

BILLIONAIRE  
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*USA Today Best Selling Author*

ALI PARKER

HIS MANY  
PLEASURES

ALI PARKER

4

HIS MANY  
DESIRES

ALI PARKER

3

BILLIONAIRE ALPHA BOX  
SET 2

BOOKS 3 - 4



ALI PARKER

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# CONTENTS

Find Ali Parker

Introduction

His Many Desires

Description

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34

Chapter 35

Chapter 36

Chapter 37

Chapter 38

Chapter 39

Chapter 40

Chapter 41

Chapter 42

Chapter 43

Chapter 44

Chapter 45

Chapter 46

Chapter 47

Chapter 48

Chapter 49

Chapter 50

Chapter 51

Chapter 52

Chapter 53

Chapter 54

Chapter 55

Chapter 56

Chapter 57

Chapter 58

Chapter 59

Chapter 60

Chapter 61

His Many Pleasures

Description

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Chapter 51](#)

[Chapter 52](#)

[Chapter 53](#)

[Chapter 54](#)

[Chapter 55](#)

[Chapter 56](#)

[Chapter 57](#)

[Chapter 58](#)

[Chapter 59](#)

[Chapter 60](#)

[Chapter 61](#)

[Chapter 62](#)

[Chapter 63](#)

[Chapter 64](#)

[Chapter 65](#)

[Chapter 66](#)

[Chapter 67](#)



[Chapter 68](#)

[Chapter 69](#)

[Chapter 70](#)

[Chapter 71](#)

[Chapter 72](#)

[Chapter 73](#)

[Chapter 74](#)

[Chapter 75](#)

[Chapter 76](#)

[Chapter 77](#)

[Chapter 78](#)

[Chapter 79](#)

[Chapter 80](#)

[Chapter 81](#)

[Chapter 82](#)

[Chapter 83](#)

[Chapter 84](#)

[Chapter 85](#)

[Chapter 86](#)

[Chapter 87](#)

[Chapter 88](#)

[Chapter 89](#)

[Chapter 90](#)

[Chapter 91](#)

[Chapter 92](#)

[Insider Group](#)

[About The Author](#)

[Copyright](#)

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## Introduction



Well hey there! Thank you so much for grabbing one of my books. I sure hope you love it.

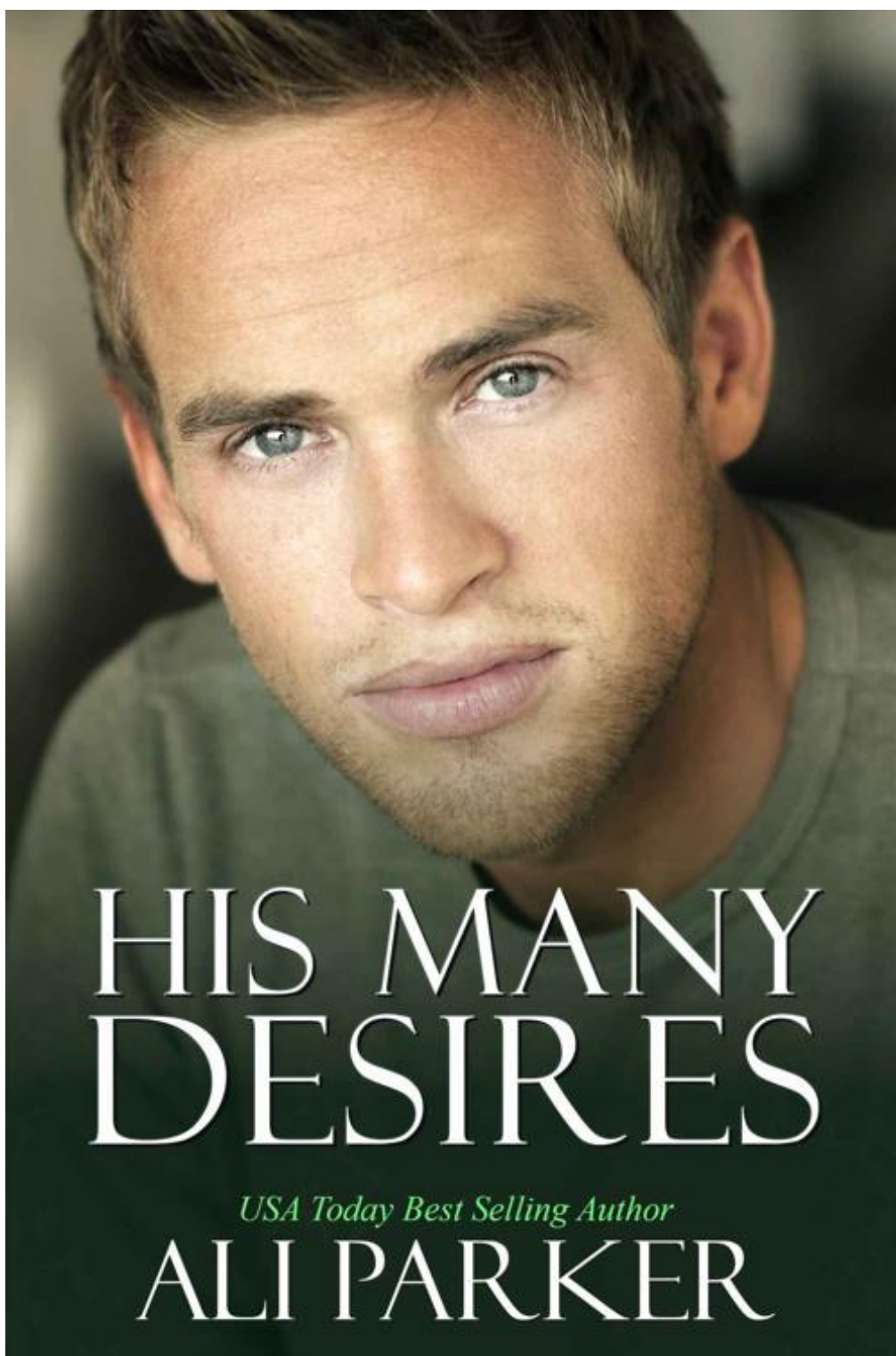
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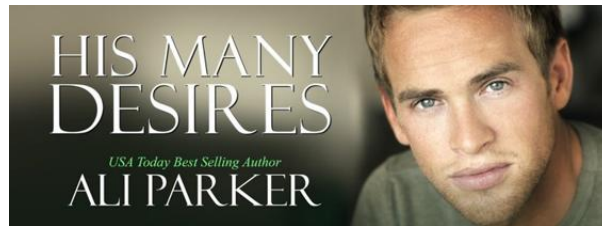


# HIS MANY DESIRES

*USA Today Best Selling Author*

ALI PARKER

## DESCRIPTION



### **I don't fit into the world around me.**

My brother and father are far more the billionaire type.

Art is what wakes me up. Expressing my soul through a paintbrush.

That and the beautiful woman that stole my heart years ago.

But she belongs to their world. An executive for the accounting firm my family runs.

And we live clear across the country from one another, but that doesn't stop the way I feel.

Every time I see her, I want to change everything about myself until she takes notice.

Funnily enough, she doesn't want me to change a damn thing.

She says that now, but when she finds out all that I desire of her, with her, she might not be so compliant.

**Or maybe that's what she's been waiting on this whole time.**

# CHAPTER 1



## MATT

“**R**emind me again why I said I would do this? It seems rather masochistic now that we’re in the thick of things.” I glanced over at Sophie and smiled as she plucked her ear-bud out and growled at me softly.

“What? Are you complaining about the weather again? It’s beautiful out here.” The stern look on her pretty face didn’t hold for long as she studied me.

I wiped my forearm across my head and took a deep breath as we bounded along the outdoor track near her house. Her dark brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and even without makeup, she was stunning. Where the snot-nose bully from my childhood had gone to was a mystery, but the woman that took her place was beautiful, and even scarier than when we were little.

“I’m not complaining. I was simply asking how you talked me into this.” I turned my focus back to the road ahead of us and let my eyes run across the tree line. The brilliant greens that covered the grass and treetops in Texas most of the spring and summer were finally starting to die off and bleed into the colors of fall. It had to be my favorite time of the year.

“You wanted to lose a little bit of weight, and I hate dogs. Remember? It was a win-win situation.” She popped me in the gut and started to jog faster.

“This sounds about as fun as our partnership in junior high. I wanted to lose weight and you wanted an extra ice cream cone, so my left over change became yours every day.”

“You had a crush on me. That’s why you gave up your change.” She glanced over her shoulder and smirked.

I chuckled, unable to help myself. What was it with me and cocky, overbearing women?

“I still have a crush on you.” I picked up the pace and blew past her as she yelped and tried to catch up. We’d been friends too long for anything to become of us, but it was one of the only solid relationships in my life.

“Liar,” she called after me and stopped at my side as I bent over and pressed my hands to my knees. We panted in tandem for a few minutes, before I glanced up at her.

“You know you’re like a sister to me.”

“You have a sister now, right?” She stood back up and adjusted her ponytail. “What’s her name? Bertha?”

“Don’t be like that.” I lifted my hands toward the clear blue sky and stretched. “Her name is Bethany and you’d like her a lot.”

“She’s taking my place. I hate her.” Sophie stuck out her tongue and took off again, leaving me with no other choice than to chase after her.

“She’s not taking your place. I’m a big guy with loads of free time, remember?”

“Speaking of free time.” She glanced over at me, her slate grey eyes filled with concern.

“Not this again. I’m fine. I’m going to Seattle this weekend and I’ll start figuring things out.”

“Leaving here isn’t a choice. You’ve lived here your whole life.”

“Yeah, and it’s not done me any favors. I’m twenty-eight and still without a career or a girlfriend. It’s time to start moving toward having something of my own. You know how much I hate having my dad support me.”

“Being a playboy billionaire is most little boys’ dream jobs.”



“Bullshit.” I laughed. “It’s to be a fireman or a cop or a billionaire tycoon with loads of responsibility and girls.”

“Okay, so I’m not a boy. I wouldn’t know, but I think you’re being too hard on yourself. You have the perfect opportunity to work on your art here in Dallas and live freely thanks to your dad’s money. What else is he going to do with it?”

She had a point, but I’d been trying to *find myself* for the better of four years and still felt like I was floundering around.

“He’s going to take care of his new wife and their future together.” I let out a loud huff as we stopped near the parking lot and walked back and forth down a short path to cool down. “I want a life of my own, I’m just honestly not sure what that life looks like, and besides, you know as well as I do that you wouldn’t be all right living off your father’s money-”

“If he had money.” She snorted and rolled her shoulders. “Find your passion, Matt. I’ve found mine. It’s reporting the news and digging deep for the story. It’s been the best four years of my life working for NBC. You should be able to say the same, but you know why you can’t?”

“Because I’m not a pretty reporter with a great rack?” I smiled and took the smack I deserved with good humor.

“Because you haven’t figured out what you want to do. Being a billionaire doesn’t mean shit if you don’t live a little with it.”

“Very true.” I ran my fingers through my hair and couldn’t help but think about my older brother. The one thing Damon wanted more than anything else in the world was a solid relationship with a woman. Was to be loved in a way that would make most men gag, and yet he kept fucking it up.

“What are you thinking about?” She reached out and tugged on the front of my t-shirt, pulling me from my thoughts.

“Damon.” I took a deep breath and glanced up at the sky. “He’s been in turmoil since Mom cheated on Dad. It’s like it changed the whole trajectory of his life.”

“But he’s with Bethany now, which by the way is weird.”

“No, it’s not.” I shrugged and brushed my hands over my chest rhythmically. “They’re a great couple, but they aren’t together right now.”

“Why? They realized they were brother and sister?”

“Why are you salty about this?” I couldn’t help but study her for the answer. She had a thing for Damon when we were younger, but he was as much of an alpha as she was. They butted heads the whole time we were growing up and almost couldn’t stand each other by the time Sophie and I graduated high school.

“I’m not. I’m just concerned that Damon’s going to end up hurt. He’s a tough guy, but I know the dude underneath all that alpha bullshit, remember?” She brushed her hand over the top of her head and locked gazes with me. “And you better be careful too.”

“We talking about Bethany wanting me too now?”

She snorted. “No, silly. We’re talking about Erica wanting to lick your skin from your bones.”

“Exactly!” I threw my hands in the air and walked in a circle, bobbing my head. “I told Bethany that Erica was a man-eater, but no one sees that but me.”

“I don’t even know the woman, but I think you think that all women are man-eaters.” She put her hands on her hips and tilted her head to the side.

“You guys are.” I gave her a goofy grin. “Let’s talk about you going over to Dubai to study the crown prince. You need to take someone with you. Period.”

“You offering to go?” She nodded toward the parking lot. “Come on. I’ll buy you a frozen coffee drink with cow hormones and white death.”

I rolled my eyes. “No, I’m not offering to go. Are you seriously still not drinking milk or eating sugar?”

“Hell no.” She bumped her shoulder against mine. “What if the prince of Dubai looks like the guy from Aladdin?”

“You know he does. Stop playing coy.” I walked around to the passenger’s side door of her jeep and got in. “You’re going over there with the hopes that he’s looking for a pretty white-skinned princess, aren’t you? Admit it.”

“Nope.” She got in and buckled up. “I’m going to make sure they’re not mixed up in some of the nefarious black market bullshit that I know their knee-deep into. I’m not looking to hook up with anyone. My career comes first, period. You know this about me.”

“It’s the reason you’re not wearing my ring. We could have pretty blond babies with blue eyes and chubby cheeks, but no... you have to be a career-driven fiend.”

“You think I’m a fiend? I like the thought of that.”

I rolled my eyes and relaxed against my seat as she hit the gas and jerked the jeep out of the parking lot we sat in. She put it in drive and ran over the parking bumps without blinking an eye. I swore the woman had more testosterone than most men I knew.

“So are you good with me thinking about moving to Seattle? I haven’t made up my mind, but getting the thumbs-up from Jonathan Luntz is a good first step. If he’s willing to showcase my work, then I might actually have a bright future up there.” I wasn’t sure why I was asking her. No one could make the decision for me. The balance of reasons to go versus not going were tied as far as I was concerned.

“I think you should follow your heart, big guy.”

“You calling me fat?” I smiled and reached over to tug on her ponytail.

“Never. You look great, and you know it. You’re a Bryant. All you guys are good looking.”

“Right, but I look more like my mother.”

“Who was beautiful.”

“Who was a cheating bitch.” I turned to watch the world go by outside the window closest to me and tried not to let my thoughts stray too far.

“That has nothing to do with her looks. I think Seattle would be a good change of pace for you. I leave early next year for Dubai for a few months. Let’s do this. If you’re not with Erica or settled into a career, then you go with me. It will be fun.”

I glanced back over at her. Memories brushed past my vision, so many of them. We’d grown up like two peas in a pod, and yet we kept to ourselves. I was grateful for Bethany in my life as a new source of companionship, but Sophie would always be first.

“Let’s just get my ticket now. My only career option is to paint for Jonathan’s studio. I can do that from anywhere in the world. I bet being in Dubai would just stimulate my creative juices.”

“Don’t say that ever again.” She laughed and pulled up to the coffee shop. “You want the caramel coffee with extra whipped cream?”

“Yep.” I pulled out my wallet as she lifted her hand.

“My treat, and this conversation isn’t over.”

“It’s my treat. I’m a billionaire though I look like a pauper.”

“It’s part of your charm, but true.” She snatched my card and ordered a few things as I tried to think through the possibility of going with her to the Middle East. Taking a break at the first of the year would be great, but I wasn’t leaving until Damon’s life was put back together and all the ups and downs with Erica were settled. Everyone wanted me to work for McKenzie and Bryant, and where some part of me knew it was the best offer I would ever get, I just wasn’t sure it was for me.

“Here.” Sophie turned and handed me a huge chocolate chip cookie and a frozen coffee drink.

“This is more calories than I burned during our jog.”

“Stop being a girl and drink it.” She lifted her light coffee in the air and smiled. “To you finally getting on with your life and not being a chicken shit with Erica.”

“To you becoming the crowned princess of the Middle East and losing your sickeningly white coloring.”

“Hey!” She turned and reached out to pinch my nipple. “You’re just as pasty as I am.”

“I’m a delicate spring flower. Stop touching the goods or I’ll charge you.”

“You let your sister touch them, I’m sure.”

“I knew you were spying on us. Bitch.”

“Always.” She smiled and lifted her coffee to her pretty lips. If she was serious about traveling around the world, I had no doubt she would steal a million hearts.

Her abilities weren’t the problem.

Mine were.

## CHAPTER 2



## ERICA

“You’re late.” I glanced up as my staff moved into the large ornate conference room where I sat. “The meeting was supposed to start five minutes ago. If anyone is going to be fashionably late, don’t you think it should be me?”

Mandy, my senior advertiser for the firm, glanced down at the floor and back up at me.

“I’m sorry, Miss Hall. We had a training we were all trying to sneak out of to get up here. The guest speaker was right in the middle of making his point.” She took her seat, and the rest of the staff followed suit.

“Who was the guest speaker?” I forced myself to calm down.

Being a bitch at the office was something I tried hard not to do too often. It would seem that the few times I let my guard down and raged angst across the advertising floor was more than enough though. I was labeled as someone to watch out for, and as a result of that, I was lonely in the midst of a crowd of people when I was there, which felt like it was most of the time.

“Dr. Leonard Jalling. He was great.” Tim spoke up and gave me a warm smile. His bright blue and gold tie left my lips lifting in a smirk. He was the artsy one of the group, and the most open. The combination didn’t surprise me much at all.

“I enjoy hearing Leonard too. He’s got a great passion for life in general.” I got up and walked to the white board at the

front of the room. “Then the tardiness is acceptable. Just call ahead next time so I don’t think my entire staff walked out on me.”

A collective laugh moved around the room as everyone settled in. Our weekly meetings weren’t my favorite thing to do, but it was nice to regroup and get everyone back on the same page. My mind was a little scattered seeing that I was about ninety-nine percent sure I’d get to see Matthew Bryant later that week. He’d been a little noncommittal in setting up the late afternoon/early evening meeting, but I was willing to take anything he was throwing out.

I cleared my throat and ejected him from my mind. There was no reason to have a hot-flash meltdown in front of my staff because of dwelling on the one man that did it for me when I shouldn’t have been. Why he was the center of my desires was a bit of a mystery seeing that he wasn’t like any of the men I’d dated in the past.

“So let’s get down to business.” I wrote a few names on the white board and asked for the various members of my group to give me an update on where we were regarding the advertising projects related to McKenzie and Bryant’s clients. We did some side jobs for Kent’s close friends, which was a bit of a pain, and yet totally understandable.

My phone buzzed as I handed the dry-erase marker to Mandy and took my seat across from Tim. I stifled a groan as I glanced down to see that it was my older brother, Daniel, calling. He was the last person I wanted to talk with - ever. His sense of elitism was off the charts, and he only got involved in family affairs when it behooved him to do so. Funny enough, my father’s funeral arrangements a few weeks back hadn’t been one of those times.

I flipped the phone over and tried to focus on the reports Mandy was walking the group through. I dazed out a little and went to the same place I always seemed to land when my mind was free to wander. Matt.

My conversation with Damon the week before had been less than helpful in the way of getting Matt to come work for



me, but I would have to simply up the wager. He wanted freedom and a way to express himself, but he needed a paycheck. If I could figure out a way to put all the pieces together in one pretty package, I might actually have a chance of getting him on my stuff.

*But would he move? And what if he found some other woman to fall in love with?*

The thought made my stomach ache. It might have been best for me *not* to have him come work for me. I was borderline obsessed with the poor guy anyway. I needed to back off, but it wasn't going to happen until Matt turned me down for the job and put his foot down on my advances. I'd relent when I knew that's what he truly wanted, but not a moment earlier.

I ran through the conversation with Damon one more time to see if I was missing anything.

*"He would be great working in the advertising department as a designer-" Damon's voice was tight with angst or anticipation. I wasn't sure which.*

*"Lead designer." I wanted to offer Matt something special, a higher position than his peers.*

*"Right, but Matt doesn't care about being in leadership or ruling Corporate America. He cares about being free to be and do what he wants to do. He doesn't need money, though I suppose he's trying to cut the ties from our father as I did just after college."*

*"Then he can just come and be a designer for me. I think he would really love the city, the people, and he could grow so much as an artist here."*

*"I agree. I'll talk to him and see where his thoughts are. I can't promise much as Matt has always been a free spirit, but I'll have the conversation."*

*"Soon please. I need to fill the spot I have available, and I'd love to put his name on it instead of opening it up to the*

*public.*”

I’d already filled the position, but being the head of advertising had some serious perks, like creating new jobs. I knew without a doubt that Kent would have no problem with me trying to work out the perfect position for Matt. He wanted him there almost as much as I did.

“That’s a wrap, Miss Hall. Did you have anything you wanted to add?” Mandy’s voice pulled me from my thoughts.

“Nope. Just have someone do a quick write up and lay it on my desk by tomorrow morning.” I stood up and glanced around, smiling at everyone. “Great job, and if you have staffing needs or anything else that might help you do your job more efficiently, just let me know.”

Everyone filed out but Mandy.

“I do need another designer. Celia is about to go out on pregnancy leave in the next few weeks. Did you decide on whether you wanted to just bring in a temp for her position or actually add a head-count?”

“Let me chew on it and I’ll get back with you. I’m meeting with a guy this weekend that might be the perfect fit, but he’d have to have special work privileges.”

“Why’s that?” She put her hand on her hip, and I could tell from the subtle shift in her expression that she was working hard not to let her feelings bleed through her professional persona. No one enjoyed working with anyone that was awarded special anything, and I couldn’t blame them.

“Because he’s Mr. Bryant’s youngest son.” I reached down and worked to gather my things. “I’ll let you know how the meeting goes, and if he takes the job, we’ll work through the details. You’ll love him. He’s a great guy.”

“Sounds good.” She nodded and turned, walking from the room as I smiled. She didn’t believe me, but then again, all she had to base Matt off of was his older brother Damon and his father. Both were strict businessmen that didn’t put up with

much of anything and seemed to have a stick wedged in their ass most days of the week. Nothing could be farther from the truth, but it was what they wanted people to think, and so people did.

My phone buzzed again with another message from Daniel, and I forced myself not to listen to it until I was in my office. I closed the door and walked languidly back to the ornate desk that Kent had forced me to get when I took the job a few years back. It was a good job, and a great career move on my part, but it was draining me emotionally to be stuck in a concrete jungle. I couldn't even recall the last time I'd pulled out my paint and brushes and let myself go for an afternoon. There wasn't much time for that anymore.

Did I really want to take that away from Matt too? Simply put - no.

I dropped down in my chair and called my brother back instead of listening to the berating that was most certainly waiting for me on the phone.

"Where have you been? I've been calling all morning." Daniel's voice was sharp and biting. It always was.

"I was in a meeting. I run a large advertising-"

"I'm aware of your position, Erica. You would think that if you saw me calling that you would pick up though. You know Mom's not doing good. It could have been something to do with her."

"We pay for the best care available to her, Dan. I can't jump every time you-"

"Anyways." He huffed loudly, as if I was the biggest pain in the ass ever created. "They're wanting to move Mom to a new room on Saturday, and they weren't able to get ahold of you. Seeing that she's non-responsive since Dad died, can you please skip your art class or whatever silliness you have planned this weekend and be there? I'm flying out of town for an important business meeting."

"A business meeting on Saturday?" I was fuming over him cutting me off every time I spoke. He'd always been an

asshole and finally settling down and marrying someone half his age didn't seem to be helping that much. Instead of growing her up, she was pulling him back down.

“Yes. Some of us work twenty-four seven.”

“That's because you bought a ring for the price of a house. Most expensive piece of ass you'll ever get, hm?”

“Very mature, Erica. Just be there. She's your mother and she needs you.”

I scoffed, but didn't get a chance to blast him back. He dropped the call and left me standing there, shaking in my anger.

“Unbelievable. A business meeting on Saturday?” I set the phone down and paced the floor in front of my desk. Where I didn't mind helping my mother at all, she would much prefer Daniel to be there. I was a daddy's girl, and my brother was my mother's pride and joy. After losing my dad a month or so ago, everything had shifted in Mom's life for the worst. Sometimes I felt the weight of that shift in my own.

“Just make it to Friday and you'll get to see Matt.” I brushed my hands down my face and tried to slow my racing heart. I didn't need Matt to love me like I loved him. I just wanted to feel like I mattered, like someone could see me. I hated the fact that he was the only person I felt that around, but I couldn't deny the truth. I craved his attention and just hoped like hell I might get to experience his affection before it was all said and done.

# CHAPTER 3



## MATT

“So my little brother here has started jogging.” Damon patted my chest at lunch the next day, a big smile on his face as our father joined us across the table. The restaurant was far too fancy for my liking, but it was close to their downtown accounting firm and incredibly tasty.

“Did you really? Who are you jogging with? Sophie?” My father picked up the menu and perched his glasses on the tip of his nose.

“Yeah. She finally talked me into it. She’s getting a promotion at the station and wants to be in better shape for some of the places they’re sending her.”

“Such as?” Damon picked up his water and took a quick sip. The dark circles under his brown eyes let me know quickly that him and Bethany were still not speaking. He slept like a baby when life was good and suffered like crazy when it wasn’t. He was exhausted. The tone of his voice was even off. It usually boomed with confidence and drive, but it was barely more than a strained whisper. I wanted so fucking bad to ask what was going on, but I knew better than to bring it up in front of Dad. Damon was forever private, even from me at times.

“Dubai in the spring. She wants me to go with her.” I shrugged and turned my attention to my father as he glanced up from his menu and pulled his glasses back off.

“You can’t go with her to Dubai. I thought you were seriously considering moving to Seattle. Was that just another

passing thought for you? You're twenty-eight, son. You need to seriously sit down and figure out where your life is headed."

"Dad." Damon lifted his hand and leaned back in his chair. "I've been through hell lately with the Zarpeth nightmare in Seattle. Let's just have a good lunch together and talk about hot women and billion-dollar deals. Hell, we can even talk about Matt's painting and great places to go on vacation, just don't start in on the future or life-planning right now."

"All right. Fine, but it's a conversation that needs to happen sooner than later." My father glanced back down at his menu as concern stuck to his features. I knew he meant well, but I was glad for a mulligan from having to go over all the options he felt would be best for me. None of them resonated with me in a way that left me wanting to agree, which meant a fight was sure to follow. We loved each other, but whatever steps I took next had to be ones of my own choosing.

"Agreed." I picked up my menu and ordered a burger when the pretty waitress stopped beside me. After everyone ordered, I turned my attention back to Damon. "I'm going up to Seattle this weekend to meet with Jonathan."

"Did you meet with Erica the last time we were up there? I know you planned to, but did you actually follow through with it?" Damon's eyebrow raised sharply. The bastard already knew that I made an excuse and denied the pretty advertising executive my time. She was too much, and I wanted to know just how much of her I could handle. There was no way to have a professional relationship with her when she made my heart palpitate by just hearing her name. It would be a Bethany and Damon situation all over again, and from what I could tell, that shit didn't work.

The issue wasn't them being related, but that they worked together. Damon was her boss, and Erica would be mine. Nothing good could come of it.

"You know I didn't see her. Don't be a dick."

"Matt," my father glanced up from his phone, "you know she's got the best opportunity that you're going to get outside of working for us. She's a fruity artist just like you."

“Fruity artist?” I snorted and laughed. There was no reason to get upset about it. I was who I was, and crazy enough, I was comfortable with just being me. Whatever the fuck that meant.

“You know what he meant.” Damon tapped the table. “She already filled the position she had open, but she’ll open another one for you. You’re going to see her while you’re up there this weekend. I’ve already made arrangements for it. Just some time during the weekend. She’s expecting your call.”

“Fine. Whatever.” I rolled my eyes and picked up my fork and knife to use them to beat out a rhythm on the table in front of me.

Damon chuckled as my father glanced up.

“This seat taken?” Bethany moved up beside me and smiled down at me, surprising me a little.

“Hey Sis. Your timing couldn’t have been better. I was about to get tied up and thrown in a three-piece suit no doubt.” I stood up and reached for her, pulling her into a tight hug. Her long brown hair was down over her shoulders and green eyes filled with worry. She was hurting too. *Damn.*

“By these two guys? No. They’re harmless.” Her eyes moved from me to Damon, and over to my father quickly. The tension in the room elevated, but it was a healthy response to their situation. They had to figure their shit out or move on. We were family and would be for as long as all of us pulled air into our lungs.

“Hey, Bethany. How is the new team? Damon tells me that you’re doing a great job of pulling your own and then some.” My father smiled over at Bethany and offered her a basket of bread.

I snatched a piece of it and noticed the way my brother watched the poor girl. She didn’t have a chance if he finally got his head pulled out of his ass. He was the kind of guy that took what he wanted, and the fact that she wasn’t trapped beside him was all by design. Either Damon was growing up, or Bethany was far stronger than I was giving her credit for.



“I’m doing my part. I love the environment. It’s teaching me more about perseverance than I care to say.” She took a piece of bread and turned to face me. “Tell me everything about your conversation with Jonathan. You’re signing with his studio, right?”

“I need to get back up to the office. Excuse me, guys. I’ll see you later.” Damon stood up and bumped his leg on the table, causing the whole thing to jostle and the drinks to spill a little.

“Is it something I need to be involved in?” My father glanced up and pulled his attention from his phone.

“It’s the Kissinger account. You might want to be on the call.” Damon brushed his hands down the front of his shirt and gave me and Bethany a tight nod. “See you guys later.”

“I’ll pack up your lunch and run it up when we-” I tried to offer.

“No, just pay the bill and take it home. It’s fish, but you should give it a try.” He turned and walked away as my dad stood up.

“Well, damn. Never a moment of rest when you’re ruling the world, right?”

Bethany smiled. “I guess not. I’m just going to eat whoever’s order looks better.”

“That would be mine.” I smiled and waved at my dad as he said his goodbyes. “Wow. This turned out much better than I thought it would.”

“Right?” She let out a long breath and sunk down into her chair before reaching up and pinching the bridge of her nose.

“Hey. You okay?” I reached over and ran my hand over the top of her back, rubbing softly.

“I think so. I don’t know.” She dropped her hands to her lap and turned to face me with tears in her eyes. “I think I’m leaving the firm. I need to get out of here. I’ll just take a few semesters off and try and build up a savings account and then

go back for my master's. I can't work there with him anymore."

"Wait. Hold up." I lifted my hands in front of me. "Did something else happen beside you guys taking a break?"

"No. Yes. I don't know." She reached out and grabbed another roll and the small cup of butter sitting on the table.

"Bethany." I reached out and ran my hand down her arm as my heart constricted painfully in my chest. The poor girl had been so damn concerned about the aftermath of something going wrong, and here we were sitting in the future she envisioned when the relationship started. Maybe things had happened too fast. Maybe that was part of the problem. "Talk to me. I'm right here and you know I'll do anything I can to help."

"I know, but I'm not sure anyone can do anything at this point. He's completely cold toward me, and I get it. I gave the damn ring back and basically spit in his face where our future was concerned." She shrugged and tossed the empty butter container back onto the table. "But he shouldn't have let your father hire Christa's sister to come work as my fucking boss at the firm."

Christa. That was a name I'd love to never hear again. Damon and the blond bombshell witch had been a thing throughout most of their lives, stringing each other along and laughing as the other suffered. He'd finally gotten his wits about him a few years back, but she still seemed to be popping up in his life. I hadn't heard the full story on why my father thought it wise to bring Delilah, Christa's twin sister, to work at the firm. There had to be a good reason for it, but from the outside looking in, it didn't matter the reason. It was killing Damon's chances of keeping things on the up and up with Bethany.

"I agree, but it wasn't Damon that hired her, right?"

"I don't want to talk about this. I live this conversation in my own head all day and night. I need to think about something else before I go bat shit crazy. My friend Krista's trial is coming up soon, and if I'm not missing Damon, I'm

thinking about how it's going to feel sitting in a courtroom and testifying against my best friend for attempted murder." She pressed her hands to her face as the waitress reappeared.

"We need a shot of jack. Two please." I gave a cheeky smile and was grateful to hear Bethany's sweet laughter slipping through her fingers. "It's going to work out. Let's talk about something else that's fucked up."

"Like?" She brushed her hair back and took a deep breath.

"Like me having to see Erica this weekend."

"You're going back up to Seattle?"

"Yes, unfortunately." I rolled my eyes exaggeratedly and smiled. "You wanna come with me? Pretend to be my sister and my girl?"

She swatted me and laughed softly. "Asshole."

"Sorry. Too much? Too soon?"

"No. It's fine. I just love him, Matt. I need to get him back, but I can't bend this time. He has to grow up and understand that our relationship isn't a college fling where we screw all the time and don't talk outside of the bedroom. I'm not living that life. Not even for him."

"Okay, first, TMI, and second, I agree. Asshole." I pulled my napkin into my lap. "I'm going to see Erica this weekend and really consider her offer, I guess. What choice do I really have? Everybody is for me making this move."

"And what about you? Remind me what you're so afraid of." She lifted her hand as I started to go down the list. "And don't you dare tell me for a minute that you're scared of Erica being a man-eater. I know you're not Damon, but you're a Bryant. You're a strong man." She reached out and squeezed my hand, winning me over more than she already had. "A good man. She's a great woman. Give her a chance from a professional perspective at least."

"Maybe." I picked up my burger as they set it down in front of me and took a big bite before glancing over to see her eyeing the two fish dishes loaded with veggies. I finished eating

the large bite in my mouth and cut my burger in half. “This is serious love here.”

“I feel it. Give me that.” She reached out and snatched it from me before taking a bite bigger than mine.

“I swear you’re my sister from another mister.”

She laughed and almost choked, which had me chuckling alongside her. I would go to Seattle and check things out one more time. After that... it was time to shit or get off the pot. Period.

# CHAPTER 4



## ERICA

I spent the next day immersed in projects just to keep myself from thinking too much about my family situation or about Matt. Neither were a healthy place for me to be, so I ignored everything but the pile of to-do's sitting on my desk. I had a standing dinner with my best friend Lanie every Thursday night, and though I really didn't feel like having anyone at the house, it wasn't fair to cancel. She needed to hang out with me as much as I needed to see her.

After driving through the empty streets near my high-rise condo, I parked the car and walked up to my apartment, wondering what other people who had a life, a family, a spouse were up to. They were most likely sitting down to dinner, or cooking with the ones they loved and laughing about the events of the day.

By the time I reached my condo, my heart hurt. How long was I going to hold myself out in hopes that the right guy would come along? It almost felt like *any* guy was better than the right guy, but it was my loneliness talking. I'd been the center of attention in college, and my father had made sure to make me feel loved and important if no one else did, but now with him gone and college a distant memory, it was just me.

It was always just me.

I pushed the door open and walked in, hanging up my keys, flipped on the light.

I needed a pet. Something to greet me when I walked into my empty condo instead of the silence, which was depressing.

Lanie would be there any minute, and as I moved through the darkness, I was almost grateful for not canceling. It would be nice to be around someone that knew me and accepted me in all of my quiriness.

A knock at the door behind me had me smiling. "It's open. Come on in."

The door opened and my petite best friend from elementary school walked in with a large brown grocery sack clutched to her chest. Whoever was hosting was in charge of providing the kitchen and cleaning up. The other had to pick up the meal and a bottle of cheap wine. We hated the thought of doing it until we were cooking and laughing about life together. Then it was all worth it.

"You look rough." I set Frodo down and walked to take the bag from Lanie.

"It was parent teacher conference night." She let out a groan and kicked off her flats. She only came up to my chin and couldn't have weighed over a hundred pounds. Her big brown eyes were full of warmth, and her short blond hair was in a pixie cut that made her look like she was still in her teens. We were an odd pair, but meshed perfectly.

"I thought you loved visiting with your students' parents." I set the bag down in the kitchen and pulled off my high heels before washing my hands.

"I usually do, but there's this one mom this year. Deborah Turner. Ugh." She started to pull various items out of the bag, and within seconds I realized she'd brought over everything to make my favorite dish - Chicken Piccata.

"Tell me about her. Make me feel better about my pathetic life by diving into the unnecessary angst in yours." I snorted as she pushed her shoulder against mine and gave me a tight grin.

"She's just a bitch. Plain and simple. She obviously didn't get enough attention as a child, and she thinks her daughter, Sandy, should get my undivided attention. The little girl is struggling with her letters and I've worked with her as much as I'm able. There are twenty-two six year olds in the room.

It's not like I can turn my attention away from them and just focus on Sandy."

"So get her some help, and maybe have the principal talk to this lady. Seems like she's not being reasonable at all." I pulled out the white wine and let out a soft sigh as I cradled it against my breasts. "Thank God for the relief of a good glass of wine. I don't have a man, my job has become a total drag and I haven't gotten laid in a year, but I have rotten grapes. Life is good."

She snorted. "Life is good. We're both gainfully employed and we have each other."

"Uh oh. What happened to Charles? Charley? Chuckie-boy?" I bent over to pull out various pans for the meal as I teased her about her latest boyfriend. Douche wouldn't begin to cover him.

"He decided that he wants a little more flare in a relationship. He dumped me yesterday."

I stood up and turned to face her, searching for sadness or regret. I surprisingly found none.

"I'm sorry to hear that?" I smiled. "I hated that guy, by the way. He was creepy."

"That's because you're uber-attractive and he used to stare at you like you were a piece of meat." She threw her hands in the air. "Why do I even try? Men suck completely."

"Only the good ones suck." I wagged my eyebrows and was grateful to get a soft chuckle from her. "You'll find the right guy. Just keep trying."

"Where am I supposed to meet someone? In a parent teacher conference? Try again." She huffed and worked on getting the chicken in a skillet on the stove. "I just wish I could bump into a hot guy at the grocery store or in a movie or something."

"In a movie?" I laughed, unable to help myself. "Like you two are the only lone souls in the theatre and happen to be sitting next to each other? He reaches into the popcorn tub just as you do?"



She glanced over at me and rolled her eyes. “No, but it’s getting old. I’ll be twenty-nine next month. I’m ready to get married, Erica. Unlike you, I’m not good being alone. I fucking hate it.”

Her voice broke, and I hated myself for teasing her. Just because my loneliness was well hidden didn’t mean it didn’t exist. I just wasn’t willing to give it a voice for fear of what it might do to me to have to face it head on.

I moved in behind her and wrapped my arms around her, squeezing softly and pressing my cheek to the back of her head.

“It’s going to be okay. You’re a beautiful, talented, loving woman. You’re going to meet an amazing man, and we’re going to look back on this time in our lives and laugh.”

“And what about you?” She turned a little and I released her.

“What about me?” I ignored the opening to dive into my own pain. I wasn’t interested, nor had I had enough wine to open the wound in my chest.

“You’re not even looking, are you?”

“Nope. I’m good.”

“You can’t let that shit that happened with Tanner affect you forever. You have to figure out how to let it go.”

“I’m not talking about Tanner tonight. That was five years ago, Lanie. College is long gone, and he was a mistake. Plain and simple.”

“He was a twelve-year mistake. It’s not that simple. You can’t just tuck-”

“Hey.” I turned to face her and put my hands on my hips. “I’m not going there tonight. If you want to talk about the handsome billionaire who has my heart fluttering in my chest and my stomach turning at the mention of his name, I’m down, but I’m not talking about Tanner. He’s a memory I’d like to leave in the past.”

“Okay. I’m sorry.” She turned back to the stove and I felt like an ass for jumping all over her.

Tanner Schultz was my high school sweetheart, the boy I thought I would end up with after so many years of sharing my heart, my time and my body with, but things didn’t work out. It was a waste of my life and having my heart ripped out of my chest and handed to me after giving myself to him from sixth grade to our senior year in college left me leery of wanting anyone’s attention - until Matt.

“It’s all right. I just can’t go there tonight.” I poured us a glass of wine and handed hers to her. “So this new guy isn’t really new. I just haven’t brought him up too much because I wasn’t sure how I felt about him.”

“Is this Kent’s son, Matt?”

I chuckled. “I guess I have brought him up.”

“Only on occasion, and you never really talk much about him, but you’ve mentioned him. He’s the only guy you’ve mentioned.” She took a sip of her wine and set it down beside the stove. “Tell me about him.”

After hopping up to sit on the counter beside her, I leaned back and nursed my wine as I worked through what to tell her. A smile spread across my face and warmth filled my chest. Matt was a dangerous choice for me because of how different he was from Tanner. Maybe the attraction would wear off and I would be left having to hurt him and myself, which sucked royally.

“He’s about six-five, football type structure, big shoulders and a strong chest. Blond hair, great tan and beautiful blue eyes. He looks like a California boy, but he’s all Texas. He’s funny as hell and loves to paint and dream in color. He’s sweet and considerate, shy and a little nervous around me.”

“Wait. This doesn’t sound like the usual alpha asshole you go for.” She winked at me and moved back from the stove. “Done with the sauce. Just a few minutes and we can plate it up. Did you make the salad?”

“Oh. Shit.” I hopped off the counter and worked on the salad quickly as I continued. “I think there’s a side of Matt I haven’t gotten to see yet. Something tells me that he’s very much that alpha male that turns me on so much, but he keeps it hidden.”

“Why in the world would he do that?”

“Because he’s part of the Bryant family? That would be my guess. His father is pretty dominant, and his brother Damon is an uber-control freak.” I shrugged. “Maybe he just wants to stand out enough to get noticed.”

“And his mom?”

“She died a few years ago from cancer. His father just remarried. That’s the trip I took to Jamaica.”

“Oh yeah. Lucky duck.” She moved up beside me and peeled the cucumber with a paring knife like a pro. I needed to learn to cook better so I could eventually impress the man I hoped to get before I was too old to enjoy him.

“It was fun, but nothing really happened. Damon proposed to his girlfriend Bethany, who happens to be his step-sister now too.” I smiled as she glanced over at me with her eyebrow raised.

“That’s not something you hear every day.”

“Right? The man knew what he wanted and he wasn’t afraid to go after it.” I let out a girlie sigh. “I just wish his brother felt like that about me.”

“How do you know he doesn’t?”

“I don’t, but I’m going to find out this weekend while he’s in town.”

“I think you should tread lightly. Just have a good time with him, and if he’s interested, you’ll be able to tell.”

“You think so?” I popped a carrot into my mouth.

“Oh yeah. He’ll be naked and in your bed. Easy enough?”

I groaned and closed my eyes. “I can only imagine.”

“Not now, please. I’m still here and we’re good friends, but not that good.”

We shared a laugh and plated up dinner. The weekend would be telling, but Lanie was right. I needed to be careful in my approach and work hard to just *enjoy* the time I had with him no matter how profitable it might be. A friendship was better than nothing.

# CHAPTER 5



## MATT

I slept like shit the night before, but it was a common theme when I knew the next day might include running into Erica Hall. She was the epitome of sex incarnate in a power suit. From her shoulder-length blond hair that framed her regal features perfectly to the thick swell of her tight ass in her business skirt.

She left me aching all over and wanting to give up my fast from sex. She was the only woman that left me feeling that way, which was all the more of a reason to tuck tail and run. I was just like every other alpha asshole in the bedroom, and therefore avoided it. I couldn't find a woman who understood that my appetite in the sheets had little to do with my devotion and adoration outside of them.

Being someone who craved love like I did, it was just easier to play it safe and keep my relationships more familial and friendly. Anything more than that, and I'd have to explain myself. My passions bled out in my art, but there was so much more trapped inside of me, begging for the opportunity to bleed out across the soft tight body of my father's lead advertising executive. It wasn't something I was willing to let my guard down about, which meant staying away.

The phone buzzed in my lap as I sat on the private jet alone. Jonathan Luntz's name popped up and I breathed a sigh of relief. I could handle just about anyone but Erica. Why she unraveled me so fast was something I needed to figure out and conquer. It wasn't like she was going anywhere anytime soon.

“This is Matt.”

“Matthew. It’s Jonathan. I take it you’re headed into the city this afternoon?”

“I sure am. I’m sitting on a plane now, waiting to take off. What time did you want to get together?” I glanced up as the flight attendant closed the door and nodded toward me.

“Let’s have dinner at six at Landralla. It’s in the heart of the art district. Very eclectic place. My wife loves it.”

Surprise rolled over me. I’d assumed he was gay, which was asinine of me.

“Is your wife coming with you tonight?”

“Yes, so make sure you bring a date, if you’re able to. She’ll feel out of sorts being the only one not blabbering on and on about art.”

“What does she do for a living?”

“She’s a real estate agent.” I could almost hear the smile in his voice.

“Great. I’ll be there at six and will bring a friend with me. I know just the girl.”

“Excellent. Well, safe travels and I can’t wait to share with you some great news.”

My turn to smile. “Perfect. See you then.”

I leaned back in my seat after dropping the phone in the empty seat beside me. Erica was probably busy for the evening, at least she should be. A woman as beautiful as her probably had a million things to do, including a man.

“We’re about to prepare for take-off. Feel free to use your cell phone once we’re up in the air, Mr. Bryant.” The flight attendant smiled and worked to buckle himself up.

“Great. Thanks.” I let out a soft sigh and closed my eyes as Erica’s pretty face made a guest appearance in my mind. How long was I going to have to keep up pretenses with her? With everyone?

My jokes and silly references to her as a scary bitch were just that. She was honestly everything I could imagine desiring

wrapped into one package, and that alone made her dangerous.

My father had been head over heels for my mother, completely taken with her. So much so that he was either ignorant or blind to all the shit she had pulled over the years. The one thing I didn't want to do was end up like him. Completely in love with a woman who was spending her afternoons in the arms of the man she really loved, which wasn't me.

The phone buzzed and I half expected it to be Jonathan again with some small detail he forgot to include. I was pleased to see it was Bethany instead. I waited until we were in the air to call her back.

“This is Bethany.”

“Hey Sis.” I forced some energy into my voice.

“Hey you. I just wanted to wish you a safe trip. I wish I could go with you. We're headed down to Florida again this weekend, and you know I work for a slave driver.” She sounded better than she had in a while, but the sadness still lingered in her voice.

I forced a chuckle. “I understand. I'm excited about meeting up with Jonathan tonight, but he's asking me to bring a date. I didn't want to tell the poor guy that finding a date in three hours in a city I'm not familiar with would be almost as hard as trying to walk up Mount Kilimanjaro, backwards, barefoot, naked.”

“Oh Lord.” She laughed softly. “Just ask Erica. You guys will have fun, and you know how much she loves art. Give her a chance Matt.”

“Easy for you to say. It's not your delicate flesh on the line.” I shivered and responded verbally to let her know I'd done it.

“You're so ridiculous, and the funny part is that you know it.”

“Yep. You guys just see what you want to see, but your vantage point is a little different than mine. I'm on the ground floor with the troops. I'm in the trenches and you guys are-”



“Watching from lofty towers?”

I smirked. “Exactly.”

“Just ask her, you silly thing. You guys could be friends if nothing else. You were meeting up with her today anyway, right?”

“I need to for sure. I don’t know about tonight, but I’ll think about it. You doing okay?”

“I’m hanging in there.”

“Right. It sounds like it. I’ll talk to Damon for you this weekend and see what’s going on.”

“No! I don’t want any help.”

I pulled the phone from my ear like she’d slapped me. “Okay.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to snap at you. I just want this thing between us to work out the way it should or be over. That’s all.”

“And what’s the way it should work out?” I couldn’t help but ask, though I already knew what Bethany was hoping for, but it was a fantasy. My brother had been the way he was since coming out of the womb.

“It should be Damon that puts forth some effort in trying to adjust his go-to response every time something goes wrong between us.”

“Sex and touch are his love language. There is nothing to adjust. He’s a dick, and he could work on that for sure, but would you really like him if he were a different man? That guy you fell in love with is still the same guy that’s hurting just like you are.”

“He’s hurting?” Her voice softened.

“Duh. I swear for a brilliant girl, you sure are being dense about this.”

“Thanks, butt-hole.”

“Anytime. You know I care about both of you.”

“I do. Let’s not talk about my shit anymore though. You need to get emotionally and mentally prepared to meet the woman of your dreams this weekend.”

“Oh yeah? You think I’m going to run into her while I’m in Seattle? Did you have a vision or something you want to share?” I was being cheeky, but I loved goading Bethany more than anyone else.

“Really? You know Erica is perfect for you, Matt.”

“I know. I’ve heard it a million times. No is my answer. I don’t want a woman like her. Honestly. She’s beautiful and leaves my insides shaking with white-hot need, but she’s not the kind of woman I want to emotionally tie myself to.”

“Why is that? It makes no sense to me.”

“Because, my nosy new sister, she’s just like Damon. Strong, confident, a bitch and a half, and I love it. I would become her lap dog in public and put a collar on her in the bedroom. She would bring out the worst parts of me. Kinda like Damon’s doing to you.”

“You think he’s brought out the worst of me?” Sadness swept through her tone and I realized the error of my statement.

“No and yes. You’re miserable and yet you’re waiting on him to come grovel at your feet. Where I think it is quite possible that he would, you’re going about this all wrong. My brother works best under the guise of jealousy.”

“Oh, hell no. I’m not working to make him jealous. That’s dangerous for everyone involved.”

“True, but it works. Just something to think about. If we’re looking for effective here, then you gotta make a move. He doesn’t feel like he’s done anything wrong.”

“He told you that?” Her voice gained back some strength. I’d hit a nerve.

“No. I’m just telling you his normal MO. If I’m wrong, then I’m wrong, but he is my brother. Start working on a plan to get him back or walk away.”

“You’re right. When you get back, let’s devise a plan.”

“Not willing to give up?”

“On Damon? Never. I love him with this fiery passion that leaves me breathless just thinking about him. Hell, no. I’ll never give up.”

“Then stop sitting on the sidelines and go get him. You’re leaving the door open for any other woman who’s wanted a shot at him to slip in by waiting on him to make a move. He’ll grow up eventually, but don’t lose him in the process, and keep your eyes on that bitch, Delilah. She’s wanted Damon since they were kids.” I shivered again, this time without forcing it.

“I knew it! She’s so damn mean to me.”

“Yeah, there’s a reason for that. You have, or had, something she wants.” I ran my hand down the front of my face.

“All right. When you get back, we’ll figure it out.”

“Sounds good. Have a great weekend and wish me luck. I’m going into the viper’s nest.”

“Oh brother.”

“That’s me.” I smiled and dropped the call, enjoying the lingering effects of talking with my new stepsister. She was good for all of us, and her mother was the best healing for my dad’s heart. He still wasn’t over my mom’s death, not that any of us were.

I closed my eyes and tried to relax as the plane turned slowly. The movement and the hum of the engine lulled me into a daydream state where everything was warm and cozy, safe and welcoming.

*The living room wasn’t mine, but someone who had taste, no doubt. The colorful painting that hung on the wall behind a brilliant red couch caught my attention and I walked toward it, stopping to let my eyes take in the emotion trapped behind the textured paint.*

*Passion.*

*“You like it?” Erica’s voice was soft and startled me a little.*

*I glanced over my shoulder and almost swallowed my tongue.*

*“Love it,” I whispered hoarsely and turned to face the beautiful vixen.*

*She stood in the doorway to what appeared to be a bedroom, her shoulder pressed to the doorframe and body clad in nothing more than a translucent nightie that brushed the top of her thighs. There wasn’t a part of her that I couldn’t see. From the smoky rose color of her nipples pressing against the fabric to the dark patch of hair between her thighs. Every part of me woke up and screamed for connection.*

*“Come here, Matt.”*

*“I can’t.” I crossed my arms over my chest and tried to breathe past the burning desire lodged in my stomach.*

*“Why?”*

*“Because you scare the fuck out of me.”*

*“I won’t hurt you.” She lifted her arm and tilted her head to the side, stealing my heart if it wasn’t already hers. It had been for the last few years as much as I hated to admit it.*

*“I’m not worried about you hurting me.”*

*“What are you worried about then?” Sadness brushed across her face, and I dropped my arms and moved toward her.*

*“I’m worried that you’ll wake me up from the deep sleep I’ve been in.”*

My eyes fluttered open as I crashed into her. A groan left me as I clenched the handles of the seat I was sitting in and the flight attendant walked toward me.

“Mr. Bryant, are you okay?”

“Oh yeah. Just need a glass of whiskey. Now, please.”

# CHAPTER 6



## ERICA

Mandy walked beside me down the hall the next morning, rattling off a list of things that we needed to get through before our Monday afternoon meeting with Kent. I nodded and took note of the important ones, but didn't interrupt her until we were in my office, seated across my desk from one another. I had on my favorite grey slacks and a tight blue shirt that left me feeling powerful and pretty.

"E-mail that list to me, and you make sure you stay focused on the new service campaign. Kent is going to start offering a new line of advisory services to our customers in Dallas, and we need to make sure the imagery is spot on. Find a few pictures of men in the oil field, or grab the right models and get the photos ourselves."

"Of course." She nodded and scribbled something down. "When do you want a mock up?"

"By Monday if you have stock imagery that you can use. Actually, use stock photos for now, and if we need to take our own pictures, we'll just make sure Kent knows that." I turned and typed in my password on my computer to find forty new messages waiting for me. Corporate jobs paid the bills, but what a fucking drag to have to sit behind a desk all day and create drama out of nothingness.

"Will do. Anything else you need me to focus on?"

I leaned in a little as one of the e-mails caught my attention. "Oh nice. Blink-182 is back on tour? I didn't even know they were coming to Seattle."

“Oh yeah. Lewis has tickets that he was trying to get rid of. You want me to send him in?”

Excitement pumped through me. I hadn't been to a concert in forever, but I knew without a doubt that Lanie would *love* to go with me.

“That would be great, actually. I need to do something fun before my head explodes.” I leaned back in my chair and studied Mandy, wondering what the girl's life was like outside of the office. The sad reality was that I knew very little about my staff, but it was a protection mechanism to keep everyone at arm's length. It allowed me not to be invested emotionally and then crushed when something went wrong, which it would. It always did in my life. My relationship with Lanie was the only solid friendship I had, or wanted.

Mandy chuckled and brushed her long brown hair over her shoulder. “All right. I'll send Lewis in. We're ordering sandwiches today. You want me to get you anything special?”

“Nope. I'll just eat whatever you guys are eating. I'm not picky.”

She bit her bottom lip and studied me for a minute. I lifted my eyebrow and chuckled. She had something on her mind.

“Can I ask you something?” Her expression softened.

“Absolutely.” I leaned back in my chair and gave her my full attention.

“How do you stay in such great shape? You're here all the time with us and eat what we eat, but you look like a million bucks. I don't mean to be too forward, but-”

“No, it's fine. I run a lot late at night, and I have enough exercise videos to fill up this office.” I snorted and stood. “It's all about balance, right? I eat better for the other meals during the day and just let myself go for one meal a day at most.”

“Very cool.” She smiled and nodded before standing up too. “Thanks, Miss Hall.”

“Erica, Mandy. I think I've told everyone to call me Erica at least ten times in the last year.” I walked around the desk

and opened the door to my office for her.

“It’s just hard to call your boss by her first name. I’ll remind them. Thanks again.”

I watched her go and leaned against the doorframe of my door for only a moment before the phone buzzing behind me pulled me from my thoughts. Maybe I needed to loosen up a little. Maybe being more relatable to my staff wouldn’t be such a bad thing.

Turning, I walked quickly toward my desk and picked up the phone. “This is Erica Hall.”

“Erica. It’s Kent. Do you have a minute?”

“For you? I guess I could make time.” I sat down and smiled as he chuckled on the other end of the phone. My boss had a special place in my life. He was a good mentor, a semi-father figure and a friend.

“Well, thank you, kindly.” He cleared his throat as I looked up to see my secretary, Joan, stick her head in the office. I shook my head at her that I wasn’t to be disturbed and to close the door. Whatever she needed could wait.

“Of course. What can I do for you, Kent?”

“You know that Matthew is headed up to Seattle right now, and from what Damon tells me, he’s planning on meeting with you one more time over the job offering up there.”

“It’s not the same position as that one has been filled, but yes, he’s going to stop by the office this afternoon to chat for a little bit. I figured we would work to open a position for him after I worked to understand what he was looking for.”

“He’s not really looking for anything, unfortunately. I wish he would grow up and realize the value of the opportunity before him, but you know how he is.”

“He’s a right brained guy. Much like everyone else in my department. I’ll work on him today and see what I can do.”

“I was hoping that would be your response. Damon and I had dinner last night, and we were thinking that maybe the



way to go about getting Matt to come join us isn't to push him into it, but to have you just bind him to your side a little."

"I'm not sure I understand. Matt's not exactly fond of me."

"Yes he is. He's just being dramatic about you with all of us, but he's attracted to you. I saw the way he watched you in Jamaica."

Warmth filled my chest and raced up my neck to coat my cheeks. "Are you asking me to use that attraction to reel him into the company?"

"Nope. I would never do that. I'm asking you to not talk about business while you guys are together. Instead, take him to see the city this weekend. Have fun with him and maybe show him around some of the art galleries. Just make him see that there is far more for him in Seattle than he's giving the city credit for."

"Why are you and Damon trying to get rid of him? Seems odd to me."

Kent chuckled. "We're trying to give him a fresh start away from Dallas. We love him to death, you know that. He just needs to grow up and find himself, and to be completely honest, I just don't think that's going to be here. He grew up here and has planted his roots in deep, but it's never been him. I wanna see him fully bloom somewhere, Erica. I just can't shake the fact that he should be there. You can help me get him there. I know you can."

I let out a soft sigh and closed my eyes. Kent didn't know what he was asking of me. Matt did belong in Seattle, but having him reject me and then move up to my city where we could bump into each other ten times a day sounded like hell on earth, but like most things... this wasn't about me.

"I'll see what I can do."

"Excellent. How are we doing on our advisory campaign ads?"

"We're working hard on them. I'll have a mock up ready by Monday for you to review."

“Just one or two ads this time. I know you like variety, but I don’t. Just put forth what you think would be best, and I’ll choose from the limited options you give me.”

I laughed. “That never works for us, but we will try it one more time.”

He chuckled as well. There hadn’t been a meeting in the last two years that he hadn’t asked for at least one more drawing. It was a running joke between them.

“I’ll do my best to choose from what you bring.”

“And if you don’t, I’ll bring more. It’s what we do.” I finished up the conversation and got up to walk down the hall to Lewis’ office. He glanced up from his computer and gave me a warm smile.

“Boss. Did you come down here to scalp my tickets to the concert tomorrow night?”

“I’m almost positive that scalping means to sell the tickets, so you would be the scalper.” I awarded him a quirky smile and stopped in front of his desk.

“And you would be the scalpee? That sounds horrible.” He pulled out two tickets and handed them to me. “Have fun. You’ll have to update me on how the band does.”

“I will. How much are they?”

“Nothing. It was a gift. I’m good paying it forward.”

“No. I’m not taking the tickets for nothing, Lewis. I’ll just get the market value of them and pay you on Monday.”

“I really wish you wouldn’t. They’re great seats and you need to enjoy life a little more. You’re a great boss and we’re always trying to think of ways to get you to get out and enjoy yourself.”

“You are?” Emotion raced up my chest and lodged in my throat. Had they been trying to help me live a little more? Maybe so. I hadn’t noticed, but the thought of them caring brought me to tears.

“Oh hey. I’m sorry.” He stood up and snatched a Kleenex from the box on his desk. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“No, it’s okay. I’m just tired. I didn’t sleep too well last night.”

“Something on your mind?” He tilted his head to the side and watched me.

“No, but thanks for asking.” I lifted the tickets and dabbed my eyes with the tissue. “Thanks again for these. I need it.”

“Anytime.”

His warmth followed me down the hall back to my office, and I figured I had about ten minutes to have a good cry, but the broad shouldered, blond haired man sitting in the seat across from my desk with his back to me left me trying to pull myself together.

“Matt?” I closed the door behind me as he stood and turned. The goofy grin on his face left my heart racing. He was beyond attractive in all the right ways, but it wasn’t the lust that sat between us, but the promise that so much more could exist if we could push past the awkwardness of our relationship.

“Erica Hall.” He extended his hand and shook mine firmly as his eyes moved down the length of my body. It was a relief to know that if nothing else, he was interested in checking me out. “Don’t you look beautiful today?”

“Thanks.” I released his hand and walked around to the other side of my desk. “How was the flight?”

“Too short. I sleep like a baby on those things.” He sat down in the chair closest him and cross his clasped hands over his stomach.

“How long are you in town?” I glanced down at the tickets and thought maybe for a minute about asking him, but lost my nerve. I was too raw from the simple kindness Lewis and Mandy had shown that morning.

“I’m here until Monday afternoon. I’m staying at the Hyatt just down the road.” He nodded toward the tickets. “Whatcha

got there?”

I handed them to him. “Blink-182 tickets. I haven’t been to a concert in forever and they’re one of my favorite bands.”

“Oh my goodness.” He laughed low in his chest. “I love these guys.”

I nodded and sat back, trying hard to relax. Everything about him turned me on. He was like the greatest treasure I might get the opportunity to uncover. I just needed to know which key to use to open him up.

“I have two tickets.” I shrugged, trying to appear casual. “You can join me if you like. I was going to ask a friend, but I’m happy to take you with me.”

“Seriously?” His eyes lit up and his smile was so big it had to hurt.

I found myself smiling like an idiot because of him.

“Yeah. It could be fun.”

“It’ll be a blast.” He licked his lips and handed me the tickets back. “So I’ll go with you tomorrow night, but I have this stupid dinner I need to have with Jonathan Luntz tonight. He’s bringing his wife and told me to bring a date. Any way I can twist your arm to come with me? You’re the only woman I know in Seattle.” He snorted and crossed his arms over his chest.

I could have taken his comment as an insult, but I decided not to.

“Yeah. I’ll go.”

“Just a friendly dinner. We’ll get ice cream or something afterward if you’re up for it.”

I nodded. “Sounds good to me.”

# CHAPTER 7



## MATT

I was having trouble breathing by the time I got to the bottom floor of McKenzie and Bryant's beautiful glass building in downtown Seattle. Erica was willing to go to dinner as my date, and I'd signed myself up to going to the Blink-182 concert with her the next night. Two nights with her tucked against my side. I might not survive it.

The image of her standing in the doorway as I turned a few minutes before seared me. My cock twitched in my jeans, my stomach tightened as desire ran around crazy deep inside me. What I would give to let loose and rein passion all over her. She was so strong and fierce, and yet a softness played on her features moments before. Had someone upset her? The need to protect her roared to life inside of me, surprising me a little. I'd have to be careful that weekend, or all the walls I'd resurrected to keep myself in check would come crumbling down and she'd be mine - at least for a few days.

The drive to the hotel was quick, but the luxury of taking the latest Audi for a spin was a treat. I had an old truck back home that I loved to drive and wasn't willing to give up on just yet, but after this weekend, I might have to use a little bit of the money I'd saved up and buy myself a nice car. It was too hard not to feel like a king sitting in the damn thing.

The valet rushed toward me as I pulled up to the Hyatt and opened my door for me.

"Good afternoon, Sir. Welcome to the Hyatt."

“Thanks.” I got out and took the ticket the guy offered before walking into the hotel. It wasn’t the one my father wanted me to stay at, but it was good enough for me. Too fancy and I’d start to feel like the rich kid I hated being.

Memories of trying to hide my wealth when I was in secondary school washed over my vision and I couldn’t help but laugh. How stupid was I? My brother was flaunting it, and I couldn’t stand for anyone to know that we came from money. It didn’t feel right. It wasn’t my money to flaunt anyway.

“Hi, Sir. Welcome to the Hyatt. How can I help you?” The middle-aged woman at the counter gave me a warm smile.

“I’m here to check in. Matthew Bryant.” I pulled out my phone to pull up the reservation and couldn’t seem to get cellular service. “Weird. Is your Wi-Fi working?”

She glanced up and nodded. “It was a few minutes ago. You might need to step outside if it’s giving you trouble.”

“Okay. I’ll do that.” I put the phone back in my pocket and took in the various pieces of art around the lobby. My dream was to one day walk into a place and see my own work accenting the beauty of the place. I had a long way to go, but I was willing to push if it meant recognizing my dreams.

“Hmmm...”

I turned my attention back to the woman. “Hmmm doesn’t sound like a good thing.”

“It’s just that I see your reservation, but the hotel is overbooked.” She gave me an apologetic look. “We have another hotel across town, but it’s about fifteen minutes. Do you want me to call over there and see if they have an opening?”

I had just enough time to check in, change and get back over to the restaurant originally, but now with a few additional minutes on my hands, I figured I would text Erica and just pick her up at her place.

“No, I’m good. I’m just going to use your restroom. I’ll call my secretary and have her book another hotel close by. Thanks.” I turned and pulled my suitcase toward the restroom,

trying hard not to get annoyed. I couldn't control all the shit life flung at me, but I learned from an early age the one thing I could own - how I reacted to the shit. Getting upset over the hotel would leave me pissy for what was surely to be a great night. Not only did I like Jonathan and looked forward to seeing what his thoughts were regarding my work, but I would get to sit next to the most beautiful woman on the planet. Nothing could dent that. Not even the extreme nervousness over all of it.



“So what happened?” Erica glanced over at me as she ran her hands over her grey skirt. It stopped just above her knees, leaving plenty of tanned flesh for me to covet.

“They had my reservation, but had overbooked the hotel. It's weird that they wouldn't stop booking people when they ran out of rooms.” I rolled my eyes and chuckled as she buckled up. “We're going to Landralla tonight. I've only been once and it was forever ago. You okay with that?”

“Oh yeah. I love their sea bass. It's juicy and melts on your tongue.” She glanced over at me with a pseudo-innocence that had my body reacting violently. Maybe spending half the weekend with the woman who played center stage for all of my fantasies was a bad idea. Nothing good could come of it but me capturing the sounds of her moans for replay later when I was back in my own world.

“Sounds delicious. Hey, I was thinking, if you want to take your friend tomorrow night to the concert, you should. I didn't mean to-”

“No way. I'm glad you want to go. Those concerts get crazy. Having a big guy like you with me is perfect. Poor Lanie isn't even up to my chin.” She smiled and the world seemed brighter. Her blond hair played along the tops of her shoulders, and the silky blue shirt that clung to her breasts brought out the darkness in her sapphire eyes. She would be



the perfect picture to paint. I could capture so many emotions in her face alone.

“Are you calling me fat?” I smiled as I pulled myself out of the depths of passion that were starting to suffocate me.

*This is the reason you run from this woman. Hello?*

“Never. You’re incredibly handsome. I like how big you are. It’s blistering hot.” She smiled in a way that didn’t match her come-on.

I swallowed hard and pulled up to the restaurant. “No flirting with me in front of Jonathan. It makes me blush.”

She laughed and got out of the car, meeting me in front of the restaurant. “You are a little flush.”

“That’s all your fault, Miss Hall.” I opened the door for her and breathed in softly, wanting the scent of her perfume to stain my lungs.

I moved up to the hostess stand as Jonathan called out my name from across the room. Where the place was fancy, Jonathan was wealthy enough not to adhere to social standards it would seem.

“I like him already.” She slipped her arm into mine and glanced up. “Just relax and make sure you don’t sell yourself short. Oh I know... let me tell him that I’m your agent.”

“Do I need an agent?” I glanced down at her and tried not to stare at her lips. Soft and pale pink. They had to give the softest kisses imaginable. Is that what I wanted? Soft?

“No, but you’re far too good of a guy for anyone to take advantage of you. Let me help.”

I stopped and turned to face her, pulling her flush against me as I leaned down and locked eyes with her.

“Do I look like the kind of man that needs help?” I wanted to be my brother, and for a moment, I sure as fuck felt like him. Powerful and strong. The kind of guy Erica would want with a burning passion inside of her. The kind of man she deserved.

Her breath caught in her chest as she pressed her palms to my chest. “No, but let me help anyway. It will make me feel better than sitting here like a bump on a log. Please?”

I smiled and released her. “All right. Could be fun.”

She laughed and slipped her arm back into mine. “And I’m your girlfriend tonight.”

“What?” I glanced down at her about the time we reached the table. Too late. She was going to have fun and all I could do was trust her that whatever she was up to would be good for me too.

“Matthew. This is my wife, Margaret.” Jonathan offered his hand and I shook it and then his wife’s.

“This is Erica Hall. She’s my agent and my girlfriend.” I slid my hand over her lower back and enjoyed far too much how her muscles tightened under my touch. She should be my girlfriend, but I was too much of a wimp to make that happen. The attraction was skin deep, but I couldn’t let lust be all we had. That would never work for me.

“Nice to see you again, Miss Hall. I believe we met a week or so ago at our initial interview.” Jonathan smiled at Erica and shook her hand.

“We sure did. Nice to see you again too, Jonathan.” She turned to Margaret. “Nice to meet you as well.”

We sat down after the pleasantries were over, and damn if Erica didn’t scoot her chair a little closer to mine. The smell of her perfume washed over me again, and suddenly spending the evening with Jonathan was the last thing I wanted to do.

“Let’s talk business first and then we can enjoy dinner together. Would that be all right?” Erica spoke up, surprising me a little.

“Oh, I like her even more.” Jonathan laughed and picked up a wine menu. “Let’s get a couple of bottles of wine and then I’ll bring out the contracts. I think I’d like to have a showing in the next month or so at De Luge if you’re up for that Matthew?”

“That sounds great actually. Do you think we have enough to put on a full showing or should we couple my work with another artist?” I slid my arm over the back of Erica’s chair and leaned in a little, not quite thinking through my actions.

“I think you have more than enough, but that’s just my humble opinion.” Her voice was soft, and I realized she was looking up at me.

I glanced down and let my eyes move across her face, memorizing the way she watched me. I felt like I could rule the world with her staring at me like I meant something. I took a shallow breath and sat back, pulling my arm from behind her and working like hell to stay focused on Jonathan.

“I agree with Erica’s assessment. We have more than enough. The showing will be free to the public.”

“No. You need to charge to bring in the right clientele. We’ll do free later when Matt’s more established.” Erica pulled her napkin down into her lap and pressed her forearms to the table.

“How much do you think we should charge? We usually do fifty to five thousand. For our new talent we start with a free showing.”

“Charge ten thousand.” She glanced over at me. “He’s incredibly talented. Value his work at what it’s worth from the beginning and we won’t have to work up to anything.”

I almost swallowed my tongue. Every inch of my skin tingled with the desire to feel her against me. I had to get up, or I was going to make the biggest mistake of my life. Would I survive having a woman like Erica for a weekend and never again? No. No fucking way.

“Excuse me for a minute.” I pushed my chair back and got up. I needed air. I had to run. Now. Hard and fast before I changed my mind and offered her my freedom and my heart.

# CHAPTER 8



## ERICA

“Is he okay?” Jonathan asked me as he leaned back in his chair. The gangly artist was exactly what one would expect of an art dealer. His shirt was every color of the rainbow and his dark hair was slicked back. His wife was cute, but lost to a game on her phone. It was almost comical, at least it was before Matt got a wild look in his eyes and bolted for the door.

Maybe I’d overstepped my boundaries.

“I think so. Let me go check on him.” I got up and walked through the restaurant searching for him. Worry wrapped in fear danced through my stomach as I reached the front door. What was I going to do if he’d left me there?

“Hey. I’m right here.” He turned to face me as the wind picked up from the water and blew his blond hair about.

“You okay?” I walked toward him, wanting to reach out and touch him, but knowing that it was probably better that I didn’t.

“Yeah. I just felt a little overwhelmed. I’ve wanted to share my art my whole life, but it needed to be on my terms, you know?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I can back up some. I should have let you-”

He lifted his finger and pressed it to my lips. “No, it’s not that. I love what you’re doing for me. I meant that I wanted to gain this privilege on my own and not with my father’s help.

I've done that now. It's an incredible feeling, but all the emotions raging inside of me have me a little dizzy."

I gripped his wrist lightly and pulled his finger from my mouth. "So you want me to help, or no? I'm good either way. I just want what's best for you."

He smiled and studied my face. "I want your help. You're my girl after all, right?"

*I want to be.*

I chuckled. "Yeah. I'm playing that part for the night."

"All night?" His smile faded and he took a step closer to me, sucking the air out of the patio around us and leaving my knees weak.

Every wicked hot fantasy I'd had of him blasted through my vision and I stifled a moan.

"Don't tease me," I whispered roughly and moved back toward the door.

"I thought women liked to be teased." He reached around me and held the door open as I walked back in. He towered over me in a way that left me feeling petite and feminine. I loved it with a passion.

"Only in the bedroom." I glanced behind me and winked as his eyes widened.

"I'll remember that." He touched my lower back and moved up beside me.

"You sure you're okay with me negotiating on your behalf?"

"Yeah. I love it. It's a turn on." He glanced down at me, the look on his face sensual and strong.

I had no doubt that he was two different personalities, like all of us were. The fun-loving guy that enjoyed a good laugh and wanted life to be a party was only part of who he was. I wanted to see the other side of him. The one I kept catching glimpses of, though he was more than enough no matter if I ever saw it.

I took my seat and ignored his comment about me being dominant being a turn on. I could analyze it later that night while I worked myself into a frenzy alone in my bed.

“Everyone good?” Jonathan gave us a warm smile and lifted the bottle of wine. “The liquor is here, so this party is just going to get better and better.”

We laughed and worked through the rest of the details on Matt’s contract. It would seem that Jonathan had the chance to show Matt’s work to some of his high net worth clients and they loved the paintings. The first showing would just be for them, and the profits on the event would be split sixty-forty in Matt’s favor. I had to whittle Jonathan down and give Matt more than a few stern looks to make it all happen, but in the end it all worked out.

“I have to say that I’m rather impressed.” Jonathan stood next to me at the front of the restaurant. Matt had a call he had to take, and Margaret was in the restroom.

“How so?” I turned and lifted my eyes to focus on him.

“Matthew is a Bryant. Rarely do men like him let a woman do his bidding. He’s a different bird than his flock, no?”

“He is, but in a good way, I think.” I glanced out to catch a glimpse of him walking back and forth in front of the restaurant. His ass looked divine in his slacks, but I couldn’t help but lament over him not having his jeans on anymore. I’d have to talk him into wearing them to the concert the next night. Just the thought of having another night with him left me smiling like a silly schoolgirl.

“Does he know that you’re in love with him?” Jonathan picked up a mint and offered it to me.

“No. He has no clue,” I murmured and popped it into my mouth. “It’s far more complicated than you might think.”

“Most things worth having are.” He chuckled.

Matt walked back through the front door as he slipped his phone in his pocket and smiled.

“Just Damon checking in on things. He was glad to hear that you were here with me.” He winked at me.

“That’s because he knows you care very little about money and would give your stuff away for free if we let you.” I reached out and brushed something off his dark green shirt. “It’s worth too much to let it be devalued.”

“The woman is right.” Jonathan moved back as his wife rejoined us. “And I think the same could be said about me. I love to share my art, but people are quick to take advantage of anything they can. Show it to those that will appreciate it most, and then when you’re well-known and wealthy... show it to everyone who will look.”

“I like that.” Matt nodded and offered me his arm. “You ready?”

“One more thing.” Jonathan lifted his finger. “What are your plans on moving up here to join us versus staying in Dallas?”

“I haven’t decided yet.” Matt’s eyes shifted back toward me. “It’s still up in the air. This pretty woman right here is trying to talk me into coming to work for her at my father’s firm.”

“Oh, interesting.” Jonathan tilted his head to the side and studied me. “Please do tell me that you’re involved in the advertising for McKenzie and Bryant. I love their slogan so much. It was done by a world-class artist.”

“Erica did that for us.” Matt ran his hand down my back, resting his fingers just above the curve of my rear and leaving my pulse to spike. I wanted so much more than he would offer, but the simplicity of his touch left me on edge and almost panting. How much could I really handle?

Jonathan laughed loudly and clapped his hands. “Erica Hall. You aren’t just Matt’s agent and his girlfriend, you’re an artist yourself.”

“I used to be.” I clasped my hands together in front of my waist and glanced back over toward Matt. “Let’s get out of here before he starts trying to show my work too.”



“Oh I would love that,” Jonathan cooed.

We all laughed and said our goodbyes. I watched Jonathan and his wife walk toward the parking lot, laughing about something and seeming to enjoy each other.

“I like him.” I turned to face Matt as his Audi pulled up beside us.

“He’s a good guy. Different, but I would assume most art dealers need to be a little mysterious, right?”

I laughed and got in the car as one of the valets held the door open for me. “Do you think art has to be mysterious?”

“No, but I think when we look at a painting, it’s always going to be part of the experience. Just think about it. You’re trying to see into the mind of the artist, right? You’re constantly thinking to yourself, what the hell was he thinking when he painted this.”

I laughed and snuggled back into my seat. The wine warmed my blood and left me feeling far more open than I would have allowed otherwise.

“Where are you staying again?”

“I was going to stay at the Hyatt, but they overbooked the damn place, remember?” He smiled and glanced over at me. “You’re drunk.”

“I am not.” I sat up and smiled.

“You’re pretty close. I like it. It’s cute.” He pulled out into traffic and rolled the windows down. “It feels so damn good out here in the fall.”

“Stay with me tonight.” I reached out and turned the air off. “You don’t need to get another hotel. You and I have been friends for a while now. I have a couch. You can take it, or I will, but don’t go trying to find a hotel this late at night.”

“It’s eight.” He stopped at a red light and reached over to touch my shoulder. He brushed the back of his fingers down my exposed skin and breathed in deeply. “I’m not sure staying with you would be a good idea. You taking charge and working all that shit out tonight was a huge turn on. As if you

weren't enough, but your aggressive ass personality is incredibly drawing."

"Drawing?" I forced myself not to reach for his hand. I wanted to feel his fingers glide on every part of me, needed to with a desire that I hadn't felt in years.

"Yeah. It pulls me closer to you. Scares the fuck outta me too." He turned the station to something a little more upbeat. "I'll sleep on the couch if you're okay with that. How about we pick up the stuff to make cookies or brownies or something? I have a sweet tooth that isn't going to let me go without giving it attention tonight."

"Mmmm... I haven't had sweets in almost four months."

"What?" He pulled into a small grocery store down from my condo. "You're not living if you're not indulging from time to time, woman."

"Woman?" I got out of the car and laughed at the stern look he gave me. "How many personalities do you have, Mr. Bryant?"

"More than I care to count." He held the door open for me and moved up beside me as I grabbed a cart and walked in. "Are you a cookie girl or a brownie girl."

"Both? I used to make something called slutty brownies back in college. They're delicious."

"I like the sound of them already." He laughed. "What's in these hookery treats?"

My turn to laugh. "Cookie dough, Oreos and brownie mix. Let's get everything we need and then we'll make them right when we get back to my place. Once you try these things, you'll never go back."

"Something tells me this weekend is going to make it hard as hell to consider going back in lots of ways," he mumbled and moved ahead of me to grab the cookie dough. He turned around and I let my eyes run up the length of his body.

"Are you afraid of me, Matt?"

“Terrified.” He dropped the tube of dough into the basket and gripped the sides of the handle around me, trapping me against his chest. “You?”

“Not even an ounce,” I panted softly, knowing we were about to step into something I might not survive.

“Hot,” he whispered against my hair and walked toward the center of the grocery store.

I turned and watched him go, trying to decide if I was going to man up or run like hell.

Both sounded viable, but when he paused and glanced over his shoulder at me, I realized I wasn’t going anywhere without him.

No matter the cost.

# CHAPTER 9



## MATT

“All right, so show me how to make the delicious brownies, and promise me that they’re completely calorie free. I’m trying to watch my girlish figure.” I shook my head like I had flowing hair and enjoyed the sly smile on her face far more than I should have.

“Let’s just go on a run tomorrow morning and we’ll be set.” She bent over to pull a pan from under the cabinet, giving me a great view of her rear.

“You should go change. Get out of your work clothes and put on something comfortable.” I moved up to the counter and took the pan from her. “Tell me what to do and I’ll get the dessert going.”

“You haven’t changed yet.” Her eyes moved across me, leaving me to feel more exposed than I thought possible. My need to run was driving through me at breakneck speed, but the promise of having a little bit of fun with someone I’d fantasized as mine wasn’t going to let me take one step in the opposite direction. I was stuck. Time to own it.

“I’ll change in a minute. Go do what I told you to do.” I nodded toward the bedroom and smiled. “Brownies in the bottom or cookies go down first?”

She handed me the log of cookie dough. “This first, then you lay down the Oreos across the cookie dough. Then mix the brownies up in a bowl and pour them over. I’ll turn the oven on. Don’t get burned.”

“Hardy-Har.” I watched her go and got busy on making the dessert. It’d been a long time since I’d spent the evening with someone I wanted to bed. Four years to be exact. I was fine with my withdrawal from women up to that point. It suddenly seemed like far too long to go without, or maybe it was just something about Erica.

She returned a few minutes later in a t-shirt that fell off the side of her shapely shoulder and a pair of yoga pants. My body hardened in all the right places as I let myself imagine the idea of running my hands all over her and memorizing every sweet curve.

“My turn?” I walked past her as she bent over and opened the oven.

“Yeah. These look great. I’m surprised. Most men can’t follow directions to save their lives.”

I glanced back and stifled a groan. The woman was beyond perfect. Why was I worried about giving myself over to her again? Right, she’d quickly own me, and I’d not want to come up for a breath.

“I’m not most men.” I turned the corner and walked down the hall. “Mind if I use your bedroom?”

“No problem.”

I grabbed my bag and took it down the hall, making sure to stop and check out the pictures on the wall as I did. There were several of her and an older man that I had to assume was her father. The other ones were various paintings. Her signature was scribbled on the bottom right corner of most of them.

“Wow,” I mumbled and reached up to run my fingers over a dark red painting. There was no definitive form, but the colors reminded me of violent passion or deep anger. I had to ask her about it after we got drunk on sugar.

I finally made my way back to the bedroom, and stopped just inside the door, letting my eyes acclimate to the darkness. It almost seemed a travesty to turn the light on. A large skylight window sat just above the bed, bathing the white

sheets in an ethereal glow. I could imagine her lying naked under the sheets, her arms before her as she rested on her side. The thick swell of her hip and her pretty dark blond hair splayed out over the pillows.

My body throbbed as tendrils of pleasure danced around in my stomach. I hadn't been so turned on in a long ass time. It took me a few minutes to shake the need to turn on my heel and attack her in the kitchen. She wouldn't appreciate it and honestly, even though I knew she was attracted to me, I wasn't sure how she felt about aggressive men. She wouldn't expect me to be one for sure. That was the hardest part. Shocking her with another side of myself that I worked to keep under lock and key.

“Did you get lost back here?” She stopped in the doorway to the bedroom and flipped on the light.

“No.” I glanced over my shoulder. “I was just enjoying the serenity of the room. It's chilly in here and this light in the ceiling is beautiful. I love it.”

“Oh, thanks. Feel free to use anything you need to this weekend. *Mi casa es su casa.*” She turned and walked out.

I threw my suitcase onto the bed and opened it, pulling out a pair of sleeping pants and trying to decide if a t-shirt would be a good idea. I wasn't exactly in the best shape of my life, but I was still proud of the way I looked. I was still a cocky Bryant at the core.

I walked back through the house, stopping to let my eyes move across the crimson painting that first caught my attention.

“Did you paint this?” I leaned in and smiled. “I like it. A lot.”

“Yeah, I did.” Her voice told me something hid behind her response.

I glanced down the hall to covet her for a moment. “Tell me about it. I want to know what lies behind it.”

She let out a soft sigh and moved toward me, stopping and taking it off the wall.

“I painted it four years ago when I graduated college.” She shrugged and started to put it back.

I reached out and gripped her wrist lightly. “You might have painted it four year ago, but you’re still holding back the story. I’m an artist myself, remember? I know quite clearly the well from which we draw out our art. This is intense passion or burning anger. Which?”

“Can it be both?” She put the picture back.

I didn’t answer, nor did I take my eyes off the picture.

“You’re not going to relent, are you?” She reached out and brushed her finger across it.

“No. I wish I could.” I moved behind her and ran my hands over her shoulders. It was dangerous to even touch her, but I wanted to hear the story, yearned to know that there was something more than she was presenting to everyone else. She was a woman’s woman. The kind of girl who decided she was going to rule the world and fucking did it.

“I dated the same guy from sixth grade through my senior year of college. I figured we were going to be together forever. The night he called things off was the most painful and yet freeing night of my life. I’d grown comfortable in my relationship with him. There was no passion there and I was suffocating.”

“But to be rejected by him left you angry?” I pressed my chest to her back and pulled her closer as I breathed in softly.

“Yes. I thought my heart was going to bleed out that night. I’ve never cried so hard in all my life. I haven’t cried since.” She pressed against me and crossed her arms over her chest. “It was a death of sorts.”

“I can understand that.” I brushed my lips by the back of her silky hair and released her. “I paint from a well of various emotions too. I love that this has more than one within it. It pulled me in immediately. I had to know what drove you to do it.”

“The need for white-hot passion.” She turned to face me and glanced up.



“Then why paint it red?”

She smiled and reached out to touch my chest. “Because most people think passion is colored in crimson and pinks. Only a true artist knows that the very absence of color is the deepest desire of the painter.”

I reached out and touched the side of her face, wanting to take her down the hall and let her find what she needed in me.

“Because it’s the beginning for us? It’s the blank canvas?” I took a step closer as the sugary goodness of the brownies reached my senses.

“That’s exactly right. Anything that happens going forward is ours to build upon. To change and make perfect.”

“And what if perfection is a myth?” I slid my fingers into her hair as my heart raced to break free from my chest.

“I don’t believe that. You don’t either.” She slid her hands around my waist and pulled me in tightly. Her eyes moved down to my lips and I couldn’t hold back another second.

The groan that left her as I pressed my lips to hers drove desire through the center of my stomach and left my skin itching for her nails to race across it.

She slid her hands up my back and opened her mouth, brushing her tongue by mine as I leaned down and pressed her to the wall beside her pretty painting. My free hand slid over her hips and down her outer thigh before moving back up to slide up her side and up to cup her breasts. She was more than a handful, and I wanted so fucking bad to strip her bare and worship each of her tits before pressing my tongue to every crevice of her body. Hunger raged through me in slow methodical waves.

“More,” she whispered against my lips and lifted her leg, looping it over my hip and sliding her hands down to cup my ass.

I ground into her and leaned down to consume her again. She smelled like heaven, something clean and minty mixed with arousal.

The buzzer on the stove went off, and I pressed my forehead to hers and panted softly alongside her for a few seconds.

“Brownies,” she mumbled and pulled away from me, walking quickly to the kitchen.

I turned and put my back against the wall as I brushed my palm over my erection. I gathered my thoughts and forced the caveman back into the cave before walking into the kitchen.

“Where are your recent pieces?”

“I’m sorry?” She worked on cutting the brownies even though they were hot.

“Your paintings that you’ve done recently. I want to see them.”

“I haven’t done anything for a few years.” She turned and handed me a plate before getting a fork and extending that to me too. “Try it. I think you’ll like it.”

“Got any vanilla ice cream?” I gave her a cheeky grin.

She chuckled. “For you? Yeah, I’ll share my ice cream.”

“I feel special.” I sat down at the table and couldn’t seem to take my eyes off of her. I had to tread lightly or she would think I was just like my brother. As much as I wished I were, it simply wasn’t me to sleep with a woman that I had no intention of creating a long-term relationship with. I wasn’t sure that woman was Erica just yet. She drove me mad with lust and left me feeling like a love-sick boy, but in all honesty, I didn’t know her at all.

“You should.” She sat down and put a scoop of ice cream on my plate. “I love painting and drawing, but I try to use that passion to fuel the work I do for your father now at M&B. It is possible to transfer your passions over to the working world. You just need a supportive boss like I have in Kent.”

“I guess, but he’s not your father. I think it would be a different answer for me.”

“I don’t think so, but that’s for you to decide for yourself.”

“Why do you want me to come work for you?” I took a big bite of the brownie and sat back, groaning loudly. “Holy shit. That has to be the best thing I’ve ever tasted.”

She laughed. “Well, now you know how to make them.”

“Answer my question, Erica.” I licked my fork, loving how closely she watched me.

“I think we would be a good pair. I’d be lying if I didn’t say I was interested in a relationship with you. Even a solid friendship would be great.” She shrugged. “I think you could find yourself here.”

“You think I’m still looking for myself?”

“Aren’t we all?”

I smiled and took another big bite. She had a point.

# CHAPTER 10



## ERICA

The night before ended too soon, but after the long day, dinner, wine and dessert, my head started to pound. I tried to play it off for a while as Matt and I finished eating dessert, but I had to excuse myself and get to bed shortly after we cleaned up. Whether we would have slept together was a mystery, but one probably best untapped. I would want more than a night of passion, and he was probably like every rich guy I'd ever met.

Love 'em and leave 'em was the theme. I wanted to think that Matt could be different, but I'd never seen him in a relationship. Not once since meeting him. There was something to be said about that. No way in hell a hot guy like him wasn't sleeping around if nothing else.

My phone woke me the next morning, and damn if I didn't have a remnant of my migraine still messing with me.

"What?" I grumbled into the phone. Only a few people were stupid enough to call me on Saturday morning before nine, and of course it was the one I hated to hear from most. My brother.

"Are you still going over to the retirement home to see Mom today? You said you would."

"Fuck, Dan. It's," I sat up and glanced over at the clock before falling back into the bed, "it's only seven. I'm pretty sure they don't let visitors come over there until nine. What's the big deal? If you're so worried about Mom, then change

your schedule and get over there to see her. I'm not the only one that-

"I didn't call to get a lecture, Erica. It's not a hospital. They'll take visitors anytime. Just make sure you don't forget. Text me later after you've been over there."

"And what do you want me to tell her when she asks where her son is?" And she would. She only cared about Daniel. I might as well have been one of the maids that cleaned her room.

"Tell her that I'm away on business."

"I hate lying to her. You know this." I pressed my hand to my head and rolled onto my side. Bacon. Was it bacon that I smelled?

"You're fine with it when it benefits you."

"Fuck you too." I dropped the call and left the phone in the bed as I sat up and ran my fingers through my hair. I had to look like hell, but it was what it was. Bacon was an addiction that I rarely fed.

The sound of music playing in the kitchen had my lip turning up in a smirk. I stopped by the door and watched Matt shake his cute little butt as he sang under his breath. He had on a pair of shorts that hit him mid-thigh and nothing else. His back was lined with muscles, but the little love handles on the sides of his hips were too cute. Where he was a little bigger than most of the guys I'd dated, I found it comforting. He was perfect.

"Shake it a little to the left. Your right ass cheek is getting all the attention." I laughed as he glanced over his shoulder and his cheeks burned pink.

"You're watching me dance?"

"Yep. I like it." I walked across the short space between us and moved up beside him, taking the fork from his hand. "Did you know that bacon is my favorite food in the whole world?"

"Nope, but I think I might love you a little now that I know it is." He smiled and moved over to the fridge, pulling out the

orange juice and pouring us both a glass. “How’s your head?”

“Much better. Sorry about last night.” I reached out and took the glass he offered before letting my eyes run down his chest. He was all muscle, which surprised me a little. He never wore anything too fitting, so I’d always assumed he was fit, but not muscular.

“It’s all good. Your couch is amazing, but I have slept in some shitty places, so I might be a horrible judge of good sleeping material.” He was talking fast and fidgeting a little. He was nervous. I loved it.

“My bed’s even better. You should have joined me.” I pulled the bacon onto a plate he had sitting to the side of the stove. I laughed as I glanced over at him. His blue eyes were wide and mouth hanging open a little. “What? You can’t tell me you didn’t think about coming and poking me in the back last night. I’d never believe you if you told me that, by the way.”

“Of course I thought about it, but I’m not sure what that would do to our friendship.” He lifted his glass toward me. “I want to start there. I know there’s something between us, but I need to figure out what that means for me, and what I’m going to do about it. With so many decisions in front of me, I just want to make sure I make the right choices.”

“Of course. I’m happy being friends. You like your eggs fried or scrambled?”

He groaned and walked to sit down at the table. “You know how to cook fried eggs?”

“Doesn’t everyone?” I turned to face him and fell a little bit harder for him as he gave me a goofy grin. The man was complex and unwrapping him would be my greatest delight. I just hoped that the stars would align in a way that let that be a possibility.

“No. No one does really. I hate it when Martha says she’s going to make eggs and promises to fry them. She scrambles them every time.”

“Martha is your dad’s chef?”

“Yeah. She’s great, but damn her eggs are nasty.”

“I’m going to fry these for real. How many do you want?”

“Four?”

“Jeez.” I laughed as he shrugged and downed his orange juice.

“What’s up for the day? You want to go walk down by the harbor with me? I’d love to poke my head into some of the small art shops and see what new artists they’re featuring now.”

“That sounds great actually. I have to stop by this morning to see my mom at the retirement home, but I can catch up with you when I’m done visiting with her.” I cracked a few eggs and tried to ignore how good it felt to have him watching me so closely.

“No, I’ll go with you unless it’s a private visit and you need some time to yourself with her.”

“No, I’d love for you to go. I’ll warn you ahead of time that she doesn’t care much for me.”

“What? That sounds crazy. Who wouldn’t wanna be around you?” He scoffed.

“My mother. She prefers my brother, Daniel, who’s a lawyer here in Seattle. She thinks art is stupid and doesn’t like the fact that I followed my dreams in some capacity.”

“What were your dreams?” He stood up and moved up behind me, standing a little closer than I would consider comfortable for friends.

“To do what you’re doing. To paint and have my art hanging on the wall in a major gallery.” I glanced over my shoulder as he breathed in deeply.

“Those look so good.”

I glanced down at the eggs and then to my breasts. “What looks good?”

He chuckled. “The eggs look good. You look incredible, but you know that already.”



I turned to face him as he moved toward the cabinet and pulled down two plates.

“Why do you assume that I already know that I look good? Maybe I have no clue how other people think I look.” I put my hand on my hip and cocked my head to the side. “It’s nice to hear a good-looking man tell you that you look good.”

“Not good. Great, and I’m not good-looking. I’m just me.” He patted his chest and nodded toward the stove. “Don’t burn the eggs. A lot is riding on how these turn out.”

I laughed loudly. “Oh yeah? This is an interview?”

“It is now.”

“And if these are the best eggs you’ve ever had in your life?” I turned back to the stove and plated them for him.

“You got a spare ring around here that I can use to propose?”

The very idea of Matthew Bryant getting on one of his knees and asking me to spend the rest of my life with him left my pulse racing and my knees weak. It was a pipe dream and a half, but it was one that I was happy to entertain.

“You’re so silly.” I walked over to the table and sat down, reaching for the bacon as he started to cut his eggs.

“I like silly.” He took a quick bite and closed his eyes. “I love them. Marry me?”

“Yep. Let’s do it today. My insurance is great at M&B, but you need to buy us a bigger place.” I glanced around as he chuckled.

“There is a softer side to you. I like it.” He reached out and brushed his fingers over my hand. “Why aren’t you following your dreams? I have a sneaking feeling that your work would be just as good as my own. Why not pursue it?”

“I don’t know.” I ran my fingers through my hair and pulled my legs up into the seat with me. “My father would have wanted me to, but it wasn’t like being an artist was something I could do if I wanted to pay the bills right out of college. I made different decisions.”

“And you’re happy?”

“Yes, very.” I stood up. “I met you, didn’t I?”

“You lucky, lucky girl.” He turned and glanced over his shoulder as I stopped by the stove.

“I’m going to go change. You really don’t have to go with me to the retirement center if you don’t want to.”

“I know I don’t, but that’s the thing. I wanna go. I’d love to see if you got your looks from your mom or dad.”

I lifted my eyebrow as curiosity raced through me. “And why would that matter?”

“I just need to know who to thank. You’re clearly the most attractive woman in my world.”

“You don’t get out much.” I turned the corner and walked back to the bedroom to the sound of him talking smack. It would be *so* nice to visit my mother with someone else there. She usually took to berating me the minute I walked in the door, but with Matt by my side, there was no way she would show her ass. Why Daniel made me go was beyond me. It had to be because he disliked me as much as she did. I disrupted their orderly world and brought color in amidst the grays and blacks they loved so much.

I changed into a long skirt and a fitted top before working my hair into a bun and slipping sandals onto my feet. I put on a little bit of makeup, and earrings. A yelp left me as I turned to walk out of the bedroom and ran into my handsome weekend visitor.

“Sorry. I need to change if you don’t mind.” He ran his hands over my shoulders slowly as his eyes moved around my face. It was an odd side of him, and yet I was quickly falling for anything he might be willing to give up. I’d wanted those hands on me for the last two years, and now that I had a taste of them, I couldn’t seem to imagine a life without more of his time, his attention, his affection.

“Sure. And just so you know. You owe me, and I’ll be collecting today.”

“What? What do I owe you?”

“I played girlfriend to you last night in front of Jonathan. I need you to play boyfriend in front of my mother so I don’t have to answer a million questions about who you are and why you’re tagging along with me today.”

“Sounds good to me.” He moved around me and popped my butt, surprising me again. “My women show more skin. How about you put on a shorter skirt.”

“You wish, buddy.” I laughed and walked back toward the living room.

His women? I couldn’t see Matthew sporting a handful of women. One would be nice, especially if she were me.

# CHAPTER 11



## MATT

I snuck glances at her as she talked about work and the new project she was working on for my father. Something about being around her made me feel fifteen again. She was alive and full of so much passion that it bubbled up around the edges of her persona. I wanted to reach over and run my hand up her thigh, but the subtle touches earlier that day combined with the kiss the night before were probably more than enough.

She knew how I felt about it. The question I'd posed was a serious one. What was I willing to do about all of it? Moving to Seattle seemed the right answer in so many ways, but being away from Damon, and Dad, from Sophie and Bethany? That sounded like hell. All I would have is Erica.

She was more than enough, and yet if things didn't work out between us, I would have to pick up and move back to Dallas. Something about admitting that failure left me not wanting to jump too quickly. I could feign that the move was more about working closer to Jonathan or being a part of the advertising division of M&B, but I would know the truth. I'd moved to see what could be with her. Was love worth all of that?

"Are you even listening to me?" She reached over and poked me in the side.

I gripped her hand and tugged a little before releasing her. "Yeah, I'm listening. I just keep trying to figure out what I'm going to do about this position you keep subtly throwing my way. I wanna be a part of what my father and Damon are

building, but wearing a suit and trying to keep up pretenses in a large office building downtown sounds like hell on earth.”

“It’s not that bad, and honestly you wouldn’t have to wear a suit unless we were meeting with investors.” She brushed her fingers by her lips and let out a soft feminine sound. “You know what? I bet we could even talk to your father about letting you work remotely. We could get you a killer apartment downtown by the art district, and you could work on your M&B projects there.”

“Hmm... that doesn’t sound bad, but I hate the thought of getting special treatment because of who my dad is.”

“Right, but you can’t have it both ways. People are going to know who you are no matter what. At least your special treatment makes sense. I mean, take the situation with Bethany for instance. She’s totally getting special treatment, but no one is going to say shit about it.”

“No one knows that she’s Kent’s daughter but a select few.”

“Oh.” She glanced my way. “Is that because of her and Damon’s relationship?”

“Exactly. It’s too complicated for any of them to deal with. It’s easier for everyone to simply think that my dad married a pretty younger woman and that’s all they get. Bethany hasn’t been connected to that relationship, nor will she. We rarely do anything with the company and the family that would connect her.” I shrugged, trying not to let my thoughts move back to my brother and all of his troubles. I loved him too much to think on it too long or I’d start working through the list of fixes that might work. He’d never listen to me anyway. He was too pigheaded.

When he and Bethany decided to start putting the other first in the relationship, everything would change. It was a lack of communication and a touch of selfishness on both of their parts. They were the main reason why getting into a relationship seemed a bad idea altogether.

“Very interesting.” She parked the car and turned the engine off, but didn’t get out. “Is it horrible that I’d rather be anywhere but here?”

“No. I felt the same way when I used to visit my mother’s grave. I loved her with all my heart, but the way she destroyed Damon and never had to reap any of the pain that she bore him still leaves me sick. I’d force myself to go out to her grave with fresh flowers and sit there almost like I was in penance. It was disturbing.”

“Do you still do it?” She reached for the door handle.

The innocence in her voice caused something inside of me to crack open.

“No. I decided that sitting beside a headstone and talking to the air with falsity and lies was a little much. I just make sure to lift a shot of vodka to her from time to time now. She loved that shit.”

Erica laughed and got out of the car. I followed her and met up with her at the front of the car, unable to take my eyes off of her.

“Will you at least consider coming up here to work at M&B with me?” She sucked her bottom lip into her mouth and studied my face like she might have the power to change my mind if I said no.

“Yeah. I’ll consider it. We can talk more about it this weekend. I need to understand what you have in mind. I’ve honestly not been paying much attention every time someone brings it up, but that’s because everyone keeps shoving it in my face.” I shrugged and tried hard not to get defensive. “I’ll hear you out and really think it through when I get home next week. I love it up here, and it makes sense for me to be closer to Jonathan with the way things are going with my art. I’m just not sure of the time commitment I can make to M&B. I want other things in life outside of success and money. I’m not the typical billionaire.”

“Agreed, but I like you just the way you are.” She slipped her arm into mine and pulled me toward the retirement home.

“Remember, you’re my main squeeze.”

“Can we sneak kisses in front of your mom?” I opened the door and smiled as she giggled. It was a feminine sound and drove a stake of desire through me.

“You’re corrupt. Don’t be touchy feely please. My mom was a lawyer in her past life. She’s intensely pragmatic.”

“Lovely.” I rolled my eyes and moved into the narrow hall behind her. There were a few things I could deny about wanting to be in Seattle for, but she wasn’t one of them. Should she question me about wanting to be closer to her, and I’d have to confess. I’d started to fall for the bossy woman in front of me two years ago when she came to work for my father. I’d just been forcing myself not to think about it, and when that didn’t work, I turned her into the type of woman that I wouldn’t want in my life. Lies. All lies.

I stopped behind Erica and slipped my hands into my pockets to keep from reaching out to touch her again.

She glanced back at me with an uneasy expression. “Thanks again for coming with me.”

“Of course.” I followed her into the apartment-like place. An older woman with a perfect blond bob haircut glanced up from reading a Time magazine and nodded at me and Erica.

“Is your brother out of town?” The woman’s tone was flat and filled with condemnation. I ached for Erica without having to hear more than her mother’s greeting. My father had been nothing but overly loving my whole life. I wasn’t sure I would know how to deal with one of my parents not wanting anything to do with me, or wanting me to be something different than I was.

“Yes, Mom. This is my boyfriend, Matthew.” She moved to the side as I walked up and extended my hand to the older woman.

She shook my hand, but didn’t address me. “Why do you wear skirts like that? They make you look frumpy. You have a handsome young man’s attention now. Don’t fuck it up.”



I jolted at the older woman's comment. With the way she looked, she was the last person I expected a curse word to slip out of.

"Right. Thanks Mom. I heard you're going to be moving to another room today. Is that right?" Erica sat down and moved closer to her mother. The older woman stiffened and glared at Erica like she was trying to take her purse.

"I'm going to make a call. I'll be right back." I leaned down and kissed the side of Erica's face. I hated to leave her, but there was no damn way I was going to be able to sit in the room with her mom treating her so badly. I was about to start verbally swinging if Erica didn't take up for herself, but I knew without a doubt that she wouldn't disrespect her mother. The slight rounding of her shoulders told me that she was defeated before anything really happened.

I walked out of the room and let out a soft exhale before pulling my phone out of my pocket. I had a text sitting on my phone from Sophie from the night before. Seeing that I wasn't in the business of lying to people I cared about, I called my old friend back and walked out into the sunny fall afternoon.

"There you are. I thought maybe the she-devil ate you."

I laughed. "She's not a she-devil. She's a hot woman with a big heart and a strong sense of who she wants to be. She scares me because I can't seem to catch my breath around her."

"Nice. I want that, but can we have it be with a really hot rich guy?"

"Yeah, your Dubai prince." I smiled and found a bench to sit on that was perfectly positioned for maximum exposure to the sun.

"Try again. I'm not that lucky."

"What did you need last night? Everything okay at home?"

"Oh yeah. It's great. I just wanted to check on you. I know you were worried about everyone shoving decisions down your throat. Just wanted to remind you that you're your own

man. Make the decisions that you think right now would make you the happiest.”

“I like that. I think if I had to decide right now, I would choose to move up here and give Erica a try. I like the city as well. I hate the idea of being away from you guys though.”

“That’s what planes are for. You know I’m about to start traveling next year, so don’t let me hold you up. Just remember that even though you’ve been thinking about this chick for a while that the relationship is basically new. It’s in its infancy. Take things slow.”

“So no blistering hot sex tonight?”

“Oh that would be fucking awesome. Score that if you get a chance. I would.”

I rolled my eyes. “You could have any man in Dallas. Silly woman.”

“I’m saving myself for a prince, remember?”

“I knew it!” I glanced up as the door to the retirement home slung open. Erica walked out with tears rolling down her cheeks. “I gotta go.”

I dropped the call and put my phone into my pocket as I moved toward her.

“What happened? You okay?” I gripped her shoulders softly before pulling her toward me into a tight hug. She let out a soft sob and buried her face against my chest. It was the only time I’d ever seen the great Erica Hall show pain.

“I hate her. She makes me feel like I’m not even there. Like I don’t matter.” She pulled back from me and wiped at her eyes. “I’m sorry. I just feel so stupid for bringing you here. This is the last thing I would want anyone to see. Especially you.”

“I’m sorry she is how she is. Let’s get out of here and get something to eat. I want to talk to you about something anyway. We could spend a little time on a different subject that might make you feel better, and then we’ll grab a nap before

the concert. We are still going to rock it out with Blink-182 tonight, right?”

She nodded and forced a smile. “Yeah. Let’s get out of here.”

I wrapped my arm around her shoulders and kissed the top of her head as we walked toward the car. She handed me the keys and as silly as it was, the simple act of letting me drive was proof that she didn’t want to lead in a relationship the whole time. Maybe she was just waiting on the right man to take the reins.

Was that me? It sure as hell felt like it.

# CHAPTER 12



## ERICA

“I love this place.” I picked up my menu and tried to push down the feeling of unworthiness I always left my mother’s house feeling. It didn’t matter if I was five or twenty-nine. I still had the uncanny sense that she looked at me like I was one of the greatest mistakes of her life. My father had always gone out of his way to remind me that I was loved and a princess in his eyes, but my mom stripped that warmth away any and every chance she got. I was never enough.

“The menu looks great. What are you thinking about getting?”

Matt’s deep blue eyes moved from the menu to my face and the depth in them caught me off-guard. He’d been so good to me over the last day or so, but seeing a different side of him didn’t help my desire to push him to stay in Seattle with me. There had to be something bigger or better than me that would convince him that he needed to move. If I wasn’t enough for my own mother, then I certainly wouldn’t be enough for a complete stranger.

“I like the hummus and their pizzas are killer.”

“Good. Let’s get the hummus for an appetizer and share a pizza or two.”

“Two?” I laughed and laid my menu on the table. “I’m good with whatever you want. What did you want to talk with me about?”

“Let’s do the pepperoni and mushroom and then the curry pizza. That sounds weird as hell. We’ll probably love it.” He

leaned back in his chair and picked up the beer the waitress dropped off a few moments before, but didn't take a drink. "I know this might sound trite, but I really want to have one more piece ready for the showing that Jonathan is working on for De Luge."

"Why would that sound trite? It seems like a great idea to add something that you specifically did just for the showing." I picked up my glass of white wine and took a quick sip. "What were you thinking of doing?"

"I want a piece that shows beauty, strength and sensuality."

"Mmm... I like that a lot. It reminds me of my red painting in the hall." I smiled, having a newfound excitement over the possibility of getting back to my own art. If I got nothing more than an awakening inside me from Matt's visit, it might just be enough.

"Exactly." He lifted the beer bottle to his lips and took a long drink. "You should paint out your pain from your visits to see your mom. That's the only way you're going to survive that shit."

I nodded and let my eyes move down to my hands as I began to pick at my nails. "It's always been this way. It's nothing new."

He reached across the table and gripped the top of my hands. "That doesn't make it right."

"I know, but she's getting older. I'm not going to turn my back on her now when she needs me most. My brother, who she worships, never visits her anymore. We both know that he isn't out of town, and yet she keeps on pushing me away." I shrugged. "I really don't want to talk about this."

"I know you don't. We can move to another subject, but I want you to consider going by the nearest art supply store and loading up on paints and canvases. Open your mind back up to the possibility of bleeding out your heart in the best way you know how. Tears aren't you."

I took a shaky breath and glanced up. "You're right. I'll give it some consideration. Tell me what you're thinking about

painting for your additional piece.”

“You.”

“I’m sorry?” I pulled my hands from his and leaned back in my seat, confused.

“I want to paint you.” He shrugged. “You can pick something you enjoy wearing, or even better, let me see what you have in your closet and I’ll pick it for you. I want the world to see what I see.”

A flurry of emotions beat through the center of my chest.

“And tell me... what do you see?” I crossed my arms across my midsection, not completely sure I was ready to hear his response. I wanted him to want me too much as it were. Suffering another blow after having my mom bend me over wasn’t a possibility.

“I see so many things.” He leaned forward and rested his forearms on the table. “I see strength and determination. You run your working world with an iron fist and keep people at arm’s length, don’t you?”

“Yes,” I whispered and reached for my wine, needing liquid courage to get through the rest of our lunch together.

“I see beauty beyond anything I’ve experienced anywhere else. The way your lips swell right here.” He leaned across the table and ran his fingertips across my bottom lip before sitting back down. “Your eyes are the color of the sky on a clear day at times and the cloudiness of a storm in the belly of the sea at others. Your skin is flawless and leaves me wanting to reach out and touch you like you belong to me.”

“Thank you.” I lifted my glass.

He reached across the table again and pushed the glass back down a little. “I see passion trapped behind your facade. You’re an artist and yet you don’t paint, you aren’t drawing and I would even stretch to say that you haven’t made love in a long time.”

“Is it that obvious?” I pulled my glass toward me and downed the contents. “I’ll think about letting you paint my

picture. You flatter me, but I've heard enough. Really."

He smiled and dropped his hands back into his lap. "Tell me any of it's wrong and I'll apologize for being a presumptuous prick."

"No, it's all spot on. I just hate you a little more for bringing it all up. It's a horrible reminder."

"No, you didn't hear me, Erica. People are going to stop by the painting of you and stand there, longing with this incredible desire to know you. To heal you. To love you." He picked up his beer and lifted it in the air. "To the best still-life painting I will ever create."

"I haven't said yes." I laughed as he shifted his beer bottle toward my glass. I couldn't deny him, though I hated myself for hitting my wine glass against his beer bottle. In effect, he won.

"But you will. You want to see what I see." He gave me a cocky smirk as the waitress walked up.

"Such a Bryant right now." I rolled my eyes and picked up my menu to order for us. The sad part was that he was right - about all of it.



"You still thinking about my offer?" Matt walked next to me from the parking lot up to the condo. Sleep tugged at me, and a nap sounded better than winning the lottery or falling in love. Funny how it was the simple things in life that pulled me in deep.

"No, I'm not thinking about it. I'll do it if you think it would help you with your showing."

He chuckled and followed me into the chilly house. "This isn't about me, Erica. It's about you."

"What about me?" I tossed my purse onto the table and turned to face him. "I don't want to see how you see me. What if it's ugly?"



“The painting or my vision of you?”

“Both?” I smiled and took a step closer to him. “You know I have feelings for you. It would hurt too much to see that you found me as commonplace as the next girl.”

“Right. Because that’s the woman I described at lunch, right?” He reached out and caressed the side of my face. “You wanna take a nap?”

“Yeah. I can take the couch though.” I cupped my hand over his and turned my face a little, pressing my lips against his palm.

“Let’s just lay down in the bedroom together. We don’t have to push things between us until we’re ready. I can keep my hands to myself.”

“It’s not you I’m worried about.” I kissed his hand one more time before pulling it from my face. “I’m good with us sharing the bed.”

“Let me see your closet first.”

“No. If you’re going to paint me, then do the pose in the nude. Show me the full picture.” I turned and walked to the bedroom. I was bold if anything, and having Matthew Bryant etch my pain and pleasure on a large canvas wasn’t going to change that. I was softening in front of him, which was scaring me, but I couldn’t seem to help myself. My protective walls were coming down when they should have been solidifying and bringing in reinforcements.

“You don’t mean that.” He stopped by the bed and kicked off his shoes as I sat down on the edge of the mattress and pulled off my sandals.

“Sure I do. I want to see what you see, but you’ve yet to see all of me.”

“I’m not sure I would survive it.”

I laughed and turned to crawl up the bed. He grabbed me and turned me over before pressing himself to the top of me and brushing my hair from my face.

“And if I can’t make it through the project without taking you to bed?” He brushed his nose by mine and nipped at my lips.

“Then take from me whatever you want. Just promise me that you’ll paint me as you see me and not as I am.” I reached up and pulled carefully at the back of his head, forcing him to press his lips to mine.

We groaned in tandem as I tilted my head and opened my mouth, coaxing his tongue to follow mine in an age old dance. He moved his hips just so, and I opened my legs, making room for him.

“I wish you would have worn the shorter skirt.” He smiled and kissed me a few more times before moving back and pulling my skirt up to the middle of my thighs. His fingers pulling at the back of my legs left me whimpering softly against the side of his neck.

“You seem to have taken care of the problem.” I slid my feet up the outsides of his legs and wrapped my legs tightly around his center.

“You have no clue how beautiful you are, woman.” He brushed his lips up the side of my neck and kissed my ear a few times. “I want so badly to feel you move against me, to hear you moan my name, to feel your body contract as you come for me.”

“Fuck,” I groaned loudly and undulated my hips, not quite sure I would make it through another playful make-out session with the handsome bastard.

“Tonight. After the concert. Promise me we can have one night together.” He moved back to hover above me and kissed my lips softly. “I need to let myself go and I trust you. I want to do that with you. Yeah?”

“Yeah. Please.” I pulled him back down and took my time exploring his mouth. The thick press of his arousal against my center left me aching and wet, but I didn’t push it any farther. The promise of having the whole night to explore each other

was more than enough to hold me back for a little while longer.

“You smell so fucking good.” He rolled off of me and growled loudly before reaching for me. “Come lay on me.”

I didn’t say a word, but crawled on top of him. He helped to position me with my back against his chest, which was odd, but being pressed to him anyway I could be was bliss.

He gripped the sides of my skirt and pulled it up over my stomach, leaving my lower half bared.

“I wanna touch you.” He kissed the side of my neck and brushed his fingers over my sex as I arched roughly and cried out. “It’s been too long, Erica.”

“Way too long.” I reached down and gripped his hand as a tremor ran through me. “Wait.”

“No.” He reached up with his free hand and forced me to turn my face toward him as he made love to my mouth. My moans were captured against his lips as he slipped his thick fingers under the thin scrap of my panties and sunk himself into me. “Work your body against mine.”

I cried out again as pleasure swelled deep inside of me. Being with him was almost too much.

“So beautiful.” He pumped his fingers in and out of my wetness as I let my knees drop to the side and rolled my hips in rhythm to him fucking me.

It took no more than a few minutes and I groaned his name, lifting off of him and letting the world explode around me in brilliant colors.

Colors I’d almost forgotten existed.

# CHAPTER 13



## MATT

“**Y**ou ready to go?” I turned from the kitchen sink with a glass of water in my hand, the desire to lick my fingers clean raging through me. I knew she wouldn’t appreciate it, or maybe I was being a prick about wanting her to think of me as more of a gentleman than I was. Sex was the ultimate expression of passion and I’d denied myself too long.

The sound of her moans accompanied with her writhing on top of me as her body clenched around my fingers had me coming alongside her the second time I brought her over the edge. I wasn’t sure she realized the power she had over me, or maybe she was simply being careful not to use it. Either way, I wanted more. So much more.

I took a long drink and watched her with the remnant of desire that still danced around my stomach. I wasn’t sure it was going to dissipate with her anywhere near me. It was a waste of energy to try and force myself into a calm. My fantasies were within reach. So close.

“Absolutely.” She licked at her lips subtly and walked to the refrigerator, pulling out a bottle of water and holding it out to me. “You want one of these tonight?”

“Nope. I’m drinking a few more beers while we’re there.” I extended my hand. “Give me the keys and I’ll drive us up there. If I’m too shit-faced to get us home, you make sure we get here. Deal?”

“Deal.” She walked to the front door and tossed the keys over her shoulder.

My eyes moved down to study the sexy curve of her ass in her jeans. The tight white shirt she wore hit just above her waistband and left a little tease of her creamy flesh on display. I couldn't help but run my fingers by it as I moved past her.

"I'm so fucking excited. How did you score these tickets?" I got into my side of her car and buckled up.

"One of my staff had extra tickets. Lewis Marshall. He's a great guy actually. He's a graphic designer and just moved over from the Caribbean. He has a killer accent and sees everything as a new adventure."

"Sounds like my kinda guy." I started the car and reached over to rest my hand on her thigh as I pulled out. "How much did you have to pay for the tickets? I'll pay you back."

"No way. I got them for free. Lewis wouldn't let me pay for them either, but I should probably slip him something. They're on the front row from what I could tell."

"What? No fucking way. Give them here and let me see." I took them from her and glanced down. "Wow. They totally are."

"Why are you so excited? Your dad makes more money than God. You've never sat in the front row of a rock concert?" Her smile was genuine.

"No, I don't take money from my dad other than what he pays in my rent and grocery bill. I've tried hard to sell a few of my paintings over the years and just live frugal. He and Damon make shit tons of money, but I just barely get by. They'd both pump money into my account left and right, but I'm not about that. I hate that my father still pays my rent. This year things are changing though. Or really next year." I shrugged. "I want to spend Christmas at home this year, and then if I'm going to make the move up here, it will be in January."

"I like that." She nodded and turned back to face the front of the car. "I won't push you anymore. I know it's a hard decision and it's not just about one thing, but many."

“I appreciate that. Tell me a little bit more about the opening that you have in your department.”

“We’re always looking for designers. You could work in several different areas, but I think being part of the idea tank would be good for you. We meet twice a week for a couple of hours and work through the upcoming projects for the company. Once we determine where we want to go with our marketing and advertising in those areas, one of the designers in the room takes the idea and sketches it. I think you’d like that. It’s pure art at that point.”

“And after that point?” I turned the radio down so I could focus solely on her.

“Another team will take it and put it into a graphic design program where we can manipulate it. That’s the hardest part, I think. Taking your art and handing it over to someone else to beat it up and change it. You really don’t get a say in the final project, but I don’t either. Your father has final approval, but he’s got quite an eye for artistic design. Everything we’ve worked on thus far has been relatively painless.”

“He’s a great guy. I like the idea of taking a concept and turning it into a design. How many days a week are we talking?”

“As many as you want. I’m sure we could work out something specifically for you and your desires with Kent. It’s all up to you really.”

“All right. That helps.” I turned onto the freeway and rolled down the windows. “No more serious shit tonight. Just me and you having fun. You down?”

“Hell yes.” She rolled down her window and moved up to her knees, leaving me smiling harder than I had in a long time.

She was the girl for me. I had no doubt.



“I got you a hot dog. That all right?” I handed her one of the three hot dogs I had in my hands as the crowd jumped up and

down around us.

“Absolutely.” She bounced on the balls of her feet a few more times before stopping and panting softly.

“I like that bouncing thing.” I glanced down at her breasts as she swatted at me.

“Where is the shy guy I fell for two years ago?” She took the hot dog and took a huge bite of it.

I reached out and wiped the ketchup off the side of her lip before licking it off my fingers.

“You’ve had a crush on me for two years? Why didn’t you say something? I could have been taking advantage of your weakness for me a long time ago.”

She laughed and pushed her shoulder against mine before turning back to the stage and hopping up and down.

I leaned down and picked up my beer, draining half of it as thunder cracked against the sky. A storm was headed our way, and with the roof open and the band singing their guts out, it was perfect. The heavens would open up soon, and I couldn’t help but wonder if Erica would be willing to dance in the rain with me. Something told me she would enjoy it as much as I would.

I downed my hot dogs and finished my beer by the time she dropped down in the seat next to me, covered in sweat.

“I like you like this.” I reached over and gripped the back of her head before pulling her in tightly and kissing her several times in succinct fashion.

“I like you however you come.” She glanced up at the sky and blinked a few times. “It’s going to start storming soon.”

“Good. I can’t wait to see what color your bra is under that pretty shirt you got on.” I chuckled and released her as she gave me a shocked look.

“You’re not at all the guy I thought you were.” She turned and slid her hands up my chest. “Or maybe you’re exactly who I expected to encounter when you let your guard down.”



“I’m still me.” I cupped her face as big fat rain drops fell from the sky. “I’m just another part of him.”

“I like it.” She lifted up on her toes as I moved down to meet her. The kiss was deep and so fucking right. It left my insides in knots, my body tight and cock rock hard.

“You sure, Erica?” I kissed her again. “I’ve been holding myself back for so damn long.”

She ran her fingers down my cheeks and brushed her nose by mine before licking at my lips. “Get me out of here. I’ve been waiting for this night for two years. I’m sick of pretending I’m not tripping over myself to have you above me.”

“Yeah.” I kissed her a few more times and slid my hands over her hips to grip the top of her perfect little ass. “Let’s go.”

She pulled from me and reached back. I took her hand and let her lead us to the edge of the crowd before moving out in front of her and pushing through the larger group of people still enjoying the concert. She tucked herself against my back and everything fell into place. I wasn’t a follower. I just needed the right woman behind me to remind me that I was the leader I was born to be. My path just might look a little different than most.

*Stop getting ahead of yourself. This isn’t a fucking Disney movie.*

Doubt raped my insides as I turned and walked through the parking lot with her jogging beside me to keep up. I wanted to stay in the moment, but the same demons that reared their ugly ass heads to beat me down seemed to show up at the worst possible time.

I helped her get into the car and made my way over to my side of the car.

“Just be yourself tonight. She’ll love you or hate you in the morning. Any way you look at it, you were true to form.” I got in the car and glanced over at her. “Tonight was fun.”

“Tonight just started.” She worked her hair into a messy bun as I pulled out of the parking lot and tried not to react as

she leaned over the console and brushed her cheek by my erection.

“Shit,” I mumbled and brushed her hair back as she worked on my zipper.

“I want you.” She glanced up as if asking my permission.

“Have me.” I unbuckled my seatbelt and helped her work my jeans over my hips. My cock popped out of my briefs as she tugged them down, the bastard thick and happy to be free.

“So hot,” she murmured and ran her tongue up my length.

“Stop talking and see how much of it you can get inside of you.” I gripped her hair tightly and moved her over to take me in. The aggressive bastard inside of me woke up, and I lifted my hips as she moved her soft lips down my shaft.

Her groan caused my balls to tighten, and I pulled at her hair, forcing her back up before setting up a rhythm that would have me crying uncle sooner than I wanted to. She used her hands, her lips, and warm, wet tongue to bring me to the edge before moving back and pinching the tip of my dick.

“Not yet,” she barked at me and glanced up, giving me a warning look.

It would seem that I wasn't the only one hiding a part of myself. I bit my lips and nodded as I tried to get my body to comply with her demands.

She moved back to hover over the top of me and let hell reign down on me as I groaned and thrust as hard as I could. She didn't seem to mind at all.

“Drink it, Erica,” I groaned as I threw the car in park on the side of the road and glanced down to watch her finish the job.

The cry that left me filled up the car as I exploded. She didn't stop her assault until I pulled at her hair and let out a shaky sigh.

“Enough, baby. That's enough.”

“More.” She swatted my hands away and went back down on me.

I nodded and let my head drop back as every cell in my body illuminated with pleasure. My words were barely legible to my own ears as I whispered roughly.

“Whatever you want. Take it. Take it from me.”

# CHAPTER 14



## ERICA

We barely made it inside the door to my condo before he pulled my shirt off. I'd never experienced passion like that before. I'd only been with Tanner, but we'd had some fantastic romps in the sheets. Fear blazed through me that I wouldn't be enough, but the feel of Matt's hands tearing at my clothes and the wetness of his tongue against my neck and the tops of my breasts decimated any thoughts from my mind. Carnality took over and I dove in headfirst.

"God, I need you," he groaned against my throat as he ground into me. I pushed off the wall he had me pressed against and broke away from him.

"Come with me into the bedroom." My walk turned into a jog as he jogged after me. I moaned loudly as he crashed into me and lifted me off my feet, tackling me to the sheets and turning me over roughly.

"My turn to taste you, you naughty bitch." He pulled at my jeans, tugging them over my hips without undoing them.

"Only for you," I mumbled and worked to help him get me free from my pants. I started to work on my panties, but he grasped my hands tightly and glanced up.

"No. You're mine to unwrap. Lay there and do what I tell you to do." He lifted up and kissed me hard, forcing his tongue into my mouth and pressing his strong body against mine. This was the guy he'd kept locked up. Excitement tore through me.

"And if I don't?" I lifted my leg and brushed my knee beside his face as he moved down to hover above my mound.

“I would offer to spank you, but something tells me you might beg for that.” He smiled up at me before leaning down and running his tongue over the front of my panties. “You want me down here?”

“Fuck yes. Don’t stop until you have your fill.” I figured I’d better fight fire with fire.

“I won’t.” He jerked my panties to the side and laid waste to what I imagined to be the perfect orgasm. His tongue and fingers played me like a well-worn fiddle and I found myself twitching and whimpering like a needy whore within minutes. He trapped my legs beneath his strong shoulders and brought me over the edge three times before I could force him off of me.

I rolled onto my stomach and panted loudly as stars danced behind my closed eyes. Never in a million years had I expected pleasure to be so intense, so demanding of me.

“I’ve got a pack of condoms in my bag. Wait here.” He gripped my ass with both hands and leaned down to lick at me a few more times from behind.

I moaned and pressed back against him, finding myself addicted to the pleasure he could provide. It scared me how fast he’d learned the movements that made me purr like a kitten.

There was nothing left to do but enjoy the ecstasy of the moment. I slid my hands along my cold sheets and pressed my face to the comfort they offered, but kept my ass in the air. The alpha male that had taken over my creative billionaire was worthy of my worship and would probably shock the world if they ever got the chance to see him, but they wouldn’t. He would never allow that.

That I had was saying a lot. Too much maybe.

“God, you’re beautiful, woman. Did you know that?” He moved up on the bed behind me.

“Why did you bring condoms to Seattle?” I moved up to my hands and knees and pressed back as he rubbed his erection against me.

“Because I knew there was a slim chance that I was going to let myself go with you.”

“Did you just bring them for me?” I didn’t want to ask because honestly I didn’t want the answer to be anything that would shut the night down.

“You know I care about you, right?” He moved over the top of me and pressed his fists into the bed beside mine as he pressed the head of his cock inside of me.

A guttural sound ripped from my chest as I pressed back on him. I needed everything he was going to give me. It had been so damn long since I’d let myself be handled by a man. Every part of me screamed for a long night of drowning in his tight grip, his dark scent, his demanding tone.

“I know you do.” I let my head drop as he kissed the top of my neck and whispered so softly that I almost didn’t hear him.

“Good. Remember that while I fuck you like I don’t.” He moved up to his knees and gripped my hips as I pushed back, taking another inch inside of me.

“More,” I moaned, growing impatient.

“All you can handle, Erica.” He thrust one good time and bumped his hips against my ass hard.

The sound of us enjoying the deep penetration left me shaking. He was my mate. Whether he chose to run from it or dive in deep with me would be the question, but whether we belonged together wasn’t even a thought at that point. I knew we did.

“Grip the sheets.” He ran his strong hands up my back and tightened his hold on my shoulder with one hand as the other slipped into my hair and pulled back, forcing me to arch my back. “There you go. Just hold that position and enjoy what I’m about to do to you.”

I bit my lip to keep another whimper inside, but the minute he started to open me up with his hard thrusts and tight grip, I let myself go, making all the sounds that accompany that type of sex.

Sweat dripped down the side of my neck as he leaned over and pressed his chest to my back as he continued to work me deep and slow. Pressure built up inside my stomach until I screamed his name and rocked back against his cock, taking my orgasm to a new height.

“I’m gonna join you.” He licked the side of my neck and kissed my ear as he trapped my head in his hands and moaned his orgasm into my ear, never once relenting or being shy about it. His aggression was beautiful, his passion blistering hot.

The night would be etched across my soul for as long as I drew breath. I just prayed like hell that it wouldn’t be the last time I’d feel him pressed to the top of me.



“You want a glass of water?” I kissed his chest one more time as I lay tucked against his side. We were still trying to catch our breath from the long love-making session that started back at the concert.

“I’d love one.” He brushed his fingers by my shoulder and pulled me down for another long kiss. “You want me to get it for us?”

“No, I’m good.” I got up and walked to the kitchen naked and feeling far more free than I had in a long time. My body ached already, the delicious warmth of where he’d been a quick reminder that I wanted him there again as many times as I could handle until he got back on the plane.

*It can’t just be about lust. It’s not lust for you. It’s love.*

But would he understand that? I would look like a stalker if I told him just how deep my feelings ran for him. I got us a big glass of ice water and walked languidly back toward the bedroom. The sound of his breathing caused my heart to flutter in my chest. Matthew Bryant was in my bed, naked and sweaty because of me.



I had no doubt that he would hurt me far more than Tanner ever could, but there was no running from him. I'd been waiting too long for the possibility that he might take his fucking blinders off and see me. Really see me.

"Thank you." He sat up and took the glass of water from me, downing it in a few large gulps. He growled and dropped back in the bed as I took the glass and set it on the nightstand.

"Did you like the concert? The part we got to see?" I crawled up beside him and snuggled in next to him as he wrapped his strong arms around me and forced me on my side. He moved up behind me and tucked his large body against mine, his erection seemingly harder than it was when we started that night.

"Loved it. The band still has their shit together." He kissed my upper back. "Sorry I pulled you out of there early, but it was worth it. I've wanted to have you in my bed for as long as I've known you."

I chuckled. "Hopefully my bed will do this time. Maybe when I come visit you in Dallas we break your bed in."

"I'd like that a lot." He squeezed me tightly and released as he let out a long sigh. "You still up for letting me paint a picture of you? I think the caveat was that I do it when you're nude because I hadn't seen you naked before. I have now. Am I still going to get the pleasure of staring at you for hours on end with nothing blocking my view?"

I could feel him smile against my back and couldn't help but smile with him.

"I want you to capture the picture however you want it. I'm happy wearing something you choose or I'll pose nude for you. I have no doubt that you'll make the piece everything it should be."

"I will. I promise." He nestled my neck and slid his hand down my side. "I want you again tonight, but I'm so damn tired. I know you have to be too."

"I am, but I hate the idea of wasting my time with you." I yawned and rolled my hips, massaging his erection with my

ass slowly.

“Mmmmm... you’re going to get me going again, Erica.”

“And that’s a bad thing?” I turned my head to look over my shoulder as he moved up and pressed his lips to mine.

“Not at all. Come up here and ride me. I wanna watch you enjoy yourself.” He moved back and reached over to grab another condom.

I crawled on top of him and pressed my hands to his chest as I arched my back and welcomed him back inside of my body.

He gripped my hips tightly and closed his eyes as his chin lifted toward the ceiling. Moonlight danced across the beautiful expanse of his chest and all thought left my mind. All I wanted was to bring him pleasure.

“Tell me what you want from me,” I whispered as I leaned down and pressed my breasts to his chest.

“For you to fuck me.” He gripped my thighs and lifted his hips. “Hard and fast.”

“Be careful of what you wish for.” I reached up and gripped the headboard tightly before glancing down at him through my extended arms.

“I know exactly what I’m asking for and I want every ounce of it. Don’t relent no matter what.” He lifted up and sucked my nipple deep into his mouth as I bucked my hips and worked him just the way he’d requested.

He met me stroke for stroke and took time to kiss and lick each of my breasts before rolling us and pressing himself deeper inside of me.

“You feel so damn good. Like you were made for me.” He pressed his mouth to the side of my neck and slipped his hands between me and the bed to grip my ass tightly. His assault was delicious and left my body opening up to him in ways I didn’t think possible. He lifted up and rolled his sexy hips, working me over the edge once more before he joined me. He collapsed on top of me and wrapped me in a tight hug that I wished

would never end before whispering words I'd give anything to make come true.

“Marry me?” He laughed before moving up to kiss me and steal my breath for the final time that night.

# CHAPTER 15



## MATT

She was more than I ever imagined possible, and making love to her had to be one of the biggest highs of my life, but laying there afterward let worry set in. Was I too rough? Too aggressive? Would she think I was a cock for pushing her around and treating her like an object?

Had I treated her like an object? The thought caused my stomach to turn.

I turned to glance at the clock after laying there for what felt like forever. 3 a.m.

The sexy curves of her body just under the sheet called to me as she lay on her side, her breathing deep and peaceful. So much of me wanted to snuggle into the back of her and tell her that I was in love with her, but it was selfish. She wanted something in life that I doubted I could give her.

I hadn't done much with myself and at twenty-eight I was without a job, a defined future or a paycheck. I was still sucking off my father even though I'd made the decision after college to cut ties with his bankroll.

My pulse spiked as indecision ran through me and I bordered a panic attack just lying there. It was stupid, but with nothing to offer the beautiful woman beside me and her seemingly wanting everything in a man that I should have been, my flight syndrome kicked in.

*Run. Just get up, get dressed and get the fuck outta here. You can tell her something came up with Damon or Dad. They'll cover for you. They always do.*

No. I couldn't sneak out in the middle of the night, though everything inside of me was chanting for me to. I sat up and ran my fingers through my hair before getting out of the bed. After pushing through the various pieces of clothes on the floor for a few minutes, I found my underwear. I just needed some air. Erica didn't expect me to be Damon. If she wanted Damon, she'd fucking have him.

Or maybe she didn't because he didn't want her.

By the time I stepped out on the small balcony of her condo, I'd convinced myself that my brother was in love with my girl.

I put the phone to my ear and started to pace the six-foot concrete pad below me.

"Matt? What the fuck? You all right?" Damon's voice was thick with sleep.

"Are you in love with Erica?" I rolled my eyes as it came out of my mouth. What the hell was wrong with me?

"What? Are you drunk? Where the fuck are you?" I could hear him shuffling around.

"No. I'm in Seattle at Erica's place. I... I don't know. I just..." I closed my eyes and pressed my hand to the front of my face. "You're not into her, right? Because the two of you would be so good together. You're the kind of guy she deserves."

"What the fuck are you going on about? It's three in the morning. What happened? Find somewhere to sit your crazy ass down and talk me through what got you to this point."

I nodded and sat down on the edge of the wooden chair she had tucked in the corner of the patio.

"I don't know. I like this woman so fucking much, but I have nothing to offer her. I keep pushing her away because she deserves so much more than I have." I let my eyes move across the darkness and tried to find my center. Maybe I'd been pushing everyone away so I wouldn't have to admit to myself that I wasn't enough. I didn't have shit to my name and I'd done nothing with my life. It was easier to pretend that

wasn't the case, but with Erica lying in the next room expecting something of me today, I was stuck.

“And you think she should be with me?” He snorted. “Erica and I are work associates, Matt. Nothing else. She's not at all my type of woman. Does she look like Bethany to you?”

“No.”

“Sound like her?”

“No.”

“Right. Because she's not her. Bethany is the only woman I want in my life, all right?”

“Then why do you keep fucking it up?” I was grateful for the momentary shift in the conversation. Focusing on Damon's fuck-ups were rare, but caused a delight in me like a kid might feel at Christmas.

“Stop diverting. I'm working on a plan to get her back, all right? I know I'm a dick, and where she loves that part of me, I've been insensitive lately. I'll figure it out.”

“Better hurry up. She's not going to wait around forever.”

He snorted. “Why do you think Erica expects you to be like me?”

“I don't know.” I stood back up and started to pace the floor again. “She has all her shit together. She's got a great job, a nice place and has made something out of herself.”

“And she's also working in a job that she's great at, but doesn't even come close to letting her live out her dreams.”

I bristled. “How do you know what her dreams are?”

“I don't, but I know yours, and she reminds me of you more often than you can imagine. If I were to guess, I would say her dreams were to create art and sell it. Am I wrong?”

“No, no, you're right.” I stopped pacing and gripped the railing of the patio. “I've been in love with her since I met her two years ago. I thought initially that maybe my feelings for her would push me forward to do something with my life, but I've been floundering.”

“No, you’ve been avoiding. You’re not floundering. You’re finally moving forward. You have spent so much time trying to stay under Dad’s radar that you’ve not had time to do anything else. He doesn’t want a cookie cutter of himself out of you, Matt. He wants you. He’s already got me to lead his company when he’s done and to give him shit on the golf course. He wants you to just be you, but stop trying to be something you’re not and fucking start living your life.”

“By getting a job?” I knew I was poking at the bear.

“Would you getting a job make you more of the man you are inside? Would that define you, like my job helps to define me?”

“Fuck no.”

“Then stop being stupid. Society says what you should do and you project that shit onto me and Dad as if we’re judging you. There’s only one person scrutinizing your shit and saying that you’re coming up empty.”

“Myself.” I hung my head in shame. Damon was spot on. He always was.

“Exactly. What happened with Erica?”

“I slept with her.”

“And? Was it everything you wanted it to be?”

“Yeah. It just tied me tighter to her, but I’m in the middle of one of those fight or flight moments. I usually tuck tail and run.”

“That doesn’t mean you’re not a man, Matt, or that you’re not strong and capable of making the right choice. It means that you’ve once again allowed yourself to fall into the trap of ‘not good enough,’ but you’re the sorry mother fucker who’s setting the standard, no one else. I’m pretty sure Erica would rather have you snuggled up in the bed with her than walking around her house looking for an exit. She’s not thinking about your 401K or your net worth, or how many companies you’re going to run in the future. She’s dreaming about the things all women dream about.”



“Love?” I sat back down as my heart softened and warmth filled me. I wasn’t ready to make a commitment just yet, but Damon was right. I was the bastard holding the gavel in the court room of my worth. No one else, though it was so much easier to project that shit onto someone else. It left me free to simply be.

“Yeah, but companionship, marriage, kids and growing old with someone who gets you, Matt. You *get* Erica. You’re both creatives. Can you imagine the life you could have together? That’s why Dad and I push her at you a little, and it’s why she’s all up in your grill when she visits us. She sees it. We see it. Why don’t you?”

“Can we talk about you and Bethany again?” I snorted and reclined back in the chair before letting out a long sigh and letting the tension slip out of my body. I was being irrational. Erica and I might have had feelings for each other for two years, but just because we finally relented and slept together didn’t mean that we had to head to the church when she woke up. Neither of us was in a hurry to push anything too fast, right?

“We can, but I’d rather not dive back into depression.” He let out a long sigh. “This place sucks without her here. Everything I eat tastes like shit, my job isn’t fun anymore and to be honest... I don’t wanna get up tomorrow morning and pretend that everything is good when it’s not.”

“Then fix it. You’re a smart guy. Fix it.”

“Yeah, it seems that way, but I don’t think an apology would do much good right now, and I keep thinking to myself that she and I are going to have to overcome so much to have a life together. Between her working for me, and her mom marrying Dad... that’s a lot, but I was so willing to do it.”

“You still are, Damon.”

“Yeah, but I’m not sure she is. I am who I am. I love sex, and I want that to be a huge part of our relationship. If she thinks I’m taking advantage of her by wanting her pressed against me every chance I get, then she’s not the woman for me.” He took a shaky breath as my heart ached in my chest for

him. "I don't know what to do. I can't change this part of me, nor am I willing to try. It's the way I show affection. It always has been."

"I get that." I brushed my fingers by my lips. "How did you win her over the first time?"

"Attraction. You know how it is when you first meet someone."

"No, not initially, but when she started to seriously move from lust to love with you. You know when that shit happens. Did you do something to show her that you weren't just a horny bastard with an attitude?"

He chuckled, but the sound fell flat. "Yeah. All that shit happened with her friends and I stood beside her quietly and gave her my strength and comfort."

"Good. Krista's trial is coming up. To have to testify in court when your best friend is up for attempted murder is a big damn deal. Be there for all of it and show her again the other side of you. She'll come back. I know she wants to."

"I hope so. I miss her like crazy."

"One more question and I'll let you go. Sorry for the crazy call."

"Anything you need from me, bro. You just need to ask."

"I was a little rough with Erica in the bedroom and you know that's not me outside of the bedroom. I don't want her to think I used her like an object or something."

"Women like strong men in the bedroom, Matt. You're the best of both worlds. Was she angry or upset during the sex?"

"No." I cleared my throat as desire raced through my center at the thought of how much she seemed to enjoy it. "No, she was good with it all from what I could tell."

"Right, and Erica is a great mix of docile and strong. She would have smacked you if you hurt her or left her feeling anything."

"And you know this because?" I bristled again.

“Because I’m a good judge of character. Stop being an idiot and get in there. Take things slow and try hard not to analyze everything in the light of your supposed failures. It’s getting old, and you’re the only one judging you. Get some sleep and call me later. Much later!”

I laughed and hung up the phone. I wanted to have something waiting for her to eat when she got up, and hoped like hell she’d let me spend some of the day working on my sketch of her for my art showing. It could be a relaxed fun day if I let it.

No quick decisions and no judging myself.

It sounded far easier than it felt.

# CHAPTER 16



## ERICA

Sunlight filtered into the room and pulled me from a restful sleep. I turned to reach for Matt and found him gone and his side of the bed cold. He'd been gone for a while.

Panic stabbed my insides as I jolted up.

"Matt?" I checked the clock and groaned. Getting up before six on a Sunday morning was a travesty I tried to avoid. It was one of the only days I let myself sleep in.

After pulling a robe over my shoulders, I walked down the hallway and tied the long silky belt to hold it together, noting that he was out on the patio or gone. I checked the patio and walked the short distance to the kitchen to find him gone. My heart dropped.

"He ran," I whispered and crossed my arms over my chest.

I had two choices. I could fall apart and deem myself unworthy of his attention, or I could swallow my emotions and pretend like a great night of sex was all I was after anyway.

I chose the latter of the two, though the tears in my eyes would call me a liar. A soft sigh left me as I walked back to the bedroom and crawled back into the cold sheets. The smell of his cologne lingered on the pillow next to mine, and damn it if I didn't lean over there and press my face to it.

My heart ached far more than I could remember feeling in the longest time, but it was a nice reminder that I was alive and that love was still very much something I wanted in my life. I'd almost convinced myself otherwise.

I flopped over onto my back and reached out to grab my phone. Lanie would be up no doubt. She was an early bird and usually had a hundred things done by the time the sun came up in the morning.

“Hey you. What the heck are you doing up?”

“Just woke up,” I mumbled and rolled onto my side. “Matt’s been here most of the weekend.”

“Matt Bryant? The guy you mentioned last week?”

“Yeah, but I should have mentioned him several times in the last two years. I think I slipped a few times and brought him up, but I’ve been holding back on talking about him.”

“That almost hurts me, but I know you well enough to know you have a good reason for not bringing him up. Spill. What’s the deal?”

“He’s just *that* guy. You know. The one you look at and think, ‘Damn... he’s living the life everyone wants to live. He’s free to make his own decisions and his passions are apparent because of the drive he has to create his art and do something with it.’ His smile warms up the room and his laugh fills me with this crazy sense of adventure... like I could do anything as long as he was there beside me. It’s stupid and I’ve been trying so hard to ignore it since we met.”

“Wow. I wanna meet this guy. Sounds like he’s the kind of friend all of us could use to have.”

“I’d say so, but I want more than a friendship.”

“Really? I’m a little shocked to hear you say that. I was honestly scared you’d given up on men entirely after the Tanner bullshit.”

“No, I just needed a break.”

“Four years is more than a break, Erica. It’s a sabbatical.”

“Agreed. Maybe I tucked part of myself away after Tanner left me. All that led to me wanting to protect myself, you know? I got the job at M&B and left my dreams in the dust. Because being an artist isn’t just about creating something beautiful that speaks to people. It’s about being smacked

around by their criticism too. It was all because I was afraid to fail. I mean, shit, if I can't keep a ten-year relationship together, what in the world *would* I be capable of?"

"That takes two people. Stop beating yourself up and tell me what's going on. Is Matt there with you?"

"No. He stayed the night last night because his hotel jacked things up, and we went to see Blink-182."

"Oh nice. Did you guys sleep together?"

"Yeah, and it was magnificent. He's this sweet, considerate, funny guy most of the time, but the things he did to me last night." I groaned and rolled onto my side.

"I'll need details next time we're together. My sex life sucks like crazy. Somehow I forgot to read the fine print on being a kindergarten teacher. Obviously I now live the life of a saint and get my kicks from the latest Elmo toys created instead of the possibility of a date."

"Oh man, Lanie. We gotta find you a guy, though that brings in the possibility of them hurting you. That part sucks, as I know you're well aware of."

"Did he hurt you?"

"No, but he's going to. I woke up this morning and he's gone. He's very right brained, so I keep telling myself that the artist in him needed to breathe." I let out a fake laugh and sat back up.

"What? Without a note or anything?"

"It would seem that way. He's not here."

"Is his shit still there?" Her tone was darkening. It almost made me feel loved to have her getting upset on my behalf.

"I don't know." I got up and flipped on the lamp beside my bed. Matt's suitcase sat in the corner. "Oh wow. His stuff is still here. Maybe he didn't run out."

"Maybe he's a romantic and ran out to get flowers and breakfast."

“Stop it. Don’t build up hope inside of me. He’s already far too perfect as it is.”

“I gotta run. We still on for yoga class and wine tonight?”

“Yep. I’ll call you later.” I hung up the phone and tossed it back on the bed. Matt’s portfolio sat on the floor beside the suitcase, and I couldn’t help but pick it up and carry it into the living room. I wanted to take my time and really take in all that he’d put together. Only the smaller pieces would have fit in the hard plastic contraption he had them in, but anything done by him interested me.

I dropped down to the floor in the living room and unzipped the container, being careful as I pulled out a good handful of paintings and transferred them to the coffee table. I moved through them slowly, each picture tugging at a different part of my heart. To say I was fearful over having him paint me would have been an understatement.

The painting of Damon that lay before me on the table stole my breath. I’d seen it before, but knowing the story behind it and actually having the time to study it filled me with the horror of what Damon must have felt that day. His whole world came toppling down. Had he ever said anything to his dad about catching his mom cheating? Was that a burden he still carried around with him?

I moved to the next picture and smiled. Bethany.

The intricate lines and brush strokes were perfect. She looked a little tired and her cheeks were sunk in, but maybe she’d gained weight and come back to life since Matt met her.

I reached out and brushed my fingers over the dark circles under her eyes.

“What’s your story?” I whispered and sat back on my heels. Matt hadn’t left me. Not that he wouldn’t leave soon to go back to Texas, but he hadn’t snuck out in the cover of darkness during the night. He thought more of me than that, or so I hoped.

I couldn’t help but reflect on my life as I stared at Bethany’s portrait. I wanted to be part of the world where she



might be my sister-in-law someday. Where my career could shift from being what I had to do to what I wanted to do. Where being in love with a good man was possible and enjoying the fruits of our combined passions was probable.

It was almost too much to dream about seeing that nothing in my life had gone as according to plan. I was working in a job that I enjoyed, but didn't love. I'd locked up my heart four years ago after college and hadn't even considered giving anyone else a try. I was going through the motions and had stopped following my dreams... but when did that happen? When did I decide to stop living and just survive?

The door opened across the living room and Matt walked in with a box of something and a bouquet of flowers.

"You're up." He smiled and set the box down as I stood to my feet and walked toward him.

*Do I hug him? Kiss him? Pat his chest? Ugh.*

"Yeah. I thought maybe you left during the night. You had about thirty more minutes before I called to hunt you down. Everything okay?" I took the flowers he handed to me and pressed my nose to them, breathing in deeply and smiling.

"Yeah. I just wanted to grab breakfast. The flowers are to say thank you for letting me stay with you this weekend. I hope I haven't imposed too much on you."

He was being considerate, but cool. Too cool. He was trying to figure me out as much as I was trying to figure him out. *And so the dance truly begins.*

"Not at all. What's in the box?" I moved into the kitchen and worked to get the flowers into a vase.

"Pastries. I wasn't sure what you like, but I figured everyone likes pastries, right?"

"Absolutely." I turned and picked up an apple tart from the box before moving toward him and giving him a quick hug. One of us had to bend. After the passionate night of bringing each other over the edge time and time again, we weren't going to shake hands and go our separate ways. We might have to take things slow, but there was no way I was going to

let awkwardness break down what we had started to build through our shared passion.

“What’s up for today? I can go find something to do if you have plans.” He took a big bite of his breakfast and gave me a goofy grin as my heart softened.

There was the guy I’d fallen in love with.

“I’m going to meet up with my best friend, Lanie, tonight for yoga and wine. You should come with me. You’d like her.”

“Oh yeah? Yoga? It’s been years since I’ve tried to put my legs behind my head.” He finished his breakfast and pointed to the other pastry in the box. “You want this one, or are you wanting me to take one for the team and scarf it down?”

“Such a martyr.” I laughed and walked back into the kitchen. “I’ll make us a pot of coffee and then we can walk down to the local fish market and pick something out for a late lunch. Sound like a deal?”

“Absolutely. Are you up for me drawing a rough sketch of you today and taking a few pictures?”

“I don’t mind at all. Can we do pictures with me wearing clothes though? I don’t need to worry about you sending out nudes of me because you get drunk with your frat brothers next weekend.”

He snorted. “Let’s have you in a sports bra and those sexy yoga pants you were wearing yesterday. That will give me a good enough view of you.”

“So you don’t remember what I look like nude?”

He ran his fingers through his hair as his eyes moved down my body. “Oh yeah. There’s no way in hell I could forget. I’m just looking for a good reason to see you again.”

“Typical male.” I turned my back to him and chuckled.

“You love it.” He moved past me and squeezed my butt.

“That I do.”

# CHAPTER 17



## MATT

“So this yoga thing... it’s not the one where I have to wear skin tight clothes and bend in half a million times, right?” I glanced over at Erica as we walked toward the harbor. The sound of people laughing and having a good time filled the air and helped to loosen some of the tension building in my chest.

*Keep it light and playful. Just be yourself.*

She laughed and glanced over at me. “You can wear anything you want to wear. It’s hot yoga, which means it’s super humid in there, but just drink tons of water and try hard not to piss yourself.”

“Very funny.” I turned my attention back to the water ahead, though pulling my eyes away from the beautiful woman beside me was difficult. Her long blue dress was feminine and made her look like a princess. I was starting to enjoy all the various parts of her personality, though the aggressive, needy girl in bed last night was certainly my favorite.

“What kind of fish are we looking for today? You like Salmon or Tuna?”

“Both are great. Let’s see what looks the best and we’ll get a pound to share.” She moved in front of me as we entered the fish market. The scent of the sea filled my senses.

“I wanna cook it for you though. Having the last few years to find myself, I’ve taken a liking to cooking. I’m quite the chef.” I wagged my eyebrows as she glanced back.

“I’ll take you up on that.” She stopped by a large counter of ice and pointed to a slab of salmon. “That looks great. Let’s do that?”

“Yeah.” I glanced up at the fishmonger and gave him a smile. “We’ll take a pound of that salmon right there, please, Sir.”

“You bet!” He pulled it off and started to prepare it for us as I turned to face her.

“I saw you went through my portfolio again. Find anything in particular that you liked?”

“I like all of it.” She put her hand in the middle of my chest and took a step closer to me. “I want you to know that last night doesn’t have to change anything. I’m good with you taking your time to figure out what you want. You have a lot of possible changes in your life. Don’t rush anything.”

I trapped her hand against my chest, not quite sure of what the message under her words was. Was she trying to tell me that she wasn’t interested in moving into a relationship together, or was she just sincere in her wanting to give me space to really think through all the various paths that I could take going forward?

“I appreciate that.” I wasn’t sure what else to say, and she backed away and turned to walk farther down the fish market. I watched her go and let my eyes linger on how beautiful she looked from behind. Lust burned through me, but that had always been there. It was the warmth of love I was looking for that I knew was there, but was almost too afraid to uncover it.

I’d get my shit together and figure out where I wanted to live and what career path I wanted to be on. Once I locked all of that down, I could come back and really offer her something. Diving into a relationship before then would just have me feeling like shit at all the things I couldn’t give her.

*Like what? Your bank account is bigger than most people’s lifetime savings.*

But it wasn’t mine. It was my dad’s money, and I was hoping to be off his payroll as soon as possible.

I took the fish and waded through the people until I found her standing at the edge of the water. Her long blond hair blew in the breeze, as did her dress. I should have wrapped my arms around her and kissed the side of her neck a few times, but I couldn't force myself to be too casual with her. It felt too raw, too right.

"Did you get it?" She smiled as she looked over toward me.

"I did. You ready to head back? We can get some work done on the new painting and then we'll go meet your friend and I'll make you guys laugh all night as I try to survive the torture I'm sure to endure."

She chuckled. "You're so dramatic. You're not an artist, are you?"

"I am, my dear." I wrapped my arm around her shoulders, unable to help myself from touching her. "That I am."

"What time are you leaving tomorrow?" She wrapped her arm around the back of my waist, and I couldn't deny how well she fit against my side.

"Probably after breakfast. I need to get back to my place and read through the agreement that Jonathan brought with him on Friday night. I know I signed it already, but I need to make sure I understand what all is going to be expected of me."

She squeezed my side. "Don't you think that would have been a good thing to do before you signed the paperwork?"

"Maybe." I gave her a cheeky grin and released her as we approached the condo. "Do you like living over here?"

"I love it, but if you're looking for a place, I would say a little more toward the art district would be a better fit for you. I live here because it's near the harbor and I can get downtown to work quickly if I need to."

"I might go look a little bit tomorrow, or maybe not. I'm not sure yet."

“See how you feel in the morning.” She opened the door to her place and I followed her in, trying not to let my mind slip back to the night before. I wanted another night in her bed, but it was probably best to sleep on the couch and make sure we were headed somewhere before giving her the false pretense that we were.

I’d been protecting myself for so damn long that I wasn’t sure how to stop. Even when it was to my detriment to do so.

“All right. Lunch and then I get to sketch you?” I wagged my eyebrows at her. “That almost sounds naughty.”

“I like it.” She set her purse down and reached for the fish. “I think we should do the sketch first and then we’ll have lunch later, unless you’re hungry? I’m still full from breakfast.”

“Yeah, that sounds better.” I walked to the living room and tucked away the rest of my paintings before pulling out my sketch pad and my pencils.

“Where do you want me?”

“Such a loaded question.” I moved to the couch and sat down as I smiled up at her. “I’d love to have you stand with your back to me, your hand on your hip and a look on your face that says you’re far more than a man could handle.”

She laughed. “Right, cause that’s me.”

“It’s the ‘you’ I see.” I licked at my lips and pulled one of my favorite sketching pencils from the pack. “We can take breaks for sure. I just need a couple of hours to get the raw sketch down.”

“And do you want me in the sports bra or nude?”

“You can actually wear what you have on for now because I’ll be working on your face first.” I grumbled softly to myself. “I should take my man card for not saying nude.”

She laughed again and the sound of it caused my heart to flutter. “All right. Take your pictures before you forget. I’ll stay in the dress and change when you want me to.”

“Awesome.” I set the pencil and pad down and got up. “Pose for me and let me put you in the perfect position.”

“Kinky.” She put her back to me and turned a little, giving me a smoldering look. “This good?”

“Fucking hot for sure.” I moved up behind her and repositioned her shoulders a little. “You look like a goddess.”

“You’re just being sweet.”

“Nope. Just telling it like I see it.” I ran my hands over her arms and positioned them like I envisioned before moving back. “Let me take a few shots and then we’ll take the dress off if you’re comfortable.”

“We spent the night together last night, Matt. Of course I’m comfortable with you.” She lifted her eyebrow and I growled softly and pulled out my phone.

“Keep that eyebrow up. That’s even more drawing.” I moved back as my cock stirred to life in my shorts. The woman was nothing less than perfection. Why she wanted anything to do with me was a complete mystery, but I’d take it.

“Like this?” She turned a little more, giving me a glimpse of the side curve of her heavy breast.

“Mmmhmmm... jeez. I couldn’t do this for a living if you were my model. I’d turn into a complete cave man.”

“You can’t keep making me laugh if you want this to turn out right.” Her shoulder shook with giggles as I smiled.

“I can’t help it. The sound of your laugh is something I’m quickly coming to enjoy.” I took a few shots of her on my camera phone and walked around to various angles, taking a few more. “All right. Strip for me, woman.”

She relaxed and rolled her eyes. “You’re so seductive.”

“Thanks. I try.” I reached out and brushed her hair back down as she pulled her dress over her head. The tiny white bra she wore barely covered her nipples, and the tiny triangle covering her mound was made of lace, leaving her exposed to me. “Wow. Damn.”



I moved back and let my eyes run across her as I tucked the camera into my pocket.

“You’re supposed to be taking pictures.” She turned and put her back to me again, glancing over and giving me a sexy look.

“I’m memorizing you, Erica.” I moved toward her and slipped one of my fingers under the top of her g-string panties before sliding my finger down to the bottom curve of her ass. “This is beautiful.”

“I’m glad you like it.” Her voice had grown soft, needy.

“I love it.” I leaned down and brushed my lips over the top of her shoulder. “Stop seducing me, you wanton thing.”

She chuckled. “Yeah right, because I’m the one that suggested that you get half naked and let me take your picture.”

“I think that was your suggestion, but it was you who would be undressing. Not me.” I kissed her neck and cupped her breast, not able to help myself. “I’m going to take a few shots and then I’ll sit down and put your beauty to paper.”

“Good. I’m getting turned on. Back up.”

“I like the thought of that more than I care to admit.” I pressed my teeth into her upper back and slid my hand down to cup her ass before pressing my erection against her. “God, you do something to me, woman.”

She bumped me with her butt and took a step forward. “Go sit down and let’s get this over with. I’m having trouble breathing.”

“Me too.” I moved away from her and adjusted myself. Why was I thinking about staying on the couch again? All of a sudden that seemed like the worst idea I could come up with. A beautiful woman that had effectively stolen my heart wanted my body again and I was going to deny her? Most likely not.

“Tell me if you want me to change anything.” She glanced over her shoulder and put her hand on her hip. The subtle

movement caused her ass to tense, and an arrow of lust bore deep into my lower half.

“Not. Don’t change a thing. Just stay still for me.” I took a few more pictures and dropped down to the couch to start working on the sketch. “Actually, turn just a little. I want more of your breast in the piece.”

She reached back and undid her bra, tossing it toward the front door and turned a little, giving me the perfect view.

“I’d rather you draw me just as I am than have to imagine it.” She glanced back at me, and the look in her eyes said she needed me to affirm her beauty, that she yearned for someone to remind her what a unique and stunning creature she was.

“I’ve been studying you for two years, Erica. After last night, I could paint every intimate detail of your beautiful body and you would weep at the depths you’d find in the picture.” I glanced up from my sketch pad and winked at her. “Relax and let me capture all that you see, and all that you don’t.”

# CHAPTER 18



## ERICA

“Matt, this is my best friend Lanie. Lanie, this is Matt.” I moved back as Matt and Lanie shook hands.

“I would say that Erica’s told me so much about you, but she’s rather private about everything.” Lanie glanced over at me and wagged her eyebrows. “He’s cute.”

“He’s right here.” I shook my head and moved to open the door to the yoga facility. “You brought your water, right?”

Matt nodded. “Yep. I brought yours too. You left it sitting in the kitchen.”

“Oh yeah. Jeez.” I walked in and moved to the back of the room as Matt moved up on my left and Lanie took her place on my right. The afternoon had been relaxing and yet incredibly titillating thanks to Matt getting up every few minutes to put his hands on me while I stood half naked in my living room, posing for him. I had to quickly get over the fear that he would find some part of me less than attractive. It was easy to do seeing that he spoke affirmation continuously.

“You ready for this?” Lanie leaned out and gave Matt a silly smile.

“Oh yeah. I could teach this thing.” He lifted his arms to the ceiling and leaned over to the left as his back popped. “Watch and learn how it’s done girls.”

I snorted. There was no way in hell he was going to make it through the whole hour without limping out of the room drenched in sweat.

And that's exactly how it happened. I'd never laughed so much in my life watching Matt try to reach the various poses the instructor called out to us.

His eyes were filled with mischief and his smile wide though I knew he was hurting.

"You're a total champ. You know that?" Lanie patted his back as she walked by us after the class ended.

"Thanks." He flinched and turned to face me. "You hate me. I get it. You could have simply said that you hated me and saved me from having to be violated by the downward dog."

I laughed loudly and moved toward him. "You're too much, Matthew Bryant."

He reached out and tucked a strand of my hair behind my ear. "You want me to let you have some time with Lanie and I'll see you back at the condo?"

"No, unless that's what you want. You might need a break from me. We spent two years avoiding each other and now we've been trapped together for a full weekend. You surviving okay?"

"Oh yeah. I'm a champ, remember?" He lifted his hands and grimaced again as a groan lifted from him. "Maybe a sore champ, but I'm still a winner, right?"

I shook my head and pointed to the locker rooms. "The men's room is over there. Get a quick shower and we'll meet you out front for a cool down and a drink."

"All right. If I'm not out in thirty minutes, come in after me, but make sure you're nude. It's a shower for heaven's sake. You'll get your clothes wet otherwise."

"You're corrupt." I turned and walked away as he mumbled something under his breath.

Lanie glanced up from pulling off her yoga pants and smiled. "If you don't want him... I do."

I laughed. "No way. He's my dream guy."

“I can see why. He’s so damn funny.” She pulled her top off. “You said he was good in bed too? It’s always so hard to find a guy that’s great outside of the bedroom and excellent in it. It’s like they’re a rare breed.”

“He’s incredible everywhere. I’m head over heels, which isn’t the best place to be.” I pulled my clothes off and dropped them in a sweaty pile on the floor before walking to the showers.

“Why’s that?”

“Because he needs to figure out where he wants to live and what he wants his career to look like. I’ve offered him a job with me in advertising at M&B, but I’m pretty sure he looks at that like putting a ball and chain around his leg.”

“What other options does he have?” She moved up to the shower head next to mine and turned it on.

“His father is a billionaire, so technically he doesn’t have to *do* anything, and he’s not really done much since college from what I understand, but he’s feeling that internal push to get up and get busy.”

“What’s he good at? We have some openings at the elementary school that I could check on for him.”

“He’s living in Dallas where M&B are headquartered right now, but I’m hoping he’ll move up here. He’s been offered a contract to showcase his art at Jonathan Luntz’s De Luge gallery.”

“Oh, I love that place. It’s the one where they serve the frozen grapes in your wine right?”

“Yeah. I love it too. Jonathan seems to be a really good guy too, but you never know with those art dealer guys. He could be blowing smoke up Matt’s ass. I hope he’s not that stupid, but we’ll see how it goes.”

“You hope who’s not that stupid?”

“Jonathan.” I reached for the shampoo and washed my hair quickly.

“When is the showing?”

“I’m not sure yet, but I’ll let you know. I would think Matt should be able to get a few extra tickets free of charge. We’ll try to score a few so you and I can go rub shoulders with Seattle’s elite.”

She smirked. “Maybe I’ll score me a billionaire to take home and spoil to death.”

“Too much info.” I winked at her and reached for a towel.

“I meant with my killer chocolate chip cookies.”

“Is that the code word kids are using nowadays?” I chuckled and moved out of the way as she tried to pop me with her towel. “Are you wanting to go out for a drink tonight?”

“I’d love to, but my mother called and asked me to stop by to help her figure out what’s wrong with her dishwasher right before you walked into the locker room. Rain check?”

“Yeah, no problem.” I finished drying off and tried to keep the smile off of my face. I was more than happy to have the evening free up and Matt to myself. A repeat of the night before would have been bliss, but I wasn’t getting my hopes up. He was subtly starting to pull back, and I had no intentions of not letting him go. If I was worth his time and effort, he’d realize that on his own.

Besides, he knew how I felt about us, or at least I assumed he did.



“You sore already?” I moved up behind Matt as he stood at the stove, working on dinner later that night.

“Yeah. Damn, that was a serious workout, Erica. How often do you girls do that?”

I reached up and pressed my fingers into his shoulders, massaging him as he groaned in delight.

“Every Sunday night. I love it. I feel like I got a detox and a workout.”

“No wonder you look so damn good. That was far more intense than I thought it would be.” He reached up and gripped my hands but kept his back to me. “I’m gonna pass out if you keep that up.”

“Then I can do it later for you.”

“Sounds good. Go take a load off. Dinner is almost done.” He released me and went back to cooking as I walked into the living room. I hadn’t checked my e-mails for the last few days, which wasn’t me at all. It was funny how quickly my desire to be needed by the office dissipated when I had something else to focus on.

I sat down at the small desk on the far end of my living room and pulled up my laptop, working through several e-mails that I should have already answered. A phone rang in the distance, and I heard Matt answer it before walking out to the patio.

I worked for a few minutes more before getting up and walking into the kitchen to make sure he didn’t accidentally leave anything cooking. The fish from earlier was sitting on the side of the stove with a piece of foil over it, and the veggies from my fridge were sautéed and steaming. Everything looked perfect.

“I’m impressed.” I smiled and walked back to the living room to work through a few more things before Matt came back in. I knew without a doubt that him leaving the next day would be incredibly hard, but it was what it was. There was nothing I could do about it, other than tell him how much I wanted him to stay. It was too needy and not at all the woman I wanted to be. I’d expressed myself multiple times over the last few days, and he was an idiot if he didn’t realize the depths of my feelings from my continuous flirtations over the last two years.

The door opened beside me, pulling me from my thoughts.

“Everything okay?” I turned in my chair to face him.

“Oh yeah. Jonathan said that he made a mistake on the agreement and needs to meet up with me first thing in the



morning to get a new copy signed.”

“Did you ask him to send it over so we could review it?”

“No, but I can. You want me to?”

“Yeah. I really do.” I turned and scribbled down my fax number. “Have him fax it to this number and we can look it over tonight. I just want to make sure you’re taken care of.”

“I appreciate that.” He took the number from me and disappeared back outside.

I wrapped up one more e-mail and got up to fix our plates. I poured drinks and set the table by the time he got back inside.

“Man, that dude loves to talk.” He smiled and glanced down at the table. “I was going to do all of this.”

“It’s all good. I don’t mind. You cooked dinner.”

“Well, I promised you I would. I’m sorry we skipped lunch, but you see, this beautiful woman was posing half naked for me and... Mmmmm, damn she was fine.” He smiled and pulled out my chair.

“Should I be jealous?” I teased and pulled my napkin down into my lap.

“Naw... you’d like her a lot.” He sat down and let out a soft sigh. “I’m going to take a week to think through everything and then I’ll make some decisions about moving up here and maybe coming to work for you.”

“Sounds great.” I tried to hide my disappointment. I wanted to hear him say that he would be thinking through us more than his career or moving to Seattle, but he needed to keep things in order. I got it. It just stung a little.

“I’m going to work on my drawing a little more after dinner, but I don’t think you’ll have to pose for me again. I have loads of pictures and you’re pretty much etched in my memory.” He tapped the side of his head as his eyes moved across my face slowly.

“Good, well, I’m here if you need me.” I took a bite of the fish and let out a sound of appreciation. “This is so good.”

“Thanks. We should take a cooking class together when I get up here.”

“When or if?” I couldn’t help but tease him.

“When. Sorry. I’m getting ahead of myself.” His cheeks burned pink.

“I like it.” I reached out and gripped his hand lightly. “When you’re thinking about what you want to do with your life, make sure that if working at your father’s company is the answer, it’s the answer you come up with yourself. Don’t let me or him or Damon sway your decision. You are going to make a killing on your paintings, and I’ll be beside you either way to help make sure Jonathan sticks to his part of the agreement.”

“That means a lot to me.” He turned his hand over and took mine in his before lifting it to his lips and kissing my knuckles softly. “I’ll be thinking about us too. I should have included that.”

“No, it’s good. I figured it was part of the deal.” I pulled my hand from his and stabbed a carrot on my plate. “Now, tell me your favorite part of hot yoga.”

“Watching you sweat?” He laughed and I joined him.

I wanted to read a million things into his promise to consider us, but I forced myself not to. If things didn’t work out between us, then I was ready to move on with my life and start looking again. Matt was my perfect match, but that didn’t mean he would come to the same conclusion.

The question I couldn’t seem to swallow was why he hadn’t already determined that. I had.

# CHAPTER 19



## MATT

I knew she wanted to talk about us, but I just couldn't. I wasn't ready to talk about anything regarding my future. I needed some time to myself to really think through things. I couldn't let a passionate weekend change the trajectory of my future without me having a say in it.

She worked on her computer and I flipped through the pictures of her on my phone, sharpening the image of her in my head until I finally had down exactly what I wanted to see on the canvas. The fax came in from Jonathan and she reviewed the agreement while I went out on the patio to start working on the sketch. We would be perfect for each other, but something was holding me back.

I worked on the sketch until early the next morning and walked back into the condo sore as hell, but thrilled with what I'd put together so far. It was going to be my most stunning piece yet.

After putting it in my portfolio and drinking a large glass of milk, I stood in the hall and let indecision pull me from walking into the darkness of her bedroom and making love to her again. It felt unfair to both of us.

I chose to watch some TV on the couch for a few minutes.



I woke up the next morning stiff and aching all over. Damn hot yoga class. Damon was going to give me shit for months over

letting a pretty girl talk me into going to a yoga class and trying to keep up with the guru at the front of the room. I deserved the horrible feeling that my legs were going to fall off. If for nothing else, for not sleeping in the bed with Erica the night before.

The note I found in the kitchen was scribbled like she was in a hurry. The lack of expression in her words left me with the conclusion that she was upset with me.

*Matt,*

*Glad you got to come down for the weekend. I put a few notes on the agreement for you and Jonathan. Let me know if you have questions. I'll see you next time you're up my way or if you need me call anytime.*

*Erica.*

“Shit,” I mumbled and cleaned up the living room and kitchen before packing my stuff up and locking the door behind me. I put the key under the mat and paused as sadness filled my chest. Why were things ending on this note? We have a killer weekend in more ways than one and now we were back to being a little more than acquaintances? No. That didn't work. We were meant to be friends if nothing else.

I'd have to figure out how to reach out to her once I got through the meeting with Jonathan. Maybe I could stop back by the office and take her to lunch or something. I owed her more than she had gotten from me, which was nothing.

The drive to meet up with Jonathan was slow and painful. Traffic was horrible, and I couldn't stop thinking about how Erica must have been feeling. Maybe I was over thinking it, but it wouldn't leave me be. I pulled out my phone and called

her number, but chickened out when the call went to voicemail. She was busy no doubt. Of course she was.

“She’s the fucking director of advertising at a multi-billion dollar firm. Hello? Idiot.” I pulled into the coffee shop and grabbed the agreement from the seat beside me. I wanted her with me to talk with Jonathan, but she had things to do, and I should have made the determination before letting her walk out of the house earlier that morning. I could have left her a note, or climbed into bed with her, or set a fucking alarm.

Anger burned through my stomach as I walked in and nodded toward the lanky art dealer who waved me over. He held the opportunity for a new future for me, one that I could imagine happily living... with Erica.

“Where is your agent?” Jonathan glanced around as if Erica was hiding behind a group of people in the shop.

I chuckled. “She’s working her nine to five today.”

“Poor thing.” He motioned for me to sit. “They’ll come over to take your order shortly. Have a seat and tell me what you think about the adjustments.”

I sat down and flipped through the file, grateful as hell that Erica had taken the time to mark the changes for me. I’d totally forgotten to review the document before heading over to meet with Jonathan. Not that I had any intention of reviewing it, but it was a nice afterthought.

