

A SWEET ROYAL ROMANCE



A
VERY
ROYAL
CHRISTMAS

A YOUNG ROYALS BONUS STORY



EMMA LEA

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A VERY ROYAL CHRISTMAS

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OTHER BOOKS BY EMMA LEA

This is Emma Lea's complete book library at time of publication, but more books are coming out all the time. Find out every time Emma releases something by visiting the website (www.emmaleaauthor.com) and signing up for her Newsletter and New Release Alerts.

SWEET ROMANCES

These are romantic tales without the bedroom scenes and the swearing, but that doesn't mean they're boring!

[The Young Royals](#)

[A Royal Engagement](#)

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[Bookish Book Club Novellas](#)

[Meeting Prince Charming](#)

[Meeting The Wizard of Oz](#)

SWEET & SEXY ROMANCES

In my Sweet & Sexy Romances I turn up the heat with a little bit of sexy. No swearing, or very minimal swearing, and brief, tasteful and not too graphic bedroom scenes.

[Love, Money & Shoes Series](#)

[Walk of Shame](#)

Standalone Novels

[Amnesia](#)

HOT & SEXY ROMANCES

Hot & Spicy Romances turn the heat way up. They contain swearing and sexy scenes and the characters get hot under the collar.

Recommended for 18+ readers

TGIF Series

[Girl Friday](#)

[Black Friday](#)

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Twelve Days

[Twelve Days of Christmas - Her Side of the Story](#)

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Quickies (Collins Bay Novellas)

[Last Call](#)

Standalone Novels

[Learning to Breathe](#)

TOO HOT TO HANDLE ROMANCES

These are definitely 18+ reads and contain graphic sex scenes and high level swearing – not for the faint of heart

[The Young Billionaires](#)

[The Billionaire Stepbrother](#)

[The Billionaire Daddy](#)

[The Billionaire Muse](#)

[The Billionaire Replacement](#)

[The Billionaire Trap](#)

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Music & Lyrics

[Rock Star](#)

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Symphony (coming soon)

The Playbook

[In Like Flynn](#)

Manscaping (coming soon)

Serendipity

[The Wrong Girl](#)

The Right Girl (coming soon)

The Only Girl (coming soon)

ROMANTIC SUSPENSE NOVELS

These are recommended for 18+ readers and contain strong themes and dramatic situations. They may contain swearing, explicit content, violence, and drug use...but always with a happy ending and a romantic element.

Standalone Novels

[Hide & Seek](#)

ABOUT THIS BOOK

A Very Royal Christmas

by Emma Lea

Lady Georgina Darkly, the newly titled Duchess of Pemberton, did not need one more thing to deal with the week before Christmas. The temperature was dropping alarmingly, a snow storm had been predicted, the milk tanks in the dairy were close to freezing and there was a leak in her bedroom roof. To top it all off Clarabelle, the cow that had a mischievous streak a mile wide, had escaped the confines of the barn and could very well freeze to death if Georgie didn't find her soon. The absolute very last thing she needed was an arrogant, stubborn, wealthy, and undeniably *gorgeous* Italian to turn up on her doorstep in need of rescuing.

Leonardo Ricci, youngest son of one of Italy's wealthiest families did not want to be stuck in the middle of a snow storm in a country barely more than the size of a postage stamp. He wanted to be with his friends in Milan, not suffering through a stilted family Christmas with his parents. When a cow appeared in the middle of the road and caused his beautiful Ferrari to careen out of control into a snow bank, he honestly didn't think his day could get any worse...and then he met the Duchess. She was opinionated, stubborn, far too capable for her own good, stunningly beautiful, and immune to his charms. They had nothing in common and if she hadn't rescued him then he probably would never have given her another thought. But then they got stuck together in her run-down mansion with no electricity and no phones. That's when the sparks really started to fly.

This is a Sweet Romance - These are romantic tales without the bedroom

scenes and the swearing, but that doesn't mean they're boring!

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The Young Royals series takes place in a country that doesn't really exist. If it were to exist it would sit on the eastern edge of France bordered by Switzerland and Italy, quite close to Geneva. The country of Merveille (pronounced Mer-VAY) is a quiet, wealthy place ruled by a constitutional monarchy. Its capital city is Calanais which is situated on the shores of a beautiful lake called Lac Merveilleux and is where the palace, named Château de Conte de Fées, is situated.

This book is written using UK/Australian English.

CHAPTER 1



Leonardo

The snow fell heavily as I pushed my car around the twisting road. The last thing I wanted was to be stuck in this tiny little country away from all the fun in Milan, but my parents had insisted. They'd leased a house in Merveille and expected me to present myself in time for the Christmas celebrations and miss all the parties my friends had organised. Typical.

The sky was heavy with dark clouds and the snow continued to blanket the entire countryside in white. It was still a week before Christmas and my parents threatened to freeze my accounts unless I spent the ensuing time with them. At least I'd gotten a reprieve for New Year's Eve. I was required to spend seven days with my family and then the rest of the holiday season was mine to do with as I wished.

I didn't even know why they were so insistent on me being present for the family Christmas celebrations. It wasn't like the almighty Ricci family were known for their close family relations. Most of the time I was more like a distant and annoying cousin than the youngest son of one of the richest families in Italy. The only time anyone really drew connections between me and my ridiculously wealthy and incredibly stuck-up family was when I did something to embarrass them. Or someone wanted something from me.

Money could buy everything, or so I had found out. Need an entourage of friends to follow you around and make sure you're having a good time by spending your money on booze and...other things? Money. Need the hottest clothes/car/watch/sunglasses? Money. Need your photo in the society pages so your family remembered you were alive? Money—specifically spending ridiculous amounts of it on the aforementioned booze and...stuff. Money was the answer to every question. People fell all over themselves to be included in my inner circle. I knew it wasn't my sparkling personality that drew them. It was my generosity. I was under no illusions, but it suited me. At least I knew where someone stood when they were only after my money.

I suppose I couldn't blame my family for sometimes forgetting that I was actually part of the family. I was the youngest. A late in life baby. My closest sibling was sixteen years older than me. By the time I was born, my parents were done with babies and they had enough money to ensure that they didn't have to deal with me. I was raised by the household staff—the nanny, the cook, and eventually a governess before I was shipped off to boarding school. That was when I learned that perhaps my life wasn't quite normal. Rather than despise it, I embraced it. My parents were rich and well-connected and people wanted to be my friend. Who was I to turn them away?

The windscreen wipers swished ineffectually at the falling snow. No gentle flurries and whimsical snowflakes. No, the snow fell in icy sheets and made the road slippery and the visibility poor.

My cell phone rang and I punched the button to connect it to the hands-free system in the car.

“Alberto, my man,” I called cheerily into the empty air.

“Leo,” he replied, the connection staticky and garbled. “I wanted to *ghksjduhe kdnfouh* New Year's Eve.”

“I'm sorry Al, you're breaking up. But if you were asking if I was still going to make it to the party on New Year's then that is a definite yes.”

“Great,” Al replied, the line clear for a moment. “And you're still keen to

meet with my partners about the app I was telling you about?”

“Yes, of course,” I replied. “I’m very interested.”

“*Jladnuruarhbg anfvjn adjoaguhniguh aifjhbaihr.*”

“What was that, Al? I couldn’t hear you. This stupid snow storm is interfering with the line.”

“I said *ndjlhflfh aharbvharuyf.*”

“Nope, missed it again. Look, let’s talk later when there’s not so much static on the line. *Ciao.*”

“*Ciao.*” Came the garbled reply through the speakers of the car.

Alberto was one of my newer friends. A friend of a friend introduced us and he’d been dogging my steps ever since. He always seemed to be where I was. I knew he wanted me for more than just my money. My family made their fortune in developing patents for products that ranged from tech to toys. He was hoping to piggy back off my family’s name as well as use our money to launch his app. He probably thought he was being subtle about it, but I knew better. I was not an idiot even if I preferred to act like one most of the time. The less people expected of me, the less of me was required.

The app he was pitching was ridiculous but it was just the thing that would annoy my family if I attached my name to it. It was the opposite of a dating app. Instead of going through something like Tinder to find someone to hook up with, this app was supposed to help find the ones who should be avoided. *Rate My Ex* was only in the early concept stage and was an asinine little thing created by someone who got burned by their ex. The premise was, after a breakup, you post your ex’s photo into the app and list all the worst qualities they have. Other people who have dated the same person can add their grievances too. The app would then rate the ‘ex’ to warn off people from hooking up with them.

It truly was an awful idea but it was worth a good few inches of press and would no doubt irritate my family, but all publicity was good publicity in my humble opinion. If nothing else I would be famous for little more than being

famous and that suited me just fine. I might even get a reality television deal out of it or get invited on to one of those Bachelor shows.

I TOOK THE NEXT CORNER A LITTLE TOO FAST. MY ANXIOUSNESS TO SHOW MY face at the family get-together and my annoyance at having to do so in the first place may have caused my foot to depress the accelerator a little harder than was wise in the current conditions. The fine piece of Italian engineering I drove grimly tried to grip the road, but Ferraris were not built for wet, slippery roads and consequently I didn't have a quick enough reaction time when I saw a cow standing in the middle of the road.

A cow.

In the middle of the road.

In the snow.

I slammed my foot on the brake and the back of the car fishtailed in the icy conditions. I hung on tightly to the wheel and tried to remember everything our chauffeur had taught me about driving...not that I had listened very well. I was young and felt indestructible and thought I knew everything. Was I supposed to turn into the spin or counter to it?

I always wondered if the whole 'your life flashing before your eyes' was actually a real thing or not. I didn't need to wonder anymore because it did, in fact, flash before my eyes and I wasn't exactly impressed by what I saw. Don't get me wrong. This wasn't a moment of personal revelation where I saw the error of my ways. No. This was more of a depressing 'I'm twenty-eight and pretty much a loser' kind of revelation. I had nothing of note in that little montage of flashbacks. There was nothing to hang my hat on as a legacy that people would remember me by. I was alternately a media darling and a rogue. When they loved me, they loved me and when they hated me, they loved me even more. When I was dead there would be a few bright headlines for a while and then I would disappear into obscurity, the one thing I had

been trying to avoid all my life.

There was an Avril Lavigne song playing in my head—hey, don't judge me, she's cool—'Anything But Ordinary' was the motto I lived my life by. In my pursuit of being anything but ordinary I had become somewhat of a joke. It was a harsh reality check. It didn't inspire any sudden promises to God that I would change my wicked ways or a determination to give all my money away in an attempt to buy my absolution. Instead, I was imbued with the determination to try harder. Be bolder. I needed to push my lacklustre profile into legendary status.

Take James Dean for example. He was more famous for being James Dean than for anything that he actually did—or so I understood it. And then there was Paris Hilton and those Kardashians. People loved them, but for what? That was what I wanted. Adoration of millions simply for being. I was so sick of being the forgotten Ricci brother. I was just as good looking as my brother Ricardo, the celebrated actor; and just as smart as Benedict, the tech genius; and if I really wanted to, I could be as serious and driven as Salvatore, the heir apparent and eldest of the Ricci offspring.

But all those spots in the family were taken. I had been approached to be an underwear model but it was too close to Ricardo's career for my liking. I wanted to carve my own path and currently that involved being a media magnet—*magnet* not *magnate*. I had no intention of owning the media, just being adored by it. The paparazzi loved me, but unfortunately everything I had done so far was fluff and bubble. There was nothing meaty and juicy to really put my name to and cement my notoriety.

All of this ridiculousness went through my head in the space of a few seconds as my car spun in lazy circles on the slick surface while I did little more than hang on for dear life. Meanwhile, the cow watched, casually munching on its cud as if I were little more than entertainment to it. Eventually the spin ended and my beautiful Ferrari plowed, nose first, into a snow bank. I hit my head on impact, seeing stars before the edges of my

vision greyed. I tipped my head back and closed my eyes, willing myself to stay conscious. The worst scenario in this situation would be for me to pass out and then die of hypothermia in my car. If I was going to die in a car accident then I wanted it to be a movie-worthy fiery explosion.

The engine died and I opened my eyes, checking for broken bones or symptoms of concussion—not that I knew what those were, but it seemed obvious that I would know if my brain was scrambled. When I was convinced I was in one piece and likely to remain so, I slammed my hands down on the steering wheel and cursed loudly.

Of course this was happening to me. Of course I was stranded in the middle of a country most people hadn't even heard of. Of course the snow was falling harder now. It seemed my entire life I was always one step away from greatness. But that last step...what a doozy.

If this accident and that cow were the reason my parents made good on their threat to freeze my accounts and I missed that meeting with Alberto then I would be out for vengeance. Just who I would enact my revenge on, I had no idea, but someone had to own that cow. Someone would pay and for once it wouldn't be me.

CHAPTER 2



Leonardo

I tried the ignition but the engine refused to turn over. With a few more colourful curse words, I undid my seatbelt and flung open the door. Or tried to. Snow was piled up around the car and I had to shove the door open before I could scramble free. I pulled out my cell phone and checked for a signal. Nothing. Fantastic. Just wonderful. Merry Christmas to me.

I looked around trying to find salvation somewhere. The cow was still standing in the middle of the road looking at me with big brown eyes.

“What are you looking at?” I asked, but it remained silent. Maybe it didn’t speak Italian.

I looked down the road in the direction from where I came and started walking, tugging my coat around me. The snow continued to fall, pounding me with icy needles and I swear it was getting heavier. I sank ankle deep in the wet, annoying stuff and I could feel my feet freezing through the Italian leather of my shoes. The owner of that cow would owe me not just the repairs on my car but a new pair of shoes and...I glanced at the legs of my pants, wet and muddy from the slush I was tromping through...new pants.

I eventually found the entrance to a driveway. It was flanked by large pillars that once held a gate but which had since been removed. The brick

pillars looked like they'd seen better days and the bare hinges where the gate should have hung were rusted and forlorn. The driveway hadn't been plowed and I stomped up the curved road ready to give the owner of the house a piece of my mind. Seriously. These people were savages to live like this.

I rounded the bend and the house came into view, such as it was. It was huge. An old manor house by the look, but it also looked suspiciously abandoned. It would be just my luck that the only house for miles around was an empty one. At the very least I might be able to get out of the snow if the porch had sufficient shelter.

As I got closer, I noticed a light in one of the lower windows. *Grazie Dio*. It looked like there might be someone at home. I didn't know how much use they'd be to me but I could at least, hopefully, warm myself by their fire. They might even have a landline that I could use to call someone to come and get me. I didn't think my car would be going anywhere anytime soon, not as long as this snow kept up.

I was shivering by the time I climbed the stairs to the porch and finally got out of the falling snow. Whoever thought snow was romantic had never lived with it. It was one of the reasons I wanted to spend the Christmas holidays in Milan where snow was a rare occurrence. Even better would have been to go south, Spain perhaps or even a tropical island below the equator. Not that I was given a choice.

I shook the snow from my coat and lifted the heavy knocker on the door letting it go with a loud boom that echoed through the house. Well, that was ominous.

The door opened a crack and a wizened face looked out at me.

"Yes?"

"I was wondering if I could trouble you for access to your telephone. It seems I've found myself in a spot of bother." My English was flawless, of course. The best money could buy.

The door opened a little wider and I looked down on the old woman who

eyed me with suspicion. “What sort of bother?” she asked.

“There was a cow—”

I didn’t manage to get the rest of my sentence out before the door was slammed in my face. I stood, stunned for a moment before I swore softly under my breath. Of all the...

I took a deep breath and lifted the knocker again. The resulting boom netted no results and I was left standing on the porch, the darkening sky surrounding me and the freezing temperatures leeching into my very bones.

Just what was I supposed to do now? I was stranded, I was freezing, and I had no cell service. My parents would be livid when I didn’t arrive on their doorstep as requested and my trust fund would be sealed until they believed I had served sufficient punishment for my many and varied indiscretions.

At a loss to do anything else, I turned back to the door and pounded on it with my fist, willing the old woman to come back and take pity on me. A loud engine caught my attention and I stepped to the edge of the porch to see an all terrain vehicle come around the corner of the house. The person riding it was too rugged up against the cold to be discernible.

“Get on,” a voice said from beneath a woollen scarf.

“What?”

“Get on the back,” the person yelled over the sound of the vehicle. “Take me to the cow.”

Georgina

THE LAST THING I NEEDED RIGHT NOW WAS THE INTERRUPTION THAT THIS stranger brought to my door. I had a lost cow and there was a leak in my bedroom. The milk tanks in the factory were close to freezing and if this blizzard didn’t let up soon, I would be stranded in the house. The only reason I was making any time for the man standing on my front porch was because

he may very well have the answer to one of my dilemmas—that being the lost cow.

“Get on,” I said again when he hesitated.

He threw his hands in the air and then finally walked down the steps toward me. He swung his leg over the ATV seat and I gunned the engine. His hands gripped me as he was nearly thrown off the back and I heard him curse colourfully in Italian. I smiled. At least someone else was having as bad a day as I was.

“Where did you see the cow?” I yelled over my shoulder.

“What?” he asked, leaning forward to yell in my ear.

I shivered at his closeness, but it was probably more to do with the blizzard than this man having any effect on me. No one had been able to warm my cold dead heart since Jacob died and I didn’t think this fancy Italian stranger would be any different.

“The cow,” I yelled again. “Which direction?” This time I spoke in Italian, hoping he would have more chance understanding.

He pointed me in the direction as we came through the gate and onto the road. It didn’t take long to find his car in the snow bank although if not for the flashing lights I might have mistaken it for just a pile of snow. The thing was entirely covered from nose to tail.

I pulled the ATV to a stop and the Italian jumped off the back, throwing his hands in the air and muttering under his breath.

I swung my leg over the seat and took a couple of steps toward him, unwrapping the scarf from around my face so I could ask him about Clarabelle.

“I take it this is your car?” I asked, again in Italian.

He nodded, then turned to look at me. “You’re a woman,” he said. “And you speak Italian.”

“I also speak French, German, English and a little Latin, and of course I’m a woman. Now where was the cow?”

“It was your cow?” he asked.

“I’m not entirely sure until I get a look at her, but I did lose a cow, so the odds are it’s one of mine.”

“Over there,” he said. “It was in the middle of the road and I had to slam on my breaks and swerve to miss it.”

“Just how fast were you going?” I asked.

“I was running late.”

“No excuse,” I replied, turning my head to look for the cow.

“And it’s no excuse to let your livestock roam unattended on public roads. Do you know how dangerous that is?”

“And that car you’re driving is sensible? If you had been doing the posted speed limit you wouldn’t have ended up with the front of your fancy car in a snow drift, regardless of whether Clarabelle was on the road or not.”

“Clarabelle?”

“My cow,” I replied, searching the surrounding area for the wayward animal. She had a mischievous streak a mile wide. Will told me she was the cow that went missing the day he found Alyssa thrown from her horse. Why couldn’t Clarabelle have brought me a prince instead of this nasty Italian hothead?

“You name all your cows?”

“Not all of them, but Clarabelle is special.”

“Is that your cow?” he asked pointing.

I looked in the direction he indicated and breathed a sigh of relief. It was indeed Clarabelle and she looked no worse for wear, thank god.

I trudged through the snow, pulling a lead rope from my back pocket. She watched me steadily. I didn’t think she would run, but just in case I held out a slice of apple. She lifted her nose and then waddled toward me. I snapped the lead onto her halter as I let her take the apple from my hand.

I tugged her toward the ATV and secured her to the back.

“Where are you going?” the Italian asked.

“I need to get Clarabelle back to the barn,” I replied, starting the engine.

“What about me?”

“What about you?”

“You’re just going to leave me stranded here in the middle of nowhere?”

I shrugged.

“At least take me back to your house so I can call someone to come and get me.”

I huffed out a breath. “Fine. Get on.”

With one last look at his car, he shook his head and trudged back over to me and Clarabelle. He swung his leg over the seat and, learning from last time, held tightly to my waist.

“Take it easy this time Princess,” he said in my ear.

“That’s Duchess to you,” I said as I put the ATV in gear and did a wide slow circle to head back to the house. I kept the speed slow enough for Clarabelle to keep up and did not enjoy the warmth of the very male body pressed up against my back. Getting rid of him couldn’t come soon enough.

We made it back to the house without mishap and I directed the ATV around the back of the house to the barn. I drove us inside and shut off the engine. Without waiting for my Italian stranger, I got off the bike and untied Clarabelle, leading her to a stall and settling her inside. By the time I came back. He was standing in the centre of the barn looking around.

“What’s your name?” I asked, not because I was interested in him but because I had to be able to call him something other than the cranky Italian stranger.

“Leonardo Ricci,” he said with a small bow. “And you?”

“Lady Georgina Darkly, Duchess of Pemberton,” I replied in my haughtiest tone.

He took my hand and bowed over it, kissing my gloved fingers. “A pleasure to meet you, my lady,” he said.

CHAPTER 3



Leonardo

The duchess pulled her hand from mine and turned away. She was an odd woman. She busied herself checking on the animals currently housed in the barn. There were more cows like the delinquent Clarabelle and a large enclosure of fluffy white sheep. I don't think I'd ever been in a barn—not an actual real barn. I'm sure I'd been in reclaimed barns that were now trendy restaurants and I'd spent a fair amount of time in wineries and barrel rooms, but that wasn't quite the same. There was a smell. No doubt caused by the livestock. I definitely hadn't been this close to livestock before—horses didn't count. They were by far superior to livestock.

The duchess had begun to unwind the thick woollen scarf she wore around her neck and which covered half her face. Her back was to me and I sighed. I snuck a peek at my watch. I was hoping to have already been at the estate, where my parents were waiting, with a glass of wine in my hand and sitting in front of a roaring fire. Instead I was chilled to the bone, despite the relative warmth of the barn, and finding a glass of wine in the dilapidated old house was probably more than I could hope for.

“I'm sorry to interrupt,” I said turning back to the duchess.

She swung around at the sound of my voice and anything more I was

going to say dried up on my tongue. The woman was gorgeous. Long blonde hair and the face of an angel. Hidden beneath all that bulky snow gear was a delicate creature and much younger than I'd originally thought her to be.

"What?" she said, her blue eyes narrowing at me.

I swallowed, trying to get some moisture into my mouth so that I could speak. Under the snow suit she wore tight jeans that were ripped and dirtied with wear and moulded to her slim figure like they were painted on. An over-size flannel shirt hung from her shoulders and should have made her look scruffy but it had the opposite effect on me. She was nothing I expected and looked like no duchess I had ever seen before.

"Um, I need to try and call someone to come and get me," I managed to say.

"Just let me finish bedding down these animals and then I will take you to the house to make your call."

"Someone like you shouldn't be doing this manual task," I said, impressed by the way she moved with such efficiency and competence.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

I spread my hands indicating the barn and the animals that were watching us like we were the day's soap opera instalment.

"You said you were a duchess. Don't you have people to do this for you?"

"Not that it's any of your business, but I sent my *people* home because of the storm. And I may be a duchess but that doesn't preclude me from pulling my weight. This is a working farm, not some petting zoo or tourist spot."

"But you're a woman—"

"I wouldn't finish that sentence if I was you," the duchess said, her eyes snapping. "Being a woman has no bearing on my capabilities. I am responsible for several hundred head of livestock, six different families who work here and in the dairy and cheese factory, and the wider area of the duchy that includes several more farms and families who rely on me."

“But you’re a duchess,” I tried again. “Where is your duke to look after all these things for you?”

“There is no duke,” she growled at me. “This is my title, my estate, my duchy and I take my responsibilities very seriously.” She looked at me, her eyes coasting over my thick wool coat and down the legs of my hand-tailored suit and finished with a sneer on my—now ruined—Italian leather shoes. “Someone like you probably doesn’t even know what responsibility is, let alone a day of hard work.”

I opened my mouth to rebut her but closed it again because she was right. Not that I wanted to give up my life or that I was willing to roll up my sleeves and help her with whatever it is she was doing in the stalls. I wouldn’t have the first clue what to do anyway.

She looked so delicate, like a good stiff breeze would blow her over, and yet there was a rod of steel running through her that I’d only just glimpsed. I couldn’t reconcile the woman who had ridden into the storm on an ATV and the beautiful creature before me.

The lights in the barn flickered and I thought they would go out. Thankfully they stayed on and the duchess looked up at the offending lights, biting down on her lip. I had to suppress a groan at the sight.

“Wait here,” she said before disappearing into an office I hadn’t noticed before.

I took another look around the barn, really seeing it this time. It was cleaner and tidier than I imaged a working barn to be. The cows and sheep looked healthy, not that I was an expert at those sorts of things. I took a step toward the enclosure where Clarabelle, the cow who started all of this, stood looking at me. I grimaced at the feeling of wet socks in wet shoes and a chill raced over me. The barn was warm, but not warm enough to dry my clothes, and the cold was beginning to get into my very bones. I shivered, my teeth chattering, and felt ridiculous. It was just a bit of snow.

“Are you okay?” the duchess asked, looking at me with more than just

disdain for the first time since we'd met.

"Cold," I said, the trembles in my body now uncontrollable.

"Come on," she said, grabbing my elbow and pulling me to the door of the barn. "You need to get inside and warm up before you freeze to death."

"Thanks," I said through my clenched jaw as I attempted to stop my teeth rattling together.

Georgina

I DRAGGED THE ITALIAN STRANGER OUT OF THE BARN AND THROUGH THE snow to the back door of the house. The icy needles beat down on us and by the time we reached the house and the warmth of the crackling fire within, we were both wet through. I shouldn't have taken off my snow suit in the barn, but the thing was clumsy and I hated how it restricted my movement.

I stomped snow from my boots in the mudroom and noticed mister tall-dark-and-arrogant just stood there as if he had no idea what to do with himself. I'd have to be blind not to notice how good looking he was, but any attraction there might have been was wiped away when he opened that arrogant mouth of his.

The guy was obviously loaded—his shoes alone were enough to feed my livestock for a month—but he didn't look like he knew how to tie his own shoelaces let alone lecture me on running a farm on my own. He was a pampered, spoiled brat and the very last thing I needed to deal with today. I already had enough issues on my plate without playing hostess to a man who wasn't smart enough to make sure he didn't freeze to death.

"Go and sit by the fire," I said, leading him into the big kitchen.

He followed me meekly and sat on one of the old wooden chairs that had been in the kitchen my entire life. I grabbed the thick pot holders and pulled the steaming kettle off the hook where it hung over the fire and carried it to

the big old kitchen table. I set to work making tea while he sat there, seemingly hypnotised by the fire.

“Here,” I said, shoving the mug of hot chai in his hands.

He looked down at the brew and then up at me with puzzlement. “Thanks?”

“Drink,” I said, “It will help warm you up.”

He sipped and grimaced and I hid my grin behind my own mug. It was an acquired taste, but I couldn’t think of anything better after a cold day out in the snow.

“You might want to take your shoes off,” I said after a moment of watching him just sit there like he was in some sort of trance.

“What?” he asked, turning to me.

“Your shoes,” I said. “Your feet must be freezing. Take your shoes and socks off. They’ll warm up quicker.”

He held his mug in one hand and looked down at his shoes like he didn’t quite know how to remove them. The guy was ridiculous. I’d met my fair share of men who’d gone through life without having to lift a finger and I could spot them a mile away. It made me cranky. This guy had probably been given every opportunity in life and he no doubt squandered it away, not even realising how many people would kill for the chances he’d had.

It was the same old argument that went around and around in my head. I saw someone and immediately compared them to Jacob and to Will. The two men in my life who I held up as role models. Jacob had stolen my heart with his gentle manner and fierce loyalty and if he hadn’t died then I would be married to him right now and living in the palace as, if not his queen, then at least his princess. And Will had shown me just what it meant to be the ruler of a duchy. My brother had taken the broken down estate that our father bankrupted and turned it into a profitable and thriving business that benefited not only the two of us but the duchy as a whole. And then he’d handed it all over to me when he married the queen.

The man sitting next to me, who couldn't even unlace his own shoes so that he didn't get frostbite, couldn't hold a candle to either of them. It didn't matter that his dark eyes glowed in the firelight or that he had eyelashes longer than any man had a right to have. The strong jaw with the perfectly groomed whiskers and the soft, plump lips that were now—thankfully—pink instead of blue, may give him the look of a model I would see on the cover of a romance novel, but the whole effect was ruined by his thoughtless comments earlier.

“You live here alone?” he asked.

“I do,” I replied. “Are you going to take your shoes off?”

He finally set his mug down and bent forward to unlace his shoes and pull his wet socks off long, tapered feet that I had no business noticing.

“Who was the old woman who answered the door?” he asked when he sat back up. He grimaced as the heat hit his frozen feet and I felt a small prick of sympathy for him.

“Cookie,” I said. “She's my cook and helps around the house.”

“Where is she?”

“I sent her home so she wouldn't get stranded by the storm.”

He looked around, taking in the room. I followed his gaze, imagining it as he might see it. It was old and run down—the entire house was—but I was too busy with Pemberton Dairies to spend much time worrying about the house.

“You don't keep full time staff?” he asked, and I felt the hairs on the back of my neck bristle.

“I don't need full time staff,” I said.

“This is a big house and your cook seemed...a little old to have the responsibility of looking after it.”

“The house is big but it is only me living here. I see no reason to worry about making sure it is a show piece when I use only four or five spaces in the entire place. Not that I have to explain myself to you.”

“But you’re a duchess,” he said, as if that explained everything.

“And?”

“Well, shouldn’t you be hosting ladies’ lunches and chairing charities and sitting in the parlour needlepointing or something?”

“Just what century do you think we’re living in?” I asked, incensed.

It was bad enough having to deal with the other peers in the realm without having to explain myself to this interloper. Will and I put up with a nasty backlash when he entailed the duchy to me. He couldn’t keep it because he was marrying the queen and he didn’t want it to go to some distant relative who wouldn’t look after it the way he knew I would. I even had a seat in the House of Lords, much to the disgust of the old guard. But that was changing and I knew that although it was hard now, the new generation of Merveillians were forging a better life for the women who came after us.

CHAPTER 4



Georgina

“I just don’t understand why you would want to work outside with the cows and the sheep and what not when you could be living the high life,” he said.

“Like you?” I asked. “No thank you.”

“You don’t know anything about me.”

“I know enough,” I said.

“Really? You know me by the what?” He checked his watch. “Less than an hour we’ve been acquainted?”

I crossed my arms and looked at him with a smirk on my face. “I know you have more money than sense,” I said. “I know you’re spoiled and entitled and think your money makes you somehow better than others. You have probably never once sweated from physical work—and I mean *work*, not a workout at the gym or on the tennis court. Do you even know how to boil a kettle or scramble eggs? Have you ever had to fend for yourself?”

“Like you’re any better than me,” he spat. “You’re a duchess and live here in this mansion. Have you ever had to fend for yourself? Your parents probably gave you everything you ever wanted, including your title. You accuse me of thinking I’m better than others because of my wealth, isn’t your

title just a fancy way of telling people you're better than them? What did you do to deserve it?"

I rolled my eyes. "Your argument is invalid," I said. "You can't just throw my insults back at me when you have no grounds for them. Look around you. Do you think I'm living the high life? This 'mansion' as you call it is falling down around my ears. Yes, I'm a duchess but it's more than just a title, it's a responsibility that I neither wanted nor asked for. As for fending for myself, do you see anyone here caring for me? *I rescued you*. You would still be out in this storm freezing your Italian loafers off if not for me. You didn't even have sense enough to take off those damned loafers so your feet wouldn't freeze when you got inside. You may have money but that doesn't make you any better than me or the people that rely on me for their livelihoods."

"How do you know that I didn't start from nothing? How do you know that I didn't claw my way to where I am with sweat, smarts, and hard work?"

I laughed. It was rude, I knew it, but I couldn't help the bubble of hilarity that fell out of my mouth. I tried to cover my mouth and hold it in, but this guy was a comedian if he thought I would buy the rubbish he was trying to sell.

He narrowed his gaze at me and crossed his arms, turning away and staring into the fire.

"Sorry," I said, hiccuping as I tried to quiet the laughter. "You didn't really expect me to believe you, did you? I mean, come on. When was the last time you had to even lift a finger to do anything for yourself?"

"Do you even know who I am?" he asked, righteous anger firing in his eyes as he glared at me.

"Nope," I replied. "You told me your name..." I tapped my finger on my chin as I tried to remember it. "Leonard, right?"

"Leonardo Ricci," he said, his voice a controlled growl.

I opened my eyes wide in mock awe. "Leonardo Ricci? Really?" I

screwed up my face as I pretended to think and then opened my eyes to look at him with a bland, innocent expression. “Nope, doesn’t ring any bells. Are you an actor?”

He rolled his eyes and turned away from me. Seriously, this guy. He was hot, but by Hades he was a moron.

“Sorry, I’m not really into celebrity gossip. I don’t read those trashy magazines or follow social media. I’m too busy...*working*.”

He refused to acknowledge me and I sighed. It wasn’t like I hadn’t spent time around men like him, it was just really disappointing. Someone in his position and his obvious wealth had a responsibility—or that’s how I viewed it. I may not have wanted to become a duchess in Will’s place, but I knew the title came with obligations. No, I didn’t think my life would turn out this way. I never expected to be running a farm and a dairy and a cheese factory, but now that I was, I was determined to do it to the best of my ability. People like Leonardo who took their wealth for granted really annoyed me. There was so much need in the world and if they weren’t contributing to the solution, then what was the point of having all that money? There were only so many sports cars and Rolex watches a person could buy.

“Look,” I said. “Maybe you should just call someone to come and pick you up. Your car isn’t going anywhere in a hurry. You were obviously on your way somewhere and you have someone waiting for you. If you call them now, they should be able to get here to pick you up before this gets too much worse.”

“Fine,” he said.

“Fine,” I replied. “The phone is this way.”

Leonardo

I FOLLOWED THE DUCHESS OUT OF THE WARM KITCHEN INTO THE HALL THAT

was several degrees cooler and darker. The woman got under my skin in a way no one else ever had. No one spoke to me like that—other than my parents and my eldest brother. Normally people told me what I wanted to hear, but not this annoying woman and not my parents. They were constantly harping on me to make something of myself. They used the same arguments, even. I was privileged and I'd been given opportunities that other people hadn't. I was a constant disappointment to them.

“Look,” I said, wanting to...I didn't even know what I was trying to do. It didn't feel right having a complete stranger summarily dismiss me after such a brief encounter. People normally fawned over me, desperate to get on my good side. I didn't know how to react to being so completely disregarded. “I apologise for my...behaviour,” I said.

