

BAD PRINCE

RECKLESS ROYALS BOOK 2



ABBY KNOX

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BOOK TWO

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**BAD
PRINCE**

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BAD PRINCE

A CONTEMPORARY ROYAL ROMANCE

Etienne

No one expects much from the spare. I've always lived life for myself, but when my brother abdicates the throne, the king suddenly strongarms me to do my royal duty. Marriage, babies, and the crown were not on my list of life goals, but here we are. It's not a love match between myself and the bride. But the smart, beautiful, uptight heiress, Kala, has nothing to worry about. I fully intend to let her go—just as soon as I've had my fun.

Kala

I was raised by my stepmother to marry the heir to the throne, but that didn't work out the first time. Now that I'm grown and made my own way in the world, I suddenly find my family's name and legacy is at stake, and the only way to save it is to marry the notorious Etienne. But what everyone doesn't know is, I've secretly pined for Etienne all along. I'm intrigued by the idea of playing the part of the happy couple until we put this mess behind us. I can do this without getting my feelings hurt...right?

ABOUT THE RECKLESS ROYALS

Reckless Royals is a tropey, soapy, swoony and sexy collection of happily-ever-after romances. It's got everything: Bad boys, grumpy, gorgeous heroes, strong, sassy heroines, arranged marriages, divorce pacts, marriage pacts, and lots of surprises along the way.

It's all packed into one royal family with five stand-alone love stories to tell! No cheating, no cliffhangers. Five separate HEAs with epilogues.

E tienne

The bartender eyes me cautiously as he polishes a glass with a rag. “The king has let you off the leash, I see.”

I’d rather not talk about what the king has or hasn’t allowed me to do. “The palace has become suffocating, George,” I say, leaning on an elbow and scanning the bar for company.

The man pours a club soda and slides it across the bar to me.

Humph.

A young woman eyes me from down the bar, appearing to dare one another to approach me.

It used to feel good to be asked for selfies in public. Now, at 34, it feels a little ... sad.

Sadness sucks. I won’t allow it.

I turn back to the barkeep, veiling my impatience.

George shifts his gaze from me to the other patrons as if on the lookout for spies. “How’d you get here, then?” He asks this low and direct, leaning toward me. “With the lockdown and everything.”

I scoff at the insult to my reputation. “I’ve had my secret ways in and out of the palace since I was 12,” I say, nodding with my chin toward the Bad Prince Lager on tap, wondering

what's taking him so long to serve me. "And drivers can be bribed."

"I see," he says, not meeting my gaze.

"What's eating you?" I ask.

The bartender looks around again, then shakes his head as if disgusted with himself.

"I ain't supposed to serve you, Your Highness."

I lean back, reining in my irritation. "On whose orders?"

George shifts out of the way as a server slides behind the bar to pull from the Favored Prince Stout tap. I purse my lips in distaste.

Something moves in my peripheral vision. One of the young women steps forward, then loses her nerve, retreating to the corner with her friends. I must have forgotten to fix my face. Poor thing. My dark looks have been known to make a paparazzo piss himself.

No matter. The last thing I need is my father's advisors seeing me tagged on social media in a bar with hot young things when I'm supposed to be under supervision.

"The palace sent out letters," George says when the rush of orders passes. "No one in Arenhammer is allowed to serve you alcohol. Not since the Birthday Brawl."

Is that what the tabloids are calling it? I haven't bothered to attend any of the royal family's publicity debriefings since my father, the king, locked us down. One familial shouting match per quarter is enough for me.

I brighten my tone. "So, you haven't heard! My dear brother Prince Torben has been found," I pronounce, not bothering to hide my sarcasm. "No doubt the king's mood has settled and he's already lifted that silly embargo. I came out to celebrate the news with a drink." I push the club soda toward him. "How about topping this off with some vodka with a twist?"

The bartender shakes his head. "We're all relieved the heir's been found safe and sound, but the best I can do for you is this."

He pushes the club soda back at me.

“He’s not the police or the governor. He doesn’t make laws,” I remind him.

Heaving a weary sigh, George says, “The palace owns everything from this building to the land that grows the grain. Your father could wreck my livelihood.”

A dismissive noise escapes me. “He doesn’t own the business or the brewery itself.”

“Better safe than sorry.”

“Even so,” I push without thinking. “How hard is it to get another job tending bar?”

I regret these words as soon as they hit the air.

Stung, George busies himself with other tasks. I might as well be invisible to him now as servers and other patrons crowd in, needing refills.

Good form, Bad Prince.

The royal dickhead is on the loose, being a dick again. Even for me, that was another level of dickishness.

Twenty euros ought to cover it, so I pull a bill from my clip, fold it, and shove it into the gaudy beer stein marked with a hand-made sign reading “tips.”

The night is breezy and warm when I meander outside, eyeing a table of friends enjoying, oh, of course—a flight of Reckless Royals.

When they see me, all four of them lift their glasses and shout, surprised and elated.

I pause and go over to their table, shaking everyone’s hands. Who am I? Torben? I don’t glad-hand people. I don’t pander. But I have a motive. I always have a motive.

“Let us buy you a drink, Your Highness!” The oldest one with a receding hairline offers. I scan the table and realize they’re not only friends. Two women, two men who look similar around the eyes. They’re related.

One of them pushes out a chair and gestures for me to sit.

Reluctantly, I oblige. Mind you; I'm not reluctant to allow commoners to buy me drinks. My reluctance comes from a place that I can't identify. If I didn't know any better, I'd say it's a feeling of envy.

Why would I envy four strangers asking for the honor of buying me drinks? Well, look at me. I'm out in the bar district, pathetically alone. No friends came to rescue me from my gilded cage this evening, did they?

I have no real friends anyway; I live only to torment my siblings. Well, Torben and Sig. Torben because he's the favorite—the heir—and that's enough of a reason. Sig because he's my little brother, and he's a mess. All the wealth of a dynasty at his disposal, and he'd rather sleep in a briar patch or...something.

Flora is the exception. I would lay down my life for my baby sister. Guilt floods me at the memory of her fall from the balcony box. She could have been seriously hurt, all because her idiot brothers chose violence.

Sig started it, I remind myself. I admit I was late, but my younger brother egged me on. And Torben was no help, trying to control everyone.

The trouble with our family is ... just that. We're all too much trouble. Just ask the king.

"Cheers!" shouts this group's ringleader. "Er, no offense. It's, er, Bad Prince Lager."

I can see the bottle with my picture on it: a passed-out slob wearing a cockeyed crown, an empty goblet in his hand. Not the most complimentary sketch I've seen.

At my silence, one of the others in his group chimes in. "It's our favorite one, actually," she says.

I scoff with extra force. "Looks nothing like me," I say before guzzling it down.

Everyone at the table chuckles, and I can feel their relief.

I let out a beery belch as I slam the empty bottle on the table.

Before long, more people have joined in, and more drinks arrive. I partake with vigor, and the irrational envy and sadness dissipate like bubbles.

The hard edges of the world soften. Bad jokes become hilarious. Strangers become best friends. I'm surrounded by fun people instead of the stodgy wraiths that haunt the palace.

Soon enough, I'm downing drink after drink—beer, whiskey, wine, whatever anyone puts in front of me—and my smile becomes genuine. I don't know these people but I decide they are the best.

The king might have me drawn and quartered, but one can't put a price on living one's best life.

Servers pretend not to recognize me or decide they're safe from breaking the king's decree by not serving me directly. Someone slides a green bottle to me.

I pick it up and read the label with its immediately recognizable beard. "Wild Prince Cider. Whoever drew this hasn't seen Sigurd's beard of late. It's too big for the label."

The party around me suddenly quiets, but I don't pay attention. I'm halfway through chugging the Wild Prince Cider when a meaty hand grabs my bicep, sending the bottle crashing to the sidewalk. People gasp, yelp, and scurry out of the way of the broken glass. Servers appear to clean up the shards.

"Hey!" I protest, lashing out unthinkingly at the dark figure that has me.

Why isn't anyone stepping in to protect my royal butt from this assault? Fine, I'll do it myself.

I wind up intending to throw a punch with my free arm. Turning my head to aim, I see two bearded, put-upon faces step into the light from the streetlamp.

Sigurd. The Wild Prince is out in public.

I'm so stunned that I drop my battle-ready fist.

"What are you doing here? Who died?" I slur.

“You might soon, if you don’t come with me right now,” my brother answers through gritted teeth.

“I can’t just leave my new friends,” I say, smiling and gesturing to the dispersing crowd.

I am aware that Sigurd’s hold on my arm is the only thing keeping me from falling face-first into the pavement, but that doesn’t give him the right to manhandle me. I remain indignant.

“Flora’s been calling and texting you. You didn’t answer,” Sigurd growls.

Shit.

“Is she okay?”

“Of course she’s okay,” he says, looking behind him. “You’re needed. Let’s go.”

I start to argue. “You’re ruining—”

“We’re done here.” Sig maintains his hold on my arm as he addresses the nearest server. “How much?”

The curvy woman with a mass of wild red hair gives him a shy smile. She hugs her empty drink tray to her ample chest. “On the house, Your Highness.”

Sig winces at the title but thanks her with a wad of folded bills. I shrug out of my brother’s grip while he’s temporarily distracted, but the big oaf manages to fist the back of my shirt collar while he stares dumbly at the server.

He fidgets his beard. “Keep the change,” he says gruffly. His eyes dart around the place, looking everywhere but at the server’s slow-blinking gaze. He’s behaving like he wants to say something to the pink-cheeked woman but gives up and turns around, hauling me away from the bar.

“Why do you have to be so rough?” I ask as I stumble to keep up. Sig’s grip is too tight, making me lose my buzz.

“Shut up and stop making a scene.”

We pass a cafe and two more bars humming with activity. People stare as Sig hauls me down the street, some taking

videos with their cameras. I wave and blow kisses.

“If you didn’t want to be part of a scene, you should have sent the palace muscle to find me.”

“Uther’s busy,” Sig retorts, referring to the silent naval veteran who does a little of everything that the family needs doing. He’s the newest addition to the palace staff, as Father saw fit to beef up security after the incident at Torben’s birthday.

At the exact moment the words are out of his mouth, a blur of pale blue catches my eye. I blink twice to focus just as a familiar, cool scent hits me.

Kala St. Rain sits at a cafe table, spine straight as a guillotine. Her hair is done up in two loose buns, and she wears a poor excuse for a sweater. The blue drape of fabric reveals so much cleavage that I can almost see her stomach.

I want to pretend I don’t notice her, but I’m flummoxed. I’ve never seen her wear anything so revealing at court.

What that royal hanger-on Kala St. Rain wears is none of my business, I remind myself. We aren’t friends.

Yet, I’m amused. She’s out with her mates, and she can’t manage to relax physically. Shoulders back, eyes wide and keen, observing everyone’s movements.

Before Sig drags me away from the mist of her expensive perfume, Kala lifts one perfect eyebrow.

What is that face supposed to mean?

Sig trundles me into the back of his car.

“Good morning, my delinquent brother.” Flora is dressed to the nines in a pale blue shift, matching sweater, gloves, handbag, and hat.

“Is there a parade today?” I slur. “Everyone’s dressed in that color, it seems.”

“What are you babbling about?” Flora doesn’t wait for me to answer but hands over a coffee thermos. “Nevermind. Torben is coming home with his fiancée, and we are meeting them at the airport like the supportive siblings we are.”

I stare at her, blinking several times before pointing out, “But we’re not supposed to leave the palace grounds. We’ll be found out if we’re all together.”

Flora lifts her eyebrows. “Ah, but Mommy and Daddy can’t punish us if we’re publicly appearing as a happy family. Besides, now that Torben has a fiancée, we can relax. Probably.”

I harrumph and stare out the window as the car leaves the city limits.

Now that Torben’s found someone...

The coffee steams as I carefully unscrew the lid and take a sip. Bitter and strong, meant to sober me up. Not Irish coffee. Dammit.

I suppose the arrival of Torben’s new squeeze means that poor, pathetic Kala will be left in the dust. The king and queen have always preferred her as a match to the Favored Prince. Now, what will she do with herself?

Pity wells up in me. I can’t help it; sometimes, actual human emotions bubble to the surface when I sober up.

Gods bless her; I could never understand the appeal of Kala St. Rain. I mean, she’s pretty. But she’s such an overachiever. She’s just so...so...put together. Polite. A “try-hard,” as the kids say. She’s utterly exhausting to think about.

Usually dressed in monochrome pantsuits or conservative skirts, the woman is so stuffy, exhibiting practiced court manners.

Tonight, however, she looked...enticing. Doesn’t matter. Her eyebrows and scandalous sweater can tempt me all they like, but it doesn’t change the fact that she was practically groomed from birth to be the wife of a future king.

The current king and queen cannot stop dangling that poor woman in Torben’s face.

Maybe pity is the wrong feeling. Perhaps she’s eating up all the attention and adoration from the monarchs. Who wouldn’t?

Putting Kala St. Rain and her cleavage out of my head, I turn to Flora. “Why do you care so much about supporting the arrival of an American woman we’ve never met? She doesn’t yet have the king’s blessing.”

Sig interjects from the driver’s seat, “If the pressure’s not on any of us to squeeze out heirs, we’re going to encourage the match as much as humanly possible.”

“You? Squeezing out heirs, Sigurd? Excuse me,” says Flora, smoothing down her dress. “In your case, it won’t be you squeezing out heirs. That unfortunate duty will belong to whoever agrees to marry you and bear your massive spawn. All you have to do is be there with ice chips and a spectacular push present.”

Sig barks out a laugh and Flora smirks.

Staring out the window and taking another frowning sip of coffee, I mutter, “Let’s hope she’s got the pelvic fortitude for twelve-pound babies with five-pound heads.”

This gets a stifled snort from Flora and a punch in the arm from Sigurd.

“Ouch!” I rub the spot. “Keep your eyes on the road, gorilla.”

My brother grunts as he steers into the private driveway at a tucked-away section of the airport.

“I see your dislocated shoulder has recovered,” I point out, recalling when our sister’s life hung in the balance.

Sigurd growls, “Recovered enough.”

I cast my gaze over at Flora. Judging by the look on her face, she remembers what exactly caused Sigurd’s shoulder to pop out of joint.

“Hey,” I say to her. “Don’t feel guilty about that.”

She peeks up from her phone and swallows, eyes shining. “I know. Just a bad memory,” she says with a tremulous smile that tears at my chest.

Clearly, she’s still shaken from that event.

“If people wouldn’t pick fights,” Sigurd begins.

Here we go.

“I’m sorry,” I say, though not sorry. “Who shoved whom first?”

“Who was running his mouth?” Sig spits back.

“Boys!” Flora shouts, cutting across the bickering. “Let’s focus on the fact that we still don’t know the identity of the stranger who caught me and broke my fall. And why isn’t the palace making any effort to find that man? He deserves recognition. Land, titles, cash—something!”

No one can argue with that. If I meet that man, I’ll hand over my birthright, as anemic as it may be, as the first of three spares.

Sig and I exchange a guilty look, each of us deciding at that same moment to let it go. This is as close as we may ever get to apologizing to each other.

I angle myself to peer out of the car’s front windshield, past my brother’s giant head. Uther, the new chief of security, drives ahead of us. Looking through the rear window, I see more black cars, one of them a large, unfamiliar SUV.

“Who’s behind us?” I ask.

“Sable and her people.”

I stare at my sister, fully sober now. “You called in the cavalry to dress the hillbilly? God, you’re so extra sometimes.”

Eyes wide, Flora nudges my knee with hers. “Happy family, remember? Happy, well-behaved children make a happy king.”

If I know my father, there won’t be any such thing as a happy king.

Not today. Not a chance.

K^{ala}

One heavy, masculine arm hugs my bare waist, cinching me tight and covering my back with a wall-like chest.

An erection burrows its way into the gap between my upper thighs. That needy length is hot, firm, and exciting.

Pale dawn coaxes me awake. My face warms in anticipation, and I smile to myself.

What a dream it is to wake up in my lover's arms in the morning.

“What have we here, big boy?” I murmur.

Sheets rustle. The bed creaks. My lover snakes his other arm under me, cupping my breast.

I sigh, my fingernails tracing a lazy path over the sinews and ridges of his muscled forearm. No matter how hard I try to hold back, I cannot go slow. Before long, I'm reaching back to caress his bed-mussed hair, his scruff, and those perfect cheekbones.

I can't see his face, but his gaze heats the skin of my neck. The sensuous pull of his full lips around my fingertips makes my tiny, fuck-me muscles clench. I need him to do me hard and fast. But he likes to take his time.

Gods, he never just fucks me. He builds me up bit by bit, then ruins me, leaving me ravaged and spent.

I gasp as his teeth lightly graze; he knows exactly how to get me wet.

That wicked mouth. That expert tongue. Those sinfully full lips. This whole man is about to wreck me. The knowledge of it makes me quiver.

The hand at my waist dips low, cupping my pussy, as if letting me know he's about to test my wetness. He knows. This man knows me. He knows how soaking wet I get whenever he plays with me like this.

His husky groan vibrates through my body as his fingers dive between my lower lips and deftly find my clit. He slides two fingers around that hard button, stroking evenly.

“Darling, I knew you’d be ready for me,” he murmurs in my ear, his voice giving away the raw hunger.

My muscles flutter against his fingers, and he lets out a soft, knowing chuckle.

“I’m ready!” I say, following a gasp.

I know what he wants me to do. We play this game every morning.

I touch the gap between my thighs and find the head of my lover’s cock there, nestled in my lips.

“You know what to do next,” he whispers.

I do.

He doesn’t have to tell me to wet him with my honey. I know. Still, I shiver at the knowledge that this time, maybe, we’ll get pregnant.

“Good girl,” he grits out as I work my honey over the shaft and head of his cock.

I wait for his command, and my body prepares to sing.

“Open up for me, Kala.”

With a whimper of need, I spread. My lover pushes in with zero resistance. My body knows him.

“Kala...” he groans. “So tight for me. Such a good girl. So tight and wet.”

He repeats his sexy murmurs like a prayer as he moves in me, taking me from behind. Spoonfucking me. Caging me in his powerful grip. Pinning me against him.

I need more. I always need more. I hook my leg behind his, opening further. My lover’s arm across my chest tightens, closing the gap I’ve created by arcing my back. I smile, knowing he hates even the tiniest distance between us.

Thick, rough fingers resume their worship of my clit. He slides them back and forth on either side of it, rhythmically as my body milks his cock.

My lover gives me what I need, the sensation with every thrust felt down to my toes.

I get lost in the perfect rhythm, the push and pull, the bucking and thrusting, until the tight curl of my orgasm begins to build below my belly.

“I’m coming,” I say.

My lover pumps harder, faster, always watching, always matching my energy.

He’s so determined to come simultaneously that I don’t have the heart to tell him it’s perfectly acceptable if we come at separate moments.

His enthusiasm for me is like no other. So I let him have this. I will always be whatever he needs.

The thick cock pushes in with increased vigor as his fingers do their magic. And I come. My release rolls through me like a clap of thunder, and I shout his name.

“Etienne!”

“Ms. St. Rain? Are you home?”

That is not my dream lover’s voice.

My eyes fly open in shock, and then I remember I'm alone.

No one is in my bed.

I was having the sex dream again.

The sex dream about the so-called Bad Prince.

That dream is going to get me into trouble one day.

If whoever is at the door heard me shout his name, they'd be appalled.

No one would ever believe we're suited for each other, not even enough for an adequate sex dream.

I've never spoken it aloud, but that man was my sexual awakening. Despite my having been groomed from a young age to marry the Favored Prince, I've always had a secret thing for Etienne.

I may sound as if I'm describing the members of a boy band, but Etienne is by far the most spellbinding of all three Haart princes. When I was 13 years old, I saw a photo of the teenage Etienne sticking his tongue out at the paparazzi, and I was done for. That rude tongue, that tousled hair, those hooded, emo eyes. My secret crush was forever sealed.

Most girls get over their boy-band era crushes. But I was being pushed at his brother Torben, and Etienne was the opposite of his older brother in every way. Yet Etienne never gave me the slightest glance. So, of course, he's haunted my dreams ever since.

The knocking continues. "Madam?"

Oh, gods, I recognize that voice. It's one of the queen's new assistants. A knot forms in my stomach.

"Just a moment!" I call out, lying here in my bed, looking out the floor-to-ceiling window at the view of the city.

I sigh heavily, wishing I did have a man in my bed to shoo the world away.

It's so early, the sun barely peeks over the choppy waters of the North Sea in the distance, beyond the line of buildings and churches of the capital city.

What's it going to be? Another audience with the king? The queen is fine. But King Otto? He jangles my last nerve. I don't trust him.

My robe knotted tight around me, I open the door and smile at the tall man in the kilt. The latest addition to the royal staff, Uther, has become quite the heartthrob in the papers. He does absolutely nothing for me, but I understand the appeal. "Good morning."

Uther nods solemnly. "Good morning, Madam. I am to deliver you a letter."

"Is something wrong?"

"The queen's advisors ask you to read it and reply within the hour."

Within the hour? My goodness, it must be urgent.

I take the letter and step aside to invite Uther inside. He blushes. "I will wait in the hall."

Ah, yes, he can't come inside. He's on business, and the royal family's employees must be above reproach. I feel silly leaving him in the hallway, so I leave the door open a crack and go to the kitchen.

As I pass my wall of windows, I glance past the downtown of Arenhammer, toward the hill on the far side, atop which sits the palace.

If I know the timing of these summonses, I'm being invited to the royal family's breakfast with the prince.

The awful memory of Torben's 18th birthday comes flooding back. The Favored Prince himself was gracious, and the palace kept the "break-up" out of the media.

There was no relationship to break up, in fact. The only thing broken was my pride.

My stepmother Ilsa's martyrdom overshadowed our whole house for the longest while. She wallowed in self-pity because I'd failed to do the one thing she'd reared me up to do: marry the prince and become queen.

I toss the letter on the breakfast island, then shuffle to the coffee bean grinder to measure exactly 25 grams. Never a whole pot because I'm alone.

I should open the letter straight away, but I need coffee first.

I measure the beans, grind them, add the water to the pot, and then wait.

Curiosity wins out, and I read the letter as the aroma of fresh coffee fills my flat.

“King Otto VI requests the immediate presence of Lady Kala St. Rain at 9 a.m. today, the Seventeenth of September, at Haart Castle.”

I groan. This is not a request. A king's request is a demand. He legally can't force me to attend the palace, but who would dare say no? Not when I'm in the current bind I'm in. Perhaps we can broker an extension on the money my father so stupidly borrowed from the palace.

Once I take my first sip of coffee, I'm ready to respond. Pushing open my door, I give Uther my word and a winning smile. “You may tell Her Majesty the Queen and His Majesty the King that I will be there with bells on.”

Uther nods and gives me a half smile. “Excellent, Madam.”

I hand him a to-go cup of coffee.

“This is not necessary,” he says.

“Don't be so formal. Take the coffee.”

He nods, and his smile grows. “Thank you, Madam.”

“Please, just call me Kala.”

“I wouldn't want to get used to addressing you as a familiar. I'll wait to escort you as soon as you're dressed.”

...Get used to addressing me as a familiar? What could that mean?

In Gravenland, lords, ladies, dukes, and duchesses are granted titles by birth or by the ruler's whim. However, unlike other monarchies, we are not addressed as such. It's a tiny island

country; if we all enforced our titles on each other, half the nation would be aristocrats. The other half would never be able to get dinner reservations, and the country would descend into chaos and bloodshed.

“Right. Royal blue dress, then? Torben’s favorite color?” I ask in a blatant attempt to get Uther to explain more about this breakfast.

Uther stammers. “The queen did mention she always favored you in yellow, Madam.”

Right. On the occasions that the tabloids have included me in their coverage of royal events, the most complimentary comments have been when I’m wearing sunny yellow. I’m still what they call a “royal hanger-on,” but the tabs are nicer about it when I’m in the right color.

Hanger-on my foot. More like at the royals’ beck and call.

“Yes,” I say. “Yellow it is, then.”

I’ll defer to the royals. Not only because of who they are but because my father owes them.

No one knows that the books are in shambles about Frost Bay Beverages.

And so, of course, I’ll consider whatever the monarchs propose today.

If Torben will have me? Fine.

Although I’ve always harbored a lust for Etienne, none of the three princes are what I would consider a healthy match for me.

If an engagement, any engagement, helps me untangle the financial mess my father left me when he retired and hightailed it to Spain?

So much the better.

3

E tienne

I stumble into the royal breakfast room, the sun blasting straight to the backs of my eyeballs, temporarily blinding me.

I blink and rub the meat of my palms into my eye sockets as I slump into my cushioned chair.

My stomach rumbles.

The cooks outdid themselves this morning: eggs Benedict. Bacon. Waffles. Chocolate croissants. Those little pastries with almond filling.

Perfect for soaking up the whiskey.

After the airport appearance, where the press lapped up our happy, supportive sibling act, I'd zipped straight to the confines of my palace chambers, where Rolf had a whiskey cocktail waiting for me.

I always need to unwind after a public engagement.

And I needed sleep after a night of drinking with strangers, which oddly didn't even garner a single headline. All anyone's talking about is Torben.

No one was surprised to see me shambling around and throwing back drinks all night.

After four hours of much-needed sleep, though, I require food.

Three of those almond things go straight down my gullet before I realize everyone around the table is staring at me.

“What?” I ask through a mouthful of buttery crumbs.

My sister, Flora, still standing, motions subtly with a jerk of her head, her halo of blonde ringlets bouncing. No one is eating. No one is sitting. Flora and Sigurd wait politely behind their seats because the king and queen are entertaining company. We do this when we have visitors rather than charge the table and stuff our faces.

My eyes slide in the direction Flora’s indicating. A visitor with straight posture and bright eyes, she could be no one else.

I had registered a light yellow blur when I’d first shambled into the room, but I’d assumed it was one of my mother’s many advisors.

Kala St. Rain. She of the impeccable manners. I pause only for a second before resuming stuffing my face as I watch her perfect fingers lift a porcelain tea cup to her lips, all the while politely nodding to the queen.

“You just returned from a trip to Malaysia, if I’m not mistaken,” Father asks.

“Yes. I was on assignment with the United Nations Council on Human Rights.”

“Did you hear that, Hilda?”

“Of course, I heard her, Otto; I’m standing right here.”

Kala is so good at small talk; she must have taken a class.

Meanwhile, I can’t help but wonder why we’re not discussing the actual event of the day: my eldest brother, Torben, showing up this morning after a week of going missing. He’s suddenly back with an American babe on his arm.

They’ve yet to appear for breakfast, and I scrub my brain of any thoughts on why that might be.

I don’t know why Kala is here. Nor do I understand why no one is discussing the American, planning the presumed

wedding, or arranging photo shoots—all of the nonsense that hopefully will not involve me.

Kala's long, thick brown hair sweeps around the side of her graceful neck, cascading down her chest. I catch myself staring before I remember how bored I am.

As conversation drones on, I reach for a hard-boiled egg and roll it on the table.

A cluck of disapproval from my mother interrupts my egg progress.

“What?”

“That's not how we open our eggs in polite company.”

“Well, I'm not polite, Mother. And since I'm forbidden to sit...”

I trail off because no one is glaring at me any longer.

Torben and the American have arrived for breakfast, finally.

And the attention is off me. Huzzah.

I slump in my chair and pull apart the egg ravenously, not caring that I'm leaving bits of shell all over the pristine table.

The skin on my neck prickles, then. I side-eye the yellow blur. Kala's contoured cheeks flush with heat, but her always-confident expression falters. Quickly, she finds something more interesting to stare at across the room.

Am I mistaken, or did I just catch Kala watching me?

K^{ala}

The things we don't say out loud in royal company could fill a book.

For instance, I still don't know what I'm doing at the palace.

I've been invited to breakfast, and we're waiting for Torben to arrive. But I do not know what purpose my presence serves.

I'm standing here drinking tea in the breakfast room, smiling and chatting with the monarchs, wishing I was still at home, in my bathrobe, with my favorite mug of coffee.

Still, it's a lovely setting on a perfectly sunny morning. Birdsong and light fill the room, bordered on one side by an enormous aviary. The morning sun pouring in casts a golden glow on the sweeping sandstone wall that frames an intricately carved fireplace, crackling with life. Not a bad invitation, if you can get it. I really should count my blessings.

The timing of this summons feels more than coincidental: The Favored Prince has been found, and returned to Gravenland early this morning.

A part of me suspects that the monarchs still want me to marry Torben, produce an heir, and secure the monarchy. But no one, since my arrival, has done me the kindness of verbalizing my purpose here.

In the meantime, I'm subjected to small talk about my beloved UN job—the one I've put on hold now, thanks to dear old dad leaving the family business in dire straits.

I won't mention those unsavory facts. My job here is to put a smile on the royal faces while regaling them with stories of trips to Malaysia and Micronesia. They don't want to hear a quick sidebar about the Human Rights Council and what we could do with a donation from the palace coffers. No, they want to listen to an amusing story of my first encounter with an elephant.

Because small talk is what we do. We don't talk about the elephant in the room, as it were.

I was hoping the king would lead the conversation into the subject of Frost Bay Beverages, possibly allowing me an inroad to negotiate a lower lease on the land and delaying the repayment of my father's loans to the palace.

Changing the subject abruptly would be the height of rudeness with the king and would also reek of desperation.

As we chat about one inane thing after another, I feel like I'm bursting out of my skin.

Finally, the queen says it.

"It's so lovely to see you again," says the queen. "We really must have you to breakfast more often. Well, once Torben lays eyes on you after the week he's had, I'm sure we'll see much more of you, my dear."

And there it is.

Buckle up, buttercup. You're about to save the family business.

"That's interesting that you bring that up," I say. "I was hoping to schedule a meeting for us to discuss the matter of my father's debt to the palace."

The king chortles. "Oh, your father's always been indebted to me. That will be paid; don't you worry about that."

A chill runs down my spine as I think back to the eldest prince's 18th birthday, when I was all but presented to him on

a silver platter and was rejected. Could it be that my father has been indebted even then?

And did I somehow play a role in his hopes to have his debt forgiven, even at my young age? No, it's too gross to even think about that.

But now I'm a grown adult, fully aware of what I'm getting into.

I don't love Torben. But I can save the family business. I can protect the family name. I can perform royal engagements related to work I care about. Once I'm queen, the work of the Human Rights Council will be front and center, and get loads more coverage in the media, as it should.

"Oh, my dears, I didn't see you there!" The queen has looked past me at someone new entering the breakfast room. I turn and see Torben walk in...holding the hand of a young woman. I swallow. The queen goes on to say, "Kala told us the most fascinating story about her recent trip to Malaysia. Torben, you remember Kala, don't you?"

I turn and smile, giving a small curtsy. The Favored Prince replies stiffly, and my stomach clenches. "Of course I do. How are you, Kala?"

"Very well, Your Highness." When I look up, something in the prince's eyes sends me back to that awful day seventeen years ago. I'm about to get rejected again, aren't I? "Thank you for asking. I hope Your Highness had a pleasant summer."

His smile is genuine, and almost warm. "Very pleasant. How is your family?"

I beam at him. "Father is enjoying his retirement in Spain. I plan to join him and Ilsa there soon. Unless I am called upon to be of service in another capacity." We might as well try to lead into the subject that no one is discussing, even if no one will directly address our probable engagement.

Behind me, Etienne coughs. I ignore him. He, of course, is taking my "service" comment sexually. Because, of course, he is.

Torben queries, “I thought your father sold the beer business to an American company? Are you running the local headquarters, then?”

And then I see it in his face. The prince doesn’t know why I’m here. He thinks this is just a pleasant visit with family friends. I’m thrown by this question and hesitate. “Why, no...I...”

“Kala,” he says, “I’d like you to meet my fiancée, Hailey.”

I need a minute that I do not have. Fix your face, bitch.

“Fiancée,” I repeat back to him, feeling all the blood drain from my brain. That’s it, then. Frost Bay Beverages is sunk. There won’t be any refinancing of loans or new land deals, or new partnerships. I won’t be having children or a royal title to leverage money for charity.

Again, what the fuck am I doing here?

I turn to the short, curvy blonde woman who stares up at me with the sweetest, most innocent face. “Of course. How wonderful to meet you,” I say, offering my hand.

“You too, Kala. I love your dress, by the way.”

“Oh? I’ll have my dry cleaner deliver it to the palace in a day.” And have my tailor hem it five inches and let it out in the chest and hips, I think, with a twinge of envy. But I don’t say that part out loud.

“I...wait...what? No, that’s so not necessary.”

“It is customary,” I tell her, exaggeratedly confused. It’s a very outdated cultural custom of Gravenland, but I’m leaning into the idea that Torben has not prepared this woman for life as a monarch.

I regret making Hailey feel uncomfortable the longer I’m in her presence. She’s pretty, down-to-earth and kind. She’s chatty, whereas Torben is reserved, and I can see how they make a perfect match.

More than anything, I see how she looks at him and him at her. My heart skips a beat. I wish I had a hold on my central nervous system equal to my grip on my manners.

With my eyes trained on my teacup—because I can't stomach any of the rich foods laid out before us on this table—I feel something pricking my skin. The feeling that someone is staring at me is overwhelming.

I look up, and see it. See *him*. Etienne's cool grey eyes match those of his mother, the queen, but he has none of her etiquette. He's smirking at me while everyone carries on with the conversation.

I can't wait to get the hell out of this room. I feel vulnerable. Exposed and suffocated at the same time.

When we're all finally dismissed, I breathe a sigh of relief.

But that relief only lasts a moment.

"Stay, if you would, dear," the queen says, pressing her hand to my forearm after I curtsy at the end of breakfast.

"Stay? Of course, Your Majesty."

