



# Royally Matched

**Author:** Jenna Brandt

**Category:** Romance, Billionaire Romance

**Description:** Liliana is trying to escape the stuffy royal world while Maxwell is trying to escape his responsibilities as the Crown Prince. What happens when these childhood sweethearts are forced into an arranged marriage? Maxwell Gerard Beaumont is the Crown Prince of Triola. All his life, he's been told how one day he will inherit the throne and have to be an example for his people. But Maxwell doesn't want to the pressure of the life he was destined for, and decides he would rather spend his days partying on his family's private island or super-yacht. But when the paparazzi catches him carousing with a trouble-making pop star, his parents demand he return home to Triola. They insist Maxwell commit to taking on his responsibilities as a crown prince, including accepting an arranged marriage to a woman of their choosing, a woman he remembers from his youth but wants nothing to do with now that their adults. If he refuses their ultimatum, he will be cut off from the money, the influence, and his family. Lady Liliana Lockhart grew up in the royal world of Triola, but once she was able to escape the constricting lifestyle, she did. Now, she spends her time volunteering at orphanages in Asia or being an ambassador for the UN. All of that changes when she is summoned home. Upon her arrival, her father informs her that she is to marry the crown prince of Triola in order to secure her future. Liliana scoffs at the idea, explaining that arranged marriages are a relic of the past, yet secretly she wonders what it would be like to marry the man she shared her first kiss with eight years ago. Can these two vastly different people find a way back to the first love they shared when they were teens? Can Maxwell let go of his bad boy bachelor lifestyle to make room for true love? Can Liliana forgive his indiscretions and see past his facade to his heart of gold? And will they find a way to make their relationship work in order to secure the future of Triola?

**Total Pages (Source):** 37

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:10 am*

## Prologue

Eight years ago

Exhilaration filled Maxwell Gerard Beaumont's body as he watched the final goal soar across the field and land in his opponents' rugby net. The crowd roared around him, clapping, cheering, and shouting accolades of his championship winning hit.

Though all eyes were on him, Max scanned the crowd, hoping to find one particular set looking at him with admiration. A few moments later, his heart filled with joy as he saw Lady Liliana Lockhart— or better known to close friends and family—Lily, standing towards the far end of the field in a pretty plum sweater and black slacks.

She looked as enchanting as ever, with her long, brown hair slightly blowing in the wind. She was smiling in the most enticing way, and all Max wanted to do was run to her, stare into her golden eyes, and kiss her pretty pink lips.

Before he could leave the field and make his way to her though, the rest of his team came running up to Max, picking him up, and placing him on their shoulders. They were dancing around the field, screaming they were the champions as the crowd continued to shout praises for their winning team.

The cheerleading squad surrounded the rugby team, pouring out compliments and stating how great Max did. Despite all the flattery, he remained unaffected by the praise. He had tired from the constant attention he had received all his life being the Crown Prince of Triola.

A year prior, he would have reveled in the attention he received, but after finding out his ex-girlfriend was only with him to be in the spotlight, he had stopped dating. That was until three months ago, when Lily ended up being his lab partner in biology class. The rare beauty turned his world upside down, and he found out he could have a meaningful relationship despite being the heir to a king.

He patted the guys' shoulders, saying, "I need to go take care of something."

Richard, his cousin and fellow teammate, chuckled. "I bet you do. Is that something wearing a purple sweater, by chance?"

Max ignored the remark, not wanting to make his relationship with Lily—which he cherished—the target of any joke. Instead, he hopped down and pushed through the crowd, wanting to find her and share his victory with the person he cared most about.

\* \* \*

Lily had watched as her boyfriend, Max Beaumont, was carried around the rugby field of Grantmire Boarding School—the small, elite preparatory school for the children of royalty, dignitaries, and celebrities. Both of them attended the school and grew up together in the royal court of Triola, but only in the past couple of months had they formed a real connection.

Her parents were ecstatic when they found out the news from a teacher at the school. They had been keeping close tabs on her progress since they had sent Lily to Grantmire as an attempt for her to catch the eye of Max. Her motivations for attending the school had laid elsewhere; the education was top-notch, and Lily wanted to get as far away from the royal court of Triola as she could. She hated the stuffy rules, the gossiping, and the judgment. Little did she know, she only traded one stifling life for another. The people at Grantmire were exactly like the people she grew up with in Triola. At least at Grantmire, she could focus on her studies—that

was, until Max was assigned as her lab partner.

He was an unexpected distraction—at least on her part—as she had no intentions to follow her parents’ orders when it came to the crown prince. Those chocolate eyes though, sucked her in against her will. She found herself drawn into their warmth without even knowing what was happening.

What started out as a forced partnership by their teacher, turned into true friendship, and a month ago, something more. The relationship was new, but Lily was hopeful for their future.

“There you are,” Max said with a smile, coming to a halt next to her. “I’m glad you waited for me. You were the first person I wanted to see when that goal went in.”

The kind regard behind his comment made Lily’s face turn pink with pleasure. As he moved towards her, his dark eyes peered deep into her own, and she felt her stomach somersault with anticipation.

Max had a way of making everything around her melt away until it was just the two of them. He reached out and pulled her towards him, then let his lips descend to hers. The kiss was tender, yet passionate, filled with the joy of the moment.

He pulled back and gave her a lopsided grin. “That was worth every beating I took out there on the field,” Max admitted, “just to get one more kiss from you.”

Lily let out a small laugh before saying, “I’m glad I could keep you motivated.”

He picked her up and twirled her around, both of them laughing this time, completely caught up in the perfection of being together.

Never had Lily felt so adored, like she was the only girl in the world for Max. She

would have never believed the crown prince of her home country would fall for her.

The rest of the team was yelling as they made their way off the field. Richard came up and patted Max on the back. “You better head with me to the locker room, Champ. Coach will want to talk to all of us before we head out to celebrate.”

Max nodded. “All right.” Turning his attention back to Lily, he said, “I’ll text you once we’re done so you can come with me.”

“Okay. A few of my friends are waving for me to join them. I’ll catch up with you soon.”

After Max headed off with Richard, Lily made her way over to where Lady Isabella Rindell and Lady Margo Benett, Lily’s best friends, were waiting. Isabella was Spanish nobility, while Margo was from Triola like herself.

“You and Max are just the cutest thing ever,” Isabella said with a giggle. “You’re perfect for each other.”

“I keep thinking it’s a dream. I never thought I would find my perfect match this young,” Lily admitted, “especially since I wasn’t even looking.”

“How romantic,” Margo sighed. “What I wouldn’t give to find a guy just like Max.”

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:10 am*

“You will one day, Margo,” Lily assured her friend. “It just happens when you least expect it.”

“What do you guys have planned tonight after the big celebration?” Isabella asked with a knowing smile. “Is tonight going to be the night?”

Lily shook her head. “You know I’m waiting until I get married, Isabella. Just because I’m with Max now, it doesn’t change that.”

“I always forget how old-fashioned you are,” Isabella stated. “You know Max has certain expectations. After all, his last girlfriend was Georgina, and we all know how she loved to brag about her and Max’s exploits. You don’t want him to break up with you because of it, or date someone else on the side.”

It was true. Though Isabella was blunt about the situation, Lily was worried about her choice to stay abstinent. She hadn’t broached the subject with Max, but the more alone time they spent together, the different scenarios of his reaction rushed through her head. Not wanting to dwell on it or the uncomfortable feelings it stirred in her, Lily decided to go find Max instead.

“I think the guys will be done changing out and talking to the coach soon. I’m going to go find him. I’ll catch up with you guys later,” Lily said, taking off without waiting for a response.

Even though she had escaped her friend’s presence and despite her best efforts to push them aside, Isabella’s words continued to haunt her. Her classmates talked about guys only wanting one thing. This made her feel like she couldn’t give Max the one

thing he would want. Would Max refrain from pressuring her for it? What would he think if she told him she wanted to wait to be intimate with him? Would he toss her aside? Would he look to someone else? She hoped he would support her decision, but she wondered how practical that was of her.

As Lily approached the doors leading to the boys' locker room, she heard Max's familiar voice speaking to someone. "You can't be here like this. What if Lily sees you?"

"Who cares if she sees me?" she heard Lady Georgina Winston, Max's ex-girlfriend, state with irritation. "I hope she does."

Lily stopped moving and ducked behind a bush. Part of her wanted to interrupt them, the other part wondered if this would answer all the troubling questions rolling around in her head. Was there something still going on between Georgina and Max? Had he been keeping it from Lily?

"I told you to keep your distance. Why can't you do what I tell you?" Max asked with frustration, as he pushed his hand through his dark hair.

"Because, you know I'm exactly what you want," Georgina stated, pressing her body up against his, "and need. Lily can't—or should I say won't. You need someone real," she said, taking his hand and placing it on her chest, "who can be real with you."

Before Lily could decide whether she wanted to interrupt, Georgina leaned up and kissed Max on the mouth. Bile rose in Lily's throat as she watched the other girl's lips linger on her boyfriend's mouth without him pulling away.

Not being able to stomach another moment, Lily turned and ran from the awful situation behind her. She had her answer, Max wanted something Lily couldn't give him. Though their relationship had barely begun, what they had was over. Lily knew

she would never be the same again.



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:10 am*

### Chapter One

#### Present day

The yacht was rocking more than normal, causing Max's stomach to tighten with nausea. As he moved his head to the side, the pounding increased to a rapidly painful tempo. It felt like Triola's annual Independence Day fireworks show was going off in his head.

When he cracked his eyes open, the sunshine made him wince. He quickly retracted his eyelids, regretting his decision to have a third bottle of champagne the previous night.

Max reached out his hand towards the nightstand, scrounging around for the button to summon Patrick. He needed a Bloody Mary, an I.V. bag, and sunglasses immediately.

A few moments later, he heard the calm, formal tone of his royal valet from the double doors to the royal suite. "Good morning, Master Beaumont. Are you requiring your usual this afternoon?"

The barely veiled disapproving tone wasn't lost on Max. The only reason Patrick got away with it was because he had been assigned as Max's personal valet since Max was a child. Patrick was more like family than a servant. Even upon Max's insistence Patrick call him by his first name, the valet refused. He only relented to switching from "your royal highness" to "Master Beaumont" after years of hounding—and only when in private. In public, Patrick still insisted on using the insufferable royal title.

Ignoring the judgment and formality, Max said, “Yes, Patrick, and you better make the Bloody Mary a double. Last night was a doozy. What time is it anyway?”

“Three o’clock, Master Beaumont,” Patrick replied. “You’ve missed four calls from the king today. His Majesty demands you call him at once.”

“Did he say what he wanted?”

“He did not,” Patrick said, hesitating before he added, “but his tone showed it was not good. I wouldn’t keep him waiting any further.”

Patrick entered the room and placed Max’s cell phone on the nightstand.

Max slung his legs over the side of the bed, stretched out and grabbed his phone. Remembering the night before, he glanced next to him. The bed was empty. “Where’s Starla?” Max asked with confusion.

“She’s sunbathing on the upper deck,” Patrick paused as he tried to mask a look of irritation, “in the nude. I tried to explain to her it was improper to have her do so on the royal yacht, but she informed me you told her to make herself at home.”

Max let out a chuckle. “What can I say, Starla is a free spirit.”

The sexy pop singer, Starla Stone, was known to be splashy. She loved making a scene and being the center of attention. This appealed to Max as he was in full swing of doing the same. When she had set her eyes on him at a nightclub in Monaco, he decided he could use the new distraction.

“Indeed,” Patrick stated with an equally disapproving tone. “I will go get your usual while you call His Majesty. Will there be anything further, Master Beaumont?”

“No, that will be all Patrick,” Max stated as he touched the screen of his cell phone, causing it to light up. Sure enough, there were four logged calls from his father. Whatever was going on was important, or he wouldn’t have made such a rapid string of calls.

Max took a deep breath, then clicked the top button. One ring later, his father’s royal secretary answered the phone. “Good afternoon. This is Sir Ronald Humphrey, secretary to his Royal Majesty, King Gerard James Beaumont. May I ask who is calling and in what regard.”

Just by being on the phone with Ronald, Max could feel the tightening of the royal court around him. He had taken the royal yacht thousands of miles away and still couldn’t escape his family’s stifling legacy.

“Hello, Ronald, this is Max. I’m calling to talk with my father.”

There was a long pause on the other end before Ronald said, “Good afternoon, your Royal Highness. I will inform his Majesty you are ready to speak with him.”

The phone clicked and there was symphony music that played in the background until two minutes later, Max’s father’s irritated voice took over the line. “I see you finally called me back.”

“Patrick told me you were trying to reach me.”

“I have been—unsuccessfully I might add. You realize that part of your responsibilities as the Crown Prince is to be available when I need to get a hold of you.”

“I never agreed to that, Father,” Max countered. “It’s something you thrust upon me whenever you get the chance.”

“We don’t get to choose what we are born into, Maxwell. You were born to privilege, and with it comes certain expectations and duties. You would do well to accept that rather than run from it.”

“I’m not running from anything,” Max stated defensively, knowing denying it didn’t make it any less true.

“If that was the case, you wouldn’t spend all your time hundreds of miles away partying on the family’s private island and yacht.”

“Excuse me if I would rather enjoy my life than be forced to live it for others,” Max stated with resentment. “Everyone else gets to live their lives as they want. I only wish to do the same.”

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:10 am*

“You aren’t like everyone else. I don’t know what happened to you, Maxwell. You were such a kind and caring boy growing up. I had such high hopes for you. Then something changed when you got older.”

Max knew exactly what—or rather who—made him change, but he wasn’t about to open old wounds. Better to leave the past where it belonged: behind him. It was much easier focusing on having fun and floating around the world spending his family’s money.

“Now that you’re done critiquing my failings, I think I will go and live down to your expectations for me,” Max stated sarcastically. “I’ve got a Bloody Mary waiting along with a blonde.”

“Not so fast, Maxwell Gerard Beaumont. That’s why I’m calling you,” his father stated in an authoritative voice.

“You called me to talk about my Bloody Mary?” Max teased, knowing it would push his father’s buttons.

“No, I’m calling you about the blonde.”

“Father, Mother can be awful, but isn’t it—”

“Enough Maxwell,” his father shouted. “This isn’t a joking matter. You can’t wiggle your way out of every situation with a charming joke.”

“I beg to differ. My phonebook is full of women that would argue the contrary. I’m

quite good at it,” Max countered with a smirk that formed on his lips, even though he knew his father couldn’t see it.

“Maxwell, you have crossed the line this time. That trouble-making pop star you’re carousing around with, has gotten you both plastered all over the news. The articles are less than flattering, and you are tarnishing the reputation of Triola.”

“Really, Father? I’m capable of toppling the entire reputation of a country?”

“As the Crown Prince, you most definitely are, which is why you will end all communications with that—woman—and return to Triola at once.”

“No, I don’t think so, Father. I quite like it here in the South of France. I have no intention of coming back to Triola any time soon.”

“It is not a request. I am your father, and more importantly, your king. If you do not return to Triola immediately, I will cut you off from everything. No money, no yacht, no servants. You will be completely on your own. Do you understand me?” his father growled in anger. “I am done letting you act like an imbecile at our country’s expense.”

Max wanted to argue, but part of him knew it wouldn’t do him any good. He’d never heard his father so upset, and his father didn’t make empty threats. If Max pushed him and didn’t comply, his father would cut him off. Max had never been without all the royal perks. He didn’t know how he would fair, but he suspected, not well.

“Fine, Father, I will make arrangements to return to Triola as soon as possible.”

“Today,” his father stated adamantly. “Take the helicopter to the airport. The jet will be waiting for you.”

Though he didn't like being dictated to, he could suffer a week or two back home. Once he smoothed everything out and appeased his parents with a few public appearances, he could return to his life abroad.

\* \* \*

As Lily turned the final page of the book, she looked out at the gathered children. "And the princess lived happily ever after," Lily said as she closed the book. "I hope all of you enjoyed the story."

They all clapped and cheered as one of the orphanage workers leaned towards her and told her what was next.

"It's nap time," Lily announced, trying to keep an upbeat tone, knowing the children wouldn't be happy about the news.

The group of kids, ranging between the ages of 3-8, all sighed with disappointment.

"Just one more story, Lady Lily?" a little boy with brown hair and eyes stated, his bottom lip coming out in a pout.

"I wish I could, but I don't want to break the rules," she leaned towards the boy and added in a whisper, "I want to make sure I can come back soon."

The boy giggled and nodded, making his dark hair dance on top of his head. "We want that too."

As Lily stood up from her chair, she watched as the orphanage workers gathered up the kids for their naps. They took them to the two rooms, one for boys and the other for the girls. There were more kids than space, and Lily had been working on raising funds to expand the Chinese orphanage. She was grateful she finally met the goal to

add on an additional wing to house another dozen kids.

Sue Shongshay, who ran the orphanage, came up to Lily with a giant smile on her face. “Thank you, Lady Liliana. You’ve done so much for the kids here, really for all of us,” Sue said, shaking Lily’s hand profusely. “I can’t believe you took time off from your UN work to come here to present the check to us.”

“She’s fantastic, isn’t she?” Lord Joseph Rogers agreed, coming up to stand next to them. The blond-haired man, with a strong jaw and steely blue eyes, gave her a look of admiration as he added, “She never ceases to amaze me.”

Lily averted her eyes, knowing if she let them meet Joseph’s, he would stare at her with affection. They had grown up together in Triola’s royal court. When he attended one of her fundraisers for the orphanage, he had shown an interest—she suspected more in her than her cause—but she had assumed he would tire of her and move on. Two years later, he was still following her from cause to cause.



## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:10 am*

Though he was a good friend, and it was nice to have the support, she didn't see him as anything more than just that. Not only was she too busy for a romantic entanglement, but she'd been burned by letting herself develop feelings when she should focus on other matters. She wouldn't let herself get distracted again. It nearly destroyed her the last time.

"How kind of you to say so, Joseph, but this was a joint effort by all of us."

"You mustn't make light of what you did, Lady Liliana. You spent countless hours advocating for the orphanage by sending out letters, hosting fundraisers, and making everyone see the importance of this place," Sue said with audible awe. "We are lucky you care so much for what happens to these children."

