

*we three*  
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#1 *New York Times* Bestselling Author

RACHEL VAN DYKEN

# We Three Kings

by Rachel Van Dyken<sup>®</sup>

[www.rachelvandykenauthor.com](http://www.rachelvandykenauthor.com)

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WE THREE KINGS

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# DEDICATION

Inspired by Grandpa Lainheart,  
who always carried a comb and had the most wisdom in the  
world.

He would have been a great King.

# PROLOGUE

*Zantland*

*Ten Days Before Christmas 2021*

I could not be any more cliché—but I loved Christmas. The sights, the smells, the way people used one day to put down their swords and get together, even if it meant an extra shot of rum in their eggnog was needed in order to do it. It felt peaceful.

I walked through the streets, quiet as usual, observing all the things I'd never really had after not knowing my biological parents, not that I didn't adore my adopted parents, they saved me when I needed saving the most as an infant, but I always knew I was different, despite their inability to tell me how.

I was from a small country in Europe.

That's all I knew.

And from birth, they swore an oath to take me, to protect me, to make sure that I was completely safe and cared for.

I was an infant when they brought me to New York; I grew up in a nice brownstone in Brooklyn, went to private school, had an annoying little adopted sister that looked nothing like me constantly batting the girls away from me all the way through high school and even more so in college.

The day she found a condom in my room was the day our pact started, I kept her secrets, she kept mine, and now it felt

like she was keeping something else from me.

She was paler than me.

Her blonde hair was pulled back under a green beanie, and she wasn't really saying much as she walked with me to the ticket counter.

"It's only a few days." I laughed and pulled her beanie from her head, then put it back on, frizzing her hair out on all sides.

If looks could kill.

She averted her eyes and swatted at me with her small hands. She was only five foot two, but she could still somehow pack a punch. "I know, it's just, it's Christmas and"—she swallowed and looked down—"I'll miss you."

"You know, I told you that you could come with me. It's a business trip, you could shop around London, hang out, drink champagne."

She made a face, her nose scrunched up while her lips formed a thin line. "I'd get bored and probably arrested."

"And then I'd have to bail you out." I nodded, then leaned in. "Like when you got in trouble in that Wal-Mart parking lot for racing carts into cars on accident when it really wasn't an accident, but on purpose because the guy you had a crush on bet you?"

Her green eyes narrowed, it was the ultimate betrayal, but I wanted to put a smile on her face or at least get a reaction. I'd miss her.

Her finger poked into my chest. “You swore to secrecy.”

“It slipped.” Just like the smile I had on my face at how adorable she was.

“Humbug.” She crossed her arms. “Just promise to call, Mom and Dad are weird about you leaving the country and I can’t help but think something’s off, I mean, Dad literally cried on the sofa holding your baby picture against his chest.”

I burst out laughing. “He’s always emotional during the holidays. Last year he wept over a dry turkey, then said things will never be the same again once I’m twenty-four.”

She snickered. “He said the same thing this year when you said you were leaving for business, what business is this anyway? I mean, you passed the bar exam a year ago and now you’re already off on official business. It’s like hiring someone and being upset when they actually do the work!”

I grinned. We were always on the same wavelength me and her. “What can I say, I’m extremely important at my firm.”

She held out her pinky finger. “Just promise me, pinky promise, like the total simp you are, that you’ll make it in time for Christmas.”

“Days, Danica, actual days and I’m home.” Yet something did bother me about not getting any information from the firm other than I was needed for my first project.

I pinky promised anyway to make her feel better, and when I got onto that flight I had no idea that my life would never be the same. I didn’t realize until it was too late, until I was one



of five people in the very expensive first class my *company* had purchased for me.

No idea that I wouldn't be coming home any time soon.

Or that the minute I got onto the near empty jet, that I wasn't headed to London.

But to a castle.

Mine.

My birth parents.

And to the country who needed the heir to their throne.

Me.

# CHAPTER ONE

*Samira*

*Present Day, two weeks before Christmas*

“All I’m asking...” I stare down at the King of Banalia, Frederick Cornelius the third—who was a cousin by marriage to the current crown even though he had his own, then again the three small countries that have all been in our royal line were settled next to one another right by Denmark, the populations were small but the heritage was huge. “Is if you would just attempt to consider it.”

“No.”

“Well, that was quick.” Would it be a crime to throw a book at a new king? Actually, I think it stated in the law that assault would actually get me thrown into prison—I always wondered if we had dungeons and really didn’t need to find out.

He sighed, but still didn’t close his book or look up. “That was the fourth time you’ve asked me and I have it on good authority you asked my cousin as well.”

My left eye twitched. How did he even know these things? “At least give me a reason why you won’t marry me and take that, that—” I couldn’t even bear to say it. “—heathen’s place!”

“Heathen, wow, using bigger words these days, color me impressed.” He smirked, his white teeth showing before

disappearing behind an unamused frown as he tucked a basically nonexistent lock of blond hair from his forehead, he'd never had a hair out of place, never truly spoke out of turn—at least in public, apparently I didn't count—and had the nickname Golden King. Figured. “And the answer is still no, also I'm a bit insulted you asked Arthur first.”

I rolled my eyes, Arthur was a prince, of course I'd ask him, I mean his father had no intention of passing the torch anytime soon, but he would be king of his country, if he lived long enough to make it past his partying ways. “I asked him first because I assumed his playboy lifestyle would fit right into it but when I went into the room.” My cheeks heated as the vision of what I actually saw replayed in my mind. Girl on top of him, him with a black feather, I looked away before I was traumatized for life but there was definitely a lot of excitement. “He had, er, company.”

“Was there a bracelet dangling from the door?” Frederick's tone was bored as per usual, uninterested, more or less, like I was about to get a complete lecture on why bracelets on doors mattered.

After a painful minute of absolute silence, I finally whispered, “Yes.”

He turned another page like the multitasker of the century. “Assume it always belongs to the person who was wearing it and don't enter unless you want trauma for life, I once found my great aunt in there, some things you just can't unsee, Samira.”

He still hadn't truly looked up from his dusty book, though in between scolding me he'd had two sips of whiskey and turned at least one page... I would hate him if he hadn't saved me through University.

Math was never my strong suit, actually studying was never my strong suit until he came along and made me feel so dumb I studied harder, passed my classes with brilliance only to have him say. "See? You just needed a challenge."

A friendship was born never to be stopped and wouldn't it be better to marry your friend rather than some long-lost heir to the throne who grew up in New York has no manners and went to law school. He even minored in art! Art was not helpful in politics.

I shuddered. "Anyway, you need a wife, my parents are archaically might I add, trying to marry me off to the rustic long lost prince of New York who's hellbent on getting on a throne he doesn't even seem to want."

"Mmmm." Frederick still didn't look up. "Sounds like a *you* problem."

I slammed my hand against the side of the green leather chair he was splayed all over. The damn man didn't even flinch, he just let out the longest sigh in the history of sighs. "Are we done here? I really want to finish this chapter and I have tea later."

Tea. He had tea. Sure, black tea, green tea, any sort of tea was clearly more important than me.

Oh no. That rhymed. He was making me crazy! Would it kill him to just respond with some sort of emotion? Or to put his damn book down for one second and make eye contact?

I clasped my hands in front of my waist. My red dress felt too tight as it wrapped around my body, my nude heels too tall, and did we really need to wear nylons every day in the palace? Mine suddenly felt itchy, bombarding. I hated it so much, but was never allowed to complain.

I was a princess by right, by birth, but my title literally gave me nothing, all I had was that. A title. And all my family wanted was for me to marry the soon to be king. I thought maybe it would be okay if I could choose one of the three.

But the problem with that scenario, the other two had zero interest in me, they viewed me as a sister and nothing more. We'd known each other too long, had too many secrets, too much exposure, which in my opinion made it better because I at least knew them. At least we'd suffer together and we could eventually just be partners in crime, in trying to be the best leaders. I even at one point thought I'd turn the other eye and let them cheat, which was a horrible position to be in, but marrying a stranger? No.

This other guy? All I knew was he liked art, he'd never been trained the way we had, and was crass.

I swore if he showed up with glasses on and asked if he could paint me, I would scream bloody murder.

Instead, he showed up looking too attractive, too cunning, sarcastic, and too smart. He saw through my facade immediately—basically he was dangerous and knew nothing

of the palace, was used to just walking around without a shirt, and was known to hang out with the staff making them uncomfortable or so I thought until the butler got drunk last week and ended up running around outside screaming. “I can fly!” Later we found out he thought he was Superman, but on account of his spectacles needed to take them off in order to jump off the building and fully become Superman.

Security came.

And Zautland, or crazy Z as I’ve started calling him in my head, just laughed and thought it was the best night of everyone’s lives despite the fact that the fire department had to get the butler off the roof!

He was an absolute menace, and that was just one experience.

“Princess?” a voice sounded, a dreaded voice... Rupert’s voice, the main butler of the castle. “It seems that your soon to be Prince Zautland, your betrothed has arrived from his meeting, I set him in the tearoom just outside the rose garden, it’s a lovely day and I’ve taken it upon myself to turn on the warmers, wine has been set and—”

I held up my hand, my gold bracelet from my dad dangling against my wrist as if to remind me he would always be with me despite the hardships I’d soon face in the next few minutes. My parents had always been distant. I was supposed to be seen, not heard, the bracelet had been one of the only emotional things I’d been given by my father. “I’ll be right down.”

“Lovely.” Rupert bowed his head, his salt and peppered hair cut perfectly above his ears, his black and grey tie tucked gently behind his black vest, his black-gloved hands perfectly poised in front of him during his bow.

Nothing out of place.

The way it was supposed to be, before Zautland came storming in.

Rupert walked out, his cadence slow and purposeful, his steps near counted.

I stared at the door and sighed.

“Better get going.” Frederick was suddenly behind me, his body heat nearly searing mine as he pulled me back against his chest, his lips whispering inches from my right ear. “You don’t want to miss your future.”

“Tell me I don’t make your heart pound,” I said in one last pathetic attempt to get him to marry me instead.

His right hand ran down from my shoulder to my fingertips, he gave them a squeeze, and pressed our joined hands against his chest, then pulled them to his lips, kissing the back of mine before he once again leaned down and said, “No, it would ruin this beautiful friendship.”

“Friendship my ass.” I grumbled. “Give me five minutes to convince you.”

He paused, his grip still tight on mine. “Oh? And how do you think you’ll be able to do that, princess?”

“Yes.” A voice sounded from the door, “I’m intrigued as well.”

It was Zautland. His dark hair and bright blue eyes annoyed me, just like his cocky smile and the way he didn’t even wear a tie with his navy suit and open white button-down shirt, he even showed off a tattoo on his right pec in the shape of a black crown.

Disgusting.

Not for me.

And a black crown? That just screamed damning for our countries! Somehow that was taboo, right?

I looked away. “Don’t be crude, gentleman.”

Zautland coughed out a demeaning laugh. “You were the one that offered, princess. Or were you lying? You know, I despise liars, right Frederick?”

Frederick smirked down at me. “You could barely handle Zautland looking your direction, do you really think you could even begin handle me?” His words, his mouth, everything about him mocked me.

Stupid kings and their good looks and even better wordsmith ability.

My cheeks heated. “I’m a woman.”

Zautland cursed under his breath. “I can’t decide if I like your fire or want to douse it with a hose.”

“It gets complicated.” Frederick agreed with a hard nod of his head.



“I’m currently present, hearing all these words,” I said.

“Yes, but you’re so short.” Zautland walked around and faced both of us, still holding hands. “It’s hard to see you, you blended right in with the curtains behind you for a solid five seconds.”

“Ah...” Frederick nodded. “Because they’re plain?”

“Are you kidding me?” I dropped his hand. “I’m not plain!”

Zautland ignored me. “Mainly because her hair’s so dark and long I thought it was part of the side of the black drapes and when I realized it was too late, I was already staring at her too long, looking like an idiot.”

“It happens,” Frederick said helpfully.

“She’s used to it, I’m sure.” Zautland agreed.

I squeeze my eyes shut. These idiots.

“So...” Zautland walked around the table and poured himself some whiskey into a crystal glass, then took a sip. “I feel I was promised a show, you said five minutes, so princess, your time is about to start now, if you can convince him to marry you in five minutes, I’ll break off the engagement. He’s a wonderful friend, horrible at pickleball, which he admits every time he loses, but would be a lovely husband.”

Panic rose in my chest, why did this feel like a sudden set up? “So if I win, you break the engagement?”

“Yes.” Zautland took another sip. “But then you’ll have to convince him to marry you, which might be harder, any man

might give into your soft touches, but when it comes to marrying you, they often times forget the very sharp claws hidden beneath your perfectly polished nails. Oh look, you changed them to pink, how very out of character, I think I preferred the dark red or black.”

I rolled my eyes. Claws? I had them for good reason! “I’ll prove it.”

“Okay.” Zautland grinned. “And you, Frederick? Are you okay with this?”

“If she can convince me she’s earnest, then yes.” He looked down at me. “But I’d like to remind you—you wouldn’t be able to handle me.”

He was soft. Weak. He read books. I could handle someone who would prefer to be a researcher than a king. “Bet.”

“You heard her.” Zautland grinned and reached for more whiskey. “She said bet.”

# CHAPTER TWO

## *Zantland*

It's not that I wanted to call her bluff—okay, I wanted to call her bluff, wow that didn't take too long. I loved Frederick; I respected him; we were cousins through marriage and he did an excellent job running his small country.

He never asked for a lot.

Loved his books.

Loved women, though that wasn't public knowledge since he liked to also fall in love with all the secrets he held over their heads whenever they dated him.

He did in fact do a lot in return, it wouldn't be a horrible idea for her to marry him, on top of that, if she didn't want to marry me—which she'd made painfully clear and at times at loud volume, why would I take a chance on her?

I wanted my freedom.

I wanted to see my sister, my adoptive parents and stop staring at a random family photo of the late King and Queen who demanded in their last will I come back “home” and take the throne, yet the more I learned about them the more it became apparent that they were not just great parents, great people, but that, my duty had to be fulfilled with or without her by my side.