She stopped and turned to face me. She really was quite breathtaking. I particularly liked the pink blush of colour that stained her cheeks when she argued with me.

“I think we may have gotten off on the wrong foot. I was in a hurry and I was driving too fast. My family are expecting me and I was completely unprepared for the snow storm.”

She didn't even smile, she just looked at me dispassionately. I was at a loss for what to say. I tried a smile instead. The self-deprecating smile that conveyed my embarrassment at being called out on my appalling behaviour. I even tried to add a little twinkle to my eye—a no-hard-feelings twinkle—and she simply sniffed and turned away, ignoring me, and continued down the hall.

“Come on,” I said. “Can't we start over? I've admitted that I was wrong and you've been such a gracious hostess, surely you can give me a second chance?”

It just didn't sit right with me to have this woman look at me so disparagingly. I wasn't a bad person, a little self-absorbed maybe, but I didn't go around kicking puppies or stealing food from orphans.

“Why?” she asked, turning to face me. “Why is it so important to you what I think? We barely know each other. In your own words we only met less than an hour ago. What do you care if I think you’re a spoiled brat? We’ll never see each other again.”

I shrugged. “I just don’t want you to think of me like that.”

“But it’s true, isn’t it?” she asked. “I mean, you are spoiled and arrogant. What is there that you can say to change my mind?”

“I may be those things, but is it such a big deal? Who am I hurting? And why do you care so much about the type of person I am?”

“I don’t care,” she replied. “You mean less than nothing to me Mr. Ricci. You are no more than a minor inconvenience in my day.”

“But I helped you find your lost cow,” I said, trying desperately for something that would make her look at me differently. I didn’t know why it was so important, I just knew it was.

She inclined her head. “And you have my thanks for that,” she replied. “Clarabelle could have been injured or worse. I am grateful for her safe return but that is as far as our acquaintance goes. You found my cow and I rescued you from freezing to death. A debt paid in full.”

“Seriously? That’s it?”

She shrugged. “What else is there? I don’t like you, Mr. Ricci and I think I have made myself explicitly clear in that regard. I don’t like what you stand for and I don’t agree with the way you seemingly conduct your life. We have nothing in common and as soon as you are out of my house, you will be out of my life.”

“Wow,” I replied, floundering. I spent the majority of my life being the likeable, if mischievous, son of a billionaire. I may have done some Random Acts of Stupid, as my father was often known to call them, but nobody outright disliked me. Most people laughed me off as somewhat dim but harmless. The duchess had taken an active and undisguised dislike of me and I didn’t like the feeling. It was a feeling I’d run from for most of my life.

“I don’t know why this distresses you so much,” she said, peering up at me with ice cold eyes. “What possible value could my opinion of you have? We are strangers thrown together by circumstance. Not everybody has to like you, Mr. Ricci and you are under no obligation to like everybody.”

“That may be the case,” I replied, “but it still doesn’t sit well with me to have given you such a bad first impression. I am not a bad person, Lady Georgina. Misguided maybe and a little supercilious, but those are hardly reasons for you to dislike me out of hand.”

“I have known too many men like you, Mr. Ricci, to see you and your attitude as harmless. Now, here is the telephone. Make your call so we can both get back to our lives and leave this as little more than a contrary experience that is best forgotten.”

CHAPTER 5



Georgina

I handed the handset to him and turned to walk away but I didn't get far. The lights went out leaving us in complete darkness.

"Damn," I whispered under my breath. That wasn't good. That would only delay Mr. Ricci's departure and I didn't think I was quite prepared to continue to verbally spar with him. The man got under my skin and I didn't like it. The sooner he could remove his person from my presence the better off we would both be.

"There is no dial tone," he said.

"What?"

"The phone," he replied. "There is no dial tone."

"Of course there isn't," I muttered to myself. Could this day get any worse?

"It seems we have lost power and the phone line," I said. "The only alternative I can offer is to drive you to wherever you are going myself."

"I don't know if that is such a good idea," he said.

"Nonsense," I replied. "I'm a very good driver and I have a four wheel drive in the garage."

I made my way back down the dark hall, feeling my way, until I got to

the kitchen. I could hear Mr. Ricci stumble along behind me and I tried not to smile. I wasn't normally this mean but there was just something about him that got my back up. He reminded me too much of my ex, Jordan, and was so completely opposite to Jacob that the frisson of attraction I felt was entirely unwelcome.

I grabbed the keys to the jeep from the hook and shot a look out the window. It was a complete white-out. The storm had ramped up in the time I had been arguing with Mr. Ricci and now it looked like he was stranded here. With me. I swore softly.

"I don't think we're going anywhere," he said.

He was standing far too close to me. I could feel the heat of his body even though he didn't touch me and it was entirely too pleasant. I stifled a shiver and stepped away from him, re-hanging my keys on the hook. I finally turned my eyes on him and noticed how bedraggled he looked. His dark hair had begun to curl as it dried. The sides were short, but the over-long top was thick with curls and one even had the audacity to fall over his forehead as if artfully arranged. The firelight lit the room and made those dark eyes of his sparkle. And he had a cut above his eye that I had failed to notice before.

Why did this man have to be the one to reignite that part of me I thought I'd buried with Jacob? He was a bad idea and would be my biggest mistake if I gave in to the attraction that snaked through my veins.

"You're going to have to stay here," I said and I did not like the way my voice sounded so breathless. "At least until the storm clears."

"I appreciate your hospitality," he said.

"You're going to need to change out of those wet clothes," I said, purposely not noticing the way his eyes flared. "And you probably need a shower to warm up."

"That would be appreciated," he replied.

"Follow me," I said, striding toward the back stairs that used to be the servants' access to the floors above. "Damn," I said, coming to a stop. He ran

into the back of me and his touch sent a buzz of awareness through me. He stepped back, but not fast enough, and I wondered if he felt it too. I swallowed. "I need a flashlight," I said.

"You can use my phone," he said and his voice sent goosebumps over my skin.

"That won't be enough," I replied.

I turned and we did a little dodgem-dance until I managed to get around him. There were flashlights and spare batteries in the pantry. I handed him one and took one for myself before climbing the stairs. I led him to Will's old room. The darkness wasn't so complete up here, especially not with the curtains pulled open to let in what little daylight was left. I crossed the room to the bureau and pulled open a drawer. Will had left some of his old farm clothes behind when he'd moved into the palace. Mr. Ricci looked to be the same size.

"Here," I said, handing him a pair of old jeans and a long-sleeved Henley. "These should fit."

"Thanks," he said, looking at them with disdain. "Your husband's?"

"My brother's," I replied.

"And where is your brother?" he asked.

"With his wife," I said, needing to get out of the room and away from Mr. Ricci. "The bathroom is through there. The water pressure will be awful due to the fact we have no power for the water pumps but it should still be hot. I'll meet you downstairs when you're finished."

I turned and left the room before he could say anything in reply. Now that I was out of his orbit I could think clearly. The power had gone out and I needed to check on the cheese factory to make sure the generator had come on. A walk in the blinding snow storm was just what I needed to get my head on straight.

Leonardo

THE SHOWER WAS HOT AT LEAST, ALTHOUGH THE DUCHESS WAS RIGHT ABOUT the water pressure. I leaned my head back under the trickle of water and tried to get the duchess out of my mind. I had bigger things to worry about. My parents were expecting me and I had no way of calling them and telling them that I was stranded. I knew what they would think. They would assume I'd just blown off the mandatory family Christmas summons like I did everything else. They probably thought I didn't take their threat seriously. I did, though. I knew they would cut me off to bring me to heel and I wasn't avoiding them, not this time at any rate.

Despite what the duchess thought of me, I was trying to make something of myself. That's why I was keen to meet up with Alberto. Apps were the way of the future and if I could get a foothold into the industry—even if it was with an asinine little app—then I would at least have an in. I didn't want to keep skating by on my parents' money, but I didn't want to have to start from scratch either. I wasn't that noble.

The barbs the duchess tossed at me so casually hit too close to home for comfort. The woman had known me for barely five minutes and she'd read me like a book. I didn't realise I was so transparent. Was that how everyone saw me? Was I a joke and the only one unaware of the punchline?

I shut off the water and stepped out of the shower. I shivered as I reached for the towel and dried off briskly. I was being ridiculous by letting the duchess get under my skin like that. No one had ever made me doubt myself before. Women threw themselves at me and I knew it wasn't just my sparkling personality and devilish good looks that attracted them. But it seemed the duchess was immune to my charms and that bugged me. It may not be necessary for everybody to like me, but I couldn't help wanting them to. It made up for the years of indifference from a family that was too busy to care for an unexpected and unwanted baby.

The clothes the duchess left me were a snug fit, but they fit just the same and they were warm, the most important thing. Worn jeans that had probably seen the inside of a barn more times than I had and a soft t-shirt that hugged my biceps snugly. I was thankful to get out of my wet, cold clothes even if the replacement offering was essentially hand-me-downs—a first for me.

I snooped around the room that had belonged to the duchess' brother. How was it that she had the estate and the farm? Didn't those things normally pass to the son? Whoever he was, there wasn't much left in the room to give me any clue about what type of person he was.

I dragged my finger across the bureau making a line in the dust. The room hadn't been used or cleaned in a while and looked as run down as the rest of the house. The carpets were threadbare and the wallpaper faded and peeling in places. I didn't know how titles worked, exactly, but didn't someone like a duchess have money? The estate had to be worth something. The barn had been impressive and it looked like the livestock lived better than the duchess did. What was up with that?

There was no way I was going to ask her. I'd already stepped on her toes too many times. For the duration of my stay, I was going to keep my mouth closed and my comments to myself. She was prickly and talking to her was like walking through a minefield...blindfolded. I had no desire to be on the receiving end of one of her tongue-lashings again. She could give my mother a run for her money in that department. I think the two of them would get on famously.

I grinned and stepped out of the room into the dark hall. The light was fading quickly and I needed the flashlight she'd given me to navigate my way back down the dark stairs to the kitchen. The fire had warmed the kitchen to a toasty temperature and it was nice to step into it after the relative chill of the rest of the house. No central heating. I assumed it would take a bit of money to heat a house this size, not that I was aware of the current cost of utilities. I'd never had to even consider it, if I was honest. I'd never once looked at a

friend's house, or my own for that matter, and considered how much it cost to heat or how hard it would be to maintain. The servants who walked through the halls of my parents' home just took care of all that and I had never once wondered about how something got done. There was always food on the table when it was dinner time and my room was cleaned daily. My clothes were whisked away and returned clean and pressed without so much as a peep uttered about it. I assumed the same couldn't be said about the duchess.

I heard the door open and a blast of arctic air whooshed into the kitchen. I turned from where I sat to see the duchess stomp into the room, drenched from head to toe, snowflakes caught in her hair and on her eyelashes, and her cheeks rosy from the cold. She was stunning.

“What are you looking at?” she snapped.

“You look cold.”

“Thank you, Captain Obvious,” she replied with chattering teeth.

“Come and sit by the fire,” I said, standing to go to her and help her into a chair.

“No,” she said, stepping back from me. “I'll go shower and change. Make yourself useful and start a fire in the parlour.”

Before I could ask where the parlour was, she'd escaped up the stairs. Okay, then. It looked like I was on my own.

CHAPTER 6



Georgina

I stood under the dribble of hot water in the shower and refused to acknowledge that seeing Mr. Ricci—and yes, I would continue to refer to him by that to give myself a bit of a barrier to help keep my distance from him—in Will’s clothes affected me. When he was dressed in his bespoke suit and those damned Italian shoes, I could see him as the self-righteous snob I categorised him as originally. Seeing him in soft, snug denim and that Henley stretched across his chest made him too...normal...reachable...approachable...wantable.

I screeched as my hot shower turned cold and cursed the Italian interloper for using all the hot water. He probably hadn’t even given the limited supply a second thought. The man was so oblivious to the world around him that he probably didn’t even know that hot water required electricity to keep it hot.

Muttering to myself, I dried off by rubbing my chilled skin roughly with a towel to get some circulation back into my limbs and then pulled on sweats, thick socks and an over-size woollen sweater that had been Jacob’s. I pulled my still-wet hair into a messy knot on top of my head and took a breath. It was more than likely I would be spending the night with Mr. Ricci and we needed to get through it without murdering one another.

I grabbed the flashlight and made my way back down the stairs. The kitchen was empty when I arrived and I hoped Mr. Ricci had done as I asked and managed to get a fire lit in the parlour. We would have to sleep there tonight—if it came to that. If it was just me, I could just as easily sleep in the kitchen on a pallet of blankets from my bed—the leak in my bedroom ceiling made my room unsuitable in the freezing weather—but I was sure Mr. Ricci would not be comfortable on the hard floor. At least there was a couch in the parlour that he could sleep on and I could make do with my blankets on the floor.

I strode down the hall and into the dark parlour. No cheery firelight or warmth greeted me. Instead, the man stood looking at the fireplace like he could light the damned thing with his laser vision.

“What are you doing?” I asked, studiously ignoring the way Will’s clothes fit him.

“You asked me to light the fire,” he replied.

“Right, so what is the problem?”

“Where is the ignition switch?”

“What?”

“To light the fire. Where is the switch? I’ve searched the entire mantle and I can’t find it.”

“Are you serious right now?” I asked, looking at him dumbfounded.

He returned my gaze with one of puzzlement. “Uh...yes?”

“Oh for the love of all that is holy and good,” I said as I stomped toward him.

I crouched down in front of the fireplace and picked up the matches that sat on the hearth. I’d laid the fire earlier, but hadn’t lit it. I struck the match and held it to the kindling, waiting for it to catch. When I was sure the fire was steady, I flicked the match into the fire and stood.

“It’s a real fire?” he asked, raising his eyebrows in surprise.

“Of course. What did you think those logs were doing in there?”

“I thought it was a gas fireplace with fake logs,” he replied. “Are they all like that?”

I tried really hard not to roll my eyes—tried and failed. “Yes. The house was never converted to gas,” I replied snappishly. The ancestors before us hadn’t bothered with much modernisation and my father never had the money. Now that there was money, neither Will nor I had the time it would take in a house this size. There was always something with a higher priority begging for attention.

“Are you hungry?” I asked, trying to change the subject and head another argument off at the pass.

“Sure,” he said, watching me carefully.

I stepped away from him—he really had an issue with personal space in that he always seemed to be in mine—and my sock-covered foot hit a particularly slippery section of wooden floor. Before I could stop the inevitable, my foot slipped out from under me and I overbalanced, reaching out to the closest surface to stop my fall. That surface happened to be Mr. Ricci. I clutched at his biceps and the world around me slowed. He reached for me at the same time, his hands gripping my waist and tugging me against his chest. The shock of his body pressed against mine was the only excuse I had for the zap of electricity that went through me, warming me to the very ends of my fingers and toes. My breath hitched and an entire kaleidoscope of butterflies swarmed in my stomach.

His eyes dropped to my lips and we were so close that it would take barely nothing to lean into the kiss that hovered between us like a ghost. It was a second, less than a second, a moment, just a breath, but it stretched between us like taffy, thick and sticky and sweet. We stood so close I could see each and every one of his ridiculously long eyelashes and his warm breath feathered over my skin.

The fire cracked and popped, shattering the frozen moment and I jumped back, away from him and out of his hold.

“I can warm some soup,” I said, turning and scrambling from the room before he could say anything.

I escaped to the dark hall and paused, using the wall to hold me upright and steady as I dragged in a breath. I refused to acknowledge what just happened. I refused to accept that a man like that could cause such a reaction in me. He wasn't and never could be Jacob and the chemistry that arced between us was little more than proximity and loneliness on my part. It had been too long since I spent time with a man who wasn't my brother or a friend and with Christmas just around the corner, my solitary existence was made more acute. That's all it was and nothing more.

Leonardo

I WATCHED HER LEAVE, UNABLE TO MOVE. THE WOMAN HAD BEWITCHED ME. She was so damned competent and capable and independent that it was dazzling. I had not lived the life of a monk but there had never been another woman that had so enthralled me the way Lady Georgina Darkly, Duchess of Pemberton had. The only other woman in my life who had such grit and determination was my mother and I certainly had never entertained the feelings toward my mother that had assaulted me when I held Lady Georgina in my arms.

I exhaled slowly and turned away from the door. I leaned against the mantle and looked into the fire that licked the logs in the grate. I just needed a minute. Maybe it was the bump to the head that had caused the reaction. It couldn't possibly be anything more than that. I knew there was a physical attraction—the woman was gorgeous and I couldn't deny that—but we had nothing in common and completely opposite philosophies on life. She reminded me of my mother for Hades' sake. I should not feel the chemistry that burned between us and I absolutely should not be thinking of pursuing it.

I had an entire family that were already disappointed in me, I didn't need to add to that number.

I took a deep breath and straightened my shoulders. It was the storm, the accident, and the stress of having to face my parents and spend the next seven days with them. That was the only explanation for the way the blood thrummed in my veins from her touch. My body was overtaxed and confused. The woman had done nothing more than offer me shelter—while berating me—and in some twisted survival instinct, the caveman part of my brain had decided that being with her would assure my survival. The woman had lit a fire, for lands' sakes, of course my caveman brain was praising her. Grunt, grunt. Fire good. Woman good. Grunt, grunt.

Determined not to let the uncouth and entirely primitive part of my brain rule my body, I strode out of the parlour and back to the kitchen. She stood over the fire stirring a large pot that hung above the flames. She had changed into sweats and a large sweater that did nothing to hide the delicate frame of her body. Her blonde hair was pulled up on top of her head and wisps escaped, curling around her face and lifting gently with the rising heat of the fire.

“Soup's almost done,” she said, not looking at me.

I crossed the room and took the seat I'd had before. My shoes were placed neatly by the hearth and my socks draped over a rail to dry with the rest of my clothes. I'd forgotten about them and had left them in a wet heap in the bathroom. Lady Georgina must have collected them and set them out to dry for me. I was ashamed of my thoughtlessness. A duchess was picking up after me like a maid and I simply let her. Not to mention she was now cooking for me. If left to my own devices I would be cold, hungry, and still wet. She'd had no obligation to do so—she didn't even like me—but she had looked after me. Probably because she recognised that I was not equal to the task myself.

She reached for the thick mittens that she'd used to move the kettle earlier

and I stood.

“Let me do that,” I said.

“No,” she replied, deftly plucking the hot pot from off the fire and carrying it to the scarred table. “You would most likely spill it.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but closed it again because she was, in all likelihood, correct.

Sitting at the table like a two year old, I watched as she spooned the steaming, fragrant soup into thick earthenware bowls. It was rustic and charming and like something out of a turn of the century Christmas special.

She pushed the bowl across the table to me and handed me a spoon. “Eat,” she said, taking her seat and drawing one knee up as she scooped some of the soup out of the bowl.

“Thank you,” I said, belatedly. “Not just for the soup but for taking me in.”

“I couldn’t very well let you freeze to death on my doorstep,” she said, not looking at me.

“Thank you just the same,” I replied before digging into the soup. My stomach had set to rumbling at the smell alone and I couldn’t smother the moan of pleasure as I tasted the warm concoction. I couldn’t even remember the last time I ate. The night before, I thought. I’d gone to dinner with friends and we’d over indulged in good wine. I barely remembered what it was we ate but I could hazard a guess that it tasted nothing like this. “Delicious,” I murmured.

“I’ll let Cookie know you approve,” she said.

“The woman is a master.”

We slurped our soup in silence with the fire crackling heartily in the hearth while the storm raged outside. It was an intimate setting. The darkness that had fallen was only held back by the light of the fire and the room was warm and cozy from the same. The chill that had invaded my bones had finally thawed and my stomach was full with a bowl of thick, delicious soup.

I couldn't remember the last time I felt so utterly satisfied.

CHAPTER 7



Leonardo

It may have been the intimacy that comes from being stranded in a storm with no electricity and nothing to do but converse, or the surprisingly good red wine that we sat sipping in the parlour by the fire, but for some reason I found myself talking to Lady Georgina about the opportunity I had to invest in Alberto's app development.

"I'm sorry," she said, shifting in her seat. She was perched in a wingback chair with her legs tucked under her and she was the most relaxed I'd seen her since we met. "But the app does what?"

I explained it again. "It rates your ex and allows other people to rate them too."

"And you think this is a good idea?"

"Well, no. I think it's an awful idea."

"What?"

"It's a gross invasion of privacy and there are only bad things that can come from it. It will more than likely get banned before it even sells enough to make back the production costs."

She took a breath and then sipped her wine, her eyes not leaving mine. "Okay," she said, seemingly searching for the words. "Then I need to ask the

obvious. Why? Why would you put your name and money behind something like that?"

I shrugged. She wouldn't understand. I knew that. Even if I were to explain it in some way that she could comprehend it, she couldn't really understand my underlying motivations. I barely understood them myself.

"It's about being known," I finally admitted, somewhat sheepishly.

"Explain."

I sipped my wine and then looked into the glass as the fire made the deep claret colour shine. "I come from a family who are well-known collectively." I had yet to explain to her who my family were. It was something I wasn't sure I wanted her to know because it could only make my own behaviour seem infinitely worse. "One of my brothers has made a name for himself outside the family, but the other two are content to stand behind the company brand. I want to be like my other brother. I want to stand out and be known for something other than what my family has built."

"Notoriety," she said, her mouth twisting with distaste as the word crossed her lips.

"Yes, I suppose. It's more that I want to be...remembered."

"And this is something that you want to be remembered for?"

"No, but this will get my name on the lips of people and open up opportunities that can lead to other, more lucrative deals."

"You are going to lose a lot of money," she said, swirling the wine in her glass.

"Money really doesn't mean anything to me."

"Because you have it," she said, lifting her eyes to his. The ice cold blue of earlier in the evening had warmed, but I could see the frost coming back.

"To be honest, never having been without it, I'm not entirely sure that you're incorrect. What I do know is that regardless of the money I have or the money I stand to make, it is not what motivates me. I need more than just cash in the bank."

“I find it ironic that the more money someone has the less value it has,” Lady Georgina mused.

“I’ve never really thought about it,” I replied.

“Because you’ve never had to experience a life without it. Here you are, prepared to drop several million dollars on an app that is going to not only flop but also tarnish your reputation and yet your only concern is whether or not you’ll get some mention in the press because of it.”

“All publicity is good publicity,” I replied.

“I don’t agree,” she said. “Good publicity has a far higher value and can open many more doors than bad publicity. Imagine what you could do with the money you are essentially throwing away. You may as well pile it on the fire and watch it burn for all the good it will do you. Wouldn’t you rather invest in something worthwhile than an app that will serve only to titillate the scorned? You know your face will probably end up on there.”

The corner of my mouth lifted in a rueful smile. “I had thought of that, yes.”

She shook her head and rolled her eyes. “I get that you want to create a lasting legacy but wouldn’t you rather be remembered for something that changed lives rather than for something that ruined them?”

“To be honest,” I said, quietly, “I just want to be remembered.” I shook myself out of my melancholy and smirked at her. “There are far worse apps out there than what I’m looking at. There is a myriad of incredibly useless products out there that people have invested time and money in. I won’t be the first, or the last, to invest in something that goes nowhere.”

“That may be,” she said. “But I find it unconscionably irresponsible just the same. You have enough money to change an entire community and you’re just throwing it away. I don’t understand it. I don’t understand how you can’t accept how foolish it is.”

“I fully accept how foolish it is,” I said. “I am also aware of the wastefulness of such an investment, but the money is going to others. People

will get paid. Breadwinners will be able to buy food and pay their rent and utilities. I could leave it in the bank and just collect the interest, would that make you feel better?"

"Of course not," she said. "But if you are going to employ these people and pay them good money, why not task them with creating an app that might actually benefit humanity rather than feed the narcissistic tendencies of our current society?"

"And where would be the fun in that?" I asked, more so to rile her up than to really disagree with her. She had a point, but I was already set on this course and I couldn't see a way out of it.

Georgina

I TOOK A DEEP BREATH TO CALM MYSELF BEFORE LAUNCHING INTO A FULL-ON lecture about the responsibilities of the one percent who held ninety percent of the world's wealth. It was not my responsibility to police the spending habits of the wealthy, as much as I wanted it to be. And by the look in his eye, Mr. Ricci was goading me on purpose.

"I just think you would be better off doing some more research into this app and the people you are investing in before handing over the cash. Do you know anything about the development team? How can you be sure they haven't targeted you because they know you're a soft touch? They could just be setting you up in order to fleece you. They'll string you along for a while, telling you the app is behind schedule and they need more money to get it completed and then they'll abscond with the cash and leave you holding nothing but a whole lot of bad debts and broken promises."

"Wow. You've really thought about this," he said.

"Sorry," I replied, dropping my head to avoid his far too perceptive eyes. I closed my eyes and took a breath. "It's not my place to criticise what you

choose to do with your money.”

“That sounded more like you’ve had some personal experience than just worrying about how I spend my money,” he said.

Damn. I had revealed too much with my stupid soapbox preaching.

“I studied law,” I said, giving him part of the truth. “I did some work in an office that provided pro-bono services for people who had been cheated out of their life savings. It always started with an offer that was too good to be refused. These people thought they were going to be the next Bill Gates and instead ended up losing everything.”

He watched me steadily, his long fingers cupping the bowl of his glass, gently swirling the wine. Even in Will’s old farm clothes, he had a presence about him that screamed wealth and privilege.

“You don’t think I should trust my friends?” he asked.

“No, that’s not what I meant.” I waved my hand in front of me as if to dismiss the entire conversation. “You’re not asking for my advice and you don’t need to hear my personal feelings on the matter.”

“No, I want to know what you think.”

I raised an eyebrow at him.

“Really,” he said. “I want to hear what you have to say.”

I huffed out a breath. “Fine,” I said, “but don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

He smiled and sipped his wine. I took a sip from my own glass to formulate my arguments. I had to admit I was enjoying myself even if we were disagreeing. There was something stimulating about a good debate and it had been far too long since I’d had an opportunity to indulge.

“Forgive me for saying this, but you seem like a man who accepts friends easily and readily,” I said.

“And that is something to be sorry about?”

“No, of course not, but with your obvious wealth, how do you know how genuine those connections are? My concern is that people see you as an easy mark. You have wealth and a name known to the media. Someone with

nefarious purposes could take advantage of you.”

“You’re worried about me,” he said, a grin splitting his face.

I felt my cheeks redden and looked away from his smiling face. “That’s not what I’m saying.”

“Yes it is,” he said gleefully. “You like me, Lady Georgina. Admit it.”

I rolled my eyes and shook my head but I couldn’t help the smile that tugged at the corner of my lips. “You may not be as entirely distasteful as I first assumed,” I said.

“High praise,” he laughed.

“Regardless,” I said, trying to get the conversation back on track. “This Alberto character. How long have you known him?”

Leonardo—*Mr. Ricci*—shrugged. “A few months. We were introduced through mutual acquaintances.”

“Do you know anything about him? Anything at all?”

“Only that other friends have vouched for him.”

“Business friends or party friends?”

“I don’t have business friends,” he replied. It seemed to me that there was a touch of sadness in his voice when he said it.

“And have you spoken to your family about your plan? Surely you would want to run it by them and their legal team before just handing over wads of cash?”

“My family don’t really put much stock in anything I do or say,” he said with a resigned sigh.

“I don’t believe that,” I said quietly. I could understand his family being frustrated with him but I couldn’t imagine them not taking an interest in his financial dealings and any investments he was interested in.

“Believe it,” he murmured, and I wondered at him and the relationship he had with his family. He seemed too affable to have come from a neglectful, disinterested family. I had my own issues with losing my mother so young and my father’s retreat from reality into the bottle, but even so my heart

softened toward him just a little. He looked sort of like a lost little boy as he sat there thinking about his family. “Besides,” he said, shaking himself out of wherever he had withdrawn to. “I don’t have time to research the developer. I need to make a decision by the new year.”

“That’s nearly two weeks away,” I said. “That’s plenty of time.”

He shrugged and finished his wine. “Enough about me. I want to know more about Lady Georgina Darkly, Duchess of Pemberton and her dairy, and her cow, Clarabelle.”

I didn’t speak straight away. I knew he was dodging any further discussion about his family and the business idea. I wasn’t sure if jeopardising the truce we’d arrived as was worth pursuing it. He stood and I couldn’t help the way my eyes raked over his tall body.

“More wine?” he asked, crossing to the sideboard and lifting the bottle.

“Please,” I replied, lifting my glass.

CHAPTER 8



Georgina

The fire burned low, the storm was quiet, and the wine was just about gone. A day that had begun badly and progressively gotten worse was softened by firelight, good wine, and surprisingly entertaining conversation. I'd written Leonardo off because of the poor first impression he made, but he redeemed himself as the evening progressed. Not entirely, he was still hell-bent on investing in that stupid app his so-called friend was pitching him, but I didn't think he was so much a waste of oxygen as a little misguided and a lot lonely. For someone with a large entourage—from what he'd told me—the man didn't have one close friend among them.

I took a breath and sorted my thoughts before answering his earlier question. "I was engaged once," I said, staring into my glass. I don't think I'd ever told anyone the full story from go-to-woe before. "It wasn't official, but we had an understanding."

"What happened?" His voice was quiet, like he didn't want to break the sombre mood by speaking too loudly.

"He died," I replied, smiling sadly as I remembered Jacob's smiling face.

"Dio," he whispered. "I'm sorry."

I shrugged, trying to downplay it even though it still felt like a stab to the

heart thinking about what I'd lost. "It's been a couple of years now."

"Still..."

"Yeah," I replied on an exhale. I shook myself. "Anyway, I was away at university at the time, studying law. I was going into final exams when I found out."

He swore softly.

"It took me a while to find my feet, but I went back, finished what I started and graduated with a shiny diploma and no job or future. I came home to lick my wounds."

He huffed out a breath and I wondered what he was thinking. He didn't seem like the type to care about education or job prospects.

"And now you're a duchess and in charge of a duchy and running a farm and cheese factory."

"Pemberton Dairies," I said with pride. "Best brie in Europe according to the awards we've won. Sole *fromage* supplier to *Château de Conte de Fées*. I believe the queen has a particular soft spot for us." I smiled at the thought of Alyssa's almost obsession with not just the brie but the man who had created it.

Leonardo nodded. "I believe I have enjoyed your brie a time or two. I had no idea when I stumbled down your driveway that you were responsible for it."

"My brother started the dairy and the cheese factory. Our father..." I sighed and closed my eyes for a moment. "Our father wasn't very good with money and he trusted the wrong people and we ended up losing just about everything. Will saved us with his crazy breeding program and ambitious plans."

"So what happened to Will? Why are you here running the place instead of pursuing a career in law?"

"Will fell in love."

Leonardo shifted in his seat, leaning forward and resting his elbows on

his thighs, holding his wine glass casually in his hand between his knees. “He fell in love and abandoned you?”

I smiled. “No, nothing like that. He fell in love and got married but he couldn’t have both—the estate and the love of his life. He chose love and transferred his title and business and the estate to me.”

“I don’t understand,” Leonardo said, leaning back in his chair. I could see the confusion on his face and his dark brows pinched together and his thoughts went inward. “His bride is allergic to cheese?”

I laughed. It bubbled out of me like champagne when the cork is popped. It was ridiculous to imagine Alyssa having to give up her beloved cheese, although I knew with her present condition, brie was off the table.

“No,” I said, when I could control myself. “Hardly. My sister-in-law has a deep and abiding affection for cheese. I think it’s the reason that she fell for Will in the first place.”

“Then why?”

I waved the comment away. I didn’t want to get into the whole ‘my brother married the queen’ thing, not that I begrudged him his happily-ever-after. I loved Alyssa and I loved what she did for Will. Before the two of them fell in love, my brother was a somewhat surly individual who was far too serious and subdued. Alyssa brought light and colour and fun into his life and I would forever be in her debt for that.

“It’s complicated but suffice it to say, I am here because my brother chose love over everything.”

“Do you resent that?” he asked. “You didn’t ask for this, you told me that earlier. If you had to choose, this isn’t the life you would want.”

I was surprised he remembered what I’d said earlier in the heat of the moment. “It’s not a bad life,” I said, realising the truth of the words as I spoke them. “No, I didn’t choose it, but I actually like it. This is my little kingdom and I get to make a difference in my corner of the world. I also have a voice in parliament, which was denied women before our new monarch was

coronated. I get so busy sometimes that I forget to appreciate what I have.”

We were quiet as the words hung between us. I had been so focussed on my plans and my determination not to let Will down that I forgot what an exciting opportunity I had. And I did enjoy it—the challenge, the victories, and even the failures. Failure was never fun but it meant I was moving forward and with every failure came an opportunity to learn and to do better next time.

Wow. Look at that. Maybe I was finally growing up and getting ahold of this adulting thing after all. Most of the time I felt like I was fumbling around in the dark waiting for someone to come along and take everything from me because I was making such a mess of it.

Leonardo

SHE INTRIGUED ME AND I COULD HONESTLY SAY I’D NEVER MET ANYONE ELSE who did that. This delicate creature with her elfin features and long blonde hair should be surrounded by flowers and lace and, *Dio*, I didn’t know what else, but here she was running a farm and a business and she liked it. I couldn’t understand it but that didn’t diminish the admiration I had for her.

“Okay, I have to ask,” I said, sitting my empty wine glass aside and leaning forward. “You run a dairy and produce cheese—”

“We also supply milk and cream to Ashby Chocolates.”

I raised my eyebrows at that little tidbit. Ashby Chocolates were my mother’s favourites.

“And milk and cream for Ashby Chocolates,” I continued. “So what are the sheep for?”

Her cheeks bloomed pink and she lowered her head. “Um...weed control?”

“What?” I asked, laughing at her explanation. “You have cows that must

keep your pastures fairly well under control. From what I can see you have no need of sheep, unless you are planning on also producing wool.”

She sighed and rolled her eyes. “Sheep are good for more than just wool,” she said.

“Yes. They are quite tasty too, but you are avoiding the question. I can’t see you raising a herd just for their meat. What are the sheep for, Lady Georgina?”

“Georgie,” she said.

“What?”

She smiled shyly. “I think we’re acquainted enough by now that we can drop the titles, Mr. Ricci. You may call me Georgie, all my friends do.”

“You consider me a friend?” I asked, honestly astonished by her candour.

“We’ve spent the better part of the day and night in each other’s presence and I no longer have the desire to stab you with something sharp. I can confidently say that we have moved past brief acquaintances and onto new friends.”

