



The King's Secret Baby

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Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

Description: From frustrated heir to king in mourning,
He wants to protect his people from further turmoil,
Little does he know, there's a royal secret in the making!

HIM

A prince and a journalist.

Nothing about us makes sense, but one New York night we found something incredible,

Just in time for the world to shift on its axis...

The night we shared will forever be a precious memory, but nothing more can come of it.

I have a country to run, and Hailey is one complication I just don't need.

But, thrust together as I try to navigate my new role, forgetting isn't coming easily...

HER

I was tasked with profiling a crown prince,

Now, he's found himself king.

I can't imagine what Luca must be going through...

Shell-shocked at the loss, reeling at the weight of new responsibilities,

There's no room in his life for exploring what started that stolen night between us,

There's certainly no room for a baby!

But a baby is exactly what he's going to get...

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CHAPTER 1

LUCA

My father and I emerge from the hotel into a mob of screaming fans. Women shove pens and photos in my face, pleading for autographs. Phones come out, a dozen of them probably streaming directly to social media.

Smiles stretch across the women's faces, eyes wide with anticipation. My father's security guards surge forward, forming a human barrier between us and the manic crowd.

"Luca, look here!" One voice rises above the others, hoarse from the exertion.

I turn to see a flurry of red hair, a young woman waving a glossy photo of me. I nod at her, scribble my signature on the photograph. Her giddy squeal slices through the city noise.

The concrete beneath my feet vibrates, echoing the rhythm of life in New York. I inhale deeply; car exhaust fumes and the smell of pretzels mix with the lingering scent of rain on the sidewalk.

Even though I've been to the city numerous times, I've never truly seen it, and I'm hoping that this trip will be an exception. That is, if I manage to slip away from my father for a bit.

"Prince Luca." A young woman bounces up and down. "Sign my arm?"

“We need to go,” my father, the king of Werdenfeld, points out.

“One minute.” I flash him a quick smile, doing my best to be diplomatic. The whole reason we’re in NYC is to foster our relationship with the United States. So why is he rushing me?

If I just push past these women without at least spending a few minutes with them, it’ll look bad. I’ll probably find myself in an article tomorrow about how much of a jerk I am.

“Where on your arm?” I ask the girl.

She quickly pulls up her sleeve, revealing a slender arm, pale and freckled. I take the pen she offers me, scribbling my name hastily. The ink stings my nostrils with its sharp smell, but my polite smile never wavers.

“Thank you!” she squeals, clutching her arm close to her chest as though it’s a precious artifact.

“All right. We need to move, now,” my father insists, his voice stern and impatient.

Jostling people part like a sea as he strides along the path our security team has created for us. A curl of anxiety twists in my stomach. The crowd is getting more excited, and I can’t just leave them.

“Please,” another girl begs. “One more?”

I glance at the rapidly disappearing figure of my father and try not to sigh. “One more.”

After her, though, I sign another autograph. Take another picture.

There's an odd comfort in the chaos. The burden of always trying to maintain a good image seems to lighten temporarily among these eager faces. At least I'm making someone happy, even though it is just with a picture or a quick side hug.

Eventually, I have to pull away from their reaching hands and their shouts and climb into the black SUV that's waiting.

"We love you, Prince Luca!" one of the girls screams after me.

As the door slams shut, cutting off the shrieks, Father turns to me. "Don't let those girls distract you, Luca. You must focus on your duties."

I roll my eyes. "No one can distract me from my princely responsibilities, Father — for that to happen at all, I would need to have true responsibilities, and at thirty years old you still haven't given me any."

He frowns, the lines on his forehead deepening. "This is not a game. You are representing Werdenfeld. That is your responsibility."

"I know." I frown back at him. "That's exactly why I stopped to sign autographs. It's important that we give off good impressions everywhere."

"As long as it doesn't distract from proper behavior." He's looking at his phone — not me — probably going over talking points his publicist has sent him for today's press conference.

I stare out the window as we drive, the city sliding by in a blur. Skyscrapers tower around us as the car weaves through traffic. We pull up to the press meeting, a nondescript office building. This time, there are no women waiting outside to catch a peek of me.

But there are certainly reporters inside. Many, many reporters, all crammed together in one room.

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As we walk into it, Father whispers, “Stand up straight. Don’t speak unless spoken to directly.”

I resist the urge to slouch and shove my hands in my pockets. We step on stage and sit behind a long table. Blinding lights glare as reporters start shouting questions. I tune them out, thinking about the vacation I’m missing with my friends in order to sit here and look pleasant.

When my father asked me to shadow him on this trip, I didn’t even think of saying no. One day the crown will be mine, and so I know how important it is that I watch the current king in action.

But I wish he would let me do more than just hang behind him like a puppet. I have things to say as well, things to contribute.

The press conference drags on. Father answers question after question in his usual diplomatic way. I stifle a yawn.

Finally, a reporter shouts right at me. “Prince Luca! What are your thoughts on taking on more royal duties?”

It’s like he’s read my mind.

Father shoots me a warning look, but I can’t resist. After our conversation in the car, I feel like starting a little trouble.

“Well, I’d love to spend more time yachting in the Mediterranean, but duty calls.”

A few reporters chuckle, while Father's expression hardens. I probably shouldn't have said that, but the temptation was too great. If I'm not going to be adding anything to our time in New York, why shouldn't I be on vacation with my friends?

After what seems like an eternity, the press conference ends. We exit the building, the roar of the city enveloping us once more.

The moment we're in the back of the SUV, its tinted windows hiding us from view, Father turns to me, anger etched on his face. "That was completely inappropriate. You are not taking this seriously."

I open my mouth to respond, but he cuts me off.

"You have an interview this afternoon. I expect you to represent our family properly."

My eyes widen in surprise. "An interview? With who?"

This is out of left field. He never lets me take interviews. And after what I just said back there, I'm surprised he's still letting this upcoming one happen.

Father continues staring straight ahead. "A reporter from The Morning Star. Her name is Hailey Warren."

"And when exactly was this interview scheduled?" I try to keep my voice even.

"It's been on your calendar for weeks," he replies tersely. "Honestly, Luca, you need to be more responsible."

I bite my tongue to stop a sharp retort. Arguing will only make things worse. But an interview, today? I rack my brain, but I have no memory of this meeting on my

schedule. Still, I know better than to question Father right now. I've already stirred the pot enough as it is.

I gaze out the window as we speed through the city, sunshine glinting off the impossibly tall buildings. My thoughts drift to my friends, no doubt having the time of their lives clubbing and sunning on the beach. Yet here I am, trapped in a series of useless formalities.

If my father allowed me to do more for Werdenfeld — sit in on important meetings, organize outreach programs — then it would be different. I would relish my life as a prince. But as it stands right now, I feel completely useless, like I'm just sitting on a shelf awaiting the day that I'll be taken down and crowned king.

The car eventually pulls up to our hotel. Time to put on my princely persona once again, I suppose. As we exit the vehicle, Father turns to me.

“I expect you to take this seriously,” he says, blue eyes flashing.

I nod, squaring my shoulders. “Of course, Father.”

Looks like duty calls once again. But someday, things will be different. Someday, I'll be king, and then I'll be free to do things my own way.

CHAPTER 2

HAILEY

I rush through the gleaming lobby of the Chelsea Hotel, my heels clicking against the marble floors. This is the biggest interview of my career so far — Prince Luca, heir to the throne of Werdenfeld — and I can't be even a minute late.

No pressure or anything.

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Taking a deep breath, I go to the front desk and introduce myself. Heart hammering against my chest, I catch my reflection in a mirror and quickly adjust a stray flyaway.

It took me forever to get ready this morning, since everything I tried on just seemed wrong. I want to look good for the prince, but not like I'm trying too hard.

Which I understand is a little crazy. I'm a professional, and so is he. I shouldn't be undone to this degree. I mean, he is extremely famous, and... extremely attractive.

Attractive enough to make anyone lose their head.

But not me. I know where my priorities are, know what side my bread is buttered on. Thanks to a few strokes of luck and a whole lot of dedication, I'm in my third year at one of the most prestigious news outlets in the world. A job like mine doesn't leave time for getting caught in fantasies about European royalty.

"Right this way, Ms. Warren," the concierge says, as he shows me to a private meeting room.

Inside, sunlight streams through the windows overlooking a garden courtyard. A table with two chairs sits in the center, an elegant tea service laid out. I'm fifteen minutes early, which to me is right on time.

"Thank you." I set my purse on a chair.

The door opens behind the concierge, and I stiffen. Is Luca here already?

But it's not him. It's a woman in a suit.

"The royal security team will need to check you as a safety precaution," the concierge says.

"Oh. Right," I say. "Of course."

I've been through security scans before, but never anything this involved. The woman pats me down, making sure that I don't have anything hidden beneath my clothes. Once she's satisfied that I'm good to go, she and the concierge both leave the room.

I check my recording app and notes, heart pounding. This is my chance to show what I can really do as a journalist. Luca's been kept very sheltered by his father King Girard, rarely giving interviews. Landing this exclusive will prove I deserve more high-profile stories. And not just at *The Morning Star*. With an article like this under my belt, all the outlets will be chomping at the bit to hire me. They'll?—

My phone rings, pulling me out of my thoughts. I look down, smiling when I see it's my best friend Millie. I answer, already prepared for the familiar background of her kids shrieking as they play and bicker.

"Hey! I'm just waiting on Prince Luca now," I tell her excitedly.

"I still can't believe you're interviewing royalty!" She laughs. "You have to tell me what he smells like, okay? Make sure you take notes on that."

"Millie." I sit down at the table and pick up one of the tiny sandwiches. There's some sort of green paste in it — I'm not even sure what. "This article is about his role as prince. Not about what cologne he uses."

"Yeah, but it's for the readers, Hailey. They want to know everything." Millie's

mischievous tone rings clear through the line. “Make it a whole sensory experience.”

I laugh, even as my heart races with nerves. “Okay, okay. I’ll do my best.”

“Good.” She sounds satisfied, and I can imagine her smug grin. Millie loves vicarious thrills, and there’s nothing more thrilling than a romance with a prince, even if it’s all in her head.

“I should go,” I say, checking the time. “He’ll be in soon.”

“You’re gonna do great.”

I laugh. “Thanks. Wish me luck!”

We hang up, and I take a deep breath and check my makeup in my powder compact’s mirror. Time to focus. This interview could change everything. I just have to stay cool and get him to open up.

There’s the sound of footsteps outside of the door, and my breath hitches in my throat. Here we go.

I stand up, ready to greet Prince Luca with my most professional smile. But as I do, my heel catches on the leg of the table. I stumble, knocking into the tea service and sending it crashing to the floor. Silverware clatters, tea splashing across the carpet.

“Oh, my God!” I gasp, immediately dropping to my knees.

My face burns with embarrassment as I frantically gather spilled teacups and scattered spoons. This is not the polished impression I imagined.

Behind me, an amused voice speaks. “Please, allow me to help.”

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I freeze, still crouched on all fours. Slowly, I look over my shoulder. Prince Luca is standing in the doorway, an eyebrow raised as he surveys the mess I've made. Our eyes meet and heat rushes to my cheeks.

With as much dignity as I can muster, I get to my feet. "Your Highness, I'm so sorry about this." I tug on my skirt, willing my hands not to shake as I offer one to him.

"Ms. Warren, I presume?" He takes my hand, shaking it briefly.

Up close he's even more handsome than in photos, with sharp blue eyes and artfully tousled blond hair. But his expression is aloof, almost bored. Clearly he doesn't want to be here.

I clear my throat, adopting a bright tone. "Yes, thank you for meeting with me today." Time to turn on the charm. I can still salvage this interview. "Shall we have a seat and get started?"

I gesture to the plush chairs arranged by the window, hoping he doesn't notice my nervousness. He nods, taking a seat. I perch across from him, adjusting my skirt again before opening my recording app.

"I hope your time in New York has been good so far." I work up a smile, trying to not stare at the way his suit jacket perfectly fits his strong shoulders.

He languidly crosses one leg over the other, inspecting his cufflinks. "It's been... okay." His response lacks enthusiasm.

I plaster a smile on my face, hoping my disappointment doesn't show. Not the most enlightening answer. "That's good to hear," I reply, striving for upbeat.

He says nothing. Just looks out the window.

I clear my throat. "I thought we'd begin by discussing your future as heir to the throne of Werdenfeld. What are your plans and vision once you take the crown?"

Luca's expression shutters. "I don't expect to inherit the throne for many years. My father is in excellent health."

"Of course," I say quickly. "But the people are eager to know what kind of leader you'll be."

He frowns. "I have no interest in speculating so far in advance."

I blink, surprised by his abrupt tone. This isn't going as I envisioned. Time for a new tactic.

"All right, let's discuss your recent philanthropy efforts, then. The shelter you opened for homeless youths was wonderfully received."

Again, he shuts down my line of questioning. "That project was mainly my advisor's doing. I simply provided funding."

I grip my phone tighter, frustration mounting. Why is he being so difficult? He's making this impossible. There must be something that interests him, some way to draw him out. I need to get something usable from this interview.

"Your Highness, what motivates you? What are your passions?" I ask gently.

For the first time, he meets my eyes. They're a striking blue, but stormy. "I prefer keeping my personal interests private."

I bite my lip. The interview is slipping away from me. Maybe if I turn on the charm...

I lean forward, softening my tone. "Your Highness, I understand wanting privacy. But the people are eager to truly know the future sovereign of your country. Please, help me show them the real you."

His expression remains closed. "With all due respect, my duties do not include baring my soul for the press. I've cooperated out of courtesy to your publication, but I believe we're done here."

Finished? What is he talking about? We just got started.

And yet, he stands abruptly, taking the biggest opportunity I've ever had with him. I jump up too, desperation clawing at me.

"Please, just a few more minutes," I say, hating the pleading note in my voice. "Tell me about your childhood, your interests — anything."

God, I sound pathetic. It's like I can't stop myself, though. The words are coming up like vomit, with me unable to do anything about it.

He pauses, something flickering in those blue eyes. But then it's gone. "I'm afraid I have nothing further to discuss. Thank you for your time."

With that, he turns and strides from the room, leaving me standing there, stunned. The door clicks shut behind him with dreadful finality.

I sink back into my chair, staring blankly at the phone in my hand. The interview I've been waiting weeks for, my chance to impress my editor, has crashed and burned. I don't have a single usable quote. After all that anticipation, I've failed completely.

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Frustration wells up as I realize I'll have to tell my editor I couldn't get the story. All that work, wasted. This was my big break, and I blew it.

CHAPTER 3

LUCA

I leave the conference room with long strides, fighting the urge to turn around and go back in — but not for the interview.

Instead, I want to spend more time with that captivating journalist. More time drinking in her brown, doe-like eyes. More time having her study me with that scrutinizing gaze...

Yes, I understand that if only I had acquiesced and gone along with the interview, I would have gotten more time with Hailey. But the whole thing felt like a charade, utterly pointless. I couldn't stand sitting in there humiliating myself any further.

Shaking my head, I try to focus on the task at hand — avoiding my father. He's somewhere in this hotel, and if I see him right now I might explode. So I set off briskly down a random hallway, keeping my eyes peeled for guards.

Of course I run straight into my father as I round the corner. He frowns, bushy grey eyebrows drawing together.

“Shouldn't you be in that interview, Luca?” he asks, tone dripping with disapproval.

I sigh, shoving my hands in my pockets. “It wasn’t going anywhere. She just wanted to talk about my becoming king and what I like to do for hobbies.”

My father’s scowl deepens. “As she should. You’ll be king someday, yet you refuse to take your duties seriously.”

Anger bubbles up in me. “How am I supposed to take them seriously when you won’t even let me sit in on the council meetings?” I demand. “I want real responsibilities, not just waving to crowds.”

“You’re not ready!” he snaps.

I scoff and shake my head. “You set that interview up because you wanted to distract me, didn’t you? You wanted me to feel like I was actually doing something for once, so that I would stop asking you to give me some real responsibilities.”

My father’s face remains impassive, giving nothing away. But I know him too well. I know the way his eyes twitch slightly to the left — a tell of his discomfort. “Luca, that isn’t true.”

“You’re lying,” I spit out, my words echoing through the long corridor.

There’s a small moment of silence as we stand off, father and son lost in a power struggle. Then, his gaze hardens.

“That’s enough, Luca,” he says sternly. “You’re behaving like a child.”

“A child? You’re the one treating me like a child!” The words burst from my lips before I can stop them.

“Then stop acting like one,” he retorts, with an amount of control that makes me hate

him.

It's not the first time we've locked horns, but something about this time feels more momentous, like we're both finally speaking the things that we've wanted to say for years.

"I'm thirty." I slap my hand with the other one. "I have a degree in business from one of the best schools in the world. I've grown up watching you make deals and make peace. What else could I possibly have to learn?"

My voice is higher than I want it to be. I don't want to shout, but it's getting harder and harder to slow this maelstrom down.

"Your... mother..." His upper lip trembles.

Oh, no. Not the "your mother" card.

She died when I was so young that I don't even remember her. Father doesn't talk about her much, but even after all these years, he clearly reveres her. He never married again; to my knowledge, he never even dated another woman again.

Because no one could compare to her.

It's romantic, really. Except for when that reverence gets in the way of my life.

"She didn't want you to be pushed into the crown," Father says. "She asked me to keep you out of it for as long as possible."

I shake my head. "What? Why?"

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“Because it’s an all-encompassing commitment, Son. She knew that, and she wanted you to enjoy your youth for as long as you could.”

“Then why am I here?” I grip the roots of my hair in frustration. “You asked me to come.”

“True. You need to see some of what I do. Your preparations to be king cannot wait until twenty years from now.”

I don’t get it. He’s trying to prepare me to be king, and yet he also doesn’t want to trust me with anything important.

“Do you think I can’t do it?” I stare flatly at him, anger boiling beneath my skin.

“Do what?” His eyebrows knit together, but he knows what I’m talking about — and he knows that I know it.

“Be king.” My voice cracks. “You think I’m not good enough, don’t you?”

We glare at each other, at an impasse. I know I’m a disappointment to him, but I wish he’d just give me a chance to prove myself.

I’m about to stalk off when I notice the journalist at the end of the hall, watching us with wide eyes. Great. She’s heard everything. Just what I need — more bad press.

“I’ll see you at dinner.” My father turns around and walks off, leaving my heart to crack in two.

Suddenly, he stops walking and looks over his shoulder, though his eyes don't meet mine. "You are not a disappointment, Son. You never could be."

That wrings my chest, though I don't exactly know why. He walks away without another word, and I storm over to the woman, irritation simmering.

"Is that what you wanted?" I ask sharply. "A scoop on how the crown prince doesn't want to be king?"

She holds up her hands, eyes still wide. "No, no, I didn't mean to eavesdrop. I was just looking for a bathroom. I got tea on my skirt when I... I spilled..."

"The tea?" I scoff, and then — in an unexpected moment — we're both smiling at each other.

"Isn't that what journalists do?" she says, grinning.

"Apparently you're the best there is."

"Not really." She sighs. "I'm about to walk back to my office without a story."

I rake a hand through my hair, the mention of our failed interview bringing back my frustration. "Well, now you've got plenty of material for your story. 'Prince Luca Is Immature Child, Disappoints Nation.'"

To my surprise, she shakes her head. "I won't write any of that. Look, why don't you let me show you around the city this afternoon? Get out of the hotel for a bit. In return, I'll write a glowing piece about how dedicated you are to connecting with the people. Maybe, once your father reads that, he'll see you in a new light."

I blink, caught off guard by her offer. She gazes at me steadily, and I find myself

noticing how her brown eyes sparkle, how the sunlight catches on her wavy chestnut hair. Spending the day with a beautiful woman does sound better than being cooped up here.

“You want to show me around, Ms. Warren?” I ask slowly.

She nods, a small smile playing on her lips. “Please, call me Hailey. I know all the best places. I’ll plan an amazing itinerary if you let me.”

I can’t help but grin, intrigued. Maybe this interview isn’t a total wash after all.

I raise an eyebrow, playing along. “Okay, then, impress me. What’s on this amazing itinerary of yours?”

Hailey’s face lights up. She ticks off places on her fingers as she talks. “First, we’ll go to the farmers market and try all the fresh pastries and fruit. Then we can walk through Central Park, and I’ll show you the pond with the sailboats and Bethesda Fountain. Oh! We should also stop by the museum and take in some history and culture. Ooh, and I know where to get the best pizza in the whole city. Do you like pizza?”

She pauses for a breath, looking at me expectantly. Her enthusiasm is infectious, and I laugh.

“Okay, okay, that actually does sound like fun,” I admit. “And yes, I do like pizza. Who doesn’t?”

Hailey smiles brightly. “Right?”

I nod, my earlier frustration melting away. Maybe I’ve been too quick to dismiss Hailey. She seems genuinely interested in showing me a nice time, and if she writes a

great story about me, that could get my country's people on my side. And once I have more citizens supporting me for something other than my six-pack or expensive smile, perhaps that will convince my father to give me real duties.

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“Shall we get going, then?” I ask, offering her my arm in an exaggerated royal gesture.

Hailey laughs and takes my arm. “Let’s do this.”

I feel lighter already as we walk down the hallway together. A day spent with a lovely lady and no one managing my every move? Sign me up.

We round the corner, arm in arm and chatting easily, and I spot a group of suited royal guards headed our way.

Crap. If they see me trying to sneak out, they’ll drag me right back to my father.

Without thinking, I grab Hailey’s hand and yank open the nearest door, pulling us both inside. It’s a storage closet, tiny and cramped with shelves and boxes.

Hailey stumbles into me with a little “oh!” and I catch her around the waist. We stand frozen like that, chest to chest in the dark closet. I’m very aware of her body pressed against mine, soft and warm. She smells really nice too, like vanilla and jasmine.

My heart is pounding wildly, but I don’t know why. I’ve been this close to many women, many times, and yet... there’s something different about right now.

My arms are still around her and I can’t seem to make them let go. Hailey looks up at me with those big doe eyes, surprise and something else in her expression.

The sound of footsteps fades past the closet. The guards are gone, but we remain

locked in this intimate embrace. The air feels electric. Hailey's lips part slightly as her breathing quickens. Without thinking, I start to lean in...

No. What am I doing? I release her abruptly and turn away. "Uh, we—we should go. Coast is clear now."

I open the closet door and step out, feeling dazed. Hailey follows behind me, straightening her clothes.

She gives me a tentative smile and nods down the hall. "This way. Come on. I know a back route we can take. It's where they let the press in for conferences."

I let her lead, trying to shake off the intoxicating effect being so close to her caused. It's odd. I barely know this girl.

But still... I sneak a glance at her as we slip out of the hotel, appreciating her confident walk and her soft profile. Maybe I'd like to get to know her better after all.

CHAPTER 4

HAILEY

My heart is still racing as we emerge onto the busy Manhattan street. I can't believe I almost kissed Prince Luca! What came over me in that closet?

Sure, he's handsome and charming, but this is a professional assignment. I need to keep things strictly business between us.

Still, when his strong arms wrapped around me, holding me close in the dark, it felt... right. Natural, even. And the way he looked at me after, his eyes searching mine...

I force the thoughts from my mind as I hail a cab. Luca slides in beside me, his thigh brushing mine, and my pulse quickens again.

“Where are we headed?” he asks with that lilting accent.

“Best pizza in the city,” I reply, trying to sound casual. “You can’t visit New York without trying our famous thin crust.”

Luca grins. “I’m famished.”

As the cab speeds downtown, he watches the city flash by with childlike awe. I study his profile — his regal nose, his sharp jawline dusted with stubble. I have an urge to reach out and touch it, feel its texture under my fingertips...

Instead, I clench my hands in my lap. This assignment will be over soon. Luca will return to his kingdom, become king. And I’ll likely never see him again.

I try to ignore the pang in my chest at the thought. It would be nice, spending some time with him beyond today, but I need to remember my place. Luca and I are from completely different worlds.

The cab pulls up outside John’s Pizzeria, a hole-in-the-wall joint with the best slices in the city. Luca insists on paying, despite my protests that it should go on my company card.

Holding thin paper plates that threaten to buckle under the weight of the huge slices, we grab a small table by the window. The scent of hot cheese and yeasty dough fills the air, making my mouth water.

Luca takes the first bite, the cheese stretching deliciously. His eyes widen.

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“This is incredible!” he exclaims through a mouthful.

“I know,” I laugh. “I promised it would be!” A bit of sauce clings to his bottom lip and I have to resist the urge to wipe it off with my thumb.

We chat easily as we devour the pizza, and for a while I let the focus shift off of him and onto me — which seems to be what he needs in order to open up more. Luca asks thoughtful questions about my job, my family, my life in the city. He tells me what it was like growing up as a prince, both the privileges and responsibilities. I feel myself opening up more than I have with anyone in a long time.

Too soon, the last crusts are gone. I glance at the time on my phone.

“We should head to the subway if we want to make the next ferry to Liberty Island,” I say.

Luca’s face lights up. “I can’t wait to see Lady Liberty up close.”

We descend into the crowded subway station, and though Luca doesn’t mention it, it’s pretty obvious he’s never ridden a subway before. He hangs back a beat, watching other people go through the turnstiles before attempting it on his own, and once on the train he grins like a kid on a Disney World ride.

We emerge from the subway and walk to the bustling pier. Luca gazes up in awe at the towering green Statue of Liberty.

“She’s magnificent!” he exclaims.

After getting tickets, we board the ferry, joining the throngs of tourists speaking a cacophony of languages. Luca seems fascinated by everything, from the choppy harbor waters to the seagulls wheeling overhead.

As the ferry nears Liberty Island, his excitement is palpable. Being around him makes my own mood lighter. It feels like we're on vacation rather than in the same city I've spent my entire life.

Disembarking with the others, we head straight for the statue. Inside, we slowly climb the tight spiral staircase, each step taking us closer to the crown.

At the top, we step out onto the narrow observation deck. The expansive view of the harbor and the city skyline is breathtaking.

Luca leans on the railing, the wind ruffling his hair. "I wish I could see sights like this every day," he says wistfully. "My father keeps me on such a short leash back home."

"I would have thought the world was your oyster," I say, "being a prince and all."

He shrugs. "It's not that simple. I wish, but... no."

"What would you choose if you could have anything?" I step a little closer, since it's hard to hear each other due to the wind.

"I want to do something meaningful. I'm next in line for the throne, yet I have no real power to help my people. All I want is to make a difference."

My heart aches for him. Impulsively, I squeeze his hand. Fire ignites where we touch, and his gaze drops to our hands.

Quickly, I withdraw the touch. I don't know what I was thinking. It was an

unchecked moment, completely unprofessional.

Turning away, I quickly look for something to focus on. Maybe I can make him forget that I ever crossed a line and touched his hand.

“There’s the Empire State Building.” I point it out.

He seems interested enough in the city’s architecture, and we linger until the sun sinks below the horizon in a blaze of orange and pink. Finally, we descend the winding staircase back down into the statue’s interior.

As we exit, Luca’s phone rings. He glances at the screen and sighs.

“My father,” he explains before answering. “Yes, Father, I’m fine... I’m just out seeing the sights of the city.” Luca’s voice tightens. “No... no, I’ll return when I’m ready. Goodbye.”

He ends the call abruptly, and I bite my lip with concern.

“Won’t the king send security forces to find you?” I ask.

He shakes his head, unconcerned. “Let them look. For the first time in years, I feel free.”

“Good,” I murmur, not wanting the day to end.

We board the ferry and take it back to the city, and once we disembark, my heart sinks with each step. I have enough for my story, but the day feels incomplete.

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Because I don't want to let Luca go, as wrong as that is.

I've never met a man as caring as he is, nor as passionate about life. It seems a crime to let him slip away into the huge world, only for us to never cross paths again.

As we walk along the river, his eyes meet mine. "Thank you for showing me New York."

My heart flutters. "It was my pleasure," I reply softly.

He looks down, seeming thoughtful. "Is it wrong that I don't want today to end?"

My heart does a flip. "No," I breathe. "I don't want it to end either."

He looks up and into my eyes, the warmth there taking me off guard. "What else can you show me? We've taken in some big sights, but what about Hailey's New York? Hailey's world?"

"I don't do much," I giggle. "I go to work and go home. I could show you those places, but I think you would be bored."

He shakes his head. "I know I wouldn't be."

"Oh." My pulse races. "Well, then... would you like to see my apartment? It's nothing special, but it's home."

A slow smile pulls on his lips. "Please, lead the way."

And so I do, guiding him to the A train and uptown to my stop. The whole way, I question whether this is a good idea: inviting my subject and the prince of a European country to my home.

But then I think of Luca, of how he's let go and decided to live without shackles for at least one day, and I decide that I, too, should follow my heart and just see where it takes me.

