

A BWWM ROYAL ROMANCE

CROWN
ME, *Baby*



TYLA
WALKER

CROWN ME, BABY

**A BWWM ROYAL
ROMANCE**

TYLA WALKER

EBOOK CAROUSEL

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ALEXIS

“Alexis is an excellent prince,” Dimitri remarks, polishing a glass. “And Christian is, too. He’s an exceptional advisor to the king.”

My hand rests on the door. Despite my need to mingle with guests and desire to get another drink, I can’t quite pull myself away from the servants’ conversation about me and Christian.

“Christian is doing well as the future king,” Joseph replies. “Although Alexis is a perfect prince in every way. It’s a pity, really.”

No matter how much good I do for Solvaria, it always has a disclaimer. That Christian is the heir.

“It’s a shame Alexis was born too late,” Dimitri says. “He’d make an excellent monarch.”

“He wasn’t born too late,” Joseph quickly corrects. “Just to the wrong father, as it were. He’s the son of Prince Ronaldi, the King’s brother.”

“Yes, forgive me for the mistake. He’s just so much like the King in bearing. An exemplar of duty and leadership. We’re fortunate to be in good hands with Christian, as well, but Prince Alexis seems built for it.”

I’ve heard the story so often, you’d think I’d be used to it by now. Yet it still stings every time I’m reminded that I was born under circumstances that were so close to perfect but not close enough.

I gently allow the door to the kitchen to close and back away. I wander aimlessly through the hall until I find a wooden bench to rest on. I sigh, rubbing circles into my eyes.

Behind me, I hear the laughter and discussions of the delegates' meeting. As the cultural ambassador to Solvaria, I've made it my duty to ensure our guests are treated warmly. Caesar, as the chief ambassador, is supposed to help me with this, but did he even bother to show up? Of course not.

I don't know how the least diplomatic of the Vanecourt brothers became the nation's chief ambassador. They're technically my cousins, but we all grew up in the palace, and they've always treated me like one of their own. Especially after my father died, the King essentially took me as his in all but name.

Murmurings from the servants reveal Caesar is likely meeting a woman, presumably another one in the ongoing cycle of female companions he keeps constantly on his arm.

Usually, I'm indifferent to his playboy tendencies, but I'm the one he's screwing over right now. And it doesn't help that the servants openly air their opinion of my talents as they compare me to Christian. Even if they think I come out on top, it's with a twinge of pity. I don't need it. Not from them or anyone else.

"Focus, Alex," I whisper to myself. "Things could be worse."

I'm fighting for a throne that in all probability will never be mine. I promised my mother, Duchess Janice of Vrinland, by issue, that I would do everything in my power for the sake of our family and the throne. But situations like these ones tonight can make me despondent.

Champagne would enliven my spirits right now. I'll have a few glasses, at most.

Rolling my neck and cracking some joints, I open the double doors to the banquet hall that currently accommodates all of our distinguished guests. Delegates from all over the

country have shown up, so it's my duty to mingle and make sure our relations are in good standing.

"Prince Alexis!" It's Lawrence, a friend and fellow noble. He claps his hand on my shoulder, catching me off guard. "Good to see you, old friend. Where's Caesar? I thought he was going to be here."

"I did, too. Apparently, he had other business to attend to."

"Ah." The twinkle in his green eyes tells me he understands what I'm talking about. "How are you feeling, my friend? You look worn out."

"Me?" I shake my head and smile, even though I know I'm not fooling him, and pluck a champagne flute from the tray of a passing servant. "Of course not. I'm a busy man, but I make sure to rest between engagements."

"Good, good." Lawrence ducks his head, then sends me a knowing look. "You're the hardest working member of your family, you know. If you don't know, then I do. They depend on you, Prince Alexis."

I chuckle quietly. "That's encouraging to hear."

"It's the truth. I wouldn't be saying it if it weren't." He wraps an arm around me as we snake our way through the crowd of tipsy delegates. "How's the family? I assume Caesar is doing very well right now."

"You know Caesar. Always doing well when there are new... um, people to meet. They're all fine, though. Nothing new to report."

"Have you met Vladimir?" Lawrence stops, craning his neck slightly to scan the crowd. "He's from across the sylvan divide. Very interesting man, I must admit. He comes from a country where they mingle with bears and drink hard liquor for breakfast!"

Interesting. Sounds like a man I'd rather keep as a friend than an enemy.

"Are you sure about that or are you exaggerating again?"

“Normally I’d be exaggerating, but with him there’s no need. it’s not too far off. Come on, let’s—”

“Prince Alexis!”

My head whips around towards the source of that sound. A small bespectacled man takes off his hat. It’s Frederick, one of King Francis’ messengers.

Once his gaze lands upon me, he shoulders his way past the delegates sending him odd looks. I move towards him, hoping to meet him halfway.

“What’s going on, Frederick?” I ask once he’s within earshot. He’s red in the face and keeps pushing his glasses up the sweaty ridge of his nose. “Can it wait? We’re in the middle of a diplomatic event.”

“Yes, I know, my Prince. If it weren’t urgent, I would not have dared. His Royal Highness, he’s...” Frederick pants, placing a hand on his chest as he tries to catch his breath. “He’s fallen ill.”

“He’s ill?” Lawrence is at my side in an instant. “King Francis? What happened?”

“Your Grace. He fainted, and he suffered a stroke.”

Frederick says it loudly enough to attract the attention of everyone in the vicinity. Soon enough, the news spreads across the entire banquet hall until it’s in a panicked uproar. A chaotic mess of gasps and wails swirls around us in a haunting echo.

I’m keeping it together externally, but on the inside, an intense pang hits my heart.

The King? How can this be? I just saw His Royal Highness, my Uncle Francis. He was fine. Everything was fine.

“He wants his children at his side as soon as possible.” Frederick’s hands shake violently as he raises them to his face. “Prince Alexis, you’ve grown up with his sons, and especially after the death of your father, he considers you one of them. He told me that he wants to speak to you before the other princes, your cousins.”

“Me?” I furrow my eyebrows, mind racing to figure out why that could be the case. “Did he explain?”

“No, sir, he didn’t.” Frederick shakes his head. “I got here as quickly as I could to tell you. Is Caesar here? I must speak with him as well.”

“Caesar is taking his entertainment elsewhere, apparently. He should be near.” I turn to Lawrence, who’s not only close friends with Caesar but known for keeping sensitive secrets. “Lawrence, can you help find him?”

“I’ll do my best.” Lawrence scratches the back of his neck. “But your brother’s like a slippery fish when he gets like this.”

“Let’s just find him.”

I’m drowning in a sea of bodies, accompanied by looks of pity for the King that make me queasy. Their fear makes it sink in that the King is really mortal. I know he needs me along with his true sons.

I was just a child when my father died. Had King Francis not taken me in, I don’t know what I’d be. His other sons were by birth. I was one by choice.

And yet I’ll never be his true son and heir.

But he needs me more than Christian, he says.

As I scramble to make my way from the banquet hall to the palace, that detail consumes me. If he is in a position where he thinks he may be speaking his last words, why would he seek me out before Christian, his heir apparent and eldest true son?

Not pausing for a moment, even for the dignitaries beseeching me for news that I don’t have, I rush out of the building toward the nearest vehicle to take me back to the palace.

A small flicker of curiosity lights in my chest amidst the anxiety.

Is there a chance he’s considering naming me heir to the throne after all? Despite my lineage?

ISABELLA

A few cold splashes to the face always work well for waking me up for a busy day on the ranch. I'm no use to the animals if I'm lying around in bed all day.

The cows need milking, the eggs need collecting, and Lily's food needs eating.

"Whatcha making?" I ask as I enter the kitchen. Making my way toward the fridge for some milk, I catch a whiff of bacon and eggs. "Smells delicious, like always."

"Thank you, honey." Lily grabs some plates from the cabinet above the stove, evenly distributing the food between the two of us. "You need a lot of protein to start the day off right."

"And a warm cup of coffee, that's for sure."

Ever since my mom's death, Lily Adams has been my rock. She was my mother's best friend and her closest confidante, so it made sense for then-sixteen-year-old me to live with her during that chaotic time following her passing.

On our ranch, Lily helps make sure that my life doesn't fall apart, just like she always has. She takes care of the cooking and cleaning in our quaint little homestead here.

It's not much, but it's everything we need. Two bedrooms and bathrooms, a living room with enough photographs to blanket the walls, a small kitchen, and even a patio where we can enjoy some iced tea and watch the Texas sunset together.

“Delicious coffee, Lily,” I say, reaching for my coffee mug. “Why didn’t you ever get married? Somewhere, in a parallel universe, there’s some lucky husband waiting to come home to your cooking. I’m lucky that I get his portion.”

“Oh, Bella,” Lily replies with a small smile, shaking her head. “You know me. I like my solitude. I get so much stuff done when there’s no one around besides just me and my thoughts.”

I lean in close. “Yeah, but you must have imagined a family, one you cooked for each day?”

“I have one. She’s sitting right here at this table. Besides, you and I have had this conversation before. Prince Charming can keep his castle.”

An intricate tapestry of emotions flashes behind her eyes, but I can’t begin to pick them all apart.

“We’ve talked about not talking about it. Someday I’ll hear all your stories,” I suggest, with more optimism than I have cause to feel.

Lily had a life of her own before she decided to raise me, but she hardly talks about it, pretending that deflection is the same as discussion.

Even now, I don’t know much of what went on with her before I came into the picture.

“I hate to disappoint you, but there’s not much to tell.” She smiles softly and starts collecting our empty plates. “You light up my life, sugar. I don’t need anyone else.”

Sometimes I wonder if there’s something more to her words. The times she’s propped open the door to her past, I’ve pushed my way through as far as I can, but it’s still not enough to form a cohesive picture.

I wrap my hair into a low ponytail and fetch my broad-brimmed hat before heading off to do my chores. Before I leave, Lily hurries out with a small bag full of food for later if I don’t want to come back to the main house.

Then she kisses me on both cheeks and waves me off, standing on the patio until I drive away.

The midday heat beats down on my skin as I patrol the ranch for any signs of mischief. Adjusting my hat, I squint and notice something amiss on the horizon. My grip on my rifle tightens as I make my way over to the animals.

From what I can tell, some fancy-pants moneybags bought the ranch beside ours and decided to start renovating the whole thing. I don't mind some good exterior detailing, but when it encroaches on my property, it becomes a problem.

"Excuse me, sir!" I call to one of the men. He's wearing a polo shirt and khakis, while a shorter worker next to him wears a plaid shirt and jeans. "May I ask why you're destroying the border fence that divides our properties?"

"Ah, it's you. Remind me of your name again."

My jaw clenches as I rest my rifle against my shoulder. "Bella Sanchez, sir. And you are?"

"Donavan Williams. Well, Bella, my boss is renovating the ranch, so we..."

"I don't care what your plans are," I interject bluntly. "I care that you're destroying the fence."

"Heh." He looks me up and down, crinkling his nose. "Are you some sort of patrol woman? A sheriff?" The other laborer snickers.

"I'm the owner of the ranch whose property you're vandalizing." To make my point, I hold my rifle in both hands again, which makes the second man nervous. "And I don't appreciate it when my stuff is messed with, sir."

"What could you possibly know about operating a ranch?" he retorts. "You're better off dancing on a pole in town. There's no way you could handle a rough man's work. Just look at what you're wearing!"

I glance down at my outfit. A tank top, jeans, and boots that reach my knees. A typical outfit in my eyes.

“I’d bet a piece of my spine that you don’t know the first thing about working on a ranch,” he continues.

“Then pay up.” I cock the gun. Both men flinch. “Because you’re dead wrong on that.”

“Wait, stop! Please.”

“Joey, don’t get involved in this!” Khaki-pants waves off his friend. “You don’t know shit about anything besides soil quality.”

“Stop agitating her! If she’s the owner of the neighboring ranch, it’s in our best interests to placate her.”

“Listen to your buddy if you know what’s best for you,” I warn. “You’d be surprised if you knew all the things I could do when I’m pissed off.”

Joey pinches his nose. “Oh, God, she’s going to kill us –”

Suddenly, we’re interrupted by a black mustang charging toward us. Joey and the other ranch hand try to calm the horse, but Joey nearly gets toppled over. The taller one keeps his distance so as to not dirty his clean polo shirt.

“What the hell! How did it get out?”

“I don’t know!” Joey exclaims. “This is an expensive horse, Donovan! We can’t let it escape!”

“Grab its damn reins, then!”

“I can’t...”

“My goodness, this is a pathetic sight.” I rest a hand on my hip as I watch the two buffoons try to wrangle the wild horse. Slinging my rifle strap over my shoulder, I make my way over. “Who let these damn rich boys on a ranch in the first place?”

The horse kicks up on his hind legs, making the men scream as they scramble backward. Instead of agitating it more, I approach slowly and offer my hand.

“Easy, boy, easy,” I say, allowing the horse to see me. “He’s probably scared out of his mind to see a bunch of men acting so foolish.”

“Hey, screw you, girlie,” Donovan says. I’m ignoring him.

The horse takes a few minutes to calm down, and once he does, he allows me to saddle him and direct his movements. I tip my hat to the gentlemen, who have since dirtied their fine outfits.

“See you around!” I wave. “Looks like y’all are the ones who can’t handle a ranch if you can’t handle a horse!”

I wish I could see the looks on their faces. It warms my heart to see a man eat his words.

ALEXIS

“Don’t worry about me.”

That was one of the last things I said to my mother, Janice. That was just before I set off on my trip to Texas when she bade me farewell at the airport.

She’s always been protective of me, especially after the death of my father, Prince Ronaldi.

‘Protective’ is a nice word for it. ‘Overbearing’ is more accurate. ‘Scheming’ is not uncommon when her name comes up.

“Of course, I worry, Alex. You’re my baby.” She kissed me on the cheek twice, the custom. “And don’t be gone too long. I can’t bear being without you.”

She can’t bear not having my pull at court.

She’s fancied herself a queen in all but name since the death of Queen Amaranta, mother of Christian, Caesar, Ishmael, and Cedrick a little before my teenage years.

Genuinely, I have her to thank for my status as a de facto son of the King. She is the one who ensured I lived in the King’s apartments after my father died. Because of her, I became one of the brothers. But as a mother, there was always something lacking.

I should have already been here long before now, but life gets in the way sometimes, and my mother had all sorts of things she needed me to do that cropped up. I left all of her affairs in order back in Solvaria before disembarking.

And the vast majority of mine.

At the very least, the delay gave me more time to prepare for my mission, not that my mother is aware of that.

On the King's secret orders, I plan on finding his first love. The woman he's been unable to forget. Lily Adams.

Something about this doesn't sit right with me. Why would he fixate on this woman after decades apart? I suppose love has a way of messing with a person's head.

Considering this mission can create a path for me to inherit the throne if I succeed, I accepted it wholeheartedly and intend to fulfill my mandate.

But still, it makes me wonder. What's so special about this woman that a trip around the world is necessary to summon her? She's not noble, which explains why the King couldn't marry her in the first place. I know better than anyone that accidents of birth have no bearing on the person. But a woman of a noble background is an ideal match. This woman, judging by the cloak-and-dagger nature of the errand, clearly isn't.

"Oh, well," I whisper, staring out the window of my private jet as we make the flight toward Texas. "She deserves my respect. She might be the reason I become the next King of Solvaria."

The mere thought of that makes me giddy.

After the King's stroke and his plea to find Lily Adams, I got to work tracking her down. I found out where she lives and bought the land right next to hers. It's the perfect position for getting close to her, befriending her, and persuading her to visit the King to fulfill his deepest wish. Hopefully not his final one.

I'm sure a challenge awaits me. The King said they parted on sour terms. What did he do to this woman? Or what did she do to him? I guess I'll soon find out.

Renovations on my new ranch are progressing well, according to the temporary staff. Maximus, my trusty steed and favorite companion, is already making his mark on the land. All that's left for me to do is arrive, scope out the area,

and find Lily. Hopefully, that part won't be too hard once I'm there.

We arrive in Texas in the afternoon, and I gather my stuff quickly before heading off to my rental car. I throw hundred-dollar tips at every person who helps me along the way. If only they knew they were attending to a possible future king.

Sighing, I relax into the seat of this electric vehicle on the isolated highway that leads to the ranch. Not many people frequent this road, I can tell. The sky turns a soft orange hue as light clouds hang in the heavens above.

I activate the self-drive option and enjoy the views. There's something special about these beautiful mountains and vast fields. In the distance, I see animals grazing. They exist peacefully here, fully immersed in nature.

"I wouldn't mind living here for a while," I say, occasionally reaching out to stop the car from drifting too far out of the lane. Even smart cars act a little stupid sometimes. "I'm sure Maximus has been having the time of his life."

Joy fills my body as I think about riding my horse again. He's a stallion like no other. He was my top choice when I played polo, and the bond between us has only deepened since then. I can't imagine being in a place like Texas without Maximus by my side.

I take over the driving just as my newly constructed ranch comes into view on the horizon, my home for the next short while. I'm a bit too late for lunch, but the household staff I hired should be hard at work for dinner.

They don't know I'm a prince. I intend to keep it that way.

"Ah!" An older woman, Ginger, in a plaid dress and silver bun pinned on her head, waves me over as I park. She walks briskly with a rake in her hand. "It's a good thing you're here, sir! Linda wants to see you!"

Linda's the caretaker. There are far too many animals on this land for me to worry about, so that's now Linda's job. I inherited some of them from the previous owner.

Originally, the owner didn't want to budge, but I had one million reasons, all in hard currency, to change his mind. With that price point, he basically left all his animals behind as a parting gift.

I still have no idea what I'm going to do once I convince Lily to return to Solvaria with me. Maybe I'll take some of these animals. Maybe I'll leave them here for the next ranch owner, who'll probably be far more well-suited to the job than I am. Who knows? I could assume a fake identity and live out my days as a rancher.

I chuckle to myself at the thought.

"Thank you for letting me know, Ginger," I reply, swiftly exiting the car and opening the trunk to get my belongings.

The woman shakes her head. "Now, hold on. You're the man of the ranch. You shouldn't have to carry your things inside. I'll fetch Daryl for ya."

"Daryl?" I blink. I knew I should have asked for pictures of each person before I hired them. "Are you sure? I'm more than capable of carrying these inside."

"No, no, don't worry about it, son!"

There's an intriguing accent to her words. I've heard a lot of things about the people of Texas, as well as the notion of Southern hospitality. This must be it.

"You head inside and say hi to everyone. Then I'll check on you to see how you're settling in," Ginger reassures me. "There's some hot food on the stove if you want some!"

My stomach grumbles loudly in reply, clearly interested in whatever they have to offer. "Alright, then. Thank you, ma'am."

"Oh, don't mention it!"

Taking a moment to admire my new setting, I have to admit that this landscape bears little resemblance to Solvaria. The air feels crisp against my skin. A warmth fills my body at the thought of a homemade stew, cooked with me in mind.

There will always be a singular place in my heart for Solvaria above anywhere else. But Texas is carving out a spot, too.

“Oh, he’s here!” A utensil clamors loudly against the kitchen countertop as a harried, no-nonsense woman wipes her hands on her apron and hurries over. “We’ve been expecting you!”

This must be Linda, judging by the responsibility she seems to take in everything here. Already, she’s more nurturing than even my mother.

“Good evening. Good to see you all.” I nod respectfully toward each staff member currently occupying the dining room. Placing my hands behind my back, I continue. “My name is Alex. I’m the owner of this ranch.”

“Son, do you know what it takes to run a ranch?”

I stare blankly at the man who just asked me that. Is it that obvious?

“I’d like to learn,” I reply with a smile.

“Good answer! Don’t worry about him. Daryl likes to poke fun,” one of the women says.

I didn’t realize it took this many people to run a well-functioning ranch. My experience as a prince should help me, I think. At least, I hope.

“Tell me, honey, was the journey alright?” The woman at the stove comes over with a fresh bowl of soup. “Oh! I’m Linda. You’re probably exhausted! And starving.”

She wipes her hand on her apron then holds it out to shake mine, and I oblige.

“Everything’s wonderful, thank you, ma’am.” I clear my throat and set my napkin over my lap. “The trip was lovely, and the ranch is even lovelier.”

I dig into the meal. I feel more at home here than I ever could have expected.

ISABELLA

“Hey, buddy,” I croon to Water, the horse who is my pride and joy. He’s in an area outside the barn once used for nursing foals and mares, but now it’s his domain. And he’s lording over it, having a feast.

He comes right over and nudges my side. I give him one of the peppermints I stashed in there and pat his head.

“I’m only here to say hello. But I’ll be back.”

It’s as if he knows I’m going to see the magnificent black mustang. Maybe he can smell it on me.

“Don’t worry, sweetie, no one can replace you. You’ll always be my favorite horse. And my favorite man for sure. Don’t mind Fire. He means nothing to me.”

Why do I feel like a cheating spouse? He’s a horse.

I wasn’t sure what to call the enchanting black horse at first. Midnight seemed too tame. But once I hit on Fire, it suited his spirit and his charred-black coat just right.

Water whinnies in appreciation, and I give him one more head rub.

Satisfied that he’s alright, I head off to the ranch next door, just a short walk from the barn. I’m the only one Fire will work with it seems, so the ranch hands who initially resented me now worship the ground I walk on.

Fire gets grumpy if no one takes him out, so I’ve become a familiar face over there.

Since the last dust-up, Linda and I have patched things up. She's now like a friend, oddly enough. Which says more about me than her. I don't warm up to people easily.

But I don't bother looking for her. Anyone on a ranch knows you don't waste time looking for someone to tell them what you are going to do. You just get it done. And this horse, more than any I've ever seen, needs a guiding hand.

"It's so nice to see you," I say, picking a carrot out of the feedbag for the midnight-black stallion.

I can almost see the wheels turning in his head as he follows the carrot with his eyes.

"It's okay," I say, offering the carrot through the bars.

He comes over and takes it out of my hand. I scratch his nose while he chomps away at it.

"You're a good boy, yes you are," I tell him, cooing. *Not like those foolish ranch hands. Oh, no, you're not.*

I grab the bucket with the brushes and start working out the gnarls of his tangled mane.

"I think you and Water could be good friends someday."

He snorts, and I laugh.

Once I get the mane brushed out, I decide to braid it.

"This way it won't get all tangled again when we ride."

When I get to the end of the mane, I find my stashed-away ponytail holders in my pocket.

"We'll just call it a stallion-tail holder. Don't take it personally. You look dashing."

I give him a quick brushing, which he seems to love. Even though I've only spent a few weeks with him, he trusts me to a degree that shocks me. I don't quite understand it, but I don't question it, either.

"How about we try a ride today? Nothing too long. We'll go around the ring, and if you're good, maybe I'll take you out on the trail!"

I put a lot of emphasis on the last word. Fire does not look impressed, but he lets me saddle him up. I saw him knock ranch hands onto their ass, fighting against them, and nearly bite their fingers off, but he doesn't even nip at me.

I lead him into the aisle of the stall, toward the doorway out.

When I walk right beside him, he whinnies. I don't know Fire well enough to know if it's a good whinny or a bad, but when I prod him gently, he starts moving.

"This is going to be great, Fire," I say, patting his neck.

When we exit the barn, I guide him right towards the ring. He and I move together effortlessly. I'm impressed by his power and how seamlessly he can transition from an easygoing stride to a confident gallop. I pat him on the neck, complimenting him for being such a good boy.

"Hey! What the hell are you doing?"

I look back over my shoulder and pull Fire to a stop.

"Whoa!"

The command isn't for Fire, who stopped as soon as I pulled on the reins. Nope, it just slipped out when I saw who was yelling at me.

Talk about a perfect specimen, I think. Who is this guy? He's no ranch hand. For one thing, he's decked out in full riding attire, possibly couture.

Those outfits are tight-fitting, the better for the judges to see the rider's form during competition. Right now, I'm thanking whoever came up with that idea. There is very little left to the imagination in an outfit like that.

He's getting closer, and I don't know what to say. I can hardly breathe. His hair is as black as midnight, not far off from his horse, and I'm flooded with an urge to run my fingers through it. There's a small scar over his left eye, but it suits him.

He looks like he could be a Wall Street mogul, he's that polished. But the scar makes it clear he's no pretty white boy.

He's gotten his hands dirty once or twice in his life.

"I said, what are you doing? I didn't hire a woman to take care of my horse." He stops short, studying me. "Did you actually braid his mane? Who the hell are you?"

The disdain in his voice is obvious but so is the fire in his eyes. In spite of the bristling that rises through me with his 'woman' comment – as if no woman is good enough to take of his precious horse – I can't help but appreciate his passion. This is a man who loves his horse. That alone makes him interesting.

The fact that this passion comes in a package that looks like him, well, interesting doesn't begin to describe it. I'd like to find out what other kinds of passions he has.

ALEXIS

“Step away from my horse!” My tone is forceful for a reason. I fear for the girl’s safety. And yet she acts like she can’t hear me.

If she knew what kind of animal she was guiding next to the ring, she wouldn’t be so dismissive. I’ll have to give Linda an earful for hiring this slip of a handler for a horse that could buck her faster than a bronco.

“Did you not hear me?” I shout again, this time angrier.

The Solvarian stallion, a half-ton of pure muscle and iron will, is not tamed so much as bargained with.

And even among these fearsome specimens, Maximus is the most stubborn horse I have ever met. I can negotiate with him only after a lifetime of knowing him. Many stable hands have been maimed because they got closer than they should have after being warned.

She refuses to move closer and continues to stare at me, gripping the reins more tightly.

I’m left wondering if she’s deaf, mute, or simply stupid. As if I need something else to deal with right now.

I jog out onto the ring and try to grasp the reins. I might have better luck with a wild horse than this reckless woman.

“There you are, boy,” I say, petting his neck. Then I turn to the woman. “And you. What were you thinking? Let go of the reins, by the way.”

Her dark curls bounce as she tosses her hair out of her face, still holding the reins. The pout of her lips, even in anger, is enthralling. Maybe because of the anger.

Her dark skin glistens in the Texas sun. But I'm too angry to pay too much attention, which is saying something, considering how good she looks. She's a truly stunning Black woman, but I don't have time to admire her beauty right now.

"What was I thinking?" she yells, pointing a finger in my face while holding the reins. "I'm the only one who's been able to work with this horse."

"Hand over the reins, please. If you startle him, he's liable to get spooked, and that won't end well for you. Stronger men than you have been put in the hospital when this horse has gotten ideas in his head."

"Who the hell are you? The new handler? Linda said she was looking for one. I'm not letting anyone march in here and take Fire without a good explanation. You have some nerve."

What the hell is Fire? Or who?

Maybe she fell off Maximus and hit her head because she's just looking at me agog and speaking nonsense. I'm the one in a foreign country, but she's the one who can't speak.

"Oh, my God." I start laughing uproariously, and she looks at me, baffled.

"What?"

"You're the one with some nerve if you're calling my horse Fire. Are you some comic book hero? The Red Lantern, and he's your flame?"

I laugh some more. I can tell from the increasingly angry look on her face that she gave him that name and that she's not someone who likes when someone has fun at her expense.

"Fire. Really. What a stupid name. His name is Maximus. He's a world champion in polo, racing, and jumping. Now give me my horse before I call the authorities. Texas doesn't punish horse thieves like they used to, but I still don't think it would be a good look for you to be in handcuffs."

Although...

I get an image of her that I'm a little slower to dismiss than a gentleman should be.

She's so enraged that I'm surprised she can actually form words. She stares at me with narrow eyes and a look of total condemnation.

"I don't know where you're from, but around here, we don't walk around calling people we just met stupid. And we especially don't throw stones when we're dressed like little Lord Fauntleroy."

Her brown eyes are full of rage and, yes, fire.

She brushes unruly coils of hair back from her face as she stares daggers at me. "So? Out with it. Who are you?"

"I am the owner of this property," I explain calmly, hoping to defuse the situation. "And the horses on it. Ask Linda if you need to. But this is all mine." I demonstrate with my arms.

Her glare starts to soften, but she doesn't hand over the reins.

She has an athletic body, compact and full of explosive energy. It's tightly wrapped in dirty jeans and dusty flannel, but with her dark skin and nearly imperceptible freckles, she has a stunning beauty that's different from any woman I've seen in my home country.

"My name is Alex Vanecourt. Surely you've heard my employees mention the name?"

She gives a small nod.

I decide that any mention of my title at this moment would only lead to more questions. Strangely, there is something familiar about her that I can't quite put my finger on.

"And I have some questions for you," I continue. "Who are you, and why were you touching my horse?"

That sets her off again. "Who am I? I'm a good Samaritan, that's what I am. If you're so proud of this horse, why is he left here all alone every day?"

She cuts me off before I can answer.

“You’re the worst kind of owner. You only see your horses as status symbols or trophies to show off before sticking them on the shelf. Can you tell me one thing about Fire... about Maximus’ health over the past month?”

“I have been very busy these past few weeks,” I reply. “But Maximus is well looked after, I assure you.”

She points to the empty stable. “By whom? All your employees are scared of him. They take the other horses out and leave him here. He doesn’t get ridden. He doesn’t get brushed. Except by me.”

