



The King's Fake Bride

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Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

Description: He was only ever meant to be the spare,
Could a marriage show the public that this playboy prince is capable
of wearing the crown?
...Even if his fiancée is entirely fake?

HIM

They told me I had one shot at improving my image,
And the way to do it? Find a wife,
No matter if she's real or not.
Getting married is the last thing I want while I'm trying to figure out
how to be king,
And lying to my people seems like an even worse idea,
If there's one girl I'd want to do it with, it's Amy,
All I have to do is not fool myself into believing it's real...

HER

It was a ridiculous deal,
But my life was a dumpster fire, and the terms were too good to turn
down –
A red-hot prince, a fixed-term marriage, and the bakery of my
dreams.
Switching to business-only seemed like the only way to stop things
from spinning,
Obviously we made things complicated,
Friends with benefits for a royal couple in waiting,
What could possibly go wrong?

Total Pages (Source): 65

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

CHAPTER 1

XANDER

“You’re going to run this monarchy into the ground!” Jorge slams his hand down on the table as he stands, gray hair slicked back and dark brown eyes blazing as he glares at me.

Atticus sighs, nodding to the chair. “Sit down, Jorge. This may be bad, but there’s no need for dramatics. I’m sure we can find a way to handle this without the show.”

Jorge gestures to me, standing up taller. “He’s been king for four months now, and not a single one of the people he rules over has faith in his ability to lead.”

“I think that’s a bit of an exaggeration,” I say, trying not to let the insult get to me. It’s better if it rolls off my back. Allowing it to jade me would only give Jorge more power.

As it stands right now, he’s already overstepping the bounds as my advisor, but I need him.

At least until I know what I’m doing, but I don’t know if that day is ever going to come.

All of this was easier for my brother. Yorgos was raised as the heir of Katastinia. We always knew that he was going to wear the crown, so he was the brother who sat through the political lessons and learned how to win over the hearts of the public.

Now that the crown is mine, the public doesn't seem likely to accept me anytime soon.

"Public perception is low, and falling." Atticus leans closer to me, shoving a report of the latest poll in my direction. "You may be their king, but right now it looks like you're never going to escape the playboy reputation you created."

"How the hell was I supposed to know that I would be taking over the throne?" I pick up the paper, eyes widening when I see my approval rating has fallen seven points from last month.

I was the spare son. The one born just in case something happened to my brother. Nobody ever expected me to take the throne.

Even my being in this room now, surrounded by all the portraits of those who came before me, is an anomaly.

Jorge's chair squeaks against the floor as he sits back down. "I told you that people don't think you're responsible enough to rule over them. They think you're too young and too immature, which means that we need to start thinking of how to change that."

I shove the poll away, looking to my other advisors. Without a word, they dump several magazines on the marble table, the glossy pages shining as they skate across the surface.

Each one features a picture of me and a different woman on the cover.

Though not one of the magazines is from the last four months, it seems that erasing my past is going to be harder than I imagined.

And then they drop down the more recent magazines. The ones with headlines

proclaiming that I will never be able to live up to Yorgos's legacy.

According to the media, the country is doomed.

Atticus drags a hand down his face, his fingers raking through the stubble on his chin. "This is a nightmare. If I had known that you had made this much of a mess, I never would've agreed to be on this council."

Jorge snorts. "We've been trying to corral the two of you for years, and it's only now that you're noticing the problems you've caused? This has been a decade in the making."

"Well, I didn't expect both my father and my brother to die within the last five years." My tone is sharp, cutting him down where he sits, sending him slumping back in his seat.

"We know that," Jorge says, "but you should have been trained to be the heir years ago. You may have the knowledge to do the job, but you didn't curate your public image like Yorgos did." He nods to the others to gather the magazines and take them out of the room, leaving only the two of us and Atticus in the room.

Atticus drums his fingers on the table, looking out the window to the festival happening in the town at the bottom of the hill. Though there is little to be seen from here, the sound of the lively music carries up the hill and in through the open windows.

He taps along with the beat as he looks at me. "I think you need to find a wife."

The ground disappears from beneath me and I'm caught in a free fall, not sure where I'm going to land or if there's going to be a ledge to save myself on before I hit the jagged rocks at the bottom.

Getting married is the last thing I want to do right now.

The room feels a thousand degrees warmer as I unbutton the top button on my shirt, needing the space to breathe.

“I’m not going to get married, and if that’s the best idea you have, then I’m scared for the future of the country. What happens when there’s actually a crisis?” I force out a stiff chuckle, getting up and pacing to the window with my hands clasped behind my back.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

This should be Yorgos in this room right now, not me.

He would get married without a second thought if that's what the country required of him.

He would do it marching down the aisle with a big smile on his face, too. I've never met anyone who loved the country as much as my brother did. Yorgos should be king. His death came too soon, and I have no clue what to do. I feel like I'm drowning as people who are supposed to be helping me are holding my head underwater.

Atticus and Jorge may be trying to do their best, but getting married doesn't feel like the answer to the country's problems with me.

They run deeper than simply finding a bride and slotting her into place, hoping that she'll play along and not expose me for the fake I am.

I have no business sitting on the throne.

"You're going to have to get married. It's the only option," Jorge says, his tone pinched as he rubs his fingers on his temples.

I wish there was something more I could do to fix this, but it seems like nothing will work. I can't make people like me.

They would be suspicious if I came along with a bride out of nowhere. It wouldn't be believable, and yet the two men in front of me think it's the only way to keep the

crown.

“You want me to find a woman that’s going to marry me? How do you propose I do that?”

“You need to think about what’s best for the future of the kingdom.” Jorge forces the words out like a parent who’s exasperated with his child.

“I’ve been doing that since the day I buried my brother. Nothing I ever do seems to be enough. I’ve gone to the parades. I’ve put on a smile. I’ve mourned with my people in the streets. They still don’t like me. They don’t think I’m capable, and I can’t do anything to change that.”

Atticus rolls his eyes. “You’ve always had a flair for the dramatic.”

Jorge leans back in his seat, crossing one leg over the other, his foot bouncing in the air. “I think we need to give some serious thought to this marriage idea. Atticus is onto something.”

“He’s onto nothing. Do you honestly think those people down there are going to believe I’m getting married? I haven’t been with a woman seriously in years. The only stable relationship I had was when I was twenty. I’m twenty-eight now, and I still have no clue what I’m doing. Our country’s people are going to see right through it.”

“We’ll just have to fake it, then. You’re going to pretend that you’ve been dating some woman for months. Maybe a year. Then all you have to do is convince the public that you love her and want to marry her.” Jorge shrugs one shoulder. “It’s simple.”

“It’s insane!” I say and throw my hands in the air.

Atticus smiles wider, his face lighting up. “This is the perfect plan. You’re going to find a woman that the press will love. Somebody who relates to the people.”

“So, you want me to marry a commoner?” I snort, leaning against the windowsill, looking down at the people in the streets as they make their way towards the castle. “And here I thought that the monarchy was supposed to marry for connections and control.”

“You need to think in a broader aspect,” Jorge replies. “Marrying someone who has nothing to do with the crown or the monarchy or the nobility is marrying for connections. You need a connection to the people. She would be that.”

I turn around and face them both, pinching the bridge of my nose. Both of them are grinning like fools, like this is the best idea they’ve ever had. I fail to see how two men who are both so intelligent in their own right have come up with something as asinine as marrying a woman I don’t know.

I take a deep breath, trying to hold my temper. “And what are you going to do, hold auditions for this woman? You don’t think that people will notice? We have to give them more credit than you’re giving them right now. If you start a search for my next wife, even in secrecy, it’s going to get around.”

“That it would, which is why you’re going on your own.” Atticus stands, looping an arm over my shoulders and hauling me back to the table, motioning me down into my seat. “You’re going to go out and blend in with the people out there. Find a woman who needs money. A lot of money.”

Steam would be pouring out of my ears right now if it could. “Oh, I see. There’s not a woman out there who’d want to marry me, so we’re going to bribe one to do it?”

Jorge shakes his head, his frown deepening as he looks between me and Atticus. “No,

we can't go and have you bribing women. That would be a whole other level of media trouble that I'm not willing to deal with right now."

"I don't see why we have to deal with it at all," I bite out. "I'll just go to more charity events and host more balls. Invite the townspeople into the castle. Show them that they don't have to worry about me. Somehow prove to them that I have their best interests at heart."

"Do you?"

For a brief second, I think of kicking Jorge out of the meeting room. I could strip him of all powers he has as an advisor, forcing him to go back to living in town in whatever little hovel he can find instead of the fancy mansion he has out in the country.

"Yes. I may not be Yorgos, but I do have their best interests at heart. I just don't know how to make them believe that. Yorgos was so much better trained for this role than I was. He was suited for the crown."

"Well, maybe you should have been there, right there alongside your brother, learning how to be king." Jorge sniffs the air, looking down his nose at me.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

If not for the fact that he served as an advisor to my dad before he died, he would be out of this room right now.

I don't know how much longer I can put up with him, but I know that I'm reaching the end of my rope.

"Yorgos was eight years older than me. He didn't want me hanging around. He had a future job to focus on. He was supposed to have kids long before he died, kids that would take over the crown and let me live in peace."

Atticus smirks as he sits down beside me, kicking his heels up on the table and leaning back in his chair. "Cousin, I would watch what you say in regard to leaving you in peace and not wearing the crown. You don't exactly have a fan club knocking down your door right now. You don't need to make it worse."

"That's exactly what you're trying to do with this marriage business." I'm about to list all the ways this can go wrong when Jorge clears his throat.

"I think that you should take some time to think about it," he says, standing up from the table. He bows to me before heading to the wooden door and leaving, shutting it with a heavy thud behind him.

As soon as we're alone, I turn to Atticus. "You must be losing your mind. I can't believe you think that I should be marrying some random woman to try and gain the country's approval."

He meets my gaze steadily. "Really, cousin. What do you have to lose?"

CHAPTER 2

AMY

Present Amy is pissed at Past Amy for not thinking about the mess that would be left all over her apartment when she decided to pack at the last minute.

I groan as I get out of bed, stretching before nearly falling over the suitcase in the middle of the floor.

Catching myself on the edge of the dresser, I untangle my foot from the midi-length slip dress I plan on changing into the moment I'm off the plane and in Mykonos.

Sighing, I glance at the clock. I still have several hours left to pack, but I have no clue what to bring.

What do you wear on your best friend's weekend bachelorette trip to Greece?

My phone starts buzzing somewhere in the mountain of clothing that met their fate on the chair in the corner, and I groan. Why the hell is someone calling me at six in the morning?

I shuffle to the side, digging through the pile and sending most of it cascading to the ground as I look for the phone.

When I find it, there are several missed calls and messages from Gabby. I dial her back immediately, my first thought going to the wedding.

"Why aren't you at the airport right now?" she asks as soon as the call connects.

"Uh, because the flight isn't for another twelve hours? You booked us for six

tonight.”

Gabby sighs, people chattering in the background. “No, Amy. I booked the flights for six this morning. I’m standing here with your ticket, but you’re not here. You’re not going to miss the weekend, are you?”

“No!” Tears spring to my eyes as I start shoving shorts and shirts into my suitcase, not caring if any of them will create viable outfits. “I’m so sorry, Gabs. I’ll call the airline right now and see what I can do to get another ticket. I promise I’m going to be there.”

“Are you sure? I can pay for the ticket for you.”

Guilt gnaws at me, tearing at the last few pieces of my dignity. “You don’t have to do that, Gabs. You already paid for the entire trip, and I’m the one who screwed up. I have some savings I can use to cover the flight.”

All of my short-term savings, actually.

“If this is going to be an issue for you, you know I don’t mind paying,” Gabby says, her tone gentle as one of the other girls calls for her. “We’re boarding now, so I have to get going.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll get the next flight out of New Jersey, and I’ll meet you there.”

“Okay. Let me know when you get a flight booked and when you’re supposed to land. I’ll send a car to pick you up.”

“Thanks, Gabs. I’m sorry I got the times wrong.”

“Everything is going to be fine.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

The call ends, and I scramble to finish packing before calling the airline. I pace around my apartment, cleaning as the line rings several times.

“Hello, Andrea from INTEL Air speaking. How can I help you today?”

“Hi, I missed my flight this morning because I mixed up the time, and I was looking to get another flight to Mykonos for today. I have a bachelorette party I have to get to. My ticket is under Amy Harlowe.”

Keys tap in the background before Andrea hums. “There are no more direct flights to Mykonos for another five days. Would you be interested in a flight with a layover?”

I sigh, running a hand through my hair. Five days from now would be too late. I’d miss the whole weekend. Gabby would be so disappointed.

“A flight with a layover is fine. Anything to get me there as soon as possible.”

Andrea makes a noise in the back of her throat, whispering something to someone on the other end of the line that I don’t catch. “My colleague has told me that there’s a direct flight to Athens in three hours, and from there you can catch a boat to Mykonos.”

“Andrea, you are a lifesaver.” I head back to my room, slinging my purse over my arm and dragging the suitcase behind me. “Book me for the ticket, please. I’m on my way to the airport now.”

“Great. The ticket is booked and waiting to be paid for at the counter.”

“Thank you. Have a good day.” I end the call, heart racing as I fly down the stairs of my building and out to the parking lot.

I’ll do whatever it takes to be there for Gabby, even if it means flying halfway around the world, using money I can’t afford to spend.

“The last boat has left for the day,” the translation app informs me as I gape at the man standing in front of me.

“No. That can’t be right.” I look out at the crystal blue water, and sure enough, the boat I was supposed to get on is filled with people and leaving me behind.

I take a deep breath, trying to hold back the tears that burn the corners of my eyes as I stare at the sun shining on the waves as it creeps closer to the horizon.

This can’t be happening right now.

I didn’t get on a plane with two screaming babies, sit through a grandmother trying to tell me about every single ailment she’s ever had, and spend the last of my emergency savings to get here.

Groaning, I tilt my head back, squeezing my eyes shut.

When I open them again, the man is still standing there, looking at me like I have three heads.

I’ve been traveling for nearly twenty-four hours. The plane spent hours sitting on the runway when a storm kept it from taking off, and once we actually got in the air, it was a steady stream of chaos.

And now I’m standing in a country where I don’t speak the language, wishing that a

boat would turn around.

The man taps my shoulder and points to a little orange boat before nodding to my phone.

I hold it up to him, and he starts speaking. “That boat will be leaving soon.”

Smiling, I gather my bag and head down to the boat. The man gestures to one of the few empty seats, helping me on with my luggage. I sit down, my stomach lurching.

Maybe it would have been better to wait until tomorrow when the bigger and more stable boat could take me, but Gabby’s weekend trip is going to be over in two days. I have to get there tonight if I want to spend any time with her and our friends.

Which means that I hold on, trying not to throw up as the boat rocks against the waves, leaving the sloping side of Athens behind.

One of the women beside me smiles and gestures to the purse in my lap. I hold it out to her, thinking she wants to get a better look, but she snatches it from me and starts rummaging through it, skipping past the wallet and heading straight for the packet of peanuts inside it.

She takes the snack and hands the bag back to me, saying something in a language I don’t recognize before tearing into the bag.

My jaw drops, and I can’t seem to pick it up as the old woman tears into the bright yellow package and pops nuts like she doesn’t have a care in the world.

Would it be wrong to throw an old lady overboard?

It might make for a good story, but I doubt anybody would be happy to find out that

I've been starting fights with little old ladies.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

Even if they did rifle through my things and steal my snacks first.

The sun is just starting to set as the woman lifts the bag to her mouth and tilts her head back, catching all the crumbs.

The man running the motor says something in a language I don't recognize as he guides the little boat alongside a crooked dock. He hops off, worn sandals hitting the planks before he tows the boat in with a rope.

Other passengers get off first, talking to each other and starting the journey up the small slope of the cliffside.

I glance up, and along the top of the island, there's a castle.

This isn't Mykonos.

My heart drops to my feet as I look around, searching for some sort of sign that might tell me where I am.

While the houses that sprawl up the side of the cliff are gorgeous and white, standing out against the lush green foliage, it's not the same as Mykonos. The roofs are all wildly bright colors, looking like I stepped into a rainbow village.

"Excuse me," I say to one of the men getting off the boat. "Do you know where we are?"

The man looks at me like I'm crazy before shrugging. "Katastinia."

His accent is heavy, and his skin looks like it's close to leather from spending long days in the salt spray and the sun.

If anybody is going to know where we are, it would be this guy.

"Is Mykonos close to Katastinia?"

He chuckles and shakes his head. "No. No boats going there today either. Or tomorrow."

The man nods to me before joining a woman with a baby on her hip. They head into one of the little houses right on the water, shutting the door behind them as I stand in the middle of the dock, not having a clue what I should do now.

With no boat today or tomorrow, I would be arriving in Mykonos on the last day of the bachelorette trip. I'd have a couple hours with my friends before we all get on planes.

They would be going back to their successful lives, and I would be going home to dream of the day I could open my own bakery, in the meantime spending long days at Newark's fanciest hotel, making pastries for people with three times the amount of income I make.

Minimum.

I take a deep breath and send Gabby a message. She may as well know now that I'm never going to make it in time.

Several minutes later and the message sits unread, as Gaby posts pictures of her and our friends out at a bar and dancing.

Once again, I'm the friend who's getting left behind while the others move on with their lives.

Tears prick the corners of my eyes as I search the map app on my phone for somewhere to stay. There's a little inn a short distance away that shouldn't charge too much for a couple nights.

It's still more than I intended on spending in Greece, but I don't have any other options.

My feet ache as I walk along the beach to the inn, dragging my suitcase behind me. It feels like a lead weight at this point.

The inn is a little stone building, the front doors opening right onto white stone that leads into the sand. I step inside, approaching the woman behind the counter with my phone at the ready.

"Hi," I say, voice soft as I watch her, trying to gauge how much English she knows. "I was looking to get a room for two nights."

The woman nods and turns around, grabbing an antique brass key from the glass case behind her. "Right this way. It will be one hundred euros a night."

I swallow hard but nod. "That's fine with me."

She leads the way down the hall to a small room with a little kitchenette tucked in one corner and large doors against the far wall that lead to a patio.

"I'll leave you to get settled." She presses the key into my hand before spinning and leaving the room, shutting the door behind her.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

Once she's gone, I set my suitcase on the bench in the corner, open it up and pull out the dress I had planned on wearing to the bar.

May as well put the dress to use even if the rest of my life has imploded.

I take a few minutes to shower and change before heading out onto the beach, the white sand soft and warm between my toes.

The sun is shining with beautiful streaks of orange and pink as I sit down, listening to the lapping of the waves against the shore.

Even if everything else in my life feels like it's tearing apart at the seams, it is a beautiful evening.

I can worry about piecing myself back together tomorrow.

CHAPTER 3

XANDER

"You have to like at least one of them," Atticus says as the last of his potential brides filters out of the room. "You have no idea the amount of paperwork I had to have them sign before they even got here."

"And you shouldn't have wasted your time," I say, brushing by him out of the conference room to the stairs that lead to my chambers. "It would have been better to forget this marriage idea and start searching for another way to win the approval of

the public.”

“What about that date you went on with that one woman last night? She was fine.”

I arch an eyebrow. “She told me that she wanted to be queen.”

“She would be if you marry her.”

Rolling my eyes, I take the stairs two at a time, my cousin trailing behind me. “I thought the point of this whole thing was to find a woman that the people are going to like? To show them that I’m a family man? How is that going to work with a woman who only cares about becoming a queen?”

Atticus makes a strangled noise in the back of his throat as we reach the top step. “Well, you might have a point about that, but I think you should reconsider those other women.”

“And I thought we weren’t going to be leading a parade of women through the palace and hoping they keep their mouths shut.” I shove open the heavy door to my room, rummaging around in the closet for a pair of shorts and a fresh shirt. “If the media sees you ushering lines of women in and out of the castle, they’re going to have a field day.”

Atticus pauses, shutting the door behind him before leaning against it. “You might be right about that, but I still think that you should be taking the plan seriously. This could be your chance to prove to the people that you really do care about them, but you’re throwing it away.”

“I’m not throwing it away,” I snap. “I just don’t share the opinion that the best way to win over the people is to lie to them.”

I disappear into one of the other rooms to change, coming back out and dropping down onto the couch by the window.

“I don’t know why the two of you can’t see that this is a bad press day waiting to happen,” I say. “None of those women you brought me are even people I would consider lying to the country about.”

As Atticus huffs and paces the floor, I grab a stack of reports from the coffee table, flipping through the pages. Each one I pass has numbers about my approval ratings should this scenario or that happen, but few have any with actual information on the country.

I stand and head for the gym connected to my quarters. “I’m going to be running and ignoring the fact that you all think marrying me off is the best idea you can come up with. If you need me, find someone else.”

Atticus opens his mouth to protest but snaps it shut as I disappear into the bathroom and through a door on the other side leading into the gym.

Shutting the door, I twist the lock into place.

Music pounds through the speakers as I press the button on the stereo. Pop music fills the room, echoing off the walls.

I turn on the treadmill, setting it to my normal running pace.

Once everything is making plenty of noise, I head to the wall of mirrors behind the weight rack. A thin divot on the side of the last mirror is just big enough to read my fingerprint before a hidden door swings open on the opposite wall.

Grinning, I slip into the secret passage, closing it behind me and heading for the

castle's exit.

For one evening, I want to remember who I was before the crown.

The sand is soft and warm beneath my feet, even as the sun sinks toward the horizon.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

Thankfully, the beach is private, with guards at either end keeping out the rest of the world.

Except today, it seems. There's a lone woman sitting in a dress that hugs her gorgeous curves, clinging to her like it was made for her. Strands of smoky auburn hair catch the dying light, showing off deep strands of mahogany.

When the woman looks up, it feels like her sea-green eyes are staring straight through me. I take a deep breath, wondering if she's one of those women who pursue members of the nobility, begging for anything they can get from them.

It wouldn't be the first time I've been out taking some time to myself and a woman hunted me down.

"Sorry," she says, her voice soft and lilting, even when it cracks. Based on her accent, I assume she's American. "I know it must look pathetic for me to be crying on a beach, but believe me there's a good reason for it."

I study her for a moment, but there's not an ounce of recognition that shines in her eyes.

She has no clue who I am.

And that might make her the most intriguing person in the world right now.

Nearing her, I tuck my hands in my pockets. "I'm sure there is. Nobody comes to a beach to cry unless they're really heartbroken."

The woman wipes the end of her bright red nose on the back of her hand, her laugh awkward. "I'm really sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry for." I sit down beside her, digging my bare feet into the sand. "Want to talk about it? I've been told that I'm a good listener."

She snorts in the most unladylike fashion, and it only makes her more attractive. Yes, she's beautiful, but from what I've seen, the way she carries herself is nothing like any of the other women in the castle.

Would she act differently if she knew who I was?

Her freckled cheeks flame a red nearly the same shade as her hair. "I'm making an idiot of myself."

I chuckle, leaning back and bracing myself on my hands, looking up at the colorful streaks that dart across the sky. "Not at all. I think you're coming across as someone who's had a really hard day."

Her head tilts to the side before she holds out the hand that she didn't wipe her nose with. "I'm Amy."

"Xander." I shake her hand, the corner of my mouth twitching as she pulls away. "So, tough day?"

"Like you wouldn't believe." She pulls her knees to her chest, the fabric of her dress stretching tight over the top of them. "I'm supposed to be at my best friend's bachelorette party in Mykonos right now, but obviously, I'm not."

"How come? Did you fall out or something?"

“No, nothing like that, though it should be coming.” Amy rakes her fingers through her hair before sliding an elastic band off her wrist and tying the curls back. “I missed my plane because I thought the flight was in the evening, not in the morning. Then I tried to get another flight. Got on a boat and ended up here with no way to get to Mykonos over the next day or two. Even if I did, the party would be over.”

I trace a foot through the sand, building it into a small pile. “I wish I could help you with that.”

If I really wanted to, I could. Right now, I could march her up to the castle with me and arrange for my helicopter to take her to Greece.

But I’m not going to.

There’s something about her that makes me want to get to know better.

What kind of woman would trespass on a private beach and then spill her issues to the first person she saw?

Amy sighs, squeezing her eyes shut before opening them and looking at me. “And that’s not even the start of all the things going wrong in my life. It’s just the icing on the cake.”

“Doesn’t sound like a good cake.”

She chuckles darkly. “I’ve spent the last few years of my life working as a pastry chef at a fancy hotel, and I still can’t seem to get through my life properly. Money goes too fast, days aren’t long enough, and all my friends are moving on while I seem to be staying in one place with no sign of ever advancing in life.”

My eyebrows rise as I try to figure out what to say to all that. “You know, from what

I hear, that's a pretty normal way to feel."

"Yeah, sure. If I was twenty-four instead of twenty-seven. I'm counting down the days until I'm thirty at this point. And it seems like by thirty, you're supposed to have your life together."

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

I grin at that. “I’m a year older than you, and I know for a fact that I don’t have my life together.”

In fact, if I was willing to tell her the truth about who I am, then maybe she would see that we’re in the same boat.

The closer I get to thirty, the more I feel like I should have life figured out.

With the crown now sitting on my head, that feeling has only gotten more intense.

Amy sighs, tucking a strand of hair that’s fallen loose behind her ear. “You seem like you have everything put together. I mean, what is there to figure out when you’re living on an island and enjoying beaches like this every night?”

“A lot.”

She bites the inside of her cheek, the corners of her eyes crinkling. “You don’t say much, do you?”

“Not all the time.” I stand and reach out a hand down to her. “Walk with me.”

CHAPTER 4

AMY

I don’t know what I’m doing as I slip my hand into Xander’s and allow him to pull me to my feet.

As I stoop long enough to grab my sandals, I wonder if this is what the start of a romance movie feels like.

Or maybe this is a horror, and he's the man who's about to kill me while the audience screams at me for being so dumb.

Xander glances at me, his dark hair falling across his forehead, shifting with the breeze. His ocean eyes seem to stare past the walls I've built around myself, whittling me down to the core.