I knew I had responsibilities, how nice to have someone by my side, to guide me, to help me. I didn't want someone who

hated me, I wanted someone who would partner with me. After being adopted out of the country because of fear of an uprising coup that ended up actually happening—I'd been hidden away from the world. Trained at the best schools? Yes. Wanted for nothing? Yes. Amazing adoptive parents who doted on me along with a younger sister who had no clue the entire time that she was throwing spaghetti at a future king? Had that too.

But now, now that it was announced I was risen from the dead, back in the country, ready to take the throne, all I had were the people around me that two years ago were strangers, Samira included.

My cousins had been generous in their pointers.

But everything there was different.

There was too much protocol, and every step I took it seemed I was fought back with politely being told it was the wrong one. At one point in my first year I was assigned a butler, Rupert, with a stick up his ass. Thankfully, I got rid of that stick real fast. Who knew all it took was one party and too much whiskey? Now he was an ally, but the point remained. I truly hated it. But I knew I'd endure it for the parents I never knew.

My twin brother had been murdered in his sleep in an effort to take back the country, and I'd been next. I understood why they did it; I didn't have to like it.

They'd wanted me on the throne.

We were at peace.

But I had to wonder how long that would actually last.

Furthermore, I didn't want a princess by my side anyway—I wanted a warrior willing to fight to the death who carried a sword that didn't belong via her tongue, so maybe her proving she wasn't worthy was a good thing.

Maybe a broken engagement was what we needed in order to move forward, though amusing, she may just accomplish it.

“Fine.” Samira snapped and shoved Frederick's arm back so hard that I swore you could hear it reverberate through the room, tear the curtains down, toss the furniture and cause a tsunami.

His shock matched mine as she wrapped her arms around his neck, jumped against him, kicked off her heels, and kissed him square on the mouth like it was their typical routine.

His arms went wide like he wasn't sure if she should keep her close or shove her away in sheer panic, she deepened the kiss and parted her lips. I saw everything in slow motion, the way her hands dug into his hair, the way she wrapped her body around his.

What man could say no to that?

RIP Frederick.

He paused and then, as any human would with a gorgeous woman in their arms, wrapped his arms around her and deepened the kiss.

And that was it.

The end.

There was no applause, no cheer, just me shrugging and wishing them a great well being.

They were still kissing when I walked out of the room.

They were probably still kissing when I whispered under my breath, “My congratulations to the happy couple.”

And they were probably still kissing when I went into my isolated room on the top floor and sat on my bed.

I missed my adopted family.

I missed my sister.

I had nobody really that I trusted other than my two cousins and now I had a broken engagement I had to explain to everyone in the monarchy.

But I didn't want someone who didn't want me, crown or not, there were things you fought for in life.

Love was one of them.

And asking her to love me in such a short time? Impossible. Asking her to stand by my side and fight? Even more so.

One day, I'd find a warrior queen.

One day.

Until then... “Cheers. Keep her happy, Frederick.”

# CHAPTER THREE

## *Samira*

He was kissing me back—and it was good, it was really good. I clung to him as he spun me against the wall and pressed himself up against me, the book dropped from his hands with a thud against the ground.

I had no clue the guy even knew how to kiss, let alone seduce someone. His hands dug into my hair, pulling the diamond pins from it, dropping them to the floor. I had no time to even be upset when he lifted me against him, wrapping my legs around him. “Is this it? Is this what you wanted?” I nodded my head even though something felt wrong inside my chest. “A show?”

I froze and pulled away, lips swollen. “A show?”

His grin was wide, red swollen lips pulled back in a teasing smile. Mesmerizing almost evil at the same time. “Did you really think all it would take was a simple kiss to bring me to your side from your fiancé? Do you even know how many women I’ve kissed in my lifetime? And what do you think makes you different? I respect you. I like you. I could never marry you, but I can buy you some more time to get your head together. What’s so bad about him?” He was still holding me in the air, pressed against the wall. I was too embarrassed to move, let alone speak. “What’s so bad? Hmm?”

His eyes crinkled at the sides, the blue flashed back at me like he saw through to my very soul and all the secrets it hid,

all the insecurities. “Hmm?”

“He’s... crude.”

Frederick smirked and looked down at me, it was slow though, like he was breathing me in, calculating what I would say. “Oh? And this is what?”

My legs were firmly around him, he was clearly turned on, and I’d just kissed him in one of the tearooms. “Ummm, this was a bet?”

“You lost before you even started.” He pointed out, gently tucking my hair behind my ears with both hands, his jeweled red blood crested ring was cold against my neck, reminding me that even if it felt good in the moment, he wasn’t my forever. “Though you do taste good, something I shouldn’t even really know about, which I’ll promptly forget.” He nipped at my lips again, like he couldn’t help himself. “Maybe I’ll sample you, then give you to him.”

Who was this guy?

He wasn’t what I expected from boring Frederick. Did he have some weird kink I didn’t know about?

I squirmed against him, suddenly uncomfortable.

“Ahhh.” He nodded and backed away. “And there it is, for someone who claims to want to marry anyone, you still want romance, you still want love, you don’t want to be led by lust, in fact, I imagine if I tried to”—he slid a hand down my shoulder dangerously close to my chest, I shoved him away and slid down the wall—“Exactly.”



“What? What does exactly mean?” My voice sounded so desperate and pathetic, had he really called my bluff?

He took a step back and wiped his mouth with his black-and-white striped handkerchief, wait was he literally wiping my spit? “It means, you still want what you want, and I could seduce the hell out of you right now and it would be meaningless for both of us, why don’t you do the opposite of what you want to do and attempt to get to know him? You might actually like him.”

“Or I could still hate him.”

“Stubborn wench.”

I gasped in horror. “Did you just call me a wench?”

His eyebrows narrowed into a squint. “Well, I was going to call you something else, but it was more inappropriate, started with a C and I still have some decorum.”

My eyes shot open. “What?”

He grinned. “I’m kidding. Go.”

“Where?”

Frederick looked around the room, his eyes wide like I was the idiot in the scenario. “To the man you’re supposed to marry, find a way to get to know him and if you truly want out...” He sighed and hung his head like I was the chore. “I’ll marry you.”

My stomach dropped to my feet. “That wasn’t romantic.”

“Again, you want romance, you want connection, you want love, and I can promise you, I will always love my books and

my country more than my wife and that's the truth, so if you choose this path just know other than some great nights together—a friendship—you'll be lonely, I would never give you my heart.”

I crossed my arms, needing to distance myself from him or maybe even protect myself. “And he would?”

“Better question...” Frederick caressed my face with his thumb before dropping his hand. “Who wouldn't?”

“You. Arthur.”

He smiled. “We were doomed kings from the start, cursed even, who wants that? One reads all day and the other drinks and sleeps around, maybe try the Yankee for once, words I never thought I'd utter.”

I laughed at that and hung my head. “When the Yankee's the better choice...”

“Might like it across the pond... hear it goes deep,” Frederick joked.

If blushes and gasps could be heard across the country mine would have been like a giant gong going off.

“Off you go.” Frederick gave me a swift light kick to the butt and shoved me toward the door and, for whatever reason, I kept walking toward Zautland's room until I stopped in front of it, ready to knock. Everyone was at the castle for the holidays, but he currently occupied the late King's room and it was daunting to even walk by it knowing that the one next door would one day, possibly be mine if I went through with this sham of an arranged marriage.

The minute I lifted my hand to knock on the door after taking a few deep breaths, he jerked it open wearing a grey wool coat, black leather gloves, and a black scarf that somehow made him more insanely attractive, he had tall black boots on like he was ready to go riding, took one long look at me, shook his head and kept walking.

Out of all the kings, he had the most power. He had the biggest castle, the most money, he was the heir to the three Kingdoms, the king of Kings between all of them. He was basically looked at as the ruler over not only his Kingdom but all three joint Kingdoms.

Women and men alike fainted when they saw him.

People adored him despite his ability to follow any rules.

People wanted him, needed his leadership, and yet I just couldn't get over the way he held himself. While he was educated, he just didn't care about royal rules and since I'd been living that way my entire life, hating it by the way, it bothered me that he couldn't at least make the same sacrifices.

Part of me felt stupid, he didn't care about me, he didn't smile back at me when I smiled at him, he looked at me like I was a puzzle or something to fix when I was trained in every way to be the perfect wife.

I scrambled after him, reaching for an arm that kept pumping in such a fast walk I nearly face planted. "Hey, I have to talk to you."

"So talk." He kept walking until he was down the stairs in the foyer, then out the door getting into a waiting black

Maserati.

I ran on my heels to my side of the car and got in. I didn't even have my cell phone on me, money, my purse, or a coat. I just jumped in like an idiot.

He said nothing, he just took off and started driving, sending my body sailing back into the leather seat, giving me whiplash. "So?"

"So." I took a calming breath and clasped my hands together, shivering in my seat. He quickly turned the seat warmers on and kept driving at alarming speeds, he shifted, and kept going. I scrambled for my seatbelt and put it on. "Where are you going?"

"Out." I would have preferred he snapped at me, instead he said it calmly.

I was barely able to stop rolling my eyes. "Yes, I see that."

"Let me be more specific, away from you, and the castle, and the pressure, and probably to the cabin in the woods that you never even knew existed but belonged to my father. I have thoughts, feelings, things that need to be done, so it's the place I go to sometimes grab an axe and passionately chop firewood."

I wasn't ready for that sort of answer. Without any clothes, or toothbrush, or my cell phone, I strapped in and said, "Okay. Off we go."

His leather gloves twisted on the steering wheel, his smile was almost mean. "Brave of you."

"Gonna kill me in the woods?"

“Forgot my special Christmas axe, wouldn’t want to waste it on the old one, especially for the death of a princess, the handle might come clean off, then where would we be?”

“How depressing for your axe.”

“Indeed.”

I gulped and stared out the window as it started to snow. “I don’t like you.”

“You’ve made that.” He increased his speed. “Abundantly clear. Sometimes I don’t like me, do we even ever at all times like ourselves? No. The point is, we have a job to do so even if you have to stare at me the rest of your life, is it not worth the extreme sacrifice for those you do love, for your people, for the Kingdoms? Maybe start thinking about that. I’m crass. I’m rude. I’m all the things you hate. But at the end of the day, my only focus is the three kingdoms, at the very least. Respect that.”

I was quiet the entire time.

It was only an hour away

Christmas music was played, but no more conversation was had, and I had to admit that deep shame washed over me. He may not have been trained the way I was or grown up with the privilege I did.

But he understood the job.

Even if we had to sacrifice it all, it wasn’t about us. This is what we were born into.

Fight for your country. Lead them right. And most importantly, think of them first.

Snow started to come down in sheets. I tried not to focus on it through the windshield because it was making me dizzy. Maybe I sighed too many times.

But suddenly a hand reached across and grabbed mine, clutching it tight.

Zautland didn't look at me, but whispered, "Close your eyes."

# CHAPTER FOUR

## *Zantland*

We weren't going to make it.

I didn't come out and say that, but I knew it the minute the snow started pouring down. It wasn't going to happen.

It quickly turned into a blizzard, which quickly turned into a whiteout.

The car was starting to spin on the snow filled road and we had no water, no food, nothing but my phone, which would lose service soon and ten minutes at the very least left to go until we hit the cabin.

We had to hike.

That's all I kept thinking as I held her hand.

There was no driving up to the cabin and the only place that had anything we needed was a ten-minute drive, possibly a thirty-minute walk, depending on the weather.

I pulled over immediately. "Take this." I handed over my jacket to Samira and cut the engine, snow was piling up too fast and I knew the hill would be too tall and that I couldn't actually see up it clear enough to get us there.

I checked the tank.

We had enough to make it, but not enough to last the night if we waited in the car. Guess that axe would come in handy after all.

“Okay.” I had to say it out loud. “Okay,” I said it again, maybe for me, not for her. “We either walk to the cabin, build a fire and survive, or we stay here and try to fight through overnight.”

The hesitation wasn't there. Samira jerked open the car door, looked over her shoulder with snow slamming against her face and said. “We walk.”

Walk it is.

I said nothing. I got out of the car, took my keys, cell, and started walking. To her credit, she didn't complain at all.

I could hear her slipping behind me to the point that I grabbed her by the hand and just held it as we continued to go through the trenches.

Hunger.

Thirst.

Hypothermia.

All real things that could happen in nature.

But she held my hand and refused to back down and at the most pivotal moments as we did walk, she gripped my fingers harder and I thought to myself I would never forget how her thumb felt as it rubbed against mine as if to say, We would keep walking and I'd keep obsessing over the way her hands even felt warm through my leather gloves.

Snow started to pile light enough that we could walk through it, but it was so slippery that falling was a huge issue and she had no preparation, she was in tall designer heels for



shit's sake, pretty heels, not that I should focus on that at all, but they had zero chance of making it through the ice and snow, and it kept piling and piling.

“Hey.” I grabbed Samira’s hand again and stopped us. “Get on my back, we’ll be there soon.”

“No.” She waved me off like it wasn’t a big deal, even though she was stumbling in the snow on wobbly heels. “I’ll walk, I’ll—”

She slipped across the ice and collapsed against my chest, her hands gripped my wool coat. “Still think you’ll walk?”

She shrugged away, her hair caught in her pretty pink lipstick. Was it horrible that I wanted it to smudge a bit, so I’d have an excuse to keep touching?

She was insufferable, but she was also strong, and strength was admirable in someone who was always shoved into a spot where she had no choice but to say thank you, please, nod her head, smile, accept a proposal you never wanted and all in favor of your country and how you’ve been raised.

“What?” she snapped. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“How am I looking at you?” Cute. She looked extremely cute, because she looked annoyed and started huffing and tugging at her hair. Crossing her arms, she gave me a small shove against the chest. I wasn’t prepared for that first blow or that it would be my final as I fell backward onto the road and into the snow, pulling her with me.

How cliché.

My heart didn't stop thudding against my chest despite the lack of warmth on my back—I had it on my front, I had her there, lips parted. I tilted my head. “You make me curious, you're quite aggressive when you feel insecure, aren't you?”

“I'm not insecure.” She snapped still on me, me still freezing.

I cupped her chin with one gloved hand. “I didn't know princesses lied. Better be careful or he'll hear you.”