She is practically radiating her passion for this animal she barely knows. Her freckles stand out even more. Her hair cascades in messy curls. I find myself unable to do anything but stare at her.

“You should be thanking me for maintaining your horse’s well-being,” she tells me. “If I didn’t come over here and take care of him, there’s no telling what state he’d be in.”

I chuckle instinctively, and she snaps at me.

“What’s so funny?”

“I’m sorry,” I reply. “But it simply would not be possible for you to properly handle Maximus. Maybe you come and pet him now and then. I could believe that. But there is simply no way that you have ever ridden on him. Someone your size would fit better on a pony.”

“Is that so?” She puts her hands on her hips. “Well, I bet me and that pony could whoop your ass in a race.”

“Excuse me?”

She holds the reins out to me. “If you and Fi... if you and Maximus are such a great team, prove it. Let’s have a race.”

I hesitate. If a local got injured at my ranch, it could bring a world of trouble.

She smirks. “Of course, if you’re scared, you can just declare me the superior handler now.”

I take hold of Maximus's reins. "Fine. You're on."

ISABELLA

I 'm fuming as I walk over to Water's stall. It's bad enough having to prove myself to another rancher. That goes with the territory when you're a woman out here working the land. I shut them up real quick.

But for someone to blow in from far-far-away and doubt me? And even worse, doubt my ability to do my job? I make a silent promise to all the female ranchers I've ever met. We're taking this pretty boy down.

Water whinnies in excitement when I approach.

"Hey, gorgeous," I say with a smile. "Feel like having a race?"

Water nuzzles against me in the affirmative. I pat his neck and lead him back toward Alex.

When we get closer, I decide to try a little trash talk, loud enough for Alex to hear.

"Water, would like you to tell your friend Maximus that you won't go easy on him just because you're friends?"

Alex lets out a derisive laugh.

"Water? Fire? Do people around here just name your horses the first word that pops into your head?"

His dismissive tone bothers me more than it should. He shakes his head.

"A weak name leads to a weak horse. When I named Maximus, he was destined to be strong as stone."

“That’s nice,” I reply. “Why don’t you ask the Grand Canyon what water does to stone?”

I start to pull myself up onto Water’s back. Alex looks at me in confusion.

“Wait, you’re not planning on racing like that, are you?”

“Like what?” I ask.

He points at Water. “You have no saddle, no bit, no helmet.”

I nod. “Water and I like running wild and free.”

Alex shakes his head. “I really must insist that if we are going to do this, we do it properly. Safely.”

I feel a ball of annoyance knotting in my stomach. His words seem laced with condescension.

“You ‘insist?’”

He softens his tone. “What I mean is, I’ve seen the damage a reckless race can do. Not only to the rider but to the horse as well. We owe it to them to ensure their safety, too, don’t we?”

It’s a smart move to play to my love of animals. I look at him. His eyes seem sincere. “Alright,” I say with a sigh as I slide back down to the ground. “You better not be trying to weigh me down, though.”

He draws an X over his heart with his hand. “I promise. I simply wouldn’t be able to look at myself in the mirror if you got hurt.”

The sweetness of this helps relieve part of my irritation toward him. Stopping to insist on my safety, like a true gentleman. It’s enough to swing my opinion of him back around from annoying to attractive.

With a light roll of my eyes, I nod at Alex. “Let’s fetch the gear, then. We’re burning daylight.” He strides alongside me to the stable. I find his proper posture very endearing. Together, we gather up all the tack and safety wear.

He shows surprising tenderness as he secures the bit in Maximus’ mouth. And I can’t help but see his muscular arms

flex as he adjusts the saddle. I wonder if he's making a show out of it to distract me. It almost works.

By the time we're both suited up, I'm begrudgingly impressed. Alex clearly knows his way around horses.

Helmet snug on my head, I look over at him. "I made the challenge. You can set the terms. Where are we running to?"

He points. "See that rock there? The trail that starts behind that rock winds to the southeast all the way to the river."

I nod. "I know that path."

"Right. So, the first one to the river wins. Agreed?"

I agree.

"On your mark," I call out. "Get set... Go!"

Water takes off like a bullet, his body surging forward past the larger horse. I can hear Maximus matching our pace, the sound of his hoof beats a steady drum roll in my ears.

As we gallop along, my mind starts to wander back to times in the past when I've been challenged. Like when Clark, one of our burly farmhands, thought he could outrun me and Water on one of our other horses. I remember his face turning beet red as we left him far behind in a cloud of dust.

All the men on this ranch were quick to step up after that, and one by one, we outran them all.

I've never been a professional rider, but there are tricks you learn when you grow up alongside horses. I was sitting on a saddle before I was walking on my own. I let out a laugh as, once again, my challenger falls behind me.

But when I look back, Alex is hot on our heels.

For all of Alex's chivalry, it's clear he's not taking this lightly. His focus is laser-sharp, his body in sync with Maximus' every move. And I can't help but feel a thrill of anticipation as we race, side by side toward the river.

We're both aware that this isn't just a race. It's a test. And as we thunder down the trail, I have every intention of

winning. No matter how charmingly distracting my opponent may be.

Maximus begins to pull slightly ahead of Water as we take the next corner. Alex calls over to me. “That’s pretty good. But now you get to see what Maximus can really do.”

With a determined look on his face, Alex leans low over Maximus’ neck, urging him onward. Maximus responds, his powerful muscles bunching as he surges forward, gaining ground with every stride.

I lean forward, whispering words of encouragement into Water’s ear, feeling him respond to my voice as we race to keep up with Maximus. The wind thrashes my hair, and I can’t help but let out a whoop of excitement. I can’t remember the last time I felt this alive, this exhilarated.

As our horses dash down the trail, their hooves thundering against the ground, the gap between us narrows. I push Water forward. We’re neck and neck with Alex again.

As we overtake him, I shout. “They can eat our dust, Water!”

With the finish line in sight, our horses race with unrelenting vigor, and we continue to trade places like a choreographed dance. One moment, Maximus is in the lead. Then with a burst of energy, Water surges ahead.

Each time we pass each other, our eyes meet for a moment. I start to wonder if I’m more thrilled by taking the lead or by seeing him look at me.

As I pull ahead one last time, I feel a surge of excitement. There’s something absolutely invigorating about the wall of wind against my skin and the sun beating down on my face. I’ve ridden this trail many days before, but today there’s a newness to it all, a fresh sense of excitement.

I look over my shoulder at the man I just met. His eyes are sparkling with competitive spirit, and there’s a grin on his face that mirrors my own. It feels so strange to have found myself in the middle of a perfect day with a total stranger, racing horses and competing.

Maybe that's the best way to spend it. Maybe I've met a worthy opponent.

ALEXIS

I can't help but marvel at this mysterious girl. She is not only able to keep up with Maximus but has once again surpassed us. Her control of the horse is effortless as if they are moving as one.

Her laughter rings through the air as she surges ahead. In this place, on this horse, she is everything pure and solid. She is the beauty of the morning sun, the joy of the cool breeze, the promise of the open prairie.

Maximus seems as stunned as I am. The usual fire in his stride falters, a hesitancy I've never felt in him. The river is only a few meters away.

I lean down and whisper encouragement into Maximus' ear. With a surge of raw power, Maximus leaps forward. We close the gap, her surprised gasp lost to the sound of thundering hooves.

I pull Maximus to a halt. Turning towards her with my heart pounding in my chest, I've never felt more alive. I flash her a smile, my voice barely more than a pant.

"Well," I gasp out. "I suppose we'll have to settle for a tie."

I dismount Maximus, the energy from our race still thrumming beneath my skin. I extend my hand towards her to help her down from her high perch atop Water.

"You're quite the rider," I remark, my tone filled with genuine admiration.

A beguiling smirk crosses her face. “You’re not too bad yourself,” she says as she playfully ignores my offer and slides off the horse on her own.

We make our way over to the riverbank, our horses trailing behind us. With our breathing still heavy, we settle down in the cool grass. Maximus and Water quench their thirst, gentle and unhurried. The soft gurgle of the river melds with the song of birds in the distance, and I feel a deep calm come over me.

I turn my gaze back to her, her profile illuminated by the soft glow of the sun. “I told Maximus that if he won the race, I’d let you brush him. And he took off like a shot.”

She leans towards me. “That’s funny. Because I told Water that if he won, I’d let you brush him. Then he slowed down.”

I take this moment to truly look at her, taking in the way the sun lights up her features. It’s not just her easy spirit or her intoxicating laugh, but the whole of her that suddenly leaves me breathless.

I become enamored with the playful little specks of her freckles. Her hair, a riot of curls, bounces with every hearty laugh. Her skin, the color of rich, warm cocoa, glistens with hard-earned sweat.

I see confidence and strength. She’s utterly enchanting in a way that’s entirely new to me.

I shake my head. *What am I doing?* I have a purpose, a duty to carry out. No part of my task is helped by getting charmed by a ranch girl, no matter how captivating she may be.

I draw in a deep breath, fortifying myself. My resolve instantly disappears as she sighs.

“I think the horse is a perfect creature. They have grace and power, but when you really spend time with them, you also get to know their gentleness, their humor, their affection.”

Her face lights up as she continues.

“It’s amazing how beautifully they can communicate if you’re willing to listen. They’re not just transportation, they’re

companions. Friends. Family.”

The sparkle in her eyes as she talks about horses draws me back in. My own love for horses – their strength, their grace, their spirit – has always been a driving force in my life.

I find myself nodding along, my heart resonating with each word she says.

“Absolutely.” I can hear the passion in my voice echoing hers. “They’re more than just animals. They’re partners in every sense of the word. They sense what you feel and respond to your thoughts. With them, it’s not about dominance. It’s about trust, respect, and mutual understanding.”

We spend the next hour bonding over our mutual appreciation for these majestic creatures. I tell her stories of riding through the woods of my homeland. She tells me how she helped nurse a sick colt back to health.

She suddenly glances up at the sun and sighs. “Look at the time. It’s almost noon,” she remarks. “I have other animals to check on back at my own ranch.” Her words are light, her smile still firmly in place, but I can sense regret in her tone.

Reluctantly, I push myself back up to my feet. “I owe you an apology. I did not make a great first impression. I was...” I pause, looking for a diplomatic word. “I was brusque. I feel perhaps we should start again.”

I reach down my hand.

“Hello. My name is Alex Vanecourt.”

She extends her hand towards me, her smile genuine and warm. “Pleased to meet you,” she purrs. I help her to her feet. “My name is Isabella Sanchez. But most people call me Bella.”

“Bella,” I repeat softly. The name dances on my tongue. “Welcome to my ranch, Bella.”

With the sun high above us, we decide it’s time to head back up the trail. Bella and I mount up and guide Maximus and Water away from the river.

I turn to her, offering a gentlemanly nod. “I’d be honored to accompany you and Water back to your ranch before I return to mine,” I propose, my voice warm. She flashes me a delighted smile and nods in agreement. Gently, we guide our horses to a soft trot, side by side.

I ask Bella to tell me more about life on the ranch. “It’s quiet, peaceful. You learn to appreciate the small things. You learn how to rely on people. And how to rely on yourself.

She turns to me, a soft smile playing on her lips.

“It’s a simple life. But when you see an animal grow and thrive under your care, that gives you a sense of accomplishment like no other.” As I listen to Bella’s stories, a part of me yearns for the tranquil life she describes.

Just as the stables come into view, a sudden clamor breaks the serenity, like a clatter of snare drums or fallen armor.

We turn our heads sharply toward the source of the sound. An older woman stands with pots and utensils surrounding her on the stone steps near the side door of the main house. She stares at me as if she’s seen a ghost.

“Francis?” the woman squints. Her eyes slowly grow wide with recognition. “Is that you, Francis?”

Bella looks at me and then back at the woman. “Who’s Francis?”

I slide down from the saddle. “Francis is my uncle. Everyone says I look more like him than my own father.” I take a deep breath, knowing that what I’m about to say will change everything. “But I am the son of the late Prince Ronaldi, who was the brother of King Francis of Solvaria. I am Prince Alex Vanecourt.”

Isabella comes down from her horse, a look of befuddlement firmly set across her face. “Hold on. Who?”

ISABELLA

I *should have known*, I tell myself. All the clues were there. The accent, the fancy riding clothes, the posture.

“You’re a prince?”

Alex nods solemnly. “I am. And I’m here on special request from the King.”

I can’t help but feel a flutter of disappointment. The morning had held so much promise. Now, to learn that Alex had been keeping something this big a secret is like a punch in the gut.

And I know that the only reason he would do that would be because he was up to something. I cross my arms and try to stare at him so hard that he combusts. It doesn’t work.

“King Francis has ruled Solvaria for many decades,” Alex explains. “But before he took the throne, he spent time in America. During that period, this woman knew him well.”

I stare at Aunt Lily’s face in the bright sun, trying to read it for clues. It seems impossible that Aunt Lily even knew a king, much less was *close* to one, but the look on her face when she saw Alex was unmistakable.

“When he returned home, Francis was betrothed to another to preserve the royal lineage,” Alex continues while reaching into his pocket. “But he made a promise that he would always love one person until his dying day. And that person was Lily Adams.”

He pulls an old photo out of his pocket and hands it to me. I see a girl that could definitely be Aunt Lily when she was younger. She's sitting in the grass with someone who looks just like Alex. They're holding hands and smiling.

Lily doesn't say anything. Her eyes are wet and lost in a memory.

A wave of anger floods through me. Aunt Lily means more to me than anything in the world. Seeing her hurt is more than I can bear. Knowing that people have been tracking her and buying up land just to get close to her makes me sick to my stomach.

"So what?" I flick the photo away, and it lands in the dirt. "Your uncle had a crush on my Aunt Lily and never got over it. Why should we care?"

Alex looks at me with confusion. All the goodwill we had built by the river has disappeared. He tries to keep his composure as he answers.

"Because the King may not be long for this world. His health has been deteriorating for several months now."

I eye him suspiciously, but the emotion in his voice tells me that this is the truth.

"So, he called on me to seek out Lily Adams," Alex continues. "His first love, maybe his only true love. He wants to see her. Just in case it should be the last opportunity."

I snap at him. "So, you've been stalking her for months then, have you? You've built a fake ranch so you could spy on her. You probably have a dozen secret photos you can send to your uncle if he wants to see her. It's a wonder he hasn't sent black ops in the night to take her."

Alex winces at the suggestion of impropriety. "I understand this may seem unorthodox."

"It seems sick," I reply. "That's the word you were looking for."

"Nevertheless," he says. "I am here out of my love for my uncle. And out of his love for you, Lily. Please."

Aunt Lily's eyes dart between Alex and the dusty old photograph. Her lips part as if to form a response, but no sound escapes. Her heartache, as visible as the sun in the midday sky, leaves her speechless.

"Lily," Alex pleads. He reaches out to gently touch her arm, but before he can make contact, I've already stepped between them.

"No, Alex," I interrupt, my voice steady despite my rage. "You've said enough. I think it's time for you to leave."

He tries to lock his dark eyes on mine. "Bella."

"Isabella," I correct him.

Revoking his privilege to call me Bella finally convinces him that I'm serious. I step forward and get right in his face.

"Get on your horse and get off my land."

Overcome by emotion, Aunt Lily picks the photo off the ground and turns away. She clutches the picture close to her heart and starts to wander toward the house.

Her movements are slow and unsteady as if she's still waking from a horrible dream. The back of her faded dress flutters in the wind as she disappears through the doorway.

As Alex makes a move to follow Aunt Lily up to the house, I quickly step in his path, blocking his way. His eyes plead with me, but I remain resolute. There is a tense silence. I refuse to go anywhere.

"Isabella, stop and see things from my side," Alex calls out. But I'm not in a forgiving mood.

I run to the front entrance and slam the screen door shut, then lock it. I make sure he can still hear me.

"*You* try to be the one who thinks about someone else for once. Can't you see what you're doing to Lily? That woman took me in when I had no one else. She treats me as her own flesh and blood because that's the kind of person she is. The kind of person you could never be because you only care about *royal affairs*."

I add a special flourish to the end of the sentence.

“This isn’t about you, or your King, or whatever twisted fairy tale you’re living in. This, here, is about Aunt Lily. And you have already put her through too much. Leave. Don’t ever come back. You’re not welcome.”

His mouth opens and closes, like a fish out of water, struggling to find words. I cut him off before he can come up with another approach.

“I’m serious. Get out of here.” Without waiting for his response, I close the door behind the screened-in one. Alex stands alone on the front step.

I watch out the window as Alex slowly climbs onto Maximus and rides off of our land. I can hear Water whinnying, confused at the separation from his new friend. I sink down onto the ground, feeling sick to my stomach.

I lift my gaze to find Aunt Lily standing in the door frame to the living room, her eyes wide, her hands trembling slightly.

“Lily,” I start, pushing myself up from the cold floor. I walk toward her. “I want you to know that I won’t let Alex or anyone else bother you.”

Lily finally breaks her silence. Her voice is but a whisper lost in the wind.

“If only it were that easy.” Her words, soft as they may be, resound like a gong in the quiet room, hitting me hard.

With heavy steps, she walks toward her bedroom. The soft click of the lock echoes in the silence as she shuts herself away. I’m left alone to wonder what else there is to this story that she isn’t telling me.

“She’ll tell me what’s happening when she’s ready,” I assure myself. I stare at the locked door. Until she emerges, my focus is entirely on Prince Alex Vanecourt and keeping him the hell away.

I step out the front door, looking around to ensure that he’s gone. I jog over to Water and lead him back into his stable. He nudges me anxiously.

I pat his head to reassure him. “Don’t worry, baby. I think our excitement is over for one day. If that pretty boy wanders over here again, he’s going to learn what a real rancher does to a rat.”

ALEXIS

It's been three days since the incident outside Lily's and Bella's house.

Isabella had called me a stalker. Ironically, only now do I have to act like one. I'm sneaking glimpses into their ranch, looking for any opportunity to get a moment alone with Lily.

I came so close yesterday. She was walking by herself near the eastern border while Maximus and I were on a morning ride. Before I even had a chance to call her name, she was already hurrying away back up the hill.

I saw Isabella glaring at me from their front step as Lily rushed past her into the house. She's always glaring at me, somehow. If I come anywhere close to the ranch, she seems to know instinctively and appears nearby.

At first, I wondered if the property was wired with CCTV, but I haven't seen any cameras. It's starting to become unnerving, almost as if she has psychic powers.

She rarely says a word to me during these encounters. The most I got out of her was when she shooed me away like a stray mutt.

"Go on, git!" she shouted. It was humiliating. When I looked back over my shoulder, I could see a devilish smile sneaking onto her face.

That's when I started to realize that some part of Isabella was treating this like a competition. And sometimes, winning a competition requires a change of strategy.

That's why I'm sitting inside their barn right now.

I know that Isabella checks on the crops on the far side of the property around this time every day. It's the largest window of time I'll have to get closer to her aunt and convince her to accompany me back to Solvaria.

So I hopped the fence and snuck inside the barn. It's wholly undignified, but I will do whatever it takes to speak with Lily Adams. I refuse to break a promise to the King.

Streaks of sunlight sneak through the wooden slats to pierce the stifling darkness of the barn. I put my face up to one of the spaces to watch for Isabella. As soon as she mounts Water, I know I'll be in the clear. It's only a matter of time now.

Suddenly, my ears pick up a faint grunting noise somewhere behind me. I hadn't noticed one of the gates slowly opening. A boisterous snort echoes through the barn, cutting through the silence.

I slowly turn my head, holding my breath. There's not enough light to clearly see what's in the barn with me. I strain my ears to see if I can pinpoint the animal's location.

Another thunderous grunt reverberates through the barn, drawing my attention toward the far corner. Emerging from the shadows, a bull charges directly at me, its hooves pounding against the hay-strewn floor.

I bolt toward the barn doors, the beast hot on my heels. I curse as I hear its snorts of fury just behind me. The door swings open, but my foot catches on a loose stone and I stumble out of the barn and onto the ground.

Landing in a great heap in the mud, I look up just in time to see the bull skid to a halt at the barn entrance, snorting and pawing at the ground. Now that it's no longer a looming shadow, I can see that it's only a young bull, not the two-ton monster I had feared only a moment ago.

I spit out a mouthful of dirt while derisive laughter rings in my ears. When I lift up my head, I see Isabella doubled over.

The sound that had been a beautiful melody down by the river is now a series of daggers.

I push myself up to my knees and shake my head. I don't recall ever feeling this small before. Isabella can barely breathe through her laughter as she watches me brush myself off.

"If you can't handle a game of tag with a six-month-old steer, maybe the ranch life just isn't for you," she finally says with a snide satisfaction. "Why don't you head back to your castle? If you hop on the plane now, maybe you'll be back in time for evening tea."

I finally get to my feet. "I'll have you know that Solvaria does not bow to the altar of tea. We make a rich and world-renowned coffee."

"That's the second fact I have about Solvaria. Thank you."

"What's the first?"

"Its princes are creepy perverts who trespass on other peoples' property."

I should not have taken the bait.

My voice is steady despite my frayed nerves. "No. You're wrong. I am a man who would do anything for his family. I have a directive, and I'm attempting to carry it out. If you would just let me talk to Lily, none of this would be necessary."

"You royals are all the same," she says with a wave of her hand. "You think you can just waltz into any place, demand anything you want, and get it automatically because you put a metal hat on top of your head. You don't value hard work or understand the meaning of the word 'no.' You think everything in this world is yours for the taking. Well, it's not."

We circle each other as we trade insults.

"Well," I counter. "It's easy to judge from behind your fortress. I've heard stories about you from my employees, Isabella. Hiding behind this tough exterior, always needing to prove how tough you are. Afraid to be weak. Isn't that right?"

Isabella responds with a scowl. “Oh, look who’s talking. The royal prince pretending to be a rancher. We have a word around here for guys like you. Maybe you’ve heard it. “

I know she’s baiting me, but I can’t stop myself. “What? What’s the word?”

She narrows her eyes and curls her lips into a smirk. “Down here, we call that a phony.”

I start to close the distance between us. “Is that right?”

She steps backward but doesn’t falter. “Yeah. Phonier than a three-dollar bill.”

“That reminds me of something back home,” I tell her, trying to stay rational as I get nearer to her. “We have folktales about a horrible sea beast, and every so often someone says they have a picture of one. But it’s always fake. It doesn’t exist.”

Isabella’s sly expression disappears when she realizes that she’s placed her back against a tree. I slam my hand against the bark with a sudden jolt, cutting off her chance to sneak around the side.

Our faces are a mere inch apart as I conclude. “I assure you, I am very real.”

She stares back at me. She’s silent, with her mouth drawn tight with steely determination. I was expecting to see fear in her eyes, but instead, they are still filled with fire.

This is the first time I’ve been close enough to catch her scent. It’s the fresh smell of the breeze over an open field cut by a beguiling earthiness. I try not to let on how much I enjoy it.

I can feel her breath against my skin as I linger closer. “Do you want to feel how real I am?”

Her lips brush against mine as she continues, not waiting for an answer. “Touch me...”

She pushes me away. “And the next thing you’ll feel is my shotgun.”

“Bella!” I hear Lily’s voice calling from within the house, pulling my attention away. Isabella is able to run past me and into the house without a second glance. I can only stand there and shake my head.

ISABELLA

Stars dot the sky outside the kitchen window. Looking out into the vast night sky over the range usually helps settle my nerves after a long day. But tonight, all I can think about is that moment with Alex this morning.

I wish I could just be angry about him sneaking onto our land again. Or that I could savor the ridiculous sight of him rolling through the dirt. Instead, I replay our close encounter by the tree over and over again.

I try to picture his eyes staring into mine, to feel the heat radiating from his skin as he looms closer. Close enough to breathe each other in.

I tried to sleep it off, but it was no use. My thoughts were causing my legs to squirm too much to lay still.

So I sit in the kitchen, staring out the window while I refill my water. I hope that the choir of night bugs outside eventually drowns out the sound of Alex's voice ringing in my ear. It doesn't. I turn off the tap with a sigh and sit down at the table.

Taking a tentative sip from my glass, I resign myself to a sleepless night. And then, out of the corner of my eye, I catch sight of something strange. At the end of the dark hallway, a soft pool of light spills from under Aunt Lily's door.

Lily has always followed the mindset of 'Early to bed, early to rise.' Her light being on at this ungodly hour is peculiar, to say the least. I put down my glass and rise from

the chair. With each slow step toward the hallway, my heart seems to beat louder.

I lift my hand to knock on Lily's door. Then I hear a sound on the other side. It's muffled but still unmistakable. She's crying. For a moment, I just stand there, torn between my desire to help Lily and my respect for her privacy.

"Aunt Lily?" I call out. There's no reply, only the continued sound of sobbing. I look down at the doorknob. Lily didn't leave me alone all those years ago, and I can't leave her alone now. I reach down and open the door.

"Lily? Is everything alright?" I ask gently.

She quickly tries to stifle the noise and pass it off as a cough. "I'm fine, I'm fine," she says as she wipes the tears away from her eyes.

Looking down on her bed, I can see a photo album sporting fresh new stain marks.

"What about you?" she asks back, but her voice is haunted and distant. "What are you doing awake? Are you okay?"

I kneel down on the floor by her bed. She looks like the entire weight of the world is on her shoulders. I take her hand in mine. "Just can't get to sleep. I am fine. You are not. And it's okay to not be fine. You don't have to lie to me."

I try to give my most comforting smile.

"We've had a hell of a week, right? We got thrown off the horse. But we always get back up, you and me. We always have, and we always will."

Lily places her other hand on my cheek and tries to smile back, but her face can only twist into a look of pure sorrow. Her eyes begin to well up, and she struggles to get out words.

"Bella, I... I have to tell you," she finally says. "I've been holding it in, so you wouldn't have to carry the burden I do. But I can't keep this to myself any longer. My heart can't take it."

I climb off the floor and sit next to her on the bed. "You can tell me anything," I say, patting her on the knee. She takes

a long breath and steals her nerves.

With a quivering voice, Aunt Lily begins her confession. “Bella, I... I was in love with King Francis. That was exactly as Alex said. But Alex doesn’t know the whole truth. Alex, he’s... he’s not the King’s nephew.”

She swallows, her eyes deep pools of sadness and regret.

“He is his son. Our son, Bella. Prince Alexis is the son of the King. And me.”

My mind reels for a moment. “What? Just... What?”

I take a moment to let it sink in. There are so many words I want to say all at the same time. Lily shakes her head.

I go from shock to anger. “You had a son? With a king? And you’ve never told me?”

“We never told anyone. Alex truly believes that his uncle is his father.”

“How?” I ask. “How did this happen?”

Lily’s eyes glaze over as she becomes lost in her memory. “I met Francis when I was a student. He was charming, ruggedly handsome, and prone to turning in his assignments late. I was tutoring to try and make ends meet, and he was assigned to me. At that time, I didn’t know he was royalty. Francis and I hit it off immediately. Our tutoring sessions became long discussions. Eventually, we were dating.”

“Wow.” I’m picturing her young, free, happy, and in love. And my heart breaks knowing that love ended. Or the relationship did, at least.

“One day, out of the blue, he suggested I join him in Solvaria. ‘They have a student exchange program,’ he said. ‘We could read Shakespeare in the mountains while sipping Solvarian coffee.’ They love their coffee.”

A small smile starts to break through the sadness.

“Imagine my surprise when I find out that my new boyfriend is the heir to the throne. But with me, he was still just Francis. We fell deeper in love there in Solvaria, despite

his family's objections. And before we knew it, I was expecting a child. Francis was over the moon. He wanted to elope, to start a family away from the pressures of royalty. But his mother, the Queen, she came to us."

Lily continues, her smile fading again.

"She convinced me that if Francis abandoned the throne, we would endanger the future of Solvaria. Francis wanted to refuse, to fight. But the Queen was relentless. 'This is for the best,' she kept saying. And I believed her. After all, what could a poor girl from the trailer park ever be to the son of a King? One in line for the throne. The crown prince."

Lily pauses. "The very day that Alexis was born, he was taken from my arms and given to his new mother. Janice. Francis couldn't stop the plan from being put in motion. I boarded a plane back to Texas. He snuck out so he could take me. It was the hardest thing I've ever done. He told me that he would always love me until his dying day."

Tears are falling onto her shirt, and I get her a tissue. I try to process the tidal wave of information I've just been hit with.

Alex, the man I've spent the week despising for his lies, is himself a victim of an even bigger lie. His entire life was built on deceit, and he doesn't even know it.

My gaze falls on the photo album on Lily's lap. The sheer magnitude of her sacrifice hits me like a punch in the stomach. She gave up her chance at happiness to protect a country she had barely stepped foot in. And she raised me instead, giving me the love she could never give her own son.

I start to wonder if pushing Alex away has been a deprivation to her. Perhaps it's an act of cruelty to keep her son away. But if either of us told him the truth, it could tear him apart. And maybe even have geo-political consequences.

And that's on top of the other feelings I have brewing for him. It's probably best to still keep him at a distance for the time being. It's safer that way.

For all of us.

ALEXIS

How does that song go? Something about her face and getting used to it. Musicals were never my thing. I don't remember how the song goes.