Lily's cheeks flushed with embarrassment. She didn't feel comfortable receiving so much praise for doing the right thing. She was lucky—being born into a safe environment in a sustainable country—and wanted to help those that didn't end up with the same fortunate birthright. "I'm just glad I can help. We've all worked so hard to raise this money. I wouldn't want to just send it over and not be here to give it to you in person."

Though it was only one section of the orphanage she could help, Lily knew it would make a huge difference. Once the expansion was completed, she could raise money to add a nursery wing for infants.

A buzzing sound drew Lily's attention to her cell phone. She glanced down at it and noticed she had an incoming call from her mother.

“I need to take this call,” Lily said, stepping away from the other two people. She didn’t need an audience for her mother making a case for her to return to Triola. She received such a call about once a month, and she was due one any day. Quickly, she sent a silent prayer for God to help her remain civil.

“Hello, Mother,” Lily said, taking in a deep breath and preparing herself for the passive aggressive digs about her work and how she is letting her parents down by not being at court.

“Good morning, Liliana.”

“It’s actually late afternoon here, Mother.”

“How do you expect me to keep track of that? You’re always going from one place to another in some third world country.”

Ah, and there it was—the dig Lily knew her mother couldn’t go more than five seconds from working into the conversation.

“Was there a specific reason you were calling?” Lily asked, trying to remain calm and not let her mother know she was upsetting her.

“As a matter-of-fact, there is. It’s time for you to come home, Liliana.”

“Not this again, Mother. You know perfectly well, I’m not in Triola because I’m helping the people here in Asia.”

“Yes, you’ve made that clear,” her mother stated tersely. “But the reason you are being summoned home is because of your father.”

“What’s wrong? Is father hurt?”

“He asked me not to say anything, but I think under the circumstances, you should be made aware of his condition.”

“What condition, Mother?”

There was a long pause on the other end of the line, before she stated quietly, “Your father had a mild heart attack. His heart isn’t doing well. The doctor has put him on two medications to rectify the situation, but they told him he needed to take it easy. Unfortunately, he feels it’s his duty to keep up the family image at court and won’t adhere to their instructions. Of course, if you came home and took up your position in the royal court again, it would give him the ability to take a needed break.”

“Mother, I haven’t been back at court in over five years. I don’t think me returning will make a difference. No one will even remember who I am. How can I help with the family image?”

“You’re wrong. Though you’ve been away, many of the Triolans have kept up with you via your blog and social media posts. You are somewhat of a mini-celebrity around here. You’ll see once you get home. I’ve booked your flight and emailed you the details. I will see you when you get here tomorrow.”

Her mother ended the phone call, giving Lily no chance to further object.

Joseph must have noticed her call ended, because a few moments later, he was by her side again. “Is everything all right?” he asked with concern.

“It seems I’ve been summoned home,” Lily stated ominously. “I’m to return to Triola immediately.”

“How long will you be gone? Will you miss the ground breaking for the expansion in two months?” Joseph asked.

She shook her head. “I won’t let that happen. I’ve worked too hard to let anything keep me from finishing this project. I’ll just go home, check on my father, and then return in time to shovel the first pile of dirt myself.”

Even as she said the words, she wondered how easy it would be. Her mother was a formidable woman, and it had taken a miracle to get away from Triola’s royal court once. Would Lily be able to do it twice?

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:11 am*

### Chapter Two

As Max walked down the ramp from the royal jet, he looked out at the familiar sight of the Triola royal welcome. A long, black, stretch-limo, along with a chauffeur, stood nearby. There were several paparazzi waiting with cameras behind a roped off area.

They were shouting out questions rapidly. “Where’s Starla? Is she coming to Triola to meet you? Are you going to propose?”

Max pushed his sunglasses up from the bottom of his nose and shrugged. “You guys ought to know, I won’t be staying in Triola long enough for her to need to come here.”

Without hesitation, more questions were sprayed at him. “Why are you back? Are you out of money? Is there something wrong with the king or queen?”

This time, Max refrained from answering. He didn’t like the sudden turn the questions took. Ignoring the paparazzi, he walked to the limo and waited for Patrick to join him as his chauffeur opened the car door.

“Good evening, your Royal Highness,” the older man said with a grin. “It’s good to have you back in Triola.”

Max glanced over at the chauffeur. After a moment’s pause, he asked, “Harry? Is that you?”

The grey-haired man nodded. "It is indeed, your Royal Highness. Your father thought you would prefer to have someone you know rather than one of the new chauffeurs."

"I hate to admit it, but he was right. It's good to see you," Max said, patting the older man's back. "You were always good to me growing up. You never treated me like a burden."

"Of course not, your Royal Highness," Harry stated with an offended tone. "I think no one has ever viewed you that way."

"I very much doubt that," Max declared with a roll of his shoulders, "but it's kind of you to say so."

Max slid into the leather seats of the car and immediately looked around for a bottle of champagne. Nothing. "That's odd. No liquor either," Max mumbled under his breath.

"Is everything all right, Master Beaumont?" Patrick asked with concern, as he took a seat across from Max.

"Nothing you need to worry yourself about," Max stated as he pushed the button to lower the partition separating them from Harry. "What's going on?" Max barked out in irritation.

"What are you referring to, your royal highness?"

"The fact that there isn't a lick of alcohol in this car," Max accused as he leaned forward. "It's like the Prohibition in here."

"The king thought it best you stay sober while you're home. He ordered that all the alcohol be removed from the royal palace and all the limos."

Max slumped back in his seat and crossed his arms. “So, it really is the Prohibition,” he mumbled, already hating the decision to give in to his father’s blackmail. “This will be a long week.” Then realizing he wasn’t at the palace yet, Max stated, “I want you to stop at the nearest store.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that, your Royal Highness. Your father gave explicit instructions I was to return with you directly. No stops or detours.”

“Sounds about right,” Max stated begrudgingly. “The old man thinks of everything.”

Irritably, Max punched the button to roll up the divider. If Max would sulk, he would do so without Harry watching him.

What had Max gotten himself into? He hadn’t expected his father would orchestrate a moratorium on all libations while he was home. What else did his father have cooked up while Max was in Triola? Perhaps he should have tried to make it on his own rather than just assume he couldn’t do it.

As Max’s chauffeur pulled through the gates signifying entrance into the royal palace, the enormous baroque structure came into view. The stacks of marble pillars lined the front and framed the massive doors in the center. The facade had gold that accented the statues that were sprinkled throughout the garden and on the edges of the fountain in the center.

Max wondered if they would give him his old set of rooms in the west wing. With over 2,000 rooms, he wouldn’t be surprised if no one had stayed in them since he last left two years ago.

The limo came to a stop, and a few moments later, the door opened to reveal a footman for the palace.

“Good evening, your Royal Highness,” a young brown-haired man he didn’t recognize said, holding the car door open.

Max stepped out, and made his way up the stairs and through the doors being held open by two additional servants. Though Max couldn’t see him, he knew Patrick was close behind.

“Your father informed me you were to come to his study as soon as you arrived,” Patrick stated from behind Max. “We should go there posthaste.”

“We could do that—but we won’t,” Max informed Patrick. “I haven’t been back here in two years. I think I will check out a few things before meeting with my father to receive my penance.”



## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:11 am*

“Really, Master Beaumont, you should take this situation more seriously. The king will only tolerate so much insubordination before you push him too far.”

“I appreciate your candor, Patrick, but my relationship with my father isn’t something I need advice on.”

“Very well, your Royal Highness,” Patrick said. “I will go inform the king you will be delayed.”

Max continued down the hall towards the east wing where the royal court guests were housed. Perhaps there were a couple of pretty courtiers who could distract him while he was here. With his title, charm, and money, he knew it would be easy enough to find many young women to help him pass the time while he was stuck in Triola.

He passed through the throne room, momentarily glancing at the massive seat he would end up inhabiting one day. It made Max’s stomach clench with dread. He would do anything to avoid taking on such a daunting task. There had even been times when he had contemplated abdicating, but his father always talked him out of it, telling him he would grow used to the idea as he got older. It hadn’t happened yet, and Max wondered if it ever would.

As Max entered the next area, he heard voices speaking in hushed tones, which ended abruptly once he entered the massive hall. All eyes turned towards him, and Max resisted the urge to fidget under the scrutiny.

He recognized all the noble families immediately; having them attend royal functions over the years made them a constant presence during his childhood. What he found

intriguing was that there were several of the noble families' daughters present in their finest attire, making it clear they knew that the Crown Prince was returning to Triola.

Two of the young women rushed to his side with thickly plastered makeup and perfectly arranged hair.

"Welcome home, your Royal Highness," the blonde one stated, placing her pristinely manicured hand on his arm. "I am Lady Matilda Blanchard, the daughter of Baron Russix, in case you don't remember me from when we were children."

The other brunette woman placed her own manicured hand on his other arm and said, "And I am Lady Alexa Davidson. My father is the Viscount Freymore. We also spent time here at the palace together when we were young."

"Ladies, ladies, Max needs some space," Georgina, Max's ex-girlfriend from high school, stated as she came up to him and put her arm through his, pulling him away from the other two women who instantly had disappointed looks on their faces.

She leaned towards him and whispered, "Sorry about the two of them. They've been jabbering all day about your return and couldn't help themselves."

Though Max welcomed female company while he was at the palace, he didn't want it in the form of Georgina. She had used him while they were teenagers to gain attention. She tried to convince him to take her back when he ended things because of it. Though all the women most assuredly wanted to use him to advance their position in the royal court, Georgina was deceitful about it. She had hurt him tremendously. He had no desire to go down that road with her again.

Disentangling himself from Georgina's grip, Max stepped back from her and pointed out, "They aren't the only ones who found the need to pounce on me."

“Oh, don’t be so dramatic, Max. With our history, you should know I would want to... catch up,” she said, arching her eyebrow and smiling in a knowing way.

“You might want to, but it only goes one way. And you should address me as your Royal Highness. We haven’t been on a first name basis in years.”

Georgina crossed her arms and shook her head. “I’m not sure what’s gotten into you. I’m only trying to welcome you home.”

Irritated that Georgina wouldn’t realize he wanted nothing to do with her, Max stated bluntly, “I need to take my leave. If you will excuse me, Lady Georgina.”

Without waiting for a response, he quickly exited the social hall and made his way towards the wing of guest rooms. He had no reason to be in that part of the palace, but he didn’t want to go back the way he came and risk running into Patrick. He needed a few minutes to get his anger under control before he did anything else.

As he moved down the hallway, he wondered how he would get through the next couple of weeks. The royal court was even worse than he had remembered. It had always been filled with gossips, opportunists, and vipers, but it was clear, this time they were focused on him.

Movement from the end of the hall caught Max’s attention. As the figure came into focus, Max stopped walking, rooted to the spot in shock.

Lily, the only girl he had ever loved, stood at the other end of the hallway. The air in the space was sucked out, causing Max’s chest to feel like it would explode. He had been prepared for a myriad of other circumstances, but never in his wildest dreams did he think he would end up standing across from the one woman who broke his heart.

\* \* \*

Once Lily saw Max at the other end of the hall, she stopped in her tracks. The blood drained from her face as her eyes grew wide with surprise.

They stared at each other for several seconds without either of them speaking a word. The tension was thick, neither of them breaking the silence, which became more uncomfortable with every passing moment.

“What are you doing here?” Max asked, the question laced with an accusing tone.

Lily blinked several times, taking a moment to regain her composure. She hadn’t expected to see Max at the royal palace. Last she had read in a magazine, he was off gallivanting around with some model.

Eight years hadn’t diminished his effect on her though. She was doing her best to keep him from knowing that. He looked even more handsome than he did on the magazine covers and social media posts she happened to see occasionally.

Realizing he had asked her a question, she finally answered him, “My mother asked me to come home because my father had a heart attack.”

Max tilted his head to the side and inquired, “Is he all right?”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:11 am*

“He should have been taking it easy, but you know how the Earl of Northrop is. He would have to be strapped down to his bed to keep him from making appearances at court.”

“Yes, but you’ve always had a way with him—more so than anyone else,” Max pointed out. “If anyone could make him refrain from overexerting himself, it would be you.”

“I’m sure that’s why my mother asked me to come back. She needed my help to convince him to do just that.”

“There you are, Master Beaumont.”

Lily recognized Max’s personal valet, Patrick, coming up behind him.

“I have been looking for you everywhere. The king sent me to find you. He told me he has no patience for your games today, and you are to report to him at once.”

Patrick glanced down the hall and a look of shock crossed his face as he recognized Lily. “Pardon my interruption, your Royal Highness. I didn’t know you were busy with someone.”

“I wasn’t,” Max stated firmly. “We merely were coming down the same hallway.” Giving a nod of his head, he said to Lily, “If you will excuse me, Lady Liliana, it seems duty calls.”

Lily watched as Max and Patrick walked away, with Max mumbling something about

only being home less than an hour and not being able to have five minutes to himself.

Certain they were gone, Lily let herself sag against the wall and let out the breath she had been holding since the moment she laid eyes on Max again. The surge of feelings that came flooding back startled Lily. She had thought she had found a way to get over him, but it seemed time and distance only muffled what she felt.

“Liliana, I have been looking for you everywhere,” her mother, the Countess of Northrop, stated with irritation. “Your father has important matters to discuss with you.” Arching an eyebrow, she asked with concern, “What’s the matter?”

Lily pushed off the wall and shook her head. “Nothing. What were you saying?”

“Your father needs to speak with you right away.”

“Where is he?”

“He asked me to bring you to the royal library.”

Lily nodded, allowing her mother to escort her through the winding areas, various hallways, and staircases that led to the other wing of the palace where the library was located. As they made their way to meet her father, Lily sent up a silent prayer for God to help her with the situation.

As they entered the room that was the size of most people’s homes, Lily stiffened as she realized not only was her father present, but also the King and Queen of Triola, and next to them, Max.

What on earth was going on? As she scanned the people in the room, she noticed all of them had serious looks on their faces, and Max looked as confused as she did. If she didn’t know any better, she would think they had both walked into an ambush.

“Good, finally everyone is here,” the king stated with a huff. “We have a lot to do, and not a lot of time to do it in.”

“What’s going on, Father? You’ve been closed-mouthed and refused to say anything until we were all here,” Max said with an annoyed tone.

“Don’t forget who you are talking to, Maxwell Gerard Beaumont. I will not tolerate your insubordination. It’s time you finally accept your responsibilities as the Crown Prince of Triola.”

“If you will subject me to a dressing-down, can we at least not do it in the presence of non-family members,” Max said, glancing at Lily with a frown.

“Non-family members for now,” the queen corrected, “but soon that will change.”

“What are you talking about, Mother?” Max asked with confusion. “Am I unaware that someone from the Lockhart family is engaged to a Beaumont?”

“As a matter of fact, that is precisely what is going on,” Max’s father confirmed to the group. “I have discussed your situation with the Earl. As one of my trusted advisors, we are in agreement that something must be done. The royal family—and frankly the entire country—is tired of your bad boy image being flaunted all over the world.”

“I will not apologize for living my life the way I want,” Max defended. “I should have fun while I can, because someday it will all be over.”

“That day is today,” the king stated adamantly. “We have arranged for you to be married to a Triola noblewoman who will make an excellent counterpart for you. The people already love her, and she has the type of reputation and image that will help yours tremendously.”

The king's and her father's attention both swiftly turned to Lily. Suddenly, it became clear why she was summoned to be present for a meeting about Max's reputation. They wanted to use her to clean it up.

"You can't possibly mean me," Lily objected, gesturing to herself.

"We most certainly can," her father stated, coming forward and pulling her closer to Max. "The two of you will be married by the end of the year. We will give you the next two months to reacquaint yourself; after which we will announce your engagement."



## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:11 am*

“You can’t be serious,” Max yelled with dismay. “I’m perfectly capable of picking out my own wife, when and if I’m ever ready to do so.”

“You’ve made it perfectly clear, you are incapable of managing your own life, which is why as your king and father, I am stepping in to rectify the situation.”

“Father, you can’t realistically be supporting the idea of an arranged marriage for us. They’re a relic of an outdated past,” Lily stated with indignation.

“In most cases, I would agree,” the earl stated with a nod, “but in extreme cases, extreme solutions are required. We must all do what is best for Triola.”

Lily wanted to argue that she knew her father’s true motivation had nothing to do with what was best for Triola, but more for what was best for the Lockhart family. If Lily married Max, she would one day be the queen, which would make them the second most powerful family in all of Triola. He had been angling his entire life to get as close to the king as he could, even sending Lily to Grantmire when she was young hoping to get Max to marry her out of school. Of course, all of that had gone tragically wrong when Max had betrayed her and kissed Georgina, which made all of this so much worse. She hadn’t told her parents the truth and let them believe he had ended things rather than tell them the embarrassing truth he had cheated on her. If she had, they would have been furious with her inability to keep Max happy.

She secretly wondered what it would be like to be married to the man she shared her first kiss with eight years ago. There was no way, however, she would be with a man who made it clear he was a playboy and had no qualms about keeping lots of women around him at all times. Marriage wasn’t a high priority for Lily, but if she ever made

those type of vows, it would be once, and to a man she could trust. She knew from experience, Max couldn't be that guy.

Taking a deep breath, Lily declared, "I won't agree to this. This is the 21st century, and women have the right to choose their own husband."

"Agreed," Max stated with a nod. "I don't agree with this course of action either."

"Of course you don't," the queen stated with frustration. "You would much rather keep wasting the crown's money while living your bachelor lifestyle."

"But one way or the other, that ends today," the king declared. "You will marry a woman of my choosing, or you will no longer be a part of this family. If you want to keep receiving the benefits of being a royal, you will do as I command."

Max's face turned white as he whispered, "You wouldn't. I mean, you've threatened to do so before, but you actually wouldn't do it."

"Try me," the king said through clenched teeth. "I have reached the end of my rope with you, Maxwell. I see no other way."

Lily stepped back and moved towards the door. "You might have leverage on the Crown Prince, but there is nothing you can do to make me compliant in this situation."

"But isn't there?" the king asked with smugness. "I know the way to your heart, Lady Liliana, and if you agree to this arrangement, I will make you the head of the Triola Philanthropic Foundation."

The offer stopped Lily dead in her tracks. "There is no such thing," Lily pointed out. "I know that the crown takes care of the people here, but there's never been a formal

foundation to do it.”