“I wanted to ask a few things.” I glanced up as he nodded.

“Absolutely. Ask away.” He leaned back in his chair and picked up his coffee mug, nursing the hot liquid inside the cup as he watched me.

I moved through Erica’s questions and jotted down answers as Jonathan further explained the wording on some parts of the agreement.

“Anything else?” He smiled and lifted his hand as if offering me something.

“No. Well, yeah. I’d like to have a handful of tickets to the showing for my family and friends, free of charge.”

“How about I give you four tickets. Will that work?”

“Yeah, that’s great.” I glanced down and thumbed through the agreement as sadness welled up inside of me. “How long have you known your wife?”

He chuckled. “That’s an odd transition, but sure, why not. She and I met at an art showing in New York fifteen years ago. I’d just graduated from the art institute and she was a model for some of the paintings another artist had showcased. Funny enough, I fell in love with her before ever meeting her thanks to those paintings.”

I smiled. “Do you own any of them now?”

“All of them.” He wagged his eyebrows. “There’s no way I would let some poor unfortunate chump fall in love with her as I did. I’d have to kill the poor fool when he went in search of her.”

“I like that. Almost like her beauty belongs to you and you alone.”

“It’s a gift.” He nodded. “One that you and I share. Your woman is breathtaking. Have you ever thought of capturing her on canvas?”

“No. She’s too stunning to share.” I packed up the agreement and stood up. “Thanks for meeting with me. I’ll be in touch in a few weeks or so.”

“Sounds great. I’d like to shoot for mid-November on the showing if possible.” Jonathan stood and extended his hand toward me.

I shook it and nodded. “I think that’s doable. Thanks again.”

“Anytime.”

I turned and walked out of the coffee shop feeling settled about one thing. The picture of Erica glancing over her shoulder might be the best painting I would ever create, but no one would ever get the chance to see it. Her beauty belonged to only two people. One that was deserving of it, and one that wasn’t.

I only wished I could be a man that could measure up to a woman like her.



“So? How was it?” Bethany worked on a ham sandwich in the kitchen at my father’s house as I leaned against the counter beside her and watched.

“It was great. Erica was a load of fun, and Seattle is insanely beautiful.”

“And?”

“And I signed the contract with Jonathan after Erica looked it over. We’ll be doing the showing in November, I think. I get a few extra tickets to it, and I’d love for you to be there with me.”

“You know I will.” She picked up the two halves of the sandwich and offered me one of them. “What about you and her, Matt? You’re being so fucking cryptic.”

“I know.” I took a big bite and shrugged before turning and walking to the backyard. The flight home had been miserable because I couldn’t stop working through a million ways to see her again. Like that night.

“So stop acting like Damon and give me my brother back, please.” She moved up behind me and walked out to join me on the patio. It was still a little warm for what most people would consider fall weather, but for Texas, we were doing good not sweating to death at Halloween, so I was happy.

“Speaking of Damon. He misses you.” I glanced over at her as I dropped down on one of the many patio seats and finished my sandwich.

“I miss him too, Matt. Stop diverting. You’re horrible at it.” She sat down beside me and turned to face me as she nibbled at her lunch. “Tell me what happened?”

“We went to a concert, out to dinner several times, to the fish market and to a hot yoga class.”



Her eyes widened. “Wow. That’s a lot to pack into a weekend.”

“Tell me about it.” I licked my fingers and reached over to snag the rest of her sandwich. “The early bird gets the worm.” I shoved it into my mouth as she got up and tried to muscle it away from me. She dropped back down onto her seat as we shared a laugh.

“You suck.” She turned and extended her legs out on the chair. “Like big time. You won’t tell me what happened with Erica and now you eat my lunch? Ugh.”

“Why aren’t you up at the office?” I turned my head a little so I could see her better.

“I was just taking a lunch break, and honestly, having to tell Philip no for going out to lunch one more time without a good excuse is going to drive me crazy.”

“Philip is another one of the interns at M&B?”

“Yeah. He’s the one Damon is insanely jealous of.”

“Right, and he would be great to use to help get Damon’s attention. Remember I told you this already? My brother’s jealousy is a great driver for him.”

“Hush. I already did that once and the whole damn world almost exploded. I’ll be ready to move on soon, but I’m not there yet.”

“I hope you’re never there.” I closed my eyes and rested against the seat and images of Erica’s half-naked body filled my vision. “Erica and I had a good time. She’s everything I want in a woman, and once I get my shit together, I’ll move things forward with her.”

“And if she’s not willing to wait until you get your stuff together? Whatever the hell that means.”

“Then I guess we weren’t meant to be.” I licked my lips and tried not to think too much more about it. I still needed to call her, but I’d get to it later that day. Bothering her at work would leave me looking weak and needy. *No thanks.*

“Come on, Matt. That’s ridiculous. You know how good you guys would be together. What’s this really about? Are you scared that she’ll cheat on you?” The change in Bethany’s voice caused me to open my eyes and turn back toward her.

“No. Never. I’m not my brother.”

“Then what? She’s a beautiful woman with her life all put together and all she’s missing is passion. That’s where you come in.”

“That’s a lot to put on a guy that hasn’t done shit with himself, don’t you think?”

“I see what’s happening.” She snorted and got up, walking back toward the house aggressively. Why the fuck was she upset with me? I hadn’t even done anything.

“Wait.” I jumped up and followed her inside. “What’s happening? I don’t understand.”

She stopped just short of going in the house and turned around, planting her hand against my chest. “You’re using the fact that you haven’t moved to Seattle, or settled into a full-time job as an excuse not to commit to her.”

“I am not.” I took a step back. I so was.

“Yeah, you are. I’ll tell you this now, and you can share it with your brother. Good women don’t wait forever, and we don’t want any of the things you think we want. Your security and achievements can take a fucking hike.”

“Beth. Why are you so pissed? I didn’t-”

“We want love. Just strong arms around us at night, the whisper that we’re beautiful and cared about, and someone to walk through this fucked up nightmare of a life with. Is that so much to ask for?” She shouted the last bit and turned to walk back into the house, letting the screen door slam in my face.

“Damn,” I mumbled and turned to walk back out on the patio. She was bent over sideways because of the shit with her and Damon, and I got her message loud and clear, but it wasn’t as easy as she was making it out to be.

Maybe that was part of the problem between her and my brother.

Shit, maybe that was the problem with most relationships... and if so, why would mine and Erica's be any different?

# CHAPTER 20



## ERICA

“Boss?” Lewis stuck his head in my office and gave me a tight smile. “Were you wanting to-”

“No. Tell everyone to e-mail me their reports and close my door please.” I didn’t even look up from my computer.

A week. A whole fucking week had gone by and nothing. Not a single word from Matt Bryant. I’d spoken with Kent and Damon a million times on our new advisory project, but nothing from the one man I wanted to hear something from. Anything from.

“Why?” I whispered as the door clicked shut. I got up as the familiar burn of rejection swelled inside of me. Was he expecting me to call? I would have believed that before spending the weekend with him, but now, I knew there was a different side of him.

He could play docile and sweet in front of the world, but he was an alpha male that liked to dominate women in the bedroom and lead them through a thick crowd of people. He was a protector, a strong man’s man. Why did he act like he was anything but that?

I’d come up with a million theories over the last week to try and make myself feel better, but nothing worked. I was hurting, lost and ready to pack up my shit and leave for another life if things didn’t turn around. Tanner’s rejection felt like a bee sting compared to the Mack truck that Matt had pulled out on me.

“Two years. Two goddamn years of pining after this man only to have him show up for a weekend, sleep with me and run away like I was the worst lay of his life.” Tears burned my eyes, but I refused to let them fall.

My phone buzzed, and I turned on my heel and walked back to my desk and fury burned through my chest. I pressed the button on the dial and leaned over.

“What?”

“Miss Hall, your three o’clock appointment is here. I’m sorry to-”

“Send him in and don’t interrupt until it’s four.” I released the button and wiped at my eyes, careful to not smear my makeup. Kent had hired a new director for the firm that would be overseeing the advisory practice and staying mostly in Seattle. I had to walk him through the final decisions we’d made recently on the advertising for the new service and make sure that he didn’t want any changes.

It was the last thing in the world I wanted to do, though like most things in my life at that moment, I didn’t have much of a choice.

I picked up the portfolio and moved to the small desk situated in the center of my office as the door opened and I glanced up.

“Hi there. I’m Erica Hall.” I extended my hand, slapped a smile on my face and moved toward the guy.

His dark hair had bits of silver streaking through it and his smile was warm and a little naughty. Had I not been lost in my angst, I would have taken a minute to mentally drool over him. His suit fit him like a glove, and his handshake was firm.

“Nice to meet you, Miss Hall. I’m Mitch Roberson. Thanks for taking time to meet with me today.” His slate grey eyes moved across my face slowly and he held on to my hand. “Kent forgot to mention that you were stunning as well as brilliant.”

I chuckled and pulled my hand from his slowly. “That’s probably because HR would have a heart attack if he did.”

He laughed as well and followed me back to the table.

“Feel free to have a seat and I’ll walk you through some of the designs we feel like we’re just about settled on.” I spread them out and glanced over to find him watching me instead of looking at the designs. “Of course, you know that if you want to give any comments, feel free. We’re happy to adjust anything that you think might help the service to be more readily sold.”

“I like your willingness to take constructive criticism. It’s the mark of confidence.” He turned his gaze toward the table and leaned over, pulling the various pictures up to study them. “I love this. The colors and the slant of the logo pulls me in. It screams power and professionalism to me.”

“Excellent.” I smiled and crossed my arms over my chest.

“I think these are great, Miss Hall.”

“Erica, please.” I picked up my favorite of the various designs and handed it to him. “I like this one best.”

“Me too. Let’s get it into design and wrap this project up. We’ll have the IT guys change that part of the website and start working on imprints in case we need those for spin-off services.”

“Perfect. I usually do that part, but if you know what you’re doing, go for it.”

“I’m an odd duck. I have a fully functional left brain and right brain.” He smiled and slipped his hands into his slacks. “I don’t have plans for dinner yet, but I’d love for you to join me. We’re going to be working side by side on this project and a few others from what Kent’s told me. I’d love to know a little more about you and share some of myself if you’re up for it.”

I hesitated only because it felt like Mitch might be interested in more than a friendly professional dinner. “Yeah, let me check my calendar.”

“Of course.” He picked up a few more of our designs and stared down at them as I turned and walked back to my desk.

Indecision raced through me, though I was being stupid. It wasn't like he was hitting on me or trying to take me home with him for the night. He was going to be one of the only other directors for M&B in the Seattle office.

"I'm free. What time do you want me to meet you?"

"I'll just swing by here at six if you want. The guys across the hall keep talking about a killer sushi place just down by the harbor. You like fish?"

"Love it." I pressed my hands to the top of my desk and smiled. "I'll see you then. Nice to meet you, Mitch."

"Pleasure is all mine." He lifted the designs in the air. "Mind if I take these with me?"

"Not at all. I have plenty of copies." I waited until he left to sit down in my chair and let out a soft sigh.

Why was I holding myself out for a guy that didn't even have the common courtesy to call me? I wasn't asking for much, but after sharing my body with him, and supporting him with his situation with Jonathan, the least I deserved was a fucking goodbye.

My phone buzzed and I picked it up. "What? It's not four yet, is it?"

"No, Miss Hall. I'm sorry, but Mr. Bryant's on hold for you."

"Fine. Put him through." I pressed my fingers to the bridge of my nose, half expecting to hear Kent's voice fill up the other end. To hear Damon instead was no big surprise though.

"Erica? This a good time?"

"Sure. I just met Mitch. He seems like a nice guy." I leaned back and crossed my free arm over my chest.

"Yeah. I think he's going to be good for the advisory practice we're setting up. The man has a resume that impressed my father. I'm thinking we're going to do well to have him on our side."



“Awesome. What can I do for you?” I forced myself to sit up a little and lose the attitude. Never before had I let anything affect my job, and it wasn’t fair to do that to myself now.

Matt made his decision, whether he realized it or not.

“I wanted to see if we could have a conference call around five thirty today. Dad and I have been talking with Matt and I think we have him convinced to at least try out a twenty hour a week schedule. He might work remotely from his new place, but I’m not sure.”

“His new place?” A small tendril of hope ran through me, but I quickly squashed it. He hadn’t called in a week after spending the weekend at my house, living life as if we were meant to be together. He wasn’t the type of man I needed in my life. I’d misjudged him. It was that simple.

“Yeah. I think he’s going to come up there later this week and try to find a place.”

“That means he’s moving up here?” I let out a long breath through my nose and tried not to let my voice give away the hurt that I was struggling with.

“He’s still being noncommittal, but yeah, I think he’s going to keep his place here in Dallas and get one up there too. You know Matt.”

“Yep. I do.” I picked up a pencil from my desk and twirled it as I walked toward the floor to ceiling windows in my office.

“What’s up with you? You sound... tense.”

“Yeah, I have things going on in my life that I’m not exactly able to ignore today. Forgive me for having an off day. Shit happens.” I pulled the phone from my ear and squeezed my eyes shut. I needed to feign illness and leave for the day. There was no way my toxic attitude was going to allow for anything remotely productive.

“Wow. I’m here for you, you know that. Talk to me and let’s work this out. We’ve been friends a lot longer than we’ve been co-workers, Erica.”

“There’s nothing to talk about.” Warm tears blurred my vision. “I’m good.”

“Liar. I’m not getting off this phone until you spill.”

“It’s my mom. She’s not doing well, and Daniel isn’t visiting her anymore. He’s too sensitive about her getting older and dying on us like daddy just did.” I let out a soft sob and walked toward my chair to sit down in it.

“What can I do to help?”

“Nothing. I just need to take some time off soon and figure things out.”

“Is this just about your mom?”

“Why do you ask?” I sniffled and wiped at my eyes.

“Because my brother has been moping around here for a week, ignoring most of us and acting like a ten-year-old boy lost in the woods.”

“I don’t care what Matt’s doing.” I reached for a Kleenex. “And if you expect me to try and talk him into coming up here, you’re shit out of luck. Tell your father that too. Matt’s a twenty-eight-year-old man. He doesn’t need any of us pushing him to do anything. If he’s not willing to make the decision to move forward with his life, none of us are going to change that.”

“No truer words have been spoken.” Damon cleared his throat. “Why are you upset with him? What happened?”

“You know how I feel about your brother, Damon. Or rather how I felt. I’m getting over it.”

“Yeah, of course I do. You guys would be-”

“Don’t. I’m not interested in hearing it. He came down to visit and we had a good time for the weekend, or at least I did. I haven’t heard a fucking word from him in seven days. Not ‘thanks for letting me crash at your place’ or ‘I really appreciate you helping me with my contract with Jonathan’ or better yet, how about, ‘thanks for the all-night fuck. I really needed that in my life’.”

“Wow. He didn’t say anything after you guys spent the weekend together? That’s more something I would do than Matt.”

“Exactly. And tell me something, and be fucking completely honest.” I wiped my eyes and let out a shaky breath. Something about getting the hurt off my chest left me feeling a little better.

“Of course.”

“Why would you do that to someone? Why would you lead them on and walk away without a word?”

“Because in my past life, I was a user. I would walk away because I never had any intention of being with you in the first place. You were just a warm body and pretty smile to spend the weekend with. But, Erica-”

“No. Fuck it. That’s exactly what happened. You and Kent are so concerned that Matt isn’t going to turn out like the two of you, but you’re wrong. He’s already everything you used to be.” I dropped the call and walked out of my office. A stroll by the bay was the only thing I could think of that might keep me from quitting my job, packing my shit and driving until I ran out of gas. California was nice this time of year... and the men were hot. Seemed like a great combination to rid myself of the nagging desire to belong to a sexy bastard billionaire I knew.

“Yeah, you know... the good one in the bunch.” I scoffed and pushed the door that led to the stairs. I wasn’t sure of my next move, but I was ready to make one. And this one wouldn’t include Matt Bryant.

Fuck him. Fuck all of them.

# CHAPTER 21



## MATT

There should have been peace, sitting outside on the patio of my dad's house, working on the sketch of Erica, but there was none to be found. Everything inside of me screamed for me to call her, but fear held me at bay. No, it locked me up, tied me down, forced me into a place of numbness. Where logically I could point to all of it being a bullshit scheme to keep myself from getting hurt, I hated it. Hated myself.

Erica belonged to me, and yet she would become someone else's if I let my fears over not being enough 'man' for her stop me from moving forward, and fast. She was my brother, Damon, in female form. Perfect. Smart and strong, educated and successful. She was everything anyone could want and beyond anything I expected to have, but I was fucking it up completely.

I reached down and brushed my thumb along the sketch, catching the side of her face and smearing the line a little to soften her.

"Much better," I whispered softly as the sun warmed my chilled skin. The weather in late October in Texas was always anybody's guess. We were lucky that year with the coolness having rushed in before the holiday season started.

My eyes moved slowly across the sketch, pausing when I reached the feminine curve of her breast, the steep swell of her hip, her long legs, her perfect ass. My body hardened and I glanced up, sucking in a tight breath.

*Get up and save whatever you can with her.*

I exhaled loudly, trying hard to keep myself from diving into one of my many fantasies where she was concerned. Not all of them have her naked and spread across a bed or laid prostrate on a table, but those were my favorite. They were more carnal and left my heart alone. The ones where she walked toward me in a white gown fitted just for her, or a little boy with blond hair and bright blue eyes bouncing around my feet hurt too much. It was almost as if the entire universe were trying to bring me to my knees.

“Matt?” Karen’s voice sounded right behind me.

I glanced over my shoulder and gave my new stepmother a smile. “Hey there. Hope you don’t mind me borrowing your patio.”

“It’s yours too. You know that.” She walked out and sat down in the lawn chair beside me, stretching out her legs and closing her eyes. “I love this time of the year so much.”

“Me too.” I slipped my pencil back in the case and picked up my sketch pad. “I’m going to have to buy a large canvas for this thing, but I’m still not sure if I should work on it here or in Seattle.”

“So you really did decide to go?” She glanced over and extended her hand. Her brown hair hit just above her shoulders, and her eyes were filled with a kindness that settled me. I could see why my father married her. She would be capable of unwinding the hurt that he suffered losing my mother to cancer. He’d worshiped her when my brother, Damon, and I were younger.

He was the reason I was scared to move forward with Erica. His relationship with my mother was a lie, and left me questioning love altogether. There was nothing my mother didn’t have, and yet she chose to sneak around behind my father’s back in search of something else, but what? And would a woman like Erica love me to my face and spend her afternoons seeking true passion from another man?

No. I couldn’t allow that. And Erica wasn’t that kind of woman, but my mother didn’t start out that way either. I

dismissed the thought, forcing myself to stay in the present where it felt safe.

“To Seattle?” I handed her the tablet and leaned back. “Yeah. I’m going to keep my apartment here, but I’ll get one there too until I assess what’s best for me.”

“And what about working for your father? Have you figured that out yet?”

I glanced over at her and smirked. “Did he put you up to this?”

She laughed. “No, but I would have done it if he had. He loves you. He talks about you all the time.”

“I know he does.” I ran my hand over my chest and turned my face toward the sun. “I love him too. I want to make him proud, but I’m not sure what that looks like anymore. Is it weird at twenty-eight to still want to impress your father?”

“No, not at all.” She turned to face me and handed me the pad back. “I love this, Matt. It’s Erica, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” I glanced down at it and closed the book. “She’s exquisite.”

“And in love with you.” Karen’s tone softened a little as if she knew when best to tread lightly.

“I’m in love with her too.” I leaned over to put the pad and my pencils on the table beside me. “But love is a scary thing.”

“Don’t I know?” She wrapped her arms around herself, and I started to offer her a blanket, but she spoke up again. “I thought Bethany’s father and I had a good thing going, but I was so wrong. I loved him with all of my heart, and he left us in the middle of the night. Who does that? He had men coming after him, Matt. Men who wanted money or blood. And he left me and Beth there to deal with them.”

“Shit.” I got up and moved over to her chair, making her scoot over as I wrapped my arms around her. “You’re with us now. I can’t imagine how horrible that must have been, but you’re so insanely strong to make it through that, and now look at the blessings you have.”

She sniffled and wiped at her eyes. “I keep thinking I’ll wake up one day and be able to forgive him, you know?”

“Yeah. That’s my mom.” I pressed my cheek to the side of her head and closed my eyes.

“What about your mom?”

“She cheated on Dad a lot. I think him and Damon talked about it a few days ago.” I squeezed her and got up, almost busting my ass in the process.

“Why do people do things like that?” She glanced up at me, and it was almost comforting to see that she thought of me as a man. So many days I still felt like a wayward child, trying to navigate through life - alone.

“No clue. Selfish?” I ran my fingers through my hair and let my eyes run across the burnt oranges and dark reds of the trees littering leaves all over my dad’s backyard.

“Agreed.” She sat up and pulled her knees towards her, wrapping her arms around them. “I’m glad Damon and Bethany worked everything out.”

“Me too.” I slipped my hands into my pockets. “I’m looking forward to the wedding. I’m just not sure if I’m expected to be the best man or the bridesmaid.”

She laughed and shook her head. “Not sure your father would agree to you wearing one of those slinky blue dresses that Bethany is looking at.”

“I can rock slinky. Hello.” I lifted my eyebrow as she laughed again.

“I have no doubt.” Her eyes moved toward the table beside me. “That picture is by far the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. Has Erica seen it?”

I glanced down at it before gathering my things. “Um... no. I went up there and had a great weekend with her and then tucked tail and ran.”

“Then go back and show her.”



I turned my attention back to my stepmother. “I’m not sure she’s going to want to see me.”

“Maybe not right now, but she’s definitely going to want to see the way you see her.” She smiled. “That picture is filled with passion, strength and beauty.”

“Good. That’s exactly how I see her.” I glanced toward the sky, lifting my chin and breathing in deeply. “I don’t know why I’m being so stupid about all of this.”

“You’re scared. It’s normal, typical and okay. Just move past it. Identify the fear and get past it. Love requires you to step out all the time, Matt. Even our love between us as new family members. Love and trust working hand in hand, but it’s worth it in the end. Even if we have a fallout and things don’t go as planned.” She stood up and I put my full focus back on her. “We always have this moment, right? And that’s so worth it to me.”

“Maybe you’re right.” I moved toward her and offered her a quick hug before grabbing my stuff and walking to the house. “All right... I’ll show it to her.”

“Good. She’s going to love it,” she called after me as I walked into the house and made a beeline for the front door.

Martha was cooking something in the kitchen, and I almost stopped to ask for a to-go box, but I was watching my weight and from the smell of things... it wasn’t weight-loss friendly.

“You leaving?” Martha leaned out of the kitchen as I turned and glanced over my shoulder from the front door.

“Yep. I’m supposed to be at Dad’s office in an hour. I’m just going to head up there early.”

“You want a to-go plate?” She smiled.

“What is that delicious smell? Tell me it’s completely fat free.”

“Pst. Not even close, boy.” She stepped into the hall and wagged her finger at me. “What do you care about calories? You look great.”

“Are you hitting on me, Martha?” I turned around and shook my ass a little.

“Not even close.” She turned and disappeared back into the kitchen. “Food or no food?”

“No food, woman. Shit... I’m trying to watch my girlish figure here. Jeez.” I opened the door and walked to my old beat up truck. It would be time to get something new soon. Maybe in Seattle. Almost as if I lived two different lives.

One where I was scared shitless of Erica Hall crushing my heart and the other where I dominated her completely.

Both seemed all too familiar.



“Dad?” I knocked on my father’s door and leaned into his office.

He glanced up from his computer, the look on his face causing my asshole to clench. He was pissed about something.

“Get in here and close the door behind you.” He glanced back down at his computer.

I walked in and glanced down at my t-shirt and jeans. Maybe dressing up would have been a better option, but it was too late now.

“What’s got you upset? Something I did?” I dropped down in the seat in front of his desk, working hard to act like I was oblivious to the ass-chewing headed my way.

“Yes.” He let out a long sigh and leaned back in his seat. “We’re going into your brother’s office in fifteen minutes for the call with Erica, who’s missing...”

“Missing?” I sat up, my back rod-stiff, my heart almost stopping in my chest. “What do you mean-”

“As in she left the office a little while ago and hasn’t come back. She’s never been one to not leave a note with her

secretary, Joan. She's upset and your brother says that it's your fault."

"Aww... fuck." I stood up and walked toward the window before turning to face him. "Do we really have to do this?"

"Yeah. We do. She's the best advertising agent I know, and she finally belongs to McKenzie and Bryant. Do you know how hard Damon and I worked to get her here? No, of course you don't, Matt." He stood up, his face shading pink. "I need you to fix this. Now. If you don't do it on the call today, you're flying your ass up there and making this right."

"Dad. This isn't something I can just *fix*. She's in love with me from what I gather."

"No shit, Sherlock."

"And I'm not rushing into anything."

"Two years is rushing? Not hardly." He picked up a few files. "If you don't fix this, then you'll be taking her spot as my new advertising director and working ninety plus hours a week." He walked to the door as bile rose up in my throat.

How the hell did Erica manage working in an office for that many hours a week? It sounded like a prison of sorts.

"Fine. I'll fly up there, but we're not doing this over the phone. It's personal. It's between me and her."

My dad opened the door and moved back. "No, you just made it between all of us. Fix it or your ass is mine."

I groaned and walked into the hall, wanting to throw a ten-year-old fit, and seriously considering it... why not act like a child?

I was being treated like one.

## CHAPTER 22



## ERICA

I had to breathe. Just breathe.

My job, my life, everything was built around my career at M&B. I loved working for Kent and Damon, and both of them had been beyond good to me. To be the director of anything at twenty-eight was huge. I'd worked my ass off to get it, but they'd been more than generous in bestowing the title, the salary and the freedom that went with being in charge.

I refused to let something as stupid as another failed, almost-happened relationship mess that up. Matt wasn't suffering from the sound of things. Why should I be?

"Because I love him." I glanced up from staring at my hands and let my eyes move around the small park where I sat on a lone bench. The weather had turned cold, and damn if I'd forgotten my coat when I ran out of the office like a scalded child.

Damon wanted to talk about all the reasons why I shouldn't be upset with Matt, why we were so good together, but he was bias. His little brother had a shot at love, a sustaining, serious, abiding love, and he was fucking it up.

A week and nothing from him. Not a call, a text. Nothing. We'd spent the weekend exploring each other physically and emotionally. Was he pissed by the professional note I left him that morning before heading to the office?

What else was I supposed to do? We had one more night together and he slept on the couch, forgoing the comfort of my

bed, the warmth of my body. His actions screamed so loud that even if he might have said something, I wasn't sure I would hear it.

Maybe it was for the better. From the look of things, fate was going to kick me in the crotch a few more times. Matt was seriously considering coming to Seattle to stay half the week and then live the rest of the time in Dallas, around his family. He'd be working on my team for twenty hours a week, most likely as part of our advertising and art think-tank. It was the perfect set up for him.

It sucked balls for me. At least it did now. He left a week ago without a word. Nothing hurt worse than rejection, but not mattering enough to even be rejected? Just simply ignored?

It was too much. Not even I could move past that... could I?

A red ball bounced at my feet, popping me in the shins and rolling off.

"Sorry, miss!" A little boy no more than five jogged past me and waved.

"No problem. You got it?" I got up and glanced around, looking for the boy's mom. I found her running toward us with a grimace on her face.

"Danny. Slow down. What have I told you about running off?"

He paused and turned, giving her the cutest look I might have ever witnessed. "I'm sorry, mommy."

She knelt and wrapped him in a hug as I moved back to my bench and dropped back down. My heart ached for what she had. Real love. After Tanner walked away from our ten-year relationship during my senior year, I'd given up on wanting a husband or a family, but something about being close to thirty changed all of that. Or maybe Matt changed it. I wasn't sure what shifted, but without a doubt, the shift occurred.

"Thank you." The mom waved at me and toted the little boy back across the park, kicking the red ball as she continued to lecture him.

“No problem.” I gave myself a few more minutes to take in the beauty around me before getting up. My bruised pride would have to be comforted later that night with a hot bath and a good bottle of wine.

If only that really worked...



I walked back into the office and Joan stood up, my secretary looking a little worried.

“There you are. Are you okay?” She moved around her desk and clasped her hands together as if she were trying to keep herself from reaching out to me.

“Yeah. I just needed some air. Are we all set to go on the five thirty call with the Bryants?”

“Yes, ma’am.” The older woman nodded and pursed her lips. “I was scared you’d walked out for good. You looked so upset when you left.”

“I wasn’t sure if I was coming back, but then I realized I was being childish. I love my job.” I shrugged and walked toward my office, letting the conversation die. There was no way I was letting anyone into my personal life at the office. It never worked out to be a good thing.

After closing the door, I sat down at the small circular table in the middle of my office and pressed the button to turn the video conferencing on. A screen moved down from the center of the ceiling and stopped a few feet in front of me. I leaned back and waited for the call I was sure to get.

Seeing Matt was going to suck royally, but I’d simply focus on Damon or Kent and keep my feelings to myself. Besides, they probably all three knew how I felt. I had been less than subtle with Damon on our call an hour before.

The loud buzz of the phone caused me to jump though I’d been expecting it. Somehow I’d slipped back into my thoughts, letting them go where they always did - right to Matt.

“Erica?” Damon leaned back in his chair and let out a sigh. “I thought maybe... well, never mind. This a good time?”

I lifted my arm and glanced down at my watch. “It’s five thirty on the dot. It’s perfect.”

“Hi, Erica.” Matt lifted his hand, his expression tight and filled with tension. It was more than obvious that someone had berated him moments before.

“Hi, Matthew. How are you?” I forced a professional smile and tried to still my beating heart. Seeing him on the screen was almost as bad as seeing him in person. My wine and hot tub night was quickly turning into a full bottle of whiskey. He looked so damn good, his dark blond hair disheveled, his blue eyes filled with sorrow, as if he cared about me.

If he did, he would have called without being forced.

“He’s good. I guess.” Kent shook his head and turned his dark gaze back toward me. “I know you’re busy, so we won’t take any more of your time.”

“It’s good. I wrapped up things this morning, so I have some free time. Let’s discuss the arrangement we’re working toward and see where we can fit Matt in, hm?” I pulled a folder toward me and opened it, the words on the page jumbling up before me. “I think you guys were talking about twenty hours a week, right?”

I glanced up as Damon nodded. Matt was reclined backward, his arms across his chest, his frown well-defined.

“That’s right. Were you thinking of putting him in the think-tank group you have?” Damon glanced over at Matt and looked back toward me, rolling his eyes so that only I could see.

“Um, yeah.” I looked back down at the papers and shuffled them around. “He’ll be working with Lewis in graphics. Should be a lot of fun. Unless you’re still unsure?”

“Are we creating a new position?” Kent butted in.

“No. Celia is leaving on maternity leave next week, so Matt could have her position for three months and decide if



this is the place for him.” I shrugged and swallowed the hot ball of regret in my throat. I should have never slept with him. What was I thinking? I’d never been the type of woman to sleep around. My heart was too involved in love-making.

“I’m right here,” Matt barked and leaned toward the camera, his expression softening a little. “You can talk to me, Erica.”

“Okay.” I leaned back in my chair as my sorrow turned into anger. I stared at him for what felt like forever. It was obvious that the other two men in the room were getting uncomfortable, but they’d decided to tuck Matt between them and call me. They were stuck, and both deserved the discomfort. “I have a three-month position in graphics that’s twenty hours a week. It’s an artsy group that I think you’ll like a lot, but I need to know if you plan on filling it, or if not, I’ll find someone else.”

He nodded as his eyes moved subtly, as if he were studying me. “You’re so beautiful. Did you know that?”

Everything disappeared but him. I nodded. “I’ve heard it before, but it’s irrelevant. I’m looking for an employee. Nothing more.”

“Matt. Not now, dude.” Damon’s voice brought me from my reverie. “Erica, he’ll be up there on Wednesday. We’re talking three months as a testing period, right, and when are you wanting him to start?”

“Yes on the three months, and Monday would be good.” I glanced over at Kent. “I need to meet with you soon to discuss the final ads on the advisory project. I met Mitch this morning. We’re going to dinner tonight, but I know you like to have a final review done by you. I assume I’m still walking you through those images?”

“Yes. Plan on coming down for the weekend maybe in a couple of weeks. Would that work?” He glanced over toward Damon.

I nodded. “Perfect. See you on Wednesday, Matt, or Monday when you come in.” I nodded at the other two and

clicked the button to end the call. Tears blurred my eyes, and I stood up, moving toward the windows in my office. I needed to feel the sunlight on my face.

Why in the hell had I mentioned Mitch? What an asinine thing to do.

A knock at the door saved me from my self-deprecating thoughts. “Come in.”

Mandy opened the door and paused at the entrance. “I was looking for you about twenty minutes ago. Everything okay?”

I turned and stood up, letting out a soft snort. “I guess news travels fast. I just got upset over something that didn’t go my way. Typical response from me, I guess.”

“Oh, good. Nothing to do with the team or something that we turned in that wasn’t up to your specifications?”

“What? No. Not at all.” I wrapped my arms around me as a thought bubbled up. “I’m going to dinner with Mitch Roberson tonight. I’d really love for you and Lewis to join the two of us. You’re my most senior ad agents, and you’ll be working with Mitch alongside me. Can you check your calendar to see if that will work?”

“Oh.” Her eyebrows raised. “Really? Yes. I would love to go.”

“Great. See if Lewis is up for it too. Mitch will be by in a couple of hours to pick us up. Just stick around and I’ll grab you when he gets here. That all right?”

“Absolutely.” Her smile was radiant. “I’ll go tell Lewis now.”

“Great. Close the door behind you, please.” I turned and walked back toward my desk.

*There.* I felt better already. Going to dinner with Mitch almost seemed too intimate. I was most likely overthinking it, but either way, I was uncomfortable. The new Director of Advisory was fifteen years my senior with streaks of grey in his dark hair and a body that left anyone with a pulse drooling.

He was dangerous in more ways than one, and yet why was I protecting myself again?

As if Matt were going to grow up and become the man I saw peeking out of the edges of his persona last weekend? No way. Not in a million years. I loved him with every ounce of my soul, but for the first time in a long time... love didn't feel like nearly enough.

I spent the rest of the afternoon, working on a graphics project that wasn't mine to do. One of my new artists would have usually been given the opportunity to sketch the first draft of a new logo we were working on, but I needed somewhere to focus.

"Erica?"

I glanced up to find Lewis standing at the door. His smile was wide, and his dreadlocks a hot mess. He was perfect, and the best employee I had outside of Mandy.

"Come on in." I sat back as he walked toward the desk and pointed to my drawing.

"Wow. That's righteous. Can I see?" He extended his hand toward me.

"Yeah, sure." I handed it to him. "It's just a mockup of-

"The new logo. I love it. It's brilliant." He studied it for a minute and handed it back. "And that's why you're the boss."

I chuckled. "Why is that?"

"Because, it's perfect. I can't even offer a suggestion."

"You're just kissing ass, but don't stop on my account. I love it."

He snorted. "Not at all. I'm an art-snob. We never kiss ass. It's against our culture."

My turn to smile. "Are you going to dinner with me and Mitch tonight?"

"Absolutely. He's downstairs. That's what I came to tell you."

“Oh good.” I stood up and grabbed my bag. “Let’s go make the best of this.”

“Are you expecting something less than pleasant?”

“No, but it’s good to err on the side of caution, right?”

“Sure, if you’re done living.” He moved back and let me go through the doorway first. “You’re not done with big risks for massive rewards are you?”

“I’m not sure anymore.” I shrugged and walked toward Mandy, lost in my thoughts. Risk seemed like a fun word when I was younger, but after longing for a life I’d almost given up on years ago... it seemed more prudent to be cautious - safe.

Matthew Bryant was anything but safe.

# CHAPTER 23



## MATT

“Matt,” Damon called after me as I walked down the hall, away from the conference room. I ignored him. “Matt. Come on, dude. Stop.”

I jerked around as I reached the elevator and poked him in the chest. “Fuck you for that. What did you and Dad think would happen? Hm?”

“Look. I know you’re-”

“You don’t know anything. You have your life planned out in front of you, the woman you love beside you and everyone else to worship the ground you walk on. You don’t know shit.” I got in the elevator and watched him with the fury that burned deep inside of me. Of all people for my brother and my father to make me look like a weak child in front of, it had to be Erica Hall.

The one woman I’d consider hitting my knees for. As if she would have anything to do with me after leaving without a word, and now this...

“Fuck all of it. Why do I even bother?” I moved toward the door as it opened and barreled past a group of monkeys in suits. The scream beating against my teeth was held in by a smidgen of respect for my father. He’d built his legacy up for him and Damon to enjoy and now they were muscling me into it too. It was done in love, but damn if I wasn’t hot by the way they went about it.

I jogged to my truck and got inside before I let out a string of curse words and pounded the steering wheel. The woman

walking beside the truck jumped back and I smiled and lifted my hands in apology.

“I hate this shit. All of it.” I started my truck and drove straight for the NBC offices on the other side of the city. Bethany would probably be bias to helping me see the good in Damon and my father, but Sophie wouldn't. She would let me bitch and act a fool until I calmed down. Then she'd help me curse everyone around me until I felt better. That's why she had been my best friend since childhood.

I parked in the garage beside the large high rise where every secret in the world was known. It was almost comical to think that someone like Sophie, who was insanely private about her personal life, would work to expose other people. True oxymoron.

The stern looks on the people's faces that I passed gave me yet another reason to run for the hills instead of working at M&B. I wanted to enjoy my life, to be free to experience all sorts of incredible things. Everyone pimped out in a standard black, grey or navy suit downtown had the same look on their faces. Like someone had just administered an enema with no lube. It was the last thing I wanted to experience. Living a life with all duty and no pleasure. No way.

I stopped at the front desk and smiled at the older woman who glanced up.

“Can I help you?”

“Yes. I'm here to see Sophie Marque with NBC.” I glanced toward the security gate, hoping that by some miracle she might come bounding through and save me the hassle.

“Fine. Wait over there please, sir, and I'll give her the message that someone is here to see her. Can I get your name and your business?”

“Sure. I'm Matthew Bryant. I'm her baby-daddy.” I leaned toward the woman and whispered the last bit.

She smirked. “All right. I'll be sure to tell her that her baby-daddy is here.”

“Thank you, kindly.” I turned and walked to the row of chairs, feeling a little bit better, but not much.

My father and brother made a fool of me in front of Erica, and what was worse? She complied. Talking about me like I wasn't sitting in front of the fucking camera. I ran my hand down my face. I truly deserved anything she wanted to throw my way. I'd messed up big time. Fixing it was at the top of my list, but now... I wasn't so sure. She too saw me as a jacked up, immature little boy.

Hell, maybe I was.

“You sure do look deep in thought. Don't strain yourself. You could pop a vein.” Sophie stopped in front of me and glanced down, her eyes filled with humor.

“I've already popped a few today, what's one more?” I got up and nodded toward the coffee shop across the street. “I need to vomit emotion. You got a few minutes?”

“For you? Absolutely.” She slipped her arm into mine. “Any reason why you told Tammi over there that you're my baby-daddy?”

“I didn't tell her that.” I glanced over at Tammi and winked. “I said Band-Aid caddie, like your walking first aid kit.”

She rolled her eyes and moved around me as I held the door for her. “You're never going to grow up, are you?”

“Do you think I should?” I walked beside her to the stop light and reached for her hand as we crossed the street, not wanting to lose her in the crowd.

“No. I like you just how you are.” She tugged her hand from mine. “You know I hate it when you try and manhandle me.”

“Manhandle?” I snorted. “I held your hand to make sure you didn't get away from me. I think you better ask for another adventure other than Saudi Arabia. I'm pretty sure your definition of manhandle is a joke compared to how those men treat their women.”



“Not the prince. I’ve been studying him.” She gave me a knowing look and opened the door to the coffee shop.

“And? Spill.” I walked in and breathed in deeply, loving the deep aroma in the air. It smelled like lazy mornings and comfort. It reminded me of Erica somehow.

“He’s nontraditional. He’s hoping to find an American woman to birth his children.” She shrugged and moved up in line.

“Wait. Are you saying that you’re good with him putting that out for everyone to hear? He wants an American woman to birth his children? What about to love? To cherish? To build a life with?”

“That’s what he meant, silly.” She moved up and ordered.

I ordered something big and sugary before turning my attention back on her. “He meant sex. That’s what having children starts out with. Did you miss this day in eighth grade?”

She popped me in the chest. “No. You were in the next room, remember? You asked me a million questions about... never mind.”

I chuckled. I’d drilled her with questions while the other guys in school were drilling anything that walked and breathed. We were different, but it was simply what made us... us.

“Today has been a total bust.” I sat down at a small table and glanced up at her. She was beyond beautiful, and would most likely score a prince in the Middle East, or anyone else she wanted. It was weird not to have feelings for her outside of our friendship, but I didn’t. She was like a sister to me.

“Yeah. Tell me what happened. It’s rare for you to come all the way to the office to see me.” She walked up to the counter to grab our drinks and handed me mine as she sat down across from me. “Something happen with Erica? Is that her name?”

“Yeah.” I took a long sip of my frozen coffee drink and winced. “Brain freeze.”

“That takes a brain.” She winked and leaned back in her chair. “Tell me what happened.”

“They wanted to have a conference call with Erica, the four of us. I haven’t spoken with her since leaving Seattle a week ago, and as anyone in their right mind would be, she’s upset with me.”

“Wait. Back up. You went up there and what? Tell me the full deal. I haven’t seen you since before you left, remember.”

“Right.” I ran my fingers through my hair and glanced around. Rehashing everything was going to suck royally.

“You’re not getting out of this. I know your flight-look. You’re not running from me. Just spill.” She took another drink of her coffee and watched me closely.

“We had fun. She took care of the contract with Jonathan, we went to a concert, to the harbor, made love a few times and-”

“Wait. Made love?” Her lips turned up into a smile that reached her eyes.

“You’re really pretty when you smile like that. You should do it more often.” I took another drink of my drink too.

“Thank you, but get back to the fucking. Was it awesome?”

“Yes. Fucking usually is.” I pulled my straw out of the cup and used it to scoop up whipped cream. “I left on Monday morning without saying goodbye.”

“Why?” Her voice hardened. “Like you snuck out while she was still in the bed?”

“No. I passed out on the couch the last night we were together and woke up the next morning to a stiff note from her. It was very business-like.” I shrugged. “I left and headed home with the intent to call her, but I didn’t.”

“Let me ask again. Why? That’s an extreme insult to a woman, Matt.”

“I’m realizing that now.” I glanced up and let out the breath I didn’t realize I was holding. “I was scared, fuck, I still am. It’s not like one weekend in her arms is going to change that.”

“You gotta get over this jacked up commitment phobia thing you have going on.” She reached out and touched my hand. “Look at me.”

I glanced up. “What?”

“You know how much I love you, right?”

“Yeah. I know you wanna lick the skin from my bones and force me to have your babies.”

“Well, there is that, of course.” Her smile faded. “She sounds like a great catch, and the kind of woman that would force you to become the man we all know is inside of you. Stop running and turn around.”

I glanced down toward our clasped hands. “Can you and I just get married? I’m comfortable with you.”

“No.” She tugged her hand from mine. “You’re not a prince, and I’m not the girl that makes your heart ache, or your body yearn for carnality.”

“We could work on all of that.” I was teasing. There was no one in my past or possibly in my future that was going to emotionally bend me over the way Erica had for the last two years. She was supposed to be mine.

“Just call her, Matt.”

“My father and Damon had me in a conference call with her today, and she blew me off pretty hard.”

“Of course she did. You dismissed her after she opened her body to you.” Sophie huffed and gave me a stern look. “Any woman would kick you to the curb after that.”

“So what the fuck do I do?” I glanced up at the ceiling, trying hard to sound like a spoiled frat boy. It was a fitting persona for me. I liked it.

“Go to Seattle and win her back. Be the man you are and tell the scared little boy to take a hike.”

I dropped my chin and tilted my head to the side a little. “When are you leaving for the Middle East again? January?”

“Yes, but stop diverting. Do what you need to do to get her back. Promise me.”

“Maybe.” I turned my attention to the people in the coffee shop, letting my eyes run across their expressions and wondered what their lives might be like. Was anyone fighting against themselves to grow up like I was? Were they in love or searching high and low for someone that could provide the high I got around Erica?

“Come on. I gotta get back. We can jog in the morning if you want. I’ll walk you to your truck.”

“Okay.” I got up and took another long draw from my straw before walking out into the chilly late afternoon with Sophie. “I want to show you something I’m working on.”

“For the private showing at De Luge?” She glanced over at me and reached out to grab my hand as we ran across the street.

I tugged my hand free and winked at her. “People will talk, baby girl.”

“Oh brother.” She moved in front of me, and we walked in a comfortable silence until I reached my truck.

“This is my centerpiece for the showing, if I can pull it together and get it done.” I opened the truck, pulled out my sketch pad and flipped it to the picture of Erica.

“Wow,” Sophie mumbled with reverence. She glanced up at me. “Matt. This is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Yeah?” I reached out and ran my fingers just outside of the figure’s face. “It’s how I see her.”

“Erica?” She pursed her lips.

I nodded. “Yeah. It’s how Damon sees Bethany, or my father sees Karen. It’s just love. Hurts like a fucker when it’s

not working, but it feels so good when it does.” I pulled the pad from her and closed it. “I just want to get my stuff together before I try to fix what I’ve destroyed. I want to be everything she needs me to be. Then I can present myself as a viable option for her, Sophie.”

“What if someone gets there before you?”

“Then I deserve to lose her.” I shrugged and pulled at her arm. “Go back to work and stop making me rethink everything. I hate that about you.”

“Not true.” She put her hands on her hips. “It’s the reason you came to see me today. You wanted me to set you straight.”

“Did I?” I got in the truck, closed the door and rolled down the window. “You know Damon is planning his wedding.”

She leaned toward me and pressed her hands to the windowsill. “I doubt Damon is doing much of anything.”

“True. Bethany is planning the wedding. I’ll get you the date soon.”

“Great.” She reached out and squeezed my arm. “You need to fix this. Love doesn’t come around all the time, Matt.”

“True, and sometimes you have to run halfway across the world to find it.”

She smiled. “That’s what I’m hoping to do. You just need to hop on a plane and take a three-hour flight. So cheesy easy.”

“Maybe, but the hard part starts when I get there, you know?”

She nodded. “Is she worth it?”

I didn’t hesitate for a second. “Absolutely. I’m just not sure if I am.”

# CHAPTER 24



## ERICA

“Hi.” I got into the passenger’s side of Mitch’s black Lexus and reached for my seatbelt as Lewis and Mandy got in the back.

“Hey. Day go okay?” He glanced back and extended his hand. “I’m Mitch Roberson.”

“He’s our new Director of Advisory.” I glanced back at my staff as they shook Mitch’s hand. “It was all right. Long to be honest.”

“Well, thanks for joining me for dinner. I hope it doesn’t impose on you too much.” He pulled the car away from the curb and smiled over at me.

Handsome wouldn’t begin to describe him. How the hell was he *not* wearing a wedding ring? Seemed like a travesty. Not that it mattered. I was lost to the asshole who left without a word. If I wasn’t, I’d have offered to host the dinner at my house and left my staff out of it.

“Not at all. Kent seems too proud of himself for getting you to join the firm.” I pulled down the mirror above my head and checked my face.

“He’s an old friend of my brother, Jack’s. They went to school together.” He turned and pulled up to the restaurant as the valet ran for the doors.

“I love working for Kent. He’s a great guy.”

We got out and walked to the front door, Mitch holding it for all of us.

Mandy smiled and glanced my way. “Is he married?”

I smirked, enjoying the fact that she was willing to speak to me like I was half-human. Most of the time, my staff shuffled around the office and stayed out of my way.

“No clue.” I walked toward the hostess stand and pointed to our name on her roster. “There’re four of us now instead of two though.”

“No problem.” The girl glanced toward Mitch, her cheeks turning pink. *Interesting.*

“Let’s go.” I turned to get everyone’s attention before following the girl to the table. We took our places, and I pulled my napkin down into my lap and picked up the wine menu. “Anyone need an adult beverage tonight?”

“Me.” Lewis lifted his hand. “I was trying to work with one of our IT guys all afternoon and got nowhere. He didn’t understand Photoshop, and I had no clue what the words coming out of his mouth meant. It was like speaking a foreign language.”

“I need a beer.” Mandy took the drink menu as I offered it to her. “My little sister just told us today that she’s pregnant. My mom is beside herself and they want to have a family meeting over it. I keep trying to tell them that I’m not part of the family anymore.” She blushed. “Too much?”

I smiled. “No, it’s all good.” I glanced over at Mitch, surprised to find him watching me. “And you, Mr. Director?”

He smirked. “I love a good glass of wine regardless of the day I’ve had. Pick your favorite and we’ll just get a bottle.”

“I don’t know.” I leaned back and let my hands drop into my lap. “I have more than a glass and one of you might have to tote me out of here.”

I laughed when everyone offered to. Somehow I’d missed out on having a relationship with anyone at work, which was a shame. Both Lewis and Mandy were incredibly supportive of me, and good people all around. I needed to fix things between us, and open up more often. There was still a line in the sand



because it was work, but I could be more welcoming toward my staff.

“You guys want an appetizer?” Mitch glanced up from his menu. “Anything you want. Dinner is on me.”

“Oh no. Let me get it.” I let my eyes run across his face and couldn’t help but think he should be on a GQ magazine somewhere. At M&B we had the most non-typical accountants in the world. Sexy, strong and masculine as all get out. “I brought Lewis and Mandy as a treat to them. I’ll pick up the bill.”

“No. You won’t.” He winked at me, but by the tone of his voice, I knew the conversation was over.

“All right then.” I smiled and glanced back down at my menu, enjoying Mitch’s deep chuckle.

“Damn. I have to go.” Mandy looked up from her phone. “My mom is coming unglued. I’ll have to get a rain check.” She stood and seemed to realize that Mitch brought her.

“I’ll take you back.” He started to get up.

“No way. I can walk. It’s only half a mile.” She pulled her purse from the chair.

“What? In downtown at night. Not happening.” Lewis gave me a smile. “I’ll take her and you can just grab us for lunch later this week.”

“What? No. We’ll all just go.” I pushed back to stand as Mitch hovered above his seat, waiting for a decision to be made, no doubt.

“No. I’m serious. Enjoy your dinner. We’ll have a good talk about the project we’re working on. Lewis is big and strong.” She smiled over at him, and I got the notion that somehow one of them had planned for the time they’d be spending together on the way back to the office.

“Okay, well, you have my cell. Just call if you need me.” I sat back down and pulled my chair up to the table and they said their goodbyes and walked off.

Mitch turned to watch them go and chuckled before looking back at me. “How long have they been sleeping together?”

I almost choked on my spit. “What?”

He picked up his menu. “It wasn’t obvious to you?”

“No.” I tilted my head and glanced toward the front of the restaurant. “You really think they’re sleeping together?”

“No, I don’t think. I know.” His dark eyes left me feeling raw, bared before him. It was strange how quickly he’d gotten comfortable with his position at the firm, or maybe it had little to do with that. Maybe he was just the type of man that was so incredibly confident and comfortable that he was relaxed no matter where he went because he was unwilling to be anyone but himself.

I wanted that for Matt. He would become that man, but when? With who beside him?

“I lost you.” He smiled and reached out, tapping my arm.

“Oh, sorry. I had a really long day today.” I smiled up at the server as he stopped by the table. We ordered wine and Mitch ordered two appetizers, which we agreed would be our dinner.

“You mentioned your long day, but you haven’t said what happened.” He clasped his hands in his lap and pressed a hard stare against me.

“It’s somewhat personal, I guess.” I glanced down at the table and tried to think through how to get out of the awkwardness he was leading us into.

“Well, I won’t pry, but I figure with both of us leading the Seattle office, we’ll become close friends sometime in the near future.” His voice was deep, soothing.

“I’d like that.” I glanced up and realized that maybe his definition of friends was different than my own. I was intensely grateful when the wine showed up.

“How long have you been working for Kent?” He took a drink of his wine and tugged at the front of his button down

shirt.

“Two years, but I’ve known Damon for the last five.” I ran my finger around the top of my glass. “I love it there, but there are days when I wish I was busy painting some new masterpiece.”

“Really?” He chuckled. “I wondered about you artist types from time to time. How much of your soul did you sell to be calm and collected in a large high-rise building?”

“Good question.” I moved back as the appetizers arrived. I shouldn’t be at dinner with someone like Mitch. It was dangerous, and I wasn’t willing to give up on Matt just yet, even though it seemed like he’d given up on me.

“One you feel like answering?” He took a bite of one of the garlic shrimp and groaned. “Wow. That’s insanely good.”

“I feel like part of me is missing, sure, but I get to make the money that I feel I’m worth, lead a team of creatives like myself and still design and develop art all day long. It’s far better than being a starving artist.” I reached for a shrimp and agreed with his assessment. My stomach rumbled as if to corroborate my thoughts.

“That’s a great way to look at it.” He licked his fingers, and I glanced away. The moment was too intimate. “I’ve been working as a consultant since I was Damon’s age.”

“How old are you now?” I picked up my glass and smiled as he gave me a cocky grin.

“How old do you think I am?”

“That’s not fair.” I leaned back in my seat and studied him.

“No? Guess close to it and I’ll tell you.”

“Thirty-eight.” I took a drink and went for another shrimp.

“You flatter me, Erica.” I enjoyed the way he said my name.

“Am I correct?”

“You’re off by ten years.” He picked up his fork and picked up a piece of sushi.

“So you’re twenty-eight?” I smiled and picked up my chopsticks. “You know it’s a travesty to eat sushi with a fork. You look like a Texan right now.”

“I am one.” He popped the sushi in his mouth and chewed slowly, taking a drink of his wine and turning the question back on me. “And you? Are you still in your twenties?”

“Yes, but I’m racing toward thirty quickly.” I felt comfortable, good. It had to be the wine.

“Husband? Kids?”

“Hopefully in the future. You?” I needed something to do with my hands. We were at a business dinner and yet we’d done anything but talk about business. I should have kept Lewis or Mandy with me. Our conversation couldn’t be headed anywhere healthy.

*You don’t belong to Matt. He doesn’t want you. You’re not good enough... remember?* My mother’s voice echoed in my head, though she’d never said anything about Matt. It was a need to condemn myself fully. Her voice always worked well for those moments.

“I have one daughter. I love her beyond words.” He licked his lips and picked up the bottle of wine, pouring us both another glass. “My wife, Lindy, died three years ago from a brain tumor. It’s been a long journey back from the gates of hell.”

“Oh, God. I’m so sorry.” I reached out and cupped my hand over his. I couldn’t imagine loving someone for years and then losing them. “How long were you married?”

He gave me a boyish smile, his eyes lighting up. “Twenty-seven years. We got married right out of high school. She was my childhood love.”

I pulled my hand back as thoughts of Tanner swam through my mind. So many years together and he just up and left. Why? I’d failed to analyze any of it then. It was too hard. I was too close to the fire.

“That’s incredible. I hope I find someone that loves me the way you seemed to have loved your wife.” I picked up one of

the appetizer plates and divvied up the rest of the meal between us.

“I’m shocked to see that you don’t already have someone loving you like that.” He smiled and nodded toward his plate. “Thank you.”

“Of course.” I picked up my fork and busied myself eating.

“So, no boyfriend either?”

“Nope.” I finished my glass of wine and tilted it toward him. “I need one more.”

He smiled and poured me a glass. “Well, I know I shouldn’t, but I can’t help but tell you that I’m floored by you not being with someone. You’re stunning. Successful. Intelligent. Talented.”

Warmth spread up my chest and coated my cheeks and throat. “Thank you,” I whispered, feeling almost overwhelmed. No more wine for me.

“No... Thank you.” He smiled. “This is nice. It’s been a while since I sat down to dinner with a beautiful woman.”

“I’m glad I could break the dry spell.” I laughed at myself, letting the wine settle my spirit.

“We should keep this up.” He watched me closely, but I tucked my head down and worked on my meal, feeling like Matt acted... young, immature and overwhelmed by the presence of the older man beside me.

I needed to go home - alone. Yeah... no more wine for me.

# CHAPTER 25



## MATT

Every mess up from the last two weeks rolled through my mind as if on a carousel as I sat on the plane on Wednesday morning. I'd jacked things up with Erica royally, and damn if I didn't try and call her several times after talking to Sophie on Monday only to hang up when her voicemail picked up. There was no way I was apologizing in a message on her phone. It would have been easy, but she and I both knew that was the chicken-shit way of doing things.

Damon and I worked out our differences the day before, and I was glad to be back on even playing ground with him. It wasn't his fault that I was perpetually dicking up my life, but it sure felt good to push it off onto him.

I groaned and pressed my palms to my eyes. Erica has to forgive me. She has to understand.

"No... she doesn't." I ran my fingers down my face as the flight attendant at the front of the private jet gave me an odd look. "I talk to myself all the time." I smiled. "Mostly because I'm the only one that doesn't argue with me."

"Makes sense. I think." She smiled and buckled up. "We're making our descent. We should be on the ground in twenty minutes."

"Awesome." I closed my eyes and let the image of Erica giving me head in the car douse me in desire. It wasn't just about the act of her being so damn naughty that got me. It was the softness of her touch, the look of love in her eyes. This was far more than I was used to being involved in. It was unknown

land, uncharted territory, and yet every part of her I'd seen - I adored.

*Then why run?*

I forced the question out of my mind. It was getting old. I had my reasons, and though no one on God's green earth understood them, they still stood. I'd try to explain myself to her once I got to Seattle, barring that she'd actually see me.

There was a good chance that I was outta luck. I hoped not, but anyone with sense in their head would have kicked me to the curb years ago. There's only so much denial and rejection someone could take.

If Erica treated me the way I'd treated her, I'd never give her the time of day. Not to explain herself or apologize. No way.

"Mr. Bryant?" The flight attendant touched my shoulder, and I jumped, not realizing that I'd dipped so far into my subconscious.

"Sorry. I guess I fell asleep." I unbuckled, got up and grabbed my bag. "Did you guys call a car service for me before we left?"

The attendant nodded. "Of course. Your car should be waiting by the tarmac. A red Audi, just like you like."

"Perfect." I waited for the door of the plane to open and jogged down the stairs toward the car. My phone buzzed and I pulled it out to find Jonathan Lutz calling. It was as if he had a spy cam somewhere in the vicinity. "You got eyes everywhere?" I laughed and stopped by the car.

"No, I wish. Did you just get in town?"

"I did." I opened the door and got into the car. "I literally just walked off the plane."

"Then my timing is excellent."

"That it is." I buckled up and started the car, loving the purr of the engine. It reminded me of Erica, and my cock twitched, my pulse spiked. The woman was without a doubt



the very core of my lust, and I was an idiot for denying her anything.

*Grow up.*

“I got the private showing set up for us. It’ll be at De Luge two weeks from Friday. You’ll need to be there at five at the latest.”

“Two weeks. Damn... that’s so soon.” I pressed the gas and adjusted my mirrors as my lust turned to worry. There was no way I would have the picture of Erica done by then. Was I really ready to show the world my girl? Bared and nude, open for everyone to realize what an idiot I’d been?

“We said November. It starts Friday. I can look at moving it if-”

“No. I’m good. I was just trying to decide if I needed to do something big, flashy, stunning for the event. I’m not sure with two weeks I really have time for what I was working up to in the back of my mind.” I reached up and ran my fingers through my hair as my heart contracted in my chest. It hurt to be in Seattle and not have her beside me. It was almost a travesty that my soul woke up to lament over.

“You’re going to need something magnificent to impress these people. Where your portfolio is more than enough to catch the eye of the commoner, I went with Erica’s suggestion and set the event up for ten grand as the entrance fee.”

I swallowed hard. “What? Did anyone pay that? I’m not even known.”

“Right, but your father is.” Jonathan cleared his throat. “We have fifty people coming that night. Create something breathtaking. You have it in you.”

“Breathtaking.” My mind immediately went back to the portrait of my girl. “Erica.”

“Yes!” Jonathan laughed. “You have been thinking about it. I had hoped I planted a seed in you that day. Put her on canvas, Matthew. She’s impossibly beautiful. Show the world what you see.”

“Okay. I’ll talk to her, and if she agrees to it, I’ll work night and day to get it done.” Exhilaration rushed through me. I could do this.

“Good. Get it done. We’ll talk soon. Let me know if you need anything at all.”

“Yeah, thanks.” I dropped the call and let my thoughts move all around the edges of what success felt like. My dream was to have an art gallery of my own where people from all over the world could come and appreciate the depths of emotion I painted in my pictures. The only thing that would have made it better was to have Erica’s work next to mine.

Even if nothing worked out between us, I would force a friendship on her. She needed someone to encourage her to push toward her dreams, even part-time. She could hold down her job at my father’s firm and still continue to pursue her heart. She had to. Without exploring her talent, she would grow cold, unmoved, numb.

I put a call into Damon’s secretary, Linda. She picked up on the second ring.

“McKenzie and Bryant, Damon Bryant’s office. How can I help you?” Always so damn chipper.

“Hey, Linda. This is Matt, Damon’s brother.”

“Hi, Matt. Did you make it to Seattle?”

“Sure did. Hey, could you e-mail that list of apartments in the art district that Erica sent over to you guys a few months back? I know Damon probably kept it just in case I finally made the trip up here and got serious about staying.”

“Oh, yeah. He totally kept it. I’ll find it and send it to your phone for you. Are you looking today?”

“Yep. Just got here. I need something really spacious and with lots of great light.”

“You got it. Give me about twenty minutes to look at the listings and I’ll have something to you.”

I smiled. “Excellent. Thank you.”

“Anytime.”

We hung up and I turned to merge onto the freeway. I plugged the phone into the hands free device and pressed Erica’s cell phone number, half expecting it to go to voicemail. This time I planned on leaving a message. She needed to know I was in town and wanted to talk to her - about the painting if nothing else.

“This is Erica.” Her voice sent tendrils of pleasure racing through me, as if the woman were an aphrodisiac altogether.

“Erica. It’s Matt. I just got into town. I’m headed to look at apartments, but I’d love to swing by the office and check in with you a little later if that’d be okay.”

“Yeah, sure. I have meetings all day long, but feel free to wait in my office if I’m not around. Just check in with Joan, my secretary, and if you’re waiting too long, she’ll hunt me down.”

“All right. I’ll see you soon.”

She hung up without a response. I sighed and tried to not get too down on myself. It wasn’t going to be easy walking back into her life. She needed to know that I wasn’t running again, and I had to be sure I could get over judging myself unworthy of her before I promised that.

My phone pinged a few minutes later and Linda had the listings for me, all of them looking great. Luckily enough, the first one I came to captivated my heart.

Much like the woman I hoped to share it with eventually.



“Matt. Good to see you again.” Joan extended her hand as I walked toward her.

“Pleasure is all mine.” I shook her hand and nodded to Erica’s office. “Is she around?”

“She’s in a meeting, but have a seat in her office and I’ll let her know that you’re here.” She smiled. “Would you like a

coffee or water?”

“No thanks. I’ll grab something myself if I get thirsty.”

“Of course. This is your father’s firm.”

“Yep.” I walked toward Erica’s office, and breathed in deeply when I walked in, catching traces of her perfume. Every cell in my body woke up. I breathed in again as if I were out of breath. Dropping down in the chair in front of her desk, I imagined her sitting in front of me, her dark blond hair in a loose bun, her lips cherry red.

What the fuck was I doing? Why did the boy in me show up when commitment was at stake? I forced myself to stand my ground with her when she came in.

I was sorry.

I was beyond interested.

I was in love. Period.

“Yeah, thanks, Joan. I’ll just leave them in-”

I turned as an old guy walked in with a bouquet of white roses and stopped at the door.

“I’m so sorry,” he started, “I’ll come back in a little while.”

“No.” I stood and walked toward him. “I’m Matthew, and you are?”

“Kent’s son. Of course.” A warm smile lifted the guy’s face. Why was he bringing Erica flowers? Old friend? Her brother? He extended his hand. “I’m Mitch Roberson. The new Director of Advisory Services.”

“Oh. Yes.” I shook his hand a little harder than was necessary. Why was the old bastard bringing Erica a gift? “Nice to meet you. My father’s told me so much about you.”

“You’re going to be joining us soon from what Erica tells me.”

“Yes. My father finally pushed enough.” I forced a smile and crossed my arms over my chest. “Those are nice. For

Erica?”

“Oh, yeah.” He moved around me and put the flowers on her desk. “She had a shitty start to her week, so I thought maybe I’d brighten it a little.”

“Nice.” Why in the world had I thought that time would stand still, that fate would keep her tucked away for when I was ready? It was a cosmic joke, and it was on me.

“Well, nice to meet you, Matt. I’ll see you Monday for sure.” He nodded and walked out, leaving me feeling far more inadequate than I should have. He was twice her age - at least. There was no way in hell she was interested.

The sound of her laughter filled my ears. I got up and walked to the door, pausing in the entrance to hear her and Mitch talking. He was funny. Smart. Rich. Handsome. And she was enjoying his company.

I turned and jogged to my seat, dropping down and working hard to keep my stomach from turning. Everything that happened from the moment I left her place last Monday to now was deserved. However bad it got, whatever I lost... I deserved every ounce of it for running.

“Matt. I hope I didn’t keep you waiting.” She walked around me, giving me a split second to check her out from behind. Her black dress was business professional, but left miles of shapely leg on display.

“Not at all. I just got here.” I turned my attention to her, taking her in and forcing myself to breathe. She’d only gotten more beautiful, or maybe that was because I was close to losing her. After having her chase me hard and fast for the last two years, I was at a loss for how to react with her possibly moving on.

Surely not.

“Great.” She smiled and sat down. “Did you find an apartment? If not, I can get one of my staff to help you.”

One of her staff?

“Yeah. It’s all done.” I leaned back in my chair and studied her. “You look amazing.”

“You’re being sweet. What do you want?” She pressed her arms to the table and leaned toward me a little.

*You. I want you. Forever.*

“Well, for starters, I could use your help.”

“Sure. Whatever you need.” She sat back in her chair and crossed her legs before fiddling with her hair. She was nervous. Good. At least I wasn’t alone.

“Jonathan set up the private showing for two weeks from Friday and he wants the piece I’m working on of you to be the main display.”

“Oh. Wow.” Her eyes widened but she didn’t look away. “Okay. So what do we need to do? You have plenty of pictures, right? There’s no need for me to-”

She didn’t want to get naked in front of me again. My spirit wilted deep inside of me, stealing some of the color out of my world, leaving me cold.

“No. No, of course not.” I lifted my hand and forced a tight smile. How awkward we were. “I just wanted to see if you would help me get everything set up and maybe mix paints for me. It’s a big project and I literally have nothing.”

“I can probably do that.” She tilted her head to the side and blinked a few times as if waking up. “Did you bring these?” She reached out and plucked a white rose from the vase beside her.

“No. Mitch did.” Of course Mitch did.

“When did you need my help?” She ignored me.

“Tonight if you’re free.” I was pushing my luck. I’d yet to apologize. I was surprised she was even talking to me, but I wanted the timing to be right, and it wasn’t, not yet at least.

“I can’t.” She ran her fingers through her hair and licked at her lips. “Friday might work.”

“Okay, yeah. Friday would be great. I’ll work to get the place set up with some furniture by then.”

“Great.” She stood and pressed her hands to the desk. “Anything else?”

“Um, no.” I stood and my legs locked. “I’m starting on Monday, if that’s okay.”

“Yep. We’ll have everything set up for you by then.” She moved around me and walked to the door, reaching up and sliding her hand down the frame. Everything about her turned me on and broke my heart in tandem.

I walked toward her, realizing that I’d worn out my welcome and it hadn’t been more than five minutes. “So we’ll grab some fish tacos on Friday and then head to the art store. That okay?”

“Sounds like a plan.” Not a date. A plan.

“I’d really like you to be at the private showing with me. Damon, Bethany and my father are coming as well.” I stopped a few feet in front of her and forced myself not to close the gap between us. The welcome mat had been retracted.

“I’ll check my calendar, but that would be fun. I love your family.” She glanced down and I caught the first glimpse of sorrow.

“I need to apologize to you. I was-”

“No.” She lifted her hand, cutting me off. “We had a good weekend together, and I want to leave it as that. If I bring Monday morning into the conversation, it hurts like a bitch. Leave it at Sunday night.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I nodded and moved past her into the hall as my heart broke in my chest. I was a fool to think there was room inside of her to forgive me.

She wasn’t going to, and I didn’t blame her.

The judge in my head had spoken.

I didn’t deserve it or her.

Denied.

# CHAPTER 26





## ERICA

Sorrow threatened to suffocate me as I watched him walk toward the elevator. A scream lodged in my chest, burning me from the inside out.

My pride wouldn't let me move, but my heart cried out to run after him. To stop him, throw myself at him and beg him to love me.

*So weak. Pathetic. Needy.* Everything my mom wasn't.

I turned and forced one foot in front of the other until I made it back to my desk. The large bouquet of flowers from Mitch was almost too much, but the gesture was sweet, kind. Poor Matt for having to see them. He had to be worried that I'd moved on after our weekend together. As if. I wished I could move on, but it wasn't going to happen for a while. No matter how perfect Mitch might be for me. I felt nothing more than an odd curiosity toward him.

"Erica. Is everything okay?" Joan's voice was soft, timid even.

"Yes." I sat down at my desk and looked up toward her as my eyes filled with tears. "No. Can you shut the door for me?"

"Of course, dear. I'll hold your calls until you tell me you're ready for them." The sad look on her pretty face only seemed to draw my tears forth faster.

"Thank you," I murmured and pressed my hands to my face as pain wrapped its ugly ropes of despair around me. I waited until the click of my door let me know it was closed to

lose myself. We weren't going to get past what happened. The passion had been too much for him to handle. It scared him and he ran from it. From me.

What kind of man did that? A boy. Not a man.

And yet I wanted to give him grace, to offer him another chance. Everyone treated him like he'd yet to grow up and maybe that was part of the reason he hadn't. It was safe to be who everyone wanted you to be. Hell, I was exactly who my mother thought I should be when I was around her for more than a few minutes. Matt wasn't any different.

Hot tears raced down my cheeks as I stifled my sobs and tried hard to rein in the anguish of knowing he was trying to make amends. I'd denied him. I was both proud and disgusted with myself. What had he expected? Me to jump in his strong arms and let him kiss away the hurt?

Fuck. That sounded so good.

My stomach clenched as I pressed my hands tighter to my face and cried harder, losing my breath somewhere in the middle of the pain. I gasped for air and dropped my hands from my face as I started to hyperventilate. I was terrified to lose him, but without standing my ground and making him come to me as the man he kept trapped inside of him, I was validating his immaturity. I couldn't do it.

"Even at the expense of losing him?" I sobbed again and closed my eyes tightly, wishing the world would disappear.

Not even over losing him. I loved him far too much to leave him believing that he could act any way he wanted and not suffer the consequences. It was bullshit.

A knock at my door surprised me. Joan would never let anyone bother me while I was upset. I'd yet to cry in front of her, but I knew it from past spurts of anger or stress.

"Erica." Mitch. Dammit to hell.

"I'm fine." I got up and walked to the door quickly for fear that he would open it.

“Let me in.” His deep voice wrapped around me, offering comfort and I reached for the knob, considering it seriously. No. He would hold me and that act alone would confuse me and bind us together. I barely knew him. No.

“I can’t. I’ll touch base with you tomorrow, okay?” I wiped at my nose and sniffled, hating that he knew I was hurting. He would use it to his advantage as someone interested in more than a friendship. I couldn’t blame him, but I was weak. The only defense I had was a good offense. Keep him at bay until I healed.

“I can hear you crying.” His voice was a soft whisper, so comforting. Like the devil at the door when you needed him most. “Tell me what’s going on. How can I help?”

“I promise I’ll come find you tomorrow. I’m just fighting with my mother. It’s stupid and childish, but I’ll explain tomorrow. Thank you for the flowers.” I locked my door and walked back to my desk, missing out on what his response was. I put my headphones on and closed my eyes, trying hard to pull myself together. No one needed to save me. I wasn’t lost nor was I hurt.

I was heartbroken. It wasn’t the first time, and it damn sure wouldn’t be the last.



“Hi there. You looking for something specific?” A short girl with a bobbed haircut bounced up beside me, a huge smile on her face.

I pointed to the puppies in the glass case in front of me. “Can I see the little brown one?”

“You bet. He’s a mix between a Schnauzer and a Yorkshire Terrier. Super playful and loves to chew on things.” She laughed and left me standing there as she went behind a closed door.

I’d been wanting a pet for as long as I could remember, but it never seemed like a wise investment. Wise could take a hike

now. I needed someone or something to love on and be loved by. Not trivial, conditional love like most of the men in my life, outside of my father, had given me. Unconditional love. Joy. Happiness.

She walked back out and I laughed as my heart swelled in my chest.

*Yes. That feeling. Exactly.*

“Here you go. This little guy is six weeks old. Still a baby.” She handed him to me and I cuddled him against my chest.

“Six weeks old? You’re so cute, little guy.” He licked my nose and I laughed. “I love him already.”

“Then you should get him. He’s a thousand, but he’s well worth it. Has all his shots and stuff.”

I let out a sigh as he snuggled up against me and started to chew on the top button of my dress. “I want him so bad, but I’m just not convinced that I’d be a good pet owner.”

“Then do this,” she reached out and took him from me, “take a few pictures, go home and put them on your fridge. I’ll put a five-day hold on him and if you can’t live without him in five days, come back and get him.”

“I like that idea.” I reached out and ran my fingers over his head. He barked and wiggled in her arms, trying to get down, or back to me. I wasn’t sure which. “Okay. I’ll try what you said, and if I can’t live without him, you’ll see me in here on Sunday.”

“Perfect. Take some pictures.” She put him down on the ground and I pulled out my phone, laughing as I followed after him. He got into just about everything he encountered, but I loved it. I’d be back on Sunday, without a doubt. Or maybe sooner. I wanted to bring Matt by to meet him, even though it was stupid. Matt and I were done before we started, but the part of me that begged for reconciliation said that Matt would be raising the little guy with me.

I wasn’t sure how to feel about any of it, so I ignored it, took my pictures and headed over to Lanie’s to pick her up.

She had something to do on Thursday night during our usual girl night, so we were getting together that night, which was perfect.

No way in hell I wanted to be alone.



“Wow. You look like hell.” Lanie opened the door to her apartment and stepped out into the hallway. “You really did have a rough day.”

“I told you I did.” I wrapped my arms around my chest, wishing I had gone home and freshened up a little before dinner instead of going to the pet store. What was I thinking? I was horrible with pets, kids and other people. Too much responsibility made me want to hide under my bed.

“I’m sorry, boo.” She wrapped her arm around my shoulders. “I’m thinking tacos and margaritas tonight. How does that sound?”

“Delicious. I wanted to go to a movie, but I have to be in early in the morning. There’s no way I’m going to make it on five hours of sleep. So just dinner tonight?”

“I’m down with anything you want to do.” Lanie smiled at me. “Tell me about your crappy day.”

“You tell me about your date last Friday. You haven’t filled me in yet. You said it was terrible with a capital T and left it at that. I wanted details.”

She pinched her nose and widened her eyes fully, using a nasally voice and looking insanely creepy. “He was a lot like this, and he drooled a little when he chewed his food. I’m pretty sure he was from another planet.”

I snorted and walked out into the chilly fall night. “The Mexican place you’re talking about is just down the block, right?”

“Yeah.” She pulled her hand from her face. “He was horrible. We barely made it through dinner, and I lost my

appetite when he took his second bite of dinner. Never again. I'm done dating. Period."

I laughed and slipped my arm into hers. "No. You're too great of a catch. We just need to find the right guy. A good guy."

"This coming from the woman that told me the guy she was after was a good guy." She pulled me closer as we half stumbled down the broken sidewalk in our heels.

"He was. He is." I shrugged. "He's just scared, Lanie. We all are in some way, right?"

"Hell yeah. I'm terrified." She shivered and giggled. "So does that mean you're going to give him another shot?"

"I'm not sure yet. I want to, but my pride isn't letting me." I shrugged and released her as I approached the door.

"Then tell your pride to take a hike. I'd give him another chance if it's just fear."

"Right, but what if he runs every time we get close?" I walked in behind her and breathed in deep, letting the greasy smell of chips and cheese offer me comfort. "Then what? I just grow old and heartbroken over a man who's never going to commit?"

She told the hostess that there were two of us and glanced over her shoulder. "How many chances have you given him, Erica? One? Two? Ten?"

"This would be the first." I got her point before she made it, but it wasn't that easy. He used me. Made love to me and gave me more hope for love than I'd had in a long time. And then he left... without a word.

"Then give him another shot." She followed the hostess to our table and sat down, giving me a look. "Is he going to have that showing soon? I seriously want to go with you guys. I have this weird feeling that I'm going to meet my man there."

"What? Really?" I laughed and picked up the menu.

She pushed it back down. "I'm being for real. Don't forget to take me."

“It’s two weeks from Friday. I’ll find out how many tickets he can get, and if nothing else, you can have mine.”

“Good. That’s real love right there.”

“Or something like it,” I mumbled and turned my attention back to the menu. The last thing I wanted to do was stand beside Matt while he revealed a painting of me completely nude to the elite in Seattle, including Kent and Damon. Maybe it was a bad idea to let him sketch me in the first place.

Too late now.

# CHAPTER 27





## MATT

The weather was a little bit more biting in Seattle than Texas, but it was good for me. I pushed myself hard, forcing my jog into more of a run as I moved down the harbor with the other joggers. Erica was constantly on my mind, driving me mad with the need to have reconciliation. My family thought so much of her, and I was right behind them, but she wasn't having anything from me. My indecision to call left me not even friend-zoned, but put into the category of a new employee that she'd never seen a day in her life.

"Tonight," I mumbled and turned to head downtown. Traffic was crazy, but it would keep me alert and aware of my surroundings and not let me dive too far into the hamster-wheel conversation in my head. Should have called. Told her you loved her. Asked her to be yours. Should have called. Told her you- "Fuck!"

I jerked back as a car honked and skidded to a stop beside my thigh. A second later and the guy would have hit me. I glanced up to see the sign across the street telling me to stop. Lifting my hands, I apologized as he got out of the car. Sickness swelled in my stomach.

"I'm sorry." I continued as if I didn't know him.

"Matt? Jeez, man. You gotta watch where you're going. I almost hit you." Mitch moved around the front of his sleek black Lexus and reached out to grip my shoulder. "You okay?"

"Yeah. I thought coming downtown to jog would help me keep my focus." I snorted and glanced around. What were the

freaking odds that I'd almost be hit by the man after my girl? My luck all the way. "That didn't work as planned."

He laughed, but I could tell he was shaken. "It's a good idea, but maybe do it at night or earlier in the morning when it's not rush hour traffic."

Someone honked behind us and Mitch turned to offer the other driver some choice words as I worked to catch my breath. My heart was thundering in my chest. He drives a Lexus. Wears a suit like a boss. Has his shit together completely.

"All right, well, sorry about that." I pulled from him and nodded as he glanced back, his cheeks flush.

"You too, and be careful. See you Monday, son." He turned and walked back to his car.

I waited for the walk symbol to come up and jogged across the street. Son? Was he so much older than me that he needed to call me son? Did he call Erica child? Make her call him daddy? I growled in disgust as my thoughts continued to dive in the dumpster.

She was coming with me to dinner and the art store tonight. It was my time to try and win back a small piece of her. Surely her feelings were still intact seeing that she'd been after me for two years and I hadn't even looked her way.

Or maybe that was the fun part. Maybe she was all about the chase.

I jogged across the street and almost got hit again. "Shit."

Time to head back to the harbor and jog where the other joggers were. In a car-free zone.



I got back home around ten and stripped before getting into the shower. My phone rang about the time I moved under the warm spray and let out a long groan.

“Really?” I opened the curtain and reached out for the phone. Erica. Well worth the trouble. “Hey. You’re not canceling tonight, so don’t even try.”

“No. I was just worried. Mitch told me he almost ran you over this morning.” The tension in her voice caused my heart to swell. She was hurt and angry, but no way was she over me. Not even close. I just had to play my cards right and she would be mine.

“It’s no big deal. I wasn’t paying attention. Too much on my mind.” I ran my hand through my partially wet hair and wished like hell that she was in the shower with me. We’d get clean just to get dirty again.

“What’s that in the background? Is it raining where you are?”

I chuckled. “Yeah. I’m in the shower.”

“Oh.” The pause between us was comfortable, though I hoped that she was envisioning being in here with me.

“I’ll be up there in a little while. I’m not going to be able to mope around this apartment all day. Get off early and let’s go see the city together.”

“I have a million things to do today. Let’s meet up at seven or eight tonight.”

“No way. Delegate. I’m coming up around one or two.”

“Matt. That’s in two to three hours. There’s no way I can-”

“Make it happen. I want to see you. I don’t deserve to, but I’m not taking no for an answer. All right?” I felt something swell inside of me that wanted to force her to behave. The good old Bryant aggression.

“Yeah. I’ll be ready,” she whispered roughly as if someone had sucked the air from the room around her.

“Good. See you in a bit.” I hung up and moved back under the showerhead, closing my eyes and enjoying the warmth of the water. My body ached for me to take care of myself, but the hope that I’d have her trapped beneath me by the end of

the night forced me to deny myself. I wanted every ounce of pent up lust and energy to go into her.

I finished up and got out, changed clothes and made a pot of coffee before sitting down and starting to work on my sketch. My phone buzzed, and I picked it up, hoping it was Erica again. Damon.

“What’s up, bro?” I answered and tilted my head to press the phone to my shoulder so I could continue to work on my sketch. I’d have it done by the time I headed up to the office. After that, it just needed to be blown up and transferred to the large canvas for painting.

“I heard you almost got hit while jogging this morning.” He sounded exasperated.

“This Mitch guy sure is a talkative little bitch.” I snorted and brushed my thumb down the front of Erica’s chest, smearing the charcoal a little.

“Are you all right, and what the hell do you have against Mitch? Have you even met him?”

“Yeah. I’m fine, and I met the old coot on Wednesday when I went up to the office to tell Erica I was in town. He brought her a large vase thing full of flowers. Seems like he’s got his eye on a *much* younger woman. Mine.”

“Oh shit. Seriously?” Damon chuckled.

“It’s not funny. He’s the kind of man she deserves.” I sat back and held in a sigh.

“How do you know the type of man she deserves? You’re being a presumptuous cock, by the way.”

“Thanks. That’s almost a compliment coming from you.” I got up and wiped my hands down the front of my shirt.

“Fix this shit with Erica or I’m going to fix it for you. There’s only room for one asshole in the family, and I’m the older brother. I get first dibs.”

I smiled. “This is true. I’m working on it. It’s not as easy as you think.”

“Oh, I’m well aware. You and Kendal have been all over me to fix my problems with Beth, but it’s a little more complicated than a ‘sorry’, right?”

Kendal was Damon’s best friend from college, and just happened to be the accounting professor that Bethany was working for. It was a hot, complicated mess.

“Yeah, it’s much more complex than that.” I got up and glanced at the clock. “Wish me luck. I’m headed up to the office to get her. She agreed to fish tacos and a trip to the art store.”

He groaned. “You guys are so damn weird.”

“Or maybe we’re normal and you’re weird.”

“Whatever. Good luck. Keep me in the loop.”

“Not a chance.” I hung up and slipped the phone into my back pocket before putting on a pair of tennis shoes, grabbing my wallet and keys and heading out.

Seattle was beautiful, the utopia I needed it to be. It wouldn’t take too long before I’d close down the lease on my place in Dallas and move to the Northwest for good. It was far too complementary to my personality to deny it.

I got in the Audi and drove toward downtown as a million thoughts moved across my mind. Maybe half the struggle with Erica was more like a struggle with myself. I wanted to be loving and fun, but the minute the bedroom door closed, I could feel this aggressive beast rise up inside of me. It was so far away from how I saw myself that I struggled with it all the damn time.

If I could figure out a way to accept that I was complex... not one dimensional, then maybe things would work out. Maybe.

I pulled up to the side of the building and lifted my hips to get my phone out, but paused. Erica jogged toward the car as the wind blew hard. How long had she been standing by the door, waiting for me? It warmed my heart and re-instilled the hope in my chest.

She hadn't given up... not yet. Her blond hair whipped around and she let out a soft yelp as she got in the car, slammed the door and turned to face me.

"Jeez. The wind is crazy." Her blue eyes were filled with more questions than I could begin to answer.

I reached over and gripped the side of her face, pulling her close and kissing her softly several times. Some part of me expected her to pull back, but she didn't. I enjoyed a few more kisses, licking at her lips to taste as I growled low in my chest.

"I don't like Mitch bringing you flowers." I kissed her again and moved back to my seat.

"Then tell him that." She buckled up and pressed her hand to her chest. "And keep your lips to yourself until I decide if I'm over you."

"You're not." I pulled out into traffic. "But I'll let you come to that conclusion yourself."

She snorted, the sound too damn cute. "You almost get hit by a car and now you're going to be ballsy?"

"I should have been ballsy from the beginning." I licked my lips, wanting to taste her again. "It's the struggle inside of me that I'm fighting, Erica. It's got little to do with you or us."

"There isn't an 'us', Matt. You left without a word and I'm not sure I'm willing to let that happen again. How many more times will you leave because of your internal struggle?"

"You need to go change at your place?" I reached over and took her hand into mine, not willing to back off for even a second.

"Yeah." She let out a soft sigh and glanced toward the window beside her, as if giving up on fighting me.

"I'm not leaving again, okay? Let's just have fun today and you accept my apology. I woke up to a note from you that sounded like something you'd leave the pool boy who works for you." I shrugged as she turned her gaze back toward me. "You deserve better than me. Far better. I'm just trying to work through that."

“Are you interested in me? In us?” The neediness in her voice scored me.

“Yes, baby. Very.” I brought her hand to my mouth and kissed her several times. “I’m sorry for my fear, for my ignorance. Let’s rebuild our friendship and push when we’re ready to push, okay?”

“Okay,” she whispered and reached up to brush tears off her cheeks.

She was crying? Shit. My need to run flared up, but I swallowed it back down and continued to kiss her hand until we pulled up to her apartment.

“I’ll be right back.” She reached for the door, pulling her hand from mine.

“Want me to come with you?” I released her.

“No. Just wait here.” She got out and I watched her until I could no longer see her. My cock was rock hard, my heart racing, my palms sweaty, but the dominant part of my spirit was in complete control.

I wasn’t giving up on ‘us’ anytime soon, if ever.

# CHAPTER 28





## ERICA

“Dammit,” I muttered as I walked into the darkness of my apartment. I’d promised myself I wouldn’t let him sweep me off my feet, and he hadn’t yet, but it was a matter of time. “Yeah, minutes.”

If he wasn’t everything I’d dreamt he could be over the last few years it would be different, but he was. Just because he had tucked tail and run the weekend before didn’t mean he wasn’t still that man underneath the fear.

I pulled my dress over my head and changed into a pair of jeans, a nice blouse and black flats. A quick brush through my hair and touch up on my lipstick and I was jogging back downstairs. Annoyance at the fluttering of my heart rose up sharply in my chest. How could I so quickly forgive him?

Because he was earnestly sorry. He wasn’t a dick, he was lost but searching, just like I was.

He watched me like a hawk as I walked toward the car. It’s the way I’d wanted him to look at me since meeting me.

*What about Mitch?*

“What about Mitch?” I snorted and reached for the car door. The older man in my office and I had hit it off really well. If Matt wasn’t in the picture, I’d not have thought twice about taking Mitch up on his offer for another dinner, and another, and another. I glanced over at Matt as he smiled.

“You look good. Really good.” He ran his hand up my thigh and squeezed softly.

“Just friends right now.” I pulled his hand from my leg. “Remember? Until I feel like I can trust you with my heart.”

“All right.” He pulled the car out of the parking lot and headed toward town. “But don’t let that old bastard at the office take my place. He could be your father. He called me son this morning.”

I laughed loudly and clamped my hand over my mouth. “Did he really?”

“He did.” Matt gave me a funny look. “He’s lucky I didn’t refer to him as pops just to give him a taste of his own medicine.”

“He’s a great guy, Matt.”

“Yeah, and one that wants to get in your panties. Fucking dirty old man!”

“And you blame him?” I lifted my eyebrow, flirting a little.

“What? Hell no. He’s smart. Who wouldn’t want to spend time with a beautiful woman like you? I’m just pissed about it.” He gripped the wheel a little tighter, causing his arm muscles to flex.

“I see that.” I reached out and ran my hand over his forearm. “There’s nothing going on between us. I’m still trying to figure out how I feel about us.”

“We’re just friends, remember?” He clamped his hand over mine and leaned forward, licking at my fingers.

I stifled a groan and pulled my hand from him. “Stop it.”

“Not a chance in hell. I messed up. I gotta make it up to you.”

“You sure do.” I snuggled back in my seat, letting the sadness inside of me dissipate for the time being. We might not become anything, but it was nice to be around him again regardless. “Hey. I wanted to go by sometime soon and pick up this little puppy I found at the pet store.”

“Oh yeah?” His voice lightened. “I love dogs. What is he?”

“A mix between a schnauzer and a Yorkshire terrier. He gets to maybe fifteen pounds. I really want someone to greet me at the door when I get home.”

“Why not get a butler? A female butler?” He glanced my way and smirked. “At least they can feed themselves and they know how to crap in the toilet.”

I chuckled. “They’re also capable of giving me attitude, moving things around in my apartment and being moody just because. Dogs are loving no matter what.”

“This is true. You wanna go by now and we’ll just skip the rest of the evening and go back to your place?” His voice had a hint of hopefulness in it.

“That sounds good, but I’m starving and I know you have your first showing coming up. Let’s go to the art supply store, grab tacos on the way back to your place and get everything set up. If there’s still time to get the dog tonight, we can go up there later.”

“Perfect. The showing is two weeks from today, which means I gotta get that painting on the canvas and work hard and fast to get it ready.”

“Did you finish the sketch?” I turned my head a little to study him. His jaw flexed as if he were nervous with me looking at him. My insides turned to mush as I watched him. It was sickening to know that I was going to give him another chance. A chance that he could use to possibly hurt me, but I was. I had to.

He glanced over at me. “Yeah. It’s beautiful, but nothing like the real life inspiration for the piece.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere, sir.” I turned back to the front as he pulled into the parking lot of the art store.

“No? Damn. I’ll have to try something else then.” He parked the car and got out, moving to the front as I got out and joined him.

“You got a lot of tools in that arsenal of yours?”

“Yep. Flattery failed, so we’re moving to humor and casual touches that look innocent, but they’re simply not.”

I laughed and reached for the door. “You can show your game plan to the other team.”

He pressed his hand to my lower back, the tops of his fingers pressing into my ass. “You’re not the other team, Erica. You’re my team.”

I swallowed hard and walked into the store. “I love this place.”

“Me too. It’s like automatic hard-on for the artist.” He wagged his eyebrows and moved to get a cart. “Help me get all the supplies I need.” He pulled a piece of paper from his back pocket and handed it to me. “You want to mark things off or get the stuff?”

“Mark things off.” I put my purse in the buggy and bumped his hip. “I’ll push too.”

“A woman who can multitask. Hot.” He moved ahead of me, giving me a great view of his cute little ass in his jeans. The broadness of his shoulders and thick muscle along the top of his back had my thoughts diving into the shallow end of the pool.

We were two consenting adults. Sure, he’d hurt me by not calling, but I’d hurt him with my note that morning too. Why hadn’t I thought more about leaving him something so impersonal to wake up to?

*Because he chose to sleep on the couch instead of the bed with you. Why?*

“You lost in thought?” His breath was warm on the back of my neck.

I stiffened. “I guess so. I didn’t even see you move behind me.”

“It’s a lovely view back here.” He ran his nose down the back of my hair, breathing in deeply, and sending chill bumps racing across my skin.

“What’s next on the list?” I whispered roughly as my nipples budded.

“Paint.” He moved away and turned down the paint aisle. “I know we’re not really back to where we were, but I’m going back to Dallas next weekend. I’d love for you to come with me. Bethany and Damon are planning their wedding, and Bethany mentioned a few times how well you did on my father’s wedding with the decorations. You think you might be-”

“Of course I’ll help.” I pulled out my phone and flipped to my calendar. “I need to be in Dallas next Saturday anyway for a meeting with your father and your brother.”

“Excellent.” He stopped in front of the paints and bounced on his toes. His energy was contagious, and I found myself feeling lighter, happy. “You still doing yoga with Lanie on Sunday nights?”

“Yeah. Why?” I smiled as I leaned against the cart. No way was he wanting to come to my yoga class. He almost died the last time we were there. I lamented over not getting to see him suffer for the days that followed.

“I want to come with you.” He handed me a few tubes of paint and knelt down to grab several others.

“You almost died last time.” I took the paints and dropped them in the cart. “Matt, you don’t have to fit yourself into my life to get my attention.”

He stood, dropped a few more tubes of paint into the cart and reached for me. His hands felt so fucking good on my shoulders as he squeezed softly and moved down my arm. The determination in his eyes left me wanting to pant, but I held myself together by a string. There was no way I was going to play the fool again. I’d just have to tread as carefully as I could around him.

“I wanna fit myself in every part of your life,” his eyes moved around my face, “your work, your fun, your sexy little body too. I fucked up. I know that, and I’m not promising that I won’t fuck up again, but I’m completely into you.”

I had no clue what to say, so I kept quiet and nodded, feeling like a stronger personality had finally started to emerge in the man I loved. He leaned down and brushed his lips by mine as his fingers brushed down the side of my neck slowly.

“Friends don’t kiss,” I murmured against his mouth. “And how do you already have me captivated again? I hate you.”

“I know you do, but plan on changing that.” He kissed me again, and moved back, his voice changing. “All right. Let’s grab a large roll of canvas and the supplies to build a platform and get outta here. I’m starving and I have a beautiful naked woman to paint. Life couldn’t be better.”

I rolled my eyes and exhaled through my nose as I followed him around the rest of the store. He was going to win the battle with me. No questions asked.



“All right. What do you think?” He stepped back and lifted his hands toward the blank canvas we’d spent the last hour building in his place.

“I love it. It’s perfect.” I walked around the five-foot structure and put my hands on my hips. “You sure it’s not too big for what you’re doing though? I’m not sure anyone wants to see a life-sized picture of a naked woman.”

He scoffed. “Are you serious right now? Everyone wants to see a life-sized picture of a beautiful, hot, sexy naked woman.”

“Wait. You’re still talking about sketching me, right?” I smiled and walked to the kitchen to clean up from our quick dinner.

He followed me and stopped at the doorway. “You like this place?”

I glanced up and wadded the papers from our tacos in my hands. “Yeah. I really do. It’s open and there’s probably a ton of light during the daytime. Am I right?”

“Yeah.” He turned around in a circle, closing his eyes and breathing in deeply before pinning me with a hungry stare. “There’s only one thing missing.”

“What’s that?” I tossed the trash and picked up his keys. I wasn’t spending the night. There was no way I was ready for that again. It seemed to be the one thing that had him running for the hills. He and I needed to talk about the why behind his reaction a few weekends back before I opened my body, and subsequently my heart up to him again.

“You.” He smiled. “It’s missing you, and your little dog too.”

His witch voice caused a chuckle to bubble up inside of me. I handed him the keys and pressed my hand to his strong chest. “Well, I don’t have the dog yet, so it’s just me.”

“That’s what I said.” He reached up to touch my face. “You sure you don’t want to stay the night with me?”

“I can’t.” I glanced down and pressed my forehead to his chest. “The last time I did, you ran away. I’m not sure that wasn’t something to do with me.”

He pressed his fingers softly under my chin and forced me to look up. The love in his eyes forced me to recognize that my future belonged to him if he wanted any part of it.

“I understand completely. I’ll make it up to you, Erica. I just wanted to become the man you deserved before I stepped into your life fully. Someone like Mitch.”

“Mitch?” I shook my head and pulled back, grabbed my purse and walked to the door. “Come on. I’m tired.”

“You know what I meant.” He moved in behind me and closed the door as we walked into the hallway.

“No, I don’t. I’ve been trying to get your attention for two years. I’m a big girl. If I’m good with you not having all your shit together before we start dating, then that’s my decision.”

“And are you good with it?”

“I was.” I wrapped my arms around myself and walked toward the parking lot.

“And now?” He slipped his strong arm over my shoulders, pulling me against his side and making it hard to walk.

“I’m not so sure.”



## CHAPTER 29



## MATT

Taking her home the night before was like stabbing myself in the chest. It was my fault that she wasn't staying, and not that I blamed her one bit, but it didn't deaden the pain of watching her walk into her apartment alone. She didn't even look back. I spent Saturday working on the portrait just to keep myself from slipping into depression or eating everything in the house, which wasn't much. I was grateful for Sunday showing up fast. It gave me a chance to at least see her.

"And today is a new day." I mumbled in my car as I sat in the parking lot of the yoga place. I pulled down the mirror above my head and lifted my eyebrow playfully before smiling. I could do this. I could win her back, and I would.

"You coming?" A knock at my window caused me to stiffen.

Lanie. Erica's best friend.

I got out and smiled. "I am. Did she tell you that I was up for an afternoon of torture and couldn't imagine letting anyone else share it with me besides you?"

She laughed and ran her fingers through her hair. She was pretty, petite. Too small in my opinion, but it was irrelevant. She wasn't Erica.

"You're too much. Just try really hard this time not to fall over and topple all of us over with you." She giggled and I smiled.

“Really? I did that on purpose. You just gotta bring that up?” I was a little surprised that she wasn’t pissy with me after everything that happened with Erica, but maybe they weren’t as close as I was giving them credit for.

“Yeah right.” She opened the door and moved in as I paused and glanced back toward the parking lot.

“Is Erica not coming?” Worry swirled in the pit of my stomach. Surely she would have called.

“She’s already here. Her car is in the shop.” Lanie stopped by the front desk and picked up two towels, tossing one toward me.

I reached up and snagged it out of the air. “What’s the matter with her car?”

Erica walked around the corner and stopped. “I got rear-ended yesterday. I’m good, but the car... not so much.”

Her tank top and tight yoga pants left very little to the imagination, and even though I’d spent all day the day before staring at a mostly-naked picture of her, the real thing was always so much better.

I closed the distance between us and reached out, grabbing the side of her neck softly and rubbing my thumb over her soft skin.

“You sure you’re okay? Why didn’t you call me?” I let my eyes move around her face, memorizing everything about her that I hadn’t picked up before.

She smirked. “Why would I call you? You have a superman cape hidden somewhere in that big apartment of yours?”

“I might.” I took a shaky breath. “Damn, you’re gorgeous. How do you walk around without having a million guys trying to get your attention?”

“Who says they aren’t?” She reached up and pulled my hand from her as Lanie walked by chuckling.

“This way, guys. We’re going to be late, and you know what that means...”

I lifted my eyebrow and watched my girl. “What does that mean? Something tells me it’s nothing good.”

She wagged her eyebrows. “I dare you to be late and find out.”

“Not only no, but hell no.” I moved past her, grabbing her hand and pulling her with me. “She makes an example out of the late people, doesn’t she?”

“Oh, it’s way more fun than that.” Lanie glanced over her shoulder and giggled again.

“Lanie. You dating anyone?” I couldn’t help but ask.

Erica glanced over at me. “Why do you care?”

“I have friends, thank you.” I squeezed her hand and released her.

Lanie stopped just inside the door and whispered, “No, but if you have a brother, I’d be interested in meeting him.”

Erica and I both laughed loudly only to be reprimanded by the older woman bending in half at the front of the room.

“Silence, please. Come in quickly, quietly and get into downward dog. Find your center, your peace, yourself.” She stood up and put her hands on her hips and watched us.

I barked softly under my breath and got the reaction I was after. Both girls beside me laughed. The old woman up front didn’t seem to think I was too funny, nor charming.

“I’m just going to get back here.” I moved behind Erica and got into position, focusing on the sexy curve of her ass and legs and trying like hell to ignore the burn that ran up the back of my legs. I was sure to make a fool out of myself, but if it scored me points with the woman that captivated every part of me... it was worth it.

“Today we’re going to work on an advanced move called the handstand scorpion. Let me show you how it looks and just know that we’ll start working on it together. Do not be intimidated by it. Okay?” The instructor glanced around the room as Erica glanced back, her beautiful face contorted into complete terror.

“Uh oh. This can’t be good.” I turned my attention back to the instructor and tilted my head to the side as she went into a handstand and *then* contorted herself. “Oh no. Hell no.”

Erica turned to face me, put her hands over her mouth and laughed softly until her face turned red.

I moved up and wrapped her in a hug, kissing the top of her head. “If I do this... you spend the night with me tonight.”

“What?” She glanced up. “No way. That’s not fair.”

“Yeah, it is. Someone has to help put the stint along my spine when I break it. That should be you for making me come here.” I kissed her forehead and moved back.

“I didn’t make you come here. You came because-”

The instructor’s voice was sharp, and scared both of us. “Is there something you guys would like to discuss with the class?”

“Um, no, but thanks for the opportunity. It’s all you.” I lifted my hands and gave the woman a sweet smile. She didn’t seem to necessarily like sweet.

“Well then, why don’t you come on up and we’ll use you as the example today seeing that your pliable and fully willing to participate.”

“Me?” My voice rose three octaves and Erica and Lanie chuckled. “No. I’m good.”

“No, really. Come on up.” She motioned for me, not giving in. I was stuck.

“All right, yeah, sure.” I walked past her and growled at Erica. “You’re mine tonight for this shit.”

Her response was lost to the blood thundering past my ears as my heart raced. I was in for a world of hurt. I deserved a lot for fucking things up with Erica, but this seemed a little much. Or a lot.



“Are you sure you’re okay, Matt?” Lanie stood beside my car, her arm wrapped around Erica’s narrow shoulders.

“Yeah. I’m good.” I rolled my eyes and shook my head. “Last time I try to impress a woman by turning myself into a human pretzel. I’m way too big to do that kind of stuff.”

“I think you did great.” Erica shrugged, a smile playing on the side of her mouth.

“Lies. All lies.” I glanced around the parking lot. “Is your rental car here?”

“No. I got an Uber. You want to give me a ride home?” She turned and hugged Lanie as I nodded my response. Of course I wanted to take her home. I wanted to spend the night with her, which she was more than aware of.

“You guys be careful and have fun, okay?” Lanie glanced over at me.

“Absolutely, and I’ll be on the lookout for a guy you might be interested in.” I wagged my eyebrows. I didn’t know anyone, but I’d meet people. I always did.

“Awesome. Make sure he’s hot, rich as hell and has a huge-”

“Okay. That’s good.” Erica walked around to the other side of the car as I laughed. Lanie might be small, but she was ballsy as hell.

“Age matter?” I stood to my full height, getting ready to get in the car.

“Nope. Well, not like fifty or anything. I’m good with forties at the max and probably twenty-nine at the other end?” She put her hands on her hips. “Are you messing with me?”

“Nope. I’m a great matchmaker. See you later, Lanie.”

“You too, Matt.”

I got in and glanced over at Erica, who was watching me closely. “What?”

“You’re just setting her up to fail. You don’t even know anyone.” She buckled and shook her head, causing some of

her blond hair to loosen from her ponytail.

“I’ll find someone for her. You have to be focused on looking or you miss things, you know.” I started the car and backed up.

“No, I don’t know. Explain.” I loved that she wanted to challenge me. I’d spank her eventually for that shit when our relationship got better.

“All right, so take for instance when you got your car. What do you have?”

“A grey Mercedes. You know this.”

“Right, but before you got it, you barely noticed anyone driving around in a Mercedes, right?”

“I guess.”

“And afterward?”

She smiled and nodded. “Everyone had one. I remember thinking I was an idiot for getting the same car as everyone else in Seattle. Or I wondered if they had a big ass sale on them.”

“Exactly. It’s about focus. If we’re looking for love, we’re going to find it. Same goes with looking for love for our friends.”

“Our friends?” She smiled. “Are you considering Lanie one of *our* friends?”

“Yeah. Of course. She’s your best friend.” I reached over and gripped the top of her hand, ignoring the way she stiffened. “What’s yours is mine, and what’s mine is mine. You’ll get it down soon.”

She jerked her hand from me and popped me in the chest. “Ass.”

“I love ass.” I licked my lips and pointed to the pet store up ahead. “This the one where your little fur-ball is hiding out?”

“Yes.” She tugged at her seatbelt and sat up straight in her seat. She was beyond cute in her excitement. “You think he’s

still there?”

“I’m sure he is. Let’s go check.” I pulled into the parking lot and chuckled under my breath as her breathing changed. She was excited, and I loved it.



“He’s so squirmy,” Erica complained as we walked to her condo. She held the puppy against her chest and I toted the massive amounts of stuff that neither of us knew went along with having a dog. “But cute. Yes, you are.”

“Whatcha got there, Erica?” a raspy voice called out, the owner a plump woman with wiry hair and a cane.

“It’s a new puppy, Ms. Gander. Do you have any animals?” Erica moved toward the woman and I paused by the door, holding my patience as I clutched everything in my arms.

“Nope, but I’d love to have one that looks like that feller over there.” She pointed her cane toward me, and I glanced back.

Erica laughed. “You want an animal that looks like Matt?”

“Heavens to Betsy, yes. Tall, strong and fine as a fig tree.” She wagged her unibrow at me. Creeped out wouldn’t begin to describe how I felt. I stifled a full body shiver.

“Can you get the door, Erica? I’ll just put this stuff inside while you and Ms. Gander Mountain are talking.” I whispered the last half, but Erica must have heard, because she swatted me before opening the door and threatening me to be nice.

I walked in and set the stuff down on the table. The place smelled of vanilla and sugar. Erica must have baked something. I made my way into the kitchen and found a plate of chocolate chip cookies wrapped in foil.

“Now I just need some milk.” I got in the fridge and got out the gallon, grabbed two glasses and moved to the living room.



She walked in and closed the door behind her, still chuckling to herself. “She likes you. Like, really likes you.”

“Creepy. Come over here and get a cookie before I eat them all.” I unwrapped the package, dipped a cookie in milk and ate the whole thing in a bite or two.

“You know cookies aren’t exactly what you’re supposed to eat after working out.”

“Says who?” I settled back on the couch and watched her closely.

*I could so play house with this woman until it became a way of life.*

“They say.” She sat down and lifted the puppy up in front of her. “What are we going to call you?”

“Ask *they*. Seems like *they* know everything.” I smirked as she gave me a look over her shoulder. “How about Buster?”

“Or Cocoa?”

“Or Sam?”

“How about Zek?”

“Hmmm... I like that. Zek it is.” I reached up and ran my hand down her back, rubbing it softly as she pressed against my touch. “You know I’m staying the night, right?”

“Says who?” she scoffed and set the dog down before turning to face me.

“Why *they* of course, and *they* are never wrong.”

It was effective enough. The conversation ended and the night began.

# CHAPTER 30



## ERICA

“You want a salad?” I leaned into the living room an hour later to find Matt cuddled up on the couch with Zek. How I had gone from not being sure that I was going to let him back into my life to agreeing (non-verbally) to let him stay the night was a mystery to me.

“I’d love one. You want my help?” He glanced up and smiled.

He so belonged right there on my couch, in the middle of my living room. Much like he belonged in the center of my world. Scary enough, if I wasn’t careful, that world would quickly come to rotate around him. That was never a good place to be, especially not with a ‘runner’ on my hands.

“No. You stay there. I’ll get it.” I worked to chop up a few things and made both of us big chef salads before setting the table and calling him over.

He moved up behind me and ran his hands over my shoulders and down my arms. “You still haven’t accepted my apology.”

“I’m trying to work through all of that.” I stifled a moan as he leaned down and pressed his mouth to the side of my neck, kissing me so sensually it hurt. His soft lips moved to hover just beside my ear.

“Tell me if there is anything I can do to help you get there faster. I’ll apply pressure to any part of what you’re struggling with if you need me to.” He kissed my ear and I shivered.

“I’m good, but thank you.” I moved out of his hold and sat down, ignoring the deep pulsing pleasure building between my thighs. The man could take me from cold to blistering hot in a matter of minutes. It was almost disturbing.

“Anything for you.” He moved around me and sat down, reaching for his fork. “So I think I’ll keep my place in Dallas until just after Christmas and then I’m going to take two weeks to go over to Saudi Arabia with Sophie and then I’ll move up here for good.”

“Sophie?” I tried to keep the angst out of my voice, but he could sense it. I could tell by the way he glanced up.

“She’s my best friend since I was a kid. Mean as a fucking snake when we were little, but she got better. Sort of.” He snorted and shoveled a big bite of salad into his mouth.

“Why is she going to Saudi Arabia? Work?” I wasn’t comfortable with the idea of Matt having a female best friend, but it really wasn’t my place to say anything. Where we might be headed back toward having a relationship, we didn’t have one yet. Not really.

“Yeah. She’s a reporter for NBC.” He gave me a cocky smile.

“What was that smile for?” I picked up my fork and glanced down at my plate, pushing the salad around a little.

“You’re jealous.” He laughed.

I glanced up. “No, I’m not. You and I are barely friends. Why would I care that you’re spending two weeks with a woman who’s pretty enough to be on the news channel in a foreign country?”

“Oh, wow.” He took another bite of his salad and got up, putting Zek in his cage. He moved toward me and reached down to pull me out of the chair. “Tell me you’re jealous.”

“No. I’m not.” I stiffened in his hold.

He gripped one of my hands and pulled it down, cupping his erection. “It turns me on to think you are. Just pretend for me.”

“Matt,” I mumbled and brushed my thumb over the head of his cock. “Don’t. I’m not ready for this.”

“Of course you’re ready for this.” He leaned down and kissed me. Hard.

I opened up, turning my head and sucking on his tongue the minute he pressed it into my mouth. Why was I giving myself over to him again? He would just end up hurting me.

“Stop thinking,” he mumbled against my mouth and gripped my hips, lifting me. “Legs around my waist. Now.”

I wrapped myself around him and breathed in deeply, wanting so much more than I should have. “I’m jealous.”

“I know you are.” He kissed me a few more times as his strong fingers dug into my ass, massaging it. “I love it.”

“Should I be?” I rolled my hips, working myself against him like the starving slut he forced me into becoming.

“Not at all. There’s only one woman I’ve wanted for the last two years.” He moved up toward the bedroom, never once loosening his grip on me.

“Please tell me it’s not this Sophie chick.” I pressed my breasts to his chest, loving how incredibly strong he was. No one could make me feel small, petite, feminine like he could.

“No, baby. It’s you. You knew that though.” He gripped my hips and forced me to slide down the front of his body. “Accept my apology. I’m not running again.”

“Lies,” I whispered and pulled my shirt over my head. A scream left me as he tackled me to the bed, his mouth hot and wet against the top of my breasts, his hands tearing at my pants to get them off.

“I’ll just have to prove it to you, Erica.”

“Just fuck me, please. No more talking.” I cupped his face in my hands and leaned down to kiss him as he threw my yoga pants across the room and snapped the front of my panties, popping the sides and laying waste to them. “I loved those.”

“I’ll get you more.” He moved up to lick at my throat. “Take your bra off.”

“Do it yourself,” I challenged him. The docile, fun-loving guy who’d captivated me from day one was nothing like the man above me.

He glanced up and smiled before moving back and forcing me to turn on my stomach. I yelped as he popped my ass hard.

“So bossy. Someone needs to teach you a few lessons.” He unhooked my bra before sliding his hands down my back, over the steep curve of my hips and squeezing my flesh. “So fucking hot, baby.”

I pressed my hands to the bed above me and lifted my ass in the air, teasing him. “Hard to believe you wanted to walk out on this.”

“I’m a fucking idiot.” He gripped my legs and moved to his knees before pressing his mouth against me. I wasn’t at all expecting it.

“Matt,” I gasped and tried to pull from him, but his hold was tight. Almost too tight.

“Relax and let me taste you.” His voice was deep, gravely, delicious.

Whether it was right or wrong, I didn’t care. I needed the carnality of the moment. We could figure out the damage of our night together tomorrow. I needed tonight, and by the way he worked his tongue against me, he needed it too.

I pressed my face to the bed and cried out as pleasure raced through my center, stealing my breath. “So good.”

“Yeah, you are.” He flicked his tongue over my clit before sucking it in his mouth. The painful press of his fingers gripping my ass was more than enough to throw me clear over the edge of ecstasy. “I can taste you. You’re getting close.”

“Harder,” I mumbled and closed my eyes, diving into what he must look like kneeling behind me, his arms wrapped around my legs, his hands clamped down on my flesh as he worshiped me with his mouth.

My orgasm slammed into me full force, and I arched my back and cried out before pressing back on him and rocking my hips hard.

“That’s it.” He rolled his thumb around the entrance of my body, dipping it in as I continued to cry out over and over. “Come for me again.”

“No. I need a-”

“You need to listen.” He pressed his finger into my body, jack-hammering it as I writhed with pleasure. “Come again.”

I worked myself against him until the world exploded. All the air in my lungs rushed between my lips and left me stunned, overwhelmed. Matt wouldn’t relent until I begged him to.

He moved back and I rolled over and pulled my knees toward my chest.

“Fuck,” I whimpered and rolled onto my side.

He didn’t say a word as he got a condom, pulled his jeans off and rolled it onto his thick shaft. His t-shirt was thrown into the pile of clothes near the bedroom door and he moved to the edge of the bed.

“My turn.” He bent his knees and reached out, grabbing my leg as I lay on my side and pulling me toward the edge of the bed. “Have I told you how much you mean to me? Was that part of my apology?”

He pressed into me and paused as I reached up and grabbed his neck, bringing him down so I could make love to his mouth.

“No. You haven’t told me.” I whimpered against his mouth as he crawled up on the bed and pressed his body against mine, forcing me to stay trapped on my side, my knees up, the position perfect for the deep fuck we were headed toward.

“You’re all I think about, Erica. No one else captivates me like you do.” He kissed me once more and extended his arms as he sunk down into me.

I groaned loudly and bit my lip as he rolled his hips, massaging my body with his. “I love it.”

“Good. It’s all yours.” His eyes darkened a little as he held my stare. “I love how well you take me inside your sweet, tight body.”

I moaned again and reached up to run my fingers over his shoulders. “I want to face you.”

“Turn on your back.” He pulled out and moved just enough for me to shift on my back. “I want it deep tonight.”

I mumbled my agreement and bent my legs around him, pulling them up to where the top of my thighs rested on my breasts.

“Such a good girl.” He glanced down and slid back inside of me. His dark blue stormy eyes returned to my face. “My girl.”

I wanted to call myself his girl, but I couldn’t. Instead, I gripped his arms and moaned over and over. He let loose, rocking the entire bed with his deep thrusts. The excitement of being trapped below him while he opened up the more alpha side of his personality was exhilarating.

“All mine.” He forced my legs down and pressed his chest to mine, locking me in a tight hug as he pressed forward and tapped against my g-spot.

“Oh, God, Matt. Please don’t stop.” I dug my fingers into his back as the pressure inside me built higher and higher.

“Breathe, baby.”

I sucked in air and screamed his name as electricity rolled from my center, snatching away any reserve I might have been holding back from him. I twitched and jerked my hips to ride the wave of pleasure he provided, never wanting it to stop.

He brushed my hair back and continued his strong, deep thrusts, not giving me a chance to change our pace or rhythm. It was all him.

“I love it,” I mumbled against his throat. “So much.”



“Me too, Erica.” He licked at my ear and bucked faster. “Hold tight and let me know if I hurt you.”

“Yes,” I whispered and tucked my face against the crook of his neck as he enjoyed himself for the next half hour. His muscles tightened as he lifted up and worked me for a minute more.

“Oh, shit. I’m gonna come.” He glanced down at me, cupping the back of my head with one hand and holding himself up with the other. “Watch me.”

“I am. I wanna see.” I let my eyes run down the length of our wet bodies before forcing myself to capture the expression on his face as he cried out.

Beautiful. Intense. Beyond sensual.

“Fuck, you feel so damn good. I could do this all night.” He rocked his hips forward before crashing down onto me.

I wrapped him in a tight hug and kissed him a few times as we lay there panting together.

“All night, hm?”

“Yeah. Give me five minutes and then you’re up.” He licked at my mouth. “I like reverse cowgirl, unless you’re shy?”

I smirked. “Not hardly, and I don’t even need five minutes.”

We took turns bringing each other pleasure half the night, but when it was over, I wasn’t sure I wanted him to stay. He had my body, but I was still trying to hold on to a piece of my heart.

“You want me to stay or go?” He brushed my hair back as he pressed me to the bed.

A million thoughts brushed by my mind. I desperately wanted him to stay, but if I woke up and he was gone again... I would be destroyed. Maybe it was prudent to save myself the pain.

“You can go. Just check on the puppy and lock up on your way out. I have work in a few hours.” I kissed him and brushed his hair back.

Sadness moved across his handsome face. “You sure?”

“Yeah. I enjoyed tonight, but I really do want to take it slow, Matt.”

He smirked. “Slow. All right.”

I rolled onto my side as my heart ached. Sex was a good first step, right?

If so, why did it feel so shitty to watch him walk out?

# CHAPTER 31



## MATT

I understood *why* she wanted me to leave, but that didn't make the pain any less. I got home around four that morning and dropped down on the new couch I'd splurged on. Pleasure still pumped through my veins, and would for hours to come because of her.

She was by far the finest, most put-together woman I'd ever known. And thanks to that, the worry over me falling short cropped up. I set my alarm and forced it away before slipping into a deep sleep that had me almost ignoring the incessant buzzing around me.

"What?" I jerked up, covered in sweat. Fear raced across my mind. "Just a dream."

I got up and lifted my hands toward the ceiling, stretching and trying to still my beating heart before walking toward the shower. I had to be in the office at nine for my first day as part of the advertising think-tank at M&B. Whatever the hell that meant.

A groan left me as I flipped on the light to the bathroom and started the shower. Everything hurt. Fucking yoga. Not only had I contorted myself into a knot during the class, but I kept up the antics at Erica's place, trying to impress her with my skills in the bedroom.

"Sure as hell hope it worked." I pulled off my clothes and got into the shower, letting the serenity around me close out the nagging truth. I was walking on a tight-wire with the woman of my dreams, and if I messed up again, the guy right

down the hall at work was more than ready to sweep in and steal her away.

“Hell, he might have already started to.” I forced myself to see Mitch as a friend of my father’s rather than competition. He might be interested, but he was way too old for a woman like Erica. Right?



“Hi, Matthew.” Joan, Erica’s secretary, stood up and gave me a motherly smile.

“Morning, Joan. I might be a little early.” I brushed my hand down my button down shirt and tried hard not to act like the monkey I felt like in my new suit. How anyone could stand to wear something so insanely constrictive and expect to be creative was beyond me. I had a few things to learn, to say the least.

“No, you’re good. Let me take you down to your office. It’s got three other people in it, but you’ll see the set up. Your team works close together, so it’s worked out well for them.” She turned and walked down the hall as I followed.

I glanced back toward Erica’s darkened office. “Erica not in yet?”

“Yeah, she’s here. She gets in around six most days. She’s in a meeting with Mitch this morning. She’ll come down and walk you through everything shortly, I’m sure.”

“Sounds good.” Meeting with Mitch? Why did that bother me so damn much?

“Here we go, sir.” She opened the door and moved back. “Matt, this is Lewis, Mandy and Sarah.”

I walked in and extended my hand to the dark-skinned guy with dreads. “Hey, I’m Matt. Nice to meet you, man.”

“Pleasure is all mine.” His accent was cool, but the fact that he was wearing slacks and an unbuttoned Hawaiian shirt

was way cooler. I'd have to hit Erica up to get me on his dress code.

"Matt. I'm Mandy. I'm the lead designer for our team. Nice to meet you." She extended her hand and smiled. She was cute, but a little overweight. The way she wouldn't hold my eye contact told me that something bothered her. Probably that. I couldn't help but hope that I could help, if she'd let me.

It was just my childish desire to make everyone like me roaring to life.

"And you must be Sarah." I shook the last girl's hand, smiling warmly at her as she beamed.

"You're Damon's brother?" Sarah released my hand and bit her bottom lip. "You guys look nothing alike. I mean, you're really good looking too, but so different."

Mandy laughed. "Sarah. Really?"

"Oh, sorry." She pressed her fingers to her lips. "I forget that I work in an office with rules and stuff."

I chuckled. "Where did you work before?"

She ran her hand over her dark hair and let out a soft sigh. "National Geographic. I loved it there, but they closed my division, and Mandy was a good friend from high school. So... a position opened here for design and I decided that it was time to grow up and get a real paycheck. Or a steady one at least."

"I totally know that feeling." I nodded and glanced over toward Joan. "Thanks for showing me down here. Will you let Erica know that I got here early? I'm trying to make a good impression on the new boss."

Joan laughed. "Of course I will. You guys treat Matt like one of your own. He's a great guy."

Warmth spread over my cheeks and chest. "I'm not sure about that, but I'm glad to see my ruse is working."

The group laughed as Lewis pointed to an empty desk. "That one is yours, man. Feel free to get settled and then I'll

walk you down to the supply room and give you the grand tour, unless you've already gotten it.”

“Nope. I've tried really hard to stay away from office buildings over the last four years.” I walked toward the desk and pulled out the chair, fighting back the feeling that I was disappointing free-spirited people all over the universe by putting on a tie and handing my life over to ‘the man’.

“I hear that.” Lewis dropped down in his chair and smiled as I glanced over my shoulder. “But... your father has done a great job of creating a little haven here for us. We live by a different set of rules than most of the rest of the company. Just follow those, and you'll be good to go.”

“And those rules are?” I turned as someone moved into the doorway.

Erica. Looking like sin in her cream-colored skirt, blue heels and light blue top. Her hair was halfway up and her lips were dark red. My balls tightened in anticipation of stripping her down and licking her dry.

“To dream big.” She walked in and stood in the middle of the room, giving her full attention to me. “To speak up and to dress comfortably, while still maintaining a professional appearance.”

“So, no togas?” I smirked and pushed my chair in.

“Only on Fridays.” Mandy leaned around Erica and laughed.

“You have a minute?” My girl was ruling the room, and everything about the power dripping off of her left me hard and achy.

*Professional. Stay professional.*

“Absolutely.” I walked to the door as she moved out into the hall. I paused and glanced back toward Lewis. “I'll get that tour when I get back if you're still up for it.”

“Absolutely, man. Take your time.”

I walked out into the hall and almost plowed into Erica. I reached out and grabbed the back of her shoulders, not quite

sure why she'd stopped.

"Hey." I pressed myself to her back and ran my hands down her arm.

"Sorry. I almost lost a thought from a meeting I had earlier. I need to write it down." And like that, she was jogging down the hall toward her office.

I laughed under my breath and followed her into her spacious corner office. "It's nice in here. Who you gotta sleep with to get one of these big beauties?"

She glanced up from scribbling something down on a post-it note. "Ha. Ha."

"What? This is great." I walked to the tall floor to ceiling windows that took up half the wall space and let my eyes move along the city. "It's peaceful in here."

"It's built for people who spend God awful amounts of hours in their offices." She walked toward the door and closed it.

I spun on my heel to face her. "You locking that?"

"What?" Her cheeks colored pink. "No. Behave."

"Not a chance." I moved toward her, meeting her in the middle of the room and sliding my hands over her perfect hips. "Why is it such a fucking turn on to see you running the show?"

"Because you like strong women?" She pulled my hands from her waist.

"No. I like you." I moved up behind her as she stopped beside her desk and reached for a folder and a pen. "You look really good in this skirt. What color are your panties?"

"Matt!" She jerked around to find me standing right in front of her.

"What?" I touched the side of her face. "I really wanted to wake up next to you this morning. I have this great recipe for sticky buns that I was going to try out, but no... had to kick me out."



“You know why I did that.” She cupped her hand over mine. “Rule number one. No touching me at work. I don’t need everyone talking. It’s hard enough to keep control of these people. They’ll think I got my job because of you and that will be the end of it.”

“No they won’t.” I leaned down and kissed her, almost surprised that she *didn’t* pull back. Maybe she hadn’t really wanted me to go the night before. If only I had pushed a little, and not just with my hips.

“Let’s fill out your paperwork and then Lewis can show you around the building.” She kissed my palm and pushed at my chest. “Back up. You’re making me wet.”

I growled at the thought. “Yeah, cause that’s going to help me want to behave.”

“Your problem, not mine.” She walked to the small table in the center of the room and sat down. “Come here and start filling this stuff out.”

“I hate this shit.”

“Everyone does. Grow up and come here.”

“And what do I get if I do.”

She smirked. “A job.”

“I want more than that.”

“A friend who lets you paint her naked?” She lifted an eyebrow.

“How about a girlfriend who lets me stay overnight and not leave the minute the passion is over.”

“Is the passion between two lovers really ever over?”

Now she was playing with me.

“Touché.” I sat down and reached for the pen. “When do we get to move from lovers to being in love?”

“When you convince me that you don’t have one foot out the door.” She leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms over her chest, causing her breasts to lift a little.

I licked my lips and forced myself to stay focused.

A knock on the door sounded, and she huffed and got up, walking slowly toward it.

“I like that skirt on you. I’d like it better on the floor, but beggars can’t be choosers.”

“Hush.” She gave me a stern look that had my heart fluttering in my chest before opening the door.

“Hey. I meant to tell you that I had two tickets to the art show over at Dantana for Friday night. I have to help my daughter with something, so if you and Lanie want to go.” Mitch. How the fuck did Mitch know about Lanie? Were him and Erica close enough that she’d brought up her best friend?”

“Yeah. That’s awesome. Thank you.” Her voice was soft, friendly, but not flirty. His on the other hand.

“Absolutely.” He poked his head in the door as Erica took a step back. “Hey, Matt. Good to see you’re still alive and kicking.”

“Thanks.” I chuckled. “I think?”

“Welcome. Let me know if you need anything.” He turned back to Erica. “I’ll be out for the rest of the day, but you have my cell. Call if you need anything too, okay?”

“Yeah, sure.” She smiled and closed the door, turning to face me. It was my turn to hand out a stern look.

“I don’t like him.”

“I don’t like Sophie.”

“You don’t know her,” I protested.

“And I don’t want to.” She walked toward me and sat down. “Fill out the paperwork.”

“Come with me to Saudi Arabia. You’ll love her.”

“No way. How uncomfortable would that be?” She rolled her eyes.

“Not at all. It’s in January. By then you and I will be engaged, so the way I see it... you’re stuck, buttercup.”

“Where is this boost of confidence coming from?”

“I made love to the most beautiful woman in the world last night. It’s hard not to be high on life.”

“Oh, you did, did you? Do I know her?”

“No, but you’d like her.” I wagged my eyebrows.

“Not this again...”

# CHAPTER 32



## ERICA

It had been one hell of a week trying to work through some of the things on my long-list of to-dos at work, help Matt with the painting, and avoid both him and Mitch on the relationship front. I had no doubt that Matt and I would end up together, but I wanted to be more cautious about it after knowing how insecure he was.

The man in the bedroom was a little bit different from the one that had everyone laughing at the office and swooning in the boardroom, but not much. When he wasn't paying attention to how people reacted, he was simply himself, and more like his father and Damon than he probably realized.

I sat in my office on Friday morning and flipped through my personal journal. I had so many decisions to make, but I wanted to ensure that they were grounded in truth. The truth was that I loved Matt, and had for two years. The truth was that he left my heart soaring, my body on fire and my mind spinning.

And the truth was simply that I was scared. We were so close to becoming something great, and I half-expected him to pack up and run back to Dallas sooner rather than later, but he hadn't yet.

"Speaking of Dallas." I dropped my journal in a drawer and pulled up my calendar on my computer. Joan already had the details for the flights the next morning and a car to pick us up from the airport and shuttle us over to the office. Everything was set.

Everything but one thing.

How were we supposed to act? Kent and Damon knew that I had feelings for Matt. Were we going as business associates or had Matthew finally fessed up to having feelings for me too?

I pressed the button on my phone and called down to the design room. Lewis answered, sounding chipper as per usual.

“Hey, boss. What can we do you for?”

I smiled. “Matt’s not working today, right?”

“He will be, but because of all the hours he put in this week already, Mandy told him just to come back in next week. He’s in Dallas for some of the week, right?”

“Yeah, that’s right. I just forgot.” I hung up and called his cell. It went to voicemail. I wasn’t surprised seeing that it was only eleven. “Hey. It’s Erica. I’m just checking to see if you’re still interested in going to the art gallery with me tonight, or if you have other plans. Give me a-” I beep resounded in my ear. He was calling me back.

“Hey. Were you leaving a message?” His voice was gravely and filled with sleep. He sounded impossibly cute.

I lamented over not being there to wake him up myself. “Yeah. I just wanted to see if you were still planning on going with me to Dantana.”

“The art gallery?” He let out a loud yawn.

I pulled the phone from my ear and smiled. “Yeah. That’s the one.”

“Absolutely. We can check it out and then grab something to eat.”

“Okay. Am I picking you up or-”

“No. I’ll come by the apartment and get you around six. That work?”

“Yeah. And then tomorrow morning, we’re going to Dallas. I’ll pick you up for that trip.”

“Okay.” There was an odd pause.

“Something wrong? Are you wanting to drive yourself?”

“No. No, that’s not it.”

“Then what?” I stood up, feeling less sure about myself by the second. It would seem he wasn’t the only one that needed to get over insecurities and grow up.

“It’s just that my father and Damon don’t know about us.”

“Really?” I couldn’t hide the surprise in my voice. “I’m pretty sure your brother does.”

“Yeah, but my father doesn’t, not fully. I know him and Damon are *hoping* that we’ll get together, but I need to tell him before we just surprise him by showing up as a couple.”

“We’re not a couple. At least not yet.” I pressed my hand to my hip, not sure why I was so offended by the conversation, but I was.

“You know what I mean, Erica.”

“Not really, but you can explain tonight. I’ll see you around six. Someone just knocked on my door. Enjoy your day off.” I let him squeeze in a parting word before hanging up the phone.

It was going to be a long weekend, and one that was sure to honestly define how I felt about taking the next step with him. If he hadn’t told Kent how he felt about me, how serious was he? They were close... like my father and I used to be.

If he were still alive, there wasn’t much he wouldn’t know about Matt.

The fact that Kent was in the dark with Matt and I becoming more than friends spoke volumes... or maybe it didn’t. I wasn’t sure.



“Hey, pretty girl.” He turned toward me as I opened the door and got into the car.

“Hey. The traffic bad on the way over here?” I buckled up and stiffened a little as he leaned over and pulled me into a warm kiss. It only took a second of being pressed against him to loosen me up. How lame were my standards?

“Not bad at all. I’d drive anywhere to get to you though.” He wagged his eyebrows before moving back into his seat. “So tell me about this gallery. I haven’t heard much about it.”

“It’s locally owned, like a lot of the galleries around here. The artist actually lives in Paris, but his sister runs the gallery here for him. His pieces are abstract, complex, hard to decipher.”

“Hmmm... sounds like my kind of guy.”

“Very true.” I clasped my hands in my lap and sunk back against my seat. “I’m so glad this week is over.”

“I bet.” He reached over and wrapped his hand around mine. “I’m looking forward to the weekend.”

“Me too. It’ll be nice to get out of here for a while.”

“Who’s watching Zek?”

“Lanie said she would do it.”

“That’s great, and are you planning on staying at my place tomorrow night or you want me to get us a hotel?”

“I think it might be best if you stay at your place and I get my own hotel. I’m on a business trip, and even though Kent is your father, I don’t want him thinking less of me.” I shrugged. “I mean, maybe it’s a *good* thing that he doesn’t know that we’re working through our feelings together. It’s not very professional of me to-”

“You’re upset.” He pulled his hand back into his lap. “I knew it. I knew the minute you hung up on me earlier that you were upset about me not mentioning us to my father.”

“No, it’s fine.” I glanced over at him as the tightness in my chest got worse. “I get it. Honestly.”

“It’s not fine, but I don’t want to drag my family in the middle of this until you and I settle on whether we’re together



or we're not. My dad already thinks I'm a flake. This will only make it worse. You mean a lot to him at the company and he's on edge that I'm going to mess that up."

"And who's making that call?" I moved my arms up to wrap them around my chest, as if I could protect myself from the oncoming fight.

"We both are, Erica." He pulled onto the freeway. "Let's just have fun tonight. Can we? I know you're tired of thinking about everything that happened. Let's forget about it for one night and just enjoy each other's company. I love being with you."

"Yeah, okay. You're right." I let out a long exhale through my nose and reached up to turn on the radio. We could have fun together and not think about the consequences, but he would be ten shades of pissed when the night ended with a quick hug at my door and him headed home to jerk off alone. I wasn't making another move until I understood where we stood together. My heart couldn't handle it.

"Cool." He let out a sigh and turned toward the art district. "You're gonna love how the portrait of you turned out. I'm a little tense about sharing it with anyone besides you."

"Oh yeah? Why?" I glanced over toward him as sadness filled my chest. We weren't going to move past our immaturities and ever become anything solid with the way we were headed. He wanted to pretend that we were together until it got too real, too uncomfortable, and then he would back off, leaving me standing there, holding the empty bag that I believed to be our future.

"Because, baby... You're insanely hot. That picture is going to give every man in the room a woody." He snorted. "I'm just not sure I want all that competition."

I let the conversation die, because the way my mood was souring, he wouldn't have wanted to hear my response to it.

"This it right here?" He pointed to the art gallery ahead of us.

“Yeah. That’s it. The woman who runs it is a little odd, but you’ll appreciate why. She lives alone with ten cats and a million abstract paintings.” I smiled and unbuckled as he parked the car.

“Hey.” He turned and reached out, grabbing my hand. “You okay? I feel a shift in our evening. I just want to make sure that you know that I plan on talking to my father about us.”

There was no ‘us’, but I was getting blue in the face from saying it.

“I’m good.” I reached for the door and got out, feeling for the first time since meeting Matt that maybe we weren’t evenly matched. He was brilliant and funny, and fucked like a wild man, but there was more to life than a few chuckles and a hot romp in the sheets. Where would he be when I needed him most?

How would he present me to other people? Like my father, who would flaunt me around as the best thing since sliced bread, or like my mother, someone to be brought in the limelight when it best served her or silenced when it didn’t?

I was sure a couple of weeks ago, but now... not so much.

“You staying the night with me?” Matt touched my lower back as we walked to the door.

“No. I need to wash clothes and pack tonight. Maybe when we get back.” I reached for the door and walked in, not giving him a chance to respond.

As much as I wanted to forget the fear of loss, I just couldn’t. There were no guarantees in life, but I needed more than he’d given so far. Maybe then I could step back into the unknown with him and really give ‘us’ a try.

# CHAPTER 33



## MATT

She was pulling back - big time. Where I was the one trying with all my might to prove myself to her, the more I pushed, the farther she seemed to pull back. She was fine with sex, but talking about the relationship? No.

I brushed my fingers by my lips as I pulled up to the private hanger. She was supposed to pick me up that morning, but I was running a little behind and didn't want to put her in a frenzy because of it.

I needed a new tactic. Damon would know what to do.

After parking, I grabbed my bag and walked to the plane as anticipation danced in my stomach. No matter what happened between us, I was pretty sure she would forever have an impact on me. There hadn't been a time over the last two years of her working for my father at M&B that seeing her hadn't left me tingling, excited, scared.

I walked up the stairs and nodded at the flight attendant before turning my attention on Erica. Her hair was in a loose bun and her dress was business-like, but a little more casual than what she wore in the office. Long legs that went on for days and cream-colored heels that looked good on her. I could almost imagine her in nothing but her garter and the heels, laid across a bed, moaning for me.

"Morning." I smiled and moved to sit down beside her. "You sleep good?"

"Yeah." She turned to face me, her expression peaceful. "Really good."

“Awesome.” I leaned over and kissed her cheek. “About last night-”

“No. I need to apologize. I don’t care if Kent knows about us dating or not. It’s probably best that he doesn’t.”

“Wait. We’re dating now?” I snorted and reached over to squeeze her knee.

“Sounds better than fucking, right?” Her smile brightened up the inside of the plane.

“I actually like the sound of us fucking.”

She chuckled and shook her head. “I don’t know what we are, but I’m tired of thinking about it.”

“All right, then I’ll just keep working to steal your heart and your panties and you just relax and try to forgive me. Deal?”

“Yeah. Maybe.” She smiled and turned her attention to the flight attendant. “Do you have coffee made?”

“Sure do. And for you, Mr. Bryant?”

“Mr. Bryant is my father, but yes, I’ll take a cup too.” I leaned back and let my eyes run along her legs as she looked out the window. “You look incredible today. So far beyond beautiful it hurts.”

“You’re just being sweet.” She turned back to face me, her blue eyes filled with far too many questions.

One decision to leave and not call and I was back to square one. Why? Something in her past? I had to know.

“I am a sweet guy. You’ve tasted me. You should know.” Just talking about it had me getting hard. She blushed. The softer side of her. I sighed internally like a love-sick fool. “Tell me about your love life in the past. Any one name repeated over and over in your little pink diary?”

“It’s black, and you mean someone besides you?”

Score. At least I was in there.

“Why am I not surprised that it’s black?” I laughed as she did too.

“I haven’t dated many guys.” She shrugged and fiddled with her dress. “And I haven’t been with anyone seriously since college.”

“Me either. The college part. I rarely date guys.” I winked and reached out to take her hand as the flight attendant told us to hold off on the coffee as the flight was taking off.

“I was with my childhood sweetheart from sixth grade, when I started dating, to my senior year in college. Ten years.” She turned her head to look back out the window. “Ten long, good years.”

Bingo.

“And what happened?” I pulled her hand to my mouth and kissed her fingers. My body was tight with anxiety over this shit swirling between us and the fact that she hadn’t stayed with me the night before, but I understood it. She was protecting herself. I could respect that, though the alpha inside of me still wanted to tear down all her walls and prove myself worthy.

“I don’t know, honestly. One day he came in and said he didn’t *feel* it anymore, which was funny, because I hadn’t *felt* it for years.” She shrugged. “After making the commitment to be with someone forever, you would expect it to last a lot longer than ten years. Guess I misunderstood what forever meant.”

“Or you were with the wrong man.” I reached over and touched the side of her face, wanting to apologize again, but knowing it was futile. She’d have to learn to trust me through my actions, not my words.

“Maybe so,” she mumbled, her eyes moving around my face as if searching for something.

I moved over toward her and slid my hand deep into her hair, tightening my grip just a little as I leaned down and kissed her a few times. I brushed my nose by hers and breathed in deeply.

“I missed you last night, but I know why you didn’t come home with me.” I kissed her again. “I’ll prove myself to you, Erica. I promise.”

She touched the side of my face, drawing me down for another kiss. She was battling herself on whether to reject me, or keep me forever. The *real* forever. I could sense indecision all over her.

“I like that you’re willing to try.” She kissed me again, pressing her tongue against my lips as if knocking on the door. I opened up and groaned a little as her tongue slid by mine. So delicious and sweet. It wasn’t going to take much and I’d have her in the back of the plane, worshiping her beautiful body and trying to heal her soul in any way she would let me.

The flight attendant cleared his throat. “Um... coffee?”

We jerked back and laughed. Maybe the worship could start later that night if I played my cards right.

My brother would be a great resource for how to play the game altogether. Maybe.



“Are you sure you’re okay with me staying here?” Erica glanced over toward my father as he nodded.

“Yes. Karen and I had Martha make up a bed for you and everything. It’s just overnight, and you know you’re always welcome in my home, Erica.” My dad moved forward and pulled Erica into a hug before glancing over at me. “How are you? Behaving?”

“Never.” I wagged my eyebrows and moved up to hug him. The smell blasting out of the kitchen left me feeling like home would always be my dad’s house, no matter how old I got. “Where’s Damon? Bethany?”

“They’re out back. Let’s get your luggage stowed away and you can join them.” Karen moved to pick up my bag. My stepmother was petite like Bethany. I chuckled and picked up the bag.

“No way are you toting our stuff. Just lead the way, and I’ll put it up.” I took Erica’s bag from her as my father wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

“Red or white wine,” he asked her while leading her into the kitchen.

“Both?” She laughed and the sound filled me with warmth. Why the hell was I running in the opposite direction of her for the last two years? Right. Fear of being consumed by her. Too late. She was all the fuck I thought about, and it didn’t seem like that would be changing anytime soon.

“How are you?” Karen glanced over her shoulder. “I mean, like really? You moving up to Seattle is a big step. I’m proud of you.”

I smiled. “I’m good. Just trying to work through things with Erica, and settling in, but I’m really good.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” She opened a door and moved back to let me go in.

“Thanks. I’m doing much better in the office setting than I would have thought. I hate being in a tiny box and only having a computer to look at, but my team has been awesome. They’re a bunch of artists too, so we have some good conversation, and the design projects are honestly pretty cool. I could see myself surviving there for at least another month.”

She chuckled and pulled me into a hug as I turned around. “Just a warning... your brother and Bethany are in wedding mode, so every conversation they have has something to do with the wedding.”

“Did we set a date yet?” I squeezed her and moved back as she turned to walk out into the hallway.

“Yes, but I’ll let them fill you in on all of it.” She lifted her hands and walked toward the kitchen. “You would think it’s happening next week with all the discussion about it, but I’m pretty sure they’re looking at early December.”

“This year?” I almost swallowed my tongue. No way the two of them would be able to pull together a wedding in a month.



“Yep.” She glanced over her shoulder and gave me a look. “Maybe you can talk some sense into them.”

“Right.” I lifted my eyebrow. “Because I’m the sensible one in the family.”

She chuckled. “It’s not even a destination wedding. Bethany wants it here.”

“Oh. Wow. So a big wedding?”

“Not really.” She waved me away. “Go talk to them about it. It’ll be good for them to have a new person to share all of this with.”

“Sounds like fun.” Or not. I was grateful that things had worked out with Bethany and Damon, but wedding planning sucked. No matter who was involved.

“There’s my little brother.” Damon walked toward me with a big smile on his face.

I couldn’t help but return the gesture. “What’s up, bro?”

Erica was sitting next to Bethany out on the patio, the two girls both having big smiles on their faces and seemed to be laughing. I loved how well she fit right into the mix, like she belonged there.

“How is it? Working for M&B? Having Erica as your mistress? Living in the art capital of the States?” He pulled me into a quick hug and moved back, patting my chest. “You loving it or scared shitless?”

I took a moment to think about it. Oddly enough, for the first time in a long time, I wasn’t scared at all. I was worried about the situation with me and Erica, but not scared.

“I’m actually good.” I shrugged. “I got a lot of shit to work through with Erica, but otherwise, I’m good. Job is all right, apartment is amazing and Erica is everything I could imagine wanting in a woman.”

“Awesome. So you guys are together now?”

“Um... no.” I ran my hand down my face as he growled.

“What? Why the fuck not?” He glanced behind him and back to me. “Did she not accept your apology for that stunt you pulled a few weeks back?”

“She accepted it, but she’s still processing it. She’s got some baggage in her past around men getting up and leaving her. It was probably the *one* thing I shouldn’t have done. Had I known, I would have called after leaving that Monday, but I didn’t.” I slipped my hands in my pockets and drew in a deep breath. “I don’t know what to do to speed things up. She’s pushing hard against me every time I try, but I keep trying.”

“Good. Don’t relent.” He nodded toward the kitchen. “Grab a beer with me.”

“Sounds good.” I followed him in and moved to lean against the counter as he grabbed two beers from the fridge. “I’m in love with her for sure, but words aren’t working. I’m going to have to figure out how to *show* her how I feel, and that I’m committed.”

“Good.” He handed me a bottle and popped the top on his. “You told me how to get Bethany back, and it worked. You remember what you said?”

“Yeah. Be there for her when she needs you most, and don’t say a word while you’re there. Just support her.”

“That shit worked like a charm.” He tilted his bottle toward me. “You need to take your own advice, and a little bit of mine.”

“And your advice would be?” I lifted an eyebrow and smirked.

“To make love to her every chance you get. Keep your hands on her. Women like to feel protected, cherished and physically adored. Make sure she gets a lot of that.”

“Every time she’ll let me, for sure.” I followed him into the living room and out toward the back of the house. “How’s the wedding stuff coming?”

He opened the door and glanced back. “Don’t even ask...”

# CHAPTER 34



## ERICA

**I**t was odd how much I felt like I belonged at the table with Matt and his family. He made sure to pull me into every conversation and touched me in some matter over and over, almost as if he wanted to reassure me that I belonged to him, but did I?

Of course I did. Why was I fighting it so damn hard?

“I’ll clean all of this stuff up,” Karen spoke to Kent. “You guys just go have your meeting with Erica here. There is no reason for you to go all the way up to the office.”

“Sounds good.” Kent stood and stretched before glancing down at me and then to Damon. “You guys okay with that?”

Bethany and Martha picked up a handful of empty dishes, and I felt odd not helping clear the table.

“Yep. I’m going to start a fire in the living room and then we can talk. That okay?” Damon got up and moved away from the table.

“I’ll help clean up and then join you guys.” I smiled and stood, gathering plates and ignoring everyone fussing around me about me working on the dishes. “Hey. I like being involved in this kind of stuff. Leave it be.”

Matt chuckled. “Back up, people. She gets what she wants.”

“You included.” I glanced over at him and gave him a cocky grin.

“You’ve had me for two years. I just don’t think either of us fully realized it.” He moved up behind me as I leaned over to get another dish and ran his hand over my hip. Luckily enough, everyone had scattered as if sensing that we needed a moment.

I turned with a handful of dishes in my hands and looked up at him. My heart skipped a beat. “I thought you wanted to talk to your family before-”

“Nope. I was wrong.” He leaned down and kissed the tip of my nose. “And you knew I was in the wrong. You gotta start telling me. Just lay it out, bare it all.”

“We’re talking about the error of your ways and not sex, right?”

He smirked. “We’re talking about anything you want to talk about.”

“No losing your man card today.” I laughed and moved around him. Trepidation would have to have its way with me another day. I was working too hard to relax and just take things in moment by moment. I wanted ‘us’ to move forward, for me to forgive him and not be in constant fear that I wasn’t enough to keep him. We needed to talk it out, but now wasn’t the time, nor the place.

I put the dishes next to the sink and reached over to rub the top of Martha’s shoulders. “How long have you worked for Mr. Bryant?”

“Thirty years.” Her smile beamed.

“That’s incredible.” I glanced back as Bethany walked back in the room. “So you’ve seen a lot of shenanigans with these two boys of his?”

“More than I care to discuss.” She shook her head.

Bethany laughed. “Erica. We should totally have a night out with Martha. Get her a few drinks and ask for the best stories of the last thirty years.”

Damon’s voice startled me. “Or you should just behave and stop trying to stir shit up.”

“Watch your language.” Martha gave Damon a motherly look as we snickered.

“I’m sorry.” He moved into Bethany’s arms, leaning down to kiss her a few times as I tried to look away. “You want to hang out with Matthew while I meet with Erica?”

“Yep. I need to talk to him about the wedding anyway.” She glanced over toward me. “And you too, Erica. Would you consider being one of my bridesmaids?”

How awkward would it be to agree and then have things fall between the cracks with Matt? I must have stared just a little too long.

“I mean, it’s okay if not. You can just let me know when-” she started to backtrack.

“No. It’s good.” I forced a chuckle. “I got lost in my thoughts. Yes, I’ll definitely do it for you.”

Relief swept across Bethany’s pretty face. “Oh, good.”

“No wearing white though, okay? Only Beth gets to tell that lie.” Damon wagged his eyebrows and walked out after Bethany swatted at him.

Martha glanced over her shoulder. “That boy is never going to grow up.”

“Do any of them?” I smiled and wiped my hands before walking toward the living room. Strong arms wrapped around me from behind and I sunk against Matt. The familiar smell of his cologne filled my senses, and my body worked up and wanted to purr.

“Hey.” He kissed the side of my neck. “You fit in almost too good here. You got plans for the rest of your life?”

I snorted. “I’m thinking that might be a little much in terms of long-range planning. I am going to be in the wedding, so if you’re going to break my heart again, just make sure you do it after the event?”

He moved back, and I turned in his arms. “I was scared. You know this.”

“Are you still scared?”

“Yep. Terrified.” He leaned down and brushed his nose by mine, his actions in complete contradiction with his words. “Terrified that I’m going to miss out on the greatest love affair of my life.”

I lifted up and pressed my lips to his. All the bullshit I’d fed myself about Tanner leaving me because I wasn’t enough was just that - crap. It was a way to protect myself just in case no one ever loved me again, a way to set my expectations low.

“Stop being so sweet. You’re going to melt my resolve.” I wrapped my arms around his neck and pressed my breasts to his chest.

“Can I lick it off of you when it melts?” He nipped at my lips.

My body hummed, my nipples budded tight.

“How do you have me wanting to crawl into bed with you when last night I promised myself that I wasn’t going to sleep with you again until we figured this stuff out between us?”

“Because we are figuring it out.” He kissed me again as Damon groaned from down the hall.

“Really? I’m the only one that’s supposed to make out with a good-looking woman in the hallway. Get your own identity, Matt!”

We laughed and pulled away from each other.

Matt wrapped an arm around my shoulders as we walked toward the living room. “She is insanely fine, right? Wait. Don’t answer that. I’d hate to beat you up in front of her.”

“Beat me up?” Damon’s expression changed, and I slipped out from under Matt, knowing where it was all headed.

“Oh, Lord.” Kent moved up beside me as I stopped at the edge of the living room and watched the two men circle each other, arms out, knees bent like two wrestlers. “We’re not going to get anything done today.”

“It would certainly seem that way.” I yelped as they plowed into each other, Damon sliding back a little on the tile as Matt pushed. “Yeah, I’m out. I can’t stand to see someone get hurt, and it’s going to happen, isn’t it?”

“Always does.” Kent turned and walked into the living room. “So how are you liking Mitch? I feel like he was a big win for the firm.”

I hesitated, only because the need to tell Kent that the new hire was hitting on me rode hard on my shoulders. It really wasn’t that he was being inappropriate, or that I couldn’t shut it down myself like a big girl, but I almost felt like I was lying by not mentioning it. Something to assess later.

“He’s great. He’s been really good to the staff and he’s on the ball all the time.” I sat down on the couch and leaned back, crossing my legs.

“He lost his wife about three years ago, and really became a good man out of it. Weird how death can force you into being a better person.” Kent shrugged and sat beside me, reaching over to grab a portfolio. “Let’s look at these final drawings for the advisory logo. I know Mitch was all for them. I assume I will be too.”

“Highly unlikely, but I have an ace in the hole in my back pocket.”

He smiled. “You made me an extra drawing?”

“Always. This isn’t my first rodeo.” I cringed as the guys hit the wall and laughed loudly. “Or should I say circus?”



The meeting with Kent was over by the time Damon walked into the living room, sweaty and huffing like a freight train.

“We all good?” He panted and lifted his thumb toward us.

I laughed, unable to help myself. I’d seen the more playful side of Damon Bryant a few times over the years, but nothing like he was around his little brother. It was comforting and



depressing all in the same moment. My brother and I had a horrible, tense relationship. What I wouldn't have given for it to be more playful, or at least somewhat loving.

"We're good, and I should fire you and hire Erica here. She's the only one among you who doesn't goof off all the time." Kent stood up and glanced down at me. "You want a CFO job?"

"Not only no, but hell no." I stood up and twisted around, stretching my back.

"Well, damn. Never mind, son. You're stuck." Kent turned and handed me the final sketch. "I love the last one. Swing it by Mitch and let's get rolling on it. Great job, as always."

"Thanks." I bent down and put the sketch up.

"You all good?" Matt stopped at the opening to the living room, and I realized everyone else had gone into the kitchen or somewhere else in the house.

"Yeah. I'm glad we came down here together. It's more comfortable. You know?"

"I do know." He walked toward me, reached out and took my hand, and walked us to the back door. "Let's go for a walk."

"It's cold out there." I glanced back, thinking a jacket might be prudent.

"It's Texas in early November. It's not *that* cold." He chuckled and opened the door, walking us out into the chilly night.

"It *is* cold." I wrapped my free arm around myself and paused when we reached the grass at the bottom of the patio stairs. Stars filled up the sky, every inch of it crowded with their light. "Wow."

"Right?" He wrapped an arm around me and tucked me against his side. "It's beautiful out here. So clear that you could see for miles."

"I love it," I mumbled breathlessly.

“Come on. I want to show you something.” He took my hand again and we walked across the large expanse of Kent’s backyard.

“Has your father always lived here?”

“Yeah. He bought it when Damon was born, I believe. It was a hell of a lot of fun growing up here. We always had parties by the pool, or haunted houses in the woods. It was a good childhood.” He glanced over at me. “How about you? Did you grow up in Seattle?”

“Yeah. My mom and dad had an apartment in the city.” I brushed the front of my shirt, suddenly a little uncomfortable. “It wasn’t anything like this, but it was okay.”

“And you’ve known Lanie all your life?”

“Since I was in junior high.” I smiled, thinking of my best friend. “She carried me through a lot of rough years.”

“Because of your mom?”

“Yeah, and my brother. He’s as mean as a snake.” I moved closer to Matt as we reached the woods. “What exactly are we doing here?”

He paused and pointed toward the sky. “See that tree house up there?”

“Where?” I moved forward and squinted, finally making the dilapidated looking thing out. “Oh, wow. Did you guys build that?”

“Yeah,” he paused to laugh, “we totally did. We wanted to see if we were good with our hands, you know, in case Dad didn’t share his money, and neither of us ended up too smart.”

I chuckled and turned to face him as he moved closer. “Are you trying to tell me that you’ve been cut out of the will and this is our future home?”

His expression softened as the moonlight danced across his handsome features. “I’d be fine with that. As long as you were involved.”

I ran my hands down the thick muscles of his chest. “I’m terrified that you’re going to run the minute I agree to let this thing between us become real.”

“I know that.” He touched the side of my face softly, his thumb dragging across my bottom lip. “We’ll just take things slow. I can only promise you that I won’t run so many times. I’m just going to have to prove it, but I’m not Tanner, Erica. I’m not going to show up and tell you that I’m not interested anymore.”

“You say that now, but-” I glanced away as he cut me off.

“No buts. I’m not that guy.”

“I want to believe that so bad, it hurts.” I turned back to him as he leaned down and consumed me with a long, passionate kiss. All the signs pointed toward go, and I was without any doubt that I would start down that path with him toward forever, but first I had to figure out how to get my nails unhinged from the past.

He wasn’t like Tanner at all, but then again, Tanner was never the type to love and leave either. People change all the time. Me included.

# CHAPTER 35



## MATT

After a few kisses the night before, I walked her back to the house and sat down on the couch to watch the fire die out. Where I wanted to sleep with her, I knew better. We were at a turning point. She needed to know that I had control of my hormones, unlike my big brother. His advice to fuck her every chance I got might be something that worked for him, but we weren't the same.

I woke to someone popping me in the head - hard.

"Ouch. Shit." I jerked up and narrowed my eyes on Damon as I tried to come to. "I swear I liked you more when you were depressed."

"That stings." He pressed his hand to his chest and frowned.

I would have asked what he wanted so damn early on a Sunday morning, but he was dressed to play golf. My father walked in and stopped by the edge of the living room.

"Are you still sleeping? Get up. Tee time is in forty minutes." He shook his head, turned and walked back out.

"Hey. No one told me we were playing." I got up and stretched, feeling like I'd slept on a box of rocks all damn night.

"We play every time we can on the weekends. You know this." Damon gave me a stern look and walked toward the backyard. "Did you sleep out here?"

“Yes. Don’t give me a lecture either. I’m not even up yet.” I walked toward the bedroom, hoping to sneak in and not wake Erica up. The sweet sound of her resting greeted me as I slipped into the darkness. The fact that I loved her wouldn’t leave me alone. It wasn’t just about the excitement and thrill of wanting to bed her, or make her laugh or hear her moan. It was about wanting to make up for anything in her past that left her unsure or unloved. Every part of me yearned to be that guy for her.

I unzipped my bag in the dark and pressed the button on my watch to see what the hell I was grabbing. I had an outfit that would work for a round of golf, though I’d not look nearly as well put together as my brother or father. What else was new?

“Matt?” Erica mumbled softly.

“It’s just me, baby. I’m getting some clothes.”

“More. Give me more,” she whispered roughly before moaning low in her chest.

White-hot need pinpricked my skin. Was she dreaming?

I stood and let my clothes drop to the floor as I moved toward her.

The outline of her on her back, the covers twisted around her legs and her hair a mess had my dick standing to full attention within seconds. She moaned again and arched her back, her breathing becoming more labored.

Did she really dream of me? Something about that thought undid me. I sat down beside her on the bed and reached out, brushing my hand down the soft side of her throat, between her breasts and rested it on her stomach.

“You awake, baby?” I leaned over and pressed my lips to the small bit of skin showing between her shorts and tank top.

She groaned again and reached down, sliding her fingers through my hair as she writhed a little. I could smell her arousal, which had me throwing the idea of golfing to the wind. No fucking way I was leaving when she was wet and needy.

Indecision raced through my mind, tearing at me. Just because she dreamt of me making love to her didn't mean she would appreciate me-

"Matt. Please," she begged and lifted her hips again, rolling them in the faint light of morning.

"Anything you want, baby." I got up and locked the door before pulling my t-shirt over my head and stripping my pants off. I left my underwear. I didn't have a condom with me, so it wasn't like I could take full advantage of making love to her.

She reached for me as I moved onto the bed.

"You awake now," I whispered before moving to rest on top of her.

"I think so," she mumbled against my neck as I wrapped my arms around her and held her tightly against me. "I dreamt that you made love to me on the plane."

Her giggle was cute, sleepy.

"I'd love to do that, if you'd let me."

"Since when do you ask for permission?" She licked up the side of my neck, sending chill bumps all over my skin. "I need you. My body hurts."

"Then you can have me." I ran my hand down her side as I kissed at her soft mouth, licking and sucking at her bottom lip as I slipped my hand in between us. Her shorts were so incredibly tiny, so hot. It took very little effort to work down to her flesh, but when I did, time stopped. She was drenched, so wet and sticky that I couldn't help but think she'd already come a few times in her sleep.

"Shit," I moaned and kissed her again before pushing up and working on her shorts. "I don't have a condom, Erica. Just let me touch you, baby."

"No. Just don't come." She sat up, moving to her knees and tore her shirt off. The movement surprised me a little, but no more than her gripping my shoulders and forcing me to turn and drop down onto my back.

“It’s impossible not to come with a woman like you on top of me.” I reached up and palmed her heavy breasts, squeezing and tugging at her nipples as she gripped my undies and moved back, pulling them down my legs.

She bent down and ran the side of her face along my length, licking and nibbling on the head of my cock as I grunted and gripped the sheets.

I needed to bother her more often in the morning.

“I want you so bad.” She moved up and ran the center of her body over my lower stomach, coating me in her wetness and making my balls contract.

I gripped her hips and shifted to impale her. She cried out and reached up to cup her tits as she didn’t let a second pass before working me. It felt beyond right to fuck her skin against skin. So intimate and delicious.

“Oh, fuck,” I groaned and reached down to grab her thighs. “Slow down, baby. I can’t hold back like you can.”

“Try,” she growled, pressed her hands into the meat of my chest and rolled her hips like a well-trained dancer. “I love how big you are. You fill me up and stretch me out. I want more of you. All of you.”

Where was this shit coming from? I wasn’t sure, but I loved it.

“And your sweet little pussy takes it so well.” I pushed at her shoulder, trapping her as far back as I could as I lifted my hips and pumped in and out of her.

The sharp sting of her nails was nothing compared to the flood of wetness that covered me when she cried out and came. Lust like nothing I’d ever imagined wrapped around me, dragging me under its depths and suffocating me.

I pulled her close to me and turned us, pinning her to the bed. “I’m falling in love with you, Erica. Did you know that?” I gripped the headboard and fucked her in long, hard strokes as she moaned in tandem with each delicious slap of our flesh.



“I want that. I want you to love me.” She tightened her legs around me and cried out, coming again for me. The strong pulls of her body on my cock had me racing toward the peak of my orgasm. I jerked back and tensed, trying to catch my breath as the room spun. She wanted me to love her. I already fucking did.

“Hold on. I’m so close.” I touched the side of her face as she moved to her knees and reached for me, wrapping her hands around my cock and pulling at it, one hand after the other. Faster and faster until I buckled forward and pressed my head against her shoulder.

“You’re so far beyond hot,” she spoke against my ear and continued to work me. The pressure was intense, the buildup almost bordering pain.

“I thought you didn’t want-”

“Shut up and come for me,” she barked and that was it.

I lifted up and pulled her against me, both of us on our knees. I made love to her mouth as she brought me through the orgasm and forced me to beckon to her in any way she wanted. I needed the high she provided. It was one of the reasons I kept myself tucked away from her.

Now... in the middle of that high, I couldn’t imagine what the fuck would ever have me running from wanting it again. She was my heroine and I wanted nothing more than one more hit. And then one more. And then... one more.



“What the hell? Did you fall asleep on the floor by your bag?” Damon opened the front door and barked at me as I jogged toward him.

“Nope. Sorry. Had to talk to Erica for a few minutes.” I winked and walked out toward the car where my father was already waiting.

“Talk? Really? About what?” He moved up beside me and smirked. “You dirty dog. You didn’t talk. You fucked her.”

“Shut it.” I popped him in the chest. “I’m not a whore like you. I don’t kiss and tell.”

He rolled his eyes. “Um, you just did.”

“Whatever. Shotgun.” I jogged around the car, feeling like a million bucks. Everything about the woman I was in love with was right for me. Where I was sensitive, she was strong, where she needed a firm hand, I had one to give. We were perfect for each other. My fears were complete bullshit.

“You all right?” My father glanced over at me.

“Yep. Much better now. Just needed to work something out with Erica.” I got in and buckled up as Damon got in the backseat.

“Or work Erica. Whatever way you want to look at it.” He chuckled as my dad snorted.

“Seriously, dude. Don’t disrespect her like that.” I glanced back in the backseat and gave him a look. “I’ll climb back there and whoop your ass.”

“Just because you’re bigger doesn’t mean you’re going to whoop anything.” He smirked and grabbed his crotch. “Suck it.”

“Damon. Really?” My dad pulled down the rearview mirror. “I swear, the two of you idiots get together and all of a sudden, you’re ten again.”

“Twelve,” Damon and I answered in tandem, which started a laugh, easing the tension between us.

“Hey, I’m really proud of you for joining the firm. I know you weren’t interested in it at first, but it seems like it might be a good fit.” My father reached over and rubbed my chest like he did when I was little and worried about something. “At least until your art gets to selling and you can do that full time.”

“You would be okay with that?” I trapped his hand on my chest.

“Absolutely. I don’t want you to be anyone other than who you are, Matt. I just want you to figure out *who* that is and

start living the life I know you're capable of living." He rubbed me once more and pulled his hand back.

Damon leaned up between us and sniffled, wiping at his eyes. "This is just beautiful."

"Fuck you." I reached over and pushed at his face. "How Bethany puts up with you is beyond me."

"Karen puts up with me too. They all deserve a prize." My father laughed and turned down the long road that would lead to his favorite country club. "To our women? Erica included, I believe?"

"Yeah... she's definitely included." I nodded and pursed my lips, a little overwhelmed by how blessed I was to see her giving in, if only a little.

There wasn't much I wouldn't be willing to do to keep us moving in the right direction. Being sensitive to how she reacted to me when I got back to the house was key. If she wanted love and adoration, it was hers. If she needed time, I'd back off a little.

Maybe.

# CHAPTER 36



## ERICA

The weekend in Dallas caused something to shift deep inside of me. Why was I fighting against a relationship with Matt? I needed to talk things out with someone. I sat at my desk on Monday morning, trying to reason through how to force myself past the stone wall of fear that kept resurrecting inside of me every time Matt wasn't around. It was childish and quickly becoming an annoyance.

Lanie would be in class, but maybe I'd catch her on her conference time. I picked up the phone and walked to my door, closing it and pressing my back to it.

"Hey. You okay?" She sounded a little out of breath.

"Yeah. Just wanted to hear your voice." I squeezed my eyes closed and took a shaky breath.

"What's up? You don't sound okay. You sound like you're on the edge of tears."

"I am." I pressed my fingers to the bridge of my nose and slid down the door until my butt hit the ground. That I had on a skirt and my panties would be showing to the world outside my window was irrelevant. I was on the edge of a breakthrough and I needed someone to sling shot me through it. Lanie was perfect for the job.

"Oh no. Did Matt leave again?"

"No. He stayed in Dallas for a few days, but he'll be back in town on Wednesday or Thursday. It was a good visit. I love his family. They're really good to me."

“Any wild sex stories you want to share with your pathetically alone friend? I need to vicariously live through someone. I was even thinking about picking up a porno the other night from that creepy adult store near the grocery store that you love.”

I snorted in laughter as a tear rolled down my cheek. “I’m so in love with this guy, Lanie.”

“That’s awesome!” The joy in her voice was something I wanted for myself. I just wasn’t sure how to find it. “Or... it’s not awesome?”

“It’s awesome, but I’m terrified. I’ve spent most of my life being strong and aggressive, but with Matt, I want to curl up and purr like a kitten. It’s disturbing. It pisses me off. I have nothing to protect myself with where he’s concerned. I hate it.”

“I think that’s exactly where you’re supposed to be.” She sighed like a schoolgirl in love. “I wish with all my heart I felt that way about someone. Stop letting fear trample down the one thing you’ve wanted since we met in grade school.”

“Love?” I whispered and couldn’t help but think of my father. I missed him so bad it burned my insides. The only love I had in the world was him and Lanie. Now Matt was quickly moving in to take both of their places in my heart.

“Exactly.”

“What if he leaves again?”

“Yes. What *if* he leaves again?” Her voice changed, and I knew I was up for a lecture that was sure to set me straight. She was the only one I’d give the chance to try.

“What’s your point, Lanie?” I got up and walked to the window as I wiped my eyes and tried to reconcile the fear inside of me with the fearless woman I’d always defined myself as. It was a struggle, and unfortunately was consuming my thoughts, my time, and all of my emotions.

“What’s the very worst thing that could happen if Matt packed up and left you? Would you die? Wilt like a flower in

the corner and force me to come get your fragile ass and bury you?”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re so dramatic.”

“Answer me.”

“Why did I call you again?” I reached out and drew a heart on the window, being silly and childish.

“Because you knew I would help you see the truth. Now... answer me. What’s the very worst thing that would happen?”

“I’d be broken and lose a few weeks of work, sleep and probably ten pounds.”

“But would you die, Erica? Would you never, ever, ever love again?”

I didn’t hesitate for a moment. “No. I wouldn’t die, and I’m sure I would eventually love again, but-”

“No buts. I’ve heard and seen all your buts over the years. They’re not worth your time to entertain them. If he left, and he’s not going to, then you would mourn that loss and I would hold you through it. When you got done, we’d clean you up, fatten you up and get you back to being the strong woman you are.”

“I can’t work at M&B if he and I don’t work out. Not if he’s here too. It’s too much to ask of me.”

“Good. Fuck them then. You do realize that there are literally a million places to work in Seattle for a woman with your skills, right?”

“I guess so.” I glanced down to see a group of joggers running by the sidewalk. I needed to get out and get some exercise. It always helped me to feel so much more at peace.

“And you know what? Maybe you would finally stop pretending like you’re happy in that big glass building you’re hiding out in every day.”

“I am happy here.” I could feel the need to defend myself literally crawling all over me.

“Right, but it’s not you, and we both know it. You have more talent in your pinkie finger than most artists have in their whole body. Are you painting again? You promised me a few months ago that you would pull out your supplies and live a little.”

“No,” I whispered, emotionally shutting down again. “I don’t have time.”

“Make time. Build more parts of your life that look like you and maybe you won’t have to worry about whether Matt stays or goes because you’ll know without a doubt who you are.” She paused and the sound of a hundred little voices filled up the phone. She laughed. “I gotta go. I love you so much. Please take my advice and start painting again. You need you before you can need him, Erica.”

“You’re right. You always are.” We said our goodbyes and I cursed her for the next half hour as I worked through the last of my inhibitions. I could find myself again, and then... I would turn that girl completely over to a man worthy of her time. The real Matthew Bryant.



“All right guys. Great work.” I stood up at the end of our team meeting and glanced around at my small think-tank. “I’m proud of you. All of you.”

“Thanks, boss.” Lewis’ smile forced him to squeeze his eyes shut a little. It warmed me. “We’re going for a drink. You wanna come?”

“I’d love to, but I’m going for a jog, and then I promised my best friend that I would dust off my paint supplies and work on rediscovering a passion I let fall by the wayside.”

“Oh, nice! I totally want to see what you come up with.” Mandy lifted her eyebrows and the rest of the group chimed in.

“Thanks. I’ll bring it up here when I figure out what *it* is.” I laughed and glanced up as someone darkened the open door



of our conference room. “Mitch. Come on in. We were just wrapping up.”

“Hey, guys.” He walked in, his smile warm and welcoming. I liked the guy as a friend and partner in our combined tasks at the firm, but I needed to tell him about Matt. I could only hope that he would respect my feelings. He’d been inching closer and closer over the last few weeks, and the last thing I wanted to do was hurt him or step on his toes in any shape or form.

“Hey, Mitch.” Lewis stood and shook hands with him before my team filed out and left us alone.

“You have dinner plans?” He slipped his hands in his pockets and studied me. He was the perfect man for a steady, strong future filled with love and security. But he wasn’t my man. No matter how much it made sense for him to be.

“No, but I’m just going to head home. A nice jog this evening should do me good.” I crossed my arms over my chest, grateful that I wasn’t at all uncomfortable around him.

“You sure? I hate to eat alone.” His eyes moved across my face.

“I do too, but I’m starting to date someone. I just don’t want him to think that something is going on between us when we’re just good work friends.” I pursed my lips as his expression changed a little. “You understand, I hope?”

“Absolutely. I think that’s fantastic. A beautiful woman like yourself shouldn’t be alone... not ever.” He winked and turned to walk toward the door, pausing and glancing back before going out. “If you change your mind... I’m right down the hall.”

I laughed and nodded. “Thank you. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Please do.” He walked out and I let out a long breath I didn’t realize I was holding. Should I have divulged the fact that it was Matt I was seeing? He and I hadn’t really talked about where in our relationship we were, but it felt like it was time to sit down and do just that.

My only hesitation was that he worked for me. I wasn't sure how well that would go over. I might have to call Damon to see how he worked it all out for him and Bethany. Matt and I were only lovers, but poor Damon had both barrels loaded on his news.

Lovers and step-siblings.

Yeah... he had it *much* worse.



I got home and played with Zek for a few minutes before eating a banana and changing into my running gear. I'd make some dinner and call Matt when I got back and then get busy on painting a new masterpiece. Just the thought of doing it gave me a keen sense of belonging to something - to my art.

My phone buzzed, and I grabbed it before heading out the door. Unknown number.

"This is Erica Hall."

"Erica. It's Jonathan Luntz. How are you?"

"Good, Jonathan. How are you?"

"Doing very well. I assume Matthew told you about the showing on Friday night, correct?"

"Yes. He did. I'll be there. We're bringing three other people with us. I was a little surprised at your graciousness with the tickets. This is the private event you and I discussed having first, correct?"

"Exactly, and no matter on the tickets. You will all fit in beautifully, I would imagine. We have some of Seattle's finest coming in that night. It should be fun for sure."

