



Royal Rebel

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Billionaire Romance

Description: He's a rebellious prince on the brink of a crown. She's a poised young woman destined to be queen. Together, they'll ignite a fire that could change a nation.

Tristan Haldonia knows what's expected of him: ascend to the throne, secure the monarchy, and wed a woman chosen for him. But as the weight of tradition looms, his rebellious spirit clashes with duty. When he meets Amelia Irving, the woman handpicked as his bride, Tristan is caught off guard by her quiet strength—and the undeniable spark between them.

Amelia has prepared for this role her entire life, but nothing could brace her for Tristan's electric presence. Behind his confident façade lies a man still grappling with loss and responsibility. As Amelia steps into the spotlight, she's determined to forge a bond with the man beneath the crown—even if it means challenging centuries of royal custom.

In a whirlwind of public scrutiny and private passion, Tristan and Amelia must navigate a world where love and loyalty are both weapon and shield. Can they build a partnership strong enough to weather the storm—or will their fledgling connection be crushed under the weight of the throne?

Step into the lavish, high-stakes world of *Royal Rebel*, where romance meets regal intrigue. Perfect for fans of the *Kings of Sin* series and the *Winston Isles Royals* series, book one in *The Haldonia Monarchy* world is full of arranged marriage and touch her and die moments.

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PROLOGUE

TRISTAN

“I’m fucked. Completely and totally fucked. The king is going to have me beheaded in front of the entire country.”

I should have been home hours ago, technically yesterday, if I’m being honest. Looking down at the illuminated clock located on the dashboard of my Bugatti, I grimace as the blue numbers turn to four a.m. The sad thing? I know what I’m required to do and I’m failing miserably before I’ve even started. The remnants of a teenage kid who went through a rebellion after his mother died, and then grew into a young adult who still hasn’t dealt with his feelings.

“That’s one way of putting it, Tris, and he’s your father. I doubt he’d behead you in front of everyone. More than likely he’ll give you a private dressing down. Public isn’t his style.”

A smirk twitches at the corners of my mouth as my goodfriend and member of my royal protection team, Parker holds on tight when I take a turn at almost one hundred miles an hour. He’s used to it, but his legs still slide across the leather of his seat. A noise in his throat is the only other giveaway of how fast I’m going.

“Perhaps slow down? Getting there quicker isn’t going to make it any better if your father is waiting on you.”

Chuckling, I question. “Faster? You want me to go faster, you say?” I press my foot

to the pedal harder, enjoying the way the car designed specifically for me responds. Gripping the steering wheel, I hold on tight as it gives a jolt and accelerates forward. Speed is the one thing I've always loved, maybe it's because it's the one thing that tore my life apart.

Parker gives a yell as we're jerked back in our seats by the force of the acceleration. The city is asleep in the eerie quietness of the early morning, but the lights pass by in a blur as I make my way downtown, heading for the residence I keep while not in the country.

"Not so fast!" Parker is pressing an imaginary brake so hard on the passenger side floorboard that I can hear it from where I sit. If the undercarriage wasn't reinforced, he'd probably have put a hole in the damn thing.

"No worries, it brakes like a dream."

The tires squeal lightly as we come to a halt in front of the gates. They open once the guards inside see who I am. Conservatively, I drive to the garage, park the car, and then as quietly as I can, sneak into the main house through the kitchen entrance.

"Tristan!"

"Shhh," I shush the head of the kitchen. Mary has worked here since I was a child, and I can always count on her to use discretion. "I'll see you in a few hours." I grab a fresh biscuit off the counter before giving her a kiss on the cheek.

Again, with the stealth of a ninja, I navigate through the main room and then the hallway. The stairs are in my sights when I hear a throat clear behind me.

"Tristan, where have you been?"

The loud, commanding tone of King Phillip, better known to me as my father, stops me in my tracks. Pasting on a smile, I turn. “Out for a morning run? Couldn’t sleep and got hungry?” I hold up the biscuit before I take a bite.

It doesn’t taste good, it tastes like dust as I wait for my father to speak to me. He’s upset, and maybe he has a right to be.

“Don’t pretend I’m stupid. Get to my office now!”

He’s angry, much like he’s been for the past twelve years since my mother passed away. Angry at the world for forcing him to grieve in public, angry at God for taking her away, and angry at me for looking so much like her. I’m a constant reminder of the life he had and lost. Whether he’s meant to or not, I’m the one who’s born most of his worst days.

I’m the person who survived the crash that took her life, and it makes him sad, even when I think it irritates him. No one wants to admit they’d rather lose a child than a wife, but some days, I think he wishes it was me who perished. Breathing heavily, I follow him into his office, knowing I’m going to deserve whatever he gives me. After all, I basically asked for it. It’s the only way I’ve been able to get his attention.

“You know what today is?” He has a seat behind the ornate desk he’s had since I was a child. Back then it’d been larger than life, much like he was to me.

“How could I forget?”

My birthday.

Twenty-five is a big year, especially in our tiny country of Haldonia. It’s the year you can legally rent a car, the time you age out of mandatory military service, and if you’re in line for the throne, it’s when the previous king or queen secedes. They give

you six months to learn the ropes, but what is six months when trying to learn how to be a ruler?

You've got that right, I'm about to be the king of a freaking country. Know what else comes along with being king?

"She's here, Tristan." He steeples his fingers in front of his face. The fact he still wears his wedding ring doesn't escape me. It flashes with the light from the lamp on his desk.

"My blushing bride, I take it?" The words are pulled from deep within my chest. I'd always thought I would make my own decision when it came to who I would marry. Even though my parents didn't, and they still had a tremendous love. One that burned bright until the day she died. I, however, haven't been that lucky. I have yet to meet anyone, and the suitable prospects sure as hell aren't there.

"You knew this day would come. Instead of gallivanting around and flaunting your status, you should have been serious about picking out a suitable wife. You haven't done that, and royal custom says the marriage is must now to be arranged. You were given time, my son. You blew it, and now you must pay the consequences."

He's not lying. It's time for me to own up to my mistakes like a man. "When and where?" I ask, having a seat in front of him and letting my hands fall in between my legs.

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“Your birthday party, tonight.” He looks at the clock on his desk. “There you’ll meet Amelia. Tomorrow, we introduce her to the country. I hope you’re prepared for what’s about to happen, Tristan.”

“Doesn’t matter if I am or not, does it?” I give him a sardonic smile. “In six months’ time, I’ll be a married man and king of a country.”

“It is custom.”

“Yeah?” I get up, sighing again. “Sometimes I’d like to say fuck custom.”

As I take the stairs two at a time, making it to my bedroom just as the sun is coming up, I wonder just why God took my mom and not me. I would’ve been a much better choice.

CHAPTER 1

AMELIA

The urge to puke is strong. Especially as I feel the hairdresser tug at a lock of hair while she curls it into what she calls a “beachy wave.” Given the fact that it’s February and Haldonia is a small country located between Sweden and Norway, beachy is subjective. Especially considering freezing rain started an hour ago. If this wasn’t a birthday party for the soon-to-be king, I have doubts that anyone would have shown up for it. Since we’re in the castle, I’m positive there’s enough room for anyone who wants to stay over. The thought almost makes me laugh.

“Do you want it down your back? Or do you want it off your neck?” she asks as she curls the next to last piece.

“Flowing down my back,” I answer, aware that this may be the very last decision I make for myself, depending on what type of man His Royal Highness Tristan turns out to be. While there has been talk, you never know someone until you’re intimate with them, actually have conversations with them. We haven’t had that luxury.

My makeup was finished a half hour ago, and once my hair is done, the only thing left is for me to get dressed. The hairstylist sprays it heavily as she tousles it with her hands.

“You’ve got that just-been-bedded look, my dear, he won’t know what hit him.” The promise is there in her voice. I’m not sure whether to be excited or not. I think I’m too nervous to be excited, too scared that I won’t be who he wants, or what he thinks I am.

As she leaves, Shannon, my new personal stylist who I’ve been working with for the past two weeks comes in. “You ready?”

My eyes follow her as she walks over to the closet to get the dress that was picked out for me last week. When I tried on the maroon sleeveless dress cinched at the waist, I knew it was mine. With my almost black hair, brown eyes, and complexion that perpetually looks like I’ve been out in the sun a few minutes each day, it’s stunning. My makeup is darker today, and my hair has been curled and brushed so much it shines. When I look at myself in the mirror, I almost don’t recognize the person looking back at me.

I nod, knowing that this is it. When I put this dress on, step into the heels, and allow her to put the jewelry on me, I will no longer be Amelia Irving, I’ll be Amelia, future Queen of Haldonia.

My hands shake as Shannon hooks the diamond bracelet around my wrist, helps me put in the earrings, and places a tiara I've opted to wear on my head.

"How do I look?" I take a deep breath, scared to death that I'm going to fall, or pass out. Maybe both.

"Like a dignified lady." She claps her hands, smiling boldly at me. "Let's fix your lipstick quickly and then you can be off."

"What if I don't want to be off?" I whisper as I grab hold of her fingers.

She's one of the only people I can now trust. Very few people have been preparing their whole lives to fulfill a role, but at the age of twelve, I was told it would be possible that one day I would be queen. An old handshake agreement between my father, one of the richest businessmen in not only our country, but the world and the king had sealed mine and Tristan's fate.

As was custom, I was kept away each time Tristan came to our home, and he came to our home a lot as a teenager with his father. He and my brother are friends. From afar I watched him, knowing that if he didn't pick his own bride, I would be his. Over the years I've watched him grow up, have read the articles on the internet, and seen his name grace many of the most eligible bachelor lists. It was strange to know he could be looking for his soulmate, but I wasn't able to find mine. It was up to me, to be available for a moment just like this. For a long time I grappled with the reality he could do whatever he wanted and I was spoken for.

Jealousy would eat at me sometimes when I would see people claim him as their own. When I've thought about him as mine since I was told about our destiny. Might seem silly since I was so young, but I feel a certain pride in serving my country, and that means doing my part for the crown.

For eleven years that's been my secret, and I've guarded it with a fierceness I wasn't sure I had within me. Gathering my courage, I bow my head, close my eyes, and try to find my Zen. Try to imagine that all of this is going to go fine, and I'm where I'm supposed to be.

"Look at yourself, Amelia, take a good look," Shannon encourages. "You're going to knock him off his feet and have the rest of the nation bowing at yours."

Even though I looked at myself earlier, I do as she tells me to. Raising my head and opening my eyes, I gasp. I again don't recognize the person in the mirror, staring back at me. There's something changed, a comfort I didn't have before. This girl staring back at me? She's a woman. She looks sophisticated, beautiful, and like she can hold her own in any situation. That's not me, has never been me. I do, however, like to rise to any occasion, and perhaps this is me rising above everything I've always believed I am.

"Do they know I'm here?" I question Shannon as we walk slowly toward the ballroom.

We can hear the noise coming from the room, even though we're quite a distance away. I won't be going in there, not yet. There's no way Tristan and I will meet one another in front of so many. The first meeting will be private.

"No," she answers. "They probably assume, but no one has mentioned you're going to be in attendance. Press those shoulders back, Amelia. Hold your head up high."

I do as she instructs, focusing on putting one foot in front of the other. Praying with each step that I don't trip and fall. Badly I want to pull my lips between my teeth and bite—a bad habit I've had since I was a child—one I've supposedly been broken of. My smile falters slightly as we get closer, staff watch each step I take. Guests who are taking a break from the gala stare at me as I walk along with Shannon.

“But they know who I am?”

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“They do; don’t let them look down at you.” She grabs my elbow, turning me before we enter the ballroom. We walk down a long hallway, where surprisingly some of the noise dissipates.

“He’s in there.” She points to a large wooden door. “He’s ready to meet you. Are you ready to meet your soon-to-be husband?”

Inside, my heart pounds against my breast, I feel faint, and a slight sheen of sweat break out over my upper lip. It takes dedicated breathing to make everything calm down again, but I manage.

“I am.” I nod, squaring my shoulders, clasping my hands in front of me, hoping to hide the shaking.

The door opens, making a noise, heavy in the near-silence of the hallway. She pushes me toward the entrance, giving me the extra courage I need. “Godspeed, Amelia. I’ll be here when you come out.”

While those words should probably make me feel better, they don’t, but I give her my best smile as I walk over the threshold. It’s a metaphor for my life at this moment. I’m leaving behind one part of myself and embracing a whole new part. One I’m not familiar with yet, but I have no doubt that this starts one of the best adventures of my life.

It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust since there’s not a lamp on. The only light is coming from a fire, giving the drafty room extra heat. For minutes I don’t see him. But as I become accustomed to the darkness, his outline becomes visible. He’s facing

the fire, his back to me, holding a glass of what looks like scotch at his side. His hand is flipped down, his fingers gripping the edges of the glass.

He doesn't turn, even when it's obvious I'm waiting for him to do so. Protocol says that he directs this meeting, although I don't know how he's going to direct it if he never speaks to me. Just when I'm about to break the silence, he turns, getting his first look at me.

Immediately there's a thread of awareness between the two of us. It's a string of electricity, and I have no doubt it would spark if we allowed it. I do my best not to fidget and at the same time allow myself to look at him without censorship. His dark hair looks as if he's run his fingers through it all night, blue eyes look almost black in the muted light of the room, and a trimmed black beard hides what I know to be a strong jawline.

For a long time, I wait—wait to see what he's going to say. Wait for him to give some indication I pass inspection. I'm about to give up when he lifts the glass to his lips and tips it back, downing the rest before setting it softly on the table.

Then, for the first time, I hear him speak toward me, and the words? I'll never forget them. They'll always be branded into my memory.

“Christ, you're beautiful, and damn if you don't look like an innocent.” He walks over, lifting his hand to my cheek, brushing back a piece of hair. “Forgive me for saying it aloud, but I can't wait to show you how to be wicked.”

With those words, I know my life will never be the same again.

CHAPTER 2

TRISTAN

I wasn't prepared, not even a little bit, for the woman standing in front of me. Have I seen pictures of her before? Yes. I may not have met her, but I was given glimpses of the woman who would eventually be mine. Did they do anything to capture her beauty? Not even close.

Dark hair, flawless skin, bold lips, sexy as fuck eyes that appear to be looking straight through me. Immediately I feel as if I'm standing in front of her without the walls I've worked hard to erect. I've had my walls up since I awoke in the hospital after the wreck with my mother. They haven't come down since, but there's something in those depths that reminds me of the woman who raised me. Her voice; I want to hear it, want to hear my name against her lips, want her to offer me some piece of herself in return.

"What's your name? Others have told me, but I want to hear it from you." My voice is pitched low. I want no one else to hear us, want no one else to be involved in this. There are few things in my life that are just mine. This moment here will be mine for the rest of my life.

"Amelia, Your Grace."

Her voice washes over me, a husky, hoarse sound that travels up and down my body. Awareness raises the hair at my neck and along my arms. The Your Grace annoys me. Enough people kiss my ass. I want her to see me as a man, not my title. For her, I'll be the best man I can be.

"I'm Tristan. Please call me that. Know me as who I am, not what I am."

She smiles, her teeth white against the bold color of her lips. It doesn't go to her eyes, though; she's nervous, possibly scared. I want to tell her I understand, I'm nervous too, but I'm never supposed to show weakness. It's been ingrained in me since I was a kid.

“Tristan,” she says my name and damned if I don’t want to hear her say it again and again. Preferably while she’s under me, begging me to go harder, deeper, faster. “Nice to meet you.”

I chuckle slightly, trying to control my wayward thoughts. “Hell of a meeting, huh?”

Her tone is wistful as she nods her head toward me. “One for the history books.”

It occurs to me that she’s correct. This will be one for the history books. After we’re long gone, the people of this country will read about our marriage in school. They’ll study and compare it against all the ones that came before and those that will come after. They’ll debate whether I was a good king or not, whether she was a queen the country can be proud of. The pressure is immense, but I’m glad to have someone to go through it with me.

“Would you like to sit?” I ask, taking her by the elbow, directing her over to the couches in front of the roaring fire. “No one will disturb us. I’d like to speak with you. To get to know you as much as I can in the next few hours.”

“We won’t go to the party tonight?” She looks equal parts relieved and disappointed.

“We’ll see how the night goes, but tomorrow you’ll be introduced to the people and I would like for us to be at least friendly. Expect the world to pick your introduction apart, and that will include how we act toward one another,” I explain to her as we have a seat on one of the couches.

“I understand.” She sits with her hands clasped in her lap. It’s the way she’s been trained.

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“You don’t have to be on your best behavior with me, Amelia. I’ve never been what one would call a stickler for the rules. You can lean back against the couch, slouch a little, and even give me a real smile later on in the night.”

She seems shocked with what I’ve said. “I’m aware of how people react to me, and I know what we’re about to embark on isn’t normal, but we have to be partners in it, Amelia. The only way we’re going to do that is by getting to know each other.”

“I agree, Tristan.” She leans back a little against the couch, seeming to relax slightly.

“How scared are you?” Deciding to go for the jugular first thing, surprisingly I want to know more than anything how she’s feeling.

Her eyes move down to her hands. “Terrified. I’ve been training for this since I was a teenager, but you’re larger than life, if you don’t mind me saying so.”

Other people have described me using the phrase before, but I’m not sure I like her referring to me in that way. “I’m just a man. A man trying to figure out how to run a country while dealing with all the expectations that go with it. I’m sorry you’ve been dumped into this too, but I have to admit I’m happy not to go this alone.”

She surprises me by reaching over and entwining my fingers with hers. As our flesh touches there’s a sizzle of attraction, just like there had been earlier. We obviously have chemistry, and that makes me dread this less. “I’ll be whatever you need me to be, Tristan.”

“Is that what they trained you to say?” I don’t mean for it to come out the way it does,

with a touch of disgust.

“No, that statement is one hundred percent me. I’ve watched you from afar for a long time. Read the articles about you, snuck glances when you’d come to our residence. You’ve always seemed so sad, like you need a friend. Someone in your corner. Like you used those women because you weren’t happy.”

How someone who’s never met me before can see my truth I’ve tried so hard to hide, I’ll never know. Because she’s right on all her observations. “Now I’ll just have one.”

“You will.” She sits up straighter, her neck extending with a regalness I hadn’t expected. “You’ll be faithful to me.”

She phrases it as a gentle command, not a question.

“And you to me as well.”

“Well we have something in common already.” She gives me a smile, and this one goes to her eyes.

“What will be your platform?” I ask hours later. When I glance up at the clock over the fireplace, I see that we’re about to go into the wee hours of the morning. We’ll have to get some sleep soon. Her introduction will be at ten sharp. My father doesn’t allow for lateness.

She takes a dainty sip of the second glass of wine I poured her an hour ago. Her eyes are bright, possibly feeling some of the effects of the alcohol. But she’s done what I wanted her to do. She’s dropped her guard, relaxed, and started treating me like a normal person.

“To me, it doesn’t matter where you come from. You should have an education, you

should be given that opportunity. Just like mandatory service in the military here, I believe that if you're required to serve us, perhaps we should be required to serve you. The United States offers financial assistance to the people of their nation who serve in the military, we should do the same, if they so choose."

"That's an interesting thought, I can't wait to see you debate it."

She takes another sip of her wine, and she looks at me over the rim of her cup. Her eyes are dark, dangerous, focused. "I'm ready, Tristan," she says just before the liquid washes down her throat.

"I do think you are." I swallow roughly from the heat her gaze ignited within me.

"And of course,"—she wipes at the moisture on her lip with a pink tongue I long to take into my mouth—"I'll work with you on the mental health aspect for the people of the country. I've been watching your speeches on it. You're very passionate about it."

"I am." I clear my throat uncomfortably. "After I was in the accident with my mother, no one thought to send me to someone to speak about my feelings. It caused me to act out, and it wasn't until a few years ago that I, of my own accord, sought out counseling and realized why I do some of the things I do."

She reaches over, grabbing my hand. "Together, we'll make a change."

With everything in my heart, I hope she's right. This place hasn't been a home for a long time, and it's my deepest desire to make it one again. The clock on the mantel strikes two, and I know this night has to come to a close.

"We should go." The regret is deep in my voice. "In eight hours, we have to present you to not only our people but to the world."

“I do need to get some beauty sleep.”

“I don’t think you need sleep for that. I think it’s inherently natural for you.”

Her cheeks darken to a pink I would like to see all over her body as I get up and go to the desk in the room. Once there, I open one of the drawers, reach in, and take out what I’ve been thinking about for most of the night. Holding the box, I walk back over to the couch and have a seat beside her again.

“I’m aware that you feel as if you weren’t given a choice when it comes to me, but I want you to know, you do. If after meeting me, sitting with me for these hours and talking, you don’t feel comfortable, please tell me.”

“Tristan, I’m nervous, that’s who I am, but I’m not nervous about you. Not anymore. I’m a good judge of character, and I think given some more time, we can become not only friends, but more.”

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There's a hope in her voice, a little fringe of desire that I desperately want to grab onto and never let go. "Then as long as you're sure." I slide off the couch, getting onto one knee. "Amelia Irving, will you do me the honor of marrying me? Of becoming my queen? Making the history together that the people will talk about for generations?"

I open the box, showing her the ruby stone that had once been my mother's. When she gasps, I know she recognizes it. "I'm glad I picked the ruby, it goes so well with your complexion and darker hair. The ruby is you—passion and fire." My mother had been both passion and fire, too.

"Yes," she answers, her voice cracking slightly. "I will. I'm not going to lie to you, I'm scared to death, but we were chosen to do this, destined to do it, and I'm willing to figure out why fate put us in each other's path."

With shaking hands, I slide the ruby onto her left ring finger before bringing that hand to my lips to kiss. She gasps again when my lips touch skin. "Come on, let's get you back to your room."

We walk slowly in the almost-silence of the hallways. Obviously my party was over hours ago; everyone has gone to sleep, or left for the night. I can't say I'm unhappy with how my birthday turned out. Much different than the ones before, but I'm getting older and a change must occur. When we get to her room, she stops to face me.

"I'll see you in a few hours?" The question is accompanied by the tilt of her mouth, in a smirk that goes straight to my groin. Her face is expressive, I mark that down for

future reference.

“You will.” I lean toward her, placing my hands on either side of her head, allowing my body to press her slightly into the wood of the door. “There’s one more thing we have to do, one more thing we have to get out of the way tonight.”

She’s breathing harsher as she looks up into my eyes. “What’s that?”

“We can’t have our first kiss in front of the people. It needs to be private, in case we’re bad at it, you know?”

She giggles slightly, wrapping her arms loosely around my neck. “You think we’ll be bad at it?”

“We’ll definitely try not to be.” I tilt my head one way, she tilts hers to the other and slowly we move in.

Our lips touch and it’s an explosion of passion I wasn’t prepared for, something I’ve never shared with another human being. Unbidden, my mouth pries hers open, allowing our tongues to duel for space that we both occupy. My hands immediately come off the door, wrapping my arms around her waist, moving up to feel the bare skin at her back. I moan as she slides her hands up into my hair, pulling softly against the force of the kiss.

When I pry my lips from hers, she makes a noise in the back of her throat, tilting her head back as I claim the sides of her neck, wanting to touch every inch of her body that’s both covered and uncovered.

“Tristan.” Her voice is breathless, dazed sounding, as I smear my lips along her jawline, nipping with my teeth.

My hands have a mind of their own as they move up from her waist to her ribcage, my thumbs seeking out the telltale sign of arousal at her breasts. When I find what I'm looking for, I growl, moving my head lower to grasp the nub through the dress, through the bra, and whatever else is separating us. The gasp she releases this time is loud, reverberating off the bare walls. It's enough to pull me out of the web of arousal we've weaved around one another.

When I let her go, we're both panting. Her lipstick is smeared, eyes are dilated, and lips are swollen from the demanding nature of my kiss. I want nothing more than to pick her up, take her into the room, and show her what else I can do, but even I know now isn't the time.

"Sorry." I inhale deeply, letting my forehead fall against the door with a loud thump. "Didn't mean for that to get out of hand."

She wraps her arms around my neck again, this time slightly combing my hair at the nape. "It's okay, I didn't either."

I chuckle deep in my throat. "At least we know we have chemistry."

"Loads," she agrees, laughing slightly against me.

With a concentrated effort, I unwrap her arms from around my neck and physically set her away from me. "Sleep well, my Amelia. I'll see you in a few hours."

"See you soon." She lifts up on tiptoe, even in heels, kisses me on the cheek, and then slips into her room, closing the door quietly behind her.

I lean against the door again, trying to get my body, my feelings, my mind completely under control. As I reach down to adjust my raging hard-on, I know one thing is for sure. My normal? It will never be completely normal again. The woman who now

wears my ring...she's fucked it all up in the very best of ways.

CHAPTER 3

AMELIA

Carefully I take a sip of the iced coffee that's been placed in front of me, making sure not to drop any of it on the white robe I wear, or to smear any of the lipstick that's been painstakingly applied to my lips.

"Nervous?" Shannon asks as she sits beside me, going over a few last-minute bullet points.

"Very," I admit, willing my arm not to shake, willing myself not to show the weakness I feel in this moment.

"It's all going to be over within the next hour to an hour and a half," she reminds me.

It's insanity that I robbed myself of any sleep last night over an hour and a half of my life. But I did. I stayed up, going through everything bad that could happen. Wondering what the pictures and headlines would be if I tripped over my own foot, or on a crack, and landed with my rear end up in the air. What if I snorted or smiled with something in my teeth? What would the world say about me then? Those were the thoughts that kept me up last night.

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They aren't the only thoughts that kept me up, though. Another part of me stayed awake, wondering what it would be like to be with Tristan all the time. What going to bed with him at night, waking up to him in the morning will be like.

"I know." I give her a smile, trying the expression out, hoping that the muscles allow me to make it. I can feel the corners twitching, but I relax, realizing I can in fact, smile today.

The cell phone the royal family gave me vibrates at my side. How anyone has my number, I'm unsure. I don't even have my number. Quickly I use my thumbprint to unlock it, which again I wonder how they were able to do that without me around, but I don't question it. What's waiting there is a text from Tristan.

T: I'm heading down your way in the next twenty minutes. If you need more time, let me know. We'll meet the press and the people together. Can't wait to see you again, Amelia.

My hands are back to shaking as I read what he's sent me.

"How much longer do you think I'll be?" I ask Shannon. "Tristan says he's heading this way in the next twenty minutes. He doesn't want me to have to walk alone."

"We'll have you done by then, I promise." She claps her hands, much like she did the night before, and gets to work.

A: I'll be ready and waiting. Thank you for thinking of me. I can't wait to see you again either.

Placing my phone back down on the vanity, I take a minute to compose myself. It's not every day a king texts you. These last few hours have been some of the craziest of my life.

"Shannon." I tilt my head so I can see her. "When will Tristan be crowned?"

"Six months from yesterday, and then you'll be expected to be married the following week," she explains. "It's the custom, but not many talk about it. No one wants to believe that arranged marriage is still a common practice in the second decade of a new century, but as you can see, it is. You have time to get to know him, I promise you that."

Her words encourage me, give me hope that he and I will be able to make this work, that we'll be comfortable with each other before we have to walk down the aisle together.

"What am I wearing today?" I square my shoulders and take the last drink of my coffee.

"Another dress. This one will be a turquoise color, with lace up and down the arms, and it's long, so it will cover your legs. It's very cold today. You'll be able to wear a jacket, but we want you to keep it open so that your dress can be photographed."

Of course, because now I'll be center stage, where everyone will want to know who I'm wearing, what I'm wearing, and the name of my hairstyle. There are certain things I'm not prepared for, and this might be one of the biggest. I've never been the type of person who had to be the center of attention, and since Tristan is one of the most sought-after bachelors in the world, we'll both be there now.

"Your hair and makeup are done."

Finally able to get up, I move over to the window, allowing myself to look out for the first time. There's a crowd gathered among the snowy roads. If someone were to ask me to describe it, I would say minus the people, it looks like the perfect winter postcard. Water flows slowly through the river that surrounds the palace, plumes of chimney smoke can be seen for miles as it helps heat the homes of the people who've flocked to see us, tree branches hang low with the weight of snow on them. But then there are the people. As far as the eye can see in front of the gates. There's no telling how long they've been there, how cold they are, or if they'll even get a chance to catch a glimpse of us. There are signs held up, some that say Tristan & Amelia. I was warned my name would be found out quickly as soon as the king called for the press op.

In a matter of minutes, the chaos will ensue.

"Let's get you dressed." Shannon cuts into my musings and I allow her to lead me from the window, and then allow her to help me into my outfit for the day. My jewelry is on, and as I place my engagement ring on my finger, a feeling of calm washes over me. I balance as I put my shoes on, right as there's a knock on my door.

"It's probably Tristan, I'll get it," I tell the room.

The makeup artist is still there, along with the seamstress the designer sent over with the dress. Right now all I want is to be alone with him, but we're destined to have an audience. Opening the door, I see him—all big-shouldered and tall in the doorway. He's as large as he was last night.

His eyes are tender, a small smile spreads across his face. There seems to be a whole conversation between us as we look at one another. His words are simple, when he speaks them, but they warm me down to my heart.

"Are you ready, Amelia?" He holds his elbow out for me.

“I, I believe so.” I look back at Shannon.

“Your coat is downstairs,” she confirms, giving me a nod of encouragement.

“Then I’m ready.” I smile up at him, allowing him to turn me and escort me down the hallway.

“This will probably be the most nerve-racking thing we ever do,” he tells me as he helps me navigate the stairs in my dress and heels. “After this, we won’t have another appearance until we know one another a bit more.”

“We’ll do fine.” I stiffen my jaw to keep it from trembling, holding his gaze with my own. I notice he’s not taken the time to shave completely, and the look gives him a rugged handsomeness I wasn’t prepared for. I lean up, kissing him softly on the cheek. “We’ve got this, Tristan.”

I’m not sure where my bravado comes from, and maybe I’m telling it to myself as I’m reassuring him, but I feel as if together, we can handle anything that comes our way. He lets me go, helps me into my coat, and together we face the door.

“Then let’s get on with it.”

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The first stop we make is in the Royal Garden, dedicated by Tristan's great-great-grandmother many years ago. Typically photo-calls are done inside, but one of the most famous pictures of Tristan is here with his mother. His only stipulation for the day, was to meet the press here.

The flashes are almost blinding, and I do the only thing I can; I reach down, gripping my other hand around Tristan's as we make our way toward the crowd that's gathered. There's a decided chill to the air, but his fingers and palm are the warmest I've ever held.

"Thank you for coming," he tells the crowd. "I know it's a bit cold this morning, and you all probably would have liked to be inside."

"Then you wouldn't be able to turn away from us and take your leave," one of the photographers teases as the rest of them laugh.

"You know I hadn't thought about that, Richard." Tristan gives him a smile. "But thank you for giving me a good idea for later."

"Perhaps some coffee next time?" he continues.

"Would you also like me to provide cream and sugar? Maybe some flavored syrup?" Tristan plays along with him.

I've seen interviews of Tristan and he is so at ease with everyone. I want to be more like him, but at this moment, I'm frozen. Not sure how to act, and all I can do is keep my fingers wrapped up in his and a smile spread across my face.

“Flavored syrup would be divine.”

“I’ll make a list for next time, Richard. Promise.”

One of the other photographers cuts Richard off. “Tristan, is this your fiancée?”

“Yes.” He smiles over at me, and the look he gives me is one that’s so loving I have to remind myself that this right here? Isn’t real. Not yet. “This is my beautiful fiancée, Amelia.”

“Where did you all meet?” someone else asks.

“At a birthday party.” I give Tristan a little wink as we share an inside joke.

They eat it up, the flashes going insane as we stand there, staring at one another.

“Two things.” Another voice cuts into the crowd. “We want a kiss and the ring, Tris. Don’t hold back from us.”

“The ring.” He brings our entwined hands together, showing them the ruby. “Was my mother’s. I presented it to Amelia last night, and she said yes.”

“And the kiss?”

He turns to me, widens his stance slightly, cups my face with his hands, and leans forward, giving me the softest kiss I’ve ever had. It’s nothing like the rollercoaster ride into passion we had last night. This one is measured, soft, delicate, and everything a young girl dreams of when she imagines this moment. When he pulls back, our eyes meet, and I’m pretty sure everyone from here to the United States can feel the chemistry between us. He leans in for another, before I can stop him, tilting my head opposite of his. This one heats up more than it should, and it isn’t until we

hear a few whistles from the crowd that he physically sets me away from him.

Tristan clears his throat, and I reach up, wiping the lipstick off his lips. He gives me a smile, as he turns those lips into my palm.

Little do we know at that moment, that picture will be the one that makes it all the way around the world.

CHAPTER 4

TRISTAN

“I think we did well.” Amelia still holds my hand as we make our way back into the palace, preparing to go up to the balcony so that we may greet the people.

