



# Seducing the Princess (Shillings Agency 3)

**Author:** *Diane Alberts*

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**Description:** A sexy category romance from Entangled's Brazen imprint...

He'll give her exactly what she needs...

**Total Pages (Source):** 72

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:27 am*

## Chapter One

Gordon Waybrook sighed and shifted his weight in the overly padded seat of the coffee shop booth he'd been sitting in for the last twenty minutes. The seat next to him was empty. Not for lack of trying, though. He'd already sent three women away, but he wasn't hanging out in Cape Elizabeth, Maine, trying to pick up women.

He was there to scope out his charge, Princess Isabelle VanGuard of Maldeva.

All he knew about the woman was she was a spoiled princess, magnificent in a way that screamed for him to see if she was as stunning under her clothes as she was in them—and she was late. He glanced down at the copy of her official schedule to double-check the time, and sure enough, coffee was penciled in at four o'clock in the afternoon.

Of course, the Princess didn't have to worry about being on time. People just waited for her and didn't dare to complain because, well, she was a fucking princess. She probably never said please or thank you. Just expected life to be handed to her with a shiny silver bow. Wait, no. Platinum.

With priceless diamonds.

If she thought he'd bow at her feet and kiss her toes, she had another think coming. She might be royalty and way above his reach, but he was an American.

And he didn't bow at anyone's feet unless he fucking wanted to.

Fifteen minutes and thirty-six seconds later...the royal princess herself walked in. As soon as he saw her, he stiffened. She wore big brown sunglasses, and held herself so stiffly he couldn't believe she didn't faint from the sheer energy it must take to stand so damn perfectly. Her long legs were covered in black pantyhose, and she wore heels that looked to be at least three inches high. Her blonde hair reached halfway down her back and was flawlessly smooth.

She was drop-dead gorgeous.

Way too much so for royalty.

Two women, who looked to be assistants of some sort, flanked her, their eyes narrow, and their mouths pinched tight. Isabelle scanned the room, her gaze slipping over him and then popping back immediately. When she didn't look away, he raised a brow and stared right back at her. He expected her to blush from being caught staring at a tatted up dude in a shop...

But she stared right back at him.

Not only that, but she sashayed over, too. That was the only word for it, because her hips swung like he couldn't believe. Holy mother of fucking shit, she was going to kill him before this mission was over. He cleared his throat and tugged on his collar. Great. Now he'd actually have to talk to her and introduce himself as her guard.

"Hello, I'm—"

"Staring at me," she said, her soft accent washing over him. "Do we know each other, or do you make it a habit to stare at strange women in coffee shops?"

"Well..." Looking her up and down, he smirked. "You don't look all that strange to me, so...?"

She laughed, then cut it off and glanced over her shoulder quickly. It was almost as if she was surprised she'd laughed at all. "You must not know me at all, then, because I'm one of the strangest women you'll ever meet."

He grinned. "I doubt that."

"So you just like watching women in shops, then?" she asked, a small smile playing on her lips. They were soft and pink.

"Pretty women?" He shrugged. "Hell yeah. But no, we haven't met."

"Ah." She tilted her head. "I'd hoped we had met, so my coming over here wouldn't seem quite so...forward."

He chuckled. "Lady? This is America. You don't need a proper introduction to walk up to someone. You just do it."

"In that case..." She nodded at the two women frowning at her from across the room, slid out the empty chair next to him, and smiled. They moved to the opposite side of the room, watching him closely the whole time. Especially the pinch-lipped one. "Nice to meet you."

Grinning, he nodded. "Likewise. Please. Have a seat," he said sardonically.

She laughed that musical laugh again. "Thank you. Don't mind if I do. That's an adorable accent you have."

The grin slipped off his face. Adorable? Adorable was for tiny puppies and little orange kittens that chased their own tails. He'd never once been described as adorable.

“I don’t have an accent at all.”

She smiled. “Not to you, but for me? It’s quite unique.”

“As is yours,” he said. After taking a sip of coffee, he motioned the barista over. “Not quite British, but almost French.”

Pursing her lips, she said, “Close enough.”

So, she wouldn’t tell him where she was from. She got an A+ for secrecy.

; The woman who’d been watching him from behind the counter came over, all smiles. “Yes?”

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“Can you get my friend here a...?”

“Fat free caramel mocha, please. No cream,” she said, smiling and friendly the whole time. “Thank you.”

So much for her never saying please and thank you.

She was proving him wrong on so many aspects without even trying. Usually, that pissed him off, but in this case? It was refreshingly good news. “Living dangerously, I see,” he murmured. “Who doesn’t get whipped cream?”

Tossing her hair behind her back, she met his stare head on. “I don’t live dangerously at all, for the most part. Taking risks is foolish and irresponsible.”

Spoken like a true princess.

“I agree.” He leaned back in his chair and laced his fingers in front of his stomach. “If everyone got whipped cream on their mochas, just think of the madness that could ensue. Rioting. Murder. Downright insanity.”

She laughed. It was perfect. Almost as if she practiced it everyday until she got it just right. “All right, Mr. Ass Pants.”

He choked on a laugh. “Mr. What?”

“Umm...” She froze, looking mortified. “Isn’t that a phrase here?”

“No.” Laughing fully now, he reached out and squeezed her hand. “I think you were going for Mr. Smarty Pants. Or maybe smart ass. But the two don’t really get combined.”

“Oops. See what happens when I try to be silly? Utter madness.”

“I think it’s refreshingly cute,” he countered. “Not mad at all.”

She blushed. Actually blushed. “Thank you.”

That was twice in one minute. He’d been so wrong.

And he had no idea what to do with that knowledge.

He shook his head, unable to look away from her. She was so...beautiful. Even more so now that he knew she didn’t have a stick lodged permanently up her ass as he’d originally suspected. He didn’t know if that was a good thing or a bad thing just yet, though, because it made her even more tempting than before.

The barista came over, a to-go cup in her hand. “Here you go. That’ll be four twenty-six.”

Isabelle reached into her purse, but Gordon beat her there. After handing the cash to the worker, he smiled at Isabelle. “I’ve got it.”

“This isn’t a date,” she said, her lips twitching. “I should pay.”

“In America, we pay when we want to.” He locked gazes with her. “And I want to.”

“You keep throwing that statement at me. ‘In America, we...’ fill in the blank.”

He snorted. “I’ll be honest. We love ‘filling in’ stuff here in America. I can’t argue with that.”

She covered her face. “Oh my.”

“It’s okay. You kinda walked into—”

“Excuse me?” the stern faced, pinch-lipped, gray haired woman interrupted. Gordon recognized her as one of Isabelle’s assistants...or whatever they were called. “We need to go now.”

“Hello,” he said. Time to come clean and tell Isabelle who he really was. He didn’t mind doing so anymore, because he liked her now. A lot. Too much, maybe. “Don’t worry. I’m her—”

“I wasn’t speaking to you.” She frowned at him, as if he was dirtying Isabelle by simply being near her. Truth be told...he might be doing precisely that. He wasn’t exactly a prince or anything. “We need to go. You have a schedule to stick to.”

Isabelle’s hands dropped, and she looked up at the woman. “Yes. Yes, of course. I’ll be right over, Mary.” She sat up straighter, her face falling back into that regal expression. “Thank you.”

And right now, he saw the princess he’d expected to see. Regal. Proper. Uptight. Spoiled. “Duty calls, huh?”



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She glanced at him. “I’m afraid so. It was lovely meeting you, though.”

“You as well.” He held his hand out, waiting for her to take it. She studied it, then slid her fingers into his palm. Staring at her, he raised her knuckles to his mouth and kissed it. “I have a feeling we’ll be seeing each other again.”

She flushed, her fingers wiggling in his. “I doubt that. I have a very busy visit planned.”

“We’ll see,” he said, grinning.

After glancing over her shoulder nervously, she turned back and whispered, “But maybe if you’d like to—?”

“Miss.” The gray haired woman crossed her arms and stepped closer. “I really must insist we continue on. There is a lot to do before six tonight.”

The cranky assistant referred to Isabelle’s dinner plans later on.

“Right.” She offered Gordon one last smile. “It really was nice meeting you.”

“You, too.” He let go of her hand reluctantly. “See ya later.”

“Goodbye,” she said, slipping out of the chair.

He watched her walk away, her hips swinging gracefully with each move. As she walked out of the door, she glanced back at him, the light in her eyes subdued. With a

small smile, she slipped her sunglasses on and left.

He couldn't wait to see the surprise on her face when he introduced himself later as her guard, couldn't wait to hear his name on her lips. Would it be as soft and lilting as everything else she said? What if she screamed it out in pleasure as he went down—shit.

He was screwed, because he wasn't supposed to touch her...

And that's all he could think about, but he wouldn't even think about trying to pursue that avenue. She was a princess, and he'd never be good enough for a woman like her. She'd expect castles, horses, world tours, and jewels.

Not cape cods, dogs, Maine, and nightmares.

## Chapter Two

Isabelle Van Guard, third in line for the crown of Maldeva, stepped into the dark hallway of La Boheme, pulling her big sunglasses off. She smoothed her white Coco Chanel dress that hit directly an inch above the knee with a steady hand. She knew exactly where the dress hit because the palace stylist had measured it three times before her mother gave her stamp of approval.

As her mother always said, a princess never shows her thighs.

She sighed and tucked her hair behind her ear. She'd been forced to sit on a wooden chair for an hour after landing in America, so her stylist could poke and prod her into perfection. Too bad she felt anything but perfect. She felt like a mess, because she was late.

And she really, really hated being late.

To top it all off? She couldn't stop thinking about the man she'd met in the coffee shop. When she'd seen him watching her, she'd ignored the manners that had been drilled into her all her life and walked right up to him. When he'd started flirting with her, and watched her with those deep brown eyes of his...she'd fallen into his web without a fight.

And she hadn't wanted to get out. Alas, duty had called. She was here for a reason, and that reason wasn't to flirt with cute men in shops.

Even now, her dinner partner, the Governor of Maine, would be sitting at the table waiting for her, and he would more than likely be cross with her for the delay. But he'd have to wait a little while longer, because princess or not? A girl had to pee. Princesses don't pee. They powder their noses, her mother's voice reminded her.

That annoying voice of reason was always there. It had been going crazy when she'd sat next to the guy in the coffee shop, shouting at the top of its lungs. She'd ignored it. Princesses don't flirt with strange men, and they definitely don't do it without proper introductions.

Princesses did not do anything fun at all, according to her mother.

"Can you go make sure that the table is secure?" she asked her assistant, who was attached to her like her shadow. "I don't need company to visit the ladies room."

The girl hesitated. "But—"

"Please. I'll be fine. I won't wander off or get lost." Leaning in, she whispered, "Besides, we're supposed to be blending in, remember? Small security team, normal girl. That's my cover. We can't risk showing our true feathers."

&nb

sp; She still hesitated, but then nodded. “All right. But I’ll be right back.”

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“Can’t wait,” Isabelle said drily.

But she smiled, lest the sarcasm be sensed.

After she was blissfully alone, she closed her eyes and let out a long sigh. Moments of silence were few and far between, so she’d enjoy it while it lasted.

Thunder crashed behind her, making her jump. She’d only been in Maine for a few hours, but the whole time she’d been here, it had been pouring. Legit pouring. The lights flickered briefly but came back to life. Thank God.

Sighing, she checked her watch for the tenth time and waited for the person currently occupying the women’s restroom to open the stinking door. She tapped a red Louboutin clad foot on the floor. If this woman didn’t pee quicker, her bladder would explode. Another boom of thunder shook the building. Within seconds, the lights went out. No flickering. No warning. Just pure blackness.

She froze. Well, bonkers. Now what? Something, or someone, moved behind her. Her heart hammered in her ears. A low, masculine chuckle sounded. She whirled on a heel, her hand brushing against a warm body as she did so.

When arms closed around her, her heart sped up even more. She tried to yank free, but the man didn’t release her. Oh no, what if this was all a ploy to kidnap her and ransom her off to her parents, piece by piece? What if—?

“Whoa, there,” the man slurred, sounding completely drunk or high...or both. “What do I have here?”

This is what her parents had warned her about. She'd instructed her guard to stand by the front entrance, since it was the only one, and they'd already scoped out the place and approved the inhabitants as "worthy" enough to be in the same room with her.

And, darn it, she'd wanted to pee in peace.

Princesses don't go in dark alleys or hallways alone. Princesses don't leave their guard. Princesses don't assume they're safe. That's what they'd told her all her life. She'd rolled her eyes and done exactly the opposite, because why not?

Well, she should have listened.

"Hey, there." She used the cultured American accent she'd been practicing for a year now, for situations such as this. The lessons had seemed stupid at the time, but now they made perfect sense. "Sorry about that."

"Oh yeah?" His hands roamed lower, over her hips. "Well, I'm not."

She stiffened. "Unhand me now."

"Unhand you?" The man holding her said, the words slurring together into one long one. He snorted and didn't let go. "You crashed into me, lady."

"It was an accident I assure you," she said quickly. "Please release me."

As she waited for him to obey, she calculated his weakest attack point. Maybe an elbow to the windpipe would be her best move. She'd need to catch him off guard and take him down, so she could run as fast as she could back to the crowds.

"Or you wanted a guy to catch you before you fell." The man lowered his face way too close to hers. "Girls like that chivalrous shit."

“Not this one.” Isabelle scrambled for something to say. Something to get this guy to let go of her, without giving away the fact that she was a princess. “My...my boyfriend is here. My big, muscular boyfriend.” She shoved his chest, but he didn’t budge. Okay. She might need more than a well-placed elbow to throw this guy off his game. “He’ll knock you out if you don’t let go of me. He’ll...he’ll take you down. So you better—”

The man snorted again, and his breath washed over her. He smelled like a bottle of cheap tequila. No, scratch that. Two bottles of cheap tequila. “I’d like to see him try.”

Isabelle sucked in a deep breath, acutely aware of how much bigger the man was than her. Why wasn’t he releasing her? She tried to wiggle free, but he didn’t budge. “Just let me go.”

“Say please, and maybe I will.”

She narrowed her eyes. “I won’t beg. I don’t beg.”

The man held on to her even tighter, his fingers digging into her arms. She flinched at the pain he caused. “You need to learn some—”

“The lady asked you to let her go,” a hard male voice said from somewhere behind them. It sounded vaguely familiar. “I suggest you do so, before I’m forced to make you.”

The first man let go of her instantly. “I wasn’t causing any trouble with your girl, man. She was just—”

“Leave, now, before I change my mind,” the second man advised, not bothering to correct the other man’s misconception about them being an item. He moved closer after the warning. Isabelle couldn’t see him, but she could feel him. “One. Two.

Thr—”

“Okay, okay.” The rude man backed off. “I’m going.”

After the man left, Isabelle collapsed against the wall, her heart thudding against her ribcage. “Th-Thank you for that.”



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“Don’t mention it.” The man came closer, his spiced cologne teasing her senses. Man, he smelled good...and familiar. Where had she smelled that cologne before? He reached out and rested a hand on her shoulder. He squeezed it reassuringly, but it didn’t reassure her. Something about him made her whole body just kind of...tingle. “Are you all right, ma’am?”

No. She wasn’t. “Yes. I am.” Princesses never fall apart in public. She forced herself to stand straight. To act fine. She maintained the fake American accent, because despite this man’s heroic actions, she didn’t know him at all. “Thank you, again.”

“You’re welcome.” He paused, his fingers hesitating on her skin before he let go of her. “I’ll stay with you until the lights come back on, or until your boyfriend comes out. My name’s Gordon, by the way.”

Gordon. She’d never heard that name before. It sounded as unique as her intense reaction to this man was. “You don’t have to stay with me,” she said, deliberately avoiding giving the man her name in return. “I’ll be okay on my own.”

Safer, too.

Leaning against the wall directly next to her, he pointed out, “He could come back.”

His chest brushed against her shoulder, making her shiver. There was something about this man that awoke things that she hadn’t felt in years. And he was right. That man could come back. She might not know Gordon, but she knew the man who’d left was a lot worse than him. And why did he sound so darn familiar?

“I’ll be fine. Really.”

“I know.” He reached out and squeezed her hand. The innocent touch burned her. She bit down on her lip, biting back a groan. At a hand touch. Geez. “But I’d feel better if you weren’t alone. Let me stay with you. I’ll be yours until you’re done with me,” he said, his tone teasing.

Her heart stammered in her chest at his touch, making her think of things. Bad, dirty things. Things princesses shouldn’t think about with strangers. But he wasn’t a stranger, was he? She knew that voice.

He was the man from the coffee shop. Why was he here, at the same place as her twice in one day? For the most part, she didn’t believe in coincidences. If he was here, it had to be for a reason—be it good or evil. She needed to play it cool until she figured out which one. “O-Okay. Thank you, Gordon.”

“Don’t mention it.” He still didn’t drop her hand. “Do I know you? You sound familiar.”

“Nope, not at all.” She forced a laugh. “I’d remember your name.”

“Yeah. Okay.” He sounded less than convinced. “Hey, did you see any other women come through here? Short, blonde chick with green eyes? Pretty little thing?”

Oh my God. Was he looking for her? Figures. The first man to awaken her lady parts was a creepy stalker...or worse. “There’s one in the bathroom, but I don’t know if she’s a ‘pretty little thing’ or not.”

“Ah.” Gordon dropped her hand and walked past her, then knocked on the door. His arm brushed hers again, and she had the same intense reaction. He tensed, as if maybe he felt it, too, but then he called out, “Excuse me? Is there an Isabelle in there?”

She stiffened. He knew her name? Bonkers. This really wasn't looking good. "Isabelle," she said with as much fake confusion as she could muster up. "Who is that?"

He didn't answer her.

"Uhh..." A woman called out through the door. "No Isabelle in here. It's just me. But the lights went out in here. I can't see anything."

"The power is out in the whole restaurant, ma'am." The man reached out and grabbed Isabelle's hand, his fingers firm on hers, as if he'd just remembered she stood there and wanted to keep an eye on her. "Need help coming out safely? I've got another woman out here, too, so it's not just me."

Silence, then, "No, I'll just wait in here. I'm...I'm not decent. I was changing."

"All right." He sighed, turning away from the door, but didn't let go of her hand. She glanced down at it, even though she couldn't see a thing. His hand felt a lot bigger than hers. Strong. Capable. Used to hard work. Nice. Too bad she didn't know if he was a criminal or not. "I've got to find Isabelle. Come with me?"

She took a deep breath. "Your Isabelle. Is she a foreigner?"

"Yes." He stopped walking and grabbed her other hand. Her stomach tightened into a knot. "Did you see her walk by? I need to find her."

"Yeah. I-I might have seen her. Who is she to you?"

He ignored her question. "Where did she go?"

"Um..." Isabelle hesitated. "Why are you looking for her?"

“I’m her brother,” he said irritably, not even hesitating over the lie. “She’ll be scared without me. Can you come with me until your boyfriend comes to keep you safe?”

That was a lie. A big, fat lie. She didn’t have a brother.

Of course, she didn’t have a boyfriend, either, but that had been her lie. She’d end up marrying for an alliance instead of love, so what was the point in pretending otherwise? As a matter of fact, that’s why she was here. To meet her intended fiancé on neutral ground. He’d been in America for a year now because he’d been working on some highly important, exclusive agreement with a manufacturer here in Maine, and was due to come home soon. Her family wanted her to marry him.

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It wasn't official yet, but once they met, and if she agreed to do her duty...it would be. She was terrified, and sick to her stomach, just thinking about mar

rying a man she hadn't even met yet, let alone fallen for. But it was her duty as her parents' sole heir. She needed to marry. Produce little princesses and princes. Be the good girl her parents raised her to be.

Even if she didn't want to be.

"Oh." She forced her tone to remain calm. "She went upstairs to the bar, I think."

"Thanks," the man said, leading her toward the stairs. "Let's go get her."

She yanked free, catching him off guard. "You go on. I'll stay down here, so my boyfriend can find me."

"I can't leave you alone," he said.

"I'll be fine."

He sighed. "Please, I—"

She tried to walk past him, but he stepped left at the same time. They collided, and his arms closed around her much like the other man's had. Only instead of feeling scared in Gordon's embrace, she felt...turned on, to be honest. It was a sensation she'd grown quite accustomed to not feeling anymore. But now, it was as if she'd been starving for this feeling for years, and only he could make it go away.

And he might be trying to kidnap her.

Go figure.

Her stomach twisted, and she rested her hands on his hard chest. Holy mother of the American royalty. The man was as hard as a rock. His hands slipped down her back and rested dangerously low at the curve of her hips. The innocent touch made her stomach tighten in knots, twisting and turning and roiling. His fingers flexed, almost as if he felt the same thing as her.

“Are you all right?” His voice was deeper than before. Raspy, too, as if he’d swallowed something sharp. He stepped closer, his chest brushing against hers. Her nipples hardened, seeming to beg for his touch already. “I didn’t mean to bump into you.”

“Yes, I’m fine,” she said, not wiggling to get free. Not this time. Heck, he felt...good. Real good. Too good. She curled her fingers over the fabric of his shirt. “Thank you, again.”

His hand slipped a little lower, making a shot of lust bolt through her veins, but he let go of her after a slight hesitation. She fought back a disappointed sigh. Wait. Disappointed? The guy was a stalker. She shouldn’t be upset he didn’t grope her.

His thumb skimmed over her knuckles in a soft caress. “Stay with me. I’m not going to hurt you. Tell me the truth...do you really have a big boyfriend waiting for you?”

“You first.” She steadied her nerves. “Tell me who she really is. I can tell she’s not your sister. She’s from another country.”

“That doesn’t mean I’m not her brother.”

“You’re not. She doesn’t have a brother,” Isabelle said, her heart racing so fast it hurt. “She told me she was an only child.”

“Shit.” His fingers tightened on her. “Fine. You got me. I’m a guard, and I have to find Isabelle. I can’t tell you who she is, so don’t ask. She’s my charge, not my sister, and the idiotic woman wandered off on me. If I don’t find her, I’m in deep shit. Now will you come with me?”

She stiffened. Idiotic woman? How dare he?

He had no right to talk about her like that. None at all.

And even worse than his impetuosity was the fact that he was her guard. This wasn’t a random man she’d never see again. This was a man she’d be forced to be around for days on end, in close quarters. And she’d been flirting with him. Twice. Gah!

Carefully, she asked, “Are you with the Shillings Agency?”

“Yeah.” He froze. “Wait. How did you know that?”

So he was her guard? Fabulous. Just fabulous. “Because I’m—”

The lights flickered and came back to life with a big pop. She blinked against the sudden brightness, squinting through the blinding pain as her eyes adjusted. Once she could make out more than the dots swimming before her eyes, she stared straight ahead at her protector.

Or his chest, so to speak.

He was a lot taller than she’d expected. He’d seemed tall in the shop, but he’d been

sitting the whole time. Now, standing at his full height, he was well over six foot. She tightened her hands on his suit-clad biceps. His really big biceps.



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Gulping in a deep breath, she glanced up. And he was just as hot as she remembered, too. Totally, unbelievably, undeniably hot. His disheveled, spiky brown hair was topped off with deep chestnut eyes, a five o'clock shadow to kill for, and a devilishly charming way with women. He was easily the most gorgeous, attractive man she'd ever seen.

Ever.

She hadn't realized men came in this attractive of a package until she'd seen him earlier, but bonkers, they did. If all the men in Maine looked like this one, then sign her up on the dotted line. She'd be American for him.

Princesses never turn their backs on their native land, her mother's voice said.

"Oh. Okay," Isabelle said, patting his biceps one last time before letting go of him reluctantly. "About that idiotic Isabelle girl..."

"No need to continue that sentence." He cocked a brow and didn't let go of her, despite her own release of him. His continued hold on her was bold, forward, and hot all at once. That would never happen back in her home country. His gaze dipped down her body, taking way too long to come back up to her face, and her stomach tightened into a knot again. "You're her."

He said it like a curse, or a distasteful object.

She flinched. "You knew. In the shop?"

His jaw twitched, but he stared at her without replying. She cleared her throat, way too aware of the fact that she was completely alone in a room with a guy who looked as if he belonged on the cover of the Men's Health magazine she'd snuck in on the way here. Did he have a six-pack under that suit?

She'd wager her country's wealth that he did.

"Well, did you know?" she asked.

"I knew then. Not now. You tricked me." His eyes darkened, and his gaze dropped to her mouth. "I'm not used to that."

"I am." Her cheeks heated. "I mean...you may release me now."

His brow went higher. "Oh, may I now?"

"Yes. You may." She stared him down, trying her best to look completely calm when she was anything but. "Now."

"Yes, ma'am." He laughed under his breath and let go of her without a sign of hesitation. Not like before he'd known who she was. "Nice fake accent, Princess. I'm impressed. It's even better than that humble act you pulled off with me in the coffee shop. You seemed so...so...normal."

"Thank you." Isabelle smoothed her dress, dropping the act and letting her real voice through. "I've practiced for years."

He stepped back, his brown eyes pinning her to the spot with their intensity. "You ready?"

She blinked at him. "For?"

“Dinner,” he said, watching her with a wrinkled brow. “You were due at the table by six-thirty. You’re late...again.”

“I know that, thank you very much,” she said, her voice tinged with annoyance at being reminded she was late. She knew that already. “Know what I don’t know? Your full name.”

He bowed at the waist. “Gordon Waybrook, at your service, Princess Isabelle. I’m one of two men who will be in charge of keeping you safe during your visit to America.”

Isabelle shook her head, unable to believe this hunk of a guy had been assigned to her. Her guards were usually old, overweight, and balding. Not...delicious. “You’re actually my guard?”

“Yep.” He cocked his head. “Is that a problem?”

Yes. It was. “No. Of course not.”

Except for the fact that he was too hot to see her stumble around without her makeup on, he was too hot to follow her around all day, and he was way too hot to resist. She stared at him, unable to believe her father had assigned this man, of all men, to her. He was an American version of pure temptation.

Princesses don’t drool over men.

He gave her a level look. “Good. Now, if you’re ready?”

“I need to...” She broke off, not knowing how to tell this hun

k she had to pee like one of her father’s prized racehorses. God, this was going to be a

tortuous visit to the states. “I have to...”

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He shifted on his feet and gave her an annoyed glance. “Yes, Princess? We don’t have all day.”

“I have to go to the ladies’ room,” she said primly, refusing to show how much his disrespectful tone unnerved her. Back home, no one ever showed her any impatience or anger. Ever. “To powder my nose before dinner.”

He snorted and motioned her forward. “Yeah, sure you do. Let’s go, then.”

She blinked at him, unable to believe how ordinary he treated her. As if she were a commoner or a friend of his. When she didn’t move fast enough, he placed his hand at the small of her back and gave her a gentle push forward. She stumbled along, letting him guide her down the hallway once more.

“You do realize I’m actually a princess, right?” she asked over her shoulder. “In my country, the people treat me with respect and kindness. They don’t push me.”

“Then walk faster. Because in my country?” He opened the bathroom door for her, glancing inside to make sure it was empty. His gaze dipped low again. When he looked up at her, his eyes were darker than before. She hadn’t even realized that was possible. “We give respect when it’s earned. Not because it’s a right. Now go pee quickly...Princess.”

With that, he pushed her inside gently—again—and closed the door in her face.

Unbelievable.

## Chapter Three

A couple of hours later, Gordon dragged his hand through his hair and followed Princess Isabelle out of the restaurant. He'd watched her all night, since it was his job to do so, and she confused him. The woman he'd met in the coffee shop and the dark hallway had seemed so down to earth. She'd held his hand, and he'd sworn he felt an attraction between the two of them building up.

She'd been refreshingly normal.

Then the lights had come on in the restaurant, and she'd turned into this haughty princess version of the woman. She'd become someone whom he'd never look at twice, under any other circumstances. But instead of shrugging it off and moving on, he couldn't let it go. There had been an undeniable attraction between them before she'd changed.

He knew it.

She knew it, too, he'd bet.

Earlier, paparazzi had been spotted hanging around the back entrance. Her team had left that way to throw them off her scent, and she was currently hurrying across the foyer so the two of them could leave unnoticed...elegantly, of course.

Rushing past her, he opened the door for her. She shot him a quick look, her bright green eyes meeting his, but then she looked away. She was still gorgeous, even though she'd gone all princess-mode on him. Her long blonde hair shined like diamonds on tiny silk strands, and she had tiny dimples in her cheeks when she smiled.

Royal dimples.

Everything about her, from her head to her toes, screamed of elegance and composure. She was so damn put together, he'd bet she didn't even sweat or cry out when she came in bed. Hell, she probably didn't even come at all.

Way too undignified for royalty.

She walked through the door, brushing against his chest as she did so. He stiffened, a fist of need punching through him. Something had burned between them in that dark hallway, when he hadn't known who she was, and now there was no stopping it.

It was there.

Had she known it was him? She should have. There had been no fake accent to throw her off. She stopped in the foyer, blinking outside. "Um..."

"Yeah?" He followed her gaze. It still poured outside. When she didn't move, but instead toyed with the hem of her dress, he raised a brow. "Is there a problem, Princess?"

She shot him a look that told him to shove his nickname for her up his ass—regally, of course. "It's raining."

No shit, Sherlock, he said in his head.

He barely stopped himself from saying it out loud. She was a princess, after all. He was supposed to treat her with respect. "Yes. Yes, it is. Quite the astute observation," he said drily.

Her eyes narrowed on him. "I don't have an umbrella."

"Ah," he said, looking outside. "Princesses don't run in the rain, huh?"

“No. We don’t run at all,” she said, meeting his eyes. “Unless it’s on a treadmill in a private gym.”

He stared at her. He’d been mostly teasing her with that comment, but damn if that wasn’t actually her problem. She didn’t want to look undignified. “Wow.”



Her cheeks flushed. “What?”

“Nothing. I just didn’t realize you weren’t allowed to run through the rain like a normal person,” he muttered, running his hands through his hair. He shrugged out of his jacket. “Put this on and wait here. I’ll pull the car up for you.”

“I don’t want your jacket. There’s no time to worry about jackets and rain. We have to go before they realize I’m not with my team. Do you have an umbrella?”

“No. I just get wet.”

“Princesses don’t get wet,” she murmured.

Yeah. He could tell. “You don’t say,” he drawled, shrugging back into his jacket, since she’d refused it. “Ever?”

Her cheeks went even pinker, but that was the only sign she gave of acknowledging the innuendo in his tone. “Ever.”

“But—” He cut himself off, shaking his head. He really didn’t want to go down that road. “I mean, stay here. I’ll run out and pull the car up to the door, and you’ll only have a little bit of rain to regally walk through then.”

“No. I have to blend in. Act normal.” She shifted on her feet and scanned the street outside. It was empty. “We’ll have to make a run for it. Come on.”

He offered his hand. “If you insist, Princess. But at least hold on to my hand in case

you slip.”

“Which one is yours?” she asked, still mangling the hem of her dress.

“The red one over there.” He pointed to his car. “Next to the silver truck.”