"Excellent. I look forward to it." I was winding down the call, which was a little out of place, but maybe Jonathan was just a superb host of sorts?

"One more thing, if you don't mind. I have something that's been nagging at me continuously for a while. I'm

thinking I just needed to call you and get it off my chest.”

I stiffened. “Sure. Go ahead.”

“When Matthew and I met to finalize the agreements, he mentioned that you painted as well, and I think you and I might have even chatted a little about it at dinner. My memory fails me often. I’m getting older.”

“Hardly,” I said and laughed.

“I’d like to see some of your work. I keep dreaming about having a pair of artists who are married and deeply in love working for me.”

“Working *for* you.” I ignored the married and deeply in love part. I had to. It was too much to dream about just yet.

“You know what I mean. I want a showcase of what real passion looks like this spring. I’m not sure what your talent looks like, or if you’re at all interested in being highlighted next to Matt, but I want to see your stuff. I can’t seem to shake the fact that I’m missing greatness by not making this call.”

“Greatness?” My heart fluttered. “I’m not sure greatness is a good title for me, but I’ll happily show you some of my old stuff. I was going to start working on something new tonight.”

“Good. Let’s talk after this weekend and set something up. That work?”

“Absolutely, but let’s keep this weekend just about Matt. He’s been dreaming of this moment his whole life. I don’t want to steal a drop of attention from him.”

Jonathan sighed. “I love that. See... that’s the passion I’m talking about. We’ll talk soon then. Be safe and I’ll see you Friday.”

“Friday.” I hung up and glanced around the condo as Zek danced around my feet. “Wow. Change is in the air, little guy. I can feel it all around me.”

I was grateful that the emotion that accompanied my realization was excitement and not terror. Good things were coming... I was sure of it.

# CHAPTER 37



## MATT

Not getting to see her most of the week left me with the sound conclusion that my life was shifting from Dallas to Seattle. I'd be letting go of my apartment in Texas before January at the rate things were going, and funny enough, everyone would be thrilled about it. By the time I got on the plane to fly back home on Thursday morning early, I was lifeless and fully depressed.

Somewhere along the way of avoiding Erica, I fell head over heels in love with her. Maybe that above everything else scared me. I just needed to have a sit down conversation with her about my mom and dad's relationship and how dicked up it got over time. I couldn't handle handing her my heart and have her throw it in a meat grinder by cheating on me. It wasn't as if I had a choice in either matter, but a 'come to Jesus' meeting would help calm my nerves a little.

I walked into M&B around ten and made my way to my office before walking up to see Erica. I figured it would be a little more prudent to stop by and let the team know I was there. Surely Erica would want to discuss how to break the news to everyone at work that we were moving into something far beyond a friendship. At least I assumed she would.

"Hey, Matthew! How are you, brother?" Lewis stood up, pushed his dreadlocks over his shoulder and extended his hand. His Caribbean accent was too damn cool.

"Hey, man. Good to see you." I shook it and greeted the other girls in the room. "How's the week been so far?"

“Excellent.” Lewis nodded as Mandy walked toward us.

“Well, for most of us.” She shook her head. “Erica was jogging on Monday and got mugged. It wasn’t pretty.”

“What?!” I moved toward the door as my heart almost stopped in my chest. “Is she here?”

I jogged out without waiting for an answer. Lewis called behind me that he believed she was. My pulse spiked as I waited for the elevators. I moved in as a couple of people tried to move out.

“I’m sorry.” I moved back and let them out before walking back in and pressing the button for Erica’s floor like I was mental. “Come on. Come on.”

“You okay?” Mitch moved up beside me, causing me to jump.

“What? Oh, damn. I didn’t know anyone else was in here.” I glanced back to see several people watching me with curiosity. “There’re lots of you.”

“Matt, you know?” Mitch squeezed my shoulder as the door opened to the executive floor.

“Yeah. Just heard about Erica’s incident.” I waved and jogged down the hall. Why the hell hadn’t she called me? Monday was freaking three days ago. I knocked and stuck my head into the door to find her standing at her desk, her back to me. “You busy?”

She glanced over her shoulder. “No. Come on in. When did you-”

“Why didn’t you tell me about Monday?” I closed the door and walked toward her in four large steps. “That’s really upsetting.”

“Because it wasn’t that big of a deal.” She turned and the bruise around her left eye was sickly yellow. My blood ran cold.

“Wait a minute. Someone hit you?” I reached out and ran my hands over her arms before pulling her flush against me.

“Yes, but it’s okay now. Seriously.” She smiled, but I couldn’t stop envisioning someone hurting her.

“It is a big deal. Did you get a visual on the guy? Did he get your purse?” I reached up and touched the side of her face. “I’m going to fucking beat him to death if we ever find out who it was.”

Her smile softened as she cupped my hand. “It’s okay. Shit happens, right? I got over it.”

“Why didn’t you call? Answer me.” I tightened my hold on her, wanting her to know that I was her protector. If I’d known she was hurt I would have raced across the world to get to her.

“It seemed silly, and you already asked that.” She wrapped her lithe arms around my waist and pressed her cheek to my shoulder, tucking her face against the side of my neck. “I missed you.”

“Me too, baby.” I rubbed her back and tried to force the violence inside of me to die down. Never in a million years had I wanted to defend someone like I wanted to defend her. “I really wish you would have called, Erica.”

“And what would you have done?” She kissed the soft skin under my ear, waking my body up and causing me to growl.

“Come home and held you. Figured out who did this and beat his fucking ass.” I clenched my teeth as she snuggled in tighter. All I wanted was her. Her safe. Her happy. Her love.

“Well, it’s all better now.” She moved back and pulled me down for a long kiss. “You are home.”

“Speaking of.” I kissed her a few more times and ran my hand down the back of her silky hair. “I’m almost positive I’m going to move up here before January. I felt like shit not being here with you.”

Her smile drove a stake of lust deep inside of me. “Nice. I was hoping that would happen sooner rather than later.”

“You work fast. What can I say?” I brushed my nose down the side of her face and nipped at her ear before moving back.

“All right. I gotta calm down. My heart is racing from fear of something happening to you, and my cock is so hard it feels like it’s gonna crack in half.”

She reached out and pressed her palm against my erection. “Hot.”

“Yours.” I cupped my hand over hers and stroked myself, not quite minding the slacks all of a sudden. They were made of much thinner material than my jeans.

“We should have dinner tonight and talk through everything.”

“You ready to do that?” I gripped her hand and pulled it from my dick before stepping closer to her. “I’m ready.”

“Yeah, I think so. Tomorrow is the big showing. Are you excited?” She leaned in and kissed me one more time before walking back to the other side of her desk and sitting down.

“I am. The painting is almost done. It’s going to be beautiful.”

“I’m surprised he didn’t want it tonight.”

“He did.” I smirked and dropped down in the seat closest to me. “I told him tomorrow morning at seven. I need tonight to add a few highlights.”

“Don’t add this, okay?” She brushed her fingers around her bruised eye.

I growled. “I don’t like that one bit.”

“I’ll get some thick make-up and have it covered by tomorrow night. I promise.”

“That’s not what I meant. You’re beautiful to me no matter what, Erica. I hate that someone put their hands on you.”

“Yeah, well, let’s move to another subject. That vein in the side of your neck looks like it’s ready to pop.”

I breathed in slowly and glanced up toward the ceiling. “You’re right. Where do you want to stay tonight?”

“Are we staying tonight?” She sounded a little surprised.



“Yes.” I wasn’t playing games anymore. “I’m not spending another night without you in my bed, or me in yours. You choose.”

“Let’s stay at your place so you can finish up working on the piece without any stress.”

“Perfect.” I crossed my hands over my stomach. “How is Zek doing? Crapping all over your place yet?” I smiled, unable to help myself.

“He’s actually been really good.” She bit her lip seductively, which didn’t help the vein in question much at all. “I did have something really cool happen though.”

“Tell me about it.” It was all I could do to stay seated on my side of the desk. Everything about her made me want to be closer.

“Jonathan called to finalize a few things. I hope you don’t mind that I worked through some of the last minute details with him.” She gave me an unsure smile.

“Not at all. I love that you’re involved in what’s happening with Jonathan.”

“Good.” She let out a sigh that sounded like relief. “Anyway, he asked to see some of my work.”

Excitement bubbled up inside of me. “Really? That’s great news. When?”

She shook her head, trying to make less of it from what I could tell. “After your event. I wanted everyone to stay focused on you for now.”

“You think you’re going to steal the show from me?” I smiled and stood up. “You deserve a spanking for that.”

“I’m not nearly as talented as you are, so no... but a spanking might be fun.”

I moved around the desk and slid my hands over her hips, pressing my erection to her ass and fondling her breasts as she stood up and pressed her back to my chest.

“What am I gonna do with you?” I kissed her ear and breathed in deeply.

“I thought you were going to spank me.” She rolled her hips slowly, playing with me.

“Among other things, yes.” Someone knocked at the door, and I pinched her nipples between my fingers and rolled them slowly as I leaned down and licked up the side of her throat one more time.

“Just a minute,” she called out breathlessly. “What else?”

“Taste every inch of you, hold your hair so I can control you while I fuck your pretty mouth and then-”

“Oh God,” she panted softly.

I slid my hand down the front of her skirt into her panties. I’d come into the room to make sure she was all right, and by the looks of things... she was perfectly fine. It didn’t dent my fury much, but it was quickly changing the anger into lust.

“Work myself into every place you’ll let me.” I opened her up and pressed my middle finger against her opening.

Another knock at the door.

“Matt. Stop,” she panted as I pressed my finger deeper inside of her.

“No. Tell them to go away. Now.” I rolled my palm against her clit and gripped her pussy with my other fingers. “I wanna feel you come.”

“No. Seriously.” She shifted her hips forward, fucking herself against my hand. “We’ll do this tonight.”

“Tell them to go. Now, Erica. I’m not asking again.”

She nodded as her body tightened around mine. “I’m in the middle of a conversation. Come back in ten minutes or don’t come back at all.” Her voice was low, commanding, fucking hot.

I sat down in her comfy chair and pulled her down with me as I pulled my hand from the front of her skirt and tugged it up her thighs.

“We really shouldn’t-” She glanced back at me, and I gripped her chin with my free hand and leaned in to kiss her as I slipped my fingers back under her scrap of panties and played with her soft swollen skin until she cried out and wet my hand.

“More.” I licked at her mouth. “I want more.”

“Tonight.”

“Now.” I drilled her for a few more minutes as she writhed and panted in my lap. Her cries were beautiful, her need beyond tantalizing.

My body ached for so much more than I was going to take, but the moment was about reminding her who she had in me. I wanted to be everything she needed me to be as her man, but more than that, I wanted her to seek pleasure in every means necessary - from only me.

# CHAPTER 38



## ERICA

**I**t took me the rest of the day to get over how well he played my body that morning. Maybe I should get mugged and thrown around more often. My insides were liquid heat every time I thought about him and how good it was going to feel to get the rest of our shit out of the way and dive into a relationship we both wanted and needed.

“You want me to take you over to your place to get Zek?” Matt’s voice surprised me as I tried to finish up a report I was working on.

I glanced down at the clock to see that it was already seven. I was supposed to have dinner with Lanie. Shit. I’d totally forgotten. I couldn’t turn away my best friend because I was starting to date Matt. That wasn’t fair.

“You know what?” I stood and let out a long sigh. “I totally forgot about having dinner with Lanie. It’s our Thursday night thing.”

“So invite her over to my place.” He walked into the office and brushed his hand down his face, smiling naughtily.

“What’s that look for?”

“I can smell you on my fingers.” He licked at them.

“Who is the wicked man in front of me? My Matthew is sweet and sensitive. Funny and so very loving.”

“Oh, I’m still him, but there are many sides to all of us, right?” He moved around to my side of the desk and reached out to tug me toward him.

I pressed my hands to his chest and ran them up to cup his neck. “I’ll see if Lanie wants to come over. She might actually like to see your painting up close.”

“Then I’ll follow you back to your place. Call Lanie on the way over, and we’ll get you a bag and pick up Zek and his stuff for the night.” He leaned down and kissed me.

Mitch’s voice sounded by the door, startling me. “Erica. Could you- Oh. Shit. I’m sorry.”

“No. I’m sorry.” My heart almost stopped as heat raced up to coat my cheeks. “I didn’t even think about closing the door.”

Mitch glanced from Matt to me and back to Matt as a smile formed on his handsome face. “That’s why you were so worried this morning. You’re Erica’s new beau.”

“Yeah. I am.” Matt wrapped his arm around my shoulders from the side.

“We’ve been toying with the idea for two years; since I came to work at McKenzie and Bryant.” I glanced up at Matt. “Right?”

“Yeah.” He smiled down at me. “I’m the luckiest man in the world.”

Mitch chuckled, but it was a friendly sound. “I agree with that completely.”

“Thanks. Did you need something?” I turned back to face Mitch.

“No. Nothing that can’t wait. I’ll find you tomorrow.” He took a few steps back as his eyebrow lifted. “Are we telling people about this or...”

“No,” I responded at the same time as Matt told him, “Yes.”

I smirked up at Matt. “We’ll tell them soon. Let’s figure everything out together first.”

“Whatever you want. I’ll meet you downstairs.” He kissed the tip of my nose and released me to walk out of the office.

“See you tomorrow, Mitch.”

“All right, buddy.” Mitch turned to watch him go and let out a low huff before turning back to me. “Matt? Really?”

My smile faded. It was never *that* easy. “Yeah. He’s a great guy.”

“He’s a kid, Erica. He’s not at all the type of man that deserves a woman like you.”

“Here’s the line,” I drew a line in the air and lifted my other hand above it, “and here’s you. Back up...”

He chuckled and lifted his hand. “No, I get it. It’s none of my business, but I’m just concerned.”

“No, you’re interested, which is completely different.”

“I am definitely interested, which might make me a little bit bias, but you’re jumping into something before really thinking it through.” He lifted his other hand. “You know what... it’s none of my concern. I’m just saying that he’s a wayward kid stuck in the body of a young man. He doesn’t have stability to plan for the future or any focus on taking care of a beautiful woman like yourself.”

“And you do?” I hated to attack him at all. Just knowing that he lost his wife three years before and that he’s been beyond good to me since we met a few weeks back stalled my anger.

“I’m not sure anyone could fully satisfy a gem like you, but I’d be willing to bend over backward to make sure you knew you were adored, kept, loved.” He tilted his head and studied me. “Anyway. Good luck, and I’m sorry for overstepping. Honestly. See you tomorrow.”

He walked out and left me standing in silence. I love Matt. He would grow up and be all the things Mitch claimed he wasn’t. Hell, he was already starting to do all of those things. Sort of.



“So? How was your trip to Dallas?” Lanie leaned against the counter in Matt’s kitchen later that night as I chopped up veggies for a stir fry. I was glad that she decided to still come even though we were adding Matt to the mix.

“It was good. Like I said, I fit in with Matt’s family so well. Not that I didn’t know that. I mean, hell, I just got back from Jamaica as the only non-family member to attend Kent’s wedding.” I picked up a bell pepper and handed it to her.

She leaned in and bit it. “What’s going on? You’re tense.”

“No, I’m not.” I popped the rest into my mouth.

“Lies.” She moved to the sink and washed her hands.

Matt was in a room down the hall, working furiously on adding the accents to the portrait before he would let me or Lanie see it.

“I’m good.” I shrugged and tossed the veggies in our stir fry pan. “It’s just that Mitch came in today when Matt and I were kissing, which was a little awkward.”

“The new director at the firm?”

“Yeah.” I glanced over at her. “I thought he might be interested in me, but after our conversation over Matt today, I know he is.”

“Uh oh. What did he say?”

“What didn’t he say?” I pushed the veggies around and checked on the pot of rice we had going. “He just thinks that Matt’s an immature child and that I deserve better.”

“He’s jealous, old and full of shit.” She moved around the bar and started to work on tearing lettuce for our salad.

“Oh, I agree, but I really like him from a professional-stance.”

“Good. Then keep things that way. You and Matt have something really cool starting, Erica. Give him a chance. He’ll keep you young and you’ll grow him up. It’s perfect. Seriously.”



“And what about you?” I forced myself to relax. She was right. Why was I even questioning anything? I barely knew Mitch, wasn’t attracted to him, which was slightly absurd, and was completely in love with Matt.

“What about me?” She nibbled on a piece of lettuce like a rabbit.

I chuckled as I knew she wanted me to. “What about your love life? You had a date last week, right? Someone you met online?”

“Horrible.” She dropped her head back and groaned dramatically. “It was so fucking horrible.”

Matt turned the corner, black paint on his cheek, his eyes wild. “You girls okay? What’s up?”

I smiled at him, unable to help myself. “Lanie was telling me about her last blind date. Seems it didn’t go too well.”

Lanie rolled her head to rest her cheek on her shoulder. “Didn’t go very well? It was fucking horrible.”

Matt moved over to stand behind me and wrapped his arm around my shoulders before kissing the side of my head. I extended a piece of bell pepper over my shoulder toward him.

“Eww... gross.” He nipped at my ear before turning back toward Lanie. “So tell us what happened. I’m thinking this is going to be hilarious.”

“I’m your number one supporter in this thing with Erica.” Lanie lifted her eyebrow and leaned toward us. “Don’t mess it up, Matthew Bryant.”

“Ohhhh... The last name?” He smiled and released me. “I’ll try not to, but spill. What happened?”

“He’s a psychologist and spent the whole damn dinner trying to analyze why my life wasn’t where I wanted it to be.”

“It isn’t?” I asked.

“No. Not as far as he was concerned. I mean, I’m twenty-eight and not married, I don’t have kids or a house. Now, never mind you that he’s thirty-five and still single too. I

wanted to tell him to stop trying to fix everyone and learn to breathe a little.” She shook her head.

“Wait. I’m twenty-eight and I don’t have any of those things.”

“Not yet. Soon.” Matt glanced my way and winked. “We could work on the kid thing tonight if you’re up for it. They say practice makes perfect.”

Lanie giggled as I growled and gave her a look. “Don’t encourage him, please.”

“Anyway... he was really cute, and I thought maybe I might end up with a second date, but I can’t handle someone tearing apart my life to find the issue, when to me, there is no issue. I love my life. I wish I had someone to hold me at night and stuff, but the other parts are really great. I adore my job and you guys.” She glanced down toward her hands and sighed, breaking my heart with her loneliness. “You sure your brother isn’t free?”

“Damon?” Matt glanced back at me. “Didn’t we tell her he was engaged?”

“No. We just made fun of him.” I put the spoon down and moved over to pull my best friend in a tight hug. I kissed the side of her head. “How about this... We’re all going to De Luge tomorrow night with fifty really rich people that live here in Washington. Why don’t we have a little bit of fun and try and find you one of them to take home? Could be interesting?”

She perked up a little. “I love that, but you know I’m really picky about the men I take home.”

“I know.” I released her and glanced over at Matt. “Lanie makes her dates show their cocks before they get to come into her apartment. Too small? No deal.”

“What?” Her eyes lit up and her cheeks burned pink. “You’re horrible. I don’t do that.” She glanced toward my handsome lover. “I don’t, Matt. Don’t believe a word she says.”

“She needs a spanking.” He shrugged, winked at me and walked toward the bedrooms. “So rich, pushy, a little old and a huge monster cock. Got it.”

“Oh my God,” Lanie whispered and covered her face with her hands. “Did he just really say that?”

I laughed until my sides hurt at the look on her face and the willingness of him to play along. I loved them both. Life was complete with them on either side of me. Now we just needed to work through our differences and find Lanie a man that we all could appreciate, or at worst... tolerate.



“Wow.” I stood in front of the portrait and tears filled my eyes. “I’ve never seen anything so beautiful.” I wanted to reach out and touch it, but I knew better. “It’s magnificent, Matt. Surely you don’t really see me like that.”

The woman staring back at us from over her shoulder was a goddess. She was borrowing my face, but she was far more intriguing and enticing than I would ever be.

“It’s exactly the way I see you, baby.” He moved in front of me and leaned down to kiss me softly, slowly. It was a good thing that Lanie was already gone and it was just the two of us. I wanted him. Badly.

“I love it so much. It makes me feel alive. Like you see me... I mean, really see me.”

His strong hands ran down my back and over my rear, squeezing softly as he ground against me. “Good. I want you to feel all of that and so much more.”

“Make love to me.” I ran my foot up the outside of his leg and hooked my knee over his hip.

“Where do you want me?”

I wasn’t sure of the true meaning of the question. “In the bedroom?”

“How about the kitchen?” He smiled and picked me up, forcing me to wrap my legs around his taut waist.

“Do you have condoms?” I kissed at his lips before moving down and sucking his ear into my mouth.

He groaned and pulled my skirt up over my ass, slipping his fingers into my panties and petting me as he walked us to the kitchen. “Yeah, I do.”

“Good.” I rolled against his touch, finding something far beyond pleasure. Acceptance. Love. Belonging. All of those belonged to me when he held me close. I didn’t want to miss a minute of it. Mitch was wrong. So wrong.

He set me down on the edge of the counter and pressed his hand between my breasts. “Lean back and rest on your elbows.”

His dark gaze said that his words weren’t a request, but a command. I loved this side of him as much as all of the others.

“Like this?” I moved back and arched my back as he gripped my ankles and rested them on his chest.

“Exactly.” He licked his lips and let his eyes run over me.

“You want me naked?” My heart began to hammer inside my chest.

“No. I like this. There’s something so naughty about fucking with your clothes on... you know?”

“Absolutely.” I tensed as he worked himself out of his jeans and pulled a condom from his pocket. “You know how much I want you beside me?”

“As much as I want to be beside you?” He sucked his bottom lip into his mouth and gripped his cock, pulling at my legs as he pushed.

“And inside of me,” I groaned as his hips bumped against the back of my legs.

“I’m all the way in. You realize I’m not going to let a night go by without us making love, right?”

“Mhmm...” I tried to keep myself in the moment, but the pleasure of him between my legs was almost too good. “Can we fuck in my office soon?”

“Shit, woman. You’re going to be the death of me.”

“I hope not.” I let my head drop back as Matt unleashed on me, rocking his body against mine until both of us were panting, exhausted and covered in sweat.

He picked me up and toted us to the bedroom to start another round of love-making that lasted through the rest of the night.

Making love every night sounded like bliss, but I was going to have to start cutting him off around ten or eleven if I was going to function the next day... much less walk.

# CHAPTER 39



## MATT

Erica left early the next morning, and I faintly remember her leaving, but I was too out of it after our all-night fuck fest. I was a lucky bastard, and I knew it. The alarm went off around seven, and I rolled on my side and groaned. Someone knocked on the door.

“Jonathan’s people are right on time,” I mumbled and got up. The hope had been that I would get to sleep until noon, but no... I just had to have the guys come pick up the painting early on the morning before the showing. Ridiculous last minute shit. So typical me.

They knocked again and Zek went nuts barking at the door, the little guy no bigger than my foot.

“Come here, buddy.” I scooped him up and opened the door before rubbing at my eyes.

“Mr. Bryant?” Two burley guys stood in the hallway.

“Hey guys. You with De Luge?”

“Yeah. Mr. Luntz said that you had an important piece that he wanted wrapped and hand delivered to the gallery.”

“Perfect.” I moved back as Zek wiggled in my arms. “It’s in the first bedroom on the left. Let me know if you need anything.”

“We’ll need you to sign the papers on the piece, but that’s it.” One of the guys smiled over at me as the other headed back down the hall. “He’s a cute little guy.”

“My girlfriend’s.” I glanced down at the mutt and realized how much I enjoyed thinking of Erica as my girlfriend. It was silly, but I loved it... I loved her.

I put Zek in his crate and made myself a few pieces of toast and two eggs before they left. I offered them breakfast, but they declined and headed out.

It took me a minute to realize why my heart was racing all of a sudden. I was nervous. Insanely nervous. My work would be on full display for a handful of really important, wealthy people later that night. It could change everything.

I grabbed my phone and called Sophie without checking to see what time it was. I tried not to bother her too often, but I couldn’t help it.

“Hey you. I got five minutes, so talk fast,” she barked into the phone. It sounded like she was running around.

“Just wanted to see how you were doing. I came to Dallas and didn’t even stop by. What a dick.” I ran my hand down my face realizing that firstly, I hadn’t called her when I was in town and secondly, I shouldn’t have called her to calm me down and reassure me. I should have called Erica.

“You are a dick then.” She chuckled. “I’m good, just running out to capture a new story. I’ll call you tonight.”

“All right. See you later, alligator.”

“After a while, crocodile.”

I dropped the call and dialed Erica’s number at the office. Joan answered after the second ring. “Erica Hall’s office. How can I help you?”

“Hey, Joan. It’s Matt. Is Erica in her office?” I picked up my toast and took a big bite.

“She sure is. Let me get her for you.”

I smiled as she answered the phone. *Much better.*

“This is Erica.”

“Hey, baby. I just wanted to call and tell you that I hope your day goes great.” I licked my lips and leaned against the



counter.

“Matt.” The way she said my name made the world seem right. “You doing okay? Did the painting get picked up?”

“Sure did, and yeah, I think I’m all right. I’m nervous as shit, but I guess that’s normal, right?”

“Completely. You’re going to be brilliant today and I’ll be right there beside you. I’m going to pick up Damon and Kent for you around two today. You just relax, get your outfit together and be ready to just be you tonight, okay?”

“I’ll get my brother and my father. I don’t want you doing all of that. You and Lanie just meet us there around six.”

“You sure? I just wanted to take as much off of you as possible.” God I loved this woman.

“No, I’m good. What are you wearing tonight?”

“What do you want me to wear?” Her voice grew sexier, as if that was possible.

“I love that cream-colored dress that hugs in at your waist.”

“Then expect to see me in it.”

“Your hair down so I can run my fingers through it, and dark red lipstick.”

“Are you planning on fucking me at the event?” She chuckled, but it was a really good question. A better idea.

“I wish. That’ll definitely be in my thoughts, but then again, it always is when you’re around.”

“Now it’s you who needs the spanking.” She chuckled.

“I’ll see you tonight. Enjoy your day, okay?”

“It would be better if you were here, but I’ll try. Call if you need anything.”

“Bye, baby.” I hung up the phone and took a minute to catch my breath. It was happening. Like, it was really happening. Erica and I were becoming the type of couple that

others would be jealous of, that most people would kill to be a part of. She was mine. I just needed to seal the deal.



“You look good. Happy.” Damon patted me on the chest as we walked into the showing an hour before the crowd was supposed to arrive. My father had gone up to the office to make an appearance and check in with everyone. He’d show up at six with the guests for the evening, which was fine by me.

“I am happy.” I reached up and fixed his tie as we stood in the foyer. “You know that picture I did of you the day you found out about mom’s cheating is in here, right?”

“Yeah.” He rolled his eyes. “It’s fine. I know it shows a depth of human emotion and you need that. I would imagine that most people aren’t going to be able to tell it’s me anyway. I was just a kid then.”

“Most people don’t realize that you’re just a kid now.” I checked my watch and swallowed hard. Why did the evening feel like a make-it-or-break-it time in my life? It was just a showing. Worst case scenario, the attendees hated my work and left without buying anything. I still had my job at M&B, and most importantly... I had Erica.

“I wish Beth could have come with me. You know how much she loves supporting you.”

“And dressing up.” I chuckled.

“That too.” He brushed something off my chest. “Since joining the firm again, she’s taken on a leadership role, and Dad promoted her to senior early. I thought everyone was going to have a fucking cow about it, but she’s got a way about her with the staff up there.”

“Now that Delilah’s gone.” I rolled my eyes. For some reason, my father thought it was a good move to hire Damon’s ex-girlfriend’s twin sister to come work as a senior manager at

the firm. Not only was the bitch conniving, but she'd almost forced Bethany to leave the firm for good.

Stupid moves on everyone's part.

"Matthew. There you are." Jonathan walked out and reached to shake my hand. "You look awesome. Is this your brother?"

"Yes. This is Damon and my father, Kent, will be here a little later tonight." I glanced over at Damon as he shook Jonathan's hand. My brother wasn't at all comfortable around artistic types. If nothing else, the night was damned to be interesting.



The hour of preparing went by far too quickly for my liking, and the clock above the main entrance chimed six o'clock. Damon moved up to greet people on my behalf as I walked into the back room to get a beer or something to help me chill out. Erica wasn't there yet, and as silly as it was, I was worried about her.

She had ten minutes and I was going to blow up her phone with texts or calls.

"You're up." Jonathan walked in and stopped in front of me as I turned to face him. "Hey. You all right? You look like you're about ready to hurl."

"Just nervous. Is Erica out there? I haven't seen her yet." I glanced around him, as if I could see out into the showroom without walking through the curtain. I couldn't.

"No, but I'm sure she's almost here. Let's have you start moving around the room, greeting people. We'll unveil the main attraction in thirty minutes, and the room will just be wild. It's incredible, Matt. One of the most beautiful portraits I've ever seen. You should make sure to put a ring on that woman's finger soon if that's really how you see her."

"It is." I pursed my lips and breathed in deeply. I hated mingling, but the thought of doing it with Erica on my arm

made it all better. Now that she was missing in action, I was ill all over again.

“All right. Let’s do this. If she comes in the front door, I’ll tell your brother to send her right over to you. Good?”

“Yes.” I walked past him and moved into the showroom, stopping beside an older couple who were talking excitedly about the picture I’d done of Bethany.

“Such incredible detail. Beautiful lines.” The woman glanced up at me and smiled. “Do you work here? Do you know the story behind this picture?”

I took a shallow breath and shook my head. “I don’t work here, but-”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.” She smiled and shook her head, her long dangly earrings moving about. “I should tell Jonathan that he needs to have uniforms for his staff. Then I would stop embarrassing myself.”

The older man beside her leaned around her. “I highly doubt that.” He snickered and I smiled.

Erica’s voice on the other side of me caused something beyond relief to flood through me. “Matthew doesn’t work here, but he’s the artist whose painting you’re enjoying. He can tell you the story behind the girl’s haunted expression.”

I wrapped my arm around her and leaned in to hug her. Pressing my lips to her ear, I closed my eyes. “I was terrified that something happened to you.”

She pulled back and smiled. “Don’t be. Talk to these people tonight and sell your art. It’s our future, right?”

“Absolutely.” I kissed her softly and turned back to the couple as the woman’s cheeks colored pink. “The painting is of my stepsister. Her mother and her were in complete poverty for most of her life. She hides it well now and works harder than any woman I know, besides my woman.” I pulled Erica closer and smiled.

“I was in poverty at one point in my life too.” The older woman’s eyes filled with tears. “I remember praying that I

didn't look like I felt."

"And how did you feel?" Erica's voice was soft, sweet.

"Like this." She pointed to it and sniffled. Her husband wrapped an arm around her shoulders, and my heart grew warm. This was what art was all about. Connecting people across generations and from places far and wide who shared one thing. The human experience.

"How much for this piece? I must have it." The woman turned toward us.

I had no clue how much to charge and figured the best thing to do was to find Jonathan. Erica spoke up before I could utter a word, saving me.

"It's four hundred thousand. Matthew is taking off a hundred thousand on this one tonight." She glanced up at me as if I were the most generous man in the world.

Four hundred thousand dollars? That was ins-

"I'll take it, and don't discount it. It's worth every bit of five hundred thousand. Have Jonathan wrap it up for Liz Mantrell. It's stunning. Great job, young man." She nodded and slipped her hand into her husband's, walking off and wiping at her eyes.

I turned to Erica, my heart racing, my knees weak. "Are you freaking kidding me?"

She laughed and bounced on her feet. "That was fucking awesome!"

"You were fucking awesome." I gripped her shoulders and leaned down, kissing her with every ounce of passion I had inside of me. "I'm so glad you're mine."

"Am I yours?" She smiled up at me, making the world disappear.

"Without a doubt."

# CHAPTER 40



## ERICA

**B**utterflies danced in my stomach over the way he looked at me. It wasn't a passing thought or a hopeful wish for the future, but our reality. He wanted exactly what I did... us, together forever.

“Matthew. Erica. Let's get ready for the big reveal.” Jonathan clapped his hands together and turned, walking toward a large canvas covered in velvety black cloth. “Everyone. If I could kindly have your attention please. Now comes the time in the evening when we're proud to share Matthew Bryant's centerpiece. The bidding will start at five hundred thousand dollars and go up from there.”

I glanced around to find Lanie talking to a handsome, older guy near the bar that Jonathan had set up in the corner. His suit fit him well, and she seemed lost to him. Interesting. I'd have to get the scoop later.

Matthew and I moved up to stand beside Kent and Damon as I realized what the painting was of. Me. Naked.

“Hey, guys.” I glanced over at the two of them as embarrassment swirled in my belly, dousing my insides and leaving it hard as hell to breathe. “The centerpiece is me, so no giving me shit about it, all right?”

“Absolutely not.” Kent tilted his head to the side. “Why in the world would-”

“And here you have it. Appropriately named, Passion of the Heart.” Jonathan had the cloth dropped and several gasps rang out around the room.

“Oh. Wow.” Damon pressed his hand to his lips and smiled. “That’s beautiful.”

“Intriguing.” Kent took a step toward it. “I can’t believe how talented you are, Matthew.”

Matt pulled me against his side and smiled like a tomcat. “It’s easy when you have the perfect model to use for our passion piece.”

“That’s stunning, bro. I’d love to have that in my house, but Beth would have a fucking conniption.”

“As she should.” I popped Damon in the chest.

“I’ll bid a million dollars.” A deep voice resounded from the back, one that was far too familiar.

“Mitch?” Kent turned and laughed. “I didn’t know you were coming, you old dog.”

“Yes. I got an invitation in the mail a few weeks back. I figured if the artist had the same last name as my boss, I’d better be here.” Mitch walked up and shook Damon’s hand before leaning forward and shaking mine and Matt’s. “Matt it’s beautiful. Who is she?”

“She’s a figment of my imagination,” Matt bit out. He was upset without a doubt.

“It’s Erica. Come on, Mitch. You can’t see it?” Damon lifted his hand as my stomach grew sick. “The blond hair, sexy smile, perfect lips.”

“Thank you. That will do.” I pushed my shoulder against Damon’s and tried to figure out how the hell I was going to get us out of the possibility of Mitch ending up with my picture. The portrait showed a part of my breast, all of my back, my ass and my legs. It was insanely intimate.

“One point one million dollars.” Matt lifted his hand.

“You can’t bid on your own painting,” I whispered to him, but the look on his handsome face told me to ‘lock it up’.

Fuck. This was going to get ugly fast.

“Two million dollars.” Mitch shrugged and lifted his hand.



Jonathan seemed pleased, but he had no clue what was going on. Matthew was going to spend every last penny he earned that night trying to buy back a painting that already belonged to him.

“Four million.” A young guy in the back lifted his hand and smiled at us. “It’s beautiful. I have to have it.”

“Five.” Mitch took the bid higher.

“I’m going to be sick.” I fanned myself and pulled out of Matt’s arms, needing a little bit of air. Nothing was going to change or be made better with me standing there and possibly hurling all over the fancy shoes around me.

I pushed the door open to the gallery and sucked in. The air was chilly, but felt good against my bare shoulders and back. The portrait was worthy of millions of dollars for sure. I wasn’t, but that was the battle that was being fought. Matt and Mitch were squaring up across the ring from each other, and Matt didn’t have the proper equipment to fight. Mitch was wealthy, no doubt, and Matt was too, but it wasn’t his money.

It would break him in half to have to borrow that from his father, and he would have to borrow some of it. Jonathan got a cut of the final price of the pieces sold that night.

“Goddammit,” I growled and turned to face the studio. What was Mitch doing? Why was he messing up the one thing Matt had going for him? This night meant everything to him.

Everything.

I pulled out my phone and texted Mitch, grateful that we exchanged numbers the week before.

Me: What the fuck are you doing? You’re messing up this night.

Mitch: So ask me to stop. Offer me a reason to.

Me: Stop. Please. You don’t want this painting.

Mitch: Yes, I do. I want it, and I want you. I hadn’t wanted anyone since Carolyn died in my arms, but I want you

something horrible. Offer me something and I'll retract my offers and the bidding will resume. He just doesn't want me to have the picture.

Me: You're driving the price up.

Mitch: Damn straight I am. You need to see what I see, and yet you're not willing to. Why? Because he makes your heart flutter? Your body wet?

Me: Stop it. Leave him be. I'm serious.

Mitch: No. You'll thank me later.

I growled in anger and glanced up at the sky. "What do you want from me? How do I stop this? He's going to ruin the evening and steal Matt's dreams and what little bit of progress he's made. What the hell?

The phone buzzed and I pulled it out and almost swallowed my tongue.

Mitch: One night. Dinner. Wine. Sex. Nothing more if that's what you decide. No one has to know. Not ever.

Me: I can't. I love him.

Mitch: Do you? His pride is about to steal everything from him but you, which is sweet, but you're not a girl, Erica. You're a woman. What wouldn't you be willing to do for the man you love?

Me: Dinner and Wine. Nothing else.

Mitch: You have my offer. Take it and I'll walk out of here and never bother him again. Deny me and this will only be the beginning.

Tears burned my eyes as I glanced down at our string of messages. I couldn't cheat on Matt, but I couldn't let him walk into this shit without doing something to save him. If I were

willing to jump in front of a gun for him, why wasn't I willing to let someone use me for a night?

Mitch turned and faced me, his handsome face filled with question. He mouthed, "Yes or No."

I swallowed hard and glanced over at Matt, who was practically shaking with fury. I couldn't see him fail. I just couldn't. I turned my attention back toward Mitch and gave him my answer, though it broke me to do it. What choice did I have?

"Yes."

# CHAPTER 41



## MATT

“**Y**ou sure you’re going to be okay without me?” I smiled down at Erica as she stood encircled in my arms tightly. “I’m the *only* one that knows how you like your coffee in the morning.”

She laughed, but the sound was far from joyous. Something was wrong and had been since the fucking art show. I couldn’t pry from her what was going on, so I’d forced myself to stop trying over the last week. I’d just love her through it, and when she was ready to talk - if ever - she would.

“I’ve been making my own coffee for many years before you came along, Matthew Bryant.” She lifted to her toes and pulled me down for a long kiss.

Every cell in my body woke up and begged for me to push the moment farther.

“You know I love you, right?” I reached up and cupped the side of her cheek as the sound of my father’s private jet roaring to life stole her attention.

She turned and looked toward it before stepping back from me. “I know. I love you too. Please be careful, okay?”

“I will.” I pulled her in again for a long string of kisses. “Zek likes his soft food in the morning and his-”

She popped me in the chest and laughed. “He’s *my* dog! I know what he likes. Get your fine ass on that plane before you get into trouble.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “Can you give me your definition of *trouble* first?”

“Go. Have fun talking with your dad about everything.” She crossed her arms over her chest, and some of the light in her eyes died.

“Erica. You want me to cancel the trip, baby? I can tell something isn’t right.”

“No.” She shook her head. Her expression tightened, and I could tell that whatever was going on, it was one hell of a battle inside of her. I could only pray it had nothing to do with me. “Go and get all of this stuff cleared up with your father and Damon.”

“And you’re okay that I’m stepping back from McKenzie and Bryant?”

“Yes, Matt. I’ve told you a thousand times that you need to follow your passion for painting. You made ten million dollars in one night.” She dropped her hands to her side and gave me a cute smile. “Who does that?”

“I guess I’m more of a Bryant than I thought.” I leaned down to pick up my bag, checking out her long legs on my way back up. My cock twitched in my shorts, and my heart fluttered. Damn... I was a lucky man. Nothing would ever outdo the joy I had over me and Erica getting together.

Now I had to keep her until I could get a ring on her finger.

“Get on the plane. Call me later?” She moved in for one final kiss. It was too short, but the pilot was hovering just behind me on the stairs to the jet.

“Alright. Love you.” I turned and walked up the stairs, nodding at the guy and walking into the fancy ass plane. No matter how much money I made in life, there were some things that just seemed to be a torrential waste... like a private jet.

I dropped my bag by a large leather seat and walked over to find Erica already gone. Fuck. Something was horribly wrong, and I needed to find a way to get her to talk to me.

Calling her best friend, Lanie, seemed like one plausible way to do it, but I'd really hoped we were growing close enough to share ourselves without outside interference.

My only other choice was to pry the information from Erica myself. I knew someone who was rather good at that sort of thing, seeing that the bastard had been prying information out of me for my whole damn life.

My older brother, Damon.



“Well, did you ask what was wrong?” Damon gave me a sideways look as we drove out to dad’s house. I’d explained Erica’s odd moodiness over the last few minutes, and of course, my brother being the practical ass that he was, asked the most obvious of questions.

I brushed my fingers by my chin and forced a contemplative look. “Nope. I didn’t even think of that one. Ask her what’s wrong.” I turned and gave him a ‘you’re a dumb ass look.’ “Of course I asked her what was wrong. She blamed it on work like she always does.”

“It’s not work. I talked to her a few days ago, and she’s doing great with her team and her projects.” He tapped the steering wheel and shook his head. “Why the fuck do women have to be so complicated? Men just need sleep, sex, food and a little bit of respect. Nothing else.”

“Don’t speak for all men, please. I need love.”

“Cause you’re a girl.” He smiled, lightening the mood in the car.

“I wish. I’d have my hand down my pants all the time.”

“And that would be different from now how?”

We laughed as he pulled into the circle drive at dad’s place. A few cars were already sitting near the house, all of which helped me identify who was there. Family. My whole family.

Warmth filled my chest over the idea of spending the evening surrounded by them. The only person missing was my woman.

“Kendal is coming over tonight too.” Damon gave me a stern look as he parked the car.

“Alright. Is that supposed to mean something?” I opened the door and got out, immediately feeling the difference in the weather from Dallas to Seattle.

“He’s just not doing so well.” Damon walked to the front door with me in tow behind him.

“Because of Mandy’s death?” I stopped short as he paused before opening the door and turning to face me.

“Something happened with Dana.”

“Like what?” I slipped my hands into my jeans pockets as my heart dropped. Kendal was Damon’s best friend, but he was like family too. He’d lost his little sister to multiple sclerosis recently and seemed to have shit going on in his personal relationship and at work too.

“Dana ended up being Ana’s sister.” Damon opened the door and walked in as I stood in the entryway in shock.

“Wait. Like Ana, the girl he almost lost his job over a few years back?” I forced myself to walk down the hallway toward the sound of laughing.

“Yeah. He’s fallen in love with his ex-girlfriend’s little sister. And he didn’t have a clue.” Damon moved over to Bethany and gave her a quick kiss.

“Matthew!” Bethany moved around my brother and plowed into me.

I picked her up in a big bear hug. “You still letting the Neanderthal touch you?”

“Watch it,” Damon mumbled and moved past us. “Maria is off today. We’re doing burgers for everyone.”

“Where are mom and dad?” I set Bethany down and glanced around.



“They went away for a few days together.” Bethany shrugged and slipped her arm into mine before dragging me to the kitchen. “Tell me all about the art show.”

“I already told you all about it.” Damon glanced over his shoulder as we walked into the kitchen. “He lost his million-dollar virginity that night.”

I rolled my eyes and moved to sit down at the breakfast nook. “Dumb.”

Bethany laughed and turned to stand across the counter from me. “Did you enjoy it? Was it everything you thought it would be?”

“Yeah.” I smiled. “Erica was brilliant, but she always is.”

“Hey. Speaking of Erica...” Damon turned and tilted his head to the side. “What the fuck was going on with you and that painting you did of her?”

Anger swam in my stomach as I thought about the situation with Mitch. “I didn’t want Mitch to have the painting.”

“What painting?” Bethany asked.

“The one of Erica naked.” Damon moved over to stand beside Bethany. “Why do you care who ended up with it? It was painted to sell, right?”

“Yeah.” I glanced down and let out a tight sigh. “I don’t know what it is about that guy, but I don’t like him. I didn’t want him to have the damn thing.”

“And where were you going to get five million dollars to buy the thing?” Damon snorted.

I glanced up. “I would have figured it out. The fucker is lucky he backed off when he did.”

“So Mitch just decided to stop bidding all of a sudden?” Bethany asked, looking between me and Damon.

“You know Mitch?” I turned my attention to my stepsister.

“Of course she does, nimrod. She works at the firm. He’s a new director. We had dinner with him a few weeks back. He

spoke highly of you and Erica.”

I snorted. “Of course he did. He’s interested in her from what I can tell.”

“He should be. She’s beautiful.” Damon turned and walked back toward the fridge. “Not as pretty as my girl, but she’s alright.”

I laughed and shook my head. “Anyway, the bastard didn’t end up with the painting. That’s all that mattered.”

“And you did instead?” Bethany leaned toward me, pressing her forearms to the counter between us.

“No. Some young guy I’ve never seen before ended up with it.” I shrugged. “It was a great piece of art. Maybe one day I’ll get it back.”

“Or you’ll do another one.” Damon pulled out his phone. “I need to get this. Keep an eye out for Kendal. He should be here any minute.”

Damon walked out of the room, and someone knocked on the door behind us.

“I’ll get it.” I stood and walked to the door, not quite sure what to expect. Kendal had been like a brother to me and Damon for years, and the poor guy had been through far too much as of late. He was private and usually didn’t share his hurts though, which made it hard to help.

Typical dude.

I pulled the door open to see dark circles under Kendal’s eyes, and his complexion was washed out. He looked like me during my bullshit drama with Erica a few weeks back. I was thrilled to be through with all of that madness.

“Dude. Good to see you!” I smiled and reached for Kendal, pulling him into a warm hug.

He wrapped his arms around me and patted my back. “Hey man. Good to see you. Seattle treating you okay?”

“Better than you.” I stepped back and gripped his shoulders. “Damon said that out of all of the women in Dallas

you ended up with Ana's sister? That's just so far beyond fucked up. I'm mind blown."

"Matt! Really?" Bethany moved up beside me and reached for Kendal's hand, pulling him past me. "I swear you have no filter what-so-ever."

I rolled my eyes and walked into the kitchen behind them.

"How did you not put two and two together?" Damon walked in from the other opening in the kitchen and turned his attention onto Kendal.

"I don't know. How could I have?" Kendal grabbed a beer from the fridge and glanced around. "Anyone want a drink?"

"Yeah. Toss me one." I took a seat at the breakfast nook and caught the beer he threw at me.

"You and Bethany want one?" Kendal asked.

"No. We're holding out for wine." Damon turned and leaned against the counter, crossing his arms over his chest as his dark eyes narrowed. "Is there a reason why you've been avoiding me along with the rest of the world?"

Bethany popped him in the chest and then went back to cooking something over the stove. "Leave him alone."

"Yeah. Leave me alone." Kendal walked over and dropped down next to me. "I'm still trying to figure it out, to be honest. How in the fuck did Dana end up being Ana's sister? They don't even look alike."

"Mixed family?" Damon offered up and moved to stand in front of us. "You guys want all the fixings for your burgers or what?"

"Where's your mom and dad?" Kendal glanced around.

"They're out of town. Spending quality time together." I wagged my eyebrows and took a long drink of my beer.

Damon made a gagging sound that caused my lip to lift. "Anyway. Jeez." He rolled his eyes and turned his attention fully on Kendal. "You know this isn't that big of a deal."

“Hey.” Bethany moved up beside him, wrapping her arms around him and glancing up.

Kendal sat stiffly next to me, but I could feel the pain rolling off the poor guy. It was a big deal to him. Falling for his ex-girlfriend’s little sister was actually a big deal to anyone with blood pumping through their veins.

“Hey what, pretty girl?” Damon turned in Bethany’s arms and leaned down, nipping at her lips.

“Gross. And you think mom and dad going off for some quality time together is disturbing? At least they keep that shit in the bedroom.” I moved off my stool and walked toward the living room. “Call me when dinner’s done.”

I sat down on the couch and pulled out my phone, wanting to text Erica, but figuring I’d look needy if I did.

“I *am* needy,” I mumbled and leaned back, closing my eyes.

The sound of the front door slamming caused me to jump. I stood and walked into the kitchen to find my brother and Bethany talking in hushed tones about Kendal.

“What happened?” I glanced around, confused.

“He’s just overwhelmed by everything.” Damon wrapped Bethany in a hug.

“You want me to go after him?” I asked.

“No. It’s alright. Just grab some plates. Let’s eat and try to have a chilled night. I think we all need it badly.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” I walked over to grab a few plates. “When is dad coming back into town.”

“Not sure. Why?”

“I’m quitting M&B. I can’t do it anymore.” I turned to face my brother.

“And what does Erica think about that?” He lifted his eyebrow.

“She’s all for it.”

He nodded. “Good woman then. Good woman for sure.”

# CHAPTER 42



## ERICA

After dropping Matt off at the airport, I wanted to go home and face plant in my bed, but unfortunately, I'd set up a meeting with my staff to go over some new ad specs that morning.

I glanced in the rear-view mirror to see Matt stop by the stairs of the plane and glance back. My heart filled with a warmth I didn't know if I would ever have. Being raised by a loving father and hateful mother made for a less than steady experience.

Tears burned my eyes as memories washed over me. The one that stuck in my mind's eye as I drove through the city was being at the opening night of Matt's showing.

Fucking Mitch Roberson.

*"Goddammit," I growled and turned to face the studio. What was Mitch doing? Why was he messing up the one thing Matt had going for him? This night meant everything to him.*

*Everything.*

*I pulled out my phone and texted Mitch, grateful that we exchanged numbers the week before.*

*Me: What the fuck are you doing? You're messing up this night.*

*Mitch: So ask me to stop. Offer me a reason to.*

*Me: Stop. Please. You don't want this painting.*

*Mitch: Yes, I do. I want it, and I want you. I hadn't wanted anyone since Carolyn died in my arms, but I want you something horrible. Offer me something and I'll retract my offers, and the bidding will resume. He just doesn't want me to have the picture.*

*Me: You're driving the price up.*

*Mitch: Damn straight I am. You need to see what I see, and yet you're not willing to. Why? Because he makes your heart flutter? Your body wet?*

*Me: Stop it. Leave him be. I'm serious.*

*Mitch: No. You'll thank me later.*

*I growled in anger and glanced up at the sky. "What do you want from me? How do I stop this? He's going to ruin the evening and steal Matt's dreams and what little bit of progress he's made. What the hell?"*

*The phone buzzed, and I pulled it out and almost swallowed my tongue.*

*Mitch: One night. Dinner. Wine. Sex. Nothing more if that's what you decide. No one has to know. Not ever.*

*Me: I can't. I love him.*

*Mitch: Do you? His pride is about to steal everything from him but you, which is sweet, but you're not a girl, Erica. You're a woman. What wouldn't you be willing to do for the man you love?*

*Me: Dinner and Wine. Nothing else.*

*Mitch: You have my offer. Take it, and I'll walk out of here and never bother him again. Deny me, and this will only be the beginning.*



*Tears burned my eyes as I glanced down at our string of messages. I couldn't cheat on Matt, but I couldn't let him walk into this shit without doing something to save him. If I were willing to jump in front of a gun for him, why wasn't I willing to let someone use me for a night?*

*Mitch turned and faced me, his handsome face filled with question. He mouthed, "Yes or No."*

*I swallowed hard and glanced over at Matt, who was practically shaking with fury. I couldn't see him fail. I just couldn't. I turned my attention back toward Mitch and gave him my answer, though it broke me to do it. What choice did I have?*

*"Yes."*

And in that moment, I'd damned myself to hell. How in the world was I ever going to get out of the sticky situation I was in? I could quit McKenzie and Bryant. I could talk with Damon and Kent and pray that they would believe me.

I could simply tell Mitch no, right? What could he do?

"Ruin me," I whispered and pulled into the parking lot just outside the office. I parked in my normal spot, turned the engine off and leaned my head back. "What am I gonna do?"

My father would have told me to be honest and open with Matt, letting him know exactly what I'd done, but my mother would have scoffed at us both. There was no reason to show your card. Not ever.

I got out of the car a few minutes later, resolved to let it go. Maybe Mitch was calling my bluff. Maybe he wouldn't want anything from me.

A large group of stiff-shouldered people walked into the building ahead of me and moved toward the elevator. Parts of my soul screamed for release. To not be in a perfectly pressed dark blue suit, but in a red dress that blew up around my legs as I walked down the street. I wanted freedom so damn bad, and I knew without a doubt that part of the reason that

Matthew Bryant had me captivated was because of his courage to go after his dreams.

I wasn't there yet, but I knew he would help me find myself again if I hung out long enough. That was the plan unless Mitch unraveled all of it somehow.

"Erica." Mandy, one of my senior advertising managers, moved up beside me as I walked out of the elevator. "How are you?"

"I'm good." I pulled my watch toward my face. "I'm running a little bit behind though. Can you get the group talking about the Traydeck account and I'll be in there shortly."

"Absolutely. You want me to grab you a cup of coffee?"

"No, but thanks." I turned and walked into my office to find Joan, my secretary setting a vase of flowers on my round table. "Morning, Joan."

"Oh!" She jumped and turned, her cheeks burning pink. "Sorry about that. You scared me."

"It's okay." I offered her a warm smile. "I didn't mean to scare you." I nodded toward the flowers. "Who are these from?"

"Mr. Roberson. He said that you needed something to cheer you up."

"And how would he know?" I walked around to the other side of my desk as my stomach sank. Mitch wasn't going to give up. He was all in for some odd reason. I wanted to know why. I wasn't all that, and he was a gorgeous older man with more money and energy than God. He could have any woman he wanted.

"Um, no clue. I'm just the messenger."

"Right. Sorry." I set my stuff down and let out a soft sigh. "Give me some advice. I need to shake him. He's becoming a little more than work friendly."

"Why on earth would you want to shake him?" She tilted her head to the side, her eyes piercing me as if she could

somehow see into my future.

“Because I’m dating Matthew Bryant, and I’m quite happy with him.”

“Erica. Can I speak freely?” She crossed her arms over her chest.

“Of course.” I sat down in my chair, knowing that she wasn’t going to have anything nice to say about Matt. The whole office saw him as a playboy child with a pipe dream of being a great artist. To the business types, it was laughable.

“I think you’re much better matched with someone like Mitch. You’re beautiful and so incredibly talented.” Her expression grew almost sad. “You need a man who can provide for you and help you build a strong, solid future.”

“I understand how you could want that, but what if I didn’t want security?” I leaned back in my chair and made sure to keep my tone conversational. I wasn’t trying to debate Joan on whether Matthew was good for me or not. He was my lover and would eventually be my husband if one of us didn’t fuck it up royally.

“I’m not sure I understand.” She turned as someone moved into the doorway behind her.

Mitch.

He lifted his hand and smiled over at me. “You got the flowers.”

“I got them.” I turned my attention back to Joan as she paled. “What if I wanted adventure, fun, intensely hot sex, and wild passion that left me racing after the next high, the next time, the unknown?”

“Um... I’ll come back later.” Mitch chuckled as if the bastard was oblivious to what our conversation was about. “Actually, just come see me when you’re done here.”

“I will.” I turned my gaze back on Joan. “You see what I’m saying? It’s not always about security.”

“I guess I do.” Her lips turned up in a smile. “I hope you know that I support you in anything you do. I’ve watched you

grow over the last two years here, but I know this is just a stop on the map in front of you, Erica.”

“Thank you for that. You’ve been great.” I stood and walked over to the flowers, plucking the card from them. “Please put these in the foyer to make the place pretty and let’s not tell anyone who they’re for or from. I have a lot of stuff to clean up in my life. I’d like to start that today.”

She nodded. “Of course. Let me know how I can help.” Joan picked up the vase and carried the flowers away, leaving me in my office alone. I had to go see Mitch and tell him that I wasn’t playing his game. Not now, not ever.

I pulled every bit of excess courage I had and walked down the hallway. A silent prayer ran through my head that I could get resolution on the situation and somehow we could work together in a professional manner and nothing else.

His door was open when I walked up to it. I paused just inside the doorframe to find him standing with his back to me, his hands in his pockets as he looked out across the city. He was beyond handsome with his salt and pepper hair and strong shoulders. His eyes were filled with fierce determination, and his smile seductive. If I hadn’t have been in love with Matt the way I was, I would have longed for the attention of a man like him.

Every woman would.

“I know you’ve come to change my mind,” he glanced over his shoulder, “but you’re wasting your time.”

“Mitch.” I walked into the room.

“Close the door.” It wasn’t a request.

I hesitated for a moment but decided that he wasn’t stupid enough to try anything on me in the office in the middle of the morning.

“You don’t understand.” I walked toward him as he moved to the other side of his desk. His dark eyes moved along my body, the dominance radiating off of him forcing me to stop in my tracks.

“No. You’re right, Erica. I don’t understand.” He nodded to the chair in front of his desk. “Take a seat and explain it all to me.”

I let out a tight sigh, frustrated as hell. I wasn’t sure how to gain control of the conversation, but I needed to figure it out. If he led me through our discussion, I would end up where I’d started. Under his thumb.

“I’m in love with Matt.” I sat down and leaned back, crossing my legs tightly. “He’s all I want in my life, and if we’re being honest, I’m not the woman you want in yours. You need someone who’s a little more conducive to your personality.”

He chuckled. “I see you’re pulling out big words on me this morning. I like it.”

“Mitch. I’m not sleeping with you.” I glanced down at my hands, which rested in my lap. “I’m in love, and I wouldn’t ever do anything to hurt Matt.”

“Make sure your calendar is clear tonight, Erica. I’ve waited over a week for you to make good on your promise.” He watched me like a hawk, his handsome face expressionless. “And wear something beautiful for me, hm?”

“I’m not going to dinner with you.” I moved up to the edge of my seat as panic raced through me. What the fuck was it about this guy.

“Yes. You are.” He leaned forward and gave me a cocky half-smile. “You don’t get to pull the strings on this thing between you and me.”

“There is nothing between us. I’m in a committed relationship.”

“And if you weren’t?” He stood and walked around the desk as I stiffened.

“I am. That’s the end result here.” I stood up and face him, ready to scream bloody murder if I needed to.

“I’m not the bad guy, Erica. I’m simply going after someone I want in my life.” He reached out and ran his fingers

down a lock of my hair. “Don’t fight me. I don’t want to put any undue pressure on you. Dinner. Wine. A long night of fucking each other.”

“No.” I turned and walked around to the other side of the room to the door. “I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“Because you’re scared of what you might feel if you do?” His tone was taunting. “That you might realize that the little boy you’ve fallen in love with is nothing more than a child dressed up in his daddy’s clothing.”

“Fuck you, Mitch. Stay away from me.” I walked out and slammed the door as terror raced through me. I had to talk to Matt about everything.

He could help me figure it out.

No. He would freak out and blame me. Get angry and walk out again.

He’d leave me just like Tanner had after all those years together.

Like my dad did.

Tears blurred my vision, but I held myself together until I closed my office door behind me. I couldn’t see a way out of it, and Mitch was right...

I wasn’t scared of being repulsed by him over dinner. I was scared that somewhere inside of me I knew the truth.

Matt was immature and youthful. Maybe too much at times.

What if he wasn’t the one I needed in my future?

What if security mattered to me? If it were my top desire in life, then what?

Then I would be with Mitch and not Matt.

No. I would never let that happen. My heart wouldn’t allow it. No matter what.

# CHAPTER 43



## MATT

“Matthew?” My father’s voice woke me from a dream I was having about Erica leaving me. I jerked up in the bed, my body covered in sweat, my heart racing.

“Yeah. I’m in here.” I pulled the covers up to cover my lower body and glanced toward the door as my father stopped just inside the room and smiled at me.

“I thought you were coming later this week?” He was fully dressed and wide awake.

I, on the other hand, was not. “What time is it?”

“Just after eleven. Karen is in the kitchen with Maria, so make sure you put some pants on before you go in there.” He lifted his eyebrow at me.

“Yeah. Alright.” I flopped back down on the bed. “What are your plans today? I need to chat with you about work.”

“I’m free for the next hour. Get your lazy butt up and come talk to me in the office. I’ll be working on a few things in there until I head to downtown.”

“Is that bacon I smell?” I breathed in deeply. Something about being back in my dad’s house had me feeling like a teenager. There was a freedom there that didn’t exist anywhere else.

“Yeah.” He chuckled before turning and walking out. “Get up and get dressed. Your whole damn day is going to be gone before you know it.”



I groaned and rolled onto my stomach. My erection poked me in the stomach, and I'd have given just about anything to see my girl. I reached for my phone and called her before second guessing myself.

"Matt?" Erica's voice filled up the line, the sound of it sending shock waves down my back.

"Hey, baby," I mumbled, my voice thick with sleep.

She laughed. "You're such a playboy. It's almost lunchtime there. What are you doing?"

"I'm rolling around naked and hard in my bed, thinking about you."

"Rolling around, hm?" She giggled again, stealing my heart for the millionth time. Why in the world I thought I had to grow up and act like my brother to win a woman like her was beyond me. She wasn't looking for perfection, but a partnership. She'd be my best friend, my lover, my partner in everything before it was all said and done.

We were perfectly matched. Her dominate and in control outside of the bedroom, and me taking ownership of her tight little body in it.

"Yeah. I had a shitty dream though." I ran my fingers through my hair before lifting the cover to stare down at my dick. He wanted attention, but there was no time for it that morning.

"What was it about?" Concern swept into her tone.

"You left me for some young guy." I cleared my throat. "The one that bought the painting of you."

She snorted. "Young guy? You are a young guy."

"Yeah, but he had more money and the painting."

"That painting was beautiful, but it wasn't something I'd want hanging in our future house, Matt. How awkward would that be? Every time we had company, they'd know what I looked like naked."

“This is true.” I forced myself to sit up. “What are you wearing?”

Another soft laugh. “A business suit.”

“Underneath it?” I licked at the side of my mouth and reached down to tug on my cock a little. Maybe a few minutes of attention wouldn’t hurt anything.

“White panties and a lacy white bra that shows my nipples.” Her voice grew even softer. “You’re breathing awfully hard over there.”

“Am I?” I stood and walked over to close my bedroom door. “I can’t stop thinking about you. You turn me on so much, baby.”

“I know the feeling all too well.” She paused for a second. “Touch yourself for me?”

“Already doing it.” I sat down on the edge of the bed and gripped my shaft pretty hard. “Walk me through it?”

“What? No!” She sounded like heaven.

“Go lock your office door and let me walk you through it then. I wanna hear you come this morning.”

“Matthew Bryant. Where is my good guy?”

“He’s still sleeping, dreaming of kids and helping the homeless. Leave him there for a little bit. This part of me wants to hear you moan.”

“No,” she whispered roughly. “Call me tomorrow night, and I’ll have time to play your games.”

I lifted my hips, fucking myself as my eyes fluttered closed. “I don’t want to wait until tomorrow, Erica. I want you now.”

“And what would you do to me if you could have me?” Her panting was going to drive me mad.

“I’d bend you over your desk and grip your hair tightly as I worked myself into your warm, wet body.” I opened my eyes as my body throbbed with the promise of release. “Are you wet for me?”

“I’m always wet for you. Stop playing around in Texas and come home to me.”

I groaned and laid back, pressing my feet into the bed as I continued to stroke myself, my hands becoming hers. “God, I need you. You have me addicted to you. Did you know that.”

“Play with your balls for me,” she whispered and moaned a few times.

That’s all I needed. I jerked back and let out a long string of groans as I released, her naughty words taking me farther and farther down a delicious hole of depravity.

I released myself and tried to catch my breath as she said her goodbyes.

“God, that was hot. I love the thought of you naked and touching yourself.” She let out a soft yelp. “Gotta go. Love you.”

She hung up before I could reply, but her quick exit had me smiling. Someone had obviously walked in. I was going to try my damndest to get her to quit M&B and come work with me in an art gallery. It was part of my one year plan, and I’d have done just about anything to make it a reality.

“Matthew. Let’s go, son,” my father barked just outside the door.

“Shit. Alright.” I got up and walked to the bathroom to clean up my mess. I should have forced Erica to come to Dallas with me on the trip. Being away from her sucked far too much.

After I got myself together, I walked out of the bedroom and made a beeline for the kitchen. My father sat at the table with a paper and a cup of coffee. The sight of him sitting there brought back a million memories, not all of them good.

“Sorry. I was on the phone with Erica.” I grabbed a plate and filled it with everything left over from breakfast. After finding a fork, I walked over and sat down across from the man I’d always seen as a hero. “You have a good time on your getaway with Karen.”

“I sure did.” He folded the paper and leaned back in his chair. “Let me guess what you wanted to talk to me about. Leaving McKenzie and Bryant?”

I stiffened. “It’s that obvious?”

He chuckled. “I never want you to be something you’re not. I do want to know that you’re growing up and becoming the kind of man who can provide for a family, but you doing that by working for me was never the plan.”

“Because you already have Damon?” I had to choose my words carefully. My big brother meant everything to me, and yet there was a part of me that never felt good enough because of the man he was.

“Because I love you just the way you are, son.” He dropped his hands into his lap and let out a soft sigh. “I like the idea of you working for my company because I know I can take care of you and pay you tons of money. It’s not like you’ll take money from me any other way.”

“No, I won’t.” I shook my head. I might have been a slack-ass for the last few years, but I didn’t owe anyone a damn dime.

“I know, so you working at M&B was a good way to let you just be you and still pay you for it.”

“I appreciate that Dad, I really do, but I can’t fit into that mold. It’s not comfortable, and I feel like it’s time to man up and follow my dreams. Especially now that we all can see that my painting career can actually pay the bills.” I took a piece of bacon and rolled it up before shoving it into my mouth.

“I always knew that if you got serious about your art that you could do great things.” He reached up and cupped his chin as his eyes moved about my face. “I saw the painting you did of Damon when he was a teenager.”

“Yeah. He had a rough couple of years.” I shrugged and glanced down at my plate, not really wanting to talk about the darker parts of my raising.

“And I want you to know that I’m sorry for my part in all of that.” He reached out and touched my forearm. “I’d take it

all away from both of you if I could.”

“Dad.” I glanced up. “It’s not your fault that mom was a cheating whore-bag.”

He stiffened. “Don’t talk about your mother like that.”

“Really right now?” I pulled my arm from his grasp and leaned back, feeling all of twelve. “She cheated on you and made Damon promise not to tell you.”

“She was lonely, Matt. It was practically my fault that she found comfort in the arms of another man.”

“Do you hear yourself?” I pushed my plate away, not feeling so good. “She didn’t sleep with one guy, but many.”

“Look at me.” He gripped my arm again, tighter this time. “Your mother fucked up pretty bad, yes, but I loved her, and she loved me. Everything isn’t black and white like you’d like to believe it is. Use your heart for a second and see the colors of our story, Matt. Read between the lines on all of it.”

“What are you talking about?” Something like ice water raced down my spine. “Did you do something to hurt her before she hurt you?”

His expression saddened. “Yes. I slept with someone at the office and thought about leaving her, but I couldn’t go through with it. We both made mistakes, son.”

“Wow.” I stood up and crossed my arms over my chest. “I have no clue what to think about that.”

“Then don’t think about it,” he offered. “It’s the past, and your mother and I both knew that we’d made horrible mistakes and hurt each other. I held her as she died, Matt, and I wished the whole time that I could go back and wipe away my affair. It’s what started all of it.” His eyes filled with tears. “There are days that I blame myself for her cancer. For her death.” He shrugged. “I know it’s stupid, but something about the human spirit begs the need for fault, for resolution, for understanding. And if we can’t see it clearly, we’ll create it out of nothingness. I harmed your mother, and she repaid me for it, but you know what she never did?”

“What, Dad?” My heart ached in my chest. There were so many more layers to the relationships around me than I thought possible. It forced me to want to dig into Erica’s sadness. What was the underlying layer that was sucking away her joy, and better yet, how could I help heal it?

“She never told you boys about my affair. Even when Damon caught her in hers.” He reached up and wiped his face. “I love you, son. I want you to be happy and live a full life. If that’s working with your art and living in Seattle, then I fully support it.”

“And me wanting to marry Erica?”

“I support that too.” He gave me a sideways smile. “You’re not planning on trying to take her away from the company too, are you?”

I offered him a grin in response. “It has crossed my mind a few times.”

“Why am I not surprised by this?” He reached up and picked up his paper. “How long are you here for?”

“I’m leaving after lunch. I was going to stay until the end of the week, but I thought I would need some time to convince you not to be upset with my decision to walk away from M&B.” I reached down and grabbed another piece of bacon from my plate. “I want to get back to Erica. Something is going on with her. I want to know what.”

“Nothing to convince me of. I trust your judgment.” He pulled the paper up in front of his face. “I don’t want another Damon, Matthew. I want you. Just like you are.”

“Thanks, Dad.” I picked up my plate and walked to the bedroom, feeling almost light, like I could float down the hallway. My last concern was what my father would think of me, and I had it all wrong.

He was glad I was who I was. It was time for me to settle into that same place, accepting myself, all parts of my personality.

Even the wild ones.

# CHAPTER 44



## ERICA

It felt so good to hear from Matt earlier in the day. It was about the only thing getting me through the fucked up task of walking around the office like everything was fine. I'd left early the day before, faking a stomach ache just to get out of having to deal with Mitch a moment longer.

The inevitable was coming closer and closer. I was going to have to leave M&B. For some strange reason, the thought of parting ways with my corporate job didn't scare me nearly as much as it should have.

"Erica. You got a minute?" Lewis walked into my office with a large poster board sketch of our latest ad project. "I know you're probably heading out soon, but I wanted to get your take on this."

"Of course." I stood and walked toward him, leaning over and studying the artwork. "It's beautiful. You have very clean lines, and I love the blue and gold coloring at the eagle symbol that they use in their main logo near the top. We're good for presenting it to Kent and Damon."

"Excellent." He rolled the poster up and walked to the door, pausing briefly. "Hey. I know that it's none of my business, but is Matthew coming back? We haven't seen him in a week or so, and you've somewhat left us in the dark on what's going on."

"I'm not sure, to be honest. He's gone to Dallas to talk with his father about leaving the firm. It's just not his persona



at all, though he has enjoyed working with you and Mandy a lot.”

Lewis smirked. “I knew it was coming. He’s way too much of a free spirit.”

“That he is.” I turned and walked back to my desk as Lewis left. Speaking of my free spirit... I wanted to hear his voice. After packing up my things, I made my way down to the first floor of M&B and waited until I was outside in the late fall evening to call him.

The phone rang three times and went to voicemail.

“Damn,” I mumbled and tucked my phone away. He must have been with Damon or Kent in a meeting. Maybe he was talking with them about him leaving the firm.

The idea gave me chill bumps. He was going to step out and live his dreams. I wished I could do the same, but crazy enough, I wasn’t even sure what my dreams were.

My phone buzzed in the seat next to me on the way back to the house, and I answered it in a hurry, praying that it was Matt. There was some part of me that was almost desperate to hear from him.

“This is Erica.”

“Hey. It’s Lanie.” She chuckled. “Did you not see my name on your phone?”

“I’m driving and answered without looking at it.” I worked hard to hold back the disappointment from my voice. “What’s up? How are you?”

“I’m good. I just keep walking around the little classroom wondering what the hell I’m doing with my life.” She let out a long sigh.

“Come over tonight instead of tomorrow night, and we’ll figure it out together.” I put on my blinker and moved over, almost getting side swiped by some asshole in a red Mustang. “Ugh. I hate driving on this freeway.”

“Be careful please.”

“Come over. I can whip something up for us. It would be nice to see you. I need to find out who the hottie at the art event was last week.”

“Right? I’m sorry about having to cancel on you for dinner and then yoga. We’re just going through some changes here at school, and I needed to deal with a few things. I’ll come over tomorrow night like usual. That work?”

“Yeah. Sure. Nothing to apologize about.” We chatted for a few more minutes before I hung up. I pulled up into the driveway of my apartment complex and got out. I couldn’t help longing for a different scenario than the one I had facing me that night.

The *only* good thing about the evening was Zek, my puppy. He’d help me stay busy after I had dinner, and maybe if I was lucky, Matthew would call later.

The sound of him moaning on the phone as he came earlier that morning raced through my mind, lighting my body on fire.

I didn’t give a shit what Joan or Mitch thought. Matthew Bryant was all alpha in the bedroom, even if he wasn’t at all outside of it.

“And maybe that’s what I need.” I unlocked and opened my front door, stopping short to the smell of Chinese food. “Hello?” I trace of fear ran through me.

Had Mitch gotten a key to my place?

“Hello yourself, beautiful.” Matt walked out of the kitchen toward me as I stood frozen at the front door. “Damn, woman... that dress looks good on you.”

I dropped my bag and reached for him, pulling him close as he ran his hands down my back and massaged my rear. “Fuck, Matt. You scared me.” I nestled the side of his neck, breathing him in deeply as I wrapped my arms around his neck.

“I’m sorry, baby. I wanted to surprise you.” He ran his hand down the back of my head, tugging at my hair softly. “Hey. You okay?”

I moved back as hard emotion tugged at my insides. “Yeah. Just a little needy for some reason.”

“Hmm... that’s usually my line.” He smiled and touched the side of my face. “I had to come home after this morning. We need a new rule. No leaving town without each other. It’s the fucking pits.”

“Agreed.” I moved in for a long kiss, opening my mouth and letting his tongue dominate mine. The delicious feel of his hands running over my sides and up my back was enough to have me melting there in front of him. “More.”

“Dinner and then more, or just more?” He kissed me as he worked on the zipper that ran down my back.

“Just more.” I moved back and pulled at his t-shirt, tugging it over his head and throwing it somewhere behind me. His eyes shown with lust as I glanced up and lost myself in them. “God, I love you.”

“Same here, angel.” He gripped the sleeves of my dress and pulled them over my shoulders. “Turn around. Now.”

I turned as my dress hit the ground, pooling around my heels. A moan left me as he encircled my waist and ran his hands up to cup my breasts. The thick press of his chest and hard stomach against my back felt too good to be true.

“Please don’t stop.” I turned my face and kissed him as he leaned down to consume my mouth. One hand slid down my stomach, his fingers sliding into my panties to part my folds.

“That’s not something you have to ask for, Erica. Just tell me if you need me to stop.” He opened me up, sliding his thick middle finger into my heat as he rolled the meaty part of his palm against my clit. “You smell so fucking good, baby.”

I lifted one leg, resting my foot on a nearby chair before leaning back against him. He massaged my breasts one at a time as I rolled my hips slowly, fucking myself with his fingers.

“I want to hear my name on your lips,” he whispered roughly into my ear as he ground against my ass.

“I want you everywhere. All over me. Inside of me.” I bucked against his hand as a fire lit deep inside my womb, threatening to explode.

“My name,” he grumbled and moved his other hand into my panties to play with the warm bundle of nerves at the top of my mound. “And come hard for me.”

“So bossy.” I closed my eyes and let the feeling of him working me hard and fast throw me off the cliff. A scream built up behind my teeth as I jerked against his strong hold.

“Say it.” He pumped his rough fingers in and out of my body. The sharp pain of his teeth pressing against the back of my shoulder had me lost to him.

“Matt,” I screamed and rode the high for as long as it would take me.

“So beautiful, Erica.” He released me and knelt, pulling my panties off as he did. “Turn around, baby.”

I turned and reached out, running my fingers through his dirty blond hair. “I want you inside of me.”

“Good. You’re going to get it.” He leaned forward and parted my folds with his fingers before dragging his tongue over my sensitive flesh. “I want to taste you later tonight after dinner.”

“Anything you want. I’m all yours.” I moved back as he stood, his cock creating a huge tent in his jeans.

“And what do you want?” He reached out and grabbed my hand before pulling me close and forcing me to stroke his erection. “A little bit of this?”

“All of it.” I nipped at his lips as aggression rose sharply within me. He was mine, and I wasn’t giving him up for anything or anyone.

He unbuttoned his jeans and slid them down his legs, taking his black silk boxers with it. His arousal sprung loose, his dick thick and hard, standing proud. “I missed you last night. And this morning.”

“I missed you too.” I reached out and stroked him as we locked gazes. “I don’t want to spend another night without you.”

“Then you won’t have to.” He pulled out a chair and sat down. “Turn around and come sit in my lap.”

“Let me get us a condom.”

“No. I’m not going to come yet. I just want to feel you against me.” He gripped my hips and forced me to turn before jerking me down into his lap. “Just ride me and find your own release. That’s what I’m after.”

“That shouldn’t be hard to do.” I spread my legs over his and gripped his thighs just above the knee as I lowered myself onto him, taking one delicious inch after the other.

“Fuck, Erica. You’re so wet.” He ran a hand up my back and gripped my shoulder, pulling down and forcing me to take all of him in one hard thrust.

We cried out together, and lust burned my insides. I dug my nails into his thighs and lifted up, working him as my body hummed with delight. There was nothing in the world like being filled up by Matt. It was a feeling I would covet for the rest of my life.

He wrapped his strong arms around me and whispered a million naughty things in my ear as I enjoyed myself for the next hour, finding my release several times over.

“Okay, baby. I can’t stand it anymore.” He gripped my hips, stilling me as I shook above him. I was beyond exhausted.

“Let me get a condom.”

“No. I want to make love to you later tonight. I just wanted to feel you come a few times before dinner.” He kissed the side of my neck and held me tight, his body still tucked deep into mine. “I made Chinese food, though I bet it’s cold as ice now.”

“I have a microwave.” I jerked my hips forward, and he growled loudly. A laugh bubbled up in me, freeing me from

my worries for the rest of the night.

He helped me off his swollen shaft and pulled his boxers over his hips. “So I talked to my dad about leaving M&B.” He walked into the kitchen, and I found my panties and followed him. There was no reason to put my dress back on. I’d be searching out my pajamas any minute.

“And? How did it go?” I walked to the pantry and pulled out a bottle of red wine. I turned and held it up.

His eyes were full of lust. “Yes, to the wine and you prancing around in your bra and panties. You’re going to give me a heart attack.”

“Nope. You’re younger than me. That means you’ll outlive me.” I set the bottle down and grabbed two glasses. “Now, stop messing around and tell me about the meeting with your dad.”

“It went great. He’s all for whatever I want to do.”

“And us?” I poured him a glass and handed it to him.

“He’s for that too, Erica. You know he thinks of you like a daughter.”

Indecision ran through me. If Kent thought of me as a daughter, then I could talk to him about Mitch, right? Or would he be pissed, or worse - disgusted?

“Matthew Bryant.” I picked up a little white Chinese container with beef and broccoli in it. “You *made* dinner?”

“Well, I picked it up. You walked in before I could get it into the pans and stuff.” He laughed heartily before taking a sip of his wine and pulling me close. “Move in with me.”

“What?” My turn to laugh. “How did we go from you lying about cooking dinner to me moving into your place?”

“I want you with me. I don’t want to have to drive over here, or you over there. We can use that big ass art studio I have to paint together. You can have half the room, and I’ll have the other half.”

His words drove hope into my heart. I swallowed my worry. “You really think we’re ready for that?”

“I know I am. I want to move fast.” He leaned down and kissed me, his tongue tasting of wine and my body.

“Why do you want to move so fast? Scared I might get away?” I brushed my hands up his thick chest and pressed myself flush against him.

“Of course I am. I’ve seen the way guys look at you. Hell, Mitch Roberson was willing to blow five million bucks on a naked painting of you. Some young billionaire guy did!”

I stiffened. “I don’t care about that, them or the painting.”

Concern filled his expression. “I know you don’t, baby. I’m just saying. I know I’m the lucky one here. It gives me a bit of concern. I want you with me. I’m not taking no for an answer.”

“Then I’m moving in with you.” I pulled him down for another long kiss. The take-out Chinese food could wait. I wanted more time with my future, my man.

# CHAPTER 45





## MATT

Spending the night in Erica's arms almost had me convinced that nothing was wrong. I woke up next to her and turned on my side to watch her sleep for a little while. She jerked and cried out several times, something haunting her in her dreams.

"What's going on with you, baby?" I reached out and brushed her hair from her face.

She shot up in the bed and yelped. "Matt?"

"Hey. I'm right here." I pulled her down and wrapped my arms around her as she snuggled against my chest. She was the toughest woman I knew and yet something had her spooked. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Just a bad dream." She wrapped her arm around my chest and nestled my neck. "I'm just glad you're here."

"See? One more reason for us to move in together. I'd be beside you every night and in the morning." I kissed the side of her face. "I need to get moving right now, though. Jonathan is stopping by the house in about an hour, and I wanted to finish working on some highlights for a piece I'd like him to put in the studio."

"Okay. What piece is it?" She rolled over onto her back.

I tugged the covers down so I could see her breasts one more time. I leaned over and kissed the one closest to me. "It's a nature scene of Mount Rainer."

She slid her fingers into the back of my hair and moaned softly. "You keep teasing me, and you're not going anywhere."

“Yeah, cause that’s a real threat.” I licked at her nipple before moving up and kissing her deeply. “Call me throughout the day, then come over, and I’ll have dinner ready for us.”

“Chinese food that you made?” She giggled.

“Something like that.” I kissed the tip of her nose before moving off the bed. I missed her warmth immediately. “Have a good day, okay?”

“Is it Thursday?” She sat up, pulling the covers up to wrap around her.

I lifted an eyebrow. “You’re blocking my view.”

She rolled her eyes but dropped the covers back down. “Is it Thursday?”

“Yeah.” I ran my hand over my chest as my pulse spiked. The woman was by far that most beautiful thing I’d ever seen in my life.

“Then I have dinner with Lanie.” She flopped back down on the bed. “I’ll call you later though.”

“Come over when you’re done with your girl’s night. I want more of you.” I picked up my shirt as she teased me in a sexy bedroom voice. I paused at the door and gave her a look. “You’re about to get yourself a spanking.”

“Please?”

I groaned as I walked out, hating meetings and hating Jonathan for forcing me to schedule one even more.

What artist went by someone else’s timetable? *Sell-Out.*



I’d just finish up on the highlights to my latest piece when the doorbell rang. Jonathan. Right on time.

After wiping my hands on a hand towel, I walked languidly to the door and opened it. “Hey, man. Come on in. I just finished the piece I was telling you about.”

“Matt. Good to see you too.” He rolled his eyes and walked in. “Where’s Erica?”

“She’s at work. I guess the good people of the world are punching the clock. Thank God for them. I think the rest of us would starve without them.”

“This is true. Show me the magic.” Jonathan followed me back to my studio, the gangly fellow looking like the true depiction of an artist. I had too much of my father in me to look like anything but a frat boy. It was a curse, but it landed me in Erica’s bed, so something was working right.

“Here it is.” I stepped back and studied it.

“Wow. That’s magnificent. We’ll get it up to the studio and hang it in your section when it’s fully dry, and you’ve done your final work on it.” He clapped his hands and turned to me. “Now... the real reason I came by.”

I put my hands on my hips. “I thought you came by to look at this.”

“I did, but let’s go into the kitchen and chat for a minute. I have a project that’s been laid on my desk that I think you might enjoy working on.”

“You know I hate working contract.” I walked behind him and tried hard not to let myself act like a cock. Jonathan had been good to me, and the future was bright because of him. He was even interested in checking out some of Erica’s work too.

*Now, if I could just get her to let loose and put some paint on a canvas.*

“I understand that, but you know it pays well.” He walked over to my kitchen table and dropped down. “It’s a pretty interesting project. I’d do it myself, but I have too many irons in the fire as it is.”

“What’s the project, who’s it for and what’s the pay?” I moved into the kitchen and poured us both a cup of coffee, like little old men. “Cream and sugar?”

“Both, please. I like my coffee and tea like a dessert.”

“The English would boo you right out of their country.” I smiled up at him. “Keep going. I’m listening.”

“It’s for a private investor, a silent one, actually.” He leaned back in his chair. “It’s eight pieces, and all of them are chosen already. They’re various people and places here in Seattle, so no travel would be required.”

“There’s a bonus.” I walked over to the table and set our mugs down. “The pay?”

“Two million for the project, and a bonus of five hundred thousand if you can get it done in the next four months.”

“Four months for eight paintings? That’s going to be pushing it, big time.” Excitement raced through my chest. It was a great payday and more than I would make working for my father and Damon over the next three to four years.

The only issue was being told *what* to paint. That part weighed heavily on me.

“Seems like a nice sum of money. And what’s got you so tied up that you’re willing to part with something this big?” I picked up my mug and blew gently on my coffee.

“We’re looking at opening another art gallery in New York City this spring. It’s a huge undertaking, and I’m not quite sure we’re ready, but my wife thinks differently. She says it’s time to open another storefront.” He shrugged. “What the wife wants, she usually gets one way or another.”

I smiled. “I’m going to ask Erica to marry me sometime next year. Probably early spring. It just depends on how everything goes.”

“And things are going well now?” He ran his finger around the edge of his mug but kept his eyes locked on me.

Everything was great, other than the fact that she had something going on that I wasn’t privy to. It had to be something to do with work. Had to be.

“Oh yeah. She’s a dream.”

“And a beautiful one at that.” Jonathan leaned over and pulled out a folder. “I have the contract here for the special

project if you want to give it a look.”

“I’ll do that.” I took the folder from him and tried to relax. It was a good next step for me, and maybe having a contract in place would encourage Erica to step out and dream alongside me. Not that she wasn’t supporting my dreams, but I wanted to help support hers. There was no way in hell that she was truly happy working for my father.

I’d only been there a few days and already felt like a hamster in a cage.

“Alright, Matthew. I need to be going. I have a million things to do today.” He stood up, pulling me from my reverie. “Just phone the office and let them know when you’re done with the mountain piece. We’ll send the guys over to get it.”

“Awesome.” I got up and walked him to the door. “Hey, Jonathan.”

“What’s up?” He walked out and turned back, lifting his eyebrow.

“Who was the guy that bought the painting of Erica? Anyone you know?”

“He’s a young art collector from London. Very wealthy fellow, actually. I’ve worked with him several times.”

“And he got his money from inheritance?”

“Yes. He’s very much into supporting new artists, especially ones as talented as you.”

“Alright. Thanks.” I closed the door behind him and forced my thoughts away. As long as Mitch Roberson didn’t end up with the painting I was good. “Speaking of…”

I grabbed my phone and dropped down on the couch, calling my brother. He answered right away.

“Hey, bro. What’s going on?”

“Hey, man. I meant to get a little bit more time with you when I was home, but I cut the trip short.”

“I’d say so. You left the day after you got there.” His jovial tone lifted my spirits. “I’m guessing either Erica wanted you

home, or you were missing her like a big ass girl.”

“Yep. All of the above.” I ran my hand over my chest. “I wanted to talk to you about Mitch.”

“Roberson?”

“Yeah. That guy.” My thoughts darkened. Something about the man gave me the creeps. Where my father and Damon thought a lot of him, I couldn’t help but see around the edge of his bullshit good guy persona. Was he the one making Erica feel off?

Damon chuckled. “Why the dark remark?”

“I don’t like him.”

“Why? Because he has great tastes and wanted to buy the picture of Erica?”

“For starters.”

“Matt. Seriously? You painted the damn thing and hung it in a gallery for everyone to come and see. You wanted someone to buy it. It’s nice to think that a stand-up guy like Mitch would buy it and treat it well versus some idiot who jacks off to it in his living room every morning.”

Sickness danced in my stomach. “You think the guy that bought it does that?”

“Alright. Moving on. You’re being an idiot, and I don’t have time for that. What do you need?”

“I just wanted to know more about Mitch.”

“He’s a guy who’s smart as fuck, friends with dad, and lost his wife a long time ago. He’s one of the good people in the world. Leave it alone.”

“Fuck you too,” I grumbled.

“Next?”

“I know we briefly talked about it, but I can’t shake whatever is going on with Erica. I keep trying to leave it alone, but I just can’t.”

“Maybe she’s realized that she’s dating a dweeb.” He snorted.

I ignored him being an ass. He had been one most of my life. “She’s been in a really weird funk since the art showing. You think she’s mad at me for painting the portrait of her.”

“Didn’t she pose naked for hours for you to paint it?”

“Something like that.” I hated him for making so much goddamn sense.

“Alright, buddy. I’m glad we had this talk. Call if you need anything.”

“I hate you sometimes.” I dropped the call and leaned back on the couch, closing my eyes. I was over-thinking all of it. Erica wasn’t upset with me. She’d have let me know in one way or the other the night before, and she hadn’t. She’d been more than happy to make love to me deep into the night.

My phone buzzed, and I grabbed it, expecting it to be Damon.

“What?” I barked angrily into the phone.

Erica’s voice surprised me. “Hey, baby. You okay? You sound upset.”

I chilled immediately. “Oh yeah. I just got off the phone with Damon, and he made me feel stupid. He’s pretty good at that.”

“Well, you’re not stupid. Tell me about the meeting with Jonathan. Did everything go okay? Did he like the new piece?”

I spent the next few minutes telling her about my meeting with Jonathan. The sound of her getting more and more excited over the details had me feeling far more confident in my abilities than I had before we talked.

“Well, I’m crazy proud of you.”

“Thanks, baby.” I stood up and stretched. “You sure you can’t come over tonight?”

“I wish. I owe Lanie some time, and if I know I’m going home to an empty house, then I won’t rush through dinner to get to you. She’s back in a contemplative mode where she’s trying to figure out her life and who she is. I need to be there for her.”

“Alright. I understand.” And I did, but I didn’t like it.

“Enjoy the rest of your day, okay?”

“Alright, baby. You sure you’re doing good? I keep feeling like maybe there’s something you’re not telling me.”

“Nope. I’m good. Better now that you’re home.”

“Love you,” I whispered into the phone, a little shocked at how natural it felt to say it.

“Love you too.”

She was more than I could hope for and so much more than I deserved. I just prayed like hell that she stayed mine. Something told me that something or someone was lurking just around the bin to take her from me.

I couldn’t shake the fact that I knew exactly who it was too.

Mitch.



# CHAPTER 46



## ERICA

The last thing I wanted to do was go into the office, but until I figured out what to do with my life, it was my only option. It was almost laughable to think that I was grumbling about Lanie needing to find herself, when I too, was lost.

“Erica. You’ve got Mr. Bryant on line one,” Joan said as she stuck her hand in the open doorway of my office.

“Which one?” I reached for the phone. I had a much more laid back relationship with Damon than his father.

“Damon.” She closed the door behind her.

“Hello, Sir. To what do I owe this phone call?” I leaned back in my seat and crossed my arm over my midsection.

“Hi, Erica. I was calling to check on the new ads for our Advisory launch in a month. Mitch isn’t answering his phone, and I have a partner call later this afternoon. Just trying to get all of my ducks in a row.” He was all business, which is why I liked him so much. He had an uncanny ability to separate business from pleasure.

“It’s coming along nicely. I gave Mitch the files on Tuesday to review, but I haven’t heard back from him.” I stood. “I’ll track him down and get back to you within the hour.”

“Excellent.” He paused, and I thought the conversation was over. The fact that his voice softened just a tad let me know that we were talking as friends now. “How are things with you and my brother?”

“Um, good? Why don’t you ask your brother?”

“Because he doesn’t like me up in his shit. I’m sure you understand that.”

I thought of my own brother, Daniel and cringed. The last thing I would ever want is for my older brother to play a part in my life. He was half the reason I had emotional scars and bullshit baggage from my childhood. My mother was the other half.

“I can understand that.” I leaned over and pressed my free hand to the top of my desk. “We’re doing great. Matt’s ready for me to move in with him.”

“And are you ready for that?”

I stifled a chuckle. The great Damon Bryant, who was known for his less than caring attitude and stiff demeanor cared about his brother more than anyone might know, even Matthew.

“I’m not sure, but I’m not dissecting it with you. I’d rather pay someone good money for that conversation.”

“Hey! We might be family soon.” Sadness swelled inside of me. What were the odds that Matt and I could make it past all the shit with Mitch? “Erica? You still there?”

“Yeah. Just thinking.”

“That was an odd part of the conversation to stop and think about something else.” He let out a soft sigh. “Matt seems to think something is going on with you.”

“He’s just overly sensitive.”

“Or maybe you’re just hiding something to protect him or yourself.”

“I need to get going. I have a meeting in five minutes that I’m not ready for. If I’m talking to my boss, then I’ll cancel it, but if you’re playing shrink, then I need to go.”

“I’m not playing anything. I’m your friend and have been for a long time.”

“I know.” I pressed my fingers to my forehead as a million thoughts raced through my mind, each attached to a jacked up feeling I didn’t want to entertain. “And I appreciate you. I do have some shit going on right now, but I’ll figure it out. I always do.”

“I’m here for you if you need me, Erica. As a boss or as family.”

“Thank you for that.” I ended the call and grabbed my cell phone. I needed to find Mitch and figure out what the hell was going on with his review on the ad specs. He was usually pretty quick about getting stuff back to me, but four days was dragging ass big time. Especially for him.

I walked out into the hallway and was a little surprised to see Mandy and Lewis standing close to each other, laughing. Really close.

“Um, hey you two. Everything okay?” I offered them a warm smile.

Lewis jerked away from her. “It’s great, boss. We were just going to start working on our second drafts for the new project you handed over.”

“Great.” I moved past them toward Mitch’s office. Were they together? Mitch had called it a few weeks back, but I didn’t believe him. Fuck. Was everyone more in tune with the office than I was? Maybe I did need to look at other options. My heart wasn’t there anymore, and from the look of things, my head wasn’t either.

Mitch’s door was opened when I walked down the hall, and I didn’t bother knocking. I honestly expected him to be gone. He glanced up from his desk, his expression tight.

“Erica. Come on in. Have a seat.” He motioned for me to take a seat.

“Thanks. I just got off the phone with Damon. He wants an update on the latest ad specs. I sent them over-”

“On Monday, I know. It’s been a long week.” He leaned back in his chair and studied me. “They look great. Your team

did a wonderful job matching every requirement I had for the design.”

“Excellent. So we’re good to submit them to the executive committee?” I stood, ready to get the fuck out of there.

“Sure. Go for it.” He lifted his hand. “Before you go, you know that you and I have unfinished business.”

“Nope. Not really.” I crossed my arms over my chest in an effort to protect myself. “All I had was the ad specs on my list.”

He chuckled darkly and stood. “I have a big art show to attend to on Saturday night for some investors in a new program that’s sweeping the nation.”

“Sounds great.” I forced myself to stay put.

“I want you there with me. As my date.”

“Not happening.”

“You don’t seem to understand the situation here, pretty girl.” He walked around his desk and moved closer to me. Too close. “I’m not going to simply back off. You need to understand what you’re giving up and what you’re getting with the decisions you’re making.”

“Well, thank you, daddy, but it’s not your place to teach me anything.”

He reached out and gripped my wrist as I turned to go. “I could teach you a lot of things.”

“Thank you, but no thanks.” I pulled my wrist from his grasp and started toward the door.

“Erica.” The sound of his voice stopped me in my tracks.

I glanced back. “What?”

“The event starts at seven. Meet me at my place at six-thirty.”

“And if I don’t?” I held my breath, truly unsure of how far the bastard in front of me would go to see me naked and wet beneath him.

“You’ll force my hand. There are so many options, but I’d rather not use any of them. I’m not a bad guy. I just care enough to want you to see the light.”

“I hate you.” I turned and walked out of the door.

“Six-thirty,” he called after me.

Fine. An art event around a zillion other people. I’d make it work, and when it was over, I’d go home. There was no way I believe Mitch capable of gagging me and throwing me in the back of his car. He wasn’t a villain; he was just obsessed.

Obsessed with what? Fear danced in the pit of my stomach.

Obsessed with me.



“So I think if I just quit this spring at the elementary school that I’ll go to the high school.” Lanie leaned back from her plate and took a sip of her wine. We’d decided to go out to dinner instead of cooking, seeing that both of us were bone tired.

“And you really think high school is somewhere you want to be? I heard the kids get mean at that age.”

“They’re mean at every age.” She downed the rest of her wine. “Call me an Uber if I get too drunk.”

“Will do.” I picked up my fork and pushed my pasta around the plate. I needed to tell Lanie about Mitch, but I couldn’t force myself to do it. Where I knew she wouldn’t judge me, she sure as hell would try and fix it.

“Hey. What’s going on with you? Daniel and your mom giving you hell again?” She reached across the table and brushed her fingers over my hand.

“No.” I let out a soft sigh and shrugged. “Matt wants me to move in with him soon.”

“Oh. Wow.” She smiled. “Wait. Why do you look so sad about this? This is great news, right?”

“Yeah, but it’s a lot of pressure. It’s the next step, and we just got back together after falling apart.”

“That’s part of being in a long-term relationship. You know that.”

“No, I don’t.” I picked up a piece of bread and dragged it through the Alfredo sauce on my plate. “My only long-term relationship didn’t work out, remember? He just up and decided to leave. As if I wasn’t worth anything.”

“Because he was a jack wagon. You know this.”

I smiled at her silly word. “He was that.”

“Matt’s a great guy.” She took the last piece of bread from the basket and gave me a look. “I’ve known you for most of my life. Something else is going on. Spill.”

“No.” I reached for my wine glass, but she got to it first and downed the red wine in it.

“Yes. Let me help you. I’m worried about finding someone worth taking my panties off for. It’s not that big of a deal. You, on the other hand, are drowning in something. Spill. Now.”

“More wine?” I asked the waiter as he stopped by.

“And more bread?” Lanie gave him a sweet smile.

“Who could refuse the two of you?” He winked at us before walking off.

“Lots of people.” Lanie snorted. “Come on. I want to help you. I love you, and you’re hurting.”

“Mitch was trying to overbid Matt at his art opening at De Luca. He was doing it to be a dick.”

“Wait... overbid Matt? Was Matt bidding on his own art?” Her lip lifted up in a cocky smile. “That’s such a Bryant thing to do.”

“Yeah, it is, but it’s because it was the naked picture of me. Matt doesn’t like Mitch, so he was willing to do just about

anything to *not* let Mitch have the painting.”

“So what happened? Did Matt get the painting?”

“No. Some young billionaire guy did.”

“Can I get his digits? I’m your best friend. That should get me some points somewhere.”

I chuckled. “Stop it. You’re going to find Mr. Right. I promise.”

“Let’s not go back to me. It’s obvious that my future husband got lost, and refuses to stop and ask for direction.” We shared a chuckle. It was Lanie’s go-to joke about being single. “So what happened?”

“Mitch wasn’t going to let up, and it was so tense in the room. I walked outside and texted Mitch, telling him to stop that shit. He said he would on one condition.”

“Oh no. This does not sound like it’s going to end well.”

“That I go to dinner and have drinks with him.”

Her eyes brightened. “Oh, nice! That’s easy.”

“And fuck him.”

“What?” Her voice rose as she leaned toward me, whispering so loud it could have been a yell. “Has he lost his fucking mind? You can’t do that. It would ruin everything. It would-” Realization rolled over her face. “Oh, shit. You said you would do it.”

Tears filled my eyes. I wasn’t a crier, and yet the situation with Mitch and Matt had me crying all the damn time.

“I didn’t know what else to do. I just wanted the bidding war to end and for Matt to feel like he’d won. I didn’t want him to lose his pride or his shining moment that night.”

“What are you going to do?” She was ignoring me for the most part, or maybe she was lost in the brevity of the situation.

“I’m going to tell him no.” I shrugged. “But you wanted to know what was wrong and-”

“No. That’s not going to work. Go to Damon.”



“What? Why not Matt?”

She gave me a sassy look. “Be for real here. Matt will get a gun and end up in jail for Manslaughter. Get Damon involved.”

“And look like an idiot or worst yet, a slut?”

“Seriously? He thinks the world of you.”

“I don’t know.” I glanced up and offered our waiter a smile as he delivered us each another glass of wine. “I’m going to go to an event on Saturday with Mitch and try and talk some sense into him. If that doesn’t work, I’ll go to Damon.”

“Take your own car and meet him at the event. Make sure you have people around you when you walk out. Fuck. Take me with you.”

“That’s a thought.” I leaned back in my chair and nursed my wine. “You think there is a better way out of this?”

“I don’t know. I want to, but damn... this is like TV drama bullshit.”

“Right?” I let out a long sigh. “I’ll do this and see what works. I’m not willing to mess up things with Matt, but I’m not sure which would do more damage; telling him what I did, or just doing it and hoping he never finds out.”

“You could sleep with Mitch? I mean, you could actually go through with it?”

“No. Not in a million years.”

“Then it seems like you have your backup plan.”

“And what if it doesn’t work and he leaves me, Lanie?”

“Then you move on.” She narrowed her eyes. “You’re a beautiful woman, and you’ll find someone else. You deserve the best. If Matthew can’t see that’s what you are and that you were trying to sacrifice for his pride and wellbeing, then fuck him.”

She made it sound so easy, but it wasn’t.

Not in the slightest.

# CHAPTER 47



## MATT

“Good morning, Sir.” A bright-eyed guy with a big smile greeted me as I walked into a flower shop around the corner from Erica’s apartment. She’d spent the night at her place after going out with Lanie the night before, and I wanted to see her. Like now.

“Morning.” I pointed to some red and yellow tulips. “I’ll take a dozen of each of those in some of that pretty paper you guys have.”

There was a box of pastries sitting on the counter beside him. My stomach growled as I eyeballed them.

“You bet.” He chuckled as my stomach protested loudly. “You want one of those? My mother bought too many as usual.”

“I’d love one.” I walked over and glanced back over my shoulder. “Any of them off limits?”

“I love the cinnamon rolls, but I’m sure she included several in there.”

“Yeah. There’s four.” I took one of the apple fritters and flipped the lid to the box over. Tina’s Bakery. A groan left me as I let the sugar and apples melt over my tongue. “Wow. That’s fantastic.”

“Right? Tina is a great person too. You should go by there. She’s just down the street two blocks. You make a left on Washington Avenue. Her shop looks like a hole in the wall, but she’s an incredible baker.”

“Obviously.” I chuckled as I held up the pastry. “I’ll head over there after this.”

“Good. Tell her I sent you.”

I paid the guy, took the bouquet of flowers and thanked him before leaving. Erica deserved to be treated like a princess, and damn if I wasn’t going to do it. I checked the time on the dashboard of my car as I drove over to her apartment, loaded with flowers and sweet treats.

“Hells bells.” She’d be leaving any minute if she hadn’t already gone. I’d put in a call to Joan earlier that morning to let her know that Erica wasn’t feeling well and would be out for the day.

I pulled up about the time she was pulling out. After hitting the horn, I parked and got out, grabbing my goodies and walking toward her car with a cheesy-ass grin on my face. She was beyond beautiful, everything I wanted in my life and then some.

“Hey. What a great surprise.” She spoke as the window rolled down.

“Oh yeah? I got you a few things. Come inside and change. You’re going to have a hard time hiking in heels.”

“Hiking?” She motioned for me to wait a sec as she rolled up the window, turned the car off and got out. “I have several meetings this morning. Can we go on Sunday maybe?”

“Nope. I told Joan to move everything, and she did.” I extended the flowers to her. “These reminded me of you. Bright and beautiful.”

“Awwww, Matt. You’re going to spoil me.” She took them and moved up to give me a hug.

I leaned down and stole a kiss. “Spoiled women get spankings. So it’s a win-win as far as I’m concerned.”

She laughed. “Is that Tina’s?” She reached for the box, snatched it and walked back to the apartment like I’d disappeared into thin air.

“Yes?” I chuckled and followed her, letting my eyes run down the long line of her back to the swell of her ass. My body woke up as it always did around her. “You look beautiful.”

“You think so?” She glanced over her shoulder as she worked to get the lock in the door and balance everything.

“Give me that.” I bumped her hip with mine and took the keys from her, opening the door and moving back so she could go in.

“You really called Joan and took care of everything?” She set the bakery box down and walked to the kitchen with her flowers.

“I did. I wanted to go hiking and spend the night in the mountains tonight. There’s supposed to be a meteor shower. I need a beautiful woman to snuggle up next to while I watch it.” I followed after her, greedy to get my hands on her.

“And if I wasn’t available?”

“Then I’d have to ask Lanie.” I chuckled as she gasped and swatted at me.

“I knew you found her attractive!”

“Not at all, baby.” I took the vase from her and filled it with water. “I don’t see anyone but you. It’s been that way for a long time.”

She wrapped her arms around me from behind and kissed the back of my neck. “Same.”

Chill bumps raced down my legs and arms. “That feels good. Do it again.”

The sound of her sweet laughter filled my ears, calming my soul and sending me into a happy place I’d only recently experienced because of her.

“Did you get everything we need for the trip yet?” She put her flowers in the vase and plucked it from my hands, depositing it in the middle of her kitchen table.

“Like what? I have you. Me. Pastries. Yep, we’re good.” I offered her a goofy grin.

“That sounds about right then.” She moved past me, reaching out and brushing her fingers by my cock. “Looks like you have something for me to enjoy on the ride up too.”

My heart nearly stopped in my chest. “He’s yours anytime, baby girl. Play with him or me as much and as often as you like.”

“So hot,” she whispered and walked to her room. I thought about going after her and having a little bit of fun, but I knew I wanted to spend the day in the mountains with her. If I got her to the bedroom and stripped her down, it was game over. We’d be naked and sweaty by lunchtime and asleep by two.

She walked out a few minutes later in a pair of shorts and a double layered tank top. Her breasts caught my attention first, and I reached out to caress her as she moved closer.

“Fuck, you turn me on, Erica Hall.” I reached up and cupped her face, not quite sure she appreciated me fondling her every chance I got. She was just so damn sexy.

“The feeling is mutual.” She ran her hands around my waist and squeezed my butt as she lifted up and kissed me a few times.

I deepened the kiss, sharing a soft groan with her as we pressed tightly against one another. I broke the kiss, knowing we were headed back down the ‘no-trip’ path yet again.

“Let’s get out of here.” I kissed her quickly before releasing her. “What time do you need to be back on Sunday?”

An odd expression moved across her face. “I need to be back by tomorrow afternoon.”

“Aw, really? Damn. I was hoping we would have the whole weekend, baby.”

“I wish I could.” She walked to the kitchen and grabbed two bottles of water from the fridge, tossing one to me. “I have an art event I have to go to tomorrow night with a few people from the office. Nothing big, but I have to be there.”

“Can’t I just call Joan and sweet talk her into canceling for you?” I smiled at her.

“Nope, but good try.” She popped my butt as she walked to the door. “Come on. Let’s go have some fun while we can.”

“Consider me all in.” I grabbed the box of treats and took the bag she had in her hand. “I’ll drive. You just relax and try to enjoy yourself, alright?”

“I like the sound of that. Should we take Zek with us?”

“No. I’ll text Lanie to come over tonight and hang out with him for a little while. He’ll be good until the morning. We’ll come back early.”

“Sounds good, baby.”

I had a million questions I wanted to ask her, but all of them were prying. I knew something was going on with her, but the mature thing to do was to back the fuck off and wait until she came to me.

*She will open up to me, right?*

“You still with me?” She walked to her side of the car and offered me a sweet smile.

“Oh yeah. You’re stuck. I’m here forever.” I got in the car, took a cinnamon roll and handed her the box. “The guy at the flower shop said these were the best ever.”

“He was right. I love those.” She snatched mine and took a big bite as I stared, opened-mouthed at her.

“You’re going to pay for that.”

She took another bite and tried to talk around her mouthful. “How exactly?”

“I’m going to fill up your pretty mouth with something else.”

She moaned and nibbled around the edges of the pastry, her cheeks slam-packed with a cinnamon roll. It was the cutest thing I’d ever seen. I laughed and started the car.

“You’re everything to me. You know that?”

After licking her fingers clean and wiping them on the leg of my pants, she leaned over and kissed the side of my neck.

“I’m so glad to hear it.” She brushed her nose down my neck and squeezed my cock softly before nipping at my ear. “You’re everything I want in my life, Matthew.”

“Then marry me.” I turned and slipped my hand into her hair, holding her in place as I made love to her mouth. I was teasing to some degree. I’d be proposing next year in the spring time, but the words just poured out of my mouth.

“Now?” She kissed me again and moved back into her seat.

“Next year?” I put the car in reverse and breathed in deeply, the scent of her perfume and shampoo the perfect combination to drive me wild.

“Count on it, Mister.” She reached into the box and handed me a cinnamon roll. “Here. Enjoy, but make sure you savor it.”

I ate it in three bites. “Like that?”

“Matt!” She popped me in the chest. “You didn’t even chew the damn thing.”

“Alright. You’re right.” I glanced over at her, falling a little more in love. “Give me another one, and I’ll take my time with it.”

She handed another one over. Crazy girl. I shoved the whole thing in my mouth and chewed until my jaw hurt. The sound of her laughing and throwing a fit over my lack of finesse when it came to enjoying sweets was music to my ears.

“You didn’t taste that! How could you?”

I licked my lips and my fingertips and growled. “I tasted it. It was the second best thing I’ve ever had in my life.” I pulled us onto the freeway, headed out of town for our overnight getaway.

“And the best?” She reached over and ran her nails up my thigh.



“You. Without a doubt.” I gripped her hand and pulled it up to my lips, kissing her fingers one at a time. “I plan on savoring every inch of you tonight if you’ll let me.”

“You’re not going to hear any type of refusal from me.” She leaned back and let out a soft sigh. “Hey.” She glanced my way. “Do you have your first art pad? I was just thinking about this last night in bed.”

“Wait. You thought about me drawing as a ten-year-old boy as you laid in bed last night?” I shook my head. “Fuck me. I’ve done something wrong.”

She swatted me again. “Or something very right. Do you have it?”

“I actually do. It’s in my big green bag in the back seat. It’s red with my initials on the front.”

She turned and leaned back to get it. I ran my hand over her ass and tried not to wreck the car.

“Really?” She dropped back into her seat and gave me a look.

“Um, yeah, really. You put that in my face, and it’s going to get some attention.”

“Good to know,” she mumbled as she flipped through the pages slowly.

I turned on the radio and let myself slip into vacation mode as she laughed, ooh’d and ahh’d at the pages.

“That’s my favorite one.” I pointed over to a picture of a little brown dog. “That’s Buster. He was my first and only pet.”

“Oh. Kent and your mom didn’t let you get one after him?”

“No, they would have been fine with it. Damon sneezed his ass off from the minute I brought the dog home. I had him for a week, and then he was gone.” I gave her a funny look. “He almost always got his way.”

“And yet you love him.”

“Yeah, and I wouldn’t change him for anything.”

“He and Bethany are doing okay?”

“They’re better. They’re getting there. He’s not an easy guy to deal with. He comes with a lot of baggage. I guess we all do.”

“That’s the truth.” She finished looking at the pictures and put the album back into the bag before dropping down in her seat and giving me a quizzical look. “Any cops around here?”

“Not that I’ve seen. Why?” My breath caught in my chest as she unbuckled and leaned over the console, working quickly to pull my dick from my pants.

“Because I want you.” She gave me a wicked smile and leaned down to run her tongue along my length. The sweet guy in me melted away.

I slid my hand into her hair and gripped tightly. “Take every inch of it, Erica. I want to feel your nose pressed to my skin.”

She moaned and obeyed beautifully.

# CHAPTER 48



## ERICA

Matt was completely out of it by the time we reached the cabin. I'd offered ten times to take the wheel and let him get a nap, but he wouldn't let me. We walked into the cabin, and he motioned that he was going to check out the bedroom.

When he didn't come back twenty minutes later, I realized where he was. Sound asleep on the bed. Poor thing.

A smile lifted my lips as I stood beside the bed and watched him sleep. He had no idea how handsome he was. I knelt and kissed his forehead before whispering into his ear.

"I'm going to town to get groceries. Be right back."

He grumbled something and turned over, his tone that of a pissy teenager. It was too cute. How hard it must have been to live in Damon's shadow. I was grateful that I only had an older brother and not a sister to be compared to, though I wasn't too sure Kent was the comparing kind. He seemed to enjoy and appreciate both of his boys for who they were. It was one of the reasons I liked him so much as a boss. He was supportive and caring toward all of us.

I drove to the store in silence, giving my thoughts a chance to entertain me. I had so many things to figure out, but something about the serenity of the mountains gave me pause. I didn't need to work through all the shit I was dealing with just yet. I could take a day off from it.

A text from my brother, Daniel busted up any sense of peace as I walked into the small grocery store. He wanted me to go see mother. It was my turn.

It was always my turn, but the bad part was that she hated seeing me. I was everything she wasn't. Kind, artistic, giving. I was my father's child for sure.

"Afternoon, Miss." An elderly guy stood at the only cash register in the store.

"Hi there. I'm just going to grab a few things for dinner."

"Absolutely. We just caught some fresh trout. My son should have the fillets ready back there if you're interested."

"That sounds great." I walked to the back and picked up a couple of things before grabbing a packet of fillets. The old man seemed quite pleased with my selection of groceries. It was cute and endearing.

There was something so simple about the type of living he and his family were doing, and I envied him a little. Could I just pick up and leave my life? Head up to the mountains with Matt and live off what we could catch or kill?

I laughed at myself as I pulled out of the store and drove back to the cabin. Matt would be up, or I'd get him up. I didn't want to come off as greedy, but I sure as hell wanted to spend whatever time I could with him.

The chances of us making it out of the Mitch situation still together and unscathed seemed highly unlikely. It was painful to think about what would happen when I told Matt everything that had transpired. Would he see my sacrifice as a true sacrifice?

And if I didn't sleep with Mitch, then what? How would he get me back for that? By lying to Matt? It wasn't like Matt would listen to him.

A million options ran through my mind's eye, each sounding worse than the last. I pulled up to the cabin to find Matt outside, working on a fire as the late afternoon was soon to turn into evening.

I got out of the car and grabbed our groceries.

"Need a hand?" He moved around the open car door and took the bags out of my hand.

“I could have gotten that.”

“I know, but I’m here. You don’t need to carry anything.”  
He leaned in for a kiss.

Cupping the sides of his handsome face, I took my time thanking him with my lips.

He pulled back, looking a little starry-eyed. “Wow. I’m going to start toting shit more often.”

I laughed and closed the car door. “I was going to get hot dogs for dinner, but they had some fresh trout that looked too good to ignore.”

“Fish sounds better.” He moved back, and I opened the door. “Sorry I fell asleep. Someone sucked the energy right from me on the ride up here.”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, Lord. Let the tacky teenage boy jokes start.”

“All part of the charm, baby. All part of the charm.”

“This is true.” I wrapped him in a tight hug and pressed my cheek to his back, never wanting to let him go.

Everything felt suddenly so fleeting.

My phone buzzed, and I released him to walk back toward the tiny living room. “I’m praying this isn’t my brother.”

“Answer it if it is. It could be about your mom.”

“Yeah, cause that’s a subject I want to talk about.” I picked up the phone to see that it was from an unknown number.

Matt pressed his chest to my back, offering me comfort. “You know you wouldn’t forgive yourself if something happened to her and you ignored it.”

“You’re right.” I pulled the phone to my ear and walked toward the door. “Erica Hall.”

“Erica. It’s Mitch. I just wanted to make sure you were feeling alright for our date tomorrow night.”

A cold sweat broke out on my skin. It was a damn good thing I’d walked away from Matt. Sickness swam in my

stomach as I opened the door and walked out, closing it behind me.

“It’s not a date, but I’m fine. I’ll be at the event at seven.”

“You’ll be here at my place at six-thirty.” His tone was still light, but I could almost imagine him with his teeth clenched together. I was a pain in the ass, no doubt. I was trying to be.

“I said I would come to the event. I never said I would meet you at your house. I don’t trust you, and you can understand why. Give me the address to the event, or forget it.”

“You play hardball a little too often, Erica.”

“You haven’t seen anything yet.” I dropped down on the stairs. “After tomorrow night, you’re going to leave me alone.”

“Or?”

“Or I’m going to talk with Damon or Kent. Or fuck. Both of them!” My words sounded silly in my ears as if I were a six-year-old girl making threats against a grown man.

“I’ll send you the address, but please don’t forget your place in all of this. You sold your body for a night. I didn’t force you to do it. You eagerly said yes.”

“No, I didn’t.” Disgust for my action threatened to pull me under. “I’m hanging up. Send me the address.”

“See you tomorrow.”

I dropped the call and stood up, my legs a little shaky. After sucking in three or four deep breaths, I turned and walked back into the house. Matt was in a woman’s apron, moving around the kitchen, humming something funny.

He was only wearing the apron. His cute little pale ass flexed as he turned and looked over his shoulder. “You like?”

I laughed, needing his humor more than anything at the moment. “I love it and you.”

“Good. Come over here and help me tote the stuff outside.”

“You are not going outside butt-ass naked.”

“True. There are wild animals out there.” He stopped in front of me and ran his strong hands over my shoulders. “But there’s a wild woman in here.” His smile faded. “Baby... what’s the matter?”

“Nothing. I’m just dealing with a lot at work.”

He encircled me with his arms. “Like what? Talk to me, and we’ll figure it out. You’ve been closing up a lot lately. Open up to me.”

“I want to, but I hate to bother you with stupid stuff.” I leaned in and pressed my forehead to his chest. “Thank you for the apron outfit though. It’s brightening my day.”

He didn’t smile when I lifted my chin and locked gazes with him. “What at work is bothering you?”

“Mitch mostly. I think he has it out for me.” A small sense of relief raced through me as I got a little bit of the situation out and on the table.

“I think he has it out for me.” Matt laughed and released me. “He was quite the dick at my event last week, and then... all of a sudden, he just stopped bidding. It was the weirdest shit ever.”

I bit my tongue and moved around him, grabbing a beer from the cooler he’d brought up with him. It was my chance to tell him *why* Mitch had stopped bidding. My offer to the asshole had plugged the drama leak that night but had made my life so much more complicated.

“He’s going to the event tomorrow, and honestly, I just don’t want to be around him.” I popped the top on the beer and took a long drink as Matt pulled the apron over his head.

His strong body was bare and on full display for me. An ache resurrected between my thighs as I reached for him.

“You need to talk to my father about this if it’s upsetting you this much.” He brushed the back of his fingers down the side of my face. “I knew something was going on, but I didn’t know what.”



I couldn't help but wonder what Damon would have done if it were him and Bethany. Would he have told her to talk to Kent? Or would he have found Mitch and choked the life out of him? Sadness raced through me at my thoughts. They weren't fair to either of us.

Matt was only trying to help with the little bit of information I'd given him.

"I'll figure it out." I lifted up to kiss him again. "Go get dressed and let's get dinner going. I'm starving."

"Alright." His voice lacked excitement. "Give me a minute."

The air around me felt like it had deflated completely. Things got a little better as we cooked dinner and turned the conversation back to his art. He filled me in on the new contract job a little more, and I encouraged him to take it.

"I don't know. I really hate being told what to paint." He shrugged and leaned away from the fire.

"I can understand that, but sometimes you have to take on a few jobs that pay the bills so that you can fund the jobs or art that you really want to work on. It's just a balancing job." I reached out and touched his arm. "I'm really proud of you, by the way. You did a great job at the show a week ago. It's been so crazy since then that I don't know if we got to-"

He pulled me close and pressed his lips to mine, silencing all my concerns and wandering thoughts. I breathed him in and sunk down into his arm, letting the strength of his hold lull me into a place of peace.

"Don't let me go. Promise me," I whispered against his lips.

He pulled me into his lap and tightened his arms around me. "Never. You have nothing to worry about Erica."

"And if I do?" I leaned in for another long kiss.

"People fuck up all the time." He licked up the side of my throat and gripped my ass, massaging it as he rocked against

me. “Just talk to me when shit comes up. I think open communication has to be the answer to everything right?”

“Maybe so.” I pulled at his t-shirt. “Make love to me out here.”

“Can I fuck you instead?” He smiled up at me before pulling his shirt over his head.

I didn’t get yes out of my mouth before he picked me up and carried me to the hammock on the side of the house. The stars twinkled above us as he laid on his back and held onto my hips. I fucked him nice and slow, taking my time to trace the muscles of his stomach and chest.

His grunts mixed with my moans and the world exploded around me as I convulsed with my orgasm. I loved him so much and wanted to bathe in the excitement of a future together, but I was too damn scared to just yet.

The moment felt fleeting, like the end was near. As badly as I wanted to shake it, I simply couldn’t.

He would find out about my proposition to Mitch and label me a whore.

No matter how good my intentions were.

# CHAPTER 49



## MATT

A smile spread across my face as I slipped out of bed the next morning and walked to the kitchen. My heart was full in so many ways. Nothing could tear me down from the high I was on. The woman of my dreams was in my bed, covered in my scent, adorned with my kisses and greedy touches.

My father accepted me for who I was, and scary enough, he always had. It was me that needed to get over my difference to him and Damon. It was me who was trying to live in the shadow of my brother, and it wasn't needed anymore.

I could simply be me, and that was enough. Erica loved me and treasured what we had. She was all I needed to confirm my security in simply being me.

After padding around the kitchen for a few minutes, I decided to make breakfast for her. I was almost done frying the bacon when she stopped at the edge of the kitchen in one of my t-shirts. Her hair was a mess and her lips a little swollen from our kisses.

I stopped what I was doing to take her in. My pulse spiked a little, and I couldn't help but wonder if she would always have such a strong hold on me.

"I smell bacon." Her smile was sweet and youthful. I could almost see what our little girl would look like when we finally got married and had babies.

"Well, looks like someone's nose is working this morning." I walked over and pulled her into my arms, leaning

down to kiss the tip of her cute button nose. “Did you sleep okay?”

“I think so.” She wrapped her arms around me and pressed her cheek against my chest. “I had a few nightmares, but what else is new?”

“About what?” I pulled back and reached up to brush my hands down the side of her hair. Leaning in, I kissed her lips softly and enjoyed the taste of cinnamon on her tongue. She’d have me back in the bed in no time if I weren’t careful.

“About someone coming after me.” She let out a soft sigh and pulled away from me. “You want some coffee?”

“Yeah. I knew I forgot something.” I turned and crossed my arms over my chest as I checked out the perfect swell of her ass in my t-shirt. It cupped her as she bent over, and my cock pulsed, promising to grow long and thick if he could get some attention. I rolled my eyes at the thought. The bastard had a mind of his own. “Who was after you in the dreams, Erica?”

“I don’t know.” She glanced over her shoulder, her expression solemn. “I couldn’t see his face, but I relived the mugging and then the fender bender I just went through.”

“Hmm...” Concern filled me. “You think that someone did those things on purpose or what?”

“I hope not.” She turned back and worked on the coffee pot.

I moved back to the stove and finished up cooking breakfast. Something deep inside of me roared to life as I stood there thinking about someone having the balls to come after my girl. Certainly not. We lived pretty simple lives in most respects. Why would anyone want to hurt her?

“I don’t like it,” I mumbled more to myself than her.

She wrapped her arms around me and pressed her soft tits to my back, her hands sliding down to cup me as she squeezed softly. “You don’t like what? This?”

“Oh, no. I like that very much. I don’t like the idea of someone messing with you.” I fixed our plates and turned as she backed up. “Who do you think it is? Not Mitch, right?”

After taking her plate, she averted her eyes down to the ground and shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” My voice hardened. “If you think he’s the one behind this random shit happening to you, then we need to find out. Period.”

“Let it go, okay?” She glanced up and gave me the biggest fake smile I’d seen from her before. “It was just a dream.”

“It was just a dream last night, but someone did mug you, and someone else hit your car.” I stopped short as she turned and walked toward the door with her shoulders rolled in. What the fuck was happening? “Erica.”

“Leave it alone, Matt. Please?” She walked out onto the front porch and sat down. “Thank you for making breakfast.”

I wanted to push her for more information, to force her to explain herself fully, but the emotion sitting on her shoulders left me biting my tongue instead. I’d figure out what was up on my own. There was no need to upset her any more than she already was.

“Sure.” I put my plate down. “I’ll grab the coffee. You want anything else, baby?”

“Just you.” She glanced up, and I paused to reach down and touch her cheek.

“You know I’m here for you, right? If something is going on-”

“It’s nothing. Just a fucked up dream.” She cupped her hand over mine and kissed my palm softly. “I promise.”

“Okay.” I leaned down and kissed the top of her head before going back into the house for our coffee. She wasn’t being honest, but I was alright with that to some degree. As long as she wasn’t in danger, and our relationship was solid, we’d work through it.

Whatever the fuck *it* was.



“You sure you have to go to this thing tonight?” I dropped her back off at her apartment and walked her to the door.

“Yeah. I’m sure.” She leaned in to kiss me a few times.

I slid my hand into her hair and deepened the kiss, enjoying the way she fit against me so well. I’d wanted to take a shower with her earlier that morning back at the cabin, but the mood shifted a little too much after we talked about her nightmare. Something told me that it wasn’t some crazy idea she’d come up with, but rather something she was seriously considering. If someone were trying to hurt her, there would be absolute hell to pay. Some part of me hoped that it was Mitch. Fucker.

“I love you.” I moved back and slipped my hands into my pockets. The sound of Zek barking inside the apartment had me smiling. “You want me to take little man back to my place? If you have to go out again tonight, he’s going to be alone. Let me have him.”

“You sure?” She turned and unlocked the door. “I know he still has accidents in the house.”

“He’s good training for the kids we’re going to have.”

She snorted and opened the door. “You’re already thinking about kids? Where is my ring?”

“Patience woman.” I moved around her and walked to Zek’s cage, opening it and scooping the little guy up as he wiggled and whined. “It’s alright, boy. We’re back now. You want to go home with daddy tonight?”

“I like the idea of you being called daddy.” She gave me a sexy smile as she leaned down to kiss Zek’s face a few times. “You boys behave.”

“No problem here. It’s this wild ass that we need to worry about.” I leaned in to kiss her again before grabbing Zek’s stuff and hauling him and it to the car. I put him back in his cage after walking him around the grass beside the apartment

complex. He whined and cried, but I turned on the radio and let my thoughts take me somewhere else. To the future. A big house on the bay with Erica and I painting together and three little munchkins running around, tearing shit up.

Bliss.

My phone buzzed, and I pressed the hands-free device. “Hello?”

“Hey, Bro. What’s up?”

“Nothing much. I’m just heading back from a night up at the lake with Erica.” I reached over and stuck my fingers into Zek’s cage. He licked me to death. “Zek’s staying over tonight, so it’s a guy’s evening. What’s up with you?”

“I’m actually flying into Seattle in about an hour. I have a meeting on Monday and figured I would get there a little early. Bethany and her mom are doing some girl’s weekend thing and seeing that I have a dick... I’m out.”

“Lucky you.” I snorted and pulled up to my place. “Come over tonight, and we’ll have dinner at the house. I’m tired of wearing pants. I need a break.”

“Yeah, I’m not so sure the idea of you being pantsless at dinner makes me want to come over.”

“See you at six?”

“Yeah, I’ll be there.”

“Good, and maybe tomorrow we can go look for places.”

“Places?” Damon asked.

“Yeah. I’ve asked Erica to move in with me, but I want to buy a bigger place and expand the art studio. I thought about it all night honestly. I want to do something big and flashy for her, something she would see and know that I loved her.”

“Flowers won’t work, hm?”

“Asshat.”

“It was worth a try.” Damon snorted. “We can go look tomorrow. I think it’s a great idea to treat her to some



extravagance.”

“I’m thinking of looking for a place with a lot of windows and maybe setting up a huge art studio and then a smaller yoga studio for her. You know she loves that shit.”

“Please tell me that you’re *not* going to take up yoga too.”

Heat rushed up my chest and coated my neck and cheeks. “No. Fuck yoga.”

The things I’d done to impress a woman. I smiled at the thought. I’d go so much farther than I already had to let her know how insanely special she was to me.

“You totally went to a yoga class.”

“Nope.” I pulled up to the house and unbuckled. “Alright, one more thing.”

“Only if you admit to going.”

“I need you to check into Mitch Roberson for me, please?” I reached over and grabbed Zek’s stuff. “I know you like the guy, but something isn’t right. Figure it out for me. I’m your little brother.”

“I’m not doing a damn thing until you admit you put on tight pants and stretched into a pretzel for some pussy.”

“Yep. I did it. Now, help me out.” I got out of the car and walked around to get Zek out. There was no winning with my brother. He’d been pulling secrets out of me since I had my first one. There was no fighting him.

“I knew it!”

“Fuck you too. Dig into this bastard, please? He’s on Erica’s case big time, and she’s having nightmares about him. I want to know if he was involved in her mugging and fender bender events.”

“Seriously? Mitch is one of dad’s oldest friends. He’s not a villain, Matt.”

“If it was Bethany that was upset about it, what would you do?”

“Alright. I’ll see what I can find out. Clear your schedule for dinner. I’ll pick up kabobs or something before I head over. You have beer at the house?”

“Does an accountant have a pocket protector?”

“Right. See you later tonight.” He dropped the call.

I knelt and pressed my face close to the cage. “He didn’t think my nerdy accountant joke was funny, Zek. What do you think, boy?”

Zek jumped around, barking his little head off.

“Me too, man. I swear my brother has no sense of humor at all.” I picked up the cage and walked up to the house as a sense of trepidation rolled through me.

If Erica was having all this negative shit happening to her, wouldn’t it be best to stick to her side all the time? What if something happened to her at the art festival later that night? She said Mitch was going. Maybe I should go too.

No. I didn’t want to invade her privacy or make her feel like I didn’t trust her. Jonathan. I’d see if he were going.

I texted her after getting inside to get the name of the event.

Grabbing my phone, I called Jonathan.

“Hey there. What’s up?” He sounded like he’d run a mile. I didn’t want to ask in case he’d just finished fucking his wife. That would make for an awkward conversation.

“I was just calling to see if you were going to the Lantique Art Festival tonight.”

“Of course I am. Why? You want to go with us?”

“No, but thank you. Erica will be there with her company and some of her work pals. I just wanted to see if you would keep an eye on her.”

“Hmmm... Something going on with her that leaves you unsettled?”

“Not at all. She’s just having a rough time, and I think one of the guys at work is making her uncomfortable. I’ve asked my brother to check into him, but I’m glad you’re going to the event. Can you just watch out for her for me?”

“Absolutely. I’ll keep my distance, but have my eyes on her for sure.”

“Thanks, man.” I hung up and dropped down onto the couch as Zek pounded on top of me, wanting attention. Worry clung to me, but Jonathan would be there.

It wasn’t as good as me going, but it was better than nothing.

# CHAPTER 50



## ERICA

“I seriously didn’t think you were going to make it.” Lanie glanced over at me from her bent-over position. Yoga was every Saturday morning, and I tried like hell *not* to miss it come hell or high water.

“I had to drive like a bat outta hell for sure.” I moved into position and glanced up at the sound of someone clearing their throat.

“Is there a reason you’re late to my class today?” The instructor was a total witch and loved to throw verbal punches at anyone who was even a few seconds tardy, but she was great at what she did. There was no denying that her class would be fantastic. A smile touched my lips as I thought about the last time I was in yoga and Matt was there. She made an example out of him, and Lanie and I stood at the back, laughing the whole time.

It was karma that I should be caught in the woman’s web next.

“Yeah. My father died last night.” I tilted my head to the side and gave her a look that warned her to leave me be.

“Oh!” She clamped her hands over her mouth. “I am *so* sorry.”

“You should be.” I bent back over and turned my face toward Lanie, who was wide-eyed and a little pale. “I just got back into town this morning. Matt took Zek, so I figured I would get over here as fast as possible.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re here.” Lanie pursed her lips and moved deeper into the stretch.

The instructor’s voice lifted above the soft music playing in the background, and we spent the next hour getting our asses handed to us.

I let out a long sigh of relief when the class was over. Every muscle in my body was limber and relaxed.

“That was a great work out.” Lanie glanced over at me as we walked to the door. “I think she took out her aggravation on the class.”

“She’s a tense woman, for sure.” I pushed the door open and walked into the chilly mid-morning day. “You want to grab a coffee?”

“I would, but I’m having some work done on the house today. I’m praying the guy is a hottie who hates to wear his shirt.”

I laughed. “With your luck, he’s an overweight gorilla who sweats like a whore in church and hates to wear his shirt or shoes.”

“Really?” She gave me a look. “You’re going to put that on me?”

“I had to.” I turned to face her as we reached our cars. “I’m going to that art event tonight.”

“With Matthew?”

“No. With Mitch.” I glanced down at my hands as deep concern welled inside of me. “I don’t know what to do. I have to tell him what I did.”

“Tell who?” She reached out and touched my shoulder, squeezing softly.

I forced myself to look back up at her as shame weighed me down. “Tell Matt that I promised myself to Mitch.”

“It’s a promise. Break it.”

“And then what? He’s not going to let it go, Lanie.”

“We’ll figure it out.” She pulled me into a tight hug. “Hell, tell him that I’ll wax his cock for you. Like a pinch-fucker? Like they have pinch-hitters in baseball?”

I laughed though tears had blurred my vision. “I just love him so much. I can’t imagine losing him.”

“Then get real and be honest.” She cupped my face in her hands. “Look at me.” I forced myself to look into her eyes. Nothing but love radiated from her. “You did this to help him because you’re an idiot and because you love him. It’s going to be okay. Go to the event, tell Mitch to fuck off and then tell Matt and Damon what’s going on. They’ll help you.”

“I know. I’m just so used to doing things myself. I can’t remember the last time I *let* anyone help me out of anything.” I forced a smile. “Other than a dress.”

She laughed. “Well, I’ll be thinking about you. Call me or text me later if you need an emergency out or if *anything* goes wrong. I’m only a few miles away. I’ll be there before you can blink twice. You’re not alone, Erica. You never have been.”

Her words were kind, but she was wrong. I’d been alone for a very long time. Asking anyone to help me clean up a mess as big as the one I was facing was not only embarrassing, it was damning.



I’d just finished getting ready for the event when Lanie called. I grabbed the phone and ignored the shaking of my hands. I was a hot mess and knew without a doubt that I wasn’t going to make it through the night without throwing up a few times.

“Hey,” I said, my voice a rough whisper.

“Hey. I had an idea!”

“Oh yeah? You want to do a face swap? We change identities, and you go as me? He’s a really good-looking guy, and he’s rich.”

“And he’s a total creep. I’m going to ignore your willingness to throw me to the sharks!”

I laughed. “Tell me your grand plan.”

“Get a few of those high-dosage sleeping pills from the counter in your bathroom. You know... the ones you used when your father died.”

“Those are old. There’s no way-”

“Just do it. They’ll work. Give him four instead of two.”

“At the event?” I bent over and worked my heels onto my feet.

“No. He’s going to want you to come home with him, Erica. Play the part and then slip the pills into his drink. Let him pass out, and Monday at the office, tell him you’re all paid up. You fucked him, and life can go on.”

“And if he says something to Matt?”

“He has no proof. That’s when you can pull out the story. I’ll be there to back you up. You know that.”

It didn’t sound like a horrible plan, and if I were being honest, I had *no* plan at all. “Alright. I’ll think about it.”

“Get the pills and be safe. I love you.”

“Love you too.” I walked quickly to the bathroom and emptied a few into the palm of my hand. Everything inside me screamed for me to skip the event and go find Matt. He could help me figure things out. He loved me.

“And I love him too.” I checked myself in the mirror one more time, steeling my resolve to end this shit tonight. Lanie’s plan was dangerous, but if I could pull it off, maybe everything would be back to normal by Monday.

I finished getting my things together and locked up the apartment. The trip over to the art gallery took a little longer than I expected, and I showed up about thirty minutes after I told Mitch I would be there.

I was surprised as hell that he hadn’t blown up my phone wondering where I was. Points for him for being a man and



not a boy.

“Good evening, Miss.” A valet opened my door and moved back, a smile on his face. “Just leave the keys in the ignition. Here’s your ticket. Enjoy the event.”

“Thank you.” I nodded and took the ticket before walking to the door.

Mitch walked out, looking like the devil himself. His black suit was pressed perfectly, and fit him like a glove. I had no doubt that every woman in the room behind him had eye-fucked him twenty times. He was beautiful and would make some woman very happy one day, but that woman wasn’t me. I was completely sold out to a blond-haired goof that reminded me of the frat boys from my past that I would turn away instantly.

Matt had every part of me. There was nothing else left to give to anyone or anything.

“You look beautiful.” Mitch reached out and took my hand before leaning in and kissing my cheek. “Thanks for coming.”

“I didn’t have a choice.” I slipped my arm into his as he offered it. I wanted to find some middle ground where I could be cordial with the asshole, but he was threatening to destroy everything that mattered to me.

“You always have a choice.” He glanced down at me, his eyes filled with needy lust. “Let’s grab a drink and let me introduce you to a few people. Then we dance.”

“I don’t like to dance.” I pulled my arm from him as we approached the bar.

“Too bad.” He moved in behind me, sliding his hands over my hips and holding me like he owned me. He leaned forward, and I stiffened. “I’ll have a crown and coke, and then whatever my girl’s having as well.”

The bartender smiled. “Of course, Mr. Roberson.” He glanced at me. “For you tonight, Miss?”

“A glass of red wine, please.” I tried to find my voice, but it was lost behind the panic building in my chest. Mitch

touching me was wrong. His body pressed to mine was sickeningly wrong.

“Relax,” he whispered against the back of my hair.

I took my wine, thanked the guy and turned to face Mitch. “Please don’t touch me like we’re together. I’m your date tonight, not your wife or your lover.”

“I understand where you are, Erica.” He reached out and gripped my chin as his eyes darkened. “But tonight is your payback for me walking away from the most beautiful piece of art I’ve ever seen. It might not mean anything to you, but it did to me.”

“So go buy it from the rich kid that won the bidding that night.” I stepped back and bumped into the bar. Mitch reached out and grabbed my wrist, helping me to keep from spilling the wine.

“Stop being hostile, or tonight doesn’t count. Period.” He gripped my free hand and pulled me alongside him as we stopped to talk with several people. He kept my hand in his, or his hand pressed to the small of my back the whole night. I calmed down a little after my second glass of wine.

There was a confidence building up inside of me that I could get him back to his place and knock him out. I could figure it out, and this travesty would be over.

“Come dance with me.” He took my glass from me, and we walked out to the dance floor. He pulled me close and breathed in deeply. “I can’t wait to taste you, Erica. I’m going to spread you out on my kitchen table and indulge in every part of you until you can’t figure out where I begin and you end.”

I smirked. “You really think you have more to offer than a young, twenty-something-year-old man? He fucks like a rabbit, and he’s so beautiful to look at.”

He smiled as if I hadn’t phased him a bit. The fear I’d let go of earlier had returned in a sickening wave.

“I’m not going to fuck you.” He moved us to the middle of the floor, his hands gripping me tightly, possessively. “I’m

going to make love to you. You need to see what it looks like to be adored by a man, not molested by a boy.”

I clamped my lips shut. I had a million nasty things to shoot back at him, but it was better for me to simply get through the night and walk away. After things settled down, I would find a way to get him fired, even if that meant telling Damon and Kent everything. Tonight was the beginning of the end.

He leaned down and brushed his lips by my jawline before letting his lips hover just above my lips. “Kiss me.”

“No. No kissing tonight.” I turned and pressed my cheek against his chest, facing away from him. I locked eyes with someone on the edge of the floor that looked way too familiar. The tight expression on the man’s face caused bile to rise in my throat. He was disgusted, ashamed, destroyed.

“Fuck.” I pulled back. “I’ll be right back.”

Jonathan Luntz stood at the edge of the floor, his eyes a bottomless pit. “Erica. Wow. I’m not sure what to say right now.”

“It’s not what you think.” I reached out to touch his arm, but he stepped back out of reach.

“No?” He glanced out toward the dance floor. “Looks to me like you’ve been cheating on Matthew. What a painful realization that’s going to be for him.”

“I’m not cheating on Matt. I love him with-”

He lifted his hand and snorted. “Right. Well, here’s the deal, he means a lot to me and my family. You can tell him about what you’re up to while he’s not looking, or I will.”

“It’s not-”

“You or me?”

“Me.” I took a shaky breath. I would just have to tell Matt, but I needed to make Mitch think that I slept with him. Matt would believe me when I told him the whole thing and my scheme. He might even appreciate it. No... that was pushing

it. He'd be furious and probably kill Mitch with his bare hands.

As long as he didn't turn away from me, I was good with anything else he wanted to do.

"Good. Enjoy your evening. You've most certainly ruined mine." He turned and walked away, his nose turned up and eyes full of condemnation. There would be no coming back from that moment with him. Even if Matthew forgave me and understood what I was up to, convincing Jonathan otherwise was going to be damn near impossible.

And Jonathan would be in our lives for a long time. Another reminder of my failures.

"Who was that?" Mitch moved up beside me and wrapped a possessive arm around my back.

"No one. Let's go."

"Home?" He pulled me flush against him.

"Yes. I'll follow you back to your place this ends tonight."

He didn't speak, but rather studied me as if trying to uncover the lies building up inside of me. A moment later, he took my hand, and we walked toward the front door. After getting our cars pulled up from the valet, he walked over and stood before me.

"Don't be afraid of me, Erica. I just want to release you from this bullshit belief you have that anyone will do. You're better than that."

"I'll follow you." I got into the car and closed the door, focusing on the front window and ignoring him as he stood outside my car.

I had to get him drugged and in bed before anything happened. I couldn't live with myself if he touched me or kissed me. I wasn't playing the part at all. I was going to try and get him to share a drink with me and then get the fuck out of there.

"Please let this work. Please."

Tears filled my eyes as my phone buzzed beside me. A text from Matt.

*I love you, baby. Me and Zek are eating popcorn and watching a chick-flick. Don't judge.*

A sob left me as I pulled out of the event and followed Mitch far out of the city to his mansion by the water. Everything was on the line, and I was teetering toward losing the one thing I wanted more than anything in the world - love.

# CHAPTER 51



## MATT

Erica not texting me the night before was a little odd, but I blew it off. I wasn't going to let anything small or silly come between us. She meant too damn much to me.

I got up to the sound of Damon moving around the kitchen. He'd decided after dinner to stay the night. He was wiped out, and the bastard laid down for a nap and never got up again.

"Finally," he grumbled as he gave me a look.

I moved toward the coffee pot, ignoring him for a few minutes until I got the coffee going. "So, what time did you get up?"

"Fucking four o'clock. Why didn't you wake me up last night?" He lifted his arms to the ceiling and stretched.

"Because you were exhausted, man." I grabbed two cups, but he stopped me.

"None for me. I've already had a pot to myself."

I chuckled. "What are your plans today?"

"I need to get ready for that meeting tomorrow morning, but I can do it later tonight. Why? You wanna go do something."

It was nice to have him there. The older we got, the more I appreciated the relationship we had between us.

"Yeah. I want to go look at places. You think any real estate agents work on the weekend?" I poured myself a cup of

coffee and forced my thoughts away from Erica. I always seemed to return to that same place, wondering how she was, what she was doing, fuck, what she was wearing.

“All of them do, dill weed.” He walked around the counter and sat down at the breakfast table. “My favorite place for Sunday brunch is a few miles from here. Let’s go stuff ourselves with French toast and bacon and then go look for a house.”

“You don’t think I’m rushing into this, right?” I walked to the table and sat down across from him.

“You’re asking the wrong guy, Matt. You know when I find something I want, I take it. I’m not real good with this bullshit concept called patience. It’s a time waster in my opinion.”

I nodded. “I hear that. Alright, then, let’s grab some food and go find a beautiful place for me to surprise Erica with.”

“I like it.” He stood up and walked toward the living room. “I’m starting to like Zek here. What kind of dog is he?”

“He’s my kind of dog. You can’t have him.” I walked down the hallway, ignoring his jabs. My heart hurt as I thought about Erica missing out on having a close family like I did. I’d just continue to pull her deeper and deeper into mine. With her mother and brother being the only living relatives she had, and both of them treating her like trash, she needed a new family.

And she could have mine. It warmed me to think about opening myself up and giving her anything she could wish for. Why in the world had I been so scared of love, of her, for the last few years? It seemed like such a stupid waste of time now that she was mine.

“Let’s go, princess!” Damon banged on the door, jolting me.

“I’m coming. It takes a minute. Chill your nuts, man.”

“I’m telling Erica that you’re talking dirty to me.” He chuckled.



I got dressed quickly and met him in the living room. We got Zek put up and made our way over to the restaurant with him driving his newest rental toy.

“So? What did you think?” He nodded toward the Mercedes as we got out and walked toward the overly fancy restaurant.

I was a Honda and McDonald’s sort of guy, so anything I said would be a twisted truth. “Drives like a... car.” I laughed as he popped me in the chest.

“I swear. You don’t enjoy any of the beautiful things in life.”

“Sure I do.” I held the door and walked in behind him. “Erica has me thinking about houses and kids and all sorts of beautiful stuff.”

He gave me a sideways look, obviously not talking about anything emotionally beautiful. “Right.”

“I’m going to run to the john. I’ll meet you at the table.”

“Meet me at the buffet. I’m starving.” He walked away, and I glanced around looking for the bathroom. After finding it, I walked in and stopped to text Erica. Not talking to her for the last twenty-four hours was driving me bonkers.

I wasn’t usually so damn needy, but with all of the shit with Mitch and her being so sensitive to whatever she was hiding, I needed to know that she was okay.

*Hey, baby. I’m at breakfast with Damon but wanted to see if you were free this evening. It’ll be around four or so. I just miss you. I want to see you. To touch you. Hold you. Make love to you all afternoon. Tell me how the event went too when you get a chance.*

I stood there in the bathroom, staring at my phone, wanting to see the little bubbles at the bottom of the screen start to move. Nothing.

“Where are you?” I asked softly as my heart ached in my chest. Maybe I was over thinking it. I had to be.

She wasn't going to answer. Maybe she was still sleeping. I dropped the phone in my pocket and walked out to find Damon sitting at a table for two with far too much food on his plate.

"Are you really going to eat all of that?" I stopped by the table and gave him a look.

"Yeah. Get your own trough." He smiled and pointed to the buffet. "They have anything a man could want. Go enjoy yourself."

I turned and walked toward the food as my stomach tightened. They didn't have what I wanted. I wanted my girl beside me. I needed to know she was alright. If she didn't text me back by the time breakfast was over, I was headed over to her place to check in.

Looking needy was a pet peeve of mine, but my pride could suck a toe. She knew I loved her more than anything else. It was my right to check on her, or so I told myself.



"Why are we going by Erica's?" Damon gave me a sideways look as we got back in his Mercedes, both of us so full that it hurt to walk.

"She's not responding to my text." I shrugged and got in the car, buckling up. "She went to some art event last night and was sick over having to see Mitch there."

He let out a sigh and pulled away from the restaurant. "I don't understand what the fuck Mitch has to do with all of this."

"Did you at least look into him?" I barked and glanced over to pin my brother with a hard stare.

"Yes, and he's the same guy I told you he was. He lost his wife, he's devoted to dad, and him and his kid don't really get along, but that's pretty normal, Matt. What were you thinking I was going to find?"

My phone buzzed, and I pulled it out like it was on fire in my pocket. Erica's text was short, but at least she was texting.

*We need to talk.*

I put the phone to my ear to call her. It rang five times and went to voicemail. *What the hell?*

“Alright. So are we going to look at places or what?”

“Yeah. Let's go over to that big reality company by the office.” I was glad he had changed the subject from Mitch. I was sick over Erica not answering my call, but I wasn't about to let my brother know that I was freaking the fuck out.

We pulled up to the reality company a few minutes later, and I'd mentally fucked myself a million times with what could be going on with Erica.

“I need to run up to the office first. You want to come up or stay here?”

“I'm good here.” I leaned back in my seat and forced my face to be as expressionless as possible.

“Alright.” He reached for the door and paused. “You okay?”

“I've been better, but I'm good. Go do what you have to do and then we'll head over to the reality company.”

“Hang tight. Be back shortly.” He got out of the car and walked away as I let out a long sigh of relief.

I reached up and turned the air on high, wondering what the fuck to do. Should I try and call her again?

Jonathan. I'd asked Jonathan to go to the event the night before. He'd be the best way to check up on her without making her think I was getting obsessive, which I was. A little.

I dialed his number and pressed the phone to my ear as I tapped my foot. Nerves tore up my stomach, and I knew I was going to be sick whether everything was fine or if it wasn't.

“Jonathan Luntz.”

“Hey. It's Matt. How are you?”

His normal upbeat tone was all but gone. “Matt. I’m good. We’re just heading out for brunch. The wife loves to indulge a little on Sundays, and the place just down the road from us has fresh berries and whipped cream. I always go for the champagne, but I like to live a bit buzzed.”

I forced a chuckle. “Well, I won’t keep you. I just wanted to check in on how things went last night. Erica hasn’t texted this morning, and I’m feeling like a pussy for wanting to call until she picks up. She’s just been so off lately.”

“Right.” He paused, and I grew sicker. “She was at the event last night.”

“And?” I clamped my teeth together. Was I going to have to pry out of him what the fuck happened? “Was she herself? Did you guys talk.”

“She wasn’t at all herself, and yes, we did talk for a minute.”

“Jonathan. What’s going on? You’re repeating everything I’m saying. Did something happen?” I gripped the door handle beside me and tried to find enough air to breathe.

“Look, man, I don’t know how to tell you this, and I wasn’t supposed to have to.”

“Tell me what?” A cold sweat broke out on my skin.

“She was there with Mitch Roberson. He works at the firm with her.”

“Oh yeah.” I let out the breath I was holding. “I knew Mitch was going to be there.” I chuckled, but the sound was shaky. “She was a little upset about him going.”

“No. I don’t think she was.”

“What do you mean?” I reached up and pressed my hand to my chest as my heart sped up again. “Just be straight with me, please. You and I have a long term plan of working together until we’re both too old to lift a paintbrush. Trust is a big fucking deal to me.”

“I understand.” He paused again, and I thought I might have a cardiac arrest. Nothing good was going to come from

the conversation. “She was with Mitch as his date last night, Matt. He had his hands all over her. They danced like lovers and held hands when they weren’t dancing.”

“No. You must have misunderstood.” I opened the door and got out. I was going to vomit the minute we got off the phone. All I needed was for Damon to split my head open over barfing in his beautiful new toy.

“No. I didn’t.” He sighed. “I pulled her aside and reprimanded her.”

“She knew you saw her and Mitch acting like they were together?”

“Yes, Matt. Every-fucking-body who was there saw them as a couple. I told her that she had to come clean with you today.”

Her text. She wanted to talk. Fuck.

“Alright. Thanks, man. I’ll touch base with you later this week.”

“Matt-”

I dropped the call and ran for the trashcan, flinging the top off of it and losing everything I’d eaten over the last few hours.

How could she? How could I have trusted her?

Who the fuck fakes love the way she did?

“Matthew?” Damon’s voice caused me to spin around.

A sob broke through me as I wrapped my arms around myself and closed my eyes tightly. This shit couldn’t be happening to me. My father had been an adulterer, and so was my mother. She had a reason to strike back, but what was Erica’s.

“Hey, buddy. Talk to me.” Damon wrapped me in a tight hug and pressed his cheek to the top of my head as I let myself go. “I’m right here. I’m not going anywhere, man. “

“Did you know that dad cheated first?” I glanced up at him.

“Yeah, buddy. He told me a few days ago. Forget about that shit, okay? It’s in the past now. Just let out everything that’s fucking you up, and then we’ll deal with it together.”

But there was nothing to deal with. I was a sucker.

All of my hopes and dreams disintegrated as I stood in the parking lot with my brother clinging to me. I shouldn’t have fallen in love, and I would never make that same mistake again.

It hurt too goddamn bad to lose it.

No wonder she wanted to make Mitch into a villain to me.

It kept me from seeing the truth of her indiscretion and instead focused on him.

Fuck her. Fuck all of them.

I didn’t need love, and I didn’t need her.

It was stupid of me to think I did.

# CHAPTER 52



## ERICA

The night before played in my mind's eye over and over as I lay in the bed that next morning. Mitch had been kind and almost sweet when we arrived at his big mansion by the water. The place was decorated warmly, from his wife no doubt. I couldn't have imagined losing someone I loved, and yet there I sat, at the edge of watching Matt walk away.

Mitch and I had shared a drink, and luckily for me, I had time to slip a few pills in his liquor, which was insanely effective. He got dizzy pretty quickly, and I pulled him down the hallway and pushed him back on the bed as he passed out.

It worked like a charm, and yet, I felt empty on the inside. What if he died in the middle of the night? What if Jonathan got to Matt before I did?

I needed to tell Matt everything. I had to.

After rolling around in my cold sheets until just before lunch, I finally pulled myself up and walked to the kitchen. Not having Zek there left the apartment filled with an uncomfortable silence. All I had was my thoughts, which were driving me farther and farther into a deep, dark hole.

I picked up my phone as it dinged with a new text message. Matt.

*Hey, baby. I'm at breakfast with Damon but wanted to see if you were free this evening. It'll be around four or so. I just miss you. I want to see you. To touch you. Hold you. Make love to you all afternoon. Tell me how the event went too when you get a chance.*



I wanted to respond, but I couldn't. I wasn't sure what to say just yet. He deserved a better woman in his life.

"I thought I was that woman." Confusion swept through me, but I dismissed it. There was no need to tear myself down just yet. There was still a small spark of hope that I could talk to Matt and explain myself. I was going to break the situation open wide for him to see and hear all of it.

Maybe he would understand. I'd done everything I'd done for him. It was a sick misunderstanding, but we could talk it through.

We had to. I couldn't survive without him.

My phone rang again, and I picked it up. My brother.

"Great," I mumbled before pressing it to my ear. "Hello?"

"Mom's not doing so good. I'm out of town and need you to get over there."

"Yeah, well, today's not going to work."

"Erica. For once in your miserable life get over yourself. So you and mom aren't close. So the fuck what. Get over there and sit beside her today. She needs one of us, and I'm tired of being the responsible one."

"Same song. Different verse."

He let out a long, disgusted sound as if his disapproval did anything to me anymore. He'd been dishing it out since we were kids. I was never enough for him or mom. "Just go."

"Fine, but it's your turn next time. Don't think I don't know why you travel, you cock head. There's no reason why you should be gone all the damn time," I barked into the phone and hung up.

Spending the day with my mother would be like opening up my veins and pouring salt in the cuts. There was nothing more painful than being under her scrutiny, no matter how calloused I thought I was to it.

After getting dressed, I paused and finally forced myself to text Matthew that we needed to talk. He tried to call after I

sent my text, but I wouldn't have been able to talk. My heart hurt so fucking bad in my chest, and I doubted my goodness.

Tears filled my eyes. Even if I could find my voice, there was no way I was responding based on the mood I was in. I would have told him to find someone else, someone way better than me. He didn't need my drama, and I didn't need to push away the *only* good thing in my life.

I reached the nursing home and got out, locked the car door and walked as slowly as humanly possible to the front door. A new nurse greeted me as I walked in and asked to be taken to my mom's room.

"She's a little grumpy today, but she had an episode last night and didn't sleep well." The nurse glanced over her shoulder and smiled. "Are you feeling okay? You look a little under the weather yourself. You know we don't allow visitors if they're sick with anything, right?"

I almost agreed with her that I was, in fact, sick with something, but it would have been yet another lie to add to my long list of fuck-ups.

"I'm not sick. Just had a rough night of sleep." I paused behind her as my phone dinged in my purse. I pulled it out to find a text from Mitch.

*I had fun last night. I don't remember much, but I'm sure it was incredible. Text me when you're up. I want to see you again.*

My stomach twisted into a nasty knot. I wasn't going to text him back or see him again. He had to know that shit. Gratefulness that he was alive swelled inside of me. All I needed was to add murder to my track record where unlovable and torrential fuck-up sat.

"Erica?" My mom sounded horrible like she'd chewed on glass that morning.

"Hi, mom." I walked around the nurse and moved over to her bedside. "Daniel said you weren't doing so well."

Her eyes moved around my face a few times before looking out toward the window. "I think I upset your brother.

He's not come to see me for a while."

"I doubt that, mom. He loves you very much." I wrapped my arms around myself as if trying to protect myself from the hell that was sure to reign down on me. Matthew had protected me from her wrath the last time I'd come to visit, but he wasn't there now.

Hell, he might not ever be with me again. The thought sent a cold chill down my back. What would I do if things didn't work out with us?

"And you? Do you love me?" She turned her head and bore into me with the same hateful stare I'd seen all my life.

"Of course I do." I was proud of myself for not skipping a beat.

"You're a terrible liar, Erica. You've got too much of your father in you." She cackled loudly.

I sat in a stony silence, not sure what to say or do. I had nothing left to give, and even if I had... she wouldn't have accepted it. My father's passing hurt her too much for her to be around me. I looked like him, acted like him, was him in feminine form.

"Everything okay in here?" The nurse poked her head in the room, and I glanced up, not realizing that an hour had gone by. We hadn't said another word to each other. There was nothing to say.

"Yes. My daughter was just packing up to leave." My mom turned her face toward the window. "Don't bother coming again. I know you don't want to be here, and you know I don't like seeing you."

"Mom-"

"Don't. Come. Again." She jerked her head around and narrowed her eyes. "Period."

I nodded and stood up, knowing better than to fight with her. I picked up my purse and walked to the door as an odd numbness settled in around me. I paused by the door and glanced back to see her one more time. She would die alone

because my brother wouldn't make time for her and she refused to let me into her heart or her fucking room.

"I love you," I whispered and walked out into the hall, not having the strength to stand there in hopes of hearing it back. I hadn't since I was a girl. Nothing was going to change with her now.

"Miss Hall," the nurse started, "she didn't mean those things."

"Thank you, but save it. She's always been that way. This is nothing new." I walked to the door and paused, looking back. "Make sure you call me if something happens. My brother is useless."

"Of course." She nodded, the look of pity on her face almost too much for me to bare.

I walked out of the home and made a beeline to a little park bench by a pretty waterfall. I dropped down and pulled out my phone, calling Matt. I needed him more than I needed my next breath.

"Erica?" Damon answered the phone.

Panic consumed me. I jolted up to my feet. "Damon. Where's Matt? Is everything okay?"

"Yeah. He's just not having a good day. He'll give you a call-"

"Let me talk to her," Matt barked.

I stiffened as my knees went weak. "Matt?" I choked out.

"We're not getting together today. We are not getting together ever. I'm not sure what the fuck to say to you right now, but I need some space to figure things out."

I choked on a sob. "No. Please. Just let me-"

"Oh. So you do know why I'm upset. Fucking perfect." He growled loudly, and I could almost hear the sound of his heart breaking. "I'm hanging up now, Erica. We'll talk when I figure out what the fuck I'm supposed to say to you."

The line went dead.

“Okay. I love you,” I whispered to no one and reached down to get my purse. I dragged it back to the car as the color drained from my vision. I got in the car and closed the door before the first of many screams ripped from my lips.

My heart wasn't just broken; my soul was shredded.

There was no way in hell he was going to listen to me now. Jonathan must have gotten to him first, or fuck, maybe Mitch did.

I got back to the house and walked in to find it still empty. I sat down and pulled out a piece of paper, putting together my resignation for McKenzie and Bryant. I needed time to mourn the loss of everything I loved. No one in my family cared for me, and though I had Lanie, she wasn't enough.

Matt was. Matt was more than enough.

I cried as I folded up the resignation and put a stamp on the envelope. I didn't belong in a big building downtown. I never had. It was all part of the hope that my brother and mother would see me as someone worthy of loving. It was a compromise of sorts, and it was draining me more and more every day.

After cleaning up a little, I packed a bag, called an uber and walked back down to the parking lot. I texted Damon that Matt would need to keep Zek for a few days and then I'd get him back, or Lanie could come get him. I got a quick text back that Damon would deal with it. And to be safe.

Funny how he knew that I had nothing left to do but run.

I dropped the letter in the mail at the edge of the yard about the time the uber drove up. I got in, told the guy where I was going and leaned back. It would be expensive, but I didn't give a shit. Lanie called moments later, and it was almost uncanny that she knew I was hurting.

“Where are you?” She asked as I picked up the phone.

“I'm in the back of an uber, leaving town.” I wiped the back of my hand under my nose as I sniffled.

“What happened?”

“I’m not doing this right now. I’ll be in Canada for a few days or a week or a month. I’ll keep in touch. Please help me with Zek until I get back.”

“Of course, Erica. Let me come with you.”

“No. You have your job and stuff. Just help with the puppy.”

“I can do that, but I wish you wouldn’t-”

“I wish I wouldn’t too, but I did. I fucked up on so many levels. I cannot sit here and wallow in what could have been. I need time to myself away from this place, away from everyone. Please just respect that. You’re the only friend I have in the world. I need your support right now.”

“Then you have it. Be safe and check in. I love you.”

“Thank you. I love you too.” I dropped the call and rolled down my window. I’d lost everything by trying to be someone I wasn’t.

I wasn’t a fixer or a gambler or a business woman with high hopes of making millions.

I was just me, and once again... that wasn’t nearly enough.

# CHAPTER 53



## MATT

Four days. It had been four days since I reamed Erica on the phone, and I hadn't gotten a text or a call since then. Lanie came and picked up the dog from Damon a few days after our last conversation, but I'd stayed in the bedroom. I wasn't sure what to think or how to feel, so I just didn't.

"Dude. You have to get out of this fucking house. Today." Damon walked into the living room and glanced down at me. I hadn't gotten off the couch for four days for anything other than to shit occasionally. I wasn't eating much, and my sleep was horribly fucked up. "You look like hell."

"Fuck off." I turned over on my side and faced the couch as my thoughts tormented me. All I wanted was to be loved by a woman like Erica. I would have given her everything. The heart from my goddamn chest, but that wasn't enough for her.

It was almost comical how stupid I was.

"Matt. Get your ass up now. I'm not messing around with you."

I lifted my middle finger in the air. He might have been able to take me to the floor when we were kids, but there was no way in hell he could do it now.

A knock at the door had me stiffening. "I don't want to see anyone. I'm serious."

Damon growled and walked away, leaving me in peace. The sound of Sophie's voice caused me to jerk up. She had



been my best friend since we were kids. There was no one in the world who knew me better.

“Where is he?” She walked around Damon and stopped a few feet from me, putting her hands on her hips. “Get up. Get dressed and let’s go. We’re going out for food.”

“No. I’m not.” I stood, not caring that I was in boxers and nothing else. The girl had seen every inch of me and laughed at most of it. “You and Damon go eat. And what the hell are you doing here anyway?”

“Damon called a few days ago and told me what happened. I took a reporting job here in Seattle and hopped the first plane I could.” She walked closer, reaching out and touching the side of my face as worry clouded her expression. “You have to eat.”

“I am eating.” I pulled her hand down carefully. “I’m not a child. I don’t need everyone crowding around me right now. Seriously.”

“Get dressed. We’re taking you to eat.” Damon moved up beside her. “We’re not taking no for an answer. Keep dicking around, and I’ll have Dad and Karen come up here.”

“This is fucking stupid.” I turned and walked to my bedroom. “I don’t need a goddamn intervention. My love life is shit. So what? I’ll get over it.”

I slammed the door behind me as sickness danced around my chest. That was a damn lie. I wouldn’t ever get over Erica’s cheating on me. Not ever.

After throwing on some dirty jeans and a t-shirt, I slid my feet into some flip flops and walked out to find them talking about me.

I moved past them and grabbed my keys. “I’ll go eat, and then the two of you find somewhere else to meet about my health. I’m not interested. It’s a broken heart. It will heal.”

“You’re being a dick.” Sophie walked past me, snatching the keys. “You could at least give me a hug. I flew all the way up here to see you.”

I pursed my lips and glared down at her. If I showed anyone softness, I would crack in half.

“I can’t,” I mumbled and grabbed the keys back before walking out the door. “Let’s go. Now.”



We sat awkwardly at breakfast after we ordered, the two of them watching me like I was a new species about to crack from a fucking egg.

“What?” I barked as I glared at both of them. Being mean was so much easier than feeling the devastation that I knew was coming again.

“Matt. Did you talk to her?” Damon leaned in a little, his eyes kind. “She’s not a whore. There has to be more to the story. The woman has wanted you for two fucking years.”

“No. And I’m not going to.” I snorted. “What would I say exactly? Why did you wax Mitch’s cock? Mine wasn’t enough?”

The sound of several shocked gasps reached me, and my cheeks burned.

“You don’t know if she slept with him, Matthew. I’m with Damon on this one. You need to at least hear her side of the story.” Sophie leaned back in her chair and shook her head. “You know that things aren’t always as they appear to be. If you love her-”

“Loved her. I did love her.”

“You still do.” Sophie leaned closer. “Otherwise you wouldn’t be so fucked up over this. You’re not a prideful guy like this bastard.” She pointed to Damon.

“Hey! I’m right here.” He grinned over at me.

I gave him nothing. “I’m not talking to her guys. There is no reason to.”

“You know what? Let’s go to the office. We’ll talk to Mitch and see what the hell is going on.” Damon wiped his mouth and stood up. “Let’s go. You want to close the door on this? Let’s do it like men.”

“Finally.” I stood up and walked out of the restaurant with them behind me. We reached the car, and I got in the back, so tired all of a sudden. I pulled out my phone and scanned through my text with Erica over the last few months.

There was so much love. So much promise, and yet it seemed to be completely gone now.

Mitch had to be the answer. If I couldn’t force myself to talk to her, then Damon was right. I could at least get in the old bastard’s face and figure out what happened. Was it him or her?

Did it matter? Yeah. It kinda did.

We got to the office in record time with Damon behind the wheel. It was nice to know that my brother supported me, even when I was acting crazy.

“Let’s talk to him in his office first, okay? No dragging him out into the hallway and beating him to death until we know what’s going on.”

“Fine, but if he’s the one that started this with Erica, I’m going to kill him.” I got out of the car and walked with purpose toward the office. Never in my life had I wanted to be violent with someone, but the old fucker who stole my woman was at the top of my list.

“Matt. Maybe we shouldn’t do this here.” Sophie jogged up next to me, her eyes filled with worry as she slipped her arm into mine and slowed me a little.

“I have to know, Soph. I need to start moving toward getting over this.” I got into the elevator, grateful that we were the only ones in it. “You would want to know too.”

“I know. I’m just worried about you making a big scene at your dad’s office. That’s all.” She pressed her cheek to my shoulder as she leaned against me. “I wish I could take this from you. I would.”

I reached out and took her hand. “I know you would. It’s my problem to deal with though. I just need to deal with it.”

“Agreed,” Damon grumbled as he stood at the front of the elevator, facing us. “If this bastard is at fault, you can whoop his ass. I’ll fire him.”

The door opened, and I moved around my brother. The sound he made let me know he wasn’t too thrilled with me taking the lead. I didn’t care.

Mitch’s voice rose up as we approached his office. “Absolutely. We’ll get those packets over to you this afternoon. Nothing to worry-” He paused as we walked in.

I glanced over my shoulder and nodded toward the door. “Get out. This is my conversation to have.”

Damon nodded and took Sophie’s hand, pulling her out. They closed the door, and I turned to face Mitch.

“Alright, well, have a great day, and we’ll be in touch.” He put the phone down and lifted his eyebrow. “Matthew.”

“What happened between you and Erica?”

“Have a seat.” He motioned for me to sit down, but I couldn’t force myself to take a step forward. All I could see was red. I’d thrown him out the window ten times in my mind since stepping foot in his office.

“Answer my question. Now.”

He nodded and slipped his hands into his pocket, looking like such a nice guy. “I asked her to break things off with you before we started our love affair, but it would seem that she didn’t.”

“Who started your *love affair*, Mitch?”

“She did.” He shrugged. “I, of course, found her attractive. Who wouldn’t.” He walked around the desk toward me. Brave mother fucker.

“And she just decided to date both of us at the same time.” I crossed my arms over my chest to keep from reaching out and strangling him. “And you were good with that? Knowing

she had her lips around my dick just a few days ago. That shit sits well with you, hm?”

His shoulder tightened, and a look of intense disapproval moved across his face. *This mother fucker could be my dad. How could Erica find that shit attractive?*

“I didn’t know she was with you a few days ago. I hadn’t seen her since the art event we attended with your friend Jonathan.”

“Right. The night your little ruse was up.” I tilted my head to the side. “So you’re telling me that she came to you? That she started your relationship even though she was still in one with me?”

“I am.” He held my gaze. “And I’m sorry that you were hurt in the process of this. I didn’t want that to happen. Your father is one of my oldest friends, Matthew.”

“I wonder what he would think about this sudden change of events.” I glanced back as someone knocked on the door. Damon poked his head inside. “Mitch. I want to talk with you when my brother is done.”

“I’m done.” I turned and walked toward the door, letting Damon in before I walked out. I didn’t have anything else to say. If Erica wanted a man like Mitch, then she could have him. I couldn’t compete, and I was too tired to try.

“Matt. Hey man!” Lewis walked down the hall toward me; his hand lifted in a high five position. We clapped hands, and he pulled me into a warm hug. “Fuck, dude. You just quit and disappear? We missed you like crazy around here.”

“Sorry, man. I had to stay true to who I was. You know?” I moved back, glad to see him, but suffering so damn much internally.

“I know it’s true. I’m glad to see you inspired boss-lady to do the same. We’re going to miss her so fucking much too.” He nodded toward Erica’s office.

“What?” I stiffened. “Erica left the firm?”

“Yeah, man. We just got word this morning.” He shrugged. “She needs to get out of here though.” He popped me in the chest. “So you guys can live your dreams of being painters together.” Realization raced over his expression. “Wait. You didn’t know she left?”

“No. We broke up on Sunday. She was fucking Mitch.” I motioned toward Mitch’s office. There was no need to save face for the whore that ripped my heart out. Everyone should know what a piece of shit she was.

“What? No way, man. I don’t believe that for a minute.” He moved closer to me. “He creeped her out completely. She didn’t love anyone but you.”

“Right. Tell that to her and Mitch.” I reached out and squeezed his shoulder. “Good to see you. Take care of yourself.”

“Matt. You’re wrong, brother.” His voice followed me as I walked back to Sophie and got into the elevator. His eyes were wide, pleading with me. “Matt. Listen to me. Something was up. I promise you, man.”

The door closed and I leaned my head back and let out a painful sigh. Who was telling the truth and who was a fucking liar?

I wasn’t so sure anymore.

# CHAPTER 54



## ERICA

**T**oday is the day. I laid in my hotel bed and chanted the same words over and over again. Today *had* to be the day. The day where I felt like eating, touring the city, breathing deeply again.

I missed Matt so bad that my body hurt, my brain ached, my teeth even felt sore. Forcing myself into the shower, I turned on the hot water and pressed my back against the cold tile wall. I wanted him so fucking bad that I honestly felt as if I were willing to do anything to get him back.

“Then tell him what happened. Make him listen to you!” I yelled at myself in the shower as a torrent of emotions raced through me, threatening to force me to my knees in anguish.

But he wouldn't listen. I knew it for a fact.

Memory after memory assaulted me, each one weakening my resolve to leave the hotel room. I cried out and closed my eyes, pressing my palms against my face and trying hard to hold myself together.

“What am I going to do without you in my life?” I let another sob go as the first time we made love raced behind my eyelids.