The king adds, "Yes, please do. We need all the company we can get around here. I'd love to have you around to help Hailey adjust to royal life."

But they have advisers and staff for that, don't they? Do I dare question it? "She seems like a lovely woman, and I'd be happy to help in any capacity," I reply.

The king and queen exchange a look, then the king retreats, heading down the hall to who knows where.

The queen still hasn't let go of my arm. "And, later on, we're scheduled to meet with the chief brewer of Frost Bay Beverages today for a photo opportunity. Would you be so kind as to join us?"

"Oh," I reply. "Of course." I don't actually want to appear in the media as a representative of the company, but when the queen asks, I can't say no.

"Good," the queen says. "The appearance is scheduled for two o'clock. Please make yourself at home."

"Shouldn't I go to my flat and change into business clothes?"

The queen shakes her head. “The guest room, and its wardrobe, is at your disposal. What can I say? We love having you around. You’re such a good influence. On everyone in this house.”

What can she say?

Indeed, I wish she’d just come out and say the truth: they want to push me in Torben’s face all day long and remind him of what he’s missing.

What no one says out loud in the presence of royalty would fill volumes.

Etienne

Barely an ounce remains of the scotch I keep in the bar cart in my chamber.

Torben is happy, my parents are acting suspicious, and Kala looked crestfallen at being rejected by the same prince for the second time in her life. Today seems like a good day to stay drunk. Something big is about to happen, and it doesn't include me or any of the spares.

I try to put all thoughts and feelings out of my head as I skulk down to the wine cellar.

I do not like that my parents are toying with Kala's emotions. It's no skin off my nose, but they shouldn't mess with people's lives that way.

And why should that woman allow her life to be toyed with? She's attractive and accomplished. Surely if she wanted a relationship, she would have been in one by now. But then I saw the look on her face when Torben introduced Hailey.

I doubt anyone noticed the moment that bombshell hit her—the subtle flutter of her dark lashes, the bob of her swan-like throat. And then, she pushed it down.

We're all professional at pushing that shit down, aren't we? Kala St. Rain fits right in. I hear voices when my feet reach the

bottom of the stone steps leading to the basement. I pause and listen.

“Don’t have a tantrum, dear.”

“I won’t go through with it. I simply will not stand there in public and announce that...American...as my future daughter-in-law.”

What in the world are my parents doing down here?

“A king doesn’t have to do anything that goes against his conscience,” the queen says.

There’s a pause and I crane my neck to listen.

“Everyone saw her exiting the plane with him. That woman rode in my motorcade with my son,” the king says.

“He’s sowing his wild oats. And after you officially announce Torben’s engagement to Kala tomorrow, that country rube will run back to America where she belongs.”

I knew my mother had claws, but I’d never witnessed her behave this way. She has such a soft spot for her children; I never would have thought she’d hurt her son like this.

“You mean simply go against his wishes?”

There’s a wicked-sounding smile in my mother’s voice. “And watch him fall in line. He may not enjoy answering to you, Otto. But he will always, ultimately, do what’s best for the country. And he knows as well as we do that what’s best for the country is to continue the line of succession with a woman who knows the score. Someone who has her own money and status, and knows what to do with it. Someone who would never make a laughingstock of our little country.”

I’ve heard enough.

My hand grips the neck of a bottle before I slip out of a side door of the basement undetected.



“You’re drunk and spouting bullshit again. It’s not a good look.”

Okay, maybe I need to practice my communication skills.

I’d drunk half a bottle of Syrah, but my conscience was getting to me.

I couldn’t just blurt, “Hey brother, Mom and Dad are scheming against you and Hailey.” No, I had to be an asshole about it. I might have said something about his stupid smug face.

Fine. I’m jealous. All the women want him, and Mom and Dad are obsessed with him.

“Ask him for yourself. Father won’t endorse your wedding. Just wait,” I tell him. “That’s why ol’ Kala’s been hanging around. Don’t you get it? The king and queen will forbid you to marry Hailey and instead give you Kala as the consolation prize.”

“Our parents cannot forbid me or force me to do anything,” Torben answers.

“Brother, you might be the Favored Prince, but you are definitely the slowest. They are scheming right now to get you to fall in line. Humiliate poor Kala for the second time, or humiliate the American. They’re gambling on where your loyalties lie.”

Torben draws himself to full height. “I’ll speak with them today.”

“Better hurry,” I call after him, knowing that could have gone better.



Where in the hell did all the booze go?

Rolf has failed to refresh the beverage cart in my chambers, and now he’s telling me the bar we use for parties in the east wing is closed for renovations.

I retrace my steps to the basement, but there's a lock on the wine cellar. Oops. Someone must not have been impressed that I swiped a \$200 bottle.

As I'm about to pilfer something from my brother Sig's chambers—betting on the notion that he's out hunting and won't catch me stealing his scotch—a blur of light gray and the scent of expensive perfume wafting in a doorway send me tripping over the rugs lining the hall.

“Your Highness, are you alright?” Kala stands half in and half out of a guest room, looking startled.

Am I alright? No, most definitely not.

“What are you doing in the family wing?”

She blinks at me, then blushes. “The king asked me to stay for a while. There are some engagements they want me to participate in.” Kala shuts a door behind her and steps fully out into the hallway to join me.

“I'll bet he does.”

Kala tilts her head, and the tiniest worry line forms between her eyebrows. “Pardon?”

I scramble for what to say next, but just then, someone's phone pings.

“Excuse me, Your Highness,” she says, uncharacteristically fumbling with her matching designer handbag.

I thought she'd be with my parents by now... I thought I'd heard something about a photo op at the bottling plant or something equally dull. As dull as that suit she's changed into. I wonder what has happened to that breezy yellow dress. I could see the silhouette of her legs through it when she stood by the aviary this morning, and the shape of her thighs was... not offensive to me.

I watch her blink down at her phone screen, scrolling through a long wall of text. She tilts her head again and re-reads it.

“What is it?”

“Pardon me, Your Highness,” she says. “It seems I’m not needed for the photo shoot. The king and queen have left that engagement early. Not sure what’s going on.”

Oh, I know what’s going on. My brother found them and gave them the third degree.

“Perhaps the king’s gout is acting up. He should never drink alcohol; it makes him sore and grouchy,” I offer.

Kala looks scandalized at my words, but I can see she doesn’t truly feel any impulse to defend my father in front of me.

“It makes many people do and say things they regret later, Your Highness.”

Was that a dig at me?

And yet somehow I don’t take offense. A sly smile crawls across my lips, and I’m about to find out if this perfect priss knows how to banter, when we’re interrupted.

“You! And you!”

Our gazes snap to the end of the hall, where a breathless Flora is approaching us.

“What’s up, sis?”

“Your Highness,” Kala says, startled into a small curtsy.

“Good, you’re both here. Let’s go,” Flora chirps, hooking one arm under mine and the other under Kala’s. She escorts us swiftly down the hall, past centuries-old tapestries, to the grand staircase.

“Where are you taking us?” I ask.

“You are going to be your brother’s best man.”

“Like hell.”

“Oh, shut up and do something nice for your big brother for once in your life. And you, my dear Kala, will keep my parents distracted.”

“Yes, Your Highness. Whatever it is you need, I’m at your service.”

I'm surprised at first, but then I forget that high-born citizens of Gravenland would lay down their lives for the royal family. If my sister the princess asks someone for a favor, the only people who could successfully deny Flora are her siblings.

And today, it doesn't appear I stand a chance.

6

K_{ala}

This is the first time in my life that I've outright disobeyed the king.

Honestly, it feels pretty good, even if I'm freaking out internally.

All that Flora had asked me to do yesterday was keep the king and queen occupied by any means necessary while Torben and Hailey sneaked away to get married.

I kept them busy with backgammon, croquet, and a personal viewing of every damned one of the palace's historical artifacts, dating back millennia when Gravenland had been divided into clans and ruled by chieftains. I even learned a few things they never taught us in school about our pre-Judeo-Christian gods that we still honor today.

Quite a noble and proud lineage leads up to this particular king standing before me, who is equal parts clueless about his progeny, yet purports to rule them with an iron fist. For all his sequestering and courtship demands, the king's fist is made less of iron and more of the grasses that whip in the cold sea breeze.

Once again, I don't know what I'm doing here. Here being the Arenhammer Plaza Hotel. The king motions me to step

forward, but I don't. I curtsy and swallow my anxiety as the king's face turns a concerning shade of red.

Torben takes the microphone from his father, then Hailey joins him on the balcony.

And then, I watch in morbid curiosity as the king and queen's entire world turns upside down.

And here is where I take my leave of this chaotic family.

"Stop right there!" shouts the king.

The security guards close the balcony doors, muting the sound outside. Uther gives me a sympathetic look, but he's just following orders.

I freeze, turning to the king. "Your Majesty?"

"My business with you is not finished."

Oh gods, what on earth could he mean? Torben is married. I'll have to figure out another way to renegotiate the business loan, go back to the American beer company, or take the lower offer, and sell off the assets they don't want.

What follows is a family argument that I do not feel comfortable witnessing. I should not be here for this. Nor should I be here for the moment that Torben abdicates the throne.

Oh, my gods. Is he really doing this? Is this happening?

For the first time, I see that this family has some honor after all—the firstborn is choosing his bride over his father's wishes.

"Etienne, congratulations. You're the favored prince now," Torben says.

All eyes turn to the prince lounging on the sofa, watching the drama.

"The hell you say?" Etienne sits up, pale and panicked.

More arguing. This time it all ends in tears, but ultimately, my estimation of Hailey goes up several notches when she stands up for her man.

There's some talk about declaring Sig the next in line just because a king can do that, according to some obscure law of the monarchy. But when I turn to look, the Wild Prince is nowhere to be seen.

I don't dare move a muscle, not even after Torben, Hailey, and Flora leave.

All that's left in the room is Etienne, me, and the king and queen.

And here is where the king finally says precisely what he wants from me.

He turns to Etienne. "Stand up, boy, and greet your fiancée."

The shocked Etienne stands and gestures wildly. "Don't I get a say in this? You gave Torben a month."

"And he betrayed me in less than a week. I changed the rules. Deal with it."

Etienne's question is a knife to my heart. Of course, he gets a say in this, as he should. So why does it hurt that he automatically doesn't want me? That his gut reaction is to argue?

The queen exits unceremoniously as the king and Etienne share some words privately in the corner. I can't hear what they're saying to one another, but something in the king's words makes Etienne's beautiful face blanch.

King Otto is not a subtle man, so I can only imagine he's threatening to cut Etienne off financially if he doesn't go through with this engagement.

He doesn't want this.

I want him desperately—or my libido does—but not under these circumstances.

Just what the hell am I being roped into now?

E tienne

A sea breeze and a gently rocking hammock are all I need.

I'm so glad I did this for myself. Ditched the royal family drama and found myself a private tropical island with my favorite person: me. Just me, the seagulls, and unlimited booze.

I will need food, eventually. I'll worry about that when I sober up.

Then again, I'm unsure how the food will arrive here, as this is a deserted tropical island. Oh, probably the same delivery method as the whiskey.

See? Nothing to worry about.

Although, I am feeling a bit peckish. My throat is starting to feel like the Sahara desert.

Ah, but listen to those waves lapping the shore. It's enough to make me forget all my troubles. And let's face it, a prince of Gravenland has no real problems.

Except, I am feeling a bit headachy, if I'm honest.

Wonder if this deserted island has any pain medicine.

Probably not.

My phone. Of course, that must be how I got the whiskey in the first place. The Door Dash app also works for remote tropical islands, if you can believe it.

So, that's four things I need: a steak dinner, bottled water, more whiskey, and pain medication. Then, I'll be all set.

I dig my phone out of my pocket, and something strange happens when I type in my passcode. It seems I've forgotten it. I stare at the digital keypad, yet the code doesn't come to me immediately. I close my eyes and think hard, saying the numbers out loud.

I open my eyes again and type the code, but my fingers move slowly. Everything is such an effort; it's frustrating. And on top of that, whenever I try to type the code, I get a number wrong and must redo it.

Seven or eight times, this happens.

What the fuck is going on with my stupid brain? Why can't I remember? And why can't my fingers just do what I tell them to do?

Something moves in the corner of my eye. A white cloud rolls along the beach in my direction, though there's no sign of rain in the sky.

When the fluffy white object gets closer, I realize it's a person.

It's Kala St. Rain, and she's heading toward me in an impossibly massive hoop-skirted wedding gown, the tulle of her skirts and veil trailing behind her for kilometers. Literally kilometers.

The trains of her gown and veil are so long that they completely cover the entire beach. I watch, dumbfounded, as she approaches, a knowing, serene expression on her face.

Kala stops a few feet away, and her lips curve upward in a familiar smile that I never found all that appealing until this moment.

Somehow, she knows how to make my phone work.

I feel relief when she takes it from me.

Without warning, Kala turns from me, facing the sea, and winds up like one of those American baseball throwers. Pitchers? No, throwers.

My phone morphs into a baseball and skims across the sea's surface until it finally disappears, sinking into the vast blue.

I feel...nothing.

"Finally, we're alone," I find myself saying, surprised that I was content to be the only person on this island just a minute ago.

I've been too keen to stay away from the palace and all of its hangers-on to have noticed Kala — really noticed her. This moment, when I'm far away from all the muck, baggage, and shouting, it's just...us.

Taking a step closer, I reach out to touch a lock of her soft brown hair that the sea breeze has loosened from the pins and combs and whatnot.

"Sigurd is gonna owe me big time for this," she says with an uncharacteristic grunt. She stands still, staring at the waves, but her voice is straining with effort. Her voice doesn't sound like her at all.

I balk at the mention of my brother's name on Kala's lips.

"What did my brother do to you?" I growl.

Kala turns to face me again, and suddenly I realize it's not Kala, but my sister.

I rear back in revulsion.

The slight headache becomes a brain-searing throb and a jolting slap to my face.

"Wake up, idiot."

I open my eyes to find my angry, slightly disheveled sister, Princess Flora, looking straight at me. When she shifts her head to examine me, the movement causes the sun to blast my face. I groan, shutting my eyes again, holding a hand up to block the light.

“Aw, what’s the matter, brother? Did I disturb your little death-wish nap?”

“Death wish...what the bloody hell are you babbling about?”

“I should have just left you here, but I won’t let that poor girl endure another rejection by one of my brothers. Sigurd should be here to rescue your dumb ass, but no one can find him. I refuse to bother Torben and Hailey on their honeymoon.”

That still doesn’t explain the death wish thing.

I slowly peel my crusty eyes open again and take in my surroundings. I’m lying on a metal platform, my arms wrapped around...a homemade rocket. What? Oh...something is coming back to my memory now. But it’s tough to explore that while there’s an outrageous kink in my neck to go along with the pounding in my skull.

Flora’s disapproving gaze is inches away, looking over the lip of this metal platform. I must be somewhere high in a tree, on a building ledge, on some scaffolding, perhaps, and she’s been sent to get me down.

All right, fine. I’ve ended up somewhere I shouldn’t be after an all-night bender. Or a three-day bender, I’m not sure.

Alas, no hammock. But wait.

The swaying...why am I still swaying?

I’m trying to process my surroundings and piece together last night’s events while Flora, heedless of my pain, prattles on about climbing “up here” in a dress and heels to wake me.

“Up here?” I croak.

She rolls her eyes and shoves an antacid tablet at me. “Chew this before you sit up. I’m not dealing with your vomit on top of getting you to the chapel.”

Chapel.

Oh. Bloody hell.

I toss the tablet aside with disdain and finally sit up to look around.

“Damn,” I say, taking in the view of the harbor, the lush mountains, the small, bustling city, and the rocky beaches. Not a remote tropical island, mind you, but the southern coast of Gravenland in the cold September North Sea.

Ah, yes. My home.

And there’s the marina, and...yes, there is the empty slip where the S.S. Frigge, the royal yacht, ought to be.

“Huh,” I grunt.

More pieces of last night trickle into the forefront of my mind.

I’m not sure at which point I passed out in the crow’s nest of good ol’ Frigge. Slumber came upon me sometime after the pyrotechnics professional refused to launch my homemade fireworks, and mercifully before I managed to light the DIY rocket myself in a drunken snit.

Flora heaves herself onto the platform and opens a bag slung over her shoulder.

“Drink this, take this, and eat this,” she says, punctuating her orders by setting down a bottle of water, a pill case, and a greasy sandwich wrapped in brown paper.

“You’re bossy,” I mutter, unwrapping the sandwich. It’s still warm, and the scent of duck hits my nostrils. My mouth waters, and I dive into the sandwich.

“Someone has to be when it comes to you,” she says, wrangling the crossbody bag from her bare shoulder and rubbing the skin there.

“Father does his part,” I remark through a mouthful of bread, meat, cheese, lettuce, and butter.

Flora winces in disgust at the sight of me eating. “Yes, well, he’s not here to do the actual work of getting you married. Shouting and threatening to cut you off is the easy part. Physically maneuvering you is the real work, brother.”

“Not wrong,” I say while tearing off another huge bite.

Flora shakes her head and looks me up and down. “You’ll need a shave too. I shoved everything we need in the bag. All

except for the wedding suit, but this will have to do. Unless, of course, you shit yourself. Did you shit or piss yourself, dear brother?"

I shoot her an offended look as I chew. "No! The fuck, Flora?"

"Well, you didn't invite me to your bachelor party, so how was I to know how drunk you got last night? Or perhaps still are?"

"Not still drunk," I say. "And I wouldn't invite you to watch me steal the royal yacht. Wouldn't want you to be complicit. Or be interrogated later."

She blinks at me, wagging ridiculously long fake eyelashes at me. "How thoughtful. Now. Finish your water and take two of those pills for your headache."

My sister really climbed up to the damn crow's nest for me.

Guilt overtakes me. Gods, I hate that feeling.

"How did you get here?" I ask after swallowing the last bite of my sandwich.

"I climbed. I'm surprised all my cursing didn't wake you on my way up."

I give her a half-grin, remembering more of my dream. Yikes.

"How did you get to the boat? How did you even know where I was?"

Flora swats the back of my head with her open hand. She can pack a punch like the rest of the Haart siblings, as my aching head testifies. "Ow! God, you're brutal when you want to be."

She ignores my comment and explains, "I'll answer the second question first. The captain visited the palace this morning to report the missing yacht. No one fucks with the Frigge except the one who fucks with everything. That's you," she says, thrusting a finger at my ribs. "And secondly, Callum helped. He won't talk."

Callum the gamekeeper? She notices my confusion and jerks her head toward the shore.

I look out past the nose of the ship. By gods, someone is driving this vessel. I crane my neck to check the rear of the

boat, where Callum's fishing boat hops along behind us over the waves, tethered to the yacht's stern.

I have so many questions. Why did she seek out Callum Black, of all people, to help retrieve me?

"Why not ask Uther for help?"

She shrugs. "Uther's busy," she sighs.

Whatever. I'm too hungover, depleted, and dreading my impending doom to ask more questions.

With the supplies Flora brought—a comb, deodorant, a clean undershirt, razor, and beard oil- I clean myself up in the mirror inside the Frigge's main cabin.

I try not to gaze too deeply at my reflection.

I don't particularly like the man who looks back at me.

He resembles my mother more than my father. But I've inherited none of her politeness or gravitas. My only stroke of luck in the gene pool is inheriting nothing from my father.

I'm just me.

Etienne the fuck up. The Bad Prince.

Scrubbing my beard and washing the oil off my hands, I mutter to myself. "Get ready to marry an asshole, Kala."

"Not today, brother!"

"Yes," I say, trying not to smile as my undefeated baby sister beams at me. "Even today."

Flora takes my arm while Callum and the marina workers secure the boat to the dock.

The hour is early, yet a small clutch of photographers waits for us, along with the coast guard, the royal yacht's captain, and the chief of police.

"What's all this?" I ask Flora under my breath.

She doesn't answer, but an official with the Gravenland Coast Guard steps forward, bows curtly, and pumps my hand. "Your Highness. Wonderful work you did, finding the Frigge and

returning it to shore. And on your wedding day, no less,” he says.

The police chief proclaims, “If his royal highness ever fancies himself a detective, we’ll hire you on the spot.”

I look over at Callum, who’s ignoring me while he and the boat captain tie knots. Flora squeezes my arm and winks when I glance down at her.

“See? I told you. You’re not an asshole today.”

Then she turns to the assembled group and announces that time is of the essence.

“Now, if you don’t mind, we have a fretful bride out of her mind with worry. We’re off to the chapel to get this prince married.”

K_{ala}

“For the love of the gods, smile with your eyes.”

I don't argue with the woman who raised me as she stands behind me in the mirror, fussing with my veil.

Ilsa and my father returned from their Spanish villa for the wedding. My stepmother is thrilled that this marriage will surely settle Father's debts once and for all.

A smile on this day will never reach my eyes, however. A smile can only reach my eyes if it comes from my heart. My heart lies with Etienne, in a way, but he does not love me.

“Good advice, thank you, Ilsa,” I say.

The older woman gives a resigned sigh and turns away from the mirror.

She does indeed give good advice. Or so one would assume, as she's the headmistress of the most prominent finishing school in the land. My father and Ilsa met and married quickly after my mother passed away when I was nine years old. I was, from then on, groomed to be a queen.

The older woman moves on to tugging the laces tighter at the back of the bodice, constricting my ribcage and causing me to gasp.

“Make it any tighter and I won’t be able to enjoy the cake,” I tease.

I turn from the mirror and watch Ilsa bend over to lift the dress hem as I carefully step into my heels.

“Take one bite at the cake-cutting ceremony—for the photographs—and be done with it,” she offers.

I scoff, but say nothing. One bite indeed. The cake is the only part I’ve been looking forward to today. My dreams are coming true, yet my heart is breaking at the same time. I will stuff my face with cake. That will solve everything.

Once Ilsa is upright again, she takes a few steps back and looks me up and down.

And then, she’s bawling.

“Oh my gods. My darling. I wish your mother could be here to see this.”

I do not. I am relieved that my mother never lived to see me married to someone who does not love me. I imagine the woman of my flesh and bone would see right through him and call the whole thing off.

And especially considering the groom is, at the present moment, missing.

Missing.

Who goes missing on their wedding day?

Well, that would be Etienne Haart of the royal family of Gravenland. Of course.

Because seventeen years after being rejected by the eldest—the Favored Prince, the one everyone in the kingdom wants or wants to be—I am now to marry Number Two.

Why, at 33, would I debase myself like this?

Well, my family’s farms and businesses hang in the balance, and I’m the only person who feels the true weight of it.

My great-grandfather grew and built his barley and hops farm from one simple parcel of land into the country’s biggest beer

producer.

He passed his legacy down to his son, who passed it to my father, who low-key ran the business into the ground. I didn't know until I received a panicked phone call from the CEO months ago after Father "retired" to Spain.

Things were so bad that payroll was short. On top of that, an American beer company offered a laughably small amount that even if the next payroll could be met, everyone, down to the workers and the farm hands, would have to take a pay cut. So I'd rejected the deal, and now everything is in flux.

And the king knows. So, if I don't marry Etienne? The capricious king can recall the loan to be paid in full, which would mean liquidating our assets and shuttering our doors.

The land on which our crops and facilities sit will transfer to the palace, and the king will do with it what he will.

How different my life would have been if my mother had lived.

I might never have been sent to finishing school. I might never have had the same tutors, attended the same schools, or been strategically placed before the king's nose as a young girl for him to notice me.

I might never have been used as a bargaining chip.

A soft knock sounds at the doors of the bridal suite, and Ilsa scampers over in her mother-of-the-bride outfit, her skirt swishing. She opens the door and leans out.

"What is it?" she asks impatiently. "Oh! Pardon my manners, Your Highness. Is the prince found?"

For a second, my heart is in my throat. Is it the king? The queen? Oh gods, is it the groom? I don't want him to see me before the wedding, it's bad luck!

Despite how I feel about today, I'm still a traditional girl. I need all the luck I can get.

"Yes, ma'am. He's been found. He's getting ready now."

Ilsa clutches her chest. "Oh, thank goodness. Is he well?"

“May I come in?”

The older woman steps out of the way, and Princess Flora enters the room.

I swallow and curtsy. “Your Highness.”

“Please, none of that. We’re friends now. Sisters!” Something about Flora’s tone is overly bright, but I nod and tell her she’s very gracious.

She leans in. “May I have a word with you privately?”

“Of course, Your Highness. Flora,” I say with a smile, then turn to Ilsa.

Ilsa buffers between being left out of the loop and deferring to the princess.

“Of course. I’ll just go and...check on other things. Try not to wrinkle your dress,” she says, bowing out of the room.

I could not care less about a wrinkled dress under these circumstances.

Flora’s angelic face turns excited.

“I just wanted a minute of your time to say how excited I am that we’re going to be sisters. You’ve met Hailey, of course. She’s wonderful, and I think the three of us will be great friends,” she says.

I tell her I agree. “Hailey seems like a charming woman, and I look forward to getting to know her better.”

Flora gives me a knowing look. “Of course, that is, after the proper time. Your honeymoon with Etienne, I mean. I suspect the two of you will want plenty of time to get to know each other,” Flora says.

The poor girl has no idea, does she?

I take a deep breath and address the elephant in the room.

“I think we both know,” I say, “I’m marrying a man who doesn’t love me. He may be handsome, and I like him very much. But the fact remains, we barely know each other.”

I like him very much? *You love him. You want to have all his babies.*

Flora nods. “Then again, sometimes two people can love each other for years but still not be right for each other in marriage.”

I tilt my head, trying to suss out whether another layer of meaning exists. Could the princess be talking about someone else?

“Does the prince have feelings for someone?”

She sits back with wide eyes. “Oh! No, of course not. How could he, with you as his bride?”

Once again, I dare to speak the truth. “I doubt he even likes me. But I am looking forward to being your sister and Hailey’s. You might find I’ll lean on you heavily in the coming days. His...habits...might be overwhelming.”

Flora nods with a knowing look.

“Etienne is a dear once you get to know him. You make beer. He likes to drink beer. A match made in heaven, right?”

Or hell, I think to myself. The man clearly has a drinking problem.

The drinking thing makes something ping in my brain and has me blurting out the next question before thinking it through.

“Pardon me, Your High—Flora. But are you stalling for time?”

She sits up straight and has the look of someone who’s been caught with their hand in the cookie jar.

“What makes you say that?”

I smirk. “Because you asked Ilsa to leave the room so we could talk, but you’ve said nothing so far that cannot be said in front of Ilsa. I thought maybe you were bringing terrible news.”

She bites her bottom lip. “Seems you’ve caught me. I am stalling for time.”

The rush of anxiety dries my mouth in seconds. “Oh. I see.” I’m going to be left at the altar. The mean girls from my past will have a field day with this, won’t they?

Flora must be able to read this thought all over my face because her hand darts across the table and clutches my forearm. “Oh, dear. Don’t worry. The groom is here. He just... he might still be a little bit drunk and smell like a distillery.”

“I see.”

“I won’t judge you if you want to postpone things...until he’s feeling better.”

I level her with a knowing look. “Flora. I’m sure whatever date we choose for the wedding won’t matter. He’ll be absolutely ripped the night before, no matter what. Am I wrong?”

She sighs. “You’re not wrong.”

We share a few seconds of companionable silence, and I decide that despite all the drama that comes with marrying into the Haart family, being sisters with Flora will be a highlight.

“I’ve never had anyone quite like you on my side, Flora.”

Her sweet face brightens, and it feels like the clouds have parted and the sun is shining through the gloom. She reaches her other hand across the table and clutches my forearm. “Sister,” she says, not knowing what it does for my heart to hear anyone say those words, “You may think I’m an ally. But with Etienne on your side, you’ll soon realize you had no idea what that word meant.”

I am highly suspicious that she, too, might have imbibed a mind-altering substance.

Etienne? An ally? He may be a perfect specimen on the outside and give me the fanny flutters, but an ally?

Hardly.



Butterflies don't even describe what's going on in my stomach.

I slip my arm through my father's, and we have a moment alone together before we head down the aisle.

My eyes are trained on the arched oak doors. My other senses take in everything, the scent of wood oil, incense, and roses. So many roses—rose bunting lines the doorways and stained-glass windows.

Someone hands me my bridal bouquet, a simple cluster of white roses interspersed with crystal gems. It's charming and not my style in the least.

"You'll do fine, daughter. Don't you worry," Father says.

I slide my gaze over to him. "Of course I will. It's not me I'm nervous about. That boy is liable to cut and run at any moment. My track record with the men in this family is well known."

My father balks at this, then pats my hand. "Then he's a fool."

I look at my father, and it feels like I'm seeing the man, the real man, for the first time. Not the man performing for a board of directors or the king.

He looks at me like...like my dad. The dad who I remember from childhood. The person he was before he married Ilsa, and everything changed. The man who used to let me run wild in the apple orchard.

"But he is already a fool, Daddy."

"Then don't marry him," he simply says. "I have a car outside waiting for you, just in case."

"You do?" I ask, incredulous.

"Of course. Say the word and we're out of here."

I blink at him. "But what about the king? The business will be ruined. You'll have a target on your back for the rest of your life."

He shrugs. "We can change our names and move to a fishing village in Portugal."

I haven't laughed this hard in a long time.

I suck my lips into my mouth. "Or maybe everything will turn out just fine," I say.

"My girl, you have made the best of the worst situations. Whatever you decide to do today, I know everything will turn out more than fine. Your life will be spectacular."

"I love you, Daddy." And yes, I'm still pissed about the beer business, but parental relationships are complicated.

"I love you too, sweetheart."

"Dammit, now you've ruined my eye makeup," I laugh wetly.

He hands me his pocket square, and I don't realize what it is until I've smudged it with mascara.

"Ilsa will have a fit over you ruining this silk."

He chuckles, then both of us startle as the ushers abruptly throw open the arched oak doors.

My eyes widen and my throat dries up at the sight of the chapel. It's the most elaborate celebration of a sham marriage I've ever seen. More white roses and crystals and candles. It's so much, and no one even asked me what I'd prefer.

I take a deep breath. "Guess I'm doing this."

"Last chance," Daddy says.

E tienne

The wedding march begins and I turn to my sister, standing to my left. Flora nudges me, whispering, “Don’t look at me. Here comes your bride, dummy.”

Slowly making her way down the aisle with the silly beer man is...her.

Kala St. Rain.

Unlike the bizarre dream from this morning, there’s not a speck of tulle anywhere in sight. Her dress. Good gods.

The pale silk sheath skims every curve, shimmering over hips that she usually hides inside conservative outfits. The straight neckline cuts across the swells of her breasts, and reveals bare freckled shoulders.

As my bride approaches, her practiced smile can’t hide the worry in her eyes.

I know she’s doing this to pay off her father’s debt to the king.

She doesn’t want to be here. And she’s scared.

Her eyes scan me for clues. Will I run? Fall down drunk at the altar? She’s wise to be worried.

Everyone in this room is holding their breath as they wait for me to slur my words, stumble into the altar, or do something needlessly stupid.

If any of them knew the truth—if these assembled dukes, duchesses, lords and ladies, prime minister, and her entourage knew what my father said to me when he forced me into this engagement—I shudder to think of the repercussions.

Hell, they might just dismantle the monarchy if they knew.

I rather enjoy the life to which I've become accustomed, though. So, for now, I'll go along to get along.

Because nobody says no to the king.

Nobody but our brother Torben. But Torben is massively beloved, and the outpouring of gifts and presents—on top of his inheritance—will see him land on his feet. If I refused to go through with this, zero people in the land would take pity on the Bad Prince.

When Kala reaches me, I take her hands in mine. A curious jolt of electricity arcs through me, along with a foreign feeling of well-being.

Lusty dreams notwithstanding, I chalk it up to nerves. The power of suggestion. Weddings are supposed to be romantic, so it must be the music, the flowers, the happy faces, the devastatingly hot bride—all of it somehow appeals to me on some level. Even if it is a farce.

I soldier through the vows, and the celebrant declares us husband and wife. That's it. I'm a husband. I have a wife.

I catch Kala's eyes fluttering closed for a second. I see the intake of a deep breath.

She's steeling herself for the kiss—our first and perhaps only kiss.

This is it. We just have to do this once and then never again.

When she opens her eyes and looks at me expectantly, I give her the slightest nod. Although my head is pounding, and I'd rather be sitting in a warm bath with some hair of the dog right now, I need her to know that I understand what she's feeling, and that we're in this together.

I move in and touch my lips to hers.

The contact lasts barely two seconds, but when I'm lying dead in my grave, I will still remember the perfection of Kala's kiss. Even in this most meaningless of kisses, the warmth and softness of her lips hold promise.

I graze over her mouth, tilting my face to capture her lips. She softly gasps as my mind blocks out the claps and cheers of the assembled guests.

I tease one lip with a sweep of my tongue just before pulling back, and I feel her hands twist the lapels of my jacket.

For a moment, I feel as if she means to pull me in and deepen the kiss. But this is not that.

Her eyes flash in anger even though she's smiling. That twist was a warning. I pushed too far with that slip of tongue and she's letting me know she was not into it. And yet her body language to anyone watching is nothing more than a beaming, blushing bride.

How talented she is at being false.

I'd thought momentarily that Kala might not take kindly to my idea of what we should do next. But now that I see how phony she is, I feel no regret at what I'm about to suggest.

K_{ala}

The words coming out of Etienne's mouth—in front of a room full of people cheering and clapping— guts me.

“As soon as I am king, we can file for divorce and be rid of each other.”

What?

Did I hear him say what I think I heard him say?

He wants ... a divorce?

My first thought? Good gods, it's happening again. I'm being rejected by a royal yet again.

Etienne must find me truly revolting. He's so full of himself that he wants to be king alone and with no queen.

Some deep down part of me hoped against hope that although this marriage is not a love match, it would become one.