He tucks his hands in his pockets, leading the way down the sandy shore to the wet sand at the water's edge. "So, if you could be doing anything with your life, what would it be?"

I press my lips together, listening to the crash of the waves. "I want to open my own bakery. It's something I've been thinking about for a long time — before my grandma passed, I promised her that I was going to see it through. It's been a few years though, and I'm still stuck in a job I hate. It feels like I'm letting her down."

"We may have just met, but for what it's worth, I don't think you're letting her down."

There's a distant look in his eyes as he kicks a small shell, sending it sailing to the water.

Has he lost anyone?

It's not the kind of question I'm going to ask a stranger, no matter how kind and welcoming that stranger may seem.

The last thing I want to do is scare off the only person who's willing to talk to me

right now.

“What would you be doing?” I ask, shifting closer to him when the waves crash against my ankles, sending a spray of cold water up my legs.

He hums. “I’ve thought about that, and I have to be honest, I don’t think I’ve ever had an answer. It always just seemed like I could do whatever I wanted, and everything would be fine.”

“I’m jealous. I wish I had that kind of freedom with my life.” I smile and kick a small clump of seaweed back into the water when it brushes against my feet. “I thought that everything was going to work out one way or another, but then things just started to spiral. And once you’re in that place, it’s kind of hard to stop.”

“Are you in trouble?” Xander asks, his voice gentle as he looks down at me.

“No. Nothing that bad.” I clap my hands to my cheeks. They feel more like scorched earth than skin right now. “I have savings and a good job, but the job sucks, too. I hate being bossed around and disrespected for the work I do.”

“I understand that. I spend most of my day in meetings where I’m supposed to be in charge, but everyone else around me tells me what I should be thinking or how I should behave. It’s exhausting.”

“What do you do for work?” I ask. He looks too clean-cut to work in one of the trades. His hands are too clean for a mechanic, and his forearms aren’t muscled enough to be in construction. He looks like the type of man who would be in the corporate world, but he’s too young to be high up unless he’s working at a startup.

Xander shrugs, his hands in his pockets. “Human relations.”

“That makes sense.” I gesture to him. “You don’t have the look of someone who spends all day in the sun.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

“Did you just tell me I look sickly?” he says, pretending to be aghast, his hand flying to his chest while the corner of his mouth twitches.

If the earth would open up and swallow me whole right now, I would die a happy woman.

“No, I mean, not really?” I groan and look out at the water as he starts laughing. “You know, you’re decent at making me flustered. Normally I’m able to carry on a conversation without making a fool of myself.”

He snorts. “I don’t know in what world you come off as a fool. We might have only just met, but I can tell that you’re a competent woman.”

I stop and turn to him, not quite believing him. “You really think so?”

“I do.” He looks out at the water as the sky gets darker, stars dancing above the waves. “It’s getting late. Are you staying nearby?”

“Yeah, I was able to get a hotel, fortunately.” My throat goes dry.

I could invite him back to the room. I don’t think I’m quite done talking to him yet.

He might be the only person on this island who’s fluent in English.

But I know it’s more than that. There’s something about the way he looks at me that makes it feel like life is being breathed back into my soul.

Maybe it's the sea air or the long two days of traveling, but I want to be someone else for a night. I want to be the kind of woman who takes an attractive stranger back to her room for the night.

The words are on the tip of my tongue, but they die on my lips before I can force them out.

Xander gestures in front of him. "Lead the way. I'll make sure you get back safely."

"I didn't think there would be much crime going on in a town this small."

"Have you seen much beyond the harbor?"

I give him a sheepish smile, shaking my head. "Not really. I found a place to stay, and then I came to the beach."

"I'd avoid walking on that section of the beach during the daytime if I were you. It's private. Belongs to the castle, and the king can be an ass, or so I hear."

I groan. "Great. We'll add trespassing on royal land to the list of things that have gone wrong in my life in the last two days." I shake my head and look up at the sky. "Enough of the pity party. It's been going on for too long already."

Xander smiles. "Don't stop your pity party on my account."

"I would rather hear more about you." I dodge a smashed shell on the boardwalk. "Tell me something about yourself that nobody else knows."

"Sometimes I think about leaving all this behind and starting over where nobody knows me," Xander says, nodding to the town on the other side of the boardwalk. "There are more people on the island than you would think, but the towns are

clustered so close together that they may as well be one city. It seems like no matter where I go, I can't outrun my past."

"What are you running from?"

He shrugs, and I can practically see the defensive wall he constructs between us. "A lot of things sometimes, other times nothing at all."

"Cryptic." I nod to the little hotel as appears in front of us, the outside light casting a dim yellow glow. "This is me."

"Well, it was nice meeting you, Amy. I hope that you're able to find your way to Mykonos."

I pause a few feet from the door, and he stops beside me. His charming smile makes my heart beat so fast that I'm sure it's going to pop out of my chest. "Do you want to come inside?"

The smile falters for just a moment before he nods.

My pulse pounds, my hands clammy as I pull out the key to my room and lead the way into the hotel and down the hall.

I push open the door, and all of a sudden it feels like all the oxygen has been sucked out of the room.

With Xander standing so close, the warmth from his body surrounding me, I don't know what to do.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

He shuts the door behind us, twisting the lock into place before taking the key from my hand and setting it to the side. Our shoes drop to the floor as I reach for the light, letting it fill the room.

Hands skim my waist before he pulls me flush against his body, the outline of his hard cock pressing against my lower stomach.

Lips press against mine, gently at first, as my hands slide up his chest, over his taut muscles and behind his neck.

His tongue sweeps along the seam of my lips, encouraging me to open them until his tongue is twining with mine while he walks me backward toward the bed.

The backs of my knees hit the edge of the mattress, but we stay standing.

Heat pools in my core as I tug on his hair lightly, guiding him to my fluttering pulse. He lets out a low chuckle that has me clamping my legs tight together while his tongue traces patterns on my skin.

“You taste like salt and sunshine,” he says, his voice raspy when he pulls away to look at me. “Are you sure that you want this?”

I reach for the hem of his shirt, tugging it up slowly and revealing the toned muscles beneath.

Xander whips the shirt over his head and throws it to the other side of the room before reaching for the tiny straps that hold up my dress. He eases them down my

shoulders, kisses trailing after them.

The dress falls from my body as he guides it, the silky material pooling on the ground and leaving me in nothing but a thong that is really little more than a scrap of fabric.

He gets to his knees in front of me, fingers on the sides of the thong. “You’re beautiful.”

I put my hands on his shoulders to steady myself, but it’s quickly over when he gives me a gentle push, forcing me to sit down on the edge of the bed. “You don’t have to do that if you don’t want to.”

Deep blue eyes burn with a million different questions, but they give away the desire there. “I want to know if your pussy tastes as addictive as the rest of you.”

“Oh.” My head drops back, eyes shutting as he slides his tongue through my folds, circling around my clit.

He sucks the sensitive bud as his fingers slide into me, pressing against my inner walls.

“Yes.” I look down at him, gaze hazy with lust as he keeps sucking and flicking his tongue, his fingers rocking harder and faster into me.

Xander crooks his fingers, driving them against a spot that has my legs shaking. I tip over the edge, rocking my hips in time with his fingers, taking as much of him as I can until the waves of pleasure subside.

Smirking, he gets up, shedding his clothing. “I was right. You’re delectable.”

My cheeks flame, but the compliment is soon at the back of my mind as he hovers

over me. Muscles in his arms flex before he flips us over.

I straddle his hips with my hands on his chest. Sliding my core against his cock, I moan, the head slipping through my arousal and just entering my pussy.

His hands trace my curves, leaving fire in its wake as one hand cups my breast. He massages it while his other hand cups the back of my head, pulling me down to him.

Our tongues tangle as I sink down onto him, moaning when he throbs and shifts his hips, plunging deeper into me. It feels impossible to take him all. He stretches me in the best ways possible.

My clit brushes against him with every roll of my hips. His tongue sweeps through my mouth, teeth nipping at my bottom lip.

I rock my hips faster, needing more of him.

Heat builds low in my core with every movement, inner walls fluttering around him.

Xander groans as he pulls his mouth away from mine. “Yes, just like that. Come for me, Amy.”

My name on his lips is a drug. I keep rocking against him while he matches the pace from below, his hands landing on my hips and holding me tight while he slams into me.

His fingers slip between us, pressing against my clit.

“You feel so good.” I dig my nails into his chest as I come, riding him as he stiffens. His thrusts slow before he pulls out, his chest heaving.

Before he finishes, I move down his body, taking his cock into my mouth.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

“Holy fuck.” His head tips back as his hands sink into my hair, holding it back from my face as I trace the vein in the underside of his length with my tongue.

I bob up and down his length, hollowing my cheeks and sucking hard. He moans as I do, rocking his hips. He forces himself deeper into my mouth, his thrusts slowing when he comes.

He keeps thrusting until I’ve swallowed every drop he has to give.

When I pull back and drop to the bed beside him, he rolls onto his side and props himself up, looking down at me.

There’s only desire as he leans in and kisses me like we’re the last two people in the world.

This may be a horrible idea, but at least I’m going to have one hell of a story to tell when I get home.

CHAPTER 5

XANDER

The vibrating is driving me up a wall. It’s a low hum that seems to have a way of driving straight to the deepest parts of my brain.

All I want is to turn it off, but my arm is trapped under the beautiful woman beside me.

Amy sighs and rolls over, her hair fanning out around her and reflecting some of the golden light streaming through the open window.

The roll is just enough to get my arm loose. I slide it out and stumble out of bed, reaching for my boxers and pulling them on.

The vibrating stops for a minute before it starts again, this time louder than ever.

Groaning, I rifle through the piles of clothing and sheets on the floor, tossing a pillow to the side and rummaging through the pockets of my pants until I find my phone.

“What is it?” I say, voice a low growl as I head for the patio doors.

Atticus sighs. “Good morning to you too, cousin. What a lovely day it is. Don’t you think that on a day like this, you would’ve been at the morning meeting instead of making your public image worse?”

I shut the door behind me, careful not to make too much noise. “I don’t think that I’m out here destroying my public image.”

“Then what do you call spending the night with a woman?”

“Are you having me followed?” My tone is sharp, cracking down the line like a whip.

It wouldn’t be the first time my advisors have sent men around to follow me, but most times sneaking out avoids the feeling of being watched.

Atticus scoffs, and someone says something in the background of the call that I don’t catch. “No. We’re not having you followed, even though you managed to sneak out yet again. I just know you, and I know that when it comes down to it, a tiger does not change its stripes.”

“What are you saying?”

“That you have no interest in being anything other than what the media portrays you to be, and it’s a disgrace to the person I know you are.”

“You don’t know anything about the person I am,” I growl. “Nobody does, because you all think that I would rather spend my time sleeping around than doing my job.” I stare out at the waves, wishing that I could walk into them and disappear forever.

Maybe get swept to some faraway land where I’m not the king.

A place where nobody knows my name. Not a single person other than me gets an opinion on my life.

It would be better than the hell I’m currently navigating.

“The meeting is why I called.” Atticus’s voice is strained, someone still trying to talk to him in the background. “I know that you think marriage is a horrible idea, but it’s the only option we have. Opinion polls on you and your performance as king are lower than ever, and we don’t have time to waste.”

“Jorge is the one whispering in your ear right now, isn’t he?” I scoff, stepping off the patio and into the cold sand, not yet warmed by the sun. “You know I don’t think marriage is the right way to win over the people, so why does it continue to be a suggestion?”

“Because, at this point, it’s the only thing that might work.”

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

I sigh and glance over my shoulder at the patio doors, the outline of Amy's body sprawled in the bed just barely visible.

If there has to be a marriage, it may as well be with someone I get along with.

She's the first person in a long time I felt like I could be myself with. There weren't any expectations tied to me being the king.

To her, I was just Xander.

"If I agree to this marriage plan — and I'm not saying that I will — then Jorge needs to take several steps back from my life. No more trying to control everything. I have a life to live, and I can't have him inserting himself into whatever happens between me and my fiancée."

"Does that mean that you're going to start taking this seriously?" Atticus sounds hopeful. "Please tell me that you're going to do this so I can tell Jorge to get out of my hair. Whenever you're being difficult, I'm the one that has to listen to him."

Someone in the background who sounds suspiciously like Jorge calls Atticus what sounds like a glass hole.

I snort and lean back against one of the posts holding up the little awning. "I'm going to consider it. I have a woman in mind. She might be willing to help me."

It's not like Amy has anything to lose. She's trapped at a job she hates, and she says her life is falling apart. Maybe if I make her a good enough offer, she would be

willing to help me out.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I glance inside at her again.

Jorge would be pissed if I showed up with an American on my arm. Frankly, it would be worth it just to see the look on his face.

“I’m going to spend the day with this woman and see if she’s willing to play along with the charade. If she is, then maybe you’ll see her later this evening.”

Atticus laughs, and there’s a heavy thud in the background. “All right, well, I’ve abandoned Jorge to be his miserable self. I’m going to go speak with the crown attorneys and have them draw up the contracts.”

“Don’t bother drawing up anything yet. I don’t know if she’s going to agree to this. It’s insane, and we barely know each other.”

“We’ll have them draw up the basics. Six-month engagement. Two-year marriage. After that, you can decide whether to call it off or not.” Atticus chuckles, and I can just imagine the smug look on his face right now. “She’ll probably get sick of you sooner, so we’ll have to make the divorce package good.”

“Hold off on anything too concrete,” I say, my tone stern. “I don’t know what she’s going to want out of this, and I’m not going to force her to agree to terms without hearing her conditions.”

“Good luck with that.”

“I’m hanging up on you now. We can debrief about the morning meeting later.”

He snorts. “Sure, hang up on me because you have your own morning meeting to

debrief for.”

I end the call without giving him a reply.

There is no way that Amy is going to agree to this. No woman in her right mind would ever consider pretending to be engaged to a man she just met.

And then I have to tell her that I’m the king.

I groan and head back inside. Amy is still asleep on her stomach, her arms shoved beneath the pillow and one leg hooked up high.

I grab the menu from the little dresser in the corner, looking through the options before placing an order with the kitchen.

Sighing, I sit back in the chair and scroll through the latest policy change the advisors are trying to push through. Most of them have voted against free meals in school as it would mean cuts to their year-end bonuses.

I should fire them all and hire people with an actual interest in the economy of the country instead of their own pockets.

It’s not the first time the thought has crossed my mind since taking over the throne.

My vision blurs, headache growing stronger as I get to the bottom of the forms before scrolling back to the top to go through them again.

There’s a knock at the door and Amy yawns. Her eyelashes flutter against her high cheekbones, but she doesn’t move, soft snores filling the room again.

Setting the phone to one side, I get up and open the door, nodding to the man who

brings the cart into the room.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

“Your Majesty.” He bows slightly, looking down at the ground.

I grab my wallet and pull out a large tip, pressing it into his hand. “You didn’t see me here, understood? I’m nothing but a figment of your imagination.”

The man smiles and nods, pocketing the couple hundred dollars and scurrying down the hall. I shut the door behind him, sliding the latch into place while I wonder how long it’s going to take him to tell someone else that I’m here.

I’m going to have to leave sooner than I planned.

Amy sits up in bed as I wheel the cart into the middle of the room. “What is that?”

“Thought you might like some breakfast.” I pull the lids off the food, revealing eggs Benedict and a mountain of bacon and waffles. “Wasn’t sure what you were going to like, so I got a little bit of everything.”

I pull off another lid, fruit piled in little ramekins beneath.

Amy shuffles to the edge of the bed, her hair a wild mane around her, the white sheet wrapped around her body. She clutches it to her chest, her lips still a little swollen from last night.

I swallow hard, picking up one of the orange slices. “So, there are some things I probably need to tell you.”

She removes the last lid, gasping when she sees the perfect little chocolate croissants

beneath it. “You’re in the witness protection program and now that I’ve blown your cover, you’re going to need to leave?”

Chuckling, I pop the orange into my mouth. It tastes bitter, though that could be the worry over what I’m about to ask her.

Once everything is out in the open, she’s going to think that I’m crazy. I doubt that she’s going to want to ever see me again.

And that would be a shame.

“Worse.” I give her a wry smile, gaze flickering around the room. “I’m the king of Katastinia.”

She bursts out laughing, the sound warm and friendly, urging me to laugh with her past the sense of dread that’s swirling inside me right now. “Okay. That was a good one.”

“It’s not a joke.” I clear my throat. As I turn to grab my phone to show her proof, her eyes burn into the back of my head.

“I thought you said you worked in human relations?” she says, her tone accusatory.

I turn back around with my phone in my hand, pulling up Katastinia’s main news website. As I scroll to the article on my being crowned king, a pit opens in the bottom of my stomach.

This was a bad idea. I should have told her goodbye and left.

Ordering her breakfast and trying to warm her up to the thought of pretending to be engaged to me is probably the worst idea I’ve ever heard.

No. That my advisors have ever had.

Although, some of the blame is to be put on me.

At least there's an end date to this arrangement — if she agrees.

The site loads, and I pass her the phone. “All the information is here, but if you want more proof, I'm sure you could look me up online and see all kinds of other articles about me and my family.”

Amy sits back on the bed, propping her feet up on the frame. Her gaze flickers across the screen as she reads the article.

I know what she's seeing right now. News that I took over the crown after the death of my brother. A picture of me at my coronation. More comments about how I'm eager to serve the country and do what's best for them.

Amy finishes reading and hands me back the phone. “So you're telling me I slept with the king of a country last night. Does this mean that security is going to be showing up at my door soon and making me sign all kinds of paperwork?”

Wincing, I nod. “Probably. If my advisors figure out where I am, they're going to be on their way with NDAs in hand.”

Her eyes widen and she gets up from the bed, pacing from one side of the room to the other. “There is no way this is happening right now.”

“Well, it is.” I put the phone to the side. “I'm the king of Katastinia. I should've told you last night when you asked what Idid, but it was nice to meet someone who didn't know who I am for once.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

“It would’ve been nice to know who you are.” Amy stops her pacing, spinning on her heel and snatching a piece of bacon from the cart. She takes an angry bite, chewing as she resumes her trek across the room. “This is ridiculous. As if I needed my life to be more complicated.”

“I’m sorry.”

She brandishes the piece of bacon at me like a sword. “No you’re not. If you were really sorry, you would’ve told me who you were right away.”

“You’re right.” I cross one leg over the other, my hand on my ankle as my foot bounces. “But I need something from you.”

“Oh, first you lie to me and now you need something from me?” She scoffs and shoves the rest of the slice of bacon into her mouth.

“If there was anyone else I could ask, I would, but there’s not.”

She gives me a flat look. “I find that hard to believe, considering you live in a country where people literally have to do what you want.”

I grit my teeth, scrubbing a hand over my jaw. “I guess you’re right about that.”

“I know I am.” She sits down on the edge of the bed. “What do you need?”

“A fiancée.”

Amy's eyes nearly bulge out of her head, all the color draining from her face. "Excuse me?"

"A fake fiancée," I say, rushing the words out as fast as I can.

She laughs until tears roll from the corners of her eyes. "Are you high right now?"

"No." I get up and drag the chair over to sit in front of her, less than a foot of distance between our knees. "I know this sounds insane, but I need help. My people hate me because I'm not my older brother and I have a terrible reputation."

"That's not a selling point." She stops laughing, her smile fading. "Why is your reputation so bad? Did you kill someone?"

"No!" I bite the inside of my cheek, trying to search for the right words to explain everything to her.

It's got to be a delicate balance of not scaring her off while convincing her I need her help.

"I've slept with a lot of women."

Amy chuckles darkly. "Great. The first thing I'm doing when I land in New Jersey is to get an STD test." She looks at me with glassy eyes. "You know, something like that might have been nice to know last night. I probably should've asked, but here I was, this idiot who thought she met a nice guy on a beach. Someone who didn't want anything from her, and yet here you are, one more person who wants something from me that I don't think I have to give."

Yet, there's this look in her eyes as the tears dry that makes me think she might agree to help me.

“I’m clean.” I cross the room and grab my phone, pulling up my most recent test results and passing them over to her. “And before you, I hadn’t slept with anyone in months. I was busy with my brother’s death and taking over the throne.”

“I’m sorry about your brother.” She presses her lips together, takes the phone and looks at the test results before handing it back to me. “Why do you need some foreigner to pretend to be your fiancée?”

“Because you don’t treat me any differently even though I’m the king. Even now that you know, you’re still giving me hell like I suspect you would give any other person.”

The corner of her mouth twitches. “Flattery isn’t going to get you anywhere.”

I shrug, sitting down in the chair. “It can’t hurt.”

“What do I get if I agree to this asinine plan of yours? And I’m not saying that I will. I’m just considering it since my life is as dry as the Sahara and I could use some fun.”

Her cheeks turn a brilliant shade of pink as she gets up and goes to stand near the patio doors.

As she stands with her back to me, spine stiff, I can’t help but admire her curves. Maybe it would be a better idea to get back in bed with her and call this whole thing off.

“If you agree to do this for me, I’ll fund your bakery. Anywhere in the world.” I grab the rest of my clothing from the ground and get dressed as I speak, needing to be able to make a quick getaway if she refuses.

Amy turns around, her mouth dropping open. “Really? You would do that?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

“Yes. If you agree to be my fake fiancée and then marry me, you can have a bakery, all costs covered. It would be good press for you too. We would have to do interviews, and I could tell everyone watching about the bakery you plan to open.”

Amy shakes her head. “If I do this, I wouldn’t want you to talk about the bakery. I would want to know that it’s successful because I’m good, not because my fake husband is the king.” She clutches the sheet a little tighter. “How long would we have to be married?”

“We’d be engaged for six months, and then we would have to be married for two years. Long enough to make it look like we did love each other, but we had problems and just couldn’t work them out.”

“And what problems do you think we’d have?” Her smile is teasing as she turns around, opening one of the doors and leaning against the doorframe.

The warm breeze blows in around her. As it does, the sheet billows out around her, the slit opening and showing off her long legs.

“I think we’d decide that I was too invested in my job as king, and though you love the country, it’s become too much for you to handle. I’m an absent husband at best.”

“Ah, is that another part of why your reputation is so bad?”

I roll my eyes. “Not quite. I’ve never been married before, and serious relationships have never been my thing.”

“You’re not going to cheat on me if we get into this.”

“Does that mean you’re going to do it?”

CHAPTER 6

AMY

Idrum my fingers on the desk, my tablet propped up on a stack of books in front of me. My stomach is tying itself in knots as I wait for Gabby to answer the call.

This is the last thing I want to do right now. I was supposed to be there for her bachelorette. I should’ve been able to make it to Mykonos without a problem.

“Hey,” Gabby says, her tone bright and cheery, words slurring together a little.

“Sounds like you’ve been enjoying the wine.” I smile and twist the tablet a little, making sure that she can’t see Xander lounging on the bed behind me. “I’m sorry that I missed the trip. I’m going to make it up to you as soon as I can.”

Gabby gives me a hazy smile, waving her hand. “Don’t worry about it. We’ll be getting on the plane in a few hours. It’s fine that you’re still home. We can video chat when I get back.”

I bite my bottom lip. “Well, actually, I’m not home.”

That seems to sober her up quickly.

“What do you mean, you’re not home? Where are you?” Gabby’s tone is stern, reminding me of when she scraped me off the ground after my parents died.

Does she think that she has to do that again? Have I really let my life fall that far apart?

I rub the back of my neck. “I didn’t make it to Mykonos, but I made it as far as Katastinia and got stuck here. I might have met a guy, and since I have some vacation time still booked, I was thinking of staying in Katastinia and doing a little sightseeing.”

“With him?” Gabby asks, wiggling her eyebrows before bursting into a fit of giggles. “I bet the only sight you’re going to be seeing is his bedroom.”

“We’re not in his bedroom right now. We’re in a hotel.” I can’t help the smile that crosses my face. “I know there’s a lot I missed out on this weekend, and I’m sorry. It’s not going to happen again.”

“I know it’s not, but you need to stop worrying about that and have some fun. I haven’t seen you look this happy since before your grandmother passed, and even then, it was like you were just moving through a fog.”

“It’s been a long few years.” I force another smile and lean forward on the desk. “I’ve got to get going, but I’ll call you later and let you know what’s been going on.”

“Keep a diary of all the dirty details. You’re going to have to tell me everything.”

I grin and shake my head. “I’m not going to keep some journal for you to flip through when you get tired of the absolute filth you read. You’re just going to have to use your imagination.”

Gabby boos. “You’re no fun.”

“Bye, Gabby.” I laugh and wave to her as she blows me a kiss. “Have a good flight.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

“Call me!”

We end the chat, and I set the tablet to the side, spinning around in my seat to look at Xander.

He arches an eyebrow, an amused smirk curling the corner of his mouth. “She seems like she knows how to have a good time.”

I grin. “Yeah, she’s always been the life of the party. I don’t know how I would’ve gotten through college without her. She pulled me off the ground when my parents died. She was one of the few people in the world who kept me going.”

“Your parents died?”

“When I was seventeen.” I get up and grab the last of my clothing from the closet, packing it into the open suitcase on the bed beside him. “It was an accident. I didn’t know how to go on then. My grandmother came and picked me up, and with her and my friends, they forced me to get back on the right track.”

“I’m so sorry about your parents. How bad were you?” he asks, hesitation in his voice as he gets up from the bed.

“You should be amazed I still have a liver, to be honest. Those first few months after they died were rough. I spent most of the summer between high school and college going to parties and trying to forget they were gone.”

“I’m so sorry for your loss.” Xander’s eyes appear to be pooled in unshed tears as he

takes some jeans from the pile on the bed, folds them and puts them into the suitcase. “You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.”

I swallow hard, my throat thick. “Thank you. It’s hard to talk about them sometimes.”

“Well, maybe we should talk about what’s going to happen when we get to the castle.”

My jaw drops as I stare up at the towering white stucco walls and the blue shingle roof, looking like the picture of Aegean bliss.