Her eyes widened. “Who? Who will? Are we being stalked?” She leaned in, her breath close to my face. “Followed? Who's he?”

I crooked my finger. She came in closer, then brought her face to mine, tilting the side of her face until I whispered. “Santa. You don't want a lump of coal.”

“Childish.” She pulled away.

I pulled her back against my chest. “Sometimes we need to play even as adults, and you should let someone do something for you. Just like we need to play as adults, we need to be carried. So let me?” I slowly sat up and helped her to her feet. “Let me carry you.”

Nostrils flaring, her brown eyes suddenly looked down at my outstretched hand. “Nobody's really ever offered to carry me and truly mean it.”

“Their loss.” I held my hand higher to her. “So? What's the decision? Can I carry you so we don't freeze to death?” I didn't tell her I was already hot down to my core from having her on me.

After a few seconds, she slapped her hand into mine. “If I must.”

Oh, you must be all right.

She helped me to my feet, I nearly tripped turning around, and getting on my haunches for her to jump. “Here you go.”

Her jump wasn’t light, and I loved her more for it, aggressive, clingy, her arms wrapped around my neck, nearly choking me to death. “Don’t fall.”

“Wasn’t planning on it.”

Snow started falling even harder, making me nervous as I lifted her up for a third time and gripped her thighs. “I think it’s getting worse.”

No shit. “Nah, I mean, it can always get worse.”

“Optimism is something you lose while being a part of the monarchy.” She shivered against my neck, probably not realizing that her lips kept touching my skin while she talked. It tickled. “You lose all hope because sometimes you don’t get to make decisions for yourself and sometimes you have dark moments just like right now, wait are we going in the right direction?”

My chest tightened. “I’ll always lead you home.”

“This isn’t my home.”

“The right direction then.” I vowed. “I’ll always lead you in the right direction.”

Even if she walked in the opposite, I’d still find a way not to lose her, even if she didn’t know I was helping.

Even if it was Arthur or Fredrick.

It wasn't even a depressing thought, it was just how I was made, and the minute I landed in the castle two years ago, I saw her fake smiles, her desperation, her anger.

Because why the hell should I be king, when this woman should be queen—could be queen?

Maybe that's what I'd negotiate. Marriage for a price. I'd do what I did best, charm the pants off of everyone, and she could do what she'd already been doing and rule by my side. If that meant she chose to be with Arthur or Frederick on cold nights like this, I could look away, right? Monarchies have done that for generations with arranged marriages.

I heaved her up one more time just as we cleared the hill. The cabin was Nordic in style, like a small wooden castle. The late king, my father, had built it with his bare hands—his queen by his side. It was their escape, a small hunting cabin under the protection of the stars.

The blue and red paint drawn over the dark wood had faded, just like any sort of memory I would have had of them.

The lights were already on for me, and the firewood was stored inside as per my instructions to staff, I just hoped they'd been able to drop off the food and wine along with my journal in time.

Only one way to find out.

Samira gasped behind me, it was a small gasp or maybe large since it was hard to hear anything through the wind from the storm.

“What?” I called over my shoulder.

She squeezed my neck. “It’s perfect.”

I smiled through my freezing face. “Let’s get out of the cold.”

The door was unlocked, I used a free hand briefly to let us in and felt every inch of her body as she slid down my back.

A fire already roared from the stone fireplace, food was set at the table, not a feast but enough to make a few sandwiches with homemade bread and there was indeed a few bottles of wine at the small wooden table next to my heavily worn brown leather journal.

Samira took in the sights and kept staring at the one bed in the middle of the room.

I winced. “Told you it was small, I can take the couch.”

“I like it,” was all she said before she started playing with her hair and dusting snow out of it, but her words seemed genuine.

I liked it too, the cabin, her reaction to it, and the fact that I wasn’t by myself. “Me too.”

# CHAPTER FIVE

## *Samira*

Zautland was a very dangerous person in this sort of setting. I could mock him when he threw parties and used vulgar language, but I couldn't mock him for wanting the small things in life, his privacy, and honoring his parents' memory like this.

His own fortress of solitude.

“Do you want me to make you a sandwich?” he asked gently, as he shrugged out of his thick scarf and dusting off the snow, revealing perfect muscles beneath a tight navy sweater.

Distracted, I looked away at the fire and set his coat on the hook by the door. “You know how to cook?”

“Well, yes, my mom taught me how to cook, but I don't think making a sandwich is going to be rocket science.” His chuckle was dark, warm, lovely.

I shivered from the cold. He grabbed a red Christmas quilt from the couch and placed it over my shoulders, spinning me around in it until I was wrapped up. “Better?”

I could scream at him for being so kind and perfect in the last hour and a half. My heart twisted a bit in my chest. The quilt had reindeer on it. It was warm, and I couldn't remember the last time someone tucked me in, even from childhood. Maybe exhaustion was taking over.

He looked around the room and at one of the wooden chests at the bottom of the bed, it creaked when he opened it but it was cedar so no dust or small scary animals came out of it.

He held up a large grey cable-knit sweater, a pair of black loose-fitting pants, and some wool socks. “Bathroom’s to the right, you’ll be more comfortable and I’ll work on getting you fed.”

He didn’t have to take care of me.

I frowned and took the clothes from his hands.

For the first time since knowing him, he looked slightly embarrassed, hesitant. “I know it’s not what you’re accustomed to, I’ll be sure to put you back in jewels and dresses once we’re back at the castle.”

Offended, I narrowed my eyes. “I have sweats, you know!”

“Are they designer?” He teased, the right side of his mouth lifted in a half smile.

I parted my lips, ready to lie, instead I just pointed at him. “It’s protocol to only wear the best.”

“Oh, okay.” He reached for the clothes back.

I clutched them to my chest. “Don’t you dare.”

He held up his hands. “Fine.”

I stormed toward the bathroom, head held high, clicked the door shut and dropped the clothes onto the floor. The bathroom was massive with floor to ceiling wooden floors, a gorgeous claw bathtub in the middle, and was that a sauna in

the corner? Curious, I went over to it and opened the wooden door.

“Unbelievable, it’s like they built Frozen up in this cabin.”

“You okay in there?” He called from the door.

“Yep, yes, great, just having trouble taking off my pantyhose.”

“I could rip them if you want.” He offered.

I stumbled against the counter and nearly collided with the floor to ceiling mirror next to it. “No need, I think I know how to wiggle my ass out of them.”

He burst out laughing.

I gasped and covered my mouth. “I mean, you know what I mean.”

“Tsk, tsk, a princess should never curse in public.”

“We aren’t in public!” I reminded him.

“My apologies, you’re correct, this is in fact as private as it gets for us, I think.” Oh, sweet God. I did not need that reminder. Why was I suddenly flushed? I stared at myself in the mirror, mascara was trickling down my heated cheeks, I no longer had the perfect eye makeup on and my lips were a natural pale pink.

Get a grip, get a grip. “Be right out!”

I quickly got out of my clothes and neatly folded them, then threw the sweater over my body, it nearly fell to my knees.



I smiled in the mirror. I kind of liked this look and the pants would probably be too big, plus I had my blanket. Talk about unprincesslike behavior, plus he was the one that said I couldn't seduce or maybe that was just in my head.

Not that I was seducing him.

I would never.

But teasing what he'll never have sounded kind of wicked and nice, and I'd been too good for too long. See? He brought out the worst in me! Maybe it was because I was tired, out of sorts, desperate, but I made the choice in that moment. Hadn't Frederick said to get to know Zautland? Well, this was my chance to prove to myself and everyone else how wrong this arranged marriage was.

I pulled open the door, taking the pants and my clothes with me. He wasn't facing me, but pouring two glasses of wine facing the kitchen. "Dinner's ready." He took a sip of wine and turned, then promptly spit it out all over the ground and started choking. "Sorry, wrong tube."

"Never seen a woman's legs before? I'm disappointed."

His eyes were lazy then, so heavy lidded as he stared me down. "Can't say that I've seen legs like that, no." He shook his head. "You must ride well." He paused while my eyes widened in shock, wait why were my cheeks heating up again? "No, no, not like no, I meant horses, because you ride English and you race, on the horse, in a saddle, wearing boots."

I laughed behind my hand. "Yes, Zautland, I ride well."

Maybe this was a bad idea.

His fingertips grazed mine when he handed me the wine, I almost dropped the glass when he smiled down at me. “Cheers to riding.”

A shiver ran down my body.

Our glasses clinked as the storm rolled outside. I couldn't look away from his chiseled jaw, he was at least six inches taller than me, if not more. “So...” I cleared my throat to fill the silence. “What masterpiece have you prepared?”

“Still working on sandwiches, but figured you were starving, so I set out the breads, cheeses, and fruits.”

“You made a charcuterie board in under ten minutes?” I nodded and held up my glass. “I approve of all forms of olives, cheese, crackers, and appetizers.”

He snorted. “If you didn't and asked for a toothpick so you could gnaw on a green olive for an hour, we'd have an issue. I mean, unless it was from a martini that I could approve of.”

I laughed into my wine glass. “I once went to school with a girl who used to swear she only ate three pieces of lettuce a day and five pickles in order to fit into one of her coronation gowns.”

He rolled his eyes, walked around the table, and poured me more wine. “Women and their incessant need to impress one another, claiming they're trying to impress men when really we just want a good non stilted conversation, something to hold on to when we're in bed and someone who knows how to smile.”

I dropped my olive onto the table in slight shock, then quickly picked it up and shoved it in my mouth. That was a bold statement to make, or maybe I'd just been so used to palace life and dating prim and proper men who wanted to put me in my place that I wasn't used to it.

He didn't notice, I don't think, just kept grabbing food and putting it on a small silver plate that had his family crest on it. He slid it over, rolled up his sweater sleeves, washed his hands in the sink and started humming Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire with a crinkled smile on his face while he sliced bread.

He sliced it with precision.

I whimpered in the back of my throat and kept popping green olives into my mouth like it was a challenge.

Was my brain warped?

Were we moving in slow motion? Why was I suddenly finding everything he did attractive? Cabin fever already? Insanity?

He rubbed his hands together, grabbed some fresh roast beef, and began slicing it into small pieces. "Onions?"

"No!" I almost shouted. "No, I mean, not on my sandwich." Not tonight.

What the heck was I thinking? That I'd be kissing my own fiancé or something? I was trying to prove we weren't a match, not launch myself at him. If anything, I should have made him put the whole onion on there. Instead, I stayed silent.

“No onions.” He repeated. “All right. Tomatoes?”

“Sure.”

“Mayo?”

Why did his list of ingredients have to sound so sexy with the way he growled it low in his throat, but in a cheerful, I want to serve you sort of way? When had my father ever even made a snack for my mom? When had my mom ever not been served on by staff? Furthermore, I nearly missed the chair to sit when he added extra lettuce to mine and cheese without asking because he remembered, then cut it into four pieces.

Something that etiquette taught you in the palace.

High tea always included smaller sandwiches, he'd made mine massive but still bless his heart tried to make it look dainty, fit for a princess.

He kept humming when he made his own sandwich, fit for a king, then sat down next to me, not across, but right next to me. His leg brushed mine.

Improper, but we weren't in public, like he'd reminded me.

“Eat.” He shoved my plate in front of me. “You'll feel warmer faster.”

I knew other ways to get warmer faster.

I nearly dropped my sandwich when the errant thought hit.

“Is it not good?” He leaned in so close I could see the flecks of gold in his bright blue eyes.

It was good, and the cabin was giving me some sort of fever, yes that's what it was, we'd always been together during

events, both too busy and isolated to go on dates that weren't for the press. Ones where we awkwardly laughed during an outing, riding.

It was exhausting.

So then all the stories I heard were in the tabloids or from the other two kings who adored him, or the staff.

Yet all I saw was a Yankee getting ready to take the throne and I would be forced to sleep with him and create an heir, plus he'd always seemed so disinterested. Insecurity always crept in, making me think it was me, he didn't like me. I was too boring, too rigid in all the wrong ways to his upbringing.

So maybe the problem all along wasn't him, but me. I set down my sandwich and blotted my lips despite there being no lipstick there, then took a sip of wine. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure." He polished off his sandwich.

I burst out laughing. "Okay, this wasn't part of it, but did you chew?"

He threw his head back and laughed freely, his smile was so easy and sexy, he held up his wineglass. "When you ate in my house you had to go fast otherwise there would be a fight over the last sandwich and I was very serious about sandwiches my entire life." His face fell a bit, he set down his wine, then motioned for us to get up and go to the couch. He held out his hand.

Would this be a defining moment?

I grabbed it daintily as I was taught, and let him lead me over. He didn't sit down right away though. He put more wood on the fire, then grabbed the quilt from me, sat down right by my side and placed the blanket over both of us, only to pull my legs onto his lap.

My. God. That was bold. He was my fiancé, but we'd only had a few instances where he'd touched me.

He tucked my feet underneath the blanket like it was normal and shot a sad look over at me. Was he going to give me bad news? Had I said something wrong? “It wasn't until two years ago I found out about my dad's favorite food, the late King's—my mom always found him in the kitchen late at night making sandwiches, they even got to the point where after catching him so many times and scaring the staff every time, that they made sandwich nights, the kitchen would be empty and they'd have all these silly names for the sandwiches that the staff learned how to make.” His face fell even harder. “It was, um, right before the coup, Christmas time, that they made their final one. I had already been taken out of the country by that time.”

Tears welled in my eyes, threatening to spill over.

His jaw flexed while he looked away from me and into the flames, taking the last sip of his wine. “Two turtledoves, it was called two turtledoves, his sandwich proof to her that he'd never leave her side, no matter what. Love. Devotion.”

“Wow.” I turned away and wiped a hot tear. “It must have been a great recipe.”

“It was grilled cheese.” He smiled over at me. “Because love,” he said in his journals. “Should always feel easy, just like grilled cheese. They died two days later on Christmas, his favorite holiday to celebrate with my mom.”

That’s why the King had wanted us married on Christmas.

I was his dove.

He wanted me, insignificant stuffy me, to be the King’s dove.

Sickness washed over me, would it have been so hard to ask this question and not just assume that I was just something else to acquire in the grand scheme of things within the crown?

