



# Crowned for His Son

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**Category:** Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

**Description:** Reunited by chance...

Bound by his royal heir!

Believing the accident that stole her memories also left her son fatherless, Eden Moss has fought to survive. Penniless, she's waitressing at a royal party—when soon-to-be King Azar Domene stops her in her tracks...and then insists he's her child's father!

There's no mistaking those molten gray eyes: Eden's toddler is Azar's heir. To protect his throne, he will make Eden his queen. He won't let their connection consume him like it once did though... Because Eden may not remember what happened before she left, but Azar remembers every devastating yet passionate detail...

**Total Pages (Source):** 73

## CHAPTER ONE

‘TO WILD OATS and Mommy issues. The first brought us into the world, the second has kept us on our toes and made us the men we are.’

Prince Azar Domene of Cartana groaned loudly, his crystal flute filled with Dom Perignon lowering a fraction as he shook his head. He could count on Teo making such outrageous toasts every year.

‘Dios. You could just wish the old man a simple happy birthday so we can get on with the drinking, you know,’ griped Valenti, the older of his twin half-brothers by five and a half minutes. The scar slashing just above his temple twitched as he shook his head.

Teo grinned and punched him in shoulder. ‘I didn’t fly four thousand miles to make mediocre speeches.’

‘And watch it with the old. I’m only three months older than you,’ Azar warned.

Teo grinned. ‘Speaking of wild oats—’

‘Don’t,’ Azar warned, fully anticipating what was coming.

He didn’t need a reminder of those wild six months three years ago. They were branded into his brain indelibly. If there was even a sliver of comfort to be taken from the circumstances surrounding losing his best friend, it was that his half-brothers had been there to offer support.

Teo shrugged. 'Not talking about it doesn't mean it's going to go away.'

To his credit, Teo now spoke in a more sombre tone, respecting the gravity of this part of their history. Of the paths of chaos their mothers had wrought with their bitter rivalry, leading to those 'Mommy issues' his brother mocked so glibly.

'But there's a time and a place, brother,' Valenti muttered, sliding his twin a hard, speaking look. 'Azar's birthday may not be the right time. Hell, you own and run a multi-billion-dollar fashion house. How do you not know the art of subtlety and nuance?'

'You know the part of the ostrich I like?' Teo asked as Valenti rolled his eyes. Then he sobered. 'Their feathers. You can make a sexy statement with those. The burying their head in the sand part? Not so much.'

'You're so busy pushing everyone into doing "the right thing",' Valenti said, with mocking air quotes. 'What about you?'

Azar watched Teo's face tighten with a punch of curiosity and pity. Those wild months in the Arizona desert, in Paradise Valley, had taken their toll in one way or the other. Valenti had delved deeper into his usual frozen solitude while Teo, the polar opposite of his twin, had given debauched revelry a run for its money.

Although they'd never spoken of it, Azar was very aware that his brothers had arrived in Arizona straight from a visit to their father, weighed down with more baggage than usual.

'There's nothing to report,' Teo answered, surprising them all. 'Sometimes you just have to cut your losses.'

Azar watched Valenti's eyes widen and knew he was about to probe deeper, verify

whether he spoke of their father or mother. Or if it had something to do with the new creative director he'd hired. He was going to intercept by speaking words he wished he didn't have to. But they were necessary, if only to quiet the demons for a hot second.

'Another toast. And, yes, I can make a toast on my own birthday.' He tightened his gut and raised his glass, his chest burning with anger, regret and shame-coated bitterness. 'To absent friends.'

Teo's face shuttered. A muscle ticked in Valenti's jaw. For a handful of seconds they said nothing, all three dwelling on memories. Azar knew both Teo and Valenti felt guilty for being caught up in their own drama and not realising the chaos unravelling in Arizona until it was too late.

Teo raised his glass. A beat later, Valenti followed suit. 'To absent friends.'

Azar nodded in gratitude.

Courtesy of his father's wild-oat-sowing history—siring three sons born within months of each other by two different women—he'd learned a hard lesson in not glossing over things. Secrets led to festering wounds and shattered trust. Hell, he wouldn't be toasting his absent friend if he'd taken his own advice three years ago. Nick's death had been senseless and deeply shocking, a product of suppressed sentiments and acute misunderstanding that would've been salvaged if everything had been laid out in the open.

He couldn't lay the entire blame on Nick or himself. No, a good chunk of that laid with another. The woman who'd created carnage, disappeared from the scene of the accident that had taken Nick's life, and then seemingly off the face of the earth. It grated deeply that neither the police nor his own expert security team had been able to locate her after all this time. Depriving him of essential closure and, yes, a little

retribution.

But that was an ongoing task he wasn't going to dwell on today, on his thirty-fifth birthday. Not when he had other news to impart. Since it wasn't happy tidings, he'd waited until the party was almost over. His half-brothers would need a minute to process.

'I have news,' he said, when another round of champagne had been poured.

'You're planning another months-long bender? Count me in,' Teo said.

He managed a smile, until the weight of destiny wiped it away. 'Papá is going to call you two this coming week. But I think you should hear it from me first. His health problems are worsening. His doctors say they've done all they can.'

Valenti surged to his feet, his champagne forgotten on the table. 'What? When did this happen?' His usual gravel-rough voice was even coarser.

'And why did you wait till now to tell us? You stood there and made me toss out nonsense when you knew this all along?' Teo growled, his face dark with disappointment and anger.

## Page 2

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‘The news wouldn’t have been any different two hours ago. And he didn’t want me to tell you just yet—’

‘Because his bastard sons aren’t important enough to know?’ Teo grated, his nostrils flaring.

Since he knew what it felt like to be an afterthought, to be the unfortunate cog caught between warring spokes, Azar looked his brother in eye and answered firmly. ‘What he thinks doesn’t matter. I told him I wouldn’t keep it from either of you because you deserved to know.’

He let them digest that for a moment, then breathed in relief when they both nodded. Traces of anger lingered on Teo’s face but he folded his arms, his voice hard and serious when he demanded, ‘Has he sought a second opinion?’

Azar’s mouth twisted. ‘What do you think?’

Valenti grunted. ‘I’m sure he’s seen ten different specialists by now.’

‘Try a clean dozen,’ Azar said. ‘Where do you think we got our trust issues from?’

Teo’s mouth twitched, then he exhaled long and hard. ‘I’m calling him before morning. You know that, right?’

There was the faintest whiff of disquiet within the curt response, also familiar to Azar.

That need for a connection that repeatedly eluded all of them.

He nodded, then twisted his glass between his fingers.

‘There’s more?’ Valenti surmised, his eyes narrowing.

There was a reason Valenti excelled as one of the most sought-after security specialists. He watched. He listened. And he missed nothing.

Except that one essential time.

A time Azar knew had scarred his brother for life, driven him deeper into his silent turmoil.

Azar nodded again, fighting the different emotions attacking him. ‘Sí.He’s stepping down from ruling. I’m to become King in three months.’

Their expressions morphed from sombre to shocked surprise. They didn’t offer immediate congratulations, as members of the soon-to-be-his council had, with their eagerness to switch allegiance and commence with the boot-licking and jostling for power almost nauseating to watch.

Teo spoke first. ‘Are you okay with that?’

Azar debated the tough, exposing question for a minute. It was what he’d been groomed for all his life. All he knew. And despite the odd self-indulgent occasion of wishing for another life, it was all he was destined to be. That unwavering duty had been driven into him from birth.

‘I have to be. For the sake of his health. For the sake of the kingdom.’

Valenti nodded, then a moment later he was offering a one-armed hug. ‘Congrats,hermano. I don’t envy you for a second myself, but you’ve got that kingly crap down to a fine art, so I think you’ll be fine.’

Teo laughed and offered his own hug. Then, ‘I’m guessing lengthy benders are a thing of the past? I’ll take a six-day one, if your kingly duties can swing it.’

‘Any more talk of benders and my first duty as King will be to force you both to use your proper regal titles.’

His brothers reared back, mirrored looks of horror on their faces. ‘Hell, no!’

Azar suspected that their rejection of their titles had something to do with the ugly vitriol with which their mother had fought for them to be titled. His mother had fought for the exact opposite, wanting ‘King Alfonso’s bastards’—as she’d so scathingly labelled his half-brothers—not to be given their due titles.

There was a certain stain to using blackmail, subterfuge and downright emotional torture to gain the upper hand in the power and prestige dynamics that left a bitter taste in your mouth. Their mothers had fully engaged in both, often with their father absenting himself and leaving his sons at the mercy of the vitriol. That he had been embroiled in all of it through no desire or fault of his own made Azar understand his brothers’ inclination to distance themselves from the darker side of the throne of Cartana.

‘It’s bad enough that our mother insists on calling us by them in public,’ Teo griped.

‘And that you’ve been labelled the “Playboy Prince of The House of Domene”?’ Valenti added, one mocking brow raised at his twin. ‘A clunky mouthful, if you ask me, but if that what you need to ensure you’re not doing badly on the ladies’ front, then I don’t begrudge you...’



Azar started to smile as his brothers mercilessly ribbed each other. Then movement from the corner of his eye snatched his attention and he stared, the blood roaring in his ears.

It wasn't.

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It couldn't be.

She'd been missing for almost three years. Rumoured to have either walked away from the wreckage or even presumed dead, even though her body had never been found with Nick's.

It wasn't her.

Was it?

He was moving before he fully clocked himself. The shattering of glass signalled that he hadn't set his champagne glass down properly.

'Hey! What the hell...? Azar? Is everything—?'

'Excuse me,' he grated roughly.

But why was she moonlighting as a waitress? Had she fallen this far from grace? Not that being a career hostess and a leech, dedicated to extracting as much money as possible out of billionaires, was in any way a pinnacle of grace.

'Um...it's just...you caught me by surprise.'

Azar sucked in a slow, sustaining breath. 'You just admitted you know who I am.'

She nodded impatiently. 'Yes. You're Crown Prince Azar of Cartana. I've seen you...and your brothers...in the news—'

She stopped, bit her lip, and now they weren't pinched at all. They were the deep pink he last recalled them being as they wrapped around his—

'I'm sorry, I'm not sure what the correct form of address is.'

'It is Your Highness,' Ramon, his head of security and a stickler for protocol, supplied icily.

The tray in her hand wobbled. Her breath stalled as she struggled to keep it upright. Another flick of his wrist and one bodyguard stepped forward and relieved her of it.

'Wait—what are you doing? I'm working.'

'Not any more. Come with me.' While he was used to audiences, large and small, Azar wasn't in the mood to air this particular item of dirty laundry in public.

He turned, nodded at his security chief, and headed for the corridor leading to his private suite.

'What—? Why—? I haven't done anything wrong.'

After a low-voiced warning from Ramon, her footsteps trotted behind him.

The moment she entered his suite her escape was effectively blocked by Ramon and his crew, and the door shut behind them all. He spun around.

'Now. You have ten seconds to confess the reason behind this poor excuse for a disguise before I have you arrested.'

\* \* \*

Eden stared at the man standing before her. The hands braced on his hips intensified his already formidable aura, rendering him more intimidating, and yet indecently hot enough to slam her heart against her ribcage.

She would've thought she was immune to such displays of power, wealth and privilege from drop-dead gorgeous people by now. This was Vegas, after all.

But no.

His Royal Highness the Crown Prince of Cartana was easily head and shoulders above the normal *crème de la crème*.

She'd been lucky to land this gig when one of the other girls had come down with a chest infection. She'd grabbed it with both hands, even though it had meant scrambling to find childcare for Max. The promise of double pay and a chance to repay her long-suffering elderly neighbour for stepping in with help was too good to pass up.

Except she stood to earn nothing at all if she got herself fired for whatever transgression His Royal Grumpiness deemed she'd committed.

She flinched as the door nicked shut behind her. Her ten seconds had passed. His security guards had left, leaving her alone with the most formidable man she'd ever met.

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‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ she ventured briskly.

Prince Azar’s square jaw, a source of infinite fascination in and of itself, with the chin cleft that was a disgraceful personal weakness for her, grew even more eye-catching as it clenched.

He didn’t need to pinch the bridge of his nose in a display of fraying patience. She got that loud and clear as his hands dropped, and he sauntered closer.

Eden would have backed away if her spine hadn’t snapped straight with the welcome reminder that she hadn’t done anything wrong.

During her frantic internet searches once she’d woken from her coma and discovered she was pregnant, most likely with Nick Balas’s baby, she’d come across pictures of this man. But even without the revelation that Crown Prince Azar was friends with Nick, whose car she’d been in that awful night, she knew what kind of man she was dealing with.

Ruthless. Conceited. Silver-spooned. With unfair good looks to match—and, in this one’s case, the breathtaking title of Crown Prince to go with them. And a mile-wide attitude that screamed that the whole world owed them adoration and worship.

Men like her father, who threw their power and privilege around just for the sake of seducing unsuspecting women, whose hearts and lives they shattered irreparably before walking away.

Her mother was one such woman, Eden the product of that kind of careless treatment.

The reason her mother had lived in misery her whole life, pining for a man who'd treated her deplorably while lauding his power over her. The reason Eden actively detested men like the one standing before her.

‘This isn’t a costume party, and it isn’t Halloween, so what is it? A prank or a dare?’

His regal head turned, probing the corners and drapes in the room before arching a masculine brow at her.

‘Are your friends recording us right now, ready to jump out with their phone cameras? FYI, I will sue them all for every last cent if they dare to do such a thing. Or is it just something to giggle over later on your own?’

Despite his easy stance, thick layers of tension laced his words. Enough to make her spine of steel sway a little. But the surprising side effect of what she'd been through these last three years was the discovery that she could bend a long way, but she would never break.

The reminder tipped up her chin. ‘Should I not be asking you that? It’s your birthday party after all. So what is it?’ She echoed his question back at him. ‘Play a joke on the help? See whose life you can toy with by getting them fired?’

She blurted the words into her swelling panic. Dear God, if she got fired, paying her rent this month would be near impossible. She was already on the last few hundred in her savings. This double shift was the miracle she'd prayed for.

‘I would’ve thought that would be more the speed of privileged frat boys—not grown crown princes who should know better.’

Dear God, Eden, shut up!

Sadly, the unfairness of it all was choosing tonight of all nights to spill out. Months of keeping it together, of working her fingers to the bone, of lying awake at night praying for that essential gap in her memory to return so wouldn't feel so...so lost, had eroded the last of her civility.

She wanted to punch and pummel and scream her frustration.

'Excuse me?'

His words sizzled like ice on a hot griddle as regal fury blazed at her.

'You had your people manhandle me in here—'

'They didn't touch a single hair on your head,' he interrupted, with blade-sharp precision.

'They didn't need to. You waved your hand and they went into intimidation mode. Is that what gets you off? Standing back and watching others dance to your tune?'

'From where I'm standing there's very little dancing and a whole load of sass going on,' he grated. 'Not to mention a stupid attempt to cling to whatever lies you're spinning.'

'What the—?' Eden took a breath and uncurled fists that had bunched without her conscious knowledge. 'Look, I know you're a big deal in royalty, with legions of acolytes on social media and around the world. And I'm sorry if your royal ego is affronted. But the truth is we've never met. I'm here on a waitressing gig.'

She waved her hand at the door, every bone in her body straining to sprint for it. But she knew those muscle-bound bodyguards would be waiting—that all it would take for them to restrain her would be another flick of his hand.

‘Maggie, my boss—the woman your people hired to cater your party—is out there, supervising the wait staff. She called me three hours ago and asked me to fill in for a sick colleague. If you don’t believe me, ask her.’

His gaze flicked to the door. Eden almost expected Maggie to materialise out of his sheer willpower alone. A moment later he pinned her again under those ferocious quicksilver eyes she swore could see beneath her skin.

‘You truly want me to believe you think you’ve never met me?’ he breathed in rumbling disbelief.

For the first time, Eden’s certainty fractured. She was reminded of those moments when shards of memory attempted to pierce the otherwise impenetrable fog shrouding those lost months three years ago.



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Was he...?

Did he...?

The visceral need to know propelled her towards him, when she should've been ending this absurd confrontation and retreating.

The Good Samaritan she'd tracked down weeks after waking from her coma—a man who'd found her with a life-threatening head injury, wandering along the road near a remote truck stop in Southern California—had known very little of what had happened to her. The police, when they'd eventually turned up at the hospital, had only been able to trace her last known whereabouts to a hostel in Vegas, leaving her with no clue as to how she'd ended up in California—save for the possibility that she'd been going to see her mom—or what had happened to rob her of several weeks of her life.

The only tenuous connection—discovered desperate weeks later, after almost driving herself ill to the point of re-hospitalisation—had been the memory of snippets of conversation with Nick, in the Vegas casino where she'd worked.

Nick—another silver-spoon-fed millionaire who had frequently visited the casino where she'd previously worked—had not taken her firm refusal to go on a date with him with good grace. He'd been relentless in his pursuit. Throwing offers of riches and luxury at her feet until he'd realised that she wouldn't be moved by them. That, in fact, she was repulsed by his obscene display of power and wealth.

He'd changed tack then, and stopped tossing around trips to Paris and life-changing

shopping experiences. Instead he'd bought her a hotdog that time he'd caught her on a break. Walked her to the bus stop instead of thinking he could sway her with a ride in his Lamborghini.

It had been during those two curiously well-timed meetings that she remembered him dangling the offer of a job...somewhere. A job lucrative enough that she'd been tempted. But she had no clue whether she'd taken the job, and with the authorities' very tepid reaction to her half-clues she'd drawn a frustrating blank.

And with Nick dead, and her sole attempt at contacting his family having resulted in the immediate harsh threat of a lawsuit, she'd accepted that dead end.

Her heart leaping into her throat now, she opened her mouth to ask. Only to recall her doctor's dire warning not to go probing.

Familiar frustration and the naked fear of living permanently with this hole in her memory clawed through her.

Shaking her head, she pushed both heavy sensations away. 'Are we done here? I'd like to salvage what's left of my shift, if that's all right with you?'

\* \* \*

She was lying. Playing games. She had to be.

And yet if she'd been an actress, Azar would've fully endorsed an award for that performance.

'You may leave,' he said eventually.

He watched her head for the door, her hip-sway admittedly less prominent than it had

been the last time he'd watched her walk away, but still hypnotic. Still enough to warm and rouse his shaft. To make his fingers curl into a fist with the need to touch.

Absolutely not happening.

But...

One last test.

'Eden?'

She glanced over her shoulder in the exact way she had that last time too, the defiant tilt of her chin at once challenging and enthralling. That night it had been enough for him to stalk over to her and demand one last kiss, unaware that she was leaving his bed and going straight into betraying him with his best friend.

She was watching him warily, her breath turning a touch agitated, bringing his attention to the seductive curve of her breasts. 'Your Highness?'

He ignored her tart tone and delivered his message. 'We will meet again.'

There was no disadvantage to forewarning her. Now he'd found her again she would need supernatural powers or the help of Houdini himself to slip through his grasp again.

Her silken throat moved, but stopped shy of a swallow. It was almost admirable, the way she fought not to show her alarm. But it didn't matter. Whatever game she was playing, he would get to the bottom of it.

Then pay her back a hundredfold.

‘Not if I can help it,’ she parried.

Then she slipped through the door, slamming it behind her.

He waited all of ten seconds before he yanked the door open. Ramon and his men hovered outside the door, along with his half-brothers.

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Teo and Valenti sauntered in, eyes the same colour as his examining him keenly.

‘Want to fill us in on what’s going on?’ asked Teo. ‘I mean, she’s hot, sure...but you can’t just ditch us and—’

‘You don’t remember her?’ This came from Valenti.

Teo frowned. ‘Should I?’

Valenti’s droll gaze said he was internally rolling his eyes. ‘She’s the girl. From Arizona.’

Teo’s jaw dropped, but before he could speak Azar raised a hand, directing his next words to his security chief.

‘Follow her. Do not let her out of your sight. I want to know where she goes, who she sees, where she lives. I want to know everything there is to know about Eden Moss by midnight. Understood?’

## CHAPTER TWO

‘WE WILL MEET AGAIN.’

The words reverberated in her head as she walked out of her neighbour’s apartment, Max’s warm weight nestled in her arms.

‘Thank you so much for tonight, Mrs Tolson.’

The old woman waved her away, wrapping her thick shawl around her shoulders as she leaned heavily against the door. Eden felt a pang of guilt for her reliance on the old woman, whose robustness had dwindled since her hip operation. It was her insistence that she missed Max and wanted to spend time with him that had made Eden finally give in, but undoubtedly she'd been a godsend in desperate times.

'I love spending time with this cheeky darling—you know that. And it was only for a few hours.' She stroked Max's cheek, earning a drowsy smile from her sleepy son before she glanced at Eden. 'Do you know what you're going to do after next week?'

Her insides clenched at the reminder that Mrs Tolson was moving to California, to be closer to her son, and taking Eden's reliance on her much-needed occasional childcare with her.

'Something will come up, I'm sure.'

Worry and scepticism creased the older woman's face, but she nodded, caressing Max's cheek one last time before stepping back into her apartment.

'Come by for pancakes in the morning,' she said, then raised a hand when Eden opened her mouth to refuse. 'I insist. I need as much Max-time as possible before I leave.'

Feeling a clog building in her throat, Eden nodded and turned towards her apartment door, twenty feet away.

Maggie had thankfully not given her grief over her fifteen-minute disappearing act with Prince Azar. She'd been more curious than annoyed, which suggested she hadn't heard about Eden's rude comment to the Crown Prince. It also meant she had much-needed money in her bank account, which would keep a roof over her head for the time being.

And after that?

She swallowed and summoned a smile when Max stirred, rubbed his eyes and delivered a heart-melting smile. ‘Mama?’

‘Yes, baby boy, it’s me.’

His smile widened and his arms wrapped tighter around her neck as she burrowed into his warmth.

‘Mama!’

She laughed, feeling lighter as she went into her bedroom. ‘Did you have fun with Mrs Tolson?’

She tuned everything else out and basked in his sweet, childish babble about Lego and giraffes. He sang half a theme tune of his favourite cartoon as she gave him a quick bath and wrestled him into his pyjamas. Holding him to her chest, she breathed in his sweet baby scent, her heart lifting and swelling with love as he fell asleep.

That same heart squeezed with anguish when she laid him down in his crib, her fingers tracing his cheek before lingering on the dip in his chin. The faintest slash of memory made her breath catch, but knowing it would go nowhere, as usual, she pushed it away and pulled a light blanket over her son.

But as she undressed and readied herself for bed the events of the evening flooded her, giving her no chance to suppress them.

‘We will meet again.’

The titanium-strong conviction behind Prince Azar’s promise shook through her,

jostling her confidence. She was certain there was some mistake—because even with the gap in her memory she couldn't fathom any scenario in which she would ever cross paths with the heir to the throne of one of the wealthiest kingdoms in Europe, never mind make an impact enough for him to remember her. Even in Vegas.



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Her brain insisted this was a mistake.

But...

No.

Seeing the news of Nick's accident in Arizona, weeks after waking up from a coma with an awful three-month gap in her memory, she'd hoped it would shed light on his possible connection with her own mysterious trauma, but the police had been closed-lipped about giving details. She suspected they'd also been threatened by Nick's family with the same lawsuit she had. Not even her shame-tinged confession that she was pregnant, and that Nick was the strongest contender as father of her child, had swayed them.

She'd returned home to Vegas pregnant, with no clue as to who the father of her baby was. Short of tracking down the hundreds of trust fund billionaires, socialites and royalty among the friends and acquaintances littering the late Nick Balas's social media pages, she'd had to quickly resolve to embrace single motherhood. She'd decided to focus on caring for the baby growing in her womb—the baby she'd already been heads over heels in love with. That way she had also avoided exposing herself to the kind of appalling slut-shaming her father had subjected her mother to before callously disavowing Eden's paternity.

Eden punched her pillow and flipped over, her thoughts peeling back those weeks when she'd attempted to contact Nick's family and quickly been reminded that men like her heartless father still existed—that they remained as vile as her own parent had been, thinking nothing of viciously informing the child they'd so carelessly

created that as far as they were concerned they'd never been born. That their existence meant less than nothing to them.

She'd also been reminded that men like that could shatter lives with a single call to their lawyers. The same way her father had devastated her mother, leaving her a shell of herself. Leaving Eden with a searing promise never to risk walking in her mother's shoes. Ever.

Only to discover she might well have.

She'd heard the many horror stories of influential families wresting custody of a child from financially unstable mothers. Still, she'd given in to a sliver of granting them the benefit of doubt.

Only to receive a 'cease and desist' letter from Nick's brother and father. Containing the labels she'd most dreaded.

Grasping whore... Heartless leech, preying on the memory of our dead family member.

Their vicious response had killed any desire to tell them that she might be pregnant with Nick's son. That Nick, with his dark hair and faintly tanned colouring, might be her son's father, even though Max's eyes were more a silver-grey than Nick's faint blue.

Nick. Who would have been thirty-six today...

As she rose from bed the next day at the crack of dawn, Eden wondered if it was wise to continue the ritual she'd started with Max last year, of laying flowers at Nick's graveside.

While a part of her had questioned what she was doing, a greater part had been adamant about acknowledging the man who might have fathered her child. If—when—her memory returned, and she discovered differently, the worst that would've happened was her having paid respects to a man she'd known briefly.

That resolution didn't stop her stomach from churning as she showered, dressed and went to wake Max.

The sunlight spilling through the curtains caught his dark curls, then his eyes and cheeks. Eden wasn't sure why her heart dipped into her belly, then nosedived to her toes. Millions of men had clefts in their chin. This was merely a coincidence, she insisted, as she bundled Max into warm clothes.

At the park near her apartment they made a game of picking flowers, Max faithfully reciting the colours and excitedly clutching the bouquet as they walked the quarter-mile to the cemetery.

The churning in her belly intensified as she stood before Nick's tombstone, suppressing her frustration and panic at the thought that she might never recover those three months she'd lost.

She urged Max forward. 'Come on, baby. Put the flowers here.'

She smiled shakily at his faint protest at relinquishing his colourful bouquet. But glancing up at her, and perhaps sensing her mood, he stepped forward and dropped them onto the grey marble.

Crouching down to his level, she brushed a kiss on his cheek. 'Good boy.'

She was basking in his smile when the tingling danced over the back of her neck. She glanced up. Several cars dotted the streets dissecting the cemetery, and two dark-

tinted SUVs were parked a short distance away, but nothing stood out to her.

Shaking her head at herself, she silently wished Nick a happy birthday and caught her son's plump hand in hers. She wasn't going to dwell on her jumpy emotions. They were due at Mrs Tolson's for pancakes in forty-five minutes, and the older woman—a former school principal—disliked tardiness, although she was a little more flexible when it came to Max.

Smiling fondly at the thought, Eden slowed her steps to match his tiny, tottering ones as they headed home.

They arrived home with five minutes to spare and stopped at her apartment to wash Max's hands.

'Are you looking forward to pancakes, baby?'

'Pancakes!'

Laughing, she opened her front door.

Then squeaked at the tall, dark and deadly handsome figure filling her doorway. 'Y-you—what are you doing here?'

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:13 am*

Prince Azar stared down the aquiline blade of his nose at her, his stormy grey eyes faintly mocking. ‘I warned you that we would meet again, Eden. Did you think I was—?’

He froze as Max’s chubby hand grasped the door and pulled it wide, his curiosity unfettered as he looked up and up into the face of the stranger on his doorstep.

A stranger who stared back, his eyes flaring, then probing deep. Deeper. His body seemed to turn to stone and a sharp inhalation lanced from his throat a long moment later.

The human brain, as Eden had unwillingly learned over the past three years, was a peculiar, fascinating and often cruel organ. Because it chose that moment to remind her of the sharp and ominous déjà vu she’d felt looking into her son’s eyes two hours ago. To remind her of that alarming sensation when she’d touched Max chin’s last night and lingered on the shallower version of the very cleft she was staring at now.

‘I don’t care what you want. I need you to leave.’

It was a plea couched as a warning.

The fact that it took several seconds for him to hear or grasp her words spoke volumes. When he did, the eyes that met hers were at once pitying and condemning. As if strongly recommending that she mourn her old life as she knew it because he was about to steamroller and subjugate it irrevocably.

‘Who is this?’

The query was ludicrously mild, considering what his eyes and body promised. Considering his immovable position in her doorway. Considering how each bodyguard subtly positioned himself, taking cues she couldn't entirely comprehend from their prince.

Her hand moved from Max's to his shoulder, gathering him essentially closer, ready to protect, todiefor her offspring.

'He's my son. Now leave,' she repeated.

Her voice shook, but held. As visceral as the resolution in his eyes. And she made sure he witnessed the fighting resolve in hers.

'We both know that's not going to happen.'

A sound whistled up her throat. Dismay. Fury. Panic.

Reminding herself to remain calm for Max's sake—a demeanour she absently realised this man was also adopting, although she suspected he was infuriatingly unflappable in most circumstances—she raised her chin. 'I can have the authorities here in minutes.'

'Under what charge? Visiting an old friend?' His gaze dropped to Max. 'Or something else?'

Her breath strangled in her lungs. 'We're not friends. A-and I don't know what you mean by "something else".'

His jaw clenched. 'Let me save you the trouble. You'll get nowhere by calling the police. Not least because I've committed no crime. And I have diplomatic immunity. Make no mistake: I'm not leaving until we've cleared up a few things.' Again, his

eyes dropped to Max, his chest expanding on a breath. ‘Perhaps several things.’

Accepting his words at face value was the quickest way to get rid of him, she suspected. The quickest way to remove his rabid interest from her son.

‘At least let me take him next door.’

Silver-grey eyes darted back to her, narrowed into lethal slits. ‘Who or what is next door?’ he asked, in a voice draped with silk and danger.

‘My neighbour. She—we’re having breakfast with her. She’s expecting us.’ She looked down as Max, tired of the standoff, attempted to step out.

Prince Azar stiffened, his hands slowly emerging from his coat pockets as if ready to physically restrain her son.

Eden pulled him back, then yanked him into her arms when he protested.

‘It’s okay, baby.’

‘Pancakes! Pancakes!’

Hoisting him up had brought him to eye level with Prince Azar, a foolish but ultimately inevitable move. Because his scrutiny of her son’s face was immediate, and so thorough it shook the ground beneath their feet.

‘Dios mio,’ he breathed, on the third, fourth...dozenthpass.

‘Please. I don’t want— Don’t frighten him.’

‘Mama...?’

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:13 am*

She kissed Max's cheek, smoothing a hand down his back as he wriggled harder.

'Which door is your neighbour's?'

'Five B.'

A subtle flick of his fingers and three of the six guards were repositioned in front of Mrs Tolson's door. Prince Azar stepped back, his eyes riveted to her.

'Half an hour while he eats. And we talk.'

Even though she suspected it was futile, she let her speaking glare echo what she felt about his edict.

The moment she stepped out he fell into step beside her. His presence bore down on her like a ton of bricks, but a quick glance showed his attention was riveted on Max. Who in turn stared at him with wide silver eyes.

Silver eyes... Oh, God.

She swallowed her trepidation as she arrived in front of Mrs Tolson's door. Before she could knock, one of the bodyguards stepped in front of her and rapped sharply on the door.

'Coming,' the voice echoed faintly from within.

As footsteps drew nearer, the bodyguard positioned himself firmly in front of the



door, ensuring he was the first thing poor Mrs Tolson saw when she opened the door.

‘Great timing. I was just— Who are you?’ Thankfully there was no alarm, just the sharp query of a former educator used to dealing with people twice her size.

‘Can you move, please?’ Eden said, as firmly as possible without frightening her son.

‘Not yet,’ Prince Azar forestalled.

Then he gave one of his subtle commands.

Before his guards could act, Eden stepped closer to the door.

‘Don’t you dare!’ Everyone froze. Prince Azar’s eyes snapped with unholy fire. She didn’t care. ‘Whatever you’re ordering them to do, the answer is no.’

‘Miss Moss, security protocol dictates—’

‘I don’t care.’ She cut across the guard who’d chastised her last night. ‘You will not invade my neighbour’s privacy.’

‘Eden? What’s going on?’