Xander stands beside me, one of my bags slung over his shoulder and the other pulling alongside him. “Come on. Atticus is going to be waiting for us at the side door.”

“There’s a side door?” I glance at the massive iron gates set in the wall that surrounds the castle grounds.

“Yeah. If we go through the front gates, then there’s going to be a horde of advisors waiting to lodge themselves up my ass. I don’t want to deal with it, and I know without a doubt that they’ll be too much for you to handle.”

I scoff and put my hands on my hips. “I think you’d be surprised. Come on. We can go through the front door like normal people and give them a piece of our minds.”

He laughs as he shifts the bags around and grabs my hand as I stop to walk forward, pulling me back. “I don’t think so. That’s a battle for another day. Come meet my cousins, Atticus and Daphne, and then you need to get ready for dinner later.”

“Fine, you win this one.” I follow him down the cobblestone road that leads to the side of the building.

A much smaller door is open in the side, and two people stand there. The man and the woman both have the same dark hair as Xander. While the woman has sea blue eyes that match his, the man's remind me more of dark chocolate.

Xander nods to them both. "Amy, these are the only two of my advisors that you should bother paying any mind to. Daphne, Atticus, this is Amy."

"Hi." I shift my weight from one side to the other, already feeling out of place.

Both are wearing jeans that look like they cost more than an entire month of rent for my apartment. They're perfectly put together, and while neither of them looks down at me, I'm sure that they're judging me.

"It's nice to meet you," Daphne says, smiling as she reaches out to loop her arm through mine, guiding me through the wall entrance and onto the castle grounds.

It's like I've been transported to another world filled with pristine walls and beige stones, intricate pops of color contrasting with the lush gardens.

There isn't a single world in which I should be here, but I am.

Xander hands my bags off to Atticus. "Take these to her room, please. I have to go speak with Jorge, and then we'll all get ready for dinner."

I want to ask him to stay, but Daphne is already pulling me toward the castle. She pulls open one of the wooden doors to showcase a wooden staircase.

"There are hidden passageways throughout the castle," Daphne says, dropping my arm and climbing the stairs. "If you want to avoid most of the politics and getting bothered in the middle of the day, you'll figure out where they are fast."

I laugh, but the back of my hands feels itchy, and when I look down, nervous hives are forming on the backs of them. “I don’t know if this is a good idea.”

“Everything is going to be fine. This staircase leads directly from outside to the hall just outside your room. If you ever get overwhelmed and need to feel like a normal person, just pop into the stairwell and take off.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

“Somehow, that doesn’t make me feel better.”

We reach the top of the stairs and head down a short hall before Daphne presses against a small switch hidden between two stones. A door clicks open, and she eases it to the side before pushing curtains out of the way. We step into another hallway, but this one is lined with doors.

“Your room is right here.”

As soon as she swings open the door, I’m met with three men in suits and a stack of paper nearly as thick as my forearm.

Daphne plants her hands on her hips. “Surely this can wait until later.”

The shorter of the three men holds a stack of papers out to me. “You need to sign these.”

I bite the inside of my cheek. “It’s going to take some time to read through them all.”

Stepping forward, Daphne snags the papers from them and sets the stack down on the intricately carved table in the sitting area of the bedroom. “Really, Amy, you don’t have to look at these right now.”

“It’s fine — even if it’s a little rude.” I give a pointed glare to the men before sitting down in one of the armchairs and starting to flip through the papers. I take a deep breath, trying to make sense of them all, but the words start to blur before me.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I take a moment before diving back in, flipping through every page until I know without a doubt that I can't tell anyone this is fake.

And that I'm going to get the money to open my bakery in two years and six months.

That's only nine hundred and twelve days.

I only have to keep up the act for that long, and then everything is going to be fine. Finally, I'm going to get to open the bakery.

If only Grandma could have been here to see it.

She was always my biggest champion. If there was a single person who believed I could do anything I set my mind to, it was her.

What would she think of me marrying a man I don't know for a bunch of money?

Shaking the thought away, I finish signing the papers and hand them back to the lawyers, who file out of the room without another word.

Daphne shuts the door behind them, twisting the lock into place before turning to me. "We have to get you ready for dinnertonight. Xander messaged me your sizes earlier, so I may have gone creeping through your social media to find out what you like wearing."

"Should I be scared about that?" I watch her walk across the room, throwing open a set of double doors to reveal a massive closet.

With her arms stretched out to both sides, she beams at me over her shoulder. "There's a perk to pretending to be the future queen, and one of those perks is a hefty clothing budget."

I cross to the other side of the room, ignoring the massive bed in the middle for now. It looks like it's calling my name with the puffy white duvet and the canopy that hangs around it, but dinner is in less than two hours.

"This is more clothing than I think I've ever owned. In my entire lifetime."

We step inside the closet, and Daphne goes to a rack of what looks like midi dresses. "Xander mentioned you were wearing something like this on the beach when you met."

"So you went out and bought a dozen of them?"

She pulls out an emerald-green dress made of a soft ribbed material. "This one is going to pop with your hair and your eyes. He's not going to know what hit him when he gets a look at you."

"I don't think we need to worry about him knowing what hit him. I just need to be presentable. Or whatever a future queen has to be."

My stomach ties itself into a knot as I sink down onto the tufted beige ottoman in the middle of the room.

Daphne hangs the dress on a hook and crouches down in front of me. "You just have to breathe. Everything is going to be okay. Now, we're going to get you dressed. Then you're going to put one foot in front of the other and figure this out as you go."

Xander stands as I enter the formal dining room, glancing at the worn oak table that looks long enough to seat at least two dozen people. "You look beautiful tonight."

My cheeks warm as he pulls out a chair for me. "Thank you. You look good too."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

The black shirt hugs his body, his slacks close to his muscled thighs.

I allow my gaze to linger on him a little too long before the nerves take over. “I didn’t know what I should wear. Wasn’t sure if the lawyers were going to be waiting to ambush me again or not.”

He has the decency to wince. “I didn’t know they were going to be waiting there for you until I found Jorge. I’m sorry.”

“I survived, so it turned out okay.”

Smartly dressed staff members enter the room, setting trays of food in the middle of the table before heading back through the doors and into where I’m assuming the kitchen is.

The scent of steaks basted in garlic butter fills the air, making my mouth water as I reach for the serving spoon in the middle of the dish of mashed potatoes.

Before I can scoop any, someone appears and does it for me, putting the food on my plate before adding a steak and some of the braised broccolini.

This isn’t real life.

Xander cuts into his steak, allowing the juices to run into the potatoes. “I thought we should talk about what this engagement is going to look like. It’s best that we’re on the same page from the beginning.”

His tone is devoid of emotion, all business and none of the warmth that was there when I met him on the beach.

“All right.” I spear a piece of broccolini and pop it in my mouth.

“We’re going to have to make public appearances now that my advisors have approved of you?—”

“Wait, what do you mean, approved of me? I only met two of them. I don’t know much, but I’m sure a king has more than two advisors.”

“I do. They ran some background and criminal checks on you.”

“Invaded my life, you mean.” I put my fork down and lean back in my seat. “What else do I need to know about how this is going to go?”

“Like I said, there will be public appearances. The news that we’re engaged will be announced in two days, and then everything starts happening. We’re going to have to show the country how in love we are. They should eat it up. My father married a commoner, and the public adored my mother.”

“Commoner?” My eyebrows climb high up my forehead. “Well, that’s a fun way to say it while trying not to be a pompous, pretentious dick.”

Xander sighs and scrubs a hand over his jaw. “I didn’t mean it like that. These are just the facts of the relationship, and speaking about that, I think it’s best that we’re just friends from this point forward. Anything else could impair our judgment when it comes to acting for my people.”

I bite the inside of my cheek. Though I felt something with the night we shared together, it’s clear that it meant nothing to him. Not if he’s willing to remove

anything more than friendship from the equation.

It's probably for the best.

This relationship has a deadline. One that I've noted in my phone as BAKERY DAY. It's in all caps to make sure I keep my eyes on the prize.

Xander gets up and moves closer to me, pulling a little velvet box from his pocket. "I figured I should do this properly, so we can at least remain consistent on our story. We're going to tell the public that I asked you to marry me at dinner while celebrating our one-year anniversary, so here it is. Will you marry me?"

"Sure." I take the box and set it to the side as he bends down and kisses the corner of my mouth.

"Thank you for doing this, Amy. You won't regret it."

Somehow, I don't believe that.

CHAPTER 7

XANDER

"You've lost your damn mind." Daphne sits down on the couch in my study, propping her feet up on the coffee table. "I always knew you were wild, but I didn't think you were going to take it this far."

I sigh and look up from the bill about school meals. When I hid away in my office this morning, I didn't think my cousins would make a point of hunting me down.

I should've seen it coming, though. The two of them always have something to say

when it comes to the decisions in my life.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

“I know that you think this is a bad idea,” I say, “but the media is going to get the news tomorrow morning. Everything has been set in motion. It’s too late to stop it now.”

Atticus paces over to the window, looking out at the grounds. “I still think an American is the wrong choice.”

“That’s not your decision to make, now, is it?” I sign off on reducing end-of-the-year bonuses in order to feed children at school, knowing Jorge is going to have something to say about it later. “I think that being with an American is a good thing.”

Daphne nods, sipping from her coffee. “Amy is a lovely woman. I found her in the kitchen this morning learning how to make those delicious lemon custard muffins the cook makes.”

“And yet she doesn’t understand Katastinia or its people. Did she even know that we were a country before she agreed to help you?” Atticus’s upper lip curls as he turns to look at me.

If an asteroid could hit the country and blow me up right now, I would be grateful.

I don’t want to keep having this conversation with him, but I’m sure it’s going to happen multiple times through the course of the fake marriage.

Atticus sits down in one of the chairs, draping his arm over the back. “I think this is a mistake.”

“You didn’t think that when you were pushing me to get married!” Shoving back from the desk, I head to the decanter of whiskey off to the side. I pour myself a healthy shot and throw it back.

Daphne grabs a pillow and lobs it at her brother. “You can’t have things both ways, Atti. You need to accept that this woman is here to help Xander. She seems nice, and you’re not going to bully her. Jorge has that covered.”

My eyes widen as I look at her. “Please tell me that he isn’t bothering her already.”

“He’s not.” Atticus smirks and picks at some lint on his trousers. “I may have convinced him that spiking his morning coffee would be a good way to deal with his jitters about the announcement tomorrow.”

I groan and run my hands down my face. “I don’t know why you insist on making him more unbearable.”

“You’re the one that still has him on the council,” Daphne says, her words anything but helpful.

“I can hardly get rid of the man who spent decades advising Dad. The country would revolt if the only people on the council were me and my cousins.”

“There are other people too.” Daphne gives me a knowing look, a wicked gleam in her eyes as she stands. “None of them are as awful as Jorge though.”

I grab the papers off my desk and hand them to her. “This would say differently. You, Atticus, and two others were the only ones who voted in favor of free school lunches.”

“Well, that’s because we have more than enough money.” Atticus holds his hands up

when I shoot him a glare. “I’m kidding. If you can’t take care of the people in your country, you shouldn’t be king. Jorge doesn’t need an extra hundred thousand dollars in his pocket.”

“Bonuses are only fifty thousand at most.” Daphne skims through the papers before putting them back on the desk. “You know, we really should be preparing for what’s going to happen when you make the announcement tomorrow.”

I sit back down behind my desk, shoving the bill into the approvals folder. “We should, but that feels like the last thing I want to think about right now. Nothing about tomorrow is going to be easy, and Atticus won’t be the last person to question the fact that I’m marrying an American.”

Daphne’s gaze softens. “I know. They’re going to see it as a betrayal. They’ll wonder what’s wrong with you and why you couldn’t find someone from their own country. At least, that’s what the ones with the small minds are going to do. I’m sure everyone else is going to love her.”

“I hope so.” I glance at the news articles on the computer screen. “I think we need to put some thought into her branding, though.”

“Branding?” Daphne scoffs and crosses her arms, arching her eyebrow like I’m a naughty child heading toward a full scolding. “She’s not a cow.”

“No, but she’s not going to know how to behave like a royal.” I drum my fingers on the desk, sorting through the rumors the PR team has already pushed. “She’s very outspoken and impulsive.”

“You’re the one who asked her to marry you!” Daphne throws her hands up in the air while Atticus starts laughing.

“I know I did. She’s also beautiful and intelligent, and spending time with her is easy. Which is why I asked her to do this with me. She feels like someone it would be natural to spend a couple years with.”

Daphne points a painted fingernail at me. “That right there is what you shouldn’t say to her. No woman wants to be told that they’re on a time limit, even if both of you know it’s coming.”

I turn and look out the window, wishing I was on the beach and surfing instead of dealing with this.

Doing something positive to honor Yorgos’s memory is important, but this marriage isn’t going to fix the rest of the problems the monarchy is facing right now.

We’re slapping a coat of paint on a bigger problem and hoping it’s enough for the time being, even though I’m sure it won’t be. There are issues that a distraction isn’t going to hide.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

Daphne leans against the windowsill. “With a little training, Amy is going to make a good queen.”

“You can take the American out of the States,” Atticus says, his tone mocking as he gets up and heads for the door. “But she’s still going to be an American at the end of the day.”

He shuts the door behind him, leaving Daphne alone with me.

She reaches out and nudges my knee with her foot. “Don’t let him get to you. He just wanted to win the bet.”

“The bet?”

“Yeah. Some of the advisors were betting when you were going to get married, and to whom. He bet that you would never go through with the plan.”

I grind my teeth together. “And what was your bet?”

She gives me a sly smile and reaches into her pocket, pulling out a wad of money and holding half out to me. “When I heard that you snuck out the other night, I bet that you were going to meet a stranger on a beach and bring her home.”

I take what looks like nearly a thousand dollars and stuff it into my pocket. “The lot of you are terrible. I should fire you all.”

“You’re not going to do that.”

“No.” I glance at the time, humming for a moment before getting up. “But I do have to go meet Amy now. Maybe I’ll even spend some of this money on taking her out.”

With that, I hurry out of my office and head for a hidden set of stairs, before she can ask any more questions.

CHAPTER 8

AMY

“That’s right. I’m not going to be returning,” I say, my tone sharper than it was the last three times I told my boss I wouldn’t be at work.

Michael makes a disapproving noise in the back of his throat. “This isn’t a good time of the year to do this to us, Amy. You’re going to want to think about your actions.”

“So sad. I won’t get to pipe a thousand little whiskers on bunny cookies for spring.” I stop walking down the cobblestone road, looking in the window of one of the little shops. Scarves of all different colors hang in the window, fluttering in the breeze that flows through the shop’s open door.

“You can’t do this to us. Think of all the bridges you are burning. Nobody will hire you after this.”

Once upon a time the threat would’ve made me cower. I would’ve folded immediately and told him that I was sorry before getting on a plane and heading home.

Now, I have something better planned for my future.

“I don’t care, Michael. You’ve done nothing but take advantage of me since the day I

started working for you, and it's done now. I won't be coming back, and you can find someone else to verbally abuse all day long."

Hanging up, I stuff my phone in my pocket, feeling like a weight has been lifted from my shoulders.

For the first time in a long time, I can breathe without the worry of something going wrong. I don't have to answer to a boss who makes it clear that he hates me. There won't be any more getting screamed at for not toasting the nuts to the exact shade of amber Michael is looking for.

Laughing, I push off the wall and keep walking down the road, the scent of coffee drawing me to a little hole-in-the-wall café.

I step inside, my mouth watering at the display case of little pastries.

The older woman behind the counter puts her hands on her broad hips, grinning at me. "Hello. I don't think I've seen you here before."

"I just moved here." I glance away from her, wondering if that's what I should be telling people right now.

Even though the announcement is going to come out tomorrow, nobody told me what I should say to people if they ask about my being in Katastinia. I've been making it up as I go along, hoping that keeping it simple will be good enough.

Although, I didn't stop to talk to any of them on my way out of the castle either.

Tomorrow, everything is going to change, but for today, I'm still just Amy.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

“You sit down, then. The first coffee is on the house.” The woman smiles and grabs a white mug, starting a shot of espresso. “I’m Beatriz. Moved here from Brazil nearly thirty years ago to be with my husband. He’s passed away now, but this is home.”

“It’s nice to meet you.” I select one of the little blue tables by the counter, sitting down on the cushioned chair. “I’m so sorry about your husband.”

She clicks her tongue. “It was a long time ago now, but I couldn’t bring myself to leave once he passed. Going back to Brazil didn’t seem like an option when we made lives for ourselves here.”

“I still don’t know if moving here is the right choice.” I smile my thanks as she rounds the counter with the cup of coffee and sits down across from me. She puts a little plate of pastries in front of us, the fruit on top shiny and inviting.

“Why do you say that?”

I grab one of the pastries, nibbling at the flaky crust. “I think I’m making the right choice most of the time. Everything seems great, but there’s the little voice in the back of my mind that says leaving New Jersey is insane and I probably should go back home to my normal life.”

“What is normal?” She grabs the other pastry and takes a large bite, catching a piece of strawberry that drops. “Life is too short to worry about doing the right thing. You should just think about doing the right thing for you.”

“How do you know what that is?” I take a larger bite, moaning as the strawberry hits

my tongue.

“It’s more of something you feel than something you know.” One side of her mouth crooks, showing off the wrinkles at the corners of her eyes. “We were given intuition for a reason.”

“I think mine might be broken.”

Beatriz laughs. “Give it time. Katastinia is a beautiful country, and there is much to see here. You should take a castle tour. They offer them every weekend.”

Little does she know that the castle is my new home for the next nine hundred and eleven days.

“Are the royal family nice?” I ask, even though I know I shouldn’t be prying for information.

I’m curious about Xander, though. The answers he did give me the other night were vague at best.

“The new king is young. He seems like he’s trying to do right by the country, but the truth is that Xander wasn’t raised to be king. He was supposed to have an easy life. One that involved all the money of the crown but without the responsibility.”

“And what about his parents?”

“His mother, the queen, she died unexpectedly a few years ago. The king’s health deteriorated quickly after that, and he passed just a few months later. Yorgos took over, and then when he died, Xander took the lead. It’s only been a few months — the boy has barely had time to grieve, never mind learn to rule — but the tabloids aren’t kind to him.”

“How bad is it?” I ask, already worrying about what those same tabloids are going to say about me.

I can see the stories now. AMERICAN MARRIES THE KING. COUNTRY HEADED FOR NATIONAL EMERGENCY.

It won't take the people long to figure out that I don't know the first thing about being a queen.

Beatriz crosses one leg over the other, her skirt kicking out around her foot. “It's not good. They spend every moment they get trying to dig up information on Xander or his cousins. No matter what that poor boy does, it's always the wrong thing to them.”

Forcing a smile, I take another sip of coffee. “It can't be easy to wear the crown. I don't think I could ever do it, if I was given the chance.”

“Thankfully, the average person will never have to see the inside of that castle and know what it's like to rule from it.” She laughs and gets up as another customer enters the café. “Enjoy your coffee, and don't be a stranger. I could use someone to talk to.”

“Thank you.” I smile and sip the coffee again, the warm notes of chocolate and cinnamon melting on my tongue.

I finish the coffee while watching the people coming and going from the café, all of them talking to each other and not even noticing my existence.

How much longer will that continue once the engagement announcement is made?

The little gold ring on my finger with the stunning oval diamond feels like it weighs a million pounds.

I take a deep breath and put my mug in the dirty dishes bin on the counter before heading for the door.

Passing several people, I head for the road back to the castle.

However, a magazine at a little stand on the side of the road catches my attention.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

On the cover is Xander and a stunning blond woman sprawled out on the deck of a boat. I grab the magazine from the rack and hand money to the man watching me.

“Interested in the king?” the man asks, his accent thick. “You tourists always are. He’s nothing special, you know. He’s going to run Katastinia into the ground, and there’ll be nothing left of it.”

“Is he off on boats with women a lot?”

He shakes his head. “Not so much anymore. That’s a copy from months ago.”

I flip through the pages, and in the middle of the magazine is a massive spread of Xander and the woman. “He looks happy with her. Is she the queen?”

Maybe playing dumb is wrong, but I want more opinions on what I’m getting myself into.

If I can’t tell the people who I’m about to be, then maybe I can still fish for information.

“Not the queen. Most suspect he will never take one. More likely to get some poor woman knocked up on a luxury vacation and claim the bastard is next in line to the throne.”

Biting the inside of my cheek, I nod and turn away, tucking my magazine under my arm and continuing the trek back up the hill to the castle.

As stunning as a castle on a cliff overlooking the water is, getting back to it after being all the way down at the harbor is hard on the calves.

Eventually my muscles will stop burning.

I creep around to the side door, only to find Xander standing there with his arms crossed.

He glances down at the magazine tucked beneath my arm. “So, you snuck out and went into town and scared me half to death for a magazine?”

“No.” I shift, keeping my arm pinned tight to my body. I don’t want him to see what’s on the cover.

He’d ask why I have it, and then I would have to admit that I’ve been asking people in town about him. Then, I wouldn’t hear the end of it.

Either that or he would never talk to me again for snooping instead of asking him.

It doesn’t sound like a great way to start our marriage.

Xander pinches the bridge of his nose. His eyes show concern for me, but his body language says he’s upset. “You can’t sneak out of the castle like that. Not anymore. You have to at least tell your security team where you’re going to go. They need to go with you.”

“I don’t have a security team.”

“You do as of this morning. You’re going to need them.”

“Does that mean that there are people who will try to hurt me?” I ask, my heart

leaping into my throat. “You didn’t tell me that was part of the deal.”

“Nobody is going to try and hurt you that I know of, but it cannot be ruled out either. There are people who want to see the crown fall, which is why you need a team following you.”

“Then why did you sneak out the night we met? You didn’t have anyone following you that I saw.”

The corner of his mouth twitches as his hand drops to his side. “Because I’m an idiot. You’re not, though, and you need to be more careful. Please. I don’t ever want to be told that the team can’t find you again.”

I nod. “Fine. I’ll take the team with me.”

Atticus comes charging over the moment we’re through the door. “You two need to get inside. We have things to do. News of the engagement went live early, and the wedding has been set for three months from now.”

My jaw drops as I turn to Atticus, eyebrows pulling together. “I thought we were going to be engaged for six months.”

He glares at Atticus. “What’s the meaning of this? Neither of us agreed to shorten the engagement. If there was a decision made to change it, we should’ve been consulted.”

“Yes, well, Jorge thought it better to expedite things. He took it upon himself to get the rest of the council to decide on a very short engagement.” Atticus sighs and runs a hand through his hair. “Daphne and I voted against it, but we were the only ones who did so.”

I gape at both of them. “Three months? I have to walk down the aisle in three

months?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

Xander takes me by the hand, giving it a squeeze, fingers lacing with mine. “We can do this, okay? You have nothing to worry about. I’m going to be with you every step of the way.”

Atticus rolls his eyes. “Save it for the wedding day. We have work to do if your American is going to be ready in time.”

CHAPTER 9

XANDER

Amy paces beside me, starting to pick at the nail polish on her thumb before stopping herself. “An engagement party. I’m having an engagement party.”

I chuckle and glance at the suit hanging on the back of the door. “Yeah, we are. Which means that you need to go get ready because we’re supposed to be downstairs in the next two hours.”

“It’s only been two days since the announcement was made. Don’t you think we should’ve waited longer?”

“This is all going to move fast.” I step into her path and cup her face in my hands, trying to smother a smile at the deer-in-the-headlights look she gives me. “You can handle this. Daphne has been training you on what to say and how to behave. Everything is going to be fine.”

“Until I trip on my dress. The last time I wore a gown was my high school prom.”

My hands drop. “I don’t know what prom is.”

Aunt Meri walks through the door, her skirt trailing behind her. “I thought I heard the two of you in here.”

Daphne scurries in after her. “Come on, Amy. The makeup artist is here and ready to transform you.”

I mouth a thank-you to Daphne as she sweeps Amy out of the room before Aunt Meri can start drilling her with questions.

Uncle Stavros enters, sitting down in one of the leather chairs near the door. “You should think about redecorating your chambers. You’re not a bachelor anymore, and your fiancée is going to want to stay in a room that doesn’t remind her of all the women you’ve been with.”

“I haven’t been with any women in this chamber,” I say, voice tight as I sit down across from him.

Aunt Meri takes one of the other chairs, tossing her blond hair over one shoulder. “It doesn’t matter.”

I glance through the doors that lead from the sitting room into the bedroom. Everything is dark and reddish wood tones, suiting Yorgos’s style more than my own.

What would Amy like?

“Really though, Xander. What were you thinking when getting involved with an American? How long have the two of you really been together?”

“We were together for close to a year before we got engaged,” I say, sticking with the

story Amy and I worked out together.

A year would've been around the time I stopped being seen in public with women I was clearly sleeping with. There would be some tabloid pictures that overlapped, but most of them would be from business trips with foreign dignitaries and their wives and daughters.

Which I had a hell of a time explaining to Amy yesterday after I saw that magazine she bought.

Uncle Stavros's eyes narrow, zeroing in on me. Sometimes he looks so much like my father that it makes me uneasy. Spending time with him would be easier if it didn't feel like spending time with a ghost.

He shakes his head, leaning back in the chair. "I don't know about this. Are you sure that you want to marry an American?"

"I don't see why you all care so much about where she comes from." I lean forward, resting my folded arms on the table. "Amy is a good woman, and we love each other. She's going to be good for Katastinia."

"You're young and blind to what the country is going to think." Aunt Meri reaches out to give my hand a sympathetic pat like I'm a child again and she's soothing me from something my father said to upset me.

"I'm not that young." I pull back from her. "Amy and I will be getting married, and you two are going to be happy for us."

"Of course." Stavros gets up and goes to one of the bookshelves, browsing through the titles until he finds the fake book filled with cigars that Yorgos liked to keep.

I never developed a taste for them, but most of the men in my family have always preferred to make their decisions around a table with cigar smoke in the air.