But I know I've had it in my head, now that her face is suddenly gone.

For nearly a week, I'd gotten used to seeing Isabella's disapproving glare whenever I approached the ranch. Every time I saw Lily, there Isabella would be, her silent guardian.

But over the past four days, she has all but disappeared.

After the ridiculous barn incident, I've been looking for a chance to apologize. Both for sincere reasons and for tactical reasons. There is simply no way that I can get close to Lily without first building some sort of bridge with Isabella. An apology is the first step toward finally reaching my goal here.

That's proven difficult, however. She avoids me at every turn, ignoring my presence and finding the quickest escape route. It's becoming incredibly disheartening. I'd rather have her hate me than simply pretend I don't exist.

As for Lily, I don't even see her at all. As far as I can tell, she has barricaded herself inside the house. It's making it impossible to proceed with my mission. Every day, I expect to receive the call that the King's health has failed further. All this would have been for naught.

As I'm lamenting this awful turn of luck, I notice Isabella emerging from the house. A car pulls up through the front

gate. She's waving, and they look to be about our age, so I can safely presume they are friends of hers. As she climbs into the rear passenger seat, I see an opportunity present itself.

I remember that the fair is in town this weekend. If I could engineer a way to casually bump into her, that could provide a neutral middle ground for us.

I quickly jump into my own car and head in the same direction.

When I reach the fairgrounds, I quickly spot Isabella. She's met up with more friends, and they walk together past the vendor stalls. I try my best to maneuver through the rest of the crowd at a safe distance.

A game barker spots me. "Step right up, big fella!" He tosses a baseball up and down as he shouts. "Knock over the bottles and win a prize!"

His boisterous announcement cuts through the din. Isabella starts to turn her head to see who he's talking to. I quickly wave him off and dart around the corner, remaining unseen.

I follow them for a long while. Embarrassingly long. A few hours. I start wondering if Isabella's criticisms of me were a self-fulfilling prophecy because now I'm actually starting to feel like a stalker.

Just for a little while. It will all be worth it.

They get tired of the fair, apparently, and the group stops in front of the local diner, across the street from the fairgrounds. They shout words I can't make out as they walk through the parking lot, excited. Isabella hangs towards the rear of the group and enters hesitantly after the rest. Something about the whole scene seems off.

Looking through the window, I see the group sitting all together in the center of the restaurant. There are five other girls and two tag-along boyfriends in all. A tall plant near the entrance could allow me some coverage to get into a nearby booth without being seen.

I'm glad I wore sunglasses. I slowly open the door to the restaurant and sit in a far corner where I can see them. I hide

my face behind a menu.

I hear their chatter carrying over the sounds of the other diners. One of the girls, a blonde named Mandy, has the attention of the table.

“So, I’ve got some news, ladies.” Dramatic pause. “I’m moving to New York!” Shrieks erupt from the table.

“I hope you can all visit me sometime.” Mandy then turns to Isabella. “There’s no hay bales there, but I think you’d still like it.” Isabella smiles and nods, but I can see from the hurt in her eyes that this goes deeper than an offhand remark.

It goes like that for the next few minutes. Plausibly innocent comments about ‘farm girls,’ an obsession with big-city corporate life, with the insinuation that it ‘isn’t for everyone,’ and an outright dismissal of any points she makes about anything, even if it’s a point they made themselves.

She faces all the thinly veiled insults with grace and resilience. Meanwhile, I grow angrier by the second on her behalf.

“You know, Isabella,” a brunette at the table chimes in. “You’re so good with the cows and horses. Maybe you could consider being a veterinarian’s assistant if this ranch thing doesn’t work out.” The idea that this woman, with her masterful ability to work with animals, would have to be anyone’s assistant is laughable.

As the conversation continues, a redheaded girl with cat-eye makeup chimes in. “You know what I respect about you, Bella?” she begins, her voice filled with false admiration. “It’s your authenticity. I mean, here you are, in your ranch clothes, sans makeup. I could never have the confidence to pull off that... ‘natural’ look.”

The words, like so many others I’ve heard this afternoon, are coated in saccharine sweetness that barely conceals the barbs they’re really giving her. Isabella simply smiles and thanks her, but I can see the tension in her jaw. I don’t know how much longer she can hold back. I don’t know how much longer I can hold back.

Just then, a guy who I clock as Mandy's boyfriend decides to speak up. "You know, Isabella, you could be pretty if you tried a little harder." The rest of the table seems to perk up in agreement.

The guy continues. "Maybe straightening your hair would do the trick." He confidently runs a hand through his own slick, perfectly gelled hair for emphasis.

Mandy nods. "With a little effort, we could even get you a guy!" The rest of the girls look at each other in agreement. Under the table, I can see Isabella's hand clenching into a tight fist.

I can't take it anymore. I swing myself out of the booth and put my hand on Isabella's shoulder.

"I can't speak for all the guys," I tell the group at the table. "But I know that personally, I love her natural hair. You must not have seen the way that it streams behind her when she rides a horse. Simply enchanting."

I gesture to the blonde girl across the table.

"Not that your hair isn't also lovely in its own way. It reminds me of wheat, straw, you know, roughage. And makeup can be wonderful." I give a nod toward the redhead. "It certainly has its place, especially for those whose natural beauty needs a little... embellishment. But Bella's skin shines in the sun, and I think we can all agree that her freckles are about the cutest thing in all of Texas."

Isabella's muscles are getting tenser. Whatever anger she had been feeling towards the table is now bubbling over toward me, I can tell, but she's forcing a smile.

"And I'm glad you mentioned her clothes. I tell her all the time, she dresses like a strong, confident woman who isn't afraid to get her hands dirty. And I, for one, find that incredibly attractive."

One of the girls at the table speaks up. "I'm sorry, so you know Bella?"

I wrap my arm around her shoulder and lean down. "I should say so. I'm her boyfriend."

This elicits an honest gasp from the table and a wide-eyed stare from Isabella. She pushes her chair out and stands up, subtly shoving my arm away. “If you’ll excuse us for a moment,” she says through a grimace. “I haven’t seen my guy all day, and I need to ask him something. I’ll be right back.”

She grabs my hand and yanks on me hard enough to nearly dislocate my shoulder. She pulls me through the diner and pushes me into the restroom in the back. After she locks the door, she shoves me into the wall.

“What the hell are you doing?”

ISABELLA

There's a thunderbolt surging inside me.

I don't know if it's my fury at the stunt that Alexis just pulled or the overwhelming electricity buzzing between us being so close to him.

“What the actual fuck, Alex?”

I'm breathing hard, pinning his shoulders to the bathroom wall, not ready to let him leave until he explains himself. “It's bad enough I had to deal with those assholes toying with me out there, but now I have you on my back, too?”

I see the shock on his strong features, his eyes narrowed as if he's trying to figure me out.

“I was helping you, Bella. You were having some trouble, and I decided I'd intervene and show those jerks who you really are. The beautiful person I see.”

“I can fight my own battles, thank you. I don't need your help.”

“But it felt pretty good to see their jaws all drop, didn't it?” His winning grin briefly distracts me into forgetting how angry I am. I laugh, then remember the reason we're in the bathroom.

“Maybe. But it wasn't your place. You don't know any of these people. You don't even know me.” I can feel my cheeks and ears getting hot. “You think because you're Prince Charming you can step in and make it all okay for everyone? That may be how it works... over there... but not here.”

His posture looks relaxed, even though I still have him pinned up against the wall, and there's a gleam in his eye. As much as I wish he didn't step on that hornet's nest out there, I'm glad he did for one reason, and one reason only. It's intoxicating to be this close to him again.

I can smell his woodsy scent, and I get a charge from the air between my body and his. If I were still out in the diner, getting piled on by those jerks, I wouldn't be luxuriating in the physical proximity of one of the hottest men I've ever seen.

My hot boyfriend, apparently.

“You just weren't standing up for yourself, Bella. I was raised to believe in duty and to use my authority to help others when I can. And I didn't like seeing them walk all over you. So, I did what I could to stomp on them just a little bit.”

A rush goes through my stomach, thinking of him wanting to defend me. Like he's my protector. And then I see his smug handsome prince face, and I get upset all over again at the audacity.

“Look, I appreciate what you were trying to do. I wasn't letting them walk all over me, though. I have to live with these people. You don't. They're idiots, but this isn't the way to deal with people like that,” I say through gritted teeth.

“What is then?” He says that softly, not accusingly.

If I knew, I wouldn't still be putting up with their shit after so many years. I can see in his eyes that he doesn't see any sense in their bullying, either.

There's something else I see in his eyes. The same rising feeling of desire that's taking hold of me in this restroom. But now's not the moment.

“Look, there's a reason I take their bullshit. It's for Lily. I go along to get along, as they say. I never really fit in here. But they all go to church with us, and Lily has always pushed me to be social. So when I spend time with these people, it makes her happy. I don't need them reporting back to her that I'm unfriendly...”

“But they're the unfriendly ones! Not you.”

“I know that, Alex. Of course, I know that. They’re terrible. And maybe one day I’ll get my comeuppance. But today is not that day.”

“Why not?” Again with that hundred-watt smile. “I still maintain that what I did was right. And I thought it went over swimmingly.”

“Lying is the right thing?” I ask him in a low voice, choked with rage. I’m glaring at him, but his expression doesn’t crack. “You don’t like the way someone’s treating your friend – if we’re even that – so you lie and say you’re my boyfriend there to save me? I can save myself.”

Before I know it, he grabs me by the waist and pins me to the other wall in the little restroom. His eyes are fixed on mine, intense and unshakeable.

My heart races as his hands slide around me, and his eyes move from mine and drift lower. They drink me in like a vampire hitting a vein.

I let out a faint gasp, and I see a tiny smirk in the corners of his eyes. He enjoys the effect he has on me.

I try to push him away, but he’s too strong. His hands are around my hips, and I’m half-grateful that I’m not strong enough for him to budge. He lifts my chin with his hand to get my attention.

“Look, Isabella. I wasn’t lying.”

I look at him like he’s crazy.

“I mean, not about the being-in-a-relationship part. That part, I’ll admit, was... hyperbole.”

“Ha! Hyperbole.”

“Good, I got you to smile. But, no, Isabella. I mean when I said that you’re stunning. Your curly hair after you’ve been outside all day, your freckles when you laugh, your beautiful mahogany skin... None of that was a lie at all. And that’s just the start when it comes to what I admire about you.”

I’m almost tempted to believe him, but I also know he wants something from me. Who is he to come into my life and

decide he knows what's better for me than I do?

“Besides, how often do you get the opportunity to one-up a bunch of judgmental snobs with the help of a royal prince? Could be fun.”

But still, how dare he decide to unilaterally make that decision on my behalf? Who does he think he is? My cheeks heat up as the blood all rushes to my head.

Without quite realizing what I'm doing, my foot's already swiftly descending onto his, feeling the soft resistance of his foot on the bottom of my sole.

“Ow! What was that for?”

“I'm putting my foot down.” I let out a puff of air, like a scoffing laugh. “Don't interfere, Alex.”

His look of betrayal, and the shaking of his leg at the throbbing pain, makes me feel a little bit bad. But still. It's not his life. He won't have to deal with the consequences of his actions once he's gone.

“There are easier ways to tell me that...”

“Yeah, but they're less effective. And this one comes with a reminder. The second you try to move, you'll remember. ‘Oh right. I shouldn't interfere.’ I don't need your help. Especially not from a prince, issuing edicts on my behalf. We got rid of our kings in this country for a reason.”

We both wash our hands. I look at myself in the mirror. If my ‘friends’ out there saw reason to judge me before, my wild hair and shortness of breath won't help things.

I see Alex start to limp pathetically, hanging his head and scowling a little bit. I pass him as I open the door and I let it close behind me. I don't even want to look at him.

I don't look back. I don't want to have to feel bad for what I did. He deserved it. Or at least, I think he did.

Did he?

My body is shaking. I want to collapse or just get the hell out of there and run all the way home. I feel like I could cry.

My heart feels like thousands of horses are running through me, pounding their hooves as they race together with Maximus and Water.

What the hell did I do? Who stomps the foot of someone who's just trying to help her? What is wrong with me?

The stranger who's probably limping right behind me might have my interests at heart more than the vipers trying to bring me down at the table just a few feet away.

Now that I see their ghoulish faces, I want to take back my foot-stomping and tell Alex Vanecourt that maybe he's not so bad after all.

Oh, well. Time to face my smiling tormentors alone.

ALEXIS

“Does that girl wear horseshoes in her cowboy boots?” I whisper to myself, still in disbelief that she just pounded my tarsals into hamburger meat. “God almighty!”

In addition to her many other talents, Isabella Sanchez can pack a kick. I wonder how many bicycle pedals she obliterated as a child.

I seriously consider whether I’ll need an X-ray later. But for right now, I have more important concerns. Like catching up with her just in case those fools mess with her again. This time, I’ll try to keep at least a meter distance from her feet.

“God, that friggin’ hurts.”

I splash some water on my face and limp out of the restroom.

Good. I’m not too far behind her. Close enough to see that the committee of vultures is still pecking at her, trying to get the last scraps.

“How did you manage to get with someone so out of your league, Bella?” Mandy says. She’s the only one whose name I know.

The throbbing in my head from these piranhas erases all thoughts about my foot.

“Yeah, tell me your secret,” the redhead adds. “How do you get someone like that to date someone like... well, you?”

Bella is squirming at the table, half-standing and clearly trying to leave. I'm sure stomping on their feet is just the beginning of what she'd like to do to them.

It looks like they're pulling her down to sit, and she's protesting, trying to get up.

"You're sure he's really your boyfriend? This isn't some prank, right?" It's one of the boyfriends.

Isabella opens her mouth and starts saying something, but she's not able to get out the words once I place my arms around her waist and pull up a chair next to her. The way I sit right against her, she sort of folds down into my lap, and I keep her there.

"Hi, sweetheart," I say to her, gazing into her eyes. With anyone else, this would be the acting role of a lifetime. With her, it's fun to play boyfriend-girlfriend. It might be the closest I'll get to it, so I may as well enjoy it.

"How's your sore foot?" she asks impishly.

"Oh, much better after the massage you gave it," I say to her, then turn to the table. "This girl. She gives the best foot rubs. And also..."

Now back in her chair, she gives me a serious glare.

"So, how did you two meet?" the brunette asks Isabella with a cruel little smirk. Bella looks like she's about to speak, but there's no way she's beating me.

"It's a funny story..." I start. She's glaring at me. I've grown to kind of love that glare. "She hates the way I tell it. You can correct me when I'm done. Okay, honey?"

She rolls her eyes, which makes it seem even more like the real banter of a normal couple.

"One of my best friends from boarding school went to summer camp with Bella. I saw her photo on Facebook when he was on his page, just scrolling, and I had to know who she was. So, we started talking, and right away I knew. It took her a little longer to be convinced though."

"Really? Bella needed convincing? I'd think..."

“She wouldn’t settle for just anyone. And she shouldn’t. I was living in Europe at the time, but I knew I needed to meet her.”

“Uh-huh. Did she live up to your expectations? You weren’t disappointed?” It’s one of the dudebros again. *Go to hell. You’ll never get a woman this good.*

“She was so much better. But it took a lot of convincing to get her to come to Paris to meet me. I asked her to give me a week to try to win her over. I really wasn’t sure what she would say the whole time. I took her to the Louvre, Montmartre, the Moulin Rouge...”

“The movie?” Mandy pipes up.

“Movie? No, I’m not familiar. The famous cabaret. You don’t know Paris, I take it?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Well, anyway. At the beginning of the week, I said if she didn’t have a wonderful time, I’d let her leave and never speak to me again. I did everything to win her over. Rented a private yacht on the Seine. Stayed at the best beach club in the south of France. Made our own wine in a vineyard in Bordeaux. And when this woman stomps grapes, whew. Watch out.”

She pinches my leg, and I mask my groan of pain as one of pleasure.

“Mmmm! Most delicious wine I’ve ever had. Because it was made with love, wasn’t it, mon amour?”

“So what did she say at the end of the week?” Brunette again. Same nasty smirk.

“She said yes! And thank God she did. My life changed forever.”

Bella leans over to me. I’m hopeful that maybe she’s finally letting herself have fun with it. Her lips brush against my ear, and it drives me wild.

“What are you doing?” she whispers. “I’m not playing this game, Alex.”

I laugh as if she just said something wildly inappropriate.

“I’m helping,” I whisper back, tickling her waist lightly.

“No. You’re not,” she hisses, sweetly somehow. “You’re just doing this to get close to Lily. I don’t like it.”

“Look,” I whisper, rubbing her hips, and I feel her relax. God, I wish these people weren’t here. “These women deserve to be knocked down a peg. And their boyfriends.”

I back away from her. “You are so bad, Isabella!”

“What did she say?”

Bella stares daggers.

“Nothing worth repeating.”

“You guys are so cute,” one of the girls says. The blonde. She doesn’t realize she has lipstick on her teeth, and she shows it off with a smug smile. “We’ll see if it lasts as long as me and my boyfriend. We’re getting engaged soon.”

“In that case, congratulations soon,” I say.

“And what is it you do?” lipstick-teeth asks.

“I’m an investor,” I say, as Bella’s forming words that ram into mine.

“He just bought the ranch next to ours.” She’s glaring, but she’s warming up.

“I want her to move in with me, but she won’t. Even down the road, I miss her.”

“I miss you, too, *mon petit chou*. That’s what I called him in Paris. I’d point to the greengrocer and say, ‘Look! It’s you! My little cabbage.’”

“And I’d call her *kapusta*. It means cabbage in my country. Isn’t that cute?”

“I’ve never been happier. He treats me like a queen.” Bella gazes up at me. *Good. Finally. Keep going.*

“I’ve finally met someone worthy of being treated as one, so I have no choice,” I say. Now she’s doing it.

“My boyfriend – soon-to-be-fiancé – is good to me, too.” It’s the redhead, although her boyfriend is not one of those in attendance it seems.

“That’s nice,” I say.

“Where is he now?” Bella asks. *Yes! That’s the Bella I know.* The spitfire who literally tames wild horses.

“He had to work.”

“Oh, on the weekend? That’s too bad. Alex sets his own hours.”

“And if she wants me to take time off, work can wait.” I kiss her on the cheek. “That’s what I have employees for. Nothing is more important than her. Actually, Bella...”

“Yes?”

I look to the side, wondering if I should do this. It’s the ultimate move to shut up these harpies.

I kneel down in front of her, looking up, and she instinctively puts her hands on her mouth.

“Isabella Sanchez...”

She pulls on my hand to get me up, but she should already know that it will do nothing.

“I’ve loved you since the moment I saw you...”

I pull up my necklace from under my shirt, revealing several rings hanging from it. I unclasp it and pull out the one with the large diamond, surrounded by tiny light sapphires, part of the royal collection bequeathed to me when I came of age. It fits perfectly on her finger.

“Will you make me the happiest man in the world? Isabella, my love, my *kapusta*, will you marry me?”

ISABELLA

How can this guy be Lily's son? She's the most level-headed person on the planet. This guy is insane. Lily's right. Royals are a different kind.

"What do you say? Marry me and make me the happiest man in the world."

Alex is grinning like the cat that swallowed the canary. I look into his eyes. They are absolutely sparkling. It's obvious he's pleased with himself.

Someone coughs, and I realize the whole room has gone silent. Everyone is watching us. Especially my longtime frenemies. Sasha, the one who said she's so close to being engaged, looks like she just got punched in the gut.

"Alexis Vanecourt, *mon petit chou*, the love of my life. Yes."

"What was that?" Alex says, grinning even a little bit wider.

"Yes, I'll marry you."

We all shriek, even the girls who just moments ago were all piling on. It's like if there's an engagement happening, women have to be happy. It's the law.

He grabs my hand, and it's shaking like crazy. He slides the ring on and pulls me into a hug. Everyone in the café starts cheering.

If he kisses me, I'll knee him in the nuts so hard, I think.

“Free coffee for everyone,” the café owner yells, ringing a loud bell behind the counter.

The café erupts, not quieting down. I try to pull myself out of Alex’s embrace. He merely tightens his hold on me. I have no choice but to look up into his eyes. I never noticed how blue they are before right now. If I had to have a husband, those eyes would be nice to wake up to every day.

He releases me, and I breathe a sigh of relief. He puts his arm around my waist a moment later. What have I done?

Nothing irreversible. It’s just a little white lie to save face. After a while, we’ll break up. I’ll say I dumped him, of course. We were just too different. I was won over with his looks and his charm, but there wasn’t enough to build a marriage on.

He slides his arm across my back, coming dangerously close to my butt, and I’m momentarily disappointed he doesn’t go further. I stiffen up but relax as he grabs my hand.

He cups my hand and my back like he’s protecting a delicate piece of china.

“Congratulations,” Sasha says bitterly.

I feel a pang of guilt, but then I think about how terrible she’s been to me over the years.

It’s still lying, I think as Alex leads me out of the restaurant. Still wrong. I just have to fake it until he leaves. He’s a prince, after all. He was just complaining he had to get back to his country and his job.

Once we are out of the restaurant, I try to take my hand back. He smiles and tightens his grip. “You wouldn’t want people thinking you don’t want to hold your fiancé’s hand.”

I wait until we’re across the street. “Where are we going?”

“I parked at the fairgrounds.”

“You were following me?”

“No, I was taking in the sights.” We walk through a row of cars, and the keyless entry to a beautiful Mercedes convertible chirps. “This is me.”

He follows me around to the passenger side and opens the door for me.

He doesn't say anything, just shuts the door for me. I spin my head to face the driver's seat. When he sits down, I'm ready.

"I know what you're up to."

"You do? Because I don't. Maybe you could explain." He starts up the car, and we're gliding over the back roads leading to the ranch.

"You think after that little photo op, or whatever it was, you'll have no trouble getting to Lily. I'll melt like putty in your hands, and you can get what you want. I'm going to protect Lily, though. I'm not that easy."

"Oh, believe me, I would never make the mistake of underestimating you. I genuinely did that for fun, because I like you."

If I let myself read into that, I might feel like I'm soaring on a swing set. But the part of me that takes things at face value knows 'like' can mean a lot of things. But still.

I give him an incredulous look.

"I mean it. That was out of no motivation besides thinking it would be fun. My business with Lily is completely separate from you."

For some reason, this hits the same way that his saying he likes me did but in reverse. And there's a burr in my heart when I hear him call Aunt Lily by her name. He doesn't even know that she's his mother. He doesn't see how much it kills her to look at him.

"Okay. Well, I will do anything I can to protect her. Just know that. I won't help persuade her of anything she doesn't want to do."

"Good. I'm glad she has someone like you looking out for her. But I'm going to do everything in my power – without pushing – to get her to come with me. So if she's inclined to say yes, I'd like you to agree not to convince her otherwise."

Protect her if she needs protection. But don't try to talk her out of anything if she decides she wants to go."

Maybe when I thought he was just some snotty prince doing his uncle's bidding, I would have fought against it. But knowing that Lily is his mother changes things. This is her long-lost son, the one she thought she'd never see again. If she wants to go, I can't stop her.

But if it's too painful for her, I *will* stop him. I don't care if he's a prince, or a king, or a god. I need to look out for Lily after all she's been through.

"Well?"

"I'm thinking. Just wait a minute."

"You're cute when you think."

"You might be, too. If I ever saw you in the act." I snort a little, pleased with myself. "Why is this thing with Lily so important to you, anyway? Why now?"

I look at his profile, and I realize he has the kind of face that would look beautiful on a coin. I wonder if his family is on the currency where he's from.

Alex purses his lips and exhales. "The outcome of this mission determines my future. And my future has a bearing on the entire nation."

"I don't even know what that means."

"I don't know if I can say it in simpler words. But we're just about at your stop, *kapusta*." I look out the window. I was so busy staring at him that I didn't realize we were almost home.

"Thanks, cabbage head." I close the door, although I regret not slamming it harder. In a car this nice, I don't even know if the doors can slam. I hear the window rolling down.

"I'll come by again tomorrow. Oh, and, we should probably tell Lily about... you know." He lifts up his left hand and wiggles his fingers. "Before she learns it from one of your good friends from the diner."

“Yeah, I’ll handle it.” I walk toward the house and lift up an arm to wave goodbye without looking back. I hear his powerful engine purr and know he’s gone.

I can’t believe I’m engaged, even if it’s fake. I have absolutely no idea how I’m going to tell Lily that I’m engaged... to her son.

ALEXIS

Maximus raises his head and looks me in the eye. I scratch his nose the way he loves.

“I need you to do something for me, Max.”

I feed him a carrot, quickly give him a brush down, and start saddling him up. He gets excited when I hold up the bridle.

There’s nothing like the feel of riding a horse at full speed. It’s the... er... second most exciting thing in the world.

“We’ll run later, I promise. But first I need to see Lily. Isabella, too.”

Lily and Isabella are outside of the barn when I get there.

“Whoa,” I tell Maximus. The three of them look up at me. Lily, Bella, and Water.

I dismount and throw the reins over a post, then climb the fence.

“You’re here early,” Bella says.

“Have you had breakfast yet, Alex?” Lily asks. “We were just about to eat. As soon as Bella’s finished fixing this mechanism...”

“Done,” Bella says, interrupting Lily.

The pump she’s handling comes to life as the water pours into the basin.

“Good job, Bella.” Lily gives her a small golf clap. “Let’s get some food. You deserve it after two hours out here.”

Lily walks off towards the house, but I hang behind with Bella.

“Does she know?” I ask Bella. Her hazel eyes are so stunning in the morning light.

“I told her last night.” She looks tired. I’m sure she was up late.

“How did she react?”

“You can ask her in a minute. She invited you in, didn’t she?”

It’s obvious Bella is giving me the brush-off.

That’s fine, I think. I don’t need Bella’s cooperation. Just Lily’s.

Kind of a shame, though. I follow Lily across the yard and leave Bella behind in the barn. Under normal circumstances, I wouldn’t mind getting to know Bella a lot better.

The women in Texas are different from the women back home. But I have a feeling she’d be in a league of her own anywhere. Not only because of her looks but her demeanor, too. She’s so bold and outspoken. So honest. Maybe that’s why I’m so drawn to her.

As much as she wants to put distance between us, she draws me back in like a moth to a flame.

The screen door slams with a thud when I come in.

“Coffee’s made for you, Alex.” Lily points to a mug on the table for me.

“Thank you.” I take a sip.

Lily has taken out some eggs and bacon.

“Why don’t you let me cook?” I offer to Lily. “You had a busy morning.”

“You can cook? Really?”

“I can indeed.” I step up to the stove and turn the burner on. “How do you like your eggs?”

“Wow. Scrambled, please.”

“You’re sure? I can do more elaborate things.”

She nods yes. “I like scrambled, with cheese then, if you’re making.”

Surprise is written all over her face. I shrug.

“When you have people attending to your every need – and I mean *every* need – you want to learn to do things yourself. To prove you can.”

Lily looks on with approval. “That’s so good that you wanted to be self-sufficient. Not everyone in your position would be.”

I give a winning smile and turn to the eggs.

In my teenage years, it occurred to me that the small army of servants were my mother’s eyes and ears. I began doing more for myself for privacy as much as anything.

She pulls a cheese grater out of the drawer and stands next to me as I start stirring. When the liquid begins to turn solid, she sprinkles in the cheese.

Bella comes into the kitchen from outside and pries off her boots. She looks right at me, and I feel a surge of energy bolt through me, even though she’d murder me with it if she could.

“Alex cooked eggs!” Lily says.

“Sorry, I guess I left the medals in my other pants,” Bella says, patting her pockets. “But I suspect you have medals back home?”

“A couple,” I admit.

“What for?” Lily asks.

“I got some academic medals. And some service medals. The King –”

Bella coughs loudly.

“You need coffee, dear,” Lily says, looking at Bella.

While Bella walks across the room, I get a whiff of her scent, and it's intoxicating. Much nicer than most perfumes, and I've smelled most of the finest in the world.

"Ixnay on the oyaltyray," Bella whispers.

"What?"

"Wait for her with the royalty business. Don't bring it up." I knew Bella wanted me to take it slowly with the asking, but not even bringing up royalty? Is this Texas or the Soviet bloc?

"Here you go," Lily says, setting a mug in front of Bella.

Bella sits back in her chair, glaring at me. *Damn, she's intense*, I think. She doesn't know who she's up against. Intense is my middle name. I do have seven of them, actually. It could be one.

"Do you like bacon?" Bella says.

"Doesn't everyone?"

Lily gets up and brings me a couple of pieces, unprompted.

"Thanks, Lily."

"What else do you like?" Bella asks.

"Like, food? Roast venison fresh from a hunt is incredible. I love the tradition of it."

"Not just food. Do you have hobbies?" Bella asks. For someone so stone-faced, her curiosity surprises me.

"Well, I like playing polo. And riding, of course."

"That's it?"

"Not at all. They sort of raised us to be sort of renaissance men. Painting. Reading. Poetry. Chess. How about you? Or does this interview only go one way?"