Uncomfortable and feeling a giant gulp of guilt lodge in my throat, I quickly changed the subject. “My parents’ love was different. I’m envious. I was told to be seen, not heard, and I know that eventually they softened to each other, but I couldn’t imagine them making sandwiches at midnight. I had no idea the King and Queen were like that. I mean, I heard they snuck away often.”

He cackled out a laugh. “I’m sure they did.”

“But, how can you say you truly love someone when you can’t smile with them, when all you have is duty first, rules second, country third, and maybe if there’s enough energy for the rest, the best you can bank on is friendship and passion?”

“Doesn’t have to be like that.” He took my wine glass away from me and frowned, then wiped another tear from my cheek. I didn’t even realize I’d been crying for him, for me, for the

future, for what lacked in my past. Memories like that. “Destiny is one thing, fate is something entirely different.”

“What do you mean?” I felt another tear coming, he was so close to my face, cupping my chin gently between his warm fingers. “It’s the same.”

“Destiny is where you’re headed. Fate is who you’re meant to do it with.”

I exhaled a shuddered breath. “I want to believe it.”

“It’s Christmas.” His smile was sexy, soft, his eyes darted to my lips, then back up to my eyes. I wanted him to kiss me so bad, instead with every gentleman fiber of his being he pulled back from me. “Sorry, that was probably too personal.”

I wanted more stories, I was about to say so when he stood and grabbed our wine glasses. “We should get some sleep so we can head out early in the morning.”

Why did my chest ache at that idea? “Let me help you clean up.”

“No, it’s okay.” His easy smile was back. “There should be some toothbrushes, new so you don’t get offended, some face wash, moisturizer, and a brush in there with a few hair ties left over. I can braid your hair if you want but—”

I stopped straight in my tracks. “I’m sorry, what?”

“B-braid your hair?” He frowned. “I’m sorry I have a little sister, I learned how to braid her hair at a young age when my mom got bad arthritis, so if you want me to braid it I can, so it’s not in your face.”



My mom never braided my hair.

My maid did.

I never had a sister.

“It’s fine.” I didn’t mean to snap it when I walked out of the room, nor did I mean to burst into tears when I got into the bathroom and turned on the water so he wouldn’t hear me or the tears of misjudgment and somewhat jealousy.

I started vigorously washing my face, wiping my mouth, wiping Frederick’s mouth from it, wishing I could wipe my words too. I’d been wrong, and I’d been proven wrong in less than a few hours of alone time with my fiancé.

When I was done, I brushed my teeth, swiped the hairbrush from the counter, and marched out. He was done and was taking off his sweater, it was halfway off the finest abs I’d ever seen in existence.

The brush dropped to the ground with a clash, just as all the power in the cabin went out.

# CHAPTER SIX

## *Zantland*

I rushed over to her. “Are you okay?”

She wrapped her arms around me, brush forgotten. “I hate the dark, but we have the fire, we won’t freeze, right?”

We had enough firewood for at least two nights, but other than that, it wasn’t looking so great. I could chop some down, but we needed it to be dry. I had to believe they’d come searching for us immediately or I would have to go out and find some wood; we had enough kindling, and the wind hadn’t seemed too bad when we got there.

Of course, the minute I had her in my arms and that stupid thought, the wind started howling around the cabin.

She clung to me harder, her face pressed against my chest. “Don’t suppose you can braid in the dark?”

I chuckled and held her tighter. “I could try, but you might look funny unless we sit in front of the fire. Let me grab some candles to light, I can use the flashlight on my cell.”

“Still no service?”

“Nope.” I gently release her. “Are you going to be okay if I put you back on the couch?”

“No,” she grumbled. “Can I just walk with you? By your side?”

I almost dropped my phone and said that’s all I’d ever wanted, to have someone to stand next to me in a world that

felt so foreign and alone. “Sure.”

We quickly found the candles and started setting them up around the fireplace mantle and on the table away from the bed, and a few in the kitchen.

Not what I expected my night to go like after seeing her with my friend, after going into my room and feeling desolation, along with this strong need to connect with my father the only way I knew how.

Journaling where he used to, in his cabin.

Telling him I was struggling, I was under pressure, and imagining him setting next to me in a cable-knit sweater and patting me on the knee. Apparently, that’s what he did when people were upset, he would reach across with a smile and pat them on the knee as if to say, it’s going to be okay, chin up.

He’d had thick wavy gray hair all his life and even before death carried a comb with him everywhere he went because he didn’t want his servants fussing over it.

I was told I had the same wavy dark hair he’d had at my age. I was also told I was a spitting image of him.

I hoped I could be that on the inside and out.

“I think that’s it.” My voice rasped. I couldn’t keep the emotion out of it, I felt like I knew him through his journals, and it was hard knowing he died around this time and left me his light so I could shine too. And what a reminder, as I looked around, all of the candles lit, even in the darkness—you can still shine. “Let’s go ahead and get some sleep.” I was about to plug in my phone when I realized duh no electricity, so I

turned on the flashlight again, ready to tuck her in, when Samira pulled my hand. “My hair?”

“Oh, right. Sorry, lost in thought.” I walked her back over to the couch. “Can you sit on the ground and I’ll sit behind you?”

She nodded and promptly sat on the ground with the blanket covering her feet, I reached over the couch for the fallen brush, then sat down behind her.

Her dark hair was stunning like silk as it ran through my fingertips. I couldn’t stop brushing, at one point her head lolled forward.

I cleared my throat.

“Sorry, it just feels really nice to have your hair brushed.”

The brush stopped. “Nobody’s ever brushed your hair?”

“My maids, but they tug, you’re softer, despite your huge hands.”

My abrupt laughter filled the room. “It feels nice too, being the one brushing.”

Her breath hitched. I couldn’t tell if she stiffened out of being offended or if it was something else.

Sadly, I set the brush down and started a french braid, it didn’t take long, I was fast at it, I wanted the moment to be more than ten minutes while the fireplace breathed light and flickered onto the side of her face. While I stared down at her in awe.

She wasn’t spoiled.

She was lonely.

Beautiful and afraid.

Most of the bravest people tend to be the most fearful of all, because they're aware of what they could lose and the cost it might take.

I grabbed a rubber band from the bottom of the brush and wrapped it tightly around the bottom of the braid, then pressed my hands against her shoulders.

Slowly, her hands hesitated in her lap before she shakily brought them up and put them over the top of mine.

We stayed like that in silence while the wind howled.

Soon enough her head lolled to the side again, her hands dropped. I moved around her and lifted her up with the blanket and set her on the bed while I opened up her side. The sheets were freezing. I tucked the blanket over the top of the comforter, took off my boots and socks, looked down at my pants and just went screw it, she knew I wouldn't touch her. I kept my sweater on, and crawled into bed next to her, turning the other way.

It was going to be a long night.



I had no idea what time it was when I suddenly had her plastered against my body, waking me up from a dead sleep. Teeth chattering, she pressed her head against my back. "Please take your sweater off, please."

Yawning, I sat up and pulled it off, tossing it to the floor while she sat up and pulled hers off her head, tossing it in the same heap.

She had a black bra on and was still wearing underwear, which made it a bit easier for me.

A bit being, as much as I could physically handle.

I tucked her against my chest while she threw a leg over mine and shivered against me.

Her feet were freezing. “Gah!”

“Sorry!” She clung to me like I was her only lifeline. “I wasn’t thinking, just so cold.”

Good to know one of us was heating up, at least. I glanced out the front windows and noticed the sun was already coming up and the snow had stopped. “They should be here soon.”

“I hope not,” she mumbled.

“You want to freeze to death?” I semi joked.

“Just a few more minutes.” She finally opened up her eyes as more light lit the room while the sun rose. “Tell me you don’t agree.”

Chest heaving, I just stared at her, at the messy pieces of hair that had fallen out of her braid, at the way she suddenly cupped my face with her chilled hands.

I hesitated maybe an inch from her mouth, but she met me the rest of the way as I pulled her on top of me.

She was the perfect fit, the way her mouth softly moved against mine. This was nothing like the kiss I witnessed with

Frederick, all full of lust, seduction, of trying to prove something.

This was something deeper. I moaned into her mouth when her lips parted and deepened the kiss, she still tasted like a mixture of wine and toothpaste.

I tugged a bit on her braid and flipped her onto her back. Her smile against my mouth was all the permission I needed. I reached for the strap of her bra when a loud banging sounded at the door.

We both scrambled away from each other.

“Sire! Princess Samira? Are you well?”

Her lips were swollen when she shot me a crazed look. “Should I hide under the blankets?”

“First off.” I laughed. “That would probably look worse.” She smacked me on the chest. “Ouch!”

“What!”

“Second, we *are* engaged and they already know you’re here, if it makes you feel any better, you can just say we shared body heat.” I kind of felt my face fall when I said that, like it was all this fever dream, this Christmas miracle, one last one before she was either forced to marry me or another stranger was.

My chest ached.

I slowly started getting up out of bed, it felt like the worst disappointment, other than knowing my biological parents

were dead. Better to taste and dream than have not tasted, not dreamt.

I was just throwing my leg over the bed when she jumped onto my back like a freaking animal, taking the top blanket with her to cover us both up. “What are you doing?”

“I have no idea.” She sounded distressed. “I just didn’t want to lose your warmth.” Her chest pounded against my back, then I felt her mouth on my ear, kissing down my neck, her hands digging into my hair just as the lock turned and both of our servants, plus King Arthur and King Frederick walked in.

I don’t know who cursed, but I imagine it was Arthur out loud and Frederick in his head at the scene.

Slowly, we both turned to them.

Arthur was smiling behind his hand, wearing a full white snowsuit and beanie. Frederick, however, had his eyes narrowed a bit, which was strange even for him.

Rupert rushed forward. “We brought you both clothes, you must have been so afraid, good thing both Kings were in the army and have survival skills we were able to hike up here no problem, we’ll have to get the car later but we’ll take you down on the Snowmobiles.”

Frederick still looked perplexed while Rupert dropped the winter clothes on the couch. “We’ll just leave you to, er, change.”

Arthur gave me a thumbs up and walked out like I’d just accomplished an insane feat.



The door clicked shut while they went back into the bitter cold and we just stood there, me holding her staring out the window, her holding on to me, probably wondering what she'd just done.

It's not like we weren't already engaged, but she'd just sealed her fate by making it look like we'd slept together in cheerful anticipation of our vows.

"You didn't have to do that," I whispered. "I could have come up with an excuse for you."

"I did what you wanted," she said right back.

Wow. "And you? I've never been what you wanted." I peeled her from me and covered her up with the blanket. "I'll go change in the kitchen, nothing they haven't seen before, you can change in the bathroom."

Those few steps into the kitchen kept cadence my heart pounding a painful rhythm against my chest, what did I expect anyway? For her to fall in love with me in less than twelve hours? For her to choose me because she wanted to, but not because she knew I needed her?

What?

To confess undying affection?

Heart stuck in my throat like a burning coal, I blew out all the candles after getting dressed, doused the fire and walked out of the cabin, only to turn to go back in and see her dressed in a similar snow suit.

She handed me the journal. "I didn't want you to forget this."

I only had to wonder if she did.

This whole evening.

Was I merely nice stories and a warm body?

I forced a smile and grabbed it. "Thank you."

The snowmobiles started.

Rupert waved me over. "Sire, it's all warm and ready for you."

I started walking over when Frederick snapped out. "Samira can ride with me, protect the King Arthur, while I protect the new queen."

Was that a dig?

Even Rupert gave me a funny look while I waited for some sort of choice where Samira would say it was fine, that she could ride with me.

Instead, she took his outstretched helmet.

Technically, he wasn't wrong. It was protocol for the next king in line to the throne to protect the King while the other two flanked the King.

I waited still though.

Damn protocol.

Was the old princess back now? Was the softness gone?

I slammed my helmet on my head and took off without looking back, pissed and hurt.

Arthur and Rupert as I'd rightly assumed flanked my sides while Frederick kept up through the back, and when we got

about a half hour into our trip by the palace, we had twenty other snowmobiles come from all sides and ride with us the rest of the way to the palace.

When we got there, I jumped off. I'd like to think I was calm when I tossed my helmet to the ground, but calm I was not.

I knew I was throwing somewhat of a tantrum but, what the hell was my friend doing? He was my cousin! My friend! He'd been everything to me and he knew how much I hated protocol, I let him kiss her! I gave up!

"Er, um, Sire," Rupert tried to keep up with me. "We only have a few days until the wedding feast, and we also have the engagement ball tomorrow evening to attend to, a warm bath has been drawn for you—"

"—Got it. Thank you." I stopped walking so fast and turned to him. "Thank you, I appreciate it. Make sure Samira has a heated bath and make sure she rests the rest of the day, we don't want the future queen getting sick."

"Oh yes, and..." Rupert again stumbled after me. "There is the matter of picking out her final ring, do you know what you want to give her?"

The rings weren't here.

My mom's went missing after the coup. "I'll figure it out, please excuse me."

I moved fluidly through the castle as people bowed and whispered, I'm sure the very minute we arrived they already knew we spent the night alone and didn't return, just like the

very minute the queen's room was being prepared for the new queen the whispering started.

I'm sure they think I seduced her.

Threatened her.

Didn't almost burst into tears with her, who would ever? I kept my head high as I marched into my room and shut the door, leaning against it. I'd gained a queen, but at what cost?

I ripped off all of my winter clothing, chucked it onto the floor, and then walked naked into the bathroom. The heated tiles under my feet did nothing to help me forget what it was like being in her arms, her warmth, and my body was having a hard time forgetting.

I stepped into the bath and leaned back in a stupid attempt to relax, then splashed water over the edge, trying to suddenly sit up. What if Frederick had just been biding his time? What if there was another coup, another murder? I was told to trust no one, but he didn't want it, he had his own country, there was no damn way he wanted to be the head ruler over all three.

No way.

But hadn't my dad's distant cousin tried the same?

My head started to ache all over again while my mind went crazy with possibilities. The bathroom door suddenly shoved open. It was Samira, and she looked pissed if her narrowed eyes and the hands on her hips were any indicator. "My room is ready? MY ROOM IS READY?"