He opens the box and takes out a cigar, sliding it into his pocket for later. “You’ll get married, but the pressures of politics are going to be hard for her to deal with.”

Page 24

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:41 am

“You don’t know her, so you can’t make that assessment,” I say, tone sharp as I glare at them. “You’ll both need to take a step back. Amy can handle herself, and she is going to be a good queen.”

“Who are you trying to convince?” Aunt Meri asks, her smile smug as she stands and heads for the door. “We’ll see you at the party, Xander. Hopefully your fiancée doesn’t make a fool of herself.”

Uncle Stavros follows her, the door shutting behind them.

I get up and lock the door, needing some time to myself.

Convincing the pair of them that the marriage is real will be the most difficult part of the entire plan. Both are skeptical by nature, and Uncle Stavros has always looked for a reason to assume the crown.

If I’m forced to abdicate, he’s the next in line.

I need public approval to go up.

And I need to make sure that the sharks circling Amy don’t eat her alive.

I stand at the foot of the spiral staircase, adjusting my gold cufflinks as light music comes from the ballroom. Soft voices flow through the hall above me before Amy appears at the top of the stairs, wearing a deep emerald gown that forms to her body like it was made for her.

She grabs the railing like she's afraid she's going to fall, turning to look at Daphne over her shoulder. Daphne motions for her to keep going and she finds her footing, starting her way down the stairs.

I stop fussing with my sleeves and take the stairs two at a time, never taking my eyes off her. The bodice of her dress is structured, but the panels of fabric are sheer along her stomach. With each step, the slit that travels up to her thigh shows off her long leg and matching heel.

When I reach her, she looks at me with dark-lined eyes.

"Hi," is all I'm able to say, so overcome with her beauty.

That's the best I can come up with?

I'm not supposed to be attracted to her or get attached.

This marriage is only for show. Amy is going to leave at the end of the contract, and I'm not going to see her again. We'll both go back to our separate lives.

Except, when her full lips part and she sighs, all I want to do is lean in for a stolen kiss.

We reach the bottom of the steps together and she stops, taking a deep breath. "I don't know if I can do this."

"You can. Just be you." I hold out my elbow for her to take, and she slips her hand through it.

Her fingers tremble against me. "I don't think they're going to like that very much. I don't have a clue about your politics or anything else about Katastinia, even though

Daphne has been trying to teach me. What am I going to talk to people about?"

"You can talk to them about the wedding or what you used to do in America. Maybe about your family."

"Ah yes, everyone loves a good dead family story at an engagement party. Will you be telling yours?" she asks, amusement in her voice.

I shrug. "Pity points really couldn't hurt us right now. People might be nicer if we remind them that we're just a couple of orphans trying to do our best in the world."

Amy laughs and shakes her head as we stop outside the pair of towering double doors leading into the ballroom. "We're not going to go around telling everybody that we're orphans. We don't need to put that on everyone else."

"I don't know about you, but it's still my backup plan. If anyone starts to bother me too much, I'm going to launch fully into the I'm so sad my parents couldn't be here to see this speech."

"That's cold."

"Does it matter if the sentiment behind it is true?" I nudge her with my hip, trying to get her to laugh again.

She struggles to smother her smile. "I don't think that's the point."

"But it made you laugh." I give her hand a squeeze as the music pauses. "That's our cue."

The doors swing open as I put on the smile I've rehearsed since I was born.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:42 am

Amy stands taller beside me, her gaze flicking around the room and back at me.

The music starts up again, people clapping as we make our way to the middle of the ballroom.

Amy's eyes widen as I remove my arm from her grip, taking her hand and spinning her around before pulling her back to me. One of her hands lands on my shoulder while she keeps the other clasped firmly in mine.

I press my hand to the small of her back, leading her in a waltz around the room. "Everything is going good."

She gives me a flat look. "I'm standing on your toes."

"Well, you're not great at dancing." I smirk as she pinches my shoulder playfully. "We have time to fix that before the wedding, though."

"I can't do intensive dancing lessons for eight hours a day. You know that, right?"

I snort and dip her low before pulling her back to me as the song ends. "You don't have to worry about hours of lessons. We'll only have to worry about a first dance. That should be easy enough."

"You've been dancing for your entire life. I don't know how I'm going to catch up." She takes my hand as I head for the bar in the corner.

Aunt Meri steps into our path before we can get far, her hands on her hips and her

nose in the air. “I thought there was something off about this situation.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I hold up Amy’s hand, showing off the ring on her finger. “Amy, this is Aunt Meri.”

My aunt sniffs and barely spares her a glance before turning her attention back to me. “You didn’t seem happy, Xander, and you know we only want you to be happy. This woman has never set foot in Katastinia before this week.”

“You’re right.” I wait for her to say something else as her face glows a deep shade of red.

Aunt Meri crosses her arms, gaze flitting around the room to make sure nobody is watching us. “I know that this marriage is a sham, and the pair of you better make sure the rest of the country never finds out.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say, stepping forward and lowering my voice. “I think you’ve had one too many to drink, and now you’re a little confused about what’s happening here.”

She scowls. “The country is going to lose all respect for you.”

CHAPTER 10

AMY

“That could’ve gone better,” I say, turning to Xander as his aunt walks away. “At least she didn’t announce it to the entire room.”

Xander groans and proceeds to the bar, grabbing two flutes of champagne and bringing one back to me. “She didn’t go nuclear, and we have to be grateful for that,

but it could still be coming.”

“Do you think she would risk outing you like that?” I ask, sipping the champagne.

“My uncle has wanted the throne for as long as I’ve known him.” Xander nods to a little alcove with windows overlooking the gardens. “Let’s go over there, and I’ll catch you up on decades of family drama.”

I swallow hard. “That sounds like something you should’ve told me about before I agreed to join the family.”

Xander chuckles and leans against one of the walls in the alcove. “You never would’ve agreed to marry me if I did that.”

“That bad?”

“Uncle Stavros has been gunning for the crown since he and Dad were kids. He thought that if my father was in a scandal big enough, my grandfather would take Dad out of the line of succession.”

“And that didn’t happen, obviously, but what does this have to do with us?”

“I don’t have children.” Xander downs the rest of his drink and sets the glass on a passing waiter’s tray. “And that means that if I do something bad enough that the council decides to force me to abdicate, then Stavros gets the crown.”

“Which is what he’s always wanted. Okay. I’m catching up now.” I hum and look around the party, spying his uncle in the corner speaking with Jorge. “Do you think the two of them are over there conspiring to blow your cover?”

Xander shrugs, studying his uncle before looking back down at me with a warmth

that sends butterflies beating their wings against the inside of my stomach. “No. I doubt Stavros knows. If he did, he would be telling everyone that the marriage was fake, hoping that it would be enough to get me thrown from the throne.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:42 am

“Are you sure about that?” I move closer to him, leaning into him as people start to glance our way. “I think people are suspicious, at the very least. Given that you flaunt women.”

“I used to.” He tucks a crooked finger beneath my chin, tilting my head back. His lips brush against mine in the ghost of a kiss. “Until I met you.”

“Damn,” I say, slightly flustered as I take a step back and finish my drink. “That was almost believable.”

He laughs and takes my empty glass. “Go out to the gardens, and do your best to stop and talk to a few people on your way there. I’ll meet you outside in twenty minutes.”

I look at him, one eyebrow raised. “And why are we slipping out like you’ve got some mission in mind?”

“Because the only way we’re going to get through this party is if we have a good time. Now, mingle and then meet me by the fountain at the entrance to the rose garden.”

I stand there for a moment before leaving the alcove and going out to meet some of the guests. Butterflies in my stomach are relentless, making me nervous as I smile at several people I pass before Daphne waves me over.

Daphne smiles and nods to the woman beside her. “Amy, this is my aunt Cora.”

Cora opens her arms, pulling me into a tight hug. I’m stunned for a moment, not sure

what to think of what's happening right now.

She looks too young to be an aunt to people in their late twenties. I would've thought that she was one of their friends, maybe another cousin.

"It's so nice to meet you!" Cora smiles and holds me a bit away from her, gaze running over my dress before she reaches out and lets the silk of the skirt run through her fingers. "I must say, you have good taste. It's going to be so nice having younger people on the throne for once."

A man nearby snorts, shifting over to join us. "Cora, you know that the young people are only going to cause too much uproar."

"Davis, you've never given much thought to the future of Katastinia, and it's showing again." Cora gives me a wink before turning to Davis. "You know that we need fresh ideas, and younger people are the only ones with the confidence to bring that forward. Now, you need to tell me about this arts program you're proposing."

He turns his full attention to her with a bright smile, looking happy to bask in her attention.

I don't blame him either. Cora has hair the color of milk chocolate and bright blue eyes that would make any man melt for her. She's the kind of woman who shines when she walks into a room.

It's clear that she was born for this, and I'm just another person playing pretend.

Daphne nudges me. "Don't look so scared. She's much easier to get along with than my parents."

"She's young." The words come out without me thinking, my cheeks immediately on

fire. “I didn’t mean it like that, but your parents are older, and Xander’s parents would’ve obviously been older than us.”

“Cora was an affair baby just before Grandpa died. It was the scandal of the castle for a while, but my grandmother took her in like she was her own. She raised her out at the country estate without the influence of the castle weighing her down.”

“And I’m guessing the rest of you weren’t so lucky?”

She chuckles. “Yeah, you’ve got that right. I wish that I could’ve grown up the way Cora did. It would’ve been better than spending countless hours in etiquette and politics classes, but I like where I am now. I’ll never see the crown, but at least there isn’t pressure on me to produce an heir.”

“Wait a second, why would you never wear the crown? If Xander, your father, and brother all died, wouldn’t that make you next in line?” My stomach ties itself into a tight knot as I glance around the room. “And also, produce an heir?!”

“They don’t allow the crown to pass to female relatives. It’s an outdated rule, and Yorgos was going to overturn it, but he died before he could get it passed.” Daphne shrugs and smiles at a couple people who pass us. “As for producing an heir, the advisors are already talking about when they’re going to pressure you and Xander into having a child.”

I feel like I’m going to be sick. “Excuse me.”

Before she answers, I hurry to the doors that lead outside, pushing them open and taking a gasping breath when the chilly air greets me.

I didn’t think that having a child was going to be part of the deal. I read through those documents over and over again, and there was nothing there about having to have a

child with Xander.

Though I want children one day, I want to have them with someone I plan on being with for the rest of my life. I don't want to have a child and be forced to leave it in a foreign country for someone else to raise.

Hiking up my dress, I walk down the steps, trying not to trip over my heels. I head straight for the fountain and sit on the edge. My chest feels tight, and my breath comes in short bursts.

Xander appears in front of me with a bottle of champagne in his hand. "You look like you're going to be sick."

"You didn't tell me that the advisors were going to be pressuring us to have a kid."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:42 am

He cracks open the bottle and takes a swig before handing it to me. “Because I didn’t know about it either. Daphne just found me and told me that you came out here and why.”

“Well, I was supposed to meet you out here anyway.” I force a smile and take a sip from the bottle. “I’m not ready to have kids yet, Xander. Definitely not one that I would have to leave here while I go back to New Jersey or wherever it is I go after this.”

“First of all, I’m not going to let them push this on us, okay?” He sits beside me and loops an arm around my waist, fingers brushing against the sheer panel. “Second, I would never keep you from our hypothetical child.”

Shivers run down my spine as I look over at him. I try not to think about the way his fingers linger on the curve of my waist.

I shuffle a little closer to him. “I think I believe you.”

He takes the bottle back, smirking as he brings it to his lips. “Is that the only thing bothering you right now?”

“Not just that.” I cross one leg over the other, the slit of my dress opening wider.

Xander’s gaze drops to my leg before it meets mine, desire running rampant. “What else?”

“Yorgos wanted the crown to be able to pass to the women in the family line too.

Daphne said he was going to change the succession rules, but he died before he could.”

“And you want to know if I share the same thoughts?” He hands me back the bottle, and I take a sip while he considers it. “I don’t ever want to see a world where any potential daughters I might have don’t have the same options as any potential sons.”

“So that means that you’re going to be changing the line of succession?” I hand the bottle back to him.

“Yes.” He smiles and takes a long drink of the champagne before handing it back to me to drain the last bit.

“I’m glad. I think you’re going to do good things for the country.” I set the empty bottle to the side, swaying just a little. “And whoever Davis is, he’s a dickhead and doesn’t know anything.”

Xander leans a little closer to me, his mouth hovering inches from mine.

There’s laughter as the doors open and more people spill outside, drinks in their hands while they gaze up at the night sky.

“We should go get a little more privacy.” He stands and holds out his hand, laughing when I nearly stumble back into the fountain. “Maybe we should put you to bed.”

“No.” I put one hand on his arm to steady myself while reaching down and taking off my heels. “I’ve never been good at walking in these damn things.”

Xander chuckles and takes the heels from me, tossing them into one of the bushes near the stairs. “We can get those later. Now, come on.”

He pulls me into the labyrinth lined with rose bushes, their scent sweet even though the blooms aren't full yet.

I follow him deeper into the maze before he turns a corner, stopping at a dead end.

When he spins me around, pulling me close to him, my heart skips a beat.

His gaze is burning hot as he leans closer, arms banding around my waist. Xander pulls me flush against him as my hands go to his chest.

I'm torn between pushing him away and pulling him closer.

Luckily, I don't have to make the decision.

One moment we're locked in a staring contest, and the next his hand is sinking into my hair, cupping the back of my head and pulling me closer. His lips mold against mine, tongue sliding along my bottom lip.

Xander tastes like champagne and possibilities.

My hands climb higher, linking together behind his head. His hand slides down the slit in my dress, fingers tracing my skin before he picks me up.

I moan into the kiss as my legs lock around his waist.

His fingers sink into my flesh as I reach for the top buttons of his shirt, loosening them.

"If the two of you are done, you should probably come inside and say goodbye to the guests that are leaving."

Page 28

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:42 am

Xander groans, pulling away and setting me back down on my feet to turn and glare at Daphne. “Give us a minute.”

I dart past him. “Don’t worry about it. I’m ready. Let’s go say goodbye.”

Xander sighs somewhere behind me, but he doesn’t hurry to catch up.

Which is fine. I need to get my head clear, and then I need to remember that even though the way he looks at me sets me on fire, none of this is real.

It’s all going to come to an end, whether I like it or not.

CHAPTER 11

XANDER

Amy paces back and forth in the hallway, fanning herself with the list of approved questions for the television interview. “I don’t know if I can do this. I’ve never done an interview before.”

I grab her by the shoulders, stopping her. “You’ve read the questions they’re going to ask. We went over everything together. You can do this.”

The color drains from her face as she peeks out at the set and the massive cameras pointed at it. “I think you’re vastly overestimating what I can do.”

“You’ve got this, and if there’s anything that comes up that you don’t know how to

answer even after looking over the questions, I'll be there to save you."

I let go of her, feeling like I've been electrocuted.

A week ago, we took things a little too far. The bottle of champagne got to both of our heads.

And since then, she's been busy with lessons, but forty-eight hours isn't near enough to have her ready to talk to an interviewer on live television.

"You two have to see this." Daphne hurries over with her phone out, handing it to me.

AMERICAN WOMAN MARRYING KING FOR MONEY AND FAME. WILL
DRIVE CROWN TO RUIN.

To my horror, the article goes on to list everything from Amy's dead parents to comments from a "source" I'm guessing is her former boss. Nothing about the article paints her in a good light.

"We have to get this taken down." I hand the phone back to Daphne, deciding not to show Amy. She doesn't need more worry piled on her shoulders. She already looks like she's going to be sick with the thought of going out there and trying to charm people.

Amy arches an eyebrow. "Do I want to see that?"

"It's nothing good." I clear my throat as one of the assistants comes out and waves us forward. "We don't have time to worry about it either. We're on."

People are cheering as we're guided over to the edge of the set.

“Good evening. I’m Taryn Doukas, and this is Katastinia Tonight. Today, we’re going to be talking with King Xander Ariti and his fiancée, Amy Harlowe.”

The audience claps as I reach down and take Amy’s shaking hand in mine. She wipes her other palm on her black skirt before we step onto the set.

I smile to the crowd, waving as we head to the white couch to the side of Taryn. “It’s great to be here with all of you again. It seems like just yesterday we were doing an interview about my coronation.”

“Yes, well, we’re glad to have you back and with your stunning American fiancée in tow.” Taryn’s eyes sparkle with something I don’t like.

She looks like a shark circling the water on the hunt for her next kill.

“It’s a pleasure,” Amy says, her voice soft as she sits down on the couch and crosses her legs at the ankles. She folds her hands in her lap, but the posture looks so stiff and unnatural that it’s obvious it’s not her.

I recline in the seat, stretching my legs out in front of me and doing my best to get comfortable.

Taryn shuffles the cards in her lap. “I’d like to talk about what the entire country is wondering right now.”

“Well, we’d be more than happy to answer any questions,” I say, reaching over and taking Amy’s hand, lacing our fingers together. When I smile at her, the crowd starts whispering to each other.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:42 am

“I think we should start with the allegations that Amy is only marrying you for your money and the power that comes along with being queen. Amy, what do you have to say to this?”

Amy pales, looking to me, her mouth opening and closing a couple times. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Leaning over, I press my lips to her temple. “There was an article put out about you.”

Amy forces a smile onto her face as she looks at Taryn and then the audience. “I don’t know what this article says about me, but I’m here because I love Xander, and we decided that it was time to take our relationship public.”

I grin and lift her hand to my mouth, kissing her knuckles. “If anything, it took too much time to get her to accept the ring.”

Taryn claps her hands, a fake smile on her face. “The two of you are cute together, but the country is wondering if this is really love or if there’s a scheme in the works. It wouldn’t be the first time a woman came abroad to marry a king. Now, I must wonder if the death of her parents and her grandmother play into this, or if it’s a scheme she came up with before they died.”

I whip around, glaring at Taryn. “I love my fiancée. I don’t know what the hell you think you’re doing making these accusations, but this is the last time I’ll be making an appearance on this show.”

Amy is frozen as I get to my feet. I tug her hand lightly and she snaps out of it,

getting to her feet and following me off the set.

The crowd starts booing, but whether it's for us or Taryn, I don't know or care.

Jorge steps in front of us. "What do you think you're doing? Get back out there and salvage this."

I drop Amy's hand, stepping between her and Jorge. "None of that was on the approved list."

"You had to see this coming. If the two of you can't take it, then clearly you both need a thicker skin. This is what the media does." Jorge crosses his arms, glaring around me at Amy. "If she can't handle this, then that's her problem."

"Maybe her media training should've been more extensive than two days," I say, looming over him until he takes a step back. "Or maybe we should've known that Taryn saw the article and was going to ask questions that weren't on the list."

Jorge glowers at me. "You should've been prepared for these questions. You know what journalists do when they get information that could give them a career bump."

"No!" My voice cracks through the backstage area. "We're not going to blame me or Amy for this. You were supposed to have this under control. You were the one who assured me that Taryn was a good interviewer and would stick to the list. She made this mess, so I suggest you speak with her about how to clean it up."

Amy steps around both of us, running for Daphne when she appears at the end of the hallway. Daphne hugs her tight, whispering something to her and guiding her down the hall.

I take a step back as people start to gather around. "Fix this."

“I’ll fix this one, but I suggest you do something about Amy,” Jorge growls. “One wrong move from her, and this entire situation is going to blow up in your face.”

CHAPTER 12

AMY

I take a shuddering breath, trying to hold back the tears that spring to my eyes as I watch another clip of my name being dragged through the mud.

I have nearly two dozen missed calls from Gabby, but I can’t explain what’s happening yet. Not to her.

She’s going to be disappointed that I didn’t tell her myself, and then she’s going to want to hunt down everyone online who has something negative to say about me.

Xander walks into the library and takes the phone from my hand, setting it on a high shelf. “No more. We’re not going to sit in here feeling miserable when we could be working towards making things better.”

“I don’t see how anything is going to get better.”

He pulls out his own phone and puts on a slow tune that reminds me vaguely of the way an autumn night feels. It’s as if the melody is made of colorful leaves drifting on the wind.

“It’s time to teach you one of the traditional dances. We’re going to be expected to do it at a charity event that’s coming up.” Xander holds out his hand, already looking light on his feet, though all he’s done is take a step forward.

I’ve never felt more incapable of doing something in my life.

There hasn't been a single time where I've danced in a way that doesn't involve rolling my hips and hoping it's enough to convince someone to buy me another shot. One more drink to convince me that I can dance and that I'm not making a fool of myself.

And now I'm sober, and I've never felt more uncoordinated in my life.

Page 30

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:42 am

Xander leads me through the steps several times, and by the end of it, my feet are aching, and I still have no clue what I'm doing.

It's lively and full of switching partners — nothing I can do while standing on Xander's feet.

We sit on the ground, chests heaving and sweat sticking hair to the back of my neck. The corners of my eyes feel prickly as I lay back and stare at the painted ceiling and the towering bookshelves that stretch up to it.

"This charity event is going to be a nightmare if it hinges on my dancing," I say. "Xander, maybe you should rethink this and find someone who can keep up with everything the job requires. That person isn't me."

Xander pushes to his feet. "I think we might just be starting in the wrong place."

"I don't think there is a right place. I think that this entire thing is going to blow up in our faces."

"Getting someone else isn't an option because I don't want anyone else."

And there it is, that damn fluttering of attraction that I stuff back down into the pits of the earth where it belongs.

I roll back my shoulders as I stand, blinking the tears away. "I still don't know if I can do this. I don't have the first clue about how to do anything a royal does."

He grins and bows low, throwing his arm out to the side. "I'm at your service."

When he gives me that charming smile, I'm sure that our business-only arrangement is going to be the death of me.

Xander straightens and grabs one of the books from the shelf, holding it out in front of me. "The next lesson is going to be the history of Katastinia."

I groan, running my hand through my hair. "Are you sure that's where we should go next? I still have no clue how to dance, and after the interview yesterday, it's clear that I have no idea how to talk to the press either."

"Nobody has any idea how to talk to the press," he says, tucking the book beneath his arm and pulling another off the shelf. "You should've seen me when I first started doing interviews."

"You were probably a child."

"I'm talking about the ones I started doing once I was twenty. You would think after ten years of being made to do interviews, I would've been better at speaking in front of people, but I used to have this stammer when I got nervous. Spent years working with a speech therapist to get rid of it."

"You did?"

He grabs a third book before heading to a table with two cream armchairs near the windows. "I did. It used to be the talk of the country. All of them were glad that Yorgos was going to be king since he was the one who had it together."

"Must've hurt to hear that." I sit down in a chair, tucking one leg beneath me.

Xander drags the other chair over beside me, dropping two of the books onto the coffee table and opening the other one. “It wasn’t great. I swear, I used to find new ways to embarrass myself in front of the media multiple times a week back then.”

“As bad as being called a gold-digging orphan on live television?”

“I told you that we were going to have to use the orphan card eventually.” Xander smirks and opens the book, handing it to me. “We’re going to have to start back at the beginning, when Katastinia was a baby country in the grand scheme of things. It’s nearly nine hundred years since my family took the throne.”

“How the hell do you hold onto power in a country for nine hundred years?” I grab the book, skimming through the first few paragraphs on the page.

Sure enough, he’s telling the truth.

Xander shrugs and shifts closer to me. “From what I’ve been told, my family has always seen the value in their people and doing right by them. Now, maybe that didn’t apply to everyone who has sat on the throne, but the family isn’t afraid to force the issue of abdication either.”

I hum, flipping through more of the pages, skimming through the history. “I can read these before bed. I want to know how to do the other things. Ones that aren’t going to get me dragged through the media.”

“It gets old eventually. They find someone else to latch onto.”

I close the book with a dull thud and set it on top of the others. “I don’t think you understand how bad this is for me.”

He hesitates like he’s reaching for me before pulling his hand back. “I’m never going

to understand exactly what they're putting you through, and I wish that I did. However, I do know how bad it was for me."

"Yeah?"

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:42 am

“In addition to the stammer, there was the constant comparison to my brother and the fact that I was never going to be good enough. No matter what I did or said, it wasn’t enough.”

“Why did it matter to them? You’re different people.”

“Yes, but to the interviewers, it makes for better media if they analyze every misstep you make. They twist everything until it’s one tangled web, and you don’t know which way is up and which is down.”

“And we just have to put up with that?”

“There’s not much we can do about it.” Xander gives me a sympathetic smile. “The public is always going to have their opinions.”

“Okay, so how do you do it?”

He presses his lips together and looks out the window at the gardens, the sun shining high above the treetops and the roses, not a gust of wind in sight.

“There’s a farmers market in town today. When I think I’m out of touch with the people, I like to go and spend my time with them.”

“I thought we weren’t supposed to do that. The security team told me that it was a bad idea to spend much time in town.”

“They follow orders from the head of security, who takes his orders from Jorge.

Beyond that, they've always been overly cautious, and I think after the interview yesterday, it would do the people good to get to know you and see that you're just another woman."

I light up, getting to my feet when he does. "Are we going out?"

He nods and heads for the door. "Come on. It's going to be a task to give the guards the slip."

Laughing, I tilt my face to the sun, basking in the rays. Xander walks along beside me, his hand shooting out to catch me as I stumble over a rock on the ground.

He shakes his head as I regain my balance. "You're going to get us caught before we even get to town."

"Nobody knows we left, and we're maybe a few dozen feet from town now. Just be happy that we got out of there."

Xander looks back at the castle. "Look, you need to do your best to not draw too much attention to yourself. Even though being in town is safe enough, you never know who people are."

"Do you worry this much when you sneak out on your own, or is this reserved for me?"

"I worry about you," he says. "I know what I'm doing when I go out, and I know how not to get in trouble with the palace. You don't."

Snorting, I look at him over my shoulder. "You seem to forget one quick search of your name brings up hundreds of pictures of all the trouble you have gotten into."

“You’ve been looking me up?” He stuffs his hands into the pockets of his shorts, the corner of his mouth tipping upward.