“Oh, it would go much further than that, my dear,” the king said, as if dangling a carrot in front of a horse to motivate it to comply. “Yes, you could use the extensive funds of the foundation to help the people of Triola, but it will also allow you to use portions of the funds abroad. Meaning, you could use it to overhaul that orphanage in China you have been working to save.”

Tempting ideas for several projects she had encountered abroad, including the orphanage, came to the forefront of her mind. All she had ever wanted to do was help the less fortunate people of the world, and she was being presented a clear way to do it. It would mean sacrificing her own freedom and marrying a man who had hurt her in the past, but, if she made it clear to Max that it was simply a business arrangement between two people, maybe she could make it work.

“Since you haven’t finished leaving, I can assume that means you will move forward with this plan?” the king asked in a way that made it more of a statement than a question.

Lily nodded her head, realizing that she felt like she was making a deal with Rumpelstiltskin. But if it meant she could help countless people all around the world, she would have to find a way to make peace with that.

As her father took her hand and placed it in Max’s, a bolt of electricity shot up her arm. The instant connection restarted a part of her heart that had been dormant since she ended things with Max eight years ago.

Her eyes quickly darted to his. As she looked into them, she realized rather than being concerned with the king, she should be worried about the fact she was agreeing to marry a wolf in sheep’s clothing. A wolf that was very, very good at getting under her skin.

### Chapter Three

Irritation flooded every pore of Max's body as he let the tailor finish the final touches on the custom suit. Max had tried to explain that he wasn't in need of any new clothing, but his father insisted he look pristine for the formal royal dinner to celebrate Max's return home.

That was the official reason for the dinner. The ulterior motives were so that Max would have time to get to know Lily again, and to allow the royal court an opportunity to begin seeing them together. Once that happened, his father had plans to start having them make appearances together in public. Not one moment of their lives, it seemed, was to be left to chance. All of it was being meticulously calculated and laid out for them.

"Here is your pocket square, your Royal Highness," Patrick said, inserting the white piece of fabric that complimented the black tuxedo he was wearing.

The royal tailor excused himself, leaving Patrick and Max alone as Patrick finished adding the final pieces to Max's attire—a pair of platinum encrusted diamond cufflinks and a black bow tie.

"Thank you, Patrick," Max said, stepping out of the dressing room and heading into his sitting area. "How long before I'm required to be downstairs for this wretched event?"

Patrick glanced at his pocket watch, an outdated mode of telling time but one he refused to give up. "You have fifteen minutes, Master Beaumont, before they make

the formal announcement of your arrival.”

“I suppose that leaves me little time for anything else. I would be tempted to avoid going at all, but I know that would result in more restrictions.” Remembering it was a party, Max was grateful for one thing. “At least there will be alcohol finally.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize you were unaware, Master Beaumont. The king has declared the season a dry one. There will be no alcohol throughout the first two months of the New Year.”

“I’m guessing that’s in an effort to dry me out permanently,” Max stated snidely. “It’s going to be an even longer night than I first anticipated.”

“You’ll manage to survive somehow, Master Beaumont; you always do.”

“I would much rather be back on the yacht or at a casino in Monaco.”

“Focus on tonight, Master Beaumont. The rest will work itself out over time.”

Though Max hoped Patrick was right, he highly doubted there would be any chance of him getting away for an excursion any time soon. His father had him under lock and key for the foreseeable future.

Pulling on the bottom of his dinner jacket to adjust it one final time, Max said, “I suppose it’s time to go brave the vultures downstairs. I’m sure they’re just waiting to pick apart my bones.”

“Good luck, Master Beaumont.”

Max nodded before heading out of his suite and making his way to the doors by the entry to the royal dining hall. One of the royal valets was waiting by the door. As

soon as the auburn-haired man saw Max, he quickly bowed and said, “Good evening, your Royal Highness. Are you ready for me to make your announcement?”

With a nod of his head, Max consented.

The valet opened the door, stepped forward, and raised his voice loud enough to interrupt the quiet talking that was happening around the room. “His Royal Highness, Maxwell Gerard Beaumont, the Crown Prince of Triola.”

All eyes turned to Max as he entered the giant room filled with over five hundred members of the royal court, Triola dignitaries, and celebrities. As he passed by different groups, he greeted them cordially, each of them reciprocating, until he reached his parents.

“We see you are on time,” his father noted with surprise. “A welcome change from past events.”

“It isn’t like I have anywhere else I can go,” Max stated with resentment. “You’ve made it clear that I must conform, or the consequences will be severe.”

“Don’t think of it as a punishment, but rather an opportunity to become familiar with the country you will run one day,” his father encouraged. “A country you’ve neglected for far too long.”

“That’s enough, Gerard, Max has barely been home two days and you’re already making it unbearable for him,” the queen whispered. “Let’s try to make it a pleasant evening.”

“You should make your way over to your fiancée’s side,” the king suggested, his eyes focusing behind Max. “It seems she already has a group of admirers. You shouldn’t let any of them get their hopes up.”

Max turned around to see what his father was talking about. Sure enough, there were three men standing around Lily. From their unwavering attention, it was clear they were smitten with her. The fact made Max's blood boil. He didn't like those men doting on her, and it took a hefty amount of resolve not to march over and stop it.

He wasn't sure what bothered him more, his reaction to the other men, or his reaction to Lily. Why did it matter so much? He wanted nothing real with Lily.

Even as he tried to convince himself it was true, he couldn't help but admit to himself how beautiful she looked tonight in her formal blue gown. It made her golden eyes sparkle. Flashes of how her perfect lips felt beneath his own came flooding back, making him uncomfortable with the desires that flared to the surface.

In an effort to squash any nostalgia, Max reminded himself that she had nearly destroyed him when they were young. He had been completely devoted to her, when out of the blue, she ended things. It had devastated him, leaving him with the inability to trust women afterward.

"Aren't you going to go over there," Max's mother suggested from behind him.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:11 am*

“Do I have a choice?” Max asked with frustration, hating being forced into a situation he didn’t like.

“You don’t. So, go now,” his father commanded.

Begrudgingly, Max moved towards Lily, but before he could arrive at his destination, Lady Matilda and Lady Alexa appeared in front of him, stopping him.

“Good evening, your Royal Highness,” Alexa stated with a flirtatious smile. “It’s so good to see you again.”

“It’s a pleasure to see you as well,” Max returned, grateful for the interruption and welcomed distraction. He would rather focus on any other woman present then spend any more time with Lily than needed.

“We’ve noticed the seating arrangements,” Matilda said with a pout, “and you’re seated all the way on the other side of the room from us.”

“I’m sorry, ladies, for the inconvenience. It’s beyond my control, but it doesn’t mean we can’t enjoy ourselves for the time being.”

“I like the sound of that,” Alexa said, letting out a small laugh that drew the attention from other guests around them, including Lily, who seemed put off by it.

Good, that was exactly what he wanted. If he could keep her cold towards him, it would make it much easier to keep affection out of the situation. She had already broken his heart once; he didn’t need a repeat performance.



Three more unmarried noblewomen came to stand in the group around Max, adding to his own flock of admirers. With all the attention, perhaps tonight wouldn't be as bad as Max first anticipated.

\* \* \*

The group of women around Max had grown to a half a dozen, all of them flirting and fawning all over him. Lily knew she shouldn't care, but every time a new woman joined, her jealousy grew a tiny bit, causing her to be angry with herself over her unwanted reaction.

Lily had been justified in ending things back when they were at boarding school. Max was just the same as he was when they were young. He continued to behave abhorrently, flirting with anything that had an ample chest and long legs. What was wrong with him?

"Did you hear my question, Lady Liliana?"

Shaking her head, she glanced over at the black-haired man standing next to her, who had pulled her away from the other men to a more remote part of the room. "I'm sorry, Lord Michael. I was distracted. What were you saying?"

Michael's focus turned towards where Lily had been looking. A wry grin formed on his face. "I see the Crown Prince has garnered your attention like every other eligible woman in the room."

"It's not what you think," Lily stated adamantly. "He just has a way of making a spectacle of himself." Then remembering who she was talking about, she quickly apologized, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that about the Crown Prince."

"On the contrary, it's rare to have a woman at the royal court who isn't obsessed with

his Royal Highness,” Michael said with approval. “It’s rather refreshing and makes my chances of keeping your attention much more possible.”

Little did he know, his chances—along with every other man—ended the previous day when she agreed to marry Max. A decision she was regretting more and more as she continued to watch Max’s behavior with the other women. Perhaps she should have asked for time to pray about the decision before agreeing, considering what she had gotten herself into.

Would he continue to behave this way after their engagement was announced publicly? Or even worse after they were married? They hadn’t talked about their expectations, but respect was paramount in any functional marriage as far as Lily was concerned. She didn’t want to be married to a man who would brazenly flirt with other women.

“There you are, Lady Liliana,” Lord Joseph Rogers’ familiar voice greeted. “I’m sorry I’m late, but my flight from China was delayed.”

“I didn’t know you were coming back to Triola,” Lily said with a welcoming smile. “It’s good to see you.” Turning her attention to Michael, she politely dismissed him. “Excuse me, Lord Michael, but I need to speak with Lord Joseph about a work matter.”

A look of disappointment crossed the other man’s face as he nodded, then gave a leery look to Joseph before scurrying off to find another woman to chat with.

“I figured you could use all the support you could get being back here. I know you try to avoid it as much as possible.”

Lily nodded her head, glad to have a friend by her side. “It’s been difficult, to say the least.”

“You must tell me all about it when we don’t have prying ears,” Joseph stated in a hushed voice, gesturing with his head to all the surrounding people.

Their conversation was interrupted by the announcement for everyone to take their seats for dinner. Joseph escorted Lily to her seat. Glancing at the other names, Joseph observed with surprise, “You’ve been assigned to sit next to the Crown Prince. That should be rather amusing from the rumors I’ve heard.”

“They aren’t all true you know,” Lily heard Max state from behind them. “Though I’m sure it’s easier to believe them than to think highly of your prince.”

Joseph whipped around, an expression of astonishment mixed with embarrassment clearly on his face. “I’m sorry, your Royal Highness. It was wrong of me to speak of such a matter.”

“Lucky for you, I’m much more relaxed than my father,” Max said with a shrug. “I don’t ruin people’s lives simply because they don’t approve of me. Of course, I’m not king yet, but that will change in the future,” he added, making the warning in his statement clear.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:11 am*

“If you will excuse me, sir, I need to find my seat.”

“Yes, it would be best,” Max stated, with narrowed eyes.

Once the other man was gone, Max pulled out Lily’s seat for her. As she slid into it, Max asked, “Who was that imbecile, anyway?”

“You don’t remember him?”

Max shook his head. “Should I?”

“His father is the Earl of Shundry. We all grew up together.” Then remembering who she was speaking to, she said mockingly, “But it makes sense you wouldn’t remember him. Lord Rogers doesn’t wear a skirt.”

Max pressed his lips together, a gesture she knew meant he was holding back his temper. After a moment, he said, “I’m surprised that man is the son of an earl. His father should have taught him to behave better than that, especially at a royal function.”

“In his defense, he didn’t know anyone besides me was listening,” Lily explained.

“And why would he think it appropriate to joke with a lady in that way? More specifically with you?” Max asked, almost as if he cared what her connection to Joseph was.

“We’re old friends.”

“Just friends?” Max probed further, taking the seat next to her.

“Yes, just friends. We have worked on several goodwill projects together. He was just with me at the orphanage in China.”

“Well, from the way he was looking at you since the moment he got here, I think he wants to be more than just friends,” Max observed.

“You were watching me?” Lily asked in confusion. “Why would you do that?”

“I want to know what I’m getting into with our arrangement. I don’t want to take on a jealous boyfriend on top of everything else.”

“You don’t have to worry about that,” Lily said, crossing her arms. “I haven’t had a boyfriend since boarding school.”

“Really?” Max asked with surprise. “That long? Why?”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but I’ve been busy helping other people. It doesn’t really leave room for anything romantic. Of course, you wouldn’t know what that’s like,” Lily stated with sarcasm.

“Liliana Lockhart, that is not how I raised you to speak to your future king,” she heard her mother say from behind her.

Immediately, Lily felt heat flash across her body, embarrassed that she had let Max goad her into speaking out of turn.

Lily’s eyes fell to the table as she said, “I’m sorry, Mother.”

“It isn’t me you should be apologizing to,” her mother chastised.

Forcing herself to raise her eyes to meet Max's gaze, Lily whispered, "I'm sorry, your Royal Highness. I shouldn't have said that."

"It's all right. Let's just let it go and move on," Max stated dismissively. "It will be a long night."

The rest of the evening passed by with cordial conversation between her and Max, but it remained superficial and polite. By the end of the evening, she was exhausted from monitoring her every word, and felt no better about her situation with Max than she did before the night began.

### Chapter Four

Max could feel his father's eyes prying into the back of him, watching every decision he made as he glanced through the documents in front of him. The king had insisted Max work alongside him to make sure he was prepared for when he took his place as the head of state for Triola.

Max, on the other hand, would have much preferred to simply relax in his suite, have gone to play cards at the local gentleman's club, or to spend time with a couple of the noblewomen.

"You missed that one," his father pointed out a section in one document regarding the repairs to several of the bridges in the capital's heart. "When you go through the briefings about public work projects, you need to make sure you read every part. There can be crucial parts we need clarification on before we approve them."

"Yes, Father," Max said with a nod of his head. Though he would rather be anywhere else, a small part of Max still wanted to impress his father and show him he could handle the workload of being king.

"Once we are finished with this, we will travel over to Grace Memorial Hospital. A new children's wing has opened, and they asked for the royal family to make an appearance."

"Good thing I wore a suit today, rather than coming to work with you in sweats and a t-shirt."

His father made a disapproving grunt under his breath before saying, “I hope for your sake you’re joking. It’s bad enough you’re constantly photographed with a myriad of trashy women, but at least you always manage to get photographed looking appropriately dressed.”

Max found it amusing his father drew the line at wearing casual clothing. Thank goodness he didn’t know all the other things Max had done that he would consider far worse.

“Is that why you want me to come today? To help clean up my image?” Max questioned, though he already knew the answer.

“Yes, our primary focus over the next two months is to restore the public’s trust in you. That way, when we announce your engagement to Lady Liliana, it will help solidify your re-branding.”

“Whatever you think best,” Max muttered under his breath, resolving himself to accept his father’s commands for the time being. Hopefully over the next two months, he could find a way out from his arranged engagement. He had no desire to be married to Lily.

A half hour later, the royal family arrived at the hospital. As their chauffeur pulled into the reserved parking spot for their limo, Max prepared himself for the paparazzi that would be waiting. They would expect their arrival and target him. He had no desire to answer more questions about Starla or his lifestyle. Max simply wanted to get this appearance over and retreat to the safety of the palace.

“I shouldn’t have to remind you to be on your best behavior,” his father stated, making it clear he expected Max not to mess up the beginning of his redemption tour.

“I will make sure to turn on the charm in all the right ways,” Max affirmed. “Believe



me, I want this to go smoothly just as much as you do.” Max knew the sooner he got the public back on his side, the sooner he could get back to living his life the way he wanted.

The king, queen, and crown prince all exited the limo, claps and cheers echoing around them. Mixed among them though, were a few boos and nasty comments directed Max’s way. Perhaps getting everyone to overlook his choices would be more difficult than Max thought.

“You’re disgracing Triola by being with that tramp singer,” one woman shouted. “You should be ashamed of yourself.”

The crowd hurled several more insults at him as he made his way to the platform. Max didn’t easily embarrass, but the public’s reaction made Max uncomfortable. He suddenly wished he hadn’t been forced to come to this appearance, but knew he had to make do until he could leave.

What upset Max the most though, was the fact he did not understand why everyone was so upset with him. He knew the tabloids and news outlets had been harsh, but he honestly thought it was to drum up business. He didn’t realize it was what the public thought of him as well.

As he climbed the steps to the top of the platform, his eyes caught familiar faces. Apparently, his father had invited the Lockharts to attend the event. Not surprising, since he had made it clear Lily would be a constant presence to get the public used to seeing them around one another.

Someone from the crowd shouted another unflattering remark about Max. Lily’s eyes momentarily darted over to him. She had a look of pity on her face before she quickly averted her attention to the king who was taking his place in front of the podium.

Max wasn't sure what to make of Lily's reaction. Part of him was grateful she cared, but a bigger part of him didn't want to be pitied, let alone by the woman he was being forced to marry. If for no other reason than to change Lily's image of him, he wanted to sway the public to his side again.

“Good afternoon, my fellow Triolans, I am grateful to be here with all of you to celebrate the opening of the Grace Memorial Hospital Children's Wing. For too long, Triola's sick children have had no place of their own to go, but with state-of-the-art equipment, the finest doctors and nurses, and a completely modern facility, that will no longer be the case. Moving forward, these children,” he gestured to the youth sitting on the platform behind him—a couple held crutches in their laps, a few sat without hair (a trademark of cancer) and one in a wheelchair, “will have a place where their voices can be heard, where they can feel valued, and where they can receive the best care in the world.”

There was clapping and cheering around the outdoor venue, and for a few moments—Max's past was not the focus of the day. Though he knew it wouldn't last, he was grateful to have even a short reprieve.

\* \* \*

Lily's attention should have been on the king as he finished his speech, but she couldn't keep her eyes from drifting to the back of Max. He was holding up respectably, despite the negative beginning to the afternoon. When the people first screamed at him, Lily had felt bad for Max, but it quickly changed to admiration as she watched him.

Having the constant barrage of insults would have broken lesser men, but Max had held himself upright and refused to let them crack his veneer. She found that rather attractive, but of course, didn't want him to know that.

The royal family, along with the Triola nobility and politicians, made their way into the lobby of the children's hospital for the reception. The children's wing had floor-to-ceiling glass windows that allowed the natural light to flood the area. There were a few dozen tables set up around the area, which included a table filled with an array of delicate desserts. Waiters were weaving in and out of the crowd, handing out appetizers and drinks to the guests.

"You need to find a way to put yourself next to the Crown Prince," her mother urged, discreetly gesturing towards Max.

