



His Royal Matchmaker

Author: *Holly Rayner*

Category: Romance

Description: Everyone deserves their fairytale, even stubborn, infuriating European princes...

Hollywood's top matchmaker, Emily Neale, knows love. Or at least, she knows how to find it for everyone else. Her own romantic life? Non-existent. But when she's invited to help a royal family across the Atlantic, it's the opportunity of a lifetime; that is, until she meets her most difficult client yet.

Prince Hugo Bastien has always put duty before desire. Running a kingdom leaves little time for love, and the idea of letting a stranger meddle in his personal affairs seems absurd. Still, he agrees to his mother's scheme, if only to prove that no matchmaker can break through his icy exterior.

But Emily isn't like anyone Hugo's ever met. She's smart, bold, completely off-limits, and precisely the kind of woman he can't stop thinking about.

As their professional boundaries blur, both Emily and Hugo must decide what they're willing to risk. Can a man bound by tradition follow his heart? Or will their connection be the one match neither of them dares to make?

Total Pages (Source): 27

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:23 am

EMILY

My silver cocktail dress glides against my thighs as I walk past security and onto the red carpet. It feels like I'm under the spotlight, but of course no one is looking at me. I'm just another random person here, not one to compete with the celebrities.

"Stop fidgeting," Nova says, gently guiding my hand away from where I'm nervously tucking a strand of blond hair behind my ear. "You look gorgeous. Like a pocket-sized movie star."

I roll my eyes but can't help smiling. At five foot one, I've gotten used to the short jokes from my best friend, who towers over me in her four-inch heels.

"Says the woman who looks like she just stepped off a runway," I reply.

The cutouts in her sleek black jumpsuit would look ridiculous on most people but somehow make her seem elegant and edgy at the same time. Her dark hair, pulled back in a complicated twist that probably took an hour to perfect, makes the look insanely polished.

"Occupational hazard," she says with a wink. "Can't be a Hollywood publicist without looking the part."

I've been to premieres before — my job matching celebrities with their perfect partners gets me invited to plenty of industry events — but this is next level.

The sidewalk has disappeared beneath a plush red carpet that stretches from the street

to the theater doors, and massive posters of Ricardo Ruiz's handsome face loom overhead, advertising *Midnight in Madrid*, the romantic action film that's generating serious award buzz.

"Wow," I murmur. "When Ricardo said he wanted us to come to his premiere, I didn't realize it would be... this."

Nova laughs. "You literally introduced him to the love of his life. Did you think he'd stick you in the back row?"

I shrug, feeling a flush creep up my neck. "I was just doing my job."

"Your job that's made you the most sought-after matchmaker in Los Angeles," Nova reminds me. "Own it, honey."

She's right, of course. Five years ago, I was struggling to get my matchmaking business off the ground.

Now, I have a waiting list of celebrity clients and a reputation for creating matches that last. But sometimes, standing in front of all this glamour, I still feel like the awkward girl from Minnesota who moved to LA with big dreams and no connections.

Ahead of us, the red carpet stretches like a ruby road, dotted with stars that shine even brighter in person than on screen.

Angelica Flammia, the supporting actress in Ricardo's film, poses for photographs, her blue gown catching the light as she turns.

A few feet away, the director fields questions from a cluster of reporters, gesturing enthusiastically as he speaks about his vision.

“Emily! Nova!” A woman in a structured red pantsuit waves at us from near the theater entrance. It takes me a moment to recognize Diane Beam, a casting director I helped find love last year.

“Diane!” I call back as we make our way toward her. “You look amazing!”

She embraces us both, her perfume expensive and subtle. “I was hoping I’d see you here. Marcus sends his love. He’s shooting on location in Vancouver.”

“How is married life treating you?” I ask, genuinely curious. Matching Diane, with her type-A personality and demanding schedule, had been a challenge until I introduced her to a laid-back cinematographer who appreciated her drive.

Diane’s face softens. “It’s... surprisingly wonderful. You really do have a gift, Emily.” She turns to include Nova in the conversation. “This woman saved me from a lifetime of terrible first dates.”

Nova laughs. “She’s got a sixth sense about these things. I keep asking her to find me someone, but apparently I’m ‘too picky.’”

Diane moves on to speak to the next person, and I spot him before he sees us — Ricardo Ruiz, the man *People* magazine named “Sexiest Actor Alive” last year, cutting through the crowd like a hot knife through butter.

The sea of people parts for him without seeming to realize they’re doing it.

His arm is wrapped protectively around a petite woman in a golden dress, her dark curls pinned up to reveal the graceful curve of her neck.

Leonie. My most successful and high-profile match to date.

“There they are,” I whisper to Nova.

“Emily!” Ricardo calls out, his voice carrying that hint of an accent that’s made him millions in romantic leads.

In person, he’s even more striking than on screen — tall and broad-shouldered, with olive skin and eyes so dark they seem to pull you in. But what makes him truly handsome is the softness that’s appeared there since meeting Leonie, a kind of settled happiness that no amount of acting could fake.

Before I can respond, I’m enveloped in a bear hug that lifts me clear off the ground.

“Put her down before you break her, Ricky,” Leonie says, laughing.

Ricardo sets me gently back on my feet, grinning like a kid. “Sorry. I get carried away.”

“It’s good to see you too,” I say, adjusting my dress. “Both of you. Leonie, you look incredible. How’s the wedding planning going?”

Their hands find each other, fingers intertwining with the easy familiarity of two people who’ve found their missing piece. The gesture sends a small pang through me — not jealousy exactly, but longing.

“December in Barcelona,” Ricardo says. “Small ceremony, just family and close friends.”

“Which includes you,” Leonie adds quickly. “We wouldn’t be getting married at all if not for you.”

Ricardo nods, his expression suddenly serious. “You changed my life, Emily. I was

so stubborn, so sure I knew what I wanted.” He looks at Leonie with such naked adoration that I have to glance away, feeling like I’m intruding on something private. “I had no idea what I was missing.”

“You two did all the hard work,” I say softly. “I just made the introduction.”

A photographer approaches, her camera hanging around her neck like an extra appendage.

Her hair is a severe blond bob, her lips a thin line of professional efficiency rather than emotion.

“Mr. Ruiz, we need some shots of you and Ms. Morales for Vanity Fair ,” she says, not even glancing in my direction.

I take a step back, preparing to blend into the background like I usually do.

But Ricardo’s hand shoots out, catching my wrist. “Wait, Emily. You should be in these photos too.” He turns to the photographer. “This is Emily Neale. She’s the reason Leonie and I are together.”

The photographer’s expression doesn’t change, but her eyes flick over me with new interest. “The matchmaker?” she asks.

He nods enthusiastically. “Our guardian-angel matchmaker. I want her in the shots.”

The photographer shrugs. “Fine by me. The three of you, over by that backdrop.”

Nova gives me a double thumbs-up, signaling me to go for it.

The commands come rapid-fire, and I try to follow along, smiling when told to smile,

turning when told to turn. Ricardo and Leonie are naturals, shifting positions smoothly while keeping me included.

Two years ago, he was Hollywood's most notorious bachelor — a different woman on his arm at every premiere, a new rumored fling every month. Magazines speculated about his commitment issues, and late-night hosts made jokes about his dating history.

What none of them knew was how afraid he was of ending up like his parents — trapped in a loveless marriage, staying together for appearances while living separate lives.

His sister Carmen saw through the playboy facade to the lonely man beneath.

She was the one who came to me, determined to help her brother find real love.

Ricardo was my most reluctant client ever. Our first consultation consisted mainly of him listing reasons why matchmaking was a waste of time. And now look at him, completely committed and in love.

I step away from the photos and rejoin Nova, waiting as Ricardo and Leonie finish their final press obligations.

“You’re about to blow up,” Nova says.

“Huh?” I feel my brow furrow.

“Once those pictures go up...” She nods sagely. “Trust me. You think you’re busy now...”

My eyelashes flutter. My work is my life, but can I really handle any more business?

The couple of the moment stand close together, Ricardo's thumb absently stroking the inside of Leonie's wrist as she answers a question.

It's such a small gesture, unconscious and intimate, revealing the comfortable connection between them.

When Leonie laughs at something the reporter says, Ricardo watches her with such passion that my throat tightens.

I did that. I created that connection. I looked at two people who seemed completely wrong for each other on paper — the international movie star and the hardworking baker who wakes up at three a.m. — and saw the potential for something real.

So why does watching them hurt a little?

"Earth to Emily." Nova waves her hand in front of my face. "Where'd you go?"

I blink, realizing I've been staring. "Sorry. Just... thinking."

She studies me for a moment, her expression softening. "About what?"

I sigh. "Is it terrible to admit that sometimes I get a little jealous? Not of them specifically, but of what they have?"

"The matchmaker wanting a match of her own? Shocking." Her tone is teasing, but her eyes are kind.

"I love my job," I say quickly. "I love helping people find their person. It's the best feeling in the world."

"But?"

“But sometimes I wonder if I’m so busy creating happiness for others that I’ve forgotten to look for my own.” The admission feels both vulnerable and freeing. “My last date was four months ago, and I spent half of it analyzing his compatibility with my dental hygienist.”

“You’ll find it,” Nova says with such conviction that I almost believe her. “The universe wouldn’t be cruel enough to give you this gift for matching others without eventually sending someone your way.”

“I hope you’re right.”

In the meantime, I have a business to run. Apparently, according to my best friend, it’s about to get very busy.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:23 am

HUGO

S traightening my tie, I walk across the sun-warmed stones of the east patio.

Mother is already seated at the table, her back to the palace gardens, a cup of tea steaming next to her plate.

The look on her face — eyebrows slightly raised, lips pressed into a thin line of determination — tells me everything I need to know about this lunch.

It's an ambush disguised as a casual meal, and I'm walking right into it.

What she wants to speak about, I have no clue. I only know it will be classically her. There's always an agenda, always an angle. For her, politics are most at play when she's not at work as queen of Marzieu.

"Hugo, darling," she says, rising slightly as I approach. "You're only seven minutes late today. I'm impressed."

"Budget meetings ran long," I say, settling into my chair. A servant materializes at my elbow, pouring water into my glass. "Thank you, Pierre."

"Always meetings." Mother sighs, unfolding her napkin with a practiced flick. "Your father managed to be punctual for family meals, you know, even when he was drowning in state matters."

I reach for a bread roll, tearing it in half instead of responding. She starts most

conversations this way lately: your father this, your father that. As if I need reminding of the enormous shoes I'm still trying to fill five years after his death.

"The trade agreement with Bellissime is nearly complete," I say, changing the subject. "We should see a thirty percent increase in exports by next quarter."

Mother nods, but her eyes slide away from mine. She's not interested in trade agreements. "That's wonderful, dear. The chef has prepared your favorite today — lamb with rosemary potatoes."

The servants bring our meals, and for a few blessed minutes, we eat in silence.

The lamb is perfect, pink in the center just as I like it.

The sun filters through the climbing roses that frame the patio, casting dappled shadows across the white tablecloth.

In moments like this, I can almost forget the weight of the crown that isn't yet mine but presses on me all the same.

"Hugo," Mother says finally, setting down her fork with purpose. "You turn thirty-one next month."

Here it comes . I take a long sip of water, bracing myself.

"I'm aware of my age, Mother."

"And yet you show no signs of settling down." She dabs at her lips with her napkin. "The palace feels so empty these days. So quiet."

"I thought you preferred quiet. You used to complain about my parties keeping you

awake.”

A smile flickers across her face. “That was before...” She doesn’t finish the sentence. She doesn’t need to.

Before Father died. Before everything changed. Before I changed.

“I’ve been thinking,” she continues, “about the Winterstein ball next month. Princess Isabella will be attending.”

I suppress a groan. “Mother?—”

“She’s lovely, intelligent, and the alliance would be beneficial for both our countries.”

“If this is another matchmaking attempt, I’ll save you the trouble.

I don’t have time for dating right now, royal or otherwise.

” I cut another piece of lamb, a bit more forcefully than necessary.

“Surely you should be happy that I’m following in Father’s footsteps?

Building something more important for the family legacy? ”

My mother’s face softens into something like pity. “Your father built our legacy by being more than just a good ruler, Hugo. He was a good man, a good husband, a good father.”

The lamb suddenly tastes like cardboard in my mouth.

My hands clench around my utensils, but I feel a warmth in my chest, an uncomfortable heat that I recognize as guilt.

Five years ago, I was more concerned with which club had the best DJ than with trade agreements or diplomatic relations.

Father's unexpected death changed everything — for the country, for Mother, for me.

“I am trying to be all those things,” I say quietly. “But right now, Marzieu needs a focused leader. The economic reforms?—”

“Won't mean anything if there's no next generation to inherit them.

” She reaches across the table, resting her hand on mine.

Her fingers are cool against my skin. “I'm not asking you to neglect your duties.

I'm asking you to make room in your life for something else. Something that matters just as much.”

Of course. She wants to ensure our bloodline, to make sure it does not die with me, her only child.

“There will be time for marriage later,” I tell her. “I still have plenty of time to have children.”

“It's not about that.” Her gaze bores into mine. “I want you to find someone special, Hugo. It would ease the stress of your life greatly.”

The roses sway in a gentle breeze, scattering petals across our table. A red one lands on my napkin like a drop of blood. I pick it up, twirling it between my fingers.

“I am happy,” I insist, but the words ring hollow even to my own ears. “I’m fulfilled by my work.”

“Are you? Because from where I sit, you look tired. You work from dawn until midnight, you’ve canceled your last three vacations — and when was the last time you did something just for fun?”

I open my mouth to answer, then close it again. I can’t remember.

“That’s what I thought.” She takes another sip of her tea. “Your father worked hard, yes. But he also played tennis every Thursday, regardless of what crisis was brewing. He took me dancing at least once a month. He read bedtime stories to you every night he was in the palace.”

“I don’t have children to read to,” I point out.

“Precisely my concern.” Her eyes twinkle with humor, but there’s worry behind it.

I sigh, setting down my fork. “Mother, I understand your concern. I do. But marriage isn’t something I can just pencil into my schedule between meetings. It requires time, energy, attention — all things that are currently allocated elsewhere.”

“You sound like you’re discussing a business merger, not finding love.”

“Isn’t that what royal marriages have traditionally been?”

Her face hardens the slightest bit. “Not in this family. Your father and I broke that cycle, and I won’t see you retreat back to the old ways out of — what? Fear? Convenience?”

“It’s not fear,” I protest, though a voice in the back of my mind whispers otherwise.

“It’s practicality. The throne comes first. Always.”

“The throne is nothing without the person who sits on it,” she counters. “And that person needs more in their life than reports and meetings and diplomatic functions.”

We stare at each other across the table, two stubborn people at an impasse. The silence stretches between us, filled only by the distant chirping of birds and conversation from some gardeners down by the pond.

Finally, Mother sighs, her shoulders dropping slightly. “I worry about you, Hugo. Not as the queen, but as your mother. I see you pouring everything into being the perfect prince, and I wonder what will be left of you when it’s all said and done.”

Her words hit me harder than I’d like to admit. I look away, focusing on the gardens beyond. The perfect rows of flowers, the meticulously trimmed hedges — everything in its right place, controlled, orderly. Like my life.

“I’m doing what I must,” I say softly. “What he would have wanted.”

“Your father would have wanted you to be happy,” she says, equally softly. “To find balance. To live, not just rule.”

I don’t know how to respond to that. The truth is, diving into royal duties after Father’s death gave me purpose when I was drowning in grief and responsibility.

It was easier to focus on meetings and signing papers and making decisions for other people than to face the emptiness in the palace, the absence at the head of the table, the crown that would pass to me far sooner than any of us had expected.

“Look at this.” She reaches into her bag and pulls out a glossy magazine. The cover shows some actress I vaguely recognize, her smile blindingly white against spray-

tanned skin.

My mother flips through the pages, stopping at a dog-eared section.

Even upside-down, I can make out the headline: “Hollywood’s Most Notorious Bachelor Pops the Question!

” accompanied by a photo of Ricardo Ruiz — whose action movies I secretly enjoy — looking besotted next to a woman at some event.

I have a sinking feeling in my stomach that has nothing to do with the lamb.

“Did you see this?” She pushes the magazine across the table toward me.

I glance down at the article, feigning minimal interest while scanning the text.

Ricardo Ruiz, Hollywood’s perennial playboy, finally proposed at forty-two, after years of high-profile relationships that never lasted longer than his movie shoots.

The article describes his bride-to-be as “the perfect match” and “his equal in every way.”

“I wasn’t aware you followed celebrity gossip,” I say, pushing the magazine back without picking it up.

“I don’t, typically.” She taps one manicured finger against a paragraph near the bottom of the page. “But this particular story caught my attention. A Hollywood matchmaker brought the two of them together.”

“A matchmaker? Really? And I suppose you would like the same for me?” I set the magazine down, fighting the urge to roll my eyes. “Next you’ll be telling me you’ve

consulted a fortune teller about my romantic future.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Hugo.” She waves her hand dismissively. “Fortune tellers are unreliable. Emily Neale, on the other hand, has a ninety-seven percent success rate.”

“Among Hollywood celebrities, whose relationships are about as stable as our southern border dispute.”

“Ricardo Ruiz had a reputation worse than yours ever was,” Mother points out. “And look at him now — soon to be married.”

“Good for him.” I push my plate away, suddenly losing my appetite. “But I’m not a movie star looking for someone to accompany me on red carpets. I’m the crown prince of Marzieu. My situation is somewhat different.”

“Which is precisely why someone like Emily would be perfect. She works with high-profile clients who value discretion. She understands the unique challenges that come with public life. And most importantly, she gets results.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose, feeling a headache forming behind my eyes.

“Mother, I appreciate your concern, but I absolutely don’t have time for whatever scheme you’re concocting.

The international summit is three weeks away, the budget needs final approval by Friday, and the renovation committee needs my input on the historic preservation elements?—”

“I’ve already booked an appointment,” she interrupts, her voice calm but brooking no argument. “Next Monday at two o’clock.”

I stare at her, momentarily speechless. The queen of Marzieu looks back at me placidly, as if she's just informed me of a routine dental checkup rather than an appointment with a professional matchmaker.

"You did what?" I finally manage.

"She normally has a waiting list, you know," Mother continues, ignoring my incredulous expression. "But when I explained the situation?—"

I laugh, but there's no humor in it. "And I'm sure the fact that you're the queen had nothing to do with jumping the line."

"Well," Mother says with a small smile, "it didn't hurt."

A staff member approaches to clear our plates, and I wait until he's gone before continuing. "I'm not going."

"Yes you are." She folds her napkin precisely, placing it beside her water glass. "Consider it a diplomatic duty if that makes it easier to swallow."

"Diplomatic—" I shake my head in disbelief. "How is meeting with a matchmaker diplomatic?"

"A stable monarchy requires succession, Hugo. The people want to see their future king settled and secure." Her voice softens. "And your mother wants to see her son happy."

"I'll find someone on my own time," I insist, though we both know my schedule allows no room for dating. The last woman I took to dinner was the finance minister's daughter, and that was purely to discuss the new capital gains tax structure.

“You haven’t been on a real date in years,” Mother says, as if reading my thoughts. “The last time you brought a woman to a state function, she turned out to be a journalist doing an exposé on royal privilege.”

I wince at the memory. That had been an embarrassing oversight on the part of my security team. “All the more reason to not trust a stranger with my love life.”

“Emily Neale isn’t just any stranger. She’s the best in her field.”

“Her field is ridiculous.” I gesture to the magazine, where Ricardo Ruiz grins up at us. “He’s an actor who needed a publicity boost for his fading career. I’m a prince preparing to lead a nation.”

Mother regards me steadily, her expression unreadable. Then she reaches across the table and flips to another page in the magazine. “Emily has worked with CEOs, sports stars, tech billionaires...”

I scan the article again, my skepticism undiminished. “And you believe this puff piece?”

“I believe in results. And in keeping an open mind.” She taps the photo of Emily Neale. “One meeting, Hugo. That’s all I’m asking.”

“And if I refuse?”

Her smile turns sweet in a way that immediately makes me wary. “Then I’ll be forced to revisit the royal tradition of arranged marriages. I’ve already received inquiries from three royal houses and two billionaire families with eligible daughters.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“I’m the queen,” she says simply. “And more importantly, I’m your mother. I’ll do whatever it takes to ensure both your happiness and the security of our monarchy.”

I study her face, looking for signs that she’s bluffing, but find none. She’d never force me into an arranged marriage — I don’t think — but she’d certainly make my life difficult if I refuse this small concession.

“One meeting,” I finally say, the words leaving a bitter taste in my mouth. “I’ll meet with this woman once, to prove to you that this is a waste of time, and then you’ll drop the subject until I am ready to bring it back up.”

“Not one meeting, no. You will go on any dates Emily arranges for you. If she either finds you a match or she deems you unmatchable... which is unlikely... then I will drop the matter.”

“Fine,” I sigh.

“Wonderful!” She beams at me like I’ve just agreed to world peace instead of a matchmaking appointment. “You won’t regret this, Hugo.”

“I already do,” I mutter.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:23 am

EMILY

My suitcase gapes open on the bed like a hungry mouth, half-filled with a jumble of clothes I've already changed my mind about three times.

The ceiling fan whirs overhead, stirring the warm air but doing little to cool my flushed face as I press my phone between my ear and shoulder and fold a silk blouse for the fifth time.

"I still can't believe my best friend is going to a real palace to matchmake for an actual prince," Nova says over the line. "You're basically living out a Disney movie."

"Except I'm not the one falling in love with the prince," I remind her, tossing aside a sweater that's too bulky. "I'm just finding him someone who will."

"Details, details." Her dismissive tone makes me smile despite my packing stress. "So you're really going to be there for several weeks? In a palace? With servants and everything?"

I pause, holding up a cocktail dress that might be too fancy — then again, maybe not fancy enough for royal events. "That's what they said. The queen wants this done properly, which means I need to understand the prince's environment, his duties, the?—"

"The eligible women of the Marzieu upper crust," Nova finishes for me.

"Exactly." I fold the dress carefully and tuck it into the corner of my suitcase. "Which

means I need clothes for every occasion. Casual meetings, formal dinners, outdoor activities — who knows what they'll have me doing.”

“You still haven’t told me how this even happened. One minute you’re matching Hollywood’s elite, and the next you’re flying to Europe for royalty?”

I sit on the edge of my bed, pushing aside a pile of shoes. The memory of that phone call still makes my stomach flip with excitement.

“Okay, so I was sorting through profiles for that new client — the tech CEO who wants someone ‘authentic’ but also happens to look like a supermodel.”

“Aren’t they all like that?” She snorts.

“Pretty much.” I laugh, leaning back against my pillows as I continue the story.

“So, I’m sitting there with these files spread across my desk when Micah comes in and says I have a phone call from the royal palace of Marzieu.

And his face was so serious that for a second I thought he was pulling my leg. ”

Even though my assistant isn’t known for practical jokes, I had trouble believing an actual European palace was calling. Why me? Why then?

Nova gasps appropriately, fully invested in my story. “What did you do?”

“I laughed! I literally laughed in his face and said, ‘Good one! Who is it really?’ But Micah just stood there, his eyes wide, and said, ‘I’m not joking, Emily. They’re holding for you right now.’”

I remember how my heart had skipped then, a sudden fluttering of disbelief and wild

possibility. But the practical side of my brain immediately suspected a prank.

“So I took the phone, already planning how I’d get back at whoever was behind this.

I said, ‘This is Emily Neale,’ in my most professional voice.

And this man with an accent says, ‘Miss Neale, my name is Leon Duvall, head of royal appointments for the Palace of Marzieu. I’m calling on behalf of Her Majesty Queen Julia. ’

“I still thought it was fake. I actually said, ‘Right, and I’m calling on behalf of the Easter Bunny.’”

Nova lets out a surprised laugh. “You didn’t!”

“I did! I was so sure it was a friend playing a joke.” I cringe at the memory, grabbing a handful of socks from my drawer and tossing them into the suitcase.

“But it wasn’t. He asked if I would be willing to come to Marzieu for several weeks to work with the prince directly.

All expenses paid, plus my regular fee. He started explaining about accommodations at the palace and?—”

“Wait, you’re staying in the palace?” she interrupts, voice rising with excitement.

“Yes! In the guest wing.” I still can’t quite believe it myself. “Anyway, he was going through all these details, and then he casually mentioned they’d like me to fly out on Sunday.”

“Sunday as in, tomorrow?”

“Exactly!” I throw my hands up, nearly knocking over a stack of books on my nightstand. “I almost said it was too soon. I have other clients, appointments, my whole life here. But then I thought...”

“When a queen summons you to matchmake for a prince, you don’t say, ‘Maybe next month?’” Nova suggests.

“Precisely.” I laugh. “So, I told him I’d make it work. I’ve been rescheduling clients and prepping Micah to handle things while I’m gone ever since. It’s been absolute chaos.”

I return to my packing with renewed focus, pulling open my jewelry box to select pieces that will work for various occasions. My head is still spinning, and I’m glad that I have to do so much before I leave, otherwise I would be sitting around doubting whether I’m up to this job or not.

I need to keep reminding myself that the queen asked for me specifically. Apparently she saw my photo with Ricardo and — just like Nova predicted someone would — decided she had to hire me.

“So, what do you know about this prince?” Nova asks. “Is he handsome? Smart? A total mess who needs a miracle worker?”

“Well, after the call, I immediately looked him up.” I feel my cheeks warm slightly at the memory. “Prince Hugo Bastien of Marzieu. And, Nova... the man is gorgeous. Like, unfairly so.”

“Let me guess — tall, dark, and royal?”

“Six-foot-something, dark hair that looks like it’s always perfectly styled even when it’s messy, and these intense blue eyes that seem to look right through you.

” I recall the official photos I’d scrolled through, along with the candid shots from various events.

“But get this — according to all the articles I could find, he’s never had a serious girlfriend.

At least, not one that made it to the public eye.

He used to be quite the party boy until his father died five years ago, and since then it seems to be all work, no play. ”

“So, either he’s incredibly private, or...”

“Or I have my work cut out for me,” I finish her thought, frowning at a pair of heels I’m not sure will be comfortable enough for palace hallways.

“The articles paint him as this reformed playboy. As I said, he was quite the party prince in his twenties — yacht parties in Monaco, ski trips with models in Switzerland — the whole ‘rich royal bachelor’ package.”

I select another pair of shoes and add them to my suitcase. “But when his father died, he completely changed.”

“That’s a lot of pressure,” Nova notes, her voice softening. “Losing his dad and having to step up at the same time.”

“Exactly.” I pause my packing, thinking about the challenge ahead.

“That’s what worries me. The queen wants me to find him a match, but from what I’ve read, this man has made his royal duties his whole identity.

How do you match someone who doesn't seem to have room in their life for a relationship? ”

“If anyone can figure it out, it's you,” Nova says with complete confidence. “You've matched people with way more complicated issues... and it's not like you have much room in your life for a relationship right now, so you can relate.”

That stings a bit, but only because it's true.

“Maybe,” I say. “But I've never matched a prince before. The stakes feel higher somehow.”

“Just treat him like any other client,” Nova advises. “Prince or not, he's still just a person looking for love — even if he doesn't know it yet.”

I smile at her simplification of my task. “You make it sound so easy.”

“That's why you're the matchmaker and I'm just the best friend who gets to hear all the juicy details.

” She pauses. “Speaking of which, you better call me with regular updates. I want to know everything — what the palace looks like, what the prince is like in person, if there are any cute royal guards...”

“I promise.” I laugh, surveying my now packed suitcase with a critical eye. “I just hope I'm packing the right things. What does one wear when trying to find a prince his perfect match?”

“Clothes that make you feel confident. The rest will fall into place.”

After we say our goodbyes, I zip up my suitcase and set it on the floor beside my bed.

The challenge ahead is daunting, but it's also exactly the kind that I live for.

Finding love for those who think they don't have time for it, who've built walls around their hearts, who need a little help seeing what's possible — that's what I do best.

Prince Hugo Bastien might be my most high-profile client yet, but underneath the crown and royal protocols, he's just a person. And everyone, even a prince, deserves to find their perfect match.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:23 am

EMILY

I press my nose to the car window as the driver winds us up the mountain road.

The palace of Marzieu appears like something from a fairy tale, all white stone and gleaming spires against the blue sky.

My heart does a little skip. Somewhere inside those walls is Prince Hugo Bastien, my newest client and probably my biggest challenge yet.

Sitting taller, I straighten my blazer and remind myself that I'm here because I'm good — really good — at what I do. Five years as a high-profile matchmaker has taught me that everyone, even a stuffy royal, has a heart that needs the right person to unlock it.

The car passes through iron gates taller than two-story buildings, and guards in crisp uniforms nod as we glide by, their faces serious under their caps.

The driveway seems to go on forever, curving through gardens where fountains spray diamonds into the air.

I can't help but feel like I'm in a movie.

"Impressive, isn't it?" says my driver, catching my wide eyes in the rearview mirror.

"It's... a lot," I answer, which makes him chuckle.

When the car finally stops, a woman in a gray suit is waiting for me. She has the kind of perfect posture that makes my own shoulders straighten reflexively.

“Ms. Neale? I’m Claudette, the royal household coordinator. Welcome to Marzieu Palace.” Her smile is small but seems genuine. “I’ll show you to your quarters.”

I follow her through doors that must be fifteen feet tall and into a lobby with a ceiling that seems to touch the sky.

My shoes click-clack against marble floors, the sound echoing.

Everything gleams — the chandelier overhead, the polished banisters, the golden frames around paintings of stern-looking royals from centuries past.

“This place is beautiful,” I breathe, trying not to gawk like a tourist.

“The east wing was built in 1734,” Claudette says, pride in her voice. “The west wing is newer — only from 1892.”

I almost laugh. In my apartment back home, “newer” means the refrigerator was replaced last year.