“2014 Ford Mustang. Nice.”

He blinked at her. “You know cars?”

“Of course.” She dropped her dress and slid her hand into his. “I might be a princess, but I know a fabulous car when I see one.”

He couldn’t have been more shocked if she ripped off her dress and started singing the “Star Spangled Banner” in the middle of the restaurant. “Holy shit. I mean...uh...”

She laughed, making her bright eyes light up in ways he hadn’t realized were possible. She didn’t look like a regal princess right now—she looked like the woman he’d been flirting with in the coffee shop. All woman, and he felt all man.

“You ready?” she asked.

“I was born ready.” He tightened his fingers on hers. “After you, Princess.”

She took a deep breath and nodded.

He opened the door for her. She rushed through it, as if she might be scared to hesitate and chicken out, dragging him behind her. He picked up speed and matched his pace to hers easily enough. She squealed when the water pummeled them but didn’t sound upset. She sounded...thrilled. As if she loved doing this.

As if she felt alive.

He watched her out of the corner of his eye as they sprinted for his car. She laughed and swiped her free hand over her forehead, her previously flawless blonde hair plastered all over her cheeks and neck like a child's first finger-painting. By the time they reached the car, they were both thoroughly drenched. He unlocked the passenger door and opened it for her, before bolting around the car to his door in record speed. He slid into his seat and slammed the door shut, shaking his head like a wet dog. "That was cold."

"Yes!" She laughed and wiped her face with her hands. "Oh my goodness. That was so much fun."

He grinned and turned to her. "See? You have no idea what you've been—"

Missing. That's what he'd been planning on saying, but the word died on his lips when he caught sight of her. She sat in his car, looking every part the straight-spined regal princess as ever, but she was completely different at the same time. Her hair was no longer straight, and her eyes shined with laughter. The dimples were out in full force, and her smile wasn't as practiced as it had been all night.

It looked real. Abso-fucking-lutely real.

And so did she.

On top of that, her white dress hugged her curves with way too much mind-numbing detail, showing him exactly how womanly she was under all that princess crap she wore like a shield. It did little to hide her breasts, and she must be wearing a sheer bra—because he could see her hard, rosy nipples through the lacy fabric.

She was breathtakingly stunning. He wanted her to be his so badly. He shifted in his

seat to accommodate his hard cock. “Fuck me.”

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The smile faded, and she met his eyes without any hesitance or shyness. “Excuse me? I barely know you, and you’re my—”

“I didn’t mean it that way. You’re...uh...” He motioned to her tits, averting his eyes so he didn’t stare and get his ass fired. But, man, it just might be worth it. “Your dress is now see-through.”

“What?” She looked down, gasped out loud, and crossed her arms over her chest. “Oh my God. No, no, no.”

His jacket was soaked and freezing, so he took it off and tossed it in the back seat. With his eyes locked on the windshield, he undid the top button on his shirt. “It’s okay. I’ve seen boobs before.”

“Not mine. Wh-What are you doing?” she asked, her gaze pinned on his hands as he undid his dress shirt. “Why are you taking your shirt off?”

“So you’ll take yours off, too.” He shot her a look from under his ducked head. “I’ll even go first, in good faith.”

“Gordon.”

“Just teasing. Relax. I’m going to give you this to wear so no one sees you.” He paused on the last button, his gaze dipping down her body of its own accord. “At least, I assume you don’t want anyone seeing you like that? It doesn’t seem very princess-like.”

“Neither is being seen with a shirtless man, while wearing his shirt,” she groaned, dropping her head back against the leather seat. “Please tell me you have a shirt on under that?”

He snorted. “No, but men

can walk around shirtless in America, Princess.”

“I know,” she hissed. “But we can’t go to the hotel like this. My people, not to mention my parents, will throw a fit if I’m seen looking anything less than perfect—with a shirtless American man, no less. I can’t afford to mess up right now.”

“We can go to my house if you’d like,” he stated calmly, hoping it would rub off on her or some shit like that. He took his shirt off and offered it to her. “It’s only five minutes from here. You can wear a robe while we’re there, and I’ll dry your dress in the dryer before I take you back to the hotel. No one will know.”

She looked at him as if he’d killed a puppy. “This is Chanel. It can’t go in the dryer.”

“Sorry,” he muttered. “Okay, how about this? Tell your people you’re with me, and I’ll tell mine the same. Tell them...you got something on your dress, and we’re addressing the issue accordingly.” When she didn’t answer or take the shirt, he looked at her. He’d been trying to avoid that temptation, but he was worried he’d broken her or something. “Well? Do it.”

She sputtered. “People don’t tell me what to do. I tell them.”

“Yeah, well, get used to it, Princess. Call them. Now.”

He expected her to argue, but she picked up her phone and made the call. While she made a hurried excuse about her absence, and assured her people she’d be perfectly

safe in the company of the guard they'd hired, Gordon texted his boss.

When he finished, he slid his phone into his damp pocket and checked her out again. She still sat there, the phone to her ear, her appearance as tempting as ever, but she watched him now, too. She was focused on his chest—or maybe his abs—and she looked like she was about five seconds from jumping him.

There was no mistaking the desire in her eyes, and there was no denying his own answering surge of lust. It was the elephant in the room that he'd tried to ignore, but refused to shut the hell up.

After a few more words, she hung up, her attention still glued on his chest. “We’re...we’re...good...”

“Princess?” he asked, his voice deepened with desire. “You okay over there?”

“I...I’m...” She licked her lips, her gaze still pinned on his shirtless torso. Her cheeks flushed bright pink, but she didn’t look away. “Oh God. You’re...I’m...it’s so hot in here. What’s wrong with me?”

He stiffened, not liking the tone in her voice. She acted as if there had to be something wrong with her if she liked the way he looked without clothes on. All because she was a princess, and he was just a normal guy. Fuck that. “What’s the matter, Princess? Is it the tattoos that threw you off? Are they forbidden in your country? Or is it that you’ve never seen a shirtless man before?”

Her head snapped up at that, finally meeting his eyes. She looked pissed as hell. “That’s none of your business.”

Damn it, she was right. He was supposed to be protecting her, not provoking her. He needed to get his shit together. “Princess.”

She shook her head, her mouth pinched tight. She looked like her cranky assistant lady. “Furthermore, you can’t talk to me like that. It’s not right.”

“You’re absolutely right.” And that’s the closest he’d get to saying he was sorry. He didn’t do apologies and regrets. “Buckle up, Princess.”

She huffed but didn’t argue. Thank God. He’d known dealing with a princess wouldn’t be easy, but he hadn’t realized just how damn hard it would be, either. Hell, he hadn’t realized how hard he’d be around her.

It was an unwelcome reaction, truth be told.



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He didn't want to want her. Didn't want her to want him, either. She couldn't handle him. He liked to be in control in bed. He liked his women confident, experienced, and willing to try just about anything. She wasn't any of those things. She was like a scared little mouse stuck in the middle of a room.

She had no fucking clue what she was doing.

"You need to show me more respect," she said, her hands latched in her lap as if she held on to her dignity with all her might. "I'm not used to men acting as if I'm a...a...common harlot."

"Maybe that's your problem," he muttered, glancing left to make sure it was clear to turn. "You need to be treated that way in bed—"

"Gordon."

His fingers flexed on the wheel at the sound of his name on her lips. It sounded good. So good he wanted to make her say it again, only this time all breathlessly and with a tinge of desperation as he went down on her in his bed. "Look, Princess, I'm not one of your subjects. I don't bow down to anyone, and I damn well won't curb my tongue for anyone, either. I'm me, and I'm not changing. That said, if you'd like to request a different guard, you're more than free to do so. I can call Cooper for you, real easy."

She stayed silent for a few heartbeats. "No. I don't want to switch. It'll just...it'll take some getting used to."

He didn't realize how much he wanted to hear her answer until she finally opened her

mouth, and his entire body relaxed. He released his death grip on the wheel, nodding once to accept her reply. “Do you drink? I have wine at my house. It’ll help pass the time as I figure out a way to dry your dress without ruining it.”

She wrapped her arms around herself, looking at him out of the corner of her eye. His shirt still sat on her lap. She hadn’t put it on. He forced his eyes back on the road before he caught sight of her rosy nipples again and crashed them into a ditch.

“I do like wine, yes. Red.”

Red. Of course. She had red written all over her, from her fancy shoes to her flawless pearls. “I have some of that.”

They fell silent and remained that way for the rest of the ride. He kept forcing his eyes to stay on the road, but he wanted to look at her. Study her. Understand her. She had some weird pull on him that he couldn’t shake loose. It was driving him insane. He wanted to wrap her in his arms and show her how to really live.

Show her what fun really was.

Not that he wanted anything serious with her, of course. She was a fucking princess, and he was...well, him. He wasn’t looking for happily ever after, or any shit like that. Just happy for tonight, or this afternoon, or whatever.

He wasn’t afraid of commitment or anything like that. He just hadn’t found a girl who made him want to commit. So he went through his life, living meaningless encounters with women, one after another, and that was fine with him.

And he had one rule and one rule only when it came to his lovers: He wouldn’t touch anyone who belonged to anyone else, and he wouldn’t have two women at once.

Not after what he'd seen as a child.

Images of his father leaving with yet another woman under his arm, while his mother cried herself to sleep, hit him. His father had come from a rich family, while his mother had been a teacher. He'd never even hesitated before throwing that back in her face as he'd left them. After watching his mother slowly die from pain, he'd sworn never to do that to anyone else. He'd sworn to avoid anyone who was taken by another—no matter the circumstances.

And he'd never broken that rule.

He pulled into his driveway and shut off the car. He sat there for a second, staring up at his quaint two story. She probably lived in a castle that was ten times the size of his home. Hell, twenty. What he used to think was charming and old-fashioned now just felt small and old. Why did I bring her here?

She bent and looked out the windshield. "Is this your house?"

"Yeah." He opened the door, not one to fuck with time over his own insecurities. If she didn't like his house, that was her problem. Not his. Again, he wasn't going to apologize for being himself. "I know it's not a castle, but it's all mine."

When he opened her door for her, she shot him a glance. "I didn't expect you to live in a castle. You're not a prince. And for your knowledge, a lot of princes don't live in castles, as well."

"For your information."

&

nbsp; She blinked. "Excuse me?"

“That’s the saying. For your information. And, no, I’m not a prince, and I didn’t know that not all of them live in castles.” He shut her door behind her, took his shirt out of her hands, and tossed it over her shoulders. “I’m trying to be polite and all, but if you keep pointing your tit—uh, breasts at me in that see-through dress—I won’t be responsible for my actions.”

She crossed her arms, shooting him a narrow eyed glance. “I’m not ‘pointing’ my breasts anywhere. I’m simply standing here.”

“If you say so.” He grabbed her elbow and led her up his walkway.

She didn’t argue, but he could tell she had a few things she wanted to say to him. Her impeccable manners just didn’t let her. “You’re impossible.”

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“That, I did know.” After he unlocked the door, he motioned her forward. “After you, m’lady. I’ll hold the door for you, m’lady. Let me kiss your feet, m’lady.”

“Now you’re just mocking me.” She brushed past him. “I might be a naïve princess, but I know sarcasm when I hear it.”

He shut the door behind them and switched on the light in the foyer. She faced him, her hands at her hips, and her see-through dress looking even more so in the bright light. Jesus, she was going to kill him. She wore black panties.

Lacy black panties, from the looks of it.

He fisted his hands. “It’s not sarcasm.”

“Whatever word you Americans use for it.” She waved a hand dismissively. “It’s not respect; it’s the opposite.”

His lips twitched. “Teasing. It’s called teasing.”

“Well, then.” She tossed his shirt at him, and he caught it reflexively. “Please stop, and show me where that robe is.”

He laughed. He couldn’t help it—it was nice when she showed spunk. “Yes, m’lady. Right this way, m’lady. After you, m’la—ow!”

“Stop. It.” She smacked his arm even harder than she had seconds before. “Don’t make me order your beheading for your impertinence.”

“Please.” He started up the stairs, her following close behind. “I’d like to see you try to get me down.”

“You’d be surprised how much I can do,” she said, her voice low. “I’ve got more to me than you think.”

He froze mid-step. “Is that so?”

“Yeah. It is.” She placed her hands on his back, shoving him forward. “Now get that stubborn ass of yours moving—please.”

He smirked. Yeah. He definitely liked this feisty side of her much more than the nervous and cautious one. “Right away.”

“Thank you,” she answered primly.

He turned right at the top of the stairs and opened his bedroom door, then switched the light on. Normally, his puppy, Georgie, would be perched on the end of the bed, but he was at a buddy’s house tonight. Gordon hadn’t been planning on coming home until morning, so he’d gotten a dog sitter. His small room was dominated by the king size bed, and he’d left his robe tossed over the left corner of his pillow.

He stalked over to it and picked it up, before turning to face her with it in his hand. “You don’t mind brown, right?”

“No. Of course not.” Her eyes fell on his bed. “Is this your bedroom?”

“Yeah.”

She peeked at him before looking back at the bed. “Are you... Are you married?”

“Hell no.”

Another quick glance, but then she glanced back at him and held his gaze. “You have something against marriage?”

“No.” He dragged his hand through his hair. “I just haven’t met anyone I wanted to marry yet, is all.”

She pursed her lips. “You’re telling me that huge bed is just for you?”

“I didn’t say that,” he said, grinning. “I’m not always alone in it. I just don’t marry the girls I bring home, if you catch my drift.”

“Catch your...?” She shook her head. “Never mind. You’re asking if I understand you.”

“Yep. I’m saying I prefer the more temporary arrangements when it comes to passion. The ones of the one-night variety. At least...for now, I do.” He grinned when she stared at him blankly, not moving. “How about you? You like to stick to one-night stands with all the princes you meet at fancy masquerade balls?”

Her cheeks went red. “That’s none of your business. And I’m not getting in that bed with you tonight, if that’s what you’re leading up to.”

“What? No.” He laughed, a hand pressed to his stomach. “Believe me, Princess. If I invited you into my bed, you wouldn’t have to ask me if that’s what I meant. You’d know exactly what I wanted. I’d make sure you knew what I wanted, so you could give it to me. And you could be damn certain I’d give it to you, too.”

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She shook her head, her lower lip caught between her perfect white teeth. What he wouldn't give to do the same thing to her. To taste her. He'd bet she tasted like mint. Fresh and clean, all the time. "You say the boldest things."

"If you say so." His gaze dropped down her body, lingering on her pink, rosy nipples. "So, are you married? Engaged? Got a cute yodeling boy waiting for you back home?"

She laughed, the sound properly prim. Everything about her was proper. "No. No yodeling boy. No husband," she hesitated, "and no fiancé...yet."

"I find that hard to believe." He gave her the once-over, lingering on all her sweet curves and dips. "A girl like you has to have a guy."

She shrugged, a lost look crossing over her expression. "I don't bother with relationships, because more than likely, I will marry for country ties. For unity. For money." She took a step closer. "Not for love. Love doesn't exist in my world."

He studied her, not sure what to say to that. He couldn't imagine living like that and didn't want to, but she was okay with it. He shook his head slightly. "You ready to get out of that dress?"

"Yes." She walked toward him, her steps bold and yet hesitant, all at once. "Could you assist me?"

His mouth dried out. "Excuse me?"



“Unzip me.” She gave him her back, glancing over her shoulder at him as she did so. “I usually have a maid to help me, but...”

He swallowed hard, staring at the bare glimpse of shoulder and neck she gave him as she swept her hair to the side. Her hair had dried a bit, but it was still damp against the side of her neck. He wanted to sink his teeth into it as he plunged his fingers inside of her. As he made her scream out his name.

Damn it, what was with this girl that he couldn't shake her? That he wanted her so badly? Maybe he needed to get laid, pure and simple. It had been a while.

Clearing his throat, he stepped closer. Close enough to discover how fabulous she smelled. “Sure. Yeah. Right away.”

He unzipped her dress, inch by torturous inch. Unable to resist, he trailed his fingers over the soft, pale skin of her back as he did so. And, fuck him, she ate it up. Loved it. Wanted more. He could tell by the way she kept catching her breath, then letting it out in a soft whoosh. She wanted him as much as he wanted her. As more and more of her spine became visible, he got closer to losing control.

When he reached the bottom of her zipper, his fingers lingering at the small of her back, he moved close enough for his chest to touch her back. Her swift intake of breath hit him like a fist to the gut. She was as attracted to him as he was to her, which only made it harder to behave. Maybe he should stop trying.

Lowering his head, he dropped a soft kiss on the nape of her neck. She gasped and tilted her head, granting him better access. Groaning, he kissed her again, pressing his lips a little harder against her soft skin that time. He released the zipper and spanned his hands out over her hips, holding her in place. Keeping her where he wanted her.

She let out a soft moan, making his dick harden in response. One word. One slight

movement toward him, and she'd be his. He'd make her come so many times she'd forget what it felt like to be a proper princess.

She'd never want to be one again.

He straightened a little bit, his mouth a fraction of an inch from her ear. She shivered and leaned back ever so slightly. It was all the encouragement he needed. With his teeth, he caught her lobe and nibbled on it just enough to sting. She let out a soft whimper, her cheeks flushing with life. "Gordon."

He stepped even closer, his cock almost brushing her sweet ass. "Anything else you require from me, Princess?"

"I want..."

"I know what you want." He nibbled on her shoulder. "And if you want it, I'll give it to you. I'm not in the business of denying myself a night of fun if both parties are interested. We could have one night together. All you have to do is ask me nicely."

"I can't do that," she protested. "There are expectations. Duties."

"Do I look like I'm expecting more than a night of fucking from you?" He lowered his hand over the flat of her stomach, creeping toward her pussy. "Let go of the stress. Of the constant worry about what everyone will think of you if you do something fun for once. I won't tell if you won't..."

She moaned, leaning back against his chest. "God."

"Just for one night, whatever you'd like, it's yours. I'd give it to you, no questions asked." His hand went lower, brushing over the line of her panties. "I'm sure you're used to that, right? Getting what you want all the time?"

Her lids had been drifting shut, but at the end of his sentence, they flew open and she stiffened. She closed her hands over his, stopping their slow descent to her core. “Y-Yes. I am accustomed to a certain lifestyle—thank you so much for reminding me. I’d like the wine you so kindly offered to be waiting for me downstairs, after I get out of this dress, and I’d like privacy, please.” She paused, a slight shiver rippling through her. “Straight away.”

And just like that? The spell she’d woven over him unraveled.

He let go of her, knowing that to her, he’d always be the equivalent of her servant boy, and nothing more. She was used to elegance, riches, and people fawning over her.

She wasn’t used to him and never would be. He’d best remember that.

/> “Right away, m’lady,” he said, his voice hard. “I’ll go fetch it.”

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He turned on his heel and walked away, leaving behind the temptation she was, and reminded himself that she was his charge. Nothing more. Nothing less.

No matter how damn much he wanted her.

### Chapter Four

As soon as the door shut behind him, Isabelle kicked her heels off and collapsed against the post of the bed. The tension and, yes, desire buzzing between the two of them was insane. When he'd been unzipping her dress, he could have had her, right then and there. Despite their class differences. Despite the fact that she was never going to get to be happy with a man like him, even if she wanted to. She would have been his.

And she would have loved every second of it.

She had no doubt about that.

But then he'd gone and made yet another condescending comment about her being a princess. Technically, she wore the clothes. Walked in the shoes. Looked every part the stuck up princess he believed her to be. But she wasn't.

She really wasn't.

Sighing, she let the damp dress hit the floor at her feet. For a second, just a second, she'd almost forgotten about her duties. All the expectations. Just like he'd said she could, and it had felt so freeing. So tempting. She'd thought she could just be

impulsive, having fun with a man that seemed as attracted to her as she was to him.

But then he'd ruined it all by opening his stupid mouth.

She hesitated before slipping her bra off, too. It was as wet as her dress, after all. She drew the line at taking her panties off, though. It was already far too tempting to take them off when she was around Gordon—if she wasn't wearing any, there'd be nothing left to shield her virtue.

If she could even bother to try.

As she slid the robe on, she hugged it close and sniffed it. It smelled like him. Delicious, tempting, and oh so sexy. She wanted him. There was no logical explanation as to why, but she wanted him so badly.

She might be as good as engaged to that Prince George fellow, but she'd never even met the guy before. She didn't have to be loyal to him before she met him, did she? One night...just one night of fun. Would that be so bad?

Princesses never have dalliances.

"Yes, Mother," she muttered to herself. "I hear you."

She tied the robe shut at the same time as Gordon knocked on his bedroom door. "Are you dressed?"

"Come in," she called out, still holding onto the belt ends of the robe.

The door cracked open slowly, probably giving her time to cry out if she wasn't fully dressed. When she remained quiet, he popped his head around the door. His gaze dipped over her, taking in her appearance in his robe. By the time his eyes met hers

again, she felt as if she might burst into flames right then and there. “You ready?”

Ready for what? Him? Yes.

She just had to figure out how to tell him that without ruining it.

“Yes.” She bent over and picked up the dress and bra. She’d never done laundry before, but she could only assume the two could be dried together. “I took off my lingerie, too.”

“Okay.” He held his hand out, his face giving nothing of his thoughts away. It was as if that moment between them hadn’t even happened. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Thank you.” She set her bra and dress in his hand, her cheeks hot. “I take it you know how to do laundry?”

He gave her a look. “Yes. I know how to do laundry,” he said with laughter in his voice.

“Don’t do that,” she snapped. “Don’t treat me like I’m some freak you can’t understand. Just because I’m different than you, doesn’t make me stupid.”

“I never said you were stupid.”

He dropped his hand to his side, her dress and bra hanging from his fingers. He still hadn’t put a shirt on, and she couldn’t stop staring at his hard abs. His chest. His tattoos. It was all so very delicious when put together. Her fingers itched to trace the artwork on his skin. To touch him. Feel him. Have him. Taste him.

If she dipped her gaze lower, she could literally trace each line of his abs. He was that chiseled, and she wanted to. She wanted to touch him everywhere. What would he do

if she reached out and curved her fingers over the black Chinese letters on his pecs?  
Too bad she would never be brave enough to find out...or would she?

“The wine?” she blurted out, tearing her eyes from his chest. “Where is it?”

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“In front of the fireplace, downstairs in my living room,” he said, his gaze never dropping. “Follow me.”

Anywhere.

She walked behind him, staring at his hard back as he went. Every step he took, the muscles flexed and played, making her fingers even itchier to touch him. To see what all those muscles would feel like under her fingertips. To have so much power leashed beneath her would be heady. Addicting. Fun. And she could really use some fun in her life.

She didn’t even really know what fun was, but she instinctively knew that he did. That he could show her a good time, and then some more. She wanted to collect.

When he turned left at the bottom of the stairs, he led her into a sitting room with a light blue couch, a matching loveseat, a table, and a gas fireplace—which was on. On the table sat a glass of red wine, waiting for her. He’d also set out some cheese for her. It was such a domestic scene that it gave her pause.

He was a surprise, in more ways than one.

“Thank you,” she said again, sitting down on the edge of the sofa and adjusting her robe over her legs properly. “This is delightful.”

He watched her with amusement in his eyes. “Ever the prim princess.”

“Why do insist on doing that?” she asked, picking up the wine with a forced calm.



“Must you throw my title around as if it’s this awful disease I have? I’m no different than you, despite my status. I’m simply human.”

He walked out without replying. And she watched him go, unable to believe the man could be so rude...and yet so attractive, all at the same time. She should report him for his insolence. Demand a replacement. But she didn’t want to.

So, she didn’t.

She took a big gulp of wine, ignoring the fact that she’d barely had a bite to eat at dinner. Princesses didn’t really eat a full meal when in plain sight—they ate in the privacy of their own homes. That way there was no risk of being caught on camera with something as undignified as food in your mouth. Or worse? On your face. She took another big sip, eyeing the cheese. She was starving.

Princesses don’t shove food in their faces.

“Oh, just eat it already,” Gordon said from the door. He relaxed against the frame, his arms crossed and a frown on his handsome face. As per the usual, ever since he realized it was her in that hallway. “You’re obviously hungry.”

“I just ate,” she protested.

“Bull. You pushed food around your plate.” He shoved off the wall and stalked across the room. “You didn’t eat a damn thing. Let me guess?” He mimicked her voice. ““Princesses don’t eat in public.””

“Princesses don’t eat in public,” she agreed. “Not copious amounts of food, anyway.”

“You’re not in public.”

“I’m not alone, either.” She stared back at him, her grip on the wine glass so tight she couldn’t believe it didn’t snap. And she’d drank it all, too. How had that happened so fast? She never drank like this. Princesses don’t over imbibe. “You’re here.”

“Who am I that I matter?” He sat down beside her, too close for comfort, and plucked her glass out of her hand. “I promise you that I won’t take a picture of you with cheese dripping down your chin, and sell it to People.”

She laughed. “I never insinuated you would. But—”

He shoved a piece of cheese into her mouth, making her choke on her own words...not to mention the cheese. She chewed quickly, glowering at him the whole time.

“What?” He poured her another glass of wine, his shoulders trembling

with laughter as he did so. “You looked hungry. It’s my duty to make sure you’re safe, dry, alive, satisfied, and fed. It’s in my contract.”

She swallowed. “Actually, you only have to keep me safe. I’ve got other people for the rest of that.”

“I’m sure you do, but they’re not here with us.” He handed her another full glass of wine, his eyes sparkling with mischief. “Tell me. Do you brush your own hair, or does someone do it for you?”

“Depends on my mood,” she retorted. Though, most of the time her stylist did it. “Do you brush your own hair?”

He chuckled. “Yeah. I dress myself, too.”

“I can tell,” she shot back.

He threw his head back and let out a full-bellied laugh. It did weird things to her insides. Namely...her lady parts. “Are you insulting my style, Princess?”

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“Maybe. Then again...maybe not.” She glanced at the empty cup he hadn’t touched. “Where’s your wine?”

“I’m on the job.” He gave her a pointed look. “And I don’t drink on duty.”

“Then consider yourself off-duty.” She gave him her best princess in command look. “I’ll be insulted if you don’t drink. My whole country will be insulted if you don’t drink with me. You alone could be responsible for starting World War Three. Choose your next words carefully.”

He snorted. “So be it. I’m not drinking, because in a few minutes I’ll have to drive you back to the hotel. After you’re safely in your room, I’ll crash on the couch outside your door and make sure no one comes to kidnap you. I can’t do that drunk.”

She stared at him, the wine making her head spin in circles already. She rarely drank, and when she did, it was only a sip here and there. Not a whole glass...and then more. The second glass he’d given her was already half empty. How had that happened?

And then a dangerous thought hit her mind. Sure, she’d stopped him earlier in his bedroom because he’d made a rude remark. But what was stopping her from crawling into bed with Gordon now?

What was stopping her from having a little bit of fun, for once in her long, prim, proper life? Nothing. That was what.

Locking eyes with him, she took a deep breath and then jumped in with both feet for

once in her life. “What if you didn’t drive me home?” she asked breathlessly, unable to believe she’d actually asked. It was time to take a chance. Time to try to have some fun before she signed her life away on the dotted line. “What if I stayed here with you?”

He froze, his impenetrable brown eyes locked on her. “You want to stay...here?”

And just like that, she chickened out. “I mean, in a different room, of course. Not with you, with you,” she said, staring at her wine the whole time and feeling like a fool. Her cheeks were on fire. “You have a guest room, right?”

“I don’t think that would work. What would your people say?”

She smiled. “We already took care of that, remember? They know I’m safe and sound in the hands of the man they hired to keep me safe.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” he muttered.

“If you did let me stay, you could bring me back in the morning. It’s late anyway, so it might be better if I showed up in the morning instead. It’ll look like I slipped out for coffee, or whatever. If we go there now, people might get the wrong idea.”

Lame excuse, but she wanted to stay. Wanted a chance to get to know more about this man. He was an enigma she wanted to unravel. Or however the saying went. Also, she couldn’t lie. He intrigued more than her curiosity. She wanted to be with him. To touch him. She wanted to have one fun, thrilling night before she met her unknown, possibly future, fiancé tomorrow.

Just like he’d promised her he could deliver.

Unexpectedly, the guilt came back full force. But it wasn’t as if they were engaged

yet. After tomorrow evening, they very well might be. But not now. Not here. She hadn't even seen a photo of the man. She had no idea what color his hair was. If he was kind or cruel. All she knew was that he was from a country similar in size to hers, his military force was stronger than hers, and she was supposed to marry the bloke.

How was that fair?

"Princess? The only bed I have in this house is mine," he said, his voice level and deep. He trailed his fingers over her thigh, keeping the touch innocent yet somehow dirty at the same time. "If you want to sleep in that alone, then you're more than welcome to. I could sleep on the couch."

She met his eyes slowly. "Or not..."

"Careful." His jaw flexed. "You might give me the wrong idea."

She handed him her wine. "Drink this, and you'll get the right idea."

"Isabelle..."

That was the first time he'd used her name. She shivered, clenching her thighs together tight. "Yeah?"

He picked up an empty glass and poured himself a healthy dosing of wine. Chugging it back with one gulp, he set the glass down and captured her chin. "Let me put this clearly. You want a fuck? I'll fuck you. And it'll be a great time. I'll make you scream so loud you'll have to whisper the whole day tomorrow to make up for it. But that's all it'll be. You live halfway across the world. After you leave, we'll never see each other again. And while you're here, I'll still be your guard. You'll still listen to me, despite our night together."

She swallowed the last of her wine. “I know this is just a one-night thing. I already told you. I’m supposed to marry for my—”

“Country,” he said, his voice flat. “I know.”

“Yes. Exactly.”

“That’s barbaric,” he said, his fingers tipping her head back. “Insane.”

She agreed, but it was her country’s custom. Her parents own marriage had been arranged, and they’d been happily married for twenty-eight years now. She could have that, if the fates decided as much. She might fall for this Prince George fellow.

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He might be kind. Generous. Handsome.

Of course, he might not be.

“It’s my lot in life,” she said. “No point bemoaning it.”

“If you say so.” His thumb swept over her lower lip. “Question time. Are you a virgin?”

“No.” She laughed. “I might be a princess, but being a virgin on your wedding night is not a requirement to hold that title.”

He nodded once. “What are you looking to get out of this, besides an orgasm?”

“Uh...” Her cheeks went red hot. “I’m not certain what you’re asking.”

“One night, like we talked about earlier? Two nights? The whole time you’re here?” He hauled her against his body, their legs glued to one another’s. “Tell me what you want, and I’ll give it to you, just like I promised.”

“One night,” she said, her heart racing. “It’s all I can give. After that, I’ll be—”

He pressed a finger to her lips. “You don’t need any more explanations. If you only have a night to give me, then it’s all I’ll take.” His fingers travelled down her throat, hovering over her racing pulse. “But understand this. I’m not a hesitant or sweet lover. You’ll succumb to me in every way, and in return, I’ll make you come so hard you won’t be able to stop thinking about me without feeling my lips on your pussy.”