That he can't even see himself giving it a shot with me? This hurts on a level I'm not prepared for.

My esteem for him may go down a notch due to the timing of this proposition. But yet, I cling to the idea that I can change his mind. He may grow to like me.

Oh, get your head on straight, girl. Marriages don't work like that.

Enjoy the status while you can. Fix Daddy's business, and move on with your life.

Get over him.

Etienne has no idea I'm in love with him, so I still have my pride. And I'll be fine, in the end. He may be a drunk, but there are systems in place that will assure that I'm taken care of after all this. My brief time at his side won't be wasted.

And yet, can I get over this hard-wired, bone-deep need? My body recalls the wicked sweep of his tongue over my lip. He may not care about me, but he likes to play, doesn't he? The man might like to kiss me again. I won't resist him. I'll never resist him.

There's always the option to play along before he cuts me loose. I can guard my feelings until then. Or bottle them up, at the very least.

My head swirls with thoughts and my stomach is in knots before we arrive at the banquet hall back at the palace. The procession down the main thoroughfares of the capital city is lined with so many happy, celebrating faces that I almost forget this whole thing is a sham.

Hailey and Flora deserve all the credit for getting me through the reception: bustling my dress, freshening my makeup, making sure I sit, eat, and have an extra pair of comfortable shoes to change into. Everyone assumes this is the happiest day of my life, but it feels like a funeral.

It's not until Etienne and I share a silent drive to the hotel that I realize something. There was no first dance. No speeches. And then the worst part of all hits me.

"I didn't get any cake," I say, sitting up straight. Etienne looks over at me, his eyes glazed over from whatever he drank at the reception.

"You what?"

"We never fed each other cake. They just cut it and passed it out to the guests but I didn't get any cake!"

"Okay," he says, narrowing his eyes.

“Did you get cake?”

“I think so? Not sure. But I am hungry now that you mention cake.”

I roll my eyes and stare at the passing buildings, pasting on my smile for the cameras.

“Driver, turn around; we forgot the cake!” Etienne shouts, leaning over the front seat.

“Leave it alone. It doesn’t matter,” I say.

“Bullshit. My wife wants cake; we’re getting cake.”

I bite my lip. “Etienne, I was just pointing it out; it’s fine. You don’t have to make a fuss.”

The driver apologizes and says there’s no way to make a U-turn or even drive around the block as all the side streets are closed for security.

“Dammit!” Etienne seems inordinately upset about this, and it’s rather touching. “I bet that beefcake Uther would turn the car around for my bride.”

I can’t help myself: I snort a laugh. Does my husband have a crush on the monarch’s head of security?

I reach over and pat his arm, noticing how natural it feels to touch him. Sigh.

I offer, “It’s really okay.”

He turns to me, fire in his eyes. “Do you want cake or don’t you?”

Blinking at him, I suggest, “There’s a Lidl grocery store around the next corner.”

Etienne scoffs. “Supermarket cake on your wedding day?”

“Why not?”

His mouth curves, and his eyes rake over me, chilling my skin. “Driver, pull over. We’re going to buy cake.”

I smile at him. Okay. I guess we’re stopping for cake.

Letting the bodyguards, footmen, and drivers hash out the details, we exit the vehicle and walk the short distance to Lidl. Whoever would have thought I'd be shopping for groceries in my wedding gown? But again, why not?

In the store, Etienne pushes a cart with one hand and holds my hand with the other. I try not to let this slight, sweet touch warm the cockles of my heart. One: he's drunk. Two: this hand-holding is for the cameras.

The store is minutes from closing for the night, yet Etienne takes his time, perusing the bakery case.

Here, it occurs to me that we could have asked the wedding coordinators to send leftover cake to the hotel. We could have had any cake in the country delivered to the hotel, probably free of charge. But I have to admit, this is immeasurably cuter. I squeeze his hand.

“Carrot cake? Vanilla? What is it you want, Kala?”

I want you to keep saying my name like that. What I want is for you to keep pretending you care this much about me, until you do care sincerely.

“Black forest,” I say. I've always preferred rich and decadent over the average white wedding cake, so why not?

He squints. “What kind is that again?”

I point to the one with the cream and the cherries nestled between dark chocolate layers.

His throat bobs.

“Yes,” he says, with a rough edge to his voice. “Perfect.”

That's not the response I was expecting. This night gets more and more head-spinning by the moment.

We pay for two mini cakes, then leave the store, and I feel like such an overprivileged asshole for blocking the streets for dessert.

Tucked in the car's back seat, we laugh like schoolchildren while feeding each other. I knew Etienne could be fun, but I'd

never seen this endearing side of him before. This is a good sign. I'll take this over awkward silence any day.

Etienne watches me take bite after bite, his gaze trained on my mouth. For an all-too-brief moment, I think he might feel something akin to attraction.

At one point, he forks a bite of cake into my mouth, then licks his lips as he watches me eat it.

“Wait, you have some cream right there...”

Lick it off, lick it off, lick it off, you silly, disgustingly hot prince!

Just as his thumb reaches for my chin, the car hits a bump in the road, and that thumb goes directly into my eye.

“Oh shit! Sorry!”

I laugh and wave off his apology. “I'm fine!”

“Let me see.”

There's no point in fighting him as he takes my face in his hands and inspects my eye. “Look up.”

I blink and look up at the ceiling. “I promise, I'm perfectly fine,” I say softly.

His hands slip from my face, and I turn my gaze back to his.

That's when I notice his whole body is sort of drooping, his elbow propped against the headrest as he faces me. “I always thought you were stuck up, but you're a pretty fun girl.”

My emotions flip-flop as I try to decide how I feel about that.

I don't have to decide. In fact, I don't even have to respond.

Etienne's eyelids droop closed as we approach our hotel. My husband is seconds away from passing out.

I sigh in resignation as the car slows to a halt at the back entrance of our lodging for the night. Tomorrow we fly off to our honeymoon. How many days and nights will I have to witness the fun and flirty drunk Etienne? And how often will the sarcastic, biting Etienne appear? I hope against hope that

I'll get the fun and flirty version of him while he's sober. At least let me have that much, I pray to the gods.

"Will he be alright?" I ask when the footman gives me his hand to exit the car.

"Yes, Your Highness. We've got this."

For a second, I wonder who this footman is speaking to. I've already forgotten that I'm a princess now.

I leave the burly men to carry my sloppy drunk husband to our suite.

My mood improves when I see our room has a deep soak tub.

Shutting the bathroom door, I see that my belongings have already been delivered and unpacked. Looking at my night creams, I give a tired, happy sigh. I strip off my gloves and wash off my makeup first, then unpin my shimmery headpiece.

Without the aid of attendants, I struggle to worm out of my dress, but I manage, suppressing any fantasies of an eager husband helping me out. Actually, I'm relieved. Those sexy unzipping scenarios only look good in movies. I'm sure it would only be awkward for me, even if Etienne and I had married for the right reasons.

I cannot bring myself to look in the mirror at my pretty bridal underthings—the white hose, the garter belts, the body-smoothing corset.

Nothing has turned out like my fantasy wedding night. I never expected spectacular sex, but I'd thought... I'd thought at least both of us would be awake, if for no other reason than to talk about the day's events. Perhaps scroll through the photos on our phones together. Discuss which guests had the best and worst handshakes. The funniest dancer. The scariest moment. How the loud wedding march music nearly made me pee myself.

At least I had some excellent cake fed to me by a man who, for a short moment, meant well.

I sink into the tub and let the hot, jasmine-scented water cover me in its embrace.



The open-air lobby of our secluded hotel is silent when we arrive the next night by private jet to the remote Pearl Crescent islands.

I'm parched and hungry, and the bowl of sliced tropical fruit at the desk is tempting. I remember what Ilsa always said: Princesses should not be seen eating in public.

I glance around at the curiously empty hotel while our assistant checks us in. Even for midnight, I would have thought I'd see guests out and about. But there's nothing and no one. One lonely bartender wipes a glass and stares at us from the poolside bar.

A nibble won't hurt. I step forward and take some, and it's the best fruit I've ever tasted, period. I moan before I can control myself.

Etienne gives me a bemused look. "Are you going to be alright?"

Still holding half a slice in my hand, I offer it to him.

"Taste this."

"No thanks," he says, surly, sober, and tired from the flight. When he'd awakened hungover this morning, he didn't say much. I gave him his space, figuring we'd have hours to get to know each other on the plane. No such luck. Mostly we talked about the terms of our divorce pact.

Specifically, we will live together as husband and wife, and pretend to be happily married. I won't be required to birth an heir before he's crowned king (gee, thanks). I'd thought this rush to secure the royal lineage was about making babies and settling my father's debt, but whatever.

When I pressed him on whether he was sure the king wouldn't expect me to produce an heir before he steps down, Etienne

popped a Valium with his vodka soda and slept for most of the trip.

I'd spent the rest of the flight wondering what the king had said to him in that dark corner of the balcony room at the Arenhammer Plaza Hotel.

Holding the fruit out to my tired, clearly thirsty husband, I urge him to take some. "Come on," I say. "It will blow your mind."

He's looking at me like that because I'm acting as giddy as a child in a sweet shop. I can't help it.

"Fine," he sighs, leaning in and accepting the fruit into his mouth.

I notice how his lips brush my fingers and feel a twinge of pleasure at their softness.

Our eyes meet, and he manages to smile at me while chewing. My stomach tumbles, and my cheeks heat.

"It's wonderful, isn't it?"

"It's good," he says.

"Your keys, Your Highness." One of our personal attendants is trying to get my attention.

I'm not yet used to the royal title.

The attendant hands me the keys as a concierge lingers nearby.

I reach out my hand in greeting.

The concierge comes forward and nods his head reverently. "It's an honor to have Your Highnesses. Anything you need at all, don't hesitate to call or text at any hour."

He seems to know exactly who we are, but I make polite introductions anyway. He tells us his name is Steffen, and he's eager to serve our every need. I could be wrong, but I hear a slight growl of disapproval from Etienne's direction.

One of our assistants gives Steffen a stern look. "The royal newlyweds will reach out through me, and I'll pass everything along to you. Likewise, all their food, beverages, shampoos,

toothpaste—all of it will have to be tested by the royal handlers.”

Etienne snorts. “This should be fun.”

Maybe it’s the fruit, but I feel daring and squeeze his hand. “We can ditch the handlers. Just say the word.”

He gives me the biggest, wickedest smile I’ve seen from him yet. “You probably wouldn’t be talking about ditching our handlers if Uther was here.”

“What is with you and Uther? Are you trying to start a rumor?”

He shrugs. “The last several women I’ve dated only wanted to use me to get to silent kilted one.”

“That’s weird,” I say.

“Funny. He seems exactly like your type.”

“Well, he’s not,” I snap, rather too loudly.

Perhaps we’re not in love, but Etienne does know how to push my buttons.

E tienne

The suite of rooms has one bed and one double-sink bathroom. I don't know what I was expecting. Of course, there's only one bed. It's a honeymoon suite.

And gods save the king if I dare request another room. Word will get out, and there will be hell to pay.

It's a massive bed, but it won't be enough acreage to keep me away from Kala.

She's already fogging everything up by smiling at me when no one is watching. I'd thought she was false at first. Which is why I felt no guilt suggesting we make a divorce pact.

But she continues to be that person when we're alone. She's quietly confident, kind to everyone, diplomatic with me, well-spoken, and perfect in every possible way a human being can be.

What the hell did I get myself into? A happy relationship?

This is not going to work. If I fall for her, I'll ruin her life. A drunk can rise to be king—let's face it, we have no real power and there have been others on the throne with far worse toxic traits. But I cannot get attached.

Kala is a fixer. I can feel it every time she looks at me. And I'd rather live a lifetime without love than drag her down to my

level.

While I'm in the shower, I think about how to keep her at a distance. Instead, I can only focus on Kala waiting for me to finish so she can do...whatever she does before bed.

When I push open the door to let out the steam from the shower, Kala enters the bathroom. I don't argue. This is what husbands and wives do, after all. Nothing romantic about sharing a bathroom.

But something is wrong. The steam dissipates, and Kala freezes when she gets a good look at me. Her wide eyes travel downward to the front of the towel I've wrapped around my lower half. Her knuckles are white as she grips a tub of moisturizer.

"Problem?" I ask, picking up the toothpaste.

"No. No problem," Kala says dryly, her throat bobbing.

I watch her out of the corner of my eyes as we finish our nightly routines. Gods, she even applies her moisturizer with grace. Gone are her makeup and false eyelashes. She looks... comfortable. Naturally glowing and younger, somehow.

Glowing, like the time I saw her at the brewery in that low-cut baby blue sweater that will live forever in my spank bank.

"What?"

She's caught me looking, and I don't know what to say.

I finish quickly and exit the bathroom, giving her space.

"What are you doing?" Kala asks moments later when she sees me, now in my pajama pants, unfolding the foldaway bed in the sofa.

She stands halfway in the bathroom doorway, cinching a satin robe around her waist.

"Making up my bed," I say, looking away from the valley between her breasts. "I don't expect a princess to sleep on the sofa."

Perhaps I said "princess" slightly too harshly even if I didn't mean it derisively.

“Of course not. But... there’s no need for you to sleep over there.”

I turn to her. “Where else shall I go? The hot tub? Look, I’ve passed out from drinking in many strange places—the night before our wedding included in the top five weirdest. But I don’t enjoy waking up with kinks in my neck, so if it’s all the same to you—”

She smiles wide and blinks her lashes at me. “Obviously, your royal back has never experienced a sofa bed. Trust me, it’s worse than waking up wrapped around a crow’s nest.”

I’m rooted to the spot.

I watch Kala for a long moment and feel something stir in my chest. I do not like this feeling. I like her...but not this feeling. The outline of her form is stunning in that robe, and her nipples are visible through the fabric. The curves and bumps and freckles and that smooth, feminine voice—all of her just makes my cock ache.

“How do you know you can trust me?”

She lifts one shoulder and pulls the blankets back, running her hands over the sheets, then scoffs. “I know self-defense. And you’re not that irresistible, my prince.” She winks.

A satisfactory answer that cuts me deep.

I climb into bed, and though she’s meters away, I can still feel the movement of her sliding under the sheets. I can feel her warmth. Feel her shift around to get comfortable.

This marriage is nonsense; I’m sorry she got bamboozled into it.

I don’t know how to be the proper prince she needs me to be.

Father should have simply handed over the crown directly to her.

Father.

My chest aches at what he said to me after Torben abdicated.

Some people manage others by giving them the confidence to rise to the occasion. My father? He uses threats and

intimidation.

I lie there and stare into the black, letting my sober, racing thoughts whirl through my head.

Eventually, the sounds of the waves, and Kala's even breathing, lull me to sleep.

K^{ala}

I hear unfamiliar birdsong, and sense a wild stirring in my nethers.

Where am I? Is this the sex dream again?

All at once I remember where I am. The Pearl Crescent Islands. A remote rock in the middle of the South Pacific.

With my husband-on-paper-only.

So why do I feel the weight of one massive arm around my waist?

Not just around my waist, but cinching me close so my back is pressed against his front, and his soft chest hair bristles my shoulder blades.

Not only that, but oh my gods...my nightgown is hiked up around my waist, and this man...this man's hand is tucked inside my panties and holding my pussy like...like a security blanket?

I listen for his breathing, and I'm sure he's still asleep.

It's bad enough I went to sleep thinking of Etienne opening the bathroom door wearing nothing but a towel.

I wasn't ready for the tousled, damp hair, the bare chest, the spicy soap scent. The bulge.

Etienne looked downright fuckable, with a smattering of chest hair swirling around his nipples, blazing a trail down to his navel and lower. He has more muscles than I'd given him credit for. I must speak with Sable, the royal tailor, because the suits he wears for royal appearances do not do this body justice. I could bounce a coin off his abs. And the bulge... well. Even flaccid, my husband is hung like a Clydesdale.

And now, his fingers are right there, snaked down past my waistband.

How did we end up here? And why am I not horrified and filled with indignation at this violation? There's no way we got here by accident.

The indignation doesn't come. But I might.

The truth is, I don't know who crossed the line first. Maybe both of us did.

It doesn't help that his erection is pressed against my backside so tightly that if my knickers weren't there, that limb would be nestled in there like a bratwurst in a bun.

Thank gods for small mercies.

I must get my head on straight. If I make one move, his thick fingers could slip between my labia. And with as wet as I feel, that will surely wake him.

We have a divorce pact. He is not interested in me in the least. I must summon all my willpower to not rub up against his fingers and start riding his hand, even though every inch of me wants only that.

Right. Best to just rip this situation off like a Band-Aid.

Besides, I want to get out there, put my toes in the sand, and fit in my morning run before the day begins.

Gingerly, I circle my fingers around Etienne's wrist and pull.

The movement of his fingers makes my stupid vagina react, and I can't control the horny little whimper that squeaks out of my throat.

Etienne groans, and his hand travels up to my stomach, wrenching me impossibly closer.

“Etienne. Are you awake?”

I bite my lip and keep still as I feel his body stiffen behind me.

At this point, my nightie is still bunched up and his hand is on my waist. We’re still pressed together like spoons in a drawer, but at least he’s not about to finger-bang me in his sleep.

Dammit.

He makes a funny, snorty, waking-up noise that I find absolutely adorable, and I have to stifle a giggle.

“Kala? Oh, shit!”

And he’s off me, peeling himself away from me in one abrupt jerk. I am boiling hot and yet cold from losing contact all at once. I’m aroused and annoyed with both him and myself.

Now free of him, I feel awful that I might have somehow caused this situation. I scoot back to my side of the bed and turn over to face him. “It’s fine,” I say, wincing.

“No, I’m sorry,” he says, bounding out of bed. When he stands, he immediately sees the tent in his pajama pants. He grabs a pillow, then whips around to face the wall.

Blushing deeply, I scramble out of bed and begin making up the bedclothes, shouting, “Think nothing of it! I think we both rolled into each other and things got...” What? What did things get like? Horny? Lonely? Needy? As I smooth the sheet, I think of the words and begin tucking in the corners. “Tangled! Things got tangled.”

Etienne is on to a new subject now. “What are you doing?”

I look up and see him staring at me like I’m a party clown he didn’t order.

He presses the pillow over his crotch and winces as if willing the blood to flow back to his brain instead of throbbing at his other head.

“I’m making the bed.”

“Why? There are people who do that.”

“I know, I just...I clean when I’m nervous.”

“But there’s no need,” he says.

I look at him and smile bravely. “I like to do it.”

His jaw works as he watches me tidy up like a lunatic. “Fascinating. Do you cook your own food when you’re angry? Wash your own clothes when you’re feeling sad?” Etienne asks haughtily.

“Of course not,” I answer.

“Then there’s hope for you yet as a princess.”

I try not to make a big deal about what a snob he’s being. As I smooth down the blankets, I gently correct him. “I do all those things as a normal part of my day, whether I’m sad or angry or hurt or embarrassed. I don’t have a maid and a chef.”

He stares at me for another short moment, as if that didn’t occur to him. “But you’re from a wealthy family.”

“Is that why you agreed to marry me?” I ask, coming to full height and squaring my shoulders.

Etienne holds up one hand, firmly keeping the pillow in place at his crotch. “We’ve gone off the rails with this conversation. I married you because my father... Because of tradition and because the king didn’t give me a choice. Though I don’t understand why you wouldn’t use your money to secure yourself a house staff.”

The sneer on his beautiful face pushes me to my breaking point.

I cross my arms over my front. “That’s the difference between royalty and commoners.”

He snorts. “You’re not a commoner. You were a titled Lady before yesterday, remember?”

“Still, I don’t waste money on house staff, drivers, gardeners, or gamekeepers. I put money into things I care about, investing in the family business, savings, and paying taxes.”

Etienne blinks. “Business...investments...savings...taxes... when do you have fun?”

“I’m having fun now...thanks to the taxes that pay for this honeymoon,” I say with a smirk, my body aware of Etienne’s narrowed eyes drifting down to my breasts. Great, he’s gotten distracted in the middle of that pointed comment.

“Does nervousness also make your nipples hard, or is that a response to me being an asshole?”

My face flushes, and I lift my crossed arms higher to cover up the outline of my protruding nipples. Pair of little traitors, those are, especially in a satiny nightgown.

I huff out the words, “No! Neither. It’s cold in here. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go for a morning run to warm up. Care to join me?”

He blinks. “What time is it?”

I look outside. “I don’t know...six? Seven?”

“Fuck no, I’m going back to bed.”

I nod. “Fine. I’ll tell the staff that you’re still sleeping off the celebration and have your assistant spin it to the press.”

He’s in the process of undoing the bed I just made when he looks up at me sharply. “Spin what?”

“The fact that we’re not together in public. That I’m out for my morning run, alone. But don’t worry, I’ll make sure the narrative is that the prince is tired and worn out.”

“Worn out?” His beautiful brows knit together.

“Sexually.”

Etienne appears horrified at the suggestion and I ignore the way that makes me feel. “The new princess is quite energetic and the groom simply can’t keep up. Well, I’m sure the paps will devise better wording. They know what they’re doing.”

He presses his lips together in an unamused line. His nostrils flare.

“Of course,” I continue, studying the ceiling and tapping my index finger to my chin, feigning deep thought. “The bodyguards will aid me when I accidentally step on a sharp clamshell. So, do not be concerned for my safety as I venture out alone on a foreign beach.”

A low growl sounds from the opposite side of the bed. Etienne stares at me like a man whose virility is being called into question.

He looks like he might come over to the bed and throw me down. I wish he would.

Oh, do I wish he would.

Alas, my husband, the prince, gives no response other than a series of monosyllabic grunts of indignation. I lift one eyebrow and say, before flouncing into the bathroom to change, “Come find me on the beach if you change your mind. I’m on my first and possibly only honeymoon, so I’m seizing the day. Enjoy your mid-morning nap.”

E tienne

I know what Kala's doing.

She's trying to provoke me.

My wife is also trying to tell me what to do, and I don't like that.

I don't flop back into bed like I'd planned. Instead, I pace around the room, watch TV, order room service, and take a cold shower—hoping this blasted erection will disappear.

If anything, this tent pole is even more painful now that Kala's out of the room.

Have you ever told yourself not to think about something, then all you do is think of that thing? In my case, that thing is not a thing. It's a taller-than-average woman with green eyes that stare too deeply, and pink lips too soft to be forgotten.

And those eyes and those lips belong to a crafty, ambitious, sober woman with the time and the will to make me look like the asshole in our agreed-upon divorce.

Sober.

That's the key right there.

Kala wouldn't have to try too hard to make me look like the asshole in a divorce. I do that pretty well on my own with no help from anyone.

And all things being equal, I *should* be the one to look like the bad guy. When we eventually divorce, I want her to come out of it better than how she entered our marriage. Kala won't have access to royal income or resources, so the public must be one hundred percent on her side.

But still. We're in paradise together, and she clearly doesn't want to spend her time in paradise alone.

Behaving like an ill match on our honeymoon would look suspicious.

So that's decided, then.

There's nothing left to do but finish myself off and join her on the beach.

It takes less than five sturdy pulls to my aching shaft before I come, with thoughts of my cock nestled in that magnificent cleavage. I close my eyes and think of my seed spilling all over that luminous, freckled skin. Then my thoughts switch to Kala's mouth, envisioning her lips wrapped around my length, sucking me dry.

Other thoughts intrude on this fantasy. Why put it in her mouth when you can kiss those lips instead...when you can feel her strong legs wrapped around you while you pump into her softness. But what if I got her pregnant? What if...

What. In. The. Hell?

I've never looked at anyone with thoughts of impregnating them. It's never been a turn-on. But here I am, yanking it to thoughts of putting it in her. Spilling my seed inside her, gripping those hips, burying my face in her neck, feeling her nails dig into my back, feeling the grip of her sex milking my shaft. Filling her up with my cum as I thrust, painting her inner walls with my spend. Giving her my baby. Giving her *our* baby.

I turn on the shower head and use the spray nozzle to clean my cum off the tile walls, disturbed by the places my brain went. I had a fantasy about Kala. About my wife. About getting her pregnant when that's the exact last thing I want. Imagine the smug satisfaction on my father's face at learning that a

grandchild and heir to the throne was conceived on my honeymoon. His match would be justified. He would step down knowing that he chose this for me and knew what was best all along, despite all the years of us locking horns. Despite all the years of ignoring me. He could claim in his delusional mind that he knew me so well.

But I'd never bring a baby into this mess. We've agreed to a divorce.

So I can't imagine why my brain even entertained that thought.

It's just a simple fantasy. A fantasy based on physical urges and not much else.

My wife doesn't need me groping her in bed, and masturbating to thoughts of her like a wanton teenager.

Kala needs a companion. A husband.

Now, what would a husband bring to his sweaty wife on the beach?

K^{ala}

The bright sun, the blue sea, the white sand, and the lush hills are almost too beautiful to bear.

I wish I could share this moment with someone who likes me even a little bit.

Who knows who made the first move to cuddle last night. But that's all it was, a cuddle that turned a little bit heated because one of us or both of us was having a sexy dream.

The beach is not as long of a run as I thought. It's rather secluded, no more than half a mile in either direction. When I reach the north end, the rocky edges give way to a hill jutting out abruptly over the water, its cliffs rising about a hundred meters.

I scan for hints of a trail or footpath, but it's a sheer climb and not for the inexperienced rock climber. That's not me. I turn around and see the bodyguards hanging back, scattered here and there on the beach. There's a fishing boat at the small dock. A kiosk where you sign up for hang gliding and cliff diving. A bartender putters at the beachfront bar. A few employees tend to the beach chairs. But no other tourists anywhere.

Is there some sort of code that people are supposed to sleep late on vacation? I check my phone, and it's already 7:30.

Back home in Gravenland, I'd have greeted a dozen other runners on my morning routine.

Well, no matter.

As I make my way closer to the resort, the concierge, Steffen, dressed in a Polynesian print shirt and khaki shorts, buzzes toward me in an electric golf cart outfitted with beach tires.

"Good morning, Your Highness! Is there anything I can get you?" Before I can say no, he hands me a tall, pink beverage with a sprig of mint leaves.

"You're so kind. I don't need anything, but what's this?" I say, automatically taking a sip of it because it's pretty, and I'm thirsty.

"Guava juice."

I gasp. "Oh my god, it's wonderful."

He nods.

"Let me know if you or the prince need anything."

Then a thought occurs to me. "Now that I think of it, I wonder if you can have the chef whip up something for the prince. He's feeling dehydrated this morning."

I try to couch this in a way that doesn't announce Etienne is hungover. It wouldn't surprise anyone if the gossip rags to learn he's behaving like his usual self.

But if we're going to play the part of a happy couple, then I need to at least try.

Steffen gives me a knowing look. "I have just the thing for that. Anything for you, Your Highness. Sunscreen?" I study Steffen's dark golden skin and then glance down at my freckled pinkness, feeling the heat searing the back of my exposed neck.

"I have sunscreen in my hotel room. But in addition to the prince's breakfast, I'd love a fruit salad."

He nods courteously, then offers the seat next to him in the golf cart. "Would Your Highness like a ride back to the hotel

to apply sunscreen? Even this early in the morning, it can be brutal if you're not used to it."

I'm touched that this man is so protective of me. I feel a twinge of sadness that my husband could not care less if I fry like an egg on the beach. He doesn't even care that I'm a woman alone on a beach in a foreign country. Anything could happen. It's not likely to happen, seeing how weirdly abandoned this place is.

"Steffen," I ask. "Why does this place seem so deserted?"

He gives me a quizzical look. "Your Highness, you're the only guests on the premises."

I blink at him. "Is it the slow season? Is something happening in the world that I'm unaware of?"

"No," he says, shaking his head slowly as if he's worried that I've been hit on the head and lost my memory. "There are no other guests anywhere in the resort because the palace booked all the rooms."

"All...the rooms?" My brain is buffering, so I'm doing that annoying thing, repeating things back to people while I scramble for a proper reaction.

"Every last one. I thought you knew."

And now he's looking at me with a hint of sympathy because, evidently, he's realizing that things were planned without my knowledge. The sheer cost of booking up every room boggles my mind. The extravagance. The misuse of money. I feel sick.

"May I ask what that cost the taxpayers of Gravenland?"

Steffen shrugs. "We gave a discount, but ..." I feel lightheaded when he tells me the amount.

"Steffen, thank you for being so honest with me. I think I will take you up on that offer of sunscreen." Because I'm not yet ready to go back to the room and look at a member of the royal family.

He nods and removes a small white bottle of mineral sunscreen from a box of supplies inside the golf cart, plus a tube of lip balm and a hat with the resort logo printed on it.

Bless him. He really does think of everything. Boy, if I was twenty years older and local...but I spot the ring on his left hand. Of course, he's married.

Moments later, I've slathered my neck, face, lower arms, midriff, legs, and everything not covered by my exercise outfit.

"Did I miss anything?" I ask.

"Ah, the backs of your legs, it's difficult to see. Shall I? I don't want to be too forward, Your Highness."

I love five-star service. "Sure," I say.

Steffen warms up a dab of sunscreen in his hand as I wait patiently, wishing I'd brought a bottle of water.

"I've got it from here, Steffen."

I whip around to see Etienne striding up the beach, his jaw set. He's carrying a bottle of water, sunscreen, my beach cover-up, and a towel.

For the briefest second, my mind clamps on the knowledge that Etienne has rifled through my things. I had declined the offer to have hotel staff unpack our clothes since we'd arrived so late at night. I'd placed my cover-up in the top drawer with my underwear and swimsuits—right next to a little stack of racy lingerie that I fully do not expect to use. I had no expectations, but if the unimaginable happens and we're both in the mood and getting along, who knows? Better to be prepared.

Of course, that's also the drawer where I'd hidden my favorite toy—in case the need arises.

The need arises a lot these days.

My face heats, and I'm thankful for the warm sun as an excuse for why I'm blushing.

"Oh! Hello!" I exclaim in surprise, a little too breathy.

Etienne closes in on me. For a second, I think he's about to kiss me, haul me away, or do something rash.

Even with his perfectly groomed and shaped beard, I can make out the tightness in his face, the ticking of his jaw.

Without taking his narrowed eyes off me, he dismisses Steffen.

“Very good, sir,” Steffen says, “The chef will have your breakfast delivered to the cabana momentarily.”

I tear my gaze from my husband to Steffen. “Thank you for looking after me, Steffen.”

He smiles and waves good-naturedly as he fires up the golf cart. “Text me if you need anything!”

I wave back and smile, ignoring whatever is wrong with Etienne. “I will!”

Late last night, after check-in, the hotel messaged both of our smartphones, providing an easy method for contacting the concierge for any needs—food, towels, booking water sports. I’d informed the annoyed chief of security that we would not need an intermediary between ourselves and the staff. The whole idea is pretentious and ridiculous to me.

Etienne must not have figured that out because he’s now even more grumpy.

“That won’t be necessary,” he grumbles, bent over, massaging the mineral sunscreen into my calves.

Despite my shifting emotions—delight at knowing my husband decided to join me on the beach, switching to irritation at his shortness with Steffen—my body likes the touch of my husband’s hands on my legs.

My stupid libido awakens again. Even after a brisk run, this man’s presence still can tease my lady parts.

Damn.

“To what do I owe this appearance, Your Highness? I’d thought you were taking a nap,” I say.

He grunts, massaging the stuff into the backs of my knees. It tickles, and I bite back a laugh.

“Sleeping at 7 a.m. is not napping, Princess. It’s called sleeping. Getting the full eight hours. But that was next to

impossible with the way we left things. And then I find you prancing on the beach with Steffen, which didn't sit well with me."

Didn't sit well? "What do you mean, prancing? What's wrong with Steffen?"

Etienne moves around to my front and levels me with a stern gaze. He doesn't answer at first but squirts more sunscreen into the palm of his hand. The farting noise of the bottle makes me stifle a giggle. What can I say? As a child, I was never permitted to laugh at farts around my stepmother. Bottle farts or bodily farts.

He rubs the lotion between his hands and then lowers his coated fingers to the exposed skin on my breastbone. He pauses before touching me, asking the question with his eyes.

I gaze into those gorgeous grays and feel my pulse quicken. With a little nod from me, he proceeds. I don't want to tell him that I already covered that spot.

"Steffen is a little too attentive to my bride." He emphasizes "bride" while a lotion-covered thumb works up and down my breastbone.

My heart races just under his smooth touch.

Is Etienne...jealous?

"That's his job," I say with a weak laugh, even as my nipples tighten again. Thank the gods for decent sports bras that smash everything in place and hide any evidence of heaving bosoms and taut nipples.

If only the humorous bottle farting lessened the desire building in my body the more Etienne touches me.

His hands massage the lotion over the visible skin of my chest, and some of the not-so-exposed skin. His fingers slide under the fabric at the vee-shaped neckline of my body-hugging spandex top. My hidden muscles flex with desire as my arousal spikes.

Oh my.

“His job is to make dinner reservations. Not to put his hands on my wife.”

He grits out the last word between clenched teeth.

Oh god.

Etienne is indeed jealous and called me wife without a hint of sarcasm.

I bite back a moan as his palms glide outward from my breastbone, placing the flat of his palms directly above my breasts. The tips of his fingers are so far under the material of my shirt that they're touching my sports bra straps. While massaging my chest, any onlookers would assume my husband is copping a feel in public.

As it is, he's already making me delirious as moisture pools at my core.

I'm a pragmatic woman. I am obsessed with numbers, spreadsheets, rules, and policies. Helping nonprofits navigate international red tape gets me high. Fixing problems makes me giddy. I compartmentalize my life, and Etienne is supposed to fit into one perfect compartment. The one that I present to the world—the one concerned about image and propriety and being of service to my country. I'm supposed to get through this honeymoon, wait for the coronation, and split from the man amicably.