I squeezed my eyes shut, so I didn't see her fierce anger and beauty in one tempting picture. "I don't understand the question, princess, and as you can see, I'm bathing."

"Oh, back to that, huh!" Her tiny fists were clutched at her sides, she was wearing house slippers, the leggings from beneath the snowsuit and a tight black tank top. "I can't believe you would just announce that in the entryway! People are going to think—"

"—What, what do you think they're going to think? We were stranded, we can't control the weather any more than you can control your temper." I finished the last sentence with a grin, then got a splash of water to my face all before she looked down, swallowed, and finally realized not only was I fully naked but she'd just splashed my own bath water on me. She backed up briefly.

I tilted my head. "What? That's what gets you to stop yelling?"

"I just, they're going to think I just, whored myself out to the new king after kissing Frederick, which is already all over the castle too!" She stomped her foot, "I can't believe this! He told me when we got here. They've been calling me the princess whore!"

I tried not to smile.

"Z..." Aw, she nicknamed me out loud. Not the time to get sensitive. "You are in some very deep shi—water!"

I bit down on my lower lip and smiled. "Aren't you the one that basically attached your person to my body, making

everything think something happened when it was a simple kiss?” Not the time to say it was anything but simple. “And aren’t you the same one who willingly seduced Frederick to get out of marrying me?”

She crossed her arms. “That was, yes, but...” She took a calming breath. “I mean, Frederick was obviously a mistake I was just, angry, and done being told what to do, if that’s my only rebellion in my life which it was by the way, then there are worse things to do, furthermore you goaded me, and I just...” Tears filled her eyes. “You braided my hair.”

“So you made them think we had sex because I braided your hair?”

“No. Yes. I didn’t want, I didn’t want to leave, I didn’t want us to leave. It was different, nice, I never got to know you in that—manner.”

I grinned. “Oh, you have no idea what sort of manner you could get to know me in, I mean, if you think kissing Frederick was a scandal...” I sat up further in the bath. “Join me, let them talk, I’ll have you screaming my name so loud they’ll think that—”

“Sir!” Rupert called. “I heard yelling.”

She looked at me.

I looked at her.

Then I waved her toward the closet, as much as I talked, I still didn’t want to add insult to injury with staff finding her watching me naked in a bath. “HIDE! He talks too much!”

“Oh, ya think!” She hissed and glanced at the closet, saw it was too far then simply dove into my very large bath and held her breath as I pulled a nearby towel over it thanking God that the towels were ginormous enough he shouldn’t be able to see from the door unless she splashed.

“NO closer!” I shouted. “I’m... private, in baths, when I do baths,” She pinched my leg, then let out a bubble dangerously close to where she should not be touching, while I shuddered. “What I’m saying is, what a king does is private.” If she punched me between the legs or bit me, all bets were off.

“Very, um, elm, well, sire, just be careful while you...” He covered his mouth like he knew how to actually whisper. “Engage in such a hot bath.”

“Yup. Got it, loud and clear, okay bye!”

He clicked the door shut just as she came up for air and I can only imagine what he’s heard.

Gasp.

Water splashing everywhere onto the ground like I’m battling my own appendage, imagining it as an alligator, who the Hell knows?

All in all, a splendid last twenty-four hours.

Samira smacked me in the chest. “You, you almost choked me!”

I burst out laughing when she clapped a hand over my mouth, only to release it quickly and wipe it on her wet shirt.

“Like I said, I almost choked you? With what? My body?”

Her cheeks burned a bright red. “Just try not to get aroused.”

“God woman!” I threw my hands up. “I’m naked in the bath with my very attractive fiancé, who I actually like when she’s not yelling at me, and you want me to just relax? Chill out? Play with a rubber ducky?” I leaned in. “You know, maybe if you wouldn’t have face planted in that exact same spot, it wouldn’t have been an issue.”

“It wasn’t a choice.” She sniffed as water dripped down her face.

“What was it?”

“Desperation.”

I jerked back. “To not be seen with me?”

“To... to...” She chewed her lower lip and sat back, not even bothered that she had clothes on and I was nude. She rested her legs on either side of me. “I don’t want to be the princess whore or the queen whore my whole life.”

“Come here.” I pulled her across my chest as more water moved around us. I had her to the right side of my body, holding her close. “I would never let that happen, all right?”

She nodded her head, her inky dark hair sticking to her chin. “Promise?”

“Well, gossips will gossip, but who are they to say it wasn’t a prank or planned or that you really loved me? It’s easy to lie in the palace, hmmm?”



Her eyes darted to my mouth, but she didn't say anything, just rested her chin on my chest and folded her arms across it. "Are you going to kiss me now?"

"Do you want me to?"

"Well, we have no reasons until the wedding so—"

I crashed my mouth against hers the minute another knock sounded. Arthur was whistling as he walked in with Frederick and a crystal decanter of whiskey.

I squeezed my eyes shut while Samira quickly looked away.

Arthur snickered. "Do you have any decorum at all, Yankee?"

"Probably a bit more than you." I glared. "And do you even knock?"

"Oh, we did." Frederick cleared his throat. "Three times. We were concerned when Rupert explained an odd story about a towel, a lake, lots of moaning and gaping and you needing private time, and felt the need to let you know that it has now spread downstairs."

"We are now..." I glanced at Samira and sighed. "...both whores, it appears, me with my towel and you with my best friend." I shot him a glare but saw no guilt on his face, it was completely dispassionate of any emotion.

It honestly worried me more.

"Well, then." Arthur sat the decanter on the nearby counter. "Might I suggest you use the door between the two suites to

get back to your room, Highness?” He was talking to Samira. “Although, you could always stay the night, God knows you already did and such juicy gossip that’s finally not focused on me feels like a Christmas present.”

He was full of absolute joy, not Christmas joy, but the sort of manwhore joy that spoke volumes about him most likely picking up another conquest since we were suddenly the topic of gossip, he could fly under the radar.

Frederick snatched one of my large white towels and held it up. “I’ll make sure she gets back safely.”

Was he deliberately trying to get her away from me?

And to what purpose?

I was instantly upset when Arthur shook his head at me. Fine, I’d leave it. Samira glanced up at me under wet lashes. “I’ll see you at the engagement party tomorrow then?”

That long?

I nodded. “Mmm, I’ll see you then.” I gripped her hand and kissed the back of it, then her open palm. “My future Queen.”

Her blush was beautiful.

Arthur cleared his throat at all the tension. “Frederick, the towel?”

Samira slowly got out and let him wrap it around her, then stared back at me, nodding. She walked with him. She let him hold her close to his body after she was just touching mine.

He was acting protective, like I was some monster. What the hell shifted? And what if the monster was him? What if all

of this was actually something deeper?

“Don’t.” Arthur warned once they were out of earshot. “Don’t let your brain get muddled days before the coronation and the wedding. He would never betray you, nor would I.”

“Then why do I have a bad feeling?” I finally said the words out loud.

“That”—Arthur poured me a glass of whiskey and handed it over—“is a question, I think, only you can answer, Yankee.”

I splashed the bathwater with my free hand.

Arthur laughed at my response and obvious temper and just walked off, leaving me questioning everything. “Have a nice, lonely sleep, I know mine won’t be.”

# CHAPTER SEVEN

## *Samira*

Frederick said nothing when he walked me back into my room, but the silence was deadly. “So, you chose to take a risk rather than a calculated one and within twenty-four hours not only do you propose to me, but are found nearly naked in his arms, stranded, then in his bath with him naked, do I have my facts straight or am I the confused one? Because I thought you hated him so much you were willing to go for the boring king?”

“Can we not talk about this now?” I pleaded. “I’ve just been embarrassed twice in a row, nearly drowned on his, on his—”

Frederick’s eyebrows shot up, his golden locks even seem alarmed. “On his?”

“Never mind.” I waved him off. “I’ve got this handled, and you know I really enjoy your friendship.” I almost winced at my own words when they were said out loud like that... to his face.

He crossed his arms. “Friendship.” He nodded his head. “Well, one thing you don’t know about me is I love a good challenge and I’m about to call your bluff. He’s one of my best friends and I grew up with you. You do not change your mind that easily. What did he do? How did he persuade you?” He circled me. “A better kisser? A would-be-better-lover? Did our new king kidnap you? Offer you the world?”

I was actually offended on behalf of Zautland. “That sounds like jealousy, what if we just got to know each other in the nine hours we were gone?”

“You’ve had years, Samira, so yes, I’m calling your bluff and no chance in hell I’m helping vote someone on the throne of the three Kingdoms if he did something evil to get you to this place of misunderstandings and commitment. You know my kingdom and my offer will always be open to you.” He bowed and started to leave.

“Yes.” I called after him. “But what about your heart?”

He looked over his shoulder. “That would never be up for grabs.”

“Then you have your answer, I guess. When something you desperately wish for is offered in sincerity, you don’t take it lightly.”

His eyes widened. “What? What did you say?”

“Goodnight, Frederick.” I did a slight curtsy in my towel. “And thank you for your pivotal words on why you would suddenly want me more—all because you like to win.”

His eyes go wide like he’s horrified. “That’s not what I—I don’t want the crown!”

“Seems to me like you want too much that isn’t yours to take.” They were heated words, and I knew it was my fault he even went there, that I confused both of us out of my need to get out of the marriage.

He nodded his head and walked off. “Goodnight, future highness, I hope your sleep is filled with the dread of having to

smile on your engagement day.”

“And I hope,” I said with viciousness. “That you regret the day you ever doubted two of your dearest friends.”

I know I have him there.

He gaped at me. Mouth open. Mouth shut. “You’ve become as bold as he.”

“I like it.”

He shook his head and walked off and I was left staring at my ceiling after getting ready for bed later that evening, like I was about to go crazy. One am, two am, and then once three am almost hit, I charged toward my joint door, opened it to go find a probably sleeping Zautland when he was up in his bed, shirtless, wearing black spectacles reading.

“You read and you cook?” He looked up with a smirk, his glossy dark hair was all messy around his face and he looked so charming I just jumped onto his bed and laid down with my silk pajama pants and long sleeve silk shirt.

“Comfy, are you?”

I nodded. “Can’t sleep.”

“Same.” He slammed the book shut. “So, what do you want to do?”

I thought about Frederick’s words, then I thought about Zautland’s heart and said the first thing on my mind as my stomach rumbled. “Do you want to build...”

“A snowman?” He guessed.

I laughed and punched him in the shoulder. “No... a um, sandwich, maybe start our own tradition.”

His face lit up, and he didn't hesitate, he leaned down and kissed me on the mouth, the nose, and then the forehead. “Just don't be extremely upset and what do you say, vexed with me, when I win.”

“You'll lose.” I jumped into the air and ran back to my room. “I need my slippers and robe.”

He put on his robe, still no shirt, figures, but at least put on his slippers, he was getting ready to take off the glasses when I shoved them back up his nose. “Nope, those you keep.”

“Because I don't look like myself?” He frowned.

I messed up his glossy thick hair with my fingertips. “No, because I like seeing you in them.”

“Ah, should have busted out Clark Kent two years ago.”

“Could have saved you so much grief over the grumpy princess with a thorn in her side.”

“Nah, she just had one in her finger, like most princesses do, should I take it out for you?” He leaned down and slid his mouth over my thumb. “Nope, not that one,” He grabbed my pointer finger and shoved it into his mouth, his tongue smooth around it. “Nope, not that one either.” He winked. “But I'm patient, I'll find out soon.”

My knees weakened so much I almost stumbled onto him.

“Well then.” He grabbed my hand. “Should we make a run for it to the kitchens?”

“Think we’ll get caught?”

“That’s the...” He started pulling me closer against him.  
“Whole, point.”

We ran down the hidden corridor, and then out into the open foyer before making a run for it toward the kitchens.

“Okay.” He pointed. “We have two options, servants’ kitchen or the main kitchen.”

We nodded our heads and said in unison. “Servants.”

We ran down the next flight of stairs and into the servants’ kitchens while we both glanced at the clock on the wall above one of the freezers.

He whistled low in his throat. “We have two hours before they’re up.”

“We can make sandwiches in two hours.”

“Right.” He rubbed his hands together. “So, where is everything?”

We both started laughing when we realized we had no idea, and began searching for bread, which he found, meat, which I found, condiments which we both found, and enough fixings to make something great.

“All right, this is only fair”—he stared at all the ingredients—“if we pick one special ingredient that will throw the other one off, so all of these are good to go,” He pointed at what we found. “But we each have to find something special to add, you know, to make it a competition.”

I narrowed my eyes. “I don’t lose at those.”



“I would never imagine you to, but are you fast enough?”

“In three.” I rapidly glanced around the extensive kitchen.  
“Two. One.”

We ran through, I chose the fridge, he chose the pantry? We both returned with our own things and grabbed our pans.

I started making mine while he started making his, the agreement was that they would be cold sandwiches so we could go faster. We had turkey, mustard, mayonnaise, a few high-end cheeses, spinach, tomato, and whatever mystery addition.

“Done!” He held up his hands.

I held up mine. “Same.”

“M’am.” He held out his hand to shake.

“Good sir.” I gripped it as we switched places and each cut into the other’s sandwich and took a bite.

I looked up in awe. “You son of a rascal, you added jam!”

“And what kind?” His grin was smug.

“Strawberry.” I grumbled. “And it’s so good.”

I stared over at mine as he went to cut it. “Nooooooo.”

I tried tackling him from the back, but he just swung me around and took a bite, then looked up in awe. “I love sweet pickles.”

“It was all I could find,” I said, still on his back.

He spun me around and set me onto the counter and fed me more of his sandwich while I grabbed more of mine and

handed it to him.

We'd clearly lost track of time because in the next five minutes we both turned to several gasps from servants all dressed in their pressed blue and white uniforms, ready to start setting things up for our official engagement ball and the countdown to our wedding Christmas Eve.

Still chewing, we both again slowly looked to our left.

Several servants were outwardly crying what appeared to be tears of joy, a few of the men kept coughing into their white-gloved hands awkwardly.

“Apologies.” One of the head chefs whose name was lost to me, stepped forward, the man looked like an embodiment of Santa down to his white beard. “We were just under the impression we needed to start at five.”