“I think so too.” I lick my lips, helping her up the first set of stairs. At the landing, we’re by ourselves, and I push her into the shadows under the next set of stairs.

“Did I do something wrong?” she asks when she realizes we’re relatively alone. It’s something that won’t happen much in this place. There’s always someone around. We need to take advantage while we can.

“No.” I can’t help but to reach up, brush a curl out of her face. “On the next landing, you’ll meet my father. More than likely, he’ll treat you kindly, but almost as if you’re not even there. Just warning you. It’s not you; he’s been like this since my mother passed. Don’t take it personally, he’ll grow to be fond of you in his own way.”

“Thank you for warning me.” Her dark eyes are wide, showing a bit of the fear I imagine is mirrored in mine. It’s not easy to become part of another family, especially one as dysfunctional as mine.

“Are you ready?”

She nods. “As long as you’re near, as long as you’re there to hold my hand and be my support, I’m ready to do anything.”

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The trust she gives me is enough to put a warmth in parts of my chest where warmth hasn't been in a long time. I didn't realize how much I've missed it until this moment, when I'm reminded again of what it feels like. I've not gotten to this age, though, without knowing that some women have as much of a silver tongue as men do. My walls aren't completely down just yet, and I'm not sure when they ever fully will be, but I'll be nice to her. What I've seen so far, I genuinely like. She deserves it, and I'll at least allow her to be my friend. If it moves beyond that—damn if her kisses aren't the best I've had in ages, I'll deal with the consequences then.

The side of my mouth tilts in a smirk as I put my finger under her chin, lifting so that I can look fully at her. "What is it you told me? We got this?"

She smiles brightly. "We do. Together we do."

"Then let's get the introductions out of the way. The quicker we do that, the quicker we can leave here, and go to my home in the country."

"The country?" she asks.

Ahhh, so no one must have told her about the other residence I keep. I tend to not mention it in the press, although everyone knows about it, I'm mostly left alone when I'm there. "I have a home at King's Pass," I mention a sea town on the coast. "It's where I've primarily lived for the past five years. We'll stay there for a couple of months, getting to know each other, preparing to take on our roles."

"You love that place." She inclines her head to the side, searching my face with her gaze. She can see through me, and that makes her one of the most dangerous people

I've met.

"I do," I admit, which is more than I've ever done to anyone else. "It's where my soul is, it's where I feel the most comfortable." I grip her hand in mine. "And I hope that you love it, I hope it's something we can share together."

She breathes deeper. "I hope it's something we can share together, too."

I hear my father asking where we are, and know I've got to get us moving. "Come on, Amelia. Let's get this done and head out to the country."

The look on her face tells me she's happy about the unexpected change in plans for her. "I'm excited, and I can't wait to see the place that has your heart."

Holding my elbow out for her, I escort her up the next set of stairs. He's there, looking solid as a stone. He's a statue of the man he used to be.

"Hello, Father," I greet our king as I pull Amelia to my side.

"Tristan, are you going to introduce me to your fiancée?"

"Amelia, this is my father. Most people know him as king, but to those of us inside these walls, he's Phillip."

"It's a pleasure to meet you." She curtsies to him, holding out her hand to him.

He takes it with the practiced grace he can affect in his sleep. "Pleased to meet you, Amelia. I look forward to what you bring to the family. I understand you'll be departing with Tristan after the introduction to the people, but we will all be back and forth throughout the next few months."

“I look forward to it as well.”

Parker enters the room like the head of security he is. “We’re ready for you all on the balcony if you’re ready to make your appearance.”

“We’re only going to wave and smile, right?” Amelia asks, her hand beginning to get cold in mine. I don’t remember a time when the people scared me. They’ve just always been there, holding me up in the saddest of times, pressuring me when I didn’t pressure myself enough, and smiling when I do something to make them proud. The people have never intimidated me. What’s intimidated me is what’s inside this building.

My father. The responsibility. The memories I’ll never be able to forget.

“Correct, just smile, wave, and look beautiful. I have no doubt you’ll have any problem doing either of those three things.”

She blushes and it looks so good on her cheeks that I vow to myself to make her do it more often.

All too soon, the doors are opened and we’re escorted out onto the balcony. As a trio, we wave, smile, and acknowledge the crowd. There are people as far as the eye can see, signs proclaiming their support of my engagement. Signs proclaiming to support Amelia. The noise of the crowd is almost enough to knock me backward, so I hold on to Amelia’s hand tighter. She’s smaller than me, and she’s not used to this at all. She closes her hand more fully around mine, probably hoping my flesh can make hers warmer.

“Should we kiss again?” I turn to her, speaking loud enough so that she can hear me over the roar of the crowd.

She nods, leading me to lean into her. Like before, I take the moment to cup her cheeks, but this time I look into her eyes. I look for something to tell me she's not what she seems to be, but I see nothing there. There's no sabotage in her eyes, and I do my best to take her at face value. Amelia stands on tiptoe, meeting me more than halfway, causing the crowd to scream and whistle their approval.

As we break apart, we turn, waving to them one more time before we take our leave off the balcony.

Just like that, our official duties are done, and I feel as if I can finally breathe again.

Parker comes in behind us. "Are we heading to King's Pass?" he questions, looking at me.

"We are. Amelia will need to pack her things, and then we'll head out. There are a few things I need to get, a few plans I need to make, but I'd like to leave within the hour."

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“Will Shannon come with me?” she asks quietly.

“She will. We’ll do most of your training there, so she will need to be present. We’ll have each other, but I know you’ll need a female friend there with you as well. Even though we’ll be getting to know one another, you’ll need someone else to talk to.”

“I’ll make sure they’re ready,” Parker assures me.

An hour later, a couple of cars packed with the belongings of the women, the security team that travels with me, and the few things I’m taking back, we leave the palace and head toward King’s Pass.

Amelia sits in the front seat of my Range Rover, Parker in the back with Shannon. There are two more RangeRovers with us. One in the front and one behind us. Even though I’d love to drive as fast as I’m allowed, I know it’s not safe, so I stay in our caravan. The farther we get away from the palace, from the city, the more I relax, and the more Amelia seems to relax as well. She reaches over, grabbing at my hand. I look over at her, smiling slightly. She takes my lead, smiling back.

“Is there anything you can tell me about it?” Amelia asks as we drive along the sea-side highway.

“No.” I shake my head. “There’s no way I can do it justice. I’d prefer for you to see it, not hear about it. I think you’ll love it just as much as I do. I hope you’ll love it as much as I do.”

I notice the only time she’s taken her eyes off the passing sea as we’ve been driving

is to look at me, and I just know the next few months are going to surprise me. Things I never thought I would never have again will be mine. Just maybe I will have someone to love and love me back. A feeling I haven't felt since my mom died, even if it's a different kind of love.

For the first time, I have hope that I'll feel that emotion again.

Fuck, I've missed it.

CHAPTER 5

AMELIA

"I'm excited to see what you think," Tristan says as he turns into what appears to be a very long driveway. "There aren't gates here. For the most part, the people who live here give me my privacy." He shrugs. "And I've never wanted to put anything up that would impede my view. You'll see what I mean."

"How long is this driveway?" I'm craning my neck, trying to see the house, but I can't see it yet.

"About two miles. It sits far enough off the road to be completely secluded. One of the reasons I love it so much. We're about eight miles from town, so it's easy to get there."

I'm about to ask him something else, but that's when I get a good look at the house I'm going to be living in. My family is well-off and I'm familiar with luxury. But this house? Takes my breath away. It looks like it was literally situated here by God himself. Like it's been here since the beginning of time. It sits in the place it was meant to be for eternity.

“Amazing, isn’t it?” His voice is quiet in the awe filling the Range Rover.

It appears to be about three stories high. The outside is dark blue with weathered shingles and a massive porch. To the left looks to be a five-car garage. “It is.” I badly want to know what the other side of the house looks like and the inside. I need a complete picture.

“Wait until you see the rest of it.”

He parks and we’re quickly out, him grabbing my hand. Mine are cold, like normal, and feeling his strong warmth is a relief. “Wait, what about our stuff?”

“There’s a small staff here.” He entwines our fingers together. “They’ll take care of it while I show you your new home.”

As we enter, I’m literally rendered breathless by the view. While this side of the house had few windows, the backside? It has nothing but windows. We walk slowly through the foyer, in my peripheral I see staircases, but my gaze is dedicated to what’s in front of me. The living room is manly, all leather and dark colors. What’s got my attention, however, is the fact I can see the ocean through the window.

“I can’t believe you have this view,” I whisper.

“This,” he whispers right along with me, pulling me into his side. His arm wraps around my neck, causing me to lean into his side. “Is my happy place. There’s something about sitting in either here or on the back deck and watching the waves, listening to them, and just enjoying the quiet. There’s so much noise in my life, so many people who need me for something, or want me to make some sort of decision. My father, telling me what I should do, or what I shouldn’t do. Here, it doesn’t matter. I can be me, and more than anything, that’s why I love it, and why I hope you love it too.”

“I think I’m going to,” I tell him, feeling the sense of peace he talked about as I look out over the water.

Like a scene from a postcard, snow is softly falling, coating portions of the rocks that lead to the beach. How I got dropped in the middle of a fairy tale, I’ll never know.

“This is my other favorite part of the house,” Tristan says as we get to the lower level. “This pool is where I spend most of my time during the winter. It’s not big at all.” He moves to the side to allow me to look.

He’s right, it’s a small square with a waterfall, but it’s got a beautiful view of the ocean.

“When I have anything to think about, I come here, sit in the water and contemplate life. Water calms me more than anything else ever has, maybe that’s why I feel so comfortable here. I want you to love this place as much as I do.”

I look down, noticing he hasn’t let go of my hand since we arrived. I like it, but I don’t make a comment about it. If he knows he hasn’t let me go, it may startle him and ruin the easy friendship we’re coming to have.

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“I’m sure I will. I can see the appeal, and I can’t wait to view it all through your eyes, Tristan. Show me the rest?”

He takes me through an amazing kitchen, a library, workout room, shows me a couple of bathrooms, a pantry, and two guest rooms. We’re about to head up the last set of stairs to the top floor when he stops, turning to face me.

“This is the master.”

As we climb the stairs, I hold tightly on to his hand. My heart is pounding, mouth is dry, because he didn’t mention more than one. When he opens the door, I gasp again. The bedroom is the length of the house. There’s a huge bed with windows looking out over the ocean again. Only here, you can see so much further because it’s higher. There’s a veranda with what looks to have outside furniture, and I can’t wait to sit out there, hopefully with him.

There’s a sitting area on one side of the room, situated around the focal point of a fireplace. It’s cozy, and everything I would want if anyone asked me what I imagined my home as an adult would look like. Carpet on the floor looks plush and like it would sink between my toes if I took my shoes off.

“Wanna see the bathroom?” he asks.

If the bedroom looks like this, the bathroom is going to be amazing. “Oh my god, yes.”

He laughs at my enthusiasm. “Come on.”

When he opens the door, I'm totally in love. There's a tub so big I can probably lie down in it, a shower large enough for at least five people, and the largest makeup vanity I've seen in my life. "This is..." I don't even have words for it.

"I'm a guy." He laughs. "This means nothing to me, but I'm really glad you like it."

Turning to him, impulsively I throw my arms around his neck, hugging him tightly. "I do like it, I can see why you love it here."

He wraps his arms around my waist. "I hope you'll come to love it as much as I do."

"I can't wait to see it through your eyes," I tell him. "Can't wait for you to show me why you'd rather be here, instead of at the palace."

"Oh you'll see that very quickly, trust me." He laughs again as he pulls me back through the room and has a seat on one of the sofas around the fireplace. "There's a few things I need to talk to you about."

And that's when my stomach drops. I'm unsure of what he's going to say, don't know him well enough to be able to gauge what he may say by his facial expression.

"While we're here, we're going to become comfortable with one another. We're going to learn all the things other people learn about each other while dating. Together we'll figure out what it is to run this country."

Hearing him talk about us like a couple is comforting. "Together?"

"Together, I'm not going to let you go about this alone. Sometimes, the media will be harsh. I watched my mother go through it, watched her hate it, and sat by while my father did nothing. I swore to myself that when it came time for me to be one in charge, I wouldn't allow my wife to shoulder the responsibility of being the face of

our nation.”

He grabs hold of my hand, twisting his wrist so that he strokes my palm. “I appreciate that, Tristan. While I do have some training, and obviously Shannon will be with us, nothing will help more than the two of us standing strong.”

“Which brings me to my next point.” He continues running his fingernail along my palm. “Obviously this is the only master suite. There are two options. I can stay in one of the guest rooms, or we can stay here together. The decision is yours. Whatever you want to do, I’ll stand behind.”

My breathing increases as I think about the implications.

“I don’t want to pressure you,” he continues.

“You’re not,” I assure him, closing my palm around his finger, biting my bottom lip as I think about what sharing a bed with him means. “In a few months we’ll be doing it anyway, right?”

“Is that you saying you want me to stay here with you?”

This may be the worst decision of my life, but we have to become comfortable with one another and the best way to do that is to spend time together. Here, in this room, at least we’ll have complete privacy. Even if my heart does pound at the prospect of sleeping in the same bed with him.

“Yes,” I answer. “Yes, I want us to share this room together.”

“To share the bed?”

“Yes.”

He shifts so he can move his palm to my neck. “To share our bodies?”

“Yes, when the time comes.”

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I've got to set a few boundaries, and that's the biggest.

“Understood, Amelia. I'll have them bring both our bags up here.”

He gets up to go let them know and as I watch his retreating back, I sigh. My life—is about to get way more interesting.

CHAPTER 6

TRISTAN

The next morning, I awake with her in my arms. Sometime through the night, even though we started out on separate sides of the bigger-than-king-size bed in the suite, we came together in the middle. She's snuggled up with her back to my front, and I have my arm wrapped around her, my legs tangled in hers. It feels good, waking up with someone there. Hardly any of my other conquests would spend the night with me.

It was mostly my doing, but they didn't push. If they had, I'd probably have pushed back and never spoken to them again, but it strikes me as a learning experience. None of them wanted to push. They really didn't want the life, they wanted the status for the one night.

This woman? She seems to want the life. At least I hope she wants the life.

As I'm trying to awaken against the last pull of sleep, Amelia situates herself more fully against me, and I take note of where my arm actually is. Wrapped around her

chest, her unbound breast resting in the palm of my hand. She snuggles back against me, her softness rubbing against the part of me that's hard.

This is hell, I decide pretty quickly, but at the same time, I can't seem to stop myself. Dropping my lips to her neck, I smear them against the exposed skin, kissing softly in the sleepy grogginess of the early morning.

"Tristan?" Her whisper is a question in the silence of the room.

"Right here, Lia," I answer, pressing my palm against the firm peak of her nipple. "I won't go too far."

She whines as she extends her neck farther, allowing me room to move against her soft skin. Nipping slightly, I allow the few days growth of beard to abrade her flesh.

"Mmmm, don't stop, Tristan." She reaches behind her, grasping my neck with her fingers, pressing her ass against my dick.

With my free hand, I hold her hips still as I grind into her from behind, the clothing providing a layer of modesty that I wish wasn't there right now. With a growl, I twist her around so that she's lying on her back, me halfway covering her body. Her arms go around my neck, pulling me down to her. Our mouths open, tongues duel, and hands fight with one another as I reach down to lift her shirt up over her stomach.

Just as my fingers feel the soft heat of her skin, my phone rings loudly. It's the phone number that comes directly from the palace.

"Fuck," I groan as I let my head drop against the pillow. "I have to get that."

She moans loudly, her fingers gripping the waistband of my pajama pants. "Really bad timing," she groans as she rolls away from me.

Flat on my back now, I scrub my hands over my face, bring my palm down to adjust my hard-on to a more tolerable level. The phone is still ringing. “Yeah,” I answer, not worried about custom, or politeness. The raging erection in my pants has made me lose all my humor.

“Tristan.” I hear my father’s voice on the other end of the line. “That’s not how you answer the phone.”

“Sorry, I was asleep. Is there something I can help you with?”

“I was just calling to see if you’d seen the news this morning, but since you just woke up, I’m assuming you haven’t. You and Amelia are the talk of the worldwide tabloids. You’ve put Haldonia back on the map, people are already planning to come here for the wedding. Be sure the two of you are able to put on a good show.”

Immediately my mood is soured. I’m feeling a friendship with her, I never expected to feel. He’s making it into almost a business transaction and it doesn’t sit well with me, but I have to realize to him that’s what this is. Six months I have to determine what this is—six months to make sure we’re compatible, six months to fall in love, six months to become the ruler I want to be.

“Thanks for the heads up, Dad.” I clear my throat. “But right now, I have work to do, I’ll be in touch.”

Talking to him always puts me in a weird head space. I don’t even realize he’s hung up on me until I hear the beeping of the dial tone.

Throwing the phone down, I growl, noticing for the first time Amelia’s gone.

“Are you okay?” Amelia asks as she makes her way back into the bedroom, her hair wet, wearing a pair of jeans and a long-sleeve T-shirt. She’s just as beautiful in a pair

of jeans as she is in an evening gown.

“Other than having the worst case of blue balls I’ve ever had in my life, I’m good.” I push myself off of the bed, swinging my legs over. “My father called to let me know that we’ve made the worldwide tabloids. Many people are already planning to make their way to Haldonia for the wedding. He says we better put on a good show when the time comes.”

She wrinkles her nose up in disgust. “That’s a vulgar way of putting it.”

“He doesn’t believe in a happily ever after anymore, doesn’t think that love can conquer all. He’s lonely, and the loneliness has made him a cynical bastard.”

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“And you do?” she asks, curling up next to the fire, tucking her legs under her on the couch.

“I saw the way my mother looked at him when she was alive. I saw the way they laughed and talked together, the little things they did for each other. Love is alive and well, but it has to be nurtured, it has to grow.” A part of me feels stupid telling her these things, but if we’re to have a relationship of any kind, I can’t be scared to be honest.

“Then I look forward to finding out what love means with you, Tristan of Haldonia.”

I give her a smile as I go into the bathroom and take my turn.

“If we walk over that hill, there’s a place we can sit,” I tell her, my breath puffing out in white blasts of air.

It’s snowing today at the beach, angry waves are crashing into the shore and the wind is bitter as it whips around us, but neither one of us has complained about the fresh air.

“Okay.” She nods, grabbing hold of my hand tightly as we navigate the beach.

Once we get over the hill, there’s a small sheltered picnic area. Looking behind me, I see Parker following not far behind, and I know that no matter what, we’re safe.

“We should be able to sit here and talk for a little while without freezing to death.” I give her my hand to help her sit.

“What is it you want to talk about?” she asks, hooking her arm in mine, snuggling in close.

“Have you seen the pictures from yesterday?”

“No.” She shakes her head. “I haven’t had a chance to look.”

I put my arm around her, situating my phone so we can both see. “Then let’s look together.

“We honestly look like a newly engaged couple, with stars in our eyes.” She reaches out to touch the picture.

“We do, but we don’t know the basics about one another,” I remind her.

“Like favorite color?” she supplies.

“Favorite foods,” I add.

“First kiss.” She raises her eyebrows at me.

“Favorite sexual position,” I tease as I lean in, capturing her lips with mine.

“That’s why we’re here.” She pushes her hair behind her ears. “To become comfortable with one another, to learn all the things about each other that we don’t already know.”

“Which is everything,” I remind her.

“No, that’s not exactly right. We know that we have chemistry, we know that we like to kiss, and we know that during the night, we’re drawn to one another.”

I clear my throat as I think about how good she'd felt pressed up against me, how responsive she had been to me. "That's more than many people ever have, much less what I imagined we would have when I was told about you."

"I'm looking forward to building it with you." Amelia grasps the edges of my jacket, pulling me to her. Her lips press against mine in a kiss I'm unprepared for.

The same heat we felt this morning is there, and before it gets too far out of hand, I put a stop to it. "We always have to be aware there may be cameras watching," I caution her. "And we should be getting out of here, the temperature seems to be falling." I can see my breath, even in the shelter we're in.

She shivers. "Then maybe we should go back to the house?"

"We'll have some lunch and learn about those food preferences." I pinch the inside of her thigh slightly, causing her to giggle.

"Are you ticklish there?"

I do it again and the throaty laugh washes all over my body. She tries to keep her response in check, but as I do it one more time, she laughs so hard she cries. Before she gets up, backing away from me.

"Stop!" She giggles. "You're going to wish you had once I throw up on you from laughing too hard."

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“Where else are you ticklish?” I question as I get up and start to advance on her.

“Wouldn’t you like to know, Tristan?”

She gives me a look that says she’s daring me, as she takes off at a run back to the house.

“I would, Lia. I definitely would.”

Finding out the things about her that only lovers know will for sure be one of my new favorite pastimes.

CHAPTER 7

AMELIA

We’re standing in the kitchen right beside one another, facing the pantry. It’s time for lunch, and it’s also a great time for us to learn something about one another.

“If you had to pick your favorite guilty pleasure to eat from in here, what would it be?” I look up, asking Tristan as I watch his dark eyes survey the contents in front of us.

“This is interesting.” He runs his palm down his stubble-covered chin. “I kind of thought we’d sit around and quiz one another on questions.”

Turning to face him, I grab his shirt between my fingers, pulling him slightly toward

me. He seems surprised, but for the life of me I can't stop touching him today. Maybe it was sleeping beside him last night, maybe it's the fact we're pretty much alone today—I don't know. But I feel more comfortable with him than I did even yesterday.

“Nothing's better than physically seeing and knowing what the person you're with likes. So again, I ask you. If you had to pick your favorite guilty pleasure item to eat from here, what would it be?”

Putting his arm around me, he turns us back toward the pantry. “The box of brownies,” he answers immediately, reaching in to grab them. They're the Ghirardelli brand, double chocolate.

“That's a lot of sugar.” I purse my lips as I gaze over at him. “Looking at you, you wouldn't think you eat any sugar.”

“Don't eat much.” He thumps the box against his thigh. “But when I do, I love chocolate.”

“Duly noted.” I tilt my head to the side. “See these are things the woman sharing your bed should know.”

“Give me a chance, Lia, and I'll teach you.”

My eyes meet his and there's that shock of electricity that continues to pass between us. I'm wondering how long we'll be able to ignore it. When will it spark too bright, that it'll turn into a fire? This slow burn will leave a trail of coals that at some point will ignite. The question is, how long will they simmer before they combust?

He clears his throat. When he speaks, his voice is all gravel, deeper than normal, and full of an arousal I'm feeling all too well. “And you, Lia? What's your guilty pleasure?”

No one has ever called me by a nickname. For my entire life I've been known as Amelia. Not one person has ever shortened it, and to hear him shorten it after spending the last few days together? I'm not sure why, but it makes the pit of my stomach do funny things. Maybe I never meant enough to anyone else to give me a nickname, but the fact that he has? It makes me want to write our names on a notebook and draw a heart around it. I don't bring attention to it, because I would hate it if he stopped.

"Pancakes with maple syrup," I answer after looking through everything once.

"You're talking to me about sugar?" He tilts his head to the side this time. "Those who live in glass houses..." He lets his words trail off.

I laugh loudly, smiling what I know is a bright smile up at him. "I had no idea you had a sense of humor, much less a dry sense of humor. You should share that more."

"I've not been allowed to for a long time." He rubs his hand over his cheek. "Before my mom died, there was a lot of laughter, there was a lot of humor, even if it was tongue-in-cheek or at my father's expense. After she died"—he closes his eyes—"there wasn't laughing, no jokes, nothing to smile about for a long time."

What he's just shared with me, breaks my heart. It's obvious he was just a young kid trying to figure out how to live in a world where he'd lost the most important person in his world. I try to think about how it would go from one day having everything, being a carefree kid, knowing someone loved you, and then not knowing how to act. In the end, I'm not sure how to approach the subject, all I know is I want to put that smile back on his face.

"Wanna make pancakes?"

A slow smile spreads across his face. "Yeah, yeah, I think I do."

“This is a mix, so we’re just supposed to add water,” I tell him after we’ve gotten everything situated on the counter next to the stove.

Well if you could call it a stove. I’m sure an executivechef could cook in here. Granite countertops, industrial range, with what looks to be two ovens. My mom would kill for this setup.

“Adding water I can do.” He flips over the package and reads the amount he’s supposed to get.

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“If you like doing this though, we can get a recipe and make them from scratch?”

“Yeah, I’d like that.”

He’s almost shy in admitting it’s something he would like to do, and immediately that becomes my goal. For him not to be shy about the things he wants to do. For him to speak up and enjoy his life. Without his mom by his side, I think he’s forgotten how to do that. I can show him how, if he’ll let me, and I feel like by him sharing some of what he’s gone through with me, he’s allowed me in, just a tiny bit.

I turn on the burner, making sure the flame isn’t up too high as I warm the pan up. He brings the water over, putting it into the bowl, where the mixture sits. “Can I stir?” He’s almost bashful.

If anyone had told me a week ago this is where I’d be and this is what I’d be doing, I would have called them crazy, told them they had someone else’s life and it sure as the devil wasn’t mine. Yet, here I am, making pancakes with my new fiancé, the world’s ex-most-eligible bachelor.

“Go for it.” I hand him the spoon. “Just stir until it’s incorporated.”

He takes his job seriously and I have to wonder how long it’s been since he’s been given a task like this. He seems to enjoy it, and I wonder if this is something we’ll do together from now on. Cook in the kitchen and spend time getting to know one another.

I hope so, more than anything, I hope this is our new normal.

“This good?” he asks, his voice quiet, almost as if he’s completely unsure.

I look over into the bowl and see that he’s done a good job getting all the wet ingredients mixed in with the dry. “Perfect! Now just take a scoop and ladle some onto the pan.”

He does as I’ve asked him to do, watching intently as I hold the handle of the pan. “Have you ever watched anyone make pancakes before?”

“No.” He shakes his head. “They’ve never been a favorite of mine, but if they’re a favorite of yours I’ll be giving them a shot. I can already tell.”

Watching the batter, I notice the edges are starting to bubble as is the center. “We’re ready to flip.”

“Wait, I’ll get you a spatula.”

“Don’t need one.” I give him a wink as I flip it with a twist of my wrist and watch it land perfectly on the other side.

“Holy shit! How did you do that?”

“Lots of practice. Pancakes have been a favorite of mine for a long time,” I explain as I finish this one off, flipping it onto a plate. “Put some more in the pan.”

He does as asked, and I watch him, watching the batter. When I see that it’s the perfect consistency to flip, I step aside. “Do you want to give it a try, Tristan?”

“Yeah.” He’s almost like a child in his enthusiasm, and I love every minute of this.

I stand behind him, showing him the movement I use with my wrist to get it to flip,

then back up so that he doesn't elbow me in the face. "This is your moment, make sure you shine!"

He does what I've shown him, but he's not quickenough and the gooey side of the unfinished pancake lands against his sweater. I try to hold in the giggle as my mouth opens wide, but I can't stop it. The giggle comes out in full force.

"You think this is funny?" He turns to me, wearing a chest full of pancake mix.

"If you could see yourself." I giggle even louder, throwing back my head and holding my stomach as I give into the laugh.

This is one of those laughs that takes over every emotion you've felt in the last week and just lets you release it all. Every bit of nervousness, arousal, stress, happiness. It's all taken care of in this laugh, and when he starts to laugh with me? I realize this moment is as perfect as it can be.

"Try it again," I tell him, wiping at the corners of my eyes, and giving him a new scoop to try it on, after we got rid of the ruined one.

And that's how it goes for the next ten minutes. In the end, we only have three pancakes that are edible, and he has to take off his sweater. One thing I will never complain about, though, is Tristan in a skin-tight white undershirt. This will be my new favorite look for a while. He carries the plate to the table, and as we get there, I notice there's only one fork.

"Share with me?" His voice is hopeful, offering a piece of him that perhaps he's kept held back in the past few days.

"I'd love to."

Having a seat beside him, I watch as he cuts off the first piece, dips it in the syrup, and then holds it up to my mouth. That bite of cold pancake is the best bite of anything I've ever taken, and I'll remember it for the rest of my life.

CHAPTER 8

TRISTAN

Amelia and I have had a full week to ourselves without having to do anything business related. We were to get comfortable with one another, learn things about each other, and figure out if we were compatible.

Given the way my body reacts to her every time she's around, we're fucking compatible. We're learning and we're getting comfortable, so I'd say we're starting off impeccably. But things are about to change. In a few days we'll get our assignments from the palace and a good portion of our time won't be our own anymore.

Today, I want to take her on an adventure. Something I love to do, but not many people know about. In fact, I'm not even sure I've been photographed doing this before. It's one of my favorite things, and I want her to enjoy it too.

"Tristan?" I hear her coming down the stairs. "Are you okay?"

I'm sitting in a chair in the quiet living room, looking out at the ocean. It's a crisp, cool day, and the water is calm. Waves don't crash, they leisurely make their way to the shore, then they're almost lazy in their ascent up to the beach, before traveling back out into the pool of water, only to make the trip again. I probably look brooding, because that's what everyone assumes about me, but I'm not. Not really. I'm thinking, trying to figure out how she's going to respond to what I'm about to say.

I like dangerous things, living on the edge, being a rebel. It's just now, I have to do it under the radar. I've been like this since my mom died; a therapist told me it had to

do with the guilt of being the only survivor of the car crash we were in, and I suppose that's right, but it hasn't changed the way I am. That's what I tell myself, but even I realize I like living on the edge and pushing boundaries more than the average soon-to-be king.

"I'm good." I clear my throat, turning around to face her. "The day is as beautiful as you are." I slowly walk over, placing the palm of my hand on her hip, before I lean down, kissing her on the cheek.

She always blushes when I compliment her. It's become a bit of a game for me. To see how red I can make her cheeks. I'm dying for the day when I can put that flush in them for something we've done physically. We haven't moved that far yet, but it's going to be soon, I can tell.

"Thank you." She ducks her head in a slightly bashful manner.

"What are your plans for the day?" I circle my arms around her waist, crowding in so that she has to tilt her head back to look up at me.

"My plans?" She grins sheepishly and shakes her head. "I don't really have any." Her teeth are impossibly white against the dark color she has on her lips. Truth be told, it's so perfectly applied it makes me want to mess it up slightly, and before I can temper my reaction, that's what I do.

"I have plans." My voice is deep, a guttural declaration as I capture her lips with mine.

When they touch, Amelia releases a soft mmm, and that sound? Goes straight south, with a detour to my heart. I feel her small hands go up under my shirt, testing the feel of my skin. I've never had a woman's touch almost unman me the way hers does. The simplest of caresses makes me as hard as a teenager looking at his first porno mag. It

would be embarrassing if it were with anyone but her.

Our mouths are twisting this way and that as our feet are trying to take the weight we're throwing around. I'm not even sure where we're going, all I know is I'm walking backward, and I know there's a couch or a chair somewhere in the vicinity. The back of my legs finally encounter something. Not wanting to accidentally sit on the coffee table, I reach back, feeling material. With a grunt, I have a seat, pulling her on top of me, spreading her legs around my waist, and moving my hands down to cup the cheeks of her ass to pull her tighter into me.

With other women, it's not been like this. I haven't enjoyed the playing. Anyone I've ever been with before would call me the fucking most selfish lover they've ever had. It's always been about me getting off. Yeah, I got them off too, but it wasn't pretty, it wasn't seducing them with soft kisses and palms cupping their asses. It was going after them hard, almost begging them to have an orgasm right after I was done. Amelia? She's changed something in me, flipped a switch I didn't know was there. It's interesting finding out new things about myself, when I thought I knew everything there was to know.

I can feel her heat around me, can feel her slightly bumping her hips against the length underneath the jeans I wear. Her tongue is tangling with mine, her hand in my hair, holding me to her, the other hand, moving down my body to where my belt buckle rests. One of my hands has come off her ass and is moving underneath her shirt, up to where her breasts are held by what I can feel is some sort of lace. Fuck what I wouldn't give to rip the shirt off her body and have a go at her right here. But I can't, there are people around, and with her, I'm not into exhibition. When I get her naked, either over top of me or beneath me, it'll be for my eyes only.

Ripping our lips apart, I gasp deep breaths in, trying to get oxygen into deprived lungs, while she does the same. Her forehead rests against mine as we pant against each other, both licking the taste of one another off our lips.

“Believe it,” I pant, letting out a breath, “or not, that wasn’t what.” I reach down adjusting myself against her. “I meant when I said I have plans.”

She giggles, the sound deep in her throat. “What exactly are your plans then, Tris?”

She’s taken to calling me Tris, and fuck if I don’t love it. Tilting my head back, I give a cocky grin as I see her lipstick is slightly smudged. Mission accomplished. With the pad of my thumb, I wipe it off, fixing the imperfection, while giving myself a pat on the back. Sitting her slightly away from me, I take a second to compose myself, before speaking.