Sidestepping the bodyguard—to his bristling displeasure—she managed a strained smile. ‘Do you mind having breakfast with just Max for now, Mrs Tolson? I’ll join you shortly.’

No matter what the Crown Prince dictated, she intended the encounter to be short. And uneventful.

Please, God.

She set a wriggling Max down and everyone, including the bodyguards, watched him toddle off into the apartment and head straight for the box of giant Lego Mrs Tolson kept solely for him.

‘Yes, of course,’ her neighbour echoed, but her worried eyes flittered over the men gathered behind her, inevitably lingering on the most formidable one of all. ‘Doesn’t answer my question, though.’

The Crown Prince stepped forward then, and it irritated Eden no end that his guards took a respectful step back, giving him room to slot himself next to her.

She took a breath and her stomach tightened.

Sweet heaven, he smelled delicious. Mouth-watering in a way no one hellbent on harassing a single mother and her child had a right to smell.

He held out his hand to Mrs Tolson and Eden watched her elderly neighbour’s cheek flush as she caught her first proper glimpse of Crown Prince Azar.

‘I’m Prince Azar Domene. Eden and I would be grateful if you could be with...Max for a while.’

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:13 am*

Had his voice caught, saying her son's name?

Eden's insides zapped with wild currents as she watched his gaze fly to Max and linger.

'Oh. Well, yes, of course. But—'

'Gracias,' he slid in smoothly. Then, with another charged stare, he stepped back.

'Two of my guards will keep you company, if that's not too inconvenient?'

Courteous words that didn't give a single ounce of room for negotiation. Mrs Tolson's head was already bobbing as he turned to Eden, clasping her arm and steering her back towards her apartment.

'Invite me in,' he said at the door.

Tension knotted in her chest. 'Do I have a choice?'

He shrugged. 'There's always a choice. No matter how much you might want to convince yourself otherwise.'

She felt the barb lodge itself beneath her breastbone, despite having no clue what she'd done to deserve it. She entered her tiny one-bed apartment, telling herself she didn't care what the shabby but neat space looked like to a man born into royalty, with unfathomable riches, power and influence.

But a tiny part of her couldn't dismiss that knowledge of falling short. The reminder

that, as a child, she'd dreamed of the white picket fence and the loving two-point-four children and family life. And even growing up with the often debauched excesses of Vegas, with very rare glimpses of wholesome, loving families, that kernel of hope had somehow not only survived, it had also grown with the arrival of Max.

One touch...one kiss on top of her newborn's head and that kernel had sprouted into a towering vow to do everything in her power to create a loving home for her son. Even if that home was just for two.

Those dreams would never come true for herself. But she would take pride in knowing it hadn't been for lack of trying. A vindictive father who'd never accepted her but ensured she could never claim anything meaningful from him for herself had seen to that. And maybe she wasn't entirely over the heartache that the man who'd so cruelly told her he wished she'd had never been born had gone out of his way to use his money and influence to keep tabs on her, killing job opportunities before she could secure them, but as long as she had breath in her body she would not be cowed.

Pushing the bleak thoughts away, she flinched when the door clicked ominously shut behind him.

'Speak.'

'Excuse me?'

His nostrils flared, giving him an air of impossible regal authority. 'I'm hanging on by a thread here, Eden.'

The faintly lyrical enunciation of her name started a shiver through her system. One she desperately clamped down upon before it took complete hold of her. This wasn't a time to be finding anything about this man attractive. Not when her senses were shrieking of a danger far more potent than the kind she was used to from powerful

men like him.

‘And that’s my fault how?’ she snapped—then held up her hand, reminding herself that she needed to get through this as quickly as possible and get back to Max. ‘Look, I don’t know what you want me to say. You seem to think you know me, but I assure you I have no recollection of our ever meeting.’

And yet more and more she suspected he had something to do with her missing memory. And that terrified her more than anything.

‘Are you for real?’ he asked.

‘You asked me that last night. My answer hasn’t changed.’

His jaw clenched so hard she feared it would crack. ‘I ought to commend you, Miss Moss. In my whole life, only one person has been able to pull the wool over my eyes so effectively. Not once, as I thought, but twice. Would you like to take a guess who that person is?’

Dread turned her bones to lead. ‘Me...?’

‘You.’ His smile was almost self-chastening. ‘Which would stun most people. Because usually I’m an excellent judge of character.’

‘What can I say? Can’t win them all.’

The last vestiges of his smile disappeared, and that ferocious gaze pinned her in place once more.

‘What were you doing at Nick’s graveside an hour ago?’

She gasped. ‘You were there? Watching me?’ At his sustained, pointed silence she blurted, ‘Why?’

‘Answer my question.’

‘Because I... I knew him?’

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:13 am*

His eyes narrowed. ‘Is that a question?’

No way was she going to tell this man about the most harrowing few months of her life—especially when she still didn’t remember most of it.

‘What do you care?’

The flash of bleakness that shadowed his chiselled features was immediately chased away by fury.

‘Mr... Prince... Your Highness,’ she said, ‘I’m going to say this once, and then I’d like you leave. Because if you don’t, I will call the police. And, contrary to how powerful you think you are, the authorities here don’t take kindly to intruders who outstay their welcome.’

That faint trace of amusement lifted the corners of his lips again, but it evaporated in a nanosecond. ‘This should be interesting.’

She ignored his arid cynicism in favour of gathering her composure to revisit a period of her life that had the ability to make her soul quake. Because it remained shrouded in thick, dense fog, with her every effort to uncover it frustratingly unsuccessful.

‘I remember Nick Balas from his visits to the casino where I worked here in Vegas three years ago. I was a waitress there, and he—he was nice to me.’ A sharp shard of memory attempted to intrude, but it soon danced away. ‘At least I think so...’

She paused when the Prince’s eyes narrowed.

‘I caution you against speaking ill of the dead, Miss Moss...’

‘If you’re going to threaten me about Nick, too, save your breath. I’ve had all the warnings I can stomach—’

‘What do you mean by that? Who has threatened you?’

The bark of laughter charred her throat. ‘It’s more like who didn’t.’ She shook her head. ‘We’re veering from the subject...and I want to get back to my son.’ She paused when he stiffened again, his eyes flashing with a fierce light before he gave a brisk nod. Sucking in deep breath, she continued. ‘I remember talking to Nick a few times...and then I woke up in hospital three months later...pregnant, and with no recollection of who I was. I was told I’d been found on the road in the middle of nowhere, but I don’t remember.’

His eyes widened fractionally. Then deep laughter rumbled from his throat.

Despite the laughter being at her expense, Eden couldn’t stop herself from gaping in wonder at the breathtaking transformation of the man. He looked carefree, as if he had everything he wished for at his fingertips, in that way he was portrayed in glossy magazines that made even the most cynical woman stop, stare and sigh. That made women hope despite suspecting those hopes would never be fulfilled because he was so far out of their league as to be in a different galaxy.

She stared. Every cell in her body tightening and straining at that soul-slashing rumble of sound. Then it was transmitted straight between her legs. Dampening her core. Plumping her flesh. Triggering a stark, breath-stealing yearning.

Even after that brief, stunning transformation was wiped away, and his implacable displeasure was re-established, the sensation remained.



‘Amnesia?’ The word was drenched with abject scepticism. ‘That’s how you want to play this?’

For a moment she was bewildered by that response. Then the fact of being ridiculed over something so vital to her sparked fresh anger. ‘How dare you?’

He stepped up to her, his face etched with superior regal effrontery. ‘How dare I? You think I should tolerate you vilifying my friend and simply accept it?’

She blinked, shock unravelling through her before a degree of understanding layered over it. ‘Is that what this is all about?’ When his face clenched again, she rushed on. ‘You think I’m playing games? I can prove I’m not.’

Keen eyes dissected her, then he nodded. ‘Fine. I’ll bite.’

She shook her head. ‘Not until you give me some answers. Why are you here? Why did you follow me?’

‘No, Miss Moss. That’s not how this is going to go. Let’s see this proof you have first.’

Eden hesitated, wondering if she’d been too rash. She didn’t know this man, after all, and baring her medical secrets to him shouldn’t have been her first choice. But the warning shrieking at the back of her head, telling her to be rid of him asap, wouldn’t let her prevaricate.

Pulling her phone from her pocket, she dialled the number she’d used far too many times in the last three years.

It was answered after three rings. ‘Dr Lloyd Ramsey speaking.’

‘Hi, Dr Ramsey, it’s Eden.’

‘Eden? You’re not due for a check-up for another month. Is everything all right? Have you had any memory issues?’

Prince Azar stiffened, his eyes narrowing at her pointed glare.

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‘Um...no. Everything’s fine. But... I’m here with...with someone who is a little sceptical about my condition. I’d like you to explain it to him, please.’

A slight hesitation ensued. ‘Unfortunately this isn’t the first time one of my patients has faced this, but I’m reluctant to do this over the phone without—’

‘I’m happy for you to record my consent, Dr Ramsey. I just need to you to tell Prince—him—about my condition.’

The doctor sighed. ‘If you’re sure. Am I on speaker?’

‘Yes. Go ahead.’

In brisk words he explained her diagnosis of retrograde amnesia, how there was no telling when or if her memories would return, and the importance of her not unduly stressing over it—which was easier said than done.

Prince Azar Domene listened to the prognosis with a thunderous frown which didn’t disappear once she’d thanked her doctor and ended the call.

In silence he paced the small space, and she felt the atmosphere charging until she was seconds from exploding.

‘You visited Nick’s graveside with your son,’ he bit out, and the sharp edge to his voice jangled her nerves anew.

‘You already know that, since you had me followed.’

A tic rippled in his jaw, and there was a curious hesitation in his face before he bit out, 'Is he Max's father?'

Heat crept up her face. As much as she wanted to be worldly about it, or consign it to her amnesia, she couldn't help but feel a sting of chagrin and shame for her situation. Because this time three years ago she wouldn't have believed herself capable of sleeping with a man she'd just met—especially a spoilt trust fund playboy who believed the world was his for the taking.

'I... I think so, yes.'

His nostrils pinched in a sharp inhalation. 'You mean you don't know?'

Exasperated, she waved her phone at him. 'I can call Dr Ramsey back, if you'd like him to go over it again?'

'He's only given me your diagnosis. He doesn't know everything you claim you can't remember. You obviously knew Nick. Do you remember sleeping with him?'

The edge in his voice was deadlier, his eyes boring into hers with a ferocity that made her every nerve quiver with apprehension.

'My private life is none of your business, Your Highness,' she bit out, cursing the new wave of heat that rushed up her face. 'But for the sake getting rid of you for good, I can tell you one of my last memories of Nick is of discussing a job with him. I don't know whether or not I actually did this job. That's the last thing I remember of my life here in Vegas before I woke up in hospital three months pregnant...' She paused, the overwhelming memory washing over her. 'I was told someone found me hurt and wandering near a truck stop in California.'

'California?' he echoed sharply, and disbelief, shock and scepticism were in his gaze.

‘Does that mean anything to you?’ she asked, equally sharply.

His nostrils flared, but he shook his head. ‘Go on.’

She bristled at the command, but she’d opened this door. She needed to finish quickly so he’d leave her alone.

‘I had no identification with me, so no one knew who I was until I woke up from my coma. Now, have I satisfied whatever morbid curiosity makes you think we’re connected?’

He stared at her for a charged minute, then he prowled close. Closer. Until she could see the flecks of molten silver in his light grey eyes. Until she feared she would be sucked into the mesmerising vortex of his aura.

‘No, Eden. We’re nowhere near done. Do you want to know why?’

She didn’t. Shereallydidn’t. Because she was suddenly terrified of his answer. Terrified of the real reason he was here. The reason he’d reacted so viscerally to her last night.

‘Not particularly. And for the last time, you need to leave.’

## CHAPTER THREE

### AMNESIA.

Such a simple cluster of letters for a profound, life-changing turn of events. As an immutable safeguard, considering he was heir to a powerful throne, a DNA test to establish true paternity was unquestionably necessary. The doctor’s credentials and connection to Eden would also need to be verified.

But Azarknew.

He'd known the second he looked into the boy's eyes.

Hell, he'd known it from fifty yards away as he'd sat frozen in the back of his SUV at the cemetery, watching Eden and the toddler placing flowers on his friend's grave.

He had a son.

Abstractedly, he praised his strict palace childhood tutors for his ability to keep standing, breathing, reasoning when waves of shock threatened to drown him. When an avalanche of possibilities unravelled, pure and urgent, wrapping around his soul with the promise of doing things differently, of being the parent he'd always yearned for as a child—a desire he'd believed he'd rid himself of years ago.

Every instinct screamed at him to stalk next door, drop to his knees and just...stare at the beautiful child he'd help create.

And the boy was beautiful. If nothing else, Eden Moss had given him a healthy son...

'Is my son well? Healthy?' he asked, with a compulsion he couldn't deny.

Her breathing stalled completely. 'What are you talking about? He...he's not yours—'

'He is.' He knew it to his very core. 'He has the Domene eyes. He is mine.'

She lost a shade of colour, but even in her shock Eden Moss remained stunning. Eye-catching in a way he couldn't believe still had such a raw effect on him, considering everything she'd done.

But that was an issue to be tackled later.

He turned on his heel and headed for the door.

'Where are you—? Are you're leaving?'

He clenched his teeth at the naked hope in her voice. Had it been anyone else, he would have felt a sliver of sympathy.

Every Domene since the fiery birth of Cartana half a millennia ago had sealed the formidable reputation of the European kingdom.

Those who'd imagined they might subsume or conquer the relatively small land mass sharing its borders with Spain, France and Italy had quickly learned that size mattered not one iota.

Enemies had been dispatched with brutal efficiency until its dominance had been widely and thoroughly accepted and respected.

These days the Domene men attempted to slap a veneer of civility and sophistication over their outward dealings on the world stage. But behind closed doors...in a matter such as discovering the next heir to the throne of Cartana was living in a squalid one-bed apartment in the back alleys of the world's most decadent city, being raised by a woman who'd shown him the true meaning of duplicity...

Mercy was non-existent in the potent gaze he levelled at her.

‘No, Eden Moss. I’m not leaving. I’m going next door to see my son. To speak to him. To touch him for the first time.’

The words launched a seismic wave through him, changing his very essence from the inside out.

‘You can come with me, or you can stay here and pack your things. Either way, when I leave here in the next hour he’s coming with me.’

Her lips had parted with his first words. By the time he was finished her delectable mouth was gaping, the weight of his resolution widening her eyes.

And perhaps he wasn’t completely heartless, because that sliver of sympathy did flash through him. But he killed it in the next instant, when she blinked, then stepped determinedly towards him.

‘No. Wait!’

He didn’t. A simple equation had supplied his son’s age, reminding him of every small and big milestone he’d lost.

More than two years.

He’d never got to see his son take his first step. Hear his first word.

Dulce cielo.



*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:13 am*

Urgency propelled him down the corridor, and one bodyguard swiftly opened the elderly woman's door. He entered the apartment and saw him—Max—tucked into a highchair, carefully setting down a cup that contained what looked like milk.

A plastic plate containing the remains of cut-up pancakes and fruit sat on a coloured mat decorated with prancing fish. His chin, mouth and cheeks were liberally sticky with some sort of syrup, but it was the cheeky grin of enjoyment on his face that wedged Azar's breath in his solar plexus.

His son looked up. Azar saw the hint of a cleft in his chin, deepening the certainty in his soul that he was looking at his son and heir.

The urgency of that mandate pounded harder—to do better than had been done to him. To ensure his flesh and blood lacked for nothing emotionally. And, yes, he wasn't entirely certain how he would achieve that, seeing as he'd often been referred to as 'the Cold Crown Prince', and hadn't entirely rejected that moniker, especially when it served his purpose. But didn't he thrive on the direst challenge?

He'd suffered a cold and distant mother who, despite being Queen, had been determined to wage a war of attrition on the woman she'd seen as her rival, and a father seemingly unwilling or unable to mediate in that war, resulting in his sons, especially Azar, being perennially caught in the crossfire. And hadn't there been times past when he'd wondered whether the fallout of those battle wounds had ever healed? Enough to overcome his bitterness long enough to forge a half-decent marriage when the time came?

Only to conclude that it wouldn't matter in the end. That all he needed was to ensure

any prospective spouse and queen understood there would be strict intolerance of melodrama or vitriol.

If that directive had to be adjusted now, in respect of how he believed he'd tackle fatherhood, at the unexpected appearance of his flesh and blood, then by God he would rise to the challenge.

He dragged himself from the past to see Max's grin had begun to slip—until he looked past Azar and it re-emerged.

Azar didn't need to look behind him to know Eden had followed hot on his heels. She zipped past him, sending him a wary look before she positioned herself defensively next to her—their—son.

'Mama! Pancakes!' the boy exclaimed.

She brushed her hand over his curls and leaned in to kiss his cheek. 'They look yum-yum! Are they good?'

'Yum-yum,' he concurred.

Azar made a note to supply him with as many pancakes as he could handle. The boy picked up a plastic fork, speared one square and started to offer it to his mother—then froze at Azar's stare.

'Maybe you should sit down? Let's take the...tension down a notch?' her shrewd neighbour said, her gaze darting between them.

As much as he wanted to scoop up the boy and hightail it to his private plane, he took a beat and paced away exactly three steps. He couldn't stomach a greater distance.

He might be able to call upon his diplomatic immunity status for many harmless things, but he was certain the authorities would frown upon him prising his son from his mother's arms. Not to mention the scandal and stress it would cause his homeland and his ailing father.

The father from whom Azar couldn't quite maintain his customary cold detachment, despite the unsettling dysfunctionality that had marred his formative years.

So he curbed the urgency rampaging through his blood, pulled out a chair that didn't look as if it would support his weight and sat.

'Coffee?' the neighbour asked.

About to shake his head, he met her steady stare and changed his mind. It was obvious she cared about Max. This might go smoother if he chose sugar instead of vinegar. 'Sí, gracias.'

Her eyes widened at his response, then her cheeks flushed lightly as she rose to fetch a cup.

Eden glared and he curbed the smile, welcoming the tiny distraction. Until his son's gaze found his again and he was thrown into a vortex of unfamiliar emotion.

He wasn't sure how long he stared. At some point his coffee was placed before him. He sipped it, smoothly hiding his grimace at the poor taste.

But everything and everyone else might have ceased to exist, for all he cared. Well, everyone bar Max's mother. Her mother hen act was hard to ignore. Not to mention the allure that had captivated him three years ago, which remained potent enough to drag his gaze repeatedly to her.

That was how he knew she was stretching out the moment. Delaying the inevitable.

He put an end to that by draining his cup five minutes later and staring pointedly at her.

A faint flush rose in her cheeks as she grabbed a napkin, cleaned the boy up, then started to gather the dirty plates. At his nod, one of his bodyguards stepped forward and relieved her of them, took them to the tiny kitchen.

Azar rose. 'Thank you for the breakfast, Mrs Tolson. We'll take our leave now.'

'No thanks needed. Max is adorable. Eden's doing a great job raising him.'

The clear warning and pointed endorsement triggered a dash of admiration and respect for the old woman.

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Not so much Ramon, who visibly bristled. ‘You need to address His Highness correctly when speaking to—’

Azar held up his hand. ‘We’ll let it slide this once, Ramon.’

This woman had looked after and fed his son, after all.

His gaze slid to Max, who now clung to his mother, one hand fisted in her hair. ‘Shall we?’

Another flare of rebellion lit her eyes and, maldita sea, it shouldn’t feel this hot to be locked in silent battle with her. A battle she conceded after ten seconds, her feet gliding gracefully across the floor towards him.

As he turned to head out, he was too busy suppressing his suddenly inappropriately roused libido to heed the whispered conversation between the women. But he breathed easier when Eden reassured the older woman with a murmured, ‘It’s all right. I’ll be fine.’

She might not be entirely fine—not if he discovered even a crumb of misinformation in her narrative. But that was an issue for later.

At her door, he met her intensified glare. Skin tingling, he was startled to admit he hadn’t felt this enlivened since— In a long while. The dark gloom surrounding his father’s illness had dimmed his already sombre temperament. That was why he hadn’t had a liaison in several months.

Only his brothers' insistence on keeping their birthday tradition had placed him on the royal jet to Vegas a few days ago.

To think if he hadn't come he would never have discovered this life-changing event that had come and gone without so much as a butterfly's wing fluttering against his skin, never mind the sonic boom it deserved.

The enormity of it firmed his resolve.

'You have half an hour left.'

'You can't just toss about edicts and uproot Max from the only home he's ever known. I won't allow it!'

His eyes shifted to his son and a different tingling overcame him. He wanted to touch him. Hold him. But what she'd said needed addressing first.

'You claim you don't remember—'

'It's not a claim—it's the truth,' she hissed, then smoothed a hand down the boy's back when he whimpered.

He swallowed a growl of frustration. 'Very well. You've had a little time to absorb the fact that he's the future heir to the Cartana throne. But, as much as I'm sure you would prefer swathes of time to come around to the idea, unfortunately it doesn't work that way. As we speak there will be several media entities wondering what I'm doing here. It's only a matter of time before the paparazzi arrive and camp outside this apartment building, hounding your neighbours and digging through your trash.'

It was a slight exaggeration, since he'd been meticulous about evading the media, if only for a short time, because those bloodhounds could sniff out news buried on an

asteroid circling the Milky Way. But he intended to use every tool in his arsenal to move things along quickly.

Far be it from him to turn histrionic, but destiny itself pounded at him. And he wouldn't be denied.

'Is that what you want for yourself? For him?' he prodded softly.

She sucked in a shaky breath, her eyes darkening with a swirl of emotion. Her soothing hand had worked, but his clever son could clearly sense the tension in the air, and was watching him with an intensity Azar silently applauded.

Now that he'd delivered the unsettling scenario, he was prepared to relent. Just. 'Pack what you will both need for the day. We'll return to my hotel.'

For now.

'Then what?' she parried wisely.

He shrugged. 'I've already delayed my return home for a day. I can probably toss in another. That should be enough time for you to wrap your head around the fact that your life isn't going to remain the same. No matter how much you wish it.'

\* \* \*

To her credit, she was packed in fifteen minutes. Although judging from the meagre things she'd glumly thrown into a backpack, she didn't intend for it to be a long-term outing.

Azar stifled his objections, reminding himself that Max was his responsibility too now, and whatever the boy needed would be more than adequately provided for.

‘You don’t have a car seat?’ he asked.

Her delicate jaw tightened. ‘I don’t have a car.’



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*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:13 am*

That explained why they'd walked back from the cemetery.

He turned to his chief of security. 'Ramon—?'

'Already taken care of, Your Highness. I suspected we might need one and sent Alfredo out to get it. It'll be here presently.'

This was the reason he'd kept his childhood friend on as the head of his royal guard, even after his brother Valenti had started a very successful security consultancy, and he always excused Ramon's occasional grumpiness and rigid sticking to protocol.

He nodded his thanks. Then at last he approached his son, where he sat on the carpet, playing with a giraffe and a tower of Lego.

Crouching down next to him, he caught the faint baby scent mixed with talcum powder. A scent that was instantly imprinted on his senses for ever.

'May I?' he muttered to Eden.

He saw her swallow before, eyes wide, she assented with a tiny nod.

Azar reached out, touched the thick curl resting at his son's temple. Smooth. Springy. Then he moved his hand lower, over his warm, soft skin.

A shudder went through him.

Then more powerful, alien emotions invaded his very bones.

A need to protect. To cherish. To claim. In a way he'd never been cherished nor claimed. With affection and acceptance—not out of militant duty and obligation because of the title destiny had thrust upon him.

Max glanced up, stared solemnly, and then, with a smile breaking out on his cherubic face, he held up his toy. 'Giwaffe?'

'Sí...yes. Giraffe. He's very handsome,' Azar murmured, lying through his teeth.

The toy was worn to the point of being tattered, but it was clear it was much loved. He tossed a trip to the toy store into his immediate itinerary as he indulged himself with another caress of his son's cheek. Obsession bloomed, and he felt his heart pounding as emotions filled every corner of his consciousness.

He was a father.

'Prince...um...?'

'Your Highness.'

His head snapped up. Ramon stood a respectful distance away, holding the car seat. Eden stood next to him, rebellion and apprehension sparking in her eyes.

He'd been completely lost in his son's presence and he didn't feel one iota of guilt. Going one better, Azar wrapped gentle hands around Max and stood, his small, precious weight making Azar inhale shakily.

'Are you ready to go an adventure, Max?' he asked.

The wide silver-grey eyes he'd seen reflected at him since childhood—from his father, and in recent years from his brothers—blinked at him.

‘Out?’

‘Out,’ he confirmed thickly, moving to the door.

He only realised he was holding his breath when it was released at hearing Eden’s footsteps behind him.

Five minutes later, as they were pulling away, a previous thought returned, demanding an answer.

‘Earlier, you mentioned being threatened by Nick’s people. Did you tell them about Max? That you thought he was Nick’s?’

The very idea of anyone else attempting to claim his son lanced jagged fury through him.

There was a moment’s hesitation, then she shook her head. ‘I thought about it, but I didn’t in the end.’

Her eyes flickered, then her lashes swept down as a wave of heat coloured her cheeks. Azar was faintly amazed she could still blush.

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‘I wanted my memories to return,’ she continued. ‘To be absolutely sure.’

He suppressed the peculiar sensation whistling through him at being so forgettable to a woman—an unheard-of thing before this one, whether by design or accident.

Instead, he dwelled on her answer. Commended her for it, in fact.

Because he knew what she meant.

There were those who knew better than to pick a fight with the powerful Domene family and a kingdom like Cartana. But a few had tried to slap false paternity on Azar, thinking they could use the widely known circumstances of his birth to their advantage. They’d soon learned the folly of that.

He was secretly thankful that Eden had waited. The last thing he needed with his father’s ill health was for his grandson’s paternity to be gossip fodder.

‘A wise decision. It’ll prevent any unpleasant publicity.’

Unreadable emotion flicked across her face, then she turned away to fuss over their son. The urge to cup her chin and redirect her gaze bit at him. He forestalled it, plucking out his phone and placing the first of many calls in the fifteen minutes it took them to arrive at the discreet entrance of his five-star hotel.

Once he had the nod from Ramon, he plucked his son from the car seat and entered the private elevator that shot them up to a floor reserved solely for his use.

‘About damn time you turned up.’ The deep voice echoed from the royal suite’s living room. ‘Not sure what you’re playing at, but pulling a no-show isn’t cool. I don’t care if you’re the Crown Prince or not.’

Azar stifled a groan. He’d forgotten about his brothers and their brunch plans today. Hell, he’d relegated every damn thing to the go to hell list the moment he’d seen Eden and the toddler at the cemetery.

Now, as he carried his son into the room, he watched his brothers’ shrewd gazes flit from him to Eden to Max. Then stay on Max. Linger for long moments and seeing the exact thing he had the moment he’d seen his son up close.

They both grew slack-jawed with shock.

‘Holy—’

\* \* \*

‘Watch it. Young ears and curse words don’t mix, brother.’

Eden watched the slimmer of the two men shove at the hand that had covered his mouth before he’d released the curse.

Azar Domene’s half-brothers—the ones the Crown Prince had spent most of last night with out on the terrace during his birthday party. The two other parts of the trio every red-blooded woman had ogled and whispered feverishly about throughout the event.

Their combined magnetism had cautioned her to stay away from them the moment she’d spotted them on arrival. And she’d almost succeeded.

She couldn't remember their names, but she'd come across many articles about them on the internet while looking up Nick's accident—especially the talkative one who ran a renowned haute couture label.

She recalled him being a little wild—a playboy who attracted women like flies to a feast. Not that the identical brother didn't command the same attention, but his was a brooding, jarring sort of intensity, unlike the Crown Prince's fiery, magnetic force field that gripped and compelled and didn't let go no matter how much you tried.

'Are you just going to stand there, Your Highness? Or are you going to introduce us?' the Playboy muttered.

He hadn't taken his eyes off Max, and a peculiar expression drifted over his face when Azar moved closer to them.

It seemed anyone who met her son was completely enthralled by him. She understood the sentiment. Hadn't she fallen deeply in love the moment the doctor had placed him in her arms? But their infatuation didn't diminish the apprehension spiking through her.

She'd seen Azar's reaction the moment he'd touched Max.

Had known without a shadow of a doubt that he was making irreversible plans where her son was concerned.

Just as she had seen and hadn't been able to dismiss the clear resemblance between father and son...the inescapable reality that her suspicions last night had been correct.

Crown Prince Azar Domene of Cartana was the father of her child.

Which meant she'd had sex with this man at some point three years ago!

‘I know. He has the same effect on most women.’

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She jumped at the mocking whispered comment and snatched her gaze from where it had latched on to Prince Azar, to find the Playboy a few feet away, his hand unfurled in greeting.

‘That’s enough, Teo,’ Azar grated.

‘Really? I’ve barely started.’ He stepped closer. ‘Let me formally introduce myself. I’m Teo Domene.’

She offered her hand and suppressed a gasp when he started to raise it to his lips. A thick rumble from Prince Azar made him freeze. He smiled and winked, before shaking her hand formally and releasing her.

‘Eden Moss,’ she murmured.

Before he could say anything else, the brooding one nudged him out of the way. He didn’t offer his hand, and his gaze was direct, but not as piercing as his brother’s. ‘Valenti Domene,’ he returned. Then, after a moment, ‘You’re Eden Moss.’ It wasn’t a greeting—more like a calibration of past events. ‘Three years ago. Arizona. The Magnis Club.’

‘The Magnis Club?’ she echoed dazedly. Then his words truly sank in, making her inhale sharply. ‘Wait... You know me? You remember me?’

His stare intensified. ‘Any reason why we wouldn’t?’

He opened his mouth, but Azar interrupted. ‘No, there isn’t.’ When both men turned



to him, he said, 'We'll have to reschedule brunch. As you can see, there's been a development.'

Both brothers' focus switched to him, then to Max.

'The understatement of the century. But understandable,' Valenti rasped. 'Is he well?' he asked gruffly.

Eden barely stopped herself from rolling her eyes as Teo held up his hands.

'No. Wait... You can't just throw us out. I have so many questions,' he protested.

'They'll have to wait. But you can say a quick hello to your nephew before you leave.'

The dizzying rollercoaster that had been revving up since Prince Azar had turned up on her doorstep took another one-eighty loop.

'You don't know yet that he's yours,' she blurted, voicing the same objection as before.

Three pairs of eyes swung her way.

Then Teo barked out a disbelieving laugh. 'You'd have to have been living in a cave without internet access or to be stone-cold blind to mistake this angelic rascal as anyone but Azar's.' Approaching his brother, he smoothed a gentle finger down Max's cheek, much as Azar had done. 'How similar is he to that childhood photo of Azar at the same age, Valenti?' he murmured softly.

'Similar enough to fool my security software for a minute or two,' his brother replied. 'Show her.'

Teo dropped his hand long enough to fish out his phone. Within seconds he was striding back to her, displaying an image that made her heart jump in her chest.

Until that second, Eden had held out some half-hearted hope that the obvious wasn't true. That once her memory returned there would be some far less overwhelming explanation for what was unfolding.

Reality battered her with hurricane force, driving home the fact that she really had—at some point—shared touches, kisses, bodies with this man. This man who, on paper, was so like her father—everything she abhorred about wealthy and powerful men and the way they wielded that power.

The way they only needed to snap their fingers to alter lives.

Like hers. Like her son's.

And yet heat scorched her at their continued scrutiny and the thoughts cartwheeling through her head. Thoughts of what that moment—those moments—had been like.

Had she enjoyed it?

Had he blown her mind and she his?

Her nipples started to tighten, and she swiftly averted her gaze to her son. Her beautiful, caring, harmless son.

Who was now second in line to a European throne.

Stumbling to the nearest chair, she sank into it uninvited—protocol be damned. A moment later a glass of water was pushed into her hand, and she looked up into the eyes of Valenti Domene. His fierce examination had her murmuring quick thanks and

refocusing her attention on the plush carpeting.

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She didn't care if she looked weak. She needed to get through the next few minutes, collect herself and plan her next move.