CHAPTER 5

LUCA

The whole trip to Hailey's apartment, I resist the urge to pinch myself. Surely, I'm in a dream.

The afternoon was the best I've ever had, and now it's extending into the evening. I'm free from my father for a little bit — whether he likes it or not — and everything about life feels better.

We enter an unassuming apartment building, and Hailey unlocks the door to her place on the top floor. “Well, this is me,” she says with a shy smile, gesturing for me to enter.

I step inside and glance around. The space is small but inviting, with colorful art prints on the walls and cozy furniture. It feels like Hailey, warm and full of life.

“I love it,” I tell her sincerely. “It suits you.”

She beams, clearly pleased. “Thanks. I'm really a homebody, so I want it to be as cozy as possible, you know? Here, let me show you the best part.”

She leads me back through the living room and to a narrow door. We climb up a short flight of stairs and emerge onto the rooftop, where the night air is cool on my face.

I inhale sharply. “Wow.”

“I know, right? My apartment was built for the superintendent to live in, and so they added direct access to the rooftop. The super doesn’t live here anymore, though. She’s across the street. And I was lucky enough to snag her apartment when she moved.”

The view is spectacular, city lights stretching out before us like a glittering carpet. In the distance, I can make out the iconic skyscrapers of Manhattan piercing the velvet sky.

“Incredible, isn’t it?” she says softly, coming to stand beside me at the railing. “I come up here whenever I need to think or just... breathe.”

I nod, unable to tear my gaze away from the vista. “I can see why. I feel like I can view the whole world from here.”

We sit side by side on a small bench, thighs and shoulders brushing. Hailey points out different landmarks, her eyes sparkling with pride for her city. I’m only half-listening, too captivated by her face in the glow of the lights.

I’ve never felt like this before — so happy, so free, so utterly enchanted by another person. With Hailey, I’m not a prince or someone who has to put on a good show all the time. I’m just... me.

“Thank you for today,” I murmur. “For everything.”

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She turns to face me, and in her eyes I see my own longing reflected back. “I’m so glad you walked into my life, Luca.”

Slowly, like magnets being drawn together, we lean in. I cup her face with a trembling hand, and our lips meet, soft and sweet.

The shimmering city falls away, my entire world narrowing down to the feel of Hailey’s mouth moving against mine, her silky hair between my fingers, the racing of my pulse. I’ve kissed before, but it’s never felt like this. This feels next level. Like I’m finally home.

We finally break apart, foreheads resting together as we catch our breath. Hailey looks dazed, her lips red and swollen. I’m sure I’m no better.

“Wow,” she whispers.

“Wow,” I agree.

An uncontrollable grin spreads across my face. I pull her into my arms and hug her tight, face buried in her hair.

I never want to let go. Right here, in this moment, with this incredible woman... this is where I belong. The burdens awaiting me back home feel a million miles away.

I pause and pull back slightly, gazing into Hailey’s brown eyes. They shine in the city lights, deep and inviting. I could lose myself in those eyes forever.

“You’re amazing — you know that?” I brush a lock of hair from her face. “Smart, driven, kind... Not to mention absolutely gorgeous.”

She ducks her head, blushing. “I’m really not that special.”

“Yes, you are.” I tip her chin up gently. “Don’t ever doubt that. The world is yours for the taking, Hailey. I have a feeling you’re destined for great things.”

“What about you?” She searches my face. “The throne, the crown... that’s a huge responsibility. Are you ready for it?”

I blow out a breath. “Honestly? I’m terrified. Being king someday, having an entire country depend on me... it’s a lot.”

“I can only imagine.” Her hand finds mine, lacing her fingers between mine, and her touch grounds me. “For what it’s worth, I think you’ll make an amazing king when the time comes. Werdenfeld couldn’t ask for better.”

Hearing that from her means more than she could possibly know. I swallow back the sudden lump in my throat.

“Thank you,” I manage. “That... Thank you.”

Words failing, I pull her to me again and capture her lips with mine. She responds eagerly, winding her arms around my neck as the kiss deepens. A hunger stirs low in my belly. I want her, all of her, with a ferocity that staggers me.

And she’s just as hungry. I can tell from the way that she pulls me closer, her tongue diving deeper into my mouth.

As if we’re one brain, one body, we’re suddenly standing, kissing as I walk her

backwards and down the stairs. In her living room, she takes my hand and pulls me into her bedroom.

There's no time to take in the decor. We're on the bed, our bodies twisting together, articles of clothing flying off and landing on the floor. The kisses get hungrier, more desperate. I roll over so that I'm on top of her, my thigh between her legs.

She moans, eyes closing in pleasure as I press against her. There's a new energy thrumming under my skin, electric and dangerous. Ducking down, I kiss her neck, each peck lower and lower until her breast is in my mouth.

Her nails dig into my back, legs wrapping around my waist. She pulls me closer, our bare skin meeting in delicious ecstasy. I grow stiff, the ache to be inside of her all-encompassing.

"Over... in the..." She moans in pleasure as I send my hand between her legs. She points at the bedside table.

Leaning over, I open the drawer she's pointing at. "Where?"

"Somewhere," she gasps. "I think... I mean..."

I move pens, paper, and trinkets around, finally locating a condom. Its wrapper is worn, signaling it's been here for quite a while. Seizing it, I rip the top of the plastic and roll the condom onto my length.

Settling back on top of her, I slowly push past her soft folds. She moans in delight, her face a picture of sheer heaven.

We fall into a slow and steady pace, sweat trickling down my chest. We're a whirlwind of kisses, damp hair, and random laughter. I rake my lips down her

shoulder, across her cheek, leaving kisses wherever I can, thrilled to lose myself in the perfection of her.

Her muscles tighten around my length, and her breathing hitches. Our gazes lock as pleasure sweeps through her, carrying her to another world. Seeing her so lost in ecstasy, I lose control and release, my orgasm ripping through me.

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Gasping for breath, I hold myself above her as we look into each other's eyes.

“Well,” I say simply.

“Well.” She grins.

What now?

My father is waiting back at the hotel for me. My life as a prince is waiting for me. Right now, though, I'm content to let them wait.

“Do you like dinner?” I ask.

Hailey chuckles. “I do like dinner.”

I grin. “Good, because I don't want this night to end.”

Her face softens. She almost looks sad, but the expression is quickly replaced by a smile. “I don't either, so let's make it last.”

Lowering my face so that it's inches from hers, I softly whisper, “Deal,” then seal it with a kiss.

CHAPTER 6

HAILEY

The first thing I notice when I wake is an arm draped across my stomach. Sunlight filters through the blinds, casting slanted shadows across the bed. I blink, memories of yesterday flooding back in an instant.

Luca. The interview, the tour around the city, sitting on the rooftop, and then... My face flushes as I recall how we ended up tangled in my sheets, a mess of desperate kisses and roaming hands. I can scarcely believe it wasn't all a dream.

Slowly, I turn my head on the pillow to look at him. He's still fast asleep, his chiseled features relaxed and peaceful. Dark-blond lashes fan across his cheekbones, and a lock of hair falls rakishly over his brow. Damn, he's even more gorgeous first thing in the morning, where I usually look a puffy mess. How is that even possible?

As if sensing my gaze, Luca stirs. His eyelids flutter open, azure eyes still hazy with sleep. When they focus on me, his lips curve into a lazy smile that sets my heart racing.

"Good morning," he murmurs, voice low and rough. "This is a sight I could get used to waking up to."

I bite my lip against a giddy smile. "I bet you say that to all the journalists you seduce."

"Only the brilliant, beautiful ones." His arm tightens around my waist, pulling me closer. "Which is to say, only you."

He dips his head to nuzzle my neck, pressing a kiss to the sensitive skin beneath my ear. I shiver, tilting my head to give him better access. My fingers thread through his hair, earning a low hum of approval.

"Luca," I sigh, eyes fluttering shut. God, the things this man does to me.

“Mmm. Say it again.” Another open-mouthed kiss, this one to my racing pulse. “I love how you say my name.”

I laugh breathlessly, arching into his touch. “Luca, as much as I’d love to stay in bed with you all day, didn’t you say you have that meeting you and your father are going to?”

He groans, burying his face against my shoulder. “Don’t remind me.” But he pulls back to glance at the clock on the nightstand. Muttered curses fall from his lips as he throws off the covers. “Damn. I’m going to be late.”

He springs from the bed and hurries around my room, gathering up his clothes from where we eagerly discarded them for the second time after we went out to dinner at a pub on the corner. I prop myself up on my elbows to watch appreciatively as he tugs on his boxer briefs and trousers. The man is pure walking sin.

Hopping awkwardly as he pulls on his socks, he flashes me a roguish grin. “See something you like?”

“Absolutely,” I admit shamelessly, drinking in his lean, muscled torso and broad shoulders. “But you should probably put a shirt on before I drag you back to bed and make you really late.”

He laughs, a rich warm sound that curls around me like an embrace. He shrugs on his button-down and does up a few buttons. I reluctantly slide out of bed, picking his tie up off the floor. Looping it around his neck, I use it to tug him down for a quick, hard kiss.

“Coffee?” I offer as I pull away, smoothing his collar. “I think I have some pastries around here somewhere too.”

“You’re an angel,” he declares gratefully, giving me one more peck before padding off to the bathroom.

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In the kitchen, I rush to start the coffeemaker and rummage through my sadly sparse fridge. Note to self: go grocery shopping.

But despite the poorly stocked fridge, I do manage to scrounge up the promised pastries and some fruit. By the time Luca emerges, looking unfairly put-together and handsome, I slide a cup of coffee and a plate across the counter to him.

“Breakfast is served,” I announce. “Nothing fancy, but it’ll have to do.”

“It’s perfect. Thank you.” He takes a quick sip of coffee before setting the mug down and pulling me into his arms. “I don’t know what I did to deserve you.”

“What do you mean?” Since he’s considerably taller than me and we’re inches apart, I have to tilt my head back to look up at him.

He runs his thumb across my jaw. “Yesterday was special.”

“It was,” I agree. My heart flutters, then — just as quickly — sinks.

Because, for as special as our time together was, now it has to come to an end.

“Hey.” He lifts my chin. “You never showed me Bethesda Fountain. Meet me there today? At two?”

Though I want to say yes, I hesitate. I’ve already breached journalistic ethics by sleeping with him. On top of that, he’s a prince! Could we really have a future together, when our lives are so different?

I lick my lips, my heart winning. “I’ll see you there.”

“Perfect.” With one more kiss, he’s out the door, leaving me in an apartment that — for the first time since moving here — feels way too quiet.

I shake my head and let out a small, disbelieving laugh. Did I really just spend an incredible day and night with an actual prince? It feels surreal. Luca is charming, funny, down-to-earth... Not exactly what I expected from royalty. And the way he touched me, kissed me, made me feel...

The delicious memories ripple through me, making me sigh in delight.

Since it’s Saturday, I don’t need to go into work unless I choose to. Trying to distract myself, I tidy up the kitchen and living room, but my mind keeps straying back to Luca. I can’t believe I’m going to see him again in just a few hours.

Grabbing my phone, I call Millie’s number before I can second-guess myself. She picks up on the second ring.

“Hey, girl! How’s the hot-prince assignment going?” Her voice is playful and teasing.

“Um, it went well,” I say, suddenly feeling shy. “Really well, actually.”

“Ooh, do tell!” she demands. “I want all the juicy details!”

So, with a deep breath, I launch into the story, telling her about showing Luca around the city, our easy conversation and banter, the undeniable spark between us. I gloss over some of the steamier specifics when I get to last night, but Millie reads between the lines.

“Oh, my God, Hails!” she squeals. “You slept with him? A prince? This is unreal!”

“I know. I can’t quite believe it myself,” I admit, pacing across my living room. “But Millie, it was amazing. He’s amazing. I felt so comfortable with him, like we really connected.”

“Aw, honey, I’m so happy for you!” Millie gushes. “Seriously, a fling with a prince? This is the kind of thing dreams are made of! Ooh, what if it turns into more than a fling? Can you imagine? My best friend, future queen!”

“Whoa, slow down,” I laugh, but I can’t ignore the little thrill that runs through me at her words. “It was one night, Mill. Well, one night and this afternoon. That’s it. I doubt it’ll turn into anything serious.”

“But you’re seeing him again today, right? He obviously likes you!” Millie points out gleefully. “Oh, Hails, what if this is the start of a real fairy-tale romance?”

I shake my head, smiling at her enthusiasm. “I don’t know about all that. Let’s not get carried away. Yeah, we’re meeting today, but... it’s just a fling, that’s all.”

Even as I say the words, though, I know I’m trying to convince myself as much as her. Because deep down, a tiny, secret part of me is hoping that maybe, just maybe, Luca and I could be more than a fleeting affair. That the connection I felt with him was real and meaningful.

I remember the soft look in his eyes last night, the way he held me close and traced patterns on my skin. The easy way we talked and laughed together. Is it crazy to think this could turn into something real?

Something... more?

No.

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I can't let myself go down that road. Luca is a prince, for God's sake. And I'm just... me. A journalist, a commoner. We come from completely different worlds. This is nothing more than a fun, whirlwind fling.

Royals don't fall for regular girls like me. That's the stuff of romance novels, not real life. So I'll enjoy the fairy tale for a day or two, but I won't let myself hope for a happily ever after. It's smarter that way. Safer.

I'll just ignore the fact that my foolish heart seems to have other ideas.

CHAPTER 7

LUCA

The women are back, swarming the front of the hotel, except this time their numbers have grown. They call my name and wave excitedly, taking pictures the moment I step out of the taxi in front of the hotel. I paste on my practiced, polite smile, stopping to pose for a few quick selfies, before gently extracting myself from their eager clutches.

"Prince Luca, over here!" they call out, waving and blowing kisses. But I barely see them. My mind is consumed with thoughts of her.

Hailey.

The way her chestnut hair shone in the sun as we walked through the park. Her quick wit and the spark of challenge in her eyes. The taste of her sweet lips against mine...

It was painful to leave her bed this morning, but the promise of seeing her this afternoon keeps me warm. Soon enough, she'll be back in my arms. And then...

Then what?

I'm not entirely sure, but perhaps she would like to visit me back home? See my country and the palace grounds? The thought of having her there fills me with joy, and I feel more like a teenager again than a grown man.

"Your Highness," Stefan, one of my father's advisors, greets me with a respectful incline of his head. His usually stern face looks even more pinched and grim than normal. "I'm afraid I have some unfortunate news. The king decided to return to Werdenfeld early this morning. He said he needed to prepare for the trade summit next week. The meeting you two were to attend this morning has been postponed indefinitely."

Disappointment crashes through me, followed by a flare of irritation. "He left without me? Without so much as a word?"

I know I disappeared on him yesterday, but still. Leaving me behind without even a heads-up feels rather discourteous. Is this his way of getting me back for going off on my own yesterday?

It's not like I was in danger! I even answered his phone call and let him know I was perfectly fine, as I didn't want him to worry.

Stefan meets my gaze, unapologetic. "With respect, sir, can you blame him? You were off the grid for hours. Shirking your itinerary and duties."

I sigh and run a hand through my hair, my annoyance deflating. He's right, of course. It was irresponsible of me to go off with Hailey like that, without a word to anyone.

Unbecoming behavior for the crown prince.

But, God help me, I don't regret a single second of it. Not when every moment I spent with her felt more real and alive than all the stifling years in the gilded palace cages of my birthright.

There's no point bitching and whining. If this is just another chess move for my father, then I can't show weakness. I need to respond by acting as if his slight doesn't bother me. And so I square my shoulders and lift my chin, donning the mantle of the cool, collected prince once more.

"Very well." I head for the elevator, planning on taking a shower. "I'm going to take the day to myself, then."

My mind is miles away, lost in memories of yesterday with Hailey — her bright smile, her quick wit, the way her eyes sparkled when she laughed at something I said.

I've never connected with someone so instantly, so effortlessly. It was like we just fit, two puzzle pieces slotting together. I want more time with her, to discover everything that makes her tick. What's her biggest fear? Her wildest dream?

I'm startled out of my reverie when Stefan clears his throat pointedly. "Sir, we're set to take off within the hour. I've already informed the pilot to prepare for wheels up."

I turn around to face him, annoyed. Of course Stefan and my father have rescheduled my departure without consulting me. What else is new?

"Cancel it." The words are out of my mouth before I can second-guess them.

Stefan's brows shoot up in surprise. "But sir, your father?—"

“Isn’t expecting me for a few more days,” I cut in smoothly. “I think I’ll extend my stay here. Take in more of the city.” Before I lose my nerve, I add casually, “I was thinking of asking Ms. Warren to dinner. As a thank-you for being such an engaging tour guide yesterday.”

“Who?”

“The journalist from yesterday.”

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Stefan frowns. “I’m not sure that’s wise, sir. Getting... entangled with a reporter?—”

“It’s dinner, Stefan, not a marriage proposal.” I infuse my voice with cool authority. “I’m perfectly capable of handling one friendly meal with a charming woman without causing an international incident.”

He purses his lips but wisely drops the subject with a slight nod. I turn back to the elevator and press the up button, a thrill humming through my blood. Two p.m. at Bethesda Fountain can’t come soon enough.

The elevator is taking its sweet time, and I’m dimly aware of Stefan hovering behind me. My phone buzzes and I glance down. The number on the screen has a Werdenfelden country code. Brow furrowing, I hit accept.

“Hello?”

“Your Highness,” comes the choked voice on the other end. It’s Elsa, my father’s head of household. “I’m so terribly sorry but... but the king... he’s gone. He had a massive heart attack on the plane. The doctors... they couldn’t revive him.”

The phone slips from my numb fingers, clattering on the floor. No. No, no, no. This can’t be happening. My father is the strongest man I know. He can’t be...

The world tilts sideways, and black spots dance across my vision. I can’t breathe. I can’t think. This has to be a nightmare.

But it’s not. Stefan’s phone is ringing as well, and I can tell from his wide eyes that

he's receiving the same news. My father has died. He's gone forever.

Stefan hangs up his phone and says something to me, but it's muffled, like I'm underwater. Oh, God. My father is dead.

And I am now the king of Werdenfeld.

Despair and panic rip through me as reality sinks in. I'm not ready for this. I can't fill my father's shoes, can't possibly lead a nation. Hot tears sting my eyes but I blink them back. Kings don't cry.

Stefan rushes to my side, face etched with concern. "Sir, what do you need? What can I do?"

My mind whirls in a daze. "I... I have to get back to Werdenfeld. Immediately."

He nods. "Of course. I'll have your things packed up."

As he pulls out his phone, a flash of brown hair across the lobby crowd catches my eye and makes me think of Hailey. Hailey. Oh, God, Hailey. In the tsunami of grief, I almost forgot. We're supposed to meet at Bethesda Terrace at two p.m. She'll be waiting for me, not knowing my entire world just imploded.

I should call her, let her know. Except I don't have her number. In my rush to leave this morning, I didn't even think of getting it.

I grab Stefan's arm. "I need a favor. Please, it's important."

"Anything, sir."

"I was supposed to meet someone, but I don't have her number. Can you get a

message to her? Hailey Warren; she's the journalist."

He frowns slightly but nods. "Of course. What's the message?"

I swallow hard past the lump in my throat. "Tell her... tell her I have to leave, that there's been a family emergency. That I'm so very sorry but I have to go back to Werdenfeld immediately."

"I'll see that she gets it." He flags down the doorman. "You, there! I have an urgent task for you."

As Stefan relays the message, I sag against the wall, feeling like I've aged a decade in mere minutes. I'm leaving behind the woman who captured my heart, returning to a role I'm vastly unprepared for. But I have no choice. I am the king now.

Duty comes before everything. Even my own heart.

CHAPTER 8

HAILEY

I've been sitting by Bethesda Fountain for two hours now, watching happy couples stroll by hand in hand, giggling children chase each other, tourists snap selfies. Two long, long hours... And there's still no sign of Luca.

Four o'clock. He's officially two hours late.

An uncomfortable heaviness settles in my chest as reality sinks in: I've been stood up. By a real-life Prince Charming who surely has a thousand other eager women lining up to be with him.

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Stupid, stupid Hailey. I blink back the sting of tears, refusing to cry in public over a man I barely know. Clearly, our magical night together meant a lot more to me than it did to him.

Anger begins to simmer, pushing through the hurt and humiliation. How dare he make a date with me and then just not show up? I deserve better than this.

I march determinedly toward his hotel, just across the street from Central Park, ready to give him a piece of my mind. Doesn't he know who I am? I'm Hailey freaking Warren, rising-star journalist. He can't just treat me like this.

But as I approach the shining revolving doors, I hesitate. Is this really a good idea? Confronting him, letting him see how much he got to me?

My pride balks at the thought. I don't want to give him the satisfaction of knowing he hurt me.

I hover uncertainly outside the entrance, warring with myself. Confront him or let it go? Risk more humiliation or walk away with my head held high?

Tears I refused to shed earlier now prickle behind my eyes. I duck into the nearest subway station, needing to get away, get home. Slumping into a hard plastic seat, I lose the last of my energy as the train rattles through the tunnels.

Why do I care so much? It was one night, a fantasy. Princes don't fall for ordinary girls like me. I knew it couldn't last.

But that doesn't stop the sharp ache in my chest, the irrational feeling that I just lost something precious. Something that could have been extraordinary.

Staring out the smudged window, I let the tears finally fall.

Getting off the train after a few stops, I walk up to ground level for cell service and call the first name in my favorites list. Millie. Always dependable, she picks up on the second ring.

"Hey, girl. How'd it go with Prince Charming today?" Her voice is bright, eager. I swallow hard.

"He didn't show up, Mill. I waited for two hours like an idiot." My voice cracks on the last word.

"What? Oh, Hailey, I'm so sorry. Well, maybe something happened and he'll call you when things settle down?" Her endless optimism usually bolsters me, but right now it grates.

"He's a prince, Millie. I was a fun diversion, that's all. Time to face reality. And he doesn't have my number. He didn't even give me his." A few more tears escape and I brush them away roughly. "Look, can I come over? I really don't want to be alone right now."

"Of course, sweetie, get your butt over here. I'll supply the wine and ice cream, you supply the full scoop. Deal?"

Despite everything, a smile tugs at my lips. "Deal. Thanks, Mill. I'll see you soon."

I end the call and go back down into the tunnel to catch the next train. Once I have a seat, I lean my head back, suddenly exhausted. Watching the tunnel lights flash by, I

let my mind drift, remembering stolen moments...

Luca's hand warm on my back as we sat at dinner. The spark in his blue eyes when he laughed. The feel of his lips on my skin...

No. I firmly shut down that train of thought. However magical it felt, it wasn't real. Couldn't be real.

Time to pick up the pieces of my bruised heart and move on. I've gotten good at that over the years. This time won't be any different.

I hope.

The train jolts to a stop and I stand, squaring my shoulders. One foot in front of the other. I can do this. Life goes on, with or without charming princes.

Even if a traitorous part of me desperately wishes this fairy tale could have lasted just a little bit longer.

The walk from the train stop to Millie's is almost ten minutes — she's definitely a trek from my place in Manhattan, but well worth it every time. She throws open the door before I can even knock, enveloping me in a tight hug. "Oh, Hailey, I'm so sorry. Come in, come in."

She ushers me inside her cozy apartment, the smell of freshly baked cookies and finger paints mingling in the air. Squeals and laughter emanate from down the hall — her kids Lake and Howie caught up in their imaginary world of make-believe.

"Where's Teddy?" I ask, looking around for her husband.

"He's cycling with his friends. It's his day off from parenting." She's already opening

a bottle of wine. “Tomorrow’s mine.”

“That’s right.” Hope flickers in my heart. A girl’s day is something to look forward to.

“There’s a sound bath tomorrow morning at the old warehouse a few blocks over.” She pours me a glass of wine. “What do you think?”

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“Sounds great.” I know it won’t wash away all the pain I’m feeling, but at least a day with my best friend will be a decent distraction.

“You can crash here, if you want.” She hands me the wine glass.

It’s so sweet of her, knowing that I’ll be incredibly sad and lonely tonight — but it also makes me feel shittier. I’m that sad, single friend, married to her career and not even committed to keeping a house plant — forget about a pet or a boyfriend.

Yep. I’m the person who has nothing to go home to, ladies and gentlemen.

“Auntie Hailey!” Lake barrels towards me in a whirlwind of blond curls and sticky fingers. I crouch down to scoop her and Howie into a hug, their innocent joy thawing some of the ice around my heart.

“Hey, munchkins! What trouble are you two causing today, hmm?”

“We’re playing castle! I’m the queen and Howie is my knight!” Lake proclaims proudly, plastic tiara askew on her head.

“Lucky queen to have such a brave knight,” I say with a smile I don’t quite feel. If only real life worked out so neatly.

“All right, kiddos, Mommy needs to talk to Auntie Hailey now. Why don’t you go set up a tea party for us and we’ll be there in fifteen minutes?”

They scamper off with delighted giggles, and Millie loops her arm through mine,

leading me to the overstuffed couch.

“How are you feeling?” she asks.

I take a long sip, the rich merlot warming my throat. “I waited, Millie. For two hours, like an idiot. He never showed.”

She rubs my arm soothingly. “I’m sure there’s an explanation. Maybe an emergency came up with his family? Or he got stuck in a meeting?”

I shake my head, throat tight. “He could have called my office. Gotten my cell number there.”

“Are they allowed to give that out?” She frowns.

“Well... no. But there’s someone answering the phones on Saturday. If he had called, they would let me know.” The tears threaten again and I blink them back angrily. “It’s fine. It’s probably for the best. I mean, who was I kidding? Thinking I could have some whirlwind romance with an actual prince?”

I let out a bitter laugh. “Guys like Luca don’t end up with girls like me. I was fooling myself to ever think otherwise.”

Millie frowns, opening her mouth to object, but I hold up a hand to stop her. I can’t handle her well-meaning platitudes and pep talks right now.

“I appreciate you trying to cheer me up, Mill, I really do. But can we just... not talk about him anymore today? I think I need to lick my wounds in peace for a bit.”

Understanding fills her eyes and she nods, giving my hand a squeeze. “Of course. Whatever you need.” She stands up, mustering a bright smile. “Now, I believe we

have some very impatient royalty waiting for us. Shall we go see what Her Majesty demands?”

I drain the rest of my wine and set the glass down with a determined clink. Broken heart or not, I refuse to wallow. Time to paste on a smile and go play pretend.

If only I could convince myself that this ache in my chest is make-believe too.

CHAPTER 9

LUCA

The funeral suit hangs on the wardrobe like a specter, black fabric seeming to suck all light and joy from the room. My fingers tremble slightly as I button the crisp white shirt, fumbling with the onyx cuff links.

Each step of dressing feels heavy, weighed down by the grim reality of what this day holds. My father, my king, lying cold and lifeless, about to be sealed away forever. It still doesn't feel real.

I stare at my reflection — pale face, shadows beneath red-rimmed eyes, golden hair combed into rigid submission. The picture of a grieving son and solemn future monarch. But inside I'm screaming, raging against the cruelty of fate that ripped him away too soon.

A quiet knock at the door interrupts my spiraling thoughts. “Sir?” Stefan peeks his head in. “It's nearly time.”

I nod curtly, not trusting my voice not to crack. Shrugging on the jacket, I take a shuddering breath, trying to steel myself. But how can I possibly be ready to lay my father to rest? To take his place on the throne, when all I want is to beg him not to

leave me?

Our last conversation plays through my mind for the thousandth time. I'd been so rude to him, so unwilling to listen and see his point of view. Yet even though I acted like a brat, he still took it upon himself to tell me I wasn't a disappointment, that I "never could be" — his last words to me.

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He was a good father. A good man. I only regret that I was too foolish to see it.

Stefan clears his throat. “The press release is prepared. After the service, the official announcement will be made to the public.” His wizened face softens. “Werdenfeld shares in your loss, Luca. They too will mourn the king that led them so well.”

Hot anger flares in my chest. I don’t want their grief, their expectations. I want my father back. But I swallow the childish words. “Of course. Thank you, Stefan.”

Straightening my tie, I meet my own bleak gaze in the mirror one last time. Time to bury my father. Time to lead my country.

I can do it, despite each step feeling like another knife jab in my heart.

As I descend the palace’s grand staircase, a familiar figure waits at the bottom. Simon, my closest friend since childhood, looks up with empathy shining in his hazel eyes.

“Luca.” He enfolds me in a tight embrace, one hand gripping the back of my neck. “I came as soon as I heard. I’m so sorry, brother.”

For a moment, I let myself sag against him, face pressed to his shoulder as I struggle to hold myself together. Simon is the one person with whom I can let my guard down. After a shuddering breath, I pull back.