My room — or should I say suite — is bigger than my entire apartment.

The bed is draped with silk the color of cream, and the windows look out over gardens that stretch to the mountains beyond.

A sitting area with plush chairs surrounds a marble fireplace.

There’s even a claw-foot bathtub in the adjoining bathroom that I could practically swim in.

“Will this be suitable?” Claudette asks.

“Suitable? It’s amazing!” I bounce a little on my toes, which makes her smile widen slightly.

“Her Majesty would like to meet with you in thirty minutes. Will that give you enough time to refresh yourself?”

I nod, suddenly nervous. “Absolutely. I’ll be ready.”

Once Claudette leaves, I pull out my phone and snap a picture of the room to send to Nova.

Then I quickly freshen up, change into my best navy dress with a structured jacket, and touch up my makeup.

My blond hair falls just below my shoulders, and I decide to leave it down but tuck one side behind my ear with a small pearl clip.

Professional but approachable — that’s my goal.

My heart hammers as I follow another staff member through the maze-like hallways.

I’ve worked with celebrities, tech billionaires, and politicians, but never royalty.

The queen of Marzieu! I practice what I’ll say in my head, going over my usual client introduction spiel.

But when we reach a set of pale blue double doors and they swing open, all my practiced words fly away.

The queen's sitting room is nothing like I expected.

Instead of another grand, formal space, it's cozy — almost like a normal living room, if normal living rooms had priceless antiques and silk wallpaper.

Queen Julia sits on a floral sofa, not on a throne, and she's wearing a simple blue dress rather than a crown and robes.

"Emily! Come in, please." She stands and extends her hand. She's tall and elegant, with silver-streaked dark hair pulled into a low bun. Her smile creates gentle creases around her eyes.

"Your Majesty." I curtsy, which makes her wave her hand dismissively.

"Please, when it's just us, Julia is fine. Sit, sit." She gestures to a chair across from her. A tray with tea and delicate cookies sits on the table between us. "Tea?"

"Yes, please." My voice comes out higher than normal. I clear my throat as she pours.

"I hope your journey was comfortable?" she asks, handing me a cup so fine I can see the light through it.

"Very, thank you. The palace is incredible."

"It can be a bit much, can't it?" Her eyes twinkle. "I've lived here almost forty years now, and I still get lost sometimes."

I laugh, surprised by her candor, and feel myself relaxing a bit.

"Emily," she says, "I want to thank you personally for agreeing to work with Hugo. I

understand it was an... unusual request.”

“Not at all. I’m honored to be here.”

She studies me for a moment, then sets down her teacup with a gentle clink. “I should be direct. My son can be... difficult. Especially when it comes to matters of the heart.”

“Most people are,” I say with a smile. “That’s why they need help.”

“Hugo wasn’t always this way.” She sighs and looks toward the window. “Before my husband died — before Hugo had to take on so many royal responsibilities — he was different. Carefree. Sometimes too carefree.”

I nod, knowing from my research about Prince Hugo’s past reputation for partying and dating models. The tabloids had loved him.

“When Gerald — the king — passed so suddenly, Hugo changed overnight. It was like he felt he had to become his father immediately.” Her fingers twist the ring on her left hand. “He threw himself into his duties. Which is admirable, but...”

“But there’s more to life than duty,” I finish softly.

“Exactly.” Her eyes meet mine, grateful.

“Gerald and I had such love. Real love. Those years together were the greatest gift.” Her voice catches slightly.

“I want that for Hugo. He deserves it. But he won’t even consider it.

He talks only of work... That’s why I called you.

They say you don't just match people based on paper compatibility, but on... something deeper."

I feel a flush of pride. "I believe everyone has a perfect match out there. My job is finding the person who makes their heart recognize something it's been waiting for."

"Yes!" Her eyes light up. "That's exactly it. Gerald used to say he knew I was the one because his heart got quiet when I entered a room — like it had been noisy his whole life, and suddenly there was peace."

My own heart squeezes at that. It's exactly what I want for myself someday, too.

"I won't lie to you." The queen smiles ruefully. "He'll try to scare you off. He'll be cold. Dismissive."

"I've dealt with reluctant clients before," I assure her, though none quite like a prince.

"I'm sure you have." She glances at an elegant clock on the mantel. "Oh! Your meeting with him is in ten minutes — if that's all right? Two p.m. I thought it best to jump right in."

My stomach flips. I was expecting at least a day to settle in and prepare, but who am I to say no to a queen? "Of course. No time like the present."

She rings a small bell, and a young man in a dark suit appears. "Pierre will show you to Hugo's office. And Emily? Thank you again."

"You're welcome, Your Majesty." I nod my head, still having trouble believing the words "Your Majesty" are coming from my mouth. Not in my wildest dreams did I ever imagine making it this far.

The walk to Prince Hugo's office feels like a march to battle.

Pierre leads me through corridors lined with portraits and artifacts, twisting and turning so much that I'm not sure I could retrace the steps if I tried.

Finally we arrive in a waiting area, which is decorated finely but doesn't have the personal touches the queen's sitting area did.

"His Highness will be with you shortly," Pierre says, gesturing to a minimalist chair that looks more like a sculpture than furniture.

Two o'clock comes and goes. I scroll through the notes about Hugo on my tablet.

Two fifteen. I shift in the uncomfortable chair.

Two thirty. My initial nervousness is fading, replaced by irritation. By two forty, I'm checking emails on my phone, my foot tapping against the floor.

At ten minutes to three, a door opens and a woman wearing a dress suit steps out. "Ms. Neale? His Highness will see you now."

I stand, smoothing my dress, and I know I really, really shouldn't, but I can't help it... "Our appointment was at two."

She doesn't so much as blink. "Yes. The prince is very busy."

I bite back my response. Rule one of matchmaking: don't start by antagonizing the client. Even if the client has left you sitting for fifty minutes in the world's most uncomfortable chair.

The prince's office is as impersonal as the waiting area.

Floor-to-ceiling windows offer a stunning view of the mountains, but otherwise, the space feels unlived-in.

One wall holds a large abstract painting in shades of — surprise — gray.

The desk is glass and metal, impossibly clear except for the computer and a small plant.

No photos. No personal items. Not even a coffee mug.

Prince Hugo stands from behind the desk as I enter, and there's a moment where I almost trip over my feet.

Of course, I knew how tall he is, how handsome he is, but being in his presence is something different entirely.

His dark hair is cut short and neat, his jaw sharp enough to cut glass.

His eyes, a deep blue like the sea before a storm, appraise me with cool detachment that matches his charcoal-gray suit.

He doesn't look like the party boy from the old tabloids. He looks like he's never had fun in his life.

“Your Highness.” I do a quick curtsy, remembering the proper protocol for meeting royalty — which I was briefed on in an email from the palace before arriving here.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:23 am

“Ms. Neale.” He waves his hand at one of the two seats in front of the desk. “Please sit.”

I do, placing my bag on the floor. “Thank you for meeting with me, Your Highness. Though I was under the impression our appointment was at two o’clock.”

A flash of something — irritation? amusement? — crosses his face so quickly I almost miss it. “My apologies. An urgent matter with the finance minister required my attention.”

It sounds rehearsed, like an excuse he’s used many times. I decide to let it go. For now.

“I understand. Shall we make the most of our remaining time?” I pull out and open my tablet. “I’d like to start by understanding what you’re looking for in a partner.”

He sits back, his posture perfect, hands folded on the desk. “I assume my mother has briefed you on the situation.”

“She shared some background, yes. But I’d like to hear from you directly.”

His lips press into a thin line. “Very well. I require someone who understands the unique demands of royal life. Someone with appropriate education and social standing. Someone diplomatic, poised, and discreet.”

I write this down, though it sounds more like a job description than a romantic wish list. “And what about personal compatibility? Shared interests? Emotional

connection?”

I already know that getting an answer out of him will be like pulling teeth, but going through my standard protocol seems the best icebreaker to use. And it’s really a sense of his personality that I’m after at the moment — which will come through as I talk with him.

He raises an eyebrow. “Those are secondary considerations.”

“Secondary?”

“Ms. Nelson.” His tone is patient, as if explaining something to a child.

“Neale,” I correct, though he continues on as if he doesn’t hear me.

“I am not looking for a romantic fantasy. I am looking for a partner who understands that this arrangement is about duty, not love.”

I sit back, studying him. His face gives nothing away. “With all due respect, Your Highness, that’s not what I do.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m not in the business of arranged marriages. I was brought here to help you find real love. A genuine connection.”

“Ah.” His lips curve into what might technically be a smile, though it doesn’t reach his eyes. “I see my mother has misrepresented the situation.”

“Has she?” I lean forward. “Or have you convinced yourself that love isn’t something you need or deserve?”

His eyes narrow slightly, the only indication that my words have hit a nerve. “My personal feelings are irrelevant. I have responsibilities that take precedence.”

“Your mother had those same responsibilities. So did your father. Yet they found love together.”

“My parents’ situation was different.”

“How?” I challenge.

He stands abruptly, walking to the window. His back is to me when he speaks again. “My mother has romantic notions about matchmaking. I agreed to this process to appease her, nothing more.”

I stand too, gathering my things. “Then I’m afraid we’re at an impasse, Your Highness. Because I don’t match people who are just looking to ‘appease’ someone else.”

He turns, surprise evident in his face. Perhaps people don’t often walk away from princes.

If he really won’t budge, though, I won’t press him.

I’m not above backing out of a job once I realize it’s a hopeless situation.

I would rather quit than end up failing and have that become part of my reputation.

“I believe in what I do,” I continue. “I believe everyone deserves to find their person — the one who makes everything else make sense. Even stubborn princes who think love is beneath them.”

His jaw tightens. “I never said?—”

“You didn’t have to.” I tuck my tablet under my arm. “I see how busy you are.” I nod at the phone on his table, which is lighting up with a silent call. “Perhaps we can try again tomorrow, if you’re actually interested in the process I was brought here for.”

For a moment, he looks thrown off balance, which I suspect doesn’t happen often. Then his expression smooths over, becoming unreadable again.

“My assistant will contact you to reschedule,” he says formally.

I nod and turn to leave. At the door, I pause and look back. “For what it’s worth, Your Highness, duty and love aren’t mutually exclusive. The best partnerships strengthen both.”

I don’t wait for his response before I walk out, my heart pounding. I’ve never spoken to a client like that before. But then, I’ve never had a client who seemed so determined to avoid happiness.

Was coming here the wrong thing? Should I go ahead and cut my losses? Return the payment and apologize to the queen before explaining that her son is beyond help? Because if I can’t match Hugo... if I fail...

I bite my bottom lip. Word hasn’t yet gotten out that I’m working for the palace, but it’s only a matter of time before it does.

If I crash and burn this job, it’ll tank my reputation.

But if I succeed... I’ll enter a new level of visibility.

I might be able to start expanding the business, opening new offices and training

other matchmakers, just like I've been dreaming of the last year.

So, there's only one option. I have to succeed. Sure, this prince is stubborn — but you know what?

So am I.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:23 am

HUGO

I slice through the water, each stroke a small act of rebellion.

My muscles burn as I push harder, trying to swim away from the memory of today's meeting.

But even underwater, I can't escape my mother's latest scheme to get me married off, or the face of the petite blonde matchmaker who's supposed to find me a "suitable" wife.

The chlorine stings my eyes as I surface, gulping air before plunging back down.

Thirty laps and counting. The pool area is one of my favorite places in the palace — high glass ceilings that let in the evening light, marble columns that have watched five generations of Bastiens learn to swim, and enough privacy that I can actually think without an aide or advisor hovering nearby.

"Planning to drain the pool tonight, Your Highness?" Guy's voice bounces off the water as he drops his towel on a nearby lounge chair.

I pull up at the edge, wiping water from my eyes. "Just getting some exercise."

"Hmm. And the fact that you're swimming like you're being chased by sharks has nothing to do with your meeting today?" Guy sits down, dangling his feet in the water. My oldest friend has always been able to read me like a boring palace document.

“How did you know about that?” I splash water in his direction, which he dodges with practiced ease.

“Palace walls have ears, Hugo.” He shrugs off his robe and slides into the water with barely a ripple. “Plus, your mother mentioned it when I passed her in the hall. She seemed quite pleased with herself.”

I groan. “Of course she is. She’s finally found a way to take control of the one part of my life I thought was still mine.”

Guy treads water next to me. “A matchmaker isn’t the end of the world. Plenty of royals use them.”

“In the eighteen hundreds, maybe.” While Guy isn’t a royal, he knows about as much of my life as a brother would. He grew up in the palace alongside me, and while he now operates a horse farm outside of the city, his father is still an advisor to my mother, and Guy is here often.

I flip and kick off the wall harder than necessary, sending a wave across the previously calm surface. “It’s embarrassing. I’m thirty years old, but my mother doesn’t trust me to find my own wife.”

“Your mother cares about you,” he says softly. “And frankly, when was the last time you even had a date? Wouldn’t it be fun to meet some girls?”

I swim back to the edge and rest my arms on the cool tile. “So, what? I should just roll over and let some stranger pick out my future wife like she’s selecting a tie to match my suit?”

“Her name is Emily, right? What’s she like?”

I stare at the rippling patterns on the pool's surface, trying to seem indifferent. "Short. Blonde. Lacking a filter."

"Pretty?" There's a hint of amusement in his voice that I choose to ignore.

"If you like the bossy type."

The truth is, Emily Neale is pretty — very pretty — with bright eyes that seem to miss nothing and a smile that appears and disappears like she's deciding if you deserve to see it. But I'm not about to admit that to Guy.

"She walked into the meeting full of questions about my 'preferences in a partner.'" I make air quotes with my fingers, nearly sinking in the process. "Like she's ordering a custom-made doll instead of finding a person."

"The horror," Guy deadpans. "She's trying to find someone compatible with you. What a monster."

"It's not the questions." I go to stand in the shallow end, water dripping from my hair. "It's the whole situation. I told my mother I would humor her, but now I see how much time this will take up, and it's time I simply do not have."

He joins me in the shallow end. "Look, here's what I think. Go through the motions. Meet whoever this Emily person selects. Make your mother happy. Best-case scenario, you actually like one of them. Worst-case, you can say you tried, and maybe your mother will back off for a while."

"Worst case is that my mother finds a match for me," I correct, remembering the deal we struck over brunch. "And what about Emily? She looked at me like I was some sort of... project. All business and tight smiles. I swear she was taking mental notes every time I shifted in my chair."

“Maybe she was nervous. You can be intimidating when you want to be. The whole Prince of Marzieu thing tends to make people act weird.”

“She didn’t seem intimidated.” The memory of her steady gaze flashes through my mind. “She seemed... judgmental.”

Guy chuckles. “So you’re mad that the woman finding you a wife isn’t falling at your feet like your usual admirers?”

“No!” I protest too quickly. “I just don’t like being analyzed like I’m a specimen under a microscope. She kept tilting her head and narrowing her eyes.”

“Heaven forbid that someone should expect clear communication from you.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Whose side are you on?”

Guy lifts himself out of the pool in one smooth motion, water streaming off his athletic frame. “The side of reason, as always. You need to find a wife eventually, Hugo. The country expects it. The council expects it. And deep down, I think you want it too.”

I follow him out of the pool, grabbing a towel from the heated rack. “I want to find someone on my own terms. Is that so unreasonable?”

“And when would you do that, exactly?” He raises an eyebrow. “Between your seven a.m. briefings and your midnight policy reviews? You barely leave the palace except for official functions.”

His words hit harder than I’d like to admit. Since stepping in to help with royal responsibilities, my life has become a carefully scheduled series of meetings and appearances. The weight of responsibility leaves little room for anything else.

“Look,” he goes on. “Think of it this way. A matchmaker is essentially screening candidates for you. Saving you time. She’s doing the preliminary work so you don’t have to suffer through dozens of awkward dates with incompatible women.”

I run the towel over my hair, considering his words. “I guess.”

“Plus,” Guy adds with a smirk, “if she’s as pretty as you’re trying not to admit, seeing her for follow-up meetings won’t be such a hardship.”

I throw my wet towel at him, which he easily catches. “I never said she was pretty.”

“You didn’t have to. Your defensive tone said it for you.” He shakes his head. “I still don’t get why you’re being so ornery when it comes to this.”

I look away, because I’m not sure either.

What I suspect is that it is all happening too fast. I never expected to settle down this young, just as I didn’t expect to inherit so much responsibility this early.

While I think I do a good job of faking confidence, sometimes I feel desperately out of control.

And a wife? Children?

What if I cannot be the man they need me to be? Just as I might not be able to one day be the king my country needs?

There it is, the real fear, tucked away behind all my combativeness.

It’s not one I wish to share, though. I need to be strong — for my mother, for my country.

A real prince is stoic, in charge, never quaking in fear.

If people saw how often I doubt myself, they would doubt me, and I cannot — will not — let my people down.

So, I need to postpone marriage for a while longer, until I am ready. When that will be, I do not know yet. I only know that I am not yet the man who can handle a family. One day, yes...

But not today.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:23 am

EMILY

The office they've given me has a view of the royal gardens, all pruned hedges and perfect symmetry, lit up tonight by the delicate lights lining the walkways.

My desk, on the other hand, is a disaster zone of notebooks, photos, screens, and not one note that Prince Hugo Bastien deigned to tell me about himself.

"This is ridiculous," I mutter to myself, standing up to pace. My heels sink into the plush carpet as I walk the perimeter of the room. "Years of being the most sought-after matchmaker in Los Angeles, and I'm stumped by one grumpy prince."

I turn to the wall, which is lined with books that have probably been here for centuries but don't have a trace of dust on them.

I run my fingers along their spines, feeling the texture of history beneath my fingertips.

My own books — notebooks filled with observations about clients, psychology texts, and my personal matching methodology — are stacked haphazardly on every available surface.

I've matched oil tycoons with art historians, tech billionaires with organic farmers, and once, memorably, a retired astronaut with a deep-sea explorer.

My success rate is blushingly high, and each year has been better than the last. But Prince Hugo Bastien of Marzieu might just ruin my perfect record.

I flop back into my chair and stare at his picture on my laptop. He's handsome, I'll give him that, but his mouth is set in a perpetual straight line, as if someone programmed him to look serious at all times.

"What happened to you?" I wonder aloud.

The last few hours, I've been tearing through the contacts the queen had sent to me, trying to find women to introduce Hugo to. It's not as simple as it is with my usual clients, as Hugo is expected to be matched with a woman who is of a certain caliber.

That means princesses. Heiresses. Girls from families with spotless reputations.

Yep. My task is to essentially find a needle in a haystack. A needle that Hugo will probably just curl his upper lip at.

If only he would tell me more about what he wants, then?—

I sit up straight, a new idea taking shape. If the mountain won't come to Mohammed, then Mohammed must go to the mountain. Or in this case, if the prince won't tell me about himself, I'll just have to observe him in his natural habitat.

"That's it!" I snap my fingers, energized by the new plan. "I'll shadow him."

I scribble notes frantically, my mind racing.

People reveal themselves in a thousand little ways they don't realize — how they treat staff, what makes them laugh, how they handle stress.

If I can just watch the prince going about his daily business, I'll learn more about him than any questionnaire could tell me.

But I'll need access to his schedule, which means I need royal permission. The queen. Of course.

I quickly dial the palace office number, tapping my pen impatiently as I wait for someone to pick up. After a minute or two, a secretary answers.

"Hello, this is Emily Neale. I need to speak with the queen as soon as possible," I say, injecting authority into my voice.

There's a pause, then the receptionist responds, "Stand by, please."

I'm placed on hold. The minutes drag on, and I begin tapping my foot against the leg of my desk. Finally, the line clicks again.

"Emily, this is Julia speaking. How may I assist you?"

Her voice, warm yet laden with authority, reminds me of a school principal. Every word is precise, every syllable enunciated with regal clarity. I swallow my nerves and plunge into my proposal.

"Your Majesty, I believe I have a solution that may expedite the process. With your permission, I would like to shadow Prince Hugo and observe him, to get a clearer picture of his personality and preferences. With your consent, of course."

There is a moment of silence on the line before the queen responds, "A rather innovative approach, Miss Neale. I must admit I am intrigued by this idea. You have my permission. And as I said before, 'Julia' is fine."

My heart leaps. Victory. "Thank you, Julia. I assure you this will help immensely in the process."

“I look forward to seeing you put your unconventional methods into action,” she replies. “I assume that your initial meeting with my son was not as fruitful as we would like?”

“Unfortunately, you are correct,” I admit, sighing softly into the receiver. “He is... a little reticent.”

There’s a beat of silence and then she laughs. “Just ‘a little,’ Emily?”

Her voice warms with honest humor, and that startles an answering laugh from me.

“All right, perhaps more than a little,” I concede, the tension in my shoulders easing.

“I do appreciate your candor. Hugo is... complicated. But he is also my son and I do wish for him to be understood, not just judged as ‘the prince.’”

“I understand completely. And I do promise to treat Hugo not just as a prince, but as a man.”

In fact, I’m already doing that. Not many people would have called a prince out on keeping them waiting for an hour, I’m sure.

“Good. I am glad we are in agreement. Hugo’s secretary will be able to give you his schedule for tomorrow.”

“Thank you again, Julia,” I say, gratitude coursing through me.

“Do your best, Emily. We have faith in you.”

We say our goodnights and hang up, my heart pounding with adrenaline and relief. I make a mental note to call the secretary first thing tomorrow, to map out when and

where I can be without being too intrusive.

Satisfied with my plan, I discover that I'm suddenly extremely tired.

The jet lag I've been fighting off with excitement and anxiety has finally caught up now that I have a moment of relaxation.

Organizing my things, I turn the lights out in the office and head into the hallway. Time to call it a night.

Tomorrow will surely be busy and long, and since I already know Hugo will be none too pleased to have me shadowing him, I'm expecting to need the energy to go head-to-head with him.

"Oof!" The impact sends me stumbling backward, and I barely have time to register the fact that, while rounding the corner, I've just walked straight into someone.

Strong fingers wrap around my upper arms, steadying me. I look up — way up — into the stormy eyes of Prince Hugo Bastien himself.

"Miss Neale," he says, his voice a low rumble. "Do you always walk without looking where you're going?"

His hands drop from my arms as if he's suddenly remembered he's touching me.

"Only when I'm thinking about something fascinating, Your Highness," I reply, holding up his schedule. "Like your very busy week ahead."

My plan was to turn over a new leaf tomorrow, to do everything I can to be kind and pleasant to him. However, after him accusing me of bumping into him — when he also had to have not been looking where he was going — I'm suddenly inclined to be

anything but.

His eyes narrow. “What are you talking about?”

“I just spoke to your mother. We had a lovely chat. I’ll be getting your schedule from your secretary.”

Hugo’s jaw tightens, a muscle twitching beneath his five-o’clock shadow. “And why, exactly, do you need my schedule?”

I straighten to my full height, which still leaves me looking up at him like he’s a particularly handsome skyscraper. “Because, Your Highness, since you won’t tell me about yourself, I’ve decided to observe for myself.”

“Observe?” His eyebrows draw together, creating a little furrow I have a strange urge to smooth with my thumb.

“Shadow. Follow. Watch. Starting with tomorrow morning.”

The prince’s face darkens like a summer storm rolling in. “Absolutely not.”

“Absolutely yes,” I counter. “With your mother’s full approval.”

He runs a hand through his hair, mussing its perfect arrangement. “This is ridiculous. You’re supposed to find me potential wives, not follow me around like a?—”

“Like a professional doing her job?” I finish for him. “Prince Hugo, I can’t match you with your ideal partner if I don’t know the first thing about you. And since you’ve made it abundantly clear that you won’t tell me yourself, this is the alternative.”

“Can’t you just...” He waves his hand vaguely. “Find some appropriate women and

let me choose? Isn't that how this works?"

I cross my arms. "Maybe for amateurs. I don't just find 'appropriate women.' I find the right woman. Someone who complements your personality, shares your values, and challenges you in the ways you need to be challenged. But to do that, I need to know who you are beyond 'Prince of Marzieu.'"

A flicker of amusement crosses his face so quickly I almost miss it. Then the storm clouds return.

"I don't have time for this. I have a council meeting tomorrow that is highly sensitive. State matters are not for civilian ears."

"Fine," I concede. "I'll wait outside. But the rest of your day is fair game."

"Miss Neale?—"

"Emily is fine," I correct him. "If I'm going to be your shadow for the next few days, you might as well use my first name."

He looks like he's considering picking me up and locking me in a tower somewhere. "Emily," he says, my name sounding strangely formal in his accented voice. "This is highly irregular and completely unnecessary."

"On the contrary; it's both regular — for me — and absolutely necessary. Unless you'd prefer to fill out my comprehensive fifty-page questionnaire instead? It covers everything from your childhood pets to your opinions on breakfast foods."

He pinches the bridge of his nose, looking pained. "You're not going to let this go, are you?"

“Not a chance, Your Highness.”

He sighs, a sound so heavy it seems to bear the burden of his entire kingdom. “Fine. Shadow me. But stay out of my way, don’t interrupt my meetings, and for God’s sake, don’t wear anything that jingles.”

I frown. “Jingles?”

“I would like to forget that you are there.”

This time, I can’t help the laugh that bubbles up. “No bells, I promise. Why on earth would I wear anything that makes noise?”

Hugo doesn’t laugh, but something in his expression softens infinitesimally. Then, as if catching himself, he steps back, squaring his shoulders.

“My morning briefing is at seven o’clock. Don’t be late.” He turns on his heel and strides away, his back ramrod straight, shoulders tight with tension.

“Sweet dreams to you too, Prince Charming,” I mutter under my breath, watching him go.

A smile spreads across my face despite his chilly departure. Phase one of Operation Find Hugo’s Heart: complete. He may think he’s just humoring me until I go away, but little does he know I can’t afford to give up on this match.

Tomorrow, the real work begins. And by the time I’m finished here, I’ll know Prince Hugo Bastien better than he knows himself. Finding him the perfect woman will be a piece of cake.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:23 am

HUGO

I wake to the realization that today is the day. The matchmaker begins her shadowing, and I'm already exhausted by the thought.

Five years as the ruling prince of Marzieu, and somehow this feels more invasive than any state dinner or diplomatic crisis I've weathered.

The clock reads five forty-three a.m., and while I could sleep another seventeen minutes, my mind is already spinning with meeting agendas and treaty clauses — and now, the added complication of a pipsqueak blonde who thinks she can find me true love.

The shower in my suite has excellent water pressure, one of the few luxuries I genuinely appreciate. I let the scalding water pound against my shoulders, hoping it might wash away my apprehension about this arrangement.

By six fifty, I'm dressed in a tailored navy suit, collar starched to perfection, hair combed back neatly, the breakfast and coffee delivered straight to my room all finished.

The man in the mirror looks nothing like the party boy I was before Father died.

That Hugo disappeared five years ago, buried alongside my father.

This Hugo — the one with the straight back and the serious eyes — takes his coffee black and his responsibilities seriously.

Emily stands at the entrance to my private office, precisely on time, her blond hair pulled back in a neat ponytail.

She wears a professional gray dress that does nothing to dim the spark in her eyes.

Those eyes — blue and alert — scan the room quickly, taking in details I'm sure will end up in some matchmaking file.

“Ms. Neale,” I nod formally, ignoring her request from yesterday to call her by her first name. “I trust you’re prepared for a full day.”

“Of course,” she smiles, and the expression transforms her face from merely pretty to something that makes my chest tighten unexpectedly.

“Just don’t be... invasive.” I clear my throat, attempting to clear the strange sensation in my chest along with it.

“I can’t match you properly if I don’t know you, Your Highness.”

I check my watch. “The morning briefing begins in two minutes. You’ll need to sign additional confidentiality agreements before we proceed.”

“Already did. Your chief of staff had me arrive at six thirty for paperwork.” She holds up a lanyard with a security badge. “I’m officially cleared to hear state secrets, although I promise none of them will make it into your dating profile.”

I’m not sure if I should be amused or horrified at the thought of having a dating profile. Instead of responding, I lead her down the corridor to the conference room where my advisors gather every morning at seven a.m. sharp. Their voices hush as we enter, eyes flickering curiously toward Emily.

“This is Ms. Neale,” I explain tersely. “She’ll be observing today. Proceed as normal.”

Harold, who is both my senior advisor and Guy’s father, clears his throat. “Very well. Let’s begin with the agricultural reports. The drought in the southern region continues, and farmers are requesting emergency funding.”

I take my seat at the head of the table, hyperaware of Emily settling into a chair against the wall behind me. Not too close — she’s maintaining that professional distance she mentioned — but somehow I can feel her presence as clearly as if she were breathing down my neck.

The briefing continues with updates on diplomatic relations with neighboring Bellevoir (strained), tax-revenue projections (lower than expected), and the upcoming visit from Japan’s trade minister (requiring extensive preparation).

Through it all, I take notes, ask questions, and make decisions while trying to ignore the scratch of Emily’s pen on paper.

What is she writing? Is she judging how I handle crises?

Does the way I discuss international trade somehow indicate what type of partner I’d be compatible with?

The questions bounce around my skull, making it difficult to focus on the ambassador’s concerns about fishing rights in our shared waters.

“Your Highness?” my foreign minister prompts, and I realize everyone is looking at me expectantly.

“I apologize. Yes, draft the statement as discussed. I’ll review it before noon.” I

straighten my already straight tie, annoyed at my lapse in attention.

When the briefing ends, we move directly to a meeting with the education minister about university funding.

Another room, another set of data projections, and always, always Emily's presence like a shadow I can't shake.

She sits quietly in the corner, occasionally making notes but never interrupting.

Her silence is more distracting than if she were chattering constantly.

During the minister's presentation about scholarship allocations, I steal a glance at her.

She seems genuinely interested in the topic, head tilted slightly as she listens.