“FIVE!” We yelled in unison, mouths full as we both clambered to start putting things away.

Immediately the staff started helping and had everything cleaned up in no time, all before Zautland stopped and shoveled the rest of my sandwich down his throat. “I was hungry!”

The staff couldn't hide their joy, so I shoveled his down, would most likely regret it when I had to fit into a dress in a few hours, we slid to a stop at the door and turned around. He bowed. “Thank you, we were just... um. Starving.”

“For... sandwiches?”

“Yes.” He nodded his head. “We have a busy night and—” He stopped talking and I could almost hear his internal groan.

So I'm not sure why I added in. "It's taxing, the holidays, an engagement, marriage—"

"—Making a royal heir." He just had to speak.

Gasps were heard all around.

"Gonna kill you," I said under my breath.

"Realized it the minute the words tumbled out," he said as he smiled through his teeth, when we left it was like Mission Impossible, dodging servants, until laughing we finally made it to the royal quarters where everyone was staying for Christmas, I was just leaning up to give him a quick kiss when I heard a throat clear.

"Shit, this has really gotta stop happening to us," he said under his breath as both Arthur and Frederick had their doors open, their heads poked out in disbelief.

"We..." I tried covering. "We were just—"

Zautland pulled me against his chest. "Leaving, just leaving, long night. See you in a few hours."

He tugged me into his room in front of them.

But I didn't mind.

He kissed me on the forehead, then in true Yankee form, when he had me in the palm of his hands, turned me around and slapped me on the ass! "Off you go."

"You little!" I lunged for him, only to get caught in his arms. He twirled me around and kissed my neck, whispering against it, "You need sleep, then you need to put on a pretty

dress, tell everyone all the pretty words they need to hear, then hold my hand. I'll need you tonight. Is that selfish?"

I hugged him tight. "No. It's not. But if you ever slap my ass again like that, I'm chasing you around the castle."

He chuckled against my neck, his breath warm. "I'm counting on it."

When he set me down, I ran just in case and when I shut the door, I just stood with my back pressed against it and wondered if this is what the word wooing meant.

Because he was too damn good at it.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

## *Zantland*

Frederick walked by me in his impeccable black-and-white suit, his sash, and all his medals. His gloved hands held a glass of champagne. “I guess congratulations are in order.”

I was wearing a black suit, longer coattails with a red sash, medals from my father and black gloves.

The dark horse, if you will. “What are you doing? Really. Make me understand.”

“We’re at your engagement ball, I’m having a drink. Smile at the Duchess she just gave birth, and her poor husband didn’t realize it would be triplets.”

We both waved while she shot us a glare that said burn in hell. “Shall we send her a box from our vineyard?”

“Send her four.” He nodded. “At the very least.” He sighed. “She prefers the white wines though, very picky.”

We made our way around the room, smiling as we passed guests. “So, what is it? Can I trust you? You’ve never given me a reason to doubt you or your intentions, you’ve been one of my best friends, you and Arthur, so what’s happening?”

He stopped walking and looked over at me with his blue eyes, reading me like he did his books. I waited for his answer. “I just cannot fathom her changing so quickly in such a little time. I know you well and I know you have your charms, but she’s never liked them she’s always loathed your crassness, so

I want to know, as one of her oldest friends, what the ever loving hell did you say to her to get her to be this smitten? I've read books, I've read poetry, I've watched—”

“—I'll stop you right there.” I held up my hand. “It's not about what scholars tell you, it's about what's here.” I pointed at his chest. “Sometimes you can't predict life, do you think I did? So there was nothing to gain in getting stuck in a snowstorm other than taking care of her, and answering her questions honestly and with a faith that she'd see me for who I really am. That's it, that's all I did, well and take off my clothes because she didn't want to freeze to death.”

“And you didn't”—his frown was so deep it was alarming—“do it on purpose? Promise her anything? Ply her with poetry, gifts?”

I clunk my glass against his. “I'll tell you my secret, but shhh, and it was earnest from the start.”

He leaned in like he would learn a huge life lesson. “Not only did I nearly cry like a baby, by accident, but we talked and in the end I noticed her hair was messy and wanted her rescue to be one of dignity, so I offered to braid her hair.”

He gasps. “You, you, you.”

“I, I, I.” I clinked my glass against his. “Am thankful you aren't vying for my spot because know I would have fought for her before, but now? Oh dear friend, it would be war.”

I walked off in search of Samira.

And then I realized it wasn't hard to miss her.

She was standing in the middle of the room, a glass of champagne in her right hand, she hadn't even sipped it yet, because there were no lipstick stains across the glass.

Something maybe I'd like to think only I would notice.

I strode toward her.

I pushed through people.

Maybe I looked angry, but I just needed to be by her side.

She turned midconversation. "My king." Her curtsy was perfect.

My bow was clumsy as I said, "My queen."

Her eyes roamed my body. "Are you doing well?"

"Very." Now that I saw her, so very well.

Because I'd found my home and I'd been so lost. So lost without it.

I held out my elbow and handed her glass to whoever she was talking to, which maybe a day ago she would have thought was crass, but I didn't care. "I think it's time for our dance."

She looked ready to grab the glass and apologize when Arthur swept in and stole the glass from whoever I handed it to. "Thank you, I was thirsty."

The old man she'd been talking to made a comment under his breath and stomped off, but I didn't care. As if he had a chance of stealing my bride, plus I didn't give a shit if I was rude. I would be king in less than two weeks. Plus, I'd been

acting as king in proxy since my arrival two years ago, along with the other two kings.

I took her in my arms, nodded to Arthur, and took her across the floor in her gorgeous red dress. It was strapless with a cape falling down her shoulders that she needed to hold while I twirled her, dancing at least I knew how to do.

We took over the entire dance floor, and all I thought of was her.

“Scandalous.” She shook her head. “You should know better, Sire.”

“*Please.*” I leaned forward and kissed her neck as I dipped her, knowing that it sounded like I was begging, maybe I was. “Call me that in bed.”

Her eyes widened.

I grinned and kissed on the other side of her neck. “Say yes or I’m not letting you up.”

“I’m learning, my king.” God, I loved how she said it. “I could never say no, not anymore, not anymore.”

I brought her to her feet as couples, dignitaries danced around us, and I kissed her full on the mouth, much to the horror of everyone in public. After all, a king must always be proper, but with her? I just wanted to be bad, and I wanted to taste her and maybe give her a little bit of a taste of what it was like not to follow all the rules.

I expected her to pull back, but she cupped my cheek with her black gloves, and she kissed me, her tongue slid past my



lips and I knew that people had to have seen the open-mouthed part of the kiss.

When we parted, I knew it was the final blow, fight or flight, they'd either love us or hate us.

But I loved us.

I loved her the minute I met her two years ago, when she told me I was crass. I loved her a year ago when we went riding and she nearly fell off her horse, then got mad at me for helping her. I loved her when I saw her donate almost all of her time to charity and while nobody was looking last Christmas, when she sat in the children's cancer ward and didn't tell the press, staying the entire day giving special gifts to each child she knew wouldn't make it most likely to their next Christmas.

I kept tabs on her every move, for protection, yes, but also because I wanted to know her despite her not wanting anything to do with me.

I wanted her to love me despite my lack of charm and I didn't want to force myself in her company, I thought if I just gave it time, she'd come to me—and she did. She finally did.

Her eyes sparkled in that moment. “You're clearly rising up to your reputation.”

“Thought I was already there.”

“Think you just got there.”

“Not him,” I whispered against her neck. “Please, anyone but him, please, just let me, let me be yours.”

She pulled back, her eyes creased between her brows.  
“What?”

“Frederick.” I clung to her gloved hands. “Please give me the chance to be that man for you. I know I teased you, I tempted you, I told you things, but please.”

Her smile was challenging. “Are you worried?”

“He has blond hair and looks like he just dropped out of a superhero movie, who wouldn’t be?”

She clung to me while I twirled her and then whispered in my ear, “I always liked the villain.”

I nearly stumbled as the music ended. I had to bow. She curtsied.

I had nothing to say to that as she walked off while I stared.

Frederick was on the sidelines, and she went exactly there, only to grab a glass of champagne and keep walking.

His expression was again, emotionless.

Being the Yankee I was, I didn’t waste time, I sprinted after her as she left the ballroom.

Why was she breaking protocol? We had a toast!

I chased until I got to the top of the stairway, imagining her there waiting with a glass of champagne and teasing in her eyes, only to see a black masked figure carrying her over his shoulder and rushing through the castle.

My heart stopped for two seconds before I charged down the stairs and gave orders.

“GAURDS!” I yelled. “My queen’s been kidnapped, down the west hallway, grab her, I’ll stop the party, Rupert send the guests home immediately. Tell them I got sick, I’ll grab the kings.”

Rupert lost focus for a brief minute before bowing. “Sire.”

The engagement ball, our engagement ball, ended immediately, of course, people would know something was wrong, but I couldn’t worry about that at the moment, instead I ran to Frederick and Arthur. “We have a problem,” I said under my breath. “And while I’m trying to stay calm. I need you. I need us to be three kings. I need us to do our duty and save our queen.”

Frederick dropped his champagne glass while Arthur kept a pained smile on his face. “What?”

I almost couldn’t get it out, then finally took a deep breath. “Someone took Samira, the guards are on the hunt but I think we might be better. Who would want to capture her and take the throne?” I glared at Frederick.

Arthur squeezed his eyes shut. “Our late cousin? Possibly? Maybe?”

“Who”—I said again—“wants or needs power the most. Tell me now, damn it!”

Frederick looked around the room, then back at me. “Me. Most likely.”

Arthur’s jaw dropped.

I stumbled backward. “What?”

“Prove it.” He leveled his stare. “Prove you’re worthy.”

“By getting her not killed!” I grabbed him by the collar.  
“What the hell!”

“Risk it all, prove you’re worthy of the crown, and she’ll be fine.” He shoved away from me and dusted the lapels of his coat. “You always knew it would be a battle, yet you wager a war, all I want to see is proof you have what it takes.”

Arthur lunged for him, but I pulled him back. “No.”

“I’ll help you.” Arthur threw his champagne glass to the floor, causing more people to scream and run, perfect. “Let me just think.”

“No.” I shook my head. “No. I’ll do this on my own.”

“But Frederick.” He pointed to the door Frederick was calmly walking out of. “He betrayed you.”

“No. He’s testing me. Because he loved her, he just didn’t realize he’d given his heart up until recently.” I let out a sigh. “And catching him does nothing. He’s smart, he left clues, he’s been planning this since their kiss. He wants to be sure she wants me, not him, and she made him question everything, damn her.”

“And you?”

I felt my throat close up. “I love her.”

Arthur grinned. “I’d say I’m happy for you, but she just got kidnapped by the smartest guy I know, so maybe just... run?”

“Yup.”

“Good on you.”

I bolted toward the foyer then upstairs, did he leave any clues? Was there a way to find her? I searched her room first, nothing, then ran into mine.

The journal was open on my bed.

It was my father's writing.

"Choose."

"What the hell?" I said out loud and flipped the page.

"Choose."

It repeated for a few pages.

And then finally.

"When love chooses it has to choose with its whole heart, I would never give anyone this task other than him, to make sure you know where your heart lies... follow the clues. My last gift to you, the first of the Three Kings, was an adventure and a test. It was a gift of the twelve days of Christmas. I hope you enjoy your wedding, you're a smart boy, you're mine, so prove it, and you'll feel more confident, less like an imposter, when you earn what is most precious to you. Your Christmas gift. *Her.*"

I hadn't read this journal yet, it was the next for me. How did they know? Was Arthur in on this too?

I turned the next page.

"Snow falls as do leaves, find where they fall heavy around the castle, and you'll see the next page, since this is the end."

I turned the page. it was gone.

Was this some sort of game? What was wrong with these royals!?

I wracked my brain. The only place I could think of was past the rose garden. I grabbed my coat, and I ran outside with Rupert shouting after me. When I got to the tree past the rose garden, there was another journal entry on the tree.

“Son, I wish I could be there with you, if you’ve found this, well done, this is where the best snow and the best leaves fall in the Kingdom. Make it strong. Keep it strong. Earn this, not through the rules, but through your passion. Your next clue. Find where the army is most brave.”

I grabbed the paper from the tree and looked around me, only Rupert stayed by my side, heaving out air like he’d never ran a day in his life, and I still had more clues in order to find her.

They wouldn’t hurt her, right?

No, it wasn’t about that.

It was about proving me right.

I finally understood the point of his journals.

My dad, in his death, did what he couldn’t do in his life.

He was teaching me, guiding me.

My God.

I crumbled to the ground and wept for a few minutes. I didn’t need to run, or rush, this wasn’t Frederick trying to take the throne, this was him trying to give it to me in the most honorable way possible without my father here.

We three kings.

We three kings.

And one over all.

I had to earn her like I had to earn the kingdoms and I had nobody to guide me, nobody to show me because the one who would do it was gone, so I had his journal, I had his teachings and I had this.

I stood to my feet.

“Sire?” Rupert asked. “Maybe you should go inside?”

“No.” In my head it was a roar, in my speech it was calm, because a king must always be calm on the outside “You.” I turned and jabbed a gloved finger at him. “You go inside.” Chest heaving, I felt like I was dealt the final blow of my existence.

I couldn't lose her.

And I couldn't lose the crown or the three countries.

I had a responsibility to both her and the people.

I looked up at the tree. “Rupert, are the training grounds, to the left or right, the snow's falling very hard right now.”

“L-left sire.”

Left it was.

I turned on my heel and walked until I hit the hunting grounds, a place next to the castle, the barracks for the soldiers if need be, though they all had homes on property.

And then I thought about it, stopping in the snow, making a crunching noise as I really thought about it, where was the army the most strong? Not the barracks, not even at home, it was when they were together.

Together.

Eating.

Feasting.

I took another left and went to the army dining hall and shoved the doors open and there on the table was another note.

“Well done, son. I’m cheering you on from the grave. Brilliant of you without much training, but where do you go when you need a reprieve?”

I wracked my brain again and quickly knew.

It didn’t take long.

I ran to the servants’ kitchen.

And sure enough it was empty and taped to the freezer was the next clue.