“Thanks for being here, Si. It means a lot.” My voice is hoarse, strained.

He squeezes my shoulder. “Where else would I be? You’re not alone in this, Luca. I’ve got your back, always.”

We walk together to the waiting car, sliding into the spacious back seat. As we wind through the cobblestone streets, my thoughts drift unbidden to warm brown eyes and soft lips curved in a smile. Hailey. Amidst the chaos, she’s been a bright spot, a tantalizing possibility of something real. But since that magical night, there’s been only radio silence.

Did she receive my message?

I suppose it doesn’t really matter. I don’t have time for women now. Not with the way my life has abruptly been flipped upside down.

“I met someone,” I murmur, gaze fixed unseeing on the passing scenery. “In New York. Hailey. She’s... different. Special.”

Simon turns to me, one brow raised. “Oh? Do tell.”

A wistful smile tugs at my mouth. “She’s a journalist. Passionate, brilliant. Doesn’t give a damn about my title.” I shake my head. “I thought we had a connection. But now... maybe it was just a fantasy.”

“Hey.” Simon jostles my arm until I meet his eyes. “You felt something real, right? Then don’t give up so easy. Give her time.”

I blow out a heavy sigh. “It’s more than that. I’m about to be made king, Simon. That changes everything.”

The car slows to a stop. My heart clenches painfully as I take in the crowds of black-clad mourners lining the walk to the cathedral. Simon’s hand finds mine, giving a

bolstering squeeze.

“One step at a time, Luca. Your people are with you. I’m with you. You can do this.”

Jaw clenched, I nod tightly. The cathedral looms before us, ancient stone and soaring spires. A monument to the enduring legacy of the Werdenfelden monarchy. My legacy now.

I climb the steps on leaden feet, Simon steadfast at my side. The great oak doors groan open, inviting me into the cavernous sanctuary. Perfumed air and low organ music envelop me. My gaze draws inexorably to the coffin at the altar, draped in our royal standard.

Father.

I stumble, catching myself on a pew. Simon’s arm slips around my shoulders, propping me up as I make my way down the aisle. Memories flash through my mind — sailing on the lake, hearty laughter echoing through the palace rooms, long talks by the fire. All gone now, lost to the ether.

I reach the bier, hardly recognizing the still, waxy figure within as my father. My king. Grief rises in my throat and I bow my head, tears slipping free. “I’m sorry, Father,” I rasp. “I’m so sorry. I wasn’t ready.”

But there’s no more time for selfish regrets. Werdenfeld needs me. I have to shoulder this mantle, bear it with strength and grace as he did. Inhaling shakily, I press a hand to his folded ones, which are cold as marble.

“I’ll make you proud. I swear it. I’ll be the king our people deserve.”

The words hang heavy in the hallowed air. Squaring my shoulders, I turn from my

father's remains to face the future. A future without his guidance, but not without his love. His memory will live on, even as mine is just beginning.

Long live the king.

CHAPTER 10

HAILEY

I stare at the blank document on my screen, cursor blinking accusingly. The office bustle fades to a dull hum as I try to will the words to come. But there's nothing. Nothing at all.

With a sigh, I reach for my coffee, grimacing as the cold dregs hit my tongue. How long have I been sitting here just staring at my computer? Too long, and with nothing to show for it.

I click back to my notes from the interview with Prince Luca, scanning them for the hundredth time. Of course, I have everything that he told me throughout our afternoon, when he opened up and bared his soul — at least he seemed to. Maybe that was only a ruse to get me into bed.

And then he had the nerve to stand me up, leaving me waiting like a fool, no explanation, no apology. Humiliation simmers in my gut at the memory.

I push back from my desk, chair squeaking in protest. I need some air, need to clear my head if I'm going to salvage this mess of an article. Grabbing my empty mug, I head for the break room.

"How's the royal profile coming?" Raven asks as I pass her desk. My cubicle neighbor and closest friend here arches a knowing brow at my scowl.

"Don't ask," I mutter. "Unless you want to be an accessory to murder when I strangle His Highness with my bare hands."

She snorts. “That good, huh?”

I just shake my head and keep walking. Even though I can trust her, I haven’t told her about what happened between me and Luca. Mostly because I’m ashamed, and sharing it with Millie was more than enough.

The break room is mercifully empty, and I take a moment to just breathe, head tipped back against the cabinets.

Think, Hailey. There has to be an angle here, some hook to hang this story on besides “Playboy Prince Dodges Questions, Pretends to Possess Depth, Ditches Journalist.”

I drum my fingers on the counter, sifting through memories of that day and night. The way his eyes crinkled when he laughed, before his guard snapped back into place. The hint of melancholy when he spoke of his deceased mother. The charged undercurrent when our hands brushed...

No. I shut that line of thinking down hard. That way lies madness, and certainly nothing printable.

Pouring a fresh cup of coffee, I square my shoulders. Back to the grind. This article won’t write itself, no matter how much I wish it would.

I march back to my desk, wake up my laptop, and once more pull up the paltry notes from our interview. Maybe there’s a thread here I missed, some quote I can build on...

That’s when Priya, one of our interns, comes flying around the corner. Her eyes are huge. “Hailey! Have you seen the news?”

“What news?” I’m only half-listening, still scrolling.

“The King of Werdenfeld! He’s dead!”

My head snaps up. “What?”

“Massive heart attack, apparently. It just broke.” She thrusts her phone under my nose, and there it is in black and white. His Royal Majesty, King Girard, has passed. Long live the king.

Long live... Luca. Oh, my God.

Suddenly, it all clicks into place with dizzying clarity. Why he never showed up at Bethesda Fountain. He must have gotten word... must have rushed home to be with his family. To step up as the heir apparent.

I’m dialing my editor before I even realize I’ve picked up the phone. “Bill. The Werdenfeld story. We need to pivot.”

“You’re damn right we do,” he barks. “I want you on a plane to Werdenfeld, pronto. We need boots on the ground for the coronation.”

“The coronation? But that’s— I mean, shouldn’t we give them time to?”

“Time waits for no man, and neither does the news. The palace has already agreed. Wheels up in three hours, kid. Get packing.”

He hangs up while I’m still sputtering. The palace agreed? To let the press corps descend when the body’s not even cold?

Then again, I think as I start frantically shoving things into my bag, Werdenfeld’s always had a cozy relationship with the media. And Luca’s ascension was going to happen sooner or later. I just never imagined... God, his poor father. His poor family.

Which, really, is only Luca, isn't it? With his mother dead since he was a toddler, he's all that's left.

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Luca. My heart aches for him even as my mind races ahead. A follow-up interview with the new king... This story just went from a nothingburger to the scoop of a lifetime.

I just wish it hadn't come at such a devastating cost.

I zoom home in a cab, my mind awirl. Packing's a blur — I toss clothes and toiletries haphazardly into a suitcase, not even sure what I'm bringing.

As I move on autopilot, a memory flashes through my brain: Luca's face, that night at my place. The sparkle in his eyes as he teased me, the timbre of his laugh. The heat of his touch...

I shake my head to dispel the sense-memory. That was a different time. A different Luca. A playboy prince, not a king in mourning.

Then again, is it really fair of me to see him that way? This new information has blown my preconceptions out of the water. Luca never showed because his father died. Does that mean that he really did plan on meeting me at the fountain?

Not necessarily. He may have never intended on showing up anyway, even if his father hadn't suddenly died.

I shake my head. This isn't the time to be thinking about my and Luca's personal relationship. Maybe he did plan on seeing me again, but now everything that happened between us needs to take a back burner.

I zip up my bulging suitcase and pause, taking a shuddering breath. This is so much bigger than me and my silly, secret heartache. An unexpected death, a nation in transition. And at the center of it all, a man shouldering a sudden, terrible burden.

I can't imagine what he must be going through. Shell-shocked at the loss, reeling at the weight of new responsibilities. Does he even have time to grieve?

I've never lost a parent. Not in the traditional sense. I suppose you could consider never knowing my father losing him, but since he skipped out on my mom before I was born, I think the two of us lucky to not have him in our lives.

The thought of losing my mom — the woman who has devoted her life to me, working long shifts as a nurse so we could live in a good neighborhood, staying up late to help me study in high school, still popping in on Sundays to make sure I'm eating full meals — makes my chest seize up.

Hauling my luggage out to the curb, I check my watch. The car to the airport will be here any minute. I'll be in Werdenfeld by morning.

And then... I'll be face-to-face with Luca again. And what can I possibly say that would make any of this even a little bit better?

Nothing. There's nothing. All I can do is go there, do my job, and try not to put my foot in my mouth. The rest is up to Luca.

Taking a deep breath, I square my shoulders as the car pulls up. Time to go.

CHAPTER 11

LUCA

I stare at my reflection in the gilded mirror, not recognizing the hollowed man staring back. Dark circles rim eyes dulled by grief and exhaustion, and my jaw clenches at the suffocating straitjacket of this formal black suit.

I want to rip off this tie, shatter this mirror. Scream until my voice gives out. Anything to relieve the crushing pressure in my chest.

But I can't. Though my coronation isn't due to take place for several weeks yet, I am already, for all intents and purposes, the king. And a king doesn't have the luxury of falling apart.

A sharp rap at the door. "Your Majesty? It's time."

I close my eyes briefly, despising that title. It should still be Father's. If only I'd told him that more often...

"I'll be right there," I manage, voice rough. Turning from the mirror, I shove down the welling grief and pain. Lock it away to deal with later. Or never.

Yanking open the door, I stride down the hallway, Stefan scrambling to keep pace as he briefs me on today's crammed itinerary.

"After the morning cabinet meeting, there's a luncheon with the visiting dignitaries. Then we need to finalize your coronation remarks..."

His words fade into a droning buzz as my temples begin to throb. Has it really only been a day since we put Father in the ground? It feels like a lifetime ago.

The ache of his absence hits me anew and I stumble, catching myself on a marble column.

“Sir? Are you all right?”

Am I all right? No. I'm the furthest thing from all right. But I don't have the right
tonotbe all right.

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Inhaling shakily, I straighten my shoulders and give a tight nod. “I’m fine. Let’s go.”

“Are you sure?” Stefan frowns. “I wish you had not asked to schedule all these meetings today. You are in mourning, and?—”

“I’m fine,” I say, less kindly than I intend to. “There’s no point in sitting around moping. There’s too much to be done.”

And I march on down the hall, each step heavier than the last, knowing I’ll have to keep marching, keep going, no matter how much I’m fracturing inside.

As I sit through meeting after meeting, barely registering the discussions swirling around me, my mind keeps drifting to Hailey. The way her eyes sparkled when she laughed at something I said. The feel of her hand in mine as we walked back to her apartment from dinner.

God, that feels like a lifetime ago now. When I was just Luca for a night, a man falling for a woman. When I could steal a few precious hours away to spend with a captivating person, without the duty for a nation pressing down on me.

I want to reach out to her. To hear her voice, even if only for a moment.

But wouldn’t she get in touch with me if she wanted to? I sent her the message. She knows why I had to leave New York so suddenly.

Should I call her office? See if...

No.

Personal desires have no place in my life anymore. Hailey is firmly in my past, and that's where she needs to stay. No matter how much it aches to accept that.

Shoving down the longing, I tune back into the droning voice of yet another government minister. But it's no use. The words slide in one ear and out the other, my exhausted mind unable to grasp them.

"Your Majesty." Stefan falls into step next to me as we leave the meeting. "Perhaps we should take a short break? You've been going nonstop since dawn."

I start to refuse, the automatic denial rising to my lips. But I catch the barely concealed concern in his eyes and hesitate. He's only trying to look out for me, as he always has.

Maybe a few minutes to clear my head wouldn't hurt. I'll be no good to anyone if I work myself into the ground.

"You're right," I say reluctantly. "Let's take fifteen minutes. But then it's straight back to work, understood? I don't have time to waste on breaks."

He bows his head in acquiescence, but I catch the flash of relief on his face.

Striding down the hallway, I make my way out to the palace gardens, hoping the fresh air will sweep away the cobwebs and longing, letting me focus on my duty once more.

The smell of honeysuckle and roses envelops me as I step into the lush gardens. I inhale deeply, willing the fragrant air to soothe my frayed nerves. But the ache in my chest remains undiminished.

Everywhere I look, memories assault me. There, the fountain where Father and I used to sail toy boats. The oak tree I fell out of at age seven, resulting in a broken arm. And the rose bushes I was told my mother so lovingly tended before her death. It's fragments of just another life that one day will be lost to the wind.

No, correction: another life that is already slipping away, my mother and father gone. It's only me now, the last of my family left standing.

Tears blur my vision, but I blink them back. Turning around, I head for the palace doors. Stefan waits with a slight frown.

“What is it?” My stomach twists. Is it more bad news?

“The journalist that has been sent to shadow you...” He pauses. “You know her.”

I frown. Why is he saying it in such a weird way?

“All right.” I walk past him, not interested in the ambiguity.

The meeting room is bustling with activity when I arrive, courtiers and officials moving to and fro. I barely register them, my mind still churning with dark thoughts.

“Your Majesty.” Geoffrey, my chief of staff, bows low. “May I present Ms. Hailey Warren, the journalist from *The Morning Star* who will be shadowing you this week.”

My head snaps up at the name, certain I must have misheard. But no, it's her. Hailey.

She stands stock-still, her slim figure clad in a gray suit, brown hair pulled back in a sleek knot. Those whiskey eyes that captivated me from the first glance meet mine, and there's a sorrow there.

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For a moment, the world falls away. There is only her. The woman I haven't been able to stop thinking about since our chance encounter. The woman I was certain I'd never see again.

“Hailey,” I breathe, forgetting protocol, forgetting the dozens of eyes upon us. “What are you doing here?”

Her lips part, but no words emerge. Her face turns pink, and she licks her lips.

Reality crashes back in as my chief of staff clears his throat. “Ms. Warren is here to write a piece on Your Majesty's first days as sovereign. Didn't you approve her assignment personally?”

I blink, trying to reconcile the dull memo that crossed my desk with the vibrant woman before me. I'd thought nothing of approving an American journalist. How was I to know it would be her?

Fate, it seems, has a twisted sense of humor. Bringing Hailey here, now, when I'm at my lowest. When I'm in no position to explore the connection that sparked between us.

I want to apologize for leaving New York without saying goodbye, to ask her why she didn't get in touch — as a journalist who interviewed me already, the palace would have accepted a direct message to my desk. All of that is water under the bridge, though, gone in the face of more important matters.

Squaring my shoulders, I incline my head in a regal nod, shoving my tumultuous

emotions to the back of my mind.

“Welcome to Werdenfeld, Ms. Warren. It is good to see you again. I look forward to giving you an inside look at our great nation.”

If my voice trembles slightly on the words, I trust no one is gauche enough to comment. Hailey sinks into a graceful curtsy, her eyes never leaving mine.

So it begins. A single, charged look. An assignment that perhaps I should hit the brakes on. I could ask for another reporter, at least. No one would even question me.

But I know how dedicated Hailey is to her career, to showing the heart of her stories. I wish for the world to get to know the true me, the future king, — and the only journalist I know who will do me justice is standing right in front of me.

So it has to be Hailey. There is no one else.

I only pray I'm strong enough to resist temptation. For both our sakes.

CHAPTER 12

HAILEY

The room buzzes around us, the palace a veritable beehive of important activity. I stay planted to the expensive carpet, sweat collecting under my suit.

I knew that seeing Luca again would be hard, but I didn't think it would be this hard.

My eyes swim with unshed tears as I recall our last night together. His soft smile. The warmth of his hand in mine. All feelings amplified now under the golden chandelier, amongst a sea of unfamiliar faces.

I take a deep breath, ready to introduce myself, to start this arduous journey. But before I can say anything, he speaks my name.

“Hailey.” My name on his lips sounds like a prayer. An apology. A plea.

My heart clenches in my chest, and I freeze, my professional demeanor slipping.

“Your Majesty,” I finally manage to choke out. “I am so sorry to hear about the king. It’s a terrible loss.”

My words are so formal that I want to cringe. It feels wrong to speak to Luca this way, and yet it’s what I must do. We’re standing in the middle of a palace, for God’s sake, surrounded by all sorts of important people.

“Thank you.” Luca’s face is coolly polite now, but his eyes tell a different story. A story of longing and regret. The man who introduced us has moved on, and I almost wish someone would take his place. As much as I want to be alone with Luca, it’s probably the worst thing for me right now.

“You’ve surprised me,” Luca admits after a drawn-out silence, his gaze never leaving mine.

“The feeling is mutual.” My voice shakes slightly around the edges. I will myself to steady my voice, to keep my emotions in check.

A low murmur ripples through the room as other conversations cease, all attention focused on us. Another heavy silence hangs in the air, like a thick fog settling between us. Luca glances at the others in the room, and they quickly divert their attention, suddenly acting as if we are the least interesting thing they’ve seen all day.

“I’m here to do my job,” I tell Luca, injecting more confidence into my tone than I

feel. “I hope I won’t cause any inconvenience.”

His eyes flash at that, a moment of raw emotion before he sweeps it away, replacing it with the perfect façade of regal politeness.

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“Of course not.” He smiles, but there’s no warmth behind it. “I’m looking forward to working closely with you, Ms. Warren.”

His words hang in the air, throwing my mind back to the last time we were this close. To stolen kisses and whispered confessions hidden under soft sheets.

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” I manage to reply, tearing my gaze away from his hypnotic eyes to look towards the crowd of officials.

Luca clears his throat. “Might I... speak to you in private for a minute?”

I blink. What for? Haven’t we already said all there is to say? Unless...

“Of course.” My heart rate picks up.

“There is a drawing room right this way.” He smiles.

My hands clench at my sides as he leads me away from the crowd, his shoulder blades pulled back tightly, revealing his stress. How is he doing after his father’s passing? Is it that that has him undone, or does he not want me here?

We walk across the hallway filled with portraits and sculptures. He opens a door and ushers me inside, the scent of old books and polished wood enveloping us. The drawing room is intimate, cozy even, with plush armchairs and shelves lined with leather-bound tomes.

Luca closes the door with a soft click, and suddenly we’re alone. Really, truly alone

for the first time since that magical day, night, and brief morning. My heart hammers against my ribs, a hummingbird desperate to break free.

“Hailey, I...” he begins, then stops, running a hand through his golden hair. “I’m sorry for not meeting you at the fountain. I had every intention of being there, but then my father...”

His voice cracks, and instinctively, I reach out to lay a hand on his arm. “Luca, you don’t have to apologize. I understand. I’m so sorry for your loss.”

He covers my hand with his, his touch tantalizing and forbidden. “Thank you. That means a lot.”

He clears his throat, stepping back, as if he just realized he crossed a line, and my heart drops. He doesn’t even want to touch me.

Which means...

“I did send a messenger to let you know I had to leave suddenly,” he says. “I hope you received the message?”

“I... no.” I stare at him. “I didn’t.”

He frowns. “What? I’m so sorry.”

I shake my head. “It’s okay. When I found out your father had died, I didn’t expect you to send me any message.”

Of course, before I found out, I considered him to be the biggest asshole in the world. That part doesn’t need to be brought up, though...

Luca's shoulders relax a fraction, and he offers me a small smile. "I didn't want you to think I'd forgotten about you."

As if he ever could. As if I could ever forget him, this man who's haunted my dreams and waking thoughts since the moment we met.

The care that he's showing me now, the regret for not meeting me... it gives me hope. I was wrong to write him off. He does want me here.

In fact, it seems that the stiffness in the other room was merely a façade. Now that we are alone, he can let his mask down. We can go back to as we were before.

But I can't say that, not now, not when he's grieving and the responsibility for a kingdom rests on his shoulders. So, instead, I return his smile and say, "I knew you wouldn't. And I'm here now, ready to do whatever I can to help tell your story."

His gaze locks with mine, a wealth of unspoken emotions swirling in those blue depths. "I'm grateful for that, Hailey. More than you know."

We stand there, lost in the moment, in the sheer magnetic pull that always seems to draw us together. But reality intrudes, the sound of footsteps and voices in the hallway reminding us that we're not alone, that duty and propriety await.

Luca clears his throat, putting a respectable distance between us. The electric charge in the air dissipates, replaced by a stiff formality that feels alien after the intimacy we shared.

"While you're here, I'll have the staff prepare a room for you in the palace," he says, his tone businesslike. "It will make shadowing me and conducting your interviews more convenient."

My heart leaps at the prospect of staying in such close proximity to him, even as my journalist's instinct warns me of the potential complications. "That's very generous of you. I don't want to impose..."

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He waves off my concern. “Nonsense. It’s the least I can do. Besides, it will be easier for both of us this way.”

I search his face, trying to glean some hint of his true feelings, wondering if this means there’s a chance for us to pick up where we left off. But his expression remains inscrutable, a polite mask that betrays nothing.

Gathering my courage, I venture, “Luca, about that night, about us... I know this might not be the right time, but I can’t help but wonder...”

His shoulders tense, and he looks away, his jaw clenching. “Hailey, I... I value the time we spent together, truly. But with everything that’s happened, with the responsibilities I now face... I’m afraid I have no place in my life for a relationship right now.”

His words knock the wind out of me. I blink back the sudden sting of tears, refusing to let him see how much his rejection hurts.

“I understand,” I manage, my voice sounding strangled even to my own ears.

I get it, of course. How can I expect anything from him when his father has died and he’s to be coronated in a matter of weeks? I feel ashamed to have even brought up the matter of us in the first place.

An awkward silence stretches between us, heavy with all the things left unsaid. Desperate to break the tension, I ask softly, “How are you holding up, Luca? With your father’s passing, I mean. I can’t even imagine...”

He stiffens, his gaze turning distant. “I’m fine,” he says, the words ringing hollow. “It’s a difficult time, but I have a duty to my people, to my country. I can’t afford to let personal feelings get in the way.”

I nod, my heart aching for him, for the weight he carries on his shoulders. “If there’s anything I can do, anything at all...”

“Thank you.” His smile is genuine, but tinged with sadness. “Having you here, telling my story... that’s more than enough.”

More than enough.

I try not to read into those words.

With that, he turns and opens the door for me, and I step through it, my heart a lump in my throat.

We rejoin the others in the grand hall, and I’m struck by the sudden change in Luca’s demeanor. He had a stiff upper lip when we were alone, but when he is with others, he takes composure to a whole new level, his face a perfect façade of royal decorum.

He greets the gathered officials and dignitaries with a charming smile, shaking hands and exchanging pleasantries as if he hasn’t a care in the world. I watch, equal parts amazed and unsettled by his ability to compartmentalize, to push aside his grief and be the leader his people need.

As he agrees to an impromptu interview with a local news crew, I feel a pang of guilt. Here I am, intruding on his life during what must be an incredibly difficult time, all for the sake of a story.

He’s doing this because he has to, because the alliance between our countries is more

important than his personal feelings. And in that moment, I vow to make this article the best damn piece I've ever written, to do justice to the man behind the crown.

Lost in thought, I barely register when a member of the palace staff appears at my elbow, offering to show me to my room. I follow in a daze, my mind still reeling from the events of the day.

The room is breathtaking, all high ceilings and ornate furnishings, with a balcony that overlooks the sprawling palace gardens. But even as I drink in the opulence, I can't shake the hollow feeling in my chest, the ache of longing for something I can't have.

I sink onto the plush bed, hugging a pillow to my chest as I finally let the tears fall. I cry for Luca, for the pain he must be going through, for the way he's forced to put on a brave face for the sake of his country. And selfishly, I cry for myself, for the foolish hope that maybe, just maybe, we could have had something real.

But I know that's impossible now. Luca has made it clear that he has no room in his life for a relationship, and I have to respect that, no matter how much it hurts. I have a job to do, a story to write, and I can't let my personal feelings get in the way.

With a shaky breath, I wipe away my tears and steel my resolve. I'll be the best damn shadow Luca's ever had, and I'll write an article that will make *The Morning Star* proud. And maybe, just maybe, by the time this is all over, I'll have found a way to mend my broken heart.

Taking a deep breath, I stand up, smoothing out my clothes and fixing my hair. I can't let anyone see how much this is affecting me, especially not Luca. I have to be professional, focused, and above all, strong.

I make my way back out of my room and down the hallway, following the sound of voices until I find myself in a grand ballroom. Luca is there, surrounded by a gaggle

of reporters and photographers, his smile practiced and perfect. But I can see the tension in his shoulders, the weariness in his eyes.

I slip into the crowd, my notebook and pen at the ready. I listen carefully as Luca answers question after question, his responses polished and diplomatic. But every now and then, I catch a glimpse of the real Luca, the one I got to know that magical night in New York. A flash of humor, a hint of vulnerability.

It's those moments that give me hope, even as my heart aches with every word he speaks. Maybe, just maybe, there's still a chance for us, if only I can find a way to break through his walls.

But for now, I have a job to do. I scribble furiously in my notebook, capturing every detail, every nuance. I'll worry about my own feelings later. Right now, I have a story to write, and I'm determined to make it the best one yet.

As the press conference winds down and the reporters start to disperse, I linger at the edge of the room, watching as Luca shakes hands and exchanges pleasantries. And then, just for a moment, his eyes meet mine across the crowded room.

My breath catches in my throat, and I feel a rush of heat sweep through me. But just as quickly, the moment is gone, and Luca turns away, his attention drawn by another reporter.

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I take a deep breath and square my shoulders. I can do this. I have to do this. For the sake of my career, for the sake of the story.

Even if it means breaking my own heart in the process.

CHAPTER 13

LUCA

I wake with a start, my heart racing and my sheets drenched in sweat. The crown already feels heavy on my head, even though my coronation is still weeks away. I rub my eyes, trying to shake off the exhaustion that seems to cling to my every muscle.

Dragging myself out of bed, I practically crawl into the shower, where the scalding water cascades over my skin. As the steam rises around me, my thoughts drift to Hailey, to the night we spent together in New York. The way her body felt pressed against mine, the taste of her lips, the sound of her gasps as I explored every inch of her.

I lean my head against the cool tile, trying to push the memories away. I can't afford to be distracted, not now. My country needs me, needs a king who is focused and strong. But even as I try to clear my mind, I can't shake the image of her face, the way she looked at me with such trust and desire.

I step out of the shower and towel off, my movements mechanical as I go through the motions of getting dressed. I choose a dark suit, the fabric crisp against my skin. I know I'll be in meetings all day, discussing trade agreements and diplomatic

relations. There's no room for error, no room for weakness.

As I knot my tie, I catch sight of myself in the mirror. My face is drawn, my eyes shadowed. I look like a man carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. And in a way, I suppose I am.

Taking a deep breath, I straighten my shoulders. I may be exhausted, but I won't let it show. I have a duty to my people, to my country. And I won't let them down, no matter the cost.

It's quiet as I make my way down to the palace dining room, my footsteps echoing on the marble floors. The scent of coffee and pastries fills the air, but my stomach churns at the thought of food. I'm running on fumes, but I can't afford to slow down.

As I enter the room, I freeze. Hailey is already there, seated at the long table. She looks up as I enter, her brown eyes widening slightly. For a moment, we just stare at each other, the tension thick between us.

That's right. I forgot — she'll be joining me at mealtimes, her attendance part of her constant shadowing.

“Good morning, Your Majesty,” she says finally, her voice cool and professional.

I nod, taking my seat at the head of the table. “Good morning, Ms. Warren. I trust you slept well?”

She gives a tight smile. “Yes, thank you. The accommodations are lovely.”

We lapse into silence as the servants bring out breakfast. I pick at my food, my appetite gone. I can feel Hailey's eyes on me, studying me, and I fight the urge to squirm.

“I’m looking forward to shadowing you today,” she says, breaking the silence. “I’m sure it will be very enlightening.”

I glance up at her, trying to read her expression. But she’s giving nothing away, her face a mask of polite interest.

“Yes, well, I’m afraid it won’t be very exciting,” I say, pushing my eggs around my plate. “Just a lot of meetings and paperwork.”

She shrugs. “That’s the job, isn’t it? I’m here to document it all, exciting or not.”

I frown, something about her tone rubbing me the wrong way. “And what exactly do you hope to document, Ms. Warren? The tedium of royal life?”

Her eyes flash, and for a moment, I see a glimpse of the passion I remember from our night together. But then it’s gone, replaced by cool professionalism.

“I hope to document the truth, sir. Whatever that may be.”

It’s like a strange game we’re playing, an effort to see who can be more formal, more cool and collected.

I lean back in my chair, studying her. She meets my gaze unflinchingly, and I feel a grudging respect for her. She’s not going to make this easy on me.

But then again, nothing about this is going to be easy. I have a country to run, a crown to wear. And Hailey Warren is just one more complication I don’t need.