Because what Azar had suggested—that she and Max would never be going back home—was preposterous.

Wasn't it?

'Hasta luego, hermanos,' Azar repeated pointedly.

Valenti was the first to move, pausing to slide Max a half smiling look before clasping his brother's shoulder briefly. Then Teo repeated the gesture.

Seconds later, they were gone. And Azar was moving towards her.

Max reached for her, and Azar reluctantly handed him over. She'd hoped having him in her arms would focus her attention, but the compulsion she couldn't seem to fight dragged her gaze to Azar's again.

'You'll have to make a list of what he needs and I'll make sure—' He stopped when a knock came at the door, his nostrils flaring with displeasure. 'Yes?'

A man slightly older than Azar entered, his steps slowing when he saw them. 'Your Highness, I've made the alterations to your schedule, as requested. Do you need anything else?'

The Crown Prince hesitated for a second before he beckoned him in. 'Eden, this is

Gaspar—my private secretary. He'll ensure the transition runs smoothly.'

Unlike the Prince's brothers', Gaspar's face remained carefully neutral as he nodded to her. He was probably used to the eclectic demands of royalty.

'I need you to draft a press statement to be released by the palace after I speak to my father and the royal council.'

'Right away, Your Highness.' The man's gaze darted briefly to her, then to Max, before returning to his prince. 'And the subject matter?'

Azar's lips flattened for a moment. 'I have recently discovered that I've fathered a son. He was born...?' He raised his eyebrow at her.

Rebellion, and the stomach-hollowing reality that she was losing control of the situation, urged her to withhold the information. But she knew his clever minions would unearth it within the hour. In clipped tones she supplied it, then listened as he gave succinct instructions about the wording of his statement.

It was neither flowery nor stark. But it didn't hide the naked truth despite withholding specific details. It merely stated that at some point three years ago he'd fathered a son, whose existence he hadn't discovered before today. It left little doubt that Azar Domene intended to claim his son and proudly insert him into the dramatic fabric of his life, groom him to take the Cartana throne one day.

The raw facts shook her to the foundation of her soul, made the blood roar in her ears until it blocked everything else out.

'You have objections?'

She looked up and realised that Gaspar had left. That she could freely express her

deep reservations. 'Of course I do. This is madness. You're moving too fast.'

'Let me guess: you're still hellbent on insisting you have unbreakable ties to that apartment? Or to your mother, perhaps?'

Her insides chilled. 'What do you know about her?'

He shrugged. 'I would prefer you tell me. I don't wish to harm your recovery by supplying information that might unduly distress you.'

A tiny, bewildering knot unwound inside her. This small display of consideration, so unlike any she'd known before, was certainly not something her father would've granted her mother under similar circumstances. But it meant nothing. It could very well be a lure to achieve his ends. She couldn't risk lowering her guard around this man whose determination to wrest her son from her was anything but quiet and understated.

'The last I heard from her two years ago, she was in a commune near Joshua Tree.'

She saw a layer of tension ease off him. 'That ties in with what you told me about her being in California,' he said.

Her eyes widened. 'I told you that three years ago?'

He stared at her for moment, then nodded. 'Now we've established she isn't a mainstay in your life, what other hurdles do we need to overcome?' he asked archly.

Irritation replaced bewilderment. 'Please don't belittle my concerns.'

'Tell me you truly want to stay in this city, in that apartment, with my son, working menial jobs while an old woman who can barely stand up straight looks after him,

and I'll endeavour to take your concerns seriously.'

The accurate assessment of everything she'd yearned to better in her circumstances brought a guilty flush. But she wasn't ready to give in. Not by a long shot.

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‘Just because my circumstances aren’t as ideal or as rosy as yours, it doesn’t mean I’m going to let you ride roughshod over the direction of my life.’

‘Mi linda, I hate to remind you again, but you slept with a crown prince three years ago and bore his son. The only direction your life is going to take now, if you wish to put him first, is to secure his birthright. And making that happen involves him transitioning entirely to his fatherland and taking his rightful place as first in line to the throne.’

‘First? Don’t you mean second?’

The flash of bleakness in his eyes was searing. ‘No. I don’t.’

The gravity of that response, words uttered with no further elaboration, washed over her, and then settled deep to weigh her down.

‘What’s the hurry? If he’s first in line surely he can have a normal li—?’

‘No,’ he interjected forcefully. ‘He was born extraordinary. The quicker you wrap your mind around that, the better. Besides...’ His voice dropped, and further dark shadows rushed over his face. ‘There’s little time to lose.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

For a moment his sensual lips remained pursed. Then, dragging his fingers through his hair in an aberrant show of agitation, he said, ‘It means that my father’s health is failing. He’s abdicating in a matter of months. It means that our son will soon become



first in line to the throne. I've already missed more than two years of his life. No more, Eden. You and I will take him home and we will do the right thing. So he can, with minimal turmoil, take his rightful place in due course as the Cartanian Crown Prince.'

And because she knew that influential, powerful men like him created their own versions of right and wrong, she insisted on clarification.

'What exactly does "the right thing" mean?'

'The only way my son can rightfully inherit the throne when the time comes is for us to be married.'

## CHAPTER FOUR

EDEN WAS GLAD she was sitting down when his hallucination-inducing words tunnelled into her brain. Her fingers dug into the plush velvet padding and she wondered whether she would pass out from the shock.

She concluded that would be impossible.

Because he couldn't mean them.

'I— What?'

Her babbled response fell in dizzying whispers. She blinked up at him, and part of her brain computed the ruthless determination on his face. The growing realisation that he was serious.

'I— You're crazy!'

Another flattening of his lips distracted her briefly, until he responded. 'I assure you I am of perfectly sound mind.'

'But... But I'm a w-waitress. With potholes in my memory. I can't be your—your—'  
She stopped. 'Look, I think this has gone far enough!' she snapped, her conviction that this was all some sort of elaborate game gaining momentum.

Her father had done enough of that, taunting both her and her mother from his lofty position. She would absolutely not take it from this man.

The lethal blaze growing in his eyes quickly abated when Max, deciding he needed to include others in his joy, pulled himself upright and started towards her, holding out a colourful storybook.

But a few steps from her he glanced up at Azar—his father—and changed direction.

Azar scooped him up, with a glint of pleased satisfaction in his eyes. She watched father and son, attempting not to feel slighted by Max's innocent betrayal.

After a moment granting his son his attention, Azar shifted his gaze to her. 'You think this is some sort of game?' he asked, his voice deadly soft.

She shrugged. 'You were pretty upset with me last night about something besides my not knowing who you were. Are you going to deny that?'

Shadows drifted across his face and his jaw clenched once. 'This is neither the time nor the place—'

'I think it's exactly the time and place. Or do you often go around tossing out proposals to women you don't like?'

And not just any proposal. One that guaranteed she would bequeen. Which was just—absurd.

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For a long stretch he studied her, almost dispassionately. ‘You’re the first to receive a proposal of marriage from me. But you’ll also recall that I have said this is entirely for the sake of my son’s destiny as heir to the throne.’

She noticed starkly that he didn’t address the subject of not liking her, and chose not to examine why it left a dark hollow in her belly.

‘Ourson. He’s not just yours—no matter how much you wish it so.’

A flare of colour stained his cheekbones at her speaking look at the way he clutched Max to his chest.

‘I’m not going to pretend I don’t feel possessive over the son I didn’t know existed until three hours ago,’ he bit out, redirecting his gaze to glide with open possession over Max.

That hollow in her stomach widened, intensifying that feeling of being left out in the cold that had been a far too familiar sensation since childhood. Because her father’s treatment of them hadn’t forged a bond between her and her mother. It had done the opposite, stripping her mother of every last ounce of self-esteem and sending her looking for love and affection in all the wrong places. The end result of which was that Eden had been abandoned to find her own way in life.

As much as she wanted to deny it, she knew wounds like those festered. Scarred. Left hearts and emotions intensely wary.

Striving to suppress the echoes of anguish, she opened her mouth, but he beat her to a

response.

‘As for your profession...it’s nothing we can’t spin to suit the circumstances. It’s not common, but it’s not rare either.’

‘A prince plucking a downtrodden single mother from destitution into untold luxury and status?’

She’d meant it to sound caustic. Cynical in the extreme. But it emerged a touch breathless, wrapped in undeniable echoes of that dream of an unrealistic happily-ever-after that made her cringe.

‘Exactly so,’ he concurred, ignoring her abrasive tone. ‘Provided you play your cards right.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’ She almost snorted as she said the words she seemed unable to stop parroting. ‘If you think I’m going to jump through hoops for—’

‘It means there’s a mountain of protocol and a strict code of behaviour you’ll need to adhere to as my wife and princess. You’ll need to be guided through it.’

The title was too nerve-shredding to contemplate just then, so she brushed it aside in favour of his other statement. “‘Code of behaviour’”? It’s almost as if—’ It was her turn to narrow her eyes as her insides shrivelled. ‘You don’t think very highly of me, do you?’ she murmured, then inhaled sharply. ‘Something happened three years ago, didn’t it? Something you’re judging me for?’

The tightening of his face told her she’d hit the bullseye.

‘Tell me what I did,’ she demanded.

‘Even if I was inclined to rehash your past, your doctor was at pains to advise otherwise. I may be many things, but I’m not a monster who’d blithely risk your health for my own purposes,’ he bit out.

That confused her. Surely he wasn’t looking out for her? That would make him almost...considerate...

‘Mama!’

Max choosing that moment to demand her attention was both frustrating and mollifying. Azar handed him over, reluctantly, then crouched before her. She grew far too aware of the arms he rested on either side of her thighs. Hands that had touched her, caressed her when they made a child together...

‘What does he need?’ he enquired when Max continued to fret.

Switching into ‘mom mode’ took effort. ‘He’s tired,’ she said. ‘His morning has been overwhelming. A snack and some warm milk usually do the trick.’

Azar nodded, and she watched—with that punch of surprise she’d experienced a minute ago—as he rose and went to the phone. Minutes later, a butler wheeled in a sterling silver trolley with tiny bowls of everything a toddler might want to snack on, and a jug filled with warm milk on its own silver platter.

Under any other circumstances Eden would have joked at the sheer over-the-top-ness of it all. But she knew she was getting a tiny glimpse of what the future held for her son. Possibly for her.

A life surrounded by people who thought nothing of using their wealth and influence to buckle people to their will—like her father.

A life far removed from the simplistic one she'd secretly dreamed of.

Could she do it?

Even for Max's sake?

Near silence reigned as Eden placed Max in the sleek-looking highchair that had appeared. It was only broken by his enthusiasm for his snacks.

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But then, ‘What happened in the past doesn’t change a single thing about what needs to happen for our son’s sake now,’ Azar murmured as they both watched Max eat. ‘He’s the most important thing. Sí?’

Turning her head, she met his implacable gaze, and in a split second a serrated white-hot memory pierced her brain, causing a gasp.

‘What is it?’ he enquired sharply.

She shook her head, her hand going to her midriff as her heart pounded. ‘It’s— Every now and then I get a...a twinge. A memory attempting to break free, the doctor says.’

‘Is it triggered by something specific?’

Sí. That word, spoken in lyrical Spanish with that almost seductive cadence.

Her face flamed as his eyes probed, awaiting her answer. ‘Sometimes,’ she prevaricated.

He stared for another handful of seconds, then exhaled. ‘I have meetings and calls to make. The butler will show you the guest suite when you’re ready. But, Eden...’

‘Yes?’

‘Be prepared to give me an answer when I return.’

‘Or what?’



A slow, heart-thumping smile curved his lips. ‘Don’t ask questions you won’t like the answers to, cara. Suffice it to say, I always get what I want. And trust me when I tell you that claiming the son I didn’t know I had, and ensuring I don’t miss a second of making up the time I’ve lost with him, is number one on my list of desires.’

Long after he’d brushed a kiss on Max’s head and left the room she was grappling with his grave words. Registering that while her father had done the opposite—ruthlessly cutting her off, then ensuring she would never be a threat to him by doing everything in his power to ensure she never thrived—Azar was using his power to claim his son. To name him his heir within hours of meeting him.

But surely she was simply dealing with the other side of the same coin.

Wasn’t she?

\* \* \*

Telling his father of his first grandchild’s existence was easier than Azar had anticipated, with the wry reminder that similar circumstances were the reason Azar’s own twin half-brothers existed easing the knots in his gut as he relayed the news.

‘I would prefer my sons don’t make a habit of following too closely in my footsteps, though,’ King Alfonso said, with a grunt that dissolved alarmingly into a hacking cough.

Azar’s fist tightened around his phone, his insides churning as he waited for his father to catch his breath.

‘Not that I would give any of you up for the world,’ King Alfonso added. ‘You and your brothers are the manifestations of a dream I believed would never come true.’

Then why didn't you fight to prevent the nightmares of our childhood?

Azar grappled with the resurgence of bitterness as his father fell into the story he loved retelling, of how the palace doctors had pronounced him sterile after a bad case of mumps in his late teens. How he'd struggled through accepting that he would never father children and then, straight after finishing university, had gone on a months-long hedonism streak through Europe with a swathe of women. Only to discover after returning home that he'd got not one, but two women pregnant.

Azar's right to the throne had only come about because he'd been the one born first—a fact he knew had always been and remained the subject that caused severe friction between his mother and his twin brothers' mother.

Hell, it had been the reason why their respective mothers had spitefully connived to keep them apart until well into their early teens...a situation King Alfonso had been either laughably ineffectual at battling or blindly naïve about until too much harm was done.

Now here he was, following directly in his father's footsteps. Alfonso had married the woman who'd birthed his first born in a hastily arranged wedding that had surprisingly withstood the test of time, despite her senseless rivalry with the mother of Azar's twin brothers. And despite the questionable machinations from his mother that had warped Azar's childhood and left him certain that marriage was anathema to him.

Yes, he'd known from the moment he'd been able to make such deductions for himself that there would come a time when he'd have to marry, to further the Domene line. But despite the recent rumblings through the royal council, telling him that it was time, he'd managed to put it off. Had given himself the mental deadline of age forty before selecting one of the many 'suitable' women lined up to be his queen.

Between that, his father's failing health and the earth-shaking news of his son's existence, he was surprised he wasn't knocking back several whiskies to numb the shock.

Blinking, he refocused as his father asked, 'What's his name?'

He pulled in a long, sustaining breath, his chest doing that curious squeezing thing when he thought of his son. The boy he would move heaven and earth to protect from the acrimony and indifference he'd suffered.

'She named him Max.'

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His father hummed in approval. ‘Excelente. A good, strong name. Your great-grandfather was named Maximiliano, if you recall?’

He did, and when he’d first heard it he’d wondered if Eden had chosen the name deliberately, attempting to gain an advantage with that stroke of familial evocation. Her condition put that into doubt, though.

If it was true...

While the greater part of him believed her amnesia diagnosis, he couldn’t help but remember how effectively she’d pulled the wool over his eyes with her false innocent act three years ago. For weeks he’d bought that act, believing her to be a good woman caught in a bad situation, until the truth had slapped him in the face.

She’d cleverly played Nick and him against each other. Expressing interest in him before inexplicably switching to his friend, then back again. It had been the first time Azar had experienced raging jealousy, and he’d detested the turbulent emotion as much as he’d detested its instigator.

She should have been a run-of-the-mill hook-up—taken, pleased and forgotten in the usual sequence of his liaisons.

Instead, he’d discovered that he’d bedded a virgin.

Then discovered that she’d selected him only because she’d seen him as the highest bidder.

While he'd felt a primal, borderline uncivilised satisfaction in claiming that prize, he'd been livid when she'd given herself to his best friend. When both she and Nick had taunted him with his expendability that last time before she'd slid into his car.

'You've had your fun but give it up. She's with me now.'

'Yes, Azar. I'm with Nick now.'

Words that reminded him that even after all this time he wasn't over the searing anathema of coming second best. Mommy issues, Teo had called it. He'd rolled his eyes yesterday. Mocked his brother. But the truth resided just there, in a sharp starburst of indelible pain, beneath the layers of muscle close to his heart. Was it any wonder that thus far the thought of reliving any of that by saddling himself with a wife was abhorrent?

And, yes, he'd hated his own friend for that too—a situation that had only compounded his guilt when Nick had perished before they could make amends.

Those weeks in Arizona they'd both discovered their weak spot. A stunning woman called Eden. And as the final betrayal she'd chosen his best friend, slid into his sports car after witnessing the lowest point of Azar's life—fighting over a common woman—intending to sail into the sunset with Nick.

Only for his best friend to wrap his car around a tree and for Eden to fall off the face of the earth.

She'd done that to him. And it remained a spike stuck in his gut.

'Azar?'

He started, realised he'd lost himself down another bitter memory lane and forgotten

his father. ‘Sí, Papá?’

‘I asked when you were returning home with my grandson. That is your intention, yes?’

It was couched in a question, but it was an order. And, while his father might have grown frail far too quickly over the past year, King Alfonso still commanded with an iron fist. It was a shame that iron fist had never succeeded in stamping out the acrimonious battlefield that had been Azar’s childhood...

‘Yes. I... We’ll be home in a day or two. Three at most.’

No matter what feeble protests the cheaply dressed siren next door threw up.

He was still in combat mode when he left his office two hours later. Gaspar had advised him that his son was taking his afternoon nap. Which made it the perfect time to finalise his discussion with Eden.

He found her on the terrace, with a glass of what looked like mineral water in one hand and the other hand gliding through the rich, dark butterscotch abundance of her hair. She’d discarded her coat, revealing skinny leggings that moulded her shapely legs and rounded behind. The snug hem of her beige top was bordering on threadbare, emphasising her trim waist. While she’d possessed curves in all the right places the last time he saw her, he realised again that her hips had thickened slightly.

Mouth-wateringly.

He paused in the French doorway to compose himself, unwelcome heat rising as memory struck again—this time of sinking his fingers into that heavy silk mass, gripping it tight in a sensual direction that had made her scream and turn him inside out with a scorching pleasure it had taken an infuriatingly long time for him to forget.

Long after he'd left Arizona he'd considered whether that response too had been manufactured.

His jaw clenched now as he dismissed the memory and stepped onto the terrace.

'Eden.'

She whirled around, her eyes going wide. Her curvy bust jiggled with her motion and Azar stifled a curse when his temperature rose several more notches. This was merely residual effects of that unwanted trip down memory lane. Nothing more.

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‘Um... Max is taking a nap.’

‘I’m aware. Have you had lunch?’ He recalled she hadn’t eaten the pancakes this morning.

She shrugged. ‘I don’t have much of an appetite.’

Whether or not that was a dig at him, he chose not to contemplate. ‘Nevertheless, I’d prefer you eat something.’

‘Because you think whatever you’re about to throw at me requires I have sustenance?’

He allowed himself a grim smile. ‘I don’t just think, cara. I know.’

Her nostrils quivered. ‘I don’t know if that’s a joke or a veiled threat, Your Highness. But I’m not amused.’

Azar stiffened slightly, wondering if she remembered she’d used that same prim little voice to say his title three years ago. At first it had been to pretend she wasn’t interested in his advances. Then it had been because he’d demanded it while she was on her knees, driving him to heaven and back.

Now it was meant as a dig, and it would’ve been amusing had there not been so much awful stagnant water beneath that particular bridge.

He sensed Gaspar hovering behind him and turned to give the nod for their lunch to



be brought out. Striding to the set table, he pulled out her chair and waited beside it.

Her gaze took in the set places, then rose to his. 'Did you hear what I just said?'

'I'm not deaf, Eden. Come...sit.'

He knew his even tone confused her. It had been carefully cultivated, purely for his mother, by the time he was seven years old and had come to realise that answering her shrill machinations with tantrums only made her act out more. That treating the Queen with sometimes impersonal kid gloves, like his father did, was the only way to defuse her volatile moods.

That lesson had served him well in his sexual liaisons in adulthood, effectively dismantling any foolish aspirations.

In the aftermath of Arizona, Azar had realised—to his bafflement and too late—that he was the one who'd lost control of his emotions. And that he had played expertly into Eden's hands. She'd used his unfettered passions to manipulate him, much as his mother had before he'd gained the upper hand.

But Eden Moss would learn that very little threw him off course these days. That his passions were very much tethered. Granted, the day's events had made this a unique day, as had those weeks they'd spent together in the desert...

No. He wasn't about to wonder why most of the distinctive events of his adult life involved this woman.

'I don't have an answer for you,' she pre-empted, defiance edging her husky voice.

One corner of his mouth twitched. 'You will. Today or tomorrow. Either way, things are now set in motion that cannot and will not be undone.'

‘Such as...?’

She moved from the railing, approaching with a graceful glide that drew his eyes to her swaying hips. His fingers tapped the back of the chair, and after another charged second she sniffed and took the seat.

Azar took his own seat before responding. ‘Such as my father, the King, having been informed that he is a grandfather and insisting on meeting Max at the earliest opportunity. Which means presenting my son in Cartana by Friday at the latest. Such as the private doctors at the palace waiting to provide the DNA and other tests—’

‘I didn’t agree to that,’ she protested.

Her fingers tightened around her knife and for a moment he wondered whether she would use it, much as his mother had attempted to attack him when he was twelve and he hadn’t answered one of her manic questions quickly enough.

The memory dampened his already downturned mood.

‘Unfortunately, that forms part of the protocol I mentioned...’ He hesitated a moment before deciding to divulge the rest of the news. After all, she’d discover the reality before the weekend. ‘With my father being unwell, anyone admitted to his presence needs to be medically approved. And before all of that happens we need to make a stop in Milan or Paris.’

‘Why?’

His gaze drifted over her, lingering on the faintly frayed neckline of her top. On the creaminess of the skin those cheap clothes caressed.

Focus.

‘The Royal Family of Cartana requires adherence to certain immutable high standards. Where we stop depends on which of Teo’s boutiques is ready to accommodate a complete wardrobe fitting at such short notice.’

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‘Teo?’ she echoed. ‘He has a fashion house, right?’

Azar tightened his gut against the needles of disgruntlement triggered by the awe in her voice. It was far too reminiscent of the jealousy he’d felt three years ago. But he couldn’t curb the grating sensation when he responded. ‘The House of Domene fashion brand, yes. Does that sway you into agreement?’ he bit out, before he could stop the betraying query.

Her face immediately tightened. ‘You think a bunch of designer clothes and accessories are all it takes to swing a life-changing decision in your favour?’ she hissed, with more venom than he’d anticipated.

He shrugged, demolishing that tiny hollow inside, made by her disappointment in him. ‘Is it? Either way, your life is going to change. If this smooths the way, then what does it hurt?’

Her eyes flashed with more venom before she pursed her lips. ‘You realise all you’re doing is confirming that you don’t like me very much? And I know you don’t think it matters, but it matters to me.’

‘Noted.’

Her lashes descended, then she flicked a glance at him. Azar noted her cheeks were lightly flushed, her chest rising and falling in a higher rhythm.

Her tongue slicked across her plump lower lip. ‘Can I ask you something?’

‘You may ask, but I don’t guarantee an answer.’

‘I get the feeling you’re hiding behind Dr Ramsey’s advice, but—’ Her flush deepened and the stirring in his own groin intensified. ‘Did we—? Was it a one-night stand—between us?’

‘You’re asking if I took you more than once?’

Her expression remained veiled. ‘Y-yes.’

He shifted in his seat, the combination of her innocence and his need to know what she was thinking stirring further restlessness through him.

‘Without going into memory-endangering details, the answer is yes.’

So many days. So many positions. So many capricious emotions he’d thought left behind in his teenage years. If he hadn’t witnessed the perils of drugs and alcoholism at a young age, and vowed not to indulge in the former and severely limit his intake of the later, he might have thought he was under the influence of both during that heady time in the Arizona desert.

But every intoxicating, emotionally turbulent moment had come from this woman alone.

A combination of relief and unease flitted across her face, triggering his keener interest.

Basta!

Reaching for the nearest cloche, he lifted it to reveal the lobster bisque his memory had reminded him that she loved. Sneaking a glance from the corner of his eye, he

watched her eyes widen slightly before she licked her lips in blatant hunger. He spooned two ladles full into bowls and exhaled in satisfaction when she picked up her spoon to sample the exquisite meal.

In silence, they ate, then moved to the next course.

Calm. Unruffled resolution.

That was the way forward with this woman some cosmic entity had deemed fit to bear his child and therefore wear his crown.

Tempestuous emotions from the recent and distant past would not be given a place in their union.

He simply wouldn't allow it.

\* \* \*

Every argument she'd thrown up had disintegrated beneath the weight of the one hurdle she couldn't overcome.

What was best for her son.

It had driven her into pacing in the guest room while Max slept in a new, exquisite cot, complete with dramatic muslin netting, until the need for fresh air and clarity had drawn her to the terrace. There she'd been bombarded with the sights and sounds of Las Vegas, the most decadent city in the world.

The last place she'd dreamed of raising a family.

Which begged the question: why was she hesitating to take the silver platter offered?

She knew why...

Crown Prince Azar Domene. Even his title was melodramatic. Like an overwhelming piece of theatre just waiting to sweep the unsuspecting off their feet.

Beside remaining a force of nature, and she deemed it imperative to keep him from gaining an inch because it would be the surest way to get flattened by him, she also sensed that he despised her. Something had happened in those weeks in Arizona. Something that kept this formidable wall of resentment between them.

For an instant she regretted calling Dr Ramsey. Maybe without that express deterrent against delving deep into her memories Azar would've been more forthcoming. Although his own expression suggested it wasn't a time he relished revisiting.

The idea that she'd behaved in any way like her mother caused waves of horror to wash through her. Landing a rich, ageing Hollywood studio executive had been a trigger for her mother's dreams of fame and fortune, only for her to be scarred for life when she was left high, dry and pregnant.

Being told by her father never to contact him again had left a teenage Eden with an impression of men that had unfortunately been affirmed by the men she'd met in her mother's desperation for companionship.

That one disastrous episode had led her mother to search for an easy way out of the tribulations of her life. Her resulting career as a barely-scraping-by lounge singer had triggered a series of disastrous relationships that had earned her deplorable labels and slurs even her seven-year-old daughter had understood and been ashamed of.

Could she look beyond this Crown Prince's tarnished view of her—whatever it was—to do what was best for her son?

She held that question at arm's length now, and asked the question activated by something he'd said. 'You said your father isn't well. What's wrong with him?'

Shadows drifted across his face. He didn't answer for several seconds, and when he did she suspected he'd weighed the value of telling her and somehow worked her son more than her curiosity into the equation. She suspected 'in the interest of Max' would heavily feature in how Prince Azar dealt with her henceforth.

Eden told herself she didn't care, but the cold pang throbbing in her middle reminding her that yet again she was alone in this, wouldn't be so easily dismissed.

'He was diagnosed with heart disease several months ago. A serious case that needs careful monitoring. Unfortunately, he also recently contracted pneumonia, which doesn't help his weakened immune system. Everyone who visits must be carefully vetted by his doctors. So you see why this precaution is necessary?'

'Yes,' she said—and then realised she was half accepting that she would be travelling to Cartana with Max and his father. While her stomach churned at the very thought, she asked herself if she had a choice that didn't include a full-blown fight with the heir apparent to a powerful kingdom?

And, as he'd pointed out, what was she fighting for? The right to keep worrying and working herself into the ground just to keep a roof over her son's head? When his destiny was already set in concrete?

Eden put her cutlery down, started to reach for her mineral water, and stopped because her hand was shaking too much.



Tucking both into her lap, she forced her gaze to meet his. 'We'll come with you to Paris. And then to Cartana. But just for a visit.'

The tiniest gentling of his features went much further than she wanted to admit in soothing her. Which, again, was absurd. Because he was the enemy. Wasn't he?

'A half-step is admirable. And I get that this has been a shock. But you're only delaying the inevitable. Max is my heir and he will inherit the throne one day. Having me chase you around the globe to assert my rights as his father will not stand. So let's make the transition scandal-free, shall we?'

'You're accustomed to a life of duty and protocol. What makes you think I'll fit in?'

Her father was Hollywood royalty, and even he, living in a land of make-believe, hedonism and wall-to-wall scandals, had been repulsed by the idea of an illegitimate child.

A hard light ignited in his eyes and Eden suspected he wasn't thinking about her in that moment, but reliving a memory.

'Ultimately, how much or how little you do and what you devote your time to is entirely up to you. But be warned that the Domene Palace is a living, breathing entity that operates its own hierarchy and ecosystem. Loyalty will be rewarded. Non-compliance will be...unfortunate.'

'That sounds like a melodramatic threat.'

A cynical smile curved his lips. 'There are those who like to promote melodrama within the palace. I suggest you don't emulate them.'

She opened his mouth to ask what he meant, but steady footsteps stopped her. She

glanced behind her to see Azar's private secretary, Gaspar, standing a respectful distance away.

'The young Prince is awake, Your Highness,' he said.

Eden's breath caught. It was the first time she'd heard her son referred to by his inevitable title.

Again, Azar's regard morphed, turning almost pityingly gentle before it hardened again. 'Stay with him for a moment, Gaspar. We will be in shortly.'

He remained silent after Gaspar retreated. And she knew she'd run out of time.

Max. She was doing this for Max. Ensuring she would always be there to protect him from the abandonment she'd suffered.

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But...marriage. Being the mother of the heir to the throne. Palace life. Being the wife of a crown prince.

Eventual queen.

Her mouth dried as the titles fell like anvils on her shoulders, threatening to sink her. There should be lightning and fireworks in the sky to mark the screeching turn her life was taking. And yet there was only heavy silence. And her...stuck with only one answer to give.

‘Yes. If you’re...’

Sure, she wanted to say. But resolute affirmation blazed in his eyes, making her question redundant.

So she cleared her clogged throat and gave an affirmation of her own. ‘Yes.’

\* \* \*

She’d suspected Azar was only waiting for her response to set things in motion, but she’d imagined it would be at freight train speed. Not the unstoppable rocket force it turned out to be.

Gaspar’s return to Max’s room, where she and the Crown Prince—who seemed determined to insert himself into every corner of his son’s life—had been watching him gleefully tear into the batch of expensive toys that had just arrived, had been to ask for her apartment keys. It had stopped her in her tracks.

Azar had coolly informed her that there was a team waiting to pack up her entire life and ship it to Cartana.

He'd told her that Ramon was already in the process of arranging Max's expedited diplomatic travel papers via the Cartanian Embassy, and it was barely mid-afternoon!

Before she could fully compute that, another knock heralded the arrival of a chicly dressed woman and a younger man, wheeling in a sleek garment rail.

'I thought a change of attire for tonight and tomorrow might be in order,' Azar said.

It was an evenly paced statement with an explicit directive underlying it. One not worth fighting, considering she'd already agreed to the wardrobe stopover in Paris.

But her gaze shifted to her son.

'Go. We'll be fine,' Azar said firmly.

Max looked up, a smile breaking out as he held up a red toy train which had already become a firm favourite.

As much as her heart squeezed at leaving him, Eden knew that thus far one thing was true. Azar Domene was obsessed with the son he hadn't known about until this morning. And if there was a fierce fire burning in her heart to ensure Max was not emotionally harmed, then a fiercer one burned in Azar—for unknown reasons of his own.

Reasons she intended to keep a keen eye on.

She went with the woman and the young man.

And, after struggling not to ogle the luxurious brands so casually offered, and settling on a pair of silk palazzo pants and an asymmetric batwing top firmly recommended for travel, with shoes to match, she gave in and allowed the male assistant to perform the quick make-up session he heavily hinted she needed.

A full hour later than she'd expected to be, she walked into the living room, stingingly aware of the brush of silk warming her skin, the smoky eyeshadow emphasising her eyes, even the arch of her feet in the new four-inch heels.

It was a predicament made even more pronounced when both Azar Domene and his private secretary froze after one look at her.

For tense seconds they stared. Then, slanting a narrow-eyed look at Gaspar, the Crown Prince said something sharply in Spanish that startled the other man, turning the tops of his ears red, before he executed a shallow bow and made himself scarce.

‘Is something wrong?’ she asked, hating the hesitancy in her voice.

Sardonic amusement tilted Azar’s lips before his gaze moved over her, slightly more heated than she remembered.