"I can't very well march myself up there and plant myself next to him," Lily countered, not liking the way her mother insisted she press herself on Max.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:11 am*

“Well, you shouldn’t do it that way, but if you slowly work your way over to his side, it can be done in a natural way.”

Lily let out a heavy sigh as she shook her head. “Mother, I don’t know why you are acting like it’s so important. You’ve gotten what you’ve always wanted; I’m engaged to the Crown Prince.”

“Unofficially,” her mother leaned in and whispered. “That can change in an instant if you don’t keep yourself relevant. A better option can come along and steal him right out from under you. It’s your job to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

Time, it seemed, had not tapered her mother’s desire for social advancement. It didn’t feel good to be a piece of bait on a hook to make her mother’s plans a reality.

“If you will excuse me,” Lily stated, moving away from her mother. Instead of heading towards Max though, Lily headed towards the restroom. She needed a break from everyone.

As she headed down the long glass corridor, she tried to muster up the courage to approach Max. The iciness between them had not thawed, and Lily wasn’t sure if it ever would. Perhaps she was doomed to be in a marriage in name only rather than find a way to have a true connection. She wasn’t naïve enough to hope for love, especially with Max, but she had hoped they could at least find a way to be friends. But over the past few days, their silent war had not ended. She saw no sign of a white flag on Max’s part.

Lily stepped into the restroom and made her way over to the counter. She glanced at

herself in the mirror, knowing her appearance needed to be spot on for photos that were sure to follow. From the side, she heard three women enter the restroom. They were giggling and whispering between them. As they got closer, Lily realized they were talking about Max.

“I heard that Starla and Prince Maxwell are secretly married, and that he’s returned home to tell his parents,” one woman stated.

“No, that can’t be the case or she would be with him,” the second woman countered. “I think he’s home to help rule the kingdom. His father is getting older and probably needs the Crown Prince to pick up the slack.”

The third woman snorted as she rolled her eyes. “No way, Layla. Prince Maxwell can’t manage to be photographed without being drunk, let alone run an entire kingdom.”

Though part of her agreed with the women, there was no way she would stand by and let them bash Max. It was that type of gossiping that was causing negative reactions to Max and the royal family.

Lily turned around to face the other women. “I think all of you ladies are mistaken. I’m sure Prince Maxwell has returned for the right reasons.”

“And who do you think you are, exactly?” the second woman challenged, flipping her blonde hair over her shoulder. “You sure seem to think you may speak on the prince’s behalf.”

“Wait a minute, I recognize her. She was standing behind the prince during the ceremony,” the third black-haired woman stated. Turning her attention to look at Lily, she asked with curiosity, “What’s your connection to the royal family?”

“I’m Lady Liliana Lockhart, the daughter of the Earl of Northrop. My father is an advisor to the king.”

“That means you know all sorts of privy information regarding the family. You can answer all the questions about why the prince has returned to Triola,” the second woman stated. “This will be perfect for my blog.”

Lily hadn’t realized that she was talking to someone connected to social media. She needed to be extra careful with what she said. “I’m only at liberty to say that the Crown Prince has returned to reconnect with the people of Triola.”

“Well, he’s doing a lousy job so far,” the first girl stated with bitterness. “Over the past few years, he seemed more preoccupied with globetrotting around the world with celebrities than being our prince.”

“He came today after all,” Lily pointed out. “That has to count for something.”

“Right, he showed up and stood by quietly as his father handled everything. Sounds like the same old routine,” the second girl scoffed. “It’s clear the prince hasn’t changed.”

Lily had wondered the same thing. Was Max capable of change? She hoped he was, knowing that to make their marriage work, he would need to. Though she had her own concerns, she needed to do her part to convince the public Max was capable of change as both their futures depended on it.

“I know it seems that way, but you really should give the prince a chance to prove himself before passing further judgment on him,” Lily requested of the women.

“What I’m finding interesting is how much you are defending him,” the second girl observed. “You mentioned your father’s connection, but we never got a straight

answer from you what your connection is to the royal family, or more pointedly, the prince.”

“My family is part of the royal court, and therefore I spend time around the royal family,” Lily stated, before adding, “I have to be getting back. I hope all of you will enjoy the rest of the evening.”

Lily made her way back down the hallway, before she reached the lobby though, she heard laughter nearby. She followed the noise and noticed through the glass windows, Max was outside on the patio playing with several of the children who had been on the stage earlier in the day.

He was playing his version of “Simon Says,” but instead was using the phrase, “The Prince Says.”

“The prince says, clap your hands three times,” the children did as he commanded.

“Crow like a rooster,” he said next.

Two of the children did it, and Max laughed as he shook his head. “Oh, no, I didn’t say the prince says. That means the both of you are out.”

All the children erupted in laughter, and Lily realized the kids were loving it. Without thinking, Lily quickly pulled out her phone and secretly started videoing the playtime.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:11 am*

As she watched Max engage with the kids, she found herself smiling at how sweet he was with them. She hadn't expected to see this side of him, and a small piece of her heart thawed towards him.

After several minutes of recording him with the children, Lily quietly slipped away. She didn't want to ruin their time together and figured it would be better to head back to the reception.

"Where have you been?" her mother asked with irritation as Lily reentered the lobby.

"I visited the restroom," Lily stated defensively. "I know you would like to have me under your thumb all the time, but I am a grown woman."

"Then act like it," her mother hissed. "Keep an eye on your fiancé."

Lily knew exactly where Max was, but she also knew her mother would happily interrupt the time for her own agenda. Not wanting to do that to Max, Lily stated, "I'm sure he'll be back at any moment."

The rest of the royal family, along with the nobility in attendance, came together for photos. Max came rushing from down the hallway, tucking in his shirt with a frazzled look on his face.

As he approached the group, Lily overheard the king whisper to Max, "Please tell me your state of attire doesn't mean you were doing something you shouldn't have been."



“You would think that,” Max stated with resentment, “but your assumption is wrong.”

Before Max could explain further, the photographer arranged everyone for the photos.

After a dozen or so pictures were taken, Lily was finally free to stop smiling for the camera. She never realized her cheeks could hurt so much.

Her mother was gesturing with her eyes for Lily to join Max. Realizing she could no longer avoid it, Lily resolved to do her mother’s bidding.

“Good afternoon, your Royal Highness,” Lily stated with a hesitant smile.

“Good afternoon, Lady Liliana,” Max said in return. “I’m surprised to see you here today.”

“Believe me, it wasn’t my idea,” Lily assured him. “I was summoned to attend by the king and told by my parents to obey.”

“Sounds about right,” Max stated with a small chuckle. “I was under the same mandate.”

“It seems it will be the way of things for the foreseeable future.”

Max nodded. “I suppose we should resign ourselves to it.”

The photographer who was wandering around the reception taking candid pictures, asked them to turn to face him. Both of them did, and the photographer snapped away.

“I’m guessing we should get used to that,” Lily stated with distaste.

“You’re not really used to it, but it’s an everyday occurrence for me,” Max pointed out. “I’ll do my best to make it as painless as possible for you.” Noticing the king was gesturing for Max to come over, he said, “If you will excuse me, Lady Liliana. It seems the king is in need of me.”

As Lily watched Max walk away, she wondered if she was seeing a new side to Max, one that reminded her of the boy she fell in love with back in high school but had been buried so far down she had thought it had been a mirage. Could it be possible that Max was a good guy pretending to be a bad one?

### Chapter Five

Lily's face, along with his own, stared back at Max from the front of the morning Triola Times Newspaper. There was already speculation about their relationship. Whether she was his new flight-of-fancy, if she was replacing Starla, and what this means to the people of Triola.

The article caused Max to get online and cruise down the rabbit hole of social media. The good news was that the public seemed to respond well to Lily—exactly as his father intended, but the bad news was that the good will towards her had not transferred to him yet. Many people were assuming he was using her and would end up breaking her heart. Little did they all know that's what happened eight years ago. Only it wasn't her heart that was broken, but rather his when she ended things between them. It was the main reason he continued to keep her at a distance. He didn't want to get hurt again.

Yet, every time he thought about Lily, he desperately wanted to reach out and kiss her, to feel her tremble beneath his touch again. He wanted to know she wanted to be with him as much as he secretly wanted to be with her.

"I see you were photographed with Lady Liliana at the hospital opening yesterday," the king said with pride as he entered the dining room for breakfast. "I am glad to see you are finally getting onboard with the situation."

"I didn't plan it, if that's what you think. We were talking, and a photographer happened to take a couple of pictures."

“Even better. It seems more natural that way,” Max’s father said with a grin.

“Are you two talking about Lady Liliana?” the queen asked as she entered the room. “I am quite pleased with the public’s response to her.” Then eyeing her son with a look of disappointment, she added, “I only wish it was working to fix your image, Maxwell.”

“Give it time, Lucinda. It’s only been a few days.”

“Correction, it’s nearing a week,” Max’s mother stated. “I was hoping to be further along than this.”

“Why? So, you can plan my wedding already?” Max asked sarcastically with a quirk of an eyebrow.

“And so, what if I do? It’s about time you settled down and gave me grandchildren,” the queen stated with narrowed eyes. “You’ve lived a life of lackadaisicalness for far too long.”

“Well, you’ve both made it clear those days are over. You’ll get your wish soon enough, Mother,” Max stated with resignation.

“Are you ready for your next social event?” his mother pressed. “You need to make sure you are seen with Lady Liliana often and exclusively.”

“It’s a royal engagement party. I can’t turn down all the women who ask me to dance,” Max countered.

“You can, and you will,” his father stated sternly. “You will only dance with Lady Liliana tonight. It will be the only way to convince the public your engagement is authentic.”

“But that’s just it, Father, it’s not authentic. Lady Liliana and I barely know each other.”

“Which is why you should be spending this time getting to know your future wife, rather than sulking around the palace feeling sorry for yourself,” his mother pointed out. “Try to make the best of the situation, my dear.”

Max realized there was no point in arguing any further. He was in a pickle of his own making, and he had to accept his arranged marriage as inevitable, whether he liked it or not. The problem was, part of him was looking forward to seeing Lily again, and he hated himself for it.

“I need to go take care of a few things before getting ready for tonight,” Max explained as he stood up from the table, wanting to get away from his parents in hopes it would stop the swirling thoughts in his head.

“We are leaving precisely at 6 p.m. Do not be late,” his father commanded. “I know you don’t care about other people’s schedules, but I hope your cousin, Richard, proves an exception in your priorities.”

Max nodded, grateful that at least he would get to spend time with his favorite cousin this evening. “He does indeed, Father. He’s been nothing but good to me over the years.”

“More than you deserve, I imagine,” his father stated with sarcasm.

“Make sure to contact Lady Liliana and see what she is wearing so you can match your suit to her dress,” her mother said to Max’s retreating figure.

Max pulled out his phone and sent a text to Lily, wanting to get the logistics out of the way.

I wanted to find out what dress you were wearing tonight so we can coordinate our outfits.

There was a few seconds pause before she responded.

I plan on wearing a plum-colored dress.

Instantly, Max thought about the last time he had kissed Lily. She had been wearing a plum-colored sweater that evening. It was his favorite color on her, and she had picked it out specifically for him. Would she still look just as beautiful in it all these years later? He suspected she would be even more gorgeous as time had treated Lily well and her beauty only grew with the years.

I will make sure to wear a bow tie and pocket square to match,Max texted back.I will see you tonight.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:11 am*

Without wanting it to happen, excitement filled his heart. He looked forward to the upcoming evening with the woman who was slowly working her way back into his heart.

\* \* \*

Lily took a final look in the mirror, making sure the folds of her plum-colored satin gown were laying correctly as they cascaded down to the ground. The lace details along the neckline and bottom gave the dress a vintage feel, but in all the right ways. She tucked a few stray curls into place and sprayed her hair one more time for good measure.

She picked up her clutch and shawl before heading out the door and climbing into the limo next to her parents.

“You look lovely tonight,” her father stated with a warm smile. “The prince will not know what to do with himself.”

Lily could feel the butterflies fluttering around in her stomach; butterflies she hadn’t expected on making an appearance. She wasn’t sure how it happened, but Lily looked forward to spending the evening with Max.

“Make sure to get plenty of camera time with Prince Maxwell. Even a couple of selfies wouldn’t hurt,” her mother directed.

“Max and I aren’t at the selfie stage in our relationship,” Lily stated, realizing she wasn’t sure if they would ever be. Though she was still physically attracted to Max,

she couldn't trust him. And if she couldn't trust him, there was no way she could let herself love him again.

A half hour later, they arrived at the exclusive Rivera Club—the poshest country club in all of Triola. It was where Max's cousin, Lord Richard Beaumont, was having not only his engagement party, but wedding reception in two months. He was marrying one of Lily's friends from boarding school, Lady Margo Benett, daughter to a Triolan baron.

Many had speculated why the couple were getting married so quickly after their engagement. The rumors spanned from her losing her citizenship to Margo being secretly pregnant with Richard's child. The couple insisted they simply wanted to get married quickly because they were so in love they couldn't wait. They had even offered to forgo all the traditions of a royal Triola wedding to speed along the process, but the king and queen insisted they wouldn't hear of it.

The footman opened the door for the earl and his family, allowing them to exit the limo and enter the expensively decorated country club. As they approached the double doors to the grand ballroom, security stopped them and asked to see their invitation. Her parents looked perturbed that they didn't recognize them but complied with the request. A few moments later, they entered the club.

The room was filled with dozens of tables, elegantly set with white linens and gold-trimmed china. Giant, pink and white flower centerpieces graced each table. There were also candles sprinkled throughout the room, enhancing the warmth of the crystal chandeliers that were dimly glowing above.

“You look lovely tonight,” she heard her father's words echo from Max.

She turned to face him, surprised he had been waiting for her arrival. “Thank you,” she whispered back with a smile. Taking in his appearance, she added, “You clean up



well. I don't think I've ever seen you in a tuxedo."

He shrugged. "I hate them, quite honestly. I always feel like a penguin on parade, but, when in Rome, and all that..." he let the words trail off.

If she didn't know any better, she would swear he was flustered by her compliment. But that made little sense; Max wasn't the type. Not to mention the fact he got paid compliments all the time. Why would it matter now suddenly?

Giving her a charming lopsided grin, he asked, "You ready to make the rounds together?"

Lily nodded, allowing Max to take her hand and place it on his arm. Being so close to Max was more disconcerting than Lily had expected. As she walked beside him, the butterflies that had been mildly stirring had turned into a swarming hive inside her.

"Are you all right?" Max asked with concern.

"Why do you ask?" Lily inquired, worried her reaction to him had been obvious.

"You seem distracted. Usually, you are very focused."

Distracted was one word for it, though it felt more akin to being unbalanced. She wasn't sure how to calm herself, but if Max was noticing it, she needed to figure it out quickly. There was no way she wanted him to know the reaction he was causing in her.

"Do you mind grabbing me a glass of punch?" Lily asked, hoping a break from him would help her get herself under control.

"Sure, I can do that, but you don't just want to come with me?" Max asked, raising

his eyebrows in confusion. “The king and queen made it very clear we are to stay by each other’s sides for the entire evening.”

“Since when were you one to follow rules?” Lily challenged, not caring how she sounded, but simply wanting to get away before she ended up leaning up and kissing him.

“Since my parents threatened to implode my life if I didn’t,” Max answered. Pulling slightly away from her, he asked, “What is going on, Lily? You’re acting really odd.” Glancing around the room, a look of worry crossed his face. “You’re not meeting that Rogers fellow here, are you?”

“What?” Lily sputtered out. “You think I’m running off to meet someone secretly?”

“I know you told me you were just friends, but if that’s not the truth, now is the time to tell me,” he said, crossing his arms. “Don’t make an idiot of me.”

“I’m not. If anyone is going to be made to look ridiculous in this situation, it will be me,” Lily stated, the words coming out in a more defensive tone than she had planned.

“Then you shouldn’t care if I stay by your side,” Max challenged, a look of “don’t try me,” gleaming in his eyes. “It will keep us both on the straight and narrow path together.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:11 am*

“Fine, suit yourself,” Lily said, grateful to at least be free from his physical touch.

They spent the next half an hour making their way around the room, talking to members of the Triola nobility, local celebrities, and friends from boarding school. It was like walking down memory lane of their childhoods.

Towards the end of the appetizer time, Margo found Lily and squealed with delight as she approached her. “I can’t believe you’re here, Lily. I mean, I had hoped you would be because I knew you were back in Triola.”

“I’m glad to be here too,” Lily said, giving her oldest friend a smile.

Richard joined his fiancée, wrapping his arm around her shoulders. “It’s good to see you, cousin,” he said, nodding towards Max. Glancing at Lily, he added, “I have to admit, I’m surprised to see the two of you here together.”

“Not as much as we are, but things change,” Max stated, his vague answer not really shedding any light on the situation.

“Well, since you are both here, it makes one decision much easier. We hoped that the two of you would agree to be our Best Man and Maid of Honor,” Margo stated, reaching out and taking Lily’s hands in hers. “It would make the wedding perfect if you would agree.”

“I’d be honored to be your Maid of Honor,” Lily said, grateful for one positive outcome from her return home.

“How about you, cousin? Are you willing to stand up for me?” Richard asked with a hopeful grin.

“Of course I would be willing to,” Max said, “as long as the king and queen approve.”

“I’m surprised you care about anyone’s approval,” Richard mused.

“It’s a recent development, born out of necessity. My parents have made it clear I need to fall in line, or else.”

“Or else? What?”

“I kiss my royal rear goodbye,” Max stated dramatically.

The group of friends burst out into laughter. A few moments later, the announcement for dinner was made. Lily and Max made their way over to the table where they were seated with the future bride and groom.

The meal passed by pleasantly, though it was long with seven courses, and the tedious, continuous prattle of the Triolan social elite. She wished the meal would end, but they were barely to the final meat course.

“How are you doing?” Max leaned over and asked Lily.

“I’m muddling through,” she said dryly. “I’ve forgotten how long royal meals could be. I’ve spent the last several years eating mostly on the go while working on projects.”

“Do you miss being over there?”

Lily let out a small laugh and shook her head. "It's only been a little over a week. Kind of hard to miss something in that short of time."

"Still, with this new arrangement, you must have considered that you won't be able to go as much. You must stay here for royal duties."