The first meeting of the day is with my advisors to discuss the upcoming coronation. I try to focus on their words, but my mind keeps drifting to the woman sitting beside me, her pen scratching quietly against her notepad.

I can feel the heat of her body, so close to mine. I remember the feel of her skin against my own, the taste of her lips. Clenching my jaw, I do my best to banish the memories.

“Sir?” Stefan’s voice snaps me back to the present. “Do you have any thoughts on the guest list?”

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I blink, scrambling to recall what he just said. “Ah, yes. Let’s keep it small. Close family and friends only.”

He nods, making a note. “Very good, sir,” he says, although what I’ve just proposed is highly unconventional. Typically, hundreds if not thousands are invited to coronations.

The meeting continues, but I find it increasingly difficult to concentrate. Hailey’s presence is like a physical weight pressing down on me. I’m hyperaware of her every movement, every breath.

Finally, after what feels like an eternity, the meeting ends. I stand, my chair scraping loudly against the floor. Hailey rises as well, her movements graceful and fluid.

“Shall we?” I gesture towards the door, trying to keep my voice steady.

She nods, falling into step beside me as we exit the room. Our hands brush accidentally, and I feel a jolt of electricity at the contact. I jerk away, but not before I see the flash of something in her eyes. Longing, perhaps. Or regret.

I quicken my pace, putting some distance between us. What was I thinking, walking so close to her? Of course we would end up touching. Then again, maybe that’s what I wanted...

As I stride down the hall, I can feel her eyes on me, burning into my back. And I know that no matter how hard I try, I won’t be able to escape the memories of our night together. They’ll haunt me, just as she does.

We reach my office, and I hold the door open for Hailey. She brushes past me, her scent enveloping me for a brief moment. Vanilla and jasmine, just like I remember.

I follow her inside, closing the door behind us. The room suddenly feels too small, too intimate. I move to my desk, putting it between us like a barrier.

“So,” I say, shuffling some papers, “next is a meeting with the finance minister at eleven, followed by a luncheon with the ambassador from France. Then in the afternoon, there’s a session with the parliament to discuss the budget.”

“The finance minister?” She tilts her head. She asks something else — I’m sure she does — but I’m too distracted by the wave of hair falling across her cheek.

I nod, pretending to listen. My mind is still on the feel of her hand against mine, the way her eyes met mine in that brief, charged moment.

“Luca?” Her voice pulls me back to the present. “Are you all right?”

“Fine,” I say, perhaps a bit too brusquely. “Just a lot on my mind, what with the coronation coming up.”

She stares at me, her gaze penetrating. For a moment, I’m afraid she’s going to push, to ask what’s really bothering me. But she just nods, closing her notebook.

“Of course. I understand.”

But does she? Can she possibly understand the weight that rests on my shoulders, the duty that I am bound to? I don’t know. I’m sure she’s been through her own challenges, as different from my own as they might be.

“Is there any time in the day for fun?” She asks. “Relaxation.”

That makes me laugh. “No.”

“That’s a shame.” Her sly smile tugs at something forbidden within me.

Clearing my throat, I nod at the door. “Shall we?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” It’s not meant to be seductive, I know that, but the way her voice drops has me thinking anything but noble thoughts.

She goes through the door first, leaving me to bite my lip in frustration. It’s our first day with her shadowing me, and I already know I’ll be counting down the days until she leaves, while at the same time wishing she could stay by my side forever.

CHAPTER 14

HAILEY

I collapse onto the plush four-poster bed, my body sinking into the lavish silk comforter. It’s only been one day since I arrived in Werdenfeld to shadow Luca, but the exhaustion seeps into my bones. The opulent palace bedroom surrounds me — crystal chandeliers, rich tapestries, gilded furniture — yet it does nothing to lighten my mood.

I feel utterly alone.

Pain claws at my chest as I think of Millie and Mom back home. I wish I could call them, hear their comforting voices. But it’s mid-afternoon in New York, and they’re both at work.

Restless, I pad over to the window overlooking the sprawling palace grounds. Perfectly manicured hedges and sparkling fountains stretch out below, illuminated by

the glow of wrought-iron lamps. It's like a scene from a fairy tale.

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If only there were a Prince Charming to complete the story.

As I gaze out, a shadowy figure striding purposefully through the gardens catches my eye. I twist my lips, wishing I were down there too.

Curiosity piqued, I make a split-second decision. If sleep is going to evade me anyway, I might as well explore. So, throwing on a light jacket over my silk pajamas, I slip out of the room.

Muted sounds of palace activity echo in the halls, but for the most part everyone is done for the day. Though I pass a few staff members, no one asks where I'm going, leaving me to assume there's no royal secret around here for me to stumble upon.

Winding my way downstairs, I let myself out a side door. Cool night air kisses my cheeks as I step into the gardens, where the heady scent of jasmine and roses perfumes the breeze.

I follow the cobblestone path, which is lit by solar lights, feeling like a princess myself out here. The further I venture from the palace, the quieter it becomes, until the only sound is the crunch of gravel under my slippers.

Suddenly, I round a corner and collide with something solid. A surprised "oof" escapes my lips as strong hands grab my arms to steady me. I look up and find myself staring into Luca's piercing blue eyes, mere inches from mine.

My breath catches. "I'm so sorry," I stammer, cheeks flushing. "I didn't mean— I was just?—"

But my jumbled words are cut off by the sound of approaching footsteps and another voice.

“Your Majesty! Forgive my intrusion...”

Luca quickly releases me and steps back. A palace staff member appears out of the darkness and drops into a deep bow before Luca, so low his nose nearly brushes the ground. Luca’s jaw clenches and a flash of irritation crosses his handsome features before he quickly schools his expression into one of cool detachment.

“What is it?” he asks, his deep baritone sending a shiver down my spine.

The staff member straightens but remains bent at the waist, eyes downcast. “I wanted to inform you that the kitchen staff is out of office for the luncheon tomorrow. They wanted to know if there was an alternative you’d prefer.”

Luca’s eyes flicker to where I’m still standing, frozen in place, before he answers. “Tell them to use the smoked salmon instead.”

The staff member nods quickly, murmuring a thank-you before hurrying away. Silence settles between us once again, and Luca turns back to me. His gaze is inscrutable in the dim light.

“Couldn’t sleep?” he asks finally, his voice soft.

I shake my head, wrapping my arms around myself for warmth. His question hangs heavy in the air, and I wonder why he’s out here alone at this hour.

“And you?” I ask, unable to keep the curiosity from my voice.

He looks away, towards the dark expanse of gardens behind him. “Sleep doesn’t

come easy these days.”

The vulnerability in his admission tugs at my heartstrings and I find myself stepping closer.

“I hate this,” he mutters, more to himself than to me. “The constant bowing and scraping. The ‘Your Highness’ this and ‘Your Majesty’ that. As if I’m some kind of god instead of just a man who happened to be born into this role.”

“It wasn’t like this... before?”

“No.” He sighs at the ground. “Of course, the staff was always available should I need something, but my father was the priority. Now...”

“It’s you.” I pause. “I think they just want to make sure you have everything you need. You’re their new leader, and...” I trail off, realizing that I don’t actually know what I’m talking about here. I’m grasping at straws.

He rakes a hand through his golden hair, disheveling it in a way that makes my fingers itch to smooth it back into place. When his gaze meets mine again, there’s a vulnerability there that catches me off guard.

“Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to be normal. To have people look me in the eye and speak to me like an equal, instead of groveling at my feet.”

“Haven’t you ever experienced that?”

“Once.” Something flashes in his eyes, and I know what he’s referring to.

Our time in New York. When he was with me, no one recognized him. And I certainly didn’t treat him like he was something special.

My heart aches for him, this man who seems to have everything and yet covets the simplest of human experiences: the ability to just exist.

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I know I should keep things professional, maintain the careful distance between us. But seeing him like this — raw and exposed — I can't help but reach out and lay a comforting hand on his arm.

“For what it's worth,” I say softly, “I see you, Luca. Not the crown prince or the future king. Just you.”

His eyes widen slightly at my touch, but he doesn't pull away. Instead, he covers my hand with his own, his skin warm and slightly rough against mine.

“I'm glad you're here,” he says, his voice low and sincere. “I know this assignment can't be easy for you, being so far from home and thrust into this unfamiliar world. But I want you to know that I'm grateful for your presence. Your perspective.”

I swallow hard, trying to ignore the way my pulse quickens at his proximity. “Are you sure you're okay with me shadowing you? I know it's a lot to ask, having someone constantly observing and documenting your life. If it ever becomes too much, just say the word and I can have my editor send someone else.”

Luca shakes his head firmly. “No. It has to be you.” His gaze intensifies, sending a shiver down my spine. “You're the only journalist I trust to tell my story honestly. To see beyond the title and the trappings of royalty, to the man beneath.”

I'm at once flattered and terrified by his faith in me. This assignment just became even more high-stakes than I realized it would be.

Even as I marvel at the trust Luca has placed in me, a sliver of doubt worms its way

into my mind. Am I truly prepared for the cost of this assignment? With each passing moment, I find myself more drawn to his magnetic presence, to the vulnerability he reveals beneath his polished veneer.

It's a dangerous game I'm playing, one with no clear rules or boundaries. Luca has already made it abundantly clear that a relationship between us is off the table. He's the future king, with duties and obligations that far outweigh any personal desires. And I'm just a journalist, here to document his story, not become a part of it.

I take a deep breath, trying to center myself. I can't let my growing feelings for Luca cloud my judgment or compromise my integrity as a journalist. I have to maintain a professional distance, no matter how much my soul yearns to close the gap between us.

"I'm honored by your trust," I manage to say. "I promise I'll do everything in my power to tell your story with honesty and respect."

He nods, a ghost of a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "I know you will. That's why it has to be you."

With those words, he abruptly turns and walks away, leaving me alone with my tumultuous thoughts. I watch his retreating form until he disappears into the shadows of the palace, my heart a riot of conflicting emotions.

I can only hope that I have the strength to see this assignment through without losing myself in the process.

CHAPTER 15

LUCA

Walking down the first-floor hallway, I stuff my hands into my pockets, letting my gaze drift out the windows. An easy tune fills the air, and I turn around, looking for the source of the humming — before realizing that it's me.

I'm humming. I'm... in a good mood?

I suppose that it makes sense. I can't stop thinking about that charged moment with Hailey in the garden two nights ago. The way she looked at me, the electricity crackling between us — I was a breath away from pulling her into my arms and kissing her senseless. Against my better judgement, of course.

Part of me curses the interruption by the staff member, but an even bigger part is relieved. Relieved I didn't let my baser instincts take over and potentially ruin everything.

Swallowing hard, I reach the room at the end of the hallway. It's fitting time. Fitting time for my coronation attire, a tedious but necessary task.

Of course, Hailey will be shadowing me, her presence both a blessing and a curse.

Has she also been thinking of me since that night in the garden? Did she want my lips on hers even half as much as I did?

Shaking the thought away, I rap on the half-open door then step inside. The room is full of racks of clothing, and a bent-over man fusses with a fur-lined cape. He's so old that he's more wrinkles than anything else.

Hailey is already here, diligently sitting in the corner of the room. Catching my eye, she nods at me, and I nod back.

Then quickly look away. No use driving myself any more crazy than I already am.

Yet as the fitting begins, I'm hyperaware of her every move: the sound of her breathing, the scratch of her pen against paper as she jots down notes. It's maddening and exhilarating all at once.

The tailor fusses over me, pinning and measuring with shaky hands. I stand as still as a statue, afraid any sudden movements might cause the poor fellow to keel over. Hailey watches the process with an amused glint in her eye, and I have to bite my cheek to keep from smirking.

"How long have you been the royal tailor?" Hailey asks, and I can tell it's her curiosity getting the better of her. This isn't really important information for her to know.

The old man pauses, squinting at her through thick spectacles. "Longer than you've been alive, my dear. I dressed His Majesty's father, as well as his father before him, may they both rest in peace."

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I raise my eyebrows, impressed by his longevity and loyalty. “We’re lucky to have you and your expertise.”

He nods, a pleased smile crinkling his weathered face. “It is my greatest honor to serve the crown.”

As he returns to his work measuring me, I catch Hailey’s eye in the mirror. She grins, and I return it, a moment of levity amidst the weight of my responsibilities. But I quickly look away, reminding myself to focus on the task at hand — which, right now, is merely standing as still as possible.

The tailor sends me behind a curtain to dress in Werdenfeld’s traditional coronation outfit: loose pants, a vest with the royal crest on its chest, and a fur-lined cape.

When I step out from behind the curtain, the man steps back, surveying his handiwork with a critical eye. “Wonderful, sir. I believe we’re finished. Take a look.”

I turn to face the full-length mirror, and my breath catches in my throat. The man staring back at me looks every inch a king, from the perfectly tailored suit to the regal set of his shoulders. It’s a stark contrast to the carefree prince I once was, and for the first time, my new role feels less a burden and more a blessing.

Hailey moves to stand beside me, her reflection joining mine in the mirror. Her eyes meet mine, and I’m surprised to see pride shining in their depths. “You look like a true leader, Luca,” she says softly, her voice filled with sincerity.

Her words send a warmth spreading through my chest, and I stand a little taller,

feeling bolstered by her belief in me.

“Thank you,” I murmur, holding her gaze for a moment longer than strictly necessary.

The tailor clears his throat, breaking the spell. “If that will be all, sir?”

I nod, tearing my eyes away from Hailey’s. “Yes, thank you. You’ve done an excellent job, as always.”

He bows deeply, a pleased flush coloring his cheeks, before shuffling out of the room. As soon as the door closes behind him, Hailey turns to me, a mischievous grin tugging at her lips.

“I think he might actually be older than the castle itself,” she quips, her eyes sparkling with mirth.

A laugh bubbles up from my chest, the first genuine one in days. “I’m pretty sure he dressed my great-great-grandfather,” I reply, feeling the tension drain from my shoulders.

Hailey’s smile widens, and for a moment, it’s just the two of us, sharing a joke like old friends. But reality quickly reasserts itself, and I sober.

“We should go,” I say, already moving towards the door. “I have a meeting with my advisors.”

I quickly change, leaving my coronation attire on a hanger, and Hailey wordlessly falls into step beside me. As we walk, I risk stealing a few glances at her, marveling at the way she manages to be both a comforting presence and a tempting distraction all at once. I know I should keep my distance, focus on my responsibilities, but a part

of me yearns to lean on her, to let her ease the burden of my new role.

“I need to pop into my study,” I say. “Collect my notes.”

Her nod is perfunctory. “Of course.”

In my study, I try to focus on gathering my papers — I prefer to use longhand rather than typing — but it’s like my body is buzzing to be closer to Hailey.

“I don’t know where I put them.” I straighten up from my desk, increasingly frustrated. I’m normally very organized.

“Are those them?” Hailey points.

“Where?”

She picks up a small notebook from my desk. “These.”

“Oh. Yes. They were right under my nose.”

I reach up to take the notebook from her, but neither one of us lets go. Instead, we stand stock-still, frozen in time, our gazes locked.

The room blurs around us, and my breathing picks up. Hailey’s pupils dilate, and her pink lips part. I actually salivate, remembering how that mouth tastes, how?—

The door to my study bursts open, and Stefan rushes in, his face pale and his eyes wide with alarm. “Your Majesty,” he says, slightly out of breath.

I swiftly step back from Hailey, taking my notebook with me. “Stefan,” I snap, irritated.

Not once has he ever burst in to a room like this. What was he thinking?

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“We have a problem,” he says.

My stomach drops, a sense of dread washing over me. “What is it?” I ask, bracing myself for the worst, even though I don’t entirely know what that would be.

He holds out a tablet, his hand trembling slightly. “This was published online just a few minutes ago.”

I take the device, my eyes scanning the headline splashed across the screen. “Prince Luca Finds Comfort in American Journalist’s Embrace.” Below it is a picture of Hailey and me in the garden at night, standing close together, our faces illuminated by the soft glow of the moonlight.

My heart hammers in my chest, a mixture of anger and fear coursing through my veins. How did they get this photo? The palace grounds are supposed to be secure, impenetrable to outsiders.

I look up at Stefan, my jaw clenched tight. “How did this happen?” I ask, my voice low and controlled.

“A photographer breached the wall somehow.” He stands straighter, and I can tell that, even though security is not his department, he’s disappointed that the breach happened. “Our team is looking into it. Right now, our main problem is this story.”

Hailey looks at the tablet, and her eyes go wide. “Oh,” she gasps.

“It’s trending on social media,” Stefan replies, his expression grim. “This should take

precedence in our meeting today. I must ask... are you two?—”

“No,” Hailey and I both say at the same time. We exchange a look, the pink in her cheeks reflecting the heat in mine.

“A relationship does not look good for me right now,” I explain.

Stefan exhales sharply. “I agree with that.”

I nod, handing the tablet back to him. “Tell the others I’ll be there in five minutes.”

Stefan bows and hurries out, leaving me alone with Hailey. I turn to her, an apology on my lips, but she speaks first.

“Luca, I’m so sorry,” she says, her brow furrowed with concern. “I never meant for this to happen.”

I shake my head, running a hand through my hair.

“It’s not your fault,” I assure her. “But we need to be more careful. My people can’t think I’m being distracted, not now.”

She nods, her eyes searching mine. “I understand. I’ll do whatever you need me to do.”

I feel a surge of gratitude mixed with something deeper, something I can’t quite name. It’s risky, though, whatever it is, because it has to do with Hailey.

“Right now, I need you to stay here,” I tell her, my tone firm but not unkind. “Let me handle this.”

Disappointment flickers across her face. She's supposed to be shadowing me, and here I am, asking her to not do her job.

This is different, though. Personal. And embarrassing. While it took the two of us to get into this mess, I just want to disappear for a while and fix it on my own.

She acquiesces, at least, and I stride out of the room, my mind already racing with strategies and responses to release to the press.

As I make my way to the meeting room, I can't shake the unsettled feeling in my gut. The palace walls seem to close in around me, the weight of my responsibilities bearing down like a physical force.

I enter the room to find my advisors already seated, their faces grave. The palace publicist, a severe woman named Martha, clears her throat.

"Your Majesty," she begins, her tone clipped. "We've already released a statement to the press, clarifying that your relationship with Ms. Warren is strictly professional."

I nod, taking my seat at the head of the table. "Good." Thank goodness my voice is steady despite the turmoil within. "We can't afford any distractions right now."

But even as the words leave my mouth, I know they're a lie. Hailey is already a distraction, one I can't seem to shake no matter how hard I try.

The meeting drags on, discussions of public perception and media strategy blurring together in my mind. But through it all, my thoughts keep drifting back to Hailey, to the warmth of her smile and the spark in her eyes.

Finally, the meeting adjourns, and I escape back to my private study. Hailey is gone from it, which I expected but find disappointing nonetheless — another longing that I

despise myself for. I sink into my chair, rubbing my temples as I try to clear my head.

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But the truth is inescapable. I let my guard down with Hailey, allowed myself a moment of weakness. And now, I'm paying the price.

I can't let it happen again. And I won't.

CHAPTER 16

HAILEY

I stare up at the shadowed ceiling of my guest suite, the plush mattress and Egyptian cotton sheets doing nothing to ease the restless ache in my body. That damned photo is seared into my mind — Luca's face so close to mine, the intensity crackling between us palpable even through the camera lens.

I'm not imagining it, am I? He was feeling something too.

My phone buzzes on the nightstand and I grab it, excited when I see Millie's name on the screen. And yet, I debate ignoring her call, because I know she's seen the photo, and it's not something I really want to explain right now. But, also, I know my best friend won't give up until she gets the scoop.

I swipe to answer. "Hey, Mill," I say, striving for nonchalance. "What's up?"

"Don't you 'what's up' me, Hailey Warren!" Her voice is a mix of excitement and accusation. "I saw that photo — the wholeworldsaw that photo. You and Prince Luca looked about two seconds away from tearing each other's clothes off!"

I sit up, switching on the bedside lamp. “It’s not what it looks like,” I insist. “We just... had a moment. But it won’t happen again. Luca and I have agreed to keep things strictly professional.”

Even I can hear the lack of conviction in my voice. I’m a reporter — lying, even to myself, has never been my strong suit.

“Uh-huh,” she says skeptically. “I know you, Hails. I can see right through that ‘professional’ nonsense. You’ve still got it bad for Prince Charming — and don’t try to deny it.”

I flop back against the pillows with a sigh, staring bleakly at the ornate ceiling tiles. Denying my attraction to Luca feels futile, especially to Millie, who knows me better than anyone. But admitting it out loud makes it too real, too dangerous.

I told her — and myself — that I was over Luca, that coming to the palace was nothing but a job. Yet I know, deep down, that’s anything but the truth.

“It doesn’t matter what I feel,” I say finally. “Luca is going to be king. And I’m just... me. What we had in New York is over. There’s no happily ever after for us.”

But oh, some secret part of me wishes there could be, even as my practical side ruthlessly squashes that flickering hope.

“Okay, I’ll stop pushing. For now,” Millie relents. “But Hailey, just... be careful with your heart, okay? You were pretty torn up when he didn’t show at the fountain, and now the stakes are even higher. Falling for a king-to-be is risky business.”

“I know,” I whisper. “Believe me, I know.”

We say our goodnights — or, for her, good afternoons — and I end the call, but

Millie's warning echoes in my head. Sleep continues to elude me as I toss and turn, my body humming with restless energy.

Unable to stand the confines of my bedroom any longer, I throw off the covers and pad over to the dresser. My fingers find the smooth fabric of my deep blue bikini and I slip it on, the act of changing into a swimsuit as natural as breathing. A late-night swim always helps clear my head.

I don't bother with shoes, and out in the hallway my bare feet sink into the plush carpet. I keep my steps light, not wanting to draw any attention. The indoor pool is located in a secluded ground-floor wing of the palace, and I'm counting on it being deserted at this hour. It's not off-limits to me, but right now I don't feel like interacting with anyone.

I just need to be alone. I need silence — real silence, without the constant drumming of the thoughts in my head — and I'm hoping that being submerged in water will help me get there.

As I push open the heavy glass doors, the smell of chlorine wafts over me, both comforting and invigorating. Moonlight streams in through the domed glass ceiling, casting an ethereal glow over the still surface of the water.

I drop my towel onto a nearby lounge chair and step to the edge of the deep end, my toes curling over the cool tile. For a moment, I simply stand there, breathing in the peaceful solitude.

Diving in, I slice through the water with barely a splash, the silky caress of it against my bare skin both soothing and sensual. I surface on the other side, pushing my slicked-back hair from my face.

Here in the sanctuary of the water, I can almost forget the complicated swirl of my

feelings for Luca. Almost.

But forgetting him entirely, I'm starting to realize, may be an impossible feat. No matter how much I try to deny it, he's crept under my skin and burrowed into my heart.

As I float on my back, staring up at the star-speckled night sky through the glass, my thoughts drift back to the garden, back to the way he held my arms — too long, much longer than he needed to after catching me before I fell.

The sound of the door opening startles me out of my reverie. I jerk upright, treading water as I turn to see who else could possibly be awake at this hour.

My heart stutters in my chest as a familiar figure steps into the room, moonlight gleaming off his smooth skin and chiseled physique. Luca.

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He freezes when he sees me, his eyes widening in surprise. “Hailey. I didn’t expect anyone else to be here.”

“That makes two of us,” I manage, acutely aware of how little I’m wearing. The cobalt bikini seemed like a good idea in the privacy of my room, but now, with Luca’s heated gaze roaming over me, I feel utterly exposed.

He sets his towel down, his movements precise and controlled. The black swim trunks slung low on his hips leave little to the imagination — not that I have to imagine anyway, since I’ve seen the whole shebang — and I have to force my eyes away from the cut of his abs, the V of his hips disappearing beneath the waistband.

“I couldn’t sleep,” he says quietly, stepping to the edge of the pool. “I thought a swim might help clear my head.”

“That makes two of us,” I echo.

He dives in with the sleek grace of an Olympic swimmer, barely making a ripple. When he surfaces a few feet from me, rivulets of water sluice down the planes of his face, dripping off the sharp cut of his jaw.

For a long, charged moment, we simply stare at each other, the only sound the gentle lapping of the water against the sides of the pool. The air feels heavy, weighted with unspoken words and barely restrained desire.

I’m not sure who moves first, but suddenly the space between us vanishes. His hands find my waist beneath the water as mine slide up the slick muscles of his chest to

twine around his neck.

Our faces drift closer, lips a scant inch apart, sharing the same shaky breath. Every nerve in my body is alight, yearning to close that last little distance.

But we hover there, suspended in that aching, anticipatory moment, both of us wrestling with the warring tides of longing and restraint.

His nose brushes mine as he angles his head, our mouths now a mere whisper apart. I can almost taste him on my tongue, feel the heat of his lips against my own.

“Hailey,” he breathes, and my name in his accented rasp sends a shiver racing down my spine. “We shouldn’t...”

“I know,” I manage, the words strangled. My fingers tighten reflexively against his nape. “The photo... If anyone saw us like this...”

He exhales a shuddering sigh that fans across my cheek. “It would be a scandal. The press would have a field day.”

I swallow hard, trying to compose myself, to remember all the reasons why this can’t happen. “Your reputation... the throne... We agreed to stay professional.”

“We did,” he acknowledges, but doesn’t pull away. If anything, his hands flex against my hips, tugging me infinitesimally closer. “But God, Hailey... I want...”

The raw need in his voice obliterates the last of my wavering control. Heat sizzles through my veins, molten and demanding.

Before I can move, though, he pulls away, his hands leaving my body. Water splashes between us, and my jaw drops.

“The photo...” He looks away.

My face heats. Of course. What was I thinking?

Say we did give in to our desires — then what? He would keep me secret from everyone? Is that what I want to be, Prince Luca’s dirty little mistress?

Or, just as bad, his distraction?

“You’re right.” I swim to the edge of the pool and pull myself out.

Water drips from my body, pooling around my feet. The air feels colder than before, a stark contrast against my heated skin.

Silently, I usher myself towards my discarded towel. The fabric is rough against my damp skin but the process of drying off gives me something to focus on, a momentary escape from the weight of what almost happened.

Luca climbs out of the pool after me, keeping a healthy distance between us. He scrubs a hand across his face, and I avoid watching the droplets of water skitter down his chest.

He clears his throat, “Hailey?—”

“Don’t.” I cut him off, wrapping the towel securely around my waist.

My voice sounds harsher than I intended and I see him flinch. His gaze drops to the tiles beneath us, and I hate how even now he looks so damn good bathed in the moonlight.

“I’m sorry,” he says after a beat. “I didn’t mean to — it shouldn’t have happened.”

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The air between us grows colder, silence stretching out. He doesn't look at me.

"You're right," I say, my voice tight. "It shouldn't have."

The suggestion is there; I don't have to say it. Any of it. Not what just happened in the pool, not our night in New York.

"Good night, Luca," I say, my voice barely audible over the dull hum of the pool pump.

He doesn't respond right away. When he does, his voice is hoarse, strained. "Good night, Hailey."

With that, I turn and leave him there, the glass doors closing behind me with a soft click.

CHAPTER 17

LUCA

I lie in bed, staring at the ceiling, my mind a riotous mess. The ghost of Hailey's touch lingers on my skin, the memory of her lips against mine seared into my brain.

I can't get her out of my head. Her smile, her laugh, the way her eyes sparkle when she's excited about a story. The softness of her skin, the taste of her mouth...

I groan, pressing the heels of my palms against my eyes. This is exactly what I don't

need right now. My father's death, the impending coronation, the weight of an entire nation on my shoulders... and here I am, fantasizing about a woman I can't have.

But God, I want her. I want her more than I've ever wanted anything.

I roll over, burying my face in the pillow, trying to block out the images that flood my mind. It's no use. She's everywhere; in every thought, every breath.

What's she doing now? I imagine she's back in her room, maybe showering after the pool, lathering up shampoo in her hair, the suds crawling down her shoulders, down her breasts, all the way down to...

"Seriously?" I ask myself out loud.

Sleep is a lost cause. I sit up, swinging my legs over the side of the bed and grabbing a dirty T-shirt from the floor. I make my way down to the kitchens, not hungry but on a mission anyway. I need a distraction, something to take my mind off Hailey.

I push open the door to the kitchens, the hinges creaking softly. The room is dark, the only light coming from the moonlight filtering through the windows. I don't bother with the lights, navigating my way to the fridges by memory.

I'm rummaging through the contents, looking for something to snack on, when I hear a noise from the back of the room. I freeze, my heart pounding in my chest. Who would be down here at this hour?

I grab the nearest thing I can find — a pot — and hold it like a weapon as I creep towards the source of the noise. Could it be another photographer, like the one who snapped that picture of Hailey and me? Has someone breached the palace security again?