‘Not at all. Although having fair warning might prove to be a useful thing.’

She blinked. ‘Fair warning of what?’

‘Your effect on unsuspecting victims.’

His hard-edged tone drew a shiver from her.

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‘What—? I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

The magnificent Crown Prince stared at her for a long stretch, and then, casting a glance in his son’s direction, to make sure he was still happily playing, he prowled towards her.

‘The innocent waif act may work with men like my private secretary, but you should know that as long as you keep it harmless your life will be as smooth as you wish it. Stray beyond that and there will be consequences. Understood?’

\* \* \*

He knew he’d given far too much away when her eyes rounded—even more alluring now, after whatever magic the damn stylists had created. She blinked again, and he stifled a breath as her long lashes batted against the top of her cheeks.

Dios mio, when had he ever noted the sexiness of a woman’s eyelashes?

It’s a good thing you’re marrying her, no?

Was it, though? When his primary reason for doing so was to keep her in position when it came to his son’s wellbeing and nothing else? Hadn’t he warned himself against raking over disagreeable emotions? Yet here he was, already snapping at Gaspar for staring at her too long, and feeling his manhood thicken at the sight of her face and the seductive sway of her hips.

‘Are you warning me against...cheating on you?’

The word fell from her glossy lips with such contempt he would've thought he was dealing with someone else entirely had he not known first-hand what this siren was capable of.

But, while his friend Nick had been many things—rabidly competitive, shockingly obstinate and borderline obsessed with one-upmanship—he'd never outright lied to Azar.

In his darkest nights, Nick's accusations rang through his nightmares.

'I saw her first. Just like you to slide in and take what's mine, isn't it? You should be thankful that she returned to my bed last night. She spent all night apologising. For the sake of our friendship, I suggest you stay away from her, though. She's mine now.'

Except things hadn't remained as cut and dried as that.

Crown Prince Azar of Cartana, a man renowned for his integrity and his tough but fair dealings with heads of state and unruly family members, had succumbed to temptation again.

And again.

Because this woman had played this same act and seduced him. And, yes, he knew the hypocrisy of blaming the woman. Knew and accepted that a large swathe of blame lay with him.

He'd succumbed to lust and desire. Rowed with his best friend over a woman. Watched that same woman choose his friend over him.

Hours later, Nick had been dead.

Sorrow and fury congealed into a hard ball in his gut, effectively slaying his blazing arousal.

Frustration cannoned through him at the reminder that she didn't even remember any of it.

'I'm advising that only your most exemplary behaviour will ensure a smooth transition for our son. We owe it to him to play a straight bat.'

Her lips parted, but he was done with this conversation.

Turning, he strode to Max and picked him up, revelling in the faint baby smell he'd grown so ragingly addicted to in just half a day.

This was safe.

This was less mind-bending.

And if there was the tiniest bit of cowardice in the act...who would dare accuse the King-in-waiting of such a thing?

## CHAPTER FIVE

A FULL DAY later and Eden was still fuming at Azar's not so veiled denigration of her character. Whether by design or coincidence—and she was inclined to believe the former—since then they'd been inundated with staff, and the occasional guest who wanted one thing or another from the Crown Prince. A crown prince who insisted that Eden and his son were present for each meeting, the last of which had included his half-brothers.

And between one breath and the next, Eden had found herself being coaxed into



having Teo Domene's creative designer as her wedding trousseau maker.

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Very soon after that she'd firmly excused herself to bath Max and put him to bed—then spent a restless night swinging between the fear that she was doing the absolute wrong thing and the knowledge that there was no way back now she'd agreed.

Morning had arrived with another flurry of activity—including a surprise visit from Mrs Tolson, apparently organised by Azar, which had triggered another jolt of surprise she'd quickly pushed aside. Because of course he'd work to keep her onside until he had her firmly where he wanted her.

Still, she was glad for the chance to say goodbye, and for her neighbour to have some time with Max one last time.

Then the regal circus resumed, with stretch SUVs transporting the sizeable retinue she'd had no idea were even present at the hotel to the airport, where they boarded a jetliner the same size as Air Force One.

Eden was still reeling at the rollercoaster effect when the jet soared into the Nevada skies and winged its way towards Europe. After a half-hour exploring with Max, who was delving into his first experience on a plane with gusto and wearing himself out very quickly, she'd just settled him with a box of colourful puzzles when his father folded himself into the club seat opposite.

It was the first time they'd been alone in hours.

She cleared her throat. 'I wanted to say thanks for bringing Mrs Tolson so we could say goodbye.'

‘It was nothing.’

‘No. It wasn’t nothing. I appreciate it.’

A spark of surprise lit his eyes—as if, like her surprise over his consideration, her courtesy amazed him. It was gone an instant later, his gaze switching to Max.

‘He’s such a clever little boy.’

But before the burst of pride could bloom within her he was spearing her with those incisive eyes.

‘Has he ever asked about his father? About me?’ he amended, as if she was in any danger of forgetting who he was.

She shook her head. ‘Not in any real sense. He’s too young, I think. He probably would’ve if he’d been in daycare...’

His nostrils flared and a fierce light of satisfaction and determination ignited the silver-grey depths of his eyes. ‘It seems I came along just in time, then.’

The sting of his words sharpened her retort. ‘If you’re trying to laud yourself as some sort of saviour, Your Highness, you won’t find me falling over myself with gratitude. You might not think so, but we were doing okay before you came along. Not everyone is born with a dozen sets of silver spoons in their mouths.’

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the polished table and surrounding her with the magnetism of his presence and the sublime scent that made her want to bury her nose in his throat and inhale lungful.

‘Word to the wise: feel free to use that cutting tone with me all you like when we’re

in private. But you will have to moderate it when we're in public.'

The delivery was even-toned to the point of icy, with zero signs of disgruntlement. In fact, he looked faintly amused.

'So I'm to walk three steps behind and ask how high when you tell me to jump or suffer the consequences?'

He reached across lazily and helped Max place another puzzle piece into its right slot. 'Not at all. And not if I express a liking for my future queen's tart tongue.'

She couldn't stop the heat from suffusing her, despite the relatively benign statement. 'I'm not changing who I am just to get on your or anyone else's good side.'

She'd watched her mother do that far too many times, with the same heart-wrenching results.

A hint of something resembling respect flitted across his face. 'Bending a little might be wise. Otherwise, get ready for a period of...friction.'

Again his words evoked steamy scenes that made her squirm in her seat. That made her far too aware of her erratic heartbeat. The tightening of her skin. The dampening between her thighs.

His silver eyes glinted again and she was sure he knew how erotically his words affected her. Straining to distance herself from the sensations, she snapped, 'We're getting away from the original subject, I think.'

The subject of his son refocused him, as she'd known it would.

He gave a brisk nod. 'We are.' Another taut pause, then, 'I wish to tell him who I am.'

Sooner rather than later.'

Eden looked out of the window at the puffs of cloud several thousand feet beneath her. Up until yesterday morning she'd believed her son's father had died in a car accident.

A part of her couldn't deny she was glad Max's father was alive and well and eager to claim him. And, yes, while the level of his claim was staggering, as long as she had breath in her body she would shield her son from any hurt and harm.

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She met Azar's piercing gaze and nodded. 'Then you should tell him.'

He surged from his seat immediately, came around to her side and crouched down next to Max, where he was strapped into his seat. Max paused in his play, the distinctive eyes she'd tried to downplay so similar to his father's, wide and inquisitive.

Emotion flashed over Azar's face as his son offered him a puzzle piece. Instead of taking it, Azar wrapped his much larger hand over Max's, bringing his pudgy fist to his mouth and dropping several gentle kisses on it before he brought it to rest on his chest.

As if knowing the gravity of the moment, Max didn't fuss at having his playtime interrupted. He remained silent as Azar said in deep, low tones, 'I am your father, Maximiliano. Yourpapá.'

Her clever son caught the emphasis of the word, or perhaps it sounded familiar enough that he blinked once, then repeated, 'Papá?'

Watching an emotional shudder move through this powerful prince Eden had no recollection of creating her beautiful boy with dragged a lump to her throat. Not wanting to draw attention to herself, she remained frozen as Azar's head moved in a nod.

His Adam's apple bobbed once before he replied, 'Sí. Papá.'

Even while registering that there were several issues between them to be resolved she

held this moment close, happy for her son. And it was made all the more precious because it was a million miles removed from the savage outcome of her attempted reconnection with her own father.

\* \* \*

Paris was everything she'd dreamed it would be.

And viewed from this lofty perch, beside a crown prince who commanded an entire realm, it was even more breathtaking.

Because of course they were flying by helicopter from Charles de Gaulle Airport to the top of their five-star hotel.

And of course they were ushered straight into the royal suite, where another clutch of staff stood ready to fulfil their smallest desire.

But the person who had snagged Eden's attention immediately was a drop-dead stunning woman, who stood almost six feet tall, wearing a brown leather pencil skirt and a ruffled chiffon layered top with a boat neck that displayed a bone structure most women would kill for. Satin-smooth dark caramel skin draped over high cheekbones served as the perfect platform to showcase her almond-shaped honey-brown eyes.

Eyes that flitted over Azar and, after a courteous greeting, returned to Eden, then to Max. Like most people who met her son, her face warmed in a smile, before returning to Eden.

Eden discovered the reason for her scrutiny a moment later, when she turned on killer legs, one sculpted arm outstretched.

‘Lovely to meet you, Miss Moss. I’m Sabeen El-Maleh, Teo Domene’s creative director at the House of Domene. I’m to fit you with a new wardrobe before your trip to Cartana.’

Her voice was a deep, sexy husk that Eden was sure must draw the opposite sex like bees to honey.

Eden hated the faint pang in her midriff, the compulsion to see if Azar was in any way affected by this breathtaking beauty, but his attention was entirely on Max as he scooped up his son and held him against his chest.

‘We’ll leave you ladies to it,’ he said.

With that he walked away, just as another staff member arrived with a tray of refreshments, effectively making any protests Eden had thought to make redundant. A little overwhelmed, and a touch irritated, she was learning that the royal machine was oiled by heavy doses of extreme politeness hiding determined steering.

But she accepted that Sabeen had taken time out of her likely busy schedule to attend her at short notice.

Taking the seat offered, she glanced at Sabeen. ‘Pardon me, but do creative directors usually undertake such tasks? I thought you’d have minions or stylists for that?’

A peculiar expression passed over Sabeen’s face, quickly veiled as she shrugged. ‘I was already in Paris for the week and Teo... Mr Domene asked me as a personal favour.’

Eden noted the slip and changed cadence in Sabeen’s tone but ignored it. It wasn’t her place to comment, and she had more important things to worry about.



But she couldn't help but add, 'If that means he owes you a favour, you should totally collect. I'm learning quickly that the Domene men are a domineering force who require occasional checking before they flatten you.'

Sabeen looked up from a large satin case she'd been examining, surprise lightening her eyes before she gave a low, forced laugh. 'Great advice, thanks.' She paused, her gaze darting to the double doors Azar had exited through. 'And if you don't mind my saying so, be sure to keep that one on his toes. Men like him get away with far too much, in my opinion.'

Their eyes met and held in silent reinforcement of welcome solidarity. Eden could and would stand her ground.

Then, with brisk instructions, a veritable feast of the most gorgeous designs Eden had ever seen outside a magazine were presented to her.

Quickly growing overwhelmed as her mind conjured up just where she would need to wear such exquisite clothes, she resigned herself to nodding at most of the selections and discarding the too risqué ones she knew she'd never be able to pull off wearing.

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They'd moved on to accessories and make-up when approaching footsteps interrupted them. The tingling at her nape and between her shoulder blades signalled who their visitor was before she turned.

Azar's gaze dragged over her before locking on her face. 'Everything all right?'

'Should it not be?'

His eyes narrowed and she realised she'd been snippy again. But she couldn't bring herself to care. Instead, she watched him stride across and settle himself into the seat opposite from her.

His scent assailed her, and for the life of her she couldn't quite catch the breath that had come so easily moments ago.

'Max—?'

'Is fine,' he said. 'He has three of my staff making fools of themselves to keep him entertained and is thoroughly enjoying the attention.'

'Oh...and you're staying here?'

'Any reason I shouldn't?'

'Well...don't you have things to do? Meetings?' She plucked the word feebly out of the air.

He shrugged. 'I did. Until my meeting got cancelled.'

She snorted before she could help herself.

One eyebrow rose, his eyes glinting. 'Something amusing?'

'I seriously doubt that anyone would cancel on a crown prince.'

Eden heard a muted gasp from one of Sabeen's assistants, but was too embroiled by the look in Azar's eyes to heed it.

It held the smallest trace of amusement, plus that sliver of respect that loosened a knot of tension. If he liked her standing up to him—and he seemed to—maybe this exercise wouldn't be so dreadful after all. Because healthy banter was surely a good foundation for serious communication?

Among other things?

'When a minister's pregnant wife goes into early labour, requiring his presence at her side for the birth of their first child, then, yes, he is allowed to cancel on a crown prince with impunity.'

'Oh...'

'Since we've got the wardrobe and accessories mostly settled, shall we discuss how specifically you wish to be styled?' Sabeen asked, her expert eye roving Eden's form. 'Perhaps you have a signature look in mind? I can suggest a few things. We can go as simple or as elaborate as you want. Perhaps a shorter hairstyle—'

'No.' The growled word made them both turn to the full force of Azar's glare. 'She will not be cutting her hair. It stays the way it is.'

The kick in her midriff should have been born of outrage. Instead, it unfurled into a blaze so powerful its heat seared her insides. Her nipples tightened and her thighs clenched as forbidden delight lit through her.

God...what the hell was wrong with her? Hadn't she only just warned Sabeen about the domineering attitude of the Domene brothers? Yet here she was, falling for the same masculine display.

She barely heard Sabeen excuse herself, gather her assistants before quickly leaving the room. The soft snick of the door drove the exquisite tension in the room higher.

'Shouldn't that be my choice?' she demanded.

God, why did she sound so breathless? And why did her heart rate triple when he surged powerfully to his feet and prowled towards her?

He shrugged. 'Ultimately, I cannot stop you, of course. But why dispose of such a striking asset when you don't need to?'

'You think my hair is "striking"?'

Heavens, could she sound any needier?

With a deft move he reached behind her and plucked the clasp holding her hair back from her face. Set loose, the long wings framed her face and Azar's gaze ran feverishly over it.

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:13 am*

Maybe she was imagining the depths of his penetrative gaze, but Eden couldn't recall ever experiencing such intensity. Her lips parted as she tried to drag air into her lungs.

'If memory serves...' he rasped, and then his hands disappeared into the tresses, his fingers lightly running through them before gripping a handful. 'It still feels like the most exquisite silk. Even from across a room it is extremely eye-catching,' he finished, almost to himself.

At her unguarded gasp his fingers tightened, setting her scalp tingling delightfully. He leaned closer, his lips scant inches away. She couldn't help running her gaze over the sensual curves of his mouth. It was unfair that he knew what their kiss tasted like, while she was left to wonder. The need to know made her sway closer, her heart pounding with sweet desperation.

'It would be positively sinful to shear even a millimetre off this...' he breathed.

Oh, God, how was it possible that a discussion of her hair could get her this hot?

'Tell me you'll leave it alone.'

The demand was edged with that customary imperiousness she suspected was bred into his DNA.

'If you feel that strongly about it, then yes,' she whispered.

Then she watched his eyes darken, his gaze dropping to her mouth.

A sound left her—a cross between a protest and a whimper that would have made her cringe if she hadn't felt so very needy.

Kiss me, she wanted to demand. Please.

Noticing that her hands had somehow crept up to his chest, and feeling his steady heartbeat, indicating he wasn't as affected as she, common sense slowly rose, then prevailed—although it stung a little when she saw the composure reflected in his eyes.

She was still scrambling to understand her confused emotions when he released her, strolled several steps away, then pivoted to face her, his hands slotted suavely into his pockets.

Eden ignored how that sexy stance threatened her common sense.

'We're dining out tonight,' he told her.

She forced her brain to keep track. 'Are we?'

He gave a brisk nod. 'Now that you've agreed to marry me, we need to set the stage appropriately for what comes next.'

Her heart lurched. 'Which is...?'

'Ensuring the right publicity so the effect of our announcement has the right impact. We must be seen in public a few times before we spring our news on the world.'

She frowned. 'So we're to put a gloss on things? Pretend this is some sort of love-match rush to the altar? Isn't that disingenuous?'

A muscle rippled in his jaw. 'You'll discover soon enough that, while sceptics abound, most citizens still prefer their leaders not be embroiled in messy relationships or emotional strife. Like it or not, we're duty-bound to be aspirational, which means we have a role to fulfil.'

'Does that scepticism apply to you as well?'

His expression grew grave, coldly contemplative. 'For our son's sake we'll endeavour to be cordial and civil to one another at the very least. You'll agree that's essential and non-negotiable, yes?'

'Put like that, it would be churlish of me to refuse, wouldn't it?'

'Meaning what? That I'm stopping you from demanding more?'

Her mouth twisted. 'Won't "demanding more" make me a gold-digger, striving to reach above her lowly station in life, or earn me some other deplorable label levelled at women like me?'

It was an insult her father had thrown at sixteen-year-old Eden that day at his gaudy Hollywood mansion.

A faint flare of colour lit high on his cheekbones, telling her she'd hit the bullseye with that observation. Which sank her spirits.

'Have the women you've dealt with in the past really been that venal?' she asked.

A sardonic smile twitched his lips. 'You believe that's only limited to your gender?'

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:13 am*

She hid a flinch. ‘I don’t know whether to feel sorry for you or feel angry that you’re lumping me in with everyone else.’

His eyes flared in surprise. Perhaps because she appeared to be pitying the man soon to ascend to an honest-to-goodness throne of a European empire—the kind of prince historians would write reams about—as if he was just a common man who deserved her kindness.

‘Save your sympathies, Eden. I learned to expertly navigate the dangerous pools of avarice and duplicity before I was out of adolescence.’

She lifted her chin, despite feeling her chest continuing to squeeze at the realisation that most of the things she’d heard about the vagaries of being royal might be true. That the grass truly wasn’t greener on the other side.

‘In that case, I guess my most important question is who’s going to take care of our son while we put on this...show?’

He had an efficient answer to that, of course.

It turned out that while they’d been flying to Paris from the West Coast of the USA, Azar had been flying nannies from the palace at Cartana.

Her mind continued to boggle at just how involved he’d become in the role of fatherhood even as her gut churned at this continued usurping of her control.

## CHAPTER SIX



TWO THINGS STOPPED her protesting.

The first was the young nanny, Nadia, who was delightfully cheerful and whom Max adored immediately.

The second was that she could hardly protest at leaving him for a couple of hours when she'd so often left him with Mrs Tolson for hours to go to work.

Still, she delivered extra kisses to his chubby cheek, her heart twinging as she watched him toddle off to bed, his hand clutched in Nadia's.

'He'll be fine—or else someone will need to have serious answers for us,' Azar threatened, with that chillingly even tone that made her double-take, because she could never tell whether he was truly ruffled or not.

His resolute gaze stated that he was deadly serious.

Which, again, shouldn't have elevated her temperature or eased that tightness. But there she was, her steps much lighter, as she walked beside him to the private lift.

Bodyguards flanked them as they exited the hotel and moved towards the stretch limo awaiting them. The first she knew of the paparazzi's presence was when a flash erupted on her left. Then another from her right bounced off the gold crystal-covered bustier and velvet skirt she wore.

Sabeen had returned to finish her wardrobe consultation, and Eden was glad for the confidence boost the exquisite House of Domene outfit, matching heels and clutch purse gave her.

Her hair had been pinned back off her face and left to fall in newly washed and styled waves down her back. She'd baulked at the priceless jewellery offered, her nerves

way too frayed to add taking care of what she suspected was a nose-bleedingly expensive collection to her worries.

To his credit, if Azar had feelings about her lack of jewellery he'd chosen to remain silent on the matter, and his heated gaze raking over her told her that at least he didn't find her too lacking.

'Ignore them,' Azar rasped, his hand in the small of her back guiding her to the open back door of the limo, heating her up in ways she didn't want to dwell on.

Her senses were still erratic when they arrived at their location ten minutes later, and Eden stared up at the matte black and silver edifice of Le Cramoisie, wondering why her senses tingled so fiercely.

Stepping out of the car, once Ramon had given the driver the nod, she walked with Azar into the restaurant—and drew to a stop.

Low ambient lights illuminated a solitary impressively laid table, its two chairs set at perpendicular angles to each other. All the other tables and chairs had been lined up on the sides like silent soldiers, and not a single other soul graced the Michelin-starred establishment.

'We're the only ones here?'

'I booked the place for the evening, so we won't be disturbed,' Azar replied.

She'd seen it in movies, read about it in glossy, unrealistic magazines. But despite having served some of the world's wealthiest men at the Vegas casinos, and rejected the advances of several, Eden had never imagined such a thing would happen to her. And, yes, while it was OTT in the extreme, she couldn't stop the waves of excitement that rolled through her.

‘If that’s okay with you, of course?’ he tagged on.

She curbed the fizz of fireworks exploding in her belly with the timely reminder that there was always a price to pay. It quickly soured her excitement.

‘And if I said it wasn’t?’

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‘Then we would have wasted one of the most renowned Michelin starred chef’s entire evening and possibly got ourselves blacklisted.’

There was an arrogant note in his voice that said he didn’t give one single damn even if that had been the case.

She looked around, noting the touches of Asia in the decor. ‘This is a Japanese restaurant, right?’ The name didn’t give it away, but somehow she knew...felt another tingling of...something.

‘Yes. It is,’ he confirmed.

Sensing his keen gaze on her face, she glanced at him. ‘Something’s up. Are you going to tell me what?’

Only the barest lift of his chest gave him away. ‘Is it?’

She sighed. ‘I’m getting that it’s a strategically advantageous tactic to answer a question with a question, but it’s getting old very quickly. Either answer the question or don’t.’

That light she’d noticed when she’d stood up to him before glinted again, and foolishly ignited her own fire.

‘I’ll bear that in mind,’ he said. ‘Ah, here’s our host now.’

Hiding a spurt of frustration, she smiled as the Michelin-starred chef reached their

table and bowed from the waist.

‘Your Highness, Miss Moss, good evening. I’m Ike Konosuke. I’ll be personally preparing your meal this evening. Do you have any preferences or allergies?’

Eden started to answer, then closed her mouth, uncertainty making her hesitate. Was it possible to develop allergies later in life?

‘She doesn’t have any allergies,’ Azar replied, slanting her a gaze simmering with intimate knowledge that had heat scything through his cool answer.

‘Very good. Then, if I may, shall I suggest a plateau de bouchées encompassing the whole menu?’ the diminutive man offered with a smile.

Azar nodded. ‘Everything but the foie gras. Eden strongly dislikes that.’

Her breath caught, and her eyes snagged on his as the chef departed and a sommelier took his place.

She nodded absently at the offer of champagne, then immediately leaned forward once they were alone. ‘The only way you could know all that is if you’d hacked into my medical records or...’

‘Or?’ he prompted redolently.

Heat consumed her whole. ‘If I told you that when we...’

‘When I had Konosuke flown over to Arizona three years ago and we ate his sushi naked in bed in... inventive ways? Yes. I’m well versed in your preferences.’

If she’d thought she was burning before, she’d had no idea. Every inch of her body

was ablaze with the flame of his words.

Fighting not to squirm in her seat, she pushed at the memory he'd so surprisingly offered. 'That's why I remember the name of this place?'

'You declared his food your absolute favourite. All except the foie gras, of course. An objection to the process with which it's made, I remember.'

'Why are you telling me this when you didn't want to divulge anything before?'

He paused for a second. 'I read up further on your condition. Your doctor is right, but he may be erring on the side of overcaution. Supplying benign information isn't detrimental if it nudges your recovery in the right direction.'

She wasn't sure whether to be surprised and thankful that he'd researched her condition, or sceptical as to his ultimate motive.

The hit of champagne bubbles when she took a sip fizzed alongside the excitement of moments ago, and for good or ill Eden chose the former. 'Thank you.'

He stiffened, his eyes searching her face. 'That's the second time you've sounded surprised as you've thanked me.'

She froze, clearing her throat when a few bubbles threatened to go down the wrong way. She considered a vague reply, then went with the truth. 'It's because I've learned that nothing comes for free—especially from influential men.' She dropped her gaze for a moment, wrestling back her composure. 'My wariness is inbuilt for good reason.'

He studied her for a long stretch, his gaze completely unfathomable. Then, 'If there are skeletons to be found, it's best to air them now rather than later.'

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:13 am*

Because of his royal status and all the infernal protocols? Eden kicked herself for forgetting that for a second.

‘You seem to know a lot about me already—what makes you think I have more to divulge?’

His face hardened a touch. ‘You’ve been reticent about discussing your past. But you don’t have the luxury of that now,querida. Courtesy of my brother, you now know you were in Arizona—’

‘Which still tells me nothing. I tried looking up the Magnis Club. It’s super-secretive... I’m assuming a billionaires-only resort or something?’

‘Yes,’ he confirmed dismissively, making a mockery of the two hours she’d wasted scouring the internet last night. ‘Do you know why you chose not to return to Vegas when you left Arizona?’

‘How do you know I didn’t?’

‘How do you think?’ His voice was cool silk wrapped in electricity.

He’d looked for her? Why?

Pursing her lips, she toyed with the stem of her glass as she contemplated where to start with the sorry saga of her life. ‘As far as I can remember, I had plans to work my way towards California.’

‘Hopes of a career in Hollywood?’ he asked, not masking his cynicism.

A tiny snort escaped before she could stop it. ‘Nothing so fanciful or unrealistic.’ And if she’d had such hopes her father would’ve doubled his efforts to squash her. ‘I was on my way to a commune in Joshua Tree to bail out my mother. She’d found herself in another predicament.’

‘Did this happened often?’

‘A few times here and there.’

Shame dredged through her and she fixed her gaze on the glass, then jumped slightly when his finger brushed her chin, firmly nudging it up.

When she met his gaze, he rasped, ‘Go on. Why were you chasing after your mother?’

‘She’d been left stranded after yet another man— After her relationship ended. The guy she was seeing had left her with a few bills and she needed help.’

A fewdozenbills—including a bail bond she’d naively and shockingly signed her name to and become responsible for after the man had absconded.

Azar’s hand dropped and she immediately missed the warmth of his touch. ‘Were you in the habit of bailing her out of “predicaments”?’

An echo of the judgy voices she’d heard so many times in the past, from friends and strangers alike, throbbed through his voice. ‘Does it matter?’ she asked.

His censorious gaze said that it did, but he didn’t vocalise it—for which she was somewhat thankful.



‘She was facing jail if she didn’t come up with a way to settle her bills. So she called me. I... I couldn’t pretend she didn’t need my help.’ Unwilling to delve into her fraught relationship with her mother, she changed the subject. ‘Tell me about the Magnis Club. Was I working there?’

His jaw clenched. ‘Sí. You were a hostess.’

Shards of memory pierced her. ‘I’m assuming it was the job Nick mentioned?’

He stiffened, his eyes boring into her. ‘I wouldn’t know, but it’s safe to assume so since you need a member who vouches for you even if you’re staff.’

Her own shoulders stiffened with the tension engulfing them. ‘You’re giving off unpleasant vibes again. I was Nick’s croupier when he visited the casino. Nothing else. And if you’re wondering whether I promised him anything in return, I don’t remember—but I know myself enough to be certain I’m not that kind of woman.’

They both stopped as the chef headed towards them, two servers bearing trays one step behind him. The elaborate presentation cooled the temperature between them, and for the next ten minutes they enjoyed the beautifully prepared bite-sized helpings of blue lobster croquettes with caviar, truffle-vinaigrette-coated scallops and grilled shrimp rolled in buttered lettuce.

Every morsel elicited from Eden an inner groan. And by the third bite a tiny bit of her tension had eased—especially because Azar, for whatever reason, had chosen to let the matter drop.

When the black stone slab of the iromasake was delivered, he expertly caught up a rolled sliver of sea bass in his chopsticks, dipped it in a sauce and held it out to her. ‘Try this.’

Her mouth watered, but something in his voice made her ask, 'Why?'

'Because you adored it before,' he said simply. 'Let's see if you still do.'

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:13 am*

Utterly self-conscious, she leaned close, parted her lips and let him feed her.

The last platter contained half a dozen exquisitely hand-rolled bites of sushi. Racking her brain, she couldn't recall sampling those at any other point in her life. She'd grown up poor, in a dilapidated suburb of Las Vegas, eating a depressingly bland and monotonous regimen of cereal for breakfast, toast for lunch and ramen for dinner. On the odd occasion when whatever man her mother was dating had felt generous, they'd been treated to fast-food takeout.

Until she'd realised the toll of accepting even such small gifts on her mother's self-esteem and begun to refuse them.

Recalling the rows with her mother over dating men who were even more deplorable copies of her father—chameleons who started out seemingly decent, only to be revealed as cruel misogynists—shredded her heart. The worst of those fights had brought the seemingly inevitable 'You ruined my life', snarled by her drunken mother. But there had been a harsh kernel of truth ringing in it, sending Eden fleeing to Hollywood in a wild bid to salvage an unsalvageable family.

It had turned out to be the worst decision of her life.

A dart of pain stabbed at her temple, and her hand was shaking as she reached for her glass.

Azar's gaze zeroed in on it and frowned. 'What's wrong?'

'Nothing.' The pain had dissipated as fast as it had arrived. 'I'm fine.'

He watched her for a few more seconds, then served her another roll of sea bass. ‘Did you ever make it to Joshua Tree?’ he asked.

The piercing pain flashed again. ‘No. By the time I woke from the coma and left the hospital my mom had moved on.’

After spending a three-week stint in jail for not honouring the bail bond—something else that had somehow been labelled Eden’s fault.

His gaze probed but she kept her eyes on her plate, the ceaseless guilt that underpinned her relationship with her mother dredging through her.

‘Does she know about Max?’

She took a breath. ‘Yes. I told her when I was six months pregnant.’

‘Eden?’ The pulse of her name from his lips jerked her gaze up. ‘Is inviting your mother and father to our wedding going to be a problem for you?’

Her eyes widened at the unexpected question. Through the relentless cascade of events she hadn’t thought about what part her parents would be expected to play.

‘My father has never been part of my life. As for my mother, I...’

‘Not inviting her will prompt more questions, but the situation can be managed if that is what you want.’

‘I’ll think about it.’

It was purely a placeholder answer, both to buy herself time to brace herself for contact with her parent and because a tiny bloom of warmth at his consideration was

baffling her emotions.

‘Speaking of mothers, am I to meet yours?’

His eyes shadowed, a familiar chilled expression passing over his features.

So they both had Mommy issues...

Thinking about it, that odd toast she’d heard from Teo during Azar’s party made sense now.

‘Eventually,’ he bit out.

She let it go, because her headache had gone from intermittent pangs to a dull throb.

‘Is this enough for your publicity stunt?’ she asked.

A current of tension returned to the air. He sprawled back in his chair and contemplated his wine glass before he answered. ‘Not quite. Breakfast tomorrow, with a walk along the Seine, and then a few more events this weekend, once we’re in Cartana, and then we’ll make the announcement next week.’

The thought of being bombarded further with his overwhelming presence made her insides swoop and dance, even as her head pounded. Easing a hand up, she surreptitiously rubbed at her temple.

‘What’s wrong?’ he repeated tersely.

She thought of downplaying it—then gave up. ‘I have a headache.’

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:13 am*

He tossed his napkin on the table. 'We'll leave now.'

'No, it's fine. I just need to...to not think about the past too hard if I want to keep it at bay.'

He inhaled sharply. 'And you let me quiz you about your mother?'

'I'm fine—'

'Stop saying that.' He came behind her chair and helped him up.

The chef rushed out, but a look from Azar had Ramon intercepting the frazzled man.

A minute later they were back in the limo. The return journey was conducted in silence, Azar mostly watching her like a hawk.

