



# The Prince's Chance at Love

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** She's a recent widow. He's a prince desperate for a vacation. Will circumstances throw them into wedded bliss?

Prince Josiah Quatremaire of Eyjania has been looking forward to a much-needed vacation. First a conference, then a week with nothing on his agenda except hanging out with a couple of friends. Rebekah Vogel has been looking forward to some time off, to ease the pain of her still-broken heart after the death of her husband a couple of months earlier. Plus she needs the time to come to terms with the idea that she's about to become a single mother. She's grateful to Josiah for offering her a place to stay right on the beach, with no demands on her time – or her emotions. But after a tragic accident results in a death, Josiah is able to leave the country due to his royal status – but Bekah would have to stay behind. That's how they find themselves standing in the Eyjanian consulate taking vows so they can just go home. Now, with his vacation canceled, Josiah must decide if he's going to become the first divorced Quatremaire in their thousand-year history or if giving the relationship a shot is the Prince's Chance at Love.

**Total Pages (Source):** 55

## CHAPTER 1

In his worst nightmares, Prince Josiah Quatremaine couldn't have imagined this.

His much-anticipated-vacation-to-Athmetis-turned-international-quagmire that only had one immediate solution.

Get married.

Bekah Vogel, one of the two friends who'd joined him on his long-awaited vacation, sat in one of the chairs. She stared at the floor, not moving as she likely tried to do the same thing he was.

Absorb what the Eyjanian consul in Athmetis was telling them.

"Let me get this straight." Josiah continued to pace. "I can leave at any time, even if they want to tell us not to leave town, because I'm a Quatremaine. Bekah can't, because she's not a member of the royal family. But they haven't accused of us of any wrong-doing..."

"Yet," the consul interjected.

"Yet," Josiah acquiesced. "But we know we didn't do anything wrong. They know we didn't do anything wrong. It's a tragic accident but just that. An accident. That deer bolted out in front of us. The four-wheeler rolled when Steve tried to avoid hitting it. He wasn't belted in properly. Neither one of us knew that, but even if we had, he was a grown man, capable of making his own decisions. And he was

driving. We had nothing to do with it.”

“I know that. You know that. They know that. But there’s pressure coming from somewhere to have a scapegoat for a tourist dying on the island.” The consul leaned back in his chair. “Especially an American tourist. Especially when it might look like they’re letting someone off easy because of his connections.”

“So they’re likely going to tell us we can’t leave town pending the investigation, but I would be allowed because of who my father was and my brother is.”

“Yes. But you could only go to Eyjania. Nowhere else. At least, that would be the gentlemen’s agreement as it were.”

“But Bekah has to stay here?” He wanted to be quite clear.

“Yes.”

“Then I will stay with her.”

“Your brother wants you to leave,” the consul pressed. “He didn’t elaborate on why.”

“Just go.” Bekah’s voice sounded nearly lifeless. “I’ll be fine.”

Josiah dropped to a knee next to her chair. “That’s not going to happen. I’m not going to leave you here when you haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Then if you want Ms. Vogel to leave with you, she must be a Quatremaine before the local authorities officially ask you not to leave town.” The consul sighed. “You can’t wait for them to do it. If you get married afterward then it’s too blatant that you’re trying to avoid them. Even though everyone will know what you’re doing anyway.”

Bekah continued to stare at the floor. "Get out of here, Joe. You have no reason to stay until they tell you to. Get out of here before they stop you."

"Not without you." He made his decision. "Marry me, and let's get out of here." Josiah had watched too many episodes of *Dateline* where visitors to a foreign country ended up in jail for something they didn't do. He didn't really think it would happen here, but could he be sure?

And something about Bekah's defeated demeanor bothered him. Something more was going on, but he didn't know what it could be. He couldn't leave her behind.

Neither one of them should stay.

"Fine. Whatever we have to do. I want to go home." Her voice still sounded flat.

Josiah wished they had time to talk it all through. To figure out another plan.

But the consul was making a motion with his hand - a motion that meant they needed to hurry things up.

Did he need to remind Bekah she wouldn't be able to go home? They could go to Eyjania, but not back to the States.

It would be better than here. He would have her things shipped to his home country if they ended up staying more than the few days it should take to sort this all out.

"Then let's get this started." The consul picked up a piece of paper. "Let's do the paperwork while we do the ceremony." He handed it and a pen to Josiah.

Full name...Josiah Edward Daniel Benjamin Quatremaine. Long but simple enough. He checked the never married box then signed on the bottom.

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The consul had already started with the formalities when Josiah slid the paper to Bekah. He didn't know her middle name or if she'd changed her name legally after her marriage.

She carefully printed Rebekah Betlinde Vogel then signed the same. She hesitated before checking the widowed box.

Bekah was partially named for Princess Betlinde of Øyanord? Interesting. Her parents, especially her father, had been friends with the princess growing up - close enough to be trusted to raise Princess Betlinde's daughter - so it made sense in a way.

"Do you, Prince Josiah Quatremaine of Eyjania take..." The consul looked at the paper. "Rebekah Vogel to be your lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward..."

Josiah tuned out more than he should have but managed to mutter his "I do" at the right time.

A minute later, Bekah said the same. Two minutes after that, they were done.

"You are now legally married," the consul told him as he signed the document with a flourish.

"Good. Let's get out of here. Can we hop a boat or something? I know we don't have a plane standing by."

"Actually, your brother already arranged for a private jet to be waiting at the airport.

A car is ready outside.”

“What about our luggage?” Bekah asked as she finally stood up.

“It will be sent to you in Akushla.” The consul ushered them out the door. “Don’t wait. Get out of here.”

Josiah wondered if the man knew more than he was saying. Benjamin clearly didn’t want him to stay, but why?

What could be going on that Josiah and Bekah didn’t already know about?

He wouldn’t get any answers at the moment.

And in less than thirty minutes, they were airborne, leaving Athmetis behind.

Fifteen minutes after they took off, Josiah turned to Bekah, seated in one of the other captain’s chairs.

“I think it’s probably time we talk about this.”

She nodded slowly. “Yes. We probably should. And how soon we can get a divorce.”

\* \* \*

Rebekah Betlinde Vogelhad never changed her last name.

Not when she first got married, though she’d planned on it. She just hadn’t gotten around to it when Ian was killed in a car accident. Then there didn’t seem like much point.

Until the pregnancy test came back positive.

She still hadn't made it to the... Bureau of Names or wherever it was you were supposed to go to change your name when the time came to fly to Athmetis for a conference and long-overdue vacation.

And now she was remarried.

Temporarily.

Because this couldn't be real.

But without even looking around her life had changed. The butter-soft leather seats on a plane smaller than her not-very-big bedroom - give or take - was enough to tell her she wasn't in Kansas anymore.

Or even southwest Missouri.

"Divorced?" Joe's voice sounded confused, but Bekah didn't look up to see if his expression matched.

"Annulled? Whatever we need to do to get this fixed as soon as possible."

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“We can talk to my brother when we arrive in Akushla.” He sighed.

“Akushla?” Bekah finally looked up. “We’re not going to the States?”

Joe shook his head. “Don’t leave town in this case means because you’re part of a royal family we have a good relationship with, you can leave town, but only to your home country. So we’re going to Akushla.”

“I see.” Would she be staying at another palace? She’d never even seen one a month ago and now could be on her way to her second. “I’m not Eyjanian, though.”

“No, but you are now married to an Eyjanian prince. That means we stay in Eyjania.”

“Did they even tell us not to leave town? They hadn’t when we, well, left.”

He nodded. “I got a text from the consul as we arrived at the airport. I purposely didn’t check my phone until we’d been in the air for a bit. The pilot had instructions to get us out of their airspace as quickly as possible.”

“I was hoping they wouldn’t try to find us at all.” The invisible weight continued to press down on her shoulders.

“Same here, but there’s something more going on.” He leaned back in his seat. “I wish I knew what.”

“Why do you think there’s more?”



“Because my brother said he wanted us to get out of Dodge. He didn’t use those words, but the consul in a secondary city actually spoke with my brother and not one of my brother’s assistants. That’s a big deal.”

He kept referring to his brother. Why was his brother so important? She finally went with a one-word question. “Why? You’re brothers.”

“Yeah, but my brother is king. Even when one of us is involved, he doesn’t usually make calls himself.”

Right.

Of course.

He wasn’t just a prince. His brother was already king.

Bekah was now a king’s sister-in-law.

She was already a future queen’s adopted sister - something she’d known for about a year, but Ginny just discovered a few weeks earlier. Ginny’s crown princess mother had sent her away for her own safety when she was just a few hours old. Their parents had told Bekah when she turned twenty-four and would have told Ginny soon, but Ginny discovered it on her own.

Her life was weird.

And her new husband didn’t know he was also going to be a father if they didn’t find a way to end this marriage in the next few months.

“I don’t know what’s going on, but for Ben to be personally involved there’s something. That means we probably need to forgo an annulment or whatever until

after the whole situation in Athmetis is resolved. We'll figure it out, but it won't be a matter of filling out paperwork when we land." Joe sighed. "We can stay in my apartment in the palace if that's okay with you. I don't usually have a security team anymore, but I do when I'm home. They'd prefer that, but we can stay at a hotel or even go to my family's cabin, but it's several hours away by car."

"The apartment is fine." She could go into the palace, hopefully unseen, and hide in his apartment. If it was anything like the apartments in Øyanord, it would have a kitchen and everything she needed. She wouldn't have to leave until this whole thing ended.

He gave a single nod. "Why don't you get some rest? You look exhausted."

Bekah reached for the blanket someone had thoughtfully left nearby. "That sounds like a great idea." Growing a human being sure took a lot out of her. Fortunately, she hadn't been sick - just tired.

Josiah showed her how to recline the seat as far back as she wanted then found a pillow for her. Curled up on her side, it was almost like being in bed, just thirty thousand feet in the air.

The lights in the cabin dimmed, and Bekah closed her eyes, trying not to remember what her last wedding night had been like.

It didn't work and hot tears leaked out of the corner of her eyes and down onto the pillow. She wasn't over Ian, not even close. Their relationship hadn't been perfect, far from it. She'd had second thoughts about the marriage even before the wedding, but she'd made the commitment and went through with it anyway.

Her hand rested protectively over her abdomen, hidden by the blanket. She hadn't experienced any cramping or anything else that would indicate she needed to see a

doctor, but maybe she should make arrangements anyway.

But that would mean telling someone. No one knew, except her doctor, new obstetrician, and their staffs.

Bekah wasn't sure how she felt about being pregnant with Ian's child. She already loved the baby, but given her conflicted emotions about the father...

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She wasn't ready to tell anyone.

Not ever would be her preference, but she knew her secret wouldn't keep for long.

She would wait as long as she possibly could.

Maybe by then she'd know how she felt about everything.

Until then, she'd keep quiet.

### CHAPTER 2

Was it wrong to stare at the woman you just married? Especially if neither one of you had actually wanted to do it?

Josiah wasn't sure, but he watched Bekah anyway. She didn't seem to sleep peacefully, but at least she slept.

Something more was going on with her, just like something more was going on with the Steve situation. Ben was supposed to be calling, but he hadn't yet, and Josiah didn't know when he would.

Casualty of being related to a king. His schedule was never his own. Josiah wondered how Katrín learned to deal with it.

He suspected his sister-in-law put her foot down, and Benjamin, being a smart man, listened.

Maybe he should call Thor in the meantime.

His step-father had been Benjamin's head of security and been in charge of both Benjamin's and their father's security team for years before that. Then he fell in love with the late king's widow, Josiah's mum, and they were blissfully happy together.

Picking his phone up, he texted his step-father. In a minute, a reply came through that Thor was in the middle of something and would talk to him later.

Josiah was fairly certain Thor would know about the accident and would have called if he could.

Finally, with nothing else to do, Josiah leaned his own chair back and closed his eyes. Maybe they could both get enough sleep to feel refreshed when they landed in Akushla. Hopefully, he wouldn't have nightmares about Steve falling through the trees on the side of that mountain.

Praying for peaceful sleep, he tried to focus on just about anything else.

When he woke, he knew it hadn't been long enough, but at least he felt somewhat better and didn't remember any dreams at all.

"Where are we?" Bekah's sleepy voice caused Josiah to sit upright so he could see her. "How long until we land?"

Josiah looked at the map on one of the screens. "We're over the Atlantic right now, about halfway between the United Kingdom and Eyjania. We probably have about ninety minutes left. Did you get some sleep?"

She nodded, her blonde hair falling out of the ponytail it had been secured in for most of the day. "Some. Not enough. I kept having dreams..." She shook her head slightly.

“I never saw him - Steve - but I never saw what happened yesterday either. I could hear him though.”

Exactly what Josiah had been afraid of for himself. “I’ll be praying they don’t happen again.”

“Thanks.”

“Are you hungry?” He needed to find out more about Bekah, about what she liked and didn’t like. He knew some - they’d been friendly acquaintances for years - but not enough.

“I could eat something light. Nothing too heavy. My stomach is a bit unsettled.” She pressed the button to raise her seat back. “I normally don’t have issues with flying, but this trip has been a little different.”

“Sure.” He went to the galley and found some French bread and a Sprite. Maybe that would help.

“Thanks.” Bekah took the offered food. “Are you going to eat?”

Josiah shook his head. “I’m good for now.”

She took a sip of the drink. “So how do we handle this when we land? What exactly is going to happen?”

“We’ll be driven to the palace. We’ll likely enter underground then go see my brother. If he’s in the middle of something that can’t be postponed, we’ll go straight to my apartment. I have no idea which of my siblings might be around. I’m not even sure who still lives at the palace anymore. I’m not sure any of them do, though we all have our own apartments still.” He closed his eyes and mentally ran through the list.

“Gen and Evie are both married. Gen spends more time here than Evie does since she’d be the regent if something happened to Ben. Her husband is an American who travels and does a blog or something. Evie married an Eyjanian actor who does most of his work in the States, so they spend a lot of time there. Darius married a San Majorian princess, but they live in Serenity Landing. Zach married Amelia Grace, cousin to King Ezekiel in New Sargasso. They live there, for now anyway. Zay is engaged to Lindsey, step-daughter of Queen Adeline of Montevaro. Last I heard, the three youngest - Angelina, Gabriella, and Alfred - were all living with my mum, step-dad, and step-brothers at their home on the outskirts of Akushla.”

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“Please tell me everyone wears nametags.” Bekah sighed. “I’ll never remember all of that.”

Josiah chuckled. “I can get you a list, or you can find us all on the family website, I’m sure. Gen is the outgoing twin. Evie is more reserved. Zach and Zay are more difficult to tell apart. Zay tends to be more happy-go-lucky while Zach is more serious, but the difference is much less pronounced than Gen and Evie.”

“Good to know. You’re older than Zach and Zay, though, right?” She tore off a piece of bread and popped it in her mouth.

“Yep. Ben, Gen, Evie, Darius, me, Zach, Zay, Angie, Gabi, Alfred.”

“Ten kids. That’s a lot.” She gave a slight shake of her head. “Wow. I bet y’all were a handful.”

“We didn’t try to be. Mostly we’ve all been pretty well-behaved. My parents had help, of course, but my father passed when I was seven. Ben was thirteen when he became king thanks to a heart attack.”

He reached over and found a bottle of water, loosened the lid, and took a swig. He didn’t like talking about his father and all the things he’d missed out on by not having one. Thor had done what he could, even while working as a member of the security teams and not even an unofficial member of the family, but the biggest male role model any of them had until recently was Uncle Isaiah.

The man allegedly eaten by sharks.



And who deserved every bite.

\* \* \*

Something appeared to be bothering Joe, but Bekah wasn't going to press him to tell her what it was. Missing his dad seemed like a logical option, but she didn't know how to approach that topic. She'd never experienced the loss of a parent. A spouse was different.

Instead, she continued the previous line of discussion. "So if your brother is busy, we'll go to your apartment and meet with him later?"

That seemed to snap him out of it. "That seems most reasonable, though I haven't heard for certain. It's possible my mum and Thor will be by to see us."

Her brows knit together as she tried to remember. "Thor is your step-dad who used to be security? I've met him I think."

He nodded. "He's a great guy and makes Mum so incredibly happy. I remember her and my father together, not much but some. They were a love story for the ages. I'm so glad she found that again. He has three boys younger than Alfred so they have their hands full. He was in Øyanord with your sister."

"Even more names to learn?" She groaned. "I'm awful with remembering what name goes with what face. I remember names. I remember faces. But putting the two together? That's a different story."

He chuckled, which made Bekah happy. Maybe the funk would be short-lived.

At least until Steve's death truly sunk in. She knew it hadn't for her, and doubted it had for Joe either.

“You’ll figure it out. I have faith in you.”

She gave him the best smile she could muster. “I’m glad one of us does.”

He stood up and leaned over, kissing the top of her head. “You should believe in yourself more, Beks. You’re amazing.”

Before she could react, he headed back to the galley. Bekah tried to process what had just happened, but she didn’t know how.

A kiss to the top of the head didn’t necessarily mean anything. Her father kissed her like that all the time. Ian didn’t, but he hadn’t been much taller than her. He also hadn’t been an overly affectionate person to start with. She suspected Joe was.

She slowly ate the bread and sipped her soda. It seemed to do the trick. Though she hadn’t had morning sickness, she seemed to get a bit more motion sick on planes at the moment. Cars didn’t affect her, but she’d noticed it a few weeks earlier on the flight to Øyanord to see her parents and Ginny once the truth about Ginny’s parentage came out, then again on the way to Athmetis.

Joe sat back down with something to munch on. She couldn’t see what it was, but they ate in silence.

As she was about to ask him another question - anything to break the silence - the captain came over the speaker to let them know they would be landing shortly. The pressure in her ears had been building, making her wonder if their descent had begun. Now she had her answer.

“Is there anything else I should know?” she asked as she made certain her chair was upright and double checked her seatbelt.

“About what?”

“Your family? The palace? This marriage?”

“I don’t know how many of my family we’ll actually see in the next couple of days. Katrín will be around. She’s married to Benjamin. They have two girls, ages two and four. I’m sure we’ll see Mum and Thor, but beyond that, I have no idea. I’ll give you a tour of where you need to go in the palace. If we’re there long, you’ll pick up on it. As for the marriage, we don’t make a public announcement unless we have to. Then it’ll be easier to... dissolve quietly later.”

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It almost sounded like he wasn't sure he'd want to dissolve it, but that couldn't be the case, so Bekah wrote off his tone to any number of other factors.

"I need to call my parents at some point. I'd really rather go back to Trumanville. Nothing against your homeland, and technically, I suppose I'm Øyanordian, but Southwest Missouri is my home." She felt the wheels lock into place.

Joe stretched his legs out in front of him and crossed his ankles. "I know. I would, too, but for now, this is the best we can do that's not Athmetis."

Buildings came into view outside the window behind Joe's seat a few seconds before the wheels thumped on the ground. "I know." Her body pressed back into the seat as the plane slowed. They didn't deplane until they reached a hanger and the doors were closed.

Joe headed down the stairs ahead of her then turned to help her take the last one that was a bit taller than the rest. The warmth that passed between them surprised her. He dropped her hand as she stepped past him toward the waiting SUV. Bekah thanked the man holding the rear door on the driver's side as Joe walked around to the passenger side.

She saw him shake hands with the man there but couldn't make out what they said. The other man looked familiar, but in her overwhelmed state, she couldn't place him. Clearly, Joe held the man in high regard, if the way his face lit up was any indication.

A minute later, they were on their way.

“Beks, I’d like you to meet my step-father, Thor.”

The man in the front passenger seat turned. “It’s a pleasure to see you again, Your Royal Highness.”

So they had met. Bekah wrinkled her nose at the man who currently held the title of her step-father-in-law. “Am I though?”

Thor tipped his head. “I suppose technically not until the king issues a proclamation to that effect, but for practical purposes, you are married to a member of the royal family. That makes you Her Royal Highness Princess Rebekah.”

Bekah didn’t reply as they exited airport property and entered the city. It was odd enough to think of her younger sister that way, even though she’d known about Ginny’s heritage for nearly a year.

It didn’t take long for the palace to appear out Bekah’s window. It rose in the distance, set a bit above the part of town they were in at the moment. She watched it get bigger, both as they drew closer and as she could see more of the impressive building.

How could anyone ever turn such a large, limestone or whatever kind of stone it was, into someplace homey?

As they pulled through a gate and through doors into a garrison, Bekah realized she was about to find out, about to meet a king who was her brother-in-law and Lord only knew who else.

And she wasn’t ready.

## CHAPTER 3

It surprised Josiah that Benjamin couldn't see them right away. Given his brother's insistence that they leave Athmetis immediately, he expected Ben to have made time to see them, but apparently, he was on a video conference that couldn't be moved.

Josiah walked next to Bekah through the back corridors of the palace until they reached his apartment, just down a wide hall from the monarch's quarters.

Holding the door open for her, he looked over his shoulder toward his brother's apartment, but saw no one. He'd hoped to see his nieces. They'd be a pleasant distraction, and he hadn't seen them or Katrín in a while.

Was that a giggle?

He followed Bekah into the living area of the apartment only to be bombarded by little girl squeals and two bundles of energy barreling toward him.

"Unc' Joe!" They both grabbed a leg before he could bend down to scoop them up.

Chuckling, Josiah looked over at his sister-in-law. "Do you hear something, Katrín? I thought I heard something, but I don't see where the noise could be coming from."

Katrín joined his laughter. "Nope. In fact, now that you're here, I think I'm going to go take a long nap. I have nothing to do and no one to take care of. No dinner to see to or anyone to feed."

"Mama!" Four-year-old Eleanor released Josiah's leg. "We're gonna be hungry!"

Katrín picked up the little girl as Josiah reached for her younger sister. "Well, I suppose I can make sure you have dinner."

Josiah gave Katrín a kiss on the cheek, but didn't bow like he probably should. "It's

good to see you, Katrín.”

“You, too, Josiah.” She turned to Bekah and held out a hand. “Rebekah, right?”

“Bekah, please.”

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Katrín waved a hand toward the living area. “I know it’s not my home, but let’s have a seat.”

“Ma’am?” Katrín’s assistant walked into the room and tilted her head.