*We barely made it inside the door to my condo before he pulled my shirt off. I'd never experienced passion like that before. I'd only been with Tanner, but we'd had some fantastic romps in the sheets. Fear blazed through me that I wouldn't be*



*enough, but the feel of Matt's hands tearing at my clothes and the wetness of his tongue against my neck and the tops of my breasts decimated any thoughts from my mind. Carnality took over, and I dove in headfirst.*

*"God, I need you," he groaned against my throat as he ground into me. I pushed off the wall he had me pressed against and broke away from him.*

*"Come with me into the bedroom." My walk turned into a jog as he jogged after me. I moaned loudly as he crashed into me and lifted me off my feet, tackling me to the sheets and turning me over roughly.*

*"My turn to taste you, you naughty bitch." He pulled at my jeans, tugging them over my hips without undoing them.*

*"Only for you," I mumbled and worked to help him get me free from my pants. I started to work on my panties, but he grasped my hands tightly and glanced up.*

*"No. You're mine to unwrap. Lay there and do what I tell you to do." He lifted up and kissed me hard, forcing his tongue into my mouth and pressing his strong body against mine. This was the guy he'd kept locked up. Excitement tore through me.*

*"And if I don't?" I lifted my leg and brushed my knee beside his face as he moved down to hover above my mound.*

*"I would offer to spank you, but something tells me you might beg for that." He smiled up at me before leaning down and running his tongue over the front of my panties. "You want me down here?"*

*"Fuck yes. Don't stop until you have your fill." I figured I'd better fight fire with fire.*

*"I won't." He jerked my panties to the side and laid waste to what I imagined to be the perfect orgasm. His tongue and fingers played me like a well-worn fiddle, and I found myself twitching and whimpering like a needy whore within minutes. He trapped my legs beneath his strong shoulders and brought me over the edge three times before I could force him off of me.*

*I rolled onto my stomach and panted loudly as stars danced behind my closed eyes. Never in a million years had I expected pleasure to be so intense, so demanding of me.*

*“I’ve got a pack of condoms in my bag. Wait here.” He gripped my ass with both hands and leaned down to lick at me a few more times from behind.*

*I moaned and pressed back against him, finding myself addicted to the pleasure he could provide. It scared me how fast he’d learned the movements that made me purr like a kitten.*

*There was nothing left to do but enjoy the ecstasy of the moment. I slid my hands along my cold sheets and pressed my face to the comfort they offered but kept my ass in the air. The alpha male that had taken over my creative billionaire was worthy of my worship and would probably shock the world if they ever got the chance to see him, but they wouldn’t. He would never allow that.*

*That I had was saying a lot. Too much maybe.*

*“God, you’re beautiful, woman. Did you know that?” He moved up on the bed behind me.*

*“Why did you bring condoms to Seattle?” I moved up to my hands and knees and pressed back as he rubbed his erection against me.*

*“Because I knew there was a slim chance that I was going to let myself go with you.”*

*“Did you just bring them for me?” I didn’t want to ask because honestly, I didn’t want the answer to be anything that would shut the night down.*

*“You know I care about you, right?” He moved over the top of me and pressed his fists into the bed beside mine as he pressed the head of his cock inside of me.*

*A guttural sound ripped from my chest as I pressed back on him. I needed everything he was going to give me. It had been so damn long since I’d let myself be handled by a man. Every part of me screamed for a long night of drowning in his tight grip, his dark scent, his demanding tone.*

*“I know you do.” I let my head drop as he kissed the top of my neck and whispered so softly that I almost didn’t hear him.*

*“Good. Remember that while I fuck you like I don’t.”*

White-hot need pumped through me as the image came to life. Matt’s strong hands on me, his body tucked deep inside of mine. I wanted to touch myself, to feel the elation of an orgasm with his name on my tongue, but I couldn’t do it.

The pleasure would hurt my heart too much.

After forcing myself to go through the movements of washing my hair and running the soap over my body, I dried off and got dress. The simple acts of getting clothes on exhausted me, and I dropped down in a chair by the window and watched people on the streets of Vancouver living life.

I had to change my focus. My future.

Whether things worked out with Matt or not. I had to decide who I wanted in my life and who had to go. There were too many toxic pieces to my puzzle, and I’d lived my life for everyone else up to that point.

It was time to start living for me.



“Aren’t you beautiful, lass, but so melancholy.” A middle-aged bartender with a thick Scottish accent leaned toward me as I slid onto a barstool at the pub down the street.

“Life has kicked me in the gut.” I shrugged and pointed to the bottle of Jack he had behind him. “I’ll take a Jack and Coke.”

“Single or double?” He gave me a warm smile.

“Double, please.” I glanced around to find the little place homely, and quite busy for late in the afternoon. Maybe people got off work early on Thursdays?

“Here you go, love.” He set the liquor down in front of me. “You look a little piqued. Care for something to eat? We have the best Fish and Chips you’ll ever put in your mouth.”

I nodded. “Yeah. That sounds nice, actually.”

“Excellent!” He bellowed and rubbed his belly as he walked away.

The sight of him caused me to smile. Matt would have loved to mimic him later in the night. I pulled out my phone and checked for missed calls and messages. I had a few texts from Lanie and one from Damon, but they were just worried about me.

I hated to leave them that way, but I wasn’t ready to talk. Not to anyone.

“So, lass. What has you up here in Canada?” The bartender returned, and I found myself happy to see him back. Something about him settled my spirit.

“What makes you think I’m not from here?” I twisted my accent a little.

He gave me a funny look. “That has to be the worst Canadian accent I have ever heard. For that, your first drink is on me.”

I laughed, feeling a little bit alive. “Well, thank you. I’ll try to make it more and more horrid as the night goes on. Nothing like drinking for free when you need to drown your sorrows.”

“And what sorrows does a beautiful, young woman like yourself have?” He leaned a little closer, but nothing inappropriate. The warmth in his eyes made me want to talk. My only problem was that I had no clue how to explain what I’d done, and what happened because of it. It was too long and complicated.

“My boyfriend and I parted ways on Sunday over a misunderstanding.” I glanced down at my liquor.

“And he’s too prideful to explain himself, and you’re too stubborn to listen?”

I smiled and glanced up. “It’s the other way around, but you hit it on the head, for sure.”

“And you love him?”

“So much.” I picked up the glass and kicked back a little.

“Mind if I ask what you do for a living?” He leaned over and pulled out a beer, popping the top and handing it to another old guy who moved up and took the stool on my left.

“I’m an Advertising Director for a large accounting firm based out of Texas. They have a branch in Seattle, and I live down there.”

“And you’re into that corporate American big-building bull shit, are you?” He lifted his eyebrow.

“Not at all.” I finished my drink and enjoyed the painful burn as it slid down my throat. “Can I have another please?”

“That one is on me.” The guy to my left smiled and nodded. “Nice to meet you, Miss. I’m Sid. The local artist that painted all this stuff you see in here. Jander is my brother.” He nodded to the bartender.

“Nice to meet you both.” I let my eyes move along the walls, not realizing until then that there was artwork lining every square inch of the place. “Wow. How beautiful.”

“Thanks. It was a hobby when I was younger, but my ma and pa talked me into following my dreams, so I did.”

“As did I.” Jander finished pouring my drink and smiled at me. “What are your dreams, lass?”

“To marry Matthew and build a huge art studio together.” I shrugged and reached for my drink. “To have a few kids together and grow old beside each other.”

“Matthew your beau?” Sid asked.

“He was.” I turned my attention back to Jander. “But I fucked it up.”

“Then fix it.” He winked at me and moved down the bar.

“Is he always so detailed with his helpfulness?” I glanced over at Sid.

The old man snorted and chuckled, the sound warm and inviting. “He’s right on this one, ma’am. Just fix it. No matter what it takes. When you find someone you love, you work around everything and anything to make it right. Whether you’re at fault or not.”

“And if they won’t listen to you?”

“You make them.”

“How?” I asked.

“Plague them to death if you have to, but you force yourself in front of them and tell the truth.”

“And if they won’t accept the truth?”

“You don’t move from that spot until they do. If your dreams are wrapped around this young man, then it would seem you don’t have much of a choice, now do you?”

“I guess you’re right. I don’t have a choice.” I picked up my drink and took a long sip. My phone buzzed in my pocket. Damon.

He’d been such a good friend to me over the years. I owed him the peace of knowing that I appreciated him and that I was okay.

“I need to take this. Don’t let anyone get my seat?” I asked Sid as I slid off the seat.

“Never. She’s yours all night, love.” He patted it and smiled, causing me to laugh.

I pulled the phone to my ear and walked outside to get away from the lively crowd that had shown up. “Hey.”

“Erica. Thank God. Fuck, woman. We were all getting sick with worry. I was about to send out the National Guard.”

I smiled. It was good to hear his voice. “They won’t do you much good. I’m up in Canada for a little while. I just need some time to myself.”

“I’m just glad you’re okay.” He let out a shaky sigh. “We got your letter of resignation today. I wanted you to know that I’m proud of you.”

Emotion built up in the back of my throat. I squeaked out my response. “Oh yeah? For quitting?”

“For following your heart. It’s hard to try and be someone you’re not, and you’ve done a damn good job of it. You’re always welcomed at my firm, and in my family.”

“Thank you,” I whispered as another round of tears rolled down my face. “How is Matt?”

“He’s been better.”

“Okay. Well, I’m fine. Thanks for calling.”

“Erica. One more thing.”

“Sure.” I turned and wiped at my tears, embarrassed as hell to be crying in the middle of the street on a Thursday night. My mother would have had a meltdown all over me because of it if she’d been there.

“Do you love my brother?”

I glanced up at the darkening sky as my heart broke in my chest once more. “More than you or anyone else will ever know.” I dropped the call and went back to the bar. Two drinks weren’t going to do it.

But three might.

# CHAPTER 55





## MATT

I stood in my studio on Friday morning, staring at a blank canvas with a million emotions plummeting through my chest. I missed Erica so bad it fucking hurt to breathe. If I thought I knew what love was before her, I was wrong.

“Hey. I need to run up to the studio to do a quick shoot. You need anything?” Sophie walked into the room and crossed her arms over her chest.

“No. But thanks.” I turned back to my canvas. “I feel like I could stick my hand inside my shirt and have enough red to paint this whole fucking city.”

“Matthew.” She moved up behind me and wrapped her arms around me. “I wish I could take this from you.”

“I wouldn’t give it to my worst enemy.” I patted her arm. “Go do what you need to do. I’ll be fine. Seriously.”

She hugged me again and walked toward the door. “I’ll be back in a little while.”

“Sounds good.” I glanced over my shoulder to find her watching me. “What?”

“You want to come with me in January to Saudi? I would love to have you with me.”

“I don’t know. I’ll think about it.” I turned my back to her. She had a long assignment overseas to check out the newest prince of the middle east. Seemed stupid to me, but she was pretty excited about it. Being a big-time reporter was her

dream, and she'd done it. Crazy enough, painting for a living was mine. And I was doing it.

It was intensely fucked up that it felt like a personal hell now that my love life had fallen apart. Having all the free time in the world to create something only left me with endless time to think. To hurt. To regret.

I closed my eyes and ran my hands down my face as my chest pulsed, my heart beating in slow, painful throbs. It amazed me how emotional pain could become physical suffering so fast.

"I miss you, baby." I pressed my palms against my eyes tightly and tried to breathe through the pain. My first time seeing Erica in Seattle was the memory that haunted me the most. We were at the Blink 182 concert, both of us still so unsure of whether we wanted to make a move. Who would be first to step forward and say something, do something, demand something? It was her. Of course, it was. She was brave and fearless, strong and independent. All of the things I wanted to be. My voice echoed in my ears.

*"You've had a crush on me for two years? Why didn't you say something? I could have been taking advantage of your weakness for me a long time ago."*

*She laughed and pushed her shoulder against mine before turning back to the stage and hopping up and down.*

*I leaned down and picked up my beer, draining half of it as thunder cracked against the sky. A storm was headed our way, and with the roof open and the band singing their guts out, it was perfect. The heavens would open up soon, and I couldn't help but wonder if Erica would be willing to dance in the rain with me. Something told me she would enjoy it as much as I would.*

*I downed my hot dogs and finished my beer by the time she dropped down in the seat next to me, covered in sweat.*

*"I like you like this." I reached over and gripped the back of her head before pulling her in tightly and kissing her*

*several times in succinct fashion.*

*“I like you however you come.” She glanced up at the sky and blinked a few times. “It’s going to start storming soon.”*

*“Good. I can’t wait to see what color your bra is under that pretty shirt you got on.” I chuckled and released her as she gave me a shocked look.*

*“You’re not at all the guy I thought you were.” She turned and slid her hands up my chest. “Or maybe you’re exactly who I expected to encounter when you let your guard down.”*

*“I’m still me.” I cupped her face as big fat rain drops fell from the sky. “I’m just another part of him.”*

*“I like it.” She lifted up on her toes as I moved down to meet her. The kiss was deep and so fucking right. It left my insides in knots, my body tight and cock rock hard.*

*“You sure, Erica?” I kissed her again. “I’ve been holding myself back for so damn long.”*

*She ran her fingers down my cheeks and brushed her nose against mine before licking my lips. “Get me out of here. I’ve been waiting for this night for two years. I’m sick of pretending I’m not tripping over myself to have you above me.”*

*“Yeah.” I kissed her a few more times and slid my hands over her hips to grip the top of her perfect little ass. “Let’s go.”*

*She pulled from me and reached back. I took her hand and let her lead us to the edge of the crowd before moving out in front of her and pushing through the larger group of people still enjoying the concert. She tucked herself against my back, and everything fell into place. I wasn’t a follower. I just needed the right woman behind me to remind me that I was the leader I was born to be. My path just might look a little different than most.*

*Stop getting ahead of yourself. This isn’t a fucking Disney movie.*

*Doubt raped my insides as I turned and walked through the parking lot with her jogging beside me to keep up. I wanted to stay in the moment, but the same demons that reared their ugly ass heads to beat me down seemed to show up at the worst possible time.*

*I helped her get into the car and made my way over to my side of the car.*

*“Just be yourself tonight. She’ll love you or hate you in the morning. Any way you look at it, you were true to form.” I got in the car and glanced over at her. “Tonight was fun.”*

*“Tonight just started.” She worked her hair into a messy bun as I pulled out of the parking lot and tried not to react as she leaned over the console and brushed her cheek by my erection.*

*“Shit,” I mumbled and brushed her hair back as she worked on my zipper.*

*“I want you.” She glanced up as if asking my permission.*

*“Have me.” I unbuckled my seatbelt and helped her work my jeans over my hips. My cock popped out of my briefs as she tugged them down, the bastard thick and happy to be free.*

*“So hot,” she murmured and ran her tongue up my length.*

*“Stop talking and see how much of it you can get inside of you.” I gripped her hair tightly and moved her over to take me in. The aggressive bastard inside of me woke up, and I lifted my hips as she moved her soft lips down my shaft.*

*Her groan caused my balls to tighten, and I pulled at her hair, forcing her back up before setting up a rhythm that would have me crying uncle sooner than I wanted to. She used her hands, her lips, and warm, wet tongue to bring me to the edge before moving back and pinching the tip of my dick.*

*“Not yet,” she barked at me and glanced up, giving me a warning look.*

*It would seem that I wasn’t the only one hiding a part of myself. I bit my lips and nodded as I tried to get my body to comply with her demands.*

*She moved back to hover over the top of me and let hell reign down on me as I groaned and thrust as hard as I could. She didn't seem to mind at all.*

*"Drink it, Erica," I groaned as I threw the car in park on the side of the road and glanced down to watch her finish the job.*

*The cry that left me filled up the car as I exploded. She didn't stop her assault until I pulled at her hair and let out a shaky sigh.*

*"Enough, baby. That's enough."*

*"More." She swatted my hands away and went back down on me.*

*I nodded and let my head drop back as every cell in my body illuminated with pleasure. My words were barely legible to my own ears as I whispered roughly.*

*"Whatever you want. Take it. Take it from me."*

A knock at the front door pulled me from the reverie. We'd fucked long and hard that night, our bodies melding into one. For the first time in a long time, I'd given myself over to someone.

And guilt had followed me into the morning.

I got up and walked to the door, thinking about how she forgave me for leaving without a word as if she were some whore in the night. She listened to my reasoning and helped me work through it.

Had I given her the same courtesy? Fuck no. I had slammed the door in her face.

My father stood on the other side of the door. Damon was on his left and Mitch was on his right. "Matt. We wanted to come over with Mitch. He has something to tell you."

I didn't hesitate, but reared back and punched the bastard in the face. He hit the ground, and I was on top of him, beating him senseless.

He didn't need to tell me a thing. Everything was falling into place.

I could hear Damon and my father yelling for me to calm down, but I simply kept swinging. If Mitch wanted to take my woman from me, he had one hell of a fight on his hands.

"Get him inside and ice his hands. Dammit." My father picked up Mitch, and half carried him back to the car.

Damon muscled me into the house and closed the door. "That was fucking awesome."

"I'm going to kill him." I growled in my brother's face. "He lied, didn't he?"

"Yeah. He did." Damon sat me down on the couch. "I talked to Erica last night. She's in Canada, and when I asked her if she loved you, she broke down. Something isn't right. I told you that. Mitch isn't saying what, but he did admit to dad that he pushed her into whatever the fuck they have going on."

I got up, ready to beat Mitch's ass into the ground. "Fuck this."

"No. Stop it." Damon grabbed me and put me on the ground, surprising the hell out of me. I smacked the back of my head on the ground hard. The pain brought me back down to reality.

"I need to find her." I rubbed my head and sat up slowly as Damon helped me.

"I know. I think Lanie is our best bet. You have her phone number?"

"Yeah. I might." I blinked a few times slowly as the room spun around me. I had to go after Erica and find out the truth. If she cared about Mitch and had slept with him, all bets were off. I wasn't the man for her. Trust mattered way too much to me. If not... maybe there was still hope. I'd have to live off that alone until I found her.

Damon handed me the phone. "Call Lanie."

"It's the middle of the day. She'll be in class."

He gave me a look. “Really, right now?”

“Right.” I took the phone and walked toward my back patio. After closing the door behind me, I dropped down into a lawn chair and dialed her number. My knuckles were red and swollen from beating the shit out of Mitch. Crazy enough, hurting him didn’t make me feel anything. There was only one thing that could heal my heart.

Getting Erica back.

“Matt?” Lanie’s voice was a soft whisper as if she were hiding somewhere.

“Hey. I know this is a bad time, but I need to find Erica.”

“She’s not here.” Her voice hardened a little. “And even if she were, she doesn’t want to see you. Asshole.”

“Me?” I stood up as anger raced through me. “She slept with some old bastard at the office and-”

“She didn’t sleep with anyone. If you would have let her explain, but no! You jumped to a bunch of stupid ass conclusion.”

“Jonathan-”

“I don’t care what Jonathan said!” She was *not* quiet at that point. I almost wished she’d go back to whispering. My head was splitting open thanks to Damon knocking me to the ground.

“Lanie. I need to find her, okay? I’m sorry. With all of my goddamn heart, I’m sorry. I saw what I saw and heard what I heard. My mother cheated on my father for years and ruined my childhood. Excuse me for overreacting.” I ground my teeth together. “I love this woman with every cell in my body. Tell me where she is, or I’m coming up to the school and causing a scene.”

“You’d do that for her?” Her voice softened a little again.

“I’d do anything for her, Lanie. She’s everything to me. Please tell me how to find her. I just want to hear her side of the story.”

“You’re not going up there to hurt her, right?”

“No. Never. Tell me where up there is. I’m begging you.” I ran my fingers through my hair and leaned against the railing of the balcony. “Please. This woman means the world to me. I’ve loved her for two years and suffered quietly about it because I knew the minute we gave into each other that our lives would forever change. And they have. Don’t deny me or her the chance to fix this. Help me.”

“Okay. Yeah. You’re right. She’s so happy because of you, but if you hurt her, Matthew Bryant, I swear to God I’ll come after you!”

I loved the little nerdy thing even more for loving Erica the way she did.

“Deal. Where is she?”

“Vancouver.”

“That’s a big area to search. You gotta do better than that.”

She sighed. “She didn’t tell me. She wanted to be left completely alone.”

“You don’t have ‘find my phone’ on her or anything?” My mind was racing through the possibilities.

“Oh yes! I do!” She sounded overjoyed. I knew the feeling.

“Good. I’m going to head up I-5. I have about two and a half hours until I hit Vancouver. Text me where she is around that time?”

“Okay.” Her voice broke. “Matt... please be good to her. Her family is so horrible, and all she has is me. Don’t hurt her any more than she’s already been hurt. Please?”

“I would never hurt her. No matter how many arrows she throws at me, Lanie. I swear it. I’ll just keep going if there is a chance at all that she’s the woman I believe her to be.”

“She is.”

We hung up, and I grabbed a bag and got in the car. Damon stood beside the window, his eyes filled with a pride



I'd seen all my life. "Hey man. I'm proud of you. Push through this shit and go get your girl."

I nodded. "Yeah. I plan to."

"Call if you need me." He tapped the window and moved back.

"Thank you for helping me."

"I'll always be here to help you. It's what brothers are for, Matt."

"I love you, man." I rolled up the window as he flipped me off and turned away from the car. He hated getting emotional in front of anyone, even me.

He didn't need to say a damn word. I already knew how much he loved me.

And he always had.

# CHAPTER 56



## ERICA

I felt a little more alive when I opened my eyes the next morning. The hangover was almost a welcomed pain seeing that it demanded my attention over the emotional bullshit I was still suffering from.

Kent and Karen's wedding had played in my mind's eye all night, the trip to Jamaica the first time I got to be part of a family. They'd pulled me in and put me to work. I was there to support them, but more than anything else, I wanted Matthew to see me. Really see me.

A smile lifted my lips as I rolled onto my side. He'd been a hot mess on that trip, and all the others after it. I intimidated him something horrible, but it was all part of the story, part of my charm.

"Not anymore." I closed my eyes and pulled the covers up around my throat. He wasn't intimidated by me now that I belonged to him, or used to. He saw me as a woman, as a partner, as someone he could protect and cherish.

I had to fight for us. I couldn't just let the shit lie where it was.

Rolling over, I reached for my phone as it rang. Lanie.

"Hey." I sat up in bed, a little unnerved by the timing of her call.

"Hey. You doing okay?" She sounded like she had just finished jogging a mile.

“I’m okay. You sound out of breath.” I chuckled. “Do I want to know?”

“Shit. I’ve been chasing one of the little boys in my class around the hallways. He’s having a meltdown, and I’m about the only one that he’ll let near him.”

“Oh. Did you get him?”

“Yeah. He’s fine. You sound good. At least, better.”

“I’m not sure that I’m either, but I’m ready to see Matt. I need to tell him what happened and force him to hear the truth at least.”

“I think that’s a great idea. He’s had some time to stew on everything too. Maybe he’s ready to talk.” She took a deep breath. “Where are you?”

“I’m in my hotel in Vancouver.”

“Are you going to check out the city at all?”

“Maybe tomorrow. I’m ready to start painting again. I got a canvas and some different paints earlier this week in hopes of helping the healing process start.”

“Oh, nice! I love the sound of that.”

“Yeah. I’m here though. I’m not sure when I’m coming home.” I got up and walked to the kitchen. “Maybe when my savings runs out?”

“Can I come up and visit soon, then? I’m missing my dinner and yoga partner. You’re all I’ve got.”

Guilt raced through me. She was right, and if I were being honest, she was all I had too. “Come up here this weekend.”

“No, but maybe next weekend?”

“I’d love that.”

“Please be safe, okay?” Lanie pleaded.

“I will. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

I dropped the call and unwrapped a miniature chocolate muffin as I started the coffee pot up. I'd figure out how and when to get to Matt, but it wasn't today. I needed today for me.

After fixing my coffee up like a dessert, I changed into some painting clothes and spent the day drawing and painting a part of a picture of me and Matt together. It was a simple picture and looked like the two of us only if you knew that's who you were looking at.

I moved back and wrapped my free arm around me as heavy emotions stung me. I missed him so damn much.

There was a half-bottle of red wine in the kitchen that seemed to be calling my name. I didn't want to turn to liquor to ease my pain, but it was a quick fix for the time being. I had to believe there was still hope for me and Matthew. Without it, I would quickly spiral into the darkness.

I opened the bottle and forced myself to get a glass. I needed to keep up with how many ounces I was drinking. Otherwise, I'd finish the whole damn thing without blinking an eye.

A knock at the door surprised me a little. I got up and realized that it was late in the afternoon, almost evening. Maybe the guys at the pub downstairs had sent someone to check on me?

I opened it to find Matt standing on the other side, red and yellow tulips in his hands. He had a pastry box in his other hand, and he was sheet-white.

"Erica," he whispered my name, and I almost lost my footing.

I reached out and grabbed him, pulling him to me and pressing my lips against his. We could fight or talk or whatever later. I just wanted to feel him against me for a minute.

The sound of the vase hitting the floor caused me to yelp. He'd dropped everything and had me in the air, his hand gripping my back and the other lost in my hair as he consumed my mouth.

Tears poured from my eyes as he pressed me against the wall and worshiped my lips and neck in deep kisses and long licks.

“I’m so sorry for the misunderstanding,” I whimpered as he rolled his hips, pressing his thick erection against me.

“I need to know what happened, baby. I think I got it wrong.” He tucked his face against the side of my throat, and I clung to him, my hands gripping his so tight I know it had to hurt him. “Everything seems so fucked up right now. Tell me that I was wrong, Erica.”

“You were wrong.” I moved back as best I could and cupped his face before leaning in to kiss him several times. “I didn’t sleep with Mitch, Matthew. I hated him.”

“What the fuck happened then?” He leaned in for another long kiss, stealing my breath. My body was on fire for him, and yet I knew we needed to talk and make sure we were okay before we made love.

I wouldn’t survive feeling him inside of me only to have him walk away afterward. It couldn’t happen like that. I wouldn’t allow it.

“Put me down. Please.” I ran my hands down the sides of his handsome face, knowing without a doubt that I wanted him to be the father of my children. “I’ll explain.”

He leaned in to kiss me again before brushing his nose against mine. The need in his eyes scorched me. “Before you say a word, know that I missed you so goddamn much. I love you with everything inside of me.”

“I feel the exact same way.” I slid down the front of his body and let out a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding as he moved back. “Mitch was bidding on that fucking painting of me the night of the art show. He wouldn’t back down, and I could see how upset you were getting. I freaked out.” I lifted my hands in the air. “I didn’t know what to do, but as hard as you’ve worked all your life to figure out who you were, I wasn’t going to let the bastard take the moment from you.”

“So you did what?” He put his hands on his hips and lifted his eyebrow. He had no clue how cute he was copping an attitude in the middle of my hotel room.

I was still trying to convince myself that he was actually standing there across from me. My mind wanted to make it a dream, to convince me that I wasn't worthy of a man like him coming after me. But I'd felt him against me. Flesh and blood.

“He was interested in me, and trying to pursue something with me, but I told him you and I were together and that I wasn't *at all* interested. I never led him on in anyway.”

“Keep going with the art event, Erica. What happened.”

I reached up and brushed my fingers against my lips as fear seized me. “I told him to stop bidding. I didn't want your night to be ruined. I told him to let the painting go. He was being a dick-”

“And what did he want in return for listening to you?” Matt's voice lowered. I'd never seen a side of him that frightened me, but something about the way he leaned toward me and narrowed his eyes, I could see him fucking someone up without worry.

“Me. He wanted me for dinner, dancing, and sex.” I dropped my hand from my face. “I thought if I just said yes that he would stop and I could find a way out of it.”

Matt's eyes widened and his complexion reddened. “You gave him the one thing that meant the most to me? You?” He was yelling at that point.

“No. I never gave myself over to him. I went to the art event and danced with him. He held my hand or gripped the back of my neck like he owned me, but he never once touched me inappropriately, kissed me, and we never slept together. I drugged him and made him think that I did.”

“You did all this crazy shit to make sure that I didn't blow a vein or ten million dollars at the art event?” He reached out and gripped my shoulders. “Why? That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard, baby. Why would you give him the thing that mattered most to me? I'd give up my talents, my money, my

house, my fucking everything just to have you. Do you not know how much you mean to me?"

"I'm sorry!" I screamed back at him. "I panicked. I wanted you to have your moment! I've never had mine, and I thought maybe if you had yours-"

He didn't let me finish the sentence before he crashed into me. His mouth covered mine as he ripped my clothes off of me. I tore at his too, helping him out of them as a frantic feeling grew between us. The room felt so small and hot, but I ignored it.

"You don't ever have to protect me, Erica." He toted me to the bed, both of us somehow down to our underwear.

"I'll always want to try. You're the only person in my life that I love besides Lanie." I pulled him down on top of me as he forced me back on the bed. "Please forgive me. I didn't do anything wrong. I never let Mitch touch me."

"You put yourself on the line for me." He closed his eyes and pressed his chin to his chest as he seemed to be trying to gain his composure. "You put yourself in danger for me." He glanced up, and I could see the depths of his love in his eyes. "You were willing to sell your body to save my pride? My moment of self-realization."

I nodded. "I'm sorry, but I would do it all over again. Even with all of this that happened."

"Because you love me." It wasn't a question, but I treated it like one.

"More than you can ever know, Matthew Bryant." I met him as he moved up to kiss me. He had my panties off and his boxers down his thighs by the time I cried out his name.

He pressed deep into me and lifted up on his arms, his massive body so beautiful and strong. "Hold on and tell me if I hurt you. I've been thinking about punishing this tight little pussy since you fucked things up between us."

I reached up and popped him in the chest. "You're corrupt."



“Only for you, woman.” He moved up, forcing my legs open wider as he drove into me.

We locked gazes, and he worked me slow and deep as we moaned together. There were no words that needed to be spoken. He knew what had happened and he forgave me. I only meant to do right by him, but people fuck up all the time. He was right.

If I had just been truthful about it, the misunderstanding would have gone away.

“Come for me,” he mumbled and lifted up farther, reaching for the headboard with one hand. He cupped my breast with the other and rocked against me, slapping the thick head of his cock against my g-spot.

I twitched and whined, holding onto his side as the delicious pressure of an orgasm built up in my stomach. “I’m so close.”

“Let it go. You belong to me, Miss Hall. Come.”

A scream tore through me as his words bore deep inside of me. I did belong to him. Body, soul, and spirit. My orgasm beat against my insides, lighting up every pressure point that I had. All I could do was hold onto him as he pumped himself into me in a fast, hard rhythm.

“Your turn.” I wrapped my legs tighter against him and lifted up, meeting him stroke for stroke. He was beyond gorgeous as he growled and thrust above me. Every inch of his perfect masculinity.

“I don’t have a condom,” he grumbled between thrusts.

“I don’t care. I want to feel you inside of me.”

“You ready for babies already?” He flattened himself on top of me and reached down to cup my ass with his strong hands. He kissed me deeply as I mumbled my yes. I wanted anything he was willing to give me, little Matt’s included.

I had him back in my arms again. The world was right, and my future was visible once again. Me. Him. Three little guys. A couple of dogs, and an art studio for both of us.

“Hold me tight, Erica.”

“I’ll never let go.” I wrapped him in a hug and pressed my lips against his thick neck as he worked himself over the edge, filling me with his warmth.

“I love you, baby.” He moved up to kiss me a few times as we stared at each other.

“I love you too, and I have, for a long time.”

“Same here.” He rolled us over. “Now... it’s time for make-up sex. Fuck me like you mean it.” He reached up and palmed my breasts. The sexy smile on his face told me he was going to milk this shit for all it was worth.

I was fine with that.

I’d just milk him in return.

# CHAPTER 57



## MATT

I made love to my girl all night long, reveling in the feeling of her skin pressed against mine. I'd have sold my soul to hear her cry out in pleasure again, but around five that morning, I finally curled up behind her and let her rest.

There was no way in hell I was sleeping and missing a minute of our reunion. It had only been a week since we'd left each other with no hope, but it felt like a fucking year.

And all over her trying to protect my pride. My heart burned in my chest as I ran my fingers down her side and nestled the back of her neck.

"I love you beyond words, Erica Hall," I whispered against her skin. She moaned and rolled her hips, waking up the monster between her thighs.

I had to two options. Give her what I wanted to give her, or let her rest up. I'd be taking her home later that day. It was time to start our life together, the way we should have before all the shit with Mitch went down.

Open. Honest. Communicating all the damn time.

I kissed her again before getting out of the bed. There would be plenty of time to take advantage of her soft skin and tight body. I pulled a pair of shorts out of my bag and put them on as I watched her. I could paint a million portraits of her and I'd never be able to truly capture just how beautiful she was.

After standing there like a stalker for a little while longer, I pulled myself away from the bedroom and walked into the

little make-shift living room they had. A painting stood in the corner of the room, the beauty of it almost stopping my heart.

I walked over and picked up the picture of the two of us that lay on the table beside it. Her painting rag was covered in various colors and crumpled up on the floor. She must have been working on it all week.

“Magnificent,” I whispered reverently.

I pulled out my phone and took a few pictures of it. Jonathan would love it. I texted him that he was wrong about her. He texted back pretty quickly that he was relieved to know that and beyond sorry.

He was a good man, and would always seek to protect his friends. I was grateful to be one of the lucky few. He loved the painting and wanted to see it in person when everything settled down between all of us.

I answered Damon and Lanie’s texts too, letting them know that Erica was good, and we were on the mend. Their responses back almost felt like a collective sign was happening around the world for us. It was a damn good reminder that we had a lot of people rooting for us.

More than we thought.

After cleaning up everything, I packed up mine and Erica’s stuff and put it by the door. It was mid-day before I crept back in the room and snuggled up beside her.

“Morning, baby.” I reached around and cupped her tit as I ran my nose up the back of her neck.

She whimpered and juttled her ass out, rubbing her soft curves over me. “What time is it?”

“Time to get up and get moving. I want to take you home tonight. Zek misses you a lot. Is that okay?” I played with her nipple, loving the way it hardened under my touch. I would spend the evening worshiping both of her pretty pink buds if she let me.

“Yeah. I’d like that.” She turned over to face me and pulled me in close. “Don’t ever leave me again, okay?”

“I won’t, Erica, but be open with me. I had no clue what happened.” I pulled her in for a long kiss. “Let’s just start over, alright?”

“I’d like that.” She kissed me again. “Alright. Let’s grab a burger to go from the pub downstairs before we go. I want to say goodbye to Sid and Jander.”

I snorted and chuckled. “Who?”

“The guys downstairs. One owns the bar, and the other is a local artist. They have been really great to me.” She kissed the tip of my nose and rolled out of bed the other way.

I jerked up to a sitting position so I could watch her naked ass as she walked across the room. I whistled loudly.

She glanced over her shoulder, a sexy smile on her lips. “Like what you see, Mr. Bryant.”

“I love it. Keep up that sassy attitude, and I’m going to spank you.”

She bent her knees and shook her ass, her voice sultry. “Like this?”

“Yeah.” I bounded off the bed.

She screamed and ran into the living room. I caught up pretty easily and turned her to face me before picking her up and kissing her senseless. “Get dressed, or we are *never* going to get out of here.”

“There’s a bed. Food. Painting stuff, and you.” She shrugged as I let her down. “I’m good staying here forever.”

“What about Zek?” I gave her a look.

“Right! Let’s bust out of this joint.”



“You really like the painting I did?” She sat beside me in the car, a smile on her beautiful face. She had no makeup on, and her hair was wild as shit, which was just the way I liked her best.

The windows were down in the car, and I could barely hear her, but the feeling of the wind against our skin was needed. Freedom was ours when we were together. It was a great reminder.

“I love it, baby.”

“My dad used to love looking at my art, but I usually had to hide it under my bed.” She glanced toward her open window. “My mom hated it. Called it a complete waste of time.”

“She’s a cold-hearted bitch, Erica.”

“No. She’s just mean. She thinks that things should be the way she wants them, and if they’re not, she shuns them. She just doesn’t get it.”

“How is she? Have you seen her lately?”

“Yeah. This last week. The day you broke things off with me.” She glanced over at me. “Sunday?”

“Fuck. Seriously?” I shook my head. “That had to be the-”

“Worst day of my life.” She finished my sentence for me. “I’m not going back to the retirement home. I can’t.”

“I don’t blame you a bit, and you should probably delete Daniel’s number from your phone. He’s a horrible person, Erica.”

“I agree.” She leaned back and closed her eyes. “Anything else on the contract job that you were looking at doing?”

“You know, I don’t know. I was supposed to get a file from Jonathan with the people and places that the client wanted to be photographed as part of the portfolio, but I haven’t checked my e-mail because of all this stuff with you. Grab my laptop out of my bag and check it.”

She leaned around the seat to the back to grab the computer, putting her perfect ass in the air. I couldn’t resist.

I reached over and fondled her, running my fingers over the edge of her short shorts until I reached her soft center. I

slipped my fingers under her shorts and panties and dipped my fingers into her soft heat.

“Matthew!” She moved back in her seat, her face flustered.

“What?” I licked at my fingers. “I’m a gentleman until you belong to me. Good luck to you now.” I winked as she swatted at me. I laughed. “Fuck, I love you.”

“You’re so naughty.” She turned on my computer. “I love it.”

“Good. I’m not going anywhere. Neither is my naughtiness.” I turned and focused on the road. As much as I tried *not* to think about Mitch and all the shit that happened to us, I couldn’t help it. Worry filled my stomach, and I glanced over at her. “Did you ever find out anything about whether or not Mitch was involved in your mugging and hit and run?”

“No, but I can’t imagine that he was. I’m letting it go. He’s not a thug. Just a lonely billionaire with too much money and time on his hands.”

“He did act a lot like my brother would have before Bethany. Bastards.”

“You’re a billionaire too, silly.” She pulled up the file and tilted her head to the side. “Matt... who’s the client for this job?”

“No clue. Why?”

She turned the computer toward me. It took me a minute to realize what I was looking at. Various members of my family popped up on the screen, then the office down in Seattle and a few other iconic locations.

“What the hell?” I pulled off the road into a gas station. “Why would someone want pictures of the places and people I love?”

“Do you think Damon is the client?” She reached over and snatched the computer back.

“Maybe so. My father doesn’t really *do* art, even though he supports me in doing mine.” I shook my head and reached for the phone.



Jonathan answered on the first ring. “Matthew. What’s up?”

“Hey.” I glanced over at Erica as a smile lifted my lips. “Who’s the client on the project you just sent over?”

“Why, your father.” There was a deep chuckle, and I couldn’t help but laugh too.

My dad did believe in my art, but he still lacked faith in the fact that I could make a living out of it. He had me at M&B so I could be me and he could pay me.

Now he was paying me to paint pictures that he would probably never put up. It was almost bittersweet.

“Thanks, man. I’ll get on it next week.”

“Excellent.”

We hung up, and I reached for Erica’s hand. “I got you something, or I started to. It will be ready in a few weeks. You need to pack up your place. I’m not living alone without you anymore.”

She nodded. “Let’s pack up the whole damn place tomorrow. I don’t want to waste another minute without you.”

“Good answer.” I brought her hand up to my lips and kissed her, breathing her in and falling in love all over again.

She was mine, and that’s all that mattered.

# CHAPTER 58



## ERICA

“Why don’t you just tell me where we’re going?” I glanced over at Matt as we rode toward the mountains. The last two weeks had been fast and furious. I had moved into his place, both me and Zek. It was bliss, and the time we had together just strengthened the truth that we belonged together.

I had started to paint again, mainly just to shut Matt up. He was after me to find myself, to explore my soul and learn who I wanted to be. He was happy to fund my *me* time for as long as it lasted.

The only thing he complained about most days was how fast I painted compared to him. He was embarrassed by it, which left me wanting to go even faster. Silly man. I wasn’t rushing. It was my natural pace to move with efficiency. There were too many pictures to paint and not nearly enough time in the day.

“Be patient, beautiful.” He took my hand and laid it on his leg before dragging it up to the thick bulge between his legs. “You’re turning me on.”

I snorted. “What? I’m not even doing anything.”

“You don’t have to.” He pulled up to a huge house mostly made of glass. My heart almost stopped in my chest.

I yanked my hand from him and moved up in my seat, letting my eyes take in the splendor. Red and yellow flowers were all over the property, and the lush forest behind it was deep green.

“What is this?” I whispered and reached for my door. I wanted to go closer, to experience whatever it was that he was showing me. Maybe a new house that Jonathan bought for his wife? Maybe just a place Matt rented out for dinner?

I walked up the white stone path as my breath caught in my throat. He wrapped his arm around me from behind and kissed the side of my neck.

“Come on. I brought you out here for dinner tonight.”

“I love it.” I turned and smiled up at him. “You’re being romantic. What do you want?”

“You. Naked and sweaty.”

“You could have had all of that without this.” I kissed him before turning in his arms and leaning against him. He had quickly become an obsession to me. The need to feel his arms around me, his body against mine, his loving words spoken aloud all around me. It scared the hell out of me to rely so much on one person for my joy, but I couldn’t help myself. I’d been looking for peace and contentment my whole life, and I found it with him. I’d cling to it as long as I was able to.

“Well, then this is just an added bonus. Come on. Let’s go check out the place.” He took my hand as we walked up to the front door. The glass was etched with different carvings. I stopped and reached up to trace one of them.

“Wow. How incredible is this?” I glanced over at him.

“You like it?”

“Yes. It’s so detailed.”

“It took hours.” He walked into the house, leaving me to wonder how the hell he knew how long it took.

“Matt. Did you do that?” I moved closer to him as the smell of salt water and the ocean filled my senses. I paused and breathed in deeply. “What is that?”

“Dinner. No more questions.” He pulled me flush against him. “Just enjoy the night. I’ll answer your questions later.”

“So mysterious.” I lifted to my toes and wrapped my arms around his neck. “Are we alone for dinner.”

He lifted his eyebrow. “Yes. Stop anticipating and come on. Let’s have dinner and spend some time together.”

“I like the sound of that.” I walked into a large dining room, the table in the middle over the top elegant. The dark cherry wood was an odd shape as if there had never been a table like it before and never would be again. “Wow. I love this.” I ran my fingers over the top of it.

“Good. Come sit down here with me.” He took me to the end of the table and pulled out my chair. “We’ll get a full tour of the house here in a little bit.”

Several people walked out of a door at the end of the dining room, each carrying a tray of something. They laid them out in front of us and pulled off the tops to reveal several different seafood dishes. My stomach growled loudly. Matt and I shared a short chuckle over it.

“I have tons of money.” He reached out and took two plates, putting one in front of me. “I thought to myself, why the hell am I not spending it on the woman that makes my world go round?”

“I don’t need you to spend-”

He lifted his finger and pressed it to my lips before leaning in and kissing me with more passion than I could remember feeling. I was glad to be sitting down as my legs would have grown weak.

“Hush. I want to spend every fucking penny I make on you. Money means nothing to me, but watching you get excited about this place, the food, the art... that’s all worth it.”

“I love it, but I’d be fine in a cardboard box for dinner if you were there.” I picked up my fork. “This looks incredible.”

“Good. I hope you enjoy it. I tried all of these last week.” He picked up his fork and dug into his food.

“Wait. You’ve been here before?”

“Yeah. I had to work on the glass out front.”

“Work on the glass?” I lifted my eyebrows and set my fork down. My hunger dissipated in the face of our conversation. “You’re saying you did all of those etchings?”

“Yes. For you.” He reached out and touched the side of my face.

“For dinner tonight?” I leaned back as shock swam through me. “Why?”

“Not just for dinner.” He laughed. “You’re not going to enjoy the food until I explain are you?”

“Probably not.” I reached for my wine glass, finding it full of white wine. I downed it. “What’s going on?”

“Come on. I’ll show you.” He stood and put the tops back on the food, but grabbed a handful of rolls. He handed me two. “Snack on these.”

“What are we doing?” I almost swallowed one whole. Why hadn’t I just shut up? I was starving to death and thanks to my questions, it looked like I was getting my official tour of the place.

“I want to show you around.” He took my hand in his and smiled down at me. “I love that dress on you. The blue brings out the color of your eyes.”

“You always worry me when you get too sweet.”

“What? I’m a total sugar bear. You know this.”

“It’s a ploy. I know it is.” I snuggled up beside him. The house was incredible, like nothing I’d ever seen. It was almost as if every artist in Seattle had taken a room and made it beyond brilliant. The colors, designs, and decorations echoed the desires of my soul.

I stood at the entrance to the last room, the bedroom already having taken my breath away completely. I envied whoever lived there. They must have been friends of Kent’s. There was no way Matt knew someone with that kind of money and I hadn’t met them yet. No way.

“Matt. What is this?” I walked in to find two separate painting areas. Large canvases set on the stands, but all along

the walls were small paintings and drawing, each of them framed.

“Is that...” I walked up to the wall closest to me and covered my mouth as a soft yelp left me. It was the red painting I’d done as a teenager. “This is mine.”

I glanced over my shoulder to find him watching me. He nodded. “Yeah. It is.”

“Why is my painting in here?” I turned and put a hand on my hip. “Why are all of our paintings in here?”

He turned and walked around the corner, leaving me standing there in shock. “Come here, baby.”

“What the hell is going on?” I walked around the corner and stopped short. The large painting of me nude hung from the ceiling, taking up the entire wall from floor to ceiling. The beauty of it stole my voice. Tears filled my eyes, and I turned slowly to look at the room again.

“Matt. Is this place for us?” I turned back to find him standing directly in front of me.

“Yeah. I had it designed based on everything I knew about you, everything you loved.” He reached out and touched the side of my face. “It’s for you. A gift from me.”

“It’s too much.” I pressed my hands to his chest and molded myself against him. “I don’t need all of this.”

“This isn’t about need, Erica. All I *need* is you, but this space is what *we* want. Hush and enjoy it. It’s yours, baby. It’s ours.” He leaned down and kissed me until I clung to him.

Never in my life had I felt so adored, so loved, so noticed.

It was a moment that would stay with me forever.

# CHAPTER 59





## MATT

### *Two Months Later*

“Please tell me again why the hell you two made me come to this.” I glanced over at Erica and back at Bethany. It was mid-January in Dallas, which beat Seattle for sure, but being out and shopping for wedding dresses with two very girlie girls had me wanting to fake diarrhea.

“Because we *need* a male perspective. Come on. It’s going to be fun, and you’re my only sibling. Jeez.” Bethany slipped her arm into mine. “And Erica is here because the two of you are inseparable.”

“And because you need someone with an eye for the arts.” Erica wagged her eyebrows and slipped her arm into my other one. She glanced up at me, stealing my heart for the millionth time. “Are we inseparable?”

“Yeah. Especially when we do it like dogs. You know, they say that-”

“Matt!” They yelled together and let me go.

“Gross. Good grief.” Bethany slipped her arm into Erica’s as they walked to the dress shop, leaving me standing on the sidewalk by myself.

I pulled out my phone and texted my brother that he owed me big time. Him, Karen and my dad. What the fuck? Like I was cannon fodder for the wedding.

“Matt. Come on, baby.” Erica held the door open and moved back. “Let’s go. Bethany wants you to tell her what Damon might like or not like about these dresses.”

“This is creepy.” I walked toward her, grateful that Bethany was already inside. “She’s my step-sister. I don’t want to check her out to see what looks right and what doesn’t. And where the hell is Karen.”

“Right here.” My step-mother walked up from behind us. “I’m sorry I’m late.”

I felt like shit. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that to sound like it did.”

She smiled. “Sure. Get in here. You deserve this torture.”

“Where are the other males in our family?” I walked in and dropped down on a rather comfy couch. I bounced a little until Erica gave me a look that warned me to chill my nuts, less she takes them from me.

“They’re golfing.” Karen cringed. “Sorry. I knew you’d be upset. They asked that I didn’t tell you, but you know that I’m an open book.”

“Unbelievable.” I leaned back and let out a long sigh, pissy as hell that I was there with the girls. “Are you all trying on dresses?”

“Yeah. Here hold our purses, baby.” Erica handed off all three purses and disappeared into a dressing room with Bethany and Karen.

I let my head drop back and closed my eyes. They’d wake me up when they came back out.

“You poor thing.” A soft voice caught my attention.

I jerked up to find a petite blond with pretty eyes staring down at me. “Are you the purse holder for the day?”

I glanced around and laughed. “It would seem so. You guys don’t have free beers for the purse holder like the bar has free soda for the designated driver, right?”

She laughed. “No, but I wish we did. We would be a lot more popular.” She glanced behind her and back at me. “You here with your girlfriend?”

I realized where she was going with it. “Yeah. Her, my mom and my sister.”

“Lucky woman.” She smiled and walked off.

“I’m the lucky one.” I leaned back, slightly uncomfortable at being hit on. Erica was the only woman I saw when I looked around, but that didn’t mean she would appreciate some wedding store chick hitting on me. A smile lifted my lips.

*You still got it, old boy.*

“What are you smiling about?” Erica stood beside me.

I jerked up again. “Oh shit. You scared me.”

“Did you fall asleep?” She moved back, and I realized she had on a pretty bridesmaid’s dress. Her curves were accentuated, but only if you really stared her down. My mouth started to water as I took her in.

“No. Some chick hit on me, but I told her to scoot on out of here. My woman is the finest thing in the world.” I stood and reached for her, wanting to touch her everywhere.

She stepped back. Apparently telling Erica that the cute blond across the room hit on me was *not* a way to win points with anyone, least of all - her.

“Where is she?” She turned around, and I took the opportunity to encircle her waist.

“Stop it. You know I only have eyes for you.” I kissed the side of her neck. “Get a dressing room to yourself, and I can help get you out of that thing?”

“This thing?” She moved out of my arms and spun around. “I love it.”

“I do too.” I licked at the side of my mouth. “What color are your panties?”

“I’m not wearing any.” She gave me a ‘gotcha’ smirk and walked off.

“Not fair,” I called after her and dropped down on the couch again. A few minutes later, Bethany walked out, looking like a princess.

“Wow.” I stood back up. Obviously, it was going to be a long ass day for my thighs. “You look amazing. Beautiful.”

“Really?” Her sweet smile captivated my heart. How did a sweet girl like her end up with a cock like my brother? Either way, I was grateful for her being in his life. She turned around slowly. “I don’t look puffy or overdone or any of that, right?”

I didn’t understand a word she said. “No. You look beautiful. Radiant.”

“Thanks, Matt.” She smiled and moved closer to me, pressing her hand against my chest. “Do you remember when we first met? Damon had upset me, and you took me out for Mexican food?”

I laughed loudly as the memory swept through my mind. “We were at mom and dad’s house. You were in the bed, acting like a fucking diva.”

“I was not. Damon had hurt me.”

“And I saved you.” I reached out and pinched her chin softly. “I’ll always save you, Sis.”

“I love you.” She hugged me tightly before walking back to the dressing room. I dropped back down and let the memory play in my head. It warmed me and reminded me that family was by far the most important thing in my life. My own voice rose up in my ears as a smile spread across my face.

*“Oh hell no,” I grumbled loudly. Bethany moved the pillow from her head and looked up, her tears having soaked the sheet beneath her.*

*“Go away. I’m not in the mood to be friendly.”*

*I pounced on the bed, my hand pressing against the upper part of her back again and again. She bounced with my efforts, growing angry and swatting at me after a few seconds.*

*Having a sister was going to be so much fun.*

*“No need to be friendly. We’re family. Get your ass up. I’m taking you out.”*

*“No. I’m not interested in seeing people. I hate everyone.”*

*“Liar. Get up. I’m going to inhale everything in the fridge. When I come back, you better be in the shower and getting ready. Jeans and a t-shirt. Get up, get dressed and let’s go have fun together.”*

*“No,” she grumbled and sat up as I walked toward the door. She was upset, and I wasn’t letting her stay there. She was soon to be family, and I’d wanted a sister my whole life. Bethany was going to be a great joy to me. I had no doubt. “Get up, or I’ll drag your ass out of there.” My voice lost volume as I walked out.*

*I gave her a few minutes before walking back in and banging on the bathroom door. “Hurry up. I want chips and queso. Nothing else will do!” Now I sounded like an agitated child. That was about right.*

*“I’m hurrying. Excuse the fact that I have to stop for a fucking meltdown every few minutes.”*

*“It can’t be that bad. Come on. We’ll work through it together.” I ran my fingers through my hair and pressed my forehead against the door.*

*“You don’t want to know this Matt.”*

But I did want to know, and I wanted to help. Damon’s happiness meant more than mine to me. Seeing him and Bethany reconciled was a huge weight off all of our shoulders. He never thought he would find a moment of peace or joy after what mom did, but he found all of that in Bethany, just like I did in Erica.

“You reminiscing out here?” She walked out in her sundress and smiled. “You look like your lost deep in thought.”

I reached for her and pulled her down into my lap. “Just reliving a few memories.”

“Happy ones?” She curled up in my lap like we were sitting on the couch in our Seattle home.

“Yeah. Really happy ones.” I leaned down and kissed her. “Get ready to come back here again soon. Bethany and Karen are going to want to come in when it’s your turn.”

Her eyes widened. “Is it going to be my turn soon?”

“When you least expect it.” I gripped the back of her neck and kissed her until someone cleared their throat near us.

The cute blond. Bad timing on her part.

“Yes?” Erica gave her a nasty look and turned, pulling me into another hot kiss.

I’d take them however they came, and for whatever reason, they showed up.

# CHAPTER 60



## ERICA

“So much has changed, has it not?” Erica stood encircled by my arms as we watched Damon and Bethany leave their wedding reception.

“It has, but it’s been amazing.” I moved back as she turned in my arms and glanced up at me. “Is everything ready for Kendal?”

“Yeah.” He smiled and glanced around, his expression that of a little boy at Christmas. Kendal Tarrington was like a part of the family to Damon and Matt. His life had been such shit lately, but he’d finally found his way out of the dark hole he’d fallen in. He was going to propose to his girlfriend Dana, and we were all in on it.

I was happy as hell for them, but I couldn’t help but feel a little jealous too. I wanted my ring and my date. Matt and I had been together for almost eight months but had been in love for years.

“Let’s get where we can see.” I forced my wayward thoughts away and reached for Matt’s hand, pulling him toward the dance floor. “So sweet!”

“Yeah. It’s so good to see Kendal happy.” Matt moved up beside me, and the rest of the family and our friends crowded around to watch Kendal and Dana dance slowly together. It was almost comical when Dana realized we were all watching her.

“What’s going on?” Dana turned and let out a soft yelp as Kendal moved to his knee.



“I’m done waiting,” he spoke with reverence in his voice.

I wrapped my arms tightly around Matt as tears filled my eyes. For someone who didn’t believe in true love, I was quickly learning my lesson. Damon belonged with Bethany, Kendal belonged with Dana, and Matt belonged with me.

“You okay?” Matt leaned down and kissed the tip of my nose as a tear ran down my cheek.

“Yeah. Just overwhelmed.” I turned back to watch Dana’s eyes widen.

“Done waiting on what?” she asked.

“On the right to call you my bride.” He pulled out a small box and lifted it toward her. “I love you with the depths of my heart, baby. I’ll spend forever proving how much you mean to me if you’ll just give me the chance to. There’s no mountain I won’t climb, no obstacle I won’t beat, no rule I won’t break to have you beside me as my wife. Tell me you’ll say yes and be my girl forever.”

She let out a soft sound of joy and dropped to her knees, wrapping her arms around him and knocking him to the floor. “Yes!”

Matt and I laughed, as did everyone around us.

“I love you, Dana,” Kendal held her tightly, stealing all of our hearts.

“I love you more.” She leaned in and kissed him the way I kissed Matt, with fierce passion.

“Come on. I have something for you.” Matt moved out of my arms and reached for my hands.

“A ring?” I gave him a cocky grin. “I am up next, by the way. I caught the flowers at your mom and dad’s wedding.”

He laughed. “Someone is impatient.”

“I should be! We’ve been together forever.” I moved up to let him wrap one of his arms around me.

“And we’re going to be together for the rest of time. I’m not pulling out a ring here with everyone watching. I have it

all planned out. Don't you worry about a thing, baby." He kissed the side of my head, and I let my angst go. It was silly.

It already felt like we were married. We lived together, worked together and went *everywhere* together. I loved my life.

"Where are we going?" I followed him through the hotel where the reception was to the elevator.

"Upstairs. My dad said him and some of Damon's buddies would wrap everything up."

"You got us a room here?" I pressed myself against him as the elevator closed.

"Yeah. I'm not waiting another minute to strip you out of that dress and lavish your sexy body with my tongue and hands."

"And your cock?" I licked his lips.

He growled low in his chest. "You drive me crazy."

"In a good way." I moved back and turned as the door opened. I shook my ass a little more than necessary, but there was something so deliciously powerful about turning Matthew on. He was laid back and docile most of the time, but once I got him in the bedroom, he turned into a beast. I loved every part of him, but his alpha nature in the sheets took the cake for me.

"You smell so fucking good." He pressed himself against my back after barking out the room number and handing me the key.

I fumbled with trying to get the damn thing in the keyhole as he ran his hand all over me. "I can't get it open."

"Keep trying, baby." He cupped my breast and pushed my hair to the side before sinking his teeth into the back of my neck.

My body tightened with need, my nipples budding, my sex growing wet. "Fuck. Stop, Matt. Give me a second."

“I’m gonna fuck you out here in this hallway if you don’t open the goddamn door, Erica.”

I moaned loudly and bumped him with my butt, gaining myself a few seconds to get the card key in the hole. I walked into the room and turned as he barged in after me, his eyes hooded, cock thick and pressing against his slacks.

“Don’t rip the dress.” I held out my hand, but he slapped it away and grabbed my wrists, pulling me close.

“Turn around and let me unzip it.” He ran his nose by mine, and the scent of his cologne and arousal filled my nose.

I moaned and turned around, dropping my head so he could get to the zipper without effort. He had it down and off of me seconds later.

“Where do you-” I stumbled toward the wall in front of me as he barked his commands.

“Put your hands on the wall. Now.”

I walked to the wall and pressed my hands against it. “I love it when you act like this.”

“What? I act like this every night.” He undid my bra and slipped it forward to massage my breasts. “I want to be buried deep inside your body.”

“Good. Then take what’s yours.” He slid his hand up to my neck and cupped it tightly, forcing me to look back as he leaned down and consumed me with a wicked hot kiss. He ran his hand down my stomach and into my panties, parting me and wasting no time in sliding his middle finger deep into my pussy.

I moaned against his lips and rolled my hips, massaging his erection as he worked me hard and fast.

The sound of him enjoying himself combined with his strong dominance over me had me limp in his arms and screaming my release.

“So beautiful, Erica.” He kissed me again and released me, moving back a little. I started to turn, but he grabbed my arms

and pressed my hand to the wall again, sliding them upward just a little bit. “Stay here.”

“Anything,” I whimpered as he moved down to his knees and pulled my panties from me. “Matt. What are you doing?”

“What I’ve wanted to do all night.” He turned and sat down, pressing his back against the wall. “Come here.”

I took a step forward and moaned in ecstasy as he parted my folds open and leaned in to lick my slit. He wasn’t careful or concerned with how he looked. He was starving for me, and he was more than happy to let me know.

“Fuck,” I moaned above him and reached down to slide my hand into his hair. I pulled it sharply, and he groaned and sucked more of me into his mouth. He had me shaking like a leaf within a few minutes. I released his hair and lifted my head toward the ceiling, bending my back a little as my second orgasm tore through me.

Pleasure, like I couldn’t remember feeling, slammed against me in thick waves, over and over again.

He lapped at me until I stepped back, panting loudly and feeling dizzy. “Damn. I feel like I’m going to pass out. The room is spinning.”

“Lie down baby.” He moved off the floor and helped me to the bed. “I’ll just hold you.”

“No.” I curled up on my side as everything calmed down a little. “Make love to me, but do it from here.”

He spooned me, sliding his thick cock into my wet body in one tortuously slow thrust. We groaned together as pleasure coursed through me.

“Tell me if I hurt you, or you need me to stop.” He gripped my hip and pressed his chest against my back as we took our time making love. Every stroke felt better than the last, and before I realized what was happening, he slipped his hand between my thighs and brought me over the edge, following soon after that.

“You okay, angel?” He kissed the top of my back and wrapped his arms around me tightly.

“So good.” I closed my eyes and let out a long sigh. I didn’t need a ring yet and knowing Matt, it would be a while before I got one. He was a showman, a perfectionist, and artist.

He never followed the rules, and he sure as hell wasn’t the kind of guy to steal Kendal or Damon’s moment.

He was creative. He was handsome. Wealthy as a man could be.

But most of all, he was mine.

# CHAPTER 61



## MATT

### *Two Months Later*

“Come on, baby. We’re going to be late.” Matt stood at the bedroom door and gave me a look. “You don’t look so good.”

“What?” I turned around in the mirror, the black dress I’d bought fitting me great. “I love this thing. You don’t?”

“I love everything you wear, Erica.” He walked into the bathroom and picked up the little blue stick I’d peed on minutes before. “I meant that you look pale. When the fuck is this thing going to show us what’s up? We’re going to be late.”

“We’ll look at it when we get home.” She moved out of the bathroom, leaving me standing there, staring at a pee-stick.

“What? We’re supposed to go all night and not know if you’re pregnant?” I put it down, cursed the universe and walked out.

“Yes. I’m not pregnant. I keep telling you that.”

“Damon said you probably are.” I grabbed her purse. “Your tits are sore, you’re barfing all the time, and you’ve not let me make love to you in three days!”

“Three days.” She put her hand on her hip and gave me a look. “You’re being melodramatic.”

“It has been three days.” I followed her out, trying hard to hide the smile lifting the side of my mouth. I secretly wanted

her to be pregnant. Nothing turned me on more than knowing she might be carrying our baby.

It horrified her because we weren't married, but I was going to remedy that shit soon. I was waiting for the perfect time, and finally... it was here.

"I forgot my lipstick. Get in the car, and I'll be right there."

"Want me to grab it," I asked.

"No. Go get the car started." She turned and walked back to the house. I couldn't help but watch her go, loving the way she looked from any angle. I got into the car and buckled up, starting it and waiting on her.

She got in and turned to me, the expression on her pretty face a serious one. "Alright, so Jonathan got all of the pieces set up where we wanted them, right?"

"Yeah. I went by there yesterday to make sure everything was perfect. You're going to love it. He put my work on one side of the studio, yours on the other and our combo pieces down the middle."

She let out a little squeal of joy and reached for my hand. "I'm so excited. Can you believe this, Matt? You and me, showing our art together?"

"It's a dream come true, baby." I kissed her hand before pulling out of the driveway and heading down to De Luge. Our family had flown out for the showing, and all of our friends would be there. I was beyond excited, more for Erica than me. It was her first showing and my fifth. I wanted her to shine bright and would have done just about anything to make sure that happened.

We drove toward the city and realization hit me. I would have done anything to let her feel the spotlight that night, to help her step into the fact that *this* was who she was born to be. An artist. A beloved painter that opened hearts and healed wounds.

She'd done the same for me back in October at my first showing. She'd offered up her body to Mitch in order to spare me that one moment in time.



“Hey. You okay?” She reached over and gripped my hand as I pulled up to the gallery a few minutes later.

“Yeah. I just love you so much.” I leaned over and kissed her long and hard, trying to push into the kiss everything she meant to me.

“Wow. Have that thought again. I like those kisses.” She smiled up at me as I cupped her face and let my eyes move around her beautiful face.

“You can have those kisses and anything else you want from me. I’m all yours.” I kissed her again and got out to find Damon and Jonathan waiting at the front of the gallery for us.

“You got the centerpiece together, right?” She glanced over at me. “Your new painting of the city?”

“Yep. All done. Now, go let Jonathan show you around. Check everything twice. I’m going to have a beer with Damon.” I smiled at her as she gave me a look, but moved over to Jonathan, talking his ear off.

“Hey, brother.” Damon reached out and gave me a quick hug. “Beth’s inside. So are mom and dad.”

“Good. Kendal and Dana?” I glanced around my brother and took a quick breath.

“Yeah. You nervous?”

“Hell yes. I want this to go right.”

“It will, Matt.” He patted my chest. “You’re so fucking cool for waiting. I know Erica has been on you to give her a ring, but *this* right here is the perfect time to do it.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” I ran my hand down my chest and let out a shaky sigh. “Alright. Let’s do this.”

We walked in, and I took a few minutes to greet family and friends. There was almost an electricity in the air.

“It’s time.” Jonathan moved up in front of me and reached out to fix my tie. “You’re going to be great. I’ll introduce you, and then we’ll have Erica turn to look at the piece. You have the ring.”

“Check.” I nodded, feeling like a scared ten-year-old boy. “Don’t let me fuck this up.”

“Never. We all have your back, Matt. She’s going to love this so much.”

“Good. Let’s do it.” I moved over to find her. “Erica, come over here, baby. Jonathan is about to open up the event and introduce the centerpiece for the evening.”

“Oh, my God. I’m so nervous.” She moved up beside me and slid her arm around the back of my waist. “I hope everyone loves it.”

I chuckled. “If not, we have a new piece for the living room. It’s all good.”

Jonathan clapped his hands. “Good Evening, Ladies and Gentleman. We have quite a treat for you tonight. Matthew Bryant and Erica Hall are our first and only artistic couple that work together to bring you these inspiring, breathtaking pieces. You’ve seen Matthew’s work several times, but we’re delighted to bring you Erica’s as well.”

The room erupted in a round of applause, and Erica smiled up at me with tears in her eyes. “This is all because of you.”

“No, baby. It’s all because of you.” I leaned down and kissed her softly. “You believed in me first.”

“Alright, you two. Please come up here, and we’ll prepare the reveal of the centerpiece.”

I moved up to the painting and faced it, pulling Erica in front of me and stepping back a little. My heart roared in my chest as I pulled out the small black box I had in my jacket pocket.

The large black velvet cloth wavered just a little, and my heart almost stopped. I knew she would say yes, but I wanted the moment to forever be locked in her heart. She had to know how much she meant to me, how I adored her with every fiber of my being.

“It’s called, ‘Once in a lifetime.’” Jonathan’s voice rang out from behind the cloth, and it dropped down.

Gasps filled the room, and I knelt behind her, lifting the ring. The painting wasn't of the city, but of us. Me in a tux and her in a tight black dress. She was standing with her back to me and I was kneeling on the floor.

"Matt. What is this?" She turned and pressed her hands to her mouth as she let out a sweet scream. "No, you didn't."

"I never in my wildest dreams expected a talented, beautiful, strong woman like you to fall for a man like me, but you did. I didn't ever think I would get to live a life true to my purpose in the art community, but you believed in me, and you pushed me, so now I am. I would be so much less than I am if you weren't standing beside me. Be my wife, Erica. Have my babies and share the rest of this life with me. Without you, all the color would be drained dry and black and white is all I would see. Don't deny me, baby." I lifted the ring higher as she cried into her hands.

"Yes. I wouldn't want to be with anyone else but you."

I stood and pulled her into a tight hug, kissing her with the depths of my soul. The sound of hooting and hollering filled the space around us, but I let it all go and dove head first into a vision of our future together.

"I love you." I kissed her again.

"I love you more." She reached into her purse and pulled out the stick from the bathroom.

"How did you-?" I glanced down to see that she was pregnant. "Holy shit! We're pregnant." I turned to the crowd and waved the stick around. "We're going to have a baby. We're pregnant."

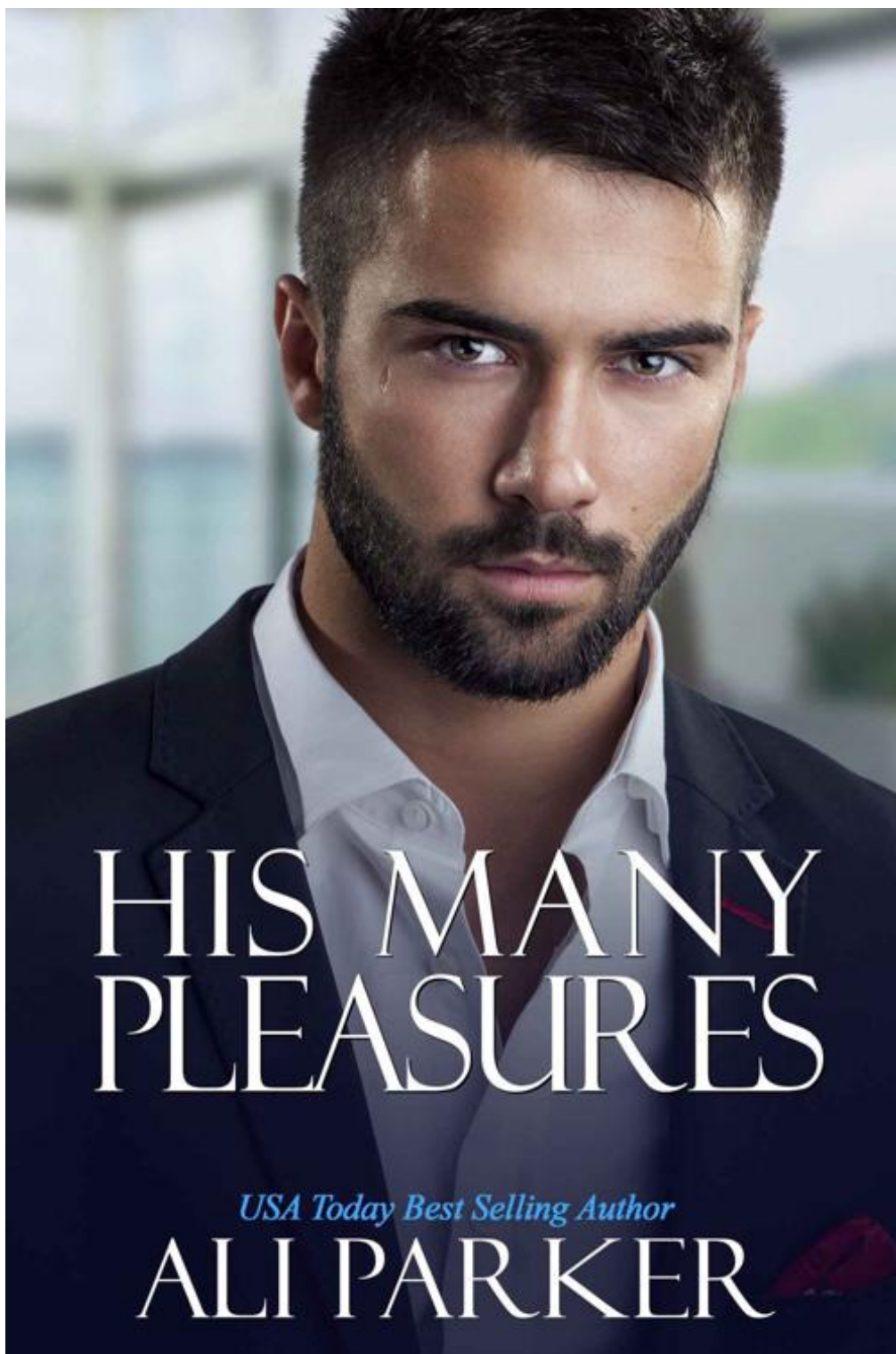
She reached up and grabbed the stick from me. "You're too much."

"Am I?" I pulled her close and kissed her. "I told you that you were pregnant."

"Three days of no sex. Ridiculous." She rolled her eyes and squeezed me in her arms.

“Tell me about it. I’m about to waste away.” I brushed my nose against hers. “You’re mine, Miss Erica Hall. Now and forever.”

And she was. My muse. My lover. My wife.



# HIS MANY PLEASURES

*USA Today Best Selling Author*

ALI PARKER

## DESCRIPTION



### **Falling in love with the enemy wasn't my goal.**

Life has been nothing shy of entertaining since I was a boy.

Adopted by the wealthiest family in Qatar.

I'm a businessman with no desire for the crown my father wore.

But I wasn't asked my opinion on the matter. My brother's too young to rule the country.

With tons of concerns, I concede and take the throne, only to have the most beautiful woman I've ever seen show up.

Her timing is almost too perfect.

It's her persistence or fierceness that holds me completely captivated.

Either way, I want every part of her for my own.

Too bad she's come to Qatar for one reason.

**To destroy me.**

*\*\*This book was first published as Unworthy of You in July of 2019\*\**

# CHAPTER 1



## LUKE

The building was quiet that morning, which I liked. England pretty much shut down during the holidays, so the only sound was my footsteps on the marble tile as I walked in the direction of my corner office.

I checked into the other offices, but I didn't hear the regular clicking of fingers over keyboards or anyone on the phone chatting about numbers or negotiations with other companies.

I closed my eyes for a moment and took it all in. I preferred it silent, but the hustle and bustle of people moving around the building meant that we were making money. Every time someone hung up the phone, I could almost hear the ring of a cash register.

For now, I reveled in the peace, knowing it wouldn't last for too long. I wouldn't allow it.

Celebrating Christmas wasn't important to me in a religious sense, but I appreciated the lights, the decorations, and the sense of joy that filled everyone around me. A lot of people spent time with their families during the holidays, but I couldn't relate to that. I moved to England to get away from my family. As much as I loved them, we were better hundreds of miles apart.

It was early enough in the day that the employees who were scheduled to work wouldn't be in for an hour or so. The upcoming New Year's Eve celebrations the next evening were going to be on their minds. I knew they would work faster and



harder to earn the day off in preparation for whatever party would ring in the New Year.

I wasn't much of a partier, so I would be at my flat getting a jump start on the new quarter.

I'd given my secretary Justine the week off, but she continued to field phone calls and emails from home. My inbox *pinged* again as I stepped into my office.

The brilliant sun beamed through the floor-to-ceiling windows serving as two of the four walls in my office. The reflection glinted off the freshly fallen snow covering every surface outside, and it was enough to start my morning off with a headache.

It was all a facade since the temperatures weren't sunny at all. My hand brushed against the cool window as I pulled the shades closed. Blinking black dots out of my vision, I sat down behind my desk. Flicking the mouse, the computer screen lit up.

I barely had my butt in the chair before heavy footsteps sounded from the hallway and my office door swung open.

"All right, mate?" Maddox, my good friend and right-hand man, stood in the doorway.

I narrowed my eyes at him. "I thought I locked that."

Maddox stepped into my office and closed the door behind him. "Special privileges and all that. I thought you'd be in the office, so I took a chance and came up to say hello to the boss man."

"I hate when you call me that," I said, standing up and tugging the lapels of my jacket together before buttoning it. With Maddox in my office, I wasn't going to get anything done.

"I know," he said with a grin. "What's with the shades closed? You hungover from holiday festivities?"

"Not in the least. It's too bloody bright with the snow."

Maddox clicked his tongue. "Says the guy with the corner office. Can't win them all."

“Guess not,” I said. “Can I help you? I have loads of work to accomplish this morning.”

“That’s what I figured. Just wanted to let you know that the deals that I’ve been working on have been closed.”

“Both of them?”

“That’s right, mate. I’m not just a pretty face.” To accentuate that, he pressed his forefingers into his cheeks and smiled, something you might see a mum doing for her kid during a photograph.

“Brilliant,” I said. “Good job.”

Maddox winked at me. “Be sure to put in a good word with payroll for my bonus.”

With those two deals closed, his commission alone would be more than his bonus this year. He and the others assigned to foreign accounts were bringing in the dough this year and would be handsomely rewarded. There was no better motivator than money, and we had plenty of it.

“Now that that’s taken care of, how about you tell me how we’re going to celebrate these victories?” Maddox asked, clapping his hands and rubbing them together.

“You’re talking about tomorrow night, aren’t you?”

Maddox had been on my ass about celebrating New Year’s Eve for the last two weeks. I had thought my consistent refusals would give him a hint.

Maddox grinned. “It’s the biggest bash of the year, my friend. You can’t expect me to let you sit at home and do nothing except count your billions like Scrooge.”

I crossed the room and opened the shades a little, peering outside. I didn’t get to this point without working my ass off. Maddox wasn’t a stranger to hard work, but to keep my family business running, there was no time for partying.

“I’m not Scrooge,” I said. “I’ll be working. Someone has to.”

“Of course you will,” Maddox said, not hiding the disappointment in his voice. It wasn’t as if I went out all the time. He had to have known that I wouldn’t change my mind.

“Don’t look at me like that,” I said.

Maddox shoved his hands into his pockets. “Like what?”

“Like I kicked your puppy,” I said.

“Promise me a drink on Wednesday, then,” he said. “I won’t take no for an answer.”

“You sure you won’t be too hungover?”

“There’s no such thing,” he said. “I’m off. See you next year.”

I rolled my eyes at his corny joke, and he laughed all the way out of my office and down the hallway.

Turning back to the window, I peered down at the people walking along the streets below. All of them were looking forward to partying the night away tomorrow night.

I wasn’t a complete stick in the mud, but there was no time for rest or partying for me. Of course, that didn’t mean I couldn’t think about it. I imagined sitting in a corner booth with a woman, her body tucked close to mine while we sipped from champagne glasses. At the stroke of midnight, I’d pull her close and kiss her—

A sharp rap on the door blasted me back to the present.

“What is it, Maddox?” I shouted, more from him startling me than actual anger. “I told you, I’m not—”

The door crashed open, and it was definitely not Maddox.

“Father,” I said, straightening my spine. Tensing all of my muscles was a reflex whenever I was in his presence. Years of living in the palace with dignitaries and other royalty visiting our home had drilled the mannerisms into me so hard that they transformed my body within seconds.

King Erol Shamon walked into my office as if he owned the place. Technically, he did but he rarely came to England

unless something was wrong. He didn't need to check up on me, though. So, why was he here?

He glanced over my desk and then narrowed his eyes at the closed curtains. He untucked his hands from the folds of his shirt and strode to the windows to pull the curtains open.

“What has brought you here?” I asked, annoyed at my formal tone. I was the boss of the company, and I had earned respect from my employees. But in the face of my father, I turned ten years old again, ready to be disciplined.

“The new year will bring a lot of changes to our family,” he said without turning to look at me. I hated when he spoke like that, almost as if I had to figure out his riddles. Again, I was a kid, trying to decipher whatever plan he had in mind for me.

“What might those changes be?” I hoped he wasn't going to ask what I thought he might ask. I'd been dreading the demand for years, which was why I fled to England. I had offered to run the business far away from my family and my responsibility. I had never asked to be raised in a palace, and yet, my future seemed to be set in stone, according to him.

“Don't pretend to be so naive, Luke,” he said, finally turning to me. His dark eyes locked with mine, and his chin lifted ever so slightly, reminding me of his status. As if I needed reminding.

“I will be stepping down as king, and I expect you to take my place,” he said.

There it was. The unspoken words were finally out there, sealing my fate, the fate I had no interest in following through with.

“You know that isn't what I want,” I said, forcing the words out as calmly as I could. Taking over the throne was a point of contention between us that he always brought up at the most inconvenient times, usually during family gatherings when he thought that my mother might influence me to agree. She wasn't in my office today, so why did I still feel her

presence in the tightness of my shoulders and the pressure in my chest as if she were?

“This is your birthright,” he said and then quickly clamped his mouth shut.

“You know it’s not,” I said. “But I appreciate you thinking of me for it. I like the life I have here. I’m still serving the family, just in a different way. Can’t you see that?”

“I don’t see it your way,” he said. “At all. This is the role that your mother and I have always seen for you. You have the temperament and the talent to lead.”

“What about Abir?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

“He’s not fit to be king,” Father said.

Abir would have been heir if I wasn’t seventeen years older than him, but his gentle demeanor was not a good fit for being a strong leader. Father was right to choose me, but I hated the idea of it. I wanted to live in the Western world. Even though I didn’t have time to enjoy much of it, I didn’t want to be tied down to the kingdom and live under the strict regulations of that life.

“I’m not fit either,” I said. “It’s ridiculous that you would continue to force this on me when it’s not something that I want.”

“Responsibility doesn’t always align with what we want, son,” he said.

How many times were we going to circle this topic? Me saying no and him pressuring me? It was exhausting, and now, time was running out.

“Do you even care about what I do here?” I asked him. “I’ve increased our profits exponentially since I took over. Don’t you think my talents are better suited here? Isn’t this a better way to serve the family?”

“Our heritage supersedes this business. I can find another CEO. Anyone would be happy to take your place.”

I exhaled sharply through my nose. He was right, of course, but if I told him that, then he’d have more leverage on

forcing this decision. So, I held firm to my choice. At least while I had any choice at all.

“This decision doesn’t need to be made in one day,” he said. “I’m giving you a month to decide.”

“Is that why you came here today?” I asked. “To give me a month to decide the rest of my life?”

“I came to bring you home at the request of your mother,” he said.

I knew what her request would be. With him taking me back to Qatar, the both of them would be hounding me, forcing their wishes on me.

“As I said, you will have a month to decide.”

“And what if I refuse? Will you find someone else to succeed you?”

“I’m giving you the time as a courtesy,” he said. “I won’t press the issue during that time—”

I snorted, cutting him off. His eyes narrowed. Even though he was my father and the king, it was rare that those two things were separate. He was the king through and through, and it had never been any different.

“But,” he continued. “I trust that you remember your duty and make the right decision.”

The right decision, or his decision?

## CHAPTER 2



## SOPHIA

The bubbles from the champagne tickled my nose as I downed my second flute. The flutes were plastic, so not regulation sized. The news never slept, so we were having the New Year's party at the Dallas Post for employees and their significant others. The location was ideal, but the budget wasn't quite there. Springing for cheap champagne and noisemakers was the extent of the party.

Still, it wasn't as if I had anything better to do. I was always looking for a story that would give me the promotion I deserved, but so far, I had failed to find something truly electrifying in my six years as a journalist.

One great story could make my career, so I picked up any scraps of news that I could and wrote every article as if it were my last story.

My boss, Mr. Fraser, always said, "You're only as good as your last piece." I lived by that motto to the fullest. My last piece was something I wanted to get past: a piece on the insect infestation at the local animal shelter. I had imaginary fleas all over my body for a week after that one.

I noticed a familiar face—outside of my co-workers'—across the room between Travis, the sports columnist, and his most recent girlfriend. I didn't care to remember her name since she would change into a younger and blonder version by the next company event.

"Matt!" I called a little too loudly, catching the attention of a few people next to me.



I smiled and headed over to him.

He pushed past Travis and what's-her-face—who stared at Matt for a little longer than necessary—and strode over to me.

He scooped me up into a hug and twirled me around. “I didn’t recognize you, Soph. You’re wearing a dress and heels.”

I jabbed him in the arm. “I dress up.”

“For funerals,” he deadpanned.

“Well, going out on interviews and writing stories until three in the morning doesn’t really have a dress code.”

He kissed my cheek and waggled his eyebrows. “So where is the liquor?”

“Don’t hold your breath for anything good.”

“Well, it’s a good thing that the airplane served the entire flight,” he said, grinning widely.

I pulled him into a quieter corner of the room. The party was being held in the main newsroom since there wasn’t much extra space for entertaining. People gathered around desks and squeezed through the thin aisles to mingle.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” I said. “I hate spending New Year’s Eve alone.”

He shrugged. “Any excuse to get out of Seattle and away from the rain for a little while.”

“Gee, thanks,” I said.

A smile lit his face. “And I couldn’t turn down a party with my best gal.”

“How’s work?” I asked.

He rolled his eyes and blew a raspberry. “This is a party. I don’t want to talk about work.”

“Me neither,” I said, even though I was standing in the room where it all happened for me.

Or in my case, *didn’t*.

“I thought you said everything was going swimmingly?” he asked.

“I never said ‘swimmingly,’” I said. “You’re the only one who says that word. Anyway, the work is there, but I haven’t been able to nail down the right story to show Fraser what I can do.”

“Well, keep at it.”

“I’ve *been* at it. For years.”

“Don’t lose hope,” he said. “Or your temper. Everything will turn out fine.”

“Why are you so optimistic?”

“Why are you so pessimistic?” he shot back.

“You sound like my mother,” I said.

He pulled a face. “She has a much deeper voice than mine.”

I laughed. “Ass. Let’s get some champagne and forget about our lives for a little while.”

“I thought you’d never ask,” he said. “I love Champagne-Soph. She’s quite the character.”

I whirled around him, and my foot wobbled. I grabbed onto a nearby desk to steady myself.

He laughed. “I see Champagne-Soph has already arrived.”

“Shut it,” I said, swatting at him. He had the foresight to move away from my hand. “I’ve only had two glasses. It’s these damn heels.”

“How about I get us something to drink while you stay here and take a load off?”

“I’d love to take these *shoes* off,” I muttered as he walked away. It would be incredibly unprofessional, unless I sat at my desk.

Matt had already crossed the room in the direction of the drink table, and I hoped he would be able to find me at my

desk. Since he had no idea where that was, I shot him a quick text.

Sitting down at my desk near the back of the room, I sighed heavily. I kicked off the devil-heels and curled my toes into the floor. It wasn't the most hygienic thing, but it felt so incredible after being squished in them for most of the day. The party had started right at six, so I didn't have time to go home and change.

"Getting ahead on the new year?" a voice asked from behind me.

I twisted in my chair to see Mr. Fraser standing there. He had on his typical jacket and tie, but for once, it was loosened a little.

Feeling for my shoes with my foot, I managed to shove them back inside, squishing my toes into the pointed ends.

Standing up, I smoothed down my black dress that, yes, I had worn to a few funerals in the last five years. "Mr. Fraser. Happy New Year. Well, almost. I swear, I wasn't working—"

"That's okay, Sophia," he said with a chuckle. It was the first laugh I'd heard from him in a long time. I wondered how many champagnes he'd already had. "You're an important part of the Post. There's no shame in hard work."

"I do love it here." If he'd noticed that I worked so hard, why the hell didn't I get the promotion that I deserved? I hoped his praise wasn't just the booze talking, though I intended to remind him of the conversation later this week if he didn't assign a good story to me.

Matt wandered past my desk and craned his neck to find me.

I shuffled over to him, putting the final push to get my foot into place in my shoe. Grabbing his arm, I pulled him next to me. "Mr. Fraser, this is Matt."

Matt handed me a flute filled with the crisp, bubbly fluid and used his free hand to shake hands with my boss.

“Sophia!” Mr. Fraser’s eyebrows shot up. “I didn’t know you had a boyfriend. It’s so nice to meet you.”

“Oh,” Matt said, shaking his head furiously.

“We’re not together,” I said quickly. “We’re good friends.”

“I live in Seattle,” Matt said.

Mr. Fraser’s eyes darted between us as if he didn’t quite believe me. How did he expect me to keep up with a relationship when I was always in the office when he arrived in the morning and hours after he left at night?

“I see,” Mr. Fraser said. “Sophia, I know it’s almost midnight, but may I have a word?”

Matt downed his glass of champagne and grimaced. I stifled a laugh and the urge to tell him that I told him so. I should have had him sneak something in, but I was sure the car service from the airport wouldn’t appreciate stopping at the liquor store on the way to the party.

“I’ll leave you to it, then,” Matt said and winked at me before heading in search of more booze.

“He didn’t have to go,” Mr. Fraser said, staring after Matt.

“Matt knows how important work is to me,” I said, smacking the head on the nail a little harder. If I were any more obvious, I’d need a piece of cardboard and a string of lights with the words “PICK ME” in big bold letters.

Mr. Fraser smiled, but it didn’t quite touch his eyes. “I’m afraid I had to do something rash, and I hope you will understand.”

My eyes widened, and I leaned closer to hear him over the music filtering out of the nearby speakers. They had been strategically placed throughout the room, a little haphazardly in my opinion. I’d nearly tripped on a few of the power cords several times already throughout the night.

“The king of Qatar is stepping down,” he said.

I blinked, wondering what that had to do with me. I rarely covered anything out of the great state of Texas. “Okay.”

Mr. Fraser stared down into his glass. “I’m assuming the eldest son will be taking the throne.”

He paused again, stringing me along like a damned puppet.

“How can I help?” I asked.

“I want to be the first paper to run the story,” he said finally. “I’m giving you the assignment. I want you to talk to the heir and get a piece back to me before anyone else.”

“Wow,” I said. “I don’t know what to say. Thank you for trusting me with this.”

“It’s well deserved,” he said. “But you will have to leave for England tomorrow. The family oil business has an office there, and the son runs it from there.”

It seemed a little strange that the heir to the throne of Qatar was working in England, but what did I know about monarchies? Not much.

Placing my flute on my desk, I knew there wasn’t going to be any more drinking tonight. Packing and researching were the only things on my agenda.

“All of the details will be sent to your email shortly,” he said. “I wanted to make sure you were willing to do the piece.”

I was *so* willing.

He cleared his throat. “I apologize for you having to leave your *friend*.”

*Shit. Matt.*

I found myself saying, “It’s fine.”

Mr. Fraser bobbed his head, muttered a “Happy New Year,” and continued to mingle with his other employees.

My heart fluttered in my chest. If I nailed this story, it might just be enough to put me over the edge for the promotion.

“What did he say?” Matt asked the moment I was alone.

“Were you eavesdropping?” I asked, hoping that he had been. Then I wouldn’t have to give him the bad news that I

was leaving him mere hours after his arrival.

“I tried to,” he said, twirling his finger in the air. “The music was too loud.”

I sighed. “He’s sending me on assignment.”

Matt grabbed my hands and squeezed. “That’s amazing. Where? When?”

“England,” I said. “Tomorrow.”

I waited for his face to fall, for the disappointed look to mar his handsome features. “You said yes, right?”

“I did,” I said. “I feel awful for leaving you after you just got here, though.”

“As long as you still give me the key to your apartment, I’m good,” he said. “This is an amazing opportunity, and I won’t allow you to mess it up because of me. I can switch my flight and come back whenever.”

“Are you sure?” I asked, unable to hold back my smile.

“Of course!”

I wrapped my arms around him and squeezed. “This is so exciting. I’ve never left the area for a story before. Now my boss wants me to go to the UK.”

“Your passport is current, right?”

Trapping my lip between my teeth, I considered that. “I think so.”

“You better hope so,” he said with a laugh.

“It’s fine,” I said. “I’ve kept it up on the off chance that something like this would happen.”

“Or if you needed a quick getaway,” he said.

I smiled. “That too.”

“See? Good things happen to people who wait.”

“You’re going to hang this over my head for a while, aren’t you?”

“Yep.”

“Well, it’s a good thing that I’m too happy to care.”

“That’s my girl,” he said. “Do you want to head out of here and start packing?”

I glanced at the clock. There was still another hour left until midnight, but if I was going to be any sort of prepared, I needed to leave. Mr. Fraser would understand, and my co-workers were too preoccupied to care that Matt and I left before the ball dropped.

I wondered if any of my co-workers who traveled around the globe felt this way before an assignment. Did they feel a sharp edge of anticipation cutting into their gut while goosebumps raked over their skin at the chance to break a really good story?

Even if they didn’t, I knew this feeling wouldn’t go away. This was the start of something extraordinary. I could feel it.

# CHAPTER 3





## LUKE

For the entire flight to my childhood home, I sorted through emails on my laptop, desperate to keep the conversation with Father as infrequent as possible.

But as king, he had other duties to attend to. While he locked himself in the suite on the private plane, fielding whatever issues were ailing the country that he ran, I did the same with my work. I wasn't as productive as I would have been at the office, with the constant turbulence and the staff's eagerness to cater to my every need, but I did get enough done to feel somewhat accomplished by the time the plane landed.

As the plane touched the ground, I drew in a sharp breath, and a sinking sensation weighed in my gut. The plane slowed, and the moment the "fasten seatbelt sign" turned off, I clicked the buckle open and stood up.

The door to Father's suite opened a few seconds later, and he strode past me with his staff right behind him.

I hadn't bothered to change into the more traditional clothes that Father would have preferred. I wasn't trying to be rude. I just wanted to show him that this particular part of our world wasn't fit for me.

I would only be able to get away with so much before Mother got involved and imposed her will on me, too. So, I took hold of my independence for as long as I could.

Outside, the temperature was much warmer than it had been in the UK. Beads of sweat appeared on my forehead after only a few seconds of being outside.

I dropped my sunglasses over my eyes as I disembarked the plane. There was already a car waiting for us, and Father was inside. I nodded at the man holding the door open for me as I slipped into the backseat.

A blast of cold air clung to my face, and I had a brief memory of how it felt back in England. As much as I enjoyed thawing out, I would have preferred to be *there* instead of here. I'd spent the last few years avoiding this moment. It had finally arrived, and I still wasn't ready.

Father didn't wait long until he started in again. I knew his whole "month" scenario wouldn't play out. Now that we were back on his turf, I knew I wouldn't be able to get a word in edgewise about how much I didn't want to follow in his footsteps.

"I spoke with my advisors, and they are on board with you taking my place," he said.

I turned to the window, gritting my teeth. I tried to focus on the landscape and how different it was from the beautiful English buildings that I was accustomed to.

Father went on about the importance of running the country and how he saw me taking the reins. I nodded my head and spoke one-syllable responses where it was appropriate. But he knew my stance already. I didn't want this. No amount of pressure was going to make me accept it without a fight.

Today wasn't the day to fight. Even though he promised me a month to make my decision—which was already made—I would wait until then to push harder to keep my life as I wanted it.

I didn't want to ruin the time I had with Mother and Abir, so I allowed him to say whatever he wanted and to get his ideas out of his head.

Even from a young age, Father tended to lecture me, forcing me into a cut-out path that he designed. As much as I appreciated everything he'd given to me, I still wanted my own life.

The decision for me to come to England had taken months of preparation and many talks to convince him finally. I was pretty sure he thought if he gave me the opportunity to make my own life, I would come back when the time was right.

In actuality, it was the opposite. Now that I had experienced independence from the throne, I never wanted to come back to rule. Father knew this, so he pushed the guilt as hard as he could. He didn't know that I inherited his stubbornness, and I would fight him until the bitter end.

The one-sided conversation with Father lasted the majority of the ride to the palace.

When the palace gates opened in front of the car, Father went silent. It was my opportunity to show him that this wasn't a request I was about to bow down to. But I waited until the car stopped in front of the steps before giving my last words.

"Father, thank you for repeating how important this position is to our country, but at this point, my decision is firm. You promised me the month, and I will take it until the very last second."

Father didn't look at me, but a small smile touched his lips.

I wasn't expecting him to frown or cry over it, but the smile was a surprise. It was the one that he always gave before giving punishment for one of my misbehaviors as a child. It was an "I know better than you" expression, and it settled into my stomach like a spoiled meal.

The doors opened on either side of the car, and Father got out first.

Stepping out into the blazing sun and heat again, I quickly rounded the car, knowing the staff would handle my suitcase.

I'd packed light, not intending to stay very long, but that didn't matter too much. I had a full closet of clothes in my chambers, and the palace had plenty of staff to get me whatever I desired.

Father already had two of his advisors flanking him on either side. At least when he was busy with the country's

affairs, he'd get off my back for a little bit. Once we stepped through the doors of the palace, Father went off to his drawing room, and my tense shoulders loosened slightly.

The palace staff bustled around the expansive hallways, but none of them spoke or made eye contact with me. It was the way Father wanted. I would have to change that if he forced me to become king.

I shook my head, banishing those ridiculous thoughts from my mind. I wasn't going to become king. Not in a million years.

There were other succession options, but I knew Father wouldn't even consider them until pushed to the absolute brink.

Walking in the opposite direction from Father's drawing room, I went in search of Mother and Abir.

Knowing where they would be, I walked with purpose down the long hallways and across the glittering marble floors with intricate gold overlays. Being in England for so long with the bleak weather and the different style of houses and buildings, coming home to the palace made everything seem brighter, enough that I yearned to wear my sunglasses again.

Mother would never approve, so I didn't entertain the option. I merely squinted my eyes until they adjusted instead.

The New Year celebration would take place tonight, and Mother always went above and beyond. It was a time to celebrate family and close friends, and she never skimmed on the festivities.

I found her and Abir in the Great Hall, overseeing the staff transforming the banquet space into the most lavishly decorated room in the palace.

Abir was the first to see me. "Luke!" He hurried over to me and reached his hand out to shake mine.

"I see you've been eating well," I said, releasing his hand. "You've grown nearly a foot since I've seen you last."

Abir raked a hand through his thick black hair. I wondered what Mother thought of his unkempt look, but I had a feeling she was more preoccupied with the party than her youngest son's current hairstyle. Though, I knew that she'd make sure he was presentable tonight.

"You don't look like you're eating enough," Abir said, poking my arm.

With work encompassing most of my life, I had to schedule a time to eat or else it wouldn't happen at all.

Mother would change that during my stay. The regimented eating times were strict, and sitting down with Father and Abir was non-negotiable. It wasn't the first time since the flight that I wanted to go back to England and live life under my terms.

Mother ended her conversation with one of the staff members and walked over to me. Her round face broke into a broad smile. "Dear Luke," she said. "I've missed you so."

I kissed her cheeks and sighed. "It's good to be home." It wasn't a complete lie, and it satisfied her enough.

"This year will bring good fortune with both my sons here," she said.

Abir stood straighter and clasped his hands behind his back. He resembled Father more than I ever would. I imagined him being a different kind of leader, but not the type that Qatar needed to succeed Father.

The thought rustled around in my gut before I attempted to shove it away. I had thirty days before I had to deal with that.

At the very least, the party would distract me from the pressure for a little while.

"Go to your chamber to get cleaned and changed for dinner," Mother said. "The celebrations will begin shortly after."

I nodded, not fighting those orders.



The rest of the day was a whirlwind. I barely had time to take a breath after eating before the guests arrived. They came in droves to the palace, and Abir and I escorted them into the Great Hall.

Catching up with relatives was the highlight of the party. While it hadn't been publicly announced that Father was stepping down, there were many questions about my future role in the kingdom. I dodged any direct questions, much to our guests' dismay, but I couldn't give any of them fodder for rumors until everything was set in stone.

So much for distraction.

After a difficult time with Mother's uncle, who was set in the old ways of the country, I looked for a break from the conversation.

Finding Mother nearby, I excused myself and went over to her.

"The party is beautiful," I said to her.

She nodded her head. "Another success."

"I agree," I said.

"Speaking of succession—"

"Not you too," I said with a groan.

"I have not said my piece," she said.

"You're the only one aside from Abir who hasn't," I said. "Might as well get it over with."

"What is your hesitation?" she asked. "It's an honor."

"It is," I said, unwilling to argue with her as I had with Father. She knew I didn't want to be king, but there were plenty of people nearby listening, and I wasn't going to give away any family discord.

"Then what is bothering you?" she asked.

"Nothing is bothering me," I returned.

"I know you," she said softly. "But I won't pry. You're old enough to make your own choices. I just hope you make the

right ones.”

I knew she wasn't going to be any help in the situation. Not that I thought she would be. I was indeed on my own, and I hated the feeling.

A group of women walked by, and one of them craned her neck in our direction. Mother bowed her head, and the girl glanced at me before looking back down at her hands.

“Her name is Ghalia,” Mother said.

“Don't start with this, too,” I warned.

“I want to see you happy,” she said. “You're thirty-three. Your father and I were married for years at that point.”

“He was also the king,” I said. “Besides, I have no intention of starting a relationship anytime soon. My life is too chaotic as it is.”

“Life isn't worth living unless you can share it with someone you love,” she said and then walked away, ending the conversation.

I headed in the opposite direction, hoping that I was done with any talks of the future, at least for the rest of the night.

# CHAPTER 4





## SOPHIA

In the taxi over to the hotel, I flipped through my passport. I tried to keep my cool as the agent at Heathrow placed my very first stamp onto one of the pages in my book. I wanted to commemorate it somehow, but I didn't want to seem like a naive tourist.

Instead, I clicked a picture and texted it to Matt with a thumbs-up emoji.

With the time difference, I wasn't sure what time it was in Dallas, or even if he had managed to get a flight back to Seattle.

I had little time the night before to pack, but I was surprised to find that Mr. Fraser had added an international cell phone package for me to use while I was in the UK.

It would make things easier when it came to communication with my boss, but I tried not to overdo it with texts that weren't work-related.

It was a little sad that at twenty-nine years old, I never made it out of the country before, but after nailing this assignment, that might change.

Who knew? Maybe next year I would have a full book of stamps that I would be able to show off, along with some great stories. Maybe an award or two.

*Hey, a girl could dream.*

I drank in as much of the city as I could on the ride over to the hotel. I knew I wouldn't have much time for sightseeing

since I would be focused on my work, so I took a few somewhat blurry pictures as we passed some famous landmarks on the way through the city.

It was a little jarring to be riding on the wrong side of the road, and I got a few looks from the driver when I squealed as we took some turns the wrong way into traffic.

Well, it was the right way to everyone else in the city. I was the only one with the problem.

When the taxi pulled in front of the hotel, my jaw dropped. I'd never seen such a beautiful building before. The taxi driver wasn't as impressed as me and had my suitcase on the curb before I unbuckled my seatbelt.

Grabbing a few quid from my wallet—I hoped it was enough—I stuffed the money into his hand and took my suitcase.

“Thank you,” I said.

He tilted his head and said, “Cheers!” before heading back into the car and driving away.

I stood as close as I could to the street and looked up at the building in front of me. It had so much character, more than I'd ever seen in a building before.

I knew right away I would like this place. And now that I was a world-traveler, it was my number one place to go back to when I wasn't working.

The check-in process was smooth since Mr. Fraser's assistant, Chelsea, had taken care of all the details. Now that I had some time to breathe, I thought it was a little odd that every little detail had been taken care of, as if this trip had been planned a while ago. Or maybe she was used to it since the paper sent so many reporters to other places to get stories.

I did wonder why he'd chosen me for the assignment instead of one of the seasoned reporters. I had no idea how to interview an heir to a throne. I supposed it was similar to any other interview.

I tried not to think about it too much. He wouldn't have sent me if he didn't think I could handle it.

And handle it, I would.

A bellhop offered to take my suitcase to my room. He was a cute guy, probably a few years younger than me, but his accent was delicious. I could barely speak after he talked. I think I drooled during the entire elevator ride up to my room.

My hands were all thumbs as I sifted through the strange money again to tip him.

With him standing in my room, staring at me with big brown eyes, I could see us getting to know each other better if the circumstances were different.

My thoughts went wild, and my face was hotter than the surface of the sun when he left with probably too much of a tip.

I closed and locked the door, taking in the décor of my room. Drawing several deep breaths, I tried to calm my racing heart.

I never believed in instant attraction, so my dry-spell with sex and relationships must have dragged on too long. A sexy English accent had turned my knees to jelly, and it took me a few moments to get my head straight.

“You're about to meet a prince for Christ's sake, Sophia!” I muttered. “Get it together.”

The room that Chelsea had booked wasn't a suite, but it was big enough for me. The four-poster bed looked as comfortable and fluffy as a cloud.

Checking the time on the nightstand, I knew my internal clock was going to be off for at least a few days. I couldn't remember if it was good to sleep when you changed time zones or to stay up. I slept a little on the plane, so I hoped I'd be okay.

Regardless, I was too excited to sleep. So, I pulled out my laptop and set it up on the small desk by the window.

There was a bottle of wine and two glasses on a small tray, and I briefly considered popping it open. However, it would most likely get charged to the room, and I didn't want to disappoint Mr. Fraser by him thinking I was taking advantage. If I was going to drink, it wasn't going to be in the hotel on the Post's dime.

Flipping open my computer, I typed "Luke Walters" into the search bar. I found several articles, mostly the same ones I'd bookmarked the night before when I'd gotten some history on the project, outside of what Chelsea had already sent me.

It took a little digging to find the address of the oil company's business address. It wasn't open to anyone who wasn't an employee, but I was sure I'd be able to find a way in.

I thought about calling ahead, but it would be too easy for him to hang up the phone on me. So visiting him in person was a must.

Since no business hours were listed, I decided to use my energy while I had it to go over there and see if I could surprise Luke. He'd have no time to prepare for an interview, which gave me the possibility of getting some dirt on what was going down with him succeeding his father.

I grabbed my handbag and shoved my notebook inside. Even though I preferred to use the recording app on my phone, I found that taking notes during travel to my location helped me prepare for an interview.



The concierge was helpful in getting me a car, and before I knew it, I was back on the road. This time, I didn't look at the sights. The sun had started to set in the distance, and I hoped that I wasn't too late to speak with Mr. Walters. I wasn't sure what the schedule for an oil tycoon was, but I needed to nail this story to show Mr. Fraser that I deserved the promotion.

When the taxi stopped, I looked up at the massive building next to the vehicle.

“This is it?”

“Yes, mum,” the older gentleman said.

Stepping out of the car, I stared at the structure. It looked like a box, all sharp angles and several stories high.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and lifted my chin, acting as if I belonged there.

Walking up to the building, I noticed a small gray box next to the door. A red light shone from the top corner. It looked like a swipe card reader, and I didn't have any way to access it.

The front doors looked pretty heavy, and I peered through the small window, which was high enough that I had to get on my tiptoes to see through it. I was just in time to notice someone coming toward the door.

I skittered back just as the door opened, and I dropped my chin to my chest, trying to look inconspicuous. The two men in suits walked past me, and I grabbed the handle of the door before it could shut. Neither of them looked at me as I slipped in through the doorway.

My insides fluttered as I tried to appear as if I worked there.

I doubted I'd be able to get up to Mr. Walter's office without getting noticed, so I decided to be somewhat truthful, and instead of going over to the elevator bank, I walked right up to the front desk to announce myself.

The woman sitting at the desk had black hair tied back into a bun at the nape of her neck. Her bright red lipstick clashed with the paleness of her skin as she pursed her lips when she caught my eye.

“Do you have an appointment?” she asked.

“I'm here to see Luke Walters.” I didn't precisely answer her question, but I also wasn't lying.

“Mr. Walters isn't here,” she said.

“Can I speak with his partner, then?” I asked, grasping for the name I'd read a few times in my research. “Maddox

Greene.”

“What is this in regard to?” she asked.

“I’m an American reporter. I’m here to do a piece on the business.”

Her eyes narrowed. Any model would die for her cheekbones, but to me, they looked as if they could cut me at any moment. “I’ll see if Mr. Greene is available. Take a seat, please.”

She opened her hand in the direction of the chairs across the way.

I walked over, straightening my blouse. It sucked that Mr. Walters wasn’t available, but I needed to keep up my story. If I were able to speak with Mr. Greene about Mr. Walters, maybe I’d be able to find out when he was in the office and I could come back.

At the very least, I had my foot in the door.

Even though the seats were plush and looked very comfortable, I couldn’t sit still. Energy bubbled through me like the champagne from the New Year’s Eve party at the Post. It seemed like a lifetime ago, but it was only one day. With the time change, it was probably two days.

If I was going to become a world-traveler, I’d have to get that right eventually.

One of the elevators opened, and I sat up. I gripped one of the chairs to balance myself as a tall man strode over to me. He had slicked back brown hair and a full beard. One hand was in his pants pocket while the other swung casually at his side. I bet he had a lot of money. His smile gave that away just as much as his cocky walk.

“Hello, there,” he said, reaching out his hand to me.

Of course, he had an accent. Everyone here did, but only the bellhop and Maddox Greene had made my toes curl so deliciously in my heels.

“I’m Sophia Holmes,” I said. “I’m a reporter from the Dallas Post.”

“Dallas, Texas?” he asked with an impersonation of a Southern lilt. It was a severe fail, but it broke the ice a little. “I’m sorry. I can never nail that American accent. What can I do for you?”

I peered around him to make sure that the front desk woman wasn’t lying about Mr. Walters not being around. It was a possibility that Maddox was the first line of defense against unwanted reporters. So, I used the easiest trick in the book. Stroking the ego.

“My editor is very interested in the success of your company. He sent me out here to do a story on you and Mr. Walters for our paper.”

“Really?” Maddox asked, rubbing one hand down the side of his beard. “We’ve had reporters here now and again but never from America.”

“Well, your success is something to be admired. I’d love to pick your boss’s brain. And yours, of course. Is he away for lunch? I can wait.”

Maddox clicked his tongue. “Luke’s visiting with family at the moment.”

I ground my teeth together but quickly recovered. The “family” was in Qatar, as far as I knew. Did Mr. Fraser expect me to get on another plane to go there? I doubted I had enough money or the appropriate clothes to visit that country.

“I’d be happy to arrange something with Luke,” Maddox said. “We’re always looking for new places to drum up business.”

I smiled, but I tried not to appear too proud of myself.

“When may I speak with Mr. Walters?”

“I’m sure he’ll be back tomorrow. Between you and me, he wasn’t too happy to get home.”

“How come?” I asked.

He opened his mouth to speak, and then he shook his head. “How long are you here for?”

My reporter senses tingled. I wasn't sure what story I wanted to tell, but digging into a rift between Mr. Walters and his family was juicy stuff. And Mr. Fraser loved a good scoop. "I'll still be here tomorrow."

"Great," he said. "I'll have Victoria set something up for tomorrow. If something changes, she'll give you a call." He snapped his fingers, getting Victoria's attention, and then pointed at me. I cringed at the fact that he treated her like that instead of walking over and speaking with her.

"Have a nice day, Sophia," he said and turned on his heel toward the elevators.

I walked over to Victoria and gave her my information. The sour taste in my mouth about Maddox's manners quickly evaporated as I knew that I was one step closer to getting this interview. If Mr. Walters was anything like Maddox, I'd have this story in the bag before the end of the week.



# CHAPTER 5



## LUKE

It was good to see my family again, but the unrelenting pressure of taking over the kingdom had turned my little vacation into a tension-inducing trip that had me more wound up when I left than when I'd arrived.

I kept it all inside, as I always did. It was one of the ways that Abir and I were different. My dear brother wore his heart on his sleeve while I closed off all emotion when I could, especially when it came to the public eye.

From the airport, I didn't even bother going back to my flat. I had a lot to do at work since I'd missed two days already. I knew Maddox would want to know what happened since I was sure the news of Father stepping down was already known throughout the company, if not the public as a whole.

Promising him dinner would help defeat his curiosity. I had a lot to make up for, and I wasn't going to let this company suffer because my mind was distracted by the decision about becoming king.

I arrived around the time that the rest of the employees did, so I melted into the crowd and hurried my way to the elevator banks. I didn't have time to wait around in the lobby before getting to work.

When the next elevator arrived, I stepped in and pressed my back against the corner. I opened my phone and started reading through some new messages in my inbox.

Other than the polite greetings and wishes for a happy new year from some of the senior people at the company, I was left

alone. There was a lot to do at the beginning of each month, and I'd curated a lot of top-notch workers to build my empire. There was little time for socialization, which maximized output.

As the last person left the elevator, I hung behind, finishing up the last sentence of an email. I stepped out just as the doors were closing.

"Just the man I wanted to see," Maddox said.

Glancing up, I saw he was a ways down the hall, but I had a feeling he had been waiting for me.

"Happy New Year," I said to him and continued to my office. If he wanted to talk, then he could do it on the way.

"You too, mate," he said, keeping up with my stride. "What was with your pops dragging you home by the ear?"

I pulled a face. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, come on, you can talk to me about it," Maddox said, following me into my office and closing the door. "You were going to spend the holiday working, and the moment he arrived, you were whisked off. Did you get into trouble?"

I knew he was teasing, but it hit a nerve, one that I'd been hiding since Father showed up.

"I don't want to talk about it," I said.

"All right," he said, holding his hands up in surrender. "I'm just asking as a friend."

"Are you?" I asked.

Maddox pressed his lips together. "Is something going on? Is the company in trouble? I thought with the two new accounts—"

"The company is fine," I said a little too sharply. All I wanted was to work in peace. "It was a personal issue more than anything."

I guessed the news about Father leaving the throne to me hadn't traveled this far. I supposed that was a good thing. Maddox wouldn't be able to hold himself back if he *did* find

out. I imagined finding plastic crowns on my desk or him giving me a scepter for my birthday. I knew it was all in good fun, but to me, this was a change in my entire life. No one other than my Father or other royal families understood what I was about to go through.

“Well, when you get over your jet lag, we can talk,” he muttered.

I gritted my teeth. “Let’s have dinner tonight. I have a lot of work to do, and you know how I get. I’m sorry. I don’t like interruptions.”

“I know,” he said with a little smirk. “Oh, I forgot to tell you that you have a meeting this morning with an American reporter.”

Any peace that I had in the time between my apology and making plans for dinner had lit up in flames. “What meeting?”

“She stopped over here yesterday looking for you,” he said, smiling. “I didn’t think you’d mind doing a quick interview. It will be good for the company. And she’s a real hottie. I bet you will enjoy it.”

“I don’t have time for this,” I said. “Why don’t *you* speak with her?”

“Come on, Luke. She wants to write an article about us. She seemed very keen, which can only be a positive thing.”

I slammed my phone down on my desk. “I can’t believe you agreed to this without my permission.”

“I had Victoria send you the confirmation,” he said. “I understand you’re under a lot of stress with your family, but you need to think about the company, too.”

I *did* recall something added to my calendar, but I was too distracted to look or care. Didn’t he know that my life *was* the company?

Turning my phone around, I swiped the screen to pull up my calendar. “The meeting is in five minutes?”

“It will be quick, I’m sure,” Maddox said.

“No,” I said. “I refuse to give an interview.” It felt more than coincidental that an American reporter arrived days after Father had come to tell me the news. It seemed that none of my employees had heard, but there were always nosy people sniffing around the kingdom for a good story. I wasn’t sure why an American outlet would be the first to break the news, but I didn’t care. I wasn’t going to speak with the reporter.

“Don’t be like that,” Maddox said.

My door opened, and the both of us turned toward it. Justine always knocked.

Instead of the familiar face of my secretary, I looked into the pale blue eyes of some strange woman. Her dark hair fell over her shoulder, and she was dressed in a gray skirt suit that made her eyes appear even bluer, if that were possible.

“Speak of the cheeky devil,” Maddox said with a grin. I knew that smile. He’d already made up his mind about her. I wished he’d think with his brain more often.

You’d have to be blind not to think she was gorgeous, but I’d been around enough news outlets to know that they always sent in the pretty girls to get their foot in the door before the real questions began. Questions I didn’t want to answer at the moment. She was right to get to Maddox first. He was a pushover when it came to a pretty face. But I knew better. She was going to have a tougher time with me.

“I’m Sophia Holmes,” she said, stepping into my office as if she owned the place.

I wasn’t impressed. “I don’t know what my associate told you, but I’m not interested in giving an interview at this time. I’m sorry I’ve wasted your time.”

“Mr. Walters, I won’t take up much of your time,” she said. Her accent struck me. It was sweet, and it had a lovely drawl to it. Wherever she’d been sent from, they were smart.

“I don’t have any time for this,” I said. “If you want to talk to someone, then talk to Maddox. Right now, I need both of you out of my office. I have a lot of work to do.”

“Don’t be rude, mate,” Maddox said.

I shot him a look. It was the one I reserved for moments such as this. Even though we were best friends, currently he was crossing a line. Showing any weakness in front of the reporter would give her the opportunity to pounce.

“I don’t appreciate people barging into my office,” I said to the reporter. “Even if they have an appointment. It shows incompetence and unprofessionalism.”

She didn’t even flinch at my insult. I bet she had a thick skin; she needed it for her job. “Your secretary was away from her desk.”

I glanced out into the hallway to see Justine returning to her chair with a mug of coffee. While it was her job to keep the order of my schedule, she wasn’t my bouncer. She wasn’t at fault. Maddox was for allowing this woman to even step foot in my building.

“Ms. Holmes,” Maddox said. “I do apologize for wasting your time. Let me show you out.”

I expected her face to fall or for her to beg to do the interview. Instead, she locked eyes with me before allowing Maddox to show her out.

“Mr. Walters,” she said by way of a farewell.

I turned around, showing her that I wouldn’t change my mind.

When the door finally closed and I was alone, her expression still lingered on my mind. It wasn’t disappointment; it was determination.

Little did she know that I was more determined than anyone to keep my family’s secrets. If she really wanted to do an interview with me about the company, then she could do it over the phone, but I wasn’t about to be bullied into speaking with some random newspaper about my life. Especially when I hadn’t fully figured it out yet.

If she thought I did, then she was in for a surprise.



For the rest of the day, I had peace. Other than constant emails and requests for the end of year paperwork from our accountants, I was able to delve into work and make up for the days I'd been away. I fell back into a routine that didn't involve thinking about my future.

The only break I took was for lunch, which Justine had ordered and left on my desk before closing my office door. I'd mentioned the little break in with the reporter, so I knew she'd be on high alert for any more unwanted interruptions.

By the time I looked up at the clock above the door, it was already five-thirty. I didn't want to keep Maddox waiting, so I packed my briefcase and grabbed my jacket.

I had the urge to hit up one of the pubs for dinner. As much as I enjoyed the food at the palace, I'd missed the greasy fish and chips with a pint in the few days I'd been away.

Sending Maddox a quick text, I intended to head home to change before we went out. Usually, I didn't mind going out in a suit, but when it came to pubs, I preferred looking like a local instead of a CEO or a prince. Hiding in plain sight had been something I'd perfected over the years.

A few others were working late but not many. Most would head home to their families for a nice home-cooked meal. That was something I never knew and would never get to know. Even if I didn't accept the throne, I would always be royalty. Mother would probably force me into an arranged marriage in which we'd have staff with a cook.

I was reminded of the woman that Mother tried to set me up with at the party. The girl was pretty enough, but the spark in her eyes when we made eye contact made my stomach twist. She looked at me for what I was, not *who* I was. All of the women that Mother set me up with would know that about me. But I wasn't just a prince. There would never be a setup that allowed me to get to know someone before they knew my

title. It was custom. Another custom I wanted nothing to do with.

I was nearly to the exit of the otherwise empty lobby when rapid clicking started up behind me. I whirled around, not expecting to see the American reporter—Sophia—close on my heels.



# CHAPTER 6



## SOPHIA

To keep up my charade about doing a piece on the company, I agreed to speak with Maddox after leaving Mr. Walters's office. I hoped he hadn't realized how struck I was by him when I burst through the door. I'd seen pictures of him, but they were mostly random candids that showed his hands in front of his face, or ones taken at a press event. I hadn't thought he'd be as attractive as he was.

He towered over me with a brooding gaze that gave me a different type of feeling than Maddox and the bellhop. Power rolled off him in waves, and I wondered what it would be like to be in his presence on my own. It was a good thing Maddox was with me for the initial meeting.

Even though I couldn't care less about the actual business, I stroked Maddox's ego for about a half hour before delving into the nitty-gritty. I couldn't get Mr. Walters out of my mind. Even though I planned on speaking to him at some point, getting some dirt on him from his friend would prove to be helpful to get him to talk to me.

Despite my best efforts, Maddox wasn't helpful at all. He skirted my more personal questions about Mr. Walters.

I decided to come out on top and end the interview myself.

"Thank you so much for agreeing to meet with me," I said, shaking his hand. He squeezed a little too hard and held on a little too long.

"My pleasure," he said. "Sorry about Luke. You coming in when you did was a bad time for him. I wished I could have

predicted that. I would have asked you to come in tomorrow.”

“*Should* I come back tomorrow?” I asked. “Do you think he’d speak to me then?”

“Probably not after today. He can be a bit stubborn about these things.”

“Families can do that to people,” I said, pushing my luck.

“How do you mean?” he asked.

“You said he was with his family,” I said casually, flipping my hair over my shoulder. Maddox’s eyes flicked to my gesture. He was too easy. “I know when I’m with my family at any event, I can’t wait to leave.” It wasn’t the total truth, but if something was going on between Luke and the king that would disrupt him getting to the throne, that would be the story I wanted to tell.

“Oh,” Maddox said. “I don’t know. As I said, he’s pretty private. Whenever his father comes here, Luke gets cranky for a few days.”

“How so?” I asked, leaning closer to him.

He cleared his throat. “I shouldn’t tell you these things. He’s a very private person, and I’m afraid the both of us have already pushed his buttons.”

I deflated. I couldn’t imagine Mr. Walters being upset with his friend and partner for some time. Had I ruined my chances? There was no way I could go back to Mr. Fraser and explain that I was unable to speak with the only person he had asked me to. I wasn’t going back to Dallas without a story; I just had to find another way to break through Mr. Walters’s tough exterior.

“May I show you out?” Maddox asked.

I sensed he wanted to spend more time with me, but I wasn’t here to be chummy with him. “I’ve interrupted enough of your day. I’ll show myself out.”

“Cheers, then,” he said with a wide grin.

That damned flutter returned to my stomach again. I had to get over these accents coupled with some seriously hot men.

“Bye,” I said and left his office.

Glancing down the hallway, Mr. Walters’s office wasn’t that far away. Though without Maddox to defend me, it didn’t seem the wisest decision to piss him off so soon.

I went down to the lobby and settled onto one of the chairs. I had a lot of waiting on my hands, but I wasn’t a stranger to it. Mr. Walters wasn’t the first tough interview I’d encountered in my career.

He’d claimed he had work to do, so I gave him that time. Maybe when he felt more accomplished and relaxed, I’d be able to get through to him.

Throughout the day, I was aware of Victoria staring at me every so often. After the first inquiry about me needing anything, she hadn’t bothered to ask me again. With the never-ending phone calls and her fingers clicking on her keyboard, she had more to worry about than a quiet American sitting in her lobby.

It was a good thing that I came prepared with a bottle of water, a granola bar I’d purchased from the hotel gift shop, and my laptop.

I transferred my notes from Maddox’s interview into a document while checking out every single person who entered and exited the building. Mr. Walters had to leave sometime.

The last two hours proved more difficult as I’d already done as much work as I could for the day. Without the big interview, the story was at a standstill.

Around five-thirty, I was about to give up. If Mr. Walters had been gone for several days, he would probably stay late to make up for it. I knew I wouldn’t be able to make another appointment, so I’d have to try something else.

As I was packing up my things, the elevator bell dinged, and fate stepped in to deal me a sweet hand.

Mr. Walters strode out of the elevator with his briefcase.

Having the moment to look at him without a grimace on his face, he looked almost kind and almost prince-like in his demeanor.

He was nearly to the exit doors before I snapped out of it and raced after him. I came up to him before he whipped around.

Then the grimace returned.

He glanced at his gold watch. The face was outlined with glittering diamonds. “You’ve been here all day?”

“Yes,” I said. “I don’t give up that easily, Mr. Walters.”

He held the door open for me. “Neither do I, Mrs. Holmes.”

“It’s Miss,” I said quickly. A blast of cold air pressed against me, and I buttoned my jacket tighter. I knew it was a dumb idea to wear a skirt, but I had to use all of my assets to get the job done. “All I want to do is sit down with you to talk. Do you have dinner plans? My treat.”

He shook his head. “I already have plans. And even if I didn’t, I don’t plan on giving you any interview.”

Were we back at this again? Hadn’t he realized I’d waited hours for him? The least he owed me was five minutes.

Though, he was a prince with apparent secrets to hide. He owed me nothing.

He turned away from me, but I kept on him, desperate not to let him out of my sight. His skin was so smooth, enough that I wanted to run my hands across the surface. He was the opposite of his partner. Dark-skin and clean-shaven. His lips were full and totally kissable.

I inwardly scolded myself. My thoughts were so inappropriate, it wasn’t even funny.

“Did you speak with Maddox?” he asked me.

Hearing him speak to me like a normal person—even though there was still an edge to his voice—showcased his accent a little bit. It wasn’t as formal as Maddox’s; it had a

little bit of something else to it. Damned if it didn't make my knees weaken a little more.

"I did."

"If you came here to do a piece on the company, then he would have given you everything you needed."

"My editor wants to get to know you and your successes," I said quickly. I had spent all day thinking of ways to counteract anything he might throw at me. I was just as relentless as him, no matter how attractive I found him.

The corners of his lips lifted. He reached his car and opened the passenger door to toss his briefcase inside. I wasn't sure of the brand of the vehicle, but I was sure it cost more than my salary.

"Ms. Holmes," he said. "I know what you're after."

"Do you?" I asked. He was a smart man, but he wasn't going to outsmart me. I wasn't about to give him the real reason for the interview, unless he figured it out for himself. And if he did, then I knew I would have a much harder time getting what I wanted.

He sighed. "Sorry, you've wasted your trip."

Pulling open the door, I moved aside. He got in before I could utter another word.

He wasn't budging. He'd built a wall up between us, and I didn't have the tools to chisel through it.

As he drove off, defeat coiled around my stomach like a large snake, squeezing harder and harder. Was this it? Had I failed within two days of arriving? What was Mr. Fraser going to say? He'd never send me anywhere again if I couldn't nail this interview. All my dreams of a full passport book floated away into the icy breeze.

Going back inside the building, I called a taxi. I waited by the double doors, knowing that I was no longer wanted.

After heading back to the hotel, I sat in the restaurant and ate more than I normally would. For some reason, the food

tasted fresher than it did at home. It probably was. Or I had been hungrier than I realized?

All the while, I mulled over what to do next. Mr. Walters had already turned me down several times. I couldn't play the same game that I did with Maddox. And if I pissed him off enough, he might report me for stalking or something. I couldn't imagine that Mr. Fraser would appreciate a phone call from the UK to bail me out.

I'd used every tool that I knew when it came to getting an interview, but Luke Walters wanted nothing to do with me.

Since I was sure the other patrons wouldn't care for me talking on my cell phone, I sent the bill to the room and headed to the lounge to call Matt.

He always grounded me, and I needed his optimism in an otherwise bleak situation.

I sat in a large chair in the corner of the room, closest to the windows. The view of the city was magnificent, and I wasn't ready to give it up entirely yet.

He answered on the second ring. "Hey, Soph."

"Matt, I'm failing miserably out here."

"Okay, slow down. Tell me everything."

I wasn't sure about the slowing down part, but I told him about meeting Maddox the day before and then the failed interview that morning, including the part where I waited for him for hours in his lobby.

"You wore the gray suit, right?" he asked.

"Yes!" I said. That suit was my closer. The fact that it hadn't worked made me rethink everything. "He was so adamant. I think he's hiding something good."

"Then you can't give up," Matt said. "Change your tactics."

"To what? I'm not going to degrade myself like some other people." I had a few people in mind from the Post and other news outlets in the area.

“I would never expect you to,” he said. “People like him have been in the limelight for years. He’s probably sick of reporters trying to get into his private life.”

“He already knows I’m a reporter,” I said. “This information might have been helpful before I tried to barge into his office.”

“If you had asked me—”

“You could have never known!”

He chuckled. “I know. Only teasing.”

I sank into my chair. I didn’t need teasing. I needed solutions.

“You have a natural talent for getting people to open up,” he said.

“Yeah, that’s why I became a reporter.” I wasn’t egotistical at all. I knew what I was good at, and I chose a career that showcased it.

“Win him over with your charm,” he said. “Don’t come in strong with the interview. Find him and talk to him like a person. I bet it will knock him off his feet.”

“And I can knock this story out of the park,” I said.

“Exactly, but don’t start off with that.”

“I know how to play it,” I said as a flurry of ideas popped into my head. “Thanks for talking it out with me.”

“No problem,” he said. “Be sure to bring me back something nice in return for helping you.”

I smirked. “Goodbye, Matt.”



# CHAPTER 7



## LUKE

The next morning, I was relieved to be back home and back on schedule. I got ready to visit the cafe closest to the office. It wasn't just convenience, even though that was a significant factor. But the pastries were out of this world. Much to my Mother's dismay, I was born with a healthy metabolism. I barely worked out and didn't get the male pooch no matter what I ate.

Remembering the night before at the pub, the fish and chips had been ace. And the conversation between Maddox and me had smoothed over any ruffled feathers. He didn't pry into the business with my father, and I was able to enjoy the time spent with my friend outside the office.

He was still flying high about landing his big clients, and I wasn't going to ruin his fun. His dating life was more exciting than mine, and we'd spent most of the time talking about one girl he wanted to take out over the weekend. When he offered to hook me up with one of her friends, I said I'd consider it. Which was enough to keep him from pushing.

I made it to the café early enough that the line was only several people deep. It was enough of a wait for me to answer a few emails. I was only one person away from ordering when someone cleared her throat behind me. Loudly, if I might say so.

I turned around and came face to face with the reporter. "Not you again."

She blinked her thick lashes with surprise. “Oh, Mr. Walters, I thought that was you.”

“You’re going with that?” I asked. “Like you didn’t follow me here?”

She frowned. “Me? Follow you?”

“It seems to be your specialty,” I said. “My answer is still the same.”

“I know,” she said. “But I have another proposition for you.”

Nothing she could say would change my mind about giving her an interview. “What’s that?”

She scooted ahead of me in line. She wasn’t doing herself a favor by getting between me and breakfast. “Let me pay for your coffee or whatever you want. I just want to sit and talk with you for a few minutes. Then I’ll be out of your hair.”

If she had done her research, she would know that I was worth billions, and I didn’t need anyone to buy my coffee. But she was persistent. An idea formed, and I smiled at her.

She thought it was me agreeing, and I didn’t let her onto my plan.

“Okay,” I said. “You can pay for my breakfast.”

“Great!” she said and hurried up to the counter. I ordered first, and she ordered the same thing. It was so apparent that she was a fish out of water.

Once the barista handed over the bag with my pastry—a chocolate croissant—I took my coffee and headed for the door.

“Wait!” Sophia said, struggling to pull out the right number of bills and coins to pay for the food. “You said—”

“I said I’d let you pay,” I said, lifting my coffee cup and tipping it in her direction. “Cheers.”

Her slack-jawed expression was priceless as I let the door close behind me. She hadn’t been close to paying the bill yet, and I hoped that she charged it to her work account. Tricking

her into using her money might have made me feel bad, but she had brought it upon herself.

As a reporter, she should have realized what I had actually said, versus what she wanted to hear.

Even though I'd just met her, her face filled my mind all the way to the office. Her look of confusion brought a smile to my lips. It was a dirty trick, which would probably fuel her into stalking me some more. I wasn't sure if it was the coffee or the anticipation of breakfast, but if I did see her again, I wouldn't mind so much.



“You look awful chipper this morning,” Maddox said as I stopped by his office on the way to mine.

I bit into my chocolate croissant, not realizing that I had been smiling. “This is so good.”

Maddox sat back in his chair, reaching his hands up before clasping them together behind his head. “No. That’s not it, mate. There’s something else.”

I took another bite, drawing out the suspense. Even though Sophia annoyed me to no end, I enjoyed playing with her. It was a fun game, even if I clearly had the upper hand.

“That reporter followed me to the cafe this morning,” I said.

“Why didn’t you get me anything?” he asked with a fake pout.

“Listen to my story, and I’ll tell you,” I said before rehashing the short conversation with Sophia.

Maddox clicked his tongue. “That’s harsh, mate. You left her to foot the bill?”

“She’ll make her company pay for it,” I said. “Besides, I had to get her off my back. Reporters are like leeches. Once they find the opportunity, they cling on until they suck you dry.”

“I wouldn’t mind some of that from her,” Maddox said.

I rolled my eyes. “And that’s my cue to leave.”

Maddox jumped up from his chair. “Wait up.”

I allowed him to follow me into my office. I’d already dedicated way too much time to Sophia that morning. It was time for work.

“So after all that, you’re not going to give her the interview?”

“Why should I?” I asked. “I know she wants to know about—” I stopped.

“About what?” Maddox asked, crossing his arms.

“Every reporter wants to know about my personal life,” I said, not wanting to get into the shit with my family. Maddox knew that I was in line for the throne, but he didn’t know how short that line was. “That’s the only reason someone would cross international lines to talk to me.”

Maddox’s gaze flicked to the ceiling as if he doubted what I’d said. Did he think an American came across the pond to talk about our *business*? Sure, it was successful, but we had given Skype interviews before with reporters all over the world.

Sophia was here for me, plain and simple.

“She’s been trying so hard, though,” Maddox said. “It’s a little sad.”

“Well, she’s going to be the one crying, not me.”

“I’ll let you get to it,” he said and walked out.

His entire demeanor had changed since I gave up Sophia’s plan. I felt a little bad for him, not understanding why she’d been to our company, but I hoped that would deter him from allowing her in again.

Even though I’d duped her into thinking she had the interview, I doubted it was the last time I’d see Sophia Holmes.



I stayed until the sun nearly set on the horizon. Every time I stopped, Sophia's face popped into my mind. What was it about that annoying woman? Sure, she was gorgeous, but she was also a vessel for her newspaper to get a story about me.

Every time I caught myself thinking about her, I started a new project or set of emails. Before I knew it, it was almost seven at night.

I had no plans with Maddox, or anyone for that matter, so I never felt as if I had to go home at a certain time. Which was why I liked to stay in the office as much as I could. It made the sting of loneliness a little less sharp.

Closing up my office for the night, I walked down the empty hallways. The automatic lights came on as I tripped the sensors. Everyone was gone for the night, and for some reason, that made me feel lonelier than ever.

I had a huge house to go to, but no one in it was waiting for me. I'd traded relationships for success. At the same time, I had no other option. Any relationship I had was doomed from the start. Mother wouldn't allow a union between me and anyone she hadn't chosen herself.

There was no point in me dating anyone and possibly hurting them or myself. Besides, from what Maddox told me, women these days needed much more attention than what I'd be able to give. My hours were all over the place, as I was a slave to the business. And if I were honest with myself, I was a slave to my family, too. Father popping into my office and whisking me away earlier that week wasn't the first or last time. Any plans I might have had for New Year's would have been dashed within moments, leaving whoever I might have been dating alone for the night.

It was better this way.

Stepping out into the lobby, the lights were still on. I stopped in my tracks, realizing I wasn't alone at all.

“Ms. Holmes,” I said without looking at her.

She stood up from the chair, her bag slung over her shoulder as if she had been expecting me. “That was a dirty trick you pulled on me this morning.”

I couldn’t help smirking. “It was the only way to get rid of you. Or so I thought.”

“I won’t fall for it again,” she said, crossing the space to get to me.

“I won’t be giving you an interview,” I said. “You’ve wasted your day.”

“Not at all,” she said. “I questioned several of your employees about you.”

I cut a look at her. “What did they say?”

She buttoned her jacket, wearing a grin on her pink lips. “All good things, of course. But at least it gave me some info about your character.”

I lifted my chin, unsure of where she was going with this. And I wrestled to keep my gaze off her pretty lips.

“You’re stubborn,” she said flatly. “I get it. I tell you what, I’ll give up asking to get this interview with you.”

“You’ve sat here all day just to tell me that in person?” I asked.

She licked her lips. “What I’m trying to tell you is that I give up *asking*. But you will see me everywhere you go until you give in. You see, Mr. Walters, you might be stubborn, but I like a good competition. And I’m going to win this one.”

I had a feeling she was bluffing, but there was a shred of guilt in the back of my mind. I’d already seen what she was capable of doing in the two days I’d known her. She’d weaseled her way into my building and into my life. Would she go further? How far would she dig her spiked heels into my life before they were in too deep?

I had no idea what the budget for her company was, but she seemed determined to see this through to the end, either

way.

I hated to give in, but I wasn't about to have my life constantly interrupted by an interview. At least if I picked the location and the questions, I could control the situation instead of her bothering my employees and drilling her way into my life.

I wanted her to go, and I was the only person who could make that happen.

"Fine," I said. "If we go out to dinner tomorrow night, will you stop following me?"

She pursed her lips. "You have to answer my questions."

"I will decide which questions I want to answer," I said.

She chewed that over for a minute until I checked my watch. I wanted to get home and couldn't wait all night for the answer.

"Okay," she said.

"Alright," I said. "I'll ask my secretary to send you the information tomorrow."

"I will call first thing to make sure," she said.

"No doubt you will," I said. "Goodnight, Ms. Holmes."

"Goodnight, Mr. Walters."

"You know how to find your way to your hotel?" I asked, immediately regretting it. She'd been a nuisance since the moment she stepped into my building. Why did I care where she slept?

"I got here, didn't I?"

She certainly did. As I stepped out of the building, I grinned and was unable to stop for some time.



# CHAPTER 8



## SOPHIA

As I said I would, I called Mr. Walters's office first thing in the morning. He wasn't getting away from me now that I was so close. Showing up to his business later in the day had worked to my advantage. I didn't have to sit there all day like I knew he thought I would. If I followed him to his favorite cafe—information given to me by Maddox—he would know I would follow him to work.

I hadn't talked to his employees. It was a lie. Though I did try. None of them wanted anything to do with me. Whether that was because of his influence or not, I didn't know. I knew he was stubborn. I didn't need anyone to tell me that.

As much as Matt said I had charm, my charm was the cute and annoying type. One thing that made me so successful—minus a promotion—was my persistence, which worked well up against stubbornness.

To my surprise, his secretary had the information to give me.

“Reservation at Chez Vous at seven-thirty,” she said. “The reservation is under Mr. Walters.”

At the very least, it seemed like he had the intention of showing up. I had been worried that it was another switcheroo like he'd done at the cafe. I was still sore over that, and I would never let myself get trapped again.

Even in the conversation I would have with Matt when I got home, I wouldn't tell him how easily Mr. Walters had tricked me. It was embarrassing, and I knew he'd never let me

live it down. Perhaps Matt would pull the same trick on me when we saw each other next. He'd find it hilarious.

No, that secret was staying between Mr. Walters and me.

I hoped that in the time we would spend together at dinner, he would forget about it as well. It wasn't something I wanted to be known for, so it was time to make a good impression on him. Possibly so good that he opened up to me like a flower in bloom. Then, I would get my story and promotion and be done with the cocky prince.

Since I wasn't going to spend the day waiting for Mr. Walters, I went back to bed and slept for a few hours. Apparently, jet lag could stretch on to days after an arrival. When I woke, I was groggy and a little crabby.

After looking through my wardrobe, nothing seemed good enough.

I checked out the restaurant's website, and it was very fancy. Nothing in my suitcase would do. I'd barely packed enough for a week, thinking the job would be over quickly. Now, I was running out of clothes.

It was a good thing that I had a company card and access to a boutique within walking distance.

I didn't go on a crazy spending spree, but I managed to find something appropriate, and it was something I would wear again. So if Mr. Fraser challenged the excess fee, I would be able to pay for it myself and not be too sore about it.

Though after getting the interview to launch my career, I doubted he would mind too much. It could be part of a bonus.

My mood picked up a bit, and by the time I went back to the hotel room to shower and change, it was almost time to go.



I checked myself out in the mirror, adjusting my necklace and placing the final touches on my makeup. I couldn't remember the last time I dressed up for a date. While this one wasn't

romantic in the least, it was nice to want to look good for someone.

Thinking about my dating habits, I counted the months that it had been since I'd had any sort of date. I cringed at the number and vowed not to think about it again anytime soon.

I shook my shoulders, releasing the tension from my muscles. It was something I used to do in high school before a big performance for the drama club. I'd taken to the habit before any date or interview.

This wasn't a date. It was a professional meeting. While I had taken care to choose my outfit carefully to show off my assets, I wasn't going to let that distract him from the truth that I wanted to uncover.



I arrived at the restaurant a few minutes early, so I wasn't surprised that Mr. Walters wasn't there when the hostess sat me at the table. I took a moment to look around at the restaurant. It was the fanciest place I'd ever been to. The tablecloths were thick white linen that matched the napkin with a little pocket to hold my silverware.

Unwrapping the napkin, I placed it on my lap and smoothed it over my legs.

The place was packed, and the tinkling of silverware against plates created a melody that was somewhat soothing.

Waiters brought plates of food to other tables, and I sneaked a peek of the menu by checking out those dishes.

My server, a petite woman with honey-blond hair, asked if I wanted anything to drink. I wasn't sure what Mr. Walters wanted, and I wouldn't let alcohol impair my judgment when it came down to the crucial questions. "Water, please."

"Sparkling?" she asked.

"Sure," I said, and she hurried off.

She returned and poured two glasses of water before leaving again. I checked my phone. It was already several minutes past our meeting time.

I wasn't seated close to the windows, but I checked them anyway, expecting to see Mr. Walters run past to get to the table in time. I tried not to be aware of the two women sitting at the table next to me who lowered their voices and cut glances my way. They knew I was in the process of getting stood up. How I wanted to prove them wrong.

I went over my notes again, and in that time, the waitress returned twice to ask if I wanted anything. Minutes stretched on, and the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. The waitress didn't hide her pitying expression at all. Both of us knew I'd been stood up.

I waited exactly thirty minutes before I realized that I'd been duped once again. My cheeks burned. How could I have been so stupid?

Mr. Walters was going to be sorry he messed with me. He'd have to get the police involved if he wanted to stop me from upping my stalker game. This guy was messing with my livelihood, and I wasn't going to stand for it any longer.

I stood up from the chair and tossed my napkin onto the table.

Heat moved behind my eyes, but I was determined to keep my chin up. I strode out of the dining room and toward the coat check.

A gust of cold air filled the small lobby area, and I glanced at the door to see Luke Walters standing there.

I ground my teeth together as the coat check boy handed me my jacket.

"You aren't leaving?" Mr. Walters asked.

I handed the coat back to the boy. "Not anymore. It's nice of you to show up."

He crossed the room, unwrapped his scarf from around his neck, and took off his jacket, handing it over. "My apologies. I

didn't have your number to call you. But when I make an appointment, I stick to it."

"I think our table is still available," I said.

"It better be," he said. "I have a standing reservation here for clients."

I chewed on my lip. That was why this was so easy for him to set up. I tried not to feel let down a bit by that revelation. This meeting wasn't about me. It was about business to him, and I needed to get into that mindset as well.

Sitting down at the table, Mr. Walters was a complete gentleman, pushing my chair in and all.

The same waitress returned, and she was much happier, mirroring my internal emotions. I knew she had felt terrible for me, but I didn't need her pity anymore.

After he ordered a bottle of wine, he clasped his hands in front of him, dropping them onto his lap. "This is how it's going to go. You can ask me a question, but I get two questions for every one you ask me."

"I feel like that should be the opposite."

"Take it or leave it, Ms. Holmes. You've invaded my privacy all week. The least I deserve is some information on you."

Thinking back to my pretense about writing a story about the company, I decided to start off easy. Even though I was dying to jump right in with my questioning, once he had some wine, he'd probably relax more, and I'd be able to turn it into a conversation more than an interview.

I just had to bide my time. Besides, I didn't need to hide anything about myself. My life was pretty boring in general, so there wasn't much I wasn't willing to share with him.

"Okay," I said. "I'll play by your rules. But I'd like to have the first question."

He nodded.

I turned on my recorder app on my phone and placed the phone down between us. I had a pretty good memory, but I hoped the restaurant wasn't too loud to record.

"How long have you lived in the UK?" I asked, checking the wave bar on the screen of my phone. It picked up my voice perfectly.

He sighed and his shoulders visibly relaxed.

I bit down a smile. As long as I kept him comfortable and relaxed, I'd get my story.

"About five years now," he said. "Before that, I traveled a lot for work. Learning the business."

I opened my mouth to say something, but he held a finger up. "It's my turn."

I clamped my mouth shut and allowed him to question me.

"Where are you from?" he asked.

"Texas." If he wanted the nitty-gritty, he'd have to ask another question. Inwardly, I smiled, feeling as if I still had some control.

"All your life?" he asked.

"Yes." That was question two. My turn now.

We went back and forth for a while. Apparently, he had no experience with being an interviewer. If he was trying to get something on me, it wasn't going to work, especially not with the questions he was asking.

It seemed as if he hadn't spoken to an American in a while, or ever. He was interested in the types of places I'd been around the country, which was good since I'd never been anywhere else.

Until the main course arrived, I kept my questions on the easy side, while sneaking in a few about his travels as well. He gave me the perfect "in" to ask, and he didn't seem bothered to answer.

I was halfway through my meal before I went for an easy, yet prying question. "So, how did your father become king?"

The friendly crinkle at the corner of his eyes smoothed out. “This dinner is over.” He placed his napkin on top of his half-finished meal and waved his hand at the waitress, pinching his fingers together for the universal sign for, “Check, please.”

“Wait,” I said. “You said I could ask—”

“Goodnight, Ms. Holmes. I’ve fulfilled my part of the bargain. I hope my questions will help you write your story about our *company*.”

He was out of the chair before I could utter another word.

The waitress came over to the table and started to clear his plate. “The meal is covered by Mr. Walters’s account. Would you like anything else?”

The fish in my stomach solidified and hardened as I watched Luke Walters disappear from the restaurant. The fact that he left meant I was on to something.

I couldn’t let him go that easily, but what else could I do? I knew that I needed more time with him to get the story that Mr. Fraser wanted, but other than stalking Mr. Walters to his business again—which I said I wouldn’t do if he took me out—I had to think of another way to get my questions answered, or else what was the point in coming to England at all?

The promotion was so close that I could see it within my grasp. It was in the shape of a tall, dark man who was walking out of the building.

I placed my napkin on the table and told the waitress that I was finished. Standing up, I wobbled a little on my heels, feeling the aftereffects of getting to know Luke in a way that I hadn’t before. Along with needing the information for the story, I wanted to see him again. And when I wanted something, I worked my butt off to get it.



# CHAPTER 9



## LUKE

I worked most Sundays, but after traveling home and dealing with the sexy yet pesky reporter all week, I slept in for a change. Well, my sleeping in was until seven, but I lounged around in bed for another hour, answering work emails and texts from Maddox on my phone.

The comfort of my soft duvet was enough to make me dread getting out of bed. Having a four-thousand square foot flat for just me had never seemed so lonely. I wasn't about to fill my bed with strange women, but it would have been nice to wake up next to someone every once in a while.

I thought of Sophia Holmes. I imagined her slinky red dress from the night before crumpled on the floor at the base of my bed. Her heels tipped over next to them and whatever undergarments she wore tangled up in the bedpost. The Dallas Post had done their job well sending her, but still, her motives were unclear.

I had a feeling she wanted to cover me rising to the throne, but she seemed entirely comfortable to talk about the company. Maybe I'd been too hasty to end our dinner. It was no secret that I was a prince. Maybe she *did* just want to know a few things.

Guarding my family against the press had always been my number one priority, and I couldn't trust anyone with the information. Reporters in general always stuck their noses where they didn't belong. And coupling that with the high and mighty American attitude, I didn't know if I could trust her with any information.

The look on her face had haunted my dreams. I was aware of how women looked at me. I wasn't ugly, but I'd never attracted an American before. We both had enjoyed our time together. I only wished that she didn't ruin it by playing her hand. At least, that was what I thought she did.

Tossing my phone to the other side of the bed, I rolled over and tucked the covers around myself. The black-out curtains were closed, so the sunlight from the day still hadn't touched me. I groaned into my pillow. I hadn't felt this way about a woman in some time. It was probably why I had been single for so long. As with work, I tended to get obsessed with the things in my life. Worrying about how a date went—even though last night was not a date at all—would only interfere with my work.

As my eyes drifted closed, a shrill sound from the other room made them spring open.

It was my landline. Only one person had that number, and she'd be upset if I didn't pick up on the first call.

Hopping out of bed, I crossed the room and grabbed my robe from its place near the door. The bright light from outside, streaming in through my floor-to-ceiling windows, temporarily blinded me as I headed for the living room to pick up the phone.

"Hello?" I said, grabbing it.

"Luke?" Mother asked from the other side. "Why did you take so long to pick up?"

I ground my teeth together. "Good morning to you too, Mother."

"How are you, my son?" She flipped on her sweet tone after having a little poke at me.

"I'm fine," I said, stifling a yawn.

"Don't tell me you stayed out all night. That is not conducive to a healthy life."

I held back a groan. "Mother, do I ever stay out all night?"

“I don’t know what you do in that country. I only know what I see on the television.”

I couldn’t imagine what she thought I did then. “No, I wasn’t out all night. Just dealing with some jet lag.”

“Mm hmm,” she said. It was a disapproving sound. She knew I was lying.

At the moment, I wasn’t going to argue about what I did in my own time with my mother.

“How’s Abir?” I crossed the room, heading for the kitchen. If I was going to have the conversation I knew I was about to, coffee was in order.

“He’s lovely as always,” Mother said. “Speaking of family and their duties...”

I rolled my eyes as I poured coffee grounds into the machine. Mother was terrible at segues.

“I was wondering if you’ve decided on becoming our next king,” she said.

She was also terrible at being subtle.

I shoved the little door on the coffee machine closed harder than I’d meant to, rattling the carafe. “Father said I had a month to decide.” I had the urge to record myself saying that and playing it every time she asked. It wasn’t worth my breath anymore. Why bother with a deadline if they were going to hound me every few days? They couldn’t beat a decision out of me, so why did he even give me a deadline at all?

Their controlling nature was one reason I wanted to leave the palace. Did they honestly think I wanted to go back there and live out the legacy that they chose for themselves?

“Yes, he did,” Mother said. “If you want to talk about it—”

“I don’t,” I said.

“No need to be rude,” she said after a pause. She had a hell of a temper behind the scenes, and even from hundreds of miles away, I felt her silent fury.

“I’m sorry, Mother. I don’t intend to be rude. I only wish to be given the time that Father allowed. It was a surprise to have him show up. I need the time to think about it if I’m going to leave the life I’ve known for a while.”

“I see,” she said, although I knew she didn’t. Neither of them did.

“You will be the first to know when I make my decision, either way.”

She made a small disapproving sound.

I could almost see her face, her lips pursed and her eyes accusing. Neither of them saw our family’s place in the kingdom as optional, but I did. Being king was sort of my birthright, but I wanted to think through all possible scenarios. I would be tied to the palace for the rest of my life. I’d have to marry someone I barely knew, and then, along with the kingdom pressuring me to make decisions all the time, I’d have my wife to pressure me into siring an heir. I wasn’t sure if my parents were ever like that, since they were so good at hiding their emotions from me, but even as a kid, I never envisioned that life for myself.

There were a lot of “what ifs” I had to mull through, and today wasn’t that day.

It was too much. I was an adult, but I wasn’t ready to be a king. I didn’t think I ever would be.

Would there ever be a scenario where they understood that? Or was I doomed to be king against my will?

I changed the subject and asked about what she’d been up to over the past week. She loved to talk about the things she did around the palace, feeling as if she had any part in the critical decisions.

“I’ve planned a banquet for next week,” she said. “I’ve found a woman that I know you will approve of.”

I gulped down a few sips of the searing hot coffee in my cup before I said, “Mother, I don’t want to be set up.”

“You can’t stay single forever,” she said. “You need someone to make you happy.”

She was half right. I didn’t need anyone to make me feel a certain way, but I didn’t want to be single forever. I just wanted it all on my terms. If I gave my parents an inch, they’d take a mile. If I admitted that I wanted a girlfriend, they would have droves of women bothering me at my office as Sophia did.

*Sophia.*

An idea formed around the reporter’s presence in my life which might get Mother off my back.

“I’ve already met a woman,” I said. “We were out last night together in fact.”

“You did?” Mother hadn’t sounded this surprised since I told her I was leaving for the UK.

“I didn’t want to say anything since it’s so early in our relationship, but I have a girlfriend now. So, there’s no need for any more setups.”

“How happy I am to hear this news,” Mother said. “You must bring her to the banquet next week.”

I froze in my spot as if Mother had appeared in the room and caught me out in my lie. “I don’t think so. It’s too early for that. I don’t think she’s ready to meet the family.”

“We want to meet her,” Mother said. “To see if she will fit in with our family. There’s no use in you dating anyone if she doesn’t.”

“Can’t I enjoy being with someone I want to be with?” I asked.

“You’re nearing mid-thirties, Luke. There’s not much time left for you to remain single. You need to settle down, and your Father and I will determine who that is to be with.”

My chest rose with heavy breathing. “What if I said I wasn’t coming?”

“Then I will send your Father to pick you up again,” Mother warned. “You and your girlfriend will arrive Friday. The banquet will last all weekend. That is plenty of time for you to make arrangements.”

I completely shut down at that point. “Is that all, Mother?”

“Yes—”

I hung up the phone on her. I knew I’d pay for that when I got to the palace, but at that moment, I didn’t care.

I’d created a lie to appease her. Now, I had to put some proof into that lie. There was no woman that I could take home with me. Was Mother trying to prove that? Did she somehow know that I was lying? She wanted me to show up to the banquet without someone to prove that I needed her to pick someone suitable for me.

I definitely stuck my foot in my mouth, and it was lodged so far in there, I’d need a crowbar to get it out.

I had a week to find someone, or prove to Mother that I’d lied. She would make sure I had more than one option available next weekend, and I doubted she would allow me to leave until I chose one. My visits were few and far between, and my age was a ticking clock for her. I imagined her arranging marriages left and right with other prestigious families, waiting for me to pick one from the lot.

The only way that I could prevent that from happening was to find someone who was on my side. Someone who could pretend to be my girlfriend to get Mother off my back for a little while.

Only one person came to mind. It was the one woman that would prove to my parents that I wasn’t ready or willing to assimilate into the kingdom. And both of us wanted something from each other. My business side kicked into play, and I mentally drew up a negotiation that neither of us could refuse.

# CHAPTER 10





## SOPHIA

I dreaded the “check-in” phone call that Mr. Fraser scheduled on Monday afternoon. I had nothing to give him, but I couldn’t lie. If I told him I had the story, he’d want to see at least a rough draft before sending me home right away. I bet the hotel wasn’t cheap and keeping me here when I was “finished” wouldn’t help the company’s bottom line.

I had to tell him the truth, no matter how hard it would be.

My eyes darted between the phone and the small digital clock on the side of the bed. I wished it would just ring. I didn’t think I had enough fingernails to last me the next few minutes. I placed my hands on my lap, pressing them against my thighs. Bleeding from the fingers wasn’t going to help me write a story.

I had spent the majority of the day on Sunday, and earlier that day, researching more about Luke Walters. If he wasn’t going to allow me to interview him, the least I could do was start my article with some background. I hated using other sources when the center of my piece was less than a half hour away, but my future seemed bleak.

I doubted Mr. Fraser would allow me another chance with an easier target for an article. I’d be stuck in the same rut for who knew how long.

The clock on the side table turned to four on the dot when my cell rang.

I jumped out of my chair and picked it up. “Mr. Fraser.” I paced around the room. It wasn’t that large, and with the

furniture in the way, I had a short distance to go before turning on my heel and heading in the other direction.

“Hello, Sophia,” he said. He sounded chipper, and I supposed his coffee was still coursing through his veins. My caffeine level had plummeted, though no one would have guessed it since I hopped around the space as if I were five cups in. “How is the story going?”

Well, he got right down to business. I didn’t expect any different, but a girl could hope.

“Mr. Walters is quite a difficult subject,” I said.

“So I’ve heard.”

“You have?”

“Yes,” he said. “Which is why I sent you. We haven’t had any luck in the past.”

My jaw dropped. I wasn’t the first on his list? So, this wasn’t *my* promotional piece? He only sent me because no one else could do it?

“I went to his office numerous times, but he won’t budge on the interview,” I explained. If I had the same luck as the others, would he send me home and try again with someone else? At the very least, I could try again for the promotion another time.

“That’s disappointing.”

I squeezed my eyes closed and pressed my fingers to my temple. Why did his disapproving tone make me feel like a kid again? “I tried, Mr. Fraser. I waited for hours on two separate days to see him. I can’t force him to talk to me. I managed to speak with his partner—”

“Did you get any information about the royal succession from him?” Mr. Fraser asked.

“Well, no, but it doesn’t seem like anyone else knows about it. Or maybe they are contracted not to talk about it? I’m not sure.”

Mr. Fraser sighed again. I would have preferred him to tell me how disappointed he was again, rather than hear that. “If you want to make it as a reporter, then you need to get the story that I sent you there for.”

“But—”

“No but’s about it, Ms. Holmes.”

We were back to formalities again. He only did that when he was upset with someone. His disapproval rarely landed on me since I was mostly given fluff pieces. He saved his disappointment for his more experienced reporters. I wondered if they ever felt the way I did at that moment. They wouldn’t be human if they didn’t.

Sweat formed under my armpits. Even though it was freezing in the UK, I pulled off my sweater, needing to cool down.

“Thank you, Mr. Fraser,” I said, sticking my tail firmly between my legs. The conversation was over according to him. If I said any more, I’d risk him sending me home and never getting an opportunity again. I wouldn’t do that until it was necessary.

“I will check in with you in two days, Ms. Holmes. I expect you to have something written.”

“I will,” I said and hung up the phone.

I squeezed the little device in my hand until the edges pressed a little too hard against my palm. Letting go, there were marks in my hand from the phone.

What the hell was I going to do? I had already told Luke that I wasn’t going to bother him again if we went to dinner.

Could I pull a fast one on him like he did at the cafe? Could I say my terms were him answering my questions in addition to that?

I cringed at the idea of stalking him to his house, but what other choice did I have? All he had to do was answer some stupid questions. None of them were particularly revealing, at

least in my opinion. Why did he care so much? Did he enjoy playing games?

I shoved my phone into my bag and tugged on my scarf and jacket. Mr. Luke Walters wasn't going to prevent me from getting the promotion that I deserved. I would sit in his office building all week and really pester him if that was what I needed to do.

With Mr. Fraser's insistence that I get the work done no matter what, maybe he wouldn't be too upset if I ended up in jail for trespassing, if Mr. Walters became too upset with me.

Though I had a feeling he'd never do that. In the short conversation we had the night before when we were getting to know each other, there was something different about his demeanor. He wasn't as agitated with me. He seemed almost amused.

Did he like me? Had I put on enough charm for him to change his mind about me? Was there a way I could use that to my advantage?

First thing first, I had to get to his office. I was cutting it close on time, but I crossed my fingers that he continued to be the workaholic that he proved to be so far.

I wasn't sure what I would tell him, but he'd have to listen to me. He didn't have a choice anymore. My claws were out, and I was going to dig them into the ground until I got my story.

If I was going to have a crazy taxi driver on any day, I was happy it was that afternoon. While I white-knuckled the handle of the door next to me, we ended up at the building before five.

The lights were still on all over the building, and I had a feeling that Luke was in his office.

After thanking the driver, I sprinted into the building. The temperature wasn't what I was used to, and I was friggin'

freezing. When I reached the lobby, I thought I was going to carve out a new set of teeth by the way I was chattering.

“You again?” Victoria asked from behind the front desk. She stood up and dug one hand into her hip. “Mr. Walters said he was done with you.”

“He might be done with me, but I’m not done with him.” Like hell was I going to let this girl under my skin. Though she was close to a phone that could be used to call the police.

“I’m not interrupting him,” she said.

“That’s fine,” I said. “I’ll wait here.”

She muttered something under her breath and sat down again. The chairs in the lobby were far enough away from her desk that I could block her out completely.

Since I’d done all my research the last two days, I honestly had nothing to do.

Instead, I opened my eBook app on my phone and continued reading a book I’d started on the plane. It was a recommendation from Matt, but I had a feeling from the sexy guy and girl on the cover that he gave me the first recommendation he saw. I knew he was trying to tell me something. That I needed a hot guy like the cover model to throw me onto the bed and have his way with me. While I wanted that too, I had to focus on my work story than the pathetic story of my love life.

Every time the elevator dinged, I stood up, preparing myself to come face to face with Luke. He needed to know that I wasn’t lounging around while waiting for him. I was serious, and he should treat me so.

I only leaped out of my chair twice before his handsome face appeared from the elevator bank.

His eyes found mine almost immediately. Unlike every other time I saw him, his face split into a wide grin. At first, it seemed like he was teasing me, but as he came closer, he looked genuinely happy to see me.

My hackles rose. What was he up to? Did he have the police waiting for me outside?

I glanced at Victoria. Had she told him I was there? Was I going to have another conversation with Mr. Fraser today, telling him that he needed to bail me out of jail?

“Sophia,” he said. “I knew you were going to be back.”

I narrowed my eyes. “You did?”

“Of course,” he said. “A woman like you never gives up.”

“You don’t know anything about me,” I said defensively, but then realized he *did* know quite a lot about me after our little Q&A session the other night at dinner. “You didn’t fulfill your end of the bargain again. I’m not leaving until—”

“Are you hungry?” he asked, checking his watch. “It’s a little early for dinner, but I skipped lunch today.”

“Um, sure,” I said, still taken aback that he wanted to go somewhere with me even after I continued to bother him at work.

“I just want to be clear,” he said, locking his beautiful light brown eyes with mine. “I have a business opportunity I’d like to discuss with you. I think it will benefit us both.”

“That’s fine with me,” I said. I wasn’t looking to start anything with someone I had to write a story about. A business deal was exactly what I was looking for. And if it benefited us both, then I had some idea of what he was offering. An interview in exchange for something. I had no idea what that “something” was, but I wasn’t about to pass up the opportunity.

# CHAPTER 11



## LUKE

“Do you have a car?” I asked Sophia.

“No, I don’t,” Sophia said. “I’ve been taking taxis.”

“Good,” I said. “I’ll drive.”

Finding Sophia in the lobby was exactly what I had hoped for after speaking with Mother the day before. The plan had formed almost immediately. Sophia was an intelligent woman that wanted something from me, just as much as I wanted something from her.

Earlier that morning, I’d informed Victoria to covertly alert me if and when Sophia came to the office again. Giving Sophia a little time to wait allowed me to prepare for what I was going to say to her. I was used to being ahead of any business deal, and I knew we’d both benefit mutually from this, as long as I could convince her to go along with it.

A weight had been lifted when I received Victoria’s phone call. A small part of me was afraid that Sophia would give up after what I’d done at the end of our dinner on Saturday.

I planned to agree to the interview as long she pretended to be my girlfriend for the banquet. I knew Mother wouldn’t approve, but she’d never stand in the way of my happiness. We had to sell it. And with Sophia being a prolific liar in her day job, she was the perfect fit. And she was motivated. We both were.

I held the door for her as we exited the building. I caught a suspicious look from Victoria. She’d been around Sophia’s for



much longer than I had over the last week, but she still seemed not to trust her. I wasn't sure if it was because she was American or if Victoria was jealous.

For some reason, the latter pleased me. If other women were jealous of Sophia, that meant she was a good choice for my plan. Even Mother wasn't immune to looks, and she would want handsome grandchildren.

As long as I could rein in Sophia's western attitudes a little, we would survive the weekend.



Even though Sophia tried to question me about what was going on, I kept her at bay until we reached the pub. I wanted to be able to gauge her reaction when I offered her my deal. The pub was loud enough that no one would bother listening to us, and I had a corner booth saved for me to give us even more privacy. I didn't expect anyone to be listening in, but if anyone overheard that I wanted Sophia to pretend to be my girlfriend for the king, there might be strange looks and I wasn't prepared to answer any questions about it.

Walking into the pub was like being enveloped in a warm blanket. A fire in the hearth pumped out enough heat to thaw my fingers and toes. Typically, I was used to the cold and damp weather, but after spending two days at the palace, I knew I'd need at least another week to get comfortable again.

I led Sophia to the corner booth and we settled in. I faced the rest of the patrons while keeping her back to them. I wanted to control the situation as much as I could.

"How much longer are you going to keep me in suspense?" she asked.

"Do you want a pint?" I asked.

She nodded. "Sure."

Slipping out of my seat, I went to the bar and ordered before coming back to my seat. I needed liquid courage to explain my plan to her.

“I wanted to apologize for how I left the other night,” I said when I got back to my seat.

Her eyebrows shot up. “You do? I never thought you’d admit to being so rude.”

“I wasn’t trying to be rude,” I said. “I just don’t like to talk about my family.”

Sophia nodded. “Obviously, but to be honest, I’m here to do just that.”

Henrietta, one of the older waitresses, brought over our drinks. “What can I getcha?”

“May I see a menu?” Sophia asked her.

Henrietta nodded and walked away to get one.

“I know that’s why you’re here,” I said.

“You do?” she asked.

“I knew from the first day I met you that you were here to talk about my father and me.”

“How did you guess?” she asked, sipping from her glass.

I licked my lips as she pulled the glass away. My gaze focused on her graceful neck as she swallowed.

“I, uh,” I stammered then cleared my throat. “No one writes about my company anymore. At least, until we get a big sale, and you were here too soon to figure that out.”

“I never claimed to be a secret spy,” she said. “I’m here to write a story about your Father stepping down from the throne. And you as the heir.”

I clasped my hands in front of me and glanced at the menu, even though I’d already memorized it some time ago. “And I’m willing to give you that story.”

“You will?”

“Yes, but I’m not giving it away for free.”

“You want me to pay you?” she asked, wrinkling her nose. It was sexy as hell. I loved getting a rise out of this woman.

“No, I need you to do me a favor,” I said.

“What kind of favor?” she asked, leaning forward. Her breasts pressed against the table, and I wanted to be that slab of wood that separated the two of us.

“I need you to be my girlfriend,” I said.

She made a choking sound and shook her head furiously. “What?”

“For the weekend,” I clarified.

“Is this some kinky stuff you’ve dreamed up to send me packing? Because I can’t leave without this story, but I’m not just going to screw you—”

“Please,” I said, holding my hand up. “I don’t want you to do *that*. Let me explain. My parents have been on my ass lately about finding a wife. I mentioned to my mother that I had a girlfriend already and she wants to meet this woman. I’m supposed to bring her to a banquet she’s hosting this weekend.”

Sophia smirked. “But there isn’t a woman?”

“Not in the least,” I said. “My days consist mostly of work to keep the family business afloat. Mother hasn’t worked a day in her life, so she has a different outlook than most people. Anyway, I will give you the interview if you help me out.”

“Why me?” she asked.

“We both have something to gain here,” I said. “I can’t reveal that my father is stepping down to just any woman. You already know that. And we both have something important riding on this.”

“Where is this banquet?” Sophia asked.

“At the palace,” I said.

“Palace?” she balked. “Like, your family’s home?”

“Is that a problem?” I asked. “I thought you wanted this interview.”

“I do!” she said. “I really do, but this is a lot. I don’t know if I’ll be able to leave—”

“Everything will be paid for: travel, clothing, expenses.”

“Clothing?” she asked.

That was the clincher. Sophia could not show up at my parents’ home dressed the way she did. I didn’t mind the Western way that women dressed in many parts of the world, but my parents were too traditional for their own good. If I was going to convince them, I had to show them that I was serious about this girl and she was serious about me. The only way to do that was to at least dress her properly. I couldn’t change too much about Sophia, or else there would be the chance of Mother figuring out we were lying.

Of course, it was all a ruse, but I had to make it as convincing as possible or my giving up the story for Sophia would be for nothing.

“Yes,” I said. “My parents will expect my girlfriend to look a certain way when it comes to her clothes.”

She looked down at her blouse. It was modest by modern terms, but it would be scandalous to Mother’s sensibilities.

“You will have to cover up much more,” I said. “Is that a problem?”

“No,” she said with a little laugh. “Most of the time, Matt tells me to show off my body a little more.”

“Matt?” Selfishly, I hadn’t asked if she had a boyfriend. My blood ran cold. Had I given her more for her story while she planned on not doing this at all? How could I be so foolish?

“My friend,” she clarified. “He’s always trying to get me to let loose, but work tends to get in the way of relationships. You know that better than most, I imagine.”

“I do,” I said, letting out a breath. “So, you will do it?”

“I will,” she said. “I have to clear it with my boss, but I don’t think he will have an issue, especially if he’s not paying.”

“Good,” I said, leaning away from the table. “How about we order something?”

“What’s good here?” she asked, perusing the menu.

“Everything,” I said.

She smiled and studied the paper in front of her. I tried to keep my attention off her, but now that she wasn’t hounding me for information, I had a chance to look at her really. Her hair was a beautiful shade of brown. She hadn’t highlighted it or dyed it. Mother would at the very least be pleased about that. I imagined touching it and tangling my fingers around its strands.

I wondered if she would have a problem with me touching her. We were going to be in a fake relationship, after all. Would she play the part as much as we needed to?

I didn’t expect her to jump into my bed—though that would be a welcome idea—but we’d have to show that we were intimate with each other.

Her eyes lifted, catching mine staring at her. “I’m going with the mini pasties and croquettes.”

“Those are appetizers,” I said.

She smirked. “It’s something I do in places I’ve never been. I find that I can never make up my mind, and ordering off the app menu gives a good idea about the chef’s cooking.”

“I’ve never thought of it that way.”

“I don’t get out much,” she said. “Delivery is my forte.”

Henrietta came by again and took our order, and I bought another round of beer.

When the drinks came to our table, Sophia lifted her glass and held it in the air between us. “Cheers to a fake relationship.”

“Cheers,” I said, mesmerized by her mouth and the way it curved over the lip of her glass. I was going to have to get used to looking at Sophia without other emotions taking over. Though if I gave in to them, it would only add to the ruse. I

would be getting more out of this bargain than I first anticipated, which made it that much sweeter.

# CHAPTER 12



## SOPHIA

The meeting with Luke had not gone as I expected when I agreed to speak with him. It made up for the quick exit he made at the mention of his father at the fancy restaurant. At least at the very end of it, I would have my story and, hopefully, the promotion to go along with it. He was right; we were both benefiting from this arrangement, even though getting this interview hadn't been at all the way I imagined.

Now, all I had to do was travel to a Middle Eastern country and make it appear as if I was in a relationship with the crown prince.

It all seemed simple enough, but the moment he dropped me off at my hotel, a flurry of nervous jitters shot up my arms and down my legs. Could I do this? Could I fool a *king*? Luke seemed more worried about his mother, though. Should I be more worried?

I took a calming breath.

This was my job, and my promotion was all about getting this interview. I couldn't let my nerves get the best of me. I was used to doing whatever it took to get my story, but I wasn't used to lying to people about being in a relationship. Luke seemed to think it would work, but we barely knew each other. And I was going to a place where women like me were unfamiliar. If there was ever a fish out of the water, Sophia Holmes from Texas was that fish.

I worked through my doubts on the way up to my room. I needed a boost from Matt, but I wanted to get in touch with



Mr. Fraser first. If he didn't want me going anywhere, I'd have to tell Luke right away. But I already knew the answer before he picked up.

"Mr. Fraser," I said into the phone.

"Sophia," he said. We were back on a first name basis. He probably thought his pep talk had worked and I had the story for him.

I hoped he wouldn't be too disappointed in having to wait a little bit longer.

"I need to tell you something," I said.

"Yes?" He dragged the word out with skepticism dripping from the syllable.

"I had a meeting with Luke Walters tonight," I said.

"You did." It wasn't a question.

"Yes, and he made me an interesting proposition." On the way to the hotel, I decided to be transparent with my boss. Lying would only get me into trouble when I was found out. "He needs to get his parents off his back about dating, so he wants me to pretend to be his girlfriend for some banquet this weekend at his home."

There was a long pause on the other end. I thought the call had dropped when Mr. Fraser finally spoke.

"You're going to meet the rest of the royal family?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "It was the only way he'd give me an interview. If you're on board with this, I'll be traveling to his palace this weekend, so the story won't be complete until at least next week."

"That's fine," Mr. Fraser said. "Actually, it's more than fine. No other news outlet has broken the story yet. And with Luke in your pocket like this, no one will beat us to the punch."

I wasn't sure who was in whose pocket. I wanted to spend more time with Luke for less than professional reasons, even

though I'd never admit it to anyone but myself. "So, you're okay with it?"

"More than okay," he said. "I'm thrilled that you've been able to get this close to the prince. You don't know what this story will do for us. For you, especially."

My breathing hitched. Was he confirming that this piece would get me my promotion? I knew I had a chance, but this was more than I expected. Now, I was even more motivated to do the job the best that I could.

"I can't believe our luck," he said. "But you better not screw this up."

"I won't."

"No Western woman has ever been in front of the royal family," he said.

"Seriously?" A sinking weight pressed against my stomach. As much as I was grateful for the opportunity of a lifetime, being the first was a huge responsibility. It was a good thing Luke was going to be with me the whole time.

"Treat this like any other assignment," Mr. Fraser said. "Do your research on the family and their customs. Ask questions. If Mr. Walters is so interested in making a good impression, then he will probably be more than willing to help. Use him as you would a regular source. He's your best asset for what you're about to do."

I nodded, but I knew he couldn't see me.

"Make this work," he said. "And keep your eyes peeled. There may be another story to uncover about this family."

"I will," I said. The prospect was enticing. Two stories for the price of one. I could smell a bigger paycheck.

"Best of luck, Sophia. Your career with us is riding on this."

He hung up.

No pressure then.

I paced around the room several times before swiping my finger over my phone screen. I needed to unload some of the tension in my body.

I dialed Matt, wanting more of a friendly conversation where I could work through my anxiety about this assignment. Luke's proposition had upped it a notch, and I needed encouragement instead of pressure.

I had almost a week to prepare, but I imagined failing miserably, letting down Luke, Mr. Fraser, and worst of all, myself.

There was my pessimism again. If only my optimistic friend would answer his damn phone.

The call went to voicemail, and the food from dinner churned in my stomach. I needed to relax. A bath would do.

As I started to undress, my phone rang.

I grabbed it and swiped at the screen, briefly seeing Matt's smiling face before the call connected.

"Sorry about that," he said. "I was in the middle of another call."

"No big deal," I said.

"It sounds like a big deal. What's up, Soph?"