Exploring my feelings for him? That's dangerous territory.

If I was another type of woman—a person more like Etienne—I suppose I could dive into this animal attraction. I could hop into bed and move on.

But that's not who I am. If the sex is good, I could get as addicted to him as he seems to be to the bottle. And if that happens, that leaves me with hurt feelings.

I can't cope with the idea of a one-sided obsession. My love for him at a distance is painful enough.

Get a grip, woman. It's just sunscreen.

“Are you overheated?”

“A bit, yes,” I say, catching him staring at my mouth as his hands make quick work of coating my neck. “I...already got that part.”

I already got that part? Geez, I sounds as if I don't want him to keep touching me.

I don't. Do I?

His gaze lifts from my mouth to my eyes, and then he slides the tip of his finger down the length of my nose.

“There. Must protect those freckles.”

I am breathless, bordering on swooning when he hands me the water bottle.

Moments ago, we were giving each other shit, and now he's acting out the jealous, protective, slightly overbearing husband a little too well.

I take a deep breath but do not detect any alcohol.

“Sober Etienne is very good at his job,” I say, hoping to build him up.

He looks offended, though, and I suddenly realize how condescending that was.

“Forgive me, Your Highness. I meant to say you're so good at this that I almost believed you were truly jealous and flirting with me. And then I forgot my manners.” I cast my eyes downward, my mind finishing the thought: I forgot my manners because he made me feel like a wife concerned about his drinking.

Then, he touches my chin, forcing me to lift my face. He looks at me with an intensity that burns so hot I might need to re-apply all that sunscreen. “There is nothing to forgive. And you do not address me as ‘Your Highness.’ We are legally married. We are equals, under the law and as partners.”

A warmth floods through my body. “Partners,” I agree, giving a slight nod though it's difficult with his thumb and forefingers still gripping my chin. Perhaps he still needs convincing that I understand. “Friends,” I add with my signature bright smile.

The rehearsed one. The one that the regular media loves and the gossip rags love to pick apart.

His eyes darken at that word. “Then let’s give them something to talk about, friend.”

His gripping fingers anchoring me to the spot, Etienne kisses my lips.

I stifle the gasp of surprise.

But I cannot press pause on my need. No matter how impractical it is. The kiss is too good for that. I am not a woman who wastes her time or opportunities.

When Etienne pulls back from the kiss, I see the hunger in his eyes. I hook one arm around his neck, roll up on my toes, and pull him back down for another kiss. Deeper, harder. With tongue.

I barely have to nudge the seam of his lips with my tongue when he opens to me. But it’s Etienne whose tongue takes control, conquering my mouth. A growl escapes him, so low and barely controlled that I know it’s not for the benefit of anyone around us. There’s no one to hear it but me.

His hand finally releases my chin. In the next second, the prince’s arms circle my waist. He hitches me up, and I yelp and laugh against his mouth when my feet leave the wave-pounded sand.

My head is buzzing as he gives me sweet, short kisses in quick succession, angling his mouth over mine one way and then another. Having a taste of me from every angle, like he’s deciding how he would like to kiss me best. He tastes like mint, smells like fresh linen, and our bodies fit together delightfully. I am losing control of the situation, and I don’t care. This is a schoolgirl fantasy come true.

He looks at me at every pause between kisses, raking his eyes over me. He’s a besotted new husband studying every pore that belongs to his bride’s face.

The thought of it, the thought of how very convincing he is, makes me wish that it was real.

What if we forgot the entire agreement and just went for it?

“Hi,” he says with a proud grin.

I smile. “Hi.”

He stares at me for a long moment, so intently that I feel self-conscious.

“Sh-should we have breakfast?”

He arcs an eyebrow. “Whatever you want to call what happens next.”

My feet land softly upon the sand, but Etienne’s arms remain clutched around my waist.

If anyone is watching—and I doubt there is—I’d say we’ve put on more than enough of a show.

“Etienne, I know you’re doing full method acting with this scheme of ours. But nobody’s watching. You don’t have to talk dirty for my sake.”

“Oh, my sweet summer princess,” he says, letting go of my waist and tucking a lock of hair behind my ear. “You have no idea what dirty talk is, do you?”

And I’m wet. Thoroughly wet and trembling with aching nipples and a powerful need to shed this godawful sweat-soaked sports bra.

“I don’t know what to say to that.”

His jaw tics in a barely noticeable hint of disappointment. Etienne sighs, then his face relaxes in a friendly, boyish grin. “That’s about enough from me. Come on, then, friend,” he says, turning me around then hooking one arm around my shoulders. “Let’s go back to the room and see what’s what.”

“Actually,” I say, pointing to the team of hotel workers setting up a cabana on the far end of the beach, “Steffen is having his people deliver our breakfast over there.”

“How do you know that’s our cabana and not someone else’s?”

I haven’t told him yet. I haven’t had the chance to.

“I gather that the king and queen didn’t tell you either,” I say as we plod across the sand, the cool water licking our toes.

“Tell me what?”

“We’re literally the only guests in the entire resort. The king booked out the entire place.”

I don’t know what I expected, but laughter is not it.

Etienne grabs his stomach and throws his head back in a guffaw. “Are you serious?”

I’m surprised by his reaction. “I think it’s a rather irresponsible expenditure as a wedding gift, don’t you think?”

He laughs even harder, hooting, his shoulders trembling.

“What’s so funny?”

“It’s not the gift that it appears to be. It’s strategic.”

“What do you mean?”

Etienne explains, “On the surface, it seems generous. But the other side of the coin speaks far more about what the king thinks of me.”

“And what’s that?” I ask, dreading the answer.

“He’s ensuring that there are no other guests for me to flirt with.”

My heart sinks. “Of course,” I say flatly. Flirting with other guests? I’m reminded of his reputation—the one in the gossip rags I’ve never believed was true. If he does flirt with anyone else, I will commit high crimes.

“But what the king didn’t realize is, now I have free rein to run amok without the judgmental gaze of the media, of him, of anyone. Well, except yours, of course,” Etienne teases.

“Precisely.” Gods. And just when I thought he was sweet.

My husband rubs his hands together and mutters to himself. “The man has no idea. He just gave me the greatest gift ever without even trying.”

Right.

Because forcing us to marry was decidedly not a gift.

And it's best I keep my head about me and remember that fact.

E tienne

One minute we're making out on the beach, and the next minute, we're having a nearly silent breakfast in a cabana.

The table between our two lounge chairs is filled and refilled with fresh-cut fruit, wine, crackers, and cheese—and anything else Kala's heart requests, and the interruptions from staff are both annoying and a relief from Kala's silent treatment.

"Are you okay?" I'd asked over breakfast, watching her gorge herself on mango while I ate a spicy fish sandwich that Steffen assured me was the perfect cure for hangovers, even though I hadn't asked for such a thing.

"I'm fine!" she'd said, smiling around a mouthful of fruit, then dabbing the juice off her chin with a linen napkin. How very uncharacteristic. Perhaps the sun exposure relaxed her unyielding table manners.

That's about all she said to me for most of the day. She seems content to read, occasionally looking up to gaze at the Pacific. Twice she's arisen out of that chair to wade into the surf, look for shells, and bask in the sun, only to return to the cabana minutes later to resume reading her book.

All day, she weaves in between silence and overly bright and chirpy.

I thought she'd been pleased when I brought her cover-up to the beach. And I mistakenly assumed that when I found her skimpy lingerie while rooting around for her beach cover-up, she was interested in more than pretending we were enjoying each other on our honeymoon.

And then, I stumbled upon the concierge with his hands all over her.

Jealousy pulsed through me like never before.

Then, when I kissed Kala, it was real. I'd meant it. I hadn't meant it for show. There was no one watching us anyway.

"You're not fine," I try.

Kala sets down her book after placing her bookmark between the pages, then peers at me over her sunglasses. "You called me friend, and then you talked about flirting with other guests and running amok...I don't know. It felt weird."

"So, we're not friends?" I ask.

"We can be, yes. But not friends with benefits."

"But the lingerie..."

Kala sits up straight in the lounge chair. "I had to make it look good for housekeeping, didn't I? Had to make it look like we were on a real honeymoon, remember?"

Oh. Housekeeping...well, shit.

"So, you... don't want to fool around?"

Kala sighs and goes back to her book. At first, I think she's exasperated, but when I see her fling a tear away from her cheek, I know I've fucked up.

There's something she's not telling me.

I need to draw her out, and so far, I'm not doing a very good job of it.

A grand gesture is what I need. Reservations at some place fancy outside of the resort. A change of scenery will do us good.

I search through the beach bag but don't see my phone anywhere. I must have left it in the hotel room. I could ask to borrow her phone to text Steffen, but that's weak, right? Asking to use my wife's phone to make reservations while trying to woo her...absolutely not. No, it should be a surprise.

"I'm going back to the hotel room for a minute. Gotta pee."

Kala lowers her sunglasses at me so I can see her disapproving gaze. "I see we're through the mystery phase of wedded bliss."

I say nothing and watch her turn to ice as she returns to her book.

My thoughts stew and bubble on the way back to our hotel suite. There's no way she was faking it with that kiss. She played it off, but I know what I felt. Her nipples hardened, even through the layers she wore. I felt her gasp. I felt her arms tight around me, her breath catching. I saw the dazed look in her eye that made me so ready to scoop her up, haul ass back to the hotel bed, and plow the fuck out of her.

Rifling through my luggage, I can't find my phone anywhere. I do discover all my clothes have been neatly folded and put away or hung in the closets.

When did Kala have time to do that?

But never mind. Where the hell is my phone?

I search through everything: the baggage, the drawers, the bathroom, even the pockets of the trousers I wore yesterday.

The bodyguard on the veranda of our suite has no answers for me, so I march down the long boardwalk across the inlet that leads to the resort's main lobby.

There, I find the man of the hour.

Steffen gives me a deep nod. "What can I help you with, Your Highness?"

Through gritted teeth, I tell him, "You can order me a new phone. It seems to have gone missing, and the attendants have no answers."

Steffen winces. “I see. I am so sorry, Your Highness. I can’t do that.”

“You literally just said anything,” I remind him.

“I did say that, yes.”

“So...”

I wait for him to offer a solution before ordering a new phone.

“I’d be happy to send housekeeping to help you look,” he says, smiling brightly.

Hm.

“No, that won’t be necessary. But I would like you to reserve a table for two for the princess and I. Somewhere suitable for a future queen.”

He chirps even more brightly. “Absolutely, sir!”

I suppose I’ll have to wait for my phone to turn up. I’m sure it’s just fallen under the bed or I dropped it in the cabana after all those gin and tonics. How many? I lost count.

Time to drink some water, sober up, and prepare for a nice romantic dinner. And woo my wife.

K_{ala}

“You can’t wear that.”

I peer downward, examining my form-fitting red dress. “Why not? Is there a stain?”

My eyes go back to my frowning.

“No, there’s no stain. You simply cannot wear that out of the hotel. In public.”

I smooth my hands down my hips. “I think it looks good,” I say.

“It’s too much,” he blurts.

“Too much for what? A romantic dinner out on the town? What’s eating you, Etienne?”

Mumbling, he paces around the room.

He goes to my closet and pulls out a cape. “Here,” he says, wrapping it around me. “You’ll get cold.”

I laugh, realizing now he’s joking. “That’s funny, husband. You do realize this cape is wool. I brought it just in case of a cold night. Tonight it’s balmy, and the sea is calm. Besides, it’s purple and doesn’t even go with the dress.”

Etienne looks torn between wanting to tell me what to do and wanting to stare at me in this banging dress.

“I wasn’t aware that racy lingerie was acceptable dinner attire.”

I freeze, my purple cape clutched in my hands. “I wasn’t aware my husband thought my choice of clothing was too racy for dinner. I’ll try to behave like less of a whore, Your Majesty.”

Nudging Etienne aside, I try to re-hang the cape.

“That’s not what I said, Kala.”

“It’s what you meant, Etienne.” The cape falls to the floor and I snarl in frustration, picking it up again and looping it around the hanger, this time remembering to fasten the snaps.

He scoffs. “You are impossible.”

I hang the cape and slam it back on the rod, turning to him as anger heats my face. “And you are a petulant, obtuse nincompoop!”

His gaze locks onto my mouth.

“So many big words, darling. Good work; it’ll give us something to unpack over dinner.”

I turn back to the closet and rifle through the contents, looking for a light sweater to wear over the dress.

I can feel Etienne hovering behind me, his presence mere inches away, not touching, yet his energy permeates the air around me like a caress.

I change my mind, then, and turn to him.

“The dress is fine. You’ll just have to deal with it.”

We leave the room and head down to the lobby to wait for our car to take us to the restaurant while my insides roll like a thunderstorm.



“Right this way,” Steffen says, leading us not outside to wait for our car but down a hallway and into a lavish, empty dining

room.

“What is happening?” Etienne asks.

“Your Highness requested a reservation? This is the reservation.”

“I asked for a reservation at a restaurant outside the resort.” I feel Etienne getting heated, and I rest on his shoulder.

“This will be just fine. Won’t it, darling?” I say.

I’m sure no one misses the acid I put into the pet name.

“Fine,” he grits out, relaxing his shoulders under my touch.

Etienne

“How about a reservation for a nice lobster dinner tomorrow night?”

Between courses, I try again with this easily confused concierge, who’s come to check on us during our dinner.

Steffen nods. “Yes, sir. Right away, sir.”

That’s better.

“Of course, I’ll need you to reserve a car for us as well.”

“No, sir, that won’t be necessary.”

“Why not?”

“The best lobster on the island is here at the resort.”

I look at Kala, but she is as perplexed as I am.

“I’m sure it is. But we’d love to explore the nightlife. This whole place is too quiet.”

“I’m sorry, Your Highness. I can’t do that.”

I scrub a hand over my face. “Steffen, this is getting old. Why can’t you make us a dinner reservation?”

He clears his throat, then leans close so only Kala and I can hear. “The armed guards are keeping the public out of the resort, under orders from the king.”

I stare at him blankly. Surely, I've misunderstood. I look past him, past our attendants and bodyguards, through to the lobby entrance, where scary dudes with guns stand watch.

"Are they keeping the public out...or are they keeping us in?" I ask, swallowing hard at the memory of being on lockdown in the palace back home. All the comforts one could dream of, but none of the freedoms.

Steffen eyes a security guard manning the restaurant's main entrance then turns back to me and quietly whispers, "I'm not supposed to tell you that. But that is the situation, yes."

"I'm being held prisoner on my honeymoon," I mutter.

"Oh my gods," Kala breathes.

"In the Pearl Crescents," Steffen chirps, shrugging. "It could be worse. Three months of no responsibility and all the seafood you can eat."

I stare at him again. "Wait. Three...months?"

"Excuse me?" Kala puts in, on the verge of raising her voice.

Steffen winces. "Were you not made aware...?"

The stare I give him says no; I was unaware of this.

"Etienne, what's happening?"

I turn to her. "I think I know what happened to my phone."

She blinks at me, confused at first. But then, she understands. "I see."

My wife does not say, "Don't be ridiculous, Etienne." Or "You're being paranoid, Etienne." Kala believes me, plain and simple. A hard knot of emotion inside me begins to unravel. Someone...is on my side?

Sitting stock straight and calm, she says, "Right. Well. This information is certainly something to think about. What do you say we head up to the room and catch up on our rest, hm? I think I'm not quite over my jet lag. How about you, husband?"

Her knowing look would send the message to even the most thickheaded dunces, which I might very well be.

Whatever she's thinking, I'm on board.

Kala

“My passport. They’ve taken it as well as my phone.”

Etienne’s declaration makes my blood run cold. What in the actual hell is going on?

We’ve shut ourselves inside our hotel room, locking all the windows and doors to keep prying ears from listening to our conversation. It feels insane, but none of this feels particularly reasonable.

“Mine’s gone too,” I say weakly, staring at the empty safe inside the closet, where I’d deposited our passports just last night.

My husband is pacing and cursing now. “I’ll kill him.”

I’m so confused. “Who took these things, Etienne? What is going on? Are we being held hostage? Are the bodyguards in on this?”

He doesn’t answer.

Mentally, I count how many drinks he’s had today, wondering if he’s misplaced these things or done something.

“Are you sure you didn’t take the passports out for some reason and lose them?” I ask. “You were drinking much more gin than water on the beach today.”

It slips out before I think better of it.

“Yes, I’m sure. And I haven’t had anything to drink in the last four hours.”

I feel guilty at the hurt look on his face, but then I check myself. I’m his wife. I should know how much he drinks because his drinking does affect his behavior. Sometimes in a fun way, sometimes in a not-so-fun way. All of it has an effect on me in one way or another.

“They,” he continues, gesturing to the ephemeral presence of someone or something.

“They?” I ask.

Etienne’s jaw works. “They. The palace. The king and queen. Someone. We are stuck here. This has happened before.”

He’s not making any sense. “You’ve been on a honeymoon before and had your phone and passport stolen?”

He paces and growls like a caged lion. “No, Kala. Don’t you see? The palace has ordered someone to take my phone and our passports so we can’t leave. We’re trapped here.”

This must be a joke.

“I don’t understand.”

“I have as many questions as you do,” he says. “And the only way to get answers is if we leave the resort.”

I blink at him. “Don’t be silly. I have my phone. We can use the internet to email the palace. Your sister seems nice; maybe she can help.”

The pacing lion now prowls toward me, backing me against the wall, ensuring I understand how sober and serious he is.

“Do you want to place a bet that we have no internet or phone service?”

The look in his eyes is like nothing I’ve seen in him before.

Heat pools between my thighs despite the upsetting news that we are imprisoned in the South Pacific for no discernible reason.

His gaze flicks between my eyes. Etienne's pupils dilate as he closes in.

Weakly, I disagree. "Of course, we have internet and phone service," I say. "I can see a tower from here."

Etienne is determined to get me to join him in crazy town. I believe that one of the guards confiscated his phone on orders from the king and that the king is quarantining us here for some reason. But taking our passports? I don't want to believe it, yet a nagging dread tells me he might be right.

"Darling, why do you think the king put us on an island with armed guards at the resort's every exit? All the easier to watch us," he says.

But I have my phone, and it has internet because I've been texting Steffen off and on all day to order drinks, food, and water. Something is off about this.

"I'll take that bet," I say. "What's the wager?"

"If I'm right, and we have no internet access, then you have to sleep in tomorrow," he says, his lip curling. The anger at his father that flooded his gorgeous face a minute ago has boiled over and undergone a chemical transformation into something else. That "something else" crackles in the air between us.

"And if you're wrong?"

"You decide," he says, twitching an eyebrow.

"If I'm right, you have to wake up at 6 a.m. and run on the beach with me!" I exclaim, proud of my idea.

"Deal," he says.

He took that bet rather quickly. So quickly, it makes me nervous.

But either way, maybe I will win. Easy enough, as he didn't say how late I'd have to sleep in. Sleeping in could mean 7 a.m.

This bet doesn't change the unsettling feeling that we might be in an actual precarious situation. No phone? No passport?

This has to be a mistake. He missed seeing it somehow. He misplaced them. That has to be the solution.

And if someone took them? All I have to do is contact the nearest embassy...somehow.

We shake on it, and his touch sets off a shiver up my spine.

I shoot him a winning smile. "Let me check my phone, and we'll see who wins."

I glance at one of his biceps bracketed against the wall, and Etienne slowly, casually, lowers his arms and backs away.

With a spring in my step, I go to my beach bag and find my phone still wrapped in a dry towel to keep it from overheating in the sun.

"Ha! Look!"

I wave the phone at him to show him the three bars. "There's the Wi-Fi signal. Right there," I say, pointing at the screen.

"Now open your browser and google something."

Buzzing my lips dismissively, I do as he says.

But when I google "paranoid delusions," it says, "Browser is not connected to the internet."

I narrow my eyes at the screen. "That doesn't make any sense."

I try other apps, but there's no Wi-Fi. "I don't understand. The bars are there... I've been texting the hotel staff all day to get service to the beach..."

I open my settings, and it says Wi-Fi is connected.

"Well, it seems I both won and lost," I say, showing him my phone.

And although I have unlimited cell data, it does me no good. And when I try to make a call, nothing goes through.

"Etienne," I say, looking up at his triumphant face. "How did you know?"

"Because this is his MO, darling. I know you're great friends with the king and queen, but this is who he actually is."

I believe his parents are scheming, and I dismiss the comment that I'm great friends with them. Still, his parents have our best interest at heart, even if it is in their warped way. I'm far more worried that we could be in real danger. The bodyguards could be conspiring with corrupt law enforcement to hold us for ransom. That seems like the most plausible scenario. My heart is racing, and now I'm the one pacing around the suite.

"This is not good. We have to be able to communicate with the outside. I have a business to run. I have vendors to pay. I have payroll...I have to speak to the king about the loan payments..."

Etienne growls, "What loan payments?"

I ignore this because I'm not ready to go there yet.

Instead, I play dumb when I text Steffen.

Me: Hi, can you tell me where the business office is? I don't seem to be able to get a phone signal or access the internet in my room.

Steffen replies back immediately:

Steffen: I'm so very, very sorry, Your Highness. But there is no phone signal or internet here at the resort.

Me: But then, how am I texting you?

Steffen: The signal you are connected to is the resort's intranet. I'm sorry your travel agent did not explain that before you left."

My stomach drops. That can't be true. The hotel staff has to be able to make phone calls, surely.

Me: Okay, that's fine. Can you tell me where I can get cell service or internet? I need to check on a few things at the business at once.

Steffen: That would require the ferry to take you to the big island.

Me: When is the next ferry?

Steffen: 9 a.m. tomorrow.

Me: Steffen, this is deeply concerning.

Steffen: I agree, Your Highness.

Defeated, I drop my phone on the bed.

"I can't believe this is happening," I say.

"Can't you?" Etienne says. "You let the king manipulate you into marrying me."

"Manipulate me? You were there, too, remember? He didn't give me much of a choice."

What I don't say is, *And I let you talk me into a divorce pact when I'm absolutely confoundingly in love with you.*

"What do we do now?" I ask.

Etienne throws his head back and laughs. "Do? Nothing. Or, if you're bored, we could try...everything."

That wicked smile comes at a time when I'm completely outraged and trying to figure out how to get us out of here. And yet, seeing Etienne lean against the wall, his arms folded

across his chest, watching me, makes my sex pulse with longing.

Tearing my gaze away from my husband, I move to the veranda overlooking the water and slide open the door.

“Where are you going, wife?” Etienne asks teasingly.

“I need some air.”

E tienne

We need drinks.

Pouring two glasses of wine, I join Kala on the dock, where she dangles her tanned legs over the water.

The sun has dipped below the horizon, and she stares at the faded orange skies over the sea.

“Thanks,” she says, accepting the glass and downing several quick gulps.

“Slow down, Princess. You’re a lightweight,” I say, groaning as I lower myself to the weathered wood to sit beside her.

She chuckles. “Bold words to say to a beer heiress.”

“True, but I can tell.”

“How?”

I lift one shoulder. “Because you’re kind of...uptight.”

“I am not.”

It feels wrong to appreciate Kala’s indignation so deep in my belly. The fire in her eyes is exciting. Shocking her in all ways would be endlessly enjoyable.

“You’re not?”

“You might think I’ve painted you with a wide brush, but I can say the same about you. I have many facets you don’t know about.”

The woman was raised from birth to marry a prince, and that’s about all I know. It’s an old and uncomfortable tradition in some of the upper-crust families in Gravenland that still carries on to this day.

Not being one to tread carefully, I prod her. “Really? Did finishing school teach you how to remove the stick up your butt as well as put it in?”

“Asshole,” she laughs. “My schooling didn’t end there, you know. I have two bachelor’s degrees and a master’s in international relations.”

I am only vaguely aware of Kala’s accomplishments after years of tuning out my parents on the subject of their most loyal noble families. “I didn’t know. Sorry for the stick-up-your-butt comment.”

She looks out at the sea and sighs. “It’s not the worst thing people say about me. Believe me, I can handle your barbs.”

I apologize again. “I know this marriage is temporary, but I don’t want you to be miserable. I hope we can be friends. Before and after the divorce.”

She clears her throat. “So. What are the terms?”

“The terms?”

“Of the divorce. I signed a prenup, as does everyone who marries into the Haart family. So, if I file for divorce for any reason other than infidelity, I get nothing. How are we going to play this?” Kala asks. She sips her wine thoughtfully.

“I’m not going to leave you with nothing,” I say. “I wouldn’t do that.”

“How generous of you. However, I also would like a guarantee that the palace will not drag my name through the mud.”

I would never sully her good name, but she has no reason to trust that I won’t. Even if I instruct the palace to release a thousand statements to defend her character, there’s nothing I

can do to prevent the gossip rags from inventing their own narrative. Anyone walking away from the royal family will get raked over the coals by the major news outlets and the trashier ones alike.

Being responsible for someone else's well-being and reputation feels...strange. The thought of anyone printing anything negative about Kala makes my blood boil.

And this right here might be the most adult decision I've ever had to make on my own. I'm generally not a man who takes on this much responsibility—not even as part of my royal duties. I'm a famous half-asser.

But now, I feel different. I feel the pull to be whole-ass about something. Even if that something is performing my part in a fake public marriage.

“How about we have a series of public disagreements?” I offer.

“I won't fight you in the streets, Etienne.”

“We can start small. You can be your perfectly charming and delightful self. And I can be the surly, impatient prince, subtly demanding you hurry along and end my misery at one public appearance or another.”

She thinks about this for a moment. “You think I'm delightful and charming?”

And why would that be a surprise to her?

“Everyone thinks so. Just ask the king and queen.”

She waves me off with a dismissive noise. “The king and queen are overly complimentary because they like to keep a close eye on me. They ask my family for favors because we owe them.”

I lose my train of thought. “What do you mean you owe them?”

“Why do you think I didn't resist marrying you, Etienne? It wasn't only your good looks and barbed wit. Frost Bay Beverages is in the red. Unbeknownst to me, my father took out huge loans from the palace to keep paying his employees.

The king implied that debt would be erased with this union between you and me.”

I ignore much of what my parents talk about, but I’m sure I would have heard about this.

“Did the king explicitly say that your father’s debts would be paid if you married me?”

“Explicitly? No. He implied it.”

“Darling, I’m afraid you don’t know my father half as well as you think you do. You should get that sort of arrangement in writing.”

Kala stares at me, then swallows down the rest of her wine. “Husband, do you think it’s a good idea to get something sketchy as that in writing? So the paps can get their hands on it? No, this is the kind of stuff you agree on verbally. It’s a bad, bad look.”

She’s right. I give a vague noise of agreement, but my head is stuck on the fact that she wasn’t clamoring to be with me. I knew she wasn’t marrying for love, but hearing the hard truth spoken aloud makes me feel like just another pawn in my father’s games.

I rise to my feet on the dock. “I’m going to bed. You coming?”

“I’m thinking about what time I’m getting up tomorrow,” she says.

“Oh no. You’re sleeping in, darling. Remember?”

Kala rolls her eyes but can’t hide the pink color in her cheeks. “Sleeping in entails staying in bed until I’m fully awake, not when my alarm goes off. I still have to go for my run, you know.”

“Princess, you lost a bet. That doesn’t mean you get to dictate the terms after you lost.”

She crosses her arms and gives me her meanest face yet, and I can’t control the laugh bubbling up in my chest.

“Sulk all you want. You’re mine until noon tomorrow.”

“Noon!” As I walk away across the dock toward our suite, I hear her mutter under her breath something about never having met anyone so slothful in all her life.

My laughter echoes all the way back to the honeymoon suite.

K^{ala}

For a man who thinks he knows me, he sure has a lot of questions.

“Why are you putting earbuds in?” Etienne asks as he slides into bed.

I turn toward him on the pillows, one earbud between my fingers on the way to blissfully blotting out the world.

“I do every night. You didn’t notice last night after passing out cold after a long day of traveling.”

Etienne blinks. “I suppose I wasn’t noticing much, not after all the pharmaceuticals interacted with the vodka.”

“I wasn’t going to say anything about that. People need what they need to travel,” I say.

“Yeah. Takeoffs and landings make my ass sweat.” I smile, thinking how nice it is that he’s sharing what makes him scared.

“And, likewise, people need what they need to sleep,” I say, fixing my earbud into my ear closest to him.

“But what do you listen to?”

He’s really curious? Hmm. I see no hint of sarcasm or mocking.

“If you must know, I listen to people talking.”

“What sort of talking? Is it recordings of parliament? That would send me off to dreamland in thirty seconds.”

I groan inwardly, dreading this conversation. But strangely, I feel safe telling him the truth. “Positive affirmations.”

My husband blinks, the only sign that he’s still breathing through his shock.

“Etienne, are you unwell?”

“I would never have thought...” he starts, then changes course when I arc an eyebrow at him. “...I mean, you’re so confident, accomplished, respected, pretty...”

“Go on.”

He laughs. “Really, why would you need to listen to positive affirmations?”

I sit up in bed, giving up on tuning him out. I’m not going to cry. I do not need to unload my baggage onto this man I barely know.

“Look, we all have something we’re dealing with. I cope with my pain my way, and you...”

“I,” Etienne says, suddenly bristling, “Cope with mine by drinking.”

“I wasn’t going to say that,” I amend. “I wasn’t going to assume anything.”

With that, I snuggle down into the mattress, adjusting this way and that before finally getting comfortable and sticking my earbud in my ear.

“It’s true, though,” I hear him say through the sound-muffling device in my ear. “I drink to numb everything.”

I turn toward him and study his face.

“I’m sorry,” is all I say.

We share a brief silence in which I think he wants to say more but doesn’t. I want to know, desperately, what pain he needs to numb. I crave to learn everything about this man.

So, I offer a look at my deepest wound. “I cope with missing my mother by listening to positive people saying nice things because that’s what I needed as a child. Also, listening tricks my brain into thinking that I’m not falling asleep alone.”

I can’t bear the look on Etienne’s face in response to that, so I turn over and face the wall. This time, I let my headphones rest on the night table.

“My father could never stand the sight of me,” my husband says. My heart aches.

“And upon our engagement, the king said he would cut me off if I didn’t go through with the wedding.”

My automatic response is to pacify. To say, *Don’t be silly. Of course, your father loves you.*

I swallow the urge to say this because, well, look at all the evidence, shall we? The king trapped us here, removed all ability to communicate with the outside world, and didn’t give either of us a reason. Oh, and also threatened his son to get married.

“That must have been terrible to hear,” I reply.

“There’s more.”

I brace myself, but more doesn’t come.

Instead, I feel the slightest brush of fingers at the ends of my hair where it lays behind me on the pillow. In the dark, I listen to Etienne’s breath, which has gone slightly ragged.

“May I hold you?”

Good gods, yes. “Why not,” I say breezily, as if I hadn’t wished for this. As if I haven’t longed for exactly that for years and years.

Etienne’s big arms surround me in warmth, much like the compromising position I’d found us in early this morning. But this time, Etienne’s touch is chaste. My spine relaxes against the warmth of his chest and stomach, one vertebra at a time, creating the same satisfied feeling of watching a line of dominoes fall. Satisfying, as long as one doesn’t have to clean up the mess.

“You’re not alone anymore, darling.” He speaks the words close and kisses my temple.

My eyes prick as tears well up in them, and my damned hopeful heart skips a beat. But for how long, dear prince?

And who will clean up my mess when you break me?

E tienne

When I wake in the middle of the night, my head is using Kala's breasts as pillows.

I'm unsure how I ended up here, but I feel like a grade-A perv.

That is until I feel her fingers winding lazy paths through my hair.

Falling asleep with her in my arms felt right. I'd never say that out loud, but having someone to hold on to—having her to hold on to—felt as natural as if we'd been together for years.

But we're not together; we're just married.

I say nothing but close my eyes again and surrender to her light touches.

Last night was the first time in as long as I can remember that I didn't go to sleep with the help of at least a nip of scotch or something else that does the job.

My head is blissfully empty of everything but her. I feel... needed. I didn't know being needed would ever come naturally to me. I've never been the type of person who nurtures. But maybe there is no "type." Perhaps I'm just me.

I don't even mind so much that my cock has been stiff since I snuggled against her. The urge to care for someone else's needs before my own outweighed everything else.

A hard bump presses against my jaw through the fabric of her nightshirt. When I shift slightly in her arms, the tiny bumps harden. That's a nipple, you moron. Kala's sensitive breasts make my mouth water with need.

When Kala lets out a gentle sigh, I sense she's awake.

Her breasts are so soft I ache to touch them, nuzzle them, and feel their weight in my hands.

Kala's fingers in my hair make me dizzy with lust. A low growl escapes me as I adjust my throbbing cock where it presses against her hip.

The movement causes more friction, more contact, and yet not enough. I itch to touch her.

I slowly wind my arm around her ribs, over her pajama top, toying with the lacy hem that's hiked above her bare midriff.

Her movements pause, and her body stiffens.

"Etienne, what are you up to?"

"About eight inches, I reckon."

She lets out a half-hearted scoff, but where my head is, I can feel her heart rate increase. In the dark, I open my eyes and see the outline of her breast rise and fall. Right next to my face.

"Sorry if I woke you," she whispers. "I woke up with your hair in my face, and when I moved it out of the way, it was so soft I couldn't resist."

I let my toying fingers descend to her bare abdomen. Her skin there is warm and responsive, inviting me to explore the slope of her hips and the dip of her navel. "Don't ever say you're sorry, especially not to me."

I let my hand wander to the left, skimming her stomach. A stray thought occurs to me, then, as I imagine filling her sweet tummy with a baby.

An heir.

What the hell is wrong with me? A baby is the last thing anyone should bring into an arranged marriage. Exhibit A: the king and queen.

“The word ‘ever’ is doing a lot of heavy lifting in that sentence,” she says. “Once you’re king and we divorce, there won’t be an ‘ever.’”