For someone who spends her days thinking about romance and compatibility, she appears surprisingly engaged by policies regarding science-research grants. An unexpected depth, perhaps.

The meeting runs long, and we barely have time to walk to the east wing for my ten o'clock appointment with the royal architect about renovations to certain areas of the palace. Emily keeps pace beside me through the long corridors, her short legs somehow managing a brisk stride that matches mine.

"Do you have any questions so far?" I ask, breaking the silence that has stretched between us for nearly three hours.

"Not yet," she answers simply, and falls quiet again.

The brevity of her response irritates me more than it should. Isn't her job to ask questions? To learn about my preferences, my personality, my needs? How can she possibly gather information if she just sits there like a silent sponge, absorbing but never engaging?

The architect meeting is particularly uncomfortable because it veers into personal territory when we discuss the renovation of my private apartments.

"The prince prefers natural light and minimalist design," the architect explains to her team, spreading blueprints across the table. "We'll be removing the heavy drapes and ornate moldings installed during the previous reign."

I feel my neck grow warm at having these preferences discussed in front of Emily. It's silly, really — what do curtains and crown molding have to do with matchmaking? But something about her knowing these intimate details of my living space feels like an invasion.

She makes a note. Just one quick scribble, but I find myself wondering what it says. "Likes minimalism, hates tradition"? "Too modern for a historical royal"? "Would clash with a partner who enjoys baroque design"?

By noon, when we break for a quick lunch in my office (a salad for her, a sandwich for me, both of us eating at my desk while reviewing reports), I can no longer contain my frustration.

"You're unusually quiet for someone who's supposed to be getting to know me," I say, setting down my pen with more force than necessary.

Emily looks up, surprise briefly crossing her face before it settles into a small smile. "Am I? I thought I was being respectful of your work environment."

“That’s not—” I stop, regrouping. “How are you supposed to gather information if you don’t ask questions?”

She takes a bite of salad, chews thoughtfully. “Who says I’m not gathering information?”

“You’ve barely spoken three sentences all morning.”

“And yet I’ve learned quite a bit.” She sets her fork down and looks directly at me, those blue eyes suddenly piercing.

“You twist your ring when you’re making difficult decisions.

You’re patient with your older advisors but get visibly tense when the younger ones take too long to make their points.

You care deeply about education funding but were distracted during discussions about palace renovations — except when they mentioned your private spaces, which made you uncomfortable. ”

I stare at her, unsettled by the accuracy of her observations.

“You asked five follow-up questions about the drought relief measures,” she continues.

“Which tells me you care about the welfare of your citizens. And you take your coffee black but add a tiny spoonful of sugar when you think no one is watching.” She smiles at my expression.

“I notice things, Your Highness. That’s my job. ”

I clear my throat, suddenly feeling exposed. “I see.”

“Besides,” she adds, her tone lightening, “you made it very clear that you weren’t thrilled about sharing personal details with a matchmaker. I was respecting your boundaries.”

A warmth creeps up my neck, an uncomfortable heat that I recognize as embarrassment. “I may have been... somewhat resistant.”

“Somewhat?” She raises an eyebrow.

I sigh, conceding the point. “I apologize if I’ve been... difficult.”

“Not difficult. Just contradictory.” She puts down her salad fork and leans forward slightly. “You don’t want to share personal information, but you’re annoyed when I don’t ask personal questions. You resent my presence, but you’re bothered when I try to be unobtrusive.”

Her directness catches me off guard. Most people tiptoe around royalty, cushioning their critiques in layers of deference and formality. Emily, it seems, is not most people.

“I’m not used to being... observed,” I admit.

“Aren’t you constantly observed? You’re the prince.”

“That’s different. People observe the role, the crown, the institution, what I’m supposed to be doing... when I’m not doing those things. Not... me .” I’m surprised by my own honesty.

Something softens in her expression. “If it helps, I’m not just watching for flaws or

quirks to put in some file. I'm trying to understand who you are beneath the title so I can find someone who will appreciate that person."

For a moment, we just look at each other across my desk, and I have the strange sensation that she can see parts of me that I've kept carefully hidden my entire life. It's unsettling and oddly relieving at the same time.

The moment breaks when my secretary knocks, reminding me of my next appointment.

"We should go," I say, standing and straightening my jacket.

Emily nods and rises as well. "For what it's worth, Your Highness, I think you're doing just fine with me shadowing you."

"Please, call me Hugo," I say impulsively. "At least when we're not in official meetings. 'Your Highness' creates exactly the distance I was just complaining about."

She stares at me. "That's quite the offer... Are you going to call me Emily, then?"

I hesitate, having only kept to formalities in order to annoy her. "I suppose so," I tease.

She smirks knowingly, and I'm struck yet again by how well she reads me. In fact, it is a little terrifying.

"Just so you know," she adds casually as we approach the meeting room, "I'll probably start asking more questions now that I know you secretly want me to."

I groan, already regretting my complaint. "Wonderful."

Her laugh follows me into the room, light and warm, and despite myself, I find the corners of my mouth turning up in response.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:23 am

EMILY

The phone rings four times before Nova picks up.

I eagerly sit down on the edge of the enormous four-poster bed, my feet barely touching the floor.

This guest room I'm staying in is bigger than my entire apartment back home, with ceilings that stretch so high I feel like a doll in a giant's dollhouse.

I can't wait to tell Nova everything about my first day shadowing Prince Workaholic of Marzieu.

"Emily!" Her voice explodes through the speaker. "Spill. Is he as handsome in person? Did you find him a wife yet? Are you having a royal romance of your own?"

I laugh and flop backward onto the silk duvet, phone pressed to my ear. "Slow down! One question at a time, please."

"Fine. Is he as good as the pictures?"

I stare at the intricate patterns on the ceiling, considering. "Objectively speaking, yes. If you like tall, broad-shouldered men with perfect hair and jawlines that could cut glass."

"So... yes."

“He’s easy on the eyes,” I admit. “But his personality? That’s a whole other story.”

“Uh-oh. That bad?”

I sit up and tuck my legs under me. “In our first meeting, he gave me next to nothing. He basically dug his feet in.”

“Ouch.”

“It’s fine. I can deal with it. I’m shadowing him to get a sense of who he is.”

“Bet he loves that,” she laughs.

I smirk, but then think of the moment Hugo and I shared during his lunch break. It was... unexpected, and left me wondering more about who he truly is.

“He’s hiding his real self,” I murmur, more to myself than her. “He’s so distanced, until he’s... not. I don’t know how to make sense of it. Not yet, anyway.”

Nova laughs. “So, which one is the real Prince Hugo? The ice king or the almost-human?”

“That’s what I need to figure out,” I admit, stopping at the window to look out at the moonlit palace grounds. “It’s like he has two different people inside him, and I don’t know which one to believe.”

“If anyone can crack him open, it’s you,” she says with confidence that warms me. “You’ve matched the unmatchable before. Remember that tech CEO who said he didn’t have time for love?”

“Now married with twins,” I say, smiling at the memory.

“Exactly. So this prince is just another challenge. And you love a challenge.”

We chat for another twenty minutes, Nova filling me in on gossip and her latest date disaster. By the time we hang up, my stomach is growling loudly enough to echo in the cavernous room.

“Time for a snack,” I mutter to myself, slipping on the hotel-style slippers provided by the palace staff.

The hallway outside my room stretches in both directions, lit by elegant sconces that cast a warm glow on the richly colored walls. I try to remember the palace tour. Kitchen... kitchen... was it left or right at the main staircase?

I opt for right and pad quietly down the corridor. The palace feels different at night — more mysterious, less intimidating without staff bustling everywhere. My shadow stretches and shrinks as I pass each light, making me feel like I’m not quite alone.

After a wrong turn and a brief, startled encounter with a stern-looking portrait of some ancient monarch, I find myself in what appears to be the administrative wing. Most offices are dark, but at the end of the hall, light spills from under a door.

Curiosity pulls me forward. The door isn’t fully closed, and through the crack, I see him — Prince Hugo, hunched over a massive desk covered in papers.

His suit jacket is draped over a chair, his tie loosened, and his sleeves rolled up to reveal surprisingly muscular forearms. His brow is furrowed in concentration as he reads something, makes notes, then reaches for another document.

I should continue my snack quest, but something keeps me rooted to the spot.

The Hugo I’m watching now seems different from both versions I met today.

There's no coldness, no forced civility — just focus and dedication.

He runs a hand through his hair, messing up the perfect style from earlier, and for a second, he looks younger, more vulnerable.

A night guard's footsteps from around the corner startle me back to my senses. I hurry away before being caught spying on the prince and follow signs to the kitchen that I somehow missed before.

The palace kitchen is enormous and gleaming with stainless steel, but warm too, with copper pots hanging from racks and herbs growing in pots by the window.

A single light illuminates the center island, where I find a plate covered with a napkin and a note: For late-night visitors. Enjoy! - Chef Remy.

The thoughtfulness makes my eyes tear up. I wasn't entirely sure what to expect at the palace, but I certainly didn't think it would be this warm and welcoming. Everyone here — with the exception of Hugo — has been mostly kind and caring.

Underneath is a beautiful array of small sandwiches, fruit, and tiny pastries. I grab a plate and help myself, still surprised at how emotional I'm feeling. Maybe being this far from LA has me a little homesick.

As I eat my midnight feast, I can't stop thinking about Hugo working so late. If he's still working past midnight, when does he rest? When does he do... anything else?

After finishing my snack and washing my plate — which I know is probably not expected, but I don't feel right leaving it for someone else to do — I head back to my room. This time, I deliberately take a different route, avoiding the hallway with the office Hugo was in.

Back in my room, I kick off the slippers and curl up in an armchair, hugging my knees to my chest. I should sleep, but Hugo is still on my mind.

Five years ago, he was known as the party prince — always in the tabloids with different women, photographed at clubs and on yachts.

Then his father died suddenly, and I guess Hugo transformed overnight into the stern, serious monarch I met today.

Grabbing my tablet, I pull up the research file I compiled before this trip.

Photos of a young Hugo show a grinning, carefree man with the same face but completely different eyes.

Then, abruptly, the smiles stop. The women disappear.

The party boy becomes a king-in-training, solemn and controlled in every public appearance.

And now he works past midnight, alone in his office, barely taking time to eat.

A strange feeling washes over me — recognition.

How many nights have I stayed up until two a.m. reviewing client profiles?

How many weekends have I spent in my office instead of out living my life?

How many times has Nova tried to drag me to a party, only to have me beg off because “I just need to finish this match first”?

I set my tablet down with a frown. When was the last time I did something just for

fun? Took a vacation that wasn't tied to networking? Had a hobby that wasn't somehow related to understanding human connection for my matchmaking work?

The realization makes me uncomfortable. I've always been proud of my dedication to my career, but seeing it reflected back at me through Hugo's midnight work sessions feels... different. Sadder, somehow.

"We're not so different, Your Highness," I whisper to the empty room.

Then it hits me — that's exactly the problem. Hugo needs someone who can pull him away from work, remind him to live, bring back some of that joy from his younger days but in a more balanced way. Not another workaholic like me.

I grab my notebook and start scribbling furiously.

This insight changes my approach completely.

I've been looking for someone who would understand his dedication to the crown, someone equally serious and duty-bound.

But maybe what he actually needs is the opposite — someone who respects his position but won't let him hide behind it.

Someone who can make him laugh, who will close his laptop at midnight and drag him out to look at the stars.

The ideas flow faster than I can write them. I'll need to adjust my interview questions, reconsider the preliminary candidates I've selected, maybe even expand the search parameters.

This is what makes matchmaking magical — that moment when something clicks and

suddenly you can see the path forward.

Hugo Bastien, Prince of Marzieu, isn't simply a difficult client.

He's a man who's forgotten how to balance duty with joy — and my job isn't just to find him a politically suitable bride, but to help him remember what it means to live fully.

I work until my eyes start to close on their own, the notebook sliding from my fingers as sleep finally claims me. My last thought before drifting off is that tomorrow, I'll see Prince Hugo with entirely new eyes. And if I do my job right, he'll begin to see himself differently too.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:23 am

EMILY

The palace ballroom sparkles like it's been dusted with diamonds — and I'm the fairy godmother who made it happen.

I stand by the entrance, clipboard in hand, checking off final details as the staff place crystal glasses on white-clothed tables.

My heart beats fast with excitement and a touch of nerves.

I've organized events for celebrities and billionaires before, but never for actual royalty.

Tonight, Prince Hugo of Marzieu will meet the amazing women I've handpicked for him.

The only piece that still needs to fall into place is his cooperation... and that is, sadly, out of my hands.

"Ms. Emily, where would you like the flower arrangements?" A young server approaches, carrying a vase of cream-colored roses.

"Center of each table, please." I smile, making a check on my list. "The name cards should go to the right of each place setting."

The server nods and hurries away. I take a deep breath, admiring my work.

For something put together in just a few days, this mixer looks incredible.

The chandeliers cast a warm glow over the room, and soft music plays from hidden speakers.

I've transformed the stuffy royal ballroom into something inviting and casual — well, as casual as a palace can get.

The doors swing open, and the first guests begin to arrive.

Twenty-five women, each one carefully selected from hundreds of profiles and personally interviewed by me over video chat in the past seventy-two hours.

I've barely slept, but it was worth it. These women represent the best Marzieu and neighboring countries have to offer — doctors saving lives, artists changing perspectives, business leaders building empires.

"Dr. Renée Corbin." I greet a tall woman with dark hair pulled into a neat bun. "So glad you could make it. I loved hearing about your work with Doctors Without Borders."

"Thank you for inviting me," she says, her voice soft but confident. "Though I must admit, I was surprised to get your call. Meeting a prince wasn't on my to-do list this week."

"The best matches often come when we're not looking for them," I say with a wink.

It's my favorite line, and I've found it to be true both professionally and personally. Though in my case, I'm still waiting for that surprise match to appear in my own life.

It's not long before all the women arrive, each dressed elegantly but not overly

formal, just as I requested. I greet them all by name, remembering details from our conversations. This is what makes me good at my job — I care about the people, not just the matching.

“Emily, this is simply wonderful.”

I turn to find Queen Julia approaching, looking regal in a midnight-blue dress that somehow manages to be both royal and approachable. Her silver hair is styled in soft waves, and her smile is warm.

My stomach does a little flip. “Your Majesty,” I say, giving my best curtsy. “Thank you for allowing me to organize this event.”

She places a gentle hand on my arm. “I’m impressed with how quickly you’ve put this together. And the women you’ve selected...” She glances around the room. “They seem quite accomplished.”

Pride swells in my chest. “They are. I wanted to find women who could match your son’s intelligence and drive, but who might also help him remember there’s life outside the palace offices.”

Her eyes crinkle at the corners. “That’s exactly what he needs. You truly are as good as they say.”

“The job isn’t done yet,” I remind her, hoping that I won’t end up disappointing this woman who holds more power than all of my previous clients put together.

As if on cue, the room goes quiet, and Prince Hugo enters. He looks handsome as always, dressed in a tailored navy suit that makes his blue eyes pop. Unfortunately, those eyes are currently fixed on his phone, thumbs tapping rapidly as he walks in.

My stomach sinks. This is not how a prince should enter a room full of exceptional women who have cleared their schedules just to meet him.

“Hugo, darling,” the queen calls, beckoning him over. “Come meet the wonderful women Emily has invited.”

He looks up, pockets his phone, and walks toward us. His smile is polite but doesn’t reach his eyes.

“Your Highness,” I say, trying to keep my voice professional despite my irritation. “I’m so glad you could join us. There are some amazing women here tonight I think you’ll enjoy meeting.”

“Sounds good.” He nods at me, then turns to kiss his mother’s cheek. “Mother, you look lovely as always.”

“These women have traveled from all over to meet you,” I remind him gently. “Dr. Fournier over there is pioneering a new surgical technique, and Ms. Beaumont is a concert pianist who’s performed at Carnegie Hall.”

“Yes, very impressive,” he says, but his eyes are already darting around the room, as if looking for an escape route.

I take a deep breath. “Shall I introduce you to some of them?”

Before he can answer, his phone buzzes. He pulls it back out immediately. “Excuse me, I need to take this.”

And just like that, he walks away, phone pressed to his ear, leaving me standing next to the queen with my mouth slightly open.

“I’m so sorry,” she says softly.

My heart nearly cracks in two. A queen shouldn’t be apologizing to me. An older woman shouldn’t be apologizing to me. And a mother certainly shouldn’t be apologizing for her grown son.

I straighten my shoulders. I didn’t become LA’s top matchmaker by giving up easily. “Don’t worry, Your Majesty. The night is young.”

For the next hour, I try every trick in my professional matchmaking handbook.

I personally escort Prince Hugo to speak with a brilliant architect who designed a children’s hospital, only to have him excuse himself after five minutes when his phone buzzes again.

I arrange for him to sit next to a charming entrepreneur during the appetizer course, but he spends most of the time checking emails.

By the time dessert is served — tiny chocolate-mousse cups with gold leaf that the palace chef prepared specially — my cheerful professional smile feels glued to my face.

Hugo has spoken to maybe half the women in the room, and none for longer than a couple minutes.

Several times I’ve caught him checking his watch.

“Is there an urgent matter at the office this evening?” I finally ask him when I catch him alone by the drink table.

He looks at me, a hint of surprise in his eyes. “There are always urgent matters.

Marzieu may be small, but it has big responsibilities.”

“I understand,” I say, though my voice makes it clear I don’t. “But these women have put aside their own important work to be here tonight. They deserve your full attention.”

A flicker of guilt crosses his face. “You’re right. I apologize.”

The response is unexpected, and there it is again — a bit of the other Hugo peeking through the facade.

“I will go speak with them.” He takes a step then pauses. “I did tell my mother I would try...”

“Thank you,” I exhale.

He straightens his tie and walks toward a group of women chatting by the windows. I watch with satisfaction as he engages them in conversation, nodding and even smiling at something one of them says.

Except my victory is short-lived. Not five minutes later, his phone comes out again, and he’s stepping away with an apologetic gesture to the women.

“I could strangle him with his own tie,” I mutter to myself.

The night crawls on, Hugo disappearing regularly to take calls or respond to urgent messages.

At one point, I see him chatting animatedly with Chef Remy about the menu, only for his phone to vibrate violently against the polished marble countertop, drawing his eyes away from a truly interesting conversation.

By the time the clock strikes eleven, most of the women have left. A few give me sympathetic smiles as they exit, their hopes of a possible romantic match replaced by faint frustration. All my efforts, all my careful preparation, it's all been wasted.

Hugo stands in the corner of the room, scrolling — scrolling! — on his phone, wine glass in hand. He's not even working at this point; he's probably watching reels on social media!

And here it is. My breaking point. I can't stand by and be a silent spectator any longer.

"Hugo," I call out, making my way toward him, my heels clicking sharply against the marble floor.

He turns at the sound of his name and gives me a cursory nod, but his expression changes when he sees mine. For once tonight, I'm not wearing a professional smile.

"Yes?" he asks, setting down his glass of wine and turning toward me fully.

"Are you really that obtuse or are you just pretending?" The words tumble out before I can filter them.

His eyes widen at my sudden harshness but he doesn't interrupt me.

"You've done nothing tonight but prove how uninterested you are in this entire process.

You said you'd try, Hugo. Try to connect with these women, try to open yourself to the possibility of finding love. "

He stiffens at my words. "I've been doing my best?—"

“Your best ?” I cut him off, my voice rising in frustration.

“Hovering over your phone is not your best. You’ve barely spoken a word to these amazing women who cleared their busy schedules for you!

These women who are doing remarkable things and have so much to offer someone who would just pay attention! ”

He flinches slightly, but I don’t back down. His excuses couldn’t even come close to making up for the embarrassment that tonight has become.

“Do you realize how hurt your mother is? She’s been trying so hard to be understanding, but even she can’t ignore how disrespectful you’ve been tonight.” The words hang heavily in the air between us, and I see a flicker of regret in his eyes.

“I didn’t mean to... hurt her.” His voice drops and he looks as if he’s been hit by a bullet train.

Anger gives way to a sudden exhaustion. I feel drained, defeated. I can’t bring myself to say any more. Turning on my heel, I take long strides away from him, leaving him standing there, all alone in the silent ballroom, staring blankly at the polished floor.

Good. Let him be hurt. Let him think about what he’s done, about how his actions affect other people. Maybe he’ll wake up tomorrow and decide to turn over a new leaf.

Not that I’ll be holding my breath.

HUGO

I stare at my reflection in the mirror, straightening the tie that feels more like a noose today.

Last night's mixer plays in my mind like a badly edited movie — me dodging conversations, hiding behind potted plants, and ignoring my mother's increasingly desperate glances.

And then there was Emily with her bright eyes narrowing each time I slipped away from another potential bride.

I'd hoped to sink her whole operation last night, and I might have just succeeded.

I adjust my cufflinks — my father's, gold with the royal crest of Marzieu embedded in sapphires. He used to fiddle with them during tedious meetings, a habit I've inherited. Five years since his heart gave out, and I still reach for the phone sometimes, wanting to ask his advice.

What would he say about what is happening now?

I like to think he would be on my side, that my mother is unnecessarily pushing me into marriage.

I can't know for sure, but he was a man devoted to his job first and foremost. Leading a country is no small task, and I hope that he would have been proud of how intensely I have put my nose to the grindstone.

I run my fingers through my hair, still damp from the shower.

The bags under my eyes tell the story of last night's restless sleep, guilt mixing with determination.

I do feel bad about disappointing my mother.

And even Emily — it's not her fault she was hired to perform an impossible task. But I can't give in.

Marriage is not on my agenda. Not now, not soon. Possibly not ever.

I have a country to help run. I have trade agreements to negotiate.

I have ceremonial duties and charitable foundations and a thousand other responsibilities that consume my days and keep me awake at night.

I don't have space for a wife who would need attention, affection, time — all things I can't spare.

Better to frustrate my mother now than make some woman miserable later.

If I'm stubborn enough, if I sabotage enough of these matchmaking efforts, eventually Mother will give up and forget about even organizing an arranged marriage. She'll have to. She's persistent, but I inherited my stubborn streak from her, so this is one battle I might actually win.

Satisfied that I'm doing the right thing, I make my way through the palace corridors toward the east patio, where Mother and I often have breakfast when the weather permits. April in Marzieu is particularly beautiful, with the gardens just coming into bloom.

As I step onto the patio, the sunlight momentarily blinds me. When my vision clears, I freeze. My mother sits at our usual table, elegant as always in a light pink dress, her hair swept up. But she's not alone.

Emily sits across from her, a cup of coffee cradled in her small hands. She's wearing a simple white blouse and navy pants, her blond hair pulled back in a ponytail that makes her look younger than her — what? Late twenties?

Great. The matchmaker is still here. I'd hoped she might have given up after last night's disaster and caught the first flight back to Los Angeles.

"Ah, Hugo!" My mother spots me and waves me over. "You're just in time for coffee."

I plaster on my diplomatic smile and approach the table. "Good morning, Mother." I bend to kiss her cheek, then straighten and give Emily a polite nod. "Hello."

"Good morning. I was just telling the queen about some of the challenges I've encountered in my career." Her eyes glint. She's taunting me.

"I imagine I've just become your biggest challenge," I say with a smile that I know doesn't quite reach my eyes.

"Oh, not at all," Emily says, matching my fake cheeriness. "I've worked with billionaires, celebrities, and politicians. Trust me, Your Highness, difficult clients are my specialty."

My mother's eyes dart between us, no doubt sensing the tension crackling in the air.

"Please, sit down," she says. "Breakfast will be served shortly."

I take my usual seat beside my mother, leaving Emily across from us. A server appears instantly to pour my coffee, and I thank him quietly.

“I was surprised to see you still in Marzieu,” I say to Emily after taking a sip. “I thought perhaps after last night’s... event... you might be reconsidering the engagement.”

Her smile doesn’t waver. “Oh, I never give up that easily, Prince Hugo. In fact, last night was quite informative.”

“Was it?” I raise an eyebrow.

“Absolutely. I learned a lot about what doesn’t work for you.” She leans forward slightly. “And that helps me figure out what might.”

My mother practically beams. “Emily has come up with a marvelous new approach.”

Wonderful. That’s exactly what I don’t want to hear.

Breakfast arrives — fresh fruit, pastries, and eggs cooked just how I like them. I use the distraction of food to collect my thoughts, but Emily doesn’t give me much time.

“Prince Hugo,” she says, setting down her cup with purpose, “I believe we should take a step back from formal introductions.”

“Meaning?” I cut into my eggs, keeping my expression neutral.

“Meaning I’d like to set you up on a practice date.”

I nearly choke on my food. “I’m sorry?”

“A practice date,” she repeats, as if this is a perfectly normal suggestion to make. “With an actress. Someone who can help us identify any... areas for improvement.”

I carefully set down my fork. “You want me to go on a fake date.”

“I use this technique with some of my more challenging clients,” she explains, apparently unfazed by my skepticism. “It’s especially helpful for people who haven’t dated in a while or who have specific obstacles to overcome.”

“And what obstacles do you think I have?” I ask through gritted teeth.

Her blue eyes meet mine directly. “Well, for starters, you spent most of last night hiding behind either your phone or a fern.”

My mother makes a small sound that might be a suppressed laugh. Traitor .

“I wasn’t hiding,” I say, though we all know that’s exactly what I was doing. “I was taking a strategic approach to a situation I had no interest in being part of.”

Emily nods as if I’ve just proven her point. “Exactly. And a practice date will help me understand what you actually want and need in a partner, rather than just what you’re trying to avoid.”

Nonsense. I see her true strategy clearly.

She wants to occupy my time, to wear down my resistance through sheer persistence.

If I go on this practice date, then she’ll suggest another activity, and another, until eventually I’m so worn down that I agree to an actual date with some princess or duchess just to get all of this over with.

“I appreciate your creativity, but I don’t think that will be necessary,” I say firmly. “I don’t need practice-dating. What I need is for everyone to understand that finding me a wife is not a priority right now.”

My mother’s face falls, and I immediately feel a sharp pang of guilt. Her hands rest in her lap, and I notice she’s wearing the emerald ring my father gave her on their twentieth anniversary. The sight of it makes the guilt intensify.

“Hugo,” she says softly, “I know you’re dedicated to your duties. But your father would have wanted you to find happiness too.”

It’s a low blow, but an effective one. I press my lips together, fighting the wave of emotions that always comes when she invokes my father.

“I think it’s a wonderful idea,” my mother continues. “Just one practice date. What harm could it do?”

Plenty, I think. But the hopeful look on her face is hard to resist. I’ve disappointed her enough already.

“Fine,” I say finally. “One practice date. One.”

Emily’s smile is triumphant, though she tries to hide it behind her coffee cup. “Excellent. I’ll make the arrangements. How does tomorrow evening work for you?”

“My schedule is rather full,” I hedge, though it’s not entirely true. “I’d have to check with my secretary.”

“I already did,” my mother says. “You’re free after four.”

Of course she did. I should have known they’d be coordinating their attack.

“Then I suppose tomorrow evening it is,” I concede, unable to find another escape route. “And who will this date be with?”

“An actress,” Emily says simply.

“Who exactly is this actress?” I ask, setting my fork down deliberately and leaning back in my chair. I cross my arms over my chest, trying and failing to hide my interest.

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about that. She’s a professional. Very experienced in helping men like you.”

“Men like me?” I arch one brow at her, intrigued and insulted at the same time.

“Well, workaholics with no social lives.” There’s a teasing lilt in her voice that unnerves me more than any harsh criticism would. It’s too familiar, too friendly for our strictly professional interaction.

My mother chuckles lightly, contributing to the absurdity.

I refuse to let Emily unsettle me further. “And what about you? Will you be joining this practice date?”

Her laughter peals through the morning air as she shakes her head. “No, Prince Hugo. This is strictly between you and your... date. I’ll be receiving her feedback on the date later, though.”

I grimace at the innocent stress on “date.” Already, I’m dreading the evening.

“Let me get this straight — you’ve arranged a date with someone who’s going to critique my every move,” I grumble, sinking against the back of my chair.

“Every move? Oh, no. She’ll only report on your major blunders. Which should, ideally, be minimal.”

I narrow my eyes at her. “Should I interpret that as a vote of confidence?”

Emily smiles, her eyes dancing with mischief. “Interpret it however you wish.”

My phone buzzes and I check my messages, welcoming the distraction.

But when I glance back up, Emily is still smiling, that insufferably knowing smile that makes me feel like she knows more about me than I do — which she probably does, considering the amount of research she’s apparently done for this “project.”

My mother sighs and eyes my phone. “Already, Hugo?”

“Our country cannot wait.”

“I have some work to get to myself.” Emily stands and curtsies at my mother. “Thank you for the invitation to breakfast, Your Majesty. Prince Hugo, I will check in with you later about your upcoming date.”

I force a fake smile, hoping that it looks more like a sneer, then wait until she has left the patio to turn to my mother.

“What did you get me into, Mother?” I groan, pinching the bridge of my nose and pushing aside thoughts of Emily’s alluring eyes.

Why am I suddenly thinking about her in this way? It’s not as if she’s done anything to truly catch my attention. Yes, she’s pretty, but pretty faces are a dime a dozen. And so what if she’s also smart? She’s calculating — conniving, even — and that... well, that is something I respect, actually.

“This is a chance to learn some balance in life, dear,” my mother replies. “Maybe you’ll discard some of your arrogance along the way.”

I huff and cross my arms over my chest. “Arrogance? Me?”

Mother looks at me, her hazel eyes sharp. “Yes, Hugo. You.”

The accusation hangs heavy in the air between us, ringing far truer than I’d like to admit. A pair of royal aides start clearing away the breakfast dishes, leaving us alone on the patio, surrounded by the symphony of nature and under the scrutiny of unperturbed statues.

Finally, Mother sighs and stands. “Do as you will, Hugo?—”

“Which is what you wish.” I gaze steadfast back at her.