I raked my hand through my hair, pulling it away from my heated face. "Oh, not much. I just had a prince ask me to be his fake girlfriend to impress his parents, the king and queen. You know, just a regular day."

"Wait, back up," Matt said. "Tell me everything."

I quickly explained the situation to him. While I thought it would calm me down to talk about it, I felt more nervous than ever.

"Let me get this straight," Matt said. "He's going to give you the interview after paying for an exotic trip to meet his parents in a *palace*?"

"Basically," I said, rolling my shoulders. I wished I had enough money for a massage before going. I certainly needed

it.

“Sounds like the opportunity of a lifetime,” he said.

“Mr. Fraser said a Western woman has never been in front of the royal family before.”

“Well, I reckon it’s about time!” he said with the most idiotic cowboy accent.

“Not that kind of western,” I said.

“I know,” he said. “I’m trying to lighten you up a bit. I can hear your teeth grinding from here.”

“I’m not grinding my teeth,” I said.

“Listen, Mr. Walters obviously thinks you’re the woman for the job. You need to trust people when they compliment you.”

“I do,” I said, only half-lying. “This is so important, though. I can’t screw it up.”

“Do you think Luke is going to pull the same thing he did at the restaurant? Bring you there and then not give the interview?”

“No,” I said. “He needs this to get his parents off his back. Besides, if he reneges then I can always expose to his parents that I’m his fake girlfriend. Which I doubt he’d ever do. From the way he described it, his mother is always throwing women at him.”

“How horrible,” Matt said. “She can’t be worse than my own mother, though.”

“Don’t speak ill of the dead. You know that’s not right.”

“Or they’ll come back to haunt you?” he teased.

I couldn’t help but laugh. He had a way of making me feel better. He always had.

“So, what does this prince look like?” he asked.

“Not like a prince at all,” I said. “At least, not how I imagined. He looks like every other suited guy coming out of a multi-billion dollar office, like the ones downtown.”

“Like me?” Matt asked.

“Pretty much.”

“Then you will get along swimmingly,” he said with a smile in his voice.

“He’s different at the same time,” I said, pulling up my memory of him. “He’s dark-skinned, almost like he’s been tanning every day for his whole life. A golden color, though, not a gross orange. His hair is so black and thick, and he doesn’t style it with a ton of gel. It’s enough to give him the ‘I roll out of bed like this’ look. He’s in pretty good shape, at least from what I’ve seen. The way his suits are tailored to him, they fit like a glove. He always looks pristine, which is kind of annoying, but nice to look at. He’s so stubborn, he almost reminds me of myself.”

I took a breath, and there was silence on the other line.

“Matt?”

“I wasn’t sure if you were finished,” Matt said.

“What are you talking about? I thought you wanted to know.”

“For someone who is supposed to be impartial to the subject of her story, you’ve spent an awful amount of time thinking about him.”

“No I haven’t,” I said.

“Please,” Matt said. “His hair is so black and thick.’ Should I go on?”

“I didn’t say that,” I said.

“You like him, don’t you?” he asked in a teasing tone.

“I don’t!” I said, affronted. “You asked what he looked like.”

“Middle Eastern man, dark skin, black hair would have sufficed.”

I chewed on my lip. “You’re not helping me feel any better about this.”

“I’m sorry, Soph. But I’m pretty sure you have it bad for this guy. At least that will help convince his family.”

“I’m hanging up now,” I said and did just that, hearing the echo of Matt’s laughter on the other end before it abruptly cut off.

I dropped my phone on the bed and stared at it. I really needed a bath.

The bathroom had a spa-style tub, and I jacked up the heat and the jets. After soaking for a few minutes, my mind wandered to the conversation with Matt.

If he was right about my attraction to Luke, would that help or hurt my chances of making a good impression? I had to spend time with him this week to prepare for the trip. How was I going to talk to him like a normal person when I had flutters in my stomach whenever I thought of him?

# CHAPTER 13



## LUKE

Waking up on Tuesday morning, I wasn't filled with the same sinking sensation of dread in my stomach. Sophia had agreed to pretend to be my girlfriend. I couldn't believe that everything had fallen into place like pieces of a puzzle. If I'd never met Sophia, I would have been subjected to Mother and her attempts to set me up again.

I didn't plan on marrying Sophia, but our "relationship" would get Mother off my back for a little while. I doubted I could convince Sophia to come back to the UK or even Qatar once she returned to Dallas, so I would be living on borrowed time.

That was if we could convince everyone that our relationship was real in the first place.

My feelings for Sophia were strictly platonic, but she *was* my type. Without dating anyone for some time, I didn't think I had a type. But the way that she always said what she wanted and made me laugh made me excited to see her again. Of course, she was beautiful. That made it easier for what I intended to do. I didn't mind looking into her eyes or seeing the way her mouth curved ever so slightly when I turned her down or said something that amused her.

She hadn't disappointed me yet, so I hoped we'd be able to keep up that streak for three days.

We would be okay as long as I did my absolute best to influence her to keep the essential things in the front of her mind: clothing, attitude, and customs.



Throughout the morning, my mind wandered to Sophia on a regular basis. Each breath I took between answering emails, I thought of Sophia in my family home. I imagined her dressed the way the other women did, accentuating her looks by covering most of her body. Even though I knew what her body looked like, there was something about the traditional dress that heightened the attraction. It was almost like I was privy to a secret.

I shook off that feeling when Justine knocked on my office door around eleven-thirty.

Her chin was down and focused on the tablet in front of her. “I’ve cleared your afternoon as you asked, Mr. Walters. Lunch is scheduled with Ms. Holmes at twelve. I’ve sent the details to your calendar.”

“Thank you, Justine,” I said, standing up. “Forward me anything urgent and call me if there are any issues. While this is a business lunch and meeting, I will be fully available.”

“Very good,” she said.

I hadn’t gone into detail with anyone about my plan with Sophia. The fewer people who knew, the better. Father would never question anyone at the company, and Mother didn’t have the means to. Whatever they saw between Sophia and me at the palace was the only truth they would know. It made the process easier for me.

Over the years that Mother spent trying to fix me up, I wondered why I never thought about it before. I supposed I never came across the right woman. I had never met anyone like Sophia before. Someone who knew I was a prince and wasn’t intimidated to wait in my office for an entire day to speak with me for five minutes.

“Ms. Holmes will be expecting you soon,” Justine said in her best effort to gently coax me out of my thoughts.

“Very well,” I said, clearing my throat. I buttoned my jacket, concealing the slight tightness in my crotch at the thought of seeing Sophia again.



The day was blustery, so I didn't expect Sophia to be waiting outside for me when I arrived at her hotel. But when I parked at the curb, she stepped out of the front doors of the hotel and rushed over to me. She wore jeans and a pea coat with a little gray hat covering her head. Her cheeks were already red. I wasn't sure if it was from windburn or nerves. I hoped it was the latter. It would make me feel a little better about feeling the same way.

"Hey," she said, getting into the car.

I blasted the heat, turning the vent in her direction. "Hi."

"I am *so* not used to this weather," she said.

"Luckily, my home is closer to Dallas weather than here," I said as I pulled the car onto the road again.

"That's a relief," she said, shivering.

I had the urge to put my arm around her and pull her close to warm her, but I silenced it. We weren't there yet. We only had to fool my family, so anything done outside of that might ruin our relationship before it fake started. I didn't want to give the wrong impression that I was interested in her outside of the business aspect.

It was a tricky situation, and I hoped I would be able to navigate it smoothly. I was giving up a personal interview for the opportunity, and I wanted to suck everything I could out of it in my favor for that trade.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"To a pub for lunch," I said. "I'm off for the rest of the afternoon, so I thought we could have a quick meal before going shopping."

"Have you done this before?" she asked.

"I go to pubs all the time," I said.

"No," she said, laughing. "Shopping with women."

“Oh,” I said. “That. Not recently.”

“Are there a lot of places in this area that offer clothes for your country?”

“I’m not interested in turning you into one of them,” I said. “Some Western women travel to Qatar all the time. You don’t have to wear the traditional dress; you just have to respect the customs of the faith. You can still have your own style.”

“Really?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said. “For the banquet, I’m sure Mother will request that you dress in something more formal, but for the day to day, all that is required is keeping a more modest look about you.”

“Luke, I’m willing to do what it takes to get this interview,” she said.

I clenched my jaw only slightly. This was what I wanted. A fake relationship. But why did her words affect me negatively? I didn’t expect her to fall for me or for us to ride off into the sunset. Our missions were aligned, so why wasn’t I happier?

As if she realized how her words sounded and how they affected me, she quickly added, “And for you to get your parents off your back.”

I smiled, hoping to crack through the dour feeling in the pit of my stomach. Mother would see right through our relationship if I couldn’t get a grip on myself.

“I’m assuming your boss is on board?” I asked.

“He is,” she said, her hands tightly clasped together in her lap. “He said I’m the first Western woman to visit with the royal family.”

I considered that. “I suppose you are.”

“That’s a little nuts,” she said, glancing out the window.

“Are you nervous?” I asked, hoping that she wouldn’t consider backing out now. Even though I hadn’t told Mother

the name of my “girlfriend,” I knew it would be a tough sell to find another one in that short amount of time.

“A little,” she said. “But if I wasn’t, then I wouldn’t be human.”

“I suppose not,” I said, pulling into the parking lot for the pub. “You know I’m here for any questions you might have.”

“I know,” she said. “But I think we should set the basis for our relationship first.”

“You do?”

“Yes,” she said. “I’m sure your parents will have a lot of questions. We need to nail down the smallest details.”

It was something I hadn’t thought of much. Instead, I focused on making Sophia look presentable so Mother wouldn’t have a reason to dislike her straight away. The idea that we had to make this relationship up from scratch lodged in the very back of my mind.

“Like what?” I asked, pulling into a space.

“Like how we met,” she said.

“I suppose I can’t tell her you stalked me to my workplace,” I said.

Sophia’s jaw dropped. “I didn’t stalk you. I made an appointment.”

“And you sneaked in when my secretary went to get coffee.”

She pressed her lips together, but I saw the slight tremble indicating that she was trying hard not to laugh.

I couldn’t help but laugh as I got out of the car.

Throughout lunch, Sophia and I talked about our fake relationship. We’d met at a pub when she was visiting the UK to cover a story. She thought it was best to stick with the truth as much as possible.

“The fewer lies we tell, the easier the story will be to keep,” she’d said.

Since our “relationship” was so new, we kept it long distance when she traveled back home to Dallas. Mother wouldn’t care to hear if we were like other couples and stayed with each other on a regular basis. Besides, it wouldn’t fit in with her job.

While I knew Father would be wary of a reporter in the palace, if we sold our relationship in the right way, then there would be no reason for him to think that Sophia was only interested in me for a scoop.

After lunch, we headed to a boutique that Justine had located in the downtown area. They had stock for women who traveled to warmer countries, even when it wasn’t particularly warm outside here.

A young woman met us when we arrived. “Mr. Walters,” she said, nodding her head. “And Ms. Holmes. I’m Katherine. Welcome. I’m excited to work with you today on clothing for your trip. I’ve already put aside some things.”

She turned away and walked through a side door, beckoning us along.

Sophia touched my arm. “How does she know my size?”

“Justine is very observant.” I wasn’t about to tell her that I was the one who guessed Sophia’s size based on the time I’d spent with her. She might think I had thought about her body way more than I should have. It was the honest truth, but sharing that might turn her off completely.

“Hm,” Sophia said and followed Katherine into the next room.

The room was the size of my walk-in closet. A plush gray love seat sat in the middle of the room in front of a trifold mirror. On one side of the room was a door that I guessed was the changing room.

“Mr. Walters, if you wouldn’t mind taking a seat,” Katherine said, opening her hand in the direction of the chair. “Ms. Holmes—”

“Sophia,” Sophia said. “You can call me Sophia.”

Katherine smiled tightly. “Sophia. Please come through here with me so I can point out some of my choices for you.”

Sophia gave me a look and then followed Katherine.

Unbuttoning my jacket, I sat down on the couch. I slung my arm over the top, then thought better of it and put it down at my side. I didn’t want to appear too comfortable in front of Sophia, as if I did this a lot. Though, why did I care? In the short time since our arrangement was made, I’d been unable to think of much else. I wouldn’t tell her that, though. She was here for the story. I had to remind myself of that.

After a few moments of rustling around in the dressing room, Katherine came out and smiled at me. “Would you two like some champagne?”

“No—” I said at the same time Sophia called out a loud, “Yes!” from the room.

I smirked. “Whatever the lady wants.”

“Very well,” Katherine said with a small bob of her head before leaving the room.

“Justine nailed it,” Sophia said, opening the door.

She stepped out of the room, and I unconsciously sat up straighter.

Sophia wore simple khaki pants that brushed against the floor since she wasn’t wearing shoes. The deep red top flowed across her chest, reaching up to the base of her neck while the sleeves reached her wrists.

While I appreciated the jeans and V-necks she wore on a regular basis since I’d met her, I was quite fond of the outfit in front of me.

“This is really nice,” she said, staring at herself in the mirror.

I locked eyes with myself in the mirror and saw the dumb look on my face. It wasn’t as if I hadn’t seen this woman almost every single day since she arrived in the UK. Still, it was like seeing her for the first time again.

“It is,” I said.

“It’s light,” she said, moving her arms up and down.

“It’s hot at home,” I said. “Even though you need to cover up, that’s no reason to sweat the whole time.”

“I like that idea,” she said.

Katherine brought champagne for the both of us while Sophia went into the dressing room to try on a few other pieces.

We weren’t going to be at the palace for long, so I opted for Sophia to pick about six outfits. She could easily mix and match them if necessary.

Katherine had certainly earned her commission. With each outfit, my interest in Sophia grew more.

Going shopping with my girlfriend, real or fake, seemed like an intimate thing between two lovers. While she was in the dressing room, it took all of my strength not to open the door and drink in how she looked in a bra and panties.

I wasn’t a pervert, but I appreciated the gorgeous woman in front of me. And with her taking my family’s traditions so seriously, that somehow made her more attractive.

The last outfit was my favorite. It was a long gray dress that covered Sophie but clung to her body as if it were tailored to her. I imagined a hijab on her head, and she would fit in perfectly with my family.

“I had this sent over when Justine told me where you were headed,” Katherine said, beaming. She was proud of herself.

“It’s beautiful,” Sophia said, pressing her hands against her hips as she turned to see the dress from all angles.

“It really is,” I said a little breathlessly.

Sophia locked eyes with mine in the mirror. “Thank you.”

Sophia decided on which outfits to buy for the trip, and I handed over my credit card to Katherine to ring up the bill.

When we were left in the room together, Sophia was finishing changing into her regular clothes.

“Thanks again,” she said from the little dressing room.

I stepped closer to the door so that Katherine wouldn't hear us. “It's my pleasure. Anything to make this plan work.”

The door opened, and I came face to face with Sophia. She stopped in front of me and tilted her head up to look at me. The side of her neck was exposed, and I wondered what it would be like to touch or kiss her.

“Excuse me,” she said, smirking.

“Oh,” I said, moving out of the way. The moment was gone, but the lingering effects remained with me for the entire ride to her hotel.

“I just want to be clear,” I said as Sophia's hotel came into view almost fifteen minutes later. “While we have the clothes and our story straight, Father is very traditional, and Mother will not like you.”

“You know how to make a girl feel special,” she said with a smile.

Mine tightened. “I want you to have those expectations. You don't need to work hard for them to love you, but you have to be someone that they accept. If Mother doesn't feel that you are right for me, then she will keep trying to set me up, and this whole thing will be for nothing.”

“You'll still give me the interview, right?” she asked, falling back into reporter mode. “I don't want this to turn into the cafe or the French restaurant.”

“I will give you the interview,” I said. “But if we can make this arrangement work for the both of us, that would make me feel at ease with this plan.”

“Don't worry about it, then,” she said. “I will keep my end of the bargain, especially since you're footing the bill.”

She had no idea that that was the easy part. I had enough money to make the trip on a daily basis. What I didn't have was Mother off my back.



I pulled up to the curb and my stomach twisted. I didn't want to be too eager, but I had to let her go. I had a lot of work to do up until the trip that had nothing to do with Sophia.

I got out of the car and so did she. I met her at the trunk, grabbing her bags of new clothes.

Flagging a bellhop, I instructed him to take her things to her room.

"I can get them," she said, unwilling to let go of one of the bags.

"This is something you will have to get used to," I said.

She nodded and handed over the bag. "I suppose so."

"Remember, the servants at the palace have a job to do. Allow them to do it, and that will earn big points with my parents."

"Okay," she said, digging her hands into her jacket.

"I should be on my way," I said. "I'll pick you up on Thursday, and we won't be back until Sunday."

"It seems so long," she said. "Especially if we're playing the roles of boyfriend and girlfriend."

"Hopefully, it won't be too hard," I said. "We have our stories straight."

"We do," she said, looking up at me through her thick eyelashes.

"I will give you your interview then," I added.

"Sounds fair," she said. "Well, goodnight, Luke."

"You have my number in case you have any questions?"

"I do," she said. "I'll be sure to send some along. I always have questions."

"I had a feeling you might."

She glanced around us, trapping her lip under her teeth. I could tell she didn't want to end the conversation either.

I was the first to initiate one of us leaving. She was trembling so hard. As much as I wanted to comfort her, we weren't on the clock yet.

“Goodnight, Sophia,” I said and left. I wasn't able to take a full breath until she was out of my sight.

# CHAPTER 14



## SOPHIA

The next two days went by in a flash. I'd locked myself in my room at the hotel and researched everything I could about Luke's home country. I checked out blogs and articles written by women who had visited the country as well. But after a while, all of the words started to blur into incomprehensible blobs.

The articles were helpful, but they didn't mimic the experience that I was about to embark on with Luke. I was about to visit a palace! I didn't doubt that I would be stared at, but it wouldn't be for my clothing. I would be the girlfriend of a prince. There would be those—his parents and family—who wouldn't be happy with him for choosing a woman like me. And others would be curious about how I captured the eye of a prince.

I thought of Kate Middleton—the only princess I knew of—and how she must have felt to be in my position. Though our situations were totally different, as I was sure she loved her husband, it was probably a strange thing for her and the royal family alike to have someone plucked out of the royal line even to date the prince.

I doubted Luke would entertain the idea of mentioning us getting engaged or married, but I had told him I'd be in for whatever he needed to say or do to keep our ruse going until Sunday. Even if he proposed in the palace, there was no harm in answering yes to get the job done.

He could always make up some excuse later on when we, in fact, didn't get married.

The idea of being a princess piqued my curiosity. So, instead of losing my eyesight while staring at the computer for long periods of time, I tried to imagine scenarios that might take place while we were there.

His mother was someone that I would probably come into contact with the most. She had the most invested in his romantic future, and she'd probably grill me for information. I wasn't a stranger to disapproving people when it came to doing my job, but this was different. I had to take the role of Luke's girlfriend seriously. In a way, she might attack me personally, and I was happy that I'd grown such thick skin over the years to handle it.

At least, I hoped I'd be able to.



The flight wasn't scheduled until late Thursday morning, but I had already been up for hours by the time Luke came to the hotel to pick me up.

I wasn't sure how Mr. Fraser would feel about my hotel room remaining empty for a few days, but Luke assured me that everything was paid for. Even my place in the hotel. That would go over well with my boss.

I still wasn't used to the casual way that he spent his money, but he was in a different social category than me. I couldn't even fathom having that much money at my disposal. I supposed it worked in his interest to spend it however he wanted.

I did wonder what his home looked like. He'd briefly mentioned that it had some really nice views of the city. And for him to think that it was a nice view—considering he'd grown up in a palace—it probably was over the top by my standards.

Getting to know more about him, I realized he was over the top in so many ways, yet completely modest about all of it. I didn't think people like him existed in the top half of the one-percent.

I bet he was one of the few, at least based on what he told me about his family. He did say his little brother Abir was a sweetheart, and we both hoped that Abir would like me enough so that someone in the palace was on our side. Though, I wasn't sure how much difference it would make.

Luke tended to steer away from any talk about him taking the throne, which was fine with me, so I didn't push. The time would come later to ask my questions, and I hoped that by helping him out with this, he would be open and honest about all of it.

Luke was quiet on the way over to the airport. I quickly learned that we weren't about to travel first class on a commercial flight as he veered off the main road nowhere near Heathrow. We headed toward a smaller airstrip.

"Of course, you have a private plane," I said as we pulled up. The plane was almost the size of the plane that I rode to England on.

"Didn't I mention that?" he asked with a smirk. "Okay, this is your last chance to back out."

"What are you talking about?"

The corners of his eyes were tight, something I didn't notice on the ride over.

A man walked up to the car and stood outside as if waiting for Luke to make the first move.

"You don't have to do this if you don't want to," he said. "I know it's a strange proposition. My driver will take you back to the hotel if you want."

"I'm in this with you," I said.

"You are?"

"Of course. I know how important this is to you."

"And so is your story."

I wanted to tell him that it was *him* who made me want to come, but he was right. Reality came crashing down. I couldn't disappoint Mr. Fraser or myself.

“You’re stuck with me for four days, Mr. Walters. Whether you like it or not.” I opened my door, and someone outside pulled it the rest of the way.

A blast of cold air found its way down the back of my jacket, and I shivered. I couldn’t wait to get into the heat again. At least I’d be able to somewhat enjoy it over the weekend.

Luke escorted me onto the plane, and I blinked a few times to make sure I wasn’t hallucinating.

It looked like someone had carved out the inside of a commercial plane and inserted big, plush couches and mahogany tables. Gold embellishments flourished over the furniture, and there were several big screen televisions just in the main space.

“Holy cow,” I said.

Luke gently grabbed my arm and brought me through into the next area.

“We’re asked to sit here during takeoff and landing,” he said.

There were two sets of four chairs on either side of the plane with a table between. Each was wide enough to fit two of me.

“I think you’ve ruined me for flying commercial,” I said, plopping down on one of the chairs. Smoothing my hand across the fabric, the leather was like butter.

“They recline too,” he said, scooting in front of me to get to the window seat.

There were plenty of chairs, but he chose to sit next to me. I tried not to overthink it.

A flurry of activity took place in the cabin, and I kept to my seat. Flight attendants appeared left and right to fulfill drink and food orders. I knew the flight was long, but I had no idea I would experience two whole meals and as many snacks and appetizers that I wanted.

“Is there a kitchen on this plane?” I asked when the flight attendants left us.

“Of course,” he said.

“Of course,” I muttered.

“No bags of peanuts on this plane,” he said. “You better get used to it by the time we get to the palace. You’ve seen nothing yet. Mother and Father will expect that I’ve been treating you the way a prince should.”

I turned to him. “And how should a prince treat me?”

As soon as the words slipped out of my mouth, I realized they sounded way more suggestive than I’d intended. The statement held fast to the air between us, and I froze.

His gaze fell to my lips, and I had the urge to close the space between us.

“Please fasten your seatbelts and prepare for takeoff,” the pilot said from the overhead speaker.

I jumped and sat back in the seat.

Luke cleared his throat. “Try not to be surprised with everything we do. That’s all I was saying.”

“Yeah,” I said, deflated by his comment. I wasn’t some naive child, but he was right. I was far too star-struck to make the king and queen think that I was remotely deserving of their son.

Once we were in the air—after the smoothest takeoff I’d ever experienced—there was no going back. As if Luke realized that, he took off his suit jacket and tossed it over his chair.

Within seconds, a flight attendant grabbed it and whisked it away.

I had the urge to throw something on the floor and see how quickly it got picked up, but I quelled it. My giddiness about this whole experience was bordering on immaturity.

I had two glasses of delicious champagne, much better than the one at the New Year’s party at work. Soon after, we



were given a three-course dinner. Probably the best meal of my life.

“How did you get into journalism?” Luke asked after a little while.

He’d been on his phone for most of the time since takeoff, and I didn’t want to disturb him.

“My mom got me a notebook when I was about six. There wasn’t much to do in our small neighborhood, so I started to spy on our neighbors and write down their daily activities.”

“I could see a little Sophia doing that,” he said with a chuckle.

“I did it for a while until Mom found the book and scolded me for prying into other people’s business,” I said.

“I bet that went over well.”

“I *did* make it my job,” I said, smiling.

“You don’t like when people tell you not to do something,” he said.

“I’m glad you finally appreciate that part of me,” I said with a smirk.

He laughed. “I never said I appreciated it. I understand it, though.”

“To be honest,” I said, feeling the effects of the champagne, “this story would be a big career step for me. I’ve been waiting for one piece that will earn me a promotion.”

Luke nodded. “I understand. And I’ll do anything I can to get you that. After we deal with my parents, of course.”

“Tell me more about them,” I said. “What was it like growing up in a palace?”

In the time we’d spent together, he’d stayed away from revealing much about his past. I couldn’t walk into his parents’ home and not know anything about it. I bet his mother already had a list of questions to ask me about our relationship and how well-suited we were. Other than the typical questions of

our meeting, I bet she'd want to know how much I knew about his past.

“Father was always running a kingdom,” he said. “He loved me in his own way, but Mother took care of me most of the time. Even when we had the staff to do that. She was more of an annoyance to my nanny than I was. We were close for most of my childhood.”

“What happened?” I asked.

He sighed and placed his napkin on the table. Then he took a sip from his water. “Father started to get on me about running the kingdom, and I was only a teenager at the time, so as teens do, I rebelled. He got Mother on his side, and for a while, there wasn't much of a relationship. Once I started with the business, Father seemed happy enough to let me be.”

“Until now,” I said.

“Until now,” he repeated.

The curious part of me was screaming to be let out, but a deal was a deal. I promised to keep my reporter side in check while I was fulfilling my side of the bargain.

We stayed on neutral topics for a while until it was time to turn in for the night. I had no idea we were to sleep in different cabins. It turned out there were several cabins, but Luke offered me the biggest.

It didn't take long for me to fall asleep on the most comfortable bed in the world and dream of becoming an almost-princess for a weekend.



Sometime later, one of the attendants woke me up to get showered and changed. I couldn't believe that there were three bathrooms on the plane, two of them equipped with a stand-up shower. While it was smaller than the one I was used to at the hotel, it was much fancier.

One of the outfits that Luke and I had purchased hung on the door. I wondered if he had chosen it for me at some point and had the flight attendant hang it up for me.

The thought was a little creepy, but he did want me to get used to people doing things for me.

I dressed and came out to the dining area where Luke was already seated with orange juice and a plate of food in front of him.

“Good morning,” he said.

“Morning,” I said, sitting next to him. “What’s for breakfast?” His plate was the traditional English breakfast that I’d shoveled down every morning since coming to the UK.

“Whatever you’d like,” he said. “We’re landing in about a half hour.”

“So soon?” I asked.

“Yep,” he said.

My order came out quicker than I thought possible, and I swallowed it before the flurry of flight attendants returned to get us ready for landing. Our plates, glasses, and silverware were gone in a matter of seconds.

Even though planes didn’t bother me, my breakfast lumped in my stomach like a lead ball. I was about to meet a king and queen of a foreign country. And I had to pretend to be dating their son.

It was a wild situation, and this was only the beginning.

Luke and I watched BBC News on one of the big screens. We discussed some current events that were being covered, avoiding the bigger topic at hand.

When the plane’s wheels finally touched down, Luke’s eyes were laser focused on the window. Glancing over his shoulder, I saw what he was looking at: a car on the tarmac and several people standing next to it. With the movement of the plane, I couldn’t get a good look, but Luke’s shoulders were up to his ears.

Something touched my hand, and I looked down to see Luke gripping it. It wasn't tight enough to hurt, but it was enough to know that he was as nervous as I was. This was a big deal for him, and whether or not he thought he could do it, I would be there for him.

At that moment, we were one person. I wasn't sure when the shift happened, but it was strong and true. At least from my perspective, we were no longer in business together. I had to look and play the part. Luke made it so much easier.

I twined my fingers with his and tugged at his hand, turning him my way.

His eyes met mine.

"Take a breath." It was the mantra that had been my rock before a hard interview or a speech of any kind. While this was different, he needed to relax. "We're in this together, Luke. You and me. They won't be convinced if you're nervous."

"I suppose not," he said. "I'm usually annoyed when I come home."

"How about trying to pretend like you're happy?" I asked. "You're with your beautiful girlfriend."

I meant it as a joke, but he was serious. "I can do that."

"Good," I said, turning away so he wouldn't see my flushed cheeks. "Now, do I need a crowbar to get you out of your seat?"

He laughed heartily. It was the first big laugh I'd heard from him ever. I made a promise to myself to make him do that more often. Though, I doubted it would be in front of his parents.

When the plane slowed to a stop, I tried to take my hand away from Luke, but he held tighter.

I squeezed it and allowed him to get out of his seat while we were still connected at the hands. He felt firm against me as we made our way down the central aisle toward the door.

I drew in several breaths, keeping them slow and even. I had nothing to worry about. As long as I played my part, I would be fine.

We were a few steps from the door before he turned around. I nearly tripped over his foot, but his hands kept me firmly in place.

“Thank you for coming, Sophia,” he said. “You don’t know how much this means to me.”

I swallowed as a fluttering overwhelmed my insides. “No problem.” I said.

Him trusting me with this responsibility meant more to me than anything. I only hoped I wouldn’t let him down.

# CHAPTER 15



## LUKE

With Sophia's hand in mine, I felt like I could take over the world. Her small hand offered me the reassurance that I wasn't going into this weekend alone. From the window, I saw Mother already had her passive expression on, the one that silently judged. She never thought I could make a decision when it came to my personal life. Yet none of her setups in the past had panned out.

"Do I need a headscarf?" Sophia asked when we were near the door.

I hesitated. It would give Mother a good impression.

I opened my mouth to say something when one of the flight attendants, a woman, came forward holding two scarves in her hands. "These are mine. Pick one."

She wasn't from my country, but she probably visited quite often if she was a frequent flier on Father's private jet.

I picked the light blue one and thanked her as I quickly wrapped it around Sophia's head. "There."

"How do I look?" Sophia asked, raising one eyebrow.

"Perfect," I said, tracing my thumb down her cheek.

Her eyes fluttered, and I lost myself in their depths for a moment before I realized we were in front of the staff. At the very least, they would be able to vouch for the relationship if anyone asked. Sleeping in separate chambers was normal for unmarried couples, but sitting next to her the whole flight would at least give some hint to us being together.

“Here we go,” I said under my breath.

Stepping off the plane, the warmth of the day rushed over me. It was early, but the sun was brilliant and strong.

Sophia squeezed my hand again and pressed her body against mine as we navigated down the narrow steps.

I kept my chin high. Through my sunglasses, I checked on Father first. He was as impassive and unreadable as ever. And Mother didn't look very happy at all.

My gut clenched, but I didn't want to give any of this away to Sophia. She had to make her own first impression. Pointing out Mother's disapproval wouldn't help keep her spirits high.

We crossed the tarmac much quicker than I wanted to, but when we were finally facing my family, I plastered on a smile for them.

“Ms. Sophia Holmes, meet my family. This is my father, King Erol Shamon.”

“Your Majesty,” she said to my Father.

Father reached out for Sophia's hand and shook it.

“This is my mother,” I said. “Queen Gia Shamon.”

Sophia reached her hand out to my mother, but she only stared at it without moving a muscle. Well, unless the twitch in her cheek counted as movement. She wore an expression like bugs were crawling over Sophia's offered hand.

I cleared my throat and moved on. “My little brother, Prince Abir.”

“Prince Abir,” Sophia said, moving her hand toward him. He shook her hand warmly. She didn't seem affected by the rudeness from my Mother, but I was.

I glared at Mother, but she knew better than to look me in the eye at that moment.

“It's so lovely to meet all of you,” Sophia said with a broad smile.



“You too,” Abir said. If it weren’t so bright outside, I’d think there were stars in his eyes.

“Shall we?” Father asked, pushing his robe aside and indicating the car behind them.

It was big enough for all of us, but I wasn’t sure if it could fit Mother’s attitude. If Father noticed, he didn’t say anything.

Her obvious disapproval of Sophia only gave me the extra energy to prove that Sophia was the one for me. At least in front of my family. She hated to be disappointed, but I’d show her what it really felt like.



The conversation was light on the way to the palace. Father was polite enough, asking Sophia questions about how we met and why I never mentioned her to the family.

“That was my fault,” Sophia said with a giggle. “I wanted to make sure that we were serious before Luke took me home to meet the parents.”

“Have you ever been inside of a palace before?” Abir sat on the other side of Sophia, and it was as if he’d never seen a woman before.

His attempt at flirtation distracted me enough from thinking about Mother and her jaw-clenched expression. What had she expected? I’d told her over the weekend that I was bringing Sophia. Did she think that I was lying?

Granted, I *was*, but she didn’t need to know that. Ever. I didn’t think about much past the weekend when it came to Sophia and me. I hoped that it would give me a little reprieve from her match-making attempts.

We pulled up to the palace, and I glanced at Sophia. We hadn’t stopped holding hands since the plane. It was as if we both were each other’s anchors.

Sophia looked out the window, her eyes widening as the palace came into view. I’d asked her to turn down her surprise

at everything, but as her jaw dropped open, I figured I'd let it slide. Seeing my childhood home from her perspective made me feel a little more grateful for the opportunities in life that I'd been given.

"You didn't tell me how beautiful it was," she said, nudging my arm.

She kept her cool, though I could feel her practically vibrating on the inside with excitement. The truth was, I had the same feeling. Coming to the palace with Sophia made it that much more exciting, and for the first time in a long time, I didn't mind being home.

Father and Mother were the first out of the car, followed by Abir, Sophia, and myself. Mother went off into the palace on her own while Father and Abir stood by the car.

Father watched Mother enter the palace before he turned to Sophia. "Abir will get you acquainted with the palace. Son, please come with me."

Sophia and I detached, and I felt like a piece of me went missing at that moment. Abir offered his arm, and Sophia took it without hesitation.

"I want to show you the gardens," Abir said, tugging Sophia along with him. She didn't appear helpless with my brother, but I wanted to get back to her as soon as possible.

"Let's talk in my study," Father said and turned on his heel.

Not wanting to appear like a little boy following his father's footsteps, I kept up with his stride.

I already knew what he wanted to discuss before one of the servants closed the study doors behind us.

I waited for him to bring it up. Just as Sophia and I talked about before arriving, we weren't going to offer any information before it was asked. That would keep our stories and lies to a minimum. At that moment, I didn't want to be the first to bring up the point of contention between Father and me. He might think that I took the time to think about it. In

fact, I kept my thinking of the kingdom to a minimum when I could.

“Have you made a decision?” Father asked after sitting down on the chair behind his desk.

“Is the month over already?” I asked.

Father pressed his fingertips together in front of his face, almost like he held an invisible ball between them. A ball and chain was more like it. If he could chain me to his desk, he would.

“Is this because of Sophia?” Father asked.

“Not at all,” I said.

“Why is this the first time we’re hearing of her?” Father asked. “If you’ve been dating for a while, there was no mention of her the last time you were here, which wasn’t very long ago.”

“I’m in love with her,” I said. “I knew you and Mother wouldn’t approve, so I kept her a secret. Until Mother forced me to mention it. If she wasn’t so meddling, then I might have kept Sophia a secret longer.”

Father’s eyes narrowed as if he could find the lies in my words.

“I knew it would bother you,” I said, pacing the length of the room. Peering out of the windows, I saw the top of Sophia’s head in the distance, a stark contrast to Abir’s dark hair bobbing along next to her.

I smiled, thinking that I’d see her again very soon.

“But you love her,” Father said. Not a question.

I drew in a breath. “I really do.”

“Does she know everything?” Father asked.

I swallowed. There was one important detail that had stayed out of the press for some time. Unless I told Sophia, she would never know. Underneath the question, there was a warning. If I didn’t share it, someone else would. It didn’t

matter with respect to ruling the kingdom, but Father knew that I would only tell her if things were serious between us.

Father raised his bushy eyebrows and placed his hands on the desk before standing up from his chair. “I can’t stand in the way of my son’s happiness. But you must take care of Sophia. And take heed where your mother is concerned. She won’t be as easily persuaded.”

“I know,” I said. “I wish she hadn’t been so rude with Sophia earlier.”

“You know she wants you to marry within our culture. You and Sophia will have a lifelong fight with her.”

I gritted my teeth. I knew there was no way that Mother would ever be fully happy for us, but at the very least, I thought Father would have some sway. I supposed he had bigger things to worry about than her approval. It was a good thing our visit was only for a few days instead of weeks. I wasn’t sure if I’d be able to keep up the charade for that long.

# CHAPTER 16



## SOPHIA

It took all my willpower to hold back my amazement at everything I saw at the palace. Having Abir take me around to the gardens was the best choice. My bones started to thaw from the frigid temperatures I'd been dealing with in the UK.

Even though it was warm, Luke had been right about my clothes not being too heavy when it came to the heat. The sun's warmth pressed against my cheek, and I knew if I stayed out long enough, I'd have a little bit of a burn. I tugged the scarf around my cheeks to prevent that.

"If you are too hot, we can go into the greenhouse for a little shade."

"I'd love to go wherever you want to take me. This place is so beautiful."

The flowers were so colorful, and I loved watching the butterflies and bees jumping from one to another. It gave the garden life that I'd never seen before.

I had a brown-thumb, though I doubted Luke's mother, Gia, tended to the garden. Several gardeners moved throughout the paths, checking on the brilliantly colored plants.

Up ahead was the strangest looking greenhouse I'd ever seen. White pillars shot up from the ground and spread out into what looked like a massive spiderweb surrounding the structure all around, leaving open oblong shapes so that the sun could beat down on the vegetation inside.

“Whoa,” I said as we walked under the awning. While the sun was still strong, it gave me a little break from the heat.

“Luke always liked to come out here,” Abir said.

“I can see why,” I said.

“I can see why he picked you,” he said.

I glanced at him. He had his hands shoved in his pockets, and he was smiling at the ground.

“You’re very sweet,” I said.

Walking through the garden, Abir gave me the scoop on the palace grounds. It was much more impressive than I thought. We had only explored half of it before my urge to see the inside of the palace took over. I partly wanted to see Luke again, but he probably had some business to attend to.

While Abir was adorable and sweet, I still had a story to write. As the only Western woman to visit the palace, Mr. Fraser’s words about finding another story piqued my interest. I imagined walking in on some family secret and giving my boss two amazing stories to put in the newspaper.

I didn’t think Luke would have an issue with any story I ran with. He wanted nothing to do with the throne. But I had to dig up the story first before I considered it.

Due to the nature of the temperature in the area, the boxy entrances that reached several stories high were open entryways filled with plants and smaller trees, making the palace look like a resort more than a home.

Abir was the perfect host, not something I expected. We went through several of the rooms while he allowed me to walk around the space. We toured through one of the banquet rooms, the library, and several guest bedchambers. If at all possible, the beds looked even more comfortable than the ones on the plane. Though, I supposed they would. Luke and his family had more wealth than I could wrap my mind around. Of course, every part of their life would have the opulence meant for a king and his family.

While I kept up the facade of Luke and me being together, I couldn't help but feel like an intruder in their life. It had been Luke's idea to lie, but the more I lied to Abir, the worse I felt. I doubted I'd feel the same way if Luke's mother had taken me on the tour. It was apparent she disliked me, but she didn't have to like me. And I wasn't going to spend the time trying to get her to warm up to me. My mission was to convince the family that we were together. That was it.

I only had to pretend for a weekend and make sure the story stood true until Sunday. After that, it was up to Luke to figure out what he needed to do when it came to his mother and her meddling nature.

An unwarranted flair of jealousy flitted around inside of me at the idea of Luke with anyone else. It was irrational, but for some reason, it bothered me. I had no claim on him, so I couldn't wrap my mind around feeling that way.

I tried to shove it away, but Abir's keen observations brought it back to full force when he said, "Luke has never brought a woman home to meet us."

"Never?" While I was sure plenty of women would be happy to have someone like Luke in their lives, I supposed he didn't make much of an effort. Being thirty-three years old and never photographed with a woman in front of any press—I had checked—was a little odd. I supposed his workaholic nature had something to do with it in addition to him not caring to impress his mother. If he were wed, I bet there were more obligations he'd have to provide for the kingdom, which was very low on his list of things to do.

"Never," Abir confirmed. "He must like you."

I nodded, not wanting to give away anything unless directly asked.

"I'd say he loves you," Abir said.

If we were actually dating and Luke brought me home to the palace, it would be because we were in love. I couldn't believe that we hadn't discussed it. I hoped Luke wouldn't be upset if he found out I'd talked about it with Abir.



“I hope he does,” I said, smiling into my hand. Playing the coy girlfriend was easy enough, and I hoped it would stop his questioning.

“Abir!” someone called down the hallway.

Abir’s face fell. “Yes, Mother? I’m down here.”

My stomach hardened as Gia walked down the hallway. With her robes covering her feet, it looked as if she were floating toward us. Her eyes didn’t shift from her son.

“Dinner will be served soon,” she said. “Please get ready.”

Abir looked at me and then hurried past his mother to get to his chambers. Gia and I stood together in the hallway, yet she didn’t move an inch.

After wallowing in the silence for a little too long, I said, “I love these paintings—”

As quickly as she appeared to tell her son to get ready for dinner, she brushed past me, completely ignoring my complimenting her home.

The decorations down each hallway were gorgeous. I guessed the paintings depicted previous kings or other royalty, but since I lost my guide and his mother was no help, I wandered down the hallway with no direction in mind.

I recalled passing a main staircase at some point, but the hallways were long, and at any given corner, another one spread out in front of me with no end in sight.

Taking the opportunity to snoop, I peeked into several rooms, knowing that if anyone caught me, I would use the excuse that I was lost.

Instead, the one person I wanted to see appeared in the hallway. Thankfully, I wasn’t snooping when I saw him.

“Luke,” I said, unable to hide the smile on my face.

He strode down the hallway as if he owned the place. While he did that everywhere, in this context, I saw an entirely new person walking toward me. He belonged here, no matter what he thought.

“Where’s Abir?” he asked, his thick eyebrows mashed together.

“Your mother told him to get ready for dinner,” I said.

He nodded. “I see. I should show you to your room to get ready as well.”

He offered his hand, and I took it. The gesture was easy now, almost automatic. If anyone came upon us, they’d have no doubt we were a couple. I walked as close as I could to him to add to the facade.

“How was the meeting with your father?” I asked, lowering my voice as two servants walked by us. Where had they been when I was lost and snooping?

“Same as usual,” he said. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“You know you’ll have to talk to me eventually,” I said.

“If that eventually is somewhere other than here, that’s better for me.”

“This place is insane,” I said. “Y’all live in a palace for Christ’s sake. You should appreciate it more.”

“I know,” he said. “But it comes at a price.” He let go of my hand. I was about to ask if I upset him, but then he opened a door in front of me. “This is your room.”

I peeked inside. “Nice.” It was as lovely as the rest I’d seen. From what I gathered, they could have dozens of guests staying at the palace at any given time. It must have been a bitch to keep it clean. I could barely keep my bathroom and kitchen clean in my apartment, and that was smaller than this guestroom.

“We’re staying in separate rooms,” he said. “Because we’re not married.”

“I figured that,” I said.

“You did?”

“From the plane ride,” I said over my shoulder as I walked into the room. The marble floor was covered with a large intricate rug that was soft under my shoes. I sank into it with

each step, and I wondered what it would feel like to dig my toes into it.

“Your clothes are already in the armoire,” he said from the doorway.

I wasn't going to push him to come inside. I knew there were rules about such things, and since he was already stressed out, I didn't want to add to it. I crossed the room and opened the armoire. Just as he said, they were all there, plus a few pieces that we hadn't brought with us. I touched one of the brightly colored robes. The fabric was thin and silky to the touch.

“Should I wear anything in particular?” I asked.

“Maybe the gray dress that we bought back home?” he suggested. The corners of his lips lifted slightly.

It was my favorite piece, too.

I grabbed the dress by the hanger, brought it over to the bed, and laid it in front of me. “What about a scarf?”

“Not tonight,” he said. “It's a family dinner, so you can let your hair loose, so they say.”

I slipped the scarf off my head, and his eyes locked on the thin fabric. I slowly tugged it out from under the neckline of my shirt, and I could almost hear the pounding of his heartbeat. Or maybe it was mine? He looked at me like I wanted to be looked at by a man. Desire flitted across his face, and I forced myself to look away before I pushed it to another level.

I doubted anyone would care if I ran over to him and pressed my lips against his. It was a gesture that any couple engaged in, especially those who were in love. Or at least, under the impression that we were in love.

I grabbed hold of those thoughts and shoved them deep down inside me. This was business. There was no reason to push the relationship when it was just the two of us. One of us getting feelings for the other would only end in disaster.

“I'm going to change now,” I said without looking at him.

“Of—of course,” he stammered and reached for the doorknob. “I’ll be back in a little while to take you down to dinner. Let’s say in a half hour?”

“Perfect,” I said, holding the dress at arm’s length in front of me. Anything to keep my focus away from his lips and the fire in his eyes.

The door clicked closed, and I exhaled sharply. Dropping the dress on the bed, I walked over to the windows. The view was of a part of the grounds that I hadn’t seen yet. The city was in the distance, giving me a perfect view, unmarred by any buildings. I watched several of the workers moving across the grounds, doing their jobs.

Turning away from them, I knew I had to do my own job. It would be nice to live in a place like this, but I wasn’t going to be the girl to do it. I was an imposter, and for the first time, I felt a twinge of shame for deceiving his family.

Sometimes, bargains were hard, but I intended to finish this one on top.

# CHAPTER 17



## LUKE

I didn't need to give Sophia a half hour to get ready. As it was, we were already going to be late, but I needed the time to get myself composed. In our time together, we hadn't been alone much. We had either been in a public place or on a plane with several staff members.

Standing in her doorway when she was on the cusp of stripping down to change had shifted something inside of me. Of course, I found her attractive. But we were playing our parts as boyfriend and girlfriend. If I had asked her to, I knew she would have kissed me right then and there. I saw the desire in her eyes, and I'd done a terrible job of hiding it myself.

Taking a cold shower was in order, but that only took ten minutes. I'd dragged it out longer than usual. I spent extra time picking through my clothes to find the perfect outfit.

While I knew I'd have to dress more traditionally for the banquet, I grabbed a suit that I had brought from home. It had faint gray stripes that were only noticeable if you were nearly nose to nose with me. More importantly, it matched the color of Sophia's dress, and in my mind, it would show our solidarity.

I had intended to tell Sophia everything when I got the chance, but we were running out of time before she and Mother were to be in the same room for a long period of time. There was no way she'd embarrass her family during the banquet, so if she was going to pull out all the stops, it would be at dinner.

Opening up to Sophia was terrifying, partly because of her job, but mostly because it meant opening up a part of myself that I swore I'd keep hidden for as long as I could.

Stepping up to her door, I hesitated, holding my fist in the air. Leaning closer to the door, I didn't hear anything. I hoped she wasn't in the bathroom. Other than the plane ride, I didn't know her primping routine at all. I hoped she wasn't the type to take an hour or two to get ready. Mother already disliked her; we didn't need to give her more reason to.

I knocked twice and stepped back from the door.

"Come in!" Sophia called from inside.

It wasn't customary for me to enter a woman's room unless we were wed. So, I opened the door and let it swing open while I kept both my feet in the hallway.

"Sorry," she said, balancing on one foot. "Just getting my shoes on."

Her hair fell in dark waves over her shoulders as she bounced on one foot while putting her shoe on. They were flats and would remain hidden under the long dress.

She stood up and adjusted the dress so that the hem fell over the tops of her shoes, just as I'd requested. Shoving her hair back over her shoulder, she opened her hands to me.

"Do I look okay?"

"You look perfect," I said. "Shall we?"

She smiled, and my heart skipped several beats. Watching her walk over to me was the most seductive movement I'd ever seen. The dress hugged her curves, and I wondered if I'd made a bold choice.

We didn't have time to turn back, so I looped her arm with mine as we headed down the hallway.

"I have to tell you something," I said.

"You're becoming king?" she asked.

"Ever the reporter."

“I’m only teasing. What’s up?”

She didn’t put on much makeup, but her naturally pink lips made me want to take her here and now in the hallway for anyone to see.

I drove my hand into my pocket to keep myself at bay. “I’ve never said it before, but I was adopted.”

“What?” she asked.

I nodded. “Not many people outside of the royal family know.”

“But why? And how?”

“Early on in my parents’ marriage, they weren’t able to have kids the natural way. So, they went to a local orphanage and picked me up. I was six.”

“And no one questioned it?” I asked.

“Things are different here. There isn’t as much media, and some of the rules are quite lax.”

“So why isn’t Abir first in line to be the king? I mean, doesn’t it go by blood?”

“It doesn’t have to,” I said. Having the truth out there for Sophia to know was a weight lifted off my shoulders. Even Maddox didn’t know I was adopted. There was no reason for anyone to know and question the methods of the kingdom in my country. “And I doubt he’d want it.”

“So, neither of you want it, but someone has to take over?”

“That’s the sum of it,” I said.

Silence hung between us for most of the walk to the dining room. It was a lot to take in, and I wasn’t sure how ready I was for Sophia to ask more about the process of me becoming king. At the very least, I had a leg up on whatever questions Mother intended to throw our way.

Right outside of the dining room, two servants stood by the open doors.



A firm tug on my arm pulled me to the side. Sophia was much stronger than I realized.

Her eyes lifted to mine. “You don’t know your parents? Your real parents?”

There was pity in her eyes, but not the kind that made me want to clam up and forget the conversation ever happened. She appeared genuinely concerned. There wasn’t a recording device or my parents there to witness my “girlfriend” being kind to me.

“I don’t remember much of my biological parents,” I said. “To me, my parents are my parents, though. As much as I fight against their wishes, they are the only ones who matter. They saved me from a bad life. While I know I’m living a very different lifestyle now than I might have, I’m lucky to have them.”

She lifted herself up onto her toes and pressed her lips against my cheek. Her lips were soft, just as smooth as I imagined they would be. “Thank you for telling me.”

Squeezing my hand, she sent a reassuring pulse through my body. I took a deep breath, and we entered the dining room where fate was waiting for us in the form of three of the most important people in my life. We had to solidify our relationship in front of them so tomorrow wouldn’t be a struggle when we met with many more skeptical people.

Father and Abir stood up when we entered, more for Sophia than for me.

Mother’s hands were on her lap, and her eyes were lowered. I ground my teeth together but said nothing, hoping that the conversation over dinner would prove to her that I was “serious” about Sophia. Then, maybe she’d give me at least the hint of her blessing.

I helped Sophia into her seat and sat in the chair next to her with Father on the other side of me.

“Good evening, Sophia,” Father said, lifting his water glass to her.

“Good evening,” she said, placing her napkin in her lap.

The servants came out with the first course and placed it in front of us.

I touched Sophia's hand to keep hers in place, and also, I wanted to touch her again. She had a voracious appetite, but it wasn't until Father started eating his course that we were allowed to start our own meals.

When Father started on the first course, I lifted my spoon to signal to Sophia that it was time for us to enjoy our soup.

"I know you've most likely told the story more times than you can count," Father started. "But tell us how you and Sophia met."

I glanced at her, grateful that we'd nailed down this part of the story ahead of time.

"It's not the most conventional way," I said, glancing at Mother. Even though she ate her food, she still hadn't looked up at any of us. "We met at a pub while she was on assignment in England."

Mother clinked her spoon against the bottom of the bowl a little too loudly and let out a small disapproving sound.

Father glanced at her and then back to me, waving me on to continue.

I went on with the story that Sophia and I had fabricated. It was a version of the truth. Father wanted to know all the little details, and Sophia and I worked together to fill in the gaps. Between the two of us, we created a story that was fit for a romantic movie—not that I had watched many of them in my lifetime.

I couldn't help but notice the stunned silence from Mother's side of the table. She usually filled the room with her opinions, but today, her reactions—or should I say non-reactions—were startling. Though I supposed whenever I was home, she mostly talked about women she wanted to set me up with, making them appear as if they were the last woman on earth and my very life depended on marrying one of them.

"Enough about us," Sophia said, after starting on the second course. "Tell me how the two of you met."

Sophia directed the question at Mother. All of us looked in her direction. Her neck must have been sore from looking down for the entire meal.

Sophia chewed on her lip and continued with her food. A faint blush appeared on Sophia's cheeks.

"It was arranged," Father said.

I wished he wouldn't feed into Mother's childishness.

As Father gave Sophia a rundown of arranged marriages in our country, I stared at Mother, daring her to look up. I should have known that she wouldn't. I hoped somehow that she'd feel the weight of my stare.

Several times throughout dinner, Abir and Father glanced at her, but neither engaged. I considered calling her out but didn't want to start a fight in front of Sophia. Father would stick up for Mother, and I wasn't about to split up the family when I had Father and Abir on my side about Sophia.

The conversation carried on between everyone except for Mother. It would have been the perfect evening if she had engaged with my "girlfriend." Did she know she was about to lose her son if she continued in this way? I would never forgive her for how she acted, and I would be even more against her when it came to finding me a wife. I'd spend all the money in the world to keep the ruse going, just to piss her off.

Dinner couldn't be over soon enough. I'd barely touched any of the courses as I'd been so focused on Mother and how she was acting.

I did finish dessert, desperate to put something in my stomach, but when the final plates were cleared, I stood up and motioned for Sophia to do the same.

Father pulled me aside before we could make our exit, lightly grabbing my arm. For the first time in a long time, his expression was tight, but it wasn't directed at me. His eyes cut at Mother before he spoke. "How about you show Sophia around for the day tomorrow until the banquet? I'm sure with

both of you having some time away from work, you will enjoy each other's company for a little while.”

I nodded. It wasn't Sophia's company that he cared about. It was removing the both of us from the company of my Mother.

She remained in her seat, her eyes lowered to her plate. She hadn't looked up once.

I had the urge to do something rash, like throwing my chair to the floor to startle her enough to look at me. Heat coursed through me as I glared at her.

“Take Sophia to her room,” Father ordered.

Mother's cheek twitched. It was the only reaction she'd given the entire night. While I knew I didn't need her approval—I outranked her technically—I didn't want her to mess this up for me. Father and Abir were convinced. It was all I could do to keep that going.

I took Sophia's hand and gave Mother the cold shoulder on the way out. Father probably expected me to say something to her, but I couldn't wrap my tongue around any pleasantries.

All words failed me as I walked Sophia back to her room. I knew Mother wouldn't approve, but I thought after I brought Sophia in front of her and my family, she'd at least try to be civil. Her actions at dinner were inexcusable. I knew I'd be angrier if Sophia had been my real girlfriend, but I was disgusted nonetheless.

“I'm sorry,” I said when we reached her door. It was all I could muster. Mother's actions spoke for themselves, and I hoped that Sophia wouldn't think that this arrangement was too complicated for her. It was only the first day, and Mother managed to ruin the entire meal with her hurt pride.

“It's fine,” she said.

“It's not—”

She touched my hand and twined her fingers through mine. I glanced down the hallway. There wasn't anyone in sight.

“It’s fine,” she said. “I don’t take it personally. She’s watching her little boy dote on another woman other than herself. I can imagine it’s difficult.”

“Why are you saying this?” I asked.

“Because coming here with you, this place, that dinner, it was the best time I’ve had in a long time. Parents are supposed to embarrass their kids. I know you have a lot on your plate, and if I can be the one person you don’t have to worry about, let me be that person, okay?”

“Okay,” I said, relaxing my shoulders. She was right. I *did* have a lot to worry about. Hearing her understand that and take it in stride opened up something inside of me. While she was obviously attractive, there was something deeper growing between us. Whether she saw it or not.

I had the urge to kiss her again. I stepped closer to her as her gaze fell to my lips.

We were a breath apart before I muttered the words, “Good night.”

She blinked and stepped away from me, a forced smile stretching her lips. “Good night.”

When the door closed, I still didn’t move. The rustling sounds from inside the room were overpowered by the rush of blood in my ears, pumping to the sound of my heartbeat.

In her way, Sophia had latched onto my heart. In the past, no one brought out the myriad of feelings and emotions the way that Sophia did. She was kind, understanding, and intelligent. While we had come here on the pretense of being fake lovers, a large part of me wanted that to be true.

More than anything.

# CHAPTER 18



## SOPHIA

I woke on my own the next day. It was the first time in a long time that I hadn't set the alarm. Though I had no idea where my phone was, even if I had set one. I hoped Mr. Fraser hadn't called, but we didn't have an appointment scheduled. Since I couldn't have anyone overhear our conversation about the story, I made a mental note to contact him on Sunday after the interview with Luke.

The previous evening's events flooded my mind as I sat up in bed. I fluffed my pillows, pushing them against the headboard and pulling the covers over my chest. I wasn't quite ready to get out of the soft coziness of my bed.

The conversation at dinner was pleasant, other than the silence from the other end of the table. While I tried to ignore it and keep Abir and Erol talking, Luke had been aware of his mother the entire time. I had never seen him so angry before, and I hoped that I would never have that expression directed at me. As a dutiful girlfriend would, I tried to calm him by catching him when I could, touching his hand to draw him out of his head.

I tended to expect the worst of any situation, which made me feel better when my low expectations were exceeded. So, I had assumed that Gia would be a tough nut to crack. Instead of trying with her, I had focused on the men in the room, further strengthening our story that Luke and I were happy and in love.

A few times, I caught myself getting a little too comfortable with Luke by my side. The lines between our lie

and reality started to blur.

Then, the dreaded moment came as I relived it. I couldn't believe I almost kissed him. I buried myself under the covers, desperate to get away from the image in my mind. He'd stiffened and bid me goodnight in the politest way, but that hadn't stopped the creepy-crawly feeling under my skin. I'd read all the signs wrong, and I wished I could have sunk into the floor at that moment.

I hoped that Luke thought it was me playing the part instead of really wanting to kiss him. It was all I could think about every time I saw him, even when he wasn't near me but close to my thoughts.

I'd fallen for our own ruse, and I hoped I didn't screw it up before I got my story.

The rejection was clear, and I wouldn't make the same mistake again. If he wanted to kiss me in front of his parents to prove something, that would be fine, but I had to keep it strictly platonic when no one else was around.

It took a few minutes for me to get out of bed. The small clock on the side table said it was early. While I knew the staff would probably be awake, I wasn't sure if Luke would be.

I took my time getting ready, showering and doing my makeup. I didn't put any lipstick or blush on, but I had enough concealer to make my skin smooth and blemish free. Luke didn't want me to grab too much attention by way of makeup or the way I dressed, and I accepted that. Since we were going out this morning—and probably for the whole day—I adhered to his wishes and picked an outfit appropriate for a day out. There was a pair of wide-legged pants that fit with most of the shirts he'd bought for me. I grabbed a black shirt with a high neck that cinched at the wrists. Both of the fabrics were light, and after I dressed, I went out onto the small balcony outside of my window. The sun was behind the palace, but the heat already clung to my skin.

My hair frizzed within a few minutes, and I decided to wear another headscarf to hide it. Luke would have suggested it anyhow, and I wanted to stay ahead of him so he'd trust me



to make my own decisions. Keeping me in the background while he did what he had to do here worked well for me. If I was to discover anything else going on at the palace, I didn't want him to keep too close of an eye on me.

There were several options in the armoire, and I picked a gray headscarf, giving another shade of depth to my outfit. I wanted to appear inconspicuous, but I had to add a little of my flavor to the outfit.

I did a onceover of my outfit before heading out of the room.

Standing in the hallway, I realized I had no idea where I was going. Luke said nothing about going to breakfast or what time we'd meet. I had no urge to see his mother without him by my side, so I went in search of Luke's room.

I wandered around for a few minutes until I came upon a servant.

"Excuse me, can you tell me where Lu—Prince Luke's room is?" I had no idea about the formality that I needed to use to get what I wanted, but it worked.

The servant pointed me in the direction of Luke's room, and I thanked him.

A ball lodged in my throat at the prospect of seeing Luke again. While I didn't want to show him my feelings, I wasn't able to hide them from myself. I allowed myself to revel in them for a moment before bottling them up again and knocking on his door.

It opened a few seconds later. I stepped back to drink him in. He was already dressed. He wore robes—a more traditional outfit like his father—and this guy never stopped surprising me. A wave of heat rolled across my neck, and my hairs prickled under the scarf.

"You look..." I trailed off.

"Ridiculous?" he hinted.

"I was going to say like a prince," I said.

He swallowed, and his Adam's apple bobbed in his throat. Was I mistaken about his feelings for me? I felt every inch of his gaze moving down my body and then back up to my eyes. "Thank you."

I shivered. "What's on the agenda?"

"I'm getting you as far away from my mother as possible."

I laughed. "She's not that bad."

"Were we at the same dinner last night?" he asked.

I wasn't going to badmouth his mother, no matter how shitty she'd been. While I was sure he was pissed at her, he and his family were the only ones who could be allowed to speak negatively of her behavior. Besides, I had no claim on his heart, and I had nothing to lose. Well, there was the interview, but I'd already earned that just by coming.

He offered his arm to me, and we walked down to breakfast.

It was just him and me for breakfast. He noted that his Father and Mother were eating in their chambers, and Abir tended to sleep in.

Breakfast wasn't a big affair, but it was delicious nonetheless. I wasn't sure I'd ever want to eat the fried foods back in Dallas after tasting what fresh delicacies were around the world. Or maybe I'd have to be a bit pickier when choosing places to eat. Matt had always tried to get me out of my shell. Maybe it was time to follow his advice.

I hadn't texted Matt since I'd left the UK. I probably had a bunch of messages on my phone waiting for me. I'd check them later. My curiosity for where Luke was taking me had pushed my need to answer Matt's burning questions to the back of my mind, even though I was sure he had a lot.

"Where are we going?" I asked Luke as two servants finished clearing our plates. I didn't like talking to them as if they weren't there—as the rest of the family did.

"I thought I'd take you to some of the local landmarks. For lunch, I thought we could head out on one of our family boats

so we can eat as you take in the view.”

“Sounds perfect,” I said.



I didn't press Luke to go inside any of the mosques that we saw on the way around the city. It wasn't customary for a Western person to go inside their places of worship, but I could imagine how they looked from the outside.

There were so many people walking the streets. We had several bodyguards, but they weren't as visible as what I'd seen in some American movies when royals were involved. Most of the women kept their heads down when other men were around. It was still strange to see them covered up like I was. In Dallas, there was no shortage of short-shorts and cowboy boots. I supposed dressing like that here would be scandalous.

At lunch, we headed to the marina. I'd never been on a billionaire's boat before, but just like the jet and the palace, it didn't disappoint.

We sat on the deck at a two-person table while enjoying the warm breeze coming off the water.

“This is the life,” I said, tilting my head back and feeling the warmth of the sun on my cheeks.

“It *is* my life.”

I dropped my head to watch his expression turn from happy and carefree to closed off and almost pained.

“What's your hesitation about becoming king?” I asked, eating a forkful of my salad.

“To be honest, I've always felt like an outsider in our family. Since I'm not blood-related, I feel like I'm overstepping Abir's birthright.”

“You said he wouldn't be a good king,” I said.

“I never said that. He’d make a great king, but I know it’s something he doesn’t want, either.”

“In a way, you feel obligated?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said. “I suppose I do.”

I considered it. Luke seemed always to be constantly warring with himself. No wonder he had such a tough exterior. As a prince, he had to keep up with the image that he was the next in line while feeling as if he wasn’t adequate for it since he wasn’t a blood relative. Did he want to be king but feel an obligation to his brother, too? Abir was young. Maybe he wanted time to be a teenager before taking over the kingdom. But if Luke stepped in before that, would it cause trouble between the brothers?

I couldn’t imagine how Luke felt. Even though I needed to get the story for Mr. Fraser, this wasn’t the time.

I changed the subject, asking about the buildings that were on the shore. They were almost carbon copies of each other, spread apart by some distance. He said they were residential buildings. What a view the water must be for them. At home, I was quite a distance from any ocean views, so I took a moment and imagined what life would be like living in such a warm place all the time with fantastic views.

“What are you thinking about?” Luke asked.

“This is quite a beautiful place,” I said. “I’d visit here all the time if I were you.”

“I can take you back here whenever you want,” he said.

I glanced at the servants who were coming toward us with more plates of food. I smiled at Luke, knowing the thought was purely for their benefit. I tried to focus on how good it felt to be there instead of how quickly all of this was going to end.



Since the banquet was in the early evening, we headed back to the palace right after our late lunch. Instead of walking, we

took a car, which got us back to the palace much sooner than I'd hoped. I *did* look forward to the banquet—not Luke's mother—and the idea of dressing up and meeting other dignitaries intrigued me. So I wasn't hard pressed to leave Luke while I got ready in my room.

He almost looked as if he'd wanted to say something important as I caught him staring at me from the doorway.

Before I could ask, he closed the door and left me.

It was the strangest thing, but if he wanted to tell me something, I had no doubt in my mind that he would. We'd talked a lot about his future that day, so I wondered if I'd left him with a lot to think about. I hoped he sorted his answers before our interview in two days.

Meanwhile, my focus was on the armoire. There were four different outfits that Luke had mentioned were appropriate for the banquet

The one that attracted me the first time I saw it was a purple gown. The color was so dark that it almost appeared bluish. A black belt cinched the waist, and the thick fabric billowed down, overtaking the other dresses by a long shot. If I was going to impress anyone with my outfits, it would be with this gown.

# CHAPTER 19



## LUKE

Sophia gave me a lot to think about during our time together. She wasn't fishing for information, but I'd told her my innermost thoughts about how I felt about the kingdom. I hoped my insecurities didn't show up in her newspaper, but there was enough respect between us for her not to exploit me. I could tell she was having a good time, and I was having more fun with her than I'd had with anyone—even Maddox—in a long time. Seeing my country through her eyes opened my own and gave me an opportunity to take a hard look at what running the country might feel like.

The time passed quickly, and I hoped the rest of the evening did as well. I didn't want to be in the presence of Mother, let alone in the same room. Her attitude from last night still bothered me. I hoped that she would be too preoccupied with her guests to notice me at all. I only had one more full day in the palace, and it was big enough to avoid her if I needed to.

Heading back to Sophia's room, I steeled my nerves. I couldn't let my fondness for her show until we were in front of others. During that time, my affection would seem appropriate, and Sophia would think I was playing a part instead of revealing how I really felt about her. It would be hard to let her go when this was all over, but at least I'd have this trip to remember her by. And who knew? Maybe she'd stay in touch with me after everything.

Though that entirely depended on where her story went. I couldn't imagine she would blast me in the newspaper, but she

didn't work for me. I couldn't control what story she chose to run with.

When I reached her door, I pushed all of that aside. I wanted to enjoy this evening with her as though it were our last.

After knocking, I heard her thumping footsteps before the door opened. She backed away from me and gave me a little twirl.

Seeing her brought a smile to my face. I had hoped she would pick that dress for tonight. It was one that I had to choose when I was back at home in England in preparation for the trip. After our shopping spree, I'd sent Sophia's measurements to the palace, and the servants had picked what would suit her best.

And this dress did just that. A thin black belt accentuated her tiny waist and in turn, hugged all of her curves.

"How do I look?" she asked.

"Like a princess," I said.

Her face fell. "Is this a princess's gown?"

I shrugged. "I doubt it. These gowns were specifically chosen for you."

She tugged at the hem of her sleeve at her wrist. "That's nice."

"I would have done it for anyone," I said, then immediately regretted it. She should know that she was the only person I wanted to have in her place.

If she was offended at the thought of me pretending to be in a relationship with anyone else, she didn't show it.

"Did I do the scarf okay?" she asked.

I stepped into the room, feeling a little bit of a thrill by doing it. If anyone caught us, I was sure to be reported to Father, but I had a feeling that as long as we weren't having sex on the floor with the door open for everyone to see, he



wouldn't mind too much if I was caught adjusting my girlfriend's hijab.

"You almost had it," I said, tugging at the front and twisting it until it was in the correct position. My hand brushed against her chin, and the touch of her sent an electric jolt through my body. Other than holding hands, I hadn't touched Sophia in any intimate way. After this weekend, I doubted I would ever get the chance.

Stepping away to make sure that everything was okay with the hijab and her dress, I wondered what it would have been like to meet her in a pub, as our fake story suggested. Would she have come over to me, or would I have gone to her? Would she have made me laugh, and would we have hit it off right away? By her looks alone, I was sure I would have asked her on a real date. Maybe she would have told me she was in the country for a story. It was possible we could have had a one-night stand, and I would never see her again after that.

Before meeting Sophia, I would have stuck in my ways and not dated, but if I met someone and we had an expiration date, I wasn't sure what I would do.

Even though sleeping with Sophia would probably be amazing, I'd much rather her stay with me at the palace so I could be with her as long as possible until she went back to the US.

"Earth to Luke," Sophia said, waving her hand in front of my face. "I'm beginning to think there's a blemish I missed." One of her hands covered part of her face.

"No, sorry. There's nothing wrong with your face. I was lost in my thoughts for a moment."

She eyed me as if she didn't quite believe me. I took her hand in mine and brought her into the hallway. "Are you ready for this?"

"Are you?" she asked.

"Hardly, but there's no going back now."

She squeezed my hand, and I offered her my arm as a formality as we walked down the hall toward the biggest test

of our fake relationship.



The banquet was already in full swing when Sophia and I entered the room. It was customary for everyone to be announced as they arrived, and we were no exception.

All eyes turned to us when our names were called. I pulled Sophia closer to me, letting my hand rest on her waist. The fabric of the gown was nothing compared to the softness of her skin, but it would have to do for now.

I whisked her around the room, introducing her to everyone. I had no idea where Mother was, but everyone was welcoming to my “girlfriend.” If only Mother could be there to hear how much other people appreciated the fact that I had a girlfriend at all.

More than a few of our guests teased me that Sophia was way too pretty for me.

While that pleased her to no end, I was happy she was having as good of a time as I was. Without the one-on-one judgment from my family, I was able to relax and enjoy myself with Sophia by my side.

Several times throughout the night, it didn’t feel as if I was deceiving anyone. Sophia chatted with everyone, all the prestigious men and women of the royal line, along with the business owners that Father was close to. We didn’t disclose her occupation unless someone directly asked, but she kept it vague or moved on to another topic as quickly as we could. We worked together without having to say a word between us. We were on the same wavelength the entire time, which made it harder for me to keep thinking that we were faking it.

I wanted Sophia with me all the time. Did she feel the same way, or was she just really good at pretending to be my girlfriend? Opening my heart to her might not end well for me. I had to weigh the options before I made my next move. If she went back to the US before I could speak with her on a personal level, then I’d never be able to forgive myself.

In the rare moment that we were on our own, Sophia unclasped her hand from mine. “I need some water. I’m parched.”

“Prince Luke?” someone said to my left.

I kissed Sophia’s cheek. “I’ll see you in a minute?”

“Of course,” she said with a wink.

Again, I couldn’t tell if she was acting or was drunk on the excitement of the party as I was.

I turned to the man who had called my name. He was one of the sons of a business owner that Father had been friends with for years.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a dark figure following after Sophia. I knew those quick footsteps anywhere.

Mother had her eyes focused on Sophia, and I knew she was bringing trouble.

# CHAPTER 20



## SOPHIA

The bar was set back at the far end of the room from where Luke and I had been talking. We barely had a moment to ourselves the entire time. He never told me how many people were fond of him. Sure, he was a prince, but he was charming and genuine when he spoke with everyone. It was hard not to fall under his spell.

But the moment we stopped talking, I swallowed against the scratchiness in my throat. There were several waiters passing food around the room but not drinks. I needed to keep a clear head, so I opted for two glasses of water. Not many people in the room were drinking, but there were a few. I liked to be a part of the majority when I was in a new situation. Especially when I was on the lookout for another story. Mr. Fraser hadn't specifically told me to keep the story within the palace walls. If there was a scandal to be found, I'd prefer it had nothing to do with Luke.

While I had to play the impartial reporter, I knew my piece would showcase the positive nature of the king and his son. Other than a small feud about who should sit on the throne, I didn't want to badmouth anyone in the family. Luke had trusted me to step into his family as an intimate partner. The least I could do was extend the same courtesy. I'd fight Mr. Fraser to keep my story the way I saw fit.

Turning around to get back to Luke, I almost bumped into someone.

"Sorry," I said and looked into the eyes of Gia Shamon.

“I want to talk to you outside,” she said and then walked away from me.

She exited through the glass doors next to the bar and walked out onto the balcony.

I glanced at Luke, who still had his back turned toward me. If I refused her, then she might hate me even more. Besides, it wasn't as if she could throw me off the balcony.

Could she?

I shook the thought out of my head. She probably wanted to scare me off and saw the opportunity to do so. I wouldn't allow that. If I could get a handle on the situation without Luke, then I'd spare him the anger. I had nothing to lose.

Placing my water glasses on the bar, I followed Gia Shamon out the door. An image of her throwing the water in my face popped into my head, and I didn't want to afford her the opportunity.

Going out onto the balcony, the air was much cooler. It felt nice against my heated cheeks. That was until Luke's mother turned to face me.

“Now that we have some time alone, I want to ask you a few questions,” she said.

It was a good thing that I had long sleeves on since the shiver that rolled through me overpowered the cool night air. “What do you want to know?”

“How did you two meet?” she asked.

“We told you last night—”

“I want to hear the story again,” she said, then pressed her lips together into a tight line.

I hesitated and wrung my hands together. Why hadn't I alerted Luke that I was out here? He could talk to his mother about her behavior. I had fallen into her trap hook, line, and sinker. “At a pub—”

“What was the pub called?”

Neither Luke nor I had mentioned the name of the pub. I hoped that he hadn't said anything to his father about it, either. I rattled off the name of the pub that we'd gone to when he offered me the deal to pretend to be his girlfriend.

"When was this?"

"Six—six months ago," I stammered.

"What was the exact date?"

I cleared my throat and rattled off a date that I had memorized. Luke wouldn't have been expected to remember it, but I had picked a date for my pretend assignment that had supposedly taken me to England. Giving it to her made me smile inwardly.

"Where are your parents?" she asked, stepping closer to me. She was shorter than me, but I could have been two inches tall from the way she was looking at me.

"Near Dallas," I said. The more questions she asked, the quicker I answered. She wasn't going to make me slip up. This was my ultimate test, and I wasn't going to fail. At least, not without a fight.

"Any siblings?"

"No," I said. "What's with the interrogation?"

"You come to my house and act the way you do around my son—"

"Act like what?" I interrupted.

"Like you are in love," she said.

"We are," I said, crossing my arms.

"Are you?" she asked. Her eyes were slits.

"Yes," I said. "Why are you so against us being together? Against your son's happiness?"

She snorted. It wasn't something I ever expected from a queen. "All I want is Luke to be happy. It's all I've ever wanted since I saw him."

"But no one will ever be good enough, will they?" I asked.

“Not unless I choose her,” Gia said.

“And you wouldn’t choose me?” I had never done anything to this woman. Now, I understood why Luke was so upset when she reacted the way she did to me. It was a personal attack. Even though I knew Luke and I wouldn’t spend the rest of our lives together, I wanted her to think I was good enough. I wanted to show her that Luke could choose his path and have a happy life.

“Luke is my baby. I would never allow him to be hurt by someone like you. So, I suggest that you break it off before you shatter his heart.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

She lowered her gaze to the floor as if she were a million miles away and seeing Luke for the first time. “I know he loves you. I can see it in his eyes.” Then she lifted her gaze, and those narrowed dark eyes pierced through me once more. “I don’t see the same from you. You’re looking for something from him. His money or his title, I’m not sure. But it’s not honest.”

My retort caught in my throat. While she didn’t have the specifics, she was onto something when it came to me. Sure, I was attracted to him, but did I love him? I never actually thought about it. Could I love him after all of this?

Would breaking off our fake relationship hurt him in the way that she imagined? If Luke loved me, this was all getting too complicated.

“I am right,” she said, coming closer to me.

My feet were rooted to the floor, but I lifted my chin in defiance. She wasn’t going to break me, not until I got my story from Luke. The one that I came to get and the one that seemed to have occurred right under my nose.

“What is going on here?” Luke’s voice came from the threshold separating the balcony from the banquet hall.

Whipping around, I saw Luke give his mother the angriest of looks.



“Sophia and I were just talking,” Gia said, bowing her head at her son. She gave me one last look before disappearing among the guests in the other room.

I could barely look him in the eyes, so I headed over to the railing. I wished he wouldn’t follow me, but I would have followed me too if I’d just witnessed even part of what he had.

“What did she say to you?” he asked, coming to my side.

Even though I faced the beautiful palace grounds, the idea of them created a gaping hole in my stomach.

“She asked a bunch of questions,” I said without looking at him.

“She upset you.”

“No, she didn’t, but she gave me a lot to think about.”

“Did she find out the truth about us?” His eyes were wide, and even under the moonlight, they were still light, and I fell hard into them. That nervous look was reserved for his mother at the moment. I’d hate for it to be brought out because of me.

If what his mother said was true, then it was bound to happen eventually. “I think I should leave the palace. I’m not helping the situation here.”

Luke nodded, and for a brief moment, I thought he was going to be glad to be rid of me. “We’ll leave in the morning.”

“We?” I asked.

He stepped closer and took my hands in his. He brought them to his mouth and brushed his lips across my knuckles. “I’m not going to abandon you. Besides, it will make Mother furious that I’m leaving because of her.”

Staring into his eyes, I tried to see through the fiction to fact. He cared for me. That was clear. But how much? Enough for me to break his heart?

# CHAPTER 21



## LUKE

There was no way that Sophia and I could enjoy the rest of the evening after she spoke with Mother. While Sophia was careful not to speak badly about Mother, the damage had already been done. Mother had meddled in my life for the last time. We were leaving today but not without me getting the last word.

I avoided Father like the plague in my search for Mother. It was late enough in the morning that I was sure he'd have some business to take care of before seeing us off. My conversation with my mother would go easier if he wasn't around.

Whatever my mother had said to Sophia the night before, Sophia's demeanor had changed for the rest of the night. While she had been polite to everyone else we spoke with, she didn't have the same carefree spunk that she did earlier in the night. Thankfully, she was clever enough not to let anyone else notice her change in mood. But I'd gotten to know her well enough to realize something had changed in the short time she was away from me.

Even when I tried to get her to talk about it with me on the way to her room, she claimed that it wasn't a big deal. I knew better. Mother had dug her claws under Sophia's skin. She'd said something to upset my fake girlfriend, and I wasn't going to let it go.

Sophia didn't have an intimate relationship with my family that would allow her to stick up for herself when the time came. I respected my parents, but I wasn't afraid of being honest with them.

After asking around, I found Mother having breakfast alone on the balcony off the dining room. It was her favorite place when she was trying to hide.

“Good morning, Luke,” she said with a cheery smile. “Sit down, and I will have someone fetch you some breakfast.”

“I’m not here to eat,” I said flatly. “Sophia and I are leaving this morning.”

I could have told her that I was about to jump off the balcony by the way she reacted. “No. Why? You said you were going to be here until Sunday.”

“Now you want us to stay?” I asked. “After the stunt you pulled last night with Sophia?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Mother said, then sipped from her teacup.

“I call bull,” I said, reining back what I really wanted to say.

“You will not speak to me like this,” she said.

“It’s well deserved,” I said. “I brought Sophia here as my guest, and you have been nothing but rude to her.”

“I have not been rude,” she said, avoiding my eyes.

“Please, Mother. I’m not blind. You’ve barely spoken to her in my presence, even when she’s speaking to you directly.”

“I don’t recall an instance like that—”

She wasn’t getting away from the conversation that easily. “Dinner the other night. You stared at your plate the whole time and said nothing.”

“I planned a banquet in your honor,” she said. “I was going over the details in my head.”

She wasn’t budging, and the more I pressed, the more infuriated I was going to become.

“Fine,” I said. “Let’s just agree that you don’t approve of Sophia.”

“Of course, I don’t approve,” she said, locking eyes with me.

“Why not?” I asked, “Why don’t you trust me to find someone on my own?”

“You mean nothing to her,” Mother said.

I leaned forward in my chair. Had Sophia slipped up when she spoke with Mother last night? Had I misread her reaction? Was she mad at herself and didn’t want to worry me?

Mother couldn’t know that our relationship was fake, even if she caught a hint of it. I was going to leave here the victor of this fight. If I gave up control now, I’d never get it back.

“That’s not true,” I said, digging my fingers into the arms of the chair. “We’re in love. You’re just upset that you didn’t choose her.”

“If you chose the right woman, someone who reciprocated those feelings of *love*—”

“How do you know Sophia doesn’t?” I asked. “Did she tell you that?” Sophia would never admit to that. She’d play along until the end. At the very least, I knew that.

“I can tell,” Mother said.

“You can tell?” I asked. “Have you acquired the means to read minds?”

She pulled a face. “Don’t be fresh.”

“I’m trying to understand you. You *do* know I have to have a wife someday, right? At this rate, you will never approve of anyone.”

“I will never approve of *her*,” Mother spat. “She will never be your wife.”

“And who are you to say that?” The idea of marrying Sophia brought a smile to my lips. It wasn’t possible at the moment, but I didn’t know where our future was headed. I wanted to try turning our fake relationship into a real one. We’d already been through so much together. There was no harm in giving it a real shot. That was, if she wanted to.

I didn't trust anything Mother had to say. She wasn't obligated to tell me the truth about their conversation. When she wanted something, she told whatever truth she needed to get her agenda across.

"I'm your mother," she said. "I'm not affected by whatever spell she has you under. She has other motives, and they don't have your interests at heart."

"I see this conversation isn't going anywhere," I said, standing up. "I hope that the next time I see you, we can have a normal, civilized conversation."

"I'm civilized," she said.

She always had the last word.

I kissed her cheek and left her without another word. She was never going to change, and I had no idea why I thought she would.



Since we were flying on a private jet, we could show up whenever we wanted, but I knew Sophia wanted to get home. I had about an hour until we left, and I already had my bags packed.

Sophia was nowhere to be found, but I didn't want to bother her in case she was still working through whatever conversation she and Mother had the night before.

I went to Abir's room, hoping that he was awake.

"Come in!" he called after I knocked.

His room was a mess, as usual. It was a good thing that we had servants, or the piles of dirty clothes would have reached the ceiling. Abir sat at his desk with an open book in front of him. Ever since he could read, he buried his head in books and filled his mind with information.

"Sophia and I are leaving today," I said.

Abir jumped up from his chair. “I thought you were going back tomorrow?”

I wasn’t about to drag Abir into the family drama. “I have to head back to the office.”

“Can’t you work from here?” he asked. “I miss having my big brother in the palace. And I like Sophia.”

“I know you do,” I said.

He slumped back into his chair. I sat on the edge of his bed—the only small corner that was still made from the last time the servants had come in.

“Did Father scare you off again?” Abir asked.

I always pictured Abir as a little boy. The sensitive one to be protected from the harsh realities of the world. But he wasn’t a little boy anymore. Writing him off wouldn’t work, especially since he was incredibly smart.

“For the first time, no,” I said with a laugh.

“Mother doesn’t approve of Sophia, then?” he asked.

I tapped the tip of my nose. “You got it. I really *do* have to take care of things back in England. That wasn’t a lie.” I had to give an interview as a tradeoff for Sophia lying to my family the whole weekend. Mulling it over in those terms made my stomach churn.

“I know you’re busy,” he said. “Father will only push you harder, you know? He’s always talking about how you will succeed him. It’s all he can talk about lately.”

“Does that bother you?” Feeling guilty for being the chosen one against the bloodline, I had to clear my mind about it before I left. I didn’t believe in talking behind others’ backs, so having a conversation face-to-face with Abir might ease my mind.

“Not at all,” Abir said. “I don’t want to be king.”

“You don’t?” I asked.

“I’m not a leader,” he said. “I like books and keeping to myself. You’re the one with the charisma and leadership skills.”

Father would never decide this if he weren't sure. He wants you and not me."

"And you're okay with that?" I asked.

"Yes!" Abir said with a smile. "It's a great relief. I can live my life the way that I want to."

I sighed. While I knew that Abir would make a good king if forced, I didn't want to be the one to force him if it was something he didn't want for himself. Now that I knew the truth, it made the decision that much harder. If I turned Father down, claiming that he should choose someone from the bloodline, then I'd force Abir into a position that he wanted nothing to do with.

Sacrificing myself for him was the only way to make two out of the three of us happy. But where did that leave me? And where did that leave Sophia and me?

Father liked Sophia, but would he approve of the prospect of her ruling with me? Did he think she was a fling until I got serious about running the kingdom? Was he being polite and biding his time, knowing that I would fall into line eventually?

A lump formed in my throat as I said goodbye to Abir. He had no idea that I was fighting a war within me, but it wasn't his problem. I would make it so that he'd never know that I considered not taking the throne. The guilt might eat him alive, and if I could protect him from living a life he didn't want, then I would do anything to make it so.

Leaving his room, I was more anxious than I had been the entire time I was at the palace. I needed to find the one person to bring me back down from that.

I had to find Sophia and get out of this place so I could breathe and mull over the decision.



## CHAPTER 22



## SOPHIA

I took my time that morning getting ready and packing my bags. I didn't want to risk finishing early and then coming into contact with Luke's mother on my own again. It had been a grave mistake that affected the rest of the banquet for Luke and me. I couldn't get out of my head, but I tried my hardest to appear like everything was okay between the two of us. I had no issue with Luke, other than his mother. I felt bad that he had to be related to someone like her, but I'd never tell him that.

Avoiding her was my number one priority.

After packing, I responded to the slew of texts from Matt and ignored the ones from the newspaper. I knew Mr. Fraser would want something soon, but after last night, I had no urge to interview Luke.

Tricking Luke's family had been bad enough. Now, I had to go on record and exploit him in front of the world. While I kept up my half of the bargain, I was hard-pressed to want anything else to do with it.

The night before, Luke had said that he would come get me around ten-thirty, but it was close to eleven. Had something held him up?

I'd paced the room too many times to count. I couldn't wait any longer. Even if he was held up, I wasn't going to be the damsel who waited for her knight to arrive. If I happened to run into Gia, then I would be as polite as possible, but I couldn't stay in the room for a minute more.

Grabbing my rolling suitcase, I exited the room, saying a silent farewell to the gorgeous gowns that were still hanging in the armoire. Even though Luke wouldn't have cared if I took one or two, I didn't want a reminder of last night. Besides, it wasn't as if I was going to be invited to any more events anytime soon. Once I returned home, it was back to jeans and T-shirts for me, eating takeout, and staying up all night writing stories. Though with the promotion, I wondered what sort of stories they might be and if I'd be able to choose the best ones for my talents.

The idea brought a smile to my face as I walked the halls, looking for Luke. At least anyone who saw me would think I was happy. I held onto the feeling of reaching my goal to keep my spirits up.

Turning one of the corners, I realized that I had some idea where I was going. I'd tried Luke's room first, but it was empty. I hoped he hadn't eaten breakfast without me. I was starving. But I didn't doubt there was delicious food on the plane as well.

"I'm afraid you don't have much more time to live," a voice said from inside one of the bedrooms.

I stopped in my tracks and stared at the small open crack in the doorway. My reporter senses went off, and I could almost see flashing red lights in my vision.

I glanced behind me and down both ends of the hallway. I was alone.

Stepping closer to the door, I got as close as I could without alerting anyone that I was there. Which dignitary or guest was about to die?

"I suggest you get your affairs in order, King Shamon," the voice said.

I clamped a hand over my mouth, willing any sound to be swallowed up.

"Thank you, doctor," Luke's father said from inside the room. "Let me show you out."

His voice was louder, and there wasn't enough time for me to get feeling back into my legs enough for me to move.

The door opened, and I came face to face with the king and another man, who I assumed was the doctor. They were dressed similarly in their white and black robes. If I had seen them on the street, I would have no idea how to tell them apart.

The king's eyes locked on mine. "Sophia."

The doctor bowed his head and hurried away, clearly aware of what was happening. How had I ended up alone with one of Luke's parents again? At least this time, I knew where the conversation was going.

"How long have you been standing there?" he asked me in an even tone.

Lying wasn't going to get me anywhere with this family anymore. "Long enough."

He sighed. "I trust that you will keep this to yourself. I have not informed my family about my diagnosis."

I shook my head. "I won't say a word."

He considered me for a moment before nodding. "I wish you the best of luck in your future endeavors. Take care of my son."

"I will," I said, shaking his hand.

He walked away and left me standing in the middle of the hallway, clutching the handle of my bag.

What the hell had just happened?

Several chairs and tables lined the hallway, and I found the closest chair, needing to sit down before I collapsed. My entire body heated up and my head spun. The king was dying. That was why he was pushing Luke to the throne before he was ready. The fate of the kingdom was really in Luke's hands as his father didn't have much longer to live.

Tears pricked at my eyes. This was the story that Mr. Fraser wanted, probably more than a piece on Luke. A secret

scandal within the palace would hand me the promotion on a silver platter.

How long would Erol wait to tell his family? Would he be on his deathbed before he said anything? Once I told Mr. Fraser about this, then he'd want the story as soon as possible so we'd be the first to break it.

I couldn't hide it from my boss, could I? Once the story broke on the national level, then he would be furious if hadn't brought it up first. He wouldn't believe that the king would hide something like this from his family, but he didn't know Erol at all. The king was a proud man and only trying to do the best he could for his family. I knew that now. Reading about this family online gave a microscopic view of what went on. Mr. Fraser wouldn't understand, and I'd probably lose my promotion before I got it.

"Sophia, are you all right?" Luke asked, coming up next to me.

"Yes," I said, jumping up from the chair. "I, um, bumped my leg with the suitcase. Not a big deal."

"Do you need ice?"

"Nope. I'm fine." I didn't want to stay in the palace any longer than necessary. I could barely make eye contact with Luke. It wasn't fair that his father was keeping him in the dark about his illness. I was sure that Luke would want to spend more time with him if he knew.

Erol would be furious if I told Luke. He'd probably cast me out of the family and never allow me back. Not that I ever thought I was coming back, but it would ruin any hope for Luke to keep me on as his fake girlfriend to get his mother off his back.

"Let's say goodbye to Father," he said. "The car is waiting for us outside."

I swallowed and tagged along as Luke pulled my suitcase in front of me.

I tried to keep my expression as passive as possible as we approached Luke's parents.

Erol shot me a look but hid it well as his face split into a smile. “It was so nice to meet you, Sophia.” He shook my hand as if our conversation in the hallway had never happened. “Do come visit us again soon.”

I nodded. “Thank you for having me. I truly had a wonderful time. And if I can convince Luke to come back here again soon, then I hope to tag along.” The lie tasted sour on my tongue, but it was enough of a pleasantry to keep Luke away from the truth.

I said goodbye to Luke’s mother, but she had returned to the sullen woman that had graced our presence at the first dinner we shared. After the confrontation with her the night before, I didn’t push it.

Abir kissed both my cheeks, and then a shrill ringing came from my bag. I grabbed it and saw the name on the screen. Mr. Fraser. My heart leaped into my throat, cutting off my air supply.

“Excuse me,” I choked, allowing Luke to say his goodbyes to his parents. As soon as I left to answer my phone, Gia smiled at her son and hugged him.

Stifling an eye roll at her rotating attitude, I steeled myself for the conversation with my boss.

“Hi, Mr. Fraser,” I said.

“Sophia, I wanted to know how you were getting on.”

I stepped farther away from the Shamons, not wanting to alert them to who I was talking to. While they knew I was a journalist, Luke was the only other person who knew that my next story was about the royal family. “I’m heading out shortly to go back to the UK.”

“Did you get the story?”

I glanced at Luke. He was smiling and laughing with Abir and their father. My chest tightened. It might be the last time that Luke laughed with his father.

“Your promotion relies on this,” Mr. Fraser said, prodding.

I realized I hadn't answered his question yet. "I have a story. I just haven't had time to write it. There are people all over the place here. I need a little more time."

"You have one week," he said firmly.

"Thank you, Mr. Fraser."

Luke waved me over, and it was the perfect opportunity to get off the phone with my boss. "I have to go now. We're headed to the airport."

"One week, Sophia," Mr. Fraser said before hanging up, as if I needed a reminder.

I forced a smile as I approached Luke. He couldn't know what I intended to write. Another lie I had to tell since arriving at the palace.

# CHAPTER 23





## LUKE

I noticed that Sophia was quieter than usual on the flight home. I asked her twice if she was all right before giving up. If she was in a mood about what Mother had said to her the night before, I didn't want to make it worse.

Once we got back to England, everything would go back to normal.

Or would it?

Sophia retired to her bedroom earlier than I anticipated. She claimed she didn't get much sleep the night before, and again, Mother was to blame.

With every mile behind us, I was confident that all would be okay soon enough.

Once we weren't forced to pretend to be together, the opportunity might come up for us to want to spend time together alone.

Since there was no one to talk to and I wasn't in the right head space to do work, I watched several movies before heading into my bedroom.

By the time I came out, Sophia was already in her seat out in the common area.

We didn't have a lot of time to talk with the flight attendants always around, but I did want to follow through with my end of the deal.

“I trust you slept well?” We had about an hour or so left until we arrived at the airport.

“I did, thank you,” she said.

“I want to take you to dinner tonight,” I said. “Once we land.”

“You don’t have to—”

“I want to. You’ve held up your side of the bargain. Now it’s my turn. You can ask me anything you want.”

She sighed. “I suppose it *is* time for the big interview.”

“Don’t be too harsh on me,” I said with an attempt at a joke.

“I already know a lot about you from this weekend. I promise it will be easy.”

I wished her smile was true, but once again, something haunted her. I hoped Mother’s negative effect wore off soon or else I’d have a hard time convincing her that I wanted to be with her. If the prospect of seeing Mother again scared Sophia, then the dinner wouldn’t end well for me.

We kept our conversation on the polite side for the rest of the flight, but Sophia seemed to get tenser as time wore on. There was nothing about my life that I wanted to keep secret from her. While I wished she wouldn’t blast my hesitation about becoming king all across the media, I’d be willing to bear it as long as it catapulted her career.

I’d given her more trouble than I needed to, and I was willing to do anything to make it up to her.

Once we landed, I didn’t want to give Sophia an opportunity to change her mind. It was later in the evening, but I’d already had Justine make reservations at an Italian place right outside the city. It was one of my favorites, and I knew she’d love it.

While Sophia had given short and quick responses to everything I’d said on the flight home, she was especially talkative after the wine had arrived at the table. She barely took a sip before her phone came out, along with her little

notebook. There were pages of scribbles, and I got the impression that she hadn't slept the entire time on the plane.

As much as I knew this was happening, it bummed me out a little to know that she had prepared so much for the interview instead of spending time with me.

Was she already sick of me? I wondered if I should bother with telling her how I truly felt about her or if it would be a waste. While we were at the palace, I was sure her feelings had a stronger foundation. Either she was a good actor, or Mother had ruined something that could have been great for the both of us.

"How long ago did you start working for your father?" she asked.

She already knew the answer, but I supposed she needed it on record. "I was twenty-three when I entered the business. I did a lot of shadowing and traveling before settling here."

I wondered who was going to listen to the recording. I was careful to keep my tone light and professional. If Sophia felt nothing for me, then I wouldn't want to convey my feelings for her if her boss needed to listen in.

"Why did you want to start with the family business?"

I answered her, but the more questions she asked about the business, the more I could tell they were generic and had been asked of me during interviews in the past. Where was the fire that led her to follow me into the cafe and wait for me every day after work? I was beginning to think this wasn't about Mother at all.

"What is your relationship like with your father?" she asked.

"It's fine," I said, wondering where she was going with the new shift in questioning. "It's hard to work with a family member, but our distance helps that."

"Would you consider moving back to Qatar to be around him more?"

I cocked my head to the side. “The only reason I’d want to move back there is if I was to be king.”

Wasn’t that what the goal of her interview was about? She wanted to know more about me succeeding my father but hadn’t asked me directly.

“So, you wouldn’t want to go back there if you decided not to be king?”

I swiped her screen and paused the recording. “Sophia, what’s going on with you?”

She pulled her phone closer to her. “I don’t understand why you don’t want to be around your family more. Seeing you and your father together, you love each other. I know your mother can be a problem, but why don’t you appreciate what you have?”

“I do,” I said. “I just need time to consider my options. If I’m there, then Father will get his hopes up.”

She turned on the recorder again. “Are you going to take over as king?”

“I don’t know.”

“What if you were forced to?” she asked.

“The only way that I’d be forced to was if something happened to my father.”

She blinked hard and asked, “What if something did?”

“I don’t even want to think about it. I love him, and I don’t know what I would do if I lost him.”

“You’d have to become king.”

I glanced at the phone and back at her.

She paused the recorder again. “You’re not off the record.”

At least what I said next wouldn’t be heard by anyone but her, no matter how she wanted to spin it. “The reason for my hesitation is that I don’t want to force Abir to do something he doesn’t want to do.”

“Abir doesn’t want to be king, either?”

“No,” I said. “I spoke with him before we left. If I refuse, Father will force it upon Abir. I’d feel worse about that than becoming king myself. But either way, I have until the end of the month to decide.”

“It seems clear to me,” she said.

“I’m not going to take this decision lightly.”

“But you want to save your brother from that fate. Why don’t you just go back now?”

“What is with you?” I asked her. Our waiter returned to the table with our food, and I held my tongue until he left. “You’ve wanted this interview for two weeks. Now you’re asking me amateur questions about my business and purposely goading me about my father. Am I missing something? You’ve been acting strange since the banquet. Tell me what’s going on.”

“I have everything I need,” she said, her expression hard and cold. It was what I expected of her when we first met, but not now. Not after everything we’d gone through together. “I should go—”

“Sophia,” I said, reaching for her.

She was halfway out of her chair when I grabbed her arm.

“Please, sit. Talk to me.”

“I need to go, Luke.” Her eyes were glossy, and her voice trembled.

“Sophia, I can’t let you go.”

She slowly sat in her chair and glanced around at the other people around us. I didn’t care much for them, only what I was about to admit. “I’ve never had feelings for anyone like I do for you. This weekend opened up something inside of me that I never knew I had before—”

“Luke, I’m going to stop you there,” she said. This time, she pushed her chair away and stood up, shouldering her bag. She was too far away for me to touch. “I’m leaving for America tomorrow. I can’t do this with you.”

# CHAPTER 24



## LUKE

I hadn't seen or heard from Sophia in two days, but when I walked into my favorite coffee place on Monday morning, a part of me still expected her to burst through the door behind me and beg me for an interview. She had done that when she first arrived in London. The American reporter had stalked me to my office and then to the one place I thought was special to me. If I had turned her down enough, she probably would have found a way to end up at my flat.

In hindsight, maybe I should have done exactly that.

Instead, I negotiated with her to pretend to be my girlfriend for a weekend so she could help get my mother off my back. That arrangement might have been my biggest mistake and the best thing that ever happened to me. Sophia was the most alluring and enigmatic woman I'd ever met.

She had agreed to come with me to my family's palace in Qatar. Having a "girlfriend"—even if she was American—would halt all efforts from my mother about setting me up with someone. While my mother wanted nothing to do with her, my father and my sixteen-year-old brother Abir liked her. She seemed to have a good time with me—other than having to deal with the rude remarks from my mother, the queen.

After the big banquet my mother had planned, Mother took Sophia out onto the veranda and said something to her. Something that changed Sophia's mind about wanting the interview with me about my father stepping down from the throne. While I still couldn't make up my mind about if I

wanted to be king, I was willing to give the interview after what she'd done for me.

But when we returned to England, Sophia didn't want the interview. Even after I told her how I truly felt about her, she walked away from me, leaving me alone and confused in the middle of a restaurant.

I tried to call her cell phone, but it had been disconnected. I had no doubt she was ignoring me, but it was entirely possible that her phone was a work phone and the international plan had expired.

She had said she was going back to America on Sunday, but there was a shred of hope inside me that she would change her mind. I knew how much the article meant to her and her career. She was the first Western woman to enter the palace, which was worthy of its own article, but when we returned to the UK, she wanted nothing to do with any of it.

I wondered what happened exactly, but all I had was questions with no answers.

For the rest of the weekend, I racked my brain for something I'd said to offend her. Each time when we were alone at the palace, energy crackled between us in a way I'd never felt before with anyone. I thought Sophia had felt the same.

Or she had been an excellent actress. She'd certainly fooled my family and me.

I wanted to think the worst of her. I wanted to agree with Mother that Sophia was only in this relationship to get something out of me. But she had left before she got anything from me, adding to the perplexing situation.

I wanted her to feel the same way for me that I did for her, and I wished she would have explained herself instead of leaving me with a million questions and doubts.

"Hello?" a woman said from behind me.

A smile curled my lips, and I turned around to see an older woman.



My heart sank.

“Get moving or out of the queue,” she snapped.

Glancing at the line behind her, there were others annoyed that I had my head in the clouds.

I moved toward the counter and put in my order.

“All right?” the girl said.

“Yeah,” I answered.

“You seem off today,” she said, flipping her ponytail from off her shoulder. “I haven’t seen you check your phone once.” She said it with a smile, and I knew she was teasing me, but I wasn’t in the mood.

I handed over a few quid before taking my order to one of the tables near the windows.

I didn’t have a lot of time before work, but I couldn’t force myself to leave. It would be just like Sophia to stalk me here and apologize to me. She didn’t have a car in the city, so maybe she had trouble getting a cab?

I slowly ate my croissant and sipped my tea. I noted every single person who came into the café, along with the people walking across the sidewalk. None of them had her face, although I pictured her pale blue eyes and dark hair on more than one woman.

I stared at the crumbs of my breakfast, hesitating at the table. A *ping* sounded from my phone, and I finally tore my gaze away from the crinkly brown paper in front of me.

Pulling my phone out from my jacket pocket, I saw several texts from my secretary, Justine, and two from my business partner and best friend, Maddox.

They were short and to the point. They were wondering where the hell I was.

I was never late. And if I was, there was sure to be panic, thinking I was in an accident or dead. I texted them both back that I would be on my way soon. I supposed I could always say that Sophia and I had decided to stay another day with my

family, but they knew me too well. Neither a woman nor my family had ever torn me away from work before.

Though, I was sure if Sophia asked, I would take weeks or months off to be with her if it meant she would stay.



When I reached the office, the car park was full. Of course, I had my reserved spot right in front of the building, but I had never seen so many cars in the lot when I arrived or left. As the boss, I was always the first to come and the last to go.

Inside, I shuffled past the front desk where Victoria fielded several phone calls. She nodded at me, and I nodded back.

I wasn't the "chat at the water cooler" type, and everyone knew it. I wasn't a hard-ass by any means, but I preferred to keep to myself. That was easier on the days when I reached my office before anyone else arrived.

The elevator was empty, which I considered a blessing, and I was able to take a breath before getting to my floor.

I already knew I would get an earful from Maddox about my weekend. Only Justine and Maddox knew that I had taken Sophia with me. They didn't know in what capacity, but they weren't idiots. The only reason I would take a woman home was to meet my parents. I had informed Maddox over text, so I knew he had been stewing all weekend about it.

I tried to get past his desk without being detected, but I had no such luck. I managed to reach Justine's desk outside my office before he caught up.

"I need a Monday pep talk," he said, winking at Justine.

She gave him a forced smile. Maddox was a flirt, and everyone knew it. While he never dated anyone from the company—at least to my knowledge—that didn't stop him from being the charming boss while I was the recluse.

Maddox pushed his way into my office and started in on me before I could take my jacket off.

“Mate, you gotta tell me everything,” Maddox said, kicking my office door closed.

“About what?”

“You cheeky bastard!” he said, clapping his hands together. “You took that smoking hot reporter with you to your *parents’* house, and you won’t even spill?”

“I have a lot of work to do,” I said.

“Speaking of that,” he said, sitting down in the chair opposite my desk. He was settling in and would be harder to shake now. “I thought you died this morning.”

“What?”

“In all the years I’ve known you, you’ve never been late. Gave me a fright. You all right?”

“I’m fine,” I said through my teeth.

“Doesn’t look it,” he said. “You can trust me. Tell me.”

I shrugged. “Sophia got her story and left. That’s it. And I overslept this morning.”

“I know half of that is true,” Maddox said, standing up. He crossed his arms over his broad chest. “I’m not leaving until we talk.”

“What do you want to hear?” I asked.

“Why did you take her instead of me?” he asked with a mock pout. “I would have loved to see the palace.”

While I knew he was joking, I wasn’t in the mood. “My mother has been trying to set me up with a bunch of women.”

“Poor you,” he said, rolling his eyes.

“To marry,” I said.

He wrinkled his nose.

“Exactly,” I said. “Sophia wanted a story, and I wanted Mother off my back. It was the perfect set up.”

“That doesn’t explain why you were late today,” he said.

I dropped down in one of the leather chairs, knowing that I wasn't going to get any work done until he left. "I don't know, mate. Something changed between us."

Maddox sat down across from me. "Okay?"

"I thought she wanted more," I said, rubbing my hand against my cheek. I shaved on a regular basis, but I had let two days pass without grooming myself. The hairs started to itch, and I knew it would bother me for the rest of the day. "I was wrong."

"What made you think that?" Maddox asked.

"There was something between us," I said. "When we were alone, it was as if we were the only two people in the world. And she fit in so well with my family, well, other than my mother. But that was to be expected."

Maddox gave me a strange look, and I questioned it. Normally, he would have been all for a weekend away with a woman without attachment.

"When she first arrived, you said that she was here for one thing," he said. "What made you think that would change? Did you think she'd refuse to go with you to the palace? It was probably what she wanted to begin with. And you handed that over on a silver platter."

"I suppose you're right," I said.

"She fooled more than just your family," he said.

I chewed on my inner cheek, a habit I thought had disappeared in my youth. If what Maddox said was correct, then I felt about two inches tall. I was a successful business owner and a prince of a Middle Eastern kingdom. How could one slight American woman turn that all upside down? Had she fooled me completely?

"Logistically, it would have never worked out," Maddox said. "For one thing, your mother would have never allowed you to marry her."

"I know," I said, although it was something I had thought about. I wouldn't admit that to Maddox because I already felt

like a fool for trusting Sophia with my heart.

I stood up and drew in a breath. “Well, I *do* have to get some work done.”

Maddox clapped a hand on my shoulder. “Let’s go out soon. I have some girls in my little black book that can help you forget about Sophia.”

I nodded, even though that was the last thing I wanted.

When Maddox left, I sauntered over to my desk. Work usually distracted me, but I had no motivation. If only Sophia would have given me the closure I needed, then I could move on.

I logged onto my computer and opened up a browser window. I typed in the website for The Dallas Post, the newspaper that Sophia worked for. Even though I’d signed up for their alerts—using a fake email—I hadn’t received anything about an article written by her or about me. The front page looked the same as it had earlier that morning, and disappointment pooled in my stomach like a lead weight.

# CHAPTER 25



## SOPHIA

I had an awful, sour taste in my mouth. I wasn't sure if it was caused by jet lag, lack of sleep, or a combination of both. I could barely drink my coffee that morning, knowing what was going to happen when I arrived at work with no article.

Leaving Luke was the hardest thing I had ever done. I didn't care that his mother hated me because I wasn't a woman she had chosen for her son. But I *did* care that Luke's father—Erol Shaman—was dying and he hadn't told his family. It was only by mistake that I stumbled upon him and his doctor speaking in confidence about his terminal diagnosis. The king had asked me to keep his secret, putting me in an awful position with Luke.

After arriving in Qatar, Luke and I had become much closer than I ever imagined. I knew I had feelings for him, but after his mother told me that Luke was in love with me and that she didn't think I was in love with him, I had a lot to think about. Adding the secret of his father's illness had sent me off the deep end.

I couldn't be with Luke after having this terrible secret on my shoulders. Luke and I would have no chance if I told him what I'd heard. Erol would never accept me into the family after that. He and Abir were the only ones who didn't sneer at me when I walked into a room.

Besides, it wasn't my place to spill their family's secrets. My boss, Mr. Fraser, wanted an article about the king stepping down from the throne and revealing if Luke was going to take over. But after meeting Luke and his family, I wanted to keep

them safe from the media. With the extra story about Erol's illness, Mr. Fraser would want both stories. Both stories would tear into Luke's life like a knife, and I would be to blame.

There had to be something else I could do. I was torn between my job and my feelings for Luke.

Briefly, I thought maybe Luke had put me in this position on purpose. He might have created those feelings between us so that I wouldn't write the story. But I knew that couldn't be true. He didn't have to invite me into his home and life. He could have continued to ignore me until I left England.

His mother was right. He *did* have feelings for me. But I'd come to England to get a story. My livelihood relied on it. A long-overdue promotion did as well.

Never before had I been put in such a situation that ripped me in two. Reporters didn't have these feelings for their subjects. But every time I thought of meeting with Mr. Fraser, Luke's handsome face popped into my head.

The feel of his hand in mine was like a corporeal ghost by my side, urging me to do the right thing.

But what was the right thing? Luke knew that I wanted to interview him for a story and he had answered my questions. I already had all I needed and a second story, as well. But having dinner with him on that last night together had been unbearable. There he was, utterly oblivious to his father dying, and I stood between him and his father's last days.

Unable to take it anymore, I had fled without explanation. What his father did with his family was their business. It was a cruel business, but it was best for me to stay out of it.

Arriving at work that morning, I struggled to get the front door open while holding my coffee and breakfast. I thought it was a sign for me to leave the office and go back home, but I knew I was just making excuses. Mr. Fraser and I would have to work something out. He knew I wanted the promotion, but I had gotten in too deep with Luke and had to find a way to crawl out of that hole with my dignity and my career intact.



Going up to the second-floor, the newsroom already bustled with activity.

Glancing in the direction of Mr. Fraser's office, I slinked by his closed door without him noticing.

Once I reached my desk, I took a breath. It was a short reprieve from what I expected to be one of the hardest days of my career, but I at least wanted to eat breakfast before I passed out.

My coffee burned my tongue as I gulped it down, but the caffeine rushed through my veins, and I immediately felt perkier.

"Good morning," Natalia said from behind me.

I turned in my chair and smiled at her. "Hey."

"How was your first trip out of the States?" Natalia pursed her pink lips, and I wasn't sure if she was making fun of me or not. She was one of the select few reporters who traveled around the world on a regular basis. Her exotic appearance made her a prime candidate for international travel. She didn't look American and hid her Southern drawl well when she needed to.

"Good," I said.

Natalia stood, unfolding her legs-for-days from under her desk. She came over to my side and leaned against my desk as if she were showcasing it for *The Price is Right*. "I need to hear more about it than that. You went over there to talk to a prince."

"I did," I said, opening my bag and pulling out my chocolate croissant. Luke had ordered one the morning that we'd met in his favorite cafe. Now I was hooked.

"Did you get the story?" she asked, her brown eyes wide with interest.

"I got a story," I said, keeping it vague on purpose.

"How was the prince?" she asked. "I bet he's gorgeous in person."

The caffeine in my body heightened my annoyance with the conversation. She wasn't going to stop until I gave her something.

"He is," I said, playing it up for the conversation. Even though Luke *was* drop-dead gorgeous, I wanted to make her a little jealous that she wasn't selected for the job. Then again, Mr. Fraser had said that other reporters here weren't able to get the job done in the past. Maybe that was why he'd sent me instead of her. Maybe she had failed and wouldn't admit it.

I told her about meeting him—not that I stalked him at his office and his favorite coffee shop—then him whisking me away to his family's palace. I didn't need to exaggerate to get my point across. It really had been like a fairy tale.

When I finished my story, I took a breath. Falling into the memory of my trip with Luke had brought back even more of the feelings that I had for him. I liked him. A lot. But was this love? Was his mother telling me the truth—that he loved me? Or was she trying to scare me away? Surely, any woman who went to the palace on the arm of a prince had some idea that she had the chance to become queen, but Luke and I had both been lying to his family about having a relationship. Did he love me or was he just playing the part in front of his family?

Natalia crossed her arms and her thin eyebrows arched.

"What?" I asked.

"So, what is your story about?" she asked.

"The prince's rise to the throne?" I couldn't help it coming out as a question. I wasn't sure what story I was going to tell yet.

"Sounds to me that you have a lot to think about," she said.

"How so?" I asked.

She sighed and pursed her lips as if she were hiding a smirk. "Sounds like you're writing a romance novel."

"It does not," I said.

She shrugged. "Whatever you say." She returned to her desk and shoved her earbuds into her ears before grabbing her

mouse and getting back to work.

I sat at my desk, allowing what she'd said to sit in the back of my mind. Was she throwing me off my game, or did she think there was something between Luke and me? The way I described him might have made her think so. I hoped it didn't sound that way to Mr. Fraser when I inevitably went into his office to explain what happened on the company-sponsored trip to the UK.

I finished my breakfast and downed my coffee, but for some reason, it felt like my last meal.

Shaking the grim thought away, I pulled up the files I'd generated while I was overseas. They contained information on Luke and his entire family, his business, and several websites of information on his out of the spotlight personal life. From what I gathered, he didn't have much of one.

I was so engrossed in my research that when my phone rang, I jumped so high that I landed on the edge of my chair. I reached for the desk phone and pressed it to my ear.

“Hello?”

“Mr. Fraser wants you in his office now,” Chelsea, Mr. Fraser's secretary, said into the line.

“Oh, okay. Does he—” The line went dead before I could finish my question. I knew she was busy, but she bordered on rude most of the time.

I grabbed my USB from my computer and my notebook before heading toward Mr. Fraser's office.

“Good luck,” Natalia chirped without looking up at me.

I gritted my teeth and attempted to take a full breath. Why the hell didn't I just get the interview from Luke like I was supposed to? Why did I allow my emotions to mess with my work?

I was so screwed.

I knocked on the door that had “Editor in Chief” etched on a placard next to it. I rarely went into Mr. Fraser's office. If he wanted something, he or Chelsea sent me an email. Going

inside was reserved for the reporters he'd put on a pedestal. Half the time, he yelled at them for something, but before going on this trip, I had wished I was important enough to get yelled at by him. Now, I knew what was coming and I dreaded it.

"It's open," he said from the other side of the door.

I steeled myself and opened it.

I plastered on the biggest smile I could. The one that I would have worn if I was about to be promoted. While the expression was natural, the feelings accompanying it weren't. They were twisted and utterly confusing.

"Let's get down to business," he said, gesturing to the chair in front of him.

I sat on the edge of the leather seat, holding myself upright so I didn't slip off it and onto his floor. I was already embarrassed enough not to have a story to hand to him.

"I'm interested to hear what type of story you'll write for me from your trip," he said.

He clasped his manicured fingers together atop his desk and stared at me with those small beady eyes of his. He was a tall man but round around the middle with a receding hairline. I tried to focus on his faults to calm my nerves, but it wasn't working. Besides, he didn't need a promotion. I did.

While the story about Luke's father being ill and dying before his son took the throne would get me the promotion that I wanted, I had promised the king not to tell Luke. If the Dallas Post published that story before Erol told Luke, then I would have broken that promise.

I couldn't do that to either of them.

I sighed, kissing my promotion goodbye. "He only spoke to me about the business."

"What business?" Mr. Fraser asked.

"The oil business. I couldn't find out anything—"

“Wait, one second,” he said, holding up a finger at me as if I were his kid and not his employee. “You went to the UK and then to Qatar, and all you want to give me is a puff piece about his family’s oil business? A business that has been written about to death by a dozen other outlets?”

“Yes.”

“Goddammit, Sophia. I sent you to get a *story*. I went against my gut with this one, and look where that got me. You can kiss that promotion goodbye. In fact, I might have to fire you for wasting my time and company money.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat. I hadn’t let myself entertain the possibility of getting fired over this. If that happened, I would never be able to get a job at another newspaper.

“Hold on,” I said.

“What is it?” he asked.

“There was something that I heard around the palace,” I said.

He leaned closer to me. It wasn’t much, but I had his attention. I had to think quickly.

“I need more time,” I said. “They trust me. Luke—the prince—he will invite me back if I ask. I can get the scoop and an even bigger story for you.”

“Why didn’t you lead with that?” he asked. I wasn’t sure he was convinced.

“I—uh—I wasn’t sure if I was welcomed after the weekend. I didn’t have enough time to research, but if I go back, that will be my sole purpose.”

Mr. Fraser worked his jaw. He could never resist a juicy story. Even just the prospect of one. Little did he know that I had nothing. Maybe I was as good of an actor as Luke’s mother had said.

“Let me think about it and get back to you,” he said and waved me out of his office.

# CHAPTER 26



## LUKE

**B**y the time midweek came around, my anxiety about Sophia had risen to an all-time high. Just like she had stalked me, I dedicated much of my free time doing the same to her. I started with a simple Google search for her first and last name.

Americans seemed to write about every little thing when it came to their achievements. I found Sophia's name in an article about her high school graduation, some early pieces of her work on an old blog website that hadn't been updated in years, and a few awards at her university.

Where I fell into utter oblivion was when I searched for her articles at the Dallas Post. She'd been there for six years, and I read every single article that she ever published for them. Many were pieces about businesses and people in the Dallas area, but with each word, I could hear her voice as if she were reading them aloud to me. Even some of the drier topics had been more amusing with her style and turns of phrase.

I had thought she was an annoying woman who was only sent to cover a story on my father leaving the throne because she was pretty—a trick that media outlets played—but Sophia had the brains too. I figured that out eventually, but reading her talented pieces only made me like her more. She was the full package.

If only we'd met at a pub and I wasn't a prince, our lives would be so different. Though, if I hadn't been adopted by the royal family, I had no idea where I would have ended up. Probably on the streets somewhere or dead.

I shivered at the thought. I was lucky to have been brought into the kingdom as a prince. The fact that they had rescued me from poverty heightened the guilt I felt for turning my father down numerous times to take over as king. Here I was, a prince and a billionaire, heir to a kingdom, and I hid in the UK away from the people who loved me the most.

Abir wanted nothing to do with being king, so it was my duty to rise to the occasion to protect my brother. Still, I couldn't agree. Not yet.

Father had given me a month to decide, so I still had time. Although as each day progressed, the decision became less and less my own. Father gave me the time as a courtesy, probably to get my affairs in order. I was sure that he would promote Maddox to my position at the head of the company and then whisk me away from the Western world to sit in his place while he had a cozy retirement.

From then on, I wouldn't have much of a choice in anything I did. All of my decisions would be for the sake of the country and its people. My marriage would be arranged, and I'd be forced to have children with some strange woman.

Since living in the UK, the customs that I left back in Qatar seemed increasingly foreign, but they were something I would have to adhere to if I became king.

Maybe it was a good thing that Sophia had left. The idea of being with her gave me hope for something I would never be able to have. Choosing my own wife and doing whatever I wanted was my dream, but it was only that: a dream. My fate had been sealed since I was adopted into the family.

The only way I could show them how grateful I truly was would be to become the king. Father and Mother probably counted on that.

I was backed into a corner, and the only way I could go was forward.

I slammed my finger against my mouse to refresh the Dallas Post home page. Sophia's name didn't appear on any of the articles on the main page.



I shoved away from my desk, needing space from her, if only for a minute.

I had to forget her. She obviously wanted me to. It was the only way to move forward with my life. I couldn't believe I fell for a woman I'd just met. That shit only happened in the movies and the romance novels that I'd spotted several of my employees reading during their lunch hour.

My phone rang, and I raced over to my desk to pick it up. Had Sophia changed her mind? Had she traveled back to England to talk things out or, dare I think, to be with me?

When I reached my phone, my happiness turned to dread. It was Mother, not Sophia.

I debated ignoring the phone call, not wanting to deal with her disapproval of Sophia and the idea of her already having another woman to set me up with.

Something deep inside me urged me to pick up the phone.

"Hello, Mother," I said after picking up. A sniffling sound from the other end made my stomach turn to lead. "Mother, what's wrong?"

She cleared her throat and spoke calmly. "I need you to come back home."

"What is it?"

"Your Father is sick," she said.

"If this is another ploy—"

"He's sick, Luke. *Dying* sick. We need you back here as soon as possible."

"What happened?"

"Apparently, he's been sick for some time," she said. "He wanted to save us the trouble of worrying about him. But now, it's too late. He's leaving us." My mother was the strongest person I knew, other than my father. Her holding back tears as best as she could made me realize that whatever was ailing Father was serious.

“What do you need me to do?” I asked as ice ran through my veins.

“I need you to come home,” she said. “That’s all.”

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll schedule the jet for this afternoon.”

“Oh, and Luke,” she said. “Don’t bring Sophia.”

I ground my teeth together. She couldn’t resist throwing in her two cents about my “girlfriend.” I didn’t want the weekend Sophia and I spent together to go to waste, so I said, “Why not? You need to accept that she is a part of our—”

“Don’t say ‘family,’” she said. “She’s not a part of our family. Father needs his real family right beside him. This isn’t some show.”

By her words, it almost sounded like she knew that Sophia and I had played them. Or was she hoping? Heaven forbid I chose someone for myself and was happy.

“Fine,” I said. “I won’t bring her.” It wasn’t as if I knew where she was. If she hadn’t posted the article about Father and his succession yet, maybe she hadn’t returned to the Post. Though, this news would get around soon enough.

“I love you, son,” she said and then hung up the phone.

Tossing all thoughts of Sophia aside, I placed my phone on the desk and rubbed my temples. Father was sick? He seemed well enough over the weekend. Mother said he was hiding this from all of us. Why did he think he needed to? Was that why he was pressing for me to decide to become king?

Heat moved behind my eyes, and I squeezed them closed. I grabbed the landline and pressed the button for Justine’s extension.

“Mr. Walters?” Justine’s voice asked over the speaker.

It took much more strength than usual for me to speak to her. “I need a flight to Qatar today.”

The sound of her fingers clicking over her keyboard sounded over the line. “Right away, sir. Can I do anything else for you?”

“No,” I said. “Just the jet. Thank you.”

“Not a problem, sir. I will email you confirmation once I receive word from the pilot.”

I hung up the phone and stared at it. The flight was long, and I hoped Father’s condition wasn’t as dire as my imagination conjured up.

I turned off my computer and gathered my things. I would be able to do some work on the plane, but I knew I’d be too distracted to get any real work done. That was why I had Maddox.

Since I wasn’t sure about the degree of Father’s illness, when I entered Maddox’s office, I was as blunt as possible. Sugarcoating it wasn’t going to do me any good, especially when the fate of the company might very well rest in Maddox’s hands. If Father passed away, then I wouldn’t have a month to decide. I’d have to take over as king. The idea of that pooled in my stomach like molasses.

“All right?” Maddox asked, looking up from his computer screen.

“No,” I said.

He cocked his head to the side, and his eyes turned to slits. “What’s going on, mate? You look like someone stole your dog.”

I swallowed. “My father is sick.”

“Shit, mate.”

“Yeah,” I said, staring at the floor. “I’m headed to the palace now. I need you to take over all of the operations.”

“Not a problem,” he said, standing up. He crossed the room and clapped a hand on my shoulder. “Don’t worry about a thing. Take as much time as you need.”

I drew in a breath. That was the problem. I was sure this would take all of the time away from this company. I’d built it up over the years, and I was being ripped away from it quicker than I wanted.

I couldn't think about that. Father was my number one priority.

"Thanks," I said. "I'll be in contact while I'm there. Let me know if you need anything."

"We're going to be all right," he said, squeezing my shoulder. "Tell your father I said hello."

I nodded, afraid that if I said anything, my voice might crack and I would break down in the middle of his office.

I wasn't the crying type, but the whole situation around the kingdom had weighed on me. Now that I knew the reason for Father pressuring me, I was so angry with him for not telling me right away. I would have come home in a second and fulfilled my duty. I would never have met Sophia and never experienced what it might look like to be with her.

Now my mind was jumbled, and I was being forced into becoming a king while knowing what I would be missing once I took the throne. Had my father given me time to think about it because he wanted me to have last experiences, or had he thought he had longer to live?

As I left Maddox's office, I couldn't get it out of my head that even Father had been surprised by how quickly his health was declining. He was a proud and strong man. If he was alerting mother and me that he was sick, maybe it was time for him to leave us.

I waited until I reached my car before I let any tears slip from my eyes. Arguing with my parents wasn't anything new, but I wanted the opportunity to do it with them as long as I could. I recalled how upset I'd been with my father when he came to bring me home two weeks ago. Why had I taken those moments for granted? Why hadn't I asked him how he was doing like other fathers and sons did? Instead, I had been so focused on refusing the kingdom that I hadn't been paying much attention to anything other than myself.

This was a kick in the ass, and I knew what I needed to do.

An email came through my phone from Justine, giving me the time of my flight to Qatar.

I put my car into gear and headed off toward my flat. I had almost two hours to pack and put my life in order before going to the palace. Would I ever see my flat again, or would I be forced to send someone there to pack it up and sell it for me? Was I about to become king of a Middle Eastern country in the span of a few days? I wasn't sure if I was ready for such a responsibility, but like so many other parts of my life, I didn't have a choice.

# CHAPTER 27



## SOPHIA

The rest of the week flew by. I buried myself in a different local assignment before going to England. It wasn't anything pressing, and I hadn't been assigned anything else, so I took my time, going over each word, changing more of the story as each day passed. When I wasn't glued to my computer screen, I vacillated between Mr. Fraser's office door and my email. I hadn't heard anything from him or Chelsea on my request to go back to England.

I wasn't even sure I knew what I would do when I returned. At the thought of getting fired, my mouth opened before I had a chance to think about what I was saying. I doubted Luke would want to see me again, but we *did* have a deal. Would he claim he had already followed through with his side of the bargain by giving me the interview before I stupidly left because I couldn't share a family secret with him? Or because I couldn't deal with him having feelings for me?

When I returned emptyhanded, I knew I didn't deserve the promotion, but getting fired? I couldn't let that happen. My reputation would be ruined, and who knew how I would pay the bills? I was a good journalist, but this time, I hadn't been careful. I let a handsome prince whisk me away to what seemed like a magical fairytale life, completely screwing with my career goals.

If given the opportunity, I would go back to Luke and get the story that I intended to get in the first place. I wouldn't let him and his gorgeous face get in the way of my dreams. I

wasn't that girl—even though that girl had dropped the ball on a promotion.

Every morning when I arrived at work, I prayed that Mr. Fraser would give me a second chance, even though those were hard to come by, even for his most trusted reporters. I'd seen top-notch reporters get fired for smaller things, but at least they had left with a good reputation and quality articles in their portfolio.

Even if I had any chance of getting another job, it would probably be as an assistant.

I shook away those self-deprecating thoughts. I wasn't going to get anywhere by sulking. I had to take the initiative and prove to Mr. Fraser that I deserved the promotion. Sure, I had screwed up but lesson learned. Pulling up my metaphorical bootstraps, I pulled up the file with everything I'd collected while I was in England.

I wasn't going to tell the story that I knew Mr. Fraser wanted. I wasn't a monster. A part of me thought there was a minuscule chance Luke would forgive me someday for leaving him high and dry, but if I reported the story about his father's illness, there would be no coming back from that.

I was grasping at straws when I came across my notes from the interview with Maddox. I'd scoured the internet for any story about the oil business that hadn't been covered yet, but Mr. Fraser already said he didn't want a piece like that. He wanted dirt. Since I had been the only Western woman in front of the king and queen, he wanted something that no other American journalist had covered before. The illness would have skyrocketed my career, but I wouldn't rise by hurting someone I cared about.

There had to be another story.

I'd managed to lie my way through my trip. Maybe if I did the same with Mr. Fraser, there would be some chance to make up for what I did to Luke and bring me back into Mr. Fraser's good graces. I was sure if I went back to the palace, then I could be on the lookout for another story. I just needed the opportunity.



Maybe if I had confirmation of a story, Mr. Fraser would have to agree to send me. Once I was there, I could figure something out.

I pulled up the number for Luke's company. I had a feeling I would get connected with the stone-faced front desk woman, Victoria, but it was better than nothing.

My emotions had gotten the best of me when I left England. I'd deleted Luke's cell number from my phone, further adding to the guilt that I had been a petulant woman versus a professional reporter. I wouldn't make that mistake again.

It would have been easier to call Luke directly, but I also knew that if he was upset, hanging up a phone would be much easier than not talking to me face to face. Showing up unannounced when it came to him and me was a part of my charm. If only I could do that again.

If I went through the proper channels and Victoria and Justine had known I called, Luke wouldn't be able to get away with hanging up on me as easily.

I smirked as I dialed the number of his company's main line. It rang two times before a familiar voice came through the other side.

"Hi there," I said, adding a sweetness to my Southern drawl. "This is Sophia Holmes from the Dallas Post. I need to speak with Mr. Walters."

There was silence on the other end before Victoria spoke again. "Mr. Walters isn't here at the moment."

"He isn't?" I asked. "Where is he?"

She sighed on the other end. "I am not at liberty to say."

"Is Maddox Greene available?"

There was a pause, and then the line clicked. I pulled the phone from my ear, wondering if she had hung up on me.

My shoulders sank.

“Sophia!” Maddox’s voice came over the line a few seconds later. I was sure Maddox knew about me and Luke’s trip to Qatar. Would he be as friendly to me as he had been after Luke told him that I ditched him at the restaurant? If not, I still had to try.

“Maddox,” I said. Maybe Luke hadn’t told him anything about the reason for my leaving.

“How can I help you?” he asked.

He was still cheerful, so I took that as a positive sign.

Movement from Mr. Fraser’s office made me sink down into my seat. Of course, he’d probably pick this moment to fire me. Maddox would hear it, and then Luke would know that I was a failure at more than keeping a fake relationship intact. But my boss stayed put.

“Is Luke available?” I knew better than to trust Victoria. She would protect her boss if he had told her he didn’t want to speak with me. Luke wasn’t the vengeful type, but I’d left him high and dry. I wouldn’t be surprised if he was upset enough with me to block any communication.

“Why do I always feel like a bridesmaid wherever you’re concerned?” I heard the smile in his voice.

“How so?”

“You only have eyes for Luke,” he said.

“I need to follow up on a few points for my story,” I said, hoping that Luke hadn’t shared everything with Maddox. Neither of them knew what I was writing about, so if I could use that to my advantage, I had to. My job was on the line.

“He went to Qatar yesterday,” Maddox said.

“Oh, we just got back—”

“Did you know his father was ill?” Maddox interrupted. It almost sounded like an accusation. But if Maddox knew, then Luke did too.

I clamped a hand over my mouth and uttered a muffled, “No.” If Luke ever found out that I had some idea his father

was sick, he would never talk to me again. And I needed him to speak to me enough to allow me to come back into his life. Though now that he knew about his father's illness, this was going to be much harder than I thought.

"Yeah, well, he went back straight away," Maddox said.

"I see," I said.

"You can call his mobile," Maddox said. "I'm sure he'd love to hear from you."

"He would?"

Maddox chuckled. "I know you two had a little ruse going on, but I've never seen my mate so depressed before. He hasn't said anything about how you two parted, but I can tell that he'd appreciate a phone call from you."

If cheerful Maddox could ever make someone feel smaller than an insect, it was me right at that moment. I wasn't an idiot. Luke told me he had feelings for me, and I blew him off. Of course, he would be upset. But for Maddox to see that from Luke without the correct information meant that I had hurt him more than I intended.

I had to see him. In person. There was no way that I could ever forgive myself if I didn't.

Truthfully, I *did* feel something for Luke, but I thought it was just because we were playing at being a couple. After I accidentally found out about Erol, I didn't think it could ever work between Luke and me with a secret that big between us. Now that he knew about his father, there was nothing between us, other than the need for a massive apology from me. I wasn't going to let our distance stop that from happening.

I could kill two birds with one stone if I dared to take that leap. With my heart and promotion on the line, I had to at least try.

"Thanks, Maddox." I wasn't about to admit to him that I deleted Luke's number. He might find that strange and contact Luke himself. No. I had to keep him thinking that Luke and I were okay so I could surprise Luke.

After hanging up the phone, I ran a quick Google search for Erol and his illness. There were no news articles yet. I was ahead of the story. That was a good thing. If the media found out that Erol was sick, they would be all over Luke for a comment about him taking over the throne. That could be my story, but I had to feel it out first.

I saved and closed all of my documents and stood up. I couldn't wait for Mr. Fraser to assign me to a story. If I was going to get the promotion, I needed to show him that I deserved it.

Marching over to his office, I knocked on the door.

"It's open!" Mr. Fraser called from inside.

I pushed through, and he looked up at me, his fuzzy eyebrows raised.

"I can't send you back," he said, glancing at his computer screen.

Normally, that statement would have deflated me, but there was no stopping me. I'd fly over to Qatar on my dime if I needed to.

"I have a story," I said.

He narrowed his eyes. "You do. What is it?"

I hesitated. "I can't tell you." *Because I have no idea what it is yet!*

He sighed. "Wasting company money on a secret project isn't going to persuade me."

"It's a good story," I said. "The prince wants to see me again."

That got his attention. "He does?"

"I need to leave tonight," I said.

He chewed on that for a minute before he said, "Fine. You have one last chance at this, Sophia. Deliver me a story, or don't come back."

"Yes, Mr. Fraser."

“We don’t have time to make the accommodations for you, but send Chelsea your receipts, and we will reimburse you. Only if you get the story.”

I had some money saved, but the trip across the world would deplete those savings. I had to come back with something for Mr. Fraser or risk losing more than my job. I would lose everything.

“I won’t disappoint you,” I said.

“You better not,” he said and then pointed at the door for me to be on my way.

As I gathered my things from my desk, I avoided Natalia’s wandering gaze. I knew she wanted to know where I was going, but she didn’t want to appear interested. That was good for both of us because I wasn’t sure what I would tell her. Was I adding more to the romance side of the story or my professional credentials? I supposed I wouldn’t know until I got there.

# CHAPTER 28



## LUKE

The flight to my homeland felt as if it took days. I wasn't able to do much more than stare out the window at the fluffy white clouds. Father would never sit on this plane again. He wouldn't do much more than he already had. The thought punched me in the gut. I was barely able to take a full breath until we landed.

The moment I stepped off the plane, I called Mother to make sure that Father was still alive.

"He's resting," she said. "We have all the best doctors helping him get comfortable. I'm so glad you're here."

"I'm not there yet," I said, hanging up and getting into the car waiting for me. I snapped my fingers at the driver, and he took off. With just one look from me, he knew not to dilly dally. I placed my phone next to me on the seat in case Mother needed to get in touch with me. We had about a forty-minute drive until we reached the palace, but from the speed that the car was going, I had some idea we would make it there sooner.

I hated when things were out of my control. The plane ride, car ride, and Father's illness were all out of my control. What was going to happen to my life when he passed? If I became king, I would give up control of everything in my life.

Maybe it was for the best. I owed Father my life, and the only person who was able to step up to the job was me. It was sooner than anticipated, but it was my duty. I knew that now.

I mulled over the rest of my life on the way to the palace.

When the golden gates shone brightly in the distance, I sat up in my seat and prepared myself for what was to come. Mother had said that Father was resting. I didn't remember the last time I saw him "resting." In all the years I knew him, he was always on his feet. Even when he sat down at his desk, he preferred to sit on the edge of his chair, ready to move at a moment's notice.

He had been that way over the weekend. What happened to make him decline so quickly? Was that the nature of the illness, or had he been sick for much longer than Mother let on? I couldn't imagine that Mother didn't know, but from the conversation with her, it seemed to be a surprise to her as well. It would be like him to keep something like this from us. One last bit of control before he bit the dust.

I wiped a stray tear from my eye before it reached my cheek. I kept my eyes on the front steps of the palace, and the moment the car slowed down, I opened my door and got out. As if the driver anticipated this, he stopped the car just as my foot touched the ground.

I stood up and buttoned my jacket before striding into the palace.

Mother didn't greet me at the steps like she usually did. The staff moved around my home without a glance in my direction, though I could feel their pity. Many of them had been with Father since he took the throne. The loss of their king would be great as well.

Arriving at Father's chambers, the door was closed, but I heard several voices coming from inside. None of them were his.

Shoving open the doors, several sets of eyes turned in my direction.

All I could focus on was Father under the covers of his bed. He was propped up against several pillows. His skin was ashen, and his eyes were sunken in.

Mother sat by his side, her fingers twined with his.



The doctor bowed his head and moved aside as I walked over to the unoccupied side of the bed.

“Father,” I said.

“Luke?” Father asked, slowly turning his head to face me. His voice was weak, almost as if it took as much effort to speak as it had to turn his head.

“Yes, I’m here,” I said.

He turned back to Mother. “Please. Leave. Us.” Each word was broken up by a deep breath.

I gritted my teeth and staved off the urge to let my real emotions show. I needed to be strong right now.

Mother accompanied the doctor out of the room and closed the chamber doors behind her.

I sat on the bed as Father tried to move. I helped him sit up straighter. He felt so light in my arms. His bones pressed against my hands.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” I asked him. “I was just here last week.”

“I didn’t want to worry anyone,” he said.

“Well, we’re worried now. What did the doctor say?”

“It’s cancer,” Father said, wincing. He hadn’t moved, so I knew it was something internal. “I’ve been handling it so far, but it finally caught up with me.”

“I can’t believe this,” I said, hanging my head.

He reached out to me, and I took his hand. His eyes were glossy, and my vision blurred.

“Father, I…” I trailed off, unsure of what to say. I couldn’t make the situation any better for him with words. I was lost.

“I know, son,” he said. “I know.”

I shook my head, cursing as many deities as I could think of for doing this to our family. Father was supposed to retire from the throne and live his life, not die before his time.

“Adopting you was the best thing we’ve ever done,” he said. “How did we get so lucky to have such a man like you in our lives?”

“Father, I’m the one who is lucky,” I said, kissing his hand.

He pressed his lips together in what looked like a smile.

“I know you don’t want to talk about it,” he said. “But there isn’t much time left to decide. You need to choose if you’re to take over after me. I don’t want to leave it up to the council.”

As much as I knew what I had to do, I couldn’t find the words. Not even now, when Father was on his deathbed.

Instead, I kicked off my shoes and laid on the bed next to him, like I used to when I was first adopted. I used to have nightmares that someone was going to pull the rug out from under me and send me back to the orphanage. Father used to bring me into his bed after I had another nightmare and hold me until I fell asleep. Even though I wasn’t conscious for half of it, the memories came back full force, and this time, I couldn’t contain myself.

Father and I sat there until his breathing became steady and he was the one comforted by me instead of the other way around.



I made sure that Father was fast asleep before I went out into the hallway. Mother sat in the chair across the hall, staring at her hands in her lap.

“Where is the doctor?” I asked.

She glanced up at me as if she hadn’t heard me come out. “I made him go eat something. He’s been with your father all day.”

“How are you holding up?” I asked.

She pushed herself out of her seat, her age starting to show. When had that happened to my parents? I’d been so wrapped

up in my own life that I hadn't noticed the passage of time and its effects on my parents.

"As well as I can be," Mother said. "I wished he would have prepared us better. Though this is his way."

"It is," I said. "How long did the doctor say?"

She shrugged and then her lips started to tremble. "Until he stops fighting, I suppose. But he's suffering so much." She let out a sob, and I wrapped her in an embrace.

"We'll get through this," I said. "I'm not leaving anytime soon."

She tilted her head upward. "Do you mean that?"

"Of course," I said, knowing where that question would lead.

"You're going to take the throne?" Mother asked.

And there it was. It was all my parents talked about—other than Mother trying to set me up with a suitable bride.

"I don't know what to do," I said. "It's not the future I ever saw for myself. I always thought that Abir would want it, as it is his right."

"It's just as much your right as his," Mother said.

"Where is Abir?" I asked, trying to veer off topic. There was so much going on that I could use a distraction, even for a moment.

She shook her head. "He hasn't come out of his room since your father told him."

"He hasn't gone into Father's chambers?" I asked.

"No," she said. "You know he's a sensitive boy."

"He is that," I said. Sure, Abir liked to keep to his books and daydreams, but he lived in the palace. The least he could do was sit with his dying father. Though I couldn't blame him. If I could, I'd hide in my room all day, but I didn't have that luxury. I had to step up and become the man that everyone, except me, wanted me to be.

“This isn’t the time to press the subject,” Mother said, getting back to the bigger topic. “But I’m sure you will make the right decision.”

Mother walked back into Father’s chambers, leaving me in the hallway with my thoughts and the heavy burden on my shoulders.

I considered going to Abir’s room and tell him to be a man, but anger wasn’t going to get anyone anywhere.

I needed to cool off somewhere. Now that Father was sleeping, I had a little time to myself to collect my thoughts before going back inside.



When I was younger and faced with a challenge in school or with my parents, I always walked the grounds to clear my head. There were acres of palace grounds, enough to walk for hours to work through whatever school assignment or argument I’d found myself dealing with. But there was no solution for Father’s problem.

I started at the back of the palace. I didn’t want to stay away long in case something happened with Father, but I hoped a short distance would bring me back to square one before dealing with the tragic situation happening inside of my home.

I wasn’t sure if it was the heat or the weight of the entire situation, but I found it hard to take a full breath as I walked. As it always did, my body adjusted itself as I moved across the grounds. My spine stiffened, and my chin lifted higher. Deep down, I was the king that Father and Mother wanted, but rebelling was always in my nature.

I couldn’t send Father off into the next life thinking that I was going to let all of his hard work fall to another.

I wasn’t sure what the council had in mind, but the fear in his eyes at the possibility broke my heart.

Raised voices outside of the palace gates broke me away from my thoughts. I almost welcomed the interruption.

Striding over to the tall gates, several of the guards huddled around one area.

People were always trying to get a glimpse of the palace, but never had one caused such a ruckus, at least as far as I knew.

A familiar female voice struck me to my core, and I froze where I stood. That voice had haunted my dreams for almost a week.

No, it couldn't be.

I was far enough away not to be noticed but close enough to hear the conversation.

“Please, I need to see Lu—Prince Luke,” she said.

The guards muttered to each other in my native tongue. They didn't have very nice things to say about her.

One of them moved aside, and my heart skipped a beat as Sophia's gaze shifted from the guards to me.

# CHAPTER 29



## SOPHIA

The trip to Qatar was much different than taking a private jet from the UK to the Middle East. The flight from Texas to the UK was fine, but the last leg was long as hell, and by the time I landed, I had no idea what day it was.

During my last trip here, Luke had accompanied me the entire time that I moved through Qatar. We'd had armed guards and all of our accommodations ready and waiting for us. I didn't have to find a place to stay since I was his guest at the palace, and we had a private car to travel around in.

Luke hadn't asked me to return any of the clothes that we'd bought together, so at least in that regard, I was somewhat prepared. Getting a ride to the palace was another story.

I wasn't sure if the leering looks had happened the first time around, but everywhere I looked, someone was looking at me. I was a fish out of the water, and everyone knew it.

After inquiring at the airport for the location of the palace, I haggled with my cab driver about a price for the trip. Since I was going into this with my own money, there was no way I could act as I had when I visited the first time with Luke. He had billions and could get whatever he wanted with the snap of his fingers. While I didn't plan on failing, I had to be frugal. If I was going to repeat my stalking habits when it came to Luke, I had to have a plan when it came to finding a place to stay.

I crossed my fingers that Luke would allow me back in his life and I could stay in the lush accommodations of his home. I

knew I had a lot of explaining to do, but that didn't bother me as much as my growing feelings for him. Back in Texas, it was easier to think that I hadn't developed feelings for him, but being so close to him in his home country changed my mind.

There was something between us, and I wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. It might help me get through the palace gates, but if I was going to get a story from the family, I had to be impartial. Betraying Luke wasn't my intention, but I also had to think of my livelihood.

During the hours of flying—in between fits of uncomfortable sleep—I mulled over what story I would tell. If I overthought about seeing Luke again, my mind clouded over with how I felt about him. Getting my head in the game was a little harder with the lack of restful sleep, but this was my last chance.

In my years at the Post, I'd never seen Mr. Fraser give anyone a second chance. Either he had faith in me, or he wanted this story. I guessed it was the latter.

After securing myself in the back seat of the cab, the driver took off. I braced myself against the seat, my hands grasping the strap of my bag for dear life.

It wasn't a leisurely jaunt around the city as it had been during my previous trip. I had some idea that I had been ripped off when it came to the price, and the driver wanted me out of the car as soon as possible.

People dodged the cab as it ripped through crowded marketplaces and small alleys. Several people shouted at us as the driver came close to vehicular manslaughter several times throughout the trip.

When we arrived outside of the palace gates, I had to peel myself off the seat. I handed over the agreed upon amount, and the driver didn't even get out of the car to help me.

I didn't have much, only a carry-on suitcase that I'd stuffed with everything I might need. Admittedly, I had high expectations of seeing Luke, and I hoped that he would allow me into his life again with all the luxuries included.



I planned several things to say to him when I finally saw him face to face, but what I would say exactly depended on his reaction to seeing me again. I hoped that traveling across the world would prove that I had feelings for him. I wasn't going to lie completely, but I hoped that Luke would accept me back into his life no matter what the circumstances. I wanted to be completely honest with him, while at the same time keeping my main goal concealed until I could find the right story to keep my job.

I hoped that not exposing his family to the media during this time would win me some points with him.

At home, it was easy to think I could cut Luke out of my life, but being that close to him brought back all the feelings I had before learning that his father was dying.

I hoped that Luke knew that, too. I wasn't sure if we could ever be a real couple, but I had followed through with my side of the bargain; I'd stopped his mother from trying to set him up. Now I needed something from him.

The cab driver sped away the second I closed the door. The palace loomed in the distance, protected by tall stone walls and numerous guards. Being in the inner circle was a completely different experience to what I had to deal with arriving unannounced.

Swallowing my pride and the truck-sized lump in my throat, I walked toward the gates, rolling my suitcase over the bumpy pavement.

Pushing back the hem of my scarf, showing most of my face, I wondered if any of the guards recognized me.

From the way that three of them moved toward me on the other side of the gate, tightening their grip on their guns, I guessed they didn't.

"Hi, there," I said, trying to keep the warble out of my voice. Showing them that I was terrified of them wouldn't get me anywhere.

"You are trespassing on private property," one of the guards said in English. The other two spoke in a language I

didn't recognize.

"I'm not sure if you remember me," I said, smiling at the one who spoke English. "I'm Sophia Holmes. I was here this past weekend as a guest."

The guard eyed me but didn't open the gate for me.

"I'm hoping to speak with Luke," I said.

"How dare you address the prince without his title," one of the other ones said. His English wasn't as good as the other guard, but it got the message across.

I squared my shoulders. "He is expecting me." I didn't care about lying to them, but from their narrowed gazes, they didn't believe me.

"If he is expecting you, we would have been informed," the first guard said.

I stepped closer to the gate, and the third one raised his gun.

My life flashed before my eyes, and I skittered back a few feet, showing that I wasn't a threat. Keeping my hands where they could see them, I tried to peer around them to see if I could spot Abir or even, Luke himself.

"I've come a long way," I said.

"Move along," the first guard said.

I wasn't leaving without seeing Luke. They would have to drag me away before I gave up.

"Please, I need to see Lu—Prince Luke," I said.

"Sophia?" Luke's commanding voice sounded behind the guards.

The guards moved aside, while remaining between Luke and me.

My gaze flicked to Luke. He was in a suit, just like the first time I met him. My heart galloped as I drank him in. It looked as if he hadn't shaved or slept all week. Seeing the effects of me leaving him wasn't something I was proud of, but the

result warmed my insides. He looked like a rugged model that might grace the cover of a women's magazine.

"Luke," I said, stepping closer to the gate.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, not moving from his spot.

"I wanted to talk to you," I said.

He cleared his throat. "You could have called."

I licked my lips. "I could have, but I wanted to see you."

"You did?"

"Yes," I said breathlessly, being completely honest with him and myself.

He glanced at the guards and said something to them in their language. If it was at all possible, hearing him speak added to my attraction for him.

The first guard said something to him, and Luke waved his hand at him and responded.

The second guard still stared at me, but he walked over to the gate and pressed a button on their side of the wall.

The gate opened, and I backed away, allowing it to swing open.

Since Luke was the prince, I figured he would have more control over the guards, but they had their jobs on the line too. So as Luke walked toward me, all three guards were right behind him.

Luke said something to them, and they stopped a few feet away, but they were still ready for anything.

I was careful where my hands were so they wouldn't think I was trying to hurt their prince. I let them drop to my side, even though I wanted to throw them around his neck. The urge to kiss him was overwhelming, but I shoved that urge way down.

"I know you're upset with me for leaving," I said, looking up at him. I'd forgotten how tall he was.

He nodded but said nothing.

I'd have to work a little harder to get what I wanted. "There is a distinct line separating the relationship between a reporter and her subject. Somehow, being with you last weekend blurred that line. I didn't know how to handle that, so when it came down to accepting your end of the bargain, I realized I didn't want to write the story."

"You didn't?" he asked.

"No," I said. "I'm so sorry I acted the way I did. It was childish and unprofessional. I've never felt this way about anyone before."

Luke's chest heaved, and I could tell that he still felt the same for me. "Really?"

The sparkle in his eyes created a giddy feeling inside of me. A laugh bubbled out of me. "Yes, really."

"What do you suggest we do now?" Luke asked.

"How is your father?" I asked.

He cocked his head, and I quickly added, "Maddox told me that's why you're here."

I still had to keep Erol's secret, even though Luke knew about his illness. I wasn't sure what Luke would think if he found out that I knew before he did and didn't bother to tell him. I doubted he would forgive me for that.

"He's not well," Luke said, glancing at the guards.

I reached forward and took his hand.

He didn't flinch and tear away from me. Instead, he squeezed my hand and stepped closer to me to take my other one. Somehow, we ended up hugging. His lean body pressed against mine, and I closed my eyes, inhaling his scent. As far as anyone in the palace knew, we were still a couple. This was normal for a couple to do.

Luke was the first one to break the embrace. He wiped at his eyes, and I knew he was hurting inside, which made me feel even guiltier for not telling him when I first found out. I

had no doubt that Luke would have liked to know sooner, but I was also an impostor and stumbled upon something that I should never have heard.

I tried to convince myself it was better this way.

“I’d like for you to come inside and see Father,” Luke said with no hint of sadness in his voice.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said firmly. “We’re still a couple—technically.” He offered his hand, and I took it. As he led me inside, he ordered one of his guards to take my suitcase inside.

I didn’t dare turn around as I felt the death stare aimed in my direction from the guard. I doubted he thought he’d come to work that morning and act as a bellhop.

“A heads up,” Luke said as we approached the palace steps. “Mother is not going to be pleased that you are here. She asked that I keep you away, but since you made that impossible,” he smirked, “I will tell her that I requested that you come along to support me.”

“I do support you,” I said.

Luke’s gaze locked on mine, and the entire rest of the world melted away. Glancing at his lips, I wanted to kiss him so badly.

Someone cleared their throat loudly, and I blinked, the moment shattered.

I glanced at the guard, thinking he was the one to interrupt our moment, but his head was bowed in our direction.

Looking the other way, I saw the disapproving face of my “boyfriend’s” mother standing at the front door.

# CHAPTER 30



## LUKE

When it came to Sophia, Mother always had a way of ruining any good moments. I was on the verge of kissing Sophia—really kissing her—when we were interrupted by Mother’s nosiness.

I was still reeling from Sophia traveling so far to see me. Hearing her mirror the same feelings I had for her had lifted some of the weight off my shoulders. I wasn’t sure why she showed up in person when she could have easily called me, but I didn’t regret her decision. Her by my side was where she belonged.

At least, that was what I thought.

Mother, on the other hand, had other ideas.

In a way, I wished Sophia would have announced her arrival. At the very least, I could have warned her that Mother specifically told me she wasn’t invited. As my girlfriend and guest, my opinion about Sophia overruled hers.

I didn’t suspect that Mother would cause any issues with Sophia while Father was sick, but I could never be sure with her. She might very well use Father’s illness as a way to push Sophia away. Like hell was I going to let that happen. Sophia would never be out of my sight again for as long as I could help it. She slipped out of my hands once before; I wasn’t going to let it happen again. Not without a fight.

With her returning to me and admitting her feelings, I saw no reason for her to leave anytime soon.

“Give me a moment,” I said to Sophia before kissing her cheek.

“I’m sorry,” Sophia said, shaking her head. “I should have called.”

“It’s fine,” I reassured her. “I want you here.”

Mother crossed her arms over her chest, and I knew I had the upper hand. I would have to go into this conversation.

“Then I’m not going anywhere,” Sophia said with a devilish grin.

I wished I could close the distance between us, but it was highly inappropriate and not the best time with Mother scowling at us.

On my way over to Mother, it was hard to sort through the mixed emotions within me. I was devastated to know that Father only had a short time to live, but having Sophia with me made it a little easier to bear. Seeing Mother still holding onto her hatred for Sophia—well, the idea of her—added some anger into the mix. If I chose to become king, I couldn’t let Mother feel as if she had any power over my decisions. If Father couldn’t keep her in line, then I would.

“I cannot believe you deliberately disobeyed my request,” Mother said loudly enough for Sophia to hear.

I walked toward the interior of the palace, forcing Mother to follow me if she wanted to have a civilized discussion. Not that anything she had to say about Sophia would be civilized, but at least Sophia wouldn’t have to be subjected to Mother’s remarks about her. Sophia already knew that Mother didn’t approve, but that didn’t mean she had to listen to Mother’s verbal abuse.

“I didn’t disobey you,” I said. “I made a mistake. I didn’t inform Sophia of what was happening. She called Maddox, frantic when she couldn’t reach me. He told her about Father, and she came right away.”

Playing up Sophia’s emotions was easy. I had imagined her returning to me so many times. With the ruse still in play,



Sophia would go along with anything I said and vice versa. We were in this together.

“She came here on her own?” Mother asked.

“Yes,” I said. “That’s what people in love do for each other.”

“Don’t go into this again,” Mother said, throwing a hard look in Sophia’s direction. “She’s using you. Now that she knows your Father is sick, she’s pushing herself into your life to get a title.”

“I would appreciate if you gave my girlfriend the respect she deserves,” I said through my teeth. Sophia had wanted an article for her newspaper about me. That was her initial motivation. She didn’t want a title, but it was something I would have to discuss with her at some point. I didn’t ever want her out of my life, but I couldn’t very well become a king and not bring her along with me.

“You need to show your Mother some respect,” she said, narrowing her eyes. “She is not welcome in my home.”

“This is *our* home,” I said. “I don’t have time for any drama in my life right now. Father is the focus, not you. So Sophia *will* stay in the palace, and you will be nothing but kind to her.”

Mother sighed. “I don’t have to be anything to her. Once this little infatuation goes away, then you will tell me that I was right.”

“I will tell you no such thing,” I said, lowering my voice. She’d gone too far now. “Sophia is extremely important to me. She’s going to stay in the palace for as long as I wish. It would be in your best interests to make an effort.”

Mother’s eyes bulged out of her head, and I knew I had gotten the message across. She never spoke to Father in that way, and she would have to learn to afford me the same courtesy, especially when it came to who I chose as my queen.

Without waiting for a response from her, I went back outside to fetch Sophia. She had her back turned toward me. I guessed she was giving Mother and me some privacy, though I

knew from the tension in her shoulders that she'd heard some of it.

She whirled around when I arrived by her side. "Luke, I can stay in a hotel. It's not a big deal."

"It *is* a big deal," I said. "I want you with me."

"Are you sure?" she asked. "You should be with family right now."

"I am," I assured her.

She quirked her lips but didn't argue with me further.

I offered my hand to her, and she took it. I didn't realize how much I missed holding her hand. It was the most intimate we'd been in the time we'd known each other. There was no reason for us to make out in front of my parents, but I had a feeling that she wouldn't mind doing it if I asked her. I would never overstep, but I would if Mother and Father insisted on making sure that Sophia and I were a genuine couple.

Surprisingly, no one other than Mother questioned our relationship. It was mostly because she wanted me with anyone *other* than Sophia since she wasn't someone that Mother picked out specifically for me. Even if I found a beautiful Middle Eastern woman on my own, I doubted Mother would show approval, which was why I didn't care much for her feelings on the subject. She could stew all she wanted. I was happy, and I intended to stay that way.

Besides, we had more to worry about than who I was going to marry.

We walked down the halls of the palace hand-in-hand while I pulled Sophia's suitcase along beside me. It was light, as if Sophia hadn't expected to stay a while.

I hoped she would. Even if she ran out of clothes, I had enough money to purchase her an entirely new wardrobe if that was necessary. I knew that would be a red flag for Mother, so I would hold off on that plan for now.

"I feel like it's been months since we were here," Sophia said.

“I know what you mean,” I said. All of the worrying I had done over the last week made the time drag on. I could have counted the seconds that Sophia was out of my life. While I wanted to go into a little more detail about what she’d been up to, at the same time, I didn’t care. She was here with me, and that was all that mattered.

As we headed down the hallway toward the guestroom she’d had over the weekend, a spark of an idea came to mind. For the most part, we weren’t pretending about our relationship anymore. While we needed to have an actual discussion about it, the only time we were alone was during meals and outings. Since Mother was sure to accompany us to our meals to make it as uncomfortable as possible and I didn’t plan on leaving the palace anytime soon, I wanted Sophia to stay with me.

There was no specific rule against it. I had given her a private room out of respect for my parents and so Sophia could have time to herself.

Not anymore. I wanted her with me. We were going to do this the right way if we were going to do it at all.

“Where are we going?” Sophia asked, glancing at the room where she stayed before.

I tugged her alongside me. “You’re not staying there.”

“Oh, is the room being cleaned?”

I smirked. “Something like that.”

Over the years, Mother didn’t change anything about my childhood room. In her mind, I was probably the six-year-old kid that she adopted. But in the few times I visited, I consulted with the interior decorators and updated my room from a teenager’s space to something more in my style.

It was a good thing that I did because when I opened the door for Sophia, the look on her face was priceless.

Seeing my room through her eyes was like seeing it for the first time. I opted for more modern furniture, but the room still held the elegance in the light fixtures and the trim around the windows and doors.

“Is this your room?” Sophia asked.

“It is,” I said.

“Where are you going to stay?”

“Here,” I said.

“With me?”

“Is that a problem?” I asked.

She hesitated with one foot over the threshold. “I don’t know. I was under the impression that we were supposed to stay in separate rooms.”

“Do you want to be in a different room?” I asked her, hoping that her response was a resounding no, but I wanted her to be comfortable. “I can arrange that for you.”

She shook her head. “Your mom doesn’t approve of me. Is this going to upset her even more?”

“She’s going to have to deal with it,” I said, pulling her into the room. I kicked the door closed and brought her close to me. Her head tilted back, and I softly caressed her cheek with the back of my hand. Her skin was so soft. “This is my decision.”

She shivered in my arms. “There’s something different about you, Luke. I can’t quite put my finger on it.” She touched my chin and played with the stubble there.

“Do you like me like this?” I asked her. I would do anything to keep her. If that involved growing a beard and sticking up to my mother, then so be it.

“I do,” she said. “But as you said, it’s your decision.”

I smiled and that urge to kiss her returned.

She was the one to break away from me first. “I think we should see how your father is doing.”

I nodded. As much as I wanted to talk about Sophia and me, or take us to another level, Father’s health was the most important thing at the moment. I had plenty of time to spend with Sophia after I announced her arrival. With her staying in

my chambers, I had the entire night to be with her. The thought of what we would do clung to the front of my mind. Even though I tried to clear it, my imagination ran wild at sleeping next to her and being that close without any prying eyes nearby.

In a situation where I wanted time to stand still, I couldn't wait for the day to end.

# CHAPTER 31



## SOPHIA

I couldn't believe that Luke wanted me to stay in his room. The gesture felt intimate, and I surprised myself by how ready and willing I was to stay with him. I worried that his mother would have a fit, but the way that Luke commanded the conversation with her earlier made me think that his father's illness had changed him. I was glad that I wasn't the one to bring about that change in him. In a way, I felt as if he would blame me for knowing first, even though I stumbled upon it accidentally.

Watching Luke as he walked next to me, his shoulders were relaxed yet pushed back into a perfect posture. He looked more like royalty than ever. Over the last weekend we had been here, he was relaxed and ready to defend our relationship. This Luke had the weight of the kingdom on his shoulders, and I wondered if he had accepted the role of king yet. Would it be appropriate for me to ask? It wasn't time to be shy with him when my job was on the line.

I thought he would tell me, but maybe he wasn't ready for that discussion. I didn't think I was either. If he was going to be king, what would happen to us? Even though we had admitted our feelings for each other, did he see me as someone who would give up everything and live with him as his queen? Would the people even accept someone like me? Or was Luke biding his time with me until he made his decision? Or was I overthinking everything? We weren't officially a couple yet, but I doubted Luke would refuse to answer me if I needed clarity.

If he didn't want me around, he could have been polite and left me in the same room I'd occupied over the weekend. For him to put my things in his room added a layer of delicious confusion to my already whirring brain.

Luke was silent for the entire walk to his father's chambers. I recognized the hallway as the place where I heard Erol's doctor speaking to him about his diagnosis.

I acted as if I'd never been to that part of the palace, even though the memory made my heart sink.

Luke didn't seem to notice my reaction, which was a good thing.

He knocked on the door to Erol's chambers and then stepped inside. Initially, I worried that we might wake the king, but he was sitting up in his bed when we arrived.

Luke's mother stood up from her chair, her face stone cold but not angry. At least that was a start.

She touched her husband's hand and then brushed past Luke and me before leaving the room.

"Don't mind her," Erol said, waving for us to enter.

Luke didn't let go of my hand as he went to his father's side. Erol's face was much paler than it had been a week ago. His skin looked as if it were falling off his bones. He had lost a lot of weight in a short amount of time. Guilt surged through me. If only I had told Luke about his father's illness over the weekend, he could have had more time with him. Was it really for the best? Thinking about the what-ifs only added to the sick feeling in my stomach. At least Luke knew now and could spend time with his father during his final days.

"It's good to see you again, Sophia," Erol said. "I would have preferred different circumstances, but I'm happy you're here."

"You are?" I asked. Heat pressed against my eyes, and I couldn't stop the tears from forming. He wasn't even my father, but he had welcomed me with open arms when Luke introduced me to his family.



“I am,” he said. “As I told Luke, I’ve been sick for a while. I’ve concealed it from my family for as long as I could.” I already knew this, but Luke didn’t. Erol explaining it to me sounded more like him thanking me for not informing his son about what I knew.

“It’s caught up with me now,” he said, drawing in a ragged breath.

He sounded as if he had come to terms with dying. It was a terrible thought, but it showed his inner strength.

“I’m sorry to hear that.” I wasn’t sure what else to say.

He nodded and looked over at his son. “Luke, would you mind going out and refilling the water pitcher?”

“I can do it,” I said, but Luke stood up, pressing his hand into my shoulder.

“You’ve had a long trip,” Luke said. He and his father shared a look, and I wondered what that was about.

Luke left the room and so did all the air in my lungs. The last time I was alone with Erol, I’d eavesdropped on his private conversation with his doctor. Even then, he’d been calm when he informed me not to tell anyone. If only I knew how serious it was at the time, I might have acted differently. The reason I ran away from Luke was because of the secret the king had asked me to keep. Mr. Fraser would have wanted the story about the dying monarch, but I couldn’t do that to Luke or his family—especially if all of them had been kept in the dark.

“Now that we’re alone,” Erol said before coughing into his hand. The sound was thick with phlegm.

I grabbed a silk handkerchief from the side table and handed it to him. I hoped it wasn’t a family heirloom or something.

“Thank you,” he said, wiping at his mouth. “I appreciate you keeping my secret.”

“You’re welcome,” I said. “Not that it did much good. They all found out anyway.”

“My dear, I’ve been fighting this illness for a long time,” he said. “I’m an old man, and I’m tired of fighting. You couldn’t have prevented that.”

“Why didn’t you say something sooner?”

He sighed. “Pride, I suppose. I should have said something, but there’s no changing the past. That’s something I will have to bear.”

“Are you going to tell Luke that I knew?” I asked. I didn’t think he had a reason to suspect our relationship was fake, but I couldn’t be too careful.

“No,” he said. “He is happy with you.”

I twined my fingers together in my lap. It was strange having approval from one of Luke’s parents. I wanted to know more. “You think so?” Heat rushed to my cheeks, and I pressed my hands against them.

“My dear,” Erol said with a smile. It lit up his face. “I’m out of touch with the dating world, but I know love when I see it. Luke’s mother and I didn’t experience it until later on, but I *do* recognize the signs. Luke is very much in love with you. I’ve never seen him like this.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“It’s as if you’re his sun. He gravitates to you. He looks at you as if you’re the answer to every question in the world. I see it even more so since you’ve returned here.”

“He *is* different, right?” I asked. As his “girlfriend,” I would notice a change in him without alerting Erol to our ruse.

“His mother said the same thing,” Erol said. “It’s sad that it took me dying for him to come into his own.”

“How do you mean?” I asked. I thought we were talking about our relationship, but Erol made it seem as if there was something else I was missing.

“He’s ready to become king,” Erol said, locking eyes with me.

Moving my gaze down to the intricately embroidered quilt, I said nothing.

“You’ve seen it,” Erol said.

“I have,” I said, remembering him speaking to his mother and going over her head to put me in his room. I saw the change, and I wasn’t sure if Luke was aware. I could see him as a king, but having that vision also brought up questions about our future. If we had one at all.

“Luke will make a fine ruler,” Erol said. “He just needs to take the final step.”

I nodded, focusing more on my future than Luke’s. Luke would be fine either way, but I wondered if I forced him to go back to his life in the UK, he would eventually regret everything and resent me for it.

“I feel confident in your abilities as well,” Erol said.

“My abilities?” I asked.

He tilted his head to the side and smirked. I saw a glimpse of Luke in his expression, and that brought a smile to my face as well.

“When my son takes the throne, I know that you will be great as his queen.”

“His queen?” I sputtered.

“Have you not considered this?” Erol asked.

I scrambled to think of something. I was tired of outright lying, but I didn’t want the king to die thinking that I would abandon Luke if and when he followed through with his duties. “I have. I just thought we’d have much more time.”

“I’m afraid you’re out of time,” he said, clasping his hands in front of him. It looked like he was praying, but the way his eyelids sagged, I knew this conversation was coming to an end.

“Do you want to get some rest?” I asked.

“Stay here until Luke returns,” Erol said. “Please.”

“Of course,” I said.

“Tell me about your journey here,” Erol said. “I suspect it was very different from your first visit.”

I went into detail about my trip, leaving out the part about the real reason I’d returned.

By the time Luke returned, Erol had his head back against a large pillow, and his eyes were almost slits. He was awake but barely. I’d skipped some of the more annoying parts of my trip and tried to keep it light and entertaining. I wasn’t sure when or how I was getting home whenever I left, but I hoped Luke would help with his more private accommodations. At least to get me back to the UK.

“Dinner is served downstairs,” Luke said, pouring his father another glass of water before placing the pitcher down on the side table. He handed the glass to his father, who sipped it gratefully.

“Should we go?” I asked Luke, unsure if Erol was supposed to be left alone in his condition.

“One of the servants will stay with him,” Luke said.

“I need my rest, Sophia,” Erol said. “But thank you for thinking of me.”

I stood up from the chair, unsure of what to do. He wasn’t my father, but I was Luke’s girlfriend.

As if Erol sensed my discomfort, he opened his arms to me.

I leaned over and hugged him. He pressed me closer to him. “Thank you for keeping my secret,” he whispered into my ear.

His voice was so soft that I knew Luke couldn’t have heard it. I wouldn’t have wanted him to. That conversation would surely result in a trip back to Dallas without a story in hand.

“Get some rest,” I said when Erol let me go.

“That will not be a problem,” Erol said.

Luke brought the quilt up to Erol's chin and gently tucked it around him. Before we left the room, Erol was softly snoring.

He took my hand, and we left the room as quietly as possible. Outside the room, a servant bowed to Luke before slipping inside of Erol's chambers.

On the way to the dining room, I hoped that Erol lasted for as long as they all needed to say their goodbyes. I felt a little sorry for taking up so much of his time, but now I knew I couldn't leave anytime soon. Erol didn't know the truth about Luke and me, and I would work hard to protect that. Knowing that his son was happy and in love would be a happy thought for Erol in his last moments, and there was no way in hell I would ruin a dying man's happiness.

# CHAPTER 32



## LUKE

Seeing Father smiling at Sophia when I returned with the water made my heart skip a beat. Even though I hadn't directly said I was going to take the throne, knowing he was happy about who I'd chosen to be my partner—for real this time—gave me a sense of calm that I hadn't had before Sophia showed up.

I took her hand as we walked through the hallway, squeezing it. She had turned my life upside down, and I couldn't imagine having anyone else by my side during this trying time.

"I thought we were going to the dining room?" Sophia asked as I led her down another hallway, not in the direction of the central stairwell.

"We're going to get Abir," I said. "He's holed himself in his room for several days. It's time for him to join the living and say goodbye to his father."

"He's grieving," Sophia said.

I gritted my teeth. "Father isn't dead yet. Abir might get a pass to complain for a little while, but he needs to step up and be the man that Father thinks he is, or he'll regret it."

"Isn't that a little harsh?" Sophia asked.

She never shied away from voicing her opinions when it came to decisions in my life. She asked the hard questions. While it was annoying sometimes, I realized that I would need someone in my life to push me. Mother hadn't been a key

figure in Father's decisions as king, but I sensed that having someone close to me as a sounding board might lessen at least some of the pressure from my mind.

We arrived at Abir's room, and I turned to Sophia. "Will you give us a minute?"

"Of course," I said.

I knocked on the door and pushed through. If it were up to Abir, he would lock himself away with his books for the rest of his life. He needed a little bit of tough love, and I was the only one in the family who could offer it. Mother babied him, and Father wouldn't force his son to watch him die.

Abir's room was a mess. I bet he hadn't let the servants come in and clean in a few days. There were trays of empty bowls and plates near the door with remnants of food crusted on the surfaces.

"Abir?" I asked, pushing farther into the room. I walked over piles of clothes on the way to his bed.

The lump under the covers moved, and Abir's head poked out from underneath. "Luke?"

"It's me," I said, wrinkling my nose as I caught the scent of body odor coming from his direction. "You need to get up and come to dinner."

"I don't—"

"I'm not asking," I said.

Abir's eyes widened, and his lower lip trembled. His sensitivity wasn't something I mentioned to him, but he could be sensitive all he wanted *after* he said a proper goodbye to our father.

"Why does he have to die?" he asked.

While my brother attempted to keep his emotions hidden under the surface, maybe Sophia had been right. Abir had never had to deal with something like this before. He buried himself in his books on a daily basis. Hiding under his covers was a way for him to cope with what was going on.



His reaction our father's illness highlighted how different we were and why Father thought I would be better off as king than Abir. I believed Abir would make a good ruler in his way, but there was a distinct possibility that he would get taken advantage of.

I sat on the other side of the bed, staring at the door. Sophia was on the other side, and I wanted nothing more than to get back to her with Abir in tow. "This is a part of life," I said. "There's no rhyme or reason to it."

"What did you do when your parents died?" Abir asked.

I shook my head. "I don't remember them. I was too young." I rarely thought of my biological parents. I had enough money in my pocket to find out every little thing about them, but after my new parents adopted me, I never looked back.

"So, you don't have any advice?" Abir asked.

I shook my head. "Father is just as important to me as he is to you. This whole situation sucks, and I'd rather be anywhere else than here, but Father needs us. There are times when others' needs outweigh our own."

Abir sniffed and shoved the covers aside. "You're right. I've been such a baby."

I clapped a hand on his shoulder. "No, you haven't. You're still a kid." I got a look for that remark, but it was true. He was still young and had little life experience outside of the palace. "Don't shy away from this, though. There are worse things than facing the truth."

"Like what?"

"Like regret." I didn't have much to regret in my life as I tended to live as I pleased, but I *did* regret letting Sophia leave. I had learned from my mistakes, and I would never do that again.