“Who does a king go to when he needs counsel?”

I wanted to run to the Prime Minister’s house but thought better and ran to her room. To Samira’s room and inside, next to her small lit up Christmas tree in the corner of her desk was the next clue. Taped to a black box was a note that said, open me.

I opened the box inside was a picture of my parents when they got engaged, my father was down on one knee, looking up at my gorgeous mom with stars in his eyes, they had gone



riding I believe by their attire and she was down on her knees across from him, both of their black coats looked filthy, her hand was without gloves and he was putting a ring on her finger.

“One of my favorite memories. I’m glad you can see it now, fully. Her favorite food was found in the garden, do you remember the journal entry about her gardening?”

I snatched the picture, shoved it into my pocket and rushed toward the back gardens, when I got there a small post was lit up with Christmas lights and attached to it was another journal entry and instructions. *“Find the ring.”*

The ring?

What ring?

I didn’t remember a ring! It died with her. It was lost during the coup!

Had I only gone nearly halfway, and I can’t find the ring?

“That’s it?” I screamed at the sky. “Find the ring! Find the ring?”

I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to think.

The ring.

What ring?

The only ring I knew of that existed was mine. And it was in the vault near the back of the castle, it used to be a dungeon but was converted over eighty years ago.

Feeling morose, I started walking toward the vault. I had full access and headed down the stairs, the guard said nothing

as I pressed my thumb against it and opened it.

And inside.

Was the ring.

Hers.

The lost ring of the Three Kings.

The one I couldn't give her because I couldn't find it and assumed it was lost along with my parents when they died. We all assumed it. It had been a national treasure and proof to the three kingdoms that no matter what, the King and Queen would fight and take care of the country not through war but through love for their people and each other.

I didn't know what to do for a few seconds but stare.

It wasn't here two years ago.

Rupert even asked me to pick one out.

What was actually happening?

With shaking hands, I reached for it. So simple, the ring wasn't made of silver. It was gold and smelled like frankincense and myrrh.

It had one small princess diamond in the middle.

Shaking, I pulled it out and clutched it in my hand, only to see another note from the journal behind it.

“You have to take risks to get the reward, should you risk it, Zautland? Should you ask her, with this ring? The three kingdoms need you, and while you might have thought this would be a journey through the twelve days of Christmas, all

we wanted was for you to have at least half the journey so that the rest of your lives you could complete the rest of those days each Christmas. Find her, find her because of your light and love, but find her now and give her this ring, but where could she possibly be? Where would she be taken? What makes the most sense? Only a good king is constantly watching, knowing where his subjects are, where his queen is at all times. What would make the most sense to you, do you think?"

I had nothing.

I wanted to give up, until I thought about it, really thought about it.

Frederick making me suspicious.

Spurning me on.

Frederick going with my shenanigans and supporting me all this time only to almost betray me.

Me getting frustrated.

Going to the cabin as he knew I'd do.

The snow storm.

I frowned.

And looked down at the ring.

It was all I had.

I tucked it into my pocket and I ran to the front. "Get me a car now!"

# CHAPTER NINE

## *Samira*

“LET ME GO!” I screamed it until my voice felt like it was going hoarse.

“God, she’s annoying.” A familiar sound hit my ears. “Do you always scream like that, Samira?”

The blindfold was pulled from my face, all I remembered was someone grabbing me and shoving me into a car and telling me not to talk for at least an hour while I scrambled against the ropes tying my wrists together and then in some sick, weird way of torture, getting told it would all be okay if I just stopped talking.

Christmas music sounded then, so loud I wanted to scream louder, I didn’t want to lose my fight.

It was warm, whatever place they brought me.

I was told to stand.

So I stood, I would fight later, when I had more energy. I was in a building, obviously, since no snow was falling.

I was told by a strange voice it was normal, that this happened from time to time when someone took the throne.

“Kidnapping?” I yelled.

People chuckled around me.

“It’s not funny! My fiancé is the King! Give him your price! He’ll come for me!”

“We’ll see.” A familiar voice that sounded eerily like Frederick hit.

I paused as goosebumps rolled over my skin. “Frederick?”

Silence.

It was around an hour later, when a breeze hit me in the face and I heard Zautland yell, “GIVE ME MY FIANCE!”

“Whoa, whoa.” Another familiar voice sounded. “I mean, no need to yell, you do, in fact, have one final clue.”

“Clue?” I asked. “What the hell is going on?”

My blindfold was removed and Zautland’s face was full of concern and anger. His bow tie had been tugged free, he had his jacket removed, his sleeves up like he was about to do hard work and his hair was a messy wreck all over his head like he’d ran his hands through it over and over again. His gaze never left mine. “It was a Christmas search, to find my bride on our engagement night, and I had to, I had to, solve...” His eyes filled with tears. “I had to find you, and I wasn’t fast enough. I should have been here sooner.”

A hot tear streamed down my cheek at his crazed hair, half ripped tuxedo and panicked look. “You were right on time.”

The cabin was filled when I looked around, with half our staff, the other two kings, and a small leather journal on the table. “What? I don’t understand?”

Fredrick stepped forward. “To be the King of the three countries, you have to prove the way his father did, do you deserve, do you care, do you know your people? It always happens at Christmas, many have tried since the coup, me

included, to become *the* King of the three Kingdoms, to rule and prove ourselves, all have failed until now.”

Zautland stumbled forward toward me, his eyes met mine. “I think I have one final clue.”

He pulled a piece of journal paper from my chair and stared it down, only to shake his head and laugh. “This, this is my proposal? This is what everyone failed to answer? Correctly?”

Everyone around us went silent.

A tear ran down his cheek as he looked up at me and asked, “What’s the name of the sandwich my parents created that was their favorite?”

I burst into tears, I couldn’t even speak, I just cried while Zautland started untying me, then launched myself into his arms once the ropes were free. “Cheese. It’s a cheese sandwich, two turtledoves.”

Everyone around us started to clap, and then Zautland pulled a ring from his pocket and pulled it out, pressing it against my left finger. “Will you marry me? My queen? Despite my inability to be the best?”

“The worst.” I nodded. “You were the worst.”

“Christmas miracle?”

He opened his mouth to speak when suddenly a priest stepped forward. “Now, if everyone is ready, let us begin.”

I slowly stood in Zautland’s arms. “What?”

The priest cleared his throat again. “This is the will of the last King. That his son would take the three Kingdoms, that he

would find his bride, and he would marry away from the fanfare on the eve of his engagement and before Christmas, privately in the place that meant the most.”

Zautland started tearing up.

I grabbed his arm harder. “It’s where I fell in love with him.”

“Took you two years,” Arthur said under his breath.

Frederick shot him a glare.

“What?” he murmured. “It’s true.”

I laughed with everyone else.

“So here we gather, now, Zautland, would you like to see the last clue, the rest are saved for the next few Christmases, but this last one, in his will, was this.”

He handed over a piece of paper.

Slowly, Zautland took it into his hand and unfolded it, a small key fell out, I grasped it as he read the letter.

*Son,*

*I gave you my best. We tried our hardest. I hoped for this moment. Please, turn around and be happy, but before that, know we loved you, we did what was best to save the Kingdoms but also to save our son. I know you look like me, I pray for it, I know you’ll rule like me, the same way you’ve probably read my journals, the same way you’re most likely standing in the cabin, trust me we have more secrets for you but for now... enjoy your life with your new bride and please, live*

*well. Make the sandwich in the kitchen. Love your wife. Make mistakes. Make decisions. Don't make work your life. In the end, make life your work. Make LIFE work. Keep her by your side. You always need a person there, doing all the things we idiots can't do. We are so proud of you. Proud of your cousins. You will rule well with them by your side. And if you ever need a little help, I have a few more journals for you. I do like words and games. Merry Christmas my boy, oh and give this to my grandbaby, whoever they may be, they might need this for the cabin one day too, we can't let traditions die. Let them know what they are born of and what we keep. I love you. And never forget to make sandwiches."*

*Love,*

*Your Father, The late King.*



# CHAPTER TEN

## *Zantland*

I got married just like that.

And just like that, everyone left one by one.

Until the three kings.

All of us were left while Samira went to get changed out of her dress with her maid.

I sat on the couch and stared into the fire. “So you guys knew?”

Arthur glanced up at the ceiling. “Oh look, a smudge, think I might grab more wine.”

Frederick just sat motionless. “I wasn’t sure.”

“Of me?”

“Of you both coming through. I wanted it for you, I wanted it for both of you, to find true love, but at one point...” He hesitated. “I hate to say this, but I finally thought, why not me? Not for the Kingship of all the countries but her, because she fights and I like that fight and I realized my entire life I’ve been sitting in the dark, you know? Just wanting to fight but getting tired thinking about it until someone rises from the ashes and says, I’ll take the throne, I’ll take the final blow, I’ll do it. And that person was you. I was jealous for a few days. I was jealous after that kiss, and then hearing about the cabin, rescuing you guys, seeing you.” He tossed back more whiskey and shook his head. “I’m not a good friend.”

“Why?”

“Because I still don’t like it.”

“It’s okay that you don’t, you could always stand up at the formal wedding and scream no!”

He shook his head. “Yes, that would be out of character, wouldn’t it?”

“Heads may roll.”

He sighed. “The heart wants what it wants and sometimes the heart is a beat too late.”

I closed my eyes. “And sometimes, it’s not because you were late, but waiting for something else, someone else.”

Frederick jerked his head toward me. “I’m not that hopeful.”

I grinned. “You should be, friend. Who wouldn’t want you?”

“Salt in the wound. Cheers.” He lifted his drink, and I realized that no matter what happened, at least I had family, I had brothers. Which reminded me, I’d get to see my sister and adoptive parents at my coronation for the first time in two years. I smiled, it was all worth the sacrifice. It was all worth it.

I murmured to myself. “Merry Christmas.”

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

## *Samira*

### *Wedding day*

It was my coronation on Christmas and the “official” wedding day, my parents were sitting in the pews at the old church, my father refused to walk me down the aisle despite me marrying the king because the new King was new.

He wasn't one of us, according to him. He was new money even though he was technically the King, he was the heir, but he wasn't good enough because he didn't know our values, he didn't know our culture.

Again, all according to my father, who was currently sitting in the front row, head straight, bow tie perfect, black suit immaculate.

I wanted to scream at him.

It might have been the first time in my entire life that I wanted to yell at my father, to tell him he was wrong, and then I had this sickening feeling.

I'd been just like that.

Staring straight ahead, judging everyone around me, losing them in the process because protocol called for something different.

My heartbeat picked up.

I stared down at my white-gloved fingers and thought. It wasn't that my life was a lie, or that I was having a total epiphany, it was just that I'd been wrong, in so many ways, in the way I treated others, but also in the way I treated myself.

Maybe, mainly in the way I treated myself.

I had no grace for myself. I expected perfection of a very imperfect person and couldn't even take small moments to appreciate, all in the name of protocol.

I stood there, utterly alone because of that protocol.

I had to walk down that aisle alone because he wasn't willing to give up his pride to the *Yankee King*.

I took a deep breath when the music started. The doors hadn't opened yet, but I'd walk down this aisle to my King utterly and completely alone.

I lifted my chin, the way I always did. I could do this in front of the three kingdoms, in front of the three—

“—Need assistance?” Frederick asked to my right.

“Of course she does,” Arthur said to my left. “Shall we?”

I sniffled and looked down. “Are you trying to break me and make me cry the way you did when I was little and you put a frog in my bed?”

Frederick chuckled. “You aren't broken, Samira, you've always been whole, see yourself the way we see you, more importantly, the way the King sees you.”

“Not,” Arthur chimes in, “just as his bride, but as his partner.”

My lips wobbled as I tried to get the words out. “Protocol states that I have to be escorted by my father the Duke of—”

“—Shhhh.” Arthur laughed. “We’re kings. We. Three. Kings. And we say what’s protocol. Now. We walk.”

The doors opened.

Gasps were heard.

I imagined what they saw, two kings in their suits, their golden crowns, their sashes across their chests showing their medals.

I told myself I was ready when a tap came on my shoulder.

The man was small, he had a white beard and thick matching hair. His smile was kind. He bowed and simply said, “Do you mind if I join?”

Join?

Who was this man?

A woman stood beside him along with a girl around twenty, they smiled and went to take their seats.

I tilted my head. “Who are you?”

People were watching not only from all over the country, but in that church with every dignitary in presence.

He smiled. “Oh, I just own a restaurant in New York.”

Tears streamed down my cheeks. “What?” I was ready to call security, both Arthur and Frederick moved in front of me.

“Apologies.” He bowed his head. “Highness. I raised the wonderful man you’re about to marry. I made mistakes. I

wasn't always gentle. I wanted to teach him our ways here in the country. At times, I got frustrated. At times, I was tired. But there were so many beautiful moments. I loved him. I do love him. He's mine even if he's not. The last thing the late king gave me was a gift to my wife and myself. We couldn't have children. I was part of the royal guard and was sent away during the coup. I'm General Hedayat, and I'm here to ask you for one small gift, on this day, may I simply ask to walk behind you? Just a few small steps."

A tear streamed down my cheek. "Why behind me?"

He held up his wrinkled hands, he was wearing a black and white tuxedo but his grey hair was a slight mess as he rubbed one hand nervously through it. His smile was wide, open, happy, his blue eyes twinkled with joy. "Highness, I would never ask to walk in front of you, I just want to finish it."

"Finish it?" I asked, completely confused while people watched, most likely filmed and wondered. The press would be all over this today. "Finish what?"

Slowly, he knelt down on knobby knees and bowed, he held his hands upright toward me. "I promised the late King I would finish my duty to his son, that I would take him in as my own that I would bring him up in the best way possible and I swore that when it came time, I would walk with his bride down the aisle. I would finish my promise, it was his last, his last entry in the journal he sent me. To finish, so please highness, let me finish my duty to the crown. It is, after all, Christmas. Miracles do happen and I know this isn't protocol."

“What a gift,” I said, leaning down to the ground in my wedding dress and putting my hands on his shoulders. “What an incredible Christmas gift, to see face to face, the man who rose one of the greatest Kings of the three Kingdoms, not only is it an honor to marry him, but to meet you.”