With a sigh, Katrín put Eleanor down and reached for the toddler now snuggled deep in Josiah’s arms. “Never mind. Hopefully, we’ll have a chance to talk more soon.” She nodded her head toward Bekah. “It was lovely to meet you, albeit briefly.”

“Same here.” Bekah curtsied toward Katrín, though Josiah didn’t think his sister-in-law noticed.

A moment later, it was just the two of them in the living area. “She’s not wrong about having a seat.” Josiah walked toward the sofa. “How are you?”

“Overwhelmed.” She sat on the chair nearby. “This place is very cool, but it’s not overly homey. How do you grow up in a place that’s so... museum-ish?”

Josiah shrugged. “It’s all I knew. Growing up was tough in general. I know it is for most people, just in different ways. My father died when I was young. My brother became king. We didn’t have a good father-figure at all until recent years. My mother mourned my father for a very long time. Being raised in the fishbowl of the palace isn’t easy at the best of times, and they definitely weren’t the best of times. I remember my father, not very well or very much, but I remember it was better when he was here.”

“That’s tough. At least I had both of my parents who loved me very much. I always



thought they treated Ginny a bit differently, but that's understandable now that I know who she really is. Even then it wasn't too bad, just annoying sometimes." She yawned.

"Why don't you go get some more rest? I'll make sure to wake you in time to meet my brother, unless he says you can stay asleep. He may not need to meet with both of us at this point."

She rose, looking a little stiff. "I'm sore from the accident. Do you mind if I take a shower?"

Josiah shook his head. "Go ahead. What's mine is yours. I can see if Katrín has something you can wear." They were close enough to the same size, weren't they?

"Thanks."

He stood and walked her into his room, showing her where the bathroom was and how to access the closet. He'd go through the other door and leave clothes in there for her.

Plush towels waited on the rack and someone had already brought his favorite toothpaste and toothbrush brands and left them in there, along with extras for Bekah - several different brands of each since no one knew what she preferred.

"Text me when you lay down and when you wake up. I'll do my best not to bother you in between."

Bekah's smile looked more tired than it had earlier. "Thanks. I appreciate it."

Josiah left and texted Katrín. He didn't want to invade their private quarters without talking to her first. He didn't get a response immediately, but after a few minutes

received a message from her assistant that the queen was otherwise occupied for the foreseeable future and would get back to him when she was available.

Great.

He sent another text, this one to Bekah, giving her an update and telling her to borrow anything of his that she might want, though he didn't know if anything would fit well enough.

With that, he laid down on the couch and was reminded why he never did. It felt like it was made out of a giant rock. His apartment didn't have another bedroom, and he wasn't going to encroach on Bekah's space, even if she - legally - was his wife.

Toeing off his shoes, he closed his eyes and tried to will himself to sleep. This time of year, darkness was hard to come by in Akushla. They were much too far north for that. He knew he should get up and close the curtains a bit more tightly, but that seemed like too much work.

Instead, he let his arm flop over his eyes to keep more of the light out.

Eventually, he started to drift. Praying the nightmares would stay away, he finally succumbed to sleep.

\* \* \*

Wearing Joe's clothes was far more comfortable than Bekah would have expected. Soft flannel pajama pants and an oversized t-shirt - at least on her it was oversized and very cozy.

The shirt was clearly one of his favorites. Faded and soft, it bore the emblem of a sports team. At least that's what she thought it represented anyway.

It felt weird crawling under the covers of Joe's bed, even though he didn't live there anymore. It only took a few seconds to discover it didn't matter. The sheets, the mattress itself, the pillows... all of it combined to be the most comfortable place she'd ever tried to sleep.

The sandman soon overtook her. Voices in the other room drifted into her consciousness as her eyes fluttered open again sometime later. Yawning and stretching, she wondered again at the comfort level far beyond anything she'd ever experienced.

Who could Joe be talking to? His brother maybe? The one who was king.

She stretched some more, visited the bathroom, and looked around for her clothes - or anything else to change into that wasn't Joe's flannel pajama bottoms and an old shirt to potentially meet another king.

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But her clothes had been removed and, unless she wanted to wear some of his actual clothes, this was going to be the best she could do.

Hesitating for just a second, Bekah opened the door between the bedroom and living area.

Both men stood as she walked in, but she breathed a sigh of relief as she recognized the second person.

Thor.

“Good afternoon, Your Royal Highness.” Thor bowed his head her direction.

“Is it afternoon? And please don’t do that.” She sank into a chair as they both took their seats. “We only got married so I could get out of Athmetis.”

“I would recommend you keep that tidbit to yourselves. It is likely the assumption of anyone who would have cause to think about it, but there’s no reason to give them confirmation. I’m not saying it could lead to an international incident or anything quite that dire, but I wouldn’t recommend risking it.”

Bekah nodded. “So what do we tell people? I’ve only been widowed three months.” Two days after she got pregnant. Weeks before she realized it.

“You’ve known each other a long time. While in Athmetis, you realized there’s something more between you. Keep it simple, and you don’t have to straight up lie. Let people believe what they want, and don’t answer any questions unless you have

to.”

“Use lots of words to say not much of anything,” Joe told her with a sigh. “Just like politicians. I swore I wouldn’t be one of those. Ben has to, at least to some degree, but I never wanted to be like that.”

“It’s always something that was going to be part of your life, most likely, Josiah.” Thor’s voice took on a fatherly tone.

“I know, but that doesn’t mean I’m happy about it.”

“Where do we go from here?” Bekah felt comfortable enough to pull her legs as close to her chest as she could and wrap her arms around them. She wouldn’t feel like that if her new brother-in-law had been in the room. “And what about luggage? I have no clothes.”

“Some clothes are being brought in for you. You can hide out here for a couple of days, but at some point, you’ll need to be seen in public.” His body shifted slightly so the second statement included both of them. “Church on Sunday, I’d imagine. I’m sure the PR folks can tell you if you need to hold hands or what the minimum is to keep people from asking too many questions.”

“Doesn’t your family have some sort of no PDA rule?” Wasn’t that a royalty thing? The Queen and Philip never showed affection in public during his lifetime, did they?

Thor gave a half-shrug. “Ben and Katrín aren’t overly affectionate in public like they might be if he wasn’t the king. Gen and Levi are while Evie and Pete are not, but that’s more a function of who they are as people and as couples than any sort of PDA rules.”

So maybe it was a British thing.

A knock sounded on the door a second or so before it opened. Joe and Thor didn't quite jump to their feet, but they did stand up as a bearded man entered.

Bekah wondered if she should stand, too, but she didn't think she cared quite enough to make it happen.

The man waved a hand, and they both sat back down.

"I'm glad you're home, Josiah." The man turned to Bekah. "You must be my new sister-in-law." He held out a hand. "Rebekah, isn't it?"

She moved just enough to shake his hand. "Bekah, please."

"I'm Benjamin, or Ben if you prefer, in private at least." He tilted his head toward her. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

Bekah wrapped her arm around her legs again. "Likewise." She should probably address him properly, but everything threatened to overwhelm her, and she didn't.

He took a seat on the couch. "I need to know what happened in Athmetis. What happened with the accident?"

Joe explained what happened in a nutshell. The king asked insightful questions before agreeing that getting out of Athmetis had been the best thing for both of them, even if it meant getting married.

There was something else though. Something Benjamin wasn't letting on.

She didn't know how she knew that, but Bekah found herself believing that Benjamin wasn't telling them everything.

A glance at Joe told her he likely agreed with her. What could it be?

The door to the hall opened again.

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This time the woman from earlier walked in, unaccompanied by her children.

Did that door lock? Bekah needed to find out if people walking in randomly was a thing she needed to be prepared for or if it was just a thing that was happening right now because they all knew this meeting was going on.

“What do you think, Bekah?”

She blinked and looked over at Joe. The conversation must have been on-going, but she had no idea what the question could have been.

How was she supposed to get out of this?

## CHAPTER 4

Given Bekah’s deer-in-the-headlights look, Josiah guessed she had no idea what they were talking about. She looked like she’d zoned out for a minute or two prior to Ben’s question.

“Why don’t we get out of here?” Katrín suddenly came to their rescue. “These two have been through quite an ordeal and need some rest. They may not be conventional newlyweds, but then, neither were we.” She stood. “I’m sure they’d appreciate all of us staying out of their business, just like we did.”

Ben and Thor joined her, though Thor’s look was one of barely-concealed amusement.



“We’ll talk more in the morning,” Ben gave Josiah a sort of sideways look that meant the conversation wasn’t over.

Not that Josiah expected it to be.

He didn’t know what his older brother was keeping from him, but there had to be more to the story than was meeting the eye.

A minute later, he was alone with Bekah. Flipping the lock on the door, he leaned back against it. “Did you have a good nap?”

Bekah shrugged. “It was fine.” She looked down and picked at an imaginary piece of fuzz on the pajama pants she wore. “Thanks for the clothes.”

“They’re actually too small for me which means they’re still too big for you.” He grinned and pushed off of the door. “Are you hungry?”

She shook her head. “Not really, not yet. How does that even work in a place like this?”

Josiah chuckled and sat back down. “There’s a kitchenette in here, but I doubt it’s stocked. We could check. It’s possible someone brought some food in once they knew we were coming. We can go down to one of the kitchens or call and ask to have something made and brought to us.”

Bekah had visibly recoiled when he mentioned going to one of the kitchens, not much, but enough that he noticed.

“Why don’t we order something in? What sounds good? We can tell them what time we’d like it delivered.”

She hesitated before finally telling him what she wanted to eat. He suspected she didn't want to inconvenience anyone. He'd never really thought about it too much. It was just the way his life worked.

He called down to one of the kitchens and talked to whoever answered the phone, asking for sandwiches, choosing simple for a reason. They would be delivered shortly then could be stored in the apartment's refrigerator until they were ready to eat.

"We probably need to talk," Josiah said with a sigh after he hung up the phone.

"Probably." She didn't sound too sure of herself.

"We're here and safe, but legally, we're married and likely to stay that way for a while."

"I know." She looked around, though Josiah wasn't sure what she could be looking for as she wrapped her arms more tightly around herself.

"I don't know what that looks like or how long we'll have to stay married." The very thought of being the first known Quatremaine in history to divorce didn't sit well with Josiah, but these were extenuating circumstances, and he didn't think it really counted - especially since their vows were bare bones and didn't include "until death parts us" or much of the usual language. "But Thor was right. The PR people will probably come talk to us, but what it will amount to is that we need to act married - at least in public from time to time until they get this whole thing sorted out in Athmetis."

"So hope someone has something I can wear that's not your old pajamas, and we go to church?" Bekah shivered slightly. "Can't wait."

Josiah stood and opened a drawer in a cabinet along one wall. He pulled out his

favorite blanket and took it to her, shaking it open as he did. “Here.”

Bekah wrapped it around herself. Maybe she needed a barrier between her and the world more than she needed to be warm. He could see that.

He took his seat again. “Meantime, what do you want to do? We can sit here and stare at the wall or watch something.”

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“That sounds good. Maybe a movie.” She looked around, but didn’t say anything else.

Josiah winced as he remembered. “The only television in here is in the other room.” His bedroom. “I didn’t watch much when I lived here full-time.”

She didn’t look at him. “That’ll be okay. I saw a remote on your nightstand. We can adjust the base so it’s more comfortable than lying flat or propping up on pillows to watch.”

“That works.” He stood back up and held a hand toward her to help her up. A wave of protectiveness he didn’t expect swept over him as her skin connected with his.

Josiah brushed it aside as Bekah stood. He squeezed her fingers lightly before letting go. When a knock sounded on the door, he sent her ahead to the other room and answered it, taking the cart with their food and promising to send it back later. The palace had plenty if they needed to take food to someone else.

He thanked the staff member and took the cart into the small eat-in kitchenette. After putting the food away, he went to his room. It briefly crossed his mind to wonder what they were going to do about sleeping arrangements. He wouldn’t ask her to sleep on the couch, and he wouldn’t ask her to share.

That meant the couch was his for the time being - until he could figure out how to get something better - or maybe a different apartment with two bedrooms. That could work. Surely there was one available.

Bekah was already situated by the time he entered the room.

“Do you have a side you prefer?” She didn’t look at him as she asked.

He pointed to the side she wasn’t on. “This is the side I usually use, when I don’t just sprawl in the middle. But we’re not sleeping anyway, so it doesn’t particularly matter.”

Despite her earlier nap, she still looked tired. Likely the stress and overwhelming nature of everything was getting to her.

Josiah found himself hoping she’d fall asleep anyway. He’d just need to move before he did the same.

\* \* \*

At least she wore clothes that fit fairly well. Bekah thanked God for that.

She didn’t know where they’d come from, but a rack of clothes had been waiting for her in the closet when she woke up.

From sleeping in a bed with her new husband.

It hadn’t been on purpose, but she’d fallen asleep watching an HEA TV movie the night before. Given that when she woke up in the middle of the night, the bed was in the same position it had been before, she suspected Joe had fallen asleep on accident as well.

She’d used the remote to move it to a more comfortable sleeping level then went to the bathroom. He hadn’t woken up, and Bekah just wanted to go back to sleep so she climbed back into her side of the bed.

They hadn't even touched in the middle of the night, at least not as far as Bekah knew.

But now, a couple of days later, they were seated in an SUV driven by Thor as they headed for church and their first public outing as a couple.

At least that was the official story.

In a few minutes, they'd be holding hands and walking into the side door of the cathedral where the royal family attended services.

Thor didn't think there would be a crowd gathered, but pictures and possibly video were sure to make their way online before long.

The ride was silent until they glided to a stop near the door.

"Everything's going to be all right," Joe said softly. "We'll be fine."

Bekah blew out a breath. "I know."

Joe exited his side of the car and then turned to hold out a hand as she slid across the seat. Taking it, she moved to the sidewalk. A few people waited off to the side, but not many. Joe gave a quick wave as they started for the door.

Her hand remained snug in his, surprising her with its warmth.

She gave a slight smile toward the people with camera phones, but didn't wave. Instead, she ducked her head and tried to stay as close to Joe as she reasonably could.

Once through the door, she relaxed a bit. Joe introduced her to some family members she hadn't met yet.

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A couple of minutes before the service began, they entered the sanctuary. Joe continued to hold her hand as they followed the king and queen, his mom and stepdad, and one of his older sisters and her husband. The younger siblings followed behind.

There was definitely a hierarchy in place.

Bekah didn't know how she felt about the rigidity of the family structure, but it was part of life with the royal family, she supposed. She'd seen it in Øyanord with Ginny, but it was more removed for Bekah there. She was outside of it - and she hadn't stayed very long.

"Are you all right?" Joe whispered as they sat down. He still didn't let go of her hand.

She nodded.

The service was a bit different than any she'd been to before, but the peace that settled over her felt familiar.

Throughout the service, Josiah continued to hold her hand when appropriate. When they stood to sing, he let go, but otherwise, that point of connection remained.

When they left the pew at the end of the service, they continued out the same way so they exited down the center aisle, with the king leading the way to the back of the sanctuary and out the main doors before anyone else in the crowd moved.

A few people waited outside, but not many. Several held professional cameras. They

had to be either legitimate reporters or paparazzi. She didn't know who else they'd be.

"Just smile," Joe told her. "Wave if you want but hold your head up and smile."

Bekah nodded. "Got it." She kept her eyes on the ground in front of her as they walked down the steps. Otherwise, she ran a real risk of tripping. Once they reached the bottom, she looked up and waved just a bit, and plastered a small smile on her face.

They were still in the immediate aftermath of their friend's death. Being joyful wouldn't be appropriate.

She was overwhelmed at best.

A minute later, they were back in the car, and Thor drove them back to the palace.

"Do you want to have lunch with my family?" Joe asked. "Or we can eat those sandwiches from last night."

"I think I'd rather have the sandwiches." She was very aware that there could be people taking pictures from outside looking through the windows. Hadn't she seen pictures of the Queen taken that way?

Once they were back inside the palace, she felt a bit of relief. At least they were out of the public eye.

Joe showed her a back way to get out of the more public areas and into the family area quickly. The stairs were more utilitarian than the ones you'd expect in a palace.

In the apartment, she quickly shed her outer layer, then kicked off her heels.



“I’m not a huge fan of dressing up either.” Joe closed the door and locked it behind them.

She turned and saw him tugging his tie off. “It’s not my favorite,” she told him. “Probably not a great trait for someone married to a prince.”

“Probably not a great trait for a prince,” he countered. He headed for the bedroom then the closet. “You’re welcome to wear some of my clothes again if you want to. They’re probably more comfortable than whatever they brought you.”

“I appreciate the offer. Your pajamas are much cozier.”

A minute later, he emerged wearing some comfortable pants with a t-shirt. She went into the closet and found clothes already lying on the dresser waiting for her. She looked down at the small swell of her belly as she let the t-shirt fall to cover it.

She was growing a human.

And needed to tell Joe about it soon.

Before long, she wouldn’t have a choice.

## CHAPTER 5

Monday morning arrived far too soon for Josiah, but as expected, a representative of Athmetis would arrive at the palace shortly after noon.

Ben didn’t want Josiah and Bekah there to start, but to be ready to join the meeting if deemed necessary by Justin, Ben’s head of security, and Thor - who stayed far more active in the family’s protection and other matters than most people would have expected.

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Josiah suspected his step-father didn't fully trust anyone else, not even his own protégé, to protect the family the way it should be. In the past, Thor had good reason not to trust anyone - as evidenced by his own predecessor taking part in the kidnapping of Josiah's whole family, the royal family of San Majoria and one member each from Auverignon and Islas del Sargasso a few years earlier.

Looking around the living area of his apartment, he decided it might be time to redecorate. He'd never used the room much, but with Bekah living there with him for the time being, it probably needed to be more comfortable.

And have a television.

The last two nights they'd fallen asleep in the same bed while watching an HEA TV movie. He needed a sofa bed or at least a comfortable couch to use. She hadn't seemed uncomfortable about it, but he wanted to make sure.

When the knock came, he could hear her moving around in the bedroom as he headed for the door. A staff member wheeled the silver cart with their breakfast into the room, bowed slightly and left as Josiah thanked him.

His life was weird.

He was used to it after having grown up with a father who was a king for few years before Josiah's birth, but having lived and studied in the States for the last several years, he'd come to understand just how odd it really was.

"Is that breakfast?" An adorably rumpled Bekah wandered out of the bedroom,

covering a yawn with her hand.

“Yep.” He rolled the cart over to the small table near a window overlooking the gardens.

They ate in silence for a minute before Josiah broached the subject of redecorating. “What do you think?” he asked after explaining a bit.

Bekah shrugged. “My style could always be described as hand-me-down comfortable. If it was cozy and the right price, I didn’t much care if it matched. Comfort over style. Always.”

“Works for me.” He pointed her fork at her. “Remember Carl and Ellie inUp? Their styles didn’t match, but they made it work.”

“True.” She took a sip of her coffee. “How does one go about redecorating in a palace? Are there rules to follow?”

“Kind of? We can’t just do whatever we want, but we can take the furniture in here out and put in whatever we want. We can’t demo the fancy woodwork.” He waved a hand at the trim along the ceiling. “But as far as furniture goes, it doesn’t much matter as long as we don’t ruin antique pieces in the process.”

“Makes sense, but where do we go shopping?” She took another sip and reached for a croissant.

Josiah chuckled. “There’s a warehouse nearby we can go look through, but it’s mostly antiques and Furniture of Historical Significance. Otherwise, we can talk to...” He tilted his head as he thought it through. “I’m not sure. I don’t have an assistant anymore. I bet Gen could help us. She’d be thrilled to shop. If she can’t, I’m sure her assistant could help us get samples to look at over there. We probably wouldn’t go to

an actual furniture store like we would in the States.”

“That works. When?”

Josiah eyed the room. “I’ll talk to Gen about getting the room emptied out. When we can refill it will depend on how this meeting goes. It may be a couple of days, but we haven’t been spending much time in here anyway. We could also get some more comfortable chairs or a sofa for the other room.”

Before she could answer, his phone buzzed. Josiah checked it. “Benjamin says we need to be ready to go to his office in about an hour-and-a-half.”

Bekah simply nodded. Were those tears in her eyes? Had she been closer to Steve than he realized? Or was it the stress of all of it so soon after her husband had died in a similar accident? Josiah was fairly certain his accident had been car versus deer and into a deep ditch where Ian likely died on impact.

“There’s nothing to find,” he reassured her. “The only thing even remotely an issue is that we left Athmetis. That was done legally, even if they weren’t happy about it. That Steve died is not our fault, not even a little bit. I don’t know why they’re insisting on this ridiculous investigation, but it makes me wonder if there was something else going on.”

That’s what he should be doing. Looking into Steve.

He never investigated his friends. Ever.

But this could be different.

Some of the research he did for Jonathan Langley-Cranston could be done with a simple web search. A person’s name and the city they lived in often brought up an

address and other names associated with them. A search of those people's names, especially with "obituary" if the person was deceased, often brought up a whole host of information. Far more than people would even think about. Siblings, parents, grandparents, nieces and nephews, birthplaces... all kinds of things.

But Josiah knew how to do much more in depth searches as well - and he was good at it. That's why he worked for Jonathan.

Plus Jonathan understood the occasionally crazy life of a royal and would work with him when he had other things going on. Like now.

He could also do a lot of his work remotely, but for now, Josiah wouldn't take on any more cases. He'd wrapped up his last investigation before leaving for Athmetis.

For the time being, he needed to focus on his wife and whatever the officials from Athmetis might want.

\* \* \*

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How did one redecorate a palace? Bekah looked around as she munched on her croissant, once again grateful her pregnancy hadn't caused morning sickness.

"So we just empty the room and then put new stuff in?" she asked.

"I guess," Joe answered with a shrug. "I've never redecorated. I'll talk to Gen. She'll know."

Gen was... Her mind wasn't firing on all cylinders.

He must have seen her puzzled look. "My older sister. She's second oldest, after Ben. Evie is her twin sister. Evie is amazing, but Gen is the one who knows this kind of thing. She loves fashion and design. We may not want her to pick out the furniture, but she'll know the process."

"Gotcha."