For a moment, I wonder if I hear regret in her voice. Regret over marrying me in the first place, or does she regret that this is not a happily ever after? Definitely the former. No one expects a happily ever after for me.

“That changes nothing. I still don’t want you apologizing to me.”

“That may be the first time I’ve ever heard a member of the royal family insist on no apologies. All everyone does is beg your pardon.”

It’s funny because it’s true. That’s precisely why I don’t want to hear apologies from her. Kala is not royal by blood, but she’s better than all of us.

My chuckling provokes a shiver from her. I can’t hold back the heated groan in response. I nuzzle my face between her breasts. Kala’s nails gently bite into my shoulders.

“Etienne,” she breathes.

I pause and lift my gaze, my eyes searching for hers in the dark. “Shall I stop or keep going?”

“For heaven’s sake, I want you to touch me so badly, Your Highness; I can’t see straight.”

I don’t bother fussing about the Your Highness thing because she’s only using it to get my attention. She has it.

“Kala,” I rasp, letting my face skim over her soft mounds. “I’ve been hard for hours. Days, even.”

My hand travels up her ribcage until it cups her soft, bare breast under her nightshirt. I move away and hike the shirt up, exposing her sensitive flesh to me. I can’t help myself: my mouth salivates as I take one pert nipple between my lips and suck, reveling in the sounds of her soft gasps. I swirl my tongue, suckling her tight peak while rolling the opposite nipple between my fingers.

I take as much of her into my mouth as I can, determined to know her and memorize every inch with my tongue.

“Etienne...Etienne, I need you...”

I pop her nipple out of my mouth. “You have me.” I almost say, *always*, but I stop myself. “Tell me what you want, Princess.”

She lets out a soft whimper of need and arcs her body off the mattress.

I skim one hand over the front of her shorts. “Here?”

“Yes...” she breathes.

I hook one finger into the elastic waistband of her shorts and tug downward, lower, and lower until soft curls tickle my knuckles.

“Please...”

My fingers slip between her folds, and what I find there nearly makes me come in my pajama trousers. My wife is wet and waiting for me.

“There...please...”

“Say my name again.”

“Etienne...”

The pitch of her voice rises as I explore deeper, finding her slippery clit and thumbing it.

And then, as if someone flipped a switch, her mood changes. Her breathing settles, and her moaning stops. “Kala.”

“Mm?”

“Where are you right now? Where did you go?”

She answers, but it’s the tone of someone attempting to smooth things over.

“I’m right here, Etienne.”

“Something is wrong. I did something—”

“Nothing is wrong, I swear...”

“Kala.”

“It’s not important,” she insists, cupping my face. I can practically see her beaming bravely up at me.

Fuck that.

K_{ala}

My husband asks where did I go just now?

I don't know how to answer that.

This may be a first. I always have a quick answer. I'm a professional thinks-on-her-toes.

"I... don't know what you mean." This is a lie. The truth is, I was enjoying every second with him until my self-preservation kicked in.

The way he ordered me to say his name repeatedly made my heart race. This is trouble. The standoff between my heart, my logical brain, and my libido has begun in earnest.

The next thing I know, we've switched positions, and he's tucking me into his side, his arm wrapped protectively around me.

"You went somewhere, or I did something you didn't like," he murmurs, kissing my temple.

This sweetness isn't helping me stay objective. Does he not know that every kiss, every touch, sends me deeper into oblivion? And how much that scares the fire out of me?

"You're doing everything right, Etienne. It's been a long time, and I don't know if I remember how to make it good for you too."

Technically, all of this is true, but a deflection.

“Good? Darling, I’m half out of my mind trying not to finish too fast. Trust me, there’s absolutely nothing you can do wrong. But if you want us to slow down, I will. I can wait as long as you need.”

As long as I need? Gods, I’ve been fantasizing about the so-called Bad Prince demolishing me with that wicked mouth for years. Too many years.

It’s not a matter of needing to wait. It’s all about being up in my head because I’m falling too hard, too fast, watching my heart break right in front of me.

“No, I don’t need to wait.”

“I think you do.”

He’s not going to budge. And I both hate him and love him for this. Where has this sensitive man been hiding all this time? And did some part of me secretly know he was hiding inside the unserious, hedonistic exterior all along?

Look at me, half-believing in soul mates.

“Tell me how to please you, Kala.”

“You were pleasing me.”

“Don’t lie to me, Princess,” he says, smoothing my hair away from my face. “You were digging your nails into me one second, and then something switched off.”

I’ve never had such an intimate conversation with any previous sex partner, and it’s a little out of my comfort zone. Okay, a lot outside of my comfort zone. Yet, I feel safe enough to answer.

“No one...no one asks me what I like. I don’t know. It’s usually just a few hurried thrusts to get each other off, and then we’re back to work.”

His hand stroking my hair stills. “Back to work?”

“Yes. I’m very busy, you see. Or, I was when I worked for the Human Rights Council. When you’re in the field, a lot is going

on. Oh, it was never a boss/employee situation but sometimes a teammate...”

He chuckles. “Getting dirty at work. I knew you had it in you.”

“Stop it. It wasn’t like that. Okay, it was exactly like that, but it didn’t mean anything.”

“Casual sex. I get it. Been there, done that. Got the tee-shirt.”

I playfully pinch his nipple, and he yelps. I don’t have time to react then because I’m under him again. My eyesight having adjusted to the dark, I can see the gleam in his eye as he gazes down at me.

“There’s my playful girl. I knew it.”

“I was punishing you for implying that I sleep around and break hearts.”

“Babe, you’ve got a thousand broken hearts in your wake, don’t doubt that,” he says.

With his arms and legs bracketed around me, caging me under him, I’ve nowhere to go. Nowhere to look.

“And what about you?” I regret asking as soon as the words are out of my mouth. I definitely do not want to know about Etienne’s body count. It might kill me.

“What about me?”

“You must be aware of your reputation,” I say, biting my lip. “Everyone implies that you’re a...”

“A what?” I can hear the fire in his voice.

“A lothario.”

He chuckles. “And what do you think?”

I take several seconds to breathe before I tell him the truth. “I think it doesn’t matter as long as you’re faithful when you’re in a relationship.”

“Or in a marriage?”

“Well, yes. In a real marriage.”

He pauses. “I am faithful.”

I sigh. “Yes, but we’ve a divorce pact. We’re not in love. I won’t hold you to your vows if you have...other interests.”

A low rumble emanates from his chest. “I said the vows, and I meant them. Just because I agreed to set you free at some point doesn’t mean I will cheat.”

Set me free? Separation and divorce sound more like a lifelong prison sentence than anything else. It’s not what I want.

“Would it be cheating, though?” I ask.

“Darling, if this is a test, I’m ripping the paper to shreds and snapping the pencil in half. I’m only going to say this once, so listen carefully.” Etienne lowers his head and presses his lips to my ear. “As long as you’re my wife, you’re the only person I’m touching.”

Oh. Oh, my. Chill bumps spread down my arms.

“Say more,” I breathe. Gods, I’m such a needy thing.

His evil chuckle in the dark is followed up with, “Fuck, you may as well be the only other person on the planet as far as I’m concerned.”

Desire pulses in my core.

“Now, tell me what you like in bed before I spank you,” he commands.

“Promise?”

Etienne laughs wickedly and rolls me onto my side, landing a firm slap on my buttock. I shriek with laughter. “Good, you’re out of your busy head. Answer quickly, now: what do you want?”

Before I have time to think, I blurt out what I wonder about whenever I pleasure myself. Each time I use my vibrator to make myself come, I imagine it’s Etienne’s face between my thighs. “I want you to fuck me with your tongue.”

I gasp at my own words that hang there in the silence between us.

The grown-up version of that same tongue responsible for my sexual awakening? Yes, that’s the one.

And then, all rational thought leaves my brain because the throaty rumble Etienne makes next makes me cream my shorts. “Yes, Kala,” he growls, running his palm up my leg and over my front, again tugging down the waistband of the satiny things. But this time, he tugs the material all the way down.

I arc my hips off the bed to help him along, my insides roiling with need. And then, his warm breath against my inner thighs fools me into thinking he will go slow. In fact, Etienne gives another restrained growl, hooks the back of my knee in the crook of his arm, and splays me open. I barely give a startled gasp before his tongue is there. Right there, teasing my core.

At first, it’s his tongue and only his tongue, licking my damp flesh, swirling around my clit, spearing my cunt. Oh, good gods. This is better than my wet dreams. This is too good.

I’m going to come too soon.

“Etienne...your mouth...your t-tongue! I...”

My husband’s appreciative noises nearly do me in. They make me feel sexy. They make me feel things I’ve never felt about myself before. I feel...delicious.

I writhe and buck under him, my hips moving of their own accord. And then, his focused teasing of my clit with the tip of that wicked tongue finishes me. Everything he does feels good, but when he finds that one perfect spot, he knows. He knows, because my entire body jerks and I come up off the bed.

His tousled hair feels soft between my fingers as I hold on tight to him.

“Oh gods...oh gods!” I gasp as his relentless tongue works that aching spot. His arms anchor both my thighs out of the way of what he wants. His muscles tighten in response to every twitch and jerk as I wriggle under him. His fingers digging into my fleshy thighs make me feel desired. Like an absolute sexpot.

I come with his name on my lips, my release ripping through me in waves. “Etienne!”

“Kala. Look at all this honey dripping just for me.”

His words make my orgasm ripple harder and harder. And so does his mouth. He consumes me. With his whole mouth at my core, my husband laps at my essence as if he doesn't want to miss a drop.

The aftershocks still have me quaking while another seed of desire roots deep in my body.

I tug at his hair. “Etienne!”

He gives a quiet, villainous chuckle, the vibrations melting my whole self into hot liquid, then murmurs, “Still hungry for my midnight snack.”

E tienne

I test out Kala's reaction to the scruff of my chin, rubbing it against her sensitive flesh.

My wife's body reacts like she's been waiting for that all day. But the words that come out of her mouth are something else entirely. "You don't have to keep going if you need a break."

"Do you doubt my stamina?"

She gives a throaty giggle that makes my cock twitch. "I don't know your stamina at all."

Only a wicked husband barely allows his wife to recover from one orgasm before ravaging her again. And I am that wicked husband.

But the way she creams on my face, I know there's more pent-up passion bubbling under her rigid exterior.

She wants a ride on this beard? She'll get one.

"Darling," I say, stroking her thighs where a moment ago my fingers had been locked onto her flesh, "If you want me to take a break, then you can sit on my face."

I roll to my back and switch on the night table light. I want to see the scandalized expression. More importantly, I want to look up between her thighs while she takes my face for a ride.

Her flushed cheeks, glassy eyes, and messy hair make me feel proud knowing I did that to her.

But I need to do so much more.

Divorce pact or no divorce pact, I want to absolutely ruin her for anyone else.

The heat radiating from her body matches the fire in her gaze. She climbs on top slowly, still shivering from her release, letting my eyes take in every bare inch of her body.

Kala hauls herself over me with little help, clutching the headboard.

My god, this view. She hovers over me, then slowly lowers her sweet, dripping pussy over my mouth.

I watch her gaze turn from heated to wild as I pleasure her with my mouth once again. I reach up to toy with one breast, teasing her pert nipple. She moans as she creams my face and beard, moving over me, adding pressure as she sees fit.

Her squeezable hips roll as she looks for just the right friction.

I knew it. I knew she'd love being in control.

I roll that nipple between my fingers while I destroy her pussy with my face, letting her get off on my beard.

This moment feels so hot I can't stand the ache of my untouched cock anymore, so I reach down with my other hand and grip my length. It's not enough. I need to feel her surround me. I want her to milk me dry.

Instead, I let go and reach for her face.

"Suck my fingers," I rasp.

My obliging wife does as I ask, sucking each of my fingers into her mouth, one by one. The swirling tongue and the slight scrape of her teeth might make me lose my load.

But her mouth isn't enough. "Come up a little, baby."

"Am I hurting you?"

"I'm perfect. You're perfect. I need your cream, darling."

Without asking why, my sweet Kala comes up on her knees, allowing me to bathe my hand in her sweetness. I must be doing it too vigorously because she cries out, another release shuddering through her.

“Gods, you’re beautiful when you come, Darling.”

“Etienne,” she rasps, gushing all over my hand.

“What is it, love?”

Her gaze locks on mine.

“Do you need to stop now?” I ask.

“No,” she grits out like a she-beast, even as her orgasm pulses through her. “Feels too good. Your beard...your mouth...your everything...oh my gods...”

I let go of her breast and pet her hair. “I know. I know exactly what you mean.” I am at a loss for words, too.

Kala makes herself at home once again, granting me the gift of her soft, tender center.

I feast on her pussy once again as I pet myself, coating my shaft with her honey. She allows herself to grind down against my face. I know she’s being careful. I don’t mind being suffocated a little, but it may be too soon for all that.

The months of being alone on this island no longer seem like such a punishment.

I fist my cock as I spear my tongue inside her cunt with every roll of her hips. My Kala has found her rhythm, and I am dying to find her sweetest spot, deep inside, to make her explode all over my tongue.

Honestly, I do not care if I drink nothing else but her.

Suddenly, her rhythm goes irregular, and I realize she’s reaching backward.

And now she has control of my cock and my mouth: her firm hand laying waste to my shaft and her sweat-damp thighs covering my ears.

If I die like this, I die.

Unexpectedly, she moves off of me. I'm about to protest until I realize what Kala is doing. I watch her ass as she crawls down the bed to take my cock in her mouth.

“Holy fuck, Princess...” And then it's only monosyllabic noises from me following that.

Kala is spread out for the taking, her mouth and tongue wetting the head of my cock—and her ass in my face.

I'm so fucking happy I laugh. “I didn't know you had this in you,” I say.

She answers with a moan on my dick, taking me in deeper and swirling her tongue around the tip, licking off my precum.

I answer this by taking two handfuls of her luscious cheeks, spreading her wide and owning her cunt once again with my mouth. Kala doesn't taste like the perfect, dignified lady. Her juice is decadent, her body luscious, and her taste for pleasure is insatiable.

Now that she is awakened, my wife is a greedy devil in the sheets.

There is no more crash of the ocean outside our suite. There is only us and the night, and the sounds of sweat-soaked flesh against flesh, mouths taking and giving. Gasping, gagging, giggling, and moaning.

When I explode into her mouth, Kala swallows it down, milking me utterly dry as I surge into her in furious, uncontrollable bursts. The more she moans on my dick, the harder I come.

Her next release comes quickly on the heels of mine, with my tongue vanquishing her elusive inner spot.

Kala releases her grip on me and screams as her G-spot orgasm crashes over her. She cries out words in our native tongue, old incantations that no one uses anymore.

My wife, she completely owns me, body and soul.

I am overwhelmed with the need to see her, touch her, and hold her to me.

I do just that, pulling her into my side and wrapping her up, our still-heaving chests pressed together.

“Etienne,” she whimpers, twitching and trembling still.

Pressing a kiss to her forehead, I answer, “I’ve got you, darling.”

She kisses my mouth, and I’m lost to her sweet lips. Yes, kissing will do for now. Kissing will keep me from expressing the things my heart is bursting to say.

I’m done for. I’m absolutely consumed with my wife. I set out to ruin her for any other man, but I’ve gone and wrecked myself.

K^{ala}

On any other day, I would bound from the bed at the first sign of sunrise and hit the ground running. Or, in my present situation, the beach.

But I lost a bet, and now I'm figuratively chained to the bed. Darn.

Running would require legs that work, though.

These legs barely cooperate when I haul myself to the bathroom to pee—and stumble right back to bed.

I lie on my side and stare out at the sea with the goofiest smile. Etienne made me come three times last night. This morning. Whenever.

I watch the waves lap the beach as the tide comes in, and try to remember the last time I came three times in one night. Never. That's never happened.

He took me over and over again, and yet the more he took, the more I had to give. This morning, I'm happily, pleasantly drained.

Etienne did precisely what I had asked; he'd fucked me with his tongue. With vigor, again and again.

I reach for my phone to see what time it is, but it falls off the nightstand, bounces off the step and skids across the room.

Dammit.

The clatter has Etienne jerking awake.

“What is it? Are you okay?”

I scramble for my phone, but he circles his arms around my waist and pulls me back against him. “Ugh, Etienne!”

“First, tell me if you’re hurt. I heard a noise.”

I laugh and push against his massive forearm that circles my waist. “I’m fine. I dropped my phone, and I want to see what time it is. I want to see if it’s time to get up.”

He laughs his evil laugh and says, “It’s time to get up when I say it’s time to get up.”

“That wasn’t the deal!” I say, giving up the struggle. “You said noon!”

He peeks over me and peers out the window, squinting. “It’s not noon yet.”

“How do you know?”

“Look how dark and gray the sky is,” he says. “It’s barely seven a.m.”

“I just want to check...”

There is a flash of light, then thunder drowns out my words. The next moment, the skies open up and rain begins to pound the beach. When I flinch at the lighting and thunder, Etienne rests a reassuring hand on my hip.

“See that? Nowhere to go anyway. Might as well stay in bed.”

I pout. “I wanted to hike today.”

“Do you ever just do nothing?”

“Hey, I spent all afternoon reading on the beach yesterday.”

“Reading is an activity.”

“Fine, then. I suppose I don’t ever do simply nothing.”

He murmurs against my throat, sending tingles everywhere. “This is why you ended up with me. Learn from the expert of doing nothing.”

I would laugh at his words, except that his mouth does evil things to my still-sensitive parts. Then, he's not only murmuring but spoiling me with licking kisses up and down my throat, working his way to the nape of my neck.

Lightning flashes again, followed closely by a loud crack of thunder. I jump, and Etienne turns me over to face him.

I wait for him to tease me for being skittish at the weather, but he doesn't. He only presses his lovely mouth to mine in a slow, lazy, wet kiss that draws my entire focus to him.

It's funny that whenever he's exploring my body, he keeps dragging his hand over my stomach and growling. He did it several times last night, a few times in his sleep, I'm fairly certain. And again right now. Ordinarily, I would shoo anyone's hands away from that region. I don't like to be tickled and I don't like for intimate partners to spend too long on my stomach.

I don't know what's different about Etienne that I don't reflexively punch him in the sternum for touching me there. Is it the magic of being married?

I dismiss the wonder as simply a gut reaction to bedding a man I've lusted over for so long. He can touch me anywhere.

Especially when his hair is mussed from the pillows, and his lazy hands and mischievous smirk transmit all sorts of filthy ideas.

He is doing crazy things to my head.

My cheeks heat as I correct him. "I don't think what we're doing here can be classified as nothing."

He laughs. "Touché, mon amour."

It's just an expression. I'm not his love. He doesn't love me.

And I don't love-him-love-him, I'm simply aroused by every little thing about him. Except when he opens his mouth and says the exact wrong thing. But today, he's saying all the right things.

"But," he continues, tracing a lazy path from my navel down to my thigh, then around to cup one cheek of my rump. "It's

less strenuous on the brain than reading. And burns more calories than your morning run.”

I hoot with laughter. “Sex most certainly does not burn even close to the same amount of calories as running.”

“The way I do it does,” he says.

“Braggart.” I playfully tweak his nipple—more gently than the last time.

“Madam,” he growls, fisting my wrists together and pinning them above my head on the pillows. “You keep doing that to correct me, but it only makes me harder for you.”

Indeed, I can feel it.

I smirk up at him. “I would wager you were already hard before I did that.”

“I wouldn’t want to take that bet,” he says, then ends the conversation by slanting his face over mine in a dominating kiss. My toes curl when he licks into my mouth like a wild thing, not caring one bit about letting me kiss back. His mouth owns mine as his erection presses into my pelvis.

I’d rather have that thing between my thighs.

Automatically, I slide my legs around him, noticing his energy shift once he comes in contact with my wetness.

“What a naughty girl,” he muses, kissing down to the base of my throat, which only makes me hotter, wetter.

To my frustration, he pulls back, letting go of my wrists.

“What are you going to do with your naughty girl?” I ask, getting myself to get used to dirty talk.

Kissing his way down my body with loud, wet, slow smacks, he answers, “Give her a good tongue lashing.”

My laughter is short-lived, because soon, Etienne is no longer kissing but parting me with his thumbs and worshipping my clit so furiously that I come almost instantly.

“Such a good girl. You come so good and hard for me,” he murmurs, still tonguing me beyond what I can handle, his

words wringing out surge after surge of pleasure from my body.

What I really want is for him to wreck me completely. Drive into me with his cock.

Fuck me, fill me, explode in me until I'm so full that your cum flows down my legs. Don't stop until you put a baby in me.

But that's not what we're doing here. We're messing around, and we're absolutely not going to bring a baby into a fake marriage.

Now that my head's on straight again, I keep my mouth shut and enjoy the ride.

E tienne

Kala may have lost a bet, but she does surprisingly little complaining about it.

As for me, my one and only complaint is I fall further and further in love with a woman who thinks we're getting a divorce.

We watch the tropical storm pelt the windows of our room. We take turns reading to each other from the thriller novel she brought for the plane ride. We play card games.

And I take her again and again, in every way possible. What can I say? Watching her come might be my new addiction.

Scratch that: every way possible, except one.

We won't be doing *that*.

Even with a condom. Even with Kala on the pill. Although a risk-taker, I'm unwilling to bring an unwanted child into the world.

Because I know what it's like to be unwanted from birth.

Here, with her, I am wanted.

I'm happy.

I thought I enjoyed lazing in bed while other people did productive things. Suffice it to say that Kala makes staying in

bed a thousand times more productive.

I'm not known for a long refractory period, but this woman does something supernatural to me.

We eventually move from the bed to the tub, from the tub to the veranda, where we watch the rain, order a truckload of room service, and plot how we might attempt to contact the outside world.

"I could bribe one of the bodyguards," she suggests. Gods, I love watching her eat fruit like she's never seen a pineapple before. When Kala eats pineapple, she talks with her mouth full—a rare glimpse.

"No joy. I promise you my father has paid them more."

Kala wags her eyebrows and shoots me a coy look. "I could set my feminism aside and flirt with one of them."

"No."

"It's guaranteed to work," she protests.

"Absolutely not."

She blinks at me. "What is your voice doing right now? You sound like your father when he's about to start shouting."

For some reason, this sends my hackles way up. "I'm not going to shout at you, and I'm not angry."

"You sound a little upset," she says.

"No flirting with the bodyguards."

She pauses, and I feel a flush of heat as the truth dawns. "Is the carefree Bad Boy Prince actually jealous?"

"No."

She takes a sip of her lemon tea and studies me.

"If you say so."

"Can we move on now? Bribery won't work."

Kala gently swings in her egg chair and stares out at the sea, contemplating. I know I should strategize and offer ideas, but

I'm too busy staring at Kala's steepled index fingers that tap against her bottom lip.

I am mesmerized until she sits up abruptly, her spine straight as an arrow.

"The housekeepers."

The maids have stopped vacuuming the floor and are now making the bed.

"What about them?" I ask.

Kala smiles. "I'm betting on your father missing a step."

Not knowing what she means, I get up and follow her into the room, and I am astounded when she begins to speak to the housekeeping staff in what I assume is the native tongue.

After less than a minute of conversation, Kala is browsing on the housekeeper's phone.

I watch haplessly but impressed. "Send an email to my sister. No, to Torben. No, to the media in Gravenland..." I list five more suggestions, desperate to let anyone and everyone know that the king and queen have trapped us here against our will. We must take full advantage of the limited access to the outside world.

However, everything I suggest is batted aside when she opens her Facebook account. Kala's face goes pale.

"Kala, what's wrong?"

She doesn't answer, but fixes a stony look, then closes the browser and hands the phone back to the housekeeper.

"What are you doing? What happened?"

"Thank you," she says to the housekeeper, but her grateful smile is not genuine.

When the housekeepers leave our suite, Kala can't look me in the eye.

"What happened? What did they say? Did you message my sister?"

Kala's voice is thin when she answers, as if all the oxygen has been sucked from her lungs. "No. I didn't get a chance to message your sister."

Perhaps I'm overreacting, but I'm upset at the lost opportunity. "What do you mean you didn't get a chance. That was our chance!" I say, gesturing toward the door where the housekeepers just left from.

"I...I need a moment," she says, then goes to the freshly made bed and curls up in the blankets, bathrobe and all.

"A moment for what? Did you tell anyone what's happening? The media?"

Her brow furrows in annoyance. "Etienne. I need a minute to myself. I don't want to discuss this any further."

I don't move a muscle.

"I deserve to know why my wife is not following our agreed-upon plan to get the hell off this rock!"

Kala slides her gaze to me, then says softly yet coldly, "When you stand like that and shout at me, you look just like your father."

I'm so stunned and alarmed by this that I simply stare at my wife, who then turns away from me and tugs the blankets up around her shoulders.

Well. That's it, then.

I glance outside and see the rain has let up.

Without thinking it through, I march downstairs to the beachside bar and order the bartender to line up shots of his best rum.

If my wife won't talk to me, I'll speak to the bottom of a glass.

K^{ala}

When Etienne finds me a few hours later, running on the beach, he smells like a rum distillery.

Now that the sun is out again, I've spent the last few hours jogging and mentally unpacking what I saw when I opened my social media. Unpacking things I thought I had already unpacked, processed, and put away.

It only took one direct message to sabotage my peace of mind.

I don't know what I'm running from or running to. I just need to run. I've run from one end of the beach to the other. One side is bordered by harrowing steep cliffs and the other by rocks and tall dunes that disperse into dense jungle. Where am I going?

If a cruise ship would come by, I would signal for help. If I had any energy to care anymore, that is.

No one wants to be greeted with terrible news when checking a silly social media account. But the source of that news was...simply the wrong person.

People always say don't shoot the messenger, but have you ever had a messenger shoot at you?

Gods, I'm so mixed up now, I can't see straight.

The run doesn't help; it only makes me angry.

“You still look like something is bothering you,” Etienne says, catching up to me on my tenth lap of the beach.

“It’s nothing.”

I’m not talking to him about this when he’s been drinking.

“What have I said wrong now?”

I want to stop in my tracks and let him have it. But I’m still upset and not thinking straight. I need him to be sober before I talk to him again. I like the attentive Etienne, but not while he’s drunk. It was fun in the car after our wedding when he’d moved heaven and earth to buy me cake. But that was one occasion.

Here is where the rubber hits the road in marriage and friendship—and I don’t think either of us is mature enough to handle it.

I need him to leave me alone, and with that in mind, I say something that comes out much more hurtful than intended.

“Not every one of my grievances revolves around you, Etienne. Sometimes I think about my own problems.”

I instantly regret it, but his reaction is surprisingly amused.

“You have problems other than being married to me? Do tell.”

He’s having trouble keeping up with my pace. There’s one way to sober him up; I can run him ragged.

“Oh, please. You don’t want to hear about it.”

“Try me.”

As I approach, a family of birds skitter away from me on the hard-packed sand.

“Please, darling.”

Do I really want to tell him?

Yes, I suppose I do.

For once, other than while in bed—his use of “darling” feels sincere.

I hesitate a moment longer, wondering if Etienne will remember anything I tell him tomorrow.

Would that be so bad? If he remembered nothing?

So I find myself spilling all of it.

“Have you ever been told some horrible news by the wrong person? And you find yourself so incensed that you can’t process the horrible news?”

I pause, knowing how nuts I sound.

“Yes,” he says. Simple as that.

He’s humoring me; that must be the case.

“For you to understand what I’m feeling, I have to go back fifteen years. Do you really want to hear this?”

“If we could just sit a moment before my heart explodes,” he says.

I take pity on him because he is somewhat out of breath. I nod toward a nearby rock formation, where we take a break. He hands me a water bottle before he takes a drink. I chug some of it and hand it back to him, only to have him wave it off, telling me to keep it.

My heart squeezes.

“In my first year at university, I shared a suite with a set of twins Kirsten and Kelly. They were fun and friendly and easy to get along with at first.

“Having to share a suite in and of itself was concerning, but that was the price of attending a no-frills university on my terms, away from the control of my stepmother. I know how privileged that sounds, but I like my privacy.”

Etienne interjects, “Remember whom you are speaking to about privilege. I’m the wastrel prince, remember?”

I wince at the idea of him believing what people say about him.

“Anyway. Over time, Kirsten and Kelly became bolder with their questions about my failed arrangement with your brother

Torben. The story was largely kept out of the press, but they seemed to have sleuthed out specific details. They finally admitted they ran a royal watcher account on social media but promised they had no interest in blogging or posting about me. Still, they were curious, wanting to know every sordid detail under the guise of comforting me. I was still raw, you see.

“I branched out and made other friends, as one does at university. The twins followed and inserted themselves into all my activities. Eventually, others grew bored with their constant chatter about my tenuous connections to the royal family. One of our friends, Cory, once shut them down at a party. I thought that was the end of their nosy behavior.

“They were ingratiating in small ways—bringing me coffee, helping me with my tech problems—and I felt guilty every time I got annoyed with them.

Etienne wipes the sweat from his brow, still catching his breath. But he’s listening.

And oh, does that make me feel things. It makes me regret the terrible news that’s coming.

“The last straw came over one summer break when they asked if I could introduce them to the Haart family. At that moment, I realized their kindness had been all about that. I gently ghosted them after that. I spent time learning about boundary pushers and did my best to be kind but firm. They didn’t like that. And yet they still maintained friendships with mutuals, and I could do nothing about that.

“Fast forward to today...oh god, it sounds so petty saying all this out loud.”

Etienne leans forward. “You’ve seen the way my siblings and I argue. We hold grudges over things that occurred when we were toddlers.”

I chuckle, but it sounds strangled, as I’m working to keep the tears at bay—the tears I’ve been willing away by running for hours.

“So today, when I opened my social media, lo and behold, I had been added to a new group chat by one of the twins.

Kirsten or Kelly? I don't recall which one. They were both there, along with a handful of people from university. And it was just awful news."

Etienne leans forward, his gaze full of concern. "What happened?"

"The message said, 'Hey guys, just letting you know that our friend Cory died in an accident two days ago.'

"I'm gutted. This man leaves a wife behind. And here I am, stewing over being added to a silly group chat I never consented to. About a man they haven't seen in ten years, nor with whom they were ever truly friends. It's wrong that I feel this upset at the twins for delivering this news to me, isn't it?"

Etienne studies me for a long, long moment as I squirm, sweat from my run trickling down my face. I feel exposed, sad, and drained. I ready myself for a verbal assault. I prepare to hear I'm being small and selfish.

"I agree with you. That was not cool."

He...agrees with me?

"It really wasn't," I burst out, my shoulders sagging as if a weight as been lifted.

"It was fucked up. Disgusting."

"I know, right?" I want to cry from relief.

"You should be learning about this awful tragedy from someone connected to the family. Not in a DM of a gossip estranged mutual acquaintance."

"So you understand."

"I absolutely do."

I smile at him with my weary eyes.

"And I'm sorry about your friend. That's a terrible loss."

I nod, the lump in my throat returning, my anger and grief now pivoting to the proper place.

I turn my gaze out to the sea and take a cleansing breath. This is the night I finally have the companion I longed for. Even

after everything we've done, this feels like a real connection.

“Right. We need to get you to the funeral.”

This has me sitting up straight. “What on earth?”

“You should be there. It's not fair that you're stuck here. With me.”

I blink at this man who has clearly lost his marbles. “You can't be serious.”

I already know by looking at him that he's dead serious.

“Do you want to go to the funeral of your friend?”

Oh gods. The grief has me by the throat, and I can't fix my face. I press my lips together and look away.

“We're going to get you out of here.”

“Etienne.” The tears are flowing now, and I can't stop them. “That's a lovely thought, but the exits are guarded by armed men. Security is watching us. We've got dense jungle to the west and cliffs to the east—there are no footpaths, by the way, I looked—and we're stranded on a rock that can only be reached by boat. We cannot access the ferry because of the scary dudes with guns. What do you suggest?”

Etienne stands and comes to me, leaning over for what I first think is a kiss. This is not the time for that. I move away, but he grips my shoulders and repeats himself.

“We. Are getting. Off. This island.”

And somehow, I believe him.

E tienne

“I like this plan,” Kala says when I lay out exactly what I think we should do.

“We don’t know when the funeral is, so I say we leave now. Right now,” I say, pointing to the dense jungle behind us.

She shakes her head. “We need to wait for our moment. And we can’t go in there without supplies. We’ll need a compass and water... there’s a lot to think about in case we have to hunker down in the forest.”

I squint at her. “What do you know about hunkering down in the forest?”

She lifts one shoulder. “It happens sometimes. What, do you think my job with the Human Rights Council involved only sitting behind a desk?”

“No, I...what exactly did you do?”

Her knowing smile makes my dick hard, and this is not the time. We’re hatching a plan, and I may still be a little drunk.

“If I told you that, then I’d have to kill you,” she says with a wink.

“Wait a minute...”

“Don’t worry about it,” she says sternly.

I don't love the idea of her hiding in dense undergrowth for whatever horrifying reason, and I find myself feeling more protective than I should. If I fuck this up...if something happens to her...I would never forgive myself.

There's that, and then the idea that I might lose her fills me with dread. I don't want to live my life without Kala. By gods, I'm in love with this infuriating woman.

"I'll always worry about you," I say, tracking her roaming gaze.

"Sure," she says, dabbing her eyes.

"Hey. Look at me." She obeys and takes a deep breath.

"If the future is too scary to think about, then just think about right now. I've got you, and we'll get out of here. And I'll just say it now so we can get it out of the way: I really wish my brother Sig was here."

She laughs. "You do? But the two of you can't stand each other."

I wince. I don't hate my brother. We are pains in each other's asses, but there's no hate. "I'll admit it chaps me that he's much more suited for mountaineering than I am. But only a little."

