games are my brothers playing? Never mind the ones with you," I say, watching her expression change. Her face is changeable like the sky; stormy one moment and a sunset of pink and red the next. Her cheeks are flushed, and her lips are as well.

Her lips part, and for a moment, I think she will break, giving me everything I want.

Instead, her chin lifts, and a look of complete stubbornness fills her eyes.

“Why don’t you talk to them yourself?” She asks, and the spear of rage goes right through my chest. She, a nothing and a nobody, dare defy me? Insulting. Absurd.

Not to be borne. My jaw goes tight and tense. Her stance shifts, her toes curling into the thick rug beneath her feet, like she’s readying for my reaction, for a fight.

Her eyes flicker; even now, when I think she might back down from my stare and assume her proper place, she doesn’t.

“Do you know what I found when I came here?” Her voice is soft, with a subtle shake to it that tells me she knows what she is risking by pushing back against me. “I found two broken, devastated men, and a little girl who was all but being neglected by them both.”

Her words are an insult, worse than any slap. My brothers, neglect and ignore Madeline? She is the hope of our family. The only thing precious and good we have ever created. Who the hell does this little bitch think she is?

“My brothers adore her, I-“ I start in, the heat curling through my voice, and I reach toward her to grab her by the shoulder. She ducks away from me, glaring.

“Your brothers were letting her be worked half to death by her tutors,” she cuts me off. “Neglect doesn’t mean they’d shut her away in a tower! Did being born rich make you stupid, or did you turn that way over time?”

She draws herself up to her full height, which would be laughable if the accusations she had levied toward Benedict and Mason weren’t so serious. Neither of them would ever hurt Maddie, and I don’t know how to handle the idea that they let others do just that.

“Tell me everything,” I demand, and she snorts, crossing her arms under her breasts. She’s behaving like she’s the titled, noble one, and I’m the servant. And later, after I’ve found out everything from her that I need to, I’m going to teach her a

lesson about who gets to tell who what to do. For now, I'll play nice. I'm good at pretend. She'll never see it coming.

“What are you going to do about it if I do tell you?” She asks archly, her red lips pulled down in a frown. “I've worked every second since coming here to make sure that Lady Madeline had time for rest and play, like any child should.”

“Did you bring this up with his grace?” I ask her, because the way that she's phrasing things leads me to believe she hasn't. For whatever reason, she hasn't gone to my eldest brother with her concerns. A look of guilt crosses her face and I pounce. “Why the hell not? If you're so worried, if you're her nanny, if her wellbeing is your sole concern-“

“He is very busy,” she says, her shoulders dipping in and down, like she's trying to shrink into herself. “It's hard to find a moment that he isn't-“

“Fucking you?”

She jerks like I hit her, her cheeks going bright red, and her mouth opens like she wants to deny it. I laugh, and walk to her, wrapping my fingers from one hand in her hair. The other lifts up the skirts of her dress. Her eyes widen.

“What, don't-“

But it's too late for that. I'm getting what I want and showing her what she is. My hand curls between her thighs despite her pathetic attempt to squeeze them together. Her fingers wrap around my wrist, nails digging in, but my hand has already found it's target.

Her pussy, soaking wet through her panties. I shove the fabric to the side and she cries out.

“What, were you too busy fucking him?” It's not a question I think she's going to answer. Not with the way her hand clings to my arm, tight, but she isn't pushing me away.

A smile spread across my face.

No, she's not pushing me away at all. She's pulling my wrist in closer, arching her hips slowly into my touch. Her eyes flutter shut, and she's begging with her body for more. My

other hand untangles from her hair to trace down the curve of her cheek.

“You’re a slut for all of us,” my voice pitches low, and she moans in response, “aren’t you?”

Her eyes flare open, pupils blown and she jerks back from me.

“Fuck you,” she whispers, her throat ragged and rough. “You’re busy scolding and shaming me, when you should be focused on the real problem.” Her lower lip trembles. “The fact that this entire house is filled with people who hate each other so much they’d destroy themselves to hurt everyone else. Maybe if each of you spent less time chasing the help around this stupid castle, you’d realize how lucky you are to even have a family.”

Her eyes are wet, rimmed with tears, and she’s blinking rapidly. And I want her, somehow, even more now, that she’s berating me and speaking to me in a tone no woman, let alone a servant, has ever addressed me.

“You all say you love Maddie, that she’s the diamond of your eyes, or whatever, but I see three stupid men who are determined to ruin the rest of her life because they won’t stop fighting each other long enough to help her. Is it the same with Ruby?”

“What?” I snap, taken aback by her mention of my sister.

“Is she quietly crying for help while you focus on your machinations... for what exactly, for more money, more power? It’s pathetic.” She looks at me with such judgment that I go cold,

“You deserve each other,” she says, and that’s when a small hiccup of a sob erupts from her mouth. “And fuck you for touching me without asking. I’d ask you if it’s okay for me to go, but you don’t deserve to order me around. Ever.”

She steps back, knowing she’s gone too far, but not able to stop herself.

I can’t even stop her. Her words have been too powerful. They’re like a spell, rooting me to the floor. All I can do is

watch her go, running out of the room as her tears start to fall,
and know that it isn't her who's crossed a line.

It's me.

And I have badly broken something that I should never have
attempted to touch, let alone look at.

There are times when the King men surprise me. The fact none of them showed up at my door the night of the ball was one of them. With every step I took toward my bedroom that night, I looked over my shoulder, expecting Noah to come out of the shadows again and grab me. I worried that Benedict might be in my room, but it was empty. And Mason? I thought at least a message... a single message wishing me goodnight. Something, anything. The tears that stained my pillow that night were gone by the morning, and I rose, like the sun on a winter's day, feeling worn out and weak,

Only Ruby is at breakfast, but it isn't my place to ask where his grace is. Instead I help Maddie get seated, and Ruby greets me with a conspiratorial smile.