She tents her fingers on the edge of the table, and the look on her face is gutting. Pity.

But, no. I don’t deserve that. I never have, and I never will. I am doing exactly as I wish, stepping up to lead this country and?—

“I will see you at supper,” she says, choosing to ignore my comment. Leaning forward, she presses a kiss to the top of my head, making me feel like a child before vacating the patio.

“Wonderful,” I mutter. As if Emily weren’t already infantilizing me enough as it is.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:23 am

EMILY

I check my watch for the fifth time in as many minutes, pacing the plush carpet of my temporary office in the east wing of the palace.

The actress I hired for Prince Hugo's practice date should arrive any minute now.

My heart does a tiny somersault at the thought of tonight's dinner — not because I'm involved, of course, but because this is one of the last ideas I have.

If tonight doesn't provide me with the info I need, there's very little left to do.

The palace staff cleared an entire restaurant in the city center for tonight, and I've prepared extensive notes on the type of conversation that Hugo needs to practice — less politics, more personal connection.

The prince may be gorgeous, but his conversation skills need serious work if he's going to charm a potential bride.

My phone buzzes against the antique desk, and I lunge for it, nearly knocking over a vase that probably costs more than my apartment back home.

"Emily Neale speaking," I answer, trying to sound as professional as possible despite the flutter of nerves in my stomach.

"Ms. Neale, this is Miranda Dupont, Annabelle's agent." The woman's voice sounds strained, and immediately my intuition flares with warning.

“Is everything all right?” I ask. “Annabelle should be arriving at the palace soon for?—”

“That’s why I’m calling. Annabelle won’t be able to make it tonight. I’m terribly sorry for the last-minute notice, but she’s come down with severe food poisoning.”

I sink into the nearest chair, my carefully constructed plans crumbling around me. “Food poisoning? But the practice date is in twenty minutes!”

“I know, and she feels terrible about it. We tried to find another actress from our agency who matches the profile you requested, but everyone is either already booked or unavailable on such short notice.”

My mind races through possibilities, each one worse than the last. “I understand. Thank you for letting me know, Ms. Dupont. Please tell Annabelle I hope she feels better soon.”

“I will. Thank you. If you like, we can go ahead and reschedule.”

I bite my lip, already knowing that’s not a possibility. “Thank you.” My voice cracks, but I push forward. “I need to scramble to find a last-minute solution, however. I will be in touch if we can use your assistance elsewhere. Have a wonderful night.”

“You too, Miss Neale.”

I hang up and stare at the ceiling, which is painted with cherubs who seem to be mocking my predicament.

I could try to reschedule, but after spending time negotiating with Hugo’s chief of staff to find this one free evening in his packed schedule, I know that’s not realistic.

The prince has diplomatic functions, charity events, and official duties booked solid for the next month.

“Think, Emily, think,” I mutter, tapping my fingers against the desk. After everything I’ve come up against and overcome, I’m not about to let a little food poisoning derail my biggest client yet.

That’s when the outrageous idea hits me.

I could step in myself. After all, this is just a practice date — an opportunity for Hugo to work on his conversation skills and personal charm before I start introducing him to actual potential matches.

I know exactly what he needs to practice and what qualities I need to assess.

But then again, I’m his matchmaker, not a candidate. There are professional boundaries. Plus, something about the thought of sitting across from those intense eyes for an entire evening makes my stomach feel like it’s filled with butterflies having a dance party.

“This is ridiculous,” I tell myself firmly. “You’re a professional. Act like one.”

Decision made, I rush back to my guest suite to get ready.

The dresses I planned on wearing during this trip won’t do.

Thankfully, I always overpack, and the red cocktail dress I brought “just in case” will have to work.

It’s nothing compared to the designer gowns that Hugo’s actual matches will wear, but it’s the best I’ve got.

I twist my hair into an elegant updo, leaving a few tendrils to frame my face.

My makeup goes from daytime professional to evening sophisticated with some extra eyeliner and a swipe of red lipstick to match the dress.

I'm considerably shorter than most of the women Hugo typically dates (according to my research), but my silver heels add a few precious inches.

Looking in the mirror, I barely recognize myself. Gone is the efficient matchmaker in her sensible blazer, replaced by a woman who looks like she belongs at a fancy dinner date. The thought sends another flutter through my chest, which I promptly ignore.

"This is work," I remind my reflection sternly. "You're still on the job."

I gather my small clutch, which contains a discreet notebook for observations. I've memorized most of my coaching points for Hugo, but I might need to jot down notes about his progress. Can I be both his date and his coach?

The professional part of me says yes, while another part — a part I'm trying very hard to ignore — wonders if I'll be able to maintain my objectivity when faced with the full force of Hugo's royal charm.

Doing my best to calm my nerves, I walk downstairs.

I could text Hugo the update, but that would give him an opportunity to back out — make some excuse and stay in his room.

Instead I'll wait by the front doors for him, right where his driver will be picking him up.

This way, there's no chance he'll slip by.

I'll give him the updated plan as he's walking out the door.

The grand foyer of the palace is quiet at this hour, most of the day's visitors and staff already gone. I position myself near the massive staircase, where Hugo will descend on his way out.

A few staff members pass through, giving me curious looks, and I catch the foyer security guard gazing appreciatively at me once or twice, although whenever I look back at him his expression snaps into a friendly smile.

Oh, no. Have I overdone it with this dress? Do I look too sexy? Because I wasn't even going for a tiny bit sexy! I was merely having fun getting dressed, not thinking about?—

A door opens somewhere above, and I freeze. The sound of footsteps echoes through the space, and then Hugo appears at the top of the staircase. As he descends, his eyes find me, and I watch as they widen slightly, his steps faltering for just a moment.

My cheeks warm under his gaze, and I suddenly feel exposed, like I'm playing dress-up in clothes that don't belong to me.

“Well.” His voice carries that hint of an accent that makes ordinary English sound like music. “I hardly recognized you. I thought you weren't coming tonight. Whatever happened to giving me space for the date?”

I swallow hard and channel my professional persona. “Good evening, Your Highness.”

He reaches the bottom of the stairs and approaches me, his cologne — woody and

tender — surrounding us both. Up close, I can see the tiny lines around his eyes, evidence of all that he's lived through.

“Where is the actress?” he asks, glancing around the empty foyer. “Aren't we already running late?”

This is the moment of truth. I straighten my spine, which still leaves me looking up at him considerably. “There's been a slight change of plans. Annabelle, the actress we hired, has come down with food poisoning.”

His expression darkens immediately. “So we're postponing? My schedule is extremely tight, you know. I agreed to this practice date because you insisted it was necessary, but if we need to reschedule, it might be weeks before?—”

“We don't need to postpone,” I interrupt, which earns me a raised eyebrow. Interrupting royalty is probably not in the palace etiquette handbook. “I'll be standing in as your date tonight.”

Hugo's expression would be comical if I weren't so nervous — a mixture of surprise, confusion, and what appears to be alarm. “You?”

“Yes,” I say, trying not to be offended by his tone. “I know exactly what aspects of conversation and connection we need to work on, so in many ways, this is actually more efficient.”

He runs a hand through his perfectly styled hair, disrupting it just enough to make him look more approachable and somehow even more handsome. “This sounds like a recipe for disaster.”

A laugh escapes me before I can stop it. “Your confidence in my dating abilities is truly flattering.”

The corner of his mouth twitches, almost a smile but not quite. “That’s not what I meant. You’re my matchmaker, not a potential match. Won’t this blur the professional lines?”

He’s right, of course, which is exactly what I’ve been worrying about for the past hour. “I’m a professional, Hugo. I can separate my role as your matchmaker from pretending to be your date for one evening. Think of me as both your date and your coach.”

“Two women in one,” he says dryly. “How economical.”

“Exactly,” I say brightly, choosing to ignore his sarcasm. “The restaurant is still reserved, the staff is prepared, and we have this rare free evening in your schedule. It would be a shame to waste it.”

Hugo studies me for a long moment, so long that I have to resist the urge to fidget. I’ve worked with many powerful people, but none of them have made me feel as scrutinized as I do under the prince’s gaze.

“Very well,” he finally says with a slight nod. “But I maintain that this is a terrible idea.”

“Noted, Your Highness,” I say, relieved that he’s agreed. “Trust me, I would not be doing this if we had another option.”

We walk toward the palace doors, where on the other side a car is waiting to take us to the restaurant.

The palace staff open them for us, and the cool evening air hits my bare shoulders.

Hugo notices my slight shiver and hesitates, like he might offer his jacket, but then

seems to think better of it as I slip my coat around my shoulders.

As we step outside, the reality of what I've gotten myself into begins to sink in. I'm about to have a private dinner with one of Europe's most eligible bachelors — a man who features regularly in "World's Most Handsome Royals" lists, a man whose future wife I'm supposed to be finding.

A palace guard opens the car door, and Hugo gestures for me to enter first. As I slide across the leather seat, I catch a glimpse of my reflection in the window. I hardly recognize the woman staring back at me, her eyes wide with nervousness and something that looks suspiciously like excitement.

Hugo settles beside me, careful to maintain a respectable distance.

The car pulls away from the palace, carrying us toward an evening that suddenly feels unpredictable.

I'm usually the one orchestrating perfect dates for others, carefully controlling every variable.

Tonight, I'm stepping into the spotlight myself, and despite all my planning and preparation, I have a strange feeling that this practice date might throw more than a few curveballs my way.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:23 am

HUGO

The royal car glides through the city streets, unnervingly exposed without our usual motorcade.

I keep stealing glances at Emily beside me, her profile caught in flashes of streetlight.

She hums to herself, completely at ease, while my collar feels two sizes too small.

This whole “practice date” idea is ridiculous — I’m a prince, not some awkward teenager — but I know that if I don’t at least partially go along with my mother and Emily’s plans, they will simply dig their heels in and try harder.

“Relax, Hugo. Your security detail is right behind us.” Emily nods toward the unmarked car following at a discreet distance. “The point of tonight is to feel normal for once.”

I straighten my tie and choose not to tell her that it isn’t being outside of the palace that has me on edge; it’s being with her. “I haven’t been normal since I was born.”

“That’s why you need the practice.” Her smile is small but powerful. “How can I find you the perfect match if I don’t know how you behave on a date?”

I grunt in response. That’s another topic I currently don’t feel like touching. If I’m persistent enough, though, both she and my mother will eventually drop the matter. Emily will return to America and get on with other clients, and my mother will find someone else’s life to meddle in.

The car stops outside a small restaurant tucked between two larger buildings.

The sign is small and wooden, soft yellow lamps illuminating the facade.

No photographers, no crowd of curious onlookers, just a single host waiting at the door.

A glance through the windows makes the place look like it is closed.

“You rented the entire restaurant?” I ask as Emily leads the way inside.

“Your mother’s budget was generous.” She winks over her shoulder.

I hate to admit it, but I’m impressed. The interior is warm and intimate without being stuffy — exposed brick walls hung with local artwork, tables dressed in crisp white linens, candles flickering everywhere. It’s nothing like the formal state dinners I’m used to.

Then Emily hands her coat to the host, and my mouth goes dry.

The vibrant red dress she’s wearing falls just below her knees, simple but perfectly fitted to her petite frame. A small pendant nestles at her throat, catching the candlelight when she moves. I don’t know what to say. How to react. What to think.

I’ve spent days with Emily invading my space and mucking up my life, but I’ve never actually looked at her until now. The realization hits me like a punch to the gut.

“Something wrong?” she asks, tilting her head.

“No, just—” I clear my throat. “You look different outside the palace.”

“So do you. Less princely, more man-about-town.”

The host leads us to a table in the center of the empty restaurant. It feels absurd — an entire dining room, staff hovering nearby, all for just the two of us. I pull out Emily’s chair before the server can reach it, an automatic gesture that makes her smile.

A tall man in white chef’s attire approaches, his hands clasped in front of him. “Your Highness, Ms. Neale, I am Chef Laurent. It is my pleasure to serve you tonight.”

Emily beams at him. “The pleasure is ours. I’ve heard wonderful things about your restaurant.”

“I have prepared a special tasting menu highlighting the best seasonal ingredients from our region,” the chef continues. “Each course tells a story of Marzieu — its land, its traditions, its future.”

I nod, feeling the immensity of the evening ahead. This is too much like a real date. The intimate setting, the special menu, the way the candlelight catches in Emily’s hair — it’s distracting and uncomfortable.

After the chef leaves, Emily leans forward. “I know that I can sometimes be all business?—”

“Is that not why you are here?”

She shrugs a shoulder. “Yes, but for the next two hours, let’s pretend I’m not your matchmaker. Let’s pretend this is simply a first date between two people who find each other interesting.”

“Is that what we are?” I ask, raising an eyebrow. My heart rate picks up, and I realize too late that she might think I am flirting with her.

“We could be, for practice.” She unfolds her napkin with a flick of her wrist. “Unless you’re worried you can’t keep up?”

The challenge in her voice stirs something in me — competitiveness, maybe, or something more dangerous.

I study her across the table, this woman who’s made a career out of reading people and pairing them up like puzzle pieces.

There’s a sharpness to her that makes her even more appealing, more tantalizing.

She doesn’t back down from a challenge, and she has the grit of ten people combined.

Simply put, she is unlike any other woman I’ve ever met.

“What’s wrong?” She tilts her head again, a habit I’m starting to recognize.

“Nothing,” I say, perhaps too quickly.

It would be a fatal error to admit that I am developing a crush on my matchmaker. Especially when it has been months — no, years — since I have had anything close to a crush. I’ve been busy doing more important things, women taking as much of a back seat as possible.

“Nothing,” I say. Wait. Did I already say that? Am I showing my hand? “Let’s do this. Hi, I’m Hugo. I run a small European country. And you are?”

Her eyes widen in surprise before crinkling with amusement. “Emily. I help people find love.”

“Interesting career choice. What drew you to matchmaking?”

The first course arrives — tiny cups of mushroom soup with truffle foam — but I keep my eyes on Emily. If she wants a performance, I'll give her one.

"I've always been good at reading people," she says, taking a delicate sip. "Figuring out what makes them tick, what they need versus what they think they want. I've also always been a romantic. I love fairy tales and romance books and movies."

"Of course you do." I smile. "But none of that is real life."

"Not most of the time," she counters. "Unless you find your person. Which is where I come in."

"And what do I want, according to your expert analysis?"

"You want to be left alone." She says it simply, without judgment.

"You've spent five years proving you can handle everything your father left behind, and you're terrified that bringing someone else into your life will upset that balance.

Maybe you're also worried that you will let down any partner you do couple up with...

although I'm less sure about that part."

I stare at her, soup forgotten. "That's... interesting."

And completely accurate.

"You won't tell me if I'm right?" She waves a hand. "It doesn't matter. I don't need an answer. Anyway, what you need might be different from what you want."

“And what do I need?”

“Someone who doesn’t need you to be Prince Hugo all the time. Someone who sees the man behind the title.”

Our eyes meet across the table, and for a moment, the role-playing falls away. She sees me, truly sees me, and it is terrifying.

As well as electrifying.

“And you?” I ask. “Have you found your person?”

I hold my breath, wanting her to say no, even though it doesn’t have any bearing on my life.

“Work has kept me occupied,” she says, looking away.

“Ah.”

“This soup is amazing,” she says, changing the subject. “The chef deserves every star he’s earned.”

I take a spoonful, grateful for the distraction. “It is good. Though I once had a chef who put gold flakes in everything. Made my teeth look like I’d been in a fight with a glitter bomb.”

She laughs, and just like that, the tension dissolves. We move through the next courses with surprising ease — roasted vegetables arranged like a garden, fish so fresh it barely needed cooking, a lamb dish that makes me close my eyes in appreciation.

I find myself telling her about past dinners gone wrong — the time an ambassador's toupee fell into the soup, the visiting dignitary who got drunk and tried to waltz with a statue. She counters with stories of disastrous matches and dates she's orchestrated that went spectacularly off-track.

"Wait," I say, nearly choking on my wine. "He brought his mother to the date?"

"And his grandmother!" Emily wipes tears of laughter from her eyes. "The poor woman thought she was meeting one eligible bachelor, not a three-generation interview panel."

"What did she do?"

"Ordered the most expensive item on the menu, three times. Said if she had to entertain the whole family tree, she might as well get a good meal out of it."

I laugh so hard my chest hurts. When was the last time I had fun like this? The realization sobers me slightly. Between council meetings and diplomatic crises and the endless paperwork of running a nation, there's been little room for simple joy.

Emily notices the shift in my mood. "What is it?"

"Nothing. Just..." I gesture vaguely. "This is nice. Better than I expected."

"You thought it would be terrible?"

"I thought it would be pointless. A hoop to jump through to satisfy my mother."

Her eyes soften. "And now?"

Our feet brush under the table as she crosses her legs, and I feel a spark — static from

the dry air, but it jolts me nonetheless.

“Now...” I shake my head. “It is nice to let loose for a while.”

The dessert arrives before she can respond — dark-chocolate mousse topped with berries and edible flowers. We eat in companionable silence, the weight of the evening settling around us like a comfortable blanket.

As the last plates are cleared away, I lean back in my chair. “So, how did I do? Am I dateable, or a lost cause?”

Emily dabs her lips with her napkin, all business again. “You did surprisingly well once you stopped overthinking everything. You’re attentive, you ask good questions, you know how to listen.” She tilts her head, studying me. “You’ll make a wonderful match for a very lucky woman.”

The words hit me with unexpected force. For the first time since this matchmaking ordeal began, I have a fleeting thought: if I am to marry, I would like it to be to someone like Emily — vivacious, intelligent, ambitious. Someone who makes me laugh, who sees through my work facade.

The thought is gone as quickly as it appears. Emily works for my mother. Her job is to find me a match, not to be one.

“Don’t look so relieved,” she says, misreading my expression. “You can’t relax just yet. I have an afternoon of speed dates set up for you tomorrow.”

I groan, the fantasy bursting like a soap bubble. “Speed dates? Really?”

“The more you humor me, the sooner I can find you a match and be out of your hair.” She gathers her clutch, signaling the end of our evening. “Unless you’re starting to

enjoy my company?”

She says it teasingly, but I can't bring myself to joke back.

The truth is, I don't want Emily to go away — not immediately, anyway.

But she also can't stay forever. My original plan was to frustrate her efforts, to be so difficult that my mother would give up on the idea of an arranged marriage altogether.

Now I'm not so sure what I want.

“Hugo?” She prompts, her use of my first name without the title so seductive that I wonder if I should ask her to stop saying it so I don't go insane.

“Just wondering how many of these hurdles you've set up for me,” I say, covering my confusion.

“They aren't hurdles. They're steps.” She stands, smoothing her dress. “Ready to head back?”

I offer her my arm as we walk out, hyperaware of her small hand resting in the crook of my elbow. It feels right there, which is precisely the problem.

Tomorrow, I'll meet more potential matches — women who fit whatever mysterious criteria she's established based on our conversations.

I should be dreading it, just like I was the last event.

Instead, I find myself curious about who Emily now thinks would suit me, even as I wonder if anyone could possibly compare to the matchmaker herself.

The night air is cool as we step outside, the city lights reflecting off puddles from an earlier rain. Emily shivers slightly, and I resist the urge to put my arm around her shoulders.

This is just a job, I remind myself. For both of us.

But as we slide into the waiting car, our shoulders touching in the back seat, I know I'm already in trouble.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:23 am

EMILY

I adjust the last place card on the round table then step back to survey my handiwork.

The palace event room glows under tasteful lighting — not too romantic, not too sterile.

Just right for speed-dating royalty. Everything is perfect, as it should be.

Matchmaking for regular clients is one thing, but for this client? This has to be flawless.

If only my pulse would stop doing that weird jumpy thing it started doing last night.

Twelve tables, each with a single rose in a crystal vase. One royal bachelor who, until yesterday, I was convinced might be the most difficult client I've ever had.

But something changed last night. Something in the way his shoulders relaxed when it was just the two of us around.

The way his laugh — when it finally emerged — seemed to surprise even him, as though he'd forgotten he was capable of it.

Five years of rigid duty had calcified around him like a shell, but for just a moment, I glimpsed the man beneath.

Taking a moment to myself before the guests arrive, I glance in a mirror and smooth

my hair. It took longer than usual this morning to pick my outfit — a floral dress — and I'm not sure why. It feels like I'm questioning everything today, and that has me concerned because it's not like me at all.

A staff member pokes her head in. "Miss Emily? The candidates are in the waiting area."

"Perfect. Please send them in in five minutes." I check my notes one more time.

Twelve new women, carefully selected from aristocratic and accomplished backgrounds. Each one with qualities that could complement Prince Hugo. Each one, objectively speaking, far more suitable for him than his American matchmaker.

Not that I'm thinking about that.

The door opens again, and there he is. Prince Hugo walks in like he owns the room, which, technically, he does. I shift my weight, feeling oddly out of place under his gaze.

"Good afternoon, Your Highness." My voice comes out steady and professional. Good job, Emily.

"Emily." He nods formally, then does something unexpected — he smiles. It's small, almost reluctant, but definitely there. "The room looks appropriate. Well done."

I blink. Appropriate? Is that... approval? From Prince Stone Face? "Thank you. We'll be welcoming twelve candidates today. Each speed date will last seven minutes, with one minute for transition. I've prepared topics of conversation if you need them, but?—"

"I think I can manage a conversation," he says, a hint of that old arrogance returning.

“Of course. I just meant?—”

“I know what you meant.” There’s something softer in his voice now. “And I… appreciate the preparation.”

Two compliments in under a minute? I should check if the palace is still standing or if the world has ended while I wasn’t looking.

“You’re welcome,” I say, recovering quickly.

“I assume you picked these women based on last night?” His brow furrows. “So quickly?”

“I had a larger selection shortlisted.”

At this point, I’m broadening the search to women I wouldn’t have considered before, but that’s based as much on my developing knowledge of Hugo as it is the number of women he’s already burned through.

When I started the job, I assumed he would be paired with a high-profile partner, but the realization that he might need a woman who prefers to stay out of the spotlight has changed things.

“Let’s get you settled at your table,” I say. “The women will rotate, and you’ll remain seated.”

He follows me to his designated spot, and I catch a whiff of his cologne — one that he hasn’t worn before, with hints of cedar. I push the feeling that it inspires down deep.

The doors open and the candidates enter, a collection of elegant, accomplished

women in cocktail attire.

I've met them all during pre-screening, and they're genuinely impressive — teachers, artists, diplomats' daughters, philanthropists, and one Olympic equestrian. Any one of them could be a princess.

I stifle a sigh as I direct them to their starting positions.

But why on earth should I sigh? This is exactly what I want — what Hugo needs.

A perfect match. My job is to find him someone who complements his life, his duties, his future.

My job is not to notice how his eyes crinkle slightly at the corners when he gives a genuine smile.

The first round begins, and I stand aside, clipboard ready, observing. This is usually my favorite part — watching connections form, noting chemistry, measuring body language. Today, though, I find my attention drifting repeatedly to Hugo himself rather than the interactions.

He's different today. More engaged. He leans forward slightly when asking questions. His posture remains impeccable, but there's a new responsiveness to him. When a brunette in a green dress says something amusing, he actually laughs — a brief, rich sound that carries across the room.

Something sharp and unexpected twists in my chest. I mark down "good rapport" on my notes, but my pen presses harder than necessary.

The timer chimes, and each woman shifts to the next table. As the second round begins, I force myself to be more methodical. Objective. Professional. I note which

candidates maintain eye contact, which ones get Hugo to talk with his hands (only two so far), which ones make him check the clock.

By the fourth rotation, I've identified three strong contenders, which should make me happy.

Instead I feel... hollow. Like I'm watching something precious being auctioned off.

Which is ridiculous because: a) Hugo isn't an object; b) he isn't precious to me personally; and c) this is literally my job.

But, God, when did my throat get so tight?

Sipping water, I remind myself of the dozens of successful matches I've made. The wedding invitations that arrive at my office. The baby announcements. I'm good at this. I know what makes people compatible.

A redhead in a stunning blue dress is currently sitting across from Hugo. Her hand touches his forearm briefly as she makes a point, and he doesn't pull away. My stomach twists again.

Oh, no.

I recognize this feeling. It's happened before — this inconvenient attraction to clients. Usually, I can stamp it out easily. A brief crush, a professional reminder to myself, and it's gone. But this... this feels different. Deeper.

I turn away, pretending to check my notes as the next rotation begins. This is just because I've been working too hard and I haven't been on any dates. I'm probably starved for a connection with a man.

That's it. And when was my last vacation?

I can't even remember. A year ago? Longer?

Nova is right. I've been so focused on making others happy that I've neglected myself. No wonder I'm developing inappropriate feelings for a client. My emotional wires are crossed from exhaustion.

That's all this is.

With that settled, I straighten my shoulders. When I get back to LA, I'm taking a week off. Maybe I'll go to that spa in Arizona my friend recommended. Hikes in the morning, massages in the afternoon, no princes anywhere.

The thought steadies me through the next few rounds. I watch Hugo interacting with a stylish blonde who works for the UN. They seem to be discussing international policy, and he's fully engaged, gesturing occasionally to emphasize a point. The woman nods eagerly, clearly impressed by his knowledge.

He'll make some woman very happy someday. If only that woman could be me.

I squeeze my eyes shut, hating that I had the thought. Maybe I need two weeks off instead of one. Two weeks of no one else, no matchmaking, no thinking about anyone else's happiness but my own. When was the last time I did that?

"Are you all right?"

I jump. One of the palace staff is looking at me with concern.

"Fine," I whisper back. "Just making notes."

She nods and moves away. I plaster on my professional smile and continue observing. Round eight begins. This woman has Hugo smiling within the first minute — a good sign. They seem to be sharing a joke. His eyes crinkle at the corners.

I write “excellent chemistry” and underline it twice, ignoring the sinking feeling in my stomach.

By the time we reach the final rotation, I’ve identified four strong matches for Hugo. This is a better success rate than I usually have at these events. I should be thrilled.

Instead, I’m mentally calculating how much a two-week vacation at that Arizona spa would cost. Maybe I could add on a side trip to the Grand Canyon. I’ve never seen it.

I’m so lost in my escape plans that I almost miss it — Hugo’s eyes, not on his date, but on me.

When our gazes connect, he doesn’t look away immediately as I expect.

Instead, there’s a moment, just a fraction of a second, where something passes between us across the room.

Something that makes my heart shoot up into my throat.

I drop my eyes to my clipboard, my face burning. What was that? Did I imagine it?

When I dare to look up again, he’s focused on his date, nodding at something she’s saying. I must have imagined it. The stress, the long hours, the foreign country — they’re all conspiring to make me see things that aren’t there.

Because Prince Hugo Bastien isn’t interested in me. He’s made that crystal clear from our first meeting, with his cool demeanor and reluctant participation. The only reason

he's being moderately pleasant now is because I've proven I can do my job.

That's all.

The final timer chimes, and I step forward to thank everyone for participating.

My voice is steady as I explain the next steps — how I'll be analyzing today's interactions and setting up more in-depth dates with promising candidates.

The women nod and smile, some casting hopeful glances at Hugo, who stands with perfect royal posture beside me.

"Thank you for your time, ladies," he says, his voice formal but warm. "It was a pleasure meeting each of you."

As the candidates file out, making small talk among themselves, I busy myself with gathering my notes and avoiding Hugo's eyes. I need to maintain professional distance now more than ever.

"Well?" he asks when we're alone. "How did I do?"

I look up, composing my face into its best professional mask. "Much better than I anticipated, Hu— Your Highness. I have several promising matches to pursue."

Is it my imagination, or does something like disappointment flicker across his face?

"Good," he says after a moment. "That's... good. And remember, you can call me Hugo."

My throat tightens. I'd rather not.

“I’ll prepare detailed profiles of the top candidates for your review tomorrow.” I clutch my clipboard like it might save me from drowning. “And then we can?—”

“You seemed distracted today,” he interrupts.

My heart stops. “Did I?”

“Yes.” His eyes study me with that intensity that seems to miss nothing. “Is everything all right?”

“Of course.” I force a bright smile. “Just making mental notes.” I start to turn away but then stop. “Actually, I was thinking that when I return to LA, I should take some time off. I haven’t had a proper vacation in years.”

“Ah.” He nods slowly. “That sounds... sensible.”

“Two weeks, I think,” I continue, babbling now. “Maybe Arizona. They have spas. And the Grand Canyon. Have you ever seen it? It’s supposed to be... grand.”

I cringe. Wow. Smooth.

A small smile plays at the corner of his mouth. “I haven’t had the pleasure.”

“Well, it’s on my list now.” I take a step back, eager to escape before I say something even more ridiculous. “I should compile these notes while everything’s fresh.”

“Of course.” He steps back as well, ever correct. “I look forward to your report tomorrow.”

I nod and hurry toward the door, feeling his eyes on my back the entire way. In the hallway, I allow myself one deep, shaky breath.

Two weeks, I decide firmly. Two weeks of vacation, minimum. And maybe I should look into dating again myself when I get back. Clearly, I've been living vicariously through my clients for too long.

Because this feeling — this ridiculous, hopeless attraction — needs to stop. Now. Before I do something truly unprofessional, like imagine that a prince could ever end up living happily ever after with his plebeian matchmaker.

I'm a thorn in his side. An employee. That's all I am to him. All I should be.

No matter what my traitorous heart might wish.

HUGO

My dreams are full of blond hair and laughter, and I wake with a smile that doesn't belong to a prince who has three grueling meetings before lunch. Emily's face floats in my mind like a stubborn bubble, refusing to pop even as I splash cold water on my face.

Something is wrong with me today. Something that feels dangerously like hope.

"Your Highness?" My assistant, Maurice, knocks on the door. "The minister of finance is waiting in the blue room."

"I'll be right there," I call back, but the words feel hollow.