She also needed to go shopping for clothes. The clothes given to her fit well enough for now, but she'd already noticed her pants getting a bit snug before they left Athmetis. As she finished her breakfast, Joe put the plates and dishes back on the silver cart and wheeled it to the door, leaving it outside.

This life was so weird.

She went into the closet and found a business suit laid out for her. Who had done that? And when? The idea of someone besides Joe in their shared space while they slept disconcerted her.

Once dressed, she went back into the living area to find Joe had already dressed in a suit. His tie was held in one hand as he talked on his phone.

“Thanks, Gen.” He held up a finger in Bekah’s direction. “I’ll see you later.” Slipping his phone in his pocket, he started to put his tie on. “She’ll have her assistant take care of getting the room emptied, as well as setting up a time for us to look at some new stuff.”

“That’s great. Thank her for me.”

Joe shrugged as he tightened the knot. “I’m happy to, but you’ll see her later, and you can tell her yourself if you’d like.”

“I can do that.”

He held open the apartment door. The silver cart was already gone. As they walked down the wide corridor, Joe leaned closer to her. “Remind me later to tell you about the secret passages and what to do in case of emergency.”

Bekah blinked. “Secret passages? You have secret passages?”

Joe chuckled as they walked past the velvet ropes that delineated the family areas from the rest of the palace. “Yep. Not everyone knows about them or how to access them, but since you’re family, you need to know.”

“Do you have to use them often?”

They started down the stairs as he shook his head. “I think I’ve used them three or four times. The most recent was a few years ago, not long after Ben and Katrín married when someone driving what you’d call a box truck died as he drove down the street leading to the gates. He stepped on the gas as he died and went through the gate

up to the portico. We were all sent to secure locations until they knew it was safe.”

A shudder ran through Bekah. “That couldn’t be fun.”

“It wasn’t,” Joe admitted. “I was with Zach and Zay at the time, though, so I wasn’t alone. That would have been worse. I’ve done that, too, and your thoughts start to drive you crazy in minutes.”

“I can’t imagine.”

Before they could say anything else, they reached the outer office. That’s what Bekah thought it would be called. The seating area had a desk area in the center but a number of doors were along the wall behind.

The man behind the desk stood and bowed slightly in their direction. “Your Royal Highnesses, the king had asked that you wait in the conference room.”

Joe inclined his head toward the man. “Thank you.”

Without waiting for someone to give more direction, Joe opened one of the doors and stood aside, letting Bekah enter before him.

But she didn’t know where she was going, so she waited for him. A minute later, they were in a conference room. No one else waited with them, but Joe held a chair for her.

“How long will we have to wait?” she asked, her voice hushed. She didn’t know why, but it seemed like a place to be quiet - like a library or church.

“I don’t know.” He glanced at his watch. “I doubt we’ll be here more than two hours if they don’t need us, but it will probably be at least forty-five minutes. It’s one of



those things where we have to be ready, in case they need us early.”

“I see.” She looked around the room. “So we just sit here?”

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He reached for a remote in the center of the table and turned on a television screen at one end of the room. “We can finish the movie we were watching last night.” Before he restarted the movie, he swiveled in his chair and looked at her. “The last thing I want to do is make you uncomfortable. I know we’ve fallen asleep together, but are you truly all right with that?”

Bekah had been conflicted for two days because she wasn’t uncomfortable with it. “It’s fine,” was all she told Joe.

“If you’re ever uncomfortable, let me know.”

“I will.”

He turned the movie on, and she leaned back in the chair, watching the couple stranded at a cabin during a blizzard continue to fall in love.

“Do you think that really happens?” Joe asked her as the credits started to roll a while later. “Two people get stranded and fall in love during a blizzard?”

“It happened for me and your mother.”

They both turned to see Thor walking in.

“That’s not how it happened. You’d known her for many years.” Joe shook his head.

“But being trapped in a cabin is when I knew there wasn’t any use fighting the fact that I was in love with her, even if I wasn’t ready to admit it to myself just yet. HEA

TV movies might not happen exactly like that in real life, but fairy tale stories do happen.”

Before they could discuss it further, another door opened and a tall, slender man walked in, bowing toward them all as he stopped. “The king will see you now.”

## CHAPTER 6

Holding Bekah’s hand, Josiah walked into Ben’s office. A couple of officials he didn’t recognize were also there. Ben introduced them as one of his attorneys and a member of the diplomatic corp from Athmetis.

“Our questions today primarily revolve around the decision to leave Athmetis while a suspicious death investigation was still ongoing,” the Athmetic diplomat told them after they took their seats.

Ben caught Josiah’s eye. A slight lift of his eyebrow told Josiah they were to remain quiet unless directed otherwise. He should have told Bekah that. Instead, he squeezed her hand and gave the smallest shake of his head when she looked at him.

“The prince and princess simply wanted to return home after a traumatic event,” the lawyer said.

“The princess has never been to Eyjania before,” the diplomat pointed out.

“Not the point. This is, and has always been, my brother’s home,” Ben told him. “As a member of this family, he and his family were legally able to return home, provided they stay in this country. They have done so and will continue to do so.”

“The marriage happened half an hour before they left Athmetis. That’s hardly the spirit of the law.”

“But it is the letter. My brother wasn’t about to leave his fiancée behind. No one would expect him to.”

“She was married to someone else a few months ago,” the diplomat pressed. “How long had they been engaged?”

“Not long,” the lawyer said with a shrug. “But it doesn’t matter. They were. They married and left the country legally, which is all that matters.”

“The optics...”

“Are far less important than the facts,” Ben said quietly. So quietly Josiah knew better than to cross him when he used that tone. Even Uncle Isaiah had - before he was eaten by sharks - though Ben had seldom used the tone with their uncle. “And the facts are that my brother and sister-in-law had nothing to do with the untimely death of Steve. They were there. They weren’t driving. They weren’t responsible for the fact that he refused to wear a seatbelt or that he was thrown from the vehicle and into a ravine when an animal emerged in front of them causing him to swerve. There was no reason for them to be detained in-country in the first place.”

“It’s not my place to determine that,” the diplomat countered.

“But it is mine to tell you that my brother and sister-in-law will not be returning to Athmetis for the foreseeable future.” Ben closed the folder in front of him. “If that’s the only thing you have to discuss, this meeting is over.” He pressed a button as he stood. “Chamberlain will see you out.”

The diplomat looked annoyed and frustrated, but exited when Chamberlain entered.

He did not bow to Ben on his way out, a slight that wouldn’t be forgotten.

Technically, it wasn't required of pretty much anyone anymore, and certainly not for someone who wasn't an Eyjanian citizen, but political niceties still existed.

Ben took his seat and swiveled in his chair until he faced Josiah. "Well, Siah, what do you think?"

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“I think it was a tragic accident, but that’s all.” Josiah continued to hold Bekah’s hand loosely. “I think there’s something more going on, but I don’t know what.”

“I’m inclined to agree, as are Justin and Thor. If either one of them know more than that, they haven’t told me yet.” Ben glanced at a notification on his phone. “If you’ll excuse me, I have another meeting in a few minutes, and I need to look over some notes.”

Josiah stood, letting go of Bekah’s hand as she joined him. “Thanks for going to bat for us, Ben.”

“It’s my job,” his brother answered, already distracted by the paperwork in front of him. “Don’t worry about their nonsense. It won’t come to much of anything.”

Without saying anything else, Josiah headed for a door different from the main one where Chamberlain’s office was or the one they came in. This one led to a back corridor where they could make it through the palace without being seen by much of anyone. It was also shorter.

So why had he taken Bekah the other way earlier?

Because it’s the way he always went? To impress her with the opulence of the palace? To sort of show off to anyone who saw them that he’d finally found the girl for him and married her?

Or for no real reason at all?

“This isn’t the way we came,” Bekah commented as they walked down the more normal-sized hallway to a set of stairs that wouldn’t win any awards for grandness.

“Nah. It’s the back way. I don’t know why I usually go the other way. Maybe because it’s the front door, so to speak. I realized we probably didn’t want to see anyone if we didn’t have to.”

“Good call,” she replied after a second’s delay.

It took several minutes, but they made it back to the apartment without saying much more to each other.

Josiah held the door open for her.

“They sure didn’t waste any time.” Bekah stopped as soon as she cleared the threshold.

He peered around her. Most of the furniture had been removed, but nothing had been brought back in yet. “Guess not.”

“So how do we go about deciding what we want to replace it with?” She moved farther into the room allowing Josiah to follow her in.

He pulled his phone and tapped his sister’s contact information. Voicemail. “Hey, Gen. It’s Siah. Thank you for making sure the furniture was removed, but we do need somewhere to sit. Can you let me know what we need to do to get something else in? Thanks.”

Bekah’s head was tilted as she looked at him.

“What?”

“I noticed your brother do it, too, but I thought you preferred Joe for a nickname. He and you both used Siah.”

Josiah shrugged. “I went by Joe when I first moved to the States, to kind of separate from being Prince Josiah. My family has always called me Siah, sometimes at least. Not always. More often in recent years.”

“Which do you prefer?”

“It doesn’t much matter to me.”

Her head remained cocked to the side. “Then, if you don’t mind, I think I’ll call you Siah.”

\* \* \*

From the look on Josiah’s face, Bekah couldn’t tell what he thought about her use of the name Siah for him.

So she hurried on. “I just mean, it’ll help solidify that we have a real relationship. If no one really calls you that but your family, then if I use it, that must mean that I know you well, right?”

He nodded but looked at his phone rather than responding. “Gen’s on her way up. She said she’s got us taken care of.”

“That’s good.” She looked around for somewhere - anywhere - to sit, but there wasn’t anything. Even the small table they’d used to eat at had disappeared, along with its two chairs.

Finally, she walked over to one of the walls and sat against it.



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“I don’t think any of us thought this all the way through.” Josiah sat on the rug that had been left behind.

“Is that rug some priceless artifact?” Looking at it more closely made her think it might be - and not just expensive because it was huge.

“I don’t think so.” Josiah squinted at it. “I’m not sure where it came from. I think it was here when I moved in.”

“How do you think this thing went? Are we in the clear?”

“I think so. They may bluff and bluster some more, but there’s nothing for them to do. We didn’t have anything to do with his death. We shouldn’t have been asked to stay in the first place. This investigation is bogus, and we know it - and they know we know it.”

Bekah leaned her head back against the wall and her eyes closed. She needed a nap. Earlier, she’d been grateful she wasn’t sick - and that remained true - but she was exhausted most of the time. Growing a human was hard work.

“Need a nap?” The sympathy in his voice both surprised Bekah and not at the same time. Surprised that he, like many, weren’t more judgmental about naps. Unsurprised because he didn’t seem like the type to judge people harshly in the first place. Not like Ian who had always made snarky remarks when Bekah wanted to take a nap - even before they were married. How would he have been with her pregnancy?

“I wouldn’t turn one down, but I don’t want to sleep through getting new furniture.”

“I won’t let you.”

As soon as he said it, there was a knock on the door.

“Come in,” Josiah called.

The gorgeous blonde who’d been at the church, and had a personality the size of Texas, blew into the room.

At least that’s how it seemed to Bekah.

The woman set a toddler down on the floor and plopped down next to Josiah - while wearing slacks that had to have cost as much as Bekah’s rent for the better part of a year.

“I kind of like it like this,” the woman said as she stretched out on her back. “Lots of room.”

“Then you can do this in your place. See what Levi says about that. He loves his recliner.”

“True story.” The princess rolled onto her side as the toddler climbed on Josiah’s back. “I’ve got a roomful of furniture coming this afternoon. You may not want all of it, but it’s all much more comfortable than the monstrosities you had in here before, Siah. Whatever you don’t like will be sent back, and we’ll try something else.” She looked at Bekah. “Siah said your current decorating style is best described as eclectic?”

“I guess that’s one way to put it. I said hand-me-down comfortable. I’ve never cared much about matching as long as I thought it was comfortable.”

The princess looked at her brother. “I like her. I love that. I like it better if it matches and is comfortable, but comfort and function trump aesthetic any day - especially in private areas the media and public will never see.”

“She and Levi live in an RV part time,” Josiah explained to Bekah. “He’s a travel blogger.”

Bekah nodded like she’d already known that. Actually, living in an RV sounded like a nightmare, but she’d always thought it would be nice to travel in one.

Maybe she and Josiah could...

She blinked. Since when did she and Josiah have a future beyond whatever was going on with Athmetis?

But the thought of traveling the country with him in a bus-sized RV held an appeal she didn’t expect. The two of them, alone together, traveling wherever the road took them. Maybe a trip down Route 66. That could be fun.

Something she never would have considered with Ian.

That she didn’t miss him more bothered Bekah.

Before she could dwell on why - again - the princess moved from stretched out on her side to sitting cross-legged in a smooth motion Bekah could never hope to imitate.

“We haven’t actually met yet. I’m Gen, second oldest of this crew.” The toddler decided she was done climbing all over Josiah and sat in Gen’s lap. “And this is the oldest of my crew.” She kissed the curly blonde hair.

“Oldest?” Josiah asked.

“You caught that, huh?” Gen smiled. “Barely, but yes. We’re having another baby.”

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“Congratulations.” Bekah meant it. That meant there would be two Quatremaine cousins at the same time.

Except, even if by some incredibly odd quirk of fate she and Josiah ended up falling in love and staying together for the rest of their lives, her baby wouldn’t be an actual Quatremaine. Would that matter to Josiah’s family? Or would her child be included as much as a blood-related grandchild?

Would it only matter in terms of the line of succession? The one Josiah was so far down it would take a world-ending disaster to move him to the top. She suspected from what she knew of the Queen Mother, that’s the only place it would matter.

Josiah would love the baby as much as he would any of his biological children.

Bekah had clearly never had those kinds of conversations with him, but she knew that deep in her soul.

Her husband, no matter the circumstances of their marriage, would love her child as his own.

And maybe that was all she needed to know.

## CHAPTER 7

Something had been different about Bekah since Gen left after the furniture arrived two days earlier, but Josiah couldn’t put his finger on what it was.

She definitely seemed quieter, more introspective, but not in a bad mood.

Something had to be going on in that pretty head of hers, something she wasn't ready to share with him.

And why would she?

They weren't really a couple, though as they'd spent some time together the last few days, he found himself wondering why it wasn't a possibility.

Except that she hadn't been a widow for long. It couldn't be possible for her to be ready to move on to someone new.

Could it?

What Bekah needed was a friend, not someone angling for a relationship and all the implications that came with a romance.

He could do that.

Maybe, someday, they'd both decide they wanted to consider something more.

But maybe not.

Maybe he'd be the first Quatremaine in the exceedingly long history of Quatremaines to get a divorce. Ben said something in passing that made Josiah think they wouldn't be able to get an annulment.

He shook his head and tried to turn his attention to the meeting with his oldest brother's PR team.

Since he'd be staying in Eyjania for a few weeks, they wanted him to do some public appearances for some of the charities he'd wanted to stay involved with on one level or another.

They were giving him a rundown of the options for the next two weeks or so, but Josiah couldn't focus. "Can you send this to me in a document of some sort? I'm sorry I'm not able to give this the full attention it deserves right this minute."

"Of course, sir. There is one that we need to know now if you'd like to attend."

Of course they did. "What's that?"

"The grand opening of the Tiny Town Development Center."

Josiah searched his memory banks. "Can you refresh me on that one?"

"It's the childcare center for victims of domestic violence. You were a part of the fundraising a few years ago."

He nodded. "I remember." He'd had a friend - albeit not a close one - who found herself in an emotionally abusive relationship. It led him to supporting this particular organization.

Last he'd heard, the friend was healthy and happy with a husband who adored her.

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“I’d like to go,” he told them.

“A car will be here for you and the princess at four.” They started to pack their things.

“That seems early,” he said with a frown.

“It is, but there’s young children involved. They have bedtimes.” The head of PR raised an eyebrow at him.

“Right.” He should have thought of that before saying something. “I’ll let Bekah know. She wasn’t feeling a hundred percent earlier. I’ll let you know if she’s not up for attending.”

He really didn’t know how she was feeling, but it gave her an out if she needed it.

When he returned to their apartment she was nowhere to be found.

And when had he started thinking of it as belonging to both of them?

When she took sole ownership of the recliner he would have picked for himself?

He had one coming in a complementary color, but it wasn’t in yet.

Pulling his phone out, he found a text that she’d gone shopping with Angie, but they wouldn’t be gone long.



He was glad she was getting to know his siblings, and that they were accepting of her. He pulled up the app that showed him where anyone was at any given moment. Not everyone was always on there, but often.

It showed his sister moving in a vehicle nearing the palace. Josiah decided to head down to the garrison to meet them. By taking the tunnels, he was able to cut a couple of minutes off his time, but he had to exit in a location where there could be someone watching. Once again, he used his phone to tap into the security cameras and make sure there wasn't anyone in the hall. When it was safe, he slipped out from behind the tapestry and hurried the rest of the way.

Their car glided to a stop as he reached it. Josiah waved the attendant off and opened the door himself.

Angie climbed out, thanking him and giving him a kiss on the cheek. "Thanks, big brother."

Bekah followed her out of the car. Josiah held out a hand to help her, though he knew she didn't need it.

"See you lovebirds later," Angie called over her shoulder in a sing-song voice.

"What are you doing down here?" Bekah asked as they walked toward the door.

He rested his hand on her lower back as he reached for the door. "There's an event I'm going to tonight. The PR team thinks you should go with me and that you'd enjoy it." He explained what it was as he understood it.

Bekah nodded as they stood waiting for the elevator. "I would like that."

"Good. Did you have a nice time with my sister?"

The elevator let them out on the right floor, but they had a bit of a walk to get to the apartment.

“I did. She’s a lovely girl.”

Josiah chuckled. “Don’t let her hear you say that. She’s almost twenty-one, you know, and quite grown-up. She’s almost old enough to drink in the States if she wanted. There will be a big party before long.”

Bekah grinned. “I see. I remember feeling that way when I was her age. I know I’m not that much older, but I feel like I’ve lived a lot of life since I was twenty-one.”

“You’ve lived more life than she has,” he said slowly. “You’ve loved and lost. That has to age anyone, at least mentally and emotionally, if not physically as well.”

She didn’t reply as they finally reached the apartment. “What do I need to wear?”

He hadn’t thought about that. “I’m not sure. There will be kids there so it’s probably not too fancy.”

“That’s good.”

Josiah watched her back as she walked to the bedroom then went into the closet and closed the door behind her.

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His brows furrowed. Had he done something?

Because his new wife didn't seem okay.

\* \* \*

To Bekah, this felt very different than attending church with the family. This felt... official.

She and Josiah were seconds away from exiting the car at this event she didn't know much of anything about. Childcare for women escaping domestic violence situations.

Getting behind it wasn't the issue. Being unable to carry on an intelligent conversation about this particular project was.

She'd read the briefing papers but hadn't truly absorbed all of it. How could she in a couple of hours where she also had to spend time with the stylist who worked for Gen and the one who worked with the younger girls, Angie and Gabi.

Apparently, since the younger two weren't old enough to do many official engagements yet, they shared a stylist and were prepared to share the woman's services with Bekah as well.

It was so weird.

Before she could think about it further, Bekah pasted a smile on her face and exited the vehicle taking his offered hand.

A small contingent of photographers and reporters stood off to the side behind a waist-high barrier. She and Josiah both waved as they walked in. The reporters hollered questions, but as instructed, she didn't answer any of them.

"You did great," Josiah said softly as they walked through the door.

"One of these days we'll have to answer questions, won't we?"

"Probably."

The director of the facility walked up and introduced herself as Brooklyn. "Your Royal Highnesses, thank you so much for coming." She dipped into a small curtsy.

Bekah didn't think she'd ever get used to that and hoped it wasn't going to be part of her daily life.

"Please allow me to show you around." As they walked around the facility, she explained the security measures in place.

To Bekah, it looked much like any other daycare she'd ever seen but with more security at the entrance.

It was well-hidden, for the most part, but Bekah noticed. The doors weren't overtly security doors, except for the keypad with a thumbprint scanner, but the windows in them were thick and the view distorted just enough to make her think they were bulletproof rather than normal glass.

She also suspected at least a couple of the teachers were trained in more than just early education. Every one of the staffers took several minutes to answer any questions they had.

The room that intrigued Bekah the most wasn't one of the classrooms, though. A large room, furnished cozily, held informational pamphlets about things that didn't fit with the rest of the room - physical abuse, emotional abuse, gaslighting, and similar topics.

As Josiah talked with several of the staff members, Bekah picked up one of the brightly-colored pamphlets then another until she had a whole stack of them.

She stuck them in the outer pocket of her purse and turned to answer a question from one of the teachers she suspected of being far more.

The assistant director told her the story of one of the mothers whose husband never laid a hand on her, but emotionally abused and gaslighted her from day one. It took several years for her to truly understand what was happening and then another year or two to gain the courage to leave.

A little girl, aged three or four, ran up and hugged the teacher.

"This is Lisette," the teacher said. "She's one of my special little nuggets." She used her hand as a claw and the little girl giggled. "Lisette, can you help me show the princess our classroom?"

Lisette's eyes grew wide. "You're a p'incess?" Her voice had filled with awe and dropped to nearly a whisper.

"I suppose I am." She held out a hand. "I am Bekah, Lisette."

Lisette squirmed until the teacher set her down then curtsied. "That's whatcha do when ya see a p'incess."

"That's what I hear, but I haven't been a princess very long. I'm still not sure what

the rules are.” Bekah crouched in front of Lisette. “What other rules do I need to know?”

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Lisette tapped her forefinger against her chin. “You’re s’posed to wear a crown.”

“I am? I don’t have one.” Bekah let her shoulders slump.

The little girl grabbed Bekah’s hand. “C’mon.” She dragged Bekah to one of the classrooms and hurried to one of the toy bins.

Lisette dug through the bin, muttering to herself. Bekah couldn’t make out the words, but she took a seat on the rug next to Lisette.

“Yes!”

She could hear that.

The girl turned around with a bright pink, sparkly tiara in her hand. “Here.” She seemed quite proud of herself.

Bekah tipped her head toward Lisette. “Will you help me?”