“I have to know what I’m getting into, since I didn’t know much about it when I first agreed.” I nudge him with my shoulder playfully, grinning when he rolls his eyes.

“Would you have changed anything if you knew about my reputation beforehand?”

“To be fair, you did tell me that you slept with a lot of women,” I say as we enter the town.

Heads turn and people whisper to each other as we make our way down the street to the lines of colorful booths set up outside shops.

Beatriz is the only familiar face I see, rushing out of the doorway of her café and over to me. “You didn’t tell me that you moved here for the prince.”

I wince and glance at the people watching us. “I wanted to meet you as myself.”

She grins and pulls me into a warm hug, guiding me into the café. “Come on. There’s a new vanilla iced latte recipe I’m trying out, and I could use a couple guinea pigs.”

Xander follows us, but he hesitates at the doorway. His eyes flit around the little building, taking in the whitewashed stone walls and the aged wooden floors. It’s like he’s looking for a threat in every inch of the room before deciding whether or not it’s safe to step inside.

Beatriz scurries behind the counter. “The pair of you take a seat and never mind the people watching. They’re all too nosy for their own good.”

Her words boom through the space, and the customers at other tables turn back to

their own conversations. People still gawk in the window, but Beatriz rolls her eyes and glares at them until they leave.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:42 am

The espresso machine whirs as she pulls two shots before mixing up the iced lattes and bringing them over to the table.

She pulls over a third chair and sits down, crossing one leg over the other. “You’re going to have to tell me how the two of you met. This one here didn’t tell me a thing about you, Your Majesty.”

Xander sips his drink, gaze flitting to me like he’s unsure of being here. “Call me Xander, please,” he says.

“Good.” Beatriz nods her approval, leaning forward and folding her arms on the table. “I think Your Majesty sounds pompous, and from what I’ve seen of the interviews you’ve done since taking the throne, you’re anything but.”

I wrap my hands around the plastic coffee cup, wishing that the ground would open and swallow me whole. “Beatriz, you know people are going to be upset if they hear you talking like that.”

She clicks her tongue. “I don’t care what they think, and you shouldn’t either. People are always going to have their opinions, and to be honest, what they think of you is none of your business.”

Chuckling, Xander holds his coffee, tipping it toward her. “This is the best coffee I’ve ever had. You’re going to have to come to the castle and teach the others how to make it this way.”

Beatriz beamed. “Not going to happen. It’s an old family recipe, and it dies with me.”

Xander groans before launching into another conversation with her while I just watch the two of them.

If every interaction we have with the public is this smooth, maybe being the future queen will be easier than I thought.

I step through the glass doors that lead to the pool, dropping my towel on one of the loungers.

The day in town was long, and I spoke to more people than I think I've met throughout the rest of my life. All I want to do is go for a swim and then spend the rest of the night in my chambers.

My chambers.

That still sounds so wrong. I don't know why there's both a sitting room and a study attached to my bedroom and en suite, but there it is.

And then after the marriage, I'll be moving into Xander's room. We're going to have to act like husband and wife.

Maybe I could convince him to move the desk out of his study and put a bed in there. It wouldn't have to be large, just something I could curl up in at the end of the night without thinking that my attraction to him is going to ruin everything between us.

I sigh and step to the edge of the pool, toes dangling before I push off and arch my body, diving into the cool water.

When I surface, Xander is sitting on the edge in nothing but a pair of black swim trunks, showing off the smattering of hair that trails from his chest all the way down beyond his waistband.

There's a tightening in my core as I dip back beneath the water.

It's not as effective as a cold shower, but it's a moment to get myself together and stop thinking about the afternoon we spent together.

"What are you out here thinking so hard about?" Xander asks as he slides off the edge and into the water.

I slick my hair back from my face. "Nothing, really."

"Doesn't seem that way to me." He stays in the shallow end, floating on his back.

I swim closer to him, my heart hammering in my chest. "I guess I'm thinking about everything going on. It feels like I'm not getting it, but then when we were in the village today, that felt natural."

"Why?" He tilts his head back to glance at me, concern in his eyes.

"Beatriz is easy to be around. She treats me like I'm Amy and not just this woman who showed up to marry you and run a country she knows nothing about. Daphne and you treat me like that too, of course, but you're pretty much the only ones. With everything else, it feels like I'm an invader and people are just waiting for me to leave."

Xander stands up, droplets of water running down the planes of his chest. "I don't want you to leave."

"I'm not going to."

"Because of the money?" he asks, his tone even, though the look he's giving me is searching.

I fight past the lump in my throat. “Not just because of the money.”

Page 33

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:42 am

The muscle in his jaw ticks, nostrils flaring for a moment, but he says nothing, instead moving closer to me.

His hands skim my waist. Sparks dance across my skin, and my heart races.

It's only been a few days, but it feels like the man in front of me has buried himself deep into my soul. There's no untangling the two of us.

Right here is where it feels like I was meant to be.

At least it does with the rest of the world fading away, leaving only the two of us in the shallow end of the pool, standing inches from each other but nobody saying a word.

And then one of us moves closer to the other.

It feels like I'm free-falling as his lips press against mine. His fingers dig into the flesh at my hips as I run my hands up his muscled biceps, fingers sinking into his hair.

I tug him closer as his teeth sink into my bottom lip. My mouth opens, and his tongue slides against mine as he walks us backward.

The edge of the pool hits the middle of my shoulder blades, digging in as Xander gets impossibly closer to me.

His thigh presses between my legs as I grind against him, my pussy pulsing with need

as he reaches for the knot at the nape of my neck.

My bikini top falls away, my nipples tightening as his hands slide lower, undoing the knot around my waist.

Xander leans back, ripping the fabric from my body and tossing it out of the pool. “You’re beautiful.”

His large hands cup my breasts, thumbs brushing over my nipples.

When he dips his head to take one into his mouth, I slide my hand between us and into the waistband of his swim trunks.

His cock throbs in my hand as I wrap it around his silky skin, slowly sliding while he tugs on my nipples. He teases the stiff peaks while I brush my thumb over the head of his erection.

Xander groans, his hips rocking forward. “You’re going to be the death of me. I hope you know that.”

“We should probably stop before this goes too far,” I say, gasping as he slips the fabric at my core to the side, pushing his fingers into me.

He presses them against my inner walls, rocking deeper with each thrust. “Do you want to stop?”

“No.” My nails dig into his chest as I try to hold on, head tilting back as his thumb presses against my clit. “Don’t stop.”

His fingers rock faster, driving harder and deeper into me. I roll my hips in time with his movements, trying to relieve the feeling building at the base of my spine.

I grip his cock harder as his mouth closes over mine again, the kiss hot and slanting as I come on his fingers.

Waves of pleasure crash over me as he keeps thrusting. It's only once my body stops shaking that he pulls his fingers out, his hands going to my hips, tugging at the strings there.

The fabric falls away and I slide his swim trunks down his legs, desperate for him.

Xander grabs my thighs, lifting me up, keeping me pinned between his body and the wall.

I wrap my legs around his waist. "Please."

With a smirk, he inches into me, head dropping to my neck. He sucks on my pulse as I wriggle my hips, trying to take more of him while he keeps holding back.

Xander chuckles, teeth grazing my jaw. "You're soaked."

"I need you." I tug on his hair, pulling his head back until he's looking at me. "Now."

His hips rock forward as he buries himself to the hilt. My pussy clenches tight around him as I roll my hips, getting used to the feeling of him filling me in a way nobody else ever has.

It feels like we were made to fit together.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:42 am

“I want you to come on my cock,” he says, his voice raspy in my ear as he rocks his hips harder and faster.

The bite of the edge of the pool into my skin only turns me on more. I’m aching as he drives deeper, each thrust sending him rubbing up against my clit until it feels like I’m about to explode.

Xander’s hand drifts up to the side of my throat, his thumb drifting over my pulse.

It’s the casual and possessive touch paired with a hard roll of his hips that sends me crashing over the edge of another orgasm, pussy clenching around him as he throbs inside me.

Xander comes a moment later, his cock stiffening and pushing deeper into me, where he holds himself until we’re both spent.

When he pulls out and looks down at me, my heart starts crashing.

“I don’t think I can go back to my chambers without you tonight,” he says.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I run my hands up his chest, wanting to spend the rest of the night wrapped around his body. “Take me to bed, then.”

His grin spreads wide as he takes me by the hand and leads me out of the pool area, stopping long enough to grab towels from the loungers before we race up the stairs.

Laughing, we stumble into his chambers, losing the towels as we move through the

sitting room and into his bedroom.

As we fall into the bed, all I can do is hope that he's still next to me when I wake up in the morning.

CHAPTER 13

XANDER

"I have to go to a meeting," I say, though I make no move to climb out of bed.

Amy laughs and rolls over, grabbing my pillow and hugging it to her as she closes her eyes. "You should go. They're going to want to talk about the interview, along with the pictures that you know people were taking in town yesterday."

"Which sounds like yet another reason to stay in bed."

Getting up, I stretch before heading for the closet, the towel from my shower earlier still draped over the back of the door. Trying to get dressed was a little difficult when Amy seemed to prefer the idea of sending my clothing sailing back to the floor.

I grab some slacks and a black polo shirt, hauling them on over my boxers. After rooting through the drawers for some socks and a belt, I finish getting dressed and step back into the main bedroom.

Amy has the silk sheet gathered against her, the deep blue fabric making her hair glow like flames flickering against the night. "Have fun at the meeting."

I pause, still staring at her. "I think you should start staying in here with me. I could take the couch if you want, but if it gets out of the castle that we still have different chambers, people are going to ask questions."

“I thought it was normal for kings and queens to have separate chambers.”

Shrugging, I grab my watch from the nightstand and put it on. “Maybe for some of them, but I don’t want to be the kind of man who spends every night away from my wife. It might work for some people, but I enjoy connecting with you at the end of a long day.”

“And if I asked you to sleep on the couch or to take turns on the couch, you would be okay with that?”

I nod. “Whatever you feel is best. I don’t want to push this too far, and despite recent events, I know this is just business between the two of us.”

Except it doesn’t feel like just business anymore.

There’s no way that I’m going to tell her that, though. Not when this arrangement is so new.

“Sure, I’ll move into your chambers,” Amy says, a teasing smile on her face as she gets out of bed with the sheet wrapped around her, heading over to the books on the mantel above the fireplace. “But right now, I think I’m going to stay here and read before Daphne hunts me down.”

“You have a good time with that.” I fight the urge to walk over and kiss her before leaving, instead heading for the door.

What I feel for her could just be a combination of fascination and lust. She treats me like a normal human instead of someone ruling over a country.

She doesn’t seem to care about the fame or the fortune, but I’ll be the first to admit that I don’t know her well. We’ve only known each other for a couple weeks.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:42 am

And right now, there are more important things to deal with than what could be the beginning of a relationship.

Atticus sighs and leans forward, his palm hitting the conference table. “I don’t think we’re going to get anywhere with this today, Jorge. You’re driving everyone insane.”

Jorge glares at him. “I spoke to Daphne this morning. She said that Amy was coming along in her etiquette lessons, which is in direct contrast to the disaster that was the Katastinia Tonight interview. She needs to get it together.”

I glower at him as the rest of the room falls silent. “I already told you that what happened at the interview wasn’t her fault. I don’t know who Taryn Doukas thinks she is, but turning to non-approved questions based on vicious lies spread by the media would throw anyone off, especially someone who is new to this world.”

“You want to protect her, and I understand that,” Jorge says, his voice soft and slow like he’s trying to placate a child.

“As you should too!” I stand, hands slamming on the table to cut him off as his mouth opens again. “Your job is to protect both the interests of the people and the interests of the monarchy. You’re going to find out who gave Taryn those stories before she went on, and then you’re going to source who at the station gave her the green light to go off script.”

Jorge’s face becomes pinched, his mouth disappearing into a barely visible line. “I don’t think you understand.”

“No, I do understand.”

Atticus groans, waving to the rest of the council. “You can leave. This will be a core council meeting only.”

The rest of the provincial representatives stand up and leave the room, leaving me with Jorge and Atticus.

Jorge rounds on Atticus immediately. “How can you sit here and help defend him when you know that this is going to be a disaster?”

“You were the one that suggested it in the first place.” Atticus reaches for the tablet in the center of the room, nodding to the image the projector is casting on the whiteboard. “Look at these.”

Atticus pulls up a search of my name and Amy’s. Though there are a few nasty articles about her only wanting my money, there are more that compliment the two of us together.

Most of them seem to be in favor of our engagement.

I give Jorge a smug smirk and sit down. “Just because Amy isn’t the woman you would’ve chosen doesn’t mean that she’s the wrong person for the country.”

Beyond the smugness, there’s still hair that stands on the back of my neck the more I look at the pictures of the two of us.

Some of them are from brief outings in the afternoon where we were walking on the private beach or through the small area of forest at the back of the castle.

Most of them were taken in moments I believed to be private.

Too many of the pictures showcase the way I look at her, and I wonder if it's as obvious to anyone else.

We're just trying to sell the relationship to the media. My family must believe it's real.

Atticus sits back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. "While Amy might need a little more polishing, I don't think we want to scrub away her personality. I was in town late last night after the two of you left, and all I heard were people singing her praise. The farmers love her."

"I should hope so. I carried home three bags of their produce. And I know that after her day's etiquette lessons are done, she plans to spend the afternoon baking."

Somehow yesterday, she managed to get Beatriz to hand over an old family recipe for little custard cakes with bourbon-glazed strawberries on top.

My stomach growls just thinking about them.

Jorge claps his hands together once, drawing my attention. "You need to focus. This isn't another situation that you can just coast through and hope that everything will be fine."

The jab strikes exactly where he wanted it to.

It's a subtle reminder that I'm not the king the country wanted. My family never planned for me to be on the throne beyond Yorgos dying before his first child was of age.

Which reminds me.

I look between the pair of them. “Enough about me and Amy. I want to talk about the future of the monarchy and all that entails.”

Jorge’s eyes widen. “I didn’t know you were thinking of having children so soon. Of course, she has to give you an heir before the divorce.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:42 am

“No, she doesn’t. That wasn’t part of the contract, and I won’t force it to be either.” I grab the tablet and open a file that I sent along this morning. “I want to revise the line of succession. No more first male heir. The crown is going to pass to the monarch’s eldest child, regardless of gender.”

“Not going to happen.” Jorge shakes his head, gray hair scattering like leaves on the breeze. “You can’t just change the line of succession.”

“Why not? As of my coronation, I’m king, and I believe that means I can do what I want.” I gesture to the file on the screen. “This is the outdated line of succession policy. You both know that Yorgos was planning on addressing this as well.”

The color drains from Jorge’s face like he didn’t anticipate me knowing about the proposed policy change. “We weren’t truly considering that.”

“Well, now we are.” I get up, pacing to the windows and looking out over the castle grounds.

Amy is out at the stables with Daphne, and by the looks of things, Daphne is trying to teach her how to ride.

My heart hammers through my chest when Amy throws her head back laughing as she manages to get on the horse.

Turning from the window, I give Jorge a stern look. “I’m not going to be met with resistance on this. We can address it with the council, but this isn’t me asking for permission. I will be changing the line of succession, and there’s nothing else to say

about the matter.”

Atticus strokes a hand over his jaw. “I think it’s a good thing, but I think we need to address it in the right way. You know that the council is a bunch of older people stuck in their ways.”

He says the last part with a pointed glance at Jorge, and I struggle to hold back a grin.

I know that the most difficult part of passing the policy change is going to be Jorge. He may not have been this difficult to deal with if Yorgos was still alive, but he seems hellbent on making everything I do an uphill battle.

And in a way, I understand.

I wasn’t the king the country wanted.

When I was born, I was the spare to my brother. If anything happened to him, that was when I would take the throne. If he didn’t want to speak at an event, it was left to me.

Although, Yorgos liked the events. He loved being at the center of it all and serving his people in whatever way he could.

I was left to my own devices, and now that’s coming back to bite me.

Jorge rises from his chair and begins pacing from one side of the room to the other. “I don’t know how you think this is going to go over. The Ariti family has ruled over Katastinia for almost a millennium. You want to end that by changing the line of succession?”

“I want to prolong that. Right now, when there isn’t a male born into the current

monarch's family, he has to pass it to the next relative. If I die without having a son, the monarchy passes to Stavros, who we can all agree would see this country burn to the ground for his own self-fulfilling prophecy."

Atticus nods. "Dad has plans for when he takes the throne since he thinks that you're going to abdicate, and none of them are going to move Katastinia forward with the times."

"Exactly," I say. "Now, if I had a daughter, but the throne couldn't go to her, we would still be looking at Stavros taking the throne. Which isn't going to happen."

Jorge stops at the window, his body tensing and arms dropping to his sides as he looks at me. "Do you think now is the right time? We're busy planning for your wedding, which is rapidly approaching, and then there's the task of trying to teach the American how to appear at royal events."

"Her name is Amy, and you will start referring to her as such. If you cannot do that, then you will explain to the rest of the council why you cannot do so," I say, ice in my voice.

This game Jorge is playing is getting old. It might be his job to challenge me and make me think, but he's pushing it too far.

I wish Yorgos were alive. He would know how to get Jorge to fall into line.

Jorge sighs. "Now isn't a good time to change the line of succession."

"And in your mind, there's never going to be a good time," Atticus says, jumping in before I can. "You think that sticking to the old ways is for the best, but times are changing, as is the country. We need to change along with it."

“I’ll think about this, but we really do need to think about the best way to put this to the rest of the council.” Jorge’s voice is strained, his face red.

“You can think about the best way to put this forward all you want, but I expect this news to be broken to the rest of them by the end of the day.”

Getting up, I head out of the conference room and down the hall.

Atticus catches up to me as I round a corner toward the door that leads out to the stables. “Do you really think dealing with him that way was for the best? You know he’s a vindictive little man, and he’s going to make sure this is the biggest uphill battle you’ve ever had.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:42 am

“Try not to stress yourself out about it.” I clap him on the shoulder as his phone starts ringing. “Sooner or later, Jorge will come around, and he’ll see that I’m right like I usually am.”

Atticus scoffs and shakes his head, pushing open the doors to the stables. “In your imagination, probably.”

“Honestly, I doubt even there.”

My cousin laughs, drawing Amy’s attention as she walks her horse slowly back and forth in front of the barn. Atticus nods to her, his smile falling slightly.

I elbow him in the side. “I don’t know what your problem is with her, but you need to get it together.”

“There’s no problem with her. I just know that when she leaves, you’re going to be wrecked,” Atticus says, then groans as his phone starts ringing. “I bet a hundred dollars that Jorge is calling us back for a full council meeting.”

“He would be.” I roll my eyes as Atticus checks his messages. “I told him to do something with the idea that I was going to spend the rest of my day the way I wanted, and now I’m going to have to get reamed out by the council over and over.”

“Maybe not over and over, but I’m sure you’re not going to hear the end of this,” he says, hauling open the door and gesturing into the castle. “After you.”

I sigh. “What are the chances of me running away and you not telling them that I

did?”

“If I have to suffer, so do you.”

As he leads me inside, I’m sure it’s for the best.

If I spend the rest of the day with Amy and avoid all the other duties I have to fulfill, someone is going to have something to say about it.

I’m going to give the council more than enough to complain about over the next two and a half years. Paperwork doesn’t need to be one of them.

And it would be good to spend some time away from Amy.

I can’t lose myself in her only to wake up one morning and find her gone.

CHAPTER 14

AMY

Gabby’s face fills my screen, her margarita untouched in front of her. “I can’t believe you’ve been engaged for three weeks and didn’t tell me. I had to find out while scrolling on my feed.”

I wince and shrink back in my chair, kicking my feet up on the coffee table. “I know I should’ve told you sooner, but honestly it still seems insane. Getting engaged to a man I just met on the beach is something wild. It’s not me.”

She scoffs, taking a big sip of her drink. “Yeah, sure, let’s keep pretending this is some random man and not the king of Katastinia. That’s a great idea.”

“I feel like we’ve entered a very sarcastic place right now.” I bite back a smile as she rolls her eyes, but the guilt still eats at me. “I know I should’ve told you about him, but there’s never been a good time. The last few weeks have been a whirlwind.”

“Do you love him?” Gabby asks, her tone stern as she leans closer to the camera. “Because if you love him, I’m all for this, but if not, then I don’t know what you’re doing.”

“I think I will, in time.”

I bite my lip. I haven’t told Gabby that this whole arrangement is fake. And even though there’s this part of me that wants to tell her the truth, I can’t.

This is the first time it’s felt like I’m catching up to my friends in years, and I’m not going to ruin it.

Not yet. Maybe not ever.

Is a divorce or a massive lie better?

“All right, so that’s what I don’t understand, then. Why are you marrying this man?”

“I just... I want an adventure. We like each other, and when I’m with him, it just feels right.”

There.

That part is the truth, at least.

Gabby takes a loud slurp of her drink. “You don’t have to sound so sad about it.”

“I’m not sad.” I put my feet on the edge of the chair, looking at the tablet. “I just... I don’t know. I thought that a whirlwind romance was going to be more fun than this, but it feels like he’s spent the last week avoiding me. I don’t know what to do about it.”

“Hold on, you’re marrying a man who isn’t obsessed with you? I’m going to book my plane ticket right now, and then I’m going to come kick his butt.”

“The guards would probably throw you in prison for trying.” The corner of my mouth twitches. “But thank you. I’m sure it’s just that he’s busy with work.”

“I have no idea, but if you ever want to pull a runner and come home, let me know. I’ll come get you if I have to.”

“I appreciate that, but I don’t think I’m going to be pulling a runner.” I get up from the chair and grab the tablet, heading out to the balcony that overlooks the edge of a cliff and the waters below. “I think I would rather stay here and see this out. It feels like it could be the start of something really special.”

“Well, then, tell me about what’s been happening,” Gabby says. “Do they have you in some sort of queen lessons? I doubt that they would just make a woman from New Jersey into a queen without teaching her how to behave like one. No offense or anything.”

I laugh and set the tablet on one of the patio tables, leaning on the railing beside the table as Gabby looks out over the view through the tablet screen. “None taken. I know I’m not queen material.”

“You are, though.”

Rolling my eyes, I shift the screen so we’re looking at each other. “You’re my best friend and you have to think the world of me, but let’s face it. He had to have hit his head pretty hard to think that I was someone a country was going to want to follow.”

Gabby scoffs. “I would follow you to the ends of the earth, and if this man that I’ve never met wants to marry you, then clearly you must be up to the task. Now, I need to know how the two of you met.”

“We crossed paths a couple times before meeting again on the beach. I met him back home one day. He was in Newark for work, and he stayed at the hotel. We got to talking and exchanged numbers, but I had no clue who he was. All that he would tell me was that he was in human relations.”

“You can hardly blame him for that.”

“I don’t. It just might have been nice to know that the king of an entire country had taken an interest in me.”

I hate this.

Lying to Gabby is awful. There’s a bitter taste in my mouth. My stomach lurches from one side to the other like a boat trapped in the middle of a hurricane.

I should tell her the truth. It isn’t too late to tell her that this is all fake and in less than two and a half years, I’m going to be out of here and moving on with my life.

My best friend leans forward, cupping her chin in her hands. “I want to know everything about him. Did you like him when you first met?”

“Well enough. He was vague about a lot of things, but I was too busy with work to pay much mind to that.” I sigh and sit down on one of the loungers beside the table, turning to face her and crossing my legs beneath me. “Maybe I should’ve paid more attention.”

“I’m going to need you to take a moment to breathe. Your emotions are all over the place with this. Now give me gut instinct, yes or no answers only, got it?”

“Yes.”

Her eyebrows pull together, a small line forming between them. “Are you happy?”

“Yes,” I say without a moment of hesitation.

“Good. Now, do you think you could fall for Xander? Despite the fact that his work is always going to come first, and his loyalty is going to be to his people above all else?”

“Yes.”

At least, if falling for him weren’t a problem in the first place, I think I could.

However, if I fall for him, I’m going to find my heart irrevocably broken at the end of our relationship. I’ll go back to New Jersey with the knowledge that there’ll always be a piece of me in Katastinia.

Gabby’s hands drop, her fingers drumming on the table in front of her. “Do you think this marriage is going to be a good thing?”

I hesitate for too long and she catches it, her eyes narrowing.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:42 am

“You’re going to need to tell me the truth about what’s going on in your head right now.” Gabby leans closer, eyes narrowing and expression stern. “That is not the face of a woman who’s counting down the days until she walks down the aisle.”

“Am I supposed to be overjoyed when I feel this overwhelmed?” I run a hand through my hair, trying to combat the breeze that keeps tugging on it. “I think this marriage might be the best thing I’ve ever done, but there’s a part of me that worries it’s going to be over before it starts.”

“Why?”

“Xander’s been avoiding me. From what I can tell, there have been some tough meetings with his council. He’s not coming to bed at night. I think he’s spending most of his time in his study in the other wing of the castle since he certainly isn’t spending time in the one in our chambers.”

Before Gabby can say anything, the hinges of the doors behind me creak and my heart leaps.

I turn, hoping to see Xander there.

Daphne gives me a sympathetic smile and steps to the side.

With a sigh, I turn to the tablet. “I have to go. More queen lessons. I’ll talk to you later, okay? And you should come out here for the wedding. There’s no way I can do this without you.”

“I’ll be there.” Gabby ends the call, leaving me feeling empty inside.

Heels click against the stone as Daphne walks over, sitting on the lounge beside me. “You’re having a hard time here, aren’t you?”

“I wouldn’t say hard, but I thought a fake marriage was going to be a lot easier,” I say, keeping my tone low.

If there’s one thing I’ve learned from endless hours of lessons, it’s that you never know who is going to be listening in on the other side of the wall.

Daphne loops her arm around my shoulders. “You have a friendship though. That’s more than some couples can say.”

“It feels like I should want more than that, though. And I just lied to my best friend. Gabby kept me going when I was at my lowest, and now I’m lying to her.”