It was a relief to return to the mundanity of checking on Max, lingering over her sleeping son. And she was relieved further when Azar, after bringing her two tablets for her headache, offered to walk her to her suite.

She refused, because these alarming acts of care and consideration were at odds with the picture of the man she'd drawn up in her head. The one who was a carbon copy of her father. And until she worked out his true character she would be best served by keeping the distance between them.

She'd taken enough blows in her life already.

\* \* \*

Except distance was out of the question when they had to put on a show the next morning.

Walking along the Seine, Azar's hand slipped into hers, their palms rubbing, and she couldn't stop the shiver that went through her.

He glanced sharply at her, his eyes turning a little molten as his steps slowed. 'We have this going for us, at least,' he murmured.

'What?'

'I touch you and you react so...responsively. This kind of chemistry can't be faked.'

She reminded herself that it was all an act. 'But it doesn't matter in the grand scheme of things, does it?'

His eyes turned flinty. 'Meaning?'

'You said so yourself—we're doing this for Max. How we react physically to one another will never become a problem we need to deal with.'

'You think not?'

'Unless you're about to admit uncontrollable feelings for me, then no.' Her voice was thankfully firm enough to make her next breath easier.

'Uncontrollable? Hardly. But noteworthy, perhaps.'

'Shall we keep walking or stand around playing word games?'

He remained exactly where he was, exercising his regal right to do things exactly the way he wanted. In her peripheral vision Eden saw their bodyguards expertly steering tourists around them—which had the predicted effect of garnering more interest. Which His Royal Highness played to maximum effect by lifting their linked hands between them, his eyes never leaving hers, and bringing her knuckles to his lips.

He took his time to brush his warm, sensual lips over each one, then laid her hand on his chest as he stepped even closer. His other slid over her nape, his thumb tilting her chin up until their eyes were locked. Then, just like yesterday afternoon, he leaned close, his gaze dropping to her mouth. As if on cue, her lips parted, and her breathing became hopelessly shallow despite knowing he was toying with her. That this was all for show.

‘Sí, querida. Just like that,’ he rasped huskily. ‘Forget word games. One more minute of this and you’ll be well on your way to winning accolades for this performance.’

## CHAPTER SEVEN

THEY LANDED AT the airport in the Cartanian capital, San Mirabet, and just like in Paris were whisked away by a sleek helicopter with the Royal House of Domene crest etched boldly into the paintwork.

Unlike in Paris, though, their arrival was orchestrated in streamlined secrecy, the red carpet leading to the covered walkway devoid of any people bar the pilot, the flight attendants and Azar’s guards.

Azar noticed her puzzled look as he buckled Max into his seat. ‘Until the announcement is made, there’s no point in inviting a circus to disturb us,’ he told her. ‘It’ll happen soon enough.’



‘When?’

He shrugged. ‘That depends on my father. Once we’ve visited him this afternoon we can take it from there.’

She thought he was hedging now, on the very thing he’d been pushing for—until three hours later when, showered and styled by her new personal staff, helmed by a no-nonsense woman named Silvia, she clutched her son’s hand outside a soaring set of doors, gilded in what she suspected was solid gold filigree. They’d been escorted here by Silvia and Gaspar, who stood behind them like the efficient sentinels they were trained to be.

Curbing the wild emotions rampaging through her wasn’t easy. The sheer magnificence of the Domene Palacio Real, poised on top of a hill at the northernmost point of San Mirabet, gave it a forceful presence in and of itself. Stepping over its splendid threshold, feeling the weight of its history, and an opulence literally built from the ashes of its vanquished enemies, had started a cascade of sensations she was still grappling with as solid, steady footsteps approached.

She surreptitiously passed her sweaty free hand over the ruched silk midi dress she’d chosen for its warm, comforting dark caramel colour as the doors were swept open.

Azar had showered and changed since she last saw him. His dark hair gleamed in the mid-afternoon sunlight and the white shirt and dark suit highlighted his deep, vibrant vitality.

He held her gaze, then nodded a dismissal at the staff behind her.

Max peered up at Azar, then his face broke into a smile. ‘Papá.’

Azar’s eyes darkened, and a trace of the bleakness disappeared.

Still wondering at what had caused it, she watched him scoop up his son, then rasp, ‘Come.’

She followed him through an elaborate private living room, down a corridor with doors on either side, then through another set of double doors, which were swept open as they reached it.

Eden’s steps faltered momentarily.

When Azar had told her his father was unwell with a heart condition, she’d assumed it was serious, but manageable.

The man propped up against a mountain of pillows in pristine bedding was a far cry from the man she’d searched on the internet, when she’d realised their meeting was inevitable. The once-vibrant, commanding King of Cartana had notably lost weight, his figure shrunken in the antique four-poster bed with elaborate hand carvings that spoke of a bygone era.

Azar lightly grasped her arm and led her to the two armchairs placed close to the bed.

‘Papá, meet your grandson, Max. And Eden, his mother.’

King Alfonso’s direct gaze landed on her son, examining him thoroughly, before he exhaled deeply. He reached out his hand to Max and her sweet son immediately offered his.

The King swallowed as he took another deep breath. ‘Maximiliano.’

His voicing of her son's name seemed almost like an affirmation. A blessing. An acceptance Eden had never felt for herself from either of her parents—especially her father. She hadn't even been aware of that problematic knot in her belly until it eased, helping her breathe that little bit easier.

‘Is he calling you Papá already?’

King Alfonso smiled at his son, who shrugged.

‘He's mine. There's no point dancing around the truth of it.’

The old man's gaze rested on Azar for a moment, then shifted to her, the signature silver-grey eyes he'd passed down to his sons pinning her in place. She accepted then that he was far from diminished. That while his body might be failing him, his centuries-old warrior spirit was very much present.

‘And you, young lady? How are you to feature in the great and elaborate landscape that is my family?’ he asked, his rich accent inflecting the words.

She executed the shallow curtsy Silvia had taught her. ‘It's an honour to meet you, Your Majesty.’ Swallowing around a dry mouth, she hesitated momentarily, then responded. ‘My priority will always be Max, no matter what. As long as he's happy and healthy, everyone who cares for him will have my utmost co-operation.’

His stare remained direct. ‘And if they don't care for him?’ he prodded.

Azar's gaze lanced her where she stood, his own interest in her response almost feverish.

‘Then I'm afraid I won't be very easy to live with. And I won't be averse to taking whatever steps are necessary to change that.’

Truth and purpose shook through her voice, but the notion that she was standing up to a king didn't escape her. Trepidatious shivers raced under her skin, but she ignored them as best she could, knowing that this wasn't the time to show weakness.

King and Crown Prince exchanged indecipherable looks, the corners of their mouths twitching in almost identical motion.

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:13 am*

And when the oldest man in the room looked at her again, a layer of that formidable willpower had been replaced by something approaching approval.

He watched them, his eyes still pinned on Eden as Azar waited until she sat down, then sat himself, leaving one hand propped against Max's back, where he was perched on the bed next to his grandfather.

'You're not afraid to express yourself. An admirable quality that will prove useful in the position you find yourself in, I think.'

The warmth around that loosened knot inside her expanded, pushing hard at her need to remain fortified against any misleading inclinations. The scars from her father's rejection remained a real, horrifying reminder.

Hell, she was in this room only because she'd had Azar's child. She didn't doubt that Azar Domene might have sought her out as he'd promised the night of his party, to seek whatever passed as payback for her slights against him three years ago. But beyond that? To go as far as to put a ring on her finger? That was all for Max's sake. And while that was a good thing for her baby, she needed to leave her emotions out of it.

'...abdication and your coronation...must bring it forward even earlier.'

Shock reefed through her and her head jerked up. 'I'm sorry...what? Even earlier?' she blurted. She was cringingly aware she was breaking several protocols by not using the right form of address, but she couldn't bring herself to backtrack.

King Alfonso's gaze returned to her, then narrowed at his son. 'Your intended doesn't know?'

Again, Azar shrugged. 'It's only been two days, Papá, but yes, she knows. I didn't think it prudent to bombard her with too much though.'

Her hands clenched in her lap. 'Stop talking about me like I'm not here. You said the coronation was a matter of months away, and now it's earlier? Explain what's going on.'

Azar waited a beat. Then exhaled. 'My father has decided to abdicate earlier than planned. I'm to take the throne in two months instead of three. One month after our wedding. And you, by ordination, will become my queen.'

\* \* \*

And that was just the first of many left-field episodes that peppered the most dizzying weeks of her life.

Contrary to her expectations, she didn't meet her future mother-in-law for another whole week. Azar's mother cited one excuse after another until two Sundays after they'd arrived. And when the moment eventually arrived it was a frosty reception that couldn't have made it more patently obvious that Queen Fabiana Domene believed her son was marrying far below his class.

To her credit, her dismissiveness didn't stray into cruelty when it came to her grandson, which meant Eden didn't need to unleash her mama bear claws. And Max was oblivious to the disparaging remarks during the Queen's icy quizzing of just how Eden had happened to cross paths with her son, and the vapours of disdain that positively oozed from her pursed lips.

It was for the sake of her son that Eden withstood that seemingly interminable meeting. The moment it was over—the second she returned to her suite and saw Azar standing at the window in her living room, the epitome of regal composure, power and unruffled magnificence—everything she'd been holding inside for the last two hours frothed over like boiling milk.

‘How did the meeting with my mother—?’

‘Badly,’ she interrupted. ‘She doesn’t like me, and thinks you’re marrying far beneath you, but I don’t give a damn about that. She’s entitled to her opinion.’

His eyes narrowed, a film of tension weaving over him. ‘And yet something is bothering you?’

‘Yes! This is all going too fast.’ She dragged her fingers through hair that had been painstakingly styled and layered for her audience with the Queen, relieved that it was the only appointment on her schedule today. ‘We need to postpone. Everything.’

Azar’s eyes narrowed, then his tension thickened. ‘No. Absolutely not.’

‘Absolutely, yes. I’m—I’m not ready.’

He’d gone so still she wondered if he’d stopped breathing. And when he shoved his hands forcefully into his pockets she was almost certain she saw them trembling.

‘Look, the announcements haven’t gone out yet. And I’ve seen how the palace machinery works. It can come up with a good enough reason for moving the wedding.’

‘And my father? You want him to put off his abdication for your convenience?’ he bit out.

A twinge across her temple jostled her breathing, and the sensation that she'd felt this time before sparked the usual frustration over her lost memories.

'No, of course not. But maybe we can switch things around. Coronation first, then wedding...later.'

'It's the first time I've seen you in any way fazed,' he rasped, and there was a faint, peculiar note in his voice. It sounded almost alarmed.

'Trust me—it's not the first time I've wanted to throw up. I've only held it together because it wouldn't be a pretty sight.'

'The thought of marrying me makes you feel ill?' he growled, molten eyes lasering into her.



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‘Yes!’ A nanosecond after she blurted that she realised what it had sounded like. ‘No... I don’t mean it like that. It’s just...’

She stopped, words failing her as she shook her head.

Her insides clenched as something deadened his eyes. ‘Well, you’ve hidden your abhorrence well. The staff are all impressed with your poise.’

‘The staff, huh?’

‘You want a more personal opinion?’

No, she didn’t. She absolutely didn’t.

‘It wouldn’t hurt to hear what the man I’m to marry thinks.’

He sauntered closer, and it was only because she was watching him so closely that she saw that he wasn’t as cool and confident as she’d thought. His probing eyes were a little too fevered. He was putting extra effort into the confident stride that commanded the entirety of her attention.

‘You have handled every interaction and interview as if you were born to the role. Almost as if you’ve been practising for years instead of weeks.’

A twinge tugged hard at her chest, and the notion that this had taken a sour turn was sobering.

‘Are you insinuating something? If you are, I’d like you to spit it out, please. I’m not in the mood for guessing games.’

Something gleamed at the back of his eyes and the quiet storm brewing within his aura crackled like the distant rumble of thunder.

‘Only that it seems you’re surprised at what you’ve been capable of. I’m saying perhaps you needn’t be.’

‘Because you think this is what I’ve secretly wanted all along?’ she demanded. ‘An elevation to some higher status in life?’

‘I’m saying hold your nose if you need to. The rewards for this slight bump in the road will be worth your while.’

Her eyes narrowed, and a peculiar feeling expanded in her chest when she realised that, in his own enigmatic way, he was talking her round. That he was perhaps even quietly desperate for her to go through with this marriage. Which was...mystifying. And strangely warming after being locked for so long within the desolation of cold rejection. But...what if this was an illusion?

‘Why are you so hellbent on this happening quickly? I’ve already accepted that Max is yours. And I’m sure whatever DNA test you did has confirmed it?’

‘Sí, it did.’

‘Then what?’ At his tense silence, she pushed harder. ‘You want something else? Tell me what this is really about!’

His eyes darkened, dropped to her mouth, and a new sensation started in her chest. Spread throughout her body. That chemistry he’d touched on—the one that had

become buried beneath the hectic schedule of readying not just the palace but the entire kingdom for a royal wedding—was suddenly awakening into stinging life, bringing with it an unexpected surge of feminine power as she read his desire loud and clear.

The laughter that spilled from her was just as unexpected as it pulsed with that power and with her own surfeit of need.

‘That’s why you’re pushing for this to happen? You’re sexually frustrated? Or is it just that I happen to be the unwanted woman fuelling that sensation?’

His nostrils flared and his eyes glinted in that way she was coming to recognise as Azar Domene priming himself for a skirmish. Why that sizzled her blood was a circumstance she wasn’t going to wrangle just at this moment. She fought to remain still as a head-to-toe tingle took hold of her. As he closed the gap between them, bringing the forcefield of his magnetism and that terrifying intoxicating scent of man and sandalwood with him.

Molten eyes raked her face. ‘You think I don’t want you?’ he breathed, disbelief tingeing his deep voice.

‘You’re a king-in-waiting and I’m the woman you’re stuck with because I gave birth to your son. It isn’t a stretch to imagine you’re just making do with what’s in front of you.’

She realised she’d been backing away while he advanced, and gasped when her back touched the wall.

‘A sound deduction,’ he said. ‘But you’re forgetting one thing.’

The boost of confidence made her tilt her chin in challenge, to meet his blazing gaze

full on. 'What?'

'The first time we met I was just a crown prince and you were a hostess. None of this...baggage was between us. And yet you felt strongly enough about me to give me your virginity.'

Her mouth dropped open on a hot gasp. 'You were my first?'

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Of course he was.

Didn't he only need to enter a room for her temperature to soar to insane levels?

His lips parted and she witnessed legions of emotions cross his face in a split second. Then that iron control was back in place.

'Yes. Freely given,' he elaborated hoarsely, 'enthusiastically accepted. Thoroughly celebrated.'

Evocative images surged to life in her head.

'Tell me about it...please,' she whispered, ignoring the shrieking voice demanding to know what she was doing.

Again, his gaze raked her face. Then his eyes narrowed. 'When was the last time you had one of those headaches?' he bit out.

'Not for a while. Please,' she pleaded.

He planted his hands on either side of her head, caging her in. His body bore down closer too, and the steel pipe of his erection pressed against her belly as he breathed in deep.

'Every nerve in my body tells me this is a bad idea...'

She waited, breathless with anticipation.

After a long moment, he exhaled. 'You were headed to the table next to mine in the cigar lounge. You stopped in your tracks the first time you saw me,' he rasped in her ear. 'Your incredible eyes went wide and these luscious lips parted...' He passed his thumb in a whisper-light brush over her lower lip. 'A beautiful creature caught in headlights.'

'And let me guess...you laughed?'

His digit continued to slide back and forth, weakening her with his sensual magic. 'On the contrary. Your effect on me was equally acute, and troubling, and puzzling in the extreme.'

'Why?'

He hesitated for a full second. 'Because until that moment I'd never experienced anything like it.'

Her breath shuddered out. Common sense screamed at her that it was impossible. That this man, soon to exit his position as the most eligible bachelor in the world, surely would have experienced a raft of sexual experiences. But his unwavering stare insisted he meant it. Or maybe because she craved that crumb of possessive knowledge, she believed him.

'Is that why you...hate me?'

He stiffened and his jaw clenched, but he didn't move away. He only examined her face thoroughly, as if he yearned for some insight that she remained clueless about and he sought desperately.

After a moment, he exhaled. 'I don't hate you.'

‘Are you sure? Because my every instinct screams otherwise.’

He pinned her beneath his gaze for an eternity before he rasped, ‘Do you need me to prove it?’

She licked her lips, a sizzling craving piling into the mix of sensation flaying her. ‘Maybe...’ she hedged.

Because...heavens, she was much too weak where His Royal Hotness was concerned.

And because to him it might be a refresher, but to her it would be a first kiss. From a real man. The man she’d given her virginity to.

His fingers speared into the hair she’d ruffled, further disheveling it as he used the pressure to tilt her head up. Then, taking the true answer she was too stubborn to provide, he slanted his mouth over hers.

Warm—no—hot. Supple. Electrifying. Possessive.

In an instant she was transported. Dizzy with need. Desperate for more. A helpless moan ripped from her soul as she surged towards the exhilarating sensation of being kissed by Crown Prince Azar Domene. And, oh, how he mastered the art.

A brief sweep of his tongue, tantalising and tempting hers to play, was deceptively coaxing, and the moment she parted her lips, ventured a taste of her own, he swooped, seizing control as effectively as his magic alone had kept her pinned against the wall.

The fingers in her hair merely supported her, so she didn’t crumple into an erotic mass at his feet. Then, as if he knew how weak she’d grown, his other hand grasped her hips, holding her as he ground his hips into hers, moulding their bodies together

as his mouth and tongue and teeth drove her towards a fevered edge that left her utterly breathless.



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Dear God, she thought hazily. If he could do this with just a kiss, what could he do with—with...?

Thoughts dissolved as he increased the tempo, his hand sliding from hip to waist and then to her breast, cupping one mound and toying with her nipple. The cry smashed between their lips made him groan. Made him mutter thick words before he delved back for a longer taste.

‘You see what you do to me?’ he rasped against her mouth after they came up for breath.

The sound she emitted was nowhere near coherent. She was about to seize his nape, beg for another taste, when a firm rap on the door knocked some sense into her.

Her hand dropped to her side, just as his dropped from her breast. But he didn’t move, leaving her flushing anew at the thick evidence of his need pressed against her stomach.

‘It’s just...ch-chemistry,’ she stuttered forcefully.

He didn’t even raise that imperious brow to mock her. They both knew otherwise. The potency of their attraction to one another defied reason and he wasn’t going to waste his time debating the issue.

Instead he peered deep into her eyes, and that not-so-quiet storm wrapped around her, lashing her with urgent electricity. ‘The wedding will proceed as planned. You will marry me and let me place a crown upon your head. Yes?’

Eden frowned. Wondered why he kept pushing rewards and crowns at her as if it was the culmination of a goal for him. But his proximity was addling her brain. And, really, her fundamental reason for doing this hadn't changed. Max. Wouldn't it be better to get it over and done with so she could spend precious time with her son?

'Yes. Okay.'

Again, she only saw it because she was staring as intensely at him as he was at her. The flash of relief before he stepped back, issued a command for the visitor to enter.

She wasn't even upset by Gaspar's interruption with more reams of protocol that needed to be studied and mastered before the big day.

She threw herself into it, because otherwise she would have spent far too much time dissecting that look. Stressing over just how much of herself she'd given to Azar Domene once upon a time in Arizona.

\* \* \*

They didn't speak about feelings again—his or hers. She'd walked that tightrope and avoided plunging into an emotional landmine. And in the weeks that followed she was thankful for that distance, she told herself.

Even thankful for her decision when she saw how Max thrived beneath the attention of his father, his grandfather and the endless relatives who arrived in a steady torrent to satisfy their various curiosities about the future King and his newly discovered heir.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

THE BIG DAY galloped towards her with as much drama and dread as an invading

army.

Coronation and wedding rehearsals took place at the stunning San Mirabet basilica attached to the royal palace with such relentless frequency and attention to detail that Eden suspected she could recite the process in her sleep.

She knew she was reaching breaking point when her engagement made headline news around the world, with renowned journalists jostling for the right to conduct her first ever public interview, and the palace insisted she needed to comply.

‘I’m not ready to sit down with anyone who wants to pry into a past I don’t remember. It’s not fair on me, or you and your family,’ she stated firmly at dinner one night, after yet another full day of firm pushing from well-meaning palace staff. The very idea of it churned her stomach, despite one of the journalists being a woman Eden greatly admired for her integrity and plain speaking.

‘Then don’t do it,’ said Azar.

She blinked in wary surprise. He’d been doing this a lot lately. Accommodating her. Disarming her. Any second now, the other shoe would drop. It always did. Didn’t it?

‘Just like that? But I thought I had to conform?’

Her wry stress on the word earned her a sardonic smile, then Azar shrugged.

‘You’ll soon learn that dealing with the palace council is a constant tug of war. It might feel like the odds are against you, but remember you hold the ultimate power. Sometimes that involves making one big sacrifice, or a series of smaller ones they don’t see coming until you’ve won.’

She pondered that for several minutes. Then, plucking her phone from her pocket, she dialled her private secretary's number.

'Tell the council I won't be giving public interviews until after the wedding. And then it'll be an exclusive to Rachel Mallory. Yes, it's her or no one else. Thank you.'

She hung up to find Azar watching her with a fierce gleam in his eyes. 'What?'

'Taking control suits you. Brava, cara.'

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Something pelvis-heating glimmered in his eyes. Something she furiously fought as thick silence settled on them. Luckily, a valet stepped forward to pour her a much-needed glass of red wine, and the moment was broken.

Still, she took that fighting spirit into the remainder of the proceedings, firmly refusing extraneous requests that pulled her time away from Max.

Unfortunately, it won her a few disapproving murmurs—the loudest of which came from Azar’s mother. And Eden hid a grimace when, a week before the coronation, they were interrupted at dinner.

‘Your Highness...?’

Azar made a low, disapproving sound in his throat, but set down the spoon he was using to feed Max his mac and cheese and glared at the hovering Gaspar. ‘What is it?’

‘Your mother wishes a meeting. Since you had a free half an hour in your schedule after dinner, I thought I’d arrange it?’

Eden stiffened, and immediately brought Azar’s attention to her. ‘I’m guessing she wants to tell you you’re making a big mistake.’

‘Most definitely,’ he concurred sardonically, making something shrivel inside her—until he added, ‘Which makes it a good thing that who I marry isn’t up to her,sí?’

The jolt of relief came from nowhere and floored her, weakening her further. 'So...you still want to go ahead?' she murmured, aware that her stomach was clenching in anticipation of his answer.

God, surely she hadn't been terrified there for a minute that he'd change his mind?

'That depends,' he said. His fingers trailed down her temple and cheek to her jaw, then lower to the pulse racing at her throat. 'Does the thought of marriage to me still make you ill?' he asked tightly.

That quiet rumbling storm had returned, along with the eerie sense that his causal query held visceral importance.

It never did, she wanted to blurt.

But she managed to cling to her cool.

Remember why you're doing this, a voice counselled. Max. Always Max.

'No.'

'Bueno. Then we are in accord.'

His movements were deliberately precise when he passed his hand over the back of hers, pausing on the breathtakingly gorgeous diamond ring he'd presented her with the morning they'd announced their engagement to the world, two weeks ago.

The belle round micropavé diamond mounted on a pale gold setting wasn't as flashy as the royal diamonds she'd seen during her tour of the royal palace's throne and crown rooms, thank goodness. And learning it had belonged to his grandmother, seeing the sombre, nostalgic look in his eyes, had prompted her to give in to a rare

bout of inquisitiveness. She'd asked Silvia, who had divulged that he'd been close to his grandmother and had been distraught when she'd died suddenly eight years ago.

Eden hadn't asked why the jewellery hadn't been passed on to Azar's mother. The tiny bubble of joyous warmth at the fact that Azar could have kept the treasured heirloom but instead had bestowed it upon her—despite the circumstances of their coming together—was something she locked away in a secret vault for herself.

'See you later,' he said now.

And so the royal circus continued.

Sabeen returned, her retinue doubled and her smile even more stunning as they met for the first of many dress fittings.

It was only when the statuesque beauty engulfed her in a warm hug, then pulled back to peer earnestly into her face, that Eden realised how much she'd missed a friendly face and ear. Mrs Tolson had been that for her.

'I hear it's been crazier than a mad hatters' convention over here,' said Sabeen. 'Even Teo is stressed, and he's three thousand miles away.'

Her mention of her boss held a distinct edge, making Eden start.

'Is everything okay between with you?' she asked.

Sabeen's lips pursed. 'You mean besides having thePlayboy Princeas my boss? Having women drop their metaphorical and actual knickers whenever he walks into the room, and him not seeing anything wrong with that?'

At Eden's open-mouthed surprise, she grimaced. 'Sorry, that sounds unprofessional.'

It's fine. I'm fine. How are you?'

Such a simple question. And yet Eden fought back prickles of tears and shrugged. 'I'm pushing through.'



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Sabeen clicked her tongue, then ran her hands up and down Eden's arms. 'I'd say you're more than holding your own, darling. Little birds tell me half the palace is impressed with your feistiness, while the other half are unsure what to make of you.'

Her eyes widened. 'They are?'

Sabeen smiled. 'You're keeping them on their toes, that's for sure. Including the soon-to-be-King.'

Eden shook her head. 'I don't know about that.'

'Oh, trust me. It's not every day a future king calls his brother to demand that his bride's gowns are as perfect as they can be.'

Eden's eyes goggled. 'He did?'

'Yup. Between Teo's mother demanding changes to her gown on an hourly basis, and Azar demanding updates every morning, it's a trip to see the unflappable Teo Domene...flapping about!' she finished, with a sharp relish that said she was enjoying the Playboy Prince's aggravation.

It made Eden wonder just what the deal was with those two.

'Azar even suggested the colours,' Sabeen went on. 'Your favourite is purple, I believe?'

At Eden's stunned nod, Sabeen beckoned one of her assistants and the woman pushed

forward a clothing rail holding a gown covered by miles of protective netting.

‘Since you’ll be wearing the purple Order of Cartana sash with the diamond and amethyst tiara set, I thought your gown would be perfect with hints of purple too,’ Sabeen said, then produced an exquisite champagne-coloured gown with a princess cut neckline brimming with shimmering purple-hued crystals.

For unknown reasons, staring at it lodged another lump in Eden’s throat.

Azar had commissioned this exquisite gown?

‘Now, I may not be a hopeless romantic, but I think it’s clear your intended cares a great deal for you,’ Sabeen murmured, her eyes on the gown.

‘Does he?’ The question came out breathlessly, even as she shook her head, holding back the swell of dangerous emotion. ‘Of course, I would confirm or deny that if I could remember any of it,’ she added, before she thought better of it.

Even Sabeen’s bewildered frown was gorgeous, and had she not been thoroughly enamoured by her warmth and friendliness, Eden might have hated her a little.

‘You can’t remember...?’ she echoed.

Aware of their audience, Eden pursed her lips.

‘Excuse us for a few minutes, please,’ Sabeen said firmly to her team, then turned back to her the moment they were alone. Concern filmed her beautiful honey-brown eyes.

‘I don’t know if you know the details of how Azar and I met, but... I don’t,’ Eden told her. ‘I’ve lost my memory of the time I spent in Arizona...’

Sabeen's concern deepened. 'You poor thing. You remember nothing at all?'

She shook her head. 'And my doctor has strictly forbidden Azar from telling me anything that might distress me. So I'm sorry if I don't jump at the idea that my future husband has feelings for me. I don't have any evidence of it.'

Again, she stopped her words far too late. But, to her surprise, Sabeen nodded briskly without an ounce of judgement.

'Then play your cards as close to your chest as you wish and reveal them only when you're ready. It won't hurt one of the Domene men to take a turn twisting in the wind.'

The flush that followed Sabeen's grave advice said she hadn't meant to be so open with her emotions either. For a few frozen seconds they shared a deep, bewildered feeling of kinship.

Then Eden sniffed. 'Can we talk about something else, please?'

'Of course,' Sabeen replied smoothly. 'Lace is back, and I've got a to-die-for gown for your wedding day...'

\* \* \*

'Dios mio, if you pull on your cuff one more time you'll ruin it! I made that suit, so I know for a fact there's no magic wish tucked away anywhere, and definitely not up your sleeve. So stop pulling at it.'

Azar frowned at the ridiculous statement. Then looked down and saw he was doing exactly what Teo was grinningly ribbing him about.

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He should've heeded his far too many valets and assistants, who had hinted that it was too early for him to get ready. This bout of...of nerves wasn't familiar to him, nor was it anywhere near enjoyable.

Nor were the recurring bolts of alarm he'd suffered since Eden had blurted that she wanted to postpone the wedding three weeks ago. He'd dispensed with that nonsense—because surely every woman desired a crown on her head?—but admittedly in those few minutes, and far too frequently since, the searing disquiet that she'd change her mind, choose an alternative to marrying him, had taunted him more often than he liked. As had the steady drips of the possibility that his suspicions about her behaviour in Arizona might be unfounded, rooted in one of Nick's games. Perhaps even cleverly orchestrated by his supposed friend?

If that was the case—if he'd acted on false evidence—could she...would she reject him? He shook his head. She wouldn't. Even if just for Max's sake.

He held on to that belief, grounding himself in the moment, ignoring the hollow in his belly at the thought that he merited blame, too.

The moment was here.

His wedding day.

No matter how much he'd prepared for it, he still reeled at the fact that he had a son and was about to acquire a wife. A wife who didn't remember anything of their time together. Call him devious, but he'd tested her in minor ways over the weeks, and eventually concluded that no woman could fake such a thing for so long. That

knowledge had added a twist to already churning sensations far removed from the titanium control he preferred.

Hell...if anyone dared label it, they might say he was suffering from the jitters.

Because what if she remembered and decided she'd been wrong to give such ready consent to be his queen? Besides his mother, she held the singular position of being the only woman to do so. And, sí, that remained a thorn far too close to his chest for comfort.

His jaw tightened. If she decided she'd made a mistake—

'I don't envy you, but it's not exactly the gallows, hermano. Lighten up, hmm?'

His jerked at Valenti's prompting. Of the three of them, he was the quietest and the most severe—which was something, considering Azar knew he terrified most people with his intensity on a daily basis.

'Or, if there's a particular problem on your mind, I'm all ears.'

The offer came with piercing scrutiny that would have raised his hackles if he hadn't known what his brother had been through.

What Valenti had suffered—taking a literal bullet for another, then dealing with the harrowing fallout of that split-second decision—would've felled most men. But the Domene blood running through his veins had lived up to its fearsome reputation. Still, sometimes he worried...

'No, I'm good, gracias.'

'He's good, yet he's ruining his damn suit! If I didn't know better, I'd think you're

freaking the hell out. Worried your bride won't turn up?'

Teo started to laugh, then thought better of it when neither brother joined in.

The truth was, Azar was marrying a woman with a spine of steel beneath the beauty and gentleness she portrayed. That meant that even though she'd given her word, there was no guarantee. And...he couldn't exactly force her. Gone were the days when a Domene man could declare a woman his, give her little choice in the matter, and have her bear his name and his children.

And, yes...the tiniest sliver of him wished for those days. But since he couldn't get them back, and didn't really agree with those Middle Ages practices, he tugged on his cuff one last time—earning himself another glare from Teo—then strode for the door.

So what if he was getting there fifteen minutes early? It would keep the guards and the royal timekeepers on their toes. Not to mention earn him some points with the media as an eager groom.

Win-win.

'Wait. Is he—? He's leaving?' Teo exclaimed. 'Dammit, it's not time yet! I don't care if he's almost a king—that is not cool.'

Valenti joined him. Together, they ignored the complaining Teo as they headed out to the fleet of silver Bentleys.

It was a good thing he'd been groomed from birth to nod and wave when necessary, because all he could concentrate on was whether or not Eden would turn up.

Why the question had suddenly taken up so much room in his mind.

And what he'd do if she didn't.

\* \* \*

Chantilly lace, with a train embroidered with white alyssum, the national flower of Cartana. Those flowers also formed part of her gorgeous bouquet, bordered by purple lilies. It was hands down the most exquisite gown Eden had ever seen. The gown several Cartanian institutions had already promised her the earth for if she would donate it to their collection, even without having seen it yet.