She did her best not to wince as Lisette jammed the tiara onto Bekah’s head, the combs digging into her scalp.

Hopefully, a real tiara would be a bit more comfortable.

If Bekah ever had a chance to wear one.

Could she actually end up with that opportunity?

Technically, she was married to a prince which made her a princess. And princesses did wear tiaras at special, formal events, sometimes. Bekah wasn't sure what the rules were, but if no one knew the truth about her marriage to Josiah and there was a formal event, it seemed like a remote possibility.

Would Angie's birthday be formal enough for tiaras? When was it anyway?

Bekah forced herself to refocus her attention on Lisette as the little girl told a story about a prince and a princess with a magical unicorn and friendly dragon who worked together to rescue a little girl from a mean man.

As she listened, Bekah suspected the mean man might be the little girl's father - or at least the man in her mother's life - at least until, in the story, the little girl's mother disappeared.

Bekah looked up at the teacher who shook her head the barest bit. She wasn't quite sure what the head shake meant. That the story wasn't true? Or that it was and the mother was gone?

Either way, Bekah did the only thing she could when Lisette climbed into her lap.

She hugged the little girl and didn't let go.

## CHAPTER 8

Something paternal swept over Josiah when he saw Bekah sitting on the ground with a little girl snuggled in her lap and a bright pink, sparkly tiara on her head.

Not exactly the kind of tiara his sisters generally wore.

They wore one at their twenty-first birthday celebration but not again until their



wedding and later. Angie couldn't wait. She'd been talking about it for years.

He found himself sitting on the floor next to Bekah and the little girl while someone read part of the first book of the Trilunium Chronicles for Kids series. The heir to the estate had recently been discovered in New Sargasso. The kids' books had been in the works decades earlier, but hadn't been published until a few months earlier.

Josiah was looking forward to visiting the parks when they opened in New Sargasso in six months or so. He'd already been notified that his whole family was on the invite list.

When the story finished, Bekah introduced him to Lisette. The little girl executed a curtsy with a kind of precision that told him she'd practiced.

"It was lovely to meet you, Lisette."

"My pleasure, P'ince 'Siah."

Bekah took the tiara off her head and set it carefully on Lisette's head. "I think you need to wear this for a bit, Princess Lisette. Thank you for sharing with me."

The little girl hugged Bekah's legs then turned and ran off.

“What’s her story?” Bekah asked the director quietly.

The director sighed. “Her mother left an emotionally abusive long-term boyfriend who wasn’t Lisette’s father. She came to our shelter, and we kept her safe. One day, she disappeared. We haven’t seen her since. The boyfriend had made threats against both of them, so for now, we’re letting Lisette stay here. She won’t be able to stay forever, but until we have a better handle on what’s happening with her mother and the boyfriend, we’re keeping her safe.”

Bekah nodded. “Please let us know if there’s anything we can do to help.”

A few minutes later, they were back in the car heading for the palace.

Josiah turned to Bekah. “What made you ask about Lisette?”

She told him about the story with the prince and princess and the mean man and how the teacher who’d been with her at the time just shook her head. When she hadn’t been able to determine how to interpret that, she decided to ask when the opportunity arose.

“What kind of help are you thinking?”

Bekah shrugged. “I have no idea. I don’t know what kind of help they might need.”

It was a bit different to offer help as a member of the royal family, but Bekah didn’t know that. He probably should talk to her about that, but this wasn’t the time.

“If we can help, we will,” he promised her.

“Thank you.”

The car pulled to a stop under the portico and a member of the staff opened Josiah’s door. He exited and thanked the man as he turned to help Bekah to her feet. He continued to hold her hand as they walked inside and up to the apartment.

Inside, he tugged on her hand and pulled her to him, wrapping an arm around her shoulder in a side hug. Bekah’s arm wrapped around his waist as she leaned her head against his shoulder. “You did great tonight. It was a good first outing for you.” Before he could stop himself, he pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “I’m proud of you.”

“Thanks. It wasn’t as bad as I thought it might be.” She leaned a little more heavily against him. “Is it always like that?”

“Unfortunately, no. That was an easy one. Sometimes they’re full of adults who are snippy or always try to one-up you or make you look bad.” He rubbed his hand up and down her arm. “Fortunately, since I’m not a full-time working royal, I get to be a lot pickier most of the time. I only come home for very important ones or ones that are important to me. I don’t have to do ones I don’t want to most of the time.”

“That seems like the best of both worlds.” Her other arm came up, and she shifted to move in front of him, her head resting more fully on his chest.

Josiah wrapped his other arm around her, holding her close for the first time. Something felt right, felt comfortable, in a way he wouldn’t have expected.

They stood there for several long moments.

Bekah sucked in a deep breath and blew it out. "I'm exhausted and ready for bed."

He kissed her head again, glancing at the new couch as he did. "Get some sleep. I'll stay out here."

She shook her head against him. "No. Don't do that. I'm starting to get used to having you there. That couch is a lot more comfortable than the old one, but it's not like sleeping in a bed."

After a few seconds of contemplation, he nodded. "Okay."

With a quick squeeze, she let him go. "That was nice. Thank you."

"For what?"

Her back was to him, but he could still hear her words. "A hug. I've always been a words of affirmation and physical touch person. Hugs are my love language." The door to the closet closed behind her.

"Good to know," he said softly to himself. He'd have to hug her more often.

The warm, fuzzy feeling he'd had when he held her in his arms was something he wanted to experience again.

He unbuttoned his shirt and tossed it over the chair as he untucked his white undershirt. In the kitchenette, he made himself a sandwich. He'd developed a taste for mustard while in the States. It wasn't something his aunt would have allowed in a royal household. Not plain yellow mustard anyway.

As he ate, a bit of lettuce fell out of his sandwich and onto his shirt. He finished eating before heading for the bedroom pulling his shirt off as he did.

A quick shower later, he dressed in pajamas and went to bed.

Next to his wife.

\* \* \*

The pants Bekahbought two days earlier no longer fit.

With a groan, she sank into the chair in the large closet. Who knew it would come in so handy?

“You all right?” Josiah walked through the open door. If it had been closed, he wouldn’t have. She knew that.

“Yeah. These pants don’t fit. That’s all.”

He grinned. “I tend to put on a couple of pounds when I come home. Better food than what I make for myself when I’m in Missouri.”

She didn’t correct his misimpression. It made as much sense as anything else.

And was easier than telling him the truth.

For now.

Although, telling him the truth would get harder and harder the longer she waited.

“There’s no real dress code for today,” he told her. “We’re just driving up to the cabin.”

She'd looked it up. Cabin was a misnomer. Quasi-palace in the woods on the lake was more accurate. "I know, but I like these pants."

"They'll fit again in no time, I'm sure." He grabbed some jeans and a collared shirt then started for the door. "We do need to be ready in a few minutes, though."

"I'll be right out." What was the hair tie trick she'd read about? Grabbing a plain black elastic band, she looped it through the button hole and then used the other end to go over the button. A long shirt and she'd be in business.

Ten minutes later, she was in an SUV with Josiah as he drove out of the palace. Several cars were making the same journey.

"Why take so many cars?" she asked. "Why not have more people in fewer cars?"

"We'll all come back at different times, most likely." He flipped his blinker on. "We don't usually leave at the same time like this either."

"I see." She stared out the window as they drove through the capital city of Akushla. She noticed the other drivers and those on the sidewalks rubbernecking. A few took pictures, but most just sort of stared. "How long is the drive?"

"About two-and-a-half or three hours." He eased into the other lane as Bekah yawned. "Take a nap if you want."

That sounded nice, but not until they were farther out of the city. The last thing she wanted was people taking pictures of her drooling or something. Like Anna in Frozen. That's how she looked when she slept.

Instead, she studied the people and places until they reached more of a countryside area. Then she closed her eyes and let herself doze.

Bekah had no idea how long she slept but woke up to Josiah talking to someone on his phone.

“What pictures?” he asked whoever it was. He must be using a Bluetooth earbud.

“Huh?” Bekah shifted, sitting up straight and blinking the sleep out of her eyes.

“They got pictures of Bekah at the daycare opening?” He reached over and covered her hand with his.

Who got pictures of her?

“And what did they see? I’m not following.” His grip on both her hand and the wheel tightened. “We’ll be at the cabin in about half an hour. We can video conference in an hour or so.” After listening for a minute, he continued. “I know you want to get ahead of it, but if what you said is right, we may just want to ignore it. Not dignify it with a response.”

A few comments later, he tapped on his earbud.

“What was that about?” She was a little more awake but not enough for a full conversation. She’d have to do her best.



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He blew out a breath. “Media coverage. We can talk about it later. It’s nothing to be overly concerned about, and you don’t look fully awake yet. Unless there’s more to it than I understand, I don’t see a reason why we need to respond at all.”

She yawned. “I’m not fully awake.” Looking out the window, she saw trees everywhere. “Where are we exactly?”

“About twenty or thirty minutes from the cabin. It’s north of Akushla, but we have to go the long way. There’s a shorter route, but it has dangerous switchbacks, and security won’t let us go that way. I can’t say that I blame them, but it’s a lot more fun in a sports car than going this way.” He chuckled. “Not that I’d know anything about that.”

A small grin crossed her face. “I’m not sure I believe you.”

“I... might have done it once or twice, but that’s it. I won’t do it again, especially now that I have a family. That’s about when my father stopped doing it. Finally, the security teams forbid it, but a lot of us have snuck it in a couple of times.” He chuckled. “At least my brothers who aren’t also the king. I doubt any of the girls have.”

“That’s because girls are too smart for that.” Bekah’s grin widened as she turned his words over in her mind.

He had a family.

Her.

She was his family.

So was the baby, but she hadn't told him about that yet.

Maybe this weekend would be the time, especially if they stayed a little longer than anyone else like he'd mentioned was a possibility.

"How long has this cabin been in your family?"

"Since it was built, I guess. It's not nearly as old as the palace, but not young either." He brushed his thumb along the side of her hand. "We will be in a one-room suite, though. Just a bedroom with a small living area and a bathroom."

"It's not that different than what we have now. We've been sleeping in the same bed since we arrived in Akushla. We're grown-ups. We're married. It's fine."

The thoughts that had been bubbling in the back of her mind started to work their way to their forefront. She'd only been a widow for less than three months, but she was remarried and not weirded out by sleeping in the same bed with her marriage-of-convenience husband.

Information she'd found in the pamphlets flashed in front of her eyes.

Based on what they said - and what she'd started to suspect even before her first wedding - the death of her first husband had been a blessing.

\* \* \*

The cabin wasn't really a cabin, though that's what it had always been called. It was more of a lake palace.

Not nearly as big as the actual palace in Akushla, of course, but for Josiah, it was just... the other home. The one that was more comfortable and less public than the palace.

He pulled up in front of the main door and put the car in park. Someone else would put it away.

“This is amazing,” Bekah said as she looked out the window at the second and third stories.

“It is pretty cool.”

He climbed out of the car then opened her door, holding out his hand to help her. She slid her hand in his and joined him as he started up the stairs.

They didn’t do a tour just yet. Instead, Josiah showed her to the room they’d share.

Once they settled in, he told her about the phone call.

“There were pictures of you from the other night,” he started, sitting in the small living area.

Bekah pulled a blanket around herself, something he’d noticed she did often, especially when she thought she might need protection from something. “Didn’t we know there would be?”

He nodded. “That’s not the issue. It’s that there’s some flyers or pamphlets sticking out of your handbag and they’re wondering if there might be some underlying rationale for them.”

Her head tilted a bit. “What?”

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“You picked up some flyers at the center, ones about living with an abusive partner and how to get free.” He looked up at her as the realization dawned, spreading across her face.

“And they think I took the pamphlets because you’re abusive and gaslight-y.” She closed her eyes. “I’m so sorry, Siah.”

The use of the familiar nickname by his wife warmed Josiah’s heart. “Don’t worry about it. Maybe be a little more careful in the future, but I have nothing to hide. I know I’m not abusive in any way. I hope you know that. I’d hope the people know me well enough to know that, too. I assume you just wanted to know more about what to look for, to help others.”

There was a slight hesitation before she nodded.

“Is there something more to it?” he asked.

Bekah stared at her hands. “I don’t know.”

Rather than pressing further, Josiah waited, trying to be patient.

Taking a deep breath, Bekah went on. “I already wasn’t sure I wanted to go through with the wedding to Ian before it happened. There were signs, little ones, that he wasn’t the guy I thought he was. But I went through with it anyway. I probably shouldn’t have, but I did. By the time I started to really question it, the wedding was just a couple of weeks away. We weren’t married long, but even then, he’d changed more. Looking back, and after hearing some of what was said at the center, it made

me wonder if I dodged a bullet. I was going to do some more reading on it later. The information about gaslighting seemed all too familiar.” She didn’t look at him as she finished.

Anger rose in his chest, but Josiah shoved it down. That wasn’t what she needed, even if it wasn’t directed at her.

“What can I do to help?” That seemed like a safe thing to say.

She shook her head. “Nothing. It’s something I need to work through by myself, for now at least. Just tell me how to make sure I don’t cause your family any more trouble.”

Were those tears in her eyes?

Josiah knelt next to her seat and took her hands in his. “Unless you’re purposely trying to cause my family problems, then there’s nothing to worry about. And no one believes you did. Not even a little bit.” He let go of one hand and reached up to brush a tear off her cheek with his thumb. “If there’s anything we can do to help, please let me know.”

“And maybe do an internet search instead of taking pamphlets that might make people think you’re not a great guy?” She gave him a watery half-smile.

He grinned back. “That might not be the worst plan.”

“Duly noted.” Bekah sniffled, but managed a bigger smile.

Josiah squeezed her hands, then stood and kissed her forehead before going back to his own seat. “I’m sorry you’ve gone through all of that, but I’m glad you won’t have to live in that kind of relationship until things got bad enough to get out.”

“Or not,” she replied with a sigh. “How many of those women never get out of those relationships? Or only find their way out through means you and I would never consider? Or only get out when the abuser takes them out? I wouldn’t wish anyone dead, not really, but I’m also glad things didn’t get worse like I now suspect they were going to.”

She seemed to be thinking about something else, but she didn’t say anything.

“I’m glad you’re here with me,” he told her. “I mean that. Not just that I’m glad you’re not with someone questionable at best, but I’m actually, honestly, glad you’re here with me.”

“I am, too.” Bekah looked around. “And not just because it means I get to live, even temporarily, in an actual palace or a cabin that deserves that title about as much as I deserve the titleprincess.”

Josiah sobered. “None of us deserve the titles we were given at birth, Beks. The best we can do is hope to live up to them. Remind me someday to tell you about Wulfriths. They trained knights, including the first real king of Eyjania. Benjamin always feared he’d never live up to the title he was given, but our ancestor learned from them. All we can do is do our best to live up to the trust the people put in us and not abuse it or the power we’ve been given. We all learned that from Uncle Isaiah. Regardless, you are as deserving as anyone. I’m just sorry you had to live through that to get to this place.”

Bekah grew somber again. “I’m not,” she whispered. “There’s a very important reason I’m not.”

He waited.

“I’m pregnant.”

## CHAPTER 9

As Josiah blinked slowly, Bekah barely managed to convince herself to watch him.

“Could you say that again?” he asked.

It could have been much worse. “I’m pregnant.”

She could almost see the wheels in his head turning. “I see.”

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“I found out a month or so after the accident. I was only about six weeks then. I’m barely into my second trimester now, but it won’t be long before I start to show,” she confessed. “I already had to do the hair tie trick with these pants two days after I bought them because I couldn’t get them to button.”

“I don’t know what the hair tie trick is, but if you’re far enough along you’ll be showing soon, we should probably tell at least part of my family. We’ll need to know how we want to respond to any comments, but mostly, we need to know how we can support you. How I can support you.”

“I don’t know. I’ve been living in denial, more or less,” she admitted. “I probably need to get a doctor. I had an appointment with one next week. I probably should have pushed for one sooner, but I didn’t.”

Josiah nodded. “I’ll probably have to ask one of my sisters for a recommendation, I suppose. Although if you’d like to keep it quiet a little longer, we can talk to the family’s physician. The only person he can legally be compelled to tell is Benjamin, who won’t ask unless he has an excellent reason to.”

We. He’d said we several times. That was good, right?

He leaned back as a thoughtful look crossed his face. “Legally, the baby will be considered my child even though we know I’m not the biological father. Because we know I’m not the biological father, he or she won’t be in the line of succession, but all my kids will be far enough down the line it won’t really matter.”

“Down the line?” She was ignoring the legally parts and just focusing on the parts



that didn't make her feel too deeply. Shouldn't she know this? Her mind was too muddled.

"Because I'm a member of the Eyjanian royal family, my kids are in the line of succession to the throne. The line officially only goes to like the first twenty-five or something. I'm already number ten or eleven or something and get bumped farther down every time one of my older siblings has a kid. The odds of one of my kids ever getting any farther up the line than I already am are slim. The highest I made it was four, after my father died, and Ben became king. That made it Gen, Evie, Darius, then me."

She had known that. "I've never had to worry about those kinds of things."

Josiah chuckled. "Worry might be a bit strong, but it's something I've thought about. Contemplated. Before any of my older siblings had kids, I wondered if I'd be able to live up to the expectations if something happened to the four of them. I never dwelt on it long, but I did think about it. It's highly unlikely my kids will ever have to."

Bekah realized her hand had moved to cover her lower abdomen, where the baby currently nestled. "I never would have thought about any of that."

He shrugged. "Why would you? And really, you still don't need to."

Because this baby wouldn't be on the list anyway? There wouldn't be any other babies, not if the marriage didn't last any longer than necessary like they'd said at the beginning.

Sucking in a deep breath, Josiah sat up straighter. "We'll figure this out, Beks. Money won't be an issue, obviously. We'll get you the best prenatal care we can. We'll tell my family when you're ready. We can stay up here at the cabin indefinitely, if you want. We don't have to go back to Akushla. Or we can go somewhere else in Eyjania.

We could probably even make an argument to see your sister, but that might not be the best idea without some good reason - like her wedding or something.”

She just nodded. Maybe it would be a good idea to see how the weekend went, though she doubted the rest of the family would stay more than a few days.

Josiah’s phone buzzed. He pulled it out of his pocket. “It’s almost time to eat. Are you up to a meal with the family? If not, we can stay here and have something sent up. Maybe later we can go out on the lake.”

Bekah just wanted to curl up and take a nap. She told Josiah that.

He stood and pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Get some rest. I’ll bring you something to eat when I come back up in a little bit.”

“Thank you.”

After brushing a bit of her hair back off her face, Josiah left the room.

It took several minutes for Bekah to convince herself to stand up and move over to the bed, but she eventually did.

Once curled under the covers, she closed her eyes and let herself sink into sleep. Fortunately, it came quickly.

Unfortunately, dreams plagued her, and she didn’t sleep well. When she awoke, the curtains had been pulled a little more tightly, meaning someone had been in the room with her. Josiah? Or someone else?

He’d mentioned in passing that sometimes staff members would come in. It didn’t seem to bother Josiah, but he was likely far more used to it - just like he was used to

thinking about how many people would have to die for him to be king someday.

The whole idea made Bekah uncomfortable, so until she knew otherwise, in her own mind, Bekah would consign that role to Josiah. Surely, he'd been the one who came in and closed the curtains more tightly.

When she sat up, a light in the corner caught her attention. Josiah sat in a chair with some sort of light wrapped around his neck. It wasn't enough to bother her, but apparently enough that he could see whatever he was looking at.

He looked up and smiled at her.

Bekah breathed a sigh of relief. No one else had been in the room with her.

\* \* \*

As they settled into the boat, Josiah tried not to let worry wash over him. He glanced at Bekah. "Are you sure you'll be all right?"

She laughed. "I'm fine."

The boat had left the dock just moments earlier, and she didn't seem seasick, but didn't pregnancy come with nausea? Wouldn't being on the lake make it worse?

Come to think of it, though, he hadn't seen any signs of her being sick.

"You don't get motion sick?" Maybe it wasn't just limited to the water. People got airsick or carsick too, though he hadn't seen evidence of that while traveling either.

"Nope. A little airsick recently, but not bad at all. I'm fine, Siah." She leaned back and closed her eyes as the sun hit her face. "Just enjoy it."

The breeze rippled through his hair as a member of the family security team eased the boat away from the shore.

"I would imagine the water is too cold to swim?" Bekah spoke loudly to be heard over the rush of air as they picked up speed.

"Without a dry suit, yes. Some people use wetsuits, but not a whole lot. The water is too cold to swim in unprotected." He stretched his legs out in front of him. "Would you like to go swimming?"

Bekah shrugged. "Not if it's cold."

Josiah laughed. "We have a heated pool at the cabin."

“You know that’s not actually a cabin, right?”

He moved to sit next to her, his arm stretching along the back of the seat next to her. The proximity would make it easier to hear her. “I know. Not compared to the cabins in the States.”

“Not compared to cabinsanywhere.” She elbowed him lightly. “It’s a mansion, a mini-palace really, on the lake, but definitely not a cabin.”

A grin crossed his face. “On one level, I understand what you’re saying, but at the same time it’s all I’ve ever known, at least until a few years ago. I have a hard time thinking of my home in Missouri as normal-sized and not small and cramped.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You live in a twenty-five-hundred square foot house on three acres. That isnotcramped. My parents had three kids in under nine-hundred square feet and two bedrooms, for a while anyway.”

“I know it doesn’t make any sense. I’ve learned a lot about the real world since I started university, but my life still isn’t normal. I won’t be a working royal, but I’ve also been left enough in various inheritances that I never have to work unless I want to. I don’t need to in order to live a very comfortable life.”

“That’s good.”

The boat never did pick up too much speed. Boating wasn’t allowed on the lake for many people. A few charter companies. A couple of families who owned property on the lake. There were strict rules to follow. It wasn’t as clear and pristine as some of the lakes in Iceland where no boating was allowed, but there were regulations everyone - including the royal family - had to follow.

One of those had to do with the speed at which they were allowed to travel.

When they reached the center of the lake, the driver cut the engine and let them drift. Josiah stood and held out a hand to Bekah. She put her hand on her head to hold her straw hat in place as a gust of wind threatened to take it but then took his hand with her other one. He helped her up, and they carefully walked to the flat area at the back of the boat.