“We have a few days left before we’ll be working in an official capacity, and I thought today, if you didn’t have plans, I could take you out and show you something I really enjoy.”

Her eyes are shining bright as she looks down at me. “I don’t have any plans, I’d love to see whatever you want to show me.”

Something in my heart twinges at the honest tone of her voice. No one’s been interested, truly interested in things I enjoy, in a very long time. Sure there have been people who’ve pretended. I entertained them because that’s what I was supposed to do. With her? I want to be the person she seems to see when she looks at me. Tapping her hip, I motion for her to get off of me. “Go upstairs and put some warm clothes on, preferably tight. I’ll have a jacket for you when you come down, and if you have a pair of boots, you’ll want those too. Not high-heeled or anything like that.”

“Hiking?” She appears confused as hell, and that’s kinda how I like it. Keeping her on her toes, and hopefully surprising her. “Yeah, something like that.”

“Okay, Tris. I trust you. Be back in a few minutes.”

Those simple words—I trust you—mean more to me than anything else ever has.

“This isn’t exactly what I thought you had in mind,” she mumbles as we stand in the garage, me helping her put on a helmet, her wide eyes on the Ducati in front of her. The fear is apparent, but if I know her, there’s also a tinge of excitement. I always get it. Doing something I’m not supposed to be doing. There’s a bit of arousal in it. It’s a feeling I’ve craved for too long in my life.

“You’ll love it, and I promise not to go too fast.” Which I kind of know is a lie. This thing is basically a Ferrari on two wheels. It’s tricked out, like everything else I have, all matte-black and badass looking. No one knows this is my bike, I can ride it in complete anonymity, and that’s the thing I love most about it.

Handing her a jacket, I instruct her on how to fasten it, and then give her gloves. “Why does this feel so structured?” she asks as she tries to move in the jacket.

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“It’s got Kevlar in it, just in case.”

Her eyes widen again, and I can see her start to panic. “Lia, you’re safe with me, I promise.”

I watch her swallow roughly, so hard I hear it. “Okay, I trust you.”

There are those words again, and as we get on, start the engine, and prepare to fly down the coastal highway, I know those are words I’ll do my best to keep hearing for the rest of our lives together.

CHAPTER 9

AMELIA

My stomach is in my throat as Tristan takes a curve at a high rate of speed. The way I’m situated on the back of his bike, I can’t see much, and if I just glance, it looks like we’re about to plunge right into the sea. It’s enough to make me squeal and giggle, all at the same time. He looks back at me, but he’s wearing a full-face helmet like I am, so there’s hardly anything I can see. Wrapping my arms around his waist, I hold on tightly, probably too tightly.

Who am I kidding? I’m allowed to touch his body, hang on to it, press myself up against him as we ride down the coastal highway. No one knows who we are, there’s not a huge motorcade following us or preceding us. Parker is a few car lengths back in a Range Rover, and for all intents and purposes, this feels very much like a date.

There's a crossing that we have to stop at. I use the moment to catch my breath.

"You doing okay?" he asks as he straightens up, putting his feet on the ground. One hand goes to his thigh, the other goes to where my fingers are clasped around his waist. He covers mine with his warmth and gives a slight squeeze.

"I love this!"

"Do you really?" He turns so that he can look at me.

"Yeah." I nod. "This is a lot more fun than I thought it would be. Thank you so much for bringing me."

"It's truly my pleasure." He lifts his hand up, giving me a squeeze just above my elbow. "You ready to go?"

"Yeah." I smile brightly, even though he can't see it. This is the best time I've had, maybe ever.

He hits the gas a little harder, causing me to squeal again and grasp him tighter around the waist. After riding for a little while longer, we come to a stop again.

"Are you getting hungry?"

After he mentions it, I realize I'm hungrier than I thought I was. My stomach growls loudly, but hopefully I'm the only one who can hear it. "Starving," I admit.

"There's a nice little fish and chips place up here." He points a little way up the road we're on. "Do you want to stop there?"

"I would love to."

Minutes later we're stopping, Parker pulling in behind us. As we get off the bike, he hands Tristan a hat. To me, he doesn't look much differently, but to people who aren't used to seeing him in a hat, it's definitely enough of a disguise. "You should be fine," Parker tells me. "The only way people have seen you is completely dressed up, and they won't expect you to be wearing biker gear."

For the first time I notice Parker isn't dressed in a suit, like normal. He looks very much like a normal guy just enjoying a day. "After you." Tristan opens the door for me.

Walking inside, I see that it has views much like the house we're staying in off the ocean. Together we walk up to the counter to order. I almost giggle, because it strikes me as funny that Tristan is doing something so everyday normal as ordering his own food. I'm not sure why, but it does.

"What do you want, Lia?"

"I'm sorry." I shake my head to rid it of my thoughts. "What did you order?"

"The fish and chips I was telling you about."

"Then I'll have the same," I order.

"Do you want a pint?" The lady taking our order questions both of us.

I'm feeling a little like living on the edge. Tristan declines while I say, "Why the hell not?"

He chuckles beside me. "Whatever the lady wants."

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When they give him a total, I realize I've never seen him pay for anything before, and I'm interested in if he carries a credit card like the rest of the world. I also wonder what I'm supposed to do if I need to buy something somewhere. The question is answered as he slips some cash out of a wallet I didn't even know he carried. My pint is placed in front of me, along with what he ordered, and we walk quickly to a corner booth, Parker sitting not too far from us. We scoot in next to each other, me crossing my legs, even though it's not considered proper, him putting his free hand on my thigh. I take a drink of the ale, and then offer Tristan a small smile. The leisurely way he's running his fingernail up and down my jeans sends little sparks of awareness through my body.

"What?" he asks, smiling back at me, the edge of his mouth tilting up in a sexy as hell grin.

"Nothing." I take another drink. "I just wondered how you would pay. Like do you have a credit card? Do I have a credit card?"

He chuckles, deep and loud. "Do you think people just hand me things?"

I lean in, cutting my eyes at him under my lashes, whispering softly. "I mean, maybe you haven't heard or not, but you're about to be king. You kinda do get handed what you want."

"Do I?" He tilts his head closer to me. "Because I've wanted you since the first night I saw you, and you have to be handed to me."

"Maybe you haven't been asking in the right way." I flirt with him, feeling freer than

I ever have with him.

Our food is placed in front of us with a flourish. “Prepare to eat some of the best food you’ve ever tasted,” he tells me as he dips the fried fish in malt vinegar and holds it up to my mouth.

When I bite down, tasting the flakiest, freshest fish I’ve ever had, I know he’s telling me the truth.

“Eat up, Lia. I think you might need your strength later.”

His eyes burn a darker shade than they normally are, and I know without a doubt, exactly where this is going.

“It’s going to storm,” Tristan yells behind his shoulder later on in the day. “But we’re only about five miles from home. Might get wet, because I want to get home safe.”

“I’m good with that,” I answer as I hold on tightly.

I can see the driveway when the rains start coming down and the wind starts whipping around us. The storm is furious as it falls almost as dark as night, even though it’s early evening. The water is cold, even through the clothes we wear. When we reach the garage, I breathe a sigh of relief. Slipping inside, Tristan kills the engine.

“Hopefully we walked around enough throughout the day that you aren’t too sore,” he tells me as he helps me off.

With both feet planted on solid ground, I know I’ll be somewhat sore. “Nothing a warm shower won’t fix.” My teeth are chattering, fingers shaking as I try to take the helmet off.

“Here, let me help.” He pushes my hands away, helping me get out of the jacket and helmet, but my shivering won’t stop.

“I didn’t expect that wind, or the rain,” I explain. “Once I get cold like this, it’s really hard for me to get warm.”

“I didn’t expect them either,” he admits as he shrugs out of his outer gear too. “Come on, let’s get you upstairs.”

With a shriek, he picks me up in his arms, carrying me up the stairs to the suite that is ours. He sets me down, going to work getting the fireplace going, and getting out of his wet clothing. Looking out the windows, we can see the tumult of the waves crashing against the shore, the driving rain, and the lightning off in the distance.

Determined to get warm, I immediately go to the bathroom and start the shower, but as I try to make my fingers work on the button and zipper of my jeans, I’m not making any headway. My fingers are still frozen and refuse to cooperate.

“Need some help with that?”

His voice is deep, dark, a promise of something intensely sensual underlying the words he speaks. I know immediately that if I look up and meet his eyes, that this dance we’ve been doing around each other is over. I tell myself to be strong, but then I tell myself to shut up. This man is meant to be my husband, and why would I not enjoy all the things that entitles me to?

Lifting my eyes to where he stands, I see first bare feet and legs. Raising my gaze up to his mid-section, I see soaked boxer briefs that leave nothing to the imagination. And I mean nothing. He wants me, of that there is no question. I finish the path up his bare chest until I get to those eyes of his. Just as dark as his voice was, the promise shining bright there.

Licking my lips, I gather up every bit of my courage. “If you could help me, I would really like that.”

He saunters across the marble floor, gliding like he’s got all the time in the world, while I’m dying for him to touch me. When he gets to where I am, he cups both sides of my face in the palm of his hands. “Are you sure, Lia? Once I start, I won’t be able to stop.”

Nodding, I breathe deeply, putting my fingertips against the waistband of his boxer briefs. “I’m sure.”

“Then hang on, princess, I’m about to blow your mind.”

As his mouth crashes into mine, tongues dueling, lips pressing together, breaths being shared, I have no doubt this man is about to do just that.

CHAPTER 10

TRISTAN

“Tristan,” she sighs before our tongues duel for position in this kiss we’re sharing. Pulling back, I allow myself to look at her for just a few moments, just to get my fill of her. My hands slide down her stomach to the button of the jeans she was trying to get off earlier. With jerky movements, I get them unfastened and push them down her legs, panties and all.

“Let’s get this off too,” I whisper as I grasp the hem of her shirt, pulling it over her body, leaving her in nothing more than a lacy bra, that’s become see-through. “Damn.” My eyes run up and down her body, before they come to rest on the smooth skin just above the scalloped edges of her bra.

With the index finger of both of my hands, I draw her collarbone from end to end, coming to meet in the middle. When they meet, I trace the line of her sternum down to the skin that’s gotten my attention. Her breaths are coming faster, her sharp intake is heard in the relative quiet of the room. The pouring of the water in the shower does nothing to hide her excitement. Using those fingers, I hook them into the encasements and pull down, exposing her flesh to my eyes for the first time.

“Mmmm, Lia.” I love the fact those nubs have tightened under my gaze, the skin pulling taut.

Her breathing is heavier now, she’s restlessly moving on her feet. “Do something, please.”

“What is it you want me to do?” I tilt my head to the left, slowly licking my suddenly

dry lips.

When she doesn't answer, I raise my eyes from where they've been locked up to her face. There's desire, passion, arousal in those depths. There's also a sense of impatience. "Make me feel good." She lets her head fall back onto her shoulders.

My cock is hard beneath my boxer briefs and I'm almost positive that one touch from her will unman me, but I want her to feel good just as much as she wants to feel good too. Reaching out, I grab her hand in mine, still cold as ice, and bring it down to the tented front of my underwear. "Come on, Lia, show me how much you want it."

Her small hand snakes between the waistband and my flesh, grasping me with a firm stroke, pushing first down and then back up again, using her palm to circle the head, gather the fluid already there, and then go back down again.

For me? That's game over. I attack her with everything I've got, ripping the bra off her body when I can't make my fingers cooperate, and then taking one tip into my mouth, swirling my tongue as I move my hands down her back and cup her ass. With little help she circles her legs around my waist and I walk us into the shower.

There are jets all around, and a waterfall showerhead; I'm not worried about making sure she's getting warm as I push her against the wall, using the weight of my body to hold her up as I get out of my now wet boxer briefs. I sling them behind me, not giving a fuck where they end up, and then use my hand to cup her breast, feeding it back into my mouth.

"Oh my god, Tristan." She thrusts against me, pushing as close to my body as she can. "Feels so good."

I let her nipple go with a groan. "I know."

Grasping her jaw, I situate her mouth the way I want it and then I take the kiss I've wanted to take since I first saw her. We move this way and that, nipping, biting, eating up one another with an uncontrolled passion like I've never felt before. Pulling away, I balance her body against the wall and move down, until I'm between her thighs.

"Hang on, baby. This is my specialty." I grin up at her as I dive in.

Using my tongue, mouth, and fingers I bring her to the edge two or three times, teasing her clit as I push my middle and index finger inside of her, using my other hand to hold her thighs open. The fingers of one of her hands is twisted in my hair, holding me to her while the other is working on her nipple, pulling hard enough to make her moan louder when I hit a particularly sensitive spot inside her.

"Tristan, I want you, I want to come with you inside me," she gasps. "And I'm so hot, now, so fucking hot."

I let go of her, moving back so that I can look up. She's in her own world, teasing her nipple with her fingers, her head moving this way and that against the shower wall, her cheeks a bright red, those lips of hers full and plump with the passion I shared with them.

The steam of the shower has created an almost dreamsequence feeling to what's going on, but I'm with her, it's too hot. Carefully letting her down, I reach over to turn the knobs into the off position when I feel her mouth wrap around my dick.

"Jesus Christ." I throw my head back, inhaling a breath so deep it concaves my stomach. "You've gotta stop." I grip my fingers in her hair. "If you want me to actually get it inside you, you have to stop." I pull her back.

She uses her hand to move up and down on my length, then sticks her tongue out to

tease the tip. “You’re no fun.”

“After we’ve got a few rounds out of our way, you can have all the fun you want, I promise.”

Pulling her up by the arm, I pick her up again, carrying her into the bedroom. As I toss her on the made bed, both of us dripping from the water in the shower, I cover her body with mine. “I don’t think I can wait,” I groan as she opens her thighs to make room for me in between them.

“I can’t either.” She fuses our lips together, kissing me in a hurried, hot manner that has me panting even harder.

“We didn’t talk about things, but I have condoms in the drawer.”

“Yeah, that would be a good idea.” She licks the taste of me off her lips as I sit back on my haunches, reaching backward so I can grab the condom. That one piece of latex will be the only thing separating us in just a few moments. Quicker than I have before, I suit up. Then I gently spread her thighs again, pushing in as carefully as I can.

“God, you’re tight.” I pitch forward on my hands, palming the covers by her head, gripping them to keep from blowing my load as soon as I’m seated inside her.

“Not too experienced.” She clutches at me. “I’ve only been with one other guy. To be honest, it was teenage rebellion after I realized the rules of the monarchy didn’t dictate I would be a virgin.”

And he must not have been nearly as big as me, or it was a long time ago, because she’s tight and having trouble accepting me. Dropping my head, I go to work on her neck, move back down to those tits that look just as good slick with water as they did

cupped in lace.

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“Ohhh,” she moans, pressing her head against the blanket.

“Yeah?” I shift my hips, pressing further into her.

“Yeah.” She opens her eyes, grinning up at me. “Do it, Tristan. Make me yours.”

There’s something about the words she spoke, about the way she trusts me, it makes me want to be a good man for her. I want our lives to be happy, and I know that this will be a huge part of that. Giving her what she asks for, I push all the way in, groaning loudly, letting my head drop as I absorb the feeling of her tightening around my length. “Fuck me.” I push up on my knees. “Are you ready, Lia?”

“Yeah.” She nods, gripping my biceps as I withdraw and then push back into her. After a few tentative thrusts, we get a rhythm down and soon she’s lifting up to meet me halfway.

With each journey into her, I moan and she makes this little “mmm” noise that I swear to God will make me hard for the rest of my life. We pick up speed as our bodies slide together, and I let my arms drop some of my weight on her. Her nipples catch on my chest as we slide up and down, in and out. She tightens around me, and that little “mmm” turns into something much louder.

“Tris.” She wraps her legs around my waist, holding me tightly to her.

“Are you there?” I wrap my arms around her body, holding onto her ass as I piston my hips in and out, my thighs screaming, my cock throbbing, the bed making a squeaking noise it’s never made before. We’re thrusting against each other, caught up

in this maelstrom of feeling I've never had, and just as I think it can't get any better, her nails drag down my back and she screams her pleasure loudly.

The tightening of her channel around my dick is all it takes, and I bury my face in her neck as I roar my approval, my thrusts faltering, becoming erratic as I find the ultimate release inside her.

For long moments afterward, we lay together, both of us breathing heavily.

It's odd, I thought I'd be embarrassed with her after this, because of how open we are with one another, but I'm not. I feel closer to her than I ever have. "I'll be right back." I lean in, kissing her forehead. "Are you okay?" I ask as I get off of the bed, looking down at her.

Her eyes are closed, there's beard burn on her chest, neck, and between her thighs, not to mention love bites that I don't even remember giving to her. She slowly opens her eyes as a lazy smile spreads across her face. "I've never been better."

Going into the bathroom, I take care of the condom and then rush back out, where I see the bed is empty. For a second my heart drops, but then I notice the blanket is also gone, and then I notice her standing before the windows, overlooking the ocean with the comforter wrapped around her body.

"It's snowing." She turns to look at me over her shoulder. "All that rain turned into snow. It's so beautiful."

I walk up behind her, wrapping my arms around her. "Yeah it is." But I'm not looking at the view of the ocean, I'm looking at this woman who just took me to paradise and back.

She turns, opening her arms, giving me the comforter. Taking her hint, I wrap it

around me, then wrap my arms around her waist, encapsulating us both. I can't keep my hands off her, can't stop from slightly kissing her neck, shoulder, and temple as we stand, enjoying our own piece of tranquility.

"Can I ask you something?" she asks quietly a few minutes later.

Kissing her neck, I nod. "Anything."

"How many women have you had in here?"

That wasn't the question I was expecting, but I can understand it. "None, I don't bring them back to my bedroom. You're the first, and the last."

She turns in my arms, wrapping hers around my neck. "Maybe I shouldn't, but I like the sound of that." Her smile is shy, almost uncertain, but her shining eyes are enough to make me feel like I've given her the world.

"I like the sound of that too." I drop my head to kiss her softly. "So, there's a room service option here, and there's a hidden TV at the foot of the bed with Netflix on it." I raise my eyebrows. "Could I interest you?"

She pinches my arm. "You didn't tell me there was a TV in here."

"I don't think I've ever been so lazy as I am right now," I admit as I yawn loudly.

"Let's do it then, order food, lounge in bed, and watch whatever we feel like."

That honestly sounds like the best time ever, and no one will ever know how much it means to me that it happened with her.

"Your wish is my command."

“Shouldn’t it be the other way around?” She giggles as she lays down, pulling the sheet around her naked body.

“No.” I tilt her head back, making sure she’s looking at me, making sure she sees me giving her my promise. “As the king, I’ll serve the country. But as your husband, I’ll serve you.”

CHAPTER 11

AMELIA

The next morning, things start to change. It's not unexpected, both Tristan and I know things are going to change. We've lived in our own little bubble for the past week, but we both know we have to go back to the real world, and that starts now. It's scary, knowing that our time together from now on, isn't exactly going to be ours.

Tristan's arm is wrapped around me, he's breathing slowly into my ear, but I know he's awake. The alarm went off a few minutes ago, waking us both up. The alarm to the first day of the rest of our lives. It's what I've been calling it in my head since I woke up. There's a feeling of doom in my body, things aren't going to remain as easy and happy as they've been so far. "I don't want to get out of this warm bed." I stretch, turning over to face him.

Overnight his beard has grown darker, and his eyes are lazy in their sleepiness. This is the first time I've caught Tristan this relaxed, and all I know is I want him this relaxed all the time. I love this look on him. It's everything I've imagined he can be.

"I don't either." He clears his throat, tightening his arms around me.

His voice is deep with the same sleepiness his eyes hold. This is the Tristan I'm getting to know, the one that no one else does. Feeling closer to him than I ever have, I wrap my arms around his waist and burrow my head into his chest.

"How different will it be? After today?" My voice is small, exhibiting how much I hate to ask the question, how much I'm dreading what's being placed before us. Having known this Tristan and being here with him, I don't want anything else.

“Very. Extremely. I can’t begin to describe to you what the next few months will be like.” He pushes his fingers through my hair. “But I promise you, we’ll make this work.” He drops a kiss on my forehead. “I need you to be patient with me, and I’ll do my best to be the man you need me to be.”

The honesty in his voice, along with the kiss to my forehead is my undoing. “I believe you,” I whisper, caressing his jawline. “I don’t expect perfect, Tristan, because the world isn’t perfect. All I expect is your honesty and respect. “

“You already have it,” he sighs. “We’ve got to get up.”

“I know, it’s time to get out of our bubble and join the real world.”

Quietly we get up, me on one side, him on the other. There’s not much talking as I think we’re both trying to process what’s about to happen. We’re about to be thrust into the responsibilities of our assigned roles. I can feel and see Tristan start to become the person he is in front of other people, and I feel myself adapting a persona as well. Maybethis is how the two of us will handle the life we’re about to be pushed into.

There’s another part of me that wonders if this will also be our undoing. The thought clenches in my chest, and I refuse to let it take hold. If it doesn’t grow roots, it can’t thrive.

“We need to find a dress for you to wear to the charity function in two days,” Shannon tells me as we sit in the living room, samples of fabrics and colors spread out on the floor in front of us. She’s left me alone up until today, when she showed up in here, arms laden down with decisions for me to make.

The view keeps me calm as I see the ocean out before us. The day is overcast, but the water is calmer than it was yesterday. There’s no snow falling, and it looks like the

wind is barely blowing. It's the perfect backdrop to what we're doing. A mundane task that before now, I didn't realize the significance of.

"I think I'd like a rich color this time. It's at night, correct?"

"Yes." She nods, flipping through a notebook at her side. "My notes say it begins at eight at night, so it's going to be later than normal. We can go a bit more elegant if you want. Since it's still cold out, I'd like to use dark colors, those go the best with your coloring." She points to a few of the swatches spread out in front of us. I don't necessarily love making decisions, but I'm grateful she makes it so easy.

Taking stock of what she's pointed at, there's a color that really catches my eye. "The royal blue is beautiful."

"It is, and the top of the dress is all sparkles and cleavage." Shannon gives me a smile. "It will look great on you."

"Can we get that one to try on?" I point out a few of the others I'd like to try on, but the blue color keeps bringing me back. Almost the way my eyes find Tristan in a room. It's got the same magnetic pull.

"Let me go get all the dresses and then we'll try everything on in the sewing room." She gets up from where we've been sitting. "We've got someone here to make alterations if they're needed. Whatever you do, don't eat lunch before we get these tried on, they'll give us the wrong fit. This needs to be perfect."

My stomach growls as she mentions lunch. Looking down at my watch, I see that it's past lunch and at this point I may as well wait for dinner. Walking to the kitchen, I grab a cold bottle of water, drinking it to help fight off the hunger pains. I haven't seen Tristan since this morning, and I'm missing him. He's been behind closed doors with his team while I've been working with Shannon.

“Okay, we’re ready. Let’s get these dresses tried on, and then we can talk about hair and makeup for the event.”

“Sounds good.” I give her a smile to cover just how tired I am, knowing we still have several hours before we’ll be finished.

Three hours later, I have a dress, a hairstyle, shoes, and makeup planned for the event. As I’m leaving the sewing room, which I have a feeling will be aptly nicknamed the beauty room before all is said and done, I take a left and head up the stairs, wanting to change before I find something to eat. My stomach grumbles so loudly I’m surprised no one hears it.

I still haven’t seen Tristan since we woke up, and I’m wondering where he is, but I can’t hear any other movement in the house. After being with people for most of the day, I enjoy the quiet. Making so many decisions will have to become something I get used to. As I make it to the next landing, someone creeps up behind me, putting a hand over my mouth. “Don’t scream, Parker’s looking for me, but I’m making my getaway.”

Hearing Tristan’s playful, deep, voice in my ear, makes me smile widely as I turn to face him. “Your secret is safe with me, where should we go?”

“The bedroom?” He wears a salacious smile on his face.

“Tristan?” We hear Parker’s voice as he ascends the stairs.

“Quick!” Tristan throws me over his shoulder as he takes the steps at a fast pace. “We’re retiring for the night, Parker, catch up with you in the morning.” He closes the door with his foot and engages the lock.

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He sets me down in front of him, sighing as he leans his head against the door. “This day...” he groans. “I don’t think I’ve ever hated a day back to work more than I hate this one. So many decisions.” He rolls his neck on his shoulders.

“I feel the exact same way you do, I still haven’t eaten lunch,” I moan, holding my stomach with my hands. “I’m so hungry.”

“Here’s what we’re going to do.” Tristan pushes off the door. “We’re going to order some food to be delivered up here, we’re going to take our showers, watch some TV, and lock out the world. Because damn”—he shakes his head—“I didn’t expect to be thrown into the deep end today, I thought they’d at least ease in,” He runs a hand through his hair.

“I feel the exact same way.”

“So, Lia, what do you want for dinner tonight?” he asks as he picks up the phone, ready to dial the kitchen.

“Whatever you want, get me the same. I need a shower.” I head for the bathroom, ready to wash the day off my skin.

As I’m stepping in, the door opens, Tristan coming over the threshold. He’s naked as he stares at me. “The food will be here in an hour. I think we can find a way to pass the time, don’t you?”

I nod, dropping the towel I’ve wrapped around my body, opening the door. His eyes travel my body as mine travel his. “I can think of a few ideas.”

In seconds he's where I am picking me up, holding me against the wet wall as his lips go for my neck. Laughing, I wrap my arm and legs around him. To be close to him is exactly what I've needed all day. And if this turns out to be our nighttime routine? Favorite part of the day ever.

CHAPTER 12

TRISTAN

"Tristan!" Amelia giggles as I grasp her around the waist, cupping her bare ass in my hands as we exit the shower. I've never had this kind of playfulness with anyone else. Her giggle is like balm to a scrape on my soul.

"Don't act like five minutes ago I didn't have my face buried between your thighs." I move my hand around her to the front of her body, slipping my finger right where my tongue was.

She closes her eyes, tilting her head back. A moan is torn from her throat. The sound going directly to my cock. A small smile lifts the side of her mouth. "I'm not, I'm just saying we should probably get dressed for when the food gets here.

"What if I don't want you dressed." I let my eyes travel her body appreciatively.

"You want me to eat naked?"

"I want you to eat however you choose to." I sober up from my playful banter before. "I want you to be in charge of what you want to do. Don't let me or anyone influence you. It's important to me that you keep your strong personality. Don't let me change that, and don't let the title change it either. Your personality will be one of your greatest gifts to this country."

“You seem like you know a thing or two about this.” She disentangles herself from me, wrapping a towel around her body.

With her body hidden from me, I admire the elegant, soft slope of her neck. The way her hair flows over her shoulders, the wet strands sticking to her back.

I watch quietly as she goes over to the vanity, using some sort of wipes to wash her face. After that, she puts a cream on her fingertips, smoothing it over her face and neck. Intrigued, I give her my full attention. This is the type of relationship I’ve never had. Where we shared the important daily stuff with one another. In the back of my mind, I always knew any woman who was with me would be with me because of who I am. Maybe I thought it was easier to wait until the decision was made for me. Either way, I can say I’m extremely happy with the choice that was made. Amelia has been a surprise and a delight in every way.

“I do.” I go over to where she’s putting that stuff on her face, lifting myself up on the vanity to sit while she does whatever it is she’s doing. Looking down at my hands, I shrug, trying to make this seem a lot less than what it is. “My mom,” I start, stop, and then start again. “She had a personality a lot like yours. She wanted me to be a regular kid and experience things for myself. I’ve done things and gone places that my ancestors never even thought of. Like eating McDonald’s and going to Disney.” I grin when she gasps.

“They didn’t eat at McDonald’s?”

“No, and it’s the biggest fast-food chain in the world. According to my mom, when they married, my dad had never done his own grocery shopping.”

She finishes rubbing the lotion on her face. “I can’t imagine not knowing how to grocery shop.”

“I’ll let you in on a secret,” I whisper as I hop down from where I was sitting. “I’m the first one to have a debit and credit card. None of the previous kings before me did. They either carried cash, or it was bought on the paper credit system, and ledgers were settled at the end of each month. It was a big deal when I made my first purchase with the card. It wasn’t like they had the press there, but they wanted to. My mom wouldn’t allow it.”

“That seems so archaic.” We make our way back to the bedroom, her still wrapped in the towel. Me in one around my waist.

“A lot of the ways that are considered proper, are archaic. I plan to turn the monarchy on its ear in a few months. We’re in the age of the internet, and women doing things they’ve never been allowed to do before. People marrying who’ve never been allowed to marry. I don’t want Haldonia to get left behind the rest of the world.” I blow out a breath I’ve been holding as we stand facing one another. “I fear if we don’t make changes and keep up, we’ll not be seen as a good place to visit or live. It’s important to me that we keep up with our history, but still make progressive strides.”

“I’ll be there by your side, each step of the way.” She gives me a bright smile, one that I know will help me make it through the difficult days we have ahead. Changing an old rule system isn’t easy, but I want my legacy to be that of an innovator, of a man who didn’t listen to what I should do. I want to do what’s right. That’s what my mother would have wanted. This is the only way I have left to honor her, and that’s what I want to do.

“Good, that’s exactly where I want you.” I wrap my hand around her neck, dragging her in for a kiss. It’s only been a few moments, but I need to feel her again, want to be as close to her as I can. “But you’re right, we really should get dressed before our food gets here. Did you even bring lounge clothes?” I can’t recall her having them in her suitcases when they were unpacked.

Her face blushes bright. “No, my parents were sure you’d be so formal that I’d never be able to wear them again. The only thing I have are day-to-day clothes and pajamas.”

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“Surely your brother knew better?”

She grins. “Nobody listens to him, least of all me.”

I’ve heard him say that a time or two and hearing her confirm it makes me laugh.

“Maybe I have something you can wear.” I wink, keeping a bit of the playfulness in our interaction.

“I swear to God, Tristan. If you pull some other woman’s clothes out of your drawers, I’m going to be very upset.”

The chuckle breaks from my chest and out of my mouth. I still don’t expect her to be funny, but she keeps surprising me. “There’s that feisty spirit I like.” I dig through, looking for some older clothes, from when I was smaller. “But I do assure you.” I pull out a pair of sweatpants that have seen better days, but at least have a drawstring on them, and a T-shirt, handing them to her. “These are mine. From when I was younger. They should at least not fall off your body. They’re from before I started going to the gym.” I slightly flex for her, causing her to giggle again.

“These are yours?” she asks, reaching for the clothes. “I’ve never worn a man’s clothes before.” She tilts her head to the side. “Although I have to admit I always dreamed of being that woman who wore her lover’s button-down shirt after they heated up the sheets.”

“Tell me more, Lia.” I’m all ears. It just so happens I’m wearing a button-down to the dinner we’re going to. I can make all of her dreams come true, and she has no idea.

“No.” She giggles. “I can’t reveal all my secrets. It’s just a little fantasy I had. You know that I’m in that sort of relationship where I can wear a man’s clothes. I’m sure lots of women have worn yours.”

She goes quiet, quickly dropping the towel and getting dressed. I do the same, but as she goes to turn away from me, I grab her around the wrist, stopping her from retreating. Sliding my hand down, I let our fingers entwine. “You’re the first, Lia.”

“Really?”

If I’m not mistaken, there are tears in her eyes as she asks me the question. This moment. It feels huge between the two of us, and I’m scared whatever I say won’t be right. I think about lying to her, making up some crazy situation, but in the end, I go with the truth. “Really. You’re the first to do a lot of things with me, Lia. I don’t take that lightly. I never wanted to give another woman parts of me that I knew would only be for my wife.”

We’re staring at each other when there’s a knock on the door. “That’ll be our food. Be right back.”

A few hours later, we’re lying in bed, the TV is on, but neither of us is watching it. I’ve got her wrapped in my arms and she’s got her legs wrapped around mine. We’re both tired, both have our guards down. She’s been halfway drifting off for the past fifteen minutes and I’m not far behind.

“Thank you for tonight,” I whisper into her ear as she snuggles closer to me. My arms tighten around her, not wanting to let her go. She makes a sound, digging her head a little deeper into my shoulder.

Her voice is heavy with sleep. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t talk about my mother to people, I don’t discuss the other women I’ve had in my life, and typically a stressful day is finished with a glass of scotch and an empty room. That room becomes filled with thoughts that make me doubt every decision I’ve ever made. You changed that tonight.”

She sighs, burying her head in my chest. “I didn’t do anything.”

“No,” I speak quietly, as I drift off, tightening my arms around her. “That’s where you’re wrong. You did everything.”

CHAPTER 13

TRISTAN

“I’ve been thinking about what you said.” She grins up at me. “That your mother had always wanted you to be normal. She didn’t want you to grow up spoiled. With her you had the experiences that most considered mundane, but you loved.”

I think back to the conversation we had. She paid more attention than I gave her credit for. “Yeah, I did love those things.” It goes without saying the mundane was gone after she died. Dad did his best to keep up appearances, but it wasn’t easy.