While Sabeen had grown misty-eyed when Eden had donned the gown, Eden's own tears had come from a deeper well of swirling emotions.

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Bells pealed from the basilica with the precision of a Swiss watch the second Eden stepped out of the exquisite four-horse-drawn royal carriage, and the soaring of meticulously trained white-tailed eagles overhead in salute drew a roar and thunderous cheers from the gathered throng who were throwing themselves wholeheartedly into the day that had been declared a holiday kingdom-wide.

Since her father would never figure in her wedding plans, or in her future, and the King was too feeble to walk her down the aisle, Azar's uncle—a rather stern-faced bishop—had been chosen for the task.

Eden was partly glad she didn't need to make conversation with him, and partly sad for the absence of any support for a jittery bride—especially one thrown into such extreme circumstances as she. Especially after her mother had eventually admitted, after much prodding, that she'd been newly released from rehab and, on her counsellor's advice, wouldn't attend. News the palace had scrambled to hide, and Eden had shed silent tears over.

Enough of that—woman up!

Long, deep breaths as they reached the imposing doors of the basilica calmed her a little. Enough to steep herself in the moment, pushing away thoughts of what her future with Azar would be like.

She'd made this decision with her head, so even if her heart seemed inexplicably to be ramming itself against the fortifications she'd thrown up to protect it, so be it.

The staggering number of dignitaries, heads of nations and celebrities had been one



thing when they'd been mere names on a list—seeing them in person lent even more gravity to the occasion.

Queen Fabiana sat ramrod-straight in her barely contained disapproval, her nose in the air, while a slightly improved King Alfonso and Max sat next to each other, their heads together in whispered conversation that made the old man smile. The press release about his existence—coupled with that uncanny picture of Azar as Max's age—had been a stroke of genius that had had the kingdom instantly falling in love with her son.

But, as always, her gaze was compelled to the imposing figure poised at the altar, flanked by his half-brothers. The multi-hued sunlight streaming through the basilica windows fell dramatically upon him, casting his dark bronze hair, his profile and his whole body in a celestial glow she would have thought was photoshopped if she hadn't been staring at the real-life, jaw-dropping thing.

Against the protocol drummed into them during their wedding rehearsals, he had turned to watch her progress with an interest that bordered on rabid. Those eyes connected with hers through the filmy veil, and the weak-kneed, shivery sensation that jolted through her body almost made her stumble. In that moment she was grateful for the bishop's arm, but even that grew insubstantial when she finally arrived and Azar held out his hand.

Imperious. Possessive.

No hope for escape.

She stepped up to him and... Was it a trick of the light, or did he exhale in what looked like relief?

But the almost arrogant possessiveness in his gaze when it slid over her told her it had

all been in her mind.

Again discarding protocol, he seized her hand, lifted it to his lips and rasped, 'Eres diosa de la belleza.'

Half a dozen of the two dozen knots inside her eased. And while she didn't entirely understand his words, she caught goddess and beauty and greedily let their confidence boost wash over her, grateful for one right, if superficial, thing.

And perhaps it was that possessive streak that kept his hand clasped around hers, or perhaps he sensed she might do the unthinkable and bolt from the centuries-old basilica, the hundreds of guests assembled be damned. Or perhaps it was something as simple as him doing her a strategic kindness.

She chose that option to keep her grounded, present enough to register that she was indeed marrying Azar Domene, tying herself to him for life.

The vows were said.

Priceless rings exchanged.

The official wedding pictures were taken.

And while it all felt as interminable as every royal task seemed, seeing her son dressed in a dashing formal suit, smiling and looking as cute as a button, soothed her with a swell of love so strong it made her blink away tears.

Or maybe it was the overwhelming sense that she was now tied for ever to the Royal House of Domene. That her name henceforth would be Princess Eden Domene of Cartana. Soon-to-be...Queen.

She gulped at the thought, and felt Azar's razor-sharp gaze on her.

‘Are you in need of bolstering again,tesoro? I’m happy to help.’

Remembering just how he'd bolstered her in her last bout of shaken confidence, she quickly shook her head. ‘No, thanks. I’m fine.’

The faintest trace of amusement twitched his mouth. ‘That’s disappointing.’

‘There are a dozen photographers in here. Whisking me into a corner for a dirty little fumble will cause a scandal.’

His lips twisted. ‘Not really. Not when they’ve all sworn in blood to remain loyal to me and are trained to overlook salacious things like a king and his queen engaging in...dirty little fumbles.’

Surprise punched though her. ‘Are you serious?’

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His amusement intensified, and she vaguely caught a flashbulb as one of the cameras captured the Crown Prince's moment of humour.

'About the blood? Not quite—our bloodthirsty days are behind us. But you get my general meaning.'

She did. Like his father before him, he commanded the utmost respect and loyalty. For some reason, that show of humour, eased the tension inside her. Enough to tease out a smile of her own.

His eyes darkened as his gaze raked her face. And right there another moment of intense connection snapped between them. It was broken once more by the flash of a camera that made her want to grit her teeth and snap at the photographers to leave them be.

'Easy, mi reina. Our wedding day isn't the right time to unsheathe your pretty little claws. There will be time for that later.'

Her breath caught, and the urge to demand to know when pounded through her. She curbed it, and sat through another fifteen minutes of picture-taking, all the while painfully aware of being under intense scrutiny—especially from her new mother-in-law.

Queen Fabiana was the only person not fully embracing the momentous event of her son's wedding. Even now she sat primly in a wing-backed chair, surrounded by her retinue who wore equally disapproving looks mostly aimed at Eden.

It was a relief when the royal event co-ordinator announced that it was time to move on to the reception—a much smaller event hosting a few hundred specially selected guests.

For the next hour she danced in her new husband's arms, then with both brothers-in-law—one all sly smiles and ribbing her about the traps of matrimony she'd willingly walked into, the other his polar opposite, with piercing eyes probing far beneath the surface.

‘What exactly are you looking for?’ she asked Valenti Domene. ‘Maybe if you told me I could save us both the silent third degree?’

‘Treat my brother well, and you and I needn't have a problem.’

She gasped. ‘Are you threatening me?’

He shrugged. ‘When it comes to my family and those I care about there's nothing I won't do. Remember that, Your Highness.’

Before she'd summoned a response Azar was there, smoothly reclaiming her, his gaze ten times more potent than his brother's.

‘What was that all about?’ he enquired silkily, even as his deep voice pulsed with slivers of danger.

‘Looks like your mother's not the only one who doesn't like me.’

His eyes grew sharp. Deadly. But it was directed at his departing brother. ‘What did Valenti say to you?’

Striving to retain her dwindling composure, she asked a question that seared in its

delivery. 'Do you care?'

His frown rumbled louder than a thunderbolt. 'I care. Tell me.'

She shook her head, fixing a smile on her face as a couple of dignitaries waltzed past, the woman's gaze sparking clear envy. 'It doesn't matter. I'm used to being tarred with a certain brush because of my mother,' she muttered, then grimaced inwardly.

When was she going to learn to keep past turmoil from dogging her present?

'I don't wish you to be hurt. Or for the sins of your mother to be visited on you. By anyone. Including my brother.'

That final sentence was a gruff admission. One that made her gaze fly over his chiselled chin and that infernally hot dimple within it to his meet his eyes.

His slight hesitation hurt, despite her knowing that he was entirely justified to take his brother's side.

'It's okay,' she muttered airily, fighting to keep her smile in place. 'He's your family. I understand.'

The fierce gleam in his eyes deepened. 'You are my family too—or have you already forgotten our vows?' he rasped.

The hurt deepened. But the sudden flash of remorse in his eyes stopped her blurting out something she might regret.

'Perdoname. That wasn't deserved,' he said. 'You have risen to everything admirably.' He hesitated for a beat, then added, 'And I don't wish to start this with discord.'

Eden swallowed, blinking rapidly when emotions surged. Maybe she should've given in to the urge to bawl her eyes out this morning in the bathroom, when the enormity of the day, of knowing she'd be going through it alone, without a loving family, had weighed her down. Maybe then she wouldn't be feeling quite so...overwhelmed now.

Digging deep, she shook it away. 'Then let's not.'

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She attempted a more genuine smile, and to her surprise felt her heart lurch wildly when he reciprocated. And when Sabeen swayed towards them, holding an enraptured Max and trailed by a surprisingly sombre Teo, Eden didn't bother debating if the smile had been for her or for their son.

'I think this little guy wants hismamáandpapá,' Sabeen said, her smile beatific as she smiled down at Max.

Azar claimed their son with one arm, while keeping the other around her, and Eden told herself she wasn't going to wish for a few more of those smiles, just so she could test herself and see if her heart continued to leap in that maddeningly thrilled way again.

Instead, she joined Azar as he threw away the protocol book, wrapped her and his son in his embrace, and swayed across the floor. Applause rang out in the ballroom when Max kissed her cheek, and Azar followed suit with a kiss on the other.

She was brought back down to earth when, after being whisked away by a fleet of royal SUVs to the mountain retreat where generations of Cartana royal couples had spent their wedding nights, Azar showed her to the suite adjoining his, asked if she needed help taking off her gown, and after she said no merely inclined his head.

And walked away.

\* \* \*

'Good morning, Your Highness.'



She shot an exasperated glare at Gaspar, his insistence on bowing and using the still disconcerting title souring her mood further.

Three days they'd been at the mountain retreat. Thankfully Max, after she'd had to spend her first ever night away from him, had now arrived with Nadia. But even he only occupied only half of her time. She was nowhere near used to having great swathes of her life organised with military precision.

And apparently part of the operation was Azar meddling where he wasn't wanted.

'Where is he?'

She forced an even tone. It wasn't Gaspar's fault if she was bristling with unspent energy after discovering what Azar had done.

'Having his breakfast on the west terrace with the young Prince. He said you weren't to be disturbed if you wanted to sleep in.'

Her lips pursed. She wasn't going to worry about what the staff thought of her and Azar inhabiting separate suites. They were probably used to such arrangements. Still, she couldn't avoid that barb in her heart as she tossed her freshly styled hair and hunted him down.

Only a few metres from the French doors, her attention rigidly captured by the sight father and son made, resplendent in the morning light.

They were completely absorbed in each other, carrying on a conversation that had them both wreathed in smiles, even though she was fairly sure Max was mostly babbling. The barb turned into an acute yearning, digging in deeper where it really shouldn't. Uncovering her secret desire for love and a family that she'd buried for so long.

Azar's head snapped up, his eyes zeroing in on her.

'Buenos dias. Something on your mind, cara?' he murmured, although the probing gaze searched her face for more. Just as it had done since they arrived here.

It was almost as if he was waiting for...something.

Eden pushed that mystery away and stepped out onto the terrace.

'You've moved my mother to a mansion?'

She'd seen the jaw-dropping floor plans. The list of staff that included a butler, maid, gardener and chef.

Her mother's call out of the blue half an hour ago had triggered in Eden that age-old yearning that maybe this time her contact would be selfless. That her parent would be seeking her out for something other than a handout.

She had been...to an extent. Her mother had called beside herself with shock and excitement at her new son-in-law's generosity. But while Eden had been pleased for her, the alarm bells shrieking in her head couldn't be ignored.

His eyes flicked to the phone she was waving at him, then reconnected with hers. He was the picture of regal casualness, a completely magnificent creature even the sun worshipped, its golden rays perfectly framing his aristocratic bone structure.

'She's the mother of my future queen and the grandmother of a prince. She's just finished rehab. You expect me to leave her in a halfway house one street away from a place un-ironically known as Crack Cocaine Alley?'

Effrontery dripped from him, as if he was aghast that she dared question him.

‘I— Of course not— But I don’t know what you want in return.’ She knew it had been a poor choice of words when his face clenched hard. ‘Look, I didn’t mean—’

His raised hand told her to stop speaking, and she bristled as he said, ‘Yes. You did.’

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‘I’m sorry, okay? It’s just that nothing in this world comes for free. And I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know.’

Slowly, he rose to his feet. ‘Very well, then. What are you offering in return for my generosity?’

Her eyes goggled. ‘What?’

He laughed. Low, deep, and so sexy she wanted to slap her own face to restore her fast-fleeing sanity. And wouldn’t that be hilarious in the extreme?

‘You’re such a sexy little contradiction...aren’t you, tesoro? You insist nothing in life comes for free, and therefore expect to pay a toll, and yet when I suggest you do so you look shocked. Even before I’ve made—for all you know—the most benign of requests.’

Sexy. The word ricocheted in her head, setting off little fireworks throughout her body until she was once more—dammit—a mass of seething need.

‘You’re suggesting I’m wrong?’ she asked.

‘I’m suggesting you don’t jump the gun so enthusiastically.’

‘Fine. What do you want, then?’ she asked, unable to contain the breathless hitch in her voice.

He pinned her with his gaze as he slowly walked towards her. ‘Three things. You ride

with me every morning. When I have to tour the country by train before autumn sets in you and Max will come too. And for the next year when duty requires that I travel you'll both come with me.'

Her eyes widened. 'That's it?'

One corner of his mouth lifted in amusement. 'What did you think? That I would demand payment in flesh?'

A flush engulfed her face, and her body reacted predictably to the rising heat in his eyes. 'It isn't out of the realm of possibility...'

'Because I'm a red-blooded male and you're a beautiful woman?'

She couldn't stop the punch of pleasure and heat at his compliment, but she pressed her lips together to stop herself from blurting out theyesthat rushed to the tip of her tongue.

He was continuing anyway. 'That may be true—and, yes, I'm aware our chemistry still blazes hard and true—but I've never bartered for sex,querida, and I'm not about to start. Especially with my wife. When you come to my bed it'll be of your own free will.'

'When?You're that sure of yourself?'

'When you can't get through a conversation with me without staring at my mouth and my body...wondering or trying to recollect what came between us and squirming with consuming need which you stoically attempt to throttle? Yes,mi linda. I do believe it's just a matter of time before you succumb.'

Her laugh emerged husky, and not at all as carefree as she'd hoped for. 'I'm almost

tempted to bet everything I own on that never happening.'

His nostrils flared in a blatantly masculine scenting that made her pulse race faster.

'A wise choice not to—since I'm certain you will lose.'

'If this is some reverse psychology thing—'

'It's a stating facts thing. And in the short term, when it happens it entirely up to you. But take this with you when you flounce away, as I'm sure you're about to. It's only a matter of time before you're naked on all fours, with all that exquisite hair coiled in rope around my wrist to hold you still as I drive into you.'

She'd half expected him to argue with her when she came out here. Instead she was drowning in a storm of licentiousness when he leaned down and brushed a shockingly platonic kiss on her cheek.

'Now, are you joining us for breakfast?'

'I... I don't think I have an appetite.'

'Have a good day, then, cara. I look forward to our first ride together in the morning. And the many rides to come after that.'

## CHAPTER NINE

SHE REALLY SHOULDN'T have been so thrilled at the turn of events.

For starters, she suspected her mother's next call, a mere twenty-four hours later—'just to see how you are'—had been part of the grand scheme that came with Azar's gift.

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She was touched, but also aware that until her mother gave her attention free of conditions, and until they cleared the air of past acrimony, she shouldn't open herself up to it. And yet she ended the call with a lighter heart, feeling happier with their relationship than she'd been in a long time. Even hopeful that, in time, their interactions might be less transactional and more bond-forming. As much for herself as for Max.

But if she was so susceptible, what else would she fall for? Especially when it came to the man who commanded the very ground she walked on and who, it seemed, could pull miracles out of the air.

A little scared to contemplate that fully, she shoved it way down on her to-do list and prepared for her first ride with Azar, fighting the blush at the remembered double entendre.

A pair of white jodhpurs and a matching top, polished boots and an elegant little cap had been laid out for her by Silvia when Eden stepped out of her shower the next morning. At this point she'd already stopped being awed by the efficiency with which their lives were run.

Dressed twenty minutes later, she was transported by a sleek little electric buggy to an area of the mountain retreat where a row of stables and an open paddock housed stunning thoroughbreds.

And there, making her despair at just how incredible he looked, was Azar, dressed to ride. His white jodhpurs clung to muscled thighs, the black belt and polished boots bringing every line of his powerful body into heart-stopping relief.

He turned away from her to watch a stable hand walk out with two mounts—one a massive, shiny black beast with a swathe of white down its forehead, and the other a cream mare with an uneven splash of black and brown spots that made her all the more eye-catching. Despite the stallion's size, the mare tossed her head repeatedly at him, in a brazen show of insolence that drew a huff from the other beast.

Eden was grinning at her antics when Azar took the reins of his stallion and turned. The snap of awareness thickened in the air, and her breath shortened in that way that screamed her pleasure at being the sole focus of his attention.

‘Are you ready?’ he rasped, after a charged scrutiny.

She was much too aware of the sensual roll of her hips, of the tightening of her skin, the clenching of her sex as she made her way over to him.

‘I’m not sure. As far as I can recall I’ve never ridden a horse before.’

Something flickered across his face, gone before she could decipher it.

‘We’ll take it easy on your first outing. Come, let me show you the basics.’

His instructions were succinct, and easy enough to follow. Not so much the scrambling of her brain as his hands slid around her waist to steady her as she placed her feet in one stirrup. By the time she was seated in her saddle Eden was hopelessly breathless, and thankful when, after another sizzling look her way, he turned to his own horse.

Since he’d laid out his conditions yesterday she’d wondered why he wanted her along for horse-riding—especially if she was an amateur. It ceased to matter the moment he mounted his saddle.



He looked magnificent.

Man and stallion were made for one another, the two so infinitely exquisite it was almost unbearable to look upon them.

‘Something wrong?’ he asked, obviously catching her gawping.

Shaking her head, she shivered all over again when one strong hand covered both of us.

‘She can be spirited when she wants her way, but she’s also my gentlest, most intuitive mare. I’ll take control if necessary. All you have to do is hold on.’

Firm, reassuring words she suspected held a deeper meaning.

Where she craved warmth, acceptance and safety, Azar craved control.

The knowledge didn’t so much render her breathless as she was already holding her own breath, searching his dark grey eyes. For what? A sign that the reasons her emotions remained caught in a maelstrom were no longer there? That the man who’d so coolly retreated after putting a ring on her finger to secure his son had somehow morphed into one who was open to the seismic feelings moving through her?

Even before her spirits fell, before the shutters came down over his eyes, she was kicking herself for her foolish yearnings. For harbouring hopes she had no right to. Yes, Azar had been considerate, even kind, but it had all been to facilitate his own goals. To control and ease the path for claiming his son.

In between trying hard to contain those emotions and absorbing the stunning vista unfolding before them, she didn’t realise how contemplative Azar had grown until he pulled both horses to a stop.

‘You’ve ridden a horse before,’ he told her. ‘In Arizona. That may have been your first time.’

The tightness to his voice snagged her attention. Her spine tingled with warning. ‘You... We weren’t together?’

His jaw clenched for a few seconds before he shrugged. ‘You were with Nick.’

‘I see,’ she said, then shook her head. ‘Tell me why it makes you angry to talk about Arizona. I need more. I don’t understand...’

For a long stretch he remained silent, his gaze on the far distance, tension tightening his shoulders.

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The tiniest dart of pain at her temple made her flinch. Piercing eyes found her an instant later. Assessed her thoroughly, as if judging whether or not to divulge whatever he was withholding.

Eden fought the exasperation building within her. ‘Just tell me! I want to know everything. But if you feel so strongly about how it’ll affect me, at least tell me something about you and Nick. You claim you were friends, and yet I feel something else was going on.’

His hands tightened around the reins until his knuckles whitened. When his horse picked up on the charged atmosphere and whinnied he leaned forward, trailing a soothing hand down its strong neck until the stallion quietened.

It seemed almost unnatural for the formidable almost-King to be buying himself time, and yet it felt as if that was exactly what he was doing. That little glimpse of humanity attacked the vulnerable spot inside her.

‘Nick and I were friends,’ he eventually said starkly. ‘As much as two people could be while navigating their families’ hidden agendas and protocols. But he liked to play games.’

She took a moment to dissect that. ‘True friendship can cut through that, surely?’

A spasm of regret chased across his taut features. ‘I thought he’d outgrown it. But conditioning has a way of lingering, long after you believe it’s gone. And Nick couldn’t quite shake his.’

Again she drilled through his cagey words, her heart thumping as she wondered if he meant her, too. She remained silent.

‘He was taught to work at every relationship and come out on top. To win every power struggle.’ A hard-edged smile twitched his lips. ‘I made it clear he would never win a power play with me. That’s how our relationship at boarding school started. Putting our cards on the table cut through a lot of the nonsense.’

‘But despite all that he never quite stopped competing with you? And I just so happened to be caught in one of your games?’ she guessed, hoping it wasn’t true, but suspecting it was.

His gaze tracked the horizon, his jaw taut. ‘He insisted that since he saw you first, you belonged to him—despite ample evidence to the contrary.’

Heat surged into her face, but she refused to be bathed in shame. Refused to believe her mother’s neediness and desperation for affection had rubbed off on her just when she’d needed it not to. But considering this man—this maddeningly irresistible man—was the one she’d been battling against, could she be faulted for succumbing?

Yes.Still...

‘I didn’t throw myself at you,’ she rallied, clinging to the belief.

His imperious head turned, sardonic eyes lasering her where she sat in the saddle. ‘There was no need for you to go quite that far.’

‘Because you’re so well versed in zealous adoration you can spot it at a thousand paces?’

He shook his head, almost pityingly. Then his face closed. ‘We’ve been over this

already, carina. It's because I was twice as affected. Twice as enthralled. And I'm not ashamed to confess it was the first time it'd ever happened. So, sí, I was intrigued. Enough to decline stepping aside for my best friend.'

There went her stupid heart again, when he was only referring to chemical attraction.

Somehow she found the strength to raise her hand, bat that away. To remember that her mother had been a source of intrigue for her father once upon a time. Until he'd had his fill and cast her aside. A trend that had repeated itself with stomach-hollowing frequency.

'So if I didn't throw myself at you, and you had issues with Nick, why do I feel as I'm the vill—?'

'You're not Nick's type,' he cut in stonily. 'I'm at a loss as to why he brought you to Arizona.'

'Because a supposed two-bit gold-digger looking for a payout has no place in a billionaires' playground?' she asked bitterly. 'Or should I leave the slut-shaming to Nick's father?'

Azar's eyes blazed, his body going rigid. 'He did that?'

Her insides congealed at the memory. 'When I contacted him...thinking Nick was Max's father.' Her mouth twisted. 'He reminded me that men like my father truly are a dime a dozen.'

His face tightened. 'Your father—?'

'I don't want to talk about him,' she interrupted.

His gaze rested heavily on her for another stretch. ‘Then don’t,’ he said. ‘And, since I have first-hand evidence that you were the farthest thing from a slut, that should answer your question.’

She was still tussling with that when he sighed.

‘We’ve strayed too far into unadvisable territory. Once your memory returns we’ll pick this up from a position of greater understanding.Sí?’

Push, pull? Support or manipulation?

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Eden's heart wanted desperately to believe this was Azar opening up and supporting her. But while those shadows and walls remained, and her memory was a locked box, how could she trust anything he said?

'Yes?' he pressed, when she didn't respond.

She breathed in deep, her own gaze now locked on the vista so she wouldn't have to keep pathetically searching his.

Was she not better off hedging her bets until such a time when she knew his true feelings? She'd seen the consequences of rushing in where fools didn't dare, like her mother did, with only pain and hurt to show for laying her heart on the line.

So, even though her chest squeezed uncomfortably tight at that decision, she dragged her gaze to his, pleased when her composure didn't crack, and nodded. 'Of course.'

And surely she misread that tiny flicker of disquiet in his eyes? His slow exhalation that seemed wrapped in the faintest dismay? Because from that moment on, as he expertly conducted a tour of the verdant mountain, it was almost as if they had been in her imagination.

\* \* \*

They slid ever deeper into their roles of Crown Prince and consort, their well-oiled machine presenting a united front, sending even the irascible palace council into muted rhapsodies. Headlines around the world hailed theirs a fairy tale union for the ages, and Max was soon garnering his own adoring following on social media.

And as one month galloped into another Eden learned to live with the thorn in her heart, ignoring the fact that it grew larger every time Azar watched her for one second too long with those shadows still in his eyes.

She even convinced herself she had her every emotion contained.

Until one month after the wedding and several days after Azar's official coronation, with her as his queen.

The last of the dignitaries and the extensive Domene family had left, the barricades taken down from the roads where thousands had celebrated Cartana's most triumphant royal event to date.

Spotting Gaspar rushing towards them on their return from dinner with Azar's worryingly more frail father, Eden exhaled, eager for relief from the constraints of being on the whole time. Because even now her assistant trailed after her, reminding her that she was yet to confirm a date for the exclusive interview she'd agreed to with Rachel Mallory.

'Let's pick this up tomorrow,' she said firmly.

Then her heart lurched when she saw the uncustomary pinched concern breaking through Gaspar's composure. When Eden's gaze dropped to the fingers drumming against his thigh, alarm bells shrieked within her.

'What is it? What's wrong?' she demanded.

Azar, who'd been on his phone, quickly ended the call, striding to her side as alarm clogged her throat.

'Gaspar?' The demand was clipped. Imperious.



‘Your Majesties, it’s about the young Prince—’

‘What about him?’ she screeched, only then taking in the tension amongst the staff hurrying back and forth through the immense palace.

Gaspar looked as close to distraught as she’d seen him. ‘His nanny is on her way, but it seems he’s gone missing.’

‘What?’ Sheets of ice wrapped around her soul as she shook her head, unable to fully compute what was happening. ‘When? How?’

Strong fingers wrapped around her wrist, lending her a warmth she wasn’t sure she had a right to accept. Not if her child was in danger and she’d been sipping fine wine at dinner.

Eden recognised abstractedly that she was hyperventilating, her heart going ten thousand miles a minute. But she couldn’t stop it. Fear had taken hold of every atom of her being.

‘Eden.’

The word came sharp and piercing. Commanding her attention. Her eyes met Azar’s, imploring him to send his strength into her.

‘He will be fine.’

‘Y-you don’t know th-that. Oh, God! What if...? What if...?’

She tried to whirl away from him, to compose herself enough so she could think. He stopped her, tugged her hard into his body, wrapping her tight in his strong, warm arms. He held her long enough for a layer of fear to dissipate. Then he captured her

chin and tilted her face to his. His eyes blazed with authority and implacable determination.

‘He hasn’t been harmed. I will never allow that to happen. Do you hear me?’

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Her head moved independently of her fracturing thoughts.

Gaspar cleared his throat. ‘Every guard and staff member in the palace is out looking for him—’

‘Then w-we should go out there too—looking! We can’t just stand here doing nothing!’

She wanted to scream when Azar shook his head. ‘We will. Right after we talk to Nadia. We’ll find him,tesoro. And he’ll be fine. Do you hear me?’ he repeated.

Her nod was shaky at first, but the pulses of sheer resolute faith vibrating off him slowly seeped into her. She nodded more firmly, and when he lowered his head and pressed his lips to hers, in a hard, reassuring kiss, she felt another layer of panic recede.

‘Your Majesties...’

Nadia’s hesitant voice pulled them apart, but Azar didn’t release her completely. He kept an arm around her waist as they faced the nanny.

‘Have you found him?’ Eden blurted.

Even before the young girl shook her head Eden saw the truth in her stricken face.

Calm down. You’re no use to Max in full panic mode.

She sucked in a steady breath, shaking her hands free of tension before she clamped them tight again.

‘When did you notice he was gone?’ Azar asked.

‘I put him down an hour ago, and went to check on him fifteen minutes ago. H-he wasn’t there. I’ve looked everywhere I can think of.’

A broken moan wrested itself free from Eden’s throat. But, as much as she wanted to burrow into Azar’s chest and sob her terror, she forced herself to think.

‘Tell me what you were doing in the two hours before you put him to bed.’

At Azar’s questioning look, she met his gaze.

‘If he’s excited about something, it’s the first thing he does or talks about when he wakes up.’

The nanny swallowed and nodded. She was trained to maintain her composure, but Eden could see it fraying beneath Azar’s piercing regard.

Freeing herself from his hold, she grasped Nadia’s arm. ‘It’s okay. Just stay calm and tell me.’

Nadia’s gaze latched onto hers, her forehead faintly creasing. ‘He didn’t want to go to bed, so I made a list of all the fun things we would be doing tomorrow.’ Her eyes darted to Azar. ‘He was looking forward to swimming with you before breakfast.’

Azar’s nostrils pinched, and the skin around his mouth whitened briefly, but he didn’t speak.

Nadia's eyes darted back to Eden. 'I also promised him we would visit the mini maze tomorrow and play hide and seek with his toys.'

A jolt went through her. 'Hide and seek is his favourite game. If he woke up thinking about it...'

Another sob threatened. The thought of her baby wandering the grounds at this time of the night...risking getting hurt. Or worse...

'Let's check his room again,' Azar barked, already striding away.

She chased after him, catching up as he entered Max's suite and crossed into the vast play room attached to the bedroom, searching for anywhere a toddler might hide.

For a cursed moment Eden wished they didn't live in a palace—a place with hundreds of places for her son to play, blissfully unaware that his parents were tearing their hair out.

'Max?' she called. Her voice wobbled horribly.

Silence.

Three minutes later they'd searched every inch of his rooms, calling out with no success.

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Eden's panic surged again when her gaze snagged on the window, latched but slightly ajar. They were on the second floor... Was the space wide enough for a child to slip through? God...he wouldn't...

'No.'

Azar said the word through clenched teeth, but he still strode to the window, tugged on it. When it didn't give immediately, he pushed it open and looked out. She saw his shoulders sag as he exhaled.

'No,' he murmured again, softer this time. With an unmissable tremor.

Relief and gratitude flooding her, she whirled about. 'He wouldn't have made it to the maze all by himself. Not without the guards seeing him.'

Please, God, let him not have attempted it.

'Never,' Azar agreed. 'Our suite?' he suggested tightly.

Every inch of their bedroom and their living and dressing rooms had been searched ten minutes later.

Eden felt fresh darts of pain lancing through her temple.

'Your Majesty?'

She turned at Nadia's hesitant voice. 'Yes?'

‘Maybe the aquarium?’

‘But the aquarium’s on the other side of the palace. Surely he wouldn’t have made it there on his—?’

‘Your Majesty.’

Eden turned, her teeth gritted at the relentless formal title. Ramon, Azar’s head of security, stood behind them, a tablet in his hand.

‘Yes?’ Azar bit out.

‘We may know where he is—’

‘Then spit it out, Ramon. Where’s my son?’ Azar grated, his composure fraying just that little bit more.

The King who craved control was seeing it decimated before his very eyes.

Eden wrapped her fingers around his, pressing into him the same strength he’d infused her with. She watched his Adam’s apple bob as he stared his security chief down.

Ramon held out the tablet. And there on the screen was their son, hurrying as far as his little legs could carry him, dragging his tattered giraffe behind him towards...

‘The cinema room?’ Azar barked.

Nadia grimaced. ‘Dios! I promised him a movie and a lollipop tomorrow if he ate his vegetables—’

‘Show me...please,’ Eden interjected.

Azar grabbed Eden’s hand tighter, and she almost had to run to keep up with him as they tore down far too many corridors to a door at the far end of their wing. She flew past him the moment he opened the door to the cinema, her feet muffled by the thick carpeting in the windowless, sound-proofed room.

There, on a plush velvet lounge set before the giant silent screen, was her son, curled up with his giraffe tucked under his chin, one fist clutching a large strawberry lollipop. A whole plastic tub of confectionery had been spilled on the floor in his search for his favourite.

‘Dios mio...’ Azar muttered, shaken.

Relief electrified Eden, freezing her for a moment before, muffling yet another sob, she stumbled towards Max. She wanted to snatch him up, examine every inch of him to make sure he was okay. But he was sleeping so peacefully all she could do was lower her face to his cheek, run her fingers gently through his springy hair and just...breathe him in.

Beside her, Azar did the same, their faces almost touching as they kissed their son.