Anger fills me. If they think they're going to break into the palace and get served their scoop on a silver platter, they have another think coming. This is my home, a place of respect and dignity. Yes, I share it with dozens of staff members, but that doesn't make it any less private. Everyone who lives and works here deserves to have peace, and the fact that even one person broke in makes me pissed off and ready for revenge.

My pulse races as I inch closer, ready to confront the intruder. I round the corner, the pot raised high, and?—

“Ahh!” A familiar voice yelps, startling me so badly I nearly drop my makeshift weapon.

“Simon?” I lower the pot, my brow furrowing in confusion. “What the hell are you doing here?”

My friend stares at me wide-eyed, his hand clutched to his chest. “What am I doing here? What are you doing, sneaking around in the dark with a pot?”

I set the pot down on the counter, running a hand through my hair. “I thought you were an intruder. A journalist or something.”

Simon raises an eyebrow. “Paranoid much?”

I shoot him a look. “Can you blame me? After what happened with Hailey...”

I trail off, the memory of that stolen moment in the gardens flooding back. The way she felt in my arms, the taste of her lips...

I shake my head, trying to clear it. “When did you get back, anyway? I thought you were still in London.”

Simon gives me a strange look. “I never left. I’ve been here all week. London was last month.”

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I blink at him, surprised. “You have?”

He nods, his expression softening. “Yeah. You’ve just been... preoccupied.”

Guilt twists in my gut. I’ve been so wrapped up in my own drama, I hadn’t even noticed my own best friend’s presence. The last time I remember speaking to him was the day of my father’s funeral.

“Simon, I’m sorry. I’ve been a terrible friend lately.”

He waves a hand, brushing off my apology. “It’s fine, Luca. You’ve got a lot on your plate right now. You have nothing to apologize for.”

But it’s not fine. I should have been there for him, should have made time for him. What kind of king will I be if I can’t even be a good friend?

The thought makes my chest tighten, the weight of my impending responsibilities pressing down on me. I lean against the counter, suddenly feeling exhausted.

“I don’t know if I can do this, Simon. Any of it.”

He steps closer, placing a reassuring hand on my shoulder. “Hey, you’re not in this alone, okay? I’m here for you. And you’re going through a lot right now, man. You just put your dad in the ground, and on top of that...”

He trails off, sparing us both from more talk about the mantle I’m now carrying.

I nod, swallowing past the lump in my throat. “I know. Thanks.”

We lapse into silence, each of us lost in our own thoughts. After a moment, he clears his throat.

“So... you and Hailey, huh?”

I glance at him, my heart skipping a beat at the mention of her name. “What about us?”

“That article... it wasn’t entirely wrong, was it? You may not have noticed me here all week, but I’ve been noticing you.”

“She’s shadowing me,” I say flatly. “For an article.”

“Uh-huh. I see the way you two look at each other, Luca.”

“Look at each other — like what?” I turn away from him and open the fridge, where there’s most likely to be leftovers. “You should really get a job. Find something to do with your time instead of looking for drama where there isn’t any.”

“I got a job,” he says over my shoulder. “I’m working with my father.”

“Here?” I turn to study him.

“Where else?”

Yet another detail of his life that I’ve recently glossed over. My face burns with shame.

Simon’s father was my father’s financial advisor, which means Dorian is

now my financial advisor. And I guess, officially, Simon now also works for me.

“Don’t worry about it.” He claps a hand on my shoulder. “Let’s just have some of that trifle cake.”

I sigh in relief. He’s too good to me. “Let’s.”

We pull the cake out, grab a couple of spoons, and sit at one of the islands, not bothering to get bowls.

“How are you?” Simon asks. “Really?”

I hesitate, debating how much to tell him. But this is Simon, my closest friend, my confidant. If I can’t be honest with him, who can I be honest with?

“That photo did tell some truth,” I admit, my voice barely above a whisper.

His eyes widen. “You mean...?”

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I nod, a small smile tugging at my lips despite myself. “We spent the night together. In New York. It was... incredible.”

The memory washes over me, vivid and intoxicating. Her skin against mine, her breath hot in my ear...

I shake my head, forcing myself back to the present. “But it doesn’t matter. It can’t happen again.”

Simon frowns. “Why not?”

“Because I’m about to be king, Simon. I have a duty to my country, to my people. I can’t afford to be distracted by romance right now.”

The words taste bitter on my tongue, but I know they’re true. As much as I want Hailey, as much as I ache for her, I have to put my feelings aside. For the good of Werdenfeld.

Simon studies me for a long moment, his expression unreadable. “You know, Luca, sometimes I think you use your duty as an excuse to run away from your feelings.”

I open my mouth to protest, but he holds up a hand, cutting me off.

“I know you’re scared. I know you’re trying to do the right thing. But denying yourself happiness isn’t the answer. It’s okay to want something for yourself every once in a while.”

I stare at him, my heart hammering in my chest. Part of me knows he's right. But the other part, the part that's terrified of failing, of letting everyone down, won't let me admit it.

"I can't, Simon. I just... I can't."

He sighs, his shoulders slumping in defeat. "I get it. I do. But you can't keep running forever. Sooner or later, you're going to have to face your feelings. About your dad. About Hailey. About all of it."

I clench my jaw, my fingers tightening around the spoon. "I'm not running from anything. I'm doing what needs to be done. What's expected of me."

"And what about what you want? What about your own happiness?"

I let out a harsh laugh, the sound echoing in the empty kitchen. "My happiness doesn't matter. Not when there's a whole country counting on me."

He shakes his head, his eyes filled with sadness. "That's not true, Luca. Your happiness matters just as much as anyone else's. More, even. Because if you're not happy, how can you expect to lead your people effectively?"

I stare at him, my throat tight with emotion. I want to argue, to tell him he's wrong. But deep down, I know he's right. I can't keep running from my feelings forever. Eventually, I'll have to face them.

But not tonight. And not anytime soon. There's a time for falling apart, a time for following your dreams. And there's a time for sucking it up and getting to work.

I'm currently in the latter phase.

I straighten my shoulders, pushing away from the counter. “I appreciate your concern, Simon. But I have to stay focused. The world is counting on me now. I can’t let myself get distracted.”

Simon looks like he wants to argue, but he nods, accepting my decision. “Okay, okay. But just remember, I’m here for you. Whenever you’re ready to talk.”

I manage a small smile, grateful for his support. “Thanks. I’ll keep that in mind.”

But as I walk away, heading back to my room, I know I won’t take him up on his offer. Because no matter how much I might want to, I can’t afford to let myself be vulnerable. Not now. Not ever.

CHAPTER 18

HAILEY

The first thing I notice when I wake up is the roiling nausea in my stomach. I groan, curling into myself as a wave of it washes over me.

What is wrong with me? I never get sick.

Maybe it’s the decadent palace food. After years of existing on takeout — and, in between, home-cooked meals at my mom’s apartment — I’m not used to eating all the strange, fancy dishes the palace provides.

I force myself to sit up, rubbing a hand over my face. My head is pounding, and my mouth tastes like something died in it. Glancing at the clock on the nightstand, I curse. I’m late for breakfast.

I stumble out of bed, fighting back another surge of nausea. I can’t believe I

overslept. I pride myself on my punctuality, on always being where I'm supposed to be when I'm supposed to be there. And now, only a few days into my time in Werdenfeld, I'm already falling behind.

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I have a quick wash and throw on some clothes, not bothering to brush my hair or put on makeup. I don't have time. I have to get downstairs before Luca notices my absence.

The thought of facing him after what happened last night in the pool sends a jolt of anxiety through me. I still can't believe I let myself get so carried away. We agreed that the past was behind us, that we wouldn't pursue anything of a personal nature.

And what did I do? I sidled up right next to him, like I was going to jump his bones right there in the pool.

I probably would have, too, if things had gotten that far.

I take a deep breath, trying to calm my nerves. It was just one slip-up. A mistake. It won't happen again.

I hurry out of my room, making my way down the grand staircase to the dining room. My stomach churns with each step, and I have to pause at the bottom, gripping the banister for support.

When I finally enter the royal family's private dining room, Luca is already seated at the head of the table, a cup of coffee in front of him. He looks up as I approach, his eyes widening slightly.

"Are you all right? You look pale."

So much for trying to fake it through the day.

I force a smile and sink into the chair across from him. “I’m fine. Just tired. I’m sorry I’m late.”

He waves away my apology. “Don’t worry about it. I know you had a long day, uh...” He clears his throat. “Yesterday.”

His face is pink. Apparently, I’m not the only one who can’t think about yesterday without remembering our time in the pool.

I nod, not trusting myself to speak. I can feel his gaze on me, searching, probing. Trying to read me. But I keep my eyes on my plate, focusing on the food in front of me.

Yet even the sight of the eggs and bacon makes my stomach roil. I push them away, reaching for a piece of toast instead.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” Luca asks again, concern lacing his voice. “You don’t look well.”

I force another smile, meeting his gaze. “I’m good. Really. Just a bit under the weather. It’ll pass.”

But even as I say the words, I know they’re a lie. Something is wrong with me. I just don’t know what.

I force myself to nibble on the toast, but it tastes like sawdust in my mouth. To make it all the worse, I can feel Luca’s eyes on me, his concern palpable.

Another wave of nausea hits, this one different from any before it. I stand quickly, pushing my chair back. “I’m so sorry, but I need to, uh, excuse myself. I just remembered I have some urgent emails to respond to before your meeting.”

He frowns, but nods. “Of course. Do what you need to do. I’ll see you in the conference room in twenty minutes.”

I nod, grateful for the reprieve, and hurry out of the dining room, my stomach churning.

I make it to my room just in time, barely managing to shut the door before I’m rushing to the bathroom and retching into the toilet. My stomach heaves and heaves, expelling what little I’ve eaten.

When it’s finally over, I slump against the cool porcelain, my forehead beaded with sweat. It’s been a long time since I felt this off. Could it be food poisoning?

I force myself to my feet, rinsing my mouth and splashing cold water on my face. I catch sight of my reflection in the mirror — pale, drawn, with dark circles under my eyes.

I look like death warmed over.

But I don’t have time to dwell on it. Luca’s meeting starts in less than ten minutes, and I need to be there to take notes.

After washing my face, I pull my hair back into a tight bun and apply concealer under my eyes, hoping it will mask the shadows. Then, taking a deep breath, I gather my notebook and pen and head for the conference room.

Luca is already there when I slip in, along with several of his advisors. He looks up as I enter, his brow furrowing in concern.

“Hailey. Are you sure you’re well enough to be here? You still look pale.”

I force a smile, taking my seat. “I’m fine, Lu— Your Majesty. Really. I’m eager to be here.”

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He hesitates but then nods and turns to address the room. I flip open my notebook, pen poised to take notes.

But as the meeting drags on, I find it harder and harder to concentrate. My stomach is still off, and I'm so exhausted that I just want to crawl back into bed.

I try to focus on Luca's words, on the discussion of trade agreements and border disputes. But the words slur together, making no sense.

And then, without warning, my stomach heaves again. I clap a hand over my mouth, leaping to my feet.

"Excuse me," I mutter, already halfway to the door. I can feel Luca's eyes on me, hear the murmur of concern from the others in the room.

But I don't stop. I can't. I barely make it to the bathroom down the hall before I'm vomiting again, my stomach emptying itself of what little remains.

When it's over, I slump against the wall, feeling better but sure it will happen again. I guess I need to stop being so stubborn; Luca is right, and I should probably call it a day.

A knock sounds on the door, startling me. "Hailey?" Luca's voice is gentle, concerned. "How's it going in there?"

I swallow hard, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. "I'm fine," I call out, my voice shaking. "Just give me a minute."

But when I try to stand, my legs nearly give out beneath me. I clutch at the sink, struggling to keep my balance.

The door opens, and Luca steps inside. His eyes widen when he sees me, and he's at my side in an instant, his arm around my waist.

"You're not fine," he says firmly. "You're sick, Hailey. You need to be in bed."

I want to argue, but the truth is, I feel awful. My head is pounding, my stomach still churning. And the thought of facing the rest of the day like this is unbearable.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, my voice breaking. "I didn't mean to let you down."

Luca shakes his head, his fingers brushing my cheek. "You could never let me down. Your health is what's important now."

He helps me out of the bathroom, his arm still around me. I lean into him, savoring the warmth of his touch, the strength of his body against mine. It's all temporary, of course, but I relish it all the same.

We make our way slowly down the hall and into the elevator, Luca supporting me with every step. When we reach my room, he opens the door and guides me inside.

I sink down onto the bed, exhaustion washing over me. Luca kneels beside me, his hand on my forehead.

"You're not warm," he murmurs.

"I feel much better." I turn onto my side, meaning it completely.

"I'm going to send for the palace doctor. You need to rest. Don't move."

I start to argue, but he's already moving away from me, and then he's gone, the door closing softly behind him. I burrow beneath the covers, my heart racing.

It's not right, but I can't help but feel a thrill of pleasure at the memory of Luca's touch, at the tenderness in his eyes as he helped me into bed.

I know I shouldn't want him, shouldn't crave his touch. But in this moment, with my defenses down and my heart laid bare, I can't stop myself from wishing he were here beside me, holding me close.

A tear slips from my eye, and I wipe it away.

Not wanting to wallow in my misery, I turn on the TV. Might as well catch up on the news while I wait for the doctor.

Not thirty minutes have passed when there's a knock on the door, and a woman enters the room. I've seen her around the palace but never knew she was the doctor here.

"Ms. Warren? I'm Dr. Novak, the palace physician. His Majesty asked me to check on you."

She has a kind face, with warm brown eyes and a gentle smile. I push myself up to a sitting position, trying to smooth my tangled hair.

"Thank you for coming," I say, my voice hoarse. "I'm not sure what's wrong with me. I woke up really nauseous and weak."

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Dr. Novak nods, pulling a chair over to the bedside. She takes my wrist, checking my pulse, then places a cool hand on my forehead.

“Can you describe your symptoms for me?” she asks, reaching for her stethoscope.

I take a deep breath, trying to focus through the haze of nausea and fatigue. “I’ve been throwing up, and I’m so tired. And a little dizzy. After I throw up, I feel better for a while, and then the nausea starts building again.”

Dr. Novak listens to my heart. “Have you eaten anything new lately?”

“I’ve just been having what everyone else here is eating.”

“If it were food poisoning, someone else would be sick, and no one is today. When was your last menstrual period?”

It’s a standard question, one that every doctor always asks me, no matter the reason I’m seeing them. “It was...”

I freeze, my mind racing. I try to think back, to remember, but the weeks have blurred together in a haze of work and stress and Luca.

“I... I’m not sure,” I stammer. “I’ve been so busy, I haven’t really been keeping track...”

Can I really have missed it? How could...? My breathing picks up, and my chest tightens.

Dr. Novak nods, her expression sympathetic. “Based on your symptoms, it’s possible that you may be pregnant. Would you like me to bring you some tests?”

“Uh, y–yes please.”

The world tilts on its axis. Pregnant. The word echoes in my mind, a terrifying, impossible truth.

There’s only one man who could be the father of my child. One night of passion, of reckless abandon, that I’ve tried so hard to forget.

We used a condom, though!

Yep. A condom that had been in my nightstand for months. For all I know, it was probably expired.

I close my eyes. Shit.

“I’ll be right back. Sit tight.”

I try to do exactly that as she fetches me a couple of home pregnancy tests, though inside I’m panicking. When she returns, I take both of the tests into the bathroom, follow the instructions, and wait three minutes.

And there it is: the truth. Both tests are positive.

“Oh, my God,” I hiss.

With shaking hands, I return to the doctor, who is waiting patiently in her chair. The look on my face must say everything.

“As your doctor, everything between us is confidential,” she says, then pauses. “Also, for what it’s worth, I know what it’s like to be a woman in this palace. We really get the raw end of the deal sometimes.”

I more collapse than sit on the end of my bed. A baby...

For the first time, there’s a flutter of excitement in my chest. Am I ready to be a mom? I understand what Dr. Novak is suggesting; it’s challenging to have a woman and a family.

But maybe... maybe I’m up to the challenge.

Dr. Novak stands. “Can I do anything for you?”

I swallow hard. “No. Thank you. I appreciate it.”

“Let me know if you need anything else.” She exits with the same formality that she entered with, leaving me alone once more.

I close my eyes. Can this be happening? I’m pregnant!

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Pregnant by Luca.

Prince Luca. The king-to-be, the man who's made it clear he wants no future with me.

I close my eyes, fear and panic and a wild, desperate hope warring in my chest.

What am I going to do now?

CHAPTER 19

LUCA

I pace outside Hailey's room, my mind racing, full of memories of her pale face this morning.

She clearly isn't doing well, and the thought of something being terribly wrong with her makes me sick with dread. If something happens to Hailey...

I draw a quick breath, shocked at how much the thought of losing her upsets me. My father is gone. My mother gone.

Aside from Simon, Hailey is the most important person in my life.

Which sounds ridiculous, I know that. I've pushed her away, told her that we can't be involved in any way but professionally. Hell, I don't even treat her as a friend.

Yet that doesn't stop her from filling my dreams every night. Doesn't stop me from keeping a room furnished in my heart just for her. Us not being together doesn't mean I don't care for her, and care for her I do — with every fiber of my being.

The door opens, and I spin around. Dr. Novak exits Hailey's room, closing the door firmly behind herself.

“What is it?” I say quickly.

Dr. Novak folds her hands in front of her belt. “Sir, I am bound by patient-physician confidentiality. I can tell you nothing. I'm sorry.”

My shoulders slump. “I understand. Thank you for seeing her.”

“Of course.” She bows before disappearing down the hallway.

I knock on the closed door, my heart pounding in my chest. “Hailey? It's me, Luca. Can I come in?”

A pause, then, “Yes, come in.”

I enter, closing the door behind me. Hailey is sat on the edge of the bed, her face pale, her eyes red-rimmed. She's been crying.

The sight makes my heart clench. Oh, no. Is it even worse than I imagined?

“Hailey, what's wrong? Are you okay?” I hurry to her, but stop myself right before taking her hands in mine. Despite what's happening now, I drew the line — yet again — in the pool last night, and I need to be careful to not send her mixed messages.

Or to make things even harder on myself — as keeping our boundaries in place

requires my not doing anything that will cause my self-control to break.

She takes a deep breath, her hands trembling in her lap. “Luca, I... I’m pregnant.”

The world stops. My breath catches in my throat. “What?”

“I’m pregnant,” she repeats. “And it’s yours.”

I stare at her, my mind reeling. Pregnant. My child. Our child. How did this happen?
We were careful. We used protection.

But none of that matters now. The reality of the situation hits me like a ton of bricks.
I’m going to be a father. And Hailey... Hailey is carrying my child.

I sit down beside her, at a loss for what to do next. How am I supposed to respond to this?

“Hailey, I... I don’t know what to say.”

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She looks at me, her brown eyes searching mine. “I know this isn’t what we planned. I know it’s complicated. But I... I want to keep the baby, Luca.”

My heart skips a beat. She wants to keep the baby. Our baby. A part of me is thrilled, but another part is terrified. What will this mean for us? For our future?

I know one thing for certain: I will support Hailey, no matter what. I won’t abandon her or our child.

“Hailey, I’m here for you,” I say softly, squeezing her hand. “We’ll navigate this together. I promise.”

I take a deep breath, still trying to wrap my mind around this news even as I promise to stand by her side.

We’re having a child. It’s overwhelming, but as I look into her eyes, I see a glimmer of hope, of excitement, beneath the fear and uncertainty.

“The condom must have been faulty,” she says, voice trembling slightly. “I’m sorry, Luca. I never meant for this to happen.”

I shake my head, pulling her into my arms. “Don’t apologize. This isn’t your fault. If anything, it’s mine. I should have been more careful.”

She buries her face in my chest, and I feel her tears soaking through my shirt. I stroke her hair, whispering words of comfort and reassurance.

“We’ll get through this. I promise you. I’ll be here every step of the way.”

She pulls back, looking up at me with watery eyes. “You really mean that?”

I nod, cupping her face in my hands. “Of course I do. This is our child. Our responsibility. And I... I want to be a part of their life. I want to be there for you, for both of you.”

A small smile tugs at the corners of her mouth, and she leans into my touch. “Thank you, Luca. You have no idea how much that means to me.”

“Of course.”

I mean what I’m saying. I would rather die than turn my back on the mother of my child. Yet, the weight of reality crashes down on me. The ramifications of this news start to sink in, and a sense of dread settles in the pit of my stomach.

Soon, I will be officially crowned king of Werdenfeld. My every move is scrutinized, my personal life dissected by the media and the public. I can’t step outside this palace without being mobbed. Everyone wants to know what the future king is doing, what he’s thinking. It’s up to me to demonstrate our country’s morals, now and for the rest of my life.

And a royal child out of wedlock? It’s unheard of. It could jeopardize everything I’ve worked for, everything my father built.

I release Hailey from my embrace, my hands still resting on her shoulders. “I need some time to clear my head, to process all of this. But I want you to know that I’m not going anywhere. We’re in this together, okay?”

She nods, her smile faltering slightly. “Oh. Um. Okay. Are you...”

“I’m not displeased. I’m shocked. That’s all.” I bite my bottom lip. It’s not exactly the truth, but I’m spinning right now, unable to get a solid footing.

Her eyes narrow the slightest bit, but it’s more from pain than suspicion.

“It’s not what I expected,” I say, rushing to explain. “I’m being coronated in a few weeks, and this — this could throw everything off. When people find out I am having a child out of wedlock?—”

“You are having a child out of wedlock,” she cuts in. “That’s the fact. Unless you’re planning on suddenly proposing to me since I’m pregnant.” There’s bitterness in her words.

I get up and pace the room, leaving her warm body behind. “That’s... not what I meant.” My stomach tightens. “I’m just... It’s a lot to take in.”

She sighs and looks away. “It’s fine. You never promised me anything, and I’m not asking for anything either.”

My heart climbs into my throat. Oh, Hailey. I would offer her the whole world if I could, but it’s not that simple. My hands are tied, and it’s not for my well-being — it’s for the well-being of my country.

I suppose it’s too much to expect her to understand that. When it comes to these kinds of affairs, our experiences are too varied. She didn’t grow up being written about on gossip blogs, being expected to set an example for every other person in her country.

“I’ll come see you later today,” I say.

As I step away, I see the disappointment in her eyes, the unspoken longing for me to stay. It takes every ounce of willpower to turn towards the door, to leave her when all

I want is to wrap her in my arms and never let go.

But I know I need this time, need to gather my thoughts and find a way to navigate this new reality.

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I pause at the doorway, glancing back at her, but she's still turned away, staring out the window. An urge to rush to her, to take her in my arms and tell her I love her, that I want her to be mine, that I want to raise the baby as a couple, fills me.

But I stand where I am, because all of that is unrealistic. If Hailey and I did rush into a relationship — even a marriage — it would be clear to any observers that I'd only be marrying her in order to cover for the pregnancy.

And yet... that wouldn't be the whole story. Not at all.

Because in another life, under a different set of circumstances, I would have already given my all to Hailey, and I would be on the fast track to picking out a ring and planning where and when I want to get down on one knee in front of her.

That's nothing more than a fantasy, though, and people with as much responsibility as I have can't afford fantasies.

So I step out of the room without another word, closing the door behind me. The weight of our future presses down on my shoulders, and of all the problems I thought I had an hour before, none seem as big as the one I'm suddenly facing.

CHAPTER 20

HAILEY

It doesn't matter how long I stare at the ceiling. The answers and the assurance I need still don't come.

Gilded trim gleams in the late-morning sunlight streaming through the windows, but the beauty is lost on me. My hand drifts to my still-flat stomach, and a wave of longing crashes over me.

I need to talk to someone. And not just anyone. An ache for my best friend, the person who gets me in ways no one else can, fills me.

I need Millie.

Grabbing my phone from the nightstand, I'm about to hit call on her name, but then I remember we're thousands of miles apart. Quickly, I calculate the time difference. It's still too early to call her in New York. Letting out a frustrated sigh, I toss the phone aside.

Luca's reaction to the pregnancy replays in my mind, his shock and disbelief a hot knife to my heart even now. I can't blame him, not really. This isn't something either of us planned for or expected.

But still, a small part of me had hoped for... more. A glimmer of excitement, maybe even happiness.

I shake my head, trying to dislodge the unrealistic thoughts. Luca is a prince, soon to be a king. His life is complicated enough without throwing an unplanned pregnancy into the mix — and a pregnancy with a woman he's not even in a relationship with, at that. I can't expect him to be thrilled about this.

A soft knock at the door interrupts my spiraling thoughts. "Come in," I call out, pushing myself up to a sitting position.

A maid enters, carrying a silver tray laden with food. The aroma of roasted chicken and freshly baked bread fills the room, making my stomach growl. She sets the tray

on the bed beside me, and I notice a folded note tucked beneath the plate.

“Thank you,” I say, offering her a smile. She nods and exits the room, closing the door softly behind her.

As hungry as I am, I leave the food to wait for a moment more and instead unfold the note, my heart rate picking up as I recognize Luca’s bold handwriting.

Hailey,

Please meet me in my study after lunch. We have much to discuss.

Luca

I stare at the words, a sense of unease settling in my gut. The formal tone, the brevity of the message — it doesn’t bode well. I set the note aside and pick at the food, my appetite suddenly gone.

What could he want to discuss? Is he going to ask me to leave? To keep the pregnancy a secret? The possibilities skitter through my mind, each one more distressing than the last.

I force myself to take a few deep breaths, trying to calm my frayed nerves. Whatever Luca has to say, I’ll deal with it. I have to, for the sake of our baby.

But as I finish my meal and prepare to meet him, I can’t shake the feeling that everything is about to change once again, and not necessarily for the better.

My stomach in knots, I freshen myself up and take the long journey through the palace, with its never-ending halls and countless doors. Too soon, I’m in front of Luca’s study, where I take a deep breath and knock.

“Come in,” he calls, voice muffled through the heavy wood.

I enter the room, my heart pounding away in my chest. Luca is sitting behind his desk, his expression unreadable, but his blond hair is sticking out to the sides like he’s been raking his fingers through it — or grabbing at it in frustration. He gestures for me to sit in one of the chairs opposite him.

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I sink into the plush leather, trying to appear calmer than I feel. “You wanted to see me?”

Luca nods, shuffling some papers on his desk. “Yes. We need to discuss your living arrangements.”

I frown, not expecting this topic — or the sudden formality, when just an hour ago he was in my room holding me in his arms. “My living arrangements?”

And why does he seem more interested in whatever’s on those papers than in me? We just found out I’m expecting his child! Surely he can put aside whatever busywork he has for a few minutes.

“I think it would be best if you moved into the palace, at least for the duration of your pregnancy, if not... longer, more permanently.” Finally, he puts the papers down and looks at me.

My eyes widen in surprise. “Move into the palace? But why?”

He sighs, leaning back in his chair. “The public has had enough turmoil lately with the loss of my father. I think it’s best if we keep your pregnancy a secret, at least for now. If you stay here, it will prevent... further tongue-wagging. Especially since we were photographed together in the garden, this is exactly the kind of story my political opponents are looking for in order to bring me down.”

I feel like I’ve been punched in the gut. Keep my pregnancy a secret? Like it’s something to be ashamed of?

“I see,” I manage to say, my voice tight. “And what about my job? My life in New York?”

He slides a document across the desk. “I’ve taken care of that. You’ll receive a generous stipend, enough that you won’t need to work ever again. As the mother of my child, you and the baby will be set up for life. You will have more than you need. And I’ll make sure your rent in New York is paid for, whether you wish to see the lease out and then move here or... return there.”

I stare at the contract in front of me, a bitter taste in my mouth. Is this what he was doing the rest of the morning? Having his personal lawyer draw up a contract in order to buy my silence?

It’s the opposite of what he gave me in my room earlier. The financial support is there, sure, but that pales in comparison to what I really want: him. His heart, his genuine compassion.

Where is the arm around my shoulder? The promise that we’ll figure this out together, that he’ll stick by my side?

Apparently, his idea of being there for me equates to regular deposits into my bank account.

He’s thought of everything, it seems. Everything except my feelings. He’s treating this like some sort of business deal.

“So that’s it, then?” My voice shakes with anger. “You’re just going to pay me off and hide me away like some dirty little secret?”

His expression hardens. “It’s not like that at all. I’m trying to do what’s best for everyone.”

I stand abruptly, the chair scraping against the floor. “No. You’re doing what’s best for you. For your precious image.”

I snatch the contract off the desk, crumpling it in my fist. “You can take your contract and shove it up your ass, Your Royal Highness.”