I go through the motions of dressing, my thoughts wandering back to the night of our dinner. To her bright eyes when she gazed back at me. To the way she looked in that dress that somehow made her look both professional and like someone I'd want to—

"Your Highness?" Maurice speaks again, more insistent.

"Coming."

I sit through ten minutes of the finance meeting before I realize I haven't heard a single word.

The minister is talking about tax rates or budget projections or something equally important that I should care about, but all I can think about is whether Emily thought

any of those women last night were good enough for me.

Because they weren't. I already know that for a fact.

"Don't you agree, Your Highness?"

I blink. "I'm sorry, could you repeat that last point? I want to make sure I understand completely."

The minister frowns slightly but repeats himself. I still don't absorb it.

After thirty more minutes of this torture, I make a decision that would have horrified me yesterday.

"Maurice," I say when the minister finally leaves, "cancel my appointments for the rest of the day."

He looks at me like I've grown a second head. In five years, I've never voluntarily canceled meetings.

"Are you feeling unwell, sir?"

"I just need... a mental health day." The phrase feels foreign on my tongue, a stupid buzz phrase that I scoffed at when I saw it on social media.

But here I am, electing to take one for myself. Yes, princes don't get mental health days. But princes who can't focus might make bad decisions for their country.

"Of course, sir. I'll reschedule everything."

"Thank you. And have the garage bring around my personal car. The one without the

flags.”

Twenty minutes later, I’m driving myself out of the palace gates, the weight on my chest already lighter.

The countryside of Marzieu unfolds before me — rolling hills dotted with stone farmhouses, fields of wheat waving in the breeze.

The sight has always calmed me, but today it reminds me of Emily’s hair, golden and moving with a life of its own.

Guy’s farm comes into view — a weathered stone house with a red roof, a large barn, and fenced pastures where horses graze peacefully. I park beside Guy’s truck and step out into the smell of hay and horses and hard work.

“My eyes must deceive me!” Guy calls from the barn doorway. “Shouldn’t you be solving the problems of the nation, Your Royal Pain in the Backside?”

I grin. “The nation will survive without me for one afternoon.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “Must be the end of the world. Coffee?”

“Please.”

He leads me into the barn’s small office, a cluttered space with faded horse-show ribbons on the walls and a coffeemaker that’s probably older than I am. The coffee it produces tastes like motor oil, but I’ve grown to like it.

“How’s Midnight?” I ask, accepting a chipped mug.

“Your girl’s fine. Out in the east pasture showing the youngsters who’s boss. Want to

say hello?”

Midnight is my horse — a black thoroughbred mare with one white sock and more attitude than a roomful of diplomats.

My father gave her to me for my sixteenth birthday, and when I took the throne, I decided she’d be happier here at Guy’s farm than in the royal stables with all their pomp and protocol.

At fifteen, she’s happier doing things her way, anyway.

“I’d like to take her for a ride, actually.”

Guy studies me over the rim of his mug. “Something on your mind, Hugo?”

“What makes you say that?”

“Because you only ride when you need to think or when you need to stop thinking. And you’ve got that same look you had after your dad passed.”

I sigh. He knows me too well. “It’s nothing that serious.”

“Could it be...?” He trails off, raising an eyebrow. I know what — or rather who — he is thinking about, but I choose to not respond for now.

Midnight sees me coming and trots to the fence, her ears pricked forward.

“Hey, beautiful,” I murmur, reaching out to stroke her velvety nose. “Miss me?”

She nuzzles my palm, looking for treats. I pull an apple from my pocket — I never visit empty-handed — and she takes it delicately before crunching away contentedly.

The familiar ritual of grooming and saddling quiets my mind. Brush, pick hooves, check for any signs of discomfort, saddle pad, saddle, bridle. Midnight stands patiently, occasionally turning to watch me with one liquid brown eye.

“There,” I say, tightening the girth. “Ready for an adventure?”

Guy helps me mount, though I don’t need it. “East trail’s nice today.”

I nod my thanks and nudge Midnight forward. We walk sedately out of the yard, but once we reach the trail, I give her the signal she’s waiting for, and she leaps into a canter with the grace of a dancer. The wind rushes past my ears, and for the first time today, my head feels clear.

We gallop across an open field, slowing to pick our way through a stand of trees, then trotting along a stream where wildflowers grow in patches of purple and yellow. I let Midnight choose our path, trusting her instincts more than my distracted mind.

Eventually, we come to a hilltop overlooking the valley. In the distance, I can just make out the palace, looking like a toy from here. I dismount and let Midnight graze while I sit on a large rock and try to untangle the mess in my head.

What is wrong with me? I met a woman for a business arrangement. We had a practice date. That’s all. So why can’t I stop thinking about her laugh? About the way she tilts her head when she’s curious? About how it felt to be just Hugo for an evening, not Prince Hugo Bastien of Marzieu?

I don’t know how long I sit here, but eventually Midnight nudges my shoulder, bored with grazing and ready to move on. I stroke her neck. “At least you know what you want, girl.”

When we return to the barn, Guy is fixing a bridle, his gnarled fingers working the

leather with practiced ease. He looks up as I lead Midnight in.

“Get what you needed from your ride?”

“Not really.” I start to unsaddle Midnight, my movements automatic.

“Want to talk about it instead of brooding like a teenage poet?”

I snort. “I don’t brood.”

He sets down the bridle. “Come on, out with it.”

I brush Midnight’s sweaty coat in silence for a minute, organizing my thoughts.

“Emily... the matchmaker...”

Guy waits, knowing me well enough to let me find my words.

“We had a... practice date. To help me prepare for the real dates.”

“A practice date?”

“Yes. And it was...” I struggle to find the right words. “It was nice. Better than nice.”

His eyes narrow with understanding. “Ah. And the real dates weren’t as nice.”

“Not even close.” I move to Midnight’s other side, hiding my face. “I pretended to like them because I knew she was watching. Because I wanted her to think I was... I don’t know, coachable.”

“And maybe to make her a little jealous?” he suggests, too perceptive by half.

I stop brushing and rest my forehead against Midnight's warm side. "She's working for my mother. To find a wife?—"

"That you don't want."

I grimace. "If you must know, I'm biding my time. Wearing my mother and Emily out until they forget about this nonsense entirely."

Saying it out loud, I realize for the first time how cowardly it all sounds.

"It's not that bad," Guy says. "Having someone around."

I gaze at him over Midnight's back. "You've been single for as long as I have."

He rubs the back of his neck. "Yes, but the difference is that I am starting to think it's not a good thing."

I finish grooming Midnight in silence, thinking about this. All done, Guy and I make plans to play tennis next week, and I leave with a slightly clearer head, if not a resolved heart.

Back at the palace, with my schedule still clear for the day, I retreat to my office. It's a room that was my father's before me, with its antique desk and walls of leather-bound books. Today it feels both like a sanctuary and a cage.

"Your Highness?" Maurice appears in the doorway. "Ms. Neale has requested a meeting with you. She says it's regarding the results of yesterday's event."

My pulse quickens. "When?"

"She's waiting in the small reception room. I told her you might not be able to today,

but she insisted it was time-sensitive.”

“It’s fine. Tell her I’ll be right there.”

Quickly, I check my reflection in the window. I look normal enough, I think, though I changed into jeans and a shirt to go riding, which isn’t my usual attire at all.

Emily stands when I enter the room, and I don’t miss the way her eyes widen slightly in surprise at the sight of my outfit.

“I went horseback riding,” I explain.

“Oh. That’s nice.” Her smile seems strained.

“Maurice said you have some results to share with me?”

She opens a leather portfolio and removes several glossy photographs. “Based on your interactions last night and the feedback forms I had the women complete, I’ve identified four candidates who would be excellent for second dates.” She lays the photos on the coffee table between us.

I glance at the photos without really seeing them.

I remember these women vaguely — a brunette who talked about her charity work, a serious academic type, someone in fashion, and a woman with an impressive family tree.

None of them had made me feel anything close to what I felt sitting across from Emily at that little restaurant.

“They all found you charming and engaging,” Emily continues, her voice bright.

“Each expressed interest in seeing you again in a more intimate setting. I was thinking perhaps a private dinner for each, spaced over the next two weeks? It would give you time to?—”

“I don’t think I want to,” I interrupt.

She blinks. “I’m sorry?”

But I’m even more surprised, for I have no clue where that statement came from. It seemed to pop out of my mouth without any foresight. Yet here I find myself, scrambling to come up with an excuse, desperate to explain it away before this woman — perceptive as she is — sees right through me.

“For second dates. I don’t think I’m... I think I need more coaching.” The excuse sounds thin even to my ears.

“More coaching?” Her brow furrows. “But you did wonderfully last night. All the feedback?—”

“Was positive, yes. But I was... performing.” At least that part is true. “I was saying what I thought they wanted to hear. I wasn’t being authentic.”

“Oh. I see.”

“Do you remember what you said at dinner? About how I seemed afraid of letting someone down?” I pace, trying to avoid her or myself, I don’t know.

“You were right. I am afraid. I’m afraid of promising someone a life I can’t deliver.

I’m afraid of being a disappointment as a partner when my country has to come first.”

“That’s... very self-aware of you.”

“Not really. I’ve been avoiding the truth for a long time.” I run a hand through my hair. “The truth is, I don’t know how to be a good partner. I know how to be a good prince. But those might be different things.”

“They don’t have to be,” she says quietly.

“Maybe not. But I need to figure that out before I waste these women’s time.” I gesture to the photos. “They deserve someone who knows what he can offer.”

She studies me for a long moment. “What are you suggesting, exactly?”

“More coaching. Different coaching.” I choose my words carefully. “Less about small talk and more about... how to be a good partner. How to balance duty and personal life.” What I’m really asking for is more time with her, but I can’t say that.

“That’s not typically the service I provide,” she says slowly.

“I understand. And I’m happy to adjust the contract accordingly for more pay.” I hold her gaze. “But I think it would be more honest than pretending I’m ready for the next step.”

She bites into her bottom lip, thinking, and forbidden thoughts race through my mind unbidden. Oh, what I wouldn’t give for a taste of those lips...

“It would delay your timeline for finding a match.”

“I know.”

“And it would require a different approach from me.”

“I understand.”

She sighs. “Can I be frank, Hugo?”

“Please.” My heart flutters at her use of my first name, even though she’s said it plenty of times.

“I think you’re overthinking this. Dating is about getting to know someone. You don’t have to have everything figured out before you start.”

“Maybe not for normal people. But when I date, it’s national news. These women will have expectations. The country will have expectations. I just want to be sure I’m not setting everyone up for disappointment.”

Emily considers this, then nods slowly. “All right. I can adjust our program to include more... personal development before we proceed with second dates.” She gathers up the photos. “I’ll need to redesign our approach.”

Relief floods through me, followed immediately by guilt. Am I manipulating the situation just to spend more time with her? Well... yes. But I also meant what I said about not being ready.

There’s another part to it as well. I still intend on never marrying, and the longer I can draw out our time together, the more likely it is she will have to consider me a lost cause and quit.

“Thank you,” I say. “I appreciate your flexibility.”

“It’s my job to help you find lasting happiness, Hugo. If this is what you need to get there, then that’s what we’ll do.” She closes her portfolio. “Anything else?”

Only everything else.

“I look forward to it.” I smile big.

When she leaves, I return to my office and sink into my chair, feeling both victorious and ashamed. I’ve bought myself more time with Emily, more time to turn this tide in my favor, but at what cost? I’m not being honest with her, and that turns me into someone I do not want to be.

But when I close my eyes, I see her smile again, and that uncomfortable heat blooms in my chest — part excitement, part guilt. I don’t know what I’m doing, but I know I’m not ready to stop doing it yet.

EMILY

By the time my alarm goes off, I've already been staring at the ceiling for hours. Sleep abandoned me somewhere between "how to teach a prince to be a good partner" and "why does my heart flutter when he smiles?"

My notebook sits on the nightstand, covered in scribbled relationship advice that looks ridiculous. How am I supposed to teach someone about love when the longest relationship I've had lasted three months and ended when he called me "aggressively cheerful"?

For the first time, I'm doubting that I actually know anything about love at all. Sure, I've matched people... but do I really understand anything beyond basic, initial chemistry?

Matching other people isn't the same as being in a relationship yourself. And teaching a prince how to be a good partner isn't exactly covered in the matchmaker handbook. I've spent my career analyzing compatibility, chemistry, conversation flow — not teaching relationship skills.

After showering, I discover a text from Hugo, asking me to meet him in his office. He looks up when I enter it, and his smile is warm enough to melt the polar ice caps. The heat from it touches my heart and spreads through my body, making me go weak in the knees.

"Emily." He says my name like it's something pleasant to taste, which I don't get. What is he playing at now? "I hope you slept well?"

“Like a baby,” I lie, setting my bag down. “Ready for your first day of relationship boot camp?”

He laughs, and I notice the same shadows under his eyes that I tried to hide this morning. Did he sleep as poorly as me? But why? “Certainly,” he says.

I perch on the edge of a chair and try to look like I know what I’m doing. “I’ve been thinking about our approach. Being cooped up in the palace all day isn’t ideal for this kind of training. Maybe we should go somewhere else? Somewhere more... relationship-y?”

“Relationship-y?” Hugo repeats with an amused smile. “Is that a technical term in your profession?”

My cheeks heat up. “I just mean somewhere less formal. Real relationships happen in the real world.”

Hugo taps his pen against his desk, considering this. “What about my friend Guy’s horse ranch? It’s about thirty minutes from here. Peaceful, beautiful views.”

I blink in surprise. “You want to go today?”

“Why not? I can clear my afternoon.” He’s already reaching for his phone.

“But don’t you have meetings? Important prince stuff?” I gesture vaguely at the papers covering his desk.

He shrugs. “Nothing that can’t be rescheduled.”

I stare at him, bewildered. The palace staff whisper about how Prince Hugo never takes time off, how he works sixteen-hour days since his father died. Yet here he is,

casually rearranging his schedule for our session.

“Is something wrong?” he asks, noticing my expression.

“No, it’s just... I heard you took yesterday afternoon off too.”

“I did.” He tilts his head. “Is that a problem?”

“No! Not at all. It’s good, actually. I just didn’t expect...” I trail off, not wanting to point out how out of character this seems.

“You didn’t expect me to take my romantic education seriously?” There’s a challenge in his voice, but his eyes are teasing.

“I didn’t expect you to be such an eager student,” I counter.

His face suddenly goes pink, and he turns away. “Then you’ve much to learn about me.”

I open my mouth but don’t have an answer. I expected to learn more about Hugo as time went on, but now I’m more confused by him each day. At this point, I don’t know what to expect when I walk into the room.

An hour later, we’re in a sleek black SUV with tinted windows, heading away from the city. Hugo sits beside me in the back seat, dressed in jeans and a simple button-down shirt instead of his usual suits. He looks younger, more relaxed, and somehow even more attractive.

Which is becoming a problem.

“I should warn you,” I say, fiddling with the strap of my purse. “I’ve never actually

been around horses before.”

He looks genuinely surprised. “Never?”

“I grew up in a city. My parents did, too. The closest I got to a horse was the carousel at the mall.”

He laughs, the sound filling the car. “Don’t worry. The horses at Guy’s ranch are very gentle. And you’ll have an excellent teacher.”

“You’re going to teach me to ride?” The thought sends a nervous shiver down my spine.

“Unless you’d prefer Guy. He’s technically the expert.”

“No,” I answer too quickly. “I mean, I trust you.”

Something warm passes between us, a moment that stretches just a beat too long. I look away first, pretending to be fascinated by the countryside rolling past the window.

The ranch appears gradually — first a white fence stretching along the roadside, then rolling green fields, and finally a cluster of rustic buildings nestled against a backdrop of distant hills. It’s like something from a painting, all soft colors and open space.

As we pull up to the main house, my stomach knots with anxiety. What if the horses don’t like me? What if I fall off and embarrass myself? What if this whole idea was a terrible mistake?

Hugo must sense my nervousness because he places his hand briefly on mine. “You’ll be fine. I promise.”

The touch is fleeting but leaves my skin tingling. I nod, not trusting my voice, and follow him out of the car.

A smiling man about our age comes striding across the yard to meet us. “Oh, look. The prince himself, gracing us commoners with his presence.”

Hugo grins and embraces the man in a back-slapping hug. “Guy, this is Emily Neale. Emily, Guy is my oldest friend and the owner of this magnificent place.”

We’ve been here for less than a minute, and Hugo is already the happiest I’ve ever seen him. I have to force my mouth closed from all the gawking.

Guy turns his appraising gaze to me. “So you’re the famous matchmaker. Pleasure to meet you.”

“The pleasure’s mine,” I say, shaking his hand.

“Midnight and Cinnamon are in their stalls,” Guy tells Hugo.

“Thank you,” he nods. “I want to take Emily on the loop.”

Guy walks us to the stables, where everything is a new experience for me, from the smell of hay and animals to the sunlight streaming through the high windows. It’s cooler in here and surprisingly clean. Several horses peer curiously at us over their stall doors.

“First lesson,” Hugo says, guiding me toward a chestnut-colored horse with a white blaze down its nose. “How to approach a horse without scaring it.”

“Can I scare something that’s ten times my size?” I ask skeptically.

Hugo and Guy both laugh. “You’d be surprised,” Guy says. “Horses are prey animals. They spook easily.”

“Always approach from the front or the side, never from the back,” Hugo explains. “Let them see you coming. Speak softly so they know you’re friendly.”

I follow his instructions, moving slowly toward the chestnut horse, murmuring hello in what I hope is a soothing tone. The horse watches me with liquid brown eyes, ears flicking forward with interest.

“Now, offer your hand, palm up, and let her sniff you,” Hugo says. “This is Cinnamon. She’s perfect for beginners.”

My hand trembles slightly as I extend it. Cinnamon’s velvety nose tickles my palm, and I can’t help but giggle.

“She likes you,” Guy observes. “Good sign.”

Hugo shows me how to stroke Cinnamon’s neck, how to stand so she feels comfortable.

His hands occasionally guide mine, each touch sending a jolt of awareness through me.

This is definitely a mistake. How am I supposed to focus on teaching him anything when I can barely remember my own name when he stands this close?

“Ready to meet my horse?” Hugo asks after I’ve gotten comfortable with Cinnamon.

I nod, and he leads me further down the stable aisle to a stall housing a magnificent black horse that seems to shine blue in the sunlight.

“This is Midnight,” he says with unmistakable pride. “I’ve had her since she was a foal.”

Midnight is larger than Cinnamon, with an air of dignity and power. She nickers softly when she sees Hugo, stretching her neck over the stall door to nudge his shoulder affectionately.

“She’s beautiful,” I say, hanging back slightly.

“It’s okay, she’s gentle.” He takes my hand again — I’m starting to think he knows exactly what that does to me and he’s just trying to make me uncomfortable — and guides it to Midnight’s sleek neck.

“When did you get her?” I ask.

“High school. A gift from my father.”

The wistfulness in his voice is barely there, but I pick up on it anyway.

“You must miss him,” I say softly.

His eyes meet mine, surprised by my perception. “Every day. But especially here. He loved this place.”

The moment hangs between us, tender and raw. Guy clears his throat from down the aisle.

“If you two want to get that ride in before lunch, you’d better saddle up,” he calls.

The spell broken, Hugo steps back. “Right. Let me show you how to get Cinnamon ready.”

The next half hour is a blur of learning to brush horses, understand saddles, and figure out stirrups.

I'm clumsy and nervous, but Hugo is patient, explaining everything clearly and demonstrating when I get confused.

By the time I'm finally sitting atop Cinnamon, I feel like I've accomplished something monumental.

"Look at you," Hugo says, swinging effortlessly onto Midnight's back. "A natural."

"A natural disaster, maybe." I grip the saddle horn like it's my only link to survival. "She's so tall!"

"You're doing great. Just relax. Horses can sense if you're tense."

"That's not helping me relax!"

Hugo laughs. "Just breathe. I'll lead you, and we'll go nice and slow."

True to his word, we start at a gentle walk, following a well-worn trail that winds through meadows dotted with wildflowers. Gradually, I begin to relax, to feel the rhythm of Cinnamon's movements beneath me.

"This isn't so bad," I admit after we've been riding for a while.

"Told you," Hugo says, looking so natural on horseback it's like he and Midnight are one creature. "Nothing beats riding for clearing your head."

The sun warms my shoulders, and a gentle breeze carries the scent of grass and flowers. Despite my initial fear, I find myself enjoying the peaceful pace and

beautiful surroundings. It's the perfect setting for a heart-to-heart talk.

"So," I begin. "About your relationship training. I thought about it a lot last night. The thing is, I'm not really qualified to teach relationship skills directly."

"You're a matchmaker," he points out. "Surely that counts for something."

I hesitate, then decide honesty is best. "I've never actually been in a long-term relationship myself."

He pulls gently on Midnight's reins, bringing her to a stop. Cinnamon halts beside them. "Never?"

"Never," I confirm, feeling my cheeks warm under his scrutiny. "I've dated, of course. But nothing that lasted more than a few months."

"Yet you've successfully matched couples?"

I nod. "I understand compatibility. I can see when two people will work well together. I just haven't found that for myself yet."

Hugo considers this, his expression thoughtful. "So, you're a physician who doesn't take her own medicine?"

"More like a chef who hasn't found her favorite dish yet," I counter. "But my parents have been married for forty years. I've learned a lot from watching them."

"Like what?" Hugo asks, genuinely curious.

We start riding again, side by side where the trail widens.

“Well, my dad says the secret is three things: listening, compromise, and never going to bed angry.” I tick them off on my fingers, nearly losing my balance in the process. Hugo reaches over to steady me, his hand warm on my arm.

The touch nearly makes me come undone, and I force my attention back to the task at hand. The work. What’s important.

“My mom says it’s about choosing someone whose flaws you can live with,” I say. “Because the butterflies eventually fade but the annoying habits don’t.”

He laughs. “Your mother sounds pragmatic.”

“She is. But they’re also still madly in love. Dad brings her coffee every morning. Mom still gets dressed up for their date nights. They hold hands when they walk together.”

“Hmm,” he says, but it doesn’t sound real. It’s like he’s thinking about something else.

“You really want this?” I ask. “To find a wife? Because you’ve been pushing against it the whole time.”

He stares straight ahead as he rides. “I cannot put it off forever, so I’ve come to accept that I should do it now, while I have the help of a qualified matchmaker.”

“Plus, if I don’t do it, your mother will find you someone.”

He gives me a sharp look.

“She told me about that deal,” I add.

His attention turns back to the trail. “There’s a beautiful creek a mile away. The water is clear as glass.”

I blink at him in confusion. So now he doesn’t want to talk about this?

“Let’s focus on how to be attentive to a partner’s needs,” I say, trying to direct the attention back to why we came out here. “How you can show someone you care through actions, not just words.”

As I launch into advice I’ve gleaned from books and observation rather than experience, I feel like a fraud.

Worse, I feel distracted by the way the sunlight catches in Hugo’s dark hair, by the gentle strength in his hands as he handles the reins, by the intelligence in his eyes when he looks at me.

This has to stop. I need to recommit to the job — to helping Hugo find his perfect match. Even if it isn’t me.

Especially if it isn’t me. I need to be the matchmaker he hired, not another woman falling for his charm.

Unless... it’s already too late.

And if it is, I haven’t a clue what to do about it.

HUGO

I tap my pen against the polished surface of my desk, staring at the document I should be reviewing, but my thoughts scatter like startled birds. It's been three days since that trail ride with Emily, and her laugh still echoes in my head at the most inconvenient moments.

I've buried myself in work since then, but even as I clear my inbox, I can't clear my mind of her. The crush is a foolish indulgence, like a forbidden dessert, but it's also the first thing that's made me feel alive in years. And I'm not quite ready to give it up.

By six o'clock, I've caught up on most of the work I missed during my two-day break. It was worth it, though. Those hours spent riding through the countryside with Emily refreshed something in me that I hadn't realized needed refreshing.

As I close things out for the day, my phone buzzes with a text from her: How's the princely paperwork going? Rescued any kingdoms today?

I smile despite myself. Emily texts like she talks — full of energy and unexpected humor.

My thumbs hover over the screen as I debate what to say.

What I want is to see her again, but what excuse do I have?

Our next official appointment isn't for another two days, and the palace is so large

it's not easy to run into someone here.

Just finished saving the world for today. Very exhausting business, I type back.

Her response comes quickly: Poor overworked prince. You need a proper break!

And suddenly, I know what I want to do. Before I can overthink it, I type: Actually, I was wondering if you'd like to see my house tomorrow. My real house, not the palace. It might help you understand me better for the matchmaking process.

The three dots appear and disappear several times before her answer comes: Your real house? Not where you normally meet clients, I'm guessing?

No, I reply. It's my private residence. I don't bring many people there. I hesitate, then add: But I'd like to show you.

Another pause, and I picture her chewing her lip the way she does when she's thinking. Finally: I'd love to see it. Professional curiosity and all that. What time?

We agree on noon, and I slide my phone into my pocket with a strange flutter in my chest. This is dangerous territory. Any romantic entanglement between us would be inappropriate at best, scandalous at worst. But I can't bring myself to care as much as I should.

The next morning, I spend more time than usual choosing what to wear. I settle on dark jeans and a blue button-down shirt — casual by royal standards, which is exactly the point.

Going to the garages, I select my rarely used Audi and drive it out front. No security detail today, and I'm enjoying just how good it feels to be out on my own — or out with just Emily.

She emerges from the palace wearing a yellow sundress and low heels. Her face brightens when she sees me behind the wheel, and it is as if my stomach does a somersault.

“No royal entourage today?” she asks, sliding into the passenger seat.

“Left the crown at home too,” I reply, enjoying the way her scent fills the car — something light and citrusy that suits her perfectly and seems to be coming from her hair.

“I’m honored,” she says, buckling her seatbelt. “So, where are we going, mystery man?”

“About twenty minutes outside the city. It’s not far.”

We drive through the city, then along winding country roads. With the top down and the wind blowing around us, it’s impossible to talk, but I don’t mind. Merely being together is delicious, a treat of the kind I never allow myself to have.

“So this house,” she says as we turn onto a private road lined with oak trees. “Is it some kind of royal hunting lodge? Secret palace? Underground lair?”

I smile. “Nothing so exciting. Just a house I bought after university. Before...” I don’t need to finish.

Before my father died. Before I became the responsible prince.

Before my life stopped being my own and I essentially moved into the palace so that I could cut the time suck of a commute out of my day.

The house comes into view — a two-story stone building with large windows and a

wraparound porch.

It's substantial but not ostentatious, set amid gardens that are maintained by a gardener.

Despite the fact that I hardly spend any time here, there is a guardhouse with a guard always keeping an eye on things.

He comes out and bows at me before lifting the gate, and I give him a wave then park at the end of the drive.

"It's beautiful," Emily says, her voice soft with genuine appreciation. "It looks like a real home."

"That was the idea," I reply, getting out of the car. "Though I don't get to stay here as often as I'd like."

Inside, sunlight streams through the windows, falling on hardwood floors and comfortable furniture. There's a lived-in quality despite my absence — books on shelves, a guitar in the corner, photographs on the walls. This place holds pieces of me that the palace never could.

Emily moves through the rooms like she's reading a book, touching surfaces, examining photographs, peering out windows. "This makes so much more sense now," she says.

"What does?"

"You." She turns to face me, her expression thoughtful. "The person behind the prince. The guy who likes old Western novels and apparently plays guitar and has a weird collection of..." She squints at a shelf. "Are those vintage beer steins?"

I feel my cheeks warm. “A phase in university. My roommate got me started.”

“I like it,” she declares. “It’s unexpected. Like finding out Superman collects stamps.”

“Hardly Superman,” I say, leading her through to the kitchen. “Coffee?”

“Please.”

As I prepare the coffee, Emily pulls something from her bag — two books. She sets them on the counter with a small smile.

“Light reading for our house tour?” I ask, raising an eyebrow.

“Actually, these are for you.” She pushes them toward me. “I’ve been thinking about our conversations. About what you said regarding relationships and your concerns about them.”

I look at the titles: *Building Lasting Partnerships* and *The Myth of Perfect Love* . They’re not the typical romance-advice books I’d expected.

“These are about healthy expectations,” she explains. “About understanding that lasting relationships aren’t fairy tales, but that they’re still worth having.” Her fingers brush against the cover of one book. “I thought they might help with some of your concerns.”

I turn the books over, checking them out. “Thank you.”

To my surprise, I find myself reading one of the back covers. I might even read the whole book...

“May I speak bluntly?” Emily says.

I set her coffee in front of her, on the island. “Please.”

I’m holding my breath, though, not sure I truly want to hear what’s on her mind. Unless it has something to do with the two of us closing the space between us and?—

“Are you dragging your feet?”

“No.” The word comes out too fast, too forceful.

Her eyes narrow. “You’re not just trying to tire me and your mother out until we give up on you?”

I should have known I could not fool her for long. She’s too astute, too intelligent.

“Emily...” I clear my throat.

“Actually, never mind.” She shakes her head. “Thank you for the coffee.”

I stare at her, surprised that she is dropping the topic nearly as quickly as she brought it up. Especially considering that this is her job we are talking about — although I suppose she gets paid whether or not she finds me a match.

“These aren’t about finding the perfect person,” she continues, pointing at the books. “They’re about building something meaningful once you do find someone worth trying with.” Her eyes meet mine, and for a moment, I wonder if there’s another message beneath her words.

“Thank you,” I say. “I’ll read them.”

By “read them,” I mean glance through them enough so that if she asks, I can provide convincing responses that make it look like I read every page.

We take our coffee out to the back porch, settling on a swing that creaks softly beneath our weight. The garden stretches before us, a tangle of late-summer flowers and uncut grass.