He tightened his grip on her shoulder. “You might own a fucking country, but tonight...I own you. Understood, Princess?”

She gasped, her stomach tightening at his naughty words. She’d never, ever been spoken to like that. Never talked dirty. It was a heady rush that she was doing it now. Here. With him. “I understand.”

He lowered his face to hers, their lips a scant inch apart. “Are you sure you want this? I’m only going to ask you this one time. You’re a grown ass woman, so I won’t ask you if you’ve changed your mind every other step we take toward that bed.”

“I want this.” She reached out and curled her hands around his nape, her fingers brushing the soft curl that rested just below his ear. “I want you.”

“Then you’re fucking mine,” he said. “You have been since you sat next to me in that coffee shop.”

She nodded frantically, needing him to get on with it. To claim her. “Yes. I’m yours.”

He growled and closed the distance between them, his lips crashing to hers. The second they touched, she knew that this would be unlike any experience she’d ever had. Gordon was undeniably sexy, and she was attracted to him more so than she’d ever been attracted to another man before, but that wasn’t what would make this so different.

It was him, and the way he made her feel. Every single caress, every soft move he made, sent a surge of lust crashing through her veins. He said he’d own her tonight, and he was right. He totally did.

Without breaking contact with her lips, he swung her into his arms and headed for the stairs. He tasted like red wine and pure man, and his cologne teased her senses as he

climbed the stairs, his muscles flexing as he supported her as if she weighed no more than a feather. She dug her nails into his shoulder, moaning into his mouth.

He kicked his bedroom door open and stalked across the room with long strides. His tongue rolled over hers as he lowered her to the soft mattress. The satin comforter soft against her bare feet was a direct contrast to his hard body on top of hers. As soon as they hit the bed, his hands were on her. Roaming down her shoulders, skimming over her hip, then curling under her butt to haul her closer.

His fingers dug in so deep that it stung, but she didn't care.

It felt good.

As his tongue rolled over hers, he rested his weight on his elbows and slid his hand inside the opening of her robe. His fingers brushed her knee, then crept inch by slow inch upward, toward her thigh. When he brushed against the line of her panties, he stopped. "So fucking sweet."

She cried out and arched her hips, the burning need inside of her demanding he keep going. "More. Don't stop."

"Excuse me?" He curled his hand around her thigh, his fingers firmly yet gently holding her in place. "Are you commanding me to do something?"

"Yes," she moaned. "I am."

He tsked. "That's going to be a problem, Princess. I'm in charge in this bed. Not you."

"Seriously?" she asked breathlessly.

“I take this very seriously.” He snaked his hand up her thigh, the tips of his fingers brushing the bottom of her butt. He caressed her gently. Tenderly. “You talk back? You get punished. On your knees, Princess.”

She gasped, her heart clenching as tight as her core at his words. “What? Why?”

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“I’m going to spank you,” he said, slapping the side of her ass gently. “Like this. And then I’m going to make you come so hard you’ll see stars. Now, on your knees.”

He was actually going to lay hands on her? Spank her like a dom or something? She’d heard about men like him, but in her life? They didn’t exist. They were characters in books that she snuck into her bedroom at night. But now he was here, with her, and he wanted to do these things to her?

Take her? Make her quiver?

Part of her was scared, but the other, louder, part wanted to do this with him. This and so much more. “Gordon...”

He ran his fingers over her butt. “I won’t actually hurt you, Isabelle. Nothing that happens here will cross the line. And if you want me to stop, I will. Right away. All you have to do is ask.” He caught her chin, his gaze latching with hers. “Trust me on this.”

She nodded once, shrugged out of his robe, took a deep breath...

And rolled over.

### Chapter Five

Gordon sucked in a deep breath, holding it until his head swam. She wore nothing but a pair of sheer black panties that matched the bra she’d removed earlier. Her sweet ass waited for his “punishment”, and she was his. Abso-fucking-lutely his.

She squirmed, her ass wiggling impatiently. She wanted it. Wanted him. And he'd damn well give it to her.

"You've been a bad girl..." He trailed his fingers over the line of her panties, slipping his fingers underneath. "You know what happens to bad girls, right?"

She curled her hands into the mattress. "Show me," she said, her voice breathless and almost lost in the silence of the room. "Show me what you do."

He traced her curves and slapped her ass gently, testing out the waters. She cried out, her entire body trembling, and thrust her ass toward him again. "Again. Do it again."

Damned if she didn't want more, too. The woman was going to kill him. He raised his hand and slapped her again, a little harder this time, but still keeping his touch soft. "That wasn't a proper request, Belle."

She froze. "No one calls me that."

"Yeah, well, I do." He slipped his fingers between her legs, caressing her gently, before pulling away. "Belle."

She whimpered and arched her back, pressing against him. "Gordon."

He nibbled on her bare back, right below her neck. She tasted fabulous. "You're so fucking hot right now, with your ass in the air. Waiting for my punishments. Begging for me to touch you. Fuck you. Claim you as mine."

"Please," she moaned. "I need...I need..."

He yanked her panties off, ripping them in the process. "You want this? More?"

“Yes, God, yes,” she cried out. “I need more.”

“Please,” he reminded her, trailing a finger down her bare back. “You have to say please.”

“Please,” she cried out.

He smacked her ass again, the sound of bare flesh hitting bare flesh ringing out in the room. Her cheeks pinked under his touch, making him harder than ever before, and she cried out in pleasure. “You like that, don’t you? You like being spanked.”

“Yes. God, yes.” She curled her fists around the comforter. “Fuck me.”

He traced a finger over her slit, grinning when she whimpered again. He’d never have guessed she would ever utter that word, let alone enjoy a good spanking when doled out. She was a pleasant surprise in every way. “You forgot the magic word.”

She stiffened. “I don’t beg for things I want.”

“Then you won’t get it.” He withdrew his touch, even though it was the last thing he wanted to do. “My way, or no way.”

“Damn you,” she snapped, her entire body humming with frustration. “Touch me.”

“No.” He skimmed his finger up her thigh, toward her wet pussy, but didn’t actually make contact. She would give in, but until then? She was getting nothing but teasing from him. “Ask me nicely.”

“Make me,” she said, her tone hard.

Game. Fucking. On.

He slapped her ass again and flipped her onto her back in one smooth motion. She gasped and let her legs fall open, a clear invitation to do his worst. He would, but not until she fucking begged him first. Grabbing her wrists with his one hand, he kissed her hard, lowering his body over hers. He was fully clothed while she was naked.

Another power trip on his part.

It was all part of the game.

As he kissed her, his tongue grazing across hers slowly, he ran his hands down her curves. He'd easily put her at 32-25-34. Fucking hot as hell. Curling his hand under her ass, he arched her up against his still-clothed cock, moaning into her mouth when she brushed against him eagerly. Her nails dug into his shoulders. He needed to feel her tearing his flesh. He'd bet she drew blood when she came.

Ending the kiss, he hopped off the bed.

“Don't fucking move,” he commanded, grabbing the hem of his shirt and yanking it over his head. “Don't even think about moving.”

Her eyes flashed a challenge at him, but she stayed still. “You're bossy.”

“So are you,” he said, cocking a brow. Not dropping her gaze, he undid his pants.

“But in the bedroom, I win. I always win.”

She snorted, but the heat in her eyes told him she wasn't actually scoffing at his comment. It turned her on, knowing she couldn't win this battle. She liked it, and they both knew it. “We'll see about that.”

“Yes, we will.”

“Your tattoos...” She licked her lips, her gaze dipping south, then darting back to his. “Are they down there, too?”

“Yep.” He unzipped his fly. “You want to see?”

“Yes.”

He lowered his pants to his thighs. The tips of the black ink letters that said “No Surrender” on his left thigh were just visible. “Ask nicely.”

“Take your pants off for me now,” she said, smiling sweetly at him.

“What was that?” He lowered his pants a little more. His boxer briefs hugged his bulging cock, and she didn't miss a beat. “I didn't hear the magic word.”

“Damn you.” She bit down on her lower lip. “Please take your clothes off.”

His pants hit the floor, and he kicked them aside. “Gladly.”

“Boxers, too.” She squirmed, her eyes on his cock. “Please.”

“You're getting good at this,” he said, grinning even wider and lowering his last article of clothing. Once he was naked, he stood there, letting her look her fill. “Now



you just need to beg me to fuck you.”

She shook her head slowly. “I repeat: Make me.”

Laughing, he opened the drawer by the side of the bed, took a condom out, and rolled it on his cock. She watched him the whole time, her lower lip caught between her teeth. Once the safety aspect of what he was about to do was taken care of, he sat down beside her and ran his thumb over her lower lip, freeing it from her bite.

“You’re so fucking gorgeous.”

A shaky breath escaped her. “No, you are. All those muscles. All this—” She lifted her hand, then froze halfway to his chest. “May I?”

Good. She’d remembered that he’d told her not to move. “Yes.”

“All this artwork...” she continued, tracing the lines of the skull on his chest. “It’s amazing.”

“Ink. It’s called ink.”

“Well, with all this ink?” She rested her hand on his abs. “You’re the one who’s beautiful.”

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Something inside of him twisted hard. No one had ever called him beautiful before. Hot? Sexy? Fuckable? Sure. But neve

r beautiful.

He didn't know how he felt about that, but he knew it made him feel things he'd never felt before. Unwelcome things. Forcing himself to stop thinking about feelings and all that shit, he laughed and shook his head. "You're wrong, Princess."

"No, I'm—"

He kissed her hard, cutting her off. She wanted to argue, that was fine. But he wouldn't put up with it in bed, damn it. There were better things to do while naked in bed with a stunning woman, and it involved her crying his name out so loud the neighbors heard her—after she begged him. Her teeth already dug into his lip, but he pressed even closer.

She closed her hands over his shoulders, squeezing hard. Groaning, he positioned himself between her legs, letting the tip of his cock brush against her entrance, teasing but not giving her what she wanted. His hands closed over her tits, squeezing them in his palms. She fit perfectly.

Fucking A.

Scraping his palms across her hard nipples, he deepened the kiss and rolled his hips. Her nails dug into her own palms, and she closed her legs around his hips. "Oh my goodness," she whimpered, kissing him again. "Oh my God."

“Nope, it’s just me,” he murmured, kissing her neck, then her collarbone.

When his tongue flicked over her nipple, she arched her back and cried out. He sucked her in deep, not going easy on her, and her mouth fell open. “Gordon.”

He trailed his fingers lower as he worked over her nipple, his fingers dipping between her legs. She was so hot and wet. So fucking ready. It took all his restraint to hold himself back. To make her beg. But she would fucking beg.

“You’re so wet. I can’t wait to taste you.”

She nodded frantically, her eyes drifting shut. “Y-Yes. Now.”

“Nope.” He nipped her hip, moving even lower. The scent of her arousal teased him. Mocked him. “Not yet.”

“Argh,” she ground out, her hips moving in a restless circle.

He kissed her inner thigh, lifting her legs so she was spread to him. Wide open and vulnerable. Her pink lips were glistening and wet. He ran his tongue slowly up her core, gently caressing the spot where she ached for him most. Her thighs trembled, and she tried to squeeze them on him, but he held her in place, right where he wanted her.

“Uh uh.” He locked gazes with her. Her bright green eyes were simmering now. Slowly, he licked her again, from bottom to top. “Beg me, Princess.”

She tossed her head back and forth, her hands curling into fists. “God. Please. Please, please, please, please.”

Fucking finally.

He closed his mouth over the hard nub, rolling his tongue over her and thrusting a finger inside of her tight pussy. She screamed and arched up, his grip on her thigh never loosening. She dug her heel into his shoulder, panting loudly and erratically.

Stopping, he pulled back long enough to say, “You’re allowed to come now, but when I fuck you, you wait till I give you permission. Or you’ll be punished.”

“W-What?”

He didn’t answer her, knowing she understood exactly what he meant, and went down on her again. She tasted so sweet. So addicting, that he wondered in the back of his mind if once would be enough. He needed to learn the best ways to get her to make that sexy little sound in the back of her throat again.

Now.

Pressing his tongue against her sensitive flesh, he moved his fingers inside of her, seeking that special spot that would send her flying over the edge. Her thrashing paused, and she came hard, her pussy squeezing down on his fingers so hard he couldn’t believe it. “Fuck,” he grated, flicking his tongue over her clit one more time.

She came again, even harder than before. “God, more,” she cried, raking her nails down his back. “Now.”

“Ask me nicely,” he demanded.

“Gordon, just do it,” she cried, arching her hips up. “Now!”

He positioned himself at her entry, slipping the head of his cock into her pussy, but not actually entering her. His body was harder than his cock from the anticipation of what he was about to feel. It almost did him in. Almost made him relinquish control.

Almost.

Gritting his teeth, he looked down at himself, almost buried inside of her. “I gave you one more freebie, but you need to ask me to fuck you. Now.”

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“Please fuck me.” She closed her legs around his waist again, digging her heels into his ass. “Fuck me hard, Gordon, and don’t stop. Please don’t stop.”

Satisfaction rocked him, and he thrust inside of her, finding heaven in one stroke. Without even pausing to savor the moment, he moved inside of her. Fast. Hard. Relentlessly. She was with him every step of the way, meeting him thrust for thrust. His balls tightened, threatening him with an impending orgasm, but he held back.

He needed to make her scream some more.

“Don’t you fucking come,” he growled, biting down on her shoulder as he fucked her. Reaching between them, he pressed two fingers to her clit and rubbed her, knowing it would make it even harder for her to hold back. “Not yet.”

“I...I have to...I need...” She punched his shoulder hard and choked back a sob. Hard enough to hurt him, even. He couldn’t help but be impressed. “God, I’m going to die. Please.”

He kissed her, not granting permission, yet increasing the pressure of his fingers with each stroke. The whole time he touched her, he fucked her in smooth, hard, steady strokes. It was torture, but of the best kind. The best he’d ever had. Tiny pinpricks of pain shot over his shoulders where she dug into him, definitely drawing blood.

He bit down on her lip and then pulled back, flicking his tongue over the gentle love bite. She whimpered and squeezed her eyes shut, ragged breaths escaping her.

“You want to let go?” he asked, pumping his hips. He lifted her up so he could enter

her deeper, hitting her G-spot with the next stroke. She convulsed around him, punching his shoulders with both fists this time and releasing a big sob. “You want my permission to come, baby? All you have to do is ask me nicely, and I’ll let you. Go on. Ask me.”

“Can I come, please?” she cried, frustration and need ringing out through her voice with crystal clear clarity. “Please.”

“Yes.” He sank into her all the way, his fingers biting into her ass as he pulled out. “Right fucking now,” he demanded, thrusting into her hard.

She cried out and arched her neck, her mouth open in a perfect O shape as she climaxed. He moved inside of her as she came down, seeking his own pleasure. One thrust, two, and then bam. She grabbed his ass and smacked it hard, stinging like a bitch.

He came harder than ever before, stars exploding behind his closed lids, and he collapsed on top of her. “Holy fucking shit.”

She let out a small laugh, curling her hands around him and hugging him close. “Yeah. Very much so.”

When she closed her arms around him, holding him close, that weird feeling in his chest struck again. Something that felt a lot like...happiness.

Which didn’t make any sense. Hell, he barely even knew her. He should be satisfied. Tired. Replete. But not fucking happy to be held by her.

That was dangerous, enemy territory, right there.

One night. One fun, amazing session of sex, was all they’d agreed upon. No matter

how wonderful it had felt, it was all he was going to get from her. Easy. No strings. No feelings. No happiness.

Gritting his teeth, he pushed off of her and crossed the room to the adjoining bathroom. Once he stepped foot inside, he closed the door firmly behind him. While glaring at himself in the mirror, he dropped the condom in the bathroom trash.

Shaking his head, he muttered, “Keep your shit together, Waybrook.”

The scar on his shoulder, where he’d been shot and almost killed, drew his eye. That was life. You lived. You fought. You died. No one remembered you after you left.

Especially not pretty little princesses with the world at their fingertips.

## Chapter Six

The next morning, Isabelle woke up alone, and her dress was folded neatly on the foot of the bed. Her shoes were lined up by the door, her underthings were set neatly beside her dress...and Gordon was nowhere to be seen. After they’d made love three times last night, he’d behaved completely normal.

The domineering man he’d proven to be in the bedroom had given away to the charming, cocky one she’d come to know so well. He’d even curled up with her in bed and slept beside her. Or...she thought he had, anyway.

Had he snuck out of bed last night?

The door opened, and there was a scuffling sound. “No! Don’t go in—”

A woof sounded, followed by a ball of brown and white fur flying across the room. Isabelle barely had time to yank the comforter up to her chin before a vibrating



furball leaped onto the bed, and landed directly on her stomach.

She let out an undignified, “Oof.”

Gordon bolted across the room. He wore a pair of dark blue jeans and nothing else. The sun was starting to rise, so it silhouetted his perfect body quite...well, perfectly. “Georgie—bad boy!”

“Georgie?” Isabelle asked, choking on the name. The dog—Gordon’s dog, the man she’d slept with—shared the same name as the man her parents wanted her to marry? The irony was too much. “That’s his name?”

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“Yeah.” Gordon stopped at the side of the bed and scratched the back of his head, looking as sheepishly adorable as the puppy on her lap. “Sorry, he snuck in when my back was turned. I just took him for a walk, so he’ll run around like a madman for a few minutes.”

Isabelle looked down at the dog that lay across her stomach, tail wagging and tongue hanging out. He was still a puppy, but he seemed like he was going to get big. Really big. His paws were ridiculously oversized for his small body. He had bright brown eyes, floppy ears, and was as soft as silk.

He was also quite possibly the cutest thing she’d ever seen. “He’s yours?”

“Yeah.” Gordon sat down on the bed. “He was at my buddy’s house last night, since I was out watching you. He’s the one who bought him for me. Supposedly owning a dog is good for ex-soldiers trying to readjust to life in the civilian world. They offer love, therapy, and whatnot.”

She froze, her hand on the pup’s head. “You were a soldier?”

“Yeah,”

he said, the one word hard and simple...yet somehow saying so much. He looked down at a scar on his shoulder—one she hadn’t even noticed last night. “Marines. Got this as a souvenir.”

Reaching out, she traced the puckered skin, keeping her touch light. Dark swirls of ink surrounded it, and if anything, it only made him all the more beautiful. In her

country, soldiers of any kind were treated with the upmost respect. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, the wound is old.” He caught her hand, pressing her fingers against his skin. “I’ve been fine for a long time.”

“Physically, yes.” She bit her lower lip. Princesses don’t pry. “But are you having a hard time adjusting to life? Being around people?”

Aaand there she went. Ignoring the rules again.

“Does it look like I am?” he asked, brow up. “I think I made it pretty clear I’m perfectly fine being around others last night.”

Her gaze locked with his. “But that doesn’t mean you’re okay. Appearances can be deceiving.”

Nodding slowly, he reached out and touched her chin. Skimming his thumb over her bottom lip, he leaned in—but didn’t kiss her. “Yeah, they can. Look at you.”

“Me?” She stared down at the dog, feeling uncomfortably on the spot, and played with his floppy ear. Georgie’s eyes rolled back in his head, and he let out a shuddering sigh. “I’m fairly straight forward. What you see is what you get.”

He let go of her chin. “Sure. If you say so.”

“It’s true.” She shrugged. “No deep, hidden torment. No sadness or torture in this heart of mine.”

Except about the whole marry a stranger thing, her inner voice oh-so-kindly reminded her. You don’t like that.

“Funny, because I just saw a shadow cross over you like a dead man’s noose. You might not want to talk about it, but something is clearly bothering you.” He stood up and rubbed his palms on his jeans. “I have no right to ask you what it is, but if you need to talk? I’m a good listener. So is Georgie.”

She smiled, oddly touched by his offer. Sure, they’d done some pretty dirty things last night and had gotten to know each other on an intimate level. It had been sex, though, and nothing else. But this? It was different. It was personal.

It made her want to open up to him.

“Have you ever been expected to do something you didn’t want to do?” She played with the pup’s ear again, not lifting her head. She couldn’t look at him right now. “Something you wished you didn’t have to do, but knew you would do it anyway?”

He picked up her bra, which must’ve been knocked down to the floor, then tossed it back on the bed. “Yeah, when I was in the military, I felt that way all the time. Not so much anymore, though. Now I do what I want and don’t give a damn what anyone else thinks.”

“There’s this thing I have to do.” She couldn’t bring herself to say what. Not yet. She had to meet the guy first. See if they would work. “I know it’s something I’d possibly hate, know I want more than what I’d get if I do what’s expected of me...but everyone else needs me to do this thing. It’ll make everyone around me happy.”

“Everyone but you?” he asked softly.

She nodded once. “Everyone except me.”

“Life’s too short to worry about everyone else in the world. You’ve just gotta worry about you.” He crossed his arms. “If it’ll make you miserable, then fuck them.”

She choked on a laugh. “I wish it were that easy.”

“It is.” He swiped the puppy off her lap. “You just don’t do it. But now, we have to get you back before people realize you’re missing. My replacement will be showing up at the hotel soon, too.”

She didn’t want a replacement. She wanted him. “When will you be back?”

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“For your dinner this evening.” He gave her a knowing look, as if he knew exactly what was going on in her mind right at that second. “I’m assuming someone comes in to wake you up in the morning, as opposed to an alarm clock?”

Her cheeks heated. He had a way of making her feel so special one moment, and so spoiled the next. He could teach her mother a trick or two. “Yeah.”

“Then we have to go.” He headed for this closet. “It’s almost five-thirty.”

“Absolutely.” She took a deep breath. “Thanks for last night, by the way. It was the first time I did something that was just for me in...well...” She broke off, thinking hard. She came up blank. “...Maybe ever.”

As she watched, he pulled out a black dress shirt. At her words, he turned to her, cradling the dog in one hand under his belly. “Seriously?”

“Yeah.” She fidgeted with the comforter but forced herself to stop. “I don’t really get a lot of ‘me’ time. Today alone, I’m booked up till almost midnight.”

“I know. I have a copy of your schedule.”

Heat suffused her cheeks. How could she have forgotten, even for a minute, that he was in charge of her safety? That this wasn’t just a guy and a girl, chatting before separating and never seeing each other again?

They’d seen each other naked...and now they had to work together.

“Oh. Right.”

He cocked a brow. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she said, shaking her head.

He set the puppy down in the hallway and closed the door. “Stay,” he said gently, closing the door in Georgie’s face. Crossing the room, he tugged her hair back gently. “Why do you look like an embarrassed school girl all the sudden?”

“I just forgot for a second that we’ll be working together after...”

“After I fucked you?” he provided, grinning.

“Yes, after that,” she said, her cheeks going even hotter. “Are we going to be okay?”

“Why wouldn’t we be? You wanted sex for one night, so I gave it to you. Now you don’t want it anymore, so I won’t give it to you again.” He let go of her. “It’s simple. Unless you tell me otherwise, I will be nothing more than your guard for the rest of your visit. If you want more...” He trailed off, his hand sliding up her thigh. He stopped an inch above her knee. Close, but not close enough. “All you have to do is ask nicely.”

Memories from last night made her blush.

The problem was, she did want more. She wanted so much more. She just couldn’t have it. Not if she was going to be getting married to Prince George.

“You make everything sound so easy,” she muttered.

He laughed. “Because it is. Now get dressed, because I need to get you home before

we start World War Three with your disappearance.”

...

Later that day, Isabelle sat at a table in a fancy restaurant. She'd spent all morning and afternoon in endless meetings with faceless people, and now the moment she'd been dreading had finally come. She was going to meet her intended fiancé. The man her parents wanted her to marry for the greater good of her country. And all she could think about was last night, and how much she wanted to do it again.

And Gordon was here. Watching.

Looking hot and oh-so-yummy.

She wanted nothing more than to crawl underneath the table and hide until this was over. She peeked over her shoulder at Gordon. He'd changed into a pair of gray slacks and still had on the black dress shirt from earlier. From the corner, he stood watching over her, like some hot Adonis whose only mission was to keep her safe.

And to give her orgasms...if she asked nicely.

She could ask nicely. It's all she ever did. Princesses aren't rude. Oh, she would ask him to rip that shirt off and show her all those muscles and abs and tattoos. Then she'd ask him to take off the rest of his clothes and do dirty, dirty things to her...while pulling her hair and making her scream.

He winked at her, as if he knew exactly what she was thinking. That wink made her tremble in places she didn't even know she had.

“Princess Isabelle?” a soft voice asked her.



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She whipped her head back around, tearing her eyes off of Gordon. A man with dirty blond hair, blue

eyes, and an expensive suit stood there, watching her. He was handsome and close to her own age. This couldn't be Prince George... "Hm?"

"I'm Prince George. It's nice to finally meet you, Princess Isabelle."

"O-Oh. Hello." She offered her hand. "It's nice to meet you, too."

He grasped her fingers, lifting it to his knuckles and dropping a soft kiss there. "I must say, you're even more beautiful than I'd ever imagined possible, Princess Isabelle."

"Um...thanks." She glanced at Gordon. His grin was gone. In fact, he looked absolutely furious. She forced her attention back to George and wiggled her fingers free. "Call me Isabelle, please."

"Isabelle, then." George smiled and sat beside her. He smoothed his lapels. "I hope I haven't kept you waiting. I hate the idea of you being alone for too long."

"No, not at all." She glanced at Gordon again. He looked as if he knew exactly what was going on, but he no longer looked like he gave a damn. He seemed indifferent. "I have my own personal guard here with me, too."

George looked over at Gordon and nodded once. Gordon inclined his head slightly, not meeting her eyes. George turned his attention back to Isabelle. He seemed

completely unthreatened by him. “I’m glad to see you took the necessary precautions with your safety. Maine is pretty quiet, but one can never be too safe. He looks quite capable of taking care of you.”

She choked on the sip of water she’d just taken. After an embarrassing fit of coughing, she finally managed to say, “Indeed. He is.”

Gordon watched her closely. This time, she didn’t meet his eyes.

“Good,” George said.

She forced a smile and picked up the menu. “My parents always take all the necessary steps to keep their kingdom safe.”

Including making me marry a man I’ve never met.

“So I see. Are you enjoying your time here?” he asked, smiling at her.

“Yes, immensely so,” she said, stealing another glance at Gordon. He stared back at her and didn’t move a muscle. “It’s been...fun.”

George looked at Gordon again, this time with his brow furrowed. “Good.”

When he continued staring at Gordon—who did his best to look as if he didn’t notice—Isabelle cleared her throat. “How long have you been here?”

“Too long,” George said, finally turning back to Isabelle with a smile. It seemed forced. “I’m ready to go home. It’s nice here, but I long for the rolling mountains of Liston. The order and sophistication.”

“I know what you mean. I miss home already, and it’s only been two days.”

The waiter approached, smiling at both of them. He had a fine sheen of sweat on the skin above his upper lip. “Can I start you off with something to drink?”

Isabelle looked down at the menu. “I’ll have—”

“A bottle of Chablis, and two filet mignons, cooked medium-well, please,” George said, closing his menu. “We’ll both have salads with house dressing, too.”

Isabelle stiffened. “Actually, I’d—” A princess never argues in public, especially in business relations. She gripped the menu edges tight and closed it. “I mean, thank you very much.”

“Ma’am?” the waiter asked, shooting George a quick look. “Anything else you’d like to add?”

“No, thank you.” She smiled at George. “We’re all set.”

The waiter left, and George sighed. “These Americans have no idea how the world is supposed to work. They expect everyone to be on equal footing, from the President to the dishwasher...to the hired help.” He gestured to Gordon, who watched them with narrowed eyes. “It’s ridiculous.”

“I don’t think so,” she said, clenching her teeth. “I think it’s a novel idea. One that’s gotten them very far in so little time.”

“Some might say so.” George opened his napkin and spread it on his lap. “I happen to disagree.”

She opened her mouth to continue the conversation, but the waiter returned with their drinks. By the time he left, she decided it wasn’t worth arguing. She’d met men like him, who were set in old ways, and there was no changing his mind. He was just like

her father. Old-fashioned. Traditional. Stuffy.

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George wouldn't pull her hair and command her to go down on her knees.

"Tell me more about your country," George said, smiling and handing her a glass of wine. He'd filled it a quarter of the way full. "What's it like?"

Isabelle picked up her wine and spent the next half hour or so going over every detail of her country's cities, people, and laws. By the time the main course came, she had a headache gathering behind her eyebrows that felt as if a tiny creature attempted to pound its way through her skull.

George was nice. He was handsome. He was every inch the typical prince she'd expected him to be. But he was driving her insane.

After half-heartedly pushing her food around on her plate, she stood up. "Excuse me for a moment, please."

George stood, placing his napkin on the table. He'd eaten his entire meal. He kissed her cheek. "I'll order us some dessert, if you're finished?" He eyed her plate, then frowned at the empty wineglasses. "And some brandy."

"Order whatever you'd like," she said, smiling even though she wanted to beat her head into the wall. As she turned away, she muttered, "You will anyway."

As she headed down the narrow hallways that led to the restrooms, Gordon fell into step behind her. He didn't waste any time in asking, "Who is that guy?"

"Prince George of Liston."

He glanced over his shoulder. “You met before?”

“No,” she managed to say through the blinding ache in her head. Her stomach growled, and she pressed a hand to it. “Never.”

“You didn’t eat again,” he said, his tone hard. “You need to go back and eat.”

Another man telling her what she had to do. “I don’t need to do anything,” she snapped. “If I want to eat, I’ll eat. Now excuse me.”

She tried to close the door, but he stuck his foot in it. “What’s wrong, Princess? Don’t like when I boss you around outside of the bedroom?”

“You know that I don’t.”

“Tough shit,” he said, leaning so close their noses touched. “I don’t like watching you flirt with that asshole, but I did it anyway. It’s called being an adult. You put up with shit you don’t like.”

Her heart fluttered. “You’re...jealous?”

“No,” he said, sounding as if she’d asked him if he wore tights and danced around in a skirt instead. “I don’t get fucking jealous of anyone or anything.”

“Good.” She met his eyes, refusing to show him how much she’d wanted him to be jealous. If she saw him flirting with another woman, you can bet your kingdom’s jewels she’d be upset. “Now let me powder my nose in peace, please.”

He snorted. “As you wish, Princess. Since you asked nicely.”

Removing his foot from the door, he closed the door in her face.

## Chapter Seven

Gordon watched Isabelle hug the prince goodbye, his hands curled into fists the whole time. There was something about the guy he didn't like. Maybe it was the way he smirked when he smiled. Or the way he kept looking at Gordon, with this knowing look in his eye, as if he knew exactly how much he didn't like watching the two of them together.

Then again, maybe it was just because Gordon knew that Prince George and Princess Isabelle made perfect sense together. The kind of sense he and Isabelle would never make. And their "business meeting" had so clearly been a date. A date that seemed, for all intents and purposes, to have gone well.

Son of a bitch.

He walked closer to the pair, tension gathering behind his shoulder blades with painful acceleration. "—yes, I'd love that. I love the opera."