“It’s so clear,” she whispered. “Nothing like Serenity Lake back home.”

Josiah chuckled. “Nope. I was a little surprised the first time I went out on Serenity Lake with friends. I knew not all lakes are like this, but I’d never been on one that was murky.”

He sat carefully on the edge of the boat and took his shoes and socks off. “We can’t swim, but we can put our feet in. Not for overly long.” The water, this time of year tended to be about fifty or fifty-five degrees Fahrenheit and much too cold to do much more without a dry suit.

Bekah sat next to him, but kept her legs criss-crossed rather than putting her feet in. “I don’t like being cold,” she told him. “I have a hard time warming back up, I think. I don’t know if it’s harder than other people or not, but definitely harder than my very warm-natured brother.”

“Duly noted.”

They sat in silence for several minutes before she broke it. “Do you have any idea how the investigation is going?” She didn’t look at him as she asked.

“I don’t. Benjamin hasn’t said anything. I don’t know that he could say anything even if he knew.”

“How long do you think it’ll take?”

“I have no idea.”

Another silence settled between them.

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After they'd been out there for about twenty minutes, talking intermittently, they decided it was time to head back.

Bekah stood, moving closer to the edge of the flat area and staring down into the lake. "I think I'd like to learn how to SCUBA dive. That would be cool."

"We can arrange for lessons while we're here," he promised.

"I'm not sure I can while I'm pregnant."

Right. He'd almost forgotten about that as they sat talking.

Another gust of wind came through, ruffling his hair.

And taking her hat off.

Bekah squealed and grabbed for it.

As it blew farther away.

She reached.

Lost her balance.

Josiah grabbed for her as she tumbled over the edge toward the glacier-fed lake.

But he was too late.



With a splash, she landed the water.

## CHAPTER 10

Cold.

Bekah was so cold.

And her head hurt.

Had she ever been this cold before?

Maybe that once when her boyfriend at the time convinced her to...

She couldn't even remember what they'd done. She could barely remember the boyfriend's name.

"We need to get her out of the wet clothes, sir."

A voice cut through the fog in her brain.

"Bekah?"

Was that Josiah?

"Cold," she whispered.

"We have to get you out of those clothes, Becks."

The words barely made it through, much less the meaning, though something niggled at the back of her mind. Something that should make her uncomfortable, but she

wasn't sure what it was.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

She felt hands moving her limbs and cooler air brushing across her skin.

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Nothing really registered, though she could tell they were moving quickly.

She closed her eyes and let herself drift to sleep.

When her eyes opened again, she was warmer.

And not alone.

“Hello?” The words squeaked out at a whisper.

“It’s me, Becks. Josiah.”

She could feel the warm, solid mass underneath her hand move and vibrate with the words.

Was Josiah in bed with her?

And what was the pinch in her arm?

“You bumped your head when you fell in the lake. They wouldn’t let me jump in after you. It took longer than we wanted to get you out.”

Was that a kiss against the top of her head?

And skin?

Bekah closed her eyes. “Where are we?”

“In the bed in my room,ourroom.”

“And my clothes?”

His hold on her tightened. “We had to take most of them off on the boat, but did our best to preserve your dignity. I took my shirt off and held you under one of those tin foil warming blankets. You were so cold. They got us back here as quickly as they could and brought you up here. Gen helped get the rest of the clothes off and put something back on. You’re wearing a pair of her shorts and a tank top. I’m wearing athletic shorts. They gave you some warm saline. You’ve woken up a couple of times and your temperature is up, so they took it out.”

“I don’t remember waking up.”

“That doesn’t surprise me. You were pretty out of it.”

She felt him take a deep breath and blow it out.

“I’m supposed to call them when you wake up.” His voice rumbled underneath her cheek. “But I’m kind of enjoying this.”

“Me, too.” The words surprised her as much as they likely surprised Josiah.

She hadn’t expected to enjoy being snuggled up next to someone anytime soon. To be fair, she hadn’t expected to have the opportunity for an exceedingly long time, but that was beside the fact.

“Are you warm?”

Josiah’s question forced her to take more of an inventory of herself. “My toes are cold, but no more than normal. I don’t feelwarmnecessarily, but I’m not really cold

either.” An involuntary shudder ran through her.

He chuckled and a different kind of warmth spread through Bekah. “I still think we’re going to stay here for a while until you’re a bit warmer yet.”

She closed her eyes and nestled closer to him. “I think that sounds lovely.”

Even before she finished, she could feel herself starting to drift.

The next time she awoke, it took Bekah a few seconds to realize what was different.

Josiah was gone.

Pushing down so she could lever herself up on her elbows, she saw him at the door, talking quietly to someone on the other side. He was more fully dressed than he had been before. She laid back down and rolled onto her side, snuggling deep under the covers. Assessing her physical state, she realized she felt almost overly warm.

That was good.

Her hand came to rest on her lower abdomen. What about the baby? Was the baby all right? Would Josiah have told her if something had gone wrong?

“Siah?” she called softly.

He turned and smiled. “Be right there.” After saying something else to whoever was on the other side of the door, he closed it and walked back to the bed.

Rather than getting back under the covers on his side, he came to hers and sat next to her reaching out to brush her hair back. “How’re you feeling?”

“Much better, I think.” She took a deep breath. “What did they say about the baby?”

He dipped his head for a second causing her heart to stop. “I had to tell them. I’m sorry. I know you weren’t ready, but I had to.”

Bekah maneuvered an arm out from under the covers and took his hand in her own. “I understand. You had to. I would have been mad if you didn’t. It might not change treatment options, but it might, and they’re aware.”

His shoulders relaxed. “I don’t think everyone knows. I asked them not to say anything. Benjamin does. So does Gen. I’d imagine their spouses do or will. I don’t think Mum knows yet.”

She smiled at him. “Then we’ll tell her together this weekend.”

Josiah leaned down and pressed a kiss against her forehead. “She’ll love it.”

“I’m guessing they didn’t say anything about the baby not being all right? The baby’s okay?”

“They said it wouldn’t change their course of treatment, but they wanted to come in and see you as soon as you’re awake enough for it.” He hesitated. “They didn’t seem overly concerned, but for all I know, it’s because they didn’t want me to freak out.”

She closed her eyes as he continued to brush the hair back off her temple. “Let them know I’ll be ready in a few minutes? I need to go to the bathroom. And as soon as they’re done, I need a shower.”

“That sounds like a good plan.” He leaned to the side and pulled a phone out of his pocket. After sending a text, he laid it on the bed and turned his attention back to her. “You’re feeling better.”

This time her smile was weary. She knew that. But it was a smile. “Much.”

\* \* \*

The medical personnel decided it would be all right to wait until after Bekah took a shower to check her out. Josiah left her with Gen - just in case Bekah needed help.

He went to a sitting room and walked to the far side, heading outside onto the large veranda. When he reached the thick stone railing, he rested his forearms on it and looked out over Lake Akushla.

“How’s Rebekah?” Benjamin joined him on the veranda.

“Much better. Gen’s helping her take a shower then the docs are going to look at her

again and check on the baby.”

“Did you know?” His brother leaned against the same railing a few feet away.

Josiah shook his head. “Not until recently.”

“Legally, you’re the father of record when the baby is born.”

“Even if we get an annulment before then?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Josiah could see Benjamin frown.

“I know. ‘Death do us part’ and all that, but really we just needed to get out of Athmetis safely, and we never actually said that. You know that.”

“I know. And, if that’s what the two of you decide is best for you, I’ll support you.”

Josiah could hear an underlying hint of something in his brother’s voice. “Privately?”

The king sighed. Not Benjamin. No, he’d flipped that switch inside and become the monarch. “You know how the public feels.”



“I know.”

“They’re barely accepting, as a whole, that my eldest two children are daughters. The approval rating for the change to absolute primogeniture is barely a majority. We’re pressing forward anyway because it’s the right thing to do. Aunt Louise proved a woman can be exceedingly capable at running the country. Far better than Isaiah did before I stood up to him. I don’t know how accepting they’d be of an annulment or how Athmetis would respond to the implications it was only to get out of the country, even if that’s the truth, and they likely already know - or at least suspect - as much.”

“So as my brother, you’d be totally cool with it and understand why, but as my king, you’ll forbid it?” Josiah needed the clarification.

Another sigh escaped his brother as the shoulders that always carried such a heavy load slumped forward. “No. I won’t forbid it, but I can’t be seen as publicly accepting of it at this point either. You may need to leave the country indefinitely and only come back for big events for a while.”

“I’d be sidelined completely? I know I won’t be a working member of the family. I’m okay with that. Happy with it even, but I can’t come fill in for one of the girls when they’re pregnant or their husbands after birth or anything else? I’m your oldest brother not married to royalty from another country. Actually, I’m your only adult brother who’s not married or engaged to royalty from another country.”

The weight increased on his brother, and Benjamin’s head dropped a bit more. “I pray it doesn’t come to that, but it is possible, yes. Especially if the public sees you as abandoning your pregnant wife, regardless of the fact everyone would know you are

not the biological father of the baby.”

Josiah felt some of the frustration drain away. “So what would you have us do?”

“Give it a chance. See what happens between the two of you.”

“And if she’s not interested? She hasn’t been widowed very long.” Though she hadn’t pushed him away when she woke up either. If anything, she’d moved a little closer before going back to sleep.

“Then we’ll cross that bridge when we get to it.”

“Sirs?”

The brothers turned to see Chamberlain, the king’s top aide, standing near the door. He gave no indication he’d heard anything, but then Chamberlain had likely heard many things over the years that he would take to the grave with him.

“The doctors are ready to see the princess, however, she refuses to let them start without you, sir.” He looked at Josiah. “Will you be along shortly?”

Josiah turned to Benjamin. “I’ll think about what you said. I’m sure we’ll talk again at some point.”

His brother nodded, but didn’t say anything.

Hurrying to his quarters, Josiah tried to keep his nerves under control. What if there was something wrong?

Plastering a smile on his face, he entered the room to find Bekah on the bed with enough pillows propped behind her that she wasn’t completely flat. The doctors had

already started doing some things apparently, but a machine with a monitor sat off to the side. “Thank you for waiting.”

He sat in the chair helpfully placed near Bekah’s side.

“Are you ready for the ultrasound?” the doctor asked. Josiah didn’t know this one. He wasn’t Benjamin’s usual doctor. Maybe he was Gen’s obstetrician.

An assistant of some kind helped Bekah raise her shirt and lower the waistband of her fresh pajama pants, though not too far, and tucked a cloth into them. The doctor squeezed a gel of some kind into a dollop on her lower abdomen then pressed a wand into it.

Images began to appear on the screen, but Josiah had no idea what they were - just blurry black and white images with circles and what looked like snow from an old television.

But the doctor was pointing at one void area and saying it was Bekah’s bladder. A minute later, he pointed to another one and said it was her uterus.

Then a fluttering movement in the center of the screen.

“Is that the baby?” he whispered.

“It is,” the doctor confirmed. “And heartrate looks good. Better than earlier.”

Bekah looked up at Josiah. “What do you mean? Better than earlier?”

“We did a quick scan with a Dopplar wand to check the heartbeat. It was slower than we’d have preferred, but not dangerously so. There wasn’t anything we could have done differently if it had been, but we wanted to know and needed a baseline.” The

doctor clicked around a few more times. “Everything looks wonderful.” He grinned at them as they both tried to absorb what he’d just said. “Now, I think we might be able to tell if you’re having a boy or a girl. Do you want to know?”

## CHAPTER 11

When Bekah turned to look at him, Josiah was surprised.

“What do you think?” she asked.

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“It’s up to you.” He wasn’t sure he should even have a vote. He wasn’t the biological father, even if he was legally her husband.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “I hadn’t really thought about it.”

Josiah turned to the doctor. “Will there be more ultrasounds later?”

He nodded. “Yes. The anatomy scan will be in a few weeks.”

Looking back at Bekah, Josiah tried to decide how to let Bekah make the choice. “You don’t have to decide now. If you’re not sure, wait. Maybe the doctor can make a note in your chart in case you change your mind before then.”

Relief crossed her face. But why? Just that she didn’t have to make an actual decision? Or that he hadn’t pushed her one way or the other? “I like that idea.”

“I actually couldn’t tell from the scan so far,” the doctor told them. “The baby is facing the wrong way. I’m happy to try if you’d like and make a notation.”

This time Bekah shook her head. “No. If you can tell as you finish, note it, but don’t tell me. If not, then we have time to decide.”

Again, she included Josiah in the decision. He was flattered, though he didn’t understand why.

The doctor moved the wand around for a moment then away from her stomach. “We’re done. Everything looks good.”

As best Josiah could tell, the doctor wouldn't have seen anything he hadn't already seen. But what did Josiah know?

"I see no reason to be concerned about the baby," he went on. "But if you feel anything unusual or uncomfortable or have any abdominal cramping or spotting, please be sure to let me know as soon as possible."

"I will," Bekah promised. "Thank you."

The machine was put away as the assistant cleaned Bekah's stomach.

Once done, the doctor stood with his arms crossed but not in a menacing way. "I won't order you to stay in bed, but I would strongly encourage you to rest and take it easy for the next few days."

Bekah nodded. "I will. I don't know that I'll feel up for doing much for a while anyway."

"Most likely not," the doctor concurred. "Get some rest, and we'll set up another appointment in a few weeks unless you need to see me sooner."

Josiah stood and walked the doctor to the door left open by his assistant who'd left a moment earlier. "Thank you."

"My pleasure, Your Royal Highness." He tipped his head toward Josiah. "Be sure to call me if she needs anything or if you're not sure if you need to be concerned about something. Anytime. Day or night."

"Thank you. I appreciate that."

After a quick handshake, the doctor left.

Josiah closed the door and turned to see Bekah still propped up on the pillows. Her eyes were closed. But...

Were those tears coming out of her eyes?

He sat next to her and took her hand in his. "Hey. Are you all right?"

"It's just overwhelming," she whispered, her fingers curling around his. "It was stupid of me to reach so far for my hat. It could be replaced or retrieved later. I'm not used to the super cold water, obviously, and it wouldn't have been a big deal, except for being wet, on Serenity Lake. I need to adjust my thinking, I guess."

Brushing the back of her hand with his thumb, he leaned over and pressed a kiss to her hairline. "You also hit your head - not too bad, but bad enough. I should have been more vehement about the temperature of the water and the danger it poses, even mid-summer." He let out a breath. "But you're both okay. That's the important part."

"True." She slowly took in a deep breath. "None of this is how I ever imagined this part of my life would be, you know?"

It didn't seem like she expected a reply so Josiah just sat next to her, still holding her hand.

"The farther I get from Ian's death, the more I think I dodged a bullet as it were. I see some of the things he was doing - gaslighting and so on. I didn't realize one of my meds would counteract my birth control." Her free hand rested on her abdomen. "I love this baby so much already, but I wish so many things were different."

The tears continued to leak down her temples.

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A snort of laughter startled Josiah.

“But I suppose I am married to a real prince. That was one of my childhood dreams. My sister is a future queen. I mean that part wasn’t in my dreams, but means I get to hang out in palaces from time to time.”

“Do they know?” he asked quietly. “I believe someone told them you’d fallen in the lake and were being cared for, but I don’t know if they mentioned the pregnancy. They may even be on their way already.”

Bekah shook her head. “I haven’t told them yet. I wanted to wait until after I got home from Athmetis, but that went all kinds of sideways.”

Josiah pulled his phone out to text his brother, only to discover a series of missed messages. “It looks like they’re on their way. They should be here before long. The flight from Øyanord is about four hours then about two hours to get here.”

“Has it really been that long?” She struggled to sit up.

Josiah helped her sit up and moved behind her to give her something to brace against if she needed to. “Almost. They couldn’t leave immediately, but by the time they get their things together and made it to the airport, it’ll take seven or eight hours in all.”

She leaned back slightly so her back rested against his chest. “I should probably get dressed into something more fitting.”

He wrapped an arm around her waist, holding her to him. “I don’t think they’ll care. I



know my family won't. You should be comfortable and rest."

She twisted and looked up at him, tears shimmering in her eyes. "Thank you for taking care of me, 'Siah," she whispered.

"My pleasure," he whispered back. As he looked into her eyes, Josiah could only think one thing.

What it might be like to kiss her.

\* \* \*

The look on Josiah's face made Bekah's breath catch in her throat.

Was he going to kiss her?

Instead, he moved back, away from his support of her. She leaned forward a bit to steady herself.

"Do..." He cleared his throat. "Do you want me to help you find something else to wear or just stay in your comfortable pajamas?"

Her family had seen her looking far worse, and, if Josiah's family was going to judge her for it, then so be it. It was a good test of sorts to see how she'd fit in to their daily lives.

Not the fancy royal lives. She'd likely never fit in there. But if she was going to be with Josiah for a little while even, she needed to know if they could get along behind closed doors.

"I think I'll just stay like this, if that's really okay." If it was a total faux pas she

wouldn't, but staying comfortable appealed to her.

"It is." He squeezed her shoulder as he stood. "I'll check and see how long we have. Are you hungry?"

Bekah turned that over in her head. "Maybe a snack? Not too much."

He tapped on his phone then reached for the handset on the side table. "What would you like?"

She shrugged. "Whatever is easy."

After talking quietly to whoever was on the other end of the phone, Josiah hung up. "It'll be up in a few minutes."

"What did you ask for?"

"Something easy. They'll send up something good."

Her eyes closed as she leaned back against the pillows again. That was easier than looking at him and trying to figure out if she'd wanted him to kiss her or not.

"We have about an hour before your family gets here. Anything in particular you need, or even just want, to do until they arrive?" He seemed to sit in a chair across the room. She still didn't look.

"Just rest." That seemed like as good a plan as any.

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A few minutes later, a discreet knock at the door caused Josiah to stand up. Bekah could hear him moving across the room then talk quietly to whoever had arrived.

“Snack is here.”

She opened her eyes and sat up, sitting criss-cross on the bed. “What did they bring?”

He looked under the silver dome. “Looks like skyr, an Icelandic yogurt-y type thing, and a bowl of berries. How’s that sound?”

“I’ve never had skyr.”

“They also sent Oreos.”

Bekah sat up a little straighter. “Why would they do that?”

Josiah shrugged. “Do you like Oreos?”

“They’re my favorite.”

“I’d imagine someone discovered that tidbit and decided it was a good idea to send some up.”

The thought that someone cared enough to find out and send her favorite brought tears to Bekah’s eyes.

She picked up one of the cups of skyr and peeled back the foil top. Before reaching

for a spoon, she sniffed the white, creamy mixture.

Her brows pulled together as she tried to place the smell.

“What?” Josiah had a big bite on his spoon.

“I’m trying to figure out what it smells like.”

He looked puzzled then smelled his own skyr. “It smells like vanilla.”

Bekah shook her head. “No. It’s something else.” Another sniff. “Not French onion dip, but kind of. Maybe sour cream.” Another one. “Or cottage cheese.” With a shrug, she decided it was time to try it.

The texture appeared to be more like... pudding or something than the yogurt she was used to. She took a small bite. Her nose wrinkled.

“Don’t like it?” He was on his third or fourth bite.

“I’m not sure. It may be a bit of an acquired taste.” She ate a little bit more. It wasn’t bad. Just different. Maybe a little tart, a taste she wasn’t overly fond of.

Before her next bite, she reached for an Orea and dipped it into the skyr. The sweet of the cookie offset enough of the tart that she did it again.

“Do you like it?” Josiah sounded concerned.

She looked up at him and smiled. “I don’t know that it’ll ever be my favorite, but I’ll eat it.”

What appeared to be a wave of relief seemed to wash over him. “I’m glad. The staff

in the kitchen would be appalled at themselves if they sent something you couldn't stand." He held up a hand to stop her protest. "Even if there was no way you could have known you wouldn't overly care for it."

"Well, now I know that it'll be all right." She twisted the cup to look at the ingredients. "I'm not a fan of skim milk in general, so that could be part of it." The ingredients all looked pretty innocuous. It suggested she peel the label off and read the story. A series of cartoon like squares told of someone who'd moved to the States, didn't care for the yogurt, and created his own version of skyr. Enterprising.

Josiah checked his phone. "Your family has arrived. I doubt you want them in here. Not enough room for one thing."

She looked. He wasn't wrong. It was like a normal bedroom, albeit a little bigger and decorated more nicely than any other bedroom she'd ever occupied until her arrival in Eyjania. Well, maybe in Øyanord a few weeks earlier, but that's it.

"Where else could we meet them?" She swung her legs over the edge of the bed and stared at her socks.

"There's a sitting room not too far from here. Are you up for walking that far?" He stood and walked toward her, his hand reaching out to help her to her feet.

She gave him a grateful smile as she took his hand. "I'll be fine. Thank you." The physical contact and the soft look he sent her way warmed her in a way even a Southwest Missouri August day wouldn't have been able to.

Could she be falling in love?

### CHAPTER 12

Keeping one hand on Bekah's back, he showed her how to get to the sitting room he'd gone through when he went to the veranda earlier. "Do you want to look at the view?" He wasn't sure if she'd want to look at the lake that so recently tried to freeze her.

"I'd like that."

She probably moved a little more slowly than she did before the boat ride, but not so much that he found himself concerned for her well-being - at least not any more than he already was.

"It's gorgeous," she whispered as he let her exit the building ahead of him.

The breeze played with the bits of hair that had escaped her messy ponytail. He found himself wanting to brush them back.

Instead, he stood next to her, his hands resting on the stone much as hers did.

"It's one of my favorite views." He leaned farther forward, resting his upper body weight on his forearms.

"I can see why."

He turned his head to look at her, wishing again he could brush her hair back, but instead watched as she did it herself. “Are you feeling all right?”

“Yeah. A lot better than earlier. A little nervous about seeing my parents.”

“Why is that?” He didn’t know them or much about her relationship with them.

Bekah sighed. “I’m married again. I’m pregnant.”

“You’re what?”