"Well, I agree I won't be able to go as much as before, but the king said I will run the Triola Philanthropic Foundation."

"That's true, but you'll be running it from Triola. You won't really have time to go on trips to the places the foundation is supporting," Max countered.

"Are you trying to talk me out of marrying you?" Lily asked, with an arched eyebrow. "Because pointing out what I will miss is a fantastic way to do that."

"I'm sorry. I can see I upset you. That wasn't my intent. I was simply concerned about what you would give up by agreeing to marry me." Max took a sip of his sparkling water before continuing. "Even if you can't leave the country as often, there is still plenty you can do here in Triola. Take for example, the Grace Memorial Children's Wing that just opened."

Lily tried to push away the frustration the conversation was bringing to the surface. Part of her knew being stuck in Triola for longer periods of time would come with being married to the Crown Prince, but she had purposely avoided thinking about it. Her feelings on the matter hadn't changed, so instead, she turned the tables and focused on Max.

"Speaking of the children's wing opening, how did you handle the comments by the public? They were pretty awful."

"They were, but honestly, I deserved it. I haven't really done my best at presenting a

proper public image.”

“Well, you did a good job of not showing it bothered you. It was admirable.”

“Thank you, Lily. I appreciate you saying that.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:11 am*

Before Lily could disclose that she had seen Max with the children, the dinner portion of the evening ended. They stood up, and Max escorted Lily over to the edge of the dance floor.

“Would you like to dance?” Max asked, holding his hand out to Lily.

She tilted her head to the side as she narrowed her eyes.

When she didn’t accept his hand, he quickly added, “I know you think I’m only asking you to dance because my parents are making me, but the truth is, I would really like to dance with you,” Max admitted.

The revelation made Lily’s heart fill with warmth. She hadn’t expected him to be so honest. She wanted to dance with him too but had been worried he was offering out of obligation rather than desire. His confirmation that it wasn’t the case put her at ease.

“I would like that,” Lily said, finally taking his outstretched hand.

Max guided her onto the dance floor and then gathered her into his arms. It felt wonderful to be held by him. Lily had forgotten how much she enjoyed being with Max, at least, until he had ruined everything.

Not wanting to think about the past, Lily instead asked, “How has the shadowing with the king been going?”

“You know about that?” Max inquired with surprise.

“My mother informed me after finding out from my father.”

“It’s going better than I expected. The king states that I’m a natural, when I actually try.”

“Are you trying?” Lily probed.

“Well, I didn’t want to at first. I was just being stubborn out of principle, but the more I learned about what the king does, the more I found not only was it interesting, but fulfilling. Each choice we made helped the people of Triola and there were tangible results.”

“I guess your father was right then. It sounds like you’re a natural, which means Triola is lucky to have you as their Crown Prince.”

“If only I could convince them of that,” Max said with a heavy sigh. “Sometimes I think I might have done too much damage. That I’ll never be able to undo it all.”

“All they need to do is see what I saw the other day at the children’s wing reception.”

“What was that?” Max asked in confusion. “All I did was stand around and make polite conversation.”

“Not the whole time. I saw you with the children on the patio,” Lily confessed. “If people saw that side of you, they would realize what I do. There’s a good man lingering just below the bad boy image you’ve cultivated over the years.”

Max blinked several times before he finally said, “I didn’t know anyone was watching me.”

“I realized that right away. It was obvious you didn’t know. The authenticity couldn’t



be faked.” Then realizing she had the footage on her phone, she added, “You know, you were so cute with those kids, I pulled out my phone and videotaped you. I could always send the footage to the royal press secretary so she could release it.”

Max shook his head. “Thank you for the offer, but I didn’t do that to gain attention for myself. I think it would cheapen the experience.”

“I respect that. I’m glad you’re really thinking about the decisions you’re making now.”

“Me too.”

“I was wondering if you would attend church tomorrow?” Lily asked with a hopeful tone.

“Sunday is my one day to rest—the only day the king doesn’t demand I perform royal duties. I don’t see myself giving that up.”

Lily dropped her eyes to the ground, trying to mask her disappointment.

The vast differences in their faith was the one area that had troubled Lily the most about her future marriage to Max. The king and queen, along with her own parents, attended church regularly. Max was a different story. He had gone to church when they were kids, but she couldn’t remember the last time she had heard of him going.

Lily, on the other hand, made her relationship with God a priority. Even when she was traveling abroad, she took her Bible and devotional with her and found a church to visit. Not that she was perfect about it, but she did her best to maintain a healthy spiritual life.

Despite all the influence in the world, being married to a man that didn’t believe in

God the way she did, could prove detrimental to their relationship. She didn't want to spend their whole life fighting about attending church or how they would raise their children spiritually.

"I think it's about time I show you how my dance skills have improved over the past few years," Max stated with a chuckle, trying to lighten the heavy mood that had formed between them.

Max spun her out into a twirl, then as he pulled her back into his arms he whispered, "You've always been so graceful when you dance. You look like a fluttering snowflake drifting in the wind."

The words penetrated Lily's heart, anchoring into the very core. Never had anyone said something so romantic to her. Her eyes darted up to meet his, and for an instant, she thought Max would kiss her. Instead, the moment was interrupted when the DJ announced it was time for the royal waltz.

For the rest of the evening, Max led Lily around the dance floor. By the end of the evening, she was seeing that there was a chance to have a friendship with Max, and perhaps something more with time.

### Chapter Six

Gunfire could be heard across the open field. Max and Lily stood side-by-side as they watched the soldiers in the Class “A” formal uniforms firing their weapons into the air.

When the 21-gun-salute was finished, the king took to the podium in front of the freshly built Triolan War Memorial. The tall, black, granite monument listed hundreds of soldiers who died during wartime from the creation of the country five hundred and fifty years ago to the present.

Two rows of the crowd were filled with the families of fallen soldiers who were there to hear their family member’s name read.

The king took the front of the makeshift stage set up in front of the memorial. “Welcome, my fellow Triolans. On behalf of the royal family and the Triolan government, I want to thank all of you for coming out today for the official unveiling of the Triolan War Memorial. I know that many of you have lost loved ones in the past wars our country has been involved in. Today we honor those soldiers for their sacrifice. I know that all of you are used to me speaking at events, but today, I thought you might want to hear from your Crown Prince, Maxwell Gerard Beaumont.”

Silence greeted Max as he switched places with his father. At least they weren’t hurling insults at him as they had last week. He adjusted his coat firmly around his body, took in a deep breath before he spoke.

“Most of you know that my younger brother, Prince Gregory, was killed when his airplane went down during the war in northern Europe five years ago. Not a day goes by that I do not miss my brother, and his loss is felt by the entire royal family. I hope, however, to honor him by serving our country as king one day, supporting our military, and never forgetting the sacrifice Triolan soldiers have made to keep our country independent. Today, this memorial stands as a reminder of that ultimate gift.”

Respectfully, the crowd clapped as Max stepped back, took the giant scissors from one of the nearby workers, and cut the ribbon tied around the memorial.

Next, the king stepped forward and slowly read the names out loud of the fallen Triolan soldiers. As each name was read, Max could feel emotions stirring inside him. Between losing Lily, and then two years later his brother, Max had kept moving, not wanting to care about anything or anyone ever again. But as the names continued to tumble from his father’s lips, Max realized he wasn’t the only one who had suffered a deep loss. In his grief, he had acted foolishly, focusing on numbing the pain rather than dealing with it.

Once the ceremony was officially over, Max stepped down from the stage and made his way over to the widows, widowers, and orphans of the men and women who had lost their lives in service of the country.

“Thank you for your family’s sacrifice,” Max said, taking the first woman’s hand and shaking it.

“Thank you, your Royal Highness,” the woman said, tears pooling in the corner of her eyes.

Max made his way down the two rows of families, greeting each of them personally to thank them. By the time he reached the end, the crowd had dispersed, and people were walking around the memorial looking at the names on it.

Lily found Max staring at the name of his brother. She reached out and placed her hand on the side of his arm. “You did a great job speaking during the ceremony. I also noticed you talked with the families afterward.”

“It was the least I could do,” Max said in a quiet whisper.

“Are you all right?” Lily asked with concern.

Slowly, Max nodded. “I’m fine. I just didn’t expect today to be as difficult as it was.”

“It’s understandable, considering your brother and how he passed away. His loss was felt by all of us, but I know you were especially close to him.”

Max turned to face Lily and tried to force out a smile, but the gesture didn’t change how he felt inside. There was a hollowness. He had tried to fill it with partying, women, and expensive toys and vacations, yet none of it had worked. Now that he understood why he had behaved the way he did, Max realized he needed to make peace with the reasons that caused him to act out in a negative way.

“It’s more than just the loss of my brother. I’m realizing there’s a lot of things I haven’t dealt with.”

“If you ever need to talk about any of it, I’m here for you, Max.” Then she added softly, “We could also pray together. I know you’ve never been much for religion, but God cares too.”

“Thank you for the offer. At the moment, I can see Patrick waving to us. It must be time to go. My father has plans for me to go over some legal documents this afternoon.”

He could see the disappointment on her face, but somehow, he couldn’t bring himself

to pray. The guilt over his past decisions was plaguing him. He didn't feel like he deserved God's mercy or forgiveness, though from his childhood years of attending church, he knew God offered both of them freely.

Max pushed the thoughts away and guided Lily over to join the rest of the royal family before heading back to the palace.

\* \* \*

Lily couldn't stop thinking about her time with Max at the war memorial ceremony two days ago. She had seen a side to him that confirmed what she witnessed at the children's wing opening. Max cared about people; however, he had become an expert at hiding it. Yet, the more time he spent in Triola performing his royal duties, the more the kind side of him was emerging, and the playboy was taking a backseat.

Now that he was letting the real Max out—the one she knew was always there below the surface—she could see a happy future with him. The more time she spent with Max, the more she realized she wanted things to work between them.

Today was a great step in that direction. It seemed her prayers had been answered. She had been happily surprised when Max agreed to go to church with her the day before.

As she dabbed on her perfume, she turned to look in the mirror. Lily wasn't sure when it happened, but she wanted her appearance perfect for Max. The plum knee-length dress she was wearing would be a hit with Max.

Rather than travel to the church separately, Max had offered that Lily, along with her family, travel with them via the royal limo. Her parents had been pleased, wanting nothing more than to blend the two families together.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:11 am*

“Remember, keep that smile on your face at all times,” her mother whispered to Lily as they left the palace and made their way down the sidewalk to the waiting limo.

“Aren’t you afraid my face will freeze in that position if I do it for too long,” Lily teased.

“That wouldn’t be the worst thing,” her mother stated. “Then I wouldn’t have to keep reminding you.”

“That’s enough, Maranda,” her father chastised his wife. “Liliana is doing a fine job of holding up her end of the bargain. You don’t need to constantly harass her by inspecting every little thing she does.”

“But that is a mother’s job,” the countess objected. “She needs me to correct her.”

“She’s not a child anymore,” the earl stated firmly. “And shouldn’t be treated as one. She’ll be a married woman soon enough and doesn’t need her mother treating her like a child while she starts her own family.”

Lily was surprised to hear her father defend her so fiercely, let alone stand up to her mother. He usually let her take the reins in guiding the family.

As the chauffeur opened the car door, Lily gave her father an appreciative smile before sliding into the seat next to Max.

Once everyone was situated in the limo, the vehicle wove through the streets of the Triolan capital.

“You look amazing in that dress,” Max whispered against Lily’s ear. “Did you pick the color out for me?”

Lily nodded. “I know how much you like it.”

“I’m guessing you chose that perfume for the same reason; the combination of lavender and vanilla is enticing.”

As Max’s breath tickled the skin at the edge of Lily’s neck, she realized that although she had set out to appeal to Max, she hadn’t banked on him doing the same thing. The proof was in every aspect of his appearance; from his dark hair being styled to the side the way she liked it, to him wearing a bow tie which she preferred. Add in Max’s intoxicating scent of cedar and spice, and it was clear they were both wanting to please the other.

“It smells almost as good as your own cologne,” Lily mumbled back, leaning in closer to Max. She liked the feel of his hard frame against her own soft one.

“It’s good to see the two of you getting along so well,” the king stated with a smug grin. “It seems this arrangement isn’t turning out as bad as you both thought it would be.”

Lily shrunk away from Max, embarrassed she had forgotten they had an audience.

“I daresay, I think they’re smitten with each other,” Lily’s mother agreed. “Who would have thought things would take a turn like this?”

“I did,” the queen stated with pride. “The chemistry between them is undeniable. It has been since they were teenagers.”

“You knew about that?” Max inquired with shock.



“Of course I did. I am the Queen of Triola. You don’t think I kept track of my eldest son while he was at boarding school?”

This time, Max’s face flamed red with chagrin as he stuttered out, “I... I had no idea.”

“Don’t underestimate the women in your life. It’s the folly of most men,” the queen stated, crossing her arms and glaring at her husband out of the corner of her eyes.

The limo pulled up in front of the First Methodist Church of Triola. A few moments later, Harry arrived to open the door and help everyone out. The group made their way into the church. All eyes were on them as they made their way down the aisle. At the front, a pew was reserved for the royal family. They invited Lily and her family to sit with them, which Lily’s parents accepted with exuberance.

The service order was structured just as she had remembered from her childhood. The congregation sang traditional hymns before the reading of scripture, and the sermon by the pastor came last. Lily hadn’t attended such a formal service in quite a while, opting for more modern churches while traveling abroad. Even so, the people were friendly, the music was inspiring, and the message about letting go of the past and accepting God’s forgiveness was wonderful.

After the service ended, the royal family, along with Lily’s family, conversed with other church members. Joseph was present and made sure to come up and say “hello.” She could tell he wanted to spend more time with her than that, but she had quickly made an excuse to use the restroom. She had been avoiding him since returning home. Not only because of how he felt about her, but because she didn’t want him asking her questions about Max.

By the end of the morning, Lily was grateful they were leaving and would return to the palace for brunch.

“What did you think of the service?” Lily asked as they made their way towards the waiting limo.

Max paused several moments before he answered. “I had gone today with the goal to please you and my parents, but truth be known, the very subjects the reverend spoke about are areas I have been struggling with for weeks now. I have been troubled by my past choices and unable to accept that God would forgive me for them. I realize now, I was letting my guilt cloud the truth.”

“What do you plan to do about that?”

“I already did something. When the reverend asked if there was anyone that wanted to pray for God to forgive their past and accept His help for the future, I raised my hand.”

“You did? I’m so happy,” Lily said with a smile. Before she could help herself, she was throwing her arms around Max and hugging him. “This is the best news.”

Max’s own arms wrapped around Lily, pulling her close. Around them, she could hear several gasps along with whispering voices. She knew it was in response to her reaction, but at the moment, she didn’t care. All that mattered to her was that Max was finally right with God.

### Chapter Seven

Lily's reaction to his decision at the memorial and church service touched Max. As he mulled it over during the next couple of days, he realized that he wanted to do something to show her he cared in return.

He found her reading in the royal library. It must have been an epic book because her face was buried in the pages. Max used her preoccupation to his advantage, watching her from across the room.

She looked beautiful. Her curly golden-brown hair was half pulled back, revealing her delicate neck and shoulders. Today, she was casual in her attire, wearing a blue blouse and a pair of cream pants. Even in something so effortless, she was breathtaking.

Quietly, Max made his way over to her side and sat down next to her.

Startled, she slammed the book shut as her eyes darted up to meet his. "What are you doing here?"

"I was looking for you." Taking the book from her hands and setting it on the nearby table, he added, "I was wondering if you would like to go horseback riding with me. If I remember correctly, you're an accomplished rider."

"I'm surprised that you remember that. I have plans later this afternoon to help Margo with a few last-minute wedding plans," glancing at her phone, she added, "but I'm free right now."

“Does that mean you will go?” Max asked, hoping the answer was yes.

Lily nodded. “I would love to. I just need to go change. Are there any spare riding habits in the palace?”

“The king keeps several sets on hand for guests when they visit. I’ll have one of the servants bring a set to your suite.”

“Thank you,” Lily said with a smile. “I could use the fresh air and exercise.”

“Is that the only reason you’re agreeing to go?” Max asked with a frown, let down by the reasons she gave.

“No, I also enjoy spending time with you. It’s just hard to admit sometimes. I’m still afraid you’ll hurt me again.”

“What do you mean ‘again’?” Max asked in confusion. “You’re the one who broke my heart.”

“What are you talking about? I saw you with Georgina after the championship game. It’s why I broke things off the next day. I couldn’t be with you knowing you were still seeing her on the side.”

“But I wasn’t. When I was with you, I was with only you,” Max protested, reaching out to take her hand.

“You don’t have to deny it, Max. I saw you kissing her,” Lily said, pulling away from his touch defensively as she scooted away from him. “Lying won’t get you anywhere.”

“I’m guessing you didn’t wait until the end. If you had, you would have seen me pull

away from Georgina. I told her I was in love with you and I didn't want to be with anyone else."

Lily's face turned white as she whispered, "You did?"

Max nodded. "When you broke up with me the next day, I tried to get you to tell me why. I had no idea it was because of that. You said it was because I was a player, and would never change; that you couldn't be with someone like that."

"But you can understand why I would think that," Lily said defensively. "I was in love with you too. It devastated me to see you with Georgina."

"It was one-sided; she only wanted to get the spotlight back. Georgina never cared about me, but only the fame she could get by being with me. When you ended things, I decided I would never get hurt again. I kept things casual with women after that. At least until you came back into my life, and all my old feelings resurfaced."

"I'm sorry," Lily said in a sad tone. "My stupidity caused me to waste all these years thinking the worst of you."

"We were young. We both made mistakes, but I'm glad it's all coming out now. I never want you to think I cheated on you. I might have been a lot of things, but a cheater's not one of them."

"I'm glad to finally know the truth," Lily said, scooting back over to be next to Max. She took his hands in hers and asked, "Will you forgive me for not believing in us?"

"Of course I will," he said, squeezing her hands back. "At least now we can move forward together, not dwelling on a past in which we both misunderstood."

Lily stood to her feet and smiled. "Let me go get changed. I'm looking forward to

spending some time with you now that everything is cleared up between us.”

As Max watched Lily retreat from the library, he realized he was getting a second chance. He was grateful for it, and he would do whatever it took to keep their relationship from being ruined this time.