Never in a million years could I have imagined talking to royalty this way, but everything I thought I knew about the man in front of me is crumbling into dust. As the onion peels that are Luca curl back, I’m seeing that he only does what’s right for him— and no one else.

I could say more. I could curse him out, yell in his face. But instead I storm out of the study, slamming the door behind me. Tears blur my vision as I stalk down the hallway, my heart shattered into a million pieces.

How could I have been so foolish to think that Luca and I could have a future together? To think that he might actually care about me, about our child? Or even — and this one is truly crazy — that our having a baby together might be the catalyst that finally drew us together?

It’s clear now that I was nothing more than a convenient distraction, a problem to be solved with money and contracts.

Well, I won’t be bought off so easily. I won’t let Luca dictate my life or the life of our child. I’ll figure this out on my own, just like I always have. And Luca can go to hell for all I care.

Without a destination in mind, I weave my way through the palace, ignoring the staff around me. I burst out of a back door, the afternoon sun nearly blinding me. My feet act of their own accord, carrying me across the manicured lawn, toward the lush gardens in the distance. I need to get away, to find a quiet place to think.

As I enter the gardens, the scent of roses and honeysuckle envelops me. All at once, my strength gives out and I collapse onto a stone bench, my body shaking with sobs. The crumpled contract falls from my hand, landing on the gravel path. Funny. I hadn't even realized I was still holding it. But now you couldn't pay me to pick it back up.

How did everything go so wrong? Just weeks ago, my life was predictable, dependable. I had a good job full of potential, friends I could count on, and my own little apartment to come home to each night. Now those things feel light-years away. On top of it all, my dreams of a happy family have been shattered by Luca's cold, calculating proposition.

I bury my face in my hands, hot tears streaming down my cheeks. Talk about betrayal. How can I possibly raise a child on my own, without the support of a partner?

But as I sit here, the gentle rustling of leaves and the chirping of birds slowly calm my racing thoughts. I take a deep, shuddering breath, wiping my tears with the back of my hand.

And that's when it hits me. I'm not alone in this. I have my mom, who raised me on her own with strength and grace. I have Millie, who's always been there for me. And most importantly, I have this tiny life growing inside me, depending on me to make the right choices.

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I draw a deep breath, new worries surfacing. What will my mom think when I tell her I'm becoming a single parent, just like she was?

The thought makes me cringe. All of the things she sacrificed; the luxuries — and sometimes needs — she went without just so I could be comfortable... I know she doesn't want the same thing for me.

And then there's the other aspect of it. Growing up without a father.

I never missed my father, exactly, since I knew he had to be a deadbeat to skip out on a pregnant woman. But what Ididmiss was the idea of him. And I still do, a little bit; maybe that ache will never go away.

Luca isn't like my dad, at least. He's sticking it out, promising to support me and the baby.

But what about after the baby is born? They'll need their father in their life.

I bite my lip, the hard truth sinking in. I'm going to need to accept Luca's offer, no matter how much it hurts my pride.

I pull out my phone, my fingers trembling as I open my email. I start typing a message to my editor, my heart heavy with the weight of my decision.

Good afternoon,

I'm writing to let you know that I'll be resigning from my position at The Morning

Star, effective immediately after I submit my piece on Prince Luca. I apologize for the short notice but, due to personal reasons, I won't be able to return to New York anytime soon.

Thank you for all the opportunities you've given me over the years. It's been an honor to work with such a talented team of journalists.

Sincerely,

Hailey

I hit send, a sense of finality washing over me. I know I'm making the right choice, though it means giving up the career I've worked so hard for.

Because nothing is more important than my child's well-being. And if that means staying in Werdenfeld, finding a way to co-parent with Luca despite our differences, then that's what I'll do.

I stand up from the bench, brushing off my dress. The crumpled contract catches my eye, and I pick it up, smoothing out the wrinkled pages.

Maybe Luca and I can find a way to make this work, after all. Maybe we can put aside our pride and our hurt, and focus on what really matters: the tiny life we've created together.

With a deep breath, I tuck the contract into my pocket and head back towards the palace, ready to face whatever the future may bring.

At Luca's study, I pause in front of the closed door and steel myself. There's no going back; I've already submitted my letter of resignation to The Morning Star.

Cringing, I raise a fist and knock.

“Come in,” Luca’s voice calls from inside. I twist the ornate handle and step into the room.

He’s still behind his massive desk, papers strewn before him. I guess that’s what really hurts when I look into his unreadable blue eyes; I’ve been outside going through the five stages of grief while he’s been in here continuing on with his work, completely unruffled. I might as well be another bump in his day, another decision to be made about a guest list or which restaurant to book for a dignitary meeting.

“I didn’t expect to see you again so soon.” His tone is neutral, guarded.

I approach his desk, the wrinkled contract clutched in my hand. “I’ve been thinking about your offer,” I begin, my voice trembling slightly. “And I’ve decided to accept.”

He raises an eyebrow. “You have?” He seems surprised, though he quickly masks it.

I nod. “Yes. On one condition. Both of us are present for the baby as they grow up.”

He blinks. “Of course. That’s one reason I asked you to live here in the palace. It’s my preference that you and the child continue to live here throughout their whole childhood.”

I swallow hard, having trouble believing that was his original intention at all, since this is the first he’s bringing up us living here permanently. More likely, he’s trying to butter me up so that I’ll sign his contract.

Right now, I don’t really care. The priority is setting my child up for the best life possible.

Luca leans back in his chair, considering me. “And you’re willing to abide by the terms we discussed? Keeping the pregnancy secret, staying here in Werdenfeld?”

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“I am,” I confirm, though the words taste bitter on my tongue. “I’ve already informed my editor that I’m resigning.”

Luca’s eyes widen a fraction. “You’re giving up your job in New York?”

“I am.” I lift my chin, meeting his gaze directly. “Nothing is more important to me than our child. If you’re serious about the money, then I want to focus on raising them, not on working.”

Something flickers in his expression, gone too quickly for me to decipher. He clears his throat. “Very well, then. I’ll have my lawyers draw up an official agreement with the new terms.”

I nod, suddenly feeling very tired. The events of the morning hours are catching up with me — the shocking news of my pregnancy, the heated confrontation with Luca, the painful decision to leave behind the life I’ve built.

I just pray I’m not making a huge mistake. That Luca and I can find a way to coexist, to raise this child together despite the complicated circumstances of its conception.

Only time will tell. And no matter what happens, I at least know that I’ll always put my baby first. Yes, it might mean sacrificing my own dreams, maybe even my own happiness, in the process, but that’s a price I’m willing to pay.

CHAPTER 21

LUCA

I stare blankly at the documents strewn across my desk, the words blurring together into meaningless scribbles. Try as I might, I can't seem to focus on the trade agreements and diplomatic missives that demand my attention.

My mind keeps circling back to Hailey's revelation this morning. Pregnant. With my child.

The enormity of it threatens to suffocate me.

I never planned for this. Never wanted the complications that a baby would bring. Especially not now, with my ascension to the throne mere weeks away. The scrutiny on me is already intense — I can only imagine the scandal if word leaks of an illegitimate royal conceived out of wedlock.

And yet... a traitorous part of me thrills at the idea of Hailey bearing my child. Of sealing our connection with a new life created from our passion. It would be so easy to cast duty aside, to marry her and claim her and our baby for all the world to see.

I rake a hand through my hair, frustration simmering in my blood. This is wrong; I can't afford to indulge in such reckless fantasies. Werdenfeld is looking for me to set an example, to be the kind of man their boys can aspire to be. Anything less than a picture-perfect reign could destabilize my country.

I understand it now, why my father was always so reserved, so committed to putting his people before himself. There was, quite simply, no one else who could do the job.

Abruptly, I shove back from my desk and stride to the window. The meticulously groomed palace grounds stretch out below, and I'm sure they're beautiful, but right now I can't see it. All I can see is the mess I've made of everything.

A sharp knock at the door interrupts my brooding. "Enter," I call out, not bothering to

turn around.

“Your Majesty.” It’s Geoffrey, my chief of staff. “I have the itinerary for your upcoming diplomatic trip to Prague. The Czech president is eager to discuss expanding trade between our nations.”

The trip. Of course. I’d nearly forgotten, consumed as I am by personal turmoil. But now, the idea of putting some distance between myself and Hailey, if only for a few days, fills me with relief.

“Excellent,” I say briskly, finally facing Geoffrey. “See that the arrangements are finalized. I want to leave as soon as possible. Actually... I’d like to leave today. Give myself some time to get settled in once I arrive there.”

Geoffrey bows. “As you wish, sir.” He hesitates, then adds delicately, “Forgive me for overstepping, but is everything all right? You seem... distracted today.”

“I’m fine,” I bite out. The last thing I need is palace gossip about my state of mind. Soon enough, the entire staff will be filled in on my and Hailey’s, ah, new situation; they’ll also be sworn to secrecy regarding it. “Just eager to serve Werdenfeld to the best of my abilities.”

He leaves, and I don’t allow myself to slow down. If I do, I’ll question what I’m doing, and I can’t have that.

Sending some quick messages to inform the important people of my sudden schedule change, I ring the head housekeeper to have her pack for my trip.

And then I go in search of Hailey.

I could send her a message, but that wouldn’t be right. Yes, I’m running away from

my problems for a bit, but at least I can let her know that straight to her face.

After a long hunt, I find her in the library, curled up in an armchair with a book. She looks up as I approach, her warm brown eyes searching my face. She says nothing, instead waiting for me to talk.

I don't blame her. She likely feels that there's no point in even trying with me. I've let her down irreparably.

I take a deep breath. "I have to go away for a few days. Diplomatic trip to Prague."

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Her brow furrows. “Oh. When do you leave?”

“As soon as possible. Probably this evening.” I stuff my hands in my pockets, feeling awkward and unsure. This thing between us... it’s still so complicated, so fraught. And now, with the baby on the way, the intricacies of it are a sea of knots.

Hailey sets her book aside, and I see that it’s a nonfiction about navigating challenging times — a knife to my heart.

She stands up, coming closer. “Is this about... about the pregnancy? Are you running away from me?”

“No!” The denial bursts out of me. “No, Hailey, that’s not it at all. It’s just... my duties as prince come first. You know that.”

But even as I say the words, they ring hollow in my ears. The truth is, I am running away. From my feelings for her — which I’m still waiting to miraculously go away — and from the terrifying reality of impending fatherhood.

Her eyes shimmer with unshed tears. “I understand,” she says softly. “Duty comes first.”

I long to reach out and take her in my arms, to promise her that everything will be all right. But I can’t. Not when I’m not sure of anything anymore.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper. Then I turn and walk away, hating myself with every step.

Three hours later, I board the royal jet with a heavy heart. Simon — sent by his father to oversee the talks from a financial viewpoint — is already on board, lounging in one of the plush leather seats with a glass of scotch in hand.

“Well, well,” he drawls as I take my seat across from him. “Someone’s in a mood today.”

I glare at him. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Come on, Luca. I know you better than that. What’s going on?”

I clench my jaw, staring out the window as the plane taxis down the runway. Part of me longs to unburden myself to him, to confess the truth about Hailey and the baby. But I can’t. Not yet. Not when just thinking about it all guts me.

“Nothing,” I mutter. “Just tired.”

Simon studies me for a long moment, then shrugs. “If you say so. But you know I’m here if you need to talk, right?”

I nod, grateful for his friendship even as I push him away. “I know. Thanks.”

As the plane lifts off, I close my eyes and try to push all thoughts of Hailey from my mind. But it’s impossible. She’s a part of me now, whether I like it or not. And sooner or later, I’m going to have to face that fact... and all the messy bits that come with it.

The flight stretches on, and even though it’s only a couple of hours to Prague, it feels like I’ve been stuck in this cabin for days. The silence between Simon and me grows more and more oppressive with each passing minute. I try to focus on the briefing

documents in front of me, but the words blur together on the page, my mind too consumed with thoughts of Hailey and our unborn child.

I'm doing the right thing... right?

Of course I am. How can I even ask myself that? And yet...

Finally, I can't take it anymore. I set the papers aside with a sigh, rubbing my temples.

"Hailey's pregnant," I blurt out.

Simon's head snaps up from where he's been looking at his phone, his eyes wide with shock. "Excuse me? What?"

I nod, the words tumbling out of me in a rush. "She's pregnant. With my child. And it has to stay a secret, Simon. No one can know. The palace lawyers are already drawing up contracts to ensure the staff's silence."

He stares at me, his mouth agape. "Ensure their silence? Why?"

Does he really not see it? "Because it would be a scandal of epic proportions. It's exactly what my opponents?—"

"Screw your opponents. Why are you thinking about them right now?"

My jaw clenches. "It's not them I'm really concerned about. It's our people. They need me to be a role model."

His eyes narrow. "And you're doing it by lying? By keeping your girlfriend and child a secret?"

“She’s not my girlfriend.”

He snorts. “And that makes this look better?”

I turn my surly gaze out the window, where I stare into the clouds as if they might provide me with some alternative course of action. Of course they don’t, and I’m stuck with sticking to the plan I’ve drafted up, despite how much it hurts.

“How long are you planning on keeping this a secret?” Simon presses.

When I don’t answer, he laughs dryly. “Wait. Forever?”

“Of course.” I turn back to him. “I can’t just come out and announce?”

“But... but this is huge, Luca. This changes everything. You’re going to be a father. Surely you see what this means for you and Hailey?”

I look away again, my jaw clenching. “It doesn’t mean anything. We’re not together, Simon. This baby... it doesn’t change that.”

“Like hell it doesn’t!” he snaps, leaning forward in his seat. “Luca, this is a sign. You and Hailey are meant to be together. Can’t you see that?”

I feel a flare of irritation at his words. “Don’t be ridiculous!” I snap back. “She and I... we’re from different worlds. It would never work. Plus, if we did end up together, it would be a pregnancy out of wedlock — extremely unconventional. And if we did get married, it would be obvious that we are trying to cover for the pregnancy.

Everyone would be shocked. It would be a scandal that PR could never fix.”

“You don’t know that,” he insists. “You’re just too stubborn to see what’s right in front of you. For all you know, the people would be happy for you, happy to see you happy?—”

I shake my head, my temper rising. “Enough. Thank you for your input, but I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

He opens his mouth to argue, but something in my expression must stop him. He sits back with a sigh, his shoulders slumping in defeat.

The rest of the flight passes in tense silence. When we finally land, I’m the first one off the plane, my steps quick and purposeful as I try to put as much distance between myself and my best friend as possible.

But even as I walk away, I can feel his gaze boring into my back, his words echoing in my mind. And deep down, I know he’s partially right. Not about me and Hailey being meant for each other — although, God, I wish that were true — but about this baby changing everything.

Because it certainly does. Whether I like it or not.

CHAPTER 22

HAILEY

The days stretch endlessly before me, each one blurring into the next in an endless parade of boredom and isolation.

I work, shadowing Luca to every meeting. I eat. I read books about pregnancy and

parenting. I wander the grand halls of the palace, marveling at the furnishings and priceless artwork. And yet nothing distracts me from the loneliness that gnaws at my heart.

Ever since Luca's return from Prague, he's been even more distanced. I haven't pushed, haven't tried to get him to warm up to what's happening. Because what's the use?

I'm still his live-in journalist, my report on him not complete until the coronation, but that's where it all ends. We aren't even having breakfast together anymore. Not that it was formally ended; he just is never there when I go downstairs in the mornings, and the maids have informed me that he's been rising early and taking breakfast in his room.

All in an attempt to avoid me, I can only assume.

What he is communicative about, though, is that I stay hidden away, sequestered from the world like some shameful secret. He says it's for my own protection, to avoid stirring up rumors and speculation. But his words ring hollow in my ears. If he truly cared for me, wouldn't he want to claim our child as his own?

But here I am, left to rattle around this gilded cage, cut off from everyone and everything I know. The solitude is suffocating, pressing down on me until sometimes I feel like I can barely breathe.

In a desperate attempt to ease the ache in my chest, I take refuge in my room and call my mom. Her familiar voice is a balm to my battered soul, and for a moment, I allow myself to imagine I'm back home in New York, curled up on her couch as we chat about our days.

But reality intrudes all too soon. When she asks how long I'll be on assignment at the

palace, I hesitate, the lie sticking in my throat.

“It’s... been extended,” I say vaguely, hating the deception. “I’m not sure how long I’ll be here.”

She hums in acknowledgment, but I can hear the concern in her voice. “Is everything okay, honey? You sound... different.”

I close my eyes, fighting back the sudden burn of tears. I long to unburden myself, to tell her everything — the baby, Luca’s cold distance, the crushing loneliness of my new reality. But I can’t bear the thought of disappointing her, of admitting that I’ve found myself in the same situation she fought so hard to escape.

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The only difference is that the father of my child happens to be royalty — although in some ways that's worse. Yes, Luca has enough money to set me and the baby up for life, but he's also keeping us shut away. I'm starting to feel like, in the face of that, all the money in the world doesn't matter.

And that... that feels worse than just about anything else I can imagine.

"I'm fine," I manage, forcing a lightness I don't feel into my tone. "Just tired. It's been a lot of work, you know?"

"Oh, I'm sure it is. I'm so proud of you, though. Everyone at work keeps asking about your assignment. They think it's the greatest thing ever that you're shadowing Prince Luca!"

The pride in her voice makes my stomach sink. She'll be happy to become a grandmother, I know, but her opinion about Luca will have to change soon enough — once she finds out the full story.

The conversation winds down, and I end the call with a heavy heart. Staring at the phone in my hand, I hesitate only a moment before dialing Millie's number. She picks up on the second ring.

"Hailey! God, it's good to hear from you. How are you holding up in that fancy palace?"

I swallow hard, steeling myself. "Not so good."

“Oh, no. What happened? Is it Luca? What’s going on between you two?”

“A lot.” With a sigh, I lean against the wall.

“Is the assignment off?” she asks quietly.

“No, that’s still on. Millie, I... I’m pregnant.”

Silence stretches between us, broken only by her sharp intake of breath. “Oh, Hailey,” she murmurs, her voice soft with understanding. “Are you okay?”

The fact that it’s her first question — not “Is it Luca’s?” or “What are you gonna do?” — nearly breaks my heart in the good way. She’s the most amazing friend in the world, and I need her more right now than I ever have.

The dam breaks then, and the whole story since arriving at the palace spills forth, including the night in the pool, finding out I’m pregnant, his insistence on keeping me hidden away, and the aching loneliness that dogs my every step.

“I don’t know what to do,” I confess, my voice breaking. “I thought... I thought maybe we could be a family, but he barely even looks at me.”

Millie is quiet for a long moment, and I can tell that she already knows what she’s gonna say; she’s just figuring out the best way to present it.

“Hailey, I think you need to come home,” she says gently. “This isn’t healthy. For you or the baby. You deserve so much more than being someone’s dirty little secret.”

I bristle at that, mostly because she’s called out my exact, specific fear. And yet an irrational surge of defensiveness rises in my chest.

“I can’t just leave,” I argue. “This baby... it’s Luca’s child, too. They deserve to know their father.”

“And what about what you deserve?” Millie counters. “Hailey, I love you, but I’m scared for you. I don’t want to see you get hurt any more than you already have been.”

“I know.” I close my eyes against the onslaught of tears.

“Honestly,” she says, “how do you even know that Luca will be a good father? He doesn’t seem interested in parenting one bit. Do you see that you’re sticking around at that palace on the very high possibility that he’ll turn out to be a shitty dad, and then you’ll end up wishing you had left sooner?”

I don’t know what to say to that. I’m too worried that she might be right.

“Just think about it,” she whispers.

“I will.” I stare out the window at the gorgeous blue sky. All I have time to do when I’m not shadowing Luca is think.

“I have to get the kids to school. I’ll call you soon as I can. I love you.”

“I love you, too.” I end the call, Millie’s words ringing in my ears.

I know she means well, but she doesn’t understand. How could she? She’s never been in love with someone so completely out of reach.

Putting my phone down, I slip on some shoes and wander the palace halls aimlessly, my footsteps echoing in the cavernous space. I’m so lost in my thoughts that I don’t hear the approaching footsteps until they’re right behind me. I turn, my heart leaping

into my throat, only to find myself face-to-face with Simon.

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Quickly, I wipe at my teary face. Simon and I have only spoken a few times, and I know that he's more than an employee of the royal family. He's also Luca's close friend. They took off on the Prague trip together, leaving me feeling like the odd one out. I also know that Luca divulged the situation about the pregnancy to his friend when they were on that trip.

He takes one look at my tear-stained face and sighs, his expression softening with sympathy. "How are you?"

"Oh." I sniffle and force a smile. "Great. Thanks."

He frowns. "Luca?—"

I shake my head. "It's not Luca. Not really. I just..."

I trail off, uncertain how to put my tangled emotions into words. But Simon seems to understand anyway. He nods, guiding me gently toward the library.

"Come on," he says. "Let's sit and talk."

The library is blessedly empty, the silence broken only by the crackle of the fire in the hearth. I sink onto one of the plush couches, hugging a throw pillow to my chest. Simon settles beside me, the kindness in his eyes a bit too much. I'm starting to feel like a charity case, like the puppy at the shelter that everyone stops to pet but that no one will take home.

"I'm trying to be patient," I whisper. "I know Luca has responsibilities, obligations

that I can't even begin to comprehend. But I thought..." I bite my lip, fighting back a fresh wave of tears. "I thought maybe things would be different now that we're going to be parents together."

Simon is quiet for a long moment, his brow furrowed in thought. "Luca cares for you," he says at last. "I know he does. But he's always put duty first. It's how he was raised, and now that his father is gone, it's more extreme. He's... single-focused."

I nod, blinking hard. "I get that. I do. But I don't want our baby to grow up feeling like they're second best. Like they'll always be an afterthought compared to the crown."

He frowns. "I know that he's crazy about you."

My heart lifts, those few words breathing new life into my tired lungs.

"I've tried to talk to him about the situation," Simon goes on, "but he shuts me down. I'm sorry."

"You don't have anything to apologize for." I shake my head.

He leans back in his seat, letting out a heavy breath. "I don't want you to waste your life waiting for him to come around."

"I'm not." I straighten up.

He eyes me. "So what will happen once the baby is born? Will you really be happy with this arrangement for the rest of your life?"

I bite my lip. "If he is a good father, yes."

The words singe the end of my tongue. Days ago, I had myself convinced that they're the truth. Now? Now I wonder if I'm lying to myself.

He considers that. "I see." A smile graces his face, but it's forced. "I'm here whenever you would like to talk, or if you would simply like to hang out. I know how isolating it can feel here, even with people all about."

I take a deep, shuddering breath, trying to compose myself. "Thank you, Simon," I say softly. "You have no idea how much that means to me."

He smiles, patting my hand before releasing it. "Anytime. And I mean that." His eyes dance with a hint of mischief. "Now, what do you say we raid the kitchens for some ice cream? I'm pretty sure Chef made a fresh batch of mint chip this morning."

My stomach rumbles at the mention of the decadent treat, and I grin. "I say lead the way."

As I follow him out of the library, I feel a tiny spark of hope flicker to life in my chest. It's fragile, delicate as a butterfly's wings, but it's there.

Maybe, just maybe, everything will work out in the end.

CHAPTER 23

LUCA

I stare at the list of names before me, the words blurring together as I try to focus. There are so many details to attend to before the coronation, and the guest list is just one more thing on an ever-growing pile of responsibilities.

A knock at the door startles me from my thoughts. "Enter," I call out, massaging my

temples.

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The door creaks open, and Hailey steps inside. Her face is drawn, her eyes shadowed with exhaustion. “Luca, can we talk?”

I gesture to the chair across from me. “Of course. Is everything all right?”

She sinks into the seat, her hands fidgeting in her lap. “No, not really.”

Her voice wavers, and she takes a deep breath before continuing. “I know we’re not a couple, but we’re going to be parents together. I just... I feel like we’re not spending any time together, like we’re not building any sort of bond before the baby comes.”

Her words shake me, because they’re true. I’ve been so consumed with the preparations for the coronation that I haven’t stopped to consider how Hailey might be feeling. The realization that she’s been hurting, that I’ve been neglecting her, makes my chest ache.

“I’m so sorry,” I say softly, reaching across the desk to take her hand. “I’ve been so caught up in everything that I haven’t been there for you. That’s unacceptable.”

She looks up at me, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears. “I’m scared, Luca. This is all so overwhelming, and I feel like I’m going through it alone.”

I squeeze her hand, my heart clenching at the pain in her voice. “You’re not alone. I’m here, and I promise I’m going to do better. We’re in this together, and I want our child to have parents who have a strong relationship, even if it’s not a... romantic one.”

Hailey nods, a tiny smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. “Thank you. I needed to hear that.”

I clear my throat, my mind a swirl of thoughts and emotions competing for my attention. It’s been hard, but I’ve been doing everything I can to remind myself that things must stay platonic between us — no matter that it would be extremely easy to slip into a heated, passionate romance.

She’s living in the palace, her room just a wing away from mine... and we’re already having a child together.... Plus she’s absolutely amazing, everything I could ever want in a woman.

So, why not? the little devil on my shoulder asks.

Because it would create more problems than peace, the angel on my other shoulder reminds me.

Everyone would find out about us soon enough, and it would be chaos. If we’re not together, then people will assume that Hailey’s child is another man’s.

Another man’s.

The thought sends hot jealousy racing through me, which is ridiculous, I know. One day, Hailey will surely move on and date. It will probably be better that way — a great cover for what has transpired between the two of us.

Yet that doesn’t change the fact that thinking about her with another man makes my hands curl into fists.

“I should let you get back to work,” she says, gesturing to the papers scattered across my desk.

I shake my head. “The work can wait. Let’s take a break, just the two of us.”

Her eyebrows rise. “Really?”

“Yes.” I fold my hands on my lap, keeping them as far as possible from my work. “What would you like us to do together?”

Her gaze drifts to the window. “Well, I would love to go to the beach...”

I suck in a sharp breath. “Hailey...”

“But I know that you don’t want me leaving the palace grounds. Not now, anyway.”

I feel my lips purse. It doesn’t give me any pleasure to keep her contained here. “It’s only a matter of precaution. An important one.”

She doesn’t react to that, and I wonder if she really doesn’t care or if she’s tired of hating me. Maybe she should hate me. I’m the man who got her pregnant, who is demanding that she change everything in her life to fit my unusual circumstances.

“How about a picnic?” she says. “In the gardens. It’s a beautiful day.”

The suggestion eases some of the tension in my belly. Now, a picnic in the gardens is perfectly manageable. Welcome, too. I’ve been far too long in this stuffy office.

I quickly make some arrangements, clearing my schedule for the rest of the afternoon. Within the hour, a picnic basket is delivered to my office, filled with an assortment of finger sandwiches, fresh fruit, and sparkling lemonade.

I lead Hailey out to the palace gardens, the warm sun filtering through the trees. We walk in comfortable silence until we reach a secluded nook surrounded by fragrant

blooms and the gentle babbling of a nearby fountain.

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I spread out a blanket on the soft grass and wait until she makes herself comfortable before settling in beside her. As I unpack the picnic basket, my attention catches on the way the dappled sunlight dances across her skin, illuminating the rich undertones in her chestnut hair. Even in her simple sundress, she takes my breath away.

If only one thing was different. If only I weren't royalty, where would we be now? Back in New York, preparing a nursery for the upcoming baby?

Or would we be somewhere else entirely different? A farm somewhere? A little cottage on a beach?

The location is so unimportant. All that would matter to me is that we're together.

I clear my throat and get busy arranging our picnic. Strange. I almost got fully lost in a fantasy there. It's so unlike me.

"What's this?" Hailey picks up a pastry with fluffy layers of dough and a strawberry paste inside.

"It's a Werdenfelden treat. They were my mother's favorites."

Her face softens. "How do you know that?"

I look down. "Oh. Ah, most of the staff who are in the palace now worked here when she was here. They love to share stories about her."

Her lips twitch into a smile. "They must have loved her very much."

“Some people say that she was most adored queen Werdenfeld ever had.”

A silence falls between us as we take time to enjoy our food, the peace of the gardens, and each other’s company. It’s a tranquility that I rarely get to experience, especially these days. And I find myself not wanting it to end.

Hailey finishes her strawberry pastry, humming in satisfaction. The sound goes straight to my heart.

“I can see why your mother liked these.” She licks the remnants of the strawberry paste off her fingers, and the sight does something strange to my heartbeat.

“I’m glad you like it,” I manage to say without losing my composure.

The sun is high in the sky now, its brilliance dappled through the trees overhead. A soft breeze shifts through the leaves, and the heat is begging me to strip off my shirt and lead Hailey to the outdoor swimming pool, the sister pool of the one where I almost got myself in trouble again.