The voice behind them caused Josiah to turn, but not as quickly as Bekah. She was already halfway across the veranda, practically launching herself into her father’s arms. At least, Josiah assumed the man was her father. The salt-and-pepper said he was older, but likely not too old. The way he caught her told Josiah this wasn’t the first time he’d done so.

The woman with them came around the pair and held out her hand. “Beth Vogel.”

He shook it. “Josiah.” It was odd, but not overly unsettling, that his mother-in-law greeted him so casually. He would have told her there was no need for formality, but it still surprised him, especially given that they’d grown up around the Øyanordian royal family.

Bekah released her tight hold on her father, but he kept his arm around her shoulders as she turned to her mother. “I’m pregnant. Early in my second trimester. I didn’t know until a while after the accident.”

Her mother held her arms open, and Bekah walked right into them. This hug also lasted an eternity as Jerry Vogel introduced himself to Josiah.

“Why don’t we go inside and talk some more?” Josiah said as Bekah and Mrs. Vogel finally loosened their grip. “I believe my brother and his wife and possibly my mother and her husband will be joining us in a little while.”

A minute later, they were all seated on a semi-comfortable couch and chairs. Not the worst he’d ever sat in, by far, but not nearly as cozy as the ones he had in the States or the new ones at the palace.

“Want to tell us what happened?” Mr. Vogel asked Bekah softly.

With a sigh, she launched into a short version of the story of their ill-fated excursion and the resultant visit to the consulate.

“That’s quite a story,” her father said as Bekah ended the story with their marriage and quick departure for Akushla. “Are you out of legal trouble?”

Josiah answered this one. “I think so. Benjamin and Thor will have a better idea.”

Voices could be heard outside the sitting room. They all turned and stood as Benjamin entered the room first with Katrín next to him and followed by their mother and Thor.

He realized her parents already knew Thor. That made sense. He’d worked in royal security for most of his adult life, until he’d married a former queen, and had the trust of multiple royal families, including the Øyanordian family and the San Majorian family. It was his connection to them that had led to the missing princess connecting with the man who, at his core, would always be a protector.

“So what’s the verdict on the whole thing in Athmetis?” Mr. Vogel asked Thor. “Is Bekah in the clear?”



“She will be,” Thor promised. “There’s no reason for the authorities there to come after the princess. They might threaten to, but they won’t, especially not now that she’s a part of the Quatremaïne family.”

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“Do you have any idea why they’re focusing on Bekah?” Mrs. Vogel asked.

Thor glanced at Benjamin then shook his head. “To have a scapegoat? I don’t really know. She had nothing to do with what happened. From all accounts, it was an accident. Nothing else.”

“Is there something more going on?” Mr. Vogel raised the question. “Is there some reason why they want Bekah to... take the fall for his death? I don’t even know if that’s the right phrase.”

Josiah watched as his stepfather seemed to turn the idea over in his head, but Josiah suspected there was something more. “It’s possible, I guess.”

“But why?” Mrs. Vogel pressed.

Thor shrugged, but something told Josiah he likely knew more than he was letting on at the moment. It wouldn’t be surprising. Thor had contacts all over the world, but especially in the smaller countries whose royal families had been close friends over the years. They had close relationships with all of the Quad-Countries, Øyanord, the three countries of Belles Montagnes, Athmetis, and New Sargasso. Thor knew the security teams in all of them. If there was something to know, Thor knew it.

“Is there anything we can do now?” Bekah’s mother asked. “Or just wait to see what Athmetis does?”

“Wait,” Thor told her.

“Then why don’t we have some dinner? I’ve ordered a meal for the eight of us on the other veranda.” Katrín stood and waited for the rest to join them.

“I need to go change if we’re having dinner.” Bekah looked at Josiah. “I don’t know how to get to our room from here.”

Katrín put her arm around Bekah’s waist. “Nonsense. The rest of us are jealous we’re not as comfortable as you are. You’re the envy of our group.”

Bekah glanced back at Josiah again. He smiled and nodded.

But as the rest of them left, Josiah tilted his head toward Thor. Benjamin stayed behind as well.

Josiah crossed his arms over his chest and stared at his stepfather. “What aren’t you telling us?”

\* \* \*

It wasn’t until they reached the other veranda that Bekah realized Josiah wasn’t with them. Neither were the king or her stepfather-in-law.

Odd.

Wasn’t it?

“Where are they?” her mother asked, looking around.

Bekah’s mother-in-law shrugged. “They may have had official business to discuss. We often don’t know. We’re not always privy to the information they are.”

“So you’ve learned to live with it?” her dad asked as he held a chair for her mom.

The former queen somehow indicated where everyone was supposed to sit without saying a word. Bekah took her seat facing the lake. Her parents were also on the side with the view. Interesting. Wouldn’t the higher-ranking royals have the better seats? It seemed Josiah would be at the head, at least if he sat next to her, but shouldn’t the king be there?

Or were they much less formal in private?

“Yes, you learn to live with it,” the former queen told them. “It’s not always fun, and sometimes you have dinner without your loved ones, but that’s a consequence of loving someone with so much responsibility. It comes with great privileges, like this home and view, but also with drawbacks.”

Things Bekah hadn’t thought through like most people would have before marrying into a royal family. At least she assumed those who married into a family like this would know ahead of time what they were getting into.

The current queen, and Bekah’s sister-in-law for the time being, set her napkin in her lap and reached for her fork. When Queen Mother Eliana did the same, Bekah and her parents followed suit. Apparently, they weren’t waiting for the others to join them before they started eating.

Sliding her napkin into her lap, she took a deep breath. She could do this.

The first bite of salad was everything a salad should be.

By the time she got to the third bite, Josiah, the king and Thor had joined them.

Conversation revolved around a number of topics, albeit nothing too serious. The

lighthearted banter between Josiah and his brother seemed to make their mother smile more than Bekah would have expected. Maybe it wasn't normal?

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Maybe they didn't have a normal sibling relationship growing up? It would be logical, she supposed. King Benjamin had likely always known he was different, that he would be king someday. The death of their father when he was thirteen would have thrust that upon him, separating him further from his siblings.

Two members of the staff cleared their salad plates and presented their entrée which was delicious. The rest of the family decided to go for a walk before dessert, but Josiah asked her to hang back for a moment.

"Are you up for a walk?" he asked quietly. "We can wait for them to get back."

Bekah glanced down, remembering that she was in her pajamas. "I think I'd rather stay here and meet them when they get back. I don't know that I want to go for a walk."

He texted someone, likely one of the people already working their way down the outer stairs to the garden.

"Let's go inside," he encouraged.

Out of the corner of her eye, Bekah saw several members of the staff scurry from out of the way behind them. Maybe going inside was Josiah's way of letting them do their job.

Despite trying to forget about the thought that had run through her head earlier, it had continued to niggle at the back of her mind.

Could this be the beginning of falling in love with Josiah?

It had to be far more than physical attraction. He was a good-looking guy. She didn't think he'd ever topped the "Hot Young Royals" lists the tabloids seemed to love, though he'd been on them.

Not that she'd read those lists closely.

And they had chemistry. She could feel that every time her skin came into contact with his for any reason. She felt certain he did too.

But was it more than that?

He'd always been kind and considerate of others. She'd noticed that since they first met. He wasn't entitled and didn't expect others to bow and scrape for him just because of who his father had been and his brother was.

It would be easy to fall in love with him.

If she let herself.

But did she dare after her last relationship? One she was starting to realize she'd been checking out of since before the wedding.

She sat in a chair that she found to be far more comfortable than it looked. Pulling her legs up underneath her, she let her head fall back as far as it could. Her eyes closed. Could she be ready for a nap already?

"You all right?" Josiah's voice cut through the darkness behind her eyes.

"Yeah. Just need some more rest. I'm okay, but glad we didn't go on the walk." She

opened her eyes but didn't move her head, looking at him from the side. He was cute.

Cute was an understatement.

"Do you want to go back to the room? To lay down?"

"No. I'm okay. I want to hang out with my parents and your family for a little while if they want to."

"Then close your eyes and rest until they get back."

She gave him a half smile. "Thanks."

For the next half hour, her mind wandered to the baby she carried. Was she going to have a boy or a girl? Did she want to know? Or did she want to be surprised when the baby arrived?

She wasn't sure how she felt about it. Maybe she should ask Josiah what he thought. Unless something changed in the next six months, he'd be the legal father of the baby. Would he be there when she gave birth? Would he be the first one to hold the baby? After her, of course, unless she wasn't able to for some reason.

Did she want him to be there?

Bekah wasn't sure, but why did the thought of him not being there suddenly make her so sad?

CHAPTER 13



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:12 pm*

As Bekah rested, the words of his stepfather echoed through Josiah's mind.

Steve may have been working for a dissident group, looking for Princess Regina. We don't think they knew who was the hidden prince or princess, so they sent out a number of people to try to get close to some of the families they suspected might be the ones who took in the infant.

That would bother Josiah for a long time. He already knew that. How could his judgment have been so impaired? How could he have let himself be taken in by a smooth talker? He didn't think he'd ever said anything that could be construed as an indication he knew where the princess had been hidden. Or anything that would have been considered classified about his family or the Eyjanian government or people.

There wasn't much he could have said anyway.

He didn't have access to nearly as much as his oldest brother, of course, but Gen had a lot more than he did. She would be the regent if anything happened to Ben before his oldest daughter turned eighteen.

So what could Steve have wanted with Josiah? Or was he just hoping to get closer to any royal family in hopes he could find out something, anything about the princess?

Or maybe it was just a coincidence.

He tried not to dwell on it while they waited for the family to return.

Before long, he heard the chatter of voices coming from a different direction.

He stood as they walked into the room. Bekah didn't stand but did sit up straighter.

"Are you feeling better, dear?" his mother asked her.

Bekah nodded. "I just wasn't up for a walk, but I am feeling much better. Plus, I'm not exactly dressed for it." She glanced down then back up with a small smile.

"No one would care." His mother gave a small laugh as she wrapped an arm around Bekah's shoulder. "But I understand." With a slight press of his mother's arm, they started for the veranda. "How about that dessert? We have Eyjanian ice cream waiting for us."

"That sounds lovely."

Josiah could tell Bekah leaned into his mother, just a little bit, as they walked. It made him smile to see them begin to bond.

As soon as they sat back down out on the veranda, ice cream was served. For an hour, they sat around the table, talking as a group long after the dessert bowls were cleared off the table.

He kept his arm around Bekah's waist as they walked back to their room.

"Thank you for arranging that." She rested the side of her head against him. "It was a lovely evening."

"I wish you hadn't fallen in the lake and been hurt, but I am glad your parents came, and you were able to spend some time with them."

"Me, too."

When they reached their quarters, Bekah went straight to the bathroom where he could hear her brush her teeth and water splashing seemed to indicate she also washed her face.

He moved to stand near the window on the far side of the bed, staring out at the midnight sun and contemplating things he never had before.

Like falling in love with his wife. That was a better thing to think about than how he'd been fooled by someone he considered a friend.

A few minutes later, Bekah emerged and headed for his side, probably because this had become her side of the bed. She slid her hand into his elbow and rested her head on his shoulder.

“You have to be exhausted, too, Josiah. You should get changed and get some rest, too.”

He turned and looked down at her, reaching his other hand around to brush a bit of blond hair off her face. “I will in a minute. I’ll pull the curtains. Get some rest.” This time he moved to stand in front of her, his hand cradling the side of her face.

For a long moment, they simply looked in each other’s eyes.

Then, before he could convince himself to kiss her properly, he leaned down and brushed a light one on her cheek. “Sleep well, Beks. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

She looked up at him and, for a second, Josiah thought she might kiss him, but instead she took a step back and nodded. “Sleep well.”

As she settled into her side of the bed, Josiah stuck his hands back in his pockets. Should he turn in as well? Or go talk to his brother and stepfather to find out more

about what they'd learned?

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But would they tell him any more than they already had?

Thor made it seem like the conversation ended because everyone else waited on them to start eating dinner, but was that the whole truth?

With a sigh, he pressed a hidden button on the wall. The heavy curtains closed, leaving the room shrouded in darkness. If there had been more to tell, more they could tell, they likely would have said something about talking more later.

Instead, he went to the bathroom and changed into a pair of pajama pants and an old t-shirt he'd left in the room when he'd stayed there some time in the past.

A few minutes later, he laid his head on the pillow and stared at the ceiling in the dark.

Bekah's quiet breathing told him she'd already fallen asleep.

But he had to clench the sheet in his fists to keep from doing something he'd never really wanted to before.

His willpower was the only thing that kept him from rolling over and wrapping an arm around Bekah as they slept.

With a sigh, Josiah rolled onto his side, facing away from Bekah and the now darkened wall of windows. Maybe someday.

He just found himself hoping someday soon.

\* \* \*

Two days after they arrived, Bekah found herself saying goodbye to her parents. They gave her big hugs and promised they'd be back before long. They were headed to Trumanville for a few weeks to take care of some things with work and other stuff. She wasn't quite sure what their plan was. They were fairly vague about it.

Maybe they were going to wrap everything up in Trumanville and move back to Øyanord now that Ginny - no, Regina - had taken her rightful place as the Crown Princess. Their jobs as her guardians were complete.

Meantime, she and Josiah needed to decide if they were going to stay at the lake or return to Akushla. Bekah wasn't sure what her preference would be.

If they returned to Akushla, her pregnancy wouldn't remain a secret very long. She'd had trouble buttoning another pair of pants, ones that had been a little too big before.

With a sigh, she flopped back on the bed, her eyes closed.

"Everything all right?"

She felt Josiah sit near her.

"Just trying to decide if I want to stay here or go back to Akushla when none of my clothes fit. I'd have to get bigger clothes or maternity clothes, and there would be no hiding it the next time we were in public. I could just stay here or stay in the palace and never go out, but that would drive me crazy."

"Then we go shopping or you and Gen go shopping or one of the palace stylists goes shopping for you and brings it all back for you to choose from. Then we go out to dinner and just let everyone say what they will. We'll have the PR office put out a

press release telling a slimmed down version of the truth. You were pregnant when you were widowed. In Athmetis, we realized we wanted to get married - no mention of why. I'll be the legal father of this baby from the beginning, and that's all that matters."

"Is that what it'll say?" She turned her head enough to see him.

"If we want it to. Or we don't say anything. The downside to that is then the media and everyone else makes up their own story until and unless we do decide to tell it." He looked down at her, and Bekah could see the compassion on his face. "I'll back whatever you want to do. Just say the word."

She turned her options over in her head. "I think I want to go back to Akushla. Probably have someone shop for me. I don't want to go out and shop. I don't particularly like to in the first place, but especially not given everything else at the moment." Blowing out a breath, she made sure her shirt was pulled down then rolled to the side. "And dinner sounds nice."

He leaned down and brushed a kiss against her forehead. "Then that's what we'll do. I'll let them know to make arrangements."

Bekah had no idea who "they" were, but at least she didn't have to take care of planning anything.

Josiah opened the door and stopped, looking at her over his shoulder. "You're welcome to borrow any of my clothes if you'd like. I left a pair of joggers I decided not to wear in the closet, and I'm sure there's a t-shirt, too." With that, he walked out the door, closing it behind him.

Joggers? It took most of her energy and uncooperative stomach muscles to sit up. Standing proved to be easier. In the closet, she found a pair of sweat pants lying over

the chair in there. She'd never had a closet big enough for furniture.

Was that what he meant by joggers? She slipped off the pajama pants she was wearing and put the joggers on. She breathed a sigh of relief as they turned out to be much more comfortable. But it meant her shirt was too nice, so she pulled one of Josiah's t-shirts out of the drawer. It was comfortably big on her. Very nice. She could get used to this.

Before long, they were in an SUV headed back to Akushla. Bekah found herself grateful for the neck pillow Josiah had given her. She didn't know if it was his or someone else's, but it made it easier for her to doze off.

Josiah seemed to be doing work of some sort in the front passenger seat, though she didn't know what.



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He turned around. “Before you go to sleep, there’s not a lot of reception for the first half of the trip or so. Once there is, one of the stylists at the palace will talk to you to get a feel for your style and what you like before she either goes shopping or has clothes brought in.”

“Clothes brought in?” Was her brain just slow to process it, or did that not make any sense?

“Yep. Some boutiques or designers will bring clothes to the palace so you can shop, as it were, there.”

“That’s handy.” And her kind of shopping, though she’d probably still have to try a bunch of stuff on. She didn’t relish that, but at least she wouldn’t be in a tiny changing room.

Her eyes closed, and she let herself doze. As they drove, she found herself sort of semi-aware of what went on around her, but not of everything.

The next thing she knew, they were in the garrison - wasn’t that what Josiah called the garage area? - and someone had opened her door.

“We’re here?” she asked, her voice groggy even to her own ears.

“Yep.” Josiah held out a hand to help her.

“What about the call with the stylist?” She removed the neck pillow then took his hand. She didn’t let go of it as they walked toward the door.

“They were able to look at enough pictures on your social media accounts and from all the publicity with your sister to get some ideas, at least enough to get started.” He dropped her hand and wrapped his arm around her shoulder. “Now, let’s go get you some maternity clothes.”

Bekah leaned into him. “That sounds perfect.”

## CHAPTER 14

A dinner date with his wife.

Something Josiah wouldn’t have expected a month earlier.

Much less his now obviously pregnant wife.

Where they were sure to be spotted and pictures taken and rumors flying.

They’d decided to have the palace press office put out a release at some point during dinner. They wouldn’t release it until there started to be whispers in the media. Someone would be watching them, and the photographers were sure to show up wherever they went.

This was, after all, their first real outing as a couple.

He knew Bekah was nervous about it all. She’d never eased into the public life. It would have been better to show up at a function where they weren’t the center of attention. After doing that a few times, they could have gone on a date where they’d be noticed.

She hadn’t said as much to him, not in so many words, but he’d seen her fussing with her hair, and she’d changed clothes at least twice.

“You look fantastic, Beks.” He reached over and took her hand, lacing their fingers together. “And you are fantastic. It’s going to be fine. I promise.”

He didn’t take his eyes off the road but heard her suck in a deep breath. “I know it’ll be okay. I’m still nervous.”

“It’s okay to be nervous. Anyone would be. Almost anyone,” he amended. “Evie married an international superstar actor. He probably wasn’t. She showed up at a benefit pretending to be Gen because Gen was sick. Pete knew right away because he and Gen were friends. I don’t think anyone else caught on.”

“Pete?”

“Sir Peter Barker. The biggest movie star to come out of Eyjania. He’s starring in a couple big movies series over the next few years. They’ve both already started.”

“I think I’ve seen a couple of them. If they’re the ones I’m thinking of, they were good.”

Josiah flipped on his blinker and let go of her hand to make a tight turn into the drive of the restaurant.

Fortunately, there weren’t actually any photographers there.

Yet.

It wasn’t a location they staked out often, but was one of Josiah’s favorites. Nice enough to have valet parking, but not too fancy. He’d heard it called “yuppie” once. That wasn’t a word he was familiar with. A quick Internet search said it was something about young people with good jobs and fashionable lives.

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He supposed that described him, though he wasn't sure he'd call his job overly good. His finances were commensurate with the definition. That came from inheritances, not income, but the end result was the same.

Hadn't Ben and Katrín come here on one of their first public dates?

A moment later, Bekah's hand sat snugly in his elbow as they walked inside. A few people waited off to the side. He supposed their tables weren't ready yet, but he was greeted immediately.

"Your Royal Highnesses, we are so happy to have you here." The maître d' bowed slightly their direction. "If you would please follow me..." He walked through two large potted plants into the dining area. "Your favorite table, sir." The man held a chair for Bekah while Josiah took his own seat. He handed each of them a menu. "It would be our pleasure to get you both something to drink while you peruse the menu." He turned Bekah. "Madam?"

"Just a glass of ice water, please."

Josiah knew the man had seen her noticeable, but not too big yet, baby bump.

"Same for me, please."

"Of course." He bowed slightly again and hurried away.

Bekah leaned closer to him. "I don't think I've ever eaten anywhere this nice. Are you sure I'm dressed appropriately?"

With a smile, Josiah covered her hand with his. “You’re fine. And even if you weren’t, no one would say anything.”

“Not to my face.” She somehow managed to talk without moving her lips. Not even a lip reader would know what she was saying.

“True.” He tried to give a reassuring smile. “But no one is thinking it.”

There had been some side-eyes, secretive photo taking, and even some blatant staring as they walked through the restaurant. Pictures would make their way onto social media quickly. He thought about texting the PR team, but they would already be on it. It wouldn’t surprise him if they’d already released the statement.

They turned their attention to the menu. Josiah had something different every time he came, but he’d never had anything he didn’t enjoy, and he told Bekah that when she asked.

The waiter arrived with their water. He bowed their direction. “Your Royal Highnesses, it will be my pleasure to serve you this evening. Would you care to start with an hors d'oeuvre?”

Josiah looked to Bekah who shrugged. “It’s up to you. Everything sounds delicious.”

“Do you trust me to order for you?” He’d been around her enough to guess at something she might enjoy without being too risky.

After a split-second’s hesitation, she nodded. “I trust you.”

He ordered their meals then handed the menus to the waiter.

“What did you get?” Bekah asked him quietly.

Josiah grinned. “You’ll see.”

She rolled her eyes his direction.

Before he could talk himself out of it, Josiah held out a hand toward her. “May I have the pleasure of this dance?”

The hesitation this time was a bit longer, but he doubted anyone else would notice. She put her hand in his. “Of course.”

Josiah held her hand while she stood then led her to the dance floor. The musicians started a new song, one he didn’t recognize.

Cognizant of the eyes on them, and not wanting to make Bekah uncomfortable, he kept a reasonable distance between them as she moved into his arms.

“Are you feeling all right about this?” he asked softly.

“About what? Us? Or being here?” She looked up at him, but not quite in the eye. Anyone watching them likely wouldn’t know the difference, but he did.

“Either. Both.”

“I think I’m glad I’m not going through this pregnancy alone like I thought I would. I know I’d have my parents, but it’s not the same as having a partner.”

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Was it his imagination or did she move a little closer to him?

His hand on her waist tightened slightly. “Then I’m glad I’m your partner.”

\* \* \*

Dancing wasn’t something Bekah had planned to do when Josiah asked her if she wanted to have dinner. She hadn’t even known it was an option.