“So,” I say, deciding to turn the conversation, “ever since we met, the focus has been on me. But what about you? You mentioned that your relationships tend to be measured in months, not years.”

She wraps her hands around her mug, her smile turning wry. “I spend so much time focusing on other people’s love lives that mine gets neglected.”

“That can’t be the whole story,” I press.

She sighs, looking out at the garden. “The truth is less interesting. I’m a hopeless romantic working in an industry that should have cured me of that by now.

” She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear.

“I’ve dated nice guys. Fun guys. Smart guys.

But I keep waiting for that feeling — that certainty that this is right. ”

“And you’ve never felt it?”

“Almost,” she admits. “Twice. But timing was wrong, or priorities were wrong, or...” She shrugs. “Something was always wrong.”

“And yet you still believe in it,” I observe. “In finding your perfect match.”

“Not perfect,” she corrects. “Just right . There’s a difference.”

She turns to me, her expression suddenly vulnerable. “Actually, I’ve been doing some thinking recently. About my life, my work. I’m good at what I do — really good — but I’ve been so focused on building my business and helping clients that I’ve forgotten to live my own life.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, genuinely curious.

“When was the last time I took a real vacation? Or dated someone without analyzing why it wouldn’t work long-term within the first five minutes?”

” She laughs softly. “I think I need to take my own advice. Take a break. Find love for myself.” Her eyes meet mine, and something electric passes between us.

“And what would that look like?” My voice sounds different, even to my own ears.

“I don’t know exactly,” she says. “But I think it would feel like... letting go. Stopping all the calculating and just feeling .”

The swing creaks between us. I’m acutely aware of how close we’re sitting, of the space where our shoulders almost touch.

“Do you think that’s possible?” I ask. “To just stop thinking and start feeling?”

“I hope so,” she says softly. “Don’t you?”

I look at her — really look at her — and allow myself, just for a moment, to imagine what it would be like.

Emily and me, together. Morning coffee on this porch.

Her laughter filling these rooms. Her hand in mine, not as my matchmaker, but as my partner.

The fantasy blooms in my mind with surprising vividness — walks through the garden, quiet evenings by the fireplace, her head on my shoulder as we talk about everything and nothing.

It's a dangerous daydream, but I can't stop it now that it's begun. What if I allowed this to happen? What if I followed this feeling instead? Would the world really collapse if Prince Hugo fell for the wrong woman?

Would my understanding of who I am collapse? And would that be such a bad thing?

“What are you thinking about?” she asks, tilting her head.

“How I need to have the house deep-cleaned,” I lie.

“Ah.” Does she look disappointed, or am I just imagining it?

She shifts the conversation back to relationship coaching, but my mind cannot focus on it. I nod and make sounds of agreement, wishing that the two of us could be swimming in the lake or stealing kisses beneath the trees.

“We should probably be going,” she says, checking the time after what feels too soon. “You need to be back at the palace for a meeting. Thank you for showing me your home. It's... it helps me understand you better.”

I walk her to my car, the moment — whatever it was — broken. The drive back to the palace is quiet, but now it feels like it's more than the loud wind forcing us into silence.

As we head inside the massive structure, she looks over at me. “We can’t wait much longer to set up second dates. Just so you know.”

“Of course.” My chest feels heavy at the thought.

“I’ll look at your schedule and figure out some times.”

I grunt in response, only wishing for the conversation to end at this point.

“And you’ll read the books?”

“I promise.”

She hesitates at the main staircase, then reaches out and squeezes my hand quickly.

“Thank you for today. For trusting me with this part of yourself.”

I watch her disappear upstairs, my thoughts churning like a stormy sea. For five years, I’ve known exactly who I am and what I must do. Prince Hugo, dutiful son, future king. My path has been clear, if not particularly joyful.

But now, for the first time since my father’s death, I find myself considering a different road. One that leads away from work and toward something frightening and exhilarating. Something that feels like living instead of just existing.

It’s not that simple, though. I’m the most conflicted I’ve ever been.

The weight of what I’ve thought I want presses down on one shoulder, while the memory of Emily’s smile tugs at the other.

I don’t know which way I’ll tip, but for the first time in years, not knowing what comes next is not terrifying.

It is freeing.

EMILY

Sighing, I sit back in my office chair and gaze at the calendar I've confirmed with Hugo's assistant. Four dates spread out over the next week and a half.

It was challenging making time for him to see some of the women from the speed-dating event, but I made it happen — even with my chest feeling like it was being wrung the whole while.

I'm not stupid. I know that the longer I stay here, the harder it will be for me to move on from this crush on Hugo. The sooner I find his princess, the sooner I can go home and forget about his crooked smile and the way he rubs the back of his neck when he's uncomfortable, about the way?—

My cell rings, making me jump in my seat.

"Hello, this is Emily," I answer, not recognizing the number.

"Miss Neale." The voice is clipped and proper. "Her Majesty requests your presence at dinner tonight. Just yourself, Prince Hugo, and the queen. Seven o'clock sharp in the Blue Dining Room."

My stomach drops. Dinner with the queen? "Of course," I say, trying to sound like dining with royalty is no big deal. "Please tell Her Majesty I'd be honored."

"She also requests a brief update on your progress with the prince's matches."

“I’ll be prepared,” I say, though I have no idea what I’ll actually tell her. That her son is still allergic to the idea of finding a wife? That I’m pretty sure he only asked me to “coach” him as a way to delay progress?

“Formal attire,” the voice adds before hanging up.

Great. A high-pressure dinner where I have to explain why I haven’t made more progress with a reluctant prince. While wearing a fancy dress. Perfect.

At five to seven, I make my way to the Blue Dining Room in one of the dresses I picked up in the city the other day after days of being chronically underdressed. Turquoise and floor-length, it feels like I’m playing dress-up.

The doors open, and a stone-faced butler gives me a slight nod. “Miss Neale. Her Majesty and His Highness await.”

The Blue Dining Room is actually blue — from the velvety walls to the delicate china plates. It’s smaller than I expected, intimate almost, with a table that could seat twelve but is only set for three. Hugo stands when I enter, and his eyes widen slightly.

“Emily,” he says, and the way my name sounds in his deep voice makes my knees wobbly. He’s wearing a dark suit that fits him perfectly, making his shoulders look even broader than usual. “You look... different.”

“Different?” I repeat, unsure if that’s a compliment.

His ears turn pink. “Good different.”

“Emily,” the queen says, saving her son from further embarrassment. She doesn’t stand, but she gives me a small nod. “Please, join us.”

“Thank you for inviting me, Your Majesty,” I say, placing my napkin on my lap like my mother taught me.

Don’t put your elbows on the table. Chew with your mouth closed. Basic stuff, but suddenly I’m terrified I’ll forget everything I know about table manners. Brunch with the queen was one thing, but this feels so much more formal. So much more serious.

“I thought it would be good to check in,” Queen Julia says as servants appear from nowhere to pour wine and place salads in front of us. “Hugo tells me the speed-dating event was... enlightening.”

Hugo coughs into his napkin. “Mother, I said it was interesting.”

“Interesting, enlightening.” She purses her lips the slightest amount, a silent question hanging in the air.

I take a sip of water to buy myself time. “Prince Hugo met several impressive women,” I say carefully. “I’ve already scheduled four follow-up dates for this week.”

“Four?” She looks pleased. “Excellent. Anyone in particular stand out?”

Hugo stares intensely at his salad, spearing a cherry tomato with unnecessary force.

“Lady Sophia seemed particularly compatible with His Highness,” I offer. “She’s well-educated, comes from a respected family, and shares his interest in environmental conservation.”

“Sophia...” the queen muses. “Baron Whitmore’s daughter? Yes, I know her mother. Good family.”

“She talked about trees nearly the whole time,” Hugo mutters.

“And yet you seemed to enjoy it,” I volley back.

“You love trees,” his mother says. “Your father and I couldn’t get you out of them as a child.”

I bite back a smile at the image of little Hugo, climbing trees and getting his royal clothes dirty.

The main course arrives — some kind of roast with vegetables arranged like a work of art.

I focus on cutting my meat into perfect little squares while the tension at the table thickens.

It feels like I’m failing at my job, even though I know the queen doesn’t blame Hugo’s stubbornness on me — she warned me how resistant he would be to matchmaking, after all.

I’m just not used to failing, along with... well, some... other things.

“Enough matchmaking talk,” Queen Julia says, taking me by surprise. “Emily, we know so little about you beyond your job. What is your life like in Los Angeles?”

I hastily swallow and dab my napkin at the corner of my mouth. “I work a lot, Your Majesty. I wish I could tell you it’s more exciting than that, but the only parties I go to are work-related... the celebrities I meet are clients...”

Her smile is sweet. “And what about a boyfriend? Do you have one?”

“I... I’m usually too busy helping others find love,” I admit. “But someday I’d like to find my perfect match.”

“Everyone deserves that.” For a moment, I see a flash of vulnerability beneath her regal exterior. “Even princes who think they’re too busy with affairs of state.”

Hugo sighs. “Mother...”

“I only push because I care, darling.” She reaches over and pats his hand. “I don’t want you to end up alone. Your father and I had many wonderful years together before he was taken too soon. That kind of partnership... it makes everything else bearable.”

Her words touch me, making me think again about how I need to get serious about finding my own happiness away from work.

“I know, Mother,” Hugo says quietly. “I just need to do this my own way.”

His gaze briefly flicks over to me, and heat rushes into my face. Why is he looking at me like that — so intensely?

“Which is why we hired Miss Neale,” the queen says, turning back to me with renewed energy. “Now, tell me about the other three women.”

By the time dessert arrives — a delicate lemon cake that melts on my tongue — I’ve detailed all four potential matches for Hugo, and the queen seems cautiously optimistic.

“Well, it sounds like you’re in good hands, Hugo,” she says, placing her napkin down. “Miss Neale clearly knows what she’s doing. Thank you for indulging an old woman’s curiosity and bringing me an update.”

“You’re hardly old, Mother,” Hugo says fondly.

“Flattery will get you everywhere, my son.” She rises from her chair, and Hugo and I quickly stand as well. “I’ll leave you two to discuss the details of these upcoming dates. I find I’m rather tired this evening.”

She crosses to Hugo and kisses his cheek, then gives me a nod. “Good night, Emily. Keep me updated on my son’s progress.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

As she leaves, a weight seems to lift from the room. Hugo’s shoulders relax, and he lets out a long breath.

“Nightcap?” he suggests, gesturing toward a sitting area near the fireplace.

I should say no. I should go back to my room and stay the hell away from this man unless I’m giving him pointers on how to make small talk. But instead, I hear myself say, “Sure. One drink.”

A servant appears with two crystal glasses of amber liquid before we even sit down. The chairs are close together, closer than they were at the dinner table, and at this point Hugo’s scent is a familiar one that draws me in right away.

“Your mother really loves you,” I say, taking a small sip of what turns out to be very good whiskey.

“She does,” he agrees. “Though her love can be suffocating at times.”

“She just doesn’t want you to be lonely.”

“I’m not lonely.” He swirls his drink. “I’m busy. There’s a difference.”

“Is there?” I ask.

He looks at me, his eyes reflecting the firelight. “You tell me. You’re the expert on relationships.”

I stare into my glass. “I think people can be busy and lonely at the same time. I think sometimes being busy is a way to avoid admitting you’re lonely.”

“Are you speaking from experience?” His voice is gentle.

I laugh, but it sounds hollow. “We’re not here to talk about me. We need to discuss your dates for this week.”

“About that...” He leans back in his chair. “I’m not sure I’m ready for more dates just yet.”

I frown. “What do you mean? I’ve already scheduled them.”

“I think I need more... coaching,” he says. “More preparation.”

“Hugo, I already gave you some coaching. How long are you going to draw this out for?”

He shakes his head. “I need more time.”

I study him, trying to figure out what’s going on. Is he really this nervous about dating, or is he stalling? “These dates are non-negotiable, Hugo. It’s literally why your mother hired me.”

“Can’t we push them back a week?”

“No.” I set my glass down firmly. “You’re going on these dates. End of discussion. You don’t need any more coaching. Read the books I gave you. Go to a family therapist or relationship coach. You’ll be fine.”

Something flickers across his face — surprise, maybe. He’s probably not used to people saying no to him.

“You’re very bossy for someone who works for me,” he says, but there’s a hint of a smile on his lips.

“I work for your mother, not just you,” I correct him. “And my job is to find you a match, not to let you avoid social interaction.”

He sighs dramatically. “Fine. But can we at least do something fun tonight? It’s still early.”

“Fun?”

“Yes, fun. You know what that is, right?” He leans forward. “Would you like to go down to the lake? It’s beautiful at night, and there’s a full moon.”

Warning bells go off in my head. The lake? At night? Alone with Hugo? This is exactly the kind of situation I need to avoid.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” I say slowly.

“Why not?”

Because I like you too much already. Because I keep imagining what it would be like to kiss you. Because you’re a prince, and I’m just doing my job.

“Because it’s inappropriate,” I say instead. “I’m here in a professional capacity.”

His eyes darken. “You came to my house yesterday. Besides, we’re just talking.”

“No, we’re not. You’re trying to...” I struggle to find the right words. “You’re trying to hook up with me instead of focusing on finding a real relationship.”

His expression shifts from surprise to hurt to anger in the span of seconds. “Is that what you think? That I’m trying to ‘hook up’ with you?”

My face burns. “Aren’t you?”

“No,” he says firmly. “I’m not.”

“Then what are you doing? Because it feels like you’re deliberately making my job harder.”

He stands abruptly. “I apologize if I’ve made you uncomfortable. That was never my intention.”

The formal tone is back, the prince mask slipping into place. I stand too, my legs unsteady.

“I should go to bed,” I say. “We both have an early start tomorrow. Your date with Lady Sophia is at noon.”

“I’ll be there,” he says stiffly.

“Good.”

We stand awkwardly for a moment, the fire crackling in the background. It’s

tempting to think that I misread his intentions, but I won't let him gaslight me. I know when a man is interested in a woman — that's a big part of my job — and he's hoping to bed me.

The old playboy prince isn't completely dead after all, but that's not my style. If something were to happen between the two of us — say, in an alternate universe — it would need to be more than a fling. I might be chronically single, but I'm also a relationship girl.

“Good night, Prince Hugo,” I finally say, retreating toward the door.

“Good night... Miss Neale.”

The return to formal titles stings more than it should; it feels like an intentional jab on his part. I hurry back to my room, my thoughts a jumbled mess.

Could I have misread things?

More importantly, why do I care so much? He's been difficult throughout this whole process, and I don't owe it to him to be patient when he has deliberately made my life harder.

I fall onto my bed, still in my evening dress, and stare at the ceiling. This job was supposed to be straightforward: find Prince Hugo a suitable match, collect my fee, go home. Falling for him wasn't part of the plan.

But here I am, jealous of women I've personally selected for him, my pulse racing for a man who wants nothing but to play me just as he does everyone else.

“You've got this,” I tell myself sternly. “Find him a match, do your job, go home.”

I repeat this like a mantra until sleep finally takes me, but even in my dreams, Hugo's piercing gaze follows me.

HUGO

Pushing open the heavy oak door to my office, I feel the burden of the family crest staring back at me from its surface. The lunch with Lady Sophia still clings to me like a too-strong cologne — pleasant enough in theory but suffocating in reality.

Two hours of polite conversation about her charity work, her travels, her opinions on the latest fashion trends. All the while, my mind kept drifting elsewhere — to blond locks and piercing eyes that see through my practiced charm. To Emily.

Maurice catches the door before it closes behind me and pokes his head in. “Your Highness, Miss Neale is here for your meeting.”

My heart does a little skip that I immediately try to squash. Five years ago, I would have pursued Emily without hesitation — charmed her with the ease that once earned me the nickname “The Royal Heartbreaker” in tabloids across Europe. But that was before.

And now? Now I’m not even sure who I am. All thanks to her.

I smooth my hair, tug on my suit, everything about me suddenly seeming wrong. Emily walks in too soon, before I’m done primping and before I know what to say.

“Good afternoon, Your Highness,” she says, all business and no smiles. “How was your lunch?”

The memory of last night flashes between us — her telling me I need to stop

attempting to hook up with her and me denying the accusation. Her words had cut through me, partly because they were true.

Yes, I had been flirting with her, standing too close, finding excuses to touch her arm or the small of her back. But also... there was more to it. Her claim wasn't entirely accurate. What I wanted — what I want — isn't just a hookup. Not anymore, that is.

And that terrifies me more than anything.

“The lunch was... informative,” I say, settling behind my desk. My fingers tap against the polished wood, a nervous habit I usually am good at stopping. “Lady Sophia is very knowledgeable about current fashion trends.”

Emily gives me a look that says she isn't buying my lukewarm review. “And her charity work with children's literacy? Did you discuss that?”

“Extensively.” I force enthusiasm into my voice. “She raised over two million euros last year alone.”

“And did you find her personally engaging?” she presses, pulling out her tablet to make notes.

I consider lying. Telling Emily that Lady Sophia captivated me would make her happy, would show I'm taking this seriously. But something in me rebels against the idea — mostly because it isn't true.

“She's perfectly pleasant,” I say carefully. “Intelligent, accomplished, beautiful. Everything a prince should want in a potential partner.”

Her fingers pause over her tablet. “But?”

“But I felt nothing,” I admit, running a hand through my hair. “No spark, no connection. Just... polite interest.”

A sigh escapes her, tiny but unmistakable. “Hugo, we’ve met with many eligible women since I got here. You’ve felt ‘nothing’ for all of them.”

“Not true,” I counter. “I thought the Duchess of ... what is it? She had a wonderful laugh.”

“A wonderful laugh isn’t enough to build a marriage on... Although I suspect you still have no interest whatsoever in a marriage.”

“I know that.” My own frustration bubbles up, and I choose to ignore that last comment. “Don’t you think I know that? And it isn’t only my mother. The council reminds me daily that Marzieu needs stability. That a prince approaching thirty-one should be settled. That the royal line must continue.”

My hands feel numb on the desk, but I feel a warmth in my chest, an uncomfortable heat that I recognize as guilt. I’ve been sabotaging her efforts, at first because I wish to avoid marriage... but now partly because no one compares to the woman sitting across from me.

“I have news,” I say, changing tactics. “I received an invitation this morning. The French foreign minister is hosting a gala in Paris this weekend — very exclusive, very last-minute. Royalty, diplomats, industry leaders from across Europe will be there.”

“That sounds promising. Who will be attending?” Her response is robotic, her eyes guarded.

What does she really think of me? Is there any chance at all that somehow, some way,

the two of us could turn into more than what we already are?

No. That's insane. She hasn't shown any interest in me, and I still do not wish for marriage. At least... I don't think I do.

If I were to marry, though, it would be with a woman like her. No, it would have to be with her.

"Hugo?" she presses, and I realize that I haven't answered.

I clear my throat, irrationally paranoid that she can read my thoughts.

"The guest list includes several of the eligible women we've been trying to arrange meetings with.

" I lean forward. "Three days of networking events, dinners, and parties. It's the perfect opportunity to meet multiple prospects efficiently. "

"It is," she agrees, tapping away on her tablet. "I'll prepare briefing documents on each woman and arrange?—"

"I want you to come with me," I interrupt.

She looks up, surprised. "To Paris?"

"Of course to Paris. I need you there to facilitate introductions, to observe my interactions, to guide me." I'm talking too fast, giving too many excuses. The truth is simple but harder to admit: I just want her there.

"Your staff can handle the logistics," Emily says carefully. "I can prepare everything in advance."

“It’s not the same.” I stand, moving around the desk to sit on its edge, closer to her. “You’re the expert. You notice things others miss. You can tell within minutes if there’s potential.”

Emily studies me, her gaze penetrating in a way that makes me feel exposed. “After last night... is this appropriate?”

I wince. “About that. I was out of line, and I apologize. It won’t happen again. This trip will be strictly professional.”

“You promise not to flirt with me? Not to stand too close? Not to look at me the way you’re looking at me right now?” Her voice is teasing but her eyes are serious.

I hadn’t realized I was looking at her in any particular way, but I straighten up and step back. “I promise to behave like the crown prince I am, not the party boy I was.”

She taps her finger against her lips, considering. “And you’ll genuinely try with these women? Give them your full attention? Actually make an effort to connect?”

“Yes.” The word feels like a betrayal of whatever unnamed thing is growing between us, but I say it anyway.

“Because I’m starting to feel like Sisyphus,” she continues, “pushing this boulder uphill only to watch it roll back down every time we make progress.”

“Greek mythology? Really?” I force a chuckle.

She doesn’t smile. “I’m serious, Hugo. If you’re not going to take this seriously, I need to know. I could return to LA. There’s plenty of work I need to catch up on there. I can’t spend my career failing at an impossible task.”

The thought of her leaving — not just this office or this trip, but leaving Marzieu, leaving me — hits like a physical blow. My breath catches.

“You would quit?” I ask, hating the vulnerability in my voice.

“If I believe I can’t succeed here? Yes.” Her face is gentle but determined. “I’ve built my reputation on results. Each year of my career has been more successful than the last. Until I came here.”

I feel a flash of anger, irrational but sharp. “So, I’m bad for your professional record? Sorry to be such a disappointment.”

“That’s not what I meant and you know it.” She stands and gazes up at me. “I want to help you find what you’re looking for. But I need to know what that is, and I need you to be honest — with me and with yourself. Are you really looking for a wife now, or are you just pulling everyone’s strings?”

The truth hovers between us, complicated and frightening. What am I looking for?

Someone who challenges me. Someone who sees past the crown to the man beneath. Someone who makes me want to be better. Someone like...

“I want a partner,” I say finally. “Not just a suitable match on paper. Someone I can talk to at the end of difficult days. Someone who understands the importance of this position but reminds me I’m still human.”

Her expression is unreadable. “Then let’s find that for you in Paris.”

“So you’ll come?”

She nods, but holds up a finger. “On one condition. You give each meeting your

genuine attention. You open yourself to possibilities. Because if this trip is like the events we've had here — if you go through the motions while keeping everyone at arm's length — then I'm done.

I'll fulfill my contract through the end of the month, then I'm going back to LA. ”

The ultimatum lands heavy in my stomach, the thought of Emily leaving forever making my chest tight in a way I'm not ready to examine.

“Understood.” I extend my hand formally, as if we're sealing a diplomatic agreement rather than a personal one. “I promise to be open, engaged, and serious about finding a connection.”

Her hand meets mine, warm and firm. That same electric current I always feel with her shoots up my arm, but I ignore it. I have to.

“Then we have a deal, Your Highness.” She releases my hand and steps away.

“Good. You'll travel with the royal delegation, on my family's jet.” I return to business mode, the comfortable mask I've perfected. “We leave tomorrow morning at eight.”

Emily nods and gathers her things, but at the door she pauses. “For what it's worth, I do want you to find happiness, Hugo. That's always been the goal. And not just because it's my job.”

After she leaves, I stand at the window, watching as she crosses the palace courtyard below. The sunlight catches her hair again, and even from this distance, something about her pulls at me.

I've made a promise to take this Paris trip seriously, to open myself to finding a

suitable royal match. And I will. Perhaps Emily and my mother are starting to break me, or perhaps I am simply coming to see that my mother and my advisors are right. Marriage is the logical next step for me.

But as I watch Emily disappear from view, I wonder if I've made a promise I can't keep — if finding the perfect princess is even possible when my thoughts are filled with the woman who's supposed to be helping me look.

Three days in Paris. Three days to save my working relationship with Emily, even if it means burying whatever else might exist between us.

Perhaps it was all a silly fantasy anyway, and it is time to come back to reality, to come back to my duty. Once Emily returns home, she will forget about me and move forward with her life.

If I know what is best for me, I should do the same.

EMILY

The chandeliers above me sparkle like captured stars, throwing light across a sea of designer gowns and perfectly tailored tuxedos. I adjust the strap of my silver dress — the one that I bought just for tonight — and wonder again if coming on this trip was a good idea.

The more time we spend together, the more confusing Hugo is. One minute I think I have him figured out, only for him to suddenly throw another curveball my way.

I spot him across the ballroom, a head taller than most guests, his hair combed and styled back.

He laughs at something the Japanese ambassador says, the sound genuine but controlled.

We haven't interacted much so far on this trip, but only because he's been busy.

I'm hoping the women I have my eyes on will be here tonight so I can make introductions.

I mean... I think I'm hoping they'll be here. Or maybe I don't want them to be here at all?

"More champagne, mademoiselle?" A waiter appears at my elbow.

"No, thank you," I say, forcing my attention away from Hugo.

The room feels oddly hot, so many bodies packed into it, so much chatter, too many thoughts and not enough quiet.

Pressing my fingers to my throbbing temples, I head in search of water. After finding it and downing a whole glass, I linger by a window and watch the cars down below pass by. For some reason I can't put my finger on, I suddenly feel horribly lost and without meaning in my life.

Odd. That's not me at all. I know who I am, know what I contribute to the world. I'm?—

“Emily.” Hugo appears out of nowhere. “I was wondering where you'd disappeared to.”

“Just observing.” I force myself to smile, though I still feel all twisted up inside. “That's part of my job.”

He leans down slightly, his voice dropping. “And what have you observed? Any potential queens in the vicinity?” There's a touch of teasing in his tone that makes my stomach flutter.

It's no longer a good flutter, though, like the kind I used to get when Hugo was around. Instead, I feel like I might vomit.

“Several,” I reply professionally. “But you've been rather busy with the German finance minister for the past forty minutes.”

“Duty calls.” He straightens his already perfect bow tie.

“You also said you would talk to women on this trip,” I remind him, while wondering if I even care anymore.

“Indeed,” he says coolly. “And I have not forgotten.”

“The night is young,” I assure him. “The Countess of Kassel is here. She’s on our list — Cambridge-educated, speaks four languages.”

Hugo follows my discreet nod toward a tall blond woman across the room. “She looks... proper,” he says without enthusiasm.

“Proper is good for a future queen, isn’t it?”

He shrugs, his shoulder brushing mine. “I suppose so.”

A waiter passes with fresh flutes of champagne, and this time I take one. The bubbles tickle my nose as I sip, and I know I might regret it tomorrow, but right now I need something to take the edge off of tonight.

“You don’t have to babysit me all night,” Hugo says suddenly. “I promised my mother and you that I would make an effort. I will. You should have fun. Enjoy yourself.”

“Our past events have taught me otherwise. Sorry, Your Highness, but when it comes to love, you do need babysitting.”

What I don’t say is that I’m enjoying standing beside him, being mistaken for someone important enough to be in his orbit. I also don’t mention that every time I imagine introducing him to the countess or any of the other carefully vetted women on my list, I feel a tightness in my chest.

A flurry of excited whispers fills the ballroom as a famous actress arrives. I’ve seen her movies, but it’s the first time I’ve gotten a look at her in person, and she’s even more beautiful in real life. Like everything else right now, though, I can’t seem to

find it in myself to care.

“Hugo, darling!” A woman’s voice interrupts us.

She’s elegant, probably in her fifties, with a French accent and perfect posture. She kisses Hugo on both cheeks before turning curious eyes to me.

“Catherine,” Hugo says warmly. “May I introduce Emily Neale? She’s a... friend visiting from America.”

Friend. Not matchmaker. Not employee. I extend my hand, which she takes briefly.

“Emily, this is Catherine Eder, an old family friend.”

“Lovely to meet you,” I say automatically.

She looks between us, a knowing smile forming on her lips. “Hugo, you’ve been holding out. When your mother mentioned you’d be at the gala, she didn’t mention you’d be bringing someone special.”

I open my mouth to correct her, but Hugo speaks first. “Emily and I are still getting to know each other,” he says smoothly, neither confirming nor denying her assumption.

Catherine practically beams. “Well, it’s about time. I told Julia you simply needed to find the right woman.” She leans in conspiratorially toward me. “He was quite the heartbreaker in his youth, but always a gentleman.”

“I was standing right here the last time I checked,” Hugo says dryly.

Catherine pats his arm. “And now look at you — all grown-up and finally loved-up. I’ve never seen you look at anyone the way you look at her.”

My champagne suddenly goes down the wrong way, and I cough discreetly into my hand. Loved-up? The way he looks at me? I force a smile that feels stretched across my face.

“You’ve caught us,” Hugo says with a charming smile, surprising me further. His arm slides around my waist in a gesture that seems both protective and possessive. “But we’re keeping things quiet for now.”

Catherine nods conspiratorially. “Of course, of course. The press would have a field day. My lips are sealed.” She mimes locking her lips before drifting away to greet another guest.

The moment she’s gone, Hugo’s arm drops from my waist. “Sorry about that,” he says, looking genuinely apologetic. “She’s a terrible gossip. If I’d corrected her, the story would have changed six times before reaching my mother. This way, she’ll keep her ‘secret.’”

But I just stare at him. What’s he’s saying doesn’t make any sense. If Catherine’s a gossip, she’ll spread news no matter what, and now everyone will think Hugo and I are dating. It’ll make it even harder to find him a match.

Why is he doing this?

Inside, something is crumbling. For just a moment, with his arm around me and his body warm against my side, I’d allowed myself to imagine it was real.

That this brilliant, dedicated man — who carries the weight of a nation on his shoulders and still remembers to thank every server who brings him food — could see me as more than a professional service provider.

I look across the room at the countess. She really would make him a suitable match.

Educated, poised, charitable. I should walk over there right now, make the introduction, and do the job I was hired to do.

Instead, I feel like I can't breathe.

"I should..." My voice doesn't sound like my own. "There's the countess. I'll go see if she's ready to meet you."

Hugo frowns slightly. "Are you all right? You look pale."

"I'm fine," I lie. "Just doing my job."

His expression shifts, becoming more princely, more distant. "Of course."

My heart pounds against my ribs like it's trying to escape.

I need to escape. This is ridiculous. I've matched hundreds of couples.

I've watched them fall in love, get married, start families.