After an age, she managed to pull back when her tears threatened to spill onto him. Sitting back on her heels, she swiped at her face, but a handkerchief arrived in front of her. She looked up. Azar was staring at her with a fierce look in his eyes. She accepted the handkerchief, then watched him lithely rise to his feet, his shoulders lowering in another deep exhalation as the security team arrived in the room.



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Ramon looked visibly relieved to see the young Crown Prince safe and sound. His gaze shifted to his boss as Azar turned to him.

‘First thing tomorrow—’

‘We’ll set up further security measures, Your Majesty,’ Ramon pledged, uncharacteristically interrupting his sovereign in his desperation to reassure him that this wouldn’t ever happen again.

Eden felt his gaze on her, including her in that pledge, but she was too absorbed in reassuring herself that her son was fine and unharmed to respond.

Another sob bubbled up, and Azar gruffly instructed everyone to leave. The moment the door shut behind them he gently scooped Max into his arms. He stirred briefly, then settled against his father’s chest. Azar’s other arm came around Eden and he murmured soft, soothing words against her ear in Cartanian as she sobbed quietly.

With relief for his safety.

With gratitude that, for the first time, she hadn’t endured a horrible experience alone.

And with sadness. Because too soon she would need to return to emotional solitude, suppress this yearning for love and a home even more.

‘It’s okay, tesoro. He’s fine.’ Azar’s lips found the corner of her mouth in a swift, firm kiss before he gripped her nape to angle her face towards his. ‘Let’s put him in his proper bed, shall we?’

Nodding brokenly, she held on tight to him as they returned to Max's room.

Only to feel her spirits plummeting all over again when, in the living area of their suite, she saw who was waiting for them.

With every bone in her body she wished she could override politeness and keep walking. Her overwrought emotions still lingered on the surface, and this encounter was the last thing she needed.

'I'm told you're having trouble keeping track of your offspring,' Azar's mother drawled.

Despite addressing them both, her critical gaze remained firmly on Eden.

She looked extremely well put-together, considering it was almost midnight. Compared to her, Eden felt like a grape left too long in the sun—not fresh, almost entirely wrinkled. Grimacing inwardly, she was relieved when Azar, still cradling Max, turned to her.

'Go on—I'm right behind you,' he murmured, but he didn't wait for Eden to leave before he answered his mother. 'That "offspring" is your grandson. And if you're here to express anything but support I suggest you leave.'

Queen Fabiana stiffened, her son's tone leaving her in no doubt that he wasn't in the mood for her antics. 'I just came to see that he was okay, Azar. No need to be snippy.'

He took one more step towards her with a nod. 'Thanks for your concern, but we're all fine. Buenos noches, Mamá.'

Her face clenched at the blatant dismissal, and she shot Eden a venomous look, but

once again Eden couldn't bring herself to care.

The pain at her temples was intensifying.

She rubbed at them as they entered Max's room. 'I get why your mother doesn't like me, but why does she...?'

'Actively despise me?'

At her gasp, he smiled stiffly. 'Long story short: she's never forgiven my father for fathering other offspring. She wanted him to reject Teo and Valenti. Papá refused. I was caught in the crossfire of their battle until I was old enough to remove myself from it. She's never forgiven me for forming a bond with my half-brothers and not taking her side in hating the whole world for what she deems her suffering.'

Eden frowned. 'But...she was Queen. She had everything your half-brothers and their mother didn't.'

His nostrils flared. 'You have front row seats to the reality that wealth and a royal title don't equal happiness.'

What he didn't add, and what Eden suddenly realised, was the fact that his mother was the reason he craved control. Why he was so often aloof to the point of detachment. Perhaps even why he wanted to forge a different path for himself when it came to being a father to Max.

Suddenly her throat was clogging again, her heart clenching in understanding and in foolish, dangerous sympathy. Yearning...

Because if Azar was as broken as her... If her foolish heart forged a connection...

Swallowing, she held out her hands.

Azar placed Max in her embrace where, after a moment, he whimpered as he protested at her fierce cuddle.

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He started to blink and wake. ‘Mama?’

‘Shh...it’s okay, baby. Go back to sleep.’

Letting go felt like the hardest thing, and she was grateful that strong arms wrapped around her once more after she placed him in his cot and they watched him settle back to sleep without a care in the world.

‘I’m not sure whether to ground him until he’s fifty or handcuff myself to him to ensure he never does that again,’ Azar admitted gruffly.

A broken sob-laugh slipped out. ‘Welcome to my world,’ she murmured, and then her breath caught when he tilted her face to his.

‘A world I’m finding I’m agreeable to inhabiting,’ he returned gruffly.

## CHAPTER TEN

SOMETHING SHIFTED BETWEEN them in that moment. Profound and heavy enough to still their breaths. To make Azar’s eyes darken, this time minus the shadows. And whether he was the one who drew her closer or if it was she who held on tighter, she chose not to dwell on it. They didn’t kiss, but they came close. And, bewilderingly, it felt even more intimate, standing there watching over their son, not rejecting the connection forging between them, even though she had no idea where it might lead.

She watched as the tightness around his mouth and eyes eased and he exhaled

heavily. As if some secret, mighty resolution had been reached. And when he dropped a soft kiss on her forehead Eden found herself sighing too. Abandoning those fierce defenders guarding the walls of her heart.

Just for tonight, she would take a break from tumult.

‘My father will have heard about this,’ said Azar. ‘He’ll need reassuring. I’ll return as soon as I can.’

She nodded, wrapping her arms around herself to retain his warmth as he stepped away. For the longest time, he simply stared at her. Then, turning briskly on his heels, he strode away.

She stayed, reassuring a distraught Nadia, when she hesitantly approached, that she bore no grudge.

Then, after assuring herself her baby was okay, she reluctantly left him to sleep.

Sleep for herself was out of the question, but she stripped upon reaching her suite, showered and dressed in a nightgown and robe, then planted herself in front of the TV in the living room connecting her and Azar’s suites. For the first time she was thankful for the strict palace protocols that almost guaranteed that news of tonight’s events wouldn’t get out.

She’d just about managed to get her heart to settle when Azar walked in. He was freshly showered too, and even before her avid gaze had taken in the damp strands of silky hair clinging to his forehead and temples, to wander lower over his hard pecs and washboard stomach, her heart was galloping again.

It really was deplorably unfair how magnificent this man was.

‘Nightcap?’ he drawled, sauntering over the extensive liquor cabinet perched next to a Venetian wallpapered wall.

She started to shake her head. But darts of pain, one swiftly following the other, lanced her temples, made her freeze.

Azar froze too, his brow furrowing. ‘What’s wrong?’ he rasped.

‘My head hurts. I’m coming down with a migraine.’

Concern clenched his brow and her heart thudded as he changed direction, striding over to where she sat.

‘Shall I get the doctor?’

And invite more curiosity? ‘No, I’ll be fine. It’s probably the adrenaline... I’ll sleep it off.’

His scrutiny didn’t let up. ‘Does that usually work?’

She shrugged. ‘I don’t know. I’ve never misplaced my son before,’ she said, then flinched at her half-facetious, half-panicked tone. It would take her a while to get over the emotional turbulence of the last hour.

‘Ven aqui.’ The command was low and utterly unshakable.

Eden stood and tumbled forward, a compulsion she couldn’t fight directing her. The moment she was within touching distance, he dragged her into his arms. She fell the last half-step, a sob of relief breaking free before she could stifle it.

Her cheek landed on his chest and she inhaled, deep and shaky. His arms banded her,

just like before, and damn if it wasn't quickly turning into her favourite place to be.

'I don't know what I'd have done if anything had—'



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‘Hush,tesoro. He’s safe and sound and tucked up in bed. See?’

Sliding a hand into his pocket, he drew out his phone, hit the monitor app that showed Max fast asleep in his bed.

‘That’s all you need to think about right now. We’ve been given an eye-opening test. We will put forward better safeguards, yes?’

She nodded, more than ready to release that rock of fear lodged in her gut. Burrowing deeper into his chest, she exhaled on a moan again as one arm banded her waist and his fingers dug into the tight knots gripping her shoulders. He massaged her in firm, soothing circles, loosening her tension until she all but melted against him.

With one final breath she wrapped her arms around his waist, not protesting when the arm around her waist lowered to circle her hips and lift her up in a show of easy, sexy strength that changed the dynamic from comfort to...something else.

Something that made her lift her head, angle her gaze to meet the ferocity of his.

A different sensation took hold of her. One that had been brewing with unstoppable force since the moment he’d dropped his champagne glass in Vegas and chased after her.

Possibly even before then. Because, as he’d stated before, chemistry like theirs couldn’t be faked.

‘You don’t want a nightcap. Or the doctor. Tell your husband what he can do for

you,' he offered, with such overpowering yet simple magnanimity that her defences crumbled all at once, making her foundations entirely unsalvageable even if she'd wanted to cling to her last ounce of sanity.

'What if it's something I... I shouldn't crave? Something impossible?'

Molten grey eyes, hypnotising and offering safe harbour, locked onto her soul. 'I've been known to achieve the impossible. Say it, mi reina,' he commanded roughly. 'Tell me what you want.'

And, sweet heaven, she was tired of fighting it. Especially tonight, when her emotions had been put through the wringer.

'I don't want to be alone,' came her raw admission.

Tonight or any other night.

'Take me to bed, Azar,' she whispered fervently, her fingers digging into his shoulders, holding on for fear he'd refuse. Reject her. For fear the lust she saw in his eyes was only in her imagination. 'Make me forget for a while?'

The flare of need and triumph that blazed a moment later told her she wasn't imagining it. And, while she knew this might ultimately be a risky path she was taking, she couldn't help the blaze that flowed through her.

The heightening need speared her fingers into his luxurious hair, gripped it tight as he drew up her nightgown, to aid her in wrapping her legs around him. The better to feel the power of his arousal, a heated rod that immediately pressed, demanding, against her core.

She ground her hips against it, causing him to curse before a thick chorus of need left

their lips. It tightened their connection, their mouths meeting in feverish hunger. Thick, untamed desire born of deprived need and residual fear drove their frantic hands faster, their movements increasingly desperate, until he pinned her against one wall, his breathing truncated as he feasted on her for an age, then lifted his head.

‘Again, Eden. Tell me you want this. That you want me.’

The demand was tinged with his usual arrogance, his imperious expectation of adoration and acknowledgment of his prowess. But, having lost chunks of valued memory, Eden had learned to search beneath the surface of words and expressions.

And she heard it. That sliver of vulnerability, of uncertainty, that spoke of a deeper need. That said that this extraordinary man, who was literally a king among men, didn’t believe his dominance was absolute. That when it came to her perhaps he lacked something—minute but essential.

And maybe it was extreme foolishness to open her heart to that, leaving her vulnerable, but here she was doing it. Discarding any smidgeon of power she might have mined from that knowledge and instead cupping his chiselled jaw in her palm, revelling in the muscle that jumped against her skin.

And with far too much emotion moving through her, she responded. ‘I want you. I feel as if...as if I’ve wanted you for ever. Even when maybe it wasn’t wise or sane or safe. I want you, Azar. Only you.’

Flames of pure lust and indecipherable emotion leapt in his eyes. She wanted to drown in the former, explore the latter more deeply. But he was spinning, striding with purpose towards the emperor-sized bed that befitted his status. He tossed her none-too-gently upon it, his hands attacking his clothes as he watched her bounce on the surface.

And once he was gloriously naked, and had ensured she was too, he prowled over her...a sleek, beautiful jungle beast.

‘You’re mine,tesoro. Say it.’

This time she had the wherewithal to shake her head. Because she knew, like his conquering kin of old, that he saw an inch and demanded a mile. She’d left more than a crack of her heart wide open for him. She suspected he would find a way in if she didn’t shore up her defences soon and effectively. But she wasn’t about to hand herself over on a golden platter.

So she slid her hand up his sculpted shoulder, thrilling in the sleek perfection of him, and buried her fingers in the hair at his nape. ‘You first. Tell me you’re mine and I’ll reciprocate.’

Those shutters didn’t come down immediately. But their silhouettes shimmered into sight. That ingrained propensity to guard his emotions, to keep his control, flared high before he rasped, ‘I’m not going anywhere.’

Not the same, her senses screamed.

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But he was lowering his head, slanting his mouth over hers in searing possession that soon turned into fiery worship over every inch of her body.

‘I’m not going anywhere either,’ she returned, and then took the smallest triumph in seeing how that dissatisfied and unsettled him, hearing the lowest growl erupt from his throat.

The result was fire in his eyes, demanding mouth and hands, and a wicked edge to his possession as he quickly sheathed himself and parted her thighs. Eyes pinning hers, he kissed his way down one smooth inner thigh, then the other, his nostrils flaring as desire gripped him tighter still.

Then, with his fingers and his mouth, he tormented her long enough to drag pleas from her very soul before, levering himself once more over her, he slammed inside her, as if imprinting himself on her very soul.

Grabbing her hands, he shoved them above her head, imprisoned them against the headboard with one hand while the other captured her hip, held her steady as, with a fierce determination to conquer blazing in his eyes, he drove her right to the edge of the world, then held her there with exquisite precision. Until she was begging...then screaming.

Then she was soaring, crying out, ‘Oh, God, Azar. I can’t... I can’t... I’m coming!’

His triumph this time was absolute, as was the restoration of his control as he plunged his tongue deep into her mouth, tasting her pleasure and her surrender.

‘For me. Only me.Sí?’

‘Yes! Only you!’

Words dissolved into action. Even as she was soaring he was flipping her over onto her knees, recapturing her hips. Then, with pure animalistic mastery, the King of Cartana reasserted his dominance. With fiery caresses, worshipful kisses and always, always, the relentless drive of his shaft, he finally gave a hoarse shout of his own, gifting her another sublime climax as he seized his.

Then, in silence, he stepped off the bed, caught up her sweat-slicked body against his own and marched them to his shower.

Eden could barely keep her eyes open as he gently bathed her from head to toe.

Or perhaps she didn’t really want to look into his eyes, see those shutters back in place.

Because from the corner of her eye she caught the tight clench of his jaw, the rigid way he held himself despite the slight tremble in his hands.

Yes, they’d been caught in the wildest tempest—but it was over. And now he was shoring up his defences.

It would be in her best interest to do the same. So she went one better and shut her eyes, scooping up her scattered emotions as he wrapped her in a sumptuous towel, after washing himself, then, striding back into his bedroom suite, placed her beneath the covers.

She didn’t even care that they were both naked. It would be absurd to call for modesty now, after what they’d done to each other. And it was too much effort to

resist when he tugged her close, wrapped his warm, hard body around hers and instructed her gruffly to, ‘Sleep now,mi linda.’ He dropped a kiss on her neck, and added, ‘Rest that rebellious little spirit that I shouldn’t find quite so engaging and yet...’

Maybe it was her imagination that he’d left some words unsaid, or maybe she’d drifted off before he finished speaking.

Either way, her subconscious had other ideas.

She dreamt of sun-drenched joy, of playing with Max, and a hovering and protective Azar tossing swathes of broody, desirous looks her way, promising her the fantasy family she’d secretly yearned for.

But they quickly turned into a repetitive nightmare loop of frantic, shattered loss...a dark hellscape where she screamed her throat raw for her loved ones for what seemed like eons—until a firm hand was shaking her awake.

‘Wake up,cara,’ a deep voice commanded. Hands pushed back her hair from her face. ‘You’re having a bad dream.’

And when she opened her eyes to the dark concern in Azar’s eyes it was to feel a piercing spike of relief, quickly replaced by the most harrowing lance of pain she’d experienced yet.

Her migraine hadn’t gone away.

Hell, it was ten times worse!

She was gasping through fresh waves of pain when the kaleidoscope of memories she’d feared lost for ever zipped into life, like forked lightning in a storm.

Only once the pain cleared, the memories remained.

Of Arizona.

Of Nick.

Of her and Azar.



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Of that horrendous fight when he'd seen her coming out of Nick's room after delivering a bottle of champagne to him and confiding in him that she was attracted to Azar.

Then had come the double blow of Nick warning her that Azar might not feel the same, followed by the cruel, humiliating words Azar had thrown at her soon after, confirming Nick's words.

Her pain had been soul-shattering and her despair uncontrollable. She had known everything she'd thought special and sacred about giving herself to him had been a lie. That he was rejecting her as cruelly as her father had done. That she was getting a taste of everything her mother had suffered.

Throat-searing sobbing had been followed by a profound vow to herself not to fall into her mother's trap of risking her emotions on a man. A man who would never feel one iota of what she felt for him.

She had been devastated that the man she'd given herself to thought of her as nothing but a convenient bed-warmer—a toy he could play with and discard—and she'd readily accepted when Nick had offered to take her for a drive, to get her away from Azar.

Only to suffer a different sort of terror. Nick, driving his Lamborghini way too fast, while raging—ironically—about Azar's unfair privilege.

She remembered her screams as he'd taken a corner too fast. As tyres slid and glass shattered.

Then nothing.

Sorrow stung deep now, and the anguish of loss and grief for Nick was raw with reawakened memories.

Every look Azar had levelled on her since their accidental reunion finally made sense. All along she'd suspected she was the last woman on earth he'd ever want.

Now she knew.

He exhaled slowly. Heavily. Incisive eyes drilled laser-sharp into hers. The hand caressing her shoulder dropped to the bed and a different tension replaced the harrowing nightmare.

'You remember.'

It wasn't a question.

She'd survived one category five cyclone only to be plunged into another.

She pushed him away, hating her subconscious for not protecting her from this when it had protected her from those harrowing hours that last day in Arizona. Chest heaving, she threw her feet over the side of the bed and sat up, snatching up the towel she'd dropped earlier.

'Eden?' Imperious demand throbbed in his voice.

The battering continued, firing tremors through her body. 'Yes. I remember.'

She didn't need to look over her shoulder to know he'd stiffened further. That his deep censure was back.

‘I’ll get the doctor.’

‘No, I don’t need—’

‘I’m afraid this time it’s non-negotiable. You’ve suffered enough trauma for one night. I won’t risk your health.’

She wanted to laugh. Then cry. Then scream at him to stop pretending he cared for her when the glaring truth of how much he didn’t was a live wire writhing between them.

She clenched her teeth as he snatched up the phone and summoned his private doctor.

‘Are you sure you want to go down that route? I’m handing you the perfect excuse on a plate. A queen of unsound mind and low morals is surely worth the scandal just to get her out of the way and have full access to your son?’

His sharp intake of breath made her shut her eyes. She couldn’t bear to look at him. His voice ringing clear as a bell in her head was a searing reminder of one of the many insults he’d thrown at her that night, when he’d seen her exiting Nick’s room.

‘Women like you are only good for one thing. And even that cheap thing becomes entirely worthless when it’s spread about.’

‘Thanks for the offer, but if you’re trying to get rid of me scandal won’t be the thing that sways me. My father has told you the story of how my brothers and I came to be born more than a few times. I won’t be letting you go any time soon,cara. If anything, the challenge of drilling down into your choices intrigues me.’

She surged to her feet and spun to face him, fury momentarily overcoming the weakness and pain still gripping her body. ‘Challenge?Mychoices? How dare you?’

You called me deplorable names. And you...you—'

His sharp curse came as if from a deep dark tunnel. She realised she was swaying, losing her balance, just before he snatched her into his arms. Molten censure-filled eyes drilled into hers.

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‘Enough of this! You have just got your memory back. We will fight, if you insist, but not until you’re in a better position to throw your verbal punches.’

‘You’re unbelievable—you know that?’ she breathed as he swung her up into his arms and returned her to his bed.

The memory of what they’d done there so gloriously unspooled like the most vibrant spectacle through her mind. She struggled to bite back a moan when he pulled covers that smelled likethemaround her.

‘I want to return to my own bed.’

That regal nostrils flared, betraying the fact that he wasn’t as unaffected as he projected. She didn’t care. Didn’t want to let it anywhere near her wounded heart.

‘Again, not until we do what’s necessary,’ he clipped out, one eyebrow raised in exasperating challenge.

‘Fine. Let’s get on with it, then.’

He stepped back, exposing every sculpted bronze inch of himself in unashamed nudity. The fact that it took three seconds too long to drag her gaze from him sent waves of heat to her face, and she exhaled in thanks when she was saved by the literal bell at the door.

Despite having been woken in the middle on the night, the doctor was impeccably dressed, and unflappable as he gently but firmly went through the file Dr Ramsey had

transferred to him before standing up.

‘I’d like to perform a more thorough examination in the morning, Your Majesty. But for now everything seems fine besides the headaches. Those are to be expected.’

His gaze darted to Azar, who stood narrow-eyed, his hands on his hips, thankfully having thrown on a pair of lounge bottoms.

‘As long as you don’t overstress yourself you in the short term.’

‘Are you saying I can’t make love to my wife, Doctor?’ Azar demanded brazenly.

‘Azar!’

She couldn’t, of course, blurt out that she had no intention of letting him anywhere near her now she’d recalled his true feelings for her. Until she decided how best to protect herself and Max, she still had to maintain this ruse of being a happy family.

‘Well?’ Azar pressed, completely ignoring her sidelong glare telling him to shut up.

The middle-aged doctor, no doubt used to the eccentricities of royals, barely reacted. ‘I wouldn’t want to impose a pause on the physical if you don’t wish it, Your Majesties, but I strongly recommend you...moderate yourselves.’

She slapped her palms over her burning face, caught between fury at Azar and hysteria at this absurd conversation. ‘Oh, my God...’

Could this night get any worse?

She started to shake her head, thought better of it, and dropped her hands. ‘Thank you for the advice, Doctor. And I’m sorry to have bothered you at this time of night.’

‘Not at all. It’s my privilege to be of service to you, Your Majesty. And I’m glad that you’re on the road to full recovery.’

Azar’s brows clamped at the doctor’s twitch of a smile. He remained grimly watchful as he handed her pills to ease her headache and then, with a shallow bow, wished them goodnight and left.

‘You!’

That infernal sexy eyebrow arched. ‘Sí?’

‘You have a nerve...assuming I’ll let you anywhere near me!’

His face tightened. ‘Let’s not close the door quite yet on what works best for us,cara.’

Gritting her teeth, she flung off the covers, thankful when she felt sturdier on standing. Her head was still pounding, but she knew it would grow worse if she stayed there.

‘What works foryou, you mean. I’m only good for one thing. Isn’t that what you said in Arizona?’

His lips firmed, and the skin bracketing his mouth paled a little while the tops of his ears reddened. On anyone else it might have looked like self-flagellation, or even unease. But he was masterful at controlling his feelings, and it was gone a moment later.

‘Get back into bed,’ he said, with unexpected gentleness.

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But she suspected that too might be a tactic.

‘No. The only bed I’m getting into is my own.’

She rubbed at her temple, averting her gaze when his chest swelled with a deep inhalation. Knowing he was about to press the point, she tightened the belt of her robe and headed determinedly for the door.

‘Goodnight, Your Majesty.’

His harsh exhale just before she slammed the door behind her was her only response.

\* \* \*

‘Eat something.’

Azar’s belly clenched hard as Eden’s gaze flicked in his direction, started to rise, then stopped halfway up his chest before returning to Max.

While he couldn’t fault her for showering their son with her attention this morning, he found he very much minded that she was freezing him out. That the eyes he’d stared so deeply into in the throes of the most profound lovemaking of his life were being denied him in the light of day.

Hell, he even felt the tiniest most uncharitable sensation of wishing her memory hadn’t returned just yet. Because he’d selfishly wanted time to grapple with his own bewildering emotions. With the persistent possibility that he’d relied too heavily on



past crutches in his interaction with Eden three years ago, and been too quick to heap blame on her.

The possibility that Nick was not blameless...

He killed the self-deprecating laugh that growled up his throat. That hinted at the impossible notion that he might be floundering on a subject he didn't want to delve into and—holy of holies—that he might be feeling the tiniest bit sorry for himself.

Hell, no.

It had never happened before, and he was damned if he would allow such useless emotions to vanquish him.

'I'm not hungry,' she murmured, with barely an inflexion.

It was the same tone she'd used since they'd dressed and gone to fetch their son for breakfast. Her mood was only transformed when she addressed Max. Then pure joy and gratitude shone from her eyes.

And,diablo, he was not about to admit to feeling jealous of his own flesh and blood. That would be the lowest of low.

So he shifted in his seat, reached for fresh fruit, sliced it before placing it on her plate.

'Try. You need your strength, and we have much to celebrate.'

That drew her attention, as he had known it would.

'Do we?' she echoed hollowly.

‘Sí. Your memories have returned. Surely that’s a good thing?’

Her gaze dropped, veiling her expression once more. Was it wishful thinking, or did he catch the shadow of regret in her eyes?

‘Well, if nothing else, I guess we both know where we stand now.’

His belly clenched tighter. ‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

She didn’t answer straight away, choosing instead to shower more attention on Max, who was devouring his favourite breakfast of pancakes painstakingly made in the shape of his favourite creatures by the palace chef.

After wiping a syrup-covered cheek, she slid Azar another no-contact glance. ‘A mere waitress could never hold her own in your world, never mind be Queen. Or something to that effect.’

‘You wish to turn every word I said to you three years ago in Arizona into a whip to flay me with? Before you do, remember that I was going with the evidence before me.’

‘What evidence? I did absolutely nothing to give you the impression that I had loose morals. Hell, you saw the “evidence” when I slept with you. And if we’re playing Remember when... Remember when you all but beat your chest in primal smugness when you discovered I was a virgin?’

She whispered those two words, her cheeks flushing as she glanced furtively to where the staff waited just beyond hearing range.

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Azar stared, wondering how he could have blocked so many obvious details from his mind.

With a heavier dose of the unease that had been eating away at him since last night, he forced himself to remember those flashes of innocence when they'd touched.

But, Nick's possible scheming aside, she had still chosen him over Azar.

Yes, she might have been settling for second-best, but he couldn't overlook the fact that the choice had been made.

And he, having spent his childhood coming second to his mother's rabid ambition to elevate herself in life at all costs, had felt something crack in him when she'd made that choice.

It had been unforgivable then.

It was...should be...unforgivable now.

Unless she'd struck out in blind self-defence? Had her 'I'm with Nick now' been designed to hurt with words and not an actual truth?

But even as those niggles of doubt swelled bigger inside him he was fighting not to reach across the table, to experience the silky smoothness of her warm, firm skin all over again.

Arizona hadn't been enough.

Last night had been nowhere near enough.

He was beginning to entertain the jarring possibility that what he was facing was a challenge without end.

He pushed every single disconcerting thought aside and nudged the fruit one inch closer. ‘The doctor is waiting for us. And he will most definitely not consider it progress if you turn with an empty stomach.’

Her frown deepened. ‘I can see him on my own.’

‘You can, but you won’t. Even if you can’t stand the sight of me right now, we have appearances to uphold—remember?’

‘And that includes invading my privacy?’ she bit out.

The signs of her fire were better than her chilled distance, even if she was using that fire to push him away.

‘What privacy, tesoro? You already had Dr Ramsey share your history with me. There’s nothing more to hide, is there?’

Her eyes flashed with the pure fire he’d hoped to provoke. And, sí, maybe he was playing dirty, but he was that unsettled.

When he had her attention, he nudged the plate another daring inch closer.

Unfiltered exasperation was stamped in every inch of her body, but he watched her devour the fruit. And when he slid her a plate of buttery croissant, ham and eggs, he enjoyed watching her consume that too with way more satisfaction than he should have felt.

But he didn't even fight it. There was a conundrum hidden in a maze. It would take time to unravel.

And if he sensed time already slipping through his fingers...? That she might make another choice, leaving him in the cold once more...?

The constriction in his chest froze his breath. No. He would not permit that to happen.

What if the choice isn't yours?

'I'm done. Let's go and get this over with.'

She stood, blissfully unaware of the tectonic chaos unfolding within him.

Max was tidied up, and she caught him in her arms and strode for the door, her intention not to leave him clear in every sinew of her beautiful body. It was a plan he wasn't about to argue with. The thought of those hours last night still sent faint ripples of icy horror and dread through him, along with the knowledge that any harm befalling his son would've destroyed him.

But in the clear light of day he also realised that the ordeal had done something else. It had cut through his deep need to claim and establish a relationship with his son and turned it into a deeper yearning for more. And not just with Max.

He wanted more with Eden, too.

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:13 am*

For a full minute he remained frozen as the knowledge embedded in him. Burrowing into all his alarmingly vulnerable places. Rushing through his chest like a tropical thunderstorm until he was drenched with pure, unadulterated need.

Rising, he followed his wife and son at a steady pace.

He would not be left behind. He was the King, after all.

But as he joined them, planting himself by Eden's side as the doctor did his tests and pronounced her healthy and on the way to full recovery, he wasn't so confident of the battle ahead to win his wife.

But, he was the King. And he had the blood of past warriors flowing in his veins. He only needed to find a way to achieve this more without fully exposing himself to any vulnerabilities.

Right...?

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

AZAR WAS CHANGING the rules on her.

Somehow he'd decided, the morning after she'd regained her memories, that what had happened in Arizona—the denigration of her character, the belief that she'd been playing him against Nick, deliberately inciting his jealousy, and that she'd even gone as far as to choose Nick over him—was merely a bump in the road they could overcome.

At first she'd been nonplussed, to the point of speechlessness. Then angry—because how dared he? But now, in the third week since regaining her memories, Eden had become intensely curious as to why and how he believed they could carry on as if he hadn't levelled the vilest of accusations at her. As to how long he intended to try and sweep her off her feet every time she so much as cleared her throat to address the giant elephant in the room.

So far, he'd taken her to every cheesy tourist spot in San Maribet and Cartana, eagerly couching it as 'the honeymoon phase' for the palace. He'd also shown her out-of-the-way haunts he'd visited as a boy with his father, like the private cave two mountains over from the mountain retreat where they'd spent their wedding night.

Today, the spectacular six-course meal he'd arranged there, across the lake on an expertly crafted royal raft, lit only with phosphorescence, was so magical Eden wasn't sure she'd taken a full breath throughout. And now, after dinner he offered revelations when she asked why only his father had featured in these outings. Revelations she would have thought unbidden if not for the strained look on his face that told her this too had a purpose. One she couldn't immediately grasp.

'If you haven't noticed already, my mother doesn't care about appearances,' he said. 'Her only abiding desire is to further her own interests.'

She flinched at the caustic words. She opened her mouth, to say what she didn't know. But he shook his head, pre-empting her.

'Don't bother with platitudes. I have recognised and accepted that ours will never be the normal mother and son relationship. And in all these years nothing has prompted me to believe otherwise. She is what she is.'

She frowned, not entirely sure why his words sent jagged unease through her. Perhaps it was because while her situation with her own mother bore some

similarities to his, she hadn't given up on forming some semblance of a relationship with her, whereas it sounded as if Azar had.

Was that so he could control never being hurt again? Did that control extend to every area of his life. To her?

'So, in essence, where Max is concerned, you're following in your father's footsteps?'

His mouth twitched—not with cynicism at her observation, but with something close to fondness. 'He said the same thing when I broke the news about Max.' Then all traces of humour were whittled away. 'And I cannot fault him. If he did one thing right, it was ensuring my brothers and I forged a relationship—despite all the opposition. I don't intend to allow anything to stand in the way of what I mean to achieve.'

Something urgent pushed her to test that control. 'With Max, and probably with me, but not with your mother?' When his jaw tightened, she continued. 'You speak as if that's set in stone. As if you can't change things even if you truly want to.' He sent her a speaking look that made heat flare into her face and her heart lurch. 'It's not the same,' she defended hotly.

Expecting an imperious counter argument, she was surprised, then vastly troubled, when he finally nodded. 'It's not. Because while I accepted the way things were with her even before I turned ten years old, I'm not doing the same with you.'

She shook her head. 'You can't just command things to be the way you want, you know?'

His nostrils flared, and in the glowing lights around them he resembled a fallen angel, intent on bending rules and kingdoms to his will.



After a moment, he reached out. 'Get better quickly,tesoro. Then we can joust on a more even battlefield.'

I want to fight now.