Bella looks at Lily and then back at me. Lily seems to want to know about me, but for whatever reason, maybe shyness, maybe even fear, she's hesitant. So I open up about my passions when Bella asks.

"When I was growing up, we learned about other cultures, and I loved it. I still do. So, my job as a cultural ambassador is

perfect. I love sharing culture, languages, food, music, dance, and art. All of it. And if we share that, we can start to find common ground.”

“And then what?”

Bella asks, but for some reason, I glance at Lily. She gives off a warmth that seems more than casual. It’s comforting. And it’s a change to have a maternal-type figure look at me with affection rather than contempt.

“We can connect without fear. Class doesn’t matter. Language doesn’t matter. Deep inside, we’re the same.”

Lily is smiling at me broadly, beaming even. Even Bella seems less annoyed. I take a risk and charge on.

“The King says that cultural exchange is a fundamental part of diplomacy. He’s glad I’m leading it.”

“It sounds like you’re doing well,” Lily says with a big smile that has a hint of sadness. Maybe the story makes her nostalgic for her time with the King.

Bella pulls me from my chair by the arm.

“Lily, will you excuse us for a moment?” Bella drags me into the hallway.

“What’s going on?”

“I told you, tread carefully. You’re putting way too much pressure on her. Can’t you see she’s emotional? Slow down on the royalty stuff. There’s a lot there. You’re upsetting her.”

“Upsetting her? She seemed to enjoy the stories.”

“I’ve known her my whole life. You’ve known her for... a week? Two? Slow down. Follow her lead.”

I shrug. “My uncle might be dying. I’m following his lead, respectfully.”

Back in the kitchen, we hear a chair scrape as Lily hurries out from the kitchen. I see a blur pass by, followed by the sound of her feet racing up the stairs.

“Lily, wait, please...” I plead.

“No, it’s fine,” she calls, already mostly up the stairs.

At the bottom of the stairs, I hesitate, but I know I need to talk to her. I go to the top of the stairs, quickly but softly.

I hear the door slam and the distinct click of a lock. I can’t hound this woman at her bedroom door. I’ve already upset her enough for one day.

If I can’t pull this off, then what happens? In the kitchen, the echo of sobs pours down the stairs.

“Happy?” Bella says. She’s sipping her coffee with her signature glare. But now it’s tinged with sadness, just like with her aunt. “So, what now, Your Highness?”

Maybe the best idea is to go back. I’ve never failed at anything before, though. And I’m determined to see this through, no matter what it takes.

ISABELLA

Alex doesn't answer. I set my mug down on the table a little too hard, and coffee splashes out.

"Why do you have to bother her? Can't you see this is tearing her apart?"

"It seemed like she was enjoying herself. Until she wasn't." He's staring at the floor. "Usually I get a good read on people."

"Well, not her. She's different, Alex."

"I'm learning that."

I start cleaning up the dishes. I get another shock when he begins helping.

I look at him. He's right next to me at the sink, putting the dishes in the dishwasher after I rinse them. I've been trying to ignore how good he smells and how strong his biceps are in his shirt.

His eyes pierce right through me. A twinge settles between my legs, amplified by my closeness to him.

"You want to do a rematch on the racing circuit now? Might be a good palate cleanser," he offers.

"You feel the need to get beaten again?" I give him a little grin, then turn away to focus on the dishes. "Alright. You're on."

I start running out the back door, and he sets off to catch me.

“Where should we go?” he yells as he catches up.

“Same as last time.”

He gets up on Fire – I mean, Maximus – as soon as we’re outside. I lead Water inside to saddle him up and mount him.

When I come out, Alex is leading his horse through some complicated dressage commands. I know how difficult it is to get any horse to learn those types of moves, let alone a spirited mustang.

Impressive. He probably didn’t train Maximus himself, but who knows with this prince. He’s full of surprises.

We trot side by side to the starting point. Alex gives a thumbs up, and I swat his hand down. He shrugs.

“On your mark, get set –”

“Don’t you need a royal bugle or something?”

He glowers. “Go!” he shouts.

I’m caught off guard, but Alex seems to expect that.

“Come on, Water. Let’s kick some royal ass.”

Alex waits until Water and I take off, then yells for Maximus to go. The horses gallop as hard as they can. I lean down over Water’s neck and urge him on. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Alex frantically flicking the reins.

“Come on,” I whisper in Water’s ear. He’s trying, but it’s not enough.

Alex blows past the finish before slowing Maximus to a trot and circling back to us.

“I win. Man, that was great. I love racing.” He guides Maximus to step beside me and we trot along, cooling the horses down.

I pat Water’s neck, but I can’t help being disappointed.

“You can’t have fun unless you win?” Alex says.

“I let you win, can’t you tell? Didn’t think you could take it if you lost to me twice.” *How old am I, eight?* Except an

eight-year-old would probably know that only sore losers say that.

“Sure. If you say so,” Alex retorts.

We trot a little further and stop at the creek. Or rather, the horses stop us. I throw my leg over and slide off of him.

“Give them a little reward after doing our bidding,” I say, patting Water’s neck.

Water is already making short work of a clump of dandelions. I toss the reins over the saddle horn and start strolling. Alex is already walking, and Maximus is drinking right beside Water.

“So what is it that you do all day? On the ranch?”

“Anything that needs to be done, basically. When I first moved here, Lily did a lot more. She’s slowing down some. This life, it’s a lot of hard work and a lot of responsibility. But satisfying.”

He stops and looks around.

“You’re responsible for all that surrounds us, aren’t you?”

“That’s one way to look at it.”

“Like a kingdom but on a smaller scale. Making it all operate. Taking care of everything and everyone. Making decisions, owning the responsibility.”

“Responsibility? Aren’t you just figureheads? I don’t know. No offense intended, but I’ve never liked the idea of royalty really.”

“Maybe you haven’t given much thought to it.”

“Maybe not. But the more I learn, the more it troubles me. Look at what happened to Lily.”

“What about it? Anyone can have their heart broken.” He seems to look at me with deliberate intensity. “You don’t have to be royal.”

“Yeah, but when two people love each other, and a system keeps them apart because of their status and no other reason?

It's cruel. And for what? Your uncle chose the crown over his heart. And after thirty years, what good does it do him? He's on his deathbed, begging for the woman who he couldn't be with."

He looks at me and takes my hand. I resent that it calms me a little when I want to stay angry.

"Try to imagine this, Bella. The love you have for Lily, how much you want to protect her. Can you imagine how a king feels? That's how a king feels about his entire country. Every man, woman, and child."

"Are you kidding me?" I don't realize I'm yelling until Water looks up. "If he loved her, none of that would have mattered."

"This isn't a fairy tale. This is real life. Royal obligations _"

"Are a pathetic excuse if you ask me. Do you really think what your uncle did was right?"

"I think there are a lot of _"

"You know what? I don't want to hear it."

I get ready to swing myself up into the saddle and reach to find the reins. "Water. Let's go."

But Water's not going anywhere, I'm realizing.

Alex has a hold of the reins and is stroking Water's nose. And Water, the treasonous beast that he is, appears to be enjoying it.

"Bella, we aren't going to settle this today."

I shrug my shoulders and then cross my arms.

"So why don't we give it a rest? I want to learn more about the ranching life. Can you show me what you do?"

"Seriously? No."

"You can show me all your favorite spots in town after that. I'll buy dinner."

I grunt at him. He whistles for Maximus, who trots right over to him. Alex climbs onto him.

“Tell you what, Bella. I’ll race you for it. If you win, I buy you dinner. If I win, you have to go out with me tonight.”

“That’s... wait a minute.” I roll my eyes.

“On your mark, get set –”

“Go!” I yell, urging Water into a run.

As we streak across the trail, I can hear Maximus’s hooves pounding behind me. This time, I have too much of a lead for Alex to narrow it. Of course, the bet is rigged. There’s no winning, even if I win.

We finish, and I beat him by at least five seconds. But I’m frowning at the Pyrrhic victory. “You won, fair and square. Happy?”

He’s grinning at me. He looks like a kid, and I smile back before I can stop myself.

“If you want to take me to dinner, you have to work for it.”

“Okay.”

“No, I mean it. I’m going to work your butt off.”

He looks down over his shoulder. Yeah, that butt. For the rest of the day, it’s mine.

ALEXIS

“**Y**ou’re good at this sort of thing,” I say, leaning on the stable gate while Bella brushes the mane of one of the horses.

She perks a brow at me. “I’ve been doing this for most of my life. I hope I’m good at it by now.”

“Yeah, sure. I love watching you do this.”

“Watching me work?”

I shrug, then send her a sheepish grin. She smiles.

Over the past week, Isabella and I have become so much closer. That’s probably thanks to my efforts since I’ve been following her around like a lost puppy. Whenever I catch a glimpse of her across the way, I drop everything to see what she’s doing.

She’s noticed, of course. It’s hard not to. But I don’t care. I might not be here for long. What do I have to lose?

“Don’t you have other responsibilities to tend to?” Bella asked me one day as she hauled a bag of horse feed towards the stables. “Seems like you’ve forgotten that you’ve got a ranch of your own.”

“I’ve got a whole team of people much more experienced than me handling that. Trust me. I’m just a nuisance to them.”

“Ah. Somehow I can believe that.” A playful glint shines in her golden hazel eyes. “What makes you think you’re not a nuisance to me?”

“That’s impossible. I’ve seen the way you look at me.”

There are some nights when she and I enjoy a nice cup of iced tea together after a hard day of work. I do whatever I can to assist her, but she barely lets me do anything. Not because she doesn’t want to work me but because I think she doesn’t like the job I’ll do. I can’t blame her.

It’s nice to sit and gaze at the stars with her by my side. We don’t have to say anything. The peaceful silence that wafts between us while cicadas chirp in the background makes me nostalgic for a time that I’ve never lived.

“Do you ever wonder where you’re going to be ten years from now?” I gaze over just as she takes a languid sip of her tea. Her eyes narrow. “Do you see yourself living on a ranch for the rest of your life?”

“I haven’t thought too hard about that,” she says. “The ranch is my life. I can’t imagine leaving it all behind. I’d need a very good reason to pack my things and head elsewhere.”

“Can that reason be a person?”

“Maybe. But they’d have to be pretty incredible.”

I wonder what kind of man a woman like her winds up with. When you’re in the midst of a crush, of course, you always picture yourself with the girl you like. But the chance of ending up with any particular person is... literally one in a million. Smaller odds than that.

But still. I wonder if the man she winds up with will be like me at all.

Bella’s been talking about the local fair going on in town, the same one where I followed her before. I’d be ashamed, sure but I know I’d do it again in a second if I thought it might get me closer to getting Lily to say yes.

Her eyes light up whenever she talks about the fair, and it’s the second to last day.

When I make my way over to the house, she surprises me by coming out in a red checkered dress that complements her

figure beautifully. I wonder if she realizes what she can do to a person just by existing. That's all it takes.

“Ready to go?”

“Absolutely,” I reply, gesturing towards the car.

“You'll have a grand ol' time, I promise,” she says with a smile, eyes twinkling as she hops into the passenger seat and allows me to drive. “There's a bull riding show I want to catch. I always think I could do what those riders do, but I'm probably kidding myself.”

“Why not? You can do anything that you put your mind to.”

“And get impaled by a bull? No, thank you.”

“Yikes,” I whisper, frowning deeply. “You're right. Don't do that.”

When we arrive at the fairgrounds, the parking situation is a mess that takes us around twenty minutes to figure out. By the time I finally find a spot and squeeze in, I'm exhausted, but Bella's a ball of light.

She drags me to the nearest corn dog stand.

“I have never had one of these,” I tell her, and she simply cannot believe it. She tells everyone who's in the vicinity that this man has never had a corn dog.

Truth be told, I'm not used to eating food in this fashion. I'm used to my dining room etiquette, digging my fork and knife into whatever's on my plate. A sausage on a stick, coated in cornbread and deep fried?

It's delicious.

“Come on!” Bella grabs my hand and leads me through the fair.

A giant Ferris wheel twirls gradually in the distance. Dozens of people play at the game booths lined with thousands of stuffed animal prizes. Bella only cares about the bull riding, though.

It's a mess of bodies to try and get to a pair of seats, but Bella's confident shoulders lead us through like the expert she is. I like the way her hand clenches around mine as we move through the crowd together.

The giddy smile she sends me once we're settled into our seats makes my heart flutter.

A wave of screams jolts my attention to the center of the ring, where a man mounts an angered bull. The animal thrashes him around, doing everything in its power to hurl him over its back. I flinch, amazed by the man who lasts around twenty seconds before being catapulted off.

A man in a cowboy hat waves to the crowd, putting up a show before he mounts the bull.

"Why do people willingly do this to themselves?" I ask.

"For the cash prize," she replies. "A thousand dollars can go a long way for someone's family in these parts. Also, there are the medical bills."

With the way she's leaning in, I can smell the fragrance in her hair and the lotion on her skin. The hairs on my arms stand on end.

"Ah, right. Where a trip to the hospital is treated like a trip to McDonald's. I guess this is why."

"Maybe. Who knows. We're not all alike, people in the same country."

"I know. Like those people. They're insane. And how about you? Would you mount that bull for a thousand dollars?"

Bella snorts. "No. Lily would kill me if she found out I endangered my life for some cash."

All she'd have to do is ask me, anyway. I'm so charmed by her that it would be hard to imagine saying no to anything she asked of me.

I'm suddenly thrown back into the moment as this man is also thrown off the bull. Competition helpers drag him out of the ring before the bull gets too crazy. He lasted forty-seven

seconds, which is an impressively long tenure on the back of a bull.

One man is thrown off in all of five seconds.

“Are you having fun?” Bella yells over the boisterous crowd.

I nod, moving my body ever closer to hers, pressing my legs against her. “This is the most fun I’ve had in a long time.”

She returns her attention to the competition, but I can’t tear my eyes away from her that quickly.

She’s beautiful. I wish she knew how fast my heart beats whenever I’m around her. If she asked me to ride one of those bulls, I’d do it for free. Just to please her.

ISABELLA

“That was really fun, Bella,” Alex says as he pulls up in front of my house.

“It was.”

Back at the fairgrounds, there was a moment when he let his hand trail down to my lower back as we walked through the crowds. For some reason, I didn’t want to pull away. Instead, I leaned in a little closer, basking in his attention and subtle touches against my skin.

In the car, he snuck in a few more touches. I saw him make a wrong turn when he got distracted. And I think he liked getting caught.

He gets out and comes around to my side, then he opens my door.

“Thank you, your highness.” I give him a little smirk. “Do you want to stay for dinner?”

He smiles.

“I mean, we’re having meatballs, and Lily’s meatballs are to die for. I won’t eat any other ones.”

“I’d love to. Thanks for the invitation. Although I’m disappointed you won’t be serving corn dogs.”

I give him a playful tap on the arm. He shuts the car door behind me and follows me to the front door. As we’re walking, I look at him seriously.

“Just don’t...”

“I know. I won’t mention the King. Not Solvaria. Just dinner. Unless it’s brought up. You can count on me.”

He taps his heart lightly with a clenched fist.

I open the front door and hold it open for Alex. To get him back for opening the car door all those times.

“We’re hooo-ooome,” I yell out to Lily as we walk into the house.

“*We’re* home? Do we have company?”

Lily appears at the door to the kitchen. When she sees Alex, her face lights up.

They have the same smile.

“If we have company, we should eat in the dining room.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Alex says.

“I insist.”

Lily turns and walks back into the kitchen. Alex starts to go after her. I grab his arm and shake my head.

“We’ll set the table,” I call as I lead Alex into the dining room.

I get a tablecloth out of the sideboard and throw it his way. Then I go into the kitchen to grab some silverware.

“We’re not using the china, are we, Aunt Lily?”

Lily doesn’t answer me. I walk over and take three plates out of the cupboard.

“This is fine,” I tell her softly as I walk back to the dining room.

Lily brings in the salad. “I just threw the pasta in. The timing will be perfect.”

Alex pulls out her chair. She looks up at him. The look on her face breaks my heart all over again. Why did this have to happen to her, of all people? She has the kindest heart of anyone I know. And I can’t imagine a heart breaking as much.

It seems like a terrible burden.

I walk over to the wine rack and pull out a bottle of Chianti. “How about this, since we’re having Italian?” I suggest.

Lily nods. Alex jumps up and grabs the bottle and corkscrew. He opens it deftly – faster than I would have, I have to admit. I grab three glasses from the hutch, and he pours.

We clink glasses. I notice Lily takes a large sip. She must still be nervous around Alex.

“How was the fair, you two?” Lily takes some salad and passes it to me.

“They had the black-nosed sheep.”

“Oh, I love those.”

We both look at Alex, who nods.

“As sheep go, they were pretty cute. What was the breed again?”

“Valais,” Lily and I say together.

“You don’t have sheep here?”

“No. I had goats for a little while. The fresh goat cheese was fabulous. But no matter how much you try to keep them in their pen, they get out. I just got tired of it after a while.”

The timer goes off, and Lily jumps up. I follow her. We come back into the dining room with the pasta and meatballs. Lily goes back for the garlic bread.

After dinner, we play gin rummy. She’s had more wine than usual tonight, but I can’t say I blame her. She’s more relaxed than she was earlier this evening. It seems like she’s truly enjoying herself.

I excuse myself to use the washroom. When I come back, Lily and Alex are laughing together. I stand out of sight in the hall listening. His rich baritone harmonizes perfectly with her sweet soprano. *I’d know they were related just from that alone*, I think.

Lily is just on the brink of stumbling, and she looks exhausted. “Well, I think I am going to go to bed. That wine...”

Lily gives me and our guest a hug and then climbs the stairs up to her bedroom. Alex helps me bring the dishes into the kitchen and heads to the sink. I still get shocked each time he helps me.

“Oh, let’s not clean up now. It’s so nice out. Want to have a beer on the porch?” he offers. “Extend the evening a little longer?”

“Sure.”

We grab two bottles out of the fridge and go outside. Alex sits down next to me on the wicker loveseat. I pull out my keys and pop the top off my beer then hand the bottle opener to Alex.

“Cheers.”

We clink and drink.

“This must have been a nice place to grow up.”

“I didn’t actually grow up here. My mom died when I was sixteen. Lily took me in.”

I look at Alex. He looks right into my eyes. Something inside me cracks open.

“It was really hard. I mean, I did spend a lot of time here growing up. And I loved Lily. And those goats she was talking about before, I loved them. She let me name the babies sometimes. Once there were quadruplets.”

I fall silent, thinking about it. Not the goats, though that was the most amazing thing my eight-year-old self had ever seen. I’m thinking about my mom.

“It must have been hard to lose your mom. I lost my dad, too. I know how hard it is.”

I look right into his eyes. I don’t want to spend the evening talking about our dead parents. I’d rather enjoy feeling very alive with this beautiful man.

“What was it like growing up in a palace?”

“You know how people say you don’t have to be alone to be lonely?”

“Yeah.”

“That kind of sums it up. I think at least if you are alone, you have a reason to feel lonely. I just always felt like I didn’t belong. Something just wasn’t right.”

I can see the pain in his face, and I have an overwhelming urge to stroke his cheek as if somehow that would make it better. The alcohol is knocking down my inhibitions left and right.

I get up and turn the porch light off.

“Should I go?”

“No, I just want to look at the stars.”

I walk across the yard to the far side of the barn. There are some hay bales, and I climb up onto one.

“This was always my favorite spot to look out.”

Alex sits down next to me. His arm brushes against mine, and I shiver.

“Cold?”

He’s already wrapping his arm around me. I am not cold. I’m on fire. I sneak a look at him, and he’s staring at me. A yearning starts growing in me.

“When your eyes adjust to the light you can really see the stars.”

I point, and he looks. “There’s the Big Dipper.”

“Ursa Major,” he says, running his fingers up my arm and grabbing my hand.

I forget how to breathe. *What is happening?* I think. Are we going to... Please, can we? Why not?

“You’re so beautiful.” He gently runs the back of his fingers across my cheek.

What would it be like to kiss him? I wonder.

“Bella, I want to kiss you –”

I kiss him. His lips are warm. His arms slide around me and lock me in a tight embrace. I open up my mouth for him, hoping he’ll accept the invitation.

He does, and a thrill rushes through me as part of him enters me for the first time. My need for him rises exponentially. I run my fingers through his hair and down to his shoulders. I want this kiss to last forever.

ALEXIS

I grab Bella firmly in my arms. Our tongues connect and part again, and then, wonderfully, come back together. She tastes like... life. I never want to let her go.

I turn and lie down on my back, pulling her on top of me. I break off the kiss so I can look at her. Her beautiful face is framed by a sky filled with stars. I pull her head down so I can kiss her again.

I slide my hand up her side. I can't wait to touch more of her. I move slowly, wanting to spend my time getting to know every inch. I'm almost to her breast. I pause, giving her a chance to stop me. She kisses me harder. I inch higher, higher, almost there –

Then the Solvarian national anthem starts playing in my pocket.

Not now, I think with a groan. Not when I finally have what I've been dreaming about ever since the first time I saw Bella with Maximus.

The anthem doesn't quit. Bella stiffens up in my arms. It's hard to make out when your national anthem is summoning you to pick up your phone.

Her body fits against mine perfectly. We break off the kiss and stare at each other. The moment is gone. I desperately want it back.

She's breathing heavily. The sight of her, her obvious arousal, makes the ache in my pants a thousand times worse.

The anthem starts again.

“Is that...?”

“The palace.”

I sit up and answer the phone. Then I grab her hand. I want to keep her close. “Hello?”

“Your uncle’s had another attack. I’m calling to tell you to come home.”

Marco’s voice cracks on the last word.

“How bad is it?” I start walking back to the house, pulling Bella along with me. There isn’t any answer.

“I said how bad?” My tone leaves Marco with no choice but to answer the question immediately.

“They are making contingency plans.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“For a funeral, just in case. I’m sorry. You need to get back here as fast as possible.”

“Understood. I’ll fly home immediately.”

I end the call. The realization hits me like a ton of bricks. He could die. In fact, the staff is actively preparing for it. How is that even possible?

“Alex?”

I realize I’m still holding Bella’s hand. I look at her.

“What’s going on?”

I can’t speak. My uncle can’t die. He just can’t. I lead her back to the house. The steps seem like an impossibly tall mountain, so I just sit down on them.

“I have to go back to Solvaria.”

“Okay... When?”

“Right now.”

I don’t want to look at her. I don’t want my uncle to be dying. I don’t want to have to leave a person who could be

exactly what I'm looking for. And I need more time to bring back the person I was sent here to find.

“What's wrong?”

I just shake my head. “My uncle. He's taken ill again. They're preparing for the worst outcome.”

She grabs both my hands. “Oh, Alex. I'm so sorry.”

She tugs at my wrist, but I refuse to move. She wraps her arm around me and lays her head on my shoulder. I put my hand up and gently cup her face. No one can fix this, but having Bella here with me still feels better than being alone.

“Can I get you anything?”

I shake my head. She gets up and goes into the house anyway. She brings back a plate with two cookies on it.

“Thanks.” I take the plate from her and take a bite of a cookie. They're delicious. She sits down next to me and hugs me again. I stare at the cookies, which summon a memory I've rarely thought of in the last twenty years. Maybe longer.

I've always shut people out when I've felt grief. I barely talked to anyone for months when my father died. I had my uncle and my mother, along with my cousins. But I've always felt alone.

When my uncle took me in as one of his own so I would have company, even then, I hid from everyone. Dinnertime came and went. I hid behind a tapestry. My plan was to stay there.

Hours later, I thought I was still there. Instead, the King was tucking me into bed. He patted me on the head. “We were frightened, Alex. Please don't worry us like that again.”

“I'm sorry. I won't.”

“It's okay to mourn. I'm mourning the loss of my brother, too. As is the country. But please don't shut yourself out of the world. People love you. It will hurt for a while, but it will be okay. We all recover from losses and become stronger after. I promise.”

He pointed to a plate on the nightstand. There were two cookies on it.

“You missed dinner.”

I found out years later they had brought in soldiers to search the grounds for me. The King had given strict orders that if I was found unharmed, he would retrieve me himself.

My uncle has done so much for me. He’s been a father in my life even longer than my dad was at this point. I don’t want him to go to his grave with a heart filled with regret. I want him to have his happiness, so he can depart this world with love in his heart.

I look at Bella. Her beautiful eyes are filled with concern. She’s such a caring person. I know she was feeling what I was when we kissed. I don’t know when we can again, but I hope that won’t be the last time.

I set the cookies aside, barely touched. “They’re preparing for his funeral. Just in case.”

She lets out a little gasp and grabs my arm tightly.

“Oh, Alex, no.”

I nod. “I have to go back. Immediately.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Don’t worry about that. What can I do? Do you need a ride to the airport?”

I laugh in spite of myself.

“You’re so sweet. No, I can take care of that. There’s only one thing I need.”

“Name it.”

“Please. Help me give my uncle his dying wish.”

She doesn’t answer. If she knew how important this is, she’d do something. I don’t care anymore about what effect this will have on my career. Just how it affects a man I love.

“I just want to do this one thing for him while I still can. If he dies and I’ve failed him, I’ll regret it for the rest of my life.”

“I’m sorry, Alex, I really am. But it’s not up to me...”

“Please, Bella. I’m begging you.” I can barely get the words out. The consequences if I fail him are overwhelming. I’ll never forgive myself.

I hear a door clang, then Lily’s voice. “What’s going on?”

Lily steps outside. “Alex, you’re as white as a sheet. What is it? What’s going on?”

Bella gives me the tiniest nod. Whatever I do now, she won’t try to stop me. Maybe she realizes this isn’t just my uncle’s last chance, but Lily’s, too.

“Will somebody tell me what is going on?”

Bella leads her over to the loveseat. Likely so she won’t fall upon hearing the news.

“I have to go home. My uncle had another attack.”

Lily gasps, and Bella quickly wraps her arm around her. “Is the King... dying?”

Tears trickle down her face.

I can’t lie to her. “There’s a distinct possibility that could happen.”

ISABELLA

“We should go inside.” I grab Lily by the hand and lead her into the living room. “Anyone want some water?”

Alex and Lily shake their heads. I go into the kitchen, my whole mind and body swirling from the highs and lows of the last half hour. I fill a glass of water and consider, somewhat seriously, throwing it onto myself for clarity.

I’m still flying high from the kiss. My brain is flipping back and forth, wildly alternating between that and the news about the King. I know which should be more important, but I can’t focus.

I take a few sips of water leaning over the counter.

I had been wondering what it would be like to kiss him. I had high expectations, but, God, he blew them out of the water.

He smelled so good. We had so much fun today, and then he said wanted to kiss me. I close my eyes and remember the feeling of lying on top of him, his hand slowly moving up my side. The closer he got to my breast, the more I wanted him to touch me. Time seemed to stand still.

Then his phone rang.

The timing was a little too perfect. Maybe fate intervened before we went too far. I’ll probably be dreaming about him long after he’s gone. Because he will be gone. He has his princely duties. I have mine here at the ranch.

I close my eyes and take a few deep breaths. My heart, still racing from the combination of the kiss and the news about the King, finally begins to slow down. I sigh as the tension leaves my body.

I finish my water and put the glass in the sink. Then I fill a glass for Lily and for Alex. She's as devastated as he is. Maybe more. Decades of loving someone and never having them might be what hell feels like.

A memory floods my mind, as clear as if it took place yesterday. I was eight or nine. I was out in the goat pen when Mama and I were over visiting. I came in for whatever reason. I have no idea now.

I heard my mom telling Lily that she couldn't mourn the past forever. She had to live in the present. Move on.

Usually, something like that, especially at that age, would have left my mind as soon as it entered when there were baby goats to play with. But there was a desperation to the conversation that I never forgot.

I take the glass of water for Lily now and head toward the living room. You don't just get over a love like that. I know that consciously, but I've never seen the pain of it on another person's face.

And you don't just get over giving up your baby. Handing him over to strangers.

I hear Alex speaking to Lily as I start to enter the living room. Something in his tone stops me in my tracks.

"I need to be completely honest and come clean," he says. I step back against the wall just outside the door frame.

"I was raised in my uncle's household after my father died, and he treated me no differently from his own children. But I have no recognized legal birthright to the throne."

"I see," Lily says.

"Solvaria is a more... progressive country now than it was years ago. My uncle made it clear to all of his children that he

would choose whoever he felt was best to rule, regardless of birth order.”

“That sounds like Francis.”

I can picture Lily’s face from the tone of her voice. She’s got that sad smile of hers.

“Of course, everyone, myself included, assumed that he didn’t mean me. I mean, blood is still blood.”

“You are his blood.”

“Yes, but his nephew. That’s different. But when I was sent here, he told me that if I got you to come see him, he would consider me for succession.”

Lily gasps. White hot fury rushes through my body. I want to throw the glass at the wall. No, I want to walk in there and throw it in his face.

You manipulative bastard, I think furiously as I race up the stairs. I have to get as far away from him as possible. I can hear Alex talking, but the words can’t penetrate the rage pounding in my head.

I lock myself in my bedroom and set down the glass of water. Then I throw myself on my bed and furiously punch my pillow.

How. Could. You. Be. So. Stupid, I tell myself, one punch for every word.