Of course you do. You're a fucking princess.

"Great. I'll pick you up at seven on Friday night, then. We can talk more about our future arrangements then." George bent over her knuckles, placing a kiss over them with a flourished bow. He even flipped his coat tails. Fucking pompous jerk. "I'm so pleased to have met you, Isabelle."

Isabelle smiled, her cheeks flushing a fetching pink. "Me too, George. Thank you."

"You're welcome." George straightened, looked over at Gordon, then kissed her cheek. "I can't wait to speak more about our possible merger."

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Isabelle paled but kept her smile firmly in place. “Me, too.”

After one last hug—overkill, in Gordon’s opinion—the annoying prince finally walked away. Isabelle’s smile faded away, and she leaned against the wall, closing her eyes with a sigh. She looked exhausted. Sad. Alone.

And he wanted to help her, damn it. He didn’t know what the hell was going on between the two of them, but she obviously wasn’t happy about it. He understood that feeling, and the frustrations that went with it, all too well.

“Are you okay?” he asked, stepping closer.

She startled, her eyes flying open. Straightening her spine, she plastered a fake smile on her face. “Yes, I’m lovely. Thank you for asking.”

“Drop the princess act,” he snapped. “I know you’re not wonderful.”

“Then don’t ask me questions if you already know the answers.” She brushed past him. “I want to go home now. Please.”

He stared at her for a beat, but then pushed off the wall. She was clearly upset, but she wouldn’t talk to him unless she wanted to. And he had a feeling she wouldn’t do it in public at all. She probably had a rule about how princesses didn’t spill their hearts out in public, or some shit like that.

Last night, she’d talked in her sleep, mumbling all these “rules” she had. It had been adorable and yet disturbing. He’d sat there, watching her talk to herself, and then he’d



gone down to the couch once she'd quieted.

Sleep was hard to come by nowadays, and when he did sleep? He had nightmares every single fucking time. Horrible nightmares that he woke himself up from by screaming. She didn't need to know that about

him. No one did. No one except Georgie.

Aw, shit. His dog had the same name as her prince.

Was that why she'd laughed this morning? Because she'd known?

"Your town car is this way," he said, his voice tight.

"I want to take your car." She turned to him, her green eyes pleading. "I don't want to be with other people."

"But you'll be with me?"

She hesitated, then said, "Yes. Is your car here?"

"Yeah." He placed a hand at the small of her back. "This way."

As they walked through the abandoned parking lot to his car, she didn't say a word. She was oddly quiet. He didn't know what to make of that. Of her. And even worse? He wanted her. Still. Again. More. She, however, seemed to be perfectly content to leave things where they were. One night of sex, and then all business.

The frustration he felt about this whole mess was new.

He'd never wanted more before, and he didn't know what it meant. Or what, if

anything, he should do about it.

When they got to his car, he opened her door for her. She glanced at him before she slid into his seat. As he seated himself behind the wheel, her phone rang.

She glanced down at it, sighed, and held it to her ear. “Hello?” A pause. “Yes, mother. You’re up late, aren’t you? It’s past twelve over—” Silence. “It went well.” Another pause. “Yes, he’s very handsome and nice. Quite the gentleman, too. Just as you said.”

Gordon stiffened. Handsome. Nice. Yep. Definitely a date.

“I don’t know yet. We’re going out again Friday.” She fell silent and rubbed her forehead. “I know. Yes, I know.” Another moment of silence. “I know. I’m well aware what is expected of me. It’s been drilled into my head since the day I was born.” She nodded. “I will. But I’m going to go to bed now... It’s late over here.”

After she said good-bye, she hung up and dropped her phone into her hand. Gordon kept his eyes on the road and cleared his throat. “So.”

She looked over at him. “What?”

“Nothing.” He stuck the keys into the ignition. “You seem tense, is all. So I spoke to break the weird silence.”

“That’s because I am tense.”

He locked the doors. “I know a good cure for tension.”

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“What is it?” she asked, her hands relaxing in her lap.

“You have to ask me to give it to you, first.” He reached out and tugged on a piece of her long blonde hair, then trailed his fingers over the curve of her breast. She was so soft. So damn touchable. With his free hand, he slid his seat back as far as it would go. “We agreed to the one time...but if you want help...”

Her breasts rose with the deep breath she took. Something seemed to break inside of her, because she launched herself at him and buried her hands in his hair. “Yes. God, yes. Show me.”

“Wait.” He gripped her thigh. “You forgot to say—”

“Please.” She crawled more fully onto his lap, her mouth pressed tight. The skirt of her dress lifted, and she situated a leg on either side of him, opening herself to his touch. To him. It was a tight fit, but he didn’t give a damn. She needed his help? He would fucking give it to her. “Now do it.”

Curling his hands into her hair, he urged her head back, exposing her neck. She hissed at the gentle tug, acquiescing without a fight. “I didn’t like watching you flirt with that asshole tonight.”

“He’s nothing to me.” She licked her lips. “I’m yours. Right here, right now.”

Lowering his lids, he watched her tits, which rose and fell rapidly. And he barely even heard her words. He dropped a kiss on her cleavage, then nipped the skin. Slowly, he trailed his hands down her back and skimmed them to her inner thighs.

When he ran his thumb over her satin panties, she moaned and strained to get closer. “After last night, you should be mine.”

“Yes.” She held onto him tightly. “God, yes.”

He curled his hand in her hair again, tugging a little rougher this time. She cried out, grinding against his cock desperately, turned on beyond belief. “Ask. Me. Nicely.”

“Please make me come. Please make it better.” She cupped his face with her small hands, her body aching with need. “Please kiss me. Now.”

He kissed her, his tongue dueling with hers for dominance. He, of course, won. And he could tell that she loved every second of it. She rode his lap, growing more frantic with each passing thrust. She was so fucking close he could feel it, despite the layers of clothing between them.

When she rubbed against his erection and made the little cry she made right before she came, he ended the kiss. “Enough.”

“But—”

“No arguing.” His hands fell on her hips, holding her still. Not letting her use him to seek her pleasure. Not yet, anyway. “It’s not time yet. First, we need to talk about that date...”

She made a frustrated sound and struggled to move out of his grip. To grind against him more. To come. “Damn you, I didn’t do anything wrong. We didn’t have an agreement about not seeing other people.”

No, they didn’t. But it didn’t make him any less frustrated. “I know, but you see...I don’t give a fuck. I don’t know what to tell you, or why I’m so pissed off, but I am.”

He reached between them and shoved her panties aside. When his fingers touched her damp flesh, she flung her head back and dug her nails into his shoulders. “You’re supposed to be mine. Say it.”

“I’m sorry. I’m yours. All yours,” she cried out, rocking against his fingers frantically. “Now please take me before I die.”

“Hell yeah.”

Flipping open his console, he moved her back into her own seat, opened his fly, and freed his erection. As soon as he had his dick out, she positioned herself so her mouth was right there. She looked up at him, all green eyes and seduction, and wrapped her hand around him.

It was fucking heaven.

With her mouth poised over the tip, she asked, “May I please?”

“Yes.” Ripping open the condom wrapper, he set it aside. Then he placed his hand around the nape of her neck and urged her closer. “But only till I tell you to stop—and you can’t stop till I say so. Got it?”

“Yes. I’ll listen.”

He pressed her closer, and her mouth closed over him. Groaning at the sensation, he dropped his head back against the headrest. Before he shut out the outside world, he glanced outside. They were still the only car in the parking lot, and no one was nearby. The town car would still be waiting out on the left side of the building, as ordered. On top of that, they were behind a tree.

They had complete privacy...mostly.

But still, he had to make sure not to linger.

“Good girl,” he said, skimming his fingers over her jaw tenderly. She rolled her tongue over the entire length of his cock. His abs seized. “Fuck, that feels good.”

She took more of him into her mouth, moaning. His stomach clenched tight, and he gripped her hair in his fist. The sight of her going down on him, with his fist in her hair, made the magic she was working on him even more intense. She belonged to him.

Right here and now.

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And that had to be enough, because it's all he'd ever get from her. She was a fucking princess... And he wasn't even close to being good enough for her.

His balls pulled tight to his body, and she cupped them with her hand. Sucking harder, she took his whole dick into her mouth. It felt good. Too good. He pulled on her hair, and she let him go right away. "Enough. Watching you fuck me with that sweet mouth of yours is too much. Put the condom on."

Closing his dick in her hand, she made quick work of rolling it on him. After she finished, she looked up at him and her pink tongue darted out, wetting her pink lips. "I want to do that again."

He swallowed past the Sahara Desert that was now his throat. "Maybe next time, if you're good." Picking her up, he set her back on his lap. "But now, I need to make you come. But first, ask—"

/> "You nicely. I know." She gripped his shoulder and lifted her dress out of the way. "Please fuck me."

"Since you asked nicely..." He moved her panties out of the way, and she lowered herself onto him. He hissed as her wet pussy closed around him, squeezing him perfectly. "Fuck me."

"Well..." Her lips twitched. "I am."

A laugh escaped him. "You think you're funny, huh?"

“No.”

“You are.” He reached between them, his thumb pressing against her clit. She wiggled her hips, taking him in deeper. “And beautiful. And smart. And mine.”

“Yes.” She threw her head back, her hips rocking quicker. He held still, letting her ride him as fast as she wanted. “All yours.”

“Kiss me, Princess.” He pressed his thumb closer to her clit, rolling it in circles. “I want your mouth on mine when you come. I want to taste it.”

She cupped his neck and kissed him, her hips moving faster. Even though every muscle within him screamed for him to move—to fuck her—he held still, letting her have control this one time. His tongue rolled over hers in tune with his hand, and she rode him harder. Faster.

When she froze, her mouth pressed to his and her nails digging into his shoulders, he growled and took over. Pumping his hips up, he fucked her hard and mercilessly, needing to feel the pleasure he knew she could give him. Needing...her.

Shit.

“Oh my God,” she cried out, meeting each of his thrusts with enthusiasm. “Yes.”

Her pussy tightened over him, almost pushing him out, and he knew she was coming again. He slammed into her one last time, and they orgasmed together. She collapsed against his chest, her breathing erratic. Lifting his arms, he hesitated.

Then he closed them around her and kissed her temple, closing his eyes and enjoying the closeness. It felt...right. “Feel better now, Belle?”



“That definitely helped,” she said, letting out a small laugh. “Wow.”

He grinned. “Told you I knew the solution to tension.”

“So much for one night, huh?” She pushed off his chest, her hair wild and so clearly mussed from a man fucking her thoroughly. He’d done that to her. “Can’t say I’m sorry we broke our rule.”

“I told you. If you want more”—he reached out and tucked her hair behind her ear. She was adorable disheveled right now—“all you have to do is ask nicely.”

“I’ll remember that,” she said, smiling at him. “I guess we should head to the hotel first, though, right?”

Or his house. Or for the highway. They could keep driving and never look back again. “Yeah, we probably should get you back before people ask questions.”

“All right.”

Her hands lingered on him, but she climbed off his lap easily enough. As she situated herself in the passenger seat, he cleaned himself up. By the time he was finished, she was buckled, and her hair was smooth. The dress that she’d lifted up around her hips so she could fuck him was smooth and flawless once more, spread out over her thin thighs as if she’d been sitting there all along. She looked every inch the princess she was.

And he wanted to own her. There was no denying that.

Too bad it wasn’t possible.

When they were finished fucking around, she’d go back to her country. Marry a

prince. Someone like Georgie boy back there. Someone not him. Then she'd have royal babies with royal blood, and forget all about her walk on the wild side with an American. Or she'd think of him on lonely nights, while her rich husband went away for work, and touch herself.

Because of him.

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“You’re awfully quiet,” she said, fidgeting with the seatbelt. She stopped almost immediately. “Regretting our impulsive tension release?”

“Relief, not release. And nah. No regrets.” He started the car and pulled out onto the road. “Just figuring out our next stop.”

“The hotel, right?” She looked out the window, and then looked back at him. “I’d love to stay with you again, but I can’t. I have to be up at four a.m. for a breakfast date with the Prime Minister of England.”

“No shit. He’s here?”

“Yeah.” She shrugged. “I thought you had my schedule.”

“I do, but it just said ‘breakfast with P.M.E.’” He turned into a parking lot. “I didn’t realize that’s who it was. And besides, I’m not assigned to that one.”

“Oh. Yes. Matthew is.” She sighed. Matthew was nice. He treated her with respect. He barely spoke to her, except to ask her questions. And every time he was there...she missed Gordon. “It’ll be dreadfully dull, I’m sure.”

He laughed. Most average people would find meeting someone of such importance exciting. Thrilling. It only served to drive home the fact that she wasn’t even close to average... And she would never be his. He’d have to accept that.

Pulling into his destination, he asked, “What are you eating?”

“What?” She looked out the window, seeming to notice only now that he hadn’t taken her straight to her hotel. “I’m not.”

He rolled his eyes. “Yes. You are.”

“I’m not even hungry.”

As soon as she finished her sentence, her stomach growled loudly.

He cocked a brow. “Care to change your statement, Princess?”

She blushed. “Something chicken.”

“Do you like it spicy?” he asked, grinning when she looked at him with wide eyes.

“Your chicken, that is.”

“S-Sure.”

He ordered them both dinner, then handed it over to her when it was given to him. She held it to her chest, watching him with an inscrutable look in her eye. “Eat with me in my room?”

“If you want.”

“I do,” she said.

“Okay.”

He finished the short ride to her hotel and got out of the car. After he opened her door for her, he took the food and motioned her inside. She smoothed her pink silk dress that probably cost an entire month of his salary... And he’d gotten her Wendy’s.

Way to fucking go, Waybrook.

“After you, Princess.”

She glanced at him as she pulled her keycard out of her purse. “Thank you for dinner, by the way.”

He juggled the food in one hand and opened the door for her with his other. “I know it’s not the same as filet mignon...”

“I despise filet mignon.” She shook her head. “So it’s more than likely better.”

“Why did you order it if you hate it?”

“I didn’t.” She punched the up button on the elevator. “George did.”

“Ah.” He leaned against the wall. “He’s that kind of guy.”

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“Most men like him are.” She tucked her hair behind her ear. “They’re stuck in old times and live by old rules.”

“Do you like that in a man?”

She peeked at him before turning away. “No. But it doesn’t matter what I like.”

“Of course it does.” He stared at her. “Why wouldn’t it?”

“Because in the space of all the things that matter, how I feel about his ordering habits really isn’t all that important.” She blew out a breath and stepped into the elevator when the doors opened. “My opinion on him really doesn’t matter at all. If my country wants me to like him, and it’s best for them, then...I’ll like him. My feelings have no place in business matters.”

She said that as if on autopilot. As if she’d been told that same thing so many times that she almost, kind of, sort of believed it. Or thought she did, anyway. “Bullshit.”

“No, it’s life,” she said. “My life.”

He stepped in beside her, his heart pounding. The pieces were finally falling together. “This is what you were talking about this morning, isn’t it? You were upset because you had to go on a date with this guy, and you didn’t want to?”

She laughed. “Kind of, yes.”

“Well, you did it. And you lived to tell about it.” The elevator doors opened. “But

why agree to go out with him again, after you fulfilled your patriotic duty—or whatever you call that forced date—if you don't want to do it?"

"It's more than that." She walked out into the hallway, her head high but her steps slower than before. "There's more to it than a simple date. It's not just...that's not all there is."

He blinked at her, trying to make sense of her words. "Is this about your countries playing nice together? Is that it?"

"No. Yes. Kind of." She lifted her hand, then let it fall back down to her side. "It's about unity. Bonds. Not just a dinner."

She unlocked her door.

He blinked at her. "But why would you going out with him make—?"

What had she said yesterday? We marry for country ties. For unity. For money. Not for love. Love doesn't exist in my world.

"It's complicated," she said. "I'm not sure you really want to talk about it with me, to be honest."

He shook his head. "No. Tell me this isn't about a fucking arranged marriage."

Without answering, she opened the door. She went inside, tossed her purse aside, and rested her hands on the table by the door. "And if it is?"

He tossed the food on the table, kicked the door shut behind him, and grabbed her shoulders. Spinning her to face him, he forced himself to take a calm breath. He didn't know whether to scream, yell, or shake some sense into her. "You can't be

serious.”

“I am.” She pressed her lips together. “It’s how it works in my world. My parents did it, and they’re perfectly happy together. They even fell in love. Who says I can’t have that, too, with George?”

He’d fucked a woman who was taken? Someone else’s fiancée? This couldn’t be happening. He wasn’t that kind of guy—one who stole another man’s woman. It wasn’t right. “You’re...engaged? To that prince from earlier?”

“I don’t really want to. That much is true.” She continued on, as if she hadn’t even heard a word he said. “But if it’s best for my country, then it’s best for me. I’ll do it, if—”

He held up a hand. “Wait a second. This man you ate with tonight. He’s your fiancé?”

Shaking her head, she pressed her lips together. “You’re not paying attention.”

“Oh, I’m paying attention all right.” He laughed, the sound coming out harsh. “I just can’t believe what I’m hearing. He’s your fucking fiancé.”

“No. He’s not. Not yet.” She put her hands on her hips. “Right now, he’s nothing.”

He backed her against the wall. He’d broken his one and only rule when it came to sex... And it was all her fault. “You lied to me. You told me you never met him before today.”

“No, I didn’t lie,” she said, shaking her head. “It’s true.”



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“Last night, when we fucked, you knew you were taken, but you let me fuck you anyway?” He ground his teeth together. “And today, after having a date with him, you fucked me again.”

She gripped his arms. “I—we—didn’t do anything wrong. I hadn’t even met him before today.”

He closed his eyes, the muscle under his left eye ticking. She wasn’t making any sense. She’d never met him, but he was her fiancé, but he wasn’t. “You. Never. Met. Him.”

“Not until today.” She made a weird little sound. “He’s just someone my parents want me to marry. That’s all. I don’t even want to.”

“Then don’t. Don’t fucking do it.”

“It’s my duty,” she said, her voice cracking. “I have to.”

“Cut the shit.” He swiped his hand through the air. “I have to breathe. I have to blink. I have to drink water. But you don’t have to marry a fucking stranger. Not if you don’t want to.”

She shook her head. “You don’t understand. It’s about duty. Responsibility. And if it’s best for my country, then—”

“It’s best for you,” he growled. “Yeah. I got that.”

She raised her balled hands. “But—”

Unable to listen to another word about why she should marry a man she didn’t give two shits about, he growled and kissed her, cutting her off mid-sentence. She curled her hands into his shirt, fisted it, and yanked him closer. His mouth worked over hers, his tongue tasting hers while his hands roamed over her curves.

She was so soft. So warm. So perfect. So not his.

And for a second there...he’d wanted her to be his so fucking badly.

When he ended the kiss, his breathing was rapid. “I can’t believe you’re taken by a man you don’t even know. You’re his.”

She shook her head. “I’m not. Not yet.”

“I don’t play with technicalities.” He trailed his fingers over her jawline, locking gazes with her. “In my world, you’re either free or you’re not. You’re not. It’s over, unless you tell me you’re not going to marry him. Unless you tell me you’re not going to marry a man you don’t even know. Who you don’t even like.”

She swallowed hard. “I can’t say that.”

“So be it.” He pushed off the wall. “Good night, Princess.”

And with that?

He walked out of the room.

Chapter Eight

The next evening, Isabelle was ready to scream with frustration. Ever since she'd told Gordon about her parent's wish that she marry George, he'd been so professional that it hurt. As a matter of fact, he rivaled Max for his polite, cool answers. He didn't tell her what to do. Didn't boss her around. Never told her she was insane for even thinking about marrying a man she didn't care about at all. Always treated her with the utmost respect at all times.

She hated it.

As they walked toward the restaurant where she was due to meet up with the ambassador of her country, she stole a quick look at him. He wore a pair of shades, a dark black suit, a black tie, and a light gray shirt. His dark brown hair was styled into perfection, parted and placed in perfect accord on his perfect head. All of his tattoos were hidden under his suit jacket—but she knew they were there.

He looked like a proper bodyguard.

And hot. Really hot.

She swiped her sweaty palms across her dress. What would he do if she stopped walking, threw herself in his arms, and kissed him in the middle of the parking lot? It would reach her parents in a matter of hours, since her stylist and assistant were there, too. She'd be yelled at. Lectured. Crucified. But it just might be worth it.

Princesses don't lower themselves to public displays of affection.

Oh, if only they'd seen what she and Gordon had done in the parking lot right before he'd found out about George. They'd die. Actually die.

"Everything okay, Princess?" Gordon asked, his tone casual.

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She jerked out of her thoughts. “Yes, why?”

“You were staring at me.” He glanced at her, then turned away. “I was worried you might walk into something, or trip over a rock and fall on your pretty little ass,” he said politely.

“I’m fine.” She smoothed her hair. “I thought you’d forgotten how to talk to me, though.”

He flexed his jaw. “Of course not. I just haven’t had anything to say.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing,” he repeated. “I’m pretty sure we’ve said all there is to say. Aren’t you?”

“Not really.”

“Still going out with Georgie boy Friday night?”

She stiffened. “Yes.”

“Then we’re good on words.” He opened the door for her. “After you, Princess.”

“You’re angry with me,” she said, her voice flat.

“No, I’m not.” He shifted on his feet. “I just don’t mess with other men’s fiancées, is all. It goes against my code.”

She curled her hands into fists. “I’m not his fiancée.”

“Yet.” He cocked his head. “But you’re planning on saying yes.”

“I don’t have—”

“A choice. Yeah, so you said.” He flexed his fingers on the door. Everything he did, everything he said, showed off the power he held barely leashed within his body. “I get it. I really do. But I can’t play a part in this game. I told you I don’t mess with women who belong to other men, and I haven’t.” He paused. “Not since you told me about it, anyway.”

“I haven’t said yes yet,” she said, stopping right in front of him.

“Bullshit technicalities.” A muscle ticked in his jaw, but he didn’t budge. “After you, Princess Isabelle.”

Walking inside, she looked over her shoulder at him. He had been staring at her butt—until he saw her looking. Then he glanced away. “I saw that.”

“You saw nothing.” He closed the door and caught her elbow. It was the first time he’d touched her since...well, he’d stopped touching her. His touch was still as devastating as she remembered, despite their new professional relationship he was determined to keep. “Look, I’m not pissed at you.”

She blinked. “Pissed? What does that—”

“Angry,” he said impatiently. “What we did together wasn’t wrong. But now that I know you’re taken, it means we can’t do it again. And that sucks, because I liked you.”

She swallowed. "I liked you, too."

Correction: I like you, too.

He nodded. "We can still be friends, though, if you want. If you still need to talk... I can be your friend. I've been quiet, but only because I had to distance myself. I'm good now, though. I'm over it."

Over it? Over her? If so, he didn't realize how much that hurt, because she wasn't over him. Not at all. "Good. I'd like that," she said.

Even though it hurt to talk past the lump in her throat.

"All right. After your meal, we can get coffee and talk, if you'd like. Somewhere public."

Somewhere safe, he meant. "All right."

She walked away from him, not sure what had just happened. He went from being completely professional around her, to telling her they could be friends. Could they? Could they really? Because she still wanted him. Badly.

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“Princess Isabelle,” the gray-haired ambassador said, rising and smoothing his suit over his rotund belly. “Such a pleasure to see you again.”

“Yes, you as well

,” she said, doing the European kisses to his cheeks. After they sat, she smoothed her napkin over her lap and smiled at him. “How’s your wife? And your son?”

“They’re both excellent.” The man beamed. “My son is in England for his second year in university, and my wife is keeping herself occupied by doing multiple charitable activities.”

That’s what her lot would be. Keeping herself occupied while her husband busily ran the country. “Excellent,” she said.

“As a matter of fact, I hear you’ll be joining our ranks soon, too.”

She froze. “Excuse me?”

“You’re getting married.” He pulled out a file with his chubby hands. “Your mother told me the wonderful news and asked me to give these to you. Congratulations on your engagement to Prince George. I hear he was quite enchanted with you.”

She took the file out of reflex. “We’re not engaged.”

“Not yet.” He waved a hand. “That’s just a formality, though. Your family wants it. So does his. It’s all just a matter of the asking now.”

“And the accepting,” she said, her grip on the file tight. “I have to accept, as well.”

“We all know you will. Even Prince George is very confident in the matter.” He patted her hand condescendingly. “It’s just a matter of when and how.”

She knew what was expected of her. She knew what she was supposed to do. But hearing that everyone assumed she would say yes, without asking her, made her blood boil. “What if I don’t like George?” she asked.

The ambassador’s grin melted away. “Then you’ll learn to like him.”

“So everyone says.” She set the folder down, glaring down at it as if it alone was the cause of all her troubles. “Why do I have to marry him?”

“He’s bringing money and strength into the kingdom.” He leaned back in his chair. “Need I say more?”

“Yes.” She tipped her chin up. “Why is it on me to bring him into the kingdom? Why can’t they try for an alliance another way?”

“Because this is the way of our people. And the people count on you to do this for them. For the country. It’s your duty, as a royal.”

A princess never lets her country down.

She swallowed hard. “I know.”

“Then why argue about it, while we should be celebrating?” He flipped the folder open. “Shall we commence with business?”

She glanced at the waiter. He was across the room, chatting with Gordon. “Shouldn’t



we order first?”

“I already did. You’re getting steak and a glass of white wine. No sides.” He pointed to the file. “Start reading, Princess Isabelle.”

She skimmed the first line. It didn’t take long to figure out that it was a pre-nup. “Seriously? We’re not even engaged yet.”

“Like we said: that’s a formality at this point.” The ambassador shrugged. “After Friday night, it won’t be.”

Her heart stopped, then sped up painfully fast. “He’s...proposing Friday? You know this for a fact?”

“I’m quite certain of it, actually. He asked your father’s permission.” He flipped the page. “Keep reading. We’ve only got an hour scheduled.”

Panic rose up in her, choking off all words. All thoughts. This was actually happening. This was her life. It wasn’t fair. She didn’t want George. Didn’t want a loveless marriage. Didn’t want...this. She forced her blurred vision to the pre-nup. “It says here I have to have three kids. Four if there is no boy in the first three. They can’t be serious.”

“Yes.” The ambassador pushed his glasses higher on his nose. “It’s a little old-fashioned, but it makes sense. They want to assure his line carries on.”

His. Not theirs. “My parents only had me,” she said. “They didn’t have an agreement on how many children they had.”

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“And they never had a son.” He splayed his hand across the paper. “If they had, you wouldn’t be forced to do this. You wouldn’t be the heir. But you are, and you need to deal with that. You need to do your duty with the poise and grace expected of you.”

She glanced at Gordon. He stood across the room, clearly not able to hear them. But when she locked gazes with him, he must’ve seen the torment in her. He took a step toward her, glanced at the ambassador, and then stopped. “What’s wrong?” he mouthed.

She shook her head once and forced her attention back to the papers.

“You can have a man on the side, once you give the prince his heirs,” the ambassador said, his attention on Gordon. “But not before. Don’t even think of dallying with the American, Princess Isabelle.”

Isabelle glanced up, unable to believe he’d figured all that out just because they’d exchanged a glance. “Excuse me?”

“I see the way you two are watching each other.” He shrugged. “Even royals have dalliances on the side. But you need to hold off till you have your heirs. It’s right here.” He flipped three pages further and pointed to the paper. “See?”

Sure enough, it had a section about “marital affairs” in it. She wasn’t “permitted” to have an affair until “after the four kids were conceived”. George, however, was permitted to “dally, as long as it didn’t affect his husbandly duty”.

“Oh my God. I can’t believe this.”

“I know. They’ve really thought of everything,” he said, admiration ringing in his tone. He picked up the wine that had somehow arrived without her noticing. “It’s extremely thorough.”

Picking up her glass, she downed it in one gulp.

Princesses don’t imbibe in public.

The ambassador frowned at her empty glass. “Thirsty?”

“Very,” she croaked. After swiping her hand across her mouth, she gathered the papers and stuffed them into the file. “I’m going to take this home with me. Read it over in peace and quiet.”

Maybe find a way to get out of it, she added silently.

“Of course.” The ambassador stood. “But you haven’t eaten yet.”

“I don’t like steak,” she said, standing and gathering her things. “So I’ll be fine.”

“Oh.” He blinked. “I had no idea.”

“No one does.” Except for Gordon. “I’ll look over these extremely thoroughly.”

Speaking of Gordon...he came up to her side, glancing between the ambassador and her. “Are you finished already, Princess Isabelle?”

“Yes. I’m ready to go.” She hugged her file to her chest, her entire body trembling with rage, frustration, disgust and...and...fear. So much nauseating fear. “Please take me back to my hotel. Could you please let my people know I’m leaving early? They can finish eating before following. I have my guard.”

“Of course. But remember what I said about the clause on—” the ambassador looked at Gordon, then back at her, “—activities outside of the contract. If broken, it could be a deal breaker, and we can’t afford that.”

She grit her teeth. “Oh, I remember quite clearly, sir.”

“Excellent.” He bowed. “As always, it was a pleasure seeing you again, princess.”

She inclined her head, then left without another word.

Truth be told, she couldn’t manage to get a nice word out at all. Not right now. Not to him. She pushed past the door, each step jerkier than the one before it. Gordon tried to open the doors for her, but she didn’t wait for him. Her assistant and stylist were sitting at the bar, but they didn’t see her pass. She hadn’t been scheduled to leave for another forty-five minutes, after all.

As soon as they were outside, she collapsed against the brick building and closed her eyes. “I don’t want to do this,” she whispered.

Gordon stepped in front of her, blocking the sun from her closed eyes. “Don’t want to do what?”

“Marry him. I can’t.”

“Then don’t.” He reached out and cupped her cheek. His touch was tender, and yet controlling all at once. “Don’t do it. No one can make you do it.”

Princesses never walk away from their duties. “But—”

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Her PR Rep, Mary, came outside. “Princess? You finished early.”

“Y-Yes.” She straightened, and Gordon’s hand fell back at his side. She patted the folder. “I have some reading to do.”

“Oh.” Mary glanced at Gordon, then back to Isabelle. “Are you going back to your room until supper?”

“Yes. I need to lie down.”

She nodded. “I’ll come along, then.”

“No need.” She smiled, but gave Mary the look that commanded obedience. The one she so seldom used. “I’ll be fine with my guard escorting me. It’s what we hired him for, right? Those moments I wanted to be alone but wasn’t allowed? Well, I need some time alone to think right now. To...process.”

“If you’re certain...”

“Very.” She headed for the car. “Mr. Waybrook? If you please?”

“Of course. I’ll stay outside of her room, keeping watch until someone else comes, if that helps you be at ease, ma’am.”

She inclined her head. “Thank you.”

“Anytime.” He nodded at Mary. “It was a pleasure seeing you again, ma’am.”

“Likewise,” she said.

But her voice suggested otherwise.

As they headed for his car, Gordon chuckled under his breath. He didn’t bother to ask her if she wanted the town car. He probably knew her answer. “She doesn’t like me.” He didn’t sound the least bit upset about that. If anything, he sounded amused.