“So I want to give you something you’ve probably never had. I would wager it’s also something your mom would love for you to experience.” She holds out her hand. “Will you trust me?”

Trust has been hard for me to give. Not because I’m unwilling, but because so many people have proven they don’t deserve it. Lia though, she deserves anything I can give her. Even though we aren’t married yet, I already feel like she’s my partner in crime. “I trust you.” I reach my hand out to grasp hers.

She pulls me into the kitchen. “Do you trust me enough to put this on you?”

I watch as she holds up a blindfold. “I guess so.” I roll my eyes in a good-natured way. “Besides if you try to hurt me, Parker’s got to make sure I’m safe.”

He grunts from wherever it is he watches, and she giggles. For some reason I don’t think it would be too hard for Parker to throw me under the bus if she asked him to. She stands on her tiptoes, securing the blindfold around my eyes.

“Walk slow,” she cautions as she pulls on my hand.

I always thought if someone blindfolded me and made me go somewhere on this property, I would know where they were taking me. I’ve downright prided myself in knowing every square inch of the land I own.

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But I don't know. I can't place it as we walk outside. The only reason I know it's outside is because of the change in temperature and the wind comes in off the ocean. Inhaling deeply, I smell the salt. It's one of my favorite scents, always reminding me of home.

We walk for what feels like hours, but I know it's really only a few minutes.

"Okay," she says as we come to a stop. "You can take off your blindfold."

I do, letting my eyes adjust for a few moments. We're in one of the shelters on the beach. There's a fire going, pillows laid out, and a blanket. Popcorn, candy, and drinks sit beside the blanket. "What is this?"

She points to a screen I didn't notice before. "Parker got a screen set up for me. We're gonna watch a movie. Like in a movie theater."

"I've never been to one of those," I admit, slightly embarrassed.

"I know, I called my brother, and he let me know. It's kind of hard to know what you've done and what you haven't, because so much of your life is as private as it is public."

Truer words have never been spoken. As much as I've wanted my entire life to remain private, I'm much too public for it to happen.

"Do you like it?" she asks softly as we settle in. I should have known she'd pick *The Fast and the Furious*. She does like fast cars and bikes. Those are two things I can say

with complete conviction she enjoys.

“I love this.” I look around, not exactly sure I’m able to believe we’re here. There were so many things she could have done for me when I laid down the gauntlet.

“I’m glad.”

Her smile is huge and I can tell she’s pleased with herself. On a whim, I entwine our fingers together.

“I’m glad, too. There’re not many firsts I can share with you, but I’m glad this is one of them.”

She giggles, elbowing me in the side. “I was way too late to take your virginity, Tris.”

I snuggle in closer to her. “But just think, if anyone asks. I can always say you popped my cherry. No one has to know which one I’m talking about.” I motion to the screen with my bottle of beer.

“Oh my god.” She rolls her eyes. “Shhh! We need to watch the movie.”

For long minutes, I give her what she wants. To watch the movie, but there’s something else I want, and eventually I can’t wonder about it any longer. My arm is still around her, our fingers are still entwined. Parker stands outside, and I know he won’t bother us unless he absolutely has to. Licking my lips slightly, I lean in, kissing the side of her neck softly, and slowly.

“Trisssttann...”

“Shhh, watch the movie,” I whisper to her. “Isn’t this what you’re supposed to do at the movies? Or have I heard it all wrong?”

With a sigh, she relaxes against me, melting completely into my body.

“Tristan,” she whispers.

“Yeah?”

She turns my chin so that we’re looking at one another. “I never go all the way on a movie date. Just because you’re going to be a king, you think you’re special?”

Running my hand up her thigh, I cup her heat. “I know I’m special.” I lean in, kissing her softly.

“Hmmm.” She makes a noise deep in her throat.

“Don’t you think?”

She shifts her body over, opening her thighs slightly. “I think we should watch them turn this into a ten-second car.”

“Opening your thighs to me says something totally different.” I smooth my mouth along her neck. “So you keep watching them make a ten-second car. I’ll show you how to have a two-minute orgasm.”

She laughs loudly. “With Parker right outside?”

“With Parker right outside,” I confirm. “So that means you need to be quiet. I want you telling me what’s happening in the movie, I haven’t seen it before.”

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Amelia adjusts herself against the pillow, burrowing deeper into the covers we've spread out.

My fingers slide to the button of her jeans, slipping the metal through, and pulling them down her thighs. Her panties come along with the denim. Carefully I move down to position myself between her thighs. I hook my arms under her thighs.

"Don't forget, Lia. Tell me about the movie."

Her eyes are dark as they look down at me. I take one last look at her before I lean in, my mouth covering her core. The fingers of her hand dig into my scalp, grabbing hold of my hair.

A noise escapes her throat causing me to lift up. "Keep those noises to yourself, babe. Don't forget to tell me what's happening in the movie."

"They're at the Race Wars," she pants as I lick her clit.

"Tell me about them."

"Uhh." She pushes against me. "Jesse, he," she inhales deeply. "He bets his pink slip against someone with a faster." She stops for a moment, seeming to collect herself. "Oh my god, with a faster car."

Bringing my hand up to her core, I tuck my pinkie and ring finger into my palm, using my middle and pointer finger to slide deeply inside her body.

“Feels so good.” She tugs on my hair.

“How long does the race last?” I whisper.

“At the Race Wars?” She pushes up against my lips.

“Yeah.”

“Like thirty seconds.” She digs her heels into the sand.

“Bet I can make you come by the end of this scene.”

She gives me a saucy smile. “You’re welcome to try.”

Challenge. Fucking. Accepted.

With a determination I haven’t had in a long time, I go after her hard. Sucking, licking, sliding my fingers inside her warmth, I flick my tongue against her hard bud. She’s wet, so fucking wet, so close.

Lifting my head up. “Have they started racing yet?”

“They’re at the starting line,” she whines, pressing further up into me.

“Are you close?” I ask her.

“So close,” she pants, wriggling against me.

It takes all my strength to reach up, placing a palm on her belly, holding her down. My other hand abandons sliding in and out of her. It moves to the top of her pussy, pulling her lips apart, letting me get even closer to her clit.

“He’s about to go across the finish line, Tris. You better hurry.”

Closing my mouth around her, I flick my tongue like my life depends on it, and in some ways it does. Her thighs tighten around my head, and I can hear the pleasure about to erupt from her throat.

Hoping to keep her from blowing our cover, I press the fingers I had inside her core into her mouth. She surprises me by sucking strongly against them, running her tongue around the digits.

That is the one thing that gets me.

As she’s coming down, I rise up on my knees, push my jeans down my thighs and take my cock into my hand. My eyes are closed, so I’m surprised to feel warmth around my cock. Prying them open, I see her kneeling in front of me, her mouth around my length.

“Lia, if you don’t want this, you gotta let me go.” Mygroan is guttural, and it takes all of three strokes for me to shoot down her throat.

As I try to get my breath back, the two of us look at one another.

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“So Jesse lost his car.” Her voice is dry as we’re cleaning ourselves up.

I laugh loudly. “Thanks for letting me know.”

“I mean you wanted me to tell you.”

Pulling her in my arms, I wrap them around her waist before laying back against the pillows again. “Now.” I kiss her nose. “We can watch the rest of the movie.”

CHAPTER 14

AMELIA

“Amelia, I’m Charlotte, nice to meet you.”

The woman in front of me holds out her hand. She looks to be early forties, dressed as if she’s a member of the royal family and avoids my eyes as I try to get a good look at her.

“Hi, Charlotte, nice to meet you too. May I ask”—I take a sip of my coffee—“what are you here to teach me, because you’re obviously here to teach me something.”

She smiles patiently before pulling a briefcase from behind her body. I’m not sure if she was hiding it from me, but it wasn’t completely visible. “You’re observant, Amelia. Can I call you Amelia?”

“Please do.” I nod. There’s not a title attached to my name yet, and for now, I like it

that way. I prefer for people to treat me as they would their friend, instead of being intimidated by who I'm going to be.

"Do you have an office?" Her gaze takes in what's left of my breakfast and coffee. Apparently she doesn't want to get into whatever it is we have to discuss at the kitchen counter.

"I believe I do." I push my hair back from my face. "I've not used it yet, so I'm not exactly sure where it is. For the past week or so, Tristan and I have been getting to know one another, there hasn't been any need for an office." I feel the need to explain, feeling stupid, because I didn't even realize I'd need such a place. Especially here.

Parker appears out of nowhere—he's very good at that. "Ma'am, your office is right off the second landing of the stairs. To the left, first door. Tristan's is the third door down that hall."

So if we're both working in our offices, we'll be close to each other for the day. For some reason that warms my chest and makes me halfway giddy. Maybe it's because yesterday, I had no idea what he was doing for the entire day, just like he had no idea what I was doing.

"I'll show you up," I tell Charlotte as I grab my plate, taking it over to the sink.

One of the women who works in the kitchen, I'm still not sure of her name, grabs it from my hands. "Ms. Amelia, how many times have I told you to leave it?"

More than I care to be reminded of, but I'm used to cleaning up after myself, and it's a hard habit to break. "I'm trying." It's the same thing I've told her every morning since I arrived.

“Try harder, Ms. Amelia. This is what I’m here for.”

I sigh, nodding. “If you’ll follow me, we’ll go up to the office.”

As I enter the room I absolutely knew nothing about, I wonder who decorated it. It’s not really in my style, and I make a mental note to check with Tristan to see if I can change it. They won’t be huge changes, but there are some that would make me feel more comfortable. As Charlotte walks in, I close the door to give us some privacy, before going around and having a seat behind the desk.

This feels completely odd and out of character for me, but it appears to be what she expects me to do. “Okay, what can I help you with?”

She reaches into her briefcase, pulling out one of the biggest stacks of paper I’ve ever seen. “These are all charitable entities that would like you to support them, Amelia.”

“What?” I’m astonished as she keeps pulling papers out. It’s like the never-ending bag—like that thing in Harry Potter that doesn’t have a bottom to it.

“Part of your duties to the royal family will be picking charities to support, and you want to make sure you throw your support behind causes you care about. Things you believe in, and to a point, things that will make the palace look good. It’s your duty to do your research, to make this decision to the best of your ability. And this”—she taps the papers—“is where you’re going to begin. You have a week to get through all of these and select possibly fifteen that we can whittle down even further. I’ll be back to speak with you about what you’ve learned.”

She gets up from her seat and I feel as if I’ve been dismissed instead of her. “I look forward to seeing what’s been offered.”

“Oh dear, it’s a little bit of everything. No need to show me out, I know the way.”

As I sink back down into my seat. I wonder what in the world I've gotten myself into. The pile of papers in front of me looks absolutely daunting, but I reach forward, grabbing the first folder and start reading to see what gets my interest.

Two hours later, my mind is blown. First because of how detailed this information is, and second by how some people in our country don't have basic needs. This will definitely be something I take a stand on. I'd had my mind made up previously when Tristan had asked me. Now, I'm wondering if I have enough in me to help all these people. My eyes are starting to cross when I hear a knock on the door.

“Yes?”

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Tristan slips in, closing it, before walking over to sit in the chair Charlotte vacated. I give him a bright smile. One I've come to learn is reserved for him. "What brings you here?"

"I've managed to slip Parker." He gives me his own bad boy grin.

There's one thing I've learned about Tristan. It doesn't matter that he's going to rule this country in a few short months. There are certain things he makes his own rules for. And I'm beginning to learn there are certain things he needs to be the person he is. He can't be put in a box, and I don't think he ever will be able to. There's a fire in his eyes, a mischievous look on his face.

"What exactly does that mean? You've managed to slip Parker?"

He gets up, coming around to where I am, he turns me so that we're looking outside. "It's a gorgeous day out there, Lia. The sun is shining, the sky is a deep blue.

"It's cold out there," I argue, knowing that it's cold enough to snow again if we get enough moisture.

"Be that as it may, it's also gorgeous. Almost as gorgeous as you."

I laugh so hard I let loose with an unladylike snort. "What in the world is it you want so bad that you're laying it on this thick?"

He holds out his hand. "Take a ride with me?"

Immediately I'm back to where I was sitting behind him on the bike, my arms around his waist, the wind whipping past us. "Are we allowed to?"

"Who cares if we're allowed to." He pulls me into him, pushing my hair back with his fingers, palming the side of my face with his hand. "When we get back to the city, we won't be able to do these things. That will be the fact of life there. Here, we still have a little bit of freedom left, and there's no one I want to express that freedom with more than you. So, Amelia, do you want to take a ride?"

His eyes blaze hot, and for a moment, I wonder if he's asking about a ride on the bike, or a ride on him. The way a smile plays at the edges of his lips makes me narrow my gaze. "On your bike?"

He chuckles, the sound deep, flowing through my body, right to all the places he makes me tingle. "On my bike."

Looking down at the desk, I see the papers, and I know I should work, I know it with every part of my being. But him, coming to me in the middle of the day, asking me to spend time with him? How long will that last—especially when we get back to the city? I can't say no. I crave being around him, loving being in his arms, and live for the moments when he lets his guard down and is the real Tristan behind the mask. These are those times when he's the real man, and the real man is what's got me hook, line, and sinker.

"I guess all of this will still be here later. Promise to take me somewhere I've never been before?"

He nods. "Have you been to Agua Park yet?" He mentions a wilderness area.

"No, but I've heard it's beautiful."

“It is. Come on, let’s get dressed and get out of here before Parker catches on.”

With giggles, shushes, and hands held we run to the edge of the stairs, take the landing to our room, and quickly get dressed. Then we do the same as we sneak into the garage.

“Don’t laugh so loud,” he cautions as I wait for him to put his jacket on.

I flip my visor down, hoping it will hold in some of my giggles.

“Oh no, we’ve been spotted.” He laughs loudly as he climbs on the bike, motioning me to get behind him. He starts up the bike, and revs the engine as we make our way out of the garage.

Looking behind us, I see Parker running.

“Hold on tight, Lia.” I hear him through the visor, doing as he says, as we race down the drive and hit the main road.

I realize he was right. I’ve never felt so free in my life.

CHAPTER 15

TRISTAN

“Did you get it cleared for me?”

Parker nods, taking a drink of his coffee. “The track is at your disposal for the entire day. I’m not sure why you think this will impress Amelia,” he eggs me on. “Or even be a good birthday present.”

“She likes riding the bike, and I have a feeling she will love the speed of the cars.”

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“Most women want to be wined and dined,” Parker argues.

“And I’m not saying she doesn’t want that on occasion, but she did something for me no one else has ever been able to do. I want to give her something she’s never been able to do too. I don’t expect you to understand it.”

Parker holds up a hand. “No, I do understand it, I just never expected you to be this invested in her.”

“She’s going to be my wife,” I say it almost as if it’s stupid of him to question me.

“I know, but you have to admit, what’s happening between the two of you wasn’t exactly planned.”

“Doesn’t make it any less real,” I argue.

“Never said it didn’t, my king.”

“Stop.” I give him a look.

A grin is playing against the edges of his mouth. If there’s one thing I know, it’s that Parker and I will always have a great relationship.

“I’m ready to go when you are.” He nods to the watch on his wrist.

“Great, let’s go get Lia.”

AMELIA

“Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you,” I can hear the words softly whispered. In this state I’m unsure if I’m having a great dream, or if someone is singing to me. “Lia, wake up.”

Slowly I open my eyes, turning toward the sound of the voice.

“There you are. Happy birthday!”

Someone was singing to me. “Thank you.” I wrap my arms around his neck. “I wasn’t even sure if you’d know.”

“Everything about you is something I know now, Amelia.”

I blush slightly. He knows every single inch of my body, and now he’s getting to know parts of my personality. It’s scary that I’ve given him this much power over me, but there’s no one else I’d rather give this power to.

“I have a surprise for you, but you have to get up so we can celebrate.”

“A surprise?” I’m always up for surprises. Even as a little kid, they were my favorite. I was all about the cake and the presents. Not just because they were presents and they were given to me, but because I loved opening them. I loved finding out what others thought I would enjoy. The one little act told me just how well other people knew me. At times I’ve been disappointed, and I hope Tris isn’t one who’s going to disappoint me.

“Yeah, why don’t you get up and get dressed. I’ll take you.”

“Where are we going?” I sit up in the bed, pulling the covers tightly around my waist.

“How should I dress?”

“Like you’ll be riding on the back of my bike.”

I can feel the smile spread across my face. “Your bike?”

“My bike.”

Now I’m trying to figure out exactly where we’re going. I’ve been on his bike before, and I have no idea how that would be part of my birthday gift. I want to ask another question, but he puts a finger over my lips.

“No more questions. Go get dressed. This is my surprise for you. Like when you took me to the movies. Let me do this for you.”

An hour later, we’re driving along the highway, but we’re going further north than I’ve ever been. I’m looking for something to tell me where we’re going, but I haven’t seen anything yet.

Tristan reaches over, grabbing my thigh. “Are you excited?”

“I’m curious,” I answer carefully, taking a drink of my coffee. “Gifts prove how well you know the person you’re giving the gift. I’m interested to see how well you’ve come to know me.”

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He whistles. “I have a feeling I know you better than you think I do.”

I hope so, but I don’t voice the words. I don’t want to scare him. When feelings are involved, the weirdest things can set off fear.

He slows down like he’s preparing to turn, and that’s when I see it.

It’s a racetrack in the middle of nowhere. A car sits at the start/finish line.

“Tristan, what is this?”

“I know how much you love speed. I thought it would be awesome if you could have some of your own.”

My heart races. “I’m gonna get to drive?”

“You’re gonna get to drive.”

I scream loudly, so loudly he plugs his finger into his ear. “This is the best thing ever!”

It feels like forever. Pulling into the parking lot, getting out of the Range Rover and walking to the track takes fifty years. A man is waiting for us.

“Tristan.” He holds his hand out.

“How’s it going, Cecile?” He shakes the older man’s hand.

“Not bad at all. We’re excited to be taking some laps around the track.”

“Amelia,” I introduce myself, holding out my hand to him as well.

“You’re the birthday girl.”

“That’s me. What car do I get to drive?” I ask immediately.

He points to a Porsche. I’ve never driven one of those before, and I’m ready to go. “You’ll be getting a few pointers and you’ll be driving with Tristan. He’s very experienced.”

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?” I grab his hand in mine.

“I’m good at everything,” he winks at me.

I roll my eyes. “Let’s go.” I pull him toward the car.

He helps me get strapped in, and then goes over to the passenger side. “It’s a stick, do you know how to drive one?”

“Yes.” I clap my hands. “It’s the one thing my dad and brother made sure of. I can change a tire too. You know, just in case I didn’t get to fulfill my prophecy as a queen.”

“Sassy today, I like it.”

“You love it,” I correct him.

“That I do.”

When the car is started, I rev the engine, loving the sound. The vibrations move through the seat.

“Don’t go too fast,” Tristan cautions.

But I want to go as fast as I can. I punch in the clutch, hit the gas and take off with tires squealing. It’s something I’ve never done before, and the excitement courses through my body. My hands shake as I grip the steering wheel.

“I can’t believe I’m doing this,” I yell at him.

I’m not even sure why I’m yelling. It’s not like this is a stock car and it’s loud as we’re going around the track.

“You should see yourself.”

“I wish I could,” I admit. I’ve never felt so free in my life.

“You can.”

Stealing a glance over to where he’s sitting, I see that he’s gotten his cell phone out and is taking either video or a picture of me.

I keep making laps around the track, until there’s almost no gas left in the tank.

“Do you wanna refuel?” he asks.

“No, I want you to drive.”

“Are you sure? This is supposed to be completely about you.”

I reach over, taking his hand in mine. “This is about us. Just like everything else. There’s no more you or me, Tristan. There’s an us. If I’m having fun, I want you to have fun.”

“Twist my arm,” he teases.

We switch seats and I get comfortable watching him. I love seeing him in his element. He grips the steering wheel with sure hands. In this position I do the same thing he did for me. I reach over, grabbing my cell phone, taking pictures of him. I hope my face was as animated as his is.

When we come to a stop, I reach over, grabbing his hand. “Thank you, Tris, for the perfect birthday present.”

“I know you, huh?”

“You know me.”

And that’s the best thing ever.

CHAPTER 16

AMELIA

The wind beating against my body as we drive up the coastal highway feels better than I ever imagined it would. In my previous life, I never would have thought I’d enjoy this. I tighten my arms around his waist, holding on—not because I’m scared—just because I want to be closer to this man. My man, who makes my heart flutter. However, I’m beginning to realize I like doing most of what Tristan likes doing. It’s almost as if he knows me better than I seem to have known myself, my entire life. He gears the bike down, tilting his head back.

“There’s a lookout point up ahead, we’ll stop for a few minutes, if that’s okay with you.”

“Okay,” I agree, yelling over the sound of the engine.

We’re going the opposite direction of the first time we went for a ride, and I kind of like this route a bit more. As we ride along the ridge line, I can see more of the ocean because of the higher elevation. The farther we get from the house, the water is slightly choppy. It looks like we may be in for a stormy afternoon, which isn’t unusual for this time of year. Getting to the lookout point he pulls us to the side and

parks the bike. There's only one other car there, so I feel safe enough to take the helmet off, as does he. It's cold enough so that I can see my breath, but with the amount of clothing I wear to keep me safe, I'm plenty warm.

"You want to take a look?" Tristan asks as he gets off and then puts his hand out to help me.

"Yeah, I'd love to."

We hang our helmets and he grabs my hand again. "There's a little food hut down the path here, along with a picnic area. It will be cold, but we can take a break before we head back."

"Sounds great to me." I hold his hand tightly as we take the rock steps, getting closer to the ocean. I can hear it louder as we descend. "I've never known these parts of our country before," I admit as we get down to where the packed sand makes it easier for us to walk.

"I have to admit, I like this being my own personal playground." He grins as he puts his arm around my neck. "If the rest of our country knew about how beautiful this little spot on the map is, it wouldn't be a safe place for us to come. There are hidden treasures in plain sight everywhere. It only depends on how closely we want to look."

The bright passion is right there in his eyes, and I wonder if he's talking about this spot of land, or me. I don't want to break the spell, so I search for something less serious to say.

"Then let's keep it just between us," I joke, causing him to laugh.

Walking up to the food hut, we peruse the menu posted on the side of the weathered building. I'm a woman who likes her food, and many of the dishes written on the side

sound amazingly good. At the same time, I'm also aware that I have to wear a dress—two actually—very soon.

“Mr. Tristan.” The young girl running the register smiles brightly at him. If I had to guess, I'd say she's a teenager and totally smitten with the man I'm about to marry. “What are you doing today?”

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“Hey, Cora.” He smiles back at her. “My bride-to-be and I are escaping from our duties today, and drove along the highway. We stopped here for some sustenance.”

“Oh my gosh!” She looks up at me. “It’s Amelia...”

“Hi.” I wave at her, a real smile spreading across my face. I’ve never met anyone who was so enchanted to meet me.

“I loved your engagement dress, and the way the two of you kissed at your photo call?” She puts her hands under her chin. It’s the dreamy way all young girls get when they think about love. “I want that so much, a boy who will kiss me and look at me the way Mr. Tristan looks at you.”

I’m laughing, not sure how to take the exuberance. “He does have a certain way he looks at me sometimes.” I cut my eyes over at him, allowing my gaze to eat up the man standing beside me.

Today he looks dangerous. His dark good looks, coupled with his black jeans and leather jacket. It doesn’t look like he’s shaved so far today either, and his hair is mussed because he’s had his helmet on. Those dark eyes of his move up and down my body—heating me up on this cool day.

“A woman as beautiful as she is?” He shakes his head as he leans into Cora. “I mean how can I not look at her?”

Cora squeals, and I’m pretty sure if this girl knew what it meant, her panties would have just dropped. Mine almost do.

“You’re my new favorite celebrity couple.” She claps, her face red with excitement and enthusiasm.

“Cora, ask them if they want to order.” An older woman gently nudges her from the kitchen area.

Tristan raises his hand in a wave. “Afternoon, Cass.”

“Afternoon to you too, sir. Thank you for stopping in.”

I can tell by the way she says the words, she does appreciate him taking the time to stop into their shop. More than likely word gets around after he leaves and they become popular for a time among the locals.

“Always do when I’m down here.”

He turns his attention back to Cora. “Can I get a fish sandwich?”

“And what about you, beautiful Amelia?” She smiles, showing dimples in her cheeks.

“I’ll have the seafood salad.”

Cora gives us our total and bottles of water. I watch, with amusement as he pulls bills out of his wallet to pay for the meal. He takes out cash, and I have to needle him a little. “No card today?”

“If I use a card, Parker can track it easily. I’m not ready to go back just yet.”

“I’m not either.”

We take a seat and for the first time, I notice Tristan is more pensive than normal. His

gaze washes along the horizon, taking in the ocean. One of the things I've learned about him since we've been living together and engaged is that he seeks out the danger when he's got tumultuous feelings, the same way he seeks out the ocean. He's quieter than normal, and it unnerves me.

"Are you okay?" I reach out, grabbing his hand. "You know you can talk to me about anything."

"I have a lot of hard decisions to make." He licks his lips before taking a drink of his water. I sense he wants to say more, but he's reluctant.

It's cold out today, not as cold as it has been, but I don't feel the cold in the shelter of sitting next to his body. Right now though, I want to shelter him. "Can you talk about them?"

Our food is delivered and we both dig in, but the conversation continues.

"There's chatter in some of the international communities of our allies that there will be an attack soon. Haldonia has one of the world's most elite militaries." He takes a bite of his sandwich, chewing thoughtfully. "If this happens, which all signs are pointing to yes, we'll be asked to activate our forces."

"Are you serious?"

"Unfortunately, we've been notified within the past twenty-four hours. There's a global response trying to stop it, but no one knows if we'll be able to. If this attack happens, I'll have to make the decision."

"You won't have to go, will you?" I know he was a part of our military since it's required in our country for the males—no matter who you are.

“No.” He lets out a small laugh. “Being king prevents that, but if I were able, I would. I’d rejoin my unit and fight right along with them. They didn’t treat me like a king there, I was just one of the guys. It was important to me.”

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“What unit were you in?”

I’m imagining him in a military uniform and I quite like it.

“Haldonia Air Force. I flew fighter jets.” He blushes when I gasp.

“Like Top Gun?”

The laugh he lets forth with is one I’ve wanted to hear for days. “No, not like Top Gun.”

“A girl has to ask.”

He sobers up, taking the last drink of his water and eating the last bite of his sandwich. “I’m telling you these things because I trust you, and if I’m preoccupied in the next few days, I don’t want you to think it’s you. You’re the only thing that will keep me sane while we wait and see what happens.”

He kisses my forehead before clearing his throat.

“It feels wrong, sitting here.” I push my salad away, grabbing his hand in mine again.

“It does, but that’s how it is. We wait.”

“Tristan, Amelia, I think it’s time you come home.”

We both stiffen as we hear Parker’s voice.

“Busted.” Tristan grimaces. “Well, my queen, are you ready to head back to our castle?”

I wrinkle my nose. “Not like it appears we have a choice, but just so you know. Wherever you go, I’ll always follow.”

As we trudge back up to where we left the bike, I know those words are the complete and honest truth.

CHAPTER 17

TRISTAN

The past twenty-four hours have been some of the most tense of my life. I’ve been on multiple conference calls, including a few with my father and the President of the United States, along with the Prime Minister of England and the leaders of Scotland and Ireland. As of this moment, we’ve been able to stop the threat made, and while I want to feel relief in knowing we accomplished something, I know there will be another. In the political and world climate we live in, there will always be a threat. This was the first time I was included in the talks, and it brought forward the truth about the responsibility I’m going to have. This is one of the last times my father will take the lead. After I’m crowned, it will be me making these decisions. If that doesn’t scare a person, I don’t know what does.

“Will you be accompanying Ms. Amelia tonight?” Parker asks as he enters my office. I don’t know how he doesn’t look as tired as I do. He’s been with me every step of the way. Parker is a goddamn machine and even if I aspired to be like him, I think I would fall short.

I’m exhausted, haven’t showered or shaved since we left the beach, and truthfully all I want to do is go to sleep for about fifteen hours. However, being the king means I

have to push all of that aside, even during this six-month period, and act as the responsible adult I am. Tradition says I can make her go on her own, while I continue to monitor the global situation, but the part of me that will be her husband knows I need to go with her. I should never expect her to do something on her own, especially this early in our relationship. I don't want her to deal with the press on her own, or the questions she might get from others as to where I am.

Running a hand over my face, I sigh. "I will. How much time do I have?"

"Twenty-five minutes before you need to leave."

Rubbing the back of my neck, I send a message to my dad, telling him that I'll be attending the charity function. I'm not precisely asking for his permission, but letting him know I won't be readily available if a response from me is needed.

It's a good idea for you and Amelia to attend. If word gets out about what's happened, the world being enthralled with the two of you will help. I'll take care of anything that happens while you're there, and we'll debrief if need be when you get back.

While I appreciate what he's saying, part of me wanted him to say both Amelia and I needed to stay here. That we shouldn't be out in public with the threat that's been made. It's not that I'm scared, I'm concerned. Even if we seem to have stopped what may happen, who's to say they won't try and hurt the future queen?

"I'm going to go take a quick shower. Don't let Amelia leave without me."

"Will do." Parker leaves quickly.

I want nothing more than to decompress after what I've been through, but duty calls, and I have a job to do. Even though I'm tired as hell, I take the stairs two at a time,

entering our bedroom. Amelia isn't here and I don't expect her to be, even though I wish she was. Her quiet strength is needed right now. More for me than for anything else. With this being a huge event, I'm almost positive she'll be down on the first floor, getting ready with Shannon.

There isn't time for me to shave, or do anything other than shower and put on my suit. It's almost robotic as I get in, washing off the best I can. The warm water does nothing to wake me up, and I'm half afraid I'm going to fall asleep at the worst time tonight. I'm clasping my cufflinks when I hear the door to the bedroom open. Glancing up, my mouth falls open at the vision standing in front of me.

"Lia..." The tone of my voice perfectly accentuates the awe I feel looking at her.

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She smiles shyly, smoothing her hands down the puffy skirt of her dress. “Is it too much?”

I hold my finger up, turning it in a circle. “Let me see.”

Doing a little curtsy, she spins around. “What do you think?”

It shows off everything in a sensual way that’s not revealing. Only I know what’s underneath the clothing she wears, and the thought makes my chest puff out.

I’ve never been this guy. The one who gets all caught up in the woman he’s with. There’s never been a pride I had with the woman on my arm, but her? I have so much pride in being with her, I feel like I won’t fit through the damn door. If anyone were to ask me, she’s going to be the best part of me. This woman will make me a better man.

Walking over to her, I put my hand up to her cheek, cupping it. “You look absolutely gorgeous. This color sets off your eyes, I don’t know what they’ve done to your hair, but the way these little pieces”—I reach out with my free hand, twirling the strand around my finger—“hang down and brush your shoulders is sexy as hell.”

She blushes, leaning into my body, letting me take her weight. I hold her up firmly, the way the thought of her has held me up the past day I’ve spent without her. She must be wearing heels, because she comes higher than collarbone level with me. “You look handsome yourself.” She runs her hands along my shoulders before twining her arms around my neck. Casually I put my arms around her waist, holding her in the same familiar way she holds me. “I like the way you look normally, but when you put on a tux, Your Highness? You get this James Bond look about you, all

sexy and mysterious. Especially when you have this sleepy look to you. How tired are you? And this beard? You look hot.”

The side of my mouth tilts up as she rubs her hands against my neck. I could purr as she digs those fingers into my tight muscles. This is how I want to spend the rest of the night. Relaxing with her hands all fucking over me. “Damn tired,” I groan when she hits a particular tense piece of tissue. She rubs, trying to get the knot out. “But not tired enough to waste the way you look tonight, Lia.”

Capturing my lips with hers, she kisses me softly before pulling back. She doesn’t let it get out of hand, which slightly disappoints me, but I let her pull away. Her eyes shine as she looks up at me. “What exactly does that mean?”

Licking my lips, I drown in the taste of her, move my hand around her cheek to her neck, pulling her closer to me. Inhaling, I let her scent wash over me. “It means.” I move my mouth close to her ear, whispering darkly, “I can’t wait to get you home and mess up this perfect hair you have. Can’t wait to see what you have on under this dress, and fucking can’t wait to smear this lipstick.”

Smearing her lipstick is going to become a favorite pastime of mine. Whenever she looks perfect, all I want to do is mess her up.

We’re both quiet as we stare at one another, and I wonder for a brief moment if I’ve gone too far. She’s not used to me, and I’m not exactly used to what she expects from me. Maybe I’ve overstepped. “Is that okay with you?”