“Then I must insist you call me Leo,” I replied.

She nodded and gave me a small, embarrassed smile. “Leo.”

I exhaled slowly. I liked hearing my name on her lips but I could also recognise avoidance when I saw it. She had derailed my line of questioning because she was hiding something about those sheep. I was an expert at the tactic myself and I was determined to pry that secret out of her.

“Georgie,” I said, tasting her name on my tongue and liking the familiarity of the nickname. “Spill the beans about those sheep. You have piqued my interest by your not-so-subtle attempts at avoidance.”

“Fine,” she replied with a dramatic, put-upon acquiescence. “I’m attempting to produce a type of *Roquefort*.”

“*Roquefort*?” I asked, unsure of exactly what the cheese had to do with the sheep.

“It’s cheese—”

“Yes, I am aware,” I said.

She glared at me playfully. “It’s cheese made from sheep milk. Of course I can’t call it *Roquefort* because it will be produced here in Merveille, but I am styling it after the French *fromage*.”

“You can milk sheep?”

She laughed and the sound danced across my skin setting the nerves alight. The smile that broke across her face and brightened her eyes took my breath away.

“You can milk sheep,” she replied, her smile still playing around the corners of her lips. “At the moment we have to do it by hand because it is not financially viable enough to buy the milking equipment we need to go into full production. I’m still playing with the recipe and haven’t yet hit on one that I’m committed to.”

I didn’t believe her. I didn’t know why, but I believed she was lying about that last bit. She did indeed have that recipe nailed down—or so I thought—but there was something holding her back from committing to full production.

“You’re lying,” I said just to watch her squirm. The easy truce we’d brokered was nice but there was something about the way she got riled up that I liked more. I had developed an unavoidable obsession with sparring with her.

“What?”

Indignation, narrowed eyes and that delicious pink tinge in her cheeks. Yep, I couldn’t deny I liked seeing her that way. Her clear blue eyes sparked with something more than the firelight reflected in them and burned into me, igniting something within me I hadn’t even realised was there. So much of my life happened on the surface. No one around me was willing to dig too deep beyond the façade I showed the world and that level of introspection scared the living daylights out of me. But this spark, the hitch in my breath and the slow burn that the woman in front of me ignited? That came from

depths I didn't know I had.

"You're calling me a liar?"

"Isn't that what I said?"

"You don't believe I'm milking my sheep?"

"Oh, I believe that part," I said, a smug smile on my face. "I also believe you're developing a blue cheese using that sheep milk. What I think you're lying about is the fact you haven't hit on the right recipe." I pointed a finger at her like a gun and pulled the trigger. "That's what you're lying about."

Her mouth gaped and her eyes widened. I knew I was a superficial person. I knew people didn't think I was very intelligent or observant, but they were wrong. I could read body language like the best of them—I studied it to make me a better poker player—and I knew when someone was lying or withholding something from me. Usually I kept my observations to myself. I liked people to underestimate me, but there was a weird satisfaction for finally getting one up on Georgie.

"I didn't think you could surprise me, Leo," she said, finding her voice and smiling at me. It was a better victory than causing her to be speechless. She blew out a breath. "You're right. I do have my recipe finalised and I have the first commercial wheels ageing as we speak."

"So what's holding you back?"

"You don't want to talk about this," she said, avoiding the question.

"I do," I replied, honestly. "I'm interested. You seem so fearless about everything else, I want to know why you're hesitating over this."

"It's complicated—"

"I'm not the air-headed idiot you seem to think I am. I actually have a bit of smarts when it comes to business—unavoidable inherited trait—so maybe I can help."

She searched my eyes before speaking. "I told you my brother built this business from scratch, right?"

I nodded.

“Well, this is the first major change I’ve attempted. I haven’t told him yet and I’m not sure how he’s going to take it.”

I frowned. “You don’t think he will like your plans for expansion?”

“No, that’s not it. I’m not confident that it will actually be a success. I don’t want to commit to something that is going to flop and ruin the reputation Will built for quality.”

“Talk to him,” I said. “Tell him how you feel. He might surprise you with what he says.”

CHAPTER 9



Georgina

I hadn't meant to reveal so much about myself to Leo, but there was just something about the night that made it easy to talk to him. Or maybe it was just him. I would never have guessed that I would spend the night spilling my guts to him in the late hours over wine.

I knew I needed to speak to Will, and I had been avoiding it. The last thing I wanted was for him to be disappointed in me. He'd handed over his business with barely a backward glance and he trusted that I would continue to grow it. The problem was my big brother was one of those guys who had the Midas touch. He was able to turn trash into treasure and I wasn't confident in my own ability to do so. Not to mention the money I needed to make the final transition from research to full production. The estate and the business simply did not have the cashflow required for me to do what needed to be done. I needed an investor and I'd be damned if I was going to tell Leo that little tidbit.

"It's late," I said. "We should sleep."

Leo looked around the room as if only just seeing it for the first time. "Are we sleeping here?" he asked.

I shrugged. "Easier to bed down here than to try and warm the upper

rooms. It's a big, old, drafty house. We would probably freeze before we could get the bedrooms warm enough."

"O-kay..."

"Don't panic, I've got this. The couch should be long enough for you to sleep on and I'll just grab some blankets and pillows from upstairs. I'll sleep on the rug in front of the fire."

"You're going to sleep on the floor?" he asked, looking horrified at the thought.

"Not the first time and probably won't be the last."

I jumped up before he could argue any more with me and grabbed a flashlight. The house was black as pitch outside the parlour and I made my way carefully up the wide main stairs to the upper level. Stairs that were barely used anymore. *Maison de Pemberton* had been my home my entire life—apart from the few years I lived away for school—and one day I would restore it to its former glory, but I had other priorities first.

I gathered an armful of blankets and pillows and tramped back downstairs before the cold could seep into my bones. I stumbled back into the parlour to see that Leo had removed the cushions from the couch and the matching armchairs and made a mattress of sorts on the floor in front of the fire.

"What are you doing?"

"I can't in good conscience let you sleep on the hard floor," Leo replied, rubbing the back of his neck as he looked down at the bed he'd created. "Plus, isn't body heat a good way to stave off hypothermia?"

"Body heat?" I asked, trying not to gulp.

He held his hands up to ward off an attack. "I don't mean like that," he said hurriedly. "I just mean it seems silly for me to sleep on the couch and you on the floor when we could pool our resources."

He was right. I could feel the cold settling into the room outside the relatively small reach of the fire. I would be close to the fire and Leo would be on the outskirts of the radiated warmth. The fire would die down overnight

and he would be the first to feel the cold. I swallowed and nodded.

“You’re right.”

We were two adults and there was no need to be so prudish about the situation. I may have had bad memories of a man who had tried to take advantage, but I trusted Leo, as strange as that sounded. I’d trusted Jordan too, but this was hardly the same situation. Besides, I refused to allow that incident to rule my life and I’d picked up a few self defence moves since then. Just let him try something.

“If it makes you feel better,” he said, reading my hesitancy, “I’ll wrap myself in a blanket like a burrito.”

I smiled, how could I not? “Don’t be ridiculous,” I said. “It’s fine.”

I spread a blanket over the cushions and handed him a pillow. Despite my protest, Leo did, indeed wrap himself up in a blanket like a burrito and then had to hop awkwardly across the floor and fall down onto the make-shift bed like a tree being felled.

“You’re an idiot,” I said with a shake of my head. He just grinned up at me in response.

Feeling completely out of my comfort zone, I lay down beside him—not close enough to touch— and tried to get comfortable. I was aware of his every move and could hear his every inhalation and exhalation. I could even feel the heat of his body against my back despite the physical distance between us.

“Good night, Leo,” I said, closing my eyes and willing myself to sleep.

“Good night, Duchess,” he replied softly.

Leonardo

I DIDN’T FALL ASLEEP QUICKLY. I LAY BESIDE THE ONLY WOMAN WHO HAD ever outright disagreed with me and argued to my face and was completely

besotted by her. It was a ridiculous, schoolboy crush and yet, there it was. She lay with her back to me, facing the fire and I lay facing her. My eyes traced the silhouette of her bundled under the blanket. I'd never met anyone quite like Lady Georgina. Admittedly, I didn't often mix with titled peers, but the crowd I ran with were almost Italy's equivalent. Sons and daughters of the wealthy afforded every privilege money could buy and yet none had as much depth and substance as the woman lying next to me.

My life had flashed before my eyes when I ran my car off the road, but even that glimpse of the inane and frivolous life I lived hadn't tempted me to something deeper. Less than twenty-four hours in the presence of Georgie and I was questioning my life choices. How was it possible that someone could affect me so profoundly when my parents had been trying to affect the same change in me for years?

Maybe I was particularly susceptible because of the accident. Or maybe it was the wine and the cocoon that we found ourselves in. There was nothing to compete with the words she spoke or to drag my attention away from my own introspection. I normally had sounds and sights warring for my attention, but being with Georgie in the quiet of her dilapidated mansion with nothing more than firelight and the sound of the storm outside had cracked something open inside me. I wasn't exactly pleased by it.

I built my life on the unstable foundation of being a loveable rogue. I knew if I looked too deeply at myself, I would find myself lacking, so I simply avoided it. I didn't let people get close even though my deepest desire was for someone to really understand me. I dared people to look past the flash and dazzle that defined my life and no one had ever bothered—not my parents or siblings or friends. No one until Georgie had bothered to push past the brash exterior and take a shot at my soft underbelly.

It both excited and terrified me with equal intensity. Here was a woman who expected an enormous amount from not only herself but also those around her and wasn't prepared to just let someone rest on their laurels. My

parents badgered me and sighed with disappointment but they had never actually challenged me to do better; to be a better person. Somehow, Georgie had. It was revelatory to see someone who was of similar age to myself with so much dedication and focus. My brothers didn't count. They were born with the self-determination and drive I was so disappointingly lacking.

The crowd I socialised with had little need to work. Trust fund babies with little more ambition than my own and the same self-destructive desire to be famous—infamous if possible. We saw ourselves as iconoclasts and yet we were little more than what Georgie had described me as being—spoiled brats.

More surprising than my apparent melancholia—an affliction I had never before succumbed to—was my desire for this sojourn to continue. I wasn't ready to go back into the real world where so little was expected of me. I had firmly established myself as the family disappointment and while I'd thought myself a rebel for my choices, I really didn't like the reality of it. I wasn't a rebel. I was needy and desperate for attention and the most effective way to garner that attention was by being contrary to what was expected of me. Negative attention was still attention after all and usually a lot quicker and easier to obtain.

Despite the ground shattering affect Georgie had on me, I wasn't ready to say goodbye to her. She pushed my buttons with a deftness that surprised me and yet I was not running in the opposite direction post-haste. Was it self-flagellation that had me wanting to spend more time with her? Was it my need to be punished for past sins that had me wishing that the storm that caused us to be stranded together would simply continue indefinitely?

Whatever the cause, I knew that I couldn't walk away from her without looking back. I didn't want to. Somehow, I needed to find a way to continue whatever had germinated between us. Her pretty face and sweet smile may have added a small incentive to the desire to see her again. I liked hearing her laugh and got the impression she didn't do so often.

We were a study in opposites. I laughed too often and tried not to take too many things seriously. Georgie didn't laugh nearly enough and took things more seriously than was warranted. She may be very good for me but it was not too arrogant for me to say that I would be just as good for her. We balanced each other out and the more time we could spend together would only prove beneficial to us both. Opposites, perhaps, but the wood didn't become smooth without the rasping of the sandpaper over it. Iron sharpened iron and all that. She needed her serious edges softened and perhaps I was willing to admit that I needed those rounded corners of mine sharpened into something more serious.

I grinned. Who would have believed that a cow called Clarabelle would set such deep thoughts in motion? Maybe there was something special about that cow just as Georgie had said.

CHAPTER 10



Georgina

I woke slowly. I was warm and comfortable and could honestly say that I'd had the best sleep since I didn't know when. It was then that I realised I wasn't in my room...and I wasn't alone. I stilled but that was my only immediate response. There was a very warm, very firm body pressed against me, or rather, I was pressed against. Snuggled up against was probably the more appropriate description. The soft, steady thump of a heart beat was under my ear and the security of a heavy arm draped over me held me close.

Leo was still wrapped in his blanket burrito and his breath was deep and even as he slept. I tilted my head slightly and gazed at the rough whiskers over a strong jaw. Those dark eyes were closed and long, long lashes kissed the tops of his cheeks. His face was relaxed in sleep and the corners of his lips tipped up in the slightest of smiles. His hair was a little mussed from sleep but he was the best looking thing I'd seen first thing in the morning ever in my life.

The realisation of what I was feeling arced through me, followed almost instantly by a swamping wave of guilt. I'd given my heart to Jacob and he had taken it to the grave with him. There was no way this arrogant, spoiled, society brat could replace him. No one could replace him.

I exhaled slowly and rolled away from the human furnace that had kept me warm all night long. I gently extracted myself from the cozy bed we'd made, praying that I wouldn't wake him. I wasn't ready to have a polite or civil conversation with him, not when I'd woken up wrapped in his arms. I was still struggling with my own feelings on the matter, I couldn't deal with having a conversation about it with him.

I crept out of the parlour and into the dim hall. I leaned against the wall and closed my eyes, tipping my head back against the ageing wallpaper and breathing in the cold air. It helped to clear my head and my nose of the scent of him. There were things I needed to do. Coffee was first and then I had to check on the factory and the barn and then hook up the plow attachment to the ATV so I could plow around the house and surrounding buildings in order for my staff to get to work. But I couldn't do any of that until my heart returned to its normal pace and my mind was firmly on reality and not turned upside down by a fantasy that had no anchor in the real world.

Feeling steadier on my feet, I headed up the stairs and to my room. The water in the bucket I'd left to catch the leaks was frozen, which definitely meant the pipes would be frozen too. The heat that suffused my body when I woke was quickly leeching away the longer I spent in the cold room. I dressed quickly and warmly and hurried down the back stairs to the kitchen. There were still warm coals in the fireplace, so I stoked them and added a couple of extra logs, patting myself on the back for remembering to fill the kettle last night before retiring.

I pushed all thoughts of Leo to the back of my mind as I carried the heavy cast-iron kettle over to the fireplace and hung it on a hook to heat. The power still wasn't on, but I didn't think it would be long before it was restored. I stabbed a piece of bread with the long-handled toast fork and held it over the coals to toast. By the time the kettle boiled, I'd eaten two pieces of toast smothered in lashings of fresh butter. I filled a French press with coffee grounds and then hot water and let it brew before pouring it into a travel mug

and topping it with cream.

The normal, repetitive actions helped to keep me focussed on the day ahead and not wandering back to the night before. Taking my travel mug and dressed in my snow gear, I headed out into the still-dark morning. It was no longer snowing and the sky looked clear but I needed snow shoes to navigate the high drifts and get to the barn. The animals lifted their heads lazily, watching me as I stomped through the entrance. The generator had kept them warm and safe during the night and they probably had no idea what could have befallen them if it had failed. I fed them and then headed over to the dairy on the ATV with plow attached. It was slow going and cold work, but this was my life and I had no other choice.

Will had tried to convince me to employ a full-time onsite caretaker, but I refused. I liked my space. I liked my solitude. Or so I tried to convince myself. Will hadn't needed a caretaker and I was determined to not need one either. It was important to me to be seen as capable and competent even though some days I wanted to hide under the bed clothes and pretend I didn't have responsibilities and obligations. I would never admit it to anyone—especially the man I had woken up beside—but trying to be everything to everyone was hard. I had people watching me closely. There were people who were waiting gleefully for the day I failed and then there was the pressure of those who willed me to succeed. I knew how much my success meant to our small country and I felt the weight of those expectations keenly. Showing weakness—any weakness—was not an option. And those feelings I'd felt when I woke up in Leo's arms? Those were weaknesses I couldn't afford.

Leonardo

EXTREMELY LOUD AND COMPETING SOUNDS WOKE ME FROM MY RESTORATIVE

and immensely satisfying slumber. My phone was blowing up right beside my ear and there was a loud pounding coming from somewhere outside the room I was in.

“Georgie!” A bellow from outside had me sitting bolt upright and looking around trying to remember where I was and what had brought me here.

“Georgie,” I whispered to myself, a smile lifting my mouth and a warm feeling of...affection?...filled my chest. The feeling was short-lived, however, with the sound of a door banging open and several pairs of footsteps thundering down the hall.

I struggled to free myself from the prison of blankets I was wrapped up in and only barely got to my feet before the parlour door swung open and a large, fierce man filled the opening. He was pushed aside by another large man whose eyes swept the room before landing on me and narrowing.

“Who are you?” the second man asked as several more men entered to room and took up positions surrounding me, their hands clasped in front of them faux casually. I wasn’t fooled.

“Ah...Leonardo Ricci?” I replied not sure why I made it sound like a question.

“Sir, please,” the first man said, a note of exasperation in his voice. “Please let us handle this.”

“Benjamin—”

“No. Your wife would have me beheaded if I let you get yourself hurt or worse. We’ve got this. That’s what you pay us for.”

The man growled but stood down handing the interrogation over to the first man.

“Mr. Ricci,” the man—Benjamin—said. “Would you mind telling me just how you happen to be in the duchess’ residence?”

I ran a hand through my hair. “Ah—” my phone vibrated and let out a cacophony of bleeps. I quickly shoved it in my pocket. “My car.” I shook my head. “I had a car accident and Georgie—I mean Lady Georgina—rescued

me and then we got stranded.”

“And where is Lady Georgina now?” Benjamin asked as the other man continued to glare at me.

I looked around the room. “I have no idea,” I said.

We all heard the ATV at the same time.

“Oh for Hades’ sake,” the glaring man said, running his own hand through his hair and spinning to stalk out of the door.

“Um, who are you?” I asked.

Before he could answer my phone started ringing. Whoever had been trying to text me had given up on my failure to reply.

“You should answer that,” Benjamin said.

I pulled the phone from my pocket as Benjamin sent a telepathic glance to the other men surrounding me and left.

“Hello?” I said, lifting the phone to my ear.

“Leonardo? Where are you?”

I couldn’t tell if my mother was panicked or enraged. The volume and pitch of her voice hinted at being either or both. Probably both.

“*Mamma*,” I replied, trying not to notice how the men in the room were unabashedly eavesdropping. “I was in a car accident—”

“*Dio mio*. Are you alright?”

“I’m fine, but I was stranded in the storm with no cell service. The Duchess of Pemberton was kind enough to take me in for the night.”

“So you are actually in Merveille then? This isn’t some complicated scheme of yours and you have actually escaped to Milan instead?”

Whether she was making a joke or voicing a legitimate concern wasn’t clear by her tone. It was better for me to proceed with caution.

“Of course not, *mamma*. I promise you and *papà* that I would be there and I will be.”

“Today?” she asked.

“Weather permitting. I’m not sure of the state of my car but the duchess

did offer me a ride if my car is un-drivable.”

“Fine,” my mother replied. “I will be expecting you.”

She disconnected without saying goodbye. I gave a cursory glance at the text messages that filled the screen of my phone, but shoved it back in my pocket without reading any of them.

“So,” I said, looking at the guards tasked with watching me. “Is there somewhere I can get *caffè*?”

“It’s probably better that you stay right where you are for the moment,” one of them replied.

“Of course,” I said.

There was the sound of a slamming door and the raised voices could be heard from the foyer.

“Seriously Will?”

“Georgie, please understand. I was concerned about you. It was a bad storm.”

Okay, so that was Georgie’s brother, Will. I didn’t know who he was to have merited a squad of bodyguards but I could better understand his glare when he found me sleeping in Georgie’s parlour.

“And I had everything under control,” I heard Georgie reply.

“What about the stranger I found in the parlour? What were you thinking?”

“I was thinking that Leo would freeze if I left him out in the storm. I was thinking that that’s what a good human does!”

“Leo? You’re already on a nickname basis with him?”

“We spent the entire night together, Will,” she replied and the frustration was clear.

“You what!?”

“Don’t be an idiot! You are deliberately misunderstanding me. And of course we know each other’s names. I couldn’t very well spend the evening calling him Mr. Ricci, could I?”

Although I had noticed how hard she tried to keep the barriers of formality up between us. I couldn't stop the smug smile that tilted my lips because of my victory in getting her to call me Leo.

“So, what? Are the two of you BFFs now?”

“God, no. We're nothing. Less than nothing.”

Oh. Ouch.

“He's wearing my clothes and you spent the night together...”

“I would blame marriage on your decidedly dimwittedness except that I know you were this desperately dimwitted before marriage. It is a constant surprise to me why Alyssa married you. You're my brother and I love you, but come on. Even you know you're being ridiculous. Please tell him, Benjamin, how much of an idiot he is and then be sure to let Alyssa know she should also reinforce the fact. I hope to heaven that the two of you don't have a girl. The poor thing would be smothered with your overprotectiveness.” There was a brief pause and I imagined her closing her eyes to take a calming breath before she continued. “His clothes were wet, Will. I couldn't very well let him catch hypothermia and yes, he did spend the night because he couldn't go anywhere. We were snowed in!”

I smirked, happy to know that I was not the only one to be on the receiving end of Georgie's sharp tongue. I was still smarting after the 'less than nothing' comment but at least I wasn't the only one who got her up on her soapbox.

“What has happened to you?” Will asked, sounding completely bewildered. “Where is the sweet, compliant, gentle sister that I used to know?”

I snorted. Sweet? Compliant? Gentle? I would never have used those words to describe Lady Georgina.

“She grew up,” Georgie said. “Now do you want coffee? I'm sure Leo does. How about you, Benjamin? Did he at least let you have coffee before he dragged you and how many other royal guards over here with him?”

Royal guards? I looked at the contingent of guards around me and swallowed. Okay then. Will was someone more important than I originally thought.

“Coffee sounds wonderful,” I heard Benjamin say.

CHAPTER 11



Georgina

I was not prepared to go to battle with Will, not this morning. Not after waking up so confused and discombobulated. I pushed the parlour doors open and stopped, taking in the scene. Benjamin had installed guards around Leo and he stood there, delightfully ruffled from sleep, his hair smushed to one side and his carefully groomed five o'clock shadow just a little bit more beard than scruff. Something rolled over in my stomach like a whole kindle of kittens playing roly-poly inside me.

Gah! I was not supposed to feel this way about him. I didn't even like the guy. I didn't like his attitude and his flashy show of wealth and the easy way he carried himself like he didn't have a care in the world. I didn't like the effortless way he was just so blasted confident in himself.

"Coffee?" I asked, not liking the way my voice was raspy.

"Yes, please," he replied, giving me a small smile.

I turned and marched out of the parlour toward the kitchen knowing that they all followed me like some rabble of soldiers guarding a prisoner of war. I felt sorry for Leo. It was unfair to be interrogated by a prince and his security detail first thing in the morning without even a hint of coffee.

"How did the factory hold up?" Will asked and I took it for the olive

branch it was.

“Fine. The generator came on, so no issues with the milk tanks or the refrigeration—although we hardly needed refrigeration last night. I’d say the temperature was actually warmer in the cold room than outside.”

“And the barn? The cows?”

“The barn was fine. Clarabelle got out again which is why Mr. Ricci is in his current predicament.”

I noticed Leo grimace slightly as I said his name. It was a protection—me using his formal address—for both of us. I did not want Will to pounce on poor Leo just because I uttered the man’s actual name. Or maybe he was simply grimacing after remembering the condition of his car.

“Was she hurt?” Will asked, turning to glare at Leo.

“No,” I snapped before Leo could answer.

I turned my back on all of them as I prepared coffee. Thankfully I had a large French press, although it wouldn’t be big enough for everyone currently squeezed in my kitchen. Benjamin, Will and Leo would get coffee, the other goons—I mean, guards—wouldn’t. Not that they would accept it anyway, not while they were on duty.

“So what brings you to Merveille, Mr. Ricci?” Benjamin asked, breaking the tense silence.

“My family,” Leo replied. “We’re spending the week here for Christmas.”

There was an awkward silence while I poured coffee into mugs and handed them out.

“Sorry guys, none for you,” I said to the guards standing nearby. They had ranged themselves in such a way so that if Leo tried to get to Will, they could restrain him. I doubted Leo was any threat to my brother, but they were ever vigilant.

Carlos gave me a small smile of acknowledgement. He’d been part of Jacob’s guard and was there when Jacob died. He’d gone through a bad

season because of his failure to protect the future king, but no one blamed him for what happened. That blame fell squarely at the feet of Jordan Wicks, who was currently rotting in a jail cell.

Leo groaned softly and I shot a look at him. His head was tipped back and his eyes were closed as he sipped the coffee in his hands. Will shot lasers at him with a narrowed, angry gaze and I couldn't hide my smile.

“Really good *caffè*,” Leo said eventually.

“So when are you leaving?” Will asked. “Surely your family are worried about where you are?”

“They are. My *mamma* just called to check on me,” Leo smirked. “I have no idea the condition of my car or how I will get to the estate where my family are staying. Lady Georgina offered to—”

“Benjamin can take you,” Will said, cutting him off.

“We should probably let Mr. Ricci check on his car,” I said, shooting Will a speaking glance.

“I have already organised someone to look into it,” Benjamin said. “They will check for damage and deliver it to Mr. Ricci.”

“Excellent,” Will said. “We'll cover any costs of repair since it was Clarabelle that caused the accident.”

“Now hang on—” I began. I had no intention of paying for the repairs to Leo's flashy, expensive, Italian car.

“I will cover the cost,” Will said, shooting me a look that had me shutting my mouth with a snap. We would have words, brother dearest and I, but not in front of all these witnesses.

“That's not necessary,” Leo said. “I don't hold any ill feelings toward Clarabelle and Lady Georgina has done more than enough to make up for the inconvenience.”

Will growled and I covered my face with my hand. Leo needed to shut up before Will lost his damn mind. Seriously. My brother was liable to take those words and twist them in his head to come up with entirely the wrong

idea.

Thankfully at that moment the power came back on and the sound of my refrigerator rumbling to life and the loud beep of the microwave stopped Will from doing or saying anything that would cause me to disown him. I knew he was super sensitive about me after what had happened with Jordan, but he needed to stop holding on to me so tight. I was an adult and I knew how to look after myself. I was not the naïve teenager that had fallen for Jordan's charm.

"Time to go," Will said. "I'm sure Lady Georgina has tasks she needs to attend to."

I did. Now that the power was back on, I had to go back over to the barn and the factory to make sure everything shifted over from the generator and back to the mains. I also had to finish plowing the driveway and walkways so factory and dairy workers could get to work. That didn't mean I needed Will to point it out.

"Your clothes should be dry," I said, turning to Leo and smiling. "Why don't you go up and change?"

Leonardo

I RETREATED TO THE UPSTAIRS BEDROOM WHERE I CHANGED THE NIGHT before. My clothes were warm from being in front of the fire and as I slipped them back on, the fit felt different. Probably something to do with the dry-clean only instructions. Surely getting drenched by snow and then heated in front of a fire wasn't the best thing for fabric of this quality.

Still, they didn't feel like my clothes or that I fit the clothes anymore. It was weird. An odd reaction to have considering I'd spent the night in someone else's jeans and Henley. Anybody would think that I would be more than keen to get back into my bespoke clothes and get back to my charmed

life.

I stepped toward the door and then turned to see the pile of clothes I'd left on the floor. After a slight hesitation—which I'm not proud of—I turned and picked them up, bundling them under my arm and taking them with me as I descended the stairs back to the kitchen and the tension that was waiting for me. There were major undercurrents of friction between Georgie and her brother. He was the over-protective type, from what I'd gathered in our short acquaintance, and Georgie did not seem like the type to put up with it.

"I'll take those," Georgie said, reaching for the clothes under my arms.

"No need," I replied with an easy smile. "I'll have them cleaned and returned to you."

"You don't have to—"

"I insist," I said softly.

Our gazes caught—the first time since the night before—and she nodded once in acquiesce. It felt like a victory.

"Time to go," Will said, the words being forced out through gritted teeth.

I took Georgie's hand in mine and lifted it to my lips. I brushed the back of her hand with a kiss, not expecting to feel the jolt of electricity that zinged through me. She felt it too. I could tell by the way she stiffened suddenly and then snatched her hand away.

"Thank you for your kind hospitality," I said. "I am indebted to you for saving my life."

"Stop being ridiculous," she replied, her fair cheeks blooming fairy floss pink. "I only did what anyone else would have done. There is no need to make a big fuss."

"You underestimate yourself," I said, "and the impact you have had on me. I hope to see you again, even if it is just to thank you."

"I—"

A hand clamped down on my shoulder and I was unceremoniously pulled away from Georgie. Whatever she was going to say died on her lips and her

eyes pinched dangerously as she looked at the man who held me.

“Will,” she began, her voice a low growl.

“I’m sure Mr. Ricci is eager to be reunited with his family. They must be concerned about his well-being,” Georgie’s brother said.

I was manhandled out the kitchen door and down the hall to the front door. I could hear Georgie’s booted footsteps following us. It seemed prudent not to struggle against Will; the guards he had with him looked like they were prepared to take whatever measures were necessary to aid the man in his endeavours. I did not need a black eye for my trouble and I could really do without bruised ribs when I met with my family. I’d suffered both once before in my life and I’d no desire to go through the pain again.

One of the helpful guards opened the door and I was deposited on the doorstep outside the warm house. The air was clear and the sky a brilliant blue. It had stopped snowing but the landscape around me was frozen and coated with a thick layer of the evidence of last night’s storm. I could see the ATV parked haphazardly across the front steps with a plow attached to the front of it. I was momentarily stunned by the thought that Georgie was plowing her own driveway. Beside the ATV were two large SUV vehicles with snow chains. My transport, I assumed.

When I was finally released from the tight hold Will had on me, I straightened my cuffs and plastered my society smile on my face. I turned to Georgie and bowed.

“Thank you, once again,” I said.

“It was lovely to meet you Mr. Ricci,” Georgie said and beamed at me. I knew it was a calculated move to annoy her brother, but I smiled back just the same. However badly things had gone this morning, last night Lady Georgina and I had come to a tentative truce. I liked her and I wanted to see her again. But I would not make the mistake again of voicing my desire. I think Will had reached the very limits of his gentlemanly behaviour and I was not going to push him any further.

“Come on,” Will said.

“Sir,” Benjamin with a shake of his head. Will rolled his eyes.

“Fine,” he replied.

Benjamin turned to me. “Carlos will take you wherever you want to go.”

The large man beside me gave me a sharp nod and then stepped over to one of the cars and opened the rear door for me.

With one last look over my shoulder at Georgie, I climbed into the car. The door slammed shut, sealing me inside. Georgie looked at me through the windows, although I knew she couldn't see me through the tinted glass. I really was not ready to say goodbye to her and I liked to think she wasn't ready to say goodbye to me. Nothing had happened between us except a conversation and yet she held my interest more than anyone else had previously. I wanted to know more about her. I wanted to know all about her plans for the dairy and the cheese factory. I wanted to taste her sheep cheese and see her expand the line into commercial production.

I shook my head and leaned back against the seat as the car moved away from the house. What was wrong with me? Leonardo Ricci did not feel attached to anyone, least of all a woman he had spent such little time with. And yet...that was exactly what I was feeling.

CHAPTER 12



Georgina

The car drove away and I held in the sigh I wanted to expel. Any outward indication that Leo was more to me than just a rescued stranger and Will would be all over me. I couldn't blame him, not really, not with the incidents in the past, but it didn't make it any easier to accept. I wasn't the same girl I was back then and I wish Will would finally recognise that. I just wanted him to see me as the woman I had grown into and not constantly see me as the helpless victim.

“What do we know about Leonardo Ricci?” Will asked, speaking to Benjamin.

“Youngest son of the Ricci family, major stockholders and founders of *L'ingenuità Corporativa*.”

I raised my eyebrows at that. Even I'd heard of *L'ingenuità Corporativa*. Leo hadn't said anything about his family and his desire to fund his friend's app made more sense now. Just like me, he was trying to step out of the shadow of those who had gone before him. His motivation didn't make the app a better product though, and I really believed it would be a mistake for him to put his name and money behind it.

“Leonardo Ricci is more known for his unfortunate choices rather than

for his business acumen,” Benjamin continued.

Will turned to look at me, his brow furrowed. It was the ‘big brother’ look—and I meant that in every sense of the phrase.

I threw my hands up in defeat. “What? So he’s a party boy? Does that mean I should have left him to freeze to death in the storm? Seriously, Will, you need to stop. He’s gone. I won’t ever see him again. You have nothing to worry about.”

Will huffed out a breath and tipped his head back. “I just worry about you, Georgie,” he finally said, tilting his head back down to look at me. “I wish you would have someone stay here with you. Pemberton Dairies is doing well. You can afford to pay for an onsite caretaker.”

“I don’t want an onsite caretaker,” I replied for about the four millionth time. Besides, what Will didn’t know was that the money it would cost me to put someone onsite full-time was earmarked to pay for the upgrades to the dairy. I was yet to share my expansion plans with my brother and now was not the time to get into it, especially when he was so worked up about Leo.

“Anything could have happened to you last night,” Will said. “Won’t you at least let me assign a security detail to you?”

“Enough Will! Enough, okay? Nothing happened last night. I was fine. The farm was fine, the estate is fine. When are you just going to let me do this my way? I know I’m not you but I think I’m doing a pretty good job.”

Will pulled me into a hug. “You are. You’re doing a great job. I feel so guilty about dumping it all on you. I know it wasn’t your choice and this isn’t how you imagined your life going. I just want to make things easier for you.”

“But you’re not making things easier for me,” I said, pulling away. “You’re constantly looking over my shoulder and your attempts to ease your guilt make me feel inadequate. You need to let me go and let me handle this my way. You have far too much going on in your own life to be constantly checking up on me. You and Alyssa are the ruling monarchs of Merveille, not to mention my little niece or nephew Alyssa has got cooking. I’m fine. I’m

not the same helpless victim that Jordan took advantage of. Please understand. I'm grown. I've learned from my mistakes. This may not be what I imagined, but I think I've found my groove and I know I can do a good job here if you would only let me."

Will exhaled in a huff and dropped his head. I knew my brother loved me. I loved him too, more than anything in the world, but he had to accept that I'd grown up and he was no longer responsible for me.

"When did you go and get all mature?" he asked, looking at me with a small, affectionate smile.

"About the same time you were falling in love with the queen of our country." I returned his smile. I reached out and wrapped my hand around his wrist. "I've got this Will. I promise you, I've got this."