She nods and smiles bravely. "We're in this together. Don't think you must fight off jungle cats for my sake."

Shit. I hadn't thought about wild animals. We're dead.

She covers her mouth and giggles. "You should see the look on your face. Relax, they're probably more scared of us than we are of them. Same for the snakes."

I shoot to my feet. "Oh fuck, no. We'll come up with another plan."

I may be a chicken shit regarding snakes, but I'm glad my distress has improved Kala's mood. I stand and help her to her feet.

"You asked me to trust you, and now you have to trust me. I'll get the supplies we need. I just need you to stay sober and play

nice for the cameras, wherever they may be. Don't let anyone suspect that we're unhappily married."

That stings more than it should. "Who says I'm unhappy?" I ask, taking her hand in mine as we return to the suite.

She says nothing as we walk but shyly tucks her hair behind her ear.



Over the next several days, we play it cool.

The housekeeping staff graciously lets us use their phones whenever they come to make up our suite. All they ask for in return are a few selfies. I don't think these housekeepers know who we are, but no harm is done. In return, these brief moments of internet access allow us to plan our escape.

We decide not to reach out to my sister, agreeing that that would make her complicit in our scheme. If we reach out to the press for help, that would draw attention to the funeral. The less chaos we cause getting back home, the better.

To that end, Kala rents a car under a fake name to be dropped off for us at the ferry station. Through her UN job, one of Kala's friends contacted the embassy, and someone will meet us at the airport with the paperwork we need to get out.

The tricky part is the ferry ride. It's a tiny island, and on the one-hour trip, we could easily run into someone from the resort who will know who we are.

"We just have to hope they don't care who we are or what we're doing," Kala says at dinner the night before our planned escape. The funeral is in 40 hours, and hook or by crook, I'm getting her off this rock.

She's far too steady while I'm about to have a panic attack. The lack of alcohol tonight doesn't help, but she's right; I need to have my wits about me for this caper.

"How can you be so calm about the most complicated plan that could fall apart at any juncture? About trekking through

the jungle?”

“It’s not like I haven’t done it before. I told you.”

“I’d love to hear that story once I’ve taken a Xanax.”

Kala shrugs and sips her sparkling water. “My team and I were secretly inspecting a meat packing plant for international labor violations in the US. We were found out and chased off by some nasty guys in masks. It was the middle of nowhere. No police, nothing around for miles. We dodged bullets, but I’m not sure they would have wanted to spark an international incident, so I don’t think they were shooting directly at us. We had to abandon our cars and walk, hide in the countryside until we found a way to get to a safe place...”

I hold up my hands in surrender. “Forget I asked, and never tell me that story again until I’ve had a lot more to drink.”

She eyes my glass of club soda. “But you’ve had nothing to drink.”

“Exactly,” I say, shivering at the idea of her getting injured or worse. “And you’re never going back to that job again. I don’t care if they hold it for you forever.”

Her eyes flash as she sets down her glass. “Are you demanding that I be a stay-at-home wife, Your Highness? Should I don an apron and take off my shoes...”

This makes me laugh. “I think the American expression is ‘barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen.’”

Even as I say this, the anxious knot in my stomach unwinds, and an odd warmth flows through me. I don’t want a wife to be unhappy at home. I may be a bit of a boor, but I’d never demand that a partner give up a fulfilling career. But the preternatural lizard brain has locked onto the image of Kala pregnant, feet bare, with another small child balanced on her hip.

She points at me and winks. “That’s the one.”

We lock eyes for a moment.

This is what I crave, for her to be safe. At home and surrounded by my love and protection, preferably behind a

locked gate. But would she be content?

I scrap the entire ridiculous fantasy. Because there's no way anyone would be content with me. I drink too much. Stay out too late. And I'm unused to being accountable for my behavior.

She would worry herself to tears, and I would grow to resent her.

However, that doesn't change the fact that I do not want to get eaten by a giant snake on this volcanic rock.

I shake my head. "No, I don't want that for you. Still, can't we just brazen our way through? The armed guards will not shoot at us if we simply walk out. I promise you."

"Etienne."

"You said yourself that those American thugs missed because they didn't want to start an international incident. This is no different from that."

She looks at me thoughtfully for a moment. "You're a genius, you know."

No one, not one person in my life, has ever said such a thing. "I am?"

Kala nods, a wicked gleam in her eye. "That's exactly what we're going to do. We make everyone here think we plan to climb out through the forest. We walk right out the front door when everyone is out looking for us."

"You do realize that makes you the genius, darling. Staging a phony escape as a distraction was not what I was suggesting."

"You inspired the thought. If I say you're a genius, that's the end of the discussion."

I blurt out the words before I can stop myself. "I fucking love you, you boss-ass bitch."

She blushes and tucks her hair behind her ear. "You say that now, but you haven't seen the half of my inner bossy bitch. You might not love her if she has to boss you around."

I say nothing else about the L word as we discuss our decoy plans loud enough for staff, servers, and Steffen to hear.

I may never be free of loving this woman for the rest of my miserable life.

K_{ala}

The plan is going to work. It simply has to.

It hurts my heart to deceive the housekeepers, whom I've grown quite fond of. But much like I don't want the king pestering Flora for information, I also don't want the maids to lose their jobs for helping us. Yet, they insist. They give us an extra set of uniforms to pack away as a disguise, among other things.

On the evening we're set to disappear, Steffen checks on us incessantly.

"Are you sure you don't want to make dinner reservations?" He wrings his hands, and his forehead sweats.

"We're quite alright," Etienne says, tucking me in close as we watch the sunset from our beachside cabana. "Besides, is a reservation even necessary?"

That is too true, as we're the only guests here. Etienne exchanges a look with me, and I wink as my insides turn to molten chocolate.

Steffen is undeterred in his goal to keep watch over us tonight. "Would you like a tour of the ancient ruins? How about a nice game of shuffleboard with some of my staff?"

He knows. He definitely knows. My gods, our stupid plan might actually work.

With his hands folded in front of him and delivering the most sober look yet, Etienne says, “We’d like a moment alone to take a romantic walk on the beach.”

When Steffen glances nervously at our backpacks, Etienne explains, “We’ve packed supplies for an evening picnic by the cliffs.”

Steffen continues to wring his hands. “I will send our top security people. The forest is dangerous at night. Creatures come down from the mountains to look for food.”

“Steffen,” Etienne repeats.

Etienne’s take-charge attitude is back. Much like the time he stopped traffic to buy me cake, this is a total turn-on to witness.

“Sadly, tourists have been known to get too close to wild animals, feed them. I would hate for anything unfortunate to befall you,” Steffen is really worked up about this. He thinks we’re up to something but doesn’t want to come out and say it.

“We’d like to be completely alone,” Etienne says with a severe, knowing look. “If you understand what I mean by a romantic evening on the beach.”

Steffen’s throat bobs. The concierge’s worry deepens, then he nods and shakes Etienne’s hand. He reaches for mine and kisses the back of it. “It has been...it is a pleasure.”

If I’m not mistaken, the man is having feelings about us leaving.

Let’s hope the only reason for that near-outpouring of emotion is about knowing he’s never going to see us again and not because he’s worried for our safety.



This isn’t the worst idea I’ve ever had, but it is up there with the worst.

I hadn’t thought through the trouble with using flashlights. They may keep the two of us from tripping over tree roots and

plummeting to our deaths, but they also cause other problems.

The cover of night protects us as we clamber over rocks and enter the dark forest. But once we are under the cover of the trees, we are in total darkness. The plan had been to walk about a quarter mile into the woods, then leave evidence that we'd suffered some unfortunate end. But the minute we turn on the flashlights, moths cover us. Not cute, harmless Gravenlandian moths. Gigantic tropical moths buzz our ears and faces, making seeing impossible.

We ditch our decoy supplies earlier than planned, randomly ripping and spreading pieces of clothing and bits of food, and other belongings around one spot in the forest.

“This is far too close to the resort for anyone to believe we were kidnapped. Everyone will know this is fake,” Etienne grumbles as we walk away from our staged scene of struggle. He grabs my hand in his and keeps me close as we continue through the rocky, muddy terrain that circles the far edge of the resort's property. Looking ahead and judging by the lights down below, we should reach the ferry station in another mile.

“At least we can see the station from here,” I reply, squeezing his hand. “My original plan would have had us trekking much deeper into the jungle, and who knows what we might have faced.”

He growls protectively, sparking my interest in exploring that reaction some more. This is not the time for that, though.

My ego is eating up all this attention. I thought I could deal with a divorce, but now everything is muddled and gray...and having him close to me feels tragically wonderful.

Tragic because one day, I won't have him anymore.

I shudder to think with whom he might move on after he lets me go.

Fortunately, I don't have a chance to chew on that dreaded thought because we're now close to the ferry station.

And here is the thing I will always feel the most guilty about I use the burner phone the housekeepers obtained for me to

trigger a spoof number. That number sends a text to the concierge desk:

Me: Help!

If all goes to plan, this will lead Steffen to my original phone, which I left at the phony crime scene.

“I’m going straight to hell for making that man worry about us,” I breathe, shoving the burner phone into the front pocket of my jogging pants.

With a grumbly growl, Etienne hovers over me and sighs, “That man is a little too worried about you in general if you ask me.”

Gods, what will I do when I don’t have the prince I’ve desired for so long looming over me like this? It’s so...very different from what I’m used to.

E tienne

When the ferry arrives the next morning to take us to the big island, I have to hold my sleepy Kala upright.

I'm tired, and my back aches from sitting up all night on the bench, waiting. But I didn't mind at all when Kala drifted off to sleep against my shoulder. Nor did I mind hearing her soft snoring.

The ferry is full of islanders commuting to work in the city on Pearl Island.

If any of the locals recognize us on the ferry, no one says anything. But we do get an earful of news about the entire resort being under lockdown due to a missing prince and princess. Everyone is gossiping, and Kala sleepily expresses her worries about Steffen.

"Oh, I hope that poor man doesn't lose his job. He was so kind to me," she whispers.

I have to control my temper when she brings up that man's name. She's right, for one thing. For another, I don't understand this automatic need to mark my territory. This urge is untamed and makes me blurt things like, "If you worry about him so much, maybe you should come back and marry him after we divorce."

And there it is. There's the asshole that everyone back home in Gravenland loves to hate.

The tiny line in Kala's forehead deepens when she looks at me like that. "What a thing to say," she breathes, but puts no force behind it. I know how tired she is; there won't be an argument. Only a silent chill until she gets her bearings. Until I apologize, and we start over again.

She moves away from me and finds another seat, fitting herself between two children dressed in school uniforms, who g at her and then go back to playing on their devices.

I shoot her an apologetic look, but her expression is dark. Kala crosses her arms over her chest, hunkering down in her light cardigan against the cool morning sea breeze.

I can't stand this.

Look at everything we've been through so far. Surely, she's not going to ignore me forever.

The thought of her silence kills me.

Going over to her, I issue my apology. "I apologize for my hasty words."

"And?"

"And... I'm sorry?"

Kala blows out a breath. "You're sorry until you say the next hurtful thing."

One of the children beside her looks up from his device and chirps, "My teacher says that being sorry only counts when you change your behavior."

Kala's eyes widen as she glances at the child. "That's right," she tells him.

He beams at her, and her smile in return is so achingly gorgeous my chest aches.

"I want to do better, but I'm an asshole. You married a right prick, you know."

The child's mother, two seats down, clucks in offense.

“Your language, Etienne,” Kala hisses. “And no, I didn’t marry...that person. I married you. The sooner you figure out who you really are, the better.”

And what do I do with that? Fall on my knees right here on the ferry and beg her forgiveness? I should, but as the kid said, it won’t mean anything without effort to change.

I stalk away from her and lean on the railing, watching the water’s wake along the vessel’s side.

Who am I?

I’m the drunk, snarky heir that the king would rather ignore. I’m the lazy, good-for-nothing second son of a beloved queen. I’m the brother who lets his siblings clean up his messes again and again.

That’s exactly who I am, but Kala doesn’t believe that.

She’s delusional.

I’ll always be the asshole. That’s my role in this family.

So perhaps we should plan to divorce. Why saddle herself with a prick for the rest of her life?

Then again, the thought of losing her...

How pathetic it is that I could lose this woman over my words? Or over alcohol? Over complete disregard for myself?

I am the man who made sure his bride ate cake on her wedding day.

I am a protective husband who brought his wife sunscreen and water on the beach.

I am a scoundrel who tricked his early-bird wife into staying in bed.

Who I am is a man who can render her utterly boneless. Proudly so.

I am a man who loves Kala St. Rain-Haart.

She’s not trying to change me at all.

She's only stripping back the old, tired, used-up, and dried-out protective layers to access the real me.

And gods dammit, that's my wife. There simply can be no other.

If I have to spend all my days laid bare and vulnerable to anyone, it can only be to her.

The woman I love.

K^{ala}

In keeping with Cory's personality, there's no traditional funeral.

No memorial service. Just a party and a multimedia display of photos, home videos, and clips of his favorite movies, with a very Cory-like playlist filling the air of the banquet hall at the Royal Art Gallery. Inside an ancient restored castle, it's a popular spot in the city for weddings, parties, and fundraisers. A funeral? That's a first.

At the center of the collages and screens looping through scenes from Cory's life is a sleek box with a framed photo of Cory and his birth date and death date inscribed on it. I realize that box contains his ashes, and a chill runs up my spine.

As if he knows, Etienne places a hand on the small of my back. I look at him, and he gives me a tight smile and a nod. My nerves settle, and together we follow the wall of memories in a long queue of people waiting to express condolences to his wife.

The wait is seemingly never-ending, yet the photos, videos, awards, and scraps of paper I scan along the way are enthralling. When I come across a snapshot of Cory, me, and several of our old chums from back in the day, he looks so happy and young. We also look like we're freezing, and I

realize that was the day we'd rung in the new year with a cold plunge in the North Sea like a bunch of idiots.

The weight of what has happened hits me hard all of a sudden. This is the first funeral of a friend. It feels wrong, like there's a tear in the space-time continuum, and Cory was sucked in through a portal. It feels like we're all idiots standing around when we should be mounting up an inter-dimensional rescue mission.

Then the guilt hits. I hadn't spoken to him in years. We've all been so busy. But gods almighty, he was still young. He barely had a chance to live. He should not be in that box. I should not be at a funeral for a friend, and that's that.

As we approach the front of the line, I see the deep lines of grief on his wife Amanda's face. She and Cory had just begun dating when we'd graduated from university, and we hadn't gotten a chance to get to know each other.

"Amanda. I don't know if you remember me, but—"

"Yes, Kala, of course, I remember you. Thank you for coming."

"I'm so very sorry for your loss."

"Thank you. He always spoke highly of you."

"He was a good man. I could tell by the way he looked at you that you were his perfect match," I tell her, and I genuinely mean it.

Her sad eyes widen in recognition at Etienne. She curtsies so low I reach for her to keep her steady on her poor, surely-aching feet. "Your Highness. I'm so sorry you two cut your honeymoon short," she says.

"I'm not," Etienne says, then immediately realizes how that sounds when Amanda's expression turns curious.

"I mean. I knew my wife would never forgive herself if she couldn't make it."

I shoot him a look that tells him he's laying it on a little thick, and to my relief, he says nothing more.

We wander toward the refreshment table where a group of people are gathered, their backs to us.

Two women with short, grayish-blond hair turn to me.

Oh gods. It's Kelly and Kirsten.

I swallow, gathering my nerves.

When they see my husband, they curtsy. "Your Highness." As a unit, they then turn their attention back to me without using my title. But I won't quibble.

"Ladies," I say warily.

Kelly pouts. "We were so disappointed we didn't receive a wedding invitation."

Kirsten nods. "Yes, what happened to us." By "us," she means our friendship.

Etienne tries his best to shift their blame to the palace. "The queen keeps tight control of the guest list. Your royal gram account is evidently more famous than you realize."

Kirsten laughs, and Kelly narrows her eyes. "Yes, one wonders why there were no journalists invited at all. One wonders if the palace was worried they might dig something up."

Oh no...are they hinting that they know something? I need to fix this. Keeping my smile intact, I explain, "You weren't invited because I didn't include you on the list. This should not be a surprise because of how you changed toward me after our first year together."

Kirsten looks hurt. "And after we were there for you when you lost the big prize."

She means Torben. And they weren't "there for me." They wanted information. They wanted connections.

"My husband is the prize," I say, a little overly sweet. I only hope my husband doesn't think I'm faking it. Because he definitely is the prize, as far as I'm concerned. More and more every day.

"She always knows the exact right thing to say. She's so talented at working a room, isn't she?" Kelly says to the

prince.

“Speaking of working a room, my wife is being overly kind and waiting for you to move aside so she can get something to eat. We’re exhausted and hungry from the trip,” Etienne says with all the charm he can muster.

Kelly bows her head and moves out of the way. Etienne meanders around the buffet while Kelly bends his ear about one thing or another, leaving Kirsten and me alone.

And that’s when the claws come out.

“So, how’d you do it?” Kristen asks.

“Do what?”

“Don’t be stupid, Kala. I know you. How’d you meet? How did you win an engagement out of the laziest prince in history? How’d you have such a short engagement? How did you manage it?”

I blink at her. Is she serious? “I didn’t manage anything. We met, we connected, we got married. People have been doing it for millennia.”

These are technically all factual statements, even if the connecting happened after the wedding.

Kirsten narrows her eyes. “You weaseled your way in somehow. And I want to know how it’s done. There’s one spare prince left. Something tells me that after everything shakes out, Sigurd will be king.”

Boundaries, Kala. Boundaries. Sigurd is my brother-in-law, and she’s implying she wants to meet him and make a play for him.

Just then, Kelly sidles up, looking sour. No doubt, Etienne deflected her questions.

“Do not use a funeral to get a date with my brother-in-law,” I say.

“Is that a royal decree?” Kelly asks mockingly, sipping her champagne.

Kirsten interjects, “Oh no. She’s not queen yet. She won’t likely ever end up as queen with the way things are going. A funeral is quite a convenient excuse to end your honeymoon early, isn’t it?”

Etienne has reappeared at my side. With snacks, gods bless him. “You will address the Princess with respect.”

The twins eye him, and I know what they’re thinking. He’s the least respected of all the royal siblings, so why should they care how they behave?

“I don’t honestly care about being queen,” I say calmly, politely, with a smile. “Especially not today. I came here to honor a friend.”

The twins exchange a look.

“And furthermore,” I say, lowering my voice so only the four of us can hear it. “My affairs are not now nor were they ever any of your business.”

“Darling, your affairs are everyone’s business now that you married a prince,” Kelly says.

Maybe I’m jet-lagged. Perhaps Kelly’s use of Etienne’s pet name for me triggers me. But I’m extremely done now. And I probably shouldn’t let myself get so worked up, but I let loose anyway. “Both of you: stay away from my family and shut your...your...your heifer mouths for a change!”

Etienne grunts, stifling back a laugh.

Kirsten is so stunned by my language that she stands there with her mouth open. And I do not care.

Kelly looks at me sulkily as I turn and walk away, Etienne following close.

When he catches up with me on my way to sign the guest book, his arms loaded with tiny plates full of snacks, I shove some cheese into my mouth.

Whispers swirl around as I try to concentrate on writing a personal note in the guest book.

“...match made in hell.”

“She’s a drill sergeant. What’s she doing, marrying the Bad Prince?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if she’s going to make him cut off contact with his entire family.”

“I heard that as soon as Torben rejected her, the king turned around and betrothed her to that one. Who could have guessed one of our royals would end up with sloppy seconds?”

I bite my lip and think about sprinting away, but Etienne rests a calming hand on my waist. My husband turns me to face him and kisses me like the prince that he is.

When several people stop whispering to gawk at us, he pulls away with my lipstick smudging his face.

“Apologies, everyone. I can’t seem to get enough of my wife.”

And although, on the surface, that kiss was for gawkers, it was full of promises meant just for me.



“Why are you looking at me like that?” I ask self-consciously as we wait for our ride outside of the museum.

I don’t particularly love security detail, but now would be an excellent time to have one, especially after all those claws came out at the funeral.

Etienne stares at me for a long moment, then leans down and moves my hair out of the way to speak directly into my ear. I feel the brush of his lips.

“I’m looking at my wife’s hard nipples,” he says. “I’m allowed to look, yes?”

His words vibrate through me, all the way down to the muscles that flutter when I remember the first time we had a similar conversation. When we couldn’t stand each other—or *thought* we couldn’t stand each other.

“Yes, Your Highness,” I breathe, turning my face just a hair to meet his smoldering gaze.

Most other men would ask if I'm cold and offer me their jacket.

Not Etienne. He knows I'm not cold. That arrogant husband of mine knows exactly why my nipples have suddenly become visible through my dress. And I don't shrink away or try to hide it, even when his decadent mouth kisses my throat, his breath wafting over my neck.

"I can't wait to get you home and take care of that ache."

The car pulls up and comes to a stop on the gravel driveway. I feel such relief that no one is following us. No one is watching. I don't have to train my face for the media.

It's just my husband and me, leaving a party. No one is gawking or following us.

We'll be alone in such a short time, but even the fifteen-minute drive to the cottage is too much for me. It feels like forever.

As we pull away, Etienne rakes his gaze all over my body. When he looks away, deep in thought, he rubs the side of his thumb along his pink bottom lip. His ears are red. And it's getting warm in the back of this car.

I depress the button that raises the blackout glass between the driver and the back seat. Surprised, Etienne looks over at me.

Thank the gods; this man doesn't fuck around by asking me what in the hell I think I'm doing. He is utterly unfazed by me making my move.

He doesn't mistake it for anything other than what it is: the clear and concise message that I want to do things with him in the back of this car that require privacy.

He wastes no time.

Etienne pivots toward me, leaning in to kiss me. I lick my lips, my spine quivering in anticipation.

But just as he's about to touch his lips to mine, he hooks one index finger into the cowl neckline of my dress and tugs it down, exposing one breast.

A low groan escapes him at the sight. He runs five fingers lightly down the length of my breastbone, sending goosebumps everywhere.

And then he's cupping my bare breast, testing the weight of it, studying it, caressing the tip with his rough fingers.

My inner walls clench at nothing, and I bite my bottom lip.

"Etienne," I whisper.

He looks up. "Wife."

How many times has that word meant nothing to him but royal duty? Tonight, there is nothing but reverent dominance in the word. I want more of that. I want all of him, all over me.

The heated look in his eyes turns to something else. Something wilder. Feral. I reach out to touch his face, wanting so badly for him to kiss me.

But he won't be kissed.

Instead, Etienne lowers his head and suction his lips over my nipple, sucking the aching bud into his mouth. He worships it with his tongue flooding my panties with the work of his wicked mouth.

I bite back a moan, unsure if the blacked-out window suppresses the sound.

He can hear it, though. Etienne notices my squirming, my back arching forward to feed his mouth, his deft fingers, and my trembling breath.

My husband rumbles as he switches to the other side, tugging the material, his mouth lavishing that nipple with attention and his masculine fingers coaxing the other.

I had fully intended to fool around when I raised the blacked-out window, but things are getting out of control now. And I'm not sure I want to press pause.

Is it possible to come from breast worship alone? I might just...

"Etienne..."

“What do you need, baby?”

I’m his baby. Let that sink in. Oh my...

“I...I need you to slow down... I’m too close.”

“That’s the entire point, beauty,” he says with a smile and a lift of one devilish eyebrow before returning to minister to my breasts. Hands groping, squeezing, tongue and fingers raking, nipping, and playing. It’s so much. It’s all so much.

“Here? In...in the car?”

He pops one nipple out of his mouth with a loud suctioning sound and looks up at me, brows raised in a question.

“Why not?”

A smile pulls at his smirking lips.

“Because I don’t want to ruin things for later...”

He backs me up against the door, his hand on my hip, his face over me. His expression is knowing and, most importantly, sober.

My heart squeezes.

“The only thing ruined tonight will be you. All of you. Utterly and completely and in all ways. By me.”

Pleasure and enticement wash over me like a pounding wave, and I feel the involuntary snap of my muscles.

My back arches, and I gasp. My release crashes over me, brought on by his godlike mouth.

Etienne curses and deepens his grip on my hips, holding me steady.

“Beauty, I wish you could see this. You’re beyond gorgeous when you come. So flushed and tight and present and...gods, I love to see you smile like that.”

“Etienne,” I gasp.

Slowly, respectfully, he drags me into his lap, my legs stretched crosswise over his. His two big arms circle my waist, stroking my spine up and down as I shiver.

Etienne joins our lips in a kiss.

It is warm and slow and dangerously intimate. Dangerous because a woman like me could mistake him for a real husband with this kind of kiss. He's called me baby, wife, darling...and he means it.

We're crossing lines and haven't discussed anything. Is the divorce on or off?

But when Etienne brushes his lips against mine so sweetly, with the barest brush of tongue, I push all those questions aside.

I open to him, and he licks into my mouth, his tongue twining with mine.

The shivering orgasm recedes, and the well-being of losing myself in his kiss takes over. I melt against him and let Etienne have his way with my mouth.

By the time the car comes to a stop, I'm completely overheated.

Bless the driver; he pauses outside and waits for Etienne to open the door.

I can't help but wonder if the driver is simply used to these sorts of antics in the car with Etienne.

But a part of me doesn't care about any of that anymore.

Etienne is becoming the person he was always meant to be.

E tienne

“Leave your dress on. And your heels.”

Kala’s eyes are on me when I lay her back on the bed.

We are in our room. At our cottage.

Home.

I am home.

I climb over her, kissing her hungrily. Kala hooks her arm around my neck and accepts my kiss with equal hunger.

“Let me taste you, lovely.”

She blinks slowly, and our gazes are locked as I feel her move under me.

Kala’s legs grip either side of my waist, and I nestle there in her warmth, kissing her and enjoying her for a moment, reveling in her flesh, her breasts...her everything.

And then, I reach down and hike her dress up around her waist.

I watch her throat bob as she watches me.

“May I taste my wife?” I say, caressing her lower stomach with the flat of my hand.

She nods. “Please.”

“Good girl.”

I keep my gaze on hers as I kiss the front of her bare pussy, dragging down her panties with one hooked thumb.

I smile, dipping my tongue in between her folds.

She gasps when my tongue caresses her clit. The tight little berry is hard and prominent, begging for contact.

I spread open her thighs and bury my face in her heat. Her wet folds slick my face with her honey, and she tastes finer than the finest of wines.

“Kala. My wife,” I rumble against her folds. “You are the most delicious thing I’ve ever tasted on my tongue.”

She gives a little tremble and runs the sole of her foot down my spine as I lazily lick and swallow, drinking her down.

I delve my tongue into her wet cunt, and she bucks against me.

“Etienne...”

I move over her to make eye contact. “You okay?”

She nods, giving me a small smile. “Please. Don’t stop. It’s good. So...good.”

Resuming my worship of her pussy, I feel more of her wetness dripping from her, sliding down my chin as I feast on her.

When she begins to writhe, I play. I suction my lips around her taut, throbbing button, and just...play. It doesn’t take long before she comes, and comes hard.

My wife’s tight cunt flexes around my tongue, her muscles spasming.

Kala arcs upward off the pillows. “Etienne!”

“Not finished yet.”

I keep going, using my tongue to lick and tease and play until she threads her fingers in my hair and pulls me off of her.

She’s stronger than she looks.

Kala pulls me up, demanding a kiss, not shying away from the taste of her own sweet musk.

I conquer her mouth the way I devoured her sex, kissing her so thoroughly that it makes our mouths swollen and sore.

Even as her aftershocks roll through her, she scrambles with the buckle of my trousers.

“Need you, Etienne. Want you inside me.”

We’re blurring the lines now. We are blowing past boundaries and limits and pacts. Feelings are involved. All of the emotions on both of our ends. The only clear thing we’ve discussed is her assuring me she’s on the pill. But I want this. I want her. Kala St. Rain is my forever person.

Which means I have to give credit where it’s due. My father made the correct match. And if we produce an heir? So much the better. Kala will be my queen, and we can burn down the monarchy for all I care. All I know is I’m never letting go. Fuck the divorce pact.

I laugh viciously as I pull away from her kiss and let her unbuckle me, and shove my trousers down around my thighs.

“You want me inside you? Or do you want me to fuck you, pretty wife?”

Her blue eyes widen, and I wait for her response.

K_{ala}

I'd always thought I craved a gentleman.

But when Etienne calls me his pretty wife and asks if I want him to be sweet or to fuck me, well, what would anyone say?

"Fuck me, pretty husband," I say, teeth gritted either in hunger or frustration at his uncooperative trousers.

Probably a little bit of both.

Etienne rises from the bed, and I come up on my knees to watch what happens next.

His trousers fall to the ground with the help of gravity when he stands. With three deft movements, he unbuttons the top two buttons of his white shirt, then reaches backward and tugs the entire shirt up and off over his head.

In nothing but his boxer briefs, Etienne is a man to be reckoned with. Broad and ridged and oh so touchable, with a smattering of honey-brown hair swirling over his pectorals. They ripple when he quickly bends over to rid himself of his boxer briefs. His cock springs free: thick, pink, and already smeared with precum at the head.

The way his gaze travels over my body, I know what he wants to happen next.

Coming to my knees, I tug my dress over my head, fully exposing myself to him.

The thought occurs to me that we're doing exactly what the king wants—he wants us to consummate and get on with having babies.

As if reading my mind, Etienne asks, “Where are you right now, beauty?”

“I was just wondering where you are with the whole face-to-face thing?”

What happens next has me going nonverbal. Etienne has me straddle him on the bed, lights on, face to face.

His thick length burrows into my heat, and it feels better than anything. Anything.

“Oh...”

My eyes flutter closed as he moves in me, making sure I feel every inch, every ridge.

“Do you know how amazing you are, Kala? I don't want to numb myself when I'm with you. I want to feel you...I want to feel everything with...someone who cares about me.”

What do I say to that?

My response catches in my throat. A powerful thrust has me falling against him, and I circle my arms around his neck and hold on.

Just as well; I don't want him to see my tears.

“I do care about you.”

“I feel it. I feel it in everything you do and say. Everything about you makes me want a better life. Pain, anger, grief, love—it's all worth it. You're worth it to me, Kala.”

I lean into his beautiful words of praise as our bodies move in sync.

I feel like I've been hollowed out in the best possible way and refilled with...well, what else can it be?

Love.

I love him.

When he and I left the island together, I felt like I finally had a companion.

Tonight, I have a husband. A real one.

Etienne

We wake to the sound of knocking on the door of Windewall Cottage.

“What the hell...?” I roll over onto my back and rub the pads of my thumbs into the corners of my eyes. Kala moans and burrows in next to me. Ignoring the continued knocking, I smile.

That’s right. I’m still married, and I’m staying married. I’m in bed with my wife, and no one can take her away from me.

“Your Highness? It is urgent!”

The voice is a familiar one.

I groan. “Rolf.”

Kala gasps. “Oh! I’ll get up and make some coffee.”

She throws the blankets off her legs, but that’s as far as she gets to making coffee for the king’s helper. I hook my arm around her waist.

“Etienne!”

“He doesn’t need coffee; he needs a new job.”

“That may be true, but our personal feelings about the king don’t supersede hospitality,” she says.

How does she know how to always say the most perfect thing? I roll over on top of her and cage her in, briefly, for a fierce kiss.

She receives it, letting me take my time coaxing her mouth open, licking into her until she sighs. I can feel her legs rub up against mine. Her hands travel up my back, warm and eager. I am hard, naked, and ready.

“Your Highness!”

The voice is louder and closer now, accompanied by a frantic tapping at the bedroom window.

“Oh my gods!” Kala gasps.

I am on my feet, ready to blast someone into next week. Rolf is fortunate the blinds are down and he can't see my wife. Me, I don't care who peeps at me.

“Stay here,” I snarl to my wife as I throw on some flannel bottoms and pad to the back door. Outside, still tapping on the window, is my father's cousin and chief of the palace staff, Rolf.

“What the fuck do you think you are doing?” I bellow.

He turns and clutches his chest in fright. “Oh good gods, Your Highness. You startled me.”

“I startled you!? Do you know how high my wife jumped just now, thinking we had a prowler outside?”

He seems to understand he scared the piss out of both myself and my wife and instantly lowers his head. “Apologies, Your Highness. Her Majesty The Queen has requested your presence at Haart Castle at once,” he says.

“My mother?”

Rolf nods. “Yes, Your Majesty. It seems there is a matter to be discussed with the palace publicist.”

“What about?” I ask. I know that both Mother and Father feel more than a little out of the loop after Kala and I reappeared back home in Gravenland after Father had tried and failed to keep us under lock and key. He loves to wield his power like

that. I shudder to think about his reasons for keeping us secluded on our honeymoon. If my wife and I want time alone, it will be on our own terms. That's all I plan to discuss with the family's publicists.

"She didn't say," Rolf says meekly.

"Rolf. It's 7 a.m. on a Sunday. When did you last see me awake and sober at this hour?"

"Well, I would not presume to keep account of your activities."

"Of course you wouldn't. You're a good man," I say. "Who deserves a raise. If you come to work for Kala and me, I promise to pay you more."

"Your Highness?"

"We can shake on it right now. And then, you can tell me what this meeting with Mother and the publicists is about."

He hesitates. The man is actually thinking over my offer.

"Well? What does the old man pay you?"

When Rolf tells me the number, I know I have no shot at changing his loyalty.

"It was worth a shot," I say.

Rolf smiles and says, "You didn't hear it from me, but the Queen plans to release a statement explaining why the two of you returned from your honeymoon early."

"To attend a funeral. Tell her that," I say.

"Page Six is already crowing that your marriage is on the rocks, and...well...you'll have to see for yourself."