“She doesn’t like anyone who isn’t royal.” She stopped at the car. “Herself included.”

Gordon snorted. “It’s like that, huh?”

“Yeah. It’s like that.”

He opened her car door, closing it once she got inside. “Where to?” he asked.

“My room.” She rested her head against the car seat. “I need to read this contract over.”

His hands tightened on the wheel. “Is that what I think it is?”

“I couldn’t possibly know what you think it is, but it’s a pre-nup.”

“Why bother to read it if you ‘can’t do this?’”

She sighed. “It’s complicated.”

“Are you going to say yes?”

“Yes. No. I don’t

know.” She rubbed her forehead. “Just take me home. Please.”

He cranked the key, turning the engine over. Without replying, he pulled out of the spot, onto the road, and drove to her hotel. When they parked, he came around to her side and opened her door for her. “I’ll walk you up, and stay out in the hallway until someone else comes.”

She didn’t want him to leave her. She wanted him to stay. To help her come up with a way to get out of this. She wanted him. “You can stay inside the room. With me. If you want.”

“Belle...” He shut her door for her, his whole body held tersely. “I want to, believe me. I want to. But I won’t. We can’t.”

Swallowing hard, she nodded. “Right. Of course.”

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“But if you need to talk.” He opened the hotel door for her and led her to the elevator with a hand on her lower back. His touch burned through the fabric of her dress. “We can talk, if you want.”

“What I want is for you to stay with me,” she said, glancing up at him and pushing the up button. He stared straight ahead, his jaw tight. “I know you say you can’t, but I feel like my whole life is out of control right now. I control nothing. No one. Not even myself. But I know what I want right here. Right now. I want you. I want you so badly, and I’m begging you—yes, begging you—to take me. Please.”

The elevator door dinged, and he pushed her inside until her back hit the steel wall next to the control board. Jamming his finger into her floor number, he tilted her head back and stared down into her eyes.

“You’re trying to fucking kill me woman, aren’t you? Because, damn it, I want you, too.” He gripped her thigh, lifting it so he could insinuate himself between her legs. Rolling his hips, he nibbled on her ear. She could feel his erection pressing against her. So close, yet not close enough. “I want you so fucking badly it hurts, Belle.”

She dropped the file, letting it hit the floor. Closing her arms around the back of his neck, she moaned and arched her neck to give him better access. “Then take me.”

“You see...I can’t. That’s why it hurts so damn much,” he muttered, dropping his face into the crook of her neck. “I want you, but you’re not mine. And you never can be, because you’re his. He doesn’t even know you, but you’re going to be his.”

She gripped his suit jacket, her heart wrenching painfully. “Gordon...”



“I can’t,” Gordon said, disengaging himself from her and backing across the elevator as far as he could go. “I just can’t.”

She swallowed past the tears threatening to choke her, not sure what to say. What to do. She knew what she wanted to do. She wanted to tell Gordon she wouldn’t marry George. Wanted to tell him she’d be his, if only he’d kiss her again. Wanted to promise him everything, and then promise him some more.

But to do that, she had to turn her back on her entire family.

Her entire country.

“Please,” she said one last time. “Please.”

He locked gazes with her, the tension between the two of them enough to bring down the elevator. “I don’t bond and share deep dark secrets with other people, but I will tell you this one thing about me. My dad cheated on my mom repeatedly. It broke her. I swore I’d never touch a woman who belonged to another man. I swore it to myself. To her. To the world.” He swallowed hard. “I can’t break my vow. Not even for you. If I was the type to apologize, I would. But I’m not, and I’m not taking you.”

Her heart twisted. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“That’s because no one does. It’s not something I tell people.” He rubbed his jaw. “But if I was going to break that rule for anyone, it would be you.”

She forced a smile. “I’m honored.”

“Belle...” The elevator doors opened, and he took a step toward her. The light in his eyes was predatory. “I think—”

“Princess Isabelle?” George said, looking between her and Gordon. His eyes were narrow, and his fists tight. It was crystal clear he knew something was going on between the two of them, even if he didn’t know exactly how far it’d gone. “Everything top notch in here?”

Isabelle stared at him, not sure what to say. “Y-Yes. Of course. But...what are you doing here? We didn’t have an appointment, did we?”

“I was in the vicinity, and I just wanted to see you again. Maybe go out for a light supper?” George smiled. “Do I need an appointment for that?”

“Of course not.” Isabelle pushed off the wall, smoothed her hair, and bent to collect the papers she’d dropped. Their pre-nup, of all things. “Give me a second. I dropped my papers while talking to Mr. Waybrook.”

Gordon bent down and helped her collect the rest, his movements jerky and hard. “Here. I’ll get them for you, my lady.”

“I’ve got it,” she said, her throat growing incredibly hard to swallow past. “I’m fine.”

“You can leave us,” George said, his tone haughty. He gestured to a group of three men who stood to the side, dressed in dark suits. “Your services aren’t required when I’m with her. As you can see, I have my own men.”

“I work for her, so unless she tells me to go? I stay.” Gordon asked from his position on the floor. He’d froze with the last paper in his hand. “Princess? Would you like me to go?”

“I...” She glanced at George, who studied her far too closely. Her whole country’s safety rode on this moment. Her answer. “Yes. You may go.”

“Okay.” Gordon handed her the last paper, his fingers brushing hers, then stood. Something flashed behind his eyes. Something that made Isabelle want to take back her answer, but she didn’t. She couldn’t. “Good evening, Princess Isabelle.”

She didn’t reply. She wasn’t capable of it at the moment.

“Thank you,” George said, his attention locked on Gordon. “She’ll be safe with me; I assure you.”

“I know,” Gordon said, backing into the elevator. “I’m not worried about you at all.” He glanced at Isabelle one last time. “I’ll be back before your scheduled dinner tonight, my lady.”

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“Thank you,” Isabelle said, her voice soft. “Arrive at six, please.”

He bowed. “As you wish, Princess.”

“Thank you for taking your duty to serve her so...diligently,” George said, his head cocked to the side. As Isabelle came out into the hallway, he tossed an arm over her shoulder. “Our countries are ever so grateful—especially since they will be uniting soon.”

Gordon tightened his jaw. “I’m just doing my job.”

“As long as everyone remembers that,” George said, looking Gordon up and down with a curled upper lip. “And as long as everyone remembers their place in this world.”

The last thing Isabelle saw, before the doors shut, was the look on Gordon’s face.

He looked like he was ready to kill someone.

Namely...George.

## Chapter Nine

Later that night, Gordon fell onto on the couch in her hotel hallway and lifted his water to his mouth, his grip on the glass tight. After the little episode in the elevator, followed by the surprise visit from Prince fucking George himself, he’d been in a less than stellar mood. As a matter of fact, he couldn’t wait until Max came to relieve him

from duty.

Last night had been hell, sitting outside her door all night, knowing he couldn't have her. Tonight would be even worse. He eyed the door, his heart thumping in his ears. It would be so easy to walk up to it, knock, and go inside. To take what she offered, and then take even more. So. Fucking. Easy.

And yet so fucking wrong, all at the same time. Her actions were like a see-saw, going up and down non-stop in his mind. One second she was on the ground, telling him she wanted him and only him, and the next she was in the air, calling him Mr. Waybrook and sidling up to a prince for pride and country.

Did she really want him, or was it all an act to get him back in her bed before she settled down and married a proper prince? He couldn't see a world where she wanted to be his, though. Not like he wanted her, anyway.

/>

It just didn't make sense. He didn't know her country's laws, but if she was expected to marry a prince, he had a feeling her parents—and country—wouldn't approve of her shacking up with an average American. She had duties. Expectations. Rules she had to live by. People who counted on her to make the best choice for them, no matter the cost to herself.

Shit, he was starting to sound like her now.

He didn't have as many rules as she did, but his only rule was pretty simple. What made this situation all the harder was how murky the water was surrounding Isabelle.

Yes, she was supposed to marry George. Yes, they'd met. But they weren't in love. They weren't even engaged yet. So who was to say he couldn't have her?

Before she said yes?

And maybe, just maybe, he'd find a way to convince her that she deserved more than an arranged marriage. Maybe she would say no...and then maybe they would...

Shit, they would nothing.

She was still a princess, and he was still not a prince.

He dropped his head back against the cushions. "Damn it."

After eying her room again, he set his water down, stood up, and walked to her door. He refused to give it any more thought. She wasn't George's yet, as long as they hadn't kissed or fucked. To the best of his knowledge, that hadn't happened.

Not yet, anyway.

So she was his...until she wasn't.

He made it to her door in seconds. That's how close he'd been to her, unable to touch. Unable to take. She'd gone inside thirty minutes ago, so she shouldn't be asleep yet. If she was, well, he'd take that as a sign that this wasn't meant to be, then. He'd go sit his ass back down on the couch and have no regrets in the morning.

He stood there for a second, his head pounding with the knowledge of what he was about to do. Lifting his hand, he knocked three times.

The door cracked open, and Isabelle peeked through. She blinked at him. Her long, wavy, soft blonde hair cascaded around her shoulders. She'd taken off all traces of makeup, and her soft pink lips looked shiny and fresh. He'd never seen her like this. So...

Real.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:27 am*

“Gordon? Did you forget something?”

“Yes.” He rested a hand on the molding. “Let me in.”

She nodded once, shut the door, and then opened it all the way. She wore a light teal, sheer nightgown that hit her knees, and a lightweight robe. Watching him through wide eyes, she hugged it closed as he shut the door. “What did you forget?”

“This.” He curled his hand around the back of her neck. “You.”

He hauled her close, and she let out a spurt of air. “But—”

“Did you fuck him?” he asked, his fingers tight on her robe.

“What?” She shook her head. “No. Of course not.”

Lifting her left hand, he checked out her ring finger. It was still bare. “Did you tell him you’d marry him?”

“No. He hasn’t asked, and I still haven’t decided—”

“Then I don’t give a damn about him anymore.” He ran his hands up to her shoulders, gently brushing her robe off. It hit the floor at her feet without a sound. “Until he claims you as his in every way? You’re mine. All. Fucking. Mine. Say it.”

She bit her lower lip. “I’m yours. Only yours.”



Bending his head, he kissed her, putting all his frustrations into that simple touching of their lips. She was his tonight, and that's all that mattered. He backed her toward the couch, his lips never breaking contact with hers. She undid his shirt as they moved, her tongue curling around his as she undid each button.

When the back of her knees hit the couch, he gently pushed her onto it. She sat, her eyes wide, and her lips swollen from his kisses. "Take off your gown," he demanded.

"Yes, sir," she said, licking her lips.

She balled the bottom of it in her fists and lifted it over her head slowly. Seductively. She sat on the couch, her perky pink nipples begging for his touch. Naked and waiting for him. Waiting for him to make her come, repeatedly. Her bright green eyes sparkled and simmered, making his gut twist tight.

"Whatever you want, sir."

"You're getting good at this." He trailed his finger down her bare shoulder, skimming over the curve of her breast. "At being a good, submissive girl."

"Only for you," she vowed.

And he fucking believed her.

He slid his hand lower, squeezing her nipple between his fingers. "Good."

"May I remove your pants?" she asked, her voice breathy. "Please?"

"No." He pinched her nipple one last time, then fisted her hair. "First, you need to be punished."

“Punished?” Her brows lowered. “But you just said I was being good.”

“You are...right now.” He tugged her to her feet by the hair. She followed his lead without a fight. “But you went out with another man. Twice.”

She gripped his arms. “Not because I wanted to.”

“I know. And I’m okay with it, even. You’re not mine, no matter how much I wish you were.” He urged her head back, tugging on her hair gently. “But I still get to punish you for it. Don’t worry. You’ll love every second of it.”

And he would, too.

...

Isabelle sucked in a deep breath, her heart hammering against her ribcage. He was so dirty. So rough. So hot. He could be reading the newspaper out loud, but he’d find a way to make it sexy. Knowing him, by the time he got to the classifieds, she’d be begging for him to take her.

“What do you want me to do?” she asked, squeezing her thighs together to ease the ache that tried to kill her. The need to have him inside of her. “What do you want?”

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“I’m going to drive you crazy, but you’re not allowed to come. Not until I let you.” He dipped his fingers between her legs, his thumb pressing against her core. Her legs shook, but she remained completely still. “And you won’t complain or make a sound the whole time. No begging. No whining. You’ll take the punishment because you deserve it. Nod if you understand.”

She bit her tongue and nodded.

“Good girl.” He rubbed his thumb in a circle, tracing a path around her aching center. “Undo my belt for me.”

Sliding her hands down his chest and over his rock hard abs, she did as told. When it was unclasped, she glanced up at him through her lashes, awaiting further instruction. It was funny that she hated having things out of her control on an every day basis, but when it came to being in bed with Gordon?

The more he bossed her around...the better.

“Take it off now,” he said, bending down and nibbling on her neck.

She pulled it out of his loops, trailing the bottom of her palm over his erection as she did so. His abs jerked at the touch, and his hand tightened in her hair in response. Leaning in, she placed a kiss over the black tattoos on his pecs. It had a bunch of numbers on it.

A date? Coordinates?

She wanted to ask, but she wisely kept quiet. After she had the belt off, she held it out to him, one brow up. He took it from her, his fingers brushing across her pulse, and ran the belt through his hands as he watched her with heated eyes. “Turn around, place your hands on the top of the couch, and spread your legs.”

Her breath hitched in her throat. He wanted her to do...what?

“Now,” he said, his voice hard.

She turned around immediately and then placed her hands on the couch, holding on tight. After a calming breath, she squeezed her eyes shut and spread her legs. He walked up behind her, trailing the edge of his leather belt over her bare butt, and whistled through his teeth. “Nice. You have no idea how fucking sexy this looks.”

When he dipped the belt between her thighs, and over her entry, she bit back a moan. Barely. He tsked. “I heard that. You almost slipped.” The belt retracted, and he caressed the curve of her butt. “But you didn’t.”

She opened her mouth to say something but closed it quickly.

Pressing his body against her, he cupped her breasts from behind. “I’m going to punish you now. I promise it won’t hurt...much. Nod if you’re ready.”

Her stomach twisted tight. Oh my God, yes. Yes, she was ready.

So she nodded once.

His hand dipped between her thighs, and he massaged her swollen nub. His jeans bit into her bare flesh, and she bit down on her tongue hard. Not a sound escaped.

When he pulled back, she dug her fingers into the top of the couch. She knew what was coming, and she couldn't wait. He skimmed the belt over her lower back, a little rougher than before. Before she could even blink, the belt landed on her butt lightly. She jerked, more from pleasure than from any actual pain.

He'd been gentle.

He massaged the spot where he slapped, and heat suffused through her. The slight pain, combined with his touch, was enough to drive her wild. He moved her hair and kissed the nape of her neck. "Nod if you liked that. I'll only ask once."

She nodded frantically.

"Yeah?" He chuckled, the sound deep and low and incredibly sexy. "That's my girl."

Pulling back, he slapped her ass with the belt again, the same strength behind it as before. She bit her lip hard, swallowing down the cry of pleasure trying to escape. He rubbed the injured skin, then did it again. She gripped the couch and dropped her head down, pleasure pulsing through her body.

Dropping the belt to the ground, he knelt behind her. He kissed the last spot he'd spanked, then spread her wide. She felt exposed. Vulnerable. Decadent.

"Don't come."

Cursing inwardly, she nodded.

Then his mouth was on her, and he was pushing her closer and closer to the brink. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to block out the pleasure, but he stuck a finger inside of her and sucked on her clitoris. There was no blocking out that. Her entire body tightened, begging for relief, but she managed to hold herself back.

After minutes of what seemed like endless torment, he pulled back. She let out a shuddery sigh of relief. “Good girl. Stay there.”

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She let her body relax, but it didn't stop the ache inside of her. The bu

urning desire to let go. He unzipped his pants, and they hit the floor. Thank God. A condom wrapper crinkled, and then he fell silent. She gripped the couch, knowing he was coming back. Knowing he was about to drive her crazy all over again.

He needed to let her come, or she'd die.

"Your ass is red where I hit it. That's so fucking hot." He came up behind her, his hand on her hip. "You've been a good girl tonight. When I fuck you, you can come. As many times as you want. And you can make noise now, too. Okay, Princess?"

She nodded, a small whimper escaping her. "Yes. Please. Do it."

"Bend over."

She bent over more, opening herself to him. He cupped her hips in his hands and made a small sound of appreciation, then plunged inside of her with one stroke. He'd gotten her so worked up earlier that she came immediately, all from him finally giving her what she needed so desperately.

Him.

He growled deep in his throat, his fingers digging into her butt as he moved inside of her. Hard. Fast. The pressure started building inside of her again, growing fast. He reached around the front of her and pressed two fingers against her. As he thrust in and out of her, he moved his fingers over her in unison.

“Oh my God,” she cried out.

He moved faster, their flesh hitting the only sound in the room. When he lifted her butt higher, he hit a new spot inside of her that sent her careening over the edge. She came explosively, her entire body going lax. He plunged inside her one more time, and then they both collapsed on the couch in a heap.

“Holy shit,” he said. Pushing her hair out of the way, he kissed her neck. “You’re incredible. You know that, right?”

She swallowed hard, her thoughts scrambled and garbled and pure mush. “Y-You’re the one who does that to me. I’ve never...not like that. Ever.”

“And you do the same thing to me.” He kissed her neck again. “Every time.”

She buried her face in the couch pillow, hiding her smile. “Stay with me tonight?”

“I don’t really sleep.” He hesitated. “Like, at all. And when I do...I wake up and cry out. I have nightmares, Belle. Lots of them. If I stayed, I’d probably disturb you, and I don’t want to do that.”

“That’s okay. I don’t mind,” she said, rolling over and cupping his cheek. His stubble scraped her palms, and his eyes looked even more deep this close. There were little specks of amber in his brown eyes, and they were gorgeous. Like him. “What are your nightmares about?”

“War. Dying.” He hesitated but met her eyes. “Watching my friends die. That day never leaves me alone. It’s the day I got shot. They died. I didn’t. I dream about it all the time. It wakes me up every night. They haunt me.”

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered, her eyes welling up with tears. “That’s awful. I can’t



imagine what that feels like. That's why you got Georgie?"

He nodded once. "Partly."

"Would he be okay alone overnight?"

"Yeah, I took him out right before I left." He flexed his jaw. "But I should go wait outside, in the hallway. I'm no good for you when I'm asleep."

"I want you to stay anyway."

He studied her, his mouth tipped down into a frown, but then he kissed the tip of her nose. "For you? I'll do it. But if I wake you up, I'm leaving."

He picked her up and carried her into the bedroom, bridal style. She smiled up at him, knowing that her real wedding night would be nothing like this.

Nothing so exciting and right.

After they settled into the bed together, she rested her hand on his heart. It pounded under her touch. Lying here like this, with him, felt right. Like it was meant to be. She'd never really believed in soul mates or love at first sight. She couldn't even say she loved him. Love grew over time.

It took days. Months. Years, even.

But this much she could easily say... She could see herself falling impossibly in love with him. It would be so easy to love him. To need him.

Too bad she wasn't allowed.

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He played with a piece of her hair. “A penny for your thoughts?”

She smiled, an inexplicable sadness coming over her. Maybe it was because she knew she couldn’t have this—not with Gordon. She was supposed to marry George. Secure the kingdom. Help her people. Do her duty. Even if she didn’t want to.

“I was just thinking how nice this was. I wish...” A stinging longing filled her heart, making it hard to speak. She faded off, unable to finish the sentence.

He kissed her. “I know. Me, too.”

Closing her eyes, she rested her cheek on his chest. The steady beating of his heart lulled her to sleep within minutes. It was the most peaceful thing she’d ever felt.

And she was going to lose him.

### Chapter Ten

The bullets came from every direction. There was no telling how many men surrounded them, or where they were hiding. It all went too fast. Too much blood. Too much pain. Too much...everything. He was going to die in this godforsaken desert, and there wasn’t a thing he could do to save himself.

Or them.

“Come this way,” his buddy, Isaac, shouted above the blasting guns. “Run!”

Gordon nodded and motioned his other surviving platoon member over. The sweat pouring down his forehead stung his eyes. Or maybe it was blood. He had no idea anymore. “Thomas, this way.”

Thomas just stood there, his eyes wide; then blood spurted out of his mouth like some sick imitation of vomit. Gordon met his eyes, the horror of what he was seeing hitting him square in the chest. Thomas was dying. Right here. Right now. In front of him. He’d never see his wife or his baby girl again. And for what?

For who?

Thomas opened his mouth one more time, then fell to the ground without a sound. Gordon would never forget the look in Thomas’s eyes before he fell. He’d known he was dying, and he’d been terrified. No one had saved him. Gordon hadn’t saved him.

“No!”

Gordon struggled to get to Thomas, but something held him back. He couldn’t move. He fought frantically. He couldn’t leave Thomas out here. Who knew what would happen to his body? It could be pulled apart. Defiled. He couldn’t let that happen.

“Gordon!” Something shook him. “Gordon, wake up!”

Gordon jerked awake with a cry, swinging his fist as he came to. He connected with someone’s arm, and then he was instantly awake. “What the...?”

“It’s just me,” Isabelle said, her voice soft and tender. “It’s okay. You’re okay.”

“Oh my God. Belle.” He grabbed her and hugged her, his body shaking. “I’m...I... Did I hurt you?”

“No, I’m fine.” She hugged him back, her arms closing around him. “Everything’s okay.”

He buried his face in her hair, drawing a deep breath. He couldn’t believe he’d been foolish enough to think he could spend the night with her and not have a fucking nightmare. They were as inescapable as death. “I should go.”

“No.” Rearing back, she cupped his face and stared deep into his eyes. Her soft blonde hair framed around her face, making her more gorgeous than ever before. “Lie back down. I’m here for you. Tell me what happened.”

Tell her? He didn’t tell people about his dreams. Didn’t snuggle until he felt better. He fucking dealt with it, and that was that. But with her...he wanted to. He wanted to tell her. Fighting his flight instinct, he laid back down. The unfamiliar desire to spill his guts almost choked him, so he swallowed hard and told her the whole dream.

Told her what he’d seen. What he saw every night when he closed his eyes. Once he started, he couldn’t stop. He told her every gory detail, holding nothing back from her.

Nothing of himself.

When he finished, she hugged him close and smoothed his hair off his forehead. “I’m here, Gordon. I’m here for you. I’m so sorry.”

He held her tight, his heart twisting painfully in his chest. He’d never understand why people

apologized for shit they had nothing to do with, but it sounded nice coming from her. Until now, Gordon had never let anyone in like this. He didn’t know why he was doing so with her, of all people. She would be leaving him in a matter of days.

What they had here, this shared understanding and friendship, would all go away the second she said yes to Prince George. She wasn't his and never could be.

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But he really fucking wanted her to be.

“Belle...”

“Shh.” She kissed him gently. “I know.”

He lay back down, cradling her in his arms. He’d never felt so at peace in another person’s arms before. So fucking happy. He’d tried to deny that the other night, when they’d first had sex. Had tried to talk himself out of the odd feeling. But there was no denying it anymore. She made him happy...

And he was going to lose her.

So he kissed her.

Later that morning, he awoke gradually. The sun crept in through the blinds, slowly teasing him into consciousness. Isabelle lay on his left side, curled up against him with her hand on his chest, and the blankets were at hip length. He lifted his lids, a content smile on his face...

Until he saw the old woman standing next to the bed, glowering at him.

Shit.

He yanked the covers up over their naked bodies, watching the woman closely. At her nod, the ambassador from lunch yesterday stepped out from the living room door, and so did her PR Rep—the one who didn’t like him. Double fucking shit.

Isabelle squirmed, her nose scrunching up adorably. “Mmm...”

“Uh...Belle?”

“Hm?” she asked, wiping her palm across her mouth. “What?”

“Open your eyes.”

Her lids drifted open, and she smiled at him sleepily. “Time for you to go?”

“I think it’s too late for that,” he said, jerking his head toward the crowd next to the bed. “We have company.”

“What?” She lifted her head and looked past him. Her eyes went wide, and she burrowed underneath the blanket. “Oh my God. What are you doing here?”

“One might ask the same of you,” the older woman said, crossing her arms.

“Oh, we already know the answer to that,” the ambassador said, his mouth held tight. “And so does everyone else. How could you jeopardize the relationship we had going with Linton? You’ve ruined everything with your car escapades.”

Isabelle paled. “W-What do you mean?”

“A reporter caught the two of you...doing indecent things in a car. With no regard to your status as a princess about to embark on a marriage that would benefit your country.” The older woman leveled a stare at Gordon that made him feel about six inches tall. “They went live with the story. It’s all over Linton, and Maldeva, too.”

“No,” Isabelle said, her voice broken. “This can’t be happening.”

“Oh, it’s happening.” The older woman came around the side of the bed, picked up Isabelle’s robe, then tossed it on the bed. “Get dressed. We need to discuss much with the ambassador.”

Isabelle nodded slowly, her face pale and her eyes hauntingly empty. “I’ll be right there.”

They all filed out of the room, leaving Gordon and Isabelle alone. Gordon reached out to grab her hand, but Isabelle hopped out of the bed too fast.

“I can’t believe I did this. I ruined everything. Brought disgrace to my people. To my parents.” She paced back and forth. “I’m a shadow upon my family’s good name.”

Her panicked words sent a knife of guilt piercing through his heart. He’d done this to her. This was all his fault. He ruined everything he touched...even her. “Isabelle, stop.”

“I can’t!”

He got out of bed and stepped in front of her. “You’re not a bad person. If anyone is, it’s me. I’m the one who should have known better than to...” He broke off, unable to finish that thought. “You got caught by some dipshit with a camera, doing something that millions of other people in the world do on a daily basis, but that doesn’t make you a bad person. It makes you human.”

She glowered at him. “Millions of other people are not princesses.”



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“You’re right.” He held his hands out, frustration coursing through his veins. “But even princesses have sex. You think Prince Harry and Kate Middleton did in vitro, or do you think they bumped nasty’s and made a baby the old-fashioned way?”

She swiped her hand through the air. “That’s different. They’re married. And they weren’t caught on camera in a car, for God’s sakes.”

“I refuse to feel ashamed because we had sex.” He stomped into his pants. “I know this sucks, PR-wise, but we didn’t do anything wrong. You’re single. I’m single. We fucked. It’s not that big of a deal.”

“It is, though.” She tossed her robe aside, went to her luggage, and rifled through it before pulling out a lavender dress. “In my world, it really is.”

“Look, I’m not going to pretend to understand your world. I don’t.” He swallowed hard, the guilt at how horrible she felt—how horrible he’d made her feel—choking him. “But even so, I want to help you. Tell me what to do, and I’ll do it.”

She clasped her bra. “There’s nothing you can do, Gordon. Nothing at all.”

He stood there, wearing nothing but a pair of jeans, and watched her as she slid into a pair of satin panties. He felt so fucking helpless. “It’s my fault that we got caught, and if I ever find the little fucker who’d sold the footage, I’ll kill him with my bare hands.” He hesitated, his throat getting tight at the words he wanted to say but wasn’t sure if he could. “But I refuse to regret what we did. And I won’t apologize, either. I refuse to regret you. I think you’re an amazing person, and I care about you. And I’m here to help you. I want to help you. Let me help you.”

She stopped, the dress in her hands, and bit down on her lower lip. “I think you’re special, too. I really do.”

He closed the distance between them, capturing her face between his hands. Kissing her gently, he tried to show her without words just how much she meant to him. Just how extraordinary she was. When he pulled back, he locked gazes with her. Her glistening pink lips were tempting, but they needed to focus. He needed to help her...

No matter how ridiculous he thought it might be that everyone was all up in airs about a fuck. “Whatever those people out there need me to do, I’ll do it.”

And he meant every word.

She smiled at him. “That’s very sweet of you, but you don’t have to do that. This is my problem, not yours.”

“No.” He kissed the tip of her nose, then went in search of his shirt. It was a hell of a lot harder to let go of her than he thought it would be. “It’s ours.”

“I don’t care what anyone says. You’re a prince.” She rose on tiptoes and kissed him again. “A true prince.”

His heart pounded against his ribs, the guilt subsiding a little bit at her words. Around her, he almost felt like a real fucking prince, which was stupid as hell. He’d never be one. “I don’t know about any of that shit, but let’s get dressed so we can brush our teeth and get out there before all those people waiting for you have a conniption.”

Her lips twitched into a small smile. “Okay.”

Progress, no matter how tiny it might be. She no longer looked as if she was about to burst into tears, if nothing else. That was the most he could ask for, considering the

circumstances. They finished dressing, brushed their teeth, and freshened up in under five minutes. They walked to the bedroom door.

Isabelle's steps slowed the closer they got.

"Hey." Gordon reached out and caught her hand. "You okay?"

She looked at him, her green eyes somber and clear. "I think so."

"Let's go out there, then. Get this over with. I'll be at your side the whole time."

She nodded once. "Open the door."

He did, and he found two out of the three people who'd woken them up, sitting on the couch. His lips twitched. If they knew what their beloved princess had been doing on that exact couch only hours before, they wouldn't look so damn regal. "Good morning...again."

"Sit," the ambassador said, rifling through papers. "Both of you."

Isabelle looked at Gordon, her fingers tightening on his. "Can we excuse Gordon, please? This mess isn't his."

"To the contrary, it very much is," the ambassador said, not even looking up from the file he was rummaging through. "He stays."

"I told you I'm not leaving you," Gordon said, frowning down at Isabelle before turning to the other two occupants in the room. The older woman held a MacBook on her lap, pointed at them, and the ambassador drank a coffee with a trembling hand. "Though I refuse to apologize for this...for what we did...whatever you need from me, I'll do it. I'm not walking away from this as if I didn't have a part in the

whole...situation. Tell me what you need me to do, and I'll do it."

"I'm very glad to hear that," a quiet voice said. It sounded muffled through technology. "Because we're going to require a lot from you, young man."

Isabelle paled. "D-Dad?"

Shit, the king of Maldeva was listening? Should he bow? Sit? Stand until invited to sit? Fuck if he knew. He wasn't exactly up to date on royal customs and expectations.

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“I’m here, too,” a feminine voice said. “Sit down, Isabelle. Princesses don’t dawdle with their mouths hanging open wide enough to catch flies. You look ridiculous.”

Her mother, obviously.

Isabelle dropped his hand and sat immediately, her head lowered from the webcam video the older woman had so obviously set up. “Yes, Mother. Sorry.”

“No, she doesn’t.” Gordon frowned at the computer, then sat beside Isabelle. “You look beautiful, like always, Belle.”

Isabelle peeked at him, shook her head, then lowered it again.

She didn’t make a peep.

“Your admiration of our daughter is to be commended, Mr. Waybrook,” her father said. “I only wish you had admired her enough to keep her from this scandal in the first place, before you sought out your carnal pleasures in public. That might be conventional behavior where you’re from, but it isn’t acceptable here. Especially not from the future ruler of our country.”