But now that she was dancing with Josiah, it was like, somewhere in the back of her mind, she wondered why she hadn’t been doing this for years already.

Yet at the same time, Bekah thought she believed him when he said he was glad to be her partner, but wasn’t sure she should.

Ian clearly left her with some trust issues.

By the time the dance finished, Bekah still hadn’t decided if she could take Josiah’s words at face value. Josiah had never given her reason not to trust him, but it was likely going to take some time.

He took her hand again as the song ended, and she trailed behind him back to their table.

People watched out of the corner of their eyes. Some were a little more blatant. A few phones were subtle. A number were less so.

Josiah held her seat for her. Within seconds after he took his seat, two waiters appeared with the first part of their meal. Was it the first course? An appetizer? Was there a difference?

Regardless of what it was called, it was delicious.

The conversation stayed light as they finished that course and started the next. They never delved into deeper topics. Bekah didn't know why. Maybe because they were in public? She didn't think anyone was close enough to overhear, but there were always body language and lip-reading experts that would dissect everything from the time they emerged from the palace to the time they returned. So maybe that had something to do with it.

When they emerged from the restaurant, a small crowd had gathered on either side of the doors. Security had appeared from somewhere, making sure to keep a walkway clear.

Josiah leaned over and whispered in her ear. "Just smile and wave. We don't have to talk to anyone right now."

She just nodded. His hand came to rest on her lower back as they started across the sidewalk toward the vehicle.

The people on both sides started talking, louder and louder, trying to be heard over everyone else.

One voice stood out above the others. "P'incess Be'ah!"

She turned her head to see a little girl, probably about four, standing with her mother holding a teddy bear a few feet away.



Without realizing she'd made a decision, Bekah took the two steps and crouched down next to the child. As soon as it hit her what she'd done, Bekah prayed she'd be able to stand back up gracefully. "Hello."

The little girl halfway turned against her mom's leg. At least that's who Bekah assumed stood next to them with a hand on the girl's strawberry blond hair. "Mama says you gonna have a baby."

Bekah could barely hear the girl with her sudden shyness. "I am."

The girl held out the well-loved teddy bear. "For the baby."

Tears filled Bekah's eyes as she took the bear, running a hand over the soft fur and noting the places where it had been mended repeatedly. "Is this your favorite bear?" she asked gently.

The girl nodded, tears in her own eyes, but she made no move to take the bear back.

"You know what?" Bekah held the bear out. "My baby won't be here for a while. Would you take care of the bear for me until the baby asks for it?" Her baby would never ask for it, and the little girl could keep her bear.

The girl nodded and took it back. "I take care of Beary."

"Thank you." Bekah needed to stand up now before her legs fell asleep. "I appreciate it." As gracefully as she could, she stood, Josiah's hand coming to her back again almost immediately.

The girl's mother gave a slight nod and mouthed a thank you as Bekah was led away. For no reason other than they were both little girls, she'd reminded Bekah of Lisette. They'd been so happy to hear that her mother had returned, safe and sound, and the

mother-daughter duo were doing well.

A few minutes later they were headed back down the street toward the palace.

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“You didn’t have to stop and talk to her, you know,” Josiah told her. “Security would usually rather you didn’t work a rope line without clearing it with them first.”

Great. She’d screwed up by having a conversation with a little girl. Staring out the window, she struggled to keep tears from filling her eyes. That was stupid. Why should that upset her?

“It doesn’t have to be a big discussion ahead of time or anything, just kind of give them a look and wait for a nod.”

That was a bit better. At least she wasn’t going to be in some kind of real trouble.

“What you did was great. You let the little girl know that you appreciated her gift, and it meant a lot to you, while at the same time not taking something she clearly loved. She’s doing you a favor by taking care of her bear.”

The tears managed to stay put and even retreat some. “I couldn’t take it from her. She likely takes it everywhere and can’t sleep without it.” She stared at the passing urban scenery. “There’s probably going to be some talking head on a gossip show saying I rejected the gift and broke the girl’s heart in the process, isn’t there?”

“It’s possible.” He flipped on the blinker to turn into palace grounds.

“Someone is going to misinterpret everything I do from now on, aren’t they?” She leaned her head back against the head rest.

“It’s possible,” Josiah acquiesced again. “Not everyone. Not most people. But there

are always a few.”

The car came to a stop under the portico. They entered the palace together but weren't greeted by anyone other than a staff member who happened to be walking through and paused to let them go by first, giving a deferential nod as they did.

The whole thing made Bekah uncomfortable, and a thought started to roll around in her head.

If given a real choice, would she have chosen this life?

Or, no matter what happened between her and Josiah, now that she'd been married to a prince and having a child who would be legally his, would she be stuck with it for eternity?

## CHAPTER 15

When Josiah walked into Benjamin's office, he immediately knew something was off.

His eldest brother sat behind his desk with Thor on the other side, along with the king's Head of Security.

“What is it?”

Benjamin motioned to one of the chairs. “Have a seat. We've had confirmation of the information about why the government in Athmetis is so keen on talking to the two of you.”

Josiah looked from one man to the other. “Why? It was an accident. Tragic, but an accident.”

“We know that. We believe they even know that. But there’s more to it.” Benjamin picked up a tablet and handed it to Josiah. “Do you know any of those people?”

After carefully studying the six faces, Josiah shook his head. “I don’t know any of them. I don’t think so, anyway. I could have run into one of them somewhere, but if so, I don’t remember.” He handed the tablet back to his brother. “Who are they?”

Benjamin glanced at their stepfather and gave a slight nod.

Thor took over the meeting. “They’re agents of a separatist group in Øyanord. We believe they were trying to find the lost princess, but they didn’t have enough information to go on. Years ago, they sent surveillance teams to scout a number of ex-pat families then sent operatives to the ones who had children the right age. They infiltrated the inner circles of these families as much as they could. One of them even went so far as to become engaged to the target.”

Josiah could almost feel the wheels turning in his head. “So Steve was a part of this group, wasn’t he? He’d been trying to get close to Ginny this whole time?” The sinking feeling in his stomach intensified.

“We believe so,” Thor confirmed.

“He used me?” Josiah tried to remember how he met the other man. “I didn’t do anything to out her, did I? I didn’t even know.” He’d learned about Ginny’s claim to the Øyanordian throne at the same time the rest of the world did, more or less. He thought he’d heard about it shortly before, but only a day or two at most - whenever the article came out saying she looked a lot like a young version of the crown princess of Øyanord.

“No.” Thor was emphatic.

That relieved Josiah a little bit.

His stepfather went on. “We believe he had to have known for quite some time, given the physical resemblance between the mother and daughter. The separatists have probably known that for a long time, but weren’t ready to make a move just yet. They likely had a kidnapping plan in place, but she disappeared before they had a chance to execute it. We don’t know what they might have been waiting for. An official search maybe? But her disappearance almost certainly saved her a lot of pain and heartache and, quite possibly, her life.”

“I’m glad to hear it wasn’t me, but I am a bit concerned that someone with that background and intention was able to get so close to any of us without at least one of the security teams figuring it out long before this.” Josiah leaned back in his seat. “Does that bother anyone else?”

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Justin gave him a look, though not nearly as strong as the one Benjamin gave him. Josiah purposely avoided looking at Thor. “Of course it does,” Justin answered. “We’re trying to figure that out. The most obvious answer is that we don’t keep an overly close eye on Øyanordian separatists unless they’re entering Eyjania. These people were deep undercover with impeccable credentials. It seems probable that heads will roll in Øyanord. They should have been keeping a better eye on the separatists who would likely try to find the princess, even if no one officially knew where she was.”

“I thought that was the whole point of the Vogels taking her somewhere far away, that no one would know where she was.” Josiah clearly didn’t understand security measures.

“It was,” Thor confirmed. “They had no idea where the princess was being raised. They should have kept a better watch on known subversive organizations that could reasonably be expected to look for her at some point. But they didn’t, so that’s where we are now.”

“What does that have to do with not wanting us to leave Athmetis if they knew the accident was just that?” That part didn’t make sense to Josiah.

“They wanted to make sure you weren’t in cahoots with him.” Benjamin answered that question. “There are allegations he was also conducting corporate espionage while in Athmetis. They wanted to make sure you and Bekah weren’t a part of it.”

Josiah’s eyes narrowed. “They really thought a Quatremain would stoop to something like that? I thought we had a better reputation than that.”

“Most of you do,” Thor answered quietly. “No one’s forgotten Isaiah.” That the former head of security didn’t use Josiah’s uncle’s title spoke volumes more than the words themselves.

Josiah looked between the three men. “But Isaiah is dead.”

Something about the way the three of them didn’t look at each other but kept focused on Josiah made him suspicious. “What? What is it you’re not telling me?”

With a sigh, Benjamin leaned forward, resting his forearms on his desk. “As far as we know, Isaiah was severely wounded when he went off that boat and most likely eaten by sharks or otherwise weighted down in some fashion so his remains were never found.”

“But...?” Josiah could hear an incomplete thought in his brother’s voice.

Thor took over. “But since his remains were never found, there is a chance, however slight, that he somehow managed to survive. We’ve found no evidence he had access to a... submarine or other conveyance that would have taken him from the scene without the WLRs noticing in person or on radar or any of the recordings of multiple kinds looked at later.”

“So because my evil uncle may or may not be dead, another country thinks I’m capable of espionage? What have I ever done to give them that impression?” Josiah looked from one man to another waiting for an answer. “Well?”

Thor answered again. “You were on vacation with a known criminal element. What were they supposed to think? I would have done the same thing.”

\* \* \*



With a yawn, Bekah contemplated a nap. She hadn't slept well the night before wondering what the tabloids would say. She shouldn't worry about them, but knowing she shouldn't and actually not worrying were two entirely different things. At least the pamphlet thing had blown over quickly.

Were princesses allowed to nap in the middle of the afternoon? Surely pregnant ones could.

The door to the apartment flung open and then closed as Josiah stormed in.

She'd never seen the look on his face before and didn't quite know what to make of it - and wasn't about to ask him what happened. If he already looked that mad, she didn't want to make it worse.

"I can't believe it!" He began pacing around the room in big squares through the open spaces. "I absolutely cannot believe it."

Bekah wanted to ask what he couldn't believe but didn't dare.

"They think..." He growled rather than continue. His pacing went on for several more minutes with angry mutterings punctuating the air - including a bit of language she'd never heard from him before.

Whatever it was, it had to be big.

Eventually, the pacing slowed to a less angry walk and the mutterings were punctuated by more sighs and quieter growls. Finally, he flopped onto one of the chairs.

"I can't believe it," he said a bit louder than his last mutterings and let his head flop back to look at the ceiling.

Bekah finally dared to speak, certain most of his anger had been spent and shouldn't spill over onto her. "Believe what?"

"Steve was an Øyanordian spy from one of their separatist groups. He was spying on your sister, infiltrating her friend group as far as he could. He's also suspected of espionage in Athmetis. That's why they didn't want to let us leave."

"Because Steve was committing espionage?" Bekah tried to assimilate the information. "What does that have to do with us?"

"They seem to think we might have been part of it. Because everyone remembers how evil my uncle was, the Quatremaine name has been dragged through the mud and isn't enough to get the benefit of the doubt anymore."

"Your uncle, Isaiah?"

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Josiah blew out a breath. “And it turns out...” He pointed a finger straight at her. “I’m not sure I’m really supposed to know this, so you can’t tell anyone else. Okay?”

Bekah nodded. “Okay.”

“They’re not sure Isaiah is dead. After a... thing, a situation I’m not supposed to talk about, he was seen going overboard while bleeding profusely. There were some sort of sharks in the area. Sharks that have been known to eat people before. His remains were never found so the assumption has always been that he was eaten by the sharks.”

Realization dawned. “But they can’t prove it, so they’re always half looking over their shoulders wondering if he’s coming back.”

“I guess. I don’t know who else knew that, but I certainly didn’t. It would have been nice to know.” He sat up then leaned forward resting his forearms on his knees. “I get why they haven’t told very many people, but I still think they should have told those of us living on our own with little to no security on a regular basis. Then we could be on the lookout ourselves.”

“I’m sure they had a reason,” Bekah pointed out, trying to be diplomatic. “The more people know a secret, the more likely it is to be leaked, even if you trust all of the people who know. Something could inadvertently slip.”

“I know. I get it. That doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

A knock on the door caused both of them to look over.

“Come in,” Josiah called.

The door opened to let the king, his head of security, and Thor in.

“We have something else we need to discuss with both of you,” Benjamin told them. “Would you like to talk here or come down to the outer area to my quarters?”

Bekah shrugged.

Josiah glared at them then stood. “I don’t want my home sullied by this conversation.”

He put his hand on Bekah’s back as they exited the apartment and went down the hall to a door she hadn’t noticed before - that’s how well it was hidden within the design of the wall. Inside was something like the lobby of a high-end hotel - or what Bekah imagined it would be like anyway. Dark wood, plush leather chairs and sofas. Paintings of kings of the past lined the walls. She should probably brush up on her Eyjanian royal history.

Once they were all seated, Benjamin took over again. “There is another piece of disturbing information that has come to our attention.”

“What’s that?” Josiah asked, snark filling his voice. “Papa isn’t really dead either?”

The glare Benjamin and Thor both sent his way told Bekah all she needed to know about how that remark hit home.

Josiah immediately deflated, his shoulders slumping. “I shouldn’t have said that. I don’t think that. I just lashed out, and I shouldn’t have. I apologize.”

Both of the other men simply nodded.

“It seems that Steve recruited someone else to his cause.” Benjamin tapped on a tablet a few times. “Unfortunately, Rebekah, it’s someone you know well.”

A thousand thoughts flew through her head. It couldn’t be her parents or her brother. One of their other friends? No name that entered her mind then left just as quickly could be right.

Then Benjamin handed the tablet to her.

Bekah gasped and blinked trying to take it in.

“Ian?” she whispered. “He was scheming with Steve to get to my sister?”

“We believe so,” Benjamin told her. “We’re not certain yet, but it looks that way.”

The churning in her stomach intensified. “Where’s a trash can?”

She managed to get the question out as the churning turned even more violent.

When she tried to remember it later, she couldn’t. Bekah just knew that as she retched, as tears flowed down her cheeks, someone held something for her to lose what little breakfast she’d eaten into. Someone held her hair. Someone rubbed her back.

When the heaves subsided, she sat back on her haunches, uncertain when she’d moved into a kneeling position on the floor.

“I didn’t know,” she whispered, tears streaming down her cheeks. “I swear, I didn’t know.”

### CHAPTER 16

The heartbreak in Bekah's voice tore at Josiah.

"No one thinks you did, love." He sat on the floor next to her, holding her in his arms.

"What does it mean? Am I in any kind of trouble?"

He rubbed his hand up and down her shoulder. "No. Of course not."

She took a deep breath and managed to push herself up. Once back on a chair, Bekah took another breath. "I'm glad you guys don't think I had anything to do with this. I didn't know." Tears continued to streak down her cheeks.

"No one thinks you did." Benjamin's voice was far kinder than it would have been before he married Katrín. "But we do have a few questions for you."

For the next few minutes, all three men asked her question after question, though their tones remained gentle. As expected, she didn't know anything of substance or have access to any materials her late husband might have left behind.

Though she wasn't aware of anything, she would give them access to her home whenever she was able to return.

"Hopefully soon," Justin told them. "The authorities in Athmetis have no real reason to keep you on the hook, so to speak. They would like to speak with both of you again."

Benjamin took over. “We think it would be best if you did. We’ll have security and attorneys with you. It will be conducted in a conference room here in person or virtually. They would rather interview you in person, but in Athmetis. We will not allow that.”

“Could they keep us there?” Bekah looked at him, her eyes wide. “Would they be able to do that?”

Justin’s face scrunched up a bit. “Maybe? If they charged either one of you with a serious enough crime, they could go before a magistrate and argue that you are a flight risk for financial reasons. Whether a magistrate would agree or not is a different story.”

“I doubt King Adrian would agree if I confronted him,” Benjamin interjected.

Josiah looked at his brother with a renewed respect. Since his marriage to Katrín, or maybe a little before when King Edward of San Majoria started mentoring him, Ben had become more confident and less outwardly cocky. There was a difference that everyone could see. He stood taller, something difficult for a man already well over six-foot tall, and straighter. He simply exuded more confidence than before. He had become a man comfortable in his own skin and in the role he was born to fill.

For a brief moment, Josiah felt jealous of his brother. He wasn’t quite any of those things yet. Then he remembered the pressures his brother had to deal with regularly and decided being the younger brother wasn’t so bad after all. He’d get there. Eventually. He hoped.

Thor nodded his agreement with Ben. “It’s unlikely King Adrian would hold a hard line, but we’d rather not be in that position in the first place. Here we control access and egress. We won’t send you there.”

“Thank you,” Bekah told them, clearly still reeling.

“Why don’t the two of you get something to eat and get some rest?” Thor suggested.

Josiah stood and held out a hand to his wife. “Thank you. Let us know what we need to do.”

She slid her hand into his for support as she stood up. With his hand on her back, they walked to their apartment.

When had he started thinking of it as their apartment instead of just his? And when had he started thinking of her as “wife” instead of just “Bekah”?

What did that mean?

Was he committing to this relationship? Was he falling for Bekah?

Could he see himself actually spending the rest of his life with her?

Before he could answer those questions for himself, they were in their apartment, and Bekah was in his arms. Weeping shook her body as she clung to him.

There wasn’t anything for him to do except hold her and let her cry until she was ready to be done.

He closed his eyes and rested his cheek against her head. Her arms tightened around his waist.

How could someone do this to her? He hadn’t known her for long, but Bekah was amazing. How could anyone hurt her like this?



Eventually, the body wracking sobs slowed until they were little more than hiccups.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“It’s what I’m here for.” His hand continued to rub up and down her back. “I just hate that you’re going through all of this.”

“I’m sorry I dragged you into all of it.”

“You didn’t. I thought Steve was my friend, too. Even if you hadn’t gone with us to Athmetis, I still would have gone. I’d still be under suspicion as well.” He kissed her hair. “We’ll figure it out. My brother, Thor, and Justin won’t send us in alone or unprepared.”

“They can have everything of his.” She had switched to talking about her late husband, but likely couldn’t even bring herself to say his name. “I don’t want any of it. Nothing he bought me. Nothing that was his to start with. Nothing we bought together. I have a few things from the house I want, things that were mine or that I inherited, but I don’t want anything else.”

“I’ll let them know.”

Bekah loosened her grip so Josiah followed suit. “Thanks again. I think I’m going to go splash some water on my face.”

While she headed for the bedroom, Josiah went to the window and stared out over the courtyard and to the view of Akushla beyond. Was he falling in love with Bekah?

Could there be any chance she was falling in love with him?

The sudden ache in his heart meant that he'd begun to feel far more than simple friendship for her.

If he decided he did want more from this relationship, then only one question remained.

Did Bekah?

\* \* \*

With a deep breath, Bekah waited to be called into the conference room. With the help of her stylish sister-in-law and her sister-in-law's stylist, she wore a new outfit. This one felt elegant and professional. It didn't hide her bump, but didn't accentuate it either.

They didn't want to draw attention to the fact that she would give birth to Ian's child, but attempting to hide it completely with baggy clothes would give a different kind of unwanted attention.

Josiah wouldn't be in the room with her. That bothered Bekah, though she understood the reasons why. He'd enter after she left. They wouldn't be able to hear each other's answers that way.

She didn't anticipate there would be any discrepancies, but the authorities from Athmetis wanted to be sure. The wait seemed interminable. Were they trying to make her uncomfortable so she'd be off her game? Not that she thought it was a game.

Finally, the door opened.

"Please join us, Ms. Vogel."

Bekah did as she'd been briefed and ignored the man. Her name wasn't Vogel anymore, and she had a title the man should use. It didn't matter to her, but she could appreciate why they told her that.

"Ms. Vogel." This time the man sounded more annoyed.

She continued to focus on a magazine she'd brought to give her something to do while she waited. It was better than fidgeting.

Or so she'd been told.

"Ms. Vogel!" The irritation had grown.

Bekah licked a finger and used it to turn the page, not actually reading - much less comprehending - anything on the page.

"Can I help you, sir?" Chamberlain, King Benjamin's chief assistant, entered the room. Bekah didn't know if that was his real title, but it seemed appropriate.

"We're ready for Ms. Vogel." If anything the irritation grew worse.

"I do apologize, sir. There is no Ms. Vogel here." Bekah wondered how he could keep a straight face.

"Then who is this?" Was he indignant now?

"You shall address her as Her Royal Highness, Princess Rebekah Quatremaire of Eyjania."

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Bekah couldn't see the man, but she'd bet he rolled his eyes so far he could see his brain.

He turned toward her. "Your Royal Highness, would you be so kind as to accompany me into the conference room?"

Setting the magazine to the side, Bekah stood, grateful she didn't have to wear the towering heels she'd seen on so many other women in royal families. She hated those things.

The man stood to the side and allowed her to enter first.

On the other side of the table sat several older men, all looking quite grumpy. The man who'd come to get her joined them.

Her side of the table held two barristers she'd met with several times in the last couple of days, Thor, and an empty chair she figured was for her. The way the seats were arranged, the king was clearly with her group but seated at the head of the table.

Made sense.

Well, it only made sense in whatever world she now inhabited was - one where she'd married a prince, but only after her late husband, and someone she'd considered a friend, planned to kill her sister.

The gentlemen on her side of the table all stood as she walked toward them. Thor held the empty chair for her.

Once she was seated, the man directly across from her began to speak. He seemed to be in charge. Maybe?

“Ms. Vogel...”

“No.” Benjamin’s voice was quiet but carried significant authority.

The man looked over at him. “What’s the problem, sir?”

“The princess is a part of the Quatremaire family. You would do well to remember that.” The tone carried an implied threat, though Bekah didn’t know what the threat was. She guessed the other man did.

“Your Royal Highness, please tell us what you knew about Ian’s dealings with Steve.” She could hear the undertones of snark when he said the title.