But of course I stay right where I am, all of my clothing firmly on.

“How are you feeling?” I ask, turning my gaze towards her, eager to find something to distract me.

She smiles faintly. “Better.” Her eyes meet mine, brown reflecting warmth in the sunlight. “Thank you for this.”

“Of course,” I reply softly, heart pounding. “I should have done it sooner.”

Her lips twist like she wants to agree, but she ends up not saying anything and instead taking a long drink of lemonade. The guilt simmers in my chest, though. I’m doing

everything I can to be a good king, and I hate that it means I can't be a great man for her.

After a while, she daintily clears her throat. "Your father was beloved, too. I did a lot of research on him before my interview with you, and Werdenfeld clearly loved him as much as they did your mother."

I nod, swallowing the lump in my throat. "He was a good man, a great king."

"And you are following in his footsteps," she says, her eyes softening.

I grimace at that. How can I tell her that I've been feeling like I am not capable of being half the king my father was?

Instead, I deflect with humor. "My feet are definitely bigger than his, though."

She chuckles, and the sound fills me with warmth. "That's not what I meant, and you know it."

I shrug, looking out towards the gardens. She's amazing. So smart. She sees right through me. "I'm trying," is all I say.

"I know." She reaches out, touching my arm lightly, and my skin tingles under her touch. I suppress a shiver and instead turn to look at her, caught in her steady gaze.

We remain silent for a moment, sharing a deep understanding. The connection feels so strong. It's a tether, linking us in the midst of this chaotic life. I wish we were just two normal people, capable of normal lives. But we're not.

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“You know,” I say softly, my gaze fixed on a puffy white cloud as it drifts lazily across the sky. “I gave my dad a lot of grief over the years. Always pushing for more responsibility, more of a say in the running of the kingdom.”

“That’s natural. You wanted to prove yourself, to show that you were ready.”

I nod, feeling a lump form in my throat. “Yeah. But now... now I realize he was just trying to protect me. To shield me from the stress and pressure for as long as he could.” I swallow hard, blinking back the sudden sting of tears. “He was always so busy with his duties, he rarely had time to just be a dad. I was mostly raised by the palace staff.”

Hailey reaches out, her hand finding mine and giving it a gentle squeeze. “I can relate,” she says softly. “Growing up without a father... it’s tough. You always wonder what it would have been like, to have that relationship.”

I lace my fingers through hers, drawing strength from her touch. “I promise you, Hailey, our child will never have to wonder. I will always be there, no matter what.”

She smiles at that, but I can see the flicker of uncertainty in her eyes. “And the public? When will we tell them about the baby?”

I sigh, the weight of my responsibilities settling on my shoulders once more. “We will figure that out after the coronation,” I assure her. “I just need to get through that first. But I promise, we will go public when the time is right. I won’t let you go through this alone.”

She nods, and for a moment, with her by my side and the promise of our child's future stretching before us, I allow myself to believe that everything will work out. That somehow, we'll find a way to balance duty and personal matters, to build the family we both crave.

I know it won't be easy. The road ahead is filled with obstacles, with the constant scrutiny of the public eye and the heavy mantle of the crown.

I only hope I have the strength to face it all, to be the king my people need and the father our child deserves.

CHAPTER 24

HAILEY

I walk beside Luca through the quiet corridors of the palace, my mind still reeling from the perfect afternoon we just shared. The picnic was like something out of a dream — lounging on a soft blanket amidst the fragrant rose gardens, sampling delectable treats, talking and laughing for hours, just the two of us in our own little world. It all felt so natural, so right.

And yet, as we approach my room, the spell threatens to break. Reality comes rushing back — the complicated nature of our relationship, the impossibly high stakes we both face. I should put some distance between us, maintain the professional boundaries I swore I'd uphold. But my traitorous heart has other ideas.

Luca pauses outside my door when I open it, his gaze drifting to the small decorative touches I've added to make the space feel more like home — a few framed photos, a colorful throw pillow, a stack of my favorite books.

"I see you've settled in nicely," he remarks with a smile. "I'm glad. I want you to feel

comfortable here.”

Before I can second-guess myself, I blurt out an invitation. “Would you like to come in for a minute? For some, um, tea.”

He hesitates, and I assume he’ll decline the offer, but he does the opposite. “I’d like that very much.”

My pulse kicks up a notch as I usher him inside my private sanctuary. I don’t know why I’m bringing him in here, what I’m hoping to achieve. I just didn’t want our time together to end. It’s too perfect — the kind of afternoon that will never come again, and I want to milk it for as long as possible.

I heat some water in the electric kettle in the corner of the room, my nerves jangling with his nearness in the intimate space. Luca admires the framed prints on the walls, stepping closer to examine one moody black-and-white cityscape.

“Honey? Sugar?” I ask.

“Just milk. Thank you.”

I make his tea and cross the room to hand it to him. When he takes it from me, our eyes lock, and I find myself drowning in the bottomless blue of his gaze, my breath catching at the open admiration shining there. The air between us thickens, charging with the unspoken desires we’ve both been fighting to ignore.

He still has feelings for me. I see it now, clear as the light of day. He’s been fighting them tooth and nail, though. But why?

The moment stretches taut between us before Luca clears his throat and glances away, breaking the spell. “I should be going. I’m sure you have much to do...”

My heart cracks. That's it? He's not even going to acknowledge the moment we just shared?

"I don't have much to do at all." I snort. "Not unless I'm working on my piece for you."

"Ah. Yes." He nods once, looking thoughtful.

"Since you don't want me going anywhere," I prompt.

His lips turn down.

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“It’s fine.” I sigh. “I agreed to it. It’s not like I’m a prisoner here.”

“If you... if you want to revisit the terms...”

“What are you saying?” I ask, not sure I want to hear the answer. Is he admitting that he would be fine if I chose to leave the palace — and taking our child with me, of course?

Luca sighs. “I don’t want you to leave, of course, but if... if you felt you needed to...”

“I’d still be bound to our nondisclosure agreement,” I point out.

“Of course.”

“Do you want me to go?”

He searches my face. Really searches it, like it’s the first time he’s seen me and he’s trying to make sense of what’s unraveling in front of him.

“No,” he breathes. “Not one bit.”

My pulse picks up, and my skin warms. It’s unfair, how one moment he’ll push me away and then draw me in the next, always giving me just enough to keep me from running away completely.

He starts to say something, then hesitates. “Hailey, I was hoping... well, I know you

have a prenatal checkup coming up soon. I wondered if you might allow me to accompany you? I'd like to be there, to support you however I can."

Tears spring to my eyes at the unexpected request, my throat closing with emotion. "I... yes, of course. I would love to have you there," I manage. "Thank you, Luca. Truly."

He reaches out to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, his fingertips grazing my cheek and sending a shiver through me. "There's nowhere else I'd rather be. We're in this together now."

And there it is again, that sense of connection, of rightness. Slowly, almost unconsciously, we drift closer, the air between us growing heavy with unspoken longing. Luca's eyes darken as they drop to my mouth, his hand lingering against my cheek. My breath catches, pulse quickening, as I tilt my face up to his.

"Hailey..." he murmurs, and I watch, mesmerized, as his tongue darts out to wet his lips. "Tell me to stop. Tell me to go, and I will."

But I don't want him to go. Not now, not ever. I want him here, with me, consequences be damned. "Stay," I whisper, hardly recognizing my own voice, husky with need. "Please stay."

His breath escapes in a shuddering sigh and then his mouth is on mine, soft and searingly hot all at once. I melt into the kiss, into him, my fingers curling into the fabric of his shirt to anchor myself against the onslaught of sensation. He tastes of the lemonade we shared, sweet and addictive. I can't get enough.

Luca deepens the kiss, his tongue sweeping into my mouth to tangle with mine as his hands skim down my back to settle at my waist, where they tug me flush against the hard planes of his body. I moan into the kiss, arching closer, craving more of his

touch, his taste.

I'm drowning in him, lost to everything but the heat of his mouth, the slide of his lips and tongue against mine, the secure weight of his hands spanning my back. In this moment, nothing exists but Luca and the exquisite pleasure unfurling within me. I want to crawl inside him, to brand myself on his very soul so that neither of us can ever forget this feeling, this moment.

Eventually, reluctantly, we break apart, chests heaving, foreheads pressed together as we struggle to calm our racing hearts. Luca raises a hand to cup my cheek, thumb tracing over my tingling, kiss-swollen lips.

"You're going to be the death of me," he rasps, but there's no censure in it, only wonder and longing and an echo of the desire still pulsing through my veins.

And as I gaze up into those brilliant blue eyes, dark with passion and something infinitely tender, I can't find it in me to disagree. Because kissing Luca, being with him like this... it feels like flying.

And falling.

Like finding a piece of my soul I never knew was missing, and coming home.

He opens his mouth to speak again, and I brace myself, worried that he's about to say this is wrong, that he needs to leave. But instead of uttering a word, he only closes his lips over mine again.

There's a new, desperate tinge to this kiss, and he sweeps his arms around my back and under my butt. He's lifting me up, pressing me against him as he carries me to my bed.

Still kissing, he rests me on the mattress and crawls on top of me. Our hands are just as frenzied as our lips, fingers tearing at clothing. There's the sound of something ripping, but I don't pause to see if it was my shirt or his pants. It doesn't even matter. This moment, as passionate as it is, is always fragile. If I don't throw myself fully into it, it could crack. It could break and be gone from me forever.

"Hailey," he murmurs into my mouth as the naked planes of his muscular chest press against me.

I can't respond. I'm too busy drinking him in, gripping the roots of his hair as he slides my panties down my hips.

His thumb brushes across the space between my thighs, and I gasp with pleasure. It's an electric shock of the highest ecstasy, a barely-there touch that somehow still makes me feel like I'm losing my mind.

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I grip his shoulders, pulling him closer to me, yet it's still not close enough. I want to merge us together until we become one.

Gripping my hips, he positions himself on top of me. I'm aching with hot, desperate desire, and he seems to be in the same boat.

He drives into me like it's something we've done a thousand times, and it might as well be, for the way he knows my body. I moan at the delicious sensation of him filling me up, my nails digging into his shoulders.

Luca's mouth finds mine again, swollen and greedy. He rocks into me, the rhythm taking me deeper and deeper into bliss. We're one, moving as one, breathing as one, existing as one.

He sits up, pulling me with him so that I land on his lap. Sweat is already forming on his hairline, carving thin trails down his neck and onto his chest. His eyes widen at the sight of me, like he's shocked to find I'm the one in his arms.

"Hailey," he gasps. "I don't want to fight this any longer."

"I don't either," I whisper.

He grips my ass, and I rock into him. My hair falls across my face like a screen, and he pushes it back with his nose to press kisses anywhere his lips can reach. My cheekbone. My throat. My ear.

"Luca," I groan, the pleasure making me blind.

He holds me tighter. Kisses me harder. It's all I need and more, and I'm falling over the edge, tumbling into a world of bliss.

We collapse on the bed, our gasps filling the room. Luca's arm is around me, and sweat sticks my cheek to his chest. Everything is perfect.

Too perfect.

What's next? Did we just make a horrible mistake? The last time we almost found ourselves in bed, he told me that it could never happen again — and that was before we knew I was carrying his baby.

“Hailey.” His voice is soft yet commanding.

I swallow, both glad for and hating the fact that I can't see his eyes. “Yes?”

There's a pause. “Thank you.”

I blink. “For what?”

“For being here.” It's such a simple statement, and yet he says it like I've given him the whole world.

I smile against his chest, some hope coming alive in me once more. Maybe this wasn't a mistake at all. And maybe, no matter what happens between us next, things will be just fine.

“You're welcome,” I whisper back.

“I wish we could stay like this forever.”

His words are a shock to my system. We can't stay this way?

Of course not. What was I thinking? This was only a one-night thing — or, rather, two-night thing if you count New York. Luca has already outlined why we can never be together. Tomorrow morning, he'll go back to being the dutiful prince, and I'll be the secret to be kept in the shadows — always and forever more.

I need to kick him out of my room, pull the Band-Aid off before things go further and this becomes more painful. Yet, as I lay against his chest, my eyelids growing heavy, I find it impossible to move.

Tomorrow... tomorrow I'll face the music. Tonight, though, I just want to pretend that all the things I want are real.

CHAPTER 25

LUCA

The early morning light filters in through the curtains, casting a soft glow over Hailey's sleeping form. She looks ethereal, her chestnut hair fanned out across the pillow, dark lashes kissing her cheeks, full lips parted slightly in slumber. Peaceful. Serene.

I prop myself up on one elbow, drinking in the sight of her, committing every detail to memory. The graceful curve of her neck, the smattering of freckles dusting her nose and cheeks, the gentle rise and fall of her chest with each even breath.

My heart swells with a fierce surge of protectiveness, of awe that this incredible woman is carrying my child. Our child. Emotion clogs my throat and I have to blink back the sudden sting of tears.

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I still can't quite believe it, that Hailey and I have created a life together. A perfect blend of the two of us. It's overwhelming and humbling and terrifying in the best possible way.

For the first time, I really question what I've been doing. Is it right to keep Hailey at arm's length? Perhaps there is a way that I can fulfill my duty to the crown and have her take center stage in my life at the same time.

Reverently, I reach out to rest my palm against the still-flat plane of her stomach, imagining the tiny spark of life growing there. Hailey stirs at my touch, eyelids fluttering open, hazy with the remnants of sleep.

"Good morning," I whisper.

"Good morning," she murmurs.

"There is something I..." I swallow, suddenly nervous. "I wish to talk to you about."

For a moment, she seems content, a small smile playing at the corners of her mouth as she meets my gaze. But then awareness seeps in and her expression shifts, becomes uncertain, almost pained.

"Luca, I..." She swallows hard, dropping her eyes. "About last night... I'm sorry; I shouldn't have let things go so far. It was a mistake."

I can't believe what I'm hearing. Is she being serious? Here I am, about to tell her that I was wrong, that we should be together, and suddenly she feels different? What

did I do wrong?

“Hailey...” I start, but she shakes her head, sitting up and pulling the sheet tightly around her chest like a shield. Like she needs to protect herself from me.

“No, just... let me finish, please.” She takes a shaky breath, finally meets my eyes again. Hers are shimmering with unshed tears. “I know we got caught up in the moment, and it was... it was amazing, being with you like that. But we can’t... I can’t do this, Luca.”

Her voice cracks on my name, and it’s all I can do not to pull her into my arms, to soothe away the hurt and uncertainty. I force myself to remain still, though, to hear her out.

“This pregnancy, it’s already complicated things so much.” She rests a protective hand over her stomach, just as I had done minutes before. “Sleeping together again... it’ll only make everything harder, messier. For both of us.”

I want to argue, to tell her that she’s wrong, that last night was the start of something real and lasting and worthwhile. That what we have goes beyond just physical attraction.

But I can’t seem to find the words — can only watch helplessly as she slips out of bed, out of my reach, tugging her discarded sundress over her head as she goes.

“I think... I think it’s best if we just focus on the baby right now,” she says softly, back to me as she moves towards the adjoining bathroom. “And try to keep our relationship strictly platonic from here on out.”

The door closes behind her with a quiet click, and I slump back against the pillows, scrubbing a hand over my face.

Fuck.

What the hell do I do now?

I swear I almost hear Simon's voice in my head, my best friend telling me to get up and go after her. To make sure that she doesn't get away this time.

So I take a deep breath, trying to gather my courage. I can't let her walk away thinking last night was a mistake. That this — us — isn't worth fighting for.

Sliding out of bed, I pad over to the bathroom door and rap my knuckles gently against the wood. "Hailey? Can we talk? Please?"

There's a long pause, and for a moment I think she might refuse. But then the door cracks open and she peers out at me, eyes guarded. "Luca, I don't think?—"

"I want to be with you," I blurt out, cutting her off. Her eyes go wide with surprise. "Not just because of the baby. But because of how I feel about you. About us."

I reach for her hand, relieved when she doesn't pull away. "I know the timing is terrible, and that my position complicates things immensely. But I'm willing to figure it out, to find a way to make this work. If you are."

She bites her lip, clearly torn. "What about your duties? The expectations? You're going to be king, and..."

"And I still will be. But I want you by my side when I am. You, me, and our child — a family." I squeeze her fingers. "I'm not saying it will be easy. We'll need to be discreet for now, keep things under wraps until the right moment. But I'm all in, Hailey. I just need to know if you are too."

Her eyes search mine for a long moment. Then, slowly, she nods, a hesitant smile pulling at her lips. “Okay. I’m in. Let’s do this.”

Joy explodes in my chest and I tug her into my arms, sealing my mouth over hers in a heated kiss. She melts against me instantly, arms winding around my neck as she matches my passion with her own.

When we finally break apart, we’re both breathless, grinning like idiots. I press my forehead to hers, hands spanning her waist.

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“Meet me for breakfast in an hour?” I murmur, thumbs tracing circles on her hips. “I just need to change and take care of a few things first.”

She hums in agreement, stealing one last quick kiss before playfully shoving me towards the door. “Go. Before I drag you back to bed.”

Chuckling, I obey, feeling lighter than I have in weeks as I stride down the hall towards my own suite. My mind is already racing with plans for our future, a giddy bubbling in my veins...

Until I round the corner and nearly collide with Stefan. My chief advisor takes one look at my rumpled appearance and his brows shoot up knowingly.

“I take it you’ve made up with Ms. Warren, then?” he drawls.

I open my mouth to confirm, but he holds up a staying hand. “Just... be careful, sir. This infatuation could lead you both into very dangerous waters if you’re not exceedingly cautious.”

Then he’s gone, sweeping past me before I can argue.

A tight knot forms in my gut, some of my earlier euphoria fading. Because, as much as I hate to admit it...

He’s not wrong.

I catch up to Stefan just as he’s about to descend the grand staircase, grabbing his

elbow. He turns, one brow arched expectantly.

“Hailey and I are together now,” I say in a low voice, glancing around to ensure we’re alone. “But given her... condition... and everything else, we need to keep it quiet for the time being. No one can know yet.”

His expression shifts from mild surprise to disapproval in a heartbeat. “With all due respect, sir, I don’t believe that’s wise. Ms. Warren doesn’t strike me as the type of woman to be content with being someone’s dirty little secret.”

I bristle at his wording, jaw clenching. “It’s not like that. She understands the delicate nature of the situation. The public scrutiny, the gossip rags just waiting for a juicy scandal...”

“And you think shelving her is the answer?” he counters. “How long do you realistically expect her to put up with being hidden away like some shameful mistake? She will tell everyone, and then...” He shakes his head, almost looking sad.

I swallow hard, hating the conflict in me. Stefan is wrong... right?

Then again, he was my father’s chief advisor for years. He’s seen the wave of politics over many decades. He knows what he’s talking about; he knows this country.

“It’s only temporary,” I snap, frustration rising in my throat. “Just until things settle and the time is right. She gets it. We’re on the same page.”

Even as I say the words, a flicker of doubt curls in my stomach. Hailey seemed so happy, so relieved when I told her I wanted to be with her... but we didn’t exactly discuss the finer details.

Will she truly be okay with keeping our relationship and her pregnancy a secret? Am

I underestimate how much I'm asking of her?

Stefan seems to read the uncertainty on my face. He sighs, shaking his head. "I hope you're right. I truly do. But I've seen far too many 'secret' royal dalliances end in tears and tabloid headlines. For both your sakes... tread carefully."

With that parting wisdom, he extracts himself from my grip and continues on his way, leaving me standing there with a cold lump of dread sitting heavy in my gut.

I shake my head, trying to dislodge Stefan's warning. He doesn't understand. He doesn't know Hailey like I do.

She's different. Special. This isn't some tawdry affair to be splashed across the gossip pages. What we have is real. Meaningful.

And yet, as I make my way back to my suite to dress for breakfast, I can't quite escape the niggling whisper of doubt.

I think of her soft smile this morning as she woke in my arms. The way she looked at me, like I was her everything. Am I about to repay that trust by asking her to continue to lurk in the shadows? To pretend that what we share doesn't exist beyond closed doors?

My jaw clenches as I stride into my rooms. No. I'm doing this to protect her. To shield her from the ruthless glare of the public eye until I can find a way to bring our relationship into the light on our terms.

She'll understand. I know she will.

I choose to focus on that belief as I quickly wash up and dress, eager to see her again. To bask in her presence and let it chase away the uncertainties.

But even as I head to the dining room, my mind whirs, searching for a solution. A way to give Hailey everything she deserves while still managing the political minefield of my new role.

There has to be a path forward. And I'll find it.

CHAPTER 26

HAILEY

I find Luca in his study, his brow furrowed as he scans a stack of papers. He looks up when I enter, his expression softening. Joy ripples through me.

It's only been a few days since we spent the night together, and ever since then we've been sneaking kisses here and there throughout the days and spending every night together in his room. He's made no effort to hide our burgeoning romance from the palace staff, which makes me more pleased than I can put into words.

"Hello, sweetness. How are you?" He sets the papers aside, giving me his full attention.

"I'm stir-crazy," I admit, perching on the edge of his desk. "It's gorgeous out. I was thinking we could go to the lake? Get some fresh air?"

Luca's smile falters. He reaches for my hand, his thumb skimming my knuckles.

"I wish I could. But we need to be careful, Hailey. Keep things private for now. Remember?"

Irritation prickles under my skin. "Luca, I haven't left the palace in weeks. I feel like a prisoner."

"You're not a prisoner." He sighs, squeezing my fingers. "I'm trying to protect you.

Protect us. Until I can figure out how to handle this publicly.”

I tug my hand free, my earlier restlessness sharpening into frustration. He’s been “figuring things out” ever since I told him I was pregnant, and it hasn’t gotten us anywhere yet. It feels like we’re just biding time until the coronation.

“Well, maybe I’m tired of needing your protection.”

His eyes widen at my sharp tone. “Hailey?—”

But I’m already turning away, striding out of his study before he can finish. The halls blur as I blink back sudden tears.

It’s not that I don’t understand his caution. But understanding it doesn’t make it any easier to bear.

I’m in the garage before I fully register my destination, sliding into one of the sleek cars. The engine purrs to life under my touch, thanks to the key that one of the servants handed over. Apparently being a guest at the palace can get you almost anything you ask for.

Luca will be furious if he finds out that I’m leaving the grounds. But in this moment, sweating in the stifling heat, our child fluttering in my womb, I can’t bring myself to care.

What he doesn’t know can’t hurt him, and so I head down the long drive, through the gate, and to the lake only a few miles away. Finding a parking spot, I slip to the edge, where families are enjoying themselves on blankets.

The water sparkles invitingly under the afternoon sun as I wade in, my sundress billowing around my thighs. Delicious coolness laps at my skin, soothing away the

worst of the heat.

I tip my head back, savoring the play of sunlight on my face. The rhythmic slosh of gentle waves is the only sound, wrapping me in blissful solitude.

If only Luca were here to share this stolen moment of peace. His strong arms around me, his lips brushing my temple...

“Excuse me, miss?”

I startle at the voice, whirling to face the shore. A man stands at the water’s edge, a curious tilt to his head as he studies me. Recognition lights his eyes.

“You’re her, aren’t you? The prince’s girlfriend?”

Ice slithers down my spine despite the oppressive heat. “I’m sorry; I think you have me confused with someone else.”

“No, it’s definitely you. From that photo in the gardens with Prince Luca.”

I curse inwardly, my brief contentment shattering. Of course people haven’t forgotten that damned picture. How foolish of me to imagine otherwise.

The man is still talking, oblivious to my rising panic. “What are you doing out here alone? Is it true that you moved here just to be with the prince?”

I force my leaden legs to move, wading back to shore as quickly as I can manage. “I’m sorry, but I really must be going.”

The man trails after me, questions tumbling from his lips faster than I can deflect them. “Wait! Can you just tell me?—”

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Other people have taken notice, and they abandon what they're doing to approach me. "It's her," a woman excitedly tells her friend.

"Excuse me." I try to be polite as I sidestep the woman, but another person takes her place.

It doesn't matter what I say, anyway. My words are lost beneath the growing clamor of voices. More people are gathering now, alerted by the man's excited shouts. Faces swim before me, a sea of eager eyes and grasping hands.

"Is it true you're carrying the prince's heir?"

"How long have you been together?"

"What's he like behind closed doors?"

I shield my face as people film me on their phones, the footage probably streaming straight to every social media site there is. Terror claws at my throat. I have to get out of here.

I try to push through the crowd, mumbling apologies as I go, but there are too many of them. They press in from all sides, suffocating me with their proximity. My chest constricts, lungs straining for air.

"Please, let me through," I beg, hating the tremor in my voice. "I don't want any trouble."

But they're relentless, drunk on the prospect of a juicy scoop. The questions keep coming, each one more invasive than the last. I feel like a cornered animal, defenseless against the onslaught.

Tears burn my eyes as desperation takes hold. Where are Luca's security teams? Surely someone must have noticed my absence by now.

I scan the area wildly, praying for a glimpse of a familiar face, but there's no one. Just an endless sea of strangers, all clamoring for a piece of me.

A hand closes around my arm and I yelp, trying to wrench free. But the grip only tightens, fingers digging into my flesh. Panic surges through me, hot and sharp.

Luca was right; I shouldn't have left the palace. This is a nightmare come to life, and I'm completely alone, stuck in the middle of it and with no way out.

CHAPTER 27

LUCA

The architect, a slight man with wire-rimmed glasses, points at a place of concern on his plans for the new greenhouse. "Your Majesty, if we could just finalize the placement of the?—"

Stefan materializes at my side, his face grave as he interrupts. "Sir, there's something you need to see."

I stare at him. Stefan isn't known for butting into a conversation. If he's popping up like this, it must be serious.

He hands me his tablet, and my heart seizes in my chest as I take in the images

splashed across the screen. It's Hailey, her beautiful features twisted in fear, surrounded by a swarm of people.

Anger and betrayal war within me, battling for dominance. How could she do this? After everything we've been through, everything I've done to protect her?

"There are photographers amassing outside the palace as well," Stefan says delicately.

I thrust the tablet back at him, my jaw clenched so tight it aches. "Get rid of them. I want every last one of those vultures off the premises. Now."

He bows his head, hastening to carry out my command. I turn away, my mind racing as I struggle to process the implications of Hailey's reckless behavior.

The coronation is tomorrow. The eyes of the world will be upon me, scrutinizing my every move. I can't afford any distractions, any hint of scandal.

And yet, even as fury courses through my veins, I can't shake the image of Hailey's stricken face from my mind. The raw vulnerability in her eyes, the way she seemed to shrink in on herself...

It tears at something deep inside me, something I didn't even know I had. A fierce, primal need to protect what's mine.

Because despite everything, that's what Hailey is. Mine. And I'll be damned if I let anyone, even her, jeopardize that.

I lock eyes with my head of security, who is standing along the wall waiting to be told what to do.

“Bring her to me.” The words are hard, unyielding. A command, not a request.

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The man nods, his face an impassive mask as he slips out of the room. I pace back and forth, my hands clenched into fists at my sides.

Minutes drag by, each one an eternity. I can't stop picturing Hailey out there, alone and afraid. It's a physical ache, a twisting in my gut that grows more intense with every passing second.

Finally, the door opens. Hailey stumbles in, her face pale and drawn. She's shaking, her arms wrapped tightly around herself as if to hold herself together.

I start towards her, my anger momentarily forgotten in the face of her distress. "Hailey! Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." She hugs herself tighter.

"Why..." Anger flares in my chest. "How could you do that?"

She looks up at me, and the accusation in her eyes stops me cold. "Don't ask me that, Luca. Not when you've kept me like a prisoner here."

I recoil as if she's slapped me. "I was trying to protect you!" I snap, my temper flaring. "Do you have any idea what those vultures would do if they found out about us? About the baby?"

She flinches at that, her hand fluttering instinctively to her still-flat stomach. But then her chin lifts, defiance sparking in her eyes.

“I can’t live like this, Luca.” Her voice is steadier now, determination threading through each word. “I won’t. Our child deserves better than to be hidden away like something shameful.”

I rake a hand through my hair, frustration boiling over. “You don’t understand,” I grit out. “The coronation is tomorrow. I can’t risk anything going wrong.”

“And what about after?” she demands, taking a step towards me. “Are you going to keep me locked in this palace forever? Pretend to the outside world that I don’t exist?”

The words hit me like a punch to the gut. Is that what she thinks of me? That I see her as nothing more than an inconvenience, a problem to be dealt with?

I close the distance between us in two long strides, my hands coming up to grip her shoulders. “Don’t you dare,” I growl, my face inches from hers. “Don’t you dare think for one second that you mean nothing to me.”