He searched my eyes and then nodded. "You do," he said. "But don't forget that I'm here if you need me. I'll always be here for you Georgie, don't ever forget it."

"I won't," I said, pressing up on my toes to place a soft kiss on his cheek.

Will hugged me tight and then reluctantly let me go. "Why don't you have dinner with Alyssa and me tonight—"

"Will," I said, rolling my eyes.

"I miss you. Is it a crime to want to spend some time with you?"

"You know how busy this time of year is. Besides, I have to finalise the products for the *Marché de Noel*."

"You're still having a stall at the markets?" he asked, surprised.

"Of course. Just because we happen to have some lucrative international deals doesn't mean I have forgotten where we came from. You know as well as I do how much people look forward to buying direct from us."

What he didn't know was that I would be using the annual artisan markets to test the new cheese and see if there were customers for it. The more interest I could gain the better it would be for me when I reached out to some investors.

“Promise me you will come and have dinner with us soon. Before Christmas.”

I sighed. I didn’t know how I would be able to swing it. Christmas was only a week away and there were several commitments I’d already made.

“Georgie,” Will said, a warning in his tone.

“Okay, fine. I’ll come to dinner tonight. But then you have to stop bugging me, okay?”

He dropped a kiss on my forehead and grinned. “Promise.”

Leonardo

“THERE HE IS,” MY MOTHER GREETED ME AS I WALKED INTO THE SITTING room. “*Il mio piccolo leone.*”

My mother sat with her secretary going over her calendar most likely. When she wasn’t working in the business with my father, she was chairing various committees and charities.

“*Mamma,*” I replied with a sigh. “Don’t you think I’m a little too old for you to call me that?”

“Come and give your *mamma* a kiss.”

I obeyed and bent to brush my lips on both of her cheeks. She patted me affectionately but already her eyes were going back to the calendar open on her tablet. “You’ll always be my little lion man, Leonardo,” she said, distractedly.

I walked over to the sideboard and poured myself *caffè* from the hot carafe. I turned and leaned against the bar watching her. At seventy-two my mother was still stunning. Her olive skin was smooth and plump, her lips full and her eyes bright. Dark hair with auburn highlights was pulled into a stylish chignon and she was dressed in her standard business chic, complete with stilettos. The press often compared her to Sophia Loren, which my mother

took graciously—as she did everything. I had seen photos of her as a young woman and I thought she was far more beautiful than the actress.

“What is it, Leo?” she asked, not looking up from her tablet. Reading glasses were perched delicately on her nose—her eyesight not as sharp as she would like—and her secretary sat in a chair by her side, making notes as instructed.

“I met someone—”

This statement caused my mother to raise her eyes at me and look at me over the tops of those glasses. Her face was carefully blank. My last girlfriend, for want of a better word, was a bit of a nightmare. I didn’t think my family had yet forgiven me for bringing her into our lives even though it was a couple of years ago now.

“Not like that,” I said, already heading off her arguments for why I shouldn’t get mixed up with a woman I had only just met.

Mother dismissed her secretary with a look and removed her glasses. “What is it like then?” she asked when we were alone.

I shrugged and crossed the room to sit in the seat vacated by the secretary. “She’s...intriguing,” I said, trying to distill everything I felt about Georgie into words. “She’s like no other woman my age I’ve met before. She actually reminds me a lot of you.” Mother’s eyebrows rose in surprise. “She is a duchess without a duke. Her brother entailed the title and the estate to her and she runs Pemberton Dairies. You’ve heard of them?”

“Of course,” Mother replied. “Their brie is a favourite of mine.”

I inclined my head in agreement. I smiled. “I don’t think she thought much of me.”

I didn’t bother expecting my mother to jump in and defend me. I knew I had disappointed her and my father both with my lackadaisical attitude toward the family business.

“She sounds like a very accomplished young woman.”

“She is. She studied law before taking over the estate. She’s smart and

hard working—”

“And beautiful,” my mother supplied for me.

I grinned. “Yes. And beautiful.”

We lapsed into silence. I didn’t know why I was saying these things to my mother. I didn’t know why she was interested in listening to me. This wasn’t a conversation we’d ever had before, that wasn’t the kind of relationship we had, but I just needed to say the words that had been circling my brain since the car drove away from Georgie.

“What is her name, this duchess?”

“Georgina. Lady Georgina Darkly, Duchess of Pemberton.” I couldn’t help smiling as I said her name. I was still a little awestruck by her. She put me to shame in so many ways and yet instead of feeling inept and maladroit, she inspired me to do better.

“And will you be seeing her again?” Mother asked.

I huffed out a breath. “I don’t know. I’d like to but...” I shrugged. “I don’t know if she wants to see me again. I’m afraid I didn’t make a very good impression on her.”

“Merveille is a small place, Calanais even more so. We are here for the week and if she lives and works here, your paths may cross again.”

I looked at my mother, my own eyebrows rising in surprise this time. “You want to meet her,” I said.

Mother shrugged. “You yourself said that she reminds you of me. I’d like to meet the young woman that can turn your head so.”

I stood and crossed back to the sideboard, putting my now cold coffee down. I felt like I was in some parallel universe where nothing made sense. I was having a real and honest conversation with my mother and neither one of us had regressed to shouted accusations or sullen silences. I was thinking about a woman who was not only beautiful but also challenged me in ways no one ever had. My clothes felt odd and uncomfortable, even though I’d changed out of the ruined clothes from the day before. If I didn’t know better,

I would have believed that spending the night at *Maison de Pemberton* had somehow transported me through some weird wormhole. Either that or I'd hit my head harder than I thought and I was in fact, still in my car, unconscious and near frozen to death. Nothing else made sense.

A commotion at the door heralded the arrival of my father and eldest brother, dispelling the private moment I'd managed to carve out with my mother. I plastered my fare-thee-well smile on my face.

"I promise to introduce her if we ever cross paths again," I said to my mother and then left the room before my father could start in on me. I was sure he had a litany of grievances that he would want to go over with me, but I was in no kind of headspace to deal effectively with him. I needed a quiet room and a good glass of cognac to get my head on straight and then I might have a snowball's chance in Hades of surviving the encounter with my father.

CHAPTER 13



Georgina

“Any damage?” Georgie asked.

“Everything looks to be in order Your Grace.”

I rolled my eyes. “Michael, you know you don’t have to call me that.” Michael was the foreman of the estate and he’d worked for Will for years. He knew the entire place like the back of his hand and he was the only one I trusted with my plans for expansion...except, curiously, now I also apparently trusted Leo since I’d spilled my guts to him the night before.

Michael didn’t reply to my often requested appeal to be on first name basis with each other. “I think we’re ready to crack open the first wheel,” he said instead.

“Really?” I knew it was close but I didn’t know we were this close.

He nodded and then grinned. We had an eight month and an eleven month cheese to taste to determine which one would go into production—ideally it would be both, but I wasn’t getting my hopes up. It was the moment of truth and I was nervous. One of the first things I’d done when I took over from Will was bring in the sheep. Michael had been interested enough in my proposal to help me without judgement or scurrying off to tattle to Will that I was ruining the reputation he’d built.

We hadn't just made those first two wheels of cheese and then left it at that. Cheese, like the *Roquefort* I wanted to produce, took a long time to mature. If we'd waited to find out that we had a marketable product on our hands before making any more of it then we would have to push back production another twelve months. When we'd settled on a recipe, we went ahead and made as much as we could to ensure we had a product to launch when the time came...and that time was apparently now.

I rubbed my hands together as I followed Michael into the ageing caves. They weren't really caves, but man made structures that simulate the environment of traditional cheese caves. There were different caves for different cheeses and if we went into full production on the sheep milk cheese, we would need to build a specific cave just for it. For now it was in a cordoned off area of one of the other caves.

We pulled on clean coveralls, hair nets, and booties. The caves were environmentally controlled—not just climatically—and it was important not to cross contaminate. Michael led the way to the back of the cave where we stored the sheep milk cheese and pulled out the corer. Of course we'd been testing the cheese throughout its ageing process, we'd be mad not to, but today we were testing for completion.

“Ready?” he asked.

I sucked in a breath and nodded.

Michael slid the corer into the wheel and pulled out a sample cross section. It looked good. The mould had bloomed and matured inside giving the cheese a blue-veined appearance. We each took a small piece and I rubbed it between my fingers testing the texture before putting it on my tongue.

A grin split my face, matching the one on Michael's.

“It's good,” he said.

I nodded. “It's great,” I replied.

Michael replaced the core and we moved onto the next one. This one was

less mature and a milder flavour but it was still good. We had a product to sell, now we just needed the finance to go into full production.

We left the cave and reconvened in the office we shared. Michael poured us both coffee and we sat at our respective desks.

“So,” he said.

“So.”

“*La Fête des Lumières* and *Marché de Noël*?”

“Yes,” I replied. The Festival of Lights kicked off the official start of Christmas in Merveille. The queen would light the massive tree that had been installed in the town square and everyone else would light up their own Christmas displays. It was also the first night of the Christmas markets that would run every evening for the next week leading up to Christmas Eve. We always had a market stall and I decided that would be the when and the where of unveiling the latest Pemberton Dairies product.

“What is the plan afterwards?” Michael asked.

“You really don’t think we can manage with what we’ve got?”

Michael huffed out a breath. “We could,” he said, “but it would cut into the production of everything else. We need a new cave, new milking equipment, more sheep—which means another barn and some fenced pens—, a new vat and press, and a couple more staff.”

“And that’s before we take into account all the marketing and advertising we need to do and the new packaging.” I tilted my chair back and stared at the ceiling. “Am I being silly to try and do this, Michael? I mean, sure, we’ve just spent twelve months developing the idea, but do you think it is worth pushing through to the next phase?”

Michael was quiet for so long that I didn’t think he was going to answer. I righted my chair and looked at him.

“I would never have begun this with you if I didn’t think it could be viable,” he said. “It is going to take money and hard work, but I have every confidence in you that we can get this done.”

“It’s a lot of money. I’m going to need an investor.”

Michael shrugged. “Your brother needed an investor too. It doesn’t make you any less of a business person reaching out to someone. This is a good direction for Pemberton Dairies.”

“Okay. So, an investor? Any ideas who might be interested?”

“Lord Bingham was one of your brother’s early investors. Maybe he would be interested in seeing the expansion of Pemberton?”

“The Duke of Monterey invested in Pemberton?”

Michael shook his head. “The younger Lord Bingham, Earl of Avonlea.”

“Freddie?” I smiled. “That might actually be doable,” I said. “He owes me a favour.”

“He does?”

“No, probably not, but I’m his best friend’s little sister. He has to owe me something.”

Leonardo

DINNER WAS A SOMBRE AFFAIR, OR SO IT SEEMED TO ME, BUT THEN I ALWAYS found family dinners sombre. Perhaps I was projecting, but I could swear the looks from my father and my eldest brother, Salvatore, were what funeral directors wore. They even had the matching black suits.

It wasn’t silent. The children—my nieces and nephews—were in attendance rather than being banished to the nursery. I was only twelve years older than my eldest nephew—closer in age to him than I was to his father, and yet he sat in judgement over me in a not dissimilar way to my own father and his. Young Raphael—his middle name because the eldest son of the eldest son was always named Salvatore and yet with two living Salvatore’s in residence it would be confusing to add a third—was a worldly sixteen and well on the way to becoming a clone of the Ricci line. He had the Ricci stare

down to an art form.

The girls—my nieces, not my brother’s wives—loved me. My sisters-in-law not so much. My youngest nephew seemed to have a little bit of hero worship for me as well, but I didn’t hold my breath that it would last. I’m sure these children heard enough of my alleged bad deeds and their parents’ opinions of those same that by the time they were adults themselves they would feel about me the way everyone else in the family felt—that I was a disgrace and a drain on resources.

Before I could escape from the interminable family dinner to my room so I could think more about my encounter with the lovely Georgie, I was summoned to join the men in the library. This did not bode well for my future, not that I expected to have my life cut tragically short—my family were not the mafia—but because I knew whatever they had to say to me would be overly flavoured with guilt and have a hefty side dish of familial obligation. I was already stuffed from the food eaten at dinner and didn’t think I could take another serving, but it was inevitable. Even dear nephew Raphael was invited in to the family meeting. I assumed my brother had already begun grooming him for the family business and this would be used as a lesson in two parts: a) don’t turn out like the loser uncle and b) this is how you deal with undesirables.

I didn’t know how I felt about being a cautionary tale. After spending time with Georgie I was less inclined to revel in it—which would have been my initial reaction. The woman was influencing me from a distance and it wasn’t entirely awful.

“Are you injured?” my father began.

“No,” I replied, helping myself to a healthy slug of cognac before taking my seat.

Salvatore Senior and Salvatore Junior—that’s my eldest brother, not his son—shared a look. My next eldest brother just drank from his glass and looked at me. The third brother had not yet graced us with his presence. He

was still on location filming and was expected to arrive tomorrow, if not, the day after. I sipped my cognac and waited.

“We have come to a decision,” my father finally said. “It is time for you to become a productive member of this family.”

I sighed. “Father, we have already been over this. You know I have no desire to join *L’Ingenuità Corporativa*. And none of you want me to either, not really.”

“That is not what we’re proposing,” my brother said.

I’d spent some time in the family business and everyone involved had hated the experience. I couldn’t really put my finger on why it had been so horrific; maybe it was the feeling of being yoked to the family and not living up to the expectation that weighed heavily on me. I had an interest in business, specifically investing in new business, but I found myself feeling constrained by the rules and regulations of the family corporation. Not everybody could provide all the data analysis and financial productions that *L’Ingenuità Corporativa* required to even be considered for investment. And there was the other little bugbear...we didn’t actually develop anything ourselves. We gave money and reaped profits without doing any actual manufacture and development. We expected those who came to us to handle all the heavy lifting while we just doled out the money and stood over their shoulders pointing out how they did it wrong. Pretty much how my family treated me.

“So what are you proposing?” I asked, the need to get this conversation over and done with as soon as practically possible forcing the words through my lips.

“An internship with a well-respected company here in Merveille.”

“A what?”

“Monticorp is one of the largest real estate corporations in the world. The current CEO is looking to diversify. He was previously the CEO of Avonlea before taking the position at Monticorp.” Salvatore—my brother—rattled off

the guy's resume like we were considering hiring him.

I knew of Monticorp and of Avonlea. As much as they liked to think I was ignorant of anything to do with business, I kept up to date with the movers and shakers. It was an incredible opportunity to work with Lord Frédéric Bingham, Earl of Avonlea, but I wasn't going to give in too easily. That was the first rule of negotiation and this was nothing if not a negotiation. They would respect me less if I gave in without a fight.

"You want me to work for the competitor?" I asked. "Without pay?"

Salvatore rolled his eyes and sat back. "It's not like you won't have an income," he said. "You will still get your allowance."

"Unless you decide not to take the position," my father said.

"What?"

He shrugged casually. "This is your wake-up call, Leonardo. Either you take this job with Monticorp and prove to us that you can actually contribute to this family and to society at large, or you are cut off."

"You can't do that—"

"Believe me, I can."

My father was playing hardball and I wanted to refuse just because it was an ultimatum, but something stopped me. The chance to work at Monticorp was really too good to pass up, even if it was under threat of banishment.

"My trust fund—"

"Will not last you more than six months with the way you spend," Salvatore replied.

He was right, especially if I chose to invest in Alberto's project.

"So I have no choice," I said, standing and draining my cognac. It was hard to force the anger. I wasn't feeling anger, I was actually feeling a spark of excitement at the prospect of working beside a man who I admired. Lord Frédéric had forged his own path and had made his own way in the world before coming back to Merveille to take over his father's company. He was who I wanted to be when I grew up.

“None,” my father said.

“Fine,” I replied, storming from the room to keep up appearances. I didn’t want them to know that I was eager to get started. I needed them to think I was sulking. It was what was expected of me.

CHAPTER 14



Georgina

“You’re here!” Alyssa said, standing from her seat as I entered the parlour.

She wrapped me in a tight hug and I held on a little longer. I’d missed her. She may be queen and my brother’s wife, but she was also my friend and I’d been neglecting my friends over the last few months.

“Let me look at you,” I said, holding her at arm’s length and casting an assessing eye over her svelte figure. “Where’s your baby bump?” I asked.

She smiled and blushed. “Under wraps for now,” she said. She pulled my hands to her mid-section and I felt the slight curve of her normally flat belly.

I pulled her in for another hug. “Have I told you how happy I am you married my grumpy brother?” I whispered in her ear. “And how excited I am for the both of you?”

She squeezed me tight and then stepped away, dabbing at her eyes. “Pregnancy hormones,” Alyssa said with a short laugh. She took a deep breath and beamed at Will who had gotten up to pull her into his side.

“So where is everyone else?” I asked. Normally dinner at the palace included the ladies in waiting and their significant others.

“Just us tonight,” Will said.

“Oh, I forgot to tell you,” Alyssa said, turning to Will. “I invited Martin.”

“You did?” Will asked, surprised.

Alyssa smiled like she had a secret and I couldn’t help but think I knew exactly what she was up to. Lord Martin Bower, Marquess of Astonbury was the brother of Jeanette, one of Alyssa’s ladies in waiting. She had been trying to set him up with Savannah, another lady in waiting, but Savannah had fallen for Jed. It appeared Alyssa thought he might be a good match for me.

I raised an eyebrow but didn’t say anything as a footman appeared with a tray of drinks. I took a glass of wine and sipped. It was delicious.

“That’s one of Martin’s wines,” Alyssa said, sipping her own—non-alcoholic—drink.

Lord Martin had turned his estate into a vineyard and winery. He was producing some very good boutique wines. I could see where Alyssa might get the idea that we could work as a couple—the whole wine and cheese thing—but what I saw was, I was a duchess and he was only a marquess. I was not being snobbish about our titles, but it would mean he would have to pass his title to his brother, as well as the winery, to become a duke to my duchess. There weren’t many men willing to give up their birthright, even if it did mean an elevation in peerage.

“Marquess of Astonbury,” another footman announced before letting Martin into the parlour.

“Martin,” Alyssa said with a big smile. “It’s so good to see you again.”

“Your highness,” he said with a small bow.

Alyssa walked over to him and kissed him on both cheeks before tucking her hand through his elbow and leading him further into the room and in my direction. “You remember Lady Georgina,” she said. “Will’s sister.”

He took my hand and brushed a kiss across my knuckles. “Your grace,” he said. “It’s good to see you again.”

“And you,” I replied.

I liked Martin. He was a lovely man and easy on the eye, but his touch didn’t light up my skin or cause flutters in my stomach. Not like Leo.

I rolled my eyes inwardly and took another sip of my wine. Of course I would think about him at a time like this.

“So, Martin,” I said, forcing Leo and his tingle-inducing touch from the forefront of my brain. “Are you setting a stall up at *Marché de Noel*?”

He nodded. “I am. We have some new wines we want to float and test the market reaction. What about you? Will there be a Pemberton Dairies stall?”

“Of course,” I said. “We also have something new—”

“You do?” Will asked. “Since when?”

“I’ve been keeping it under wraps,” I said. “Michael and I tested a core sample today and we both think it’s ready.”

“No fair,” Alyssa said, her lips turned down in a pout. “I can’t even try any.”

“I noticed the significant drop in our cheese order for the palace,” I said with a wink.

Confusion showed on Martin’s face as he looked between the three of us. “Am I missing something?”

Alyssa and Will shared a look before Alyssa spoke. “It’s a bit of a secret, but the news is sure to break soon,” she said. “Will and I are pregnant.”

Martin’s face broke into a big smile—he really was quite good-looking—and he reached out to shake Will’s hand and kiss Alyssa on the cheek. “Congratulations,” he said. “That is fantastic news.”

The parlour doors opened and a footman announced dinner. Martin offered his arm to me and I tucked my hand in his elbow. There were a lot of things to like about Martin and I could see why Alyssa hoped something would bloom between us, but there just wasn’t any chemistry. He seated me and then moved around the table to his own chair opposite me.

“How did you fair with the snow storm?” I asked as a footman placed a napkin on my lap.

“No damage, thankfully,” he replied. “We recently upgraded the power supply to the barrel room and it seemed to hold up. What about yourself?”

“Georgie had an unexpected visitor,” Will said with a growl.

“You did?” Alyssa asked. “Who?”

“Leonardo Ricci,” I replied, not looking at Will. “He was caught in the storm. Clarabelle got out and caused him to swerve off the road into a snow bank. I offered him a place to wait out the storm.”

“Is Clarabelle okay?” Alyssa asked.

“She’s fine,” I said. “I wish I could figure out how she manages to escape all the time. That cow can be a menace.”

“Was Mr. Ricci injured?”

“No,” I replied and shook my head. “But his car wasn’t drivable.”

“The name sounds familiar but I can’t place it,” Martin said.

“His family founded *L’Ingenuità Corporativa*,” Will answered with a growl.

“Oh, of course,” Alyssa said. “They’re here for the holidays.”

“You know them?” I asked.

Alyssa shook her head. “I know of them, but I’ve never actually met them. They’ll be at *Le Réveillon*,” she said, turning to Will.

I was planning on attending *Le Réveillon* which was being held at Freddie’s, but not looking forward to it. Now, though, my interest was piqued. I had previously refused to admit it to myself, but I was secretly hoping to see Leo again. A formal situation such as the *Le Réveillon* at *Domaine d’Avonlea* was the perfect opportunity to see him again. Both of us would be bound by the formality of the setting and we wouldn’t be tempted to lapse into the same familiarity that our previous meeting had ended on.

“You’ll have to introduce me,” Alyssa said.

“Of course,” I replied.

Leonardo

“THANK YOU FOR MEETING ME,” I SAID AS I WALKED INTO THE OFFICE, MY hand outstretched.

Lord Frédéric Bingham, Earl of Avonlea, clasped my hand confidently and smiled.

“It’s good to finally meet you,” he said, showing me to a seat off to the side of his desk. A tray of refreshments sat on the coffee table in the middle of an arrangement of comfortable chairs. “Your father and brother have told me a lot about you.”

I sighed and shook my head. “I’m surprised you agreed to this if that is the case,” I said, and he laughed. Already I could tell he was a different type of businessman to either my father or my brother. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d heard either man laugh.

“It wasn’t all bad,” he said, leaning forward to pour coffee into a cup. He offered to pour one for me and I nodded, a little off balance that someone such as Lord Bingham—an earl and the CEO of one of the largest real estate development companies in Europe—was pouring his own coffee, let alone one for me as well.

“My brother and father don’t exactly approve of my lifestyle, Lord Bingham,” I said, accepting the full cup from him. “And we have a different philosophy on how business should be done.”

“Call me Freddie,” he said before sipping from his cup. “I did some of my own research. You’ve been financing small projects for people you know,” he said. “With mixed results.”

I nodded and drank, more to gather my thoughts rather than because I was thirsty. “I haven’t had the best of vetting processes,” I admitted. “I am often swayed by the enthusiasm of the people involved and their passion rather than actually looking at the product and the viability of it.”

“And you tend to choose projects that run contradictory to your family’s focus.”

I sighed. He was correct in his analysis. I picked products and investment

opportunities based on how much it would annoy my father and brother rather than because of their likelihood of success. It was just another way for me to try and get their attention. I knew I did it, hated that I did it, but did it anyway.

“You’re right,” I admitted.

He nodded slowly. “I’m wondering if you can put aside your vendetta against your father in order to focus on the new branch of Monticorp that I am developing.”

I shifted in my seat, feeling uncomfortable under his scrutiny. “I wouldn’t call it a vendetta, exactly,” I said.

Freddie laughed easily. “Maybe vendetta is too strong a word, but I need to know that you’re not going to take this opportunity and use it for your own agenda.”

“I admit to being foolhardy in the past. I was trying to forge my own path and I took opportunities that I knew would distance me from both my father and *L’Ingenuità Corporativa*. But this opportunity is different. I’m keen to work with you and your company. I watched you grow Avonlea before taking over Monticorp and I was impressed.”

Freddie smiled. “I’m glad to hear it. We’ll get stuck into the real work in the new year after the holidays, but I’d like you to spend some time in the office with me before then, just so you can get a feel for it. We run things a little differently to *L’Ingenuità Corporativa*.”

“Hence the attraction for me,” I said with a smile of my own.

Freddie grinned. “Of course. I hope I will see you and your family at *Le Réveillon* later in the week.”

“My family is excited to be there,” I answered, not really knowing if it was true or not. I did know that any opportunity to network with people of influence was always appreciated with my family. “May I ask what exactly this new initiative of Monticorp is?” I asked after a short pause.

“Monticorp was built on investing in large commercial projects—

shopping malls, hotels, office buildings and the like. And while these are lucrative and continue to be so, I find myself looking to smaller projects these days. Merveille is a wealthy country for its size, and yet we are losing a lot of our younger people to bigger countries with better opportunities. The queen and I have discussed this problem at length and we both think the solution is investing in the next generation of businesses before they go looking elsewhere to grow.”

“So you want to solely invest in products made here by people who live here?” I asked.

“Yes and no,” Freddie said with a smile. “We want to entice small business into the region. If that means investing in established businesses here in Merveille then that is a win-win for everyone. But we also want to make it an attractive alternative for foreign businesses to set up shop. We want to look for viable companies that have an idea or product that needs funds to get off the ground. We would provide mentoring and support where needed as well as finance. The main criteria, of course, would be that they would need to base their operations here in Merveille so that it would benefit our economy, which is good for all business.”

My thoughts immediately went to Alberto and his app. Would he be willing to relocate to Merveille in order to fund production? The plan had been for him to work out of the offices he already had in Milan, but maybe Merveille could be a workable option for him. The infrastructure was here and from what Freddie was saying, Merveille would welcome them with open arms. It was worth pursuing. Sure, Merveille wasn’t as flashy as Milan, but there was something about the country that lured me. I refused to admit that Georgie was part of the draw.

“It’s an interesting challenge,” I said. “Do you have any initial projects in mind?”

“Maybe. I have a lot of people coming to me with requests for financial assistance. It’ll be your job to sift through them and bring me the ones you

think are most promising.”

“And if I have a project myself that I think might have merit?” I asked.

“Bring it to me and we’ll discuss it,” he said.

CHAPTER 15



Georgina

“Go,” Bethany said, shooing me away from the stall.

“Are you sure you’ll be okay?” I asked, straightening a wheel of cheese and adjusting the display of brie.

“Of course we will be. This isn’t our first time,” she replied with a smile.

I took a breath and consciously relaxed my shoulders. Bethany and her team had it covered. They knew everything there was to know about the cheese they were selling, even the new one. We’d christened it *Bleu Laineux*—Woolly Blue—as a nod to the origin of the milk used. I wanted people to try it before knowing that it was sheep milk. Too many people could be put off just because it was something different.

“Go and have a wander around,” Bethany suggested. “Check out some of the other stalls. I hear Ashby Chocolates have a stall this year.” She winked at me and I had to laugh. We dealt with Ashby Chocolates on a regular basis and none of the staff at the dairy would ever get enough of the chocolate truffles they showered on us.

“Okay, fine. I’m going, but you have my number. Call me if you need anything.”

“Go. We’ll be fine.”

I turned to walk away, determined to find the Ashby Chocolates stall and inhale my body weight in truffles, when I ran into a solid wall of male chest. I stepped back quickly, almost tripping on the slippery cobblestones of the market square, but was saved by a pair of strong, familiar hands.

“Georgie?”

I looked up into dark eyes framed with long lashes that would make most women weep with jealousy.

“Leo,” I breathed.

He smiled, the corner of his lips tipping up and the edges of his eyes crinkling.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“I’m here with my family,” he said, looking around but obviously not spotting said family. “Well, I was. It looks like they have abandoned me. What about you?”

I realised he still had hold of my hands from where he saved me from falling. I withdrew them slowly and turned to the Pemberton Dairies booth behind me. “We have a market stall,” I said, looking over my shoulder at him shyly. “Would you like a sample?”

He stepped up to the stall beside me and pursued the display, his gaze landing on the *Bleu Laineux*. “What’s this?” he asked.

“Try it first,” I said, “and then I will tell you”

Bethany handed him a small toothpick with a piece of cheese on the end. He slipped it into his mouth and closed his eyes, a small moan escaping from his lips. I shivered. It was cold, of course I shivered. He opened his eyes and the dark, molten chocolate irises seemed to darken further.

“That is delicious,” he said. “This is the new one, yes? The sheep cheese?”

I nodded, blushing. “It is. That’s the one that’s aged for eleven months. This other one is a bit milder with only being aged for eight months.” I handed him the *Bleu Laineux Doux*.

He slipped it between his lips and smiled as he swallowed. “That’s good too, but I do like the first one. It has a great bite to it.”

“Thank you,” I said. I took the toothpicks from him and dropped them into the little receptacle we had for the used sticks. “I was just heading over to the Ashby Chocolate stall if you want to walk with me.”

“I’d like that,” he said, taking my hand and tucking it in his elbow.

Walking with Leo like this felt so different to when Martin had taken my arm the other night. The energy between us was charged, and despite the frigid temperatures, I felt warm all over.

“It seems the storm didn’t leave any lasting damage in its wake,” Leo said.

I looked around the town and tried to see it from Leo’s perspective. The streets were cobblestone and most of the buildings were old enough to be heritage listed. The large square in the middle was full of people and market stalls, with the large Christmas tree pride of place in the middle. Strings of lights crisscrossed the road and draped over the buildings. They weren’t lit yet, that would happen after Alyssa flipped the switch on the big tree.

“It’s probably a little provincial for your tastes,” I said.

“I like it,” he said. “It’s doesn’t have the glitz and glamour of some of the bigger cities around the world but it does have something special.” He looked right at me when he said it and I sucked in a breath.

“Leo,” I said quietly but before I could say anything else—not that I had any idea what I was going to say—an announcement was made from the small stage set up near the tree.

“Come on,” I said. “We need to get a good spot so we can see.”

The chocolate stall forgotten for now, I dragged him through the crowd to the front of the little stage where people were assembling.

“What’s going on?” he whispered in my ear and his warm breath on my skin sent a riot of tingles through my body.

“The tree lighting ceremony,” I said, thankful that my voice didn’t betray

the affect he had on me. “The queen is going to turn on the lights for the tree and then all the shop owners will turn theirs on too. After tonight, the town will be stupid with Christmas lights.”

I watched as Alyssa and Will stepped up onto the stage and felt Leo stiffen beside me.

“Is that your brother?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I replied. “He’s, um, he’s married to Alyssa.”

“Alyssa?”

“Queen Alyssa,” I said and pulled my head down into the nest my woollen scarf created.

“Your brother is married to the queen?” he asked, and I could hear the disbelief in his voice.

“Um, yes. Didn’t I mention that before?” I asked, not looking at him.

“No, you did not, but all those guards now make so much more sense.”

Leonardo

WILL WAS THE QUEEN’S HUSBAND. GEORGIE WAS RELATED TO THE QUEEN OF this country and yet she worked in the dairy like a commoner. I just couldn’t seem to get my head around the concept. Will could have had me ejected from the country after finding me in his sister’s house, and he certainly could have had me killed and my body buried somewhere it could never be found.

I watched as the queen spoke to her subjects. She was gracious and personable and I didn’t comprehend anything she was saying, not with the knowledge of her connection to Georgie running around in my head. Surely being here with Georgie, having her arm tucked in my elbow, could cause some international incident. That would make my father so very happy.

I tried to step away from Georgie, but the crowd was packed tight. There was no way I could move away without causing a scene and that was the last

thing I needed. Maybe if I stood really still, Will—was he a king or did he have another title?—wouldn't see me standing so close to his sister. Being sent home with the body guard named Carlos had communicated very clearly that Will was not keen for me to see his sister again. Carlos hadn't said anything to me, but the looks he gave me in the rear vision mirror were warning enough.

There was a ripple through the crowd and then a collective gasp of awe followed by cheering and applause. The tree came to life, lit with thousands of little lights. I looked down at Georgie and her smile was wide, her eyes glowing with delight and her cheeks delicately pink. I leaned toward her before I knew what I was doing and pulled back just in time before she noticed. I was going to kiss her. Out here in the open in front of all these people and in direct line of sight of her brother—who had the resources to make me disappear. I forced my eyes away from the woman beside me and up at the tree. It was beautiful. The crowd continued with their cheering and clapping as the rest of the lights around the town came on.

“Welcome to *La Fête des Lumières*,” Georgie said smiling up at me.

Her lips were rosy from the cold and my eyes were drawn to them of their own accord. Her wide blue eyes blinked up at me and I once again felt myself being pulled down to her. The allure of her lips almost too much for me to ignore. Until I felt an icy stare cut through me. I looked up and met the narrowed, cold gaze of Will. His jaw was clenched and his arms were crossed over his chest as he watched me.

The crowd had begun to disperse and I hurriedly stepped away from Georgie. Her brows furrowed in confusion and she looked over her shoulder to follow my gaze.

“Oh for Hades' sake,” she muttered. “Come on, Leo. I think you owe me some hot chocolate and at least a dozen truffles from Ashby Chocolates.”

“A dozen?” I asked, grabbing on the lifeline she was throwing me.

“At the very least,” she said, taking my hand and dragging me through the

crowd.

I could still feel Will's eyes on my back and felt like I had a target painted there. I tried to shake it off, but I knew I would never live up to the expectations of Georgie's brother. I could barely live up to the expectations of my own family. Trying to impress the husband of the queen that I was good enough for his sister would be an impossibility.

"So is Will the king?" I asked as we joined the line in front the hot chocolate stand.

"No," she said, shaking her head. "Officially his title is Prince William, Duke of Vale."

"O-kay," I said, not quite understanding.

She sighed. "The title of king is for the male ruling monarch and is higher in the hierarchy than the queen. But you can only be a ruling monarch if you have a direct blood relation to the throne. Until Alyssa became the queen, Merveille had never had a female ruling monarch before. When Will married her, they couldn't give him a title above hers, so he became a prince. The same thing applies to the English queen, Elizabeth, and her husband, Prince Phillip."

I nodded. I knew that the queen of England's husband wasn't a king but I wasn't sure how that happened.

"It's also why he had to give up his title as Duke of Pemberton and why I am now its duchess."

"I don't think your brother likes me very much," I said.

She snorted. "Don't take it personally. Will doesn't like many people and especially not someone like you who I might actually like in return."

She handed me a paper cup with steaming, frothy hot chocolate and a candy cane sticking out of it and we moved away from the stall.