“We do what we must.” Daphne gives me another squeeze before standing. “Come on. You’ve been working hard all week, and it’s time we had some fun.”

“Run!” Daphne takes off sprinting down the stone street, dipping between two buildings.

I follow her, chest burning as I laugh, not looking over my shoulder.

Eventually the security team will figure out we lost them two streets ago, but Daphne promised everything was going to be fine.

Now I’m wondering exactly how much trouble she’s going to get us in.

There is no way this is going to go well, especially once Xander finds out that we left,

but Daphne is right. I do need a bit of fun.

I can't remember the last time — other than moving to Katastinia — when I left all my responsibilities and let loose a little.

All I was capable of when my parents died was losing myself. Same thing when Grandma passed, too.

And now I'm running through the streets with Daphne, laughing as she skids around another corner.

She stops at a door nearly hidden in a stone wall, the light of the neon sign casting a pink glow down on her face.

"This is the place." She knocks on the door as I lean over, hands on my knees while I try to get a deep breath in through the laughter.

The door swings open and a man the size of a wall steps into our path. He takes one look at the pretty smile Daphne flashes him before stepping to the side and letting us in.

Once we're in the building, a pounding bass fills my head and strobe lights flash around the room.

Smoke pours out from machines onto the dance floor, weaving around the writhing bodies.

Daphne takes my hand and tugs me over to the bar. "We're going to need four shots of tequila to get this party started."

I pull down the hem of my short black dress. "Are you sure we're not going to get

caught?”

Page 40

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:42 am

“Oh, we’re definitely going to get caught.” She leans against the glossy black bar top as the bartender slides four shots in front of us and two slices of lime. “Xander is probably going to kill me for this little stunt, but I think it’s worth it.”

Grinning, I grab one of the shots and throw it back before biting into the lime. “If we’re going to be given hell anyway, we may as well have a good time.”

“Here’s to that!” She takes her shot and throws it back.

We take the other shots together before going to dance.

I run my hands over my body to the music, letting the beat take me away. My hips sway in time with the rhythm, the bass rattling my bones.

The longer I dance, and the more drinks Daphne brings over, the less and less I feel like myself.

I’m no longer the woman who’s spent so long holding herself together that she forgot to have fun along the way.

I don’t have to worry about walking into a toxic kitchen environment and wishing that the day would be over just so I could go home and do it all again the next day.

No, I get to dance in a club, laughing with strangers as we jump to the beat.

Daphne grins as she gets on a table, holding out a hand to me.

My eyes go wide. “What are you doing?!”

“Time to cut loose a little!” she shouts to be heard over the music. “Get up here and have some fun.”

I take her hand and climb onto the table with her, laughing as she spins me around, my back pressed to her chest as we dance.

Our hips move in time, hands above our heads.

It’s only when a cold breeze fills the bar and I look at the door that time seems to stop.

CHAPTER 15

XANDER

What does she think she’s doing?

This isn’t the way a queen would act.

Those are the two thoughts that rotate through my mind as Amy stares at me from the top of a table, a dozen people gathered around the base. She keeps dancing with Daphne, and I don’t know whether she can see me or even register that I’m standing in the club with her.

And even though I know it isn’t how a queen should act, and that Jorge is definitely going to have something to say about this when the story hits the media in the morning, I like this side of her.

It’s the side of Amy that the crown will eventually smother if Jorge has his way.

I keep my head down as I weave through the bar, my ball cap casting enough shadows between strobes of the light to keep me hidden.

When I stop at the base of the table, Amy is in the middle of dropping into a crouch. Her legs straighten, and she slowly pulls the rest of herself up, laughing as Daphne grabs her by the hand and twirls her around on the tiny tabletop.

“Amy, we need to talk,” I say, trying to keep my voice even as I reach for her.

I don’t know whether to laugh or scold her, but she makes the choice easy when she kneels in front of me, reaching for the knot in my tie.

Her eyes warm with lust as she looks at me. “You should loosen up and have some fun sometimes too. When was the last time you had fun?”

My hands close over hers before she can pull the tie loose. “You know this is going to be all over the internet tomorrow, right? We’re going to have a media storm on our hands. I don’t want you to have to deal with people insulting you and saying whatever they want about you behind the safety of their keyboards.”

She shrugs, leaning in and skating her lips over mine. “They’re already talking about us. We may as well let them have their fun, and we can have ours.”

Joining her is more tempting than ever as she slips my tie off and loops it around her thigh, knotting it into a makeshift garter beneath the hem that seems to keep climbing higher up her leg.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:42 am

If she wasn't drunk, I would be hauling her out of here and straight to bed for the fun she's suggesting.

"Amy."

She arches an eyebrow and stands tall again, a new song coming on.

People laugh and jostle each other as they dance near the table, some of them handing Amy drinks. Thankfully, she's still sober enough to hand them to someone else.

"It's the king," someone whispers beside me.

Amy hops down from the table as the song ends. "If you're going to stand here like a rock all night, you probably should've stayed home. You're going to ruin the fun for everyone."

"I heard that you were missing." I tense as people start to turn to look at us. "Your cover's been blown, and so has mine. We should go back to the castle."

Her lithe fingers reach for the hem of my shirt, untucking it from my slacks. "Nope. I know you know how to have fun. You used to do it. Don't let the crown ruin you, Xander."

"It hasn't." I grit my teeth, wishing that I could just throw her over my shoulder and carry her out of there.

Right now, she might not realize how the press is going to spin this, but once the

articles hit the news in the morning, things are going to get ugly. People who have never met her are going to have all kinds of things to say about her life.

They're going to hurt her, and I want to do everything I can to prevent that. I want to protect her from the same mess I went through for years.

And yet, she doesn't seem to care.

She's not so drunk that she doesn't know what she's doing.

It's clear from the way the corner of her mouth has an impish curve while she reaches for my top two buttons, flicking them open.

Her hands travel up my chest, sending desire rushing along with them. When her body presses flush against mine and she starts to sway us to the music, I know I'm a goner.

I would give this woman the world on the platter if she asked for it.

And that scares me to no end.

I bite the inside of my cheek, unraveling myself from her. "I have work to do, Amy."

"One night." She steps closer to me again, but she doesn't touch me.

Instead, her eyes do all the work. She looks at me like this is the one thing in the world I can give her to make her happy.

So I do.

"All right, how about we get some water first though?" I ask, already heading for the

bar.

Several people part to the side as Amy follows along behind me.

She stops to talk to a woman like she's known her forever, laughing and joking, both of them busting out dance moves to an American song I don't recognize.

Amy grins and waves me back to her once I have a bottle of water in my hand. "Xander, this is Lyra. She's a journalist with the Katastina Chronicle. Did you know that she's their entertainment writer?"

The hair on the back of my neck stands. "It's nice to meet you."

"You too." Lyra gives a smile before turning her attention back to Amy. "I love this song! We have to go dance!"

Amy grabs her hand, and they rush off together. Daphne appears out of the crowd and joins them near the DJ.

As more people gather around them, Amy greets all of them like old friends.

Standing to the side and watching her is like being in a theater as the audience falls in love with her.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:42 am

People gravitate toward Amy like they have to be in her orbit. She welcomes them like they've always been there.

And then, when she looks at me, I tuck the bottle of water into my back pocket and join her.

Maybe she has a thing or two to teach me, too.

Amy dangles her heels from one finger, laughing as we walk home, the sun rising behind the cliffs. "You should've seen your face when you saw me up on that table."

"I'm sure it would've been picture-worthy." I grin down at her, stopping to take off my shoes. "Here, wear these. It's a long walk back to the castle."

She smiles and puts on the shoes before falling into step with me. "I'm sorry that we took off from security. I know you must've been scared when you got the call."

"I was worried that something was going to happen to you."

"Nothing did." Amy nudges me with her hip, sending me to one side. "I am sorry, though. I know you worry."

"Why did the two of you do it?" I ask, my tone gentle.

Her head tilts back slightly as she looks at the streaks of pink and orange creeping across the sky. "I don't know who I am. I don't think I've ever known. It just feels like I have to keep moving forward. Like I can never stop and take a moment to

figure myself out.”

“You’re more than welcome to take the time now.”

“I’m not, though.”

Guilt burrows in my chest. I was the one who dragged her into this life. I put her in front of the public and told them I was going to marry her. In all of this, I was the one who set the terms and dangled what she wanted most in the world in front of her.

And right now, I hate myself for it.

“Do you ever think that we should call the marriage off?” I ask, my voice wavering a little at the thought. “I know that this can’t be what you wanted for yourself, and I know that it’s not what I wanted either.”

“You’ve asked me before if I think we should call this whole thing off, and I still don’t think we should.” She glances at me from the corner of her eye before kicking a small rock in the road to the side.

“Why not? Are you happy?”

“Yeah, I am.”

“Why?”

Even though I know that pressing her could backfire on me, I like her too much to keep up this charade if it’s too much for her.

I don’t want us to end up resenting each other.

Just because I know I have to stay away from her and keep my feelings out of it doesn't mean I want to lose her as a friend.

Amy shrugs. "This is the most freedom I've ever had in my life. I don't have to worry about making rent on an apartment I hate. There's not a single night I spend dreading going to work the next day. I have a chance at getting everything I've ever wanted. And to be honest, even when you're avoiding me, I still think you need someone as much as I do."

"I'm not avoiding you on purpose," I say quickly, though the lie is bitter on my tongue.

Amy scoffs, amusement shining in her eyes as her gaze connects with mine. "Yes, you are, and that's fine. For now. I know that this is the loss of your freedom. Maybe I shouldn't have asked you to be celibate through our marriage."

"If that's what you asked of me, we're doing a horrible job at that."

"It's just sex." Her cheeks turn a deep shade of pink. "There doesn't have to be any more meaning beyond it than that. We're two adults who enjoy each other's company, and we can continue to do so for the duration of the marriage."

"You sound like you're reading the words directly from a contract." My tone is teasing as I reach out and tug on a loose strand of her hair, curly from her dancing in the warm club.

"I'm not. I've just never done the whole friends-with-benefits thing before. I've never had time. It's more long-term, sad relationships that fizzle out over the course of a year at most."

"I don't think you can call those long-term, then."

Page 43

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:42 am

“Well, maybe not,” she says. “Either way, we need each other. I don’t see why, if we’re looking for a little stress relief, we can’t go to the other person.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell her that there’s this small part of me — that seems to be growing larger every day — that wants more for us.

Except if I let that happen, then I’m going to lose her like everyone else I’ve lost in my life.

A black car pulls alongside us, and a member of the security team looks out from the open window. “Jorge sent me to find you.”

I nod and open the back door, gesturing for Amy to slide in. She bites her bottom lip before doing so, getting settled against the leather seat and stretching her legs out in the wide space in front of her.

I sit beside her, looking at the black partition that separates us from the driver. “You scared the hell out of me tonight when the security team said they couldn’t find you. I thought maybe you packed your bags and left.”

Amy toes off my shoes. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Reaching for her thigh, I slip my finger beneath the tie, the silk nearly as soft as her skin. “Don’t leave.”

One moment she’s beside me, and the next she’s straddling my lap, hands cupping either side of my face as she looks down at me. “I’m not leaving.”

What she doesn't say is that she's not leaving until the end of the contract.

Right now, I can't be bothered to care. Her lips are a siren song, calling me to drown in her, and like a fool, I give in again.

Amy rolls her hips, grinding against my erection as it throbs against my pants, straining to be closer to the heat between her legs.

I grip her hips, dragging her against me until her soft moans fill the car.

If she's fine with friends with benefits, then I'm going to make the most of it for the morning.

When she wakes up later today, everything is going back to the way it was. Friends and nothing more despite the attraction between us.

Anything else is too risky.

Amy pulls out of the kiss, thumb sweeping along my jaw. "I lost you there for a moment. Come back to me."

I groan, cupping the back of her head and pulling her into me. Nipping at her bottom lip, I urge her mouth open, tongue twisting with hers.

She reaches between us for the zipper of my slacks, undoing it and slipping her hand into my boxers.

Aching, I throb in her hand as she works my cock out of the fabric constraining it.

She slides off my lap, kneeling on the floor of the car in front of me with a sultry smile on her face.

I tilt my hips, letting her tug the slacks and boxers a little lower before her tongue traces along the seam on the underside of my length.

With a moan that sends vibrations coursing through my body, she takes me deeper into her mouth, tongue swirling around the head.

Her teeth graze against the sensitive flesh as I scrape her hair back into my fist, wanting to see her clearly as she tries to take all of me.

“Good girl.” I rock my hips, pushing myself deeper into her. “Just like that.”

She hollows her cheeks and takes me deeper, pushing me close to the edge.

I pull her up by her hair before my hands drop to her hips, spinning her around. She hovers above me for a moment as I grip my cock, sliding it through her slick folds.

Her back presses against my chest as she sinks down onto me, her pussy dripping wet as it wraps around me.

My hand dips between her legs, pressing against her clit as she rocks her hips back and forth. Her inner walls shudder around me as she arches her back, letting me thrust deeper into her.

Amy’s soft moans make me harder. “I’m going to come.”

Page 44

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:42 am

“I bet you’ve been thinking about this all night.” I wrap one hand around her throat lightly, pulling her back to me. My thumb skips over her racing pulse. “You’re soaking wet.”

“Yes.” She rolls her hips, grinding harder into my hand with each rock of her hips until her body starts to quiver.

My cock throbs faster as I drive harder into her, keeping her pinned against me as she comes. Her arousal coats me as I come, teasing her clit until her body is spent and her chest is heaving.

When she turns to look at me, completely sated, all I want to do is take her up to my bed when we get to the castle and spend the night with her wrapped in my arms.

However, I know that the second she’s asleep, I’m going to slip out of bed and head to the couch.

Keeping feelings from developing will be impossible if I spend a day with her that close to me.

Even tonight, it felt like I was on the edge of a cliff and ready to throw myself over for her.

It can’t happen again.

CHAPTER 16

AMY

SIX WEEKS LATER

I take a deep breath, looking at the red circle on the calendar. There's a little less than three weeks until the wedding.

I don't think I'm ready.

Nineteen days until I walk down the aisle to the start of a marriage I want but don't know if I can handle.

In the weeks since Xander found me at the bar, I've felt more alone than ever, even when he's sitting right beside me.

Tonight is going to be different.

This is going to be the last night I spend on my own, sitting in my future husband's chambers and wondering if there's even a friendship there to build a relationship off of.

I take a deep breath, heading into my closet and rummaging through the lingerie Daphne bought for me. Most of it is racier than anything I would even think about wearing right now, but there's an emerald baby doll in the back. The fabric is light and airy, the right amount of sheer to make it impossible to focus on anything other than me.

Which is exactly what I need if the two of us are finally going to have a conversation for the first time in days.

As I slip into the baby doll, there's a moment of wondering.

Am I doing the right thing?

Should I leave him to his own devices?

Will I be comfortable in a marriage with a husband who has made it his mission in life to avoid being alone with me?

I don't think I can.

As I pull on a silk robe over the lingerie, I consider changing into jeans and a blouse. Something a little more understated. Nothing that looks like it was made for seduction.

Whatever. Lingerie is better than completely naked.

Unless he doesn't find me attractive. Then this is going to be for nothing.

I could walk into the room, and he could walk right out of it without a second thought.

Groaning, I run my hands down my face.

When I met with Cora the other evening, she told me that her nephew thrived on isolating himself and that she was hoping I was the one who would break through it all.

Page 45

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:42 am

Meanwhile, Daphne made it clear that her father is waiting for this relationship to fail.

And then there's the way Meri has been looking at me recently. It's like she can see that the relationship — if I can even call it that — is on the rocks and headed for disaster.

I have to do something fast, and this is the best option I have.

I won't allow Xander's family to steal the throne. Not when it means so much to him.

With that in mind, I push past the last of the insecurities holding me back, heading through the chambers to one of the secret passages Daphne showed me the other day.

The door slides open after a press of a stone just beside the mantel. I step into it and flick on the lights, following the path she told me about to get to the room where Xander has allegedly been hiding from me.

My heart hammers in my chest as I walk across the cold stone, down a flight of stairs, and down another passage before finally reaching the door marked with a green stone.

Something about this feels like it could be right out of a fantasy novel, and the thought steadies me a little.

I'm not just a woman trying to get her future husband back on the right track for his sake. I'm a queen escaping the villains who linger in the dark, circling like vultures

and waiting for their chance to strike.

With a deep breath, I push open the door, only to be met with the smell of old books and baked goods.

I spy the plate of chocolate chip cookies I made earlier in the day sitting on the corner of Xander's desk as he bends over a paper with a magnifying glass.

"Seems like you're busy," I say, tone soft as I step into the room and shut the door behind me.

He jumps to his feet, spinning and looking at me, black ink smeared on his cheek. "What are you doing?"

"I thought it would be better to come find you and see if you're going to be coming to bed one of these nights instead of hiding out here." I brush past him, looking at the bookshelves that line one wall.

Most of the spines are gilded and leather covered. I don't want to think about the fortune he or someone else in his family must have spent on this room.

Xander sits down, turning back to the papers in front of him. "You didn't have to do that. I'm just going to be going over documents."

"Until you get tired and fall asleep on the couch," I say, nodding to a beige suede couch in front of the window. "And then you pretend that working late was the reason you avoid coming to your chambers even though you sleep on the couch in there too."

"I thought we agreed that it was best that we were just friends." He looks up, the stern expression falling as his gaze rakes up and down my body.

There's a flash of interest there. It's on his face for a fraction of a second before it's gone.

I tug at the tie around my waist, letting the robe fall open. "We are just friends, but friends talk to each other, and you haven't been talking to me at all."

"And that means that you come into my office and decide to try seduction as a technique to get me to listen to you?" He scoffs and grabs his pen, underlining something in the document he's going through.

"I'm not trying anything." I sit down in one of the armchairs across the desk from him, crossing one leg over the other. "This is just what I wear to bed."

He gives me a flat look. "It's not a good time, Amy. I have a lot of work to do. Changing the line of succession is taking longer than I ever imagined. Instating free lunches in schools is an uphill battle, even though the policy already passed, and there are about a thousand other things I'm trying to push through."

"And none of them are going to go anywhere if we can't convince everyone that this is a real relationship."

"You saw the stories that broke after the night at the club," he says, his tone bitter as he leans back in the chair and crosses his arms. "The public thinks we're a couple who are happily in love with each other. They thought it was a joy getting to spend time with royals who were just trying to have a good time."

"What's so wrong about that?" I can't keep the hurt out of my voice as I look away from him, focusing on the stars dancing in the sky outside the window.

"There are a dozen things wrong with that. The first being the chewing out I got from Jorge. He thinks that you're going to drag me back into the party lifestyle and that

I'm going to ruin this for myself."

"Xander, I'm here precisely because I don't want you to ruin this. Daphne told me that Stavros is putting more pressure on the council to assess whether you're going to be a good leader or not. Do you think the housekeepers don't talk to each other?"

"What are you talking about?" Xander pinches the bridge of his nose before shaking his head. "You know what, I don't have time to deal with this tonight."

"No." I lean forward, taking the papers from in front of him and shuffling them to the side. "You're not going to write me off because you've got something going on in your head that I'm not privy to. I agreed to do this with you."

“Fine.”

He scowls and gets up, going over to a decanter on one of the shelves and pulling down a bottle of something amber. He pours a large glass and comes back to the desk, setting it to the side, although he doesn't take a sip.

I sigh and try to get comfortable, but it feels like the walls are closing in. “The housekeepers were talking to the chef the other day when I went to the kitchens to work on some recipes. They're talking about you sleeping in the study.”

“I'll come to our chambers at night, then. Is that all?”

“No.” I get up and tie the robe tight. “Let's go for a walk. I can't think straight in here. It feels like you're the one holding all the power and I'm coming for a meeting with the king. I hate it.”

I glare at the portrait of his family staring down at us from over the fireplace.

Xander sighs but gets up, catching sight of the ink on his cheek in a mirror near the door and wiping it away.

We walk through the empty halls out to the stables, passing the barn and down the landscaped path to one of the fields in the back with a massive tree.

“Yorgos and I used to play out here all the time when we were younger.” Xander tucks his hands into the pockets of his slacks.

“Were you two close?”

“We were, even though Yorgos was a good few years older than me.” Xander points to a little stream that cuts between the field on the ground and the forest, the fence that surrounds the castle just barely visible. “We used to climb that wall there and take off into the woods.”

Chuckling, I look up at him. “Security must’ve loved that.”

“I keep thinking about what he would say if he were here right now.”

“What would he say?”

“He would probably try to race me to the tree.” His lips quirk to the side.

“Last one to the tree has to tell the other what’s on their mind.”

Before he can respond, I take off running, knowing that he’s going to outpace me in seconds. His longer legs and what I suspect is a desire to keep his emotions to himself have him running past me.

Xander leans against the tree, hands in his pockets, crossing his legs at the ankles as he gives me a smug smile. “So, what’s on your mind?”

“You’ve been avoiding me for weeks, and I hate it. I hate that I came here and decided to agree to marry you, thinking that maybe we could be friends. But then we gave each other these mixed signals, agreeing to be adults one minute and then dodging each other the next.”

“Let’s be fair about this. I know that I’m the one doing the dodging.”

I nod and lean beside him against the tree trunk. “You are, but maybe I’m not making this easier on you either. I know I spend a lot of time learning how to be a queen, more so after those pictures of us at the club went public.”

“We knew that was going to happen.”

“And Jorge gave me quite the dressing down about it.” I nudge him. “I should’ve pulled out the orphan card. It might’ve been a good time for it.”

“Wouldn’t work. The man is in his sixties and still hasn’t found his heart.”

Laughing, I scuff my toe in the soft grass at my feet. “I think you want out of this, but you don’t want to admit it,” I say.

“No!”

I pause, lips pressing together in a thin line.

Butterflies erupt low in my stomach, beating their wings as that familiar feeling of falling for someone races through my body.

As difficult as he can be, and as avoidant as he is, there’s no denying that the sweeter moments with Xander I share have him worming his way beneath my skin.

The harder parts only make me like him more.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:42 am

“If you don’t want to end this, then what do you want?”

“You,” he says, his voice barely more than a whisper as he looks down at me.
“Always you.”

My heart skips a beat as our eyes lock on each other. With the way he’s staring at me right now, my pulse is a runaway train.

“Why is wanting me so horrible to you?”

“I lose everyone and everything I care about. For the last few years, it’s been nothing but death and desertion. And we have a timeline.”

“We do.”

“This is only supposed to be business between us. And then it started morphing into having fun together, and if we keep going, I don’t know if I’m going to be able to walk away when this all ends.”

It feels like the air has been forced from my lungs as he stands in front of me, bracing himself with a hand against the tree on either side of my body.

I don’t touch him, waiting to see what he does. Needing him to want me as much as I want him.

The moment is ruined when he takes a step back and shakes his head. “I can’t keep doing this, Amy. We need to set solid boundaries with each other, and we need to

stick to them. I can't keep toeing this line with you and thinking that this relationship might end in something other than both of us getting what we want and walking away."

A lump lodges in my throat, and I take a shaking breath, trying to figure out what to say to him.

We're in two very different places and that has been evident for a long time, but it seems like a starker comparison now.

Our wedding is in less than three weeks, and I'm getting married to a man who is standing here and telling me that this is never going to be anything more than what it already is.

And I need to find a way to be okay with that.

"All right, well, we're adults. Adults like to have fun. Like we said after the club, this doesn't have to be anything serious. Sex and friendship. Nothing more. To be honest, I don't plan on staying in Katastinia once the contract is done."

The words taste like ash in my mouth, making it dry as I fight back the tears that prick the corners of my vision.

Thankfully, it's too dark for him to see what I'm sure are glassy eyes and splotchy cheeks.

What little emotion there was drains from his face as he tugs on the robe, loosening it and sliding it down my shoulders to puddle on the ground.

"All sex. No feelings. Not when we both know that this is still going to end as we planned." Xander says the words like they're the law, his gaze searching mine.

I force myself to be cold as I nod. “No emotions. Just sex. And you need to make more of an effort to look like we’re together. The staff are talking, and it’s only a matter of time before it reaches the media.”

“I’ll come to the chambers and sleep in the bed.”

“I’ll build a pillow wall for you before I go to sleep every night.”

Xander recoils like I’ve slapped him, but the look is gone quickly and his lips are on mine.

I slant my mouth against his, fingers sinking into his hair as he scoops me up before lowering us both to the ground. He kisses his way down my neck and chest, tugging on the ribbon between my breasts.

He groans as he pulls it open, the sheer fabric falling away. “You’re so beautiful, you know that? Spending the night in bed with you is going to be torture.”

I roll my eyes, reaching for his shirt and tugging it up over his head. “I don’t know. I think not touching you would be a worse punishment.”

Chuckling, he takes one of my nipples into his mouth, the sharp sting of his teeth against the sensitive peak sending a rush of lust through my body.

He cups my other breast, pulling it between his fingers and pinching until I start to writhe beneath him. His low moan increases the arousal between my legs.

Xander switches to the other side, repeating the process as my thighs press into his hips hard.

Arching my back off the ground, I grind into him, needing more.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:42 am

He presses down into me, the bulge of his cock grinding between my legs until it disappears.

As he kisses his way down my body, shoving the babydoll out of his way, his tongue traces patterns on my skin. My fingers sink into his hair, tugging him closer to me.

When his mouth closes over my pussy, I see stars.

His fingers press into me, massaging my inner walls as his tongue flicks over my clit.

My hips rock off the ground with each thrust of his fingers. I hook my leg over his shoulder, gasping when he sucks hard on my clit.

“Yes, I’m so close. Please. Don’t stop.”

Xander crooks his fingers against the spot that drives me wild, thrusting against it until I fall to pieces, whimpering as he slips his fingers out.

He slides out of his slacks and boxers, tossing them to the side and kneeling between my legs. “Touch yourself for me. I want to see how much you want me.”

When his hand wraps around the base of his cock, I don’t think I’ve seen anything more attractive in my life.