Thank God I didn’t sleep with him. Kissing him was bad enough. I should have known. He was only looking out for his personal gain. I lie back down on my bed, collapsing onto it.

Kissing him was a big mistake in more ways than one. It was also without a doubt the best kiss of my life. The connection I felt as our lips touched, his hand on my body. He knows what he is doing.

I grab the pillow and smash it on top of my face. I have to get it together. Yes, he is hotter than hell. Yes, he is a fabulous kisser. Yes, the sexual chemistry is undeniable. But he’s also not to be trusted.

For all I know, that kiss was just to get me to let my guard down. And what did he do after the kiss? He asked me to help convince Lily to go see the King. And then he uses a sob story about his position in the family to convince Lily.

Maybe it was fake. Was the news about his father fake, too? When you can't trust someone with small things, you don't know where the line is drawn.

I hear the front door slam. He must be leaving. Good. Go back to Solvaria and stay there. I get up, yank off my clothes, and crawl into bed.

“Stay out of my dreams, too,” I order as I shut my eyes, tears streaming out of them.

ALEXIS

“Of course, everyone, myself included, assumed that he didn’t mean me. I mean, blood is still blood.”

“You are his blood.”

“Yes, but his nephew. That’s different. But when I was sent here, he told me that if I got you to come see him, he would consider me for succession.”

Lily stares at the wall, unable to look at me. “So you need me to help you become King.”

I sigh. “Yes. But honestly, that doesn’t matter to me right now. If that’s the only reason I came here, I’d have already left to spend what could be my uncle’s last days with him. But seeing my uncle happy is even more important. He’s not just my King. He’s my family. And I want to honor him.”

She bites her lip and fidgets with her sleeves. “God, his final days. I can’t believe that. We were so young. We felt like we had all the time ahead of us. And now look at us.”

She looks down at her hands. She looks young for her age, in her late fifties or early sixties, I’m guessing. But time inevitably leaves its marks. On hands and hearts.

I sit down next to her. “I don’t know how many more days there will be. I hope it’s a good many more than they think. I do know he wants to spend some of that time with you. Could you please come and see him, even if only for a few moments?”

Lily is shaking but holds in her emotions. She avoids making eye contact. Finally, she replies. “Can you give me some time to think about it? How about until tomorrow morning?”

“Of course,” I say. I stand up from the couch. “If you say no, I promise I will respect your decision. But I hope you’ll say yes.”

I look down the hallway. It’s dark and empty. No sign of Isabella.

Every time things start looking like they are going well with her, something pushes us right back to square one. The way she kisses makes the slow pace worth it.

Stopping in the front yard, I can see a light somewhere on the second floor. That must be Bella’s room. It would be too awkward to walk back in.

There’s some stonework on the wall. I could probably scale that, I think. Or go back to the old country ways and toss a few pebbles at her window. I just want to see her face.

But my duties take priority. Thoughts of love are a luxury I can’t afford. This whole trip has been a huge undertaking, but it finally ends tomorrow. One way or another.

I return to my own house and try to push the events of the day from my mind. Some sleep will do me good. As I pull my shirt over my head, I get a faint trace of her fragrance. I try to stop myself from breathing it in before depositing the shirt into the hamper.

As I brush my teeth, I try to push thoughts of Isabella out of my mind. I turn off the lights and climb into bed.

Alone in the darkness, I find my mind wandering back to her. But I catch myself, sternly reminding myself to focus. With a deep, steadying breath, I close my eyes, encouraging my mind to embrace the silence.

The loud buzz of my phone stirs me awake. I’d set up keyword and sender alerts for emails regarding royal duties, especially pertaining to the King. I sigh as I read the subject line. *Urgent: Regarding Your Return to Solvaria.*

Opening the email, I find the contents cryptic, to throw off any other potential readers. But its message is clear. If Lily is to return with me, she must assume an entirely different identity.

The message implies that the last time Lily was in Solvaria, she sparked a royal scandal. It will be difficult to fulfill the King's wish discreetly if every tabloid in the country has her face plastered over it.

The email ends with a chilling coded message.

“Don't set your crown on the edge of the table.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose as I sit back in my chair. Another complication to deal with. What kind of person could I bring with me to Solvaria to deflect suspicion? I start thinking about the possibilities.

Maybe an academic coming to do research on ancient Solvarian history? It would justify spending time with the royal family. But that would require a lot of specialized knowledge, and I'm already asking so much of her.

I could simply say she was an expert rancher, coming to consult on the construction of a new stable. But then there would be questions about her qualifications and additional scrutiny.

Any idea I can think of would draw attention, defeating the entire purpose of the clandestine approach.

Then it comes to me like a flash. What if there was much bigger news to divert everyone's attention? I can think of a news item that would knock Lily Adams right off the front pages.

Like a royal prince introducing his beautiful fiancée to his nation.

It almost makes too much sense. We've already laid the groundwork for the act here. We can simply replicate it in Solvaria. It would serve as the perfect distraction while Lily spends time with the King.

And it would give me a few extra days with Bella at least.

I'm certain she will fight the idea as hard as she can. But if it's what Lily wants, she won't say no. I stay up all night practicing the phrasing as if my proposition for Bella is a diplomatic address.

I'm already knocking at the front door of their house before the sun is fully up. When it opens, I greet Bella with a warm smile and a box of crullers. She looks at me with a strange kind of removal.

"Oh," she says. "We weren't expecting company this early. Can I help you?"

My smile quickly fades. It's even worse than going back to square one. She's decided to treat me like a complete stranger. But I have to go along with my plan.

"I need to speak with Lily," I say urgently. "And you."

She shrugs indifferently. "If you say so." She steps back from the door and allows me in. The silence is deafening as I step inside. She keeps her gaze firmly on the floor, a wall of indifference between us.

"I brought you these," I say. "Not quite as good as a Solvarian pastry, but they might hit the spot." She simply nods, taking them from me without a word. Without even a look.

There's a longing to reach out to her, but the emptiness of her gaze stops me. This is going to be a harder sell than I had originally thought. I speak to her as I'm walking through the front room.

"I know it's early, but this is too important of a conversation to wait. I told your aunt that I would respect her decision, whatever it is. But I have one more thing that she needs to know first."

"I see," she whispers. Then, she disappears. Probably off to her room. Despite my desire to chase after her, I hold my ground.

When I step into the living room, I'm shocked by the sight of Lily Adams standing in the middle of the room. Her face seems to have acquired an entirely new set of lines overnight.

My heart starts to skip when I notice that she is holding the handle of a rolling suitcase.

She takes a deep breath and nods. “When do we leave?”

ISABELLA

Aunt Lily sits on my bed. The light of the rising sun bathes her in a golden glow as she stares into the distance. I wonder how long she's been sitting here. I doubt she ever went to sleep last night.

"What's going on?" I ask as I rub the sleep out of my eyes.

She turns to me with a melancholy smile. "I've decided," she tells me. "I need to go to Solvaria."

She can see the protest about to leave my mouth, but she holds up her hands to stop me.

"I know you don't like the way Alex has gone about everything. I know you don't think we should give them what they're asking for."

I silently listen, fighting my urge to argue.

"But, sweetheart, there's a lot that you don't know, too. For thirty years, there's been an entire part of my life that's felt like this unfinished painting. One locked away in a dark corner of the cellar. And now, the lights are on and I have a key. I need the chance to finish it."

I close my eyes and take a long breath. Lily's right.

She had both Francis and Alex taken away from her. In one single moment, she lost a family and a future. She's probably been wondering ever since what her life could have been like.

Lily's done so much for me. I owe it to her to be supportive. "If you need to do this, Aunt Lily, and if it's important to you, I won't stand in your way. I promise."

She reaches out and squeezes my hand. "Thank you, Bella," she whispers, a weight visibly lifting from her shoulders.

Once she leaves my room, I throw my pillow to the floor. It's not much, but it feels good to let out the frustration.

I toy with the idea of my not going. The King wants to see her, after all, and not me. But I know Aunt Lily can't do this on her own. She needs me.

I try to tell myself that I can just ignore Alex from now until the end of the trip. I'll focus on supporting Lily and enjoying a new place. I try to imagine myself sightseeing, but there's a knot of anxiety growing in my stomach. I have a feeling this won't be as easy as that.

I try not to think about it while I pull on my jeans and a T-shirt. By the time I reach the bottom of the stairs, there's already a knock at the door. I have a feeling I know who it is before I see his face.

I try out my new tack of ignoring Alex as I let him into the front room. I pretend he's just another visitor. He hands me a box of donuts, which I'm tempted to drop into the kitchen trash on principle. But I wouldn't do that if anyone else came to the house, so, it violates my new *modus operandi* to treat him like a stranger.

This is already getting confusing. I just decide to put the box on the table.

When I walk into the front room, Alex is in the middle of explaining something to Lily.

"So, you see, the problem is that if I get off the plane with anyone, that person is immediately under scrutiny. You deserve the chance to just spend time with the King..."

He perks up when he sees me.

"Oh, good morning, Bella," Alex says brightly.

“Um. Hi. What are you two conspiring about? Did I miss something?”

Alex stands up perfectly straight at my entrance. This show of deference alarms me far more than if he gave me the finger.

“Bella, we have something to ask of you...” Aunt Lily says. Is she carrying his water for him now?

“We?”

“Yes,” Alex says, looking at Lily. “When Lily was last in Solvaria, it was a scandal. If it’s just her, it will be harder to hide her presence.”

“Okay... And where do I come in?”

“But if I’m the guardian of the prince’s fiancée, Isabella...”

My face drops. “No. I thought we were done with this.”

“We just have to tell the people in Solvaria the same story we told your friends,” Alex insists. “We convinced them. We can convince anyone.”

I shake my head. So much for ignoring him. He went and made it impossible.

“Isabella.” He steps towards me with plaintive eyes. “I will give you anything if you just see this through. Lily Adams, the ex-lover of the King, cannot be seen in Solvaria. But Lily Sanchez, the mother of the bride-to-be, would be welcomed.”

“No,” I blurt out. “This is insane. And it’s unfair to Lily. You’re already guilt-tripping her into seeing an ex-boyfriend who destroyed her. Now you’re worried she’ll embarrass you?”

I want to tell Alex about all the things I know, all the ways that his family has already hurt her. They took her love, and they took her child. Now they won’t even let her have her own name?

I turn to Aunt Lily, feeling myself getting choked up. “I know I said I’d support you, Aunt Lily. But is this really what

you want?”

Lily walks past Alex and puts her arm around me. She looks at her son and takes my hand.

“Alex, let me talk to Bella for a moment.”

She pulls me into a room down the hall.

Once the door is shut behind us, she hugs me tightly.

“I know you’re trying to stand up for me. And I appreciate that so much.”

“But?” I ask her.

“He’s my son, Bella,” she says, her eyes welling up. “I know we’ve only barely met him, but I can feel it when I look at him. That is my son, and he needs me. And I’d like to see King Francis before he dies.”

Her words rip through me.

“I know it isn’t fair to ask you to do this,” she continues. “But I *am* asking. You’re all I have. You are the person I love the most in the world, but I have never had a full heart. I need to go there and find the missing pieces. Don’t do it to help him. That’s fine. Do it to help me.”

I look into Lily’s pleading eyes and swallow hard. “Alright,” I whisper. “I’ll do it. For you.”

She squeezes me so tightly for so long, she might have left an imprint. When we re-enter the living room, Alex looks up, a questioning expression on his face.

“Okay,” I tell him, staring him up and down with skepticism. “I’m in.”

He practically jumps. He starts to say something, but I cut him off.

“But only if you agree to a few things first. Lily is going to be treated with respect. If I hear any of your puffy-shirted relatives talking down to her or gossiping, there will be a big problem.”

He nods. “You have my word.”

I wouldn't trust the word of a royal, especially one looking out for his self-interest, for two seconds, but I keep that to myself.

“As for us, we can be a couple in public. Holding hands, using cute names, being sweet, and all that. As soon as we're alone, that stops.”

I think back to the porch wistfully before it all got interrupted.

“And no kissing. Or anything else, for that matter. It is out of the question. If that's going to be an issue, you'd better start looking for another girl.”

“Of course. I can't even begin to thank you enough for this.”

“That's a start, I guess.” I turn to Lily with a smile and shrug. “Looks like we're heading to Solvaria.”

Within the hour, with fully packed bags in hand, we're preparing to board the plane that will whisk us away to Solvaria. As we prepare for takeoff, Lily reaches over and pats my hand. The plane starts down the runway, and with a final jolt, I say goodbye to the world I've known.

ALEXIS

“Do you want my window seat?”

Bella shakes her head. Lily is leaning over, looking out the window. I’d like Bella to see Solvaria from the air. My homeland is as beautiful from the air as it is from the ground.

The crystal-clear water gently laps against long, white beaches, which stretch out to small coastal villages. In the interior are dense forests, carpets of green broken up by small towns. Then the mountains, with verdant foothills that give rise to steep crags.

The view doesn’t disappoint, but my heart is heavy. I wonder whether my uncle will ever see the view of our country from above again.

Once we land, the plane does not taxi to the main terminal. The door opens, and my secretary, Nicolai, steps on. I get up, and we confer quickly.

“We’ll get off here,” I tell Lily and Bella when I board again. They look confused but get up. I grab my carry-on bag and Lily’s. “Nicolai can take yours.”

Isabella nods. A number of porters are along to take the bags out while we’re walking down near the royal hangar.

Bella walks off the plane first. At the bottom of the stairs, Nicolai rushes ahead. He leads us to an inconspicuous, unmarked limousine, one that does not have any royal insignias or signs of notable passengers.

Nicolai opens the back door of the vehicle for us. Lily starts to get in and stops. “What about our luggage?”

“We’re taking some in the limousine, but the rest will come within the hour,” I tell her.

“Your mother doesn’t even know,” Nicolai says proudly.

“You’re the soul of discretion. Thank you, Nicolai.”

Normally there would be at least one photographer greeting the plane, but Nicolai pulled out all the stops to ensure that Christian scheduled a photo op at the exact same time.

I climb into the limo, which is decked out with all the usual fixings. I help myself to a pastry.

“Do you want one? Bella? Lily?” I hold up the tray.

Bella shakes her head, but Lily’s face lights up. “Oh, I remember these. Try one, Bella.”

“No, thanks,” she says, sulking.

You’re going to have to eat while we are here, I think. Or maybe Bella is planning on starving herself until she goes back to the States.

“Oh, try one, Bella. It won’t kill you,” Lily says, taking another bite.

“I said I’m good, Aunt Lily.”

The car is silent as the limo turns left into the large circular driveway. The car stops, and the driver opens the door closest to the house. “Villa Silvae, sir.”

Bella looks at me, eyebrows raised.

“We’re not going to the palace?” Lily says.

I shake my head.

“What’s... Villa Silvae?” Bella asks.

“It’s just one of our residences –

“One? How many do you need?”

“We have a few. It means cottage of the forest.”

“Some cottage.”

I don't tell her about Villa Amabilia, in the mountains, the one we call 'the cabin.' As we exit the car, the staff bows in greeting. I sneak a look at Bella, and she's obviously impressed at the sprawling, towering mansion.

My phone buzzes, and I see a text from my mother. *Where are you?* it says.

“You two get settled here, Lily and Bella. I have to attend to something at the palace. Take good care of them, Vittoria and Arturo.”

The head housekeeper and butler nod. In the limo, I help myself to more pastry. I'd like to show her around. I think she'd like it here if she let herself forget for a moment how much she wants to hate it.

Nicolai got here quickly enough to be waiting for me at the Palace. “Your mother is in the sitting room in the East Wing, outside of her apartments.”

“How is the King?”

“He's in bed. Weak. He wants to see you as soon as possible as well.”

He turns left, but I stop. The East Wing is in the opposite direction from the King's private quarters. “Sir, I highly recommend you see your mother first. Sir.”

I nod and follow him. On the way, he brings me up to speed on some projects I was working on before the King's first attack.

“You've done an excellent job while I was away, Nicolai.” I mean it.

“Thank you, sir.” Nicolai leaves me with a slight bow.

I take a deep breath before I enter the room. “Mother.”

“Alex. Sit.” She raises her cheek for me. I kiss it, and then I sit across from her.

“Well, it seems your trip to America was very exciting. You've brought back a fiancée?”

I nod. *Technically true.*

“Well, bring her in. I want to meet her.”

“She’s not here. She’s staying at the cottage.”

“What? Why?”

“I thought it would be better.”

“What are you hiding, Alex?”

“Mother. Nothing. Please trust me.”

My mother takes a sip of her coffee. I can see the rage building in her eyes.

“We’re going to have an official engagement ceremony, Mother. You’ll meet her then.”

“I want to meet her now.”

“Not yet, Mother.”

“You’ve known this woman, what, a month? Less? Don’t risk everything for some unknown. Your position is tenuous enough as it is...”

“I know that, Mother. Even so, no. Not yet.”

She leans forward and sets her teacup down so hard that some liquid sloshes out of the top. “I will get to the bottom of this. I can meet her now, or I can show up at the engagement party with all the dirt I find on her. And I’m sure there will be dirt. There always is.”

I stand up.

“Where are you going?”

“We’re done here.”

I expect her to shout, but for some reason, she doesn’t. I leave the door open when I leave, and one of the guards in the hall hurries to close it.

I head to the other end of the palace, to my uncle’s bed chamber. I’m calm when I get there, but when I see the King lying there, something inside me breaks. He looks so small and fragile. The nurse sitting at his bedside leaves with a small

bow. I kneel down beside the bed, grab my uncle's hand, and kiss it.

"Alex," he says.

It's hard for him to utter just that one word. Quickly I explain that I'll arrange for Lily to see him for an interlude during the engagement party. It will be the perfect time when everyone is distracted. Since he's ill, no one will expect him. My uncle nods.

"Thank you," he whispers, pulling on my shirt. "How is she, Alex? She's..."

"She's good, Uncle. She's excited to see you. She talked about the many happy memories you have."

He smiles bigger than I've maybe ever seen, and his eyes widen. He pats me on the shoulder and just keeps smiling. Then he shuts his eyes and falls asleep quickly. I gently pull the covers up to his chest.

I leave the room, quietly shutting the door on my way out. The nurse immediately goes back in. *Almost there*, I think as I head toward my own suite. I need to sit for a moment before heading back to Villa Silvae. On the settee, I think about the task ahead of me.

To fulfill my uncle's wish, there's one more thing I need to do to make this work. Convince Bella to have an official engagement party with me. Piece of cake, right?

The whole way there the next morning, after staying at the palace overnight, I practice the conversation in the car, still not knowing how exactly to break it to Bella.

ISABELLA

Alex has been gone just overnight at the palace, but I somehow miss him already. Looking over at Lily, I don't know how she does it.

How does someone live for thirty years without the person they love? Not that I love Alex or anything.

Right. I'm not fooling myself. In the moments I'm able to forget that this is all just an act, I'm the happiest I've ever been. But then I come back to reality.

He's a prince and I'm... not. If he pulls this off, he could be in line for the throne. I'll just go back to Texas.

"Want to have breakfast together, Lily?" I ask when I come downstairs.

"I'd love that, Bella."

Now I just have to build up enough courage to ask the staff, the one I'm afraid to talk to, even though they're specifically here to wait on us.

"Vittoria, ma'am?" I call out with uncertainty.

"Just remember," Lily whispers. "It's like asking for a waitress in a restaurant."

"Except it's not, though."

"Yeah. I know." She giggles.

Vittoria appears suddenly, as if by magic, and Lily clams up. I shoot her an amused look.

“Yes, Ms. Isabella?” Vittoria asks.

“Could we have some breakfast, please? If you’re able?”

“Yes, ma’am, it would be my pleasure. What would you like?”

“Whatever you like to make the best. Or whoever is cooking, what they like.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Thank you.”

She curtsies in her long skirt, and I see a flush of pink on her smiling cheeks. I wonder how often she’s asked what she likes.

There’s a stream outside the grounds from the back terrace, against gently rolling green hills. A trophy room in the vast mansion hints at the profusion of game in the area. A family of deer grazes below.

“Wow. Can you imagine living here all the time, Lily?”

From Lily’s wistful smile, I see that she can, and no doubt she has.

I hear footsteps behind us coming onto the terrace. I turn around, expecting Vittoria. Instead, it’s Alex, carrying our tray.

“Breakfast for the beautiful ladies,” he says with a flourish. He joins us on the patio, and I feel jittery with him next to me.

This is all a ruse, I understand that, but I have a feeling that if I reached over and planted a kiss on his cheek, he wouldn’t mind it. I wish I had the courage to find out.

“How is the King?” Lily asks.

“He’s in good spirits. He’s pleased you’re here. We arranged a date for you to meet.”

“Really? When?” Lily brightens with anticipation, holding her breath expectantly.

“At the official engagement party.”

Oh, God. For Lily’s sake, I try to feign enthusiasm, but I’m sick of being a living mannequin.

“And when is this engagement party?” I ask. I’m getting claustrophobic here in this huge mansion. More, though, being close to Alex is dangerous for my heart. The sooner I leave, the better.

“Five days. There are many arrangements to be made in advance.”

“It can’t be sooner?”

“Five days is warp speed given what’s required. This is a state affair.”

“Okay.” I sigh, lamenting the delay so much as the five extra days of getting close to Alex, only to have to leave. “What do we do in the meantime?”

He opens his arms and nods to the scenery. “Would you like a royal tour of the Kingdom of Solvaria?”

“Does it have to be the royal version?” I grin.

Lily looks so vicariously excited for me to go that I don’t have the heart to let her down, even if I wish I could. But of course I want to go with him. As much as it hurts to open my heart for something that can never work, I’d rather spend the day with Alex than wish I were with him.

“What will you do while we’re out, Aunt Lily?”

“Eagerly await all the amazing photos you’re going to send me.”

We get into the car, which Alex tells me is chauffeured mainly because it can cause traffic problems when he travels in one of his own cars conspicuously.

“Good to know,” I say, trying to let it sink in.

I have a better idea of what he means when we get to the center of Vanecourt Square in the coastal city of Vitasca. It makes Rodeo Drive and Madison Avenue look like Main Street Mayberry.

“I’ve never seen so many flashbulbs in my life.” I look nervously outside the limousine window.

“Well, I had Nicolai contact the media.”

“You what?”

He exits the limousine first, then looks back with a guilty smile that’s maddeningly charming.

The shutters go into a frenzy as he kisses my hand, then leads me out, and pulls me close with his arm around my waist.

“Kiss her, Prince Alex!”

“Show off your fiancée!”

“Should we humor them?” he asks, moving my hair away and putting his mouth against my ear. I giggle and close my eyes involuntarily.

“I don’t want to disappoint on my first outing.”

He spins me toward him and kisses me slowly and passionately. A cheer rises up in the crowd, but it’s not nearly as loud as the one in my heart.

His two security officers, straight from central casting in sunglasses and suits, exit the car behind us and push back the crowd.

They escort us into the central plaza, filled with dozens of luxury stores. There’s a fountain spouting water following arcs of light. The cobblestone promenade is flanked by delicate palm trees.

Alex dips me in a little improvised dance. Although I feel unsteady, I feel safe in his arms, following his lead, and letting him guide my steps.

In each of the stores, he slips the staff what I assume is an obscene amount of solvars to have the space to ourselves.

Our first stop is a spare boutique with dresses that look like they came from a Vogue photo shoot. “Anything you want, Bella, it’s yours.”

“But the dresses are, like, three thousand solvars each. How many dollars is that?”

“That’s for me to know.”

“And me to find out?”

“Nope.”

I pick out three dresses, two pairs of shoes, and a bikini. Alex gives me a disappointed look.

“What? You told me I could get anything...” Is he really getting annoyed for doing what he asked?

He shakes his head. “It’s not that, Bella. Get more. Get everything you desire. I saw you eyeing that black beaded gown there.” He points. “Try it on. Get it if you’d like. If you want the whole store, it’s yours.”

Alex helps by taking things he likes off the racks and draping them over his forearms.

A shopkeeper whisks the clothes to a fitting room.

“I bet you’ll look beautiful in this one.” Alex holds a coral-colored form-fitting dress flush against my body, and I’m so tempted to kiss him. But without the paparazzi, I don’t know if I should.

I try it on. When I walk out and present myself to him, he’s sitting on a chair outside, staring hungrily.

“You have to get that one, Isabella.”

I do, along with about twenty other items from that shop alone.

Our last stop in the shopping district is a jewelry store that’s decorated in more crystal than I’ve ever seen in my life. He buys me a sapphire and ruby necklace, along with matching earrings.

“The same colors of your country and mine.”

“Thank you, Alex. I love it.”

I hold myself back from saying more. It would take so little for me to spill, to change that ‘it’ into another little word. I can’t puncture our illusion. To keep the ruse convincing, I can’t fool myself into thinking it’s anything other than fiction. That’s what I keep telling myself.

By the time we're done, the cars are stuffed with boxes and bags full of suits, heels, athletic clothes, nightgowns, party dresses, loungewear, jewelry, and accessories, including types of attire and accouterments that I didn't even know existed before now.

I have no idea how I'm going to take any of this back with me. But I don't want to think about that. I just want to live each moment as it happens.

ALEXIS

I have to remind myself that this is all just a performance. Our public affair is only meant to serve as a distraction, drawing eyes away from the palace.

When we're spending time together, I can't help but notice the way Bella's eyes light up. It looks too genuine to be an act. Maybe she's truly enjoying herself. Maybe she's feeling that fire we've always felt together, too.

I approach Villa Silvae, a quick drive from my own home. The guards bow and open the entrance right away. I wait in the sitting room for Isabella to come downstairs. I want to read the edition of the *Solvaria Sun* in my hand, but I don't want to have to fold it back up to show it to Bella with the requisite flourish.

"Good morning," she says sleepily as she descends the stairs. She looks radiant in a light dress that goes down to her knees and hugs her curves, even when she's still waking up.

"Look who made the front page." I hold up the daily newspaper, with the two of us pictured on the cover.

She grabs the paper out of my hand and shakes her head at our image. But her smile is pure delight.

"Alexis Fancies His Fiancée. Now that's funny," she says as she raises an eyebrow. She hands me back the paper like it's a dirty towel.

I try to reassure her. "This is a good thing, Isabella. It means we've gotten over the hard part. The next few days

should be smooth sailing.”

My confidence seems to help calm her nerves. When she looks at the picture again, she’s smiling. I lean forward. “Speaking of sailing, have you ever been to a real beach?”

“It depends on what you mean by a real beach,” she admits. “The ones in Texas are mostly rocky and brown. If you mean white sand beaches with clear water, then... no.”

“You’re going to love the Solvarian shore then. Pristine white sand, azure water, and mountains looming over the horizon. Would you care to join me at the beach this morning?”

“I’ve been dreaming about it since I saw it from the plane. Yes. And I got those new swimsuits yesterday.”

I can’t wait to see her in them.

Whether she’s excited about the beach or spending time together, I’m thrilled to see her joy at something I’ve provided.

As our driver heads toward the beach, my gaze keeps drifting toward Bella, drawn in by the way the light dances on her dark caramel skin. I resist the urge to reach over and intertwine my fingers with hers, and I settle for stolen glimpses of her beauty.

If I have to put on a show, I couldn’t ask for a more stunning scene partner.

We go into a cabana to leave our things. I give her a parting glance, and she giggles back and waves goodbye as I leave her to put on her swimsuit.

While I wait outside in our lounge area at the beach club, I mingle with a few Solvarian citizens nearby. They are quick to offer their well-wishes for the King, and I can’t help but dwell on the sacrifices he has made to serve his people. Am I ready to bear the same weight and suppress my personal desires to serve the nation?

They all congratulate me on my engagement and eagerly await my fiancée’s emergence from the cabana. I tell them she’ll be here in a moment.

A gasp follows as she walks out the door at the mere sight of her. She's clad in an elegant white one-piece swimsuit that accentuates her toned athletic figure. She exudes strength and confidence along with grace and femininity.

The sun radiates off her sun-kissed brown skin, drawing all eyes to her. Amidst the sea of people, Bella outshines everyone on the beach.

"I thought you were bringing me to see the beach, not just standing around," she teases me. "Let's go!"

Before I have a chance to respond, she's sprinting across the beach, and I'm tumbling right after her. As we reach the water's edge, Bella's excited laughter echoes across the water. I grasp her hand, leading her further into the sea till the waves lap around our knees.

She lets out a shriek of delighted surprise as I suddenly lift her up while the water sprays around us. With Bella laughing in my arms, our connection feels as real as it must appear to everyone watching from the shore.

Bella notices a group of children diligently constructing a sandcastle, and her eyes light up with childlike enthusiasm. "You know, I've built sandcastles, but never with real sand at the beach," she confesses. "With buckets and everything."

Bella and I find ourselves kneeling on the soft sand, setting up our own construction site next to the children. Her joy radiates like the sun overhead as we spend the next hour laughing, flirting, and having the occasional sand fight.

After putting the final touches on the outer wall, we stand back to look at our masterpiece. Compared to the children's grand castle a few feet away, it looks more like a sand shack, but I like our cozy home.