"You like me?" I asked, grinning at her like an idiot.

She rolled her eyes but a smile played about her lips. "You're not the drain on society I originally thought you were," she said and I laughed.

“Don’t get too carried away,” I said. “I don’t think my ego could take it.”

“Your ego is plenty big enough,” she said. “It could do with someone knocking it down a few inches.”

“And you’re the one to do it?”

She shrugged. “It’s a tough job, but someone has to do it.”

I laughed. I didn’t mind that the cheap shots coming from her mouth were at my expense. It was refreshing to be with someone who saw through my games and took me for what I was without expecting more.

She took my hand and even through the gloves we were both wearing, an awareness zapped through me. It was a simple thing, holding hands, and really not worthy of the importance I placed on it, but it felt bigger. It was an easy acceptance. It was a reinforcement that she wanted to spend time with me simply because she liked being with me. There was nothing she wanted from me except to enjoy the evening together. It was a revelation, and a heaviness I had been carrying around with me for far too long fell away and I felt lighter. It was a Christmas miracle.

CHAPTER 16



Georgina

We wandered through the market and headed toward the Ashby Chocolate stand. Leo kept my hand securely tucked in his elbow and it felt nice. I meant what I'd said earlier; Leo wasn't who I originally thought he was. He was still arrogant and immature, but I was beginning to realise that was a façade and not the real man. I didn't understand why he wanted people to see him that way and I wanted to ask. In fact, I wanted to know a whole lot more about him and that was a little scary. No one had piqued my interest—platonic or otherwise—since Jacob died. It was exciting and a little terrifying mixed in with a whole lot of guilt.

I knew no one expected me to mourn Jacob for the rest of my life, but it still felt dishonourable to have these feelings for another man, especially a man who was so completely opposite to the kind of man Jacob was. Jacob had taken his heritage and his future seriously. He was going to be king and he knew the kind of king and the kind of man he wanted to be. When I looked at Leo it was almost like he didn't know his place in the world or even what he wanted his place to be. I saw a man pushing against the expectations of his family but with no clear path of his own.

“I think that crowd might be some indication of the direction of the

Ashby Chocolates stall,” Leo said, nodding toward the large group of people in front of us.

“Shall we join the fray?” I asked, grinning up at him.

“Into the breach,” he replied, looking down at me with a grin.

For a moment I thought he might lean down and kiss me...and I wanted him to, as much as I felt guilty for the wanting. There had been a similar moment earlier during the tree lighting where he even leaned down and was only a breath away from dusting his lips across mine. My lips tingled with anticipation but before it could be realised, he redirected his gaze. And again, he stopped himself from following through, instead moving us forward into the gathered crowd.

“Do you know that Ashby Chocolates use milk from my cows for their milk chocolate?” I said as we moved toward the front of the line.

“I think I might have heard that somewhere,” he said with a wink. “And it’s made here in Merveille?”

I nodded. “It’s an Australian company, but they manufacture the chocolate here and then ship it to their various factories around the world. There is talk of them opening a store here in Merveille.”

“Merveille is doing a lot to try and encourage more businesses into the country,” Leo observed.

“It’s one of the main focusses of the queen. While her father was the king, we lost a lot of people and business to other countries that had more incentives for small and large business. She’s trying to change that. It’s important for the future of our country that we keep as many people here as we can.”

He smiled down at me and I blushed. “Sorry,” I said. “I’m part of the Women in Business initiative that she started. I tend to get a little carried away.”

“Don’t apologise—I like seeing your passion,” he said. “Your eyes light up and your skin glows. Most of the people I spend time with rarely have

passion for anything that doesn't provide immediate gratification."

His smile was sad as he spoke. I knew the type of people he was talking about, Merveille had their own fair share of them. Sons and daughters of the peerage who would rather live off their family's legacy than forge one of their own. Will and I never had the opportunity to live that way. We'd fought for everything we had. I wondered if I would be a different person if I'd grown up pampered and spoiled like Leo. I'd like to think I would be the same as I am now, but who could know? We were a product of more than just our environment. Both nurture and nature played a part in the final product, not to mention the individual intrinsic personalities that we all possessed. Maybe if I'd had everything handed to me on a silver platter I might be just as spoiled and arrogant as I'd labelled Leo as.

"What are these?" Leo asked, drawing my attention to the basket of paper wrapped truffles.

"They're *Papillotes*," I said, picking one up to show him. "It's a Christmas tradition." I smiled at the girl behind the market table and handed her some money before unwrapping the truffle to show Leo. "Inside each one there is a note." I showed him the inside of the wrapper. "It started toward the end of the nineteenth century. A young apprentice chocolatier was in love with a beautiful young woman so he stole some of his master's chocolates and wrapped them in love notes to give to her. When the master chocolatier found out, instead of firing him, he saw the potential—a true businessman at heart—and started to include little notes, jokes, and the like, in the wrappers of his chocolates."

"Like a fortune cookie?" Leo asked.

I laughed. "No. There are no fortunes in *Papillotes*. Mostly these days they are bad jokes that people read aloud over Christmas dinner. Sometimes they're inspirational quotes."

"What does that one say?" he asked, taking the wrapper from my hand. "You can't buy love but you can buy chocolate and that's kind of the same

thing.” He grinned.

“It’s true,” I said, popping the truffle in my mouth and closing my eyes to savour the taste. I may have even moaned a little.

“Good?” he asked, his voice rough.

My eyes popped open to see him staring at me, his eyes darker than I had ever seen them and a hungry look on his face.

I nodded. “Try one,” I said, my voice breathy as I handed him a truffle.

Leonardo

CHOCOLATE TRUFFLE MELTED ACROSS MY TONGUE, AND IT WAS DELICIOUS, there was no denying it. But I was more interested in the woman who stood before me. In the short time I’d known her she had shown more passion and excitement about life than anyone I had ever known. My family was all about the business, but they were never *passionate* about it. We were Italian, and passion came with the territory, but it was more expressed through anger in my experience. Or maybe that was just because I was such a disappointment to them. Being here with Georgie made me want to get as excited about something as she did about her dairy and the economics of the country she so obviously loved. I’d thought Merveille was little more than a blip on a map on my way to somewhere else. But I was coming to appreciate its appeal.

“Good?” she asked.

“Very,” I replied, although I wasn’t exactly talking about the truffle.

“What does your note say?” she asked.

I blinked, clearing my mind of the fantasy trip it had gone on and looked down at the piece of paper in my hand. “Everything you need to be great is already inside you.”

“Profound,” she said.

“Do you think it’s true?” I asked.

“I think everyone has potential inside them,” she said. “Think of a tiny seed. It’s packed full of potential, it just needs food and space to grow.”

My father and brother were always going on and on about how I had been given every opportunity in life to be great and yet I had achieved nothing. But maybe what I needed was space. I was forever trying to fit into their idea of who I was supposed to be and then when I failed, they accused me of not trying hard enough. In the end it was easier to not even try. I was never going to be like them. I was different and, in their eyes, different meant inferior.

“Hey,” Georgie said, nudging my arm. “Are you okay?”

I rearranged my face into a smile. “Yes,” I said. “I’m okay. Just thinking.”

“The night is too beautiful for thinking,” she said. “I know what you need.”

“You do? And what is it I need?”

“A drink,” she said, taking my hand in hers and dragging me away from the chocolate stall and into the milling crowd.

“Lord Martin,” she said when we stopped in front of a stall selling wine.

“Lady Georgina,” he said, taking her gloved hand and brushing a kiss on her knuckles. I bristled at his familiarity with her. “It’s good to see you again.”

“And you,” she said with a smile before turning to me. “Have you met Mr. Leonardo Ricci? His family are in Merveille for the holidays.”

Lord Martin put his hand out to shake and I took it. Maybe I squeezed a little harder than I needed to.

“Lord Martin owns a vineyard,” Georgie said. “Ferry Grove Wines.”

“Would you like a sample?” Lord Martin asked.

“I was actually hoping you had some mulled wine,” Georgie said.

Lord Martin smiled at her and I felt a little growl vibrate in the back of my throat. It was the oddest sensation and completely unintentional. I didn’t know what had come over me. It was almost like I was...jealous. Which was

ridiculous. I never got jealous—over women or anything else for that matter. Besides, Georgie and I were nothing—her words—and I had no claim on her.

Lord Martin winked and ducked behind the counter where bottles of wine were displayed. He came up with two cups and handed them to us. “This is our Zinfandel,” he said.

I sipped the warm wine, the aromatic spices filling my nose, and felt slightly better about Lord Martin.

“Oh Martin, this is delicious,” Georgie said, and I was once again back to hating Lord Martin even if he had excellent wine. “Can I order a case?”

“Of course,” Lord Martin said, turning to one of his staff and relaying the order.

“You should order some too,” Georgie said to me. “I’m sure your family would love to taste the local wines while they’re here. The palace even serves it.”

I nodded thoughtfully. Another local producer with excellent quality. It seemed that Merveille really was nurturing the next generation of businesses. As much as I was inclined to dislike Lord Martin merely because of his friendliness toward Georgie, I couldn’t deny the wine was good.

“I’ll take a case of each,” I said.

Details were exchanged and then Georgie tugged me back into the throng.

“Where to now?” I asked.

“I want to check on my stall. I want to see how the *Bleu Laineux* is going and what the feedback has been like.”

“Lead the way,” I said.

“Lady Georgina,” the woman behind the counter said when we arrived at the stall. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“Is there a problem, Bethany?” Georgie asked, her brow furrowing in concern. I wanted to reach out and smooth the skin between her eyebrows.

“Not a problem exactly,” she said. “We are out of the *Bleu Laineux*. I didn’t know if you wanted me to send someone back to the dairy to pick up

more.”

Georgie shook her head. “Not tonight. The market will be closing soon. We have limited stock, so best to keep some back so we have some for the rest of the week.”

“That is a good problem to have,” I said.

Georgie huffed out a breath. “Yes and no. It’s good that it’s so popular, but it’s also bad because we’re not ready to go into full production yet. The *Marché de Noel* was just meant to be a testing ground. I haven’t even told Will what I’ve done yet.”

“Surely he wouldn’t be upset about this? You’ve obviously hit on something that could be profitable for the business.”

“It will be profitable eventually. There will be a bit of a deficit for the next little while though. I just hope I can justify the financial outlay.”

“What do you mean?”

“To make this commercially viable, I need new equipment and an extension to the barn, not to mention more livestock.” She shook her head and exhaled roughly before turning her face up to mine and smiling. “But you don’t need to worry about any of that. Tonight is about having fun and exploring all the wonderful things about Merveille. Come on. You have not had an *éclair au chocolat* until you’ve had one from *La Pâtisserie Délicate*.”

Once again, Georgie grabbed my hand and pulled me into the crowd. I don’t think I’d ever been led around by anyone before. I tended to lead with my entourage following behind. I think I preferred this.

CHAPTER 17



Leonardo

It was late. *La Fête des Lumières* finished with a bang and a brilliant display of fireworks over the lake. Georgie and I stood side by side on the dock to watch and I didn't want the evening to end. Of course it had to and it did and now I was lying on my bed unable to sleep. Thinking about her.

I picked up my phone and scrolled through social media but with each post and photograph I felt more and more distanced from my friends—my so-called friends. They weren't missing me. No one had even tried to contact me or find out where I was except for Alberto and his interest was purely financially focussed.

I switched from social media to the photograph I'd taken. A selfie of me and Georgie with a burst of fireworks in the background. She was smiling, her blue eyes alight with fun, and her cheeks rosy from the cold. I couldn't get her out of my mind. She captivated me and with each encounter I felt myself being drawn away from the man I had crafted myself to be and wanting something more. I wanted to be worthy of her. I wanted her to look at me and see more than what she saw that first day.

This was one thing that couldn't be bought and all the money in the world was useless. Georgie didn't care about the size of my trust fund or my last

name or even what I could do for her. For the first time in my adult life, someone wanted to know me, not just my wallet.

I opened my messaging app and sent her a text. I didn't expect her to be awake or to even reply. I just knew I needed to reach out to her.

Leo: I had a good time tonight. Thanks for showing me around and sharing my very first La Fête des Lumières with me.

With a sigh, I slipped my phone on to the bedside table and closed my eyes trying to find sleep. I had to be at Freddie's office in the morning and I would be a mess unless I got a decent sleep. I knew the morning would be a complete info dump. I needed to be on my game and show Freddie that I wasn't the man everyone thought I was. My phone beeped with an incoming text and I grabbed my phone, holding my breath.

Georgie: Hey. I had a good time tonight too. It was my pleasure to show you around. What was your favourite part?

I couldn't help the smile that broke across my face.

Leo: That's a tough one. The tree was amazing and the fireworks were a great way to end the night.

Georgie: I was hoping you'd say the Bleu Laineux was your favourite :'(

Leo: It was definitely a highlight ;) And I have a soft spot for the casaro

I bit my lip and debated with myself before sending. Was it too forward? Too much too soon? I had never had to try and impress a girl before and telling her I had a soft spot for the cheesemaker—i.e. *her*—might frighten her away. I huffed out a breath and sent it anyway.

She took so long to answer that I regretted being so impulsive. I should have kept my feelings to myself. Nothing good ever came from showing your hand without knowing what the other person held in theirs.

Georgie: Leo...

Dio. Here comes the bit where she shoots me down. An unfamiliar tightness constricted my chest and it hurt to breathe.

Georgie: I have a soft spot for you too

The breath rushed out of me in a whoosh and I did my best impression of a happy dance while I was lying on the bed. Before I could think of something else to say, my phone beeped in my hand with another message.

Georgie: What are you doing tomorrow? Want to see what hard work looks like?

Leo: Tempting but I have a prior engagement.

Georgie: Oh.

Leo: I have a job, if you can believe it.

Georgie: You do? I thought you were here for a vacation.

Leo: Apparently not. My father and brother have organised an internship with Monticorp. I start tomorrow.

Georgie: Does that mean you'll be hanging around Merveille for a while?

Leo: For the next year at least and then we'll see.

Georgie: Freddie is good people. You'll learn a lot working with him.

Leo: Believe it or not, I'm actually looking forward to it. I'll be shadowing him for the first few days and then in the new year the real work will start.

Georgie: I'm proud of you, Leo.

Georgie: ...oh

Georgie: ...does that sound too condescending? I didn't mean it to. I just wanted you to know that I'm happy for you.

Georgie: Okay...well...

Georgie: Maybe I need to sleep now before I say anything else that comes across incredibly rude and patronising. Good night Leo.

Leo: Thank you. It wasn't condescending. I haven't done much for anyone to be proud of lately. It's nice to hear (see?) the words and know that you mean them.

Georgie: I think you underestimate yourself...I think a lot of people underestimate you.

Leo: But you don't. You expect more from me than anyone else ever has.

Georgie: I'm sorry. I don't mean to put undue pressure on you. I just see so much potential in you, Leo. I think you could do something really incredible with your life if you wanted to.

Leo: Don't be sorry. I like that you challenge me. I like that you expect more and look at me with something other than disappointment. I want to make you proud.

Georgie: Don't do it for me. Do it for yourself. Good luck tomorrow. Good night.

Leo: Thanks. Good night.

I put my phone down and sighed back into the pillow, my eyes going to the dark ceiling. There was an odd lightness in my chest now. It almost had me feeling giddy. Georgie liked me but the more surprising thing was she saw more for my life than my family ever had. I meant what I'd told her. I did want to make her proud, but for the first time I also wanted to do something that I could be proud of.

Georgina

IT HAD BEEN A COUPLE OF DAYS SINCE THE *MARCHÉ DE NOEL* AND *LA FÊTE des Lumières*...and the night Leo and I'd had our initial text conversation. There was something intimate and yet still anonymous about having a text conversation with someone in the middle of the night when everyone else was asleep. It was easier to say things that wouldn't normally be said. It was easier to reveal things that would normally stay hidden.

I didn't regret it. As much as I opened myself up to Leo, he had opened up to me. And it hadn't stopped with that one night. We texted every day. Mostly it was just silly stuff. I sent him a photo of me milking a sheep because he didn't believe me when I told him what I was doing. He sent me a

text with a photo of the huge induction manual Freddie had handed him and told him to read. I responded with crying laughing emojis. I wasn't sure if Freddie was just hazing him or whether he was serious about Leo learning all that. It didn't exactly seem like Freddie's style, but then I only really knew his social persona, not his business one.

I sent him a copy of a promotional photo we were using to promote our brie. It was an amazing charcuterie board loaded with local products from other suppliers in the region. He responded with a photo of his sad vending machine lunch. I felt sorry for him, which was how I found myself standing outside Freddie's building holding a picnic basket and chewing my lip with hesitation. Was it too much to just turn up here with lunch and invite myself to share it with him?

I pulled out my phone and sent him a text.

Georgie: Hey! What're you doing right now?

He answered immediately.

Leo: I'm in induction hell.

He followed it with a photo of the manual open to a double page spread of single spaced text.

Georgie: Can you take a break? I have a surprise for you.

Leo: You are my saviour! Tell me where and when and I'll be there.

Georgie: Come down stairs. I'm outside.

I waited nervously for him to reply or appear and hadn't realised I was holding my breath until it whooshed out of me when I saw him step out of the doors.

“What do you have in the basket Little Red Riding Hood?” he asked as he stepped close and brushed a peck on my cheek in greeting. “I hope that is for me and not because you're on your way to grandma's house.”

I grinned up at him. “I thought we could have lunch together. How does that sound?”

I tried not to come across needy or desperate or nervous. We were just

two friends having lunch, no big deal...right?

“That sounds like the best thing I’ve heard all day,” he said with a grin. “Where shall we go to eat?”

I hadn’t really thought that far ahead. It wasn’t exactly picnic weather. The snow was just starting to fall. Soft flakes floated down from the heavy clouds above dusting Leo’s dark hair with sparkles of white.

“Ah...do you have a break room?”

He laughed. “Come on. There’s a visitor’s lounge. We can set up in there.”

“You won’t get in trouble?”

“Of course not.”

He bent down and picked up the basket before reaching for my hand. It felt natural to weave my fingers between his. I ignored the guilt that tried to raise its ugly head. Leo and I were just friends. We’d started out not liking each other very much, but I could confidently say that we had progressed to the point where I could call him a friend. Having lunch with Leo—my *friend*—wasn’t traitorous to Jacob’s memory.

I signed in at the reception desk and then followed Leo into the elevator that would take us up to his floor and the visitor’s lounge.

“How have you found working for Freddie?” I asked.

“My brain feels so overloaded,” he said with a grimace. “He knows so much and he never seems to stand still.”

“But that’s good, right? I mean, you can learn a lot from him.”

“Oh absolutely. I’m just a little brain dead from all the information.”

“I thought he might have been hazing you with that massive induction manual,” I admitted. “Freddie can be a bit of a prankster.”

Leo groaned. “Oh I hope he wasn’t joking. Imagine if I read the whole thing only to find out it was some big prank?”

I patted his shoulder as the doors of the elevator opened. I hoped for his sake it wasn’t one of Freddie’s pranks. I could tell how hard he was trying

and I wanted Freddie to see it too. I knew how much this opportunity meant to Leo.

Leo took my hand again and led me out of the elevator and through a maze of desks to an open space furnished with comfy chairs and low coffee tables.

“How about that one over near the window?” he said.

“Perfect.”

We crossed the room and I set up our picnic on the coffee table complete with cute red-checked tablecloth and everything. I wasn't doing it to impress him. It was left over from the photo shoot. There was even a bottle of Martin's Cabernet Sauvignon.

I heard Leo's stomach growl and couldn't help the laugh that bubbled out of me.

“Hungry?”

“Starving,” he said.

He opened the wine while I made a plate for him. It was nice. Friendly. Completely platonic. Nice.

“*Saluti*,” Leo said, clinking his glass with mine.

“*Saluti*,” I replied and then took a sip.

It was just lunch. Nothing special. Nothing to feel guilty over. Nothing to get excited about. Just lunch. So why did it feel like so much more?

CHAPTER 18



Georgina

L *e Réveillon*. The traditional Christmas Eve feast. This year it was being held at *Domaine d'Avonlea* and hosted by the Earl and Countess Bingham—Freddie and Alex. Alyssa and Will had hosted the year previous and before that, I hadn't been to one since my mother died.

I dressed carefully. It was a formal event but not so formal that I had to wear the sash and star of my position. This was just everyday black tie, not royal black tie.

I bought a new dress. I even had my hair and the tragedy that were my nails, done. I sat through the manicurist clucking her tongue at the damage for a whole hour. Milking sheep and running a dairy farm didn't exactly lend itself to a pristine manicure. But for the next two days, I was free of my regular duties. The dairy farm didn't stop, but we had drawn straws to see who would have to be on hand to oversee it. The lucky winners would be paid a bonus for their sacrifice and I got to enjoy a couple of days of blissful peace. I packed up and moved camp to the rooms Will and Alyssa kept for me in the palace so I could get ready without being tempted to check on the farm. I would spend the night in the palace and have Christmas day with Will and Alyssa, before escaping back home to enjoy a few hours of uninterrupted

solitude and perhaps finally finish that book I'd been reading.

The lady's maid Alyssa assigned to me to help me dress stood back from where she had been finishing my makeup and smiled.

"I think you're ready," she said.

"Thank you, Chantelle," I said, checking my reflection in the mirror. I stood from the vanity and walked out into the sitting room, picking up a glass of wine on the way.

Chantelle had done a good job but it did nothing to quell the flutter of butterflies that had taken wing in my stomach. I was nervous, which was absurd. I had attended far more important dinners and balls than the *Le Réveillon*. This ridiculousness was due to knowing I would be seeing Leo tonight. I had seen him in a suit and bundled up in thick winter coats. I'd even seen him in Will's old farm clothes and yet coming face to face with him in a tuxedo was having a stupidly puerile effect on me.

There was a knock on the door and Chantelle went to answer it. Will stepped through the door resplendent in all his princely glory.

"Are you ready?" he asked and I nodded. "You look lovely," he added as an afterthought.

"Thank you," I replied.

I was wearing a dark red velvet gown with an asymmetrical neckline that left one shoulder bare. The gown hugged me to the hips where the skirt flared slightly to a bell-shape and fell to the ground. My hair was up in an elegant chignon and dotted with sparkling crystals. Long strands of diamonds hung from my ears and matched the bracelet I wore on my wrist.

Will escorted me down to the parlour where the others waited. Alyssa and her ladies in waiting, along with their significant others, were enjoying a drink before the cavalcade of cars would escort us all to *Domaine d'Avonlea*.

I was immediately joined by Bianca—sister of Priscilla, one of Alyssa's ladies in waiting—who now worked in the palace with her sister. Our other friend, Lily, was already at *Domaine d'Avonlea* where she lived with her

sister Alex, Freddie's other half.

"I love your dress," Bianca said.

"Thanks," I replied. I hadn't spent much time with Bianca or Lily since taking over from Will. There never seemed to be enough time and the few times we had caught up, I'd felt like I couldn't relate to them anymore. They both had men in their lives and were working, but their responsibilities were nowhere near mine. I felt ten years older than they were even though we were all the same age.

"I like your dress too," I said, taking her in. She was wearing her signature pink. I rarely saw her dressed in anything else, but it did suit her.

"We should have lunch sometime next week," Bianca said. "I've missed you."

I smiled and nodded. "That sounds great," I said, but I was already working out in my head how I could get out of it. It wasn't that I didn't want to spend time with my friends, it just seemed that we had nothing in common anymore.

Thankfully before Bianca could extract a promise from me, we were directed to the waiting cars. I rode with Margaret, the only other single woman in the entourage. Margaret was the youngest of the ladies in waiting and usually treated as more of a personal assistant to Savannah than a titled Lady in her own right. I liked Margaret. She was smart and there were depths to her that others hadn't bothered to try and get to know. Not that I was any better, of course.

We made small talk until finally arriving at Freddie's mansion. I hadn't visited since Alex and Freddie had married. The estate had been a wedding gift from Freddie's parents and put my own *Maison de Pemberton* to shame. I really needed to do something about fixing the place up before it fell down on top of my head but there never seemed to be the time or money to do it. Especially not now with the new line. That was my priority right now.

A footman opened the door and handed Margaret out and then me. I

walked with her up the stairs and into the grand foyer where our coats were taken. We were directed into the ballroom. As I stepped across the threshold, I knew Leo was already there. I could feel him among the crowd and when I scanned the people in front of me, our eyes connected with a jolt. He smiled and I couldn't help the smile that tugged at the corners of my lips in response.

Leonardo

SHE WAS BREATHTAKING. SERIOUSLY, BREATHTAKING. I'M SURE EVERYONE else looked good too. Who didn't look good in a fancy dress or a suit? But I couldn't drag my eyes from Georgie as she greeted the hosts and then several other people waiting nearby. Thankfully her brother hadn't seen me yet. I would hate for him to see me looking at his sister with the current look on my face. I'm sure my feelings about her were written there clearly.

I waited where I was, watching her as she made her way through the crowd. I hoped she was coming toward me because if I didn't have her in my arms and on the dance floor soon, I was going to go and drag her there myself. Probably not the best way to endear myself to her brother.

Finally, the crowd broke and she stepped toward me. I took her hand and bowed over it, pressing a soft kiss to her knuckles.

"Lady Georgina," I said, when I straightened. "It is a pleasure to see you again."

"And you, Mr. Ricci."

If not for the smile that accompanied her greeting, I may have taken her formal greeting as a step back in our relationship, but I knew better.

"May I have this dance?" I asked, offering her my arm.

She slipped her hand through my elbow and I led her onto the floor. I pulled her close—not too close to arouse suspicions—but close enough that I could finally breathe again. It felt like far too long since I had been in her

presence. I tried not to analyse it too closely, but if I were to, I would say I had a thing for the lovely Lady Georgina Darkly. What that meant for the future, I didn't know and wasn't prepared to speculate on.

"You're a pretty good dancer," she said, grinning up at me.

"Years of dance lessons for this specific purpose," I replied.

"Oh really?" she asked, raising an eyebrow. "You thought one day you'd be dancing at a Christmas ball hosted by an earl?"

I smiled down at her. "No," I said. "I took dance lessons so I could impress a beautiful woman."

She blushed a lovely delicate pink.

"You look absolutely stunning tonight, Georgie," I whispered, pulling her just that little bit closer.

"You don't look too bad yourself," she replied, and I liked that I put the hitch in her breath.

"How has the rest of your week been?" she asked as I swirled her around the floor.

"Good. Great actually," I replied with a grin. "I finally got through that mammoth manual and spent some time working with Freddie. I'm keen to get back into it after the Christmas break."

She blinked up at me and I was struck by the look of...approval? Affection? Pride? I couldn't identify what exactly it was she was feeling when she looked at me, but I would take all of the above. I liked seeing her look at me like that. I liked making her happy. It was a far cry from the looks she gave me when we first met. I would take this look over the other every day.

"How about you? How was the rest of your week?"

She sighed. "Good, busy. I'm glad to have a couple of days off."

"The sheep take a day off from milking?"

She smirked at me. "Ha ha. No, I have some staff looking after the farm for the next two days."

“Big plans?”

She shook her head. “Christmas with Will and Alyssa and then a long, lovely stretch of solitude. I see hours of doing nothing but lying on my couch with Christmas leftovers and a good book.”

The image made me smile. I didn’t think I’d seen Georgie stop in the week I’d known her. She seemed to be perpetually moving. There was always something that needed her attention and I was glad that she had managed to carve out some time for herself.

The music stopped and we stepped back from each other to applaud the musicians. I felt the loss of her body keenly and offered her my arm simply so I could have an excuse for her to touch me again.

“Would you like some refreshments? I believe they have some of Lord Martin’s mulled wine available.”

“That sounds divine,” she replied as she hooked her hand once again through my arm.

“Leonardo,” my mother said, beelining for us. “Aren’t you going to introduce me?”

I looked at Georgie and hoped she could read the apology in my eyes. “Lady Georgina Darkly, this is my mother, Francesca Ricci. Mother, this is Lady Georgina, Duchess of Pemberton.”

“It’s lovely to meet you,” Georgie said.

“And you,” my mother said with a slight bow. “My Leo has told me a lot about you.” Georgie shot me an amused look with a quirked eyebrow. “I must tell you that I am such a fan of Pemberton Dairies. Your brie is amazing.”

“Thank you,” Georgie said with a small, adorable blush. “I can’t take the credit for it, though. My brother was the brains behind that particular product.”

“He has great taste,” my mother said, her eyes tracking to where the prince stood beside the queen.

I knew what she was thinking and I needed to get both of us out of there before the inevitable happened.

“If you will excuse us mother, I was just getting Lady Georgina a glass of wine.”

I moved us away from my mother somewhat abruptly but I knew if I’d lingered mother would have somehow tried to finagle an introduction to the queen and prince. I refused to put Georgie in that position.

“Slow down, Leo,” Georgie said with a bit of bite.

I looked down at her and noticed the furrowed brow. What had I done to put that look there, for surely I was to blame.

“What’s wrong?” I asked as we neared the table where the *vin brulé* was being kept warm.

“I don’t appreciate being your dirty little secret,” she said, pulling her arm from mine and stepping away from me.

Before I could respond, Georgie had disappeared out the side doors and into the night.

CHAPTER 19



Georgina

The cold hit me as I left the warmth of the ballroom and I regretted my impulsive decision. I needed to get out of there and away from Leo. Being treated that way felt...awful. I'd been Jacob's secret too. As much as I loved him and knew that he loved me, he'd needed us to keep our relationship from the press and from his family. They wouldn't have approved the match but he was going to make a way for us. Somehow. He never got the chance and so I was left to mourn him in secret until Alyssa found the engagement ring.

Jordan had also treated me like some tawdry little secret to be hidden from the people who mattered. In hindsight I was glad that no one ever found out that we'd been seeing each other. It would have been yet another scandal to discredit my family had the information come to light. Now that Jordan was in a jail cell serving time for the murder of Jacob and an accessory to the murder of the king, I was more than happy to keep our relationship a secret.

But having Leo treat me that way felt wrong. It cheapened the relationship I had begun to treasure. Maybe Leo hadn't changed as much as I thought he had. Had it all been an act? These last few days? Had he just been pretending to be the man I thought he was? It wouldn't be the first time I was

fooled by a pretty face and some sweet words—the whole debacle with Jordan was case in point.

I stood at the edge of the balcony, my hands pressed into the stone balustrade as I looked out over the gardens of Alex and Freddie's estate. People all around me were finding love. I had too, only to lose it tragically. Did that mean I was destined to never find it again? Up until meeting Leo, I had resigned myself to exactly that, but somehow he'd snuck behind my defences and I found myself caring for him. But of course it didn't mean the same to him. Of course it was yet another cruel twist of fate that had me falling for someone who could not or would not return my affections.

“Georgie.” His voice caressed my skin and made me shiver.

“Go away, Leo,” I said without turning to face him.

“No,” he said and then slipped my coat over my shoulders.

I was thankful for the warmth but not so much the intrusion.

“Georgie,” Leo said, turning me to face him.

He looked contrite, concerned even, but could I trust him when he had already fooled me so completely?

“I don't think there is anything left to say between us,” I said.

“What? Why?”

I tried to turn my back on him, but he gripped my shoulders, preventing me.

“Georgie, please. Just tell me what I did wrong so I can fix it.”

“That's not how this works,” I said, finding the button on his jacket fascinating. I couldn't look into his eyes when they had been lying to me all this time.

He huffed out a breath. “I honestly don't know what I've done,” he said, almost as if he were talking to himself. “I thought we were having a nice time on the dance floor. I was hoping to have an entire evening with you, but then out of the blue you pull away from me. What is going on?”

“It wasn't out of the blue,” I said, finally looking up at him. “I meant

what I said. I'm not your dirty little secret."

"What? Who said you were?"

"Nobody said it so many words, but it was quite obvious to me."

"Could you please just tell me what you mean? You've never held back your honesty before, so spit it out."

I flung my hands in the air, dislodging his hands from my shoulders. "You didn't want to introduce me to your mother. You practically ran away from her, dragging me with you."

"You think I did that because I didn't want to introduce you to my mother?"

"What other reason could there be? I'd barely had time to even speak to her and you were dragging me away."

"Georgie," he said, his voice going soft as he reached for me, his hands sliding around my waist and pulling me toward him. "Sweet Georgina, that is not the reason I pulled you away from her."

I let myself be pulled into his embrace. I hated myself for it. I hated the vulnerability I was feeling. I thought I'd put all that behind me when Will handed me the title. I thought I'd dealt with all the lingering baggage of grief and heartache.

"I was protecting you," he said, his hand skimming over my face to tuck a stray strand of hair behind my ear. "My mother was about to request an introduction to your brother and the queen. She is obsessive about networking and I knew as soon as she met you and realised who you were and who you were related to she would wiggle her way around to an introduction. If that happened, I wouldn't have seen you for the rest of the night, and I couldn't let that happen."

I stared into those dark chocolate eyes searching for some hidden agenda or untruth but I saw nothing but sincerity.

"Why couldn't you let that happen?" I asked, my voice breathless.

"Because then I wouldn't have been able to do this."

He lowered his head and brushed his lips across mine in a soft, gentle kiss. I pressed closer to him, every other thought floating away on the breeze with the snow flurries as he kissed me again, deeper this time.

“Georgie,” he murmured against my lips. “I’ve been wanting to do that since the day I met you.”

“Kiss me again,” I said. “I need you to kiss me again.”

“With pleasure,” he replied, dipping to sip from my lips again. I lost myself to the moment where nothing mattered but Leo and me and the feel of his lips on mine.

Leonardo

I COULD BARELY BELIEVE THAT THIS MOMENT WAS ACTUALLY HAPPENING. SHE felt so right in my arms and fit against me like she had been fashioned just for me. She tasted like wine and something sweet with a hint of spice, just like the woman herself.

“Is this really happening?” she asked, her words a whisper against my lips.

“If not then I don’t want reality to force me to admit otherwise,” I replied. She blinked up at me, her blue eyes wide and her lips pink from my kiss.

“This—”

I silenced her with another kiss.

“Don’t talk. Don’t think,” I said, punctuating my words with kisses. “We both knew this was going to happen eventually, so let’s just enjoy it.”

“But—”

“No Georgie. I know we need to go back inside. I know we need to return to our real lives—a life incidentally where your brother hates me and would probably, gleefully, skin me alive for kissing you—but I just need a few more moments with you. I just need you to be here with me in this moment and

enjoy it for what it is.”

“And what is it?” she asked, her lips brushing mine as she spoke.