Gordon flinched. “I’m sorry for that. I truly am.”

“Noted,” her father said.

Gordon almost wished he could see his face, so he knew exactly who he spoke to. “Are you truly willing to do whatever it takes to fix this? For Isabelle?”

“For her, I’d do anything, yes. She’s come to mean a lot to me, in a very short time.” He lifted his chin. “But I’d like to go on the record in saying this whole thing is ridiculous. She’s a grown woman. I’m a grown man. There was a consensual night or two between us. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“If she wasn’t a princess on the verge of a marriage, I might agree.” Her father’s voice hardened with every word spoken. “But she’s not average, like you.”

“Father,” Isabelle hissed, her cheeks flushing with color. “Don’t insult him.”

“It’s not an insult. It’s the truth,” her father argued.

“Enough,” the ambassador said. “We’re wasting time when we should be plotting how best to make this look good to the people.”

“There’s only one way for us to make this work,” the older woman said, looking at Gordon with a tinge of disgust on her face. “No matter how much I might wish otherwise.”

“Hold on,” Gordon said, holding his hand up. “I know who’s on the computer, even if I can’t see them. But can everyone else please introduce themselves and tell me your job? I feel the need to know who you all are before I obey your every whim.”

“You’ve already seen me, but I’ll play along. I’m the ambassador of Maldeva, and I need to save her from certain ruin,” the fat, bald headed man with the file said. “Before it’s too late.”

“I’m what you American’s call a PR person, and my name’s Mary,” the older woman said, her lip curled up so high it almost touched her black hair. “It’s my job to protect her image and help come up with the best possible spin on this whole thing.”

Gordon nodded. “I’m Gordon, and I was a Marine before I became a private security agent at Shillings Agency—where you hired me to watch over your daughter.”

“We should have specified how closely we wished you to watch over her,” the mother said, a touch of irony in her voice. “And we should have requested a photo of you. One look, and I would have vetoed your hiring. This was a disaster waiting to happen.”

Gordon laughed. “Fair enough, your majesty.”

“Enough,” the ambassador said. “Prince George is quite obviously out of the picture, as one would expect.”

Isabelle flinched. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“There’s nothing to be sorry about.” Gordon couldn’t deny the surge of relief he felt at the man giving up on the idea of marrying his Isabelle. “It’s his loss.”

Mary looked as if she was ready to kill him.

The ambassador sighed. “I don’t suppose you come from a rich family with a secret noble background...do you?”

Gordon snorted. “No. I’m pureblood American. My mom was a teacher, and my dad was a CEO. They’re both dead.”

“But you were an officer in the military?” her father asked from the computer. “Correct?”

“Yes.” Gordon drummed his fingers on his knee. “But I’m out now. I got out after I got shot in the shoulder.”

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“In the battle that killed your team,” her father said.

His grip tightened on his knees. “Yes.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” her mother said. And she actually sounded as if she was. “That must have been hard.”

“Thank you. It was.” He paused. “It is.”

“We can still spin him as a decorated officer of the American military,” Mary interrupted, watching the royal couple. “It’s not a prince, but it’s better than nothing. Also, I did some digging on his background. He got the Purple Heart for his bravery over there. He carried a dead Marine to safety.”

Gordon stiffened. “He’s right here and can speak for himself.”

“Calm yourself, boy,” the ambassador said, waving a hand. “You’ll have to get used to this if you’re truly willing to help.”

Gordon hesitated. “I am...”

“Good.” Her father cleared his throat. “So, a heroic American military officer swept Princess Isabelle off her feet, and they had a whirlwind romance that would rival a romantic movie’s plot. Romantic dinners. Boat rides in the moonlight. Sweet kisses under arched bridges in the sunset.”

Mary nodded. “Yes. Exactly.”



“Unbelievable,” Gordon said, laughing under his breath. “What’s next? We fell in love and eloped without telling anyone?”

The room fell silent.

Three pairs of eyes stared at him.

“Wait.” His palms started to sweat, and he swallowed past his dry throat. “You can’t be serious.”

Mary finally cracked a smile. And it was in the face of his panic that she finally showed a sense of humor. “Well, actually…”

Triple fucking shit.

## Chapter Eleven

Isabelle snapped her head up, her heart pounding so loudly in her ears she almost didn’t hear Mary’s reply. As soon as Gordon had made the joke about them eloping, she’d gone into panic mode. It hadn’t even occurred to her that her team might be toying with that notion. Not at all.

But then Gordon had joked about it...

And she’d realized that’s exactly what they wanted him to do. Marry her, all because of a fun sex session in a car. It was insane. And so unfair to Gordon. They’d had a fling. A fun, harmless—mostly—couple of nights together.

He shouldn’t have to marry her because of them.

“No.” She stood up, fisting her hands at her hips. “This is ridiculous. He’s not going

to marry me because you asked him to.”

Gordon rubbed his jaw.

“And upon that, you’re crazy for thinking I’d be willing to marry someone because we had sex. It’s...it’s...bonkers! We were just having fun. People do that.” She put her hands on her hips. “Everyone does it.”

Princesses don’t—she cut the rule off mid-sentence.

Enough about what she should and shouldn’t do.

She was done. D. O. N. E.

Mary pressed her lips together. “You’re a princess. You have a name, and an image, to uphold. What would the people say if they knew you were just ‘having fun?’”

“They’d say ‘good for her!’” she snapped. “God knows there are enough uptight royal snobs out there. It’s time the world had a change of pace.”

“Sit. Down,” her father said, his tone brokering no room for argument. “Now.”

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God, she hated it when he took that darn King tone with her.

She sat, still not looking at Gordon. He'd been suspiciously quiet. Maybe he was in shock. She certainly was. "This isn't right."

"Then you should have thought of the possible consequences before you did what you did," her father said. "Enough whining and babbling. Mr. Waybrook—are you willing to marry her, or not?"

Her heart lurched. She didn't want to hear him laugh and turn her down. Because some weird, crazy part of her would be hurt. Which was stupid. Obviously, he didn't want to marry her. They barely knew each other. All they'd wanted was some fun. Not this.

Never this.

"Don't answer that," she hissed, her shoulders so tense it almost hurt.

Gordon cleared his throat. "Well, uh, I—"

"Don't say another word." She glowered at Gordon. What the hell was he doing? He should have walked out of here as soon as the word "marriage" got thrown out there. Helplessness had never sat well with her, and right now, she felt more than helpless. She felt as if they were taking advantage of a good man, and he was just going to let them. "Let me talk to Prince George. I bet I can get him to change his mind. He liked me."

Gordon stiffened beside her. “No.”

“What?” She blinked at him. He watched her with narrow eyes and flared nostrils. He looked like he was about to explode. Literally. Her heart sped up. “Why not? You can’t possibly...”

He flexed his jaw. “Are you res

isting so much because you want to marry a real prince? Are you ashamed of falling for a lowly American?”

“No. God, no.” Shaking her head, she reached out and grabbed his hands. “I would never think that way, and especially not about you. But I refuse to trap you into this marriage. That’s not what you signed on for when you kissed me that first time.”

His lips twitched. “Not exactly, no.”

“One night. Remember?”

“I remember.”

She squeezed his hands. “You don’t have to deal with this mess. Only I do. You can walk out that door right now, and no one would blame you. Just do it. Walk away.”

He pressed his mouth into a tight line. “Sorry, but I can’t do that. That’s not the kind of guy I am, and you should know that about me.” He turned back to their audience. “I have questions.”

“No,” she said, her heart twisting. “Gordon, don’t.”

He ignored her, the muscle in his jaw ticking.

“All right.” The ambassador cracked his knuckles. “Ask away.”

“I’m not saying I agree to any of this, but if I did... Can she even marry an American?” he asked, gesturing toward Isabelle. “I thought royalty had to marry royalty.”

“In some countries, that’s true, yes.”

Gordon cocked a brow. “But not in yours?”

“No. She can marry anyone she wants. We simply wanted it to be a prince with money and military to back him up. However...” her mother said, drifting off.

She latched onto that last piece of information. “I can still marry a prince. There has to be a prince out there that doesn’t care if I was caught in someone’s car, even if I can’t change George’s mind.” She dropped Gordon’s hand and stood so she could pace back and forth. “There’s a way to fix this that doesn’t involve me marrying Gordon. I can—”

Her father made an annoyed sound. “Sit—”

“Down,” Gordon finished, his voice hard. Without waiting for her to obey, he turned back to the screen. “Would we have to live there, if I agreed?”

“Yes. She’s a princess,” her mother said. “She needs to learn how to rule the country. You would need to know how, too.”

“Would I be a...king?” He rubbed his temples. “Or a prince?”

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“Neither. You’d be a royal consort,” the ambassador said.

He stared at the computer with a wrinkled brow. “What does that even mean?”

“It means you need to run. Run fast,” Isabelle said.

He was actually thinking about doing this. Actually debating marrying her. Her heart lurched at the thought of him as her husband.

What would that be like? How would it feel?

“That’s a complicated question. I’ll give you the simple, yet wide-reaching answer,” her father said. “You’d be expected to attend functions. Help with court hearings and hold a seat on the house—”

“Stop it.” Isabelle fisted the skirt of her dress. “He’s not marrying me, and I’m not marrying him. I refuse. You hear me? I. Refuse.”

“Enough, Belle.” Gordon stood up, his face stony and hard. He reached for her, but she leaped back. “It’s over. We got caught, and now we have to look at our choices before—”

“No.” She backed toward the door, shaking her head as she went. “I will not be a part of this.” Tearing her eyes off Gordon, she glowered at the computer. “And I will not marry him.”

Princesses don’t run away—but this one was.

Whirling on her heel, she left the room and slammed the door shut behind her. She only made it two steps before she saw the two royal guards blocking the hallway on either side. She stopped mid-step. “What are you doing?”

“Keeping you here.” The man to her left bowed. “Sorry, Princess. We’re under the order of the King.”

Looking back and forth between the two men, she swallowed hard. “Seriously?”

“Yes, Princess,” the other man said.

She collapsed against the door, her hands fisted at her sides. Closing her eyes, she counted to three in her head. This was all going to go away. It was all a big nightmare come to haunt her. As soon as she opened her eyes, she’d wake up in bed alone.

Gordon wouldn’t be forced into marriage—and actually considering it—and she would still be dreading having to marry a man she didn’t know.

It would all have been a dream. A big, horrible, stupid dream.

Except when she opened her eyes...she was still in the hallway with two royal guards babysitting her. And it was all real. Very, very real. “Right.”

“Princess?”

“Nothing,” she said quickly. “I’ll just stand—oof.”

The door opened behind her, and she collapsed backward. Strong arms closed around her, catching her before her butt hit the floor, and she knew without looking who caught her. Gordon—her future husband, if everyone else had their way.

“Jesus, Belle. Are you okay?”

Gripping his forearms, she nodded. “I’m fine.”

“I’m not.” He set her on her feet, then glanced at the two men staring at them. “Leave us. Now.”

“I can’t.” The man to the left swallowed hard, his gaze drifting over Gordon with apprehension. “I’ve been ordered to—”

Gordon opened the door. “Lose the detail, or I’m out.”

“Hans? Christopher?” The ambassador peeked out. “Inside, please. Mr. Waybrook will see to it that the princess stays safe. He’s a decorated military officer, you know.”

The man on the left looked at him with new respect. That was something everyone in her whole country agreed upon—soldiers of any sort were to be treated with the upmost respect. “Sir, it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Gordon stared at him. “Uh. Thanks.”

“An honor.” The other man bowed. “Sir.”



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“Nice to meet you,” Gordon said impatiently. “Privacy, please?”

The men cleared out of the hallway, and the door shut behind them. Isabelle watched him with new eyes. He already had the authority thing down pat with the royal guard, and he wasn’t even married to her. “Did you get rid of them so you could run? Because you should.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “No. I’m not running...yet. I got rid of them so we could talk without a bunch of people listening to us.”

“That’s what your life will be like from now on, if you agree to this crazy idea. People always watching. Judging. Ripping apart everything you do.” She crossed her arms. “How does that make you feel?”

“Like I still don’t give a damn about who watches or judges me.”

“Then you won’t make a good royal,” she said quickly. “We have to care. It’s what we do. Who we are.”

“Not me.” He caught her hands and squeezed them gently. “All I care about is what you think. Are you upset that you might have to marry me? Because of who I am? What I do?”

“How can you ask me that?” She wasn’t upset because she might have to marry him. She was upset because he might have to marry her. “This just isn’t right.”

Dropping her hands, he paced back and forth. “What isn’t right?”

“Everything.” She covered her face. “Think of the way you felt about arranged marriages when we talked about it before.”

He swallowed. “Yeah, but that was different.”

“How?” she asked, confused. “How could this possibly be different?”

“Because I don’t consider marrying you an arranged marriage.” He hesitated, avoiding her eyes. “I like you, Belle. And you’re not a stranger.”

She swallowed hard, her heart picking up speed. “I like you, too, which is why I don’t want you to get stuck marrying me.”

“Yes, because it’s so awful to have to marry a princess.” He snorted. “I totally could have scored a queen instead. Exactly how happily married are your parents?”

A laugh escaped her, and she smacked his arm. “Gordon.”

“What? I’m not allowed to make you laugh?” He rubbed his chest. “Man, this being married to a princess shit is hard.”

“We’re not married. We’re not even engaged.”

His eyes sobered, the amber sparkle dying down. “We could be. If this is what needs to be done to protect you, then I could do it, if you want. I told you I’d do anything to help you, and I meant it. But not if you don’t want me to.”

Some small—okay, huge—part of her wanted to say yes. Wanted to selfishly ask him to marry her, because she had a feeling being married to him would be pretty amazing. But it wasn’t fair to him, so no matter how much she wanted to...

She couldn't do it.

"It's not that I don't want you to." She took a deep breath. "But you don't have to. I'll be fine."

"Fine isn't exactly good." He leveled a look on her, his brown eyes pulling her in with their magnetism. "What if we could be more than fine? What if we could be happy?"

Her heart twisted. If he didn't stop trying to convince her they would make a team...she might stop fighting it. And he didn't want that. Not really. He was just doing what he thought was right. Being an honorable gentleman.

And she wouldn't punish him for that.

Forcing a smile, she crossed her arms. "I'm sure we could be. Honestly. But not like this. Don't listen to them. Listen to me. The people of Maldeva will get over this, and so will all the 'princes' of the world. If Harry can party in Vegas nude and be forgiven for it, then I can have sex in a car."

"Were you there, too?" he asked, all wide eyes. "Who would have guessed that underneath that prim little exterior, you were a—"

"Gordon."

"Fine." He held his hands up. "I'll focus."

"How can you be so calm right now?"

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“I don’t know.” He lifted a shoulder. “I just am. The idea of marrying you doesn’t scare me, and that has to mean something. Right?”

She bit down on her lip. “You can’t possibly want to marry me.”

“Was that a questi

on or a statement?”

“A question!”

“Well...” He scratched his ear and scrunched his nose. “I could certainly do worse. I mean, you are a princess.”

“Well, that’s a ringing endorsement, right there. ‘I could do worse.’” She rolled her eyes. “Please, marry me before I die in the romance of the moment.”

He laughed and leaned a shoulder against the wallpapered wall. “It’s true. Again, you’re not a queen, and I feel I could have scored one, but...”

She threw her hands up. “I’m done here. You need to leave. Run. Fast. Don’t look back. Don’t pass Go. Don’t collect two hundred dollars. Send a different guard to watch over me, if your boss insists. But whatever you do? Don’t come back here.”

“They have Monopoly in your country?” He rubbed his jaw. “This might not be so bad after all. I’m surprisingly good at that game, you know. One time, I—”

“Gordon.”

He pushed off the wall. “Fine. I’ll go home. My shift is over, anyway.”

Something told her he was leaving...but he wasn’t really leaving. She hadn’t won this argument. He looked way too pleased with himself to have lost. “You’re going to refuse them, right?”

He cupped her cheek, his finger brushing over her cheekbone gently. Leaning in, he kissed her so lightly that if her eyes had been closed, she probably would have missed it. “Rest easy, Belle, everything is going to be all right.”

She dug her fingers into her palms. “That didn’t answer my question.”

“Didn’t it?” He shoved his hands in his pockets and walked down the hallway. “Till we meet again.”

She took a step after him but stopped. Princesses don’t chase men down halls. But this one wanted to...

“Good-bye, Gordon.”

## Chapter Twelve

The next night, Gordon walked down the small, old-fashioned hallway, his chest tight and the small spot where his shoulders met even tighter. This was insanity. Pure, unaltered, unexplainable insanity. He should be locked up in a padded room for even considering this at all.

But he was doing it anyway.

Life was full of the safe choices that kept you whole, and the risky choices that would probably lead you to heartache and ruin. For a long time now, he'd only been making safe choices. As soon as Belle came in his life...that had changed. He didn't want to play it safe anymore. He wanted to fucking live.

Even if it might screw him over in the end.

Patting his chest pocket, he smoothed his jacket, took a deep breath, nodded at the two royal guards that stood in the hallway, and knocked. Like always, the hotel smelled like an odd combination of expensive perfume and cleaner. The door cracked open, and a bright green eye peeked at him through the crack. Once she saw who stood there, she closed the door in his face. For a second, he thought she was refusing to talk to him...and that would make things a little bit harder.

But then she opened the door.

“Gordon? I told you not to come back here. What are you—?”

“Why aren't you dressed and ready to go?” He pushed inside her room and closed the door behind him. She wore the same robe as the other night, but she hadn't taken her makeup off yet. “We have to leave in ten minutes.”

“What?” She blinked at him. “I don't have any engagements this evening.”

“Sure you do.” He tugged on his shirtsleeves. “We're due at the opera at eight.”

She rolled her eyes. “I highly doubt that George is still taking me to the opera.”

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“I didn’t say anything about Prince George.” He narrowed his eyes on her. “I said we are due at the opera. You. Me. High singing and loud music.”

“You want to take me to the opera?” She canted her head. “Why?”

He took a step toward her. “Why not?”

“Because it’ll give people the wrong idea.” She stepped back. “It’ll make people think we’re playing along, when we’re not. We said goodbye yesterday. It’s over.”

He had a feeling she was going to bring that up. He’d let her believe she won, but the truth was? He’d only left because he’d had some shopping to do.

Not because he’d given up on her.

“No. I said ‘till we meet again.’” He grinned. “Well, we’ve met again.”

She opened her mouth, then shut it tight. “Gordon...”

“Hold that thought. You’ve now got eight minutes to be ready.” He sat on the couch and crossed his ankle over his left knee. “You’d best go get dressed, and when you’re finished, you can lecture me all you want.”

“Someone could see us. This will only make it harder when I go home alone.”

“They already know about us,” he said, tapping his foot. “They will just assume it was part of our time together. No one will think twice about it.”

“But—”

“Seven minutes. I wouldn’t want to make me late. There would be severe punishments later on.” He raised a brow. “Tick, tock, Princess.”

She made an agitated sound, but her eyes sparkled with excitement. She loved it when he bossed her around...despite what she said. “Fine. But if this comes back to bite me in the butt, there will be severe punishments for you.”

“I like my odds. That’s a chance I’m willing to take.” Grinning, he spread his arms out on the top of the couch. “Don’t be late.”

After one last look his way, she went into the bedroom and shut the door behind her. He sat there, trying to ignore his racing heart, and waited. He couldn’t believe he was going to do this. Take this leap. Was he fucking insane?

Yeah, he was. He was crazy about her.

And it was time he did something about it.

He’d never been one to be scared of commitment. He’d always known that someday, somewhere, he would settle down. Get married. Have a few kids. He’d been waiting to meet the woman that would make him want to...

But he hadn’t expected her to be a fucking princess.

Exactly six minutes and thirteen seconds later, the door opened, and she came out. The elegant black dress she wore hugged every curve, managing to look both sexy and classy all in one fell swoop. A diamond necklace circled her throat, and she wore a matching bracelet on her left wrist. She looked stunning. Every inch the princess.



And she could be his. Actually be his.

He couldn't wrap his mind around that.

Up until now, he hadn't let himself want more—not until those pompous assholes had told him he could actually have more. Helping Belle was the right thing to do, but more than that? He wanted to do it. Wanted to move to her country with her. He wasn't sure exactly why that was such an appealing idea, but he didn't exactly have anyone here. Didn't have family left.

There was no reason he couldn't be her hero.

No reason he couldn't marry her.

“You look fucking perfect,” he said, his voice coming out hushed and awe-like without him even realizing it. But it made sense. She constantly took his breath away with her beauty. “So beautiful.”

Her cheeks pinkened. “Thank you. You look lovely as well.”

“I don't know about that,” he said, standing and offering her his arm. “But with you on my arm, it sure helps matters.”

Shaking her head, she slid her hand into the crook of his elbow, holding on tight. “Wow, you're really turning on the charm. You feeling excited about slipping out of the matrimonial knot with me?”

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“Maybe.” He opened the door for her. “But then again, maybe not.”

An hour later, he took a deep breath, juggled the two glasses of red wine in his hands, and slid into the box that he and Belle had to themselves. He’d gotten help from her people in procuring the private box, so they could have some alone time. To give him a chance to take a huge leap of faith...

And hopefully not regret it in the morning.

“Hey, I’m back.”

She lowered her binoculars and glanced over her shoulder at him. ?

?I see that.”

“Whatcha watching?” he asked, settling into his seat next to her. He offered her a glass of wine, and she took it, her fingers touching his. “Anything good?”

“I saw a bunch of stagehands doing the final touches.” She leaned in and handed him the eyepiece. “Oh and see there, over to the left, next to the stage? The redhead in green?”

He held the metal object to his eyes. “Yeah.”

“She kissed some other bloke when her companion left.”

“Seriously?” he eyed the woman. She looked prim and proper and straight-laced. Not

the type to kiss and hide it. As he watched, her companion came back in, kissed her, and sat down beside her, looking all too happy to be there. “I don’t understand why people do that. If you’re not happy, just leave. Cheating ruins families. Destroys lives. That’s something I would never do to anyone.” He gripped the binoculars tight. “Ever.”

“Me, either,” she said, softly.

He could feel her eyes on him, but he kept watching the pair. The woman kissed him and smiled into his eyes, putting on quite the act. He set the binoculars down. If he kept watching the couple, he might do something stupid like march down there and tell the man what kind of woman he was with—right in front of her.

If he was seriously considering latching himself to her, maybe he needed to let her get to know the real him. “My dad...he cheated on my mother, like I told you the other day. He left us when I was a kid. She was from a normal family, but he came from money. Once he left, he didn’t send her a penny. Told her to go back to struggling on a teacher’s salary. I haven’t seen him since. I told your parents he was dead, but I honestly have no idea if he is or not. I’m assuming he is, since I never hear from him anymore.”

“I’m so sorry.” She rubbed his back, her mouth pressed tight. “People can be such idiots when it comes to sex. Do anything, no matter what the costs, to have an exploding orgasm.”

His lips twitched. “Explosive.”

“Whatever. You know what I mean.” Her hand paused. “Not that I have much room to talk, I guess. Look at us. I destroyed my nation’s chances at a union that would have been good for it, all so I could have some fun with you.”

He stiffened. He knew she didn't think he was sticking around, but, man, that hurt. She regretted them. Regretted touching him. He didn't regret a damn thing. That might make him a bad person, but he didn't. "It wasn't your fault."

If anything, he was the one to blame. He'd known better than to touch her. Had known that she was a princess, with certain expectations as far as her behavior went. Had known she needed to marry a prince, and couldn't afford to mess around with a guy like him. But he'd done it anyway.

"Yeah, it is." She sipped her wine, then turned to him, her knee touching his thigh. "And it's not your fault, so you better not be thinking that in your head."

He grinned, but it was forced. "Guilty as charged."

"It's not your fault."

He shrugged. "It's not yours, either."

"But it is." She collapsed back against the seat, her eyes on the stage. "I knew exactly what would happen if we were caught, but I guess I didn't care. I just...didn't want to stop long enough to really think it through. All I cared about was us."

She fell silent.

Gordon had no clue what to say... But he had to say something.

"Why don't you want to marry me, Belle?" he asked.

She glanced at him quickly, her cup pressed to her lips. Slowly, she lowered it without taking a sip. "Why do you want to marry me?"

“You make me happy,” he said. “I’d almost forgotten what happy felt like.”

She smiled at him, her green eyes sparkling. “You make me happy, too. Very happy. You make me laugh, and have fun, and forget all about what I need to be.”

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“Good.” He fingered his coat pocket. Maybe it was time to show her exactly how long he wanted to make her happy for. But first, she had to admit she wanted to marry him, at least a little bit. He had to know he wasn’t in this alone. “Then why don’t you want to marry me?”

“It’s not that I don’t want to.”

“Then why—?”

“Because it’s not fair.” She set her cup down, and the lights flashed off and on. “We kissed. We had sex. It was fun. That doesn’t mean we need to live happily ever after, like in a fairytale. You didn’t want to spend the rest of your life with me when I walked up to you in the coffee shop, and you didn’t plan on forever when we had sex. We even talked about all that beforehand. It’s not what you wanted. What either of us wanted. We were just having fun.”

“Fun,” he echoed. “Just fun.”

She hesitated. “Right?”

So that’s all she viewed him as. Fun. That’s all he’d ever tried to be, really, ever since the war had fucked him up. But still. He’d thought she might see him as something more. The lights flickered for the third time. “Right. That’s all I ever do. All I am.”

She glanced away, a flash of something in her eyes. Disappointment, maybe? “Exactly. You told me that ahead of time, warned me it was only for a night or two. I agreed to your terms. I won’t break them.”

He had said that, yes. But that had been before her.

Now, for some inexplicable reason...he didn't feel the same. But she did.

He glanced away. "We could be happy, I bet."

"We probably could be." She squeezed his knee. "But, like I told you, I should marry someone that would make my country stronger...not someone who makes me happy, no matter how happy he might be making me."

His chest hollowed out. "So that's why you're refusing to marry me? Because I can't bring enough money to your country."

"No. That's not what I'm saying." She covered her face. "Maybe we need to g—"

The music started up, and the curtains lifted.

She broke off, clasping her knees tight.

He let out a breath, not sure what she'd been about to say, but not wanting to hear it anyway. He'd been so sure he was doing the right thing, but maybe he wasn't. Maybe she really didn't want to marry him—not because she felt bad.

But because she really didn't want him.

## Chapter Thirteen

Isabelle stared at the empty stage, still feeling like a complete and utter fool. Gordon had left to get them more drinks, and she was alone with her thoughts. Those thoughts were not very kind at the moment. He'd kept asking her why she didn't want to marry him, and she'd kind of...panicked.

Princesses don't panic.

He'd told her he had a question for her right before he'd ducked out for some drinks. From the way he kept touching his pocket, she had a feeling she knew exactly what he had in there. A ring. He was going to propose. She had no doubt about it. The thought of him going down on one knee and asking her to marry him filled her with so much excitement and joy, she could barely stand it.

But she couldn't let him do it.

He was only doing it because he felt guilty. Because he thought she needed him to swoop in and rescue her. She didn't. She'd be fine on her own, without him sacrificing everything for her. Without him giving up his freedom. His country. His life.

How could she let him do all of that?

Princesses don't let people sacrifice everything for them, but they must be prepared to sacrifice everything for the people.

Right now, he might think he wanted this. He might even think it would make him happy. But it wouldn't. He didn't love her. He didn't need her. And she had to remember that, no matter how much she'd come to care about him. It was best for him to think she didn't want to marry him because she was a snob.

Then he'd walk away.

A footstep sounded behind her. She took a deep breath, crinkling her dress in her hands, then letting go. "About earlier, we need to talk."

"You're right. We do need to talk."



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Isabelle whirled around, her eyes wide. “George? What are you doing here?”

“Seeing the opera, just like you.” He came inside their box, his blond hair immaculate. He wore an expensive, custom made suit, and he looked handsome. “I invited you, if you recall.”

She crossed her arms. “Who’d you bring with you? A princess who doesn’t horrify your sensibilities?”

“Mine?” He laughed. “I wasn’t the one who was horrified. It was everyone else. And I’m alone. I went to your room, but you weren’t there, so I came here, hoping you’d still come.”

“Why are you looking for me? You’re the one that called off the”—she finger quoted—“sure thing between us. And earlier today, when I came to see you, you refused to consider the possibility of us still working together for our countries.”

“No, I told you that we, as in me and my people, needed to think about it.” Sitting down beside her, he crossed an ankle over his knee. “I’ve thought about it.”

Her heart sped up. “And?”

“And I think with some damage control, we can still make it work.” He grinned, tapping his ankle with his left hand. “You’re not the only one who makes mistakes. I have things I’d rather not become public fodder... But I keep them private. I don’t dawdle with employees of the crown in public places like some other people I know.”

Her cheeks flushed. Princesses don't open themselves up to criticism from their peers. But she had. Oh, she had. And she deserved every jibe he took.

"Your advisors would never let you marry me. I'm a scandalous name now. You can't possibly want that for your country," she argued.

"We could swear that you were with me at the time of the alleged photos. Say they were photoshopped. Faked for profit." He gave her a knowing look, her brows drawn tight. "Even though we both know they're not."

"They're not, and I don't regret what I did with him." She stared right back at him, refusing to flinch. "We weren't engaged yet. We didn't even know each other the first time it happened."

Something twitched in his cheek. "It happened more than once?"

"Yes." She gripped her dress. "It did."

?

?How many—? Never mind. It doesn't matter." He waved a hand. "I can't say I liked hearing about it, or that the news made me happy, but it's not a deal breaker in my eyes. We can still make this work, as long as you refuse to see him again."

She blinked. "B-But I'm here with him now."

"Then leave with me. Walk out right now, and this can still happen."

Hesitating, she glanced at the door. Gordon wasn't there yet. She couldn't walk out on him like this. Couldn't leave him without an explanation.

“My people want me to marry him. Pretend we fell in love over here in America and spontaneously got eloped. Make it romantic, so the people will swoon,” she said.

“What will that gain your country, besides a pauper king?” He shook his head. “Together, our countries will be formidable. Together, we could have a unified front. One that the whole world—even the great mighty America—will respect. Would you give all that up for a rough American security guard?”

Her heart twisted. He didn’t have a right to talk down on Gordon, as if he didn’t mean anything at all. As if he was dispensable. “He’s not—”

“Just marry me, Princess Isabelle.” George pulled a ring out of his coat pocket, and she choked on a laugh. She’d been so sure Gordon was going to propose to her tonight... And now George was doing it. “Will you marry me, and unite our people for the greater good?”

Oh holy mother of all things royal. This was happening.

What should she say? Her brain told her to take him up on the offer and do right by her people. But her heart wouldn’t stop thinking about a certain brown-haired, brown-eyed man who made her smile, and run in the rain. Who made her happy.

Princesses always do what’s best for their people...not themselves.

“I—I don’t know.”