I've smiled at their happiness while telling myself that someday it would be my turn.

And never once have I fallen in love with a client.

Until now. Until Hugo.

"Excuse me," I murmur. "I need some air."

I don't wait for his response. I hand my champagne flute to a passing waiter and make my way toward the French doors I spotted earlier.

They lead to a balcony overlooking the gardens, and the cool evening air hits my flushed face as I step outside.

Thank goodness, the balcony is empty. There's no one to witness my breakdown.

My hands grip the stone railing as I take deep breaths. What am I doing? I should call Queen Julia tomorrow, make up some excuse about a family emergency, and recommend another matchmaker. I should book the first flight back to Los Angeles and forget I ever met Hugo.

What I'm doing here, this dance and game Hugo and I have going on, it's dangerous. The only thing he is serious about is breaking hearts, and if I stay, it will be the biggest mistake of my life.

HUGO

I scan the room for what feels like the hundredth time tonight, nodding politely at another potential match whose name has already slipped from my memory.

The crystal chandeliers above cast everyone in the same golden light, making it impossible to distinguish one smile from another.

All I can think about is Emily — where she's gone, if she's still getting some air on that balcony, and why the thought of someone assuming she was my girlfriend keeps replaying in my head like a favorite song.

"Your Highness, have you met Fredericka?" A woman presents her daughter to me with the practiced grace of someone who's rehearsed this moment for years.

"I don't believe I've had the pleasure," I say, my mouth running on autopilot while my mind drifts.

The young woman curtsies, her blond hair cascading over her shoulders in perfect waves. "It's an honor, Prince Hugo."

I should be focused on this, but all I can think about is my matchmaker.

My matchmaker. The title seems absurdly inadequate for Emily. She's more than that — she's the woman who's seen me at my most vulnerable, who knows what I'm looking for even when I don't.

“Prince Hugo?” Fredericka’s mother prompts, and I realize I’ve been silent too long.

“Forgive me,” I say, taking the young woman’s hand and brushing my lips against her knuckles. “I’m afraid I’m a bit distracted this evening.”

After a few more minutes of small talk that I won’t remember tomorrow, I excuse myself and drift toward the edge of the ballroom. The balcony doors are open, letting in a cool breeze that feels like salvation after hours in the crowded room.

That comment earlier from Catherine — assuming Emily and I were together — is stuck to me like a burr.

Such a simple mistake, yet it felt like a flash of clarity in a fog.

The idea of Emily as my girlfriend doesn’t seem ridiculous or impossible.

It feels... right. Like someone finally naming the feeling that’s been growing in me for days.

I lean against a marble column, watching the crowd but seeing only memories of Emily. The way she laughs with her whole body. How she tucks her hair behind her ear when she’s concentrating. The slight wrinkle in her brow when she’s about to disagree with me but is trying to be diplomatic.

I have never even wanted a relationship. Never had time for them. All the effort I have put into matchmaking since Emily arrived has been an attempt to throw her and my mother off, to make them leave me alone.

Or that’s what I told myself. The truth is, no one seemed worth the effort. No one until Emily.

It's crazy. She's my matchmaker. Mother hired her to find me someone else.

But maybe that's why it works — she knows exactly what I need because I've shown her, even when I was resistant to the idea.

Because that is how smart she is; she sees through every facade, notices every sleight of hand.

There can't possibly be a woman in the world as smart as her.

I push off from the column, decision made. I need to find her.

The ballroom is a sea of elegant gowns and suits, faces turning to me with practiced smiles as I pass. I nod politely but don't stop. My feet carry me toward the eastern balcony where I last saw Emily slip away when she said she needed some air.

When I step through the French doors, the night air hits my face, cool and fresh after the perfumed warmth of the ballroom.

The balcony stretches along the side of the ballroom, with stone balustrades overlooking the gardens.

And there she is, at the far end, a solitary figure in her emerald dress, looking out over the moonlit landscape.

Even from behind, I can tell something's wrong. Her shoulders are tense, drawn up toward her ears. Her hands grip the stone railing so tightly I can see the strain from here. This isn't someone getting air. This is someone fighting battles in their head.

I approach slowly, giving her time to notice me. The click of my shoes on the stone makes her straighten her spine, but she doesn't turn around.

“Emily?” My voice sounds different to normal. Softer. Uncertain.

She turns then, and I catch my breath. Her makeup is smudged under one eye, as if she quickly wiped away a tear. But she’s smiling that professional smile that never quite reaches her eyes.

“Hugo,” she says, and the lack of formality reminds me of how far we’ve come from our first meeting. “Are you enjoying the evening?”

I step closer, fighting the urge to reach out and touch her cheek. “Not particularly.”

Her smile falters. “Oh?” There’s a trace of hurt in her voice — but why?

“The problem isn’t the people,” I say carefully. “The problem is me.”

She studies my face, and I wonder what she sees there. Does she notice how I can’t look away from her? How my hands are restless at my sides because they want to be holding hers?

“Did you meet anyone interesting?” she asks, and I can hear the professional matchmaker taking over, pushing whatever was bothering her aside.

I shake my head. “No.”

“Hugo.” My name is half sigh, half scolding. “You have to try. There are at least a dozen women in there who would be perfect for you. Women who tick every box on your list.”

“I tried.”

“Really? Because Rowan Steele is brilliant and passionate about conservation. And

Marie has that dry sense of humor you appreciate. And?—”

“Emily,” I cut her off, moving a step closer. “None of them are you.”

The words hang in the air between us. Her lips part in surprise, her eyes widening.

“What?”

“None of them compare to you.” My heart is pounding so hard I’m sure she can hear it. “I’ve been sitting through these introductions for days, meeting women who match every criterion you say is right for me, and none of them make me feel the way you do.”

Her mouth opens and closes, like she’s searching for words and coming up empty.

“Hugo, I don’t... I’m your matchmaker.”

“I know.” I run a hand through my hair, probably messing up what my stylist spent an hour on. “I know how this sounds. But I’ve been thinking... and when Catherine believed us to be together, it was like something clicked. I couldn’t stop thinking about it — about you.”

Emily takes a small step back, bumping into the stone railing. “This isn’t— we can’t?—”

“Why not?” I move forward, closing the distance between us. “Tell me you don’t feel it too. This connection between us.”

Her breath catches, and I see the conflict in her eyes — professional responsibility warring with personal desire. “Your mother expects you to marry someone suitable. Someone who?—”

“Someone who understands me,” I finish for her. “Someone who challenges me and makes me laugh and sees me as Hugo, not just the Prince of Marzieu.”

A shiver runs through her that has nothing to do with the night air. “I’m not royal material.”

“Neither was I, according to half the European press.” I smile, remembering some of the less-flattering headlines from my younger days. “But here I am.”

The moonlight catches in her eyes, illuminating the raw emotion there. My hands are trembling slightly as I reach up to touch her cheek, half-expecting her to pull away. She doesn’t.

“I wasn’t looking for this,” she whispers. “I was just doing my job.”

“Maybe you are too good at your job,” I say, my thumb brushing her cheekbone. “You figured out exactly what I need. It just happens to be you.”

A small, helpless laugh escapes her. “This is crazy.”

“Completely.” I’m smiling now, feeling lighter than I have in years. “But it doesn’t feel wrong, does it?”

Her eyes meet mine, and the professional mask is gone. Now I see the Emily who pushes me in the best way possible. The Emily who always has the perfect quip, an answer to everything, a solution to each problem. The Emily who knows my coffee order and my fears and my dreams.

“No,” she admits softly. “It doesn’t feel wrong.”

I lean in slowly, giving her time to back away. She doesn’t. Instead, her eyes flutter

closed, and then my lips touch hers.

The kiss is gentle at first, a question more than a demand.

Her lips are soft and taste faintly of champagne.

My hand slides from her cheek to the back of her neck, feeling the silky strands of her hair between my fingers.

A small sound escapes her, somewhere between a sigh and a moan, and something inside me ignites.

The kiss deepens, her mouth opening under mine.

My other arm wraps around her waist, pulling her against me.

Her hands find my shoulders, fingers digging in slightly as if she needs to steady herself.

The cool night air, the sounds of the party inside, the onus of my responsibilities — all of it fades away until there's nothing but Emily in my arms, her heart beating against mine.

I'm lost in her — the soft curves of her body, the scent of her perfume, the way she kisses me back with a hunger that matches my own. It's everything I didn't know I was missing, everything I've been searching for.

And then, suddenly, her hands are on my chest, pushing me away. The abrupt loss of contact leaves me dazed, blinking at her in confusion.

Her chest rises and falls rapidly, her lipstick smudged. The vulnerability in her eyes is

quickly shuttered, replaced by something that looks too much like regret.

“I can’t do this,” she says, her voice shaking. “I’m sorry, Hugo. I can’t.”

Before I can respond, before I can reach for her again, she is slipping past me, back toward the bright lights of the ballroom. I stand frozen, watching her go, feeling like something precious is sliding through my fingers.

“Emily, wait,” I finally manage, but she doesn’t turn around. Her turquoise dress disappears through the open doors, leaving me alone on the moonlit balcony.

My legs feel unsteady, and I grip the stone railing for support. What just happened? She kissed me back — I know she did. I felt her respond, felt the same connection that’s been growing between us for days. So why did she run?

I stare out at the gardens below, trying to understand. Maybe it’s professional ethics — she’s still technically working for me. Or maybe she’s worried about the public scrutiny that would come from dating a prince. It’s not an easy life; I know that better than anyone.

Or maybe — and this thought twists like a knife — maybe I misread everything. Maybe she was just caught up in the moment, the moonlight and the romance of it all, and I’m the only one who felt something real.

I touch my lips, still warm from her kiss. For five years, I’ve done everything right — put duty first, country first, responsibility first. But tonight, for the first time since my father died, I want to put my heart first.

And my heart is walking away in an emerald-turquoise dress.

EMILY

The palace walls seem to watch me as I pace across my guest suite for the hundredth time today. My shoes make soft thumps against the plush carpet — a rhythm that matches my racing heart.

A day since we returned from Paris, three days of replaying our kiss in my mind until the memory feels worn at the edges, like an old photograph handled so many times that the image is blurry.

We haven't spoken about what happened on that balcony.

Instead, I've been ignoring him, hoping that somehow the problem will take care of itself.

Stopping at the window, I press my forehead against the cool glass. The palace gardens stretch out below, perfectly manicured and painfully romantic. A place designed for royal proposals and fairy-tale endings. Not for the hired help to have mental breakdowns over clients.

"This is ridiculous," I whisper to my reflection. My hair is pulled back in a messy ponytail, dark circles forming under my eyes from three nights of terrible sleep. "You're a matchmaker extraordinaire. Get over this. Get over him."

My stomach twists with the same sick feeling I've had since our return flight on the royal jet — the one where we sat three rows apart because I claimed I needed extra legroom and he pretended to believe me.

The same flight where I spent an hour staring at the back of his perfectly styled hair, remembering how I wanted to mess it up when we kissed on that Parisian balcony.

My phone buzzes on the nightstand, and I lunge for it, desperate for any distraction.

It's a text from Hugo's assistant confirming tomorrow's schedule: breakfast with the royal family, followed by a meeting to review how Hugo's second dates are going.

The very thought makes my stomach drop to my knees.

How am I supposed to sit across from him and discuss other women? Women who might be perfect for him on paper but who don't know how his eyes crinkle at the corners when he really smiles, or how he absently taps his fingers when he's thinking, or how surprisingly soft his lips are when?—

“Stop it,” I groan, pressing a hand to my face.

The thought of him with someone else makes my skin feel too tight, like I might burst out of it.

But I can't match him with myself either.

I'm not royalty. I'm not politically connected.

I'm not on any of the lists his mother approved.

And most importantly, I'm the person being paid to find him someone else.

The whole situation is beyond unprofessional.

My phone rings, and Nova's face lights up my screen. My best friend's timing has

always been uncanny, and I answer immediately.

“I’m having an ethical crisis,” I announce before she can even say hello.

“Hi to you too,” she laughs. “What kind of ethical crisis are we talking? Did you eat the last chocolate in the fancy royal box without offering it to the queen?”

“If by chocolate, you mean the prince, and if by eating you meant?—”

She gasps. “You slept with him?!”

“Kissed him.” I close my eyes and groan. “So not as bad... right?”

“That’s even worse! That’s true romance!” Nova’s voice rises an octave. “Emily Neale, you kissed the prince? The prince? The guy whose future wife you’re supposed to be picking out?”

I press my fingers against my temples. “Yes, that prince. In Paris. On a balcony. With the Eiffel Tower lit up in the background. It was like something out of a movie, Nova. And I’m not picking out his wife. I’m helping him meet women.”

“Not when you’re busy shoving your tongue down his throat, you’re not.”

“Nova,” I groan.

“Okay, okay. I’m sorry. Seriously... what were you thinking?”

“I wasn’t thinking! That’s the problem.” I pace the room, nibbling at my thumbnail.

“We were at this gala, and someone mistook us for a couple... and then I was out on the balcony, and he came out... And then we were kissing, and it was amazing, and

then I panicked and haven't really spoken to him since. ”

“Ah, the classic kiss-and-avoid,” she says knowingly. “And now?”

“And now I'm supposed to meet with him and his mother tomorrow to see how his most recent round of dates are going.

” I dig my fingers into my scalp, but it does nothing to stop the growing headache.

“I can't do this, Nova. I can't sit across from him and talk about how Lady What's-Her-Face would make an excellent princess when all I can think about is how it felt when he touched me. ”

“Oh, honey.” Her voice softens. “You've really got it bad.”

“I know,” I groan. “And it's not just physical attraction.

I genuinely like him, Nova. He's dedicated and thoughtful and takes his responsibilities so seriously, and the way we talk...

I don't know. It's different. Challenging, like we're sparring.

And when he talks about Marzieu, his whole face lights up. He wants to do right by his people.”

“So what are you going to do?”

I flop onto the stack of pillows on my huge bed. “I don't know. I could tell Queen Julia I can't complete the job, but if word got out, it would make me look terrible. Or I could just... do my job. Present the candidates. Watch him choose someone else. Maybe even plan their royal wedding.”

It's a joke, but my voice cracks on those last words, and I blink back unexpected tears.

"Okay, well, what if I told you there might be a third option?" she says, her tone shifting to what I recognize as her "business voice."

"What kind of third option?"

"The kind that comes with its own makeup team and primetime slot." She pauses dramatically. "Elliot Ridge called me yesterday."

I sit up straight. "The Elliot Ridge? The producer who made *Love in the Spotlight*?"

"The very same. He's developing a new dating show, and he wants a professional matchmaker to host it. Not just any professional matchmaker — he specifically asked for you."

My mind races, trying to process this information. "Me? To host a TV show? Nova, I work behind the scenes. I'm not a TV personality."

"That's exactly why he wants you," she counters. "He's tired of the fake drama and scripted nonsense. He wants someone authentic who really knows how to create lasting matches. He's seen your success rate. He called you, and I quote, 'The real deal in a field full of charlatans.'"

Despite everything, a small thrill runs through me. Being recognized for my work by someone like Elliot Ridge is no small thing. "What did you tell him?"

"I told him you're currently working with a high-profile client who requires your complete attention and discretion. He was disappointed but said the opportunity would still be there when you finish your current contract. The thing is, Em, they

want to start production next week — ideally.”

“Next week?” I echo.

“Yeah, and here’s where it gets interesting,” Nova continues. “When I mentioned the general timeline of your current job, he said they might be willing to push back the production start date, but only by a few weeks. This is a big opportunity, Em. Like, career-changing big.”

I get up and start pacing again, my mind whirling with possibilities. “A dating-show host...”

“Not just any dating show. This would be prestige television with a massive budget and international distribution. You’d be reaching millions of people, not just the select few who can afford your services.”

The thought is both exhilarating and terrifying. “But I’d have to be on camera. People would recognize me.”

“Yes, and they’d pay you obscene amounts of money for the privilege. Plus, think about the book deals, the speaking engagements, the product endorsements. This could set you up for life, Em.”

She’s right. This kind of opportunity doesn’t come along every day.

And the timing... it almost feels like a sign.

A way out of my current predicament that doesn’t involve professional disgrace or watching the man I’m falling for marry someone else.

With such a great excuse to bail out on the royal job early, who wouldn’t take it?

I've done so much here already — surely the queen will understand?

“What should I do?” I ask, though part of me already knows the answer.

“I can't tell you that. But I can tell you that, as your friend and occasional publicist, this is the kind of opportunity most people only dream about.

And as someone who loves you and wants you to be happy, I think you need to ask yourself if staying in Marzieu is going to bring you joy or heartbreak. ”

I sink onto the window seat, looking out at the palace grounds again. In the distance, I can see Hugo walking with his security detail, his posture straight and regal even from afar. My heart does a little flip just at the sight of him.

“What if it's both?” I whisper.

“Then you have a really tough choice to make,” Nova says. “But maybe it helps to know you have options. You're not trapped, Emily.”

Three paths stretch before me: fulfill my contract and watch Hugo marry someone else; confess my feelings and risk professional ruin and/or Hugo playing me and breaking my heart; or take the TV offer and leave Marzieu behind.

My fingers find the gold pendant at my neck — a gift from my first successful couple. They had faith in my ability to find them love when they couldn't find it themselves. I've always believed in my gift, my ability to see the connections between people that they sometimes can't see themselves.

But I never expected to be on this side of the equation — the one needing guidance, the one with the messy feelings and impossible choices.

HUGO

I stare at the same report I've been trying to read for twenty minutes, but the words keep swimming across the page like fish avoiding my attention.

The palace is quiet this early, just the occasional soft footsteps of staff in the hallway and birds chirping outside my window.

I should be focused on the agricultural proposal from the eastern province, but all I can think about is breakfast in thirty minutes with my mother and Emily — the woman who was supposed to find me a wife but instead stole my heart.

The leather chair creaks as I lean back, rubbing my eyes. My office suddenly feels too small, and I'm not sure what to do with myself.

I pick up a framed photo on my desk — my father and me sailing on his last birthday. His smile was already strained from the illness none of us knew about yet. What would he think of this mess I've created?

Pushing away from the desk, I walk to the window.

The palace gardens stretch out below, gardeners already at work in the cool morning air.

In thirty minutes, I'm supposed to sit across from Emily at breakfast and tell her and my mother how wonderfully the matchmaking process is going. I'm supposed to lie.

The memory of our kiss floods back without warning — her surprised gasp against my lips, the brief moment she responded before her hands pressed against my chest, pushing me away. Her eyes wide with shock as she stepped back.

But what if we could make it work? The thought has been circling my mind for days now, gaining strength like a hurricane over warm waters. What if I simply told the truth? Admitted — not just to Emily, but really to myself — that I am ready for something I have never had before.

I turn back to my desk, energy suddenly coursing through me. Everyone loves a good romance, don't they? Even in royal circles, there's precedent. My third cousin married his secretary, and after the initial scandal died down, the public adored them.

Emily's business wouldn't need to suffer — it might even thrive. The matchmaker so good at her job, she accidentally matched herself with a prince. I can almost see the headlines. Her reputation for finding true compatibility would be cemented, not damaged.

I pace the length of my office, rehearsing what I'll say at breakfast. I'll be respectful but honest. I'll make it clear this isn't a whim or a game.

Yes, I have been purposefully disrupting her attempts to match me with a woman, but that was something different.

I know what I want now, and what I want is?—

Three quick knocks on the closed door interrupt my thoughts.

“Come in,” I call, expecting Maurice with the morning's updated schedule.

Instead, Emily steps into my office, and my heart does that ridiculous skipping thing

that makes me feel fifteen instead of nearly thirty-one.

She's dressed in a simple dress, her hair pulled back neatly, a tablet clutched in her hands like a shield.

I start to smile, but then something about her expression makes my stomach twist.

"Emily," I say, my voice sounding strange to my own ears. "Good morning. I was just... thinking about you." The moment the words leave my mouth, I wince. So much for my well-rehearsed speech.

"Your Highness," she says, and that formality makes my heart sink even before she continues. "I apologize for the unexpected visit. I know we're meant to meet for breakfast soon, but I wanted to speak with you privately first."

"Of course." I gesture toward the sitting area near the fireplace. Two armchairs face each other across a small table; it's much more intimate than the grand desk. "Please."

She hesitates, then crosses the room with measured steps and sits on the very edge of a chair. I take the other, trying to read her expression. Her usual warm confidence seems muted, replaced by something more guarded.

"Is everything all right?" I ask, knowing it is likely a ridiculous question. After everything that has?—

"I received a phone call last night. From Los Angeles."

"Los Angeles?" I repeat, confused. "From your friend Nova?"

A flash of surprise crosses her face. "You remember my friend's name?"

“Of course I do.” I shrug. “You mentioned her.”

“Once.” She clears her throat. “Yes, well, the call was related to Nova. She knows a TV producer who has... they’ve approached me with an opportunity. They want me to host a new dating show. It’s a big platform, national audience, completely different from what I’ve been doing, but... good.”

“A television show?” I lean forward. “That’s... unexpected.”

“It is,” she agrees. “But it’s an incredible opportunity. The producer said they’ve been following my work, and they think I’d be perfect for the format they’ve developed.”

Something cold settles in my stomach. “When would this start?”

“That’s why I wanted to speak with you.” She looks down at her hands, then back up at me with determined eyes. “They need me in LA for meetings as soon as possible. I’ve accepted the offer. I’ll be leaving Marzieu today.”

The words hit me like a physical blow. “Today? But what about—” I gesture vaguely, meaning everything — the matchmaking process, my mother’s expectations, the kiss... us.

“I’ve arranged for a colleague, David, to take over your case,” she says, sounding like a robot. “He’s extremely capable, and I’ll brief him thoroughly on the four remaining candidates. Your schedule of dates won’t be disrupted.”

I stand up, suddenly unable to sit still. “This is very sudden.”

By sudden, I really mean disappointing. Crushing.

She remains seated, watching me with careful eyes. “It is. But sometimes the right

opportunity comes at the right time.”

“Is that what this is?” I ask, unable to keep the edge from my voice. “The right opportunity at the right time?”

She stands too. “Your Highness?—”

“Hugo,” I correct automatically. “Please.”

“Hugo,” she says, and my name in her voice still does something to me, even now. “I think we both know I need to remove myself from this situation. After what happened...” She doesn’t finish the sentence, doesn’t need to.

“The kiss,” I say bluntly. “You can say it. I kissed you, and you pushed me away.”

“Yes.” A flush of color rises in her cheeks. “And that’s exactly why I need to go. I’ve crossed a professional boundary, even if I tried to correct it immediately. The integrity of my process is compromised.”

I take a step toward her. “What if I don’t want another matchmaker? What if I don’t want any of the four women you’ve selected?”

She takes a step back, maintaining the distance between us. “Then David will find new candidates. Or perhaps you should consider a different service altogether.”

“That’s not what I meant.” I run a hand through my hair, frustrated. “Emily, what if the reason none of these matches feels right is because?—”

“Please don’t,” she interrupts, holding up a hand. “This is exactly why I need to leave. Prince Hugo, I’ve never had this much trouble finding someone a match before. You’re—” She stops, seeming to search for words.

“I’m what?” I ask, a sense of dread building.

Her expression hardens slightly, her professional mask slipping into place.

“You’re beyond help. You say you want one thing, but your actions suggest something else entirely.

You claim you don’t want to marry, and yet you say you will humor us with dates.

You say you’ve outgrown your playboy past, but at the first opportunity, you?—”

“Kiss the woman I’m genuinely attracted to?” I finish for her.

She flinches slightly. “Compromise the professional boundaries of someone trying to do their job,” she corrects. “I can’t help you if you won’t be honest about what you really want. And I certainly can’t help you if you... if we ...” She shakes her head. “This is precisely why I’m leaving.”

Each phrase lands like a small knife. Beyond help. Not serious. Still a playboy. Is that really how she sees me? After all our conversations, after everything I’ve shared about my commitment to Marzieu?

“I see,” I say, my voice hollow.

“I’m sorry,” she says, and she does sound genuinely regretful. “I’ll still attend breakfast with Her Majesty to explain the transition process. David will arrive tomorrow to take over.”

I want to argue. I want to tell her she’s wrong about me. I want to explain that I kissed her because after days of talking, of her actually seeing me as a person and challenging me, I felt something real. But the certainty in her eyes stops me. She’s

made up her mind.

“Will you at least consider?—”

“No,” she says firmly. “This is for the best. For both of us. For your future and mine.” She glances at her watch. “I should go prepare for breakfast. I’ll see you in the Blue Dining Room at eight.”

With that, she turns and walks to the door, her steps quick and decisive. She pauses with her hand on the doorknob, and for one wild moment, I think she might turn back, might say she’s reconsidered.

“Good luck, Your Highness,” she says instead, not looking back. “I truly hope you find what you’re looking for.”

The door closes behind her with a soft click that somehow sounds louder than a slam would have.

I stand frozen in the middle of my office, my carefully planned speech unspoken, my hopes deflated. The silence rings in my ears. Beyond help, she said.

Was it pointless to even hope that something could happen between the two of us? To imagine we could be more than a passing fantasy?

Is there a way to turn things around? To convince Emily that she’s wrong about me, and I can be the man that she wants and needs? Sitting at my desk, I drop my head in my hands and wait, but I sit and sit, and an answer does not come.

HUGO

My schedule sits on my desk like a shield, each hour blocked in perfect rectangles of duty and obligation. It's been three days since Emily left, but I don't count days anymore. I count meetings attended, documents signed.

My hands hover over my keyboard, numb from typing since dawn, but I feel a warmth in my chest, an uncomfortable heat that I recognize not as heartburn from the coffee I've been drinking like water, but as something worse — regret.

“Your Highness?” Maurice knocks at the door to my office, his voice hesitant. “The minister of finance is waiting in the conference room.”

“Tell him I'll be there in five minutes,” I say without looking up from my computer screen, where budget figures swim before my tired eyes.

When the door clicks shut, I lean back in my chair and rub my face. The stubble on my jaw feels like sandpaper. I've forgotten to shave again, and I don't give a damn.

Emily would notice the stubble. She'd probably make some joke about me trying to look rugged for the cameras, her eyes catching the light as she laughed. But Emily isn't here to notice anything about me anymore, and that is the bed I made for myself, isn't it?

I push back from my desk, straighten my tie, and head to the meeting. One foot in front of the other. One meeting after another. This is what I'm good at now.

By evening, I've sat through six meetings, approved a trade agreement, and reviewed plans for next month's diplomatic visit to London.

My eyes burn from staring at screens and documents all day.

My back aches from sitting too long in uncomfortable chairs, pretending to care about grain tariffs and tourism statistics.

"Your schedule for tomorrow, sir," Maurice says, placing a freshly printed agenda on my desk. "And Matilde called to confirm your dinner tomorrow evening."

Matilde. The name takes a moment to register in my exhausted brain.

One of Emily's matches. From the speed-date event, where she laughed too loud at jokes that weren't funny.

Emily said we'd be perfect together because we both loved modern art.

I don't even like modern art; I only told Emily that because I thought Emily liked it.

"Cancel it," I say, the words coming out sharper than I intended.

"Sir?" Maurice's eyebrows rise slightly.

"The dinner with Matilde. Cancel it. Tell her I apologize, but state business has come up."

"Of course, Your Highness." He hesitates, pen hovering over his notepad. "Should I reschedule?"

I stare at him, at his careful, professional expression that doesn't quite hide his

concern. “No. Don’t reschedule.”

I loosen my tie and feel my shoulders slump. Emily would be disappointed. She put so much effort into finding these matches, creating detailed profiles, arranging perfect dates. And here I am, canceling them without a second thought.

But that’s the point, isn’t it? I never wanted this matchmaking business to succeed. I only agreed to it to get my mother off my back, to prove that I couldn’t be matched, that I wasn’t ready to settle down with some princess or duchess who only wanted the crown. I wanted Emily to fail.

Except now that she has — now that she’s given up on me and walked away — the victory feels hollow.

Maurice is still hovering at the door. Strange. I thought he had already left. Am I starting to lose my mind, or is it lack of sleep muddying up my mental facilities?

“Yes?” I ask him.

“The queen is wondering when you will be able to join her for tea. She has texted you...”

“Tell her I’m busy,” I reply, looking away.

“She was quite insistent, sir. She said, and I quote, ‘Tell my son if he doesn’t come to tea, I will come to him, and no one wants that.’”

I almost smile at that. Almost.

“Fine. Tell her I’ll be there at four.”

The hours pass in a blur of work and more work. I skip lunch, surviving on coffee instead. By four o'clock, my head is pounding and my stomach is empty, but I make my way to my mother's private sitting room because I know better than to stand her up. Plus I could do with a biscuit or two.

She sits with her back ramrod straight, reading something on her phone. When I enter, she looks up and frowns.

"You look terrible," she says by way of greeting.

"Thank you, Mother. Always a pleasure to see you too." I bend to kiss her cheek, and she catches my face between her hands, examining me with critical eyes.

"When was the last time you slept a full night? Or ate a proper meal?"

I shrug and take the seat across from her. "I've been busy."

"Yes, I've heard." She pours tea into delicate porcelain cups, adding two sugars to mine the way I like it. "Everyone in the palace is talking about how Prince Hugo has locked himself away, working all hours, canceling appointments, avoiding his friends."

"I'm not avoiding anyone. I'm doing my job."

"Your job is to take care of yourself as well as your country." She hands me my cup, and I notice the slight tremor in her hands, the new wrinkles around her eyes. "I didn't push you to find a match so you could work yourself into the ground."

I take a sip of tea to avoid answering.

"About Emily..." she starts.

The tea burns my tongue. “Emily? What about her? She went back to Los Angeles.” I set my cup down with a clink. “The matchmaking didn’t work out.”

“Yes, I know.” She sighs. “But why? Those women were all perfectly suitable.”