“It’s a wish upon a star and a sprinkle of fairy dust. It’s the perfect moment with the only person I want to be with.”

She pressed up and sealed her lips over mine. My arms tightened around her and she twined her arms around my neck, her fingers burrowing into my hair.

I hadn’t been lying. This was the single most perfect moment in my entire life. Nothing in my past compared and I doubted there would be much in my future to match it—not unless Georgie was there with me.

It was a first kiss. A perfect first kiss complete with romantic music playing in the background and the softness of snow falling around us. It was the type of moment poetry was written about and movies were made about. There was a connection between us. A gold thread that drew us close and wound around us. It was more than just chemistry and attraction. It went beyond what my mind could comprehend and straight to my heart like Cupid’s arrow.

And it was the scariest moment of my life.

I was in free fall. Falling for a woman who challenged me to do better and be more. I couldn’t imagine a world without her in it and that was terrifying. I’d built my life on not needing anyone, not relying on anyone. No one had needed me—my money, sure, but not me. Letting someone get this close to the real me was destined to end badly and yet, I couldn’t pull away. Georgie was tugging me out from behind the walls I’d built and I felt suddenly exposed and vulnerable.

I lifted my head, breaking the kiss and watched as her eyes fluttered open.

“We should probably go inside,” I said, my voice rough. “Before your brother sends out a search party.”

“Not yet,” she said, her cold hands cupping my cheeks. “I was wrong about you, Leo.”

“No, you weren’t,” I said. “Everything you said about me was true.”

“Maybe on the outside,” she said. “But that’s not who you are in here.”
She tapped my chest.

“I want that to be true,” I said, gazing down at her and wishing I could be the man she deserved.

“Then make it true.”

She pressed up on her toes and kissed me once more before pulling away slowly.

“I think I need a walk before I go back inside,” she said. “Walk with me?”

“Of course,” I said, tucking her hand in my arm.

She smiled up at me, her lips swollen from our kisses and her cheeks pink. She wrecked me. With just one look, she turned my whole world upside down. One kiss and I knew I would do anything she asked of me. Never had I been so completely enthralled by someone. Never had I been prepared to open myself up to someone or allow them into that part of me I kept hidden from everyone else.

“When can I see you again?” I asked.

“What?” she looked up at me from beneath her lashes.

I stopped walking and turned her toward me. “I want to have dinner with you. After Christmas, obviously, but soon.”

“Okay,” she said, smiling at me. “I’d like that.”

“So it’s a date?” I asked, determined to let her know in no uncertain terms that I did indeed mean a date.

“It’s a date.”

“Perfect,” I said, dropping another kiss on her lips. Now that I had broken that seal and kissed her for the first time, I didn’t know if I could stop. I knew I never wanted to.

“Georgina?” a voice called from the doorway.

“It’s Will,” Georgie whispered, laughing up at my horrified expression.

“I’m here, Will. Leo and I were just getting some air.”

We walked toward him and I tried to look like I had not just been kissing his sister. I gathered from the thunderous look on his face, I failed.

“They’re calling us into dinner,” Will said, holding his arm out to Georgie.

“I’m sure Leo is capable enough to escort me,” she said, not letting go of my arm. “Why don’t you go and escort your wife to dinner?”

Will dragged his eyes from Georgie to me and I swallowed. If he could extract Georgie from my presence without causing a scene, I knew he would.

“Ah, I see you’ve met my new intern,” Freddie said coming up beside Will and slapping him on the shoulder.

“Yes, we’re old acquaintances,” the prince replied through gritted teeth.

“Perfect. Then please come inside and Will, I believe your wife is looking for you. None of us can eat until she does, so hop to before I have a mutiny on my hands.”

Will stalked away after one last, long look at me.

“Thanks,” Georgie said to Freddie, pressing a kiss to his cheek. “You know you’re my favourite, right?”

He winked at Georgie and then narrowed his eyes at me. “Don’t make me regret intervening. Will is my best friend and that makes Georgie my sister by association. I like you, Leo, but if you hurt Georgie I will not hold Will back from crushing you.” His serious tone lightened and he smiled. “Now, let’s eat!”

I huffed out a breath and Georgie laughed beside me as I led her inside and on to the dining room.

CHAPTER 20



Georgina

A soft knock on my door pulled me from the daydream I was indulging in.

“Come in,” I called.

Alyssa stepped through the door and I sat up from where I was lounging on the couch. I hadn’t even changed out of my gown from *Le Réveillon*, I’d been too busy reliving every moment I’d spent with Leo...and the stolen kisses that still tingled on my lips.

“Can’t sleep?” she asked as she came into the room followed by a maid carrying a tray.

I shook my head. “You?”

She shrugged. “Eh, I seem to be perpetually tired these days and yet tonight sleep is elusive. Will flaked right out as soon as his head hit the pillow and there is no way I can sleep now, not with him snoring the way he does.”

I smiled as she instructed the maid to put the tray on the coffee table and then dismissed her.

“Feel like a night cap?” she asked.

“Love one,” I replied.

“We have regular eggnog and unleaded eggnog for me,” Alyssa said as she grimaced. “Although I don’t see the point of having eggnog if it doesn’t have a nice kick of rum in it.”

“I’ll take the regular eggnog so you’re not tempted,” I said with a wink, reaching for the mug.

Alyssa sipped her drink and sat back in the armchair eyeing me over the lip of her mug. “So tell me about Leo,” she said.

I rolled my eyes. “There’s nothing to tell.”

Alyssa smirked. “You’re not allowed to lie to me. I’m your queen. I could have you put in the dungeons,” she said pleasantly.

“Do you even still have dungeons?” I asked.

“Come on, Georgie!” she said, leaning forward and cupping her mug between her hands. “You need to tell me. I thought Will was going to crack a molar or fracture his jaw tonight the way he was gritting his teeth, not to mention the death glares he was aiming at poor Leo. He refused to tell me what his problem was with the guy but it most likely had something to do with the way Leo was looking at you.”

I looked down at my drink and skimmed my fingers along the outside of the mug. “How did he look at me?” I asked.

“Like you were the reason for everything good in his life.”

I sighed and looked up at Alyssa through my lashes. “I don’t know what to do with that,” I said. “Or with all this jumble of emotions I feel inside.”

“Maybe talking will help,” Alyssa said.

“You just want to know the gossip,” I retorted with a crooked smile.

“Well, there is that, but also because you’re my sister and I want to know what’s going on in your life. We hardly see you these days. I know having the duchy and the estate and the business thrust upon you turned your world upside down and it’s a whole lot of work, but you’ve got to make time for fun. Believe me, I know. I also know how hard it is to find that balance when you’re trying to prove yourself to ignorant and overbearing men. But don’t

put the rest of your life on hold until you achieve some intangible point in your life.”

“I know. It’s just...” I turned to look out the dark window. I couldn’t see anything except the reflection of the two of us. “Do you miss Jacob?” I asked softly.

“Every single day,” she replied.

We sat in silence, each lost in our thoughts about the man we’d each shared our life with, albeit in different ways. To Alyssa he was her big brother, to me he was my first love and I thought my forever love.

“Is this about Jacob?” she asked eventually. “Are you burrowing into work to avoid living a life without him?”

“I feel all these things...inside me. And then I feel guilty for feeling them. Jacob was this amazing man with purpose and drive and a social conscience. He made me want to be better and do better. Leo isn’t anything like him, in fact, he is like the complete opposite of Jacob. He’s lazy and arrogant and spoiled and yet...”

“And yet you can’t help but like him.”

I dropped my head. “I’m a horrible person,” I whispered.

“No, you’re not. I loved Jacob too. And I saw him as this perfect man, the perfect brother, the perfect son, and he would have been the perfect king too. Instead, I have to rule in his place and I will never be what he could have been. But that doesn’t make me or my rule less than. It’s just different. You loved Jacob like you could never and will never love another man. It’s just not possible to love two people the same way. That doesn’t mean that it’s not as good or as right. It’s just different. Leo is not Jacob and he never will be. You can’t expect him to be. And that’s okay. And it’s okay for you to have feelings for him. You have room in your heart for more than one love—”

“No one said anything about love,” I said, my stomach turning over at the thought.

“No, not yet maybe, but you yourself said you were beginning to feel

things and those things made you feel guilty. Liking someone else isn't a betrayal of Jacob. There will always be a Jacob shaped part of your heart that you can never fill with anyone or anything else, but that doesn't mean you can't make room for someone else too. It's okay to live your life. It's okay to be happy again. It's okay to love again. Falling in love with someone else doesn't take away from the love you had for Jacob. Falling in love with someone new doesn't mean you love Jacob any less."

"How did you get so smart?" I asked, looking at Alyssa through the tears that were coursing down my cheeks and dripping into the now cold eggnog in my hands.

"I fell in love with your brother," she said. "And he showed me just how much a heart can expand. He proved to me that love is infinite and our capacity to love grows with our acceptance of it. But if you tell him that I will deny it."

I crossed the space between us and hugged Alyssa tight. "Thank you," I whispered. "Thank you for being the best sister ever."

"Back at ya," she replied, squeezing tight.

Leonardo

"SO WHO IS THE GIRL?" RICARDO ASKED, HANDING ME A DRINK BEFORE sliding into the arm chair opposite me.

"Which girl?" I asked, although I knew exactly who he was talking about. The same woman I couldn't get out of my head and who had me completely discombobulated.

Ricardo smirked and sipped his cognac. My movie star brother had been at *Le Réveillon*. He'd obviously seen me go stupid over Georgie—I'm surprised her brother hadn't had me thrown out. We'd left as a family to attend midnight mass, as was our tradition on Christmas Eve, and now the

house was quiet with everyone retiring except for Ricardo and me.

“She’s one of the royals, then?” he asked.

I sighed and sipped my drink before answering. “A duchess. Lady Georgina Darkly, Duchess of Pemberton and sister to Prince Will, the queen’s husband.”

Ricardo whistled softly. “What’s she like?” he asked.

I felt the corners of my mouth lift into a small smile. Thinking of Georgie always made me smile. “Like no one I’ve ever met before.”

“So it’s serious?”

“*Dio*. I don’t know.” I looked at him. “How do I know? How can you tell when it’s something more or just something different? She’s not like the other women I’ve socialised with. She’s not a simpering princess type or a social climber. She doesn’t want anything from me. She doesn’t need me for anything—not to get ahead or to get famous or to buy her expensive things. She challenges me and disapproves of my lifestyle and expects more from me. I can’t get her out of my head but I don’t know if it’s just because she’s so different or because there’s something between us.”

Ricardo stared at me like I was from another planet speaking a weird alien language and I’d just grown a second head.

“What?” I asked, withering under his stare. “Say something. I’m crazy, right? I should just walk away.”

Ricardo slowly shook his head and sipped his drink. “I’ve never known anyone to get under your skin like this,” he said.

Ricardo may be sixteen years older than me, but we were more alike than our other brothers. The main difference being Ricardo’s successful movie career. He got a pass on the family business because he found success early through modelling and then went on to acting. I hadn’t had such a break in my life. I was the eternal disappointment. But despite the different trajectories in our careers, Ricardo lived his personal life much the same as I did—never letting anyone get too close. He dated to be seen on the arm of the

right woman. He socialised with people who could further his career in some way. Everything he did was for appearances, same as me.

“Do you ever get sick of all the superficial relationships?” I asked in a rare moment of honesty with my brother. “Do you ever get lonely? Or want more?”

He inhaled slowly before exhaling with a huff. “Sometimes, but then I take a pretty girl on a date and the feeling goes away.”

I snorted. “I’m being serious here, Ric. Come on. When was the last time you dated a woman just because you enjoyed her company? When was the last time you asked someone out even though they couldn’t do anything for your career?”

Ricardo sat back and contemplated the drink left in his glass. “Secondary school,” he said. “Probably. *Dio*. I don’t even know.”

“So again, I ask, aren’t you sick of living that way? Don’t you want to find someone to spend your life with?”

“*Dio* Leo. I think this duchess has broken you. Are you seriously considering marriage?”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “It’s too soon for that. I barely know her. But the point is, I want to get to know her. I think about her all the time. I make decisions based on what she would think. I mean, the woman is so responsible and hard working I feel guilty whenever I’m around her. She milks her own sheep...by hand. There is nothing about me that impresses her and yet I want to keep trying.”

“I think you’ve made your decision,” Ricardo said. “It sounds to me you already know what you want and now you’re just looking for permission.”

“Maybe,” I replied. “I think I’m worried that she is so incredibly fascinating to me because she is an anomaly in my life. What if the novelty wears off? What if I get into something and then realise that it was the challenge that drew me?”

“The only way to know is to go all in,” he said. “You will never know the

truth if you hold back. If it's the novelty of it or the chase that attracts you, you will soon know. Take away the mystery. Pull back the curtain and if you're still attracted to her then maybe it's real."

"That's quite a gamble to take," I said on a sigh. "I just wish I knew before I showed my hand."

"There are no guarantees, Leo. Not in life, not in business, and especially not in love. What I do know is that if you never try—never reveal your cards—then you will never know."

"Why haven't you ever married, Ricardo?" I asked as he stood.

"Because I've never found anyone who challenges me or expects more from me," he replied, giving me a sad smile. "Good night, little brother. Get some sleep. Things will look better in the morning."

CHAPTER 21



Leonardo

The ringing of my phone woke me. I groaned and rubbed my eyes, squinting at the bright morning light that shone through the window. It had taken far too long to fall asleep last night after talking with Ricardo. I wasn't any clearer on where I should go from here, but I knew I wanted to see Georgie again and maybe test the waters. I wanted to know if there was a chance of something real between us or if it was just the excitement of something new and different.

I reached for the still ringing phone and blinked blearily at the caller I.D. Alberto.

"Pronto."

"Ciao, Leo, sono Alberto."

"Yes, Alberto. Why are you calling? It's Christmas day."

"I haven't heard from you, Leo. My team need to know what's going on. We're ready to start."

"I told you I would speak to you after Christmas," I said, tiredly. I did not want to discuss business with Alberto this morning.

"I just need to give them something, Leo," he said. "They're getting jumpy. If you don't finance us then we need to start all over again looking for

investors and that is going to push back our plans even further.”

“I understand that, Alberto, but it’s Christmas day.”

“All the more reason for you to give us some good news. I’m not trying to pressure you, but we’re getting desperate here.”

I sighed and swung my legs over the side of the bed, dropping my head into my hand. Why was it that when people said ‘no pressure’ that’s exactly what they were causing?

“Look, I’m investigating something that would perhaps be better for you than a straight injection of cash. Are you married to the idea of working out of Milan?”

“We’re all set up here. Moving would take time and money.”

“But what if it was worth your while? I’m working with a company called Monticorp. Have you heard of them?”

“Aren’t they a real estate business? What do they have to do with us and what we want to do?”

“They’re opening up an investment arm and are looking for projects that would benefit Merveille.”

“How can our app be of any interest to them?”

“By having you set up and run it from here,” I replied, getting up and rifling through my drawers for something to wear.

“I don’t know, Leo,” Alberto said. “I’m not sure my team will go for it. I mean, Merveille? It’s barely a blip on the international stage and most people think it’s a French province. Besides, we don’t really want interference from some multi-national corporation. We just need the cash, that’s all. Everything else is covered.”

“It’s a lot of money, Alberto.”

He laughed. “Not to you, my friend. It’s barely a drop in the bucket. Come on Leo. We had a deal. You were all set to invest before you left for that little backwards country.”

“Regardless,” I said, “it is still a lot of money and it would be remiss of

me not to fully weigh the pro and cons of such a large investment. Why don't you email me the prospectus again and I'll have another read over it."

"You're wasting time, Leo. This app is a guaranteed gold mine. The longer you delay the more it puts us behind schedule."

"Just send me the prospectus," I said, losing patience. "I might have my brother look it over and see what he thinks."

"Fine, I'll send it to you, but there is no need to involve your brother. If we'd wanted *L'Ingenuità Corporativa* involved then we would have gone to them directly. I thought you wanted to make a name for yourself outside of the family business? Investing in this app and the company we will build around it will give you everything you need to step out from under the shadow of your family name."

"I have to go, Alberto. My family are expecting me for breakfast. Just send the prospectus and I'll have another look over it. I'll call you when I've made a decision. *Ciao.*"

I ended the call before he could respond and threw my phone on the nightstand before dropping back onto the edge of the bed and burying my face in my hands.

I felt dirty after speaking to Alberto, like I'd been dragged through a cesspool. To my friends I was little more than a wallet or a ladder they could use to climb up to get where they wanted to go. Unfortunately, it was an all too familiar feeling; it only felt odd today because I'd gone almost a week without feeling it. That was how my life and my friends made me feel every day. Spending time with Georgie and Freddie had opened my eyes somewhat but I hadn't really had the revelation until right now. I knew what I preferred, the question was whether it was sustainable. Could I actually live my life like this consistently? Always being challenged and striving for better? It was a big ask, especially when no one had ever had the confidence in me to expect anything of any value to come from my life.

My phone beeped and I cast a cursory look at it. A grin broke across my

face as I saw Georgie's name on the display. I grabbed the phone and clicked open the text message.

Georgie: Merry Christmas.

Leo: Merry Christmas.

Georgie: I hope I didn't wake you. I didn't know if you would be up this early.

Leo: You didn't wake me, but even if you did, I wouldn't mind. It's a nice way to wake up.

I was grinning down at my phone like an idiot. The dirty feeling from earlier was washed away by a single text from Georgie. I couldn't wait to see her again.

Leo: Are we still on for dinner tomorrow night?

Georgie: Definitely. Are you still happy to let me cook you dinner?

Leo: Do you promise not to poison me?

Georgie: Haha very funny.

Leo: I can't wait. Have a nice day with your family.

Georgie: You too.

Georgina

I PUT MY PHONE DOWN AND SIGHED AS I LAID BACK AMONGST THE MOUNTAIN of pillows on my bed. I couldn't help the stupid smile on my face. It was just a text message with a friend and yet it had the power to put me in a great mood.

There was a soft knock on the door before it opened to reveal Chantelle.

"The queen sent word that breakfast will be served in half an hour. Would you like me to help you dress?"

"Thanks Chantelle, but I'm fine. I would kill for a cup of coffee though."

She smiled. "I have some waiting for you in the sitting room."

“Perfect,” I replied, throwing back the covers and sliding out of bed.

Chantelle closed the door and let me dress. Christmas breakfast would be in the palace breakfast room with all the ladies in waiting and their partners. Alyssa liked to have everyone together first thing on Christmas day and then encouraged them to disperse to their relevant family celebrations. The palace ran with minimal staff and those who were tasked to work were generously compensated. The day after Christmas—Boxing Day—was set aside for staff celebrations and only the essential staff were on duty.

I stepped out into the sitting room where a French press and a mug were waiting for me.

“Thank you, Chantelle,” I said, reaching greedily for the mug. “Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas, my lady,” she said with a smile and a curtsy.

“Do you have plans today?”

“My family always have a big Christmas lunch,” she replied.

“Well, I’m not going to need you for the rest of the day so if you want to take off, you can.”

She looked concerned. “Are you sure—”

“Chantelle,” I said with a soft smile. “I don’t have a lady’s maid at home and while I appreciated all your help yesterday and the coffee this morning, I really don’t need you today. Go and have fun with your family. It is Christmas after all.”

“Thank you, my lady,” she said and then disappeared through the servant’s entrance of the room.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Christmas always made me think of my mother and father and Jacob. It was a time to miss those who had been lost and tinged the day with an overlay of melancholy. I waited for the melancholy to come. I waited for the sadness to drag at me and the grief to wrap its arm around me, but...

It was there, of course it was, but it was different. I didn’t want to cringe

from the day like I normally did. I didn't want to hide in my room and avoid all the fun and frivolity of the holiday. In years past it felt wrong to celebrate, especially the year Jacob died. How could I be happy when he was gone? How could I smile and laugh and take joy in the day when he was no longer with us?

No one likes to admit that life goes on. It feels like such sacrilege to admit that we need to go on and get back into life. Those first few months after his death, I felt like I would never know happiness again. I couldn't imagine smiling and god forbid I should hear someone laugh. It seemed so incredibly wrong that the world kept turning and other people went on living when my life seemed to stand still. From the moment I first heard of Jacob's death, I'd felt my life had frozen in place. I was going through the motions, but I wasn't living, not really.

Today I felt different, although with hindsight, I could see that it wasn't the first day I'd felt this way. It was only the first day that I'd acknowledged I felt different. Life had slowly been creeping back in. While I threw myself into work and dedicated my days to making Pemberton Dairies a success, my heart had been healing.

Alyssa talked about a Jacob-shaped hole that would always be in our lives, but as I examined it, I saw that it was more a scar than a hole now. It wasn't ugly but it had changed the contours of my heart and it would always be there as a reminder of the man who had changed me profoundly. My heart had knit itself back together, but it had woven Jacob back into the re-knitting and he would always be there. Alyssa was right. There was room in my heart to love again and it had taken an arrogant, spoiled, beautiful man to show me.

I hugged myself, wrapping my arms tightly around my body as I contemplated the possibility of beginning a new relationship. It was scary—the fear of losing someone and being hurt again was very real—but there was also a tingle of excitement and anticipation.

Leo was not Jacob and he never would be. For the first time, I allowed

myself to be okay with that. Jacob had been special but that didn't mean Leo couldn't be. The love I had for Jacob—and he for me—had been this soft, dreamy thing. It had flowed around us like a delicate perfume, wrapping us in the tender fragrance of it. What I felt when I was with Leo was not like that at all. It was bold and colourful. It didn't so much wrap around me as grab me by the heart and squeeze. I didn't know if it was love, but it was definitely something...something I wanted to explore.

I had been a different person when I was with Jacob. Situations and circumstances had changed me since his death so it was only natural that it would also change the way I loved. It didn't make it any less, it was just different. Just as Alyssa had said. Different wasn't good or bad, it was just... different.

I exhaled and let my arms fall to my sides and a smile to lift my lips. I wiped the tears that had fallen silently from my cheeks. The day looked suddenly brighter and I was excited to step into it.

CHAPTER 22



Georgina

“Thank you for seeing me, Lady Isabella,” I said as I sat in the chair opposite Lady Isabella de Vaughn, chair of the Women’s Caucus and hopefully my saviour. It was Boxing Day and although it was a public holiday, Lady Isabella had agreed to meet with me.

“It’s good to see you again, Lady Georgina,” she replied. “Coffee? Tea?” I shook my head. “No, thank you.”

Lady Isabella dismissed her assistant and then leaned back in her chair and folded her hands in her lap. “What is it I can do for you?” she asked.

I took a breath to settle my nerves and order my racing thoughts before I spoke. “I’m interested in applying for one of the Women in Business grants that your office has available,” I said.

Her eyebrows raised. “You are?”

I nodded. “I would like to expand the dairy. I’ve been developing a sheep milk cheese that I would like to put into full production. The problem is, I need a lot of capital to expand the dairy’s operations to do so. At the moment we are hand milking and using too-small vats for the production process. It takes too long and is far too labour intensive to make the final product profitable.”

She nodded. “Is this the *Bleu Laineux* that you had available at the *Marché de Noël*?”

I nodded. “It is. We have several wheels of it ageing at the moment, but as I mentioned, the cost of production out-prices what we could sell it for.”

“It’s great cheese,” she said and then she leaned forward, resting her arms on the desk. “I must ask, though, why do you need our grant? From all perspectives, Pemberton Dairies is doing well. Can you not simply borrow from a bank or seek out an investor?”

I grimaced. “The bank turned me down,” I said. “They wanted Will to co-sign the loan and this is something I don’t want to involve him in.”

“He doesn’t approve?”

“He doesn’t even know,” I replied with a sigh. “I want this to be my thing, you know? My contribution to what he built. I want to do it on my own and then show him that he left his baby in good hands.”

“But you’ve already done all the hard work—product development, research—and you have a product. Will co-signing a loan at this late stage doesn’t take anything away from what you’ve done.”

“I know. It’s just...I want this to be mine. He built Pemberton Dairies from nothing and I want to show him that I can further build on the foundation without relying on him.”

“I understand,” Lady Isabella said. “I really do. Unfortunately, I can’t help you.”

“You can’t?”

She shook her head. “The grants we have are aimed at helping underprivileged women build sustainable businesses. You are a duchess with an estate and an already thriving business. You don’t qualify for any of our grants.”

I exhaled roughly. “I thought that would be the case,” I said. “I wanted to ask anyway. Is there anyone you know who might be able to help?”

“*L’Ingenuità Corporativa* could be someone you could approach. The

founders are currently in the country and if the rumours I've heard are true, you know their youngest son."

I blushed but didn't look away. "Leo is a recent acquaintance of mine," I said. "But I don't think his family's company is a good fit for me. Aren't they more interested in technology investment?"

"Pemberton Dairies has an impressive record. It might be enough to interest them."

I bit my lip. It didn't feel right, approaching Leo's family for investment. They would probably take a chance on me simply because of who my brother was—if what Leo said about his mother was true. It would almost be like getting Will to co-sign the loan with me. I'd still be trading off his name and position. I didn't want that. And I didn't want Leo to think I was only using him to get to his family. From what he'd told me about his circle of friends, that was all that anyone wanted from him. I was different. I liked Leo for who he was, not what he could do for me.

"No," I said, shaking my head. "It would be too messy to get involved with them. I want to keep this as simple and professional as I can."

"Okay, then what about Lord Frédéric?"

"What about him?" I asked, confused.

"Monticorp are developing an investment arm. Their goal is to invest in local businesses or businesses that would be willing to move to Merveille."

"Really?" I asked, shifting forward on my seat eagerly. "I didn't know that."

"It's still in development, but maybe he would be willing to use you as a test case."

I tapped my chin with my finger as I thought it through. My brother was friends with Freddie—I was friends with Freddie—but would it be crossing a line to go to him and apply for an investment? I could make sure I had all the paperwork in line and present my case professionally. I could tell him that I didn't want any favours. Freddie might come across as a little too casual and

light-hearted in social situations, but I knew he was a businessman at heart. Prime Minister Bingham wouldn't have put him in charge of Monticorp if he thought Freddie wasn't up to the challenge. Not to mention his track record with Avonlea, the company he built and then sold to take over Monticorp.

I stood and stuck my hand across the desk to Lady Isabella. "Thank you," I said. "I think I will go and see Freddie."

Lady Isabella shook my hand and smiled. "I wish you luck," she said. "You're doing good work, Lady Georgina."

"Thank you," I replied before escaping the office with my head full of ideas for my pitch to Freddie. I would need samples. I know Freddie loved our cheese almost as much as Alyssa did, so I would prove to him just how good the cheese was and he couldn't possibly turn me down.

Leonardo

"HOW WAS YOUR CHRISTMAS?" FREDDIE ASKED AS HE BREEZED PAST MY desk.

"Good. Yours?"

"Perfection," he replied with a laugh. "Come on, let's chat."

I got up from my desk and followed him into his office. We sat on the sectional couches near the big picture window that looked down on Calanais.

Freddie called his assistant in and we ordered coffees. When she left, Freddie crossed his ankle on his knee and steepled his fingers in front of him. "Before we talk about business, I think there might be some personal things we need to get out of the way first."

"Is this about Georgie?" I asked, my stomach cramping at the thought that Freddie was going to reprimand me and expect me to walk away from her.

He nodded. "It is about Georgie. I know Will is all riled up about the two of you and I just want to ask—respectfully—what is going on between the

two of you.”

I blew out a breath. “To be honest, I don’t really know,” I replied truthfully. “I don’t know how to classify it. We met completely by accident and Georgie was not at all impressed with me. We were stuck overnight at *Maison de Pemberton* and we got to know one another. I like her. I like the person I am when I’m around her. She’s just not like anyone else I’ve ever been attracted to.”

“I know the feeling,” Freddie said with a wistful smile. “Alex wasn’t exactly enamoured with me when we first met.” He took a breath before he continued. “Georgie has been through a lot.”

“She told me about Jacob,” I said quietly.

Freddie’s eyebrows popped up. “She did?”

I nodded. “I know she’s been hurt and she’s thrown herself into work to forget the pain. But she seems to enjoy spending time with me as much as I like spending time with her. There’s something special about her.”

Freddie grinned at me. “You have eased my concerns,” he said. “I will try and talk Will off the ledge on your behalf.”

I chuckled with relief. “Thank you.”

Freddie clapped his hands together. “Now. What do you have for me?”

I launched into a description of Alberto’s app. Even as the words crossed my lips, I heard just how ridiculous the whole thing sounded. I knew it was a bit of fluff before this, but now I was seriously questioning if I wanted my name associated with it. My priorities had changed. Getting my name mentioned in the media was no longer my goal. It was a little disconcerting to take a step back from my life and see it from an outsider’s perspective. Was it any wonder that Georgie had found me so distasteful in the beginning?

“So it’s an app that lets you post awful things about your ex online where everyone can see it?”

I nodded and grimaced. “See it, comment on it, and add to the profile.”

“And you think this is something worth investing in?” he asked, leaning

back and examining me.

“I was going to invest my own money in it,” I admitted. “Alberto is a friend. He asked me to help get it off the ground.”

“And how does he feel about relocating to Merveille...if we were to decide to invest?”

“He wasn’t keen,” I replied. “But I think he could be convinced.”

Freddie was silent for a moment and I couldn’t help but shift in my seat. Having spoken the whole idea out loud again, I no longer felt the draw to it that I’d originally had. How strange that in little under a week so much had shifted in my life and my priorities.

“Tell me what your gut feeling is,” he said.

“Originally, I thought this idea was brilliant...not the app itself, but the stir it would cause in the media. It would get the developers names in the media, as well as mine. I wasn’t concerned about the negative publicity and I honestly didn’t think the app would last long, but the after-effects would be long-lasting and far-reaching.”

“And now?”

“Now I’m not so sure that the negative press would be all that good. I think the kinds of products you want to attract to Merveille are science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.”

“STEM,” Freddie said.

I nodded. “Exactly. This is where the future is headed and we know that there aren’t nearly enough young people studying these subjects for the demands of our not-so-distant future. Having an app company here in Merveille would be great for the country and your program.”

“I agree,” Freddie said. “But do you think your friend, Alberto, and his team are the app development company we should invest in?”

“I want to say yes,” I admitted, “but I’m concerned that it is only out of loyalty to our friendship. I have their prospectus if you are interested in reading through it.”

Freddie nodded again. “Send it to me. Do you know if they have plans for any other apps, or are they banking on this one only?”

“I know he’s working with a team who have some undeveloped ideas but I’m not sure what they are or how close to development they are with them.”

“See if you can find out and send it to me when—if—you get it.”

“No problem,” I replied.

“I also want you to look at some businesses here in Merveille who are already established and looking for investment to help them to expand into other markets. They don’t have to be STEM. I want to have a range of different investments in different industries.”

“I can do that,” I replied.

“Excellent.”

Freddie stood and moved to his desk and I was dismissed. My first task would be to contact Alberto and find out just how serious he was about his app and whether he was prepared to pivot. The more I thought about it, the more I realised that his original app idea was not a good fit for me or Monticorp. Now I just needed to find out what that would mean for our friendship.

CHAPTER 23



Leonardo

I turned off the road and into the plowed driveway of *Maison de Pemberton*. I wasn't in my Ferrari, even though it had been repaired and returned to me. Instead I drove a sensible SUV—a far more suitable car for the road conditions. There hadn't been any more snow storms since the one that brought Georgie into my life, but there had been snow and driving a four-wheel drive car was just the smart thing to do.

I was looking forward to spending some time with Georgie but I wasn't exactly in the best of moods to be doing so. I'd taken Freddie's suggestions and contacted Alberto regarding other app development options and the phone call had not gone well. I was left with the unwelcome and hurtful discovery that Alberto thought very little of me as a person and only saw a walking dollar sign when he looked at me. What would have never upset me before was now burrowed into my newly exposed and fragile heart.

The changes in me were good but I still felt a little like a new born foal finding his legs. My first foray into being a real businessman had been slapped back and it still stung. It was a hard realisation to find out you were little more than a laughing stock among your friends.

I pulled the car to a stop in front of the porch and looked at the warm

glow from the lights inside. It really was a magnificent house or, rather, it could be if it was restored. It had a presence and I could imagine just how amazing it would be if Georgie ever got around to fixing it up.

I got out of the car and jogged up the stairs to the front door. I knocked and waited, hearing her footsteps as she approached. Despite my bad mood, the corner of my mouth lifted in an anticipatory smile at seeing her. She was exactly what I needed to wipe away the bad mood that I'd fallen into thanks to Alberto.

"Hi," she said, opening the door and grinning up at me.

She wore white jeans that moulded to her legs and her feet were bare, her toes painted a soft pink that matched the fluffy sweater she wore. Her blonde hair fell around her face in a tumble of loose curls and I didn't think I'd seen anything prettier.

"Hi," I said. I didn't over think it, I simply leaned down and brushed my lips across hers.

I lifted my head and watched as her eyes fluttered open. Her gaze was soft and I felt my shoulders relax as the last of the weight from the day fell away.

"Come in," she said, stepping back and giving me access to the foyer.

She closed the door and wove her fingers through mine, leading me down the hall toward the big kitchen.

"I hope you don't mind," she said as we stepped across the threshold. "I thought we could eat in here tonight."

"I don't mind at all," I replied, unwinding the scarf from around my neck and removing my overcoat. She took them from me and hung them on a coat rack near the door.

"Drink?" she asked, holding up a bottle of wine.

"Please," I said, reaching for the glass she poured.

I sipped the dark red wine and looked around the room. It looked different from the last time I'd been in here, not that I'd really taken much

notice the first time. I'd been too preoccupied by the cold and my ruined shoes and how rundown the place looked. Now that I saw it again I realised it wasn't so much rundown and well lived in and homey. I'd spent the majority of my life bouncing from one professionally designed yet impersonal space to another. This was Georgie's home and that was what made it feel different.

"I hope you like *bœuf à la Bourguignonne*."

"It sounds delicious," I replied taking a seat in one of the armchairs by the fire to watch her as she bustled around the kitchen.

It was all so...domestic. I didn't think I'd ever sat in someone's kitchen and watched them cook before in my entire life. It was fascinating. Georgie pulled a black and white polka dot apron over her head and stirred whatever she had bubbling on the stove. It smelled divine and my stomach growled in appreciation and anticipation.

"How was your day?" she asked when she turned from the stove and took a sip from her own glass.

I sighed. "Good."