"Wasn't last night illuminating?" She asks.

"I wish I could go to a ball," Maddie sighs, looking at her stack of pancakes as if it's the most disappointing thing in the world.

"When you're grown, you will. I'll take you to all the excellent ones, and we'll laugh at the men who think they are good enough to dance with you." Ruby gives her an affectionate pat on the head, and Maddie sighs. It'll have to do, for now.

And last night was illuminating, Ruby, I want to tell her. But not in the way you think it. Maybe I should be grateful the men aren't here at breakfast. In fact, I am.

It means I don't need to see them. Mason, for what he shared that he seems determined to hide from everyone because he's ashamed of me.

Benedict, for the way he plays at being a monster and plan Mason's downfall when secretly he just wants to be loved.

Noah, for being crude and an actual monster.

I'm lost in my thoughts, so I don't hear them the first time.

"Eva!" Mrs. Harris is calling me from the door, her face ashen white. Ruby glances up from breakfast, looking concerned.

"What is it?" She asks as Maddie sits forward, plainly excited to ignore her pancakes for whatever interesting thing has just happened.

"There's a visitor come calling for Evangeline," Mrs. Harris says hurriedly, "he is waiting with his grace."

A visitor... For me?

I start forward without thinking and then look at Ruby. She nods, and puts an arm around Madeline's shoulders.

"We'll be fine, just the two of us, right?" She asks Maddie, who nods. I follow Mrs. Harris out of the room after a brief nod and curtsy to the ladies.

"Who—"

"You'll not be asking any questions," she says, her voice sharp. "You're in for a world of trouble; after this is sorted out, mark me."

My heart squeezes tight and I can barely breathe as I push into the duke's office, expecting to see, I don't know, my father there, maybe—

"Eva, as if I've died," he breathes.

Him.

That man.

That *monster*.

He stands in the middle of Mason's office, looking no worse for wear than when I ran away from Paris.

Benedict and Noah stand behind him. Mason is seated at his desk, but gets to his feet at the sight of me.

I can't move an inch. My feet are stuck to the ground, my mouth sewn shut. My body trembles, for all the wrong reasons, as I see the very last person on the whole planet that I ever wanted to see again.

Archduke Frederick Montroy of France. He's still handsome, his eyes watery blue, his hair blond and going to silver at his temples.

And he looks at me like he did then, like he wants to devour me.

"I've searched for you across all the continents, and finally, found you here." He crosses the floor toward me, and I wish it would fall out from under me. Let there be a trap beneath my feet. Let the earth open up and swallow me whole, so I don't have to be here. Revisiting everything he ever did to me. Every perverse demand. Every abuse. The slap of his hand against my face, my thigh. Nothing and no one compares to him in the list of people who have hurt me in my life.

And now he's here, speaking to me like I still belong to him.

"You... you're..." Mason isn't quite able to get the words out, and behind Frederick, I see Benedict exchange looks. Their faces are matched expressions of confused fury.

The archduke stops right in front of me and falls to one knee.

Bile rises in my throat.

"I left her. For you. I am a free man."

"What in the hell—" Benedict sputters.

"Who is this asshole?" Noah says, taking over him.

And Mason only stares at me, confusion, betrayal, warring on his face.

The archduke reaches for my hand. I'm frozen still, solid, and he takes it.

"I can be here for you now, fully, and completely. Eva, will you be my wife and grand duchess?"

Behind me Mrs. Harris inhales like a teakettle.

In front of me the one person I thought taught me everything about love, but only really took from me all that was good and innocent, looks at me with earnest eyes. I would have died for this, almost a year ago. I begged on my knees for him to love me the way he said he did.

And now?

“I—“

“Absurd,” Noah says, storming toward us, and pushes me back, inserting himself between us. “Get off the ground. She won’t marry you. She can’t.”

Benedict makes a growling sound.

“She’s just a servant,” Mrs. Harris says weakly in the background, but everyone ignores her.

“I can’t see any reason for her to say no,” Montroy says, sounding infuriated at being stymied.

“I wonder how you survived the terrors,” Benedict comments drily, before looking back at me.

“Can I please just tell him myself?” I ask but Mason is walking toward me, taking me by the hand, and pulling me close, away from the archduke. Benedict clears his throat.

“She’s my fiancée—“ Benedict says, smirking at the same time as Noah lies through his teeth, turning to look at Mason directly.

“She’s carrying your child, the possible heir to the ducal throne,” Noah says, and there is a silence in the room, so big that it nearly fills the whole space.

From what little I can see of the archduke’s face, he has gone gray and pale.

And behind me, there’s a thud. I turn and look. Mrs. Harris has fallen to the floor, her mouth open, eyes wide as she stares at us all.

And beyond her, the door to the study is open. And the hallway is filled, twenty people deep, with the household

servants.

Who have just heard and witnessed, all of this.

Oh, my god. I'm finished.

Book 2 in the Red, White, and Royals Series is out next
month!

Available for pre-order on Amazon here:

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- Kit

(KT Strange)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KT Strange is USA Today and internationally best-selling author and has ranked in Amazon's Top 100. She calls the Great White North home, but is currently living in Dallas, TX with her partner who is a voice actor, their dog Echo, and several silly cats.

After spending a decade in the music scene babysitting drunk rock-stars, Kit finally ready to settle down and write books inspired by her life on the road with bands and her love of everything paranormal.

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