\* \* \*

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:11 am*

As Lily and Max approached the royal stables, the groomsmen looked at them with surprise. Though Lily was known for her riding skills and had won many competitions in her youth, Max was more of a rugby guy—enjoying team sports rather than solo endeavors. Lily was certain it was the first time they had seen Max at the stables.

“Good afternoon, your Royal Highness,” a skinny, young groomsman said, rushing up to their side. Eyeing them both with curiosity, he asked, “What can I do for you?”

“I was hoping you could saddle up two horses for myself and Lady Liliana.”

Nodding his head, the groomsmen scurried off towards the equipment room.

“Are there nice riding trails around here?” Lily asked with interest.

“You know, if you had asked me that two hours ago, I would have had no idea. As it turns out, I looked into the matter and found out that the royal palace and grounds encompasses fifty acres. My great-great grandfather, King Rutherford, had trails established because his wife, Queen Anna, loved to ride. They’ve been kept up by the groundskeepers ever since as part of a decree he passed before his death. He wanted them to remain as a legacy to honor his wife who died before him.”

“What a romantic gesture! He must have loved her dearly to make such a bold declaration.”

Lily wondered if she would ever be loved that way. Max was the only boyfriend she ever had. They were teenagers when they were together; not to mention the

relationship was short-lived. As an adult, she pushed men away, claiming she didn't have time for dating. The truth was, she didn't want to get hurt again. As a hopeless romantic at heart, Lily wanted the grand gestures, the flowery words, and epic vows of forever, but was unsure she would ever find a man who could do it.

A few moments later, the groomsman returned with their horses. "Do you need me to ride along with you?"

Max turned to Lily and asked, "Do you think it's necessary?"

Lily shook her head. "No, I'm quite capable of teaching you anything you would need to know. We'll take it easy for our first time out."

Once the groomsman helped them both up onto their horses, Lily went over the basics of riding with Max. "That's right. Make sure you use the reins to direct your horse where you want to go. If you pull them to the left, he'll go left. If he goes too fast, pull back on the reins; you can also use your legs to push in at his side which will let him know to slow down."

"You're superb at teaching," Max complimented.

"Thanks. It's probably because I've been around children often while working overseas with different foundations and the U.N." Then giving him a playful wink, she added, "You're not much different from most of them, so it's easy to teach you."

"Ha ha" Max laughed sarcastically, "I'm more mature than that."

"Are you though?" she asked with a quirk of her eyebrow.

"If I wasn't, could I do this," he said, pushing his legs in at the side of his horse and taking off down the nearby trail.



Lily spurred her own horse to follow Max as she yelled behind him, “I think you’re getting a little too overconfident for your own good. Don’t come crying to me if you end up falling on your royal behind.”

Almost as if on cue, Max tumbled to the side, but he tried to right himself at the last moment. As he was hanging off the side of his horse, he slowed his horse from a gallop to a trot, and finally a meandering walk, allowing Lily to catch up to him.

“Your horse got the better of you, didn’t he?” Lily inquired with a laugh. “I told you not to get so cocky.”

“Hey now, no need to bruise my ego. The horse did that enough for the both of us.” He tried to pull himself up, but the more he struggled, the worse he got tangled up in the stirrups and saddle. “Do you mind helping me out?”

Lily forced herself to hold back her amusement as she freed Max’s feet, then pushed him up and back into the saddle. Once he was there though, she couldn’t contain herself any longer. What started out as a small giggle, turned into fits of laughter.

“Seeing you hang off the side of the saddle had to be one of the funniest things I have ever witnessed. You should be really glad there weren’t any paparazzi around to see you like that.”

“I suppose you’re right. Lucky for me, only my future wife saw my vanity take a beating.”

“Lucky for you, your future wife kind of found it adorable.”

Max pulled his horse up close to hers, moving towards Lily as he asked, “Did you now?”

Lily nodded. “I find it rather charming to see you trying new things without caring how it makes you look.”

“Maybe I should do it more often.”

“Maybe you should,” Lily said, loving Max’s closeness, which allowed their legs to brush up against one another’s.

He reached out his hand, rubbing his hand down the side of her arm. Closing the gap between them, Max leaned over and placed his lips upon hers. A spark ignited between them, causing Lily to stretch out her hand and grip the front of his shirt to steady herself.

As Max pulled back, Lily smiled. She had known it would feel wonderful to kiss him again, but nothing prepared her for what just happened. It made all their other kisses pale in comparison. Perhaps it was eight years of pent up desire on her part, or perhaps the maturity they both possessed now. Whatever the case, it was a good thing she would marry Max, because she wouldn’t want to kiss anyone else ever again. Lily didn’t know when it happened, but somewhere between their secret engagement to right now, she had fallen in love with the Crown Prince of Triola again.

### Chapter Eight

The noise in the club was deafening and getting on Max's nerves. When Richard had begged him to come along for his stag night, Max had done it thinking he would enjoy himself. Little did he know, all that would happen was that he would end up with a pounding headache and foul mood.

“What's wrong with you?” Benji Stinson, one of the other groomsmen for Richard, asked with irritation. “I thought Maxwell Beaumont knew how to party. Didn't know you would end up being the stick-in-the-mud,” he said, slapping Max on the back. “I would have put money on it being Richard but look at him grinding up on that girl on the dance floor.”

Max ignored the breach in protocol, as it was taboo to touch a royal without their permission, and instead said, “I need to get some air.”

As he stood up from the VIP table and left the roped-off area, Max heard Benji mumble to the other groomsman, Bradley Furlez, “Max isn't at all what he was billed to be in the press. I must say, what a disappointment.”

Normally, being slammed like that would have annoyed Max, but considering the source and what it meant, he didn't care. It was true, the old Max would have loved all of this, but since returning home, he had changed.

The combination of taking on the responsibilities of the Crown Prince, developing a real relationship with Lily, and rededicating his life to God, left no room for his old ways. He no longer wanted to live a partying lifestyle or be around people who did.

Not only was he content to be king one day, but he wanted to be a devoted husband and Christian. None of those things meshed well with drinking, sleeping with random women, and throwing money around.

Max stepped into the alleyway, noting his bodyguard was close by, and took in a deep gulp of fresh air. He could still hear the noise from the club, but rather than being an overwhelming pounding beat, it was now a muffled, pulsating beat.

If Max had it his way, he would leave right now, but he knew it would be in bad form if he didn't at least stay for another hour. Once he made it another sixty minutes, he could make his excuses to Richard and quietly slip out.

Now that he had a plan, he could focus on that rather than how much he hated being there. A wry smile formed on his lips as he thought about how much his life had changed in only a couple of months. Never would he have thought he would rather be watching Netflix with his fiancée than out partying with friends.

Just as he pulled the door open to go back inside, he heard the unwelcome voice of Georgina. "There you are, Max. I've been looking for you everywhere."

"Is that right, Lady Georgina? And why would that be? I thought I made it clear last time we spoke to stay away from me."

"Oh, don't be silly," she said with a flirtatious smile as she placed her hand on his chest. "Why can't two old friends catch up? I mean, you sure have been doing a lot of that with Lady Liliana. What's keeping you from doing the same with me?"

Ah, it all made sense now. That was definitely Georgina's mode of operation. She hated being shown up by anyone, especially Lily, so it made sense that she would come after him with a vengeance. She wanted to prove she could get what she wanted, when she wanted it, and take it from anyone she wanted. It actually had

nothing to do with him, and everything to do with her desire for social dominance.

Pulling away from Georgina, Max snapped, “I will not be a pawn for you, Georgina. You need to get it through your head, I want nothing to do with you.”

Georgina pushed her bottom lip out in a pout. “Is this because of Lily? Are you two back together or something?”

“Even if we were, I wouldn’t be telling you. It’s none of your business,” he said, pushing past her.

“That wasn’t a denial,” he heard Georgina shout from behind him. “I guess I’ll just have to go to the press about what I know.”

Max hesitated for a moment, wondering what he should do. Realizing he didn’t care if the press knew about him and Lily, he called Georgina’s bluff. Turning to face her, he challenged, “Go ahead. You do what you think you have to, but I won’t be blackmailed.”

A look of shock came over the woman’s face, then one of anger, and finally disappointment. “Whatever, Max, you want to act like you’re so different, but leopards don’t change their spots. You’ll go back to your old ways soon enough, and I’ll be there to say, ‘I told you so.’”

Max wanted to rebuff her statement, but a small part of him worried she might be right. Rather than standing there and arguing with her any further, Max turned around and took off. He couldn’t be around the irritating woman a second longer.

Once back at the VIP table, he noticed that both the groomsmen were now out on the dance floor with Richard. Well, thank goodness for small favors. At least he didn’t have to listen to Benji and Bradley prattle on about their latest sexual conquests,

financial acquisitions, and social triumphs anymore. Max could wait out the rest of the hour in relative quiet—minus the obnoxious electronic pop music blaring through the speakers all around him—and escape back to the palace. Maybe if he was lucky, Lily would be still up, and they could spend some time together.

\* \* \*

The Primrose Tea Room was elegantly decorated for Margo's bridal shower luncheon. The tables were set with light pink tablecloths with vintage mixed china. In the center of each table was a pink and white flower arrangement with pearls draped through them.

The vintage eatery was filled with antique knick-knacks that decorated the flowered wallpapered walls. It was an unusual location choice for a royal party, but one that Lily was glad Margo had insisted on. Both of them got tired of pretentious parties at country clubs and mansions, so it made planning the bridal shower a pleasure for Lily.

Once the final guests arrived—rounding out the number to fifty of Margo's closest friends—Lily stood to her feet and addressed the group. "Welcome, everyone. I'm so glad you could make it to Margo's bridal shower. Growing up together, Margo was always looking for her perfect match. Just like me, she was a hopeless romantic, so when she met Richard and they fell in love, it was obvious it had finally happened for her. Today, we are going to shower her with gifts to bless their upcoming union." Lifting her glass into the air, Lily added, "To Margo and Richard—may their lives together be more than both could ever hope for."

All the other ladies in the room lifted their glasses as they agreed to the toast.

Lily took her seat, and the servers came out with the meals, placing them in front of the ladies. They spent the next hour eating and talking about royal affairs, their

families, and the upcoming wedding.

As the meal portion of the afternoon was wrapping up, Lily was suddenly ambushed by Lady Matilda Blanchard and Lady Alexa Davidson who were seated at the same table as Lily. She had grown up with both women, all three of their families being part of the royal court.

“So, we’ve seen you’ve been spending a fair amount of time with the Crown Prince the past couple of months,” Matilda said with a hint of irritation in her voice. “Is there something going on between the two of you?”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:11 am*

Lily wasn't sure how to answer the woman's probing question. She knew exposing their engagement was off-limits as the king would want to be the one to orchestrate the announcement, but was she allowed to tell people she was involved with Max?

Rather than answer her directly, Lily said, "My father is an advisor to the king, not to mention Prince Maxwell and I went to boarding school together. Our families thought it a good idea for us to socialize together since we were both freshly back in town."

"But that's not the only reason, right?" Alexa inquired. "I can tell by the way you look at one another, it's more than that. Plus, when you were in boarding school, didn't you two date for a time? Have you two rekindled something from the past?"

At first, Lily was shocked by the woman's blunt questions. Then she reminded herself it was common for daughters of noble families to hunt royals—single as well as married—to further their positions. Though a lot of things had modernized over the past centuries, that aspect of royal life had not. It was the whole reason her own parents had pushed her towards agreeing to the arrangement with Max. Even though she knew that this was common, and she would have to find a way to cope with it, it didn't mean she had to like it. When all of this first started, she wouldn't have cared that it seemed like Matilda and Alexa were far too invested in Max's relationships. Now that she had grown to care for Max again, she didn't like the idea of other women chasing after him.

"The Crown Prince is a good person, and I'm proud to count him amongst my friends."

Matilda snorted with a roll of her eyes. "See, there must be something going on



between them, Alexa, because anyone who knows the prince, knows he's not a good man or anyone's friend."

"You shouldn't say that about the Crown Prince. He's a wonderful man." As soon as the words escaped Lily's lips, she realized she shouldn't have said them. The other women pounced on them mercilessly.

"I knew it; you two are together," Matilda stated with a wicked grin. Turning to Alexa, she added, "Wait until Georgina hears about this. She's going to have a conniption."

"Forget Georgina, wait until the press finds out." Looking directly at Lily, she stated coldly, "You're going to wish you never got tangled up with Prince Maxwell Beaumont. No woman ends up on the good side of the press afterward."

Were they trying to upset her? Or were they warning her off? Perhaps it was both. Whatever the case, Lily didn't like it.

Narrowing her gaze at the other two women, she said through clenched teeth. "You both sound ridiculous. Your wild speculations do you both a disservice."

"So, you're saying nothing is going on then?" Matilda probed, crossing her arms as she leaned back in her chair. "Because if that's the case, you shouldn't mind if I make an effort to attract the Crown Prince's attention. After all, if he's single, he's fair game."

Lily placed her napkin on the table and stood up, unable to stay a moment longer around either woman. "If you will excuse me, I need to go to the ladies' room."

Not waiting for their responses, she darted out of the room and made her way down a side hall of the establishment. Once in the bathroom, she entered a stall and leaned

against one of the walls. She needed just five minutes where no one was watching her.

Silently, she prayed to God to help calm her nerves and to give her patience with the other women. She knew it would be difficult being back in the royal court and dealing with the horrible people that ran in her family's social circles, but this last attack was harder than she imagined.

The door to the restroom opened and Lily could hear someone was entering. A moment later, she heard a woman say, "Can you believe that the Crown Prince is spending time with her? She doesn't even care enough about Triola to live here permanently. She's spent the past decade living abroad."

"That doesn't bother me as much as how basic she dresses," another woman said to the first woman. "It's like she puts as little effort as possible into how she looks. No future queen of Triola should present herself like that."

"Ugh, I hope he doesn't plan to marry that sow. Why can't he see she's not fit material to be the queen," the first woman stated adamantly.

"Come on, let's get back to the luncheon. Lady Margo will be opening her presents soon."

The women retreated from the restroom, leaving Lily alone again. Just when she thought she couldn't feel any worse, she had to overhear that conversation.

Lily exited the stall and went over to the sink. Looking at herself in the mirror, she analyzed herself critically. The pale yellow sundress she was wearing seemed appropriate when she put it on that day, but now she wondered if she had been dressing poorly without knowing it. She wasn't much for fashion, and preferred function over style, but she didn't consider herself a slob. Was she wrong? Perhaps it

was time to hire a personal dresser and makeup artist. A lot of royals and celebrities did it, but Lily didn't like how pretentious it would make her look.

She closed her eyes and started to pray again. The only thing that was going to help her right now was her faith. She needed God to show her what to do, and how to handle all of this.

A moment later, the door opened again, and Lily's head turned to the side to find Margo entering the restroom.

"There you are. I was looking for you everywhere. I didn't want to start anything else without you." She must have noticed Lily looked upset because she came up and placed her hand on the side of Lily's arm. "Are you all right? What's the matter? I can tell you've been crying."

"It's nothing," Lily stated, pushing away the tears she hadn't even realized had been falling since the other women left the room. "It's your day, Margo. Let's get out there and focus on you."

Lily tried to push past her friend, but Margo reached out and stopped her. "Oh, no you don't. You don't get to push your own feelings aside for me. You've always done that for everyone else. Tell me what's wrong."

"Some women are being catty, that's all. It's nothing, we're both used to growing up in the royal court."

"I know, but it doesn't make it any easier." Tilting her head to the side, Margo stated, "Let me guess, this has to do with the fact you're in a relationship with Max again."

"Who told you? Was it Richard? Did Max tell him?"

Margo shook her head. “No one had to tell me. I have two eyes, and it’s obvious to anyone that knows the two of you.”

“You can’t say anything to anyone,” Lily whispered. “The king would be furious if he knew I confirmed the fact.”

“Don’t worry about that. Your secret is safe with me. Let me give you a little advice. Though Richard isn’t next in line to the throne, he is a royal. When the other noble women found out we were dating, they were horrible to me. I had to decide whether my relationship with Richard was worth putting up with it, and that’s when I realized I loved him. I would rather deal with a hundred vicious gossiping harpies than be without him, and so I made peace with it. You need to do the same thing.”

Lily thought about Margo’s words. It was true, if Lily was going to be with Max, she needed to accept that parts of it would be harder than being with someone else. She had to decide if she cared enough about Max to be with him despite the difficulties that would come.

“Thank you. I appreciate you sharing that with me.” Lily would have plenty of time to worry about her future with Max, for now she wanted to focus on her friend. “I think we should join the others and open your gifts.”

Margo nodded. “Let’s go enjoy the rest of the afternoon.”

### Chapter Nine

Max paced the floor in front of the staircase as he waited for Lily to come downstairs, glancing every few moments to see if she was ready. He had a special evening planned for them and couldn't wait to see her reaction to all the surprises.

On his fifth round of walking back and forth, he saw Lily come into view at the top landing.

She was wearing a brown silk blouse and a pair of cream slacks along with a pair of beige pumps. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail, causing her curls to bounce as she moved.

"You look great," Max said with a grin.

"Do I look all right for where you are taking me?"

"You sure do."

Glancing at his outfit, she noted, "You're wearing slacks and a button-up shirt. Your outfit isn't any help in letting me know what you've got planned."

"And try as you might to get it out of me, I won't tell you. It will ruin the surprise."

Max reached out and took Lily's hand as he escorted her out of the palace.

Patrick climbed into the front passenger seat while Harry opened the car's back door

for Lily and Max. They both slid into the leather seats of the limo. Once inside, Max took the open bottle of sparkling cider and poured them both a glass. He handed one to Lily.

“No smuggled-in champagne?” she mused.

“I know you’re not a drinker, so I opted for something we both could enjoy.”

Her cheeks tinged pink as she said, “That was sweet of you to remember.”

“It’s been that way since we were kids. When all the rest of us were sneaking off and drinking behind our parents’ backs, you didn’t. Was it a religious or taste thing?” Max asked with curiosity.

“A little bit of both. I’ve never gained a taste for it, and I think people can make stupid decisions when they drink too much. It never appealed to me.” She took a sip of the cider, then glanced out of the corner of her eyes at him. “I noticed you haven’t been drinking much yourself.”