He leaned in and kissed her, his warm mouth fitting over hers. She started to lurch back, but he cupped the back of her head tenderly with one hand, his touch soft. With his other hand, he held hers lightly. She froze. The kiss was pleasant and sweet, but he wasn’t Gordon. It didn’t feel right. How was she supposed to marry another man when it felt so...so...wrong?

She broke off the kiss.

It might be a mistake, but she needed to turn him down. If Gordon was going to propose to her, then she couldn't accept this man. It wouldn't be fair to anyone involved, no matter what the rest of the world said. "I—"

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“Am I interrupting something?” Gordon asked, his voice hard.

Isabelle leaped up, her stomach hollowing out. “N-No. He was just—”

“I’m quite aware of what he was doing,” Gordon said drily. He held two glasses of wine in either hand, and his jaw was tight. His gaze was locked on her, but he looked like a complete stranger. “What’s going on, Princess?”

“I asked Princess Isabelle to marry me,” George said, straightening to his full height. He held out the gigantic ring like some sort of sick and twisted trophy. “She said yes.”

Gordon’s grip tightened on the cups. “I...see.”

Isabelle struggled to speak, but she was in shock. This was all too much, too fast. She didn’t know what to say or do, so she just stood there, wringing her hands and feeling foolish. “I...”

“Surely, we can all agree that it’s what’s best for Isabelle and her country.”

Why, that little jerk. She hadn’t said yes. And she wasn’t going to. That snapped her to attention and out of shock. “Stop speaking for me,” she retorted, anger making her almost speechless. “I’m so sick of people speaking for me. I’m not—”

“Aw, your first lovers quarrel. How cute.” Gordon smirked. “I’ll leave you two lovebirds alone, then, to continue this in private. Good luck with everything. Really.”

He turned on his heel.

“Wait, Gordon—”

“Don’t.” He glanced over his tense shoulder, the veins in his neck more pronounced than usual. “You have nothing to say. You told me all along that you’d do anything for the good of your country, and you did it. There’s nothing to apologize for.”

“But you were going to ask me something,” she said, her voice strained. “Ask me. Ask it.”

He looked at George, staring at the ring the prince held. Then he shrugged. “I don’t remember my question anymore. It must not have been important.”

She took a step toward him, but he was already gone.

Just like that.

“See?” George asked, stepping closer and placing a proprietary hand on her lower back. “Even he knows you’ve made the right choice. Now, let’s go.”

She jerked free, tears blurring her vision, but she refused to let them fall. “Don’t. You had no right to tell him those lies. No right to tell him I’d accepted your proposal when I clearly hadn’t.”

“You will.” He shrugged, his blue gaze not flinching from hers. “It’s the right choice, and you strike me as a woman who usually makes the right choice...aside from sleeping with the poor security guard. But I guess we all need to screw a peasant every once in a while. It reminds us how lucky we are not to be them.”

Fury rushed through her, and she slapped him as hard as she could. His head swung

to the side, and the sound of her slap echoed in the box. “How dare you judge me.”

Rubbing his cheek, he grinned down at her. “I like it when you’re angry. It’s cute.”

“I will not marry you.” She grabbed her jacket off the chair, her entire body vibrating with anger. Helpless, powerful anger. “Consider yourself rejected.”

He spluttered. “But you can’t. Our people are already in talks to—”

“They can talk all they want, but it’s not happening.”

With that, she walked out of the box, her head held high the whole time. She was going to go straight to Gordon’s house and get this whole thing straightened out. Explain to him that she hadn’t actually accepted George’s proposal, nor had she intended to.

And then she was going to marry him, if he still wanted to ask her.

The rest of the world be damned.

## Chapter Fourteen

Gordon unlocked the door to his office, his coat slung over his shoulder and his collar loosened. He’d gone out with the intention of asking a woman he’d just met to marry him, and she’d accepted someone else’s proposal before he could. It was like a real life version of the bachelor, only with royals.

And so fucking fucked up.

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He should be grateful that she'd accepted George's offer. He'd dodged a bullet. After all, he barely knew her, really. They'd met less than a week ago, had sex a few times, and that was it. He didn't need her, and she certainly didn't need him.

But he wasn't relieved.

And he didn't feel happy at all.

He kicked the door shut behind him and leaned against it, squeezing his eyes shut tight. His chest held an aching hollowness to it, and it hurt to swallow. It didn't make any fucking sense. He didn't need her, damn it. Didn't need anyone.

"What are you doing here?" Cooper Shillings, his boss, asked.

Gordon's eyes flicked open. It was well after nine o'clock, and he hadn't been expecting anyone to be here. Not only was Cooper here, but so was his co-worker, Jake Forsythe. They both looked pretty damn drunk, too. Too bad he wasn't.

"I...uh...I forgot some paperwork for my case," he said.

"For the princess?" Jake asked, leaning against the doorjamb and looking half asleep already. He looked as if he'd been running his hands through his hair all night. "Isn't she due to go home tomorrow?"

Gordon nodded, his chest getting even tighter. "Yes, thank God."

Maybe once she left, he would be free of this odd hold she had over him. Maybe he'd



be able to go back to being him...whatever the hell that meant, anyway.

“You don’t look happy about it,” Cooper said, his green eyes narrow on him. They reminded him of Belle’s eyes, which made him curl his fists into tight balls at his sides. Cooper

pointed at Jake with his thumb. “You look about as bad as he did before I got him drunk.”

“I’m fine,” Gordon muttered.

“I’m not,” Jake tossed in, his green eyes hollow.

Green eyes...just like his Belle.

“Jesus, does everyone in this fucking office have green eyes?” Gordon snarled.

“What?” Jake blinked at him.

Cooper cocked a brow. “Hm.”

“Stop it.” Gordon’s cheeks got suspiciously hot. “Don’t look at me like that.”

“The princess has green eyes, doesn’t she?” Cooper asked.

“She does,” Jake offered. “I saw her picture.”

Cooper pressed his tongue to the inside of his left cheek. “Hm.”

“What?” Gordon snapped, crossing his arms.

“He’s got it bad,” Cooper said in a loud stage-whisper to Jake. “Just like you.”

Jake scowled. “What the fuck, man?”

“Yeah, what the fuck?” Gordon asked. “I don’t have ‘it’ bad, or at all, even. I’m perfectly fine.”

“Yeah.” Cooper snorted. “Sure you are.”

Gordon tensed. “She’s my charge, and she leaves tomorrow. Nothing more to it than that.”

“Funny, because I was called earlier today by a certain ambassador of her country, and he told me that you were going to marry the princess.” Cooper leveled those green eyes on him again. “We all saw the video, man. She obviously meant something to you.”

“Shit.”

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Jake rolled his eyes. "I hear ya."

"Guys, you need to relax," Cooper said. "Jake: you need to go tell Tara that you love her. Gordon: are you marrying her, or not?"

Jake shook his head. "I don't love her. She hates me."

"There's a thin line between love and hate. And I doubt she actually hates you," Cooper said, not taking his eyes off Gordon. "Did you ask her to marry you?"

Jake snorted. "No."

"He was asking me, numbnuts," Gordon said. "How much tequila did you two drink?"

"Too much," Cooper said. "But he drank most of it. I have to go home to Kayla at least somewhat sober. Now answer my question."

"I didn't. I was going to... But a prince beat me to it," Gordon said.

Jake snorted again. "A prince? Seriously?"

"She is a princess, Sherlock," Gordon said.

"How could she marry you, then?" Jake asked, scratching his head. He sounded a little more sober...but not much. "Don't princesses have to marry princes?"

“Apparently not,” Gordon said, waving a hand dismissively. “But it doesn’t matter. She decided to marry a real prince instead of me.”

“So you proposed, and she said no?” Cooper asked.

“I didn’t get a chance. The other guy beat me to it.”

“Then she might change her mind,” Jake said. “Women do that shit all the time.”

Gordon closed his eyes and prayed for patience. The normally serious and quiet Jake was neither of those things tonight. On any other night, Gordon would love seeing this side of his friend. But tonight, he could use the serious and smart version of his buddy. “Yeah. I know.”

Jake nodded. “Glad to help. I’m going home now.”

“Wait. I’ll catch a cab with you.” Cooper grabbed Jake’s arm, holding him back. “Since I seem to be the love doctor tonight, I’ll give you some unsolicited advice. Maybe you should ask her even though you think she’ll say no. Being rejected is better than wondering what could have been.”

“Maybe, but she’s taken.” Gordon shrugged. “She kind of always was, even if I forgot for a minute.”

“Talk to her. Don’t wait until it’s too late.” Cooper clapped Jake on the back. “Let’s get you home, buddy.”

Jake yawned. “K. Night, man.”

“Night,” Gordon said.

“Lock up when you leave,” Cooper said. As he passed, he stopped. “And let me know if you’re moving to some small bumble-ass country in Europe.”

“I’m not. She’s marrying someone else.”

“Change your destiny, man.” Cooper left, calling out one last time. “Talk to her.”

Gordon watched them leave, then reached into his pocket and pulled out the ring he’d bought for Belle. It was easily half the size of the one Prince George had gotten her.

Yet another reason she’d never pick him.

“Idiot,” he said, his empty voice filling the office.

“You’re not an idiot,” Holt, the IT guy of the office, said.

“Jesus,” Gordon said. “I didn’t see you there.”

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“I was just leaving.” Holt pushed his thick-framed black glasses up his nose. He wore a checkered shirt and a crisp pair of khakis, paired with a vest. “You okay, man?”

He looked like such a straight-laced computer geek, but Gordon had a feeling he was the opposite of that typical stereotype. He might look quiet and harmless, but he had that whole wounded warrior shit going on—including the inner rage that went with it. Just like they all did. His blue eyes...they were empty and hollow and lonely.

So fucking lonely.

Gordon knew that feeling all too well.

“Yeah. Just have some female drama going on.”

Holt nodded. “That’s why I avoid any relationships. I’ve got enough shit going on without throwing a woman into the equation. Without having to deal with someone else’s baggage.”

“I used to feel that way, too,” Gordon said. “Maybe I’ll get there again.”

“I hope so, for your sake.” Holt shifted the bag higher on his shoulder. “I’m going out for a drink. Wanna come with me? You can tell me all about your princess while we drink, if you’d like.”

He’d never really hung out with Holt outside of work, but the guy seemed cool enough. Truth be told, he’d do pretty much anything to avoid going home. Having a few drinks with a fellow military man was the least of the things he could do to avoid

seeing his empty bed. To avoid missing her.

“Sure, but I’m not pouring my feelings out. We’ll drink, but no talking about her.”

Holt shrugged. “Whatever you say, man.”

...

Even though he’d planned on going straight home after he’d left Holt at the bar, somehow he ended up parking at Belle’s hotel. He sat in the parking lot, gripping the wheel tight and cursing himself out. He hadn’t meant to come here. Hadn’t meant to fuck with her life more than he already had.

If she wanted to marry a prince, then good for her. She should. Except...she was supposed to marry him. She was supposed to be his.

Cursing under his breath, he shoved out of the car and stalked to the door, each step growing surer. He didn’t hesitate when he wanted something. Didn’t give up. So why was he being such a pussy when it came to this? As he rode the elevator up, he went over everything he wanted to say to her in his head.

She had to give herself a chance to be happy, while still helping her people. She had to stop living for other people and start living for herself. She had to give them a chance to fall in love, because he knew they could.

It could be a love for the ages, or some sappy shit like that.

But first, she had to fucking marry him.

She could still change her mind. They weren’t married yet, her and George.

The elevator doors opened, and he stepped out. Walking right up to her door, he raised his fist to knock. Before he could make contact, the door swung open.

Instead of Belle, he met the eyes of her PR rep, Mary. And she was smiling. “Just the man we wanted to talk to.”

Gordon dropped his hand back to his side. The evil woman was smiling. This couldn’t be good. Maybe she’d killed a helpless puppy or something. Surely nothing else would bring that woman joy. “Okay. What’s up?”

“You’re off the hook. That should make you happy.”

Gordon frowned. “This about George’s proposal?”

“Prince George has decided he still wants to marry her,” Mary said, clapping her hands together under her chin. “So your services are no longer required. You’re free to go. Please refrain from being seen in public with her between now and when she leaves.”

“What are you going to tell the country about those photos?” he asked.

“We’re going to say it never happened. That it was all photoshopped.” She laughed. “It’s brilliant, really. They wouldn’t have believed it without Prince George, but he’s going to claim that she was with him when the photos were taken.”

“And they’ll believe him,” Gordon said, his voice hollow.

“Of course. He’s a prince.” Mary set down a folder. “This is the best possible solution. I’m glad Princess Isabelle was able to convince him to marry her after all this. We shouldn’t have doubted her powers of persuasion. She is her mother’s daughter, after all.”



His gut twisted. That couldn't be right. Sure, she might have taken advantage of the situation and said yes when asked, but she couldn't have asked him. Could she have? No. He didn't believe it. "She asked him?"

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“She had asked him to reconsider, yes. After you left, she went to see him. She thought it didn’t go well, but she was obviously wrong.” Mary studied him. “It was the right thing to do, and she knew it. Marrying you would solve the issue, but it wouldn’t help her country in the end.”

“Jesus,” he said, pinching the bridge of his nose.

She’d actually told him to leave, then sought out George behind his back. Asked him to marry her. He didn’t know why it hurt so much, but it did.

Mary slammed a book shut. “You can’t possibly be upset about this. You’re free from any and all obligations you felt toward her.”

“Maybe I wasn’t trapped in the first place.” He crossed his arms. “I like her. It’s not the worst thing in the world for us to be together.”

“It is for her country. For her, too.”

Gordon laughed, and it sounded harsh. “How so?”

“She needs a man like George on the throne with her and so does her country. This isn’t just the lives of you and her. This is a whole country of people, counting on her to make the best

choice for everyone. If she chose you, and went for a long shot at love, then she’d regret it later. She’d know she made the wrong choice.” She paused. “And in the long run, she’d hate you for it.”

Gordon swallowed hard. For the first time, the old hag made sense. Belle probably would resent him in the long run, if he convinced her to choose him. She knew she could do better than him. Hell, he knew it, too. He was a fucking wreck—just a normal guy, with normal amounts of money in his account. He lived a normal life in a normal house. Nothing about him was extraordinary...but everything about her was.

It only made sense that she chose someone else.

Someone more like her.

Glancing away from the bedroom, he nodded once. "I'll back off, if it's what she truly wants."

"It doesn't matter what she wants, personally. It's bigger than that." Mary smiled again. Just the simple gesture made him feel dirty. "Her country is hurting financially. Without Prince George's coffers, it will fail. He will save her country, and she can, too, if she chooses him."

Well, shit. Now he really couldn't mess with her.

If she only had one way to save her country, how could he fuck with that? She'd hate him for sure. He couldn't do that to her. And he couldn't do it to himself, either.

"I didn't know you guys needed money," he said.

"We do." The PR rep cleared her throat. "We need the story about the photoshopping to ring true. We need to know you won't come out and sell a story proving she was with you."

Gordon stiffened. "I would never do that to her."

“We’re willing to offer you compensation, if you’re interested,” she continued, as if she hadn’t even heard him. “We’re offering—”

He blinked at the exorbitant amount of money she threw out at him. He could pay off his mortgage with how much money she’d offered him. Curling his fists tight, he shook his head. “I thought you were hurting for money.”

“This is from Prince George himself.”

He shook his head. “I don’t want his fucking money.”

“We need to ensure your silence,” Mary said, her nostrils flaring. “Prince George has offered this as a show of good faith.”

“I. Don’t. Want. Money.”

“Suit yourself.” She cocked her head. “But you’ll stay quiet anyway?”

He nodded once. “Even better than that, I’ll disappear from your lives for good. She leaves tomorrow, and we’ll never see each other again.”

“Perfect. She’ll be back here with her fiancé soon.” She paused. “You should go home, before there’s an awkward run in with them.”

“Yeah. Of course.”

Gordon took one last look at the room, lingering on the door to the bedroom, where he’d felt so close to her the other night, and then left.

It was time to give up. He'd lost.

### Chapter Fifteen

Isabelle paced on Gordon's doorstep, her heart racing more and more with each step. It was almost ten o'clock, and he still wasn't home. Where the heck had he gone after he left the theatre? She glanced down the driveway, nodding at the royal guard parked there. They'd tried to stop her from coming here, and she'd gone all princess on their asses, mimicking her mother when she wanted something done now.

They hadn't known what to do, so they'd driven her here.

Now all she needed was for Gordon to show up.

She nibbled on her nail and continued her pacing. Princesses don't pace. Princesses don't bite their nails. After a short pause, she continued doing both. She was done living by the rules. They didn't get her anywhere. She wanted to live. Have fun. Be happy. All she needed was Gordon, and she could have and be all those things.

What seemed like hours later, lights illuminated the porch, and she spun on her heel. She immediately recognized the headlights from his Mustang. She watched him get out of the car, and he stared at the cars parked on the street. Slowly, he turned toward her. She knew the exact moment he saw her.

He stared her way, the moonlight shadowing his face. He looked...resigned. There was no other word for it. Then he walked away.

Her mouth opened in shock, but then she bolted after him, balling her gown in her fists. “Hey! Wait!”

He kept walking, his shoulders one tense line. “Go home, Princess.”

“No. I—” she cried out, tripping over a rock in her haste to chase after him in heels. “Oof.”

He caught her easily, like he always did. His grip on her was firm, but he let go right away. When he glanced away, his profile was in perfect illumination from the streetlights. He was so handsome, brave, and strong. Just the kind of man she wanted at her side—not some sniveling coward who masqueraded as a noble prince.

He was the true prince.

“Why are you here?” he asked.

“I needed to talk to you.” She crossed her arms, a painful twist settling in her chest. He was acting so cold. “Why are you running away from me?”

He snorted, but it sounded forced. “You’re the one running away from me, Princess. You’re going home tomorrow.”

“That’s not fair.” She gripped her dress tight. “All along, you’ve known I had to go home at the end of my trip.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t know it would be with a fiancé.” He glanced over her shoulder. “Is he in the car, watching us right now?”

She licked her lips. “About that—”

“I don’t want to hear all the reasons you chose him. More so than that, I don’t care.” He held his hands out. “We fucked. We had fun. It’s over. I’m a big boy. I’ll be okay. As a matter of fact, I’ll be great.”

She recoiled back. “What?”

“You heard me.”

This wasn’t Gordon. This wasn’t the man she’d come to know and care about. This wasn’t the man she wanted to be with. “But you...we...you were going to ask me to marry you.”

“I never said a fucking word about that.” He laughed. It sounded cruel and foreign. “I said I had a question. I was going to ask you if you were okay.”

Princesses don’t cry in public.

She shook her head, blinking rapidly. “You’re lying.”

“I’m lying?” He finally looked at her, but his brown eyes looked cold as ice. “I’m not the one who lied. You told me you didn’t want to marry him.”

“I don’t want to. I told him—”

“You asked him to reconsider the marriage,” he spat. “After you begged me to leave, you went to him and asked him if he’d still marry you.”

She froze. “How did you...?”

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“Your PR rep told me, right before she offered me money to keep my fucking mouth shut.” He laughed again, his eyes focused somewhere above her head. “Enough money to pay off my house, I might add. I’ll be living very comfortably, thanks to Prince George. Hell, we both will.”

Her heart shattered. The man she’d wanted to trust with her heart had been paid off, and he’d accepted it. “Y-You took the bribe?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” he asked, his voice hard. “We had fun. It’s over. I got money out of the situation. We all win, Princess. So go back to your pretty little life with your pretty little prince, and live in your pretty little castle.”

She shook her head, backing up. Princesses don’t cry. Princesses don’t cry. Princesses don’t— “Why are you doing this? Why are you being so...so...?”

“Me?”

“No, mean.”

He shrugged but didn’t meet her eyes. “It’s how I’ve always been. I was being nice to get you in bed, so I could maybe score some cash, but that’s over now. I got what I wanted out of you.”

She slapped him. Actually slapped him in front of the royal guard. Backing away from him, she stopped trying to hold the tears back. Stopped trying to act strong. Just...stopped. He’d used her. Betrayed her. Hurt her.



And he didn't even care.

"You're not who I thought you were," she sa

id.

He cupped his cheek, his dark eyes flashing. "Funny. You're exactly who I thought you were."

"I never want to see you again," she said, tears rolling down her cheeks. "Enjoy your money. It was well earned."

He laughed, but the sound didn't match his eyes. "Indeed, it was. Have a good life, Princess. It's been real."

She turned and ran for the car, tears streaming down her cheeks. She almost made it there, but then she stiffened and turned around. He stood there, watching her with an empty look in his eyes. One that almost made her go back. Almost. "I didn't say yes. I told him I wanted to be with you."

His jaw flexed. "You shouldn't have done that."

"I know." She inclined her head, swiping her hands across her wet cheeks. "Silly me. I thought you actually cared, and I cared, too."

"Belle..."

He took a step toward her but stopped.

Shaking his head, he let out a long breath. He didn't say anything else. Instead, he walked away from her, for the third time that night. This time...

She let him.

When she got back to her room, Mary was waiting for her. She had the cursed laptop on her knees, and she looked as if she'd been waiting for her for way too long. She smiled when the door opened, her gaze going behind her. "Here she is now. I'm sure she has Prince George..." She faded off. "Where's Prince George? He went to get you."

She closed the door behind her, collapsed against it, and rubbed her forehead. "I have no idea. I left him at the theatre hours ago."

"Why do you look so sad?" her father asked, his tone confused. "You did it. He still wants to marry you. Whatever you said to him yesterday worked."

"Yay," she said. "May I go to bed now?"

"Why isn't Prince George with you?" her mom asked.

"I told him I didn't want to marry him, and then I left." She closed her eyes. "I wanted to marry Gordon."

"Did you go to see him?" Mary asked, her voice a little panicked. "What did he say?"

"Yes. He told me about your little arrangement. Don't worry, he'll stay quiet." She glared at the computer. "You guys offered him enough money to make certain he did. I'm not surprised he accepted it."

"What?" her mother asked.

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Her father said, “But he—”

“Look. I’m tired. I’m upset.” She blinked back tears. “And all I want to do is close my eyes and shut out the rest of the world. Can we be done for tonight? Please.”

Before she broke down in front of them.

“Isabelle...” Her mother trailed off. “If you want this boy, this Gordon, maybe we could still—?”

“No.” Isabelle stood straight, shaking her head. “He made it quite clear that he doesn’t want me. He doesn’t want this. Everything was an act. All of it. It’s over. He’s done. I just thought...” She swallowed past the throbbing ache in her throat. “I thought I could be happy with him. Really happy. Like you and Dad are. Obviously, I was wrong.”

“Isabelle...” her father said. He used the soft tone he reserved for her and her mother. The one only they ever heard. “Don’t cry. We can fix this.”

She bit down hard on her lower lip.

If she couldn’t marry Gordon, who she’d thought she could be happy with, then she might as well do what everyone else wanted her to do. She might as well offer herself up as a sacrificial lamb for all her country and marry the pompous jerk.

“Call George’s people. Tell them I panicked, but I’ve seen the light. Tell them...” She closed her eyes, Gordon’s image crossing into her vision. Only, it was the

laughing, kind version of him. The one she'd fallen for. The one she'd wanted to marry. But that wasn't the real him. It had all been an act. "If George still wants me, I'll marry him. If I can't have happiness, then I'll give it to the people. Tell him I said yes."

She pushed off the door and went into the bedroom without another word. After shutting it behind her, she ripped her gown off, stripped down to her slip, and fell on the bed. Curling into a fetal ball, she stared at the spot where Gordon had slept next to her on that one, perfect night. The night before it had all gone horribly wrong.

Before she'd lost him for good.

Had she ever really had him? The whole time they'd been together had become tainted. He'd accepted a bribe to stay quiet. Had taken money from George, then laughed her off when she'd told him she wanted him, instead.

It had all been a ploy for some quick cash.

That wasn't the man she'd come to know. She didn't know who he was. Didn't know him at all. She never really had. Rolling over, she stared at the blank wall for an unknown amount of time, going over the last few days in her head on repeat.

None of it made sense. None of it at all.

It was a good thing she was going home tomorrow. Everything would go back to normal...whatever that meant now. It was time to make the best of an awful situation. She'd always known she would marry for her country, and she'd accepted it as a way of life.

So what if she didn't love George?

He didn't love her, either.

It would keep their relationship simple. A business interaction of sorts, really. No heartache. No pain. No disappointment. She would be safe, and so would he. She would smile. Hold his hand. Present a united front in public.

If she cried herself to sleep at night, then so be it. No one else had to know that she'd had a taste of happiness, and that it had all turned out to be fake.

No one had to know what she really wanted, deep down in her soul. Love. Happiness. A partner. No one would ever know how badly she'd wanted...

Gordon.

No one would have to hurt anymore.

## Chapter Sixteen

Four days later, Gordon fell back on his couch. Releasing an exhausted sigh, he let out an "oof" when Georgie leaped enthusiastically onto his lap. He'd spent the last few days burying himself in work, trying to keep busy. Trying to erase the sight of her broken heart when he'd told her he didn't give a damn about her.

Nothing had worked.

At the time, being an asshole had seemed like the right thing to do. He hadn't wanted her remembering him fondly, and maybe missing him. Didn't want her hurting.

So...he'd hurt her.

Yeah. It didn't make much sense now, but he'd likened it to ripping off a Band-Aid.

Fast and painless...mostly. Lie to her. Make her think he'd taken money from her fiancé, and then watch her walk away with hatred seething in her eyes. Make her pissed so she wouldn't care about him. Make her forget all about him.

But it had hurt him more than he'd expected.

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Watching her believe that he'd done that, that he didn't care about her at all, had hurt, too. And he still hurt. A lot. Telling those lies had felt wrong. No matter how many favors he had done for her, allowing her to move on without any doubts, it had felt wicked. On top of that, he missed her, damn it. Did she miss him, too?

No, because he'd made sure she wouldn't.

Fucking idiot.

Someone knocked on his door.

He stared at it, then squinted at the clock. Eight o'clock at night. Georgie's ears perked up, and his tail wagged. "Who could that be, boy?"

Georgie bolted for the door, barking the whole way, and he shook his head at the delayed reaction. He slowly stood, setting down his drink as he went. It was probably another set of fucking reporters, eager for a story.

When he reached the door, he peeked out the peephole. A woman he'd never met before, but who somehow looked familiar, stood outside.

Blinking, he glanced down at his attire. Ripped jeans and a tight gray shirt. Not exactly a match to her expensive dress and high heels, but whatever.

He had a feeling he knew exactly who she was—another reporter looking for the inside story behind him and Isabelle. He almost walked away, leaving her knock unanswered, but then he swore under his breath. He'd had enough of these vultures

hovering outside his door twenty-four-seven.

He opened the door a crack. “I’m not interested in selling you a damn story, so you can go home right now before I call the cops again.”

As soon as he finished talking, he looked to the side...and saw two royal guards standing guard over the woman on his porch. They hadn’t been visible through the peephole. And if there were royal guards, then...

Well, shit.

“I don’t want a story, but I’m glad to hear you’re loyal to the princess’s cause,” she said, her soft accent hitting him like a brick in the gut. She sounded like...no. It couldn’t be. “I can see you’ve realized who I am. May I come in, Mr. Waybrook? My men will remain outside.”

The men nodded but remained quiet.

“Yes, Your Majesty.” He opened the door for her. “Or is it Your Highness?”

She waved a hand. “It doesn’t matter. We’re in America.”

“Indeed.” He closed the door behind him, then stood there awkwardly. He’d never had a fucking queen in his house. A princess, sure. But he couldn’t treat her mother the way he’d treated her. Georgie hopped up and barked excitedly, his paws on the queen’s knee. Aw, shit. “Georgie, down!”

“Please, don’t call him off.” The queen—what was her name, anyway?—bent down and scratched Georgie in his favorite spot behind his ears. Her lips curled into a smile. “Georgie?”



“Yeah. He was named before...well, everything.”

“I see.” She lowered her blonde head and pet the dog with her well manicured hand.

“He’s adorable.”

“Uh, thanks.” He scratched the back of his head, staring down at her. “Would you like a drink? I have red wine, bourbon, or beer...”

“No, thank you.” She glanced up at him. In that moment, with her green eyes latched on him, she looked so much like Isabelle that it sent a shaft of pain piercing through him. “Your home is very nice.”

“Thanks.” He glanced over his shoulder at his messy kitchen. If he’d known she was coming, he would have cleaned. “Look, I’m not going to tell anyone what really happened, if that’s why you’re here.”

“I know.” She straightened and smoothed her black dress. “If you were looking for money, you would

have taken the funds Prince George offered you.”

He shifted on his feet. “I don’t want money.”

“We know.”

“There’s only one thing I care about, and it’s her.”

The queen nodded. “It’s all I care about right now, too. It’s why I’m here, with you.”

“Is she...?” He rocked back on his heels. He didn’t have a right to ask, but he had to know. “Is she happy now?”

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She canted her blonde head, those familiar green eyes locked on him. Then she headed into the living room without answering him. He followed her, studying her closely. She acted like a regal queen and held her head high, but she wasn't as standoffish as he'd expected.

Like mother, like daughter, apparently.

She trailed her fingers over his couch, then perched on the edge. "Why did you tell her that you took the money?"

"She needed to hear that." He sat across from her on the loveseat. Georgie jumped up and laid his front paws on Gordon's thighs, then rested his head on them. His eyes were locked on the queen. "I wanted her to move on without any doubt in her mind that it was the right thing to do. To make it easier on her."

Nodding, she pursed her lips and lowered her brows. She looked as if she was measuring him, and he had no doubt he'd come up short. After all, she was a fucking queen. "Did you think it would be hard on her?"

"We'd bonded. I grew to care for her, enough to want to marry her to help her out, and I think the feeling had been...mutual." He stared down at Georgie. "I thought it best for her if that door was firmly shut in all ways."

"I see." She tapped her finger on the arm of the couch. "So you acted like an opportunistic jerk to protect her? That's what you're saying."

Refusing to act ashamed, he met her eyes and shrugged. "Yep. Pretty much."

“How did that make you feel?”

“Not good,” he admitted. No point beating around the fucking bush. “Like an ass—” He cut himself off. “—jerk.”

She smiled. “I liked the first one better, though I’d never utter such a word. Queens don’t use foul language.”

Well, now he knew where Isabelle got all her rules.

“Of course not.” He cleared his throat. “Not to be annoying, but you didn’t answer my question. Is she happy?”

“Are you?”

“No.” He narrowed his eyes. “Is she?”

Her lips twitched. “I hate to say it, but no. She’s not happy. That’s why I’m here.”

“You came to me because she’s not happy?”

“Indeed,” she said.

His heart raced full speed ahead, and he moved his leg impatiently. Knowing that she wasn’t happy made him want to jump on a plane and show her just how happy he could make her, if she gave him a second chance.

But that wasn’t possible. He was too late.

“I fail to see how I can help. She’s engaged to another man. One who your country chose.” He locked gazes with her. “One who your daughter chose over me.”

She lifted a dainty shoulder. “She did not choose him.”