"Good? That didn't sound exactly like a good kind of sigh."

"No, but I'm feeling much better now that I've seen you," I said, and her cheeks went pink under my compliment.

"So not a good day then? Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not really," I said. "Tell me about your day."

She huffed out a breath. "I had a mixed bag kind of day." I raised an eyebrow in question. "A mixture of good and bad news."

"Nothing serious, I hope?"

"Let's just say that I'm hoping for a positive outcome," she replied.

"Positive is always better than negative," I said.

"Positive is *always* better than negative," she agreed. "Now come and take a seat, I think our dinner is ready."

I crossed to the table and took a seat where she directed me. She pulled out a loaf of bread from the oven and the warm, yeasty smell hit my nose and

made the rumbling in my stomach louder. I took her hand before she could move back to the stove and tugged her down on my lap, pressing another kiss to her lips.

“I’m so glad you invited me for dinner,” I said.

Georgie smiled up at me. “I’m so glad you came.”

I kissed her once again, taking my time and relishing the way she sighed into me. My stomach chose that moment to register its complaint at having to wait and she broke the kiss with a smile.

“I think it’s time I fed you.”

DINNER WAS DELICIOUS; SIMPLE, RUSTIC AND FULL OF FLAVOUR, AND GEORGIE was the perfect dinner companion. We sat kitty-corner and I couldn’t stop myself from reaching out and touching her whenever I could. We lingered over dessert—a chocolate pudding with fresh cream from the dairy—and our wine. It was as if we were the only two people in the world. I couldn’t remember ever enjoying myself so much, unless it was another time when I had been with Georgie. I’d worried that the novelty of Georgie would wear off, but the more I got to know her, the more I wanted to know. I wanted to know everything about her, every childhood memory she had, everything she was thinking and all the plans she had for the future. I couldn’t imagine ever getting tired of listening to her talk.

A knock on the back door interrupted us and Georgie got up to answer it with an apology to me.

“Sorry. I have a foreman over at the dairy but I told him to let me know if there were any issues.”

“It’s fine,” I replied, finishing my wine.

Georgie stepped out of the kitchen and into the mud room to answer the door. I got up and started collecting the dishes off the table. I had never cleared a table before and wasn’t quite sure what the protocol was.

I could hear voices through the open door as I transferred the dishes from the table to the sink and I paused to listen. Whoever Georgie was talking to sounded upset. I was prepared to step in if need be but I didn't want to make a fool of myself so I eavesdropped instead.

"It's going to be fine," I heard Georgie say.

"I don't think it will last another week, my lady. If we don't get some money to fix it soon everything we've been working for will be ruined, not to mention everything Will built."

"Michael calm down. I don't think it's as dire as all that. We'll get Carl out to look at it tomorrow and see if he can't fashion a patch for it until the money comes through."

"Are you sure you're even going to get the money? I know the bank turned you down."

"Michael, trust me, please. I have a plan. I promise you we will have the money by the new year. I guarantee it."

The meal in my stomach curdled as I listened to the conversation between Georgie and her foreman. Georgie needed money. A lot of money by the sounds of it, and soon. Is that what this dinner invitation had been all about? Is this why she had been cultivating a relationship with me?

I didn't want to believe it, but what else was I supposed to think? The day we met she didn't have a single nice thing to say to me...not until she found out who I was. This whole time I thought she had been getting to know me because she liked me but she was no better than all the other people in my life. She wanted money and she knew I was a soft touch. All she needed to do was bat her eyelashes at me and smile pretty and I would be bending over backwards to do whatever she wanted.

I rubbed my chest as pain bloomed behind my sternum. I'd been an idiot. I'd fallen for her, thinking that she felt the same for me. I should have known better. No one could ever love me, wasn't that the lesson I'd been learning over and over again throughout my life? Georgie made me believe that I had

value beyond dollars and spreadsheets and yet it was all fake, just another ploy to use me the way Alberto was trying to use me. Hadn't I known it was too good to be true that someone like Georgina Darkly would fall for someone like me?

The door closed and Georgie stepped back into the kitchen, a worried frown on her face.

"Sorry," she said, shaking her head and then smiling up at me brightly. "What are you doing? You didn't need to clear the dishes."

"What was that all about?" I asked, my voice cold.

Her eyes widened in surprise at my tone and she took on a cautious look. "There is a problem with the cooling system in the dairy," she replied carefully.

"How much?"

"What?"

"How much do you need to fix it?"

"I don't have an estimate yet, not that it's any of your business."

"No? Isn't that why you invited me to dinner?" I asked, my voice devoid of emotion. "Isn't that what all of this has been about?"

"What in Hades are you talking about?" she asked, fire snapping in her eyes. "Just what are you accusing me of?"

"Are you really going to stand there and tell me that you didn't set this whole thing up?" I snapped. "You know who I am and the amount of money I have to throw around. You pulled me in, showed me the dairy, talked to me about your new project. Slowly drawing me into your web and then letting me kiss you at *Le Réveillon*. And dinner tonight, a cosy little meal between the two of us only to be interrupted by your foreman with a problem. What happens next, Georgie? How were you going to play it?"

"Are you serious right now?" she yelled. "Are you actually accusing me of only inviting you here to get money from you?"

"I think the whole thing speaks for itself," I replied. "I'm here. I overhear

about your financial difficulties and because I'm so blinded by your beauty and half way to falling in love with you, you know that I will want to make all your problems go away with my fat wallet. And then what? We see each other for a while—just in case you need more money—and then when you're all set, you tell me it's not working out."

Georgie's face went white as I spoke and for a moment, I thought I saw a flash of hurt cross her face but it was quickly replaced by anger.

"Get out of my house," she said, her voice low and dangerous. "Get out of my sight before I have you removed."

"Don't worry, I'm going. I think we're all done here."

I grabbed my coat and scarf and stalked from the kitchen, my anger keeping me warm as I stepped into the cold night. I drove away without looking back.

CHAPTER 24



Georgina

I stood in the kitchen surrounded by the remnants of dinner and wondered what-in-all-that-is-holy went wrong. One moment we were having a nice dinner and I was letting myself fall for him and the next moment he was yelling at me and accusing me of using him before storming out.

I slumped into the nearest chair and rested my head on the table. Wow, that hurt. I rubbed a spot on my chest trying to ease the ache there. Although logically I could understand the order of events, and I could even acknowledge the reason for Leo's over-reaction, it didn't make it hurt any less.

I knew this would happen. I knew that as soon as I opened my heart up to someone, everything would go wrong. Hadn't I experienced the same thing twice now? Just when I was falling for Jordan, he showed his true colours and nearly ruined my life. It took a long time to learn to trust again and then I fell in love with Jacob.

My heart broke all over again. Jacob. Jacob had helped me find my way after Jordan tore my world apart. He'd helped me rebuild and gave me hope in a future. I fell for him hard. I'd had no choice in it. It was like he was the other half of my soul. Everything was just so right and perfect and...

I felt the warm splash of tears as they dripped from my chin onto my hands. The universe was conspiring against me. Every single time I gave a piece of my heart away, the universe went and ripped it from my chest. I should never have believed that I could make a new life without Jacob in it. He was my one chance at love and Jordan had taken him from me, just like he'd tried to take everything else from me. Now the universe had taken the last little bit of my heart.

I sniffed back the tears and sat up. I refused to go back to that broken girl I was. I refused to let this beat me again. If I was meant to do life alone then I would. I was stronger now and my strength had been forged in the fire. Leo would not break me. Leo would not take from me everything I had fought for. I had been to the dark place and crawled my way out of it. I could do it again.

If Leo could so easily accuse me of only wanting him for his money, then he hadn't known me at all. I wiped my face free of tears and let the indignant anger warm me. It was far better to be angry than heartbroken.

I was angry that he could dismiss everything that happened between us as a simple five point plan to get my hands on his money. I was angry that he would lump me in with his other, parasitic, so-called friends. I was angry that he obviously thought so little of me. I was ready to give him my heart and he thought I was working an angle.

Well, I didn't need him. I didn't need him or his money. When I told Michael I had a plan, it had nothing to do with seducing Leo into opening his wallet. I did have a plan. This dairy and this estate meant everything to me... they were all I had left of my family's legacy. I was going to find a way to not only hold onto what I had but also make it better and I wouldn't need Leo to do it.

“HEY,” I SAID, STEPPING INTO ALYSSA’S OFFICE. “DO YOU HAVE A MINUTE TO

talk?”

Alyssa looked up from her desk and smiled. “If Priscilla let you past her desk then I must have some time,” she said, getting up from her chair. “Let’s sit over here. Do you want tea?”

I shook my head and sat down on a floral armchair. Alyssa ordered herself some tea through the intercom before joining me.

“So what do you need?” she asked.

“Before I tell you, can you promise to not tell Will?”

“Is this about Leo?” she asked with a gleeful smile.

Hearing his name still hurt. I swallowed and shook my head. I took a breath before answering because I wasn’t quite sure my voice wouldn’t crack. When I thought I was ready, I cleared my throat.

“No,” I said. “Leo and I are...” I swallowed again. “We’re over,” I said in a rush. “I need some advice about the dairy.”

Alyssa opened her mouth to speak but was interrupted by Priscilla entering the office with her tea. She waited for Priscilla to leave before speaking.

“If this is about the dairy, why do you need my help and not Will’s?”

“I have plans to expand the dairy and I’m not ready to tell Will yet. I want to get it all in place first to show him I can do it.”

“Honey, he knows you can do it. He wouldn’t have handed everything over to you if he didn’t think you would do a good job.”

“I know, but I just...I want this to be my contribution to it without his help. Does that make sense? I know I sound stubborn, but it really means a lot to me.”

“I get it,” she said and I knew she would understand. Alyssa had stepped into her father’s shoes when he died. Jacob was supposed to have been king after their father passed, but he never got the chance. Alyssa had fought for her right to rule and she understood how important it was to create her own legacy. “So what do you need my help with?”

“I want to apply for one of Freddie’s investment opportunities.”

“You need money?”

I held up my hand to stop her from opening the crown’s treasury to me.

“I need investment, not a hand out. I’ve already spoken with Lady Isabella and I don’t qualify for the grants she has on offer. She suggested I approach Freddie.” I pulled out the business plan I had drawn up and handed it over to Alyssa. “This is my proposal. I was wondering if you could read over it and tell me if it is okay. I’ve read it so many times now and I can’t tell if it’s good or bad.”

She took the folder from me and flicked through it. “Are you sure you don’t want Will to cast his eye over it? He knows far more about this than I do. He’d be able to help you with all the technical details.”

“I don’t need help with the technical details,” I said, a little annoyed. “I have Michael to help me with what I don’t already know. I just need someone to read it from a business perspective and tell me if I make a compelling enough argument and a viable investment contender.”

Alyssa sighed. “Okay. Leave it with me. I’ll read over it and let you know what I think.”

I bit my lip. “There’s just one thing,” I said.

“What?” she asked, suspicious.

“I have an appointment with Freddie tomorrow.”

Alyssa sighed and rolled her eyes. “Fine. I’ll read over it in my lunch break. I don’t need to eat, anyway. It’s not like I’m carrying the next queen of Merveille or anything.”

I squealed and jumped up to hug her. “You’re having a girl?”

“We don’t know yet,” she said, “but I like to think that our first born will be a girl. I would enjoy starting a new tradition where the women lead the country instead of the men.”

I hugged her once more and then started to head for the door. “So, I’ll leave you to it—”

“Where do you think you’re going?” she asked and I stopped.

“I’m sure you’re busy—”

“Nope. If there was something more pressing then Priscilla would be banging on my door. Now sit back down and tell me what happened with Leo. Do I need to send Benjamin out after him?”

I slumped back into the chair. I knew there was a chance I’d have to tell Alyssa all about the disastrous dinner with Leo. I was hoping to distract her before she could interrogate me, but no such luck.

“We just didn’t work out. That’s all,” I said.

“I don’t believe you. Something happened. You look sad Georgie. Heartbroken. Talk to me.”

I tipped my head back and stared at the ceiling. “I thought things were going great,” I eventually said, not looking at her. “I thought there might actually be a chance for us, you know? But he didn’t feel the same way about me.”

“I would argue that point,” she said. “I saw the way he looked at you.”

“Yeah well that’s not the impression I got when he accused me of only being interested in him for his family’s money.”

“What?”

I sighed. “He came over for dinner. We had a really great time, or so I thought. Michael interrupted us because there was a problem with the cooling system at the dairy. When I came back inside after talking through some possible solutions with Michael, Leo was all up in arms about me using him to get the money I needed for the dairy.”

“You know that he is surrounded by people who only ever want something from him.”

“I do know that, but how do you know? You’ve never even spoken to him.”

Alyssa shrugged. “When the sister of the Prince of Merveille is interested in someone, I need to know who that someone is. I had Benjamin run a

background check.”

“Seriously? Between you and Will I’m surprised anyone wants anything to do with me at all.”

“Calm down. It’s not like that. Will was worried that he was some playboy who just wanted to tick ‘duchess’ off his bucket list and I was concerned that maybe his family weren’t all they said they were. We were wrong on both counts. He has made some unfortunate choices in friends and done some pretty stupid things to grab media attention but apart from that he’s harmless.”

“Not so harmless,” I said miserably. “He hurt me.”

Alyssa reached across the space between us and covered my hand with hers. “And I bet he’s hurting too. Give him some time. He overheard you and Michael talking and jumped to the wrong conclusion, but he knows you—or I’d like to think he knows you—and he’s probably already realising that he was wrong.”

“Then why hasn’t he called?”

“Because men can be a little dense sometimes, especially when their pride is involved.”

CHAPTER 25



Georgina

I thanked Freddie’s PA before stepping across the threshold to his office. He looked up from his desk and smiled. Freddie had a way of making a person feel like they were the most important thing in his day, even if you were little more than the annoying little sister of his best friend.

“Lady Georgina,” he said, getting up from his desk and stepping toward me. “To what do I owe this lovely surprise?”

He took one of my hands—the one not holding a picnic basket—in his and kissed both my cheeks before leading me over to a comfortable arrangement of chairs. He didn’t mention the basket or why I was carrying it.

“I hope I’m not interrupting you,” I said, nervous now that I was there. I shouldn’t be worried about meeting with Freddie, I’d known him my whole life, and yet I could feel the anxiety bubble under my skin. I set the basket on the floor beside my chair and sat, smoothing out my skirt.

“Of course not. Tea? Coffee?”

I shook my head. “No, thanks.”

He nodded and settled into his chair, crossing his ankle over his knee casually and looking at me with kind eyes and a small smile. “How are you? I’ve been hearing some really good things about Pemberton Dairies.”

I returned his smile. “I’m good,” I lied. He didn’t need to know that his intern had ripped my already bruised and battered heart from my chest and stomped all over it. “Pemberton Dairies is doing well, which is actually why I’m here.”

He raised his eyebrows at me in surprise. “How can I help?”

I exhaled a slow breath. “I would like to apply for one of your investment grants,” I said, turning to the picnic basket I’d brought with me. I opened the lid and removed the small platter of cheese and crackers that I’d brought with me. I set it all on the table and then looked up at him. He didn’t say anything, but he looked intrigued. “This is a new product we’re producing,” I said, trying to remember the words of my spiel. “This is *Bleu Laineux* and *Bleu Laineux Doux*. They are both made from sheep milk. We have been developing this product over the last twelve months with a small herd of sheep. Please, try it.” I waited for Freddie to help himself to the cheese and tried not to fidget. He didn’t give anything away by his expression, but he wasn’t spitting it out either.

“Currently the production has been done primarily by hand. Although we have milking machines for the cows, they are unsuitable for the sheep, so each sheep needs to be milked by me or one of my employees.”

“You’re hand-milking sheep?” Freddie asked, his tone curious.

I nodded. “I and a few others are, yes. We’ve also had to repurpose some of the other equipment we use for our other cheeses to make the product before you today. Although this has been sufficient for the initial testing stages, it is not suitable for long-term commercial production. Currently the costs involved in producing the *Bleu Laineux* make it unprofitable. To expand our product range into producing this cheese commercially, we need new equipment and a larger herd of sheep.”

“And you need an injection of funds to purchase the new equipment and livestock,” Freddie said.

“Yes.” I nodded, trying not to let my nerves show. “I have already spoken

to Lady Isabella from the Women's Caucus, but I don't qualify for the Women in Business grants they offer. I was hoping I would be a good fit for Monticorp."

"I see," he said, still not giving anything away.

I pulled the prepared prospectus from the basket and handed it over to him. "I want to be completely transparent with you," I said. "These are the financials for the last few years of Pemberton Dairies. You can see that we have made consistent growth, which has not slowed down since Will transferred the company to me. We have significant international contracts for our traditional cheeses, ones I believe would be interested in taking on the new range. We have a reputation for artisan cheeses of impeccable quality and I can assure you the *Bleu Laineux* won't be any different."

"This is really impressive, Georgie," Freddie said as he flipped through the prospectus. "Were you aware that I was one of Will's early investors?"

I smiled and nodded. "Yes, but I only found out recently."

"I can see that my initial confidence in him was warranted." He lifted his head to me. "And I see that you are just like him."

I smiled shyly. It was the best compliment he could have given me. I had always seen Will as this strong, invincible man who didn't let anything bring him down. By comparison, I'd felt weak and unable to fight my own battles. To hear of someone seeing the same positive attributes in me that defined Will gave me a confidence that I had been lacking.

"We have a few other applications to go through," Freddie said. "And although I will be included in the final decision, I won't be the only one. There are other people that have to read through this and make their own minds up about which applications should be pursued."

My confidence dipped at his words. I suppose part of me was hoping that Freddie would invest in me because of who I was and that shocked me and then made me feel guilty. Hadn't I been telling everyone I wanted to do this on my own merits and not because of who I was or who I was related to?

Maybe I wasn't as independent as I thought I was.

I pasted a smile on my face and nodded at Freddie. "I understand," I said. I began to clear away the samples I'd brought when Freddie's voice stopped me.

"Would you mind leaving that here with me?" he asked with a crooked grin. "It really is quite delicious."

"No problem," I said, returning his grin. Maybe my proposal wasn't dead in the water yet.

Leonardo

I STOPPED OUTSIDE FREDDIE'S DOOR WHEN I HEARD HER VOICE. I KNEW IT was her even if I couldn't hear what they were saying. My heart squeezed in my chest. It had been a few days since I'd stormed out of her kitchen so indignant and wrapped up in my own rage. I'd been convinced that she'd been just using me like everyone else. Lying on my bed later that night, unable to sleep, I wondered if I'd been wrong.

But I'd heard her tell her manager that she had a plan. It was only natural to assume that seducing me was that plan. She had me wrapped around her little finger and if she'd asked for the money, I would have opened my wallet and not given it another thought.

But she didn't ask. Instead, she was manipulating me...wasn't she?

The door opened before I could answer my own question and then there she was, in front of me. She hugged Freddie, not yet having seen me, and I took in every single little detail about her greedily. My head might have decided she was not the woman for me, but my heart hadn't yet given up hope.

She turned and our eyes collided. The warmth in her blue ones fading to an icy cold as the smile fell from her face. She walked past me without even a

backward glance. And I knew she didn't look back at me because I watched her the whole way down the hall until she turned the corner out of sight.

"Trouble in paradise?" Freddie asked, clapping me on the shoulder.

"What was she doing here?" I asked, still looking down the hall to the last place I'd seen her.

"She was applying for one of our investment grants."

I turned around slowly to look Freddie in the eye. "What?"

He slapped a folder against my midsection and stepped away from the doorway, motioning me in. "Have a look for yourself. It looks like she's been working on it for a while," he said, and every word was like a little knife to my heart. This was her plan? Applying for investment with Monticorp? Not fleecing me?

Freddie sat down in an armchair and reached forward to smear some cheese on a cracker. "Have you tried this?" he asked. "It's kind of incredible."

"I know," I said, my knees melting as I sat in an armchair opposite Freddie. I flipped through the prospectus and with each page I knew I'd made a mistake. My own hurt and insecurity had sabotaged one of the best relationships I'd ever had. The only relationship I'd ever had.

"What do you think?" Freddie asked.

"Huh?"

He nodded toward the folder in my hands. "What do you think? It dovetails nicely into our goals. It's an established business with a proven record that not only employs local people but also equips them and supports them in their own micro businesses."

"It does?" I asked stupidly.

"Georgie doesn't produce all the milk herself," he said. "She has her own herd of course, but all the farmers in her duchy also work with her. They farm the Pemberton Jersey and Georgie buys their milk. They work as a syndicate."

“I didn’t know that,” I said, feeling stupid.

“I assume her plan is to encourage her farmers to also start stocking sheep, but that will probably be some ways off. She’ll want to establish her own herd first and prove to the other farmers it can be done.”

“Yeah,” I said, my mind spinning.

“Are you okay, Leo?” Freddie asked. “You look a little pale.”

“I think I made a big mistake,” I replied, slumping back in the chair and looking at Freddie across the coffee table that separated them. “I accused Georgie of only wanting to get to know me because of my trust fund.”

“What?” Freddie looked amused and then horrified. “Seriously?”

I closed my eyes and winced. “I overheard her talking to her foreman about having a plan to get the money they needed. I assumed she meant me.”

“You do realise who her brother is, right?” Freddie asked. “I mean, if she was the type to just want you for your money, don’t you think it would have been easier for her to approach her brother for it? I mean, he has the ear of the queen, he could get her whatever she wanted.”

“I’m an idiot,” I said, squeezing my eyes shut as I massaged the bridge of my nose.

“Not going to argue with you there,” Freddie said. “So what are you going to do now?”

“You saw the way she looked at me,” I said, opening my eyes. “I think I’ve ruined any chance I ever had with her.”

“So you’re just going to give up without even trying?”

Was I? Every time something hard came up in my life I walked away. It was why I didn’t get close to people, because I knew one day I would have to walk away. It was easier to walk away if you weren’t emotionally invested in someone. Would I do the same thing this time? Would I walk away from the best thing to ever happen to me because it might be too hard to fix? Did I have a choice?

“I don’t know how to fix this,” I said.

“You might start with an apology,” Freddie advised. “Then there’s flowers, chocolates, shiny, sparkly things.”

“Is that how you won Alex?” I asked. Freddie had told me a little bit about his not-so-smooth courtship of Alex.

He smiled affectionately as he shook his head. “Alex would have thrown all that stuff back at me,” he said. “I needed to get creative with her. I needed to work out what she needed, who she needed me to be, and then I just became that man.”

“So the question is,” I mused, “who does Georgie need me to be?”

CHAPTER 26



Leonardo

“**A**lberto, listen to me,” I said trying to calm my ‘friend’ down. Alberto had not taken the news well that his ‘Rate My Ex’ app wouldn’t be funded by me or by Monticorp.

“I don’t know what else there is for you to say,” Alberto said.

“The app you proposed is just not a good fit for us but we do want to work with you. Surely you have something else? You have an entire team of app developers, you can’t tell me that you don’t have something else you’ve been kicking around.”

He exhaled roughly and it whistled through the phone. “There is something,” he finally said, “but I didn’t think it would be something you would be interested in. It’s more expensive and won’t garner near as much media coverage as ‘Rate My Ex.’”

“That’s not so important to me anymore,” I said, realising it was the truth. “Just give me something to present to my boss.”

“It’s a medical app,” he said. “The plan was to finance it with the profits from the other app.”

“You might not need to do that now,” I said. “Tell me what it is.”

Alberto proceeded to tell me about the diabetic helper app they had been

developing. It synced with personal fitness devices, such as Fitbits and Apple watches, and could also send updates to the user's doctor. It was so completely different to the 'Rate My Ex' app that I wondered if I even really knew Alberto at all. Why hadn't he approached me with this idea instead of the other stupid one?

"That's sounds great," I said when he finished his explanation. "Email me the proposal. My boss wants to make an announcement right after New Year's and I think he'll be really interested in this."

"But it means we all have to move to Merveille," Alberto said.

"It does, but I don't think you will find it as much of a hardship as you think," I said with a smile even though Alberto couldn't see me.

"You'll let me know?" Alberto asked.

"The minute I know," I assured him.

I signed off and leaned back in my chair, staring at the ceiling. It was pretty amazing what a broken heart could do to a man. I was the last one still in the office, not something that had ever happened before in the history of my working life. It was dark outside and most people were still getting over their Christmas hangovers and yet here I was, working. Even my father and brother noticed my new dedication.

Unfortunately, my dedication to work had little to do with work and a whole lot to do with trying to drown out the thoughts of Georgie. How could someone come to mean so much to me in such a short amount of time? It didn't seem possible that a chance meeting could uproot my life so completely. If someone told me two weeks ago that I would be burying myself in paperwork in an attempt to numb my broken heart I would have laughed in their face. I didn't fall in love and I certainly didn't fall in love within a couple of weeks. It just wasn't possible.

And yet...

And yet here I was, mourning a relationship that barely had time to begin. Georgie had left an indelible mark on me and I didn't think I would ever be

free of it.

“What are you still doing here?” Freddie asked, walking into the office where I’d set up my home away from home.

“I was just talking to Alberto,” I replied, stretching. “He’s got an app idea that I think you’ll like.”

Freddie sat on the corner of my desk and looked at me, his brows pulled together. “You want me to go with this friend of yours? Not Georgie?”

I blew out a breath. “Yes, but hear me out.”

“Okay,” he said with a nod. I liked that about Freddie. He was prepared to listen to me instead of just shooting me down.

“This is a test case and will determine how the program moves forward,” I said and Freddie nodded. “This is going to get a lot of media attention and I think it will play better in the media if you finance someone you’re not intricately connected with.”

“So Georgie gets shafted because of my relationship with her and Will.”

I shook my head. “I want to finance Georgie,” I said. “Me, personally.”

“You can’t buy her,” Freddie cautioned.

“That’s not what I’m trying to do,” I said. I’d spent the last few sleepless nights working this out in my head. “I believe in her and what she’s trying to do and I want to invest in that. But it will be strictly professional and absolutely no strings attached. I want her to know that I have faith in her and that I’m prepared to put my money where my mouth is.”

“And if she takes the money but rejects you?”

I knew it was a distinct possibility and I was prepared for it...mostly. “No strings,” I reiterated. “She can take the money and have nothing else to do with me. I already have an umbrella company that can administer the investment. She doesn’t even have to see me if she doesn’t want to.”

“It’s a bold move,” he said and then nodded. “I like it.”

I smiled—a real smile this time—and felt a tiny little glimmer of hope. As grand gestures went, it was expensive with very little chance of success,

but it was all I had. I may crash and burn completely. She might reject me and the money both out of spite, but it was a chance I was willing to take. Not just for me, but for her and Freddie too. The public needed to see that this initiative of Freddie's was purely motivated and would benefit all the people of Merveille, not just the already titled peers. And Georgie needed to know that she was just as capable and worthy of investment as her brother had been. If it won him the tiniest bit of favour with her then it was worth it.

Georgina

“THANKS FOR COMING IN GEORGIE,” FREDDIE SAID AS I CROSSED THE OFFICE to take a seat in front of the big desk.

“I didn't expect to hear from you for another few weeks,” I said, feeling anxious. I didn't know if this being decided so quickly was a good thing or a bad thing for me and the dairy.

“Things are progressing faster than we originally planned. The announcement has been moved up to the first day of business after New Year's and I wanted you to hear it from me first.”

It didn't sound good and already my stomach had begun to free-fall. “You decided against investing in the dairy,” she said.

Freddie exhaled roughly and nodded. “We did, but I want you to know that it wasn't because your proposal wasn't strong.”

I wasn't sure what to say or do. I'd been counting on that money—had already spent it if I was honest. I'd walked away from the meeting with Freddie thinking I was a shoo-in, if only because we had history. Which was naïve of me. Freddie was a businessman, he didn't get where he was by investing with his heart and not his head.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

I nodded, not sure if I could speak.

“It’s not all bad news,” he said.

“No?” I lifted my head to him.

He smiled kindly at me. “There is someone interested in investing,” he replied.

“Please tell me you didn’t tell Will,” I groaned.

“I didn’t tell Will,” he replied with a smirk. “The investor is actually here, waiting to speak to you.”

“What?”

“Just head down to the conference room. All will be revealed.”

I stood and left his office, not understanding what was happening. Freddie was turning me down but he’d called in a favour to get me financed anyway? I wasn’t sure if I should be excited or humiliated.

I stepped into the conference room and froze when I saw who was waiting for me.

“Georgie,” he whispered, and the sound of my name on his lips caused a tremor to vibrate through my body. A tremor I fiercely tried to smother.

“Why are you here?” I asked, glad that my voice didn’t waver.

He cleared his throat and straightened his shoulders. I refused to acknowledge the flash of hurt in his eyes at my sharp tone.

“Lady Georgina,” he said, his voice professional and devoid of the warmth that had been in the earlier whisper of my name. “I would like to invest in your expansion plans for Pemberton Dairies.”

“What?” I was angry now, and hurt, but mostly angry.

“I read the proposal you presented to Lord Bingham and I would like to finance it.”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “No. I don’t want your money. I already told you I didn’t want it.”

“Georgie, please listen. At least hear me out—”

“Like you listened to me? Like you let me explain to you?”

He dropped his head and his shoulders rounded. “I’m sorry about that.

More sorry than I can ever explain,” he said, lifting his head to me. “But I would really like it if you could listen to me. This is a solid proposal and I’m offering it to you because I believe in what you want to do with Pemberton.”

“Who did Freddie choose over me?” I asked, suddenly desperate to know why I’d been rejected.

“I don’t think—”

“Tell me or I am walking away without even considering your offer.” It was unfair of me and I was probably breaking every non-disclosure agreement Leo had signed but I didn’t care.

“We decided to go with a proposal from Alberto—”

“Are you kidding me?” I yelled. “You went with that ridiculous app over a real investment in a thriving business?”

“No. Alberto has more than one app—”

“So what? You chose him so that he would be your friend? You know he’s just using you, right? He isn’t really your friend, he just wants your money. Isn’t that what you accused me of?”

“If you would just let me explain,” he said, and I could hear the heat in his tone, not that I cared.

“So is this some sort of guilt money? You feel sorry for me so you want to offer me a consolation prize? I don’t need your pity, Leo.”

“Georgie that is enough,” he yelled and it was surprising enough to make me shut my mouth. He took a breath to calm himself and when he spoke again, his voice was even. “We chose Alberto’s proposal over yours because of what it would do not only for Merveille but for the investment scheme Freddie is implementing. The app is solid and I know Alberto’s initial interest in me was purely for financial gain. This is not my way of buying his friendship and I think you know Freddie better than that to think he would go along with such a thing.”

He was right. If this was just about Leo buying favour with his friend, then Leo would have been better off just handing over the cash.

“There was a very good chance that Freddie would have chosen Pemberton Dairies in the next round of investment opportunities. What you want to do is good. It makes excellent business sense and I know it will be a success which is why I asked Freddie if I could invest in it personally rather than you having to wait until the next round with Monticorp.”

“You can’t just throw money at me and expect me to forgive you,” I said, tired of fighting with him. “You hurt me, Leo. Your words hurt me.”

“I know,” he said, dropping his head. “And I am sorry for that. I am sorry for letting the scars of my past ruin the only good thing to ever happen to me. But regardless of our personal relationship, this is a genuine offer.” He slid a document across the table that separated us. Neither of us had bothered to sit and we’d each stayed on opposite sides of the table so there was a physical barrier between us as well as all the other emotional baggage that hung in the air.

“Take it with you. Read it over. Have someone else read it over too. I have never met anyone like you, Georgie. You inspire me and challenge me. I see the potential in you and what you want to do with Pemberton. I want to be part of it even if you want nothing else to do with me.”

I lifted the document and flipped through the pages without seeing any of it. It was an olive branch and an apology. I just didn’t know what to do with it...yet.

CHAPTER 27



Georgina

Leo's offer was...good. No, it was great. I was tempted to reject it just because he'd hurt me but then that would make me an idiot. And I wasn't an idiot. I was hurt though. I was hurt and still angry. How could he accuse me of only using him for money and then give me money? I was so confused and hurt and angry and confused and quite possibly falling in love with him even if I was angry and confused and hurt.

Seeing him in the conference room had been torture. My body and heart had yearned for him. I wanted to feel the touch of his hand against mine and the press of his lips against mine. But my brain wanted to hurt him as much as he had hurt me. My brain wanted to throw his offer back in his face and storm out of the room and never lay eyes on him again.

"Georgie," Will said, a big smile breaking across his face as he entered the room where I waited for him.

I stood and accepted his hug, holding on a little longer because it felt good to be in his arms and feel his solid, dependable strength surround me.

"Did you make an appointment to see me?" he asked, pulling back and searching my face.

"I did," I replied, pulling away and moving back toward the chair where

I'd been waiting for him.

"You don't need to make an appointment to see me," he said.

I smiled. "I know but this is a business meeting and I wanted it to be professional."

"A business meeting?" he asked, skirting around his desk and sitting down.

I nodded as I sat. "I want to talk to you about the dairy."

He leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers in front of him. "Okay. What's on your mind?"

"Michael and I have been testing a new product." I fished out a couple of samples and handed them over to him. It wasn't the fancy platter I'd done for Freddie, but I didn't think it would matter to Will. I waited for him to taste. "It's made from sheep milk."

His eyebrows popped up in surprise. "It's good," he said. "But changing the dairy over to accommodate sheep is going to take a lot of work and money."

I nodded. "I know. We've been developing this sample over the last twelve months by hand. I didn't want to outlay any finance until I knew we had a viable product. But now I think we're ready for full production."

"How much do you need?" Will asked, reaching for his drawer and the check book I knew was inside.

"I don't need money," I said and then shook my head. "I do need money, but not your money. I've had an offer of investment. What I need from you is advice. Do you think this is something I should consider or should I go elsewhere?"

Will took the document I slid across the desk to him and flipped to the first page. I fidgeted in my seat as I watched him read through the contract. His eyebrows raised at the amount Leo was offering me. There was the choice of paying back the investment in instalments or letting Leo own a stake of the dairy. I wasn't sure which one I wanted. Part of me wanted him

to be a part of the dairy because that would mean I would see him from time to time. I wasn't sure how good of an idea that was, especially when being around him still caused such an avalanche of emotions to swamp me.