Her cheeks are bright, her eyes slightly glassy when she looks back up at me. She takes a deep breath, seeming to try and compose herself. “More than okay, Tris. Let’s leave as soon as we can?”

The honesty in her gaze hits a piece of my heart that hasn’t been touched in a long

time, and I find myself doing something I haven't done since my mom was alive. On impulse, I hold out the pinkie of my right hand. She grins at me, holding hers up and hooking it around mine. Our pinkies entwine, her cool skin touching the warmth of mine.

"Pinkie promise, Lia, and I don't make a pinkie promise I can't deliver."

Her eyes are round, almost as if she can't believe what I've just done. And I get it, it's such a juvenile promise to make, but it's always been one I see as important. Back when I was small, this was the one promise I didn't break to my mother. She taught me that each person has something they will never go against. This promise was ours, and I want to have the same kind of promise with Lia. Maybe I can't voice the feelings to her yet, but I damn well can prove to her how much she means to me by my actions.

Sometimes actions speak louder than words, and I hope like hell she can read between these lines.

"We're ready." Parker enters the room, his eyes going to our entwined pinkies.

As I escort her out of the room, I wonder just how in the hell this woman got under my skin so quickly.

CHAPTER 18

AMELIA

"Are you nervous?" Tristan asks as he sits next to me in the back of our limo.

We've just entered and have about thirty minutes before we reach the venue. "A little, but I'm more worried about you." I brush my hand over his hair, bringing my palm

around his bearded cheek. “You look so tired.” I run my fingertip underneath his eyes, wishing I could erase the dark circles. He looks like he has the weight of the world on his shoulders, and perhaps he does—at least the weight of a country.

“I’m exhausted,” he admits as he yawns loudly. “It’s the way this whole thing goes though. Somebody has to worry about the safety of the country, and that person is me.” His soft voice whispers. “Nothing in the world means more to me than making sure you’re safe.”

“Why don’t you take a nap as we drive over.” I hate to see him so tired, and I hate that he’s decided to come with me after not having slept. The stress and lack of rest is so apparent in his face. He looks like he’s aged a few years in just the past few hours. It looks good on him though, he’s the type of man who will be handsome when he gets older. I hate the circumstances which has brought it forth.

He checks his phone, grimacing slightly. “I wouldn’t be able to sleep long.”

The part of me that wants to take care of him argues vehemently. “A little bit is better than nothing.”

“Come on.” I pat my lap, much like I would do with a small child. In many ways there are certain instances where he does remind me of a child. Of the child who lost his mother too early, and is trying desperately to be the man she would have wanted him to be. “Tris, lie down and get some sleep.”

Tristan looks like he wants to argue, but he gives in as he yawns again. I scoot further over into the corner of the limo as he stretches out, putting his head in my lap. It’s this surrender of security that’s my undoing. The fact he feels safe enough to let his guard down lets me know exactly how deeply involved with one another we are.

“Wake me up when we get there?” He grabs hold of my hand, entwining our fingers

together. My heart melts slightly when he brings the back of my hand up to his lips, kissing it gently before laying it on his stomach.

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“Yeah, just relax for a little while.”

He closes his eyes. I can't help but to rub against the way his forehead is crinkling. His face finally starts to relax as his breath evens out and he slips into sleep.

Funnily enough, I hardly ever get a chance to see Tristan asleep. I'm typically always asleep before him, because I feel so safe. I wonder how safe he feels with me, if I help him to come down from what has to be the anxieties of his position. One day I won't be asking myself these questions, I have complete faith the two of us will be talking about it. We'll have the relationship and marriage my parents have.

My parents are each other's best friends, they do most everything together, and there's not a night they go to bed angry with one another. They always work out their problems.

Any problem at all is worth working out.

This is exactly how I want to be with Tristan. Looking down at him, my heart flutters, and a small smile works its way onto my lips.

In sleep, he looks much younger than his years. His face smooths out, and the tension that always seems to be at his neck and shoulders dissolves. Obviously there's a huge weight on him, knowing that he's the person making the biggest decisions for a nation. Even if he were used to it, it would be extremely nerve-racking.

His hands grip mine in his sleep, and for this moment I'm thankful that he's able to have this time and I'm able to have it with him. Able to give it to him. As much as

he's changing, I'm changing too.

One day there will be people that try to pull us in different directions, one day we might not be able to stand as a united front without someone trying to tear us down. But here, right now, in the back of this limo, we're anchors for each other. The swirling sea around us resembles the one not far from the road we're driving on. But I know one thing is for certain. I'll never take this or him for granted.

As scared as I was to be his wife, I'm even more scared to live my life without him.

"Tris." I lean over, kissing him softly. "Wake up, we're here."

I don't want to disturb him, but it's time for us to put on a show. It's a show that's starting to sit deeply in my heart.

His palm cups the back of my neck, pulling me down for a kiss of his own. Immediately he sits up, stretching. His eyes are alert, the lines of fatigue are gone from his face. I've never seen someone improve so much by just a small catnap.

"That's exactly what I needed."

"You don't even look like you were tired." I brush his hair back from his forehead, fingering some of it that got mussed. Even though I haven't been able to tell him my feelings, I can show him.

"Lots of practice after partying hard the night before." He winks. There's a little bit of danger in the grin he gives along with the wink.

"I didn't know that about you." I laugh.

He puts his arm around me, kissing me on the forehead. "And hopefully you never

will. I like to think I've evolved. I know I don't need that mindless company anymore. You completely make up for the loneliness I was feeling." He taps the tip of my nose.

The partition in the limo lowers and I hear Parker speak. "We're about to get out, be prepared."

Immediately I'm nervous, as nervous as I was on the balcony of the palace. Here there won't be twenty or so feet in height separating me from the looks and cameras of the world. With the spotlight on us, they'll be able to tell if my smile doesn't quite meet my eyes. Maybe a spot was missed when my makeup was put on. Someone will point it out. We'll be under a microscope and I'm unsure if I'm ready.

Out of the frying pan and into the fire, I think the saying is. This is exactly how I feel right now.

Parker gets out, coming to the back of the limo, where Tristan gets out before he reaches in to give me his hand. "Slow if you need to," he cautions as I set one foot down on the pavement, get my balance on the heel of my shoe, and then swing my other leg around. As I stand, brush my skirt down, take Tristan's arm, and glance up, I'm not prepared for the amazing amount of photographers in front of us. I'm blinded as flashes go off, but I keep the smile on my face and hold on tightly to Tristan as he walks us down the red carpet.

He's slow, making sure my dress is out of the way every time I take a step. It warms a spot in my stomach as he takes care of me. Reporters shout out questions, wanting to know personal details.

"Amelia, have you picked out a wedding dress?"

"Tristan, how are the two of you getting along?"

“Amelia, what was the first kiss like?”

“Tristan, have you done anything romantic for your bride-to-be?”

As instructed, we ignore all of the questions, smiling this way and that. Tristan turns his head to mine, we're standing close together, I can see his eyes flutter down to my lips, and that's the only indication I get that he's about to kiss me. The kiss is slow, sensual in its own way, even though all we do is touch lips. He's lazy in his possession. It doesn't mean I feel it any less. This claim is just as potent as any other one he's staked on me. In a way it's even more so because he's doing it in front of the public.

There are whistles breaking out from every part of the gallery where the photographers and reporters have gathered. My cheeks heat, and I know a blush covers the skin.

Tristan clears his throat. “If you don't mind, my fiancée and I have a party to attend.”

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There are laughs and giggles from the same people who were just whistling.

I'm glad he speaks, because I can't. Not now, I have to pull myself together. Even when he doesn't try, he's able to pull me apart and put me back together in a way that leaves me shaky. Not shaky in a bad way either, in the best damn way. If given the chance, I'd be this shaky for the rest of my life.

And when we enter the ballroom, I realize quickly just how much out of my element I feel.

"We're here, we're together, and then we get to go home together," Tristan whispers in my ear.

I give him a smile, leaning in to kiss his cheek. "You're right. Let's get this show on the road."

CHAPTER 19

TRISTAN

I'm doing my level best to pay attention to what these very important people are saying to me. They are members of boards we rely heavily on within the government, they are the people who make donations to many charitable causes we support as the leaders of our nation. But the fact of the matter is, I'm distracted.

Completely and totally distracted.

By one person. The person who has had my attention since she appeared in my life.

My soon-to-be wife on the other side of the room.

Over the course of the last few hours, I've observed her from afar. Unfortunately I can't be at her side; tradition calls for us to work rooms separately so that we can give more people the attention of the crown. Watching her smile at the appropriate times, laugh when the situation called for it, and thoroughly bewitch anyone she's come into contact with makes me proud. The worst part about it? I want her to bewitch me. Tonight, I don't want to share her laughs, smiles, or anything else with anyone. They are all mine, and I'm salty I have to share.

"I heard about the situation going on," Barrett Wimberly, son of one of my father's biggest supporters, whispers as he comes to stand next to me.

He and I have been friends for years, I would consider us very good friends, if asked. "It's been taken care of." I take a sip of my scotch. "Just barely."

"Did you face any opposition, my king?" The side of his mouth twitches with a grin as he lifts his own scotch up to take a drink.

"Fuck off," I whisper. "How long have we known each other? You'll never call me King." My mouth twitches as well. I'm grateful to have people like this in my life. My father doesn't, and it's obvious in the way he's secluded himself in past years. "At least to my face."

He lets the laugh overtake him, as do I. Laughing with friends is the best thing to alleviate a stressful situation, outside of being with Amelia.

"To answer your question, no opposition yet," I sigh. "But I haven't officially taken the crown yet either. I'm prepared for there to be something. In this day and age, it

seems no one lets anyone else peacefully do what they're supposed to. There's always someone in the crowd who wants to ruin it for everyone else."

"It's going to be a big week for you when you do. Marriage, ruling of a nation, the crown. I mean this will be the biggest week of your life."

The way he says it, presses forward how much is going to change. It's more real when others say it.

"No doubt," I agree. "I know I can be honest with you, and I have to say I think I'm more excited about marriage. The crown, the title, the palace—that's all good. But there's something about her." I tilt my glass in her direction.

Barrett glances at me, his eyebrows drawn together. "Are you perhaps falling in love with your soon-to-be wife?"

I take another sip of the scotch, letting it work its way down my throat. The burn is welcome as I contemplate what he's asked. It's not an easy answer. Just like anything else worth having, love is complicated, and I'm unsure of whether I'm ready to say the words to anyone. "Love is a strong word, one I haven't said much of since my mother passed away, but I do find myself caring deeply for her."

He snorts, like he doesn't believe me. And maybe he doesn't, but that's his issue, not mine.

"You've got it bad, Tristan."

I shrug as my eyes track her across the room. There are a few things I'm willing to share with my friend, honestly with anyone who asks. There are certain parts of Amelia's personality I wish everyone were privy to. "She makes my days better and I've never had someone who did that for me."

“Then I would say you’re a very lucky man.” Barrett claps my shoulder as he moves on to the next person he needs to speak to.

Now that I’m alone, I slyly slink into the shadows, effectively avoiding everyone who may want to stop me and have a word. It’s not what I’m supposed to do, but I can’t seem to help myself. I want to have a few moments to see her, see how she reacts to everything going on with us. I want to make sure she’s happy. It’s becoming my main goal in life. To make sure she’s happy and taken care of. With my back against the wall, I observe Amelia. Watching her has become one of my favorite pastimes. When she doesn’t know my eyes are on her, I can see how she’s really handling her new reality. The one who attentively listens to the person speaking, bends slightly down to hear an older person, holds the eye of the one wanting her attention, and politely smiles even when she’s uncomfortable.

Love. I think back to what Barrett suggested, and I wonder if perhaps she’s not starting to get under my skin in a way more than physical. I promised myself after my mom passed away I would never give my heart to someone else, but I never anticipated someone coming into my life like Lia. Stupidly I presumed everyone was like my father.

I think I was wrong.

I think I'm fucked.

AMELIA

Glancing around the room, I wonder where Tristan is. I've been covertly watching as he works the room, just like I do, but five minutes ago, I lost him in the throngs of people. If he's in the shadows, he's doing a very good job at hiding. Working the room, I keep my eyes open and alert as I watch for him. He's the thing that keeps me grounded in this crazy electrical storm of a situation I've found myself in. I'm doing my best to give everyone my undivided attention when I see a nightmare brought to life—a boy I met when I was fifteen and rebelling against being the one chosen for Tristan.

I'm looking for a way out of this situation, desperately trying to find my center. My Tristan, but I can't see him. I don't even see Parker. My heart beats faster, and I do my best to try to get a conversation with someone else going. But it doesn't work. Right now everyone has somewhere else they need to be. Right when I need someone, everyone is gone.

Callum Wright was the man who stole my heart, my first kiss, and smashed through my virginity, even when I wasn't sure I wanted him to. I try to avoid him, but he's heading toward me, and as he catches up, I have no place to go.

My pulse pounds, almost so fast it makes me dizzy. Can't anyone see I don't want to be here? Can't anyone see how uncomfortable he makes me?

I know they don't, because everyone thinks Callum Wright is the nicest of men. More

women than me have to know he isn't, but I know no one will speak up.

"Amelia." He mock bows to me. Just the sound of my name on his lips makes my skin crawl. "How is the future Queen of Haldonia."

"Looking for her king," I quip, glancing around, hoping I see Tristan in the crowd somewhere. I desperately want to see him, need to have his strong presence beside me. His strength will hold me up when nothing else will. Please, I beg silently, please come to me.

He leans into me, and I can smell the alcohol on his breath. When I glance up, his eyes are glassy, meaning he's probably done more than drink some alcohol. It's well known in the circles he runs in that he can get anyone whatever they'd like to get their hands on. "I hear he's a bore."

My chin raises slightly, my jaw tightens. "He's perfect for me."

"Which makes sense, my dear, because you were a bore too." He laughs cruelly.

I hate him.

With every beat of my pulsing heart. I hate him.

Tears prick, and I fight valiantly to keep them at bay. I refuse to let him see how his words have affected me. Instead I remind him of the day where he took what I didn't want to give him, hoping it will make him ashamed of the man he was that day. "You didn't seem to think so that day in the hayloft."

His eyes burn, a smirk crosses his face. It's so obvious he's not ashamed of anything he's ever done. It hurts me, maybe more now than it did then, because I know what it's like to have the beautiful part of sharing your body with someone else. "At least

one of us enjoyed ourselves.”

I fight to keep from flinching. “Must have been you, because I’ve had much better now.”

He doesn’t like what I said. His breathing quickens and he makes a sound in his throat. Maybe I’ve pushed too hard. Maybe I should have just kept quiet. The look on his face now is scary, and I find myself trying to retreat, but there’s really nowhere for me to go in this throng of people. Just as I’m about to fully panic, I feel a strong hand at my elbow.

“Is there a problem here?”

Tristan’s voice is the sweetest thing I’ve ever heard in my life.

“Yes,” I answer. “Yes, there is.”

CHAPTER 20

TRISTAN

I can hear the fear in her voice. It enrages me, the fact someone would make her this scared. The way it trembles at the end of each word she says. Her hand is cold as I take it, her body slightly trembling when I brace behind her for the support she so obviously needs in this moment. One of my arms goes around her waist. I’m not worried about how we should feel because we’re in public, I’m more concerned with the woman who will soon wear the crown beside me. The woman who is very quickly becoming one of the most important people in my life.

Leaning down, I angle my face to her ear, not taking my eyes off the man in front of her. “What’s wrong, Lia?”

The man in front of us has the eyes of the devil. They're hard and angry, like he's been misrepresented in life so he's now trying to live up to all the shit people assume he's done.

I know what that's like. Everyone thought I was a wild teenager. I didn't start out that way, but as soon as I realized that's what others expected of me, I lived up to it in a big way. Luckily I'm growing up and getting older now. I realize what that did to people who care about me. Now I'm wondering why this man is doing this to the woman I will call my wife.

He flinches when I call her Lia, and part of me wonders why. Did he call her this name once before? She didn't object when I gave her the nickname.

Her hand clasps mine around her waist. She grips my fingers tightly, almost as if she's taking strength from me. It's what I want her to do. Take whatever she needs from me. I want to be the person to give her the confidence and strength she needs. "Someone from my past, who doesn't matter now."

"Then we should be going," I say the words with a finality so there is no question. No one would dare question the future king, anyway. I make sure to let him know with the firm set of my lips, there is to be no questioning my authority. "It's almost time to eat."

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As we leave, she flips her hand over in mine so that our palms clasp, I entwine my fingers with hers, navigating the crowd. Her hand is freezing, shaking slightly in the protection of mine. When we get to what will eventually be our table, I push us past it and direct her outside onto a balcony. Parker stands quietly by, watching under his ever-present gaze.

It's cold, slightly snowing. I can see our breath in the stillness of the night, but I have to know what was going on back there. It's a gnawing in my gut that won't let go.

"What are we doing out here?" She wraps her hands around her upper arms, scrubbing up and down. I wonder if she's scrubbing his gaze off her, or if she's cold. Either way I'm a gentleman.

Shrugging off my jacket, I close her up in it, running my hands up and down, hoping to generate some heat. My voice is low as I speak to her. Even though I think we're alone, one can never be too sure. "This is the only place we could be alone. I have questions, and hopefully you have answers."

"I'll never lie to you, Tris, I know how important that is." Her chin quivers in the semi-darkness, and that little sign of vulnerability is almost enough to undo me.

Leaning forward, I rest my head on her shoulder before I kiss her cheek. "It is extremely important to me. Please know I'll respect your wishes if you don't want to talk about this, but I have to ask. What was going on with Callum back there?"

Her eyebrows come together in question. "You know him? The two of you acted like you've never met one another."

“A mutual agreement. Unfortunately I do. Our families know one another. He and I have never been friends.”

He stole something from me as a child and then lied about it. I’ve never been one to forgive easily and the grudge I’m holding against him has been one I’ve been harboring for years. To know he’s done something to Amelia makes me want to rage.

She looks like she doesn’t want to tell me, but I take a chance, whispering in her ear. “We both had lives before we met each other, Lia. Just tell me.”

I know she doesn’t like thinking of my life before her, and I sure as hell don’t want to think of hers. But we’re human, and being a human is sometimes messy. If we’re going to be together, it’s got to be through the messy honesty of our pasts.

“He was my first,” she whispers back at me.

The knife goes through my heart. I know what kind of an asshole this guy is. To know he was her first, how sensitive she is, and how passionate she’s been with me, is enough to make me clench my hand in a fist. I’d love to knock out his two front teeth.

“And it was awful. I never remember saying yes to him.” She closes her eyes. “But I don’t remember saying no either. It’s a blur.”

Fucking Callum Wright. There have been rumors going around about him for years, and to hear her talk about things I’ve heard. Goddamn him. “Why is it a blur?”

I’m torturing myself, wanting to know the answer to these questions. But I need to know, have to know what’s happened to her. Maybe one day it’ll give me the knowledge I need to get him out of our circle, and if it happens, then so-fucking-be-it.

“Callum was my first crush, my first kiss, and everything in between.” She grips my white tux shirt in her fingers. She’s playing with the buttons. I know from experience it’s a nervous gesture, so I let her continue, but the small way she’s talking is breaking my heart. She’s shrinking in on herself, trying to become invisible. I hate what he’s obviously done to her. “He knew I was promised to you, and I was going through a little bit of a rebellious phase.”

“Trust me,” I interrupt her. “He knew what he was doing, there is absolutely no love lost between the two of us.”

“One night my mom was talking about what my life would be like once I was promised to you. How she and I imagined things would be. Funny.” She laughs. “I didn’t exactly figure on us being compatible at all. But I was scared.” She shrugs. “I was a teenager and scared by what was expected of me. He happened to be visiting my brother, and I told him I didn’t want to do what was required, I wish I hadn’t been betrothed.”

“I’m sure he used that to his advantage.” My tone is darker than even I like to hear it.

“We went to the barn, up to the hayloft. He gave me a drink to calm my nerves, and I can remember telling him I felt weird, but he said it was okay, he would take care of me. Then I remember pain, so much pain.” She stops, refusing to meet my gaze.

“Don’t you be ashamed of this, Lia. Don’t think it’s going to change the way I feel about you. He’s an ass and a manipulator, always has been.”

She breathes deeply. “After that night, he didn’t come around much. I don’t know if it’s because he got what he wanted, or because someone found out. Either way, I haven’t seen him in years, so it was surprising to see him here tonight.”

“Tristan.” I hear Parker’s voice. “They are expecting you. Everyone is starting to sit

down for the food.”

“Not now.” I turn from her to face him. It’s not often I use my status to my advantage, but right now? I’m using it to within an inch of its life. She needs me, and I need her. Everyone else can wait. This is what’s most important. “We’re the guests of honor and we’ll go in there when we’re ready.”

“Tris.” She frames my face with her hands, her voice chiding. “Let’s go, there’s no reason to make everyone else late because I’m telling you about all the mistakes I’ve made.”

I want to argue, to tell her with one command anyone will do what I want them to. Immediately I know that’s not what she wants or needs, but fuck I need it. I need to be close to her for one more moment, to be reminded that the experience with Callum didn’t ruin her.

In this moment I want to be normal, want to let her get her feelings out, and be the helpful fiancé, but I can’t because I’m expected to rule a nation. “Wait.” I grab hold of her fingers. “Out of every obligation I’ve supposedly ever had in my life.” I pull her to me. “You’re the best one.”

She smiles brilliantly before I lean down, capturing her lips with a kiss.

“You’re my favorite one too, Tris.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 7:00 am

With a smile on my face and a warmth in my chest, we go face not only our adoring public, but our adversaries who would love to tear us down. But that—I look at our hands clasped together, fingers entwined—will never happen.

CHAPTER 21

AMELIA

When we go back inside, Tristan makes sure I'm escorted to the table before he makes his way to the front of the room. I watch his broad back and shoulders as he slowly walks between the tables, shaking hands and smiling when he needs to. To know he's gone so quickly from wanting to protect me, to putting on this face for the public, amazes me. He's much more than he gives himself credit for.

The anxious part of me looks for Parker, wanting to make sure someone is out there looking after his best interests. When I spot Parker, I allow myself to slump slightly, then remember I'm going to be queen and need to act like it at all times. All I need is for someone to take an unflattering picture of me, then I'll be all over the tabloids. I know for sure I'm not ready to face that sort of ridicule yet.

Once again, my eyes follow him. He stands tall and sure as he walks to the podium. Up on the stage, he's larger than life. Even bigger than he normally appears to me. When he faces the crowd, my heart flutters in my chest. The short beard is dashing on him, as is the small amount of lipstick he forgot to wipe off his lips.

“Thank you all for being here tonight.” His deep voice echoes in the silence of the room. “As most of you know charitable entities make up a great amount of what I

work with throughout the year, and as I'm scheduled to take the place of my father, I will be handing these decisions over to my soon-to-be bride. The both of us rely heavily on those of you filling this room to help fund the grants we are able to give to the less fortunate of our country."

As he says those words, he steps back and a video plays, showing the things he and his team have been able to do with the money raised. My eyes travel along the groups of tables situated among us. For a brief second, my eyes meet Callum's. I avert them quickly, but he still makes me shiver uncomfortably.

"As you can see, your generosity allows us to make Haldonia one of the lowest-ranked countries when it comes to homelessness and starvation. We are also a world leader in recognizing mental health deficiencies in the national healthcare system. It's my honor to announce our graduation rate from the countries secondary schools is ninety-five percent. We are able to send eighty percent of those that graduate on to post-secondary education. There, our students that are ranked among the highest in the world. It's my pleasure to say the people of Haldonia can have the pick of where they want to work. Many stay here and put their earnings back into our economy, but some go to the US, to Scotland, to the UK and show all of the other nations what we can do."

He pauses as everyone applauds.

"Without you, we wouldn't be able to provide this kind of education, and there definitely wouldn't be this kind of funding. The success of these programs does not start or end with me, even though I'm the one who implemented most of them as I studied under my father. No, these programs start and end with you, the people of this great country. Together we can affect change, I believe that wholeheartedly. And as you dig into your purses and wallets tonight, please know that your donation makes a difference, not only to us, but to the rest of the world. Thank you."

I stand, along with everyone else as he shakes hands with other dignitaries before walking back to where I'm seated at our table. "You did very well up there," I whisper as he takes a seat next to me, before leaning over to kiss him on the cheek.

People are watching us, I can sense it, trying to see how we act in public. There are still murmurs going around that Tristan and I don't like each other. Every time there's an arranged marriage for the crown, there's got to be some sort of cheating behind it.

The secret I have—that we both like each other—is the best secret I've had in years.

"I concentrated on you the entire time, I hate getting up in front of people and speaking."

"There's no way anyone could tell that about you."

He takes a sip of the scotch they've placed in front of him. "One of the many things I've learned to do well over the years."

The night goes on, people stopping by our table to congratulate Tristan and I on our upcoming nuptials. Some stop to speak to him about foreign policy, their wives speak to me about dinners I should be attending, but never once does he leave my side. Anytime I reach over to grab his thigh, he's there, squeezing my hand and telling me it's okay. I'm so nervous I don't eat most of the dinner, but when dessert comes it's a chocolate fudge cake with ice cream.

"Would you like some?" Tristan asks.

His voice is deep, dark, and just for me as he leans close enough so that I can hear him over the rumble of the ballroom.

"Yes." I nod. "It's my favorite."

He grins. “I know, I asked they bring it to you especially.”

It’s then that I look around at all the other plates, noticing they have a different dessert. We’re the only ones with the one I prefer. The way my mood surges at this is almost stupid. The way it makes me feel that he decided to do something nice for me, is out of this world. Small things matter the most, and this is one of the nicest things anyone has ever done for me. “You shouldn’t have, but I’m glad you did.”

A chuckle escapes his pouty lips. I watch as he takes his dessert fork, digging into the cake part, scooping it up with a tiny bit of ice cream and chocolate sauce. “Open wide.” He holds it up. I do as he says, and when I take a bite, it’s the richest cake I’ve ever had. I can’t escape the moan that breaks apart from my throat. It’s that damn good.

He leans in, his lips so close to my ear, I can feel them disturbing small strands of hair. “Dammit, Lia, don’t moan like that. I can’t get through the rest of this if I’m hard as a rock.”

“It’s so good.” I close my eyes, savoring the next bite he gives me. “The way the heat and the coolness mix together.” I lick my lips. “Reminds me of other things.”

After seeing Callum tonight and relieving what he put me through, I need this with Tristan. I need to take hold of my own sexuality and express it any way I want to. He allows me to be open, always up for whatever I want to do. The way he looks at me, I think he gets that I need this. He doesn’t try and temper my answers or his response to me. It’s heady, and everything I need.

“This wasn’t supposed to give me a hard-on,” he growls.

A smirk plays against my lips. “Maybe it wasn’t supposed to, but I’m happy it did.”

“You’re evil.” He puts down the fork, picking his scotch back up and taking another drink. No more sipping from my man, now he’s halfway downing the tumbler. I’m proud I’ve been able to affect him this way. “You have no idea what you’re doing to me.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 7:00 am

A quick glance to make sure that everyone is preoccupied with what's going on at their table, and I reach down to palm his hard cock in my hand. "Oh, I think I have some idea."

He chokes slightly on his scotch. Not enough so that anyone really pays attention. He mumbles softly. Jesus Christ. Before he clears his throat, looking at me straight on with flaming eyes. His voice is even deeper than it was earlier when he asks.

"You sure you wanna do that?"

His eyes darken even further, full of life and fire. I love this look on him, love the fact that I'm the one who brings it out.

"I'm completely sure," I whisper. Because I'm taking this in my own hands, so to speak. He doesn't direct me in everything we do, I can be sexual with him and not be ashamed at the way he makes me feel. He lets me be who I am, and who I am with him is completely different than I thought I was.

"You just wait until I get you back in the limo." It's a promise I hope he keeps.

"Promises, promises."

A grin transforms his face. "We'll see what you're saying when that mouth of yours is full of me."

Squeezing my thighs together, I think about what he's saying and I can't eat anything else, all I want is him, and it can't come quick enough for me. "Can we leave yet?"

“As much as I would like to, we have to make one more round of the tables.”

“Then let’s do it fast so we can get out of here?”

He kisses my cheek. “I like the way you think.”

His outstretched hand grabs hold of mine and as he pulls me from table to table, I smirk knowing our secret.

CHAPTER 22

TRISTAN

Getting Amelia back into our limo happens at just the right time. We’ve been teasing each other off and on since she moaned, but this is it. We’re finally alone. I help her step into the back, turning around to wave at the public before I scoot in next to her.

“Straight to the house?” the driver asks. Parker sits next to him, and I know there are enough members of our security team around, we’re safe on the thirty-minute drive.

“Sounds good,” I answer smoothly. “We’d like some privacy, please.”

The privacy window goes up, separating us from the front seat, and prying eyes of the other people in the limo with us.

“Tris,” Amelia gasps slightly. “Really?”

Turning to her, I pull her hand to the crotch of my tuxedo pants. “Does this feel like I’m playing around?”

Her eyes dilate, her mouth opens slightly as her palm curls around my length. “Feels

like you're playing with a full deck." She licks her lips, smirking slightly.

"I've waited too long," I whisper, grabbing her hand in mine, pulling her across the bench seat of the limo, "to have you in my arms. All night, this is exactly what I've wanted."

Her thighs straddle mine, and her breath catches as my cock punches up into her core through our clothing. "Me too," she whispers, closing her eyes slowly, licking her lips again with the same speed.

It's like we're in this slow-mo dream sequence in a movie. She reaches behind her, taking her hair down. The length goes down her back, curling around her body. It's enough to shroud us in privacy as she leans forward. Goddamn the fragrant shampoo she uses encompasses us in a hazy cloud of arousal. From now until the end of my days this scent will turn me on. Now that her hair is down, her fingers slide up under my jacket, shrugging it off my shoulders.

"You look hot like this," she says before swallowing hard. Her pulse throbs at her throat, showing just how excited she is. "The beard on your face, the bluish-black stains under your eyes, your muscles straining against a tuxedo shirt, your cock straining against the pants." She grinds down slightly on me.

Tilting my head back on a groan, I take my hands from her hips, running them up her stomach and cupping her breasts through the material of her dress. They move up, sneaking beneath the fabric, teasing the nipples pulled tightly against her skin. It's then that I lean forward in the seat, taking her lips with mine. The kiss is out of control from the moment our tongues touch.

It's a fast and furious fuck of two people who've been undertremendous amounts of stress and all they want is to feel one another. My hands work their way up her body, tangling in the soft fall of her curls. Her fingers tangle in my shirt, pulling at the

material. I feel it clear the waistband of my pants, and even that small change in touch is enough to make my cock jump, make me want even more of what I know she can give me.

Pulling back, I open my eyes, lifting them slightly so we're looking into one another's gaze. Her eyes are dark, dilated, and full of arousal. "You look hot like this," I whisper, pressing up into her heat. "Your hair down around your shoulders, your lipstick smeared against your lips, your nipples straining against the fabric of your dress."

She makes a noise deep in her throat, coming back in for another meeting of flesh. It's not the flesh I want to meet, but as she grinds against me, I'll take whatever I can get. There's something primal about arousing her. I live for it, love it, and promise to do it as often as possible.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 7:00 am

Her lips go to work on my neck, sucking, kissing, biting at whatever flesh she can get hold of. With trembling hands, I work the fabric of her dress up from the back, holding it around her waist with one hand. With the other hand, I sneak a finger into her pussy from behind, groaning against her shoulder at the moisture coating my skin.

“Lia, you’re so wet.”

She moans against my neck, working around to my throat. Her mouth sucks hard, her tip nips sharply as she lets go of the skin. It’s sexy as hell when she’s in control of the situation. “It’s because you’re so hot.”

Now, I’m a man on a mission. I want to feel her come apart against me, I ache to have to quieten her moans of completion against my flesh. From behind I start a rhythm of moving my middle finger in and out of her body, tapping against her clit on the way in.

“Right there,” she breathes against me. “Whatever you’re doing, don’t stop.”

An army would have to tear me away from her. There’s something about her coming completely apart in my arms. It makes me feel like the baddest bastard on the block.

“Faster?” I whisper as I feel her hips start to thrust quicker.

“Yeah.” She nips at my neck again. Her voice whining as she’s striving toward what she wants.

“Yeah?”

She nods, her fingers tightening against my shoulders. I continue my rhythm until I feel her body start to tighten. Then I pull my finger out, grasping her around the hips. Turning to the side, I lay her down on the leather of the seat, getting up on my knees, and burying my head between her thighs.

“Tris,” she gasps.

Tangling one of her hands with mine, I use her hand to cover her mouth. “Silence, my queen,” I command.