But she held her tongue, because this place he'd brought her to, one that was special to him and his father, was wreaking sweet magic on her. She was loath to spoil it with disagreement. And also, deep down, the promise of fighting him for what he wanted sent too large a thrill through her.

For the two nights in a row after that, when the magic wrapped tighter, she came within a whisker of succumbing to the goodnight kiss he brushed over her lips, to the intensity in his gaze when he stared down at her, willing her to take things a step further. Or perhaps a step back, so she would be in his bed?

The clawing need when that happened felt like an uphill battle she was doomed to lose.

Caught in deep thought on just how she could save this heart of hers, which seemed to be flinging itself headlong, with zero caution, into the hands of a man she still couldn't trust to treasure it, Eden forgot all about protocol as she opened the door to her father-in-law's living room to retrieve her exuberant child and take him for his afternoon nap.

King Alfonso, who'd finally got rid of his pneumonia and was remarkably stronger, insisted he was fit enough to withstand Max's frenetic pace, but Eden knew he needed a day or two between Max's visits.

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:13 am*

‘Don’t think I can’t see it,mi hijo.’

Eden stopped in her tracks. King Alfonso was talking to Azar.

She’d had no idea Azar would be there—and honestly, she’d been cowardly and avoided him for most of the last few days.

She feared she was falling in love with her husband, despite the insurmountable barriers between them. Her heart was a foolish organ, she’d decided upon waking this morning. And it needed a serious time out.

She needed to walk away. If nothing else, she could trust that Azar would ensure Max didn’t tire his grandfather.

‘See what?’ Azar replied.

Her feet stalled, her heart thumping wildly.

‘The strain between you and your wife. Put on a show for the public, but you can’t fool me. I know the challenges of dealing with an unhappy wife, remember? This path you’re on...leaving things to fester...it’ll only lead to further strife.’

‘You don’t need to worry about us. We’re making it work.’

His father snorted, then coughed for a few minutes before chuckling. ‘You’ve never been one to bury your head in the sand, Azar. That you insist on doing so now makes me think you’re afraid.’

‘Afraid?’ he scoffed. ‘Because I don’t subscribe to some false notion of baring myself wide open in order to satisfy someone’s grand expectations?’

‘Tell me what hiding your true feelings has achieved for you?’

‘Papá...’

‘You’re a skilled negotiator in diplomacy and lately, with the help of your wife, very skilled at getting the whole world to fall in love with our beautiful kingdom. But you’re terrible at seeing what’s right in front of your face. Do the right thing. Drop the pretence and be straight with her,’ he warned.

‘Doing “the right thing” is one thing. Strangling a relationship with unwanted emotion is quite another.’

Through the dull roaring in her ears, Eden heard the former King sigh. ‘I should’ve insisted your mother do better with you, shouldn’t I? Should’ve put a stop that silly rivalry before you and your brothers were caused irreparable damage.’

Tense silence. Then, ‘What’s done is done. There’s no point dwelling in the past,’ Azar said.

She didn’t need to be in the room to know he was pacing. He’d be hating not being able to control the whole nonsensical notion of love his father was pushing on him.

A notion he was dismissing out of hand.

‘Is it done when it’s affecting your future? Wake up, Azar, before it’s too late.’

Something she recognised as hope shrivelled within her as Azar’s bitter laugh caught her right in the chest, snagging hard at a very soft spot.

‘I appreciate the advice, Papá, but for the sake of my son I can’t—won’t—risk upsetting the status quo.’

‘Not even if it’ll bring you greater happiness?’ his father pressed, even though his voice had weakened with fatigue.

The long stretch of silence wrecked her to her core.

Then, ‘I haven’t seen any evidence that it’ll be worth it. So, no. Things between my wife and I will stay the same.’

An imperious declaration that completely shattered her, and her breath caught on stifled sobs as she stumbled away towards the privacy of her suite.

\* \* \*

‘I’ve arranged to visit my mother. Max and I are leaving in three days.’

His espresso cup froze halfway to his mouth. ‘When was this decided and why am I only hearing of it now?’

She was doing that thing again—staring at his chest instead of meeting his gaze.

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:13 am*

The Great Unnerving—as he'd taken to calling the sensation inside him which had only intensified since his father's wholly unsolicited counselling—surged higher. At this rate he'd be completely engulfed, would drown without knowing what exactly was killing him.

Really? You don't know?

'I spoke with her last night. You know she's never met Max. And now, thanks to you, she's able to host us.'

There was no sarcasm or rancour in her voice—and, yes, he wished his magnanimity wasn't returning to bite him in the behind in the form of facilitating this separation.

'And how will your sudden absence be explained?' he rallied.

She shrugged. 'Get the palace to spin something. They've done an exemplary job for the past few months, haven't they?'

'They may well have done—you seem to have them in the palm of your hand, after all. But even if I agree to you going, I'm not sure I want to be parted from Max.'

It was a purely selfish, rash means of ensuring she returned. Because for a blind minute he couldn't cast off the notion that if he let them go he would never see them again.

Now she met his gaze—with fire and brimstone.

‘You think I’m going to leave my son behind? I will fight you to the ends of the earth before that happens. I dare you to try it!’

For the second time in his life he knew the meaning of blazing jealousy. Of feeling control slipping through his fingers. The other time had been when he’d seen her with Nick. When he’d assumed—falsely, as he was now accepting—that her interest in him was anything but platonic.

The wife and Queen he’d lived with these last months, had watched interact with his people—several of whom were falling over themselves to gain her friendship—even deal with his mother, had too much integrity to be putting on an act. She wore her true emotions on her sleeve.

Now he was jealous of his own son.

He clenched his teeth as shame whistled through him. The whole situation was shaming him, emphasising just how dependent he’d become on seeing her—seeing them—at his table every morning and night. On knowing she was within reach, even if she’d taken to avoiding him more effectively in the last few days.

Even while he despised that uncontrollable dependency, he knew he needed it. More than he’d needed anything for a very long time.

Sí, it vastly contributed to that Great Unnerving.

‘How long do you propose to be away?’

The subject of her leaving without his son was closed. He couldn’t separate them any more than he could stop breathing.

Relief flashed across her beautiful eyes—and, yes, he despised that too.

‘Then do something about it.’

He pushed his father’s voice out of his head in time to offer the most selfless boon he could. ‘Two weeks,’ he said.

She frowned. ‘What?’

‘You have two weeks. I’ll find an explanation for your absence.’

She shook her head. ‘One month.’

His lungs flattened, suffocating him. ‘Absolutely out of the question.’

She glared at him, rose from her chair and turned away, her arms wrapped around herself. ‘Three weeks. And I’ll throw in some diplomatic work. I seem to know my way around that well enough by now.’

Ice filled his veins. ‘You really want to get away that badly?’

Her eyes shadowed, then she shrugged and looked away again. ‘I’m not ready to write off any relationship with my mother. I’m going, Azar.’

And, as much as it ravaged him, he hung his hopes on that integrity and let her go.

\* \* \*

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:13 am*

Eden had been half afraid that the camera had lied about the transformation she'd seen in her mother during their video calls.

But, whether it was the Californian sun that seemed to have taken years off her or an unknown root cause, Liv Moss looked miles better than Eden had seen her in ages.

The fact that there was no self-serving man there, offering false promises and responsible for her mother's warm smile when she threw the doors of her Azar-gifted mansion open? Even better still.

And perhaps her newfound self-esteem and emotional clarity was what kept Liv from probing too deeply when Eden changed the subject every time she tried to talk about Azar.

Sadly, it didn't last very long.

Five days of exploring the quiet exclusive Santa Barbara beaches with Max and only a handful of bodyguards in tow was all she got before her mother cornered her one evening, while Max played with his toys.

She delved right in. 'You're not talking to your husband. Why?'

Eden's grimace earned her a wry glance. She scrambled for myriad excuses. But did she really want to rekindle a relationship with her mother and yet hide such an important aspect of her life?

No.



Her gaze flicked to Max, to the soft features already such a powerful reminder of his father that she wondered how she'd believed he was anyone else's but Azar's.

In the end, the facts she hadn't wanted to admit to herself came tumbling out.

'He doesn't want me. He only married me because of his son. I thought it would be enough to do it for Max's sake, but I don't know if it'll be enough in the long run.'

'Of course you know. Or you wouldn't be here,' Liv said briskly.

'What—?' she started, but her mother was shaking her head.

'And it's absolutely fine to feel that way. You shouldn't settle for less than you deserve. But, sweetheart, I think you're wrong.'

Her insides lurched. She wished to be wrong. 'Why?' she asked anyway.

'Because it's the twenty-first century, Eden. And, as much as respectability means to these people, they don't need to marry someone to validate their claims. Even if they do, courting scandal by stepping out of their marriage vows will only get them more attention. And these days any form of attention can be spun into good attention. He married you because he wanted you and his son. Don't make hasty decisions before you find out. I made the opposite mistake with your father. I wish I'd seen the light much sooner than I did.'

The echoes of her mother's pain triggered memories of the most distressing period of their lives and made her prod deeper. 'I'm sorry about that. But what about the other...?'

Her mother gave her a sad smile. 'The other men I tried to replace your father with?'

At Eden's hesitant nod, her mother swallowed, then blinked back a surge of tears.

'Because they made me forget my pain for a while, and some of them even made me feel loved. But it was never the real thing.' She reached across and grasped Eden's hand, the lighter shade of the green eyes she'd inherited pierced her with its earnest intensity. 'If you have a chance at the real thing, don't walk away from it, honey. You'll regret it, and if you're not lucky it'll be far too late to do anything about it.'

'And if it's not the real thing?'

Her mother sagged back in her chair, but the look in her eyes never wavered. 'If it's not, and you decide to walk away, don't settle for second and third best. Don't make my mistake. Because you'll lose more than yourself.' Her eyes flicked to Max, her eyes filling when they returned to Eden. 'You'll miss the chance to feel an equally meaningful kind of love. I missed a lot with you, sweetheart. And for that I'm sorry. I know I don't have the right to ask but...can we start over? I would very much like to stay in both your lives.'

Swallowing the lump in her throat, Eden nodded. Her hands were shaking as they gripped her mother's. If nothing else, she would repair this vital relationship with her mother, regain everything she'd lost when her father had let them both down.

'I would like that very much, Mom.'

As her mother threw her arms around her, salving a wound left far too long unattended, Eden couldn't shake the feeling that in his own way, Azar had facilitated this for her. Even while his own tumultuous relationship with his mother festered.

'I haven't seen any evidence that it'll be worth it. So, no. Things between my wife and I will stay the same.'

She swallowed another wave of hurt at Azar's devastating words. But was her mother right? Was she writing something off that was potentially salvageable? Could she stand having her heart crushed by pursuing a subject her husband had already ruled on?

As if intuiting her thoughts, Max toddled over, holding out the sleek phone Eden had given him to play with. 'Papá.'

Her heart lurched, and for a second she believed—hoped—Azar was calling. When she realised her child was making a demand, asking to call his father, her chest squeezed.

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:13 am*

Azar had video called Max every evening before his bedtime. And while he remained cordial with her, she'd read the intent in his eyes. Her three weeks were counting down. And she suspected he wouldn't give her a second longer.

Why did that thought send fireworks through her when she needed to be standing her ground?

But what if that ground wasn't as cold and desolate as she had initially believed? What if there were priceless gems to be discovered if she dared to dig deeper?

'Papá,' Max insisted, his bottom lip threatening a full-on wobble if his demands weren't met.

Before she could decide, her mother reached for the phone.

'Let me do it.'

Her tears had receded, a sheen of mischief taking their place.

'Why?' Eden asked a little warily.

Liv smiled. 'Just a little experiment to see how the land lies. Max gets to talk to his father, and you get to take a long bath...think about what you truly want. Win-win.'

She made shooing motions and Eden found herself heeding them. But just before leaving the vast living room she paused, taking care to remain out of sight as her mother dialled the first number in the contacts list.

‘Liv? Where’s Eden?’ he demanded.

It was imperious, but she heard the sharp edge she knew well now. The edge that said he wasn’t as in control as he portrayed.

‘She’s occupied with something else. But your son wanted to talk to you so I—’

‘Occupied with what?’ Azar interrupted sharply.

Eden’s heart jumped at the frantic disgruntlement in his voice.

‘Papá!’

‘Here’s Max now. Enjoy your call.’

Her mother sailed on smilingly, securing Max in his highchair, then walked away before Azar could question her further. Liv rounded the corner where Eden stood, hiding an enigmatic smile.

‘Just as I thought,’ Liv murmured.

‘What do you mean?’ she asked, her heart still galloping. ‘What are you doing?’

Her mother cupped her cheek. ‘Nothing. Go, honey. Have your bath.’

She went, torn between interrogating her mother and not wanting to know what she meant.

Because she didn’t want to hope.

\* \* \*

For the first time in his life Azar wished the palace machinery had failed. But they'd expertly mixed enough public engagements into the three weeks he'd grudgingly granted for Eden's trip for it to be hailed a triumph as she met with first ladies, industry experts and charitable organisations. Her popularity already on a steep upward trajectory before she'd left, had now gone stratospheric. Even more tourists were flooding into Cartana, wanting to breathe the same air as its royal couple.

And his wife didn't display a single crumb of homesickness. Hell, she seemed to be positively enjoying herself, speaking about Cartana with a poise, charm and expertise that had made his jaw drop and his palace council fall over themselves in rhapsodies.

It's happening despite you never making your kingdom her home. You've pushed her away...just like you were pushed away.

With every glimpse of her, and with every brief, stilted conversation before she passed the phone to Max, he felt the distance between them stretch wider. A mere ten days had felt like six lifetimes. And with each second the drum that beat into him, telling him that he should be doing something wouldn't relent.

'What are you going to do?' Teo asked, for the dozenth time.

His brothers had turned up to spend some precious time with their father. And, while he didn't begrudge them a single minute of that time, he wished they'd find someone else to pester while their father was resting.

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:13 am*

He suppressed the urge to snap at them, demand to be left alone, as he looked up from his phone—another call unanswered by Eden—and realised his hand was shaking.

Again.

Dios mio, she was the only woman to make him tremble so damn much. She drilled holes in his control without even trying. And, astonishingly, his heart—his soul—was making peace with the fact that he would relinquish that control if it meant having her...keepingher.

‘Why do you care?’ he lashed out.

Teo looked momentarily pained, an expression that pierced regret through Azar before the all-encompassing terror reclaimed his whole being.

‘Look, it’s clear to everyone that you miss your family. Even I miss Max. I’ve grown fond of the little rascal. And your wife isn’t half bad either. You can bury your head in the sand about it if you want, but lately you’ve seemed...’ He shrugged. ‘I don’t know...less sour-faced? Passably tolerable?’

‘Seriously. Shut up, Teo,’ Valenti growled from his position of solemn watchfulness in the corner.

Unflinching, Teo sauntered over with glasses of the premium cognac he’d poured and handed them out, watching, with one brow arched as Azar downed his in one go.

‘I’m going out on a limb here, so bear with me,’ he mused, ignoring Valenti’s venomous look. ‘If this is still about Nick and what happened in Arizona, you need to handle it quickly.’

‘Teo...’

He ignored his twin. ‘You chose to overlook his faults and, while he was great at hiding them, he wasn’t that good. So what I’m saying is, are you willing to lose your family over whatever is holding you back?’

Azar had jack-knifed in his seat when Teo started talking, but now the bracing words made his insides shrivel. Because it really was that simple. And the answer was as clear as the blue skies outside his window.

He wanted her. He needed her.

And unless he took careful, calculated steps, he might lose everything.

So he stood, ignoring his brothers’ probing stares, and walked out.

Unfortunately, a whole day later he, the clever strategist everyone claimed him to be, hadn’t devised an effective strategy to win his wife. Instead, he was reduced to texting her. With idiotic hands that wouldn’t stop shaking.

You’re ignoring me.

The words made him seethe, and they terrified him.

A whole five minutes passed, then:

You’re a king, with realms of adoring subjects. You’ll survive.



He gritted his teeth, even as his belly swooped with fear. He looked around the room—her suite, which he'd taken to wandering into because her scent lingered in the air. And he found he needed that, too.

I won't survive without you...

He started to type the words, then quickly deleted them. Carefully. Because accidentally sending it would...would...

What?

Reveal, once and for all, the true, fathomless depths of his feelings? Reveal that his aberrant outburst in Arizona had been the unstable precursor of what he hadn't recognised was his love and obsession for her? That he would give up everything, including his cursed control, if she would forgive him and love him back?

He swallowed...blinked hard as the truth settled deep and immovable in his heart.

Come home. Please.

Delete. Delete. Delete.

Come home, por favor.

Right. Because begging in his father tongue was less emasculating? Why not simply text his true feelings too and be done with it?

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:13 am*

He paced faster, eyes glued to the screen, then froze when the speech bubble appeared.

We agreed a time and duration for my trip. What's changed?

Everything, his senses screamed.

Then he forced himself to stop. Think.

He'd shamed and rejected her publicly once. Shouldn't he make amends the same way?

Dragging himself from her suite, he entered the living room where his brothers were enjoying a nightcap.

When Azar flicked Valenti a glance he was waiting, one eyebrow quirked.

'What do you need?'

About to shake his head, to send them both away so he could deal with this alone, he felt a jagged thought shimmer into life. Slowly it took shape and solidified.

It was a risk. But if there ever was a time when being King should count for something, surely it was now? When his very life was on the line. Because now he'd had a taste of what the rest of his life might look like, he was confident he wouldn't make it.

‘I need you to find someone and bring them to me. As soon as you can.’

Valenti barely blinked before he nodded. ‘Give me a name.’

\* \* \*

Another three days passed before Eden accepted that she couldn’t stay away the full three weeks with the subject of where she stood in her marriage, in her heart, hanging over her head.

Maybe she could reach him some other way.

She called her personal assistant.

‘We never nailed down my interview with Rachel Mallory. Can we make it happen while I’m here?’

‘Leave it with me, Your Majesty.’

Eden wasn’t expecting the response she received when her private secretary returned her call five minutes later.

‘Your Majesty, it looks like Miss Mallory won’t be available to interview you.’

She wasn’t so full of herself that she was upset by it, but she was surprised.

About to shrug it off, she stopped when her assistant added, ‘But you might see her in Cartana after we return. She’s been summoned by His Majesty for an interview due to air tomorrow night.’

Eden’s eyes goggled, her emotions running riot. ‘What? She’s in Cartana? Are you

sure?’

‘Quite sure, Your Majesty.’

Azar was giving a public interview? For what purpose? His father’s condition hadn’t changed. The former Queen hadn’t done anything scandalous enough to require managed publicity.

The King of Cartana giving a public interview was a big deal...

Surely he wouldn’t be so cruel as to end their marriage by giving a world exclusive?

Hand shaking, she dialled Azar’s number. It rang and rang. Then went to voicemail. The idea that he was paying her back for her near-silent treatment seared her heart.

Unwilling to leave a message when every fibre of her being shook she tried texting instead.

I’m not sure what’s going on, but I hear you’re giving an interview? Azar...if this has anything to do with us...for the sake of Max...call me.

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:14 am*

Dear Lord, could she sound any more desperate?

Hastily deleting it, she replaced it with a less emotive message.

We need to talk. Call me.

Then she watched as the speech bubble rippled for a heart-stopping twenty seconds before disappearing.

Fury rising to mingle with the anguish of her heart cracking, she took a deep breath and dialled his number again. Listened to the ring tone with her fingers wrapped tight around the device.

Just when she thought he'd ignore that too, the call connected.

But it wasn't Azar who answered.

'Good afternoon, Your Majesty.'

'Put me through to him, Gaspar.'

A taut pause. Then, 'I'm afraid His Majesty is indisposed. Perhaps I can pass on a message?'

Her heart cracked wider. When her legs lost power, she sank to the side of the bed.

'It's eight in the morning. I know he's about to sit down to breakfast and I know he's

deliberately avoiding me. Put me on speaker so he can hear me.'

'Your Majesty—'

'Do it, Gaspar. I don't care if the whole world can hear me.'

'Yes, Your Majesty.'

The fact that he complied forced another spike into her heart. But she scrounged up the last bit of her composure.

'I'm going to keep this simple, Azar. I know you don't want me. And you can do whatever you want to me, but if you do anything to hurt my son with this interview I'll never forgive you. I'll make sure you regret it for the rest of your life. Do you hear me?'

She hated the quivering in her voice, but she'd got her message through.

And when she heard a muted rough exhalation she knew he'd heard it loud and clear.

Yet ending that call felt as if she'd stopped her own heart from beating.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

'IT'S NOT TOOlate to change your mind.'

Both Azar and Teo swivelled their heads to Valenti, who scowled at them for a second before staring out of the window of the media room of the palace.

'I swear I didn't switch bodies with him. I'm still Teo.' Teo turned to his twin. 'What the hell has got into you? I should be the one to tell him that, even though I'm told

women love it when you make a fool of yourself over them.’ Teo eyed Azar up and down. ‘And you’ve got that tortured lover look down to an art.’

‘Enough,’ Azar growled, wishing he could open another shirt button.

But he’d pushed things already by conducting this interview minus a tie, sending the palace council into apoplexy. If he told them it was because he couldn’t breathe properly they’d have him trussed up in an emergency room before he could explain it was an entirely emotional condition, not a physical one.

‘You can both shut up. Or leave. This is the only way.’

They stopped talking. And the roar in his ears grew louder, his heart slamming against his ribs as Eden’s words echoed in his ears.

‘I know you don’t want me...’

‘I’ll never forgive you...’

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The raw pain in her voice had shrivelled his soul to nothing. He'd spent a sleepless night wondering if this decision was the right one. He, a man known for cutting through the dross to the heart of any given situation, was floundering desperately, unnerved by how wrong he'd got the most important relationship of his life. To the point where he'd been avoiding the most important person in his life. The person who held his heart and soul in the palm of her beautiful hand. Avoiding her for fear that he'd wreck that too, before he came within a hope of salvaging what he'd destroyed.

'Your Majesty? Miss Mallory is ready for you.'

Valenti glanced over at him. Azar thanked his brother with a curt nod. Not that it had been a huge effort to get the world-renowned broadcaster to drop everything and fly to Cartana for a global exclusive with the King.

Clenching his belly, he strode to the blue-cushioned, gilt-edged chair opposite where the middle-aged woman sat.

'Your Majesty, thank you so much for granting me this interview. It's an honour to speak with you.'

He nodded briskly, but didn't reply. She got the message and moved on, touching on economics, social standing, human rights.

He cut across her ten minutes in. 'You've done your homework, I'm sure, Miss Mallory, so you'll know our GDP is healthy, our healthcare and gender equality are ranked among the top five in the world, et cetera. But I didn't bring you here to waste time talking about what you already know.'



She hesitated for a minute, wondering if she could smell a trap, before obviously deciding that whatever was coming would be worth it.

‘What would you like to talk about, then, Your Majesty?’

His heart leapt one last wild time, then settled into a rapid thudding. ‘I would like to talk about my wife. My queen,’ he replied, and the pulse throbbing in his voice made everyone in the room—perhaps everyone tuning in—sit up and take notice.

Which was exactly what Eden deserved.

Rachel Mallory nodded. ‘Of course.’

‘As you and the world know, we met some three years ago in Arizona. What you don’t know is that at the time I misjudged her terribly. She was trying to make a living in the most honest way she knew how, and I allowed my past and adverse influences get in the way of seeing her for who she truly is. A generous, warm, supportive and intelligent woman who puts those she loves above everything else in her life. She tried many times to let me know I was wrong in my thinking and...’

He paused, his chest caving in on itself under the overwhelming weight of his guilt. Teeth gritted, he pushed his way forward.

‘I refused to believe her. I was wrong.’

‘Say more,’ Rachel Mallory encouraged, her focus unwavering. Almost daring him.

‘All my life I’ve felt... I’m not quite enough.’ Azar’s lips twisted at the sceptical look in her eyes. ‘And, yes, I see you don’t quite believe that, because I’m a king. But first I’m a human being. With feelings I’ve long suppressed because it hurt too much to feel.’

There was movement in his peripheral vision. No doubt palace advisors, wondering where he was going with this, alarmed that he might be revealing too much. But he didn't care. Not any more. If baring his soul, relinquishing control, was what it took, then so be it.

But then he felt a unique sensation.

Felt her.

Swivelling his head, searching past the spotlights, he saw her.

Dios mio, she was here. To make true on her promise? No, he would expose every last crumb of himself before he let that happen.

Rachel Mallory followed his gaze, her eyes widening before she quickly pivoted. 'Your wife, the Queen, is here. Do you mind if she joins us, Your Majesty?'

'It is entirely her choice,' Azar replied, though his whole being was straining for Eden.

When his fingers twitched, rising towards her almost independently of his thought, his breath snagged in his chest.

To his shock and awe, she stepped into the light, her eyes pinned on his as she accepted the invitation, swaying and poised and so damned beautiful he wanted to drop to his knees in worship of her.

She was here.

Perhaps all was not lost.

She took his hand and sat in the hastily produced chair, barely acknowledging their interviewer. 'Go on,' she encouraged him, her husky voice composed.

He cleared his throat of the surfeit of emotion. He had a confession to finish. The most important of his life.

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‘We all seek validation in some form or other. And when that validation is withheld from us by one of the most important people in our lives, and repeatedly given less priority, it has a way of eroding self-worth. I have every material thing I could dream of at my fingertips, but the most important thing...the love I thought—knew—I deserved...was withheld by...’

He shook his head. The issues between him and his mother were private. He would not air her inadequacies now. Maybe never.

‘Deep inside I knew better than to accuse one person of another’s behaviour, but reality goes out of the window when feelings you’ve never truly experienced rip your insides out.’

‘What are you saying, Azar?’ Eden whispered, her fingers convulsing around his.

‘I was falling in love. Deeply. Irreversibly. And I didn’t know what to do with those feelings. So when I believed you’d chosen someone else, I let that colour my judgement. And I lost you because of that.’

‘Azar—’

He shook his head, ploughing on with a desperation he hadn’t felt in a long time. If ever.

‘I wasn’t good enough for you then. You had every right to walk away. And I haven’t been good enough for you since you agreed to be my wife.’ He reached for her other hand, his insides shaking like a leaf in a thunderstorm. ‘But you have my vow, here

and now, that I will not rest until I'm worthy of you. And if it carries me into the afterlife, I will spend an eternity winning you back.'

Her fingers trembled as they threaded with his, and he saw her nostrils quivering as she tried to hold back her emotions. Then she went one better and cupped his undeserving cheek.

'You don't need to win back what you have never lost, Azar. You only need to open your eyes and see what is in front of you.'

His jaw dropped, and he knew he was the furthest thing from cool and calm when he sucked in a sharp breath. 'Eden.Mi reina.I—'

'I forgive you for all of it, Azar. Just tell me what I want to hear.'

He swallowed, then laid the last of himself bare. 'I love you,mi corazón. With everything I am. Inside and out. With every cell of my body. I love you, and I would be honoured if you would spend this life with me.'

For the longest second she simply stared at him, her eyes beautiful, her spirit glowing bright with the merest hint of reproach.

'Took you long enough,' she murmured.

The moment she swayed towards him he scooped her up, deposited her in his lap, then gruffly instructed her, because he was still a king after all, 'Kiss me, my queen.'

She spiked her fingers in his hair and dragged him down to meet her lips.

Gasps echoed all around them. Feet shuffled. Some people probably attempted to give them privacy.

All Azar Domene cared about was that the most precious thing in his life was where she belonged.

Her cheeks were a deep pink and her beautiful eyes bright when they parted, and she clutched at him. 'We're breaking two dozen protocols...do you know that?' she whispered, her sweet breath brushing his mouth.

He ignored the rolling cameras and carded his fingers through her hair. 'I'll break three dozen more just to keep you right here, in my arms.'

When her bottom lip quivered, he dropped his forehead to hers.

'I'm so sorry for everything I've put you through, tesoro. I was a coward who hid behind his pain and distrust.'

She swallowed. 'I should never have gone with Nick that day. I should've stayed and done everything in my power to show you how wrong you were. But it's behind us now. I love you, Azar.'

He groaned under his breath, then rose, hitched her up more securely.

Then he walked out.

Ten minutes later he was deep inside his wife, in their bed, with her arms and legs wrapped tightly around him as if she'd never let him go. He planned never to let her.

'Tell me again,' he pleaded.

'You first,' she taunted throatily as he pushed even deeper, as if their newly revived souls were rising to wrap around each other.

‘Maybe these three years apart were exactly what I needed. Because your every breath, your touch, your scent, your love is so much more precious to me now, Eden. I will give up everything for you. I love you. I love you...Dios, I love you so much.’

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Tears dripped from her eyes as the words poured out of him. ‘And I love you, my king. With every one of those breaths. For ever.’

### EPILOGUE

Eighteen months later

AZAR WALKED INTO their suite, then stopped dead at the sight of his wife...wearing her wedding dress. It took a second for him to clock the fat candles dotted around the room, and another nanosecond to take in the various flower arrangements giving off pleasant fragrances, the bucket of champagne and what looked like a platter of food from her favourite French Japanese restaurant.

Then his gaze was back to her, answering the siren call he never wanted to resist.

‘What’s this?’ he rasped, crossing the room to where she stood, her hands tucked innocently behind her and her head wantonly tossed back, watching his every move.

As always, knowing he was her sole focus caused a thrilling and exhilarating kick to his chest, and the roar in his ears announced loudly that he was alive. And loved by this woman he loved back more than life itself.

Her smooth skin gleamed in the flickering candlelight and his fingers itched to touch. To taste. To worship.

‘I thought we could enact a different ending to our wedding night.’



Regret stabbed him deep, for letting fear get in the way of what should have been the start of this profound, meaningful life he'd found with her.

So of course he nodded enthusiastically, without a single reservation. 'What do you need from me, mi corazón? Shall I carry you over the threshold?'

She mused on that for a second, then shook her head. 'I can do without that, thank you. Besides, you've done a different version of that already, remember?' She laughed.

The video footage of him walking out of the palace media room with his queen in his arms had been played several billion times. It had even acquired its own meme, and was the most searched for video clip in the world. Cartana had been awarded the title of 'most romantic destination of the world', and once Azar had agreed to open up his private cave to the public it had become the most popular venue for marriage proposals. Eden had once been filmed feeding him chocolate in a hot air balloon, and immediately gained another two million followers for the official palace social media platforms.

'Do you wish to eat your favourite meal off my body, then have your way with me?' he asked hopefully.

Her head tilted, her smile widening. 'While both of those things are highly tempting, I don't want our bed to smell of sushi.'

'Tell me why you're wearing your wedding dress again, then, my love?'

'Because I just saw the doctor. In a few months I won't fit into it, so I wanted to do this now.'

The roaring in his ears made his heart shake, but the soaring in his blood told him he'd heard her right.

‘Dios...another baby?’ he rasped. His chest felt tight. Ready to explode with love for this incredible woman.

She held out her arms and he rushed into them. It was the only place he wanted to be.

‘Sí, mi rey. You’re to be the father of twins in a little over seven months.’

Azar hadn’t quite got over how quickly she’d learned his language. And how much it touched his heart...and other places in his body...when she spoke in his tongue.

He fell to knees now, this extra blessing finally flooring him. ‘Twins?’

She nodded, her ecstatic smile taking his breath away.

‘Are you happy?’ she asked.

He swallowed. ‘More than I ever imagined. More than I ever expected. You’re a miracle and I’m so blessed.’

‘Then get up, my love. Let’s repeat our vows, and then you can show me how much you love me.’

He did so—eagerly.

And in the aftermath, so replete he didn’t think he could move, he combed his fingers through her hair. ‘What are you thinking, mi amor? I asked you that the first time, do you remember?’

‘I remember.’

He smiled. ‘You hedged a little, then, didn’t you?’

She nodded. 'I had to. I was terrified by how you'd made me feel.'

His nostrils flared. 'Tell me now. What were you thinking?'

'I was thinking how much I wanted you to be mine. How much I wanted to belong to you. Always.'

'Tesoro...I was yours then. I just didn't know it and hadn't accepted it. But my heart knew. It remained empty, hungering. Desperate to find you again. And it did. So I'm yours. Today. Tomorrow. Always.'

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