As much as I wished my attachment to Leo would dissolve, it still felt like there was unfinished business between us. I couldn't deny that I was still attracted to him or the fact that seeing him had caused my heart to flop about in my chest in an attempt to get his attention. I had been in love before. I believed Jacob to be the love of my life. What I felt for Leo was the same and yet different. It was still too new and fragile to be love, but if I let myself think about a future with him, I could see it turning into something more. Not the same as the way I'd loved Jacob, but love nonetheless. The difference between the two didn't make either of them any less true or potent. Even knowing he had hurt me so completely was proof there was more between us than simply friends or acquaintances or even just a crush. None of those things would cause me to ache as much as I did.

"This is a really exceptional offer," Will said, closing the document and looking at me. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," I replied truthfully. "That's why I wanted to talk to you."

Will sighed. "When I handed Pemberton to you it wasn't just because I wanted to keep it in our immediate family," he said. "I chose you, Georgie. I chose you because I knew you would take what I started and turn it into something better than I ever could. It was always my intention to involve you in the business, right from the beginning, but then there was Jacob and I knew when you married him you couldn't be a partner in a dairy. After..." He swallowed and I felt tears burn in my own eyes as Will struggled with talking about the loss of his friend. "After Jacob died, I thought I'd lost you too. I was so worried about you and I didn't want to burden you with the business and then Alyssa swept me off my feet." He smiled. "I saw the way you healed and how strong you had become and I knew that signing everything over to you was the right thing. Not because it would take your

mind off your grief or because I thought you needed something to give you purpose. I saw in you the drive and determination that Pemberton needed.”

“Thank you, Will,” I said, not realising how much I needed to hear those words.

“This new product is proof that I was right. There is no way I would have come up with an idea like that. This is a great product and this offer is exactly what you need, but...”

“But?”

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “But if you don’t want to have anything to do with *him*, then let me finance you.”

“Thanks for the offer, Will, but that’s not why I came to you. I need to do this on my own, but that doesn’t mean I don’t value your advice. This offer looks good to me, but I wanted you to see it too. I respect your opinion.”

“Then take the offer,” he said.

Leonardo

“RICARDO,” I SAID AS I STEPPED INTO THE LIBRARY. “WHAT ARE YOU DOING still awake?”

He lifted a glass of amber liquid to me. “Drinking,” he said. “Join me.”

I took the glass he offered me and sat down next to him. I hadn’t heard from Georgie and I didn’t know whether I should chase her or just wait for her to come to me.

“What has that look on your face?” Ricardo asked.

“Nothing,” I said and sighed, leaning back in the couch and sipping my drink.

“Ah,” Ricardo said with a knowing nod. “A woman.”

I exhaled roughly.

“Is it the duchess?”

I stared at the liquid in my glass, swirling it around and watching as the firelight sparked off it.

“Yeah, it’s the duchess. I think I ruined everything.”

He slapped me on the back. “Tell me all your troubles, little brother.”

I didn’t know why, but I found myself spilling all the gory details to him. The way I felt about her and how much it hurt when I thought she was only using me for money. How much I missed her and how seeing her again was like an arrow through the heart.

“So you offered her money?” he asked.

I nodded. “It’s a sound investment. This isn’t like the other times I’ve given money to people for their ‘latest venture,’” I said, even using air quotes.

“And then what? Did you tell her how you feel about her? Did you tell her that you’d made a mistake? Did you grovel?”

“Ah...no.”

“So you offered the girl money and what? Walked away?”

“She walked away from me,” I said, “but pretty much yeah. I offered her the money and told her it was a no-strings-attached deal.”

“You’re an idiot,” Ricardo said with a shake of his head.

“What? Why?”

He shook his head. “You’re in love with the girl, maybe you should have led with that.”

“It’s too early to call it love,” I argued.

“Okay, so not love then, but you have feelings for her and you want more with her than just a business relationship. Did you tell her that? Or did you simply say, ‘Here have some of my many millions of dollars. Nice knowing you?’”

“No, I didn’t do that.” Did I?

“So she knows you want more than a business relationship?”

“Well, no. I didn’t want to pressure her. I didn’t want her to turn down

the money if she thought I was only offering it to her to get her to date me.”

“Fair enough,” he said. “But did you at least give her the option?”

“I thought the option was implied.”

“Idiot,” he said with another shake of his head. “That is not how you win the girl, Leo. Don’t you know anything? Don’t you watch any of the movies I make?”

“I did the whole grand gesture thing,” I said. “Isn’t that enough?”

“Giving her the money isn’t a grand gesture,” Ricardo said, tiredly. “You made a sound business decision, not a leap of faith.”

“So I shouldn’t have given her the money?” I asked, confused.

“That’s not the point. The money isn’t the point, Leo. You hurt her. You probably humiliated her as well. Money doesn’t fix that. Money doesn’t make the hurt go away, you of all people should know that.”

“It wasn’t just the money,” I said in my defence. “I told her I believed in her. I thought I was being the man she needed me to be.”

“She needs you to be the type of man who takes responsibility for his mistakes and is willing to admit when he’s wrong. She needs a man who stands by her and supports her, not someone who just throws money at her.”

“I don’t know how to do that,” I said. “I don’t know how to be that man.”

“It’s easy,” Ricardo said, turning to me, his eyes sad. “You just lay everything at her feet. Lay your whole life down. Make yourself vulnerable. She doesn’t need you to fix her life, she just needs to know you’re willing to be by her side while she fixes it herself.”

CHAPTER 28



Leonardo

I was nervous. The tux I wore felt too tight. I wasn't even going to come to the New Year's Eve party at the palace until Ricardo reminded me she would probably be there. I didn't even know if she would speak to me. Things had been left ambiguously at best the last time I saw her. For all I knew, she had dumped my offer in the nearest trash can as soon as she'd left the conference room. I hoped that wasn't the case.

I took another walk around the room looking for her. As far as I could tell, she hadn't arrived yet. There were so many people in the ballroom that I couldn't know for sure. Every blonde head I saw had me turning to see if it was Georgie. I was desperate to talk to her, if she would even give me the time of day. I just prayed, for the sake of manners, she wouldn't yell at me, although that would be preferable to ignoring me.

I didn't even know what I was going to say if and when I actually got her to talk to me. I'd rehearsed a few things but they sounded wooden and, well, rehearsed. Ricardo told me to speak from the heart, but that was easier said than done. I didn't have much experience listening to my heart.

The air around me seemed to change and I knew, without turning around, that Georgie had just stepped into the room. I took a breath and swallowed a

glass of wine I grabbed from a passing waiter. I passed off the empty glass to another waiter and smoothed my suit before turning around.

She wore blue and it matched her eyes. She was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen and my heart stuttered at the sight of her. The rest of the ballroom faded away until all I could see was her. I started moving in her direction before I'd even consciously made the decision. She looked up and our eyes locked and I knew she felt the frisson of electricity that passed between us. She broke the connection first, but it didn't deter me.

I took two glasses of wine from a waiter and strode across the room to her.

"Lady Georgina," I said with a bow of my head. "It's so lovely to see you again." I handed her the drink and she eyed me with caution.

"It is good to see you again too, Mr. Ricci. I believe we have some unfinished business to attend to."

I offered her my arm. "Would you care for a turn about the room, my Lady?"

She tucked her arm through mine and I suppressed the need to pull her closer. There were things that needed to be discussed before we could move on to, what I hoped, would be the kissing part of the night. I might end up with a slap rather than a kiss, but I was taking Ricardo's advice. I was going to bare myself to her and trust she would forgive me.

"I have gone over your proposal," she said, and the stiffness of her voice didn't inspire hope on any sort of reconciliation.

"And have you made a decision?" I asked.

"I have," she replied and then sucked in a breath. "I would like to accept your offer, but I have some conditions."

"Of course," I replied, thankful that my voice didn't betray the hurt I felt.

"I would like to keep this offer strictly professional," she said, and my heart sank. "I would like to have it administered through your company rather than personally by you."

“That’s not a problem,” I replied even though I was dying inside. I hadn’t even had a chance to give her my not-prepared speech about how I felt about her and she was already severing the relationship between us. “I will have my lawyers draw up the papers at their earliest convenience.”

By this time, we had reached the doors on the opposite side of the room that led out onto the balcony. There was no point in going any further. Georgie had made herself clear. The only thing that would be between us going forward was a professional relationship.

I came to a stop and pulled my arm from hers. I bowed my head and stepped back, out of the range of her scent, hoping to somehow break the hold she had over me at the same time.

“It was lovely to see you again Lady Georgina,” I said. “I’ll leave you to enjoy the rest of your night.”

I turned to step out of the ballroom and into the cold dark night when her hand on my arm stopped me.

“Leo,” she whispered.

Georgina

I DIDN’T KNOW WHAT MADE ME STOP HIM FROM WALKING AWAY. I KNEW IT was best to just leave whatever we’d had in the past but I couldn’t leave it like that. It felt so incomplete. Neither one of us had the closure we needed.

He turned around slowly, his eyes sad. My hand clenched on his arm, desperate not to let him brush me off. I didn’t have the words, but I knew we both had things to say. It couldn’t end this way.

“Can we go for a walk and talk?” I asked.

He inclined his head and tucked my hand through his elbow once again.

“I’ll just get my coat and then we can walk in the gardens,” I said.

We crossed the room once again and he helped me into my coat before

slipping into his own. Once more he took my arm and we walked out of the palace and onto the balcony. We didn't speak as I led him down the stairs and into the hibernating rose garden.

Now that we were out here in the dark and quiet of the winter night, I didn't know where to start. I didn't even really have any clue what to say, I just knew that things needed to be said.

"I want to apologise," he said, breaking the silence. "That night at dinner? I was so far out of line for the things I said. I should never have even thought for one minute that you were the type of person to manipulate me like that. Logically I knew it, but instead I found myself saying things I didn't mean. It was like watching it from high up with no way of stopping it."

I didn't say anything. I needed to hear him out. I needed to understand what happened that night before I could forgive him for it.

"It's no excuse," he said, "but I've never had someone like me just for me. I've told you about my friends. I've told you how I let them use me. I do it to protect myself. I didn't think anyone could ever really care about me and so I made sure they did by buying their affection. It was easier and I knew I couldn't get hurt if they ever disappointed me because it wasn't real and I knew it wasn't real. I was in control and that control kept me safe. Until you."

We stopped walking and he turned us so that we were facing each other. "I had never met anyone like you. I couldn't understand why my charm didn't work on you. I couldn't understand how you expected more from me, but I found myself wanting to do better...to *be* better. You got around my defences by not accepting my antipathy and challenging me. I thrived on it. Finally I thought I'd found something real. When I overheard you telling your foreman you had a plan to get the money you needed, I immediately thought the worst. It reinforced everything I had been telling myself all my life. I wasn't worthy of having someone care for me unless I could do something for them. I had just started to think you liked me for me and then

hearing those words was like a bucket of cold water thrown over me. All of my doubts, all of my fears converged on me in that moment and I shut down.”

“Leo,” I said, reaching out to him and clasping his hand. “It hurt me so much that you would ever think I would do that to you. I was so angry you saw me that way.”

He clutched at my hand. “I should never have doubted you. You had done nothing to make me think that way and maybe I was looking for an excuse. Things between us were happening so fast and the things I was feeling for you were so big that I don’t think I knew how to deal with it. I latched on to those words I overheard and used them to sabotage our relationship before it could go any further.”

“I don’t think I’m entirely blameless,” I said, stepping closer to him. “I was scared of those big feelings too. I thought I was going to marry Jacob and when he died, I couldn’t see a future where I would ever be happy again. But you made me happy and I didn’t know how to cope with that. I felt like I was betraying Jacob but I couldn’t stop the feelings I had for you from growing.”

“So where does that leave us?” Leo asked. “You said you wanted me to administer the investment through my company. Does that mean you want no more to do with me?”

“No,” I said, nerves bubbling in my stomach. “I said that because I want our business relationship to be separate from our personal one.”

His eyes widened as he looked at me. “What do you mean?”

I stepped closer until our bodies were touching. “I’d like to get to know you better, Leo, but I want it to be independent of the investment. I don’t want you to ever think I am with you because of the money. I don’t know if there is a future for us beyond friends, but if there is, I want to make sure you know it has nothing to do with the money and everything to do with who you are.”

“You want us to start over?” he asked, and I could hear the disbelief in his voice. I didn’t know if that was because he no longer felt the same way about me or if it was because he didn’t fully believe I could feel that way about him.

“I do,” I said. “I want to know if we have a future beyond the dairy. For the first time since I lost Jacob, I feel like I could have a future and I would really like to know if you will be in it.”

He dipped his head and brushed his lips across mine. The undeniable connection that had always been between us zapped through my veins at his kiss. It wasn’t a happy-ever-after just yet, but it was a new beginning.

EPILOGUE



Leonardo

T*welve Months Later*

I MADE MY WAY THROUGH THE CROWD TOWARD THE PEMBERTON DAIRIES booth. It was *La Fête des Lumières* and the first night of *Marché de Noël*. The launch for *Bleu Laineux* had been a few weeks ago and already the praise and accolades were coming in.

I saw Georgie’s blonde head and couldn’t stop the grin that split my face. It didn’t matter how much time we spent together or how many times I glimpsed her in a crowd, I always had the same reaction. I was well and truly in love with her and I wasn’t afraid to show it.

My internship with Freddie was coming to an end and he had offered me the position permanently. We had funded ten new businesses in the last twelve months and with each one I felt like a proud papa. I couldn’t imagine walking away from Monticorp and what I helped create.

“There you are,” Georgie said when she spotted me.

I tugged her into my arms and kissed her. I would never get tired of that either. It didn't matter what happened in my day, being with Georgie, having her in my arms, feeling the touch of her lips on mine, always made my day brighter.

"Come on," I said. "We need to go now or we will miss the tree lighting."

She gave some last minute instructions to the staff manning the stall and then slipped her arm through mine.

"How was your day?" she asked, smiling up at me.

"Better now," I said, dropping another kiss on her lips.

She frowned when I lifted my head. "You didn't have a good day?"

"My day was great, it's just better now," I replied.

She grinned and my heart squeezed with happiness. It hadn't been an easy ride for either of us. We both carried baggage and scars but we made a commitment to each other every day to choose one another over the hurts of the past and now things were in a great place. So great I was hoping it might be time to take the next step. The ring in my pocket was waiting for just the right moment. A moment I hoped would be tonight.

We made our way through the crowd to the front and Georgie waved to her brother and his wife. Will had grudgingly accepted me and when I met with him to ask if I could marry Georgie, he'd actually hugged me. The threats of death and dismemberment he'd whispered in my ear balanced out the overly affectionate display. I didn't mind. I knew he loved his sister and seeing as though I loved her too, I could understand his fierce protectiveness of her. Not that Georgie was a fan.

I pulled Georgie in front of me and wrapped my arms around her. She sighed and relaxed back against me and I didn't think anything felt better in the world. Georgie just made everything...better. Even fighting with her, and we fought often, was better than not having her in my life. And we always made up, which was the most important thing. I loved the way she continued to challenge me. It wasn't easy, changing habits that I had honed over many

years, and Georgie didn't let me get away with any of it. She was my guiding light and whenever I started to get lost in my own head, she showed me the way home.

But it wasn't just the way she challenged me that made me fall head-over-heels in love with her. Georgie was brilliant and funny and sweet and generous. She loved with her whole heart and was fiercely loyal. She stood up for me, something no one had ever done before. She stood in the gap between my family and me when they took pot-shots at me and she defended me like the lioness she was. It was only because of her that they were beginning to see me differently and had begun to respect me. It was only because of her that I had begun to respect myself.

She was my everything—my life, breath, and heart—and my happiness was only complete because she was in it.

The queen stepped up the mic with Will at her side, each of them cradling a swaddled baby, both babies rugged up against the cold. The queen's speech was brief and then she threw the switch, lighting the massive Christmas tree with a million and one fairy lights.

"It's so beautiful," Georgie whispered.

"Not as beautiful as you," I whispered back.

The town around us became ablaze with strings of fairy lights and the crowd cheered and applauded. I turned Georgie around to face me and kissed her before getting down on one knee before her.

Georgie gasped and covered her mouth with her gloved fingers. "What are you doing?" she hissed.

I pulled the ring out of my pocket and held it out to her. "I'm proposing to you," I said with a wink. "I love you and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Please Lady Georgina Darkly, will you marry me?"

People around us had stopped to stare as my words hung in the air between us. Her eyes filled with tears and I had a moment when I thought perhaps she would turn me down but then she started nodding and the tears

fell and she got down on her knees in front of me and burrowed into my chest.

“Yes,” she said against my neck. “Yes, I will marry you. I love you Leonardo Ricci. I love you so much.”

She tore her gloves off and held out her hand so I could slide the ring on. It sparkled under the fairy lights of the big Christmas tree and then she was kissing me and the cheers and congratulations from the crowd around us faded away.

I pulled back when I felt a cold drip on my face and looked up to see the snow beginning to fall.

“I love you Georgie,” I said and kissed her once again to seal it under the stars and snow.

The End

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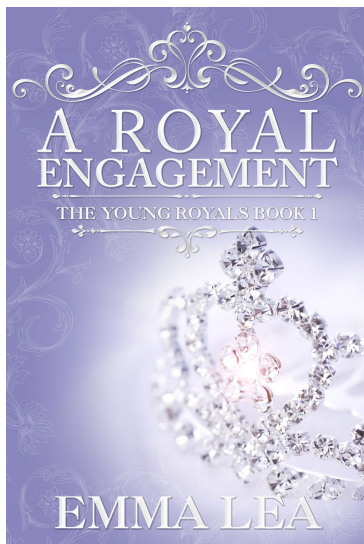
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Despite being the second child of the King and Queen of Merveille, Alyssabeth thought that if she kept a low profile she could stay out of the media's glaring spotlight and live a relatively normal life. That was until her father, the King, and her brother, the Crown Prince, was both killed in a hunting accident.

Her dream of joining the UN was no more and instead she needed to return to the small European country of her birth to pick up where her father and brother left off. Her Harvard degree in International Relations is forfeit and in its place she must become Queen, that was if the misogynistic Parliament can see past their prejudices.

Not much had changed in the small country in her four year absence, but there are two noticeable differences. Her brother's two best friends Will

Darkly and Jordan Wicks have grown up into two very intriguing men. Jordan practically swept her off her feet from the moment she stepped off the plane, but Will's more reserved, darkly intense interest in her gave her tingles.

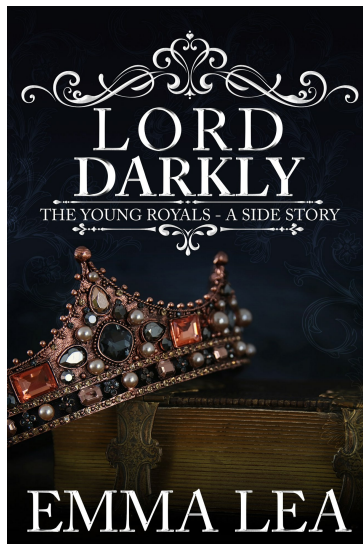
Alyssa wasn't sure she was cut out to be Queen, but she knew that she wanted to do her father and brother proud, so she was willing to give it her best shot, even if it meant going toe to toe with Parliament. And then there was the small matter of her needing to be married in order to fulfil her birthright and take her place as the Head of State.

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Jacob's death brings Will face to face with his

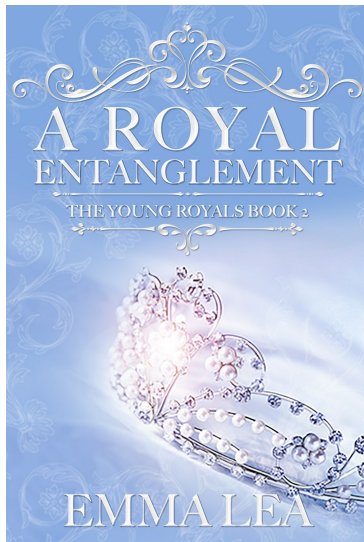
childhood crush, the prince's sister, Alyssa, now the crown princess and heir apparent and she's even more beautiful than he remembered. She's also involved with the one man who could cause Will to commit murder.

Grieving for his friend, trying to keep his business moving forward, and avoiding the attraction he feels for his best friend's sister leaves him short tempered and irritable and something has to give before he loses his mind.

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On the day of the new Queen's coronation, a man from Lady Alexandra's past turns up unannounced in Merveille. Lord Frédéric intercepts him and discovers that Alex had left this man at the altar six months ago and now he was here to claim her.

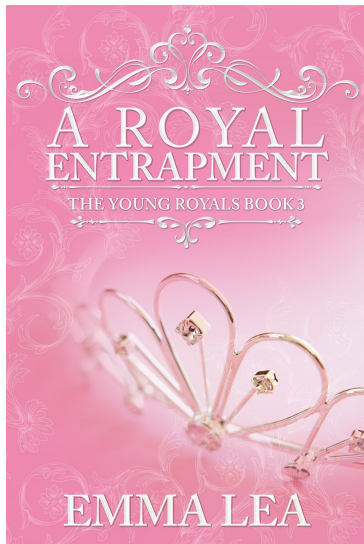
Alex hasn't told anyone the real reason she left everything she had worked so hard for in the States to move to Merveille and take up the position of Queen Alyssa's personal assistant. But now the main reason for her flight from the US has turned up on the palace's doorstep and she is backed into a corner. The only person that she can think of to help her is Freddie, but she's worried that getting too close to him might just do more harm than good.

The last thing Freddie wants is to get entangled with a woman. He liked to keep his options open, but now that he has returned to Merveille for good, his mother is trying her damndest to get him married off and producing the next Bingham heir. When Alex asks for his help, he is only too eager to help her and maybe get his mother off his back in the process. He never expected to fall for her.

A Royal Entanglement is Available Now



Book 3 - A Royal Entrapment



The Queen is getting married and Priscilla is required to work alongside the Lord Chancellor, Dominique, to ensure that the whole affair goes off without a hitch and that they don't, unwittingly, start World War Three. The only problem is that Priscilla finds Dominique insufferable and Dom isn't all that enamoured with Priscilla either.

When Priscilla's sister, Bianca, falls for Dominique's brother, Louis, the two young lovers hatch a plot to ensure that they can spend time together, but it means that Dom has to pretend to be interested in Priscilla and get her to date him.

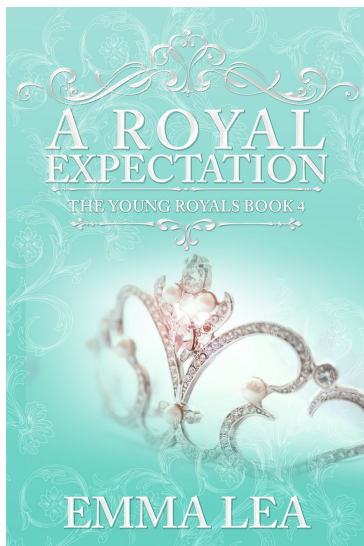
The more time they spend together, the more Dom and Priscilla start to like each other, except that now Dom is caught in a difficult spot...should he

tell Priscilla that he only asked her out because his brother wanted to date her sister, or should he keep quiet and hope she doesn't find out?

A Royal Entrapment is Available Now



Book 4 - A Royal Expectation



Lady Jeanette Bower had always known what her life was going to look like. It had been drummed into her since she was a little girl. She would marry a titled gentleman and make him a splendid wife who was above reproach. It was what her mother had always wanted for her and Lady Jeanette always did what her mother wanted her to do. She was a good girl. The only problem was, Lady Jeanette didn't expect a six foot four Australian with sparkling tawny coloured eyes and a mischievous grin to walk into her life and show her that there was perhaps another path for

her to take.

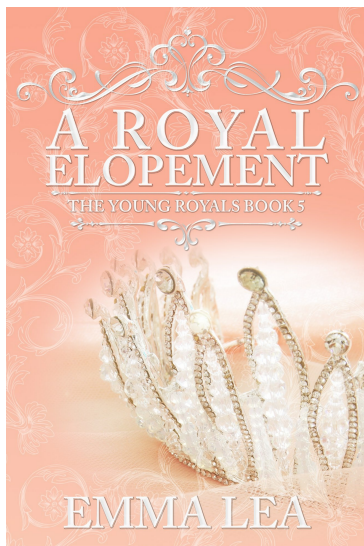
Drew Taylor had just landed his dream job and the fact that it was half way around the world from his meddling mother was just icing on the cake. He never expected to be swept off his feet by a woman on a hot pink Ducati. A woman who also happened to be one of the queen's ladies in waiting. And then there was the complication of the viscount she was supposed to marry. How could a cane farmer's son from tropical Queensland compete with a

man who could give Lady Jeanette the title she had always wanted? He couldn't, but that wouldn't stop him from trying.

A Royal Expectation is Available Now



Book 5 - A Royal Elopement



Lady Meredith Bingham thought that she had her life sorted. She was a member of the royal guard - an elite security team tasked with protecting the queen of Merveille. She was also close personal friends with the queen and part of her inner circle - the ladies in waiting. But then her mother had to go and ruin it all. Lady Caroline Bingham was sick of her daughter fooling around and playing soldier. She thought it was high time her daughter got serious about her future and found herself a suitable husband. With the duke pulling double duty as the country's prime minister, it was only right that his daughter start acting like a proper daughter of nobility. Much to Meredith's chagrin, the queen agrees that Meredith must step down from her post.

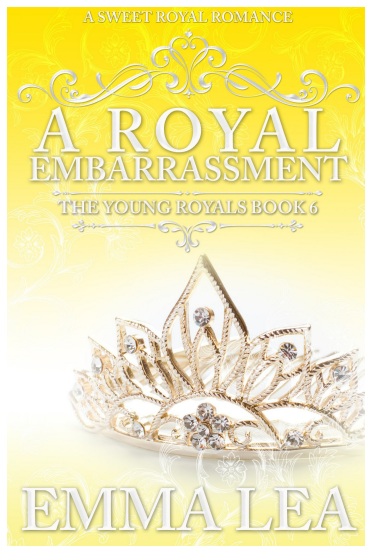
Prince Christophe Kostopolous was a prince in exile. For the last ten years he had been living under the pseudonym of Jamie Kosta, and for the last seven years he has been part of the royal guard. Very few people knew his true identity, but that was all about to change. The people he had been

hiding from all these years have found him and he may finally have his chance to reclaim his rightful place on the throne of his small island nation of Kalopsia. The only problem is, he has fallen for a certain duke's daughter and she has no idea who he really is.

A Royal Elopement is Available Now



Book 6 - A Royal Embarrassment



Savannah has a secret...a secret that could cost her everything she's been working for.

Coming to Merveille and taking up a position as one of Queen Alyssa's ladies in waiting hadn't been part of Savannah Rousseau's plan, but she wasn't going to turn down the opportunity when it came her way. The daughter of an impoverished viscount, Savannah had nothing to lose and everything to gain by being included amongst the new queen's entourage...as long as no one found out about her secret.

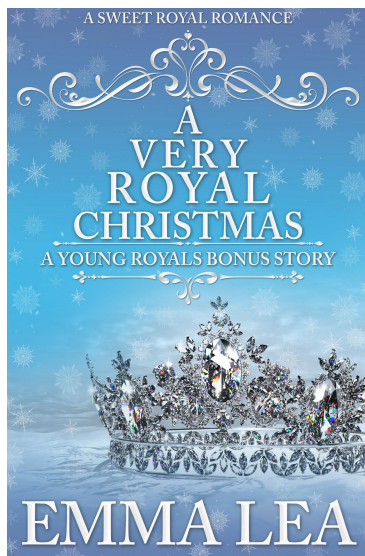
Savannah loved her son. Archer was the sun and moon of her life, but being a single mother would mean instant disqualification from the ladies in waiting. So she hid him from the queen and her new friends...for two years. Now someone had stumbled upon her secret and Savannah would do anything to ensure that she didn't become a royal embarrassment.

Jed Fairchild came to Merveille to escape his own scandal and the last thing he wanted was to be embroiled in another. Finding out about the young boy and impoverished viscount that Savannah had stashed in the abandoned hunting cabins was a complication that he didn't need. Being attracted to the hot-tempered lady in waiting was another. All Jed wanted was to live a simple life working with his horses and ignoring the rest of the world, but with Savannah in his life and the inquisitive Archer following him like his very own shadow, the quiet life was the last thing Jed had...and maybe it wasn't really what he wanted after all.

A Royal Embarrassment is Available Now



Book 6.5 - A Very Royal Christmas



Lady Georgina Darkly, the newly titled Duchess of Pemberton, did not need one more thing to deal with the week before Christmas. The temperature was dropping alarmingly, a snow storm had been predicted, the milk tanks in the dairy were close to freezing and there was a leak in her bedroom roof. To top it all off Clarabelle, the cow that had a mischievous streak a mile wide, had escaped the confines of the barn and could very well freeze to death if Georgie didn't find her soon. The absolute very last thing she needed was an arrogant, stubborn, wealthy, and

undeniably *gorgeous* Italian to turn up on her doorstep in need of rescuing.

Leonardo Ricci, youngest son of one of Italy's wealthiest families did not want to be stuck in the middle of a snow storm in a country barely more than the size of a postage stamp. He wanted to be with his friends in Milan, not suffering through a stilted family Christmas with his parents. When a cow appeared in the middle of the road and caused his beautiful Ferrari to careen out of control into a snow bank, he honestly didn't think his day could get any worse...and then he met the Duchess. She was opinionated, stubborn, far too capable for her own good, stunningly beautiful, and immune to his charms. They had nothing in common and if she hadn't rescued him then he probably would never have given her another thought. But then they got stuck together in her run-down mansion with no electricity and no phones. That's when the sparks really started to fly.

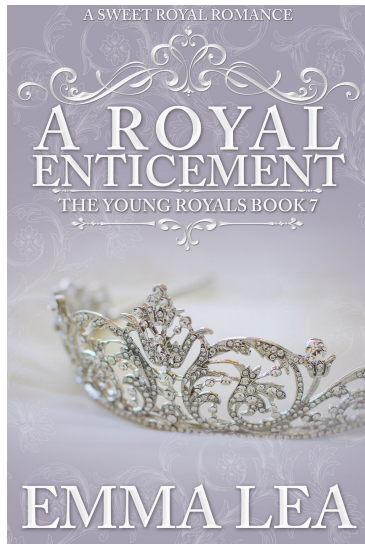
A Very Royal Christmas is Available Now



Book 7 - A Royal Enticement

Lady Margaret de la Fontaine was the forgotten lady in waiting. She didn't mind...most of the time. She liked working with Lady Savannah and the others and believed whole-heartedly in what the queen was trying to achieve in their small country of Merveille. She just wished that someone would notice her, just once.

Queen Alyssa's ladies in waiting had, one by one, met and fallen in love with their dream partners, all except Margaret, not that anybody had given her single status another thought. That didn't



mean she didn't also wish for someone to love, but she wasn't holding her breath, especially since her best friend, Lady Hadley Winchester, was now part of the ladies in waiting. It seemed the newest member of the group was a hit with everyone, including the queen, which was great but once again left Margaret as the wallflower.

Until Brín.

Brín noticed the sweet wee Maggie standing against the wall while everyone else at the ball danced and chatted. He felt a kinship with her, even across the room and sought her out for a little bit of harmless flirting. He was supposed to be checking out the candidates for his arranged marriage, but he really wasn't keen on the whole idea. He understood his responsibility as the lost heir of a broken down estate that was haemorrhaging money, but he didn't really see himself as the marrying kind...and even if he did, he'd want to do it for love, not money.

Brín was immediately taken with Lady Margaret, but alas, she was not the debutante his advisors had picked out for him. That honour went to Maggie's best friend, Lady Hadley. But what was a newly minted earl to do when he had the livelihoods of several staff and families to look after? Not to mention, if he didn't find a solution he may very well lose the estate and the title that went with it.

[Get a Royal Enticement Now](#)



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I love Georgie and Leo! (I think I say that every time :D) They were so much fun to write. Georgie was all snarky and grumpy (a bit like Will was before Alyssa softened his heart) and Leo was like this adorable but naughty puppy who just wanted attention.

I'm so glad I got to write Georgie's happy-ever-after. She's had it rough the last few years and it felt like a kind of closure to give her someone who would love her so completely. Leo came out of nowhere, he wasn't even on my radar and then, BOOM! he crashed into the story in his Ferrari and swept both me and Georgie off our feet!

Writing and publishing couldn't happen without my support team and I really pushed them hard to get this book out on time. Maybe deciding to write two Christmas stories at the end of September wasn't the best idea, but my amazing team pulled through!

Thanks to Kathryn who is always the first person to read these books and gives me valuable feedback as well as being my loudest cheerleader.

Thanks to Brooke who polishes my words so they shine like sparkling diamonds. I have learned so much from you and am so thankful that you came into my life.

Thanks to my husband for just being him. Thanks for listening to me talk about these characters like they're real people and helping to work through

sticky plot holes and saggy middles. I love you to the moon and back.

And thanks to you, my readers, for taking a chance on an Aussie girl and her imaginary friends. Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays and Blessings to you all!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emma Lea is a barista, artist, cook, mother and wife. She lives on the beautiful Sunshine Coast in Queensland, Australia with her wonderful husband, two beautiful sons, her dog and cat (both of which are female because, hey, we needed to balance all that testosterone!)

She is a ferocious reader with eclectic tastes and has always wanted to write, but never had the opportunity due to one reason or another (excuses, really) until finally taking the bullet between her teeth in 2014 and just making herself do it.

She loves to write stories with heart and a message and believes in strong female characters who do not necessarily have to be aggressive to show their strength.

If you enjoyed reading this book, please share the love by leaving a review and telling your friends!

To connect with Emma Lea

www.emmaleaauthor.com



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These are romantic tales without the bedroom scenes and the swearing, but that doesn't mean they're boring!

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Standalone Novels

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Hot & Spicy Romances turn the heat way up. They contain swearing and sexy scenes and the characters get hot under the collar.

Recommended for 18+ readers

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[Twelve Days of Christmas - Her Side of the Story](#)

[Twelve Days of Christmas - His Side of the Story](#)

Quickies (Collins Bay Novellas)

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[The Young Billionaires](#)

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[Rock Star](#)

[Songbird](#)

[Strings](#)

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Symphony (coming soon)

The Playbook

[In Like Flynn](#)

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The Right Girl (coming soon)

The Only Girl (coming soon)

ROMANTIC SUSPENSE NOVELS

These are recommended for 18+ readers and contain strong themes and dramatic situations. They may contain swearing, explicit content, violence, and drug use...but always with a happy ending and a romantic element.

Standalone Novels

[Hide & Seek](#)