The children look at our creation and then at us, their expressions a mix of amusement and pity. We burst into laughter, and we invite the kids to help us knock it down.

A notification on my phone interrupts the serenity. It's a text invitation to an exclusive party later this evening hosted by Solvaria's most prominent land developer, Parcifal Richter.

The presence of the prince and his fiancée has been specially requested.

I turn to Bella. “There’s a party tonight, on an acquaintance’s yacht. Some friends of mine would like to attend. It’s going to be swarming with press, so an appearance there could keep us in the news for the rest of the week. Entirely up to you.”

To my surprise, she looks back at me with a playful grin. “We wouldn’t want to disappoint your adoring public, would we?”

“And yours.”

We pack up our things and return to the mansion. The positive energy of the morning carries us through the car ride. Whereas before I wasn’t sure if Bella was looking out the window out of genuine interest or just to avoid me, now she remarks on all the different things that catch her eye, from old couples walking by to luxury store window displays.

I fight the temptation to kiss her in the hallway before she retreats to her quarters to prepare for the night’s event. The world sees us as a perfect match, and I’m seized by a desire to live up to that.

I look at the portrait of the King hanging in my chambers and remind myself of what is at stake. But when Bella smiles at me, it all seems about more than just ambition. I don’t care about any of that compared to her.

I stare at the array of suits hanging in my wardrobe. Do I go for a full formal suit, complete with a tie? Or do I opt for the relaxed look of a man of leisure?

I imagine Bella walking into the event on my arm. With her carefree spirit, I can’t imagine her being comfortable in a stuffy dress. She won’t have to do anything other than be herself to instantly wow everyone in the room. I follow her lead and go for comfort.

I reach out for a well-tailored navy blazer, a pristine white shirt, and a pair of black dress pants. No tie.

The door creaks open, and Bella steps in. Her minidress, one she bought yesterday, tightly hugs her curves and shows off her radiant dark skin. She is elegant, playful, and hot as hell.

“Wow,” I manage to gasp out. “You look... absolutely stunning.”

She bashfully tucks a strand of hair behind her ears. “You wanted to grab their attention, right?”

Damn the press’s attention. She has mine.

ISABELLA

“God, am I out of my mind?” I whisper, staring down at the dress that hugs my thighs. It leaves very little to the imagination. “I don’t usually wear things like this.”

Too late to change now.

When I walk into the room, his mouth drops. “Wow,” Alex says once I’m within earshot. “You look... absolutely stunning.”

“You wanted to grab their attention, right?” I feel like I should click my heels or thank my fairy godmother.

On the inside, I want the ground to open up and swallow me whole. How am I supposed to survive the night when everyone’s staring at me? But the answer is obvious. I’ll do more than survive. I have Alexis by my side.

We arrive at the party with linked arms. He leads the way through the crowd, nodding and exchanging greetings with the people whose heads nearly snap when I enter the room.

Nothing about this feels comfortable, from what I’m wearing to the event we’re currently mingling at. This is important to Alex, so I’ll put on a brave face and push through.

But *wow*. Every single person we come across, they smell like money. They might shit gold, for all I know.

Their outfits are custom-made. It’s clothing that has never been worn by anyone else and might never be worn again since it’s already been worn once. Most of these people look

like models with dewy, clear skin. One woman approaches us and says she's sixty-three, but she looks no older than forty.

"How are you feeling?" Alex whispers. His hand grazes my lower back, making me stand a little straighter. "I know that this might be a lot. Just let me know if you want to leave."

I force a smile. In my peripheral, I see one of the bar areas. I may need a glass or two soon. "This is wonderful. Don't worry about me."

"Alex!" A man raises his hands above his head, nearly spilling his glass of wine all over his suit. "My God, it's good to see you! Who's the beauty?"

We walk over to get closer to him.

"Benjamin, hello," Alex replies, ducking his head respectfully. The man eyes me with a glint in his gaze and a coy smile. "This is my fiancée, Isabella."

"Aren't you a sight?" Benjamin whispers, taking my hand and brushing his lips across my knuckles.

Beside me, I feel Alex stiffen up considerably with his actions. I don't want this man slobbering over my hand, either, but I suck it up.

When he straightens out, I grin. "Nice to meet you," I say softly.

"Where'd you find one like this, Alex?" Benjamin asks, adjusting his blazer. "I'd kill for a woman this good-looking."

"How much have you had to drink tonight, Benjamin?" Alex asks, raising a brow. "You need to watch the alcohol. I don't think your wife would appreciate the words coming out of your mouth."

"Ouch." Benjamin frowns. Meanwhile, Alex brings me a bit closer to his side, digging his fingers into my waist. "I'm just kidding. Please don't tell Priscilla."

The smile Alex sends him is forced. It never reaches his eyes. "Don't worry. Just be careful, yeah?"

Alex pats him on the back and sends him on his way. When he's out of sight, the scowl on his face deepens and his eyes darken considerably. I swallow hard.

"I don't tolerate disrespect," he says in a low voice, guiding me to a more secluded spot. There are a few lounge chairs positioned around a small fire pit. I take a seat, conscious of how my dress rises a little higher up my thighs. "If anyone tries talking to you like that again, let me know."

"Aren't we supposed to mingle?" I ask, brushing my fingers along his wrist.

"Only if they're worthy of our company."

My breath catches in my throat. What's going on with him? He isn't jealous of the attention I'm receiving, is he?

I catch his gaze trailing over the expanse of my legs. Clearing my throat, I gesture to the drinks station. "I'm going to get some water. Do you want anything?"

"No, I'll..." He hangs back, sticking his hands in his pockets. "I'll talk to some people. Join me whenever you're ready."

"Alright."

Wetting my lips as he begrudgingly joins the sea of mingling bodies, I sigh and rise from my seat. I can feel many pairs of eyes piercing through me as I make my way through. Some mumble greetings. I reciprocate with a small smile, but there's something underlying their glances as they look me up and down.

Good God. It looks like these people want to eat me alive.

The gentle thump of music drowns out some of the conversations around me. At the drinks table, I pour myself an ice-cold water and sip casually.

Alex stares at me a few yards away, which makes me fidget. At the same time, it makes my knees go weak. What do I do about the tension between us? The pooling wetness that's beginning to emerge in my panties?

I knew I should've worn a damn pantyliner. It's like a necessity whenever I'm around Alex at this point.

After a quick nod from him, I return to his side. His hand gravitates toward my waist as he introduces me to everyone who stops and speaks with us. His claim of possession over me drives me wild. It only intensifies with every man who shows a faint interest in me beyond knowing my first name.

"There's a limousine waiting for us," he whispers, lips dangerously close to my ear. A shiver runs down my spine. "Want to go soon?"

One glance at my phone tells me that it's close to midnight. I don't know how much longer I can handle this, standing around while he seduces me with his eyes.

"Let's go now," I whisper in return.

He makes my wish a reality. Taking my hand, he issues his final goodbyes to some attendees before leading me away from the party. I can feel the urgency behind his movements, coupled with the desperation in his voice as he asks me to join him at his private mansion.

"Are you sure about this, Alex?" I mumble, rubbing circles into his hand.

He shushes me, trailing his thumb across my bottom lip. "Don't fight this feeling, Bella. We both want this."

The limousine cannot come any sooner. When it does, Alex ushers me in first and makes sure the partition between us and the driver is closed tight.

That leaves us alone. Immediately, his attention closes in on me. His hands are on my waist. His scent and pheromones encapsulate me. I allow him to guide my hands as his lips meet mine in a passionate frenzy, aching for his dominance over me.

Soon enough, his hand starts to trail south. Down my bare legs, he hikes up my dress and makes a move towards my soaking wet panties. He hums against my lips once his fingers make contact.

“You’re a mess right now,” he whispers, trailing kisses across my cheek and chin. He sneaks a few bites in, too. “Is this all for me?”

“Yes.” I nod quickly. “It is.”

“Good.” He stops kissing me and makes me look him in the eyes. His voice is soft and he makes me feel as if I’m the only person who matters. “God, I want you, Bella.”

ALEXIS

“G od, I want you, Bella,” I whisper in her ear.

I run my hand up between her thighs. I’ve been thinking about her legs all night. Her legs and the rest of her. She grabs my hand.

She slides my hand up higher. I cup the area between her legs and rub her gently. She lets out a soft low moan that I quickly smother with my mouth.

I push my tongue into her mouth. Her lower body is writhing under me. Her hands grab randomly at my arms. My cock is straining against my pants. I want her like I’ve never wanted anything or anyone in my life.

I release my hand. She gasps.

“It’s okay, love.”

I slip my fingers into her panties and touch her. She’s so wet. I run my finger down the opening to her.

“Yes. Oh, Alex.”

I’m just about to plunge my finger into her when the limo stops.

“The estate house, Your Grace.”

The driver’s voice coming through the intercom cuts through the air like a knife. We both freeze. I give her one sharp little tap with my finger. She squeals. And I pull my hand away.

“You’re relieved for the evening, sir.”

The driver nods and bows. His face is unreadable, as it should be. He’s paid not to have opinions.

We walk into the house. I gave the night shift the evening off, so it’s a skeleton crew. When I got my first look at her in that dress, I knew I’d made the right call.

The entrance hall is massive. In the center, under a large chandelier, is a circular marble table. I run my hand across it while we pass it.

“I could take you right here,” I tell Bella, looking directly at her.

I can see the excitement in her eyes.

“I won’t, but I could.” I grab her by the waist and position her exactly where I want her, fully clothed, as we walk through.

Under my hands, she’s trembling. I raise my hand up, deliberately brushing against her breast, and stroke her cheek gently.

“This way,” I whisper.

I take her by the hand and lead her into the library.

“Lots of options here. Two couches. The table. Do you have a preference?” I offer.

“I…”

I pull her in close and grab her butt. I grind my erection against her, and she throws back her head, sighing.

“Guess we’ll do what I want then.”

She laughs, and I kiss her. I lead her to the side of the room and yank on a specific book. The section of the bookcase pops open.

“Ohhhh.”

I push her into the hidden staircase ahead of me. The light comes on automatically at the top of the staircase. There’s just

enough light to see, and I love the sight of all that I'm surveying.

Her eyes are filled with fire. Her chest rises up and down rapidly. She wants me as much as I want her.

I pull the door shut and push her up against it.

"Oh, Alex."

She picks up her leg, and I press the length of my body against hers. We both moan when we touch. I kiss her again, dipping my tongue deep into her mouth.

"I could take you right here, standing up. I bet you'd like that." I'm rubbing my hard cock against her and take her by the hands, positioning her as if I'm going to fuck her right there.

"Yes."

"I knew you would somehow. I just wanted to hear you say it. But not today. Not right now. Right now, you'll get fucked properly."

We walk hand in hand up the stairs. I pop the door open. And I guide her in but stop her.

"Stay there. By the door. I want you to show yourself to me in all your glory. I want an unadulterated view." I slide the zipper on her dress all the way down. Then I grab her hands and place them on her breasts, pinning the dress in place.

I strip off all my clothes. My cock springs free, straining in Bella's direction. I sit down in the chair, facing her.

"Drop the gown now. Show me all of you."

She walks forward with nothing on except her high heels, thong, and barely there strapless bra. She struts forward for my pleasure alone. Her legs look fantastic. I run my eyes up her body. Her slim waist accentuates the curves of her hips and breasts, which are barely contained, spilling over the cups.

I look right into her eyes. She walks over to me and bends over, grabbing my cock with one hand and cupping my balls with the other.

“God, you are so beautiful.”

Words fail me as she takes me in her mouth. So warm and wet, sliding up and down, applying just the right amount of pressure. I grab her by the hair, but I don't need to guide her. She knows what she's doing.

She runs her hands down my legs and removes her mouth from me. I open my eyes and watch her take her panties off.

“I think we're ready,” she says.

She straddles me, and I grab her by the waist. She grabs my cock and rubs the tip right against her opening. She's so wet. I push down on her, driving myself into her.

“Ahhh, oh my God, you feel so good, Bella.”

She stands up a little, and I shove her back down again.

“You are so tight.”

“I need all of you, Alex.”

“I wouldn't think of giving you any less.”

I drive all the way inside of her. She gasps and picks her legs up off the floor, resting all her weight on me.

“Yes. Just like that,” she moans.

She raises herself up and down over and over. I lean back, enjoying the view. She grabs my shoulders and starts going faster. Her breasts are bouncing up and down in front of my face.

“Take your bra off.”

I could do it, but I prefer to sit back while she exposes herself to me. Her little striptease, while I watch. She grinds back and forth on me while she unhooks it and peels it off.

Her breasts are full and round and just perfect. Her nipples rise up in little hard dark brown peaks. I attack them, kissing and sucking on her while she grinds up against me.

“Alex, God, it feels amazing, I feel it building...”

I jerk her back and forth, and she cries out. I feel her tighten up around me, throbbing. I can't hold back. I grab her

waist and raise her halfway up then pump ferociously into her.

We climax at the same time. The feeling flows through me like a tsunami.

“Alex.”

“Bella.”

It turns into more of a howl.

She collapses on me and rests her head on my shoulder. I stroke her back gently.

“That was amazing.”

She laughs. I feel the vibration of the sound and twitch my cock inside her.

“Ohhh.”

“You like that?”

I do it another time.

“Give me a minute, Alex.”

I pull her up so I can kiss her. I stroke her breasts lovingly, then tease one of her nipples with my tongue. She takes in her breath sharply. I can tell she’s very sensitive.

“What are we going to do now?”

I laugh while she strokes my hair. Is she kidding? The answer is obvious.

“Now.” I pick her up and start walking across the room. “I fuck you standing up.”

I slap her gorgeous, billowing ass for good measure, and her coy smile tells me everything.

ISABELLA

“**Y**ou’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen, Bella.”

He said that to me last night. Here I am in his home, his own private one, not the family’s summer house, making out with him for who knows how many hours in the day. We’re living in our own bubble right now, and it’s only a matter of time before it pops.

Am I crazy for never wanting this to end? No, I don’t think so. Not when his fingertips and lips feel like this against my skin. With him, I forget there’s a whole world waiting for us out there. I forget that Lily’s the reason I’m here.

But for once, I don’t care about the consequences. For once, I’m allowing myself to feel as deeply as I want and act purely on impulse. Alex rewards me handsomely each time.

When I’m old and gazing out at my ranch during the golden years of my life, I’ll remember how I fell in love with a prince and shared so many beautiful moments with him.

Why are you acting as if Alex won’t be a part of your future? Do I think history is repeating itself?

Alex starts stirring somewhere behind me. His arms wrap around my body, pressing his nose against the crook of my neck. Before long, he’s peppering me with kisses along the expanse of my skin.

“Good morning,” he says, voice raspy.

“Hi, handsome.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Amazing.” I flip around so I can face him directly. “Can I make you some breakfast? I can make a mean plate of bacon and eggs.”

“That sounds wonderful, but I don’t want you to do any hard labor while you’re with me.”

“Hard labor?” I perk a brow. “Cooking some scrambled eggs isn’t hard labor, honey.”

“Doesn’t matter.” He reaches for my hands, kissing each of them. Then, he turns over towards his nightstand and presses a button. Raising a small device to his lips, he starts speaking. “Bring two coffees, two ice waters, and a full breakfast for two. Thank you.”

“Aww.” I frown. “I wanted to do something special for you.”

“And leave me in bed? Alone?” he replies. “That would be so cruel of you to do to me. It would break my heart.”

Rolling my eyes, I swat at his chest. He pulls me against his body, reminding me that we’re both naked, separated by a thin sheet that can be easily ripped away and thrown to the floor.

He kisses me passionately and his hands trail aimlessly across my body. I wrap my arms around him, keeping his warmth close to mine. *This man is mine.*

That may not be the truth forever, but it’s true now. He’s in my arms. He’s kissing me. He’s whispering sweet things to me for my ears only. Everything about him drives me wild.

One of his hands finds its way into my hair, entangling itself in my locks and pulling gently whenever he wants me to open my mouth for his tongue.

Soon enough, a knock comes at the bedroom door. Alex doesn’t want to stop kissing me, so I have to be the villain and pull away from him. It’s one of the household staff with an overflowing cart of food.

The staff member doesn't even look at us. He just leaves the food and exits the room as silently as he came in. Alex sits up and reaches for the cart, allowing the blanket to fall off his body.

"Wow." I whistle, trailing my hand down the expanse of his muscular leg. "Do you come here often?"

"To my bedroom? Yes, I do. But not with such beautiful company. What would you like? Pancakes? Waffles? You've got quite the selection."

He grabs a bowl of blueberries and glazes them over with honey. Then, he offers to feed me one. I let my tongue graze his fingertips as I accept the fruit into my mouth, eyelashes fluttering as I do so. "

"My God," I whisper, crawling over to gaze at the food cart. "And you don't mind eating in bed? What if I get syrup on the sheets?"

"There's this cool thing called laundry. It's very innovative and convenient for a man like me."

Again, I roll my eyes at his attempt to tease me. He's laughing, which makes me fall into a fit of giggles myself. Reaching for the plate of pancakes, I scoop some eggs onto the plate and drizzle the whole thing with maple syrup. There are a few slices of bacon that get syrup, too.

Meanwhile, Alex fills his plate with scrambled eggs and seasons his dish with salt and pepper. There are some boiled eggs on the cart that he grabs, too.

"Enjoying yourself?" he asks while I scarf down my food.

"Yep! Want some?" I stab a pancake with my fork and offer it to him. He accepts the bite graciously into his mouth, licking up the extra syrup that finds its way onto his bottom lip. "It's good, right?"

"Of course. I've hired the best cooks in Solvaria to serve my food. If it were lackluster, I'd be sorely disappointed."

"Mm. There's nothing lackluster about you or the life you live. I'm sure a lot of people would die to spend a night in a

place like this.”

“Want to know what I think about all that?” he replies, tilting his head slightly. He moves his fork around the plate, not gathering any eggs. “I think all of the money, riches, properties... none of it matters unless you find a person to share it all with. Someone who gives you purpose beyond all the materialistic stuff.”

I blink slowly. Is he talking about me? Why else would he mention this while we’re sharing such an intimate moment, feeding each other breakfast while the sunlight filters in through the open satin curtains?

“Have you found that person?” I ask quietly. I’ve never been so nervous in my life.

He drops his gaze back to his plate. “I don’t know if I can say for certain.”

My God. I’ve completely fallen in love with this man.

When we finish breakfast, we dress quickly and take a walk through the property. He interlocks his fingers with mine, kissing my knuckles every now and then. There’s a gentle breeze that wafts by, rustling the loose shirt of his that covers my upper body.

“Are you excited for the engagement party?” he asks as we overlook his property. He stands behind me with his arms wrapped around me as his chin rests on my shoulder. “It’ll be an exciting event. Everyone will be talking about it for ages.”

A smile emerges on my lips, but it soon fades away. Thankfully, he doesn’t have a direct view of my face. He isn’t able to see the quiver of my bottom lip or the beginnings of tears accumulating in my eyes.

This man owns my heart. He has assumed an important part of me and has consumed my mind, body, and soul. What am I going to do when this is all over and we part ways for good?

“I’m excited,” I manage out. “It’ll be a great time, I’m sure.”

He doesn't respond, allowing an easy silence to pass between us. My thoughts start consuming me, reminding me that this is only temporary.

We're only together for convenience. My heart doesn't want to accept it, but as reality sinks in, so does my despondency. My feelings for him are real, but nothing else is.

ALEXIS

When I wake up, it takes me a minute to get oriented. I'm on the wrong side of the bed for some reason. Then she shifts beside me, and I remember. I turn over on my side and look at Bella.

She's sleeping peacefully. The covers rise gently up and down. Her curls are spread gracefully across the pillow. I reach up and touch my own hair. As usual, it's pointing in every direction.

I could watch her forever, I think. Sleeping, she looks so vulnerable. It's so different from her tough exterior.

We are already engaged, I remind myself. But we're not.

I shake my head and turn away from her, grabbing my phone to see about my uncle. If anything had happened, they'd find me. Still, I breathe out a sigh of relief when I see the morning update. No change.

There is a text from my mother, however, that I wish I could unsee.

I glance over at Bella. I'd rather wake her up and slide the covers off her and cover her naked body with kisses.

But I'd better see what my mother wants before she hunts me down.

Did you look at what I sent you? her message says.

I suppress a groan. Yesterday she sent what I've come to call the eligible noble lady's PR packet. They are literally

brochures of women. Each has professional photographs and a CV detailing education, work experience, likes, dislikes, and, worst, lineage.

It also has thinly veiled suggestions as to their... prowess and particular abilities. My mother's a very, very, very high-class madam.

I looked, I text back.

What did you think of number five?

Ugh. My mother ranked her choices in the note she sent. I look at Bella. She looks like an angel. *I think none of them compares to you*, I tell Bella silently.

The erection I woke up with is starting to ache. Would it be so wrong to make love to her one more time?

Yes. No. I don't know. I swing my legs off the bed with some difficulty and walk into the bathroom, turning on the shower.

"After tonight, it's over," I tell myself.

She'll be fine. She told me, with her usual steel resolve, that she knows we don't have a future. We both have known that all along. I just didn't expect her words to feel like such a stab to the heart.

When the water hits me, the scent of her rises. God, I'm going to miss that smell.

"But will she miss me?" I grab the shampoo.

It'll be a nice memory for her. Like a keepsake that she has in a box. She gets to live out every woman's fantasy of being wooed by a prince, taken on fantastic adventures, and escorted into a palace full of servants. And the best part is she gets to walk away when it's over. No gilded cage.

It isn't always as grand as it seems. The obligations require sacrifice. You have no privacy. Protocol is the same as religion. Family and kingdom above the self.

I can't blame Bella for wanting to have some fun and then to get the hell away from here. At times, when she looked at

me with a certain expression or touched me a certain way, I held out hope that she might decide to stay with me. But now, I don't know if I can do that to myself anymore when it seems like she couldn't be more eager to go home.

Or could she? I have no idea. I'm a terrible judge.

As I dry off, the urge to gather her in my arms and wake her with a kiss is overwhelming. I could see her by my side forever.

My family would find my sentimentality amusing. According to them, marriage is a political strategy. That's what they all say until you're the one on your deathbed begging for your lover one last time after thirty years apart.

It's just fun for her, I tell myself. She said so. But what have I told her in the course of this excursion? When I put her on the plane back to the States, I want her to leave smiling. My heart can break enough for both of us.

I force myself to leave the room. After shutting the door quietly behind me, I text Nicolai to let him know I'm on my way.

Already here, he texts back. He's so good at his job.

When I get there, he has my coffee ready. I tell him I need a minute while I go into my office.

I sit down at my desk and pop open the hidden drawer where I stored my mother's catalog from yesterday. I had an irrational paranoia that Bella would find it, along with a pretty rational idea of what her reaction would be.

I flip to number five. She's pretty. Well educated. Her hobbies include 'competitive English riding.' I slam the folder shut.

Yes, it's a difficult discipline that takes training and dedication. But it can't possibly compare to the feeling of racing down the trail with Isabella.

Hearing the hooves pounding, feeling the horse move under you, and urging him to go faster and faster. That adrenaline rush can't be matched by prancing around a ring.

Like the difference between marrying for love and marrying for status.

I stash the folder and call for Nicolai. He places a huge folder of his own in front of me. “All the details for tonight, your grace,” he says. “The run of show, final music selection, centerpieces, speeches. Things like that. All it needs is your sign-off.”

I motion for him to sit. We go through each line item one by one. After a half hour, we’ve barely made a dent. Nicolai gets up to get us both some more coffee.

I should be enjoying this, I think, but all I can think about is how this is the end.

“Here you go.” Nicolai sets a fresh cup of coffee on my desk and sits down. He looks at me expectantly.

“How has planning the party been for you, Nicolai?”

“Oh, it’s been excellent. With the circumstances of my life, anything involving engagements has an air of excitement.”

“Your circumstances?”

“Yes. About two months ago, my beautiful Katerina said yes to my proposal. We’re getting married next summer.”

“Nicolai! Congratulations! How did I not know this?”

“I don’t like to spread gossip. And besides, the evil eye gains strength through hubris. That’s what Katerina tells me, and I believe her.”

“I love that. Just for you. Is she coming tonight? I’d love to meet her.”

“No, she’s not. I mean, I’ll be working, no time to socialize _”

“You should bring her.”

“Sir?”

The shock on Nicolai’s face is obvious.

“I insist.”

“Thank you, sir. I think you’ll like each other. And I think she and Ms. Isabella will get on well, too.”

“If she’s as lovely as you say, I have no doubt.”

“So, back to business?” He holds up his tablet. It takes another hour to finish, but I approve of all the details.

“You’ve done a great job. You deserve an enjoyable evening tonight.”

Nicolai beams. “I’d consulted with my fiancée. And for inspiration, I thought about what she would like. She has excellent taste.”

“All the better that she should be here tonight. She’ll be a guest of honor.”

He smiles and leaves. Now I just have to somehow get through today and tonight before I say goodbye to Bella forever.

I’m sure Nicolai is wondering about my invitation for his fiancée to come, even though she’s not someone whom Bella or I know personally. But I wanted someone at the party to be happy tonight. And if it can’t be me, it should be him.

ISABELLA

“One more here.”

The hairstylist slides the flat iron out of my hair and carefully lays the ribbon of hair on my shoulder. She and the makeup artist stand back, chin in hand, looking at me critically.

“Just a touch more sparkle here, do you think?”

I close my eyes. The makeup brush tickles. “Can I see?”

For all I know, they’ve made me look like Frankenstein’s bride. They shake their heads.

“Dress first, so you get the full effect.”

I slip out of my robe. It’s the softest, lightest silk I’ve ever felt. It weighs practically nothing. And all of this is for me. Compared to my uniform of heavy denim and sturdy boots, it feels like I’m walking around naked.

Carefully we get the dress on. The third stylist, the one for clothing, helps. She picked the dress. I stand still while they lace up the back.

“Okay. Now you can look.”

They turn me around, and I gasp. I look like... a princess. Minus the tiara. The cut of the dress and the off-white color complement my dark skin perfectly.

“The diamonds from the royal collection are stunning,” the makeup artist says. “They bring out your hazel eyes somehow.”

“And that necklace, with the rubies and sapphires,” one of the hairstylists says. “It’s beautiful.”

“A gift from my wonderful fiancé.” My cheeks hurt from the size of my smile.

“There’s no doubt. You are smitten. If you’re happy now, I can’t imagine how happy you’ll be at the wedding. You’ll be such a beautiful bride.”

‘Wedding.’ The word is like a punch in the stomach. I smile through the pain.

“Where’s Alex? I’d love to see him.”

“You’ll see him when you’re announced. You’re so in love, it hurts to be without him, huh?”

My smile fades. It’s true. That’s the problem.

I follow the stylists down the hall to the banquet. The palace is massive, but I recognize the top of the grand staircase. As we get closer, the lights go out.

Where is Alex? I think frantically. If he were holding my hand, I could navigate the stairs. I’m sure of it.

There’s a loud click and suddenly a huge halo of light in front of me.

“Go.”

I don’t know who says it, but someone adds a little shove. I step into the light and then see him on the other side. We are obviously meant to meet halfway down, like the two sides of the staircase do, and then descend together.

“Introducing Prince Alexander and his fiancée. Lady Isabella Sanchez.”

Across the way, Alex smiles at me. He looks every bit the prince, in a sharp dress uniform embellished with gold braid and medals glinting on his chest.

Our eyes lock. My confidence rises. With him by my side, I can do anything.

He takes my hand, and we turn to face the crowd, which stuns me with its sheer size. I let out a little squeak when I see several hundred faces looking up at us. Alex squeezes my hand. I feel the now-familiar electricity shoot through me.

“You look beautiful,” he says. I angle myself to him automatically. “Eyes to the front.”

Right. This is the business part of the arrangement. I sure hope Lily is finding closure, or peace, or whatever it is she needs. Because this is one hell of an extravagance for a mere diversion.

I sneak a look at him. A loving glance from the prince’s fiancée surely helps the charade. *Look, she can’t take her eyes off him. You can tell this truly is love.*

Alex brings us to a stop halfway down the stairs. We stand there, everyone admiring us as about a thousand flashbulbs going off. As soon as my eyes open back up, there is another flash of light.

Alex turns me to face him.

I could do this for him, I think. I’d walk through fire for him. I would marry him. A few royal annoyances seem like nothing. He’s worth all of it and more.

“Please clear a path into the ballroom. It’s the couple’s first dance.”

“Dance?”

Alex squeezes my hand. “Don’t worry, I got you.”

He walks through the crowd, the picture of princely confidence. I smile and hold my head high. It’s not easy but not because I’m intimidated. I know deep inside we are all the same, royalty or not. No, it’s the dark feeling leaking out of my heart that has me feeling heavy.

Since we got here, our days have been filled with fun, sex, and... love. On my end, anyway. I’m sure Alex has plenty of other things on his mind, like fulfilling the King’s wishes and securing his own destiny.

A destiny without me.

He leads me to the center of the ballroom. As the people file in and encircle us, he takes me in his arms. My heart soars at his touch. I feel weightless for a second. Then the terrible anchor of the truth drags me down to earth again.