Moving the lace hiding her mound from me, I dive in, using the tip of my tongue to tease her flesh. Her moans are barely hidden against the palm of her hand as I press harder, using one of my fingers to rub against her clit while my tongue bathes her slit. Not able to stand it any longer, I reach down, unbuttoning my pants, fishing my cock out from behind the material of my boxer briefs. As I go down on her, I jack myself. Relishing the feel of relief. I’ve been hard too long without pleasure and damned if this doesn’t feel like a whole lot of pleasure.

“Fuck,” I mumble against her flesh.

I’m leaking, totally wet against the leather of the seat, and it feels good as I bump my hips back and forth, needing some sort of touch against my length. Her thighs tighten around my head and she grabs my hair with her free hand, pulling it deeper and tighter against her. My ears are ringing, not sure of what’s going on around us, all I can do is experience my soon-to-be wife. Her taste, smell, the feel of her skin against mine.

My name is muffled against her palm, and I can tell by the way she’s pumping up against me, she’s close. Her body is pulled tight, she’s straining, going after what she wants. I love this moment when she’s almost there, and not afraid to be the one to orchestrate what she needs.

Pulling back, I look up into her eyes. “Come for me, I want to feel it, want to hear it as much as I can. Come for me.”

Her eyes darken before she tilts her head back, giving me complete control over her. For long minutes I feast, fucking refill my well with her. All the shit bothering me over the past few weeks goes away as I’m licking up and down her clit, as I’m feeling her pull against my hair. It’s a cleansing of all the shit I have to deal with on a day-to-day basis.

Knowing she’s close, I jack my cock harder, faster, and rougher. There’s no finesse, no being gentle. No, I like the roughness I’m handling my flesh with. There’s no time for soft touches and even softer words. I want to come. When she blows, I want to blow too. It’s been too long. There are no words as we strain against one another, each of us going after our pleasure.

I’m the luckiest man in the world, who would have thought an arranged relationship would have this much passion in it? I’ve never had this much passion with anyone, and I’m looking forward to spending the rest of my life with her.

Her thighs tighten even harder against my head, her whole body tightening as I feel her release. She’s moaning against her hand, and later on, I’ll be surprised if the two up front don’t hear it. At the same time, I’m feeling a tightening in my spine, a euphoria in my head. Lifting up on my knees, I pull my boxer briefs in front of my cock just in time for the material to catch my load.

“Tris,” she purrs as she watches this, her hand coming to the front, touching me through the material. Just the touch alone is enough to coax another spurt from my length.

I’m gasping like I just ran a marathon, and so is she.

“We need a bed.” She giggles.

“And a shower.” I chuckle along with her.

“This isn’t over?”

I reach up to her mouth, tracing the one I had inside her around her lips. She opens, sucking me inside, twirling her tongue around. “Nope,” I groan as she nips at the skin. “Not by a long shot.”

CHAPTER 23

AMELIA

Tristan breathes heavily, humming loudly. “We’re almost back to the house, we better prepare to get presentable.”

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Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 7:00 am

Somehow I forgot there were other people with us. Like he normally does, Tristan got my attention focused completely on him. Which I needed. Seeing Callum tonight wasn't part of my plan, and if Tristan had let me, I would have thought about it for the rest of the evening.

It's one of the bad habits I have. Letting one thing ruin my entire day. Possibly days. Thank God Tris didn't let me do it this time. As much as I make him smile, he does the same for me. Maybe even more.

The limo comes to a stop as I'm trying to push my hair back up into its clip. Tristan is doing his best to button my dress, making sure no one besides him gets an eye full.

"Tristan." I giggle, my body heating up, probably covered with a blush the likes of which none of them have ever seen. "I can't believe we did this here."

"Never done it before." He wipes at his lips. "You're a bad influence, Lia."

Somehow I don't believe that.

We're more likely a bad influence on each other.

As I exit, I don't meet Parker's eyes. It's not that I'm totally embarrassed about what happened. I'm also shy about sharing how I like to behave with Tristan. He makes me feel like a lovesick teenager, and it's just not something I'm used to. I'm ninety percent positive both of the men in the front seat knew exactly what we were doing.

"Thank you, Parker." Tristan relieves him as we enter our home. "Your presence isn't

required for the rest of the evening.”

Parker nods, bows slightly and then takes off for his room.

“You basically just told him we were going to go screw,” I groan as I lean my head against Tristan’s chest.

“Screw?” He snorts. “My queen, royalty doesn’t use the word screw.” He laughs. “Besides. Trust me, he knows what we did in the back seat. His job is to be discreet, and I have no doubt he is.”

I squeal when Tristan picks me up, carrying me up the stairs toward our room. “You’re so strong.” I grab hold of his shoulders.

“Go ahead, tell me more things that’ll blow up my ego.”

Giving him a saucy grin, I lean in to his ear, grabbing the lobe between my teeth. I let it go, and then say in my sexiest voice. “I’d love to blow up more than your ego.”

He growls, deep in his throat, it’s the one I love. It travels all over my body, down my arms and up my chest. Outside the door, he allows my feet to touch the ground. With a smirk, he looks down at me, pressing me up against the hardness of the wood.

“What?” The smirk is something I’ve never seen before.

Tilting his head to the side, he moves in slightly. “You’re beautiful, Lia.”

The heat spreads across my cheeks, I can feel it warming them, making the skin go red. “Thank you.”

“No.” He shakes his head, taking a breath. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

His hands slap against my ears, boxing me in. I don’t want to run though; I want to melt into him.

“For being here,” he whispers. “I know you’ve been groomed for this since you were a teenager, but we both know you could have said no. It would have caused issues, but you could have refused.”

“You could have said no too,” I remind him.

The implication hangs between us. We didn’t want to say no, we both wanted to see where this goes between us. Leaning forward, he presses his lips against mine before pushing off the door.

“C’mon.” He grins.

My hand goes into his as we slink into our room.

This is our haven, has been, and I assume it always will be. Here we can be who we really are. There are no expectations other than our own. He pulls me into the bathroom, where the lights are low and romantic. We don’t speak with our voices. Our eyes do the talking as they meet at different intervals.

My gaze follows his as he reaches into the shower, cranking up the main jet, along with the ones running down the sides. Once he tests the temperature, making sure it’s to his liking. A slow smile spreads across his face as he approaches me. My eyes meet his and I see it.

The passion. The desire. The love.

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It's everything I've ever wanted in a partner.

And I had absolutely no idea I'd get it with an arranged marriage.

TRISTAN

She's gorgeous as she bites her lip when I approach. There's something about the way she becomes coy, almost shy when I let her see exactly how much I want her. Slowly I take first her clothes off and then mine. Still, neither one of us speaks.

I can't help it now, though. "I didn't expect you," I whisper, hoping not to disturb the almost dream-like quality of this room.

"Expect me?" she questions, her eyes running up and down my body.

"There were so many things I expected when I knew I hadn't picked a wife. I thought I'd get someone who didn't want to be my friend. Someone who wouldn't enjoy pleasures of the flesh," I smirk, following the edge of her collarbone with the tip of my finger.

I run it down completely until our palms meet, our fingers clasping.

"I enjoy the pleasures of your flesh." She smirks right back at me.

Pulling her into the shower, I run my hands through her hair. The dark locks flow like a river across her shoulders and down her back. I take great pleasure in the way she lets me wash them. The liberties she lets me take as she tilts her head this way and that

so I can get all the shampoo out.

“There are so many women who could have been picked for me, Lia. I have to think you were picked for a reason. No matter the things my father has done wrong, this is the one thing he did right.”

I’m half-scared to say the words to her. It gives her power over me, a power no one has ever had. It’s my greatest fear, handing my heart to someone who can crush it. Having already had it crushed once before has made me skittish. So I’ve held on tight, doing my best not to put myself into a situation where I’d have to answer the question—why won’t you give me yourself, Tristan?

The fact of the matter is, I’m not even sure I’ve ever had control of myself to give it to someone else.

But Lia? She’s given me the confidence and security I didn’t know I needed. I may not have known I needed it, but fuck do I feel it. In the way she is with me. The way her eyes look at me, the smile she gives only me, and the way my whole chest gets warm when she finds me in a crowd.

I’ve never had a relationship with any woman the way I have with her. There’s never been trust, or this depth of emotion she makes me feel. Crushing her body to mine, I kiss her neck, letting my lips do the talking, instead of promising things I might not be able to deliver on in the future. I’ve done that a lot. Promised shit I knew I’d never be able to deliver on.

But she’s made me better, made me want to be better. Not only for her, but for myself too.

“Are you okay? You got real quiet there for a second.” She’s worried, I can see it plain as day in her face.

“Just enjoying my time with you. The last few days have been some of the most stressful in my life, and all I want to do is be with you. Drown myself in you, and feel you all around me.”

“Use me.” She leans up, nipping her teeth at my ear. “I want to be the person to help you handle your stresses. I’m not here just for the good stuff, Tris. I’m here for everything. The good, the bad, or the ugly. That’s what marriage and a relationship are about.”

Leaning down, I frame her face with my hands, kissing her softly. I long to give her all my feelings in this connection of our bodies. Hopefully they can say what my words aren’t. What I can’t bring myself to say just yet. It’s the prayer I pray as I turn her around so that she’s back under the spray.

The heat from the water causes a haze of steam between us, giving a touch of a fantasy to us. Her hands move along my body, grasping me around my waist, pulling me to her. She steps up on her tiptoes, kissing me brazenly, thrusting her tongue into my mouth, owning it.

I groan deep in my throat because it’s not often she takes what’s hers, and there is no doubt I’m hers. She owns me in a way no one else has owned me in a long time.

My hands palm her ass, carrying her from the shower to our bed.

Lying her down, I feast, look at what she’s offering, before I spread her legs and push myself home.

As I enter her, our eyes meet, and I swear I see the rest of my life.

CHAPTER 24

AMELIA

Tristan lies on his stomach with his arm draped over mine. The only sleep he's gotten in the past few days is what he got in the back of the limo, this is desperately needed. It does my heart good to see him sleeping so deeply this morning. The muted light of the morning plays hide and seek with the shadows on his muscles. It gives him a mysterious quality. Even more than he normally has.

Running my finger along his jawline, he makes a face, scrunching his eyebrows together, before they relax again. This time his breath evens out, and he turns slightly more into me.

The only other time I see him this relaxed is immediately after we've been together. After he's buried himself so deeply in my body I don't know where I begin and he ends. Truth be told, having him like that is one of my favorite things about the life we've carved out for each other. Carefully, I roll over onto my side, mussing up his hair. He stirs, but doesn't awaken. I'm as quiet as can be as I whisper.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 7:00 am

“I’ve known exactly what I was supposed to do for most of my life. At an early age, I realized I was going to be yours.” I run my hand down his neck. “Each time you’d come to our house, I’d watch you, wondering what it would be like when I was with you every day.” I smile, feeling protective pride as I look at him. “It’s far exceeded my expectations, Tris.”

He makes a noise in his throat, and I wait to see if I’ve woken him up. When he doesn’t make any more noises and I know he hasn’t come out of sleep yet, I continue lightly stroking his neck, needing to get out everything on my heart.

“I’m gonna be honest though, when I was told you hadn’t found anyone on your own, and I would be expected to marry you, I got scared. Scared that I wouldn’t be enough, scared that you wouldn’t be enough. If I’m honest, I was more afraid of you not being enough. As a kid, I wanted to be a princess.” I laugh lightly, thinking about my dreams. Cinderella was a loved story in my home, and I wondered all the time what it would be like to have someone love me enough to look everywhere with a shoe. Now, I realize how crazy that is, but back then? It was my dream! “Don’t we all? But I had plans about how I wanted my life to go, about what I expected from the person I would spend the rest of my days with.”

“I had plans too.” His deep voice surprises me so much I jump slightly. His arms tighten around me, keeping me right next to him. I don’t mind, after all, it’s become my favorite place to be in the last few weeks. “I planned to never let anyone force me to do something I didn’t want to do. I watched my mom...” He stops for a second, clearing his throat. He’s reliving something, and I want to know what it is, but at the same time, I don’t want to pressure him. What he tells me absolutely has to be on his own time. “Watched this life take everything out of her.”

“Take everything out of her?” I question, because I’ve never heard anyone say this before. From everything I saw she was loved by our country, and had a life most only ever dream about. But I’m also learning, not everything is as it seems.

He sits up against the headboard, pulling the sheet and blankets around his trim waist. I grab the blanket, securing it around my chest, before moving up to sit beside him. There’s an energy vibrating from him, one I’m not sure I’ve ever seen him have before. He scrubs his palms up and down on his face before shoving them through his hair.

“She was done.” He tilts his head back against the headboard. “She loved me and my dad, but she was done with this life. She hated it. She hated not being able to go out where she wanted to. The press made her anxious and she hated always having security with her. It was smothering her.” He shakes his head. “It was like she’d been this flame who burned so bright, and the oxygen feeding it was going away, dwindling to nothing. It was burning out, and there was nothing that was going to breathe air back into it. She was sick of being smothered. She wanted to live free and wild. The night of her accident, her and my dad had the biggest fight I’d ever heard them have.” He stops again and I can see the pain in his eyes. I’m wondering what he’s thinking, which spaces of time he’s reliving. “She left, running out to her SUV. I hopped in because I didn’t want her to be alone. I remember her telling me to leave, but I wouldn’t. She finally accepted I was going to be there with her. Together, we sped away while my father ran down the drive after us. She didn’t want it, though. She’d listened to promises he made, and he’d broken one too many.” He looks over at me.

“Why was she done?” I don’t remember everything about Tristan’s mother. She died when I was younger, and while we mourned as a country, I was too young to realize what exactly was happening.

“My mother,” he whispers almost reverently, “was gorgeous. Everyone worshipped

her, especially me and Dad. She had this way about her, where she could look at you and make you think you were the only person in the room. She made everyone feel not only special, but heard. So many people assumed the monarchy wasn't listening to them, but they truly believed she was. She was amazing, a mother to every single person in this country."

"I remember." I smile fondly. "Her being the queen of the people."

"She was," he agrees. "Everything she did was because she wanted to be a good role model, the best mother, and the type of leader others would want to follow."

"What happened the night she died?"

This is something I've never asked anyone. It was in the tabloids when I was younger, but I could never bring myself to pick one up and satisfy my curiosity. It seemed wrong in every single way. There were videos, but I couldn't watch them. Especially when I was clued into the fact I would be marrying Tristan, it felt wrong. All of it felt wrong.

He cracks his knuckles, something I've never heard him do before, and I wonder if that's a nervous gesture I have yet to be privy to.

"Like I said, they argued, and I'm still not sure about what. I think..." He swallows roughly. His eyes cloud with hurt as he remembers a time I think he would much rather forget, but there are some things in life we're never able to forget. The things that follow us into the depths of our subconscious. They leave a mark that we're never able to erase, and I have a feeling this is one of the things Tristan will never be able to forget. "I think it was about me. About this." He gestures between the two of us. "There are certain snippets of conversation I can remember, and it fits, that it would be about what's happening between us right now. Even though she and Dad loved each other, she resented having an arranged marriage and she wanted better for

me. She wanted me to meet the woman of my dreams, fall in love, marry, and give her a castle full of kids. She used to tell me that was her biggest wish for me.”

“Would she have hated me because I wasn’t your choice?” I ask quietly. It will kill me, but I want the truth.

“No.” He shakes his head, a smile breaking across his face. “She would have loved you as much as I do.” He reaches over, pushing the hair out of my face.

Immediately I smile. The little trip in my chest when he says he loves me will forever be my undoing. It’s still weird to hear him say that he loves me. I never expected it, so hearing it is always a little bit like me pinching myself to make sure I’m still awake and not in a dream.

“You think so?”

“Oh yeah.” He pulls his full bottom lip between his teeth. The dark beard on his face makes the white color of his teeth, even lighter. “You remind me a lot of her. She wasn’t exactly sure about being a queen, knew the things she would have to do would be hard, and wanted more than anything to make a difference. I see you.” He grabs hold of my hand, pulling it up to his lips. “I see you and I worry that you’ll end up being like her, which is why I hold a piece of myself away from you. If I don’t share that piece, then I won’t get hurt.”

I disagree. “If you hide that piece of yourself, then you’re not allowing me to love the entire you, Tris. I want it all, every single bit of you. I’m willing to give you every bit of me.” I straddle his waist, forcing his eyes to meet mine. “I want every bit of you.”

CHAPTER 25

AMELIA

Looking around the room, I let the smile I've been holding in, out. It's been hard to do this without Shannon knowing, considering the two of us are together for hours most days.

"It looks great in here," my mother says, coming up behind me.

"Hey." I reach in, giving her a hug. "I didn't know you, Dad, and Thomas had made it." I've not seen them since before Tristan's birthday.

Seeing them now, while good, is almost odd. At one time my home was with them, I couldn't imagine living anywhere else. Over the course of the last few months, that's changed. Home isn't the house or the bedroom I grew up in. It isn't the kitchen I came down to every morning to share bacon and eggs with my dad. Home has become where Tristan is. Over the course of this time together, he's become my home.

It hits me like a ton of bricks, and I'm shocked. Shocked that I haven't realized it before. I should have, but as I hug my mom, I realize they now don't know me as well as Tristan does.

She hugs me back tightly. "Just a few minutes ago. Parker let us in."

"Is he watching everyone who comes in, like they could rob us of the silver?" I joke, giggling with her.

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“He does have that look about him.”

Anne Bowling is the mother everyone wishes they had, but the one I got. She’s taught me to always stand up for myself and at the same time, always be a lady. “That he does,” I agree, going down the line, hugging my family. “I’m so glad all of you could be here today. I know you’ve only met Shannon once, but she’s like family to me.”

“Then she’s like family to us.” Dad reaches in, hugging me.

“Thank you.”

Tristan comes in, he and Thomas immediately start talking to one another. I’m unsure how long it’s been since they were able to have a private conversation, but as they put their heads together, they’re making up for lost time.

Parker comes into the room. Looking over at him, I give him a nod. He whistles loudly, motioning for me to take the floor.

“Thank you all for being here tonight.” I look around at the group of people who have gathered. Shannon has been in the same circle as Tristan for a long time, so he knew exactly who to invite, but the rest of this? It’s totally my doing. “Shannon is a very important person to me, and I appreciate all of you celebrating her birthday. She’s driving up as I’m speaking, so if we could all get prepared. She won’t know what’s hit her.”

There’s a loudness in the room, mixed with a tinge of excitement, as everyone tries to hide. Tristan takes my hand, pulling us behind one of the curtains. I can’t help but

giggle as I try to stay quiet.

“Stop.” He smiles at me. “You’ll give us away.”

“No I won’t,” I protest, but as we hear the door open, we freeze.

“Amelia?” I can hear Shannon questioning where I am. After all, I’m the one who got her here.

“Be right there,” I call out.

Parker turns the lights up and everyone jumps out of their spots to yell surprise!

We come out from behind the curtain, and I take in the look of bewilderment on her face, until she realizes what this is.

“Oh my god.” She laughs, looking around the room. She’s waving at people she knows and if I’m not mistaken, there’s a little bit of moisture in her eyes. “I can’t believe someone did this for me.”

Parker speaks it. “It was Amelia. She got all of this together.”

“How?” She looks at me. “With the wedding and everything, how did you have time to do this?”

I walk over, grabbing her outstretched hands. “Are you kidding me? You take care of almost everything I need to do every day. This was my pleasure, Shannon.”

She wipes at her nose, laughing. “Let’s eat cake!”

“You did good,” Tristan whispers in my ear as we watch Shannon open her gifts. “I’m

not sure anyone has ever done anything like this for her before.”

“She’s an important piece of my life, I want her to feel as if we’re her family.”

“Speech! Speech!”

Those are the chants as she stands in the middle of the room. She’s beaming as she looks around at all of us. Her blonde hair is shining, and she’s got a glow I’ve never seen before. Parker stands not too far away from her. I’ve noticed him watching her all night, and she watching him. I’d love to question her about it, but now isn’t the time.

“Okay, okay.” She laughs as she looks around at us. “I’ve worked for the Haldonian Royal Family for the last four years. I started at the bottom.” She grins. “The first job I had was polishing the silverware in the castle.”

This surprises me, but I listen intently as she continues.

“Once I got really good at that job, I was promoted, upward and upward until finally I was given the task to start picking out Tristan’s clothing. I bet you didn’t know that.” She winks over at him.

“I didn’t, but it explains why I’ve become fashionable,” he jokingly brushes off his shoulder.

The group laughs as they watch the two of them.

“I thought that was the top for me.” She shrugs. “But then an excited utterance started going around the castle. Tristan was to marry, and the lovely woman who would marry him would need someone to dress her.” She looks over at me. “Very early on, I saw a picture of Amelia, and I was awestruck by her beauty. It’s old Hollywood

beauty, a timeless treasure that so many in this day and age would contour to death. They would tell her to get extensions so her hair would be fuller, they may even encourage her to lose weight. Immediately I was worried about her, I didn't even know her, but I felt a kinship. I knew I wanted to help her learn to navigate these sometimes curvy roads. Even today I can't explain it. I just knew." She stops and holds her palms up as if to say, I don't know. "I just knew she'd be my friend and I'd be the one to help her."

"I'm glad you're the one to help me." I hold my glass up, wanting to toast to her.

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“Hear, hear.” Everyone holds their glasses up along with mine.

I don’t miss the way Parker runs a hand along her back. I make a mental note to talk about it to her later, but I also tell myself not to be nosey.

“I see one of my father’s business associates over there.” Tristan points out an older man in the crowd. “I need to go see how he’s doing. You want to come with me?”

“No, I think I’m going to go sit with my parents for a few minutes.”

I watch, my eyes on him as he walks across the room. No matter what room he’s in, he commands attention.

“Marriage is going to suit you,” I look over at my mother.

“I think so, too.”

“You’ve been ready for this since you were a kid.”

What she’s said is true. When I was a little girl, I played with dolls and I was always the mother, always the one taking care of everyone else. I can distinctly remember when I was ten, walking around, wearing my mom’s high heels with a fake wedding ring on my finger. Being a wife and a mother has always been the endgame for me.

“I’m thankful I get to do this with Tristan. At first I was scared, but there’s no one else I’d rather be in this situation with.”

Mom hugs me, and over her shoulder, I see something that makes my blood run cold. Tristan is leaning down, kissing another woman on the cheek.

But it's not just any other woman.

It's the one, the one the tabloids thought he would marry. The only one I've ever seen him be serious with besides me.

As they pull back, I see his arm around her waist, and her hand on his hip.

I've never felt jealousy like I feel in this instant. I don't even remember what I say to my family, but I get up quickly, only knowing I need fresh air.

I'm not sure where I'm planning on going, all I know is I need to get away. Running around to the back of the house, I battle with the doorknob, trying to open it. Tears are pooling in my eyes, making it hard for me to see. My fingers fumble again, but this time I manage to get the door open, barreling into the cold night air. The wind whips around the balcony, but there's no snow tonight.

Below me, the ocean is calmer than normal. Ironical since it's usually raging in turmoil, much like I am right now.

Inhaling deeply, I close my eyes, but the only thing I can see are her lips on his cheek and his arm around her waist.

"Amelia!"

The voice of the one person I don't want to hear right now is the voice of the man who's going to be my husband.

CHAPTER 26

AMELIA

I don't wanna talk to him. There's not even one part of me that wants to speak with him. I move further into the darkness, hoping to get away from him.

"Amelia! Stop running away from me! What's happening?"

I hold my dress up, running as fast as I dare, but I'm screwed as I come to a dead end. There's no other place for me to go.

Right now I feel more trapped than I ever have. Which is saying something, since I was promised to him at a young age. Even then I didn't feel trapped, but right now? I do.

"I don't wanna talk to you." I hold my hand out, hoping to stop him.

"It doesn't matter, I wanna talk to you. What the hell happened?"

"How could you?" I wrap my arms around myself now. "How could you with her?"

"With who?"

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He's acting like he has no idea what he did, but he has to know. "How could you let her touch you? You were in love with Anastasia. She was the one woman you would have married besides me."

I can see the recognition in his eyes. "Lia, she's nothing to me." He reaches out, prying my fingers off my arms and holding them. "Yes, she and I had a relationship once, but that doesn't mean anything now. Nothing has mattered since you came into my life."

"But she does matter to me," I argue. "I saw it, an article of the two of you, about how you were going to marry her. At the time, I knew I was your betrothed, I felt second best."

"I'm sorry." He lets go of my hand and runs his hands through his hair. "What did you expect me to do? I had no idea what was going through your head. I had no idea what was going through mine."

"And maybe you didn't." I do my best to keep my lip from trembling. "But I went and threw myself at Callum, because I didn't want to feel like second best," I whisper.

"Lia," he sighs, reaching out, grabbing me by the neck. "I can't tell you how sorry I am about this."

"You're right though." I wipe at my eyes. "Back then, neither one of us knew what would be happening now. If we did, I'm sure we both would have decided to do things differently."

I do my best to contain my emotions, sniffing. “I’m sorry I ran from you.”

“I’m sorry I hurt you.” He reaches out, and I fall into his arms.

With the hope of a young girl, I choose to trust him, and I hope this is the last time we have to speak of this.

“Bad news,” Shannon tells me the next morning, throwing a newspaper on my desk. “The press picked up the argument you and Tristan had last night.”

There, in full color, is a picture of me running from the party, wiping tears from under my eyes. Along with that is a series of pictures featuring me and Tristan. You can clearly see we’re having some sort of argument, but then we can be seen embracing one another.

“How did they even get these pictures?”

“Parker is trying to figure it out.” She shakes her head. “He’s furious.”

I glance at the clock. “How do you know he’s furious? It’s early in the morning to know Parker’s furious.”

Her face goes a bright red, and I have all the answer I need. “Well I hope you had a great birthday.”

“It was.” She giggles. “A wonderful birthday. I feel bad being so happy when you and Tristan have these articles floating around about you.”

After last night, I feel more secure than I ever have. “This will happen,” I throw it over to the side. “People will make their own assumptions, and we all know what assumptions are.”

If anyone does, I do, and I promise myself I'll never make one again.

CHAPTER 27

TRISTAN

WEEKS LATER

The calendar is staring me right in the face. The time Lia and I have had here is close to coming to an end. There's a big red circle on the pristine white paper. It's a date, the day we've picked to marry one another.

We're finally in the same month of the wedding.

It's weird, I always assumed seeing the date would cause me to be anxious, instead I'm excited, more excited than I ever thought I would be. Running my hand through my hair, I sigh as I realize how close we are to being in charge of this country.

"What are you sighing for?" Parker asks from where he stands at the entrance to my office. "You're three weeks from marrying your bride."

"That's part of the problem." I sigh again, realizing how much responsibility we're going to have. How much time isn't going to ours anymore. We won't be in our small, secluded, private piece of paradise. We'll be in a great big ocean where people don't care about how we feel. "We're about to leave this place where everything's perfect. There's not as much pressure here as there will be at the palace with Dad. Here we don't have paparazzi chasing us, trying to get pictures. Once we get back, they'll be clamoring for a piece of us. I don't know how Amelia will react."

"I think it's less about how Amelia will react and more about how you will."

Sometimes I hate Parker because he's so intuitive.

“Perhaps.”

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He opens the door to my office, sticking his head out to say a few words, then he closes the door, locking it. “We need to have a real talk without people coming in and interrupting us.”

“Bestow your wisdom upon me.”

It’s a smart-ass answer, but Parker takes it. He knows me well, and he realizes I have to talk this out. If I don’t, it’ll drive me insane.

“This isn’t funny, Tristan.” He walks over, having a seat in front of my desk. “Do you trust me to protect you?”

“It’s a double-edged sword, Parker. I trust you with my life. You’ve always kept me safe, and I’ve never been scared with you, but this...” I trail off. “This is different.”

“Why?”

I’m struggling to say what I need to, but it has to happen.

“Because I love her. I don’t want my life shattered if she’s injured. You and I both know she’ll be targeted. The women always are. The way to get to a man is to threaten the woman who makes his world go around. She’s become that person for me.”

“You have to have faith in me, my friend, and I am talking to you as a friend. I won’t allow anyone to hurt either of you. Easily I would take a bullet.”

I've become close with him, and hearing those words causes my gut to clench.

"Don't you think I know that?"

"Then where is this anxiety coming from?"

The root of everything, where it always comes from with me. "I don't want to end up like my father." The words come out in a whisper. Back when I was a child, I'd looked up to him, but the man he's become? I hate it. My biggest fear is I'll lose Amelia and become the type of man he is now. The one who can't allow himself to feel, the one who pretends like he's living the life he wants.

When the reality is he's so unhappy, I wouldn't be surprised if he exiled himself once I take over the throne.

"You won't, because you aren't him. You're Tristan, someone completely different from him. Everything about your lives is different except for being king. Look at the family he grew up with, versus the one you grew up with. Your mother, his mother. I promise you." He leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "You're not your father."

He says it like it's just so. It can't be this easy. If it were this easy no one would be like their family. We'd all skip over whatever horrible gene is in our line and become the best people ever. Since life isn't like that, I have more questions to ask.

"Aren't we the product of our parents?" I'm still not convinced.

"We're products of our environment, and the one you were raised in was a good one. You can pass it on to your own children."

A smirk pushes the side of my mouth up thinking of Amelia big and round with a

child. “You believe I can?”

“I know you can. When you don’t have confidence in yourself, that’s what we’re here for. You have an extensive network of people who love you, Tris. Not for the king you’re going to be, but for the man you are. Don’t forget that in the craziness of what will be the next few months. You have a support system, all you need to do is call on them.”

“Thank you, Parker. Sometimes I feel like I’m in an ocean on an island all by myself. I realize it’s me who feels this way, not because anyone causes it.”

He nods. “This is overwhelming. Do you think I wasn’t nervous when I took over your patrol five years ago? I second-guessed myself all the time, but eventually I came to understand I know my job. I know my place in your life.”

I flinch when he says those last words. “I hope I’ve never made you feel like you’re the help. That’s most definitely not the place in my life you have.”

“No.” He chuckles. “That came out all wrong. My place is to make sure you’re safe, make sure you’re cared for, mentally and physically. Along the way you’ve become one of the best friends I’ve ever had, and I thank you for that.”

“Do you think I’ve changed since Amelia showed up?”

This is bothering me lately, part of me wonders if I’m the best for her. If possibly she could be engaged to another man who cherishes her more than I can.

“Oh my god, yes. You’re not as selfish. You’ve matured, and you think about her before you think about yourself. There aren’t days when I worry if you’re going to do something stupid for attention from your father.”

I chuckle. “I did do that, didn’t I?”

“All the time, but now you don’t need that attention. You have it with her. She makes you the center of your world, and I believe that’s what you’ve needed more than anything. To know someone loves you unconditionally.”

A deep breath blows out of my lungs. “Because my father’s always made love conditional. He would only show his love if I did what I was supposed to do, be the son he thought I should be.”

“You’re a natural rebel.”

Until he’s said the words aloud, I never really thought about it that way. I am a natural rebel. The one who automatically goes against the grain, and dares someone to tell me no. What I’ve longed for my whole life is someone to love me for me. My mom did, but she never did the way Amelia does. I finally have my partner in crime, the person who will stand next to me instead of in front or behind me.

“You’re right.”

“Of course I’m right.” He adjusts his cuff links. “You’ll be fine when we go back. I promise.”

He gets up, walking over to open the door again. But I can’t help but think maybe things won’t be as perfect as I want them to be.

“Tris.”

Amelia’s voice causes me to glance up from the document I’m reading on my laptop. A smirk tilts the right side of my face. “Lia,” I say the word in a deep tone that causes her to roll her eyes.

“They need you downstairs to try on the suit you’re wearing. You know, for the wedding.”

“What wedding?” I quirk a brow.

One of the things I love about her is how she plays along. “Some little party in a few weeks. Not a big deal at all.” She puts her hand on her hip. “I heard the bride’s not even that pretty.”

“No?” I get up from my desk. “I heard she’s gorgeous, and the groom is a lucky bastard.”

Making long strides across the room, it doesn’t take me long to get to her. When I do, I scoop her up in my arms, grabbing her under the thighs. Instinctively her legs go around my waist. Hitching her up a little higher so that she looks down at me, I look up at her.

“I heard the bride’s pretty lucky.” She wraps her arms around my neck.

My eyes flutter to her lips. “We’re both pretty lucky.”

I chase her lips with mine, finally catching them, and once I do, I take control of a kiss that’s better suited for the bedroom than my office. Either way, I give her what both of us want.

“I love you,” she mumbles in between smacks of our lips.

“I love you, too.”

Turning her so that I’m holding her body against the wall, I stop, heaving a small sigh. We’re both breathing hard as we put our foreheads together.

“Not too much longer,” I tell her.

“Until what?”

“Until you’re wearing my ring and my crown.”

She smiles, one that spreads across her face.

“I can’t wait, Tris.”

The truth is? Me neither.