“I’ve come to realize I’m one of those people who doesn’t do well when I drink. When my father first forced sobriety on me, I was pretty angry, but the longer I went without it, the more I realized I was better off. Now, I don’t really see a need to drink.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Lily said with a smile. “You keep making wiser and wiser decisions.”

“Well, it helps I have a good influence around me lately,” he said, scooting closer to her. “I never thought I would say this, but I’m glad you’re back in my life, Lily.”

“I know, it’s odd hearing you say that. It’s even more peculiar I feel the same way.

I've become so used to being around you, I can't imagine that changing."

"According to our parents, it doesn't have to. For once, I'm glad my parents meddled in my life."

"I feel the same," she said in agreement. Glancing out the window, she asked, "So, you're really not going to tell me where you're taking me?"

Max shook his head. "I told you, you won't get it out of me. You'll just have to wait to find out."

A few minutes later, they arrived at a private airport. They entered the gates and made their way over to the royal jet which was fueled and ready to go.

Lily's eyes grew round with surprise. "We're going on that?" she asked, turning to Max.

"You travel a lot, so I'm guessing you're not afraid of flying," Max stated, trying to hide his amusement at her reaction. "What's wrong?"

She pressed her lips together as she whispered, "I traveled on lot bigger planes than that."

Max shrugged. "Once you're on it, you won't feel the difference. Plus, you don't have to worry about crying kids or annoying people. I promise you, once you go private, you won't want to go back."

A few minutes later, Max, Lily, and Patrick were on board the plane and taking off to Max's surprise destination. He knew the plane ride would be long, so he had the servants stock the plane with several board games, books, and various electronics.

Lily glanced at the stack of supplies and raised an eyebrow. “How long is this trip?”



*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:11 am*

“Long,” he said with a grin, “but worth it.”

Gesturing to the items nearby, he asked, “Up for a game?”

“Sure,” she said, running her finger down the stack. “I haven’t played a game in years.”

“I have to admit, I haven’t either, but I used to love them when I was a kid.”

“Let’s play Monopoly. It’s a time-suck, but you said it will be a long flight, so it shouldn’t matter.”

“Right, let’s set it up. You should know though; I tend to be great at board games.”

“I’m surprised we never played any together when we were little,” Lily noted.

“I think it was the whole boy—girl thing. I wanted nothing to do with girls until I hit my teens.”

Lily let out a laugh. “And then you couldn’t keep away from them.”

At first, Max was slightly offended at the comment, but realizing it was accurate, he joined in and laughed with Lily.

They spent the next couple of hours playing the game, with Lily winning at the end by bankrupting Max.

“Your winning seems about right,” Max joked. “You’ve always made way better decisions than me.”

“That might have been the case, but not lately,” Lily corrected. “Lately, you’ve done a great job with your decisions.” Giving him a playful smile she added, “Like taking me on this date for instance.”

“I’m glad you think so,” Max said, returning her smile. “Let me go check with the pilots and see if we are on schedule to arrive at our destination.”

“I can take care of that for you, your Royal Highness,” Patrick offered.

“That’s all right. I got it,” Max said as he stood up and made his way over to the cockpit. He opened the door and stepped inside. “How is it looking?”

“We’re right on time, your Royal Highness,” the head pilot said. “We should arrive in Karamay, China, in three hours.”

“Thank you,” Max said, shutting the door behind him as he exited.

Max sat back in his seat across from Lily.

“How’s everything going?” she asked, placing a card down as she played solitaire. “Are we going to arrive at your private island soon?”

Max let out a chuckle. “Nice try, Lily, but I’m not that easy to trick.”

“Can’t blame me for trying.”

Max picked up a book, trying to distract himself from how gorgeous Lily looked as she concentrated on the cards in front of her. No matter what he did though, he

couldn't take his eyes off of her pretty lips and how enticing they looked.

Unable to stop himself, Max leaned across and cupped Lily's face with his hand. He stared into her eyes for several seconds before his mouth claimed hers. Rather than pull away, Lily leaned into him as he deepened the kiss. She wrapped her arms around his neck, her fingers tangling in his hair.

Breathlessly, Lily finally tilted her head back and whispered, "That was a surprise."

"It won't be the last," he promised.

They spent the rest of the flight watching a movie before the plane touched down. As they disembarked, Lily must have noticed the writing on the outer part of the terminal because she quickly asked, "Are we in China?"

Max nodded, enjoying the fact she was trying to figure out why, but hadn't quite landed on the reason yet.

"Why did you bring me here?"

"Just a little while longer, and you'll have your answer."

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:11 am*

As they reached the bottom of the tarmac, the wind blew Lily's hair across her face. Max reached out and pushed the locks out of her eyes. She smiled, revealing her incredibly cute dimple, which was Max's undoing. He pulled her towards him and placed a passionate kiss upon her lips.

"What was that for?" she asked, slightly out of breath.

"It seems I can't keep from doing that lately."

"That's okay, you're welcome to kiss me any time."

They made their way into a waiting car which drove through the streets of Karamay. Lily was looking out the window. Her eyes grew wide as she recognized familiar buildings and landmarks. "Are you taking me to the orphanage?" Lily gasped.

As they pulled down the dirt road that led to it, Max could feel joy bubbling up in him as he watched Lily get excited. She clasped her hands together as she said, "I can't believe you brought me here, and today of all days. I didn't think I would get to be a part of the groundbreaking ceremony because of our arrangement."

Max reached out and took her hand. "What's important to you, is important to me. I know how much work you put into this. I didn't want you to miss out on this monumental moment."

"This means so much; more than you will ever know," she whispered, squeezing his hand with gratitude. "Thank you."

The car pulled to stop at the front of the orphanage. As Lily and Max got out, Sue, along with the other orphanage staff and a couple of the older children, were present. There was also the board of trustees, several news reporters, and Lord Rogers.

Max wasn't happy Rogers was there, but Max knew that Rogers had been a huge supporter of the project. He couldn't control the guest list, but it didn't mean he had to like who was on it.

Lily and Max made their way over to the group. The other people greeted them, telling them how pleased they were that they were able to attend.

Rogers picked up the shovel and handed it to Lily. "You said you wanted to shovel the first load of dirt. Now's your chance."

They turned to face the gathered local townspeople who were there to watch the ceremony as Sue addressed everyone. "We are so glad that everyone could make it here today. This is a big moment for all of us. We have been working to make this happen for a long time." Gesturing behind her, she added, "And we couldn't have done any of this without Lady Liliana. We are so glad she is here with us." Looking back out at the crowd, Sue ended with, "It's time to move that dirt."

Lily moved forward, along with the chairman of the board and Sue. They each took a shovel, pushed it into the dirt on the far side of the orphanage, and lifted it up. The cameras snapped away, catching every moment.

Afterward, Lily and Max talked with everyone for another half hour before they went inside and greeted the children. They spent an hour reading to them and playing a couple of games.

As they climbed into the car, Lily let out a yawn as she leaned her head back. "That was wonderful, but I'm exhausted."

“Does that mean you’re not up for anything more?”

Lily turned her head to Max and asked, “What did you have in mind?”

“I was hoping you would want to go to dinner with me before we head back to Triola.”

“I think I can spare the energy for that,” she said with a smile. “But we probably shouldn’t go anywhere too fancy. I’m pretty dirty from today’s activities.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’ve got it covered.”

They headed to a luxurious downtown hotel where Max escorted Lily inside. The hotel manager was waiting anxiously by the door, with two key cards in his hand.

“Here you are, your Royal Highness. We have both your suites ready for you.”

“Thank you,” he said, taking the key cards. “Have the items for tonight been delivered to both rooms?”

“They have, your Royal Highness,” the manager said with a nod.

Max turned to Lily and handed her a card. “Meet me down here in an hour?”

Lily nodded and made her way towards the elevators. Though the first part of the day was wonderful, Max couldn’t wait for the second part of the night where he would get to spend alone time with his future wife.

\* \* \*

Even though she shouldn’t have been, Lily was surprised to find a beautiful formal, red dress waiting for her in her room, complete with all the accessories.

After taking a quick shower, she slipped the dress on, pulled on the red heels, and added the jewelry. She took a final look in the mirror and decided she was ready.

Max was waiting in the lobby. As she moved towards him, he couldn't take his eyes off of her.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:11 am*

When she reached his side, Max extended his hand to her, which she took.

“You look amazing tonight,” he stated with awe.

“Thank you. I rather surprised me when I found all of this waiting for me in the room.” Then glancing at him, she smiled, “but seeing how handsome you look in that tuxedo again, I have to say, I’m rather glad you did all of this.”

“It should tell you how special you are to me,” he said with a smirk as he guided her from the hotel lobby into the waiting limo. “I don’t go around wearing one of these things for just anyone.”

They made their way into the elegant restaurant that was on the top floor of the multi-level building. As the waiter seated them by the window in a private room, Lily looked out at the glittering lights of the city.

“The view is breathtaking,” Lily said in awe. “I knew this hotel had a wonderful restaurant, but I never had a chance to try it out.”

“Well, now you get to,” Max said with a grin. “I’m glad I picked the right place.”

The server came and took their orders. Once he was gone, Lily turned her attention to Max. “I want to thank you again for today. I can’t tell you how grateful I am. Today was one of the best days I’ve had in a long time.”

“You don’t have to keep thanking me. You’ve been so supportive and encouraging to me, that was the least I could do.”



The waiter arrived with their appetizers—a salad for Lily and crab cakes for Max. They ate them while conversing about the day. Next, their main course came. Both of them ordered the steak and lobster, which was exquisite. The final course was dessert in which they shared the restaurant’s famous custard tart.

As they stood from the table, Lily said, “This has been a wonderful night.”

“It’s not over yet,” Max corrected. “I still have one more surprise before we retire to our separate rooms for the evening.

“What’s that?” Lily asked with excitement. “I can’t believe there’s more.”

Max led Lily up to the top of the hotel where there was a roof deck with a view of the whole city.

“I’m surprised there isn’t anyone else up here right now,” Lily noted as she looked around.

“I reserved the whole place for us this evening.” He pulled her over to the edge of the building and pointed out over the mountains. “Wait for it,” he whispered, before pulling her close to his side.

Suddenly, fireworks burst into the air, lighting up the night sky. The pops of color were brilliant. Lily felt like she was a kid again, celebrating Triola’s independence, but this time, she was standing next to the man she was falling in love with all over again.

After a few moments of watching the fireworks, Max turned to Lily and bent down on one knee. He pulled out a ring box, opened it, and held it out to her. “I know we already have an agreement, but I want this to be more than just a relationship on paper. I love you, Lady Liliana Lockhart, and I want to be your husband in every way

possible. Will you marry me?"

Lily nodded, tears in her eyes, as she gave him her hand. He slipped the emerald and diamond engagement ring on her finger. "I'm glad it fits. It was my grandmother's ring."

She looked down at it with appreciation. "It's gorgeous. I love it." Then her eyes flickered up to meet his as she added, "And I love you."

"You don't know how happy it makes me to hear you say that," Max said, as he pulled her into his arms. He placed a kiss upon her lips before spinning her around, the fireworks still glowing around them.

Max placed her back on the ground, as he said, "I know, given our history and how we ended up together again wasn't the best of circumstances. It's why I pulled out all the stops to make tonight extra special."

"I can see that. It's not every day a prince takes a knee for you," Lily said with a smile. "I should keep that locked away in my vault of secret memories."

"You can tell the entire world for all I care. I would go down on one knee for you a million times to keep you happy."

"It will never come to that. Just being with you is all I need," Lily said as she placed her hands on his chest, knowing she was exactly where she should be with the man she loved.

Lily's phone dinged in her purse, disrupting the perfect moment. She pulled out her phone and looked at the screen. It was a Google alert that Max was in the news, but what was more interesting was the fact she was in the news as well. She clicked the button that took her to a link where a video only moments before had been posted.

“What is that?” Max asked.

“I think it’s a video about us,” Lily said, clicking the button to play it.

“This just in, the Crown Prince of Triola, Maxwell Gerard Beaumont, was in Karamay, China, today,” a gray-haired man in a suit stated. “What most would assume was a standard goodwill trip, was anything but, when pictures surfaced that the prince was accompanied by Lady Liliana Lockhart. The two have been rumored to be seen socializing together several times over the past couple of months, but nothing surfaced to substantiate that it was more than royal duties. At least, until today, when it was confirmed they flew in together on his private jet. How did we confirm this? There is the old saying, a picture is worth a thousand words. Here is an exclusive photo of the two of them kissing just as they disembarked from his plane.”

Lily gasped as she saw a picture of them kissing earlier in the day pop up. It remained on the screen while the news reporter continued to speak in the background.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:11 am*

“With this new information, we wonder is this the reason for the sudden change in Prince Maxwell? His patterns of partying and womanizing have taken a sudden decline over the past couple months, and just recently, we were sent these two videos showing the prince in a new light.”

First, the video Lily recorded of Max at the children’s wing dedication and then again at the war memorial played on the screen.

“Does that mean playboy Crown Prince Maxwell is gone for good? Or is Lady Liliana just a passing fancy like Starla Stone was a couple months back? Only time will tell, so if you want to be the first to know, make sure to watch our show daily for your royal updates.”

As soon as the video ended, Lily’s eyes snapped up to meet Max’s. “I promise I didn’t leak those videos. I have no idea how they got out.”

Max nodded. “I believe you.” Pointing to the comments, he added, “At least the responses are positive. People seem to approve of you and I as a couple and they think the videos show I’ve changed for the better.”

“Well, I guess we should be grateful for that.” Clicking through her phone, she went to the videos to see if they were gone. They were still there. Next, she looked in her messages and didn’t find them sent to anyone. Her last idea was to check her email. She went to her "sent" folder, and about five messages down, she saw an outgoing message to her mother with both videos attached.

“Mystery solved,” Lily said, showing the email to Max. “I’m sorry she did this.”

Then realizing it was too odd it all came out at the same time, she stated, “I think she arranged for that photographer to snap the photo. I wouldn’t put it past my mother to have one follow me, waiting for the chance to snap a photo to release with these videos.”

He shrugged. “It sounds about right. The countess is a formidable woman.”

“You could have her banished from the royal court for this,” Lily said, “and part of me wouldn’t blame you.”

“That won’t be necessary. I’m not about to do that to the mother of the woman I love. I don’t like how it happened, but honestly, I’m glad everyone finally knows we are together. I love you, Lily, and I don’t want to hide it anymore.”

He reached out and kissed her firmly on the lips, pushing out any worries that still remained in Lily’s mind. For now, all that mattered was that they were together openly for the first time.

### Chapter Ten

The day for the royal wedding had finally arrived. The St. James Cathedral was bustling with tons of people. In the thick of it, Max watched the wedding planner put the final touches on the aisle runner and bouquets of flowers that lined the center walkway. She was fussing to make sure all the decorations were centered correctly and lined up the way she planned.

“Don’t forget that the series of candelabras on each side need to be tilted so the guests can still see everything,” the blonde woman stated, pushing a loose wisp of hair out of her face. “Everything needs to be perfect. This is a royal wedding after all.”

Max wondered if his own wedding would be this chaotic. Then remembering that because he was Crown Prince, and it was his job to display his wedding for his whole country (and world), it would be even worse than all of this.

A quick glance at his watch confirmed they were just over an hour away from show time. Max hurried out of the ceremony area, knowing they would seat guests shortly. It was time for him to check in on Richard anyway.

Max found his best friend in the groom’s room, where he was nervously pacing back and forth. “Are you okay?” Max asked with concern.

“I’m fine. I want to get married already, and this is taking bloody forever,” Richard’s British accent from growing up abroad came out when he got upset.

“I understand but be patient. It’s almost time,” Max said, coming up to Richard, and

putting his hands on either side of his shoulders. “Just take a deep breath and focus on the fact that in less than an hour you will be married to the woman of your dreams.”

“Or, on the other hand, you could reflect on the fact you’ll be tied down to the same woman for the rest of your life,” Benji stated snidely. “Are you ready for that?”

“Be quiet,” Max demanded, glaring at Benji. “We don’t need you trying to tease him right now. Can’t you see he’s nervous enough?”

Benji shrugged. “I was just trying to make a joke.”

“It wasn’t funny,” Richard corrected, “And Max is right, I sure don’t need that type of help. Why don’t you find something else to do?”

He must have known he had overstepped, because Benji shrunk away without another word. Max figured he would probably go bother the bridesmaids, but as long as he wasn’t bothering Richard, Max didn’t much care what Benji did.

“Let me look at your bow tie,” Max said, straightening it by slightly pulling on both sides. “There you go. You look great.”

Richard looked every bit the royal groom in his custom white tuxedo. Though Max had fixed his cousin’s outer appearance, it didn’t seem to help calm his spirits. Wanting to help him, Max offered, “Do you want me to say a quick prayer?”

Richard stopped pacing and raised his eyebrows in shock. “Never did I think I would hear those words come from your lips.”

“What can I say, I’m a changed man,” Max explained with a roll of his shoulders. “So, what do you say?”

“I would welcome it,” Richard said, closing his eyes.

Max closed his own eyes before he prayed. “Dear Lord, right now we come to You and ask that You bless this special day. Help my cousin to put everything in Your hands and trust that You will help everything go smoothly.”

“Thanks, cousin, I appreciate your support,” Richard stated as he opened his eyes and smiled. “You always know how to keep me calm.”

“That’s what family is for. And for the record, it’s not me, it’s God. I’ve realized the more I pray, the better off I am.”

A little while later, the wedding planner knocked on the door, telling them it was time to enter the ceremony area. They made their way in to the crowded venue where over a thousand guests were seated to watch the royal wedding.

“You got this,” Max whispered reassuringly to Richard as they took their spots at the front of the room under the massive arch adorned with pastel flowers and ribbon.

A few moments later, the orchestra played, quieting the crowd and turning everyone’s attention towards the back as they stood to their feet. The doors opened to reveal Margo standing in a white satin gown with a long train and a beautiful tiara that glistened against her golden hair. She also had a veil draped over her face that flowed out and around her.

Behind her stood her two bridesmaids, four flower girls, two page boys and Lily, her Maid of Honor. The rest of the bridal party was wearing cream-colored outfits.