"Hello, Rolf." The scent of fresh coffee fills my lungs as my bride, looking like a vision in her fluffy, pale pink robe, opens the creaky garden gate carrying a tray of mugs. "Care for some coffee?"

Rolf jumps, then turns to my wife. "Oh dear. Here, let me take that for you, Your Highness."

“You see, Rolf, the princess wouldn’t have to carry around trays of hot beverages if we had a house staff such as yourself,” I tease.

Kala clucks at me. “Oh stop it, you. I’m perfectly capable of making coffee and serving my guests. Please, take some.”

“I couldn’t,” Rolf chuckles.

“Because he’s not a guest; he’s on my father’s staff,” I mutter.

Kala shoots me a warning look that has the opposite of the intended effect. Her reproof only reminds me that I’m married, and to a proper lady. I return her admonishing gaze with my own heated one.

She shakes her head and turns her attention back to Rolf, but I see a hint of rosiness in her cheeks.



While Kala and I ride in the back of Rolf’s nondescript Audi to the palace, she receives a text from someone that puts a frown on her lovely face.

“What is it?”

“It’s the CFO at Frost Bay Beverages. I...oh my gods. Rolf, can you make a quick detour?” Kala asks, leaning forward to address our driver.

“Darling, it’s 8 a.m. on a Sunday; what could be happening now?” I ask.

Rolf apologizes. “I’m so sorry, Your Highness; I’m under strict orders to escort the two of you to the palace immediately.”

Kala sits back, frustration lining her face. “I can’t believe this.”

“What is it?” I ask again.

She says nothing but gives me a stony look, then hands me her phone. There, I read the message.

“King Otto has called an emergency meeting of the board of directors. I think he’s going to demand full repayment of the loans immediately. We’re sunk.”

I turn to Kala. “How can he do that? My father is not on your board of directors.”

Her face is pale. “He is on the board now. He bought most of the shares while we were on our honeymoon.”

I sit up straight in my seat. “How? How did he manage that?”

“The way he stranded us together on that island without access to outside communication? He knows I’m a workaholic. He wanted me out of the way so he could take over the company.”

Her words sink in, but it still doesn’t make any sense. “I’m no accountant, but he can’t use palace revenue to buy up a for-profit business. Pretty sure that goes against protocol for the royal family. The palace owns the land, but the businesses belong to businesses...”

Kala blows out a slow breath. “Yes. Except if said company is in arrears on the lease of the land...and has borrowed from the palace again multiple times over putting the company up as collateral...it’s a perfectly legal way to collect on that debt.”

But why would this be happening now when we both kept up our ends of the bargain?

“But you agreed to marry me because your family owed the palace money,” I remind her. “You gave up your life for your father’s mistakes. The wedding was simply a financial transaction, was it not?”

Kala simply stares at me, shaking her head. Then, her eyes brim with angry tears. “You idiot! I agreed to marry you because I loved you!”

She...she loves me?

The mental and emotional whiplash is intense. “I...how... but...”

My wife mutters to herself as she tugs a tissue from her handbag. “I’m such a moron.” Dabbing under her eyes and nose, she shakes her head.

“Hey. No one talks like that about my wife.”

Kala scoffs wetly and turns away, staring out the window.

Raw emotions take over. I have nothing nearby to numb my pain at seeing her cry. The discomfort simply is allowed to jab at me like a hundred needles. “Look at me, Kala.”

She sniffs and continues to stare out the window.

“Kala.”

“No.”

Calmly, I say, “I’m going to touch you now.”

Her answer is soft, almost a whisper. “Do what you must.”

I take her shoulders in hand and turn her toward me. She doesn’t resist.

“We’re talking about this. Right now.”

“Okay,” she says weakly.

“How long?”

“How long what?”

“How long have you loved a spoiled, ungrateful prince?”

She blinks and then inhales a trembling breath.

K_{ala}

He's going to make me say it. "Twelve years."

"Twelve? Twelve years ago I was nothing but a sixteen-year-old good-for-nothing."

"Hey. Nobody talks like that about my husband," I say, my voice cracking, still terrified of what he'll think of me now that he's learned I've felt this unrequited love for more than half of my life.

Etienne gives me a sad smile. Oh, great. He thinks I'm pathetic.

"You were...you were 17," he says.

"Yes, and you were 16, and it seemed the entire internet was obsessed with the rebellious young teenager sticking out his tongue during the royal family's visit to Finland."

"Was it?"

That he doesn't remember a moment so formative for me is mind-boggling. But why would he remember it? He doesn't understand his effect on people.

"Yes. The photo was everywhere. You were flashing devil horn fingers and winking, too."

"Oh gods," he moans, laughing and pinching the bridge of his nose.

“And that was the moment I knew.”

“You fell for a photo of an obnoxious teenager?”

“No,” I answer immediately. “I fell for someone I knew was more than what the tabloids said. Remember, I grew up in your orbit. I watched you. I saw there was more to you than what people believed. I saw there was more to you than *you* believed.”

He hesitates. “And now?”

I breathe and say, “And now I’m desperately in love with a husband who will likely shatter my heart into a million tiny pieces.”

Etienne takes a moment comprised of a single breath.

And then he kisses me. Hard, and with both hands clasping the back of my head, the only thing keeping me from knocking my skull against the car window.

His mouth takes possession of mine. His tongue sweeps past my lips, already parted in momentary shock. My husband has finally heard the truth about me, and his response is to kiss me so hard that all flesh between my legs throbs for him.

The prince’s mouth is so insistent I wonder if he understood what I said. Could Etienne have mistaken my words for play-acting? Surely not.

I go over what I said, and...no. Nope, I put the truth out there, spelling it out so that even a total nincompoop would understand. There’s no mistaking it.

And he accepts me. And kisses me, and keeps at it.

And the kiss is so...so...wonderful.

Suddenly, something feels scratchy at the back of my throat, but before I can pull back out of fear of giving Etienne a head cold, the truth of it pours forth. I’m not coming down with a cold. I’m about to cry. Sob. Blubber like a baby because this man, my husband, who has done all manner of filthy things to me, is destroying me with his kiss. I’ll never be able to move on from this moment.

He pulls back when he feels the wetness against his cheek.

“Kala,” he rasps, thumbing away a tear. “What is it? Should I not have kissed you?”

“Gods, no,” I say, blinking out more tears. “I’m feeling a little overwhelmed over everything I just said. It’s a relief, I suppose. I’ve held that in for so long...” I want to look away, dab away my tears, but there’s nowhere to look and nothing to do because my husband still grasps my head in his firm hands.

Etienne thumbs away another tear here, kisses away more tears over there. He’s in complete control of me and the situation. I’m at his mercy. My fingers curl against his silk lapels.

“I love you. So fucking much, Kala,” he grits out, resting his forehead against mine.

A gasp chokes my tight throat. “You do?” Could it be true? Is this for real?

“Of course I do. The one thing my father did right by me was putting your hand in mine.”

Relief, joy, and a dozen other indescribable feelings flood me.

“Don’t make me cry again, you fiend,” I whisper, squeezing my eyes shut. “I have to go to a meeting.”

He seems to understand. “I’m going with you.”

I shake my head. “It’s better if you go on to meet with your mother. Perhaps you can convince her to talk some sense into the king. I have to fix my makeup.”

“Not necessary. And I’m coming with you.”

“Gods, why are you so bullheaded?” I say with a laugh.

Etienne presses his forehead to mine. “Because I don’t like the idea of you facing that man alone.”

“I know. But it’s just business. I’m not afraid of him. And I already have an idea of what I’m going to do. I’m more afraid of whatever he might say to me or you outside the boardroom. We’ll have to have a family meeting at some point.”

He growls, then lets go of me. He leans forward to address the back of the driver's head as we pull up to the gates of Haart castle.

"Rolf, drop me here, then take the Princess to Frost Bay Beverages headquarters," he orders, his voice thick with reluctance. He doesn't want to leave me alone, and I love him more for that.

"No need. I'll order a rideshare," I say, tapping away at my phone.

"Darling. That's not how we royals do things."

We both exit the car and smile at each other from across the span of the vehicle's roof. "I may be a princess, but I'm still a plain old businesswoman. Besides, I don't want to make a fuss by arriving in one of the royal fleet."

"Plain old businesswoman, my foot," the gravelly voice says. "More like a very sexy, very saucy, bad little girl."

I'm about to protest and tell him he's winding me up. But his dark look has me crossing my legs.

"And she's mine. Entirely."

My stomach tumbles in happiness.

Etienne

The queen seems surprised when I bend down to kiss her on each cheek in the traditional greeting. “Wonderful to see you, Mother. Where’s Father?”

The Queen blinks up at me, failing at words. The breakfast room is, as always, resplendent with pastries and a dozen delicious things. Perhaps she hasn’t had her morning caffeine yet.

So, I haven’t been the most affectionate of her children. But the clarity of the last few days has done many things, including genuine affection and sympathy toward my mother.

After all, she’s had to endure the nonsense of four reckless children and a husband who vacillates between domineering, distant, and tempestuous. Even if she schemes and connives—and oh, she certainly does—everything she does is for loyalty to a husband she was arranged to marry, to preserve the monarchy, and for the benefit of our country. She knows no other way.

Rolf hands me tea with lemon, and I sit by the window.

Still flummoxed at my warm greeting, she says, “It’s lovely to see you too, Etienne. The King just left; he’s at a meeting he couldn’t cancel. Are you alright?”

“I’m perfect, Mother.” And I mean that. “Why wouldn’t I be? I’m a newlywed, remember?”

I know what she’s thinking. The look on her face says it all. Everyone in the family knows this wedding was forced upon me, and she was the last person who expected me to fall in line and be happy about it.

“You’re home very early and unexpectedly from your honeymoon,” she says.

I glance around the room as I drink my tea and see the servers have yet to clear Father’s breakfast place setting. In my usual careless demeanor, I stroll over to it and pick up a half-eaten slice of bacon.

Mother clucks at me, so I set it back down, but only after slipping a used spoon into my pocket without her noticing. My thievery skills have come in handy for the greater good: evidence.

At that moment, her team of publicists file into the room, all in black, like a murder of crows, waiting to peck my eyeballs out.

Ignoring their stares, I smile down at the queen. “Kala had an unexpected emergency. A funeral for an old friend.”

I’m waiting for her to acknowledge that we were supposed to remain stranded on the island for two more months. That we were held captive and isolated in an attempt to break my spirit.

Instead, she sprints by those details and says, “Yes, the publicists saw the photos on the news, the two of you leaving the Royal Museum. Really, darling, you should have alerted us you were coming home early.”

Is she really continuing with this charade? “I would have loved to, Mother, but under the circumstances of our departure from the island, I still had not received my phone. In fact, it’s a miracle we were able to make it home without passports.”

The look of utter confusion she gives me next is an Oscar-worthy performance. “Your phone...passports...my son, what are you talking about?”

“Really, Mother? Are you going to keep up the pretense that you didn’t know? Because I expected this of Father. I was shocked that you went along with it.”

“What exactly did I go along with, Etienne?”

I step back and examine the huddle of publicists murmuring amongst themselves, scrolling through feeds on their phones, glancing up at me, at my mother. They all look shifty as fuck, and I don’t like it.

“Come on, Mother. You know perfectly well that the security team confiscated our phones and passports.”

The queen gasps, and I’m starting to believe this act. “My dear, why would you think I would do that?”

My throat tightens. I examine her face; she truly did not know that happened. “Why do you think His Royal Gasbag would maroon me on an island with unlimited access to alcohol?”

“I have no idea, Etienne.”

She’s losing patience with me. Good.

“To control my movements,” I explain. “To keep me calm, drunk, or both. To keep me from having the clarity to plot my disappearance?”

Every word from my mouth chips away at my mother’s heart.

“Your father glossed over that detail when the palace planned that trip. All he said to me about security was that he would book a private security firm, and that the palace would book the entire resort out so you and your bride would have the utmost privacy. No chance of paps ruining things, nosing their way in.”

I nod and prepare her for the worst bit. “And did he tell you the palace booked out every room for three months?”

“Three months? Preposterous.”

“Yes, it’s a preposterous waste of funds. I’m curious, Mother. When do you think you might have started to wonder when I was coming home?”

She takes a moment to respond. “I need to speak to your father. This is horrible. What he did to you was horrible.” The queen raises her hands in reassurance that she’s going to take care of the situation. She’s going to smooth everything over between Father and me. “But first, we must meet with the publicists to discuss how to spin your abrupt homecoming.”

I am incredulous at this pivot. “Kala’s friend died. We came home to pay our respects. That’s the story.”

She nods. “Yes, yes. But the royal watchers already imply that the palace didn’t know you were coming home. They’re all extrapolating so many stories, Etienne. Do you understand now that you’re next in line to the throne, everyone who matters is watching every move you make?”

My mother gestures to one of the publicists, who seems to be in charge. A severe-looking young man in a trendy suit carrying a tablet I know is not on the market yet.

Before I can ask how he got his hands on that thing, he starts in on me. “People want to know why you ended your honeymoon for a funeral of a distant friend.

“People will find something else to care about tomorrow,” I say, waving this off.

This conversation is making me tired. It shouldn’t matter. I can’t possibly care about any of this, not when my wife is at Frost Bay Beverages, fighting to preserve her family legacy.

I pivot away from the publicist and return to the woman who raised me.

“Do you think I have a drinking problem, Mother?”

The room goes so quiet I can practically hear the royal family’s approval rating drop.

After what feels like an eternity of awkward glances and stares, my mother clears her throat. “You...well, we Gravenlanders have always enjoyed our celebrations.”

“That’s not what I asked. Be honest.”

My mother, the woman who can be counted on to smooth things over, stares at me for another long moment and then

says, “You have sometimes caused a scene because of your drinking. There’s no denying that. But why bring up these youthful indiscretions at a time like this?”

“Youthful indiscretions...right. Except I’m now 34, and I very recently passed out in the crow’s nest of the Frigge on the morning of my wedding. If it weren’t for Flora, that wedding would never have occurred.”

She laughs dryly and glances around. “You were exhausted from the stress of the wedding...and from rescuing the missing boat!”

“I didn’t rescue the boat. Callum Black and Flora did that. They found me.”

The chuckles become less and less convincing from her. “Don’t be silly. Why would Flora and Callum Black team up together? Of all people?”

That’s what she’s worried about? That Black and her daughter happened to be on a search party together?

“Mother. You can’t spin this. I fucked up. Not the captain.” I turn to the publicists who are not doing the best job of pretending to give us our privacy. “I’ve got a story for you. How about the palace ask the public’s help to identify the man who rescued Flora on Torben’s birthday when she fell from the balcony? Who was the man who caught her? Whoever he is, he’s a hero and deserves a reward.”

To their credit, several of them nod and begin typing furiously into their phones.

My mother is growing agitated now.

“Dear, let’s not worry about that right now. Your father needs us to work out how to explain away your unannounced arrival...”

“No, Mother. Father simply wants to know how we escaped despite all the barriers he put in place. And do you know what I want to do? I’d like to release a statement that the King is at Frost Bay Beverages this very moment, attempting a hostile takeover of his own daughter-in-law’s business.”

The queen's face turns red in embarrassment. "A hostile takeover...honestly, Etienne. The king is at the board meeting to discuss an amendment to the business loan terms. That's all."

"On a Sunday morning? He bought up most shares and called an emergency meeting."

Her brows draw together. "Bought up all the shares? That can't be true. That's millions of dollars. He wouldn't have done that without checking with me first."

There was a time when that look on my mother's face would have driven me to grab a bottle. Hell, I still very much would like a whiskey on the rocks right now to erase the pain I feel at seeing this woman trying to decide what emotion to cling to. It's one of those moments where she knows the king did something awful, but she's also determined to present a unified front.

"Mum." I step toward her and grasp her shoulder. "Everything will be alright. I trust Kala to handle herself. No matter what happens, my wife will help the king see sense."

My mother grimaces, then her shoulders stiffen. "And what shall be the statement from the palace regarding your shortened honeymoon?"

K_{ala}

What a strange day.

What a bizarre, terrifying, exhilarating day.

The key sounds in the lock at Windewall Cottage. That'll be my husband arriving home.

Home.

I let out a sigh of relief. This is our home now.

After the meeting I just had with the King, the debt my family owes to the royal family is more than paid.

I am not sure that Etienne will like how I put an end to the King's meddling in our lives, but at least we can take some time alone as a couple. Really alone.

My body, my mind, know that he's home. The door closes, and he hangs the key in the nook by the front door. Unties his shoes. These are the everyday things I get to hear now that I'm his. He's mine.

Etienne comes over to the sofa and flops down beside me.

"Well?"

He stretches out and reaches for me.

I hold my breath as a thrill runs through me at his touch. Be brave, girl.

“It went well. Better than expected,” I say, blowing out an uncertain breath.

“And?” he says, shooting me his mischievous smile because he knows I’m hesitating to tell him everything. He tugs me forward, and I give in, letting him guide me until I rest against his chest, our legs cozily tangled together. Etienne’s hand strokes up and down my spine, and my eyes flutter closed at how good that feels.

“And it’s done. I am no longer the owner of Frost Bay Beverages.”

His hand stills in the middle of my back. “What? What did my father do? He can’t do that...I’ll meet with him and hire my own lawyer.”

“Etienne,” I say, unable to stop the smile from forming on my lips. He’s getting all worked up on my behalf. Outraged, even. There’s no need, of course, but it is sweet of him to care. He cares so much it squeezes my heart.

“No,” he says, his voice a rasp. “He can’t do this to my wife.”

At that, my nipples harden, and I pray he can’t feel that through my sweater.

“I sold out to him at a fair price. Willingly. Happily.”

He goes quiet, but his breathing still feels rapid underneath me.

“But why?”

I strain my neck to meet his gaze. “Because I...”

I pause, then, because at his noticing my neck straining, Etienne adjusts his body so that we’re lying on our sides, face to face, his arm my pillow.

“Go on,” he says.

“Because I don’t want to run a beer company. I never wanted to run a beer company.”

“But...your grandfather...”

I nod. “I know. But I knew the man pretty well. And I think he’d agree with my decision. Especially if I intend to help my husband in his decision to avoid alcohol, all the better if I don’t spend my days peddling beer.”

He says nothing for a time, then shakes his head. “I have no words, and barely any thoughts. How do I respond to something like that? What do I say to the person who has given up everything for me?”

I see where this is going, and I’m ready for it. “I already know what you’re going to say. That it’s too much.”

“It *is* too much, Kala,” he says, his voice cracking.

I am prepared for this reaction from him. “It looks that way to you because nobody has ever sacrificed anything big for your benefit. I want to help you live your life. If that means honoring your wish to not drink again, this is one small thing I can do.”

“Small?” he croaks.

I smile. “I never asked to be the beer heiress. I’m good at running a business and being in charge, but it doesn’t excite me. Making beer doesn’t excite me in the least.”

“What does excite you?”

“Being your wife excites me. Doing something for the greater good of society excites me. Compelling the wealthy to donate huge sums of money to something worthwhile and then writing those gigantic checks for charity excites me,” I say.

His face takes on that familiar smirk. “Oh gods, please tell me I won’t ever have to pose with one of those gigantic checks for a photo.”

I’m not expecting this, and I laugh so loud and hard that I snort. In turn, my husband laughs at the way I laugh, which only makes me laugh harder. And then, the most horrible and inappropriate thing happens. To my horror, I pass gas. Loudly.

“Hell’s bells!” Etienne shouts, and the horrified look on his face is enough to send me into a fresh fit of giggles.

“Pardon me,” I say between gasps of breath, dabbing my eyes.

“You sound like a tortured goose,” he cackles.

“Oh my gods.” I’m shaking, bent over with laughter, and beet red from embarrassment. I bury my face in his chest and curled into a fetal position on the sofa.

“My wife is such a delicate flower,” he says with a wheezing laugh.

And now I’m laughing so hard I make no noise at all.

“Breathe, wife. Breathe.”

The more I try to calm myself and take a breath, the more I burst into more laughter. “It’s nervous gas built up from the meeting,” I tell him.

Etienne sits up and pulls me onto his lap without warning. I gasp at the hard thing pressing against my inner thigh.

“Next time, just let it out in the car like a normal person,” he says, then angles his face up to catch my bottom lip in his mouth.

I groan as Etienne swipes his wicked tongue across my lip. Slowly.

When he lets up, I pull back to look into those clear gray eyes that have had a grip on me since forever. I smooth a strand of hair away from his eyes. “I don’t think anyone would ever accuse us of being normal.”

Etienne cocks his head to examine me. “So, what do you want to do now that you’ve given up your family business?”

I blink down at him, all laughter and humor gone. “Take care of you. Make a home with you. Build a marriage with you.”

His face darkens a little. “That might not turn out to be as pleasant as it sounds, if I’m off the bottle. I’ve not been off the sauce for this long since I can remember, but who knows how unpleasant I’ll be this time next week, next month, next year.”

I bite my lip. “And to that end, I have an idea.”

“Uh-oh. I see that look. What do you have up your sleeve, my love? Do you want to go back to working for the Human

Rights Council? I support that completely, but I won't stand for anything dangerous. You know that, right?"

I don't know how my husband will take my idea. But I want a do-over on everything. Our honeymoon, our marriage. Everything. And he deserves someone to stick by him and show him unconditional support no matter what. And honestly, I deserve that, too.

"Maybe in some capacity," I say. "But right now is not the time for me to leave you alone while I'm away at work for days, sometimes weeks at a time."

He nods, and the nervousness in my belly calms. I feared he would see my idea as too mothering or controlling. But he's open to it, and I let that little nod propel me along.

"So, here's what I think we should do..."

King Otto

The palace's chief publicist is sweating through his shirt and hovering like a mayfly while I'm trying to eat my dinner.

"Spit it out, Franc."

"Ah, the *Times* is asking for a comment on the palace's purchase of Frost Bay Beverages."

I pause the fork full of eggs halfway to my mouth. "Come again?"

"It seems the *Times* ran a story about the purchase and another story about prince and princess's sabbatical from royal duties."

My fork clatters against the wall before I realize I've thrown it as I leap to my feet.

"What in the name of the gods are you blathering about, boy?"

Franc clears his throat. "Apologies, Your Majesty. It's just that we need to release a statement. *The Times*, *The Daily Gravenlandian* — all outlets are already three stories deep on this."

Where is my wife? "Hilda!"

Franc flinches, and I motion to him to hand over the tablet he's holding.

The top headline on the *Times* website reads, “Royal couple’s statement casts doubts on the stability of their marriage.”

“What in the bloody hell?” I grit out.

Accompanying the article is yet another photo of my son and his new wife crossing the grounds of the Royal Museum, pretending to look somber as they leave the wake of someone they’re pretending to mourn for. I’ve never heard of any of those people. Etienne has no friends that I’m aware of.

It’s as if the media can’t get enough of the photos of my son all of a sudden.

The article reads: “The newly married couple released a statement overnight, hinting that perhaps their marriage is already on the rocks. Some have speculated as much due to the abrupt end to their honeymoon, and this statement gives a peek inside the life of a troubled prince and his new bride.

“The prince and princess have requested a six-month leave of their royal duties as they enter counseling together.

“Whether that be marital counseling, one can only guess. Sources close to the royal family have suggested that given the prince’s affinity for parties, the princess may have him on lockdown until he sorts himself out.

“No doubt an accomplished professional as the princess would be unwilling to tolerate a husband constantly chasing skirts, as well as chasing the bottom of a bottle. One wonders whether Ms. St. Rain’s decision to sell her family’s business to the royal family precipitated this self-quarantine or the reverse.”

Rage suffuses my being, and I toss the tablet across the room. It shatters against the stone wall.

“Otto!”

The shocked voice behind me can only be one person. My wife.

I turn toward her, expecting a row, but all I see on her face is worry, which makes me feel worse.

“Let me help,” she says, addressing Rolf, who is already cleaning up the glass. She brushes past me, lovingly patting

my arm.

I'm hardly deserving of such grace.

"Your Majesty, please do not approach. I've got to fetch gloves and do not wish you to cut yourself. God knows what they put in these things..."

Turning back to me, I see now she's clutching a piece of parchment. Franc looks like he wants to crawl under a rock. "Otto. Let's not read the news about this. Let's you and I sit down and read the statement ourselves and not put any speculation on it. Alright?"

Grudgingly, I let my wife take my arm and guide me into the throne room at the far end of the hall. The throne room is where we do our best thinking and strategizing.

She waits until I'm seated, then smooths out the sheet of parchment on her lap.

Before I hear her read the words, though, I snatch the paper away from her. "I assume you've already read it."

"Yes, I was bringing it to you to read, but unfortunately, the media got to you first."

"I'm not a baby," I insist.

"No. Just read the statement and try to forget what you've read."

I scan the words, but they do not make me feel better about the situation.

"The office of Prince Etienne and Princess Kala have released the following statement:

To improve the Prince's health and assist in his full recovery from a dependency on alcohol, the royal couple will no longer engage in public royal duties for the next six months.

"To maintain their privacy, the prince will be undergoing treatment with professionals at their home at Windewall Cottage.

"I wish to express my sincerest gratitude to the citizens of Gravenland for their unyielding support and well wishes on

our nuptials. To be as transparent as possible, I officially state that I am in treatment for alcohol dependency, anxiety, and depression. I am grateful to my wife, who has graciously sold her share of the business at Frost Bay Beverages to align herself with my treatment and recovery,' stated the Prince.

"Further, the Prince and Princess announce that they will resume royal duties when this critical recovery stage is complete. Their chosen area of charity work as members of the royal family will be mental health.

"It is our sincerest wish that together the Prince and I can shed light on the needs for access to mental health among citizens of Gravenland, and further to reduce the stigma attached to such issues,' the princess stated."

The rest of the letter reads like a hospital brochure, with phone numbers for more information about accessing counseling, hotlines, and other mumbo jumbo.

"It's a far cry from what we saw in the news, isn't it?" my wife asks.

"Yes," I say, rising to my feet and crumpling up the statement. "Very clever."

"What do you mean?"

When I turn to face my wife again, she stands, looking pale, drawn, and underfed. I hate what this drama has done to her.

"What I mean is, our new daughter-in-law is much more conniving and calculating than we gave her credit for. The palace's purchase of Frost Bay Beverages was supposed to be a silent handover. Everyone signed a non-disclosure agreement. I had set up a development business on paper only, to make the purchase, and I was planning to re-sell it for a profit to that American company before anyone found out."

My wife takes a step toward me. "Otto. Did you try to maroon those two on the island so you could get Kala out of the way? Was this all because of your own greed?"

"Greed? My dear, look around you. We're hardly wanting for money. No, it's much deeper than that."

She takes a moment to think over my words. “This is about the Reckless Royals thing?”

“No one profits off mocking my family and gets away with it,” I say, puffing out my chest.

“Otto, you didn’t.”

“I most certainly did. The re-design of those labels has already begun.”

“My gods. It’s a free country, Otto. People can mock us free of retribution. No, it isn’t fun. But what a colossal waste of time and resources. When we could be putting that money to charity.”

“The crops that make those beverages grow on land owned by the palace. Free speech isn’t free in this case.”

“You’ve gone too far, husband,” she says, turning white.

“My dear, you calculated and schemed to get our son married off. So don’t play the innocent party. Since your plot backfired and led to the real heir giving up his right to the throne, I figured it was time for me to take matters into my own hands.”

My wife gives me a dark look. “And see where that has landed us. Now, two sons may never speak to you again. You have to fix this. We can’t have the news speculating about their marriage. They’re mocking what it means to be a royal family in this country.”

Then, I say what I’ve been holding in my cold heart for years. Decades, even. “Our son? What do you mean, *our* son?”

The queen gasps sharply, gripping the arm of the throne. “How dare you?”

“Since everyone is blabbing out the truth now...” I say carelessly, waving my hand around the room.

Franc has resorted to pacing and frantically texting who knows what to who knows whom.

“You can never express that thought to Etienne,” she says.

“It’s already been said.”

“When?”

Should I be ashamed? She’s looking at me as if I should be sorry for speaking the truth to our son. I promised my wife I would never spill the beans to the public—after all, I have my own demons she could leak to the media. But that doesn’t mean I can’t use that fact as a bargaining chip with a non-compliant heir.

“I may have used that information to incentivize the marriage between Etienne and Kala.”

“Otto!” She looks as white as a sheet now.

“Don’t worry, dear heart. I would never tell on you to anyone but him. But to answer your question, I told him that if he wanted to stay in my good graces—if he wished the palace to continue supporting him—he’d better fall in line, settle down, and get married. He was to be the future king, after all.”

“*Was* to be the future king? What on earth do you mean by that?”

“I can’t very well step down and hand the crown over to a mentally ill bastard son, now can I?”

The queen walks away from me, her hands wringing. “I have to go speak to Torben. Perhaps he can help us untangle this mess you’ve caused.”

I think about it, then nod gravely, schooling my face to be serious. “Yes. Go and speak to Torben. You’re right.”

As she scurries away, I sigh in relief. “Keep yourself occupied with your favorite son, my dear. I’ll be here plotting the next move.”

E tienne

The next few days are strangely quiet.

When Kala and I hear nothing from the palace, we relax.

Windewall Cottage and the grounds lie approximately five miles up the coast from Arenhammer, where the highway narrows to a winding, two-lane road hugging a craggy coastline. It's one of several cottages owned by the palace and has been designated as our residence until I ascend to the throne.

It's a simple, rustic place, but well protected from the prying lenses of the paparazzi, with a neglected fruit orchard and several acres of thick woods. An ancient stone wall meanders around the entire oblong circumference.

I settle into a routine with my wife. Routines and daily rituals were never my thing, but now I find the constancy soothing.

In the morning, we practice yoga in the garden. It's laughable—I've never done it before, and while the poses look simple, they are deceptively challenging—and embarrassing to someone with as little body awareness as myself.

Then my wife and I quibble when she pushes fruit onto my plate at breakfast. I find it revolting at first, but by day three, I've accepted my fate as a husband who gets up, does yoga, and eats fruit daily. We work out a lighthearted bargain on day

one: if I eat the fruit, I also get to taste *her* in our post-breakfast shower. I don't tell her that by day three, I don't mind the fruit. However, I think she's on to me. And anyway, judging by the noises she makes when I lick into her honeyed cunt, I'd say she's getting the better end of the deal.

After breakfast and our morning "shower," I meet with a therapist.

Dr. Brahms is apparently the best, and Kala refuses to tell me how much she's paying him.

Yet another thing I have to get used to is trusting someone to know what's best for me until I'm in a better place, mentally.

While I'm having my sessions with Dr. Brahms, Kala busies herself by working remotely—both for the Human Rights Council, reviewing grant applications, and as our full-time publicist.

I never expected us to receive so many phone calls about our situation. Calls, emails, and texts poured in immediately after we announced my treatment plan. And not just from the media here in Gravenland. Every mental health podcast and vlog on the globe is in our inbox.

For now, we've crafted one response to these requests: no interviews until our self-imposed isolation is over.

Once I'm finished with therapy, we lunch on the terrace with meals prepped by the chef afforded me as a member of the royals. Each night, our personal chef arrives to cook dinner, then prepares lunch for the next day. If he is dissatisfied with the whole foods that Kala prescribes, he doesn't say a word about it.

As for me, I'm coming around to her way of thinking. I miss the pastries at the palace, but I do feel better now that I'm eating more vegetables. Staying sober seems to help as well.

Our afternoons are spent hiking along the craggy cliffs, or slipping into the woods. Kala has set up a bird-watching area in the garden, and I've been working on trimming back the mess in the orchard, ripping out and replanting trees, herbs, and ornamental flowers. Every corner of this dusty, damp old

cottage is getting a deep cleaning, and worn-out, impractical furniture is replaced by more comfortable pieces.

Hour by hour, it seems, Windewall Cottage is transforming into a place I can call home.

“Are you sure you only want to isolate for six months?” I ask my wife one afternoon as we lounge on a blanket on the grass. My head is in her lap, and my hands rest on my belly, now full of chicken and grape salad sandwiches. “I’ve gained six pounds already. If you insist I keep eating food instead of drinking, I will be the size of Henry VIII by the time they crown me king.”

Kala chuckles as she plays with my hair. I could lie like this forever.

“I highly doubt that. You expend too much energy,” she says.

“Oh? I’m happy you’ve noticed my efforts in the bedroom.”

Kala playfully swats me. “I meant all the hiking, your work in the orchard. That energy. Gods, you’re awful.”

I sigh. “But you love me.”

Chuckling, she leans down, her curtain of hair haloing around my face as her lips touch mine. “I do,” she says, adding one long, lingering, wet kiss. “And...your efforts in the bedroom do not go unnoticed.”

The whispers against my cheek, her fingers in my hair, and her soft tendrils brushing my neck have awakened the beast inside once again.

“That’s tempered praise.”

I know exactly what she’s doing, and I don’t even mind. If she taunts me enough, I’ll flip her over and prove my stamina right here on the cliffs.

“Oh. Shall I give you a gold star for your chart?”

“There’s a chart?” I ask, weaving my fingers through her soft locks.

She nods.

“Describe this chart to me,” I say.

“Hmm. Well, there’s missionary. Oral. Handsies. Doggy style. Woman on top. Reverse woman on top. 69. Toys. And along the top is a monthly spread so I can compare and contrast your performances each time. A gold star each time I orgasm.”

I know she’s utterly full of shit, but she makes me laugh. And just hearing her describe this fake chart has me as hard as diamonds.

“And how am I doing so far?”

“All gold stars,” she says, kissing the tip of my nose.

Something occurs to me, then. “But wait, you made a mistake. I have yet to take you on all fours, my love.”

At the flush in her cheeks, I know she’s thought about it.

“You’re right. I was thinking of the time we did that in my dream.”

Gods, this woman.

“How about I take you home and complete the rest of the chart properly?”