CHAPTER 28

AMELIA

Every little girl’s dream is what they’ll be wearing on their wedding day. At least for me, I’ve thought about it since I was at least four. From the time I watched the Hollywood starlets get married, other royal couples get married, I’ve thought about what my dress would look like.

When it came time for me to pick my dress, I wasn’t sure if I could trust myself. There was a part of me that wanted to look like a princess, but there was another part of me that wanted to look like a mature woman. One the country would be proud to call their queen.

I communicated all of those thoughts with the designer, giving her carte blanche to do what she thought was right, after speaking with me. It was a lot of trust to give someone I’d only met a handful of times, but this is it.

My heart is pounding as I wait to turn and look in the mirror. So far they’ve kept me away from one. I’m trying to decide if that’s good or bad.

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“Okay, Amelia.” Shannon puts her hands on my shoulders. “You can take a look.”

As I turn to face the mirror, I’m not expecting how amazing it actually looks. An off-the-shoulder white number with crystal and lace details, along with the puffiest skirt I’ve ever seen. The back cinches in my waist until it’s small enough to make me look like a doll.

“What do you think?” Shannon asks as she bends down, fluffing out the ends of the skirt.

“I’m speechless,” I admit. The woman in the mirror standing back at me can’t be me. She just can’t. The reflection staring back at me shows a woman with her shoulders squared, her chin held high, and she’s beautiful. I’ve never felt beautiful before, not like this. I feel beautiful from the inside out. Is this what Tristan is doing to me? For me? There’s a glow I’m not sure I’ve ever had before.

“You’re like a fairy princess, Amelia.” She giggles as she walks around me. Her eyes are wide, her hands are held under her chin, and the smile on her face is bright enough to light up the world at night. “Like when I was little and I thought about Cinderella, this is what she looked like.”

Our eyes meet, and both of us have tears in them. We’re sharing a moment, one I never truly thought I would ever have. I’m so happy she’s here, she’s been with me through a lot of firsts in the past few months. There’s no one else who deserves to see this through other than her. “You’re right. I can’t believe this is me.”

“It is, Amelia, it is. This is your real life.”

Immediately I wonder what Tristan looks like. I bet he's handsome, I wonder what kind of tux he's wearing, or if he's wearing his military jacket. Part of me hopes it's his tux, because I remember what he looked like that night in the limo.

That night was a turning point for us, now that I look back at it. It was where we stopped tiptoeing around each other, and started being ourselves.

Pressing my hands down the skirt, I take a deep breath, trying to get my nerves to calm. "Three weeks."

"Three weeks," Shannon echoes, an excited grin on her face. "Are you ready?"

Back when I first met him a few months ago, I wasn't ready. Truth be told I was scared, scared I wouldn't meet his expectations and halfway scared he wouldn't meet mine. But this time here, away from the city, was the best thing we could have ever done for one another.

"Yeah, I'm ready. I'm worried," I admit, even as I second-guess the utterance. "Worried that things will change once we get back into the city, back to the palace. There will be a different set of rules and expectations. What if we don't mesh as well there? What if this is one of those instances where we only get along well in a controlled environment? It's been keeping me up at night the last few days."

"Trust me." Shannon winks. "I've heard how well the two of you mesh."

My face burns bright. It must be the color of a tomato, but I don't refute her claim. Tristan and I enjoy each other very much.

"You know what I mean. There will be a whole new set of rules there, ones I don't know as well as I do here." The logical part of my brain tells me I didn't know the rules here either, but I got along fine after I learned them. The palace, it just seems so

much bigger.

“Then you’ll learn them, Amelia. You’re a great judge of character, and you’re going to be an asset to the monarchy. Don’t second-guess yourself. I know it’s nerve-racking, but you’ll be fine. There’s never been a queen like you, and I, for one, can’t wait.”

Fine. I’ve never hated a word so much in my life. I don’t want to be just fine. I want to thrive. To make a family I can be proud of, to make a difference in how the rest of the world views our country. Instead, I give her a weak smile, slightly frustrated she isn’t seeing this like I am. “I know I will.”

“Let’s get this off of you so we can make the last few adjustments before we head back. Do you know how you’re going to wear your hair?”

“I’ve thought about it a lot. I’m thinking half up and half down.” Tristan likes my hair up, but custom says I wear some of it down.

“Have you picked which tiara you’re going to wear?”

“No.” I hold up my arms so that I can be taken out of the dress. “I don’t want to pick it without seeing them. Something tells me I’ll have a feeling when I see the right one.”

Shannon hums in agreement as she zips my dress up in a protective case. “That’s a good idea. I don’t know how you’re okay with wearing something that expensive though. I would more than likely screw it up by dropping it.”

“I’m terrified,” I admit. “This will be the one time in my life when I have butter fingers and I’m going to ruin one of the priceless treasures of Haldonia. The tabloids will give me a dreadful name. One that rhymes, and I’ll never be able to look at

myself in the mirror again.”

We look at each other before cracking up. It’s exactly what I need to make the moment less serious.

“Do you want me to come with you?” she asks, helping me step out of the skirt.

“Would you?”

“I mean I’ll do whatever you ask me to, Your Highness.”

“Stop.” I wave her off. “You know you’re my friend.”

“I know, but there are still customs I must abide by. Meaning, I can’t go where you don’t ask me to.”

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I grab her hand in mine. “Please come with me. I have this horrible feeling once we get to the palace things are going to change, Shannon, and I’m not sure if they’re going to change for the better.”

“Did you get your tux situated?” I ask Tristan later on as we sit down for our evening meal.

“I did.” He grins, the slight beard covering his face giving him an illusion of it being slightly sinister. “Did you get your dress situated?”

I grin back at him. “I did.”

Deciding to flirt with him a little, I lean in over my plate so that we’re in whispering distance of one another.

“The top is so tight I don’t have to wear underthings.”

He groans deep in his throat. “You tell me these things at the most inopportune of times.”

I bite my lip, giving him a wink. “I know.”

“I’m convinced you want to make me walk around in a state of uncomfortableness twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.”

“Not me.” I put a hand to my chest.

“Yes, you.”

Our exchange is halted when Parker comes into the room. “My apologies, but I just wanted to let you know you’ll see many people around the area in the coming days. We’re preparing to move you back to the palace. Which means we’re taking extra precautions. You were to move at the beginning of next week, but I’d like you both to be ready to go tomorrow.”

My world slightly comes crashing down. I wasn’t prepared to go back this soon. It’s too soon, honestly. I enjoy my time here, and I’m not ready for it to change. I know without a doubt it will as soon as we go back.

“Is there a problem?” Tristan asks, looking at his friend. These two don’t lie to each other, but I can tell Parker isn’t being completely truthful when he says. “Nothing we haven’t faced before.”

Which makes me wonder exactly what we’re facing. When Parker leaves, I look at Tristan.

“I don’t like being kept in the dark.”

He throws his napkin on the table. “Neither do I, Lia, but we have to trust Parker knows what he’s doing. I trust him with my life, and even more so I trust him with yours.”

It’s unspoken I should leave well enough alone. It’s hard, but I realize this is the first of many times I’ll be expected to sit back and believe other people know what’s best for me. And honestly, that’s not something I can do.

CHAPTER 29

TRISTAN

“Why are you sitting in here with no lights on? Is this about the slight argument we had?”

I glance over to the entrance of my study, seeing Lia standing there. She’s backlit by the light in the hallway. It’s giving her an ethereal glow, and I can’t help but give her a smile. She’ll learn the way of things soon, especially when we’re dropped into the middle of the frying pan, so to speak.

“No.” I shake my head. “You have a right to know what’s going on, but the fact is, it makes us safer not to. Parker keeps things from us for our own good. I know you don’t understand that now, but you will. Especially with us going back to town. That’s why I’m sitting here in the dark. I’m thinking about how we have to go back to the real world.”

She groans, and I know she hates it as much as I do. The real world is such a shitty place to be. If given a choice, I would choose to be here any day of the week. I motion for her to come in, she does, closing the door behind her. As she approaches, there’s a slight darkness to her eyes. Maybe now’s the time for making up, since we just had a small argument. Make-up sex. Something I’ve never done before. All the other women either left, or I ghosted on them.

No one has ever stuck around after the first fight. Me or them.

“Do you have plans for me?” I smirk, watching as she walks closer.

She almost glides across the room, so different than the woman I first met. There’s now an air of confidence around her, almost as if she knows exactly how much she affects me. It’s given her color to her cheeks, a sleekness to her body, and a knowing glint in her eyes.

I've been here for a few hours, drinking scotch and enjoying the fire. Trying to remind myself this woman is to be my wife, I can't stay mad at her for long, and I have to understand where she's coming from. Never go to bed angry is the one takeaway I've gotten since we've been engaged. I was working myself up to follow that advice. This is my favorite leather couch in the entire place, and I'm going to miss it when we leave.

"Are you drunk?" She giggles, her eyebrows raised.

I think about what she's asked. "Wouldn't say drunk, per se, but I feel better than I should."

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“Do you?” She walks slowly toward me.

“Yeah.” I take a sip of my scotch, shaking the cubes of ice in it. “There are a million things I should be doing right now, and this isn’t one of them. My to-do list is a mile long.”

She has a seat next to me, I set the scotch down, almost sure I won’t be drinking it heavily now. “Mine is too, Tris. I have to contact the charities I’ve decided to work with, but I’d rather be here with you. When we get back to the palace, there will be plenty of time for us to do what we should be doing. Being here, we can do what we want to do.”

There’s a spark in her brown eyes, one I’ve seen before and one that makes me sit slightly up and take notice. It’s a touch of desire and a handful of passion. It’s one she gives me when she’s feeling sure of herself and honest with what she wants. If asked what’s on her mind, I would say getting naked with me, and I’m all for that.

“Is that right, my queen?”

She laughs, throwing her head back, exposing her throat to me. “I’m not your queen yet.”

I scoot closer so we’re touching. “You’ve always been my queen.”

Her plump bottom lip goes between her teeth. “Have I?”

Realizing this might be one of the last times we can do something just for us, I take

this opportunity for what it is. Leaning in, I cup her jaw in my hand. “Since I met you, Lia.”

The kiss is a slow seduction. One I’ve only ever had with her. I love the quick fall into passion, but taking our time is so much better. It allows me to savor her taste, feel her hands upon me, to mold her body into how I want it to be over me, or under mine. Our lips meet, our tongues mesh, we share breath as I ease her up and over my lap. Her thighs straddle me easily. This is where she belongs. In my arms, across my body.

We chase each other, not wanting to end the kiss. It isn’t until neither one of us can breathe that we break apart. We pant, glancing at one another. My hands immediately go to the hem of Amelia’s shirt, pulling it up and over. Off her body in one smooth motion. The bra she wears is something made of my wet dreams. Gray and black, with lace. It’s every damn thing I love about her femininity, but also leaves much to the imagination.

Reaching down, I push the lace edge of her bra down, exposing her to my gaze. The flesh puckers; even though I have the fire going the room is still slightly cool, evidenced by her reaction. When her nipples harden, my cock punches at the fly of my pants, begging to get out. The way my body reacts to her surprises me each and every time. She could lead me around by my cock and I would be perfectly happy.

My eyes flicker up to hers. I love the way hers are so expressive as she looks down at me. “You’re beautiful,” I whisper. The words seem so hollow, like they aren’t enough to explain how much she means to me.

“You’re handsome,” she whispers back.

Dipping my finger into my scotch, I do something I’ve wanted to do for a while. I lift it out, painting her nipple with the fluid, before leaning forward and taking it into my

mouth. Lia moans deep in her throat, making a noise I've never heard before. One that makes me hard, and I want to hear again. Pulling my lips back from her peak, I shift my eyes up, whispering. "You like that?"

Her fingers tangle in my hair, tugging me back to where I was. "Mmm hmmm," she breathes, her chest heaving. "Do it again." Her voice is soft, her eyes are closed. Almost as if she can't make the demand while looking at me.

I'm nothing if not a follower of requests. I do the same thing again, this time she squirms against my lap, knocking against my hard-on. A groan is ripped from my throat, I want nothing more than to reach down, pull it out, and rub flesh against flesh, but this is about her. If anyone had to describe me before this moment, they would say I'm a selfish bastard. For her, though? For her, I'll give everything. I'll give it all to make sure she feels good. Her feeling good is all I live for in this moment. Finally this only child has learned to share.

"Tristan." Her voice is breathless, full of desire and passion.

"Lia?"

"I love you."

"I love you, too."

With all the strength I have, I put the glass of scotch down, wrap my arms around her, and turn us over on the couch before situating myself between her thighs. This. This right here. It's my favorite place to be. In the cradle of her thighs I feel at home. A home like I've never known before. She welcomes me the way I need to be welcomed. With open arms and trust. It's the trust no one else has been able to give me. Everyone thinks I'm after something, or watching what others are doing so I can report back to my father. That's not it, though. It's never been it. I've always been

just me, and she accepts it. She accepts me for me, and that is the greatest love of all.

She's thrusting into me, and I'm grinding into her. We're fighting each other's hands as we try to get rid of our clothing. It's all some hazy, lazy dream sequence in my head as I finally seat myself home inside her. We both groan, my fingers tangle with hers lifting them up and over her head. We're splayed out against each other, every single part of our bodies touching as we slip and slide. Sweat coating us, making it easier for us to glide.

I'm taking this all in, experiencing every moment, breathing her in as we thrust against each other. Some people are never lucky enough to have this kind of connection in their lives, and here I am. This woman was chosen for me, was destined to be mine from the beginning of time. How much luckier can I get? I don't need to be lucky anymore, not with her at my side.

We're not in a rush, and this time, it's different. So much more different than it's ever been before. I feel like so much of our lives is rushing toward a conclusion. The marriage, the monarchy. We haven't had time to experience things on our own, we haven't been able to enjoy as much as we should have been. This, this moment, as I grip her fingers with mine. This is ours.

No one else can touch it.

CHAPTER 30

AMELIA

My heart is pounding, my stomach is turning, and my hands are shaking. Even more than they were the day I met Tristan; if that's even possible. At the time I hadn't thought it was, but I'm proving myself wrong.

Tristan reaches over, grabbing my hand in his. “My palms are sweaty,” I whisper, hoping he doesn’t let go, but also kind of not wanting him to grab my hand. Aren’t sweaty palms gross?

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 7:00 am

He moves so his mouth is tilted toward my ear. “Why are you whispering? It’s just us in this back seat.”

But my eyes are watching the crowded streets around us as we make our way to the palace. This crowd looks even bigger than the one who gathered when we announced our engagement. I can’t tell how deeply the people are standing, but I’m assuming it’s three to four people deep. “You’re wrong.” I nod to the crowds. “It’s us and them.”

Part of me doesn’t want to speak with my face toward the window. I’m afraid someone will read my lips and presume to know what’s going on in our lives. After the engagement, I saw articles from lip readers interpreting what we said, but without knowing what we were speaking about, it all seemed random. Or worse yet, it seemed like we were short with one another. Which wasn’t at all the case. Something will inevitably be taken out of context and it could brand either of us, or just one of us as ungrateful. It could turn the tide of the people away from us, and then where would we be? It’s a lot of pressure, especially for two people who aren’t even thirty yet.

“No.” He reaches up, grabbing my chin, forcing my eyes to meet his. “It’s always just us, Lia.”

I don’t argue, but even I know it’s not the truth. My whole life I’ve watched the royal family on the periphery and there’s no doubt in my mind—the people always have an opinion. Whether it’s good or bad, they always have one. It’s our job to make sure the opinion for us is a good one.

But I lie.

“Okay.” I nod, smiling slightly.

I wonder if he can tell I’m not being truthful. Then I worry this isn’t a good way to start off a marriage. My conscience reminds me this isn’t a typical marriage. There might always be things he won’t be able to tell me, so what if I don’t tell him everything?

But even thinking it leaves a bad taste in my mouth.

Slightly shaking my head, I look back out at the crowd that’s gathered for us. Doing what I’m supposed to—putting a huge smile on my face and waving back at them—helps to alleviate some of those thoughts. Instead of thinking about everything I can’t control, I decide to think about the things I can. Shannon’s words come back to me. Keep the smile on your face, wave with elegance, don’t turn the elbow too much, don’t give a weird face that someone will be able to use in a tabloid. Keep my shoulders back, look down when we pass members of the military. There are so many rules, I’m not even sure how I manage to keep them straight, but I do.

After what seems like a million years, we pull into the parking area of the palace.

“Don’t let Father intimidate you,” he tells me before we get out. “This is our home now, he’ll be living at his summer home full-time moving forward.”

“Is that near where we were?” I question, not sure how these family dynamics work.

“No.” His normally relaxed face isn’t there any longer. “He and I don’t get along like we used to. It’s on the other side of Haldonia. The west side. Any luck and we won’t have to deal with him after the wedding.”

Just by the way he says the words, I can figure out that’s what Tristan’s hoping for. It’s not like I’ve never met him before, but being here with Tristan, it feels

differently. Instead of feeling like someone who's about to get married, I feel like a child who's worried they're going to disappoint their parents. I don't feel like an adult at all. I feel like a fraud.

"This way." Shannon helps me out of the car.

I'm so excited to see a friend, I grip her hand in mine, hanging on for dear life. The familiarity of her is enough to almost bring tears to my eyes.

"You're doing great," she encourages me. "You're going to go in, meet with a few dignitaries, and then you'll be done until tonight. You've got this."

Tonight. I let a slow breath out.

Tonight we get introduced for real.

The engagement was small compared to what this will be like. I need a drink, but I know that doesn't set a good precedence.

"Father."

The tone he uses isn't one I've heard from him before. Usually Tristan is open, no matter who he's speaking with. He's the type of person who has nothing to hide, no matter who he is. But his tone changes when he speaks to his father. It's apparent, at least to me, he's closing himself off to the man standing in front of us. Doesn't want to give him a chance to hurt him. Seeing him close off is almost devastating to me, because he's such an open and giving person.

"Tristan." He shakes his son's hand.

It's so cold. Colder than I've ever seen with the man who will be my husband. I feel

as if I'm hearing and seeing an entirely different person.

It makes me wonder how their relationship was before his mom passed away. Were they close? Have they not been able to find their way back to each other? Is my job to be the one to help them bridge the gap?

"Amelia." He looks down at me.

I'm torn. Should I curtsy? Are we going to shake hands? At one time I knew exactly what I would do, but now I see how he treats his son, and I can't bring myself to do what I should.

"Call me Phillip." He reaches out his hand to me, the same way he did to Tristan.

Even that strikes me as odd, I'm not related to him, and he's just greeted me the same way as he did his son.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 7:00 am

“Nice to see you again, Phillip.” I keep my eyes cast downward. I don’t want to engage, and I feel like it’s the appropriate thing to do.

“What are your plans?” Tristan asks as we walk into the palace.

Immediately I notice how many people flank us. I can see some wearing badges. Aides, members of the press, and other security now that we’re here. It never occurred to me how many more people would be in our lives once we took up residence. It’s just one of the new things I’m going to have to get used to.

Shannon stands beside me as my hair is being fixed, reviewing the schedule we have over the next week and a half. She’s doing her best to keep me in the loop about what I’m wearing and where we’re expected to be. Tristan and I split up hours ago. Him to go talk to his father about the ceremony taking place tonight and me to get ready.

“My head is spinning,” I admit to her. “I knew this was going to be a lot, but I don’t think I realized how much it would actually be.”

“It’s understandable.” She hands me an energy drink with a straw in it. “But as long as you have me by your side, you’ll be fine. We’re in this together.”

I smile at her, grateful and thankful to have her with me. There’s only so much I can take on—on my own. To know she’s here, just in case I need her, is more than I know other people in my position have had.

All around me there are noises, voices of people speaking, it occurs to me they’re speaking at me, not to me. It’s too much to take on today, but I know if I want this

nation to see me as their queen, I'll have to stand up for myself. I take a fortifying drink of the water someone placed in front of me. It almost hurts to swallow, my throat is so dry. I'm not sure if it's out of thirst or fear.

If I'm honest with myself I know the answer.

Fear.

I'm scared I'm going to fail. Not be the woman Tristan needs, not be the woman this country needs. What if I'm an embarrassment to women everywhere and not the empowering role model I want to be?

"Whatever is going through your head right now, leave it." I hear Shannon. "You've gone pale as a ghost all of a sudden. Whatever you're thinking about. Stop. You're going to do amazingly. Tonight will be a success, and then you'll have your wedding."

"I'll have Tristan." I smile at her in the mirror.

"You'll have Tristan," she confirms.

Maybe that's the scary part. I'm not sure I'll ever really have him. There's always going to be someone who needs him just as much as I do.

His loyalty will never truly be mine.

It will always lie with his country.

The thought scares me more than I'm willing to admit, but I just put a smile on my face. I pray no one sees what's going on behind my eyes. Truth is; I'm terrified.

CHAPTER 31

TRISTAN

“She looks scared to death.”

His tone is accusatory, and it pisses me straight off. Not for me, but for her. There’s no reason he should be commenting on her, not when she’s the person he picked, and she’s going to be my wife. I’ve never stood up for anyone else. Toward the end, I should’ve stood up for my mother, but I didn’t. I regret it every single day, and I’ve promised myself I won’t have those same regrets when it comes to Amelia.

I turn to my father, facing him for the first time since we walked into his study. Actually, guess it’s my study now. It’ll take a while for me to get used to calling things that have always been his, mine. “Wouldn’t you be scared to death? Look at what she’s facing.” I sweep my arm across the room, hoping he understands the scope of everything involved with being the face of this country. “She’s doing a great job, handling everything that’s been thrown at her. Lesserwomen would have cracked under the pressure, but not her. She’s held it together, and she’s helped me hold it together. None of this is easy for anyone.”

“It was for you,” he argues. It’s always been a thorn in his side how well I seem to adapt to situations out of my control. A part of my personality learned from my mother. “But you didn’t realize it. You took and took, didn’t know how good you had it, Tris. I hope you’re ready for your new station in life.”

I’m not, and we both know it. Admitting it does me no good.

“I was born for this,” I remind him. I don’t have a choice, and I never did. “It was planned for me as soon as I was born a boy.”

“We all were, Tristan. I just don’t know if you’re prepared.”

There’s a part of me that hates what I’m about to say to him, there’s another part that knows it’s exactly the truth. He’s been so wrapped up in his selfishness for so many years, he can’t see past it. The minute my mother died, he withdrew and he’s never been able to be the father he should have been. “Your fault.” I throw the words at him. “You had two jobs. Rule this country and make sure I was ready for my turn. You ruled this country well, no one will ever be able to say you’ve been a shitty ruler. But as a dad? You failed.”

“You think so, don’t you?” His eyes light with a fire I haven’t seen in years.

“The country is doing fine, but I’ve not been okay for years. I’ve been able to adapt, because that’s my personality. But I haven’t been okay. You know it and I know it. You just ignored it.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 7:00 am

“We’re going to do this now, huh?” Father looks around, seeing everyone staring at us. It’s not like him to do this in a public setting. “If it’s okay with you, I’d like to clear the room.”

It’s hard to push the saliva down my throat. I’ve never been scared of him, even when I’ve made him furious. Tonight though, I’m slightly worried. There’s something about the way he’s behaving I don’t understand. The look on his face is dark, full of thunder and hell-bent on injury. I’ve seen it a few times before, not always pointed at me, but I’m going to get the full brunt of it tonight. I have no doubt about it.

“Clear the room!” he says again, turning into the man I know. Getting frustrated when someone doesn’t immediately bow to his authority is one of his signature moves.

Parker steps forward. “Sir?”

Our eyes meet and we have an entire conversation in the span of a few seconds. That’s how well we’ve come to know each other. His loyalty is to me, not the crown. He doesn’t want me to do this, but there’s no way I can’t. If I’m ever going to get out from underneath what holds me down, my father and I have to have words. They have to be the words of an adult too, they can’t be the anger of a child.

“Go.” I nod to him. “It’ll be fine.”

“Taking orders from you now, is he?” Dad rolls his eyes.

“I’m his king.” I take great pleasure in taunting him. If there’s one thing he hates, it’s

being reminded he's about to give all of this up. "All that's left is the ceremony. Both you and I know the ceremony is just that. Ceremonial. Legally I'm the King of Haldonia."

"Be that as it may." Dad buttons his suit jacket. I've always hated when he pulls this move. It's like he's buttoning himself off from the rest of the world, putting on some sort of mask that allows him to be someone else. "I'm still not sure you or your soon-to-be bride are prepared. Does she know you killed your mother?"

My blood boils. I run hot a lot of the time anyway, but right now I can feel the rage bubbling just beneath the surface. His accusations have bothered me for years, but tonight, I've had enough. "I didn't kill her," I argue.

"You might as well have," he yells. Here it comes, how much he hates me. I've wanted him to say these words to me for so long. It hurts, but at the same time, I'm happy it's finally out in the open. "She left here that night because you and I couldn't get along."

"Because you stopped seeing me as your son," I yell back at him. These are the words I've wanted to say for so long. "The minute you realized you were going to give up your crown to me, the second you knew I would make a good leader, you stopped treating me like a son. You started treating me like an enemy." I'm doing my best to keep the emotion out of my voice. But then I can't. He needs to know. He should have known all along, tradition is tradition. "I loved you," I whisper. "I would have done anything in this world to make you proud of me, but all you wanted was control. The law of succession is just that, Dad." I shake my head. "A law. Regardless of what you want, I would still be taking the throne."

"Don't turn this around on me. I don't want control. I want someone who will know how to bring this country into the next decade. Someone who has the best interest of the people at heart. Not someone who will run when it gets tough. Serious decisions

have to be made when an entire country counts on you.”

“But when your son counts on you, it doesn’t matter? Does it?” I throw it back in his face. With most men, they would have the decency to feel bad. Not my dad, I think he takes some great pleasure in not being emotionally invested in anything other than the throne he sits atop.

“Run along, Tristan.” He smirks.

“I did run,” I admit. “I was a teenager. Of course I ran. She was my mother, and she was gone. One day she was here, and the next day she wasn’t. She was the one who made my days better, who cared how I felt. I was angry and I needed you, but you weren’t around. You were so deep in your own misery you couldn’t see how much I needed you. I still do, but you don’t want to hear that either.” I run my hands through my hair. “I don’t know what you wanted from me then and I sure as hell don’t know what you want from me now. I’m sick of trying to figure it out on my own.”

“For you to take responsibility.”

“For what?” I scream, not understanding why he’s so upset.

He advances on me, wrapping his hands around my neck. He squeezes, and it’s right then I realize he’s lost his damn mind. “You killed her, Tristan. If she hadn’t left here so upset, she wouldn’t have gotten in the car with you, she wouldn’t have driven so fast.”

Surprise causes me to try to inhale deeply. He’s really doing this to me right now? My heart breaks in half because I know there’s no way for us to come back from this. He’s never assaulted me before, and I can’t believe he’s doing it to me right now.

I’m pulling his hands from around my neck. Trying to make him see what he’s doing.

He's seriously coming unhinged. Luckily I'm stronger than him, and I manage to slip the grip he has on me. "The paparazzi killed her," I say the words as calmly as possible, trying to defuse the situation. "If they hadn't been following her, she would have cooled off and it would have been fine. It was an accident." I do my best to try to get between him and his clouded memories of so long ago. I have no doubt he'll severely injure me if I can't get him to calm down.

"Nothing is ever an accident, Tristan. There's always a plan." He shakes his head. "Always a plan. Even when you don't think it's possible."

He drops his hands from around my neck, leaving the room like nothing happened. As I watch him walk away, I can't help but wonder exactly what he meant by those words.

CHAPTER 32

AMELIA

Today has been one of the longest days I've had since we came to the palace. The final wedding dress fitting and the last of the decisions for the wedding have been made. I get the feeling tonight is the last night Tristan and I will ever be normal again. It makes me sad, we had gotten into such a good routine, and now here we are. I haven't even seen him today. Tomorrow night we won't be sleeping with one another, so we have to make this count.

Entering the bedroom, I shut the door, sighing. The wood catches my weight as I slump back against it.

"Sounds like your day has been as long as mine."

The deep tone of his voice is welcome, and I can't help but smile. I've missed him,

and all I've wanted to do all day is see him. "It has been."

He comes walking out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped around his waist, another towel scrubbing against his hair. "I'm sick of everyone pulling at us from all different directions." He throws the towel on the floor.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 7:00 am

“I can see why you like it better at the house in the country,” I admit, reaching up to remove the pin holding my hair. It feels good to let the heavy mass down. My scalp throbs with soreness where it was secured. Pushing away from the door, I rub at the back of my neck as I walk closer to where he stands.

When I get within touching distance, he pushes his hands into my hair, massaging the soreness out. I moan loudly. This feels heavenly. “Don’t stop.”

There’s a deep chuckle in his chest. “Usually you’re saying those words and they have an entirely different meaning.”

I glance over my shoulder at him. “Don’t turn this into something it isn’t, Tristan. You have no idea how much my hair follicles hurt.”

He chuckles as he continues massaging my scalp. “Beauty is pain, Lia.”

I roll my eyes, turning around to face him. “Or so they say.”

He pulls me into his arms, running them up and down my body. Instead of the normal fall into passion it usually is, it’s soothing, calming me down from the crazy day I’ve had.

“In two days we’ll be married,” he whispers, a touch of awe in his voice. “Six months ago, it seemed so far away, and now it seems like it’s been nothing but a blink of our eyes.”

“I know,” I answer back, the same awe in mine. “Are we ready?” It’s a question I’ve

been asking myself since we came back into the city. I don't love it here as much as I thought I would. I guess I was under the impression I'd be a princess in a castle, but it's not been that way at all. This is work, and I'm more than expected to pull my weight.

He sighs, brushing a kiss against my temple. If there's anything I know, it's that we're a team against anyone who wants to tear us down. "We're ready." He tightens his arms around me. "I'm ready, I'm more than ready to be with you for the rest of my life. I'm unsure if we're ready for the media onslaught and the invasion into our personal moments, though."

Pulling back, I look up into his dark eyes. They're the eyes I've come to love, the ones I've started looking for in crowded rooms, what I see when I turn over at night in bed. He seems to not sleep lately, either afraid he's going to miss something, or maybe his brain is churning with all the things we must do. I don't know, because I haven't asked, and that's my fault.

Something I'm going to correct.

"Are you okay?" I caress his neck, pulling my hand along his whisker-covered jaw.

The side of his mouth lifts up in a small smile. "Yeah, but I'm anxious."

My stomach turns slightly, worry creeping in. "Anxious about what?"

"Not about you," he's quick to assure me. "For you. Like I know what comes with this life, I know what the people of this country are going to expect. You don't."

"But I do," I argue. "I've lived here my entire life. Part of my life has been researching your family and knowing what's expected of me. As your betrothed, I had classes. Granted they aren't the same as real-world application, but I'll get

through it. What I don't know, I'll learn. That's what Shannon and the others here are for. I want to make you proud, Tristan." I lean in, kissing him quickly.

"You make me proud, no matter what you do. I can't believe I'm going to have you beside me for the rest of my life."

"I can't believe I'm going to have you for the rest of my life either, but you have to promise me we're going to work together."

He nods. "It's not something I'm used to. You have to understand."

"I do understand." Because I saw what happened when his mother died. I watched as his father kept a firm hand on the monarchy and I have to believe he did the same with his son. "At the same time, you have to tell me your feelings."

"I know, and that's not where I excel." He grins, rocking back on his feet.

"Maybe there's something we can do to work on that." There's an idea niggling at the back of my mind. One I want him to agree with.

"What do you have in mind?"

"Why don't you get dressed in your comfy clothes, I'll get dressed in mine, and we can meet right back here."

His eyebrow quirks, but he nods. "Okay, I'm trusting you, soon-to-be wife."

The fact I'm about to be his wife makes me happier than I ever imagined it would, to hear him say those words means everything to me. "If you give me your trust, I promise I won't break it."

“I’m holding you to that.”

Quickly I start changing into the clothes I like to lounge in. A weird thought crosses my mind. When we get married and move into the big bedroom here, do I have to stop wearing shorts and a T-shirt? I make a note to ask the question.

Brushing out my hair feels amazing, especially since it’s been up all day. I do the rest of my business faster than I normally do; I want to be with Tristan more than I want to do my nightly routine.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 7:00 am

He's lying in bed, waiting on me, making the best picture I've seen in a long time.

"Took you long enough," he teases.

I give him a look.

"Ohhh there's that sass."

Climbing into bed, I face him, pulling my legs in front of me. Shifting around, I sit cross-legged, putting my hands underneath my chin. "I'll show you sass."

We stare at one another until he breaks into a smile.

"Okay, Lia, tell me what we can do to work on our feelings."

"Each night before we go to bed, we reserve a few minutes for one another. We talk about our days, if something is bothering us, if something great happened. We have to communicate in order to have a successful marriage, and there's no better way to communicate than to talk."

"Oh I can think of a few other ways we can communicate." He winks at me.