He twirls me expertly around the floor. Everywhere I look, people raise their glasses of champagne and call out their congratulations. If this were real, I'd be having the time of my life.

After the dance, Alex leads me to two throne-like chairs set up at one end of the ballroom. I carefully tuck in my skirt as I sit, and I cross my ankles to the side as the stylist instructed me during our two-hour royal behavior cramming session.

“Speeches.”

Alex doesn't seem to move his mouth when the words come out. He's staring straight ahead, and I quickly look in the same direction. Rule number 842 or something. Eyes forward at all times.

“The royal princes, son of King Francis.” His brothers are announced. The brothers who he thinks are just cousins.

“Prince Caesar.”

“You've always been like a brother to me,” and I can see from Alex's earnest look that it means a lot to him.

Caesar passes the microphone to Prince Christian.

“The family story goes that I could never stand to see you crying, Alexis. Now that I see you here, I can tell that Isabella has brought you great happiness. If there are tears, they will be tears of joy, I'm sure. I'm proud to welcome her to the family and can't wait to get to know my new sister.”

I feel tears welling up.

Christian is a true prince. He goes on and on, saying beautiful things about Alex and me. The more he talks, the worse I feel. Inside, I'm collapsing, but my spine stays perfectly stiff. My eyes stay forward like a sniper rifle. I don't dare drop them.

What have we done? Lying to all these people. I should get up. I should walk right out of here right now. I should leave and stop my part in all this. But my body won't obey my brain.

Do it, I scream silently. Get up and run out. Find Lily and don't stop running until we are on a plane back to Texas.

I'm going to do it. On three. One, two –

“Stop!”

The crowd turns and then a path starts opening up. Janice, Alex's adopted mother, the one who's his aunt by marriage but not a relation at all, the one who he *thinks* gave birth to him, comes storming up the aisle they make for her.

As she passes, heads bow and some women curtsy.

She stops about twenty feet from us. Her eyes are on fire, and her nostrils are blazing. She looks like a horse that won't be broken. And I know how dangerous those are.

“Stop this sham!”

ALEXIS

I look at Bella as our guests murmur in confusion. Her eyes widen as my mother makes her way forward, bottle in hand.

“Get behind Christian,” I tell her.

Janice chuckles. “Are you trying to hide my future daughter-in-law from me? But this entire celebration is to welcome her into our family. But you’ve forgotten all about your dear old mother. I’ve barely seen you since you’ve come home.”

That’s true. My time with Bella has given me an exhilarating sense of freedom. Her untamed spirit and joy for life are such a contrast to my regimented mother.

“And the whole kingdom is swept up by the story of the prince who fell in love with a beautiful cowgirl from America,” Janice tells the crowd with a flourish. “I’m sure for you all it’s a fascinating story. But I’ve always hated sequels.”

I approach my mother much in the same way I would walk up to a thrashing horse. “Calm down, mother. I think you’ve had a little too much to drink. We’ll get you some water and a place to sit.”

“Don’t treat me like some common nothing,” she snaps at me. “I am a Duchess of Solvaria! But I could have been queen. Did I ever tell you that?”

I try humoring her to see if that settles her down. “No. I never knew that.”

She laughs bitterly. “There’s a lot you’ve never known. That no one here was ever supposed to know. So how about I give you a special engagement present?”

Janice straightens up, her eyes dark and joyless.

“How about for the first time in your life you get the truth?”

Isabella shoves her way past my family members. “Alex!”

She takes hold of my hands and looks into my eyes. I can see a strange sense of fear taking hold of her. “Just have them take her away, Alex. Please.”

“Of course you want me taken away,” Janice says. “You have no qualms about breaking up the royal family. Like mother, like daughter.”

I glare at her. “Leave Lily out of this.”

“Oh, yes, I would hate to besmirch the good name of Lily Sanchez. Or should I say, Lily Adams?”

The murmurs from the crowd grow louder and more scandalized. Janice calls out to them. “That’s right, the rumors were always true. The King wanted to marry a commoner. A dirt-poor gutter rat.”

I throw out an arm to hold Bella back from charging at her.

Janice points at her. “She ruined everything, that vile American. I was set to marry the King, then Francis fell in love with her. I married Ronaldi instead when Francis left for America. And when he came back, knocked-up mistress in tow, it wouldn’t be a scandal if I was the one who had a baby.”

“Don’t insult the name of my father,” I tell her. “Prince Ronaldi was a good man. He doesn’t deserve to be impugned.”

“Prince Ronaldi was a good man. But your father is not.” As what she says sinks in and the pain is clear on my face, her grin widens in proportion. “King Francis and his cheap American. You were only redeemed because of me. Because I insisted Ronaldi take you in and pretend you were mine. Instead of being queen, I got the remnants left behind from the King’s little love affair. I love you. I always loved you. And

you don't appreciate it. Just like your father. Doesn't appreciate what's in front of him."

The guards finally arrive. Janice continues shouting while they attempt to drag her away.

"I lost my chance to be queen because your mother needed to ensnare a crown prince! Oh, I'm sure that one wasn't planned. Too bad it didn't work out for her."

The murmurs stop. There's a disturbing, sickening silence.

I stare at Janice's smug, self-satisfied face. "What did you say?"

"Lily Adams. Your mother. Fled in disgrace. It's a wonder your father – your real father, that is. Not Ronaldi, may he rest in peace – didn't carry the stench of the scandal with him," she explains.

Things start to swiftly fall into place. The King's affection for me and our resemblance. My claim to the throne. Growing up with the four boys as my brothers. My mother's and father's distance. It was because they were my aunt and uncle.

My entire life was a lie.

I reel back, struggling to keep my footing. I feel a rush of hot embarrassment as the court's murmurs and gasps echo in my ears. My heart is pounding so hard that my chest hurts.

"Take her away," I call out to the guards.

Janice screams at me while being escorted out of the room. "You'll regret this! You don't know what you're doing!"

I had spent my life thinking I was royalty. Now, I was just the product of a scandal. The reality of it hurts more than any physical pain I've ever felt.

Isabella puts a hand on my shoulder. Her face is sullen. Her expression tells me everything I need to know. And what she said earlier when Janice started speaking, like she knew what she was about to say next.

"You knew, didn't you?" I ask. "When did Lily tell you?"

She doesn't answer me.

“When did she tell you?” I shout at her.

She stares at her feet. “A little after you showed up to the ranch.”

I reflect on all the time we’ve spent together since then. The entirety of our engagement. It feels like a full lifetime has passed in such a short amount of time.

My rage bubbles over. “You’ve been holding this secret for that long? She’s been holding this secret for that long?”

“I didn’t want to hurt you,” she says with tears in her eyes.

“So instead you joined in with everyone else lying to me. And after all the talk you gave me about phonies.”

“Alex...” she starts to say before trailing off.

“Turns out you were half-right,” I tell her with disdain. “I wasn’t a prince pretending to be a rancher. It’s always been the other way around. I’m just a sham. Like this whole relationship.”

She shakes her head. “That’s not true.”

“I was starting to think...” I stop myself.

I allowed myself to think that we could be something real. I fell for it, just like everyone else.

Bella had stirred real emotions in me, from the very first day we met. But clearly, she didn’t respect me enough to tell me the truth. She knew about my life but didn’t tell the one person it impacted directly.

She looks at me with her wet eyes. “Alex, what do you want to say to me?”

“I just want to say congratulations,” I manage to spit out. “You’ve done your duty to Lily. You protected her at all costs, damn anyone else. It must have been hell to pretend to care about me for so long.”

The bitterness in my words is almost palpable.

“You don’t have to pretend anymore, Bella. It’s over. It’s all over.”

I glance at the crowd, a sea of faces in shock, disbelief, and judgment. “Ladies and gentlemen, my sincere apologies for the events that have unfolded tonight. It seems the party has come to an end. It’s become clear that the engagement is off.”

I start to walk out of the room. Bella reaches out for me. “Alex, please.”

“Don’t.” I step into the hallway, not turning back. I lock the door behind me and feel the tears start to sting.

I started this day as the son of Ronaldi, a prince of Solvaria. And yet I was in line to be heir to the throne. I was the future husband of the most beautiful woman I’ve ever known. The love of my life.

Now the only thing I know about myself for certain is that I’m the illegitimate accident who nobody actually wanted.

ISABELLA

A long with everyone else, I watch Alex disappear out of the ballroom. But I'm the only one who's watching her life disappear along with him.

Slowly all the eyes turn from him to me. Alex's brothers are still standing there, obviously shocked. And as beautiful as the speeches were, especially Christian's, he doesn't actually know me. He only knows me from the lie that we told the world.

I can't imagine what he thinks of me. Or maybe I can. Which is probably worse.

What do I do? I think frantically. I'm in a foreign country, surrounded by people who I don't know. The man I'm in love with just looked at me like I completely betrayed him. Which I guess I did.

You can hear a pin drop in the ballroom.

Suddenly a woman steps out of the crowd and comes toward me. The crowd murmurs immediately.

"Who is that?" I hear one guest say.

"One of her friends? From America?" another replies.

I've never seen this woman before in my life. She stops in front of me and hesitates, then gives me a small curtsy. She looks as uncertain as I am.

"Come with me."

Her voice is so soft I can barely hear her.

If I want to live? I think wryly. I'm not sure I do. The look Alex gave me when he realized that I'd known all along was enough to destroy me.

The woman leads me, together with Nicolai, Alex's secretary, toward a panel that looks like it's part of the wall. It's a secret passageway. Alexis said the royal residences are full of them, just like in his home.

We slip inside, and the man shuts the door on the growing excitement in the ballroom.

"I know you. You're..."

"Nicolai. The prince's secretary. This is my fiancée Katerina. Give me your phone, K."

Katerina opens her purse and hands it to him. He starts typing on it.

"Katerina will take you back to Villa Silvae." He stops typing to look at me. "I assume that's where you want to go."

"Yes, definitely. And..."

He gives Katerina her phone back and starts marching down the hall. We follow.

"And?"

"Plane tickets. I need to go back to Texas." I hesitate, then add on. "I can pay for them."

I'm not sure I can. But I need to get out of Solvaria as soon as possible.

"It will be arranged."

Nicolai leads us through a maze of hallways to an underground garage. He and Katerina kiss quickly, then part. I follow Katerina to the car and get in the seat beside her.

"Oh. I thought you'd sit in the back."

I shake my head.

"I'm not royalty."

"You do look like a princess though. That dress. It's amazing."

“You should see me on my ranch. No dresses. Just horses and manure and hay twenty-four seven.”

She laughs. I say very little the rest of the drive. Light chit-chat here and there. But I’m too far inside my head to be able to talk about the real world.

“Thank you, Katerina, for this. You saved me on one of the worst days of my life.” Only the death of my mother exceeds it. But just barely.

“Good luck, Isabella.” She pauses. “I’m rooting for you.” We give each other two kisses on the cheek. I hope I see her again one day. If not, she’ll have a place in my heart for life.

I shut the door and run inside our temporary home for what is likely the last time. Lily is pacing in the front hall.

“Are you okay?” We say it at the same time, but neither of us laughs.

“You first.”

“I was with the King when... some member of the staff came running in to tell us about the commotion. How did she find out? How is Alexis?”

I shake my head and bury my face in my hands.

“Furious, I’m guessing,” Lily says.

I nod and start crying as soon as she says the word. I can’t speak. Lily pulls away and lets out a wail. “My one chance to know my son...”

The tears are streaming down her face. I hug her silently.

“Don’t you cry, too, Bella. I don’t want you to be sad on top of Alex... loathing me.”

That just makes me cry harder. He loathes me, too, I’m sure.

Out of nowhere, a staff member appears and hands Lily a box of tissues, then turns. Lily wipes my tears away, ignoring her own.

“He hates me,” I whisper.

“Oh, honey. He doesn’t. But don’t worry about that. We’ll go home and...”

“I’ll never see him again. But he doesn’t hate you, Aunt Lily.”

Lily yanks some more tissues out of the box. I blow my nose in a very un-princess-like way.

“Isabella.” My aunt touches my face so I look at her, and I see her concern. “I’ve seen you this upset, but it was a long time ago. Tell me what you’re feeling.”

The words start tumbling out of me along with more tears. A lot more.

“I love him, Aunt Lily. I’m in love with him.

“With Alex?”

“Yes. I’m head-over-heels in love with him. And he hates me.”

“I thought so. I just wasn’t sure. I wouldn’t have known what to do about the two most important people in my life. So I didn’t want to think about it. But of course. It makes sense.”

Lily wraps me in a hug, and I sob into her shoulder.

“He makes me crazy, you know, all the time, Aunt Lily. But somehow that just makes me love him more. I’m not making any sense.”

“ I know exactly what you mean.”

Lily grabs my hand and leads me up to the room she has been using.

“Can I sleep with you tonight?”

I haven’t asked to do that in years. She smiles at me. “The bed’s big enough. Of course. But we have to go as soon as we can. We need to figure out flights before we go to bed.”

“I know. Alex’s secretary said he’d get us tickets. I told him I’d pay.”

She raises her eyebrows.

“I know. It’s one of those niceties. They know we won’t pay, we know they’d never ask.” I start crying again, harder this time. “Alex will be so happy to get rid of me, I’m sure he won’t mind paying.”

“Shush. Let’s just get some sleep. We need to go home. Broken hearts can be mended.”

Yours wasn’t. But I just nod. I can’t say that. Not right now.

Somehow, we manage to get some sleep. Vittoria comes early with the details for our flight.

“First flight from the airport.” She hands me the itinerary.

I knew Alex couldn’t wait to get rid of me. She turns to go.

“Wait,” I call out, and she turns back.

I point to the dress that I hung carefully up on the rack in the corner of the room. “Nicolai’s fiancée, Katerina. I want her to have that. Can you arrange that?”

“It will be done.” Vittoria curtsies and leaves.

I hope Katerina will be thrilled. She will make a beautiful bride. I have the crazy thought that the dress deserves to have a happy ending, even if I don’t get one.

Lily and I shower and dress quickly. We eat fabulous pastries in the limo, like a decadent parting gift. Lily looks ruefully at them and mutters something about watching her diet. I hate-eat one, and Lily follows.

“Fuck it,” she says, her mouth full of Danish. They probably call it something else here.

The airport is our arrival in reverse. We settle into first class, and the flight attendant reminds us that alcohol is free. Lily and I look at each other.

“Maybe after lunch.” We both agree.

She offers me the window seat, but I decline. I don’t want to see the beautiful vast lands, with all its mountains and coasts and steppes, getting smaller and smaller. I already know I’m never going to see Alex again.

The plane immediately begins accelerating on the tarmac. I resist the urge to jump up and demand to be let off.

Then I remember the look on his face the night before. He'll never forgive me. And I can't blame him.

ALEXIS

After the engagement party, I hid myself in the darkest corner of the palace. I wallowed in a mixture of anger and self-pity for an entire week, refusing to speak to anyone.

Janice's tirade achieved its aim of exposing the King – my father, my real father – and his dalliance with my mother, Lily Adams. But it also had the unforeseen consequence of drawing attention to other scandals in the court.

An investigator uncovered evidence of Janice embezzling money from the kingdom, nominally for my care. It was only for care of herself. I was a means to get extra cash and a path to higher status.

The stress of the investigation drove her to a mental hospital. I don't plan on visiting her there, or in her prison cell.

You're still my son. She sent that message. I was surprised she had a phone.

I was never your son. You were never a mother to me. Please don't message me again.

It felt clean.

Another week goes by. The King is doing better, and he sits with me in the courtyard. The perfect weather reminds me of the Texas ranch I miss so much, and the perfect days I spent with a woman I didn't yet know would be the one I wanted to be mine forever.

His voice is almost at full strength from before the illness.

“Alexis, my love. My sweet first son. I owe you an apology. And an explanation.”

And thirty years of my life returned to me. But I just nod. I’m willing to listen first before telling him my opinion. Only because he’s King.

“I’ve always been burdened with shame, not for who you are but for my own cowardice. I’ve wished countless times that I’d had the strength to follow my heart. I should have stood up to my mother, the Queen. I should have stood up against the system. I should have used the press. There were so many things I could have done. But I gave up my life.”

My throat is constricted. The King continues.

“I could have abdicated the throne, and I didn’t. Your mother was gone, left for America. And I didn’t want to lose you, too. The best that I could do to hold on to you was to beg them to let you be adopted.”

His eyes are wet.

“I just wanted you near me, so I could keep some part of my life with Lily. If I had known, I would have put my foot down.”

“But at least through her, I got to live here in the palace as one of your sons. Regardless of the reason. And I’ve always felt like yours...Father.”

“Alexis,” he says, his voice trembling slightly, and his eyes are spilling tears. “I cannot change the past, I cannot undo the hurt that has been caused. But I am here, asking for your forgiveness. If there’s any space in your heart that has the mercy to provide any at all, please forgive me.”

A surge of emotions wells up inside. Anger, confusion, and sadness. But also understanding. More than my father knows.

I find myself softening. “Before anything else, I’d just like to spend some time with my father.”

I think that means more to him than any words of forgiveness would have. He knows that time is the one thing

that you can't get back. And I want to spend mine with him, both of us knowing that I'm his son.

His eyes lighten, shining just as blue and intense as mine, and he throws an arm around my shoulder. We spend the rest of the day outside on the grounds, riding horses and enjoying the countryside of the nation we love.

Every day after that, we're together. I have dinners with the King and my brothers, who after all these years I could finally call that for real.

Before I know it, it's been a whole month since I last saw Bella. I still think about her every day. Every minute is more accurate. It's a wonder I can think about anything else.

As much time as I spend with the King, it still feels like I'm on a trip to Solvaria. Like I'm visiting temporarily. And I know exactly why. My heart is far away, in Texas. And I can't be whole until I'm with her.

After dessert one night, Christian pulls me aside. "I think I've always known, deep down," he tells me, putting an arm on my shoulder. "Blood or not, you were my brother before, and you will always be my brother."

It's a wonderful few weeks. I'm fully accepted by my family. And in a sense, I learn that I always was.

And yet the emptiness inside me gnaws at me. The longer I'm without her, the worse the void becomes. And I can't live with it anymore.

I knock on the door to the King's chambers. "Your Majesty, would you have a moment for an audience with me?"

I hear his muffled reply through the door, getting louder as he walks toward it. "Of course, Alexis, please, come in!"

I open the door, and he hugs me tight, then shuffles back to his desk. He's moving so much better these days.

"It's good that you've come. I have something to show you, actually."

Walking over to the desk, I stop to look out the King's window. Our kingdom looks so peaceful and beautiful from

this vantage point.

“Alexis, my son,” he says warmly as he gestures to a piece of paper. “Come look at this.”

I stare at the document on his desk, then back at him. “Is this what I think it is?”

He nods. “This is my royal decree naming you heir to the throne of Solvaria. If it is delivered to the court, then it becomes official.”

He smiles at me.

“You fulfilled your promise. And I’m fulfilling mine.”

The pen hovers over the final signature line. I see my entire lonely future laid out ahead. A flatline.

The King puts the pen down. “Unless you have something you want to tell me.”

“So, I take it you’ve heard,” I say with a sense of relief.

“I must say, at first we were slightly concerned. Christian heard about your ranch land. Stephan told us about all the possessions you donated to the shops. When a man starts setting his affairs in order, it makes you wonder what he’s got planned.”

He puts a hand on my shoulder.

“Then the paperwork came through for your name change.”

“I should have told you before,” I say with a shrug. “It just felt right. I will always be proud to be your son. But I don’t want to follow in your footsteps. These past few months have really shown me that I need to figure out how to be my own man.”

I continue.

“I don’t want to walk in your shoes. I want to forge my own identity, as Alexis. Not as a Vanecourt. And I think that starts by honoring the person who sacrificed so much.”

He offers me the paper containing his decree. “So I can officially consider this your resignation from the court?”

I look my father in the eye. “I love you. I love my family. I love my kingdom. But there’s someone else I love more. And I can’t be the king of any nation. Not if she’s not going to be there.”

He smiles. “I was hoping you’d say that. Good luck, my dear son. I love you.”

“I love you, too, Father. And it’s important that you know I forgive you. I forgave you immediately.”

“That means so much more than the throne of any country. And believe me. I know. And please. Give your bride a kiss on the cheek from her father-in-law.”

“She isn’t my bride yet.”

“I have faith, my son. How could she say no? You’re made for each other.”

We hug, kiss, and cry. I’ve never felt so at home as I do on the day I decide for certain I’ll be leaving it.

As I step out of the castle, a lightness fills my being. The sun is setting on Solvaria, painting a breathtaking canvas of purples, oranges, and blues across the sky. My heart aches, but it blooms with optimism. I know it’s not my home anymore.

The driver is already waiting for me at the gate. He tells me that the King already had the jet refueled and ready for my departure. I have to chuckle at the brilliant foresight. He was meant to be a monarch.

As I board the plane, my heart thuds in my chest with excitement, as well as a reverberating fear. I’m leaving behind a kingdom and the chance at a legacy. But I am heading toward a life. An actual, real life, with a family and with a path that isn’t chosen for me. I’m heading toward freedom. I’m heading toward my love, and if she has me, I’ll never let her go.

As we rise in the sky, Solvaria quickly fades into the distance.

I can only hope that Bella is waiting for me the way that I've been waiting for her. I know that I hurt her when I shut her out. If it takes years to win back her trust, so be it. That's nothing compared to the joy of being with her.

She can yell at me. She can run from me. She can threaten me with her shotgun again.

I just want to see her face.

ISABELLA

“Good morning.”

Lily smiles at me. I smile back. Then we both look at the floor.

When will it get easier?

We’ve been home for a month. I cried myself to sleep every night at first. I’m pretty sure Lily did, too. After a while, I was out of tears. Now I just walk around with a dull ache in my chest.

“Have some coffee.” Lily pours me a mug and slides it across the counter.

“Thank you, Lily.” I take a big sip. My brain is waiting for the caffeine jolt. My heart doesn’t know what it needs.

“You want eggs?” Lily already has the frying pan on top of the stove.

“Mm-hmm. Yes please.” I nod.

“How do you want them?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know anything anymore.”

“It’s just eggs, sweetie. Hey, you remember hat eggs?” Her face brightens.

“Of course. Lifting up the bread and taking off the hat.” I grab the bread. She cracks the eggs in the pan, and I cut circles out of the bread slices with a glass.

We place the opening in the slices over the yolk. Five minutes later, we sit down to eat.

“You loved these when you were little.”

“I still do.” I lift up the circle of bread to reveal the egg underneath. Taking off the hat.

I smile at her, for real this time. What I wouldn't give for the simplicity of childhood right now. I fold the hat into a half circle and stab my yolk.

“Extra butter makes everything better,” Lily says.

We laugh, a little more authentically this time. After we eat, she shoos me out of the kitchen, saying she'll clean up. I head over to the barn.

All I think about when I look at it is that I have to finish the staining job. I started it when I got back, to give myself a project. But then it became overwhelming. I look at the cans and brushes and shake my head. *Not right now.*

I go into the barn to see Water. “Hey, boy.” I give him his morning carrot. “How about a ride? Then I'll paint.”

I lead him outside so he can graze while I muck out his stall. I'm just about to take the filled-up wheelbarrow out of the back of the barn when I hear Water neigh loudly.

Please, don't be a coyote. I go to check to make sure.

As I exit the barn, I hear another horse. The snort sounds familiar. I stop dead in my tracks.

“What...?” I gasp. “How?”

It's Fire. Maximus. And seated on top, looking every bit the prince, is Alex.

He should be on the other side of the world. I can't move. I can't breathe. Maybe I've finally lost my mind, and I'm hallucinating. Maybe all the stress.

Oh, it's a dream. I dream about him every night. Sometimes he shows up on Maximus, sometimes he just appears in my bedroom and tells me he loves me before making love to me over and over. I need to wake up.

Alex hooks the reins over the saddle horn and lets Maximus into the pen with Water. Water looks up from his grass for a second – the highest compliment – and goes back to eating. Alex closes the pen and comes toward me.

Wake up, Bella. I don't want to have this dream again. I wake up ecstatic and then I'm crushed all over again when it's not real. Alex stops about five feet from me.

“Hi, my love. My little *kapusta*.”

That's funny. He doesn't usually say anything. He usually just takes me in his arms, kisses me, and –

“Bella?”

I flick my work gloves off and pinch my wrist really hard. It hurts. Also, you don't usually smell horse shit in a dream.

Not a dream. But I still don't know what to do.

“Thought you'd be happy to see me.”

He looks straight at me with a penetrating gaze. His smile makes me weak. He gets closer and then touches me.

He places my hand over his heart. “This beats for you, Bella.”

My heart soars. I feel like I could fly. Then I remember all the things that pushed us apart. I gently try to loosen my hand from his. But he won't let go.

“I've been dying inside since I left. Since you ran...” I begin.

“I've been dying inside, too. That's why I came.”

He kisses me, and I can't resist him. It feels like my whole life is coming back to me through one kiss. His lips are soft and gentle as his tongue reaches and presses through my lips. I missed this so much. He holds my waist.

“But what about everything we said? Getting on with our lives, both of us. You with Solvaria, me with... here.”

He takes my hand in his again. “Bella. Listen. I gave that all up. It's done.”

“What?”

We stand there, staring. The hand holding mine is like a vise. I stop straining to let go, and his hand relaxes in sync.

“I gave up the crown, Bella. I don’t care about any of that. All I care about is you. I didn’t realize until you left that without you there is no life.”

“But, why? Why did you do that?”

“Because I love you. I’m madly, crazily, certifiably insane in love with you.”

“I love you, too, Alex. My little cabbage.”

His eyes are filled with warmth and love. Everything inside his soul, I see it staring at me.

“I did it for you. And I’d do it again a thousand times. Does that make you happy?”

“Very.”

“Me too.”

He drops down on one knee.

“Will you make me even happier? Be my fiancée for real. Marry me.”

Without thinking, I sit down on his knee and wrap my arms around his neck. I kiss him passionately, long and hard, not letting go.

God, I thought I missed him before, but now that he’s back, holding me, kissing me with his perfect mouth, there’s so much more that I missed. His strong arms around me. The way he smells. The feel of his breath on my face.

This is exactly where I belong.

“Is that a yes?”

“Make me your girlfriend first and I will.”

“I love you. Now kiss me.”

“I love you, too, Bella.”

I open my mouth but then he kisses me. As much fun as teasing him is, kissing him is better.

ALEXIS

As I get closer while riding Maximus, I admire the work we did on the barn together. I can't believe how much fun it was staining it. Actually, I can, because I did it with Bella.

And there she is. I love how she looks in jeans. Or anything. Or nothing. All of it. None of it.

She must hear us coming because she turns around and waves.

"Whoa," I tell my horse. Maximus stops immediately. "I think Water might be a good influence on him."

She scratches Maximus' nose, and he snorts. "I'll give him a carrot while I saddle Water up."

I follow her into the barn. She tosses me a carrot. By the time I get back from feeding Maximus, she's got the saddle on Water. I grab the strap and pass it to her. Then I head back outside. Timing is going to be crucial. I need to be ready to go when she rides Water out of the barn.

We haven't even started the competition, and my heart is already pounding.

"Race?" I yell as soon as I see her.

I take off before she can say anything.

"Hey, no fair!"

She gives chase, and I'm sure Water runs his heart out. But my head start was massive. There's no way she can catch up.

When she crosses the finish line, I'm already off of Maximus. Bella pulls on the reins and slides off Water before he comes to a complete stop.

Then she marches over to me, eyes blazing. "What are you smiling about?" she asks.

I'm smiling because I executed my plan perfectly. As she gets close, I drop to one knee. "What are you..."

I reach into my pocket and pull out a box. I pop it open, revealing the ring I had custom-made for her.

"Will you marry me?"

She's speechless. I've caught her off guard, just like I planned. She was about ready to kill me and now...

"Marry me. I promise to let you win every race for the rest of our lives."

"No. I don't want to marry someone who lets me win."

"Good."

She throws herself at me and kisses me. I catch her and she covers my face with kisses.

"Let me put it on you, Bella."

I slide it onto her finger and hold her hand up so she can get a good look. The diamond is surrounded by alternating rubies and sapphires. I knew exactly what I wanted. Something special and unique. Like my Bella.

"Red for fire and..."

"Blue for water. Oh, Alex."

"It's like us. We shouldn't be compatible on the surface, but where it matters, we are."

We kiss for a long time, and then I pull out a blanket and spread it out on the ground. We stretch out together, and I wrap my arms around her. She lays her head on my chest, and we talk for what seems like hours.

The sun climbs higher. She pulls herself up and looks down at me. I trace the outline of her face.

“We have to go back. They need water. I do, too, in fact.”

“Plus, we need to tell Lily,” Bella adds.

Lily already knows. I told her, even showed her the ring. She was thrilled. Still, Bella should share the joy.

Since it’s hotter, we walk the horses back rather than race them. Lily’s waiting for us on the porch. My mom. My real mom. “He asked me to marry him, Aunt Lily!”

Lily claps her hands and comes running. Bella shows her the ring. Our eyes meet over Bella’s shoulder. “Wait.” Bella pulls away. “Did you know?”