I slip my fingers along my slit, teasing myself while I watch him stroke. He groans, gaze burning as I press two fingers into me. I plunge them deeper, riding my hand as he watches.

There's something about him watching me that turns me on.

"I need you, Xander." I gasp as another orgasm begins to stir.

He smirks and crawls up my body, grabbing my leg behind the knee and hooking it over his hip.

When he sinks into me, my nails dig into his shoulders. I roll my hips in time with him, meeting each thrust and trying to take him as deep as I can.

My inner walls pulse around him as he buries himself to the hilt. He stiffens, his strokes slowing as he comes.

When he pulls out, his fingers press against my clit, swirling as he kisses my neck, sucking on my pulse point until I feel like I'm going to combust.

His fingers dive into me, hard and fast, his heavy breathing making my body tingle. I come as he takes my nipple into his mouth again, sucking on it hard.

Xander teases me, fingers pressing against my clit while he looks at me. "We should go back to the chamber, but screw that pillow wall for tonight."

After he helps me to my feet, he grabs his shirt and hands it to me.

I pull it on, the scent of his spicy cologne wrapping around me. If there's no way that anything else is ever going to happen between us, then at least I have this.

I just wish it wasn't so difficult.

For the next two years, I just have to focus on doing my best to be a good queen. A good wife.

Doing what's right for the crown and for myself.

This heat between me and Xander is what feels right. It's easy.

Kiss the spot beneath his ear so he makes a sound that has my core clenching. Nip at his bottom lip when I'm craving him. Grind against him to be rewarded with one of the low moans in the back of his throat.

And because it's so easy, I lose myself in it, like I've lost myself in every other aspect of my life to avoid feeling the pain.

CHAPTER 17

XANDER

Jorge scowls and slaps the table in front of me. "We've barely started the meeting, and yet it feels like you aren't listening to me. One of these days, you're going to have to make the crown a priority."

Daphne springs to her feet. "Watch it, Jorge. I've had it up to here with you and the issues you keep creating."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:42 am

“Some days I think you’re working for Stavros,” Atticus says to Jorge, frowning as he looks over at me. “I told you that we should’ve fired him a long time ago. You could have promoted one of the prime ministers to his position and not a single person would’ve had a problem with it.”

The color drains from Jorge’s face. “I’m not committing treason, and how dare you suggest such a thing. I have the best interest of the crown in mind.”

“Then you need to stop picking apart Amy at every turn.” Daphne glowers at him before looking at me. “She’s coming along in her lessons just fine, and she’s going to be ready for the wedding. We had the final dress fitting yesterday, and she’s been learning the dances.”

Maybe I should spend some time with her. It might be worth it to help her practice the dances before we have to perform them in front of hundreds of people.

Although, that could blur the boundaries we set a couple nights ago.

It’s just a dance or two though. I can do things for her without it having to mean anything more. We’re friends after all.

Are we, though?

Atticus raps his knuckles on the desk in front of me. “All right, maybe Jorge did have the right idea. You’re not paying attention at all today. Are you sure that you should be at this meeting right now?”

“Actually, no. We must go over some of the financial records today. Put them on my desk in the study in my chambers, and I’ll get to them later tonight.”

Jorge looks like he’s about to have an aneurysm in the middle of the conference room. “You can’t be serious. You’re going to blow off work when you know that the public already thinks you’re going to run the monarchy into the ground.”

“I have a hard time believing that’s still the opinion.” Daphne gestures to the stack of magazines in the middle of the table. “The tabloids love Amy and Xander. If he wants to go work on making their relationship look more legitimate in front of everyone, then that’s part of his job now too.”

I nod to Daphne in a silent thank-you before taking off.

Though I don’t know what to do today, I do have a couple things that I think Amy would like. She’ll probably want to see Beatriz and find out how the wedding cake is coming along.

When she suggested hiring people in town to make the cake and flowers for the wedding, I couldn’t have agreed with her more. She even found people who decorate for a living and was able to hand them a blank check for the wedding.

Jorge was furious, and that was the icing on the cake.

I glance out the window as I head down the hall, and sure enough, Amy is in the rose garden, sitting on the edge of the fountain with a book on Katastinian history in her hand.

Pushing open the nearest set of doors, I go out to her with a smile. “I was thinking that we could head to town today if you don’t have anything else planned.”

“You want to go to town?” She closes the book and sets it to the side. “I thought you were supposed to be in a meeting right now?”

“Yeah, but it’s a boring one and I could think of a million better things to do.” I take her by the hand, helping her to her feet. “Besides, weren’t you the one who said I still have to be myself and have fun?”

“I think it’s a good idea and what your family would want for you, but are you going to have a problem with Meri and Stavros over this?”

“I don’t care if I do. Aunt Cora is currently giving them a run for their money with a property she’s looking at buying in Scotland. It’s a castle bigger than the one they have there, and Meri is just about losing her mind.”

Amy laughs and drops my hand, following me around to the garage. “You really think that’s enough of a distraction for them?”

I nod. “Meri and Stavros will back off once we have the wedding. Neither of them are going to get on the throne either way. Abdication hasn’t been mentioned in a council meeting since you showed up.”

Her cheeks tint pink as I lead her over to a sleek black motorcycle. “Well, I’m glad I could help.”

“You have helped, which is why I want to spend the day with you. We’re getting married soon, and you were right the other night when you said we haven’t been seen much together.”

And I’m still not sure we should be.

The boundaries are in place, though. We act like a loving couple while we’re in

public, and then when we retreat to the safety of our chambers later tonight, we go back to being nothing more than two friends who are working together for the greater good.

At least, that's what I keep telling myself when I start to think about other possibilities late at night.

It's better this way though.

I'm not going to lose another person the way I lost Yorgos.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:42 am

Amy won't have to go through losing me either.

If there's one thing I've learned, it's that the crown is a curse in some ways more than others.

Amy shines so bright that I'm sure the council will do nothing but drain her energy and light. I don't want them to ruin her.

I grab a helmet and hold it out to her. "Here, put this on."

She takes the helmet and slides it over her head. I stand in front of her, adjusting the strap to the proper tightness before flipping up her visor.

Her eyes sparkle with amusement. "I don't think this is a side of you I get to see much anymore."

Guilt stabs me in the chest. "Work has been awful, and it seems like the policies are getting harder to push through. After the wedding, we'll have a bit of a honeymoon though."

"Actually, there's something I have to do a few days before the wedding."

I press the button to open the garage door before putting my own helmet on and turning on the comms between both. "What's that?"

"I have to fly back to New Jersey for Gabby's wedding. I'm her maid of honor, and I have to be there for her. It's bad enough that I missed the bachelorette."

Tensing, I nod and get on the bike, waiting for her to get on behind me. “Give Daphne the flight details, and she’ll inform the pilot.”

“I don’t need a private plane.”

“I think you should take it. You’ll fly comfortably, and you don’t have to worry about who else is on the plane.” I gun the engine to life as her arms wrap tight around my waist.

Amy hums, but she doesn’t say anything, nestling tighter behind me as we rip out of the garage and down the road to town.

The front gates swing open as we near them, security nodding to us and a black car appearing behind us.

The team will stay far enough back that it’ll feel like we’re alone, but I’m still not going to be able to shake the knowledge that we’re being followed.

We enter the town, and I park the bike near Beatriz’s café, popping in long enough to wave at her before leading Amy to the next street over and down about two blocks.

“Where are we going?” she asks, looking around at the other shops and restaurants in the area. “The florist said they would be done with the arrangements the day before the wedding.”

“We’re not going to see the florist. I had something else in mind.” I stop in front of a little building with a “for lease” sign hanging in the window.

Amy looks at me, her eyebrows pulling together and her mouth pinching into a thin line. “Are you going to be leasing a space in town?”

I punch the code into the key box hanging from the handle, opening it up and taking out the key.

There's a dull thud as it twists in the lock before the paned glass door swings open, showing off white oak floors and a counter painted the same color as the ocean.

Amy walks in, her mouth dropping as she looks up at the white ceiling with the exposed beams that match the floor. "Xander, what is this place?"

I shrug. "I don't know. I guess we should look around and find out."

She goes over to a window that links the main area to the industrial kitchen in the back. "This looks like it could be a bakery, but that still doesn't explain what we're doing here."

"I don't know what you're talking about." I smirk as she rolls her eyes and pushes her way through the white swinging door to the kitchen.

Her excited squeal echoes through the empty building before she pops her head back out. "You have to come in here. Everything is top of the line, and whoever had this kitchen loved it."

I follow her through the door, glancing at the white and blue tiles on the floor and the glossy white walls. "What do you think of the place?"

"It's gorgeous, but if you think this is going to be my bakery, you must've lost your mind. There's no way this building is going to be on the market in two years. Someone is going to see this and snatch it up right away."

"I thought that too, which was why I thought I should bring you here and show you the place today."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:42 am

Amy bites the inside of her cheek. “I can’t afford this place. Not reasonably, at least. I have a good chunk of money in my savings, but I’m sure the lease for this space is beyond that. And then I have to worry about all the startup costs.”

I lean back against the stainless-steel counter. “And what makes you think that you would have to drain all of your money to do that?”

“Because this would be my building. I know that I get a bakery at the end of the deal, but if I were going to purchase this now, I would have to drain my savings and then still need more money. I can’t afford it.”

“What if I was going to lease it for you now?”

“What happens when the deal ends? I plan on going back to New Jersey,” she says, looking away from me.

My heart sinks in my chest, even though that was always the case.

We have a deadline, and she’s not going to stay with me.

Not that I should want her to. I was the one who imposed the deadline and the conditions for her returning home. I know that this is going to end.

And yet, there’s still a selfish part of me that wants to keep her here for as long as possible.

I can’t stand the thought of having to say goodbye to her.

At least there are years before that happens.

I clear my throat, crossing my arms so I don't have to think about what to do with my hands. I haven't felt this uncomfortable since my coronation. "I know that sitting in the castle every day isn't going to be enough for you, and I would never ask you to do that anyway. I was thinking that I could purchase the building, and then when the deal is over and you leave, I'll still buy your bakery wherever you want it."

She bites her bottom lip. "What if I don't want to open one yet?"

There's something in her eyes — a look of longing — that makes me think that isn't the problem.

I shrug. "It's not going to hurt my bank any to keep the building in my portfolio. You can take as long as you want to think about it, but if you love this building, say the word and I'll buy it."

"I can't ask you to do that."

"I'm offering."

Amy shakes her head. "I don't know, Xander. This is a lot. And to be honest, I don't know if I'm good enough. I know that I make good desserts, but opening a bakery is a huge undertaking."

"And you are more than up to the challenge. I've spent weeks eating everything you make, and so has the staff. They've been raving about your desserts and the bread you make. If there is one person in the world who should open a bakery, it's you."

Her eyes shine with tears as she looks away from me. "I think it might be time to play the orphan card again."

Understanding flows through me as I pull her into a hug, holding her while she sniffles and presses her face into my chest.

My heart feels tight as I wish that I could take away her pain.

“I know the first big step after my parents passed was the hardest. Then came the realization that I was next in line to the throne. I felt like I was going to throw up every morning when I woke up.”

“And you got over that?”

“Until Yorgos died, and suddenly I was king. I didn’t know how to do it without any of them, and it felt wrong.” I clear my throat, hand drifting up and down her back. “I know it’s hard to keep thinking about doing this without them, but everything is going to be fine. You’re strong enough to get through this, and your family would be so proud of you.”

She pulls back and looks up at me. “I don’t think I can do this right now. Not with everything else going on.”

“Then I’ll buy the building and keep it for you until you’re ready, whenever that might be.”

Amy wipes her tears. “Thank you. I don’t know if there’s any way to thank you for everything you’ve done for me, but this is incredible.”

“I haven’t done anything else.”

She gives me a wry smile. “I think you brought me back to life.”

CHAPTER 18

AMY

Gabby tosses her veil out behind her. “I can’t believe it. In less than twenty minutes, I’m going to be walking down the aisle. It still doesn’t feel real even though I’ve been planning this for a year.”

Laughing, I reach out and adjust a piece of her hair. “You look beautiful. Paul isn’t going to know what hit him.”

“I’m sure he’s asking himself what he got himself into.” Gabby smirks and looks at herself in the mirror, turning this way and that to get a better look at the dress that hugs her body like a glove.

“He knows how lucky he is to have someone like you in his life. I know that the two of you are going to have an amazing marriage.”

The wedding planner appears and gives the other bridesmaids their cue, and they all file out of the room, leaving me and Gabby alone.

Gabby turns to me, a stern look on her face. “And where is Xander? I thought he was going to come to the wedding with you?”

“He thought about it, but then there was some drama with the caterers for our wedding, so he’s staying there and handling it so I can be here with you.”

Another lie.

They keep piling on top of each other.

I'm going to have to tell Gabby the truth eventually, but how do you tell your best friend that you were relieved your fiancé said he was too busy with work to come?

If nothing else, the couple days I'm back in New Jersey are days for me to get my head together and figure out what it is that I want from my own marriage.

I'm not sure that a bakery is enough anymore.

Not when it feels like Xander and I are lingering on the edge of something bigger, but both of us are too scared to take that jump.

The wedding planner reappears at the door. "It's time! Are we ready to go in here?"

Gabby nods at her, grabbing her bouquet. She turns to me. "You know, the other girls and I have been talking about your wedding all week. I can't believe you're taking us on a private plane."

I roll my eyes and grab my own flowers. "Enough about me. This is your big day. We're supposed to be celebrating you, and that's what I plan on doing, even if you keep trying to distract me."

She laughs and nods to the door. "Let's go get me married."

We walk through the villa, heading to the heavy iron gates that lead to the courtyard of the winery.

Gabby takes a deep breath and loops her arm through her father's while I stand with

the rest of the bridesmaids.

The soft and lilting song she chose to walk down the aisle to starts, and the first bridesmaid comes out, meeting one of the groomsmen when she steps through the door.

I take a deep breath, waiting for the others to go before it's my turn. All I can do is focus on not tripping on the white rug that lines the aisle as we walk to the altar.

Paul beams as everyone stands.

Gabby steps out of the villa, looking radiant as she smiles. Tears gather in my eyes as I stand to the side, happy that I could be here for my best friend.

It would've been nice if Xander could be here to meet my friends before the wedding.

The thought is fleeting, my heart sinking deeper in my chest as Gabby hands me her bouquet.

The beginning of the ceremony is lost to me as I stand there, wondering if my own wedding is going to be as beautiful as this.

"And now, Gabby and Paul are going to say their vows." The officiant turns the microphone to Gabby first.

She sniffles and dabs her fingers beneath her eyes. "I know this is going to sound like something straight out of a fairy tale, but when I met you, Paul, I knew I'd met the one."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:42 am

He grins and takes her hands, bringing them to his mouth and kissing the back of them.

The tenderness in his eyes makes me a little jealous. I know that when I stand at the altar with Xander, he's not going to be looking at me like he adores me.

There's going to be respect and friendship there, but there isn't the same emotion I have for him lingering behind his eyes. I'm not going to look at him and know the marriage is meant to be.

And there's a part of me that mourns that.

Gabby clears her throat. "I knew that we were going to spend the rest of our lives together from that first night in our apartment. Most of our things were damaged from our storage unit flooding, and I was a wreck. You brought in those waterlogged boxes, looked at me, and asked me how long I thought it would take to burn everything."

Paul smirks as the people around us start to giggle, leaning over to whisper to each other.

I reach up to wipe a couple tears.

Gabby grins and squeezes his hand. "You are the only person I know who would take a bad situation and set it on fire. But the growth that comes after the fire has always been my favorite part. I know my life with you is going to be filled with nothing but growth."

Paul pulls out a scrap of paper from his pocket. "I had to write this down because I knew I was going to forget everything when I saw you."

And as he keeps talking, telling Gabby all the things a wife wants to hear, I know I'm never going to hear those things from Xander.

But I want to.

I would give anything to have him love me the way Paul loves Gabby.

From that moment we met on the beach, I should've known that Xander was going to come into my life and change it forever in more ways than one.

And now, to know that he's not going to love me the way that I love him is devastating.

I don't know how I can go back to Katastinia and pretend that everything is okay when I'm in love with a man who would rather send mixed signals than sit down and talk about everything.

A man who is so terrified of losing another person that he's doing a stellar job of pushing me away.

I force a smile on my face as I try to focus on the rest of the vows, but I can't pay attention.

Was agreeing to marry Xander a mistake?

No.

The answer comes to me immediately, and I know it's the truth.

Agreeing to marry him is never going to be a mistake. I know that I would never regret any of the time I spent with him because he did bring me back to life. He made each day better, even when things have been at their worst over the last couple months.

But having to leave him?

Knowing that I'm going to spend the next two years in love with a man who is never going to love me?

Now that's something I think I'm going to regret.

CHAPTER 19

XANDER

Amy is back in Katastinia, and her friends from the States have come with her since our wedding is so close now. After departing the private plane, Gabby and the others load themselves into a waiting limo, laughing and talking to each other with glasses of champagne in their hands. They'll check into a cute bed and breakfast and explore Katastinia while Amy prepares for the big day.

The chauffeur shuts the door behind them as Amy waves, standing beside me, one arm wrapped around her waist.

If the look on her face is any indication, she's thinking about making a mad dash for the plane and leaving me standing on the runway, wondering what went wrong.

I swallow hard, trying to get rid of the dry feeling in my throat. "Is everything okay?"

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:42 am

Her gaze flickers past me as she forces a smile onto her face. “Yeah, everything is fine. I’m just tired from the flight and then having that show of reuniting in front of the cameras. I just want to crawl into bed.”

“Did you want to stop by the bakery building first? They changed the color of the counter to that shade of blue you liked and installed a new butcher-block top on it.”

She opens the car door. “I don’t think so. It’s been a long day.”

We get in the car, but it feels like the oxygen has been sucked out of it. I don’t know what to think about any of this.

Should I tell her that I missed her?

It’s the truth, but I think it’s just going to make things more complicated between the two of us.

And to be honest, I didn’t think I would miss her as much as I did. I’m still trying to process it myself and telling her is only going to confuse me more.

Amy shifts in her seat, her hair falling like a curtain between us as we leave the airport behind. “I’ve been thinking a lot about the wedding. I know that Gabby and my friends aren’t going to be in the room with me while I’m getting ready — due to the security issues and all that — but they are going to be in the front row, right? They’re the only family I have.”

“Of course they’re going to be there, and Daphne is going to make sure that they’re

taken care of all weekend. You don't have to worry about a thing."

"I have a lot to worry about." She twists to look at me, tucking her hair behind her ear. "Do you think that we're making a huge mistake and that we should call this off before it's too late?"

It feels like she's punched me in the gut.

"What?"

Her cheeks turn a bright red. "I know. Maybe we should've thought about this a little more. We rushed into the plan thinking that everything was going to be fine, but the truth is that we don't love each other."

The ground is falling out from beneath me. It feels like I'm grabbing onto the sides of the cliff, trying to haul myself out of the free fall.

"No, we don't love each other," I say, though my voice sounds strangled. "I didn't think that mattered, though. We agreed to get married because there was no risk of us falling in love, and then we could both have everything we wanted."

She bites her bottom lip, rolling it between her teeth as she looks past me out the window. "I know."

"Are you having second thoughts?"

"Maybe." She shifts in the seat again, huddling closer to the door and farther from me. "I keep thinking about Gabby's wedding and the love that was there, and I don't know if getting married without love is right."

I take a ragged breath, torn between spilling the rollercoaster of emotions in my head

and letting her think that she isn't the single most important person in my life right now.

The other part of me — the one that knows a king can't be vulnerable — shoves those emotions down the best he can.

“I think that we're making the best decisions we can with the cards we've been dealt. This is only temporary, and I do care for you. It's just not in that way.”

But it might be.

Though I don't know what being in love with a woman feels like, if I was going to fall for anyone, it would be her.

It would be impossible not to.

The way Amy connects with everyone she meets is astounding. She understands me on a level that nobody else ever has.

When I'm at my worst, she charges at the problem headfirst instead of shying away like so many other people would.

I'm not sure there's anything in this world or the next that would scare her into backing down.

And that's why I can't drag her down and tie her to the crown forever.

After all that she's been through in her life and the ferocity with which she attacks the world, I can't cage her. She's not a bird to be kept by the rules of a council.

She should be free to live her life without the weight of it all hanging over her head.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:42 am

Amy sighs and crosses one leg over the other. “I’ve been thinking that both of us deserve to have someone who adores us.”

“I think what we have is enough.”

“Maybe.”

Amy leans back in bed, one leg crossed over and her book in her hand. She doesn’t look up from it as I take off my shirt and toss it in the corner before climbing into bed beside her.

For the first night since she teased me about a pillow wall between us, it’s not there.

This is worse than I thought.

She’s spent most of the day going over wedding details with Daphne, so I didn’t see her much, but it seems like she’s still bothered by what we talked about in the car.

I don’t know how to make this better.

As I settle into bed beside her, she flips to the next page in her book, still not saying anything.

I bite the inside of my cheek. It’s clear that I’m going to have to be the first one to make a move to try and bridge the gap between us, but I’ve never done this before.

When other relationships started to fall apart — if they could be considered

relationships in the first place — I let the women walk. I didn't try to stop them.

And now that Amy is starting to pull away, all I want to do is hold her close.

"I missed you," I say, the words foreign to my own ears. "I thought a lot about when you were going to get home and what we were going to do. I don't think I've ever missed anyone the way that I missed you."

She closes her book and sets it on the nightstand. "I missed you too."

Looping an arm over her shoulder, I pull her closer. "I know that you're worried about the wedding, but everything is going to be fine. Unless you still haven't learned how to dance. People might notice if you're standing on my feet again."

A ghost of a smile appears.

I might be getting through to her.

I hope that I am. I don't think I can spend months of my life with her icing me out and putting on a front.

As wrong as it might be, I crave that teasing smile and her playful laugh. It's the only thing that's made me feel normal since taking the throne.

At this point, I'm not capable of living without it.

"They'll definitely notice," Amy says. "It's one of those mermaid-style dresses. I'll have nowhere to hide."

I get out of bed, bowing low and holding my hand out to her. "Come on, then. Let's practice one more time. Tomorrow is going to be a blur, and the day after that is the

wedding.”

She takes a deep breath and takes my hand, shuffling across to my side of the bed to get out, her little shorts climbing higher.

Even when she’s ready for bed, her hair tied into a messy bun on top of her head, she’s still the most beautiful woman I’ve ever known.

And as selfish as it is, I can’t let go of her.

I grab my phone and put on our wedding song, turning it down low. My hand rests against her bare back, the crop top she wears showing the curve of her breast when she puts her hand on my shoulder.

“Now, you’re going to do your best not to step on my toes.” I guide her back a step, spinning us in a slow circle, holding her free hand in mine. “And I promise I won’t drop you when we do the dip.”

“If you drop me, we will have some great articles getting plastered all over the internet. Other women might finally lose their fascination with you.”

“Is that a hint of jealousy I hear?” I ask, banding my arm around her back and lifting her against me for the spin.

I don’t know if she can feel the way my heart is trying to beat its way out of my body as she slides down against me, feet touching the floor, but I would be surprised if she couldn’t.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:42 am

Amy's gaze flickers to mine, hesitation there. "Yes."

That simple word is nearly enough to send me staggering back a step.

What was supposed to be another round of banter between us is taking another turn.

And though I know that she's the only woman I can see the rest of my life with, I can't find the words to tell her. Not when everything else about my life is so unsure.

"I don't think you have anything to worry about. The only woman screaming my name for the next two years and three months is you."

Her face pales at the countdown. "If you're that eager to get rid of me, I could get on a plane right now."

I spin her around beneath my arm before pulling her back to me and dipping her low.

Her breath hitches as I pull her back to me, lips brushing against hers.

"Don't leave me," I say, words soft.

Instead of assuring me that she's going to be here to stay like she has before, she closes the distance between us.

My cock hardens, straining against my shorts as I turn her around and walk her back toward the bed.

“I didn’t think you missed me this much,” I say, tone teasing as I hook my fingers in the sides of her shorts and pull them down her long legs. “We could’ve had some fun in the car again.”

She smirks, whatever was bothering her melting away as we return to territory that’s neutral for both of us.

I don’t know whether it’s a good thing or a bad one, but it’s hard to focus properly when she’s pulling her shirt over her head and tossing it to the side.

My hands skim up her waist. “I hope you realize I plan on spending the night showing you how much I missed you.”

She runs her hand down my bulge. “I think I might have figured that out already.”

My own shorts hit the ground as I claim her mouth again, kissing her until we’re breathless. I cup the back of her head, our chests heaving.

We have a deadline.

Screw the deadline.

We have tonight.

I push her back on the bed, hovering over her body. Her legs part as I skim my fingers through her wet slit, teasing the little bundle of nerves with the slightest of touches. “I’m going to spend hours worshipping your body until you don’t even know your own name.”

Amy props herself up on her elbows, giving me a cocky smile. “You don’t have that kind of stamina.”

Chuckling, I slide two fingers into her, pressing against the spot that has her mewling for me every time. “I don’t think you know what kind of stamina I have. I’ve been going easy on you.”

Her eyes burn with lust as she rocks against my fingers. “Give me everything.”

I thrust my fingers slowly, teasing her with each movement. “Are you sure? I don’t think you really want to come. I think you would rather I spend hours keeping you on the edge.”

“If you do that, I’m shoving your motorcycle off a cliff.”

I crook my fingers, smirking when her pussy clenches around me. “I don’t know if I believe that. You liked it when I took you for a ride to the outlook and made you come on it before you left me.”

She dips one hand between her legs, fingers swirling around her clit with a smug look on her face. “I can get myself off if you’re not going to be any help.”

Grabbing her wrist, I force it above her head, keeping her pinned in place as I plunge my fingers into her harder and faster. “I don’t remember telling you that you could do that, do you?”

“You’re not the boss of me.”

Page 57

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:42 am

I drag her earlobe between my teeth as she moans. “As I seem to recall, I am when we’re in the bedroom. You like it when I tell you what to do, Amy.”