I brought him to his feet and looked at the other two kings.

They didn’t even need to be told.

They took a step back behind me while I pulled Zautland’s father forward, grabbed his arm and said, “No father of the King walks behind me.”

I could see tears streaming down Zautland’s cheeks as we approached. It was silent in my head despite the music. The walk was slow.

It was perfect.

I smiled with each step.

And realized it was never only three kings, Arthur, Frederick, Zautland, there was another man in this scenario, his adopted father. There were four of them who carried out his father’s orders.

Maybe the fourth king was Hedayat, holding my arm and walking me toward my future. The man who raised him.

Yes. A Christmas miracle indeed.

When we got to the end of the aisle, Zautland had no words he just looked away from us and took a minute.

“Well done.” His adopted father patted him on the shoulder. “I hope it’s all right, but I have a few words.”

I nodded and spoke for Zautland. “Go ahead.”

He turned toward the guests. “I’m sorry to intervene, I used to be a general here many, many years ago. I missed my country, but I’d like to think I served it well in bringing up its king.” The air was thick with silence. “I now finish my final secret task given by the late King Donald the third.”

Gasps were heard around the church.

He cleared his throat. “Zautland, you will serve the three Kingdoms well, I have entrusted you with them, and with a family that will teach you loyalty, heart, joy, patience, peace, reverence. I have entrusted you with trial and tribulation, which will make you a great King. If this is being read at your wedding, please congratulate the beautiful bride, please tell her I knew it was her from the start because of her heart and her fire. This country needs people who are strong, willing to go out of the boundaries of what’s normal. They need you two. From the bottom of my heart and your mother’s, thank you. Lead well, and when you have time, make a grilled cheese, that’s all your heart needs.”

Hedayat’s hands shook as he reached into his pocket and pulled out a pin for my hair.

Two turtledoves. “May I?”

Tears streamed through my makeup down my cheeks. “Yes.” I knelt lower so he could put them in.

He gently put the pin of the turtledoves in and turned to the crowd. “And now I resign, knowing true peace.”

He turned toward Zautland. “My King.”



Zautland didn't hesitate, he didn't follow protocol, he simply grabbed his father by the shoulders and hugged him.

The start of my wedding.

Of a beautiful beginning.

And an ending for one general who served his entire life to protect three Kingdoms.

Frederick nodded toward me. Arthur grinned with a tear sliding down his cheek, we knew.

How very brave.

And that was the man I was marrying.

I turned immediately and just launched myself onto Zautland and kissed him.

“Highness.” The priest coughed. “Highness.”

I waved him off and kept kissing my king while Frederick and Arthur watched with amusement.

Zautland kissed me back.

His gloved hands tore at my veil, ripping it off.

His gloved hands cupped my chin, pulling it closer.

His gloved hands ignored protocol.

And when we parted, I looked out toward the crowd and through the windows.

Fresh snow.

Fresh start.

# CHAPTER TWELVE

## *Zantland*

I was tired.

Not too tired to ravish my wife, just too tired to actually function in a manner that wouldn't have me face planting against her and grunting.

I laid back against the white silk sheets and sighed.

The door clicked open. "Rupert, I swear if you ask one more time if I need tea—"

A snowball hit my face right in the bed. "Are you kidding me?"

When I sat up, it was Samira staring at me in nothing but a red teddy that hid nothing but, well, like actually nothing. It was lace from shoulder to thigh, red lace.

She had a Santa hat on. "Want your gift?"

"Please God yes." I jumped from the bed, tangled in my sheets, as I stumbled to the ground, only to have her on top of me instantly. "Yes wife, yes."

She grinned and flipped me onto my back, then threw the sheets away. "You have to unwrap me first."

"Tell me there are no buttons."

"A zipper."

"God bless us every one," I murmured and made quick work at her back, tugging the lace garment off of her, shoving

it past her thighs down to her knees. “This might be a quick unwrapping.”

“Meh, I never save the paper anyway.”

“God, I love you.”

She paused and kissed me on the nose. “I love you too.”

I turned her onto the ground and stripped. “I missed you.”

“We were together for hours.”

“Doesn’t count.” I breathed against her neck as we joined together, as our bodies melted against each other in every way I’d always wanted. I was claiming my queen. “Doesn’t matter, only this.”

“Creating.” She gasped as I kissed her harder and pressed into her. “An heir?”

“Love.” We moved in sync, the most perfect sync you could imagine as my hips rolled against hers, as my lips captured her moans and kisses, every last one with every single movement, with every single Christmas wish I’d ever had between us.

She captured my lips and whispered, “Zautland, my King.” And relaxed beneath me. I knew we’d have more moments like this, and that she was as tired as I was. I thought she’d ask me to tuck her in, to braid her hair, my queen needed a break, instead, she leaned up looking beautiful and gloriously naked, her hair draped in waves down her back. She clung to me harder and whispered, “Do you... want to build?”

“A sandwich?” I guessed.

“A family.” She flipped me over onto my back easily. “And then many, many...” She kissed my mouth harder. “Sandwiches, starting with a Christmas themed one right now.”

I laughed. “We’ll have to sneak past the staff.”

“And,” she added, “Make sure Arthur and Frederick don’t catch us.”

“Why does everyone always catch us?”

“Because you’re scandalous?” She shrugged and jumped to her feet. “But isn’t it fun?”

I grinned and hopped out of bed while she put on a robe.

“Maybe...” I grabbed my slippers. “That’s what the rush was, what kept their marriage alive, the constant fear of getting caught in the kitchen.”

She threw a slipper at my head and laughed. “Or the normalcy of just going to a kitchen and making it yourself.”

“They needed it.”

“They did.”

We shared a smile and after I grabbed my robe, I grabbed her hand and poked my head out the door. “Do we boldly walk or just sprint?”

“Sprint.” She wrapped her arms around my neck. “Or maybe we race?”

When we raced, we saw Rupert, we saw a drunken Arthur making his way up the stairs, and we saw Frederick shake his head.

And for the next forty years.

We would race.

Even if the races became slower.

Even if our four boys beat us.

We would race to the kitchen.

And build a grilled cheese.

THE END

*Merry Christmas!*

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*A Renwick House Christmas Boxed Set*

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Rachel Van Dyken*

Rachel Van Dyken is the #1 *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today* bestselling author of over 100 books, ranging from new adult romance to mafia romance to paranormal & fantasy romance. With over four million copies sold, she's been featured in *Forbes*, *US Weekly*, and *USA Today*. Her books have been translated into more than 15 countries. She was one of the first romance authors to have a Kindle in Motion book through Amazon publishing and continues to strive to be on the cutting edge of the reader experience. She keeps her home in the Pacific Northwest with her husband, adorable sons, naked cat, and two dogs. For more information about her books and upcoming events, visit [www.RachelVanDykenAuthor.com](http://www.RachelVanDykenAuthor.com).

# ALSO BY RACHEL VAN DYKEN

## PERFECTS NOVELS

*New Adult, Angsty Romances — Interconnected  
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*The Perfects* (*Ambrose & Mary-Belle's story*).

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*New Adult, Romantic Comedies — Standalone Novels*

*EXposing the Groom*

## EAGLE ELITE

*New Adult, Mafia Romance — Interconnected Standalones*

*Elite* (*Nixon & Trace's story*).

*Elect* (*Nixon & Trace's story*).

*Entice* (*Chase & Mil's story*).

*Elicit* (*Tex & Mo's story*).

*Enamor* (*Trace & Nixon's bonus story*).

*Enchant* (*Frank, Luca & Joyce's story*).

*Bang Bang* (*Axel & Amy's story*).

*Enforce* (*Elite + from the boys' POV*).



*Ember (Phoenix & Bee's story).*

*Elude (Sergio & Andi's story).*

*Enrapture (Frank, Luca & Joyce's story).*

*RIP: A Bratva Brotherhood Novel (Nikolai & Maya's story).*

*Empire (Sergio & Val's story).*

*A Very Mafia Christmas (bonus holiday novella you get for free when you join Rachel's Rockin' Readers).*

*Enrage (Dante & El's story).*

*Eulogy (Chase & Luciana's story).*

*Envy (Vic & Renee's story).*

*Debase: A Bratva Brotherhood Novel (Andrei & Alice's story).*

*Dissolution (Santino & Katya's story).*

*A Two Twirl Christmas (bonus holiday short story).*

*Exposed (Dom & Tanit's story).*

*Eagle Elite Box Set Volumes 1-3*

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*Destructive King (Asher & Annie's story).*

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*Fallen Royal (Maksim & Izzy's Story).*

*Broken Crown (King & Del's story).*

### **CRUEL SUMMER TRILOGY**

***New Adult, Angsty Romance — Trilogy***

*Summer Heat (Marlon & Ray's story).*

*Summer Seduction (Marlon & Ray's story).*

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*Stealing Her (Bridge & Isobel's story).*

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### **WINGMEN INC.**

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### **BRO CODE**

***New Adult Romance — Standalone Novels***

*Co-Ed (Knox & Shawn's story).*

*Seducing Mrs. Robinson (Leo & Kora's story).*

*Avoiding Temptation (Slater & Tatum's story).*

*The Setup (Finn & Jillian's story).*

**THE DARK ONES SAGA**

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*Untouchable Darkness (Cassius & Stephanie's story).*

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*Darkest Temptation (Mason & Serenity's story).*

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*Darkest Need (Tarek's story).*

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**RUIN SERIES**

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*Ruin (Wes Michels & Kiersten's story).*

*Toxic (Gabe Hyde & Saylor's story).*

*Fearless (Wes Michels & Kiersten's story).*

*Shame (Tristan & Lisa's story).*

## **SEASIDE SERIES**

***Young Adult, Angsty, Rockstar Romances — Interconnected  
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*Tear (Alec, Demetri & Natalee's story).*

*Pull (Demetri & Alyssa's story).*

*Shatter (Alec & Natalee's story).*

*Forever (Alec & Natalee's story).*

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*Strung (Tear + from the boys' POV).*

*Eternal (Demetri & Alyssa's story).*

## **SEASIDE PICTURES**

***New Adult, Dramedy (RomCom with Dramatic Moments),  
Rockstar/Movie Star Romances — Interconnected  
Standalones***

*Capture (Lincoln & Dani's story).*

*Keep (Zane & Fallon's story).*

*Steal (Will & Angelica's story).*

*All Stars Fall (Trevor & Penelope's story).*

*Abandon (Ty & Abigail's story).*

*Provoke (Braden & Piper's story).*

*Surrender (Drew & Bronte's story).*

## **MY SUMMER IN SEOUL**

***New Adult, Angsty, K-Pop/Rockstar Romances —  
Interconnected Standalones***

*My Summer In Seoul (Grace's story).*

*The Anti-Fan & The Idol*

*Lost in Seoul (Sookie & Ari's story).*

## **THE CONSEQUENCE SERIES**

***New Adult, Laugh Out Loud Romantic Comedies —  
Interconnected Standalones***

*The Consequence of Loving Colton (Colton & Milo's story).*

*The Consequence of Revenge (Max & Becca's story).*

*The Consequence of Seduction (Reid & Jordan's story).*

*The Consequence of Rejection (Jason & Maddy's story).*

## **THE EMORY GAMES**

***New Adult, Laugh Out Loud Romantic Comedies —  
Standalone Novels***

*Office Hate (Mark & Olivia's story).*

*Office Date (Jack & Ivy's story).*

## STANDALONE DRAMEDY

*RomCom with Dramatic Moments — Standalone Novel*

*The Godparent Trap (Rip & Colby's story).*

## CURIOUS LIAISONS

*New Adult, Romantic Comedies — Interconnected  
Standalones*

*Cheater (Lucas & Avery's story).*

*Cheater's Regret (Thatch & Austin's story).*

## PLAYERS GAME

*New Adult, Sports Romances — Interconnected Standalones*

*Fraternize (Miller, Grant and Emerson's story).*

*Infraction (Miller & Kinsey's story).*

*M.V.P. (Jax & Harley's story).*

## RED CARD

*New Adult, Sports Romances — Interconnected Standalones*

*Risky Play (Slade & Mackenzie's story).*

*Kickin' It (Matt & Parker's story).*

## LIARS, INC

***New Adult, Romantic Comedies — Interconnected  
Standalones***

*Dirty Exes (Colin, Jessie & Blaire's story).*

*Dangerous Exes (Jessie & Isla's story).*

**THE BET SERIES**

***New Adult, Romantic Comedies — Interconnected  
Standalones***

*The Bet (Travis & Kacey's story).*

*The Wager (Jake & Char Lynn's story).*

***New Adult, Romantic Comedy — Standalone Novel***

*Originally Published as The Dare*

*The Love Strategy (Jace & Beth Lynn's story).*

**THE BACHELORS OF ARIZONA**

***New Adult Romances — Interconnected Standalones***

*The Bachelor Auction (Brock & Jane's story).*

*The Playboy Bachelor (Bentley & Margot's story).*

*The Bachelor Contract (Brant & Nikki's story).*

**WALTZING WITH THE WALLFLOWER — WRITTEN  
WITH LEAH SANDERS**

***Regency Romances — Interconnected Standalones***

*Waltzing with the Wallflower (Ambrose & Cordelia).*

*Beguiling Bridget (Anthony & Bridget's story).*

*Taming Wilde (Colin & Gemma's story).*

**LONDON FAIRY TALES**

***Fairy Tale Inspired Regency Romances — Interconnected Standalones***

*Upon a Midnight Dream (Stefan & Rosalind's story).*

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*The Wolf's Pursuit (Hunter & Gwendolyn's story).*

*When Ash Falls (Ashton & Sofia's story).*

**RENEWICK HOUSE**

***Regency Romances — Interconnected Standalones***

*The Ugly Duckling Debutante (Nicholas & Sara's story).*

*The Seduction of Sebastian St. James (Sebastian & Emma's story).*

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*A Crown for Christmas (Fitz & Phillipa's story).*

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*Compromising Kessen (Christian & Kessen's story).*

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*Divine Uprising (Athena & Adonis's story).*

***Inspirational, Historical Romance — Standalone Novel***

*The Parting Gift — written with Leah Sanders (Blaine and Mara's story).*



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