“They were friends. That’s all I knew. I don’t know how they met or what they talked about when I wasn’t around. When I was around, it was pretty innocuous stuff. Their families, my family, dinner, the next wrestling match or whatever bloody, fighting thing it was they were going to watch. Things of that nature.”

“Did either one of them ever mention Øyanord to you?”

“Not to my recollection.” She was supposed to use that phrase or one like it a lot when she was pretty sure something hadn’t happened but wasn’t absolutely sure.

“Did you know you were a native Øyanordian?” Another man asked this question.

“How is that relevant?” one of the barristers asked.

“We believe it is,” the head guy replied.

She didn't know their names. Maybe she should make some up. Larry, Moe, and Curly? Except the guy she would call Curly was bald.

Larry, Darryl, and Darryl? Few people of her generation would get that joke.

Kirk, Spock, McCoy? Luke, Han, and Chewie? The Hanson Brothers? Amigo Uno, Amigo Dos, y Amigo Tres? Her high school Spanish teacher would be mortified to discover Bekah didn't remember much more than that.

"Ma'am, please answer the question." Yep. Curly could turn on the snark while still being just polite enough not to get called out on it.

"No." Short and simple. Her inclination was to explain, but they'd told her not to unless the question absolutely required it.

"Did you believe yourself to be native to the United States?"

The barrister to her right held up a hand. "Are you aware of the connotations that statement could have in the United States?"

The three men looked at each other. Curly spoke for them. "I'm afraid not."

"I would recommend rewording your question."

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Curly glared at the man while speaking to Bekah. “Did you believe that you had been born in the United States?”

“No.” She’d always known they’d moved when she was a small child, but had no idea where her parents came from. They were close lipped about all of it.

“How will you respond when we tell you we have evidence you were a part of the plot to kill Princess Regina, who you believed to be your sister?” Curly leaned closer.

And Bekah laughed.

## CHAPTER 17

Was that laughter coming from the conference room?

It took all of Josiah’s willpower to stay seated and not pace the outer office.

Another twenty minutes passed before the door opened, and Bekah emerged.

She looked at him and winked, but didn’t say a word. He’d known she wouldn’t. Nothing that could be construed as communication.

But what was the wink about?

He stewed for another ten minutes before the door opened. This time Thor came out.

“They have decided the inquiry is over, and they don’t need to speak with you, sir.”



He inclined his head toward Josiah. “You are free to leave and find your wife.”

Josiah thanked him. He found it so odd that his mother’s husband would act that way and address him like that, though he understood why in a more formal setting. If Thor did it in private, they’d all glare at him and refuse to answer. It had taken some time for him to get comfortable calling them by their first names when they were together as a family.

And he would likely never be truly comfortable calling Ben by his name, much less the diminutive.

“Thank you, Thor.” Josiah nodded toward him then walked as sedately as he could toward the stairs where he’d be out of sight of anyone official. Then he could hurry more toward their apartment.

Bekah couldn’t have beaten him by much. When he reached their hallway, his phone buzzed. The text made him want to whoop and holler. As he entered the living area, she emerged from the bedroom having changed clothes into something more comfortable.

“Did you finish already?” She seemed stunned.

“They decided they didn’t need to talk to me. They’re dropping the whole thing.”

She gaped at him. “What?”

“It’s over.”

Bekah squealed and threw her arms around his neck. He grasped her around the waist and spun her around.

“Oh, my goodness!” Her grip on him tightened. “Why?”

“Does it matter?” Josiah set her feet back on the ground. His hands came to rest on her hips.

Bekah looked up at him, tears in her eyes. “No, I don’t suppose it does. Not really, but it would be nice to know. Just so we know what changed.”

Josiah found himself glancing down, just a little farther, to her lips and wondered what it would be like to kiss her. What would she think if he did?

Before he could make a decision, her hands slid down his upper arms then somehow managed to snake around his waist.

Her cheek came to rest against his chest. Josiah moved to hold her a little more tightly.

“I don’t think I want to vacation in Athmetis again anytime soon, though.”

Josiah chuckled. “I’m inclined to agree with you. We can find other places to vacation.”

She went oddly still and silent.

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“What is it?” he asked after she didn’t say anything for what seemed like an eternity.

“We? If it’s over, I can go home, and you can be released from your obligation to protect me. There’s no need for us to be ‘we’ anymore.”

The realization slammed into him with nearly enough force to knock him over. “No,” he replied slowly, vowing not to loosen his grip until she did. “I don’t suppose there is.”

Her arms dropped to her sides so Josiah let her go as she stepped back. “Thank you,” she told him, not looking his way. “I can’t tell you how much I appreciate your support since the accident.”

“It’s been my pleasure, Beks. I’m glad I was there to help.”

She nodded and turned away from him, going into the bedroom and shutting the door behind her.

With a groan, he collapsed into the chair. That could have gone better.

Before he could go after her, someone knocked.

His brother and Thor stood on the other side.

“We need to talk to you,” Benjamin told him. “Both of you.”

Josiah glanced at the closed door behind him. “I’m pretty sure Bekah’s taking a nap.”

It seemed like a reasonable assumption.

The other two men shared a look.

“Can you come with us then? We don’t want to bother her.” Ben led the way out the door. Josiah followed behind Thor.

When they were in the same outer room as a few nights before, they all took seats.

“What’s going on?” He looked between his brother and stepfather wondering why they looked so somber if the Athemtis issue had been resolved.

“We still have to deal with everything on our end,” Thor told him with a sigh. “You were still on vacation with a known separatist who was committing espionage. Your wife’s late husband was in league with him. We know those things. But is there anything you could have said or done that would give those separatists knowledge about the Quatremaine family or the inner workings of our government or security measures that they could pass on to dissident groups here in Eyjania?”

Josiah shook his head. “I don’t think so. I’ve always been careful with what I say and who I say it to. I haven’t even shown Bekah the tunnels yet.” He probably shou...

No. If she wanted out of this marriage now that the threat was over, he wouldn’t stop her - and she wouldn’t need to know how to get to safety if something happened.

Even if he’d always remember how he’d wondered what it would be like to kiss her.

“We still need to talk to both of you. The protection team leader from Øyanord is on his way. He wants to talk to both of you, too.” Thor leaned back in his seat. “I know it’s unlikely that you let anything slip, but they have to follow procedures, and so do we.”

Josiah blew out a breath. “I get it. I’m sure Bekah will, too. Doesn’t mean we have to be happy about it.”

“We aren’t either,” Ben agreed. “But it still has to be done.”

Standing, Josiah started for the door. “I’ll let Bekah know. Where do we need to meet you?”

\* \* \*

When Bekah emerged from the bedroom a few minutes after she’d entered it, Josiah was nowhere to be seen.

Odd.

Before she could decide what her plan would be, there was a knock on the door.

She opened it to find the king’s head of security standing there.

“Do you have a moment, Your Royal Highness?” He inclined his head her direction.

Would she ever get used to that? Would she need to?

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“I have all the time in the world, I think.” She opened the door a bit farther. “Please come in.”

“It would be better if you came with me, ma’am.”

Not knowing what else to do, Bekah nodded and went with him.

They walked through the family’s section of the palace and down to the security offices. Justin assured her she had nothing to be concerned about, but when they took a seat in a conference room, and he told her their discussion would be recorded, she wasn’t so sure she believed him.

“We just need to discuss a few things, ma’am.” He opened the file folder in front of him.

They went through how she met her late husband, how he knew Steve and everything she knew about their friendship, then her friendship with Steve.

She didn’t know much of anything worthwhile - at least she didn’t think so, but Justin questioned her for what seemed like an eternity.

“I don’t know what you think I might know,” she told him. “He never really talked about much of it with me, certainly nothing I could have pinpointed as anything that would be useful to you.”

“I know. So do the king and Thor, but we needed to make sure. The Øyanordians will likely want to have this same conversation with you.” Justin seemed to be watching

her closely.

Defeat settled around her shoulders. But then she took a deep breath and squared them. “If that’s the way it has to be, I’ll do it again.” Why? Why couldn’t they have only done this once? Couldn’t the Øyanordians just listen to the tape?

Or did they want to see if her answers changed in any significant way?

That was the good thing about telling the truth. It was possible she’d remember something if they asked a question another way, but she hadn’t lied about any of it, hadn’t obfuscated with any of her answers.

She’d be fine.

Wouldn’t she?

Her stomach started to churn a bit more, but a deep breath calmed her down. At least a little bit.

“When will they be here?” At least she’d know how long she had to prepare.

“You won’t need to speak with them until tomorrow.”

Just far enough away to give her a chance to stew and not sleep well worrying about it. “Thank you.”

He stood, and Bekah followed suit.

“I’ll have someone walk you back to your quarters.”

Bekah shook her head. “No. I’m okay. I know how to get there from here.”

“It’s no trouble, ma’am.”

She smiled at him. “I am quite certain I can find my own way back. And if safety is a concern, we are in the palace. I have full faith your team has already made certain it is safe.” With a slight incline of her head, she started for the main entrance to the security offices.

As she made her way back to the family’s quarters, Bekah suspected Justin or one of his team followed her - either on foot or more likely just out of sight while someone directed them via the cameras in the public areas of the palace.

It annoyed her, but at the same time, she tried to remind herself that it was to make sure she stayed safe and didn’t get lost. She hadn’t lived there very long.

How long would she continue to live there? Now that everything had been cleared up, would she move back to Serenity Landing? With Josiah - or without?

The idea of moving on without him didn’t sit well with Bekah. Somehow, over the last few weeks, he’d worked his way into her heart.

Her heart?

Or just into her life?

There were other friends she wouldn’t want to go an extended period without seeing. Could it be that Josiah had become one of them? Or could it be more?



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The look on his face before they'd been interrupted earlier seemed to say he thought it might be something more.

He'd wanted to kiss her.

She'd stake her life on it.

Well, maybe not her life, but she'd put... something important on the line.

Should she talk to him about it? Or wait to see if he talked to her?

What if they both waited for the other one to make the first move?

Wasn't that what the missed connections section on websites was about? Neither one making the first move?

When she reached the staircase leading to the family's section, she ran into the queen and the two little princesses.

Eleanor, the older of the two girls, slid her hand in Bekah's as they walked slowly up the stairs. Katrín asked a few questions, but Bekah knew she'd never remember what they talked about, not when she had so much going on in her head.

At the top of the stairs, they stood for a few more minutes and talked about the girls as they ran around - just like little girls anywhere.

Was this the life she wanted for her baby? Living in a fish bowl. Always needing to

be careful about where they went or what they did while they were there.

She remembered hearing about what it was like for the Bush daughters when they headed to college and started to spread their wings. They'd both moved on to be successful career women, wives, and mothers. The Obama girls had some of the same, though they'd been younger while their father was in office.

But Josiah wasn't the President of the United States.

He wouldn't even be the regent if something happened to his brother before the little girl pulling on her mother's hand as they walked away turned eighteen.

Walking slowly down the hall toward the apartment she still shared with Josiah, Bekah wondered if she'd have the guts to make the first move.

Or if she'd have to hope Josiah would?

\* \* \*

When Josiah walked back into the apartment after finishing his meeting with his brother and stepfather, something immediately seemed... off.

Years of training to be ultra-aware of his surroundings - just in case - made him stop and take in the whole place before going farther in.

There wasn't anyone in the living area. The door to the kitchen was ajar so he could see there wasn't anyone there either.

The bedroom door also stood wide open. He could see most of the bed from where he stood and it was empty.

Where was Bekah?

That's what seemed off.

There wasn't anyone else here. Where could she have gone?

A knot formed in the pit of his stomach.

Could she have already left? Decided this life wasn't the one for her and headed for the States?

He went toward the bedroom, hoping she might be in the bathroom or in one of the corners he couldn't see.

Instead, his heart dropped when he realized she wasn't in the apartment at all.

Josiah tried to keep his mind from heading toward worst-case scenarios. More likely, she'd simply gone for a walk or one of his sisters or sisters-in-law had come by and they'd gone somewhere.

There was nothing that he could see to indicate she'd left permanently. Her phone charger was still on her side of the bed. A glance in the bathroom showed her toiletries still in their places.

So where could she have gone?

He pulled his phone out of his pocket to see if he'd heard from her, but there weren't any messages or missed calls.

Justin would know, wouldn't he? Or would be able to find out.

Swiping up, he started to find the security office in his contacts. Before he could, the door opened to let Bekah in.

"There you are." His relief felt palpable.

"Where did you think I was?" The puzzled look on her face told Josiah she couldn't know the brief inner turmoil he'd experienced while not knowing where she had gone.

"I didn't know." He reached out and took her hand as the door closed behind her. "But I do think we need to talk."

A few seconds later, they were seated on the love seat. The look on her face told him Bekah felt uncertain about what he might want to say.

He looked at their joined hands. "Athmetis isn't after either one of us anymore."

"No," she replied slowly. "They're not."

Josiah took a deep breath. "Which means you and I have some decisions to make."

“I suppose it does.”

Was he really ready for this? “The biggest one being if we decide to give this a go or call it quits.”

He glanced up to see her staring at their hands as well. Were those tears?

“What do you want to do?” A slight tremor in her voice surprised him.

“It’s a decision we have to make together.”

“To a point. But if one of us doesn’t want to give this a real shot, that’s all that matters. If one is out, we’re both out.” She still didn’t look at him.

Was that a good sign?

Josiah let go of her hand and crooked a finger under her chin and lifted her face until he could look her in the eye. “I want to give us a shot,” he said softly, now certain there were tears in her eyes. “If you’re willing, I’d like to see where this takes us.”

She gave him a smile, though it seemed more timid than he would probably like.

“Then we’re in agreement.” Relief soared through him.

“What does that even look like, though?” She pulled back slightly. “Do we stay here? Do we go back to the States? Do we live together while we try to figure it out, or do we live apart while we’re dating? How does any of that work?”

He leaned over and pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead. “We’ll figure it out. It means whatever we want it to mean. I don’t know that I’d want to stay here for the moment. I’d rather we go back to Trumanville and figure it out there. Far less prying

eyes and less time in front of the public.”

Bekah’s shoulders relaxed as relief crossed her face. “That sounds great.”

Josiah stood and helped Bekah stand with him. He wrapped his arms around her as she put hers around his waist. Her head rested on his chest, and he felt... right. This felt right.

She sighed and relaxed against him. “I really like that idea,” she said softly before pulling away from him just a little bit. Enough that she could look up at him.

The moment from earlier replayed, but this time there were no interruptions.

Josiah didn’t have to move far to initiate their first kiss.

A kiss he immediately knew he’d remember for the rest of his life.

His fingers slid into her hair as he felt hers grip his shirt.

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And he understood, for the first time, how easy it could be to get carried away.

Instead, Josiah purposefully loosened his hold on her and slowed it down.

And then it was over. Intense and full of emotion and all too short.

But told him what he'd suspected for some time.

They definitely had chemistry.

Once she'd returned her head to his chest, he tightened his hold again.

"That was..." Bekah blew out a breath. "I'm not sure what that was."

Josiah chuckled. "I know what you mean." And then he sobered. "I wish I could tell you that I've fallen in love with you, Beks, but I don't think I can. Not yet. It hasn't been long enough. I don't know you well enough. What I do know is that I want to get to know you better. I want to spend so much more time with you. Go on dates. Pick out new furniture. Whatever. Just be together. But not here unless we need to be. Back in the States. In a lot of ways, it's more home than the palace has been in a long time."

"That sounds perfect." She moved away enough to look into his eyes. "I wish I could say I've fallen in love, too, but I can't. I can say that I think I'm well on my way. I'm just not there yet."

Bekah stretched up and gave him a light, lingering kiss. "I'm just glad I have a

second chance with someone I can truly trust.”

With another chuckle, Josiah rested his head against hers.

It might be Bekah’s second chance - something he’d learn to be okay with - but he found himself mostly grateful that, no matter how far down the line he might be, the prince had a chance at love.

## EPILOGUE

Bekah wasn’t sure she really wanted to sit in the sweltering heat during early September in Southwest Missouri, not while pregnant.

Or any other time really.

She wasn’t a fan of hot.

Or cold, come to think of it.

But family friends had a kid who was the head drum major for the Serenity Landing Patriot Pride Marching Band this year.

And they needed a Vogel representative there to cheer her on.

So she and Josiah were headed to the football game but were mostly there for the band.

First, though, they were going to have dinner.

If they could ever decide where.



“Where do you want to go?” Josiah walked into the living room wearing a pair of cargo shorts and t-shirt with the band logo.

Bekah was wishing she had a tank top she could wear. That might make it a little more tolerable. Where was her big sun hat? That should help, too. “I don’t even care, honestly. Somewhere with air conditioning.”

The summer had been unreasonably hot and muggy, even for Southwest Missouri. She remembered summers where it was cool enough in July that swim meets had been almost intolerably cold. This summer was the opposite.

When had she started sounding so old?

Josiah gave her a sympathetic smile. “Want to order in and watch the live stream on Patriot Sports?”

She shook her head. “No. I want to go. I love watching the band play. Ginny was always really good. I just wish it wasn’t eight thousand degrees.”

“I get that.” He tilted his head to one side. “What about the diner? They have air conditioning, and you can get breakfast.”

When had he gotten to know her well enough to know that she’d eat breakfast any time of day?

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Bekah wasn't sure, but it did bode well for the future of their relationship. A relationship that was getting better by the day.

Mostly.

They had their moments. But so did most relationships of any kind.

"That sounds good." She needed to convince herself to get up out of the plush chaise lounge they'd purchased to give her a comfortable place to sit with her legs up but not need an ottoman.

The downside had to be that she hadn't found a graceful way to stand up.

Josiah held out a hand and helped her. "I already started the car."

Thank God for remote start. By the time they reached the vehicle, it would be significantly cooler. Then she'd probably turn the heated seat on at least for a few minutes to help with the perpetual ache in her lower back.

When they reached the diner, it wasn't nearly as full as Bekah had feared. Fifteen minutes later, a cheese omelet and giant pancakes had been placed in front of her, along with a large glass of milk.

She cut off a bite of pancake and sighed as she ate it. "This hits the spot. Thank you for suggesting it."

"My pleasure."

The meal was filled with conversation about everything and nothing. They'd gotten good at that. Personal discussions were never held in public. Josiah wasn't a big target for the paparazzi that occasionally staked out Serenity Landing and Trumanville, but he was a target of opportunity. If they saw him in public, he was considered fair game.

So personal discussions were saved for home.

In public, it was more about favorite lunch meat or least favorite musical genre. Things that could be overheard and publicized and not matter a whole lot.

After eating almost all of the meal, they paid and left the diner to head for Serenity Landing. Esther and Darius, Josiah's brother and sister-in-law were supposed to be there and save them seats in the part of the stadium with chair backs. Bekah didn't think she could handle two or three hours on bleachers.

The lot was fuller than she'd hoped, so Josiah dropped her off near the entrance to the stadium then went to park. She waited in the shade and fanned herself with the hat she'd finally remembered was already in the car.

Once inside, they made their way to the front of the stands and looked for Esther and Darius. Bekah's heart sank. It had been a while since she'd been to the Serenity Landing stadium. There were no seats with chair backs.

After about thirty seconds, Josiah spotted his sister-in-law waving from in front of the press and coaches' boxes in the top middle. She sighed in relief when she realized she'd be able to use the wall as a back rest.

The next three hours were spent trying to stay cool, cheering for the Patriots as they defeated Spring Meadow, and being impressed - as always - with the marching band. They would come back in October, when they'd likely struggle to stay warm, and see

the progress the group made.

On the trip back to their home on the outskirts of Trumanville, Bekah closed her eyes and tried not to fall asleep. Instead, she tried to remember as many of the conversations as she could. With her hand in Josiah's, she didn't make it very far and dozed off.

When they arrived back at the house, Josiah woke her up and supported her until they were in the house.

They went about the mundane tasks of showering to get the Missouri heat off of them and getting ready for bed.

When Bekah walked back into the bedroom, she saw Josiah.

Really saw him.

Bent over on her side of the bed to make sure her lotion and lip balm were where she needed them and a bottle of water waited, in case she woke up thirsty.

He'd been taking such good care of her.

And she loved him for it.

The thought took her by surprise.

She loved him?

As she leaned against the door jamb, she realized it was true. Somewhere in the last few months, she'd fallen in love with her husband.

Now she just needed to work up the courage to tell him.

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With a deep breath, she moved into the room.

“Hey.” He looked up from where he sat. “Feel better?”

Bekah nodded. “Much. Thank you.”

She sat next to him and wondered how to let him know. Finally, she turned her body to face him. “There’s something I need to tell you, ‘Siah.”

A bit of panic flitted briefly across his face. “What’s up?”

Reaching out, Bekah took both of his hands in her own. “I’ve realized something.” Sucking in air and courage, she went on. “Somewhere, somehow, since that day in Athmetis, I’ve fallen in love with you.”

His face relaxed into a smile. “That makes me so happy to hear.” He leaned forward and gave her a soft kiss. “Because I’ve fallen in love with you, too. I’m happy I get to spend the rest of my life loving you.”

A sharp pain in her left side made Bekah catch her breath. It wasn’t really a pain, but she didn’t know how else to describe it. She dropped his hands and pressed hers to her belly.

“Are you all right?”

Another movement under her hand told her what she needed to know and a smile crossed her face. “Do you want to feel the baby move?”

His eyes went wide. “Can I?”

She took his hands in hers again and put them where she’d felt the movement. “I’m not a hundred percent sure I felt it from the outside, but maybe...”

There was another rolling movement.

“Was that it?” he whispered.

“Yes.” Her own voice hushed on its own.

“I only felt it a little bit but it’s so cool.” After a slight hesitation, he went on. “Can the baby hear yet?”

“That’s what the books say.”

Josiah knelt down in front of her, facing the baby bump. “Hello in there, little one. I’m so glad God chose me to be your daddy.” He looked up as tears obscured Bekah’s vision. “And I’m so glad he put me and your mama together.”

She ran her fingers through his hair as he continued to talk to the baby.

This.

This was what she’d always dreamed of.

Divine guidance had led them here. She had no doubt of that. She’d made mistakes, but those mistakes had led to this moment.

This amazing man.

This husband willing to be a father to a child he wasn’t biologically related to.

Her prince.