"You've become wise in your old age," Abir said.

I tossed a pillow in his direction, and he jumped off the bed, laughing.

“Give me a few minutes to take a shower, and then I’ll be down,” Abir said, dodging another pillow.

I might have worried that I would make a mess of the room, but it was already there. “A few minutes. Mother will be displeased if you’re late.”

Abir poked his head out from the en suite bathroom and bowed deeply in my direction. “As you wish, Your Highness.”

The shower turned on in the other room, but I couldn’t force myself off the bed. I knew he was teasing me, but his words struck a chord in me. I became aware of a shift in my perspective. Whether I wanted to or not, on a deeper level, I was acting more like the king, even before I knew of Father’s imminent death. Was this a sign of what was to come?

I shook away the feeling, wanting to bring Father and his declining health to the forefront of my mind. I wanted to be there for him, mind and body, and worrying about the kingdom would taint these last days I had with him.

Walking out of Abir’s room, I couldn’t wait to see Sophia again. We’d barely had any time to ourselves since she arrived, and once dinner was over, I planned on changing that. Since neither of us had shared a first real kiss yet, I wondered if it would happen tonight. I supposed we should get it over and done with, but I wanted to make sure that was what she wanted. She had feelings for me, but we came into our relationship weirdly. Somehow, we had to move backward out of a fake relationship into a real one. How we did that was up to Sophia. I would go at her speed, working against my wants and needs.

She smiled at me when I came out. “That was quick.”

“He just needed a pep talk,” I said, taking her hand. She didn’t hesitate at all when she twined her fingers with mine. This was right, and we both knew it.

“Is he coming down?” she asked, glancing behind her.

“He needed to clean himself up,” I said, not wanting to get into detail about the disarray of himself and his surroundings.



I was surprised that the dining room was empty when we arrived. I had expected Mother to be there, waiting to show how disappointed she was with Sophia and me. At least we'd get a break from that. Sophia and Abir liked each other, so I looked forward to having a pleasant conversation between the three of us. Maybe Mother had changed her tune. I didn't expect her to welcome Sophia with open arms after hearing how she honestly felt, but being cordial would have sufficed.

"It's just us?" Sophia asked.

"I guess so," I said, pushing her chair in behind her.

"I don't mind her," Sophia said quickly. "I wish she didn't mind me, though. Should we tell them about us?"

"That doesn't matter anymore. We're together now. We don't need to reveal any of our previous lies. I foresee Mother using that to her advantage and upsetting Father."

Sophia nodded. "Good point."

Abir came in a few moments later as the first course arrived. One of the servants rushed out to get another plate for my brother.

"Sophia!" Abir said, running over to her.

She stood and hugged him. "Hey," she drawled.

Abir turned to me and lightly smacked my arm. "You didn't tell me Sophia was coming. I would have dressed better."

I glanced at his outfit. In the same way that he was into his books, he appreciated a nice outfit and gelled hair. "You look fine."

"Where's Mother?" Abir asked, sitting down in his spot.

I shrugged. "She wasn't here when we arrived."

The conversation turned to other pleasantries as we ate the first course. I started to relax when the doors opened again.

Mother strode into the room. Her eyes narrowed on Sophia.

“Is something wrong?” Abir asked. “How is Father?”

Nothing was wrong with Father at that moment. I stood up, attempting to intervene with whatever she was about to say or do.

“She is not welcome at this table!” Mother said.

I moved in front of her so that Mother’s already pointed finger came nowhere near Sophia.

Mother tried to sidestep me, but I was ahead of her and blocked her once again.

She let out a frustrated grunt and peered around me to face Sophia. “I don’t even know why you are here, but as long as I am alive, you will not be welcome here. I suggest you leave if you don’t want to hear exactly what I have to say.”

Sophia’s chest heaved as she took deep breaths.

“That is enough,” I said to Mother.

“It will be enough when she leaves,” Mother said.

The legs of Sophia’s chair scraped across the floor. “I should go.”

“No,” I said, but Sophia was already halfway across the room. Then she was gone.

Mother let out a satisfied sound and took her seat at the head of the table, across from the empty chair that Father always occupied.

“Are you pleased with yourself?” I asked her.

She placed her napkin in her lap. “I will not be pleased until she is out of our home.”

Abir stared at Mother with wide eyes. He didn’t like confrontation.

I glanced at the door. I would never be able to finish my meal if Sophia was alone and hurting from Mother’s words.

I had nothing left to say to my mother, so I showed her my displeasure and followed Sophia out of the dining room.

“Luke, come back!” Mother called as I closed the doors behind me. Since my conversation with her hadn’t changed her mind, my actions might. She would have to get used to seeing Sophia and me together or else she would lose her son.

I hoped her extreme reaction to Sophia was a symptom of Father dying, but she had expressed her disapproval of Sophia before. This whole situation might be a turning point for our entire family. I would have to wait it out and see.

I went to my room, knowing that Sophia would have gone there. It was the only place she had privacy.

I slowed down as I approached the door. I hoped she didn’t want to be alone. I wanted to show her that I was always on her side and my mother would never come between us. Nothing would.

Opening the door, Sophia sat on the bed, her back facing me.

“Sorry I left,” she said without turning around. “Everyone is going through a lot right now. I didn’t think it was appropriate for me to stay if she was that upset.”

I crossed the room and stood in front of her. Her eyes were a little pink, and my jaw clenched. My mother had made Sophia cry for no reason.

I reached over to her and helped her off the bed. Bringing my hands to her waist, I pulled her closer to me. Tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear, I drew a line over her jaw with my finger. “I don’t care what she says or thinks about us. You are more to me than she realizes. Nothing will come between us.”

Her gaze darted between my eyes, and I couldn’t suppress the urge to kiss her.

I lowered my mouth to hers, and our lips met.

# CHAPTER 33



## SOPHIA

Luke's warm lips touched mine, and my entire body exploded with ripples of pleasure. My nipples pressed against my bra, and before I knew it, I threw my arms around his shoulders and kissed him back. His tentative mouth turned hungry and so did mine. He slipped his tongue into my mouth, and I moaned into his.

I regretted not kissing him sooner. He was like a glass of water after I'd been wandering in the desert. He quenched my thirst, but I wanted more.

His hands reached up and moved through my hair, sending tingling feelings running down my body and spreading warmth throughout my midsection.

He pulled away from me, holding my face in his hands. His eyes were heavy, and he panted slightly. He licked his lips, and my gaze fell on those delicious pillows. How I wanted to rest in them for the remainder of my life.

"Sophia," he said. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

I answered him by untucking his shirt from his pants and tugging at the hem.

He grinned, and the dampness between my thighs intensified.

His hands roamed from my waist to my butt, squeezing me where it counted.

I lifted up on my toes to kiss him again while undoing each of the buttons on his shirt. There were so many, I had the urge

to rip them off, but I wanted to take it slowly. I hadn't been with a man for so long, and I was going to take my time and relish every damn second.

Pulling away his shirt, I splayed my hands over his rock-hard chest. He wasn't chiseled like men in the movies or on the front of magazines, but he was strong. He proved that when he lifted me up and dropped me on his bed.

He lifted my chin to look right at him. "Damn, you're so beautiful."

Heat coursed through me, and it wasn't just because of the compliment. I was eye level with the hardness bulging in his pants.

I reached out to touch the line of hair under his belly button. Feeling the soft tuft, I dug deeper, popping the button of his pants open and slowly pulling down the zipper.

I glanced up at him, and his jaw slackened as he watched me pull out his cock and stroke it. His silky hardness was ready and alert. While I stroked, I watched him. His pupils dilated, and his chest heaved.

I leaned forward and kissed his tip. He moaned and moved closer to me, aiding its entry into my mouth. He filled me, and I continued to stroke while sucking, harder and harder. My pulse spiked every time he moaned, and my breasts started to ache, wanting to be set free. I wanted his hands and mouth all over me, and I became more impatient.

I pulled away from him, and before I could say anything, he shoved his pants down, freeing himself completely. He pressed a hand against my chest and pushed me down onto the bed.

He stood over me, and I could see him with a crown on his head. He was a prince that anyone would have fantasized about, yet I had him right in front of me, all to myself.

He peeled off my shoes and tugged my pants down, revealing my lacy black panties. It was a good thing I had chosen to wear them today. I wasn't expecting this to happen, but I thanked whatever instinct had told me to pick them.



Speaking of prepared. “Do you have any protection?”

His hand trailed up my thigh, and my muscles vibrated under his touch. His lips quirked, and for a moment, fear flashed across his face.

“I, um, have never brought anyone here.”

“I have something,” I said. Then my cheeks flushed. In addition to the lacy panties, I’d brought a few condoms. So maybe I *had* wanted this to happen. I hoped he wasn’t offended or thought that I did this often.

“You little minx,” he said and kissed me. His body was on mine, and the heat rolling off him overwhelmed me. He pushed off the bed and went over to my bag. I rolled over and propped myself up on my arm.

“Inside pocket,” I said. I chewed on my lip, wondering how long I’d had those. I hoped they weren’t expired. I shook away the thought. I had wanted Luke for a long time, and nothing was going to stop us from making love tonight.

Luke returned to me seconds later with the foil packet. He tossed it onto the bed next to me and coaxed me into a sitting position. He lifted my shirt over my head and unclasped my bra. The material fell off my chest, exposing me completely to Luke. He kissed one of my breasts while kneading the other. My head lolled back as his tongue circled the most sensitive part of my body. Well, at least, my upper body.

“Scoot up,” he said without removing his mouth from my breast.

I slid backward, and he crawled onto the bed with me. He switched to the other breast while his free hand moved lower. He drew a line with his finger down my middle and stopped when he reached the top of my panties. His finger curved along the edge of the hem before he pushed himself inside.

I gasped as he entered me. He slid in so quickly. His thumb rubbed my clit, and before I knew it, I was climbing higher, unable to breathe properly. I panted as Luke covered my mouth with his and his tongue darted inside of my mouth. He massaged my tongue with his, and my ears started to ring.

I was on the precipice of orgasm when he started to slow down.

“No, no,” I moaned.

“Patience,” he said with a smirk. He pulled my panties off and tossed them off the bed before ripping open the foil packet and rolling the condom down his length.

I moved closer to him and opened my legs, inviting him inside.

He took the invite and slowly entered me. I drew in a breath, which was quickly extinguished by his lips.

He moved inside of me, and we quickly found our rhythm. Streaks of heat ignited in every spot that he touched me. His hands roamed my body as much as mine did his. I found the peaks and valleys of his muscles, and I committed them to memory.

Even though I knew Luke hadn't had a girlfriend for some time, he knew exactly how to make me feel good. He was a tease, too. He'd build me up until I was close and then slow down, drawing out the anticipation of my climax.

I nipped him on the shoulder, silently warning him that soon, I was going to take it for myself.

He slowed down enough that he could kiss me. His lips were soft and gentle, as if this were our first kiss.

The moment he broke away from the kiss, the race was on. He picked up his pace as if he'd also had enough of his stalling. I didn't plan on letting him get away from me anytime soon, so I knew there would be more to come. I made a mental note to see how he liked to be teased.

All thoughts were extinguished from my mind as he hammered into my sweet spot over and over. My chin reached for the ceiling as I tried to contain myself. Luke grunted the most animalistic sound I'd ever heard from him.

He thrust into me over and over until I reached my peak. I dug my nails into his back as he rode me up and over my climax and then all the way down. I felt the moment that he

came, and I wanted to do it all over again to see the pleasure on his face again.

I bucked my hips to milk every ounce out of him before he pulled out of me and dropped to my side.

I twined my legs around him and kissed him again. We stayed like that for some time, kissing and touching each other.

“That was...” Luke said and then licked his lips.

“Good?” I helped.

“Better than good,” he said. “I was going to say unexpected.”

“Rarely do I go from kissing a guy to that,” I said. “I mean, I don’t kiss a lot of guys—” I shut up before I ruined the moment.

He chuckled and took my hand in his, grazing his lips over my knuckles.

Luke adjusted himself so that I was lying on his arm. His finger traced around my stomach and up to my breasts. I closed my eyes, intensifying the feeling of his skin against mine.

I thought back to earlier in the evening and why I’d come back into his room to begin with.

Fluttering open my eyes, I glanced up at him. “Sorry about before.”

“You’re sorry?” he asked.

“Not about this,” I said, touching his hand. “With your mother, I mean. I didn’t want to make things uncomfortable for everyone.”

He grunted. “Don’t worry about her. I’ll handle it.”

“You will?” I asked.

“Of course,” he said. “This is where I want to be, and my mother is going to have to get used to it.”

I curled up with him, a grin plastered on my face. Closing my eyes, I listened to Luke’s breathing become heavy before

the both of us drifted off to sleep.

# CHAPTER 34



## LUKE

Waking up to the sound of Sophia's heavy and slow breathing was the sweetest sound I'd ever heard. Turning my head gently so that I didn't wake her, I watched her eyes flutter as she slept. A lock of hair split her face in two, and I had the urge to move it away and fully see her angelic face.

But I wanted to preserve her in her peaceful state. Sophia didn't need to wake early to another day facing my father's death and my mother's grimace. She'd given me more than I bargained for last night, and she deserved some rest before waking.

Getting out of the bed, I pulled my arm out from under her and flexed my fingers. Most of my arm was in the pins and needles stage of waking up, but it was a minor inconvenience after a night of bliss.

The thought of more nights like this in our future made me smile. While Sophia was in my life, she would always come to bed with me, even if just to sleep.

I pulled on a pair of pants and a shirt before scribbling a quick note to Sophia and placing it on my pillow. I wanted no confusion about my intentions with her. I wasn't the type to sneak away, but I wanted to see how my father was doing.

The hallways were bustling with activity when I made it out of my bedroom. I quickly moved past the servants, hyper-aware of them. I felt like a new man after being with Sophia. My head was clear, and I knew what I had to do next.



Entering my father's room, I was surprised to see him awake and sitting up. He looked as if someone had helped him shower or bathe, either last night or this morning. Color had returned to his cheeks. He was sipping water from a glass when I arrived.

"Good morning, Luke," he chirped.

"I see someone got a good night's sleep," I said.

"I'm not sure about that, but I feel more energetic today."

"Ready to go for a walk around the palace grounds?" I asked him with a smile.

He chuckled. "Not quite." He eyed me for a second. "You seem to be in a good mood this morning, as well. Did things turn around between you and your mother?"

I frowned. I bet Mother hadn't informed him about the confrontation between her and Sophia the night before. That was typical of her. But this wasn't the time to discuss that. I didn't want any unnecessary strain on Father. Mother was my problem, and I would deal with her.

"Not exactly," I said.

Father attempted to lift the tray from his lap, but I stood up and grabbed it for him, placing it on the side table. "My mother was the same way, you know," he said.

"She was?" I asked. "I thought you two were an arranged marriage?"

"Yes, but my mother wanted someone else for me."

"She did? I had no idea."

Father grinned, and I saw a flash of him as a younger man, like me, rebelling against his parents while he could. "My father and I agreed that Gia was the best choice for me. My mother was hurt that I didn't consult her before the marriage

was already arranged. She gave your mother a tough time in the early days.”

I sat back in my chair, completely surprised that my mother might have experienced the same discomfort that she pressed upon Sophia. I knew our situations were different since Sophia was from America, but Mother knew how it felt to be disapproved of, yet she continued to do it to the one woman I wanted to be with.

“How long did that last?” I asked.

Father sighed. “It would have gone on until my mother took her last breath, but at some point, I had to put a stop to it.”

“You said something to her?”

“I did,” he said. “It was the hardest conversation I ever had. Looking back, I know she was only trying to preserve my happiness. I had to show her that I wanted to be with your mother. It was my choice, and she had to accept it or lose me.”

I wasn’t sure if now was the right time for me to say something like that to my own mother, but it did give me a few ideas.

“I don’t want you to stick around here while I’m shackled to the bed,” Father said. “Go back to England and check on the company.”

“I don’t mind,” I said.

“I *do* mind,” he said. “Everyone is too worried about me. I feel okay. And you have a big decision to make. I want you to clear your head before you make it.”

I knew he was talking about taking over as king, but he didn’t say the words. Since returning this week, he hadn’t hounded me about it. Did he already know what I was going to do? He had always said I would make the right choice. Was this him allowing me to do so?

“I’ll still be here when you get back,” he said.

I swallowed. I didn’t know that for sure, but he was right that some business matters needed to be dealt with. I’d left



England too quickly when I found out Father was sick. I had a lot to do while I was there. The sooner I left, the sooner I could return. "Okay."

Father took my hand, and I held it between both of mine.

"I love you, son," he said. "You know I only want what is best for you, right?"

"I know," I said, kissing the top of his hand. "I know."



I stayed with Father for a little while longer until enough time had passed that I knew Sophia would be awake. I'd written in the note where I would be, but I wanted to see her and let her know about the change in plans. I wanted to be on a plane as soon as possible so that Sophia could escape Mother's wrath and I would be able to return as quickly as possible.

On the way to my chambers, I ran into my mother in the hallway. She was speaking with one of the servants but shooed the young man away when she saw me coming.

"Have you seen your father this morning?" she asked me.

"Yes," I said. "He looks well."

Mother sighed. "I've been so busy this morning that I haven't been able to check in for more than a few minutes. I thought he looked well, too. I wonder if this will turn around for him."

"It's all we can hope," I said. "I wanted to tell you that Sophia and I are leaving today."

Mother groaned. "Not again! That little snake keeps taking you away from us. Doesn't she realize that we need to be a family right now?"

I stepped closer to my mother and dropped my head toward her. "If you would get off your issues with Sophia for a second, I would tell you that Father requested I go back to check on the company."

“He did?” she asked, pressing her hand to her chest.

“He did,” I said. “And when I return next weekend, it will be *with* Sophia.”

“Luke, I don’t think—”

“Stop it, Mother,” I spat.

She clamped her lips together.

“I love her,” I said. “Sophia is the one that I’m going to be with, and there is nothing that you can say or do to stop it.”

“If you would just listen,” she said. “She isn’t the person you think she is.”

“I know exactly who she is,” I said. “Picture the situation from the other side.” I wanted to remind her of how my grandmother felt about her without revealing that Father had told me the story. I didn’t know if she knew that he was the one who had handled the situation in their past, but I was going to handle this one, and she was going to listen. “Sophia is trying hard to get on your good side, and she’s a pretty terrific person if you bothered to get to know her.”

Mother crossed her arms like a petulant child.

“You’re going to have to accept it one way or another,” I said, hoping she understood the threat. I wasn’t sure if I could ever tell her she would lose me over Sophia. Mother was stubborn, but she was also hurting right now. Projecting her anger on Sophia might have been her way of coping with Father. I wanted her to understand that I was serious about Sophia, but I wasn’t about to leave on bad terms.

I kissed Mother on the cheek and said, “I love you. I’ll see you soon.”

“Goodbye, Luke,” she said coldly as I passed her.

Walking toward my chambers, I wondered if that had been the best time to tell Mother I loved Sophia. I wanted Sophia to be the first one to hear it from my lips, but with Mother’s attitude, I couldn’t help it. She had to know that I would do anything for Sophia, and I wanted her to experience this new chapter in my life with me.

I had previously told my parents that I loved Sophia last weekend to convince them that Sophia and I were a real couple. But now that Sophia and I had confessed our feelings, the words took on a whole new meaning. I felt different by saying them. Lighter. As if I could conquer the world.

I had never felt for anyone like I did for Sophia. Were we ready for that step in our relationship? Would telling her make her run away or into my arms?

# CHAPTER 35



## SOPHIA

Rolling over, on the verge of dream and wake, I reached my hand out and felt the cool side of the bed, void of anyone other than me.

Lazily opening my eyes, my suspicions were confirmed. Last night hadn't been a dream, but the sexy man who I had made love to was nowhere to be found.

I grabbed the note on the pillow next to me and cracked my eyes open against the sunlight streaming in through the window to decipher the words.

“Went to see my father. Be back soon.” Luke's handwriting was fit for a king; it was neat enough that it could have been typed. Most of the male reporters I knew had trouble reading their hieroglyphic scribbles after an interview. That was why I always recorded an interview, along with jotting down notes.

I stretched my arms over my head, feeling the small ache in my lower back from the fantastic sex last night. Even with the stiffness, my body was refreshed and ready for the day.

Last night, I had taken it to another level with Luke. He had only intended to kiss me, but I had a lot of pent-up sexual frustration when it came to him. And as far as I knew, he did too.

I grinned madly as I sat up in bed and scooted off the mattress, padding over to the bathroom across the room. I didn't care that I was still naked. I felt free after what we'd

done together. If Luke walked in right now, I would challenge him to round two.

Being with him like that helped me forget—at least for a little while—the reason I was at the palace to begin with. My article. At the moment, I still had no specific story to tell. The moment I arrived, it had been all about Luke and me reuniting and coming back to where we had been before the conversation with his mother at the banquet and finding out his father was ill.

I was letting my emotions take over again. So as I showered, I allowed the hot stream of water to wash over me and clear my head. Luke was different than any man I had ever met. He was kind, intelligent, and sexy. He had a lot of turmoil inside of him, and somehow, that drew me in as well. I wanted to make his life as easy as possible after he'd given so much to me.

But I also had a deadline to meet, and I wasn't about to lose my job, never mind the promotion, because of a man. I was sure I could find something to dig up that wouldn't compromise our relationship.

After showering, I dressed and headed out to find Luke. I wanted to see Erol as well. His approval of my relationship with Luke meant a lot. While I wasn't sure where our futures would take us, at least Erol knew that his son was happy right now. I wouldn't do anything to jeopardize a dying man's happiness, but Luke and I needed to talk about everything. I debated on telling him about the article. He had already known and accepted the fact that I was writing an article about him and his father when we met, but I also didn't want to rely on his money and power to find me a story. I had to do this on my own.

Walking down the hallways of the palace, I allowed my mind to wander. I couldn't imagine growing up in such a grand place. The servants moved quickly down the hallways, carrying supplies throughout the massive house. They were so efficient that I rarely saw them doing work, only scurrying between jobs. But my room had always been pristine when I

came back to it, and I doubted coming back to Luke's room later would be any different.

I was about to round a corner when I heard two voices coming from the hallway containing Erol's chambers.

I slowed my pace as I recognized Luke's voice. The other speaker was clearly his mother. I noted her grunts at whatever it was he said.

Not wanting to reveal myself—and make another mistake with eavesdropping—I stopped and was about to turn around when Luke said, “I love her. Sophia is the one that I am going to be with, and there is nothing that you can say or do to stop it.”

My heart leaped into my throat, and I clamped a hand over my mouth. Hearing him say those words with such ferocity made me realize that he wasn't trying to convince her of our fake relationship anymore. He meant it.

I didn't hear his mother's response but I assumed it was dismissive. I turned around and practically sprinted toward his bedroom.

Little did he know that I had come looking for him. He would come back to the room sometime, and I could pretend I had never left. I could also act like I didn't hear him confess his love for me. Luke hadn't said the words to my face, and I wondered if today was going to be that day.

Love was such a strong word, and it meant commitment. He seemed so adamant to convince his mother of his feelings for me.

After last night, our bond had grown, but into *love*? I wasn't sure if it happened that quickly.

For me, there was a significant difference between having feelings for someone and loving them. Especially in such a short amount of time.

Did I love him in return? If today was the day he revealed his feelings to me, what would I say back?

Inside Luke's room, I wasn't sure what to do while waiting for him. If he was having a private discussion with his mother over me, then I couldn't go back out there and pretend I hadn't heard anything.

To keep my hands busy, I made the bed and straightened up the room. Our clothes were thrown on the floor, and at that moment, I was glad I came back. If the servants came into the room with it looking like this, they would know what happened between us last night.

My cheeks burned with the memory. When the door opened, I jumped and clutched my chest.

Luke walked into the room and smirked. "Did I startle you?"

For some reason, I couldn't meet his eye. "You did."

He strode over to me, and before I could say anything else, he kissed me. The strong minty taste of his toothpaste swirled in my mouth, and the scent tickled my nose. I lifted up on my toes to deepen the kiss. Even last night, my mind numbed every time Luke kissed me. He had a power over me, and I wasn't sure if I would ever tire of it.

When we finally broke apart, my heart thrummed in my chest.

"Good morning," he said.

"Mornin'," I drawled.

He pecked my lips and took my hands in his. "I'm glad you're ready."

"Are we going somewhere today?" I asked. "I thought you wanted to stay home with your father?"

He shook his head. "I need to go back to England."

My heart sank. "Oh."

"Father insisted that I check on the company," he said, avoiding my eyes.

The conversation from before didn't make any sense. Was he still pretending? I couldn't keep track. I also couldn't leave



without a story.

“You’re okay with coming back to London with me?” he asked. “You can stay in my flat.”

“You want me to stay with you?” I asked.

“Of course,” he said. “Did you think I was going to leave you here?”

“I didn’t know if you wanted me to go back to the States while you handled business,” I said.

His eyes burned into mine. “Sophia.”

My breath caught in my throat. Was this the moment he would tell me how he felt? I still wasn’t sure what I was going to say.

“Do you want to go back to the States?” he asked. “I don’t want to force you to do anything you don’t want to.” He hesitated before saying, “I thought after last night—”

“No!” I said. “I want to come with you. Of course, I do.” The thought of leaving Luke again made my insides ache. While I could sort through naming my feelings at another time, I knew I wasn’t going anywhere without him.

“Good,” he said with a smile. “I’m sorry to do this. I know you had a long flight on the way over here.”

“As long as I don’t have to deal with people in coach, I’ll be fine,” I said. “Do we have time to eat before we leave?”

“I’ve already ordered the pilot for the jet. There will be food on the flight. I want to get there and back as soon as possible. If that is okay?”

“As long as I’m with you, it’s more than okay,” I said.

“I was hoping you’d say that,” he said.

“How was your father this morning?” I asked.

“Better than I’ve seen,” he said. “Which is why I want to get my business duties over with before I return. I’d like to stay for a while. Until—” He cut off there. We both knew what he meant, but no words needed to be said.

I went over to my suitcase with the burning desire to force him to tell me that he loved me. I had to know. I wasn't sure if it was the reporter in me that wanted the scoop on how Luke felt, or if I wanted him to tell me he loved me so I would know our status. But I pushed anyway.

"Did you see your mother this morning?" I asked as I folded the clothes I'd worn yesterday and placed them in my suitcase.

He sighed. "Briefly."

I waited for him to elaborate, but he didn't.

I chewed that over for a minute before going into the bathroom to grab my toiletries. The more I thought about it, the more anxious I became. Why was it so easy for him to say it to his mother but not to me? Was he waiting for a special moment?

Staring at myself in the mirror, I smoothed my hair down and took a deep breath. When had I turned into this woman? Was it because I hadn't previously met the right man? I wasn't into the lovey-dovey things that other women in the newsroom were. They gossiped about their dates and the meaning behind every single word their potential partners said.

Since I always focused on my work, I ignored them, but maybe I shouldn't have. I could have picked up on some tips for dealing with a situation like this.

Coming out of the bathroom, Luke was sitting on the bed, flicking his finger over his phone screen.

He looked up at me and smiled. "You ready?"

"Almost," I said and stuffed my toiletry bag into my suitcase. "Should we say goodbye to Abir and your mother?"

"Maybe Abir," Luke said. "I'd rather not deal with my mother until I return. Her actions were ridiculous yesterday, and I won't subject you to that two days in a row."

"I don't mind," I said. "I should say goodbye so she doesn't think we're sneaking away again."

“I already informed her of our plans. You will see her again next week.”

I couldn't help pushing one more time. “What did she say when you told her?”

“Not much,” he said, standing up and shoving his phone into his pocket. “It was Father's request to tend to the business, and she doesn't have a say in the business side of my life. Which is a blessing.”

I forced a smile.

He walked over, took my hand, and kissed the top of it. “I'd rather not think of her unpleasantness right now. I can't wait to get you back to England and away from this toxic environment, even for a little while.”

As we walked to Abir's room, I watched Luke as he spoke to me about his conversation with his Father earlier that morning. His eyes were wide, and they sparkled with love for his father.

There was love between us, too, and even though he couldn't say it, I felt it deep in my core.

# CHAPTER 36



## LUKE

With the long flight and the time change, Sophia and I arrived in England late in the afternoon. The flight home was much different than the last flight we had together. Previously, she'd been distant and cold with me. Presumably, it was because of the conversation she had with my mother at the banquet, but we were way over that. I hoped she knew Mother's dislike of her existed only in Mother's mind. Abir and Father liked Sophia just fine, and I loved her. My opinion was the only one that counted anyway.

Even though we'd had plenty to eat on the plane, I was anxious to blot out the last date we had, when she picked up and left for America without another word.

Since we slept on the plane, we were wide awake, and I had already called in a reservation for a place near my flat.

"What is the dress code?" Sophia asked.

"Don't worry about that," I said.

"Of course, I'm going to worry. I want to look good for you." She smirked.

If we weren't about to disembark from the plane, I would have taken her into my bedroom and thanked her properly for that remark. But I had other plans for her.

"Besides, I didn't pack much, other than my carry-on."

I kissed her deeply before saying, "Then let's go shopping."

She pressed her lips together. “Now?”

“You said you needed clothes,” I said. “What better time than now?”

“What about work?” she asked.

I checked my watch. I wasn’t about to invite Maddox out on my date with Sophia, and if we started talking about the business, I was sure to be preoccupied all night. I had almost a week to get everything straight, so tonight, Sophia and I could enjoy ourselves without worrying about servants, family members, or flight attendants in a place where no one knew that I was a prince.

Here, I could finally remove the metaphorical crown from my head. I was just a run of the mill CEO. Little did anyone know I was worth billions and was heir to a kingdom.

I made another phone call to the boutique that Sophia and I had gone to before our first trip. It all seemed so long ago, but it had only been two weeks. Everything was happening so quickly, which meant that there had to be something different between us. In my time being single and dating—before taking over the company—I had never felt this way about a woman. Sure, I wanted to spend time outside of my bedroom with a few of them, but I never had the connection or chemistry that I felt with Sophia. She challenged me as a person and was beautiful and kind. She wasn’t who my mother wanted as my wife, but I could see a future together with her, regardless of my mother’s consent.

The moment we stepped off the plane and into the waiting car, I had the driver take us to the downtown area.

The entire way, I held Sophia’s hand, and she talked about the sights in the area.

My shoulders relaxed as the two of us spoke like any old couple, instead of a brand new one. I supposed we’d come into this situation backward, fake dating while we were still acquaintances. We were so comfortable with each other, it was a little unsettling and amazing at the same time.

“Do you think we’ll have time to do anything this week?” she asked.

“Like what?” I asked. I wasn’t sure how long it would take to get everything in order, but I wanted to make her happy if I could.

“I didn’t get to see the sights when I was here last,” she said. “Anything besides my hotel room and your office building.”

“And a palace,” I reminded her.

“That too.”

“If we have time, I’ll take you wherever you want,” I said.

She leaned her head against my shoulder and snuggled closer to me. I wrapped my arm around her and pulled her tight against me. I would give her the world if she’d let me.



“Welcome back!” the saleswoman, Katherine, said when we arrived. I was surprised that we had the same woman as before. Either that girl worked long hours, or she wanted the commission badly. The previous set of outfits weren’t cheap, so I guessed it was more likely the latter. But I only wanted the best for Sophia.

Katherine indicated for us to follow her into the back room where we’d been in the private dressing area before. It all was the same setup but felt different. I already knew what Sophia looked like naked, and I could openly appreciate how she looked instead of trying to hide it from her.

How things had changed in such a short amount of time.

“Since you didn’t specify things you needed, I pulled out several styles and types of outfits for you to try on today,” Katherine said. “Let me know what you like and don’t like and if you’re planning for any special occasions.”

“Sophia would like a dress for tonight,” I said. “Something elegant but not too formal.”

Katherine nodded. “Brilliant. I have several choices in the mix. Shall we?”

Sophia gave me her handbag and smiled.

“Pick as many pieces as you like,” I said to Sophia, grabbing her hand. I pulled her close and kissed her. “In case you want to stay longer.”

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“Absolutely,” I said, catching a glimpse of myself in the trifold mirror in front of me. My happiness was unmistakable in my mirror image.

“Thank you,” she said before following Katherine past the divider and into the dressing room across the way.

I sat down and placed her bag next to me. Sinking into the love seat, I unbuttoned my jacket and placed my arm on the top of the sofa. I imagined most men would be bored by this, but any situation that made Sophia smile like that wasn't boring for me. Watching Sophia come out of the room with each outfit was like opening a new present. Her brilliant smile warmed my heart as she spun around to make sure all of her angles were good. And they were.

Katherine had a real talent for picking pieces that highlighted Sophia's assets, although there wasn't much of Sophia that I *didn't* want to look at.

Sophia chose some pieces for Qatar—the more modest shirts and long pants—but she picked a few outfits for the cooler weather in England. Even though she was more bundled up in some of the cashmere sweaters, the softness of the fabric made me want to touch her even more.

“Just one more,” Sophia said after modeling a sexy red dress that I was going to force her to buy even if she refused. She needed that in her closet.

“Katherine!” Sophia called a few minutes later.

Katherine launched away from the wall, her post while Sophia changed, and hurried over to the divider before knocking. “I'm here.”



Katherine entered the dressing room, and she let out a gasp.

“Is everything okay?” I asked, sitting up straighter.

Katherine closed the door, and both she and Sophia said “Yes!” at the same time.

I wondered if the zipper on the dress ripped or something. If it were the red dress, then I would demand a tailor to fix it.

The women spoke in hushed voices, piquing my curiosity, but I wasn't about to intrude into whatever they were talking about. Katherine was no threat to me, and I had to give Sophia some distance or else I might crowd her too much.

A few minutes later, Sophia came out of the dressing room in her normal clothes.

“Didn't fit?” I asked.

She glanced at Katherine. “Something like that.”

I narrowed my eyes but didn't pry. Sophia and Katherine seemed amused by something, and I wasn't going to ruin their fun.

After Katherine packaged all the clothes and I paid for them, I instructed our driver to take us back to the flat to get ready. Dinner wasn't for another hour, and I wanted to see Sophia in that red dress again.

When we reached my flat, my pulse spiked. As much as the palace had been my home for the majority of my life, bringing Sophia to my home in England took our relationship to the next level.

Sophia got out of the car, and I watched for her reaction. She looked up at the building then tore her eyes away to glance at me.

“Nice place.”

I grinned. “The inside is even better.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “I can imagine.”

I asked the driver to remain outside while we changed. While I wanted to take Sophia inside and strip her down, there wasn't much time before dinner. I didn't plan on getting up early in the morning to get back to work, so there was time for us to get intimately acquainted with my second home.

I adjusted the hardness between my thighs and walked over to Sophia, taking her hand in mine as I brought her to the front door.

It had been so long since I had brought a woman here, I didn't recall if it had been months or closer to a year.

Since I wanted my privacy after coming from a life of servants and valets, there were none at my flat. I had a cleaning woman, but she came when I wasn't home.

Sophia and I lugged her suitcase and the many bags from the boutique into my place. For a brief moment, I knew what it was like to be a man in love with a woman. Not a prince in love with a commoner. Our paths would have never intersected otherwise, but it was a nice thought. And yet another reason I had to thank my parents for adopting me.

I opened the front door and held my breath, waiting for her reaction.

The automatic lights turned on, illuminating the front entry and hallway. Since it was already dark outside, my eyes squinted against the lights until they adjusted.

I rolled Sophia's suitcase behind me as I walked the familiar hallway. The end opened up to the living room, kitchen, and dining room with a broad view of the London Bridge.

"Holy cow," Sophia said, clutching her bag. She strode past the eight-seat dining room table and stared at the view. The lights of London twinkled in the distance. Sophia's silhouette against the windows made me pause as I drank her in. How I wanted this view for myself every single night for the rest of my life.

"This is your view?" she asked.

“Yes,” I said, quickly realizing she meant the view outside the windows.

She let out a low whistle as she spun on her heels, taking in my home.

I checked my watch. “We should get ready.”

Sophia nodded.

“You’ll have plenty of time to explore,” I said. “And snoop.”

She grinned. “I’ll find all your little secrets.”

I laughed. “I hope you won’t be too disappointed. I’m afraid I’m rather boring. All work and no fun and all that.”

She walked over to me and lifted up onto her toes to kiss me. “Where do you want me to get changed?”

I drew in a breath. Sadly, it would be inappropriate for me to ask her to change right then and there so I could see her naked again. I pointed to the guest bedroom. I didn’t intend for her to stay the night in there, but I had to change, too. If I was anywhere near her while changing, I might have said screw the dinner and screwed *her* instead. I forced the thought away.

I needed to replace the date that we’d had last week with a much better memory. There was so much drama with my family; I wanted to have one nice evening with Sophia to hold onto while I dealt with the rest tomorrow.

Sophia took her suitcase from out of my hand and only one of the bags from the boutique. She winked at me and then walked away.

I had to force myself to move in the other direction, or else I might not have been able to continue with the evening as planned. I wanted her more and more with each passing second. How was I going to get through an evening with her in that red dress?

I imagined it pooled at the end of my bed in the morning, and that put a little spring in my step.

I changed quickly and came out, unable to wait any longer to see Sophia. It had been less than ten minutes for me, but it felt like an eternity.

I wondered if Sophia was the type to spend hours getting ready. While normally that wouldn't annoy me, we were on a tight timeframe, and I wanted to start our evening right away.

I was about to say something when the guestroom door opened. My jaw dropped as Sophia stepped out of the room.

She wasn't wearing the red dress, but now I knew why she and Katherine had the reaction they did. Sophia hadn't come out of the dressing room for one of the pieces, and this was it. If she had, I wouldn't have let her change out of it.

It was a simple black dress, but the cap sleeves hung across her shoulders, exposing her collarbones. The dress fit her exact measurements and hugged her breasts and hips so well, I was sure I would have to peel it off her later.

She wore a pair of red high heels that clicked over the marble floors as she neared. They were almost the exact shade of her lipstick. Her red lips curved into a smile. "Do you like the dress?"

I pulled her close to me, smoothing my hand over the soft fabric of her waist. "The dress is perfect."

# CHAPTER 37



## SOPHIA

Trying on the little black dress again created a wave of tingling to move across my skin. Seeing my reflection in the full-length mirror in the bathroom showed a whole other Sophia. Surrounded by expensive fixtures, marble tiles, and the sparkling surfaces, I felt like a princess about to meet her prince for the ball.

Smearing one of my more daring shades of lipstick and adding another pop of color with my shoes, I felt a little more like a Southern lass. Even in this unreal situation, I had to be myself as much as possible. I didn't intend on shedding my roots, but the more time I spent with Luke, the more I wanted to be a part of his world.

Stepping out of the guestroom, I wobbled on my heels a little. My best friend Matt's voice popped into my head, along with his smiling face. If he saw me, he would call me out on being a bit of a tomboy. Though going out with Luke, I would have to get used to wearing fancy things. At least in the UK. In Qatar, it was perfectly acceptable to wear flats. This dress required a higher heel. My calves looked amazing, and I would suffer for the evening so Luke could stare at me in the way that gave me giddy feelings in my stomach.

Luke's hands were in his pockets, but he pulled them out and dropped them to his side when he saw me. His mouth was open slightly, and I was reminded of older cartoons when a character's tongue lolled out of its mouth and red hearts beat from its eyes.

I started to believe that Luke *did* love me. Hell, I was almost certain that I was falling in love with him, but I kept going back and forth. Love wasn't that easy, nor should it be. But who was going to say it first?

"Do you like the dress?" I asked, a little nervous when he didn't say anything. I almost snapped my fingers to break him out of his trance.

He blinked and pulled me against him. His fingers moved across my back and rested on my waist. "The dress is perfect."

"You look great," I said, touching the soft fabric of his suit. He wore them all the time, but they never got old. It was a good thing he went with black, or we might have clashed.

His hands brushed against my bare shoulders. "I wish we would have bought some accessories for you. A diamond necklace would have been perfect."

A breath of air whooshed out of me. He tilted his head, questioningly.

"I thought you were going to bring me into some secret room where you had a stash of jewelry."

He laughed and kissed my forehead. "Unfortunately, no. But you *did* give me an idea." He waggled his eyebrows.

I swatted his chest.

"Come to think of it," he said. "I'm sure my mother has a room like that."

"Then, I'll have to try harder to get on her good side."

His smile faltered for a minute, and I hoped I hadn't said anything out of line. I didn't want to intrude on his life, assuming that I would stick around for some time.

"We should go," he said, extinguishing the awkward moment.

He took my hand, and I was able to put much of my weight on him to balance myself.

On the way to the restaurant, Luke slowly became his chatty self again, and by the time we were seated, his smile

had returned.

I was able to relax as well.

“Let’s hope this dinner won’t end up like the last one,” Luke said, placing his napkin across his lap. “I’m looking forward to dessert this time.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m never going to be able to live that down, am I?”

He reached across the table and took my hand. “I won’t mention it again. I’d prefer not to bring up depressing times.”

I nodded. “I agree.”

The waiter appeared at the perfect moment and took our order. Luke ordered champagne for the table and some appetizers. I wasn’t sure what I wanted for dinner yet, but I never turned down apps.

“How was Dallas?” Luke asked.

If I’d had any food in my mouth, I might have choked on it. “It was fine.”

In the time we had spent together since reuniting, we had avoided the subjects of home and the article. It might have been a sore subject for him, and I certainly didn’t want to talk about the real reason I had come back. It all seemed so distant now that I was with him. I supposed it had to come up eventually.

“Sophia,” he said in a warning tone. “Honesty, remember? Here, I’ll go first. I’ve been stalking your newspaper’s home page before your arrival. I fully expected to see an article about my family. At the very least, it might have explained why you left.”

“I thought stalking was my thing?” I asked him.

He smirked and then opened his hand, gesturing for an explanation from me.

I sighed. “I couldn’t write the article.”

“Because you didn’t interview me?” he asked.



That would have been the easiest excuse. Even though he wanted us to be honest, there was no way I would tell him that I knew about Erol and allowed Luke to be unaware of his father's illness for almost a week. I wasn't sure we would ever move past it if he knew.

"You know I came here the first time to find out about you taking your father's place on the throne," I said.

"Yes?"

"You hadn't answered whether you would or not," I said. "I was confused about us, and with the whole situation with your mother, it was too much."

"Is that why you came back?" he asked. His eyes were wide, as if he could see through into my soul. I glanced at the empty plate in front of me as if it held all the answers.

"I wanted to see you," I said. It was as honest as I could be at the moment. "It was stupid of me to run away in the first place."

"You're here now," Luke said, raising his glass of champagne. "That's all that matters."

The bubbles popped over the rim of my glass as I lifted it to touch his. I had promised Mr. Fraser an article, and I was going to get him one. I would have to rely on inspiration, though, because at that moment, there was nothing about Luke that I wanted to expose. He'd done so much for me. It was only fair that I repaid the favor by not revealing his family's secrets to the world.

"Have you put any more thought into becoming king?" I asked. I hoped I didn't sound too much like a reporter, but I was genuinely interested. The last time I left him, he was close to saying yes, but he hadn't done it yet. I thought his father's illness would force him to accept, but here we were, instead of being at the palace.

Luke finished his glass of champagne and placed the glass flute on the table. "I've given it a lot of thought."

"And?"

“And I’m no closer to saying yes,” he said firmly. “After seeing how Abir acted this week, I don’t know if I can leave the throne to him. I keep thinking he will step up, but I don’t believe that’s in his nature. The council would push him around to get there way, and I would feel terrible if that happened. It’s not what my father worked for.”

“I know how much your family means to you,” I said. “I think it’s admirable that you’re willing to sacrifice the work you’ve done with your company to save your brother from having to be in a position that he never wanted.”

“I’m not necessarily sacrificing the company,” he said.

“But your position,” I said. “That’s what I meant.” I had to slow down on the champagne. Being with Luke, mixed with the delicious drink, I was starting to get a little lightheaded. Where the hell were the appetizers?

“Maddox will be a fine CEO,” Luke said as if he were already the king and speaking of his many business ventures. “What I’m mostly worried about is losing my independence. Even though I’ve only had it for a little while, compared to a majority of my life, I’m unwilling to let it go just like that.”

I wanted to tell Luke how lucky he was. Either way, he had billions of dollars at his disposal. I doubted he would be able to disappoint his father, but if he wanted to rebel, he had enough income and talent to take himself elsewhere and still live an amazing life.

I, on the other hand, had no other options available. I wasn’t going to push my issues on him, but if he knew how badly I needed a story about his family, he would either give one to me, or he’d force me on the first plane home for thinking I was using him. Either way, the article wouldn’t be mine. And with the second option, I would have nothing—no Luke *and* no job.

“You must think I’m an ungrateful human being,” he said.

“Not at all,” I said. “Everyone, no matter their station in life, has issues. I can’t say I relate, but I get it.”

“I wish there was a simple solution.”

“Is there ever?” I asked.

“There could have been if Father wasn’t sick. I could have pushed the decision to a later date, but time got away from me I suppose.”

Speaking of his father, Luke’s demeanor changed. That smile of his was almost gone, and I desperately wanted it back.

I squeezed his hand. “I’m not doing a very good job of changing this date from last time, am I?”

He shook his head and exhaled. “It’s not you. I’m sorry. This week has been crazy.”

“I know what you mean,” I said. And I did. Even having Luke in the trenches with me, I was no closer to fulfilling the goal of this trip.

“Let’s just enjoy tonight,” Luke said.

I wanted to. So, I pushed away all thoughts of Mr. Fraser and the article, and I focused on Luke, the handsome man in front of me that loved me.

I was reminded of the conversation between him and his mother. All through dinner, I was convinced that he would tell me he loved me. His mood significantly improved, and by the time the check was dropped in front of him, desire flickered in his eyes.

A warmth spread through me. As much as I enjoyed making love to him the other night, we were heading back to his place that was completely devoid of people. We could indulge in whatever fantasies we wanted to, and no one would have anything to say about it.

After paying the bill, Luke helped me get my coat on. As the heavy material draped over my shoulders, his hand brushed against my bare chest. An electric pulse moved through me as we walked out of the restaurant.

The driver was already waiting for us outside, and we quickly got into the backseat, a blanket of warmth wrapped around us.

As we drove away, Luke's hand never released from mine, even when he put his seatbelt on, which impressed me. His thumb made delicious circles over the top of my hand as we anticipated getting back to his place.

While every nerve ending in my body was in overdrive, I wondered if I should take the first step and tell him how I felt. In modern times, it was entirely acceptable for a woman to make the first move.

The words were on the tip of my tongue the entire ride. Even when Luke started kissing me. The way that his tongue pressed against mine made me think that he wouldn't be doing this with me if he wasn't in love, right?

By the time we made it back to his place and the cold night air slapped sense into me, I knew I wasn't going to play my hand yet. Playing games with people's hearts wasn't something that I did. I had to be sure he loved me before I said anything in return. I still wasn't one hundred percent sure if he really meant what he had said to his mother or if it was just for show. I pressed my lips together, stifling those life-changing words from spilling from my mouth.

# CHAPTER 38



## LUKE

I wasn't sure if it was due to jet lag or how comfortable I felt sleeping next to Sophia, but after a repeat of the other night, we fucked twice before we both passed out, and then neither of us woke until early evening on Sunday.

I awoke too late to get any real work done, but I called Maddox to figure out what needed to be done before I left again. Then I checked in with my father, who was still feeling good and energetic.

While I took care of those responsibilities, Sophia insisted on preparing dinner for us. Having her in my house, flitting around the kitchen as if she belonged there all along was playing tricks with my mind. This was the life I wanted, but choosing this life was no longer an option for me.

I tried to conceal my disappointment at that fact, while keeping it from Sophia. As much as I preached to her about being honest, she didn't need to know about the worries going through my head. Forcing my insecurities upon her over and over might end this relationship before it even started. If I finally agreed to become king, then Sophia would be my queen. Was that something she wanted?

Selfishly, I wanted to hold on to what little time we had left together before we returned to the palace. There, we would have to deal with my mother disapproving of our relationship and the likely chance that Father would give up the throne to me. Sophia's decision would be her own, but I wanted to influence it if I could. I couldn't deal with Father's passing, becoming king, and losing Sophia all at once.

On the other hand, I wondered if I could make the prospect appealing to her. We had a strong connection, so I didn't see why she wouldn't want to be with me. Sure, it was a quick transition from the subject of an article to fake boyfriend to real boyfriend and husband, but I couldn't go into being the king without knowing her plans.

When I woke up Monday morning, I had zero desire to get out of bed. I wished I had drunk too much the night before so I could skip work, along with all my other responsibilities, and lounge around my flat with a half-naked Sophia.

She was curled up next to me, her ass inches from my crotch. I wondered if I had time for a quickie before work, but the pressure of responsibility forced me out of bed.

I hopped into the shower and changed. I hoped Sophia would still be sleeping when I finished so that I could sneak out without her eyes and sexy as hell body beckoning me back to bed.

I had no such luck.

When I entered the bedroom, she rolled over and faced me. The blankets covered her body—which was a shame—and she was wide awake. “Heading to work?”

I straightened my tie and nodded. “For a bit. As much as I hate to leave, it's the only reason we came back to London. There's no avoiding it.”

She jutted out her lower lip, and I crossed the room to kiss it. I dragged my teeth over her lip so she could know how much I wanted to jump back into bed with her.

“I'll try to get out early so that we can have a late lunch,” I said.

“Let me know,” she said. “I know you have a lot to cover with Maddox. I'll make my way around on my own.”

“There's a spare key in the table by the door,” I said. “Grab it if you go anywhere.”

“A key to your apartment?” she said, placing her hand on her chest and fluttering her eyelashes. “Is this serious?”

I laughed, and I kissed her again. “I’ll see you later.”



I couldn’t stop smiling on my way to work. Thinking of Sophia’s naked body in my bed gave me all sorts of feelings that rushed much of my blood supply to my lap.

Once I pulled into my spot at work, I put on my game face. Maddox’s Maserati was parked next to me, and I was happy he was here to meet me like I asked him to. He was rarely late, but he also tended to arrive just before the rest of the employees. I wanted to have a private conversation with him before alerting anyone that I had arrived back into town.

Heading up the elevator, the sound of the elevator music made me tap my toe in time with the beat. No matter how hard I tried to appear completely professional and like the workaholic that everyone at the company knew, Sophia had changed me. For the better, I thought. As happy as I was, I couldn’t help but wonder what our future held. We were walking a tightrope together, and I needed her to firmly grip my hands or risk losing her and our relationship.

I thought back to the first time I met her when she barged into my office for an unwanted interview. Back then, I had no idea we would end up in this situation together. I wouldn’t trade it for the world.

Getting out of the elevator on my floor, I headed in the direction of Maddox’s office. Outside, the sun hadn’t risen yet, so the lights in the hallways seemed bright against the darkened rooms I passed on the way to my best friend’s secluded corner of the building.

My stomach growled as I rounded the corner into Maddox’s office. I’d forgotten to eat that morning, and two cups of coffee sat on Maddox’s desk next to a large bag filled with delicious smelling pastries.

Maddox was fit and rarely indulged in junk food, but when he did, it was over the top for anyone, never mind someone as in shape as he was.



I leaned against the door frame and attempted to stifle a smile. Maddox sat in his chair with his head leaned as far back as comfortably possible. His eyes were closed, and his mouth was slightly open.

I rapped a hand on the door, and Maddox jolted in his chair. He blinked a pair of blurry eyes at me. “Morning, mate.”

“Out late last night?” I asked, stepping into his office. The food beckoned to me.

He grabbed one of the cups, and I took the other. “Not really. You got me up so bloody early that I didn’t do my workout. That usually wakes me up.”

“You might be missing a lot more workouts,” I muttered to myself as I took a swig of the coffee.

“What’s going on with your dad?” Maddox asked, not hearing my remark.

I opened the bag and grabbed a chocolate croissant. The very mention of my father made me lose my appetite, but if I was going to function at all, I needed fuel. “It’s not great.”

“Fuck. Sorry, mate.”

I nodded at him and forced myself to eat. The normally sweet chocolate tasted chalky in my mouth as I chewed. I had to take a swig of the coffee to force it down my throat.

“Are you headed back there soon?” Maddox asked after grabbing a flaky pastry. As he bit into it, the flakes scattered all over his desk. He didn’t seem to notice as all his attention was on me.

“Looking to go back this weekend,” I said.

“With Sophia?” he asked, wagging his eyebrows.

I narrowed my eyes. “How did you know?”

He smirked. “She was asking for you.”

“And you assumed she’s here?”

“I assumed she flew to Qatar to be with you,” he said. “But now she’s here? Interesting.”

Since when was he so observant? Although when it came to my love life, he had pushed me for years to meet someone. He was probably more aware of my relationship than I had been.

“She is.”

He clapped his hands together. “I knew it, mate. She’s got it bad for you.”

I sat down in the chair across from his desk. I knew what I was here to do, but talking about Sophia was a welcome distraction. “I’d say it’s mutual.”

“What happened?” he asked, grabbing another pastry.

I told him how Sophia had arrived at the palace gates and how she barged her way through there and into my heart. “Father likes her.”

“What about your mum?” he asked.

I shrugged. “We’re working on her.”

“That’s great to hear,” he said. “Not the situation with your mum, but overall. Glad to see that someone has cracked through your icy exterior.”

“I’m not icy,” I said.

“Not anymore.”

After polishing off three pastries, Maddox guzzled down the rest of his coffee. His eyes were much more alert from the sugar and caffeine rush.

“What do you need me to do?” Maddox asked. “I’m here for you and your family. If you need anything, I’m your guy.”

“I know,” I said. “I appreciate that. Right now, let’s keep Father’s illness between us. You’re the only one that knows other than Sophia.”

“My lips are sealed.”

“Since I’ll be flying back this weekend, I’ll need you to take over operations again.”

“Got it,” he said, checking his phone after it pinged several times. He put down his cup and typed a reply into the phone.

I wasn't sure why I was hesitating to ask him. He was my sole confidant in England. Why was it so hard to give him the best opportunity that his career might ever offer?

Part of it was my hesitation to let go of the life I'd been living for years. Unfortunately, I had responsibilities. It wasn't like I was handing over the company that day; I wanted him to put it in the back of his mind so when the time came, I could count on him. Maddox was the perfect employee. He was intelligent and a swift businessman. I was the lucky one to have him by my side.

“How would you feel about taking over the company?” I blurted out.

Maddox's finger stopped moving across his phone screen. He looked up at me. “You serious, mate?”

“Hypothetically,” I said, backpedaling. “I don't know what the future is going to hold for me. I need to know you have my back.”

“I'll always have your back, but if you want me to take over the company, does that mean you're going to stay in Qatar? Long term? Possibly with a crown on your head?”

I glanced behind me and then walked over to the door and closed it. I didn't want anyone to catch wind of our conversation before I made my decision. “I haven't decided yet, but I would like you to be ready if the time comes.”

Maddox dragged a hand over his face. “I don't know what to say.”

“You don't need to make a decision right away,” I said. “Think about it. You'd make a great CEO, and I feel comfortable leaving my family's business in your hands.”

He nodded. “So you really haven't decided?”

I knew what he meant, even though he didn't say the words out loud. “I haven't.”

I left his office, needing to escape that space. I'd done it, but I still didn't feel right. I didn't think I would until I made a choice and stuck with it.

Pulling my phone from my pocket, Sophia had sent me a text. I hadn't realized my phone was on silent still. There were several texts from her. She sent pictures of herself in her pajamas, sipping coffee, and wandering around my house.

The sight of her calmed me.

Entering my office, I flipped on the light and closed my door. It was the universal sign for "don't bother me." I had a lot of work to do and zero motivation to do it. All I wanted to do was get into my car and drive back to Sophia.

I had to force myself to get my ass into the chair and get to work. The faster I got my responsibilities dealt with, the quicker I would be able to see her again. And that was more than enough motivation for me.

# CHAPTER 39



## SOPHIA

After Luke left his place, I fell back asleep for a little while longer. There was no rush for me to get out of bed when he was going to be at work for most of the day. I was no closer to writing a story about his family, especially when I was thousands of miles away from them. My initial research involved finding every article written about his family and him. I hadn't left a stone unturned. Other than exposing this difficult time in Luke's life with Erol's illness, I had nothing that hadn't already been reported on a hundred times.

While that should have bothered me, the silk sheets and comfortable mattress aided in me falling back asleep and forgetting all my worries.

When I woke again, it was an hour later. My stomach ached with hunger, and I reluctantly shoved the covers away and got out of bed. Wandering across the room to Luke's walk-in closet, I stepped through the doorway, and the lights came on right away. Rows of suits hung on either side of me, along with a small collection of shiny leather shoes and several drawers of underwear and socks, neatly folded as if they were on display in a store.

While I didn't care much for men's clothing, in the back of my mind, I was searching for a woman's touch. Our relationship had moved so quickly that neither of us had gotten into the nitty gritty of past relationships. I wasn't blind to that fact that he must have had a girlfriend—or girlfriends—in his past.

After a thorough look, I didn't see any hanging lingerie or perfume left from a previous relationship.

That made me perk up a bit.

I headed out into the central area of his place. The guest bedrooms—I counted three—were located down a small hallway off the open floorplan. Those were all boring and had no touch of Luke in them. They looked more like hotel rooms, with immaculately made beds and not a thing out of place. I wouldn't have been surprised to see mints on the pillows.

It made me feel a little better to know that Luke didn't have guests often, especially of the female variety.

I snapped a few selfies and sent them to Luke. I couldn't help smiling at them as if I were looking at him and not a reflection of myself in the camera. Even in the short amount of time we were apart, I missed him terribly, but I wasn't about to make him feel bad for leaving.

If it were up to him, he would have remained in Qatar with Erol. We were on borrowed time, and Luke didn't need me to make him feel guilty.

Walking through the living room, I peered out at the spectacular view of the bridge in the distance. The unobstructed view of the city was breathtaking, and I wouldn't mind waking up to it every morning.

Heading into the kitchen, tricked out with all the most expensive appliances, I made myself some coffee. Luke had different kinds on hand, enough for a post-coffee apocalypse. I picked the only one I recognized and set a filter into the machine before pouring the grounds. The act was so normal, but at the same time, so different. I was in a billionaire's home, doing something as ordinary as making coffee.

Although to Luke, all of this was ordinary. I was getting a glimpse into how the "one percent" lived, and it wasn't so different, other than having infinite money at your disposal.

After pouring a piping hot mug of coffee, I took it back to the living room and sat on one of the couches. While it looked pretty, it was quite stiff. I wasn't sure if it was the style or if it

went unused most of the time. I wondered if I could change that.

An erotic image of Luke and I making love on the couch with the view of the city behind us made my toes curl. I doubted he would have a problem with it if I suggested it.

I shivered and pushed the image out of my head. If I was going to experience it, I wanted Luke underneath me while I rode him to his climax.

Glancing at the mantle above the fireplace, Luke had stuffed it with shiny, expensive frames filled with photos of his family. I smiled. Even though he wanted to be as far away from them as he could, he brought them into his safe space and put them on display. He really cared about them.

My phone rang from the kitchen where it was charging, and I jumped up, nearly spilling my coffee on Luke's expensive area rug.

I knew who was calling before I got to the phone. Matt had a specific ringtone. I had barely spoken to him through all of this, and I wanted to tell my best friend about my crazy adventures with my prince.

"Hey," I said, picking up just before it went to voicemail.

"It's nice to hear from you," he said. "I was starting to get worried."

"Sorry," I said a little breathlessly. I had sprinted to get to the phone, and it was too much movement before finishing my coffee.

"Where are you now?" he asked. "I can't keep track of you now that you're a world traveler."

"Be careful, or you might sound jealous."

"Oh, I am," Matt said, and I heard the smile in his voice.

"I'm in England," I said. "At Luke's place."

"At Luke's place," he repeated. "How interesting."

"Stop it," I said, giggling. "You sound like a terrible reporter."



“You would know,” he said.

“Ouch.”

He snorted and then burst out laughing. “Sophia, you know there’s this wonderful thing called the internet. You could have emailed me to tell me you were on a jaunt across the world again.”

“I know,” I said. I had only given Matt a few details when I left Dallas. I hadn’t been sure what to expect, so I didn’t want to get either of our hopes up. Then, once I saw Luke, thoughts of everyone else in my life disappeared. “I’m a terrible friend.”

“You can make up for it by telling me what the hell you’ve been up to,” he said.

Starting from the conversation with Mr. Fraser about me going to England, I told Matt everything. Well, not everything. I kept the erotic details out of the conversation. While Matt and I were close, he didn’t need to hear about my sexual encounters. Those were private between Luke and me.

“You’ve been on quite the adventure,” Matt said when I finished.

I glanced at my surroundings. “Yes, I have. Do you think I’m nuts for doing this? I like him.” I wasn’t about to say “love.” Matt would never let me hear the end of it. Besides, I wanted Luke to know before anyone else.

“You went there to do a story,” he said. “But it looks like you’ve already written it.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You went to the UK and Qatar with a handsome prince who appears to be smitten with you,” he said. “Your personal love story is unfolding right in front of you. How can you not see it?”

“But I didn’t come here for that,” I said. “As much as I want to be with Luke, how can I keep my job at the Post too? I’m not the kind of girl who falls for her subject and then loses

her job and my whole identity over a guy. What if it doesn't work out? What will I have then?"

I hated to think like that, but Luke and my relationship was different from what I wanted for myself. As much as he didn't want to admit it, he was going to become king, and where would that leave me? I couldn't watch him marry someone else, someone who wanted to be queen and live for her people. Would I sit on the sidelines and watch the only man I ever truly loved be with someone else? I had no idea about being a queen, and it wasn't fair for Luke to be with someone who wasn't sure if she wanted the position to begin with.

"You can get a job anywhere," Matt said. "Why do you want to jeopardize your happiness?"

"If I lose the job at the Post over this, I doubt I'll be able to get a reporting job anywhere else."

"Don't be so hard on yourself. You're talented. Any outlet would be happy to have you."

"I'd never get a recommendation," I said. With Mr. Fraser's clout in the business, I wouldn't be able to get a mailroom job without his approval.

"That's crap," Matt said. "Any outlet would love to get the inside scoop on a competitor. Don't let your boss bully you."

"I suppose."

"You suppose right."

"What should I do about it now?" I asked, not wanting to entertain the idea of getting fired.

"Enjoy yourself," Matt said.

I rolled my eyes. "That's helpful."

"When have you ever enjoyed yourself? You've worked like a dog for years, and you're still not where you want to be. Then a *prince* comes along and sweeps you off your feet, and you're debating the alternative? I thought you were a good reporter. It seems like you're missing an opportunity for a good story."

“What story? I can’t expose Luke to the media. He’ll never forgive me.”

“You’re story, dummy,” Matt teased. “Your life story. Here it is in a handsome package, with money and status to boot, and you’re about to throw it away for some job.”

“It’s not just a job; it’s my life.”

“And here is another part of your life, ready and waiting for you to accept it. True love is hard to find.”

“I never said I was in love,” I muttered.

“You didn’t have to, sweetie. I can hear it from thousands of miles away. Don’t be afraid of it. You’ll regret it later.”

I knew what regret felt like. I experienced it the first time I left England and Luke behind.

“I know it’s hard,” Matt said. “But looking at it from an outsider’s perspective, you’ve hit the lottery. Anyone would step into your shoes in a minute. Life’s too short to worry about the little things.”

I chewed on my lip. “But would I be giving up my dream just for a guy?” I was never *that* girl, but Luke made it easy to become her. I wasn’t materialistic or anything, but it was nice to rely on someone else for a change. The thought made my stomach churn, and it wasn’t just hunger.

“From the way you’ve described him, I think he likes that independent side of you. I’m sure he’d support you in whatever you wanted to do. Whether that was to become a queen or a superstar reporter.”

“I never said anything about being a queen.”

“I’m not an idiot, and neither are you. What if this goes further? His father can’t live forever.”

Little did Matt know that Luke’s father wasn’t going to live much longer. The decision was much closer than he realized. If Erol were healthy, Luke and I could see how our relationship developed without the pressure of him taking the throne. But we no longer had that luxury.

“Anyway,” he said. “It’s something to think about. You’re there, so take advantage. See where this takes you. And at the very least, if you do marry the guy, I’m sure Mr. Fraser’s threats won’t hold up against Luke’s connections. If there were any bad feelings, they would be buried under piles of money.”

“You seem to have this all figured out,” I said.

“I want to see you happy,” he said.

“Thanks.”

“Well, I’m off. I don’t want to take any more time away from your prince.”

We said our goodbyes and hung up. Matt left me with a lot to think about, though.

My phone rang again, but this time, there weren’t happy feelings attached to the particular ringtone. Mr. Fraser’s name came up on the screen. My finger hovered over the ANSWER button, but I couldn’t force myself to take the next step. Instead, I allowed it to ring until my voicemail answered for me.

# CHAPTER 40



## LUKE

Regrettably, I couldn't join Sophia for lunch again on Wednesday. After being away from the office so much recently, things had been piling up that needed my attention. And since I was going back to the palace at the end of the week, I wanted to square everything away for Maddox so he wouldn't get overwhelmed. I had full confidence in him, but I also wasn't going to leave him with work that I could do myself.

Apologizing to Sophia over text, she said it was no problem. She wanted to go sightseeing today, and I informed her of my stash of cash in my home office. She refused to take it without repaying me, and I agreed, not wanting to get into that unnecessary argument. She could think she was going to repay me, but I would make it known that her presence was payment enough.

While it didn't please me to have her traipsing around the city by herself, I felt better that she had enough money for cabs or anything else she might need. She refused to allow me to call the car service, but it was freezing out. I hoped she would put her pride aside and take a car when she needed to.

Worrying about her wouldn't get my work finished for me, so I tried to push her out of my mind while I focused.

Over the last two days, I asked Justine to send all of my calls to Maddox so he could start taking over my responsibilities while I was in the office. If he had any questions, I told him to come to me right away, but I wanted

our clients and other partners to start to trust him in the event that I didn't come back from Qatar for some time.

I had nothing scheduled for lunch that day because I planned on working through it, but when my office door opened around noon, I looked up to see Maddox carrying a cardboard box filled with food.

The scent of grease made my stomach growl.

"I wanted to talk with you," he said. "Lunch, okay?"

I hoped he wasn't about to quit after a short time as the big boss, but I had more faith in him than that. He was an honest man, and if he couldn't do the job, he would let me know.

He didn't tell me right away what he wanted to talk about, though, which kept me on the edge of my seat.

Maddox spread the fish and chips meal on the table closer to the windows, which was usually reserved for meetings with clients. They always appreciated the view of the city, which tended to distract them enough for me to persuade them to think in my favor when it came to business.

We ate for a few minutes in silence. I wasn't going to pressure him into telling me what was on his mind.

Just as I crumbled up the crumb-filled oil-stained paper, he got to the point.

"I've considered your proposal," he said.

"And?" I said, leaning back in the chair.

Maddox wiped his mouth with a napkin and then rolled the paper around between his hands. "When the time comes, I would like to be your top man for the job."

"That's great to hear," I said. "I wouldn't want it to be anyone else."

He sniffed and leaned back in his chair. "I do have one condition."

I would give Maddox anything to keep the company in my best friend's hands. "What's that?"

“At least for a little while, until I get my bearings, can you make yourself accessible to me? In case I have any questions, I don’t want to look like an ass in front of our clients.”

“That’s all?” I asked.

Maddox narrowed his eyes. “Yes, why?”

I chuckled and stood up, bringing my trash over to the garbage can. “I thought you were going to ask for more money or a car or something.”

“I just assumed I was getting more money,” Maddox said, raising his eyebrows. “I am, right?”

I laughed. “Of course.”

“Then I can buy a new car on my own,” he said, linking his fingers together behind his head. He put his feet up on one of the other chairs and leaned back. “How do people eat this much on a regular basis? I’m exhausted.”



It was nearly five by the time I felt comfortable enough to leave the office. I sent a text to Sophia, apologizing profusely. Apparently, she was still in the city. Checking the darkening sky outside, I asked for her to make her way home sooner rather than later.

“I’m picking up dinner,” I texted her. “We can stay in tonight.”

“I feel like my legs are going to fall off,” she responded.

“I’ll start a fire too,” I texted, imagining Sophia curled up next to me while we sat on the couch. I wondered how long I could keep up with these normal activities. I never once saw my parents snuggled on a sofa.

“Want me to do it?” she texted.

“No,” I replied before getting into my car.

My phone went off seconds later. “Afraid I might burn down your place?”



“You said it, not me,” I wrote back. Hooking up my phone to my car, I texted her the rest of the ride to the takeout place. Getting out of the car, I noticed a flower shop next door. Since we had done things backward, I never had a chance to get her the typical flowers and chocolates that other couples did for each other.

I picked up the biggest and most expensive arrangement and tucked it between the front and back seats of my car so it wouldn't fall over while driving.

I drove home quicker than I normally would. I usually didn't have anyone waiting for me. But it wasn't just that; I wanted to see Sophia much more than I'd ever wanted to see anyone before.

I started to understand those employees who checked their watches during our later meetings. Was this the feeling they had when they wanted to rush home to their families?

That was never the case with me since I lived so far away from mine. But now that I understood, I would make sure Maddox didn't schedule as many late meetings as we did in the past. Between the both of us, we didn't care, but I could make Maddox the “nice boss” to start him off on the right foot.



Arriving at my flat, I saw that the lights were on inside. A small thrill moved through me at the prospect of seeing Sophia again. I hoped she enjoyed the food from one of my favorite takeout places. I wanted to relax with her tonight, and I couldn't think of a more relaxing stay-at-home date than takeout and a movie.

When was the last time I saw a movie? Probably not for years. I hoped Sophia liked movies. I was up for watching anything as long as she was sitting right next to me.

Once I got inside, I didn't see or hear Sophia anywhere.

I wanted to call out to her, but I also wanted to surprise her.

Walking down the short hallway toward the middle of my home, I was about to say something when I saw movement from the kitchen.

Sophia wore a pair of tight jeans and one of the cashmere sweaters I'd bought her. She held a bottle of wine in one hand and two glasses in the other. I wasn't opposed to drinking at home, but I didn't recall the last time I bought alcohol for myself outside of a restaurant or pub.

"I hope it's good," Sophia said, holding up the wine. "The cashier said it was good. I bought a few different ones if it's not."

Her nervousness made me smile. "I'm sure it's fine."

I kissed her thoroughly on the lips and lingered there for a moment before she pulled away.

She swatted at the flowers that nearly took over her face.

I laughed. "Sorry, these are for you."

"Thank you," she said, burying her nose in the petals and inhaling. "They're beautiful."

She poured two rather heavy glasses of wine, but I didn't complain. We both took sips, and Sophia regarded her glass.

"Not bad," she said.

"No," I said, checking the label of the wine. I'd never had it before, but if it had been bought in a store, then I doubted I would have. I preferred top shelf liquor which was usually only found in restaurants. I took another sip.

"How was your day, honey?" she asked with a smirk.

I kissed that smirk. "Tiring. I'm looking forward to loosening my tie tonight."

She placed her glass down on the countertop and reached for my tie. Smoothing her hands over the fabric, she untied it and pulled it out from around my neck. "Better?"

"Much," I said.

“Did you speak with Maddox?” she asked, getting down to business. I supposed it was something that couples discussed at the end of the workday. Admittedly, I wanted to tell someone about Maddox agreeing to accept my job.

“I did,” I said, grabbing another sip of wine. It was good. “He’s ready and willing when the time comes.”

“And you’re happy with that?” she asked.

“As happy as I can be with getting forced to take the throne.”

“No one is forcing you,” she said.

I wished she were right, but I wasn’t about to spoil our evening together with arguing about my lack of choice surrounding the situation.

“You’d make a great king,” she added as if she sensed the tension in the air.

I did not doubt that. “How would *you* feel if I became king, though?”

She shrugged. “As long as you were happy, I would feel fine about it.”

I wanted to have a broader discussion about the expectations that came with the throne, for myself and for her, but I couldn’t force the words out of me. I hated being so torn between being honest with her and keeping our relationship as normal as possible. It all happened so quickly. If I were to discuss the nature of our relationship going forward, would she run? Was I selfish for keeping her in my grips this long when she might not want anything to do with the throne?

“It’s a big responsibility,” I said, focusing on me for a minute. Maybe I could work out her feelings about being my queen a different way.

“You run a billion-dollar company,” she said. “I think you can handle a kingdom.”

“It’s not the same.”

“I’m sure it isn’t, but you’re naturally great at everything. You’re strong yet gentle enough to be the king. I’ve seen the changes in you since I arrived. Whether you want to admit it or not, you’re ready.”

“The problem is, I don’t feel ready. When it comes to working at the company, I can separate my professional and personal life. Being the king, both of those things collide. What I say directly affects my work and my family.”

“Can you find a way to separate them? If that’s what will make it easier for you?”

“I don’t know,” I said, finishing my glass. I placed it on the counter and took a step closer to Sophia. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore. I’ve missed you.”

She snaked her arms around my shoulders and brought her lips to mine. She tasted sweet like the wine, and I indulged for a moment. All of my worries disappeared while I kissed Sophia. Her lithe body was perfectly shaped to mine. I grabbed her waist and lifted her onto the counter. Her legs pulled me closer to her and squeezed around my waist.

My erection pressed into her, and just as I was about to lift her off the counter and bring her to my bedroom, my phone rang.

Pulling away from her with a groan, I reached for my phone to turn it off. Nothing was going to stop me from fucking Sophia right now.

I glanced at the screen, and my heart stopped.

“What is it?” Sophia asked.

“It’s my mother,” I said, mentally calculating the time difference between London and Qatar. It wasn’t a regular time for her to call, even if she was trying to interrupt something between Sophia and me.

“This can’t be good,” I said, picking up the phone.

# CHAPTER 41



## SOPHIA

My lips were swollen and hot from Luke kissing me. I wanted him to bring me over to the couch to make love to me, but with his mother's phone call, I knew those plans were gone for good.

My chest tightened as Luke picked up the phone and put his mother on speaker. That little gesture meant a lot to me. He trusted me with personal family business, and I could have kissed him for it if it were an appropriate time.

"Hello, Mother?" Luke said into the phone.

There was a long pause, and then a sharp inhale mixed with what sounded like a sob.

My hand clamped over my mouth and tears welled in my eyes. Luke's eyes didn't move from the phone as his mother spoke.

"Luke," she said. "Your father passed away a few minutes ago."

Luke's chest heaved with the effort of breathing. It was a good thing that my legs were still around him. If he passed out or something, then I could at least try to prevent him from smacking his head on the marble tile.

"What happened?" he asked.

"It was peaceful," she said. "He was asleep when it happened. His body gave up. I need you to—"

"I'll be on the first flight out," Luke interrupted.

“Thank you,” she said.

Luke was as still as a statue, and my stomach felt as if I had swallowed a boulder. I wasn't sure what to say. Gia didn't know I was in on the conversation with them, and I didn't want to piss her off after she'd just lost her husband.

“I'll see you soon,” he said and then hung up the phone.

He placed the phone on the counter next to me and then touched my legs, gently removing them from around his waist. His chin brushed close to his chest as he walked through the living room and stopped by the windows.

I slid off the counter and stood there for a moment. Wiping the tears from my cheeks, I took a breath and went to Luke. He needed my support, not my sadness. I barely knew his father, and Luke had a lifetime of memories with the man.

Luke didn't move as I approached him. I wasn't sure if he wanted me to touch him, but to me, it was the right thing to do. I gently touched the top of his arm.

He turned to me as if he'd forgotten I was in the room at all. His eyes filled with tears, but none were shed. “Sorry.”

“Don't be sorry,” I said. “Be whatever you need to right now. I'm here for you.”

“You are?” he asked.

At that moment, I got a glimpse of a younger Luke, the one that had been abandoned in an orphanage. “Of course.”

He sniffed and grabbed a tissue from the coffee table to wipe his nose. “I knew it was coming, obviously, but it's still tough.”

“I know.”

“I should have stayed,” he said in a voice just above a whisper.

“He asked you to come here to get things in order,” I said. “You can't blame yourself.”

“I suppose not,” he said. “There's not much to do about it now, huh?”

I shook my head. “What do you need from me?”

He raked a hand through his hair and then unbuttoned the top two buttons of his shirt. “Is it hot in here?”

“Let’s sit,” I said, bringing him over to the couch.

He sat and kicked his shoes off his feet. “I feel dizzy.”

“You did drink a glass of wine in, like, two minutes,” I said. “Let me get you some water.”

“No,” he said, grabbing my arm. He brought me down to the couch and then laid down, resting his head in my lap. “I want you here.”

“Okay,” I said, pushing my fingers through his hair.

His eyes fluttered closed, so I kept going. A tear slipped out from his eye, but neither of us brushed it away. My heart broke for him.

We sat there for some time in silence. Luke’s head appeared to get heavier in my lap, and I thought he had fallen asleep. When I leaned over to check on him, he spoke.

“He was a good man,” Luke said.

“He was,” I said.

A smile touched his lips as his eyes fluttered open. “When I first moved to the palace, I was so scared. At the orphanage, we were crammed into small rooms. All of us were on top of each other all the time. Father gave me a room big enough to fit more than half of the orphanage building inside. It was too much for me, so Father would allow me to sleep in his room.”

“That’s nice.”

He chuckled. “Mother didn’t appreciate it because, apparently, I was quite the restless sleeper. But sleeping in their room helped. Eventually, I felt bad for taking up their days and nights and made my way back to my room. But Father always gave me the time and space that I needed, even when I didn’t know I needed it.”

“Sounds like he cared for you a great deal,” I said.



“He did,” Luke said. “Now that I’m thinking about it, he did a lot more for me than I ever realized.”

“Like what?” I asked, keeping him talking. His voice was stronger, and his eyes were clearer. I would let him rest on me for as long as he needed to work through his emotions. It wasn’t going to get easier, especially when he returned to Qatar, but I would do whatever it took to help him get over this hump.

Luke regaled me with loads of stories about Erol when Luke was younger. To me, it didn’t seem as if Erol had been grooming Luke for the throne. He had taken in a child and had given as much of his time to creating a safe environment for him.

I was sure Luke wasn’t making up the fact that Erol wanted him to become king, but I wondered if it was coming out of a place of love rather than selfishness.

Luke continued to talk about his father well into the night. While I knew he wanted to get on a plane right away, sifting through his emotions was even more important. It amazed me that he calmed down as much as he did. Selfishly, I wondered if I had anything to do with that, but it was his personality. He was intelligent and probably knew that making rash decisions wasn’t the best thing for the situation. Working through all of the feelings in his mind was the most rational first step for him.

When he finally sat up, I took his hand. His hair was mussed from me working out all the gel from the strands, making him appear younger and if possible, more handsome.

He dabbed at his eyes with a tissue. “I suppose Father has always been seen as the King of Qatar, but he’s also been the father that took a scraggly kid into his life as his own son.”

“What do you want to do?” I asked.

“I need to get back there,” he said, standing up. “I’ll call the pilot to prepare the jet and then get Maddox on board with everything.”

While Luke handled his business with the pilot and Maddox, I went into the bedroom and started to pack my things. I only picked out the appropriate clothes since I only had a carry-on suitcase. I didn't doubt that Luke would let me borrow a bigger one, but he had a lot on his plate.

When he walked into the room sometime later, he glanced at my suitcase and then at me standing next to it.

"You're coming?" he asked.

"Do you want me to come?" He had never refused me before. In fact, he tended to push me to be by his side in every situation since I returned to Qatar. Had I misread the signs? Did he want to deal with this on his own?

"Y-yes," he stammered. "Of course. But only if you want to."

I went over to him and kissed him. "I want to. Is this going to piss off your mother? I don't want to cause problems."

"She's going to have to get over it," he said, taking my hand in his. He squeezed it. "I want you by my side for all the big moments. Even the bad ones."

He pulled me close to him in a tight embrace. "Thank you."

For once, there was no hesitation in my decision. I was going with Luke, and I would be there until he no longer needed me.

# CHAPTER 42



## LUKE

With each trip back home, a myriad of emotions tended to flow through me. When I traveled back the first time with Sophia, I was anxious to introduce her to my family and get my mother off my back about hooking me up with whatever woman she had chosen. On the previous trip back, I felt dread for Father's illness.

As I held Sophia's hand during takeoff for another trip to Qatar, I wasn't sure what to feel. I had unloaded all my feelings for Father after hearing the news from Mother. They had been locked away for years in the back of my mind, especially when Father started pushing me to replace him as king. In my annoyance, I'd forgotten everything that Father had done for me over the years.

Under his rough exterior, he'd always been the one that I could count on during my many tough transitions in life.

Remembering our last conversation, I wished I could have said more. His words held much more weight to them than I had initially thought. Did he know he wouldn't make it past the week?

I couldn't help but think he'd sent me away to take care of the business knowing that he would never see me again. Was he that proud that he didn't want to die in front of me? Or was it poor timing? All of this was poor timing.

I glanced at Sophia. I met her at the worst time, too. I was about to replace my dead father as king and risk the possibility of ruining any chance for us to be together.

What the hell was I going to do?



Once we arrived in Qatar, the ride to the palace went by quickly enough that I barely had time to think about what I would say to my family. We went into this situation knowing that Father didn't have much time left, but every second he was alive, I'd held onto the hope that there would be more seconds after that.

I hoped that Mother or Abir had been with him when he passed. Even though he was asleep when it happened, it made me feel better that I hadn't completely abandoned him. There was no point in regret since I couldn't bring Father back, but a shred of it niggled at the back of my mind. It was the same feeling that I got when Father initially suggested me going back to the UK. I didn't want to, but per usual, he pushed me into doing his bidding.

When we pulled up to the palace, Sophia sighed, then looked at me. We'd been mostly quiet for the flight and the car ride. I knew she was allowing me to reflect on everything, but a part of me thought that she had a lot on her mind too. Did she know that I was going to take the throne? Did she wonder—as I did—what our future would hold?

We got out of the car, and before I could make it to the front steps, Abir appeared at the top of them.

My kid brother rushed down the steps and slammed into me. I wrapped my arms around him as he sobbed into my shirt.

I patted his back. "Let's go inside." Glancing around, there was an influx of guards present. No doubt, the news of Father's passing had reached halfway across the country by now. Through the funeral and until the new king was appointed, the country would remain in unrest and anticipation of the new ruler.

I kept Abir next to me while he tried to keep his tears at bay. I distracted him by asking how it happened.

“Mother woke to tell me that he passed,” Abir explained. “I’d said goodnight to him just hours before, and then he was gone.”

“It’s better this way,” I said.

Sophia took Abir’s hand, and he held on tight to her. She was a source of comfort to both men in our family. I hoped she would continue to do so since I was about to deal with a lot at once, and most of my duties wouldn’t involve her.

“Where is Mother?” I asked him. I fully expected her to be awaiting our arrival, disapproving frown and all. Maybe she was playing nice with Sophia for once. If she was going to, this was the time.

“She’s in her bedroom,” Abir said. “She hasn’t moved much since it happened.”

That sounded familiar, but Mother never sulked like Abir. She was hurting and needed someone to comfort her this time.

“Abir,” I said. “Help Sophia get settled in my chambers. I’m going to see Mother.”

“Let’s go,” Sophia said, smiling at Abir. “We can take the long way if you want?”

Abir nodded and sniffed, still holding onto Sophia.

As they walked, Sophia glanced over her shoulder and winked at me. She had this handled. Now I had to step up and handle my Mother and possibly the kingdom.



For the interim, the council would keep the country and the people in line until a new ruler was chosen. I had a few days at the most to make my decision, but it wasn’t happening today. Today I was going to be a part of my family and mourn the loss of the greatest man I’d ever known.

Arriving at Mother’s bedroom door, I knocked and stepped through, not waiting for her to answer. I imagined that she would refuse anyone entry, but I wasn’t about to be deterred.

While my parents tended to sleep in Father's chambers, Mother did have her own room off the bathroom. I had only seen her in there if either of them were sick, but I knew that today she would be in there instead of the bed that Father died in.

She was sitting up with the quilts across her lap. She glanced at me when I came in but said nothing.

I sat on the bed next to her and placed my hand on hers. If she didn't want to talk then, that was okay, but I wanted to show my support.

Mother sighed heavily and leaned against her pillows. She stared at the ceiling.

The conversation between Father and me reminded me of the next conversation I had with Mother. If she had been the one who died, I would have felt terrible about the things I'd said to her. Watching Father pass so quickly, I realized how short life was.

"I'm sorry for what I said to you the last time I was here," I said.

She waved a dismissive hand. "I don't want to talk about her."

I gritted my teeth. Even in the face of losing her husband, she still held onto her hatred for Sophia. Or maybe she had given up. Either way, this was no time to argue. We had work to do, and neither Mother nor Abir seemed to be willing to put in that work.

"I know you're in mourning," I said. The customs of our country gave widows much time to mourn the loss of their husbands. But Mother was also a queen and not one to sit down and let life take over when there was work to be done. "We have much to do to prepare for the funeral. And Abir is beside himself with grief. We all need to step up and do our part."

Mother turned her head slowly and stared at me. I leaned away from her, fearing that she was about to either scream in my face or smack me.

Instead, she said, “You’re right.”

She sat up straighter and pushed the quilts off her body. She stood up from the bed and shook her black skirt out, allowing the fabric to fall around her legs and feet. She walked across the room and grabbed a black headscarf, wrapping it around her head.

She linked her arm with mine and looked up at me. I had never seen her look so tired in her life. It was as if she hadn’t slept the entire week that Father was dying. Maybe she hadn’t.

“Let’s go to Abir,” she said. “Then I will deal with the arrangements.”

“I can help,” I said.

“Very well,” she said, and we were off.



I wasn’t sure how Mother was going to react when she saw Sophia. There were so many different scenarios playing out in my mind as we made our way to Abir’s room.

I knocked on the door, and Sophia answered, beckoning us inside.

Mother stiffened as I opened the door.

Sophia was in the chair next to Abir’s bed. Abir sat on his bed, facing her. When we entered, he turned, and his eyes widened when he saw Mother.

He bounced off the bed and rushed over to us. “Mother,” he said before falling into her arms. He was more than a foot taller than her, but he leaned over and allowed her to take him into her arms as he did when he was a toddler.

Sophia came over and took my hand. “I’m so sorry for your loss,” she said to Mother.

Mother cut a look at Sophia but said nothing. Her expression gave the impression that Sophia had been the one to cause all of this.



Mother rubbed circles on Abir's back, hushing him as she used to when he was a child.

Sophia squeezed my hand and then wordlessly left the room.

I wanted to scold Mother for her actions toward Sophia, but this wasn't the time or the place. Once we got Abir on track and the funeral over with, there would be a serious discussion. Her behavior was going to change.



Sophia and I took Abir into the dining room to have lunch while Mother went off to plan Father's funeral. I told her I would help, but she wanted me to keep Abir out of his room and from sulking all day. Since Sophia wasn't going anywhere and Mother wanted nothing to do with her, it made sense that the three of us went off on our own. Mother would have no trouble telling the staff and the council members what to do about Father's body and how the funeral would proceed, and it might keep her from sulking herself.

After lunch, we walked the palace grounds, telling Sophia about memories of Father. Abir did most of the talking because he was the one that needed to and I had already given Sophia a good glimpse into my past at my flat.

Sophia was the same compassionate person to Abir as she had been to me in my time of need. She listened and reacted to his stories, even the few times he was too choked up to speak.

Abir left Sophia and me at some point, wanting to check on Mother. In the time since his birth, Abir had always been a momma's boy. They loved each other fiercely, and neither wanted to see the other in a bad mood about anything. In a way, it reminded me of how Father and I were before my late teenage years when I wanted nothing to do with becoming king.

Him checking in with her meant that he was ready to step up, even if it was just to protect our mother.

It was a step closer to him becoming a man, but not the man that was to be our next king.

Sophia and I stayed away from Mother as long as we could. But when dinner came around, we knew we had to come out of hiding.

We went down to the dining room, holding hands and showing a united front to Mother in case she decided to step out of line again.

Surprisingly, Mother didn't say much over dinner. None of us did. The weight of Father's death pressed heavily on each of us, and it was easier to deal with it internally than with each other.

The only words uttered from her lips were when we all finished. "The funeral will be tomorrow evening." She made a point to look at Abir and me only.

"Would you like any assistance?" I asked.

She shook her head once. "That won't be necessary. I trust that everyone will have appropriate attire?"

The question wasn't for Abir and me, but for Sophia. It was her way of digging at Sophia without directly doing it. I knew there were more than enough outfits in the palace that would be appropriate for her.

"Yes, Mother," was all I said before she retired for the night.

Sophia, Abir, and I followed shortly after. Tomorrow was going to be the worst day of my life, and I needed to prepare.

# CHAPTER 43



## SOPHIA

The next morning, there was more movement in the palace than I'd ever seen before. Servants rushed around, completing their tasks, while I was utterly lost and I had no idea what to do with my hands, never mind my body.

Luke explained that everything was taken care of, but I still felt as if I should be doing something.

Early that morning, two servants came into the room carrying several different options for the funeral. They all looked the same to me as they were black and heavy on the fabric. I chose the lightest one that covered every inch of me, other than my hands and the neck up. It came with an accompanying headscarf. I didn't try that on, not wanting to embarrass myself if I arranged it incorrectly. Luke would help me later on if necessary.

Luke kept me at his side the entire day, enough that I felt like an accessory more than his girlfriend. I wondered if he was protecting me from his Mother or if I was his main support system. Either way, I didn't mind.

Guests arrived all morning and afternoon. I recognized a few, but Luke and I didn't stop to chat with anyone.

After the funeral, a banquet in Erol's honor would be held in the palace. Luke informed me that we would have plenty of time to speak with the guests then.



The actual funeral was a cultural shock and one of the saddest events in my life. As much as Gia hated me, I didn't like seeing her devastated with grief. The events of the funeral were not familiar to me, but Luke jumped in with explanations whenever he could. There were so many people in attendance. I supposed it made sense since the country was losing a king, along with this family losing a father and a husband.

There wasn't a dry eye the entire night during the service. I was choked up for most of it, even though everyone spoke an unfamiliar language. Many people mourned loudly during the ceremony. Their wailing reverberated in my chest, making it even harder to breathe a full breath.

Luke was stoic for most of the time. I knew everyone was looking at him as their next ruler, but no one spoke the words. The funeral was about Erol, but I knew the conversation would come up soon after. Since I was Luke's girlfriend and I never left his side, I knew I would be a part of that conversation.

I was ready for anything when it came to Luke, but I wasn't sure if he wanted me as his queen. A distinct divide separated us on that fact. If he did want me as his queen, I would have a lot to consider. If he didn't, then I was about to go through this thing with his family and then be sent off back to Dallas without a story.

I doubted Mr. Fraser would care about my sexual encounters with a prince—that story might work at a woman's magazine, but not the Dallas Post. And anyone could research Muslim funerals to get the scoop.

I was between a rock and a hard place, and the space between quickly closed in around me.

Luke and I had a private car on the way back to the palace. Once we were inside, both of us sighed.

"How are you holding up?" I asked.

He wiped a hand over his face, his fingers scratching against the stubble on his cheeks. "I just want this to be over."

"I know," I said. I had to think of a way to distract him in the time we were alone. I had no idea when we would be alone

again. “What’s next?”

“Everyone will go back to the palace for a banquet,” he said.

I already knew that was happening, but I nodded my head as if I didn’t.

“It’s going to be an all-night thing,” he said. “If you want to go to my chambers, I’d completely understand.”

“No way,” I said. “I’m here for the long haul. You didn’t bring me here to sit in your bedroom, did you?”

“If I could join you, then yes.” A hint of a smile touched his lips. It was nice to see it after the day we’d had.



When we made it back to the palace, it was much later than I realized. We headed into one of the main ballrooms, which was already starting to fill up with guests. Even though we’d been up for a while that day, there was no ending in sight. While I wasn’t at all tired, I could have used a little more time alone with Luke to figure out what he was thinking about all of this.

Luke had an iron grip on my hand as we entered the banquet. The feeling in the room was much different than the last time I attended a banquet with Luke. That time had been all about Luke showing me off in front of influential people.

Now, all eyes were on Gia. Everyone made their way over to her and Abir—he hadn’t left her side either—and offered their sympathies.

We were approached as well. The tone was a little different when Luke spoke with these people. He remained stoic and spoke with them as if they were business associates more than family and friends. I supposed that was his way of dealing with everything. I imagined that him stepping up to the throne was in the front of his mind. The suggestion lingered on everyone’s lips, but no one flat-out asked him.

While they didn't get the answer they were looking for, everyone who approached us was friendly toward me. They acknowledged my presence, much to Gia's disappointment. I felt her heated stare from across the room more times than I could count. While I appreciated the kindness toward me, I wondered if it was just them being polite or if they thought I would be their future queen.

I had to immediately shake away that thought. I didn't want to be with Luke just to become his queen. I wasn't sure if I wanted the position at all. Erol's funeral was not the time to consider it. Luke wanted his space when it came to the throne, and I would comply, if not for my own selfish reasons as well. When it came to any future between Luke and me, I knew it involved a crown on one or both of our heads.

When there was a little break in the crowd coming to speak with us, Luke pulled me aside. We stood by the floor-to-ceiling windows on the other side of the room, opposite from Gia and Abir. I wasn't sure if he'd seen her death-stares or if he wanted a breather. Either way, I wasn't going to speak with him about his mother's attitude at that moment.

"How are you doing?" I asked. "Can I get you anything?"

He smirked.

"What is it?"

"The last time I let you get me something, Mother spoke with you, and you ran away from me."

It seemed like a lifetime ago, but we were also reporter and subject at that time. Now, I wasn't going anywhere unless Luke wanted me to. At least, not until after the funeral events.

"I could use a break," I said, noticing some of the guests trying to catch Luke's eye. "How about I stay here while you mingle for a little while? I'll catch up in a minute."

The cool air coming from the windows beckoned me to stay near. Even though the dress I wore was light and flowed around my legs, the temperature in the room had spiked significantly after all the guests arrived.

Luke leaned closer to me and cupped my cheek. I leaned into his warm hand, even though my body was already on fire. Luke ignited something else inside of me, and for that brief moment, the entire world fell away, and we were the only two people in existence.

“How did I get so lucky?” he said.

“I’m the lucky one,” I said, speaking from my heart.

His lips met mine in the most chaste yet erotic kiss of my life. I wasn’t sure if it was because he was claiming me in front of everyone in the room or the fact that we hadn’t kissed since early that morning before breakfast.

I vowed not to let that amount of time pass again.

When he pulled away from me, I sighed and shooed him away. My cheeks flushed, and I needed a minute to compose myself.

Watching Luke speak with others was different than standing next to him. I felt as if I were a voyeur, watching a regal prince schmooze with his subjects. His chin was high, and he commanded the conversation, even though I couldn’t hear exactly what they were saying.

Someone cleared her throat next to me, and I instinctively moved aside, thinking that I was blocking their way.

When I glanced over my shoulder, my stomach plummeted, and I drew in a sharp breath.

“Gia,” I said.

Luke’s mother turned her body so she stood next to me. Her mouth pressed into a thin line.

I looked around for Abir, but I had the idea that she sent him away so she could have another conversation with me. This time, it would end differently. I wasn’t going to be rude to her, but I also wasn’t going to allow her to speak with me as she’d done before. No matter what Luke said to her, she continued to look down on me. I wasn’t that girl anymore, at least not when Luke wanted to be with me.



“I know you don’t like me,” I said. “But I’m not here to cause problems. I’m here to be with Luke and give him whatever he needs at this difficult time.”

“I know,” she said.

I snapped my head in her direction. “You do?”

She nodded slightly, still focusing on the crowd in front of us. Her hands clasped in front of her, and they weren’t tight fists as I’d seen on numerous occasions in my presence. “From what you and Luke insist on repeating, I know that you both want to be with each other. I’ve tried to put sense into my son’s head, but it hasn’t worked.”

“I’m not sure what to say to that,” I said. I knew she didn’t want me to be with Luke, but hearing her speak so bluntly was a little off-putting.

“I’d like to know what you’re going to say when Luke becomes the king,” she said.

“I’m not sure I understand what you mean,” I said. “Do you think I would tell him not to take the throne? I would never.”

“I’m not talking about him,” she said. “He’s going to make the right choice. But I do wonder if you’re willing to give up your life for him.”

“My life?” Was I missing something?

“If you’re so invested in my son’s life and you want to be there for him, there is the eventuality of you rising to the throne with him. If you’re serious about him, then you must be serious about letting go of your life to shoulder the responsibilities of the throne.”

This wasn’t where I thought the conversation was going. Had the room become warmer in the short time since Gia started speaking with me?

I couldn’t allow her to get under my skin, but from the satisfied expression on her face, she knew she already had.

“Do let me know if you have any questions about being queen,” she said and then flitted away.

I watched her leave, my chest heaving with effort as if I'd just run ten laps around the palace.

Glancing at Luke, he was still in a conversation with the same group as before. And just like the first banquet, Gia had ended our private conversation, leaving me with a lot to think about.

# CHAPTER 44



## LUKE

For the last hour of the banquet, I wanted nothing more than for it to end so I could go up to my room with Sophia. While it would have been nice to make love with her, after the full day of activities, I was mentally and physically exhausted. I had attended numerous banquets at the palace throughout my life, but obviously, this one was different. Typically, I was able to enjoy myself. I never shirked my responsibilities, but most of the time, Father was the center of attention. Everyone wanted to talk to a king more than a prince.

With Father gone, I got a glimpse of what being king would be like. It wasn't hard, but it was exhausting. I figured it would get better over time. Sophia made it a little easier.

If I were to take the throne, I wanted her with me. I knew that now, more than ever. She spoke eloquently to our guests, and with her charm and wit, she could handle an intelligent conversation, rather than being the silent partner that Mother tended to be when she was with Father. If I was going to be forced to take the throne, then I was going to do it in my way with the woman I chose.

When there were only a few dozen people left in the hall, I took my leave, grabbing Sophia's hand in the process.

"Are you ready?" I asked her.

"More than ready," she said.

"Can I come?" Abir asked, sidling up to Sophia.

"To my chambers?" I asked.

Abir made a horrified face as if I'd asked him to sleep in the same bed as Sophia and me.

It was the first time I laughed all day. I clapped a hand on his shoulder and pulled him alongside me.

Mother could handle herself, and I didn't want to expose Sophia to any more of her that night. I'd seen them talking, and the entire time, my stomach was in my throat. But Sophia hadn't seemed too bothered after their conversation, not like she had been the first time she was there.

Maybe Mother was making an effort. While I didn't completely believe that, I wasn't going to hound Sophia about it. She could handle herself, and she would be honest with me if something was bothering her.

We stopped at Abir's room, and Sophia kissed him on the cheek. "I'll see you in the morning," she said.

Abir placed his hand on his cheek and grinned.

Sophia stifled a laugh while I hugged my brother a little too forcefully.

"You know she's mine, right?" I whispered into his ear.

Abir laughed and then walked into his room.

"I'll be a minute," I said to her and walked in after him. Abir and I hadn't had a lot of time to ourselves since I'd dragged him out of bed when we arrived the last time; when Father was still alive.

Sophia had stuck close to me, and while I appreciated her support, I wanted to make sure that Abir was okay before leaving him alone. He liked her, and I knew he would try and hide his feelings from her the best he could.

Abir lifted his shirt over his head and tossed it on the floor before walking into his bathroom.

I picked up the shirt and laid it neatly on his desk chair where the servants could find it the next morning.

Abir was quiet as he went through his nightly routine. I gave him space, but he was an entirely different person than he

was outside in the hallway. My gut feeling was right. Abir was still mourning, but he had taken a page out of my book and pretended like he was fine. It was the first step to becoming the prince I'd always wanted him to be, but I feared it was too late. The council would meet soon, and I wasn't sure which one of us they would choose. That was unless I stepped forward and made the choice for them.

"Sit down for a minute," I said when Abir returned to his bedroom. He wore his robe, and his hair was damp.

Abir sat on the small couch near the windows, and I sat next to him.

"What's on your mind?" I asked.

He sighed. "What do you think?"

I shrugged. "You tell me." He wasn't getting off that easily.

"The meeting is tomorrow," he said.

I'd been wrong. Instead of Abir's sadness over Father's death, he was more worried about the decision regarding the new ruler.

"You don't have to worry about that," I said.

"Don't I?" he said, his eyes wide with fear. "What if they pick me? I'm not ready. I don't want this."

"Abir," I said, trying to remain calm. If I revealed my same fear, it wouldn't help anything. "Tonight is not the time to think about this. It's been a long day, and everyone is tired and overwhelmed. How about you get some rest and then we can discuss all of this tomorrow."

"I suppose you're right," he said. "How are you so calm?" Abir still didn't know the turmoil inside of me. He thought he might have to take the throne, and that terrified him.

"I can barely hold my head up right now," I said. "Exhaustion is the best way to get your mind off something."

Abir smiled, only a little, but it was enough for now.

I grabbed his shoulder and brought him to me in a tight embrace. I ruffled his hair, much to his displeasure. “Night, little brother.”

“Get off me,” he said, laughing.

As I was leaving, Abir got into his bed and flipped his bedside lamp off.

I paused for a moment, soaking in the sight. Tomorrow was going to change our lives completely. I hoped that he had a restful night’s sleep in preparation for what was to come.

Outside Abir’s room, Sophia was waiting for me. She was still on her feet, but she swayed slightly.

“Let’s go,” I said, linking my arm with hers.

Sophia and I leisurely walked to my chambers.

“What a day,” she said.

I sighed. “Tell me about it.”

“Anything else happening tomorrow?”

I knew she meant to ask if there were any more funeral events, but I wanted to be honest with her about what was going to happen. I didn’t want to blindside her after the council decided. This was the last chance for us if she wanted to be by my side for the rest of our lives.

“There will be a council meeting tomorrow,” I said.

“Tomorrow?” she asked. “A little soon?”

“Not really,” I said. “We will mourn for a while, but business needs to be handled by the next heir. And that heir is to be chosen the day after a ruler is buried.”

Sophia was silent for the rest of the walk over to my room. I really didn’t want to have this conversation when both of us were dead on our feet, but if not now, when? I had to put my cards on the table, no matter how much I didn’t want to.

When we reached my chambers, I helped Sophia out of her dress. I couldn’t help my hands from roaming around her body. She wrapped her arms around my shoulders and peered

up at me. Without any words between us, we knew we were at a tipping point in our relationship. If only it hadn't come so soon.

"I love you, Sophia," I said before kissing her.

She was the first to pull away, her gaze darting between my eyes.

"I've wanted to say it since you returned to the palace." I went to the armoire and gave Sophia my robe. She draped it around her shoulders but kept the front open, giving me a view of her spectacular body. "I don't know if I can make it through all of this without you."

"You're stronger than you think," she said.

It didn't escape my notice that she hadn't said she loved me back. Had I gone too far with telling her how I felt? I supposed if I was going to scare her away with that admission, then becoming queen was out of the question. Or maybe she was scared. If she were my queen, she'd have to pick up her entire life and move to a foreign country where she didn't know anyone other than my family. Mother wouldn't be much help, and I would have to adjust to the new lifestyle for myself.

If she knew that I was by her side too, then it might be easier for her to make a choice.

"I can't delay this any further," I said. "The decision will be made tomorrow. I have to tell the council something."

Sophia wrapped herself up in the robe and pulled the ties around her waist. "I don't know if I can be what you need me to be if you choose to become king."

There it was. Topped with the fact that Sophia didn't love me. I wasn't sure which one hurt more.

Seeing it from her point of view, it was a tough choice. I was asking her to give me an answer without any warning at all.

Sophia came over to the bed and stood in front of me. We were face to face, but I couldn't even look at her. I wasn't sure



who I was more disappointed with, her or me.

She lifted my chin with her hand. “Luke, you’ve been through a lot this week. How about we get some sleep and then we can talk about it in the morning?”

She kissed me, and I tried to be into it, but I knew from the look in her eyes when she pulled away that I wasn’t.

She was right. There was nothing to be done tonight. The more I pressed her to fit into the position of the queen, the more she would push back. If this was the last night for us to be together, I wanted to remember it as a time where we were good with each other. We were a great couple but on opposite paths.

“I’m going to change,” I said, brushing past her. “I’ll be in bed in a few minutes.”

The truth was, I took my time in the bathroom. I didn’t want to look at her and see the reflection of my embarrassment in her eyes. Even though she didn’t say it back, I still loved her. I probably always would. Since the moment she came back into my life, we were on borrowed time.

I drew a bath and sat in the tub for a while, soaking in the musky scented soap. While I was exhausted, I also felt as if I’d had a shot of adrenaline. I mulled over what I was going to do.

Telling the council to fuck off wasn’t in my best interest. Sure, I would get to keep Sophia, but then Abir would be in a position that he never wanted. I would disappoint Mother and Father’s memory in the process. The only ones who were affected if I chose to become king were Sophia and me. Could I put her on a bigger pedestal than my family? From what she said, it didn’t seem as if she wanted the position to begin with. If I gave up the throne to Abir and then Sophia and I broke up for whatever reason, I would regret it wholly.

I came back to the same resolution every time.

When my hands turned wrinkly and the water cooled, I stepped out of the tub and knew what I had to do for both Sophia and me.

# CHAPTER 45



## SOPHIA

The morning came too swiftly for me. I had waited up for Luke to come to bed, but I must have fallen asleep. I'd heard the bath running, so I assumed he needed more time to himself. I supposed telling someone you love them and having them not say it back was cause enough to stay away from that person. I still didn't know what possessed me to keep quiet about my feelings. He had just lost his father for Christ's sake. The least I could have done was told him I loved him. It wouldn't have been a lie.

Luke was still fast asleep next to me, and I wondered if he even bothered to wake me when he came into the bedroom after his bath. His hair was mussed, and it took much of my strength not to reach out and touch it. Had I ruined our chances completely?

I had the urge to shake him awake and tell him how I felt, no matter what the cost. I still wasn't up to the idea of becoming a queen, but he should know how I felt.

I stared up at the ceiling for some time, willing Luke to wake up. But after the day and night that he had, he deserved to get some uninterrupted sleep.

The more I thought about having a conversation about last night, the more nervous I became.

Unable to fall asleep again, I quietly got out of bed and shoved my arms into Luke's robe. There wasn't anywhere in the room I could go without appearing as if I was waiting for him to wake up, so I left and went into the hallway. Closing

the door as silently as I could, I turned to the empty hall. Tightening the robe around my waist, I walked toward the end of the hallway where there was an open the door to a balcony. Maybe after I cleared my head a little, I would return to face Luke.

I was halfway there when a familiar face rounded the corner.

“Oh, hello,” I said, nearly bumping into Abir.

He was already dressed for the day and eyed me as if I were naked instead of covered in a robe. I supposed I could have put socks on, but Luke would have woken up if I started to dig through my suitcase.

“Hi,” Abir said, averting his eyes.

I checked to make sure I wasn't hanging out of my robe, but everything was covered. Abir seriously needed to get a girlfriend. “How did you sleep?”

“Fine,” he said. “Where is Luke?”

“Still sleeping,” I said. “I didn't want to disturb him. I suppose the both of you have a big day today.”

Abir nodded and shoved his hands into his pants pockets. “What do you think about all of this?”

“What am I supposed to think?” I asked. I wondered if Abir was going to ask me about becoming Luke's queen. Although after the talk with Gia and the awkward discussion with Luke last night, I started to warm up to the idea. The very thought of losing Luke and Abir from my life was like a knife to the gut. Would that wound ever go away if I let him go? Would I regret it all if I left? “I know that Luke will make the right decision for everyone.”

Abir cracked a smile. “He's fortunate to have you.”

“He could do this on his own, too,” I said. Just as I wanted to make my own way in life as a reporter, I knew that Luke didn't need someone else to make him a good king. He already had all he needed to fulfill the position. He just needed to take

that last step and accept the position to save his brother from that fate. I also knew it had meant a lot to Erol.

“I think it’s easier for him to accept it when he has you by his side,” Abir said. “He sees a future with you. I think that was his problem before. He never looked too far into the future, and now that he has, I think he will take the role and be happy with it. As long as he has you.”

Was that how Luke truly felt? Did he think he could fulfill his father’s promise because of me?

“I’m heading down to breakfast. I’ll see you later.” Abir left me alone in the hallway with my jumbled thoughts.

My legs moved forward on their own as I made my way toward the balcony. Coming outside, the morning breeze was cool against my cheeks. Inhaling, I was able to draw in a full breath to fully clear my mind.

Luke was a smart man. Even if he hadn’t told me, last night should have alerted me to what he was going to do. He wanted me to tell him that I loved him and that I would be the queen he needed at his side.

Stupidly, I rejected him on the eve of the most important day of his life. He’d already had a pretty shitty day with the funeral, and I had turned him down.

I leaned against the stone railing, peering down at the palace grounds. While I doubted Qatar ever had a Western queen, Luke had trusted me enough to offer the position. He pushed past tradition and went for what he wanted. That was me.

I blew out a breath. He chose me. He trusted me. And I went and broke his heart because I couldn’t utter the words that were deep in my own heart.

Whirling around, I started down the hallway again. I knew what I had to do. There wasn’t anything in Dallas other than a job with a boss who didn’t appreciate me. I could bring Matt to the palace as much as I wanted, but other than that, I wasn’t losing much.

Luke's admission made me realize that if I let go of my fears, I could have a chance at an amazing life, full of adventure with the kindest and sexiest man I'd ever known.

A sour taste filled my mouth. How could I have ever thought that I couldn't do this? With Luke by my side, he would never let me fall. And it wasn't as if he could leave me if I made a mistake. Marriage to these people was forever. I would be with Luke forever. It was everything I wanted and more. Luke was willing to turn his back against tradition for me; I could change for him. I would do it in a heartbeat as long as I got to fall asleep and wake up with that man for the rest of my life.

I loved him, dammit. And I would scream it from the roof of the palace if he wanted me to.

With an apology on the tip of my tongue, I pushed open the door to Luke's chambers.

The moment I stepped through the door, the lump on the mattress stirred.

I closed the door, unable to hide the big grin on my face. Walking over to the bed, I crawled on top of it as Luke's head peeked out from under the covers.

Before I could touch him, he jumped out of bed and turned to face me.

I sat on my knees, propping myself up for what I was about to do. The ties of my robe came undone and exposed my bra and panties underneath. I imagined me telling him I loved him and then us making love to mark this special day.

"I need to tell you something," I said.

Luke's jaw clenched. "Me first." He cracked his knuckles, something I'd never seen him do before. His mouth was set in a hard line, and his shoulders nearly reached his ears. His chin lifted as if he were about to speak a royal decree.

I couldn't wait. I needed to tell him. "About last night—"

"Sophia, please," he interrupted.

I licked my lips and tilted my head to the side. What was wrong with him? Was he still upset about last night? I wanted to push him, to ask him what was going on, but the coldness in his eyes made me keep my mouth shut.

“Things are changing for the both of us,” he said. “I don’t want to be the one to change your life so dramatically. From the beginning, we were doomed. I don’t even know why I bothered to keep this ruse going.”

“Ruse?” I asked. “You said you loved me.”

“I did say that,” he said, staring at the floor. “I made a mistake. I got caught up with all of this. And I was emotional last night. The reality is that we had fun together, and I’m grateful for everything you’ve done for my family and me, but it’s time for you to go home.”

“Go home?” I repeated.

“Yes,” he said, finally meeting my eyes. Any emotion inside of his body had disappeared, replaced by a hardened man.

I shook my head. “No. You don’t mean any of that. I hurt you—”

He sneered. “You didn’t hurt me.”

I tried to swallow, but my throat was so tight that I could barely breathe. “Luke, do you honestly feel this way?” He wanted us both to be honest with each other. If he was hurt, I could fix that in a minute.

He didn’t hesitate for a second before he said, “Yes.”

The word had enough strength to sock me in the gut. I got a glimpse of the man that I’d first met: cold and distant. Now, in addition to that, he was heartless. Whatever he’d put in his bathtub had transformed him into a person that I barely recognized.

“You can go back to the States with this story,” he said.

I shook my head. “What story?”

“Sophia, you’re more astute than that.”

I wasn't going to allow him to put me down after breaking my heart. As if he sensed that, he said, "I'll have the jet ready to take you back to England. Then you are on your own. Safe travels and good luck."

He pulled on a pair of pants—the ones he'd worn all day yesterday—and left the room.

The sound of the door closing was a final sound, mimicking the cracks in my heart widening as Luke distanced himself from me.

I was such an asshole. I should have told him how I felt when he opened up to me. Now, we were finished. I had lost my chance, and I had never felt so awful in my entire life.



# CHAPTER 46



## LUKE

Saying goodbye to Sophia wasn't going to heal the ache in my heart. I stood in Father's office, watching her roll her suitcase out of the palace and out of my life for good. It was the hardest decision of my life. I knew that if I went out there, I would pull her into my arms, kiss her, and tell her it was all a mistake.

But I couldn't. With Father gone, I had to step up in his place. Losing Sophia and my happiness was my sacrifice for my family. I'd spent too many years denying my place in the kingdom. Too bad Sophia couldn't have wormed her way into my life sooner. We would have had more time. We could have built a relationship, and she would have had the space in her heart to love me. At that point, we could have made it work.

Her admission last night was my deciding factor. I couldn't be with her if she was uncertain about our fate together. I didn't blame her at all, but the timing was off for us.

Sophia turned so quickly that I could have sworn I'd said her name aloud.

Instead, Abir dashed in her direction like a dark blur. They spoke to each other. I leaned closer to the window as if there was some chance that I could hear them.

Abir wrapped his arms around Sophia, and she embraced him in return.

The last time I touched Sophia was when I returned to bed the night before. She had fallen asleep, being just as exhausted as I was. I didn't think she felt me holding her hand and

brushing her hair from her face. I wanted a clear mental image of her to carry me through while I healed from our breakup.

I never intended for things to end that quickly, but I couldn't allow Sophia to say something that would change my mind. She'd returned to the room in my robe, looking as amazing as ever. Her eyes were clear, and I could almost hear her apologizing and telling me that she loved me and wanted to be my queen.

While I knew it was a longshot, if she did say it, then I wouldn't be able to turn her down. If she'd given me what I wanted, I wouldn't have allowed her out of my sight.

But I had to let her go. She had a life back in the States, and I wasn't going to force her into a situation where she couldn't refuse me. What would happen after several years when she regretted her quick decision to stay? Would she despise me for forcing her into a life she never wanted because we were in the honeymoon stage of our relationship?

I was about to step into a new life, and I had to navigate that first and foremost. Maybe it was for the best that my marriage would be arranged. I could blame the situation for not wanting to get close to whoever was chosen for me while I mourned my relationship with Sophia.

Sophia would be fine. She could go off and get her promotion, marry whomever she wanted, and create her own path. Being with me would stifle her. I was sure of that. Or at least, it was what I continued to tell myself.

Abir backed away from the car as Sophia got inside. Both of us watched her drive farther away from the palace and out of the main gate.

Movement out of the corner of my eye caught my attention. Abir stared up at me, his mouth twisted with anger.

I backed away from the window and headed over to Father's desk. It was incredibly hard to breathe, but I blamed that on losing Father. If I had to admit to myself that it was solely because of Sophia, then I would be a wreck and unable to do what I was about to do.

A few minutes later, the door burst open, and Abir stormed inside.

“What did you do?” Abir spat at me.

I ground my teeth together, forcing a straight face. “What are you talking about?”

“Don’t be daft, Luke,” Abir said. “You forced Sophia to go home. Why? You two love each other.”

“It wasn’t going to work out,” I said, which was the truth. Sophia didn’t want to be queen, so there was no future for us. I wished Abir knew what I was doing for him. He wouldn’t dare speak to me in such a way if he knew. But that was the easy way out. I would rather him think that I sent her away because I didn’t love her than the alternative.

“She wouldn’t tell me anything,” Abir said. “She just left.”

“It’s for the best.”

“Is it?” Abir asked. “I spoke to her this morning, and she couldn’t have seemed happier. Like, less than two hours ago. I don’t understand.”

I rounded Father’s desk, glancing out the window. Had she told Abir everything? I wondered if she’d said something that would lessen the effect of what I’d done. I wanted Abir to think that I wasn’t in love with her. If he knew I felt the opposite, then he would never let me get over her.

“You’ll understand when you’re older,” I said. “Sometimes responsibility is more important.”

“Than love?” Abir asked.

I nodded. Little did he know that it was my love for him that forced me into this position. If he had my personality, then he would be getting ready to become king, and Sophia and I would be just fine.

A part of being king was shouldering responsibility. I would rather Abir be upset with me for a little while than make him feel guilty for the rest of his life.

I had enough life experience outside of the palace for a lifetime. I would take Sophia's memory with me everywhere, knowing that she would be happy in the States, far away from the prestige of the palace.

"As I said, you'll understand someday." I wanted the conversation to end. With every second that Abir argued with me, the knife twisted a little farther into my heart. This was going to be much worse than when Sophia left the first time. I had my closure, but I also had her broken heart on my mind as well.

At least I'd have enough new duties to keep me busy for a while.

Mother knocked on the door, and Abir and I turned to face her.

Her hands were clasped in front of her, and her face was almost fully concealed by her headscarf. I could've sworn I saw a hint of a smile on her lips. No doubt, she had already figured out what happened between Sophia and me.

That fact was confirmed when she said, "You did the right thing, son."

Abir snorted and left the room. Mother glanced over her shoulder at him, then turned back to me.

"I don't need a lecture, Mother," I said, turning to the windows. While I knew life was short and all that, I had no time for hearing how she had been right about Sophia. I wasn't ready to go into the details of our final encounter. I doubted I ever would. It would be one of the only scars in my life, other than my parents' deaths. It would forever be a part of me and offer a place and time of reflection, but that was it.

"I'm not lecturing you, Luke," she said. "I'm glad you came to your senses. Today is a big day, and you don't need any distractions."

I curled my lip. Sophia was never a distraction. I thought more clearly with her by my side. Why didn't anyone see that? Did they think I was that cold of a person to break our hearts for no reason? Abir and Mother didn't know me at all.

Though part of that was my fault. I had abandoned them for years while I lived in England. Abir was a kid when I left, and I still saw him that way. This was an opportunity to get to know them again. Maybe someday I would be able to be honest with them about Sophia. Perhaps I wouldn't tell them everything, but enough for them to know that I wasn't as heartless as I seemed.

That persona was something the kingdom needed. I understood why Father acted in the way he did at times. He was unable to separate his personal and professional lives. He had to appear strong for his people and our enemies.

I would rule differently. I wouldn't be the workaholic that I was in England. It had gotten me nowhere in life. If I could have one takeaway from my short relationship with Sophia, it was that I could be two people. I could work hard and be strong, while opening up to those who mattered most in my life. If I was that way with Father, maybe I wouldn't have so much regret inside of me after he died.

"You don't have a lot of time left," Mother said, coming up next to me.

I stared out at the palace grounds, feeling more like a fraud than a king. But I was good at pretending. And this performance would literally be my crowning achievement.

"I need to get ready," I said to Mother and left her in Father's office. It soon would be mine, but I wasn't sure if I'd ever think of it any other way.



Inside my chambers, there was nothing left of Sophia in plain sight. Inside the armoire was another story. Every item that she'd brought from England that I had bought her was neatly arranged on hangers. The movement from opening the doors made the clothing sway as if her spirit was inside of them.

Since I was alone, I didn't hide my emotions anymore. I touched the soft fabric, pinching each item between my fingers. I brought the sleeve of the dress she wore the night

before to my face and inhaled. It still smelled like her. The memory of her hand in mine, her kisses on my lips, were so vivid, like she had never left at all.

A sharp rap on my door forced me to jump away from the clothes. It wasn't customary for a servant to enter one's chambers without asking, but I didn't want to risk anyone knowing how much I missed Sophia.

"What is it?" I barked.

"The council is meeting now," one of the servants said through the door.

I gritted my teeth. "I'll be there shortly."

I slammed the doors of the armoire shut a little too forcefully and headed into the bathroom.

I walked through to my wardrobe and picked out one of the more traditional pieces. If I was going to show the council who was king, I had to look the part.

After changing, I looked at myself in the mirror and saw the man that Father saw. I was the king, and now I had to prove it.

Walking into the bathroom again, I stopped at the sink. Sweat clung to my brow, and my face was paler than ever. I turned on the faucet and splashed water on my face before staring at myself in the mirror. Droplets fell from my jaw, plopping into the sink.

There wasn't much time to waste, but I looked inside myself and wondered if this was what Father really wanted. He wanted me to be happy, but being king wouldn't make me happy. Did he know that, or was he trying to push me into his version of a son? He'd done so much for me through the course of my life that refusing to become king would dishonor him, even in death.

Just like last night, I knew what I had to do. I took Father's memory and Sophia's strength with me on the way to declare my fate.



Standing in front of the council was a lot different than any other time. Usually, it was Father who stood there while I watched. I kept my face impassive as they asked me the customary question about why I graced them with my presence.

Stepping forward, the room tilted slightly, but I didn't falter. I looked each of them in the eyes and then told them that I would accept the position as the new king.



# CHAPTER 47



## LUKE

A month had passed since accepting the role of the king in my home country of Qatar, but my hands still moved automatically to adjust the phantom tie at my neck. For years working in England at my family's oil business, it was rare that I went to work without a tie. It was rare that I didn't go to work in general.

With any thoughts of England came the influx of memories of the one woman who I would have stayed there for. I would have given up all of my father's hopes for me to become king if only she had felt the same for me as I did for her.

I shook away all thoughts of Sophia as I tried to do every single morning. Even after some time had passed, she was still lodged firmly in my mind. I wanted to know what she was up to, if she finally wrote the story that she'd come to England and Qatar to write, and most of all, if she was happy.

When she left me the first time, I had flipped around and become the stalker that she had been to me when she was hungry for the story. But this time, I couldn't bear to see what she wrote about me for the Dallas Post. Whether her thoughts were negative or positive, either would draw me back into that part of me that I'd been trying to hide. I hoped with time, the twisted feeling in my gut at the thought of her would go away completely.

Looking at myself in the mirror, I still didn't see a king.

The only king I knew was my adoptive father. Ever since I had met him, I always pictured *him* when I heard the word “king.” I felt like an impostor, struggling to fill his enormous shoes. The other council members had accepted me due to my insistence that Father wanted me to take the role, but I knew they would have preferred my sixteen-year-old brother Abir instead. He had a gentle demeanor that could be bent to their will.

With Abir not wanting to be king and Mother and Father’s insistence that I take the throne, I had no other choice. At least, I didn’t see one. The only way I could have kept Sophia in my life was for her to stay with me, but I wouldn’t force anyone else into the position like I had been.

I let out a grunt, annoyed that Sophia had crept into my thoughts again.

I left my bathroom and headed into the main area of my bedroom. Mother had wanted me to move into Father’s suite—the king’s suite—which was much bigger than my childhood room, but I couldn’t. Not yet. She had already moved to a different bedroom at the other end of the palace, so she should have understood my reasoning for not wanting to disturb any of Father’s memories in his room.

I wasn’t sure if I would ever move.

Mother was on the warpath again when it came to finding me a bride—something I wanted nothing to do with—but it was another responsibility that I had to take without my full consent. It was part of the job and the only thing that kept her distracted during her period of mourning.

A sharp knocking on my door broke me from my thoughts.

“Come in,” I said through gritted teeth. I hoped Mother wouldn’t start with me this early. I steeled myself to drive her away, at least until dinner, but I was surprised that Abir entered my room instead.

So much had changed with him since Father’s passing. While his personality hadn’t changed much, he woke every morning—much earlier than he had in years—and paid more

attention to his studies and important goings-on around the kingdom. I doubted he wanted to be king, but he was finally stepping up in his role as a prince. Too bad Father's death had turned him into an adult so quickly. His innocence was something I had tried to preserve when I could. And if Mother could keep Abir close to her breast as her biological little boy, then I was sure she would have.

Abir walked into the room and stood next to my bed. His hair was much shorter today, not the tousled floof that I always ruffled when I teased him.

It wasn't the time or place, but I wanted to tell him that he looked like a younger version of Father.

Abir was the sensitive one, and I wouldn't break that smile of his just yet. He was taking Father's death harder than all of us.

"Good morning, King Luke," Abir said with a smile.

I rolled my eyes. "I thought after the first time that would get old."

"Is it?"

"Yes," I said. "What do you need? I'm headed off to meet with the council."

Abir shrugged. "I wanted to check in with you and see how you like being the king."

I wasn't sure why, but in the month since I returned to Qatar for good, Abir had taken more of an interest in my job than he had when Father was king. When Father was alive, Abir took his life for granted since he'd been born into wealth and prestige. Maybe he was making up for lost time, or he wanted to be more connected with Father. I had no idea, but I didn't want to dampen his mood by discussing the more challenging parts of being king.

If something ever happened to me, Abir was the next in line. Boggling him down with details would only scare him away from ever accepting the role, even though I planned on living a long life.

“It’s not much different than managing a company,” I said, equating the only other life experience I had. “There’s a lot of politics and sometimes arguments, but overall, it’s not that challenging.”

Abir nodded as if he understood. “Seems you fit right in.”

“I like to think so,” I said.

And I had, more than I wanted to. Father had been right to push me to make this decision. While I would have preferred to live a life as a prince, this was the place that Father had groomed me for my entire life.

I wished that I felt as fulfilled as he had. By my age, he was already married to Mother. For me, there would be a Sophia-sized hole in my heart until I could patch it up with someone else. The transition would have been easier with her by my side, but she had made her choice. I had to live with that, even at the expense of my own happiness.

Walking into the meeting room was still a new experience for me, even though I’d done it almost every day for the past month. As a child, the room had always been forbidden unless Father requested our presence. Those occasions were few and far between and would usually involve other officials within the kingdom.

I was used to meeting with people who didn’t see me on their level. I got used to it years ago when Father first gave me full access to our family company. I would butt heads with many of the older investors, but it never took long for me to prove my worth.

The council had been generous the first week of my reign, due to Father’s death, but they stopped holding my hand soon after.

I jumped into the job with the enthusiasm I had when I first moved to England and had to claw my way through the trenches until I earned those investors’ respect.

All five council members were in attendance when I entered the room. I wasn't late, but they had made it a point to arrive earlier than me on a daily basis. I wasn't sure if it was their solidarity or they'd given me the wrong time on purpose.

I didn't show any signs of ruffled feathers. One of the things I didn't tell Abir was that one man on the council didn't fully respect my decision to become king. Since it was Father's wish that I replace him, the four others fell into line, but the oldest, Jaabir, made his position known with his gruff expressions and demeanor.

I wasn't sure if he would be happy to have anyone in the king's seat other than himself, but there was quite a long line of succession to get him there. I blamed his attitude on him being ancient and resistant to change.

While the issues from the previous meeting were read aloud, I couldn't shake Jaabir's glare in my direction. I forced myself to ignore him as best I could when I really wanted to confront him about it. If he respected my Father as king, he should fall in line with the others and respect my decision to follow in Father's path.

When it was time for current issues to be resolved, I took the opportunity for distraction by delving into my work. My word was law, and I took care with everything that I said, feeling the weight of Father on my shoulders.

It was similar to running a company, something that I could hold on to since it was what I excelled at in my previous life, but the opposition from Jaabir every single step of the way grated on me.

Even for the simplest of issues regarding the infrastructure of the country, he pushed against any decision I made. Most of his opposition made no sense. It was like if I told him the sky was blue, he would declare that it was orange.

The others in the room seemed to feel the uncomfortable cloud settling in over the room. The head of the council, Qadeem, listened to each council member appropriately but tended to side with me in most arguments. He'd been a good friend to Father, yet we rarely spoke outside of the meeting

room. I understood his position since he couldn't appear to favor me. I had to earn that spot. Over time, I would. If only Jaabir would work for the betterment of the country instead of himself, proving myself to be an effective king would be easier.

Jaabir's opposition came to a head during the second hour of the meeting, and finally, Qadeem closed the discussion for the day.

For the first time in two hours, I was able to take a full breath. I wasn't cursed with flaming red cheeks when I was annoyed, but sweat clung to my skin as my body temperature rose way past normal.

A month was long enough to deal with Jaabir's insolence. If I was going to be respected, all of the council members needed to fall in line.

I charged over to Jaabir before he could shuffle out of the room as he always did.

"Jaabir," I said, catching his attention.

Sometimes, he played the elder man card and pretended not to hear me, but today he was up for a fight.

Little did he know, so was I.

"Your Majesty," he said with a curled lip.

I glanced across the room where the other four members were huddled together. I rarely saw Jaabir with any of them, and I suspected the other council members had had their confrontations with Jaabir in the past, earning him no friends. Now it was my turn. I outranked him, and he wasn't going to take over my meetings with his selfish agenda.

"What is your issue with me?" I asked, getting straight to the heart of the matter. I saw no reason to beat around the bush with him.

Jaabir smirked, and I had the urge to slap the expression off his face. Instead, I put all that energy into clenching my fists at my sides.

"I don't respect you," he said bluntly.

“You respected my Father,” I said.

Jaabir blinked but said nothing.

“My father was your king and wanted nothing more than for me to follow in his path.”

“That is where Erol and I differed. It was one thing to adopt a child but another thing entirely to make that child a king. You have no royal blood flowing through you. You usurped your adoptive-brother, the true king. I have no respect for you, and I will stop at nothing to get you out of the seat as king.”

“You will do no such thing,” I said.

“Won’t I?” he asked, smirking. He shuffled away, ending the conversation.

I gritted my jaw. I had enough angst about taking the throne instead of Abir. But Abir never wanted to be king. Even Father knew he wasn’t cut out for it. I had taken the throne to make everyone happy.

Everyone except for me.



# CHAPTER 48



## SOPHIA

“We are beginning our descent into Seattle,” the pilot said over the speakers.

Chewing the flavorless gum as quickly as possible, little popping sensations sounded in my ears as the plane landed. The journey from Dallas to Seattle was a piece of cake compared to the long-distance flights I had traveled just a month ago.

*A month.*

I drew in a breath, feeling the effects of Luke still in my system. The swirl of pleasure that I felt for him now circled my lungs and squeezed every time I thought of him.

Mechanically, I moved down the aisle of the plane, falling in line with the other passengers. Just like every time I thought of Luke, the world closed in around me, and I struggled to breathe. Even in the ample open space of my apartment or at a coffee shop when images of him floated into my mind, I developed a strange sense of claustrophobia that crippled me until it decided to pass. Which usually wasn't for several minutes, although it always felt like hours.

Those situations were few and far between now, but they had returned with a vengeance in the confines of the plane. I wanted to scream for everyone to get out of my way and rush off the plane.

But no one wanted a crazy person on their plane, even if it was already on the ground. I knew there was a trigger-happy

air marshal somewhere on the plane, and I wasn't going to get arrested before I got to see my best friend, Matt.

He would tease me to no end if I got arrested, and he would probably find some photographic proof to harass me with for the rest of my life.

Instead, I took another deep breath, closing my eyes and willing myself to think of vast, open spaces nowhere near the country of England or Qatar. I preferred to think of the farmlands that I drove by on the way to the airport in Dallas.

"Miss?" someone said behind me.

My eyes sprang open to see the annoyed passengers behind me. The woman in front of me was already way down the aisle of the plane, and I was holding everyone up.

I muttered an apology and lurched forward, dragging my carry-on suitcase behind me.

Focusing on the signs for the baggage claim area, I hustled through the airport, a blur of other travelers moving around me. The only face I wanted to see came closer with every step.

I hadn't seen Matt face-to-face since New Year's Eve, the day that changed my life for better *and* worse. That night, my former boss, Mr. Fraser gave me the assignment to get the dirt on a prince after rumors surfaced of his father leaving the throne. Weeks later, I was Luke's fake-turned-real girlfriend, visiting his family's palace in Qatar after his father's death, and Luke sent me packing, claiming that he didn't love me just hours after confessing his love to me.

Since then, I had suffered through many sleepless nights, replaying the conversation over in my head, willing it to have a different outcome. But with no communication from Luke in a month, I knew what I felt was heartbreak, and I wasn't sure if I would ever recover.

I had never been in a relationship long enough for it to hurt. I'd also never fallen for someone so quickly before. First, it had been a job to me, but getting to know Luke on a deeper level while we pretended to be a couple for his mother's sake was what did me in. Under all the money and good looks, he

was a genuine guy. Someone that I could see myself with for the rest of my life. Granted, that would have made me a queen, but if I hadn't hesitated, Luke wouldn't have been hurt and pushed me away from him.

He was going to be king no matter what, and apparently, I was the only thing standing in his way.

It didn't take long for other news outlets to get the first jump on the story, the story that I didn't feel comfortable telling.

"Soph!" Matt called my name from afar.

I jolted and then found his smiling face in the crowd. He'd grown a beard apparently. It was longer than I imagined him to be comfortable with but trimmed nicely. I wondered if that had to do with the chilly Seattle weather.

My heart warmed for a moment before I walked in his direction. He met me halfway and scooped me into his arms. I dropped my carry-on, and the handle smacked against the ground, startling several nearby passengers from my flight.

"It's good to see you, too," I said. "Now, put me down."

"You packin' a few extra pounds there?" he asked, squeezing my upper arm.

I swatted at him. "Shut up."

"All those break up pints of ice cream?" he asked with a smirk.

*More like bottles of wine.* "You're looking fit as ever."

He preened. "It's Erica. She's so damn fine. I swear she gets more and more beautiful every day."

"Worried?" I asked as a smile played along my lips.

"Hell, no. With this personality? Please." He pointed to himself and wagged his eyebrows.

I couldn't help but laugh.

We walked over to the baggage carousel, and I found my bag right away. It wasn't that heavy. I was only spending a few

days in Seattle. Since I had used most of my savings to go to England and Qatar to find Luke, I had to pinch my pennies. It was a good thing the flight to Seattle was Matt's treat. I never would have been able to afford it.

"How about some lunch?" he asked. "I want to catch up with you for more than an hour at a time."

"You said me ditching you on New Year's Eve was fine," I said, giving him a look.

"It will be fine when you tell me everything."

"I have—"

"I've known you for a long time, Sophia. I can tell when you're lying. I know *everything* wasn't covered in our few short phone conversations."

After returning home, I had to deal with quitting the Dallas Post and searching for a new job or else I was going to go broke. And I had no urge to talk about Luke to anyone. Ripping open that wound wasn't going to solve any of my problems.

Matt brought me to an expensive restaurant near the water. I scanned the menu, seeing so many good options. My palate had changed a lot since meeting Luke. Him taking me to expensive restaurants and the amazing food at the palace had brought me out of my fried food and pasta meal rut. Since I'd worked so much, those were always easy and quickly bought or prepared.

"Don't worry about the bill," he said. "My treat."

"I don't want this vacation to be me sucking your bank account dry," I said.

"Like you did to yours?" he asked, sipping his water. "Too soon?"

I glared at the menu, and he gave up for the time being. I ordered the cheapest entree, but Matt didn't skimp on the white wine. The sun was shining, a rare thing for Seattle, and after a full glass, I started to relax a little bit.

“You can’t hold me in suspense too long,” he said. “I *am* paying for lunch.”

So that was his game. He was footing the bill as long as I supplied him with information. I supposed there were worse things to trade for.

“What do you want me to say?” I asked. “Mr. Fraser wanted a scoop on life at the palace with Luke, and I couldn’t give that to him.”

“Didn’t Luke want you to write the story?” Matt asked, bringing back the memory of Luke telling me to write about him. He knew how important the promotion was to me, yet I still couldn’t do it. It proved how selfless he was, but putting his name into my word processor was only going to make everything worse.

“He did,” I said, pouring myself more wine. “But I figured if Mr. Fraser couldn’t see my talent after six years, it wasn’t worth it to write the story. So I left.”

“How do you feel about that decision?” he asked.

I shrugged. “It’s probably something I should have done a long time ago, but I needed that push. I needed to see that there’s so much more out there, and Mr. Fraser and the Dallas Post wasn’t for me. I only wished I didn’t spend most of my savings on plane tickets.”

“Do you have anything lined up?” Matt asked.

After a week of wallowing in my sorrows and another week to peel myself up off the couch, I applied to several other newspapers. The jobs didn’t pay as well, but I needed to pay my rent.

“I have an interview next week,” I said. “I sent over my portfolio before coming here.”

“Sounds positive,” Matt said.

“I hope so,” I said.

“Well, if you ever get kicked out of your apartment, I have a spare room. And there are plenty of news outlets here that would be lucky to have you.”

“Thanks,” I said, truly meaning it. But I had created this mess, and I was going to get myself out of it. If only my heart weren’t attached to my failure, I might have had another job already.

“Are we going to talk about the Luke-sized elephant in the room?” Matt asked.

“No,” I said firmly. “We can talk about work and any other aspects of my personal life, but not him.” I didn’t even want to think of him, never mind talk about him.

Matt put his hands up in surrender. “That’s fine. But I’m here if you need to talk.”

“I know,” I said. I appreciated everything he did for me, but I couldn’t help seeing a black hole as my future with nothing waiting on the other side for me.

After lunch, Matt brought me to my hotel. He had wanted me to stay with him, but I was already disrupting much of his life. Also, I wanted to use the trip to regroup and get my head in the game before my interview next week. Staying in Dallas only reminded me of my failures.

He suggested I treat myself to a spa day, and I promised I would consider it. He knew cost was an issue and offered to pay, but I figured I would get a manicure or a pedicure just to show that I tried.

All I wanted to do was sleep and order room service, maybe binge watch a few shows that I had on my list and never had time to see due to my work schedule. If I got the new job, then I would throw myself back into work, harder than I ever had before. It was the only way that I could see getting over Luke.

Matt followed me up to my room, probably to make sure that I didn’t hightail it home out of fear, and helped me settle in.

It was early afternoon, but I was exhausted. I couldn’t blame jet lag. After going from Dallas to England to Qatar and

back, there was no amount of jet lag that could take me out ever again.

“I’ll leave you to it,” he said. “I’ll be in touch tomorrow after work so we can have dinner.”

I walked over to the window and stared out at the Space Needle in the distance. “Sounds good.”

We said our goodbyes and Matt left. I had been alone for most of my adult life, but hearing the click of the door catapulted me back to being in Dallas. I could travel as far as I could away from Luke, but he was never far from my mind.

What the hell was I thinking? Did I really think that a vacation could make me forget that easily? His memory was attached to everything I did. My needing a job reminded me that I had failed to write the story that he wanted me to. Even being in Seattle reminded me that I wasn’t with him in Qatar instead.

A vacation wasn’t the easy-out that I wanted and needed to get Luke out of my mind.



# CHAPTER 49



## LUKE

Rolling over in bed, I reached out to the spot next to me. For a brief moment, I felt something solid and warm. My eyes sprang open, and Sophia gazed back at me. Her lips curled into a smile, and she was still her breathtakingly beautiful self.

I reached out to touch her but came up with nothing but air.

I blinked again, and she disappeared, leaving two large white pillows in her place.

It wasn't the first time I had woken up thinking she was still with me. It was my fault she was gone, and for some reason, my subconscious couldn't accept it.

I shoved the pillows to the floor. There was no need to take out my frustration on them, but it was all I could do.

Every day without Sophia seemed to get worse instead of better.

Glancing at the clock, I remembered that it was Friday. I wasn't scheduled to meet with the council today, but I did have breakfast with my family.

Meeting for at least one meal a week was something that Mother requested soon after Father's funeral. Since both her sons were at home for good, she wanted to have scheduled time in the week for us to catch up with the goings on in our lives.

I wouldn't have minded spending time with my family—I loved Mother and Abir—but the conversation always leaned toward me being single. Sure, I was the first king in some time

that wasn't already married before taking the crown, but the circumstances were different with me. I had thrown myself into making our family's company a success.

Father's death had been sudden and had given me no time to prepare.

Matchmaking was all Mother could talk about, so I dreaded any time I spent alone with her. Thankfully Abir was a buffer between us. He was a mama's boy, and she doted on him enough that it was a little easier to avoid her speaking to me when he was around.

I shambled through the bathroom to my walk-in closet. As I chose my clothes for the day, I never felt more alone.

Sophia had affected me more than I had ever hoped any woman would. I heard her voice in my thoughts and dreamed about her every single night.

I had forced her to leave but regretted every second of it. What made it worse was knowing that I'd had to do it. It was for the best. Just not the best for me.

Sifting through my clothes, I didn't bother with the traditional robes I had worn every day for a month since taking the throne. I wasn't leaving the palace, and I had work to do in my office. I wanted to be comfortable and feel like myself for a day. It wasn't so much to ask, but I still felt strange putting on a suit again. Keeping the top buttons open and my tie loose, I strode out of my bedroom toward what was sure to be an interesting breakfast with my family.

Abir and Mother were seated in the small breakfast nook at the west end of the palace. It was more intimate, and Mother and I both thought sitting at the formal table for our meals was a little too much, too soon. It was nice to see that I wasn't the only person still feeling the effects of Father's death. While I wanted her to carry on with her life, sometimes I felt like everyone had moved on too quickly.

Or maybe it was just me. Getting thrust into wearing the crown hadn't given me much time to grieve. Losing Father

and Sophia in the same week wasn't intentional, but it had been necessary for me to take the throne.

Even though I missed them both terribly, one of them was still alive and easily accessible, if only I could pick up the damn phone and call her.

I would never do that. It was confusing enough when Sophia left me the first time. If I called her, she might not know what to think about my word. And at that moment, my word was law. I had to stick to my guns. I refused to drag Sophia into my life if she wasn't one hundred percent sure she wanted to be there.

"Good morning, Luke," Mother said with a smile.

In the past two months, I had never seen Mother smile more than she did now. I hated to think that was because Sophia was out of my life. Since Mother didn't hide her emotions well, I knew that it was the case, but I would never confront her about it. It would only make me think of Sophia more than I already did.

"Good morning, Mother, Abir," I said, taking my seat by the window.

I caught Mother looking at me from the corner of her eye, but I didn't engage her. I lifted my piping cup of tea and sipped it.

"Where were we?" Mother asked Abir.

Abir smirked. "I wanted to ask if I could miss dinner tonight."

Mother's eyebrows shot up.

I smiled. His excuse better be good for missing family time.

"I'm going out with Alda for the day," he said, throwing a look my way.

This was about a girl?

I glanced at Mother. Her response would depend on the girl's status. This was the first I'd heard of Alda, but I'd only

been back at the palace for a month. My previous visits revolved around convincing Mother that I wasn't single and Father's death, and I'd never asked Abir about his life in the palace. Now was my chance to make an effort.

"Who's Alda?" I asked.

I hadn't seen Abir grin like that since Sophia was around. I was convinced he had a crush on her, and she was just as doting, but all mine.

"She's Kaamil Badour's daughter," Mother said, practically floating on air.

Kaamil was a close friend of the family. Abir didn't need to find a match for status, so I was surprised he'd found one anyway.

Sliding a look at Mother, I wondered if she had arranged their meeting behind the scenes. Either way, Abir seemed positively smitten with the girl.

My chest ached.

"Don't be out too late," Mother said, hardly disguising her stamp of approval.

For the rest of the conversation, I asked Abir about Alda and how they met. It all seemed to have occurred naturally enough, but I kept an eye on Mother's reaction. I didn't know why I cared so much, maybe because she had tried to set me up every single time I came to visit the palace. There wasn't one time before a month ago, when I brought Sophia as my fake girlfriend, that she hadn't set me up on at least two dates during whatever short time I'd been home. And she wondered why I stayed in England for most of the year.

Abir didn't want to be late for his date with Alda, so he left soon after shoveling his breakfast in his mouth.

I wanted him to stay, but I knew I would have to face Mother alone sooner or later. After discussing Abir's love life, I knew what was coming before she said the first word.

"With all this talk of girls and women in my boy's life, I wanted to tell you that I've arranged a date for you," Mother

said, getting right to the point. “Tomorrow night.”

“Did you?” I asked, shaking my head. “I’m guessing I can’t refuse?”

“Now that you’re king, it’s time you solidify other aspects of your life. Namely, securing a wife.”

“Yes, Mother. I am king. A king who can make his own decisions.”

“Not personal ones,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve been moping around this place after that girl left. It’s not royal behavior. Now that that toxic woman is out of your life, you need to settle down.”

“I’m settled,” I said. “Her name is Sophia by the way. But when it comes to women, I don’t want you meddling anymore.” I wished there was a royal decree for king’s mothers to stay out of their business. Knowing Mother, she would only try harder.

“It’s not about me meddling anymore,” she said. “You came into the throne under unorthodox circumstances. Your Father’s death was sudden, and the council didn’t have much time to deliberate before you chose your path.”

I snapped my neck her way. “What do you know about the council?”

“I hear things,” she said.

I narrowed my eyes. “What things?”

“You will be much more respected with a woman by your side.”

“Who said I’m not respected?” I asked, standing up. My chair teetered on the edge of falling but righted itself. My breakfast caught in my throat. What did she know about anything to do with the council? Had someone been feeding her information... or lies? What happened in that room was private and confidential.

She dodged the question. “It shows stability, for the council and your people. Isn’t that what you want?”

“Of course,” I said, stalking over to the balcony. “But this is none of your business.”

Her chair moved, and her soft footsteps approached. I could barely breathe. I loosened my tie, but it didn’t help.

“I want you to be happy. Fulfilled.”

“I’ve been on my own for years, and I am fulfilled.”

“I know you think you are, but it’s different when you have someone to share your life with.”

She was right. I had never felt as complete as I had when Sophia was with me. How could anyone but her give me that feeling again?

“You know I’m not privy to what happens in the meeting room,” she said, as if reading my mind. It was a gift of hers and a curse for me. “But I’ve seen the way the council members act toward you and how they acted toward Erol. There’s a disconnect.”

“And you think a woman is going to change that?”

“It wouldn’t hurt. Since you haven’t been around for years, they want to be sure that you are prepared to be settled here for the rest of your life. You need to do something to prove that to them.”

Jaabir was the most traditional member of the council. While he hadn’t said it aloud, I wondered if Mother was right and he wanted to see me put down roots. To him, I looked like someone who came back to the palace out of duty instead of a desire to reign.

I wanted to respect Father’s wishes. Maybe the only way was to follow in his footsteps. All the way.

The thought of being with someone other than Sophia made my stomach churn. With her, it had been so easy. Even though we faked it for a little while, I quickly fell for her, and being with her was as easy as breathing. I knew a love like that

would only come around once in a lifetime, but I had needed to let her go. It was the best for everyone.

At the very least, I could go on a date to show I was trying. Maybe Jaabir would see my effort and accept that I was on my way to becoming a shade closer to the king that Father was. It was all I could do at the moment.

“Fine,” I said to Mother. “I will go out with this woman.”

Mother grinned. “Her name is Saanvi, and her father has been a good friend of ours for years. Perhaps you’ve met her father before.”

Mother went on about Saanvi and her bloodline. I briefly recalled speaking with her father at the banquet that I’d attended with Sophia. I was so enamored by my date that I barely recalled the conversation with her father. At the time, it appeared that I was in love with an American woman, so he hadn’t brought up the awkward conversation about his daughter being single. Now, it was fair game for fathers to try and set up their daughters for the chance of being a queen.

I supposed I should have been grateful to Mother for vetting these women before future banquets turned into The Bachelor. I never thought I would be happy with Mother’s meddling, but stranger things had happened in my life.

“I’ve set everything up,” Mother said. “You don’t need to worry about a thing.”

“Great,” I said, dreading my weekend more than I usually did.



# CHAPTER 50



## SOPHIA

**B**y the time Friday rolled around, I was *so* ready to go home. The sun from the first day I arrived had disappeared for good, and it poured buckets of rain every day since. How could anyone live in this sort of weather? I looked forward to the blistering Dallas heat to dry me out.

Matt had been a gracious host, leaving me to explore and clear my head during the day while he worked and taking me out at night. I wished he lived closer. Now that I was without a job, it was nice to meet up with him on a regular basis. It was something I never did before, since I rarely went out with anyone other than co-workers, but those were usually company-planned events.

I wondered if I would ever be that girl who went out with other women and chatted about our boyfriends or husbands. I supposed I would have to make some female friends before that could happen. *And* get a boyfriend or husband.

Perhaps this new job would open a chapter in my life that I'd never had before. Being with Matt made me crave people in my life to share things with. If I took anything away from the trip, it would be that.

Being in my head for most of the day as I traveled around the slick streets of Seattle didn't ease the ache in my heart or head about Luke. It would take more time, but with the prospect of opening myself up again, I could see a future when it wouldn't hurt so bad... a distant future.

My phone rang just as I was coming out of my second shower of the day. During my final shopping trip, the sky had opened up and soaked me from head to toe. A hot shower had been in order. No wonder Matt was so in shape, his muscles were probably jacked from shivering all day.

“Hello?” I said into the phone.

“Soph! Put on something smashing tonight; we’re going out.”

I glanced out the window where the darkening sky looked even more foreboding than usual. “Really? How about we stay in tonight?” I was looking forward to slipping into the soft hotel robe and slippers and stuffing my face with room service. Who knew the next time I would have a good meal?

“No way,” he said. “Don’t be a party pooper.”

I rolled my eyes. “What do you want to do?”

“There’s this bar that I love,” he said.

“You love every bar,” I said, wrapping the robe around my body. I could have sunk into its soft folds until tomorrow. I wondered how much it cost to take the robe home with me. Probably more than I wanted to spend.

“Come on. It’s your last night here. Live a little.”

I grumbled without saying anything.

“I’ll forgive you for New Year’s when you ditched me,” he said.

I chewed on my lip. “I’ll go out if you promise to never use that against me again.”

“Scout’s honor,” he said.

“You were never a Boy Scout.”

“I know, but I’ve always wanted to say that, though.”

“What time do you want to meet?” I asked.

“In an hour,” he said. “I’ll grab the Uber and meet you.”

I glanced at my ragged face in the mirror. The mascara I’d put on that morning blurred down my cheeks. “See you then.”

My LBD stared at me from the closet. I had packed it on a whim, unsure if Matt was going to take me anywhere nice. I supposed getting dressed up might improve my mood, so I grabbed it from the hanger and slipped it on.

Since I knew the weather wasn't going to cooperate, I pulled my brown locks back into a low ponytail and did some magic with the tiny hotel hairdryer, making a nice wave throughout the tail. It was a good thing I packed my raincoat with the oversized hood because I didn't want to ruin the look I'd created.

At the very least, I looked like a woman who was over her recent ex, totally hiding how I felt on the inside.



Matt was right on time with the Uber. I managed to get inside the car without getting too wet.

I had been right to dress up tonight. Matt wore a jacket and slacks. No tie, but he looked really good.

“Heels, nice,” he said, appraising my choice in clothing.

“It’s all for you,” I said with a grin. “Otherwise, I’d have my fluffy slippers on.”

“You shouldn’t have,” he said and slung his arm over my shoulder. “I’m going to miss hanging out with you.”

“Me too,” I admitted.

“Let’s not wait months for the next time, okay?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Let’s not.”

“Okay, enough of that mushy shit. Tonight, we’re going to have a blast. Send you off with a bang and possibly a hangover.”

“How about just the bang?” I asked. “I have to fly tomorrow.”

“Bang it is, then,” Matt said, grinning.

I realized what I'd said, and so did the Uber driver. He eyed me from the rearview mirror, and Matt and I burst out laughing.



When we arrived at the crowded bar, we managed to find two open stools at the end of the long wooden bar.

Matt ordered some appetizers and drinks for us. I had already eaten a big lunch, but I agreed to get food because I didn't want to get hammered. I was in a strange city, and even though Matt would keep an eye on me, I didn't want to spend my last night hugging the toilet bowl.

I sipped my vodka and cranberry while scanning the faces at the bar. Most of the women were in dresses, so I'd made a good choice with my outfit.

"How was work today?" I asked Matt.

He shrugged. "Let's just say TGIF."

I nodded. In the media industry, it was rare that I worked only five days. I hadn't had an actual weekend in forever, and I probably wouldn't for a while if I nailed the interview next week.

"What I want to talk about is that guy staring at you," Matt said.

"Where?" I asked.

"Don't look!" he said, pulling my chin toward him. "Near the door, black suit, black shirt. Don't ruin this."

"Ruin what?" I asked, daring to look in the direction that Matt indicated.

"I know that you're not over Luke," he said. "Maybe it's time you take that next step."

"What next step?"

Matt rolled his eyes. "I might call you pathetic if I didn't love you so much."

I gritted my teeth. “You want me to meet that guy?”

Matt shrugged. “What harm could it do?”

“I thought tonight was about you and me?” I asked. “I’m not going to see you for a while.”

“Remember, we agreed to change that,” Matt said. “Just go over there and say hi. It’s not like I’m going to leave you stranded.”

“I don’t know how saying ‘hi’ is going to help me,” I said.

Matt’s eyes widened. “Maybe you can sleep with him. Get Luke out of your system and someone else inside.”

I glanced at the end of the bar, and the guy was gone. “That’s not—”

“Hi there,” a deep voice said from next to me.

Matt pinched my arm, and I drove my elbow into his side. The guy in the black suit stood right beside me. My mouth went dry as I took him in. Tall, pale blue eyes, and a five o’clock shadow. He smiled, showing off white teeth.

“Hi,” I said.

“I’m Thomas,” he said, extending his hand to me.

I took it. He had a firm handshake, and my hand disappeared into his palm. “Sophia.”

“I haven’t seen you here before,” he said.

“I’m visiting from Dallas. My friend—” I went to introduce Matt, but he’d already faded into the crowd. Two thumbs up shot out of the group of people standing near the bathrooms, and I shook my head. So much for not leaving me stranded.

“I’m visiting with a friend.”

Thomas glanced around, apparently not realizing that I was with Matt. Or maybe he didn’t care.

He sat in the vacant stool beside me and asked me about my life. I kept it as vague as possible. He went all in, though. I learned about his life story: grew up in the Midwest, came to

the big city to work at a PR firm, had an apartment overlooking the water, no woman in his life other than his dog, Molly.

Talking to Thomas was easy, and Matt had been right. I barely thought of Luke. I didn't plan on getting married to Thomas, but he was a handsome distraction.

Glancing at the clock sometime later, I was surprised to realize that two hours had passed. We had downed several drinks in that time. I wasn't drunk by any means, but my body was warm, and part of that radiated off Thomas. We sat much closer than when we'd first met. I wasn't sure if it was due to the bar getting more crowded or if I wanted to be closer to him.

My phone pinged, and a text from Matt showed up.

“Exhausted, will pick you up tomorrow before your flight. Get it, girl.”

I chewed on my lip before taking a final gulp of my drink. A sense of boldness moved through me, and I pressed my hand against Thomas's chest. He had a great body, and I wanted to see what was underneath his expensive clothes.

“Do you want to get out of here?” he asked.

I nodded.

Getting off the bar stool, my legs wobbled. *Damn heels!*

Thomas was paying the tab, and I looked around the bar. The people seemed louder now that the spell was broken between Thomas and me. I called an Uber, setting the address for my hotel.

Was I really about to do this?

Thomas took my hand and led the way out of the bar, making a path toward the door.

My heart pounded in my ears as Luke returned to the front of my mind. His smile burned into my retinas as we walked outside. A blast of cool, damp air enveloped my skin.

The Uber driver pulled up to the curb.

“Is this for us?” Thomas asked.

I cleared my throat as the fog in my mind lifted. I would be lucky to sleep with Thomas, and it might help get over Luke, but the idea of it brought a sour taste to my mouth.

“It’s for me,” I said. “I don’t want you to come back with me.”

He blinked, and I expected him to be upset with me, but instead, he came closer to me and took my hands in his. “Can I have your number, then? For the next time you come to Seattle? I had a great time with you, Sophia.”

It was a nice gesture, but I politely stepped away from him. “It was so nice talking to you, but I’m not interested in dating right now.”

He let out a breath and turned on his heel, going back into the bar. He gave me a little wave without facing me.

I cringed.

The Uber driver called out to me, pulling me from my thoughts. I hated that I had led Thomas on, but it felt right getting into the car alone.

At least, it did until I walked into my empty hotel room.

I tossed my purse onto the bed and kicked off my heels. As my feet pressed into the carpet, an ache radiated up my legs. I was going to feel that tomorrow.

Laying down in the bed, the room tilted slightly. I imagined Thomas on top of me, us kissing and making love on this bed. Why had I turned him down?

Luke had moved on with his life. Why couldn’t I? I had the opportunity to be with a sexy guy for the night with no strings attached. Why the hell did I leave him to sleep with another woman?

I raked my hands through my hair and groaned. Matt was right. Sleeping with Thomas would have distracted me, at least for the evening. There was no reason why I should have turned him down while Luke wanted nothing to do with me anymore.



# CHAPTER 51



## LUKE

I had agreed to go on a date with Saanvi, but if I was going to attempt to find someone to replace Sophia, I was going to do it in my own way. Which meant I dismissed the outfit that Mother approved for my date and went with a slick suit and tie.

Holding onto my independence was vital for my future at the palace. I didn't need it to get around that at thirty-three years old, my mother dressed me up for dates. It was bad enough that she had set me up in the first place. I wasn't going a step further to add to my humiliation.

Even though most of it was in my head, I felt a little more like myself before heading off on my first blind date in some time. Years before meeting Sophia and taking over the family business, Mother had set me up with some women. Those were forgettable, and I hoped Saanvi was interesting to talk to at the very least.

I also chose the venue. My mother intended for me and Saanvi to eat dinner together at the palace, but if I was going on a date against my will, then I wanted to be as far away from Mother as possible. I had nightmares of catching her with her ear to the dining room door or her telling Saanvi embarrassing stories about my childhood.

I suspected those would come eventually—if they hadn't already—if I decided to take things further with her.

I shook that thought out of my head.

*One step at a time, Luke.*

As the clock ticked closer to the date, I started to get nervous but not in the same way that I had whenever Sophia and I were getting ready for a date.

This was different. With Sophia, it was excitement and anticipation that put my nerves on high alert. With Saanvi, I felt nervous because I was going in blind. What did she look like? Would I feel any attraction to her? Did we have anything in common, other than our families and the fact that we were single? I didn't even know her age. I had a feeling she was much younger. Most women in Qatar were married off early.

If she was a world traveler, we might have something to talk about, but if Mother was setting me up with her, I assumed Saanvi was more traditional. Fit for a queen in Mother's eyes.

I straightened my tie and took one last glance at myself in the mirror before heading off to the unknown future.

Before I could open my door, someone knocked.

"Luke," Mother said from the other side.

I sighed and opened the door. "I'm leaving."

She pushed through into my bedroom, and I turned to face her. "You can't barge in here." I sounded and felt like a teenager, but Mother always brought out that side of me.

"You need to be on your best behavior tonight," she said.

"Yes, Mother," I said, wishing she would go away. This wasn't my first date.

"Saanvi would make the perfect wife and queen to stand beside you," Mother said.

The fact that she set me up without my permission was bad enough; now she was giving me dating advice. Would it ever end?

"I don't need a lecture, Mother." Over the last few weeks, Mother's attitude had improved enough that I could deal with her. Now, she was pushing herself back into where she was when Sophia was around.

“This is not a lecture, Luke,” Mother said. “I’m trying to make you understand—”

“I understand perfectly well,” I snapped. “Now if you will excuse me?”

I whipped open the door and slammed it closed behind me. As I stalked down the hallway, my skin prickled with annoyance. Even with Sophia out of my life, Mother wasn’t going to stop until I’d secured a wife. But I wasn’t going to pick just anyone. I needed the one woman who could measure up to Sophia, or at least prove to be a distraction while I got over the true love of my life.



Since we were both single, it was inappropriate for me to pick Saanvi up. So, we met at the restaurant. It was nice to be alone in the back of the car, mentally preparing for an evening with a stranger. Even though Mother and Father had a successful arranged marriage, the idea was archaic to me. If I was going to spend the rest of my life with someone, they needed to be someone I could tolerate on my own without anyone else interfering.

I arrived early enough to secure our table and gather myself before meeting her.

The restaurant was exclusive enough that no one approached me, but I noticed heads did turn when I sat down. I ignored their stares, already feeling the weight of Mother’s persistence in the back of my head. I had a sense that she would wait up for me and want every minute detailed to her when I arrived home.

Deep inside, I hoped that I had something to tell her. Distracting myself with another woman would surely help me get over Sophia. It was all I wanted, even though it made my chest tighten to think of a day that Sophia wouldn’t fill my head.

The waiter came over to the table and announced Saanvi’s arrival.

I stood up and buttoned my jacket before lifting my gaze to the woman approaching my table.

I sucked in a breath as I took her in. She dressed in a flowing, deep purple gown. Even though she was covered from neck to toes, I could almost see her thin figure underneath. Her black hair was tied back in a plait, and it slowly swayed against her back as she walked. She was exquisite.

“Luke,” she said in a breathy voice. Her smile was warm and friendly.

I bowed to her. “Saanvi, I presume.”

The waiter helped with her chair, and I sat down again. According to law, it was prohibited for men and women to show affection toward each other in public. I had the law on my side since I didn’t plan on moving this relationship faster than a snail’s pace. If I was searching for a wife, I wanted to be sure that I could spend the rest of my life with whoever I chose.

Her looks helped ease my mind.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” she said.

I could barely hear her over the conversations around us, so I leaned closer to hear what she had to say.

The truth was, nothing she said throughout the dinner was particularly exciting. It appeared as if her father had kept her under wraps until he could find her a suitable husband. I supposed the king was suitable enough for him, but talking to her was like talking to my fork.

“Your life in England sounds so exciting,” she said after I explained about running the company in England. I hated to resort to business talk, but we didn’t have much in common, and I was running out of ideas.

“It wasn’t much,” I said. “I worked a lot. Enough that I barely had time to do anything else.”

“I know how that is,” she said.

“You do?”

“Of course,” she said. “My days are filled, too.”

“With what?” I asked, hoping I didn’t sound too rude. From what she’d already told me, she had no hobbies and barely made it out of the city.

“Oh, plenty,” she said with a laugh, but I failed to understand what was so funny.

I chided myself for thinking poorly of her. She was pretty and nice and probably nervous to have dinner with me—a king.

“I keep my parents’ house tidy, and I am in charge of the servants,” she said.

What a vacation it would be for me to be in charge of the servants. I noticed a little flicker of something in her expression. A small smirk that reminded me of Mother when she attempted to pull a fast one on me. It was then I realized that Saanvi had been prepped for this dinner.

I sat back in my chair and used my food as a distraction, taking a breath and recalling the rest of the conversation. She was a blank slate, no personality, no hobbies or job. She was completely open to being molded into a queen. Her being “in charge” of her servants was the kicker. It was Mother’s sole purpose at the palace to keep it running smoothly. With Saanvi’s only qualification of running a household, of course, Mother would think she was perfect. She had the title and the ability to give me what I needed. Sure, she was beautiful, but that would only take her so far. I was sure plenty of other single men would be happy to be with her. Not me.

I felt sick. Never had I worked so hard at a conversation before. I imagined Sophia sitting across from me. She had enough life experience—at least ones that were foreign to me—to carry an entire meal just on her stories alone. This woman was nothing like her, and she wasn’t what I wanted.

While I stewed inside, I gave Saanvi no indication that I knew that I’d been set up in the worst way. Mother would never stop if I didn’t take charge of my life. The longer I sat with Saanvi, the more I wanted Sophia. If it were possible, I

wanted Sophia even more than I had right after she left. Mother's plan had backfired, and there was only one thing I needed to do.

My head was clearer than it had been in a month.

When dinner was over, I parted ways with Saanvi politely and went back home. As I walked up the palace steps, my nerve endings fired rapidly. The solution was clear, but I had avoided it, suffering much more than I needed to.

Mother shuffled into the front entryway of the palace, just as I expected her to.

I didn't end the date early since I wanted to give Saanvi a good time. It wasn't as if I would ever see her again in the same setting. Maybe she would be able to regale her family about the time that she went on a date with a king. I was sure she would make some man happy, but that man wasn't me.

"How did it go?" Mother asked. Her lips pressed into a smile, and her hands clasped in front of her.

"The meal was fine," I said.

"Fine?" Mother asked.

As much as Mother enjoyed playing games, I preferred to be straightforward. "I'm not going on another date with Saanvi."

"What?" Her clasped hands fell to her sides into fists. "No, you will try again. She's perfect for you. I'll talk to her. She was probably nervous. I told you we should have had dinner here."

"We? No, Mother. She's perfect for someone, but not for me."

Mother stepped forward, but I wasn't going to back down. "You will see Saanvi again. How can you know someone after one date? She's beautiful and smart—"

"And boring and not for me," I finished for her.

She balked. "You need a wife, Luke."

"I know," I said.

“Then why are you pushing back so much?” she asked. “You and Saanvi will have exquisite royal children—”

“Stop it, Mother,” I said. “You’re pushing too hard for this. I need you to listen to me. I don’t want to be with Saanvi. I don’t want to be with any woman that you choose for me. I want to pick my own wife.”

“You’re a king. There’s no dating app for that. You need these women to be brought to you. It’s the way that kings have done it for years.”

“I understand,” I said. “But I choose to do things differently.”

She crossed her arms. “How are you going to do that?”

I took a deep breath, knowing that I was going to disappoint her more than I ever had before. “I’m going to America to do something I should have done a long time ago.”

Mother’s mouth fell open, and I strode past her, hoping that she wouldn’t follow me. This was something I needed to do, and as king, no one could tell me otherwise. I would deal with the fallout when I returned home.



# CHAPTER 52



## SOPHIA

The hot feeling of embarrassment over the encounter with Thomas faded over the next few days. While I knew Matt wanted me to get a one-night stand out of my system, he'd been supportive when I told him what happened. It wasn't as if I would ever see Thomas again, but talking to him all night and feeling that rush of excitement at a new love interest was what I needed at the time.

Sex would come later. It would be with someone I knew well, as I had known Luke well before taking that step with him. I wasn't about to jump in the sack for the sake of it. I was worth more than that.

Funnily enough, thinking of Luke didn't hurt as much since returning from Seattle. I imagined Gia had set him up on plenty of dates already and he had probably chosen a bride by now. The relationship we had was a whirlwind, but it wasn't practical. I would hold it in my heart forever, but the sting of heartache I had felt began to fade away.

I went into Monday morning with a new outlook on life. While getting ready for the interview, I went over my portfolio in my head, trying to pump myself up. For some reason, I couldn't do it. For years, my life had been about reporting. I ate, slept, and breathed journalism.

I knew I was good. The Dallas Post wouldn't have kept me on if I was terrible. But something had changed. Whether that was because I'd ended my career with them so abruptly, or it was Luke opening up my eyes to a whole new world. Either way, I wasn't itching to get to the interview and start a new

job. That itch had lived with me for years, pushing me to write better and create more interesting stories.

Practicality came into play when my passion fizzled out. Looking around at my apartment, I wanted to keep it. It was my sacred space, and nothing was going to take it away from me. I'd already had enough tragedy when it came to my love life. Being homeless on top of that would tip the scales in a not so favorable direction.

As much as I loved him, taking Matt up on his offer to move to Seattle into his apartment was not going to happen. I was heartbroken, but I wasn't a weak person. I would survive on my own.

I took a deep breath and checked myself out in the mirror. After weeks moping around my apartment in various stages of pajamas and undress, it was strange to be in work clothes again. Even after drinking my weight in wine and indulging in every type of food in Seattle, my clothes still fit. The black slacks hugged my butt, and the pumps I wore only for interviews made my legs look fantastic.

Pairing that with a gray blouse that accentuated my light blue eyes, I knew I was ready.

There was nothing like a good outfit to add pep to my step as I walked out of my apartment.

My confidence wavered in and out while on my way to the interview. Since this job opportunity was my only prospect, I had to nail it. Moving on with my life was the only way to overcome what I'd dealt with in my past. There was no use holding on to things that were never going to happen.

Strangely, Thomas had taught me that. Luke was never going to happen, so there was no use in thinking about him or allowing the idea of him to hinder my life.

Reporting wasn't my dream job anymore, but until I figured out what I wanted to do, I had to force myself to do the only thing I was good at. Once I got my bearings again—and replaced the hole in my savings account—I would be able to figure out the rest of my life.



Outside the building for Dallas News, a direct competitor for the Dallas Post, I took a big breath and propelled myself toward a new future. One that I could go into on my terms.

If only Mr. Fraser could see me now.

The inside of the newsroom was impressive. While the Dallas Post was up on current technology, Dallas News had taken it to a whole other level. The newsroom was one room with glass dividers separating the few offices on the edges of the room. Everyone worked in a wide open space instead of cubicles that cut off the editors and head reporters from the rest. Each of the desks had thin computer screens that were so big, they hid the faces of many of the reporters. Who needed cubicles when you had those massive things?

“Sophia Holmes?” someone asked from behind me.

I whirled around to see a tall, rail-thin woman with voluminous wavy auburn hair. Her high cheekbones almost reached her eyes as she grinned at me.

“Carrie?” I asked.

Carrie Lyons was the editor in chief at Dallas News. She had contacted me hours after I sent in my resume. Mr. Fraser rarely contacted anyone directly unless it affected him personally. His secretary, Chelsea, was the middleman between him and anyone that might annoy him.

“It’s such a pleasure to meet you,” she said, taking my hand in hers. “Let’s go to my office.”

She wore heels better than I ever could. Her confidence shone through every step. While I hadn’t been so confident in my future, there was something about Carrie that made me want to work for her.

“Sit, sit,” she said when we entered her office. She had a fantastic view of downtown. Other than the traditional desk and chair near the window, she had two leather couches sitting

opposite each other, close to the glass dividers separating her from her reporters.

I placed my bag down next to me and pulled out my portfolio.

“Not yet,” she said, waving a hand at my folder. “I want to talk about your experience.”

“Oh,” I said, putting the folder down. “Well, I’ve been with the Dallas Post for six years.”

“Six years and they just let you go?” she asked.

I hadn’t been transparent in my cover letter about why I left the Post, but I knew this was the time to put it all on the table—well, enough that she would hire me.

“I had a conflict of interest with one of my stories and my boss—my previous boss, Mr. Fraser—couldn’t see past that.”

She shook her head. “As reporters, we have to go with our gut. And working with someone for six years, I’m surprised that he didn’t allow you to have your own feelings about the matter.”

I narrowed my eyes. Carrie was nice, but she was, at the very least, a reporter. I wanted to believe she was genuinely interested in me, but I couldn’t reveal too much too quickly. Falling in love with a subject of a story wasn’t something that reporters did while expecting to keep their jobs.

“What was the story?” she asked.

“The king of Qatar was stepping down from the throne,” I said, trying to keep emotion from my voice. Even though I hadn’t known Erol that long, his loss still affected me. In the end, he was a kind man to Luke and me, accepting us as a couple. “I was sent to England to interview the prince.”

“And what happened?” she asked.

I stared at my hands. The buried feelings about Luke resurfaced, filling me with guilt and dread for the rash decisions I had made throughout our relationship. Pushing through them, I said, “We came to an arrangement.”

“You and the prince?”

“Yes,” I said. “I traveled to Qatar with him so that I could secure the interview.”

Carrie leaned toward me. “You were a visitor at the palace? Color me impressed.”

I nodded. “Then the king died, and I returned home without a story.”

“Why is that?”

I wanted to tell her it was because I fell in love with the prince, but she was in interview mode, and I didn’t want this to be about Luke and me. I had to prove myself to her without Luke’s help.

“The family was grieving,” I said. “I made a choice, and I would do the same again.”

She sat back and licked her lips. “Well, sounds like you enjoy a good adventure.”

I let out the breath I’d been holding. “It *was* an adventure, but I would prefer to cover domestic stories. It’s my strong suit.”

I handed over my portfolio. I was done speaking about Luke and my international travels. I needed to get this job on my own merit.