When I stop thrusting, she rolls her hips again. “Please. Please let me come.”

I nip at her pulse, grinning against her soft, vanilla-scented skin when she jumps. “Then come for me.”

With each thrust of my fingers, I press my palm against her clit. She rocks her hips in time with the thrust, her wrist straining against my grip on her.

She coats my fingers with her arousal as she comes, soft whimpers filling the room as I step back and shove my shorts off.

I hover over her, but she hooks a leg around my waist, flipping us over.

She positions herself over my cock, but instead of sinking down on me, she rakes her nails down my chest. “You’re not playing fair.”

“I’m always going to fight dirty when it comes to you. Now, be a good girl and ride me until you can’t move.”

My fingers sink into the flesh at her hips, pulling her down on me as she arches her back.

She leans closer to me, peppering kisses over my chest before kissing the hollow beneath my ear. I groan, using my grip on her hips to rock her faster.

My cock throbs as her tight core wraps around it, squeezing me until I feel like I'm going to burst.

Grabbing her hair, I pull her head back, keeping her back arched as I set the pace from below, needing to feel her pulsing around me as I finish.

As I bury myself deeper into her, I stiffen and she cries out, nails digging into my chest as she comes again, coating me with her arousal.

It's enough to send me over the edge of my own release, slowing my thrusts as she rolls her hips, her body slumping against mine.

She props herself up on my chest, that cocky smile that has me falling deeper for her on her face. "Was that everything?"

I chuckle and roll us over, already kissing my way down her body. "You haven't seen anything yet. You're never going to leave this bed again by the time I'm done with you."

Amy's soft snores fill the room as the sun creeps through the opening in the white curtains. I haul myself out of bed before she can wake up, grabbing my shorts and heading into the hall.

Things are better if we keep a distance between us.

Even if my entire body is screaming at me to go back in there and stay beside her until she wakes up.

In the end, I know I'm only going to let her down.

CHAPTER 20

AMY

Two mornings in a row, I've woken up to an empty bed, the sheets cold and the door between the bedroom and the sitting room shut.

The door was open last night when we went to sleep. Xander's arm was around my waist, and everything felt like it was going to be all right. I was sure that this time when I woke up in the morning, he was going to be there.

Giving him the benefit of the doubt keeps biting me. Sooner or later, I'm going to have to admit to myself that this is who he is and this is who he's always going to be.

I was an idiot for thinking that Xander would stay with me the night before our wedding.

Sighing, I toss back the sheets and get out of bed, stepping out on the balcony to look down at the cliff below.

Tears prick the corners of my eyes. Even though I knew two days wouldn't change the way he feels about me, it still hurts to know that even if there is something there, he's not going to let himself feel it.

Xander is holding something back from me, and the romantic in me wants to believe that maybe he does have feelings for me. They may not be love, but they could be adjacent to it. Something that we could build on in the coming months.

Maybe I should've told him that we need to call the whole thing off.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:42 am

“Knock, knock,” Daphne says, the hinges on the door squeaking. “I thought you might like a little surprise since you’re getting married in a couple hours.”

“Thanks, but I think I just need a little bit of time alone, please.”

“Not going to happen,” a familiar voice says.

Turning, I squeal when I see Gabby standing there with her. “How did you get past security?”

“Daphne snuck me up.” Gabby grins and pulls me into a tight hug. “The other girls are getting ready in our suite.”

“I’m so glad you’re here.” I look over her shoulder to Daphne. “Thank you for doing this for me.”

Daphne nods. “I’m going to grab a few more things, and then we’re going to get you ready to walk down the aisle, okay?”

I nod, my stomach twisting.

I don’t know if I can do this. Especially not the part where I have to walk down the aisle in front of the people I care the most about and lie to them all.

Gabby pulls back as the door shuts behind Daphne. “All right, so you’re going to tell me why you’re crying, and you’re going to tell me right now.”

The familiar rush of guilt consumes me as I sit down on a lounge, looking at the pattern of the stone tiles. “What if I told you that all of this was fake and I’ve been lying to you for weeks because I didn’t know how to tell you the truth?”

She sits down beside me, taking my hand and holding it tight. “Then I would tell you that it’s okay. And whatever is going on here, we’re going to get through it together.”

“I never should’ve lied to you,” I say, voice shaking as I look over at her. “I know I shouldn’t have, but I didn’t know what else to do. It finally felt like things were working out for me for once and I was catching up to everyone else.”

“Why would you have to catch up to us?” Gabby leans closer to me, her shoulder butting against mine. “You’ve never needed to be in the same place as anyone.”

“I know, but it feels like you and the other girls are moving on with your lives and I’m stuck being the same failure that I’ve always been.”

She squeezes my hand tight. “Nobody has ever thought you’re a failure, Amy.”

“You might not have, but I felt like I was.” Laughing, I tilt my head back and look up at the sky. “Xander and I didn’t know each other before he found me on the beach when I couldn’t make it to your party.”

“Yeah, I kind of had a feeling that everything wasn’t quite like you said it was.”

“Not even a little bit. He and I got along well, and we’re attracted to each other, but there’s no love there. He needed a wife to make him look good to the public since he’s newly crowned with a bad reputation, and I wanted a bakery. It seemed like a no-brainer at the time.”

“Oh honey, was this about making your parents and your grandma proud?” Gabby

wraps her arm around my shoulder, pulling me closer to her. “I know you thought you had to do this for her, but she would’ve been happy just to know that you’re happy.”

“I don’t think I am.”

“Why not?”

I wipe some of my tears, sniffing and shaking my head to try and clear it. “I thought this was going to be a walk in the park. I was going to get married to a man I barely know, get everything I wanted, and at the end of two and a half years, it would all be over.”

“You’re a smart woman, Ames. There’s no way you thought it was going to be that easy.”

I sigh and shrug. “I guess I hoped that it would be.”

“You already sounded infatuated with Xander that morning you called me.”

“I know. I really do know, and I chalked that up to lust. I thought there was something good between us in bed, but I didn’t think we were going to develop feelings for each other. And then I didn’t try to. Back when we started this, I was sure I wouldn’t.”

“And now?”

“Now I love him, and I know he’s never going to love me, and I feel like an idiot for getting in this deep.”

“I can go tell him right now that this isn’t going to work and that I’m taking you

home.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:42 am

“No, but thank you. I told him that I would see this through. He needs me. I can’t abandon him like that.” I stand up and take a slow inhale, the salt air doing little to ease my nerves. “He’s offered me outs a couple times, and I’ve never taken them.”

“So you still want to get married, then?”

I bite the inside of my cheek, holding back more tears. “I just want a family and a bakery. I could have both if I marry him.”

“You could have both if you don’t. You’re one of the most capable people I’ve ever met. You held on when you lost your family. Twice. Sure, you may have struggled, but you’ve always come out on the other side. You’ll come out on the other side of this too.”

“And what if I don’t?”

Gabby pulls me into a tight hug. “Then I’m going to be waiting for you on the other side, the same way I always have been.”

“Even if I decide halfway down the aisle to turn and run?”

“Ames, I’m here for you through everything. If you want to run seconds before you say ‘I do’, I’ll race you to the getaway car.”

Laughing, I wipe my eyes and hug her back, holding on until I hear Daphne shuffling around in the bedroom. “I think it’s time to go and get me married.”

“Are you sure that this is what you want?”

“No, but I want Xander.”

CHAPTER 21

XANDER

Maybe I should find Amy and tell her that the wedding is off.

It would save both of us a lot of heartache. She wouldn't have to marry a man she didn't think loved her, and I wouldn't have to lose her at the end of two years.

I sit in my study at the other end of the castle, staring at a picture of my parents on their wedding day. They were in love with each other, and it showed. Dad looked at Mom like she was the reason the stars hung in the sky.

And then here I am.

Amy doesn't even know that's the way I look at her.

How can I put Katastinia above everything else when I would walk away from the crown right now if it meant I got to keep her in my life?

How can I be as devoted to Katastinia as Yorgos was when my heart is with a woman who wants to leave when our contract is done?

Am I prepared to walk away from the crown and the promise I made to my brother?

I take a deep breath as a knock at the door echoes through the room. “Come in.”

The door swings open, and Atticus steps inside, an envelope in his hand. His gaze scans over me before he nods. “Good. You’re already in your tux. I wasn’t sure that you would be.”

“Of course I am. It’s my wedding day. What’s supposed to be the happiest day of my life, allegedly.”

“If you’re having second thoughts, I can handle Jorge and Stavros.”

“Neither of them has been bothering me about the marriage or the crown recently. I think Stavros is finally ready to accept that I won’t be backing down, even if this marriage goes up in flames.”

Atticus holds out the envelope to me. “Well, as long as you’re still going through with it, I’m supposed to give this to you. Your dad wanted me to hold onto it until your wedding day just in case he wasn’t around.”

My heart stops as I take the envelope from him, my hand shaking. “Do you know what it says?”

“Not a clue. I’m going to go make sure Beatriz found the kitchen all right. You read that and then get yourself to the altar on time. You have an hour.”

He leaves the room as I stare at my name on the front of the envelope, scrawled in my dad’s familiar writing.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:42 am

As I slip a finger beneath the wax seal, I hold my breath.

I don't know what I'm going to find in the letter. I doubt that Dad ever thought that this was the way I would be getting married.

Yes, it's to a woman I love, but there's still a war going on in my mind about how much I'm allowed to love her.

Xander,

If you're reading this letter, it means Atticus did his job, which is good.

On the other hand, if you're getting the letter, it means I'm dead and not there to give it to you myself, which kind of puts a damper on the mood, don't you think?

Now, if I know you, you're sitting alone and panicking, wondering how to do your job — whatever that may be now — while also being a husband.

I'm not going to lie and tell you that it's easy, because it's not. You and your wife are going to have to work on your relationship every day, and to be honest with you, sometimes love isn't going to be enough.

Your mom and I had our issues during the first couple years of marriage. There were days when I didn't know if we were going to make it through, but we learned that the most important thing is to be there for each other and to reconnect every single day.

Of course, there are going to be times when you may not be able to be there for your

wife, but you make time for her, and she makes time for you.

There's a way to make room for everything in your life, but you have to know what your priorities are.

And if you haven't figured it out for yourself, I'm going to let you in on a little secret.

I would've put your mother before anything else in this world and the next. Including the crown.

She was the person who made me feel like I could be myself. She loved me for who I was and not what I did or what I would do as king.

I loved her, and I would've given it all up if I had to just to be with her.

I hope you feel the same way about your wife.

I hope you know that nothing is ever going to be greater than the love you share for each other. Not work, or the crown, or the family you had before.

If you're marrying a woman your entire world doesn't orbit around, then I'm going to have to tell you that you're doing something wrong.

Marry the sun, Xander.

Life isn't worth living if you don't have someone to risk everything for.

Love,

Dad.

I take a deep breath and read the letter again through blurred vision.

Dad never told me about the fights between him and Mom or the days when they felt like calling it off. They were together for decades, and I never knew that things were rough for them in the beginning.

Not as rough as faking an engagement or making his son believe that he didn't love her.

I set the letter to one side, burying my face in my hands. I've done a great job at pushing Amy away. The last several weeks have been spent trying to convince her that I didn't love her. That nothing was ever going to happen between us.

Too much time was wasted thinking about what I would do if I had to choose between the crown and her.

From the beginning, I've known that I would choose her.

It didn't sit right with me — not until I read Dad's letter.

A king is supposed to put his people before everything and everyone else, and I've always known that I could never be that kind of man.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:42 am

Not when it comes to Amy.

Perhaps doing my best for my people means being a king who doesn't hold himself back out of fear.

Today is going to be the last day I ever allow myself to live like that.

I stand and look out the window over the gardens where people are setting up the seating for the wedding to the right of the fountain.

Deception was never the way to handle public opinion of me.

It might have brought me to Amy, and I won't regret the choice because of that alone, but it's time to stop lying and hiding who I am for the sake of a few people's opinions.

In time, they'll learn to trust me as their king.

Daphne pokes her head into the room. "Are you almost ready? Amy is. I thought it would be good to arrange a first look between the two of you. I've seen it done at other weddings. It just gives you both a chance to connect before going out there and putting everything out for the world to see."

I nod, smoothing down my tie before tucking the letter into the top drawer of my desk. "That's a good idea, but there's something I need to do first."

Her eyebrows pull together as she sweeps into the room, the skirt of her dress trailing

behind her. “And what’s that?”

“I have to go capture the sun.”

CHAPTER 22

AMY

I love him, and he doesn’t love me, and that’s going to be okay.

The words play on repeat in my mind as I stand in front of the mirror, glancing down at the beading over the sheer panels on my dress. The skirt hugs my thighs before it flares out just above my knees, trailing behind me.

It’s by far the most beautiful dress I’ve ever put on, but there’s something that doesn’t sit right about going through with this.

Daphne sweeps back into the room with a smile. “Well, this is it. In a couple minutes, we’re going to go downstairs, and the ceremony will begin.”

Gabby sips from her flute of champagne. “There’s still time to run if you’re thinking about it.”

“When were we thinking about running?” Daphne asks, eyes wide and mouth dropping open. “You can’t do that. I know this is difficult, but give him a little time.”

“I don’t think time is going to fix us, but I want to try anyway.” I smile as Daphne grabs the veil and nestles the comb into my wavy hair, disguising it behind the white florals the stylist weaved into it.

“The two of you are going to be happy together. It’s just going to take Xander a little

while to come around to it.” Daphne gives me a sympathetic smile.

“I know you all think that he’s going to have some miraculous change in personality and decide that maybe he could love me, but it’s not going to happen. We all just need to accept that this is what life is going to look like until the divorce.”

“Well, maybe I should go then.” Xander’s reflection appears in the mirror as he stands in the doorway.

Daphne gives me a sheepish smile. “I came back to tell you that he was on board for the first look.”

“A first look?” I turn and stare at her, wondering how she could set me up like this when I told her everything that was already wrong with the marriage.

Daphne nods. “Yeah. Gabby, let’s go downstairs and find out where the wedding planner wants us for now.”

The pair scurry out of the room, shutting the door behind them.

Xander scrubs a hand over his mouth. “You look beautiful, Amy. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you look more beautiful than you do right now.”

“Thanks,” I say, tone cold as I watch him.

One part of me hopes that he stays on the other side of the room and doesn’t come anywhere near me. I know I won’t be able to think with him too close.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:42 am

And then the other part wants him to cross the room and tell me that he was wrong.

But this isn't a fairy tale.

I take a deep breath. "What are you doing in here? I know that Daphne said there was going to be a first look, but I wasn't planning on that. Besides, it's bad luck to see me before the wedding."

"It is?" he asks, his gaze roaming my body before he meets my eyes. "I didn't know."

"It is. Though I guess with a fake marriage that doesn't really matter much, now does it?"

My laugh is bitter as I pace away from him, heading over to the vanity and leaning against it for support.

Xander makes a noise in the back of his throat. "I came in here for a reason, and you looking like that is making it extremely hard to think."

"Was that reason to tell me that you want to call this whole thing off?"

"No!" He shakes his head, hands curling into fists at his sides. "That's not what I came in here to say at all, though it seems like that's what you were talking about with Daphne and Gabby."

"I was." There's no point in denying it when he walked in here and heard us. "I know this isn't what you want, and I know you're never going to love me despite the way I

feel about you. And I feel like such an idiot because I knew this was never real, but I still fell for you either way.”

“Amy, I need you to calm down and listen to me.”

I grab a cotton swab, pressing it to the corner of my eyes and catching my tears before they fall. “I’m not going to run, Xander. You don’t have to be worried about that. I told you that I would help you.”

“That’s not what I’m concerned about.”

“If this is about living up to your brother’s name, you should know that you don’t have to do that. You’re your own person, and Yorgos would be proud of you either way. Look at all the good you’ve done in the country in the last few months.”

“I’ve done all that because I’ve been trying to prove something, but it wasn’t to him. It was to you.”

My breath catches in my throat as I look at him.

Every argument I had disappears as my mouth opens and closes.

Out of all the things he could’ve said to me, I wasn’t expecting that. I thought he was going to tell me that it was time for us to get down the aisle and promise to love each other. Maybe we were supposed to take a couple pictures before moving on with our lives.

Or maybe he was going to call everything off and tell me that it was time to go home.

“You don’t have anything to prove to me,” I say, voice wavering as I look at him before glancing past him at the clock on the bookshelf. “We should get downstairs.

The ceremony is supposed to start soon. People are going to be wondering where we are.”

“Damn it, Amy. Let me talk for a minute, okay?”

“Why should I?”

“Because we’re either going to do this wedding properly, or I’m going to call it off.”

Xander tucks his hand into his pocket, pulling out a little black box. He flicks it open and holds it out to me. “This was my mother’s engagement ring. It was left to me when she died. She told me that I had to give it to the woman I loved when I was ready to marry her.”

I look at the stunning gold band with tiny diamonds encrusted into it and an emerald in the center. “Xander, you should save this for the woman you love. You know that.”

“That’s what I’m trying to do!” Xander says. He sighs and takes my hand, sliding off the ring that’s there and replacing it with his mother’s.

Holding my hand up, I stare at the way the ring sparkles on my finger. It’s stunning.

“Do you understand what I’m trying to say?” he asks, tone teasing as he takes me by the hand and pulls me to him.

I stare up at him, holding my breath and waiting for him to break the silence.

Right now, I need him to say it to me. I need to hear the words for myself and know that he means them. No implied meanings or skirting around what he’s trying to say.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:42 am

I need to know that he loves me enough to admit it to himself and me.

Xander cups my jaw with one hand, thumb drifting over my cheekbone. “I love you, Amy. I’ve been half in love with you since I met you that day on the beach. While you look at me like I hung the stars, I know without a doubt that you’re my sun. My entire world revolves around you, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

Tears sting the corners of my eyes. “I love you too.”

“Good. I would never dream of marrying a woman I wasn’t in love with,” he says, those teasing words making my heart flutter and the butterflies come to life. “And just so you know, I plan on loving you every day for the rest of my life, even when you bring out the orphan story for sympathy.”

Laughing, I throw my arms around him. “You’re horrible. I wouldn’t bring out the orphan story at the ceremony when we’re both missing our parents.”

“Are you sure about that?” His arms wrap around my waist as he pulls me closer to him.

“I was saving it for the reception. I thought it might get us some good wedding gifts.”

He laughs and shakes his head. “I love you, Amy.”

“I love you, too.”

For the millionth time, I can’t help but think of my fiancé as the most attractive man

on earth.

All I want to do now is get to the part of the evening when the tuxedo hits the floor and I'm out of my corset.

His head dips down and his lips press against mine, molding to me like he was made for me.

And maybe he was.

This wasn't the start of the whirlwind romance I was expecting. It was messy and carved from lies, but something beautiful blossomed after the fire that tore through us.

Xander steps away from me with a small smile on his face as he gets to one knee in front of me. "I love you, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. With you, it feels like my life is finally headed in the direction it's supposed to be. I know that the two of us are going to have a long life together, and I know it's not going to be easy all the time, but I love you, and I want you to be my wife. Will you marry me?"

"Yes." I laugh as he gets to his feet and sweeps me into another kiss before letting go. "You should go now, though. We're already late, and they're all going to think we ran for it."

"We could run away and elope if that's what you want."

"Really?" I raise an eyebrow, arms crossing as I tease him. "You would leave everything behind and run away with me to get married? Right now?"

"I told you, Amy, you're the sun. If I don't have you, then nothing in my world makes sense."

I smile and gesture to the door. “Go to the altar.”

He kisses the corner of my mouth. “I’ll meet you there. I’ll be the best-looking one in the garden until you arrive.”

Xander hurries out of the room, shutting the door behind him and giving me a minute to myself.

I take a deep breath and make sure my makeup is still in place before turning toward my future, confident that this is the life I’m meant to live.

As I enter the garden to a soft melody, Xander’s full attention turns to me.

And when he looks at me like he adores me, I know that he’s my forever.

EPILOGUE

ONE YEAR LATER: XANDER

Amy leans back, propping herself on her forearms and looking up at the cotton candy clouds as the waves crash against the shore. “I swear, after all the trouble getting the bakery up and running has been, I need a night away with you.”

I lean over and kiss her, taking her chin in my hand. “You don’t need to worry. All the electrical has been replaced, and there’s not going to be another fire.”

She sighs. “I know, but it could’ve been a disaster. If Beatriz hadn’t been in there to get a sneak peek at the renovations, it could’ve been so much worse.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:42 am

“She was, and we have her to be thankful for.” I reach into the picnic basket and pull out a plate of little custard tarts. “And she made these. Dropped them off this morning while you were working. She told me that you deserve to be spoiled.”

“As if you don’t do that already.” Amy rolls her eyes and sits up to pluck one of the tarts from the plate once I get the plastic wrap off.

“Well, I had some time to make up for.”

“I don’t think we need to talk about that tonight, do you?” She groans after taking the first bite of the tart. “This right here is the reason why I’m doing a dessert bar and bakery instead of a café. Beatriz would put me out of business.”

Chuckling, I stretch out on the sand beside her as streaks of pink and orange dance across the sky. “So, after one year of marriage, are you still as happy as you used to be?”

“Happier.”

She shifts closer to me, putting her head on my shoulder.

I run my hands up and down the curve of her waist. “I keep thinking about what would’ve happened if we met another way. Maybe we would’ve crossed paths in New Jersey sometime.”

Amy hums. “It could’ve happened. I was working at a fancy hotel. Maybe you would’ve stayed there sooner or later. It’s possible that you could’ve wandered your

way into the kitchen and found the lowly pastry chef getting chewed out by her boss.”

“And then I would’ve come swooping in to rescue you.” I smirk and kiss the corner of her mouth. “I believe that we were always going to meet. I couldn’t do half the things I’ve done in the last year without you.”

“You’re only saying that because Cora and I worked together to convince Stavros and Meri that they should retire to their castle in Scotland.”

Laughing, I hold her a little closer. “That’s only part of it.”

“I forgot about the sad orphan story. It wouldn’t be nearly as moving without both of us telling it every chance we get.”

“And there it is,” I say, my tone dripping with sarcasm. “There is the real reason I married you. For convincing orphan stories to get more money for charities at fundraisers.”

She laughs and sits up. “I knew it. Maybe we should get remarried. This time we can come up with a new reason, like my beating you in races to the tree.”

I sit up beside her, reaching into the basket and pulling out a bottle of champagne and the containers of food the kitchen prepared for us. “I don’t think that’s going to happen, but you can keep dreaming, Ames.”

“That’s not what I’m dreaming of.”

Scoffing, I grab her by the chin again and pull her back to me. “If you keep that up, you’re going to end up with sand in places that sand really doesn’t belong.”

Her eyes dance with amusement. “That a threat or a promise?”

“Always a promise when it comes to you.”

I pop the top off the bottle of champagne, the foam pouring over my hand before I haul out two glasses to go with it.

Amy leans forward and takes the top of the container off the roast chicken with a lemon and hot honey sauce. She picks a piece of the skin off, nibbling at it while I pour a glass of champagne.

“None for me,” she says when I go to hand her the glass.

I arch an eyebrow and take a sip. “It’s good. Your favorite and still bubbly.”

“Well, I hear it’s a bad idea to drink when you’re pregnant, so it’s probably for the best that I don’t.”

“What?”

She laughs and gets up, walking a little up the beach to where our tent and bags are. It takes her a couple minutes to root for something before she comes back with a little present.

“This is for you.” She sets the present in my lap with a broad smile, sitting down beside me.

I hand her the glass of champagne to hold. “Hold on, back to the baby thing.”

“Nope. I’m not saying anything else until you open your present.”

Page 65

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:42 am

Groaning, I tug on the white ribbon, and it falls away. When I lift off the lid, there's a positive pregnancy test resting among some crumpled tissue paper.

I grab the test out of the box and turn to her. "You're serious? We're going to be having a baby?"

She laughs and nods, her eyes glassy as she puts the champagne on a tray to the side. "We're going to have a baby. I found out two days ago."

Grinning, I drop the test back in the box and toss it to the side before hauling her into a tight hug and peppering kisses on every inch of her skin that I can reach. "I can't believe that we're going to have a baby!"

Amy hugs me back, kissing me before pulling away. "I'm probably just a few weeks along, but I have an appointment with the doctor on Monday to confirm."

"Can I be there?"

"I would be mad if you weren't."

My cheeks ache from grinning as I lean over and kiss her stomach. "Hi, little baby, it's your dad. I just wanted you to know that we love you and can't wait for you to be here with us."

Amy runs her fingers through my hair before I sit back up and look at her.

I don't think I've ever loved another person more than I love her.

She's been with me through everything over the last year. We've spent weeks pouring over policies together and trying to push forward innovation. The two of us have spent countless hours volunteering and spending time with the people, traveling around the country and getting to know as many towns as we can.

Without her, everything I've accomplished since the day she came into my life wouldn't have been possible.

And now we're going to have a baby to add to the mix.

I grin and kiss her again. "I can't believe this."

"Well, we weren't exactly not trying, now, were we?" Amy shuffles closer to me as I wrap my arm around her. "We're going to be parents. Can you believe it? I'm scared. I always thought that my parents were going to be around when I had kids of my own while I was growing up, and now they're not here."

"Our baby is going to be surrounded by so much love from us and your cousins and the staff. An entire country, really." I press my lips to her temple. "But I know what you mean. I wish they could all be here for this too."

Amy nods, leaning into me more. "We're going to be good parents."

"We're going to be amazing parents."

As we sit and watch the sunset, I know that the life I have now is the reason I went through all the trials and tribulations.

Everything I've ever faced has brought me to Amy and our baby. The good and the bad. The losses and the wins. Endless nights of thinking that I was never going to be good enough. Times when I thought that I was too good for other things.

Every single moment has been making me into the man she deserves.

I would go through it all a million times over if the result was the same.

She's my sun, and I'm perpetually in her orbit.

And I wouldn't have it any other way.

The End