I laugh, a short, bitter sound. “Suitable. What a word.”

My mother waits, her eyes never leaving my face. She has always been patient, knows when to let silence do the work for her. It’s a skill I’ve never mastered.

“Fine,” I say finally. “You want the truth? I never intended to find a match. I agreed to the whole thing to get you off my back, to prove it wouldn’t work. I thought if I went through the motions, eventually you and Emily would give up.”

I expect her to be angry. To lecture me about responsibility and duty and the importance of securing the royal line. Instead, she looks sad, which is somehow worse.

“Oh, Hugo,” she sighs. “You think I don’t know that? I’ve known you your entire life. Did you really believe I couldn’t see through your little game?”

“Then why did you push it?” I ask, confusion replacing defensiveness.

“Because I saw something you didn’t.” She sets her cup down and leans forward. “At first, I thought the matchmaking might actually work despite your best efforts. Those women were carefully chosen, after all. But then I saw how you looked at Emily, and I knew.”

“Knew what?” My mouth feels dry suddenly.

“That you were falling in love with her.” She smiles, perhaps more to herself than

me. “You looked at her the way your father used to look at me when he thought I wasn’t paying attention.”

“I—I...” do not know what to say.

Yes, I’m in love with Emily. But what good will that information do me now? She’s already decided she wants nothing to do with me.

“Is that why you’ve been working around the clock since she left? Why you look like you haven’t slept in days? Why you’re sitting here now, holding that cup like it’s the only thing keeping you from falling apart?” My mother’s words strike me like bullets, quick, each hitting right after the other.

I look down at my hands, white-knuckled around the delicate china. Slowly, I release my grip.

“It doesn’t matter,” I say quietly. “She’s gone. What was I supposed to do? Fall for my matchmaker? The woman hired to find me someone else? It’s absurd.”

“Love usually is.” Her smile is sad and knowing. “Hugo, you’ve worked so hard these past five years. You stepped up when we needed you most, and I’m so proud of the king you’re becoming. But your father wouldn’t want you to sacrifice your happiness for duty. Neither do I.”

Something cracks inside me, a wall I’ve been carefully maintaining since Emily walked out of the palace and out of my life. The truth spills out before I can stop it.

“I do love her,” I admit, my voice hoarse.

“I love her laugh, and her jokes, and the way she sees through people to what they really need. I love how passionate she is about her work, how she lights up when she

talks about love even though she hasn't found it herself yet.

"I swallow hard. "But I realized it too late. And now she's gone, back to her life in Los Angeles, probably having already met someone else."

"So, what are you going to do about it?" my mother asks.

"Do?" I echo. "There's nothing to do. I can't just chase after her. She made the decision to walk away."

Her lips draw thin. "And you made the decision to not chase."

I blink at her, unsure of what to say to that. I showed Emily how I felt — or did I?

For all she knows, I'm still the playboy I used to be. Perhaps she believed I was only attempting to bed her.

My cheeks burn at the thought. It makes perfect sense; why would she think otherwise? That is, after all, my track record, and even once I became interested in Emily, I wasn't thinking about any long-term plans.

Not at first, anyway. But that quickly changed. I quickly changed.

I shake my head, knowing that none of that matters now. Emily has slipped through my fingers nearly as quickly as she appeared in my life. She's gone, and that is something I will simply have to learn to live with.

Page 25

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:23 am

EMILY

“E mily, you’re with us, right?” Elliot’s voice snaps me back to attention.

Elliot is the executive producer — a man with gelled hair and a smile that never reaches his eyes. He taps his expensive pen against the table and raises his eyebrows at me.

“Sorry, just taking notes,” I lie, quickly flipping to a fresh page in my notebook.

The hearts I’ve been drawing mock me. I should be paying attention, but instead I feel like a bored kid in school.

I’m supposed to be helping plan a reality dating show where contestants compete for love in a tropical mansion, but I feel like a fish out of water.

This whole week of meetings has been nothing like what I expected, and the vision of the show...

it’s more than lacking, in my humble opinion.

“As I was saying,” Elliot continues to the group, “we need the drama to start early. Maybe we pair the fitness model with the kindergarten teacher right away. Opposites attract, but they’ll clash by episode three, guaranteed.”

The other producers nod along. There are five of us crammed around this table in the production office, the walls covered with headshots of the contestants — beautiful

people with perfect teeth who applied to find love on TV.

I wonder if any of them really believe it will work. Good for them, if so.

Or not.

Honestly, I'm starting to wonder if love is truly meant for everyone. Maybe some people — like me — are destined to wander the Earth all alone for their entire lives.

My throat feels dry. "I thought the point was to make successful matches, not to create conflicts."

Elliot laughs like I've told a joke. "Emily, Emily, Emily. The point is to get viewers. Conflict gets viewers. Happy couples are boring to watch."

I bite the inside of my cheek and don't say anything. When Elliot and I first got on a call about the show, it sounded different. "We want a real matchmaker," he had said over the line. "Someone with credentials to give the show legitimacy. Someone who knows love when they see it."

I took the job because it seemed like a good distraction. After what happened with Hugo, I needed something new to focus on. Something that wasn't sitting in my apartment remembering the way his accent made ordinary words sound like poetry, or how his lips felt when they pressed against mine.

I thought I would be doing good on this show, not only helping contestants find love but giving viewers tips on it as well. But so far I'm getting the impression that the producers only want me here to stand next to the infinity pool, introduce people, and lend my name's reputation.

"Maybe we should do compatibility assessments," I suggest, pulling myself back to

the present. “I have methods that have worked for my clients for years. We could actually help these people find real connections.”

An assistant producer, a woman with sharp bangs and sharper eyes, snorts. “That’s cute, but we need people who look good fighting and kissing. Preferably both in the same episode.”

I feel my cheeks grow warm. This isn’t me. This isn’t what I do.

For years, I’ve built my reputation on thoughtfulness and care. I interview my clients for hours. I learn their histories, their hopes, their secret fears about love. I introduce people who might actually build lives together.

Biting my lip, I look away. Usually, I would stand my ground, but since arriving back in LA, I feel like a different person.

I’m constantly on edge, feeling like the slightest thing could tip me into a breakdown.

Hugo’s always on my mind, like a movie playing on repeat. Did I do the right thing by leaving?

Yes. Of course I did. Why am I even still asking myself that?

The meeting drags on for another forty minutes. By the time we break, my notepad is filled with more doodles than notes, and my patience has worn thin.

Elliot catches me as I’m gathering my things. He leans against the doorframe, blocking my exit with his body. “Walk with me to the parking lot? I want to chat.”

I nod, although what I really want is to go home, change into sweatpants, and call Nova to complain.

“You seem hesitant about our approach,” he says as we walk through the hallway. The walls are lined with posters from the network’s other reality shows — shows filled with people crying, people kissing, people throwing drinks at each other. The kind of stuff that brings in money but has no heart.

“I just think we’re missing an opportunity,” I say, choosing my words carefully. “What if we did something revolutionary and actually matched people who might fall in love? Real love, not just for-the-cameras love.”

Elliot stops walking and turns to face me. “Emily, you’re here because you have a reputation. Your name gives us credibility. But this is television, not your boutique matchmaking service. We need drama and tears and make-out sessions in the hot tub.”

My stomach clenches. So, my suspicions were correct. I’m a prop, not a professional.

“Give me a chance,” I press. “Let me do one round of actual compatibility assessments. If it doesn’t work for television, we’ll do it your way.”

For a moment, I think I see consideration in his eyes. Then he shakes his head.

“The network approved this format. The contestants signed up for this format. We start filming in three weeks.” He pats my shoulder like I’m a child who doesn’t understand basic concepts. “Trust me, this is how these shows work.”

I walk across the parking lot alone, the bright sun beating down in a way that should feel cheerful but just makes my skin prickle. The drive home is a blur of traffic and radio songs that all seem to be about lost love. At a red light, my mind wanders to Hugo again.

Prince Hugo... the man who looked at me like I was a puzzle he wanted to solve. The

man who fought me, pushed me away, made my job difficult — then kissed me in an act that felt akin to my heart being torn out.

The car behind me honks, and I jerk only to find the light has turned green. Sighing, I press the gas pedal and push the memory away.

My apartment feels too empty when I get home.

It's a nice place — the kind of place a successful businesswoman should have.

Modern furniture, tasteful art, a view of a slice of the city from the balcony.

But lately, it feels like nothing more than a hotel room.

Just a place I stay, not a place I live.

Kicking off my heels, I pour myself a glass of wine. It's only four p.m., but today feels like a wine-before-dinner kind of day. I curl up on my couch and call Nova, who answers on the second ring.

“There's my favorite matchmaker. How's the glamorous world of television?”

“It's awful,” I say, not bothering to hide my frustration. “They don't care about actually matching people. They just want drama and ratings.”

“I'm sorry, babe.” I can hear the sound of her office in the background — phones ringing, people talking. “Did you really expect it to be like your regular job?”

“I expected it to at least pretend to care about the premise,” I sigh. “They're going to pair people up just to watch them fight. It feels wrong.”

“I’m sorry I hooked you up with it. Maybe you should quit.”

I take a sip of wine. “It’s not that easy.”

“Why not? Your business is doing well. You don’t need this job. And yeah, it will lead to more exposure for you, but if that exposure doesn’t accurately represent you, it’s probably not a good thing.”

She’s right, but I can’t explain the real reason I took it: that after leaving Hugo behind, I needed something new and different to throw myself into.

That the thought of going back to how my life was before feels like rubbing salt in my own wound.

I’m in my same apartment, in the same city, but at least I have the distraction of a new job.

“I signed a contract,” I say instead. “And maybe I can make it better from the inside out.”

Nova makes a sound that’s half laugh, half sigh. “Emily Neale, always trying to fix things. You have the best heart, but some things can’t be fixed, you know.”

I wonder if she’s talking about the show or about me.

“Anyway,” she continues, “drinks tonight. My treat. You can tell me all about the beautiful-but-doomed contestants, and I’ll tell you about the actor who threw a smoothie at his manager in my office yesterday.”

“Sounds wonderfully distracting,” I tell her. “Our usual spot? Seven?”

“See you there. Gotta run. I have another call coming in. Love ya.”

After we hang up, I stare out my window at the palm trees swaying in the breeze.

Los Angeles continues its eternal summer, indifferent to my problems. Meanwhile I sit here, wondering what’s next in my life, wondering where I even want to go.

I promised myself a vacation and some dates with hot guys, but right now all I want to do is crawl under a rock and never come out.

My phone pings, and I open my email to find a message from the production company with attachments of all the contestant profiles for me to review. Twenty-four beautiful strangers who think they might find love under hot lights and watchful cameras.

I should open the files. I should be professional. Instead, I find myself typing “Prince Hugo Bastien” into my search bar. It’s a bad habit I can’t seem to break.

The results are the same as always. News about his royal duties. Photos of him at official functions, looking handsome and serious in his tailored suits. A recent article about speculation on who he might marry now that he’s thirty-one and the country is eager for a future queen.

No photos of us together, of course. No one knew about his matchmaker, thanks to the NDAs the palace had all the women and their teams sign.

My chest aches with an uncomfortable heat that I recognize as heartbreak.

Closing the browser, I open the contestant files instead. Maybe I can’t fix my own love life. Maybe I can’t even fix this shallow TV show. But I can at least try to do my job with some integrity.

But the words blur in front of my eyes, and guilt gnaws at my conscience. These people have dreams and fears and hopes, just like my regular clients. Just like me. They deserve better than to be set up for failure in the name of entertainment.

My phone rings again. It's Elliot.

"Change of plans," he says without greeting. "The network wants to move up filming. We start in two weeks, not three. I need your contestant rankings tomorrow."

"But I've barely looked at their profiles," I protest. "I need time to?—"

"Just rank them on chemistry potential and camera appeal," he interrupts. "That's all we really need from you right now."

The call ends before I can argue. I stare at my phone, feeling my life crumble a little more around me.

This isn't what I wanted. This isn't what I built.

I think of Hugo, who stepped up and became the prince his country needed when his father died. He made the hard choice because it was right, even when it hurt.

Maybe it's time for me to make a hard choice too.

I look at the contestant files again, but this time with new determination. If I'm going to do this, I'll do it my way. I'll find the real potential matches in this group, and I'll fight for them to have a chance.

Elliot and the network might not care about real love, but I do. It's the one thing I've always believed in, even when my own heart is breaking.

Maybe especially then.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:23 am

EMILY

The ice in my glass gives a final surrender, melting into the amber liquid with a soft clink. I stare at it like it holds answers, while Nova's voice floats beside me, familiar as my own heartbeat.

The bar wraps around us with its usual blanket of low lighting and murmured conversations, but tonight even this comfortable ritual feels hollow.

I've ranked all the contestants for the dating show in record time — work that should have taken days, not hours — but efficiency brings no satisfaction.

Not when my thoughts keep circling back to the same old place.

"Earth to Emily," Nova says, waving her perfectly manicured hand in front of my face. "You've been staring at that drink like it insulted your grandmother."

I blink, forcing a smile. "Sorry. Just thinking about work."

"Liar. I'm calling an official ban on moping tonight." She taps her glass against mine. "Those rankings are done, and Hugo Bastien is?—"

"Please don't say his name," I interrupt, the sound of it making my chest squeeze tight.

She rolls her eyes. "Fine. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is not worthy of your emotional energy."

I laugh despite myself.

“Speak of the devil,” Nova mutters, her eyes flicking over my shoulder.

For one terrifying second, I think she means Hugo, but when I turn, I see Melissa, a stylist we know from around town. She’s wearing a dress that seems composed entirely of strategically placed sequins, her smile blindingly white as she approaches.

“My two favorite power women!” Melissa gushes, air-kissing both our cheeks. “Please tell me you’re coming to the launch tonight.”

Nova raises an eyebrow. “The perfume thing? I thought that was invite-only.”

“It is, but I’ve got three extra passes.” Melissa dangles shiny gold wristbands between her fingers like bait. “Rooftop at The Palmer. DJ Upscale, champagne, and enough beautiful people to stock a modeling agency. It already started. Let’s go.”

On any other night, I’d politely decline. My usual routine involves being in bed by ten with a book and herbal tea. But tonight, the thought of going home to my quiet apartment, where thoughts of Hugo would inevitably corner me, feels unbearable.

“I’m in,” I say, surprising both Nova and myself.

Nova’s eyebrows shoot up. “Really? You? Miss ‘I-Need-Eight-Hours-of-Sleep’?”

I shrug, suddenly determined. “I finished my work early. Why not celebrate?”

Melissa claps her hands together. “Perfect! I’ll text you the details. It’s going to be fabulous!” She floats away in a cloud of expensive perfume and ambition.

Nova studies me with narrowed eyes. “Who are you and what have you done with

Emily?”

“Can’t a girl just want to have fun?” I drain the last of my drink, feeling the warmth spread through my chest.

“A girl, yes. You? You once left a party because it was interfering with your skincare routine.”

“That was an important night cream,” I protest, but a smile tugs at my lips. “Look, I just... I need noise tonight. Distractions. People who aren’t...” I trail off.

Her expression softens. “People who aren’t royalty from small European countries?”

“Exactly.”

“Well, then.” She stands, smoothing down her dress. “Let’s go.”

Thirty minutes later, we step onto the rooftop of The Palmer Hotel, and I immediately understand why this launch is the event of the season.

The space has been transformed into a midnight garden.

Trellises wrapped with tiny lights create winding pathways between clusters of plush seating, and glass orbs hang from invisible strings, catching the light like suspended dewdrops.

“Now, this,” Nova says, grabbing two glasses from a passing tray, “is exactly what you need.”

I accept the champagne, letting the bubbles tickle my nose. The night air holds just enough chill to feel alive against my skin, and for a moment, I allow myself to simply

exist in this space, untethered from my troubles.

“I’m going to find the photographer. I’ll regret it if I don’t get some social media content out of this.” Nova squeezes my arm. “Promise me you’ll mingle? No hiding in corners.”

“I promise,” I say, already scanning the crowd for a quiet spot to observe from.

But before I can retreat, I spot a familiar face near one of the light-wrapped trellises. It’s Ricardo, who I haven’t seen since the movie premiere right before I left town. He catches my eye and his face breaks into a wide grin.

“Emily!” He makes his way through the crowd, tall and handsome in a tailored suit that probably costs more than my monthly rent. “The matchmaking maestro herself!”

He wraps me in a warm hug that smells of cedar and joy. Ricardo has always been affectionate — one of the traits I identified as compatible with Leonie.

“Ricardo! I didn’t expect to see you here.” I pull back, genuinely pleased. “Shouldn’t you be filming in New Zealand?”

“Wrapped early.” He gestures with his drink. “Besides, couldn’t miss the chance to support my friends tonight.”

“How is Leonie?” I ask, curious how my match is faring. “How is wedding planning?”

His expression shifts to something softer, more complex.

“She’s... Leonie.” He laughs, but it’s not dismissive.

“We fight about which takeout to order and then stay up all night talking about the universe. Yesterday she threw an orange at my head because I criticized her favorite musician, and this morning she brought me coffee in bed with a note that made me cry.”

I tilt my head, trying to read between the lines. “So... good?”

“Not perfect,” he says, swirling his drink thoughtfully.

“But real. I spent years dating women who never challenged me, who I never fought with. It felt safer.” He looks at me directly.

“But you saw something else for me. You pushed me toward someone who makes me feel everything — the frustration and the joy, the uncertainty and the certainty.”

His words lodge somewhere beneath my ribs. “I remember you were resistant.”

“I was terrified,” he corrects me. “Of the imperfection of it. But real love isn’t a neat package with a bow. It’s messy and complicated and sometimes it hurts. But it’s worth it.” He smiles. “Thank you for that. For seeing what I needed, not what I thought I wanted.”

I feel a prickle of tears and blink them away. “That’s my job.”

“And what about you?” he asks. “The woman who finds everyone else their perfect match — has anyone claimed your heart yet?”

The question hits a tender spot. “I?—”

My response dies in my throat as my eyes catch on a figure across the rooftop. Tall, broad-shouldered, with dark hair that refuses to be fully tamed even when styled. My

heart stutters, then races as my brain confirms what my body already knows.

Hugo Bastien is here. The Prince of Marzieu. But... no. Why would he be?

“Emily?” Ricardo follows my gaze. “Ah. You know Prince Hugo?”

I can’t seem to find my voice. Hugo hasn’t seen me yet. He’s listening to a woman, nodding politely, but his posture holds the slight tension I recognize from formal events — he’s being courteous, not engaged.

“We’ve met,” I finally manage. “Through work.”

With horror, I realize Hugo is moving toward me. His eyes have found mine across the space, and they hold me in place more effectively than hands ever could.

“I should check on Leonie,” Ricardo says. “See where she got off to. It was wonderful seeing you, Emily.”

I can’t even respond; my mouth isn’t working properly. He slips away while Hugo keeps advancing on me, and my heart hammers against my ribs like it’s trying to escape.

“Emily.” My name in Hugo’s accent still does things to my insides. “I hoped I might find you here. I asked around and heard?—”

“What are you doing at a perfume launch in Los Angeles? Shouldn’t you be in Marzieu, running a country?”

A small smile touches his lips. “Even princes delegate occasionally. Especially when they have something important to attend to elsewhere.”

“And what’s that?” I ask, though I’m not sure I want the answer.

“You.”

The single word hangs between us, loaded with meaning I’m afraid to interpret.

“Me?” I repeat stupidly.

“I came to tell you that you were wrong.” His eyes never leave mine, intense and clear. “What you said when we last spoke — that you could not find me love, that I was a helpless case.” He shakes his head. “You were wrong.”

My heart drops. So he did find someone after all. The kiss we shared was truly nothing other than that — a silly kiss.

“Oh. Well.” I raise my chin. Clear my throat. Will myself to not cry. “I’m glad to hear it worked out with?—”

“You,” he interrupts. “It is you, Emily.”

I stare at him, uncomprehending.

“You didn’t fail at finding me love,” he continues, stepping closer. “You succeeded beyond measure. You just didn’t realize that the person you were matching me with was yourself.”

The noise of the party fades to a distant hum. “Hugo…”

“You accused me of playing with your feelings, of wanting our time together to be nothing but a fling.” A flash of hurt crosses his face. “Is that really what you thought of me?”

“I thought...” I swallow hard. “I thought I was being practical. You’re a prince. I’m a matchmaker from California. It doesn’t make sense.”

“Love rarely does.” He takes another step closer.

“Emily, I’m not here for just any reason.

I’m here because I won’t walk away again — not unless you can look me in the eyes right now and tell me you don’t feel what I feel.

That there isn’t something between us worth fighting for, worth figuring out, no matter how complicated. ”

His gaze holds mine, unwavering. In it, I see the man who listens intently when others speak, who carries the load of responsibility with grace, who still sometimes sneaks dessert before dinner like the boy he once was.

“I can’t,” I whisper, and tears spill over before I can stop them. “I can’t say that.”

His expression softens, hope replacing uncertainty. “Then tell me what you can say.”

The truth pushes past all my carefully constructed barriers, the professional distance I tried to maintain, the practical objections I listed in my head like bullet points.

“I love you.” The words feel both terrifying and freeing. “I’ve been trying so hard not to, but I do.”

A smile breaks across his face, transforming it. “So, the expert matchmaker finally admits I’m her match?”

“It seems that way.” I laugh through my tears. “Though the logistics are a

nightmare.”

“Logistics,” he scoffs, his hands finding my waist. “They are just details. And details can be worked out by people who are determined enough.”

“Are you? Determined?”

“Emily.” He says my name like it’s precious. “I flew across an ocean and tracked you to a rooftop party. I’d say determination isn’t in question.”

And then he’s kissing me, and the crowd and the music disappear. His lips are warm and certain against mine, his hands steady at my waist. I taste promise and possibility and the sweet relief of finally, finally being exactly where I’m meant to be.

When we part, I’m breathless and smiling so hard my cheeks hurt. Around us, the party continues, oblivious to the fact that my entire world has just realigned.

“So,” Hugo says, his forehead resting against mine, “what happens now, matchmaker?”

I look up at him, at this unexpected match that no algorithm could have predicted, and feel a certainty I’ve never known before.

“Now,” I say, “we write our own love story.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:23 am

ONE YEAR LATER: HUGO

The city of Paris unfolds beneath us like a love letter written in lights and centuries-old stone. I watch Emily lean against the hotel room railing, her profile silhouetted against the evening sky, and I can't help but marvel at how much has changed in a year.

Over twelve months since she stormed into my life with her matchmaking clipboard and determined smile. A year of learning each other, of building something I never thought possible for someone like me.

"What are you staring at, Your Highness?" she asks, turning to face me with that crooked smile that still makes my stomach flip.

"Just admiring the best view in Paris," I reply, joining her at the railing.

She rolls her eyes but leans into me, her head finding that perfect spot against my shoulder. "Smooth talker. No wonder you had that reputation."

"Had," I emphasize, pressing a kiss to her temple. "Past tense. Very important distinction."

I'm not the only one who has changed. This last year, she's been pouring herself into expanding Matchmaking by Emily into new territories.

Just yesterday, before we left for Paris, I watched her training three new matchmakers in her office in Marzieu, her hands animated as she explained her philosophy, her

eyes bright with purpose.

Gone is the dating show that she planned on hosting.

Instead, a whole new chapter of her life has begun.

The transition wasn't easy for her — moving her life to Marzieu six months ago.

She gave up her apartment in Los Angeles, left behind the comfort of daily coffee dates with Nova.

But her best friend visits often enough, bringing her Hollywood stories and infectious laugh that fills the palace halls in a way that makes even the stuffiest royal advisors smile.

“So what’s the plan for tonight?” Emily asks, turning back to the view. “You’ve been mysteriously tight-lipped about our evening itinerary.”

I check my watch. Almost time. “It’s a surprise. But you might want to wear that blue dress. The one that matches your eyes.”

Her smile turns suspicious. “The blue dress is for fancy occasions.”

“And this isn’t a fancy occasion? One year together?” I raise an eyebrow, enjoying the blush that spreads across her cheeks.

“You know what I mean.” She pushes away from the railing. “But fine, I’ll wear the blue dress. For you.”

“For us,” I correct, catching her hand and pulling her back for a kiss.

An hour later, we’re in the back of a car, winding through the evening streets of Paris.

Emily keeps trying to guess our destination, each suggestion more outlandish than the last.

“Are we going to break into the Louvre? Midnight hot-air-balloon ride? Wait — are you finally taking me to that cheese shop you’ve been talking about for six months?”

I laugh, shaking my head. “Better.”

The car pulls up to a familiar building, and I watch recognition dawn on her face.

“Hugo,” she breathes. “I didn’t think... Isn’t it closed for renovations?”

“It is,” I confirm, helping her from the car. “But being a prince has its occasional perks.”

The security guard nods respectfully as we approach. “Your Highness,” he says, opening the door. “Mademoiselle. Everything is prepared as requested.”

Emily’s hand tightens around mine as we step inside.

The grand hall is dimly lit, scaffolding visible along the walls, but a clear path leads through to the ballroom.

Unlike the night we attended the gala here, when hundreds of guests filled the space with chatter, and the orchestra played from the corner, tonight it’s silent save for the echo of our footsteps.

“This is... I don’t even know what to say,” Emily whispers, her eyes wide as she takes in the empty grandeur of the space.

I guide her through the ballroom toward the set of French doors that lead to the balcony. “Do you remember?”

Her smile is soft, nostalgic. “How could I forget? You followed me out here. Kissed me...”

The balcony is transformed from how it was a year ago.

Tiny string lights create a canopy overhead, mimicking the stars obscured by Paris’s glow.

A small table holds a bottle of champagne on ice, two flutes next to it.

Rose petals scatter across the stone floor, and the view of the city stretches out before us, just as magical as it was the night we were last here.

That night, I thought I might die from heartbreak. Tonight, I feel as though I have been reborn thanks to love.

Emily’s fingers brush against mine, and I feel that spark — not static from the dry air, but the same jolt of connection I’ve felt for a year.

“You were right.” I turn to face her, taking both her hands in mine. “About everything. About how I was hiding from real relationships because I was afraid of failing at them. Afraid of letting others down.”

The city lights reflect in her eyes, turning them into something magical. “You never failed, Hugo. You just needed to find your balance.”

“And you showed me how.” I squeeze her hands gently. “This past year, watching you live your life has been... inspiring. The way you walked away from that TV show because it didn’t align with your values. How you’re training those new matchmakers, keeping the process personal like you always wanted.”

“I learned that from you, you know,” she says, surprising me. “Watching you lead

your country with such care, even when it's hard. You taught me that compromise doesn't mean sacrificing what matters most."

My heart swells at her words. This is only one of the many reasons I love her — her ability to see the best in me, to reflect it back when I need it most.

"When you moved to Marzieu," I continue, "I felt like our worlds finally aligned. Like the puzzle pieces fell into place."

"Even though I still can't pronounce half the street names?" she teases.

"Especially because of that." I smile, remembering her attempts at local phrases, how the palace staff adore her determined efforts to learn.

"We're good for each other," she says, the declaration simple but powerful.

"We're perfect for each other," I correct her. "Which is ironic coming from the man who once believed perfect matches do not exist."

Her smile widens. "I think you said they're statistically improbable, not impossible."

"Always the optimist." I take a deep breath, feeling the importance of the small box in my pocket. "That is one of the countless things I love about you."

Something in my voice must give me away, because her expression shifts, a flash of realization crossing her features. But I need to do this right, need her to hear everything I've been rehearsing for weeks.

"Emily, a year ago we stood on this balcony as two people who somehow recognized something in each other." I release her hands to reach into my pocket. "I did it wrong that night. I didn't have my approach planned out. If only I had thought it through, given more care to what I was doing..."

I shake my head, getting choked up. “The past is in the past, and I do not wish to make such a mistake ever again.”

Her breath catches as I lower myself to one knee, the small velvet box now open between us. The ring catches the light from the string lights above — a sapphire surrounded by diamonds.

“You’re the match I never thought to look for,” I continue, my voice shaking from the pounding of my heart. “The partner who challenges me, supports me, and somehow manages to make royal protocol briefings amusing.”

She laughs through the tears that have begun to fall.

“I don’t need a professional matchmaker to tell me that what we have is rare and worth holding on to forever.” I take the ring from its cushion. “Emily Neale, will you marry me? Will you be my wife, my princess, my partner in everything?”

For one breathless moment, the world narrows to just this — her eyes, wide and sparkling with tears; her hands, trembling slightly as they cover her mouth; the significance of the ring between my fingers.

Then she smiles, that beautiful, crooked smile that I fell in love with, and nods.

“Yes,” she says, voice breaking. “Yes, Hugo.”

I slide the ring onto her finger with hands that aren’t quite steady. When I rise to my feet, she throws her arms around my neck, and I lift her, spinning us both in a circle on the balcony where I just took the most important step of my life.

“You know what this means,” I murmur against her hair when I finally set her down. “You’re going to have to learn all those royal protocols you’ve been avoiding.”

She pulls back just enough to fix me with a mock-serious stare. “Does this mean I have to stop calling your great-aunt the ‘Duchess of Disapproving Glances’ behind her back?”

“Absolutely not. It’s the most accurate title she’s ever had.”

Her laughter mingles with the night air, and when we kiss, I taste the salt of happy tears and the promise of all our tomorrows.

In this breathless moment, with the woman I love in my arms and the city of lights spread out below us, I feel the culmination of every step we’ve taken together and the thrilling start of a lifetime ahead.

“I love you,” Emily whispers against my lips.

“I love you too,” I reply, my forehead resting against hers. “Always.”

And as we stand here, wrapped in each other and the Parisian night, I silently thank whatever twist of fate brought the matchmaker who believed in perfect matches into the path of a prince who didn’t believe in forever — until her.

The End

I hope you’ve enjoyed Emily and Hugo’s story!