“What do you mean?” He sat up straighter, and Georgie moaned. “She’s not engaged to him?”

“She turned him down that night, and then went to see you.” She traced a pattern on his couch, never dropping her scrutiny of him. “When you did what you did, she came back to the hotel defeated. She told us to talk to George and fix everything, but we held off. We wanted to see if she got over you first.”

“It’s only been four days. Hardly enough time to really see if someone is okay.” He paused. “But did she?”

“She smiles. She laughs. She’s every part the perfect princess, despite the turmoil that has been brought to life after her...time...with you,” she said.

He swallowed hard, collapsing against the back of the couch. Georgie rolled over onto his back. She’d forgotten all about him. His plan had worked. She’d moved on.

“She got over me.”

Too bad I never got over her.

“I didn’t say that.” She sat forward. “She’s only been home a day. There’s still time to bring you over and go with our original plan of you two being married in a whirlwind romance. We can make the announcement through my husband while we’re on the plane, and all the world will be waiting for us.”

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Heart thumping against his chest, he sat forward.

Georgie finally gave up on him and hopped down to the floor, where he sat looking up at Gordon with big brown eyes. “But your country...the money issues...?”

She blinked. “What money issues?”

“The PR girl, she told me Belle had to marry George because of financial reasons. That your country would fail without him, and Belle would blame me.”

Shaking her head, she glanced out the window. “That’s a lie. We are financially stable. Extremely so.”

“So you’re not a failing country?”

“No. Not at all, and Mary will be dealt with for telling such awful lies.” She sighed. “Yes, it would be better if she married a prince. If that prince brought riches to our country. I’ve always told her that her country was the most important thing, and that she had to sacrifice all for it. But after seeing her do exactly that... I’ve changed my mind. There is something that is more important to her father and me, even though it took me a long time to realize it, and I have a feeling it’s more important to you, too.”

He cocked a brow. “And what’s that?”

“Isabelle’s happiness.” She stood, rubbing her palms briskly over her dress. “Are you still willing to do whatever it takes to make sure she’s well cared for? To protect her? Do you love her?”

He gritted his teeth. Though he didn't know much about love, he had a feeling this burning pain he had in his chest might go away if he won Belle's trust back. If he could hold her again, the empty feeling in the pit of his stomach would go away, too.

Did that mean he loved her?

He had no fucking clue. They'd only known each other a few days, but he knew if given more time, he could love the shit outta her.

"Honestly? I wouldn't know love if it punched me in the face." He stood, locking gazes with Belle's mother. "But I know that I miss her so much I can't sleep. I already had trouble sleeping before her, but now I really can't sleep. I miss how she curled up with me at night, her hand on my chest. I miss her laugh. Her smile. Her hair. Everything about her. All the—"

He broke off, his cheeks heating up in embarrassment. He hadn't meant to ramble so damn much... But all of it was true. Every single word.

"That's a lot of missing going on," she said, her eyes lighting up with a smile.

He cleared his throat. "Yeah, I know I care about her. I have an empty feeling in me that won't go away, and it has been here ever since I sent her home without me. And I know it kills me when I think of her being with another man. Especially Prince George."

She smiled. "That sounds like love to me."

"Then maybe it is." He ran a hand through his hair. "I wouldn't know."

"Should I call the castle and have them start the announcements?"

“I don’t want her to know until I get there.” He paced. “I want to be the one to tell her. Can we keep her in the dark?”

“Hmm...” She tapped her chin. “I can send her on a spa retreat. I’ll tell her it’s a present from her future husband, and she simply must accept.”

He grinned. “I’ll go there, then, and talk to her. I hope she’ll forgive me.”

“I have a feeling she will, if you grovel enough.”

Flinching, he cupped the back of his neck. “I’ve never done that before, but I can try my best. For her, I’d do anything.”

“I know. That’s why I want you to be my son-in-law. I’d thought Isabelle could marry a prince of our choosing and find happiness, just like I did. Not all arranged marriages are bad. I fell in love with her father, after all.”

He shook his head. “Then you’re lucky. Not all arranged marriages work out that way.”

“I know that now. I thought that our country should come first, but now I see that finding love doesn’t mean you still can’t put country first. Forcing Isabelle into a loveless marriage isn’t the right thing to do, and I’m willing to help make things better now that I’ve seen the error of my ways.” She smiled. “Please. Go pack. We’ll leave within the hour.”

“The hour?” He glanced at the clock. “I have to talk to my boss. Tell him—”

“Oh, please. Don’t stress. That is already taken care of,” she said, her smile widening. She seemed to be hiding some sort of secret from him, but she wasn’t telling, if she was. “Yes, I know it’s presumptuous of me. But I followed a hunch.”

Laughing, he headed for the stairs. “I think it was a good hunch. I’ll go pack now.” He only made it two steps before Georgie tripped him. He frowned down at him, thinking of one possible issue. “Uh...how does the palace feel about a royal dog?”



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The queen bent and scooped Georgie up under the belly. Cuddling him close to her chest, she smiled. “We’d be delighted if he’d be interested in taking the position.”

“Oh, I think he’d like that very much. We’ll have to arrange transport, though.”

She scratched Georgie’s head. “He can fly with us.”

“Will the airline allow it?”

“I’m quite certain it will be all right.” She glanced up at Gordon. “After all, I own the plane.”

Of course she did.

“Right. I’ll go pack, then.”

He headed up the stairs, his mind going a mile a minute. He needed to pack, get on the plane, and after that...he needed a plan. A good one. One that would show Belle he’d been trying to do the right thing when he’d hurt her, and that he never wanted to hurt her again. One that would make her give him a second chance before she saw the news.

If he had any luck, she’d forgive him. If he had any luck, she wouldn’t be angry he’d let her mother blast news of their “marriage” all over hell and back, before she said yes. And if he had any luck, she’d fall in love with him...

Because he was most definitely falling for her.

## Chapter Seventeen

Isabelle stretched out on the massage table, which had been set up in her bedroom for privacy's sake, and closed her eyes. George had apparently decided to send her here as a special gift to his "wonderful" fiancée, and she hadn't had much choice in the matter when it came to accepting. They were probably on tenuous ground as it was, what with her rejecting his proposal and all, so she didn't want to offend him. Didn't want to risk losing everything for her people.

She'd already lost what she'd wanted. Happiness.

Truth be told, she was starting to think happy endings were more of a fairytale than actual fairytales. A myth, not to be taken seriously.

Not when it came to relationships, anyway.

Princesses don't pout.

The door cracked open, and she faced downward. She didn't want to see the person who would be running his or her hands all over her. It was embarrassing enough that she was stripped naked on a table with nothing more than a sheet covering her lady parts. With two guards watching over her.

Princesses don't blush.

There were some hushed whispers, and then it sounded as if someone left. She hesitated, the hair on the back of her neck rising up. Her heart sped up, too, which was weird. Strong hands lowered on her back. She bit down on her lip. "Hello?"

"Shh," the man whispered. "Let's get you relaxed, hm?"

His voice sounded a heck of a lot like Gordon's, but it had to be her mind playing tricks on her.

She curled her hands into fists. "Thank you."

He made a reassuring sound, then starting rubbing her shoulders. Something in her stomach fluttered to life, something that only Gordon had ever awakened, and she clenched her jaw. So...her mind thought the voice was Gordon's, and her body agreed.

Fabulous.

He kneaded her shoulders just like Gordon had all those nights ago, and she bit back a groan. God, this was going to be torture, if her body kept reacting this way. Princesses don't come on the massage table. Okay, sure, her mother hadn't told her that—but it had to be a rule.

It would be very undignified.

When he trailed his finger over her spine almost tenderly, she stiffened. "Um..." His touch moved lower, massaging her lower back, and her stomach did a flip-flop. "Mm."

His hands paused. "That good, Princess Isabelle?"

"Y-Yes." She gripped the massage table. "Thank you."

"Mmhm."

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It was crazy. He sounded so much like him.

If it weren't for the fact that Gordon wouldn't fly out here to see her, she'd swear it was him. But she hadn't been anything more to him than a big, fat paycheck.

The tips of his fingers almost touched her butt, and she squeezed her thighs together. Geez, this was ridiculous and wrong in so many ways. So. Many. Ways.

Princesses don't fantasize about strange men.

When he massaged the top of her butt, she groaned. Actually groaned.

He froze, then moved his hands perilously close to her core. "Just remember...you don't have my permission to come, Princess."

Only one man would dare to say those words to her.

Lifting her head, she stared right at the masseuse who was rubbing her rear end... And then her heart stopped beating. Gordon. It was Gordon. He was here, rubbing her butt, and she had no idea what to think. What to say. How to feel.

"I know." He let go of her, rocking back on his heels. "You want to know why I'm here."

"You shouldn't be here. Guards?"

She sat up, clutching the sheet to her chest. A quick glance showed that they were

alone in the room, with no one to save her from him. No one but herself.

“They’re not here,” he said unnecessarily.

“Where did you send them? And why did they listen to you? And why are you here, when I’m naked on a table, and you’re fully dressed?”

“One question at a time, Princess.”

He undid the top button of his vest, his brown eyes locked on her. Everything about him made her muscles weak with desire. He wore a gray button up shirt, a vest, and a pair of slacks. There was also some major five o’clock shadow going on, and his artwork was all hidden. Or it was...until his vest hit the floor, and he started unbuttoning his shirt.

“I—” She swallowed past her dry throat. He looked so...so...delicious. But he’d betrayed her. Broken her heart. She refused to want him. Princesses don’t forget past wrongs. “What are you doing?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” He quirked a brow. “I’m getting naked, too, so it’s fair.”

“No.” She gripped the sheet tighter, holding it to her chest over her racing heart. “You need to go. Now.”

He shook his head slowly, undoing another button. “No. I’m not leaving you again.”

His words made her want to cry, scream, and cry some more. He’d told her he didn’t care about her, and yet here he was. Telling her he wasn’t leaving her, after all he’d put her through. It wasn’t fair. None of this was fair.

Curling her hands into fists, she stared him down. “Why did you come here? You

made it quite clear how you felt about me the other day.” She lifted her chin up, trying to cling to the last remaining scraps of her dignity. “We have nothing more to say to one another.”

“Yeah, we do, because I was wrong.” He undid another button, and she watched with wide eyes. “I shouldn’t have said what I did. It wasn’t true. I lied to you.”

She forced her eyes back up.

He kept on unbuttoning his shirt, but she stared at his face. It was safer...except when she saw his chocolate brown eyes, with those flecks of amber. Those eyes were addicting. Just like him.

Oh, who was she kidding?

Everything about him was dangerous to her self-control.

She forced her attention on the conversation at hand. “Which time did you lie to me? When you told me you had something to ask me, or when you told me you didn’t want to be with me?”

“For starters?” He shrugged his shirt off. “When I told you I took the money.”

Her gaze dipped down over his bare chest. Man, she’d missed that ink. The black swirls and splashes of color. Heck, the muscles, too. All of it. All of him.

“You mean you didn’t take the money?”

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“No, of course not.” He undid his belt, and her stomach hollowed out. The things he could do with that belt... He smirked, as if he knew exactly where her thoughts were. But that smirk faded away, and he frowned at her with narrow eyes. “And the fact that you believed I would, hurt. I’m not happy you fell for it so easily.”

She flinched, an apology on the tip of her tongue. But she refused to voice it aloud, even if she would say almost anything to get him to be the Gordon she’d known and come to care for, instead of the man he’d been before she left. He’d told her some horrible things that night. Of course she’d believed him.

“You presented a pretty strong case,” she said defensively.

“Yeah. I did.” He pulled the belt out of the loops. “But I’m still not happy you believed those lies. We’ll discuss that later.”

Licking her lips, she stared at the belt. “What else did you lie about?”

“Not caring about you.” He slapped his palm with the belt, heading for the door. With his back to her, he locked it. She watched his muscles roll and flex, unable to look away. “That was a lie, too.”

“It...was?”

“Yeah.” Tossing the belt to the side, he turned back her way. His hands went to the button of his pants, and he undid it with a flick of his wrist. She could count the tight ripples on his stomach, and all she wanted to do was trace the outline of each and every one. “I care. I care a lot. And...I’m...” He swallowed hard. “I’m sorry. I’m so

fucking sorry, Belle.”

The significance of that apology wasn’t taken lightly. He’d told her he never apologized

, and yet here he was. Saying the words. She gripped the sheet tighter. “I missed you.”

“I missed you, too.” He unzipped his pants. “So damn much it hurt.”

Nodding, she blinked back tears. Princesses don’t cry. “You hurt me. You hurt me so much, Gordon. You have no idea.”

“I know, and I’m so sorry for that, Belle. I’ll say it a million times if that’s what it takes to make you take me back. If that’s what it takes to get you to forgive me. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” He stalked across the room, his stride sure and steady. Like him. “I’m so fucking sorry I hurt you. I thought I was doing the right thing. Thought pushing you away would save you in the end.”

“It didn’t.” He blurred in front of her, due to the annoying tears. “You ruined everything, and it’s too late now.”

“It’s never too late for us. For this.” Reaching out, he cupped her cheeks tenderly. His thumbs brushed away her tears, and his eyes ached with regret. “I can’t lose you. We might have only met a few days ago, a short blink in the void of time and space, but I can’t live without you. I can’t be the guy who regrets losing the woman he loved for the rest of his fucking life.”

Her heart wrenched. “L-Love?”

“Yes. Love.” He smiled at her, his brown eyes so tender and sweet that it almost



broke her heart. “Princess Isabelle, I don’t really know what love is, but I think I love you. I think I fell in love with you that first night we ran in the rain together, but I know for a fact that I don’t want to live in a world where you’re not with me.”

“I think I fell for you, too,” she admitted, laughing. “Is this seriously happening?”

“This is seriously happening.” He kissed the spot under her eye where she had a small freckle. “I will spend the rest of my life making that one night up to you. I want to make you happy, Belle. All you have to do is say yes...” He hovered by her lips, but didn’t touch. “...and ask me nicely.”

Yes. God, yes.

Of course she wanted him. Of course she wanted this.

But...she couldn’t have it. He was saying all the right things, but she was already engaged to another man. She’d already agreed to marry George. After jerking the guy around three different times, could she back out again? Would her parents let her?

He didn’t know about her fiancé yet. And when he found out, he’d leave. Again. And after all she’d done to get here, it was painful to even contemplate. “Gordon...I...”

“Hm?” He kissed the tip of her nose. “What is it?”

“I can’t,” she said, her voice breaking on the last word. “I’m sorry, but I can’t say yes, no matter how much I want to. You see...” She closed her eyes. “I’m already engaged. Again. After you said what you said, I gave up. I said I’d marry George.”

“I know.”

Her eyes flew open. “You know?”

“Your mother told me on the plane.” He smiled at her and slipped his hand into his pocket. “But you don’t know what she did.”

“My mother told you? Wait, did she come get you? Is that where she went?”

“Yep. Turns out, your parents never contacted George at all. They knew what you really wanted, and they set about making it happen.”

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She blinked, but her pulse skyrocketed. If her mother had brought him here, then all might not be lost. Maybe there was a way for her to actually get what she wanted and not hurt anyone in the process. She didn't say anything. Just stared at him.

He laughed and rubbed his jaw. "I'm still adjusting to the fact that out of all the princes in the world, you want me."

"Why wouldn't I want you? You're a prince, too."

He smiled. "The prince of all things raunchy, maybe."

A little laugh escaped her. She couldn't wrap her head around any of this. It was like a dream. A wonderful, wonderful dream. "Let me get this straight. My mom came to your door, told you to come home with her...and you went? Just like that?"

"Yep, she knocked on my door, and I left with Georgie that same night to try and come win you over." He bent down on one knee, a ring in his hand. It sparkled, with a princess cut diamond on a white gold band. It was perfect. "How am I doing so far?"

"Oh my God."

His lips twitched up into that cocky grin she loved so darn much. "So...I have a question to ask you."

She covered her mouth, forgetting all about the sheet. It fell to her lap, and his gaze dipped low. When he returned his attention northward, his stare held a heat in it that

made her shiver with anticipation. “Go on. Ask me.”

“Princess Isabelle VanGuard the Third...will you please do me the honor of becoming my wife? I vow to spend all my days supporting you, and all my nights making you scream out in pleasure. I promise not to be bossy—too much, unless we’re in bed—and I promise to know when to shut up and when to stand up and take over. I will be your partner. Your lover. Your husband. Your royal consort.” He took a deep breath, and she blinked tears back. “I don’t know a damn thing about running a country, but I know you can teach me. Just like I can teach you how to have fun. To run in the rain, and dance in the streets, and be free. Will you marry me...please?”

“You asked me nicely,” she said, grinning so wide it hurt her cheeks. “So how could I possibly say no? Yes, you silly man. Yes, I’ll marry you!”

“Fuck, yeah. Thank God.”

He clasped the back of her neck, his touch firm yet gentle, and kissed her. As his mouth melded to hers perfectly, she let out a little sigh and opened her lips. He seized control the second her mouth parted, sweeping his tongue inside to entwine with hers. She moaned and gripped his bare shoulders, the need he brought out in her wakening instantly. “I missed you so much.”

“Me, too, Belle. Me, too.” He slid his hands down to her thighs, hauling her to the edge of the massage table they’d brought into her room. He slipped inside her thighs, his chest brushing against her core in a teasing touch. His fingers skimmed over her naked breasts, feather light. “So damn much. I need to touch you. Taste you. Love you. Fuck you.”

She tossed her head back and closed her eyes, burying her hands in his hair. With a jerk of her wrist, she tugged hard enough to sting. “Do it. Now. Don’t torture me. Don’t tease me. Just take me.”

“First of all? You didn’t ask me nicely.” He squeezed her nipples between his fingers.  
“And second? I’m not ready yet.”

She groaned and tried to tighten her thighs around him, but he held her in place with his body. “God, you’re so...so...ugh.”

“Love you, too, Princess.”

He nipped her left shoulder, then dipped lower to her breast. Without warning, he flicked his tongue over the distended bud, then sucked her in deep.

“Gordon,” she cried out, clinging to his hair, and arched her back. “Please.”

He released her with a smacking sound of his lips. “Mm. So fucking delicious. I might have to taste every inch of you tonight, and more.”

Princesses don’t beg.

“Yes, please,” she said.

“Not good enough,” he said, laughing. Then he closed his mouth over her other nipple, sucking hard and scraping his teeth over her. “More.”

“I said please, damn it,” she said, punching his shoulder. “Ugh.”

He moved lower, nipping the skin right above her hip, and slipped his fingers between her thighs. When he brushed against her aching core, she moaned and leaned back on the table, spreading her thighs wider. Begging without begging.

And she knew before he was finished with her...

She'd be begging for mercy.

## Chapter Eighteen

Gordon moved lower, nipping the skin of her thigh as he dipped his head down. After all that stress and worry, he couldn't believe he was here. With Belle in his arms again. This time, he wouldn't let her go. This time, she'd be his forever. He'd make sure of that. He'd seen what his life would be like if she wasn't his, and it had been bleak.

/>

Really fucking bleak.

Yanking the sheet off, he spread her thighs wide and looked down at her. What a pretty picture she made, all rosy lips and wet, glistening skin. He ran a finger over her slit, playing with her as he watched her writhe beneath him.

She moaned and dug her nails into his shoulders. “Gordon.”

“Hm?” He thrust a finger inside of her, rubbing up against her G-spot, and then withdrew. “Did you need something, Princess?”

She rocked her hips against his mouth. “You. Please.”

He watched her through his lowered lids, loving the way she begged for his touch with every writhe, thrash, and whimper she made. “You need your punishment first.”

“For what?” Her pink tongue darted out, leaving a wet trail behind on her lips. “What did I do?”

“You kissed him.” His grip tightened on her thighs. “And you thought I used you.”

“I’ll make it up to you,” she said, her bright green eyes latched on him. Sitting up, she grabbed his waistband and looked up at him. “May I, please?”

Clenching his jaw, he nodded once. Since he’d already undone his zipper, she easily

tugged them down. He curled his hands into balls. This was going to be torture—the best kind. His pants hit the ground, and she massaged him through his boxer briefs. Her fingers closed around him, and she jerked, making his balls and his muscles tighten.

“Jesus, Belle.”

“Don’t worry.” She tugged his underwear down, watching him through those dark brown lashes of hers. “I won’t be mean.”

Closing his fist in her hair, he urged her close. Her hot breath washed over his dick, and he shuddered. “Damn right you won’t. Now fuck me with that sweet little mouth of yours.”

Without another word, she obeyed.

Her mouth closed around him, and she sucked him in deep, hollowing her cheeks out. Groaning, he pumped his hips a little, testing her out. She took more of him in, her eyes drifting shut. The sight of her mouth around his cock was fucking amazing, and he needed to be inside of her. Now.

Even though the urgency to be buried deep inside her was strong, he remained still, letting her work him over. She let out a little moan and cupped his balls, her feather light touch making him grow way too close to coming. “Enough.”

She pulled back right away, flicking her tongue over him one last time. “You taste so good,” she said, licking her lips. “I want more.”

Dear God, this woman was going to be the death of him.

“Not now.” He closed his fist over his cock, squeezing. Her eyes flared wide. “Ass



up, Princess. It's my turn."

She rolled over and braced her hands on the table. "Yes, sir."

"Legs apart."

She spread her legs. He slapped her lightly, then spun her around and fell to his knees in front of her. Reaching out, he parted her lips, and flicked his tongue over the entrance of her pussy.

Tensing, she cried out beneath him. "May I come?"

"Hm." He thought about it. "Yes."

"O-Okay."

"But first..." He slapped her ass again, watching the red mark spread over her pale, smooth skin. "You have to beg me, Princess. Once you beg, you can come."

She gripped the table. "Make me."

"Gladly."

He went down on her, thrusting his tongue inside of her. Her juices coated his mouth, and he groaned. Pulling out, he closed his mouth around her clit and moved his tongue in slow, lazy circles.

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“Gordon.”

He kept up his slow pace, making sure he was barely touching her. She writhed against him, pumping her hips and thrusting her ass back. He slapped the side of her thigh, increasing the pressure just enough to drive her insane. She screamed and dug her nails into the table.

When her pussy clenched tight, he pulled back and bit down on her ass gently. “You know what to do,” he said, skimming his fingers down her inner thigh. “You want me to make you come, Princess. You want that explosion of pleasure you know I can give you. You know what to do...”

“Please.” She drew in a ragged breath, a small sob escaping her. “Please take me. Spank me. Fuck me. Please, please, please!”

Satisfied, he leaned in and rolled his tongue over her with the perfect amount of pressure. As he made love to her with his mouth, he slapped her ass—since she’d asked so nicely. She cried out, her pussy clenching down tight.

He deepened his intimate kiss, and within seconds, she came. He stood up, flipped her onto her back, and positioned himself between her legs. “We’re engaged. I’m clean.”

A broken sound escaped her. “I am, too.”

“Are you on the pill?”

She nodded frantically. “Do it.”

Tilting her hips up with his hands, he thrust into her with one solid stroke. She made the hottest sound he’d ever heard before, arching her back and clawing at his chest. He moved inside of her, keeping his stroke clean and even. Her eyes squeezed shut, and he reached between their bodies and stroked her clit.

She went off like a wild woman, kicking and screaming and coming apart in his arms. As her tight pussy clamped down on his dick, he moved faster. Harder. Deeper.

His balls tightened to his body, and he lowered himself so he could kiss her, inhaling her sweet scent as he made love to her. Her hands cradled his face, her touch tender once more, and then he came explosively. She closed her legs around him, keeping him where she wanted him.

They lay like that for a while, until his breathing was no longer erratic. Once they fell back down to Earth, he carried her to the bed and curled up with her. Their bodies were as entwined as their fingers were. He stared at the sparkling diamond on her hand.

She was his. Actually his. Hell, she was even wearing his ring, and it looked beautiful on her finger. He’d made sure to get the right size and everything.

Nothing but the best for his Belle.

She shivered, so he pulled a sheet up over their bodies. When she settled into the crook of his arm, letting out a loud yawn, he grinned and kissed the top of her head. He’d been a little tougher on her this time around, dragging their lovemaking out longer than ever before, but the end result had been worth it.

He had the scratches down his back to prove it, too.

Lazily, she traced a pattern on his bicep, following the black lines of his snake tattoo. It had been his first one. It wrapped around the whole upper half of his arm, the scales all vibrant colors of green, yellow, and brown. “What are the numbers from?”

“It’s the day my mother died,” he said, knowing instantly what she was asking. “I got it the day after her funeral.”

“I’m so sorry,” she said, resting her hand over the ink.

“I know.” He kissed her temple. “She would have loved you.”

“I bet that I would’ve loved her, too.”

“You two are very alike.” He smiled against her temple. “Both strong willed, loving, determined, and willing to drop anything to help people. If she’d been a princess, she would have done anything for her people, too. Just like you.”

“Speaking of which...we have to tell the people about us,” she murmured. “I’m sure my parents will have some smart way to present it.”

He swallowed. “Actually...they kind of already know.”

“What?” She rose up on her elbow, her narrowed eyes piercing into him. “You guys already told the country? How? When? Where was I?”

“This little trip your fiancé sent you on?”

Her lips pursed. “Yeah...”

“Well,”— he rubbed his forehead— “that was my way of getting you away from the TV’s. I didn’t want you to know I was coming till I could talk to you in person.”

She stared at him. He didn't know whether she was really pissed or just not sure what to say. His heart thudded in his ears, and he shifted his weight beneath her.

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“You assumed I’d accept your proposal.”

“I followed a hunch,” he said. “Just like your mom did when she came to see me. I had faith that what we had together was real enough for us to be together. For us to be happy. I believed in us.”

Her mouth tightened, but then quirked up in a smile. “I like that. You believed in us.”

“I did.” He cupped her cheek tenderly, memorizing the way she watched him. All wide eyes, soft smile, and happiness. This was what he’d wanted. To make her happy. “I do. I always will.”

She kissed him gently. “Me, too, Gordon. Me, too.”

Sighing, he cuddled her close as she rested her head on his chest. His heart swelled, and he closed his eyes. This was it. This is what he’d been looking for when he’d left the corps...love.

Even if he hadn’t known it at the time.

### Epilogue

#### One Year Later

Isabelle sighed and checked the time. She’d been in this meeting with the Ambassador for over an hour now, and she was exhausted. All she wanted to do was go back to her room, find Gordon, and curl up beside him. He’d been her rock for the

past year, always there for her when she needed him.

And, man, she needed him now.

Because she felt awful.

The ambassador leaned closer, pointing at a map that had been spread out in front of her. “After that, we’ll make a stop in Linnea, and then England.”

“Mmhm.”

She swallowed hard, nausea hitting her like a tsunami. She swirled her wedding band on her finger, a nervous habit she’d started lately. Princesses don’t fidget, her mother’s voice said in her head. The hell they don’t, Gordon’s voice argued.

She kept twisting the ring.

Her stomach rolled like a tidal wave, and she swallowed hard. This wasn’t going to end well. She knew it. The only question was: how long until she could no longer hold the impending explosion of the contents of her stomach back?

“And then after that, we’ll—” He froze, looking at her with a wrinkled brow. His gray hair stuck up like usual, and he’d smeared a bit of pen across his nose. “Are you all right, Princess? You look a little...green.”

“I’m not—” She swallowed down yet another rise of bile. She was obviously coming down with something. Princesses don’t vomit in public. For once, she agreed with her mother. “I need to go.

Now.”

“But—”

“If I don’t leave now, I’m going to throw up all over your maps.” She stood and rested her hands on the wood table. “And you. I need to go now.”

He nodded. “Quite right. Off you go, then. We’ll finish later.”

She walked serenely to the door...until her stomach roiled again.

Then she ran to her bedroom, not looking anyone in the eye, one hand pressed to her stomach and the other to her mouth. When she reached her bedroom, she threw the door open and bolted inside.

Gordon sat at the desk, a bunch of papers in front of him. His crisp white shirt was unbuttoned and rolled up to his elbows, and his suit jacket lay across the top of his desk chair. He’d been studying her country’s policy on immigration when she’d left.

Looked like he was still at it.

“Hey. You’re done early.” He glanced up, a big smile on his face. “Looks like it’s time—shit. What’s wrong?”

She didn’t answer. Just bolted for their private bathroom. As soon as she squatted in front of the toilet...well, it wasn’t pretty. At all. Her stomach rebelliously booted everything she’d eaten in the last five hours...and then some.

When it was over, she looked up.



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Gordon was at her side, a warm washcloth in his hand. “Man, what the hell was that? Did you eat something bad for breakfast while I was in that meeting with your dad?”

“No. I think I’m getting sick.” She took the washcloth and dabbed it across her mouth, then unsteadily rose to her feet. Pressing a hand to her stomach, she collapsed against the tile wall. “Or I guess I could have eaten something bad. Who knows?”

Eyeing her speculatively, he crept his arm around her waist. “Yeah, maybe.”

He helped her over to the sink, where she washed her hands, face, and brushed her teeth. After she felt human again, she dried off and glanced at Gordon. He watched her with a small smile. “Why are you smiling? I feel like I’m dying.”

“I’m smiling because I think you’re not getting punished for a long time.” He came up behind her, closing his arms around her. He rested a palm over her belly and dropped a kiss on her shoulder, next to the strap of her dress. “I think you’re pregnant.”

“What?” She blinked, covering his hand with hers. “I can’t be. Can I? No...”

“You’ve been off the pill for three months.” He swept her hair over one shoulder, then kissed her cheek. “It’s possible. Plus, you’re late. And your boobs have been more sensitive.”

Her cheeks heated. “Gordon.”

“It’s true,” he said, laughing. “You’re so cute when you blush. I can’t believe you can

still blush, after the things you do to me every night.”

Her cheeks got even hotter. “You’re the one who—”

“Enough, wife.” He spun her in his arms. “I love you so damn much. You know that, right?”

She nodded slowly, clutching his shoulders. Her head was spinning a million miles a minute. “I love you, too. We’re going to have to take a test.”

“I know.”

“Will you go buy it? Maybe then we won’t have to tell everyone right away. You can throw on a hat and escape out the back door.”

He grinned. “It’ll be our little secret, if we can pull it off.”

“Exactly.” She rested a hand over his chest. “Until we’re ready to share it.”

“Agreed. I like keeping secrets from the gang. It makes me feel like I’m still the rebellious American I used to be,” he said, kissing her forehead gently. “The man you fell for, hook, line, and sinker.”

“You’re still him.” She shook her head, smiling even wider. “I’m so glad you got assigned to my case. You’re my knight in shining armor. The prince of my heart.”

A snort came out. “Please. You’ll make my head get even bigger than it already is.”

“It should be. You’re the best.”

“I don’t know about that last part, but I’m glad I got assigned to your case, too.” He kissed her, his mouth moving over hers. “Let me show you just how glad I am...”

He swept her into his arms, cradling her to his chest, and carried her to the bed. He might not think he was a knight in shining armor...

But he was definitely hers.