As they made their way down the aisle, Max knew he should be focused on the bride, but he couldn’t keep his eyes from drifting to Lily. She looked like perfection in her gown, and Max could only imagine how much more beautiful she would look on



their own day down the road.

The ceremony passed quickly, with the traditional vows, rings, and prayers. By the end, there wasn't a dry eye in the room, as it was clear that Margo and Richard truly loved each other.

The bridal party, along with the royal family, exited the cathedral and prepared to go by carriages to the wedding reception at the Rivera Club. Hordes of people were out for the event, waving and cheering on the royal family. Max was grateful there were no hecklers in the crowd, and the day could go by in peace.

As they rode through the streets waving to everyone, Max leaned over and whispered to Lily. "You look beautiful."

"Thank you," she whispered back. "You look handsome as well."

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:11 am*

“I can’t wait to dance with you at the royal ball.”

“I know, I’ve been looking forward to it myself. Margo and I have worked so hard on everything. I hope you think we did a good job.”

“If you helped, it will amaze everyone,” he said with admiration. “Everything you do is phenomenal.”

They arrived at the club, climbed out of the carriage, and made their way inside for the reception.

\* \* \*

The reception passed by like a blur. Before Lily knew what was happening, the toasts, the meal, and the cake cutting had already taken place.

“They really look happy,” Lily stated as the bride and groom took to the dance floor for their first dance.

“They do,” Max agreed. “And by the way, you and Margo did a terrific job with everything. Everyone will talk about this wedding for years to come.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Lily stated with pleasure. “I was really nervous.”

“There’s only one problem.”

“What’s that? What did I miss?”

“Nothing,” he said, shaking his head. “The problem is you’re going to have a hard time topping this wedding with our own by year’s end.”

Lily let out a laugh, causing several heads to turn towards them. Quickly, she placed her gloved hand over her face to muffle the sound. “Stop it. You’re going to get me into trouble,” she whispered against his ear.

“Oh, you should probably get used to that,” he whispered back, his breath tickling the skin of her cheek.

“Not surprising,” she said in a hushed tone, “but somehow I think I will love the type of trouble you get me into.”

Taking her hand, he pulled her towards the exit. “Let’s sneak out for a few minutes. No one will miss us while all eyes are on the bride and groom.”

Once outside and in a dark hallway, Max pushed Lily against the wall. He leaned towards her, then pressed his lips against hers, searing her mouth with a red-hot kiss.

Though she liked kissing Max, she knew the dance wouldn’t last forever. Gently, she placed her hands on his chest and said, “We should get back.”

Max nodded, stepping back with a regretful look. “Not that I want to, but you’re probably right.” Glancing down the hall he added, “I need to go to the restroom first. Are you all right heading back in on your own?”

“Of course. I’ll see you in a few minutes,” Lily said, placing a peck on his cheek before heading back into the ballroom.

She was about halfway back to the dance floor when Joseph stopped her.

“Can we speak privately for a moment?” he asked, the look of admiration shining from his eyes.

“I don’t think that would be wise. Anything you would like to say to me, you can do it in the open.”

The admiration disappeared and was replaced with one of anger. “I’m guessing your refusal to be alone with me has to do with your new relationship with the Crown Prince.”

“Not that I owe you any explanation, but yes, the prince and I are involved.”

“What does that mean? How serious is it?”

Lily folded her arms across her chest and narrowed her eyes. “I really don’t feel comfortable talking about this with you.”

“I thought you were different than the other women who throw themselves at royalty around here, but I watched you leave with the prince a few minutes ago. Now, you’ve come back alone with your hair out of place and a missing earring,” he said gesturing towards her.

“What I do, and who I do it with, is no concern of yours. The way you’re acting confirms I made the right decision by keeping you strictly as a friend, but you can rest assured, that’s over now too.”

Turning on her heel, Lily rushed back the way she came. She rubbed her ear lobes and realized she must have dropped one of her earrings in the hallway when she was with Max. They were on loan from a jeweler and worth a small ransom. She had to find it before someone else did.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:11 am*

Lily headed back down the hall and looked for her earring on the floor where she had just been with Max. From down the way, she could hear him speaking to someone. At first, she didn't pay attention, until she heard him say one name. "Starla."

"How did you get in here?" Lily heard Max ask the other woman.

"I'm Starla Stone, Max, I can get in anywhere I want. I've been trying to get a hold of you for a while, but that guy you're always with—Patrick I think his name is—told me to stop calling. I think he blocked my number and hasn't been giving you my emails."

Lily inched along the wall until she could see them, but remained out of sight. She knew she shouldn't eavesdrop, but Max was her fiancé and she needed to know what was going on.

"Maybe you should take the hint," Max stated with irritation audible in his voice. "He's doing that because I've moved on."

"I think you want to, and you're trying to replace me, but you can't. I saw the news reports about you and that vapid skank. It's why I came. I thought you should know before you get too serious with her, I'm pregnant. And before you ask, yes it's yours."

"Do you know how many royals have claims of babies every year? This isn't a new trick you've come up with," Max accused.

"I thought you might say that. It's why I brought this," Starla stated, pushing a piece

of paper towards him.

“What’s this?” he asked in confusion.

“It’s a sonogram, Max. In other words, a picture of our baby. If you look at the due date in the corner, it shows when I got pregnant. It was when we were together.”

Lily tried not to gasp. The news made her heart lurch with a flurry of mixed emotions. What was she going to do? She loved Max, but she couldn’t ask him to pick her over his baby. A royal baby would mean he had to marry Starla in order to avoid a scandal. And since Lily and Max hadn’t officially announced their engagement, the king and queen could quietly demand they end it without anyone knowing. This baby meant her life with Max was over.

“I can’t believe this,” Max muttered under his breath. “What am I going to do?”

“I’ll tell you what you’ll do. You’re going to put me up in that swanky palace of yours until the baby comes, or I’ll go public with my pregnancy and how you jilted me.”

“That’s not how it happened, Starla. I didn’t know you were pregnant.”

“But the press doesn’t know that. Who do you think they are going to believe, a pregnant woman or a known playboy?”

“Fine, Starla, you can stay at the palace, but just until we figure all of this out.”

“That’s fine, Max. You’ll come around to the idea of being a daddy and parenting with me soon enough.”

Heartbroken, Lily didn’t wait to hear anything else. She rushed down the hall and fled

into a dark corner of the ballroom to hide. Once the wedding events were over, she would quietly leave Triola forever.

### Chapter Eleven

Max woke the day after the wedding, tired and worn out. After his disconcerting conversation with Starla, he had tried to find Lily to tell her what was going on. He wanted her to pray with him and discuss how they should move forward. Every time he tried to get her alone, however, she came up with something she needed to do for Margo. By the time the night was over, she claimed she was too tired to talk and anything they needed to discuss could wait.

“Would you like your morning espresso, Master Beaumont?” Patrick asked.

“You better make it a double, Patrick. I have a feeling it’s going to be a long day.”

“Does this have to do with that wretched Starla woman?”

“I take it you know she’s staying at the palace,” Max stated with disgust. “I didn’t have a choice, Patrick.”

“It’s my job to make sure you are taken care of, Master Beaumont. Sometimes, that means keeping track of those around you. I’m aware Starla Stone was at the wedding.”

“Do you know why she tracked me down?” Max asked, concerned Patrick knew about the baby but had kept the information from him.

“I assumed she wanted to re-establish your relationship. She had been trying to get a hold of you, but like all your past women friends, I kept her from contacting you once



you had moved on.”

“You’re right, I have moved on, Patrick. I’ve been so focused on the news Starla told me, I had forgotten that I’m not the same man I used to be. I have to forgo my espresso this morning. I need to go find Lily and talk with her about why Starla came back.”

After getting ready, Max headed to the guest area of the palace. He knocked on the door to Lily’s suite. A few moments later, she opened the door with a distracted look on her face. “What do you want, Max? I’m busy.”

He looked past Lily and noticed an opened suitcase on her bed. Two drawers were partially closed, and there were clothes scattered on the bed. “Are you going somewhere?” Max asked in confusion.

“I’m heading back to Karamay later this evening,” she stated matter-of-factly.

“Why? Is something wrong at the orphanage?” Max inquired with concern. “I can go with you now that the wedding is over.”

She shook her head. “No, I’m going alone. You need to stay here. You’re going to have your hands full enough in about seven months.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I know about Starla being pregnant. I overheard you talking to her last night.”

It all made sense why Lily had been avoiding him now. She knew the truth and was trying to distance herself.

“Let me explain,” Max said, wanting her to understand. “It doesn’t change anything

for me. I still love you and want to be with you.”

“We both know it doesn’t matter now. You’re going to have a baby, and that baby will be heir to the Triola throne. The king and queen will require you to marry Starla to legitimize the baby. This means there is no future for us.”

“You don’t know that. Times have changed; that’s an old way of thinking.”

“Things haven’t changed that much, not in Triola. The royal family would never survive such a scandal. We both know Starla being pregnant changes everything.”

“It doesn’t have to. We can figure something out. Please, Lily, don’t do this.”

“You’re the Crown Prince of Triola, and begging is beneath you.” She closed the door as she added, “Goodbye, Max, I wish you all the best.”

As Max watched Lily disappear behind the door, he felt a part of his heart shrivel up and die. What was he going to do without her? Lily was everything to him. He couldn’t see his life without her in it.

Dejected, he walked down the hallway. Before he could make it very far, Starla found him and blocked his path. She had a satisfied look on her face as she said, “There you are, Max. I wanted to find out when you wanted to make the announcement about the baby?”

“What announcement?” he asked in confusion.

“Well, this baby,” she said patting her stomach, “is the future king or queen of Triola. Everyone needs to know.”

“This isn’t the right time,” Max stated dismissively.

Placing her hands on her hips, she glared at him and asked, “Why? It’s not like the circumstances will change? Does this have something to do with that stupid woman you were seeing here in Triola?”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:11 am*

“Don’t talk about her that way, and if you must know, she told me she is leaving the country. I need time to process all of this before I decide on how to move forward.” Pushing past Starla, he rushed down the hall, wanting to escape to his room and fall asleep. Maybe when he woke up, all of this would be a bad dream.

\* \* \*

Lily handed the last of her luggage over to the palace servant. “Thank you. I will be down in a few minutes.”

She took one last look around the room before grabbing her purse and coat. It was time to put all of this behind her again. This time though, no matter how hard her parents begged, she would never return to Triola. There was too much pain for her here now.

Lily weaved through the hallways of the royal court areas, trying to avoid as many public places as possible. She wasn’t in the mood to talk to anyone, or come up with an excuse why she was leaving court.

From a nearby room, Lily heard a muffled voice from behind the door. It sounded as if it might be Starla. Lily knew the pop star was staying at the palace. Was this her suite?

Lily wasn’t sure why, but something prodded her to lean closer to listen. When she did, the voice became clearer, and she was certain it was Starla.

“Yes, it’s working, JoJo. I’ve got Max’s attention again, which is exactly what I

wanted. I couldn't believe it when I heard the news say he had replaced me with that basic local girl. No one can replace Starla Stone," she stated with indignation.

A few moments passed while Starla must have been listening to the other woman, then she responded. "Well, it was a last resort... No, he has no clue about the truth...How will I fix it? That's easy, he'll agree to a quickie wedding. Once we're married, I can fake a miscarriage. He'll never know the difference." Starla let out a laugh as she added, "I know. I mean being a pop star is great, but every girl dreams of being a princess. There was no way I was letting Max get away."

First, shock, then disgust, and finally fury settled in Lily's heart. Starla was lying about the baby and she was using her lie to manipulate Max. There was no way she would let her get away with it. She needed to find Max and tell him the truth.

Lily rushed through the palace until she reached Max's suites. She hoped he hadn't left for the day, and more importantly, he would still be willing to listen to her.

She could tell from his expression earlier in the day, she had hurt him deeply when she refused to work with him regarding the situation. Rather than go to God in prayer about it, she let her fear cause her to push him away rather than fight for the one man she loved. Now, even if he couldn't forgive that, she still needed to save him from the clutches of a woman like Starla. Even if Lily didn't end up with Max, he deserved far better than that.

Lightly, she rapped on his door. "Max, are you in there?"

A few moments later, Max opened the door. He was wearing a t-shirt, his hair was tousled, and his eyes red. Had he been crying?

"You haven't left? Did you change your mind?" he asked with a hopeful tone.

“I need to speak with you, Max. It’s of the utmost importance.”

“What is it, Lily?” he said, gesturing for her to come into his room.

“I just heard some troubling news.”

“What now? I don’t think I can take one more thing,” Max said with exasperation.

“I just overheard Starla talking with someone. She is lying about the baby.”

“You’re certain?”

Lily nodded. “She said once you married her, she planned to fake a miscarriage.”

A look of hurt and anger crossed Max’s face. Lily reached out and placed her hand on his arm. “I’m sorry, Max. I don’t want to hurt you, but you needed to know the truth.”

“You’re right,” he said, pulling her into his arms, and adding, “Of course, you’re right. Thank you for telling me.”

“No matter what happens, I only want the best for you, Max,” she muttered against his chest. “I will always love you.”

Max leaned back and stared at her, his eyebrows furrowing together in confusion. “You’re talking like we’re not getting back together.”

“I... I just assumed after all that’s happened—how I reacted—you wouldn’t want things to go back to the way they were before.”

“You’re right; I don’t,” Max said, “I want things to be better, and by you coming here to help me, even with the crazy idea in your head I wouldn’t want you back, shows

me we'll be even stronger because of this. It's shown both of us, we truly love each other."

Lily nodded. "I do, I really do, Max. I love you so much, I didn't even feel like I was me without you."

"Well, you never need to worry about that again. I'm going to marry you, and you'll be stuck with me forever. First, we need to go kick Starla out on her lying lip-syncing rear end."

### Chapter Twelve

Starla was still in her room when Max and Lily knocked on the door. When she opened it, her eyes grew round with shock.

“Surprised to see us together?” Max asked with anger. “I’m sure this wasn’t part of your plan.”

“What are you talking about, Max?” she asked with fake innocence. “I’ve just been in my room looking at baby registries.”

“You can stop the act, Starla. I know the truth. Lily overheard you talking to someone on the phone.”

Starla’s eyes snapped to Lily as she glared at her. “I don’t know what she told you, Max, but it’s all lies.”

“Save it,” Max stated with fury. “I don’t want to hear any more of your empty lies.”

“You can’t talk to me this way. I’m the mother of your unborn child,” she yelled at him. “Who are you going to believe, me or her?”

“Her, most definitely her,” Max said, taking Lily’s hand in his own. “I can’t believe you would trick me into marrying you and then fake a miscarriage. What type of horrible person does that?”

Pressing her lips together she said defensively, “You left me little choice, Max. When



you just up and left me, I had no idea what I did wrong. I tried to contact you, but you wouldn't even respond to me."

Guilt over his mistreatment of not only Starla, but all the other women of his youth, washed over Max. His poor choices were coming back to haunt him in the form of one diabolical pop star; however, she was a monster of his own making. If he had treated her better then maybe all of this could have been avoided.

"I'm sorry I didn't end things better, Starla. I was a different man back then. You deserved to be treated better than that. But that doesn't excuse away your lies and manipulations." Gesturing to her stuff he added, "I want you to pack and vacate the palace within the hour."

"You can't do this, Max. If you do, I'm going to the press with my story. I've still got the sonogram, and it did a good enough job to convince you, I think it will work on them."

"Try it, and I'll have you arrested for fraud upon the crown. You don't want to see what it's like on the inside of a Triola prison. I guarantee you they are not as nice as American ones."

Shaking her head, she said, "You don't have to do that. I'll go quietly."

"That's the smart choice, and it should be clear by now, I don't want to ever see you again."

Narrowing her gaze at him, she spat out, "Likewise. I can't wait to be free of this backward country, anyway."

Lily and Max exited the guest room and made their way through the palace until they were alone in the royal library.

Max turned to Lily and let out a heavy sigh. "I'm so glad all of that is over."

"Me too," she said with a nod. "I can't believe how hard and dirty she fought until the very end."

"Thank goodness you heard the truth. I can't even imagine being married to her for the rest of my life," Max said as his eyes went wide with revulsion.

"I guess that means I saved you from a life of misery then," Lily said with a smile.

Reaching out, he pulled her towards him as he said in agreement, "I guess it does, which means I should probably thank you."

"And how do you plan to do that?" she asked with a quirk of her eyebrow.

"Like this," he said, placing his mouth upon hers. The kiss was like a healing balm, covering up all the wounds, not only from their distant past, but what had happened in the last twenty-four hours.

As Max pulled back and stared into Lily's eyes, he realized he would do whatever it took to hold on to her and the love they shared.

\* \* \*

Lily looked down at the newspaper in front of her. Scrawled across the front page was her engagement announcement to Maxwell Gerard Beaumont, the Crown Prince of Triola.

In six months, she would walk down the aisle, marry the only man she had ever loved, and promise to spend the rest of her life with him.

“That’s a great picture of us,” Max said as he entered the room. “I’m glad we went with your photographer friend rather than the royal one. He never seems to catch anyone’s good side.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:11 am*

“Maybe that’s because you didn’t have one until recently,” Lily teased with a smirk.

“Ouch. I’ll have you know, I did have one. It was just buried below the surface.”

“I know that,” she said, reaching out and placing her hand on the side of his face.

“You’ve got a heart of gold, it just took some work to get it to shine.”

The king and queen, along with the earl and countess, entered the room. Both sets of proud parents stared at them as the king asked, “Are you two ready for this?”

Both of them nodded as the king pushed open the doors to the center balcony of the palace. He went out first along with the queen, followed by Lily’s parents.

From outside, the king’s booming voice said, “Today is a grand day. A day where the future of Triola is secured for the next generation. We are pleased to announce the royal engagement of Crown Prince Maxwell Gerard Beaumont, and Lady Liliana Lockhart, the daughter of the Earl of Northrop.”

“Here we go,” Max said with a smile. “I’m glad I met my match in you, Lily.”

“I feel the same. I had no idea I could be this happy.” Leaning over and giving him a quick peck on the lips, she added, “Let’s do this royal thing.”

The newly engaged couple walked onto the balcony, waved to the crowd, and welcomed their people as the future king and queen of Triola.