Carrie sifted through my portfolio, but I knew she had already gone through what I’d sent her. She had prepared questions that I answered as easily as breathing. I knew my previous topics well and spoke about them with confidence.

Carrie’s smile grew the longer we were in the interview. I felt so comfortable with her, almost as if I were speaking to a girlfriend over drinks. It was a nice change from the gruff Mr. Fraser and his attitude when things didn’t go his way. Sure, he was successful, but I knew now more than ever that the Dallas Post hadn’t been for me, and I was glad for the way things turned out.

“Well,” Carrie said, standing up after almost an hour. She flexed her legs and offered her hand to me. “I’m so happy to

meet you, Sophia. I'm so impressed with everything you've done, and I see some real potential here at Dallas News."

"You do?" I asked.

"Absolutely," she said. "The rest of this is all formality, but I will be in touch with you tomorrow with an offer in hand."

I blinked. "Oh."

She smirked and walked over to her desk, jotting something down on a piece of paper. "I don't like to beat around the bush. I believe in honesty and transparency. You possess both of those, and I see no sense in delaying the inevitable. Any news outlet would be lucky to have you."

"Thank you," I said, shaking her hand.

She checked the fragile-looking gold watch circling her wrist. "I have another meeting shortly, but let me walk you out."

Carrie bid me farewell at the door, and I walked outside with a new outlook on life. The interview was the easiest I'd ever done, and I couldn't believe that she offered me a job on the spot, even after I told her how I'd disappointed Mr. Fraser.

Maybe I *did* have the potential for greater things, but I only focused on the smaller ones to get me by. I wondered if I should have left the Dallas Post years ago, but then I would have never met Luke. For better or worse, he had changed me. In years past, I might not have impressed Carrie the way I did today. Or maybe it was because I had insight on her competitor.

Either way, I had a new job, and I would be able to keep my apartment and the lights on.

Getting into my car, I went to a local coffee shop and treated myself to a latte and a chocolate croissant. It was nice not to penny-pinch, and I deserved it after nailing the interview.

I sent a text to Matt and told him about the job. There were too many exclamation points in his text to count. I smiled and

sifted through my email and social media feed, feeling even more relaxed than I had on vacation in Seattle.

I wondered when I would start at the Dallas News. Hopefully soon. I itched to get back to a normal routine to continue to move forward instead of remaining stuck in my past.

After the latte and pastry, I wanted to get home and relax for a little while. Still feeling the high from the amazing interview, I looked forward to getting into some sweats and vegging out on the couch. If I had only one more day to relax, I was going to make it a good one.

Parking in the reserved spot outside my building, I headed inside, feeling the caffeine boost from the coffee and chocolate.

A car pulled up close to the entrance, and I glanced at the driver. I didn't recognize him, but when the back door of the car opened, I figured it was another resident of the building. I held the door open, since sometimes it stuck even after punching in the code for the door.

I glanced at the man getting out of the car, and I had to blink several times to be sure of what I was seeing.

Luke strode toward me, and I wondered what the hell had been in my coffee.



# CHAPTER 53



## LUKE

Taking the trip to America to see Sophia was the most spontaneous thing I'd ever done. Growing up in a palace with a daily schedule and then working at a company with complete focus and structure didn't prepare me for what was to come.

Each leg of the journey brought moments of doubt. What if she was completely over me and I was about to make a fool out of myself? Going to her apartment to see another man hand in hand with her would have broken my heart. But thinking of that possibility made it all seem very real.

It would be better for everyone if she moved on, but I had to see her one more time. Putting it all out there for her one last time would give me a chance to either make something of our relationship or leave it in the past for good.

It was the only way I would be able to stomach any other dates with Mother's picks for my wife. Getting Sophia out of my head and heart was the solution.

With enough money to travel privately, I reached Dallas far quicker than anyone flying commercial. I didn't want to give myself the opportunity to change my mind. Mother was furious with me, and if I returned home, I doubted she would ever let me out of her sight again.

This was my last chance to be with Sophia, and I wasn't about to ruin it because of cold feet.

The limo driver pulled up to her building. I fully expected to wait around outside or in the lobby of her apartment

building until she returned home from work, but as I got out of the car, the woman holding the front door turned around, and my breath caught in my throat.

Sophia's face mirrored the shock within me. My feet moved on their own, as if she had a magnetic pull on my heart. I strode over to her, wanting to take her into my arms. The corners of her lips tightened, and I knew this wouldn't be as easy as I would like it to be.

We had gone toe to toe before, but I'd royally fucked up by sending her away without an explanation. Well, I had an explanation, but it was a lie. I never stopped loving her, and if she would be with me the rest of my life, I would be the happiest man alive.

As long as she wasn't seeing anyone else, I promised myself I would stick around until we could figure something out.

Her hand tightened on the handle of the door as I approached her. Cautiously, I slowed my walk and waited for her to say something. I wasn't in the mood to get a bloody nose if she decided to shut the door in my face.

When she didn't move or speak, I took the first step, unable to bear the silence between us any longer.

"Sophia," I said, keeping my hands at my sides even though I wanted to reach out and cup her cheeks in my hands. I wanted to pull her close and never let go. "I'm sorry."

She shoved away from the door and right into my arms. Her arms slung over my shoulders, and she squeezed me closer to her. Her body against mine sent electric pulses through me. I lifted her off her feet and inhaled the scent of her.

All of my worries went away. I couldn't believe that she missed me as much as I did her. This wasn't a hug between friends. There was still a chance for us; I just had to make it happen.

"Let's go inside," she said.

She took my hand and then noticed something behind me. We turned to see my suitcase sitting alone where the limo had been. I hadn't even noticed that the driver had left it there.

I grabbed my bag, not letting Sophia out of my sight. Walking into her building, I felt whole again.



“It’s not much,” Sophia said when we got off the elevator on her floor. We were silent during the elevator ride, but it wasn’t like the dips in conversation that I’d experienced with Saanvi. Sophia and I were comfortable enough with each other to know that sometimes words weren’t needed.

She didn’t loosen the grip on my hand as we ascended to her floor.

Though, I did want to express how sorry I was. I would spend the rest of my life doing that as long as she was there next to me.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said, not caring if she lived in a cardboard box. I was with her, and that was all that mattered.

“Says the man who has a palace,” she said.

Before she could open the door, I took both of her hands in mine and drew her close. I wanted to kiss her so badly but not before she knew everything. I would leave it up to her if she wanted to continue being with me after.

“As long as I’m with you, I don’t care about anything else. Apartments, palaces, they’re just things. I want more out of my life than things. Can you understand that?”

“I can,” she said and unlocked her door.

I walked in behind her, and my heart skittered in my chest. Since I had only seen Sophia in England or Qatar, I never seen her in her element or seen what her life really looked like outside of fancy restaurants and palaces.

The main area of the apartment was an open space with a living room, small kitchen, and breakfast nook. It was tidy,

and the knick-knacks and paintings on the walls gave me better insight into her mind. A few framed articles hung on the wall. I planned on taking a closer look at those if Sophia asked me to stay.

The place was every inch Sophia.

“So, this is it,” she said, tossing her keys onto the small table near the kitchen. “The bathroom and bedroom are through there.” She pointed to a door across the room.

I nodded my understanding. “Can we talk?”

“Sure,” she said. “Let’s sit over here.”

We sat on the oversized brown suede couch nestled in the corner of the room, facing a small flat-screen television. Before I met her, she worked a lot. I imagined a big screen wasn’t at the top of her list of priorities. I vowed that whatever she wanted for the rest of her life, I would give it to her. She had an opportunity to have it all, but she needed to be the one to make that choice.

“Do you want something to drink?” she asked.

I shook my head. Water wasn’t going to quench my thirst for *her*.

I wasn’t sure where to start with everything. There was no segue into what I needed to say.

“How is being the king?” she asked, saving me from starting the conversation.

“It’s different,” I said, settling into the couch. After my long journey and Sophia not throwing me out of her apartment, my body started to relax.

She flipped her hair over her shoulder and pulled her legs under her. “I can imagine.”

“How about you?” I asked.

“Everything is status quo,” she said. “I just got back from Seattle.”

My eyebrows knotted together. “Seattle?”

“Yes, that’s where my friend Matt lives.”

I noticed she used the word *friend*. From the way she’d spoken about him in the past, I never worried about his intentions, but it was nice to hear her side of it.

“Did you have a nice trip?” I asked.

“Yes, I did,” she said.

“What about work?” I asked.

“I quit,” she said without explanation, but I knew it was because of me.

“You didn’t write the article?”

She stared at her fingernails, flicking at them. I’d hit a sore spot.

“I couldn’t,” she said.

“You couldn’t? Why not?”

“Why do you think, Luke?” she snapped. “I cared for you, and you threw me out of your life like I meant nothing!”

I deserved that and a whole lot more for what I did.

“So, when do you want to stop diverting the conversation and tell me the truth?” she asked.

“The truth about what?”

“If everything is fine with you and being king, why are you here? I didn’t think coming to some commoner’s apartment thousands of miles away from your palace was on your busy agenda.”

I couldn’t help but smile. Reporter-Sophia had returned and she was snarkier than ever. She deserved an explanation for me showing up in her life again after I’d been so cold toward her back in Qatar.

“What’s wrong?” she said, her expression softening. “You can tell me.”

“I know,” I said. “Seeing you so soon threw me for a bit of a loop.”

“Okay,” she said, awaiting my explanation.

“Things aren’t all that great at the palace,” I admitted. “It’s been so tough.”

“Well, your father did just die, and you had to replace him so quickly. I understand that’s not easy.”

“It wasn’t,” I said, relieved that she still understood me even after our time apart. “But that’s not the hardest part.”

“Is your Mother trying to set you up again?” she asked. “I thought you handled that.”

“I’m having a hard time because of you, Sophia,” I said, laying it out on the table.

“What do you mean? You were the one who told me to leave.”

“I know,” I said.

Her shoulders heaved, and her breathing was heavier. I was fucking this up.

I scooted closer to her and took her hands. “I only have myself to blame for feeling like this. I sent you away because I wanted to protect you.”

“Protect me from what?” she asked.

“All of it. Mother, the council, the kingdom. That choice to replace my Father was mine and mine alone. I didn’t want to uproot you from your life so that you could hate me for it years from now.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You didn’t give me a choice. You just threw me out of there like the weekly garbage. You told me you loved me. I know I hesitated, but I wanted to be sure. That morning when I walked into your bedroom, I was sure.”

“I messed up. I know that now.”

“You could have called me,” she said.

“You could have called me when you returned to my life,” I said, taking her hands in mine. They were as soft as I remembered them. I traced the lines of her palms, needing to

commit them to memory. I wanted to know every one of her thoughts, and I wanted to know every inch of her body. If only she would accept me back into her life. “I wanted to give you the same grand gesture.”

“So, what are you saying?” she asked.

“I’m saying that I want to be with you. Letting you out of my life was a mistake. One that I will spend the rest of my life making up to you if I can. If you will allow me to.”

Tears filled Sophia’s eyes, and I wondered if I had said the wrong thing.

It wasn’t until she reached over to me, grabbed my tie, and yanked it toward her that I was absolutely sure she felt the same way. Our lips crashed together, and I didn’t hesitate to take her in my arms.

We tasted each other, panting between frantic kisses. My tongue darted into her mouth as I deepened the kiss. Sophia was my oxygen, and I breathed her in, tasting, touching, and taking in every single drop of her.

“I want to be with you, too,” she breathed against my lips.

I pulled back, still holding her in my arms. “You’re not seeing anyone else?”

“No,” she said, her eyebrows knitting together. “All I can think about is you, Luke.”

“That’s good,” I said with a smile. I kissed her again, more tenderly this time, pressing my lips against her soft mouth. She tasted like chocolate and something else. Whatever it was, I never wanted to stop tasting it. I never wanted to be without her by my side again.

Something shifted inside of me as if a puzzle piece clicked into place. Sophia was the only woman in the world who made me feel whole; I knew that now.

Now, I had to be the man she needed and wanted.

From the way her hands roamed my body, I knew that wouldn’t be too hard for me.



# CHAPTER 54



## SOPHIA

The weight of all the emotions of my downward spiral from the last month lifted as Luke bared his soul to me. He hadn't come to Dallas to just apologize. He had professed his love for me, just as he had in Qatar. Sure, we had a little bump in the road, but I was certain I wouldn't allow that to happen again. Not without a fight.

The moment he reentered my life, I wanted him more than ever. Whoever said absence made the heart grow fonder had been right. My heart, head, and body wanted him, and I couldn't stop until I had him.

He seemed to have the same idea as he reached for my shirt. His fingers moved down the row of buttons, and they flicked open within seconds, exposing me to him. I couldn't remember which bra I wore to the interview, but I didn't care. It would be tossed onto the floor in no time, either by him or me.

I hoped it was him.

His hands cupped my breasts and squeezed ever so lightly. One of his hands plunged into my bra and brought out my taut nipple. His mouth surrounded most of my breast, and he sucked hard, flicking the peak with his tongue.

A gasp escaped my lips. "Oh my god," I said.

His chuckle vibrated against me, and he moved to kiss the other one.

My head fell back against the couch, and my eyes fluttered closed. Feeling his warm and wet mouth on mine, the dampness down below intensified.

Luke removed his jacket while still holding me in his arms.

I flung myself on top of him, not wanting a single moment to go by without us touching. Every lonely day spent without him scrambled to the surface of my mind, and I wanted to make up for every second of it.

“Sophia, you’re just as soft as I remember,” he said against my neck. He kissed the sensitive spot there, blowing my mind.

I reached up under his shirt and felt the muscles of his hard stomach as I moved up and pressed my fingers along the lines of his chest.

Before I could get his shirt off, Luke moved lower, driving his hand into my pants. The button of my slacks popped under the pressure, but I didn’t care. As he drew the zipper down, I knew where he was going.

Bucking my hips toward him, I wanted to feel his mouth on me. I was hungry for it.

“Touch me,” I panted. “I need it.”

He chuckled. “Your wish is my command. But I’m going to do way more than touch.”

I smiled, licking my dry lips. How could I have ever thought I would have this with anyone else?

Luke tugged my pants down until they pooled around my ankles. He shoved my panties to the side and got down to business.

Luke’s tongue circled my clit, and I let out a moan. My legs fell open as I gave him unspoken directions on what I wanted.

Before I could say another word, he shoved his fingers inside of me. I gasped and then rocked my hips against his fingers. His tongue and fingers alternated, creating a pleasurable numbness between my legs.

His flicking tongue against my clit spiked my pleasure, and in those quick spurts, I nearly came.

“I’m not letting you come that easily,” he said.

I groaned as he drove two fingers inside of me, beckoning me to try and orgasm. I was close a few times, but Luke knew my body and slowed down before I could.

“You’re a damn tease, you know that?” I panted.

He moaned against my lower lips, driving me crazy.

I raked my hands through his thick hair, forcing him to plunge inside of me again.

My legs wrapped around his shoulders and locked him in place. I wasn’t giving up without a fight.

His tongue plunged deeper inside of me, and my legs gave out, falling to the cushions.

“I want you so much,” he said, propping himself up on his elbows.

I sat up and pulled him on top of me. Grinding my wet and naked body against his clothes, I wanted them all to disappear.

“Let’s go into the bedroom,” I said, even though I didn’t want to move from that spot.

“Okay,” he said.

Scrambling off the couch, I sprinted into my bedroom and kicked off my pants. Now only in my underwear, I locked eyes on my target. My suitcase was still on the floor next to my closet, and I pulled out the three condoms I had left. Having them didn’t feel awkward, now that I had someone to use them with.

Luke entered my bedroom wearing only his boxer briefs. They fit him so well that they didn’t leave much to the imagination when it came to his arousal. He was hard and ready for me.

He strode over to me, every inch the man that I needed and loved. He took the condom from my hands, and the rest fell to the floor.

“I want you to do it,” he said.

“Me?”

“Yes,” he said without hesitation. “I want to make sure you want this.”

“I do,” I said.

“Show me.”

He pulled down his underwear, and he sprang free.

Wrapping my hand around him, I stroked his length. He was so hard for me that my panties got even wetter than they already were.

He ripped the wrapper open with his teeth and held it out to me. I took it, and his hands rested on my waist as if he were holding me steady instead of the other way around.

Rolling the latex over him, I shivered with pleasure.

His hands roamed over me, and my head felt light again as if I could float away at any minute. It was a good thing he was holding on to me.

He reached around to unclasp my bra, and it fell to the floor at my feet.

Luke pulled me close to him and kissed me again. I breathed him in as he led me to the bed. I glanced at the unmade bed and held back a laugh. Never in a million years did I think I would have sex with a king on my bed.

I hopped onto the bed and spread my legs for him. He grabbed my legs and pulled me closer so my butt hung off the mattress. He didn't waste any time burying himself inside of me.

I gasped as he filled me to the brim. I was so wet that he slid right in. He pumped his cock into me. His eyes were slits of pleasure, and I reached out to him. I needed to kiss him again.

He complied with my wishes but continued to push himself inside of me while we kissed. Our kisses grew more frantic as the pleasure intensified.

He kneaded and squeezed my breasts and flicked his finger over my nipples, making them hard little peaks.

He groaned into my mouth, and I knew that he was getting closer to climax.

While I wanted this to go on all night, the need to have him come inside of me thinned my patience.

My feet were on either side of his head as he continued to fuck me.

He grunted as the pace of his thrusts sped up. “Damn it, Sophia, I’m going to come.”

“Me too,” I panted.

He pushed away from me and grabbed onto my waist, pressing me into the mattress. My toes curled as his thumb reached down and circled my clit. White spots exploded behind my eyes as whimpers of pleasure filled the air.

“Come for me, baby,” he said.

He was deep inside me now, moving so quickly that I could barely breathe. As the pleasure exploded inside of me, I cried out.

He came seconds after. Even though we’d both finished, he continued to push himself inside of me, prolonging the aftereffects.

“Luke,” I breathed.

“Yeah?” he asked, peeling his eyes open. His pupils dilated enough that only a sliver of his light brown iris showed through.

“Come here,” I said.

He laid down next to me, and our heavy breathing mingled together as I drew him close for another kiss. Our bodies were hot and sticky, but I didn’t want him ever to leave my side again.

We didn’t move for a while, but Luke’s fingers twined with mine as we gazed at each other. I never thought I would see him again, never mind hear him tell me he loved me. Was

this true love? The kind that overcame everything? Was it even possible to overcome the fact that he was a king and the only way I could be with him was to become a queen?

In the time that we had been apart from each other, I considered that idea a lot. More than I had when we were together. I would do anything to be with Luke, but I had no idea how to run a country, especially not a foreign one. Maybe having Luke by my side and his trust that I could do it would be enough.

If only he asked me.

It was mostly my fault that I didn't get all the information from him before I launched myself on top of him, but did I want to have that conversation yet?

Sliding my hand over his slick chest, I pulled him closer to me. Closing my eyes, I inhaled deeply, burning his scent into my mind. I wanted him in my life so badly it hurt. From the look of things, maybe my dreams *were* going to come true.

# CHAPTER 55





## LUKE

As I drifted out of deep sleep, I glanced over at Sophia lying next to me. Memories of the previous day flooded my consciousness, and I knew this wasn't a trick.

I blinked a few times anyway, just in case, but the sight of the unfamiliar bed and the naked woman sleeping next to me was proof enough.

She inhaled deeply, and for a moment, I thought she was awake. Instead, she rolled over and faced the other way. I tightened my grip around her body, spooning her. I had missed waking up with her next to me. Granted, I had only done it a few times, but I missed it just the same.

She was on the edge of sleeping and being awake, and I didn't want to disturb her. We were going to have a lot to deal with soon, so keeping us in a little bubble was key, at least until it inevitably burst and we had to deal with real life.

Sophia had been with me for every moment since I had arrived at her apartment, so I took the opportunity to explore while she slept in.

I grabbed my boxer briefs where I'd thrown them the day before and walked out into the main area of the apartment. Closing the door as quietly as I could, I stood in the middle of the living room to put my underwear on.

Glancing at the digital display of the cable box, it was already close to noon. I guessed I was more affected by jet lag than I thought.

Or possibly, it had been the incredible and overdue sex we'd had. The memory of Sophia's face as she came for me caused a wave of pleasure to ripple over my skin. I wanted to wake her up and do it again and again.

I sucked in a breath, calming myself down. There would be time for that. We had a week before we both had to answer some hard questions.

Going into the kitchen, I peeked through the cabinets for any signs of coffee. There was an older model drip coffee machine and a container of coffee grounds in the cabinet above it. I wrinkled my nose. Being able to afford the best of the best in life changed my view on a lot of things. Coffee was one of them.

I glanced at my suitcase which I'd left by the door. I could go out to get some coffee, but I didn't want her to wake up without me there. After starting the machine, I went to the refrigerator to grab some milk. Inside, I saw numerous takeout boxes and little else.

I frowned. I knew Sophia suffered through our breakup as much as I did, but she wasn't doing herself any favors by eating that crap.

I grabbed a few questionable looking meals and tossed them in the trash. I wasn't the best cook in the world, but I could find my way around a kitchen. I had for years when I lived in England. I imagined staying in with Sophia all day, cooking together for lunch and dinner. It was what most couples did, and I wanted nothing more than to be normal, at least for a little while.

While Sophia and I got to know each other again, I wanted to be a part of her world before we took that leap and went back to Qatar. My time here was limited, but I hoped that she'd come back with me. I wouldn't force her, but putting all my cards on the table was what I came to the United States to do.

When the coffee finished brewing, I fished two large mugs from the cabinet and poured the steaming liquid into the cups.

Heading back into the bedroom, I was anxious for Sophia to wake up. I wanted to see her smile again and have her fill me in on the rest of her time that I had missed when we were apart.

Sophia's eyes cracked open when I entered the room, and she sat up.

"Don't get up," I said and handed her the mug of coffee.

"Room service," she said, grinning. "I could get used to this."

I kissed her cheek, and she leaned her head against my lips. She moaned contentedly as I turned her face toward me and kissed her lips.

"As much as I love this, I love my unburned skin too," she said.

I pulled back and noticed the coffee in her mug was dangerously close to spilling on her.

"Shit," I said and slowly lowered myself onto the bed.

She laughed. "A little eager this morning? I thought you'd be tired from last night."

"I have a month to make up for," I said, sipping my coffee. I tried not to pull a face at the gritty taste. Sophia didn't seem to mind.

"Yes, we do," she said.

"You know, I never stopped loving you," I blurted.

She cleared her throat. "But you said—"

"I know what I said, and I didn't mean a word of it. I was stupid. I wanted you to know that this isn't just some fling for me. This is for the long haul."

"It is?"

"I wouldn't have traveled across the world for a booty call," I said, smirking.

"No one has ever called me a booty call," she said. "I like it."

I nipped at her lower lip. “As long as I’m the only one calling you that.”

“Well, duh,” she said, grinning.

She fluffed her pillow behind her and crossed her legs. She only wore lace panties and a small tank top. She was more beautiful than ever. She must have changed at some point. I practically passed out the moment we finished fucking.

“It’s not possible for me to love anyone as much as I love you,” I said.

“I love you too. You have no idea how much I wanted to hear you say that again.” Her cheeks flushed. “Why do we keep doing this to each other?”

I took her hand in mine and brushed my lips over her knuckles. “Let’s promise each other that we won’t go running off across the world anymore when we’re upset. We should talk things through. We owe it to each other.”

“You don’t have to worry about me,” she said. “I blew most of my savings to get to Qatar last time.”

I opened my mouth to say something, but her eyes went wide, and she shook her head. “I’m not asking for any money,” she said before I could open my mouth. “I decided to find you. I don’t want you to think I need you like that.”

“I don’t,” I said, cutting her off. I didn’t plan on letting her ever want for anything for the rest of her life. She would get upset if I offered to reimburse her travels to find me, but with me, she would never have to worry about money ever again.

“Tell me more about being king,” she said, changing the subject. Sophia was an independent woman, and my offering to take care of her wasn’t in her plan. “Is it what you hoped for?”

“I never *hoped* for this,” I said. “I spent most of my adult life avoiding it.”

I enjoyed living in England and having my own life. Now, I was chained to the throne for the rest of my life. I never took the decision lightly, but since it was so soon after accepting

taking the throne, my previous life still lingered in the back of my head. I supposed it would take some time to forget about all of it.

“I know,” she said. “But after your father passed, do you feel as if you did the right thing?”

“Yes,” I said firmly. “Abir wasn’t up for the job, and my mother seems pleased with how things turned out.” It was all I could do to keep everyone happy—well, everyone except for Sophia and me.

“But she wants you to have a wife?”

“It’s her life mission,” I said, groaning. “That’s a whole other story.”

If I had my way, Sophia would be my wife. I allowed myself a moment to imagine her in Qatar, taking over my mother’s role as queen. It wouldn’t work if I pushed Sophia too soon. I had to ease her into it.

“I don’t mind hearing about it,” she said, taking my hand in hers. “Sometimes, it’s easier to talk it out and get things off our chest.”

Sophia and my mother were a sore subject to each other, but it seemed Sophia was putting that aside right now. She opened her heart to me. There was no reason I couldn’t do the same. Although instead of bringing up my mother’s obsession with finding me a wife, I chose to tell Sophia about the struggles of ruling my kingdom.

I sighed. “One of the council members is proving to be quite difficult during this transition.”

“Really? Didn’t they have to vote to allow you to take the throne? Didn’t he have his chance to air his grievances about the choice?”

She had done her homework. Since parting ways, I had kept away from any mention of her or the Dallas Post on the internet, but I wondered if she had done the same when it came to me. Asking would only stir up reminders of our breakup, and I wanted more than anything to get past all that.

“They did,” I said. “But there are five of them. I wasn’t there for the voting, but with my Father’s dying wishes and the need to settle a new king on the throne, I didn’t think there was an issue. Apparently, I was wrong.”

“What is he doing? Can’t the others vote him out or something?”

I shook my head to answer the second part. “Jaabir goes against everything I say, even when it doesn’t make sense to oppose me. We all should have the kingdom in the front of our minds. Instead, he has some agenda to get me kicked off the throne. He’s proving to be quite difficult.”

“What’s his problem?” Sophia asked. “Erol wanted you. He prepared you for the throne. Don’t you have a say?”

“I do, but to Jaabir, I’m not worthy of the position. I’m not Abir. I’m not part of the bloodline.”

She sat back against the pillow and sipped her coffee. Her eyes narrowed, and I was reminded of that face each time she attempted to interview me.

“The older generations are very old school in that way,” I said. “He never approved of me, which is something I learned recently. He was hoping for Abir to come of age before Father passed, but none of us had control over that.”

Sophia ran her hand over mine. “I’m sorry you have to deal with this. He sounds like a jerk.”

“Thank you,” I said. My mother’s suggestion about getting Jaabir on my side was to offer me a wife. It was nice to be comforted instead.

“So, while you’re here, you’re also hiding?” she asked.

I chuckled. “Something like that.”

“I’m glad you chose to hide in Dallas,” she said, accentuating her Southern drawl.

“I’m also here to make my wrongs right,” I said. “In the past month, I’ve felt as if a weight has been pressing on my chest, enough that it was hard to breathe.”

“I know what that feels like,” she said.

“Then, can we promise not to do this shit again, Sophia? We want to be with each other. So then let’s be with each other.”

“Believe me. I want to, but what about all the rest? You have a kingdom to run, and I have a life here. How can we make this work?” My pipedream of being a queen sounded fun before, but I wasn’t so sure anymore.

I felt her slipping away from me again, and I had to stop her. I took her mug and placed it on the side table next to mine. I took her hands in mine and drew her close to me.

I squeezed her hands, making sure she knew how serious I was about her. The light blue depths of her eyes filled with concern.

“I have a week here,” I said. “All I want to do is prove to you how much you mean to me. Will you allow me to do that?”

“Like I would say no to a proposal like that,” she said.

I kissed her, and for now, the issue was tabled. I shoved it out of my head and focused on the beautiful woman in front of me.

# CHAPTER 56





## SOPHIA

When Luke and I finally peeled ourselves away from the bedroom, we settled on the couch. Armed with more coffee and two heavy blankets, we snuggled up together and watched television. The hours flew by with me snuggled up so close to Luke that I could count his heartbeats thrumming against my cheek.

In the time we'd dated, there hadn't been many moments of us sitting still. I supposed without a kingdom or company to be in charge of, Luke was finally able to relax.

But I couldn't turn my mind off. Seeing him was a pleasant surprise, and the sex we had last night was incredible, but what was going to happen tomorrow or the day after? Luke said he loved me, and I said it in return—in an appropriate amount of time—but were the problems that kept us apart still around? Did he plan on giving up the kingdom for me, or was this a proper goodbye?

My phone rang, and I was surprised to see that it was almost five in the afternoon.

“Do you have to get that?” Luke asked with a frown.

I grabbed my phone and nodded. “Just a minute.”

Carrie's number flashed on my phone screen. With Luke returning into my life, I had completely forgotten about accepting the new job.

I picked up the call and said, “Hi, Carrie. Just a second.”

“Sure thing,” she chirped.

Luke's eyes were on me the entire time I walked across the room and onto my small balcony. He didn't seem threatened, but I knew I would have a lot of explaining to do when I returned.

"Okay, sorry," I said into the phone. "I was, um, in the shower when you called."

"Well, as you know from yesterday, I'm super impressed with your skills and qualifications," she said, getting right down to it. "This is more of a formality, but I want to give you a final offer for the open position."

"Wow," I said, glancing through the window at Luke. He watched the television, but I knew he was aware of the secret conversation I was having. If I accepted the job right away, what would become of Luke and me? Would this be another thing standing in the way of our happiness?

"Speechless?" Carrie asked and then laughed.

I cleared my throat. "Sorry, yes. I'm so grateful that you've given me this opportunity."

"But?" She was much smarter than I gave her credit for.

I didn't know what Luke's intentions were, and I wasn't going to force it out of him less than twenty-four hours after he arrived. He wanted to prove something to me, and I wanted to hear him out entirely before I made any life-altering decisions.

He would only be here for a week. Surely, Carrie could wait that long for my answer.

"I hope this isn't too forward, but I think I need some time to decide. I have several other interviews lined up."

"You do?" she asked. "Of course, you do. This is a very generous offer, and I'm not sure how long I'll be able to keep the spot open."

"I just need a week," I said, giving her the same deadline as Luke's departure. This was my backup plan, and since Carrie wanted me to work for her, I hoped she would be able to give me the time I needed.

“A week,” she said. There was a hint of annoyance in her voice.

“Thank you so much,” I said. “I just need to be sure.”

“I understand,” she said. “I’m sure you will impress whichever other places you’re checking out, but I guarantee they won’t be able to offer what we are. I’ll send your contract over to your email for comparison.”

“Thank you,” I said again. She had no idea how grateful I was.

She was the first to hang up. I hoped I hadn’t pissed her off. I had made a good impression, but I was pushing my luck by not accepting right away.

I glanced into the apartment, and Luke was no longer on the couch.

I took the moment of silence to absorb what had happened. I had no other offers, but by lying, I was able to keep the door open at Dallas News. I didn’t have another interview, but I *did* have another position that opened. That was the spot at Luke’s side.

The conversation between us would have to happen in the next week, and I debated on telling him about the job offer.

Then, I thought better of it. It would only complicate things. If Luke knew I had another job lined up, he might be selfless again and push me to take it.

Reporting didn’t stir the same passion in me as it had before I met Luke, but I couldn’t give it up without knowing the real reason he was here.

Walking inside, Luke stepped out of my bedroom and settled onto the couch again. He patted the seat next to him. “What was that about?”

I licked my lips. “My friend, Carrie. She’s having issues with her husband.” I hated to lie, but it felt necessary. At least, that was what I kept telling myself. “I didn’t want to bore you with all that man-hating talk.”

He slipped an arm around my shoulder. “You don’t hate men.”

“Nope,” I said and kissed him.

My stomach growled, loud enough that Luke gave me a look. We had eaten some cereal before as I was too embarrassed to offer him the stale leftovers in my refrigerator. Though, he probably saw them when he grabbed the milk for the cereal.

“Do you want to stay in tonight?” he asked.

I winced. “Not really.” I wasn’t up for explaining why my refrigerator only contained old takeout and condiments. I wasn’t about to poison a king on his first day in the States. “To be honest, I haven’t left my apartment much in a month.” I couldn’t look him in the eye. I wasn’t playing the pity card, but it was the truth. If he was only here for a week, he was about to get a lot of honesty from me.

“Then, I will take you out,” he said. “Let’s get ready.”

“Let me guess; you’ve already planned something.”

He grinned. “You know me so well.”

“Since when?”

He blew out a breath. “Since this morning. It was more of a backup plan. One that I hoped you were going to choose.”

“I should shower,” I said, raking my hands through my greasy and sexified hair.

“Do you want company?” Luke asked. His eyes darkened dangerously.

As much as I wanted a moment to think about the job offer, I wanted Luke more. I wasn’t going to talk to him about everything just yet, so distracting myself with his wet, naked body worked for me.

In the shower, we could barely take our hands off each other. If we took it to the next level, then we would never get to dinner. Luke had the same idea because even though we were kissing and caressing each other, he pushed for washing

up at the same time. His hands moving over me helped clear my head.

When we were done, Luke didn't bother wrapping a towel around his waist, but out of habit or shyness, I did. I rarely walked around my apartment naked, but seeing Luke do it elicited crazy waves of tingling to move across my body.

Luke pulled on a pair of boxer briefs and came over to me before landing a kiss on my lips. "Sit down."

"Don't we need to leave?"

"Yes," he said.

I raised an eyebrow but did as he said. I doubted wherever we were going would care if we were late. If they did, then Luke had enough wealth to pay for the inconvenience.

I sat on the bed, and Luke went over to my dresser and into my underwear drawer.

I couldn't help but laugh. "What are you doing?"

"I love these," he said, plucking out a pair of black lace panties.

I swallowed the lump in my throat. He grabbed a pair of black knee-high stockings and walked over to me. Kneeling down in front of me, he lifted my foot and slid the panties up my leg.

The touch of his hands on my body fired crazy nerves throughout me.

"What—" It was all I could manage before Luke grabbed my arm and stood me up in front of him.

He slowly pulled the panties up higher, smoothing his hand over my butt as he positioned them. They were damp within seconds.

If Luke noticed, he didn't say anything.

He lightly pressed his fingers against my shoulders and pushed me down on the bed again. He did the same for my stockings, pulling them up to their place on my legs before

leaving me wet and hungry for more while he walked over to my closet.

He picked out a red dress that he'd bought for me in England. It wasn't appropriate for Qatar, so I never had a chance to wear it. It was the only piece that he bought for me that I had kept. I'd left the rest at his palace and apartment when he asked me to leave.

It felt like an eternity ago, and the sting of the breakup was far behind me. No matter what happened, I would have this time with Luke to look back on. I hoped that this week would be a happy one, a place where I could go when Luke finally realized that he couldn't have me *and* the kingdom.

Luke helped me step into the dress, and he zipped it up, tracing his finger up my spine.

"If you keep going like this, I'm not going to be able to walk out of here," I said. My breathing came quicker, and I was desperate for Luke to take off everything he'd just put on me.

Luke chuckled. "I'll help you out of here, but I told you that I'm here to make everything up to you. I'm here to cater to your needs."

I pulled a face, and he kissed away my pout.

"I'll fulfill the rest of those needs later," he said.

While I found a pair of heels, Luke dressed in a suit. He looked more at ease than he had in the past. The top buttons of his shirt were left open, giving him a more relaxed and casual look. This was the Luke that I'd fallen for. While being with his family had stressed him out, there was always a sense of calm when he was in Qatar, something he probably hadn't noticed himself.

A black sedan waited outside my building to take us to Luke's surprise. I peppered him with questions along the way about where we were going, but he was a sealed vault.

Eventually, I settled for looping my arm with his and leaning against him. I wanted to be as close as possible while I

could, even though the inevitable clock ticked down the minutes until he would leave again.

The driver pulled the car up to a French restaurant in downtown Dallas. I had never stepped foot in the place, but I'd heard about it. It was exclusive and the type of place that required making a reservation months in advance.

"Are you serious?" I asked Luke. He always had a way of surprising me.

"I am," he said, kissing the tip of my nose. "Serious about you, that is."

I wasn't sure what to expect when we walked into the restaurant, but I was a little confused to see that the only people in the dining area were us and a few staff members.

I checked the time. "Are we too early?" It was close to seven. Surely, there wasn't a holiday I'd forgotten.

"We're right on time," Luke said, following the hostess into an empty dining room. Tables and chairs had been set up, but no patrons sat eating at any of them. Was there a food poisoning scare?

"What's going on?"

"I rented the place out," Luke said, standing next to a table set for two. Three red roses stuck out of a small vase in the center with a bucket of champagne next to it.

I looked around at the lavishly decorated space. "You what?" Renting out a restaurant for two people in a place like this must have cost an astronomical amount. I couldn't even fathom the price tag.

"Tonight is about us," he said.

"Other people might have wanted to eat here too, you know?" I said with a smile. No one had ever done anything this cool for me before. I was speechless but grateful.

I supposed it was something fit for a king. How the hell did I ever get so lucky? I never missed Luke more until that moment, and I vowed I would do everything I could to keep him in my life.

# CHAPTER 57





## LUKE

The look on Sophia's face was priceless. She deserved more than an exclusive restaurant, but it was only my first full day with her. There was more to come, and I couldn't wait to make some happy memories with her without my mother's disapproving stare or the weight of Jaabir's pressure on me.

In the past, Father and Mother traveled all the time on vacations; one week wasn't going to make the country crumble. That was what I had the council for.

Our waitress poured two flutes of champagne and placed the glasses between Sophia and me. She walked away—as I'd already planned the menu—and I lifted my glass to the beautiful woman sitting across from me.

"To forgiveness," I said, clinking my glass with hers.

"For what?" she asked.

"You forgiving me," I said.

She shook her head. "We've both made mistakes. I say we toast to finding our way back to each other."

Sophia still surprised me in many ways.

"To finding our way home," I said. Sophia was my sun, stars, and moon. I would never be able to leave her again. I knew that now. I just had to convince her to feel the same way, and then we would be able to put the past behind us finally.

She sipped from the flute and placed it down on the table. Her lipstick created a ring on the rim of the glass. I had never

been so jealous of an inanimate object before.

“This is great,” Sophia said. “I hope you don’t do this all the time.”

“What do you mean?”

“It must cost a lot.”

“Sophia, don’t worry about money.”

She rolled her eyes. “Luke, I live in the real world.”

“So do I.”

She took another sip of champagne. “Real world people don’t do things like this. Don’t get me wrong; it’s fantastic. But for me, it’s hard to imagine someone treating me to this. Every time I’m with you, it’s as if I’m living in a fairy tale.”

“That’s exactly how I want it to be,” I said. “Sophia, I love you. What I have is what you have.”

She sighed, and her eyelashes fluttered. Her eyes glossed over, and for a moment, I thought she was going to cry.

“Let’s talk about something else,” I said.

She polished off the rest of her champagne and said, “Let’s. How is Abir?”

Abir was the safe way of asking about Qatar without involving the stress of Mother and her disapproval of Sophia.

“Abir has a girlfriend now,” I said.

Sophia’s jaw dropped. “No way! That’s adorable. Who is the girl? She better treat him right.”

I loved how much Sophia adored my brother. It was one of the things about her that made me love her more.

Women that Mother insisted on setting me up with were interested in my wealth and title, while Sophia cared about way more than that. I didn’t need anything else to solidify my decision about Sophia, but if I did, then her asking about Abir did just that.

“Her name is Alda,” I said. “From what Abir tells me, she seems lovely.”

“Abir and Alda sound like a reality TV show,” she said. “Was this arranged?”

“Surprisingly, no,” I said. “Mother has been more obsessed with *my* future, leaving Abir to find a girl himself. She approves, though.”

“I guess that’s all that matters,” Sophia said.

The tension between Sophia and Mother tended to lean more toward Mother, but the things that she’d said to Sophia seemed as if they were still raw, even after a month. If there was to be any future between us, Mother needed to keep her thoughts to herself, or else she was going to be quite unhappy for the rest of her life.

I loved Mother, but I needed Sophia more. I hoped that one day, Mother would see what I did in Sophia and accept her into our family as she and Father accepted me all those years ago.

We talked of Abir for a little while longer before the conversation fizzled out. Our appetizers came, and Sophia and I ate in companionable silence.

I recalled dinner with Saanvi where she attempted to fill all the awkward silences. I preferred this so much more. Envisioning Sophia in Saanvi’s place had been the final straw in dealing with losing Sophia. I regretted nothing about my decision to come to Dallas.

While I didn’t want to bring up any past bad feelings, I wanted to know what Sophia had been up to in our time apart.

“Tell me more about your trip to Seattle,” I said. “I’ve never been there.”

She shrugged. “It was okay. It wasn’t my first time, but it was nice to get away. I needed a little time after quitting. That was a life change, going from a mile a minute to sleeping in until noon.” She laughed. “Matt was generous with me, as he always is.”

“Did you stay with him?” I asked.

She pressed her lips together, suppressing a smile. “No, but would it have been a big deal if I had?” She twirled her fork around a piece of fennel on her plate.

“Just trying to get the big picture here,” I said, popping a scallop into my mouth.

I felt something against my leg. Sophia’s eyes widened for a moment. “I was alone the entire time. In a hotel room. Thinking of you.”

I leaned forward, letting her get as close to my leg as possible. My pants were a little too tight around the middle because of it, but I couldn’t care less. Even if the restaurant was full of people, her arousing me was no secret. She was drop-dead gorgeous and all mine.

She continued talking about all the sights she’d seen while she visited Seattle. While I’d traveled to places all over the world, there were a lot of places in the United States that I hadn’t seen. In fact, I hadn’t seen much at all. Most of my deals were in foreign markets.

“I’m surprised you haven’t met anyone,” I said as the waitress took away our plates. While I wanted Sophia for myself, I never could understand why she remained single.

“I can’t meet many people from my couch,” she said.

“Sure you can,” I said, indicating my phone.

She laughed. “I suppose you’re right. I’ve never been the casual dater, though.” Her eyes widened, and she retreated into her mind for a moment. I wanted to ask what that was about, but I’d hesitated too long before she put me in the hot seat.

“Tell me about the dates that you’ve been on,” she said.

With another woman, that line would probably be the opening of a trap, but Sophia’s carefree attitude and wide grin meant she was teasing me. Hard.

“Only one date,” I said.

“So far,” she said, sipping her wine glass.

The waitress had disappeared and reappeared numerous times so quickly and silently that there wasn't a break in our conversation. I had chosen the wine from a list and was surprised that for a California wine, it was delectable.

"Come on, spill," she said.

"Honestly, it was terrible."

She flung her head back and laughed. "That's what you get for allowing your Mother to set you up."

"First of all, there was no allowing," I said. "Secondly, you're mostly right. The conversation was awful. To be honest, I imagined you were sitting across from me the whole time."

She leaned back in her chair. "You did?"

"Yes, it was the only way to keep me from falling asleep."

"Where else have you imagined me?" Sophia asked, crossing her arms. Her breasts lifted, and I couldn't take my eyes off them.

I was grateful to get away from the conversation about me dating other women. While it seemed like a joke to Sophia, I wanted her to know that she was the only one I wanted to go on dates with.

The waitress returned with our entrees, and Sophia's question hung in the air between us.

"In bed," I said after the waitress was out of earshot.

"What?" Sophia asked.

"I've imagined waking up with you most every morning," I said.

She locked eyes with mine. "You got your wish this morning."

"That I did."

"I'm not sure if the kissing or sex made it any clearer, but I'm happy to see you again," Sophia said.

I smirked. “You are? You know, I was wondering about that.”

She dug the toe of her shoe into my leg. “Don’t make fun. I just wanted to let you know.”

And there it was. Professing our love for each other was one thing. Something that we should have done in Qatar. But hearing her express appreciation for me seeking her out added another layer to our relationship.

While I wanted to tell her my plan, I had to keep that discussion for another day. Dredging up the reason I forced her to leave in the first place wasn’t a part of why I came to Dallas. Showing her that we were perfect for each other outside of England and Qatar was key.

Instead of talking about potentially depressing matters, I changed the subject to places that Sophia could take me around the city. She launched into listing her favorite restaurants that offered real Southern cooking.

“Not that this place isn’t amazing,” she said quickly, clearly enjoying her meal. She was already done with it before I was even halfway through. “But I want to get some amazing fried chicken into you. There’s a lot of Latin flavor in this area, too.”

“I look forward to all of it,” I said.



The best thing about French restaurants was the smaller portions. It left room for a delectable chocolate mousse, better than I’d ever eaten before. Sophia enjoyed it as well, dragging her spoon across her bowl to retrieve every last morsel.

I suspected I would have a different outcome after visiting some of the places that she wanted to show me.

With our belly’s full and a bottle of wine and champagne thoroughly drunk, the ride back to Sophia’s place offered a distinct change of mood for the both of us. Even though there was no divider between the driver and us, Sophia’s hand

caressing my thigh gave me a hint of what she expected when we returned to her home.

If I had chosen another vehicle, perhaps a limo, she would stand no chance against me. I would hike her dress over her waist and take her right then and there.

Instead, I had to hold off on my urges, even though Sophia's eyes twinkled when the headlights from the passing cars lit them up.

When we arrived at her place, I jumped out of the car. Turning to help Sophia out of the vehicle, her shoe snagged on the seat, and she tumbled out.

I caught her, and her body was vibrating with laughter. "Wow, I feel like a klutz."

"Let me help you," I said, using that as an excuse to draw her closer to me.

She giggled all the way to the elevator, going on about how embarrassed she was about falling.

But once we reached the elevator and the doors closed, she stopped laughing. We were finally alone, and the heat that I'd felt in the car returned with a vengeance. I shoved her against the elevator wall, kissing her. My cock strained against the fabric of my pants, and I pushed it closer to her body. I wanted her to know how much she turned me on.

She beckoned me closer, wrapping her leg around mine. I was so close to her pussy. I could easily rip her panties aside and plunge myself into her soft folds.

The *ding* indicated that we were on her floor, and we broke apart. Sophia's lipstick was smeared, and I pressed my hand against my mouth, pulling away to find most of it was on my mouth.

I grinned as Sophia tugged me down the hallway. Thankfully, no one else was around to witness how mussed up we were. I didn't care what anyone else thought, but I would be mortified if anyone else walked by and noticed how hard I was.

Sophia struggled with the key, but when she finally pushed the door open, I grabbed her face and crushed my lips against hers.

We stumbled forward, and she threw her purse onto the kitchen table.

I unzipped her dress and pulled it down over her breasts.

She fumbled with the falling fabric. “The door,” she said, her voice muffled against my lips.

I kicked the door shut and lifted her off the floor. Her legs wrapped around my body as I deepened the kiss between us.

I shuffled over to the bedroom without once breaking contact with her. The mix of the chocolate mousse and wine added to the already delicious flavor of the woman in my arms.

I gently laid her on the bed in front of me and pulled her dress down the rest of the way. I laid it beside her on the bed. She looked so fucking hot in that dress that I wasn't sure how I made it through the evening without stripping it off her.

She stared up at me, her hair splayed around her like Medusa. Like the mythical creature, Sophia turned me rock hard with one glance.

“I love you so much.” I hoped my words were enough to convey that I wanted her more than life itself. And then, I kissed her.



# CHAPTER 58



## SOPHIA

Luke dug his face into the space between my breasts. I grabbed onto his hair and squeezed, holding him in place. His hands moved over my breasts. One of them unhooked my bra, and it dropped to the bed.

Stumbling across the room with my dress at my waist, the sucking and tugging of his mouth and hands over my sensitive peaks made me instantly wet. My lower lips burned for Luke.

After the amazing dinner we had, and Luke nailing every minute detail, he deserved everything that I was about to give him. I didn't have the money or title to curate elaborate and lavish evenings, but I did have something he wanted. And I planned on giving it to him as much as he wanted tonight.

As we moved to the bed, he undressed me, and I pulled his shirt out from his pants and dug my hands underneath to feel his smooth skin. The tuft of curly hair near his belly button showed me the way down to the important part of his body. The part that pressed into my leg, begging to be unleashed.

When Luke finally released me from his lips, I took advantage of the situation. He pulled his pants off, and I moved so I stood in front of him. Trapping my lip under my teeth, I pushed him hard enough so that he fell onto the bed.

He stared up at me with wide eyes. All I had on were my panties, the stockings he put on me, and my heels. I felt like a goddess, staring down at her soul mate.

Luke drank me in. The heels made my legs look amazing, and wearing stockings made me feel a little dirty.

I straddled his lap and started to grind against him slowly. He still wore boxer briefs, so I slipped my hand into the hole and pulled him out. I stroked him several times while not taking my eyes off him.

His jaw dropped open, and I yearned to kiss him again. But I was running the show. I was going to pay him back for teasing me last night.

I moved closer to him, slowly moving my slick panties over his cock.

His head fell back against the bed, and his eyes fluttered closed.

The more I rubbed, the wetter I became, adding to the slickness between us.

The intensity built up inside of me, and I could barely hold back from moving my panties aside and letting him inside of me.

I had to be patient. He had brought me to my brink last night before finally giving in.

Luke's head popped up, and his hands rested on my waist, holding me in place. I took that as a sign to keep going. Arching my back, I moved over the length of him over and over until his breathing became hoarse.

“Sophia,” he said. “You are so incredible.”

Smirking to myself, I continued. His moans made me even more turned on than I had been before.

His hands roamed up to my breasts again, and then his mouth followed. He wasn't making it easy on me, but I didn't make it easy on him either. We were at a stalemate, neither of us wanting to let go of the pleasure to get to the next level.

When I couldn't take it anymore, I sprang off the bed and the room tilted. With a combination of the alcohol at dinner and the lightheadedness of him touching me like that, it was a dangerous time for me to be in heels.

I reached down to take them off, but Luke said, “Stop.”

Peering over at him, his tongue snaked over his lips, and his eyes didn't move from my legs. "Allow me."

I propped my foot onto the bed, and Luke finally looked at me as his hands reached the top of one stocking and slowly rolled it down to my ankle. He lifted my foot, pushing the shoe off my foot. It bounced on the floor a few times before it stilled.

As I put my other foot up, his hands moved up my naked leg toward my center. He cupped me, and his eyes rolled back in his head. His fingers slowly ran over the thin fabric, and I almost lost my footing.

"You're so fucking wet," he said.

"It's all for you, baby," I breathed. He continued to touch me, and I grabbed onto his shoulders to keep myself steady.

"You like that?" he asked, his voice deep.

I dropped my chin to my chest and locked eyes with him. "Fuck yes."

He licked his lips. "Dirty language."

"For a dirty man," I said, appreciating the talk between us. I wasn't much of a talker during sex, but with Luke, it made me want him even more.

"I should show you how dirty I can get," he said.

Moving aside the fabric, he plunged his fingers inside of me.

Sucking in a breath, I grabbed his shoulders to stop myself from falling forward.

He chuckled and stroked me from the inside before continuing to my other leg. A trail of wetness followed as he unrolled my stocking, removing my other heel. He rubbed the wetness around my lower lips, drenching them.

I took the opportunity to move away from him before he could tease me again. With my heels off, I dug my feet into the floor and shoved my panties down. They crumpled to the floor before I sprang on him, straddling him.

He was still mostly clothed, but I didn't care. All that mattered was having him inside of me.

He fumbled in his jacket and pulled out a foil packet.

"Presumptuous." I laughed.

"I've learned that I always need one handy with you around. You turn me on so much, Sophia."

I kissed him again, showing him just how much I wanted to screw him right then and there. He managed to get the condom on, and I lowered myself onto his hardness, allowing him to fill me to the brim.

"Fuck," I moaned as my body stretched to accommodate him.

"Fuck is right," Luke breathed.

Without my heels and the threat of poking holes into my comforter, I drew my feet up and lifted myself enough to stroke the length of him. Up and down, my body moved over his cock.

Luke's arms went limp at his sides, and his head lolled back again.

Smirking, I picked up my pace. I loved watching how much I pleased him. I never thought I would be with anyone like this, never mind someone as amazing as Luke. At that moment, I knew that I would never love anyone the way I loved Luke. He had opened a part of me that was locked away to the rest of the world.

We matched mentally and physically. We fit each other like a lock and key.

My legs ached, so I settled in, allowing him completely inside of me. Rocking over him, the contact with my clit added to the already intense pleasure of the moment.

Leaning my head back, my hair fell across my shoulders and back. It started to cling to my heated skin.

Luke lifted his head and grabbed my ass, pushing and pulling me over him.

I kissed him again. This time, it was slower. His tongue moved against mine, deepening the kiss. Cupping his head in my hands, I kissed him more passionately than ever. My nipples ached with pleasure, and my entire world shifted. This was where I was supposed to be, with this man, in this moment.

I opened Luke's shirt and pressed my hands against his hard chest. I was on the edge of my climax. It was right within reach.

Pushing on his chest, I moved quicker, building up until the pressure was too intense to stop. I moved my hands, gripping the pillow behind Luke and squeezing the fabric in my hands.

"Come for me," Luke said close to my ear.

My eyes sprang open. I hadn't realized I'd closed them.

As we looked into each other's eyes, I came, riding my orgasm out as Luke kept pushing and squeezing my butt, rolling me over the waves of pleasure until I was spent.

I fell against him, and Luke adjusted himself and started to thrust inside of me. I was still drenched, and the tendrils of pleasure remained within me.

He gritted his teeth and shoved himself inside me over and over. He squeezed my butt, keeping me in place while he screwed me, reaching his peak.

I pulled my forehead away from his shoulder, and I kissed him. His tongue darted into my mouth, and it flicked over mine. His breathing came quickly, and it was only a short time before he came, too.

He let out a guttural sound and then slowly moved inside of me until he stopped completely.

Propping my arms out, I pulled away from him, staring into his half-lidded eyes. I kissed both his cheeks before kissing his mouth.

"Christ, Sophia. That was fucking amazing. You are just..."

“Perfect?” I helped with a smirk.

“More than that,” he said, kissing me again.

When he finished, I removed myself from the bed and walked across the room to my bathroom. I had the urge to pee, and Luke wasn't going anywhere.

On the way out of the bathroom, I caught a look at myself in the mirror. My hair was askew, and I adjusted it so I didn't look like a total hobo. Staring into my own eyes, the distraction from the pleasure that Luke gave me dissipated, leaving me as worried as I had been before.

Carrie's annoyance at not jumping at the job echoed in my head. Waiting a week was the right thing to do, but it seemed as if Luke were hiding something from me. I hadn't heard of any plans after his visit this week or what would happen at the end of it.

If I had accepted the job in front of him, would I have pressured him too much to tell me what was going on in his head? Was this his way of saying farewell to me for good?

I took a few calming breaths and tried to clear my head. Luke cared about me; I already knew that. He wasn't the type to fall in love so quickly and travel across the world to have sex with someone. Women would line up around the corner to be with him. So, I had no doubt he wanted to be with me, but how was this all going to work?

I threw some cold water on my face, attempting to make sense of it all. After patting my face dry with a towel, I was no closer to finding an answer.

Luke was lying on the bed again, and I noticed that he had put on his boxer briefs. For a moment, I was able to forget all the drama surrounding his arrival. Maybe that was the point. I had no idea what our future held, and maybe he didn't either. I supposed we would just have to wait until our clock ran out to make the tough decisions.

# CHAPTER 59





## LUKE

Even though I cherished every single second I spent with Sophia, those seconds were moving quicker than I wanted. All the money in the world couldn't compete with the inevitability of time. With each passing minute, the hard conversation came closer to us, threatening to split us apart again.

After hearing Sophia tell me that she loved me and being with her, behaving like a normal couple, I knew I couldn't go back to Qatar without her. I would do anything to convince her that being together was the only choice for both of us to live a happy life.

I regretted our month-long breakup but concluded that it was necessary for us to realize how much we needed each other.

Sophia wasn't who Mother imagined I would be with, but she was the only choice for me. While Jaabir would fight me more, he had an expiration date for being on the council. I had the rest of my life to deal with the fallout if I broke it off with Sophia for good.

The warring thoughts flew to the front of my mind as I awoke on Wednesday morning. Sophia had mentioned over dinner the night before that she wanted to show me around Dallas. I was in serious need of a distraction, and keeping busy was the only way to make that happen.

We showered and went out for breakfast at a nearby diner.

“You have to get the huevos rancheros,” she said after the waitress poured our coffee.

The older waitress winked at me as if Sophia had told me that I was about to win the lottery.

“You’ve convinced me,” I said, putting down the menu.

The diner wasn’t that busy. We had missed the morning rush after sleeping in. It was a nice change from being at the palace with the early morning council meetings. This was what a vacation felt like, although I would rather Sophia and I were on a white sandy beach, sipping from cocktails as the ocean water hit our feet.

We would get there someday. I wasn’t going to let that dream go without a fight.



After breakfast, we walked around downtown. Sophia had been right. The food in Dallas was delicious, something I hadn’t expected from the small, dingy diner. She proved to me that the best things sometimes came in unlikely packages. Just like her. Meeting her for the first time, I saw an American reporter and expected her to be ditzy and to use her body to get her story. In actuality, she was an intelligent spitfire destined to take my heart into her hands.

I took her hand in mine as we strolled across the sidewalk. “What’s next on your agenda?”

“Since it’s so warm today,” she said, tilting her head toward the sky, “I thought we could visit a nearby zoo or the amusement park.”

Weighing the options in my head, I chose the amusement park. It offered more opportunities for Sophia to grip my arm in excitement and terror on the rides. The closer we were, the better.

“What time does the amusement park open?” I asked.

She smirked, checking her phone. “I was hoping you’d go with that. I haven’t been in years, but I used to love it as a child.”

“Great minds think alike,” I said before kissing her. Her lips were sweet, and the lingering taste of syrup from her stack of pancakes flooded my taste buds.

“We better walk off our breakfast before getting on any rides,” Sophia said. “I don’t want the food to make a reappearance.”

I shoved a lock of Sophia’s hair behind her ear. I would be there for her in sickness and in health, but it was a good idea not to force the former.

We took a taxi to the amusement park. The roller coasters reached toward the sky in the distance as we approached the gates.

“Which rides do you like?” I asked Sophia.

“All of them,” she said, staring out the window. “The bigger and twistier, the better.”

“I’ve never been to an amusement park before,” I admitted.

“What?” she asked. “You’re a virgin?”

The driver glanced at me through the rearview mirror.

“I suppose you can say that,” I said.

“Oh, wow,” she said. Her eyes were shiny with tears; I knew she was trying not to laugh at me. So what if I was a grown man who’d never been on a roller coaster before? I grew up in a palace. When I was old enough to travel, it was for the family business. There hadn’t been a lot of time for that kind of fun.

“That’s why you wanted to go here,” she said.

I took her hand, twining our fingers together. “I want to be anywhere that you are. But popping my cherry, so to speak, was another part of my agenda.”

“Oh, this is going to be fun!” she squealed.

“Should I regret this decision?” I asked her.

She nodded her head. “Most definitely.”

I paid for a day pass for Sophia and me, only after agreeing to let her pay for our lunch. I crossed my fingers while I made the arrangement, but she would forgive me.

I would break her of the habit of wanting to pay for things when she was with me... or at all. If all went according to plan, she would share my unlimited funds. She would soon realize that a sixty-dollar pass was a mere blip on my bank account. If she were to be with me, I planned on taking her to much more luxurious and expensive places.

While we walked, Sophia pointed out the different rides and gaming stalls she frequented as a child. She was convinced the games were rigged, but she swore she knew how to get the biggest prizes. I wasn't sure going up against her would earn me any points or a big stuffed animal, but I would try. It was something men did for their women, and I intended to keep up with the tradition.

“Should we start off with something easy?” she asked as we arrived at the rides section of the park.

“Probably,” I said. “Until I get my sea legs.”

“I know the perfect one,” she said, tugging on my hand.

I followed her to a monstrous ride that had close to fifty chairs attached to the mushroom-shaped ride by long chains.

“What is that thing?” I asked, curling my lip.

“They're called swings,” she said. “Come on.”

She flashed our tickets to the ride operator—we'd picked the unlimited ride voucher—and she sat down in one of the chairs, buckling herself in.

I sat next to her, unsure of what the ride did. The swing sagged when I sat down, and I tested the chains by pulling on them. “Are you sure this is safe?”

“As safe as we're going to get,” she said.

I frowned. I wanted Sophia safe forever, but I couldn't allow her to think I was a coward. I sucked in a breath and buckled myself in, pulling the strap tight. Due to the long chain, I was able to move closer to her. Making sure she was securely fastened to the chair, I was able to release the breath lodged in my throat.

The ride operator came around to each of us and visually checked that we were buckled in. I wished he would have tested to be doubly sure, but I wasn't going to show my fears to anyone, especially Sophia.

He started the ride, and we slowly rose into the air. I gripped the chains of my swing as Sophia let out a squeal of excitement. My feet dangled over the hard concrete below as the top of the mushroom-like structure started to rotate.

My stomach swooped as we moved in a large circle. Once the speed picked up, Sophia let out a "Wooo!" sound, and a few others joined in.

We circled for what felt like an eternity. I had never felt so out of control in my life, and I understood why I had never been to one of these places before. It was utterly terrifying.

Sophia tilted her head back, enough to make the swing dip backward. On instinct, I reached out for her, but the motion of the ride put her at quite a distance from me.

I counted down the seconds until the ride ended. When we stopped moving, and I could touch the ground again, I had the urge to lay down on the concrete and pray for our safe return to real life.

"That was so much fun!" Sophia said. "Let's do another ride."

I stood on wobbly legs and took her hand, more for comfort. "How about something a little less intense?"

"Less intense?" she repeated. "Those were easy."

I balked, tasting the remnants of my huevos rancheros. "Easy?"

“Was it that bad?” she asked me. She grinned like a crazy woman, and I didn’t want to be the one to make her smile go away.

“No,” I said, trying to hold onto whatever manhood I had left. “How about a ride where we sit together?” I offered my hand to her and she took it.

“Sounds good to me,” she said. “I’ll take you on an easy roller coaster.”

“Does such a thing exist?” I asked.

She chewed on her lip. “It doesn’t have any loops.”

The idea of going upside down made my stomach flip-flop. “Works for me.”

On our way to my imminent doom, Sophia and I wandered through the crowds toward the massive wooden rollercoaster in the distance. It was white with chips in the paint and looked as if it could use more than a few repairs. Distracting myself from the coaster for the time being, I focused on the crowd. There were people of all shapes and sizes. Families and couples walked past us, many of them with smiles on their faces.

Sophia and I melted into the crowd as if we were two regular people. To those around us, that was what we were. Not a king and the love of his life. The anonymity was the biggest thing I loved in England, and America now offered me the same sort of invisibility. Going to a public place in Qatar was much different than anywhere else. Here, no one balked or stared at me when I entered a room or walked into a public park. I knew I couldn’t stay away forever, so I tried to memorize the feeling of warmth that flooded my body as we walked together, hand-in-hand without a care in the world.

The anticipation of riding the rollercoaster was much worse for me than the ride itself. Other than the initial fall from the highest peak, I understood why people thought they were so fun. Unlike the swings, I was able to be close to Sophia. I felt her body tense as we dropped and swooped around each corner after that.

When the ride finished, we took another loop around the line and did it again.



“Coasters are your thing,” Sophia said after we rode two more of them. Both had loops. While I closed my eyes for most of the rides, I enjoyed the rush of adrenaline. No other part of my life offered that feeling.

“I suppose so,” I said.

“I’m famished,” she said. “How about we take a break and eat something?”

I pressed a hand against my stomach. “And then more rides? I’m not sure.”

“We don’t have to do more rides,” she said. “Especially right after eating. We can do some shopping or play some games.”

She was the one who wanted to play the games. I wasn’t going to be the one to disappoint her.

We stopped at a smokehouse restaurant on the far end of the park. Since it was later in the afternoon, we didn’t have to wait for a table. Once we were seated, Sophia and I downed our glasses of water before ordering two beers.

“I think this is the place with the amazing chili-cheese fries,” Sophia said, checking out the menu.

“I’ll leave the ordering up to you,” I said, putting my menu down.

Sophia winked at me. “I won’t disappoint.”

After the waiter took our order, we sat back and sipped our beers. My body ached from all the jolts from the rides, and it felt nice to be on solid ground.

Sophia’s gaze was far away, and I reached over to take her hand.

“What’s on your mind?” I asked, glancing in the direction where she looked.

A family of five sat at one of the larger tables. The three kids were coloring, and two of them were fighting over the blue crayon while their parents—who looked utterly exhausted—didn’t bother to break up the fight.

Sophia blinked, coming out of her trance, and looked at me. “Have you ever thought about starting a family?”



# CHAPTER 60



## SOPHIA

**M**y words echoed in my mind as Luke's face fell. The lovely family across the way entranced me enough that I blurted my question out without thinking.

*Have you ever thought about starting a family?*

I might as well have asked him if he wanted to screw on this table and make a few babies that minute. What if he didn't want to have children and I had backed him into a corner with that question? I didn't even know if he wanted to be with me. Now, he probably thought I was forcing myself on him and demanding we have kids. I was still young, and nothing about our future was set in stone. I was such an idiot.

"I just meant..." I trailed off, my mind scrambling to bring back the serene smile on his face instead of whatever he was thinking at that moment.

He blinked and then his hand shot across the table and enveloped mine. "No, don't take it back. I was a little surprised, is all."

"I didn't want to imply that I—we—shit," I said, shaking my head.

He squeezed my hand. "Until you came into my life, there were so many things I'd never considered before. Children being one of them."

He glanced at the family, and their servers dropped the food on the table in front of the three ravenous boys. They dug into their food, and I couldn't help but smile. Coming from a

small family, I always wanted to have several children so that they didn't feel as alone as I had as a child. As much as I regretted the way I asked Luke the question, I still wanted to know the answer.

He had a more tragic past than me, so I wouldn't have blamed him if children weren't on his list of things to accomplish in life.

Was Gia pressuring him? Was that why she wanted him to get married? I bet she would give him his wedding day off without meddling and then get on him about having children immediately after.

Thinking of him marrying someone else made my stomach twist into knots.

Our food couldn't have come at a better time. I could tell that Luke wanted to be as far away from the conversation as possible, so I dropped it.

"This is biscuits and gravy," Luke mused. "I don't see the biscuits."

"They are underneath the amazing gravy," I said, poking at the bread with my fork.

"Ah, I see," he said and dug right in.

I waited for his reaction. The way his eyes rolled into the back of his head made me smile. "I knew you'd like it."

I dug into my po' boy and had a similar reaction.

"How do you not weigh a hundred pounds more than you do with all this delicious food?" Luke asked, taking another bite.

"It's all about moderation," I said. "Though a lot of people don't have the same mentality."

"I'll have to bring some recipes home for the palace chefs. I think they could do a nice spin on this food."

Luke glanced at me with his mention of going home. I locked eyes with him, and something shifted over us. He started talking about the chefs and how his father had

cultivated a particular type of menu that had been repeated over the years. Luke hadn't realized that was a part of his royal duties.

I tried my damndest to stay in the conversation. While I responded appropriately, my mind wandered to the end of his visit. He had no choice. He had to go back to Qatar. But where did that leave me? Where did that leave *us*?

I doubted I could make a long-distance relationship with a king work when it was customary for him to get married and have at least one heir. I wasn't about to be his American booty call, so at the end of this very short visit, both of us would have to choose our future. It looked like I was the only one who would have to change everything, though.

In the month that we were broken up, I imagined him sweeping me off my feet and taking me to become his queen. Now that it seemed like a possibility, why was I so afraid?

I would also never forgive myself if I let him leave again. I was completely in love with him, and I didn't know if my heart would survive if he left.

There was no need to repeat any mistakes between us without making sure it was what we both wanted. If Luke was unwilling to accept what I was about to give up, if he didn't care, then maybe ending it was the best thing for the both of us.

Luke excused himself to go to the restroom. When he was far enough away from the table, I wrapped my arms around my stomach and squeezed. This couldn't be it for us.

All of the nervous feelings from when I left Qatar the last time bubbled to the surface. Nothing mattered without him. I couldn't see a future in which he wasn't next to me.

I had to put it all out on the table for him. No more secrets. As much as I still wasn't sure about the job with the Dallas News, I wasn't willing to throw away the opportunity unless I was one-hundred percent sure that we wouldn't work out.

I slugged down the rest of my beer, willing my nerves to relax so I could think straight.

Staring at the family across the way, I was distracted by the mini-food fight between the two older kids. While the mother wasn't amused in the slightest, it took me out of my brain for a minute, allowing me to focus on what was sitting right across from me.

Luke appeared next to the table. His head cocked to the side. "Everything all right?"

I took a deep breath and grabbed the check from the table. I hadn't realized the server had brought it over. "I'm perfectly fine."



Shoving away all the "what ifs" for the remainder of our time at the amusement park, I fell even more in love with Luke. We played a ton of different games, ranging from group to individual ones. I kicked his ass on a lot of them, determined to flip the gender roles and earn him a big stuffed animal. Luke accepted my gifts like the gracious king he was, but I knew it bruised his ego a bit to have me win them for him.

When it started to get dark and the lights on the rides burned into my retinas, Luke suggested we head back to my place.

I agreed, even though I wished we could have stayed at the amusement park a little longer.

Denying the inevitable could only last so long. I had to pull up my big girl pants and get the conversation over with. That would give Luke two days to figure out what he wanted.



"Are you all right?" Luke asked as we stood outside my apartment. He held two bags of takeout Chinese food that I barely remembered ordering. I was too in my head about what I needed to tell him, and I completely lost track of everything else.

“Yes,” I said, forcing a smile. “I’m a little dizzy. Probably hungry.”

“Let’s go in then,” he said, offering me his arm.

Pressing my fingers against Luke’s arm kept them from trembling.

What if I told him on Friday about the job? After he told me whatever it was that he needed.

No. Prolonging the lie was only going to get me into trouble again. As far as he knew, I was jobless and had no boyfriend. The perfect recipe for the position that he was trying to fill.

Queen Sophia. I couldn’t wrap my mind around the name.

We reached my door much quicker than I anticipated.

Luke went into my kitchen and found plates and utensils. As if I were a robot on autopilot, I moved everything off the table and set up the takeout, popping the boxes open and gathering them in the center of the space.

Luke came to the table, pressed a kiss to my cheek, and set the table as if he were a busboy instead of a king.

The thought of him being king brought back my name attached to a similar title.

Luke sat down and looked up at me. I couldn’t move from my spot. I stared at the small crack in the top of the chair that I hadn’t noticed before. Had I bought it like that?

“Sophia.” Luke’s voice broke into my thoughts. “You must tell me what’s on your mind.”

“Okay,” I breathed, finally looking at him. “I have to tell you something.”

Luke’s mouth pressed into a hard line. “What is it?”

“Carrie,” I said.

“Carrie?” he asked, his eyebrow raising.

“She’s not my friend,” I said.

“Who is Carrie?” he asked.

I sighed. “The woman I spoke with yesterday.”

“Your divorced friend—but you said she’s not a friend?”

“Yes. I mean, no.”

Luke shook his head. “Just spit it out, Sophia. The food is getting cold. Whatever it is—”

“She’s an editor in chief,” I said. “For the Dallas News. I went on an interview. That’s where I was coming from when you showed up on my doorstep.”

He licked his lips and dropped his gaze to the table. “Oh, I see.”

I rushed over to his side, needing him to hear me out. “She called to offer me the job. I asked her to give me a week to decide because I don’t know what’s going to happen between us, but I wanted to figure it out. I’m sorry I lied. I just—I’m not sure what to do about all of this.”

I expected Luke to get mad and yell at me for lying or to walk out of my apartment. I did not expect him to sit there and say nothing. It was much worse than I anticipated. So much worse.

“Please, say something,” I said, resorting to begging. Had I ruined everything by telling him about Carrie? Damn it! I should have waited. If he wanted me to come back to Qatar with him, he would have asked already. Was this him telling me he only wanted closure? What the hell were the last few days about then? Who would tell someone they loved them and then leave for good? I wondered if I had thought about his return all wrong.

He had no intention of taking me back with him.

I plopped down into my chair and stared at my food. My stomach growled, but the sour taste in my mouth had already ruined my appetite.

Luke’s head lifted, and he reached for the closest box to him and poured some noodles onto his plate. “We have one more day together. We can decide everything after that.”

I opened my mouth and then thought better of it. He had come to Dallas on his terms, and he was obviously going to leave on those terms as well. Whatever he had planned would wait until he was ready to reveal it.

Even though I felt like shit for blurting it all out, once I forced down some of the Chinese takeout, I felt a little better about my decision. Neither of us could worry about feelings when it came to the inevitable conclusion that loomed over us. We had to put it all out there, and if we made it through the worst of it, we would come out on top, together or not. This was a turning point in our relationship, and I wasn't going to hold back or lie to keep living in our little make-believe world. Those stories were in children's books, and this was real life. It was my life, and I had to take it by the reins and ride into whatever sunset fate had in store for me.



# CHAPTER 61



## LUKE

I never intended to be the downer of the day, but Sophia's admission about the phone call from her possible future employer completely blindsided me. For once, I didn't curb my reaction. It put a wrench in my plans for sure, but I should have been more reserved. I didn't care that Sophia had moved on with her life in a month. If she never worked again, I would think something was wrong with her.

The job offer itself didn't bother me, but why did she feel she needed to lie to me? Were my intentions unclear to her? I wasn't against her taking the job if that was what she wanted. Perhaps I had completely miscalculated the entire situation. Without being honest and forthcoming to her, she felt she needed to keep a part of her life hidden from me.

If there were a way to feel more terrible than I already did, it would be caused by leaving Sophia in Dallas while I returned home empty-handed.

My reaction had terrified her.

I tried to make up for it by brushing it off, but I knew I came across callous. It seemed like I had taken a bunch of steps forward in our relationship and huge strides backward. We were at square one again, and it was all my fucking fault.

For the rest of the evening, Sophia was quiet and reserved. I tried to make small talk, but after dinner, she shut down. We didn't discuss Carrie or the job, even though I prompted her to. She had to know that I wasn't the type of man who wanted to

take away her choices, but I hadn't given her the counteroffer yet.

I had somehow managed to end another amazing trip with Sophia in the same way as all the others.

No, this couldn't be the end. I wouldn't allow it. I was reserving that next step until tomorrow. Was it possible to move it up?

Even when we went to bed that night, after politely kissing each other on the lips, I lay awake for hours.

I was motionless enough that she had no idea I was still awake. As Sophia went through the normal phases of sleep, I stared at the ceiling, my eyes creating shapes in the plaster above me. The shapes turned to faces—angry ones. Was my subconscious messing with me?

Would waiting until the morning help me out at all? I had already blown it with that idiotic reaction.

When I was sure Sophia was asleep, I slid out of bed as quietly as I could and went to the window. Glancing out the window, the street lights created shadows across the concrete. The stillness of the night offered no new advice for me to follow.

The right thing for me to do was go back to my kingdom and allow Sophia to live out her life and dreams. But we'd already been there before and nothing good had come from it. We were both miserable.

Would it turn out the same? Would I wake up every morning and want Sophia with me? Of course, I would. But would Sophia move on in the same way that she'd started to before I turned up? If I had appeared on her doorstep any other day, she would have already had a job lined up, and we would be in a different place.

Did it mean something that I came to Dallas when I did? Did that mean we were meant to be, or was I sticking my nose where it didn't belong?

All I knew was that I didn't want to be without her ever again.

She seemed to be on the same page as me, but she'd held back from telling me about the job offer for some reason. Was it because she wanted to come with me, or was she afraid I would leave as soon as I heard it?

Getting back into bed, I wanted to shake her awake and pick her brain, but if she was already pissed at me, forcing her to talk to me would make it worse.

No, I had to wait until the morning. At least until her head was clear and we could have a proper conversation.

I jumped out of bed and strode across the room.

I couldn't wait until the morning. I could barely wait another ten seconds. I had come here to do something, and I intended to do it. The choice was Sophia's, but she needed to know exactly why I showed up unannounced and professed my love for her. I wasn't going anywhere, and I hoped she wouldn't either.

Grabbing my phone from the table, I texted Gerard, telling him to prepare everything and that I would pay him double what we'd agreed on.

He replied within a few minutes. As if a warning shot went off, I went into planning mode.

The more I moved, the less my nerves got to me. If I stopped for any reason, I was afraid I would rip all the hair out of my head. Other than claiming my spot at the throne in front of the council, I had never been so nervous before.

I sneaked into the bedroom and grabbed my suitcase, pulling it into the bathroom. Closing the door as silently as I could, I changed.

Dressed in my last suit, the one I had saved for this very occasion, I stood in front of Sophia's sleeping form and took one more shaky breath before leaning down and shaking her shoulder.

"Sophia," I hissed. I wasn't sure why I was so quiet. There was no one else around.

I cleared my throat and tried again. "Sophia, wake up!"

She jolted awake and sat up. “What? Luke, what is it?”

I sat on the bed next to her. “I need you to get dressed.”

She shoved her hair off her face and turned to the alarm clock on the side table next to the bed. “What time is it?”

“Three,” I said.

“In the morning?” she asked, more confused than ever.

“Just, please trust me,” I said.

“Luke, I don’t understand.”

I helped her out of bed. Turning on the light in the bathroom, it gave us enough illumination to navigate the bedroom. Injuring her before arriving at our location wasn’t in the plan.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. “Why are you dressed like that?”

The more she asked, the fewer excuses I gave her. She would find out when we got there. I feared if I gave it all away too soon, she might refuse to come.

I had chosen a good time because in her sleep-delirium, she was quite pliable and went along with helping me get her dressed.

While I would have wanted to make it a formal affair, I wasn’t going to have her freeze to death. The temperature at night in Dallas put frost on the windows, so I dressed her in black pants and a nice blouse. I hoped all of this would be worth it for her. Years from now, we would laugh about it.

*Hopefully.*

After getting her fully dressed, Sophia shoved away from me and stalked into the bathroom. “I can dress, you know?”

Whether it was because of the conversation from yesterday or me waking her up—or an unhealthy mix of both—she wasn’t pleased to be doing what I asked.

While she was in there, I paced the room, cracking my knuckles until the pressure started to hurt.

Had I been too quick to push us into the situation? In my sleep-deprived mind, this seemed like the only way. But was it? Should I have kept the schedule the way it was and done all the fanfare? Or would she appreciate the gesture?

There was no going back now.

My phone rang just as Sophia walked out of the bathroom.

“Hello?” I answered.

Sophia’s hair was back in a smooth bun at the nape of her neck. She wore a little makeup, enough to make it appear as if she hadn’t been sleeping ten minutes ago. Her eyes were slits as she grabbed her shoes and watched me out of the corner of her eyes. She wanted answers. She would have them soon enough.

“Everything is ready,” Gerard said. “We’ll be waiting.”

“Perfect,” I said, then hung up.

“Who was that?” Sophia asked.

“His name is Gerard.”

“How do you know this Gerard, and what does he have to do with getting me up before the crack of dawn?” She crossed her arms over her chest. “Are you going to tell me what this is all about?”

“Not yet,” I said and indicated for her to follow me.

She muttered something to herself, but I didn’t inquire about what she said.

Outside, the Uber I’d called idled in front of the building. “Your chariot awaits.”

I got a small smile out of her, but coupled with an eye roll, it didn’t quite have the effect I’d hoped for.

Inside the car, Sophia peered into the front seat. Initially, I had no idea what she was looking for until I saw the driver’s phone attached to the dashboard of the car. The destination wasn’t listed, but even if it were, I’d only typed in the address.

I was safe for now. It was only a matter of time before she found out about it, though.

“I’m guessing you’re not going to tell me anything?” she asked.

“Not yet,” I said.

“Can you tell me why we needed to do this at three in the morning?” she asked.

I wanted to take her hand and reassure her that everything was going to be okay, but then I thought better of it. My actions spoke louder than words and small gestures. “I’m not going to make the same mistakes I have in the past.”

“With regard to what?”

I turned to her. “To losing you. I won’t do it again.”

“You could have told me that in the apartment,” she said.

“I know,” I said. “But if I’m going to prove my love for you, I needed to bring you somewhere.”

“Where is that?” she asked.

I smirked. “Nice try. How about you stop trying to guess and just go with the flow?”

“I’m a reporter,” she said and then frowned. “I *was* a reporter.”

I knew she was thinking of our conversation from earlier in the night. I didn’t care that she already had another job lined up, but I wanted to throw my hat in the ring so she could make an educated choice about her future. I would accept her decision either way, even if I had to drag my tail between my legs all the way back to Qatar, but for some reason, I had a feeling that I held the upper hand. I just needed Sophia on board.

“What is open at this hour?” she asked. “Unless this is an outdoor excursion?”

“We’ll be inside shortly,” I said.

“Good,” she said with a shiver. Maybe I hadn’t picked the warmest outfit for her.

Soon enough, she would be fine.

The Uber driver pulled up to the curb in front of a building. The store was the only one with lights on. The glittering glass cases inside were a beacon for us.

Sophia leaned closer to the window and peered inside the building. “This is a jewelry store.”

“Yes, it is,” I said.

Gerard came out the front doors and approached the car. He opened Sophia’s door for her and helped her out.

“Good evening—or morning, I suppose I should say.”

“Hi?” Sophia said, more of a question than a greeting. She glanced at me.

I shook hands with Gerard, and he led us inside.

“You’re going to have to explain this to me,” she said.

“In due time,” I said, pressing my hand against the small of her back and leading her into the building.



# CHAPTER 62



## SOPHIA

In the past, I had worked into the wee hours of the morning on a regular basis. Living on coffee and other caffeinated beverages was my thing. After a month of not working, my sleep became precious to me.

Luke waking me up in a panic drew forth terrible thoughts in my mind. Was there a fire? Or a burglar? My building was safe, but no place was completely safe in our day and age.

Luke's lack of information worried me. After he refused to talk to me about the job interview, I thought for sure he would be on a plane back to Qatar. Initially, I thought his early morning wakeup call was to do just that, but I was mistaken.

My mood improved only slightly when the cold air blasted me as we left the building. We were really doing this, whatever "this" was.

In the past, Luke had surprised me by taking me to unexpected places, but this little jaunt took the cake.

From the way he woke me up, it seemed like an emergency. Questioning him got me nowhere, but asking him the right question got me a little closer to what he planned. He said he wanted to prove his love to me. But I already knew he loved me. Did he think I stopped loving him because of the conversation from the night before? Sure, I was upset by the way he reacted, but neither of us ended the night in a good mood.

In the few times that I had drifted from sleep to wake, I knew that Luke hadn't gone to sleep at all. In fact, it had

worried me so much that I pretended to be asleep so that he wouldn't know that he was on my mind as well.

But a jewelry store? And not just any store. This was in a prime location downtown. Did he think a necklace or bracelet would solve our issues? He was going to leave me in a day. I didn't want anything from him, just him. Having something to remember him by would only add to my torture.

The strange man that helped me from the Uber was dressed in a suit as if he were going to a wedding. His hair was slicked back, and he didn't appear to be fazed by the hour. What was it about these men and looking so dashing before the sun even rose?

Walking into the jewelry store, there weren't any other employees in the building. I assumed this man was the only person helping us. But with what? Did Luke want to get something for his mother? Couldn't he have done that during normal hours?

The more questions that formed in my mind, the more my stomach sank.

Luke took my hand and walked me to one of the cases. Dozens of sparkling diamonds twinkled on gold and silver bands. "Do you see anything you like?"

"I don't understand all of this," I said. "What are you doing? What are we doing here?"

The man—Gerard—walked away from us and stood across the room behind a glass partition, giving us some privacy.

Luke took both of my hands in his. "Sophia, ever since I met you, you've managed to make me rethink everything in my life. Never have I met anyone that challenged my way of thinking while grounding me in my life. You've always been so patient with me. You even went as far as pretending to be my girlfriend, traveling to a faraway place while keeping your head about you. I admire your intelligence, and I want you to know that I wouldn't be the man I am today without you."

I glanced at the case next to us, and what he was doing smacked me in the face. I opened my mouth to say something,

but he shook his head.

“Please, let me finish. Being without you is an impossibility for me. You’ve turned my world upside down. I can’t feel or see anything correctly unless you are by my side. I came to America to check in with you, to make sure that you felt the same way. And over these last few days, I know you do. I don’t care that you lied about the job. I had planned to come here and bring you back into my life for good. I hoped that by showing you that through it all, we can be a normal couple, even though we’re going to live a very extraordinary life. I can’t live without you, and I wanted to tell and show you that.”

“Okay,” I said, for once in my life almost completely speechless.

“What it all comes down to is that I want you to be my queen.”

My breath caught in my throat. We always danced around that particular topic, so hearing it from his lips made it all very real.

“Now, all we need is a ring to make it official.” Luke glanced at the case next to us, but I couldn’t take my eyes off him.

“I didn’t say yes yet,” I said, getting his attention to move back to me. Nothing that Luke did was orthodox. Who took a girl into a jewelry store in the middle of the night?

“Well, then,” Luke said, dropping down to one knee. “I suppose this is what you’re looking for. Sophia, will you make me the happiest man alive and marry me?”

“Yes,” I said without hesitation.

He popped up from the floor and kissed me. Even though we were fully clothed and in the middle of a public establishment, the kiss we shared was the most sensual of my life. It was slow and tender and made my toes curl most deliciously.

When we broke apart, Luke called Gerard over to us.

The man grinned as if he were a proud friend of Luke's. In fact, I had no idea how they knew each other. But I bet Luke had given the man enough money for his time, and he was about to give him more. I would have been smiling, too, if I were him.

Gerard turned on his salesman speech and went through the different types of rings displayed in the case. None of them had price tags on them, so I couldn't balk at how much Luke was going to spend on my engagement ring.

Engaged! I was friggin' engaged. It hadn't sunk in until I started trying on the rings. They were the prettiest and most delicate pieces of jewelry I'd ever tried on before. I was incredibly gentle with each of them, afraid of breaking them on the spot.

Luke had his own opinions and convinced me to get a white gold band while the cut and shape of the diamond was up to me. I wasn't a jewelry person. I tended to stick with stud earrings and maybe a necklace.

Gerard was patient with me and went through the different types of diamonds that I could choose from.

After I narrowed it down to three, I forced Luke to make the decision.

"I want you to pick," he said.

"I did," I said before he could say anything else. If I could have the upper hand in any part of this conversation, it was going to be at this moment. "None of this is traditional. I want you to at least pick the ring."

Without any hesitation, Luke grabbed the middle ring. It was the one I would have chosen for myself.

He slipped it on my finger, and I held up my hand.

"Beautiful," he said.

"I know," I said, glancing at him. He wasn't looking at the ring. He stared right into my eyes.

The world around us fell into darkness, and I was only able to focus on Luke. A month ago, if anyone had said I would

end up in a jewelry store with Luke, I would have said he or she was crazy. But being in the moment with the love of my life, I wondered why we hadn't made it there faster. All of the family and political drama seemed like nothing compared to the feeling of happiness zipping through my veins.

Luke kissed me again, a small peck on the mouth. Gerard excused himself to bring the bill to Luke.

I was torn because I wanted to know how much the ring cost, but I knew if I did, I would probably be too afraid to wear it.

"Should I take it off?" I asked Luke.

"Never," he said, bringing my hand up to his lips. His breath moved across my knuckles as he kissed each one.

I grinned, and I had the urge to call Matt about everything that happened since Luke came to Dallas. I hadn't told my best friend anything since seeing Luke again, just in case it didn't work out. But Luke had me for good now.

I bet his mother didn't even know what he had been planning when he came to Dallas.

"Oh my gosh," I said, voicing my question.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Does your mother know about this?"

"Not exactly," he said. This wasn't news to him.

She had hated me the moment I passed through the palace gates as his fake girlfriend. How the hell was she going to deal with me being her future daughter-in-law?

"It will be fine," Luke said as if reading my mind.

"I'm not sure I want to be in the room when you tell her," I said.

He snaked an arm around my waist. "You're going to have a hard time of that."

"How so?" I asked.

“I don’t plan on letting you out of my sight for very long ever again.”

“Oh yeah?”

“You’re mine and don’t you forget it,” he growled close to my ear.

I shivered with pleasure. “I won’t.”

Gerard waved Luke over, and he left me to take care of the finances. In a million years, I never thought I would be the one to pick out my gorgeous ring. I always thought the women who did that were a little ditzy and too controlling. But for Luke and me, this was his grand gesture. He wanted to make sure I knew what he wanted and that I wanted the same.

And how I did.

Wandering around the store, I checked out the other pieces for sale. Everything sparkled as if it belonged to celebrities or supermodels about to walk down a runway. As much as I tended to be the frugal type, if I were to become queen to Luke’s king, I would have to change my mind about a lot of things. Namely, the clothes, jewelry, and lifestyle that befit a royal family.

Luke took a while with Gerard, so I grabbed my phone and punched in Matt’s number. I knew he wouldn’t pick up, so I left a voicemail. “Matt, you need to call me the second you get this. I have the most amazing news.”

I hung up and shoved my phone into my purse before admiring the stunning rock on my finger. As beautiful as it was, it also represented a new life for me. One that I thought I would never have a chance to get again.

I breathed a sigh of relief that Luke came to Dallas when he did. Now, our path together was straight and narrow, unlike the winding curve that we’d traveled on since we met.

“I’m guessing that was Matt,” Luke said, coming up to me.

I brought him close to me and embraced him. My fiancé. It had a nice ring to it. “Yes, but he’s two hours behind. He won’t get the message until he wakes up in few hours.”

“Good,” he said. “More alone time for us.”

“Are we good to go?” I asked him.

“Yes,” he said. “Now that we’re taken care of, we can both get some sleep.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to call your mother and tell her?” I asked.

He shook his head. “I said I wanted to sleep, not get an earful. I’ll tell her soon. Besides, we have only one more day here before we need to get back to Qatar.”

*We.* For once, that sounded nice, even though it would be a permanent change.

Walking out of the jewelry store, the lights flashed. I turned to see them come back on but then another flash went off.

“Get out of here!” Luke growled.

Turning, I saw the photographer snap several more pictures, the flash blinding me. I opened my hand and held it in front of my face.

“Nice ring!” the photographer said, rapidly snapping more photos before he took off down the sidewalk.

“What was that about?” Luke asked.

“It’s about the king of Qatar and his new fiancée.” A breath caught in my lungs. I recognized the photographer. He worked at the Dallas Post. Kevin-something. He was new and hungry for work. He was going to get good money to be the first to expose our engagement.



# CHAPTER 63



## LUKE

Since I finally had Sophia forever, I was able to get some rest when we arrived back at her apartment. But she was quite the opposite. She went on about the photographer, wondering why he'd taken so many pictures of us. It wasn't until the later hours of the morning that I calmed her down enough for us to get a few hours of sleep. We were going to have a busy day, and there was no reason we had to trudge our way through it because of tiredness.

The spineless photographer from the night before seemed to bother Sophia more than me. Even though I hadn't been photographed in some time, I knew there wasn't much of a market for foreign princes in America. At least, not those who weren't connected to the British crown.

Sophia enjoyed her privacy, and I had attempted to assure her that she wasn't in any danger of being exposed.

I made sure both of us slept in as much as we could. And that wasn't a problem because we both rolled out of bed around one the next afternoon. That was what a sleep-deprived night did to people.

When she woke, she wrapped an arm around my body and wiggled her fingers at me. I kissed her hand and turned to face her before doing the same to her lips.

"Good morning, my queen," I said against her mouth.

Her body vibrated underneath me. "I *do* like the sound of that."

“Me too,” I said.

“How about we get out of here?” she asked. “Dallas is much nicer in the daylight.” She giggled and rolled off the bed.

“What did you have in mind?” I asked. I wasn’t sure when we would come back to Dallas, if ever. There was nothing here for Sophia anymore, and there would be much to plan when it came to our wedding and getting her settled in as my queen.

She didn’t seem fazed by it, and I wasn’t going to mention it and ruin her mood.

“How about this cafe that I love?” she suggested.

“Race you to the shower,” I said and jumped off the bed.

Sophia turned on her heel and squealed all the way into the bathroom as I chased her.

We took way too long in the shower, long enough that there wasn’t much hot water left by the end of it. We took our sweet time getting ready and then headed out to get some coffee. I kept an eye out for any other photographers, but the guy from the night before seemed to be working on his own. He had probably been out and about and noticed that the jewelry shop was open. Not sure what he was doing out so early, but I doubted he knew what he’d come across until we walked out.

My phone buzzed from my pocket as we were leaving Sophia’s apartment. It was Mother. I hung it up before the second ring. She wasn’t going to ruin my day with whatever nonsense she wanted to discuss. She probably had four more dates lined up for me, but she had no idea I would never go on a date with anyone other than Sophia ever again.

Even though most of the patrons at the coffee shop were halfway through their workday and in need of a jolt to get through the rest of it, Sophia and I were ravenous, and I was close to purchasing all the delicious looking pastries in one fell swoop. To keep my presence on the down low, I purchased only a few items to sample. Today was our last day in the

States, and we would spend the rest of the time packing up Sophia's things.

The boxes were to arrive in about an hour and the movers later that night. I'd had everything on hold, awaiting Sophia's response to asking her to marry me. I had started the ball rolling the moment we got into the car after she had said yes.

Since everything was moving so quickly, I didn't think Sophia had time to worry about the photographer. By the time any story came out, we would be out of the country.

As I was paying for our food and coffee, my phone rang again. I knew right away it was Mother. Again. I was surprised that she had waited this long to get in touch with me. She probably expected that I would come running back to her when Sophia turned me down, but she was in for a surprise when I returned to Qatar with my queen. Her days of playing matchmaker were over.

Sophia and I sat down and tore into our food. Both of us were hungrier than we thought and finished everything within a few minutes.

Sophia leaned forward while sipping her coffee. Her left hand smoothed over my hand, the ring reflecting the light from above us.

"My queen," I said with a big smile. My cheeks started to hurt from smiling so much, but the pain was worth it to see the pure bliss in her eyes.

"My king," she said, nodding her head. "You're going to have to teach me how to curtsy!"

I laughed, and any reservations I had about returning home were dashed into the wind. With my life on track, I had no reason to worry about anything anymore. Sophia would be by my side for the rest of my life, and I wouldn't have to be distracted with that part of my life anymore. I could focus on being the best king and husband that I could be with the most incredible woman by my side. This trip was so worth it, and I would never forget a single second of it.

Even though Sophia was in a teasing mood, the smile faltered from her lips mere seconds later.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Nothing,” she said. “At least not with me. I’m a little worried about what to expect when we get back to Qatar.”

As if from her mouth to Mother’s ears, my phone rang again. I gritted my teeth and turned my phone on silent. She wasn’t going to ruin this moment for us.

“You don’t need to worry about anything,” I said, placing my phone facedown on the table. “Once we’re wed, you will outrank Mother, and she won’t be able to say anything to you anymore.”

“But until then, will she just try harder to break us up?” she asked.

I touched her chin with my finger, lifting it up so we were eye to eye. “We love each other, right?”

“Right.”

“Then, nothing and no one, especially not Mother, will get in the way of our happiness.”

“Okay,” she said, letting out a big breath. “It’s a big change. A good one, but a big one.”

“I’m here for you. Every step of the way.”

“Every step of the way,” she repeated. “But don’t you think that you should at least warn her that I’m coming? Even if you want to surprise her with the engagement?”

“She knows you’re coming,” I said.

“She does?”

“She’s an intelligent woman. As much as she doesn’t want us together, she knows I’m coming back with you. When I want something, I get it.”

“She knows more than that,” Sophia said. Her lips pulled down into a frown as she looked at the table next to us.

I glanced in that direction. On the empty table next to us was a newspaper. The top read “The Dallas Post”. On the front page was a large color image of two people.

Sophia grabbed the newspaper, and a small moan escaped her lips. “This is bad. I told you it wasn’t—no!”

She wasn’t making any sense.

“What is it?” I asked, reaching for the paper.

She shoved it over to me and then shielded her face with her hands. Her eyes darted around the room, making me more confused than ever by her reaction.

I opened up the front page and stared at the familiar faces of the two people in the photograph. Damn it. Sophia’s reaction suddenly made sense.

The background of the photograph was dark, but our faces were lit up from the flash of the camera. It was from the night before. The photographer had captured exactly what he’d needed when he invaded our privacy. Gerard’s shop was behind us—the perfect photo op for him but not so much for us. The photograph showed Sophia grinning up at me and me gazing down at her. We were holding hands, and her left hand was held up between us. The ring was as clear as day, and there was no mistaking what it meant for the two of us. She almost looked like she was showing it off, but I could see the look of surprise in her eyes.

I didn’t even remember the moment, but now, it was forever burned in my mind. It would be the same photograph that would send Mother into a terrible rage after discovering it. If she hadn’t discovered it already.

“Fuck,” I muttered and glanced at my phone.

“We should get out of here,” Sophia said, attempting to hide behind her coffee cup. Her new ring mocked me from her hand. This wasn’t how I wanted Mother to find out. Soon enough, everyone would know, and Mother would be furious from the way she had to find out.

Unless she already knew. Was that why she was calling me nonstop this morning?

I checked my phone, and there were seven missed calls from her. She hadn't left a voicemail. She was probably saving her speech for when she got to speak with me directly.

Glancing behind me, I checked to be sure there weren't any other nosy reporters or photographers stalking us.

A newspaper stand sat by the front door. If anyone walked in and noticed us, our little bubble would be shattered. The bubble already felt as if someone had poked a hole in it, and the air was slowly leaking out.

I supposed the only shiny beacon of light was that Sophia had already agreed to marry me. We were in this for good, and no one—not even Mother—could ruin it for us.

I had wanted to tell her myself, preferably alone so that Sophia wouldn't be exposed to her initial shock and possible wrath, but we didn't have that luxury anymore.

Picking up our things, I saw Sophia shove the newspaper into her purse. On the way out, she left some money in the small cup near the newspapers, paying for the one she snagged. I had a feeling she didn't want the paper for sentimental reasons. I doubted she was pleased at having her face blasted all over the news. No doubt it would be on the website soon if it wasn't already.

“Do you want me to purchase all of these?” I asked her.

She glared at the stand. “For what reason?”

“We could trash them so you don't have to worry about anything,” I said.

“No, I don't want to support that filth,” she said with a curl in her lip.

Being on the other side of reporting wasn't fun, and she was about to get a rude awakening.

# CHAPTER 64





## SOPHIA

My heart felt as if it were going to burst from my chest. Talking with Matt only made it more real. He was as giddy as I was. I hung up the phone and let out a long sigh. Was this shit really happening?

I knew that we would end up in the tabloids eventually, but not this soon. It felt like an invasion of privacy for my face to end up in a newspaper without my consent. I knew better than most that consent didn't matter in a lot of situations. The article didn't show any sign of libel. At least, not yet. That was why I purchased the paper, so I could take a closer look once we were out of the public eye.

How did anyone know who or where Luke was? Mr. Fraser had sent me away to England to find the story. Did Mr. Fraser have someone tail me the moment I quit? Knowing Luke and I were involved, my old boss would know it was only a matter of time until I exposed what I'd been doing with the prince turned king. I didn't think Mr. Fraser would stoop that low, but I had no idea what people did when they were desperate. He had tried to get the story on Luke for some time and eventually had sent me. What if he was in the hole with money and could use a story like this to boost papers?

Even though Luke wasn't well known in the States, people loved a good fairy tale. Luke plucking me out from the masses of women would have been lucrative fodder for any newspaper.

"Over here," Luke said as we exited the cafe.

The sun shone brightly, not offering any cover for us to escape. If anyone had seen the paper that morning, they would recognize us. I wasn't ready for people to recognize me at all.

It was something I would have to get used to. Eventually, when I became Luke's queen, the entire country would know what I looked like. Eventually, I would be dining with royals from other countries and appear in photos with them as well. Would I become a household name? Would people in Dallas remember me as just another queen in a foreign land or the Southern girl from America?

The possibilities swam through my mind. I had to get to the bottom of it.

Once we were safely inside of our Uber, I opened the newspaper. Since the photo was so big, the article was a few pages in, a desperate attempt to force readers to read through the whole paper to get to the meat of the story.

"The New Royal Family," the title read, and I gripped the paper tighter in my hands. I hadn't been engaged for twenty-four hours yet, but Luke and I already had this ridiculous moniker.

Glancing at the byline, I let out a string of curses, enough that the Uber driver's ears started to redden.

"What is it?" Luke asked.

"That backstabbing bitch," I said through gritted teeth. "Natalia wrote the article."

Luke shrugged. "Do I know her?"

"No," I said. "She worked at a nearby desk when I was at the Post. She wanted to know every single detail about me going overseas."

"Was she fishing for information?" Luke asked.

"I don't think so," I said. "At that point, the article about you was still mine." Reading through the article, there were several mentions of my past and a lot of information that I didn't want public. I wondered if they would find Matt and

interview him too. I knew Matt wouldn't say anything, but he deserved a heads-up at least.

After reading a bit about Luke and his father's death, I put the paper down in my lap, unable to take in any more information. "Your mother is going to hate me even more than she already does."

Luke slipped the paper out from under my hands and folded it. He placed it on the other side of him. Taking my hand in his, he twined his fingers with mine. The ring on my finger pressed harder into my hand.

"How are you so calm?" I asked him.

"This is part of the job," he said. "I didn't quite expect it to go this way, but these things do happen. At least we weren't caught doing other things."

I noticed a look from the driver at Luke's remark.

"It's creepy and unnecessary. If they wanted an interview, they could have asked."

Luke laughed at that.

"What's so funny?" I asked him.

"The tabloids never ask," he said. "They do what they want and apologize later."

"But the Dallas Post is a reputable paper."

"They still need to sell papers to keep the lights on," he said.

"Never in my six years with them had I ever seen something like this before," I said.

"Well, you didn't give them the story they wanted," Luke said.

He was right. Mr. Fraser wanted a certain story, and when I didn't deliver and Luke's father passed, there wasn't a story. He had to fill the space somehow.

I had never felt so happy that I left. If they were going to resort to intrusive stories like this, then I didn't want to be a

part of it. Reporting wasn't ever going to be in my life again. Not that I minded. I supposed I enjoyed the job when a promotion was on the horizon, but taking a step back and meeting Luke had altered the way I thought about my life. Now, I could affect an actual change in others' lives. With Luke ruling by my side, there was no end to the good we could do together.

"If you don't want to deal with things like this, I understand," Luke said to me.

"Who does?" I asked.

"No one," he said, turning my engagement ring around my finger. "Everything is going to be okay. I promise you that."

From his frown to the crinkles in the corner of his eyes, something was churning in his brain.

"Luke, I still want to be with you," I said. "I don't want you to ever think otherwise. This is just disgusting to me, and I'm not sure how to feel about it. I don't doubt us, but I wished this news would have come out differently."

Luke sighed and nodded.

I dropped my head to his shoulder and squeezed his hand. I wasn't sure how else to comfort him and let him know that I was going to be with him through it all.

"Once they find another celebrity sex tape, I'm sure this news will be on the back burner," he said.

I snickered. "Sex tape? What are you, back in the 2000s? No one cares about those anymore. You'd be hardpressed to find a celeb without one."

Luke laughed. "At least I got a smile out of you."

"You did," I said, holding on to his arm. We were going to get through this, but we had to get over the hurdle of telling Gia in person first.



When we arrived at my apartment, stacks of boxes leaned against the wall outside my door, along with rolls of bubble tape and other packing materials. A few of the stacks blocked the hallway. My neighbors wouldn't appreciate that when they got home. Good thing I was leaving.

"This seems like a lot of boxes," I said.

"I wanted to be sure we had enough to pack everything," Luke said, grabbing my keys and opening my door.

I knew I was going back to the palace with Luke, but going through the process was much different than I expected. This was the first place that I'd lived without roommates. In a way, it was my bachelorette pad, and here I was, just letting her go in a day.

Everything moved too quickly for me, and I wasn't sure how to slow it down.

I went inside and dropped my purse onto the table, as I always did. Glancing around the room, I asked, "What about the bigger furniture?"

"Whatever you don't want to bring to the palace will go into storage for now. Unless you want to donate your things right away?"

I had no doubt that I was going to be with Luke for the long haul, but donating everything I wasn't taking to Qatar was a little too much, too quickly.

Luke started pulling in the folded boxes into the apartment, along with the packing tape dispensers.

"I'll keep everything in storage for now," I said, making at least one decision. Since going to the cafe, I'd felt as if my life was out of control. If I could hold on to something, it would be my cherished belongings.

"Perfect," Luke said.

"Do I need to call anyone?" I asked.

"Nope," he said. "I have it all taken care of. We're going to be gone before the movers come. I have the landlord taking care of it."

“You do?”

“Is that all right?” he asked, shoving his hands into his pockets. “I’m a take-charge kind of guy, and I thought it would be an easier transition.”

“Sure,” I said. There was no going back anyway. Luke had thought of everything.

“Where would you like me to start?” he asked.

“How about the kitchen?” I suggested. “All of that can go to storage. I’m not sure your mother will appreciate any of my chipped plates and bowls.”

He smirked and started putting together a few boxes while I went into the bathroom. Most of the products that I used would be necessary for now, at least until they ran out and I would have to figure out how to get more. In the time I had spent in Qatar, I kept my head covered, so that would affect the amount of mousse and hairspray I used. For now, I packed all the products into my toiletry bag. Somehow, it comforted me to have them with me.

Grabbing my only two suitcases from the closet, opened them both, and laid them next to my bed. For now, everything I wanted to have in Qatar would have to fit into these cases. The other stuff would arrive later.

It took only a half hour to finish packing my bathroom. Walking inside to do a final inspection, the room looked as if I had never been there. My heart pinched at the thought. Someone was going to move into this place, and there wouldn’t be any of me left. It was a sad thought. At the same time, it gave me a little boost knowing that I was about to go off on a new adventure with the love of my life.

When I finished my bedroom, Luke was almost done with the kitchen. He was patient as he asked what I wanted to keep—nostalgic, yet old chipped plates—and what I wanted to toss—all my cleaning supplies that had barely anything left in them.

We ordered food in for dinner, and by the time the pizza arrived, I could barely contain myself. I grabbed a slice from

the box before Luke placed it on the table.

I caught his eye and said, “This is a lot of hard work.”

“I know,” he said, showing me his hands, which were covered in dust.

I hadn’t cleaned the top half of my cabinets in some time.

The only spot not covered with boxes was the couch. We snuggled together and ate for a few minutes. We had a lot more to do in a short amount of time.

Since I wasn’t moving around, my anxiety about leaving crept through my brain again. I wanted to confide in Luke, but hearing his nervousness when he thought I didn’t want to do this wouldn’t help either of us. I was the one who had the problem. Keeping it in my head was best for everyone.

Luke kissed my cheek as he went into the box for another slice. We locked eyes, and for that brief moment, I knew that everything was going to be okay. Warmth moved through me at the thought. We were going to be okay, no matter what. Just as long as Luke was by my side, we could get through anything.

Anything, including his mother. It was hard to imagine that she would be okay with our engagement, especially days after she had set him up with another woman.

There was no reassurance in Luke’s eyes about that.

# CHAPTER 65





## LUKE

We cut it close when it came to packing up Sophia's apartment. I didn't leave much time for rest since I knew Mother was only going to keep blowing up my phone until we arrived back in Qatar. I hoped that with some time to let the news sink in, she would cool herself down, and we could have a civilized conversation.

It was probably wishful thinking.

I had taken a quick reprieve from packing to call Abir and inform him of what we'd done. I also asked him to keep Mother distracted until we returned. We had a long two days ahead of us. As much as I wanted to get the conversation over with, we had a planned stop in England for the pilot to rest and refuel while Sophia and I could do the same.

Two days was enough time for Mother to relax before we had to deal with her. There was nothing for her to do except to take what we had done and start to accept it.

She needed to understand I was no longer just her son. I was a ruling king and could make my own decisions in life. The sooner she knew that, the better.

I noted Sophia's nervousness as we drove to the airport.

"What if I forgot something?" Sophia asked when we pulled onto the tarmac.

"The landlord is going to do a final sweep when the movers are gone. He has my number and email and has promised to let me know if there's anything left."

“You have thought of everything,” she said.

I kissed the top of her hand. “I want this to be as easy for you as possible. You’ve made me the happiest man alive; this is the least I can do.”

She let out a sigh and her shoulders finally relaxed. It was a good thing we were stopping in England. I wanted the transition to be as seamless as possible for her. A nice dinner in the country that we met was just the ticket to starting off this engagement the right way. I would pull out all the stops for her, starting today and for the rest of our lives together.



Since we were engaged, I didn’t feel the least bit guilty about sharing a bed with Sophia. After takeoff, we were both falling asleep in our chairs when I suggested we go to the bedroom to be more comfortable. We were going to deal with a lot of jet lag, and keeping up with the correct time zone, even when the sky was bright and sunny, was important. I wanted to be as fresh and alert as I could be when it came to speaking with Mother.

She would be ready to fight with me as soon as I arrived, and I was going to be ready for her.

The impending conversation aided in keeping me restless for the ride over to England. Here were the two most important women in my life, and there was this giant rift between them. I knew Sophia was trying as hard as she could, but Mother could prove to be stubborn as a mule when she wanted to be.

It was tempting to ask Abir to meet with us as a family so she would curb her tongue, but it was only a matter of time before she got Sophia or myself alone to tell us how she really thought.

I was a man who could stand up to his mother, and I would do just that.

Sophia turned in her sleep, and she clasped her hand in mine. Even though it was dark in the bedroom, her eyes opened. “Are we there yet?”

“No,” I said, kissing the tip of her nose.

“Go to sleep then,” she said and moved closer to me.

I inhaled the scent of her shampoo, and for a brief moment, I was able to forget about Mother. I closed my eyes and concentrated on Sophia’s breathing, the very sound lulling me into a deep and dreamless sleep.

A sharp knock on the door came sometime later.

Sophia jolted, and I sat up, rubbing the sleep from my eyes. Glancing at the digital display next to the bed, Sophia and I had slept for most of the flight.

“Your Majesty,” one of the flight attendants said through the door. I couldn’t tell who it was over the engines of the plane.

“Yes?” I called.

“We will prepare for landing in ten minutes,” he said.

“Very well. Thank you.”

Sophia rolled over and stretched her arms over her head. “We have to get up?”

I kissed her forehead before getting out of bed. “I’m afraid so.”

I went to the window and flipped open the shade. The sun was setting in the distance, and the sky was darkening over the city. I drew in a deep breath, back in England once again. Since becoming king, I had no intention to return to England in the near future, but going back to gather Sophia had changed that plan.

Sophia went into the bathroom to change before we went into the main cabin area.

We sat together in the same places that we had every single flight we’d taken together. Side by side in the plushier chairs, overlooking the wing of the airplane.

I took her hand in mine as we watched the big screen television fixed on the wall in front of us. I enjoyed keeping up with current events and so did Sophia. The landing was smooth as we were distracted by the pretty news anchor on BBC News.

Once we were safely on the ground, Sophia let out a big breath.

“Everything all right?” I asked her.

“Yeah,” she said. “Sort of.”

Unbuckling from the chair, I turned to her. “We’re staying here for the night. I’d like to take you to dinner. Unless you’re too tired?”

She shook her head. “Surprisingly, I’m not tired. I got a nice rest before. I’d love to go to dinner. When do we take off again?”

I checked my watch. We didn’t have nearly as much time in England as I wanted.

“Early tomorrow morning.”

“So if we don’t get a lot of sleep tonight, we can sleep on the plane?”

“Yes,” I said, a little confused by her question.

It didn’t take me long to put together what she’d said and the quick flash of something in her eyes. Clearing my throat and adjusting the growing hardness between my legs, I followed her off the plane.



Even though it was late afternoon, the streets of London were bustling with activity. Those coming from a long week of work were off to their families or out to the pub.

Since I wasn’t sure what tonight would entail, I ordered a car service for us so neither of us would have to worry about

driving under the influence of jet lag or the costly bottle of wine I was about to purchase at dinner.

I wanted as much time together in our hotel as possible, so I'd sent our things to our room, and we headed off before the flight attendants and pilot even left the tarmac.

They had a long working day ahead of themselves; I hoped they rested appropriately.

We arrived at one of my favorite restaurants in the city. It showcased garden to table entrees in a modern British fashion. I always loved the unique menu and freshness of their food.

It was a good thing I'd booked the restaurant when I did. The main dining room was packed with people.

The hostess led us to the private dining room upstairs. While I'd hosted several meetings there, I enjoyed having the intimate setting for just Sophia and me.

The room was beautiful, and Sophia mentioned it to me, but she no longer had that wide-eyed response when we arrived at places like this. It gave me a little thrill to see her melding into the lifestyle that I'd cultivated for myself a long time ago. It gave me faith that she would blend into my life just as seamlessly.

With everything that happened in the past few days, Sophia took to quietly brooding during most of the dinner. I wanted to press her about what she was thinking, but I was in my own head about a lot of things as well. I played different iterations of the conversation between Mother and me when we returned to the palace. In my mind, all of them resulted in a lot of screaming and anger.

I debated having Sophia somewhere else when this conversation occurred with Mother. Sophia was a catalyst for Mother. I'd gone behind her back to propose to the one woman she didn't want in my life, and I knew she would throw everything she could at us since it was her last chance to do so. I was still on the fence about what I wanted to do.

Sophia enjoyed comfort food, so I took the liberty of ordering several samplers of the decadent desserts the menu

offered.

But when Sophia didn't turn her head at their arrival, I knew I had to say something.

"You should try the soufflé," I said to her.

She blinked and then came back to the present with me. "Sorry." She lifted her fork and dug in.

"I know what you're worried about," I said, testing out the flourless chocolate cake.

"Is it that obvious?" she asked.

"Not really," I said. "But she's on my mind, too."

Sophia sighed and took a sip from her wine glass. "I've never been this nervous in my life. I mean, going to Qatar the first time as your fake girlfriend, I had nothing to lose. Now, this woman is about to be my mother-in-law, and she hates me."

I could have attempted to calm Sophia down by saying my mother didn't hate her, but we both knew that wasn't true. Getting Mother to accept Sophia was the solution. The only way to do that was to not back down on my decision to be with the beautiful woman in front of me.

"We're going to do this together," I said. "You and me. I love you so much, and I never want to see you upset about anything. I will make this right for all of us."

She nodded, but I wasn't sure she believed me.

Sophia wasn't the type to just let things go. She needed more proof than that, and I was going to give it to her.

"Do you want to get out of here?" I asked her.

She chewed on her lip and then shook her head. "I'd like to try some more of these desserts."

For the short remainder of the meal, we both put Mother aside and enjoyed ourselves. I didn't want to scare Sophia and tell her we weren't going to leave the palace for a while, but with the impending wedding and proving to Jaabir that I was the king for good, I wanted to put some roots down in Qatar.

Sophia would have a lot to get used to as well, and I hoped that Mother would be a positive influence at some point.



After dinner, we went to the hotel. Even though we only had a few hours left in England, the wine and caffeine from dessert buzzed through my system so we decided to get a room. With the change in conversation leading in a positive direction, I was able to enjoy Sophia's company more. Being in the city that I loved with the woman I adored shifted something inside of me. I wanted her so badly. It was the last chance we would have to be intimate together in some time, and I hoped she wasn't too exhausted.

When we entered the suite, Sophia dropped her bag near the door. She walked through the living space and opened up the curtains, displaying a breathtaking view of the city.

"So beautiful," she said.

I came up behind her and wrapped my arms around her. She leaned her head back, tilting her chin up so our lips brushed against each other. My hands explored lower. She leaned against me and spread her legs open, inviting me to touch her some more.

# CHAPTER 66





## SOPHIA

Whether it was the weight of everything coming at us at once or the amazing dinner that Luke planned, upon coming back to the lavish hotel room, I wanted nothing more than to be as close as possible to the incredible man I loved. Tomorrow was far away. In my mind, we had the rest of eternity to make love to each other and remain in this hotel room.

The decor was something out of a movie. Possibly an erotic movie where the alpha male showed off his riches for the lowly peasant. I could get into that fantasy.

Looking out the window, I imagined my life with Luke and everything that would come with it. When he touched me, I was unable to hold back any longer. His touch was like fire to my skin and soul.

Our lips were incredibly close, but neither of us closed the gap. Pressing my butt against his stiffening length, he was already ready for me.

My panties were wet in an instant, and all I wanted to do was remove the clothes standing between me and his incredible body.

His fingers moved over my neck, pushing my hair to the side so he could rest his lips against my skin. The spot where we touched created a searing heat that pulsed through me.

I pressed my ass firmly against him and rolled my hips. His breathing quickened, making me press harder.

“If you keep doing that, I’m going to have to show you how I feel about it,” Luke whispered against my ear.

“Why do you think I keep doing it?” I asked, trapping my lip under my teeth.

His hands reached up to my breasts and squeezed. He found my nipples under my shirt and rubbed them until they were sensitive, hard points.

I moaned at the sensation, and he smothered my moan with his mouth. He held me against him, unwilling to let me go.

Both of us were at a stalemate, not wanting to push it to the next level since the current level was incredibly pleasurable.

I closed my eyes and listened to Luke’s breathing. Starting in my core, a warmth spread through me. Every touch from Luke sent sparks of pleasure flickering from his fingertips to my skin.

“I want to be inside of you,” Luke whispered.

I moaned in response. I wanted the same thing, but we didn’t have to rush. We were in a private hotel room, and there was no longer an urgency in our situation. I was his, and he was mine. Forever.

Flicking my ring around my finger, the promise that Luke and I would always be together added an extra zing of excitement coursing through my veins.

Luke’s hands smoothed across my belly and down to the waist of my slacks, slipping his hand inside.

I froze as he found my sensitive clit. He rubbed slow circles around me while plunging his fingers inside. His other hand tightened around my body, keeping me in place.

I glanced at our reflection in the window. We were on one of the top floors, and most of the city was asleep or too far away to see. The thought that we could be caught or someone could be watching added to the intense pleasure in my core.

If Luke weren’t holding me, I would have fallen forward against the window, begging for him to finish me off. But I

knew him too well. He wanted to drag this out. He found extreme pleasure in teasing me, and admittedly, so did I.

I reached my arms up and pushed my fingers through his hair, pulling him closer to me. Dragging my teeth over his lower lip, I kissed him hard, driving my tongue into his mouth.

His fingers slowed, and I knew I'd distracted him with my kiss. We played a game of tug of war, but this one was between who could have the upper hand the longest. It appeared as if I was winning when Luke pulled his hands out of my pants. I was about to declare victory when his fingers drove the zipper down and then the rest of the fabric, including my panties, came with it.

I barely had time to register how I had become half-naked in a matter of seconds when he pressed against my back. I fell over and grabbed onto the chair in front of me, the one that faced the city below.

Luke's hands caressed my butt before he shoved his fingers inside of me again.

I cried out at the sudden intrusion but moved my hips to get maximum pleasure from the movement of his fingers.

With whatever strength I had left, I pulled my shirt over my head, and Luke took the initiative and unclasped my bra. With my breasts free, my nipples ached when faced with the cool temperature in the room. It was a blessing since I was already starting to sweat and we had barely begun.

Luke's cock pressed against my ass, and I reached behind me to stroke him through his pants. How did I always end up naked before him?

He helped me by opening his pants and pulling his hardness out. I grabbed it and stroked ever so slightly. Luke's fingers slowed as we started to play our little game again.

The wetness between my legs trailed down one of my legs, and I brought his cock closer to my opening. I was so ready for him, and he was the same.

"Get inside me now," I groaned, panting between each word. His fingers were magical, but I wanted the real thing. I

wanted him inside of me.

He pulled his fingers out and then pushed them inside of me again. He did that a few times, giving me a preview of what was to come.

When he pulled his fingers out for good, I heard a rustling of fabric. Turning around, Luke put up a hand. "Don't move from that spot."

I wiggled my butt at him but remained in place. On the way over to his suitcase, he stripped out of his clothes. When he returned, he had a condom on, and he strode across the room with purpose.

I turned around, expecting him to push his cock inside of me, but instead, a warm tongue slithered along my lower lips, and I let out a squeak of pleasure.

He spread my cheeks and flicked his tongue across my clit. He moved up higher until he reached a place I'd never had anyone touch before. He slowed his rhythm before his tongue disappeared for good. "That will be for another day, my queen."

He shoved his cock inside me, and I moaned as he filled me up. He grabbed my hair and twisted it around his hand, pulling slightly so I could lock eyes with him in our reflection in the window. He let out slow breaths as he thrust inside of me over and over. He moved much slower, pulling out until his tip was barely inside and then pushing again until our bodies became one.

Shivering with pleasure, I rocked my hips, beckoning for him to stay inside of me.

"Patience," he said and smacked his hand against my butt cheek. He squeezed them harder, and my moans became louder and hoarser.

Lifting up on my toes, I gave him full access to me. He slid in what felt like another few inches, plunging into me. I'd never been so in love with him before. Our bodies were united as one, and I wanted us to stay in this hotel room, in this position, forever.

Luke leaned forward, resting his weight on my back. I lost my grip on the chair but quickly recovered. My knees were like jelly, and I wasn't sure how much longer I could stand.

His hands cupped my breasts and kneaded them, pressing his thumb into the peak. His mouth dragged down my spine, leaving a hot trail of kisses in its wake.

"You're shaking," he said.

"I'm about to collapse," I said, even though I didn't want him to stop. Stopping meant he would have to come out of me, and I wasn't ready for that yet.

"Let's take care of that then," he said, pulling out.

I turned to face him, and he scooped me into his arms and brought me to the bed. Gently laying me down, he said, "I want to see you when you come for me."

I pushed myself back toward the fluffy white pillows. Pressing my heated body against them, their softness glided over my skin like silk. Luke crawled onto the bed, and with just one look, my legs fell open for him.

Luke leaned forward and kissed me.

He tasted like me, and I'd already forgotten that he kissed my lower lips when I was practically dripping for him. The sweet taste perked up my mood, and I grabbed him, guiding him back inside of me.

Coming from a different angle, I bucked my hips until he was fully inside of me. He looked down at me, his body unmoving except for the smirk on his lips. "You don't need me then?"

"I just need your body," I said.

He chuckled, and the vibration reverberated through me. "Ouch, that hurts." He pressed a hand against his cheek, feigning his pain.

"Come here," I said, reaching for him.

As we kissed again, his body relaxed on top of mine. The heat from his body seared into mine. Beads of sweat gathered

at Luke's hairline, and I intended to make him sweat it all out to earn my orgasm.

I wrapped my legs around his waist, pulling all of him inside of me. He slowly rocked his hips for a moment, his eyes blissfully closed.

Staring at him, I knew there wasn't a face I wanted this close to me ever again. Tracing a finger down his cheek and across his jaw, I settled my finger on his lips, pulling the lower one down.

His eyes sprang open. His pupils were dilated, making him look as if he were a wild creature instead of my fiancé.

*Fiancé.* I was going to marry this amazing man. Tingles spread across my skin at the thought.

"I can't wait any longer," he said. "I'm about to burst."

"Then, you better get on with it," I said.

He kissed me and drove his tongue into my mouth. I could barely take a breath before he started pumping himself inside of me. I lifted my hips so he hit me in the right spot. He grunted and didn't slow at all as he quickly built us both up.

My nails dug into his biceps. His arms were like metal poles, keeping his body millimeters above me so he didn't crush me. As long as he kept doing what he was doing, I wouldn't care if he crushed me or not.

"Oh god," he said. "Fuck, Sophia."

"Keep going," I said, squeezing my eyes closed. I was so fucking close.

He brought us both to oblivion within seconds, and as he rode me down from my orgasm, my eyes flung open, and the room spun on its axis. My head felt light, and I tried to draw in a full breath.

Luke slowed down until he was completely spent and then rolled over onto his back. The both of us laid out like starfish in the sun.

After I was able to catch my breath, I rolled over and rested my head in the crook of his arm. Placing my hand on his chest, I played with the scattered hairs. All the worries from the last two days drifted far away into the back of my mind. Luke and I were connected, both body and soul. No matter what happened, I had Luke. There was no reason for me to worry about anything anymore as long as we were together. I wasn't sure why it had taken me so long to figure that out. Maybe because I was living a fairy tale ending that most people dreamed of their whole lives.

I kissed his chest and snuggled closer to him. As his hands slowly dragged through my hair, my eyes closed, and I drifted off to sleep with a smile on my lips.

# CHAPTER 67





## LUKE

I had spent so much time making sure that Sophia was calm, but I had forgotten to do the same for myself. We barely had an hour's rest before we had to get ready to catch our next flight. Sophia and I made love again in the shower at the hotel and took our time getting ready, knowing there was a comfortable king-sized bed on the plane for us to sleep in during the long haul to Qatar.

We knew a long flight was ahead of us, so we both dressed casually. Jeans and a T-shirt for me, and leggings with an oversized sweater for Sophia. She looked amazing in all styles of dress, and her legs looked amazing in the tight fabric.

When we were safely in the air, Sophia headed to the bedroom. I had told her that I would be there soon, but I never ended up fulfilling that promise. The television wasn't much of a distraction, but I ended up staring out the window, watching the clouds roll over the wing of the plane as I contemplated my future.

I knew in my heart that I had made the right choice when I proposed to Sophia. I had no doubt about our life together, but I could have prepared Mother better. In her mind, she believed that I would be able to get Sophia out of my system and eventually settle down with someone from my own country. Being an adopted member of the family, I was never on the same page with the rest of them. I wanted more out of my life than tradition and custom. I wanted love and happiness. If I could find a way to meld the two parts of my life together, I knew I would come out on top.

Getting over the hurdle with Mother was step one, and then Jaabir was step two. I wasn't naive enough to think my life wouldn't have challenges, especially being a king, but I hoped with Sophia by my side, we would overcome it all.

"Hey," Sophia said from behind me.

I turned to see a bright-eyed and bushy-tailed woman scoot into the seat next to me. She kissed me, and I tasted the crisp minty flavor of her toothpaste.

"Did you get any sleep?" she asked.

I rubbed a hand over my face. "Not at all."

She frowned. "I thought you told me not to worry about it."

"I did," I said. "There's a lot of work to do when I get back. I'm just going through all of it in my mind."

I knew she didn't believe my white lie, but she didn't push me to explain further. Both of us were going into this situation blind, unsure of how Mother would react to the news that I was about to marry an American woman—the furthest choice for an acceptable marriage.

"Let's watch a funny movie," Sophia said, grabbing the remote. Her hand was still firmly in mine, and I was unwilling to let her go just yet. She gave me the strength to overcome all of these issues with my family and the council. No other woman could have done that for me.

Sophia went through the list of all the new releases for movies and picked one without my help. It was as if she knew that I was tired of making decisions and just wanted to go with the flow for once.

In an hour and a half, I managed to calm down a little before the anticipation of getting to the palace crept up again.

The hours flew by, and before I knew it, we were in the car on the way to my home.

Both of us were silent as the familiar sights filled me with a sense of dread. As much as I loved my country, I had the

urge to flee and never return until I knew it was safe from Mother and her hatred of my soon-to-be wife.



When the palace came into view in the distance, I squeezed Sophia's hand. Mine was slick with sweat, but I didn't let go.

"I love you," Sophia said. I snapped back to reality and looked at her. "I don't know what else to say, so I wanted to leave you with that. No matter what happens, I'm not going anywhere."

"Thank you," I said. "That helps."

"Here we go," she muttered as the palace gates opened for us. "This view never gets old."

She stared out the window at the palace grounds. Even though I'd spent a majority of my life living in the palace, we had the same view of it. Each time I returned home, I always marveled at the beauty. The palace had been my second chance at life, and I had promised myself I would never take it for granted.

Either the car moved at warp speed, or my sense of timing was off. Before I knew it, the driver was out of the car and holding my door open.

One of the valets was already helping Sophia out of the car.

As I didn't want Mother to attack my fiancé first, I didn't hesitate a moment longer.

Stepping out, I rounded the car and grabbed Sophia's hand in mine. Until Mother could accept us together, I wasn't allowing Sophia anywhere in the palace without me.

"Luke!" Abir called from the top of the main steps. "Sophia!"

Sophia's face broke out into a wide grin.

It warmed my heart that Sophia got along with Abir. He and Father had similar views of her, and I appreciated that not everyone in my family was as disapproving of us as Mother was.

Sophia pulled me alongside her to meet up with Abir. Abir had a broad smile on his face, and he hugged Sophia first.

“It’s so good to see you again,” Sophia said.

“I knew it wasn’t going to be the last time,” Abir said.

He pulled away first and lightly smacked my arm. “You had me scared for a little while there. Now, let me see the ring.”

Sophia flourished her hand, and Abir let out a long whistle. “Good job, brother. I’m going to have to try and outdo you when it’s my turn.”

“Tell me all about Alda,” Sophia said to Abir.

If it were possible, Abir smiled more. “She’s amazing. I can’t wait for you all to meet her.”

“I’m sure she’s lovely,” Sophia said.

“She must be if Mother approves,” I muttered. It didn’t matter that Abir was Mother’s little boy, even at sixteen. As long as he chose anyone in the country, he was a step above me in Mother’s eyes.

“I *do* approve,” Mother said from the shadows. She came out from behind a pillar, and I wondered how long she had been there.

Sophia grabbed my hand, and I squeezed it before breaking away and walking toward Mother.

Mother’s eyes were slits as she glared at Sophia.

“Not even a hello?” I asked.

She tilted her head up at me. “Not after your betrayal. How could you, Luke? It’s bad enough you went to visit America. It’s another thing entirely to propose to one of them.”

“Don’t sound so surprised,” I said. “You know I’m in love with her. I never stopped loving her.”

“I thought you were over this,” her voice was louder, and even Abir couldn’t hide the fact that he’d heard.

Sophia’s eyes met mine as if she were asking if I needed help. I could handle Mother. Now, I would have to. This wasn’t going to get resolved in one day, but even Mother would get tired of the fighting eventually.

I shook my head once and winked at Sophia.

“I will never be ‘over this.’ Sophia is going to be my wife, so you better start getting used to it.”

“Luke, I did not raise you to speak like this to me,” she said. “I will not tolerate it.”

I gritted my teeth. I didn’t enjoy arguing with Mother, but I wouldn’t allow her to make me feel bad by playing the victim.

“Mother, you don’t understand. You’re not listening to me when I tell you that I love Sophia. If it were that easy to let her go, I would have. She’s everything to me. Don’t you want to see me happy?”

Mother crossed her arms, but her lips remained firmly pressed together.

I sighed. “I don’t think love like this comes more than once in a lifetime. I wish you were on board with us as Father was. He wanted to see me happy, no matter what. I complied with both of your wishes and stepped up to become king. Isn’t that enough? Can’t I choose my path when it comes to my happiness?”

She still refused to speak to me. I wasn’t sure which was worse, her yelling or pretending to ignore me.

Sophia and Abir had moved quite a distance away from us, and I wished I was with them. But standing up for Sophia and me was what I was here to do.

“Are you going to say anything?” I pressed.

At that, she finally met my eyes. “The council wants to meet with you.” She turned on her heel and walked away.

“That’s it?” I called after her, but she continued her silent treatment, leaving me with a sinking sensation that tugged at my stomach, threatening to tear it from my body.

Why would the council want to meet so soon after my arrival? How did they even know I was coming back? We rarely met on the weekends, so maybe they had urgent business they had needed to discuss in my absence.

I tried thinking of the meeting as business related, but I couldn’t help feel that it had something to do with the woman I returned home with. Without the blessing from Mother, I knew I would have a tough time convincing the council that marrying an American was a good idea. I hoped that our love could overcome all, but the battle was far from won.

# CHAPTER 68



## SOPHIA

My stomach sank the longer that Luke and Gia argued with each other. I didn't miss the disgusted glares thrown in my direction. As much as I wanted to catch up with Abir, I couldn't allow Luke to be utterly alone in this. I wasn't going to stand back if he needed me.

The conversation between Luke and his Mother was one of the most brutal ones I've witnessed. She held firm in her decision to hate me. I didn't care so much about my feelings, but if I could protect Luke's, I would at all costs.

I would have stepped in if I thought it would help, but one look from Luke told me he would handle this. I held my ground while Abir attempted to keep the conversation far away from his mother.

Even though I wasn't taking part in the conversation, I still kept one ear leaned in Luke's direction. If Gia went too far, I would be forced to step in.

Luke and I were a team, and we would have to be if we were going to make it through the family drama surrounding our relationship. If only Gia got to know me, I would be the doting daughter-in-law that she probably wanted. Was it the color of my skin or because I wasn't from Qatar? Would either of those things make a difference? Or was it because Luke chose someone that she hadn't preapproved?

When Gia walked away from Luke, I wanted to run over to him and tell him it was all going to be okay. But the expression on his face told me otherwise. He had never



seemed so bothered by her before. What had she said to him that turned his skin a shade grayer?

As he came over to us, I tried to read his expression. He had turned into the stone-faced man I'd first met. Something was definitely on his mind.

"Let's get settled in my chamber," he said.

Abir was happy to comply and grabbed the handle of my suitcases while Luke took his own.

I reached for Luke's hand, but he only gave it a quick squeeze before letting go. Any other insecure woman would think he was second-guessing himself about us, but we were far over that. He was stuck thinking about something she'd said, and I planned on finding out what.

"Tell me more about Alda," I told Abir, needing to end the silence between the three of us. Maybe Abir could break through to Luke when I couldn't.

"She's beautiful," Abir said excitedly as if he was bursting at the seams to talk more about his girlfriend. "And smart. She reminds me of you."

"She does?" I asked at the same time Luke said, "Easy, brother."

Abir smirked. "It's a compliment to you both."

"How did you meet?" I prompted.

"At the last banquet," Abir said.

"You've been seeing her for that long?" Luke asked.

"We talked online for a while," Abir said. "Without Mother's knowledge."

"Don't tell her that," Luke said.

"I already did. She likes Alda. You two need to meet her. I've told her all about you."

"All good things I hope," I said, eyeing Luke. Abir was a sweet boy, but he didn't know how to read a room.

"Of course," Abir said with a little skip in his step.

He went on about the excursions that he and Alda had gone on over the past month. It seemed that in my absence, Abir had made headway in his relationship with this girl while Luke and I suffered apart. That was all in the past, though.

It was nice hearing that Abir was happy again after the passing of his father. I was sure Alda had a hand in making sure the prince was distracted from his feelings. Young love did that to people. So I'd heard. If it was anything like how I felt for Luke, then there was a good reason for the grin on his face.

If only Luke would show me that smitten smile I'd seen for most of his visit to Dallas.

I missed our alone time together already, but we were far past the honeymoon stage, at least, as far as Gia was concerned. We were in the thick of it, and she had all the power.

Once we arrived at Luke's room, Luke opened the door and allowed Abir and me to enter first.

"Here, okay?" Abir asked, indicating my suitcases.

"Sure," I said. I had never been to the palace as more than a guest before. Protocol eluded me, so keeping my bags fully packed before I interfered with the servant's job was the best idea in my mind.

"Abir, thank you," Luke said. "If you wouldn't mind, Sophia and I would like to get settled."

Even though Abir didn't appear fazed by the request, Luke's tone held a heavy weight. For once, I didn't want to know what was on his mind, but I had a feeling I was about to find out.

This was what I was here for, to be Luke's rock like he was mine. This was what a real relationship looked like, for better or for worse.

When Abir left and closed the door behind him, Luke collapsed onto his bed. He rolled over onto his back and raked his hands through his hair.

“Penny for your thoughts?” I asked, intending for it to sound like a joke.

Luke wasn't smiling. “The council wants to meet with me,” he said.

“Okay? Don't you meet often?”

“They want to see me *now*.”

“Now?” I asked. “You just got back. They can't give you a second to get settled?”

Luke sat up. “That's what Mother said. A king's duty never rests.”

I sat down next to him. I didn't touch him for fear he would shrink away from me. I wanted to be there for him but not to make him more uncomfortable than he already was.

“Are you worried about what they're going to say about us?” I asked.

“I'm not worried. I just don't want to deal with it right now.”

“How come?”

“It's none of their business,” Luke said, shoving off from the bed. “Just like it isn't any of my mother's business who I choose to be with. It won't affect how I will rule this kingdom. I have to deal with so much superfluous bullshit when I should only be concerned with making sure the people in the kingdom are fed and content. I shouldn't have to worry about everyone's agenda.”

I stood up and went over to him, not wanting him to be alone in this. “Whatever they say, I'll be here for you. I'm not going anywhere.”

“I'm not either,” he said, taking my hands in his. He drew me close, and I wrapped my arms around his waist. We had already been through the hardest month of our lives; nothing could stand up to that, not even crotchety old men and their customs. I was going up against years of tradition, but if Luke didn't seem worried, then I wouldn't be either.

“Whatever they say,” Luke said, tilting my head up toward him. “Nothing will stop you from becoming my wife.”

“Promise?” I asked with a smirk.

“I more than promise,” he said.

“What are you waiting for then?” I asked.

He chuckled. “Courage? There’s never been a point in my time as king that I feared going into one of these meetings. I’m going to have a lot to explain.”

“Didn’t they know we were dating before your father passed?”

“They did,” he said. “But you weren’t here much after that. I know that’s my fault, but I thought it was the best thing for us at the time. I supposed this conversation should have come sooner rather than later, but either way, it’s here, and I’m unprepared for defending how I feel about another person when it has nothing to do with the job.”

“Sure it does,” I said.

“What?”

“Being a king, your family has everything to do with the job. Your people look to you as an example. Which is why your mother probably feels that you should already be married.”

“Probably?”

I laughed.

“I never imagined that you’d take her side on anything,” he said.

“Her issue is with me, not the other way around. I don’t appreciate when someone dislikes me for no reason, but I don’t dislike *her*. I just wish things were different. Maybe I could get some tips from Alda.”

Luke chuckled at that, and his face returned to its normal color. In a small way, I was helping him. If he could go into that room in the best mood possible, I knew my job was done.

Luke kissed me on the lips, and I stood up onto my tiptoes to deepen it. I wasn't sure what would come out of the meeting, but I wanted Luke to have a piece of me there, even when I couldn't be there in person.

His hands started to roam over my body. My head lightened, and I felt the urge to straddle him and make love right there on the carpet.

I had to force myself to break apart from him. "You should go."

He nodded and was a little out of breath. "I should."

We kissed again, a peck on the lips before I sent him off to the meeting with the council.

I wished him luck again and then watched him walk out of the room. I sneaked closer to the door and saw his form rounding the corner.

I breathed a sigh of relief and crossed my fingers, hoping that it would all turn out okay. After going through everything that we had, I couldn't imagine that it would just end like that. They couldn't tell him not to be with me, right? He was the king for Christ's sake. He had the power to pick anyone to be by his side. Wasn't that the point of being in power? If it wasn't, then I had no idea what to expect moving forward.

I grabbed the door with the intention of closing it. I would wait for Luke and be here for him when he returned from his meeting.

Footsteps shuffled down the hallway in quick succession, and I wondered if Luke had returned, possibly forgetting something?

I whipped open the door again as Gia Shamon passed Luke's bedroom without a single look in my direction. Since she knew everything going on in the palace, she knew I was standing there. She just chose to keep up her attitude when it came to me.

Gritting my teeth, I closed the door, not wanting her to know how much she bothered me.

I charged across the room and sat on the edge of Luke's bed. If I were at home, I could have distracted myself with television, but there wasn't one in his bedroom. Anytime we were in his chambers, it had been for sex or sleep. I didn't have an international data plan yet, so I couldn't even browse YouTube on my phone or anything.

Instead, I pulled my legs up to my chest and wrapped my arms around them. Resting my cheek on my knees, I stared at the door, wondering what was going on in the meeting room and counting down the seconds until Luke returned to me.

*Everything is going to be all right*, I thought to myself over and over until the words ran together. Love would prevail. Even in the strangest circumstances, we would come out on top. I had to believe that or wonder what the hell we'd done all of this for.

# CHAPTER 69



## LUKE

I walked toward the conversation I dreaded, and my heart pounded in time with my footsteps.

As I approached the meeting room, I glanced down at the suit I wore. I hadn't even bothered to change. Would it have made a difference? I didn't want to keep the council waiting longer than necessary, since they were adamant about meeting me the moment I arrived from a long-ass flight into Qatar.

If they didn't like the suit, too bad. This was my house, and if they were going to make ridiculous demands, then I wouldn't completely bow down to them.

Shoving open the doors a little harder than necessary, the doors smacked against the wall and came back quicker than I'd intended.

At the noise, the other council members turned their heads in my direction.

Jaabir looked particularly smug while the other members had serious frowns on their faces.

*Shit.*

Normally when coming into this room, I received smiles of greeting, at least from everyone except Jaabir.

"Take a seat, King Luke," Qadeem said as the others took their seats in front of me.

After barging into the room, it seemed like the only thing to do was comply with their wishes. For now.



I sat down and waited for them to make a ridiculous accusation about my behavior. Since I wasn't sure if it was because I'd taken off for a week or because I'd proposed to Sophia, I waited to hear what they had to say before defending myself without incrimination.

Qadeem got right to the point. "What you have done has disgraced not only the country but your father as well."

My hands gripped the arms of the chairs. How dare they speak for my father?

Sophia's face popped into my vision, and I peered into the depths of her eyes, feeling a sense of calmness rolling through me. If I was going to win this argument, I needed to remain calm and not argue with them at the onset. There was plenty of time for that.

"Might I ask what you are accusing me of?" I made sure to look all of the council members in the eyes. They were all involved in this, and none of them would be safe from my wrath if they continued to accuse me of "disgraceful" behavior.

"Choosing a wife from outside of our country," Jaabir chimed in. "There are certain protocols that a king must obey. You allowed yourself to be photographed with this American trash—"

"You will not speak about Sophia that way," I interrupted, venom dripping from my words.

Jaabir clamped his mouth shut and then opened it again. "Every king before you followed the rules that have been passed down for years. Why are you so different?"

"I'm not different," I said. "I just think they are guidelines to live by. No king has been removed from his position over these rules."

Jaabir dropped his hands on the table in front of him. "Because all previous kings have obeyed them."

I shook my head and stood up. Adrenaline coursed through my veins. There was no way I could sit down.

“What about changing the rules? I’ve read through all the laws regarding my position. Most of them are archaic. Arranged marriages? That might work for some people, but not for me. I’d rather rule with someone I respect and love.”

“How do you love her?” Jaabir asked. “The first we’d ever heard of her was two months ago. How do we know she can be trusted? What if she is a spy?”

“Of all the preposterous things—”

“Let him speak,” Qadeem cut me off.

I blew out a breath but held my tongue. Since when did Qadeem give the floor over to Jaabir this much? How long had Jaabir been whispering in Qadeem’s ear about me not being fit for the throne? By leaving, did I give him the opportunity to seal that mindset?

“These rules are there for a reason,” Jaabir said. “They are to protect this kingdom and the people.”

“Since when do you care about the people?” I asked. So much for holding my tongue.

“Excuse me?” Jaabir asked.

“You’ve been against me from the start,” I said. “You’re grasping at straws to get me out of this position, but I will not allow it. I’m king, and you better start getting used to it.”

“It’s not just him,” Qadeem said. “We allowed a non-blood relative of the king to come into this position because of Erol’s request. It appears we were mistaken. We’ve gone against traditions in that sense, but we won’t break every single one of our rules for you, Luke.”

“So, according to you and these laws, I can’t marry Sophia?” I asked, clarifying and wishing they could understand how ridiculous they sounded.

“You can marry Sophia,” Jaabir said, his lip curling at her name. It reminded me how Mother spoke my fiancé’s name.

“I don’t understand,” I said, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Jaabir glanced at the others. “You can marry Sophia, but you can’t be king if you do.”

“What?” I asked. “Then who will be king?”

The name formed in my head just as Jaabir said it. “If you want to marry that American woman, then you will give up the seat and hand it over to the rightful king, Abir.”

“No,” I said.

Jaabir shrugged. “Then you’ve made your choice. You better send that woman away before she gets too attached to living in the palace.”

“I mean, no, I’m not giving her or the throne away to anyone. Abir—” I almost revealed that Abir didn’t want the throne. As his big brother, I had sworn to protect him. He didn’t want the throne, but these men didn’t need to know that. I would rather they thought I’d stolen it from him than reveal the truth. It wasn’t my truth to give away. Besides, they were bluffing. They couldn’t force me out or Abir in. There had to be laws about that.

“Then we are not in agreement?” Qadeem asked.

I didn’t say a word. I knew that if I agreed to that, then the council could invoke their own set of laws. If all of them didn’t agree with me, then they had the power to enforce whatever rule they wanted. It was a checks and balances system that wasn’t working in my favor anymore. I could handle Jaabir and his old-fashioned customs but not all of the council members. Each of them sat there staring at me, waiting for my response. No one was on my side anymore, and if I gave up the kingdom, then I would be dooming my brother to a life he didn’t want.

I thought I could have it all: protecting my brother from being king, Sophia, and holding up my father’s wishes. From what the council revealed to me, I *couldn’t* have it all. If I chose Sophia, then I would have freedom from the throne and a title but a brother who would probably despise me for the rest of his life. If I kept the kingdom, then I would have to take

back the promise I made to Sophia. The promise that I worked so hard to keep.

I wasn't willing to do any of those things.

But what the hell could I do? I had no allies in the room. I was out of time and options.

# CHAPTER 70



## LUKE

The closing of the meeting room door signaled the end of the conversation between myself and the other council members. My head swam with questions about what the fuck had just happened. Leaving Qatar and going to America to reclaim the love of my life Sophia was supposed to be a joyous occasion. Returning to the palace with her had more than turned my world upside down. While I thought Jaabir, the oldest and most traditional council member, was my only foe in that room, it turned out that all the council members weren't fond of my decision to marry a woman outside of our culture.

Their final ultimatum was clear: either I give up Sophia to keep the throne, or I give up the throne to keep Sophia. If I chose to keep Sophia, then my sixteen-year-old brother Abir would be forced onto the throne. Other than Sophia, no one else knew that Abir didn't want the crown. Father's dying wish was for me to take the throne. Mother had supported the decision too, which was why I made Sophia leave in the first place.

Coming home should have been a happy reunion. But with Sophia in my life again, Mother didn't hide her disdain for the woman I chose to spend the rest of my life with. Apparently, the council felt the same way.

It was an impossible choice. Either I betrayed my brother or Sophia. In my mind, they were both my family, and either way, I would feel a heartbreak even worse than I had in the past.

I cursed Jaabir as I strode down the hallway. Even though I wanted to slow everything down, I wanted to be with the only person who understood me.

I went back and forth, trying to decide if I should tell Sophia about the ultimatum. Since it only happened ten minutes ago, by the time I reached my chambers, I decided to keep it to myself. There was no need to worry her just after she arrived in Qatar. If it were possible, I wanted to extend our honeymoon phase a little longer before I broke someone else's heart, along with my own.

The door to my room was closed, giving me a moment to take a breath before turning the knob.

Sophia sat on my bed. She turned my way and her light eyes met mine. They widened before she jumped off the bed, her long brown hair flouncing behind her as she raced over to me. She lifted on her toes and wrapped her arms around my neck.

I held her close to me, inhaling her scent. I knew right then that I would never be able to let her go. Underneath all of the weighty decisions I had to make, I held tight to the idea that I would be able to make it out of this problem with Sophia on my arm and a crown on my head. I wasn't sure how I was going to do it, but Father had instilled a "never give up" attitude within me at a young age. I was going to get through this how I wanted, no matter what those stuffy old council members said.

Sophia leaned back, her arms still around my neck. Her gaze searched mine. "How was the meeting? I've been on pins and needles."

"It was fine," I said, not breaking eye contact with her.

She swallowed hard. "Did they say anything about us?"

I moved a lock of her hair off her face and drew her toward me for a kiss. Her lips were soft, and my aching heart warmed in that moment.

"I'll take that as a no?" she asked when we pulled away from each other.

“They wanted to discuss some matters of the kingdom,” I said, treading carefully. I’d told Sophia there would be no more lies between us. Omission was different.

Sophia searched my eyes, and I smiled, pushing for her to believe me. I wasn’t ready for this discussion yet. Who knew if I would ever be?

“That’s a relief,” she said as her arms dropped from her sides. “Your mother walked by here earlier and didn’t even look at me. I thought the council would be the same way about me since I’m so ‘wrong’ for you.”

I gave Sophia a reassuring smile. No matter what, I would keep her. Separating again wasn’t an option for my heart. The month-long breakup had almost killed me. I would never do that again. We were both proud people, and if Sophia knew about the council’s attempt to force me into their tiny box of what a king should look like, she might decide to leave. Just as I wanted her to have a happy life, she wanted the same for me. There would be no more self-sacrificing in this relationship. I would give up the kingdom for her, but not without a fight.

“Let’s get out of here,” I said, wanting to be as far away from the mood of that meeting as possible.

“Okay,” she said and took my hand.

I led her down the hallways, wanting to head out to the gardens. It was my place to think, and I knew Sophia loved the beautiful view of the architectural design of our greenhouse. Mother and Father loved the place as well. It seemed to be the only thing that Mother and I had in common nowadays. But even though she was persistent in setting me up with women that I wanted nothing to do with, she was still my mother.

“So, what are we going to do about your mother?” Sophia asked, as if reading my mind. “She was so cold to me earlier. I don’t think she will ever accept us.”

“Sure she will,” I said. I would do anything to keep Sophia from regretting her decision to pick up her life and move to a foreign country with me. She gave up a lot to be with me, and I wasn’t going to allow her to regret a second of it.



“I love you, and I appreciate you saying that, but I don’t think she’ll be an easy egg to crack.”

We walked along the winding pathway toward the massive structure on the west end of the grounds. It was a beautiful sight with a beautiful woman, and I didn’t want Mother to ruin it, even in spirit.

“Sophia, she will learn to live with it, or she can live her life without us.”

“Might be hard living in the same house as her,” Sophia said.

“We don’t have a normal home,” I said. “When I was a teenager and pissed off at them for whatever reason, there were plenty of places to hide.”

“You, the king, are going to hide from your mother?”

“No, but if she doesn’t want to be involved in our life together, then she can do all the hiding.”

“Our life together,” Sophia said, looking down at the ring on her left hand. “I like the sound of that.”

I pulled her close to me, never wanting to be more than a room apart from her ever again. “Me too.”

We wandered through the manicured flowers and other plants that were native to my land. The first time I had brought Sophia home to the palace, we pretended to be dating to get Mother off my back about finding a wife. We were still getting to know each other and couldn’t completely relax and enjoy ourselves. That was only two months ago. How life changed.

Now, even though the council’s decision sat in the back of my mind, I was able to enjoy exploring my home with her.

Since I’d spent so much time over the years in the gardens, I acted as Sophia’s guide. Many plants weren’t native to America, and she seemed genuinely interested.

Eventually, I found out why.

“I have such a brown thumb,” she said, smelling one of the flowers.

I loved watching the smile stretch across her mouth as she breathed in the scent of the brightly colored petals.

“I once killed a cactus,” she said. “True story.”

“It’s a good thing the palace employs professionals.”

“It is,” she said, stepping away from the flowers as if her very presence might turn them rotten. “I can enjoy them from afar and not worry about killing them.”

I laughed and took her hand in mine. I recalled the time spent at the amusement park in Dallas. Being with her that day was so easy, just as it was at that moment. I was used to having the weight of something on my shoulders, like expectations from Father and the family business. I compartmentalized the decision and truly enjoyed my time with Sophia at that moment. I would have time to worry another day. Today was the first day of the rest of our lives. Sophia wasn’t going to leave the palace unless I was with her.

My stomach growled, and I checked my watch. It was past time for lunch but too early for dinner. After the conversation with the council, I needed some sustenance if I was going to get through the rest of the day with a clear head.

“Let’s go inside for some tea,” I said.

“Tea?”

“I lived in England for many years; tea is a hard habit to break.”

She looped her arm around mine. “Sounds good.”

We walked in silence all the way back to the palace. Sophia’s attention was on the grounds while my mind wandered back and forth between my options. Running a company gave me the skills to have many things going on in my head while showcasing whatever mood I wanted. To anyone else, I looked just as blissfully happy as I felt, yet the undercurrent of nerves about what to do about the kingdom moved under the surface of my smile.

Since returning to the palace, I had requested tea in the late afternoon. The servants hadn’t missed one of them, so when

Sophia and I arrived on one of the balconies overlooking the gardens, our afternoon tea was already waiting, with fresh fruit, biscuits, and empty tea mugs.

I helped Sophia into her chair before sitting down. Two servants appeared from inside and poured the prepared tea into our cups.

“Thank you,” Sophia said to the servant next to her. The woman bowed, and they left quicker than they’d arrived.

Sophia’s eyes met mine, and she tilted her head to the side. “What is it?”

At some point in our lives, Mother, Abir, and I got used to the servants in the palace. They were around so often that a “thank you” would be irrelevant after one day. Other women that Mother had set me up with carried the same mentality. Sophia was out of her element, and it made me love her even more.

I twined my fingers with hers. “Did I tell you that I loved you lately?”

Sophia quirked her lips. “Not in the last hour.”

“Well I do,” I said.

Sophia winked at me.

I was about to take my first sip when someone’s fast footsteps came closer to us. I whipped around, expecting Mother to burst into the room, ruining the moment between Sophia and me.

Instead, I came face to face with a smiling Abir. I stood up and walked over to him. His body vibrated as if he had ants under his skin.

“Abir,” I said.

His thick black hair was slicked back instead of its normal poof. He dressed smartly in a white shirt and slacks. If we were blood-related, I would say he was the spitting image of me in that outfit. He was dressed to impress, but why? Was it for Sophia?

“Alda is here,” Abir said. His cheeks were high and tight, as he couldn’t lose the grin on his face. “I want you and Sophia to meet her.”

I clapped a hand on his shoulder. “Why don’t you two join us? There is plenty of room at the table.”

“I don’t want to interrupt,” he said.

“Isn’t that what you’re doing now?”

Abir’s eyes widened, and I laughed. “Don’t be silly. We want to meet the girl who’s stolen your heart.”

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll be right back.”

# CHAPTER 71



## SOPHIA

“What was that about?” I asked Luke. As quickly as his adoptive brother entered the room, Abir left again.

Luke walked over to the table and lightly kissed the top of my head. I leaned against him. “Abir wants us to meet his girlfriend.”

Sophia’s eyes widened. “Alda?”

“Apparently, she’s a frequent visitor to the palace.”

“It must be serious then,” I said.

“I’ll be the judge of that,” Luke said.

I touched his hand. “Down, boy.”

He smirked. “I just want to get to know her better. I haven’t been a very good big brother.”

“You’ve done just fine.”

Something flashed in Luke’s eyes. Before I could identify it, the look was gone.

Even though Luke had told me that everything went okay in the meeting with the council, I had a strange sensation that he wasn’t telling me everything. Luke only hid things from me when they directly affected our relationship. I thought we were over doing that, but Luke was a kind and intelligent man, and if he needed to work through something, he would do it before coming to me.

While our relationship was strong, I knew it had to be that way when coming back to Qatar. Gia Shamon disapproved of

our relationship as a whole, and she didn't hide it from either of us. I hoped she didn't go to the council and demand that Luke break it off with me. Both of us had done that before, and with Luke's return into my life, it was going to be harder to do that. Especially after he made it official by proposing.

I twirled the gorgeous ring around my finger and held my tongue instead of asking about whatever was on Luke's mind. He'd tell me eventually, and then we'd work it out together.

At least, I hoped it was something we could work out. I had a feeling that Gia wasn't going to give up that easily, at least until we shared our vows, and maybe even after that. I shuddered to think that it would take that long. As much as Luke claimed that he would deal with his mother or else remove her from our lives, I didn't want to be the cause of breaking up a mother and son. Maybe it was time to take it into my own hands. I just had to figure out the best way.

Abir reappeared in the doorway. He only had eyes for his brother, and I knew this was a big deal for him. Other than the noticeable difference in looks—Abir was darker skinned and resembled the late Erol Shamon—and different biological parents, no one would be able to refute that these two were loving brothers. Abir looked up to Luke, and this was a big step in Abir's life. He liked this girl and wanted Luke to approve of her.

I was sure Luke was oblivious to Abir's admiration, and his calm indifference only made Abir squirm more. I wanted to point it out to Luke, but now wasn't the time.

A young girl stepped out from behind Abir. Her gaze lowered to the floor as Abir took her hand and brought her forward, presenting her to Luke and me.

I stood from the table and walked over to Luke, jabbing him in the arm.

He looked at me, and I widened my eyes in a look that said, "Down, boy."

The corner of his lips quirked, and I knew he was only playing a role. Along with being a big brother, he was also the

king. Having a reputation to protect, his goal was to appear as regal as possible. Straightening my spine, I tested the theory on myself. Eventually, I would be a queen, and getting some practice in before that time came would only benefit me. Too bad Luke's mother wasn't as keen to help me as I would have liked. I supposed I would have to do some on-the-job training for the role.

Abir took Alda's arm and led her to Luke. Her big brown eyes lifted to Luke's at the same time as her shoulders. She looked positively terrified, and my heart reached out to her. She played with the ends of her thick hair that hung all the way down to her waist.

"Alda, this is my brother Luke."

"Your Majesty," Alda said with a small bow of her head.

Luke reached out a hand to her, and she glanced at Abir before taking it. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Alda. Abir has told me so much about you."

Her eyebrows shot up. "He has?"

Clearing my throat, Luke pulled his eyes away from Alda. "Yes, this is Sophia, my fiancée."

"I've been looking forward to meeting you," I said.

Alda chewed on her lip. For a moment, I thought Gia had gotten to the girl before I could meet her. But she shuffled toward me before her mouth split into a wide grin. "I've never met an American before."

Luke coughed out a laugh, and I offered my hand to her. "Come, sit. I want to hear everything about how you and Abir met, Alda."

Two servants rushed onto the balcony with place settings and extra chairs for Abir and Alda. The servants poured two more cups of tea, and we were back in our seats within a minute or so.

Abir scooted his chair closer to Alda, and Luke gave me a weighted look. Abir watched Alda almost as if he were waiting for her to move before he did anything.



I couldn't help smiling at the two of them. They were so damn adorable.

"Tell me about yourself, Alda," I said, starting the conversation. I already had Abir on my side, but there was no harm in getting a good recommendation from Alda to convince Gia that I wasn't the devil, wanting to steal her son away to America, never to be seen again.

While Alda spoke of her background, Abir didn't take his eyes off her. As a daughter of a big wig in business in Qatar, it seemed she was the perfect fit for a prince when it came to social status. I had no idea how it would affect anything with the kingdom, but I was sure that Luke would fill me in if I asked. Since leaving my lifelong job as a reporter, I still had the same curiosity that helped me get insight into many of my stories, even though most of them were puff pieces for the Dallas Post.

A sour taste filled my mouth, thinking of them. While I tried to stay engaged with Alda, I couldn't help but blame my former employer for exposing Luke and me getting engaged before he could tell his mother. It was icing on the layered cake of disdain that Gia held for me.

It didn't take long for Luke to warm up to Alda. Her charm won him over quickly. She was sweet and so in love with Abir.

"We won't waste too much more of your time," Abir said, standing up. He helped Alda from her chair. "We have plans for dinner tonight, so don't wait up!"

We said our goodbyes, and the two of them left without a second look. Abir took Alda's hand as they walked down the hallway together.

"Oh my god," I said. "How cute are they?"

Luke turned from the hallway to face me. "He's head over heels for her."

"I'd say it's mutual," I said. "When I was sixteen, I never felt that way for someone."

"Never?" Luke asked.

“Unless they were on the movie screen and out of my league, sure. Those were crushes. Whatever Abir and Alda have is for life.”

“Like you and me?” Luke asked.

He puckered his lips, and I met him halfway, melting into his kiss. “Like you and me.”

Even though we were years ahead of Luke’s brother, finding what he and Alda had was the dream. I couldn’t wait to spend the rest of my life with him.

Luke stared into his mug as if he were trying to conjure something from it.

“You know you can talk to me about anything, right?” I asked him.

He shook his head and blinked as if coming out of his own mind. “What?”

“You seem distant today,” I said.

He sighed and drank the rest of his tea in one gulp. “Probably jet lag.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” he said firmly, without looking at me.

I knew when to drop it, but if this went on for much longer, I would have to push. I hadn’t been there for him during his first month as king. If he was stressed about his duties, this was my time to be there for him. That was why he traveled across the globe to get to me. We were partners, and I wouldn’t give up on him ever again.

“Maybe we should rest for a little while before dinner,” I suggested.

Luke nodded his head. “That sounds like a good plan to me.”



Since I had slept for a majority of the flight to Qatar, I wasn't tired at all. In a way, I tested Luke by offering to go to bed. If he wasn't tired, then he would have to explain what was on his mind. It was something I did as a reporter, allowing the subject to lead the interview until I backed them into a corner, and then the tougher questions started.

But Luke, true to his word, passed out within minutes of laying down. He didn't sleep at all on the plane, but lack of rest wasn't the only reason he acted so strangely after the meeting with the council.

Staring at the ceiling, my mind wandered. As the queen, would I not be privy to the information that went on during those meetings? Would there always be a divide when it came to Luke's work and our relationship?

I wasn't on good enough terms with Gia to ask her, even though it would have been nice if she offered any help when it came to the transition. I bet she would help any other woman in my position.

It was so unfair.

I hoped that Luke and I would be as different as we already were. Him marrying a woman outside of his culture was a big enough change. Taking it a step further and ruling as a family would keep the new traditions going. Would Luke be up for that? So far, he wanted honesty. I could demand that he be honest with me when it came to what would happen after the wedding.

The wedding. In all the traveling and dealing with family drama, I hadn't even thought of the wedding. The minutes sped by as visions of big white gowns and sparkling crystals filled my mind.

By the time Luke stirred, it was already dinner time.

"Hey," he said, rolling over. His hair was smashed on one side, and his heavy-lidded eyes sparked something inside of me. I loved seeing him ruffled like that. It made him seem a little more normal and down to earth.

“What’s on the agenda tonight?” I asked. “Dinner with your mother?”

Luke smacked a palm on his face. “That’s going to be pleasant.”

I kissed his cheek. “We’re in this together.”

He took my hand in his and then kissed the top of it. “I’m going to shower. Care to come along?”

“Of course,” I said and then bounced out of bed. “Last one there is a rotten egg!”



After our quick, yet erotic shower together, my shoulders were much more relaxed than before, although they started to tense up the closer we got to the dining room.

This would be my first real meeting with Gia since returning to the palace. When we’d arrived, Gia only wanted to speak with Luke about how upset she was that we were engaged. Now, I would have an entire meal with her to feel the hatred in her eyes while attempting to swallow the normally delicious food that the palace served. I already felt my throat closing up as two of the doormen opened the doors to the main dining area.

Inside the room was a long table that could easily seat twenty people. There were only three place settings at the far end of the table. I assumed Luke would take the head of the table, while Gia would sit across from me.

Maybe after staring at me for a while, she wouldn’t think I was so bad.

Though I doubted it.

“I don’t think she’s coming,” Luke said, holding my chair out for me.

I placed my napkin on my lap as he scooted me in. “How do you know that?”

Luke shook his head once. “Just call it a hunch.”

It turned out Luke was right. Gia never showed up. The tension in my shoulders remained high as each minute ticked by. Neither of us spoke about her until the very end of the meal.

“I think we should go back to England tomorrow to check on the company and Maddox,” Luke said. “It will give Mother some time to calm down. It was a mistake to come here so soon after the article released.”

I doubted she would ever learn to accept me, but I wasn’t going to argue with him. If he needed time to breathe away from her and wanted to take me along, that worked for me.

Luke sat back in his chair and closed his eyes.

Shoving out of my chair, I went over to him. Standing behind him, I dropped my hands to his shoulders and started to massage them.

He moaned, and his head fell back. I scratched his head, and a slow smile spread across his lips.

He was under a lot of stress. I could see it in his face and feel it in his muscles. Even though we’d just arrived at the palace, going to England to visit his best friend and check in on the business that he ran for many years might help clear his head.

It was all I could hope for so that when we *did* return to Qatar, maybe Gia would understand that I wasn’t going anywhere.

# CHAPTER 72



## LUKE

Unlike last time, I didn't leave Qatar without speaking to Mother or the council. At least they wouldn't think I was doing anything rash. If they thought I was running away with Sophia to marry her, all hell would break loose.

I spoke with Mother first, informing her that she would be rid of Sophia for a few days while I attended to Maddox and the business. I hadn't heard from my friend for some time, and I wanted to see him again. To Mother, it probably appeared like I didn't trust him, but she could think what she wanted. I had a life outside of the palace, and she didn't. She would never understand.

"Feel free to come back here alone," Mother said before walking away from me.

She always liked to have the last word, and in an effort to not leave in a shitty mood, I allowed it.

I contacted Qadeem and informed him of my trip. The council had a small hand in the oil business, and in the years I'd run it, they had no issues. Going back there would only improve relations with our clients and partners.

"Don't think this gives you any more time to decide," Qadeem warned at the end of the conversation. "We're not forgetting this."

"Neither am I," I said, hoping that I convinced him that I wasn't running away from my problems. I wasn't. Not completely.

So much had changed in the matter of a few days, and while I wanted to flee the country and hide in England for the rest of my life, that wasn't in the realm of possibility for me

I didn't plan on doing anything without Sophia. We were a package deal, and being with her outside of the palace pleased me so much more. Mother could busy herself with Abir and Alda while I solidified the relationship between Sophia and me. If we were going to make it through this, our bond had to be as strong as possible. And that involved making sure that we took the time away from the drama of my family whenever possible.

I planned on telling Sophia about the ultimatum someday, but for the moment, this was a chance for us to enjoy ourselves in the city where we'd met. The layover after our engagement wasn't nearly long enough. Spending a few days away to get some work done would clear my head. I hoped divine intervention would appear, and I would know exactly what to do regarding my title and my future wife.



Stepping off the plane in England, I took a deep breath, feeling as if I could fill my lungs again. The weight of the kingdom affected me so much more lately, and the council's decision weighed on me like a ton of bricks.

Setting foot on the tarmac, Sophia visibly shivered. I held her close to me as we disembarked the plane and went straight to the car.

"All of these weather changes are starting to get to me," Sophia said through chattering teeth.

"We can go shopping again if you want," I said. "Maybe get you a thicker coat."

"As much as I'd love that, don't you have a reservation for tonight?"

"How do you know that?"



“You always have a reservation when we arrive anywhere,” she said, smiling.

“You’re catching on, my queen.”

“And I thought you were going to see Maddox?” she asked.

The meeting with Maddox wouldn’t give me enough time to wine and dine Sophia. “We’re going to meet tomorrow. Maddox needs a little more time to prepare the reports for me.”

“Are you sure that you two didn’t want to go out?” she asked.

I brought her hand to my lips. “Tonight, I want to be with you.”

She sidled closer to me and dropped her head to my shoulder. I pulled her close, and for that moment, I was able to forget everything except the two of us. It was what I wanted for tonight.

Even though I still owned my flat, I took advantage of the luxury hotels in the city. Sophia was my queen, and she was going to be treated as such. That also meant dining at the best restaurants around. Since I’d plucked her out of Dallas, I wanted to bring back a little of the Latin flavor that she loved so much.

Entering the restaurant, it seemed busy for a Sunday evening. We squeezed past a multitude of people huddled in the lobby area, desperate to get away from the gusts of wind that the opening of the door brought.

Sophia clung to my arm as we made our way to the hostess stand.

We sat right away, and the claustrophobic feeling dissipated quickly.

“I feel like we were here an hour ago,” Sophia said, grabbing the menu from the table in front of us.

“Don’t think about it too much,” I said. “Jet lag has a funny way of catching up to you in unsuspecting moments.”

Sophia glanced over her shoulder and then back at me. “I suppose I better keep quiet then.”

I grinned. “What looks good to you?”

She sighed. “All of it.”

I opened my mouth to say something, but Sophia put up a finger.

“Don’t you dare get the whole menu,” she said.

“I wasn’t going to say that,” I said, though the idea had some merit.

“I don’t believe you,” she said, laughing.

“I was going to suggest we get a few items and share.”

She closed the menu and placed it on the table. “I like that idea.”

“Hey, I need your help,” I said. “This is your expertise.”

Sophia rattled off a few dishes when the server came back to the table. We shared a bottle of wine that I chose, and at that moment, I knew more than ever we were the perfect pair. In such a short amount of time, we could read each other’s minds when it came to enjoying a meal together. The stress from the palace seemed like a distant memory, at least for now.

Focusing on Maddox and the business would distract me for a little while. And of course, there was always Sophia’s body to make my mind wander.

I lowered my gaze to her chest. The shirt she wore was wide open at the neckline, showing off the top of her breasts. How I wanted to touch the smooth, silky skin. I knew what bra she had on, a cream-colored one with lace at the top. I wanted to tear it away from her body with my teeth.

“Luke?” Sophia’s voice broke through my thoughts.

“Yes?”

“Where did you go?” she asked.

“Nowhere. I’m here.”

She pressed her lips together.

I hadn’t convinced her. “I was thinking of what you were wearing under that shirt.”

She blinked in surprise. “You were?”

My tongue darted out and dragged over my bottom lip. I grabbed my wine glass and sipped from it. “You’re rarely far from my mind.”

“I just thought…” she trailed off.

“What?” I asked, concerned that I’d offended her somehow.

“You’ve been distant since the first day we were at the palace,” she said. “I was curious. Was it something the council said? You’ve been off in your head a lot since then.”

I wasn’t ready to ruin an evening with Sophia with talks of the idiotic ultimatum from the council. I would speak to her when the time was right—after I decided how to get around it. Abir was so happy with Alda, shouldering him with the responsibility of ruling the kingdom would break his fragile disposition. I wasn’t sure Alda was ready to be a queen either, and like hell would I step down just because I wasn’t blood-related to Father.

“It’s not for you to worry about,” I said.

She stared at me, and to get her off my back about the subject, I stared back.

“Okay,” she said and then reached for more wine.

She let go of it easily, but I knew that it wasn’t over. I just had to figure out a plan before she found a different way to ask me.

When the food arrived, Sophia’s eyes lit up. In an effort to take her mind off the topic, I took the opportunity to ask her about the dishes.

She speared each dish with her fork and brought them to my lips.

The sparkle in her eyes made me believe that she'd forgotten about me dismissing her question, but it was only a matter of time before it came up again. Sophia's reporter instincts were piqued, and I knew her well enough to know that she wasn't going to back down.

Little did she know, I had her best interests in mind by not telling her.

The conversation turned light, and Sophia asked about Maddox.

"I haven't spoken to him much over the last month," I said.

"You're a bad best friend," she scolded.

"I've been available to him," I said. "But he seems to have taken to the position much quicker than either of us thought he would."

"That's a good thing, right?"

"Of course. It's hard for me to let go, though. I suppose I've always thought that I was the best and only person for the job."

"You hate to be proved wrong?"

I smirked and shoveled another delicious bite of empanada into my mouth.

"I'm sure Maddox would love to hear that," she said.

"He would, so don't you mention it."

"Are you going to make me?" she asked.

"I could if I wanted to," I said. "But you're a smart woman. I might have something else up my sleeve if you do."

Her eyes flashed. "You're going to punish me?"

I licked my lips. "I wouldn't dare."

"Good," she said.

The banter between us made me anxious to get out of the restaurant. I wanted to get Sophia alone and show her how important she was to me. She was so unlike any woman I'd ever met. We spoke more like friends and lovers instead of one

or the other. The sensation drove me wild for her, and I didn't see an end in sight to that side of our relationship. It made me want to fight for it more.