The setting sun shines through the strands of her hair, glinting off her eyelashes. She bites her bottom lip. “You could ravage me right here on the blanket.”

I wouldn’t dream of plowing into her from behind on the hard ground. Even with the blanket, it’s not much of a cushion—and there’s likely to be plenty of friction to hurt her knees.

“Let’s save that for our bed. Because I’m a gentleman.”

When her lips turn down in a pout, I nearly lose control. “I love your gentleman side. But I also crave the naughty boy.”

The word “naughty” on her lips causes my cock to twitch, and it gives me an idea.

“You want me to be naughty? Oh, but I’ve tried hard to be a good boy for you, Mummy.”

The flash in her eyes tells me I’ve shocked her. And then, she licks her lips. “You’ve been a very...very good boy for

Mummy,” she rasps uncertainly while punctuating the “very” with soft, upside-down kisses. I can tell she’s never toyed with this kind of dirty talk before, but dammit, all this talk about stickers and charts sent my mind to a slightly fucked up place, and I can’t help myself.

“All I want to do is make my Mummy proud,” I say, reaching down to adjust my straining dick. Her eyes flick down to where I fidget, and her soft pink tongue darts out to wet her lips again, gods help me.

She seems slightly emboldened now, and I watch in awe as her hand goes to her breast. “I’m so proud I’m throbbing.”

Look what I’ve done to this perfect girl. I’m going straight to hell.

The view from here as I lie in her lap and watch her caress the undersides of her breasts as she moans is like nothing else.

“If you keep touching yourself like that, you might wet your knickers,” I say.

“Too late to be concerned about that, darling,” she answers, using my pet name for her.

I reach back and feel the heat between her spread thighs. She moans softly as I work my fingers up and down the seam of the material. “Do you have a fever? You feel very hot there. You take such good care of me. What can I do to help you?”

There’s a hitch in her voice when she answers, “You know what I need. You’re such a good, smart, thoughtful boy.”

“The ground is so hard, though,” I feebly pretend to protest.

“It’s a long walk home, Etienne. I need you to help me feel better before we begin the return journey.”

Her words send electricity down my spine straight to my tight, aching balls.

“Pray tell, what will you do with it if I give it to you right now, right here, out in the open?” I continue stroking up and down the seam of her crotch, and her hands have moved down to fidget with the collar of my shirt. It takes everything in me not to shred it to pieces, as well as her sweater.

The way Kala bites her lip is maddening. “What will I do with it? I’ll milk it so tight and hard, you’ll see stars, my bad prince.”

I don’t know who moves first—whether she pulled me on top of her or I reached up and tumbled her over until she was under me. Likely, this was a joint effort.

“Etienne,” she gasps feverishly, her hands deftly working my belt buckle and unzipping my trousers. I lift my heavy cock free of its confines while she squirms under me, working down her leggings until they’re rolled to her knees.

With a growl, I ruck her sweater up to her waist and plunge into her with little warning.

A worry niggles at my conscience briefly—maybe this was too quick. Perhaps she’s not quite ready to take me with so little foreplay. But the sigh that explodes from her throat is pure relief, followed by, “Oh yes, Etienne, thank the gods...”

“Fuck me,” I growl. “You’re so...damn wet...and tight...and perfect...” I thrust into her with an offbeat rhythm on each ragged phrase that falls from my lips.

I pause because I might explode before she takes her pleasure. Hitching myself up, I reach down between our bodies and find my wife’s tight clit at the apex of her pussy. She whimpers when I run my thumb over the hood, then cries out as I work past that bit of skin to her most sensitive source of arousal.

“Etienne,” she moans. “Keep fucking me.”

“You come first. Always.”

Her brows knitting together, she croaks, “I can’t believe you’re mine.”

My chest aches at this. My entire being aches to be closer, always impossibly closer to her.

“Mine,” I growl against her throat as I pump into her. I’m pleased as she shivers at that. She knows she’s mine, and she shivers at the reminder.

My wife explodes with a scream. I revel in the startling echoes—I’d almost forgotten we’re entirely exposed outside in

nature. It's incredible. I plunge back inside her even as she sobs my name—I need to feel her spasming around me. Because I'm still a selfish bastard.

“More, darling,” she begs. “I know you want to go harder. Don't hold back. Show off for me, good boy.”

Hell's bells, I'm already seeing stars. Without another word, I let loose on her, pushing into her with deep, hard thrusts, each punctuated by her cries of pleasure. I keep my eyes locked on hers, gauging her reactions. If it's too rough, too much, I'll stop.

I pull out and drive back inside her, watching her dazed expression, her shining eyes. Kala's lips curve in a faraway smile, so I keep going.

Hard, fast, and thorough, I fuck my wife on this picnic blanket for all to see. A dozen drones could be locked on our every move, but I doubt it. I'm too dizzy with need and pleasure to care.

I must hold back this urge to strip her down, take her hard nipples into my mouth, and feel her perfect skin against mine. My saving grace is this protectiveness she's found in me; I'd never put her at risk like that. Besides, there's nothing wrong with a furious, messy, half-dressed shag. It's exciting. *She's* exciting.

I explode into her and roar her name on a swift, deep thrust.

“Kala!”

“Yes, husband!”

My words tumble out in nonsensical, slurred relief as my seed fills her.

I come and come as her muscles milk me and her arms tighten around me.

“Good girl.” I lick into her mouth languidly. Gratefully.

“Good boy,” she breathes, kissing my sweaty forehead, cheeks, and mouth. “Such a good, good prince you are.”

K_{ala}

Weeks pass far too quickly before we hear a peep from the palace.

Before everything falls apart.

It's amazing what happens when we choose how we want to live.

Etienne takes to the orchard like a real farmer, which is the last thing I expected. He trims dead branches and removes diseased trees. He reads up on their care and learns about irrigation and fertilization. We spend long hours walking down the rows, taking our meals from the terrace to the shade of the fruit trees. The woods are equally fascinating for him. One day, I find him hooting excitedly as he uncovers an old footpath leading down to a creek. Another day I find him chopping up a fallen tree and stripping the bark with the intention of building footbridges over the creeks and streams.

His beard grows, and between that and his newfound fascination with the outdoors, it's all I can do not to tease him that he's starting to resemble his brother.

He offers to shave, but I rather like it. I like the look of him, all suntanned and shaggy. I have given up the tidy, structured look and opted for jeans, leggings, and breezy casual dresses. Etienne prefers the breezy casual dresses for reasons that make

me flush with heat when I think about it. The longer he is removed from his former habits, the lustier he becomes.

And I have zero problems with that.

As for me, I've informed the palace that with my income and savings, we no longer need the services of the palace chef. Apart from feeling guilty over using this luxury while Etienne and I are not performing royal duties, I want to cook.

I am not what anyone would call a domestic goddess, but I've never been opposed to taking on a traditional feminine role in a household. I don't mind cooking and cleaning—all of it feels natural, especially when seen in the context of caring for a husband in recovery. I'm not his mother, but handling some domestic duties is my way of coming alongside him and making our space a nurturing environment. I'm happy to do so for a husband who treats me as his equal.

Soon, temperatures begin to drop to the point where I have to insist on taking dinner inside the house.

On this night, as we dine on a surprisingly successful attempt at wild rice and foraged mushrooms, we both hear a noise that makes me sit up straight.

It's the slightest rush of paper sliding across the stone floor.

Etienne is out of his chair and bounding to the entryway before I ask, "Did you hear that?"

I watch, wide-eyed, as he returns with an envelope gripped in his hands. His knuckles are white.

I see the red wax seal and the Haart family insignia pressed into it. All the air leaves my lungs.

My hand automatically raises in offering. "Want me to read it?"

He shakes his head, then scratches his beard. "No. I've got this."

"I wonder what they want," I say quietly, suddenly having lost my appetite for the tasty rice and mushrooms.

He slowly breaks the seal and tugs out a folded letter. I watch the hard lines form between his brows as he reads.

“Their Majesties, the King and Queen have requested your presence at a family meeting at 9 a.m. sharp at Haart castle,” he reads.

“So, another breakfast meeting,” I say. “We can go if you want to.”

Etienne tosses the letter on the table. “No. We told them we were isolating for the time being. This is a disrespect of our boundaries.”

I bite back a smile. I’ll have Dr. Brahms to thank for that.

“But do you want to go?”

“No.”

“Okay. Then we won’t go. But there’s no information on how to send our regrets,” I say, scanning the letter. “Perhaps Rolf is outside. We should invite him in and tell him we won’t be able to attend.”

I go to the door and open it a crack, Etienne right on my heels. But no one is out there waiting for us. The winding walkway is empty save for the tiny solar lights that Etienne installed last week. Down the lane, red taillights disappear around the bend, blocked from view by the trees.

“Strange,” I say. “They dropped the letter and left?”

Etienne huffs and crosses his big, tanned arms over his chest. “That’s their way of telling us we don’t have a choice. But we always have a choice.”

I reach out and take his hand. “I don’t want to cause trouble.”

“Too late for that,” he says, a smirk spreading into a wicked smile. “We’ve both been nothing but trouble since we came home from our honeymoon.”

Keeping our fingers entwined, I raise my other hand to cup his jaw, my thumb stroking his soft, short beard. “This *is* our honeymoon.”

Etienne angles his face and nips at the tip of my thumb. And now, all I can think about is going for a ride on that gorgeous, bearded face.

And all talk of the intrusive letter, as well as our dinner, is forgotten.

Until late at night, while we lay entwined, exhausted, and sated, something intangible strikes.

It's as if an unseen force rips him from my arms as I sleep. I gasp, awakened by the sudden loss of his warm body beside mine. Startling awake, find Etienne on the edge of the bed, gasping for breath.

I flick on the side table light. "Etienne. What is it? What's wrong?"

"I can't breathe."

Oh, gods. I haven't prayed to them since I was a child, but I'm praying now that my husband isn't having a heart attack or something.

After scrambling off the bed, I kneel between his knees and get a good look at him. I focus on his body language, his face. He breathes in short gasps.

"I have to go," he grunts, shoving up from the bed and descending the winding turret staircase.

He leans on the rough stone walls as he descends.

"Talk to me, Etienne," I demand.

"Have to get out of here."

Oh, no.

I've seen this before.

And so, I know not to take this personally. Still, a tiny, irrational insecurity surfaces, causing me to wonder if he's upset because of me. That I'm suffocating him, as some royal watchers claim. Has he awakened in the middle of the night in a panic because he doesn't love me? Does he resent me for keeping him from his family? Have I made a mess of everything?

I bury those irrational thoughts because my husband could fall down the stairs if I do not act fast. I flick on the light and follow his long-legged strides, trying not to stumble.

“You’re safe, Etienne.”

“I need air.”

Yes, I’ve definitely seen this before.

When I was at finishing school, it happened to me at least once a month. Sadly, not privately in my room in the middle of the night. No, my panic attacks occurred in the middle of lessons.

How many times had I felt like the ceiling would crash down, that I felt that if I didn’t run, I would die? So often that I can recall addressing my teachers by the wrong name while requesting a restroom pass. One of those times, I called the teacher “Mum” when I raised my hand. I’d never been able to live that one down amongst my peers.

Barefoot, my husband finds his way outside and slumps onto a garden rock, scrubbing his face.

Careless of bugs and dirt and whatever else might lurk around at midnight in these woods, I kneel next to him.

“I’m going to touch you now, husband.”

He nods, and his hand is cold and clammy when I take it.

I talk him through it, reminding him what Dr. Brahms said. Find something he can touch, see, smell, hear, and taste. I remind him he’s safe.

“I’m sorry,” he says when he finally catches his breath.

“Don’t be.”

“I’m a fucking mess.”

“If you are, then so am I.”

Still, his chest heaves, and he shakes his head. “We can reinstate the divorce pact if you want.”

“Fuck you,” I blurt without thinking, which, to my relief, makes Etienne laugh out loud. An owl swoops from its hidden

perch overhead, shrieking like a banshee, and I shiver at the creepy beauty of it all.

“It’s the weirdest feeling,” Etienne says when he’s finally calm enough to talk. “I woke up feeling like...do you know that scene from *Star Wars*, where they’re stuck in the gigantic trash compactor?”

“Yes.”

“That’s what it felt like. In my head, in my body. I was absolutely certain everything around me was crumbling, and I felt like I was dying.”

I hate this for him. “You’re safe, Etienne,” I repeat. And I’ll keep repeating it as long as he needs to hear it. Until my knees give out.

No need for knee injuries, though. Before another word is spoken, he lifts me into his lap and hugs me so tight he takes my breath away.

“Kala.”

“Don’t apologize again; I won’t hear it.”

He chuckles into the soft material of my nightshirt, and the warmth spreads out and in, down to my soul.

I don’t know if these panic attacks will be frequent, but I’ll be here for him if they are. I know that we will not give in to the King’s command to come to the palace. Not today.

We do nothing until my husband is ready.



The following day passes without incident.

Etienne and I have a pleasant breakfast outside and take our coffee in thermoses out to the orchard to clean out the abandoned cider mill. We dig through rusty equipment, sorting items into potentially salvageable piles and what can be sold for scrap.

I think both of us are fidgety, so we fill our time with things to keep our minds occupied.

When we're both physically spent, we hike back to the cottage hand in hand to shower before his therapy appointment. Upon arrival at the cottage, however, there are not one, not two, but five news vans parked up and down the lane.

"What the blazes?" Etienne asks.

I tease him for cursing like a grandpa before his time, but I see the genuine concern on his face.

I reach over and grip his hand.

"Do you want to go to the woods and sneak in through the garden?" I ask.

"No. I'd rather face whatever this is and get it over with," Etienne says.

I give his hand a squeeze, and we march on.

News reporters are gathered on the front step. One of them knocks on the door. One of them turns to another one standing behind him, her arms crossed as she holds a microphone.

"I don't think they're home," she says.

Just then, one of them spots us coming up the lane, and it's like a stampede.

Before we can change our minds and hide under a rock, a microphone and recording devices are thrust into our faces.

"Any comment on the king's decision?"

Etienne and I exchange a look.

"What decision?" Etienne asks.

One reporter with an accent that tells me she's traveled here all the way from America pipes up with, "The king has declared you mentally unfit to serve as king, so he won't be stepping down."

Some part of me knew it would come to this. I didn't want to entertain that thought, but now it's happening.

“Etienne? Let’s go inside and clean up first. They can wait for a statement,” I say.

“No, I’m ready to comment right now,” he says, his expression calm and relaxed.

Oh my stars and planets, don’t cuss. Please, husband, do not cuss at these people. I glance around, and this is not the paps. These are legit news organizations. Someone from the BBC is here, the CBC and CNN.

“The king is within his rights to stay in power as long as he lives. I wish him a long and healthy life with that decision.”

One of the reporters turns to me. My throat dries up.

She asks, “Now that you know you’ll never be queen, what’s going through your mind?”

At this, I know exactly what to say. Although I don’t like the way the king and queen have treated their children or the underhanded way they’ve connived to see them married off, I have always enjoyed my company with the queen. She’s never spoken an unkind word to me. For that, I cannot bring myself to say anything against her.

“I could never fill Queen Hilda’s shoes. She is a legend, and she raised a fine man. I’m more than content to live simply as the Princess and Etienne’s wife.”

I glance up at him and smile; the look he gives me is pure love. A hundred shutters snap, but it’s just us.

In minutes, everyone with internet access in the country will witness this moment between us. But for now, it’s just us.

E tienne

The next few days bring a barrage of the wildest tabloid stories about me.

I've never had this much media attention in my life.

Anyone taking these stories seriously will be of two schools of thought: I'm an unstable abuser who is isolating his wife and making up a whole story about my recovery. Or, my wife is a shrew bent on driving a wedge between me and my family.

My wife finds me doom scrolling again and pacing back and forth in the orchard one morning after I've skipped breakfast to be alone.

"They can say what they want about me, but they cannot and will not say such things about my wife," I growl when Kala tries to take my phone away to mitigate my internet consumption.

She sighs softly and offers me my coffee with her gloved hand. It's autumn in Gravenland, and the winds from the north are getting colder and harsher. The weather chaps my wife's lovely cheeks, and I have the impotent urge to shield her from the forces of nature and the media.

"That's very sweet of you to be protective of me. But it's not their fault entirely. We should go to the king," she suggests.

"No."

“He and the queen can end all of this speculation,” she says. “It’s too much for you.”

Indeed. The king has graciously sent bodyguards and 24-hour surveillance of the cottage and grounds, as my wife has been receiving death threats online and through the post. She doesn’t accept my offer to find their IP addresses and crush their nuts with my bare hands. “Leave it to the professionals,” she says.

Now that my head is clear, I don’t want to sit back and let things happen. I want to live our lives in peace.

“Oh, some post came for you. Uther already opened it to inspect it, but I haven’t read it.”

I grimace and take the letter from her. In consuming so much news, I know Major Uther Nancarrow’s fan base. The royal followers love to comment on the mysterious bodyguard in the kilt, swooning over how sweet he is with my mother and Flora. He’s done nothing to earn my petty reaction other than to exist and be called a dreamboat by every Gravenlandian with a pulse. No commoner would dare go rogue and approach the queen with Uther standing nearby.

“Calm down. He’s a perfect gentleman,” Kala snorts. But even my devoted wife looks a little flustered just saying his name.

“Just because a man had an inhuman growth spurt in his teens,” I mutter, unfolding the letter.

“You’re being paranoid. What does the letter say?”

My jaw drops. I knew the answer was a 50/50 chance one way or the other, but I hadn’t expected this.

I hadn’t expected my father to outright lie.

“Right,” I say, handing her the letter.

Kala’s eyes widen, and her mouth gapes. “I knew it,” she breathes.

“Seems you’ve won this argument, darling. We have to go see the king,” I say. “I’ll call for the palace to send a car.”

Sheepishly, my wife turns crimson and admits, “Uther is already waiting at the front gate.”

I clear my throat and insist that I’m not jealous. Because I’m not. I’ve got much bigger, louder, tempestuous fish to fry, and the oil is good and hot now.



I’d thought approaching the palace and walking through those doors again would put me on edge.

With Kala’s arm entwined with mine, I brace myself at the bottom of the steps to the main entrance.

“Anything I can prepare for you, Your Highness?” Rolf looks at me warily.

“Sparkling water, Rolf. Thank you.” I shake his hand and look him in the eye. The man has worked to meet my material needs every second of my life but remained behind the scenes.

His sharp eyes are so much like looking at my father.

“There’s much to say, Rolf. Much for me to apologize for,” I say.

“No need. It’s a pleasure to serve.” He turns to my wife. “And for the Princess?”

Her gracious smile is sunshine on this gloomy autumn day. “Just tea, Rolf. Oh, and hold on. We brought something for you.”

Before he can protest, my wife reaches into her large handbag and retrieves a small glass bottle of apple cider.

“What’s this?” Rolf says, chuckling, examining the label. “Windewall Cider.”

“It’s nonalcoholic cider...something we’re trying out,” I say quickly. “It’s probably not good.”

Kala squeezes my arm, and I know I’m babbling. It is good.

“You made this?” Rolf asks.

“She did,” I say, patting my wife’s hand.

“We both did,” she corrects. “It was just a fun project to pass the time, but you’re our very first guinea pig. If you’ll pardon the expression.”

Rolf nods generously, then turns the bottle over in his hands. He then looks up at me with a strangely chagrined expression. “I was looking forward to serving under you once you became King. I rooted for you, young man.”

My throat feels scratchy all of a sudden. “I know you did,” I say to the man who was more of a father to me than my own father. “I hope I do you proud, even if it’s not in the way you expect.”

He holds up the bottle. “I’d love to see what you’ve done with the place.”

“You’re welcome to visit any time.”

And now, it’s time to face my father and mother.

At the sight of Torben, Hailey, and Flora rounding the corner from the east garden, my tense shoulders relax.

We meet them at the top of the stairs and exchange hellos. Kala presents them with more gifts from our little project, and the women break off to chat in the entry hall.

“Seeing you here makes me feel much better about the audience with the king,” I say.

Torben looks pleasantly taken aback. “Wonderful of you to say so, brother.”

And because I’m still an asshole, I add, “Only because he’s far more pissed at you than me.”

Torben guffaws, and I’m relieved he can take me with much more humor than he used to.

Or maybe I’m far less of an asshole than I used to be.

Time will tell.



The five of us find my parents waiting for us in the salon. Uther is there, leaning down low from his obnoxiously tall height, listening to murmured instructions from my mother the queen.

On some new orders from the queen, Uther disappears on some unknown mission.

I don't miss the look that Uther and Flora exchange before he exits. I make a mental note to explore that later, but I've got to get right to the point here.

"Father, I want you to put a stop to these ridiculous speculative stories today. Right now."

The king leans back in his chair and sips his tea. "As if I have any control over what the media does or doesn't print."

Servants sweep silently about the room, presenting a selection of teas and finger sandwiches.

"Have a seat, dears," the queen says.

Instead, I take a step forward. "Who else would have planted those rumors that I'm not your biological son?"

"I couldn't say."

The king turns sharply toward my wife, who is standing by the window overlooking the east gardens, and who's just made a noise of derision.

"Don't even think about it," I warn. "She's done nothing wrong. She's here as my wife and a witness."

"A witness to what?" Mother asks.

I unfold the document and cross to the queen, showing it to her first.

She looks at me, dumbfounded. "Of course, the king is your father. You knew that already."

I look straight at my mother and tell her something she never knew was happening under her nose. “Father had planted enough doubt in me over the years that never I knew for sure. But here it is.”

Mother hands the document over to my father, and he examines it. “And?” the king asks haughtily.

“And there’s the proof,” Kala says impatiently. “Don’t you think you owe your son and wife an apology?”

The king steps toward my wife, but I place myself between them.

Strangely, the servants have all disappeared.

“You may be a princess, but you will speak to the king with deference,” says my father.

“In this room, it’s just family. I’m your daughter-in-law, and I’m speaking to you as a member of this family. What you did...”

Everyone’s gaze turns to her as her words falter. I slip my arm around her shoulders.

“My dear, I didn’t choose you because I wanted you to be a part of the family,” says the king. “Paying off your father’s debt was one thing. But I also knew you were marrying a mess of a man. I knew my son would be a project for you and keep you out of my way. But apparently, it wasn’t enough.”

I’ve never seen this woman speak to my father like this before. It’s rather exciting. “We’re all a mess in our own way,” she says. “The problem now is that you refuse to accept responsibility for your role in the current chaos.”

“The pair of you made the royal line appear weak,” the king says with a grunt.

My wife is far from finished, and I won’t be the one to stifle her. “Telling a 12-year-old boy that he isn’t your son and that if he breathed a word about it, he and his mother would be cut off? Is that how you show strength?”

The queen gasps. “Otto, is this true?”

The king gestures wildly. “Do you believe her word over mine?”

The queen stands. “You haven’t answered my question yet.”

“I never accused you of being unfaithful,” the king blusters.

The queen draws herself up and squares her shoulders. “Did you tell your 12-year-old son you were not his biological father?”

“There’s no reason for it. Why would I do that?”

“Because, Father,” I say drolly, “you would do and say anything to keep me in line. By the time I was 12, I’d sent four tutors into retirement. I’d been picked up five times for shoplifting, and the papers were having a field day when the shopkeepers could no longer keep sweeping it under the rug. So, you told me I didn’t have any claim to the throne and that you would keep me in the line of succession despite these facts because you were such a good person. It was our little secret. You wanted to protect Mother. And it would be my fault if that secret ever got out.”

I’ve never said those words out loud to anyone but Dr. Brahms.

“I’m going to be ill,” Kala says, slumping into a chaise.

“The stories you come up with.” The king waves a dismissive hand and walks to the window.

“These are not stories, Father. This actually happened,” I say. “And it will all be in the papers tomorrow if you do not publicly set the record straight. They’ll know everything about you that first drove me to drink.”

The king turns on me. “You would put every detail out there? You would present your weakness out there for the world?”

Torben pipes up. “That’s the difference between you and the rest of us. We’re not afraid of looking weak. You should be proud your son is getting help.”

The king rounds on my brother. “Why are you even here?!”

The shouting is so loud that Torben steps back, and Hailey reaches up and rests a protective hand on her husband's shoulder.

"Dude, you need help. You're completely toxic," Hailey points out to the king. The American is not wrong.

"Out! All of you!"

"Not so fast." At these words from the queen, everyone swivels to face her. "There's still the matter of the throne to discuss. My husband, for better or for worse, promised me long ago that he would retire so that we could enjoy our golden years together, out of the spotlight. This family may be falling apart at the seams, but we still must discuss who will be crowned king. Or queen," she adds, glancing at my sister Flora.

For her part, Flora swallows hard and looks over at her hero, big brother Torben.

"It won't come to that," he murmurs, resting an assuring hand on her shoulder.

"It might," says the queen. "Unless we can find Sigurd."

The third in line to the throne has been missing ever since Torben abdicated.

No one has seen or heard from him since.

Uther enters the salon again as if on cue, with the gamekeeper Callum Black trailing behind. Flora shoots them both a look, but only Uther looks apologetic. Callum is agitated, like a man ready for a fistfight.

The king is visibly bored. Hailey looks as if she regrets ever agreeing to marry into this family. The queen is exasperated.

"Major," she sighs, addressing Uther. "I asked you to fetch my son. Sigurd is the tall one with the beard. This is the gamekeeper. You might be confused since they are best friends."

"Pardon me, Your Majesty," Uther says, bowing. Gods, even *I* find him attractive, and I'm as straight as a fucking

ruler. “But I thought perhaps the gamekeeper could shed some light on where Sigurd might be located.”

The queen doesn’t look hopeful. “And Callum? Have you any ideas?”

“Last I saw, Sigurd was on a boat headed north to Frost Bay,” he says, looking regretfully at Flora. She shakes her head, and I understand now. Flora’s disappointed that the gamekeeper has given up our brother’s location. Most likely, Uther bullied it out of him.

The queen seems satisfied with this answer. “Ah. Then he’s probably at the family’s hunting retreat. Of course. That should have been the first place we looked. Uther? Good work. Callum? Please go fetch our son, and we’ll chat about his duties leading up to the coronation. We’d like this to take place as soon as possible.”

My mind does the math, but it doesn’t add up.

Flora speaks up, saying out loud what everyone is thinking. “But you said marriage was a condition of becoming the next monarch.”

“I did,” Father replies. “Lady Ilsa has promised the top student in the graduating class from her finishing school will be primed for the job of marrying the next king.”

My stomach churns. “You’re not going to betroth an 18-year-old girl to Sigurd. He’s 31! And he’s not willing, I can tell you that.”

“I was 18 and fresh from finishing school when I married your father,” the queen points out. “And he was twelve years my senior.”

Flora clucks. “Yes, Mother. But times have changed. And have you considered that maybe you’d have been happier if you hadn’t married the king? Perhaps if you’d married for love...”

The room goes silent as Flora’s words hang in the air.

Finally, the queen replies, “If I’d followed my silly teenage heart, I’d have married the sweaty gardener at my parent’s estate, and none of you would exist. As it stands, I love my

family. Even the ones who have broken my heart.” Her gaze goes to Torben. She adds, “And the ones who have brought unseemly gossip on the family.” That’s clearly a dig at me.

This time, it’s Torben who speaks up. “It isn’t unseemly, and it isn’t gossip. If anything, I find my brother to be quite brave.”

Uther goes utterly crimson as the king mutters that the actual bravery in the room belongs to the man with all the naval medals.

Callum, having his orders, takes his leave.

Eventually, we reach an agreement with my father, and as we leave the palace, I have a sinking feeling that I may not be invited back, even after Kala and I return to royal family duties.

The papers will publish the paternity test results, and the palace will release a statement supporting my ongoing treatment. We’ll be allowed to continue to reside at Windewall Cottage. Kala and I will resume palace duties after Christmas, and the king’s decision to deny me the throne will stand.

Whatever rumors circulate regarding the king’s decision are out of our control. Eventually, maybe, they will die down.

One by one, we all trickle out of the room.

“I’m sorry,” Kala says as Uther drives us back to Windewall.

“For what, darling?”

She turns to me with eyes welling with tears. “If I hadn’t let my feelings dictate my actions...if I hadn’t fallen in love with you...if I’d stayed objective...you could be king by now.”

This? This is what’s making my wife cry?

“Kala. Look at me.”

This conversation reminds me of when she blurted out that she loved me and always loved me. I believe it was right here in the back of this exact car.

This time, she turns to look at me without hesitation. “Gods, you’re lovely when you cry.”

“Idiot,” she sighs, making me laugh.

She looks down at her lap and snuffles.

“I don’t need a crown. I don’t need the fanfare, and I certainly don’t need handsome Uther hanging around. No offense, man.”

“None taken,” Uther replies, not taking his eyes off the road.

This makes Kala laugh.

I lift her chin so her eyes meet mine.

“I would never want to take the throne without you by my side. And now, I don’t want a throne at all.”

“Are you sure?”

I lean in and deliver a kiss that can leave no doubt. A claiming, worshiping kiss, which she receives and returns.

Her soft smile feels lovely against my mouth.

“There was a time when the mere fact that my father said I couldn’t have something would send my ego into a tailspin. Before I met you, before I decided to stop fucking everything up for the fun of it, I would have pushed back. I would have gone to the press and exposed him for everything he put me through. I would have demanded the crown, which is rightly mine. But I don’t want to do that to him. I’m much better off simply letting it go. I’m far more interested in patching things up with my siblings, with my mother. But mostly, I’m interested in simple pleasures with you, Kala.”

She sighs. “Why do you have to be so wonderful?”

I dab away a tear with my thumb, then kiss away another one.

“Because I’m the best,” I joke.

She rolls her eyes, which makes me smile.

“And because you see the best in me, and you always have. And that’s enough for me to build a life with. A family. Eventually.”

I’ve gotten pretty good at guessing what she’s thinking, but I could never have imagined what comes next.

Kala takes my hand and rests it on her stomach. “I hope it’s okay that the family part is starting rather than later, then.”

The gears in my mind squeak to life, and finally, the realization hits.

“You’re...you’re going to have a baby?”

She nods. “*We’re* going to have a baby.”

“Good gods,” is all I can say. And then I let out a great whoop and grab a startled Uther by the shoulder. The car swerves, and he recovers.

“Did you hear that, Uther? I’m going to be a father!”

“Congratulations, Your Highness.”

My wife laughs and tugs me away from harassing poor Uther. “Are you sure you don’t want to go after that crown and give your children a shot at the monarchy?”

I lean in and kiss her hard, with all of the pent-up emotion from the day’s events spilling over. My cup overflows.

“Crown? What crown?” I mutter against her lips.

And it’s the truth. She will always be whatever I need. My darling Kala.

EPILOGUE

Five years later

Kala

It is always lovely to visit Torben and Hailey in America.

Even if the Wi-Fi is spotty in the countryside, it's peaceful here, where all the siblings can be themselves.

Besides, it's nice to leave the Windewall Cider Works in the hands of trusted employees and have a change of scenery. Our little company has grown to a staff of twenty people. Just enough to keep Etienne busy when he's not chasing down me or our little ones.

I continue to work remotely for the Human Rights Council. I've traveled enough, and my goal now is to spend as much time as possible with our family at Windewall. I love our life there. I love visiting with Sigurd, Flora, and the remaining members of the royal family, both old and young.

Sadly, the king has passed, and Queen Hilda has moved into the position of Dowager Queen with the ascension of the current monarch.

I do miss seeing and bonding with Hailey. And though I don't love the fact that her grandmother's passing is what brings us together at this moment, I'm happy to see her.

The family invited the queen to join us, as we always do, but she's still stinging from Torben and Hailey being invited to the coronation.

"We're all hoping she gets over it and reconciles with the American side of the family, as we refer to you," I tell Hailey.

"I hope so, too," she says, biting her lip. "I've reached out again and again. I send photographs and presents from the kids on the regular..."

"I know you do," I say. "She might as well reconcile instead of hanging on to titles. Soon, the titles won't mean anything at all."

Hailey takes a step back and blinks. "What does that mean?"

And that's when I tell her what Etienne and I have nicknamed the Great Secret.

The biggest news that will shake the monarchy of Gravenland to its core has my sister-in-law gasping and covering her mouth. "Are you serious?"

I nod my head.

Hailey leans in. "And she can just do that because..."

Again, I nod.

She understands the delicacy of this information.

"How long has this been in the works?" Hailey asks.

"Nothing has been announced yet. I was asked to assist with research on the disbursements in preparation last year."

Hailey nods enthusiastically. "This is crazy! And exciting! What happened next?"

I lift one shoulder and tell her the truth. "I think everyone will be satisfied with how it all ends," I say.

The two of us turn to the house where Etienne, Torben, Sigurd, and others are playing in the tall grass with the little ones. Our twins Madeleine and Marta have bonded instantly with all of their little cousins. Flora steps outside and waves down to us, smiling.

“The crown has always kept everyone on their toes,” I say.

“Well, in the end,” Hailey says, taking a drink of the new cider I’ve smuggled for her in my luggage, “we’re all still family, and that’s what matters.”

As far as Etienne and I are concerned, she couldn’t be more right.

MORE BY ABBY KNOX

All my books are stand-alone romances, each with its own HEA. No cliffhangers or cheating!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Abby Knox writes feel-good, high-heat romance that she herself would want to read. Readers have described her stories as quirky, sexy, adorable, and hilarious. All of that adds up to Abby's overall goal in life: to be kind and to have fun!

Abby's favorite tropes include: Forced proximity, opposites attract, grumpy/sunshine, age gap, boss/employee, fated mates/insta-love, and more. Abby is heavily influenced by Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Gilmore Girls, and LOST. But don't worry, she won't ever make you suffer like Luke & Lorelai.

If any or all of that connects with you, then you came to the right place.

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