Giggling, I reach out, smacking his arm. "Stop, I'm being serious, Tris. I want our marriage to work. When the world looks at us, I want people to see a couple who truly loves each other. Partners in both life and work. I don't want us to hate each other."

He grabs my hand, pulling it up to his mouth. The simple kiss he drops there is enough to make my heart flutter. “We’re never going to hate each other.”

There’s a part of me that wants to tell him not to make promises he may not be able to keep. “How do you know?”

“I don’t hate people I love.” He pushes my hair back from my face.

“People we love can be the first we hate,” I argue softly.

“Let’s not invite trouble where we don’t have any, Lia.”

I lean in, resting my head against his shoulder, wrapping my arms around his waist. He holds me tightly, and I know I’m never going to feel safer than I do in his arms.

“As long as we stand together, no one will be able to break us.” I swallow roughly. “We have to keep a united front, if we have a disagreement, it gets handled here. At night, where we can talk about it in the comfort of our own bedroom.”

“I promise.” He kisses my neck softly. “Do you?”

“I promise.” I kiss him on his neck.

We pull apart, he lays down, and I lay next to him, snuggling up to his side. I can smell the shampoo and body wash he uses; it’s become one of my favorite scents. The way his beard scratches against my forehead as he tucks my body in beside him.

“Our lives are going to change.” I play with the hem of the shirt he’s wearing.

“But it doesn’t mean we have to.”

In reality I know it won't be so easy, it's going to be work. But I'm willing to put in the work as long as he is.

I make a noise in my throat, grabbing his hand. Our fingers entwine together, and tonight as I drift off to sleep, I do it with a smile on my face.

CHAPTER 33

TRISTAN

“When do you plan to officially abdicate?”

It's an answer to a question I've been asking since I came here. Times in the past I called this home, but right now it doesn't feel like it. Not after he and I had it out. Truth be told, it hasn't felt like home in a while. I'm hoping I can change that with Amelia. The quicker I can get him out of the palace and into his own home, the better it is for me and Amelia. We can start our lives and not have to worry about him moping around.

My father has been dragging his feet when it comes to doing what he's supposed to do. My wedding is tomorrow, and I don't want to worry about what he's going to do.

“Tomorrow when we come to the balcony.”

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Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 7:00 am

I roll my eyes, sighing. I should have known he would take one last moment for himself. “It’s always got to be about you, doesn’t it?”

He’s unaffected. “I am the king, Tristan.”

“Not really,” I remind him, a smirk on my face. “The minute I turned twenty-five, your time was over. You don’t have to even abdicate. By law, the crown is mine.”

He hates this, the way his jaw tightens, his teeth grind together. The only thing he’s known for the last twenty-six years is the throne.

“You don’t have to remind me.”

“I’m not unsympathetic to what’s happening with you, Dad. It’s time, though, time for you to find a hobby, something that will make you happy.”

His tone is resigned, a sadness replacing so much of the anger and vindication that’s been there for so long. “Your mother made me happy.”

The words are like a punch in the gut. No matter how hard he’s made life for me the past few years, he’s still my father.

More than anyone, I know this. I know the shell of a man he became once she was gone, and it still hurts that I wasn’t able to help ease his pain. I suspect no one will ever be able to ease the hell he lives in. He’s never said it, but I know he blames himself. If he wasn’t king, my mom wouldn’t have been in the situation she was in.

“There are other things that can make you happy.”

He looks over and for the first time in a long time he's looking at me without the mask of the man he's become. He's looking at me like the father he was. I take this look and hold onto it. The grieving widower who doesn't know how to deal with his feelings has been pushed aside for a short amount of time.

“I'm not so sure about that.” He rubs his chin. “I wasn't like you. I lived my life knowing this would be the endgame for me. You knew it, but you didn't allow it to keep you from experiencing all the things a young man does.”

For the first time in my life, I'm hearing something I've wanted to from my dad. The truth, possible pride, and praise I never counted on.

“I never would have thought to break curfew, ditch my protection team, or drive my car at top speeds through the streets of Haldonia. I respect you doing that in a way.” He stops to take a drink of the water sitting in front of him. “I've had no life experience. Not like you have. There isn't anything for me to compare to. I never did anything I wasn't supposed to do.”

For the first time, I chuckle, realizing how much of a hellion I am compared to him. Maybe he didn't know how to control me because he'd never once thought of being out of control. “You know, I never thought about it like that, but you're right. I can't remember you ever doing anything that angered your team, or grandfather. You truly have done everything you were supposed to do, haven't you?”

He nods. “It's why I'm so scared not to have this seat at the table anymore.”

I walk over, extending my hand to him. One of us has to forgive, and if it's up to me, then that's fine. For the good of my family and for the good of the country, I'll take the first step. “You'll always have a seat at my table. No matter how much we've

argued over the years, especially since Mom died, you've always been my father."

Uncharacteristic wetness can be seen in his eyes. He wipes discreetly at it. "I admire you. As soon as you realized Amelia was here for you, you took her away from the scrutiny of downtown Haldonia. It's obvious how close the two of you have become in the last few months. More than anything, I wish you a life of love and a million memories. Sometimes memories are all we have left. I hate to be the person to remind you of that, and..." He stops for a moment, picking at an invisible piece of lint on his dress pants. "I'm sorry for what happened. When I put my hands on you. It never should have come to that. I'm terribly sorry, Tristan. I've had time to think about it and put it into perspective. That angry man wasn't me when I took this throne, and I don't want it to be me as I leave it."

"Thank you."

There's nothing more I can say. This man who purposely kept himself closed off from everyone since my mother passed away is finally opening up. The way I've wanted him to my entire life. On the eve of my wedding, it's almost too much for me to emotionally deal with.

I promise myself I will.

If he's been brave enough to do this type of work on himself, the least I can do is appreciate it, and acknowledge it wasn't easy.

"Tomorrow is okay with you?"

He phrases it in a question and for the first time in my life, I get he's actually asking my permission. He's not being a smartass and framing it in a way where I'll be expected to say yes. Perhaps believing he's been doing that for so long is my fault. Maybe I didn't give him the benefit of the doubt when I should have.

“Tomorrow is perfect.” I open my arms, and he falls into them.

Giving me the hug I’ve wanted far too often in my life, and never received. Those memories he talked about? This will be one of the best ones I carry with me, through whatever it is the future brings.

“Nervous?” Parker asks as he enters my office.

Dad left almost an hour ago and I’ve been sitting here, stewing in my own thoughts, trying to get them together. Marriage is a lifetime commitment, at least for me, and it’s starting to become abundantly clear the closer we get. I wonder what Amelia will look like possibly thirty years from now as we welcome a new king and queen to take over Haldonia. That’s my plan. Five years before we bring a child into this craziness. I have a feeling it’ll be as soon as possible, though. I have a lot of love to give.

“Slightly.” I give him a smile.

He gives me a smile back. “That’s why I’ve brought you this.” From within his suit pocket, he pulls two cigars out. “Figured we could toast on your upcoming nuptials.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 7:00 am

Parker has been my best friend for years, even though it's arguable we shouldn't be friends. He's the person in charge of my protection and for intents and purposes, I'm his employer. But I trust this man with my life. I trust him with everything. He's never given me a reason not to, and he's seen me at some of the worst times I've had. If there's one person I want with me tonight, it's him. I want him to see the man I've become and leave behind the kid I was.

"Nice." I reach out to take the cigar.

It takes us a few moments but we get them cut down and lit. "I'm proud of you." Parker blows a plume of smoke.

The words stop me, causing me to parrot them back. "Proud of me?"

"You're not the same Tristan I used to know. You worry about Amelia more than you worry about yourself. You stand tall when people question you and you worry about your country. While so many have called you spoiled, you've grown up. You're becoming the man your mom would be proud of. The man she saw you becoming. This country will move into the next decade with you at the helm, and I have no doubt we'll succeed. With you guiding us, we'll be the best we've been."

It takes me long moments to speak around the lump in my throat. "Thank you, Parker."

"You know me, my lord. I don't say things I don't mean. I don't give praise just for the sake of giving it. You've earned it. It's my pleasure to serve you."

The talk is deep for the two of us. It's not how we normally spend our time together, but knowing he's proud of me is akin to knowing my father is proud of me.

And if that's how I'm entering into this marriage. Then I know I'm giving Amelia the best I can give her.

Which helps me know for her, I'll be the best man I can be.

CHAPTER 34

AMELIA

The room I'm in is opulent.

I don't think I've ever been in an opulent room before. Granted, my family is well off, but we're nothing like the royals.

Even though this is the house we stayed at for the last six months, I never came into this room on the fourth floor.

Tristan and his crew are staying at the palace. The trip will be made with me in a car, my father and Shannon by my side. I'm already shaking, thinking about it.

The bed is huge, big enough for at least six people, if I'm being honest. With just me in it, it'll feel even smaller.

My phone makes a noise from where I laid it on the desk. It hasn't made a noise in so long it takes me a moment to realize what it is. Tristan and I have been together since the day after we were introduced, and I haven't needed it.

Running over to it, I grab it up like it's a lifeline. When I see Tristan has sent me a

text, a stupidly excited smiles spreads across my face. It feels huge, but I can't even make myself care.

T: Be sure and get plenty of sleep tonight. Tomorrow will be a very long day.

A: I'm not sure how I'm going to get any sleep, Tris. First we're going to be on actual TV tomorrow.

I'm not sure what's freaking me out more. The fact I'm not sleeping in the same bed as him, or that millions will see me. Millions tuned in to see Phillip marry his queen. More will probably tune in to see us. I'm worried people will pick out something stupid I do, then I'll be a meme for the rest of my life. It's a legitimate fear, and I don't know how to stop thinking about it.

It doesn't help that earlier in the day, Shannon pointed out the TV crews.

They're even camped out in front of this house. I knew there would be people watching me leave and head to the wedding venue, but now it's so much more real.

T: The only one who is going to matter will be me. You'll be beautiful and I'll be the luckiest man in the world.

A: Tris, I'm scared.

There I said it, told him about the fear tingling at the back of my neck.

Cold feet is one thing, but I'm legitimately scared something may happen tomorrow we can never come back from. I keep telling myself no one would try to take a shot at us, but it's on a global stage, and there are plenty of people who would love to take the spotlight from us.

T: Scared about what?

Now that he's asking, I don't want to throw my fears off on him. What if I'm the one who's worrying for no reason. It's easy to downplay it and pretend like I'm not scared to death.

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A: I'm not sure, I just feel like we have a bullseye on our backs. Like someone is going to ruin our perfect day.

T: It's normal. I'm sure all brides and grooms feel this way. I mean we're on a global stage, Lia, but you have to know we're going to be fine.

I don't, and that's why I'm worried. Instead of keeping him longer, I decide to end the conversation. Having a seat on the bed, I type quickly.

A: I know we will be. I have to get my beauty sleep for tomorrow. I'll see you in a few hours. Love you, Tris.

T: Love you too!

I throw the phone to my side on a sigh.

"That doesn't sound good." Shannon makes her way into the room. "Not having second thoughts, are you?"

"No! I want to marry Tristan more than I've ever wanted anything in my life. I'm just nervous." I do my best to explain to her. "There will be a lot of people watching tomorrow, a lot of expectations."

"No one else matters but his," she reminds me.

"Now you sound like him." I giggle. "In theory, I know that's right, but I'm still worried."

“Hey, he sounds super smart.” She comes over, sitting next to me. She turns to face me, her knowing gaze almost feeling like it can see right through me. “Tell me, Amelia. What’s really wrong?”

Do I be honest with her?

Do I admit I’m not sure I’m the person everyone thinks I am?

“I feel like a fraud!” I shout, throwing my face in my hands.

“A fraud?”

It’s hard to explain, but I struggle through it, praying I can get her to understand. “You make me beautiful, you pick my clothes, do my makeup and my hair, you tell me if the jewelry I pick out matches.” I shrug, letting this insecurity out. I hadn’t planned on doing it now, but if not now, when.

She pulls my hands back. “I work with what I have, Amelia. If you weren’t already beautiful, I couldn’t make you look the way I do. Tristan loves you for who you are, and the world will love you for the same reasons he does. Don’t be nervous.”

It’s so easy for her to say, but my stomach is rolling, thinking of everyone who will see me on the screen tomorrow. There are people camped out in the royal park here, wanting to catch a glimpse of me or us as we travel through the streets. For some reason the reality of the situation is hitting me tonight, and I’m almost having a freak out.

“You’re living almost every little girl’s and some little boy’s dreams tomorrow.” Shannon laughs. “Enjoy your day. Do your best to forget about all the people watching and just focus on your husband. I mean, can you imagine how hot Tristan’s going to look in what he decides to wear?”

“I hope it’s a tux,” I blurt out. “He rocks a tux in so many ways.”

“But what about his military uniform?”

“That’s what it’s between. A tux or a military uniform. I’ve only seen pictures of him in the uniform, but I’ve seen him alive and well in a tux. Either way I won’t be able to wait for the wedding to get over, to get him out of either one.”

Shannon laughs loudly at what I’ve just said. “He is very handsome.”

“He’s hot!” I correct her. “Dark and brooding with the right amount of mystery and danger. He’s every dream I ever had of the man I was going to marry.”

I don’t realize the truth of the words until I say them. Why am I freaking out when this is truly every single thing I want?

“Then focus on that.” Shannon claps her hands. “Focus on the fact your dream is coming true. Not that you’re scared of the future. Live in the present. Mark every moment tomorrow as a memory that won’t be erased, and above all, have fun. Smile if you want, laugh if you want, cry if you want. You’re perfect, Amelia, just the way you are.”

You’re perfect just the way you are.

Those words are echoing in my brain later on when I lay down to sleep. They’re running on a loop that won’t seem to stop. I wonder if other brides have this much trouble sleeping the night before they get married.

I’m trying desperately to focus on what Shannon told me instead of worrying about falling while walking up the stairs or maybe having a wardrobe malfunction. It would be the one thing I’d never be able to get away from.

The phone on my nightstand vibrates again, and I reach over, grabbing it like it's a lifeline.

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T: I don't know that I can sleep without you here.

Who knew he'd be this man when the two of us met?

A: I know, this bed is huge, and I miss the warmth of you next to me. I'm freezing.

T: That's the one thing I'm not missing. Your frozen feet rubbing against my calf, but other than that, I miss you a lot.

A: LOL! My favorite thing to do is rub my frozen feet against your calf.

T: I know, which is why I need to start wearing pajama pants to bed.

A: Tris, it'll break my heart.

T: Oh you're pouring it on thick now, Lia. It won't break your heart, I promise.

A: It might.

T: I'll never break your heart.

There he is, the man I've learned Tristan can be. He's sweet in his own way, keeping me on my toes with the words he says. It may be stupid but I trust him and believe him fully.

A: I know, I can trust you with anything.

T: I can't wait to have you with me forever, Lia.

A: Me neither. I'll be the one in white walking toward you at the end of the aisle.
Don't forget me?

T: I'll never forget you.

I smile, putting the phone back on the bedside table before I curl up, pulling one of the many pillows into my side. It's a poor substitute for Tristan, but for now it'll do. In less than twelve hours, nothing will ever be able to pull us apart.

Closing my eyes, I think of how handsome he'll look, how happy I'll be, and what the rest of our lives will look like.

For now, I'll believe it'll all be flowers and hearts, because I refuse to think of the opposite.

CHAPTER 35

AMELIA

"You should eat something." Shannon points to the tray of fruit brought to me almost an hour ago.

"I don't know that I can."

My stomach is full of excited butterflies, has been since last night. Sleep didn't come to me until roughly two hours before I had to wake up.

"Wouldn't it be something if I puked my way up the aisle?"

Shannon giggles. “Could you imagine the reports? Pregnant before the wedding. The king is shocked!”

I giggle along with her. “We’re doing our best not to draw attention to ourselves.”

“I don’t think you have to try to get attention. Especially in this day and age.”

Figuring she’s got a good point, I reach over, grabbing a few strawberries. They taste so good, but it’s hard to swallow. There’s a boulder lodged in my throat, and I’m worried I won’t be able to get them down.

Shannon sees what’s happening and offers me a glass of champagne. “You have to calm down, Amelia. Everything is going to be fine.”

Glancing at the clock, I see we’re running slightly behind. “Are you sure? I don’t want to be late to my own wedding.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 7:00 am

“The wedding starts when you get there, girl.” Shannon smirks.

“You’ve got a point.” I laugh.

I know I sit in the chair for hours, but it literally feels like minutes as I wait for my hair and makeup to be done. I’m transformed from someone who had minimal sleep the night before to someone who looks like they’ve had the best night of sleep ever. My hair, which had been a wreck, now looks perfect. My makeup is natural yet dramatic at the same time. I don’t look painted on, but just a better version of myself, which is exactly what I wanted.

“It’s time for the dress,” someone says.

My hands shake and my heart pounds. Putting on the dress means it’s official. I am on my way to becoming a royal.

“Are you ready?” Shannon asks, grasping my shaking hands.

“As I’ll ever be.”

She and I walk into a dressing room off from the bed. I take off my robe, revealing the lingerie I’m wearing underneath. She’s the only person I would be comfortable sharing this with besides Tristan.

“Ohhh girl.” She whistles softly, giving me a wink. “I wondered what you’d wear underneath it.”

It's a lace bodysuit, with an underwire bra, in the same white as my gown, allowing me to show off the small amount of cleavage I have. "Is it too much?" I ask her seriously.

"No." She shakes her head, "It's amazing."

Her gaze goes down to the garters held in place by a white garter belt. "He'll have so much fun taking that off of you."

Truth be told, I can't wait. The moment we come together as man and wife will be worth all of the crap we've been through these past six months.

"Should I put my shoes on first?"

"Yes." She nods at my question. "We'll put the dress over your head."

Stepping into my heels feels like a big moment. Like I'm stepping into a whole new personality, or just perhaps a whole new life. Truthfully I am, and this is one of the defining moments.

"Arms up."

I do as Shannon asks, watching with my eyes lifted to the sky. She's called in a few helpers and they're putting the dress over my head. On impulse, I close my eyes, wanting to be able to feel everything about the dress being put on me. The lace softly scrapes my skin, the satin makes a noise as the waist of the dress is settled into place. There's lots of fluffing and people speaking, making sure the material has kept its shape. It's got slight padding at the hips to make my waist appear smaller. One of the things I didn't realize was an option.

"Okay, Amelia, time for the tiara."

This was maybe the hardest part of what I had to do, pick out which tiara to wear. My jewelry was either gifts from my family or Tristan, but the tiara is a gift from the royals. It's on loan from the people, and I wanted to make sure I picked out the perfect one.

In the end, I picked the same one Tristan's mother got married in. It's got over a thousand diamonds and encased in a platinum finish. I know Tristan wanted her to be here, so I hope when he sees this, he knows she's in my heart as well.

"You're ready, my queen," Shannon whispers.

My eyes snap open and I can't believe the person staring back at me in the mirror. This can't be real life. She looks poised, elegant, and much more mature than my years. I look at Shannon who smiles.

"I am ready, aren't I?"

"Yes, yes you are."

"You look beautiful, Amelia."

My dad's voice always calms me in the middle of any storm I'm in. "Thank you, Daddy." I hug him tightly.

When we pull back, he makes sure my veil doesn't get stuck.

"We're proud of you," he whispers. "Proud of the woman you've become, and so happy with the life you're going to build for yourself. To show you how proud we are, I brought you something."

"Dad, you didn't have to."

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“I know, but it’s a tradition in our family that every woman who gets married carries a piece of my great-great-great-grandmother’s dress.” He reaches into his pocket, pulling out a piece of satin and lace.

“Oh my goodness, Dad, this is gorgeous.”

It’s yellowed slightly with the passage of time, but I hold it closely to me.

“It means a lot to know you’ll have it on you.” He kisses me on the cheek.

“Can you pin it into my dress?” I turn around, feeling him reach in and pin it in the back.

“Okay.” Shannon comes over to us. “I hate to interrupt you, but it’s time to get you in the car and to the venue.”

“He pinned something into the back of my dress. Can you see it?” I turn back around.

“You look amazing, and no one can tell what you have under this dress.”

“How are we going to get her out without people seeing her?” Dad asks.

There’s a group of women holding what looks like a blanket. “We’ll walk her out with this around her. If we can have any luck, no one will be able to completely make out what she’s wearing.”

The plan in place, I wait for everyone to surround me. It’s amazing how they work in

tandem, and no one touches my dress. I hold up the train as we walk out to the waiting car.

It's a beautiful day, not a cloud in the sky, and the temperature is just right. The sun warms my body, but not at unpleasant levels. It feels good on my shoulders.

"All right, ladies," Shannon is directing the group. "A little to the left."

I can hear the crowds of people who have gathered, it causes goose bumps to appear on my arms. To know there's that many people waiting to see me. Wanting to see a part of our country's history happen.

Schools have been closed, and over ninety percent of the country has been let off work. From what I've heard, they've been lining up for at least the last day. We somehow make our way into the car that'll be taking me to the chapel.

"Are you comfortable?" Shannon asks after I sit down.

"Yup, I'm good."

My father gets in on the other side of me, Shannon takes a seat in the front passenger side, and off we go. A Range Rover in front of us, a Range Rover behind us. It's odd to have no other cars on the street as we navigate our way to Haldonia's city center.

"Look at all of these people." I smile brightly, waving to the ones who have lined the streets. I do my best to make eye contact with as many of them as I can, wanting them to know I care. They've taken their day off, and they've come to be a part of my big day.

"They're here for you, they're here for Tristan," Dad reminds me.

“I just hope we can always make them proud of us.”

The responsibility is tremendous and I silently vow to always keep the people in the forefront of my mind.

CHAPTER 36

TRISTAN

“She’s on her way.” Parker’s voice cuts into my thoughts. They’re so deep, I almost don’t hear him. Then I realize what he’s said to me.

“How do you know?”

“Like she’s not on international news right now.” He quirks a brow, answering like I’m an idiot.

I didn’t even think about her being on TV. I’ve wanted to see her all day, and now I realize I have a chance to do so. “Let me see!”

“Oh no.” He grabs hold of my shoulders as I try to see around him. He holds me back from getting the glimpse I so desperately want. “It’s bad luck to see your bride before the wedding.”

“Everyone else is seeing her, why can’t I?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 7:00 am

I'm aware I sound like I'm pouting, but I do want to see her. I have no doubt she's a vision in whatever dress she's decided to wear. She's beautiful no matter what, and I can't wait to see her walk toward me.

"You don't want to start your marriage off on the wrong foot, do you?"

I obviously don't, but at the same time I want to know what she's wearing. Not only that, but is she smiling? How is her hair? Is she as nervous as I am?

"You have a lot of questions."

It's then I realize I've asked them all aloud. "How much longer until she gets here?"

He glances at his watch. "Fifteen minutes. It'd be best if we made our way into the chapel."

I shake hands as I walk down the aisle to the place where I'm supposed to stand and wait for my bride. I've watched others do this before, and I always wondered how it felt. What it was like to have everyone stare at you. Obviously I knew this would be where I end up, but I never thought there'd be this many people here today. There are dignitaries, movie stars, childhood friends, and music icons in the audience. Over five hundred people have filled this chapel to the rafters.

It's scary for me to walk down to the front, I can only imagine what it's going to be like for Amelia. At least I know most of these people. I'm not positive who all she knows besides my family and hers.

“Looking good, Tristan,” the head of our government holds out a hand for me to shake.

“Thank you, kind sir.” I tip my head to him. “Thank you for being here to celebrate this day with us.”

“Thank you for the invitation.”

Like he wasn’t going to get one. The last thing I want to do is play host on a day like this, but it is what it is, and I’m almost always on. I give him a smile, then head further down the aisle. I lose track of the amount of people I shake hands and greet. It isn’t until Parker comes to my side, ushering me down, that I realize how long I’ve been doing this for.

“Thanks for rescuing me.”

“If I hadn’t, Amelia would be making her way into the chapel with you not even wanting on her yet.”

The thought makes me chuckle, but I appreciate the fact he’s gotten me away from everyone who wanted to speak to me. My back is to the entrance.

“Good luck today, Tristan.” The officiant pats me on the shoulder.

“Thank you, sir. I appreciate you being here and performing the service for us.”

This gesture I’m thankful for. He christened me, and the fact he’s here to marry me means a lot.

“She’s coming in,” he tells me.

And that's when I hear the sharp intake of breath as everyone gets a look at her.

"How does she look?" I ask him, because I'm not supposed to turn around yet.

"Absolutely beautiful. Your bride is gorgeous."

I ache to turn around, to get a look at her, but I know it's against custom, and honestly, I don't want to start this marriage off with breaking custom.

So I wait.

The long, agonizing minutes it seems to take her to come to where I am. Finally the officiant gives me the go-ahead, and I turn to face her.

I gasp.

She's beautiful.

Lace cups the top part of her body, flushing down into satin. She looks like a doll I saw as a child, and I'm worried I may break her. She's fragile like a flower, but strong as a tree against the wind. She's not shrinking away from any of the pomp and circumstance happening today. If I had to walk down the aisle the way she did, I'm not even sure I could do it. She's one of the strongest people I've ever met.

She's even more beautiful than I imagined she would be, imagined she ever could be. Her father gives me her hand to start the ceremony, and as I try to remember my part in this, I do my best not to get lost in her eyes.

"Do you, Tristan, take Amelia to be your lawfully wedded wife?"

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 7:00 am

The rest of what he says seems to drag on in slow motion. I'm not stupid, I know the vows, I know them by heart. In this moment, I feel like I've been waiting to say them my entire life.

"I do." The words come out on a breath I hadn't known I'd been holding.

"Do you, Amelia...?" He repeats the words.

My eyes meet hers and I can see the depth of her feelings. While we're both in this moment together, I can tell by the look in them she's ready for this to be over. Ready to get me by myself and celebrate the fact we've actually become man and wife. I'm sure there were many who thought this day would never happen.

But it has.

Here in front of the entire world.

Finally the words I've been waiting to hear are the words spoken.

"You may kiss your bride."

And kiss her I do.

CHAPTER 37

AMELIA

The amount of people who have gathered in front of the balcony is impressive. As far back as I can see, there are bodies. They're moving this way and that, like a crowd at a huge concert. They're making so much noise, I almost can't hear what's going on in front of me.

Planes have been going overhead here and there, each carrying a banner welcoming me to the royal family and telling Tristan congratulations.

Tristan and I are standing in front of the people gathered, looking down at our countrymen and women. "Shall we kiss?" he asks when he can finally make out what they've been chanting.

"Kiss!"

"Kiss!"

"Kiss!"

I giggle loudly. This is the best part of everything that's gone on for me. Their excitement is mine. "I think we definitely should."

Instead of it being proper, he brings me in, bends me over his arm, and dramatically locks our lips together. The crowd goes wild, and even though I probably shouldn't, I hope that picture is the one on the cover of all the magazines.

TRISTAN

This is the moment I've been waiting for.

Abdication.

Wearing a crown I've meant to wear since I was born.

There's a lot of pomp and circumstance going on, a lot of it I don't even understand. I figure I'll understand why it matters certain dignitaries are here right now, while others aren't.

"I'm pleased," my father starts, turning to me. "To give the crown to my son. I hope for him to have a healthy life and a great marriage. We should all be so blessed to have a love like he does."

The crowd goes wild when he puts the crown on my head. I look out at them, wondering what they are seeing when they look up at us. Can they see a son and father who have struggled to hold it together? Can they see how close we were to falling completely apart?

Or rather, do they see the future of their country? Do they see me as the person who's going to fight for them, to do what's right? I hope so.

"Thank you," I speak into the microphone. "Thank you for allowing me the honor of taking the throne."

The applause is deafening.

"My queen and I promise to make sure we take Haldonia into the next decade in the most honest way possible. We promise to keep your interests at the forefront of each thing we do. We will make the hard decisions, and we hope to grow with you. Thank you so much for participating in our big day with us. We couldn't have done it without you."

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The chants begin again.

“Kiss!”

“Kiss!”

“Kiss!”

I chuckle as I pull her into me with my arm around her waist. We kiss again, each laughing as the exuberance of the crowd washes over us.

Hours later we're in a horse-drawn carriage driving through the streets of Haldonia. So many flowers are being thrown at us. My cheeks hurt from smiling and my hand aches from waving. It's worth it though, to show the people of the country how much we appreciate what they've done. Including them into our day has always been important to the both of us.

“I love this,” Lia shouts over the noise.

“I love you,” I shout back at her.

She turns to me, leaning in for a kiss.

I'm allowed to do this all the time now. She's mine whenever I want her, whenever I need her.

That's my favorite thing ever.

AMELIA

“What time is it?” I groan as Shannon pulls the curtains on the windows. Tristan and I are so wrapped up in one another, neither one of us cares she’s here.

“Your reception starts in two hours, Your Highness.” She playfully curtsies. “We’ve got to get you up and presentable. Many people will want to speak with you, and everyone wants a picture of you and your husband.”

Husband.

The word brings joy to my chest. He’s next to me, his face covered with the couple of days growth of beard he’s been wearing lately.

“One second please.” I lift my finger up, letting her know I want a moment alone with my husband. She nods, leaving us alone in the room.

“Tris.” I lean over, trying to wake him up.

He’s sleeping soundly, the product of what must be the last six months catching up with him. He stirs slightly. “Tris,” I try again, kissing him on the forehead. “Time to wake up. Hey husband.” I grin as his eyes open.

“Hey, wife,” he answers. “What time is it?”

“Time for us to get ready for our reception.”

“This is it, right? We’ll be able to relax after this?” He tightens his arms around me.

“For a day or two, yes.” I giggle.

It's as if the stress of the last six months has hit him full force.

"All I want to do is spend a few days with you, trying to figure out where we fit into this whole puzzle."

"Same, Tris, but we have duties. Those duties say we have to entertain tonight."

"It's time for the garter!" the DJ says as the group of all of us gather on the dance floor.

The parents went home hours ago, and now it's the youngsters who have gathered for the reception.

"This is going to be my favorite," Tristan announces.

He brings me to the middle of the floor, motioning for me to have a seat in the chair someone's brought out for me. I do as he's asked.

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He looks dark and dashing, his white tux shirt rolled up to his forearms. I'm not sure where his jacket went, but he discarded it hours ago.

"You ready?" he asks, his dark eyes shining brightly.

"Yes." I wink, spreading my legs slightly.

Going up under her skirt, he grabs my garter with his teeth, using his tongue to run against my thigh.

I laugh loudly.

Pulling out from under there, he holds it between his teeth. The crowd goes wild, and he makes a presentation of taking it out of his mouth, twirling it around on his finger.

"Line up my guys," I shout loudly.

He watches as they listen to me. I'm standing beside him, giving him a look. Telling him where Parker stands.

Leaning back, he shoots it up and over.

Looking around, I see it land right on Parker's head.

"Ohhhh!"

Everybody makes noises, but Parker looks scared to death. There's not many things

that scare Parker, and I love that the piece of cloth in his hand brings legitimate fear to his face.

“You’re welcome, Park.” Tristan taps him on the shoulder.

“With all do respect, sir.” He tilts his head. “Screw you.”

EPILOGUE

TRISTAN

ONE MONTH LATER

We’re at the beach, at what we’ve begun to call our home away from home. Each weekend, we go back to the beach house. As soon as I’m done with my weekly duties we high-tail it to the place we fell in love.

They still treat us like normal people here, and we can sleep late. Some days we don’t even get out of our pajamas, and those are my favorite days.

“Tristan, do you want to take this one?” She lifts up a shell.

We’re trying to make a lamp made of shells for her office. That way when we’re at the palace she has something to remind herself of our home here.

“I think that’s a good one.” I give my stamp of approval. “Let’s head back, I’m getting hungry.”

She runs over, grabbing my hand. Together we trudge up the beach, Parker at a reasonable distance behind us.

“I’ll meet you in a few I’m gonna go see how this compares to the other ones I’ve

picked out.” She drops my hand.

I kiss her forehead, smacking her on the ass before she goes to the room she’s claimed as her craft room.

“Tris?” she asks later on as we get ready for bed. “Are you okay?”

I’m looking out at the ocean, and I can’t help but feel as if someone’s watching us. Which is crazy, because someone is always watching us. We’ve become the favorite couple for the paparazzi to follow.

“Fine.” I smile as I turn around to face her.

But I’m not really. I reach up, closing the shades.

“We won’t be able to watch the sunrise,” she pouts.

It’s our favorite thing. To make love as the sun rises in the morning.

But I can’t tell her, can’t tell her I feel the eyes on me. “I’ll make the sunrise for you,” I growl as I wrap my arms around her, taking her down to the mattress.

“I love you, Tris.” She giggles.

“I love you, too.”

And I hope the love we share will help us overcome anything in our way. I have a feeling the fairy tale ending won’t last forever.