“Guilty.” Lily hugs Bella tightly. “You’ve always been like a daughter to me. But this makes me even happier. It was a son telling his mom about the girl he’s in love with..”

The horses head right to the water trough. I wrap my arm around my girl.

“Should we tell her?” Lily asks, bursting with excitement.

Bella looks back and forth between us. “Tell me what?”

“Well, I was kind of hoping you would say yes...”

“And I wanted to throw you an engagement party since the one in Solvaria was...” my mom starts.

“...An unmitigated disaster?” Bella finishes her sentence.

We all laugh. *What a relief to have that part of our lives behind us.*

“I kind of planned it already,” Lily says sheepishly.

I look at Lily. My mom. Her face is shining. She’s so proud of her children.

She’s told me about all she feels she missed out on. My first steps, first words, birthdays, graduations. I see how much it meant to her. When she asked if she could plan an engagement party, I couldn’t say no. And I was sure Bella wouldn’t mind, especially if she knew the reason why.

“That sounds wonderful,” Bella says.

“Let me show you what I’ve planned. I have it all on my tablet.” Lily pulls out the tablet and turns it around.

“Of course you do.” Bella smiles and we all go inside. The enthusiasm is contagious.

“I’ll be low-key, Bella, I promise,” Lily insists. “You should have what you want, whatever you want. Both of you.”

I have all I could ever want right here.

A week later, it’s happening. A tent is set up in the backyard, and the catering staff is bustling around. Bella comes downstairs. The simple white sundress covered with small blue flowers is the polar opposite of what she wore in Solvaria.

She looks even more beautiful.

“They’re forget-me-nots.” She fingers the fabric. “For true love and fidelity. When I saw what kind of flowers they were, there was no changing my mind.”

“You look amazing.”

Unlike the pomp and circumstance of the royal introduction, we wait together at the front of the house and greet our guests.

“This just arrived.”

Lily’s voice comes from behind a giant flower arrangement. I grab it from her and set it on the table.

“There’s a card on this side.”

Lily hands it to me, and I rip it open.

Congratulations, Alex and Bella. I’m still not supposed to fly, or I would be there, dancing up a storm. My dearest wish has always been to have my children find happiness. And Alex, thank you. Love always, your loving father.

My eyes feel a little wet. I hand the card to Bella. She takes it and reads it.

“Oh, Alex.” She grabs my hand and squeezes it. I think she knows how much it means to me.

I clear my throat. “We should get outside.”

“I hope he can make it for the wedding.”

As soon as we step out on the porch, we notice the limo heading towards the house. Two of my other brothers, Cedrick and Ishmael, get out.

Nicolai and Katerina get out of the limo after. Bella and Katerina hug each other and start talking at once.

“Thank you for the dress, Bella,” Katerina says after kissing her on both cheeks.

“I wanted you to have it. I’m sure you looked even more stunning,” Bella says, then kisses her on both cheeks.

I tug gently on her arm and introduce her to my third and fourth brothers. She hugs Cedrick, and he embraces her like she’s really a part of the family.

“Are we early?” Ishmael asks.

I point down the road. A couple of trucks are on the way. “No. You’re right on time.”

“The bar’s in the tent.” Bella points, and my brothers nod.

“I like it here already,” Ishmael says.

“Are you ready?” Bella asks me.

“To get married?”

“Yeah. To have the wedding.”

“Since the day we met, Bella.”

She gives me that brilliant smile of hers. The one that I wake up every morning just dying to see.

“Me, too.”

ISABELLA

Alex and I wave to the last of the guests from the porch. The caterers are long gone, but they set up a firepit and s'mores for us before they left. Cedrick and Ishmael helped carry buckets of water to extinguish it. Alex pulls me closer, and I turn to face him.

One of the best nights of my life, I think. And I don't want it to end.

“Do you want to stay here tonight? Instead of going all the way to your ranch? It's so far.”

He smiles. I think I can read his mind.

He uses one finger to tug at the strap on my dress, then runs it across the top of my breasts.

I know Lily went to bed over an hour ago, but my heart races as we creep quietly up the stairs. I feel like a teenager sneaking my boyfriend into my room. I very carefully shut the door and lock it, wincing at the loud click it makes.

“We have to be quiet.”

“Well, that could be a problem.”

He comes over to me and brushes my hair back over my shoulder.

He pulls me close, crushing me gently against his chest. I sigh with relief. All through the party, fun as it was, I kept wondering when I could be alone with him again.

“My beautiful Bella. My beautiful fiancée.”

He tips my face up and covers my mouth with his. The minute his lips touch mine, energy courses through me like fire and water together.

Instantly, I'm aroused. A throbbing begins deep within me, moving down between my legs and making me acutely aware of how empty I feel without him.

I relax into his arms. As our tongues merge, I feel a tug at the strap on my shoulder, then on the other one. He separates our upper bodies to push my dress down to my waist, then pulls me close again. I gasp as my naked breasts collide with his shirt.

"Remember," he whispers. "Quiet."

He sits down on the bed, and he stands me up to remove my dress. The moon is full and cuts a bright streak of light over us through the darkness.

His eyes roam down my body, and I tremble. He reaches out and pushes my dress down, taking my underwear with it. I step out of it for him. He grabs my butt and pulls me back towards him.

Then he slides his hands up my sides and cups my breasts. He puts his face between them. The slight stubble he's grown since this morning tickles ever so slightly, and I squirm. He tightens his grip so I can't pull away.

"I adore you in the moonlight."

I look down and watch him take my breast in his mouth. It's so wet and warm. He makes tantalizing circles with his tongue, moving in closer and closer. His other hands are roaming, one caressing my other breast with exquisite tenderness, the other moving lower and lower.

"Mmmmm."

A loud moan escapes me when he plunges his finger inside. *Oh, God*, I think frantically. Suddenly he stands up and, in one quick motion, reverses our position. He gently but firmly pushes me onto the bed.

He runs his hand across my chest and then quickly undresses. *Yes*, I think, nodding. I lay down. He pulls me to a seated position toward the edge of the bed, sliding me by my legs. Then he kneels down in front of me and parts them, lifting them up at my sides.

I grab onto his shoulders as he lowers his face and lets out a strangled cry as he makes contact. His tongue swirls around my clit perfectly. My whole body tenses up.

After a few minutes of driving me wild with his tongue, he sits up and kisses me, now driving his tongue deep into my mouth. At the same time, I feel his fingers opening me up. Then he's there, the tip of his cock lined up against me.

I want him more than I've ever wanted anything in my life. Which is how I always feel when I'm with him. Every single time.

He plunges his thick cock all the way into me in one swift motion. My cry is muffled by his mouth. He slides one arm under my leg and grabs my back firmly. I'm barely on the bed anymore, and I cling to his shoulders.

"I got you. And I'm never going to let you go."

I nod. He slides in and out of me several wonderful times. Then he puts his hand between us and starts rubbing me.

"Look at me."

I meet his eyes. They seem extra blue in the moonlight. They pierce right through me, filling me with heat while he thrusts in and out of me.

"I want to see you come."

I nod.

"Good."

He rubs me a little harder. I close my eyes and clamp my lips tightly to stifle the noises threatening to escape.

"Look at me."

I open my eyes again.

“I know you want us to be quiet,” he says.

As if to test my resolve, he rubs me a little more vigorously. “So I want you to be loud with your eyes.”

I nod again, more enthusiastically.

He slides in and out of me slowly while massaging me perfectly. At first, he glides with excruciating slowness. After a while, he starts ramping up the speed and intensity.

I can barely catch my breath. I pant harder and faster.

The feeling in me builds and builds until everything in me boils over.

The strangled cry that emanates out of me does no justice to the feeling exploding inside. It seems like by not releasing any of the intensity through sound, every cell of my body was forced to absorb it. It seems to go on forever, leaving me absolutely shattered, like crystal.

“Oh, yes.”

He pulls out of me and drags me up onto the bed as I gasp. I’m completely limp with spent pleasure. He turns me up on my side and lays down behind me. Then he picks up my leg and drives his cock into me again.

“So tight. So wet for me.”

He pumps in and out of me, then grabs my hand and places it between my legs. He moves my hand back and forth. I’m so sensitive but can feel my arousal building again. When he takes his hand away, I keep touching myself.

He grabs my breast and kisses my neck.

“Do you know how much I love you?”

“I do.”

“You’re sure you do?”

“Show me.”

He grabs my hips and pounds into me.

“I’m going to…” he chokes out.

This time, I can't stop the noise I make. Behind me, Alex gasps and thrusts. Hearing and feeling him come at the same time, after all the silence, fills my eyes with tears. I can't contain the emotion.

He holds me close as we shake uncontrollably, feeling the pleasure of it. Slowly the trembling stops and our breathing slows down. He kisses my shoulder.

I push back up against him, and he wraps his arms around me a little tighter.

"I love you."

"I know. You showed me."

"You're crazy."

"But you love me in spite of that?"

He kisses me again. "No. I love you because of it."

"I love you, too, Alex." More than I could ever show him.

ALEXIS

“My goodness. You would think this was your first public appearance.” My mother smooths the white bowtie at my neck and chuckles.

“Hmmm?” I’m not listening.

“Never mind,” she says with a laugh. Standing back to look at me, she places a hand on my shoulder and squeezes. “I’m so proud of you, Alex. My sweet son.”

The words warm my heart. These last six months of our engagement have been a whirlwind. Public events have been my life since the cradle, but this private event has my stomach in knots. I want the day to be perfect for Isabella, but there are so many factors I can’t control, especially since she wants to be married outside.

“Relax. It’s going to be perfect.” Mom places a cool hand on my cheek.

“Only perfect?” I smile into her eyes and lay my hand over hers. I stand before a full-length mirror brought to the ranch so that I can look as handsome as my bride deserves.

“I’m fine. Really. I’m ready! You should be helping Bella.”

“And leave the groom alone on his wedding day? Never! You need your mother. Bella has a whole entourage. She’ll be alright.” She glances at her watch. “When your brothers arrive, maybe I’ll go tend to her. They should be here any minute.”

Right on cue, there's a knock on the door. I walk quickly to open it, excited to see them. I was told that two of them would be here, but not who specifically. Out the window, I see Ishmael and Christian on the porch. They look every bit the country gentleman in their casual tuxedos.

Right behind them are two people I'm utterly thrilled to see. "Nicolai! Katerina! I can't believe you made it. I'm so thrilled."

I embrace all of them in a group hug. "Katerina, Isabella will be dying to see you. She's upstairs."

"You look amazing, big brother," Christian says, giving me a huge hug. "Proud of you."

"Everyone, come in. Just be ready to leave at any moment. We can't see the bride."

I can relax now that my family is here. Knowing that they were in Nicolai's hands, I never should have worried about a thing. He's never let me down.

"I'm so glad to see you."

"I'm so glad we could be here," Christian says. I can see in their eyes that they know I mean so much more than that, and so do they.

They greet my mom before I usher her off to look after Bella. Even though we'll all be together after the honeymoon, it'll be the longest time the two of them have spent apart in years. Besides, a woman needs her mother on her wedding day.

Wedding day. I can't believe I'm marrying the most incredible woman in the world today.

Christian puts his arm around me, then looks at me head-on. "The King sends his congratulations to you on your wedding day. He sent this for you so that he wouldn't be far from your heart."

"The King is never far from my heart. Neither are you and all of Solvaria." I bow slightly to him as he pins a medal to my uniform with the King's seal. We say a word of prayer wishing

long life over the Royal House of Vanecourt and the nation of Solvaria, along with all of the nations of the world.

I hear tunes of music from a quartet around the property. Soon, I hear the sound of a screen door and a handful of women streaming outside. I know that's a sign to flee the area to avoid seeing my bride before the appointed hour.

"Let's take a tour around the property, Christian and Ishmael." I put a hand each around my brothers, and we walk toward the barn. We have several horses, and I made sure we had enough saddles and equipment for all of us to ride together.

Bella made me promise to uphold the tradition of not seeing her until I'm standing at the altar. It's a little difficult considering we're preparing in the same space. But for her, I'll try to make even the impossible within reach.

The three of us ride our horses through the ranch, looking at it from all angles, averting our eyes to any billowing sheets of white. I tell them about the plans Bella and I have for every part of our land, especially now that we've combined the two properties.

We stop next to the barn where the reception will be, and Ishmael snags three crystal tumblers from the bar. It's a mix of simple and decadent, which is exactly his style. He pulls a bottle of Scotch from the shelf and pours it into the glasses, making a glass for each of us.

"Few people get it all. As of today, you can consider yourself among those lucky few," Ishmael says, lifting his glass in the air. "To the man who has it all, and to the bride who gave it to him!"

Christian and I lock eyes over our toasting glasses with expressions of pure joy.

"We'll make a diplomat out of you yet, Ishmael," Christian jokes. Ishmael, who's a few years younger than us, was always one to buck tradition, making his own name for himself in business. I'm grateful the pressure isn't as heavy on him as for me and Christian.

When it's time for the ceremony, I line up with my brothers at an archway festooned with yellow roses, the entryway to the aisle we'll walk down. The cellist picks up her bow and slips it across the strings.

The two horses who guaranteed our first introduction bring the rings to the altar.

It's amazing how well Maximus behaves when tethered to Water, absorbing his calming presence. They are the picture of obedience as Christian unties the rings from their necks. Bella's bridesmaids appear one by one and line up as my heart takes off in my chest.

As anticipated, Bella's face rises over the hill next. Her dress billows around her legs in the breeze as she and Lily float gracefully down the center aisle. They part at the end as Lily transfers her hand to mine.

She is so beautiful, I can't take my eyes off her. For most of the ceremony, I focus only on her, unable to look away. Her freckles skip across the creamy brown smoothness of her nose and cheeks.

Toward the end, I picture planting a gentle kiss on her exposed shoulder, watching the goosebumps rise on her neck and behind her ear as her eyelids flutter closed and her mouth opens.

I stumble back to reality for the final vows and the moment we say 'I do.' It dawns on me for the thousandth time that day that this woman is marrying me. I turn and gather her in my arms, then kiss my bride as the minister prompts. I don't need the instruction.

After a long, passionate kiss, I come up for air to say one thing. "I love you. My wonderful wife."

She pulls me back with a nip to my lower lip. "I love you, too. Marvelous husband."

Gingerly, I play with her curls. "Thank you for leaving them curly for me. I love them that way. I love you as you are." I look her directly in the eyes. That was the sole request I

had made for the day. And my perfect wife, of course, provided.

“Of course. When an agreeable man asks for something, you give it to him.” She bobs her nose into mine and smirks.

My hand travels the length of her back and comes to rest just above her scrumptious behind.

“Is that so?” I ask, “I had no idea I was agreeable.”

She nods coyly as she positions my hand even lower. “Mostly agreeable.”

She whispers into my ear, breathing hot on my neck. “But I love it when you’re not so disagreeable, too. I love it when you’re bad.”

ISABELLA

I collapse into the limo, and Alex collapses on top of me. I caress his hair as he kisses my shoulder. “I’ve been wanting to do that all day.”

He settles into the seat next to me and grabs my hand. I sit up next to him, and he wraps his arm around me. He leans in to whisper in my ear. His breath on my skin sends a quivering wave through me.

He gently caresses my cheek with the back of his fingers.

“Tonight, I get to make love to my wife for the first time.”

“I get to make love to my husband.”

It sends a chill straight through me, like the time we made love in the barn, through a lightning storm while it rained outside.

He kisses me, gently cradling my face in his hands. Emotion soars through me, and it’s not the raw, demanding desire I’m oh-so-familiar with. He’s kissing me like I’m made of the finest crystal. His lips convey the message to me perfectly. I am not only loved, I am treasured.

We walk into the hotel hand in hand.

“Checking in?”

The clerk barely glances at us.

“Yes.”

“Name?”

“Mr. and Mrs. Adams.”

The pride in Alex’s voice is obvious. The clerk perks up, too.

“Oh, the honeymoon suite. One night only?”

“We fly out tomorrow.”

He nods. “Congratulations.”

He hands Alex the key and calls for the bellhop.

I grab the bag I packed full of lingerie and run into the bathroom in our room quickly, hopefully before my husband even notices I’m gone. Although given how hot and heavy we are right now, every second probably feels like hours for him, the same as it does for me.

The lace gown floats down to my ankles. A hint of my dark skin shows through it. When I bought it, I thought it looked incredibly romantic. It seems perfect for tonight.

I walk slowly out of the bathroom. Alex is standing at the window, jacket off. He looks like a model in a magazine.

“Alex.”

His eyes widen, and his nostrils flare just slightly.

“Bella. Wow.”

He comes to me and picks me up, cradling me in his arms as if I weigh nothing at all. I slide my hand up his arm, then his neck, and finally stroke his face.

He carries me over to the bed and sets me down. I watch him as he undresses. I run my eyes over every part of him, and I help him unwrap my gift, marveling at the definition in his arms and chest.

He lies down beside me. With only the tip of one finger, he traces the deep V in the front of my nightgown.

“I love you.”

“I love you so much.”

He kisses me. Inside me, the urgency rises, but his lips and hands touch me with such exquisite tenderness, I don’t ever

want it to end. I slide my hands around his body. Feeling his biceps and pecs sends shivers through me. He's so strong.

This is the man who has sworn his life to me, promised to live for me. I slide my hand down over his stomach and go lower, then wrap my hand around his turgid, stiff, pulsating shaft.

I grab him firmly and slide my hand up and down. He moans into my mouth. His fingers move delicately up and down my body. Then he starts sliding the skirt of my nightgown up, and the feel of the lace riding up against my skin is thrilling.

He lowers himself on top of me, feeling my skin with his hands, merging perfectly. He balances his weight on his forearms, and I grab them like they're my possession.

Then I slowly run my hands up to his shoulders and down his back. He pushes one knee between my legs, then the other. I slide my legs apart for him.

He kisses me and then raises his head. I stare into his eyes. He pushes inside me, inch by inch slowly. The deeper he gets inside me, the more connected we are. Until there's no separation at all.

He slides slowly almost all the way out of me and then back in. Then we start moving together. After this, we belong to each other forever. It's a ceremony as sacred as our vows.

Every move he makes, my body responds automatically. The perfection of it drives the excitement higher and higher. I'm so close.

"I love you."

The words come crashing down on me and then I explode. I feel myself tighten up around him, and he cries out. Everything ceases to exist except him, me, and the exquisite pleasure we bring each other.

I reach up and stroke his face. He grabs my hand and kisses my palm.

We stare at each other. I don't know what to say, then I realize I don't have to say anything. Because he already knows.

ALEXIS

We sit in my favorite café in a little village up on the bluffs where my family used to go for long weekends in the summer. Next door is a gelato place that I love. I planned today especially so she would be able to feel the open air after being cooped up in the cities.

When Bella asked to go to Solvaria on our honeymoon, I didn't like the idea at first. I wanted to take her on an adventure somewhere she had never been. She wanted to see all my old haunts since I had seen all of hers, and it seemed only fair. Marriage is a compromise.

We've spent the last week in Solvaria's major cities seeing where I was educated. She's particularly taken with my college years at Solvaria University and the summers I spent at political conferences in the major cities and abroad.

Today, on the other hand, I brought her to one of our favorite getaways, an estate that's been in the family for generations. It's the height of freedom, a mountain retreat with the entire world below opening before us. We can see the crystal blue sea from here, and it's a quick jaunt by horseback, by car, or by bike.

"Why don't we go back to Virka next week? It's been a while since we were in the capital."

I shrug. "We could." She's staring out at the glassine blue water, and I move to catch her eye before slipping the invitation out of my pocket. The velvety card glosses over her fingers as she feels the embossed lettering.

After looking at it for a moment, she squeals. “A ball!”

I never thought fancy parties would suit my little rancher, but I’m learning all sorts of new things about her. Apparently, every little girl grows up dreaming of fancy balls. All I wanted to do as a kid was escape them. Now, though, I appreciate it. They’re a lovely tradition.

“Father invited us when he heard we were in the country. We’ll go in a day early to find you a gown. Then we can spend the day with the family getting massages and eating until our clothes don’t fit anymore. What do you say?”

I think she’ll pop out of her chair with excitement. After lunch and a giant scoop of her favorite gelato, I take her to an art gallery showing the work of an artist collective who came here to capture the mustangs on the Solvarian grasslands. The horses are semi-wild, living on a reservation, and the representations are spectacular.

There is a hall of paintings, a hall of photography, and a hall of sculpture. When Bella comes into the building that is full of horses, I can tell she has mixed feelings about it because she misses hers so much. But when she enters the hall of paintings, she halts in disbelief.

At the end of the hall, framed by all the other tastefully hung pieces, is a portrait of Maximus and Water grazing in the pasture. “But how...” The words barely pass through Bella’s lips. “When?”

“You can do a lot with cameras these days.”

She laughs, looking at me with shining eyes. “So what happens to it now?”

“Well...” I elongate the word to add suspense. “First, it stays in this gallery for a few weeks. Then it goes on tour for a couple of months. Then it comes and lives at our house with us, unless we decide to loan it out.”

“Really?” she practically screams, covering her mouth before realizing we’re the only ones here. I nod, and she practically bowls me over in delight.

In the next hall, the hall of photography, it takes her a little longer to find the painting of us riding on a trail. She doesn't recognize us at first, and when she does, her eyes widen. This one takes a little more explaining.

“Do you remember the photographer who came out to take our picture for *The Texas Horseman*?” The media had gotten quite the kick out of the Solvarian prince-turned-rancher, who found his very own princess in America.

Bella visibly relaxes. “Oh, good.”

I hide a smile. It's a concern of hers that one day she'll see someone hiding in the bushes to take her picture. She's finally starting to loosen up about it, so now is not the time to rib her.

I barely get her out of the photography wing in one piece. I've already let her talk me into buying three or four unsold pieces in each hall. When she goes into the sculpture wing, there is only one on display. Hers.

A marble masterpiece of Maximus in full rear while Water gallops beside him sits in the middle of the room with a spotlight trained on it. The marble is perfect, without striation or flaw. Bella falls silent and travels slowly around it.

Her breath is short, and I can see her lip quivering. The only thing that's more beautiful than the statue is the woman circling it.

“Thank you,” she whispers as I come up behind her and place an arm around her shoulders. I draw her up against me, and she melts into my body in a way that fulfills me.

At our mountain retreat overlooking the sea, she stands on the balcony, smelling the salt in the wind.

“You know, I just had this thought cross my mind. That I'm right where I want to be.” She leans her head back on my shoulder again, this time running her slim fingers up my legs to her hips.

“It's where I want to be forever. With you. My beautiful wife,” I whisper in her ear, leaving a trail of kisses along the back of her neck. Slowly unbuttoning her blouse, I run my

fingertips across her criminally soft chest as she catches her breath.

“Why don’t we adjourn to the boudoir?” I tease, and she giggles.

“No. Out here is perfect.”

She turns and hops up onto the balcony railing, threading her legs around my waist and pulling me close. Brazenly, she slips her blouse off over her head and lets it fly off in the breeze, then unsnaps her lacy bra and allows it to follow.

My heart jumps into my throat as I approach, tracing my mouth from her throat to her collarbone and down her sternum. As I gaze at my wife’s perfect form, I reflect that I am the luckiest man alive.

ISABELLA

I don't know if I can make it through this dinner. Sitting beside Alex and across from Lily in our home, I feel the urge to pass out or retch every few minutes.

"Could you pass the salt please?" I muster the strength to say.

My stomach churns, and Lily eyes me meaningfully across the dining room table.

"You've hardly touched your food," she says. "I thought this was your favorite. Maybe a little wine would settle your stomach."

She holds the bottle to my glass, but I take it from the table.

"I don't think that works, Lily. Really, I'm fine. It'll pass."

Lily's stare grows more intense. "You're sure? Maybe you should rest."

Yes, I'm sure. It's not going to pass.

I stand. "I'm just going to get some water. Anyone need anything from the kitchen?"

I bolt to the bathroom, barely making it in time. I rinse my mouth out, and as I leave the washroom, I feel Lily's familiar hand on my back.

"When are you going to tell him?" Lily whispers conspiratorially.

I chuckle, then groan as she wipes my face with a cool, wet cloth. “I swear, you’re a witch or something.”

She snorts. “You’re so green at the gills, it was hard to miss. Are you alright?”

“Better now. I’m sorry, it’s just some smells...”

Lily nods. “Believe me, I know the drill. How far along?” She can barely contain the excitement in her eyes, and I start to tear up. Of course, everything makes me cry lately, but it’s good to see someone else as happy as I am.

“Just eight weeks. I didn’t want to say anything until I was sure, but I went to the doctor yesterday.” I take the ultrasound still-shot from my pocket and hand it to her. Lily stifles a squeal.

“Oh, how wonderful!” she exclaims and hugs me.

When she lets go, I can see she’s starting to cry, too.

“I can’t wait to have a baby around. So, when are you going to tell Alex?” she asks brightly. She retrieves a lemon from the fruit bowl and a knife from the block.

“How do you know he doesn’t already know?” I lean my back against the counter and cross my arms.

She squeezes juice from half the lemon in my ice water and points at my husband through the doorway with the tip of the knife. “That is not a man who knows he’s about to be a father.”

I laugh. Alex is so absorbed in his food that I’m pretty sure he hasn’t even noticed we’re gone. I take the photo and the glass and head to the table.

“Honey?” I begin when I get settled back down in my chair. “Alex?”

“Hmm?” He glances up with raised eyebrows.

“I have some news.” I slide the glossy black square across the table and watch his face shift from thoughtful to amazed, with every expression in between.

If I had been worried that this international diplomat would be inscrutable with his poker face, Alex dispels that fear completely.

“Yes!” he yells, pumping his fist in the air. He gets down on his knees next to my chair.

“You’re going to be a father!”

Wrapping his arms around my middle, he talks to my flat belly. “Hi, little one! It’s your papa!” I dissolve into fits of uncontrollable laughter.

“He doesn’t even have ears yet!” I say through my giggles.

“She can feel vibrations, I’m sure. That’s a form of hearing,” he insists.

I look at Lily for help. She shrugs and shakes her head with a huge smile on her face.

“How long have you known? How far along are you? And are you alright?” he asks rapid-fire.

“I just found out yesterday. I’m eight weeks along. And I’m wonderful.”

“She’s sick as a dog,” Lily interjects.

“We’ll do whatever you need to help you feel better.” He has his phone out already, looking up remedies.

“Of course, you’ll have to stay off the horses until the baby comes,” he says.

I feel my eyes widen and my cheeks grow hot. “That’s what the doctor said, too,” I say forlornly. “But I twisted her arm. If Water just trots, it’s okay. I had to promise to be careful.”

“Good. I’m sure it’s good practice for our little girl if you hear no more often, considering how headstrong I’m sure she’ll be.”

“Or how stubborn he’ll be!” I put my finger in the air.

“Boy or girl, they’ll be perfect,” Lily says, always the peacemaker. “Have you thought about names?”

“I just learned a second ago we were having anything at all. But, yes,” Alex says with a laugh. “Grace and Georgiana are both beautiful. I’m partial to ‘G’ names. No idea why.”

“Whoa, there, Papa!” He beams at the word ‘papa.’ “We’ll figure this all out as we go. For now, let’s just celebrate.”

“Hear, hear!” Lily seconds my speech with a raised glass. “Alex, let me know when you’re telling your family so I can be there to help everybody scream! Especially your father.”

Lily has a secret smile, and I’m so happy she and King Francis – my father-in-law is a King, which is crazy – have continued to talk even after she came back. They’re taking it slow. They talk on the telephone, video chat, and even text, which is hilarious to see. But even in the short time they saw each other in Solvaria, it was just like the first time they were together. Nothing had changed.

And I hope it’s like that for me and Alex in thirty years. Just without the long separation in between.

Alex gets back into his chair and takes my hand. For the rest of the meal, he runs his thumb across my knuckles and refuses to let go. He keeps looking at me like he can tell what I’ll look like when I’m swollen with his child.

Lily laughs at him. “I don’t think you could look more in love if you tried, my sweet son.”

“I don’t think I could be more in love.”

“So, it’s safe to say you’re happy.”

“Excruciatingly.” He raises his eyebrows at me until I giggle again.

My hand springs to my mouth. “Don’t make me laugh too much!”

After dinner, Lily surprises us with virgin daiquiris, and we all sit on the porch to watch the sunset.

Usually, I like to feed Maximus and Water and groom them in the evenings, but Alex called the stable hands and asked them to cover for me this evening. Little does he know I told the horses yesterday.

From my spot on the porch, I can just make out the sculpture of Water and Maximus in the fading light. The sculptor carved their rippling lines with such finesse that I can almost believe our horses are about to gallop through the door and out into the sunset, wild and free.

There was a time when I would have liked nothing more than to climb onto Water's back, take off toward the horizon, and ride away until nothing looked familiar. I didn't think there was anything that could have tamed my heart.

As I look out across the ranch, I think I'll burst with joy. My heart doesn't feel tame, but I realize I don't have to be someplace unfamiliar to be free. I have everything I need right here.

THE END.

For sneak peeks and a slice of life about Isabella and Alexis

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