In the time that I'd been the king, I learned to appreciate the job. There had to be a way I could keep both parts of my life. If there was, I would work as hard as I possibly could to find a solution that worked for everyone. Tapping into my business side, there were many situations I'd had to negotiate. Treating this like another one of those would make it easier to come to a resolution.



After dinner, the car service drove us to another luxury hotel in the heart of the city, different than the one that we'd stayed at after we got engaged. I'd reserved the penthouse, which was big enough for Sophia to stay in while I worked with Maddox tomorrow. I knew that she would be comfortable in a smaller place too, but she was close to becoming a queen and deserved to be treated as such.

"Damn, Luke," she said, walking through the door.

The curtains had been pushed aside, giving a spectacular bird's eye view of the city. It even took my breath away. During my time in England, I'd always lived in my flat. I appreciated the privacy and having a place to call my own. While I still owned that place, I also enjoyed the best places that money could offer, especially when it came to Sophia.

"This is amazing," she said, walking across the living area to the bedroom. "You could fit like ten people in this place."

I strode over to her, and she turned. I drew her close to me and kissed her.

She moaned against my lips. "If we had ten people here, I wouldn't be able to do what I want to you."

"And what is that?"

I pressed my lips to the sensitive and soft skin of her neck. "This."

# CHAPTER 73



## SOPHIA

The feel of Luke's lips against my skin set it ablaze. A numb, light feeling took residence in my brain as Luke dragged his lips over me. He peppered my jawline with kisses, and each press of his lips caused another electrical pulse to zip through me. My chest ached with the pounding of my heart.

I was sure he felt my throbbing pulse under his kisses.

My hands moved of their own accord, unbuckling his belt and popping the button of his pants. His rock-hard cock sprang up as I shimmied his briefs down. Grabbing him, he sucked in a breath. I stroked his length, needing him to feel what I felt at that exact moment.

He captured my lips again and sucked hard on my lower lip, dragging his teeth across it.

Opening my eyes, I caught the flash of desire in his. Locking gazes, I slowed my hand and forced him to watch me touch him.

The hairs on my arms stood up as a wave of tingles washed over my skin. In his eyes was my future. I wanted to show him how much I appreciated his love and how much I would fight for it when others were against us.

Dropping to my knees, Luke barely had time to speak before I drew his hardness into my mouth.

"Oh," he moaned, fisting my hair in his hand.

I started with the tip, flicking my tongue over it before sucking. He tasted so good; I wanted more. Stroking him with

my hand, I drew more of him inside of me. Closing my eyes, I focused on his moans of pleasure and how they mirrored my own.

He started to thrust, and I allowed him to move inside of me, wanting him to get the maximum pleasure.

“Fuck, Sophia,” he muttered.

Smiling, I cupped him and kneaded his other sensitive area.

Even though my jaw was a little sore, I pushed through it, licking and sucking him until I was sure he would come for me.

His breathing intensified, and I pushed to my limit.

“I’m going to come, Sophia,” Luke said.

I slowed my rhythm and locked eyes with him. Sucking on his tip, he shuddered.

I licked him again. “Do it.”

“Really?” he asked.

I muttered my consent, and his hands dropped to my shoulders as he moaned.

Picking up the pace, I stroked and sucked him until my mouth filled with his sticky warmth. I continued to suck until he was completely spent.

“Damn it,” he breathed as I slowed down in time with him.

Looking up at him, he dropped down to my level and kissed me. I stroked him again, expecting him to go soft in my hand, but he continued to retain his hardness.

“Now it’s my turn,” he said.

Before I could open my mouth, my back was on the floor. Luke lifted my legs and pulled off my shoes. They fell to the floor next to him.

He grabbed the waist of my pants and pulled them down over my butt, and they fell to the floor in a crumpled heap.



He pressed his hands against my thighs and put pressure on them, spreading me wide. I hadn't realized how wet I was until that moment. The air clung to my lower region as Luke's warm mouth didn't waste any time in lapping me up.

My whole body tightened, and my back arched with pleasure. His tongue plunged deep inside of me, and I cried out.

"I like when you do that," he said against my lower lips.

"I like when you do that," I repeated, moving my lips closer to his mouth.

Luke pulled my legs up, wrapping them around his neck, opening me further to him.

My mind whirled, and the room spun slightly. I wasn't sure if it was the wine or getting drunk off Luke's touch, but either way, I didn't care. I closed my eyes and focused on the pleasure centering in my core.

Luke's expertise in finding my sweet spot built me up within seconds. He barely took a breath as he flicked his tongue and nipped at my clit, adding to the pressure deep within me.

"I want you inside of me," I breathed.

"I am inside of you," he said against my lips.

"No—"

"I'm a man who likes to repay his debts," Luke growled.

Luke reached up, shoved his hands under my shirt, and found my breasts. He grabbed the sensitive mounds and squeezed.

My muscles tightened around his neck, and I had no energy to argue with him.

Giving in, I abandoned everything and fell into the ecstasy of his touch.

He removed his hands from my chest and brought them down to my folds. He plunged what felt like four fingers inside of me, filling me with an intense pressure that

threatened to make me pop. His tongue worked my clit, and within seconds, I came for him.

He continued to work me until the orgasm reached its peak. I fell hard and bucked my hips to continue riding the orgasm to its completion.

I was still living on the high when I rolled over and popped up from the floor. On my hands and knees, I wiggled my butt in his direction.

“I want more,” I said.

The soft carpet fibers were rough against my sensitive skin. I couldn't stop without him sticking his cock inside of me. I wanted—no, needed it.

“One sec,” Luke said, sprinting across the room.

I wriggled out of my shirt and bra, tossing them to the side. My skin was heated, and only his touch could satiate me.

With the same idea, he removed the rest of his clothes, and as he pulled the condom over his very-ready cock, I admired his broad chest and chiseled good looks. How the hell did I ever get so lucky to have this man in my life? While the riches and title might have been enough for some women, there was nothing compared to the deep connection that Luke and I shared. I wouldn't have cared if we'd met as two normal people in any other situation. I would still care for him the way I did. His kindness and generosity meant more to me than expensive hotel rooms and the future possibility of being the queen of a country.

Though our surroundings *were* nice. I had to give that to him.

I hooked my finger at him, and he dropped down to me.

“You sure you don't want to do this on the bed?” he asked.

“I can't wait that long,” I said, grabbing him and guiding him inside of me.

He groaned and pulled my butt closer to him as he filled me to the brim. He slid in so easily, both of us completely ready for each other.

Luke pressed his hand against my back, and I bowed down, getting the maximum pleasure from the angle. Luke did too as his breathing came quicker.

My orgasm built up much quicker with him inside of me. I squeezed my eyes closed, wanting it to last as long as possible. I wasn't ready for it to end just yet.

Luke leaned over me, his sweaty chest sliding across my back. Reaching around, he cupped my breasts and rubbed his slick fingers over my nipple.

"Oh god," I moaned. I wanted to be on the same level as him, but that wasn't going to be the case if he kept touching me like that.

"I'm so ready for you, Sophia," he said. "I want you to come for me again."

"I will if you keep doing that."

"Wish granted," he said, kissing my shoulder.

He moved to my other breast and pinched my sensitive nipple. I cried out, and then Luke's hand suddenly disappeared. He gripped my waist, harder than I would have normally liked, but even the sharp pain didn't compare to the intense pleasure within me.

Luke thrust harder and harder, slamming into me with such force that my orgasm exploded out of me. I was barely able to breathe as Luke moved so quickly, building himself up.

"I fucking love you, Sophia," he muttered before he let out a massive groan. I felt him soften only slightly before he pulled out of me. Sliding across my sensitive folds, I sucked in a deep breath.

"I love you too," I whispered roughly.

Licking my lips, I still tasted the residue from when he came in my mouth earlier. The memory made my insides tremble.

I laid on the floor, completely spent. Luke had worked every single muscle in my body, and I felt as if I'd run a marathon in record time.

Luke pulled the condom off and tossed it to the side. He leaned over me, and for a second, I thought he was going to kiss me.

Instead, he shoved his arms underneath me and lifted me off the floor. The sudden movement made my stomach swoop, and I curled up in his arms.

He kissed me then, deep enough to make my toes tingle, and gently placed me on the bed.

Luke went over to the side of the bed and lifted the sheets and duvet cover.

“Come over here,” he said, hooking his finger at me.

“Do I have to?” I asked, the weight of the world pressed on my body. I was in heaven, and moving was the last thing I wanted to do.

Luke chuckled as I rolled over, falling into the comfort of the silky sheets. My eyes were heavy, and I strained to keep them open as the love of my life slid into the bed next to me. He pulled me close to him, and I rested on his chest. His heartbeat was a steady rhythm under my ear.

He ran his fingers through the length of my hair.

“If you keep doing that, I’m going to start snoring,” I said.

“You snore anyway,” he said.

I slapped a hand on his chest. “No, I don’t.”

His chest rumbled with laughter. “It’s cute. Go ahead. Fall asleep. It’s my favorite part of the night.”

“It is?” I asked.

He nodded his head. “Your slow breathing—”

“And snoring,” I cut in.

“And your snoring calm me. I feel as if I’m just a man with his woman. No worries or cares. At least for a little while.”

I considered that and knew I felt the same way. I was completely in love with Luke, and I couldn’t stop thinking of

the day I could call him my husband.

# CHAPTER 74



## LUKE

Coming out of a dream-filled sleep, I opened my eyes. It was still dark in the room, courtesy of the blackout curtains I'd closed at some point in the night. A sliver of light peeked through, and I knew it was at least morning.

Turning over, I checked the clock on the side table, and it was nearly seven in the morning.

Sophia stirred and rolled over to face me. Her eyes were still heavy from sleep. "What time is it?"

"Time for me to go," I said, holding back a groan. I didn't want to leave her, but coming to see Maddox and how the business fared in my absence was the main goal of the trip.

"No," she moaned, barely opening her eyes. She reached for me, and I pulled her close and kissed her. She melted into me, and I had to extricate myself from her before we had a redo of the night before. I planned on fucking her again later, but I would never leave if I didn't do it now.

"I'll be back as soon as possible."

"Okay," she conceded and snuggled into the pillow.

"What are you doing today?" I asked her. I'd gotten the hotel room for her to enjoy. There were enough amenities in the hotel to keep her busy for several days.

"Probably more sightseeing," she said.

I gritted my teeth. I would have preferred she stayed safe in the hotel, but I knew if I said something, that would only

make her want to do it more.

“They *do* have a nice spa here,” I said, in the hopes she would find that more appealing.

“I’ll have to check it out,” she said. Her voice was heavy with sleep, so I left her alone.

It didn’t take long for me to get ready, and by the time I came out of the bathroom, Sophia had fallen back asleep.

I wanted to kiss her goodbye, but I didn’t want to disturb her or be tempted by her naked body again. Instead, I took a mental picture of the sexiest woman I’d ever known. Her breasts slowly moved up and down as she breathed, and I longed to suck those perky nipples again.

And I would soon.



On the way to the office, I called my favorite cafe to place a delivery order for the office. Since I would be present at the office for most of the day, I wanted my employees to be happy and on their game. I planned on checking in with all of the departments, and I hoped they were ready for me.

I had given Maddox a day to prepare, and I expected that the day would run smoothly.

Once I walked into the office, a wave of déjà vu flowed over me. Victoria’s head peeked over the top of the desk at the center of the lobby. Her eyes widened, and she stood up straighter. She moved on instinct since technically, I wasn’t her boss anymore. Well, not her immediate boss. The kingdom still oversaw the business, but a vast majority of the executive decisions came from Maddox now.

“Mr. Walters, it’s so good to see you,” she said. “We weren’t expecting you until later.”

“This is still my company, and I am an early riser.”

“Of course,” she said, without missing a step. “I’ll inform Mr. Greene that you’re here.”



“Very well, thank you,” I said and headed for the elevators.

For years of my life, I strode across the lobby on the way to my corner office. It felt strange to come as more of a visitor. I wondered if that was how Father felt whenever he came to “check in” on me. He never ran the business in his youth. He preferred to stay in Qatar as much as he could, allowing whoever he’d chosen as his UK representative to run the company from afar.

While that method worked for Father, it didn’t work for me. I’d hidden in England, avoiding all responsibility when it came to the throne. It was a position I’d never wanted, and I was excited when Father and Mother had Abir on their own. If Father were alive and well, I would have completely agreed with the council that someone from the royal bloodline should rule. But nothing turned out the way I’d wanted.

My chest tightened as the elevator rose to the top floor. My palms started to sweat as I imagined how different life would have turned out if Father never fell ill. I wouldn’t have met Sophia, but I *would* be living my own life.

I couldn’t imagine life without her, but I would have never known the difference if she hadn’t come over to England for the interview.

I shook my head as the doors opened in front of me. I never regretted meeting Sophia, but I *did* regret Father dying and his final wish being for me to succeed him.

Stepping out onto the main floor, I stopped in my tracks as Maddox charged toward me.

“Hey, mate,” Maddox said, taking me in his arms for a tight embrace. He slapped a hand on my back a couple of times.

“Maddox,” I said. “Did you miss me that much?”

Maddox laughed and held me at arm’s length. “Blimey, did you stop eating? You’re thin as hell.”

I glanced down at my jacket. I didn’t weigh myself on a regular basis, but I supposed the stress from the job and losing Sophia might have had a physical effect on me.

“It’s a good thing someone ordered all of these amazing pastries for us,” Maddox said, dragging me into the main conference room. “Come on. Have one or five. You need it.”

About a dozen employees gathered around the tables covered with food and coffee.

“Our fearless leader has returned!” Maddox said to the group.

Everyone turned around and made their way over to me. I shook hands and caught up with everyone, even those who ventured into the room later in the morning.

When I worked as the CEO, I knew who worked for me, but I rarely spent time speaking with them. Now that I wasn’t on company time and someone else ran the show, I relaxed a little more and really solidified my connections within the company. I recalled faces and remembered vague details from interviews that were expanded upon throughout the morning. I got to know people’s family lives and what they did on their breaks from work.

A warmth spread through me, and I genuinely enjoyed their company. It wasn’t until Maddox pulled me away for a little one-on-one time that I snapped back to reality. Schmoozing with the employees wasn’t going to get me back to Sophia.

On the way to his office, the one that used to be mine, Maddox chatted up all of the employees that we met along the way. The atmosphere was much different now that he was in charge, and a pinch of jealousy flared in my chest. I forced it down. It was his right to run the company as he saw fit. He was always a chatty guy, and he used that strength in his running of the company. It hadn’t crashed and burned in the month since I quit, so he was doing something right.

Justine was still at her desk outside of Maddox’s office. She grinned when she saw me. “How was your trip over here?”

“It was good, thank you,” I said.

She glanced at Maddox, and his eyes lingered on her a little too long.

I rolled my eyes but said nothing. Maddox loved to sleep around, but surely, he wouldn't mess things up with his secretary.

It wasn't my place to talk. I proposed to a professional reporter whose job was to write a story on me.



The interior of the office was exactly how I left it. I wasn't sure what I expected. A pool table perhaps? Maybe a stripper pole?

But other than Maddox's jacket hanging by the door, I could have sat down at the desk, and nothing would have changed.

In the short time I'd spent in the building after coming back, my mind wandered once again to the possibility of never accepting the position as king. Only then would I have Sophia and the job that I loved. I could live my life out as the company's owner and be happy with that.

Why the hell did Father have to die? And why was Abir the way he was? I loved them both, but at that moment, I couldn't help but feel like I'd lost everything for the both of them.

"You told me you were coming in, but you never told me why," Maddox said, leaning next to his desk. "What's going on? Everything okay in Qatar?"

Raking my hand through my hair, I nodded. "Everything is fine."

"Come on, mate," Maddox said, indicating the chairs in front of his desk. "Let's have a little chat, shall we? I know you better than that."

"Am I that obvious?" I asked, sitting down.

Maddox stretched his long legs out in front of him and crossed his arms. “First off, you could have called me. Showing up here means you want to escape something. Is it Sophia?”

“No,” I said quickly. “She’s fine. In fact, she’s the best part of my life right now. I proposed to her.”

Maddox lifted his thick eyebrows. “Did she say yes?”

“She did.”

Maddox clapped his hands together. “That’s brilliant. Congrats, mate. How come you didn’t bring her here today?”

“She’s sleeping in,” I said. “The flight gave her some serious jet lag.” I hated to lie to him, but it was necessary. I didn’t want Sophia there because Maddox was the only one I trusted with the question swirling around in my head. He was a good friend like that; he could spot things that I never could when it came to the hard decisions in my life. He was my sounding board, and I needed him now more than ever.

“The council doesn’t like my decision to marry Sophia,” I said.

Maddox scoffed. “Because they’re jealous?”

“I wish,” I said. “She’s not a traditional wife. I’m not a traditional king for them, either.”

“So, are they kicking you out?”

“They want to. Unless I get rid of Sophia.”

“That’s shit, mate. Can you fight back?”

“I’ve tried,” I said.

“And you want to be the king?”

I nodded. “I have to be the king.” I didn’t want to go into the family politics with Maddox. Abir confided in me about not wanting to be the king, and I had to keep his secret, even though it killed my chance of a happy life.

“That’s rough,” Maddox said. “You’re going to keep the girl, though?”

“Of course.”

“Then there must be another way,” he said. “You’ll figure it out. I know you will make the right choice.”

It was the same thing that Father told me when he’d come to this very office and instructed me to take over for him. It was before he told us all he was sick. My decision would have been quicker if I knew. I would have flown home and been with him for doctor’s appointments and the rest. But that was part of his reason for not wanting me involved.

“You know,” Maddox said. “Your spot is always here if you want to come back. As much as I love the view, I miss you, friend. I’d give it back in a heartbeat if it meant I could see you every day.”

“Is that because you want to see my secretary?” I asked, dropping the bomb.

Maddox clicked his tongue. “You are observant.”

I stood up and shook hands with him. “And you are an ass when it comes to women. You better treat her right.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Maddox said. “But in all seriousness. If it gets too much for you and you want to keep Sophia, come back here. The council can fuck off if they think that you aren’t the best person for this job.”

“Thank you,” I said. “Truly.”

We moved on to business, and that part took less time than the discussion about my ultimatum. Maddox had been doing everything right, and he had even improved the quarterly numbers in that short span of time.

When I left, I was confident in his abilities, even though I was less so when it came to mine and telling the council how I truly felt. Even though I loved getting a chance to meet up with my good friend, he hadn’t provided the sage advice I needed for when I returned to Qatar and faced my fate.

# CHAPTER 75



## SOPHIA

Luke left the hotel room around seven-thirty, but I couldn't force myself out of bed until nearly eleven. I felt like I was judging a competition for who could make the softest bed. Out of all the hotels we'd stayed at and the palace, this one was the best. It didn't help that I was sore as hell, and the mere idea of moving made me groan in protest.

I wasn't sure how long we would be staying in England, but I wanted to make the best of it. I called room service for breakfast and took a long shower. By the time I came out, my breakfast was already in the sitting area of the room.

My skin crawled thinking that someone was in the room while I was naked in the bathroom, but I quickly got over it when the amazing smell of bacon filled my nose.

Flipping on the television, I ended up on BBC News while I ate my breakfast. Sitting back on the plush couch, I kicked my feet up and enjoyed the momentary solace. While I wished Luke was with me, I hadn't had much time alone since he scooped me up out of my life and into his. It was nice to take a breath and assess how far we'd come.

I knew Luke was still hiding something from me, but I didn't think it was too bad since he hadn't discussed it with me. I had never been a part of a royal family before, and I still had a lot to learn. While I wanted Luke to be transparent with me, the process was going to take some time for the both of us.

Eventually, I wanted him to come to me with any big problems so that we could figure them out together. At the

very least, it would help keep my brain functioning. If my only role in life was worrying about servants all day, I would go crazy.

After eating and filling my mind with current events from around the world. I headed out onto the streets, wanting to explore the city that Luke loved so much.

While most people in Texas were friendly and greeted strangers on the street, the sidewalks of London were filled with bustling groups of people off to their next destinations. It must have rained the night before because the roads were still slick, and gray clouds hung in the sky, making it damper and cooler than I would have liked.

I went into shops that I normally wouldn't have so I could warm up.

Eventually, I found a cafe and ordered the biggest coffee I could find to keep my hands warm.

Somehow, I ended up on a street with a lot of cute boutiques. The mannequins in the windows displayed some really nice clothes. My fingers itched to touch the soft fabrics. I didn't have much money to my name after losing my job and spending most of my savings to travel to Qatar on my own, so I didn't dare go inside any of the shops for fear of temptation.

Luke and I hadn't discussed finances between us. I knew he liked to pay for everything since he seemed to have an infinite amount of money to his name, but it was wrong to assume anything. Gia thought I was a gold digger, and I refused to give her evidence she was right.

“Gorgeous ring!” someone said.

I turned to see a woman standing in the doorway of one of the shops. Her brown hair was tied back into a ponytail, and the long wavy locks fell over her shoulder perfectly as if she were one of the mannequins herself.

Glancing in the window of her shop, billowy white dresses filled the display space.

A wedding dress shop. No wonder she mentioned my ring.



“Thank you,” I said, curling up my hand to give her a better look.

The woman shivered, but the smile on her face didn’t move. “Have you found a dress yet?”

“We just got engaged. I haven’t even thought about it.”

“Sure, you’ve thought about it,” she said.

I smirked. “You got me there.”

“How about you step inside and get warm for a minute. There’s no pressure, but I think a girl should start looking as soon as possible.”

She disappeared into the shop, and I hesitated. I could easily keep walking along, but the sparkling gowns in the window called to me. There was no harm in looking around. She said it herself, no pressure.

The inside of the shop was much warmer, which was more appealing than the stark white dresses around me.

The woman clasped her hands in front of her. “I’m glad you decided to come in.”

“Thanks for inviting me,” I said, glancing around. So much white surrounded me, it was almost blinding, yet mesmerizing at the same time. None of the dresses had price tags, which probably meant they were ridiculously expensive.

I glanced at my coffee and placed it down on the small table next to several white couches. I wasn’t going to risk this woman forcing me into buying a dress because I spilled coffee all over it.

“I’m Marie,” she said, extending her hand to me.

I took it. She had a flimsy handshake, coupled with freezing cold hands. “Sophia.”

“My sister’s name is Sophia,” she said with a smile, showcasing two rows of perfectly straight and white teeth.

“Do you get along with her?” I asked.

She laughed as if I'd told her the funniest joke in the world. "We do. That's how I know you and I will have a good time together."

Several other women were in the shop. A mother and daughter with another one of the saleswomen were at the far end of the room, sifting through a rack of dresses.

Excited voices from the back of the shop made me wonder if one bride-to-be had brought her entire bridal party with her.

Thinking of a bridal party made me freeze in my spot. Would I have one? Having no clue how weddings were handled in Qatar, never mind a royal wedding, I wasn't sure if they were needed or not. I didn't have many girlfriends. I supposed I could pull a fast one and have Matt as someone who would stand next to me, but I wasn't sure how that would go down with the very traditional members of Luke's family.

I grabbed my phone and was about to text Matt when Marie said, "Do you know what type of dress you're looking for?"

"Um, no," I said, gripping my phone. I wasn't the dress type, but being with Luke started to change that. What sort of dress would he like on me? "My fiancé is from a traditional family."

Marie winked at me. "Is his mother pressuring you to look a certain way?"

"Something like that," I said. I could have gone into the whole "my fiancé is a king" situation, but I knew the atmosphere would change if I said that. I imagined seeing dollar signs in her eyes, and I doubted she would let me out of here unless I had a deposit on my credit card.

She pressed her fingers against her mouth, considering me. The way her eyes dragged over my body made me a little uncomfortable, but this was her job. Even though I didn't plan on getting a dress, I supposed there was no harm in getting more information.

"When you two go out, when do his eyes light up? When you wear a more fitted or looser dress?"

“Fitted,” I said.

She walked around me, and I felt like a show horse might before a competition. “For your height and body type, I think the bulky dresses are out. We really want to accentuate your assets. I’d like to see you in an A-line dress with a modest neckline for your family’s more traditional values. The bodice will be tight enough to please your man, while starting off your marriage right with his family.”

If only a dress would make Gia accept me.

“I have a few if you want to take a look,” she said. “And if you’re up for it, we can try a few on.”

“I’d love to take a look,” I said. “But I want my sister to be with me for the fittings.”

“Of course,” Marie said, totally unaware of my lie. I knew if I tried something on, I would love it, and I would hate to be disappointed if I was to wear something different.

Marie led me across the room where the bride and her mother had been before. Now they were sitting on the couches, sipping from champagne. I shivered, unable to imagine having anything but a hot drink on a day like this. They were probably used to the weather in England. I wasn’t so fortunate.

The phone rang behind the front desk, and Marie put up a finger. “I’ll be over here if you have any questions.”

“Thanks,” I said as she ran off to get the phone.

I sifted through the elegant gowns that were taller than me. The fabrics were so silky, and the embellishments were probably more expensive than everything I owned.

I couldn’t believe I was looking at wedding dresses. I wished Luke or Matt were with me. Either would offer better advice than I could hope for.

Not wanting to disturb Luke at work—or pressure him into us getting married right away—I called Matt. I wasn’t sure what he was up to, but I missed his voice. We hadn’t talked in

a while, even though he knew I was engaged. He was probably dying for more information.

“Soph!” Matt’s voice filled my ear.

“You won’t guess where I am right now,” I said.

He sighed. “I’m not going to bother. You’re in a new country every day. I can’t keep up.”

“Well, I’m in England,” I said.

“Did you go back to Qatar yet?”

“For a bit. But Luke needed to check on the business here. But that’s not why I’m calling. I’m in a wedding dress shop.”

“No way,” Matt said.

“Just browsing.”

“You have to try on at least a dozen before you leave,” he said.

“I wish, but I think if I stay here too much longer, it won’t be a good thing.”

“Well, if you do, you have to send pictures. I’m bored out of my mind today and could use some cheering up.”

“What’s wrong?”

“My best friend flew across the damn world without so much as a goodbye visit.”

“Don’t be like that,” I said.

“I’m not,” he said, and I heard the smile in his voice. “But I do want to hear from you more often than a week at a time. I’m living vicariously through you.”

“You want to marry a king?”

“I’m happy married to the princess I have.” He cleared his throat and lifted an eyebrow. “I mean queen!”

“Good answer,” I muttered. “I just wish his mom would lay off.”

“She still giving you shit?”

“Big time,” I said. “Even more so than before.”

The mention of Gia spoiled my mood. I walked away from the rack, wondering if and when I would be able to marry Luke at all. She would probably threaten to disown him, and we would be back to square one again. Breaking up a family wasn't in my nature. But Luke promised he would figure it out. I hoped he would keep that promise.

“I wish I could be there and tell her how amazing you are and that Luke is the luckiest guy.”

“If she'd believe you, then I'd say give it a shot. But Luke can't even convince her.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a flash of movement. I turned to see Marie holding a dress out to me. A breath whooshed out of me as I took in the spectacular dress.

“Matt, I gotta call you back.”

“Sooner rather than later!” he said before I hung up.

“You love it,” Marie said.

“Was that on the rack?”

“No, this was in our back room. Someone had a custom order and then gave it up just like that, deposit and all! What I wouldn't do for that kind of money.”

I took the dress into my hands. Tiny crystals covered the bodice, and the skirt was thick enough to give a little bit of poof but not too much.

“If you're going to try on one dress, this has to be the one,” Marie said.

I glanced at my phone. No texts or calls from Luke. Surely I had enough time to try on one dress.



Coming out of the dressing room, where Marie had to help me into the dress and tie up the corset back, I felt lighter than air as I stepped in front of the massive mirror in the center of the

room. The overhead lights filtered through all the crystals, lighting up the dress in a blinding white light. I twisted my body, making them sparkle even more.

Marie spread the train out around me, and I felt more like a queen than I ever thought I could. The neckline was modest, nearly reaching my collarbone.

“It looks like it was made for you,” she said.

“But it was made for someone else,” I said.

“Don’t allow that to hinder your decision. This dress is perfect.”

It was perfect. I imagined Luke’s face if he ever saw it on me. I also thought of how much fun he would have taking it off me.

I snapped a quick picture and sent it to Matt. He sent several heart-eyes emojis in return.

“Your sister?” Marie asked.

I blinked a few times and then remembered my lie to her earlier. “Oh, yes. She loves it.”

“Do you want me to put this on hold for you?” she asked.

I knew Marie was hoping for a big commission, but today wasn’t the day to commit to anything. “Not today.”

Without missing a step, Marie zipped out of the room and then back inside. She held a small clipboard. “How about I hold onto it for a little while? No money down. I’d hate to see this dress get away from you. I’ll call you in a few days to follow up.”

“Okay,” I said, knowing I wouldn’t be able to get rid of her if I didn’t. It would be easier for me to tell her no over the phone.

“What’s your number?” she asked, and I gave her all the pertinent information while standing in the wedding dress of my dreams.

# CHAPTER 76



## LUKE

Sophia had texted me almost an hour ago, telling me she was on her way back to the hotel. I timed it perfectly as I walked through the lobby doors and saw her walking toward the elevators. I took a moment to admire her from a distance. I still couldn't believe I was marrying that woman.

The swish of her hips caught more than just *my* attention. A group of Asian men in business suits stared at her as if she were their next meal.

I cleared my throat. "Sophia!" I called across the lobby.

Several people—Sophia included—turned my way. A broad smile stretched across her lips.

After seeing me, the businessmen quickly returned to their conversation while staring at their shoes. I smirked.

Sophia strode over to me and stood on her toes to kiss me. "I think you just gave everyone a heart attack."

"There are other people here?" I asked innocently.

She smirked. "You think you're so cute, don't you?"

"I do."

She shivered in my arms, and I wasn't sure if it was from the weather or what I'd said. The proclamation would come from my lips eventually, and I loved her reaction, even if it wasn't for real just yet.

"Did you have a good day?" I asked.

"I did, but I'm freezing," she said.



“How about we get a drink?” I asked her, noting the bar to the left of the lobby. There were several restaurants on site, but the lounge overlooking the street had a better view of the city.

“Sounds good,” she said. “I need something to warm me up.”

“Wine it is, then,” I said, taking her hand.

We sat down on one of the couches in the corner of the room. Sophia swirled the wine in her glass before taking a sip.

“This one is really good,” she said.

“I know,” I said.

She rolled her eyes. “I’m determined to find some wine you haven’t tasted.”

“You realize I spent years on my own, wining and dining clients from all over the world. You’d be hard-pressed to find one that I haven’t tried.”

“Challenge accepted,” she said, picking up the wine list from the table in front of us.

“You look different,” I said.

“Do I?” she asked, locking eyes with me. “It’s probably my hair. It’s not doing so well in this weather.”

She twisted up her hair away from her face, and I touched her hand, forcing it back down.

“Your hair is fine,” I said. “What did you do today?”

She shrugged. “Walked around a bit.”

“Did you do any shopping?” I knew how much fun she had the few times I took her shopping for new clothes. When we got back to Qatar, she was going to have to do more of that to replace most of her wardrobe. It was one thing to dress like a visitor; it was another thing entirely to dress like a queen.

She glanced at me. “Window shopping.”

“You find anything you like?” I asked.

She returned her gaze to the menu and shook her head. “I don’t need anything.”

I regarded her as she scanned the list. “You know you have all of my money at your disposal.”

She put down the paper and turned to me. “I don’t expect any of that.”

“I know, but it’s true. You’re going to be my wife. Everything of mine is yours and vice versa.”

She snorted. “I think you got the crappy end of that deal.”

“As long as I have you, I don’t need anything else. But I want you to be happy. You don’t need to worry about anything anymore. If you want a new wardrobe, get it. If you want the next best thing, get that too.”

“I don’t need *things*, Luke. I never did. You saw my apartment and my meager possessions. I don’t feel that it’s right to assume anything—”

“Then don’t assume,” I said. “It’s all yours. No questions asked. I’ve already started the process of getting you a credit card in your own name.”

“My name?” she asked.

“Yes.”

She pursed her lips. “What about later? I mean, I don’t want to assume, but do you want me to take your last name?”

“I would love that,” I said. “Then I can have another one sent right away. It’s not a big deal. Let me take care of you.”

She released a long, slow breath. “Wow, this is a lot for my first glass of wine.”

I drew her close to me and kissed her. “It would make me the happiest man alive to see you happy. So don’t stress about it anymore. Okay?”

“Okay.” She polished off the wine in her glass and poured another one from the bottle. “How was your day with Maddox?”

Her changing the conversation was obvious; she never liked talking about herself for too long. I didn’t mind changing

the subject, though. I would get her to live my lifestyle eventually. That was, if she wanted to stick around forever.

“It was great, actually,” I said. “It was strange going back there without the stress of the job. I actually got to spend some time with my previous employees.”

“Maddox taking to the job all right?”

“Yes,” I said. “Admittedly, he’s made the environment a little more fun and light. Everyone still works hard, but I suppose his personality has bled into his managing style.”

“You were also the boss’s son,” she said. “There’s more stress to that than people know.”

“True.” My shoulders relaxed. For some reason, I always underestimated her and how she understood me so well.

“I bet you feel relieved that he fits in so well. I know you were worried.”

“Not worried, exactly,” I admitted. “It was a rapid transition, and I wanted to make sure that he was ready. From what it seems, he was ready and has thrived with more responsibility.”

“Too bad you don’t get a lot of time with him during this trip.”

“I know.” Again, I wondered what it would be like to stay in England permanently with Maddox and Sophia. How much different would my life be? I knew I would be happier.

“Maddox did say that I could come back to the company if I wanted to. He’d be ready to give it up just like that.”

Sophia turned to me, her eyes filled with curiosity. “Could you do that and still be king?”

By the wrinkle in her brow, I couldn’t tell if she was concerned or genuinely curious. If I told her I was considering it, would she try and pressure me as Mother would? I knew she wanted the best for me, but I couldn’t make both positions work. I would have to choose one or the other. Sure, we would have all the money we could ever need, but was that enough

for her? Should I strive for the top job to make her proud of me?

“He was just teasing,” I said, playing it off as a joke. Until I made up my mind, I couldn’t involve Sophia. It would only make her worry. “I doubt he’d want to give up his title of CEO anytime soon. Apparently, the ladies like it.”

Sophia smiled and the mood surrounding us relaxed.

Why couldn’t I tell her what was going on? Every time I thought I could, I clammed up. Every part of me was pulled in many directions. I had to live up to my family’s and Sophia’s expectations. I thought Maddox was the only one I could bounce ideas off of, but even he left me wanting.

We had a limited time away, and I didn’t want to spend it distracted with thoughts of what the hell I was going to tell the council when I returned to Qatar. If I admitted everything to Sophia tonight, then she would have the opportunity to run again. Even though she had nowhere to go, I wanted her to return to the palace with me and be there when I made my choice.

Whatever that choice ended up being.



After finishing the bottle of wine, Sophia wanted to spend a nice quiet evening in our penthouse, ordering room service. Typically, when I visited England, I ate at different restaurants, but as we were leaving the next day, a quiet night was just what I needed.

I allowed myself to forget my impending future and enjoy her company. Mother’s disdain and the council’s watchful eyes were the only things waiting for me at home. The least I could do was take the night off from my constant worry and stress.

“Oh, I’ve been dying to see this one,” Sophia said, pointing the remote at the television. She seemed so excited that I didn’t even bother looking at the title of the movie before agreeing to watch it. I found slapstick humor and

people with more unfortunate lives than me was a good enough distraction.

It wasn't until the room was silent, and Sophia lay in my arms in bed that my mind clicked on again. I tried to push those thoughts away, but without Sophia to distract me, I dug myself deeper into my head. The questions and possibilities burrowed into the depths of my mind, and I fell into them.

The swirling faces of the council and Mother filled my vision until my stomach clenched and my armpits started to sweat. My breathing whooshed in my ears, and I could barely take a full breath without wanting to jump out of my skin. How could I have everything I'd ever wanted and have to choose to give it all up for a few old men and my mother's approval? It didn't make any sense to me. Living a long and miserable life as a king didn't seem that appealing. Would I ever get a happy ending?

The thought of losing Sophia made my arms tighten around her. She let out a small sound, and I released her, realizing too late that I'd squeezed her too tightly. If it were possible, I wanted to keep Sophia at arm's length for as long as I could. She was the most important person in my life, and there was no way in hell that I could ever give her up for anything or anyone.

# CHAPTER 77



## SOPHIA

Luke tossed and turned for most of the night. If I didn't already know he had something on his mind, I would have then. My night of distractions hadn't worked as I'd hoped. Something was bothering him, and I wished he would only tell me what.

I had kept a secret from him too. It wasn't a big one, but if I told him about the wedding dress, then he would probably feel the pressure that I wanted to get married right away. I didn't want to be engaged for the next ten years, and I *did* want to discuss the timing eventually. It would come up sooner or later when we got back to Qatar. From what he'd told me, it wasn't like a king to remain unmarried for so long.

Though, if Gia had anything to do with it, she would postpone it as long as she could in the hope of finding Luke a more "suitable" wife.

I couldn't believe that we were headed back into that mess in just a few hours. I wished we could live like we did in Dallas, where Luke and I shared our own little bubble and nothing could stop us from being a happy couple.

Reality struck, and my mind started to whirl.

Glancing at Luke, he was finally asleep. I had the urge to touch his rock-hard body, but instead, I let him sleep. If I knew him as well as I thought, he wouldn't sleep much on the flight back to Qatar. It seemed the closer he got to confrontation, the less he could relax.

As quietly as I could, I pulled on the same jeans I wore the day before and pulled my cardigan over my shirt.

Grabbing the keycard on the way out of the room, I closed the door as quietly as possible.

The hallway was much brighter than the room, and it took a second for my eyes to adjust. The plush carpet was springy under my feet, and even though it was cold as hell in England, I was going to miss this place. I loved jet-setting with Luke by my side. Anywhere other than the palace, we could be ourselves and not worry about the pressure of Gia or the kingdom. At least, that was how it felt for me. I hoped that wasn't what was bothering Luke. Though hearing him laugh last night at the movie we chose gave me hope that the short time away relieved some stress from his mind.

I shoved my fingers through my hair a few times to smooth down my locks. I should have grabbed a hair tie, but whatever I looked like would have to do. In the elevator, I used the reflective surface of the walls to make myself appear as normal as possible before running into any other guests.

Down in the lobby, I made my way to the small cafe across from one of the fancier restaurants that we hadn't had a chance to visit. The cafe was more my style, and I wanted to get back up to Luke as soon as possible. He would worry if I was gone too long.

Standing in line, I felt a prickling sensation at the base of my neck. I tried to brush it off, but when it intensified and cascaded down my back, I turned to see where the feeling was stemming from.

A man stood behind me. He was only a few inches taller than me, but his eyes locked on mine.

I gave him a polite smile, and I was about to turn around when he said, "What's good here?"

He had an accent that I couldn't quite place. He was a little overweight, but he had a kind smile.

"I'm not sure," I said. "It's my first time here."



He nodded. “Me too. I prefer a good English breakfast, but I don’t have the time.”

“Maybe a pastry then?” I suggested, unsure why I kept talking to him.

“That sounds like a splendid idea, thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

I turned around just as he said, “Traveling alone?”

I bit down on my lip. Could this line move any faster? He was trying to make conversation, but it bordered on flirting now. I glanced around. If Luke saw this guy standing so close, he would get the wrong idea. The guy moved closer to me now and tapped me on the shoulder.

“Not alone,” I said, lifting my hand and wiggling my ring finger adorned with the impressive diamond. “With my fiancé.”

He blinked and then took a step back. “Oh. That’s nice.”

His gaze returned to the menu as red splotches formed across his cheeks.

I held back a smile and waited in line for my turn.



Coming back up to the hotel room, I was surprised to find the bed empty and Luke nowhere to be found.

“Luke?” I called, balancing the two coffees and bags of breakfast. I wasn’t sure what he wanted, so I grabbed a few things, more than enough for two people. I figured it was easier to bring food onto a private jet than a commercial airplane.

“In here!” Luke called from the bathroom. He came out wearing only a towel with a toothbrush sticking out of his mouth. “Oh great, you brought food. I’m famished.”

Steam rolled out of the bathroom behind him, outlining his handsome figure.

“You didn’t wonder where I was?” I asked.

He cocked his head to the side. “Should I have?”

“No,” I said, not wanting to make him uncomfortable to know that a strange man hit on me. “I didn’t want you to worry.”

“If you didn’t return by the time I changed, I would have come looking for you. Be sure to take your cell next time.”

My phone sat on the side table next to the bed, still connected to the charger.

“I’ll be in the other room,” I said, tearing my eyes away from him.

I set up all the food at the table near the window. Overlooking the city, I sipped from my cup and leaned back against my chair. This was the life. Qatar had amazing views too, but at least here, Luke and I could live without the fear of his mother butting into our lives to wreak havoc on our relationship.

“This all looks great,” he said, grabbing a croissant and biting into it.

“What time are we leaving?” I asked.

Luke shrugged. “Whenever you get ready. The pilot is on standby.”

His gaze settled on the window next to the table. To anyone else, it might have looked like he was admiring the scene below, but to the knowing eye, I could tell there was something on his mind.

I’d asked him several times in the last few days, and he refused to talk to me, yet the same faraway look continued to take over at random parts of the day.

Chewing over his mood and the delicious breakfast sandwich, I contemplated how to ask him again. I wasn’t the type of girl to lay down and let her man suffer without any assistance. He hadn’t asked for help, but I knew he needed it.

“What is your plan when you get back home?” I asked.

He blinked a few times and then shook his head as if he were slowly coming out of a trance. “What was that?”

“When you get back,” I repeated. “Do you have plans?”

“Oh,” Luke said, finishing his croissant before picking up a scone. “I have to make a big decision when we get there.”

I sat up straighter in my chair. This was the most information I’d received since we’d left Qatar.

I waited for him to elaborate, but he pulled the chair out from the table and plopped down on it. “Can you turn the television on?”

Gritting my teeth, I grabbed the remote and turned on the news. Luke put me in a hard spot. While I wanted to be the doting fiancée, I also needed him to be honest with me.

I kept my flurry of questions to myself. If he planned on deciding whatever was on his mind when we arrived in Qatar, I didn’t have much longer until I figured it out. Once he made whatever decision he spoke of, I was sure he would talk to me then.

While Luke’s attention remained on the news anchors on the TV screen, my mind began to race with all the possibilities of what was on Luke’s mind.

Would he finally stand up to his mother, telling her that it was unacceptable for her to treat me the way she did? The bond between Luke and I was stronger than ever. He was the type of guy who expected and told the truth. If he didn’t want to be with me, he would tell me. His mother’s approval was all he needed to finalize our marriage.

But he was lost in his head during random moments of our trip when his mother’s name was far from our conversation.

Did it have to do with the council meeting? He’d completely changed after that, but what could they have said to him that would force the man in front of me to disappear into his head on a regular basis?

Maybe it had to do with Abir or something totally unrelated to his family.

Keeping Luke in the corner of my eye, I willed him to tell me. But when it came to secrets, similar to me, Luke was a vault.

I gave up trying to use my nonexistent mind powers to force it out of him. I had to be patient. There wasn't another option.



The flight back to Qatar was uneventful, yet the stress level in the cabin was overwhelming. This time, I was the one feeling restless. My brain didn't stop rolling over the possibilities of what was to become of Luke when we returned to the palace.

I knew I was worrying over nothing, but nothing could take my inquisitive reporter side out of me.

We watched endless movies; I barely retained the plot of any of them as the minutes ticked by into hours.

Luke was abnormally quiet, but neither of us spoke of the elephant in the room. Granted, I had no idea what that elephant looked like, but I wanted to stare it in the eye more than Luke probably did.

It wasn't until we were about an hour away from landing when Luke dropped the polite conversation and gave me a hint to what was on his mind.

"Sophia, do you want to spend the rest of your life with me?" he asked.

I paused the movie and turned to him. I was about to ask if he was serious, but the tightness in the corners of his eyes and his hard-pressed lips gave me the answer. "Of course. Why do you ask?"

"No reason," he said.

I took his strong hands in mine and forced him to look at me. "Luke, you can't ask a question like that and expect me just to let it go. Did I do something to make you doubt us?"

“No. The question stemmed from a force outside of our relationship.”

“Your mother?” I asked.

He sighed. “I don’t want to get into it.”

He gave me the door I needed to get into his head, and I kicked it open. “Is this a part of your ‘big decision’?”

He nodded. “I’d prefer to decide before discussing it. If you wouldn’t mind.”

His tone held no anger or malice. It was simply a request. One that I couldn’t refuse.

Even if he was going to distance himself emotionally, I squeezed his hand, unwilling to let him go physically. If he wasn’t ready to discuss what was on his mind, I would show him my support in other ways.

“I’ve never wanted anything more in my life,” I said. “That’s the honest truth. And I hope you believe me.”

“I do,” he said with a small smile. “Thank you for saying that.”

“Thank you for not giving up on us.”

Resting my head on his shoulder, I may have looked calm and relieved to be with him, but my nerves were firing all over the place. Whatever this big decision was, we were both in on it together even though I wasn’t sure what the hell it was. Either way, I would be there for him and hope that we would come out on the other end without too much damage.

# CHAPTER 78



## LUKE

Sophia's admission was more than enough for me to prepare myself for the decision I had to make when we got back to the palace. Even though I knew the council would force my hand, having a plan in mind gave me somewhat of an advantage. Little did they know that I had to get Mother on board before anyone else. She had no say in any of the council business, but she was a force to be reckoned with. If Mother gave her approval of Sophia and me, then the council may have to concede, even just a little bit. And then, I would have the ability to change their minds.

I bet Jaabir hoped that Mother would give a good fight, knowing her values. But what he underestimated was my negotiation abilities, along with the natural love between a mother and son.

I wasn't blood-related to her, and I never would be, but she chose to bring me into her life, and she wanted to keep me there. Throughout all of this, she never threatened me with questions of our bond, only the bond between Sophia and me. If I could prove that Sophia and I loved each other no matter what, then there was a possibility that Mother would understand enough to let us live our lives. We were going to have enough trials and tribulations through life. I didn't want to start our marriage with familial issues.

I wasn't going to budge in my decision, so I was willing to give everything I had to change her mind.

My new plan involved breaking open the wound caused by my Father's death, which still hadn't fully healed over. One of

our last conversations would be a key point in bringing Mother onto our side. If we were a united front for the council, then they might back down. It was my only plan, and it had to work.

I would make it work.

Per usual, the landing in Qatar was effortless, but as we drove farther into the country, my palms and armpits dampened. Mother was a tough nut to crack, but with my resistance to change when it came to Sophia, I hoped that my plan to dig up her past would be the entrance I needed to warm her up to the idea of Sophia in all of our lives.

“Luke,” Sophia said, breaking into my thoughts.

“Hmm?”

Her pale eyes locked with mine. “We’re here.”

My door was open, and the palace stood right in front of me. The driver didn’t bat an eye as I pushed out of the car and onto the pavement.

I’d fallen so hard into my thoughts that I didn’t realize we were already home. While I should have been nervous, the hours of plotting and planning on the plane offered a strange sense of calm instead.

I went to Sophia’s side, and she grabbed my arm as we walked up the palace steps. Unlike last time, no one met us at the front. Abir was probably off with Alda, and I knew Mother was avoiding me. She’d said her piece before we left, and she was probably waiting for me to tell her that Sophia and I broke it off in England.

She was about to have a rude awakening.

“I need to speak with my mother,” I said as we walked up the central staircase toward the bedchambers.

“Okay,” Sophia said.

“Alone,” I said.

She pinched my arm. “I figured that.”



“Where are you going to be?” I wanted to get back to her as soon as I possibly could.

“I’d like to unpack,” she said. “Settle in a bit.”

I brought Sophia to our chambers and kissed her. It wasn’t heavily passionate, but I needed the encouragement from the woman I loved. She boosted my confidence that this plan was going to work.



I found Mother in the library attached to Father’s study. I still couldn’t force myself to do my work in there for long periods of time. The memories were too overwhelming. Every item had significance in his life, and after a half hour, I couldn’t concentrate on anything but him.

The library was a hiding place for our family members. The only entrance was a small door at the back of Father’s office.

Mother glanced up at me from her chair by the window. Sunlight streamed through it, and for a moment, I thought I saw a smile cross her lips.

“Is she with you?” she asked.

“Sophia? My *fiancée*? Of course.”

The smile faded into a frown as Mother returned to her book.

“I want to speak with you,” I said, walking farther into the room. Unlike other times, I allowed the memory of Father to accompany me instead of pushing him away. Borrowing from his strength would only help me.

“About?” she asked without looking at me.

I walked over to her and sat across from her. Her feet were up on a small stool, relaxed as ever, but there was a tension in her shoulders that slowly brought them up to her ears.

“Sophia,” I said. “I love her, and she’s not going anywhere.”

She finally put down the book, closing it in her lap. “That’s not a wise decision. Not for you or this kingdom. As long as I’m alive, she won’t be welcomed here. And I plan on living a long life.”

“Don’t you want me to be happy?”

“Of course I do. Which means I don’t want to see you suffer, either. These American women, they have grand dreams of being wealthy and living the good life.”

“Don’t generalize,” I said. “You haven’t bothered to get to know her at all, so making assumptions won’t work on me. You and Father raised me right, and I found a woman that understands me and still wants to be with me.”

“For now,” Mother said. “Until things get difficult. There is more to being a queen than both of you realize.”

“You can show her, teach her. She wants to get to know you.”

Mother scoffed. “She cares nothing of this place. This isn’t her home country. It’s ours. She needs to have the passion of someone who’s lived here and wants to continue to see our country thrive.”

“So, if I went out there and plucked a commoner from the streets, you would give me your blessing?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she said. “The match needs to be beneficial.”

“There it is,” I said.

“There *what* is?”

“You want to pick out the woman. Just like grandmother did. She wasn’t too happy when Father chose you instead, was she?”

Mother blinked and then narrowed her eyes. “This has nothing to do with her.”

“Yes, it does,” I said. “Father told me everything before he died. He wanted me to be happy, just as he was when he chose you. And you two barely knew each other, but he wanted you to rule with him. He didn’t care about what his mother thought. I’m telling you now that you won’t have a say in this.”

“Then why bother coming in here at all if you’re going to do whatever you please?”

“Because I want you both to be a part of my life. We’re a family and living under the same roof. Would you prefer the awkward tension for the rest of our lives? Because I don’t want that. Can’t you see past the traditions and appreciate the fact that I found someone that I love and am happy with? Screw the rest of it. When I’m old and leave the throne, I want to live out my life with someone I chose and who loves me for me and not just because of our titles.”

“This kingdom was built on tradition,” Mother said. Even though she wasn’t completely on my side yet, I noticed a change in her. A small one, but it was a good start.

“You’ve already broken tradition by putting a non-blood relative on the throne. Father groomed me for the job. The kingdom hasn’t crumbled yet, so who is to say it will if I marry outside of our culture?”

“It’s a lot of change, too soon for the council.”

“Screw the council. This is about us. About our family. Sophia adores Abir and loves me. If you give her a chance, I know she will love you as much as I do.”

“I was beginning to think you *didn’t* love me anymore,” she said quietly. Her gaze shifted to her book again. Her hand smoothed over the cover as if she were petting a cat instead of an inanimate object.

“I will never stop loving you,” I said.

“You said I was going to lose you if I didn’t accept Sophia into my life.”

I *had* said that. “I apologize. I said that out of frustration. I will never stop loving you, no matter what. But I love Sophia

too. I don't see a future without the both of you, so we need to figure something out."

Mother moved the book to the small table next to her. She stood up and walked over to the window. "This isn't easy for me, Luke. I've had certain expectations laid out for your future."

"I understand," I said. "Which is why I don't expect you to make a decision right away. But I'd really appreciate you considering Sophia. If you get to know her, I know you will love her too."

Standing up, I went to her side and kissed her cheek. "Think about it."

Mother nodded but didn't look my way. There was no scowling, but I hadn't won the battle yet. She was a hard-headed woman and would need time to process what I'd told her.

Leaving the room, I released a full breath. Mother's change of attitude about Sophia wouldn't happen overnight, but I forced myself to remain positive. If we were going to push back against the council, we would have to do it as a family.

Standing in Father's office, I didn't want to leave just yet. I had a feeling that Sophia would want to know about the conversation between Mother and me right away. I was already keeping so much from her that I knew I wouldn't be able to hold off her questions for long. I needed a little time to process as well, so I sat at Father's desk—my desk—and inspected the room.

Seeing the world through his eyes brought back a lot of memories. This time, I didn't push them away. I immersed myself in what he must have thought while sitting in the same spot as me. While a lot of recent painful memories surfaced, my mind traveled to all the good ones. Did Father sit here and contemplate life? Did he smile with pride after one of my accomplishments? Did he hold Abir in his arms, telling his child stories of the kingdom?

I smiled, holding on to those imagined happy times. Then I thought of my few memories in that office. Father's study was a private place, but on rare occasions, he invited me inside his sanctuary. I remembered flipping through the books on the shelves, reading about the history of our country. I recalled sitting in one of the more comfortable chairs by the window and listening to the rustling of paperwork on his desk as he silently pored over his work.

Closing my eyes, I held onto the visual of what he looked like when he was healthy and much younger. Heat pricked behind my eyes, and I opened them before I shed one tear. Father wanted me in this position, and I was going to honor his legacy. I was going to remain king and have Sophia by my side.

The council expected me to bow down to their wishes, but I wouldn't allow them to dictate my life. No one was in charge of my life except for me.

# CHAPTER 79



## SOPHIA

Unpacking our suitcases took all of ten minutes. The trip to England was a short one, and we hadn't taken much along with us.

After staring at the bed for too long, I was anxious to do something while waiting for Luke. I knew he wanted me to remain nearby for when he was finished speaking with Gia, but without doing anything, my stomach was a bundle of nerves while my mind whirred with endless possibilities of how the conversation would end.

I kept imagining that Gia would come into the room and demand I leave the palace and her son alone. Needing to distract myself, I went off to explore the palace for a little while. Besides, if Gia was going to try and find me, keeping myself moving would delay that confrontation.

There was a flurry of activity in the main ballroom. I wasn't aware of any event happening at the palace, so curiosity got the best of me.

Wandering into the room, the servants huddled around a table. The clinking of silverware filled my ears as I got closer.

Five female servants were polishing the forks and spoons in front of them. They were speaking in their native tongue, and I had no idea what they were talking about.

For a brief moment, I felt as if I were intruding on their privacy. Before I could turn around, one of them glanced up at me.

“M’lady,” she said in perfect English.

The others turned to me and stared.

“Sorry!” I said. “I was just looking around.”

They were silent for a moment, and I wasn’t sure if I was breaking some palace rules by speaking with them. In the past, I’d only ever seen Gia talking to the servants and usually when she was giving instructions. At least, that was what I gleaned from their conversations since I didn’t speak the language.

“Can we help you find something?” one of the servants asked. She was the tallest of them and had the longest eyelashes I’d ever seen.

“No,” I said, feeling a little foolish for interrupting their day.

“You come from America, yes?” another asked. She appeared to be much younger than the rest.

Two of them said something to her in a hushed voice.

“I don’t mind,” I said, not wanting the girl to get into trouble for being curious. It had happened to me a lot when I was younger and was part of the reason I became a reporter and buried myself in people’s lives professionally. “Yes, I’m from Texas.”

They looked at each other blankly.

“The southern part of the United States?” I tried to help.

“You’re a reporter?” another asked.

Now I had all of their attention.

“I used to be,” I said. “How did you know that?”

“We hear things,” the youngest said. “And we wanted to get to know our future queen.”

So they had heard about the engagement as well. The conversation with the women was more informative than I thought it would be.

“Don’t mind us,” the tallest one said. “We don’t meet many people outside of the palace, and America seems like an



interesting place.”

“It’s definitely different,” I said.

“You must love the king to move all the way out here.”

The questions came quickly, and by the time the silverware was polished, I knew all of their names and answered all of their questions. It was a nice reprieve from other times I’d spent in the palace.

“We must go,” the leader of the small group, Eshe, said.

“Don’t be strangers,” I said, waving to them.

They giggled and were off and out of the room in seconds.

“That was a dumb thing to say,” I muttered to myself.

“There you are!” Abir said from the doorway.

Whipping around, I noticed he was alone. How much of the conversation had he heard? Was I not supposed to speak with the servants? “Is Luke looking for me?”

“No,” Abir said. “I was looking for you. Fancy a walk around?”

“I’d love that,” I said. It was better than Gia catching me alone. If she found me now, then Abir could be the buffer. At least, I hoped he would. From past experiences, Abir was a pushover in most instances. While it was endearing, when it came to Gia, I needed help until she could finally get over herself and accept that I wasn’t going anywhere.

“They finished installing a new fountain in the gardens. I know you and Luke like to go out there, so I thought you’d like to see.”

“I’d love to,” I said. “Where is Alda?”

Abir smirked as we walked down the front stairs and toward the entrance to the palace. Walking across the intricately designed stone floors, I still couldn’t believe that this was going to be my home for the rest of my life.

“She’s home today,” Abir said. “She takes care of her younger sister when her mother goes to the market.”

“I’m surprised you’re not with her.”

Abir’s eyes widened. “It would not be appropriate for us to be unchaperoned.”

I needed to learn a lot more about this culture. There were so many things I didn’t know. Luke would be helpful, but it might impress Gia if I was a quick study and learned about this stuff myself. I would need to know it eventually when Luke and I had children of our own. The thought created a wave of tingles that spread from the center of my body.

“You spent a lot of time with her,” I said.

“She’s great,” Abir said with a sigh. “I hope that Mother approves of our union.”

“I’m sure she would,” I said. It was more “appropriate” than Luke and me. It would be like Gia to dote over Abir and Alda and completely shun Luke and me.

“I know Alda and I are a good match. I hope to love her in the same way that Luke loves you.”

“I think you already do,” I said.

He nodded his agreement. “I don’t know what I would do without her. It hurts to think about it.”

“Don’t think about it then. There’s no use worrying over nothing. As long as you treat her well, the both of you will end up quite happy. I’m sure of it.”

“I appreciate that, coming from you,” he said. “If only everyone would make it easier on you and Luke.”

“That would be nice.” I wondered if he could hint that to his mother, but asking for that would be putting Abir in the middle of our issues. I wasn’t going to drag anyone else into that mess. It was already crowded with too many people.

“Here it is,” Abir said, holding out his hand in front of him.

The new fountain was massive, reaching up at least ten feet in the air, and the pool width was at least three times the size of me. We were far enough away from it, but still, the

water spray peppered me in the face as the water crashed down over the oblong-shaped pool. The stone was black and slick with water. It was a really beautiful fountain and only enhanced the look of the garden as a whole.

“It’s breathtaking,” I said.

“Father commissioned it before he died,” Abir said.

“He did?”

Abir glanced behind him and then back to me. “He did it for Luke.”

“Does Luke know?”

Abir shook his head. “I overheard Father and Mother discussing it. Only a few days before he passed. He knew Luke loved to come out to the grounds.”

“I’m sure Luke would love to know that.”

“I’m sure he would. But I can’t tell him. And neither can you.”

“Why not?”

Abir scratched his head. “It’s not the first time I’ve overheard things I’m not supposed to. It’s not my fault, but I usually end up in places I’m not supposed to. Mother would be furious.”

“She adores you. I doubt she’d be upset with you.”

He shrugged. “Just don’t tell Luke. Allow her to do it when the time is right.”

“Okay,” I said.

I went over to a small stone bench nearby, and Abir joined me. We sat and watched the movement of water in the fountain. With the sun beating on my face and the gentle flecks of water cooling the air around us, it was the perfect place to clear your mind. I knew that was what Luke hoped for every time he came to the gardens. If only he knew how much his Father did for him.

I wondered if Gia would ever tell him. Would she hold it from him until he did as she asked?

I tried not to think of her in a negative light, but she made that difficult. She could be such a shrew when it came to Luke. Sure, Abir was a people pleaser, but they were both her sons and she should treat them equally. It was her right to feel disappointed but at the expense of her son?

The more I thought about her, the less relaxed I felt. There was no way that she would speak to me about Luke. She barely looked at me. As much as I wanted to help, this was between the two of them, much to my dismay.

Abir shifted next to me, and I glanced in the direction he faced.

As if from my head to physical manifestation, Gia walked in our direction.

Abir jumped up from the bench and went over to his mother. I wasn't sure what to do. If I stood up, then I would acknowledge her in the way that she never did for me. But if I ignored her, I would only be engaging in the game that she played with me.

My body made a choice for me, and I stood up from the bench and faced the two of them.

“Mother,” Abir said, bowing his head slightly. His hands were clasped in front of him.

“Abir,” she said without a single nod or look in my direction. “It is time to come inside.”

I gritted my teeth and used all of my strength not to roll my eyes. She didn't even want her youngest son around me? I was the palace pariah, at least when it came to Gia's two sons. I didn't have the fucking plague. I was a human being. She took her hatred to another level, and I wasn't sure how much longer I could take it.

Abir turned and offered me a small smile before waving goodbye at me.

Without another word, Abir shuffled off.

Gia hesitated for a moment, staring at the fountain in front of us. Even though we were outside in the wide-open world, my skin crawled as if invisible walls closed in around us, stifling us with our awkwardness.

I couldn't take my eyes from her. I dared her to say something to me. She had no reason to interrupt my time with Abir. Soon enough, we would be related by marriage. She wasn't going to stop us, so I didn't understand why she continued to fight mine and Luke's relationship.

I opened my mouth to say something, but when Gia's eyes snapped to mine, I clamped my mouth shut.

Her dark eyes bored into mine, and a slight tremor shook my knees. For a split second, I could have sworn her eyes softened, almost as if the ice in her heart thawed for a brief moment.

Then she turned away from me and headed off toward the palace.

It wasn't until she was quite a distance away that I was able to release a breath I'd been holding. What the hell was that? I wanted to think that she was warming up to me, but we had also been standing in front of the fountain that Erol had commissioned for Luke. Obviously, she would have a lot of feelings about it. Maybe it was her first time there, and a bunch of emotions flooded her mind. It was understandable.

The warmth in her eyes wasn't for me, but for her dead husband. I was a fool to think otherwise.

# CHAPTER 80



## LUKE

The sense of calm that I'd felt in Father's office stayed with me as I walked the halls of the palace, back to my chambers. When I arrived, Sophia was nowhere to be found. Checking my watch, I realized I'd spent more time away from her than I'd originally intended.

Before going out to search for her, I wanted to change into something more comfortable.

By the time I finished, the door had swung open, and Sophia stood in the doorway.

"Hi," I said. "Where did you go?"

"Just took a little walk around the palace. Apparently, the servants had a lot of questions for me."

"What did they say?" I asked. The servants normally kept to themselves, but I imagined having an American woman in the palace was a novelty for them.

She shrugged and sat down on the edge of the bed. "They asked about my life back in Dallas. They were much more excited about it than I was about living it."

"Most of them were born into this position. The palace is all they know." I crossed the room and planted a kiss on her cheek.

Reaching to me, she pulled me down to deepen the kiss. "It's all very strange to me. I know you normally don't speak with them, but I enjoyed talking to them."

“I *do* speak with the servants,” I said. “It’s a fine line, though. As a child, I used to spend a lot of time with the grounds workers. They were like extended family to me. But since becoming king, I have to respect the traditions. I don’t have much time for myself, never mind keeping up with the staff and their lives.”

Sophia frowned. “But they live here and work for you.”

“As I said, it’s a fine line. To you, it might sound strange, but to us, it’s just how it is.”

“Is that why your mother feels that way about me? She’s so wrapped up in tradition she thinks ‘oh, I have to hate Sophia because that’s how it is’?”

I released a slow breath. I’d walked into that one. Sophia was not happy.

“You know she came out onto the palace grounds where Abir and I were perfectly content with having a conversation, and she insisted he come inside to get away from me?”

“Did she say that?”

“Not with words. But she practically charged out there to get him. And then she ignored me completely. How much longer is this going to go on?”

“I *did* speak with her,” I said.

“Should I try to talk with her?” Sophia asked. “Your plan doesn’t seem to be working that well.”

I took Sophia’s hand in mine. “We have to give her some time.”

“Luke, we’ve given her plenty of time.”

“My mother isn’t someone to be changed overnight.” Just like the council, which was why I had to do something about their ultimatum soon. Ignoring the deadline was only going to piss them off.

“What did you say to her?” Sophia asked.

I went over every last detail of the conversation between Mother and me.



“She was hurt that I said I was going to choose you over her,” I said. “I explained that I wanted you both in my life, and I think she was a little more accepting after that.”

“I don’t think she’s going to change, Luke. What are we going to do? I can’t be your wife, living in this palace, and having to fight with your mother every day. That’s going to put all of us in early graves.”

I knew she didn’t plan on breaking things off with me, but her words instilled a sense of urgency to our situation. Mother had to accept Sophia before the council ever would. But pressuring her might force her to back away and lose whatever progress we’d made.

“Please, just be patient, Sophia,” I said. “Things will be fine. Trust me.”

Her eyes fixed on mine. “I trust you, Luke. But this is much harder for me than it is for you. I have no one here except for you and Abir.”

“I know,” I said. “It will get better.”

Someone knocked on the door, and Sophia and I jumped up from the bed as if we were two teenagers sneaking around together.

“Yes?” I asked, unsure of who would be there. Was a servant calling me to the council meeting room? Surely, they wouldn’t expect my answer this soon. Then again, I couldn’t predict their behavior anymore.

But it wasn’t a servant. Mother stood in the doorway. Her eyes slid between Sophia and me.

Sophia stiffened.

Mother lifted her chin. “Dinner will be ready soon. I would like the two of you to join Abir and me.”

It was as if someone had her by the ear and was forcing her to speak to Sophia. I pressed my lips together so I wouldn’t break out into a smile. This was her way of trying, and some small part of me enjoyed watching her squirm in front of Sophia.

“Thank you,” Sophia said.

Mother bobbed her head before turning on her heel and walking down the hallway.

“She acknowledged that I was in the room,” Sophia said, a little dumbfounded.

“That’s progress,” I said.

“Sure as hell is,” she said with a grin.



I wasn’t sure what to expect when we arrived at dinner. The four of us hadn’t sat down together in quite a while. The last time we did, Mother forced Sophia to flee from the room after showing her true colors. I hoped that the conversation we’d had earlier in the day held some weight.

Taking Sophia’s hand in mine, we entered the dining room as one unshakable force. Nothing was going to come between us, and I wanted to show Mother that. The sooner she realized it, the sooner we would be able to move on.

Mother sat next to Abir, to the right of the head chair that I was supposed to occupy. Finding that spot empty was strange. We hadn’t had a proper meal in that room since Father died, and after the conversation about Sophia, the weight of the moment crashed over me.

Sophia’s hand in mine gave me the strength to hold in the myriad of emotions swirling through me.

I pushed her chair in as she sat. Then I took my place at the table.

Mother still held her chin high, but her eyes were glossy with emotion as well.

“It’s nice of everyone to join us tonight,” Mother said and then signaled for the servants to start the meal.

Sophia’s foot rested on mine, and it was nice to have physical contact with her. I doubted Mother would appreciate

us holding hands during the meal, but we both needed each other's strength.

“What did you do today?” I asked Abir, steering the conversation away from Mother or Sophia. We had to take baby steps.

“Not much,” Abir said. “After my studies, I took Sophia out to the gardens to see the new fountain.”

Mother cleared her throat, and Sophia stared down at her plate.

Narrowing my eyes, I inspected the both of them. The same reaction from the two women in my life that were supposedly feuding was bizarre.

“I expect it came out okay?” I asked.

“It's beautiful,” Sophia said.

Mother stared at my fiancée as if she were waiting for Sophia to insult the fountain or something. What was going on between the two of them? Had Sophia misled me about what happened in the gardens earlier that afternoon?

“We should take a look sometime soon,” Mother suggested to me.

“I'd like that,” I said.

For the remainder of the meal, the conversation stayed on safe topics. Abir continued on about he and Alda and their copious time spent together on the palace grounds and their outings around the city.

Sophia smiled the entire time and engaged with him.

Even though I enjoyed seeing Sophia and Abir get along, my focus was on Mother. She contributed to the conversation only when directly addressed by myself or Abir, but the permanent scowl around Sophia was nowhere to be found that evening.

I bet Sophia didn't realize, but that was significant progress for Mother. It warmed my heart to see Mother try so

hard when Sophia's presence went against everything in her mind about tradition and our culture.

Convincing her gave me a sense of accomplishment and a little boost in confidence that I could do the same for the council. Mother was as hard-headed as the rest of the old men in that room. This was one more step in pushing toward my goal of keeping the kingdom under my rule with Sophia at my side.



After dinner, Abir went off to call on Alda, leaving the three of us in his wake.

One look from Sophia, and I could read what was going on in her mind. She was unsure of what would happen without my little brother in the room. But I had no issue with being alone with Mother. Sophia didn't realize how much had changed in a day.

Sophia turned to Mother. "Goodnight, Gia."

"Have a pleasant evening," Mother said. She forced the words out, but they were better than any other remark that Mother made in reference to my fiancée.

I kissed Mother's cheek. "Thank you for a lovely dinner."

Mother clasped her hands in front of her and shuffled out of the room.

"That was... strange," Sophia said.

"That's what I call an improvement."

"That's one word for it," Sophia said. "Did you slip something into her soup?"

I laughed harder than I had in a while, releasing a massive weight from my shoulders. "Come on. Let's go back to my chambers."

The euphoric feeling continued to lighten my steps as we walked down the quiet halls toward my bedroom. As much as

I loved staying in hotels with Sophia, nothing could compare to going to my private room with the love of my life.

For once, I could see and the possibility of my fiancée and my mother getting along. I hoped Mother would continue her efforts to be nice and get to know Sophia. If she did, then there should be no reason why the council wouldn't respect my decision to choose Sophia as my wife, no matter what her nationality.

Sophia was all in for me, and I was going to do the same for her, no matter what it took.

When we reached the bedroom, Sophia tugged at her ponytail and let her hair down in loose waves over her shoulders.

“What a day,” she said, sighing. “Can we hold off on the traveling for a bit?”

“I can't make any promises on that,” I said.

“Are you planning on going anywhere for work without me?”

“Not work, exactly.”

She tilted her head to the side. “What are you thinking?”

I stepped closer, pulling her into my arms. “I'm thinking about how much I love you.”

“Don't change the subject.”

I silenced her with a kiss, and she melted into my arms.

“That's not fair,” she said.

“I don't like to play fair all the time,” I said against her lips.

She looked up at me through her thick eyelashes, fluttering them once before dragging her teeth over my bottom lip.

Her meaning was clear, and within seconds, I had her against the bedpost, pressing my body against hers. She let out a yelp of surprise and then smirked. Her hands reached under my shirt, and her fingers splayed across my chest. We were

both breathing hard and ready for each other. I could almost see her sharp peaks through her shirt. I licked my lips, ready to have them under my tongue. How I yearned to hear the little noises she made when I touched her naked body.

Tilting her head to the side, she exposed her neck to me. I pressed my lips against her soft skin and kissed her again.

# CHAPTER 81



## SOPHIA

Luke's distraction techniques totally worked for me. After a tension-filled evening with his mother, the night ended up better than I expected. I wanted to talk more about why he thought we were leaving, especially after his mother started being less mean to me, but the way he made my body feel took up even more of my headspace.

My head fell back against the bedpost as Luke's mouth and hands roamed my body. It was amazing to me how quickly he could turn me on. Only in a matter of seconds, it seemed. I pushed my fingers through his hair and held the back of his head as I drew his lips closer to mine. I hesitated for a moment, our lips brushing together, a tingling sensation fizzling just inches from his mouth. A searing hot heat flickered throughout my body, and I could barely take a full breath.

Luke's fingers pulled down the collar of my shirt, exposing my breasts. He kissed the top of them before his other hand popped open the clasp. My breasts were free, and he didn't waste a moment in drawing one very hard nipple into his mouth. He nipped at the sensitive tip.

My legs were numb with pleasure, and it took all of my strength to hold on to him.

He groaned, and the sound of his pleasure vibrated through me, piercing my chest.

I reached down, shoving my hands under his shirt and fisting the fabric before pulling it over his head. He didn't lose



his rhythm as he returned to my breasts. I smoothed my hands over his muscular back, looking to grab any part of him to stay upright.

He stepped back from me, and I almost dropped to the floor. His strong hands gripped my waist.

“Whoa there,” he said, grinning.

I wasn’t going to appear weak in front of him, so I unbuckled his belt and shoved his pants to the floor before I leaped onto him. His arms wrapped around me, and his tip glided along my slick lower lips.

“I like where you’re going with this,” he said.

I kissed him to show that I liked it too. I deepened the kiss, desperate to have him inside of me. No pretense tonight, I wanted to make love to him as soon as possible and for as long as possible.

His cock teased me, moving back and forth over my sensitive folds. I moaned into his mouth, the need filling me to the brim. I almost moved enough to allow him to plunge inside of me, but we were always safe with sex. At least for now. Once we were married and needed to produce an heir for the kingdom, all bets were off. I couldn’t wait for that day.

“Do you have something?” I asked.

“Don’t you want to take it slow?” he asked, pushing a lock of hair behind my ear. His touch made me shiver with pleasure.

“Hell, no,” I said and kissed him again. I flicked my tongue over his, and his body stiffened.

He held on to me, still kissing me as he strode across the room. He didn’t even struggle with effort as he walked over to his desk drawer and pulled out a condom. I tried to wriggle out of his grasp, but he held me tighter. “Not yet.”

A frustrated grunt bubbled out of me.

“Patience,” he said, running a finger down my jawline.

I nipped at his finger and bit the tip.

“Do that again,” he said.

I drew his finger into my mouth and sucked on it. If it were possible, his cock hardened even more against me.

Dragging my teeth over his finger, I sucked harder, and he shoved another finger in my mouth.

Luke’s pupils dilated, and the intense expression on his face made my nipples perk up even more. God, he was sexy. All of the drama from days and months past were gone when I was with him like this. We were just two people in love that turned each other on so much.

“Fuck this,” Luke growled.

I laughed. “Whatever happened to taking it slow?”

“I changed my mind.”

“You’re not getting an argument from me.”

His arms loosened around me, and I dropped to the floor. I fell against him, one of his arms still coiled around my waist. He ripped the foil open with his teeth—which was sexy as hell—and rolled it on himself before lifting me up again.

I was so wet that he slid right into me. Since we were so close, his cock filled me to the brim in seconds. Tightening my legs around his waist, I clenched around every inch of him. He stumbled over to the bed until my back slammed against the post.

“You okay?” he breathed into my mouth.

“Yes,” I said. “Don’t stop.”

Crushing my mouth with his, he complied with my wishes. He thrust into me, each movement caressing my lower lips.

My head fell back, and Luke’s lips landed on my neck again.

His hot breath puffed against my skin, and my heavy breathing matched his. Electricity coursed throughout my body, and even though the bedpost dug into my back, I didn’t want to move from that spot. We fit together so perfectly. I

knew when we finally came together, it would be an epic event. One that I could barely wait for.

Luke thrust so hard into me that I couldn't help but cry out when the wooden post heaved against me.

"We're going to break this thing," I said.

Luke glanced up as if debating on whether or not he cared.

Shifting slightly, he lowered me to the bed. While I loved how he felt so close to me, my back thanked him for the reprieve.

He scooted me to the edge of the bed and lifted my legs up, holding them out on either side of him. If it were possible, he pushed even farther into me.

I cried out as he went to the limit, stretching me until I couldn't take it anymore.

His eyes were heavy and lidded, his mouth slightly open as he slowly moved in and out of me. He came out until it was just his tip inside of me, and then he thrust his cock into me over and over again.

"Sophia, you're so fucking soft," he said.

His eyes rolled back before he closed them.

"Come here," I said, reaching for him.

Curling my legs around him, his chest met mine as I pulled him close. He was hot and sweaty, but he never looked more attractive to me.

He lowered his lips to mine and kissed me. My toes curled with pleasure as he moved slowly in and out of me. If it were possible, I got wetter by the second. He kept the movement steady enough that it still felt good, but my orgasm was nowhere in sight.

I bucked against him until I reached the sweet spot, and I remained there, taking matters into my own hands.

"You can't wait, can you?" he asked, nipping at my lower lip.

“Nope,” I said.

“Maybe I can help you with that,” he said with a grin.

He stood up again and pulled me to the edge of the bed. My butt hung off the side, but his cock pressed hard against my clit.

He started to move slowly at first and then quicker and quicker until that nonexistent orgasm built up quicker than I imagined it could.

Fisting the fabric underneath me, I arched my back, wanting to feel every second of his touch.

“Oh, god!” I cried out.

“Fucking come for me, Sophia,” Luke growled.

I grabbed on to his arms, pulling him closer to me. My legs nearly reached the bed as Luke spread me wide open for him. I barely registered the pain as the pleasure center within me rose higher and higher.

Before I knew it, I came. My body tremored as he thrust inside of me, fulfilling his own pleasure.

I tried to be present, but my head swam with lightness, and I wanted nothing more than to feel Luke next to me again.

He came soon after and then collapsed onto the bed.

Curling against him, I grabbed his arm and pulled him close to me. Even though he wasn't inside of me, the gesture was just as intimate.

“How is it that every time we're together, it gets better and better?” Luke asked.

“Because we're in love,” I said, twining my fingers with his. I pulled his hand up to kiss it. My lips moved over his knuckles as the memory of those fingers inside of my mouth lingered on the edge of my mind.

He pulled his arms around me and pressed me against him. “I've never been so in love in my entire life. Just know that I will never leave you, Sophia.”

Turning my head to face him, I noticed something flicker in his eyes. “Is there something wrong, Luke?”

“I’ve been thinking about something, and I wanted to ask what you thought.”

Here it was. What I’d been waiting for him to tell me. “Okay.”

“What would you think about us getting married this weekend?”

“This weekend?” I hadn’t expected that. Was this the big decision that he wanted to make when he returned to the palace? It didn’t make much sense. He could have told me that at any time. I wondered if he knew about me going wedding dress shopping. “Are you serious?”

“Yes,” he said.

I turned to face him and took his hands in mine. “Luke, I love you, and I don’t plan on going anywhere. But just make sure you’re doing this for us. I can wait as long as you want.”

He swallowed and nodded his head. Then a yawn overtook his face.

Smirking, I kissed his cheek. “We should get some sleep.”

“Yeah,” he said.

Slowly, we crawled up to the top of the bed and snuggled under the covers. Tonight, I was the big spoon. Luke still had something weighing on his mind, and it had nothing to do with the wedding. I sensed he was trying to distract me from some other big decision that he needed to make.

I stroked his back until his breathing became heavier and he lightly snored, indicating that he was fast asleep. If there was anyone in the world that Luke didn’t need to worry about, it was me. And I intended to show him that until death do us part.

## CHAPTER 82



## LUKE

The afterglow from the activities of last night made Sophia's face shine brighter than ever. Every time I was intimate with her, my fondness for her grew. Would there ever be a cap on that, or would I love her so much that I would always feel the urge to burst with love at every moment?

It wasn't a terrible feeling, and I welcomed it as it pushed down the dark swirls of fear for what our future held within the kingdom.

The question from last night lingered in my mind. She seemed ready and willing to get married as soon as possible, but I *did* notice hesitation in her eyes. Did she want the big fancy wedding? I had enough money to make that happen, but she didn't have much family around. So, why did she brush it off? Maybe she was hurt that I hadn't predicted what she wanted. I supposed I'd have to have the conversation again with her, but I had to do one thing first.

Sophia stood next to the intricate coffee machine down in the kitchen while one of the servants pushed buttons across the facade of the machine. Normally, I would have taken my coffee on one of the balconies, but Sophia insisted on getting it herself.

In the short time that Sophia had been living in the palace, there had been a lot of changes, especially when it came to her attitude about the servants. While I knew there was a point where I would have to rein her in, there was no harm in her navigating her own way around this new culture. It wasn't in

me to stifle her curiosity. Besides, I knew she would work harder to do what she wanted if I tried to stop her.

“Okay, I think I have this,” Sophia said to the servant. “I’m going to make Luke one.”

I leaned against the counter. “If it’s anything like the coffee at your apartment, no thanks.”

Sophia tossed a coffee bean at me, and it bounced off my chin. Sophia covered her face with her hands and laughed. The servant looked mortified, which only made the situation funnier.

“Okay, serious now,” Sophia said, clapping her hands together. “I press this button, right?”

The servant glanced at me a few times while helping Sophia. She was older, and surely Father and Mother never did this. Sophia was different for all of us. But I’d learned to embrace change when I could, especially where Sophia was involved. It was good for everyone, even Mother.

When the coffee started to pour from the machine, Sophia pumped her arms into the air. “I did it!”

She hopped over to me and jumped into my arms. I held her close to me and stared into her gorgeous eyes.

“I have no idea why I’m so excited,” she said, giggling. “I seriously need a life.”

“You’re adjusting to your new one,” I said before kissing her.

“And it’s going to be a great one,” Sophia said.

After the first cup finished brewing, Sophia set up the next one on her own. The servants cleared out of the kitchen, probably to give us some privacy. If we needed help, they weren’t too far away to call. Not that Sophia needed help. She was an intelligent woman. I couldn’t imagine doing this with any other woman that Mother would see fit as a queen. Sophia’s playfulness would keep things new and exciting for us and shake up things in the kingdom. While she wasn’t



doing it on purpose, it was just her personality; I appreciated her being herself.

“All right,” she said, holding out my cup of coffee. “Taste it.”

I clinked mugs with her, and we sipped from our mugs.

Sophia blinked a few times with surprise. “That is the best cup of coffee I’ve ever had.”

“I’d say the same,” I said, moving closer to her. “I think you’ve found your new calling.”

“Barista?” she asked.

“But only for me, and I’d prefer coffee in bed next time.”

“That won’t be a problem,” she said. “I’m an early riser, and I live to please.”

Slipping my arm around her, I pulled her to me. “Just as long as you only please me.”

Someone cleared their throat, and Sophia and I jumped apart to see Mother standing on the other side of the room.

“Good morning, Mother,” I said.

Mother nodded in our direction. “Good morning, Luke, Sophia.” Her hands were clasped in front of her as if she were holding on to something very tightly. Possibly her dignity. Since she acknowledged both Sophia and me, I knew whatever she was about to say was going to be hard for her.

“Hello,” Sophia said, moving closer to me.

I placed a steady hand on her hips.

“Luke,” Mother said, lifting her chin. “I’d like it if you made yourself scarce today. I would like to spend some time with Sophia on my own.”

Sophia stiffened, but when she tilted her head to glance up at me, I saw a smile on her face. It didn’t look forced. Even though Mother had treated her like garbage since they met, it appeared as if Sophia would finally get what she wanted—a

chance to prove herself to my mother. I wasn't going to stand in the way of that.

“I can do that,” I said, putting down my mug.

Sophia looked down at her clothes. We'd showered earlier but only dressed casually, thinking we were headed back up there after dinner. She looked great, and appropriate for the day since they were staying on the palace grounds. I squeezed her hand, conveying my approval, and she took a breath before chugging the rest of her coffee.

I kissed her cheek and met Mother across the room, doing the same. “Have fun today.”

Looking back one last time, I wanted to give Sophia the “out” she needed. I would make some excuse to take her away if I needed to.

Instead of a scared looking woman, Sophia appeared just as confident as Mother.

There was no reason to worry about either of them. I had faith that Sophia could handle herself—hell, she had with me. As long as Mother tried, they would be fine. I hoped Sophia surprised Mother just as much as she'd surprised me through every step of our relationship.

Leaving the room, it was strange to be on my own and not worry about Sophia. Sure, I thought of her. I wanted to be a fly on the wall during the conversation between the two of them, but one thing I had to do was allow her to make her own life in Qatar. The more space I gave her, the better off we would be when we finally came together at some point in the day. She couldn't cling to me the rest of her life here, and I doubted she wanted to. Eventually, Mother could turn into a confidant for her as Sophia would be her successor.

The thought made me shiver. We were that much closer to solidifying our relationship within the kingdom. I could see our future right around the corner, where everyone would be happy. Abir could be with Alda and stay out of the spotlight as king, and I could hold that position while standing next to the woman of my dreams.

I headed back to my chambers. It was a strange thing not to have any specific plans that day. I had cleared much of my schedule for the trip to England—mostly wanting to keep the council at bay when it came to a decision about Sophia and me. They carried on with their duties while I set my plans in stone to convince them that I was the best choice for king and whomever I chose to spend the rest of my life with was no business of theirs.

Inside my chambers, the bed was already made up and the surfaces polished. Sophia's phone and mine sat side by side on my desk, the servants having moved them there so they wouldn't get lost. Sophia didn't need her phone, but I wondered if I should give it to her anyway.

Though interrupting Sophia and Mother might break up whatever connection they were forming at that very moment.

Picking up my phone, I checked my email. There were a few from Maddox with the quarterly projections attached. Even though Maddox and I hadn't spoken much in the time I was king, he did keep me informed with updates on the business. After the most recent trip, I vowed to myself to make more of an effort to keep our friendship going outside of the business, as we had when I lived there.

Sophia's phone rang, and I glanced down at the screen. A number that looked familiarly English scrolled across the screen.

Who did Sophia know in England? Was it the hotel? Did we forget something there? I didn't remember giving them her cell number, but if it was important, I didn't want to let the call go unanswered.

I slid my finger over the screen. "Hello?"

"Hello!" a perky English voice trilled over the line. "I'm guessing this is Sophia's fiancé."

I was happy that it was a woman, but I wasn't so pleased with her knowing me when I had no clue what her and Sophia's relationship was. "May I ask who is calling?"

“My name is Marie. Sophia stopped by my dress shop the other day, and I wanted to touch base with her and see if she was interested in the gorgeous gown that she tried on.”

“Gown?”

“Wedding gown,” she said.

“She tried on a wedding dress?”

Marie hesitated. “She did. Sophia informed me that you two hadn’t made any plans, but I cannot let this dress go to anyone else. I’ve been in this business my whole life, and I know she will regret it. Even if you don’t get married for two years, she needs this dress.”

“I see,” I said.

“My apologies for overstepping, but as a happily married woman, if you were to make sure she had this dress, you’d start your marriage off with a bang!”

“Do you have a photograph of the dress?” I asked.

“I do, but I’d hate to break custom and send it to you. You know the adage, never see a bride’s dress before the wedding. We’re very superstitious in the wedding industry.”

“You said it’s perfect for her?” I asked.

“Yes. And that’s not just a sales pitch. I was the one who held the dress for her. She wanted to tell you first, but I’m guessing she hasn’t. I understand the cost might be daunting —”

“We haven’t had much time to discuss wedding plans as of late,” I interrupted. “But the cost is not an issue for me.”

“That’s brilliant,” she said. “With a deposit, I can keep the dress here as long as you want. But if you’re not interested, I understand. I’ll put it back on the rack, and we can forget all about it.”

Just then, an idea struck me like a shot of adrenaline. The pieces fell into place, and I knew what I had to do to force the hand of the council and profess my undying love for Sophia.

“Hold the dress,” I said.

“Brilliant,” she said. “I’ll need the card number that you wish to use.”

“Let me get in touch with you soon.”

She cleared her throat but ultimately said, “I can give you twenty-four hours.”

“I don’t even need that much time. I just want to arrange everything. But I have to go.”

“Sounds good!” she chirped. “Sophia is never going to forget this.”

I hoped not.

After hanging up with her, I grabbed my phone and dialed Maddox.

“Hello, mate!” he said over the line. “Get those numbers from me? I bet you want to pat your best mate on the back for all the work I’ve done.”

“This isn’t about work,” I said. “I wanted to know if you were available this weekend for a wedding.”

There was a short pause on the other line before he asked, “Who’s getting married?”

“Me,” I said.

“Finally clamping on that old ball and chain? I’m proud of you. What did the council say when you told them about the wedding?”

“They don’t know yet,” I said. “I’m going out on a limb here and doing it without anyone’s permission. I’ll have to face them eventually, but I know this will work. And I’m tired of delaying it. I want to be married to Sophia.”

“I’ll do whatever you need, Luke,” Maddox said. “I love a good fight against ‘the man’.”

“I’m not looking for a fight, per se, but if we’re married, then they can’t go up against me.” The decision was a little hasty, but the adrenaline coursing through my veins clouded my head. I had to do this.

Selfishly, I couldn't wait to have Sophia by my side for the rest of my life, but if the council wasn't going to budge, I would have to force them to. Deep down, they knew I was the best choice for king, and making decisions like this was in the nature of a ruler.

"What day do you need me there?" Maddox asked, pulling me out of my thoughts.

"Can you make it here for Friday? Justine can get in touch with the pilot for my plane and get all the details nailed down."

"Flying in style? How did I ever get so lucky?"

"I need you to do one more favor for me," I said.

"Anything, mate."

# CHAPTER 83



## SOPHIA

The marble countertop pressed against the small of my back as I watched Luke walk away and leave me alone with his mother. On any other day, her presence in the room would be cause for alarm, but after the conversation between the two of them the day before, Luke left us, knowing that his mother wasn't about to berate me about my background or being with her eldest son.

At least, I hoped that wasn't her plan. I hadn't had enough coffee that morning to put up a proper fight about my background, though why should I be expected to?

With a shaky hand, I placed my mug down on the counter and plastered a smile on my face. "Where would you like to go, Gia?"

"Every morning, I enjoy taking a stroll around the grounds. It clears my head for the day. I wanted you to accompany me."

I nodded. "Okay."

She tucked her hands under the folds of her dress and turned around, facing the doorway that Luke had just walked through.

I scurried to her side as she led the way for our morning stroll. Since she had called this little meeting between the two of us, I waited for her to start the conversation. As much as I wanted to impress her, she was calling the shots, and I would let her. If she wanted to know more about me, then she would have to ask.



“Do you enjoy coffee?” she asked as we reached the main hallway.

“I do,” I said.

“I never liked the stuff,” she said, wrinkling her nose.

Was that a mark against me? Luke liked coffee, but he was also her son. Was I starting this conversation off on the wrong foot again?

“Luke is getting me used to tea,” I said.

“That’s good,” she said. “It’s not from my influence, though. Spending so much time in England did that.”

“I’m sure he thought of you when he first started, though,” I said.

“That’s nice of you to say,” she said as we walked down the back steps toward the palace grounds. “But Luke has always done his own thing, even as a child. I suspect it’s because of his upbringing. He told you he’s adopted?”

“Yes.” It was a strange question. Of course, Luke and I shared our pasts with each other. If we hadn’t, what sort of couple would we be? And if I were just finding out from his mother about the adoption, then we would have a host of other issues.

But I recalled how she and Erol met. Neither of them knew much about each other before they were married. That was the custom here, but I wanted to make it clear that was not how it was between Luke and me.

“It was a tough decision,” she said. “Erol and I tried for just a few years to get pregnant. After any royal union, the kingdom yearns for an heir. Everyone wants to be sure of the bloodline. It seems like after the wedding, it’s all anyone can talk about. Erol was the one to bring up the topic of adoption. He didn’t care that the child wasn’t his by blood. In a way, I think Luke got his perseverance from Erol instead of me. While Erol tried to follow the rules of the kingdom, there were a lot of things he didn’t agree with when he first started.”

I listened to her story, mesmerized by her face and how it lit up when she spoke of Luke or Erol. She loved them so fiercely; it mirrored how I felt about her son.

“The council didn’t agree with Erol when we brought Luke home. They consistently tried to force my husband to bring a blood-relation to the throne. They threatened him, but since his brother passed years before that, there was no one else to rule.”

“Did they ever get off his back?” I asked.

“Only after Abir was born,” she said.

“It took that long?” I asked. If that were the case with Luke and me, the council wouldn’t accept him until I was out of the picture. Even if we did produce an heir for them, they would forever be stuck on the fact that Luke wasn’t blood-related to Erol and that he chose a woman outside of their culture.

Was that what was bothering him lately? And was that why he wanted to get married? It seemed that was the opposite of what anyone wanted. Would that decision change the council’s mind? I knew Luke wasn’t going to get rid of me that easily, but would the council force his hand? Now that Gia was opening up to me, it would have been the perfect time for me to confide in her and ask, but what if Luke hadn’t told her either? With the way they butted heads recently, I doubted he would have said anything to her if he didn’t speak with me. Or at least, I hoped. Making her worried about her son wasn’t going to earn me any points in her book.

“Luke is a lot like Erol,” she said. “He will fight for what he believes in. And it appears that he believes in you and your relationship.”

I wasn’t sure what to say to that. She’d barely spoken to me since I met her, so the kind words made me speechless.

“Tell me about yourself,” Gia said. “It’s about time we got to know each other.”

“I’m not sure what you want to hear,” I said, suddenly feeling shy. Never in my days as a reporter was I nervous about talking to someone. But I was in the hot seat now, and I

had to work my butt off to impress this woman. This was my first real impression, and I wanted to make it a good one.

“Tell me about your family,” she said helpfully.

“There’s not much to talk about. I’m an only child, and my parents passed away several years ago. There isn’t much other family around, either. Most of my relatives were older and didn’t have any children.” My life sounded so sad when I said it aloud.

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

I shrugged. “Thank you. I think of them often, but I quickly got used to being alone. They always encouraged me to be independent. I suppose that was why I pushed so hard in my career. Well, my previous career.”

“As a reporter,” she said.

“Yes.”

“I suppose it’s a good thing you never had to write a piece on him before,” she said. “We taught him at a young age not to trust the media. It never turned out in our favor.”

In my ease being around her, I forgot that his parents didn’t know the truth about how we really met. I grabbed on to the story we concocted when I was at the palace the first time. I supposed now wasn’t the time to tell her we lied to her. Maybe that would come later after Luke made his big secret decision.

“It’s a good thing,” I said, smiling. I hoped she didn’t see through me.

“I suppose you had to leave that part of you behind after Luke proposed. What did that feel like?”

“To be honest, it was a tough choice,” I said.

Gia indicated a nearby bench and invited me to sit with her.

I sat, and the muscles in my legs twitched. I wished we could have kept walking; it was helping to keep my nerves from overwhelming me. I clasped my hands in my lap and tried to act as calmly as possible.

“I dreamed of being a journalist my entire life. But after meeting Luke, things came up at work, and I wasn’t going to move forward in that career.”

“So, it was time for a change?” Gia asked.

“It was,” I said. “I never would have left if it weren’t for Luke.”

“Why is that?” Her eyebrows drew together, and I could already hear the phrase “gold digger” in her mind.

“He supported me and my career, but in a way, I was always looking for more. That more turned out to be Luke.”

“So, you quit your job for him?” Gia asked.

“Not exactly,” I said, treading carefully. I was never the type of person to do something because someone told me to do it. In fact, I was quite the opposite. “I interviewed and got another job with a different newspaper. It was right around the time that Luke came back to the States. He gave me a choice to do what I loved or take a chance on us. And I decided to take that chance.”

Gia nodded. I wasn’t sure if she approved or not.

“Gia, you’ve raised a wonderful man. He’s supportive, kind, and intelligent. You should be proud. I’m sorry that I’m not the woman you would have chosen for him, but here we are.”

“I know,” she said. “Forgive me for taking so long to realize what was good for him. Things are very different in this country. Traditions are not easily changed, but if things are going to be changed, Luke is the king to do it.”

“I appreciate you saying that, and I know he would too.”

She sighed. “There are a lot of things I keep from my sons. My emotions are a big part of that. With Erol gone, I have to show them how strong I am.”

I placed my hand on hers. A brazen move for sure, but I wanted to show her that she wasn’t alone in all of this. “You are strong. But sometimes it’s good to talk about these things. I can be that person for you if you want.”

Gia gave me a small smile before moving her hand out from under mine. She swiped at her hair as an excuse, but she didn't appear to be the touchy-feely type. I wasn't either, but this woman needed someone by her side, and I wanted to be that person for her.

Abir was growing up, and another girl was going to replace his mother, at least for a little while. And Luke, as the king, wasn't going to show his mother that he needed her. He needed to be strong for his country and not a mama's boy. The strain between her and Luke was still very real and would only change when she was more accepting of me. While she was trying, we weren't there yet.

In the distance, the trickling of water from the new fountain caught my attention. Without telling her about Abir overhearing their conversation, it was a good opening for her to reveal more to me in confidence. At least, it was an attempt. If that was something she wanted to keep between her and her late husband, that was her choice.

"Abir showed me the new fountain," I said, pointing at it in the distance. "It's beautiful."

"It is," Gia said without looking at me.

I held my breath, wondering if she would tell me anything about it.

She glanced at me before looking toward the fountain again. "Erol wanted that fountain to serve as his memory at the palace. It's a shame he never got to see it."

We sat for a moment in silence, soaking up the feeling of the moment. This time, it was Gia's hand that touched mine.

I looked at her. "Sophia, I want only for my sons' happiness. When it comes to Luke, he's never been very traditional with anything in life. It's about time I start accepting that. He's not the type to be with someone like myself or Alda. He's worldly, and I can see now why he chose you."

"He is very happy," I said.

She nodded. “I know. Maybe you will understand someday, but when a son finds another woman in his life, his mother is no longer his number one. It’s a hard transition, and I haven’t made it easy on you.”

“I’m stronger than you think,” I said.

“It doesn’t excuse my actions,” she said. “Don’t let me off the hook for that. I hope we can spend each day forward getting to know each other better.”

“I hope so too.”

“Having a strong royal family serves the country well. They look up to us, and if we’re divided, it shows weakness. I won’t be the cause of weakening how we look to our people.”

“I understand,” I said.

“Good,” she said. “Well, I’ll let you get back to your day.”

She stood up and smoothed down the fabric of her skirt, brushing away invisible wrinkles.

I stood up too, and I couldn’t quell the overwhelming emotions swirling through me. It had taken a while, but her opening up to me was the best gift she ever could give me. I couldn’t help myself as I threw my arms around her shoulders. “Thank you for trusting me with your son’s heart. I won’t let you down.”

After losing my parents, it took me a while to steel my heart and not allow anyone else inside of there so that I wouldn’t ever feel the pain of losing people so close to me. Gia’s admission of her feelings opened up that wound. Unlike what I thought would happen, I didn’t feel hurt or angry. I wanted Gia to fill that gap in my heart, just as Erol had when he accepted Luke and me when no one else did.

Gia stiffened, and I squeezed my eyes closed, unwilling to let her go just yet. She would see the emotion pouring out of my eyes. But when her arms tightened around me, I finally smiled and allowed myself to feel something for this woman. We had a lot of work to do on our relationship, but just like my relationship with Luke, I wasn’t willing to let it go without a fight.

## CHAPTER 84



## LUKE

After the conversation with Maddox, I was more than excited to tell Sophia the big news. I hoped it wouldn't scare her, but if she felt the same way I did, there was no reason we had to wait any longer to be man and wife. It would take a lot of planning and money, but I had enough staff and money at my fingertips to give Sophia all she wanted and needed when it came to her wedding day.

I didn't care much about the day, other than spending every second of it with her.

I thought about how the council would handle it when we returned to the palace as man and wife. They would probably flip out and threaten my seat on the throne again. While I wanted nothing more than to marry Sophia, I had to be smart about all of this. I couldn't get a wedding arranged any sooner than Saturday, so there was time between now and then to settle things with the council. In a perfect world, I would want them to accept Sophia and me. Then we could have our wedding without any baggage on our shoulders.

Was this the right choice for us? Was it time for me to confide in Sophia about what the council said?

Though if she went to a wedding shop and tried on a dress, I didn't want to ruin this moment in her life. She wasn't going to marry anyone else, so I couldn't put this mark on her memory of planning her wedding.

No, this was my decision and mine alone.



While I waited for Sophia to come back to the room, I went back and forth about my options. When working at the company, I always made lists of pros and cons when faced with a tough choice. If I told the council what I planned to do with my life, they were going to attempt to dethrone me. If I came back to the palace with a wife, they were going to try to oust me. Either way, they didn't want me on the throne unless I got rid of Sophia. But I didn't want the throne without her. I'd gotten used to the idea of ruling with her alongside me.

I was stuck between a rock and a hard place.

Since the outcome was the same, I thought about my situation from another angle. If I told them ahead of time about the wedding, they would know that I respected them enough to do so. I didn't appreciate where they were coming from, but I recognized their positions. If I did this behind their backs, they might never trust me again, and their thoughts about me not being the best candidate for the throne would be realized.

The door to my chambers opened, and I snapped my head in that direction. I wondered if the council got wind of my idea somehow and had sent someone to fetch me.

Instead, Sophia stood in the doorway. I tried to read her expression. I hoped Mother wasn't too rough on my fiancée.

"How did it go?" I asked.

"It went better than I anticipated," she said, closing the door behind her.

I wondered if Mother was nearby and listening. Was Sophia about to tell me that Mother was rude to her again? I couldn't imagine Mother changing overnight, but miracles did happen.

"Really?" I asked.

"Really," she said. "We went for a walk. She opened up to me like I never thought she would."

"About what?" I asked.

Sophia lifted and dropped one shoulder, her gaze moving away from mine. “Private stuff.”

“You two have ‘private stuff’ now?”

She smirked. “Maybe. We got along well. She wanted to know about my past, and she sort of gave us her blessing.”

“She did?”

“She did. She said she just wanted the best for you and that’s why she gave me such a hard time.”

“She mostly gave me a hard time.”

“Don’t make this about you,” Sophia said, grinning.

“What else happened?”

Sophia gave me a play by play of the conversation between her and Mother. When she came to the part about the fountain being a monument for Father, I asked her to repeat herself.

“He commissioned it before he died,” she said, her gaze moving to her hands. “I think he wanted to do it for you.”

“What makes you think that?”

She licked her lips as if she were nervous to tell me something. Or maybe it was because she knew the topic of Father was hard for me to stomach, even more than a month after his death. “He knew you always went out to the gardens. He had all of the palace grounds to place the fountain, but he chose there.”

“Wow,” I said, running my fingers through my hair.

We were silent for a minute as I thought of Father.

She took my hands in hers and squeezed them lightly. Her hands were cool, and their softness moved over my palms. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No,” I said, needing to process all of this first. “I *do* want to tell you something else.”

“What is it?” she asked.

“We’re getting married this weekend,” I said, putting it out there.

“What?” she choked out. “Are you sure? What about—”

“What about *what*?” I interrupted. “Unless you want to wait, I don’t see a need to.”

“Me neither,” she admitted. “Last night when you mentioned it, I didn’t think you were serious. Has something changed? You can tell me anything, you know?”

I sighed. “A lot is going on with the council. I think if we get married, that will solve a lot of problems.”

“Problems?” she asked, stepping away from me. “So this is a political move?”

“Not at all,” I said. “I want to marry you. If it were possible, I would have done it when we were in America. You’re not the problem. What I meant is that there’s no reason for us to wait, or for the kingdom to wait. They’re expecting a new queen, and I want to exchange vows with you and spend every waking moment of the rest of my life with you.”

“Can you arrange it so quickly?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said. “I have connections, remember?”

She rolled her eyes. “How could I forget?”

“I already contacted Maddox, and he will be here Friday. Is there anyone you want to invite?”

“Matt is the only other person I want here.”

“Okay, then we can arrange that.”

“I don’t have a dress, though,” she said, glancing at the armoire.

I almost wanted to tell her about the conversation with Marie, but I kept my mouth shut.

“But I can make something work. Now that your mother doesn’t hate me, she might be able to help.” She lifted her chin proudly. At that moment, I saw a glimpse of the regal woman I was about to wed in only a few days. I couldn’t believe how

lucky I was to have such a woman in my life. I wasn't sure if I would have been able to survive with anyone different. Someone who might add more drama to my life instead of lessening it as Sophia did.

"She never hated you," I said, cupping her face in my hands.

She pulled a face. "Seriously, Luke?"

I laughed and kissed her. "Despise is different than hatred."

"Tomato, tomato," she said, accentuating the "ah" sound on the second one.

I tilted my head to the side.

"Never mind," she said, waving me off. "Speaking of your mother, should we tell her about all of this? You are inviting her, right?"

"If I wanted her to hate me, I wouldn't invite her. No, she's coming."

"Should we tell her now?"

"No, let's wait until tomorrow."

"What about dinner?" she asked. "Are we going to pretend like nothing is happening? That might tip the delicate balance out of our favor if she finds out we've been planning this without her."

"I thought we could do a private dinner tonight on the terrace." Keeping away from the servants or anyone else in the palace might help in keeping a low profile and the council off my back. For now.

Sophia glanced at the two balconies that jutted out from our chambers, and then she turned to me, smiling. "That would be nice."

"I'm glad you agree," I said and took her in my arms. "I'll tell Mother tomorrow, but for tonight, it's all about you and me."

“I like the sound of that,” she said, and I took her in my arms and kissed her, pouring every ounce of love into that kiss. Even if she didn’t know it now, she would someday understand how much I loved her.

# CHAPTER 85



## SOPHIA

Our evening together was one of my favorite nights with Luke. While we'd gone to the most expensive and luxurious restaurants and hotels in the world, I was still that Southern girl who loved to kick back with her man and spend the night with just him.

As if the servants were already aware of Luke's plan, they'd arrived in the room quickly with all the necessary things to turn the balcony into a private dining experience. The table was small and just big enough for our food, offering comfort and intimacy that a meal in the dining room never could.

I felt bad for skipping out on dinner with Gia right after we'd started to get along, but once Luke informed her of our plan to get married that weekend, I hoped she would forgive us, knowing that we had wanted to spend one night alone with the secret. I honestly wanted her to fill that mother-shaped gap in my heart.

The next morning, my hands shook as we walked out of Luke's bedroom for breakfast. While we hadn't stayed up all night making love, my brain was fuzzy, and I wished I could have slept for another few hours. Though, with the wedding taking place in only a few days, we had a lot of planning to do.

I wished I had done some research on weddings during all of our traveling, but I never expected Luke to want to get married so soon and without all the bells and whistles. Luke tended to do his own thing, and I hoped that he wouldn't piss off too many people by pushing the ceremony so soon. If Gia

was right about the council and how they reacted to change, I doubted they would be happy.

But Luke was the one calling the shots. I had to allow him to be the king.

It was a strange, yet freeing feeling to let go for once, and if I was honest with myself, it felt good.

“What’s wrong?” Luke asked, taking my hand in his as if he knew my nerves were firing at a rapid pace.

“Nothing is wrong, per se,” I said. “But I’m wondering how your mother will react. Up to this point, she’s been pretty traditional.”

“She altered her view on you,” Luke said. “This is the start of many more changes around here.”

“I thought you said she was hard to change?”

“She is, but I’ve found the crack in her armor. Now, I plan on breaking it open whenever I can.”

“What if she doesn’t approve?” I asked. “What will we do then?”

“Let’s see her reaction first,” Luke said. His thumb made mind-numbing circles around the top of my hand. It was enough to distract me until we reached the dining room. I suspected he knew that as well.

“Remember, we’re in this together,” Luke said. “I’m not leaving you, ever. No matter what decisions are made, *we* will be fine.”

“We will be fine,” I repeated like a mantra in my mind. Trusting Luke was all I could do in this foreign place. Until I got my feet completely wet, I had to believe whatever he said was for the best.

Inside the dining room, Abir and Gia were already at the table. Abir stood when we entered the room, and Gia was smiling. I couldn’t remember ever seeing her smile before and especially not when she looked at me.

Luke helped me into my chair, and we all sat down.



“Good morning,” Luke said to his family.

“How did you sleep?” Gia asked.

She was still smiling, so I knew that she hadn’t heard about our plans to get married this weekend.

“Fine, thank you,” Luke said. “What are your plans for the day, Mother?”

“I have the meals to prepare for the next week, but why do you ask?” Her smile pressed into a hard line. Her gaze shifted to me and then to her son. This woman had some serious intuition.

Abir was completely oblivious to what was happening right in front of him. I almost wished I was in his seat instead of mine. At least then, the heat moving through me wouldn’t be making my hands clammy and damp.

I cringed when Luke took my hands. If he noticed me sweating, he hid it really well.

“Sophia and I will be married this weekend,” Luke said.

Now we had Abir’s attention. “This weekend?”

Little did he know, that had been my reaction as well. I wasn’t concerned with his response as much as I was with Gia’s. We were already balancing on a fine line with her patience and understanding about our unorthodox relationship. Was this the tipping point?

“Yes, this weekend,” Luke said without skipping a beat.

“It seems rather soon,” Gia said. “Are you sure you’re both ready for such a commitment?”

“I wouldn’t have asked Sophia to marry me if I wasn’t ready for the commitment.”

Luke seemed ready to fight back against his mother, but for the first time, I could see her side of things. From what I understood, mothers loved to help plan weddings for their children, daughters especially. Since Gia had two sons, was Luke taking away the joy and pleasure she would have had in planning a wedding with a future daughter-in-law?

“I’m not being argumentative, Luke,” Gia said. “In fact, I think it’s a great idea.”

“You do?” Luke and I asked at the same time. That didn’t go the way I anticipated.

Gia placed her hands in front of her on the table, clasping them. “Over these last few months, I’ve seen you go against every wish I’ve had for your future. As I can see, you’ve chosen a woman that is your equal in many ways. While the country might not be ready for such a change in tradition, I don’t see any harm in continuing with *your* new traditions. If you want to marry her outside the eyes of the country, I won’t stop you.”

“You won’t?” Luke asked.

Abir reached over and touched Gia’s hand. Gia turned to him.

“I just wanted to make sure you haven’t taken ill,” Abir said.

Gia swatted at him. “The two of you. You have no faith in me. After losing Erol, I’ve concluded that I’m not willing to lose any more men in my life. Traditions are important, but you two, and you, Sophia, are much more important to me.” Her eyes met mine, and her smile had returned. “All I ask is that I can help with the arrangements. It’s the least I can do for you both.”

“Of course,” Luke said, taking my hand in his. He moved our hands to the surface of the table.

It was the first time that Luke and I were so close in front of his mother without her scowling at me. I wondered what the hell someone had put into her tea that morning because I wanted some of it. I was seeing a damn miracle unfold in front of me. I’d never seen her be so agreeable about anything in the time I’d known her. And by the slack-jawed expression on Luke’s face, it appeared that neither had he.

During the remainder of the meal, Gia talked about the different plans she had for the wedding. The two of them hashed out a lot of the details between the two of them. Since

Luke and I were on the same page when it came to a lot of the details of our lives, nothing he said seemed out of line for me.

Gia wanted to use the grand ballroom, but Luke thought it was too big of a room to accommodate the few guests that we wanted.

“We want to keep this intimate, small,” Luke said. “We have the rest of our lives to be surrounded by hundreds of people at social events.”

“Do you agree, Sophia?” Gia asked.

“I do,” I said, popping another strawberry into my mouth. I was almost finished with my fruit bowl and eyed the full one in front of Luke.

“It seems you two agree with most of these details?” Gia asked.

Luke glanced at me, and I nodded.

“Yes, we do,” I said.

Gia placed her cloth napkin next to her plate. One of the servants rushed over to her and helped with her chair. “Then, Luke, you wouldn’t mind if Sophia and I handled the details of the wedding?”

“I wouldn’t mind,” Luke said with an edge to his voice. It was as if he were waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Truthfully, so was I.

Gia opened her hand to me, and I quickly wiped my mouth before putting my napkin down as well.

“Sophia and I will handle the decorations. Abir, you prepare the music. And Luke, you handle the food.”

“Very well,” Luke said, unable to hide his smile.

Without a second look behind her, she started for the door. I quickly followed behind.

“What was your wedding like?” I asked her when we reached the hallway.

“It was a grand affair,” she said. “Hundreds of guests and it took place over many days.”

Did she want that for Luke? Had we disappointed her again?

“This is better,” she said as if reading my mind. “It will be easier for you to remember. All I remember is being pulled around all over the palace and grounds, many different outfits, so many people. It was a whirlwind.”

“Still sounds fun, though,” I said, not wanting to put down anyone’s idea of a perfect wedding.

“Looking back, it was.”

Gia turned down a hallway so quickly that I tripped over my foot to turn in time with her. She pushed through one of the rooms, and inside was what looked like someone’s study. It was all hardwood and very masculine.

“This was Erol’s study,” Gia noted. “Now, it’s Luke’s. Through here is the royal family’s private library. It’s much smaller than the one that you’ve seen. But I prefer it.”

Her words pulled me away from noting the small details of the room. I wondered how hard it was for Luke to work in the same place that his father had for years.

Through another door, I marveled at the intimate space. Bookshelves took up every inch of the wall while sunlight blazed through several large windows, illuminating the room.

Three couches sat in the center of the room. They looked like the newest pieces in the space. They were pristine and looked incredibly comfortable.

Gia went to one of the shelves and pulled out a leatherbound book. She sat on the biggest couch and patted the spot next to her. “Come, this is my wedding album. I don’t know if you care to see it, but I thought it might give you a little inspiration.”

“I’d love to see it,” I said, truly meaning it.

I settled next to her. Our legs pressed together as she spread the album over both our laps. The photographs had a

sepia tone to them, but the pictures were gorgeous. As she flipped through the pages, pointing out the various people in her life at the time, the pictures had a more formal tone to them. They reminded me of the photographs that I sifted through after my parents died. Their wedding had the same traditional flare to it.

As Gia spoke, an idea started to form in my mind. Even though she had only been agreeable for the last two days, I wanted to show her how much we appreciated her support and somehow honor my parents as well.

When she finished with the book, she took it in her lap. “If you want to go online and research, I can give you the email address for our event planner. There’s no money to be spared in this. You will get everything you want.”

“I think I already know what I want.” I explained my plan to her, and her eyes welled up. The emotion within her burst to the surface, and I started to tear up as well.

She took my hand in hers. “Did I tell you how lucky Luke is to have you?”

# CHAPTER 86



## LUKE

Since Sophia wanted Matt to trek across the world to the palace, I had to give up my private plane for him. He was the only other significant person in Sophia's life, and I wanted to be sure he would be on time for the wedding.

Which was why I had to put Maddox on a commercial flight to Qatar and why I waited for him at the terminal so that he could tell me how much he hated me in person.

After he berated me, I could ask for any last-minute advice about the meeting that I was about to have with the council.

With Mother's acceptance of the quick union between Sophia and me, I didn't feel right about moving forward without informing them that I fully intended to marry Sophia while keeping my position as the king.

While I knew they weren't going to give up without a fight, I had to hold my ground. They would never respect me if I gave up under their wishes, and I wouldn't respect myself. Sophia and I were meant for each other. We were meant for the kingdom.

Thinking about all the possible outcomes of the meeting, I was all worked up when I spotted Maddox coming toward me.

A tall, busty flight attendant beamed up at him as he typed something into his phone. He looked as if he had just joined the mile-high club. I knew he was already a member, so whatever had happened between the flight attendant and him hadn't been so innocent.

She walked away from him, wagging her fingers in his direction before joining the other navy blue uniformed attendants near one of the airport restaurants.

“Do I want to know what that was about?” I asked.

“Nope. I’m afraid your virgin mind might not be able to handle it.” He grinned at me before slapping a hand on my back. It might have hurt if I wasn’t expecting it. “Where is Sophia?”

“She and Mother are nailing down the details for tomorrow.”

“She and your mother?” he asked.

“Mother is the only reason we’re pulling this off.”

“Wow, that’s something I never thought I’d hear.”

“Yeah, me neither.”

“Fancy a drink?” he asked.

“Sure.” Even though his flight was taken care of, I wanted to stick around a little longer at the airport. My meeting wasn’t for another two hours, and waiting at the palace was only going to drive me insane with worry.

“So, I take it you’re not mad at me anymore about the flight?” I asked as we entered one of the restaurants.

Maddox gestured to the hostess that we were going to sit at the bar. “I wasn’t mad. Surprised is all.”

“Why?”

“You’ve sent your plane across the world to pick up another man for your fiancée to have at her wedding. It sounds like the start to a bad romantic comedy. And you’re the man about to get dumped.”

“He’s her best friend,” I said, settling on a bar stool.

“I’ve heard it before, mate. But don’t worry. I have your back. No American is getting in the way of your happiness.”

I rolled my eyes. “Thanks. I am happy that you were able to make it on such short notice. I couldn’t imagine getting



married without you as my best man.”

“Don’t fret about it,” he said, signaling for the bartender. “Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

We caught up on business and personal matters on his side, and by the time Maddox was ready for another beer, I cut myself off.

“I’m pretty sure this is as close as you’re getting to a stag party. Drink up, mate.”

“I can’t.” We had caught up with his life; now it was my turn. “I have a meeting in a little while.”

“With the council?” he asked.

He was more astute than I remembered.

“Yes. I can’t show up intoxicated. I need to have a sharp mind.”

“What are you going to tell them?”

“That I’m not bowing down to their wishes. With Mother’s support, I think I can turn at least two of them in my favor. There’s a gray area surrounding the rules of marriage in the kingdom. They are reading the law with a more traditional mind. I need to turn it.”

“Just like you did with your mother?” he asked.

“Sort of,” I said. “She has a personal stake in all of this. They want Abir on the throne to keep with the traditional royal bloodline. Sophia is their way of leveraging that. They know I won’t let her go.”

“But you’re not a pushover, either.”

It was my turn to clap a hand on his back. “Exactly.”

“I wish you the best of luck, mate. If you want to try out some of those fancy king lines you have in the back of your head, I’m all ears.”

It wasn’t that funny, but I laughed, a little too hard. *There* was the Maddox I knew and loved. Everything was going to be okay. It had to be.

After he knocked back a few more beers, we headed out to the car where my valet had waited while Maddox and I caught up.

“It’s nice to have someone get your bags for you,” Maddox said, walking around with an air of lightness surrounding him. No matter who you were, whenever people went to airports, they walked as if the weight of the world rested on their shoulders. I’d had my valet grab the package and Maddox’s suitcase after Maddox arrived. It was one less thing that Maddox had to worry about during his stay. Both Matt and Maddox wouldn’t have to lift a finger this weekend; everything was to be catered to their specific needs. It was the least I could do after scheduling the wedding on such short notice.

To keep distracted from the fateful meeting that I was to attend when we arrived at the palace, I pointed out different sights for Maddox outside the window. His nose was practically glued to the glass while I spoke.

In our years as friends and business partners, Qatar was one place that I kept sacred to me. Sophia was the first person that broke that rule, and it was only a matter of time before I did the same for Maddox. I hoped he didn’t have hard feelings about it, but if he had, he didn’t show any emotion either way.

“Mate,” Maddox said as the car moved past the main gate and up toward the palace. “You’ve been holding back on me.”

“I have?” I asked.

He shoved my arm. “This is a palace! Like, a real palace.”

“I *am* a king,” I said, chuckling.

“I have a pretty wild imagination, but nothing that could have created this in my mind. I’m blown away. Thank god I have a seatbelt on.”

“I’m glad you like it,” I said.

“Like it? I think I’m going to move in. It looks like you have plenty of room.”

“That, I do,” I said. Growing up in the palace, it was easy enough to hide from my parents. That was until the servants were employed to find me. They outnumbered my family by a lot, so I could never hide for too long.

When the driver stopped the car outside of the side entrance, which I asked him to, Maddox and I got out. Another servant grabbed Maddox’s bag and went ahead of us to bring it to his room. I specifically asked him to bring Sophia’s dress myself.

I knew the rule about not seeing the dress before the wedding, so I’d asked Marie to conceal it within the bag. Purple and pink tissue paper stared up at me from the package as I lifted it from the trunk.

“It’s amazing,” Maddox said.

“You saw it?”

“Yeah,” he said. “The woman at the shop didn’t want to wrap it up until the very last second. She gave me specific handling instructions that I promised to pass on to the baggage claim people. It’s a good thing I went first class. From the way they banged up the coach passenger’s bags, Sophia would have had a wrinkly mess for a dress.”

She had no idea the dress was coming. I knew her well enough to know that little things didn’t upset her. I think *I* would have been more upset if the dress was damaged. And I had the means to rectify it.

“Thank you for doing this,” I said to Maddox. “You really are a great friend.”

He grinned. “Don’t make me blush, mate.”

Walking inside the palace, I saw it through Maddox’s eyes. Each room we passed, he emitted a low whistle through his teeth. His reaction made me appreciate my home a lot more. For years in England, I tended to refer to the palace as my “childhood home,” but after becoming king and bringing Sophia and my best friend there, it was now just “home” to me. And it would be for the rest of my life.

The realization pressed down on my shoulders, comforting me. If only I would have felt that way sooner.

Even though I knew that Sophia was in my chambers waiting for me—as I asked her to—it was hard for me not to glance into every room to ensure that she wasn't there. I had a plan in mind for presenting the gown to her, and I wanted it to be intimate and private. I wasn't sure how she was going to react, but I wanted to experience all of it for myself. Since we were going down the smaller route for the wedding, I wanted to be there every step of the way, etching each memory into my mind so I could recall them throughout my life.

I knew without a doubt that this was going to be one of the highlights of my life, and I wanted every memory to be perfect.

“I know you have your meeting soon,” Maddox said, breaking through my thoughts. “If you want to get that to Sophia, I can find my way around here.”

I nodded, only having less than thirty minutes until the meeting. I was cutting it close, but it was imperative that I do so. Giving my mind time to wander would only make the situation worse for me. “If you have trouble finding anything, just ask one of the servants.”

“Don't worry about me,” he said. “Best of luck, and I hope you come out the victor.”

“Me too,” I said.



Heading up to the residential wing, I focused on the dress in my hands. The longer I held it, the heavier it became. I knew the price tag since I paid for the dress, but now I knew why it was so expensive. It was well worth the cost of fabric, and I hoped it wasn't too heavy for Sophia. Though, since she'd tried it on, I knew it was something that she wanted and liked. I just hoped she appreciated the gesture. I wanted to give her everything in life, but I had taken away most of the planning process from her. The dress was my peace offering.

Knocking on the door of my chamber, I pushed through as Sophia called out to me.

“You’re back!” she said, leaping up from the bed. Around her were several binders that the event planner had brought over that morning. The staff was going to be working all night on the wedding. A part of me felt sorry about it, but a wedding was a happy occasion at the palace. I was sure they wouldn’t mind. And they were getting paid for it.

Sophia’s gaze fell on the package in my hands. “What is that?”

“I’m going to give this to you and then turn around. You open it and tell me what you think.”

Her head tilted to the side, and her eyes narrowed. “Why are you turning around?”

# CHAPTER 87



## SOPHIA

Taking the heavy bag from Luke's hands, my head tilted to the side, and I narrowed my eyes. "I didn't get you anything."

"I have all I need right here," he said.

I weighed the bag in my hands.

"Just trust me," Luke said and kissed me on the cheek.

"Okay," I said, bringing it over to the bed.

Luke turned around. I couldn't figure out why he was acting so strangely. First a mysterious package, and now he didn't even want to see me open it?

Knowing it was from him, I gently unzipped the bag and moved aside the pink and purple tissue paper. It wasn't until the silky, white fabric moved under my fingers that I knew exactly what Luke had done for me.

"Luke!" I gasped, pulling away the rest of the tissue paper. I couldn't believe it! It was the dress from the shop in England. "How did you do this? *When* did you do this?"

Luke didn't move from his spot, and I understood why. I didn't realize how superstitious he was. "I have my ways."

I rushed across the room and into his arms. He was still facing the door, and I had the urge to bring him over to the bed to show him. But if he wanted to keep that tradition alive with our wedding, I wasn't going to ruin it. "I can't believe you did this for me. Thank you."

“You’re welcome,” he said. “Your face is thanks enough.”

“You need to tell me how you pulled this off,” I said, then put my hand on my hip. “Did you follow me that day when we were in England?”

“No,” he said, his expression darkening. “I trust you completely. The other day when you were out on a walk with Mother, your phone rang. I wanted to be sure that you didn’t leave anything at the hotel in England, so I picked up. Marie was a very persuasive woman. She convinced me that this was the dress you wanted to get married in.”

“She’s right,” I said, glancing over his shoulder to see the dress on the bed. Remembering that day in the shop, I couldn’t wait to put it on again.

“So, I made the arrangements and had Maddox pick it up before he came here.”

“I’m in shock.” I had no idea that he’d done this for me. In some ways, Luke could be a locked vault. I wondered if there were any more surprises up his sleeve. Though, I would have to be on my game in the future. Even though I didn’t have as many connections as he did, I would make us even somehow for this amazing gesture.

“That’s a good thing,” he said, cupping my face in his hands.

The alarm on my phone trilled from the desk across the room. “Oh! I need to go pick up Matt at the airport. Do you want to come?”

Luke shook his head, and a frown curled his lips. “I can’t. I have a meeting with the council in fifteen minutes.”

I blinked. “Fifteen minutes? Where did that come from?”

He sighed and took my hands in his. Worry lines creased his forehead, and I had the urge to smooth them out for him. “I’ve decided to inform the council of the wedding.”

“I thought you wanted to wait?” I asked. “Until afterward so they couldn’t fight it.”



He shook his head once. “I don’t feel right about doing that. My whole life, I’ve made decisions with my gut. This time is the same as any other. Going behind their backs will make all of this worse.”

“All of what?” I asked. Was this the decision that Luke hid from me over the last week?

A pained look crossed his face. “The council wants me to either give up the throne or give up you.”

“What?” I asked, stepping away from him. This was bigger than I thought, but somehow, deep down, I knew it had to do with me. “I can’t believe they would force you to make that choice.”

“Me neither,” he said. “But they did. It’s been on my mind for a while now.”

“I know,” I said. “I’ve been trying to get it out of you.”

“I know,” he said. “But I didn’t want you to run away again.”

“Why would I run away?” I held up my left hand, wiggling my ring finger. “I made a promise to you.”

“I know,” he said. “And I trust you to keep that promise. But I wanted to figure out a solution before telling you. If you knew that I was faced with this choice, would you have given me the option to give you up?”

Of course, I would have. I knew Erol wanted Luke to be king, even when Luke didn’t see it in the cards for himself. It was why I didn’t put up a fight the second time I left. Luke had to be the king.

“I would have,” I admitted.

“Exactly. So, now that we have Mother on board with our relationship, I think that will help.”

“Can they remove you from the throne?” I asked.

“The way that they interpret the law, they’d probably try,” he said. “But I know I can turn two of them to my favor. With

them knowing that there is a union and an heir in the works, they might concede.”

I wasn't going to get on the topic of an heir. Gia had told me the council pressured her enough that she ended up adopting. Apparently, that wasn't good enough for them.

“I can't believe this is happening now,” I said. “Do you want me to send a car for Matt?”

“No,” he said, drawing me closer to him. “Be there for your friend. I don't want you pacing the room while I'm in there. I have no idea how long it's going to take.”

“Okay,” I said and lifted onto my toes to kiss him. I pushed all of my love into that kiss. Luke's arms tightened around me as if he were pulling strength from me.

As a king, he was the face of the royal family. But I knew him best. He was still a man and had feelings. The council telling him he couldn't have the woman he loved in his life was preposterous and disgusting. While I didn't know the politics of the country well, I knew that Luke would always do the right thing.

When I pulled away from him, I said, “Good luck in there. I'll be back here as soon as possible.”

His finger traced the line of my jaw. “I'll look forward to that. And to see you in that dress tomorrow.”

He brushed past me, and when the door closed, I let go of the breath I'd been holding. Walking over to the bed, the dress mocked me. It was a symbol of something that might not happen. What if the council refused to have Luke as king because he wanted to marry me? What would we do then?

A sharp rap on the door shattered my thoughts into a million pieces. Did Luke need to tell me something else before he went in to see the council?

I raced over to the door and flung it open. A female servant bowed her head to me. “M'lady, the car is ready to take you to the airport.”

I sighed. “Thank you. I'll be right down.”

She nodded and shuffled away from me.

I went over to the bed and brought the dress to the armoire. I made sure that after hanging it up that I replaced the tissue paper to cover the white material as much as I could. Luke wouldn't peek, but I didn't want to give him one single detail of the dress until the day of our wedding. I wanted him to be as excited about the dress as I had been.

After I was sure it was all covered, I zipped the gown and closed the doors. I said a quick prayer for Luke to come out on top of the situation with the council before heading out to the car.



On the way to the private tarmac that Luke and I had been to numerous times together, I couldn't get my fiancé out of my head. Was I an unsupportive fiancée for not being by her man? Was Luke testing me somehow, or did he really not want me near the council meeting? I supposed since I was the topic of conversation, Luke thought he was saving me from whatever they had to say. I doubted it could be any worse than the things that his Mother said to my face, but I knew he was trying to protect me. I didn't want to go to my wedding the day after getting berated by a bunch of old men, so going to get Matt was the next best option.

Besides, I missed the hell out of him. He'd been supportive and there for me since the beginning when it came to Luke, but I didn't feel that I was a good friend to him. Now was my opportunity. Flying him over on a private jet and giving him whatever he needed to enjoy this trip was my present to him for being the best best friend a girl could ask for.

When we arrived at the tarmac, the plane had already landed. Two workers were setting up the stairs next to the plane, and right when I got out of the car, the door opened.

Matt's mop of brown hair was the first thing I saw as he shaded his eyes from the intense sun beaming down over us.

He threw on his sunglasses as if they were the lifeboat to save his vision.

I walked over to the plane and met him at the bottom of the stairs. “A little sunnier than you’re used to?”

“Soph is that you?” he asked, reaching out and pinching my cheeks.

I laughed and swatted him away. The other workers continued whatever they were doing, but I felt their eyes on us. I wondered how many future queens had other men teasing them the way that Matt did.

“Have you been on that plane before?” he asked.

“Yes, of course, I have.”

“I never want to travel any differently,” he said. “I slept. In a bed. On a plane. And had gourmet meals that didn’t come on a microwavable dish.”

“I am with a king, you know,” I said.

“And about to be married to one!” Matt said excitedly. “I can’t believe all of this. It’s like a dream.”

“It is,” I said. “Come on. Let’s get you in the car before you burst into flames.”

“Maybe I could get a tan while I’m here,” he said, glancing around.

“You’ll have plenty of time for that,” I said, getting into the car.

Even though there were more important things to worry about, a question lingered in my mind. I had wanted to ask Matt over the phone, but it was too personal and deserved to be asked in person.

Once we started driving away toward the main road, I couldn’t hold it in any longer.

“I have something to ask you,” I said.

“What’s that?” he asked, staring out the window. Matt traveled a lot for work but mostly in the States. I was more

surprised than anyone that I had more stamps in my passport than he did.

“Look at me,” I said. When he did, the question burst from my lips. “Will you be my man of honor?”

“Yeah,” he said with a shrug.

Slapping my hand on my leg, I asked, “That’s it? Just ‘yeah’? This is a big moment for me.”

“Who else would you have?” he asked, glancing around the car.

“True, but you could have at least acted surprised,” I said.

“You know I hate lying,” he said with a grin.

I bumped his arm with mine. “You love to lie.”

Matt and I chatted about his travels on the way to the palace. I pointed out some landmarks for him, at least the ones I knew. Luke would have been a better tour guide. Thinking of Luke, my fingers crossed over each other as I hoped that he was all right during the meeting with the council. I wondered what he would tell me when we arrived back at the palace.

Butterflies fluttered in my stomach, and I leaned forward, closer to the driver. “Excuse me, can we get back to the palace as soon as possible?”

He glanced at me in the rearview mirror and nodded his head before accelerating the car.

I had to be there for Luke. As much as I loved Matt, I wanted to be there for one of the most significant decisions in his life. Even if I was late, I was going to try to get to him as soon as I could.

# CHAPTER 88



## LUKE

I arrived in the meeting room earlier than the rest of the council members. It was a first for me and gave me a few minutes to organize my thoughts before they walked in through the back door and took their seats in front of me.

Jaabir had a smirk on his face. My hand twitched, itching to smack it from his mouth. He was the reason for all of this. If he hadn't pushed his agenda onto the other council members, maybe they would have accepted Sophia right away. Now, I had to stand up in front of them and defend myself for no reason.

Qadeem, as head of the council, was first to speak. "Why have you called us to this special meeting?"

It was a formality, but stating the purpose of a meeting outside the regularly scheduled ones gave the meeting purpose and drive. And it was useful for the meeting minutes.

"I have called this meeting to discuss the wrongful ultimatum that you pronounced, forcing me to make a decision regarding my relationship with Sophia Holmes."

"Wrongful," Jaabir spat in a low voice.

My jaw clenched, but I didn't give him the satisfaction of knowing that I'd heard him.

"Yes," Qadeem said. "And we are under the assumption that you have a decision for us."

"I do," I said.

“Before you offer your decision, I want to be sure that you understand that whatever you say here is your final choice and that you understand the outcome of either decision,” Qadeem added.

“I understand.”

Qadeem sat back in his chair while Jaabir leaned forward, desperate to hear that I would either give up the kingdom or give up the woman that I love. In his eyes, either way, he won. Little did he know that I was going to win no matter what.

“Then proceed,” Qadeem said, opening his hand to give me the floor.

I stepped in front of them, making eye contact with each of them before moving onto the next. I was their king and like hell would I allow their old-school thoughts on how a king should live to dictate how I lived mine. I thought of Sophia, and the fleeting thought of her not being in my life made my chest tighten. I thought of telling Abir that I was stepping down after a month and now he had to have all the responsibilities while I went back to England to live happily ever after with Sophia. The image of his grief-stricken face made my stomach churn.

In the council’s eyes, they didn’t care that I was happy. They cared that I agreed with them, even when I didn’t. I channeled Father’s tough attitude when it came to fighting for what was right.

“I’ve decided to marry Sophia,” I said.

Jaabir crossed his arms, not hiding the wide grin on his face. The other members, including Qadeem, shook their heads, unable to meet my eyes. They didn’t need to look at me for me to see the disgust written all over their faces.

“You’ve left us no choice,” Qadeem said. “I am sorry to say that according to this council, the seat of the king has been revoked and—”

The doors to the room opened, and I whipped around to see Mother standing in the doorway. She was formally dressed in a white gown and hijab.



The council members were speechless. All except for Jaabir.

“This meeting is closed,” Jaabir said. “You know the rules.”

“The rules are about to be changed,” Mother said, unshaken by his words.

“Stop her!” Jaabir said to Qadeem.

“You will do no such thing,” I said to all of them. “At this moment, she is still your queen and outranks all of you. Now, you will sit and listen to what she has to say, or I will have the guard escort you from this room.”

Mother came to my side and lifted her chin. “Thank you, Luke.”

Jaabir shot daggers at Qadeem, who looked a little more shaken in a room that normally, he commanded. He didn’t speak, but a small nod of his head signaled for Mother to continue.

I was open to whatever she had to say, knowing it was in my favor. She hadn’t told me that she’d planned on barging into the room, and I wondered if she’d planned this ahead of time or happened to be passing by when she heard that the meeting was happening. Considering they were about to tell me that I was no longer king, she had the perfect timing.

“Luke is and will be your king until he takes his last breath in this palace,” Mother said, addressing the council.

“We gave him a choice—”

“You will not speak until spoken to,” Qadeem interrupted Jaabir.

Jaabir sat in his chair like a kid who had just been scolded by his mother.

Now he knew what it felt like each time he addressed me in the same manner.

“Luke may not be of the royal bloodline, but he is Erol’s and my son and will always be. Under our laws, you do not

have the right to remove him as king for his decision to marry a woman outside of our culture.”

“It has never been done before,” Qadeem said.

“So, what?” Mother asked him. “This is why the laws were written as such. They are open to interpretation by the council and king. You are the checks and balances to the system. Just because one of you has a problem,” she shot daggers at Jaabir, “someone who’s had a problem for a very long time doesn’t mean there aren’t discussions to be had. Since when are ultimatums about wives any concern of the council? If you want me to bring you the definition of the council within our laws, I can do that. The interpretation is quite black and white on that subject.”

The council members shifted in their seats. I couldn’t be prouder of my mother for standing up for me. It was something I always wanted but never knew that I needed. I didn’t care that she commanded the meeting space where I was supposed to reign. We were a family, and treating the kingdom like that would be my legacy.

“When Erol and I chose to adopt a son, it was not something we took lightly. We knew we would change a child’s life and possibly be able to choose the successor to the throne.” She looked over at me and smiled, the way she used to when I was a child. When things seemed much simpler. When had I lost touch with that?

“We picked a boy that we felt, in our hearts, needed us as much as we needed him. You all worked with my husband and the previous king. You saw how big of a heart he had for this country. You trusted his choices. Why are you turning your backs on him now? He wanted Luke to become king in his stead. What would you say to him right now, face to face, if you had the opportunity? Would you tell him that he’d made the wrong choice with Luke?”

Mother paused, and none of the council spoke a word. The only movement was their blinking eyes of surprise.

“You’ve already seen what Luke can do with a company, one that has put a lot of money in your pockets. Why not allow

him to rule as a happy king with the woman that he loves? A woman that I love and respect as well.”

Shooting her a look, she was as serious as I'd ever seen her. She *did* love Sophia, even in the short time she had gotten to know my fiancée. It was the same with me. Sophia managed to burrow herself into Mother's heart as much as she did mine.

Mother bowed her head at the council, daring them to say something.

I looked at them too, hoping that they had something negative to say to my mother. We were a united front, and I would defend her as much as she defended me.

The council members glanced at each other while Jaabir kept his narrowed gaze on Mother and me.

I never thought it was possible that none of them would have anything to say. At the very least, I expected more of a fight from Jaabir. But even though he didn't agree with many things, he *did* agree with Father. And Father's wish had been granted. Were they about to dethrone me because someone stirred the pot? I was going to outlive all of them. The least they could do was work with me instead of against me.

“Nothing?” Mother said, resting her gaze on each of them. “That's what I thought. Now, there will be a wedding at the palace tomorrow. You are all invited if you choose, since you are important friends of the royal family.”

The council members looked at each other, and I couldn't help but smile. I'd come into the room expecting to tell them that I was marrying Sophia. I'd intended to come into work on Monday with a ring on my finger, but Mother's admission gave a far greater reaction. One that I was happy I didn't miss.

“Congratulations,” Qadeem said. There was no hint of anger in his voice, but I did hear a twinge of regret. Maybe he should remember this confrontation next time he wanted to listen to Jaabir and attempt to mess with my personal life.

“Come, Mother,” I said offering my arm to her. I wanted to pick her up and kiss both of her cheeks, but I would save the

celebration for when we left the room. There was no need to rub it in their faces.

I pushed open the door, and someone yelped. I glanced back to see the council members shuffling out the other door.

“What was that?” I asked, just as I saw Sophia jump out from behind the door I opened.

“Sophia?”

She gave us a sheepish smile. “Sorry, I was eavesdropping. You opened that door faster than I could move.”

“What about Matt?” I asked. “Where is he?”

“He’s here somewhere,” she said. “I told the driver to get me back here as soon as possible. I heard only part of the conversation.” She turned to Mother. “Gia, you don’t know what it means to hear you say those things about us.”

Mother reached out and hugged Sophia. I wasn’t sure who was more shocked, Sophia or me. When Mother pulled away, she cupped Sophia’s cheeks in her hands. “You’re going to be the new queen. And I couldn’t be happier to pass that along to you.”

Sophia blinked away tears in her eyes. “Thank you.”

Mother squeezed my hand before shuffling down the hallway, getting back to whatever she’d been doing before coming into the meeting and rescuing me. With Father’s passing still in their minds, the council members couldn’t turn down the opportunity to honor their previous king. I wished I would have thought of it, but Mother’s speech was way more inspiring than mine ever could have been.

“My queen,” I said, slipping my hands around Sophia’s waist. We were completely alone for once, and there were no secrets between us. It was a strange, yet comforting feeling. From the beginning, there were lies and secrets either to each other or my parents. With everything out in the open, the path cleared for us to be together.

Sophia lifted on her toes to kiss me. I met her halfway and our lips pressed together. I put all the love I had for her into

that kiss, and I hoped that she understood just how I felt for her.

“Thanks for risking your seat for me,” she said, leaning her head back. Her eyes darted between mine.

“I’d risk it all for you, Sophia,” I said. “I love you.”

She pecked me on the mouth, grinning. “I love you too, Luke.”

# CHAPTER 89



## SOPHIA

Since Gia put together the wedding in such a short amount of time, there was nothing Luke or I could say when it came to the night before the wedding. She'd let go of most of her traditional views but chose to hold on to the one that didn't allow us to sleep together that night.

While I wanted to show Luke how appreciative I was about what he'd done for me, we respected her wishes.

After a wonderful rehearsal dinner with the people we loved, I took Matt around the palace while Luke and Maddox went off together. Maddox had mentioned something about the bachelor party, and Gia's face had paled to the color of the tablecloth. I knew Luke didn't plan on going out to a strip club—I didn't think they had those here—but he went off with Maddox anyway, probably to defeat his best friend's urge to flirt.

Matt eventually dropped me off in the same bedroom that I'd slept in when I first came to the palace. We said goodnight, and I thought I saw excitement flash in his eyes when he asked where Luke and Maddox might have gone.

Settling into my new-old room, it was strange not sharing a bed with Luke. I was used to his solid body right next to mine for the entire night. Instead, I was able to stretch my arms and legs and not even reach the edge of the bed.

Curling up in the same position that I slept in every night, I arranged the pillows to act like a Luke-substitute. Too bad they were too soft to matter much.

Instead, I filled my mind with everything that was to happen the next day as I slowly fell into a dreamless sleep.



I supposed it was a good thing that I got a restful sleep because the flurry of activities started at the crack of dawn the next morning.

Gia burst into my room with several servants behind her. “It’s your wedding day!”

She was already dressed and perky. The exact opposite of me. If she hadn’t said anything, I wouldn’t have known what day it was without waking up and realizing it on my own.

I rolled over and shoved my hair out of my face. “Huh?” I asked, still in the uncomfortable stage between wake and sleep.

“Get in the shower,” Gia said, pulling off the sheets around me. I quickly adjusted my shirt so that none of the servants would see too much of me. Though, I doubted they would care. And I knew they were going to get a look at my naked body when I put on the dress.

“There’s a cap in there,” Gia continued. “Keep your hair dry so that it’s workable.”

I allowed Gia to escort me to the bathroom. She closed the door, trapping me inside while she gave the servants orders on the other side.

Shuffling over to the shower, I turned it on, giving it a minute to get hot. Walking over to the mirror, I surprised myself with how horrible I looked. I forgot to take off my makeup from the day before, and dark circles surrounded my eyes.

I washed my face before throwing the cap on and getting into the nice warm shower.

Without risking Gia bursting in on me while I was in the shower, I cleaned up quickly and came out to the bedroom in a



robe, my towel still cinched under the soft folds of the silky material.

“Hair and makeup first,” Gia said, pointing in the direction of a chair set up across the room. In the time spent in the shower, Gia had the servants set up a vanity next to the window. On the surface were various kinds of makeup, along with hair supplies.

The servants went to work. Hands pulled at my hair and wrapped locks of it around small curlers while others patted my face with creams and then caked on the makeup. The result was stunning.

Then it was time for the dress. Gia oversaw the entire makeup and hair process but insisted on lacing up the back of the dress for me. Another “tradition” I supposed. But this one, I didn’t mind so much.

Her nimble fingers moved down my back. I was swept up in the moment, and I lifted my eyes toward the ceiling to keep myself from crying. I wasn’t the sentimental type to think about my mother and my wedding, but the moment had come, and it turned me into a mushy girl.

Gia inspected me one last time. “You look stunning. Are you ready?”

I glanced down at my dress. I said a silent thanks to the woman who chose another dress instead of this one. I loved it, and I knew Luke would too.

“Yes,” I said, taking her hands in mine before lightly squeezing them. If I talked about how much she meant to me, I knew I was going to burst into tears.

As if Gia understood the words I couldn’t say, she held tight to my hand as we made our way out of the room.

In the hallway, Matt was there, dressed to the nines in a very dashing tuxedo.

“Wow,” he said, checking me out.

“Same to you. Where did you get that?” I remembered his one suitcase from when I picked him up.

“Your future husband has amazing taste,” Matt said, checking himself out. “I sent him my measurements and poof! Don’t let go of this one.” He winked at me, and I looped my arm with his as the three of us, plus a train of servants silently following us, walked down the hall.

We arrived at the smaller ballroom sooner than I anticipated. It was a good thing that Matt was by my side. My knees started to shake, and my palms were clammy. I wasn’t nervous to marry Luke; I was nervous to go in front of everyone that we loved and profess that love to Luke. I didn’t care about being in front of people. Hell, I’d given countless interviews in my career, but this was so different. It was like these people were interviewing me, coaxing me to reach deep down into the depths of my soul and become more vulnerable than ever.

“It’s natural to feel nervous,” Gia said. “But just remember, this room is filled with love for you and my son. This is the safest place you can be.”

“Thank you,” I said to her.

Gia smiled and reached up to grab my veil. She pulled it down over my face, and the world turned a hazy shade of white. All but two of the servants dispersed, and Gia walked into the room, closing the door behind her.

“You ready to get married?” Matt asked me.

“Yes,” I said, lifting my chin. For a moment, I felt like Gia. Since I was to take her place as queen one day, it seemed fitting.

A swell of music filtered out from under the doorway and the doors opened. It was a good thing the veil covered the surprised expression on my face. We’d planned for the wedding to be small and intimate, but I didn’t know that there would be more than immediate family at the event. Gia had mentioned some close family and friends that she’d wanted there, and I brushed it off, thinking there would be one or two extra people.

All in all, there were only about fifty people, but when their gazes turned toward me, there might as well have been two hundred people there.

Matt gripped my hand harder. “Just look at Luke.”

As if he heard Matt, Luke turned around. His smile was unmistakable, and it was all I could do not to sprint down the aisle toward him. His gaze dragged over my body, and I could almost feel the searing warmth radiating from him.

Matt started forward, and I kept the same pace as him. My gaze drifted to the crowd. There were a lot of people I didn’t recognize, but they all seemed to be happy to be there. It was a wedding. Who wouldn’t be happy?

Abir and Alda sat next to Gia in the front row, and Gia dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief. I had to look away, or I was about to use my veil as one too.

When I reached Luke, he held his hands out to me, and I took them. Matt stood at his place by my side, and the ceremony commenced.

I’d heard enough stories of women’s weddings where they didn’t remember much about it. Whether it was the number of people invited or the amazing music or food, but there was always a common thread when others spoke of weddings.

I had no such feeling. Whether it was the feel of Luke’s hands against mine or his brilliant smile. With every blink of my eyes, I took mental pictures of the ceremony and the emotions associated with it. My nerves were gone, and even though we were far from alone, all I could focus on was him and the poetic words given by the officiant, even though I had no clue what he was saying.

My next step toward queendom was actually learning the native tongue.

The ceremony was quite long, but with Luke’s strong hands in mine, I didn’t falter once.

I only knew that it was the end of the ceremony when Luke lifted my veil and we kissed for the first time as husband and wife. It was a chaste kiss, but it sent an electrical pulse

through me. Luke's eyes never left mine, and for a moment, I wished we could leave right away and go somewhere a little more private.

Luke turned me to face our guests, and they applauded for us. My heart swelled with love for my new family.

I glanced at Matt, who clapped the loudest. He even let out a quick whoop, much to Gia's dismay. I couldn't help but laugh. Everything had turned out perfectly, and now I was married to the most spectacular man while gaining a brother and mother to boot.



Later, at the reception. Luke and I danced the day and night away while he introduced me to everyone who attended the wedding. Now that I was more than Luke's fake girlfriend, I took note of each person, remembering their names and a little tidbit about them to recall at later events. These were the people I had to impress, even though I was their queen. If Luke was going to change the ways of the kingdom under his rule, there was no reason that I couldn't shake things up too.

When Luke introduced me to the council members and their wives, I turned up the charm. These were the men who wanted to break us up, and there was a hint of awkwardness during our introduction. One in particular, Jaabir was his name, was the stiffest man there. I was sure to chat him up when I could. I had a feeling I would hear more about him throughout our lives. Or at least, until the end of his time on the council.

At some point, Gia pulled us aside. Her cheeks were flushed from dancing and smiling. I'd seen her grace several of our guests with dances, while I only danced with Luke, Abir, and Matt—the three most important men in my life.

"I'm so happy for the two of you," she said to us.

"You have no idea how that makes me feel, Mother," Luke said.

“Your introduction to our country as king and queen marks the most important and special day of my life.” She teared up, and I had trouble not doing the same.

“I will try to do your family justice,” I said to her.

“And you will succeed,” she said, taking me into her arms for a tight embrace.

# CHAPTER 90



## LUKE

I never wanted my wedding day to end. Even though it was an intimate affair with under a hundred guests, the party went much longer than most banquets that I'd attended. Sophia and I stumbled into my bedroom in the wee hours of the morning.

Even though I celebrated, neither of us drank heavily. I supposed we were almost drunk from the music and dancing, so when we arrived in a quiet and sacred space, the both of us passed out from exhaustion.

The one thing I remembered as my eyes closed was the way she looked slipping out of her wedding dress. God, I was a lucky-ass man.



When my eyes finally peeled open, Sophia was already up and facing me. She had a big smile on her face, and her left hand propped on the pillow between us. The sparkling engagement ring glittered in the morning light that streamed through the windows. The night before, I'd barely gotten out of my clothes, so there was no chance I had been able to reach the blackout curtains before falling onto the bed.

“Good morning,” Sophia said. I loved that her voice was a little hoarse. It made my cock twitch. I was already semi-hard from waking up, and I needed to consummate our marriage as soon as she wanted. I felt a little bad that we didn't do it last

night, but it wouldn't have been much fun with the both of us so tired after the events of the day.

"Morning," I said, raking my hand through her hair.

She turned over and stretched her arm over her head. "Ow."

"I told Abir to be careful," I said, bringing her arm down to mine. I kissed her hand before placing it between us again. I enjoyed seeing the diamond on her finger. It meant she was mine. Forever.

"He *does* like his spins," she said, wincing.

"It was a good day, wasn't it?" I asked her.

"The best," she said. "I'm glad I remember it. It was my goal for the day. Other than to marry the kindest and most handsomest man in the world."

"I was thinking the same thing," I said. "I remember when my father told me of his wedding. He and Mother had to ask each other to remind them of certain parts."

"They did have like a million people there," she said.

"Are you okay with how we did it?"

She narrowed her eyes. "Of course. Are you?"

"It was more our style," I said. "At the time, my parents conformed to what their parents wanted to get out of the ceremony. Luckily, Mother has had a change of heart when it comes to us."

"I'm not sure we'd be married right now if she didn't," Sophia said.

"There's nothing that would have stopped me from marrying you. You might not have been a queen, but you were always meant to be my wife."

"Gosh, Luke, I think you're getting soft on me," she said, giggling.

"I might be," I said, sitting up. "How about I get some breakfast for us. Coffee is in order before I start spouting



poetry to you.”

That made her laugh harder. I rolled over to her, trapped her in my arms, and kissed her until I started to get erect again. At that pace, I would never leave the room. But I had a plan for Sophia and me and that involved nutrients.

I jumped off the bed and strode across the room. I was in my boxer briefs and the white T-shirt I'd had on under my tux. So when I opened the door to the hallway, I wasn't too embarrassed to see a servant nearby.

I asked him for breakfast in the room, and he nodded his head and skittered off toward the kitchen.

Turning back toward the bed, Sophia was gone. The sound of running water from the bathroom brought her to my attention.

Joining her, the two of us brushed our teeth together. It was nice to get the stale taste of food and champagne out of my mouth. I watched Sophia through the mirror as she watched me. Energy crackled between us, and I could have dragged her into the shower to expend that energy. Knowing we were to be joined by several servants as they brought breakfast in the room for us made me kill the urge. For now.

Even though it was the simplest of acts, the idea that I would brush my teeth at least once a day with this woman filled me with the most joy I'd ever felt. I wondered if only the birth of our children would rival that feeling.

I finished before her and held her against me while she finished. With a shimmy of her ass against my crotch, I glanced at her. She leaned back against me, lifting her perky breasts higher. Slowly guiding my hand along her middle, I caressed the outside of her breasts.

That was when I heard the door open from the other room. My hand froze before I removed it from her completely. Walking into the other room, several servants carried a small table into the room.

“That won't be necessary,” I said. “Just the trays. Sophia and I prefer to eat in bed today.”

They nodded at me and carried the table out of the room while two other servants brought the trays in.

“Over there,” I said, pointing to the side tables. Even though I didn’t prepare or arrange the food, I wanted to be the one to serve it to Sophia. To show her a shred of my appreciation for sticking with me as much as she had over the last few months.

The servants closed the door just as Sophia walked out from the bathroom. “I don’t think I’ll get used to being waited on.”

“You will,” I said. “Come back into bed. This is the start of our honeymoon, and I want to do this right.”

She hopped into bed and brought the covers over her lap before smoothing out the wrinkles. I placed the tray on her lap, and the legs kept it straight so none of the food would spill.

I couldn’t remember the last time I had breakfast in bed at the palace. It was probably when I was younger and sick. The vision reminded me of Father and his last days when he couldn’t get out of bed.

I said a silent prayer for him, hoping he was finally at peace and in a place with no pain.

“Did you plan a honeymoon without me too?” she asked.

“No.” I hadn’t thought about much past the wedding. Getting there was hard enough. It was a miracle that I survived to tell the tale while holding on to my title. “Would you like to go anywhere in particular?”

“Anywhere where you are,” she said with a smile.

Plopping the tray on my lap, I pointed to her plate. “You better start eating, or you’re going to get all mushy like me.”

I rattled off a few places for our honeymoon. I knew we wouldn’t be able to go until sometime next week. I wanted to settle things with the council first and get everything in a row before we left. This wasn’t going to be a three-day hike to England. I wanted to show Sophia the world, possibly two to three weeks before returning to the palace.

“I think you should set it up,” she said. “Planning a wedding in three days wore me out on planning for a little while. Besides, you know more places than I do. I trust you.”

“Okay, then,” I said, plotting the itinerary in my head. It was one reason I loved having a private plane at my disposal. We could get to where we wanted on our schedule.

We ate in silence for a few moments. Memories of the night before came in flashes in my mind.

“Do you ever think of having kids?” Sophia asked.

“Where did that come from?”

She shrugged. “All of this mess was because you weren’t blood-related to Erol. Since you’re changing a lot of things, I didn’t know if you changed your mind about that either.”

Recalling the last time she asked me this question, we were at the amusement park in Dallas. The question had caught me off guard, but that was before we were engaged and before the council made it perfectly clear that someone like me wasn’t wanted on the throne.

“As I said before, I never thought I’d find someone to have children with,” I said. “To be honest, if Father died before I knew you, I don’t know if I would have married straight away. I supposed I would eventually, but thoughts of children weren’t in the picture until now.”

“Until now?” she asked, her eyes widening.

I finished my tea and turned to her, holding the tray steady. “I’d like to have kids, but we can wait. There’s no rush.”

“Your mother said—”

I pressed my finger to her lips. Mother had no right to be in this bedroom right now. This was about Sophia and me.

“Whatever happens in this bedroom is between the two of us. I don’t want to have a child today, but someday. I’d rather practice with you instead.”

Moving my finger down her lips and to her chin, I lifted it and pressed a kiss to her lips. Pushing into her mouth with my

tongue, I tasted the sweet fruit from her breakfast.

“I think I’d like to do that too,” she said, breathing heavily.

“Good,” I said, nipping at her bottom lip. There was no hiding my arousal then. The tray shifted, and I grabbed onto it before I ruined the moment between us.

Hastily removing the trays from our laps, I replaced hers with my body, showing her how ready I was for her.

“You want to practice now?” she asked.

“More than anything,” I said, kissing her again.

# CHAPTER 91



## SOPHIA

Every single point where our bodies touched lit me up inside until searing heat scorched every fiber of my being. Touching Luke's face, feeling the stubble of his chin under my fingertips, added licks of heat to burn through me. I fell into the pools of his eyes, my love for him wanting to burst out of me. My panties were soaked through as his hand moved up the side of my body. His fingers brushed over the side of my breast. After getting out of my dress last night, I changed into a ratty old T-shirt. The fabric was thin and worn, which didn't offer any protection from his touches. Not that I wanted any.

His fingers lightly touched my neck. He put some pressure on my jaw, and I moved my head to the side. I loved when Luke kissed the sensitive part of my neck. It was one of his favorite moves. At least, from what I could tell.

His soft lips touched my skin. With each movement of my body, he left a wake of warm invisible kisses along the way. He trapped my earlobe between his lips and tugged.

I reached up and drove my fingers into his hair. It was messed up from sleep, and I raked my hand through his thick locks as he made his way to my mouth again.

As we kissed, explosions of light burst through my eyelids. They fluttered open as I looked deep into his eyes. How could I ever love anyone as much as I loved Luke? We were both drawn to each other like the Earth and sun. But unlike the rotating planet and star that would never touch, each of our touches was the air to the soul of the other. We breathed each other. We'd been through so much that our fate was sealed the

moment we exchanged our vows. Nothing was stopping us now.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked, drawing me back to the moment.

“You,” I said. “Us. How much I love you.”

“Mmm,” he murmured against my lips.

Not wanting to live a second more without touching his naked body, I tugged at the hem of his shirt. He sat back, admiring me. Enough that the tops of my ears burned.

I lifted his shirt over his head and dragged my hands down his body. I moved lower until I reached the thick, curly hair at his waistline.

He clicked his tongue, and I glanced up at him. “We’re going tit for tat today.”

I sat back, opening my arms at my sides. “Fine. Tit for tat it is.”

Luke licked his lips and pushed his hands up under my shirt. He brushed over my breasts before lifting the shirt over me. My hair spilled down over my breasts, covering them. He moved my hair away and leaned over to flick his tongue over the hard peaks.

“Tit for tat,” he muttered as he kissed me.

Dropping my head back, I sat in the moment, allowing my mind to fill with the pleasure that Luke continuously gave to me every time we were together.

When his mouth disappeared from my body, I waited for him to start on my other breast. Instead, he cupped my panties, and I sat up, gasping for breath.

“You’re so wet for me,” he said. “I barely did anything.”

I lifted his chin and kissed him. “Don’t you know how amazing you are? Just being near you makes me wet.”

Desire flashed in his eyes. “I’ll have to remember that the next time we’re together at a banquet.”

“Unless you want me to screw you in a closet, I’d keep it to the bedroom for now.”

His eyebrows lifted before he kissed me again. His fingers moved in slow circles over the silkiness of my panties. They were new for the wedding, something a queen would wear. Too bad they were ruined now.

I reached down and felt his hardness, even though it was still trapped under his boxer briefs. I stroked until Luke’s breathing intensified. He wasn’t the only one that could turn someone on.

Grabbing onto him with a touch that was both light and commanding, I moved up and down his cock, resting for just a moment at his tip before doing it again and again.

“Don’t stop,” he said.

“I won’t,” I said. “You neither.”

We touched each other in the most intimate areas of our bodies. My normal need for him inside of me drifted in the back of my mind instead of coming forward, hungry, as it normally did. I was content to touch every inch of him instead, memorizing our first sexual experience after we declared ourselves husband and wife.

Luke moved along the hem of my panties and slowly pulled them down. The wetness down below turned cold as the air touched my soaked lips.

The very sight of a half-naked Luke in front of me made my legs fall to the bed, opening up for him.

He drove a finger inside of me, and I bucked my hips up to meet him. Falling back against the fluffy pillows, we moved as one, intensifying the pleasure within me. Adding more fingers and that circling thumb, my eyes fluttered closed and moans escaped my lips. If this was what it was going to be like for the rest of my life, I looked forward to every moment spent in this bed with Luke.

After the drama that we had to deal with in such a short amount of time, I never felt so relaxed in my life. That part of our struggle was over, and even though there would inevitably



be issues with the kingdom and Luke's reign, there would never be a problem that we couldn't overcome, especially if we came together like this as much as possible.

The idea that I might have missed out on this life with him made me hold him close to me. I sat up, deepening his reach inside of me, and I grabbed his hardness again, thrusting all of my love and appreciation into the movements.

His chin lifted, and his movements became slower and more sensual. We rocked together, slowly taking our time, pleasuring the other. My nipples ached with need, and I reached up with my free hand and kneaded one of them, desperate to release some of the buildup within me.

"I want to be inside of you," he said, his voice several octaves lower than normal. His voice sounded like a feral growl that spoke to a more instinctual level within me.

"Do it," I said.

Luke reached over to the side table, where he now kept his condoms, and expertly rolled one on in seconds.

I grabbed onto him and scooted closer, guiding him inside of me. He didn't thrust right away. Instead, I moved closer until he was as deep as possible. His hand smoothed down between my breasts and across my waist before cupping my butt cheeks and pulling me up to him. Wrapping my legs around his middle, I started to rock over him.

Luke tucked my hair behind my ears and stared at me, offering the balance I needed to make love to him. He didn't move much, allowing me to control the pace.

His mouth touched every part of my face, neck, and hair as I built myself up. His body pressed against my sensitive clit, and I leaned back to get the most out of the position.

I stayed there for a little while before Luke drew me close again. Dropping my arms to his shoulders, Luke embraced me. I continued to rock against him, but he met me, stroke for stroke, pushing deeper inside of me. I felt so full that I was convinced that he was going to split me in half.

“I want you here when you come,” he said, holding me in place. “I want to look into your eyes and see the pleasure I give you.”

“Okay,” I breathed.

I moved against him and found that sweet spot again. Coupled with his movements, I was able to build myself up quicker than I expected.

“I’m close,” I said.

“Sophia, I want you to come on me,” he said, nipping at my lower lip.

A dull ache throbbed deep in my core as I let go. I rose up on my knees and crashed down against him, over and over again. My moans of pleasure filled the room, and for once, I didn’t care who heard us. All that mattered at that moment was that I was Luke’s and he was mine. Forever.

“Come, Sophia,” Luke grunted, and I could feel his orgasm building too.

I clawed his back, desperate not to move an inch from my spot. I was so damn close that I feared if I moved one way or another, I would miss out on the most spectacular pleasure of my life.

When I finally reached my peak, I slowed only slightly.

Luke grabbed my legs and pulled them out from under me. While he was still inside, he pressed me against the bed and thrust his cock inside of me.

His face screwed up with concentration as I rode my orgasm down while he worked on his. I spread my legs out for him, offering myself up to the sex god in front of me.

Within a few moments, Luke grunted and came inside of me. He worked himself until he was dried up before slipping out of me. The sheets around my butt were soaked from our lovemaking, and Luke rolled us away from the aftermath.

Curling against his heated body, I burrowed into the spot that I slept in every night.

“That was a hell of a way to start a honeymoon,” I said, catching my breath.

“That’s just the beginning,” Luke said, his hot breath hitting me in bursts. “I plan on pleasuring you for the entire time we’re away.” He kissed me again, tilting my face toward his.

“I love you,” I said against his lips.

“I love you too.”

I was so ready to spend the rest of my life with this man. His very presence brought me joy, and his body offered pleasure that no one had before. He was the perfect package. And he was all mine.

# CHAPTER 92



## LUKE

As I perused the newspaper in front of me, Sophia and Mother discussed some upcoming banquet. Glancing over the top of the paper, I watched my wife of six months calmly eating her breakfast. Tilting my head to the side, I noticed something different about her. I couldn't quite pinpoint it. I wasn't sure if it was her outfit; today she wore one of the more traditional outfits of our country. Over the last months, Mother had been an excellent tutor to Sophia, teaching her about our customs, traditions, and the language.

Even though Sophia hated when we went full immersion with the language, she loved it at the same time. It worked her brain like her reporting career did. I still felt a little twinge of guilt now and then for taking her away from her passion, but she had a full schedule since we had returned from our honeymoon. We both liked to keep busy, and that wasn't going to change anytime soon.

It didn't take long for Mother to get on board with the new way of life around the palace.

After going against the council's initial wishes, they were more amiable to any changes that I wanted to make within the kingdom. Nothing was over the top or unreasonable, and they knew their lives would be better if they agreed with me. Jaabir proved to be an antagonistic force within my day-to-day interactions with the council, but I preferred life with a little conflict, or else I might be bored to tears.

"Oh, Luke, Qadeem's wife informed me that they are taking a trip for a week."

“They are?” I asked. None of the council members ever missed a meeting, at least not while I had been king. “Why wasn’t I informed?”

“I’m informing you now,” she said with a smile. “Since the kingdom is running so well, they’ve wanted to get away.”

“Good for them,” Sophia said.

“It’s all a testament to the two of you,” Mother said.

Sophia preened at me. “Well, I’ll give most of the credit to Luke.”

I took her hand in mine. “I won’t accept credit without you accepting it as well. We’re a team, remember?”

Mother sighed. “Your father and I were just getting to know each other at this point after our marriage. I wonder if your method of finding a spouse needs to be written into the laws. You two make it seem effortless, and the kingdom is greatly benefiting from it.”

Sophia finished off her tea while she and Mother went over some key phrases of our language. Sophia’s tongue rolled over the syllables beautifully, and if it were possible, I found her even sexier at that moment.

I would definitely sneak another lesson in the next time we were making love. It would be sure to heighten my arousal even more than usual.

Leaving them to their lesson, I grabbed my tablet and scrolled through the BBC news website to check out more news from around the world. It had been a daily habit of living in the UK, and I didn’t plan on giving it up anytime soon.

When Father was alive, he kept up with only the big events. I preferred to get a greater look at the world as a whole and shape my rule around it. Keeping an open and broad mind about the world would only further my country’s wealth and prosperity. I would do anything to secure that and to ensure that generations from now would be set up for success as well.

An email from Maddox popped up on my screen, and I opened it. Another set of quarterly numbers hit my inbox. I

wanted to view them on the computer to compare them to last quarter's numbers.

"Ladies, I am going to excuse myself to do some work," I said, standing.

"That's fine," Sophia said. "I need Gia's help with something anyway."

Mother raised an eyebrow. She knew what was happening all around the palace, why was she surprised that Sophia needed her?

I glanced at Sophia, attempting to read her face. She was careful to keep all thought and emotion from crossing her expression.

Narrowing my eyes, I said, "Everything good?"

She glanced at me over the top of her teacup. "Yeah."

I didn't believe her, but I also didn't have time to question her about it. If she had a secret, I had a feeling it was going to be revealed soon. I was glad it had nothing to do with me. She knew I wasn't a fan of surprises.

I kissed Sophia and bid farewell to Mother before leaving the room.

Heading up to the study—which I finally started to think of as mine instead of Father's—I got to work. Maddox was killing it each quarter with our numbers. Within one year, he had accomplished more than I had in two. Granted, I had a lot more pressure from Father at the time, but I responded to my best friend positively. He took to the job so well that I had to give him a raise.

I wrote that on my to-do list, the one that seemed to grow by the page every single day. I had to review that with the partners, but I knew it would slip through without question. As their pockets grew, the more likely they were to spend money on things that were working.



When a knock sounded on my door a little while later, I glanced at the clock, and my jaw dropped. An hour had already flown by, and I'd checked off several items from my list.

"Come in!" I called. Everyone knew that when the door to the study was closed, they were to knock and wait for my approval before entering. It was my sacred space in the palace, and it wasn't a hard rule to follow. Though, I imagined bending the rules for our child—whenever we got around to having one—since Father had always done so for me.

Sophia stood in the doorway for a moment before entering the room.

"Hi," I said to her. "What's up?"

"Do you have a minute?" she asked. Her hands clasped in front of her, as Mother's normally were. The both of them were turning into clones of each other. I wondered if I should limit their time together or not. The thought made me smile. Neither of them would agree to that. They were two peas in a pod now.

"For you? Always." I stood up and stretched. For the last hour, I had leaned close to the computer, and a small ache in the middle of my back gave me a slight twinge.

"It's not just for me," she said, taking my hand in hers. She led me out of the room and down the hallway.

"Is this about earlier?" I asked.

"What happened earlier?"

"When you said you wanted to do something with Mother?"

"Oh, that," she said. "I only needed her to pry Abir away from Alda. They were out together, again, and I wanted to bring all of you together."

"All of us?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "What I have to say affects all of us."



I regarded her, but once again, she was a locked vault. “Where are we going?”

“To the fountain,” she said.

Even though I visited Father’s fountain on a daily basis, I still got chills each time I went there. It was as if his spirit was present in the marble itself.

We walked out onto the palace grounds. The sun was high in the sky and beating down quite hard. I hoped she didn’t plan on baking us outside for too long. But I wasn’t going to ruin her plan for whatever it was she had to tell us. I racked my brain to figure out the mystery. Sophia hadn’t acted strangely lately. Maybe this was a new development that cropped up over the last few days.

I was aware of everything going on around the palace, but I had no idea what was whirring in her brain.

As the fountain came into view, I remembered the last time Father shared a secret with us. That he was sick and dying.

Sophia looked okay. I would die if something were wrong with her. And I would be furious for her not telling me sooner.

I was all worked up by the time we reached the fountain. Mother and Abir were already there. Both seemed confused as well but more patient than I felt.

Sophia stood next to the fountain and picked up a small box from the edge. There were three of them in total. Two of them were the same size, rectangular, wrapped with white ribbon, while the third was smaller and square-shaped.

She handed the two rectangular shaped boxes to Mother and Abir. “I want you all to open these at the same time. So give me a moment.”

Then she came to my side and handed over the square one.

“I wanted everyone in this family to be present when I said this.”

We all glanced at the fountain then back to Sophia. Weighing the gift in my hand, it was very light. Did it contain

jewelry of some kind? Sophia knew I wasn't much of a jewelry-wearer, unless it was my wedding band.

“Over the last six months, you've all been so kind to welcome me into your family. I wanted to show you my appreciation somehow by inviting you all into my life with a very special message.”

Mother's eyebrows furrowed as she looked to me for answers. I shrugged my shoulders and returned my attention to Sophia.

“You can all open your gifts,” Sophia said.

Abir ripped his open as if it were his birthday. He pulled the tissue paper away and curled his lip before lifting up a small pale blue shoe from the box. “Umm, Sophia. This might be a little too small for me.”

Mother lifted the other half of the matching pair from her box, but hers was pink. “I don't understand.”

Sophia looked at me. Her eyes sparkled, and her smile grew broader than ever. The last time I saw her like this was on our wedding day. “Open yours, Luke.”

Pulling the ribbon off the box, I lifted the top, and a small photograph stared up at me.

“What is it?” Abir asked.

I pinched the photograph between my fingers and raised it up, taking a closer look. It was black and white but clear as day.

“An ultrasound?” Mother asked before throwing her hands up to her face.

Sophia nodded. “I'm ten weeks pregnant.”

“Ten weeks,” I said. “How long have you known?”

“About nine weeks,” she said, grinning.

I turned to her and pressed my hands against her belly. Tears of joy sprang to my eyes. If I wasn't completely overwhelmed with happiness, I might have been embarrassed by my display of emotion. “I don't believe this.”

“Believe it,” she said. “I don’t know the sex yet, which is why I got two shoes.”

“I don’t care about the sex,” I said. “I just want all of you to be healthy.”

“We’re fine,” she said. “We’re *so* fine.”

I cupped her cheeks in my hands, and I kissed her. The entire world fell away, and all that was left was me, Sophia, and the future of Qatar living inside of her. I felt Father’s presence more than ever before, and I knew that he was happy for us too.

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ali Parker is a full-time contemporary and new adult romance writer with more than a hundred and twenty books behind her. She loves coffee, watching a great movie and hanging out with her hubs. By hanging out, she means making out. The man is hot. Hello.

She's a creative at heart and loves coming up with more ideas than any one person should be allowed to access. She lives in Texas with her hubs, teenage son, one grown daughter and two love-of-her-life grand babies while the other grown daughter lives in Tennessee! Telling a good story that revives hope, reminds us of love and gives a vacation from life is all she's up to.

Questions, comments or concerns? You can always email her at [Ali@aliparkerbooks.com](mailto:Ali@aliparkerbooks.com).

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