Her eyes widen at my intensity, but she doesn’t back down. “Then prove it,” she challenges. “Tell the world about us. About our baby. Now.”

I stare at her, my heart hammering against my ribs. She’s asking for the one thing I’m not sure I can give her. The one thing that could bring everything I’ve worked for crashing down around me.

“You can’t, can you?” Tears fill her eyes. “You never will.”

“Maybe...” The word sticks in my throat, bitter and acidic. “Maybe it would be better if we kept the baby a secret. Forever.”

The moment the words leave my mouth, I regret them. I see the shock, the hurt, the

betrayal flash across her face before she shutters her expression, going eerily calm.

“I see.” Her voice is flat, emotionless. She steps back, out of my reach. “In that case, I’m done. I’m out.”

Panic claws at my chest, sharp and jagged. “Hailey, wait?—”

But she’s already turning away, striding towards the door. “I gave up everything for you,” she says, not looking at me. “My job, my life in New York. I was willing to try and make this work. But I won’t let my child grow up thinking they’re something to be ashamed of.”

She pauses at the door, her hand on the knob. For a moment, I think she might turn back. Might give me a chance to take it all back, to beg for her forgiveness.

But she doesn’t. She just shakes her head, her voice cracking with the sound of heartbreak. “Goodbye, Luca.”

And then she’s gone, the door slamming shut behind her with a finality that makes my knees buckle. I sink into a chair, my head in my hands.

What have I done? Simon and Stefan both warned me that I was making a mistake, that I wasn’t dealing with Hailey properly. And now... now I might have lost the best thing that ever happened to me.

The woman I love. Our child. My chance at a real family, at a future beyond duty and obligation.

And for what? A crown that feels heavier by the second? A legacy that will never bring me true happiness?

I've been a fool. And now... now it might be too late to fix it.

CHAPTER 28

HAILEY

I storm into my room, hot tears stinging my eyes as I slam the door shut behind me. My heart feels like it's been ripped out of my chest, trampled on and crushed into a million pieces.

How could he do this to me? To our baby? I thought what we had was real, that Luca truly loved me. But apparently, his precious reputation and royal image matter more than his own flesh and blood. He never planned on revealing our little family to the world.

I wipe away my tears, refusing to shed any more over a man who clearly doesn't deserve them. If he wants to keep me and our child hidden away forever, then fine. We don't need him anyway.

I yank my suitcase out of the closet and start throwing clothes into it, not even bothering to fold them. I just need to get out of here, away from this palace and the painful memories it holds.

With shaking hands, I pull out my phone and book the first commercial flight back to New York tomorrow morning. I don't care about the cost. I'll use my savings, max out my credit cards if I have to. I just need to go home.

Home to my mom, my friends, my job at *The Morning Star*, if they'll have me back. The life I never should have left behind for some fairy-tale romance that was doomed from the start.

Zippering up the bulging suitcase, I set it by the door. Was it all a lie? A charade he put on until he got what he wanted from me?

It doesn't matter. Questions will get me nowhere, and I'll be fine without him.

I have to believe that. It's the only thing keeping me standing as I turn off the light and crawl into bed, hugging my pillow as I cry myself to sleep.

My phone vibrates on the nightstand, startling me awake. I blink groggily at the screen, my heart leaping into my throat when I see it's my mom calling.

I answer on the second ring, my voice thick with tears. "Mom?"

"Hailey, sweetheart, what's wrong? Are you okay? I saw photos of you online, and people are saying..." Her voice is laced with concern, and it's all I can do not to break down sobbing.

"No, Mom. I'm not okay." I take a deep, shuddering breath, trying to find the words. "I'm pregnant. And Luca... he wants to keep it a secret. From everyone."

There's a long pause on the other end of the line. "Oh, honey," my mom says softly. "I'm so sorry."

The dam inside me breaks, and everything comes pouring out — how Luca and I got together in New York, how we tried to stay professional in the aftermath of his father's death, how freaked-out but overjoyed I was when I found out I was pregnant.

"I thought we could make it work, Mom. I really did. But he's so focused on his image, on what people will think... I don't think there's a place for me and the baby in his life." My voice cracks on the last word, and I swipe angrily at my tears.

“Hailey, listen to me.” My mom’s voice is gentle but firm. “You are an incredible woman. Strong, smart, compassionate. Any man would be lucky to have you by his side.”

I sniffle, clutching the phone tighter. “You really think so?”

“I know so. And if Luca can’t see that, then he doesn’t deserve you or that baby.” She pauses, and I can practically hear the wheels turning in her head. “I want you to come home, sweetheart. Back to New York. You have so much support here. I’ll help you through this, every step of the way.”

Tears well in my eyes again, but this time they’re tears of relief. Of gratitude. “What about you, Mom? I don’t want to be a burden, or make things harder for you...”

“Hailey Warren, you could never be a burden. Not to me.” Her voice is fierce with love and protectiveness. “You’re my daughter. My family. And family sticks together, no matter what.”

A sob catches in my throat, and I nod even though she can’t see me. “Okay, Mom. I’ll come home. I... I already booked a flight for tomorrow.”

“Good. That’s my girl.” I can hear the smile in her voice. “I’ll be waiting for you at the airport. Everything will be okay. I promise.”

We say our goodbyes and I hang up, staring down at my phone, my mom’s words still echoing in my ears.

Part of me wants to believe her — wants to cling to that promise of unconditional love and understanding. But another part, the part that’s still raw and bleeding from Luca’s rejection, whispers that it won’t be that easy. That I’m still going to be doing this alone, no matter how many people rally around me.

Alone. The word settles like a stone in my gut. I never thought I'd be in this position — pregnant and single, just like my mom was with me. She made it work, I know she did, but I also know how hard it was for her. The struggles, the sacrifices.

Is that the life I want for my child? For myself?

I close my eyes, picturing Luca's face. The way he looked at me that night in New York, like I was the only woman in the world. The way he held me close and whispered promises against my skin.

I really thought we had something special. Something real.

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But now... now, I don't know what to think. He wants to keep me a secret, like I'm something to be ashamed of. Like our baby is a mistake that needs to be hidden away.

My hand drifts to my stomach, cradling the tiny life growing inside me. "It's just you and me, kiddo," I whisper. "But we're going to be okay. We have to be."

Because I will not let my child grow up thinking they are anything less than loved and wanted. No matter that their father can't — or won't — be a part of their life.

Tomorrow, I'll be on a plane back to New York.

Back to my old life.

And as much as it hurts, as much as I wish things were different...

I know it's the right thing to do.

Even if Luca can't see that.

CHAPTER 29

LUCA

My eyes snap open, the remnants of a restless slumber still clinging to my lashes. This is it: coronation day. The day I've been prepared for my entire life.

And yet, as I stare at the tiled ceiling above me, all I feel is a hollow ache in my

chest.

Hailey. Her name echoes through my mind, a relentless reminder of what I've lost.

I glance at the clock on the nightstand. Seven a.m. She's probably at the airport by now, waiting to board a plane that will take her back to New York. Back to her life. A life that no longer includes me.

I drag myself out of bed, each movement heavy with regret. The palace is already buzzing with activity — servants scurrying to and fro, the distant clamor of guests arriving for the ceremony. But as I go through the motions of getting ready, I feel detached from it all. Numb.

The royal tailor enters the room, his assistant's arms laden with my ceremonial robes. "Good morning, sir," he greets me, his voice bright with excitement. "The big day has finally arrived!"

I force a smile, but it feels like a grimace. "Indeed it has."

The assistant lays out the robes on the bed, smoothing the rich fabric with reverent hands. "The people are so eager to see their new king," the tailor says. "The crowds outside the palace gates are already massive."

I nod, but his words barely register. All I can think about is Hailey. The hurt in her eyes as I pushed her away. The way something shattered in those eyes when I said that perhaps we should keep the baby a secret forever.

I didn't really mean that. It just came out.

And now she's gone. Because I was too much of a coward to fight for her. For us.

I dress mechanically, letting everyone else fuss over the drape of my robes and the placement of my medals. But as I catch sight of my reflection in the mirror, I hardly recognize the man staring back at me.

I am soon to be a king. But at what cost?

Did my father ever have the same thought? As committed as he was to Werdenfeld, were there times where he wondered if the price wasn't worth it after all?

A knock at the door startles me from my bleak thoughts. "Enter," I call out, my voice sounding hollow even to my own ears.

Simon steps into the room, resplendent in his own ceremonial attire. But his brow furrows as he takes in my expression. "She's gone, isn't she?"

I let out a humorless laugh. "Yes. She's gone. Hailey and I... we're over. You were right. This situation could never work out."

He looks incredibly sad, like he's the one who's been dumped and not me. "What happened?"

The staff in the room take the hint and scurry out, leaving me and Simon to ourselves.

I sink onto the edge of the bed, my head in my hands. "I pushed her away. Told her that maybe we should keep the baby a secret forever. That the scandal would be too much for the monarchy to bear."

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He sucks in a sharp breath. “Luca...” His voice is gentle as he sits beside me. “I know I expressed my doubts before, but listen.”

I look up at him, confusion mingling with the ache in my chest. “Listen to what? It is over, Simon. It was folly to think that it ever could have worked out.”

“Your relationship with Hailey can work out. But only if you give her the respect she deserves. Public opinion be damned.”

I stare at him, hardly daring to believe what I’m hearing. “But the backlash... the tabloids... It could destabilize the monarchy.”

He grips my shoulders, his gaze fierce. “And what good is a stable monarchy if its king is miserable? Hailey makes you happy, Luca. Happier than I’ve ever seen you. That’s worth fighting for.”

His words floor me. He’s right. I’ve been so focused on what others might think, on the potential fallout, that I lost sight of what truly matters.

Hailey. Our love. Our future together.

I want our child to have two parents united, two parents devoted to them. They deserve what Hailey and I never had growing up.

I stand abruptly, my heart pounding. “I have to go after her. I have to make this right.”

But even as the words leave my mouth, reality comes crashing back in. The coronation. My duty to my country.

I can't just leave. Can I?

Simon seems to read my thoughts. "You have to go through with the coronation, Luca. But that doesn't mean you can't still fight for Hailey."

I pace the room, my mind racing. The future I always envisioned for myself — taking the throne, leading my country — it all seems hollow now compared to the life I could have with Hailey and our baby.

"Your people are waiting for you, Luca," Simon goes on. "Call Hailey. Ask her to come back, to join you in this day."

I nod excitedly. I want to be there for my family in a way my father never was for me. I want to give them the time and attention they deserve, even if it means defying tradition and expectation.

But first, I have to make sure Hailey knows how I feel.

I pull out my phone with shaking hands, my breath catching in my throat as I dial her number. It goes straight to voicemail, and for a moment, I'm seized with panic. What if she's already boarded her flight?

"Hailey..." My voice cracks as I leave the message. "I know I have no right to ask anything of you right now. But please... if you haven't left yet... if there's even the smallest part of you that still believes in us... come to the coronation. Let me show you how much you mean to me. I am sorry for what I said."

I end the call, my heart hammering against my ribs. I have no idea if she'll come. If

she'll even listen to my message.

But I have to try. I have to believe that our burgeoning love is strong enough to overcome any obstacle.

Even though that obstacle is my own destiny.

The minutes tick by agonizingly slowly as I wait for the ceremony to begin. Waiting in the antechamber that will lead me into the hall and then outside to the grounds and onto the makeshift coronation stage, I try to focus on the faces of the people around me — the dignitaries, the advisors, the staff bustling about making final preparations. But all I can think about is Hailey.

Did she get my message? Or is she already on her flight to New York, ready to leave my life forever? Is there a chance, even the slimmest possibility, that she might show up here today?

I clench my fists at my sides, fighting the urge to pace or run my hands through my carefully styled hair. I have to maintain the image of a composed, confident ruler, even as my insides churn with anxiety and regret.

Stefan appears at my elbow, his brow furrowed with concern. "Sir... it's time."

I nod, swallowing hard. This is it. The moment I've been preparing for my entire life. The moment I take on the mantle of king and all the responsibility that comes with it.

But as I step up to the dais, my eyes scanning the crowd for any sign of Hailey's familiar face, I realize that none of it matters without her by my side.

The archbishop begins the opening invocation, his voice ringing out through the massive speakers. I try to focus on his words, but my mind is miles away, imagining

Hailey on a plane whisking her across the ocean, her eyes red from crying, her heart broken in two at my hands.

CHAPTER 30

HAILEY

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I stand in line, ticket in hand, my carry-on slung over my shoulder. The airport bustles around me, a sea of faces I don't know, all headed to destinations I'll never see.

My heart feels heavy, weighed down by the life growing inside me and the possibilities I'm leaving behind. I rest my hand on my belly, wondering if the baby can sense my turmoil. Maybe once I get to New York, I can start work again at The Morning Star and throw myself into preparing for the baby's arrival.

The line inches forward, and I take a step, then another. Each movement feels mechanical, like I'm on autopilot, just going through the motions.

I reach for my phone, needing a distraction from my spiraling thoughts. That's when I see it — a voicemail. From Luca.

My heart leaps right into my throat, but I put a hard stop on my racing mind, which longs to jump to all sorts of conclusions.

My finger hovers over the play button. Part of me wants to ignore it, to board this plane and never look back. But a bigger part, the part that still loves him despite everything, needs to hear his voice one last time.

And so I press play and lift the phone to my ear.

“Hailey...” His voice is rough, strained. “I know I have no right to ask anything of you right now. But please... if you haven't left yet... if there's even the smallest part of you that still believes in us... come to the coronation. Let me show you how much you mean to me. I am sorry for what I said.”

I close my eyes, tears threatening. One of them escapes anyway, to slip down my cheek. I quickly wipe it away, glancing around to see if anyone noticed. The message over, I lower the phone, my heart racing.

The line moves again. The gate agent gestures for me to come forward, to hand over my ticket and board the plane that will take me back to my old life.

But suddenly, my old life isn't enough anymore. Luca's words echo in my head — his love, his pleading, his apology. Can I really walk away from all of that? From him?

My hand tightens on my ticket as indecision wars within me. Board the plane and leave Luca and Werdenfeld behind forever? Or turn around and take a leap of faith, giving our love the chance it deserves?

I take a deep breath... And then I'm spinning on my heel and racing back through the terminal, my carry-on bumping against my hip.

“Miss!” the gate agent calls after me. “Miss, your flight!”

I don't turn back. I can't. My heart has already made the decision for me.

I weave through the crowds, ignoring the curious stares and irritated grumbles as I jostle past. The gleaming floors and glass walls blur together as I run, focused solely on my destination.

Luca. I'm going back to Luca.

I burst out of the airport into the bright sunlight. Panting, I hail a taxi, practically throwing myself into the back seat.

“The palace,” I gasp out. “Quickly, please.”

“You won’t even get close to it today,” he says. “Not with the coronation.”

“I don’t care.” I shake my head frantically. “Take me as close as you can.”

The driver raises an eyebrow but nods, merging into traffic. I stare out the window, my knee bouncing with nervous energy. Will I make it in time to see Luca crowned? Will we be able to work through everything and come to an agreement, despite what’s happened?

The drive simultaneously takes forever and no time at all. The driver pulls up to the palace gates and I quickly swipe my card before tumbling out of the door and onto the pavement.

But I stumble to a halt, my eyes widening. The palace grounds are packed, crowds of people jostling for a good position, craning for a glimpse beyond the gates. The driver was right. There’s no way I’m getting inside, even with the staff knowing who I am.

I push my way forward anyway, murmuring apologies. But the closer I get to the gate, the thicker the crowd becomes, the individual bodies morphed into an impenetrable wall. I pull out my phone and try to call Luca, but there’s no answer. He’s probably already on stage, maybe even being crowned at this very moment.

“Please,” I beg, trying to squeeze through. “I need to get inside. I’m Hailey Warren; I’m here to see Pr— King Luca.”

But the guards just shake their heads, unmoved. “No entry,” one says firmly. “Invited guests only.”

Desperation claws at my throat. I’m so close — I can’t fail now.

“Please, you don’t understand! I need...” But my pleas fall on deaf ears. I’m just another face in the crowd, another commoner trying to catch a glimpse of royalty.

I’m about to give up, my shoulders slumping in defeat, when I hear a shout.

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“Hailey! Hailey Warren!”

My head snaps up. That voice...

And then I see him. Simon, pushing his way through the throng towards me.

“Simon!” Relief crashes over me like a wave. “Please, I need to get inside, I need to see him?—”

He reaches me, grasping my arms. “I know,” he says urgently. “Come with me, quickly.”

He turns to the guards, who snap to attention at his approach. “This woman is with me. She is to be granted entry immediately.”

The guards exchange glances but step aside, allowing Simon to usher me through the gates. We hurry across the grounds, Simon’s hand at my elbow.

“The ceremony is in the gardens,” he explains tersely. “We must hurry.”

My heart is in my throat as we race through the halls, bursting out into the sunlight once more. And there, in the distance, I see him.

Luca stands at the front of a sea of guests, resplendent in his ceremonial robes. My breath catches; he’ll never see me all the way over here. But then, as if he senses my presence, his head turns.

And his eyes meet mine.

Time seems to slow. The noise of the crowd fades away until there is only him, only me.

“Come on.” Simon leads me along a roped-off section protected by security. We carve a path up to the stage as Luca comes down it.

The crowd whispers in excitement, everyone wondering what’s going on as Luca strides towards me, his robes billowing behind him. The moment he reaches me, his hands come up to cup my face, the electricity rippling through us.

“Hailey,” he breathes. “You came back.”

Tears spring to my eyes. “I had to,” I whisper. “I couldn’t leave after you... what you said.”

Something fierce and wonderful blazes in his eyes. He leans down, his forehead touching mine. “I am sorry for saying it would be best to keep the baby always a secret. I didn’t mean it. I love you. More than anything.”

“I love you, too,” I breathe.

“Come.” His fingers lace through mine, and he leads me onto the stage. My heart races as I feel the eyes of thousands of people on us.

The dignitaries on the stage, some of whom I recognize and some I don’t, look on in shock, probably flabbergasted over what’s happening. Luca doesn’t seem to care, though.

“People of Werdenfeld,” he declares, his voice ringing out strong and clear. “I present

to you the woman I love. The mother of your future monarch. My soon-to-be queen.”

A gasp runs through the crowd, quickly followed by a rising swell of cheers. I stand tall at Luca’s side, my heart so full it could burst.

“I’m so sorry for everything,” he murmurs, turning to face me. “I never should have let you go. You and our baby — you’re my world.”

Emotion clogs my throat. “I was so afraid you were ashamed of me. Of us. I thought...”

“I’m sorry,” he says, gaze raking across my face. “I handled the situation all wrong.”

Tears slip down my cheeks. This man, this king, he’s everything I’ve ever wanted. And by some miracle, he wants me too.

The cheering of the crowd grows louder, more insistent. Cameras are aimed on us, and I dimly become aware of the fact that a big portion of the world is watching. But I don’t even care. Luca and I are in our own little world.

He grins at me, his eyes twinkling with mischief. “What do you say we give the people what they want?”

I laugh, exhilarated and completely in love. “By all means, Your Majesty.”

He sweeps me into his arms and kisses me deeply, passionately. I cling to him, pouring every ounce of my love into the kiss.

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When he's touching me like this, nothing else matters. Not the crowd, not the cameras, not the burden of the crown. All that matters is him and me and the beautiful life we'll build together.

When we finally break apart, breathless and beaming, the roar of the crowd is deafening. The coronation ceremony begins, a breathtaking display of centuries-old tradition. I stand at the edge of the stage, heart swelling with pride as I watch the man I love take his solemn vows.

Luca kneels before the archbishop, his face a mask of regal composure. But when his eyes meet mine, they dance with barely contained joy.

The archbishop places the heavy golden crown upon Luca's head. It glitters in the sunlight, a symbol of the immense responsibility he now bears.

"Rise, King Luca of Werdenfeld," the archbishop intones. "Long may you reign."

Luca rises to his feet, tall and proud, every inch the king he was born to be. The crowd erupts into thunderous applause, and it's a wonder that the ground itself doesn't shake in jubilation.

He extends his hand to me, and I join him on the dais, trembling with emotion. This is really happening. I'm standing beside the king — my king. The king of my heart.

Still holding hands, we turn to greet his people. Turn to greet our future. Our happily ever after.

EPILOGUE

ONE YEAR LATER: LUCA

A soft breeze blows through the nursery's open windows and makes the curtains dance as I gaze down at the precious bundle in my arms. Frederick, our beautiful baby boy, coos softly, his tiny hand grasping my finger.

"There's my little prince," I murmur, my heart overflowing with love and wonder. How did I get so lucky?

Hailey appears in the doorway, radiant as always, a tender smile on her face. "And there's his doting daddy," she teases gently. "The kingdom will have to send out a search party for their missing king."

I chuckle, reluctantly tearing my eyes away from our son. "Ruling a country is important, but nothing is more important than family."

She moves to my side, resting her head on my shoulder as we marvel at the perfect little being we created together. "I never thought I could love someone so completely, so instantly," Hailey whispers. "He's amazing, Luca."

"Just like his mother," I reply, pressing a kiss to her temple. "I'm in awe of you, Hailey. Watching you become a mom, seeing how naturally it comes to you... You're incredible."

She lifts her face to mine, her lips soft and inviting. "I love you, Luca. More than I ever dreamed possible."

"I love you too," I murmur against her mouth. "Forever and always."

As we lose ourselves in a tender kiss, I marvel at the incredible journey that led us here. The sacrifices, the challenges, the triumphs... All of it was worth it, for this — for the family and the future we're building together, one precious day at a time.

“You really shouldn't be in here,” I remind her.

She purses her lips playfully. “I'm checking on my son!”

“Yes,” I laugh. “But isn't it bad luck for the groom to see the bride on the wedding day?”

“Only if she's in her dress.” She retreats toward the door anyway. “And I'm not in my dress yet.”

“I can't wait to see you in it,” I say, meaning it completely.

“Soon enough.” She winks then disappears into the hallway.

It's time for me to get ready as well, and so I hand over Frederick to his nanny and go to get dressed.

Fully suited up, I stand at the window, taking a moment to savor the tranquility before the joyful chaos of the day begins.

A soft knock at the door pulls me from my reverie. “Come in,” I call, turning to see Simon enter.

He looks dashing in his tailored tuxedo, a big grin stretched across his face.

“Well, don't you clean up nicely,” I tease, smiling back at my best friend.

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He chuckles and adjusts his tie. “I could say the same for you, Your Majesty. But then again, you always were the pretty one.”

I laugh, the familiar banter settling my nerves. “And you were always the wise one. I’m glad you’re here, Simon. I couldn’t do this without you by my side.”

“Where else would I be?” Simon asks, his tone turning serious. “I’ve been with you through everything, Luca. The highs, the lows... I wouldn’t miss this for the world.”

Emotion clogs my throat as I clasp his shoulder. “Thank you, my friend. For your loyalty, your support... For always being there.”

He nods, his eyes bright. “Let’s get you married, shall we?”

I take a deep breath, excitement and anticipation thrumming through my veins. “Let’s do this.”

Side by side, we make our way through the palace halls. As we near the garden where the ceremony will take place, Simon stops, turning to face me.

“Luca, before we go out there, I just want to say that I’m proud of you. Not just for the king you’ve become, but for the husband and father you are. Hailey and Frederick are lucky to have you.”

Tears prick my eyes at his heartfelt words. “I’m the lucky one,” I manage, my voice rough with emotion. “I never thought I could have this, Simon. A love like Hailey’s, a son to cherish. It’s more than I ever dared to dream.”

Simon smiles, clasping my shoulders. “You deserve it all, my friend. Never doubt that. Your father would be proud of you.”

I pull him into a fierce hug, pouring all my gratitude and affection into the embrace. “Thank you, Simon. For everything.”

As we separate, I square my shoulders, ready to face the future with my heart full and my head held high. The garden is breathtaking, a sea of white roses and delicate lilies perfuming the air. At the altar, I take my place, my heart pounding with anticipation.

In the front row, I spot Hailey’s mother cradling our precious Frederick in her arms. The sight of them fills me with warmth, the love I feel for my family overwhelming in its intensity. It stings that my own parents are missing, but Simon is right — my father would be proud of me. I am a good king, doing my best to follow in his steps, and I aim to be an even better husband and father.

As the music swells, I turn my gaze to the start of the aisle, my breath catching in my throat. Millie appears first, a bridesmaid resplendent in a flowing lavender gown. She beams at everyone as she makes her way down the aisle, her joy palpable.

But it’s the vision that follows that steals the very air from my lungs. Hailey, my beautiful bride, glides towards me, a goddess in white. Her gown is simple, yet elegant, hugging her curves before falling in a soft cascade to the ground. Her dark hair is swept up, tendrils framing her face, and her eyes sparkle with unshed tears of happiness.

The world falls away, and it’s like nothing has ever existed except for her. The love of my life, the mother of my child, the woman who has stood by me through trial and triumph. She is my everything, and I am hers, now and forever.

As she reaches me, I take her hands in mine, marveling at the softness of her skin.

“You are so beautiful,” I whisper, my voice thick with emotion. “I love you, Hailey. More than words can say.”

She smiles, a single tear slipping down her cheek. “I love you too, Luca. Always and forever.”

Hand in hand, we turn to face the officiant, ready to pledge our lives and our hearts to one another in front of the people we cherish most. Suddenly, the family I have lost does not feel so far away after all. I feel my parents’ presence, their spirits celebrating with us.

The officiant begins the ceremony, his voice ringing out across the garden. “Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to witness the joining of King Luca and Hailey Warren in holy matrimony.”

As he speaks, I gaze into Hailey’s eyes, losing myself in their warm depths. The love I see there takes my breath away, and I squeeze her hands gently, trying to convey all that I feel in that simple touch.

When it’s time for our vows, I take a deep breath, my heart pounding in my chest. “Hailey, from the moment I met you, I knew that my life would never be the same. You challenged me, inspired me, and loved me in ways I never thought possible. You have been my rock, my comfort, and my joy, and I promise to spend the rest of my days cherishing you, supporting you, and loving you with every fiber of my being.”

Tears are flowing freely down Hailey’s face now, but her smile is radiant. “Luca, you have shown me what it means to truly love and be loved. You have given me a home, a family, and a love that I never knew existed. I promise to stand by your side, to be your partner in every sense of the word, and to love you with all that I am, now and forever.”

As we exchange rings, the symbolism is not lost on me. This circle, unending and eternal, represents the depth of our love and commitment to one another. I slide the ring onto Hailey's finger, marveling at how perfectly it fits, just like she fits into my life, my heart, and my soul.

“By the power vested in me, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

I pull Hailey into my arms, our lips meeting in a kiss that is both tender and passionate. This incredible woman is mine, and I am hers, bound together by love, now and for all eternity.

As we turn to face the cheering crowd, hand in hand, I know that this is just the beginning of our happily ever after. With Hailey by my side, I can face anything, conquer anything, and love more deeply than I ever thought possible.

We take to the dance floor, and the music swells as I lead my bride in our first dance as husband and wife. Holding her close, I sway to the melody, lost in the magic of this perfect moment. Her head rests on my shoulder, and I breathe in her scent, committing every detail of this day to memory.

“I love you, my queen,” I murmur, my lips brushing her ear.

She looks up at me, her eyes shining with love and happiness. “And I love you, my king, my husband, my everything.”

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A familiar cry catches my attention, and I look up to see my mother-in-law approaching with Frederick in her arms. Our son, our perfect little prince, reaches out for us, his chubby hands grasping at the air.

I release Hailey's hand, and she takes Frederick into her arms, cradling him close. My heart swells with love and pride as I watch my wife and son, the two most important people in my life. The song ends, and another one starts, our guests spilling onto the floor.

"May I have another dance?" I ask, extending my hand to Hailey once more.

She smiles, and together we make our way to the center of the dance floor, Frederick nestled between us. I wrap my arms around them both, holding my family close as we sway to the gentle music.

The breeze whispers through the garden, the very same garden my mother tended with such love and care. Her presence lingers here, a comforting touch in the air, and I know that she is watching over us, together with my father, their love eternal and unwavering. It is a blessing, a gift more precious than any crown or kingdom.

Hailey rests her head on my shoulder, and Frederick coos softly, his tiny hand grasping my finger. I close my eyes, committing this perfect moment to memory, etching it into my heart for all eternity.

This is what matters most. Not the crown, not the throne, but the love that surrounds me, the love that I have for my wife and son, and the love they have for me in return. It is a love that will endure, a love that will guide us through whatever challenges life

may bring.

As we dance together, our little family, I feel a sense of peace wash over me, a contentment that comes from knowing that I am exactly where I am meant to be, with the people I am meant to be with, now and forever.

The End